FOREHEAD

Upon hearing that a high forehead was a sign of true intelligence, I proceeded to shave off my bangs and expose my scalp. Although this made me look like an egghead, I decided that if it impressed other people, I could learn to live without a mirror in the house.

It was then that I began writing books of great acclaim. They were massive books, some as large as my front door, and I found them as difficult to read as they were to carry. Critics loved them though, calling them remarkably advanced for a woman my age. I often found myself in libraries asking for my books so I could stare at the back inside cover. There I would find a picture of my forehead, sweat splattered and displaying a fine network of tiny purple veins, like rivers on a roadmap. I had the picture enlarged and hung it over the head of my bed where it still hangs today.

I am losing my hair now. My skull seems to become more and more oval shaped each day and the purple veins now resemble cracks in a sidewalk. I don't write books anymore and often stay in bed all morning, fearing breakfast.
She is not in love with her husband, but she stays with him for the sake of the children. She is supposed to be in love with the dark haired foreigner man, who is duller and uglier than her husband but has a better contract with the movie studio. They often meet for dinner.

"Run away with me to my homeland," he pleads one night in a checker-board café.

"I can't," she says, staring down at her hands that are choking each other.

"But why?" he asks, bewildered.

"Because I hate that brown mole you have growing next to your left nostril," she says.

"Shall I wash it off?" he offers, rubbing it with his knuckle.

"No," she says, "Leave it on for the sake of the children."

There were times when the night would be pierced by chirping birds. We'd run to the zoo and watch through black iron bars as the seals awoke and helped the penguins get dressed. Or we'd hunt for huge mechanical Japanese lizards that spit fire and ate cities. But mostly we'd sit in fast food restaurants drinking coffee and deciding what we were going to be the next day. Sometimes I was a war hero and you were the tattered orphan I would take under my wing. Other times I was a little girl and you were a starving artist who taught me how to hold my liquor at night. Yet other times I was a bottle of Coke and you were a pencil and we would flirt hopelessly across the desk top.

When he is among the big ones,
He is like a loaf of freshly baked
Whole wheat bread;
They pinch him, leaving their thumbprints
Like tiny bruises all over his body;
They cut him into bitesize pieces
And bring him to church in a golden goblet
As their Sunday offering.
When his nails grow too long, they
Chop them into croutons for their
Dinner salads, while the meatloaf
Is stuffed with his shoulders.
When he is bad, they put him into a plastic bag
And close it with a twist tie.
He sits in the refrigerator,
Barely breathing.
But when he is good and guests come to visit
They say,
"This is our boy. We baked him ourselves."

-- Lydia Tomkiw
Chicago IL

catacombs
sneaking
in a
small
place
a candle
held in
both hands

solitary
the rug
rug in my
own room
kept to
itself
till the
animals
began
to march
& a dish
of honey
was brought

clouds
geese
large-eyes
birds
anything!

cobblestones
running
metal struts
dandelion
born
& dies

ragged
clothes
on
scarecrows
straws
made into
bodies
red
ribbons
for
buttons
small
black
feet

lobby
of an
old hotel
a touch
of mildew
a round
green mat
an umbrella
stand

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A man found that by clasping his hands at the fingers he could hold himself together. "All my life," he said, "I have searched for a way to hold myself together."

But in this position he found it difficult to scratch. If he released his hold on himself he could not stay together. If he stayed together he could not scratch.

So he hired a young boy in the neighborhood to scratch for him. "Not there," he would say to the boy. "A little lower. No, to the right. And not so hard."

The man itched so deeply the boy could not reach the spot. Soon the man, refusing to give up his hold on himself, interviewed new scratchers. But none of them could satisfy the man's incredible itch. None could scratch deeply enough.

The man, exhausted from interviewing, decided to quit this silly search for an adequate scratcher. "After all," he would say, "is it not enough that I have finally found a way to hold myself together?"

But the itch changed from simple annoyance to deep tickle. And the man, refusing to give up his hold on...
himself, began to laugh. Soon his laugh was so loud he kept the neighborhood awake. His laugh was so loud and hard his fingers began to sweat and slip apart. The neighbors worried.

If the man's hands should come apart, won't he become a threat to everyone around him? Shouldn't they see to it that this man, grown mad under the weight of his deep itch, be restrained from harming others?

So they secured the man's fingers together with tiny ropes and threw him in his basement where he could laugh as loud as he wanted and still keep a hold on himself.

THE PAST

A mud worm enters my ear and finds an empty cave. He goes to work on the walls, leaving long mud lines. He drags his body in circles, leaving a print of an antelope, a shovel, and a wheel. He works his way across the cave, rubbing his chin until he invents light and places some at intervals along the wall.

Later the same day, after the mud worm has crawled through a rear door, a crew of anthropologists enters my ear. They find the cave. They find an antelope, a shovel, a wheel, and ashes on the floor. They pull out their picks and dig just beneath the surface of the wall, putting parts of my brain in sacks.

Flashbulbs pop in my ears ....

A SHADOW'S LOVE

-- for Susan

My shadow is missing. I've tried walking through noon sunshine or standing between a spotlight and white wall, or strapping metal reflectors to my waist. But I haven't received even a collect phone call from my shadow.

I think of foul play. One morning someone digging a long narrow hole on the west side of the sidewalk and kidnap­ping shadows as they drop by.

I can picture a night train with one dark room, filled by shadows. And my shadow, taught a love of the good life, taken to a city where it waits on some back street under, maybe, a streetlight, to sell itself.

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And now I walk through the sunshine, shoulders beaten red, into the shade of a shadow not my own, a shadow whose love I can never have.

-- Patrick Bizzaro

Manassas VA

KING

when she takes a nap
when I'm around
I get offended,
because when I'm around
the world's lucky, right?

KAREN

went to a movie
with Kevin,
a guy she's known for ten years,
they probably made out all over the place,
but when she asked me if I was jealous I said no.

CHARLIE

best friend
even though
in seventh grade I hated him for making a sanding block that was perfect, even the nail-holed initials, C.C.

FAST THINGS

my red shorts and Pumas dart over the vanishing trail, brushing past brush, and then a lizard, a black stick running like the devil from devil's work.

825 BRAZIL

the weeds on either side of the walk to her door were wet and quiet when she told me after she kissed me to be sure not to step on the snails on the way back.

KISS ME, BOB, SHE SAID

on the bus from the ninth grade graduation picnic where Jason and Murdock swiped her purse they got embarrassed when they found 32 cents and some Tampax.
9TH GRADE BOOB BLUES

G.G. PARK

Murdock dumped her
then stuck
two blueberry pancakes
in her locker
and then she cried
when I laughed.

WE ARGUE

and I watch the dog
sniff scratch for ticks
and baby teeth a rawhide bone
slowly to death.

FOG PARK

huge puffs of mist, ground clouds,
a slow motion ghostly avalanche,
tumbling over the grass
into left field.

MRS. McK--

twists her cigarette into the
ashtray until her
mind screws up too,
and she wonders what
she should tell me about Maureen,
her daughter, my sort of ex girl,
next.

CHANGING TIRES

a guy tanner, more muscles,
sitting there, talking with her
while I rotate my tires,
while she talks in her bikini,
even though the evening before
was miserable.
the tires now switched around,
I sit by her, ask her for a walk,
she says okay, I think,
takes a half-hour getting ready,
and we drive to the Tasty Freeze,
and accidentally we bump each other
and accidentally hold hands.

-- R. E. Blaisdell
San Francisco CA

THE MULTI-COLORED COUPLE

At first they were very happy. Everything was rosy. They woke up pink like anyone else. One day the wife realized that nothing they touched had turned to gold. They had one little white car, a tiny orange house. A neighbor had two big black cars with shiny chrome bumpers. The wife turned green with envy. That night, as the sky turned purple, the wife said, "I'm blue." "Why?" asked the tan husband. "Look at what everyone else has. Big shiny cars and summer homes in Greenland. We have only this tiny house and one old rusty car." The husband turned red. "You're right," he said. So they packed everything & went looking for greener grass. After many years of moving from town to town, things grew blacker & blacker. One day the wife said, "Let's move again." The husband, fed up with moving & afraid to try for another job, replied, "No. I will never move again." The wife said, "Then I'll hold my breath until we do." They sat there for days. The husband was yellow, the wife was blue.

THE HUSBAND & THE WIFE

The husband throws himself against the wall. The wife thinks nothing of it. Just yesterday she did the same thing. A splash of Boston fern on the chair beside the swing has her attention. On the left: jade, cactus, philodendron. The wife sticks her finger in
the soil & waters the dryer plants. The husband sits on the couch & tries to think of an excuse. The wife comes in from the porch, she sees the hand on the wall.

-- Philip Shirley

Birmingham AL

THANKSGIVING MORNING

Loading luggage for trip north noticed flats. One on each car. Knife punctured. Neighbor also lost two. Must have been random slashing.

Small relief.

FOUR CONNECTIONS

To shoot well you must hit the target's center regularly.

An expert shot rarely misses the bull's-eye.

An artist can hit the bull's-eye without looking.

An enlightened man recognizes himself & doesn't shoot.

SHORT

Quit painting but can still get a poem off if I keep it short.

MISSED WORK FRIDAY

Been sick. More ways than one. Headache keeps me awake. Gutache keeps me on my toes. Heartache keeps me guessing.

FIX

Gotta be a little drunk to drive safe thru Sacramento at nite. Natives take over warp traffic patterns to fit their fix. Gotta get in rhythm with em or risk riding a gutter nitemare home.
Winding down thru Nevada Country
on way home from Ananda
Brent asked was I
disturbed by way Americans
use land ... way we build
it up selfservingly
oblivious to nature's
rhythms & patterns?
I said not really.
Which isn't true.
I just put it
out of mind.
Working with high school kids
(as a group as messed
up as the land)
cuts me pretty thin.

A FAMILIAR ADDICTION

Giants swoon September
instead of June
& piss off fans
who suddenly see
players playing for
too much money
coach as ignoramus
stadium a jammed wind
funnel & far too
many ghosts come
home to roost.
Under this pressure
minds stray across
bay wonder how
Raiders are doing.

-- Phil Weidman
North Highlands  CA

JALAPENO PEPPERS

are what I would like to support.
Smell them on the vine,
and clean your sinuses.
Lift them green and peeled
from the can,
like large green slugs,
and put one in your mouth.
Hotter than any otherwise
unknown hell
they are, and good for the mind,
thrilling at a time when booze,
or women, or the lack of women,
or the lack of life in general --
that time of ennui and angst --
is upon you, and you need.
Let it sit on your tongue,
then bite, chew it,
and that bit of hell that you've taken
just moves through you,
like a fifth column, to clear those
webs that have blocked your collective past.
And if it is all fire in your mouth,
what will cure it?
Sugar, granulated, powdered, cubed.
Just like everything,
the sweet can vanquish that hell,
for a while.

WITTGENSTEIN, JASPER JOHNS, AND ME

Having read that Jasper Johns
is indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein
for many ideas in his enigmatic paintings,
I decided to pick up one of Ludwig's
books -- just to take a look.
Sure enough, there were the colors
that were not colors:
R for red, Y for yellow, B for blue.
The rest of the text read something like:
"If someone named Bill looked at the anus
of a chicken
and called it a horse,
and the other person that stood beside
Bill, called Fred, from then on told his
children, friends, acquaintances
that a chicken's anus was a horse,
then a chicken's anus, to them,
would truly be called a horse."

I thought about this for awhile,
and, I must admit, that I do know
many assholes that are called
by another name.
But I read on and saw a drawing,
which I promptly reproduced;
it is called the duckrabbit
and can only be described as looking
like a duck, from one angle,
and a rabbit, from another.

From that day on I cannot help
but to look at things, always,
from a different angle.
Instead of this being a poem,
for instance,
to me it is a poem.

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DOCTOR LOCKLIN AND MR. HYDE

are a couple of friends of mine,
one a writer, the other
a bartender and, nowadays,
a real estate agent.
Mr. Hyde, the agent,
told me the other night,
him drunk and leaning on the
jukebox that played
Willie Nelson ballads,
that Locklin should be
a millionaire.
"If that queer Capote
can be on TV, Locklin can,"
Hyde told me.
And I agreed.
"And that sonofabitch
should be rich; all of my friends
should be rich."
And I agreed again,
not thinking that being
a starving writer is that necessary,
or desirable.
Hyde knows how, nowadays,
to become rich.
"I feel seventeen," he says.
"My eyes pop open at seven,
because I'm afraid that I'll
miss something, someone.
Something's happening."
I hope that he gets rich,
I hope that Locklin gets rich,
I even hope that I get rich,
but I doubt it.
Yet I respect that which Mr. Hyde,
Locklin's fan, and Locklin's friend,
and my friend, too,
has found.
He has found that he likes something,
and I told him then, that night,
"Paul, you do your stuff,
in your own way. Get rich.
And we'll do our stuff
in our own way,
probably not getting rich.
But at least we try, Paul.
We try to do what we feel
we can do."

-- Rafael Zepeda

Long Beach    CA
BUT, SERIOUSLY, FOLKS

an l.a. poetess
stormed out of a reading
a friend of mine was giving,

but not before she had intoned,
"i cannot abide poems
that are intended to make me laugh."

since then, i've been afflicted
with this nightmare
that she shows up at one of the
increasingly less frequent readings
at which i am invited to participate

and i can't find a single funny poem.

GERALD LOCKLIN
"Were you ever in a war?" she asks, and I say, "Yes, there was a liquor price war after the fair trade act was declared unconstitutional, and I was in the vanguard of the hordes that depleted the inventories of Scotch.

Later she asks, "How much did you spend that day?" "Oh," I reply, "I guess I invested a couple hundred dollars."

"That must have been," she muses, "truly a short term investment."

I think his decision was eventually overturned, but it was within the last year that a judge handed over to their parents for de-programming a couple of 30-year-old hare krishnas. He said that the parent-child relationship was not only sacred but abiding. He said a parent would be incapable of acting in anything but his child's best interests. "Once a son, always a son," he said.

When I told a friend of mine that one over the phone, there was nothing but silence at the other end of the line.

i know this poet on the east coast who is likeable and writes very slowly.

i know this poet on the west coast who is a prick and writes a couple poems a day.

the poet on the east coast enjoys the west coast poet's writing very much.
The west coast poet does not care to hear the mention in his presence of the east coast poet.

The east coast poet is a vegetarian;
the west coast poet is a drunk.

The east coast poet is a homosexual;
the west coast poet makes fun of gays.

They both write poems
that are readable, funny, dirty,
and great.

Requiem for three bar guys

Ernest Hemingway used to say, "There are people dying this year who never died before,"

And, in How It Was, Mary Hemingway says it became an all-too-frequent refrain.

Well, I walked into the bar yesterday and there was a schooner on the counter with some bills and coins in it and a note attached that read, "Flowers for Claudio."
"What happened to Claudio?" I asked, and the bartender said, "Friday night there was a disturbance outside his bar and he went out back and found this guy trying to drag some broad into a car. Claudio intervened, and the woman ran away, and there was a scuffle, and the guy pulled out a knife and got Claudio in a major artery."

"He died?"
"Sure."
"They get the guy who did it?"
"Do they ever?"

"I didn't know him."
"He was a good guy, just a young guy who'd worked hard and saved some money and got some backing and was trying to make a go of a place of his own. Everyone liked him."

Just then a guy down the bar said, "You knew about Nels, didn't you?"
"Nels?"
"The engineering professor who always drank in the 'Niner."
"Sure, I used to have a beer with him nearly every afternoon."
"He's dying of cancer of the tongue."
"Christ."
"He was one of the last of the good old boys from over at the university ... and what did you think of Tom?"
"Which Tom?"
"Two-Ton Tom that always drank with the Negretis. Truck-Driver Tom. Used to take the mike at the piano bar and sing 'Hello, Dolly,' like Louis Armstrong."
"He always went out of his way to be friendly to me, buy me a beer, ask about my poems ...."

"Stroke. Doctor says he's alive and nothing more than that."
"He couldn't have been fifty."
"He was a ton overweight and drank like we all do; what the fuck, there's nothing wrong with going quick."

So there in one day were three guys dead or dying from the old drinking triangle that used to extend from the Forty Niner Tavern near the campus to the Bayshore Saloon and the other joints of Belmont Shore to Clancy's and the Irisher of Main Street in Seal Beach.
I suppose they'd all seen as many good times as any man has a right to in one lifetime, but you know how it is about drinking times, they lose a lot in the re-telling, you'd have to have been there to appreciate them.

And I know this isn't much of an elegy, but then again some poems exceed their subjects and others, like this one, are doomed to fall short, because for my money these guys are no less worthy of remembrance than Lycidas or Thyrsis or, especially, that fucking asshole A. H. H.
And even if I've taken the edge off whatever lyricism I may once have been capable of, the result of a life similar to the one that killed these three guys off, I ask you

if I don't write their requiem,
who the fuck do you know that will?
A COLLEAGUE AND CONFRERE

blaze comes out of his office which is right across from mine
and he says, "that sonuvabitch brown -- he's gone too far this time!"
and for a split-second i figure the governor has cut our pay or maybe just fired us all and turned the whole fucking university system over to the jesuits.
but it turns out that his deed is not that trivial: he's signed into law a bill giving the track an even bigger slice of the exacta pool than they're already grubbing.
good old blaze; his type of professor is a model discontinued by the graduate schools.

A CORNER OF ONE'S OWN

I go to see Julia which is great but enough to drive one back to cigarettes and early drinking hours, what with Jane Fonda as Lillian Hellman laboring gloriously at her typewriter, ashtray to one side, shot glass to the other.
And then she's out complaining to Jason Robards that she can't write her play there in their homely beach-house on Martha's Vineyard, perhaps they'd better go to Paris,
and I'm reminded of Virginia Woolf's famous formulation that what a woman needs to be a novelist is an independent income and a room of her own,
and I think of my note-pad of projected projects resting beneath a table-top of student papers,
and Virgie, Lil, I love you, love to read you, love to read about you, love to teach your works,
but I'm writing this
at a typewriter I don't really own,
in a cluttered corner of the one-bedroom apartment
that the girl I live with claims is hers

and I feel for you
but can't quite find you.

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

I understand there's a book out
on how to get your kids
to do what you want them to.
Well, I dropped in for a holiday drink
with my friend Dave Cherin,
and he had told his younger son,
Dylan Thomas Cherin
(I hold Dave's wife,
Patricia Hamilton Dominique Esme O'Connor Cherin,
fully responsible for the name,
especially since her other two kids
are named Alexander Hamilton
and Sarah Isadora)

and anyway Dave had told young Dylan Thomas
that if he was bad
Santa would bring Rudolph in the house with him
and Rudolph would take a dump
right under the Christmas tree
and Santa would put Dylan Thomas's name on it.

The child was behaving perfectly.

OLD FOLKS' DAY

i was in the bank near the retirement community
(where the lines are always long
because the financial dealings are so complicated,
not to mention that the customers look upon
their visit as being of a social nature)

when i saw this old guy fall off his bicycle.

he didn't get up,
and my first impulse was to rush to his assistance,
but my wiser nature prevailed
and sure enough
the first old lady in line
hobbled out to help him,
moving me up a good ten minutes.

she lifted his bike from on top of him ...
but then it became too much for her,
and she dropped it on his head.
honest to God I almost laughed out loud,
and thank God I didn't
because I would surely have been caned to death.

anyway, later in the day,
i had a birthday card from my aunt in Florida,
who's always been a fine, buxom, lusty gal,
and she pulled one of the great all-time Freudian
abbreviations: she said that her husband
was keeping busy in the condominium association

that, in fact, he was the "President of Ass."

I know you're thinking, "you son of a bitch,
you'll even sacrifice your dear aunt and uncle for a
laugh; wait till you're an old duck on a bicycle!"

let me assure you that,
if you're only as old as you feel,
i'm there already.

ADONIS FOR A DAY

this sculptress did a bust of me once
and she made it look like adonis.

her boyfriend, who was a famous poet,
stuck around while I was sitting for it
and he did everything possible to distract her.

when it came out looking like adonis,
he was really pissed off,
and he told her it didn't look like me at all
and he talked her into taking my name off of it
and entering it in competitions
as "the poet idealized,"
or something like that.

but when I was about to have a book of stories out,
the publisher got in touch with her
and a picture of the bust ended up as frontispiece.

the other night some girls who had somehow heard about the bust asked me about it and i had to tell them that the sculptress had written me that she'd moved to phoenix, opened a beer bar, installed the bust, and inevitably the bust had gotten busted by a drunk.

but i got out the book of stories and showed them the frontispiece.

"oh well," they agreed, "it didn't look like you anyhow."

PEOPLE ARE LOSING THE ABILITY TO MAKE DISTINCTIONS

i would be the first to admit that my daughters are probably the only women i have ever loved selflessly, but already unloved women are suggesting to my daughters that, since i have never loved other women selflessly, i can't be capable of so loving them.

THE END OF AN ERA

dear brenda, i got up early and, as i had promised you, i was at the sears store a half-hour before it opened. there were already about three hundred people lined up outside the tickettron entrance. i recognized one of my students about a hundred people ahead of me in line; he waved to me to join him. at first i virtuously refused, but when i noticed throngs of aging flower-children cutting in line ahead of me, i sidled up to him. fortunately, the five girls behind him declined to tear me to shreds. at eleven the manager announced that friday was sold out. by eleven-thirty, saturday and sunday were gone. at noon, it was announced that only single seats remained. a lot of people left. i stayed and moved close to the door.
by now my back was killing me, 
from my having stood on one or the other 
of my deadened legs, like an obese heron, 
for at least three hours. 
i hadn't had any breakfast. 
my student had scrounged only one section of the 
morning paper: 
the letters to the editor. 

i was ten people from the counter 
when all performances were officially declared sold out. 

brenda, i hope your idol, zimmerman, 
swallows his fucking harmonica.

WRITE ME OFF AND OUT 

My one friend tells the other 
that he is thinking of opening a beer bar 

and the second friend tells the first 
that he could use a write-off, 

and the first says, "I'm just the man for you: 
the last resturant I owned lost forty thousand in a year."

MECHANICS

Although I'm nearly thirty-seven, 
the man with the Texaco star 
always refers to me as "Buster," "Skipper," or "Sonny," 
and once he called me by some name 
so juvenile that these friends and I 
still laugh about it, although we can't seem to remember what it was.

Recently, though, from an article in the local paper, 
he found out that I pass, in certain of the less discriminating circles, 
as a poet, 
so now he asks me where he can buy my books, 
and I hedge on that, because I'm pretty sure my literary standing in the grease pits is bound to be diminished by close familiarity of the works themselves.
But I'll tell you this, Old Fellah
(though I doubt you're over fifty),
I sure as hell can put a stanza back together
better than your young mechanic did my carburetor.

TO DAISY, WITH SPITE
daisy longfellow
was the most beautiful and popular girl
in mrs. botsford's ballroom dancing class.

and i, the faustian over-reacher,
in spite of my bad skin and quivering ego,
was somehow compelled to try to fill as many places
as possible on her saturday evening dance card.
sometimes she condescended
but more often her card was (politely) filled.

dixie, i have no idea how you turned out,
but we're both in our mid-thirties now

and i wonder if you're still all-booked
for every dance.

IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT
i'd fooled around with her some years before,
but the only reason i now sat down with her
was because there weren't any other
vacant seats in the bar.

so this guy had to start putting the make on her
and i didn't care if he slipped it to her
right there on the table
but he thought i cared
and i knew he thought i cared
and i knew that he was barging in
even though he thought i cared

and i began to get pissed off
just at the principle of the thing.

maybe he sensed that
or maybe it was just that she was doing such
a good job of warding him off,
but anyway just about the time i was deciding
i'd have to give him a poke in the snoot,

he finally left the bar.

i felt bad then
that i hadn't done anything.
i had a couple more drinks
and then i was sure i would never
for the rest of my life
forgive myself
for not having gotten into it with him.

the next morning,
when i woke up,
my first thought was,

"thank god i didn't bother with that guy!"

AN OCCASIONAL POET

Ten years ago my good friend
Patricia Hamilton Dominique Esme O'Connor Cherin
has her first poem published in Wormwood Review.
I still think that it was an excellent poem.
It was called, I believe, "The Night I Was Donna Reed,"
and it was about her dreams
and their violation by reality,
especially by the reality of a doctor
she was briefly in love with.

The point of all this
is that she wrote a second poem a few years ago
and it is on the wall of her bathroom
and I can't get her to send it out
so I'm incorporating it into this poem
without her permission
because I think her second poem is her second great poem,
and, don't worry, she isn't the sort to sue any of us.

The poem is entitled, "William of Orange,"
and it goes:

William eats oranges.
William is an orange.

For my money, Esme's still batting 1000.
SOMEONE WHO MADE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF KEN KESEY

the kid with the crooked teeth, bespectacled hammerhead,
says, "yeah, i met kesey once in oregon. he's sure not the same ken kesey as the kool-aid acid test. he's almost middle-class. i sure was disappointed."

"look," i say, "everybody changes, why not kesey? maybe he just didn't feel like putting on a show for you."

the kid is pissed off now because i have had the bad manners to impugn his inalienable right to backbite his literary betters,

so he tells me he's just read the latest saul bellow, and i say i only read bellow from a sense of duty and even then a good three years after the rest of america, and he says bellow sure does have a way with words,

and i say i should hope that any writer would, and he says yeah, but there's sure a difference of degree between bellow and writers like himself or, more conspicuously, me,

so the conversation has reached that stage where it's a good idea to make one's adieus even though it's the first night in two weeks i've allowed myself to drink, and i was sorta planning on savoring a couple more vodka-tonics before returning to the wagon, but kesey obviously figured this guy right as someone not worth getting fucked-up with; so, middle class, ready or not, here i come.

CATCH-23: AN ACADEMIC LIFE

I received one of those phony form letters the other day, the kind run off on an expensive automatic typewriter to make it look personal, inviting me to lend my financial support to this creative writing center at a local state college. Ironically, the board of directors contained the names of certain people responsible for terminating
my employment at that school thirteen years ago.

I was twenty-three at the time and my third kid was on the way and I was all full of ideals. So when the department chairman summoned me to his office I just knew it was to extend to me his highest commendation, especially since I had heard through the grapevine that the report of the guy who had sat in on my class had been glowing. Instead, what the chairman said was, "Locklin, the policy and personnel committees have been meeting in joint sessions in an effort to define the future needs of our department and their conclusion has been that you are not a part of the aforesaid plans."

You might not think, if you know me now, that I would have been greatly affected by those words, but let me assure you that I just about croaked. Even apart from practical, financial considerations, my sense of personal and, yeah, professional rejection was such that it is only today, with so much water under the cooler, that I am able to write about these things.

Of course they pulled the typical academic bribe on me, and for not making waves they gave me the highest recommendations and I ended up at a better school, run by better people, at a higher salary, and at the beach rather than in the thick of the smog. They did me a great favor, though that was not their intention. At least I think they did, for another ramification was that I was moved from the company of black people to that of white, the students, that is, and who knows where I would have ended up if I had remained in a position to follow the dictates of my conscience — maybe dead in a swamp in Mississippi. At the last party there, my black friends said to me, "You're gonna lose your soul down there," and I lifted my glass and quipped, "This is the only soul that I have anyway," and there was more truth than fiction to that.

So I was assaulted, in soul not body, not by rednecks but by liberally educated members of committees meeting in executive session. I still don't know what they had against me — some colleagues suggested I didn't hang around the other faculty enough; some said I got caught in the swinging-door between an outgoing and incoming department chairman; one guy tried to twist a schedule request I'd submitted to imply that I'd refused to teach composition. Maybe they just didn't like my looks. I don't like them much myself.

But here's a postscript for you: at one point that spring I learned there was a new appeals procedure, and I mentioned this to the department chairman. He assured me he
would confer with the appeals committee. A week later he had their answer for me — if I were being fired for cause, for, in other words, something I'd done wrong, I would have had full recourse to appeal, but since I hadn't been accused of a single peccadillo, I had nothing to defend myself against and no appeal was possible.

Joseph Heller could win himself a Pulitzer with that one.

THE CIVILIZING OF THE SHREW

"You didn't drink much on the trip," she says.
I say, "I drank a lot of beer."
"Never enough to make you feel bad in the morning."
I say, "I didn't feel so hot some mornings."
"Never so bad that you felt you had to have a drink."
"A couple of days I started at lunch," I say. "Anyway, how much would you estimate I was putting away most days?"
"Oh, a couple of six-packs," she says, getting it about right. "But that isn't so much over a number of hours, in such heat, when you're keeping active and have a lot of reasons to need a little something to relax you."

What a difference a mere ten years make! This girl has really come a hell of a way!

DUBIOUS DISTINCTION

I ran into one of our former English majors and I asked him if he'd ever graduated.

He said he hadn't.

When I asked him why, he said, "well, if you'd taught just a couple more courses I might've been able to.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

Since I only have an old black-and-white set anyhow, and it's getting increasingly difficult
to tell the teams apart,

I have a suggestion for the National Basketball Association: divide the teams on the basis of color.

There could be the same number of teams as now, but half would be all-white and the other half all-black.

Or there could be more teams: instead of the L.A. Lakers there could be the Watts Blacks and the Beach Whites.

I think the matchups would be interesting: Jabbar-Walton, Erving-Barry, Gervin-Westphal, and so on?

Aren't these the squarings-off that everyone seems most excited by anyway?

I mean instead of our country being surreptitiously obsessed by race, let's get our fears, hatreds, partisanship right out into the open.

Change the above, in fact, to Watts Niggers and Beverly Hills Honkies.

I don't consider this idea the least bit ridiculous. How is it different from the Olympics?

And, if over fifty percent of the whites in L.A. are opposed to integration of the schools -- not just busing, mind you, but integration itself -- how is the other system working?

My idea may be the safety valve to short-circuit racial holocaust.

I haven't figured out yet which side gets the Orientals and Chicanos. They can't be counted on to remain short indefinitely.

PROCESS OF DEDUCTION

when our friend's face met the floor, someone said,

"find out where he's been drinking! they must pour the last honest drink in town!"
ALICE IN ACADEME

I was pleasantly surprised when I learned that we were now to have one personal holiday a year, a day over-and-above our sickdays, which could not be accumulated, but which could be used for any reason whatsoever.

Later I heard one of the deans explaining that the holiday of course could not be taken on a day when we had classes.

ROLL OVER, ARISTOTLE

for their final exam
i give my contemporary fiction class the question, "what's new in the novel?"

and going over their answers, i find one guy has written, "literature never changes -- it still comes down to whether or not you're getting laid."

there should be a grade a little higher than A-Plus.

IN THE HEART OF THE HEART OF THE MAN WITH THE BLUE HOTEL

i'm sorry but no poem could live up to the above title.

TAKING PRECAUTIONS

when he heard the a-russian flu was in town, he switched from bourbon to vodka.

-- Gerald Locklin

Long Beach CA
TELEPHONING

With the dial tone
I finger numbers
spinning out my call
across America.
On the third ring
a woman sings, "Hello."
As kindly as I can
I say the same.
I begin my story.
In a pause for breath
silence crackles
through the wires.
And with still a bit
of song
that same voice asks,
"Who is this?"
I tell her my name
and add, "You don't know me --
that's why I called."
Another silence.
I'm just about
to add onto my story
when she blurts, "Damned idiot!"
hanging up,
leaving me to dangle
on the end of the line,
alone with the dial tone
and her one declaration.
I'm surprised by it
and wonder if
perhaps she does know me.
But that's my one long
distance call for today.
Tomorrow I'll try
my social security number.
Now I'll just wonder
who the woman was
and remember her remark,
so personal.

CAPITAL X

I found exes,
big capitals in red,
on sections of sidewalk and curb
cracked by age and weather.
The slightest crack provoked one X.
They appeared last fall.
This summer jack
hammers rattle through the day;
we awaken with them,
going to sleep at night with them.

Their echoes ring
beneath the canopy of trees
throughout our neighborhood
sometimes even after dark.
Their noise replaces
racket by cicadas
in our thoughts;
apparently cicadas
won't come out this year.
Perhaps that noise scares them
into thinking of
some giant insect
waiting on their hatch.

I've now begun to find
the same red exes
crossed on trees along our street,
older, mature ones
in grass between sidewalk
and curb. I think
their roots have sprung
the concrete slabs
so they have to go
before repairs are made.

Other exes mark those trees
beneath our power lines;
I've seen these done before.
Men truck in saws, ropes,
machines that eat up wood.
You see creatures
swing in trees, buzzing
off branches on the sides
and on the tops until the trees
are left denuded.

In a dream last night
buzz saws and jack hammers
threw me thrashing
in my sheets; I woke up
sweating, having seen myself
with tincture of iodine
paint an X across my chest.

-- William Vernon
Dayton  OH

- 150 -
In the epileptic's apartment, everything is padded shag, of a single, quiet, fall color. Outsized walnut sculptures, which resemble brains, hang high on the walls. A dim light glows around a row of easy anti-convulsant pill dispensers, in case there's warning time. In case the incapacitating pills are swallowed, the refrigerator's stocked for a few days. Speaking of time, there's a clock on the wall, also a Wechsler Adult Intelligence Test, to measure post- and inter-ictal alertness. Near the clock, a barometer implies the possibility of prediction. And manufacturers' labels, evidence of known origins, are displayed on all the furniture. Other epileptics come here to relax. The only concession to despair is a beautiful dark red nipple, dangling from the ceiling, just out of reach.
1. When Inspector Fitzly and Sergeant Trim arrived, the deputy minister’s body had already been removed from the boudoir. Fitzly was relieved, Trim a trifle crestfallen. What clues there were were put in plastic bags: a typewritten statement from the assassins, full of the usual leftwing drivel and promise of more mayhem; a shell casing; some threads disengaged from the broken window. But no fingerprints and no witnesses.

2. The typewriter turned out to be an Olivetti Lettera 22 with several wonky characters; the paper was a common 22 lb. bond. The casing came from an untraceable .22. So Fitzly phoned down to the numerology lab. Then he phoned upstairs to enquire if manpower was available to examine every typewriter in Greater London. Then there was a knock at the door.

3. “Come in.” “Detective Dwiggins, Internal Affairs. You’d best come with me, sir. Trim’s in custody. 22 bloody burglaries, you two... he’s told all. Forget that murder case, you’re suspended.”

-- M. Kasper

Florence MA
A little after 5:00 the curb in front of the Bank of America is rich with typists holding their cold elbows and waiting for boys who are pale and hairy, who play a little guitar, always have some good dope and do not work.

These girls in their panty hose are sowing their wild oats now because soon each will leave the hair and the ribs—that-show for their legacy, the movie Mom ran every day of their lives.

Already they hate their husbands for sucking up to big shots, for voting Republican and pointing out creeps in vans. They will never love anybody like they do the one who is always late. They will never look up and down the street so eagerly, not even when dinner is ice cold and someone in a new Country Squire has just been involved in a terrible crash.

DOPE

Sports Illustrated breaks The Fixer story and people start calculating my folly, telling me how they knew all along. I listen a little but mostly I look: They're all lit up. This has made their day.

"Well," I say, "when somebody's cheating it usually shows. That's why I check the probable exacta payoffs. Funny stuff sticks out. So either you lay off or get out some more 5's and bet the hot cripples."

"What are you talking about?" they say. "It doesn't work like that. It's all here how they cheated you. Look!" They're on the muscle. Their eyes are rolling. They're sweating. It looks like somebody slipped them something when they weren't looking.

A WELL-DRESSED MAN

bursts into the apartment of a naked woman and at gunpoint orders her to put on some panties, then a bra and slip followed by a skirt and sweater set under a tunic covered
by a trenchcoat topping tall boots. As she pulls a hat down over her ears, he cries out in ecstasy and stains his trousers which he quickly changes while she holds the gun, panting with excitement.

A MAN IN ALABAMA FIGHTS THE DRYNESS

by digging his own well
so relentlessly
that he pops out of the earth
between two Chinese.
He cannot see faces, only feel warm smooth stomachs.
They say, "Get out of here," tumbling him back to the States
where his wife finds him sitting on the edge of the hole.
"What happened?"
"I wish I knew," he says touching his cheek still warm
thinking about his son still in Viet-Nam bursting into tears.

-- Ronald Koertge
South Pasadena CA

you breathe out
knowing as you breathe out
there is nothing at the end of that breath
to do

there is in me
so much song
yet my pen falters
at a crumb!
I sit alone and I
imagine you I cry
outside this window see 8 birds
8 golden finches/tourists and they
balance along
a single
hollyhock

you go through
this house
shutting windows
I opened
to shut out, you say,
the bad
nightair
Traces
of yr haircut
in sink, on floor.

-- Barbara Moraff
Strafford VT

THE IMMORTALS
the old jazz place
in the French Quarter
New Orleans
those great names
they went back decades
but they were tired
those old blacks
they were tired and old
but they still had style
they pumped it out
it was authentic
they pumped it out
and they
were drinking too like
the rest of us
and in between sets
we all used the same broken toilet to
piss in
and they stood there
hitting on joints
getting ready to
do it again
for 25 or 30 more tourists
the all-white audience.
they were great and they were tired
and they were
overweight
most of them
bald

- 155 -
now almost all of them are dead
and I don't recall the jazz

so much

any more

only that we all pissed
in the same broken toilet
between sets
their sets.

SIBELIUS AND ETC.

sick on a Friday night while the discos rock of ass
and hip and leg, I'm too sick to drink,
listening to Brahms and squeezing orange
juice. when I'm too sick to drink you
know I'm sick. I didn't even buy
tomorrow's Racing Form. now there's
some Sibelius on the radio and
in the apartment house on the
corner a woman screams as a
man beats her.

there's nothing on tv. it's moments like this that
the madhouses are better understood. I've even
rolled a joint now. I found some old stuff in
the closet.

when Sibelius reached 40 he shaved
all the hair from his head, walked
into his house and never
came out again until they
came for him.

sick at the age of 57 I sit listening to
the music and smoking this poor joint
while I plan a comeback.

sick on a Friday night I understand very little. but I
like the lamplight and my cigar box keeps saying over
and over to me: mentel charutos pimentel charutos
pimentel charuto entel charutos pimentel charutos
pimen ...

the woman screams again as the man
beats her. he calls her a whore.
what is he doing living with
a whore?
SILK

silken kneecaps
blue garters
pink garters
all through the depression
better than the
N.R.A.
the W.P.A.
silken legs for
Cagney and Gable and
all the boys in the neighborhood.
now that pantyhose is worn
a man no longer gets to watch
a strange woman on the street
with her fine legs
pulling her stockings up
stretching that silk over the
kneecaps
with just a glimpse of white flesh
and pink petticoat ...
I suppose it's best, though, that
women be comfortable.
I wouldn't like to go around pulling
my stockings up
continually, yet
some of us who remember
are still wistful about that era
dreaming of those legs of the
1930s
legs no longer beautiful now
or
legs that are dead
simply bone
but legs we remember the other
way
those legs that kept the silkworms
busy
legs that were for our fathers
our uncles
legs for Cagney and Gable and
all the boys in the neighborhood.

2ND. STREET, NEAR HOLLISTER, IN SANTA MONICA

my daughter is 13 years old
and the other afternoon
I drove to her court to take her
to lunch
and there was a beautiful woman
sitting on the porch
and I thought, well, she'll get
up and tell Marina that
I'm here.
and the beautiful woman stood up
and walked toward me.
it was my daughter.
she said, "Hi!"
I answered as if everything were
commonplace and we drove off
together.

AN OBSERVER

oh, she said, I know how you do it.
you sit down
you've got your wine and
your cigarette
you turn the radio on
you blow smoke
you touch your nose
you touch your face
you rub yourself along the throat
and then you begin:
ah, tick tick tick tick
tick tick tick tick
and you go on and on
and then you blow more smoke
drink more wine
you touch your nose
you touch your ear
and then
ah, tick tick tick tick
tick tick tick tick.
she's right
that's how I wrote this
one.

-- Charles Bukowski
San Pedro CA
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