

Our Time Now

Collected Poems 2002-2011
by Chris Cefalu

Short Cut

Jack didn't understand the City
cutting through
on the way back from the ballgame,
hotdog heartburn and lobster red from
Senior discount bleacher seat

He didn't understand
the endless ravaged blocks
plywood windows and
waist-high weeds,
the blacks everywhere, just standing there,
going nowhere,

And the music
pounding out of the cars
as they all waited for the green
dark heads swiveling coldly behind tinted glass
eyes squinted, lips pursed,
whole faces clenched like a fist
in the next lane like some
alien species driven by bass drum and
rage

And the one gleaming lit main drag
the sad, shitty-looking tattoos
on the young girls,
more or less functionally naked
swiveling around on the sidewalk,
walking up and down in front of the clubs
trading their youth over to the grunting boys,
for a half dozen almos
a handful of groping maybes
sniffing around each other

Inexplicable sights:
Cars so low they leave trails of sparks when
they hit the speed bump,
hats pulled down over eyes,
pants around ankles,
everything low and saggy and slack,
in the parking lot beside a Chinese grocery
a group of young men in a snaky,
fast-closing ring of elbows and white eyes hollering,
some two in the center with a beef,
the pack mentality of it all,
like animals, he thought
and knew he was bad for it

It was possible to see

the smeared edges, the waning figuration
of the City he used to know,
old signs and dangling shards of shingle
but the core had been gutted
factories standing empty, not even troubling to pollute
the darkened loading docks strewn with wrinkled trash
the big brick schoolhouses shuttered and mute,
learning had moved on

Jack didn't understand the City
what he saw of it
and he was glad when he turned off onto
the long boulevard that wound him homeward,
the blocks flashing past, the street smoothing out
beneath the gliding wheels
and suddenly there were trees again,
and little shops, and corner markets and maybe
a few too many goddamn Starbucks, but all in all
glad
to be home,
feeling his skin-tight luck
enveloping him so completely
that it couldn't possibly be fair,
but it was fading already,
swallowed by the good smell
from the kitchen and the familiar
carpet beneath his feet,
and he hung his ballcap
tiredly on the peg by the door
and went to see about
his family.

Carriage

that time in the taxicab
when you
were all I wanted
blurred from booze
and flushed from running

but far too soon we
arrived
and as I dug into my folds
to pay the fare,
I recognized
that same old driver

1992

I remember being on
a train
watching the night
fly by behind the glass
and it was a
dark mystery
that old America
still offline
for a few years more
god, I had no idea
how precious it was,
that ignorant analog world
waiting to invent
its own death
to drown in minutia
strangled by connection
all things known
and searchable
yet still
striving ever onward
to upgrade
adding more memory
halving the response time
accelerating the instantaneous
like a madman
scratching around for
just the right word,
and
lucklessly
finding it

Consensus

The people
in the square
 nod
and sometimes
 smile
and rarely
 speak
but mostly
 know
because the town is
 small
and mostly
 White.

Vow

just one strong statement
before I lean back against
the crisp sheets
and do the long inward dive –

give me one mighty
yawp,
shattering the sky and
scattering the birds that circle
around my cooling skull-

just one giant geyser,
spewing up through this
palace of white and hopeless health,
drenching the nurses
and greasing the doorknobs-

and when they wheel me away
make me ready with that last gasp,
so that by god they'll know it's
a man
they're strolling down that
long white hall

Up On High

at last call
the moon is cold on you
like an unblinking eye
and you,
pregnant with a night's swallowing
- endless attempts
at becoming
unseen,
and to
 unsee -
scatter along the pavement
like loose change,
in pieces but
still cursedly intact,
destroyed
but still huffing,
absolved
but not forgiven,
watched
but not
watched out
for.

SAMPLE in 15

(submitted to a prospective employer requesting a writing sample in which the applicants were instructed to discuss their favorite animal in 15 words or less)

Dog (me)

barks, mutters, bites

- not aloud (not allowed!) -

but still jumps

through the

hoop

that long first summer

that long first summer
We tunneled into bed
like burglars and knew
that everyone
was wrong

but the rippling of
Your youthful haunches
was not sufficient ballast
to counter the sagging
of My dead weight,

plunging Us into muck

it took Me years
to come clean

and You were long gone
having absorbed and discarded
numerous protégé'
married for money
and wrinkleless
eyes

now We're both
locked up in these
suburb walls,
Me, playing my
electric guitar like some
grotesque bearded
teenager
You, putting off
that class
You're meaning to take
at the community college,
scowling at the stepdaughter
who blows sweet breath
on hot cereal
and pays You
absolutely
no
attention

Really

The tragedy lies not
in the chance that
is excessively
wasted

but in
the chancelessness
that is excessively
tasted

Young Man's Blues

and are these the days
so grand and gone by?
trickling down Time's thigh -

are these the glorious sunbursts of youth?
seeping, sap-like
down limb

these days which will soonest be
our shared-together
his(and her)story -
all I wanna know is

where's the golden halo light
of youth to bathe me
in innocence
and render me
utterly without fear for
one
goddamn
minute -

christ, it'll only get
worse.

Intervention

Beckon backward
to that You
you knew -
 wave your hands
and shout
shout
shout

he doesn't listen
and he cannot
Stop.

Advice

Push hard
through the befuddling
whiplash of
Detail
but don't sink too deep
into the cozy Cosmic
armchair, neither -
keep your
eye on the
goddamn Ball
(in other
words)

Blues for Jack and Me – Mostly Me

in between endless long gone-bad jokes
cracked with decades
like the horn
he heaved up at last to
his lips and puffed out and settled down
and began to blow for real,
Jack was beautiful for
5 minutes

and I was kinda there,
at the bar, watching and listening
and wanting to breathe in the moment,
to extract something of fineness
from Los Angeles,
but I was mostly itchy and absent,
already leaning toward the door
and my car down the block
and the corridor along
the 405
where I would leave my money
with young black men, curbside,
hurrying home,
right around the time Jack
was finishing his last set
of that weekly gig,
mopping his brow and putting the horn
in its old stickered case, signaling the
impossibly perky young waitress
for a drink, tired –

I would be puffing up
my own overandover 5 minutes
of what was never beauty,
not even before I got hooked,
not even later,
when I put it down
and picked up
This,
just a shame,
cause Jack's gone now
and I mostly
missed him.

Black Dog

It reaches up
out of the ground
like a hand, and you shake
in the dry wind,
waiting for it all to
pass
-knowing all the while
that
This
is why you came
and the rest
is just lucky time
between the
shaking

Free Fall

The possibility of
Lapse
exists ever-ly
out there
buzzing like flies in the night air
that smothers the city
and locks in the sweat
and bars the windows with
shadow,
rattling the beasts inside
and you wrap your nails
around the glass,
waiting to be cooled
but rising yet,
hotter than Shame,
stronger than Guilt
taller than
Sorry –
and then you're out the door
and there is always a bad move
waiting
when you finally hit the streets
in search of it,
like there is always
a bottom to hit
when you are done
falling

Moving

Clouds
over the
left behind
fall back
mirror-ward
closer than they
appear but moving
away into desert
dust and
memory while the
sky
waits ahead to
cover us
and whatever storms
we will brew
there

Relapse

the rain rolls down
your teeth
as you gnash at taxis
and girls in slickers,
the wet night expelling you
like a moist muscle
into the glare of
the next day
and
the slow climb
back

Home

You can't outrun it, sucker
dancing as fast as you can and still
and always
that black hole
that appears beneath your feet
maybe on a sunny carnival day
you with your girl
licking on something sweet
alive with promise
and just laid,
but when the ground
opens up again
it's as if you'd
never left,
and home ain't
where you dance
it's where
you hang

Very Becoming

the pain is
that life
becomes
us
- is all
we're good for -
whatever it is we
are
 here
before we're
gone.

Promise

and when one day
we go bad together
and our bodies,
now such fun
become sick and broken
and burdensome,
and I must watch pain
flicker across the eyes
which now hold only youth
and love for me
i will love you harder
and stronger than
even the death which swoops
like a hawk at our upturned faces,
and we will
 still
Win.

The Last Gasps

they're 3 tonight,
slaving in the corner,
bass/drum/piano
thrumming along
while salesman make naked passes
and cigars are lofted and puffed out
and the waitresses scurry with frozen grins
and sloe gins
and cleavage,
 40 years ago they might
have been stars,
these 3,
wailing at the Vanguard,
lavished in Down Beat,
studied by schoolboys,
instead of relegated to the Oak Room
at the Fairmont from 8 to 11,
soothing the post-happy-hour
grope and guzzle
because it is not 1946
 - and in the middle of
"Black Narcissus"
the piano man quotes
"Black Coffee" and they all nod and smile,
getting it, not even –
at this late stage of the dying of an art form –
looking at the audience,
they're alone in the living room,
they're 3 in the corner,
they're talking
to themselves,
like 3 old friends convened for
a last chat before they all go
their separate ways,
invisible, into
some strange new
history.

Eternum

every day we fight the weary dread of History
grapple with newspaper phantoms
tell towering, majestic and disposable lies to each other
like scattering seeds in the junkyard hoping to grow
hope

restrain the basic decency that we might survive
tunneling inside ourselves and peering out, frightened and bitter
blindly groping each other in bars, sodden and dank, hands
covering groin and breasts, searching for a
heart

Retreating: falling back to attempt love for those who would destroy us
to wring compassion and character from our endless defeat
to unearth soothing reason and rationale
to commit only to humor
to get a little distance from the whole godawful
mess
to find God carefully camouflaged in the jungle doom,
charging over the hill like the cavalry at the last possible minute

But the road keeps unwinding, across time and tantrum,
between the shards of our futile struggles in the mirror
among the ravaged corpses of our one-night-stands
along the chasm of our miscommunications
inside the hollow windows of our tired eyes
over the lines of our faces and the tracks of our clownish tears
beyond our ability to know or see it

Artistic License

go ahead and run with it for now,
sling scoops of cruel
like a baby in the
mud,
it's okay
it's all in quotes anyhow, and
you can always
reclaim your goodguy skin
later –
it was a "difficult time",
you'd "lost your faith"
you weren't
"happy"

Duck and Cover

he started backing out
of the corners,
reneging on the blood vows,
going back on the big talk
of his younger days,

reconsidering some of those write-offs
letting the doubt come trickling in
through the cracks of the years

what was that nonsense he called love?
slumped up against her
in a booth on Western Ave.
soiled with smoke and dripping food stamps
it's hard to believe

but it's never too late to
get fat and fuzzy,
that simpering child-bride was mail-ordered
they say – okay, kinda bitterly
(you should see *their* wives)
but it wasn't right the way he
dropped Mary without even a note

scooted on back behind the lines
to graze on good wine,
swirling in candlelight,
wingtips and all,
and they halfway knew all along
it was coming, but you couldn't help yourself
the kid had charm,
and really you gotta pity the poor sonofabitch
ain't no way he's happy
over there
it can't be that easy

maybe the saddest part

maybe the saddest part
is the ebbing
of indignation
at
how few tracks I've left
on this flown earth –
I've not much mucked it
up,
been mostly frozen it seems,
worried and always
thinking it
 to Death,
well,
I made it.

And all I got to say is

LIVE
while you're livid

(dummy)

Mine

can't quite decide whether
it matters,
to make your
stinking mark? or
to
let time alone
to steal itself back from you

i have my own forever
to make up
my own
mind
in my own
Time

The Girl's Eyes

the girl's eyes
tell you pretty lies
that feel so nice
against your ears
like gentle lapping waves
and you never have to go
too deep and you never
have to get hurt
or struggle for shore

she does this without twitching
because you bring the muscle
and she the window

better than those you see
in the mirror every morning,
razors and red,
rubbing away the black night with knuckle
groaning into the birth of
another day

the girl's eyes
are your eyes
to blink
your eyes to smoke and drink
and when you're done
you close them
and someone
wheels them away

The Days Gone By

The days gone by
assume proportions of majesty and tragedy
like ships barely visible in the fog
you wonder where they're going
and know that you cannot know
and are transfixed by your
ignorance

The days gone by
are girls who kissed you once
and it meant nothing
both of you being drunk
and caring little for each other
but it still turns you on
thinking of it
as you lie beside your
fat and faithful wife

The days gone by
summon song from silence
rear back and snort
like dogs of war
make you stand a bit straighter
while you tell some slack-jawed
teenage cretin:
I Was There

The days gone by
keep you in a position of eternal
prayer
nose to your navel
wondering at the beauty of
death, how it bestows grace
and solemnity to even
the fucking cartoon commercials
that sold you soap
back when you were freckled and
pure

The days gone by
Are gathering in number
as your grip loosens
and you wonder why you never
took more precaution

tethered yourself more tightly
hoarded life a little more
instead of spending it
like coins in a jukebox
for songs you
hardly heard

The days gone by
are so much more beautiful
Now
than when you lived them

Not Done Yet

behind her eyes
covered with thin rice-paper
skin and dark spots
like continents,
are wheezing gasps of memory
flickerings
of the life
that used to grow here
before it was replaced
by all these tattooed and
pierced young bodies
and she's not done yet,
still taking up
a tiny space
where she can find it,
a bit of shade
while the big healthy pups
leap and bite
out there in the sun,
on their vanishing patch of
earth, and she
smiles, hardly seeing any of it now,
but knowing that
their sun is the same
as what warmed
her, even though it
seems a little dimmer,
there's still plenty
and no need
to worry,
it's not done yet

Whaddya Got?

He figured to go back
underground,
but he kept tunneling down
five or ten feet and
hitting these big
mainlines that said
PG&E –

 -coulda swore he had
the right spot-
but he moved a few inches over
and broke through the earth
thinking

 farewell dismal mainstream acclaim –
when
POW
he ran into
this big mass of wires bound up
by a tag
that said
PAC BELL

and now he's getting pissed
baked on all sides by billboards
nobody even noticing his
tattoos

and after fruitless hours of attempted hitchhiking,
straggled up out of Amtrak,
two hours late,
desperate for a cigarette
and made his way
like a salmon
to Times Square,

but it was already
gone.

Another Mr. Bridge

you try to bury yourself
in work maybe,
beat back the black
once
twice
three times more
submerge your one self
in a suit
and call it
 skin
sit, cross-legged,
boring the hostess,
wondering why you don't feel
better,
why you can't get warm

and on days
when the wind
mutes the traffic
and the sky twists itself into some
familiar shape
from your boyhood,
you loosen the knot at your neck
and take a real mouthful
of air,
the immensity
of what life can – with the right luck –
be
(but usually isn't)
roaring in your throat
like the ocean,
 and you might
as well
call that
wisdom, because
that's as close
as you'll get
this time around

Ode

them times you want to do
violence to the world,
to shiv that knot of bile
at your center and fling it
in the eyes of the woman
in the next lane, to put out her
cigarette with a pure heavenly stream
of urine,
to expel your failure
and smear it on the coat of a
blind man's dog,
to pluck out your eye
and roll it down the lunch counter
where it drops into the lap of
a flushed cheerleader,
staining her thighs
with blood so red and
peeping,
to summon the waste of yourself
and mold it into a towering
joyfully hateful
obelisk that leans in the wind
and casts a big chilly
shadow,

 them are the
TV
times
 round here

Vigil

the shadows falling across your face
like bodyguards moving
to block the bullet,
those lips that held cigarettes like
rose stems,
the way they dangled there
fearless,
the way the IV
dangles there,
the way the bedsheets crease
the cold indifference of it all –
and the only fear
in this room
belongs at last
to you

Stuck

what pins us to this
dead ball in the black?
the gluey muck of
hope

slumped over the wheel,
2-inch ash casting a shadow
like a crow's beak
lapward,
mouthing the good news
we continue to bring
never dreaming to
uncling

Traffic

the car rolls through the intersection
and fleeting glances are caught of
faces squinting into the sun;
scolding a child in the rear-view mirror;
hurriedly lighting a cigarette
while the light is red;
gazing into space

and my feelings about the faces
blink green
or
blink red
and some days I am glad to be
behind that safety glass,
singly, selfishly occupying my coffin-like space,
guzzling oil like a piss-drunk ten-gallon bastard,
alone in the swarm -
and some days
I would let go a limb
to crawl
into the front seat of
Anyone's rusted Buick
and let them run their fingers
through my starving hair

some days it is Them
but on my good days
I know that
it is all We
and We
are all
driving in the same
narrowing
circles
like facepainted clowns
in a
house full of mirrors

Nature Poem

Generations come and go

The earth gets older

trees air and soil
aging yet so much more slowly than
the truly endangered
We

the momentum slackens perceptibly
and no one knows why
- we write it off
as nostalgia
which is, of course,
foolish and dismissible

the same sun burns us,
the winds ruffle head after head

it is our time now

Papa

the fight is not what you thought
and the enemy is not the same
as at who you first aimed
your youthful punches,
jabbing playfully,
an eye to your glistening reflection,
savoring the moment
until this treacherous
Now
when suddenly
the light is fleeing the room,
and those on the sidelines
can no longer hurt or help you,
alone at last
with tired hands
and a inkling
of the danger

A Few Pounds

that's still you
inside of
what time has draped
over your shoulders,
over your thighs and waist and fingers
to insulate you from
the unwanted attention
of those endless older men, with their
tans and rings and
understanding,
which they used
like master thieves
to pick the lock of a door that would have
swung open with a simple honest
push,
and when they were grunting
above you, their eyes turned inward
away from you and toward a pleasure
that you were only
an incidental appendage of,
you thought not kindly
of those goods purchasable
with the currency of your
rich young body,
and now
your vow of poverty in place
your husband unaware
what revolutions it once inspired
(that weight in the bed beside him)
it only takes one glance
at your unchanged eyes
to know that I am more boy still
than man

Glimpse

I stood outside the bar
and looked in
while I was waiting
for my wife to finish in
the bathroom.

It had been a good dinner,
many courses, and a fine
tip.

I stood outside the bar
and looked in
and saw myself there,
younger and more shabbily dressed
following the barmaid's ass with red eyes
gripping that bottle of Bud
and waiting.

That young man
is in me still,
buried but still breathing
capable of asserting himself
given a sufficient accumulation
of tragedy.
Cancer, maybe
or
my wife never comes back from the bathroom.

I stood outside the bar
and looked in
and knew that I can never
truly vanquish that
frightened, bitter,
desperate young man.
He will wait inside
-and with any luck
die inside -
me,
 never having been given
a second chance to
destroy the both of us.

My wife emerges, smiling,
and I turn without regret

and loop my arm through hers, thinking
maybe nothing will go wrong.

The night is beautiful.

It is easier to believe.

The Myth of the Starving Artist

I leaned back in my easy chair
and watched my easy trees
since attaining all I'd wanted for
I have no use for please

no struggle here on easy street
no landlord at my door
you'd think that I'd have less to say
instead I find there's more

New Orleans, 1993

we would meet in
Jackson square
at noon
 one drum
 a sax
 a harmonica

it was so hot that August
and as soon as we had enough
for a couple of tall beers
we'd quit
and lie in the shade

Red talked about Chicago
while we listened to
the real musicians
beat it out
under the yellow sun,
the sunburned tourists of the Quarter
pelting their hats with coins
and moving on

one day Red didn't show
and me and Skinny Bobby tried it alone,
but Bobby only knew
the words to one song
and we played Iko Iko
for 2 hours
 one drum
 a harmonica

when we gathered
the few bills
like leaves
from the hat,
Bob said
he knew a house connect
and we each got
a couple of rocks
and smoked in silence
huddled behind the Napoleon House,
our eyes like demons
and our instruments upturned
on the pavement

we did it that way a few more times
before calling it quits and
going our separate ways,
moving deeper
into a life
without
music

Carson's Town, Georgia

black girl
at the gas station
asked me
why I wanted to go downtown

"ain't nothing there"

but I went anyway
not understanding
the South

and stared at the
boarded-up
buildings, the
empty eyes
of old windows

decided I wouldn't stop here
to get a job

later found
a whore
between the vacant slabs
of former American
industry

made a deal
and currency was exchanged

drove away that night
and went on to the next town

they were all the same,
dying
 everyone gone
but the whores
watching over
the ruin
and dispensing cheap pleasure
to tourists
like
 mayors

False Advertising

I see you there
in bed, blinking
asking me why
I need to leave

in the bar, smiling
sadly
asking me why
I won't stop drinking

in the park
that time
asking me why
I won't take off
my sunglasses,
why I keep wanting
to sit down and
smoke

and I hear your voice
coming through the wires
that last phone call
when you finally began
to be angry,
but you still didn't
understand why it had to
be like this,
why I couldn't have
gone on being the man
that I briefly,
but far too successfully
impersonated
that perfect
first
night

Lost

the streets I walked when
furrowed and young
have been paved and
repaved,
windows bricked
and words wiped away

that bar I romanticized
for years, it's been
dozed
the demo crew
wiped clean
countless years of
ceaseless inadequacy
with wrecking ball,
in a matter of minutes,
but it took a lot
of whiskies
to knock me down

hotels have sprung up alarmingly
walls laid flat
lots filled in
green turned to brown
and back to green
the old finally expiring
and the new sprouting
its present tense on
the grave of my
used-to-be

frantically America changes
and I stand still, getting
slowly
lost

I used to know this place

those streets that supported my
scamper
those bartenders, waitresses
patrons and panhandlers,
the cast with whom I shared
my time here

on stage, not knowing
how to act
or when
or why –
all shuffled into shadow of
Then

and now
that I've learned
a thing or two,
all I want is for things
to stay the same
a little

you know?

god, that was a great bar,
in the way a bar can only be great
when it has been torn down
to make way for a hair salon
and you were 22
and barely getting laid
but luckier
than you
knew

so what of my now scenery
will bring pang
some not yet day
when I come back
and find it gone?

impossible.

these streets mean nothing to me
and I stopped drinking
years ago.

I stopped drinking
All Of It

years ago

-Seattle, 2008

in Paradise

in Paradise
you are left alone
with Yourself
to devise your own
Torture
without the encumbrance
of Damnation
or the blessing of
Sin

Eulogy

that man was like
a broken bowl
you kept filling
with your wounded love
dripping it
across the kitchen
throwing the same tantrum
over and over again
I confess I stopped listening

in fury
he was his whole self
and in tears
you were only a fraction

I saw the real of you recede
until only grim lips remained
and a furrowless botox'd brow
and fake tits
and numbered days

good-bye

Co Habit

there were bruises
and marks
and swelling that never went
down

there were soft places that roughened
like words you can't take
back

there was much crying
and bitter laughter
and long silent desolate stretches
of feigned indifference,
tempers like snakes
coiled in watchful
wait

there were bottle days
and powdered nights
and a horrible
unspeakable
mockery of
sleep

there was a crime
and there were victims
and guilt like air
moving in and out of us,
sustaining us even,
engines running on noxious fumes,
toxic
dependency

no one is
innocent

the punishment
is the
postponement
of
punishment

White Collar

BadBadBad

(chuckling wagfinger naughty whatcha gotta sayferyuhself)

God. Bless. America.

(graveyard severity drip from thin lip)

GoFreeMySonAndProsper

(of course verdict)

For Elizabeth

how to keep at bay
that feeling that life
is slipping away
like the tide withdrawing
leaving no treasure
thoughtlessly erasing the footprints
you labored at for centuries

loving first one and then another
and finally thousands
until love explodes
into a million pieces,
and rains back down on you
in a tepid fondness

attachments made and unmade
friends who mysteriously disappear
and others who won't leave you be
finally you tire of the effort
even as you cling to it
fearing most of all
the day when at last
they trouble you
no more

riddles in a gathering dark
old questions that melt into a resigned shrug
answers that arrive too late,
like flowers for a funeral
regrets that sting like
nettles
on your bare skin

The Narrative

the narrative is best understood
as perfectly
incomplete

probably the last thought
in my head will be
"almost"

it was planned this way,
but by no one
we can ever
know,
for reasons that are so veiled in
random
as to ever escape
our eyes

still, there's a kind
of comfort
in
the glimpses
we get

like the muffled sounds
of some treasured guardian
up late into the night,
cooking
 while we sleep

Chicken Scratch

mounting impotent rage of child wailing
mute

pulling back fist and letting fly into soft wall of sponge
harmless

weeping gallon tears of taut poverty that begs for sympathetic groan
alone

voice bouncing off shower walls surround starved loveless body flaccid dripping and
pale

typing scrolling searching printing all forms of freeware pornographic inter-connection
blues

digital screams in broadband night under vacant screensaver stars winking ordered and
cold

long fast walks through city sidewalk bustling with life too real to grasp sniff taste or
touch

steaming food through blue windows devoured by plump impervious cruel-eyed WASP
killers

scribble chicken scratch line after line in baking bungalow dreaming of acclaim and ripe
women

ageless years that crowd life into corner of shrinking room
unlived

voices shuffled like cards in a deck gets dealt to
no one

Age 20

Memphis was cold
that winter
and I worked outside
with my broom
and pan,
staring up at the gray sky
and peering in
the yellow windows
of the bar around the corner
from my rented room,
watching the black bartender
mixing beautiful
multi-colored potions I was still
one year young
for

I would return to my room
and listen to blues tapes,
watching the snow fall
and sometimes I think
I never left that room,
alone, but with my future
filling the room
like a kind of
company
and the good times
just around the
corner

Prayer

even if this is
all we have
and
hope is something
to outgrow
in time,
there is still
the rage
and the spectacle
and the sex
(for a time)
and, always,
even in
starched and flaccid
convalescence,
the unending bleat
of the Inner,
finally reduced to
one syllable, stating the
obvious over and
over like
a broken record:

ME

ME

ME

ME

ME

- the only prayer
that
(godlike) answers
itself

Rickie

I see you
in those bars
along Fairfax,
the sunlight cooling
in pools at your feet
on the corner stool
near the door,
busy heels and
wing tips slapping
on the sidewalk
inches from where you
so carelessly dug your grave
like a little girl
playing with something
precious
and you want someone
to take it away
before she
breaks it

The Last Thing

the last thing
reveals the original intention,
the beginning
mirrored in the end

dying the way you lived
you glimpse
not death
but life

entering
the darkness
you are surrounded by
the light
you leave behind

in this way
you
 and everything
are
immortal

Strive

Strive
for those qualities
which
in the City
would mark you
a sucker

Oven

friends fall away
like curtains from the window
and the glare from the
naked sun
turns your little room
into an oven
and your little self
into a muffin,
and the world keeps
taking bites until
there's only the crumbs of you
and what do you do?
Just like a man,
you scratch around
for a woman
to wipe you
up

Inheritance

hand upraised
with crumpled note and
brand-new pain
outstretched fingers
cannot call back the train
as it breaks free
of the station
like a man leaving a wife
the children unnoticed
waiting to grow up
burnt and bitter and fumbling
to lose lovers
that slip through
fingers
over and over
all over
again

Peace

Peace sweeps over you
in an unsettling sort of electric sweat
the nagging knowledge
that things are actually
okay
just as they are
and that your
precious little hustle
is nothing more than
the beating of
tiny wings
fluttering madly
to hoist this
thoroughly inert
Earth
and carry it somewhere
better, always
Better

The Old Haunts

when you return,
you can only return to

Where
and never to

When
and being

Now
your eyes seeking

Then
you see only

Them
living their

Now
unaware of the

Why
and the

How
of your

Then
and your

There
and they don't

Care
there is no

Where
there's only

We
and we can't

Share

it,
any of

It.

Almost

you can almost taste the victory
like the abrupt craving
for an old cigarette
that comes upon you,
flooding your mouth with saliva
and a remembered quench
of desperate need
as you lean wearily,
waiting for your coffee
watching the young breasts

you can just barely imagine
what it must be like
to win,
to be just that tiniest bit of
more
than you are – only a
cunthair's difference
but all the world knows
what a difference
it makes

in some alternate
version of time,
you stood before them
mouthing words of thanks
for their generosity
in anointing you,
feigning modesty
and fluttering fingers,
knowing you were
the shit

you carry this memory
of a world never born
in your ass-pocket
like a bottle you take out
and nip at
from time to time,
late at night,
senses blurred
and sleep forgotten,
dreaming of the almost-you
that could have been,

dreaming so hard
you can almost smell
your other skin,
feel those other shoes
encasing your other feet,
feel a gentle hand
on your other arm,
sweet scent
and all those EYES

On Authenticity

never having had a job
she sings so movingly
of a life of wandering indulgence and
restless longings for unnamable
needs,
sneering in truck stops
at the moored and shackled,
dreaming her
towering dreams, following
the white line on
the freeway that unravels
like an endless line of coke
at one of those
Laurel Canyon parties,
so much
emptiness and ennui
you just can't quite
stay away
 until
wizened and shriveled
voice like a trucker
and nicotine-stained fingers
she reinvents herself
as an earth mother
pregnant with normalcy
and hard-won wisdom
 – she was just a good old girl all along –
and this new role
fits her right somehow,
reminding you that
authenticity is always a dodge,
that only the truly gifted
can reflect our small lives
back to us, showing us
the beauty we never saw there
the countless times
we looked
with our
ordinary eyes

Punching Out

he's still behind the counter
thinking of the girl
who used to come in
to flirt with him,
teasing the blush
into his smooth cheeks
lingering over the displays

she's no longer young,
he realizes,
rubbing the sandpaper
on his face, watching
the clock,
20 minutes till 5

he would not recognize her
if she came in again
and if he did, he would
do nothing – he was not married then
that was the chance
and he missed it

she might be dead, of course
fat, married
pasty and ignorant,
voting for the wrong people

he thinks of her sometimes
when he is making love
to his wife,
the way she used to look up
at him under her lashes,
eyes lowered in a mockery of shyness,
fingering the skittles,
sighing with feigned indecision,
enjoying her affect on him,
more mischief than malice
only recently aware of her beauty,
but not yet trusting it completely

we had not hardened into our shapes
then,
he thinks

we were still pouring
into the mold

we could have
gone
any way

it's 5 now
and he pulls the apron
over his head and heads
to the back to
punch out

it didn't seem that way though,
then,
he remembers

it didn't feel fluid,
any more than it does now.

it seemed I was always
who I am

and yet, when
I remember her,
it is with a sense of grief,
not for some customer
whose name I never even
knew,
but for the scarlet
on the skin of that
scared young boy
who is like a ghost
haunting this house
I have built
and called
me

Abdicated

tomorrow I may
crack the blinds
but it's so much
easier to snipe from behind
staying out of the fray
launching my precious little scuds
into the
wide empty air

they tell me to get my
hands dirtier, but I say
why

why dwell there in the light,
just one more face
turned upward like a
flower to the sun
for approval

I will be my own sun
my own shade
one more head wagging
in this wounded world

Love Letter to The World

big world
we have grown old together

we never knew
each other well
but I always
liked you

it was an abstract
fondness
one not dwelled upon

I was otherwise
occupied, you see

but you were not

you were busy killing us both
with
Life

* * *

the city will make you crazy
but you find ways to relax

perhaps twice a year
we drove to the country
and put down a blanket
to keep the bugs off our skin

at one point we talked a lot
about how everyone
was getting married

then they all had kids
and we talked about that

later, when they were all
dying
it began to seem
as if we had talked
around
something

for so long, that
whatever it was
was lost

* * *

you had it all along
big world
hidden in the folds
of your rolling hills
and the wink of
your evening skies

we peered into screens
for years and years
like moles
in the dark,
groping for touch

you watched us
so patiently
like a lovesick fool
waiting for us
to catch your eye
so that we might
remember

12/31

to open one small crack
in the stone wall
of the world
would be enough
and

 if not
then
to allow the impenetrable
mute face
its own beauty
and

 if not
then
to wail
with futile fists
and tears like dancing Rockettes
at What will not
give
despite the show
you've put on
and

 if not
then
to open one small crack
in the stone wall
of your heart
and let the world
In
like light
through the window
and, then, at last
the brickish taste of
all those weary
Whats
slips from your tongue
and you newlike remember
 Why

Whitney, 1983/2011

face breaks down
only in future
that eyes can't see

voice trickles away
far around bend
that ears cannot hear

skin stretched
around jagged bones
fragile beyond
touch of
babyfat days
with heartbeats and
clamor

the magic ebbs
so slowly
like a leaking boat
you cannot feel the
dip
the core of yourself
subtracted
thimble by thimble

love stretched across
the yellowline
flattened by
riderless time
a spec
first in the headlights
and then the rear view
and you've almost
arrived,
looking back at
Then
wondering:
where was
 Now?

Tenses

the poor vanished
younger us
who never cared for
its future self
like an ungrateful child
pissing its presents away
while the future
it
watches helplessly
from a
just beyond tense
too far
to be much of a threat
but closer
than anyone
knows
until it's
 past

Love in 3 Parts

the
sweetness
of how important
it seems,
briefly,
to be loved
by the right
another
in this blurry
world

* * *

I bathed in her
covered all over
with her
and me and us
I was submerged
in it
waiting for it
to enter me more deeply
through pores or mouth or
eyes

* * *

like droplets
on glass
love is wiped away
leaving
only the traces
that spell your
life