

Trashman

Collected Poems 1988-2001  
by Chris Cefalu

Alone in America

Breakfast  
at McDonald's and  
dinner at  
Taco Bell  
and to sleep  
again,  
in the car  
parked in  
some neighborhood  
somewhere  
beneath the  
glow of porchlights  
as hidden families  
fight over the  
TV  
remote

and toothbrushing  
the next morning in  
Exxon before  
following the  
signs  
to the next place.

\* \* \*

Faces

in the cars

in the lanes

all around

me

\* \* \*

in the Chevron, I  
walked in to  
wash my  
hands, held them  
under the faucet and a thin  
spray of water

appeared  
automatically,

turned,  
dripping, held  
my hands under  
the tube and  
warm auto  
matic

air  
dried, or  
sort-of-dried  
me,

wiped the  
remaining wet  
onto my shirt,  
walked out  
having touched  
nothing  
but  
myself.

## Castle

The  
threeblocksaway  
voice  
of a girl  
at midnight  
on a  
darkened rainslicked  
street  
    sounds like  
a castle  
when you are  
swimming home  
alone  
through the  
moat-like  
darkness of  
your own  
company.

Toward the End of a Long Night

Patiently,  
unborn,  
    my dreams wait  
for me to stop  
pacing the empty  
house and come  
    to bed  
    at last.

## Mobile

I love you  
so much  
I'd like to knock out  
all your teeth  
like the windows  
of a shiny, beautiful house  
and hang the stunning shards of  
your smile  
from the ceiling of my room  
on strings,  
and I'd lie on my bed  
and watch you  
twisting lazily  
grinning at me  
from up there.

The End

There come  
these  
suddenly obvious  
points of impasse.

    You are looking  
at a woman.  
She is sitting in  
a chair,  
not facing you.

        There is something wrong  
        and you have  
        been arguing.

She is looking  
at something that  
you can't see.  
Suddenly you are afraid  
that she will never  
look at you again.

    You speak,  
anything,  
to try to fill  
the silence that is slowly  
swallowing  
    everything.

You say:  
    "You know, I think  
    that I really don't  
    know you at all  
    anymore."

    And then  
she does look,  
turning to you  
with blank eyes.  
And she does  
not argue,  
or  
say a  
word

And you turn away  
from her  
and  
your eyes

come to rest  
where she was looking,  
because  
you can  
see it now.

## The House of Breakfast

It is always morning  
at the  
House of Breakfast.

I like it here.

I like this happy  
place where people yawn  
and stretch forever, and read  
the paper and say  
"Good Morning" to  
each other, and  
the pretty girls  
stare dreamily  
into their coffee  
and the eggs are  
always  
sunny side up.

## Today

It's always  
changing,  
I know.  
But today,  
for me,  
America  
is:

    a fourteen-  
year-old girl  
wearing long underwear  
under a black  
mini-skirt,  
tons and tons of  
make-up,  
cowboy boots  
and see-through top,  
standing in the middle  
of a parking lot  
smoking a cigarette  
and looking  
very  
bored.

Macon, GA.

They're standing on the platform  
at the Greyhound  
in Macon.  
I heard them say  
"New York"  
and the hushed way  
they said it tells  
me it's their first time.  
Maybe they decided  
the night before  
in a beer-cloud bravado -  
    "Let's do it!"

two country kids  
invading the Biggest city  
in search of  
what? the  
usual.

But this morning,  
a little hungover on the  
chilly gray platform surrounded  
by strangers like me,  
the big plans seem tiny  
and they're feeling a little  
tiny themselves,  
clinging together, passing a  
Marlboro back and forth,  
waiting.

But now my bus  
is leaving for California  
and home, and  
they're just two specks vanishing  
on the platform, puffing  
and looking around,  
two more strangers along  
the way.

As my bus rumbles  
up the on-ramp,  
they are ghosts  
made real by guesswork -  
strangers

of my mind, and  
all I'll ever know  
about them originates  
solely in my imagination,  
and the desire to  
know more  
about our  
fellow  
passengers.

Limb

He didn't  
like his  
life  
and he didn't  
hate  
it either,  
but he  
grew  
          hateful  
all the same.

## Memphis Musings

Sitting alone  
in a strange room  
in a new city,  
    you really get  
a sense  
of how  
    out there  
the world is  
and how  
    in here  
you are.

Eventually,  
needing a nameless something,  
you go  
    out there.

    Out there  
won't come  
    in here  
so out  
you go  
like an  
uninvited guest,  
desperately hoping  
someone else  
will ask you  
    In.

1 + 1

I was  
at the  
bar,  
drinking for  
    one.

This guy came up,  
from behind,  
wearing a smile-face  
atop confident body-muscle  
and hair-commercial  
hair,  
and he ordered  
for  
    two.

I tried to  
remember the  
last time I  
ordered for  
    two.

He walked back  
to his other  
    one  
and I shifted a little  
on the stool,  
looked around,  
spied a  
    one  
at the end  
on the  
corner stool.

I got up  
unsteadily,  
reeling, rocking,  
consumed by  
mathematics,  
the simple equation  
flooding my  
brain  
like a new  
    theory,

pushing me toward  
her,  
and the  
solution.

Beforeplay

I sit at  
the piano  
in a new girl's  
apartment.

    She is looking  
at me over  
the keys.  
Her face is unreadable,  
hidden.

I look down  
at the row  
of black and white.

We both wait  
for that first  
note.  
That first sigh  
of relief  
between it and  
the second note.

By the third note,  
it's  
    music.

## Rebel Birds

Thoughts of  
you  
break off from  
the pack like  
rebel birds,  
soaring off, arcing  
into a  
new pattern,  
creating their  
own space,  
their own  
mind.

## Beginning

Waiting  
for a woman,  
waiting  
for sex, maybe  
love,  
waiting  
for it to cool,  
waiting  
for the  
other woman the  
other man,  
waiting  
to be discovered,  
waiting  
for the fights and  
the curses,  
waiting  
for the end  
and the next  
woman.

Waiting  
to start it all in  
motion.

The bell  
rings.

I go down  
to say  
hello.

you look  
lovely.

where  
should we  
go?

Girl

Girl  
with  
bruise  
    behind me  
in line  
at the convenience  
    store.

I walk out  
and the man  
is in the  
T-bird  
waiting for his  
    cigarettes  
and  
I look at him  
and  
walk back to  
my car  
wishing  
I had  
more guts,  
then  
correcting myself  
and wishing  
she  
did.

Next Town

New town.  
Old town.

This town.

MY  
town

the greatest town  
in the world...

Well back where  
*I* come from -

try Seattle

... ain't all  
it's cracked  
up -

When  
we  
get  
to  
the  
next  
town  
we'll -

How many are there?  
I'm running out  
of  
America

Been there  
been there

Naw, too  
big people  
unfriendly  
too hot nasty  
winters rent  
was cheap  
though whores

were cheap  
though

... told you  
in the beginning  
I couldn't  
stay long -

"I'll bet  
you have  
one in  
every..."

the people  
like moles  
never look...

I'LL BET

like moles

I'LL BET  
YOU HAVE

like moles  
they never look

I'LL BET  
YOU HAVE  
ONE IN  
EVERY

not even  
if you  
were on  
fucking  
fire

EVERY  
TOWN

they just  
rush on by,  
goddamn em'

ONE

IN

EVERY

TOWN

and

never

even

look

Immobile

Perhaps

better

off

we'd be

after all

without these

fond

memories to

look back on,

I think

maybe

## Capsule

We spread  
    the map  
across the table,  
she and  
I, at  
    Taco Bell  
and we were young  
and in motion  
and she had not yet  
left me and  
neither of us had  
been married before,  
then only 20 and  
spreading the map  
across the  
table there, and  
I said  
    where  
and she said  
    there  
pointing at  
    the map and  
    the country and  
    all countries and  
    all maps  
spread before us  
there, in  
Taco Bell  
when we were  
young.

Affirmation at Dusk

He smokes  
thoughtfully on  
his front porch  
in the dusk.  
He is thinking about  
leaving his wife.

    He taps his  
ash into the  
dirt at  
the base of  
the flowers.

He thinks about it  
some more.

    But then  
it gets dark  
and the thought  
vanishes  
in the comforting  
familiar glow  
of the living room  
lights.

He drops the  
cigarette,  
steps on it,  
and turns,  
climbs the steps,  
humming slightly  
to himself,  
ready to  
go in  
now.

## Support System

Bad Night:

There were many  
famous men before me  
with these feelings  
but it does not  
cheer me to know that  
or to  
read the last  
forty pages  
of their  
biographies.

Man

Man  
waiting.

Shuffling feet.  
glance  
  
at  
  
watch.

Others,  
shuffling,  
glancing,  
waiting for the  
same bus.

He watches them.  
It might take years  
of watching before  
he moves over  
and really speaks  
to one.  
But he'll do it  
because the  
species must go on,  
but mostly because  
he has finally  
figured out  
how to  
wait.

## Goodnight

There's a  
sensation  
just before falling  
asleep at 3 am. on Saturday night  
after 2 joints  
and 17 beers -  
    what I  
imagine death will  
someday feel like:  
a gentle letting go  
and a sadness  
that this is all  
there is, but  
also a gladness at  
having earned  
my rest at last -  
    and thinking  
maybe I'll do  
it different  
next time.

## Devotion

I love  
you still,  
whatever  
it is  
you've become  
now,  
I love what  
you were  
then, as  
if it's  
still a  
real person,  
as if you  
still sleep  
warm beside  
me in  
bed and  
never got  
angry or  
wise  
or woke  
up.

## Handy's Children

The old men  
dance to  
blues music  
in the  
park on Sunday  
and nobody's  
watching,  
the park empty,  
the newspapers  
skipping lightly  
over the  
grass.

## The Sacred Moment

The  
sacred moment  
is always  
ruined  
by someone  
laughing too hard  
or dropping  
a glass  
or snoring,  
                  or by the fool  
who always  
has  
to point  
it out.

Untitled

She's  
thin and beautiful  
again now and  
has a baby.

Her old man's  
gone. He  
didn't like what  
fucking did  
to her body.

She would  
have got an  
abortion if  
he'd asked  
but he didn't.  
He just went  
and now she's her  
old body,  
her old self  
again and  
she wonders  
if he might come  
back.

Once, when  
he was  
coming, he said  
he loved  
her.

When he  
left, he didn't  
look at her. She  
could see  
the disgust  
on his face  
and the urge to  
be elsewhere.

He closed the  
door as he left  
and she watched  
him out the  
window.

He looked unfamiliar  
as he was leaving.  
Like they'd  
never met  
and he was really  
moving backwards  
on his way to  
meet her  
for the first  
time.

## Me and Keith

I stood in front  
of 7-11  
at 8 in the morning  
and finally some guy  
on his way to work  
gave me a quarter  
and I was hungry  
but I bought  
cigarettes  
and gave one to  
Keith and  
we walked off and  
finished the whisky  
on a roof  
and I was so tired  
I wanted to sleep  
but Keith wanted coke  
and it was  
something to do  
so we hitched downtown  
but no one was selling  
who we could jack  
and we crashed  
down by the water  
with the gulls  
and the secretaries were  
eating lunch and  
they seemed like  
movie people  
and the waves were  
hazy and  
I was tired  
and I wanted a job  
and a home and  
a woman and a  
meal

    But I wanted to  
sleep more  
and when I woke  
up I felt  
better, ready  
for more  
and I didn't want  
a job anymore

I wanted some pot  
and Keith still wanted coke  
and the night stretched out  
before us  
and it seemed promising  
like a grand adventure  
after we stole some  
more whisky and had  
a few shots  
and life kept going  
like that,  
running all by itself  
like a machine  
with me hanging on  
and time standing  
still  
like an old man  
and we were  
23  
so it didn't matter  
we were just  
having fun Keith said  
don't worry so much  
and I was always  
tired

## Stranded

The one night stand  
may not  
mean much  
but it always  
seems important  
just before it  
happens, and  
the next morning  
it's so hard  
to find the value,  
but it's there,  
wedged between the  
mattress and the wall,  
tangled in  
the soiled sheets,  
in the space between  
your thigh and  
hers,  
          pressed together strangers  
in the morning.

It's in the space  
between the  
contact, bridging  
the gap like  
a cobweb glue,  
strands nearly  
invisible in  
the light.

## Rhetorical Question

Is there  
any word  
that means  
what  
it feels to  
wake up with  
your woman asleep  
and satisfied,  
and nowhere  
to go or  
be, just  
the early sun  
and her warm  
back and  
no  
words.

## Children

Ah,  
the truths  
shared in  
the bars,  
like pale  
ghosts  
    invisible  
in the  
daylight.  
Alas, the  
night cannot  
last forever,  
and ghosts lose their  
power over  
all but the  
children who  
appreciate them.

## Behind the Counter

The black boys  
come into  
the store.

They don't look  
me in the  
eye.

They aren't expecting  
anything.

They pay  
and leave.

That's  
all that  
ever  
happens.

## The Walk

Walking home  
after work.  
You smile at  
that same old man  
who's always out  
watering his roses  
at dusk.

    He had  
jobs too. They're  
done now.  
He's making  
things grow.

    His smile  
lends you dignity,  
makes some sense  
of the walk,  
and even after you  
pass him, and  
leave him behind  
on your way  
to other things,  
you are really walking  
toward him,  
waiting to  
catch up,  
straining  
upward like  
a

    flower.

9-1-1

They pinned  
my arms  
down,  
gave me some  
forms to sign  
first  
though.

## Widow Park

The children  
romp happily  
in the huge sandbox  
and the mothers  
sit on benches  
around the edge  
and smoke.

The eyes of the mothers  
are still very young  
themselves.  
They stare  
at the children  
tiredly.

One mother  
unwraps  
a sandwich  
that looks like it was made  
of dust and bones.

The kids play on and on  
tirelessly,  
using up their last seconds.  
The mothers wait,  
smoking cigarettes  
on the sidelines,  
for the kids  
to get older.

## Tenant

I lived there,  
in that old hotel in the middle  
of downtown for a few months  
when I was younger.

I delivered newspapers part-time  
in the downtown area  
and one of my deliveries was to  
an old man  
in my hotel.

He was on the eighth floor  
- the "monthly" floor -  
meaning people who got checks  
from the  
government.

He was very polite.  
I would set the paper on the table  
and he would say  
    "thank you"  
and as I would turn to leave  
he would croak  
"come over here, boy."

I would go to where he sat  
in a wheelchair  
by the window and he would rummage  
through the pockets of  
his pajamas for  
a quarter -  
my tip.

The pajamas were so old  
they frightened me  
although he did not.

He was very polite.  
He had lived all his life  
in New Orleans  
and now he was living his death there  
too.

One day

as we were acting out  
our usual ritual of me starting to leave  
and him calling me back,  
an indignant look came over  
his face as he ran his hands  
over his pajamas.

I waited patiently as he searched.  
"It's OK, really," I said.

"No!" he said with a sudden fury  
and for a moment I thought  
that he would rise from the  
wheelchair and  
slap me.

"I always give a quarter."

There was nothing I could do.  
I wanted to help, but I  
couldn't.

"I've lived here all my life."  
His voice was a hoarse scream.

His hands continued to move  
suspiciously,  
like one who has been  
robbed  
or cheated.

## The Last Set

He's an old bluesman.  
One of the last of  
the old great ones.  
We're sitting at a table together  
in a club in Memphis, TN.  
We're sharing a bottle  
of Canadian Mist between sets.  
His eyes are sad,  
haunted. Roaming the room  
like ghosts.  
I have all his records.  
I want to ask him  
what it was like  
to play with Muddy Waters,  
with Willie Dixon,  
but I know he's given  
those same answers hundreds  
of thousands of times and  
I am ashamed to ask.

We drink silently from a  
pint I smuggled in.  
Occasionally an attractive young  
white woman comes up with  
a disk for him to sign  
and he smiles politely and  
always takes a big shot  
after they leave.  
One elderly black couple  
is drinking quietly in  
the corner, waiting  
for the last set.

The old bluesman lights up  
one last Pall Mall,  
looks around, fidgets  
with his tie as  
if he's not sure, maybe  
he'll just slip out  
the back...  
I remember the photographs  
I saw,  
Chicago in the 1950s  
when he was much younger

especially around the eyes,  
and there are so many  
things I want to say  
but there is nothing  
to say, no connection  
to be made between the two  
of us, only the  
whiskey and what we  
both remember.

"Gotta go to work,"  
he says, taking a last  
shot and heading toward  
the bandstand.

I see him the next night  
at a different club.  
We don't talk this time  
but I see him at  
a table with another young admirer  
and another bottle.  
Tomorrow he'll leave  
for St Louis and a three-nighter  
at a club in the  
University District,  
fifteen dollar  
cover.

I take one last look  
at him, alone  
there at the table with  
his fans, in his old  
brown suit, killing himself  
in style  
and I think briefly of  
a photo I have of him  
on the bandstand at Theresa's  
in 1955, sweat dripping down  
onto the black women in  
the front row whose mouths are  
open, shouting, probably  
saying "go!" "make it!"  
"tell it, daddy!"  
(one dollar cover)  
and I leave  
before the  
last set.

## A Night in the Valley

they were big  
and red-faced and worn,  
with arms thick like cables,  
and blunt hard faces  
and thick square hands  
and  
they talked all night long  
and they talked nothing  
but shit  
and ideas were exploding  
in my head  
every time I leaned down  
to do another line  
    but I restrained myself  
and I talked of cars  
and girls  
and the new day bartender  
and faggots and fights  
and the talk went on and on  
endlessly, like dry sand,  
the rest of them  
punching each other  
and laughing hollow empty  
lifeless laughter  
and I kept thinking:  
    one more line  
    and I'm getting  
    the fuck  
    out of here  
but it was hours  
and hours later  
that I finally left,  
with a small bag  
for myself,  
and I got home  
and tried to write it out -  
all the things I'd held back  
for fear of seeming  
different,  
but they were gone,  
seared from my mind  
by the endless pathetic  
stupidity of the hours with  
them

and furious  
I did four lines  
and, shaking and sweating,  
I broke some things  
and made some phone calls  
I would regret later,  
to people who had long ago  
lost patience with me,  
then drank a pint  
of whiskey  
and collapsed, listening  
to some idiot  
on the radio  
singing about  
the  
working  
class.

## We Ran Her Down

we ran her down  
over by Sepulveda  
and Steve slapped the shit  
out of her  
while I waited in the truck  
and worried about cops  
and then we got high  
and Steve talked about  
what a whore she was  
and I agreed,  
feeling agreeable,  
although I didn't know her  
and really,  
she seemed  
nice,  
what I saw  
of her.

## You Hunker Down

you hunker down,  
drunk,  
in some bungalow  
deep in the Valley,  
the radio on,  
apartment door open,  
summer heat and tight mexican girls  
not yet pregnant but soon -  
    and after a six-pack  
you don't worry about the bottles  
crouched around your room  
in tiny Manhattans,  
or what the neighbors will say,  
but you politely retire  
to the bathroom  
for the line or the fix,  
and you stare  
at the tv in your hawaiian shirt,  
waiting for the inspiration  
while the palm trees sway  
and the years roll  
by.

Age 16

falling leaves  
and winter wind.

I lean against a brick wall  
and wait to be older.

the men in the park  
pay me no attention.

there are still many books to read.

there is still  
plenty of time.

## It's Time

it lurks just  
at the edge,  
waiting for you to slip  
    and you drink to keep it there  
and you drink  
for other reasons and also  
for no fucking reason  
at all

and then one day it's  
just  
there,  
no longer biding its time  
pacing the sidelines  
but standing there  
grinning in the doorway  
and the bottle  
spins, empty  
on the bare  
floor  
in the almost empty  
room.

## Love Always Wants More

she was a redhead  
with big taut  
thunderous dancer thighs  
and after she'd squeezed me for awhile  
I almost told her I loved her

- she was clean and strong and  
had a good heart -

but mainly I just wanted to say it  
to someone, because that's what so many  
of the songs and poems are about,  
and I felt like I ought to get in on  
the action

but after,  
lying, smoking and flicking the ash  
out her 2<sup>nd</sup> story window  
I was glad I hadn't said it,  
because I didn't feel it anymore,  
just at peace and wanting nothing  
and love always wants more,  
the words lingering in the air  
long after the sheet is dry  
and the cigarette has burned out  
and the fool has gathered his clothes  
and crept away into  
the night.

## Nostalgia Act

I lost the thread  
somewhere  
along the way,  
but I can still  
perceive  
the absence,  
fading slowly,  
like a handprint  
on the car door,  
and when the  
surface is clean  
and the memory  
dissolved,  
what is  
missing  
then?

she waited for me -

she waited for me  
even when she  
must have known  
I would not come.

but she waited  
just in case.

she waited for me  
to rise above  
the usual  
and be better than me.

and I waited too.

both of us,  
waiting.

and no one

arriving.

## Traveller

lean back into the light  
part your perfectly young lips  
and crinkle your face  
into that smile that is for me  
quickly before we get older  
and it all goes away  
quickly  
I need it now  
because I've seen later  
and this right here,  
us on this blanket,  
spring break,  
blue sky,  
light breeze,  
Seventeen -

this is as good  
as it will  
get.

## We

we were only  
bound for this,  
you and I,  
from the beginning,  
but I wouldn't trade  
any of it,  
except perhaps  
for the end,  
which will come  
I know,  
but so slowly  
that,  
          stupidly,  
I'll probably  
forget by then  
how much  
I wished for it  
now.

## Over the Fence

it's 3 am  
and in the dusty  
parking lot behind  
    Jay's Tavern  
two drunks are  
playing  
stickball.

    inside Jay's  
the bartender  
is washing  
glasses.

    on the street  
out front  
people are flagging cabs,  
piling into them  
in laughing groups  
of twos and threes.

    the bat is a hunk of board  
that one of the drunks  
ripped off the fence.

    the ball is  
a crumpled beer can  
with some dirt  
and pebbles  
stuck in there  
to make it really  
    fly.

the drunks are in their  
40s or 50s -  
    a long way from childhood.

one of them knocks the can  
over the  
    dumpster -

    a home run

and he laughs  
and stumbles  
around the bases  
in the perfect glee  
that comes from swinging

once,  
really hard,  
and connecting,  
watching it rise, rise,  
arcing upwards above  
the dirty earth...

knocking it  
over the  
goddamn  
fence.

## Trashman

I threw away  
and then again  
and found the trash bin  
with profound regularity  
I was graceful in the dismissal  
impossible fall-away  
jump shotting one after another  
the round balls of women,  
friends, jobs, cars, books,  
dreams, reasons all-  
    until the dismal dawn of day without  
a single item left to chuck  
my room empty  
    but for me  
and all the space  
I had carved so carefully  
around my stiff-scared self began  
not so slowly  
to swallow me

and when I ran to the bin  
to retrieve what had been  
I found that someone  
had hauled it away.

## Last Poem

It was in the  
psyche ward that I realized finally  
that poetry is the internal syntax  
of the mad,  
the broken lines  
of broken minds  
often

    indenting  
for no reason,  
and it was then that I  
stopped writing it  
(having realized  
in one horrific 72-hour flash  
that I was indeed in the wrong  
place)  
    stopped cold.

It was then that I opened life,  
stopped “appreciating” it  
and began to see,  
to *be*  
    it

tore off the cover  
and found the words  
that had been there all along  
between the lines.

- Los Angeles, 12/06/00