

On Slow Learning

If you have ever owned
a tortoise, you already know
how terribly difficult
paper training can be
for some pets.

Even if you get so far
as to instill in your tortoise
the value of achieving the paper,
there remains one obstacle—
your tortoise's intrinsic sloth.

Even a well-intentioned tortoise
may find himself, in his journeys,
to be painfully far from the mark.

Failing, your tortoise may shy away
for weeks within his shell, utterly
ashamed, or looking up with tiny,
wet eyes might offer an honest shrug.
Forgive him.

Infirmities

Some mornings you know you've seen
much of this before.

The kind woman across the street
is lame, and her daughter is lame.

Some defect they've had since birth
is working to dissolve their bones.
The boy three doors down
is blind. And the idiot
girl who sweeps up at the market
insists all day on her own
strange tune. And sometimes they seem
happy enough and sometimes
you might find one alone, muffling
grief with a coat sleeve.

And the shy way the blind boy
laughs when he stumbles
makes you laugh with him some mornings.
Some mornings it hurts to see.

A Lot

*A little loam and topsoil
is a lot.*

—Heather McHugh

A *vacant* lot, maybe, but even such lit vacancy as interstate motels announce can look, well, pretty damned inviting after a long day's drive, especially if the day has been oppressed by manic truckers, detours, endless road construction. And *this* poorly measured semi-rectangle, projected and plotted with the familiar little flags upon a spread of neglected *terra firma*, also offers brief apprehension, which—let's face it, whether pleasing or encumbered by anxiety—dwells luxuriously in potential. Me? Well, I *like* a little space between shopping malls, and while this one may never come to be much of a garden, once we rip the old tires from the brambles and bag the trash, we might just glimpse the lot we meant, the lot we hoped to find.

Promise

Someone is to come, is now to come.
—Derrida

“When the Messiah comes,” we mumble as we pore over our knotted and confused translation. Should we listen we may hear with a blush that begins in the breast and rises, and seems even to reach the responsive leaves of the fringe tree overhead.

The responsive leaves of the fringe tree overhead fly back as if breathed upon, but that is surely due to the first gust of the gathering storm approaching, so we are not inclined to make much more of their quick flight than that, though we may wince under the *new*

compunction—the common failure to make more. How often and how clearly must we say these words before we finally hear them, and their weight reveals what mute hope they must have harbored all along, and without our notice, which we only now set down?

Having Descended to the Heart

Once you have grown used to the incessant
prayer the pulse insists upon, and once
that throbbing din grows less diverting

if undiminished, you'll surely want
to look around—which is when you'll likely
apprehend that you can't see a thing.

Terror sometimes sports an *up* side, this time
serves as tender, hauling you to port.
What's most apparent in the dark is how

the heart's embrace, if manifestly
intermittent, is really quite
reliable, and very nearly bides

as if another sought to join you there.

Memento

In some circles, skulls still serve as graphic and conventional choice, especially when what one hopes to call to mind is *Death's* indisputable if typically discounted imminence. Here, in the artist's study, even this diminutive Golgotha underhand can serve as scene for just such fraught locality,

as evidenced by a good dozen such paintings, *famous* ones, a spate of lyric, plastic, and dramatic works, not to mention quite a run of recurrent nightmare billings. One particularly agéd practice of the ancient Church promotes actual discourse with the dead; we speak of them as if they now might hear us,

and we speak *to* them as if they might care—and more than that, might speak in our behalf. The icons of the several saints I love the most create a vivid gallery—if one in that word's rarer sense, wherein the blessed reposed within its arc are the crew in best position to comprehend the view. These surround the shallow altar

where I say my prayers and, if I'm lucky, where I pray. When I say my prayers, of course, there is much to remember; when I begin to pray, far more to forget. In any event, we visit the dead, and *that* tilt of the head thereafter avails a curious space, wherein we conceive that we too rest among them—seated maybe, communing

Two Icons

I. Nativity

As you lean in, you'll surely apprehend
the tiny God is wrapped
in something more than swaddle. The God

is tightly bound within
His blessed mother's gaze—her face declares
that *she* is rapt by what

she holds, beholds, reclines beholden to.
She cups His perfect head
and kisses Him, that even here the radiant

compass of affection
is announced, that even here our several
histories converge and slip,

just briefly, out of time. Which is much of what
an icon works as well,
and this one offers up a broad array

of separate narratives
whose temporal relations quite miss the point,
or meet there. Regardless,

one blithe shepherd offers music to the flock,
and—just behind him—there
he is again, and sore afraid, attended

The Leper's Return

—a gift of Saint Francis

He had grown used to the fear he brought
to every soul he passed along the road,
though the chagrin he bore inside became

a bitterness worse than the fetid taste
that never left his mouth. He could not bear
to stay near town for long, nor could he yet

walk far enough away. His days were marked
in varied degrees of suffering, varied
degrees of shame. So when the brilliant youth

stood trembling, waiting in the road ahead,
he felt the weight of his long burden briefly
lift, and when the youth rushed to embrace him,

the leper startled to discern his body
gently held, and held in firm, benevolent
esteem, and when he felt the kiss across

his ruined cheek, he found forgotten light
returning to his eyes, and looked to meet
the brother light approaching from the young man's

beaming face. Each man blessed the other
with this light that then became the way,
thereafter, each would travel every road.