

SOLAR ICE

The sudden shock of what you really are.
Early March. The tentative return of afternoons.
Saturday, and Mass again. The four.
All about swelling buds on beech & ash
& maples. Crocuses & snowdrops
trilling. Four months impacted ice at last
receding from the north side of the house,
and bobbing robins back & soon, soon, red-
winged blackbirds strutting on the lawn.
Soon too the sweet familiar groundswell
of peepers in the marshes. Reason
enough to melt the frozen heart.

Father lifted the host above his head & prayed:
a small white sun around which everything
seemed to coalesce, cohere & choir. But
as I raised my head, the thought
of some old insult likewise reared
its head, and in that instant the arctic
hatred flared, shutting out my world
& spring, along with, yes, my lovely wife & sons,
a no & no & yet another no, until I caught
myself refuse the proffered gift of Love.

At once the host diminished to a tiny o:
an empty cipher, like some solar disc
imploding on itself. Only my precious
hate remained, the self-salt taste

of some old wound rubbed raw again,
a jagged O at the center of my world.
Ah, so this is it, I whistled through my teeth.
So this is hell, or some lovely ether
foretaste of it, alone at ninety north,
with darkness everywhere, & ice & ice
& ice & more ice on the way, and this
sweet abyss between myself & You.

THE SWEATER

Loomed my first real Saturday night date.
My father winked and beamed as he led me
into the master bedroom, where he unstuck
the bottom drawer of his highboy dresser
so he might bestow on his firstborn, & newest buck

on the block—about to be initiated into the mysterious,
Eleusynian, head-spinning, perfumed world
of women (and who knew what other ecstasies)—
his Sunday best & dashing cashmere sweater.
I watched his dark eyes blaze with memories

of his own lost mythic youth even as he spoke.
This was almost fifty years ago, so that he still
had half a foot and fifty pounds on me. But if
I flexed both my so-called biceps, and kept
my narrow shoulders, rigor mortis military stiff,

and if I sucked in air in some sort of blowfish
style I might—just might—make his sweater fit.
Ah, this was it, he whistled: my first bestowment,
bar mitzvah, confirmation, manhood's
yummy threshold & inner sanctum moment.

I was just sixteen, and so (alas) would need
to take three emasculating buses OR be driven
by my father in the family's green two-toned
'47 Pontiac to the other side of town
to retrieve my beautiful blue-eyed blond.

Ah, she, with her Cinderella curls and crinkled smile,
God's own sweet angel bathed in an unearthly light
who had somehow (inexplicably) said yes (yes!)
when I'd asked her out to see Charlton (Moses)
Heston take out Pharaoh's boys & all his armored horses.

Alas, came my father's sage advice along with his
borrowed sweater. *Shake the father's hand*, he boomed.
*Be firm, but don't try to grind his knuckles. Sweet talk
the mother, yes her this, her that. Oh, and as for
the girl, laugh at all her silly little jokes, walk*

*on the outside, play the gentleman, & don't ever let her
catch you staring down her blouse. Most of all, my boy,
take extra special care with that cashmere sweater.*

Mother, who'd heard it all before, groaned at the bull,
such as she'd suffered all these years Mr. Wonderful

had been dishing out so lavishly, and had her own advice
to offer now. *Treat the girl the way you'd treat your mother
or your sister's friends. Be polite, laugh, have fun,
and remember how lucky any girl would be to be
going out with her sweet, smart, oh-so-handsome son.*

Thus, decked out in my father's too-huge sweater,
the looming night advanced as looming nights will do.
And yet a sweet time, too, it was, and lyrical and poignant.
And very nearly a success. Except that, by the time
we left Moses back there at the movie, the Fates had sent

the Red Sea conspiring up our way, backing up along
the gutters & the sidewalks while we waited on the corner
for my gallant father, who showed up hours late
to chauffeur me & my half-drowned Cinderella home.
And that was that. Except what I learned about the fate

of sons who willy-nilly step too soon into their father's
place and so must pay the price. And though I never
dated her again, I hope she's blessed as I have been and—better—
doles out wisdom to her kids sounder than I got when I handed
back my father his ruined (imitation) cashmere sweater.

CASUALTY REPORT

The car coming on, then crossing the divide,
you at the wheel, distracted by our earlier fight.
Blood on the dash, blood on the steering wheel, your
sweet face shattered in an instant, so that the slant light

still, after fifteen years, reveals the seismographic scar
across your upper lip. Harm done to others, harm
to myself. After all these years my words, however
well-intentioned, fail like the useless charm

words so often are. Too many nights you've heard me start
from some fitful, endragonned sleep, thrashing in the chill
eddy of first dawn, my heart thumping
against its savage cage of bone, replaying still

the oncoming car, swerving, then crossing the divide.
How many times I've startled into night,
relieved to find you sleeping there beside me,
like some brave new world in the uncertain light

off starboard, a gift of such proportions it still
amazes. Live long enough, and we will surely all
turn up on someone's list: the accident report
filed by the trooper at the scene, the hospital

bed with its checklist, where this time it's you awake
all night, and me an obit in the morning paper. And there
you have it, the latest casualty noted over coffee,
before I rise up at last to rinse the silverware

in the kitchen sink, replaying the morning's latest
tragedy over in my mind, the way I've done so
many times before, wondering if I just might get
the right words said this time, or simply let it go.

NINE ONE ONE

Once again the nightmare. The blueblack plume,
The billowing flame. All my life I've been afraid
Of tall buildings, and here was the tallest, down
At Manhattan's prow. Firemen and police officers
Kept running *toward* the flames! People were falling
Or jumping. No one yet seemed to understand
What was happening. How will they put it out,
I kept wondering. Then the second tower.
Then the Pentagon. Then a fourth jet, down

Somewhere over Pennsylvania. Reality itself
Seemed to buckle with the buckling towers.
"Mourn for the city," a man who knew
His Apocalypse quoted me later that week.
The Scarlet City, he said. All over again. Gone.
Gone in an hour. But who deserved this? These
Were folks with families, folks with mortgages
To pay. You or me in the right place
At the wrong time. Plans put on hold. Forever.

Nurses waiting for patients who never appeared.
A priest saying Mass in the smouldering rubble.
The dead, the many dead, and the millions more
Wounded that morning. Mother of sorrows,
What can I say? Here in my room, I watch you
Watching your son, the one they will crucify
In their own good time, as they crucified him here
At Ground Zero. A mother grieves, while
Her little ones wonder where is their daddy.

And where *are* the lost who paid with their lives?
A mother grieves, and my eye follows hers down
To her child. *Remember*, he says at the omega point
Of the final Book, *Remember this well. I am*
The morning star rising once more above
My beloved city, as above the homes of my Afghans,
Above my whole bent, broken world. Have I not
Told you I will not leave you orphans? Not
One of you. Not one, not a single precious one.

HIGH TEA WITH MISS JULIANNA

'Begin at the beginning,' the King said gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end: then stop.'

In the land of the JubJub together they had tea. High tea, one has to understand, six cups of imaginary tea, the good Miss Julianna Frances, aged two and a half, and her grandfather, sixty-four. "How *do* you do this afternoon, Miss Julianna," he began, good manners there in JubJub Land being understood and *de rigueur* between the Professor and his finical little Queen. Sporting diapers beneath her summer dress, she poured her airy tea in cups with such finesse they might've been in Queen Victoria's drawing room instead of in his modest parlor. "Might I presume upon you, my lady dear, for yet another piece of cake?" "Oh, sure," she too demurely said. "But let me bake it first. It will only take one minute." I.e., one minute in her understanding, for they had time within it for another cup or two or four or six or three of Miss Julianna's very best imaginary tea, and time for her to sit upon his lap so he might read her all about the Midnight Land of JubJub and then confer together about the best way to pick the naughty dirt from between their toes, or which of her many skirts her dolly, coincidentally named for Daddy John, should wear, and which chair he should sit upon if Daddy John were to be invited to partake

of tea with them, together with a second piece of cake,
which was humming along just fine in the imaginary
oven in the slowly darkening room. High tea
on a Sunday afternoon at summer's end,
sweet credences of summer. How better to spend
an hour, a day, a year? And Alice leading down
the rabbit hole, and him following into JubJub town,
and all cares left behind now, as the little girl—who would
not be little long—beckoned toward the still-enchanted wood.

WHEN WE WALKED TOGETHER

For Eileen

When we walked together
in the cool of the evening,
walked together, you and I,
in the cool of the evening,
after the heat of the day,
after the long hours under the sweating sun,
after the buzzing words like black flies
had at long last ceased their querulous stinging,
after the questions, after the answers
that refused at last to answer anything at all,
in the cool of the evening, when we walked
in the garden, you and I, in the cool of the evening.
When it was no longer important
for either of us to speak, since the words,
whatever words they might have been,
would have been beside the point,
would have said nothing our hearts
did not already know, where simply being there,
there in the cool of the evening
was all that finally mattered,
with the long night coming on, and the last trill
of birdsong fading off in the distance
by the ridge of the tree line,
when we walked together there in the garden,
in the cool of the evening, you and I.