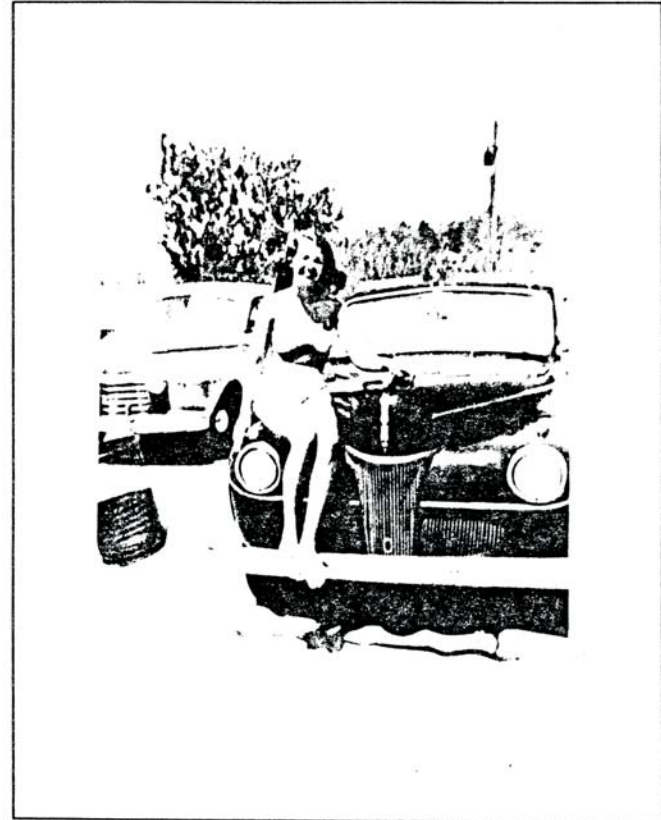


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Parting Gifts

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Give me another one, she says.

I stand in front of the pressboard mirror so I can see everything in the room: the cardboard picture of the boat sailing into a pink sunset, the paneling with its fake oak knot holes that almost look real. GOD WILL GRANT YOU MANY WISHES FOR ALL YOUR KINDNESSES, I tell my reflection.

GOD WILL, my mother starts back, closing her eyes. What is the other part?

GRANT YOU MANY WISHES FOR ALL YOUR KINDNESSES, my mirror face says to her.

Her mouth opens and I can see she's oiled her teeth again with Vaseline. She likes to do that in the morning. Once, before she married daddy, someone told her she looked like Elizabeth Taylor with her polished teeth. Mother says WISHES and KINDNESSES and hides her teeth with her lips.

You're going to have to put Zoey up as well, I say to her. Mother's dachshund bit Mrs. Neal when she came to the house for something the portable meal people called an "entrance interview." Took the flesh right away and left a gaping wound. Mrs. Neal didn't sue.

Mother, try this one. I'm not sure she's awake. Try: YOU'LL BE OLD SOMEDAY AND SOMEONE WILL DO THE SAME FOR YOU.

YOU'LL BE OLD SOMEDAY..

I prompt, AND SOMEONE WILL DO THE SAME FOR YOU, and wait for her to repeat it to me. She doesn't seem to try.

My yellow legal pad rests on her stomach's soft hill shaking back and forth when I pull the compliments out of her hair.

I turn to the mirror like Vivian Leigh reading Scarlet O'Hara and push my chin into my neck. THAT BAG SMELLS LIKE THE DINING ROOM AT THE READ HOUSE, I say, a smile pulling

Practicing Compliments

Karla Homer

I sit on the bed in our motel room and write compliments for the portable meal volunteers. Actually mother writes them down and I just brainstorm them into the conditioned Holiday Inn air:

THANK YOU FOR THINKING OF ME TODAY. THAT BAG SMELLS LIKE THE DINING ROOM AT THE READ HOUSE. GOD WILL GRANT YOU MANY WISHES FOR ALL YOUR KINDNESSES. I LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR VISIT ALL DAY. And for the few young ones: YOU'LL BE OLD SOMEDAY, TOO, AND SOMEONE WILL DO THE SAME FOR YOU.

Senior Neighbors sent the letter, and it has torn mother up. The portable meal clients didn't make the volunteers feel special, it said, and Mrs. Neal, director of the program, went on to say it was the little things that really counted. After all, the program couldn't exist without the wonderful people who drove the piping hot food to mother's front door. We need to sweep steps, they tell us. Create holiday thank-you cards. Pen up guard dogs. Smile. A happy volunteer is a healthy volunteer, Mrs. Neal wrote.

I give mother enough compliments to make it through five weekday lunches.

She's on heavy-duty medication and it takes longer than it should. We practice saying them with enthusiasm even though it's our vacation and we should be walking the beach or visiting gift stores, buying overpriced trinkets that we don't need.

I LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR VISIT ALL DAY, I say to mother, and she chants it back like she's cheering a new evangelist at the church. No, no. I take her hand and pull her from her matching bed over to mine. Emphasize the word YOUR. Say: I look forward to YOUR visit all day.

Mother sighs and leans back on the bed until her back and head touch the covers. Her feet still touch the floor.

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Here in sagebrush territory
I've watched weekenders float
on innertubes and rubber rafts
winding canyon rivers. Their
lazying whisks me like a
strange breeze, as if
I could sense my life's climate
changing. As if easier
satisfied, I drive in low gear,
dreaming of fallow
land, imagining
a tea kettle
cooling near the stove.

Ross Tharaud

and not much wiser, no tulips
in mind, none promised. How days
scud by, choppy waves of telephone
wire strung miles behind us
and ahead.

Also high tension
lines on towered scaffolding.
They hum like forever
into distance
linking needs to convenient
satisfactions.

Checking right-of-ways in
Michigan once we spotted a swath
that scarred a hillside like
a lone ski run. No one
we could find knew what it
was for, a strip of carpet
parting woods as far as road
could follow, eye reckon. Later
we learned it covered a gas line
stretching to Minnesota. I
thought of hiking it to the end,
saved from bushwhack, switchback,
compass, and led home soon
by its unquestioning
direction.

Bikini'd Woman Perched on Studebaker,
Summer 1953

I forgive you for not saying goodbye
or telling me where you were going.
Of course you didn't know you were dying
that February morning bruised and snowy.
I was probably asleep. You touched my head
in mama's blessing and covered my feet.
You can't have known we would exchange beds
me standing staring, your face a still sheet.
I forgive you for being cold and absent.
I forgive you for moving to a grave
and leaving me a sister as you went.
I visited you once, but I couldn't stay.
Forgive me for making this forgiveness a lecture
to a woman I know only from a picture.

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Timetables

“Though thirty spokes converge towards the hub,
It is the median void that makes the chariot go”
--Lao Tzu

Meeting is a perverse attempt,
In the face of a random world,
At the management of coincidence.

We fleshly particles wander the globe, and
Like vectors intersecting in the space/time desert,
Bounce off one another, not realizing
A coincidence has occurred.

Airborne one freezing Russian night, I alone
Sat in white-knuckled suspense,
Knowing how aleatory it all was:
No one else recognized the miracle
Of a lover waiting there on time
As we fell from the sky into London.

But meeting is not an arrival,
Rather the briefest of stopovers
On the way to the next risking.

It is the silent rage of solitude
That signifies the character of meeting.
It is homesickness that shows us
Our special people, our piece of the earth,
Not the homecoming.

And an airport is only our echoing, hollow claim
That we are in control of things.

Barry Fogden

The Artists I Know

I get tired of art,
the same angry, hungry, gaunt faces
riding away into the night
on the back of a buck-board,
full of the theories that
isolate each one of us,
every stone in the road, every bump,
jostling their heads in further
cut-throat agony while they scribble,
while they flash a brush across canvas
as if it all related to breath,
and they shrink away from me,
smaller and smaller thanks to the
highway's interminable philosophy,
as I stand here wondering who my friends
are, why the gallant suffering artist
only knows these, crouched together
behind a pack of ageless horses,
as unfamiliar as the me that is
not my work, dropped off each in
a different place, with more phantoms
to exhume and a pay phone that only
works when they call and I'm not home.

John Grey

Sincerely

Mended loose leaf shadows brain the left side
Of the road with some conundrums like
Steeplechase mortality until the populace
Stops caring for the guest bedroom perfect
For hiding wishbones behind a very stuffed
Couch with a lady on it wearing understandably
Less than everything she owns showing
Of course real restraint in typically
Genteel fashion as she was brought demurely
Into this world through purse strings untangled
In the various anxieties symptomatic
Of the failures and the crosswalks and the
Impish jargon so many conversations come to
Include beside gravestones we know no
Ancestors to be remembered by

Sheila E. Murphy

Arabesque Photo
When I Was 11

in my grandmother's
back yard my shoulders
square but my leg is
barely turned out. In
shorts I never liked my
legs in odd they must
have been tan my leg
higher than it's gone
since my back let me
down kittens maybe in
the damp grass where
Louise and I tried to
imagine what would be
ahead as hard as it
seems now to imagine
me that was it August
or May in that
stranger's body

Lyn Lifshin

Travel Poems

I

Ithaca

A bush by the door is turning red;
a woman walks her dog.
The mailman, in gray, picks through his bag.
A cold wind blows wet leaves.
You are far from home,
but this poem is a safe place.
It's all right to cry,
here, in someone else's town.
Heavy ghost, you can recall
the places that you cannot be—
a natural history of vacant lots—
the letters that you cannot send,
the doorways that you cannot cross.
This poem is a safe place.
Let it hold you in its lines
of remembered things—
of all that is lovely and lost—
till you can fold it and mail it
into the wind, your pockets turned out.

Sheila Nickerson

Elegy for Uncle Dickey

It was embarrassing the way we buried you.
Those old drunks from the V.F.W.
couldn't keep anything straight
between the shaking and salutes.

We should have done better by you
than the horror of Taps
and rifle blasts.

Your life was a cigar stuck in a smile
but there's no ceremony like that.

I guess the only thing we did right
was drink for three nights, oh,
and that marvelous sight of your son
pissing on the gravestones.

Sheila M. O'Connor

Crack of Day

The long knife of 5 o'clock
cuts the circle of your game
and your friends run down their shadows
into cracks of light.
Low in the indigo east
the evening star is rising.

Your mother's in the kitchen
guarded by her pots and spoons.
You're alone now in your own hour
beyond the kingdom of her hands.

Quietly you slip into the house,
climb the stairs that night comes down.
In your room the air is cold and still
like the sleep of wind in stone.
You light a candle and go into the closet
where they wait:
the cows, the shepherds, the wise men,
the mother and child—
their shadows wavering in the half-closed door.
You took them from the tinsel in the attic
and hid them in this corner
where it's always Christmas Eve.

All the years you've come from that room
are the unwinding of a moment.
In every wall that's held your sleep
you've found a door half-open—
in every sky, a star about to rise

Barbara Lucas

Woman

She was the I miss you
lover and our talks
promised not to hurt me
leaving me broken
like a doll in the street
who couldn't stop screaming
Help me Help me
until the battery ran dead.

Jeffrey Zable

A Window

Perhaps
An orange poster
of a sunset
or a ship at sea
will attract my
eye to your window.

j. ranhand

On Preparing to
Leave Earth in Springtime

Carry me to the backyard

I want to die in the pear tree
in full bloom
staring at the sky

Become a child
floating in the perfect lake
eyes buried beneath the surface of water
but open
watching the clouds run
from another dimension
Keeping drowning from my lungs by will
something no longer possible

Pear blossoms call my breath to them
hypnotize me

Their small splendors
my three children

My son will not remember
He will have to be told
beneath this tree
crushing onions and violets
small feet
gibberish under the sheet

Suicide

I don't mind
that he jumped
but why
did he do it
at rush hour,
back up
the trains
for thirty
minutes,
make me
suffocate
between stations
all that time.
I don't mind
that he jumped,
only wish
he'd found
a better way
or picked
a later train.

Joseph Farley

Egypt

I feel fat. My overweight
lover thinks I resemble a model
in stomach-reduction ads.
What does he know about flab?

 He's never been to grad school
or worked in a shopping mall.

He tells me he's an expert
 and has suffered the lack
of women and chocolate doughnuts.
What does he know? He's never
 had a broken fountain
in his home town or found
a one-winged bird frozen to the front door.

Deborah Meadows

 I nod
There are only the blossoms

The girls blow dandelion tufts
 my hair
 my hands root

 My wife's here
 I know
listening to a small bird's squeak

 Let
his babble recede from earthly ears
immaculate petals smother my eyes
her kiss the last warm moment.

Easier now than fighting
 to go
the pears the breeze
her prayers
breathe

 Please

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

In the Raspberry Villages, September

In the raspberry villages
strung out along the alleys,
the news is mostly bad.
There is rumor of storms from the north,
more disappearances.
Even the birds, those summer enemies,
have fled, and those who come to pick.
Neighbors watch each other fall but can do nothing.
The damage cannot be told.
Yet out of the ground comes a hum like a river,
word of a warm red cave in the place of roots
where strength is building. Some even say,
Now, let us go. It is time to enter the earth.

Sheila Nickerson

Civil rights and all and yet
A caste of untouchables:

One with no legs, shaking
An empty coffee cup, another
Three asleep on a subway platform, junkies,
Drunkards and AIDS victims,

Around whom all pedestrians step
On the morning treadmill toward
Purple mountain's majesty and
Assembly-line versions of civilized.

Even a woman well dressed,
No doubt a housewife and mother,
Herself a Levite when she boarded
The train that morning

Until she grew nauseated and vomited
From her subway seat and those
Nearby scrambled away, leaving
A vacuum in the crowd,

Containing only corrupted memories
Of breakfast and stench familiar
To all the uninterested—
Companions turned onlookers.

When asked how she could stand
The smell of the lepers she treated
With her simple remedy, "What smell?"
Mother Teresa responded.

T. R. LaGreca

Did Someone Call the West Enlightened?

Did someone call the West enlightened?
One with no legs shaking,
Around whom all pedestrians step,
Even a woman, well dressed
Until she grew nauseated and vomited,
Containing only corrupted memories
When asked how she could stand

Somewhere that euphemism was spoken:
An empty coffee cup, another
On the morning treadmill toward
No doubt a housewife and mother
From her subway seat and those
Of breakfast and stench familiar:
The smell of the lepers she treated.

Civil rights and all and yet
Three asleep on a subway playform, junkies,
Purple mountain's majesty and
Herself, a Levite when she boarded
Nearby, scrambled away, leaving
To all the uninterested
With her simple remedy, "What smell?"

A caste of untouchables:
Drunkards and AIDS victims
Assembly-line versions of civilized:
The train that morning,
A vacuum in the crowd,
Companions turned onlookers.
Mother Teresa responded.
Did someone call the West enlightened?
Somewhere that euphemism was spoken,

Cutting the Long Night

I see on a bridge a white-haired old man
waving frantically to traffic,
blowing kisses, smiling madly.

I see myself on a bridge someday,
lost in the old man's paradise
riding his smile like a merry-go-round,
riding his blown kisses into walls.:

And none of us will remember
beginning or ending, only the in-between
crushing weight squeezing molecules dry.
And, one more thing, if we're lucky,
the old man's lips, evolving, a kiss, ~
a red rose cutting the long night.

Joseph Gustafson

Why We Began Therapy

After making love
he took me

to see the man

juggling
chain saws
on Venice Beach.

Deborah Meadows

Madonna Who Wakes Up
Wishes She Was Still Dreaming

except when his arms are
a braid instead of notebooks
and orange peels where there's
only the warm shape she's
made with her own body to
curl into

Lyn Lifshin

Kafka Suffering
Tuberculosis of the Larynx

A rabbi asks God,
"Keep poor Franz," and a sky
fills with crows.

A woman screams in Yiddish
above a deaf husband.
Birds flock from rooftops
and the square.

Old men sit at tables
sipping beer.
Birds fly out from under
my sisters' skirts.

They never suspected nests
were there
and raise their skirts higher
to inspect the eggs.

The birds attack my father
pecking his head.
He curses my name Franz
as the boy he beat
for coming home with spoiled eggs.

The crows follow me heavenward
and if a balding saint asks,
"Are you holy?"
I'll lie, "Yes,"
fearing God's judgment.

Russell Thorburn

Novae

The stars differ in glory,
and passages in Paul
differ in the degree to which
we see their light.

Let me stand before God
and make my case,
not before that loutish
Pharisee, that scornful

turncoat, gadding, angry,
jumbled. And once a light
felled him and a voice
blinded him. And I? Well,

I am otherwise, jealous,
uninterrupted, never one
chosen, never like him a
darkness suddenly made new.

Raeburn Miller

Breaking Up Christmas Eve Day

go out to Price
Chopper to not
be there when he
picks up his
things. Puddles,
strangers, sun
thru pewter clouds
the light or time
of day maybe like
December in Venice
I walked out late
afternoons with
bikers shouting
“Baby, Honey”
in the same fur
jacket I’ve got
on today, “Foxy,
Lady,” “Come on,
give,” Foxy this

last man called
me moaning give
it all to me
in bed. Tangerine
light then too.
Bells and beggars,
nights on the
water bed with a
man I hardly knew
who I couldn’t
two years later
stand having
stay one night,
amazed at how
I’d fallen into
something so
quickly, then
left fast
like now

Lyn Lifshin

Carnival

Susan Benjamin

When I was a girl I went to a carnival every summer. I went with a group of children from a day camp that I hated. I didn't have many friends and the ache of loneliness, so present in my life, grew in intensity when I was with all those happy others.

On the bus ride every day we passed an abandoned car with, legend had it, a hermit living inside. Even he, dark with dirt and shabby, or so I imagined, was part of their world: too frightening and special to belong to me.

And so I dreamed of befriending him, of understanding him, of going in any direction beyond all the others.

Anyway, the carnival. We went to the carnival somewhere in late July or early August and while the others went on rides and got sick after, and went on again, I stayed on the ground, afraid. Tried to win stuffed animals at the arcade. Talked to strangers.

Once I was watching a ride called the Whip; was engrossed in the screams, in the fun that was going on beyond my courage.

The operator, dark and half hidden in his operator's box, noticed me and encouraged me to buy a ticket.

I said no.

He told me he'd go slow and if I wanted to get off I could.

I said no, no, and still he insisted, demonstrating from his dark solitude how slowly he'd take the corners as the next ride began.

He forced me into a trust, or anyway, a situation, that didn't feel like mine. He started the machine and I cannot forget sitting alone, palms damp, bar cold while the others sat in twos and threes, the engine roaring a beginning. I can not forget that first corner and the operator looking as we slowly turned, "Are you all right?" speeding up with each consent, asking, always asking, until I said, finally, once and for all:

"I'm all right, I'm all right, I'm all right."

Casting a Pall

If you wait around here long enough
and let the walls do your thinking
for you, then memory takes the shape
of a shrew with a suitcase wrapped
inside her fingers or an escaped
convict dressed in a white suit with
arrows pointing a thousand different ways.

These blankets, this kitchen table,
the stereo and TV used to be so
comfortably in the present,
doggedly authentic like a kiss or
a handshake.

But now they're just triggers,
swaying watch-chains in the grip
of the hypnotist.

I find myself opening doors
to let her out with the breeze
or bundling my prized possessions
into a burlap sack, assisting the burglar
to the point where he thinks I'm
with him.

And the moon, giddy and yellow,
the clouds slipping across the ceiling
of night, these may be the
only in-roads into the future.
I stare at them through the
window wistfully while the past
robs with a pistol, with a goodbye.

John Grey

Warm Shadows

They pass me: old men
with memories like shoes
that don't fit. They go
to lowlit shadowed rooms
and move the dust about
beneath the yellowed
papers that they soon
will be a part of.
A woman lived there once
who changed the calendar
and caulked the windows
too. "Show me this" or
"show me that" she'd say
to make him tersely wise.
But now he knows his wisdom
and the words he wishes
he'd spent, winding down
a long day, too casual,
warm shadows in a room.

Robert Parham

Remembering Not to Forget

Sometime after you're fifty
when you say you'd like to forget,
what you really mean is
you~ d like to remember
where you had dinner,
or what you were reading.

Everything dies
in its own language.
Even before we find the name
we remember only
what we can piece together.

and when the name is remembered
or the book, or a song
it's too late.

Sue Saniel Elkind

Lighter-Pen

One end is a lighter.
I picture her
drawing it to her lips,
the scratch of flint,
burst of flame,
its glow on her face,
her red lips pursed
around the cigarette's tip,
the snap of the cover
smothering flame,
the sigh of her first inhale.

With the other end,
I imagine her
writing on silvery paper,
the mother-of-pearl pen
making sky blue letters:
Dear Daughter,
I see you watching me.
Someday, I'll leave you this pen.
It will be our immortality.

Rochelle Natt

Love Poem

This is a locket with a broken clasp
emitting light, an opal
nesting in my open palm.
The shimmer of your name
as it leaves my lips, an aureole
of smoke turning liquid in the air.
If love is the heat and power
of the heart, this is a crystal
steaming its way from ice to pool
in the calm guidance of the sun.
For what my speech fails to convey—
may your eyes on the page melt
these words, each a token,
a burning lozenge to cool your tongue.

Mindy Kronenberg