

POETRY, 2003-2004

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1. AT ALYA'S HOUSE

9/7/03

I am turning over a seashell in my hands
While listening to her talk. The shell,
I'm told, reminds her of her grandmother's
Old shelves where sundry things are laid, as well
As the very air of that place only she knows;
I see in it a smooth, hollowed-out cone,
An accumulation of Archimedean curves.

Beside my mother, but very much alone
A week later, riding on a tour bus
Through an unfamiliar countryside, I'll be
Turning over and over in my thoughts
Precarious as a shell beside the sea
Between a watery grave and death by age,
A thread of gladness that seems enough for me.

2. 280 SOUTH

9/14/03

At eighty-five, I thought the sounds of static
Were windows shaking; reached forward to touch
The windshield, hoping I was not too much
In danger, with a mind on automatic,
A shadowy hillscape flying by my right,
A concrete barrier looming at the cleft,
Behind, a battalion of cars that I had left,
Before, a black road untouched by moonlight.

Somewhere between the mountains and the sea
One car that did not stand out from the rest
Was hurtling down a road it had not known,
Faster, as though from some death it would flee.
Though all roads must, in time, lead on to death.
It was only static, and I was driving home.

3. THE LAST NIGHT OF SUMMER

9/21/03

Tomorrow, I shall say to whoever I meet
That I am happy to be back, and smile,

And do whichever things are known to greet
 Those unfamiliar faces. All the while,
 I'll wonder: it is proper not to feel
 Any excitement for a different year,
 No happiness, no sadness to conceal,
 Nothing to say which would be quite sincere?

The dark expanse above fades to a hue
 Of dying ashes on a deeper grey.
 Between this silence and a day too bright,
 Between the tasks now set for me to do
 And all the words that I'll no longer say,
 I listen for a poem within this night.

4. WHY I WILL PROBABLY NOT DECORATE MY WALLS
9/28/03

The walls are white at sunrise, the walls are white at noon;
 If they are white through autumn, should they be white to June?
 I've been advised against it, I think you would say no;
 Each room deserves its color, its luster and its glow.
 What, then, should I place there? What could I see at eve
 That to my eyes seem pleasant, yet won't be hard to leave?
 Would it be past reminders, or yet another door?
 Which would bring peace and order into a mind at war?
 They'll ask me again, surely, and somehow I'll reply;
 But this will be my answer, and that will be my lie.

5. I AM NOT SAD PER SE
10/6/2003

If all this seems too somber, if brightness seldom shows,
 It is because I'm thinking the thoughts I might compose.
 It takes some time of searching, and it takes time to feel
 A lifetime's broken currents to discover and conceal;
 Then it is all too easy to be caught in a pool
 Of swift-descending misery, half pensive and half cruel.
 It isn't like that, mostly; whatever fills my days
 Remind me not of darkness, or at least, not always.
 There will be ways around this, it is not hard at all:
 I'll find a path to walk on and expect not to fall.
 If I am close to smiling, don't read it as a frown;
 I might in truth be happy before the sun goes down.

6. INSIDE A COURTYARD WINDOW
10/9/2003

When there are voices keeping me awake
 Long after autumn night has settled in,
 Beneath a second will I could not break

I'd listen, forgetting where my mind had been.

With distant whistles of each passing train,
 With thunder breaking through a sheet of rain,
 In time, they'd wane to whispers all around
 And I'd recall the night, and not the sound—

Unlike those voices taking me by force
 Into a room where visions strain to stay;
 Unlike those thoughts that bend me in my course
 To places yet more distant day by day.

Assailed by spears that walls can seldom keep,
 With opened eyes I'm waiting for my sleep,
 Watching my thoughts go out in fluttering streams,
 Trying to catch one, save one for my dreams.

7. CLIMATE REPORT

10/19/2003

We have such pleasant autumn weather:
 The breeze as mild as any sigh,
 The courtyard full of earthen shadows,
 A view you couldn't sell or buy.

We have such pleasant autumn weather:
 The cirrus-sprinkled crystal sky,
 The sun upon the roof reclining
 As if she winked and waved goodbye.

We have such pleasant autumn weather:
 The evening's air so cool and dry,
 The clouds receding into darkness
 As if they tried, but couldn't cry.

8. GRADER'S CONFESSION

10/27/2003

In scouring pages of hard labor,
 Seeking mistakes to take to task,
 Comparing neighbor against neighbor,
 A careful reason's all I ask.

I do confess a twisted pleasure
 In marking wrong what's almost right;
 And, lacking what is beyond measure,
 That's all the fun I'll have tonight.

9. PREPARING FOR MIDTERMS

11/03/03

At eight-o'clock in the morning
 I heard the alarm ring out;
 I thought about the day ahead
 And wracked myself with doubt.

What had I failed to study?
 What if I'm in too deep?
 I sketched a mental outline
 And then fell back asleep.

At ten-o'clock in the morning,
 I heard it ring again
 When I was still half dreaming—
 Not of this world of men
 But of an early December,
 Of darkness and of light—
 I'll say that's all I needed;
 I don't care if I'm right.

10. MISSING AN ECLIPSE

11/12/03

If there could be a sunset, if just the moon could rise,
 If there were any color in this sad excuse for skies,
 If this were not in winter, if I lived far away,
 I'd have a better chance to see a lunar eclipse today.

But suppose it were sunset: would I but stand outside
 And watch upon the railing as I'm waiting for a ride
 The bright blue of an afternoon grow dark and darker still?
 Then is that any better – or ever was, or will?

Or if, long after sundown and nearer time for bed,
 I'm looking out the window at a creeping, ghostly red
 Glide slowly past the clouds and bathe the moon in bloody light,
 Would that bring more of pleasure to me than it would of blight?

What would I trade to see it, what price would it take?
 How often in life will I have this useless choice to make?
 Why should an astronomical phenomenon cause pain?
 It will be over soon regardless. I'll just watch the rain.

11. EXCESS

11/14/03

It is a theorem
 that there are too many preferences
 for an election to be fair
 too many possible alternatives
 for everyone to have a chance
 And perhaps a natural law
 that a year is too long
 for changes not to take place
 but a day too brief
 to understand them at a glance

And in someone else's experience
 Life is too turbulent
 to coast without crashing
 and too often mastered
 for there not to be a way
 There are too many people in the world
 to have air to breathe
 But not (perish the thought) not too late
 to hope there is something more you'll say

12. THE STATE OF MY STUDIES

11/26/03

There must be art in being an hour late
 To classes that are only an hour long,
 To walk in, scribble down a name and date,
 And look up as if nothing could be wrong.
 There must be art in laboring hard by night
 To buy a dull complacency by day,
 To ward off sleep until the morning light
 But then surrender as good intents betray.
 There must be art in any scheme that's false,
 In leisure that only makes tomorrow grim,
 In any proof that mocks but does not solve,
 In any verse composed upon a whim.
 There is still time to counteract this fate,
 But, someone, please don't leave me to this state.

13. THANKSGIVING HOLIDAYS

11/29/03

Muddled after so much reason,
 Drowning beneath wave after wave,
 Within this cold and wishful season
 I think of Owen at his grave.
 I wish I had such sense of purpose
 To try when I might write no farther,
 Or half so much, at least to surface—
 Midnight is here, time to work harder.