

Woodpecker

To dig an inch he bangs with everything he's got, bug-zaps the stump's glut with barbed tongue

and publishes no canticle or caw, only a paradiddle of discovery, dead tock among the limbs. Backporch

suet's his junket in Fat City, upside down bender after the daily hack at dry forms with the pick of himself

face up into bark's foolscap, the beat of labor sometimes all there is to eat.

Apples to Oranges

This is not supposed to be a virtuoso trick

MILTON BABBITT

But it *is* supposed to be a type of challenge, like a grope toward a rhyme for orange

or other fancy trope, an Elizabethan-style whore-binge of sound for poets who rise or plunge

into the whacked-out word-party hardcore grunge that puts them squarely on the poor (lunatic) fringe

of love distress. I've been there: one more inch and you know you're over the top or edge,

so lost and bent and glazed you couldn't gum porridge let alone manage the simplest rhyme or extend your range

of possibility – everything suddenly, as they say, *apples and oranges*, as if comparison itself were just bacillus dead in the dour syringes

of commerce, Whitman's grass so much astro turf, Stonehenge only a *coupla big rocks*. The stale falange

of the literal everywhere prosecutes its sour revenge, and for what? A few sunbaths on the roof when awe inched

toward us like summer; times we spiced the blancmange of rules and regs with gin and rebellion and felt no twinge

of regret – as in that basement Ethiopian joint, where your *injera* and my kneeling declarations oiled the sore hinge

of pleasure's portal, fresh as a wedge of peeled orange.

At the Airport

The sky shudders with takeoffs, clouds piled up over the rubble of history

in more destinations than these departures will touch. My body cannot find a pattern to calm its essential tremor.

The layover is long. Today's news flutters in my hand. Looking in vain for airport recycling,

I add it to the trash instead, all the rot we move toward. Someone else will tie the knot in a plastic bag and play catch

with the absorbent earth, pitching what's left of the current wars into memory's cluttered ground.

In every airport bar the screens are on. The world has grown another frank face, the steppes where my crushed cup at last arrives

and lands on the same ageless troops, the same shrieking women in sandals, and every penny that flies from my pocket

for a soda drops on the head of the child I could have been from a height I am losing my grip on.

Late Round

This clinch is preface to the final embrace of loss even the winner knows, thirty-six minutes that make you less

no matter how much leather you dish and eat. What's sweet about this science isn't confined to the sweat

whose salt rivers run you down like rapids that carve their own bed from the stream's din.

It's hours in the long dark before, your hands bandaged against break to send their hard thanks,

landing where you dream, the long shot of pain scored for performance's final cut, a panorama

that began with sitting up a thousand times. No one tolls this bright agony, shape that makes you the left ball

of God – only monks and maybe puritans, who would approve the way one slip of discipline

blooms in the blood-filled eye, the swollen cheek. This is your not-yet-rotten luck,

to live a lucid half-hour half naked and bent in a squared ring where you can die of heart.

Small Blind

When every bluff ends finally in the muck of chance, and what blade-thin luck you get to hold goes dull, scraping away at your limited stake, what you need to get out of this universal hole

(that is not so much black as blind) is to know when to dare and when to fold your arms or the laundry or the last lonely pair of kings on earth – O plastic-coated paper monarchs! – to sweeten a pot

with a departure, turn your back on a bet and walk outside with your spine finally straight, no longer pushing the empty or full boat of hopes your ship may come in. Then you can ace

the test, conquer the longest odds, survive the trips and falls – nearly broke, but with a few last chips.

Sideman with Singer

Play half the piano twice as well. Melody is a blue bar you pass under, that limbo. The tao of your end: follow her snap but lead her pitch. Select. Walk *sometimes*.

Watch her back for signs of breath you take together. Find the blue smoke of space and blow there. The book says handle the changes like a snake.

Be quiet more. Let go of roots.

The chords are a dry canyon
of echoes and she is the kestrel
circling the thermals above. Below
her, touch one pedal of harmony, tremolo.

A Waste of Shame

The expense of spirit

He got it backwards on desire. It's shame that sucks. And love? Whatev. I do know lust is lovely, true: biology. I blame the church, of course, then poetry; don't trust

these prudes in fancy hats who claim they're straight. Among the couplings you and luck have had, the dreamy and deceived laid flesh as bait to wake the wolf of love. Wanna get (go) mad?

Chase love. You *can* take lust in hand – just so – but worship needs illusion more extreme than ravishing, less cleanly dirty. Whoa, baby! That way nightmare lies (if not dream),

another bucket down the dried-up well of longing. One more time: take me to hell.

In the Street Without My Glasses

Blur sips at the blue bowl of morning. The heart,

old mole, noses forward to sense something of steel, maybe

of stone – without a lens the filth is gone. Unrefracted men and women

regress toward a trembling Monet mean, trees and marquees go dumb

in the warble of sky, and even nameless cars

dodging their promised manslaughters gleam like starlings

under bus faces smeared to leaf and petal. Someone crosses

the street, a tremolo of arm, a shudder of color

smoothed to one age, race and sex as light as that shadow

shimmering off the asphalt like distant desert heat, the true flicker

we may be. The world before the uncorrected eye

brims, marbles, quivers over its boundaries, wells.

