

Some Old Poems, by Robert Basil

Briggs Room Reading Stanford University Spring 1984

Hi there, everybody.

*This August I was sitting outside the Student Union reading To the Lighthouse and thinking about when my mother would attain the literary buoyancy of Mrs. Ramsey. It was a spacey day, and out of the store comes this little kid with a woman I presumed to be his Ma. The woman had three chocolate bars and she gave the child one half of one. The Union bees were waiting for him to open it. They had already crawled into my coke can, too intent on sucking sugar up to sting me when I waved at them. The woman gives the child her chocolate bar and she walks away, and I might have seen her start eating, but reading all day made me too tired to turn my neck, so I just heard her unwrapping. Then the child said the first two lines of my poem. I was blown away by the beauty of his words and how they represented in *haiku* implicitness the perfect tasty union of mother and child. Then the child said the third line of my poem and that changed everything. Because the word that is my poem's second line was misspoken. The child was about four. And he meant to say something else, that, in order to say, he had to add a couple of cloggy syllables. What before had been sweet now signified a kind of craving I knew more closely, and I guessed that the woman was probably a sitter, not a Ma.*

The last three lines are mine.

“Sweetness Alighting”

“Me and my Ma
are chocolate.

Choclaholics.”

Always
a ways

away.

This next poem was conceived while working the graveyard shift at a Mighty Taco on the east side of Buffalo. The key situation of this place: Everyone I had successfully avoided on the streets for the four years prior all came in to buy food after drinking. The poem is about Deb, the junior assistant manager.

“Deb Says She Will Lose Weight Soon”

Your thighs are capsized canoes.
But this is bliss.

My maya and your maya.
You lean over my lap.

The handiwipe is in the sink.
And your breasts are encyclopedias.

They are heavy.
They are stiff.

Never been used.
World Books.

We scrape the red right off our faces.

The first book of poetry I purchased was Wordsworth's collected poems, near Edmonton, Alberta. I was working on famous Al Oeming's Game Farm literally dawn to dusk, shoveling shit into the pick-up. I memorized the first sections of the Immortality Ode while trying to spot the buffalo who had the runs. Because once you saw the runs you had to report it and then watch for it to happen again so you could shoot a dart into the animal and give it medicine. This was the only part of the job I liked.

“Under Wordsworth”

“There was a time
when meadow, grove,
and stream” –

filled my genderless eyes
with steam
and with blood.

I kicked mud
but being spry
didn't eat

mud.
Vapor sleeves lid up
the waterfall's drawers

like football player
hobgoblins.
I plopped in

the hole the splashing gored
and stayed there
perky

until I heard my friends
coming, throwing
twigs at the hanging

pine cones.

This is a poem about a wimp from my childhood, Mickey Higgins, who was large but weak, who nonetheless had a large and strong dog, named Arbumba. Arbumba bit the ear off Dirky, my best friend's dog. This poem is not about that particular incident.

“Remorse Years Later”

Those boxing gloves
Given to Mickey Higgins

Made him even easier
To beat up.

I wrote this poem the morning my first day working at Xerox, a morning that marked the beginning of me getting back on the stick, said my Ma, who was driving the car. I was looking out the windows and recalled that scene in “Taxi Driver” where Travis drops an alka seltzer into the glass and, a Zen trainee, absorbs himself into its patternless plop and fizz.

“Rural Red Light”

He goes through it.
We sink.

without
bubbles.

Our samsara waits on Fairport
‘s nirvana.

A spent strawberry field

and mushy yellow cambium

crave another galaxy's
smoother

religion.

Robert Creeley and Lou Reed seemed to take on a greater significance for me after I left Buffalo and moved to Palo Alto and lived in an apartment complex called "Tan Village." California! Only when I returned to Buffalo did I discover that the place was owned by a man actually named Mr. Tan.

I.

"Proof"

Proud words like lurid
need lines longer than
Creeley's breathed-in ones

lines drunk with nouns
aims for our irises

shingleboards
denting our nuts

or any kind of play
biting the hair
of the night

or noon
and after -- .

Live with
out bur-
glary of

mind

lone

II.

“Lou Reed is Saved in Newark”

(after Lester Bangs)

“WANTED

LOU REED

DEAD OR ALIVE

(what's the difference)

*for transforming a whole generation
of young Americans into faggot junkies.”*

Is there any word
I can use

and how much
does it

cost
to leave

here?
Oh

sweet nuthin'
sweet Jane –

unroll,
rock your hearts.

*This is pretty much the first poem I wrote. I wrote it in Nevada, 1979:
East of Reno, on the banks of Interstate 80. I stood in one place for 25 hours
with a sign that said “HOME.” Normally this was a fabulously successful sign.
Three cars emitted “Obbbbs” that were split by the Doppler Effect
as they locked their doors. Although I was hitching alone, I imagined myself
with my brother, Christopher. When I rolled his boyscout sleeping bag out
I started having desert hallucinations. I overheard four people
arguing at a table that had a red and white checkerboarded cloth on top of it.
Then I heard the A side of Tom Petty’s “You’re Gonna Get It” album
and understood and remembered all the words for the first time.
Me and my brother started to dance.*

“Two Days in One Place”

The Reno truckstop is behind us
and Christopher’s halo and frantic rap
have unraveled and scattered
into entropic bits of benzedrine psychosis.

Morning is still early rinsed orange
but my sneaker treads are melting.
Mindlessly I roll
my dewy down bag just right.

My brother sucks breath from this skinny roach
and sends melancholy streams of smoke
skidding across seed-heavy heads
of ochre desert weeds.

I console my brother.
“Two more of these black ones,
will wring what’s left
from your dopamine glands.

“So be happy.
And take my place by the roadside
and thumb till noon.
Dance where the roads merge.

“I am just one yawning fucker.
Tonight, brother, we are going to brush our teeth in Cheyenne.”

Tequila Mocking

“Tequila Mocking”

Shudder again Basil, at your success
Better pleasures will surely follow
And alter your odor
 So another shudder
It all seems to be there now
What you have wrecked has been moved away

Between lunch and nighttime chocolate
Fred found your blonde tequila
It was in a bottle it was on a table it was in
Another neighborhood

Private language exposed.

“My Drive Home”

Driving home from the Main Street tequila store
it hit me that this love
I am now suffering is not
a new kind of love remember

what you wanted to give the woman I wanted
to be her friend. She is married and has two young sons.
Promiscuity will save me from this
before virtue does. Should I put a hymn to her

here? *What should it contain?* Her hair
when it is parted down the middle & right now
also my fear, that I would flood the one
who would alleviate my loneliness – my love

restrains itself from its object, her
shoulder, eye, her hood & her nod,
hymen, toe,
hair & ear.

“Tequila Man”

I will sleep where the dog sleeps.
“The dog sleeps under my bed.”

The kind of guy you never get friendly with,
“the kind of guy you miss the most.”

I closed my eyes
“to see yourself”

near the coffee in my cup
“and saw yourself”

on Bailey Avenue
“with a cup you cut with white tequila.”

“The Shine”

I have walked up another hill
And hated it's perfection
The brown shine of its beauty

I know all the ways your sweater turns to beer
I have lied to you perhaps you know when.

But it must be
Never merely
This and here

Shutter tomorrow's
Minding, kiss
All four lips

And keep this
As you have
It. Love and
Glow of gut.

With the endurance of tequila
I have found no reason to move
My small wares to Budapest
For rage does not enhance reason

Though it feels necessarily human
Like a vice, or an eyelash.
Your music, honeypie, was the new necessary.
It was good as bone on a wet day.

First bone, final wet day.
Just that you smack it
Can I crave my
only body now.

"This Morning"

I.

After four hours I'm
up, & I smell
like tequila & piss
& that too smells like
tequila, & my teeth
tequila, underarms are
my favorite & best,
like tequila & also
you. My dreams one wash
of you, that's all,
I can't believe I am

alone right now or
how much I talked just
in order to
avoid letting you know
you have given me
the quote unquote world
& such coolness cost me!
Who drove me here?

Running puff puff
puff four no-shirt
sidewalk miles, my lungs
will love me forever
& I smoke to spite them
but I get thru my run
hit the park for pull-ups
but there's two kids
swinging on my set & two
others sprinting beneath
them like maniacs in a queer
kiddy game of near
collision. I check out the world.

Bark pieces are in between
my toes (which smell
like tequila) & all Moms
seem old today,
wearing lots of coats.
But I know that this
morning you too awakened
with your cat, perhaps,
on top of you, but also I'm embarrassed
I've taken this long
even to know
I haven't been able
yet, to say,
just what there is,
I mean, here. Hi there.

II.

I started by wanting
to say I

was going to sit
here

all
night

until I said it.
But it hit

me
the impossible

task
I had set

for
myself

was to sit here
& all night

until I
did

it.

"Running with Ish"

I. Run –

The orphan.
The family.
The neighborhood.
The striding.
The Sunday.

The foods.
The beds.
The porches.
The restaurants.
The generations.

The off-time.
The marriage.
The hammock.
The payment.
The working.

The abortions.
The dresses.
The soirees.

The twins.
The musicians!

The air inside.
The lovely try.
The team member.
The biggest race.
The red present.

The cot-winners.
The good sinners.
The take-home meals.
The three watchers.
The faith-healers.

The one, one male.
The taste of yum.
The lovely look,
 Around the arm.
 Atop the mom,

The sweat and goop.
The crack alight.
The motel room.
The rented car.
The near-deaf teen!

Money for time.
Soup for you.
Match for me.
Television for us.
Ideas for travel.

Kisses for sleep.
Blows for change.
And room for everybody.
Help for us.
 “Out for good,
 oh, for shame.”

Sins for that.
Locks for legs.
Tears for effect.
Shoes for parties.

Hands for holding.
Rolls for noses.
Air for outside.
Cotton for comfort.

Extras for leaving!

II. Back –

Two divorced men,
the desire to write.
 the night within Palo Alto.

The music too loud,
the wear of masturbation,
 the vodka in coffee.

The friends in Buffalo
trust of the past,
 the surprising poem.

Pissing in the backyard,
the patience they all have,
 the tape Ish listened to.

The brother's brother,
the inhabited apartment,
 Being on to something.

You are not in jail,
clothes in the dryer,
 Saturday is different.

Elsewhere I think,
telephone one's son,
 the lovely landlord.

Loud all these years,
unified isn't it,
 it made the driveway.

Increasing ugliness,
the friend is immoral,
 too dead to speak.

Unaware of this again,
Karen Carpenter is back,
 gossip gives birth.

My joy is yours,
the kiss on the arm,
 two first names.

Finally got it down,

anything in bed,
Christmas and holidays.

The alarming arrival,
words in the morning:
what blood got.

It should catch you:
It was hard to say:
You don't re-

member a lot
of it,
of spray on our ceiling.

"Clean As a Whistle"

The completed sentence
to stand alone

away from all
things. Away from

a way to
complete a lone

sentence. The standing
thing away alone.

Bailey Avenue Buffalo Poems

"Prelude to a New Career"

Today is finally our day
To write poems whose lines
Are exactly of equal length

When written in longhand
And without enough weapons
To show I

Can put up with your
Pages and pants. Did I say,
"Just love?" Yes, a mere

Fair love, a fast ass, a

Coquette, one just
Stretched, to make it, to

Pack it, in,
Toward our night, our
Soiree, or your thin opalescence,

Or your men, wee bones, the pelt
Of our beer, when broken
Throughout, by straws.

The next movement from all those
Epiphanies is the worst:
Cut clogged sod

Wadded in our mouths before
The end. I can't stand it. Oh man:
Are your dad's hands like yours?

Are those my dungarees heated
In the holy water, so near
His One Mouth in Twilight?

I am not guilty of that, but
Of this:
Making an interrupting

Move – that is, you there.
We must scratch. Your un-
Mothered word, hurting

My teeth. We must scratch
Oh, it. For instance, I
Have been reading about it

And reading a lot, about them,
Like wanting to find one:
Libya's bee going backwards

Manoeuvring the steering wheel
While the other poets wriggle lamb
Embryos over the rocks the Balls (surely)

Of God.
Must I guess this, sniffing like a glug
In a mug?

Their eyes peer down
And cats are often in the photo.

Otherwise they are alone, while “ad-

Dressing,” yanking an underwater
Circle down into the dumb,
Nearly deep enough to pleat

Our clavicles, dent our
Temples. To avoid the bends
It becomes habitual.

But you, lover, are still
One with unwiped and soft teeth.
With you a kiss is what one properly terms

A meal. Please push up all volume
In these shiny stadia:
You are talking about the seats.

“The Advice”

Miscegenate for world peace!
Veneration should never find
Blood allied with gratitude.
Your loves will be time-zones apart.

Scorned men explain
Neither sleep nor insomnia
But remember the clothes they kept on
To keep their love perfect.

And under
Wonder
Mood
Lies
 everywhere.

“The Lasting”

Love is its own aversion therapy.
It is a harsh toke from a big bong
where favorite flavors find their connotations.

And even our sweeter vacations
(Sweetie!)
never lasted this long.

“The After”

Cold coffee does not necessarily
Got bugs in it.
A large town can be a safe place.

But to your friends there
I was just a subject of interest
And we were momentarily the case.

Everyone I did not know wanted to
Talk about it.

Motherfuckers!

Generalizing
Primary human feelings
Is a questionable act.

“The January Drive”

I decided not to hit the Pink Flamingo tonight
& didn't turn off at the liquor store on Elmwood
which I had forgotten was there
across the street from the doughnut store
wine was at home
and I might relax for tomorrow –

Who should move in this
place who should take
my son's room where can I buy
a bed and how big
must it be,
how big must it be

for a four leg fit
to finish the bottle
and cap the pour
legs lip just yours.

“The Memorial Day”

A pubic brush
has pulled back

a
pink bloom

from a pair
of underwear

you borrowed
to share.

“The Funny Valentine”

You yearning honeybun
Sad eyelash honeybun
You make me cry in my heart.

Your hope is laughable
Unphotographable
You see your favorite work of art.

Is my figure less than Greek?
It's my soul, 's a little weak.
When you open it and seek
Is it smart?

Don't change your thing for me
Let yourself sing to me

Bye, yearning honeybun, bye.
Each love's sweet funny day will die.

“The Romantic Song”

Count those kisses
And let tonight
Forget tonight.

Feel your back and when
Rain covered our car
Where are your roaming lips
When they are near the words of love?

Break your breath
Before that note dies
And bring your hands near

Sweet honeypie.

Oh hang back and then
Wave fire at far stars
Where are your flat eyelashes
When they are near the one you love?

Break your breath
Before the note dies
Bring those hands near
Sweet honeypie.

Where are your roaming lips
When you are near the words of love?
And where are your light eyelashes
when you while the one you love?

“The Deaths”

(a gloss on lines by Jack Spicer)

No love deserves
The death it gets.

The same should not be said
For the lover, or the other.

“The Brief Candle”

I'm going to fuck your brains out.
And keep them out!

She is going to fuck her brains out
And keep them out,

And he is going to fuck our brains out
And keep them,

Period
(as they say).