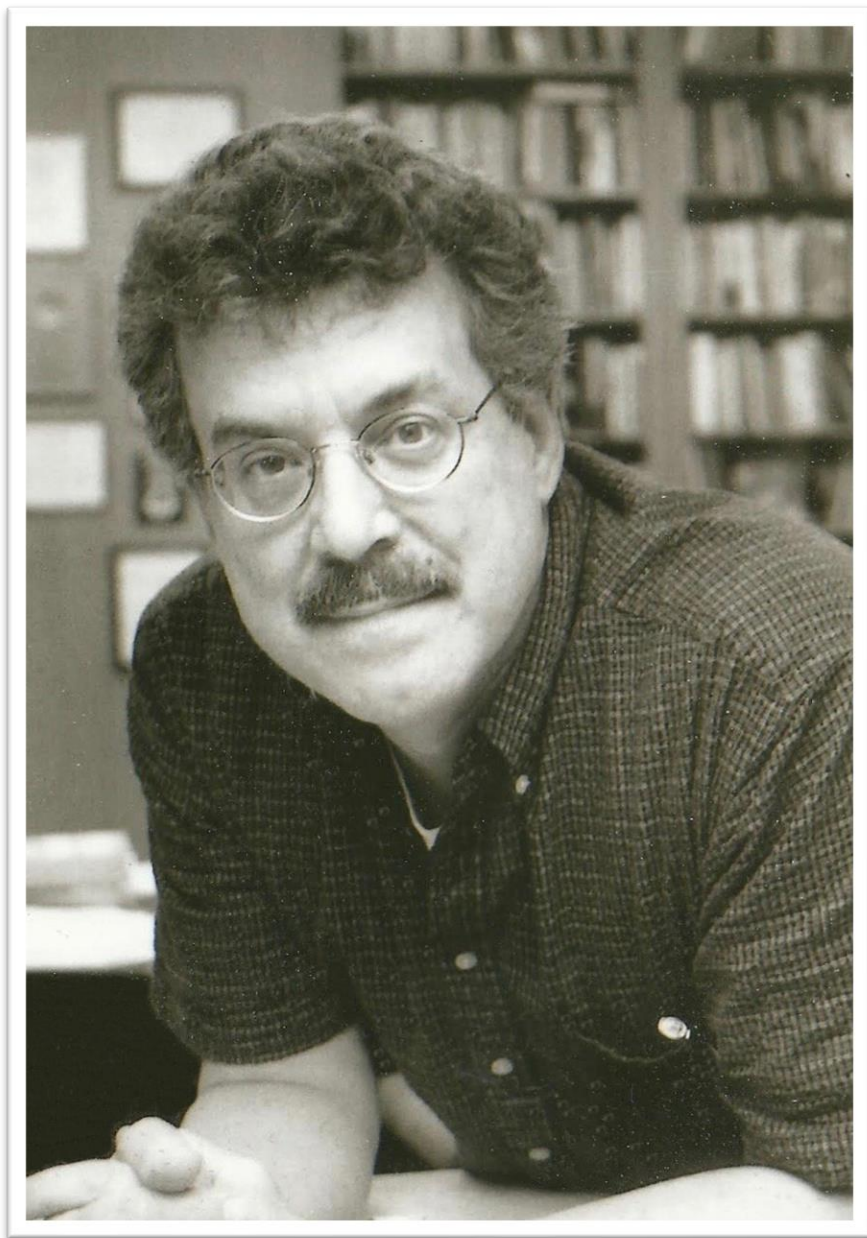


David Citino



Maybe I'm a bit biased about David Citino. I met him on my first tenure-track job, where he came to the school and led a week-long summer workshop on writing poetry. Before he showed up, I read a lot of his poetry, and saw that we had much in common. We're both Rust-belt kids (he's from Cleveland; I'm from Pittsburgh). We both came from working-class super-religious Italian families, where there was equal emphasis on the public practice of the religion and the nationality. He was educated by the Jesuits; I was a former Jesuit. Of course, there were also some significant differences. He was the Poet Laureate of Ohio State (where he taught for over 30 years), and I was an Assistant Professor at a directional school in Kentucky. And our lives were moving in different directions. I was over a decade younger, in fairly good health. Although he himself didn't mention it, I knew that he was in the middle of the slow and painful process of succumbing to multiple sclerosis. But you'd never know it unless you recognized his fleeting unsteady seconds or passingly awkward gesture for what they really were.

I laughed out loud at many of his poems, and when I met him I was in awe of his kindness and generosity. He was gentle with the poets in his workshop, and never failed to make their work better. He was selfless; he had time for everyone, and then time to relax afterwards.

His poetry, for me, embraces all of his background: working class, Italian, Catholic, intellectual, and academic. He's got some great recurring characters, my favorite being Sister Mary Appassionata, who is sometimes sappy stern and sometimes profound.

If you read just one of his poems, make it "Volare," and imagine him slowly singing the last line for you.

Volare

Just as the lights inside our living room
and steam from water boiling on the stove
erase Cleveland from the picture window;
father comes in,
stands in the kitchen, one shoulder thrust forward,
feet apart the way he's seen Lanza stand,
eyelids drooping like Dean Martin's or Como's,
Lucky Strike to lower lip.

*We can leave the confusion
and all disillusion behind.*

And we know he got the raise,
his laborer's share of the chemical company profits
from the Manhattan project
and the revolution in plastics.

Four hundred a year. And that's not hay.

He grabs my mother
and spins her before the stove,
wooden spoon brandished like the fine lady's fan
she saw that day in the pages of *Life*.

*Just like birds of a feather
a rainbow together we'll find.*

Then he comes for me,
and I'm soaring above cauldrons
of rigatoni and sauce bubbling bright
as the scarlet cassocks altar boys wear
at Christmas and Easter.

He brings me back to earth
and twirls away to phone his mother.
That night when he comes home from moonlighting
in the credit department at Sears,
feet heavy as bricks,
he'll come to my bedroom and tell me again
how there'll be no promotion for him
because he couldn't go to college
but he's still risen higher than his father
who put in fifty years with the B & O.

He'll step out the door
and for a moment his head will be caught in light
like some raptured hoary saint drunk on love
in the window of Ascension of Our Lord
and the last thing I'll hear
will be his lovely forlorn baritone
fading, falling into stillness.
Volare. Wo-wo. Cantare. Wo-o-o-o.

Ivy, Late Sun, With Fettucine

There is art on these walls, as if
windows could be improved on—
Dufy's riotous, variegated fields,
flashes of dancers by Degas,
posters bruited shows of shows.

Yet as we wait for water to boil
for pasta, as chicken simmers
in Pinot Grigio, lemon, basil,
I want the tongue of summer sun
on green afternoon leaves.

Now I know what ivy has tried
all my life to mean, and gold.
What, on a day so pure, can compete
with green? Yet we insist on not
leaving well enough alone. Years

I've stained the brightness of paper
with dark words, when I have
love, ivy's newest hues,
rooms and rooms of nothing but
everything there is, light, true light.

Venice Declares War on Pigeons — AP

for Dominic

There are photos and slides in a closet,
stored too in the dark of my skull.
A son of mine, still a child—though yesterday
I met the woman he says he'll marry—

stoops in the Piazza San Marco as if
he bore the weight of the ten pigeons who,
having achieved flight, surpassing
the bipedal waddle we do, having

dominion over their heavier brethren,
rise to claim his bag of popcorn.
His face is radiant, the moment of perfection.
(Is it only in childhood the soul

has such control over bone?)
It's as if by coming all the way
from Ohio to this magic place he holds
the scene together, even San Marco,

staggering Frankenstein monster
of beauty. My boy rises off stones to do
a little dance with liling creatures,
birds which still today inhabit

the kingdoms of paper and air.
City authorities, citing disease, filth,
are bringing in nets, cylinders
of poison, army marksmen.

Amid the jewels, hourless breaths
of Byzantine gold, under the Campanile,
next to the Doges' Palace, a city
where death, water and light conspire

to elevate us, there is soon to be
a slaughter. I will find those photos,
carry them outside, start a fire. Smoke
from my pyre will twist off the paper.

Fat, dirty little angels will dance forever
on the shoulders of my smiling boy.

Naming a Wildflower, a Mountain, a Night

Wild Carrot or Queen Anne's Lace.

Given choice between native and colonial,
how will we say the filigreed wildflower

strewn along blurs of July highway
near ice-blue chicory (or *Cichorium intybus*)?
Alaskans have changed the mountain back

to Denali, The Big One—the sacred name
the Athabaskan folk shouted in prayer—
from McKinley, coined by a white prospector

in 1896 to lift a dull Republican candidate.
David, I became in Cleveland in 1947,
along with a peasant cognomen, to replace

the utter nothing I was, when, to put
a spell on a cold night, tongues dancing,
they said one another, a woman and a man

Depressed by a Review, I Walk Toward the Mall

“Citino’s poem about Christopher Columbus is . . . pungent . . . but it lacks the psychological complexity of Tennyson’s work.”

— *American Book Review*

Wait, let me get this straight, I say:
a poet great as all get-out out-got me?
I stand convicted of being just me.

Filet o’ Fish wrappers stained with flecks
of special sauce, soggy fries,
shreds of lettuce limp and brown,

broken straws scabble through
the cracked asphalt of parking lot
to collect at ivied K-Mart walls,

like wreckage of a heart discerned
too well. Through golden arches
tumble the sad permutations of my soul.

Tennyson was the Man—OK? A stud,
large as Elvis in the Blue Hawaii period,
spill of grandiloquent Cambridge beard,

sage, aged visage. He was known far
and wide as The Poet of the Victorian Age,
and was made a Lord, for Christ’s sake.

My diplomas, of acidic State of Ohio
paper, age less gracefully. Were Tennyson
alive today he could be an MTV VeeJay,

Coldwell Banker realtor, televangelist
or game-show host just by opening
his vatic mouth, while my voice

is pure Cleveland—West Side no less.
This mall is no Crystal Palace, I certainly
no bard. Still, seeking solace in beauty,

I step toward the thonged, gartered
mannequins of Victoria’s Secret,
mourning the ungrandeur of my days.

Reading the M.R.I. Report, the Retired Pastor Considers Dementia

Days when the body tells me it's found
another way to say "Oh no you don't,"
I try not to think about the nothing
I'll become—except perhaps in the minds
of those who know me, the hearts
of the few who love—when I go to ash.

(Not that I'll be able actually to do anything
about it. The ash I mean.) Stop thinking,
I say to myself, as you'd say to a child
No talking in church. I've two ways
of talking to myself inwardly (inwordly,
I almost wrote), my intimate monologue.

There's the way I say using words,
as if I were speaking on the record
for someone listening in on my thoughts.
(This may come from a noisy childhood,
my head filled with garrulous saints,
angels, demons, and the three Gods,

one of whom—or is it Whom?—had wings
and cooed like a bird.) Then there is
the lightning, too-fast-to-hear thought
by which I will myself to jerk the car
from chattering squirrels or kids going
from one oak or game to another

across the road, the wordless ways
I communicate with mind, heart, arm.
Don't give it another thought, the saying goes.
How can I (not)? I can't know I'm not
thinking. No voices. No chants. Nothing—
but keeping track of the nothing is now

the postmodern occupation, itself
a thought, perhaps the most important one
we have. No way out of this haunted church
of neurons. We scream at ourselves,
or whisper, or make that silent speech
inside the confessional of dark old bone.

Is the voice I use when I talk to myself
as much like Mother's and Father's as
my outside voice? His (capital here
because he begins a sentence, not
as a theological statement) was always
too loud, especially when I was near,

though still he can shout great distances.
'Ten states over. I don't know how
Mother sounds inside her head, for all
our love. (No one yet—for real—has heard
the inner voice of another, though many
lovers claim they know the foreign accents

of God. (What does His—some now add
or Hers) sound like to the angels?
To Himself (Herself)? Can all three cast-
members of the Trinity speak at once?
While I'm losing the knowledge necessary
to mouth words to myself, thinking

more slowly Hey, listen, to me. I'm
thinking!, might I also be losing it
that other way, beyond mere words,
eluding, exceeding the drag of syllables,
a nighthawk dipping, diving above
ripe fields, earth rising quickly, stones

Weed Killer / Killer Weed

“I’m not saying it’s safe for humans. I’m not saying it’s unsafe for humans. All I’m saying is that it makes hermaphrodites of frogs.”

—Dr. Tyrone B. Hayes, researcher, quoted in the *New York Times*

Now this, a poison tale of handsome frog
who halfway morphs into fair princess,
maiden toad who bathes, primps

before the glass, grows her own May pole
to stroke, to moan her own name over.
The family tree’s top branch: Mr. Eve,

who’ll never know another naked one
or sin with fruit, or argue who’s on top.
It’s Atrazine, a wondrous elixir,

human herbicide of love, magic bean
that grows a dewy dell to fit the male,
a hard-guy thing for that one special gal.

Now every man is Mr. Right, each woman
the Girl of My Dreams. Two hearts beat
as one: my cells divide but in reverse.

Love thunders the blood, the very air
that’s everywhere around me, water
in the ground, fluff and wisps of cumuli

and cirrus, rains small and great,
the stars and moon that shine for me.
My God I love me now. Yes I do.

I’m the pleasure principal. I’m
the snake devouring my tail, eye-apple,
honeybunch. O sweetie pie of me!

The Last Cricket in Ohio Sings a Song of Wilderness

I walk out into dark that feels
sacred, even though it's Ohio,
it's now. Orion strides above,

shattered ice strewn across
the vast black, a hint of azure.
The year's last crickets

are singing their hearts out,
slower than yesterday.
They know the north wind

is serious about staying.
Shivers in the trees, a stirring
of birds. The crickets chant

their names until my presence
quiets them. I hear the silence
of eternity. They'll sing again
only when I've gone home.

Six Stabbed After Argument At Baby Shower

Not since Fight Breaks Out At Funeral
has a headline stuck so deep. It's the duty
of the news to bring us up suddenly,

make us groan Oh no, another thread
of social fabric rent, stained, bloody.
What in hell? Baby showers, even more

than bridal, should engender smiles,
oohs, aahs, booties of precious memory.
Grandmother knew who'd given what

to her babies and to theirs, shower by shower,
remembered for decades who was generous
nearly to a fault, who had sauntered in

bearing a pretty little package of shame.
Grandfather would intone the latest outrage
as I sorted baseball cards on the floor.

Listen to this one, Sonny boy. To him
the news was One damn thing after another.
I learned early to shake my head slowly

from side to side, frown an adult frown
at the rustle of paper, the ink that stained
my fingers every paper route morning,

as flaming airliners plummet, towns
disappear under raving rivers, babies,
livestock rolling away in brown spume,

as guests scatter at the flashing blade
that strikes at civilization, slicing up
pretty paper, pink and blue.

Shoes

Magic, these little boats we sail, riding
perilous tides. “Nor can foot feel,
being shod,” Hopkins claims,
but the bound foot feels too well
the torturer’s whim, and what shoes

does God want on a woman? Not
the magic red ones that danced a girl
to death, nor the ruby slippers
that inflamed the green witch until,
aching to stroke the innocent sole,

she called Dorothy “My pretty.”
I’d not understood these wonders
until you came breathless, bright-eyed
into the coffee shop where I’d
been waiting too long, growing

impatient, then angry. You said,
“Forgive me. I was making love
and lost all sense of time.” Marriage
a dirty wind, your husband, the brute,
visiting his mother in Europe,

lover’s wife at work, you told me
how, after the barefoot pas de deux
in their bed, fervent writhing
of dreamers blind to the damage
such tempests wreak, you’d gone

to the closet to see the clothes
of the woman whose man you’d fit
so well he’d shouted out “O God.”
“A lovely woman,” you said of the wife,
almost proudly, “Asian, lustrous hair,

a body so tiny that when I picked up
her shoes and placed my hands
inside, I filled them,” and that act
of fondling, the violation of the shoes
with a hand damp with passion,

the taking of another's enchantment
was a possession greater than what
you'd done with her man,
Wicked Witch, you pulling the slippers
from the feet of the girl lying helpless,

unknowing on the storm-torn bed
and lost inside an alluring dream
that will turn out to be a lie,
rapt, holding your breath, slipping
long-nailed fingers into forbidden dark.

On Poetry As Punishment

They knew the value of a poem,
those Jesuits in Roman collars,
worn soutanes, and sad black shoes
who wished to fashion Leaders
of the Catholic Middle Class.

When the demerit cards we carried
in our wallets showed a line
of five black marks, just as
the immortal soul was defaced
by crimes venial and mortal—

long hair, tie forgotten,
animal sounds by which we showed
how close to beast a boy can be,
frog legs hanging from urinal,
as if like us the creature struggled

to emerge into evolutionary light
of bell, book, and candle,
or the quick furtive punch
to the groin of the one
just called to blackboard math—

we had detention on Saturday.
This meant a bus and train
and the reproachful dolor
of a mother paying dearly to have me
reach above my class.

We called this shame Jug—
no one knew why. Latin Scientific,
my course of study: Caesar, Virgil,
a virgin goddess, Ignatius, Xavier,
Madame Curie, Watson, and Crick.

Some of us had hopes of medicine—
many of the Irish kids, prosecutor
and then judge—but most were pointed
toward the business world which
we'd want to conquer for Him,
saving our suburban souls
by investment, diversified portfolio,
wise tithes. The punishment was poetry,
poems to be memorized without error
before a body could leave.

When the frost is on the pumpkin
and the fodder's in the shock,
I'd recite again and again
to myself as hours passed, knowing
the attempt aloud to Prefect

would be heard by the roomful
of snickering, snorting miscreants.
How easily word could get out,
a man condemned to high school hell
for reciting poorly, or too well.

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
and A wind blew out of a cloud,
chilling My beautiful Annabel Lee.
Feet of muddy trotter plodded

across the page, pulling me
in the sulky of adolescence.
Hoary verse, but still a new language
too human for me to be content
with all the other ways to say.

Later, as I waited by the tracks
for the Rapid Transit to rumble
the future to me, the poems
waited too, and have remained,
not penance, but a way to labor

this life. By word and song
we say our failing, cry our pride,
fields we've left fallow or crops
gotten in before the frost,
timbers of Old Ironsides gory red
or lapped by harbor tides,
youth's beauty pale and dying
on the bed beside the desk,
lines we work to know by heart
and measure out the distance of a life.

A Brief History of Fathers

Do we miss a thing we love
less if, in going away from us,
it grows beautiful? It rained

all weekend, and the leaves
this morning are going
from brown and tan to crimson.

The splendor flaming from
these trees compensates us,
nearly, for what autumn takes

leaf by leaf, the lined white face
of a father growing noble
the angrier, more confused

he grows, rain like angry bees,
his empty eyes, a cold wind
coming on like dementia.

Sky Burial

1.

Their Chinese overlords think it bizarre,
the dumb show of a slow, woeful race,
this setting out of the dead
like a village supper and summoning
the vultures. The old Tibetans, chafing
under the rifles of a foreign army,
say it's a way for the nothing
we become to float home,
begin over, rising on thermals
toward the hidden tops
of the last mountain. It has
everything to do, they say, with freedom.

2.

There's no longer a need
for this fleshy shell, the body
having gone unsupple as shale.
The monk strips the flesh expertly,
as if he filleted a fish,
the knife sliding on the board
just above the skin beyond
the backbone. The inner organs
will make special treats, fit
for a gourmand, the fiercest,
most assiduous bird. He brings
the sledgehammer down
again and again, making morsels
of us, beak-sized, the bones
surprisingly fragile. We'd
been promised they'd last forever.

3.

Just as the roots of a tree are said
to mirror the crown, a duplication
and balance below, above,
the dead flourish in numbers
that match the living.

At Calvary and Holy Cross
in Cleveland--where most
of my people have moved
to keep us living ones
from thinking too much
of ourselves--biding time
in the Earth Burial
we favor over here, we feed
the grubs, roly-poly bugs,
and of course even children know
The worms crawl in, the worms
crawl out, the worms play pinochle
on your snout. Rather, we did
feed the earth once,
before stainless-steel caskets
and cement vaults, which seal in
the salt, bitter, sweet, and sour of us.

4.

The Tibetans whose villages
are near a stream practice
Water Burial, where a body
is given as a gift to the fish.
Maddened by the lure and hook
of flesh, they splash and nibble,
mouthing a life away, gills
beating, a floating communion rite.
Now, this is their body.

5.

When my spirit has left me,
I too would be a feast
for creatures of miracle
who breathe water or fly.
I will this body away.
It's already slowing, breaking out
in lesions of darkness eternal
along brain and spinal cord.
Already I can't feel the thistle seed
that fills my hands as I try to fill
the finch feeder. Already I need
to watch what I'm doing.
Come to me, grackle and finch,
starling, cardinal, and wren--
even you, vicious old crow, villain jay.
Stand beside the carrion me
in your feeding frenzy.
Poke and thrust and tear.
We'll rise above Ohio, light
as dawn, to begin the great migration,
and, when nature's run its course,
you'll drop me to earth to bless
the soil. In spring, I'll rise
from roots on tentative stems,
stand up in crowns of new green,
robes of carmine, ocher, blue.

The Newlywed Game

Bob Eubanks: What's the one thing your
 husband doesn't like you to put
 on his hotdog?

Wife No. 1: Catsup

Wife No. 2: Mustard

Wife No. 3: Relish

Wife No. 4: Rubbing alcohol

In every crowd there's one
who understands that demands
of metaphor must take no honeymoon,
who refuses to hunker down
in the mud and dust of the literal--

and not merely because the audience
insists, tittering like squirrels.
Hotdog must mean what we've made
of the word since childhood,
when with no other way to say

the mechanics of utter miracle,
we spoke poetry of wiener and bun.
Primly earnest, arms tensed tight
across an unpatterned cotton blouse
buttoned to the throat,

pretty knees pressed together
below the polyester skirt,
staring the emcee straight
in his leering eye, Wife No. 4
tells nothing but the truth.

Poem Fifty Years After Everything

The *Plain Dealer* looks back
through rheumy eyes, detached retinas
of veterans who make their way again—
Pearl, Bataan, Iwo Jima, Okinawa
and the blast that broke time
only to be followed, nine days later,
by another. I hadn't arrived yet,
but would, two years after
ground zero's big bang vaporized
mothers' nipples, babies' breath.
Daddy had learned from street toughs,
gritty rain of refinery and mill,
how to Pride the dark of the foxhole
like a fetus. I still hear his violin
through bars of my crib, the Zeros
he'd impersonate, droning away
from Henderson Field, as the blood
of Guadalcanal steamed at dawn.
I learned to play by dying—better
than anyone else on the block,
tossing toy rifle in air, buckling knees,
knowing when I came alive again,
as new and whole as the one
he called Jesus H. Christ when
he was upset with me, it would be
my turn to be the Kid from Cleveland
who'd save the world. Drill press
and assembly line taught us to revile
the martial lies of pols and generals
who wanted us nothing but nose-to-
grindstone. Thus we venerate
the boys who screamed for mother
on a foreign beach. We can't stop
naming what it took to bring us here,
can't stop wishing for the day
we're too full of memory to believe
a war will save us.

Clownfish

When the female dies,
the father of her offspring
changes sex and mates
with the nearest male.

Some grief sweeps us away.
We struggle back into
a strange new ocean,
magic with what we've lost.

At the Close of the Twentieth Century

These are the days—the heels
of running gunmen clicking
on concrete in parking garages,
monsters who mean business
menacing kids in dark stairwells,
only the shouters and howlers
being heard above the brute din
of days, birds falling from the sky
as if to signify the very end
of things—we envy the trees.

Obsession

A sixteen-year-old boy obsessed with smelling nice died after months of repeatedly spraying his entire body with deodorant.

— *Associated Press*

Nor can foot feel, being shod,
Hopkins says in “God’s Grandeur.”
How can nose know the real rose
from the faux? It’s come to this.

Banks of foggery, each one large
as the screws of The Titanic,
turn our fields any odor we wish,
Vanilla Passion, Kiwi Apricot Musk

from the mall’s Bath & Body Works.
My 9th grade daughter, still
the angel who flew from heaven
between her mother’s legs,

leaves for school smelling like nothing
found in nature. When no pines
are left we can hang plastic trees
from the sides of glass malls,

just the right chemical soup
to dope our very noses
into not seeing clearly.
Back in the day, our tribe

made progress on all fours.
Now, we’re too high to smell
where we’ve been, where
we’re bound. Your calf gods
stink, O Samaria, Hosea
shouted at the unwashed crowd,
his face grave, wrinkled
in haughty distaste, a dried fig,

Time and again they whored
after sweet, beastly meat.
The prophet’s God was lilac, wild-
flower, onion, new mown hay

drying in July fields. And then
you have the essence of love,
good sense we sucked in
at the breast. I will come to you

in two weeks, Napoleon, knowing
the sweet intensity of desire,
wrote to his dear Josephine.
Promise me you will not bathe.

Fecal Fossil Found

We are so much less
than what we eat.
Most of a life's feast

we leave behind, day
by day, dusky earth
marking our fires,

smooth knuckle bones
strewn like jewels
across dark routes

of beetle and worm—
so many precious relics
we've no use for.

What will I leave behind
of my last meal? Sated,
the Tyrannosaur dropped this

65 million years ago,
“More than twice as big
as any previously reported

coprolite from a carnivore.”
A life still steams.
This is hot. This is news.

Sister Mary Appassionata's History of the Aria

In Memorium

Every creation tale, god loves us enough to make our arms
long enough to reach the tree of life, the burning bush.

Flogging the falcon

Teasing the taco

Charming the cobra

Between Tigris and Euphrates, Apsu moved his omnipotent fist,
gathered speed until the divine glitter of the Milky Way
sprayed out across the skies. And there was light. He rested.

Choking the chicken

Wapping the pud

We know the real sin of Eve and Adam. Forbidden fruit.

Fig leaves are a divine way of saying Stop it, you'll go blind.

Waxing the weasel

Flitting the clit

Athenians praised it as the gift that keeps giving.

Women worshiped dildoes of wood and leather fashioned
by the dark-eyed craftswomen of Miletus.

Dialing the telephone

Beating around the bush

In *Lysistrata*, women praise the joy's length and heft.

To Sappho, every student was the itch and scratch, the poem
that burns and soothes.

Drilling for oil

Pearl fishing

Galen said we hurt ourselves holding back, kill, chill heart
and glands. He praised Diogenes for whipping it out in public

Pounding the flounder

Ramming the ham

Luther confused Onan's sin with self-abuse, when all
he wanted was not to rub his brother's ghost the wrong way.

Augustine saw a potent demon stand, his palm sprouting hair.

Tugging the tube steak

Playing the pocket hockey

Draining the main vein

Let us praise lovers of the self from Genesis to Revelation,
the end of childhood to just last night, every time we grow
full enough with want and love to sign, dance
the mortal choreography, rub until sparks fly,
play our starry part, our lonely art.

Bopping the bologna

Answering the bone-a-phone

Five against one

Finger painting

Sister Mary Appassionata Lectures the Eighth Grade Boys And Girls: Every Day Another Snake

And God gave Adam hands, fingers
smooth enough to soothe, deft enough
to create, arms long enough to reach,
but Adam sinned by trying to please
himself alone, so God made Eve, and
to her too gave hands, fingers, arms,
but Eve sinned by wanting to please
herself before all else, so God was forced
to make the snake, but by this time
He'd learned a lesson, and made it
limbless, and its slither and hiss
made Adam work, and Eve, until
their hands grew rough as pumice,
fingers gnarled from scrabbling for roots
in rocky soil, sewing greasy skins
callous-tough with blunt bone needles,
arms bent from a winter's weight
of firewood, a spring field's
depth of stone and clay.

Still today women and men come
into the world with the means to soothe,
create and reach, but a burning lust
to please nobody else. Every day
God's forced to make another snake.

Those Old Songs

We've had our arguments,
this irascible old pal and I.
Too much I've put on his shoulders,
heartstrokes taken as my right.

At times he's been the straw man,
barn-loft whoosh of combustion;
other times a log vexing the stream,
damn Polonius, a royal pain,

Fat Mr. Oh-Oh, all thumbs. Yet
how once we'd leap and ride.
Now age slithers up to spy.
With a child's eloquent reticence,

worry-lines mapping our path,
he ladles out his heart, mortifying.
Sorry as can be, feigning devotion,
I listen late into the night

to those old songs of the body,
the list of half-imagined wrongs
against our just cause,
the fatal necessities of life.

The Conception

How could you let him do that to you,
Mother? Nine months before March
you let him in. That means June. Still

the smell of world war, a future rising
before you like the fat orange of city sun.
Sleeveless top, bare feet, perhaps

the sweet waft of clover out beyond
the last slaughterhouse on the west Side.
Music was involved somehow, I need

to believe. Oak or elm, I like to think.
In this family, we're sweet-talkers,
the men, and we have our needs (to hear us

tell it), headaches, tremors, the blues
coming on (we say) if we don't get, you know,
solace. How a man can suffer, we plead.

But we're men who'll spend a whole life
courting. And of course, no pedestal's
too high for you, in my eyes. You were always

too full of love for those who needed you
to be. Would you be here today if
you hadn't labored to bring me here?

Am I guilty of the screams, the tubes,
the morphine that blissed you at the end?
Did I put you under grass early? Some debts

are paid only when the debtor lies down
nearby, image and likeness an homage
to the maker, pockets empty, hair combed

by strangers sterile in latex gloves.
I know it's what I owe, when all is said
and done, my dear, the least I can do.

Famed Brassiere Maven Dead at 95

This is no world for holding up the spirit. MTV demands,
“Boxers or briefs, Mr. President?” Not even old ones escape.

The Times concludes the first paragraph of its long obit,
She was 95 and a 34B. My daughter, whose wit and mind

when she was still unbudded made me shout out loud, to
myself of course, now leaves the house with painted toes,

killer heels and cleavage. A friend, a nurse, swears that when
she reached a certain age, male doctors began looking her

in the eye. Always, bodies get in the way of best intentions.
Young love is flesh, odes to moans, sonnets to heaving dark.

How we make each other sweat. Fingers wriggle, push clothes
aside to reach the treasure, the bra (Please make it black!)

unclasping front or back, beauty spilling into our laps.
The other world looms large only when we grow close to going.

Selma Koch worked six ten-hour days all her life. Her job?
Estimating loveliness. “I knew in a minute what was right:

finished, buy it, out!” O Selma, you were granted visions
of utter beauty, 32A to 45JJ. No Doubting Thomas,

you believed without handling the merchandise, pearls,
plums, apples, honeydews, watermelons of great price.

“What’s the big deal?” you asked the leering talk-show host,
lights bright in your hair, “I’m only selling bras.”

The World Without

(written on the occasion of the College of Humanities 25th anniversary in 1993)

1.

In the world without the humanities
few human tongues can dance. Histories
are numbered tiers, shelves of emptiness.
Our words are bone-bare, vacant rooms.

Birds perch in trees too few can call
by name, given or proper, hoot drearily
to the dawn in codes science only knows.
With our poems we buy and sell ourselves.

We trust no fiction, have scant lore.
One mortal moment leads to the next.
We've lost the pure, lovely language
of the old mothers and fathers.

2.

Only disconnect, the wisest advise.
Who? Who? We never think to ask,
but if we do, I haven't a clue
becomes the fervent battle-cry—

and better wars blossom daily.
Where are the old melodies to guard
like flames inside the windy heart?
Every waving flag is new, shrill, red.

Those different deserve their fate,
the primitive hiss of us. We do our duty;
young ones come to earth, get and spend,
and learning but to count, become us.

3.

No one writes to recollect our future,
answer questions no one thinks to ask.
Sacred towers collapse to heaps of babble.
Flights of fancy don't get off the ground.

The exchange most valued these days
between the sexes, races? How much?
Are we too full of fear to dream a night
where every child dreams unhungry, unafraid?

The whine of this unlettered life
is I and I. No hunter, swan or bear
rises with the wheeling constellations.
Not a damned or blessed soul asks why.

Dylan Sings For Pope At Eucharistic Congress

I did a killer Dylan—or so I thought, Marlboro
stuck between strings above the nut of my fat Gibson.
But the Levi jacket was too blue, work boots unbruised.
The nasal rasp would drive my parents crazy.

*Come mothers and fathers throughout the land.
And don't criticize what you can't understand.
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command.*
Such protest stirred the soul of a teenage jock aching

from perpetual erection. Not the puppy love
of steady girl or virgin goddess. *I had a girl, Donna
was her name. And On this day, O beautiful Mother,
on this day we give thee our love. Near thee, Madonna,*

fondly we hover, Trusting thy gentle care to prove.
Not doodles of Gregorian chant going nowhere
forever and ever. In 8th grade, church was so damn quiet,
no sweat, no joy, the pudgy red-faced priest straining

to hit notes of the young, the lame Sears Silvertone
strumming *Kumbaya*. Dylan's voice was pure dissatisfaction.
The later stuff, the electric, Nashville, Jesus, Jewish years,
were disappointments. Always it's the early anger

I hear. *Come you Masters of War. You that build all
the bombs and How many deaths will it take till they know
that too many people have died?* This is what we need
from poet-singer and poet-pope. Wails of protest,

the rage for justice young ones wear, songs that leave a scar,
as still the villages burn, hunger crouching out beyond
the laden tables of opulence, tribe still eating tribe,
children walking mine fields, calling for their parents.

And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall...

Tabloid Poem

I take refuge in the aisles of belief
where mortals leave their laden carts
with wheezing wheels and float
in realms of awful wonder. Now
I'm safe to dream, the Housewife
Who Lives in Hell, Scared to Death
of Germs, Bat-Boy on the Loose
at the Mall, Hunting Blood
of Plum Virgin Girls, Space-alien Dad
Up all night Probing and Probing
the Neighbors, Hapless Traveler
Raped by Biker Dykes and Kept
as Sex Slave for Three Years.
I can't wait to tell you what they did to me.

Tales Of Trickster: No. 3

Trickster, so life always will have
meaning and there will be more
salmon and trout, ponies and land,
makes himself an invisible fire and visits
the tent of one who's just fallen,
and slowly burns away flesh from the muscle
and sinew from the bone, the very marrow
boiling away, to see to it that, while
most children are permitted to become
old women and men, and most of the sick
to become whole again, and most of the women
to remain women and most of the men
men, no matter how many tears fall
from the eyes of parents, lovers, daughters and sons,
no matter how deeply the fallen one's kin gash
their faces, arms and legs,
no matter how many curses and prayers fall
from their lips, all
the dead must stay forever dead.

Tale No. 5: Trickster Becomes Snake, Smoke, Umbilical Cord

When the daughters of the tribe
come down to the water
to mend nets and wash,
Trickster becomes a long black snake
sinuous in the weedy shallows
wriggling toward their legs,
to make them remember
their husbands and lovers
and run home, hands wild
in their hair, limbs gleaming,
a scream coiling in their throats.
Thus for one more day at least
the nets remain unended,
the fish untaken.

When the sons of the tribe
go out to the fields to dig
or stalk game in the woods,
Trickster becomes the sinuous smoke
of the cooking fires rising high
above the village, and the scents
of rich loam, mushroom, musk,
to make them remember
their wives and lovers
and go home, clothes tight
around their hips.
Thus for one more day at least
the fields remain unfurrowed,
the deer unfallen.

The daughters and sons of the tribe
come together. Trickster becomes
a hot breeze and enters the tents
to see to it the men become
unyielding as the plow, the arrow,
the women as patient as the net,
pliant as the river. Trickster
shakes the tent poles.
In time, Trickster becomes
a long umbilical cord
joining the women to the new ones.
The midwives enter the tents
and cut him in two.
He dies until the next tale.

Tales Of Trickster: No. 6, The Gift Of Fire

When Trickster saw that God
fashioned the first woman and man
out of clay with great care,
the pain of his cramped fingers
and the light of squinting eyes,
and that he painted their faces
in his own image
and baked them in his kiln
until they were done
and breathed hot life between their lips,

and when Trickster saw that God
placed them on the teeming earth unclothed
and then sent reckless winds
to snap their limbs
and floods to fill their bellies
with pestilence, and fire to burn away
the insides of bone and breast and lung
and rot their perfect flesh
he had a plan,
and held his sides and laughed,

and Trickster's laughter
became a tree that came apart in time
to nourish a grove
that came apart in time
to foster a great forest
that grew to cover all the land.

And walking in the forest woman and man
found shelter from the reckless winds, a home,
timber to build boats and weather floods,
and blossoming from seasoned wood, a gift of fire.

Tales Of Trickster: No. 7

Trickster in the days before
he became Trickster
when he was still a young man

left the tent and fire
of his mother and father
and walked out into the desert

to abstain from love, food and words
and meet God and ask
what he should do with his life.

After a week without women
his penis swelled with hurting
large as a rooster.

After three weeks without food
the pain moved up to his belly,
which bloated large as a calf.

After seven weeks without words
the pain moved up to his tongue,
which grew long as a snake.

After nine weeks of only light and dark
the pain moved up behind his eyes,
which blazed like midnight torchlight,

and he saw the face of God, who
shouted at him from inside his head
“Go home. I’ll show you what to do.”

When he walked into the village
he looked for women to have intercourse
with and to prepare him food

and he looked for friends
to speak with, and priests,
to describe to them the face of God

but the people feared his
swollen penis, distended belly,
black tongue, burning eyes,

and ran away. And from that day
Trickster became Trickster
and refused to forgive the people

and to this day they know him as
Adultery and Rape, Famine and Lies,
Hallucination and Mirage.

Three Kinds of Laughter

1.
if you renounce all words
near a midnight sea
where rocks shiver and cry
in a cloud of gulls
you'll hear the laughter of fishes
pulling toward the net,
stars rowing their way to dawn.

2.
women laugh more than men
because Eve
on their first night
laughed at her husband
big with need, the tree
of his loneliness.

3.
if you listen
to any graveyard you'll hear
beneath earth's heaving weight
the lipless grin of those
who found, at last, a lover
bound to last forever.

The Sentence

that first Spring
Cain fashioned stone into fence
and with his oxen trampled the earth
until it bled honey and grain
but his brother, whose scent
Cain couldn't abide
rearranged the fence into stone
because his lambs couldn't understand it
and reddened their fleece
with the lack of understanding
so Cain shattered his brother
and sowed him over the fields
and scattered his sheep
and tried to wash his hands
but the scent was in his hair
and deep in his skin and when,
at harvest, Cain fired his first fruit
God flew down into his head
and shouted, "listen, when you burn
your fruit to do me honor
the stench of your brother
wafts through heaven like angry singing —
why is that?" and Cain couldn't answer
and walked out over the earth
with God's tiny thumbprint on his head
to look for lost sheep and topple fences
and try to flee the din behind his eyes
and to this day when something burns
the smell of his brother covers heaven
and God hasn't let him die
and God hasn't stopped shouting.

January 17: Anthony, Patron of Gravediggers

No, we must not . . . grieve as though we were perishing.

Anthony went to the desert
and dug a hole so small
his head was always near his knees,
his curved spine a bow of pain
to catapult his soul to the clouds
where it would almost be alone.

every other night
he'd swallow three times
for bread, water and salt
and in the dark he'd wrestle
with memory and flying asp and troll
and full-lipped, pouting girls
who floated in (it seemed) with every prayer.

lice and spiders
lived their lonely lives on him
but he knew flame
only when Satan made him hard
or when at prayer
the fiery words sputtered on his tongue.

soon Egypt's desert miles
were numbered by the cells of hermits,
flesh pulled taut as a drum's,
toothless ones, hard as raisins,
who grew to love and hate themselves
and dance at starlight, who smiled
and moaned and shook with dawn.

Pilgrimage

tonight it is
nearly too cold to love.
the rigor of time
distinguishes us,
ushers us in to separate rooms.

in the morning
two tattered penitents
sick to death
of poverty and plague,
ice and flame and hands
beneath their clothing
labor on their knees
over sharded rock
wet with red and regret
toward the tomb
of some cold saint or other,

a house of stone
aged smooth by pilgrimage,
the rollicking cadence
of gnarled limbs,
kiss of winter lovers' lips.

Charcoal Sketch of Aged Couple in Peasant Dress, Circa 1880

Their child, Father's father,
Took to sea in steerage
from wild Calabria, once a kingdom
ruled by nomad Normans, who,

ages before their France
were Norsemen, fierce travelers
blown like cinders from bonfires
of home by prevailing gales.

In the eyes of ancestors
staring down the wall at me
as my hand makes its slow way
across this ruled page

I recognize a northern cold,
numb and alien unease
of wanderers huddled around
their frail, windy fire,

and at the same time
the sweet heat of storied South.
I find myself this night bound
To Ohio, where all that breathed

once huddled close in caves
as outside the glacier screeched.
I feel the earth tilt and lurch
in its incessant spinning

toward winter and beyond,
sky just behind my window
a map of the history of wishing.
What comings and goings lie ahead

for my own restive children?
I feel the family disease:
blood a few degrees too hot or cold,
home both before me and behind,

the need above all else to stay
and learn the lay and language
of this adopted land;
the ache to take leave.

In the Kitchen, He Recalls a Passage from Suetonius

He raises his fist high to strike
and the flashing flat of blade
smashes down loud as *spumante* uncorking
on the cutting board that bears the scars

of every last deast he's fashioned.
It's what he does. Wife and children
due home in two hours, in something close
to haste he's crushed the garlic clove

and brought to mind mad-eyed Giovanni ,
herb doctor of Calabria, father
of his father. Memory's biting scents
for a moment make him old as fear

of dying unloved, take his breath away.
He scrapes garlic pulp into the skillet
to whirl and spatter in virgin olive oil
heated just moments from smoking.

He recalls that, in "The Shield
Of Minerva," the dish that made him
immortal, according to Suetonius,
Emperor Vitellius served his guests

livers of parrot fish, brains of peacock,
lamprey entrails and flamingo tongues,
"Brought back in great ships from the Straits
of Spain and the Carpathian Sea."

He thinks, "So little taste remains
these days." Oregano and sweet basil,
calamari bubbling in sauce the hue
of heart's blood, goat's milk cheese.

It's a sacred duty, he believes,
the best we can do with this
our daily wanting, to season the one life
we're give and make the time to savor.

The History of Avian Abduction

Already an ancient fireside thrill
to chill the souls of children and holy folk
when Herodotus heard the tales from Egypt.

*The little girl could not
have walked up the craggy
mountain so far*

Birders—women and men—claim the greatest raptors,
eagles, condors, can carry no more
than their own weight, twelve pounds at most,
from where she was

*last seen playing
in the backyard*

and though under craggy aeries far from trees,
fossil monkey skulls in Africa are found with holes
the size of eagle talons punched clean through,

*with her Raggedy Ann
which too was found
with dress in shreds*

that was eons ago, when myths were not untrue,
and a young one cursed like Ganymede
with utter beauty could be summoned

*the body picked at
and torn, strewn
in brush and thorns*

by a hungry eagle god with lightning eyes,
who brought him up to paradise to serve him
eternally in short tunic, pretty little sandals,

*the condor too full
to fly, the eyes
dull and satisfied*

until Hera ruined Troy because of one beautiful boy.

That is why we all, waiting for the souging wisp and whirr
of wings of the hunter who's been tracking us all life long,

*every so often, night
and day, sun, moon, rain,
look up, look up*

The Invention of Secrecy

The ancients were not able, save
for a few remarkable ones—
Alexander, Julius Caesar, Ambrose—

to read, or write, silently. *I would
have written to you sooner*, Cicero wrote
to a friend, *but I had a sore throat*.

Read to yourself, we say to children
still today. This they cannot do.
Saying the Latin answers at the Mass,

dressed in my white Sears shirt under
Medieval cassock and surplice,
Chuck Taylor Converse All-Stars—

to protect the sacristy carpet -
I heard some new music. The words
tasted nothing like Cleveland.

Ages ago, library, school, temple
were loud places where tongues flexed,
heart and lungs giving, taking,

the song and dance of subduing self
enough to put in our mouths words
of another body, words of our own.

Learning to read without even moving
our lips, we invented private life.
We created secrets of the dark hollows

of bone and flesh, a new selfishness,
deceiving ourselves into believing
that, alone, we could be complete,
silent, we would not grow too full.

My Father Shaves with Occam's Razor

Entities must not be unnecessarily multiplied.

William of Occam, 1285?-1349

The simplest of answers
is preferred. Explanations
of the unknown should first
be sought in what is near.

So with love and poetry:
what we can't make out
we seek in the seen,
ice ,fire, stone, steam.

Shaving away another day
I recall watching my father--
flecks, specks of soap.
Ooo, blood! Such longing.

Where has he gone? Not
cloudward, to rise and fall
on wires taut as harp string--
and what parent ever

was consigned to fire
ever and ever?--but here,
a rectangle on the wall,
every morning mirror,

darkness between lips,
a song, this very voice,
the blinding light of eyes.
Each night he grows in me,

appears at dawn at the end
of dream, his hand moving
in billows of steam.
And just like him I bleed.

Salt

1

Flesh ocher and brick-hard,
clothed all in wool
and the conical hat of his guild,
he's hauled up to the surface
near Salzburg, Salt-Town,
this miner whose last sun set
700 years ago when
the tunnel tumbled shut.
Cured of all but his humanity,
he'll be lowered with our prayers again,
to labor longer than tears and blood,
saint of our eternal thirst.

2

Dropping the just-honed knife,
I thrust finger to my lips,
the slice keening its crimson
with the sting of the garlic clove
that gleams on the cutting board
like old bone. In this panic
of small pain, I recall
the savor—more bitter and sweet
than any Ohio rain—of the dark
that trickles onto my tongue
from between your heaving breasts,
our August night a moan and cry

3

Pythagoras preached the seasoning
of every meal with a blessing
from our first parents, Ocean and Sun.
The old brain's hypothalamus
still worships these tides, doles out
our share of sodium and potassium.
All the want in the world
and the satisfaction, storms
of egg and sperm, the mortal crave.
It's our salary, the edible rock,
the bit of earth we eat each day
to teach us how forever tastes.

Smelling the Snow

I've heard it said
There are those on such
close terms with night
they can smell the very light.

Not only does the moon,
they say, give off a scent
nothing like the sun's,
but old moon smells

sweeter than slivered new.
Monks of old claimed sin
took the breath away, while
God was wild onion, lilac, pine.

I know a carpenter who
boasts he can sniff out a maple
in a woodlot of ash and oak.
A stalking cat knows

the unsinging sparrow
from the finch. This day
as it returns to Ohio, like
some feathery creature

seeking the very moon and tree
where it was born,
I can smell the snow,
which seems to me,

against the dark trees
moving in slow procession,
a few birds stark and silent,
an essence close to love.

But any old fool can smell love.

We Owe the Dead

this much at least, to wonder
what to call them. From Eve
to just this evening, more than
100 billion — give or take
some millions, depending on when

we start to imagine,
shriek of Australopithecine,
murmur of Homo sapiens.
The din swells with the O, O
of each act of generation,

decibels of mortality, furtive
or brazen. Some signed in,
but most left no way to say
them. Crawling from oceans,
lungs filling with the bloody froth

of moments, they lived only
to be swept into the brine
of dissolution, their unspoken monument
the brittle script of bones.

Who becomes our tribal duty.

Listen. Singing from that oak,
from cave, river rock, fallow field,
spume of sea, the wild wind's guttural.
Every storm and dream roars out
The dear names of the lost.

Winter

You look out the window
as winter drains the light.
Where can your parents be?

At first they swore there was
no such thing as leaving;
then, that they'd never leave.

At last, bundled in great coats,
turning together to look
over their shoulders

they promised to return.
eyes white as mothballs,
faces dark old marble

Soon, they said. *Soon.*
You won't have long to wait.
Centuries, it's been.

How many times can you
listen to their records,
tunes they crooned to you

with your rations
of Jesus, milk, guilt?
Oh, my love, my darling,

I've hungered for your touch.
Touch my hair as you pass my chair,
Little things mean a lot.

You must remember this, a kiss
is still a kiss. They flit
through each day's mirror.

Not even the handwriting's yours.
It's winter again.
Leaving your own children

around the table
in the bright and fragrant kitchen
you go slowly to the closet

to find your great coat.

Pomp, Circumstance, and Other Songs of a Lifetime

If you're like me, you've got a big head,
not to mention a funny robe, full of music—
poems and melodies, the tunes
we move to, shower and shave by,
study, write to. Not just the incidental,

but the momentous music keeping time.
Our histories are measures of song,
Listen to your heart: drums of Africa,
sea-spume of blind, far-sighted Homer,
Sappho's honeyed love lyrics. Often,

music speaks for us, one note saying
a thousand words. Like Rodolpho
in Puccini's *La Boheme*, *Sono un poeta*.
I am a poet. *Che cosa faccio?* What
do I do? *Scrivo*. I write. This ceremony

is loud music—pomp and circumstance
of the life you began freshman year
or that first day of graduate school.
In my head I press Play, and the CD
of Big Days kicks on. I leap and linger

over moments too sweet, nearly, for words.
I'll never escape rhymes from the nursery.
Up above the world so high, like a diamond
in the sky. We knew from the start
our universe was aglow with wonder.

Italian, Latin, English songs in nasal accents
of Cleveland. *Gaudeamus igitur, Juvenes
dum sumus*. So, let us rejoice, while
we are young. Youth is that gift we can't
comprehend while we're young. This ceremony

means you all are less young than you were.
Don't let the heavy knowledge gained
from your studies deprive you of the gifts
of youth, to be able to rejoice at the drop
of a hat, to care for, be moved by others.

Now I hear golden hits of five decades.
Big Mama Thornton, and that so-called King
(King of what, fried butter sandwiches?)
who stole away her hound dog. You ain't
never killed a rabbit, you ain't no friend

of mine. As with those profs and TA's,
course after course, you had to produce—
kill some rabbits—to earn respect.
And at times OSU may have seemed
like Heartbreak Hotel, down at the end

of Lonely Street, so difficult was it
to do your best. Tennessee Ernie Ford,
“Sixteen Tons”: St. Peter don't you
call me because I can't go. I owe
my soul to the company store.

You have been digging deep in mines
of knowledge. We all owe our souls
to Ohio State, company store of learning,
shared experience—precious ore
we have in common forever.

Now I hear Domenico Modugno's
fervent urging to wish, sing, fly,
Volare, Wo-oo. Cantare, Wo-o-o-o.
My grandfather was a peasant farmer,
a *contadino* in Calabria in the toe

of Italy. He knew it's the human lot
to dream of flying. Lucky, lucky,
lucky me, I'm a lucky son-of-a-gun.
I work eight hours, I sleep eight hours,
That leaves eight hours for fun.

Hey! He sailed in steerage across
the Atlantic, came to Cleveland, where
he stayed long enough to work 52 years
for the B & O Railroad, before lying down
to rest in good Ohio soil. So many of us

here today came from elsewhere,
or ancestors did. From Tennessee, Italy,
Africa, Asia, Appalachia—even,
President Kirwan, the wilds of Kentucky
and Maryland. Women and men with backs

supple as birch trunks. The courage
it took to pick up stakes and begin again
in a new world! Think of the work
those older ones did. For you. You all
are facing a change right now.

This sheepskin is your passport.
You're bound for emigration to
the next song of your life. Ohio State
is the ark on which you've been sailing.
You've been the precious cargo.

But, as Noah once said, I can see
clearly now the rain is gone. The ark,
our university, was filled to overflowing
with the diversity of us. Diversity.
Networks and talk shows devalue the word.

I say, rather, the richness of us,
precious difference, the grand multiplicity
of selves that balance this globe
and enable it to spin true. Grandson
of peasant immigrants, I was given

the opportunity to earn a doctorate
in English literature from Ohio State—
because my family labored long nights
around the kitchen table trying to learn
this arduous English. I sat where

you're sitting twenty-six years ago.
Bob Dylan and Smokey Robinson got me
through. Yes, it took a prophet and Miracles!
My son earned an OSU Ph.D. in history.
Now you, graduates, are being honored—

by degrees. We've all come together
around the kitchen table of Ohio State.
Ohio, Round on the ends and high
in the middle. For the years to come
we'll sing together, Beautiful Ohio,

in dreams again I see, Visions of what
used to be. These psalms, sacred thoughts
of our tribes, 78's and 33's, tapes,
CD's—they take up space in shelves
of our skulls, our hearts. They remind us

we want a song beyond the run-
of-the-mill thrill, the moment throbbing
with pleasure or bathed in the blues.
We ache for something grander than
pure selfishness. Songs sung for one

alone are not true music. Arias shared
are music of the spheres, ways of saying
to another something from the soul.
Of course the Buckeye Battle Cry
is there. Drive, drive on down the field,

Men (and women!) of the Scarlet
and Gray. Well, you drove on down
the field, and you drove up and down
the streets, around and around
crowded lots, looking for a place to park,

and you searched our dark, ancient library
for a decent place to study. My wife,
Mary's, father marched in the first
"Script Ohio," in 1936. He's here today
with us, blowing his horn, I can't help

but feel, as is the sweet mother
I lost last year, the one who gave me
the stars. Today's music makes us think
of the debts we owe, and never can repay.
So many of us would not be here

were it not for the lullabies and songs
of dear parents, their parents, theirs.
Some are here today in the flesh.
Many are not. We mourn them with cadences.
of our hearts. Think how many people

sang before us, gave us a name, a voice,
taught us the right words. We must
cherish them by remembering every song.
When we sing to others, we honor
our fathers and mothers, thank them

for this day of profound scarlet and gray
pomp and circumstance. O, come
let's sing Ohio's praise, And songs
to Alma Mater raise. Alma mater.
Ohio State is our sweet, nurturing mother.

We came of age here, with her help.
Well, Mother, we love you, but, like,
it's time we moved out, got a place
of our own. You're standing there,
Mom, gray hair, eyes scarlet

from crying. We won't forget you.
Now, even though this ceremony
means we're being weaned, taken off
the nipple, let's take care to cherish her
all our days. Let's remember

the words to the songs she taught us,
and pass them on. We'll remember
always, Graduation Day. Summer's heat,
and winter's cold, The seasons pass,
the years will roll, Time and change

will surely show How firm thy friendship,
O-hi-O. We call that little number
Carmen Ohio. Carmen means song
in Latin. You've worked hard; she
is your reward; today is your reward.

You're filled to overflowing with
the notes, the poems we've written
together. You know the score.
Continue to work hard for yourselves,
and one another. Find the ones who need

you to sing to, for them, in the world.
Graduates. this joyful litany, this hymn
our ancestors collaborated on with us,
the calling of your name today is music
to our ears. Sing that name proudly

all your days, as if your life depended
on it. It does, you know. It has been
an honor for me to speak—and sing—
to you today. Thank you, graduates,
and, again, Congratulations.

Letter From The Shaman: Up From Down, Raw From Cooked

In the beginning was the wind
and the wind was on fire. To
teach us up from down, raw
from cooked, he formed the clouds
that brewed the rains that fell
to earth and chased all fire
up into ash and hickory, maple
and oak, where still today
it blazes through October afternoons,
where still today, when we're oppressed
by night and wind, ice and age, we
can go to bring it down again.

Letter From The Shaman: The Dance

The first woman and man
came near one another, wary,
wondering, sniffing, sighing.
Pines swayed. Willows. Ash.
Their mingled breaths, the air
between them, they called "wind."

They danced up and back,
side to side, hips circling
like birds. They barked, whistled,
babbled, howled, tongues twisting.
Drum and bone. Flute and wind.
The din they called "song."

Ever moving, they heightened
the friction between them,
motioning until sparks flew.
They discovered fire. Rain came
from them. Smoke. Mist. Steam.
They called it "spring."

Letter From The Shaman: Salt, Oil, Sweetness, Love

He made the eye salty
so grief would sting, and beauty,
and too much mourning
make us blind,

the ear oily so bad news
and gossip, death's rattle
and cough could go in one ear
and out the other,

the lips and tongue sweet
so we could savor the nature
of sea, field and tree, make
a feast of every word,

so we could love.

Letter From The Shaman: The Colors Of Pain

There's a pain the color
of a piece of raw flesh;
it can be drawn out
with salt, fire and smoke.

There's a pain as blinding
as the desert hunters cross
on their slow way home
from where there was no game.

to cure this requires one
good prayer, eye and hand,
one stone hurled at heaven,
one plump bird plummeting.

For the pain white and blue
as the water churning
around a drowning man, move
the victim into fresh air.

There are pains crimson as
the sun's rise, its fall,
pains the varying shades of night;
to cure these takes time.

Letter From The Shaman: Drought, Famine, Age

When the sun draws up creek, pond
and pool because he's grown mad
staring at his own reflection,
old ones must teach the children
to chew grass and roots,
meat red and raw as a wound,
songs that summon thunder,
lore of the beaver and canoe,
a fear of every kind of fire.

When the hunters and planters
grow crazy or lame, lazy, drunk
or too stiff beside their young wives,
old ones must teach the children
to stalk and leap, move
fast as cloud shadows across
the plains, stoop and rise
like the crow, the lore of seed
and wind, name of every grain.

When the babies are taken by drought,
famine or age, old ones must teach
the children to groom
their long hair until it glows
like the night sky, to dance together,
whimper and groan from bushes,
shake the tentpoles every night,
give their hands to one another,
trace the image of woman and man.

Letter From The Shaman: Cures For Cynicism And Despair

If you doubt for an instant
the awful power of the law,
pluck a wasp from the air
with your bare hand, trust
in the dollar's worth, feast
on the juicy flesh of a pig
cooked medium-rare, hurl
stones and insults at police
and then resist arrest, travel
to the country of age and swear
"I'm only visiting, I can't stay."

If your world becomes too dry
and you come to feel "Beyond
my own life nothing is," or
you swear "When death comes
walking slowly up the stairs
I'll run to get my coat, go
with no regret," then listen
to your blood thundering through
its course summoned by a whisper's
roaring eloquence, the sea
in the ear's conch, a lover.

Letter From The Shaman: The Calling

At sixteen I grew too sleepy to move.
I'd lie alone for days praising
the beauty of nothing, until in the sky
high above the nighthawk, owl and pine I'd
see things. I found my voice, my tongue,
learned to bark, sing, wriggle, fly.

When I'd been alone in the forest
three weeks, I learned the frail language
of wood, moss, dove. After four weeks
without women or food, my penis, belly
and heart taught me the drum. Now

I can cadence you through the dance
of rites, seasons of loving and birth.
I'll frighten leanness from your cattle
and babies, march your girl and boy
into woman and man, seed into tasseled corn.
I'll find your hunters lost in snow, your souls.

You've a hurt? There's a root, an herb, a word.

Letter From The Shaman: He Orders You To Listen

Listen. The birds
and dogs. Pine and ash.
Your penis, hair, nails.
All are speaking to you.

Listen. Winds bear
souls. Initiations.
Expirations. Gales
of death-breaths.

Listen. Every star's
a tall tale. Look up.
Every pebble's a sharp truth.
Go barefoot. Listen.

Letter From The Shaman: Dying Just Once, Loving Every Other

The last dream means a room,
brightest you've ever seen,
where long-time lovers simmer
with a passion time can't cool,

where no one falters, where
there's no ache, though
everybody's touching, no one
dying just once, every lover

loving every other.

Letter From The Shaman: Mourning

Let the businessman rend his suit,
cancel all appointments, hurl
paperweights and bills of lading
to the floor, pound his metal desk,
scatter ashes on his head.

Let young women and men
who move together (even as I write)
come apart, keep hands to themselves,
walk out into snowy woods
shapeless in coarse cloth, alone.

Let the mother withdraw her breast
from the baby's lips,
migrating birds fall from the sky
to walk earth aimlessly.
May nothing leap, run or speak,

for at this instant, someone
we've never known, much less
loved, clutches chest or side,
falls all the way to ice or flame,
or starts from sleep, and waking,

dies.

Letter From The Shaman: Rites To Prepare Yourself For Death

Try to hatch a boiled egg
or weave your shroud from just two threads
or break the wind and mend it.

Try to distinguish wind
from seed, spore and leaf, dark from night,
mourner from lament.

Try, with your final love,
at the instant pleasure transfigures your face
and makes you more than you are,

to tie a knot in your last
stream of semen. As darkness falls, wish hard
for clay and peace, say

“If I only had the time.”