

[for Sixfold, July, 2022]

## Random Thoughts

### Birthday

(for J. Alfred Prufrock)

#### Scene One

I'm in a large room enveloped  
in mist, like a scene from a  
Boris Karloff noir. The  
delicate blaze of the forty  
candles (sleek like young  
bodies, each a fragment  
of a failed dream, the  
touchstone of a borrowed  
fantasy) burns through the  
density, sucking  
oxygen from the crowded  
room. Is that why I feel  
so faint, so thoroughly flushed?

#### Scene Two

I'm at the beach at noon.  
The air is as dense as a  
poor man's dreams. The summer  
sun burns melanomas  
into city-soft skin.  
Other people's blankets  
cover sand too hot  
for me to stand on. This  
human flesh parade—pampered,  
nubile, and firm—begins on my  
left, circles around, and ends  
on my right. Two dogs bare teeth  
in the shallow water but move on  
without drawing blood.

Shall I wear the glasses to  
note the details? Shall I dream

of other days—days of heat, of  
youthful perfumed passion?  
Shall I compose that list of  
all I must see and do to  
make my life complete?

### Scene Three

I'm at the hospital at  
ten pm on a moonless  
night that feels like  
November but isn't.  
I am dreaming of home and  
the surrealistic glow of a  
single candle against the  
darkness. My stethoscope  
dangles lifelessly from my  
sagging shoulders. I am  
scowling as I gaze out of  
an open window. The  
fragrance of misery taints  
the sweet night air. Another  
shift and no-one is saved and  
no-one is spared. Shall I write  
that book or shall I simply  
go home and never come back?

### Scene Four

It is finally the dead  
of night and I am alone  
in the bedroom. The stars  
are surely whispering  
outside; I do not think they  
whisper to me. The sun is  
still burning flesh over  
Maui. The sun is always  
burning someone somewhere.  
But I am not burned. I  
only turn out the light,  
pull the sheet over my  
head and imagine that I  
am drowning in a bathtub  
under a UV lamp. Shall I

luxuriate in the heat  
or dare disturb  
the universe with a single  
silent cry for help?

## Don't Ask a Poet Who He Is

One Sunday morning after Mass,  
a young man I didn't recognize  
approached me in  
the gathering space.  
He flashed a religious  
grin and said,  
"I'm Jonas, and you are?"

I sighed as I watched him watch me,  
his expression as unchanging and insistent  
as the crucifix on the wall behind him.  
"I am," I began, "the blood-red sky  
that heralded yesterday's dawn.  
I am the sweet white cream in your espresso.  
I am the muscles you need  
to form your lips into a smile.  
I am the difference  
that makes a difference.  
I am the time it takes  
to put these words on paper.  
I am the foot that—"

He raised a slender and  
ringless hand to stop me.  
He gave me a patronizing  
look and said,  
"I'll just call you Roy."  
I nodded. We shook hands.  
I didn't ask why Roy.  
I saw *Die Hard* and  
assumed he had too.

## Garage Sale

A plywood plank resting  
on two metal sawhorses  
holds the depression glass.  
Flashy wide ties and leisure suits hang  
on a rope with the peasant dresses  
and the bell bottom jeans.  
Books, mementos, souvenirs,  
remnants of a life on display  
for anyone to pick through,  
cast out, take home.  
The difference between trash  
and treasure determined  
by age, taste, and need.

And so it is with poems,  
so carefully crafted,  
so beautifully printed;  
the silver among the tin,  
poet's favorite, editor's choice.  
And yet silver tarnishes  
and tin can shine;  
and a sale is a sale,  
and souls can be bought.  
In the end, it's all the same;  
such is the business of life.

## I Found a Poem

This morning, sifting through  
my archives like a  
curator at the Smithsonian, I  
found a poem I wrote when I was  
nineteen. With the detachment  
that comes with age, I read  
and re-read, trying to remember  
that poet, that voice shouting over  
the gaping chasm of fifty years,  
a cool half-century.

But a poem, like a memory, is only  
a photograph, a grainy image frozen  
in time. And so out of context are those  
words, laden with honest lies,  
misplaced rhymes, metaphors  
infused with the hope of living  
forever in that moment of lost time—  
before love, before loss, before  
the acceptance of mediocrity,  
the acceptance of life as it is  
and not how it should be—  
or could have been.

As though the pure white canvas  
that was the future held no promise  
for the young abstract artist.

I read the poem one last time  
then burned it, adding these  
ashes to all the ashes  
I have saved over that  
ever-widening span  
of years.

## I Wanted to Write a Happy Poem

It was that moment—  
or so I thought.  
I was ready  
and I was poised to write  
that happy poem—  
you know,  
the one full of  
roses and sunlight,  
blessings and youth  
and love is in the air.

But then I saw this  
April sky hovering overhead,  
gray as a gravestone; I saw  
the timid green leaves in  
the garden slowly emerging,  
waiting for the warmth that  
is more like a fantasy  
than forthcoming. I  
felt the cold winter kiss  
still fresh on my cheek.

And sensed the illusion  
of it all and breathed the  
faint transcendent hope  
that tomorrow the sun  
will shine and my pen  
will work a different magic.