

Sixfold submission "To Do List" etc.

To Do List

To live in long anticipation
of postponed joy, make a list of duties.
Perform them while remembering
every mean and nasty thing others
have said about you.
Start another longer list.
Eat a sandwich which is missing
the single ingredient
for which you truly hunger.
Cancel each day with an X on the calendar.
Observe all rules of decorum.
Consult your horoscope,
therapist, and mother before
making a decision. Postpone
your one-week vacation.
Decide it's okay if you never see
Prague. Work late for no reason.
Turn down the music. Keep your shoulders
hunched in case of unexpected attack.
Avoid sunlight, moonlight, starlight,
cloud light, candlelight. Ignore
the aspens' leafing. Worry.
Breathe like each breath cost
\$1.49. Forget what you dreamed.
Forget your childhood nickname.
Ignore the old woman
at the pharmacy who's
wearing your grandmother's
plastic rain bonnet
over her thin hair. Don't
look at her bruised hands.
Stop drawing.
Don't read poetry.
Check the headlines for disaster.
Read advertisements as if
they were written by yogis.
Lose your temper at the stranger
who inadvertently cuts ahead in line.
Do not apologize.
Calculate the day you'll draw
your first retirement check.
Worry it won't be enough money.
Have sex without kissing.
Kiss without opening your eyes.

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Take yourself very seriously.
Don't smile at children.
Don't smile at yourself in the mirror.
Look up symptoms for cancer
on the Internet. Sleep
next to a loudly ticking clock.
Break yourself into marketable bits;
sell them to the highest bidder.
With what remains walk
the slippery aisles of stores.
Tie the dog to her kennel—
with her chain let her measure the dark.

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After the Meeting

Ripe darkness of sky,
send me the dream that unfurls
what life is.
Listen this once—
give me a plan like a spider web:
I have small things to catch.
Clouds that clot and ravel,
throw shadows on this broken mirror,
so I will remember
how I once learned to
to stand inside
a sleeve of sunlight.
I could ask a doctor,
a therapist, or a professor,
Why is soul shaking me?
They'd nod and cross a leg.
Do you wake in the night?
Have you fallen lately?
Are you coming down with a cold?

Reason is angled like a coffin,
and Brahma has not woken.
Light builds its tent of day—
time is for now.
Shy animals are waiting
to enter me.
No more filling up minutes
like bread rising under a towel.
The body's not a paperweight
to hold down hours.
Trees go crooked in harsh weather.
and there's no money in that
unless rain is as good as love.
I ran out of the meeting
when the words rotted
as we said them.
My former names
are passwords I've torn up.
Sky, belly up to the window,
and spill your make-believe heaven,
remind me sometimes.

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Meanwhile

We know how we waste our minutes
and that this is a crime which helps
us fit in with the rest, who pretend
life is like money and they own deeds
to ninety years. In the time it takes to read
the poem, someone is scalding milk
in a white enamel pan and someone
else is lifting the old dog into the back
of a truck. Meanwhile, a cloud
in the shape of a flying saucer has assembled
above the house. I want to think I love
life enough to look around, but I don't
look long enough. We waste ourselves
with committee meetings and TV
documentaries on Egyptian mummies
and it all appears normal and sensible.
The brain sings its same song
of pretending to sort things out. While
the body creaks and drips and waits to be
found good enough. A separate life
hides inside each hour. We know we lost
it long ago. I'm not talking about childhood—
that island sank and disappeared
for good reason. An old woman
in the 99 cent only store pinches coins
from a zippered purse. I wonder
if she knows the value of a day.
I wonder how we learn.

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Forgetting

When I die I will be in the middle of something—
I'm writing this so I won't forget that.
I try to notice what's important,
which today is the icy puddles in the street
and the wind flinging itself upon the town.
But I get distracted.
A phone call from the insurance company
sends me to the file cabinet where I realize
I didn't mail the rebate coupon on the heater
which stands ready like a missile in the closet,
ticking with the time bomb I knowingly planted.
The self-help books say, Do important stuff
first. The blinking lights of the smoke alarm
and the carbon monoxide detector are on alert.
I have test results that show I'm good for thirty
years if I don't take up cigarettes or gain sixty
pounds. But I keep forgetting why I'm alive.
I was supposed to do something.

And I forget again as I sort the laundry, sort
the bills, sort my dreams into to do lists.
(The self-help books recommended this.)
Until one day, in the middle of something,
I will die. Of course, by then I'll know what's what.
If it's cold, the heater will click on and ready
itself to explode, but I will be slowing and
cooling. I hope I will have time to look
outside. I think I will remember to take one
last glance at the world that I loved more than
I showed. Attention is love. The sun
will stare me down as I go.

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The Little World

Sometimes when I say *the soul*
doors and windowpanes appear.
I can sense some other kind of life
if I were brave enough to live it.
Sometimes the word is attached
to a pulley that tugs on a lever
that opens what feels like my heart.

Mostly, I'm afraid to be alive,
a goldfish nibbling flakes
in a small bowl. This, the little
world in which I hide: house, car,
street, office, restaurant, dentist chair,
bank, and one day, ash poured
into a box. Labeled and solved,

but something still unspent and hopeful
among the chalky fragments.
I love to say *the soul* but I neglect
the secret work that it requires.
Surviving on the crusts, saving
the good parts for that later
to be scorched by my own mouth.

What kind of bargain am I making?
The chipped ends are called good
enough. I squander time and sun,
pretend that work is being done.
How do I know to what I belong?
Inside a lighted room, another
piece of daylight is choked down.