

*The Music of As Is*

Dearheart: forgive the extreme tardiness of my reply—  
I meant to reply much sooner, but, alas, intentions  
are weaklings who hardly ever muscle their being  
into keeping its appointments. An interesting notion,  
that we're nearly always late to or altogether missing  
the meetings set up for us by our own desires,  
and thereby run around on the stringy detritus  
of our potential. Why stringy? I don't know,  
but when I think out the field and walk through its grass,  
I envision the shed potential not as flakes of skin  
drifting down, but as strung out guts falling in ropes,  
though without the gore or macabre mess—no,  
these are the guts of something finer within us,  
some heavenly-feathered cross-fiber, some  
suddening strings of energy that break into music.

When I lie down in that field and feel the wind  
make followers of my hairs, I envision us running  
over these barely perceptible snakings of failure—visible,  
like much of beauty, only if we actively look for them—  
and think yes, there's music in the air, so much music  
that the strings beneath us and the strings of us  
combine and conduct for the ear that cocks  
with ache to hear it, and that's the music I want:  
the music of the way things go, not the way things  
could go, if. Oh, I meant to write you a letter dearheart,  
but I guess this is as it should be—I was never much  
of a correspondent. Still, imagine the possibilities  
of all that music, waiting like starlight to be  
plucked, threaded through the ears and taken down.

*The Last Good Thing We Do*

*for Amy King*

Turning my day inside out, all I hear is the pounding  
that woke me up late last night, or early this morning,  
the sound of a hammer to a piece of wood  
that makes no sense in a February land of concrete.  
The garbage truck it wasn't, that nightly nuisance  
hauling away the bottles of drunks  
and the excesses of a culture that prides itself  
on purchasing power. If a thing breaks, it hardly matters,  
there's ten million others like it—one of a kind  
is a thing of the past and the show will go on without you.  
Disbelief is understandable, and also not worth the debate.  
Have a look. There's a line of stars extending out the door,  
around the corner and over into undetectable galaxies.  
A fiery mixture of redheads and gas giants and blond  
ice planets coldhearted down to their greasy, mean-spirited,  
middle-aged defiance. Maybe some comet of realization  
will undo the habits that harm them, but the chances are  
so not good it makes the lottery look like a shoe-in.  
We should get together and hash it out, spec a plan  
to make amends and stop ignoring wounds,  
but who would take such a theory seriously?  
When has anyone ever wanted to get together  
over a glass of water? We could give it a try  
but I bet three flies and a lesson in gardening  
one of us would signal the waiter and place the order  
to wine it down. And that would be the end of that.  
How easy it is to bring hands to the table  
in contemplation of work, interlace fingers like the fates  
of neighbors and throw them up in helplessness,  
or hopelessness, or a botchy, beleaguered despair.  
Because nothing can be done. Because no one in this  
field of compassion is in a position to do anything about it.  
Because it's out of our hands and we haven't the calluses  
in our nature to grab ahold of the ropes and tug.  
The subject is the earth and Atlas has an achy shoulder.  
And yet mothers who have no kids are this very minute  
teaching rooms of them how to behave. Prophets in  
hand-me-downs with newsprint pamphlets are knocking  
on doors trying to save as many souls as they can.  
Businessmen are buying young men farms to work  
and aging bikers are salvaging soup from vegetables  
sent toward the compost heap—to feed the foodless,  
to serve their country, to show a man that someone, somewhere

cares whether or not you starve. There's enough good will  
in every small town to make even the blond bitch weep.  
And there's enough carelessness in every indifferent heart  
to lead us explosives-first into a species-leveling bloodstorm.  
And sadly, sadly, sadly, that may be the last good thing we do.

*Discomfort and its Undoing*

Discomfort, mere (*ha, mere*) discomfort, never mind pain, discomfort alone will make of us irritable idiots who clamber over one another to get at the throat of language, men and women who take the easy road, the wrong road, the road that leads to trouble. And we will curse the road for being the way it is, and our feet for having trodden it.

And when we get to the end of that road, or a forlorn stopping place, we will know it was the wrong way, and everything will be met with disgust, revulsion, the inclination to swallow all beauty and spew. The dissatisfaction of living will make our tongues unable to stand the taste of our own mouths. We will spit in the dust and get the spit on ourselves and glare at the sun as though it were the bright idea behind all of this.

Unless. Unless something gets in the way of our anger. Some messenger who intersects us—a tangerine for instance, just a tad overripe, might be the hook which untangles everything that went wrong. Then, the sky will clear. Then, the mind will conduct the weather's music, even if the clouds remain grey. Then, a foul wind might dog us, might drive us to seek comfort, but we won't wish it ill, might even to teach it to fetch if there's a stick at hand.

*The Blooming Noses*

Flowers, these people are flowers who can brace the wind of a winter's day, but not the wind of a bullet. Most aim is bad despite the years of training and most rubber bullets will miss, but the few that don't will scatter the majority into hiding, the rebels into the hills, while dissidents shiver in abandoned buildings, heating beans over small blue flames. Some of the shooters will want to change sides, but will be honor bound to ignore their conscience and abide by the pullers of strings. Strings of the purse, not strings of the heart. Strings that say plant the drugs in the pocket and watch the felony grow. Mace the face and watch the dissent shrivel into tears. Rough up for good measure, but not in front of the camera, and not the pretty female face or the old face or the rest of the faces where it's blatantly visible. A kidney shot for the mouthy ones and a stomach jab to widen the eyes of the poorly dressed and highly educated. Raid the encampment in the middle of the night and make a racket that would make your scalp seeking ancestors proud. Burn the library and break the cookware. Accost the medics and dump their stores into the sewers. Herd them all like sleepy cattle. Hint at slaughter. Make them feel that their life is in danger and tell them that you're doing it for their own good. Their hygiene has been declared a public hazard and their health is in jeopardy in more ways than one. This is the land of baby powder, not the land of shit and mud. This is the land of tightly controlled chemical stimulation and the doctors are standing by to diagnose your condition. The pharmacists are standing by to fill your orders. It's time to put away the signs and pick up your belongings and head up the mountain of debt. It's time to think of your children in the present and forget about a nebulous future. It's time to face the facts of your position and make your journey along the predefined routes. And if you insist on questioning the rules, if you insist on picking at scabs, then it will be time to call in the hounds, and there is nowhere left on earth that escapes our gaze for long. If we have to hunt you down, we will, and then it will be time to teach you a lesson. Then it will be time to taste the blood of a traitor. Then it will be time to wake up and smell the blooming noses.

*Death, a Wife, and a Life of Broken Rules*

I

Is it because  
I'm tired tonight  
that I don't want  
to think of death,

my lifelong confidante,  
the ear in me  
that has no flesh,

that never had a drop of blood  
to spill  
between some crack in the desert—

the ear that,  
as far as the eye can tell,  
is not here  
but is nonetheless wholly listening?

II

Whatever the reason,  
I must decline.

No, my friend, I do not want  
a glass of wine with you,

a tray of cheeses  
and fine cuts of meat;

I do not want to shove you in my mouth  
and savor your descent into my bowels.

III

I want the simplicity of water  
tinged with the minerals  
of my hometown,

the familiar blend of sulfur,  
iron and arsenic that makes  
hotel water taste wrong.

IV

I want a joke  
and the knowing laughter  
that swells in wit  
born of sorrow,

sorrow that bites  
and leaves a mark  
that mars  
every flawless mirror.

V

I want a lame limb that has just experienced  
an uncommon day of relief,

a limber bend to pick up a fallen pen  
that the knee thought would never happen again.

VI

I want to know why the pigment in that painting  
made me feel the way I do. I want to live  
another night in the company of my wife's skin.

I want the moment when her shades of cream  
conspired to teach me what I could never  
have taught myself about the complexities of snow.

VII

I close my eyes  
and I am there;

she is next to me  
and we are happy;

the future  
is a condition

apart from  
our time together.

VIII

They tell me I am foolish to dwell,  
that there is no life in death  
and no bringing back what's gone.

But I tell you  
they don't know everything  
and life is a breaker of rules.

IX

What my heart does with me  
when I turn myself over to its aims

makes me a firm believer  
that love can do anything it wants.

X

When I want to be with her,  
all I have to do  
is sit like this  
and close my eyes.

Then it's easy,  
it's like  
I've awoken in the night  
and all I have to do is

peel back the covers  
and feel my way  
to her  
through the dark.