

Is This Thing Loaded?

It's late, and I'm doing the last dishes
of the day. I rinse them, swing the door down,
pull out the lower rack, and then
I sigh. Every time.

Someone designed this machine with a lot of thought.
There is a right way to load it.
Twenty years and my wife still won't do it.
She's waging her own private revolution

in this two-by-two-by-three-foot box.
Today she's put the spatula longways
in the top rack. It's lounging there
across all the little indentations

meant for cups and saucers,
legs crossed, arms behind its flat slotted head,
smoking a joint. She's put the plates all kinky
and off kilter. I hate that.

But a couple months ago, she was gone
for a couple days, and I had to load it wrong,
just to feel her close. Now I get it.
I love my wife. She loads with panache:

The plates snap their fingers
like bohemians in black turtlenecks,
clearly enjoying the salad bowl
lying naked on her side,

waiting for the waves.
It's jazz fusion in there.
Abstract expressionism.
Performance art.

New York City in a Kenmore.

The dishes go anywhere they want.

In the Land of the Lost

He flicks the lighter, fills his lungs with smoke.
A tendril of spent American Spirit snakes into the air
on his exhale, like a tired girlfriend, bored and listless, sneaking out

the minute he looks away.
He asks for help but no one can reach him.
No one gets past the charm—a tranquilizer dart

for the well-meaning interventionist. Your muscles relax
and you get sleepy, drifting off, thinking,
“*He knows what he’s doing. He’s got this.*”

Let me tell you something. He doesn’t got this.
The scooter he borrowed was impounded, and now
the penalties cost more than the scooter did, new.

He’s not returning calls from friends
with suddenly abbreviated wallets.
He shapeshifts through the alleyways,

trying to outrun the damage.
“Help me!” he yells, sobbing, behind a door
he has locked and barricaded with furniture.

You throw your body against it, pummeling
it with everything you’ve got, everything you want for him.
Finally, with heroic strength, you bust it down

and he stands there with a poem in his hand
by an obscure photographer
who wrote about physics in the 1890s.

You’re bruised and panting, his anguished “Help me!”
echoing in your body, as he asks you--cool as a bullet--
“Ever heard of this guy?”

The family forms scar tissue,
heals hard against these wounds.
There is no bottom for this guy

until everyone, everywhere, says
“No more.”

Master Class

This is who I am right now:
A swimming pool that waits in vain.
A Master Class I bought but didn't take.
A dress I only have but never wear.

The swimming pool waits in vain 'cause I watch TV.
If I ever do get off my ass to work out at the gym,
that dress I never wear will slip right over my hips and into an Uber,
delivering me to the party in high heels, fashionably ravishing.

Salts my ass, though, the thought of working out at the gym.
All those people racing in place, chasing their discontent.
But I'm right there with them, racing ideals in high heels, fashion-ravaged.
I hold my breath for zippers, I break my feet in shoes.

What if I chose a different race, outran my discontent?
But that's a race that isn't run. It's won by standing still.
I unzip my lungs, take off my shoes, stop trying so hard to win.
There's nothing here for me to lose, except who I have been.

My heart racing, I stand still at the edge of this pool.
I have nothing to lose. I dive in. Then smiling, belly up, I float.
Turns out I did everything just right. This Master Class I both took and taught.
This is who I am. Right now. Barefoot, and not who I thought.

Junk Mail

Her hands flutter through the junk mail.
She puts down her slice of Fuji apple,
and pulls out the offer.

It's the sixth time in the last hour.
She puts on her glasses.
"Let's see what they have to say..."

Reading each word to me, deliberate
and true, factual: "Mrs. M. Terrone,"
(*she is so pleased*)

"GREAT NEWS...M. Terrone...
You are officially eligible for a
chance to win the one...

million.... dollar... prize...
or one of over two hundred and
seventy-five other prizes...

and if you respond by May 28, 2018,
you will also be eligible for the
\$2,500.00 early bird prize!"

She folds it carefully, replacing it in the envelope.
"I'll read this later, when my brains are right."
A few minutes later, she pulls it out again.

"Let's see what they have to say..."

Before she got sick, we used to drop in
to pick her up for lunch,
and I did my best to intercept this crap
so she didn't get sucked in.

I was such a good daughter.
But now, spending the whole day with her,
I feel this piece of mail so differently. She's reading
something that came to *her*, that was addressed

specifically to *her*, with free greeting cards, free address labels!
Giving her such good news!
This was a small moment of respite
from the crushing indignities

of extreme old age.
It's not crap. Not junk at all.
It's a moment of bright possibility
struggling for oxygen in the dark sea

of her depression. It's someone to tell her
she won.
I am a better daughter now.
I let her have it.

But suddenly,
half way through the seventh reading,
she yells, "Ah SHIT!"

ripping open a present
neither one of us wants—
this unending desert of geriatric boredom.

I trudge over to the sink and make her another cup of tea.
She notices an envelope on the table, fusses with it,
unfolds the announcement. "Let's see..."

It Doesn't Really Matter

It really doesn't matter
that you never made it big.
The structure of the world didn't shatter.

Hmm. All those juicy morsels quivering on that platter
offered up to you with fresh-picked figs?
You didn't even taste one. But that doesn't really matter,

I guess. You were in love with Bluebeard. Your mother had her
doubts. Your father never noticed. But it was *your* grave to dig,
though you thought you were gardening. Weird that your world didn't shatter,

when you fell in, fell in deep and fell asleep to the pitter patter
of clods of dirt, shovelfuls, burying your best gig.
But look at you. See? It doesn't really matter.

Because before dreams turn to ash, they spark and scatter,
and start other fires. So you zagged instead of zigged
and the structure of your world did not shatter.

But the ghost of who you were is full of chatter.
She wants to blow you up for becoming the you of You Now.
She wants to end you for thinking it doesn't really matter,
and for pretending, bald-faced, that the structure of her world didn't shatter.