

Weekend Plans

In a talk I recently heard, the speaker said
 that at 50, a man has fewer than
 1500 weekends left in his life.
 Having chewed on this fact for the last week,
 I now realize that my 1499th weekend is coming.

And so I'm making big plans:
 On this 1499th remaining Saturday
 I plan to grade a stack of student papers
 But knowing that there are only so many of these
 Saturdays to sit through
 I am planning on writing the most
 remarkable comments and grades
 I have ever composed.

Instead of pointing out where the prose clunks,
 I will say that the sentence over which I stumble
 reminds me of a '62 Fiat convertible
 I once owned, a car that ran well enough
 when I bought it,
 until I rear-ended a truck one day
 and the front end crumbled
 pushing the radiator back just enough
 that the fan chewed a hole through
 the back end,
 the blades not only making an unearthly racket,
 but also bleeding the radiator dry
 and leaving a green stain on the pavement.

And instead of pointing out that a comma is not a coma
 that noone and alot are two words
 that a manor is a large country house,
 (in a manner of speaking)
 and that collage
 is not an institution of higher learning,
 I will point out to them that Shakespeare, too,
 invented new spellings and words
 so that rather than see their grades as a kind
 of condemnation,
 they might rather embrace these marks as a sort of celebration
 of their wild and anarchic spirit
 which has emancipated itself from all bounds,
 from all pedestrian, prosaic concerns
 on this glorious, remaining 1499th Saturday.

The Dead Grandmother

Oh, how my heart aches to hear to hear of your dead grandmother,
particularly on this, the day that your final paper is due,
on which the question of your passing or failing this course
so desperately hinges.

I am thinking of her there in Clackamas or Council Bluffs
or Dubuque, laid out in her best white lace dress
in that expensive black coffin lined with lavender silk
just waiting for your last minute arrival at her funeral. I imagine

it was no accident, her death. No, she loved you so--more than
any of the rest of your family ever did.

Unlike your unfaithful parents or siblings, aunts or uncles,
she saw past your slovenly habits, your poor grades,

your lack of attention to detail to the real you, the one
buried beneath that false veneer that so easily fooled the rest
of us. And it was that abiding love she bore for you,
I am almost certain that was, in this, the 15th week of the semester,

her downfall. I imagine, too, just before she passed, she went out for her evening walk.
As she shuffled along, she glanced up, saw the first evening star,
and wished upon it for you, a wish born of worry--for you,
worry about the stresses of your young life, worry about your tendency to overindulge

in cocktails the night before the big exam, worry about
the pressures put upon you by professors who did not understand your genius.
And hurrying home from the cold, there she sat
in her complaining rocker, worrying, worrying--with her delicate heart,

her high blood pressure, her diabetes--all too much, and so,
as the darkness came to claim her living room--need I remind you
of her ever-present anxiety for you--her heart beat one last aching beat
for you, dearest one, and beat no more.

So, yes, of course, I will accept your late work, of course
you should go to the imaginary funeral, and when you make up
a red rose to lay on her coffin, imagine another from me—and tell her Godspeed,
before they lower her into the waiting, unforgiving earth.

The Six Things A River Might Say If It Were to Speak

I)

There is no such thing as a river.
The word you call me is simply a place where waters pass.
I am no more an unconnected thing than is ocean, air, you.

II)

When a swallow dips its beak for a drink,
the sky bends down to kiss the surface,
and this moment is reflected, like a tale told twice in joy, wrinkling the cloud's face.

III)

All rivers are not metaphors, nor similes:
Forget what you have heard: I am life—and what living thing
doesn't become something new as it empties into the ocean to weep salt?

IV)

If not fate, or some magnanimous hand,
what made the waters that you bend down to touch?
Did the waters make themselves? Do the salmon return to their ancestral beds by accident?

V)

All words about rivers ultimately fail us:
Listen to the sounds of the water passing over the rocky bottom in the rills.
Isn't that the word that spoke us all into being?

VI)

In the end, you come to me for the same reason
the salmon do:
God tips you back into yourself when you seek Him:
Anyone who leans too far out over the water to see himself must finally fall through into the
depths for an answer.

Seven Rides to Remember

I

The first ride that every hitchhiker needs to consider is the one that doesn't come. For this one, simply pretend you're not waiting. The desert is patient, a dry place to rest your bones. The vultures will likely consider that too. Try something unusual: make a funny sign, lay down and stick out your thumb, read a book. Later when it's dark, use the pages you've finished as kindling. If the sun should ever arise, you might count the number of times you can walk across the median before the next car passes you.

II

One ride to remember is the one you should refuse. Desperation inhibits judgment. You'll learn that the hard way, won't you? Say, for instance, Tennessee in winter, 12 hours waiting in a light snowfall. Finally, a panel van pulls over, promising warmth, a ride all the way to Mardi Gras. Only, there are no seats, no rug. Hours later you'll ache from banging your butt on the corrugated metal floor.

By dark, when the driver pulls over, just outside Jackson, Mississippi, to pick up two hitchhikers, no one will notice that they're Black, one blind, his cousin's gently guiding him. But what you will see is the driver's dawning horror. You'll see, too, how he takes them one exit before dropping them off in the middle of nowhere. Blinded by rage, you'll let loose on the driver with a piece of your mind, get out, too, regretting that you hadn't seen that both kindness and hatred often reside in the same tangled corners of our hearts.

III

Remember that a hitchhiker is like a bartender. drivers who go the distance get bored, sleepy. When they ask you what your story is, remember to be prepared. When you open your mouth, don't forget to bring the fire of imagination, adventure, wisdom, and laughter; otherwise, you'd better start counting road crossings again.

IV

Sometimes they want you to drive while they sleep. If they do,
don't pick up hitchhikers.

V

If the driver has been drinking or smoking something,
has the habit of pulling into rest stops and doing donuts in his panel van
trying to run down coyotes,
keep in mind that sometimes even gamblers let their winnings ride.
When he does 100 mph across the desert,
sucking down Jack Daniels, keep your cool.
Just remember that when the cop pulls him over, runs his ID,
then slaps the cuffs on him,
it's a long walk from the middle of nowhere
to anywhere else.

VI

If the driver picks you up in a snowstorm,
tells you his name is Kissing Cousin Clem Kiddlehopper,
you have every reason to be skeptical. But when he explains
that he used to drive truck for years, and you start to see vehicles
spinning out on the ice, flipping over in the median, you might muster up
some helping of gratitude. And if the car should begin to spin out,
the passenger's side window where you sit becoming
the front windshield, momentarily,
take a deep breath and be glad
he knows the simple truth
that steering into trouble is the best way
to ease back into balance.

VII

Last of all, should you find yourself
just outside Phoenix, Arizona one raw winter evening
and some fellow pulls over into a white sedan, says
he's headed to St. Louis, for God's sake, don't question your luck.
Get in, sit down, and start talking
as the miles of white lines burn up the night.
Bless the midnight flier and the miles he will deliver to you
free of charge, even if the heater doesn't work
even if he asks you to do all the driving,
and you spend the night chewing on your lips
in order to get the car safely through the turnstiles
For this, my friend, is the best gift that God has to offer those

who have nothing but the grace of others
speeding them through the long night.

The Bridge

This morning my thoughts stretch across the distance, aiming to connect those places we must abandon with our hopes for what the future may offer with its hidden hands. No wonder then, my thoughts drift to the Golden Gate, remembering how if the westering sky was clear, my father used to reach out toward the dim outline of the Farralones, a place he spoke about as if it were some fabled land where children had wings or could step into a mirror, stepping out in another mirror on the other side of the world. I remember, too, the adventure of riding my bike across the span, trying to hold the dizzy buzz of traffic apart from the rush of pavement below my wheels, a necessary separation if you did not want to fall into the angry rush of traffic at your shoulder or plunge over the sickening edge to the waiting Pacific below. There is no way you can come to such a span without considering that gap between the world where we live and the world which darkly shimmers just on the other side. My mother learned this the hard way. One day she went for a walk on the bridge. She arrived just before sunset, oppressed by the weight of all her life had come to be, burdened with the caustic laughter of my father, with the way he held her down in every corner of her life, until a well of sadness spread and spread so that had once mattered was covered in a sticky darkness that would not yield. She walked drowsily, you see, in the place between worlds, knowing full well her purpose, yet like a sleepwalker, simply putting one foot after another, without any understanding. Had you asked her, I am not sure what she would have said; perhaps, because so much of her life was then acted out in pretense, she would have claimed she was just going for an evening stroll, though it was too far from home for such an outing, and who would take such a stroll in solitude? Perhaps, under the spell of the evening, she would have mumbled some drowsy half truth, under the weight of evenings inky incantation. She walked until she came to mid span and then simply stood, looking down, imagining. I imagine, too, because it was nearing sunset, the air was charged with possibility, the sky yielding its magical blues into the gloaming's pending darkness. The lights of the city would be winking on, one by one, and the cars would be hurrying desperately for home. In that uncertain moment, a single car stopped, a man leaped out like nothing so much as a prince bounding over a last line of thorns, and grabbed her by her arms and then what? Maybe he simply said, Wake up! And she did, surprised by the great gulf below, surprised by the dark path that had lead her to the edge. It was a long trip back from that gulf to the place where we lived. In some ways, she never came back. Not all the way. Yes, she lived with us for a few more years, but by then, she was wide awake to the evil magic of her marriage. In the end, she left him, found another life, another marriage. And I cannot help but thinking this is the bridge we all must cross, you see: For this journey, what preparation will suffice? No one can tell you how to stop your ears when the sirens begin to sing below; no one

can tell you how to go on putting one foot in front of the other
when there is nothing but darkness behind and the greater mouth
of nothingness darkening ahead.