

## **The Thing about Dying**

Today on a remote trail I encountered  
a man, and as we were passing he said  
Beautiful morning!  
and I said Yes it is!  
and he said I bet  
you didn't think you'd die today!  
and I said No I didn't but  
it *would* happen this way, wouldn't it!

but he didn't really say  
the thing about dying; that part  
was only in my head.  
What he actually said was  
It's my first time out here! I'm Keith!  
To which I replied  
Ah! Nice! I'm Jeff! Second time. Great spot. Enjoy the trail!  
Keith was very smiley and heavyset,  
with a bright white beard and a golden retriever  
who was just as smiley as Keith  
and who should've been on a leash, but oh well

## **All That's Happened Since Kristen Spilled Beer on Our Carpet**

Grandpa died. We quick made plans to pack and fly to Michigan. The luggage got lost in Milwaukee. Everyone and everything arrived, eventually. The day after getting home, we turned around and drove to Chicago for the conference. Virginia was a no-show, and we were sad about that; we're pretty sure we know what it meant. We picked up the kids in Iowa, where they'd been stashed with your parents. Sam had blown out his pants and your dad changed a diaper for the first time in his life. "If anyone is changed, it's me," he said. Halfway through Missouri the family meltdown began. It's one thing that's never unexpected. We solved it with a ten-dollar pizza from a Casey's. We sat in the car and ate it in the dark. We didn't know gas station food could be that good. The silence was nice at first, but when it was too much I slipped in my favorite CD. You said "Now is not the time for Sinead O'Connor." I disagreed, and grabbed the last two pieces of pizza. I sulked for the next few hours. The children made us listen to Yo Gabba Gabba. Somehow we got home, and the Tigers got Prince Fielder. Whitney Houston died in her bathtub, and was only 48 years old. I had no idea she was that young. I'm in my thirties, and she was Whitney Houston already when I was around five. I'll never forget the time she guest-starred on Silver Spoons. "I think I'm in love with Whitney Houston," said Dexter, and then of course I was, too. Good Lord. Now Kristen's gone, and the stain is still here. What has it been, a month?

**Per His Request,**

a poem for Sam  
on Wednesday morning  
at the dining room table  
as he eats his Nutella  
on toast and we listen  
to Aaron Copland and Sam  
asks for a sip of my tea  
and proceeds to chug half the mug  
after which I read him what I've got

and he says it's not done  
and then says it's not a real poem  
it's just about us  
and I say Sam  
that's all I really know and then he  
lunges for the paper with a marker  
and says he's going to put lines  
all through what I wrote  
so it will go away  
and I say Oh no you're not you little

and now he is crying  
and also he is screaming  
and now I've got him pinned  
and it's a struggle for the marker  
and we are both fighting for the poem

## The Stay-at-Home Dad

I got a little longwinded, apparently,  
on the Papa Murphy's automated telephone survey  
and they had to cut me off. I was just getting going on that  
optional voice message part at the end, telling them  
how pleased I was with my recent pizza, and how  
I usually just get a five-dollar HOT-N-READY from Caesars but  
today when I went there it was gone, the Little Caesars  
had just up and left,  
but driving home, my dejection  
lifted like plastic surgery when I saw the sign  
for five-dollar large pepperonis  
at Papa Murphy's for a limited time only, which is  
a much better buy, and a far superior pizza, I might add,  
even though you do have to go home and bake it yourself and  
right about there is where the beep kicked in,  
followed by a man's voice thanking me for my time  
and encouraging me to stop by soon with the coupon  
for some cookie dough which, if I'd just shut up a minute and listen,  
they'll give me the code for momentarily.

Speaking of a man's voice, just before naptime today  
Sam, my two-year-old, requested his favorite Leonard Cohen song – “Hey,  
That's No Way to Say Goodbye” – and instead of playing the  
original version, I popped in a cover by a Frenchwoman  
with vocals like one of God's highest angels  
and Sam smiled, and was quiet, but then said  
“I need a man to sing it”  
and I said “Well, let's go up for sleepytime  
and I'll sing it for you”  
and Sam said  
“I need a *man* to sing it.”

Speaking of a man's voice, it's now time for  
Guided Meditation with Jack Kornfield.  
I'd gotten the CD for free, and had vowed to finally give it a listen –  
had vowed to start there at least, when, showering yesterday,  
I'd seen the bottle of sea kelp shampoo and been reminded  
of my wife's suggestion, a while back, that maybe I ought to have  
my little mood issue looked into, like, professionally, because  
I guess it's not normal or healthy  
to so often be either extremely happy  
or extremely sad

and so now  
that Sam's actually napping  
and I might have an hour to myself,

I strip off the CD's plastic wrapping.  
I put in the disc, press Play.

I sit down and shut  
my eyes. My mouth.

I listen and do as I'm told.

## **Stop**

I'm at a truck stop in central Kansas staring at a t-shirt display while my three-year-old marvels at a claw game I'm totally not letting him play. Tequila makes my clothes fall off, says one shirt. Rebel born, rebel bred, I'll be a rebel until I'm dead, says another, with a skeleton face made of the Confederate flag. A black man walks past us toward the Huddle House diner. Shower customer seven, your shower's now ready, the ceiling speakers say.