

## Fragments of Happiness

τίς δ' ἂν ἐκὼν τοσσόνδε διαδράμοι ἄλμυρὸν ὕδωρ ἄσπετον;  
– *The Odyssey*, Book V, line 100

Ogygia is hell, Kalypso.  
A ceaseless carousel of all life's pleasures.  
Every bone, down to the smallest toe, is sated,  
    And could ask no more.  
Hades have it all! I wouldn't wish this upon  
Hector, Helen, or Hun.  
With my last heartbeat, give me mortality,  
A fight with Penelope over something soon forgotten:  
    Fish tonight, or meat;  
    A comedy or a tragedy from Phemios;  
    The color of our new bedsheets.  
Watching my son disappoint me, as all sons do,  
    Only to see him become his own man.  
The uncertainty of the harvest,  
    The joy in a bumper,  
    The despair in drought.  
Last stories from Laertes, before he is planted with lamentations.  
The shattered cup,  
The cobweb in the corner,  
The well-worn rut leading to a quiet spot.  
Aching muscles after a day's work in the fields,  
    To have Pen rub me down  
    With oil well-deserved.  
Unshackle my emotions,  
Let slip the wolf from his cage,  
    To prey upon my pleasures.  
Give me back pain, fear, uncertainty, death.  
Without these things, man's life is meaningless,  
And all good things impossible.  
Just as the silent pause

    Gives melody to the hymn—  
So does suffering allow mortal man happiness.

If the gods do favor me, as you suggest,  
Return me to my earthly woes,  
    Those things you immortals eschew.  
More adventures and travails, no doubt.  
I go home how Thomas went to god:  
By knowing all the cities and men it is not,  
And with all the map scratched out,  
I am left only with Ithaka—happy at home.

## BZ.1947.18

On Sunday mornings in mid-winter  
I often find myself  
Wandering through this reliquary of meaningless  
Junk – sign posts stuck in the sand  
of human memory’s crumbling landscape.

I pause in front of BZ.1947.18.

Small, alone, made smaller by its aegis:  
Plexiglass and climate control.

“Marriage ring inscribed with couple’s name.”

I must kneel to read the names:  
Intaglio, backwards, shortened,  
Framing their busts in profile,  
Forever staring into each other’s unblinking eyes,  
Noses so close it feels like if I stare long enough  
They will touch, finally.

AITNA[L]IGIV + SENAHPOTSIRA

Laughs and shouts forgotten.  
But I remember the hope  
When she slipped this ring  
On his finger the first time  
Under the Bosphorus sun shimmering on the wavetops  
That still mark the unpassing of time.  
The eternal love they pledged  
Reduced to a tracking number  
And gold worth more melted.  
Pockmarked by the abuse of careless centuries  
When it too tried to be lost  
And die with the souls who gave it meaning.

But its two faces of frozen love,  
The two names nailed and bound by the cross  
Enchanted imaginations and hopes.  
Until Aristophanes and Vigi[l]antia  
Became unrelatable to their progeny,  
But this varnished gold of this ring  
Said to us,

Love.  
Or maybe asked us,  
Love?

I stand  
On this riverside dock  
In Old Town.

When the Potomac dries up  
And a poor mudlarker  
Sweeps his detector over the cracked bed  
Hoping to find some metal  
That will change his life –  
When this mudlarker happens upon  
My platinum ring, still round, symbol unbroken –  
    Unending love and commitment  
    For these ancient cultures.  
With time dust caked into its inscription  
Lazily picked by rote, a thought without a subject,  
A promise for an ambiguous object –  
    To have and to hold.  
And the jeweler's trademark meaninglessly wedded  
To the unrusting ring that wore a rut  
In my finger for three years:  
    Ring-shaped paleness  
    Of unsunned skin.

Sinking to the Potomac's polluted mud:  
Witness to all of man's conceits, welcoming  
This newest casualty in a childish game  
Where words like  
    Til death do us  
Echo loudly through museum halls  
Where curators will shape the story  
Of my ring, however they please.

Because truth's edges soften, and the toss  
That tossed my ring into the river  
Is forgotten with my death.

Time – man's infinite resourcefulness –  
Creates happy stories,  
Fooling future patrons with an uneasy untruth:  
That blissful marriages exist, have existed,

And will exist for them, too.

But,  
Finally cured of our human myopia  
At Hades' dinner table;  
Aristophanes and Vigi[1]antia,  
I and the Carolinian,  
Will watch these future patrons  
And will share a smile  
At their hopes for being different  
Than us –  
These smiles will bring us the peace  
we missed in life  
that these rings promised.

## Hagiography of St. Cowboy of Wildwood

### I.

He was born in a blister  
Barely noticed by god or mom,  
Who never said there there.  
His birth only noted  
As an aberrative pause on addiction.  
Born of a virgin,  
Since she would never recall who  
His for sure father was.  
There was a war going on –  
'Nam, Drugs, or Desert.  
Growing up on Greyhounds  
Going nowhere, cosmopolitan childhood,  
At least between exits 1 and 8  
On the Garden State.  
For a while, indistinguishable  
From any other boy –  
A face in the warm glow of pipes  
Praying for no end.  
Tanning under the sunblaze  
Of 99 cent plastic lighters,  
Crying Fuck you to this week's dad,  
As woman known as ma  
Shakes the trailer in communion  
With her wallet.

### II.

He had a friend once.  
Contrails crossing in ice  
Blue sky. Death under  
A worm moon in a wet April,  
Like milk on the bowl of the ocean.  
Eddie was a good friend,  
There til the end, thus  
Speaks the dragon  
Tilting on the edges of his lips.  
Anonymous, in a checkout line  
Sort of way, nameless.  
To mother: Kid.  
To fathers: Shit Stain.  
To children and dealers: Slim.  
To the police: Cowboy.  
To the neighbors, clean and white:  
Jimmy Crack Corn.  
Names as varied and dissimilar,

As the ever-gaunter faces  
In his carousel of mugshots.

III.

Imagine, if you will,  
A ladybug on your finger,  
The soft spring breeze  
Carrying lavender on its back.  
The smile of innocence  
When a cherubic child  
Wins a soon-forgotten stuffed tiger  
At the boardwalk's rigged game.  
This might be how,  
Contemplating the man,  
Adult and jailable,  
An apophatic would describe him.

IV.

The first time he met the Law,  
He confused him with chocolate cake,  
And tried to eat his hat.  
Efficient baton-chopping  
On brittle bones like chopsticks.  
Boardwalk lights shimmering,  
Summer night, ferris wheel,  
Over other people's happiness.  
For his twenty something birthday,  
His brain gifted him a second self,  
Twice the fun, double the trouble.  
Split with a satisfying thluck,  
Like the unscrewed lid of a pickle jar.  
Having only known loneliness  
He was only aware of a Garden-sized  
Gaping void, begging for barbiturates.

V.

Once, he denied his Fate  
And begged to stock shelves  
In a suburban Shop Rite.  
Stocking shelves, like a child collecting  
Clam shells at the tide line.  
His temptation insatiable,  
Skeletal fingers wrapped around  
The necks of beer bottles  
He can't honestly afford.  
The far-off caw of crows  
That could be the cry

Of his child, Mulligan's Bar-born.  
Fired, as from every job,  
The sun set on the last day he awoke  
With hope kissing his forehead.  
Midnight TV alert test,  
Pissed pants and half empty beers:  
Tomorrow, tomorrow,  
Or Saturday, straight and narrow,  
Though he lost track of days  
Sometime in the nineties.  
John Kruk at first,  
Bush in the Oval,  
And A.C. still the place to be.

## VI.

Some places he's lived,  
In no particular order:  
Under the Wildwood boardwalk.  
Halfway house in an empty  
Pine Barrens town.  
Southern State.  
Uncorrected at Salem and Camden  
County Correctionals.  
Under an overpass over  
The Maurice River.  
A tree house in a Vineland backyard.  
A playset at Crest Memorial.  
Half empty dumpster during  
A vacation to South Philly.  
In a Mexican's house, smelling  
Like beans, broken dreams, desiccated fish.  
Liquid, melting neon watching  
Empty motels full of immortals.  
Happiness cast out with his cord.

## VII.

One time, during that vacation in Philly,  
He had in his head to cross  
Broad mid-block.  
Unbelieving onlookers gasping,  
Without pause or hitch or swerve,  
Traffic unfazed  
By the god-protected pedestrian.  
He can only smell chemicals,  
This child of creosote  
And diesel fumes.  
He can feel the approaching

Thunder on rusted rails,  
Long since abandoned.  
Once he wandered over the boards  
On a soft light summer night.  
Pizza, cotton candy, ocean, B.O.:  
Crispness, but all that assaulted  
His nose was pipe plastic.  
This last time out,  
He resolved to make a home.  
His nephew rented a condo in the Crest  
From a clueless daughter in PA  
On behalf of a senile mother,  
Suburban sufferers whose bad day  
Was the unnapped one.  
He curtained the windows  
And set up his kitchen  
To cook the crystal  
Everyone agrees no one should  
Live without.

#### VIII.

The world is wide, wonderful, and extraneous.  
Long ago he shrunk reality  
To the greying matter in his skull;  
The jumps of transmitters  
In rotting parts of fish flesh.  
Present in the Kingdom of Solipcism,  
What needed he with teeth,  
Or hair, or bones to lift anything  
Heavier than the breath of God  
To his cracked lips.  
His appearance is superfluous:  
Like an unchanging character  
In an abstract painting,  
He is the same, always.  
Always there, on the porch of another's  
Condo down the shore.  
Wearing a busted-brim Phillies cap,  
Good Will clothes they dressed him in  
The day they discharged him.  
Rocking, incapable of stillness,  
Smoking cigarettes to nonexistence.  
Not waiting, not dreaming,  
Not waiting for a thing,  
Because he has the keys to heaven  
Burning through his jeans in a dime bag.

IX.

You've seen him panhandling  
On otherwise empty streets  
That you cross to avoid his crazed eyes.  
He's tried to wash your windshield,  
Sell you flowers, and pose as a vet in traffic.  
You've seen the cruiser  
Transporting him to booking, again.  
You've stood behind him,  
As he pays with pennies  
For a cheeseburger and fries.  
Once, during a fight with sobriety,  
You kneeled next to him in the pew.  
You watched him ride a bike,  
Dodging through people on the boards,  
A bike that was no more his,  
Than Sin itself.

X.

Smiling blindly,  
Come one, come all,  
He alone among men  
Will never judge ye.