

Rick's Downstairs Café – Leland, Michigan

Wind rattled the fake South-Pacific-Island grass
stitched to the patio umbrellas,
and ducklings wandered underfoot.
Yet, despite the crowd upstairs,
here we found an open table by a railing
next to the river's rush.

Water curled over the upstream spillway,
dropped, splashed, and tumbled
inches from our shoes
and sang a repeated mid-tone riff
that forced the waiter to shout the specials
before taking our drink order.

Eventually, we spread whitefish paté
on crisp, greasy, homemade chips,
then sprung our jaws for thick burgers
while the ducklings stumbled about
like a shape-shifting white cloud
in search of under-table droppings
and an occasional, extended hand.

Dinner done, we strolled the harbor
where each docked fishing charter
had scores of rods and reels in at-ease rows
hinting at yesterday's yarns
and ready for tomorrow's run.

North and South Manitou Islands
stretched across the horizon
like layer cake slices behind a wall of translucent mist
stirred by the north wind ruffling our collars
and forcing us to tighten our caps.

But the evening had remained dry,
our car had been untouched,
and the drive home was easy
all the way.

The Silent Treatment

Like a straight and flat Kansas highway
past endless fields of waiting wheat.

No special vista, lake or turn-off.
No shops or billboards,
cafes, gas pumps, historical markers.

Like a pile of laundry waiting to be washed.
Dishes left in the sink.
No more clean glasses in the cupboard.

Flowers that lost their color,
milk gone sour,
and bike seats at the wrong height.

Like a room that won't cool
and a keyboard's stuck key.

Taking the ball and going home.
Sitting out the next dance.
Sleeping till noon,
and burning the toast.

Dining for one.
Getting your own mail.
Reading your own paper.

No hug. No kiss.
No glance or mumble.

An immovable mountain
under cloudy skies.

Independence Day
without the parade.

Ping-Pong Song

Leaning in. Leaning back.
Reach and watch. Flick it back.
Check the ball. See the spin.
Stay compact. Try to win.

Bip, bip, bip.
Roll, roll, roll.

Toss it up. Draw the paddle.
Skim the net. Hope to rattle.
Back and forth. Left and right.
Keep it going, in rhythmic flight.

Bop, bop, bop.
Skip, skip, skip.

Move the paddle, hand to hand.
Offer odds and take a stand.
Let the ball drop low and lower.
Search for touch until it's over.

Dit, dit, dit.
Dit, dit, dit.

Laugh and talk, then hit another.
Rally back. Smash and smother.

Bip, bop, bip, bop.
Dit, dit, dit.

Routine Ode

The large, leaning bush before the turn.
The way wind lifts and whispers
before rain begins to fall.

A slot for spoons, another for knives.
Dinner plates on this shelf.
Salad bowls stacked above.

I feel at home on this dance floor,
know where to reach and turn, how high to lift,
what can share space with what.
The corkscrew and bottle opener.
The thermometer and peeler.

At first we ask,
“Where should we put this?”
Then we hunt. “Here or here?
Is it lost? Is it gone?”

But soon we move something aside
or open another drawer,
and everything’s found
at its own address, neighborhood and zip code.

It’s easy and comforting,
like dancing with your wife,
holding a familiar hand,
and knowing when enough is enough.

The sun rises. The sun sets.
And in between we feel at home.

We travel to new places,
to see how others live,
hear their unfamiliar tongue
and taste their daily food.

Then back home, we slide our key
into that familiar lock, sit in a favorite chair
and breathe in what we’ve made and know,
where our band is playing
with the light switch nearby.

Drizzle

Drizzle arrives like a soft whisper
or the quiet footsteps of a burglar or lover
tiptoeing along a hallway and up the stairs.

It's as timid and daring as a fawn,
standing like an ears-up statue
hoping the headlights won't show
her spots or breathing.

This gentle, gentle rain touches the sill
with a gloved finger
as if there to wipe off dust
or buff its shine

even though the night is as black
as well-used oil dripping from a crankcase
or the inside of a refrigerator
when the door is closed

and the once-warmed chili cools
as the kidney beans and ground meat
hug each other and listen
to the tender, tenuous tapping.