

ALMS

TO THE WAR VET

BEGGING AT THE RED LIGHT

~ Albany, New York

What an April pity -- entire right hand
swaddled, bandaged, unable to come to the aid
of the other, the left holding your
Jesus Thanx U poster board.
Which of your barflies scribbled that poor excuse
for a sign? Or are you, "thank-your-god,"
left-handed?

I'm righteous. Watch me flop
my arm out the window, donate the two nickels
loitering in my coffee cup, then fling you
a bumper sticker from Albany Atheists.

Unbelievable -- your gold crucifix
on a chain, your amputated English.
Do you fancy yourself Our Lord returned?

Behold! the light is green. I'm saved.

ALMS

TO THE HOMELESS MAN
CASING THE ROTARY

~ Alewife, Massachusetts

You mean to tell me, you know no magic?
Was never taught how to pull a king of hearts
outta your sleeve? juggle ping pong balls or Turkish knives?
make a watch disappear? What is this goddam economy
coming to in the Land of the Free and the Brave? Hey,
I've done the scene down south of Mexico, I've cruised
big city streets where bastards worse off than you
know better. In Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, they busk.
They turn a really nice trick for drivers stuck in traffic --
walk on stilts or on their hands, somersault, backflip.
You gotta compete, do something new to earn my quarter
for your bucket. Recite a poem at least, for chrissake, get
to work. Put on a wig, a hat, a mask. I'm losing interest.

ALMS

TO THE PANHANDLER
WEARING A BLACK BURQA

~ Dubai, UAE

That tin cup gives you away -- too precious
a prop, too Bollywood. I don't believe you
are really a woman.

Or Muslim.

Likely you're some Hindu part-time waiter
who needs extra cash
for Friday night binges in the sand dunes.
I know your kind -- you send not a dime
back home to your crippled sisters.

Can't even look me in the eye.

I take it back, I take it back:
I don't believe that you're Hindu after all
or Buddhist or any other kind of foreign
holy. You're what they call here a faqir,
a charity case. A damned immigrant faker.

Drop the veil, and I'll throw you a dollar.

ALMS

TO THE SINGLE MOTHER
WITH A VAN FULL OF KIDS

~ Thruway plaza parking lot, New York

Watch out for that girl of yours sitting up front, staring out the window with the eyes of a pirate skinning you alive. Eight, nine? In a few years she'll snitch, get you busted for trafficking in

innocent-looking kids. She saw you flash that faded badge from Georgia State, heard you swear to God that, "we haven't eaten yet today" and "I don't have any cash" to fix the engine to get to

Jersey, Philly, DC, Atlanta. She reigns even now, keeping your boys saintly while I pull out my wallet, hand you last month's coupon for Caesar pizzas. "God is great," you say

but she's leering at the idols in my billfold. She'll snatch, gnaw, she'll only grow hungrier. Partake, partake, till Kingdom Come.

ALMS

TO THE DONORS

Why the fuck waste a dollar at the red light?
I always pay the beggar.

Why the fuck waste a five at the rotary?
I always pay the beggar.

Why the fuck waste a dirham in Dubai?
I always pay the beggar.

Why the fuck waste a ten in the parking lot?
I always pay the beggar.

Why are you begging the fuckin' questions?
Upon the place beneath, droppeth the gentle rain.