

On a Napkin

Imagine the table-bards
of yore, filling the scraps
with blotty elegies & kennings
depending so much on the unfolding
wheelbarrow-thoughts beside
the chewed white chicken bones. I pine
for the lost scop world of prescription
pads, envelope backs, menus, telephone pole
fliers & stub pencils borrowed
from fat salesmen on trains,
the crushed index cards
with jam stains retrieved from deli trash.

But now I'm back in front
of a moony screen, touching my eyes
& fingers to what can never
also be used to clean
that dollop of cream cheese
off your beautiful, hungry lip.

Swift River

Two brook trout flash in the current,
their iridescent shimmer a surrender

to the veiled hymn of gravity
and light. How small the self is.

Their bright wrinkling knows
they & the stream's contralto

were born to the same tune,
as if their flicker & gleam

fires not just a stippled kinship
but the synapse between, invisible

gate of their own depths. Trout linger
in the rill but don't know why or how long—

a while, with animal confidence, to turn orange
and find out why they stay. That is marriage.

The water has no words; I only imagine I hear
the pink & blue rings brookies wear

ping an ancient set of vows, history
of the recessional promise they whisper

to each other through the tips
of themselves: to face up

into the flood current that feeds
us minute particulars, the future's

freestones ringing beneath us like bells.

Science Section

I hate infinity, you say, spreading
the paper's latest news
on the cosmos under a blueberry
lowfat muffin in this old cafe, one graph
after another of universal vastness
you'd love to dismiss, so you close
the paper in disgust & I sip an iced tea
and feel embarrassed for the inability
of math or science to find a conclusion
concrete as a blueberry
in the face of so much taste & conviction.

Infinity is hard to love,
someone else's spoiled child
who doesn't know
when to stop. Small magic
is wonder enough, a penny appearing
suddenly in the hand, a son
crying *I have a tornado*
in my mouth, a crocheted ball
vanishing under a candlestick
that never held a light to anything.

But infinity soars out of reach
even when, after too many glasses
of transparent spirits last night,
we were sure the long-dead stars
in our eyes were not pictures of themselves
nor equations nor probabilities,
not even figures of speech.

Refusal

In the trivia contest blaring in the next room
at An Beal Bocht the question
seems to be *Which states touch
other states?* & after a 5th black pint I'm in a state
that touches several other states I will never
be able to name & the first rock&roll song was—————?
& a vicious dispute breaks out over the number
of overtimes possible in some type of game
as outside the traffic waltzes by
like a tipsy girl in the night
& the college students smoke & wish
they could get served by the biceppy bartender with the Cork accent
while a Mexican cook makes more Irish curry
& then runs out (thanks be to God) of *Irish pizza*
& you drink under the glare of a big painting of Behan
& Beckett & Joyce & Flann O'Brien
& Patrick Kavanaugh, who in the painting
looks like someone (perhaps one of the Beatles, maybe Ringo)
playing Patrick Kavanaugh, & you are trying to remain
aware you are writing in a very small notebook
this five-pint poem, & suddenly dreaming (*One minute!*
warns the quizmaster) in your remaining minute
of that Irish girl with waterfall hair
when you were sixteen, the two of you
trembling together in your trembling station wagon
in her driveway outside the barn
where her quarter horses trembled in their withers
in the suburbs & every synapse you had
fired with the electricity of her skin
& now--right through the stout & dried curry dustings
sparking under your nose—you can smell
that girl's hair & you look in yet another unnamed state
toward the two sad white frosted cakes squatting like stones
on the shelf between the bar & kitchen
& you think, in spite of everything, no.

Jaundice

Two hours old, he fingers
his monk's cap like a magician
fanning four aces. Through the perfect feather
of a mouth, the quill of his cry
still echoes in the other cave
he came from & illuminates our margins
before the printing press is even
dreamed of with its poisonous text,
its heavy leading. In a dawn light
flimsy as tissue I write
standing up with one finger
in his mouth while he pedals
and grabs for invisible boughs
under a flight of strong tubes burning
with their own full name—*Bili Ruben*—
to void the blood of what is
golden & deadly, this new pen
leeching its own dark cargo.