

Brick City  
Five Poems Submitted to  
The Sixfold Poetry Contest

## Brick City

1

No one understands the traffic jams in this city,  
how they just spring from the ground like this  
and why, when you reach the head of the line, there is  
no accident, no cause or reason for them, where  
are the work crews? where the car wrecks?  
where's the fallen tree? What – who- do we blame it on?

2

I've been idling here what feels like hours  
trying to remember it, a song on the tip of my tongue,  
it's ....it's ... I don't know – it's not Blue Suede shoes  
it's not sung by Bo Diddley, not by Elvis,  
or Mississippi John Hurt. Could be Chuck Berry

3

A theory: these ramshackle streets were laid out  
on a metaphysical whim: "Let's make some streets here,"  
the mayor said one day "and not worry about how  
"they all connect – they could all  
"go one way in the same direction – what do we care?"  
and the town council said "Yeah , we can do that  
"let's make a lot of streets  
"put them anywhere we want. And not worry about it"

continued.....

4

And this is why I can't get to the office,  
this is why I'm still at the end of the line  
going through all the rock and roll legends --  
hey! How did Johnny Rivers get in here?  
Get out, you!

5

At a speed to make snails laugh  
my car crawls past the weary night courts  
as they open and the defendants arrive  
all incredibly innocent but  
the cell doors waiting wide open just in case

6

And up on MLK hill, drug dealers are humming,  
business is steady, new deaths  
are on the way. Someone fetch the black gurneys  
and those Ziploc bags – they may be needed.

7

Moody city, bless you for refusing  
to be just any predictable old city,  
sometimes you are even pretty at night if I look  
in selected directions, turn my hand  
into a camera lens and pan around until  
I find an isolated piece of shining metropolis.  
Oh, Newark, Oh Brick City,  
Honey, is that you?

## They Have Been Meeting Again

The vice president of paperclips, the director of vending machines,  
the supervisors of smoke, the assistant fuck-em-alls,  
the executive presidents of lying ,with silver  
wings on their tongues, the junior vice-chairman  
of the parakeet washing division-- they have been meeting  
forever again behind the glass doors of a conference room  
and by now their work must be mostly done, our medical insurance  
cut, pensions frozen, and buyout offers rumored for days  
ready to go out on Monday so carefully lawyered and sanitized  
that when the laid-off people open the envelopes  
there is nothing inside but a cryptic message: "Guess What?  
And out here we go on with our day at 4 in the afternoon,  
trying to survive, trying to look busy, faking it  
through the death valley hours when it seems we will never get home.

Then the conference room doors swing open  
and the executive vice etcetaras emerge  
their raptor smiles shining flanked by the yes people,  
the subdirectors of boss flattering and all the other importantances –  
as they check cell phones for stock quotes  
and Google for news about themselves as they jabber  
about the weekend as they enter the elevator  
laughing all the way down

Self Portrait using the Word “No”

*No more television.*

No more television?

*No more television,  
You have screwed around all day long  
neglected your family, your writing, your chores  
watched nothing but football  
lying on the couch like a fish on the sea bottom.  
No more McDonalds either.*

No more McDonalds?

*No more McDonalds,  
you're getting fat,  
your heart hums in the morning  
from the junk you eat.*

*and no more staying up late.*

I love staying up late,  
I'm afraid I will miss something.

*No Staying up late, it's bad for you,  
you wake up like a crazed cyclone  
barely making it to work, nerves pounding  
temper flaring, cursing your job.  
Staying up late is out.*

Who's talking to me?

*Someone.*

I don't like you, someone.

*And while we are at it,  
no more Jack Daniels.*

No way I give that up.  
I love the clatter of ice cubes  
In those heavy glasses. That's all

*No more Jack. You don't know how  
to just have a social drink,  
you drink to get drunk,  
you're already borderline alcoholic. No more Jack.*

But all these things make me happy.

*No more being happy.  
Look what it does to you.*

## Blood on the Floor

I've been meaning to tell you about the quarterly meeting last week, how the vice presidents arrived all day, from Tokyo, Singapore and Boston, how the office rippled with handshakes and five hundred dollar ties, and the big news whispered everywhere, that Witherspoon, head of our northern division was getting the axe, that the boss was fed up with excuses, that this was the last meeting for Witherspoon, his red ink would be all over the floor; nobody wanted to miss it.

We gathered in the conference room, the evening lit up all around. Blinking jets floated softly on the sky, sirens wandered gently through the streets below, caterers whizzed in and out and the long mahogany table glistened like a bronze lake. The junior VPS were the first to speak, and they read their reports dutifully and matter of fact, hurrying with the hidden excitement of those who know somebody else is in trouble. Then it was Witherspoon's turn. And the room went quiet.

Rumpled, vaguely unshaven, a hand quivering a little, he rose and began to fumble at a flip chart, clearing his voice. He told a joke that wasn't funny. At the head of the table, the boss smiled, maybe it was a smirk – whatever, it was gone in a second and his left eyebrow started twitching the way it frequently does, as Witherspoon forged ahead, his eyes darting like minnows in a bowl, his voice breaking again and again. He needed three drinks of water to get through the first minute of spreadsheets

but as he talked confusion slowly welled up from inside him. Sentences just got away like adled sheep after the hammering logic collapsed as he repeated himself, tried to start over while the boss fired questions that fell upon Witherspoon like jabs. Until he just stopped talking, stood there, bleeding in long pauses. The VPS leaned back and loosened their ties, a whisper passed behind hands while Witherspoon looked down at the table and smiled, was it relief? Everyone just stared. Here was the death, we all came to see.



## Small Town Nursing Home

They're all here,  
the fifth grade teacher  
who thinks your still 10,  
the mailman delivering invisible letters  
from an invisible bag,  
store clerks, housewives, the cop  
who put you in jail for drinking,  
the hardware man  
who sold paint and nails  
for every house, the folks  
who made the old town go,  
living in little rooms  
instead of houses,  
along hallways instead of streets  
where the patients scuff by  
like slow Sunday traffic. My father  
hears a lawnmower idling  
somewhere, there's that  
lawnmower again, he says  
but its just the janitor  
sweeping back and forth  
keeping the streets clean  
in hallways town.

