

My Life in Bicycles

Like a lifetime's succession of pets,
apartments, or houses,
schools or best friends,
I can follow my bicycle timeline backwards,
the bicycles diminishing in size—
twenty-six inch, twenty-four, eighteen—
like an exemplum of Zeno's paradox.

From tricycles to training wheels,
banana bike to ten-speed,
mountain bike to city hybrid,
I loved them all—
thought of them as living things—
creatures with spirit, energy, soul—
vehicles to augment my quotidian self,
infusing speed, agility, balance
into my otherwise too-stolid days.

As a child—at the dinner table
or agonizing over homework—
I felt its presence parked outside,
waiting on its kickstand,
faithful as a favorite steed grazing placidly
until next saddled up, bound for adventure.

Even now, after a long day's work, a quiet dinner,
I think of it out in the garage—
perhaps take it out for a night ride—
speeding along the avenue, the twilight cathedral
of trees—
my legs turned to pistons on the pedals,
the spoked wheels whirring against the asphalt
powering the earth's giddy rotation like a child's hand
spinning a classroom globe.

The Wellfleet Oyster

“In the 1850s Henry David Thoreau came tramping down the Cape and stopped overnight in the house of the Wellfleet Oysterman, and made him a fixture in American literature. But what bugged me was that Thoreau said not a word about the oysters themselves.”

—Howard Mitcham, *The Provincetown Seafood Cookbook*

I didn't much care for Mr. Thoreau either,
though I do not begrudge him his interest in that old oysterman—
that vicious murderer and despoiler who ravaged
and decimated our population
where we rested placidly at peace in the soft sand
off Wellfleet harbor.

Why we must be hunted so voraciously,
our paradise plundered,
feasted on so enthusiastically, our flavor praised so highly—
as if this were recompense for annihilating us—
our shells discarded in great heaps, the world unmindful
of this pitiless genocide,
why, why, why is the question that consumes us
as you consume us, split open on the half-shell,
doused with lemon juice (how it burns!),
a dash of Tabasco (how it stings!)

Mollusk, you call us, as if we were some lowly thing
akin to slugs, snails, and whelks.

Yes, we are indisputably the finest aphrodisiac.
We can make a dried and withered octogenarian
find his tent pole again,
inspire lustful smiles in the ardent
as they slurp us up.

We perplex and fascinate you with our binatural sexuality—
female one year, becoming male the next,
experiencing the pleasures of both,
the envy of Tiresias.

You glory in pearls, the oyster's gift,
string them around the neck of the one
you lust for,
dazzled by their iridescence as you suck our juices
off the half-shell,
ravish each other like barnyard beasts
and think nothing of pillaging our beds.

You say the world is your oyster—

but what does this make the world for us?
What justice is there in hirsute bipeds
feasting on defenseless bivalves?

Your bones will bleach as white as our shells—
this is my pearl of wisdom.

A Poem Trying Hard Not to Be About Death

Perhaps all poems really are about death...
except for all those poems about love, I guess—
though love poems bring tears as well as joy
because we all know they'll become epitaphs soon enough....

But then there are all those poems of new revelation—
you know the ones I mean—
when a startling, slanted way of seeing things
explodes in you like the taste of a fresh, cold grape,
making you realize how narrow our consciousness is
and how short its duration...
which I guess does bring in that whole death thing again....

Limericks, then, limericks are certainly not about death,
not the usual salacious sort that call up a quick chortle
or a guffaw...
though the way that first rhyme spins around
and chimes with that final word
does make a circle, a circle not unlike
the endless cycle of birth and death—
and it's hard not to realize that even that buxom girl
from Nantucket
will one day kick the bucket....

So here I will write an elegy for all poems about death,
have the last of these last words.
Here, I hand you an elegy for all those poets
who thought they'd write about springtime
but ended up writing about death.

It is a poem we never stop writing
as this country churchyard of a globe
spins our earth-encrusted bones in a perpetual waltz
across the vaulted ballroom of night.

Singing the Alphabet

Now that I know my ABCs,
I never sing the alphabet anymore,
 which is a shame.
The sheer joy of it, I remember, welled up
 and out and over me as we sang—
the nursery school tables piled high
 with those wooden alphabet blocks,
uppercase on one side, lowercase on the other.

Learning the mysteries of symbol and sound,
 we gazed toward the foothills of adulthood
where people spoke so astonishingly aware
of the streams of letters corresponding to whatever
they said—their voices rivers of jumbled alphabets!
Teachers and parents who could so effortlessly secure
 with ink
the silent sounds and scrawls of their thoughts....

And so we sang, earnestly, proudly,
 with a tremulous yearning to learn,
thinking of those mysterious storybooks
 the older children read,
turning pages like doors, their eyes like flashlights
 cutting swaths through the darkness.

So lately I have been singing the alphabet again—
walking by the lake, singing to the mallards
 and geese along the shore,
singing to the busy muskrats, the gliding gulls,
 the curious crows.
And it seems that they, too, would like to know
the quizzical mysteries of these gnomish sounds.

So I sing, learning and unlearning as I go,
now that I know with a knowing that unlocks
 at least one secret drawer
of this labyrinthine world.

And as I sing, so does the crow—
rasping out its dark alphabet I'd sorely like to know—
while gulls glide on invisible updrafts,
 riding the unseen syllables
 of my herdsman's song.