

The Beach on Sundays

We went to the beach on Sundays
When the sun was high and the tide was low
And sat on a gray blanket
On metallic pink plastic chairs
Under a garish polka dot umbrella
Jostling for shade.

My mother packed sandwiches on bulky rolls,
Cracked pepper turkey with a slice of Havarti cheese,
Wrapped in aluminum foil, stowed neatly in an Igloo cooler.

We devoured our sandwiches and slurped sodas out of straws
And when seagulls prowled the sands we shooed them away.
We watched waves roil and spin;
The sea orgasmic in its spume of white foam, a maritime geyser,
Voyeurs at a peep show.

Once our cousin Dustin came.
He was ten, wiry and tan, from Kansas.
He had never seen the ocean
And he stripped off his shirt.
A welt on his chest distended like an enraged nipple.
What's that, my sister and I asked, laughing, mocking.
Who cares, he said and ran to the water,
His feet bouncing off sand, heels slapping butt
Arms pumping, elbows flying backward,
An animal on a hunt.

His footsteps deepened as he approached the shore,
Footsteps that would later be washed away
By the rising tide
But for now they etched his existence.
He dove face first into the water,
Arms out like some cliff-diving osprey,
Washed up and spun around
In the cycle of foam,
Human laundry.

We sat in silence watching
Until my sister picked up a bag of potato chips
Dumped the crumbs into her ravenous maw
And barked with a sneer on her pale face,
Jesus Christ, we're all out.

Mastodon

The mammoth is massive and woolly,
Synthetic and cinnamon
Portentous even behind a glass case.
Tusks flare out like daggers, a warning:
Do not mess with me.

Someone has curated a gash in his hindquarters
The soft part of the beast,
Embossed a reddish brown matting of dried ketchup.
And given him a name: Darryl.

How many hundreds of thousands of miles
Did Darryl rove across our vast earth,
Over frozen taiga and verdant meadow
In quest for food or perhaps love?
Did he find and lose or was he merely forsaken
By the harder elements, by the bronze and blade?

I wonder too about the heat wave outdoors
The scorched sidewalks and desiccated lakes.
Do I dare venture into the red blood sun at its meridian
While the air conditioner thrums overhead, a virtue, a blessing?
Yet I must go for my hunger is ravenous
And a friendly café awaits me
Where I can say four words, swipe one card, push two buttons and
Someone slides out a plate of avocado toast and lentil salad
And I can eat in sublime peace
And I don't have to wonder about Darryl.

A Wedding is for Dancing

Will it be asking too much if I ask for some photographs
Not a lot, just a few, the best of the bunch, maybe five?
Will it be unfair for me to say I love you?

The Long Island Sound draped in gray
With summer gone and autumn on its knees
And soon the first snows of winter.

You didn't have to come but you did.
It was all quite last minute the modern way
A voice message, an email, the succinct phone call.
That is friendship, that is fifteen years;
It would have been an empty seat.

Tomorrow our friend James will be married
To a woman we barely know
And I shall return to the interior
Where the trees barely whisper
And the leaves crunch not underfoot.

Tomorrow there will be dancing because James loves dancing
And I will extend my hand and ask
For we have never danced, you and I.
I will wait for something slow
Where our feet can pitter patter
And into the mystic we can sway, two gypsies.

But the dancing will end because the dancing always ends.
And as I lie in my aloneness in the early morning
I will wonder whether it occurred to you
In sweet reverie that flits between awakesness and sleep
That I never dance.

Bicycle Ride

On a late Saturday afternoon
I dug my old bicycle from my garage
And took a ride on quiet country roads
To escape what ailed me.
I pedaled lazily past meadows canopied in wildflower
Black walnut trees swollen with fruit
Chokecherries bursting on limb.
A deer stood impassively in the middle of the road
A fawn tugging at its underbelly
Eyes placid and full, staring back at me
All of creation in fulfillment.

But I was neither participant nor privy
Only an observer and one soon tired of pedaling
So when I passed an ice cream shop I stopped for relief.
It was the final weekend and a line coiled to the side
Exuberant families with children, rapt in joy
And I no sooner would have continued on
For it was too striking a reminder
Had I not seen the old woman
Alone on the picnic bench
The crepuscular sun radiating on her face,
The cone to her mouth, a swirl of colors
Her tongue dancing with gusto
As if it were her first treat or her last.

Buried Treasure

He buried treasure all over the world;
The sands of Mexico, the plains of Montana
The ash of Iceland, the savannah of Tanzania.
And then he drew maps
For friends and relatives and strangers
To find the treasure he buried.

I went with him once
When no sun spots graced our face and
Our hair flowed coarse and black.
We hiked westward to Kinsman Ridge on federal land.
I guarded the flank as he dug off-trail
In the narrow ravine
Under the lone conifer
With his handheld child's beach shovel.

The treasure was in a Chock Full o' Nuts tin.
He was from Minnesota
Where the winters are draped in snow
And to adorn is to die.
What's in it, I asked;
You'll have to come back, he said.

In his middle years he found treasure
The best kind
A wife and two children
A home near green hills
And he buried something else
Seeds for a garden
And paid a mortgage
Dissipated radon
Composted waste and collected rain
And his children grew.
I visited in the spring, every spring
When flowers bloom and ants scurry and birds chirp.
We walked the hills, ate home-cooked meals, reminisced,
Shared, laughed, and looked forward.
Until the day in January
When a phone call shattered time.

So after the bells stopped ringing
And the hymns all sung to mourning
I returned to Kinsman Ridge
Unsteady on my new prosthetic hips

With his map and our memories
To unbury his treasure.
The afternoon was clear and cold
And the sun gleamed in the north sky;
I dug in the shadow of the lone conifer
That never aged.
With hands raw and purple
Creased with subcutaneous blood
I squeezed and pulled at hard soil
Until I touched tin.
It came up with a shake
And I opened it then
With sprinkles in my eyes.
Inside was a note, simple lined paper,
And a pencil.
What do you want to be doing right now? The note asked.
I shook my head and dabbed at my cheeks and
Laughed and took the pencil in my hand.
This, I wrote, how did you know, Ryan?