

Surliness in the Green Mountains

I like to complain
about too little steamed milk
in coffee. And ill-timed
cloud cover stripping the blue face
off the ocean. I know

I'm fortunate. No cancerous calamity
has found me. No car crash
has maimed me. Pulling away
from the drive-through, my drink's too hot
to taste, to judge. I turn
the wheel toward the hem

of mountains, where clouds press
like sour insistence: I have a duty
to attend, a funeral for a colleague's father.
It will cost me
two of the days I've rented the house
on the cove for a holiday—a holiday

to still the flurry of a life that feels
like coins spilling to the pavement
through a hole in my pant's pocket.
I should have gone to Jamaica.
Someplace beyond obligation's

reach. A foreign paradise,
blinded by palms and voices
redolent, familiar, but off kilter.
It helps to get places
where traffic lights seem superfluous
as they do in Montpelier. Though,

I often stand before travel books
on Budapest—petulant and wishing
to be swallowed by its pandemonium.
Cities are survival's hallmarks.
Slaughter and roast everyone
rooted in them, and they rebound,
resilient as Vermont maples after winter.

(new stanza)

This beleaguered Toyota
doesn't like the climb—its four cylinders
wheezing, coaxing combustion
to reach another summit.

The service will be in the same chapel
where my colleague was married, back

when she was a friend. I never knew
her father. So why the struggle
to attend? To be politic, to feel less
awkward when we run into each other
at a meeting back in Boston? I suppose
that's enough motivation. Or,

maybe I simply relish
something new
for my repertoire of complaints.
A flat tire, broken axle—
a chance to show
how far I'll go to suffer.

Meditation Waiting for the Orange Line

If I were a savant,
I could calculate the number
of lavender tiles that cover
the walls in this station.
I could detect the aria
in the brake squall
arriving from Forest Hills.
I would grasp the quantum dimensions
that transcend the urge to copulate,
and that lush-lipped girl's photograph
in the frame beyond the tracks
could never entice me
to purchase toothpaste
that can't possibly whiten
enamel this stained by coffee
and neglect. If I were a savant,
I could remain mute,
without consequence
or criticism: *He hardly ever
talks to anyone.* I might know
the mollusk phylum's almost infinite
array, from pre-history to present.
No one would know.
Gifted as a sideshow act
in an intellectual circus,
I could recite Sumerian limericks
and every move from the past
twenty years' chess championships.
If I were a savant, I'd tattoo syllables
down the backs of waterfalls
and watch them coalesce to sonnets,
in the mist and foam of pools
at the base of the cliffs
we're all tottering toward.

But I'm not a savant.
I'm an overwrought grunger
passing through mid-life
with a messenger's bag of images
muddled as crayon drawings.
I am St. Francis to mosquitos.

(stanza continues)

I guard a small vault
dubiously filled with trivia:
the two dozen counties in the states
of Vermont and New Hampshire,
the lyrics of most songs
Pearl Jam's recorded.
To be a savant might be
wondrous. To scan and recall
every word in the dictionary—
vocabulary unfettered by the urge
to reorder and coax meaning
to the surface. To the savant,
meaning kicks off its shoes
and finds a careworn bed in a room suffused
with incomprehensibility's pleasures . . .
the city's walls resting in the distance,
untroubled by a single ambition. If

I could join the savants' tribe,
would I? It's easy to proclaim one might
choose to undiscover the practical,
to let incandescence dissolve into dark's mystery.
Perhaps what's wanted is a variation
on Kurzweil's singularity: To integrate
intellect and insight with savant capacity
could be the next stop on evolution's tour.
Here's the Orange Line, at last . . .
screeching, rolling, rectangular
pumpkin, ready to ferry us
to Downtown Crossing.
If I were a savant, I might
not know to get on. I might stand
here all afternoon, like an arrow
without a bow. Harmless
potential. Traveler on an island
of flesh, unsure how to reach
any destination beyond
this maze of interior revelations.
If I were a savant, wouldn't I
 be happy
 just to be here?

Blowing the Third Eye

A friend would never threaten to paddle
up the Amazon in a canoe commanded
by an American-turned-shaman. What
could be less American? Wait, did you say
hallucinogens are involved? And,
a vomit bucket? It sounds suspiciously like
the Age of Aquarius as reimagined by Dick Cheney.
Or, a variation on the sublimely surreal—like the time
Allen Ginsberg cleared an audience at an all-girl's school
in Kansas with a soliloquy on ass-fucking.
Language can only transcend so far. It takes

a good hit of ayahuasca to blow the lid
from the third eye, to melt the wall where
the snakes gyrate like electrified ribbons
through undetected dimensions. Split and
spill the terrors that hunger for one's life . . .
those vibratory hells that demand homage,
that refuse to cauterize lonely nights with vodka
bottles. When television nurses hunger
for amenable society, who could argue
that the ship has foundered on a shoal
of snapping serpents? In the jungle's night,

any shaman's a beacon. Even the Pentecostal pastor,
with all his uncaged tigers of damnation, might seem
a friend. Physical ruin feels right (or at least familiar).
Whatever potion one can find to swallow, to salvage
the pretension of a soul . . . that's medicine worth
a paddle up the Amazon, worth a wade in magical
self-delusion's improbable realms. Say hello
to Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson . . .

 they're the only angels
who might prove all that's unseen
transcends the drying skin
on this latticework that carries us
 through these days.

Under the Influence

The best days often include
a browse through a bookstore.
When my libido was more
vigorous, I liked to sneak a paperback
karma sutra to the automotive section.
I appreciate the symmetry now—
the proper calibration of carburetor
and clitoris both essential
to effective performance and power.
Though at the time, I imagined,
if caught, I could claim to have found
(quite unexpectedly) this sexual concordance
tucked between Edmunds Used Car Guide and
the Encyclopedia of Corvettes. These days,

I gravitate to the literary review section.
It's interesting to see poems written by people
I know—and there's always the potential to find
that gloriously intact shell, tumbling in the surf,
inhabited by some living thing wanting someone
to appreciate its nearly unrecognizable luster.
Tonight I sit beside a poster—*On Becoming
an Alchemist: A Guide for the Modern Magician*.
So much wisdom undiscovered, crusted and nestled
like jewels in the strata of bound pages. Though
we're such lazy miners, requiring Provigil's
stimulation and the simulated realities of television
to provoke the intellect. I might hurry back down

Newbury Street to catch Saturday Night Live.
What a metaphoric mash. This week's show's a repeat—
leftover, half-clever satire in three minute skits, wedged
between commercials. I've got a bed half-buried
in books and unread *New Yorkers*. It makes
me apprehensive to sleep with so much knowledge
wanting to snuggle with my witless, empty notebook
of a mind. So, I'll probably doze on the couch
and wake to infomercials in the netherworld
that insomniacs are cursed to wander—
having dreamt a shaman with a blouse half-
unbuttoned, finding the windows

(stanza continues)

to my consciousness open— believing
it's Whitman's fingers brushing my hair,
trusting I've written this indisputably compelling
paean for an original century.