

Common Ground

When I was a child, I used to wonder why
Only the birds and insects knew how to fly.
Why couldn't I?

***When I was a child, I used to wonder why
I was always hungry and where my dad was.***

When I was a child, my grandpa would take me to the park
And I'd see Bambi and bunnies, and I'd play until dark.

***When I was a child, my gramps wasn't around.
He was long buried, his life wasted and knotted up by hate.***

When I was a child, everyone loved me,
And told me stories of the places I'd see.

***When I was child, every body said they loved me too,
But they loved themselves more, so I grew up lonely.***

When I was a child, I laughed a lot and I played ball in the street,
And when it got dark I'd have dinner, a bath, and sleep in clean sheets.

***When I was a boy I turned to the streets too; cept
There werent no balls, no plates, and the knives were for killing.
Fear, not laughter, ruled my little feet.***

When I was a child, I went to a really good school and I tried hard to get A's.
And together, my parents and my teachers encouraged me, gently, with praise.

***When I was a child, I hated to read, and I didnt like free lunch,
So I misbehaved, put my head down, and tried to rise above.***

When I was a child, I used to dream about what I'd be—
A teacher, a doctor, a savior of all humanity!

***I had dreams too, way back when—
til they got all stomped to death, crushed into nuthin
by some invisible power I couldnt never see.
But all that stomppin aint stoppin me!
Understand?***

When I was a child, we took vacations out West--
I saw bald eagles and herds of buffalo and elk.
And I swam in Yellowstone and I dipped my toes in Tahoe.
Old Faithful's geyser was really something. I liked it best!
And, oh, did I mention that I saw the Badlands?

***When I was a child, we took vacations to the city pool--
Til it closed. And I didnt have to travel west to see no badlands.***

When I was a child, I loved my brothers and sisters and all my friends
Cuz they helped me out when I was in trouble and had to make amends.

***When I was a child, I loved my bros too, cuz they had my back,
So I guess we got that much in common.***

paperboy

the smell of the air
this november day—pungent with warming
and damp leaves—transports me to those
grade school days
when I awoke early in the morning
to deliver papers.

how delicious! I loved those predawn mornings,
pedaling my bike,
an oversized bag laden with news
pinching my shoulder,
the sidewalks dark, everything black and white,
and the streets empty.

how glorious! a scout out on my own,
tossing tiny missiles on to a
porch, or misfiring and striking the drum
of an aluminum screen door,
and making a getaway, knowing fully
I wasn't getting away with anything.

how prescient! those fall mornings, communing
with thinning oak trees and maples already shorn,
and the air a gentle tempest of leaves any color but green,
the flowers sadly prostrate under the tyranny
of yesterday's frost. I could see it even then,
the coming of the end.... the time of going....

gone now the little boy on the 20" bike.
gone now the pumping of growing legs.
gone now the painless mornings
and the days of easy peace.
come now the evening
when all the news has gone old.

Leaves Descending
at a Soccer Game

...what God is responsible
for moments of such
ineffable distraction?...

You are alone sitting in a soccer stadium,
you can see Tommy run
you can hear Tammy cheer.
Then dusk falls
amid a shower of wind.

For just a moment, you lift your eyes
from the darkening green carpet,
and offer your face to the wind, just as,
across the field, a rising breeze, joyously irrational,
rattles a fragile bandage of cottonwood leaves.

At first, it seems just another crisp
autumn breeze and all you
sense is the chill, the coming promise
of winter and white; yet
as you reach for your second jacket,
the thick prudent one,
a voice, both brittle and fragile,
compels you to lift your gaze again,
high above the playing field, and as you do ...

There! Two hundred feet away,
where trees form a fence line to the east,

a lone cottonwood,
among the oaks and maples, is dancing:

and the wind and the dance and the tambourine leaves
create a joyous song—cresting on waves of tarnished silver.
(What makes you think of prayer?)

The song distracts you easily
from the secondary athletics unfolding
before you: the sweat-matted hair, the errant passes, the
dirty shin pads, the ever-vigilant goalies on the prowl
like cats at the mouth of a cave, all staged inside a one-dimensional box.

(Leaves Descending on a Soccer Game, p.2 of 3)

But then, with your gaze transfixed
on the cottonwood, the wind emboldens
the last of its steadfast leaves,
and far above the green plain you bear witness
to the dizzying letting go,
to the creation of cloud upon cloud of leaves that
slip their tinny bodies into a shadow-lit air,
tumbling with exquisite abandon as they

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earthbound in
p o r o u s c u r t a i n s
 of joyous rattling.

Spellbound—how can you not be spellbound?
—you watch *and listen* as
over and over in wave
after glorious wave,
the leaves wind and bind,
descend and blend
in brittle fishlike schools
whose airy song has no parallel.

Have you just overheard the autumnal voice of God?
And has the cottonwood—sensing you
are unaccustomed to vespers—
heeded His summons alone, dutifully
relinquishing its argentine grip on summer
in leafy rapids
of floating down?

It is all over--
this brown Niagara,
this tinkly chorus of tinsel--
in a minute, even less.

(Leaves Descending on a Soccer Game, p.3 of 3)

With the leaves reduced now
to a slow floating seepage,
you ponder:
life,
death,
the seasons and divinity.

Although
the wind has died
and the leaves have stopped falling,
you sit stunned by an irrepressible belief
that what you have witnessed
 is no simple natural display
 but something miraculous
and that those fans whose cheers have risen again
 displacing the joyous hymn
 of crinkling leaves,
 have not.

You will never be able to explain why
 you were singled out, or
 how a simple tree discharging its leaves
 could affect you so deeply.
Though you resist, you surrender to the nascent feeling
 that all along you have been sitting
 in a temple
 whose high priest has, for reasons inscrutable,
 thrust aside a curtain and
 granted you
 one ephemeral glimpse
 of the face of God.

Yes, you peeked
at just the right moment
and witnessed the handiwork of God; and yes
it was the chorus of all those failing, fading
voices of summer's sudden detritus that beckoned you.

And so you ask yourself:
 What God is responsible
 for moments of such
 ineffable inspiration?

Joe,
With quiet, tenacious resolve
you fought valiantly against the dying of the light,
until the General of All Peace proclaimed the
battle ended, and thus your fight,
only then, your arms laid down, did you surrender
to that dark night.

Paean for Joe

Joe Janney,
Husband, Father, Buddy, Friend:
God's speed on your final trip North!
Along the way, I pray
your spirit veer from its celestial route
and dally, one last time, on the Cable Lake Road.
There, may you taste again the road's fine dust;
may you trod its sloping lumber track;
may you find the time to greet
 the newest boulder outcropping,
 newly conceived by a hoary thaw;
may a deer leap before you, may a quail take to the sky;
may you quench every thirst at the Net
 (tannin brown as always and its grasses current tossed);
may your heart break one last time as you bask
 in the fraternal bliss of the Amasa Hilton, your second home.

There, may tranquility embrace you; may memories
regale you. There, may the angels breathe into the treetops
and the pines sway. There, may a bird (maybe two or three),
float overhead in the sun, careen into a cloud, become invisible.

There, may every sensation, every sight, as far as a spirit can see,
be extravagantly beautiful. Divine. There, one last time,
may you--weary traveler--rest in peace
on your way Home.

There, may the oil tank echo hollow
as your knuckle gives it a surreptitious knock
--someone will need to settle up--
yet the grand 24 by 32 suite reserved for you is
warm, full of cheer. Chick has arrived early, tidied up,
and in the bunks along the wall, shouting a glorious welcome
as you cross into the cabin's dusky shadow,
you see your father, Bryce, and Dick.

(Paeon for Joe, p. 2 of 2)

While the old cabin across the road has at long
last abandoned any hope of recovery and
collapsed upon itself, behind you ferns and grasses
bow and wave heralding your arrival.

The lake at Edwards' Farm, you will see, is dried up
and met its end too. The deer will find no need to trek
around its shallows any longer.

At the siding, the tracks will go unused, remain
only as footprints through the woods;
the rails have accepted their fate, yet point
stoically t'ward infinity, disappearing
in the distance long before their final stop.

Joe--
husband, father, buddy, friend--
with this final primal cry
I sing for you
my song of praise, admiration, love and loss:
Who was ever more heroic?
 More gracious?
 Who more likely to win at cards?

In every winning hand
 improbably won,
in every raised glass, and
in tranquil moments
 reflecting on that
 promised upper peninsula
I will see you, Joe!
My (father), buddy, friend!

where to hide chocolate
(for Caity)

when you were young, hiding
the chocolate
behind the vegetables
was just right.
then you grew,
like a mushroom.
behind the eggs?
that only worked until
you discovered pancakes.
from day one
placement behind
the snacks was
out--
those were your favorite foods.
the basement was
too musky,
the garage
too melty.
finally,
the day came when
I realized
chocolate
was your kind of plum--
right for stealing,
without apology.

so I learn'd to buy more
and I learn'd to eat less
or
go without.