

louie scungil' saves the world

the ladies with the perfect hair ankle their
way off the sidewalk to avoid running into louie scungil'.
gay tom's dogs scoot sideways barking
and the bartender with the pink tattooed scalp
lowers her head and raises her step count
passing louie scungil' who is drunk enough
by seven p.m. on april first to embrace the world
and drunk enough to have just pissed in the fountain
at primo levy plaza where passyunk crosses tasker.
'i love you' louie screams 'love ya fucking love youse all'
'i am the messiah' he says 'jesus came back'.
there's almost-silence on the street,
the old guys hangin' on the corner,
they don't say nothin' because they went to school
with louie's brother and the perfect hair ladies
don't say nothin' because there's nothin' to say.
but fat joey, he's walking by, he turns to louie,
real loud: "you ain't no fucking messiah.
i know 'cause i'm the fucking messiah."
and one of the hair ladies, the one from haddonfield,
ronelle, she stops and takes a step to louie
"hey louie, it's me, ronelle. i'm the messiah.
me and my son anthony too."
and i guess you know what
gay tom's dogs said and you can image up
the corner boys all tapping their chests and
saying soft "it's me it's me" and all the waves
of cooks and saints and blowhards up and down
the avenue yelling into the smoky spring night
"i, i, yo, i am the promised one, me me."
and you can image up right now that you and me
and louie scungil' and all of them
were swept along the curb and into spring south philly air
blown past stoops and high into the center city night
and just like that, we were saved.
yeah, saved.

the tree on tasker street

cousin mary from second street
the one with the grey-green eyes
the one who ties great cloths around her head
and feeds the starlings because they
make her think of black pearls,
cousin mary came by today -
with winter squash from ninth street
she's newsy, cousin mary and she says
"guess what" no question mark
"the city cut down that old tree,
eleventh and tasker, you know the one."
and from the stoop, i see some vacant,
tree-sized patch of sky
and momma mourns
the shade at the bus stop.
cousin mary takes little annette who's six
and when they don't come right right back,
i go down to where the tree used to be
and cousin mary's sitting on the stump
counting the rings, digging
little pits with a pen knife that she keeps
for attacks like this and i hear
"lookit sweetie, this is when your father was born
and this is when gannie came to this country.
look, look they just cut the tree and until it
dries out the time is right there. you can run
your hands along it to where the phillies won
and rizzo lost or anytime at all."
and little annette pokes kidfingers at the stump
like she's pressing buttons and getting years
and cousin mary says "hurry sweetie, hurry
it can be any time you want" and annette laughs
"now!" she says "now now now!"

a four-year old holstein cow

a four-year old holstein cow
walked into rittenhouse square last wednesday.

she sat, remarkably upright on a wrought-iron stool by a
cement cafe table, negotiating a resting place
for her udder bag when the waiter approached.
she ordered a man-burger
medium well with goat cheese and an extra roll. no fennel,
hold the silage, and a bottle of Raison d'Être, not too cold.
and without really trying, without so much as a thought
the dappled sunlight for which the square
is famous played patterns on the black and white
of her hide. her weight coaxed fugueish creaks from the iron stool
the slow re-chewing of her man-cud and the
puffy counter-point of bovine gas made-
oh what can we call it?-music.
yes a melody. enormous light, eluctive, weighty
rhythms, grumbles.

a man stopped, put away his iPhone
and gave himself over to staring
and then a woman too and then
another and another's cousin
and soon a crowd that the cops would have chased
if there weren't so many cops to the crowd.
the man-burger arrived
and the smell of themselves and the idea of lunch
un-manned the women and un-womened the men
and kidded the kids and nagged the nannies.
and soon the herd of them, restless snorting
shifting from foot to hoof were maowing, crowding,
defecating on the ground beneath raised tails
and pigeons worried away from crumbs 'til the panhandlers
and bike messengers and young lawyers-in-love closed
their eyes and found the spot in the back
of the human throat which, when properly tensed
and air-stroked gives out a brumbling, anxious bovine 'moooo'.

benny d goes hawaiian

benny d is sitting outside gleaner's coffee shop on ninth street.
he's got a book of poems and a braid of fresh mozzarella.

the mozz cost seven bucks at talluto's, the book was a deuce at gilmore's
it's a big book, but benny's stuck on one line
e consarlo dell'umano stato
'and console him for being human'
the poet's saying what parents should do for kids
and benny d's thinking that he could use
a cupla spoonfuls of consolation right now
to go with the thick smoky coffee he's drinking
and this certain memory that makes his world
sad and yellow and jaundiced in the eye.
then this guy stops beside his table.
the guy's not too steady on his feet,
swaying in wind that blows off his personal ice cap
he points at benny d and make a prophecy.
"you" he says "should wear hawaiian shirts, that way you won't look freaky."

now benny d lifts weights, reads a lot of poetry
and sometimes he wears big floppy hats to keep the sun
from bouncing off his bald head and blinding the
pigeons who-he fears-might hurt themselves
by flying blind in a dangerous neighborhood.
but he ain't freaky, no way
at least not how we measure things down
here, south of washington ave.

but benny's a reasonable man and so
as the prophet is blown uptown, benny is moved.
he feels the weight of his being human
he wants it lifted, he wants to be consoled
for the freakishness of this whole human business.
so he leaves his coffee, walks home and puts on
the one hawaiian shirt he owns: yellow with faded red
orchids and suddenly things don't feel so bad.

the next morning, benny's at the thrift shop and he's
got three more hawaiian shirts. he practices standing
next to the fruit stands on ninth street,
sometimes with the grapes, sometimes with papayas.

benny's not a man you laugh at so people don't

but they smile and three or four times an hour
someone compliments his shirt-
the green one with the parrot or the pale blue
shirt with the surfers or even the one that's all pineapples.
usually it's a woman doing the complimenting
and if you ask benny d these days how it's going
he's likely to tell you that it's great, just freakin' great.