

Requiem

His bed sheets with their flowers made of sweat stains
open to sunlight. I stand by, ready as needed,
to fill his cup with still waters, his veins with morphine.

The same could be said of turkey vultures in the trees—
the same could be said of the scythe in his garage—
for our ancestors who gather on the lawn—Now what?

It's the city itself, the manifest, the occurrence. It's time to postulate
the great rotation. It's time for him to take the road out of town.
The burglar came yesterday and all last night, for blood and for gold.

Now there's no currency, no motion to appeal. There's a chill but no winter.
The water's down, his river's lost the "o" from its cello but still sounds
of smoke and anger for that moment of unfinished doubt, such is hope.

The last point of consideration? The shade from a fallen oak,
or bear skin thrown onto the back of the hero. Then dusk,
as night explodes into liquor and coins for his eyes.

I lean down to take a record from my brother's lips, and hear him
as a village well full of the moon hears a herd of deer, rending them
to the promise in our past, this tribe of lost November.

Fifty eight stones, dropped by two boys on their way into the woods.
Later, under moonlight, one comes back out having gathered them up.
Inside the farmhouse, a fire consumes a small piece of the dark

as wind rattles a window near an empty bed, asking "Where have I been?"

Sleep

Sleep that kills to protect to strengthen to destabilize
Sleep that heals the eye with ghost-stories

Sleep that crawls over the army until its soldiers find themselves
begging for salt peter so they can dance with the monkey
And here I'm talking about sleep's extract—sweet prayer

You know, the anti-chamber opening into a museum on the balcony
of a theater where a play is being performed in the basement of a church

Like that drag of existence, so slight at first it's barely noticed but then picks
up steam one bird at a time until at the age of fifty-five you find yourself
walking into a field of old cars

Pieces of sleep found underneath the sustain pedal of a grand piano
After supper the sound of gunfire from across the river
It's not how well a couple makes love but how well they make sleep

Those who've worked all day on the radio come prepared
to sleep in front of a fire as opposed to a bucket of nails

To bend down and let tiredness fall from one's eye onto a pig
To drive a team of sleep-horses through a village occupied by those
who've given everything away and now they want it all back

Picture This

Some cameras are left in front of scenes so compelling
they must take the picture whether commanded to or not.
The click/flash from the Nikon left on the dining room table
as an animal crawls through a window and waddles
across the kitchen at two a.m., to the garbage, and tips it over,
the evidence there to wonder at should anyone care to see.
Or the shot of the boy who flew from god knows where,
from how far away, and my wife, sitting on the dock under
a relentless, blue sky sticks up her hands and pulls him right
out of the air, him and his trailing white blanket that looks
like a slice of cloud—the only provision he'd brought with him,
so hasty was his departure—and just as she fetches him fat
from the sky a camera left on the dock unattended fires from
deep inside itself to capture this moment that no one would
believe if it weren't for such hard proof, my son's undeniability,
Jack, who we wanted so badly we took him right out of the air,
stopped dead in his tracks, and if the picture were to continue,
you'd see my wife knocked flat on her back, lying on the rough
wood with our son in her arms, his cheeks pink from disturbances
of wind, me coming into the scene with a newspaper in one
hand and a fishing rod in the other, wondering what, exactly,
is this strange thing that she'd caught.

Jack

saw me coming to pick him up at the playground and came running to me as the tears began to run as well and said “Daddy” and that’s all he could get out and so had to lay his face on my stomach and sob out the depths of his fury and anguish as only one of his few years could

so I held him knowing he knew I couldn’t do anything but that it was all right because he wasn’t expecting me to in fact if I should give him advice on how to handle his buddies on the playground when they didn’t want to play with him or play with him how he wanted them to it would

only make things worse. So all he was expecting of me was to bear him up in this time of anguish and why shouldn’t he for after all hadn’t I just last night been at the gym doing my 15 minutes on the treadmill and then 25 minutes of weightlifting followed by more treadmill work and hadn’t I

several days before given up soda for the most part and my daily popcorn to lose weight to get in better shape for just such a moment as this when I would carry not only my own but his bitter disappointments and hadn’t I read Carl Jung’s essay on Job and listened to a web posting on magical thinking

in the event any of that could be helpful and hadn’t his mother and I resigned ourselves to our daily failures to each other and to him and to ourselves so that we could after he’d gone to bed have a nice talk for him to fall asleep to the hush of instead of angry talk or the more unbearable silence and didn’t I

go to bed early last night so I could get up this morning and work to help keep this bailing wire and kite string operation together in a house on a street that’s so beautiful then who better than me for him to run to on the playground in tears and who better than me to take a stand there with him in front of the whole

school yard our hearts visibly breaking—his with suffering and mine with joy?

Suggested Narratives

Ever since I dashed out a 48 line poem and put it with some others in a book (my first) and won a major competition (Yale Younger) after earning my way through college on a fellowship and before making a living teaching writing in among other places a hunting lodge in Alaska people have given me suggestions for poems.

For instance my brother died after a struggle and his nurse thought I should write a poem about his last chemo therapy how the oncologist didn't want to administer it but my brother clearly on the last leg of his journey and his wife his friends myself too if truth be told couldn't bear the thought of him dying so young without doing everything and so the nurse thought that might be a subject for poetry my brother pale barely able to stay with us the oncologist looking like he'd done some sad thing that he deeply regretted and so the nurse suggested Hey write a poem about that I smiled and said Yeah I probably will knowing I wouldn't that's not the way poetry works.

Instead I'll probably write something about the night my mother and father conceived me—no realistic details but rather conception steeped in myth involving tribes who cross over the border into the kingdom and I'll say something about salt and my mother and father will speak as oracles and there I'll be as some disembodied spirit not even human.

No one ever suggests I write a poem about that.

These days poetry comes and I'm not ready for it and by the time I've gathered my wits it's gone later at my son's baseball game as he's stationed at second base and the ball is hit to him instead of retrieving it he picks up a stick and scratches in the dirt while another six year old runs past him and all the parents scream certain they know what must be done but my son well you know my son ...my wife laughs leans in to me and says You should write a poem about that and I too laugh but don't write the poem as I can't see how the subject's numinous.

Poetry well...what do I know? Numinosity—as if I had a clue.

You should write a poem about that God says and I say Yeah okay and go upstairs to my office (just a room in our house so cluttered my wife won't set foot in it) and write about two black birds on a summer afternoon—the heat unbearable again after the rain—who fight over a grape a woman in the kitchen lifting the hem of her blue dress towards my hands as wind blows in through an open window.