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Everything we call ordinary

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EVERYTHING WE CALL ORDINARY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Mark Heinlein

May 2009

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SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

EVERYTHING WE CALL ORDINARY

by

Mark Heinlein

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ABSTRACT

EVERYTHING WE CALL ORDINARY

by Mark Heinlein

This collection of poems, written in first-person free-verse lyrics, is composed in prose-poem forms using long lines largely influenced by Walt Whitman. The poems address the mundane aspects of our lives, such as eating leftover kung pao chicken, flocking Christmas trees, grocery shopping, to contemplating the magnitude of war and the inevitable struggles with mortality. In so doing, the poems deal with themes of work, of love and loss, financial struggle, suicide and alcoholism among others.

The collection is divided into five sections. Each section borrows its title from an epigraph which begins the sections. These sections help structure the narrative arc of the collection. The epigraphs are from three short story writers, a poet, and a photographer. Though the main focus in theme and subject is the ordinary events of our lives, these poems also reveal the beauty and pathos that are part of the human condition.

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This collection is dedicated to Michael D. Heinlein.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Works Cited	10
 DECENT PEOPLE	 11
so i ate leftovers.	12
worrying about catering	13
we were in the 7 th grade	14
the fear of what's under me	15
dear pops i'm trying	16
my mother lives in urbana, ohio	17
i hear something	18
it's 10	19
there has to be something more	20
a double feature and a soda	21
 BODY	 22
mondays i watch the ballgames at the pizza joint	23
never quit your day job to become a poet	24
i am the richest man in the world	25
when i walk through morning like a man	26
i never thought about fat	27
in your mother's j.c. penny's pajamas	28
i'll have to settle for petunias	29
the bustle and fog	30
tomorrow will be filled with music	31
all those those years of carefree summers	32
 COMFORTABLE	 33
bunches of flowers like a torch	34
what happens with the next atrocity	35
the white peach tree getting leaves	36
after the motorcycle accident	37
remember how we laughed	38
my hands are wrinkled	39
where do we go from here?	40
nature	41
apartment still life	42
dead patches of grass	43
you can't tell me	44

in the middle	45
i'm not above sentimentality anymore	46
 SOUTHWEST	 47
hold these moments sacred	48
she looks out the window and she makes homemade cheese	49
everybody smiles	50
why the apostles never drank cuba libres	51
it ruined everything	52
small black spots all over the oatmeal carpet	53
i was going back to college for my degree	54
this is the chance i've ben waiting for	55
we're too old to start over	56
 PERFECT LIGHT	 57
the walkway beside the holly	58
why i'll never make it to the big leagues	59
we lean on each other	60
i know i've faltered in my life	61
i take an envelope	62
living again with the chance for victory	63
sunshine without a cloud on the horizon	64
quiet	65
i won't even answer when you call	66
things themselves of wonder	67
opening the curtains	68
i didn't know where you were	69

Introduction

The poems in the collection *Everything We Call Ordinary*, composed of long-lined lyrics, best articulate their concern with the exploration of the self by the employment of the prose-poem form. The collection is organized into five parts. The first section, called “Decent People,” takes its title from Richard Ford’s short story “Puppy.” The long epigraph emphasizes the small acts that we perform regularly to counterbalance the ennui that often perpetuates itself in the periphery (but not *always* in the periphery) of our lives. Executing these “pointless acts of pointless generosity” is often the only way to get through our days humanely (97). The poems in this section address these “pointless acts” as well as the sense of self-righteousness that sometimes derives from these acts. Though instances of kindness can imitate our concept of “morality,” the epigraph I have selected captures the duplicitous nature of self-righteousness. The poems in this section explore the varying degrees of emotional subtlety involved in these instances of ennui, acts of kindness, and instances of self-righteousness.

The second section is called “Body.” This section takes its title from a transcription of David Sutherland’s 1998 documentary film *The Farmer’s Wife*, a stark examination of a Nebraska couple that struggles to maintain its home, its family farm, and its marriage. The film follows four distinct movements: circumstantial difficulties (marriage/financial stress), emotional strife (threat of divorce/loss of farm), period of loss

(continued debt/separation), and finally a sense of reunion (therapy/end of separation).

The poems in this section are arranged in a similar narrative arc: making a living, maintaining a marriage, dealing with the emotional parts of our lives, and working to accomplish a lifelong dream. The poems in this section explore the theme of “work.”

The third section, “Comfortable,” takes its title from the short story, “Forgiveness in Families,” written by Alice Munro. In the epigraph I have selected, the narrator of the short story considers the small actions of daily life, going to the grocery store, eating grapes, meeting with one’s mother every Wednesday, events that she says “don’t seem that much like life” (99). These daily actions in which each of us participate, however, comprise the bulk of our lives. They are, in essence, the core of our lives’ events. And all too often, except when we are confronted with a loved one’s impending death, for example, we fail to regard these seemingly unimportant acts as meaningful. The poems in this section address the state of being lulled into a sense of comfort with regards to our mortality.

The fourth section of poems, called “Southwest,” addresses the theme of death. The title refers to a line taken from *I Remain*, the collection of Beat Generation poet Lew Welch’s posthumously published letters. Welch, a college friend of the poets Phillip Whalen and Gary Snyder, killed himself in 1971 after years of suffering from depression and alcoholism. He left a suicide note in a journal in his van abandoned on Gary Snyder’s property in the Sierra Foothills, where Welch hoped to begin his life anew. The penultimate line of the note read: “I went Southwest.” Welch’s body was never found. We know that the impact of suicide and attempted suicide irreparably affects loved ones

years after the occurrence. The decision to commit suicide, however, does not occur out of thin air but is the culmination of a variety of afflictions, such as compulsive and/or irrational behavior patterns, undiagnosed clinical depression, and/or alcoholism. The poems in this section dramatize some effects of these afflictions, such as alcoholic blackout, emergency room and psychiatric ward visits, and cyclical attempts at alcohol rehabilitation. And they examine what it means to travel as far “Southwest” as one can go, before one descends into oblivion, while still having the luck and tenacity to be able to recover and resume some semblance of a daily routine.

The fifth and final section, “Perfect Light,” takes its title from Galen Rowell’s book *Mountain Light*. Rowell’s photographs of landscapes are immeasurably beautiful. In describing his photographic method, Rowell delineates the physical object and the landscape and the light that enhances the landscape. The function of the camera is to capture light, not the object, so “remarkable photographs” capture “remarkable light” (84). In the fifteen poems in this last section, I foreground the emotional content of a dramatic scene over the importance of the actualities of the event, what I consider to be the literary corollary to Rowell’s “remarkable light.” Rowell writes, “I search for perfect light, then hunt for something earthbound to match it with” (84). My search is much the same. I have chosen the title of this section to characterize the process and aesthetic of my poems, as well as to symbolize the light at the end of the tunnel, the end of the journey.

Influences

Walt Whitman's expansive poetry has been an undeniable influence on the poems in this collection. Following Whitman's lead, I have lengthened my line so that I too may "contain multitudes" (71). Still, it is Whitman's self-exploration that draws me to his poetry. In "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd," Whitman explores the individual self at a moment lost among the masses: "Out of the rolling ocean the crowd came a drop gently to me,/ Whispering *I love you, before long I die,/ I have travel'd a long way merely to look on you to touch you...*" (95). The intimacy of the italicized words, as if whispered, announce Whitman's speaker's deepest need by the adverb "*merely*" and expresses the urging of the self to be connected to others, to experience the nuances of love. In my poems in the "Comfortable" section, such as "the white peach tree getting leaves" and "even i don't pretend this is comforting," I imitate Whitman's intensely intimate voice. I find this voice to work effectively when writing poems that deal with pain and with the need for love during times of sickness. In "the white peach tree getting leaves," the speaker quips, "what would you do without me" then suddenly understanding his own profound need for love, he wonders, "*what in the world would i do without you?*"

Another great influence on these poems has been William Carlos Williams. What draws me to Williams' poems is his collage technique, used, for example, in a complex prose-poem like "The Descent of Winter." Williams uses the same kind of dynamic, vernacular language in the "The Descent of Winter" as he uses in his shorter Imagist poems but achieves different layers of emotional subtlety. I am also attracted to

the possibilities of understatement in his work. For instance, in a line such as, “A dell with a pretty stream in it below the little garden and fifty feet beyond, the board fence of the Ajax Aniline Dye Works with red and purple refuse dribbling out ragged and oily under the lower fence boards,” the specificity of the language implies both the actuality of place and the sense of emotional collapse that Williams inscribes in the scene (297).

Another example of understatement that has been a great influence on my collection can be found in the poetry of Raymond Carver. I particularly admire a poem like “Iowa Summer,” where Carver implies a painful narrative detail that is not explicit in the poem, as in the lines, “I stall for time/ Sweat runs off our faces; we stand waiting./ I do not offer them chairs and no one speaks” (9). In my poem titled “it ruined everything,” I use the seemingly innocuous image of bleach in the washing machine to convey the dissolution of a relationship: “it didn’t drain all the way, and it ruined my sweatshirts and pants, it ruined everything.” In other poems in the “Decent People” section, such as “we lean on each other” and “my mother lives in urbana, ohio,” I also employ Carver’s technique of elided understatement. Structurally, I use the first person pronoun “I” in the lower case in all of the poems. This, I believe, better emphasizes the technique of elided understatement.

I am not sure if I would have been willing to write publicly about private subject matter without the precedent of Robert Lowell’s open-form poetry. What compels me about Lowell’s work is how he dramatizes his autobiography within the so-called “confessional poems,” while he also shapes the poem through formal artifice. The speaker’s situation in such poems must be entirely convincing, though the “facts” may be

somewhat fictionalized for the sake of the art. I admire Lowell's use of prosodic devices for the way they suggest the necessity of form and glue the poem together in the absence of traditional content and meter. In "Home After Three Months Away," Lowell skillfully deploys rhyme and pun in lines such as, "Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil./ Three stories down below,/ a choreman tends our coffin's length of soil" (185). The recuperation process after Lowell's crack-up involves no physical labor, "neither spin nor toil," but the dramatic monologue implies both the "spin" and "toil" of the speaker's mind. Lowell uses self-reflection to comment on the human condition, looking out the window to see the inevitable "choreman [who] tends our coffin's length of soil." The rhyming of "toil/soil" and the echoing of "choreman/Charon" insinuate something grander than the self.

As a model in matters of my poems' content and their craft, Lowell is a great influence on me, especially in my poem "hold these moments sacred." In that poem, the image of "a plastic 12-foot Christmas trees with big, empty boxes wrapped ostentatiously" in the hospital foyer elucidates the sense of separation relatives, "holding magazines and cookie tins outside the barred door waiting to be buzzed in," experience when visiting family members in a psychiatric ward. In these two lines, the slant rhyme of "tree/ empty/ ostentatiously" and the internal rhyme of "tins/in" help draw the contrast between family holidays and visiting hours at the hospital.

But the intensity of self-examination in Lowell must, I believe, be mitigated to some degree. For me, the work of Frank O'Hara, one of the leading first-generation New York School poets, acts as the counterbalance to Lowell's biting self-examination.

Through his hyperbole and irony, O'Hara often achieves a sharp and sometimes humorous epiphany that could be reached no other way. In his poem "Ave Maria," O'Hara invents the ridiculous narrative scenario where mothers destroy their children's emotional development by not allowing them to go to the movies. O'Hara writes, "Mothers of America/ let your kids go to the movies!/ get them out of the house [...] instead of hanging around the yard/ or up in their room/ hating you" (372). The poem comments on the negation of desire as the ultimate unfurling of the self. In my poem, "when i walk through morning like man," I use some of the same indeterminate techniques, ironizing the construct of what it means to be "a man" providing for the family. When the speaker returns with "spoils" from a Saturday morning jaunt, walking "up our rattley staircase carrying a bag of old-fashioned maples and a half-/ gallon of 2% clover milk," his wife leaps up anxiously "to hug me, to ask me where i've been." My use of O'Hara's style of hyperbole and irony is evident in one of the last poems in my collection, "things themselves of wonder." Here the "things" that pass for masterpieces are empty "peanut butter, jellies, relish" jars on the windowsill "filled with nothing else besides light and, more light." In the end, I believe this is a perfect poem to articulate the goals I have struggled to achieve in the section "Perfect Light" and what I have attempted in the entire collection as a whole.

Style

Though my style resists the traditional notions of poetry by its expansive lines and prosaic flatness, I have never considered the work written for this collection as anything other than poetry. Hardly constructed with formal structures, these poems nevertheless reflect a very lyrical aesthetic. Without traditional sonic devices such as rhyme and meter to measure the poem, I arrange the poems in what may be called “verse paragraphs” rather than stanzas. What maintains the verse paragraphs as complete units is the accretion of emotive instances within the lines. This allows me to orchestrate a compelling response from the reader by contrasting the plainness of diction with the intensity of emotion. For instance, in the last lines of the poem, “i start packing as if i’m going on vacation,” i write: “i study/ my wristwatch. i study the numbers on the monitors of the machines hooked to you./ i can’t figure them out. i wait for you to wake. i wait for morning to take me from this.” In these lines, I convey the sense of urgency, dread and helplessness one possesses for a loved one involuntarily admitted to a hospital for alcohol abuse by utilizing the repetition of “I” and the listing of the observations the “I” sees. This device of incremental repetition combined with simple statement allows for a greater emotional tension, such that the final line becomes more powerful. With this in mind, “morning” connotes both a tone of relief, as well as a mournful tone. Again, using only the lower case first person pronoun “I” in the poems helps crystallize the sense of ordinariness that is at the core of this collection.

Another stylistic device I employ is the use of a persona. The collection may be seen as one long poem, novelistic in its approach, that tells the story of a man “nearly forty” who lives with his three daughters and wife in an apartment in a non-descript suburb. The title, *Everything We Call Ordinary*, reflects the daily events of this man, who could only be described as “ordinary.” The poems, however, consider not only these events, but the startling, emotional intensity of how he responds to those events. While seemingly uneventful, a situation such as losing one’s wallet in the street provides a scenario in which two strangers come closer together personally. Instead of the daily, uneventful acts of our lives, these instances become most extraordinary. And it is the commonality of response to such intense instances that makes these poems envision a universal understanding rather than the mere personal. As Samuel Maio writes in *Creating Another Self*: “[The] use of the persona voice presents another method of self-examination: The behavior of the one, who is typical of the many (including of course the poet), is explored in the poetry through the voice of the persona” (94). In addition, the utilization of the persona in *Everything We Call Ordinary* creates an unparalleled degree of authenticity, inviting the reader into a world of intimacy which may not otherwise have been achieved.

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DECENT PEOPLE

But I found myself thinking – except I didn’t say it to Sallie – that though we may have thought we were doing the puppy a favor by trying to find it a home, possibly we were really doing ourselves a favor by presenting ourselves to be the kind of supposedly decent people who do that *sort* of thing. I am, for instance, a person who stops to move turtles off of busy interstates, or picks up butterflies in shopping mall parking lots and put them into the bushes to give them a fairer chance of survival. I know these are pointless acts of pointless generosity. Yet there isn’t a time when I do it that I don’t get back in the car thinking more kindly of myself. (Later I often work around to thinking of myself as a fraud, too.) But the alternative is to leave the butterfly where it lies expiring, or to let the big turtle meet annihilation on the way to the pond; and in doing these things let myself in for the indictment of cruelty or the sense of loss that would follow. Possibly, anyone would argue, these issues are too small to think about seriously, since whether you perform these acts or don’t perform them, you always forget about them in about five minutes.

– Richard Ford, “Puppy” (96-97)

so i ate leftovers

when i got home and you weren't home (i didn't see the subaru in our parking spot in the carport) i went upstairs to see if you'd called and left a message. you hadn't. so i ate some leftover kung pao chicken (beads of water had formed on the inside lid of the styrofoam take home box, but i didn't care, i flicked the lid with a finger and the drops mixed with the sauce that had jellied) and i grabbed a coat and went on the porch for a smoke. the lights of the city hummed in streetlamp yellow and evening white. i flicked the ash into the potted ficus we had on the porch steps, and listened to myself exhale. i thought that if we were going to get through this

mess, if we were going to stay together, we shouldn't ever talk about what happened. i could forgive if i wasn't reminded of what happened. when i'd finished the cigarette i stomped the butt out, slid the glass door open and closed. locked it. the porch light was on and a dirt-brown moth circled dumbly. i went in and cracked a budweiser open, plopped in the chair. i turned the television on, but i wasn't watching it, wasn't listening to it. i sat there and waited for you to get home, waited to see how you'd greet me once you came through the door. i waited in that chair for what the future would unfold, for what dark turnings were in store for us, for the way the tiny spaces of our lives were to be altered.

worrying about catering

we've had nothing but rain so now we wait for spring, for sunshine, because we've had nothing but hardness, cold mornings, deaths we never expected. i have been to one wake each month now six months straight. i wasn't planning on this, of course, no one plans for this, but what i am trying to say is that i am weakening. i need sunshine, spring, i need something to bolster me through these hard days. i look across the room at my wife in her black outfit i've seen too often, and even when she catches my eye i find no solace.

i know if she dies first, i will have to worry about catering arrangements, call relatives, arrange to pick them up from the airport, get hotel reservations, rent a rec-hall or banquet room. or worse, i've been thinking, i may be the one to leave first. but what will i have left her, what have i done in this lifetime? a few potted plants, a few vacations recorded in a few photographs. some jewelry she rarely wears. some policies we've filed in manila folders in the file cabinet out in the garage. she'll have to go through them so she has copies when she calls our agent.

funny how a man's life can, in the end, be worth nothing but paper. who among us has a legacy to reign beyond the small tragedy, beyond the cups of coffee and buttermilk cookies served on paper doilies? beyond the drive home on a sunday when it's raining, and hardly anyone is on the highway on the long quiet drive all the way home? and pulling in the garage, and getting out the car, taking off overcoats damp with rain, asking my wife, *how could this have happened?* knowing, of course, she doesn't know the answer. knowing there is no goddamn way she knows the answer.

we were in the 7th grade

i can't find my wingtips i know i put back in the closet when i was done polishing them. i can't find my watch i know i placed on the dresser. and where's the suit i picked up from the cleaners, the one i'm supposed to wear to the funeral today? aunt edwina's inside the seven thousand dollar coffin. she's ended the years of youth, the years of future. and i'm left wondering, *where have they gone for me?*

i can't find the photographs since i moved all the boxes downstairs to the garage. i know they're in a cigar box inside a banker's box. i'm sure i put it on the plywood shelf up in the rafters. i can't fit into my pair of dress pants anymore. i can't remember anymore what my first girlfriend looked like, we were in the 7th grade and french kissed in a walk-in closet at a sleepover my parents didn't know i'd gone to. i've lost memories, lost my watch. i've lost aunt edwina, her soft hands, her green beans and italian sausage dish. she's inside

the seven thousand dollar casket. it's to be lowered in the hole dug next to uncle oscar. i've lost her. i've lost him. now that i'm by the graveside everything sinks in. the sun's making everyone miserable. i'm sweating and kicking clods with my cowboy boots i had to borrow since i couldn't find my polished wingtips. i'm lost, aunt edwina. the priest's saying the lord's prayer: *hail mary, full of...* here i am in a borrowed suit, which snugs in the crotch and tugs across my back each time i reach to shake someone's hand, each time i move close to hug somebody tightly, hoping not to lose them, hoping not to lose these few moments we hold together.

the fear of what's under me

i'm ready to move to the city where there's always something to do. i'm ready to hike the sierra, climb half dome, dangle my feet over the edge. i'm ready to lose fifteen pounds, get into the pants i bought last summer, get back into a thirty-two waist and wear fashionable clothes again. i'm ready to ride my bike up the hill, up the 17, over the hill, all the way to 15th street beach (where i took my wife our first date almost twenty years ago) and swim out past the breakers and float a long time, letting go of the fear of what's under me, and just become part of the movements of the ocean, then ride the waves in and walk up to the beach where i dropped my bike and spread my t-shirt, and lay on top of the sand, feeling the sun deep in me until sunset, when i'll hop on my bike and ride back up the hill, down the hill, home to

make dinner of bar-b-qued salmon and asparagus and greek salad with fresh-picked cherry tomatoes and cucumbers with feta cheese and red onions and lots of cracked pepper. i'm ready to be done with all this worry of apartment living, all the crying children screaming for mommy for an hour, and mommy never coming (where is she? it's sunday night for chistsake!) and then daddy stomping around downstairs yelling, *mommy's not here, i told you mommy's not here*, and the door slamming, then no more screaming. and all the complaining about trash spilling over and recycling bins overflowing and the old couch just left by the dumpster that city garbage never picks up, it gets banged into the dumpster every monday 4 a.m. the walls are cheap here. i hear everything and windows always look in, and the carpets i live on are ugly, tramped with footsteps of worry from one room to another, back and forth through this place.

dear pops i'm trying

my old man's getting his top teeth pulled next week. i don't like this. he'll ask me to drive him to dr. fitzgerald's office and i will. and he'll talk about ornamental cherries (even if they're not in bloom), how they remind him when his grandparents took him to d.c., *you should have seen the whole town aburst with blossom*. always when we're on this side of town, he tells me how he picked apricots at white's orchards when he was ten.

i sit in the living room and listen to the details of the procedure, how he could've opted for implanted posts for his broken bridges. i listen. i watch his hands never fidget, like books with split spines fallen from a nightstand.

he tells me the trouble fitting dentures, how he's anxious the anesthesia will affect him, how a man his age might not wake up, how his gums will be swollen and the goddamn things might not even fit after that. i listen as light shoves through the window over his shoulders, over his terrycloth housecoat. the light makes him small, and i see he knows it makes him small. he remains stiffly turned to it. but for a moment, there is a quiet we know we shouldn't disturb. of course, nothing lasts. outside, clouds move, sun shifts. he stands up, asks if i'd like a cup of coffee.

my mother lives in urbana, ohio

i was nearly forty when i realized eating peanut butter helps kill the smell of alcohol (lately i've been drinking bloody mary's early in the morning – 6, 7, 8, sometimes on break out in the parking lot, i'll crack the thermos open, pour a cap full, smoke a cigarette, then eat a couple peanut butter crackers or a dozen nutter butters and get back at it).

only once did anybody say anything to me (some joked because i sweated so much, and sometimes i got pissed at my co-workers, but i was smart enough to stay away from them), and i told my boss as we stood out back next to the dumpsters and barrels of grease from the grease traps, and smoked a cigarette, i told him my mother was dying of brain cancer.

he just stared at me and exhaled a puff of smoke which clung for a second to his fat face, and finally he told me i could take time off whenever i wanted to. my mother lives in urbana, ohio, and she's healthier than me. still, i used to take long breaks in my car, tell everybody i needed some time alone (the first month mostly they stopped joking about the sweating and my red w.c. field's face–

the girls at the front desk were sweeter to me, they really seemed to care – sometimes i even cried the lie was so real). sitting in the car with the last of the thermos in my cup, when the afternoon winds blew, i would study the leaves as they flipped, their lighter greens beneath sometimes showing, hinting at something i couldn't grasp yet: how difficult it is to cling and hold on, how difficult not to simply let go.

i hear something

you sleep in the other room. i poke my thumbnail into the pulp of cut wood. i toss a log on the fire. i dodge out the apartment with car keys and 17 bucks to buy a twelve pack. i also buy a king-size snickers, a box of safeway automatic dishwashing detergent. coming back, i hear something in the dark. i pretend it's brake pads or rotors, so i turn up "hotel california." i roll the windows up, turn the radio off. i sneak up the walkway. you don't hear the key in the lock. its' thursday, my friday night. i drink all twelve beers and carefully peel the dewed labels off.

i bury the caps beneath totino's pizza crusts, coffee grinds, orange peels from oranges you picked at your grandpa's orchards in madera. branches hung just over the fence, over the road which wasn't there in your youth. no longer your family's, you pulled onto the shoulder, killed the engine, kept on the headlights, insects fanatically circled. you picked as many you could hold in the flipped up basket of your sweatshirt. you sat in the front seat, fresh orange smell filling the car. sat and listened to insects, dropping of fruit in the dark, cold from the fields wafting in. you spilled them onto the front seat, started the car up.

it's 10

why don't i dream in this bed of another time, of old loves, of the future or something new to say. i can't. i'm in bed with my wife and she's wearing her pajamas again, her marigold housecoat slung over the back of a chair. it's 10. i rest my burdens like a wristwatch next to the alarm clock on the nightstand waiting for morning, for an ultramarine dawn. the cat's found his place between my wife and me. she plays solitaire with a deck of american airlines playing cards we got on a trip to san francisco to see alcatraz, to see her family. the lamp goosenecks over my pillow and i read before i go to sleep and shines over me. my clothes, laid out for morning, are ready to go. i close the book. turn off the lamp. my wife and i peck a kiss at each other. it is dark.

there has to be something more

dressed in faded sweats and an old harvard t-shirt, i walk to the mailbox in bare feet hoping not to see the neighbors. i've put on a few pounds, and without a shower this morning, my hair's crazy. i haven't brushed my teeth. i've already had three cups of coffee, no cream. it's not right to speak about life as though it's at its' end, but i don't know where to go from here. moving into this apartment wasn't my idea, but it was what

we could manage. i won't go to a bar-b-que the downstairs neighbors keep inviting us to. we never hear them fighting, but something's wrong. we hear her cry every night. in the summer, the couple who've lived in #4 for twenty-five years, cocktails on their porch beneath a cinzano umbrella. he never lets her talk, and if she's had too much to drink, she tells him so. i caught the bastard flirting with my wife when she was doing laundry.

it's not right to think about the end this early (i'm nearly forty, out of work now six months. i was working for a drycleaners, no future there, but i find myself, in the morning, getting mail, ducking neighbors like *i've* done wrong). i don't know where to go from here. i need to lose weight, i'll give you that. there must be more. i lost something awhile ago, but i can't put my finger on how. i hope, as i open the lock that sticks on the mailbox, and grab the mail, walk into the apartment, lock the deadbolt behind, i hope the phone doesn't ring, hope no one comes to complain, hope we have enough to pay the bills, hope we don't divorce, hope something good lies in wait. i hope for something different.

a double feature and a soda

this is the final day to pay the pg&e bill. they'll turn off the electricity (can you imagine?) we'll have to do everything in the dark. so i have to go downtown to some cash and carry store and wait in line with \$279.54 in cash to pay the bill in full. that's two missed payments with added late fees, nearly all we have in the bank account until next week. i hardly have a half tank of gas in the truck. it needs tires i noticed, especially since it's been raining. they're bald (hell i'm bald, but i can't do a thing about that). anyway, if i call accounts-payable and find out the address and get to the bank early, ask the teller to give me big bills and an envelope (that seems to bother tellers, i don't know why, it's my money, at least for the moment, i think i should get an envelope) and get down there and get out of there,

i can be back for a 1:05 matinee at the cheap cineplex by our apartment. who cares what shows, since it costs six bucks for a double feature, and four bucks for a large soda and a bottomless bucket of popcorn. it's the only way the wife and i hit the town lately with no money to spend, but we have to get out sometime. so that's what i'll do. i'll call the electric company, then withdrawal cash from the bank. stand in line and pay the bill. drive back cross-town, and spend ten bucks to kill an afternoon with a couple flicks and wash buttered popcorn down with syrupy soda. then i'll come back home and flip on the lights in the place, every bulb and every lamp. i'll crank the heater up and switch the fridge to coldest. i'll unplug the alarm clock and crawl beneath the blankets and deal with everything else tomorrow morning.

BODY

Trying to farm during the night an' work all day for somebody else, it's...it's worse than a living hell. You know, you feel like...your body just feels like hell all the time. You know, they expect you to be a slave, and if you can work a hun'red miles an hour, they want you to go twice that fast, you know? Everybody needs some time off and everybody needs some credit for what they're doing.

– Darrell Buschkoetter, *The Farmer's Wife* (121)

mondays i watch the ballgames at the pizza joint

i go to work every day of the year that i'm not ill and do the job like i'm supposed to do the job. i've never put money in the 401K and everyone calls me crazy for it. i suppose i am a little crazy, but mostly i'm scared to continue doing what i'm doing. i take the xanax and the noise (which is all this constant worrying) quiets a little, so i can get through the day easier. life's still life, but this gives me a chance i don't know i've ever had. i can't remember a day in my life that i didn't dread.

in the morning someone will ask me how i'm doing and i'll answer, *you know*. i'm losing my hair. sometimes when i'm typing letters or eating cereal, i discover a strand fallen on my placemat or keyboard. my father lost his hair when he was twenty-eight, started coming forward and carefully working it just right. my brother and i laughed when the wind blew it out of place. i'm nearly forty, have plenty of hair, but i always look in the mirror or car window to see what's disappeared. i admit it, if i made more money, i'd use rogaïne.

another tough day, but this time i've decided not to tell anyone about it. keep it to myself, you know, *not say a boring thing*. i work at the grocery and take night school so i can teach and coach high school in three years. mondays i watch ballgames at the pizza joint, have a pitcher with the boys, hands all cut from throwing the dairy load. i know it could be worse than this. half a world away someone's dying for something or for nothing, and when i think about having to kill someone, really kill someone, i nearly weep.

never quit your day job to become a poet

i wake up every morning to make her a frozen blueberry waffle and apple and spice caffeine free tea because she's the only one working these days to pay our rent. i quit my job and was only making ten bucks an hour at the drycleaners, so the last check went quick. i thought about looking for work that next day, but didn't. i couldn't fit in the suit i have. there weren't any clean clothes, so i took the baskets and baskets down to the laundromat and used the jam jar filled with quarters and washed everything, including the comforter and blankets and bathroom mats. it took

the entire afternoon. i was tired, but i went to the taqueria and had three (okay, six) negra modelas with limes. when i got home i laid on the living room floor and watched tv, then fell asleep. by the time she got home, i'd cleaned the kitchen, showered and brushed my teeth. i popped in a frozen lean cuisine, made a salad of butter lettuce and thousand island and flipped the tv on. she said it was one of the worst days she'd had, that bitch of a boss of hers made her do her figures again. she was bloating. she'd started her period. she asked me to go to safeway to buy welch's light white grape juice and lemon jello, and i thought that day, boy this sure is one hard way to make a living.

i am the richest man in the world

with the sun coming through the giant picture window of the living room,
i move through the apartment with my cup of coffee as my family sleeps
in their beds, in their rooms. i walk over and look out the window a moment,
before i start thinking about the 1/4" pipe fitting i have to return to the hardware
store for one 1/8" larger. before i think about christmas shopping and recitals

this afternoon. before i turn away, i let the sun fold over me. i let the sun work
through my sweatshirt and flannel and t-shirt, until i feel the warmth inside
my collar nearly becomes unbearable. before i leave the living room
for the garage, standing in this sunlight, i think of these seconds, of my family,
as bright pennies at my feet i could gather up into my pockets if i felt the need to.

when i walk through morning like a man

i burn so easy i wear earth tones, long sleeve light button-downs, and big brimmed hats. i always have sun block 50 with me. but i love the sun if it's 68 degrees out on a saturday and i have an extra 10 dollar bill to buy junk at garage sales (like an indian clay oven with cookbook still in the box, terracotta flower pots for the balcony, or a boston fern we can put the maroon macramé one of the girls made in scouts, perfect for the entrance way),

and i love the sun when i walk through the courtyard of the apartment complex, up our rattlely staircase carrying a bag of old-fashioned maple donuts and a half-gallon of 2% clover milk and i open the door, and you're reading the newspaper propped up in the lay-z-boy by the window, blinds opened, sun overflowing, and you jump up, tying your raspberry housecoat over your nighty, hair curly as a wig, slip into your slippers to come hug me, to inspect my spoils, to ask me where i've been.

i never thought about fat

in the morning when you leave for work we kiss each other with flat lips and press our lumpy bodies together. i hand you the bag lunch filled with carrots and oranges and a sandwich made with low-sodium turkey and whole wheat bread. since we ate all the holiday cookies, both of us diet. you're fatter than i am, but i say nothing of course. i wrap my arms around your waist and hug. i'll admit i never considered there would be so much flabby skin so soon in our marriage. i never, in fact, once considered flabbiness in our lives at all. as a boy, i wanted to be married when i turned nineteen and have a child by twenty like a cousin of mine. *how romantic*, i thought. what it will be like to live with a woman forever, i thought. i never thought about fat.

you walk down the stairs with your jacket, your bag lunch, thermos filled with vegetable barley, and a travel mug of decaf tea. your doctor said you need to lower your cholesterol, so i fill you up with spinach on everything i can. and i never use butter. it's funny how things change. i don't mean the fat that we've both grown, but how i stay home now and clean the apartment and shop and cook for you. now that i take care of our daughter, whom we took home from the hospital sick with leukemia. we decided not to keep her there anymore. luckily, your insurance covers partial homecare. twelve years old and i wash her most of the time with a washrag in bed. there's not an ounce of fat on her body when i lift her limbs, when i rest my hand on her naked head and notice how much she looks like you.

in your mother's j.c. penny's pajamas

on sunday i wake at 12:28 p.m., and i'm in my blue hanes underwear and harvard t-shirt (since i've been sick these past three months, i always wear it to bed), you're wearing baby-soft cotton pj's your mother bought at j.c. penny's for five bucks black friday after thanksgiving. you crochet a bedspread, and i make a p.b.j. i pour coffee, add some 2%. i'm not bringing in income and should feel guilty, but i don't. i'm a poet (at least these three months, since i was fired, writing poems every day, reading borrowed books from the library, listening to the *impulse!* coltrane) for once in my short, plain life (until i have to find a two-bit job, for two-bit wages, so we can make our two-bit ends meet).

i'll have to settle for petunias

i should have built a redwood fence around the front yard, but i didn't. i didn't want to miss the women walking the neighborhood in the morning with golden retrievers and slick strollers. i'd lie to get just one of them, get their panties wet. (hell, i'd settle for getting my wife's panties wet. we haven't touched in over a month). i wanted sunflowers fifteen feet tall but i never planted them. it's too late to plant, so i'll have to be satisfied with pansies and petunias. i don't

want to think about it. a pigeon shit on my windshield, and the sun's hot. i need a tune-up on the toyota and my kid badgers me to teach her to drive. i tell her to get a job, but she doesn't get a job. (and her mother doesn't make her get a job.) i go to the mailbox, but the mail hasn't come. and someone's stepped on the petunias. i'll have to buy more at the drugstore to replant. and wake up tomorrow morning to mow (the kid doesn't even do that). tomorrow's another tomorrow, i know. i'm fed up to here with all of this.

the bustle and fog

i walked into a copy shop in san francisco, in the sunset, that had been in business twenty years. but the owner had developed cancer. he was selling everything, moving to alaska to live with his grandson and daughter, who was in the back going through files and boxes of files and boxes of boxes of files. twenty years he'd had that shop. he gazed out the window onto the bustle and fog of geary street, telling me he couldn't wait to move, *someone else can have all this*. he worked at the pile of paper in front of him, but often he'd look up, take in the street. then he looked at me, hand resting on a box with #60 white on it, said *this is good paper, want it? how about five bucks?* he sold me fifteen reams, mixed and matched, all i could carry for five bucks, for nothing. when he held the door open for me, the fog was so thick it looked like rain.

tomorrow will be filled with music

tomorrow's another tomorrow, i know, but i'm looking out the window into morning. what do i do with this: this view, this sunlight, this lay-z-boy that creaks when i rock it? the refrigerator's clattering, and i don't know how to fix it. i don't know how to fix anything, though i act like i do. for now i'll sit here, while it's quiet, while no one's around to ask for anything. i won't answer the phone. the sun comes over my legs, and i'm in my underwear and t-shirt drinking a cup of coffee. tomorrow's another

tomorrow, but half-naked, warming in the sun, i can't imagine anything to do tomorrow. or today for that matter. except pour another cup of coffee, except listen to the creaking chair, the fridge, count imaginary pennies on fingers. i hope this day holds out. i hope it continues like every day before it, straight to nighttime without incident. so i can crawl in bed, close my eyes, hope tomorrow is something different, hope tomorrow's the day everything falls into place and somehow or other i'll fix the damned rattling fridge.

all those those years of carefree summers

my youth was spent no further than a quarter mile from some 7-11
where i could buy hershey's score bars, cherry-root-beer-suicide slurpees,
star wars, baseball, football trading cards with their one thin wafer of pink gum
each. i've never known a summer evening without yellow street lights robbing
the night sky of endlessnesses of stars. when i lived those years in richland, texas,
every summer fewer and fewer fireflies lit the front yard on humid summer evenings
we'd walk to the all-night tom thumb to buy pop-rocks, dr. pepper or chico-sticks.

now i live a block from taco bell, baskin robin's, safeway, a 76 station,
but i never walk to shop. i get in the truck, drive over for sliced ham sandwich
meat, two-scoop sundaes, or a 7-layer burrito, pepsi and mexi-melt. i walk to lose
weight, too fat to run, too fat to ride a bike, too fat to jazzercise (do they do that
anymore?), too fat to tie my shoes without losing my breath bending over.
is this what i expected all my years of carefree summers? is this what my life

amounts to? all those years turning-two at second and drag bunting for base hits
all through high school and college. i remember limping off the diamond (this is true)
for the last time, it was sunset, i saw an owl swoop down from a branch and snag
a mouse. i pulled hamstring. i thought, *i'll never have to worry about this again.*
that night i got drunk on mickey's wide-mouths, screwed my roommate's girlfriend's
roommate (everyone wanted to), and thought, *i'll write poetry for a living*, then
i thought, *you rotten son-of-a-bitch, you're gonna live forever.*

COMFORTABLE

I thought about Mother's life, the part of it I knew. Going to work every day, first on the ferry then on the bus. Shopping at the old Red-and-White then at the new Safeway – new, fifteen years old! Going down to the Library one night a week, taking me with her, and we would come home on the bus with our load of books and a bag of grapes we bought at the Chinese place, for a treat. Wednesday afternoons too when my kids were small and I went over there to drink coffee and she rolled us cigarettes on that contraption she had. And I thought, all these things don't seem that much like life, when you're doing them, they're just what you do, how you fill up your days, and you think all the time something is going to crack open, and you'll find yourself, *then* you'll find yourself, in life. It's not even that you particularly want this to happen, this cracking open, you're comfortable enough the way things are, but you do expect it. Then you're dying, Mother is dying, and it's just the same plastic chairs and plastic plants and ordinary day outside with people getting groceries and what you've had is all there is, and going to the Library, just a thing like that, coming back up the hill on the bus with books and a bag of grapes seems now worth wanting, O God doesn't it, you'd break your heart wanting back there.

-Alice Munro, "Forgiveness in Families" (99)

bunches of flowers like a torch

the memorial's in half an hour, so i go to safeway to get a bouquet of flowers for the boy's mother. grandmother's favorite flowers were red carnations, so i think to get a couple bunches. i think i'd better get something else to lighten the red, *the red*, so i pick calla lilies, a bunch of three stems is five ninety nine. i inspect them all, but each has tips burned brown. i finger one then another. none's perfect. so i close my eyes and pick. i take the bunches to the fifteen items or less. i think to get some mints, find peppermint menthos. i grab two.

the man in front of me, with his daughter, flirts with the young girl checking. she doesn't laugh, but smiles politely. i can't hear what he says, but he looks at me, he tries to get my attention. i hold the bunches of flowers like a torch. i look at magazines, look at crossword puzzle books, recipe books, candy bars, packs of gum. his little girl opens a packet of photographs just developed, i hear, *look daddy, look at this one*. he looks quickly, *oh look at that, look how handsome daddy is*, and laughs. i sense him looking. he laughs again. he looks at the checker who's called on the loudspeaker for the price of a cantaloupe. he says something

to her about the picture. she hangs up the intercom, punches in the price, places the items in a plastic bag. she asks, *do you need a bag for the pictures?* she *can't seem to take her hands off them*, he says, then laughs his laugh. this time he catches my eye. so i smile, because that's what people do. he pulls a few bills from his wallet. the checker opens the till and slips the bills where they go. she counts the change, tears the receipt, closes the drawer with her hip. he puts the bills in his wallet, slips the coins in his pocket. the little girl says, *look at this one* and he says, *yeah*, but he doesn't look. he tries to catch my eye,

but i don't let him. *you all have a real good day*, he says. i hear, *daddy, look daddy*, as i walk up and hand the clerk the flowers, hand her the mints, pull out two twenties. she asks if i want to use my club card, *these are on sale*. i say, *no thanks*. she takes the money and gives me my change, my receipt. i grab the mints, the flowers. when she asks if i need a bag, i tell her, *i'm in a hurry*. i walk out the automatic door. it's bright outside and hot. i carefully hold the flowers, as close to my body as possible, as if i could protect them from wilting. i start running a little, because i know i have to go, because i know it's getting late.

what happens with the next atrocity

in the morning i get my wife and kids off to work and school. she drives them in our rusted saturn. we couldn't keep up the payments for the '04 caravan and sold it for four thousand less than we'd paid the dealer. but someone took over the payments, and that's what we cared about. i haven't shaved in two days and finally last night, the last day of my wife's vacation, we had sex. it'd been a month, no more, i don't know. we kissed afterwards, and rolled over to read magazines. when she went to sleep, i got up and pulled on my housecoat, made the kids lunch. i sat in the blue chair by the window, and turned on the lamp. i thought i'd read the headlines of the paper. instead i just sat. i wondered if we'd come up short again this month. we used up most of our savings

and borrowed three thousand from her folks who just retired in may. of course they were happy to help out, they said. but i could tell her old man was a little pissed. my wife protects him, says things like *wouldn't you be concerned if you were him?* i'm concerned. this isn't exactly the way it was supposed to work out: nearly forty, fat, three kids, jobless, and debt which keeps mounting. living in an apartment with our king size bed, where i lie awake (since we don't make love) wondering what happens with the next atrocity, what i'll pay for college tuitions, my tombstone? is this the story they'll sell to hollywood for millions and fame (if it comes at all) shall come posthumously? is this what i'd bargained for? all those years before, wedding bells ringing, the girls' births, every day the sun rising?

the white peach tree getting leaves

you have mouth cancer but it hasn't metastasized to the lymph nodes, thank god. but it's enough to have a bit of your lip removed. sixty stitches so that all you can eat is melted ice cream spooned to you with a teaspoon, baby food mixed with a half jigger of brandy, or pre-stirred yogurt. you love yogurt, but you like raspberry and peach especially. you'll have enough of yogurt you won't want it for awhile. you'll think it's good to be home after three days in that stinking hospital, to be in your own bed, beneath your own blankets, propped up on pillows watching talk shows, to shower in our shower. careful not to get any stitches wet, i wash

your hair, your head tilted back, ring the water out, until it cascades upon my feet. you slip on your housecoat, your slippers, sit at the kitchen table a few minutes, sip orange juice and 7-up with a straw. in a week we'll go back to the hospital, get stitches removed, get tests done. you are tired now and want to get back in bed. i lift the blankets, the sheets, and when i cover you (you've grown so skinny), your body nearly disappears. it's bright out, so i go to close the blinds. i think, *what in the world would you do without me?* then, looking at the sapling white peach tree getting leaves, i think, *what in the world would i do without you?* as i draw the blinds, as i shut the bedroom door behind me.

after the motorcycle accident

when you turned the light out i was just falling asleep. i had an icepack on my knee because of the torn cartilage and i'd taken three alleves to help the swelling and help with back pain. after the motorcycle accident i haven't slept well in weeks. you leaned over and pulled the icepack off, pulled the blankets up. and kissed me on my ear. i grumbled, bothered, and rolled over. it wasn't until you'd left this morning for work, pulled out the toaster from the bottom drawer, warmed yourself up a kellogg's blueberry waffle, opened the refrigerator and poured yourself a cup of no-pulp orange juice, then left out the front door, and the apartment was perfectly quiet, before i remembered that kiss.

remember how we laughed

if we were to buy a hyundai or misubishi, or god, if we could save enough for a lexus, i'd want you to drive in it with me over the hill, to the coast, up the coast to that small town, up main to that side street, down the side street, to the last driveway on the right, where the quaint little bed & breakfast is with the blue and lavender country-décor room up the stairs, down the hall,

the last room on the left (with our own bathroom, thank god!) you and i stayed in the first night you slept naked with me. we went to the crab-feed, the art faire, all the boutiques, stopped at a roadside fruit stand for oleberries on the way back. remember how we laughed, you got sunburned on your forearm dangling it out the window, and somehow, i burned both the tops of my feet.

my hands are wrinkled

i look out my window in the back bedroom to see the hills covered with snow. this is california and it's march. this rarely happens this late in the year, just south of san francisco. it's the worst storm i can remember, the worst winter. though i see everything changing, i don't care. what i care about is my wife driving to work with a cup of hot tea in her lap (on top of one of our bath towels, still), and my sister stuck with a needle in her breast for biopsy (thank god it came back negative), the prick-spot thickening, and mother who climbs step-ladders to trim the hedges over her head, when shall she fall? when perish?

my hands are wrinkled, and i am alone in this apartment where no one comes to smoke cigarettes or drink wine coolers or six-packs of budweiser with me. i shut the blinds on them, they shut them back. i don't care. i don't care about neighbors, or the war which whirls out of control in a country i never would've gone to anyway. soldiers come home fatigued, come handicapped back to their cheap homes, their lives and wives and babies. i don't care about them. i don't know them. i live in this apartment. if they lived across the way, i'd shut the blinds on them, they'd shut them back. has it always been this way, our lives so small?

where do we go from here?

i spend the nights driving aimlessly with my brother in his work truck with six-packs of budweisers. in the pullouts up in the hills, i curse and kick rocks, spit in the dust, as we look out to see the lights of the valley tick boastfully with their distances from us. my brother talks about his wife, how he never wanted children, how he dreads the fact he's turned into a terrible father, turned into someone he's never wanted to be.

i know you can see the stars all the way up here, still i don't look. i'm content to get in the truck, flip the radio stations, sometimes getting crackly news, sometimes a ball game. i pop a beer, one for me, one for him. i toss the empty cans back in the brown paper sack at my feet. if i were smoking i'd smoke a cigarette. but i just hope there's enough beer to get us back home, to get us through the evening.

i don't even bother with the newspaper that comes every day. but sometimes i'll flip the front page open and try to read it cover to cover. i get hung up on all the suffering, the demise, the lingerie ads. what does it mean to be alive at this stage of our lives? what does it mean to be alive at all, to live life like it's sunday evening with no place to go, with absolutely nothing in the world to do that matters?

i know the end's far enough away from us to do something differently, but i don't move from myself, i don't step over all of this atrophy piling at my feet like the unread newspapers tossed at my door. my hands fall limp from me, as i search for instruments to stop the bleak gears grinding outside the single-paned windows of my 850 buck-a-month apartment, in this world that awaits our awakening with disguised and anguished need.

nature

i stop trying to outguess nature and let it rain. it rains and now my ears attune to it in the middle of night. it's rattling the windows like it had something to say to me, just to me. i lie in bed and listen, try to understand, but can't get it. i get a smidgen like a plea slipped from a window of a passing bus. it says, *live*, or *love*. i'm consumed by the hard choking of my dear wife's snores. i'm cold

tonight, she's taken the blankets. my naked shoulder greets the night like a tight plum, i think, or a child's fist jamming the air with some threat. i want to wake my wife, shake her to see if she can decipher what what's being said. i come to my senses, remember she's the only one working, the only one making money for us. she needs sleep. 3:15 in the morning, i'm left to fend for myself again.

apartment still life

your freshly washed bras hang from the shower curtain rod in the bathroom, drying. i hear your little noises from the bedroom when you roll over, as i walk into the kitchen to get more coffee. the laundry's folded, separated in piles, in the right basket, socks matched for you, underwear folded for you. i get the sunday paper from the front porch, toss it on the table. i go back to the office (the second bedroom) to write this. it's eight a.m., still, sometimes i hear a car drive by. sometimes, because you are asleep, it's as if the apartment speaks of you.

dead patches of grass

when i was seven i lived in a cul-de-sac apartment complex, next to mexicans who partied late every friday night. once, my father taped their *gritas* on his portable cassette recorder he used in lectures at state university, and played the tape again and again, laughing at their songs.

i remember he was trying to lose weight eating baco-bits, soft-boiled eggs and grapefruit halves mornings he drove the valiant up highway 9 to the supermarket he worked at on weekends and days before class.

the neighbors moved out one night. i remember them backing the u-haul right through the backyard, past the swing set, past the trikes. by dawn, they were gone. i never even knew their names. i remember the empty backyard, the dead patches of grass, the mattress slumped by the garbage, my dad playing that tape, that night, all of us laughing and laughing.

you can't tell me

when the new neighbors moved in, they had a boy the same age as me. i can't remember how we became friends, but we were best friends. ty and me. we went to the planetarium for his tenth birthday party. later, when everyone had gone home, we ate the rest of the neapolitan ice cream and chocolate cake. we watched the dukes of hazard, watched the boys escape in the general lee.

we used to take our action figures to the vacant lot (where a new bank's been built and apartments are now) and make a fort of hunks of concrete and broken pieces of plywood, whatever we found. once we had a dirty piece of carpet for a door. i was always luke skywalker or han solo or obi wan kenobe, which left princess leia, chewbacca, vader, or the jawas. you can bet he wasn't leia.

one time, out in the clumps of that vacant lot, when i'd turned to see a hawk circling above, high in its' gyre, he grabbed luke and han, said *i'm the hero today, i've got the force on my side*. i grabbed at him, grabbed them, *you can't talk right, give them back, you're not white. you can't tell me, i make better light saber sounds than you*

he said *you don't know, you look like yoda and leia put together*. i remember tears glistening on his cheeks, that he didn't wipe them away as he picked up his action figures. i remember his shadow weaved among weeds and the pieces of concrete as he walked through the hot sun, as he walked home from that lot.

in the middle

my father's dying, and in the middle of it, my mother tells me she always expected him to be the type who followed doctor's orders to a "t," and if he were told to exercise, he'd walk even if it meant walking around the block was all he could manage. and diet: eat spinach raw, steamed broccoli, even though as a kid in missouri his mom boiled it every night and made him eat it. she says,

he hated the smell, hated the flowerets stuck in his teeth, hated that mush spreading into his mashed potatoes. he forbade me to cook it as newlyweds, living in chicago, when he worked at the apparel center. i loved broccoli. when we had you kids, i fixed it only when he traveled, days sometimes weeks at a time he'd be gone, we'd be in that big house all alone. do you remember? now i can't even eat broccoli, i can't even stand the smell.

i'm not above sentimentality anymore

if i seem fragile at all in your opinion, i must tell you that i never spent more than three years in any elementary school and mother worked two jobs and rode the public transit to work every day. when she got home, i had to pick up the house and do homework until dinner, which for two full years was frozen pork chops, frozen peas, and instant potatoes she doled out weeks in advance in little sandwich bags, so all she had to do was boil water.

every friday night she would come home and we would clean the bathrooms and dust and vacuum the entire apartment. we'd have a frozen pizza and get to fold out the hid-a-bed and watch tv in our sleeping bags, waking up early to have just-add-water pancakes and boiled-water-and-sugar syrup. we'd watch the bugs bunny and road runner show, and then mother left for the bus back to work. she cleaned houses of people she worked for at the aerospace plant.

i shouldn't ever complain, i know that, and that's what i tell my children though they hate hearing it. it's just that, i was lonely then, and often i am lonely now. of course making a living is a difficult thing to do anytime, it's just, something i don't know what to call disappeared from me in those dim corners of afternoons, and i wish i could go back to the evenings mother walked down our block from the bus stop, and to those saturday mornings leaving with her paper sack lunch of oranges picked from the neighbor's tree, and once, get to hold her hand again.

SOUTHWEST

I went Southwest. – Lew Welch, *I Remain* (187)

hold these moments sacred

it begins storming three days before christmas and headlights swirl through the morning and over the glistening asphalt streets. i should hold these moments sacred, i know: the crow on the streetlamp with feathers furling in the winds and bright as a slicker in the grey day's rain, and the lights blinking from trees inside living rooms and overcoats taken from the coat rack and pulled on in the foyer to run quick to buy presents at the mall. i know i should remember these moments: baking snicker doodle and apricot cookies, and pans of sheet fudge and all-spice cakes and mulling spices burning on the mantle where a presto log's lit, but it's storming outside with vehemence and my brother waits in a chalk green gown

and slippers in the psych ward for us to visit. my father wiggles his left foot, dumb with parkinson's, out the van and thumps through puddles. mother's festive broach twinkles in the dim light as she tries to hide among some watercolor society's sad paintings hung along the long entrance hall of the hospital. a plastic, 12-foot christmas tree with big, empty boxes ostentatiously wrapped, stands in the corner where the automatic door plunges open allowing those sick and in wheelchairs entrance. we turn down a different hall and try not to catch eyes with other families visiting. we huddle holding magazines and cookie tins outside the barred door. we wait to be buzzed in.

she looks out the window and she makes homemade cheese

my wife wears her housecoat because it's saturday morning, the first day of vacation. we've slept in until ten. fresh out of the shower, she smells fruity and pulls on jeans, looks through the clean clothes bin to find her bra, to find her shirt and sweatshirt and socks. i lie on the bed watching, her breasts starting to tighten slightly because of the cold air in our bedroom. it's december.

i pull her close to me and place my head between her breasts and feel her body, still warm from the shower. her arms goose pimple. i cup her bottom, her clean jeans still a bit stiff from the dryer. i kiss her stomach, and she lowers her head, and kisses my head where i am balding. *you're soft right here*, she says.

she goes over to her mother's to make homemade cheese and spinach and pork ravioli's. i wait until two for visiting hours to see my brother in the psyche ward in a town i've never been to. i'll drive with my folks, who'll dress up in slacks and sweaters. this is nothing new for us, and we talk in the car like we're picking him up from the airport. the difference is mother sometimes turns and looks out the window, and when dad and i stop speaking, we hear weeping in the back seat.

everybody smiles

the streetlamp shakes in the wind and i'm tired of everything, the rain, the clinking wind chime, the overcoat and ball cap i wear so my hair doesn't get wet and show i'm balding. in another thirty minutes, visiting hours begin. after two weeks of this, and cleaning his place and doing laundry for whenever he gets released, i'm tired of buying papers, magazines, bags of peanut M&M's. i'm tired of how everybody smiles when we visit.

i wish it was over with. i'm tired of everything. i had to take my vacation so i could make the drive twice a day, once at twelve, then at six. and it's raining. my overcoat's soaked through at the shoulders i notice as i pull it on in the foyer. i find the car keys and put them in my pocket. i put on my ball cap, lock the door. the rain slices at an angle. as i sit in the car and let it warm up. tired of everything, i rummage for change in the ashtray to buy a bag of M&M's.

why the apostles never drank cuba libres

that was the summer i bought prayer beads, a tibetan hand-crafted singing bowl,
and blessed votives of all sizes burned beneath the bleeding heart of jesus christ
of nazareth painting hanging above fistfuls of incense burning throughout the day.

that was the summer i stopped drinking alcohol for three weeks, and fasted twice
in july. the first lasted a whole day into the following morning, but the second lasted
only until the weather forecast of the late night news, when i found a whole bag of

yogurt covered almonds stashed (somehow i'd forgotten) behind the pitcher of
filtered water i kept in the fridge that i filled and refilled that afternoon with squeezes
of fresh limes i ended up cutting in wedges for my rum and cokes later that same night.

it ruined everything

i'm willing to do whatever it takes, you said, and i was willing to, too. but i thought it'd be okay to have a cold beer when i got home from work. it was friday, after all, so i got a six pack at rotten robbies. you were pissed of course, at first, we'd come forty-eight, no, forty-nine days sober so far. soon enough, you joined in. we decided to celebrate a raise you'd gotten three weeks ago. *this will be the last time, then on the wagon*, you made me promise. we drove to the liquor store. then back. then drank. you white wine and 7-up with vodka and lots of ice and lemon. i drank vodka and ice, but occasionally 7-up got mixed in. we were watching some damn celeb show, somebody was having a baby and somebody was getting divorced. i started telling you how the neighbor downstairs, telling you he'd used bleach in the washing machine, how it didn't drain all the way, and it ruined my sweatshirts and pants, it ruined everything.

i was telling you this, but you kept watching tv, you kept watching tv and saying, *no way*. out of the blue, i smacked you once across the face. you'd stood up to grab some saltines and velveeta hunks we'd put on the coffee table for hors de vours. after drinks, we'd planned to grab pasta and wine, cab back for a nightcap, but i caught you off-balance, just as you stepped over the ottoman. i noticed the light from the tv kept changing your face into something horrible, raspberry mark dying your cheek, your head pressed into the spider plant. i walked into the kitchen and took a shot of vodka, swore i'd have to stop this. you got to your hands and knees, stood up. *you fucker*, you said. you walked out the door into what was nighttime, what was a lifetime neither of us ever wanted.

small black spots all over the oatmeal carpet

it's the new year now, so let's examine our lives a moment. you are a little fatter you'd admit. and i'm a little fatter, i'll admit. i couldn't fit into the only slacks i have, so i had to wear ironed jeans for your formal christmas work party at the downtown mariott. i don't want to be specific, but only sometimes our hands find each other under blankets, with the lights out, for anything other than pats on the back. last night, walking to our car, i looked at the stars, wondered how we'd spent this life together. i can't stand the way you sing, as if you know what in the hell you're doing. and how you deal with my halitosis, i'll never know. and the hard spells of inconsistency. i said there would be no more booze, no more young girls, no more smoking dope. then one night you found the front door un-

locked, the wood burning stove door open, the radio blaring. sixteen beer bottles scattered around the apartment. you counted each. kicked one with a cigarette butt and a little warm beer left over which sprayed against the bathroom window and the new set of hand towels. *goddamn it, four bottles in the bathroom.* i was passed out, but i heard you yell that. a week later, when you started talking to me again, i had to admit i had no idea i'd even started a fire, much less left the stove door open. bits of cinders had popped into the living room, burning into the brand new oatmeal carpet, into the seat of the rocking lay-z-boy we bought at penny's on layaway. we bought it to sit and watch the fire on quiet evenings up in the hills, away from the bars, away from the liquor stores, from everything that had got us into trouble before.

i was going back to college for my degree

i didn't want to, but i got a job in the shop, just like my high school summers. after six months, i made it to head mechanic. people started to demand only i work on their cars. my wife said i saved for our own shop. but that was the start of last year. now we're divorced. and i was fired for doing jobs on the side. cash-in-hand, i was taking home two grand a month. i went back drinking after a decade of sobriety. it started out of anger, but i told everybody i was celebrating: that i was going back to college for my degree, that i wanted to date again, that i wanted to fix up the impala out in the garage. i thought i'd take a trip down the coast, take a drive. camp at state parks. stay a night at a hotel. get away.

but i started late, on a friday, traffic was murder. so i pulled into a bar. i had too many cocktails. then shots. i started to talk shit to this dude who bumped me when he went to the john. but people knew him. i could tell i wasn't welcome. so i went to take a piss and ditched the bill out the back door. sped out the parking lot. hauled over the curb and somehow pulled off part of the front bumper. i don't remember how, but i slipped onto a residential street and slept in the cab of my truck. i woke up, started to heave bile out the door. all night the yellow from street lamps smeared my fogged windows. i remember how bad my mouth tasted, how bright the sun was, that it was garbage day, all the trashcans were lined up and down the street. the garbage truck kept coming closer. i palmed around for my keys, put them in the ignition. i started my truck to drive away.

this is the chance i've been waiting for

i haven't packed anything for lunch tomorrow and it's the second day of meetings. i spent seventy-five bucks on groceries, so i could bring my lunch, all the things i like, including yogurt almonds, low-sodium sandwich meats, previously frozen alaskan salmon. today, for lunch, i bought a double whopper with cheese, medium fries, a large chocolate shake. i'm supposed to lose weight since i was diagnosed pre-diabetes. being on disability, i need to save. even though it's early in the program, i'm excited to be around drunks, because only drunks know what it's like to be a drunk. they know what it's like, in the middle of the night, to imagine ice clinking against a scotch glass after lying down in bed, after setting the alarm for six to wake up for coffee before work.

in that frantic stillness, your mouth waters profusely, sweat saturates the sheets. you know you're supposed to stay sober, but your body clenches for that sound. you get up and get dressed to go drink in a dark bar, picking up the keys to the car, putting down the keys to the car, picking up the keys, putting down the keys. wanting to feel the swirl of scotch in the glass and hear the ice clink, but knowing you're supposed to be sober, you put down the keys, take off the clothes, get back in bed. you turn off the lights, swish your palms across fresh sheets to stop their sweating. digging your heels in the mattress, you swear to the silent disquiet hung in the corners of your room, swear to yourself over and over that you can do this, that this is it, this is the chance you've been waiting for.

we're too old to start over

i set the alarm to wake up early and drive the hour to get to your place by eight. i pack a set of clothes in case i have to stay over, have to crash a night or two at your place, but i don't want to. i sleeping bag on your living room floor, and now that i'm older and fatter, i get sore. you'll offer your bed of course, which is a king, but grown men snoring side-by-side is too much for me. i'll grab a book, a tablet of paper, my pens and toiletry kit (i'll grab the newspaper if it's arrived), and drink

a cup of coffee. i'll want to beat traffic, so i'll be out the door by six. it's a lovely drive, coastal oaks and laurels line the entire stretch. i daydream and concoct exotic plans i never follow-through on when i drive to see you. tomorrow's different, since we must get you readmitted to rehab. if they don't accept you (why didn't you come back the fifth day?), you'll lose your job, your benefits. how will you afford your meds? we're

too old to start over, to jump through hoops, but we need to pull out all stops to get you back in. could we have done something different those summer nights we downed beers and kicked dirt clods and watched the world, high in the hills, away from everything, a couple hundred bucks for a week's pay in our pockets, with nothing but the future taking hold each tab we popped from those twelve-packs? what would we have done if we could have seen ourselves tomorrow morning, speeding to some day-patient facility, everything riding on a few words, trying to hustle some HMO shrink whose heard every story before, who doesn't give a damn about you or me or the lives we still have left to live?

PERFECT LIGHT

Most amateur photographers think of landscapes simply as objects to be photographed. They tend to forget that they are never photographing an object, but rather light itself. Where there is no light, they will have no picture; where there is remarkable light, they *may* have a remarkable picture. When the magic hour arrives, my thoughts center on light rather than on the landscape. I search for perfect light, then hunt for something earthbound to match it with.

– Galen Rowell, *Mountain Light* (84)

the walkway beside the holly

what you see here are mistakes: these blue t-shirts and jeans friends donated to dress me, this fat body, this apartment, this beat-up truck i've had a decade. it still gets good gas mileage, but needs paint. i was supposed to be someone else. i should have been a corporate vice-president driving a cadillac. but what can be done about it now? now i try not to step in mud on the walkway beside the holly berry hedge. i tamp my boots against an edge of cobble, swipe them on the turf welcome mat before i come into my ho-hum apartment.

painters whisk their drop clothes and buckets up the stairs into #4. it's just past the first of the month. the neighbors i never knew have moved, i guess. when i opened the blinds, their stuff was gone. i should have been different, should have known where they moved, where i could send mis-mailed mail. so close and all we shared was a wave or two. once or twice talked sports or miserable weather. it's rained for days, even snowed in the hills above this town. it's april, and the nibs of grass haven't yet sprouted from the mud.

why i'll never make it to the big leagues

i should be doing something bigger in life than sitting here in the lay-z-boy. but everything's dull, now that i don't drink, now that i quit my job, now that i live on what little i've saved, what little i get here and there, what little my wife gets paid each month (only once more before the new year). we don't go to movies, but dine out more than we should. sometimes we carelessly leave a dollop of beans in the rosarita vegetarian refried cans we use to stuff burritos, leave half-cut red onions on the cutting board. i know we shouldn't waste

anything, so i pull out plastic bottles and aluminum cans from the trash, and recycle. sometimes, because i haven't exercised, or slept, or cleaned in days, i throw everything away to start fresh. i haven't had a dishwashing machine since i was seventeen. cleaning's a burden, but my friend, dead of cancer at seventy-eight, told me not to waste. i should know better. i should do important things today, like taking a walk

around the block. i need to get my legs in shape. i've been sick three months straight. instead, i write this. i thumb through a book on pollack, listen to music (i think it's coltrane). letters need to be written, and people i had commitments with, i cancelled on at the last minute. i'm the type who sits alone, as sun comes through onto the living room carpet covered with library books, and marvels at the quiet. i don't worry about dining at the right places, or having my picture taken at the ballpark, fitting somehow in the big picture. my whole life, i've given hardly a damn about what people call fame.

we lean on each other

the apartment court will flood in the rain i'm sure of it, it rains so much.
we don't mind though. it's monday evening and you tell me to get undressed,
unbuckle my belt, slip my pants off and take my sweatshirt and t-shirt off. i do.
i kick them to the foot of the bed, but keep my socks on. you wear your black
panties, that's it. i turn on the radio on the clock radio, it's 5:42. at 6:23 you
get up, get a hot washrag, as i sprawl on the sheets. we have to change them, do

laundry for the week. i rub my stomach clean, slip back into my jeans and
sweatshirt and start to peel garlic for our pasta. i get the stove hot and pour port
in the skillet, slide in the diced garlic off the cutting board, add a can of tomato
paste and a can of tap water. i fill the pasta pot and cover with its lid. you come
in the kitchen, put your cold hands on my neck and stand on your tippy toes to
kiss me, happy to have fresh sheets, to wait for dinner, to be home from work.

i know i've faltered in my life

i sit with my cup of coffee next to the window. the cat finally jumps on my lap after watching me awhile. i know i've faltered in my life, i've sinned because sin was not acting justly, but acting from fear and from doubt. i stole my mother's eisenhower silver dollars when i was seven, and lied when i got caught cheating on my driver's test. (and, lord help me, i admit i've smelled underwear not mine and not underwear i was welcomed to smell, and i've done that more than once.)

i'm no saint. but if there is any sense of holiness, it is this, this moment, this quietude in this apartment, in the neighborhood, in the world for a second (because i am selfish i can say this), because i don't care about anything except my family quietly sleeping in their rooms, and my black coffee, my cat warming in the sun, in my lap. i'm no saint, i know, but i love my daughters

more than breathing. if i will be remembered, it will not be that i worked thirty-five years at the supermarket, or bank, or mill. i will be remembered when one of my daughter's husbands gazes upon his kids, my grandchildren, when i am long dead. he will stand in the bright hallway at the door, looking in on their rooms, everyone asleep, all quiet, all tucked in, and he will know an instant of wonder like a new language. and he will think of his parents, of my wife, and he will think of me, and in that new language, he will give thanks.

i take an envelope

early this morning my wife, still asleep a few more hours, rustles.
the cat laps at what's left in his water bowl. it's been years since i wrote
anything down like this, feelings like climbing ivy planted in plastic

inch pots on top of the balcony banister where morning sun shines.
done with worry now, i take the back of an envelope, take the black pen
we took from the marriott in the city we stayed at one christmas we keep
by the phone for messages, and write her a note: *i always miss you.*

still, with the fingernail-less cancer deepening into my father-in-law,
and worry about *blood cell count*, about *lymph nodes*, about *pneumonia*,
there's nothing but worry. what am i going to teach anyone? to care?
how shakespeare's sonnets differ from plutarch's? the world does just fine
without me. still, yesterday my father-in-law calls me from the hospital bed
telephone, and says, *every day's icing, like seeing naples the first time.*
i don't want to do it, he says, *but today i could die a happy man.*

living again with the chance for victory

i'd dropped my wallet, was across the street and around the block with my hand on the door and the key in the lock of my '76 valiant, when a gentleman with eyes wet with importance, or humility, wearing glasses that were thick with magnitude, a man thin in his arms, thin everywhere except just above his beltline - a pudge bulged beneath his blue button down. it was obvious he'd had it for years, but i could only describe him as fit. anyway,

the evening was clear and i heard his voice from behind me, so i turned to face him, turned to him holding my wallet: *say, i think you dropped this*. thinking of it, then thinking better of it, i didn't offer money as a sign of my appreciation. i just shook his hand. it was softened from being old. and though i could feel a tremor, it was a firm grip. i felt his heartbeat in it.

sunshine without a cloud on the horizon

forget that half the world is concrete and half unconquerable ocean (or three quarters of the world suffers). forget that in another ten years you'll be just like your mother or just like your father, hands moving the same way, saying those things you always said you'd never say, looking over a life gone by like a goddamn knife flung into a tree trunk, and *snap!*,

like that, it's just like you never thought it'd be. one minute the whole world opened before you like a good book and you snuggled in clean sheets on a saturday morning to read it with no yard work to do and a cup of coffee (with cream of course), while the sun is shining, and the weather man predicting more and more sunshine for the next, he says, gloriously foreseeable future.

quiet

i walk around the apartment in a sweatshirt and sweater and scarf i steal from my wife's wardrobe that stinks with the perfume her mother buys her every year for christmas. i've always hated it, it's grandma-flowery, and she's too young to wear such smells. but it's cold tonight and we try never to turn the heat on, try to save every way we can, *wear another sweater*, she says. so i am, and stocking cap. i drink coffee, without cream, made from grinds these past four mornings.

i brush my teeth in the bathroom using the last of the rolled tube of crest and warm water. she's in the other room masturbating because i told her i'd come in in a second, but stayed in the office (the second bedroom) to finish writing checks for the bills thirty minutes ago. it's saturday night, no it's sunday morning, 1:16 a.m., everything's quiet. the front door's locked and the lights except for the bathroom are turned off. then i hear her turn over in bed. i wait to make sure she's asleep. i spit in the sink, blood from my gums, wash it down, flip off the light. i quietly get into bed without waking her.

i won't even answer when you call

in the morning i close the blinds because the windows face east, face the sunrise, the school which is a bustle of cars and kids crossing with the crossing guard. it's quiet again at 8:08, classes filled, cars stopped circling and parked, or left for work. normally i'm at work but i've been fired for embezzling. now i read the newspaper, drink coffee, wonder how i came to this point.

i won't even answer the phone when you call (and i know you'll call), you'll leave a message, you'll tell me not to worry about this little hump in our lives. but you are not me, you don't listen to the silences between school bells and the rush of children class to class, on the playground between school bells. but i don't understand this either, the silence and rush, how i came

to this. middle aged and fat. balding. no savings. no pension left. and you want more children. i just hope my insurance lasts one more prescription of xanax. i'm feeling anxious. i can't sleep. i haven't had a bowel movement in two days. it must be 8:15. the little girl's doing announcements, lists the hot plates served in the cafeteria today. she says don't forget school photos this week. she says the pledge of allegiance, *i pledge allegiance...* she ends the daily bulletin. the phone rings.

things themselves of wonder

i collected jars when i was unemployed and didn't have any money for anything except laundry and groceries and rent. what a waste to throw away, to throw out glass containers which could be used for something. i didn't know certainly what i'd use them for, but i'd paid for those jars: salsa, pasta sauce, peanut butter, jellies, relish. i saved anything glass. then i set them in steaming water fifteen minutes, and peeled the dampened paper with an unnamable delight. i scrubbed with a sponge the gum from the label and used a butter knife to jab the sponge in hard-to-reach spots.

i'd rinse with hot water, as hot as i could get it, wearing yellow rubber gloves. then snap them off, grab a dishtowel to dry every spot. i'd lift them to the kitchen lights to behold perfectly clear glass, a specimen saved from the trash. it was as if i'd blown them myself, the excitement i felt as i set them on the window sill. but i never filled them with anything, rocks or seashells or homemade honey, things themselves of wonder. instead, they contained their own beauty, glass jars lined up, filled with nothing else besides light and, more light.

opening the curtains

i ignore pains in my arm and my bleeding gums, my heart racing when i walk up the staircase after taking out the garbage that's been under the sink a week. sometimes i ignore sunshine, ignore the fact i have the curtains closed most of the time, because when they're open, i know the neighbors peer in. it doesn't matter what they see. i go on shaving, saving aluminum cans for cents. every now and then, i scour through the dumpster in case some got slipped in. still, how am i supposed to tell the neighbors about poems i keep in my notebook

which talk about me constantly, hell, constantly talk about them? would they understand? if i told them, sometime bumping into them on the stoop, or lifting a sprite can from the garbage can they'd just tossed in, that nothing and everything in here happened and never happened just the same? that's why i'm always closing the curtains and (perhaps) that's why they're always looking in. but i don't bother with that. i keep writing poems, keep looking through garbage, keep grabbing for something to make sense, keep holding my wife when she's tired or desperate, drawing the curtains closed, opening the curtains, living our lives as best we can.

i didn't know where you were

in those dark nights which were not nights at all, but years, years, how dreadful they were like stones, like nails driven into the pale tenderness of the bottoms of our feet as we sloughed through the world looking for each other.

our first date i pissed behind some gas station dumpster in santa cruz, then you pissed at 15th st. beach in the sand, and we never stopped talking. we went to my place, looked at my star wars action figures. we never kissed. then you left, four in the morning.

now we make fried sausages and pasta on sunday evenings. the kerr jars you canned the tomato sauce in have to be washed, the grease on the stove top and counter top wiped up. i'll sweep, you grind coffee beans for the morning.

sometimes you wake me up with your snoring, and you say sometimes i wake you up with my snoring. it's amazing we get any sleep at all now that we've moved into this apartment. we hear everything, even the neighbor peeing when he gets home at ten.

i didn't know where you were. when i called your cell phone, you were at the post office sending the rent check. i'd forgotten to send it. when you got back your hair was messed up, it was breezy out there. i smelled your papaya shampoo as you hugged me, took your jacket off, started to thaw the chicken in the microwave for our dinner tonight.