

Only Now

POEMS

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For Susan

Prayer While Downshifting

Driving into town just past dusk I see the gas station sign lit up and underneath the brand and the price in big white letters *self-service* as if this is not just a place to buy gas and get chips and beer, but the place where you can take yourself in for your own repairs, making sure to change the soul's oil frequently, checking the timing belt with every 60,000 emotional miles, making sure the air filter isn't clogged with the dirt of the dreamless road because we've got to keep track of these things, for who else will these days, and when we're done we can drive down to the self-storage units at the edge of town, so many selves in those metal-sided buildings. We can open the padlock and rummage through the windowless room, discover who we were, not just the golden highlights but the total incarnation, pacing the concrete floors or sitting on the couch that we don't need anymore listening to our own stories, all the troubles we used to have.

Rocky Coast

First there was the pink granite
molten and buried for 350 million years,

then there was the ice encountering the ledge
dragging rocks and trees over the land

and then the lichen working in the cold, ceaseless wind,
cleaving to the stone, resurrecting the soil by eating away

at the mica and quartz to make a thin layer of earth
that the coast rests on. And then there was the Dunkin' Donuts

built on the ledge in 1989 in Bucksport, Maine, the town where
the paper mill makes clouds and sends them billowing

out into the landscape, the Dunkin' Donuts where
the coffee is always fresh and when you inhale its aroma

it's as if you are starting the day again or starting
your life over. One more chance. This is where I buy

my chocolate sugar donut and drive down Route 15 in the dark,
when I bite down on an earring-back baked into it.

I dream of the million-dollar liability settlement, enough
to do whatever I would want to, and return

to show with horror the small steel post to the young woman
in bright polyester at the counter who offers me a dozen

free donuts, not enough to change my life, but
enough to feed me for a while, and what else

could you need: sugar, fat, and the first bite,
like Eve's, just before she walked out into the fallen world.

Getting There

Where is the place we are always asking about.
It's the country we remember in our dreams.
Where is where we'll find what we need to know

whatever that is, whatever we thought it was
going to be. Suddenly the answer will be there
to which we will say, "Where on earth

did that come from?" and it will have come
from deep inside us, the place we didn't even know existed,
where all the answers are waiting patiently.

We are amazed that an answer so vibrant,
so without pretense, so right, could have existed
inside us, as if this is the job of some organ

within our bodies, to produce things we knew all along
but didn't recognize, like some quiet street or trail
where we are walking and someone is calling out our name,

where we stop to listen and can hear what was there all along:
the water dropping from leaf to leaf, the syncopation
of air and green and small birds that are hidden in the branches

singing the only song they know, over and over and over
and over into the twilight where the world merges
into one color, one shade, and one breath.

The Next World

We throw away so many things, pack them into translucent garbage bags where you can see through to the once beloved objects. The humbling moment is to realize it's all heading to the dumpster, not just my journal and last month's bills, but all of history, and all that will be left is an ember rotating in space.

Don't worry, it will all start over again. This isn't the only world, this is just one try at it. This is the world that had ice and snow, this is the world where the apple blossoms fell to earth, this is the world where the clapboarded churches stood so white against the blue sky, like a remarkable original idea that gets our attention. When this world goes someone will build another one and somewhere at the mom and pop store next to the coffee and non-dairy creamer the angels will be gathered around remembering this one with nostalgia and a bit of sadness, the way we always remember the thing that has passed, the fallen petals, the fallen leaves, the door to the abandoned house partially unhinged and swinging in the wind. In the next world the old letters and bills will fall like snow, white upon white of special deals and eternal promises of love. The next world will wait for the sun to rise for the first time over the hills we haven't named yet. All of the cars will still be asleep and the traffic lights will wait expectantly like kids on the first day of school, before you know all that order doesn't make sense. The traffic lights will wait to turn, wait for the honk of now and the day breaking.

We'll all get started again only this time we'll get it right, this time we'll think with our bodies and our hands, this time we won't write anything down, we will just learn to listen, not only to each other, but to the beat of birds' wings, not only to our own inner whisper, but to everything that's whispering around us. I'm quiet now. I'm ready for the next world, ready for the ice to rumble across the pond, ready to glide over the surface of this new place, where there's no trash

in the gutter yet, no love lost, no discouraging words
and every heart is open for business,
cash only, no checks or credit cards accepted.

Waking

If we didn't imagine our own lives every morning
then the next step wouldn't be possible,
and we wouldn't find ourselves brushing our teeth
or staring out the window.

We don't have to imagine all of the day, just the first
moment as if every morning we are once again
emerging from the birth canal
and entering into the room of our own being.

Here for another day. One day we'll stop imagining
that first moment, stop imagining the road outside,
the light snow falling, the newspaper being shoved
into its tube at the end of the driveway.

Then it will be all over and we will have
slipped somewhere else. What will we imagine then?

The shadows of trees, the hunger for another day?

Perhaps someone will imagine us, imagine we are possible
and we will rise again and start doing things in the world,
only no one else will hear us, like yesterday
during a conference call when I was trying to talk

but my mute button was on—the conversation is going on
without me, even though I think that I have

something to say. We always think we've got something to say,
something that can add to the dialogue, but maybe we don't.

Maybe there is no dialogue, only each of us imagining our lives
or each other's lives. Some mornings you don't imagine

yourself right away. It takes a few heartbeats

and a few breaths like an old car starting in winter,
the cranks and groans of the engine before ignition.

In that gap we can see everything. We can see the world
before we were in it, when it was all clouds and endless sky,

when it was shadows. It's the shadows that let you know
that there is something behind all this, the shadows

that describe the life of the solid objects that the light
can't pass through. We've awoken in a planet full of life.

We are breathing in this body, this collection of cells

so specialized as to make the world appear before our eyes again,
to have the blood circulate through our veins and arteries

like the rivers of a great undiscovered country,
the day just beginning, the day breaking as it always does,
whether we expect it to or not.