

**Something an Atheist
Might Bring Up
at a Cocktail Party**

Charles Rafferty

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Contents

The Man With a Moth on the Inside Coming Out	3
The City and the Country	4
What We Learned From Our Dead Parakeet	5
Introduction	6
A 26-Word Explanation	7
Stained Glass	8
Shadow	9
Stars Above the Desert	10
Bittersweet	11
The Knife Thrower's Assistant	12
The Contortionist	13
Divorce	14
A Man Remembers Not Swimming in the Pacific Ocean	15
Supposition	16
On Poetry	18
The Man Painting the Inside	19
What Came Over on the Mayflower?	20
Nevada	21
Border Fence	22
The Fifty-First State	23
Something an Atheist Might Bring Up at a Cocktail Party	24
Backyard	25
Three Takes on Spring	26
Persistence	27
After Seeing on Google Earth That a Woods Containing the Last Hive of Wild Honeybees I'd Ever Seen Has Become a Chicken Processing Plant	28
The Man Puts His Thoughts in Order After Visiting the Barringer Crater	29
Star	30
Noah	31
Pharaoh	32
Jesus's Brother	33
About the Author	35

For Wendy, Callan, and Chatham

The Man With a Moth on the Inside Coming Out

The radiance of stars
is perfect
for looking inward

at that which has
always been
waiting, like a moth

that cannot fly except
in a light
like this. It stutters

up my throat. It holds
onto my lip
with legs as fine

as pins. I want to
knock it off,
to spit. The sky

has never been more
ready. And then
a batting at the air,

a relief
to learn it flies.
I mark

its progress by the way
it darkens
one star at a time.

The City and the Country

The city won't stop. Even
at 3 a.m. someone is desperate

for a drink or a girl or the smoke
of their own destruction

deeply held. The moon does not pause
for them. It wants to get away

from their kicking, their rattling
of the door inside its frame. A cab rolls by

like a slow marble. Antennas blink
on the tops of the tallest buildings.

The pleading comes next.
It is the sound of one dish

after another being broken
in the kitchen of a neighbor

whose eyes you will avoid the next day
in the building's mailroom.

The country is no better.
A possum's in the attic, and roots

crack into the basement walls.
She won't open this door either.

What We Learned From Our Dead Parakeet

We repositioned his cage
according to the sun. There was
a parking lot in one window,
a grove of maples
in the other. The parakeet sang
to both of these views
as if they might sing back.
Sometimes they did. He learned
to imitate the chirping
of our neighbor's car alarm.
The purple finches called from the feeder
as if they were his brothers.
That bird was a lesson in how
to live: Eat what you are
given, shit when you have to,
sing for the world beyond your reach.

Introduction

There is something
at my center — a thing I have
protected all my life

the way a boy hides
a bruise from whoever gave it.
To find it you must

flake me away
like an onion — first the brittle
and papery skin,

then all those layers —
white as a tooth or a toppling wave —
tightening down

and down. If you do it
right, your hands will not grow
rancid, your eyes

will not be stung.
But all you have to dismantle me
are the clumsy knives

of your otherwise
lovely fingers. We'll both be weeping
as you near my core,

and you must be prepared
to taste it, to tell me,
finally, what it is you've found.

A 26-Word Explanation

A boy can dream
exotic: fireflies, girls,
hummingbirds in January,
kayaks, lionized men,
nooses of passion,
quarks. Repeatedly
something turns up
vandalized. Walls,
x-rays. Yawning zeros.

Stained Glass

She broke
the stained-glass window
I was hiding

in my pocket, leaving me
only knives.
They are all blade —

some so tiny
they slip even deeper
as I finger them

out of my chest. But when
I get one,
I hoard it to the sun

for that shard
of holy color, for the piece
that proves we're done.

Shadow

Darkness that is me,
recognizable
only in profile, you

try on surfaces
and all of them fit — even
other people,

even the creek
as it rushes
to get away. You need

only light
to leap into being:
a cigarette match,

the bare bulb
of an interrogation room.
Even a camera

flash confirms you.
They all contrive
the same

darkness, the same
mystery
we cast and carry

like a suitcase
we can't put down
or even open

to tell what we have
taken with us —
without effort

or choice —
into the night
that swallows us.

Stars Above the Desert

I have always wanted to swim
in the Great Salt Lake
to see if it will make good on its promise
to buoy me better than Erie or Superior,
the ragged churn of the Atlantic,
the soundless and tea-colored Mullica.
The taste of it, too, must be
astonishing — the whole thing distilling
in the desert down to pure sensation.
That's how I imagine all deserts —
everything refined, deliberate
among the red rock cliffs
and boulder fields: a patch of wild
wheat, a cactus blooming
beneath the serious moon and waiting
for the beetle legs, the moth tongues
that will carry the species forward
to blossom again beside these rocks —
the stars almost exactly the same,
the daughter my daughter has yet to imagine
inhaling what scent there is.

Bittersweet

The vine my daughter
rides is dead.
Out she pendulums

above the dirt
that stains and catches
what comes

its way. The vine has not
let go of the crown
it once had

climbed toward. It divides
up there like a river
at its source

until my daughter
is held aloft
by seasonal creeks

and runoff,
the sky itself,
the letting go.

The Knife Thrower's Assistant

It calms him to see something
beautiful refusing
to flinch. The knives thunk

into the wood beside my cheek,
between my thighs,
wherever he needs to make

that noise. True, he nicked me
once — in the triceps —
but even then I didn't move.

The smile stayed bright
upon my lips. Love
is the reason for the red

cat suit and spangles. Yes,
they hide the blood,
but they also make me look

like wine, reminding him
of how he'll feel when
he tips me up for the last of it.

The Contortionist

One day she was scratching her back
with her own left foot and somebody
commented. That was the start of it.
The spandex and spangles followed,
the boyfriends who amazed themselves
against her pliancy. And always
the show-stopping smile, the sense
that someone should be filming this,
the sense that when she righted herself
and walked out of the bedroom or the circus tent
she was just like you or me — a little bit happy,
a little bit used. It became a game.
Was there an angle or a shape
she wouldn't attempt? As far as she was
concerned, the Kama Sutra
might as well be the hokeypokey.
But the men were never her match.
They were just counterweight
and fumbling — an inability to endure
the pleasures that bloomed around her
like black-eyed Susans on a summer hillside,
undiminished by the local flower arranger
who takes his pick each morning.

Divorce

I feel like a box
of love letters
that has been
through a basement
flood — blurred
ink and mildew,
pages that tear
as you turn them.
Don't even try
to pick me up
for I can only fall
apart in your hands,
leaving you
an emptiness,
a wetness,
a grime
to wipe away.