

*Ode to Dogs*

I am tired of hearing about dogs  
used as metaphors for the uncivilized.  
Imagine a world in which humans

possessed at least twenty times  
as many olfactory receptors,  
able to distinguish the tang of cancer

rising musk-like from the bedsheets  
next to a smoldering ash tray,  
able to detect that one drop of blood

in every five quarts of water,  
to know what you did last night  
no matter how many times

you soap-scrubbed the evidence.  
It does not take savagery  
but more love than we can muster

to lick the hand you've sniffed,  
to love despite the perfume of sins  
we wear each day like a halo.

## ***Real Courage***

I think I could be very brave  
under the right circumstances. For instance  
if I were in the middle of lifting weights  
shirtless in front of a mirror  
and the Wolfman broke in, conveniently  
just as I was pausing to admire  
my silver-plated crossbow set; or else  
if I happened to stroll onto the roof  
of a clock-tower about the time a glass-jawed sniper  
was fumbling with a jammed rifle,  
or a shipload of hostile aliens  
or a van filled with terrorists and nail-bombs  
stalled in the middle of an oil field  
while I palmed my cigarette lighter, then,  
*then* I could be every bit as brave  
as the indestructible Achilles. I would pose  
for sculptors, glossy movie posters, a fan club  
full of pipe-smoking intellectuals, silky-  
tongued critics and well-breasted gymnasts  
hanging on my every word and deed.

But in the real world, vampires only attack  
while you're sitting on the toilet  
or trying on your mother's high heels;  
muggers only leap from the rosebushes  
when you're ducking out of a cheap motel  
or leaving Family Video with armloads  
of porn. And if the State wants you dead,  
if they send a death-squad of cyborgs  
or a serial killer marks you in the parking lot,  
it will happen when you're constipated.  
You'll not have bathed or shaved yet,  
paramedics will note your frayed underpants,  
an absent testicle, the acne your face wore  
as you piled into a car full of burger wrappers  
and the day-old remnants of diet shakes,  
unconcerned with collapsing elevators  
or damsels on runaway horses, derailed trains  
and earthbound asteroids, unprepared  
to meet your maker but willing to finish  
without fanfare, getting by as best you can.

## *Grief Song*

I poured my mother's ashes like gravy  
on a nest of wildflowers. The sky

was bright and cold today, winds  
thoughtless as my blood still  
pumping. This is not the first time.

I've decided by now that if ever there was  
something fine inside me, it is broken now.

If ever I carried something—a vase,  
say, or a delicate glass bird—it has shattered  
long before this. I have enough:

a long dark funeral coat, strong fingers  
and a knife for slicing open the bag

of well-enriched soot. There are prayers  
but they stick in the throat. Useless, bent—  
if there was hope, its need has passed.

We are as it is, ragged as wolves  
in the common daylight. Aware

of the weight of each breath, measuring  
whether the heart should follow.  
If there is salvation, I do not want it.

If there was water, it has frozen.  
If there was memory, something ancient

and ancestral as the curl of fins,  
if we stirred in the deep, it is finished.  
We are houses propped by grief.

If there is God, keep him away—  
do not relieve me of anything.

## ***Hollywood Jack***

I am tired of men named Jack  
locking swords with pirates, falling in love  
on the decks of sea-faring death-traps,  
traveling to parallel worlds  
to challenge exiled Egyptian gods.

Always the same story—Jack  
must come out of retirement to perform  
spinal surgery on a crying child,  
then lead a manhunt after stolen nukes  
before acknowledging his feelings

for a fellow rancher whose hat  
perfectly matches the color of his horse.  
You've seen Jack many times  
since he axed that giant beanstalk—  
he has the best one-liners,

earns hegemony over desert islands,  
wrestles angels by the throat  
then saves brunettes from runaway trains.  
He is the one who gets *too involved*.  
He is the skeleton who loves Christmas.

He is the coiled jester inside boxes.  
Sometimes, he inspires strangers to dance,  
steal, lift things, masturbate.  
That show-hoarding verb of a man  
who goes through sidekicks like syllables.

See what he's done to pumpkins,  
forests, how he's infiltrated every deck  
of playing cards—bowing still  
to the hoity king and queen, sometimes  
the ace, but it's only a matter of time.

*On the Occasion of Two Poets Committing Suicide in the Same Month*

Staying alive is what hurts.  
Not the moment when the heart  
stutters, but afterwards,  
when the body tries to shove itself  
along like nothing happened.  
Not the punch, the crash,  
the bullet, but our wild response—  
blood rerouted, adrenaline  
flooding abruptly lacerated tissues.  
All not to soothe, of course,  
but to make you mad. To keep you  
going. This is what hurts.  
Walking with shrapnel  
from a Ford Pinto  
or a smart bomb in your leg.  
Walking without a leg.  
Same can be said about loss—  
not the moment when  
someone you cherish goes extinct,  
but that moment  
when you tighten your gut  
and go to the grocery store without them.  
When you drive by the bar  
where you told your deepest secrets  
to someone you trusted  
not to leave. Least of all like that.