

THE MOON EXACTLY HOW IT IS TONIGHT

When Mount Everest was measured in 1856
it was discovered to be 29,000 feet exactly.
But since no one would have believed the figure,

sounding as it does too close to something
rounded off, two extra feet were found,
invented out of thin air, the thinnest on earth,

and added to the mountain's top
to provide the appearance of precision.
Twenty-nine thousand and two.

So too, tonight, a cloud has passed
before the moon in such a way
that were I able to describe it

exactly how it is, no one would believe me.
Which is why I need two extra feet of moonlight,
or dark cloud, or to be fair, one foot of each.

ARS POETICA

*To circumscribe poetry by a definition will
only show the narrowness of the definer.*

—Samuel Johnson

Anyone who thinks he knows poetry's definition
certainly *doesn't* know it.

'Cause the truth is there are as many definitions
as there are people who call themselves poets.

It's what off' was thought but ne'er so well expressed;
the best words in the order that's also best;
A prayer to the otherwise unprayable.
That which is left when all else has ended;
the celebration of things only vaguely apprehended:
the art of saying the unsayable.

It's a human expression of life's beautifully complex and
deadly futility.
Or the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings
recollected in times of tranquility.

That was Wordsworth, and for what it's worth
he came close to explaining what words can be worth.
Which is to say, you could do worse.
You test it on the pulse. It's jazz, the devil's wine, with
extra sizzle.

All poetry is man's rebellion against being what he izzle.
For shizzle. It's the rhythmical creation of beauty in words.
What ideas would be if they didn't fly like birds.

A kind of literary mirror, a way to make things clearer.
Poetry is both the substance abused as well as the key to recovery.
A poem itself is therefore a kind of literate act of discovery.

I'm not saying I understand it. It's a mystery.
Plato was right when he said poetry is nearer vital truth
 than history.
That's Truth with a capital T. Not the facts, but the Truth
 as you know it.
That's one of the most appealing aspects there is to being a poet.
You can rewrite history to make yourself sound smarter
 than you actually are.
Recast the night sky of your own life to constellate
 yourself as a star.

We are the small gods of our own poems. We fix what
 cannot otherwise be fixed.
We are what is lost in translation, the clear explanation of
 feelings that are mixed.
Just as life would be a tragedy if it weren't so goddamn comical.
Poetry is a lot like prose but somehow more economical.

THE EGYPTIAN DEATH POSITION

Rarely at night was falling asleep
ever a problem for me, but still,
nights when the next day was bigger than usual,
I lay in the valley of my horsehair mattress,
listening to the traffic on Park Avenue
and began a strange ritual.

On my back I straightened myself out completely,
head cocked needed uncocking, hips unshifted,
unakimboed elbows, knees unbent, and fingers.
Nothing touched nothing, and I worked
at total stillness until it seemed that even breathing
required more effort than I wanted to spend.
I didn't try to die, but if I could have
stopped my heart I might have tried.

It was The Egyptian Death Position,
even though I never said the words
out loud, even to myself, until now.
I lay there unmoving and thought of nothing:
not the cars, my brother sleeping in the next bed over,
my parents in the next room loving each other,
my sisters away at boarding school,
Elma dreaming of Jamaica in the maid's room,
the red front door, our dog, the red rug
in the giant playroom where I kissed the lips

of the woman I would marry twenty-five years later. Didn't think about sex, or even girls—their hair, and their lips, their beautiful eyes, and the mystery of what they don't have—ancient history, the pyramids, the pharaohs, the mummy I was imitating, even the Temple of Dendur recently brought over from Egypt block by block and reassembled in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in a special wing of mostly glass so that even at night you could see it with the lights on inside.

I lay in my bed like that, like the stones of a temple, heavy resting stones so far away from their home.

READING ALLOWED

Maybe I met her in a restaurant.
Maybe I met her in a bar.
Maybe I saw her while stopped at a stoplight
driving down the street in my car.
And maybe it started out great,
like it does with every woman I've dated.
Amazingly passionate amorous love-making totally caffeinated.
But no matter how varied our sex life,
eventually when we're in bed
women always ask me to do the same thing
and it's starting to mess with my head.

I feel I'm being used, maybe even abused.
I am trapped, and she is my captor.
She'll be naked, on her back, and she'll give me a look
and say, I want you...to read another chapter!

Women always want me to read to them.
They demand it. I have no choice
but to spread wide the pages of the book on the night stand
and get busy giving good voice.
Because once upon a time we grew up on stories
and the voices in which they were told.
We need words to hold us, and the world to behold us
for us to truly know our souls.

So I read them *The Chronicles of Narnia*
and *The Education of Little Tree*,
and they close their eyes and listen, as I did
when these stories were read to me.
All of my siblings and all of our friends
(sometimes it was quite a crowd)
would gather and listen to my mom or dad
as they began to read aloud.

A different voice for every princess.
Every knight and all the dragons.
When my mom read Tolkien you could tell the difference
between Frodo and Bilbo Baggins.

We spent so much time reading out loud
on long drives or nestled in reading nooks.
Much of the man I am today was influenced by all the
good books
that my mother and father read to me when I was no more
than a child.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, and I know *The Call of the Wild*.
Charlotte's Web, *Watership Down*, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*,
The Diary of Anne Frank, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and *The King Must Die*.

Read to your children all the time:
novels and nursery rhymes, autobiographies,
even the newspaper. It doesn't matter, it's quality time.
Because once upon a time we grew up on stories
and the voices in which they were told.
We need words to hold us, and the world to behold us
for us to truly know our souls.