

THE ACTUAL
WORLD

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Black
Lawrence
Press

for Charlie and Harper

Contents

I

At the Orchard	5
New England Sand & Gravel Co.	6
Sudden Death in Middle Age	7
New Year's Day	8
On Turning Two	9
What Jack Next Door Remembers about Vietnam	10
After the Fourth	11
Waking on Vacation without Alarm	12
Genre	13
The Actual World	14
Kindness	15
Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo	16
September	17
Cleaning House	18
Having Forgotten to Put out Fresh Towels, I Run Naked and Wet to the Bedroom	19
Dusk	20
Lines in Early Autumn	21
At a Loss	22
At Thirty-Seven, I Hear the Cry of a Great Horned Owl for the First Time	23
In the Country	24

II

Locker Room	27
Catharsis	28
Discipline	29
Early Morning in Late Summer	30
On the Dock	31
I Was Having a Wonderful Dream	32
Moon Poem	33
Calling for Intermittent Storms	34
A Dream of Departure	35
Paper Mill in Winter	36
Self-Portrait: The Poet at Nine	37
April Foolishness	38
After the Storm	39
Christmas Morning, after Illness	40
My Father at Seventy	41
L'Arabesque	42
[December snow.]	43
Beatitude	44
I Looked up to See	45
Picnic	46
Between Poems	47

III

Still Life	51
Morning Commute	52
The Retreat	53
The Reminder	54
Morning Commute	55

The Book	56
The Engine Has Stalled	57
Memory	58
He Must Be Tired	59
Visiting a Friend Who Was Given Six Months to Live Eleven Years Ago	60
Wading out to Tarp the Boat on My Fortieth Birthday	61
Thanksgiving	62
Directive	63
Swimming Alone in Broad Bay	64
Matrimony	65
Weekend Away	66
The Last Time I Cried	67
Early Morning, Spring	68
Then	69
Acknowledgments	71

My ambition is truly limited to a few clods of earth,
some sprouting wheat.

—Vincent van Gogh

‘I’m dime a dozen and so are you!’

—Arthur Miller

At the Orchard

We sit beneath a giant maple
watching pirouettes of yellow
gust upwards, each leaf
an illumined skin
stretched across a pliable spine.

My son spins an apple between his hands,
bites it like a buck-toothed animal.
Mouth full, cheeks juice-streaked
he laughs at the pig
wallowing in its mud pit.

Distantly I hear
the dull crunch of gravel
and I am a boy again
running down a dark road,
the sky full of stars
as if blown from an open palm.

When my father found me
at the edge of the reservoir
and shook my shoulders, angry and afraid,
I didn't know where
I was going. I didn't know why.

New England Sand & Gravel Co.

From beneath the stiff brim of an Irish flat cap
my neighbor hawks and spits
with the power of a pneumatic rifle.

The day we moved here
I waved to him. This morning
I smile. In black paint on a white board

the sign up the road says,
“We sell what we sell.”

Sudden Death in Middle Age

When I heard that he'd had a heart attack
on a flight from Boston to Detroit
I went out to water the pots of sage
that flourish with little attention
on our west-facing stoop.

Straining to hear the water
seep through the soil, I saw an ant colony
migrating in multiple files
across the sidewalk.

On my hands and knees
what had looked like an organized march
was a frenzied mob of thousands
trampling one another
as if trapped inside a stadium riot—

the way that painting by Seurat
looks like a sunny day in the park,
crowds of people lounging
on the banks of a blue river,

but stand too close
and the images divide
into distinct dots of color
that dizzy the head and nauseate.

New Year's Day

All afternoon the snow has been falling
in flakes the size of silver dollars,
falling so slowly I can see
the crystalized patterns
of their intricate symmetry.

It piles on the shed roof
and against the chain-link,
windshield wipers like arms
shot up in surrender.

When it thins to a flurry
I will pull on my boots
as will we all on this block,
emerging like extras in the opening number
to heave and toss in rhythm.

On Turning Two

My son lowers his eyes
from the eagle hovering above us,
its wings fully spread
as if pinned to the azure sky—

jams his hand
the length of his arm
into the damp black spaces
between the jetty rocks.

What Jack Next Door Remembers about Vietnam

The explosion of the girl's nose.
The cracking orbital bones. Her spit
hitting a gold metal button on his uniform.
The pyramid of Wonder Bread on display,
the shine in her hair like a brushed mare's mane.
"Forgetting to buy the plates my dad
had forgotten for the party," he says,
and lifts a can of Natural Light
to kernels of boiled corn lodged in his gums.

After the Fourth

From the western shore
comes the annunciatory tremolo
of the common loon.

Then: no sounds

but the splash of bodies in the distant darkness
and the crescendo of a mosquito's
beating wings.

Waking on Vacation without Alarm

The kitchen
lit by the stove clock
a dungeon's
dank green,

I rub my spine
against the chair's
ladder back.

The hilltops
blush.

Genre

I did once write a love poem.
In it, a man sat on a park bench
so enraptured by the woman he loved
he didn't care about the sudden torrent of rain,
the mud spattering his new leather shoes.

I sent the poem in a letter,
then another letter
to confirm receipt of the first.
Finally, an envelope
sliced my mailbox in two.

And today, after a marriage,
the birth of a child, the deaths
of two dogs, the purchase of a house
and a second-hand couch,
its cushions sunk
from too many evenings of TV,
I heard she got divorced.

The Actual World

for Jane Kenyon

On the oiled grate of the kettle grill
the sausages split their skins, spurt
and hiss upon the coals.

I take a sip from my glass:
a mash of juniper and lemon,
angelica, coriander,
and grains of paradise

distilled with a neutral spirit
and poured with tonic
over ice.

Kindness

There it was, on Congress Street today,
a body limp and twisted
by a fender's curled metal.

Someone shouted, "Listen,"
and we heard a gurgling in the boy's throat,
we saw him raise a hand.

A man rocked the boy to his chest
despite the known command
to leave the injured where they lie

and pressed his ear to the boy's lips.
"I don't know it," the man said,
"I don't know the song."

A woman cradled the boy's face,
blood spitting into her eyes,
and began to sing a song

for which I knew the melody
but was feeling for the words,
my mouth moving in shapes

as the sirens drew nearer
and the drilling of a jackhammer
resumed.

Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo

It was snowing on the lake.

I could not tell
where land ended,
where water began

and the line of the horizon seemed like
a smudged erasure
of pencil.