

**The Unemployed Man
Who Became A Tree**

poems

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Once again, for Celia

“Anything for the quiet life.”

Seamus Heaney

“You few who understand know when death is
near the food you give your soul must be supreme.”

Semonides

“Time will not be ours forever;
He at length our good will sever.
Spend not then his gifts in vain,
Suns that set may rise again.”

Ben Johnson

I. Street Music

Insomnia

You can never see the moon
that should be hanging over
Fourth Street and since you know
all about compromise you settle
for yellow circles from traffic
lights that slide across
the bedroom wall.

Most nights are like this—
not being able to sleep.
If you doze it's usually too
late to dream so you sweat
and don't even bother to turn
on the fan since like everything
else lately, it only blows.

When the walls begin to talk
or mumble it's usually a tv
in the next apartment and
for some reason you are back
in your parents' living room
watching their old black and white
RCA, everyone on the screen
the color of priests and nuns.

Your mother is on the couch,
her belly big as a basketball
filled with your sister. And now
your sister with kids
of her own and a son who
is already the age of a good
bottle of scotch. You love him,
he loves the Knicks, but what matters
most is his sweet outside shot.

Every woman you ever dated
must have all gotten together
and taken the early morning express
bus into the city. There's no other
way to explain the chill
in the breeze that just came
through the window.

And when you hear a cop car
hit some potholes then watch
its red light, the color of the sore
throat you just got rid of, speed
across the ceiling, it makes you
realize how lonely you are.
As the siren fades you almost
wish it would come back, loud
enough this time so you could turn over
on your side, put your arm
around it and fall asleep.

Milk

On a warm night in upstate
New York during the summer
of 1948, Charlie Parker got out
of a brand new Pontiac, the bass
player from his quintet was behind
the wheel. Clubs along 57th Street
were an hour behind them. Parker
had grabbed the case with his sax
in it from the back seat and walked
out onto a field. He was off drugs,
clean for at least six months
but knew he'd never be clean
as the air he breathed.

A herd of cows watched him walk
in front of them, place the case
on the grass, open it and take out
a bent piece of sky the color of dawn.
Then he blew on it as his fingers
like a flock of small dark birds flew
up and down. The cows listened, stopped
chewing but couldn't prevent their tails
from swinging like the Basie rhythm
section. Sounds they never heard
came out of a hole in the sky.
Then it stopped. He placed it back
in the box and walked away. Within
hours the green grass they began
chewing again turned the milk in
their bellies white.

Looking for Work

I'd been out of work for a month
and knew it was time to get going
on my job search. So I got out
of bed, gazed out the window, looked
for a job, saw nothing that interested
me, crawled under the covers again
and fell back to sleep.

An hour later, I got up, brewed
coffee, made it strong, the color
of wet road, then traveled a mile
with my throat until the pot was empty.

I didn't go out at all the day
before but knew everything worth
missing was just outside my door
in the paper. Even with Monday
folded over with a crease through
noon, fifty cents seemed too
expensive for a day I basically
slept through.

The lead story reported a man
was shot just a few blocks
away, and though I hate guns,
I rifled through the rest of the paper,
tossed it on the floor then went
over to the refrigerator, even though
I don't believe in miracles and opened
it. None was going to take place on
that day either: no food appeared
just an old piece of steak I cooked once,
that looked raw as last December.

With the temperature reaching
for 90° again and knowing
it shouldn't reach for anything
beyond its grasp, I decided to get
dressed and walk over to St. James.
It's a Catholic church but since
the saints inside are still concrete,
I like to go in on weekdays where
it's cool, dark and empty. The strange
part is it feels like home. I've decided
it's the candles who look like my
relatives. Irish. Each flame a jig,
lit up on Guinness instead of matches.

The Corner

I stand on the corner
in the middle of a heat wave,
dressed in a white linen shirt
and pants with creases so sharp
I cut my finger putting them on.
It has been in the 90s all week
but it's clear to anyone who looks
my way where the coolest spot
in the city is today.

A red '56 Buick slides by
with the kind of curves
a man can only fantasize about
and makes any woman who looks
turn green. When a friend
of my father's walks by, stops
to say she heard he died
and was sorry for my loss,
there was no way to tell
her it was a profit, or running
every day for a month and
dropping ten pounds was
the real loss.

After she leaves, my brother
who lives around the block
walks by. We pretend
not to see each other since
we haven't spoken in over
a year. Even if I add a few
extra miles jogging, I'll never
be able to cover the distance
between us.

As I look over my shoulder
to see if he is gone, I catch
my reflection in the window
of the store I'm standing
in front of. Lights from the sign
above it and from the deli
next door melt across my face,
making me look like a Sioux
warrior on my way to Custer.
I like the look, then take
a cigar from my pocket, and
light it on the next hot breeze
that passes by, just to make sure
another hour will go up in smoke.

Promises

I'm standing at the corner
of Seventy-Second and York.
My niece who is eight and already
beautiful holds my hand. I warn
her again not to trust lights or cars
that fly by like summer.
She looks up and tells me not
to worry. She knows. But how
could she know I already worry
about the first guy who falls
in love with her. The kind of guy
who promises her the world, when
he can't even deliver Brooklyn.
Or the first guy she falls for, the one
who at night wants to take the lights
from buildings along Park and tie
them into a bracelet around her wrist
then slides the brightest light
from a penthouse on to her finger.
Before I can lean over to tell her
that the sparkle will go out as soon
as the sun comes up, she
points to the walk sign and says
we can go. Instead I remind her
to make sure the traffic light is red
and strong enough to stop
all the cars it should. As we
cross, a woman passes us
with a dog the color of smog.
My niece asks if I can get her
a puppy just like it. She's not allowed
to have pets yet but I find myself
promising to buy her a dog
that's even bigger, smarter
and with extra fur,
if she wants.

The Distance Between Fog and Times Square

After I moved into my first
apartment, every time the phone
rang I expected it to be
the voice of a woman sounding
like slow approaching fog
or a thousand Playboy
magazines. For months
I slept alone under an old
skylight on the top floor
of a five flight walk up.
Every time it stormed
raindrops hitting the glass
sounded like a typewriter
working on another story
until there was a sixth floor.
I soon learned what was real
in the city and what was fake.
The ten-inch statue in a shop
window along Times Square
could never be the Statue of Liberty
but did turn out to be the next woman
holding up her arm to hail a cab.