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A house squared

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Iowa State University

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A house squared

by

James Graeme Francis

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Major: English (Creative Writing)
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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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A House Squared

I.

I have built
a house,

a double-size
home with distant

echoing ceilings. I
can't reach

the shower head
to adjust it.

I can't
reach anything,

light switches,
thermostat, windows.

My wife and
I avoid

each room's
outer edges.

We sit in
the middle,

in carpet
so thick

a person can
lose pencils, keys

and change
forever. We

have to, the heating
grates are

so—I
guess I should

make this more
clear.
II.

What I mean

is a house
squared,

a house times
a house, not

a double-size
house. A

house that
multiplied itself

by the power
of itself. It's

really a
huge

house. Thus--

the grates
for the central

heating are
dangerous, enormous.

Our furniture
is completely

inadequate in
this house I

built. Try
finding paintings

or any artwork
that doesn’t

get swallowed
up on walls

that size. We
couldn’t.
III.

So we commissioned hundreds of muralists to cover the walls. The Master Bedroom recounts the entire saga of Shakespeare's history plays, both tetralogies arranged so you can follow the storyline straight through. I find it endlessly fascinating. Though it is odd, in bed, looking up to see Richard II's enormous face. We had the living and dining rooms done with scenes from the great revolutions in non-Anglo cultures, a well-intentioned effort, I think, but finally a bit depressing.
and, as my wife’s
mother said,
perhaps needlessly
bloody for
the most often-
used rooms
in the house.
If you sit in
the middle
of the room the patterns
become a bit
fuzzy and the effect
is not unlike
a dark Victorian
wallpaper
pattern.
It’s not a
disaster.

IV.
The amazing
thing
is that the plans
for the whole
thing—the house,
I mean, though
I suppose it
applies equally
for the mural—
anyway the house
plans, the
sketches,
they look perfectly
normal, like plans
for a normal-sized home. Until you check the scale.

V.

In a house squared, there's room for all your books. Closets are offices. Hallways are meeting rooms. A sink is a bath, and a bath a pool. A chandelier is the sun. So what would happen if the sun never set? At our house, we know.
The Real Story

It's what happens when the actor stands up, unexpected in the middle of a scene, with no regard for blocking. Maybe he sees something through a window, a cloud that was never there before, and the others scramble to admire it with him, or scorn him for it, or use the distraction to exchange glances or sip from a flask. Someone moves to the left side, another moves to the right, puts a hand on the chair's back.

Or maybe he's compelled to move to her, the young woman at the bookcase. She might just be the maid, she might be due to exit, but tonight he touches her arm and the actors move or glance or gasp or sneer or sneak another drink, knowing they have only a momentary answer, hiding in their mannerisms, considering what they can do. Because he's holding her arm, and it's never happened before, and anything can happen now, everybody's improvising.
Squinting

When I look in your eyes I see James Joyce’s eyes.  
I see the picture I have of James Joyce’s eyes in your eyes.  
I see the picture I have in my mind of the picture I have of James Joyce’s eyes in your eyes.

When I close my eyes, I see something familiar in your eyes.  
When I close my eyes, I see the something familiar in your eyes that I see with my eyes open.  
When I close my eyes, I see your eyes lightly reflecting my picture of James Joyce.

I wonder about James Joyce.  
When I skate, I like to think about James Joyce’s eyes.  
I like to think of James Joyce falling on the ice.  
I see Jimmy Stewart’s eyes in James Joyce’s eyes.

When I sit with you, I hold your eyes in my lap so they don’t go rolling away.  
When I sit with your eyes in my lap, I keep a look-out for James Joyce’s eyes.  
When I sit with James Joyce’s eyes in my lap, I put your eyes in my pocket so James Joyce doesn’t stare at you.

I know what that can be like.

Picture the scene:  
James Joyce spots you on the ice.  
Lily Briscoe crawls from a pocket on his side.  
Caramel drips from an open slot in your smile.  
A little little dog walks by.

Even James Joyce’s eyes need sex.  
Even James Joyce needs everything he tries.  
Odd James Joyce liked everything with ties  
and old James Joyce, wiser, sighs  
for those slippery, dextrous disguises,  
those patterned bow tie surprises  
he used to come by.

James Joyce’s eyes say  
it’s the same old choice epitomized  
in your wax-legged marble thighs.

I like to think of James Joyce watching me from the sky, from the top of an enormous, sticky kite.  
I like to think of James Joyce cuddling my kitchen with his body heat and his wonderful pliers.  
I like to think of James Joyce in a Rolls Royce, blind.
How We Are Different From Grain

Pretend that at dinner last night you and I duplicated ourselves, split into two wholes,
each of us. This morning, as I scrape the bottom of the pan and you
make out a list, where are they?
Still in bed, perhaps, from making love
till late. We’ll presume they found themselves attracted to each other (how could they not?).

But wait. Suppose that you ended up with him, and I with her, without even realizing and,
really, without any moral repercussions. What then? Why not? Sleep in!

She can make that list as well as you. Though I don’t know why I’m out here with the pan
and the steel wool as he lies in bed all morning. You know, it’s just like him.

I pretended not to see his eyes on you all evening, but I was fooling myself, I know.

What if the two of you have run off and left me with her? Come back, please!

She needs him. And, frankly, he needs me— you might be fine on your own, but he’ll be lost.

We’re not like grain. Simple transmogrifications do not improve us. Poured from a pan of steaming
water, we do not emerge as more wholesome versions of ourselves. We do not explode into beauty when
thrown into the fire. What do you see in him? Grain converts itself in admirable

ways, but he’s a bad seed, and she is nothing without you (or if I am him I’m
glad we’ve run off, we needed to get away, I just hope one of them cleans up).
At the Balance Beam Cocktail Party

Jennie is immediately declared the winner. She wrangles past me, placidly lunging into her drink. Rounder now than when I knew her, paler, and a little thinner, she exits the beam, and with a salacious wink slinks to her prize. I step up. I'm just a beginner but the crowd expects my tights to do something. I think about the dismount. I think about Jennie in her better days, when she was flatter, and wider, and a little more pink.

If I call out her name it's an automatic deduction. And if I jump I'll lose style points. My landings stink. The judges become uncomfortable.

Did you know the beam is set 4 feet higher during competitions than it is in practice?
Territory

And I am not in bed with you right now
I am looking for your lips in the sheets

Maybe you left them in a place too tightly tucked
At the last bed-making and now

I am looking for something to eat and now
I am staring up at the window and

The brown cat is back looking for
Whatever he and the Gray Princess

With her jewelled collar-stones and throaty
Growl see in that window well

Whatever it is he can smell it I see
But where is it! he spins

Noses and roots and in that particular
Cat-way grabs and disposes of me in a glance

The whole thing takes three seconds
Then he moves to digging

His little paws moving and moving and
I have got to get my lips around something

A cigarette anything and as I strike
The match the cat still digging

Pops his head on the window and says
“When the worms discover tobacco

Then the earth will burn”
And beneath me the mattress grows warm

And wet
One Act

He was still writing that long play about the man who was afraid to go to prison. The man was not going to prison, but feared it nonetheless.

He showed the play to a couple of friends, showed it in its horrible, distressing length, its endless sentences of two-syllable, Saxon words, thousands of squashed ants on every page, indistinguishable, the pages stuck together not from ant guts, but from drool or monotony, on each page a water mark where another reader could make it no further. Dear God, Steve! How you can go on... Fear of prison, fear of prison on every page (And before he can explain its necessity to set up the ending where the man lands in prison and ends up eating the entire Old Testament, page by phyllo-

Thin page, smiling at the guard who made him eat beetles at night as he shits it on the floor, as they haul him off retching at them to read his entrails so they know what is coming for them when they join him in hell, and the cell-mates with their ingenious fingers mixing the words up into a message of mercy and hope, they tell him:) it seems to me it would breathe as a one-act. Oh God! One act, the bastard mongrel of the theatre, it too an eater of words, less pithy than its excrement, the bulbous queen kept on life-support by obsequious, shattered drones, oh God! Oh God!
Everything Will Be Warm and Fine

If only we can get out of Nebraska
Those frosted windmills along the road
Frosted flakes of cereal in the car
Without heat our feet frozen
The car blowing down the dotted line
Two wheels on each side spinning in ice
Maintaining a controlled slide to Iowa
If only we can get out of Nebraska
I think how warm I'll make your feet
How much food we can eat cereal in bed
If we want Chinese food delivered
In someone else's frozen car I think
There are others like us paired
For warmth and companionship turning
Past windmills drifting in the snow
Shifting gears on steep hills shifting
Hands on the wheel shifting hands on
Hands tracing circles in the frost
On the window sharing cereal watching
The windmills spinning in place thinking
How warm and fine our hands will be
If only we can get out of Nebraska
Stopping For Chinese in North Platte, NE

They greet us by the shoulders, and walk us to the table. They hold hands in the lobby, a family business. We are car-sick travellers, we must relax and they will take care of everything. Sitting down, we hit our heads on a plastic decoration. The daughter brings us water, returns to the counter, bored.

I will propose marriage tomorrow. I notice the way you hold ice in your mouth. The placemat says it's the Year of the Rat. My year. The old man brings us vegetables and winks as he takes our compliments, wrinkles up his lips. I see my wife in bed at night, staring at the lines in my lips. You will lie in bed at night, my wife, staring at the lines in my lips.

We drink a quart of tea for the road. The old man checks on our "progress." We are a fine young couple. I do not look at your eyes but at your hands as I tell you last night's dream: pounding and beating on a horned animal with a stick. I'm too tense, me and my dreaming. You rub the tightness above my eyes, my cheeks.

The old man and his wife bring our bill, I tip most generously. I will come back sometime, and I must take care of the little lady. The fortune cookie says not to listen to strangers, drops in the unfinished soup.

Ogallala, Sidney; then Lincoln; then Omaha. I ask if you'll take the wheel when we get to Iowa. Four hours and we cross the border.
Remembering the '96 Presidential Debates

9:00 I told her I'd been up all night rolling triangles. She said that was impossible: triangles only exist in the abstract. And she was right, I couldn't find one anywhere. She proved herself correct.

10:00 Suddenly it was Lincoln debating Frederick Douglass about affirmative action and both of them baffled and me screaming at the set, climbing up to it, and the barkeep pulling at me from below and inhabitants spitting cherries at me. They chopped me down.

11:00 My obsequious manner will get all of you the times you so justly deserve!

12:00 Fear of lockjaw.

1:00 Leaky me looking for a linden tree.

2:00 You say you've got a motorcycle you say you're overqualified you say you've got a big blue bottle you say you're happy all the time you say I can buy you roses.

3:47 Tiny, tiny people. Halflings. Finding that they really exist, and that, in fact, they're responsible for hedonism, barbarism, eating their weak and unwanted, the general moral decline in America. They pay their stooges to buy them tickets by the hundreds to highly violent, violently sexual, sexually amoral films, etc. Must remember, will change world.
Mary and I

You're away again and I breathe you, I smell you,
Still, this evening in my chair, in my room, our kitchen.

Eating your snack, your odd improvisation: the taste of new
Bananas in ginger ale, all your tastes in my mouth, bubbly and green.

I eat all our fruit tonight, end of the week, none goes to waste.

Commitment. I twist commitment around and round my finger,
Curse it, hate it, then clean it with a toothbrush. Your smell lingers,
Lingers in this room, with no source. Commitment. As if a ring
Like twine binds us to this house,

As if it holds us like the neighbor's dog, weened
From his mother for a life tied to a pole. As if anything

Other than food and shelter and a chain on his neck keeps his home
His home. You were expected at ten.
I listen to the neighbor's dog crying he wants to come in.

Commitment. That strange obligation
Of the master to find a lost pet.

The cat you crawl after,
Heard but not seen in the shadowed foundation

Of an abandoned house. The dog who pants a kind of laughter
Even after you slap and scold him.
Leading Headlights Emerge in Gray Flaps

Indigenous to waddling vitriol, a libertine plumber in a freeloading vat, car hair restraint fantasies pleading, nudges a deal with a latitudinal horse. Cottontailed judges awake from sleep, find they’ve been tickled mercilessly by cats with baby tangerines and too much attitude. Oh, ho, ho! says one barrister, noting the horse and his side to side tapdancing, I guess I’m made of pink tobacco! (Not what she meant.)

A rusty ottoman, pesto-colored and battery-operated, like so many of us, throws its head up in the air. It never ever falls back down. A wealthy landowner, call him Dean, speaks insistently with a plastic mop, discovers secrets hitherto known only by slippery, clumsy mudwrestlers. He writes it all down in a wooden-edged book labeled—hastily by a teenage clown—“Things I’ve discovered about Cheese and Oyster Distemper,” then throws it to the nearest smirking pine, which coos, spreads his moist ladle on the grassy carpet and states, a bit like a young Jack Palance, that he’s heard it all on an effluvial glacier and jackal phone hotline many times. One of them coughs softly to one of themselves. It wasn’t the horse. The horse just wants to do some honest waffling, representing gadflies and solid iron furniture with dignity and a sense of, if not elan, then effervescence or, what is it? Alto?

A young soprano, feeling slighted and partly freeze-dried, challenges a fax machine with 700 poison eggs. Local finger-scratchers, confused about the location of the horse, don a ghastly hound dog and trick a chair into fasting for weeks. When weekend bibs retrogress, a white chocolate maniac (in such detail!) appears, asks for a sweet melon or an ego.
A Midsummer Sunday Matinee’s Guilt

“Pyramus and Thisbe were ugly today,”
you said, and we smiled—a strange measure
of success, this ugliness. But I feel ugly.

Dirty. Poor. I felt alone onstage,
among fairies and magic and new love,
I hit bottom, playing an ass with half a heart

for people who would never know the difference,
slumbering through an actor’s dream with little chance
of a transformation before the 8:00.

Should we eat our supper onstage? Dine
on the set where we mock our true love?
Make love like actors do? Pull my donkey head

on once more? Or do I leave you and sleep,
sleep, sleep until the Dream begins again?
(“Look at how funny his ears are, Momma!”)
Prop Table

We eat our dinner
On the prop table

No plates,
Just taped outlines
Around each portion

An effective diet
He Was Going to Push on Her Tooth Again

Seven drinks and there he goes;
She’s so pathetic, putting up with that;
Her teeth are just fine, and she’s always been an attractive woman;
I hear he does this every night;
Has it helped?; Hardly;
No;
Every time he’s drunk;
I never noticed her teeth;
He does it when he’s not drunk;
Why would a woman put up with that?;
And in public!;
Pathetic;
I’d never let him touch me again;
He’s disgusting, I’d never let him touch me to begin with;
Poor little thing;
Are her teeth so bad?;
There’s absolutely nothing the matter with them!;
They’re a little crooked;
I’ve noticed;
Why can’t he wait till we’ve gone?;
He likes us to observe the progress;
He’s a bastard;
It’s a rule, every night at 10:30;
I like any man who keeps a schedule;
She’s the guilty one, the little mouse;
He doesn’t really use pliers?;
Of course not;
He’s a sensible man;
I’ve heard he’s tried it;
What’s he doing?;
Scrubbing up;
Desanitizing;
He’s clean;
Everyone has his quirks;
There’s something about watching this;
What’s that?;
Something to blot the blood?;
It’s a towel, the mouth’s too wet;
Is he ready yet?;
Move over a little;
This is sick, this is wrong, this is sick;
Should I put the music back on?;
Such a ritual;
No wife should put up with this;
She says it doesn’t hurt;
Shameful;
He’s a good man;
He’s unusual;
He’s got a keen eye;
He’s always been an attractive man;
He’s a sick man;
I’m going to ask my dentist about this;
There’s a dentist right over there;
On the other side, next to Mrs. French;
The one holding the gin;
They’re both sweating;
This is something;
It’s a lot of pressure;
I think he works out;
Oh!;
Such a beautiful house;
All of you, each one, perverts;
He’s moving in;
That’s it, old man!;
How astonishing, like a bunch of children, your heads, down, down!;
A good grip, he says;
He didn’t say anything;
He ought to be holding her hand;
Is it actually working;
Slowly;
This will be spread out over the course of several years;
Lovely lady;
She’s tearing up;
She doesn’t even look nervous;
Someone should call the police;
There’s a policeman right over there;
He’s almost done, he says;
He didn’t say a word!;
We all need to rest after this;
This is intimacy;
Forget it;
Marriage is what brings love together, or so they say, or something like that;
Some party;
They’re crazy! They’re in love!;
How he must hate her;
How she must have to love him;
Poor thing;
There is just something about this;
They’re done now;
Sure, I’d take another;
I was saying, the garbage;
Someday we’ll get there, dear;
A glass of water and I’m smiling again!
Second Sun Passing

_for Kara_

The second sun
Exits on our marriage.

Certainly, it's a challenge:
A hundred silver seals

In a row, hoops
Balanced on their noses

Through which other seals jump,
Or try

To fly.
The sky is all orange skin.

It's like that,
If you take away the seals

Holding up the hoops,
And then take away

The seals jumping
Through the hoops.

Twilight.
The second

Sun, two
In a million,

Burns its breath out.
We go to bed. A

Hundred rings suspended in a row.
Good-byes are an Urban Myth

It starts when he sees his Uncle Bud

driving with Lorne Greene and Nixon

in a minivan, heading up a ramp.

*

At lunch, he's bumped by a cranky Noel Coward at the falafel stand.

*

Later that day it's Peg outside the movie theatre. She helps him when he drops change.

*

And then Albert, dead friend of his grandfather, now a fast food employee, catches him vandalizing in florid nailpolish script on the arches’ base, stops him mid-word.

*

Cars glow in long strips away from
the city. He orders a strawberry shake from newsman Edward R. Murrow.

Outside little children wave to the setting sun.
Distance’s Harbinger

That summer’s cluck, so limp and reedy, resounding like a barrister in a chilly spotted hymn, casts its shadow of open mouthwash over the great green knob. And in the West,
cousin Jeanie in her old black cob leans with humidity on the farmers below.
Invidious drachma, holed like St. Martin in pristine abomination of vigor. Another
mountain for the soda, a broken lamplight smoke for your momma. Hold your bulb crisply. Lavender got what that stickhead hasn’t said. I think that pen is a veritable blister. And back to cluck, and chocolate risky, barnacles and lazy misty meats
thrown through windows, still sluggish and oily with the night’s onslaught of red perfume, the children and their bayonet heads, such with their waddling accusations,
a vine talks, blushing, in its own balance.
Francises

I painted the Red House red one summer
With my father, who amazed me with his
Spray gun, his permission to paint right over
The spider webs—I was paid, enough to buy
A baseball game with push buttons. I am ten
Miles out of Lake Mills, farm town where
My grandparents lived for forty years,
Family reunions each summer.
I can’t find the farm. My cousins
Played softball every summer—home runs
Into the field across the road. I hit
For average. My cousins peed off the garage
Roof and I couldn’t look. I’m normal
Now; it would surprise them. A giant cardhouse.
A crush on Amy. McDonald’s orange.
And now I can’t find the farm.
My Aunt Edith on the porch, telling me the corn
Stalks her at every turn, throwing her head
Back, laughing and the mark on her neck.
The way I told my father: the way I told
Ruth when I found the cousins’ wine bottle.
The way I told my father at Christmas
That I had told him, right afterwards,
But he forgets and who cares.
I decide to look for the summer river
And the summer rope, turn on a dirt
Road. I squint; things go black and white.
The road curves like a bass clef
Down a hill from corn rows to plots
Of rock and dust, to fenced-in men frozen
In poses with axes and rakes, scythes
And bomb detectors, pretty stalags and
Happy gulags in their rare smiles.
The women, severe in dark, baggy two-
Piece costumes, beautiful, young and old,
And cold, cold, cold. Mile after mile, rolling
Through the countryside of Iowa turned to
Russia, the Russia of my childhood, still
Bleeding for American breasts and MTV and
Style. Around another bend, what I’ve been
Seeking all the while: something on the hill
Ahead, something with a barn,
Plaids, blue jeans, men and horse shoes,
Pig tail girls and summer dresses,
Autumn burning leaves, lemonade and sugar,
War and Peace, Audrey Hepburn and Henry Fonda
Dancing in a field, deus ex machina.
Riding to Aunt Helen's Funeral, I Think of My Nephew

I.

So
This is how it feels
Sitting in the back seat
Above the rear wheels--

The place where you retreat
On our drives home
From school, those busy days
When your mother can't come,

And I struggle for ways
To talk with you.
And the radio plays.
And nothing is new.

And the singer says,
*Oh, whoa, whoa.*
You sing along
with the words you know.

II.

You'll never know,
My nephew,
How much I think about you.
I am quite like you,

I don't know how to
Be comfortable with the people
In the front seats,
Or in the church's *simple*

*Life, better place, letting go.* Cousins greet
Me with handshakes and stares.
Bells ring.
We bow our heads, and say our prayers

As the choir sings,
*Oh, woe, woe.*
I sing along
With the words I know.
We We Sergeant

‘round picky perambulator, element of squawl. The seagulls.

Vous me pressez,

she hiccuped, ogre and ogress tumbling from her lips,
the sleeveless stickman splicing their gorges—illegal radish!

displaced and sprinkling platter! Your Wilford and bladderhead
cousins cleaving like so many starboard apples in a clandestine

peppermint. Oh, to be such fudge, such fudge in love.

Tu me maquilles.
or in a spicy brown sauce... 

Part II. & the title goes here.

I have organized my motor
my animal the loading
dock the fixed penny
driftwood ranging thru
my soda

my mice nights

O slap prosthesis
plaque plaque sequoia

* * * *

Smelters Salters deserters, a demitasse
in hand some men w/ elegant catacombs
stuffing their drama roughing their drama
I could give you my diamond wrist, splattered
and kissed w/ the ceiling splattered and kissed
w/ the ceiling Haddock

[she hiccuped, ogre and ogress tumbling

Je me souris
blanket blanker bloodhead
We Drank Water and Looked Serious

*after Walker Percy*

I pull on my oldest shoes and button up my workshirt,
Serious about mowing the yard. You say I look like Trotsky.
And, suddenly, there I am on Lake Michigan,
I can smell it and I can smell the ducks,

I'm going on and on about the rights of the workers,
And I'm ruining these old black shoes
Wading in the morning into our Great Lake.
Plastic bags in our hands, we're looking for stones we can take
And hold, memories we won't lose,
Memories that can ornament a hutch
Or table top, or balance on a book end—
Memories we can touch—and we're swinging those plastic bags

Around, reaching for rocks that gleam from beneath like obsidian and pearls
And shine green and blue like Venus, too beautiful for this world,
Rocks which quickly moved into our living room
And which, when I hold them now, tell me only

That I must not let the books on the shelf fall over.
But I'm here! I'm here for this one wild breath racing
Like the time, while pouring out a can of green beans, when you found
A pebble, and we stared and stared at it

Submerged at the bottom of the pan, slippery and round.
DARLA and POPPA LARRY sit center-stage, both juggling various plastic items: grapes, life-sized heads, travel alarm clocks, a hat, etc. Finally DARLA, defying those who won't believe, runs to a cupboard, leaving her plastic items hanging wonderfully in mid-air!

DARLA: I can't go on! I just can't!

POPPA LARRY: Thank you for the furniture in my room. Thank you for the clothing in my room. Thank you for the furnace in my room. Thank you for the plates, dishes, messages from a supreme being in my room.

DARLA: But I've misplaced the toast, Pap. Without the toast, we'll never be...

POPPA LARRY: Complete human beings.

DARLA: (sotto voce) I was thinking: victims of panda assault.

A PANDA breaks into the room, apparently looking for toast.

DARLA: (holding a battery) Hold it! Where do we keep the mice?

POPPA LARRY: We'll have to discuss this in a big room with lots of people.

DARLA: That's bright and shiny... it makes me wonder about my clothes.

THE PANDA: Roar!

Everyone scatters leaving only the mysterious UNCLE WICK, who sits, reading poetry for nearly an hour.

UNCLE WICK: I'm quite a character! We got the wrong kind of bear. Now a polar bear, that could have been different.

Cleverly, UNCLE WICK sets fire to the stage, causing general panic and a lot of damage. Hundreds are hurt and still more are left crying with an unpleasant odor about them, but not UNCLE WICK--he's got what it takes!

UNCLE WICK: My, my.

Eventually, after much legal sparring, UNCLE WICK pulls toast from his pockets, and takes a long, well-earned bow.
Borrowed Hatred

Woman on the bus
says she hates the /j/ sound,
and the /v/.

Evade, judge.
Budge, fridge.
Just because.

I don’t hate any sounds,
I hate the meaning of words—
not for their definitions
but for their insistence
on signification,
the way they just won’t give
it up.

Sideburn motor,
rung ton.

Tell a poet words are for defeating--
Ask the linguist for flange malaria.
There is always sense.
Rung ton.

The woman on the bus
must hate jive.
And fidgeting.
This afternoon I will borrow
her hatred.
Evade, judge.
Chips

My God, I didn’t believe
This was possible.
Down began digger down,
Down funded and powered.
Through dirt to send,
Clay, bedrock. I didn’t
Really believe this was
Possible. It’s not
A short line to surface.
The layers are bedrock like
Brick. Down began digger
Down—An experiment.
That’s all. Down beneath
The surface digger down.
I did not believe this was
Possible. The machines
Build the machines build
The digger down. Tunnel
Fire. A conversation of
This was not possible.
Where we live
Computer Jim the digger
Down. I didn’t suspect.
Red phone for political
Digger religion. The call.
Fractured bricks chips on
The digger down. Sir, you
Know Jesus no one expected.
Binary dirt was my joke
Still room digger
Down there it’s hard to
Be possible, it’s hard to
Breathe like bedbricks.
How many thousand feet.
Metal chips metal chips metal
Chips meet down red
Phone. I did not
Believe this possible. You do
Believe in God, sir. Yes
The digger. Said he found
Bedbricks, rocks of possible
Digger down. Well then He
Gave to us in infinite wisdom
Digger down binary dirt.
Ha Ha. Metal chips metal.
My God, my digger down chips.
Your equation is the layers
Of slate. The digger down down.
We come. We come back
Robot heroes. We come
The digger down. We
Chips. Digger dirt.
She won’t stop crying.
I never really believed
This possible. My God, I didn’t
Believe this was possible.
Imitate a Stapler

Staple the papers together.
Press them, face to face
and join them at the corners, so one lies
behind another. Amazing, isn’t it, the power?
The stapler spits metal
to hold papers together.
And I have used staples
to hold my papers
together. Sure, your fingers could do the job
more securely, but not better. Give me your papers. They’re falling apart! Why didn’t you staple them together?
Imitate a stapler:
sit steady in the room with your heavy enormous arm ready.
Sit quiet like a stapler,
poised with your unifying pinch. Be noisy as a stapler,
pounding all day, keeping things together, while others are trying to think.
The Power of Lasers, Greatly Exaggerated in the Popular Press,
Must Be Harnessed With Discipline

Only if the dream of suspending people in mid-air
By the power of light is revealed for what it is—
Three old women in the gravity ring, lit severely at angles.

There aren't any good books, says the first, holding one
At the proper angle to achieve an effective burn.
I can't tell you the last time... Green, red, yellow.

The space is filled with spectators, clapping for
What they think is something else, while the center
Is flooded with beams from every direction.

That same woman--her mute companions a bit
Awkward at the attention--grabs another as it
Floats past, leafs through it in her manner, with the fingertips.

A voice tells the audience that more concentrated beams
Will be used early in the next century (a brief
Hesitation) to suspend supermodels in the air. Clapping

And tentative laughter. Several people look worriedly at
Their programs. A careful observer may notice
The stifled cries of dogs in the distance.

Light browns the edges of pages, the smell reminds me:
Of marshmallows. Her ubiquitous partners are
Smiling. They think that the lasers will save the world.
A Pit With a Ladder, and Some Gold

It is better to climb up a ladder for freedom than down a ladder for true love. For true love must not throw you into a pit. Is it better to stay in a pit to free your true love, or to stay on a ladder to assert your freedom?

Suppose there is gold just outside the pit. Should you climb the ladder for freedom or stay in the pit to avoid having the gold enslave you? Or climb out, and throw the gold in the pit so the ladder has a purpose?

And if someone else throws the gold into the pit before you get out? What if you’re climbing out of the pit in order to escape from the gold, but the ladder is burning at the top? Should you face the fire for freedom? Face it for true love? Climb down and grab the gold and put it into the fire to avoid temptation?

A man at the top of a ladder burning from the bottom descends again to save the burning gold. Which he gives to you. Must you now build a new ladder? Must you now get back in the pit?
More Than I Have Done at Work Today

Squealing breaks around the hive, ignition over the comb. Tunnels, with their electric mouth and fog, loom like a hotseat for the queen. And sticky soldiers, frozen like figures on Lincoln Logs in awkward immobility. How can these fellows attack? And can they succeed, clumped as they are in their pre-packaged residue? This is the sound of a bomb dropping off a package for its mother. Watch as it, like coriander in a honeyjar, sneaks its way to embellishment, not harm.

All your life. I think you said you saw the bees when they were less popular. Ever clean, like marines they chalked you up to something less oppressive, an order for, rather than an admission of, a crushed barracks. And a job to do.
& The Clock Goes Tock

Frantic, she took
A trick from Mother's book

And shook the kid
Like Mother did

To Bobbie (whose head
Got all scrambled up dead

They said),
And she thought of Mom

Pounding the piano
In the days after,

And setting her time-keeper
Faster and faster

Till it was hard to know
What song she was playing,

And she remembered
Mom saying

*If I only had time,*
But time got worse,

She found,
Each time the clock went around

And maybe,
Without the baby,

Then time would stop.
Tick.
Second Sun Passes

Pricking
at paper stacks,
his tiny hands
wriggling to
a staple,
nail
stirring
in the wire,

little mouth
chopping
the pile’s edges,
my animal works.

Wet-glue
teeth slop, tear
actually
bubble
the corners.

My animal’s
paw’s fingers
trace
the sun
on my window
on my stomach
and cheeks,
its face
on my face
and stomach,
its face
on my hands.

I record
the second sun passing.
1000.
It's more
than
ten times
ten times
ten times
ten.
It's more
than
you can
understand,
1000.
It's the
first
of the incomprehensible
numbers.

You've never
counted
1000
of anything.
You don't
have the
patience.
Your only
chance
is to
live to

1000,
but then
you'll need
others
to count
for you,
because
by then
you'll
be less

than
ten times
ten times
ten.
You'll
be
out of
your
mind.

You’ll
be
1000.

May
the sun
still
smile
warmly
on you
then,
my un-
countable,
in-
comprehensible,
im-
patient,
millennial

friend.
The Second Person

In the walk between
memorials you come running up
behind me,

ask me to stop. Sit.
You are shorter than I'd imagined,
your feet swing from the bench

floating just beyond the grasp
of green blades
arching to touch you.

We set down
our respective briefcases.

Stop controlling me.
I don't like to roll in the lawn.
I wasn't at that rally against the death penalty.
I hate the lover you've paired me with.

Your candor hurts me.
You smoke a cigarette and walk
off. That will not do
as a suitable ending.

No, I think we shall
end in the grass,
suitcases fallen to the wind,

bounding, each, after something elusive,
something beautiful, some happy other

like a bubble
just above the surface,
just above the blades
in the shadows of tributes to the dead.
God on the Mound Again

*after Anne Sexton, 10/28/96*

And here I am, the plucky free agent, someone’s cheap midseason acquisition. I’ve fouled off each pitch You’ve sent— I don’t want to hit it in play because You play every position and You’ve *never* made an error. I’ve been swinging from the very first ball because Your pitches, three in one, can strike a man out immediately. Is that fair? It’s a strange call but then, You’re the umpire, You do as You like. I wonder. Why are You letting me even touch Your pitches? Why are You tossing melons when You know Your fastballs of fire fill me with terror,
to say nothing of Your inside curve, or Your slider of death. O, Infallible One, with Your high leg kick and Your perfect earned run average, You’ve been playing this game for such a long time. Is torture really that much fun? O Chance, Fate, the Word, whatever you are, God, why aren’t You nice to Your offspring? Why so vengeful, so absurd? Can’t You spare the rod since the children are already spoiled?

They say Your spirit just hasn’t been the same since You left the old park in Eden. O God, throw a strike. Take me out of this ballgame.
Lines Written While Everything Goes to Hell

The philosophy of the geologist, i.e., that everything is very old,
is lost, according to my friend, the biblical literalist,
is “very controversial,” fading like detritus into the grass,
circular decay of human ideas, unrecognizable or rather
indistinguishable—still clearly human and flawed,
doing their dance, the dust to dust dance of human arrogance,
inevitable, creatures that we are, bound to
a short half-life of acceptance, though radium and its suggestions
are very controversial too, not to be trusted, as indeed is

anything (which adds up to nothing) and that’s just right because all
thought is human and evil as is his though, fortunately, he’s been chosen
because of the Ark, which you can see, it’s been found in Turkey,
and it goes back to Abraham, undeserving too, but chosen, don’t let it
bother you, the radical cruelty of the universe (and no, peoples of other
religions do not go to heaven) can be made kind, as when a child stamping
the entire yard clean of anthills spares a random few, out of love, grace
even if later he pounds them with a basketball, foul things, lecherous
rolling in his spilt ice cream, a metaphor apt and not at all unkind in my
friend’s eyes.

(In case there’s any confusion, the biblical literalist
is not a literalist who comes from biblical times, though
that would have been more fun, he is the first kid I met back in kindergarten.)

***

I’d like to say it doesn’t matter,
I’d like to agree to disagree. I’d like us to play frisbee
together, and run into each other
and fall down, laughing, sweating
together, and look, each, into the other’s eyes
and see
the familiar outside world curved uniquely
in each reflection, beautiful.

I’d like to.
in church, he is at the top of the balcony and I am at the top step before the alter and we are shouting back and forth and he asks me why the church has to have such high ceilings (his words vibrate down, shake the whole room and my chest with the sound, enormous in the cavernous space, bouncing through with the ageless rhythm of questions about grace, of sharing, of holy, holy, holy).

My face shines watercolor blue and orange and yellow and continues to glow as I tell him that God needs that much space to hold Himself. I might have made the sign of the cross.

This I know...

12: God needs a big room so His voice will echo and sound more impressive when people repeat it, again and again. My parents fight it but this insufferable little child will not come unto Him. Little cross and handprints taken down.

6: Church, if you take off the steeple, and the glass doors and all the people, is like a doghouse to an ant.

17: A faded place of faded men.
Need is not quite belief.

This I know...

* * *

And tonight, Lent staining everything, my mother sings her heart out, a sixty-year old woman sounding like the only thing that an angel could be, my friend, a row behind, and the little ones which belong to him...

I have come to hear my mother sing.

We shake hands when told to shake hands.
All are welcome in the Father's house, he says. The bible tells him so.

(Along with which of us are abominations, which headed for hell, and that we are the haves, they are the have nots, the poor will always be with us, and he'd have them do unto him by letting him do for himself, I can keep my Aficas and former communists and goodnight.)

We climb into our respective minivans and head home.

* * *
Sometime tonight I
realized that I am tired of distinguishing
one thing from another.
How nice it would be, not to know

the difference between
foot rest and settee, living and dining room,
eternal rest and sitting down,

chess and checkers,

living and dying,

sock and serape,

love and bus driver,

automobile and

sofa.

I am tired
of distinguishing between the biblical literalist and large-winged jay
soaring, above, where no one can touch.

***

Too easy to pick on him.

After all,
should we be swallowed by a whale,
or maybe fear,
which of us
would face it with a better attitude?

***

(This changes the ending,
I know, but I have to
say that, begging the reader's pardon,
I would.)