I sense my humours

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I sense my humours

by

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PHLEGM

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phlegmatic
CREDIBILITY

His mother’s friends were visiting. They’d brought their children. His older sisters wanted to entertain the guests’ children, whose presence, their being strangers, insisted on novelty. His sister said, we will visit Annie, the witch who lives in our barn.

Does not, the strange children said.

Okay, so let’s go look in the barn if she’s not there, she said.

You’re stupid, you believe in witches, they said. All the children, he, his sisters, and the strangers, set out for the barn.

Still little larger than a toddler at four, he rode on his sister’s shoulders. The air was cold and smelled dark with rain. It’s gonna rain, one of the strangers said.

Let’s go back, gonna rain, he said.

Shut up, his sister said.

They climbed the ladder to the loft. He and his sister brought up the rear. His sister climbed only high enough to see the floor of the loft. He floated in the air over her shoulders, a small, pale ghost. He could see the dirty hay and rotted boards. No witch, the strangers said.

Shut up or she’ll get you, his sister said.

Annie Apple Tree, if you are here, she said then, and paused to consider what the test should be, then commanded, Open the loft door! The door opened, the unused hinges moaning a protest. All of them watched the arc through the dusky light without breathing. In his mind, they are still there. He knew then that if there was a witch in their barn, then witches are probably everywhere, and he has been frightened ever since.
Making Body Bags

*Peerless Plastics, a company in Farmington, Minnesota, manufactures “unionalls,” which are worn under the clothes of the deceased in the case of severe bodily damage or leakage.*

Roll out a stretch of opaque plastic—
7 feet for large, 6 medium, 5 for small.

Cut over-sized paper dolls out of rubbery plastic.

Bring them to the sewing machine operator, who will buzz two pieces at a time through the sewing machine, tossing clumsy, flat plastic snakes of arms and legs aside impatiently.

Inspect carefully for gaps where the sewing machine has gone off the track in a chewing rhythm.

Bring the flawed bags back to the sewing machine operator, so that she may frown, her huge eyebrows sparring caterpillars.

Unzip the neck-to-crotch plastic zippers on the cool, corrected bags.

Turn right side out.

Shake the bags once, twice, three times, snapping the plastic in a violent dance.
Fold carefully—in half at the crotch, arms and legs in thirds.

Tie the bow neatly at the plastic throat.

Product is now ready for customer.
How I Can Tell

When the weak chins dance
down the church aisle
in their Bostwick's clearance rack dresses,
when three cars line
up beside each other on main street,
blocking what would be traffic
if there were any traffic
yelling didja hear about that hail south of town there,
when the excitement grows
like a cancer on Thursdays,
everyone yammering
to get into the American Legion pork feed
before the good tables are gone,
when the cats have
no loyalty, but will sneak
into anyone's basement, yowling to be fed,
when the postmaster narrows
his eyes at my mother, begging her to remember
his clumsy gropes of forty years ago,
when the women titter
in the bowling alley over fried longjohns and coffee,
discussing anal sex and why in the world
their husbands like it they'll never know,
when the middle-aged softball players scream
at their kids and drink beer, praying
for the dance halls and drag races
to reappear and give them back
what they thought they'd never lose,
I know that I am home.
Harold Never Runs Out of Socks

or boxes of baking soda, or light bulbs.
He's never kept a client waiting,
or a date, or a dentist. He changes
his oil, trims his hair just when
it's time to. He's never afraid

of the knock of a surprise visitor
or the buzzing of the phone
(he's never known a bill collector)
because he keeps his house
and accounts straight. In order

of importance, he'll rate each task
of the day: meet his boss,
call his mother. He never forgets
to floss, or to flush, or to wash
his hands before dinner. He repeats

his prayers each night, chews
every bite twenty-seven times, pops
a vitamin, pays his taxes,
and never relaxes until the dishes
are done. He's never wished

a failure or heartache on anyone.
He's untainted. He returns extra change.
We all think he's a saint. Sometimes
we tell him so, just to see the blush.
Larry Dreams of the Sexual Evolution

Sin has been bred out of sex
like the strings that no longer
have to be pulled off green beans.

The Mayflower Madam

Larry reads that Sidney Biddle Barrows,
that famous former madam
of heritage dating to the first pilgrims
who arrived on the Mayflower,
assures all that sex is no longer sinful.

He watches in shock
as a listening nation breathes a horny sigh of relief.

The pastor who buys his newspaper
from Larry’s stand on Sunday mornings
asks, “How are you?
Sex-life okay then?
There’s nothing sinful about it,
you know.
Any problems, come to me.”

Larry’s father, so Catholic
that his mouth is always sour
from dry Communion wafers,
has papered his dining room
with centerfolds of smoky eyes
and rosy skin.
“What? What?” he shouts at Larry.
“It’s not sinful anymore!”

The local community college
has set aside a sex section
with the hardy approval of the students'
religious organization, which hands out condoms.
“It’s a little noisy,”
an observer tells Larry.
“But at least they’re not killing themselves
like in the smoking section.
Smells better, too.”

Larry and his wife buy an airline ticket
to Miami for a winter get-away.
“First class or coach?
Engaging in sex or abstaining?”
The reservationist tells Larry
that engineers advise distributing the engagers
evenly throughout the plane
to avoid a turbulence effect.

Now Larry and Marion are in counseling.
Larry wants to make love
in the bedroom with the lights out
and the door shut
so as not to wake the children.
“Shitting’s no sin either,
but I still do that in private,”
he wails to the psychologist.

Marion wakes Larry
from his shouting nightmare,
and he smiles, reassured, as Marion
grasps her flannel nightie shut
tight at her neck
and hushes him back to sleep.
Patrick, She Told You

Patrick, she told you her cupboards were bare. Her house is long empty, and yet you stopped: she heard the old saddle creak, the clip-clop of horse's hooves. Hunger scented the air.

She has no dinner for you. When you knocked the fruit basket shook, the one rotten pear mocked her and the dusty cupboards. The bare wind blew you in. What possessed you to stop?

You'll leave here with nothing, just as before, your shallow stomach clicking, the tin clock ticking past dinner hour. A drawn look back, and you'll ride off, forget you were there. Oh Patrick, you knew her cupboard was bare.
Playing Solitaire

The corner breaks off
the four of spades.
I mutilate the deck,
preferring not to know.
Some Touch

The arms of passion have loosened
and again you can breathe, take a breath as deep
as a well so dark and ringing a wishful penny dropped
would never reach bottom. Those arms
have released their haunting grip,
the alarm has stopped ringing its warning
and a calm silence softens your fall.
You are certain this torpor
is sweeter than any and all
that has come before, yes you’re sure:
you will nestle in, wallow in the absence
of a forearm tight against your throat,
a limb squeezed like a boa around your waist.

Yet, after a while, you’ll tire of any taste.

Yes, this one too. The gray begins to wear
on you, the lack of laughter doesn’t flatter.
Your edges seem to blur—once a pressure
held the outlines in more clearly.
The sweat has dried, leaving a salty dust
waiting to be brushed off. Your ribs
have room to flare, there’s room for a sigh,
for a cough, but why does the air
taste so stale now? You yawn and yawn and yawn.

It’s not the crushing hold
you’re lonesome for, not those gripping fingers
digging in, rubbing the skin raw. Not at all.
You don’t miss your arms pinned at your sides
in an embrace you couldn’t hide in, or from.
You’re not pining for a numbness that comes
from a stunted flow of blood.
But if you sense, in the emptiness, the shadow
of kinder arms reaching through the vacuum,
you will not run. You need some touch to live.
And if, from time to time, they cling too tightly,
you’ll forgive, you’ll forgive.
Tracking

    no matching socks have I
never owned a pair? nothing
ever put away
    pears, apples,
oranges, grapes supposed to eat
fresh fruit every day remember
eat a bowl of Golden Graham instead
    car is so cold vinyl seats and steering
wheel cold sun on a land winter-dead
where snow lay another time
    so far
behind cut them off in mid-sentence
attention is a debt unpaid you don't know
what they’re talking of
    no cash
rummage for change no lunch today
smoke a cigarette to clear my head the fog
remains clouding the day
    catch an elbow
nothing to say but vague
remembered names
    lie with my
cheek on the tiles fading
to a pain that won’t go away
Visitation

The three brown lumps I peel off the carpet with a paper towel are reddish-brown. Their smell is not the clean smell of horse manure. Carpet fibers are stuck among the finely packed, wrinkled cylinders, and parts of the cylinders remain on the rug.

My cat lies on the windowsill. I see her satisfied expression and think that I work too much in this life. I clean up after myself and come when called. I must work to be satisfied, but she is pleased at a nap in the sun, a chase through the house, an occasional stroke. A bowl full of food. A shit in the guest room.
What to Do with Them

Collect regrets as some people collect hats or fishing lures. Gather them into a flock which flutters along the edge of your vision like malevolent blackbirds. Curse and rant at the regrets. When a regret sweeps into your vision, coming close enough to glance for a cold moment into your eyes with its own shining black ones, flinch and turn your head. When the flock becomes agitated and whirls wildly, a storm of deliberate, twirling confetti, close your eyes and imagine the steel and wood of a shotgun in your arms and the kick of the gun against your shoulder. Laugh out loud at the explosion of a bird hit dead-on. Imagine doing this four-and-twenty times. What a meal you'll have! But brace yourself. Passing regrets is no small task. It takes some time, passing regrets.
El Niño

I yank on my moon boots. El Niño's back, and even staggering out the door over the dry push of the heating vents my skin flinches where it knows the cold will get to it. I need to head for the Quik Trip but when I get out to the pickup I can't drive shit I can barely get in because my boots are too big. Shoulda worn my Thinsulates. The wind is driving the grain snow into the air ducts and I may freeze to death out here but I'm so drunk and stoned I don't care. I question my soul.
BLOOD

*

sanguine
THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT

When Flora decided just exactly what to get Arnold for his birthday, she went out to a farm where a bearded farmer Flora liked very much sold fish out of blurry aquariums lining his basement.

Flora walked around and around the basement but could not decide which fish to get Arnold. She knew only that she must get one as happy as he. So she approached a tank and said to a dour-looking goldfish loitering near the glass, “Are you very happy?” But the goldfish ruffled his scales at this very personal question and sank down to bob near a serious diver.

Flora walked to the next tank and leaned near the glass. A tiny fish so clear she could see its spine and internal organs wiggled by. “Are you happy?” she asked. The tiny fish shrugged his membranous fins. “Actually, I’ve never given it much thought,” he said.

Flora stood finally in front of the final tank, which was nestled against the crude gray stone wall of the basement. She peered in at the piranha who beamed back at her. “Are you very happy?” she asked.

“Happy? Happy?” the piranha chortled. “Happiness is the only good,’ as R.G. Ingersoll reminded us. I’m wonderfully happy. I dance every day, and when I get tired I like to peruse a book of poetry or get in a hand of cards. And, of course,” the piranha said, grinning to display all his glorious teeth, “my voracious appetite keeps me busy hunting for food! I do enjoy a good meal.” And, perhaps musing in contentment about a particularly good meal he’d enjoyed of late, the piranha sat dreamily smiling amid the bubbles which floated through the green water.

“That’s just the fish for Arnold!” Flora cried to the farmer.
"For Arnold?" the farmer asked in surprise. "But Flora, Arnold is a--"

"Shh," Flora said, her finger to her lips. "He doesn't know it."
Winter Bush

In a tub hot enough
to keep winter chills from us,
I draw my razor over my knee
and stop.

Bid August goodbye
and her trespasses as well.

Summer has gone,
Winter Bush,
you great tangle,
you September pleasure,
and you are a flowering, fitting tribute
to the woman of me.
You are no trouble at all.
You help keep me warm.
chancetakers

we dream of you skating
on the second floor landing
the buzz of the wheels across the boards
a lilting drone in our sleeping ears

knowing what to expect we do not start
at your crash through the railing
the crack which punctuates the thin air
of our dreams

we stand in blank rows
well back from the gaps the wood
splintered sharp as teeth to watch
your hands broken off stiff as mannequins
dead as dolls' hands now flapping like doves
we watch envy rich wine in our veins
we watch them now spinning and spinning
high up happy at last
Don't Fear the Muskrat

\textit{Under the bank a muskrat was trembling}
\textit{with meaning . . .}
\textit{William Stafford, "Ceremony"}

I bring bread to the ducks.
The muskrat, a wet caress into the water
to steal their food, snakes up behind,
biting tail feathers. He sends the birds
honking, their wings snapping the water,
sailing pale, flashing arcs.
The muskrat's head snaps back,
the ratty tail stiffens
to a grey stick, the muskrat jumps
onto the bank, chitters
in circles, and flings
himself at my knee.

He leaves clear drops of water
knocked from his fur,
bloody scratches, muddy pawprints. I am still
in my surprise. I touch my skin.
Even the trees are swimming.
Change-of-Life Baby

She lolls in every day
to buy a newspaper. With her owl eyes
and frog-wide smile, she places
her coins on the counter. She is proud
that she has brought in the exact change.
She peeks out under blunt, dark
bangs and tugs at the kerchief tied
beneath her chin. Peeling each layer
back as gently as pulling a blanket
from a sleeping child, she checks
that every section is intact. Her face
is odd without the wrinkles sun
and stress will paint. Perhaps:

back at home her ancient mother
reads the funnies to the retarded woman,
exaggerating the voices for her delight.
Her laughter will cough out of her, a bouquet
of delight. Later, looking out the window,
she will decide to wear her favorite green
pantsuit to buy the newspaper tomorrow.
Duck Pond

Up close, we can see
how little the rusted bin
resembles a duck pond. Corrugated
metal surrounds rushing water, circulated
by some unknown apparatus.
Plastic ducks in varying shades
of fading yellow, chipped red swatches
of paint on the bobbing bills, dozens
of ducks, sail blankly around,
around, and on each duck's bottom
is a magic number painted for a prize.

And above are the rows of bears
with checkerboard stomachs
and hard, friendly eyes; plastic and elastic
bracelets; roach clips with feathers.
There's nothing here
you'd want any other day.
But—oh, the joy of picking out
a duck: who knew what the number
would be? Perhaps one that belonged
to a prize so terribly wonderful
it couldn't even be displayed.
I Drive a Lot

The trip from Ames, Iowa to Minneapolis takes about 3 1/2 hours and $6 worth of gas. The trip back is about the same.

I write while I drive but I can never read it. I probably need new shock absorbers.

Once in a while I look at my own eyes in the rearview mirror. They’re always looking back.

Sometimes I bring my cat. A lady in another car made her dog wave to us. We didn’t pay any attention.

I think of funny things my friends say. People in other cars look at me like they don’t know why I’m laughing.

I drive 68 miles per hour on the interstate. That’s all the faster my car goes. I’ve never gotten a speeding ticket.

If I turned my wheel fast, my car would roll. I don’t ever do it.

When I pass Albert Lea I always say; “I personally believe I can see Dubuque from here.” But I really can’t.
Marilyn

With a magnificent tangle
of ragged reddish grown-out perm
that tosses on her shoulders
and around her thin neck
in the hurricane of music, she
dances in front of the band.
Her nose hawkish and her
smile thin and wide and promising,
she'll bring home the drummer,
if nothing else. Her arms pump, pulling
the guitar licks toward her.

She wears two rings, one on
each middle finger. Because,
she smiles: That's the finger
I flip people off with. And I always
like to look pretty when I'm doing it.
Minnesota Welcomes You

As I drive home, the land suddenly
has texture, the ditches, depth. I-35
is peppered with rest areas, and the sea
of pale blue license plates bobs on
bumps, thoughtfully labeled. White arms
of snow wrap around tufts of yellow grass.
The last clinging leaves wave hello
from gray branches. The air smells more
civilized. Evergreens hold their hands up
to cradle the coming snowfall. The sky
is smaller. In town, men and women,
none under eighty, dot the ends of driveways
like protective sentinels, armed with shovels.
Who'd have thought to put Hastings so far
from Ames, Iowa?
Questions the Watch Man Asks

Say, do you know what time it is?
Well, that's a nice watch, isn't it?
What's the brand name on that watch?
Do you remember where you bought it?
Do you like that type of watch?
Do you like that bigger face like that?
Do you like expandable watch bands?
Why not?
Would you like diamonds around here, or would that be too fancy?
What type of clasp does that have?
Are those easy to get off?
Can I see that clasp?
Is it easy to change that band size?
Do you like gold watches like that?
Do you like numbers or just those little dots?
Do you like Roman Numerals?
Why not?
Would you like this watch?
Well, if someone gave you this watch, would you wear it?
Well, if you didn't have any other watches, would you think, "That's a nice watch, I like that watch"?
Would you say, "I wish I had a nicer watch"?
Would you like it if it didn't say "Calumet College"?
But if you had smaller bones, would you like it?
Well, if it was gold and had a wide leather band, would you like it?
Why not?
BLACK BILE

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melancholic
THE DELICACY AND STRENGTH OF FACE

I lie on the couch and finish reading and cry silently because I want to. Face crawls onto my chest to comfort me. She is not a lap cat, preferring attention from arm’s length and in rationed doses, but now she writhes back and forth across me, rubbing her forehead on my sweatshirt, upside down.

She cannot leave my side. She stands to watch me put on makeup, paws at my blankets, waits by the shower. Yesterday on the drive home from my father’s she came out from under the seat often to howl, in duet, with her sister cat, answering my calls, answering my singing to the country music station, answering my sneezes at the dust their prowling has raised. When I crooned her name insistently enough she crawled onto my lap. In frantic reunion—we’d been parted a month—she returned the clicking of my lips by pressing her mouth hard enough against mine that I felt the clean wetness of her gums and tiny shark’s teeth.

My lover is allergic to Face, to her sister, to all her sisters. If I stay with him, she will have to go. I try to rub her purring into my skin, into my wrists and fingers, imagining the loss. This is why I cannot have children: knowing she is here, and perhaps having to think, as my mother thought, holding my own sister’s cooling hand, but you are here, you are here, how can you be gone?
Water on the Road

If you drive into the sun, the water
on the road—a spring snowmelt
or summer rain—radiates bands reflecting
the clouds and the hollow weeds
at roadside. The water masquerades:
the closer you approach, the larger
the scarlet and gold and violet snakes
waver. Shimmers of copper and platinum
change their shapes until you drive
the oil-filmed water under and behind you.
If you look in the mirror, all that’s left
of the water is a horizontal line, thin
and black and solitary on the sun-
lightened road, a single line on a discarded page.
The Cry

*for Edvard Munch*

Black angels at your cradle
returned while you painted, saying,
"If you please, I, Death,
and he, Insanity, wish
to be portrayed upon that bridge,
approaching, approaching, for we
are always drawing nearer."

Whose blood is that, streaming
through the sky? A sunset
of gore over a river of blue-black
roily water: look up, look up,
see coagulations descending
to bathe you.

Clutch your face in green-
skeleton hands, your mouth
a circle of scream. Feel them
approaching. See it descending.
Be all alone, and all alone. Scream.
After Father's Funeral

Regret as perfect as eggs drives
him home through a snowstorm
to the squealing lament of wiper blades.
Holiday

I dust all the furniture,
polish the silver,
and wipe the spots from the crystal.
I play the jauntiest music,
light candles, skewer hors d'oeuvres.
At midnight
I put on fresh lipstick,
raise my glass of wine
and flirt with the refrigerator.
Orville in the Legion, Twenty-Seven Years Later

She was going on ten when she died.
She was something else. She was the baby, until the wife surprised us and had one more.
Wasn't a few years after that she got herself locked in the barn when the door stuck while she was playing with the runt out of one of the litters. I knew it was gonna die, told her go ahead.
I'd been after Greg every day for a week straight to fix that loose fence. Or maybe I was just thinking to tell him.
Anyway, you know, those goddamned sows got killing mad.

She had her hair all done up in them pink foamy curlers--church was next morning.
First and last time I ever missed communion, that Sunday. She come up to me and I told her, go ahead, no harm in fooling with a runt that was gonna die anyways.

Her brother found her. I never seen her.
Found one of them curlers, though.
Killed every sow myself. Didn't bother none with them cruel to animal laws. Wouldn't nobody bothered to report me, anyways.
Welcome to the Heartland

Back to the flat. The license plates are as dark and blue as a tornado-heavy July afternoon. Cars are abandoned at roadside, sullen, blinking. Memories are wider and have more weight here. The highway is gray, and the fields, and the faces behind their windows are as closed as a door shut against the plains winds.
Steps

What frightened me most was Mother’s voice. She called to tell how Grandma died. Step-grandmother—bold, ribald, whose favorite story was the one about the night before her wedding. It was, she said, all right, as she was to marry my grandfather in the morning. She did not see how she could be falling from grace in God’s eyes. Past seventy, she sneaked into Pop’s room at my aunt’s house. They took what they both deserved, having waited, and waited. They smiled at the altar, sated.

When Mother met the woman who would wed her father, she smiled, winked over her head, asked, “Do you two have to get married?” and they smirked, saucy as they dared. “After thirty years, it’s about goddamned time Dad brought me a Momma. Would you be mine?”

Mother’s voice was quiet, choked. I twisted the white phone cord, the line cracked. Grandma went in her sleep; she couldn’t have known. Mother said that’s how she, too, would like to go. I didn’t want to see her pale fear, but offered to drive over. If not to outlive, what are daughters for?
Speed Queen

What a delightful name, wasted
on washing machines, when such glamour
should cling like a stinking shadow:
Speed Queen, the woman chewing her nails
at the abortion clinic, her acne
bright testament to the joys of amphetamines,
Speed Queen, the homemaker who creeps
from her sleeping husband and daughter
to rev the Toronado to 80 on a back road,
a six-pack of Schlitz on the passenger seat,
Speed Queen, the trembling man who comes
in the toilet stall at the back of the bar
before the boy's lips even touch him,
Speed Queen, I am the Speed Queen,
each should shudder to think, head
drooping forward, guts rollicking
while the thrill and the guilt swish,
agitrate, but never cleanse.
Having Joined You in the Bathroom

Standing silent in front of the watchful toilet,
we look down into the broken bands of water
which, in their own way, reflect us. A naked mirror,
it winks, as the upset of flushing begins, at our embrace.
We cannot see all of ourselves, only rippled pieces
of faces above our bare bodies standing on the carpet.

With a bare toe I trace out patterns on the carpet.
I frown to hear the raucous celebration of the toilet
as it breaks our reflection into pieces
which swirl, disappearing through the water
as you hold tightly in a bathroom embrace.
Weeping, we glance into the mirror

as we have glanced into many mirrors.
Our familiar reflection is a cushion, a carpet
to support such heaviness of this concrete embrace.
Annoyed, I toss down the lid of the toilet
and listen to the final trickles of the water
and am sorry. I touch your face. Every piece,

every place, on your face, is a piece
I know, better than any mirror.
Your eyes shine, like this morning's sun, with water.
Under our feet, the snags on the carpet
rustle, as if in gossip, concerned, to the toilet.
They're gossiping of our embrace.

If, this last Sunday morning, an embrace
gives lovers grown apart some late peace
as we stand as witnesses before the toilet,
what of it? What? We murmur into the mirror
as we tiptoe, suddenly so careful, on the carpet.
Our voices seem to quiver like water.

And nothing restores like the coolness of water. Unless it is to decide to leave all else aside, to embrace for this moment, on the worn, weary carpet.

This is such a small piece of your life, says the mirror. It waits for assent from the toilet.

But water simply leaks onto the carpet as the mirror in the toilet reflects me, embracing you in pieces.
YELLOW BILE

*

choleric
BREAKING BULBS

Children: throw light bulbs at the garage; they make such a pop and a shattering scatter of shards that you’ll always feel better immediately. In the spring the snow will melt off a winter’s worth of garbage. Pick through the wetness and salvage the light bulbs, first shaking them to hear the skittering of the filament. Then, raising your arm far up and back, fling them one at a time at the garage, watching the arch of the white and silver and laughing in delight at the small explosion.

Don’t think of this as a particular outlet for aggression. Don’t think back to a vicious classmate, “So, you call me a buck-toothed four-eyes, do you? Well, take that!” and fling the light bulb in a fit of fury. Don’t use the garage to vent anger over parents’ “Clean up this goddamned room!” or older siblings’ “Get lost, you little freak.” Don’t feel God-like, holding the globe of the bulb as if it were the earth and aiming at the blank wall of the universe, laughing deviously at the hateful, hurtful, less-than-innocents who don’t realize they have mere moments before they will be smashed to smithereens.

Don’t even know why your family throws so many of them out.

Just break bulbs.
Real Man’s Villanelle

When I wake up to your blank artist’s face I know I’ll be sorry. I’m not gonna turn down a chance to get laid but don’t expect me to read your poetry.

When my reticence rides you heavy as you’ll ride me, keep it your secret. Don’t complain, don’t hold your breath for me to come around. It’s a sorry search for that sad romance, a fool’s folly. Your face is folding like an accordion. In pain, you wait for those healing words, perfect in their poetry.

I doubt your desires fall far from your history. Think back: check those childhood files. At what age were you made to recite that stifled tripe, “I’m sorry”?

And did you think those words carried some sincerity? You’ll be an easy mark, taken in every day by the long-haired soulful type who talks in poetry.

Ah, now you’re crying—will you join that sorority of women who use that weapon to get their way? You’re looking for the sensitive guy who’ll sigh he’s sorry. Okay, okay, but I’m not writing you any goddamned poetry.
You're Some Conversationalist

Butterflies of brilliance dance inside your thin skull and fly out of a mouth striving to keep some control of its pretty painted flutterers.

I eat the insects, choke on the bitter powder of their dusty, battering wings, swallow, feelers tracing fine lines in my throat. Your winged tongue has stolen my heart—
Don’t Call Me Sir; I Work for a Living

I despise civilians. I’m not prejudiced—I hate them all.
If healthy men and women can’t give a bit of their lives for freedom’s sake—just line ‘em up and mow ‘em down.
Shroud them in the Iron Curtain and bury them by the former Berlin Wall.

But the new recruits--
I still get a hard-on every time a new busload of raws rolls in. I love their pimpled, babied faces. I love their long greasy hair they try to hide behind. I love what they become. I love what I make them.

The new lieutenant arrived last week.
Such a pretty, pretty white boy.
“Sir—” I took him aside—
“Sir, if you’ll pardon me, you might want to check your uniform before you review the troops."
Wouldn’t you think he’d want to put those shiny yellow bars on, first thing?

I had a wife once. She was in the Army too. Then she started talking babies, biological clocks.
I told her I’d married a soldier, not an incubator, and if that was the way she felt not to let the door
hit her on the ass on her way out.
She lied when she married me.
She’ll have to answer if we’re held to account why we parted before death.

Had the day off.
Spent four hours polishing my jump boots.
The bowels of hell ain’t any deeper than the luster of that leather when I’m through with it. 
I can see my reflection—jawbone that hasn’t seen more than three days’ growth for sixteen years, 
eyelids chapped, 
red from running in the dry Alabama winter wind, 
nose broken in a fight I didn’t start but sure as hell finished.

Three years, seven months to retirement.
How I Admire Your Restraint

After hiding for hours under
a couch as tattered as your winter-
frozen ear, answering my calls
with the coldest of silences,
you peer around one end,
approach, stiff-legged, brows
scowling, and stalk toward me.
You’re purring already.

One paw reaches out to my left leg.
It prods, gentle as a hand coaxing
a sleeve down a woman’s arm.
Now you paw at my book, open your mouth
to release that rarely-used rusted-hinge
cry to alert me:
Now is the time. You are ready.

If I put my book down
(and won’t I always?)
will you climb on, cautious
as a strange lover, fall onto your side
while my hands roam over
a strong forehead, above autumn-grass
green eyes and along a back turning to fat
down to your twitching tail?
Will your eyes close, shutting out
all other senses but this one,
the pressure of hands
comforting as your mother’s tongue
once was, the touch,
the stroke of a chin?

Will one pawed leg reach along my breast
while your head rests against it, then drops back
over my arm as you arch, a parenthesis of pleasure
audible in the ragged purring, deepening, roughening,
until, overcome,
you stand, shake, and jump away,
leaving me to find my place
on a faded page? You can, after all,
take just so much happiness.
My Love, You’re So Self-Satisfied

The cat doesn’t mourn over thumbs for his paws.
Without any therapy, he seems to work through every single shortcoming. He loves all his flaws.

Clenching a smile with the mouse in his jaws,
while he looks quite convinced that his qualities do.
The cat doesn’t mourn over thumbs for his paws.

He’s certainly not on a search for the cause,
or searching his genes for a fault, for a clue for his precious shortcomings--he loves all his flaws.

With no hands to write of his history or laws
I’d think he’d forget what to do. Is he blue?
Nah--the cat doesn’t mourn over thumbs for his paws.

Neither can you do it all, just because,
my love, perfect you’re not (Though you’ve no time to rue every gorgeous shortcoming. You love all your flaws.)

When I think he’s defective, he shows me how claws serve him well, quite convincingly, rather like you.
No, you two never mourn. Au contraire: you will pause, contemplate your shortcomings then love all your flaws.
Zones of Silence

I don't have to go to Mexico, to the *zona de silencia* where land platforms are built toward the sky, meteors fall like spring rain, and foot-long albino insects and purple trees do well to keep the natives quiet, as do the saucers that buzz their villages in waspy warnings of what might come if they speak to the outside.

I needn't travel thousands of miles by ship to cruise with large-eyed desperados of love, their peeling burns lost forever in a triangle whose angles add up to nothing, really, when the ship is lost as the sun in a rainstorm.

It isn't necessary to go anywhere to find silence and loss in land masses and bodies of water when I have my own personal black hole of love and laughter in you.
666, or, The Anti-Transcendental Signified

She didn't start out thinking about being the son of Satan (first she thought she'd be the daughter but knew no one would take her seriously) and in fact she just started out trying to annoy her husband, especially after he tacked up that list: "The Wife's Place in the Home" which was fastened on the fridge with two magnets, a plastic Hershey's Kiss and a rubber Phillip's 66 logo. Somewhere between reading "My body is God's gift to my husband" and "My broken spirit is my gift to God" she got so annoyed she thought she'd play a harmless trick and tacked up little Zacharia's drawing of a fire engine with his plastic Playskool numbers, putting the orange six right up snug beside the rubber magnet. She had to smile to herself just a bit every time she went by, but not so he could notice, and when he didn't pay any attention she went ahead and bought black candles that she burned during dinner (he thought he was finally getting through to her and she was learning a man needs some pampering) but he never noticed they were on the points of a pentagram she'd traced lightly on the wood with a bar of soap. She did a little reading, she was feeling so frisky, and bought a little goat of porcelain (Zacharia thought it was just the cutest thing) she put right above the fireplace mantle and finally she took to boiling the dog droppings she collected off the lawn but he didn't say a word about the smell of shit that permeated the house. The bastard just wouldn't acknowledge that she had a direct and personal relationship to the King of Lies, the Prince of Darkness, he couldn't see the blood ties, the family resemblance to save his life.
Then she read that there wasn't any such thing as God anyway, it was just this whole transcendental load of crap perpetuated by men afraid of getting castrated if they didn't keep their women down, and she found that idea the least appealing of all, she thought she wanted a God, she wanted him big and omniscient and transcendental as all get out and she wanted him in her husband's corner and she thought she'd do just fine as the Son of Satan, castrated in the most beautiful way, and the sword she'd yield in the fight would be much more dangerous, yes, much more deadly, and sure as shooting a whole lot bigger than his.