

The Boy Sees the Man

The man
comes hustling down
my street
past my window.
He looks up at me, I look down
at him. Our looks don't meet.
He's headed someplace else. He'll go
downtown
to Else Street.

The Man Sees the Boy

The shortest line
between home and subway
is this straight street of strangers,
All the windows have eyes,
and I have eyes for none.
That boy looking down,
have I seen him before?
Should I smile? Wave?
I look straight ahead.
I must get to the corner.

A Trash Can's All Right for Basketball

A trash can's all right for basketball
but not if it's empty.

Every time you sink one
you have to lean way over
to get the ball.

It's hard on the ribs.

If you don't want to lean,
keep your city clean.

Bananas

The man at the store,
he's scared I'll steal
his bananas
if he just blinks.
Me,
I'm scared too.

The Things I've Done!

The things I've done
the things I've done,
who will believe me?
The things I've thought
and not been caught,
no one will believe me.
The times I've lied
the things I've tried,
you won't believe me.
The blood that's run
the fights I've won
the things I've done
Believe me!

Dreams

People say things you dream
can turn out true.
Some of the things I've been dreaming,
they'd better not.

Cakes

*Angel cake is white,
devil's cake is brown.
Turn it around.*

If I eat too much cake and get sick
and die
my friends won't wear black. They'll mourn
with a rainbow. They'll wear wide ties
all the way to the grave's green mound,
What I mean is,
they'll turn the cakes around.

They Caught Me Once

They caught me once
when I was small,
The time I stole
a Magic Marker.
I wanted it
to write my name
in purple flames
upon a certain wall.
“What is your name?
What is your name?”
the angry clerk kept asking.

I wouldn't say.

Plans

I'm thinking of getting
swimming lessons
so I can take
one of those ocean liners
around the world.
You know,
in case I fell off.

He Asks Me

He asks me
what I want to be
when I grow up.
I'm *grown*,
can't he see?

The Vow

If my mother marries again,
I won't take orders.

The Nightmare

I dreamt I was a man
but not a man
a dwarf.

Without feet I floated down my street
and the people looked down at me.
My mouth was full of their knees.

The Day My Father Went Away

The day my father went away
my uncle came up from Maryland
and gave us kids a ride
in his Mustang.
We were laughing most of the time.
Then he gave my father a ride,
and my mother kissed my father
before he went.
He hasn't come back.

Sales Song

Here's your Sunday car, man,
take your girl for a ride.

A honey of a car, man,
start it up—it's clean inside.

All right it has a few dents,
all right it's seen better days,
but for ninety-eight dollars and ninety-nine cents,
you can take it away.

Your money for this car, man,
give it a whirl—decide.
I can tell you're going far, man,
with your girl at your side,
with your girl at your side,
with your girl at your side. . . .

Fifth Street

The fat funeral man
squats on his front stoop
measuring his prospects.

T raveling

Some days fooling back
and forth on the block,
none of us going far,
we see metal trunks stacked
outside the luggage store.
I opened one once; it was empty
but it smelled packed.
If I had one of those big black trunks,
I'd *go*.

Open and Shut

Once a lady read my palm.
She said I'd become
a rich celebrity,
my future was golden.
I said hold on,
that seemed unlikely.
She said nevertheless
I was bound for success.
I said if you insist,
and looked at my palm:
it had turned into a fist.
The lady was gone.

Too Bad

It's too bad about substitute teachers:
they don't know our names.

Flowers and Roaches

One day my teacher showed me
a picture of her garden.
When life is ugly,
she said, remember this garden.

That night while I was dreaming
a roach crawled in my ear.
I woke up screaming,
and then—I remembered the flowers.

They pried it out at the clinic.

Sweet Thirteen and Wondering

I promised my mother I never will marry,
kids and bills, babies and spills.
I promised my brother I'll keep out of trouble,
kids and bills, babies and spills.
I promised my teacher to "strive to advance,"
verbs and nouns all over town.
I promised my girlfriend I'd get to the dance,
round and round and round and round.
Now what shall I promise myself, dear Lord,
what shall I promise myself?
(kids and bills, babies and spills)

Love Shadows

I stood
very still
outside their window
and watched the lovers.
When they pulled the shade
I watched their loving shadows.
I couldn't go,
I had to stay.

Granny

She thinks she's still down home,
bossing and kissing.

Bitter-Sweet

Most Sundays
I sin for candy.
I keep the dime
my mother gives me
to drop in the collection.
There's a way to palm the dime
and at the same time
make the box clink.
It's a small sin,
I think.

I Met a Boy

I met a boy,
I met a boy.
He's not loud or mean.

He's seventeen,
he's really seventeen,
and he has a goatee.

He likes me,
he likes me.
I think he likes me.

Last night he called me,
he swears he called me,
but my line was busy.

Tonight I'm dizzy,
sulky and dizzy.
It's the waiting that's worst.

June twenty-first,
June twenty-first
is my birthday.

Should I tell him?

Some Summer Nights

Some summer nights
I sneak away
and cross the bridge
to the side
where we don't live.
It's cooler there
some summer nights.

My Homecoming

I'm told when my father came to take us home,
after I was born,
he brought nothing bright for me to wear,
just an old blanket
turned yellow and ragged from washings,
and my mother was ashamed
in front of the nurses.
She held me away from my father.

If I Have to Die...

Somebody said
the dead don't die:
they turn into animals
and live awhile longer.
If so, my sister wants
to be a puppy.
She's a puppy already
the way she yips.
Me,
I'll be
a Persian cat,
if I have to die and be something.

The Amazing Story of How I Was Born

My mom comes from the Deep South,
my dad from Trinidad;
I was born in the mouth
of a whale who spat when he was mad.
He was sunning himself on the Mississippi,
holding me tenderly in his jaws,
when up from the ooze swam a Dixie hippie
and tickled him under his Arkansas.

That's when he spat,
and that's how I got where I'm at.

The Devil

What I'm going to tell you
is strictly on the level:
I have seen the Devil.

The Devil sleeps but doesn't snore,
he blows into his beard.
The Devil never smiles,
his thirteen teeth are weird.
The Devil's all alone,
he shakes because he's scared.
The Devil seems unhappy,
his beard drips with tears.

The Devil's in my closet.
If my closet had a door
I'd slam it on his beard.

The Flagpole Has No Flag

The flagpole has no flag.
They say one night
some kids stole it,
anyway it's gone.
The rusty pole
stands in the middle of the project,
and when the wind comes
it clangs—
the old drooping rope
against the cold pole—
like some forgotten buoy
tossing in a big sea.

Some nights I hear
the clanging in the wind.
I toss
and feel forgotten.

Lullaby

light	dark	light	dark	light	dark
hot	night	hot	night	hot	night
must	get	sleep		sleep	
BAR		BAR		BAR	
red	bed	red	bed	red	bed
beer	can	kicked		kicked	
can't	sleep	can't	sleep	can't	sleep
car		car		car	
heels	click	heels	click	heels	click
one	two	kick		kick	
she	screams	dog	barks	dog	barks
BAR		BAR		BAR	
can't	sleep	can't	sleep	can't	sleep
hot	night	hot	night	hot	night
red	bed	red	bed	red	bed
BAR		BAR		BAR	
BAR		BAR			

What a Night!

Mother was out.
My little brother started crying,
and I thought maybe he was dying of hunger.
I found just two eggs,
and no matches.
Then *I* started crying.

4 AM.

The buzzer
must have buzzed
a thousand times,
sawing
toward the dark knot of our dreams.
Mother said a drunk.
Father said some punk.
I said
when are we going to move?

Looking for a Place

“I have just three children,
three is all I have,”
my mother told the landlord.
“No, seven,” I said.
“Shut up,” she hissed. “Do you
want to live in a tent?”
I wondered if I
was one of the three she meant.

Accommodations

I'm Summering at Valencia Court,
my friend at Welfare found it;
I'm Wintering at a small resort
where the heat works if you pound it.
I'll be Springing at this place I know
next door to the Monterey;
the view of broken glass below
takes my breath away.
The Belvedere is out this year,
no one important stays there;
and frankly I'm fed up to here
with the Broadmoor and the Mayfair.
The Whitehall lacks a certain charm,
the service is appalling;
perhaps I'll try the Clinton Arms—
they say it's fine for Falling.

Right? Wrong

At last the police are black and white.
Prepare for fair days and impartial nights.

Right?

Wrong. Chasers are their own race—
when you're being chased.

This Morning's News

Yesterday was so hot
kids opened 4300 hydrants
all over the city
and oceans of cold water
ran down the sewers,
drying up and turning off
all the expensive air-conditioners
in the big offices downtown,
and the man sweated in his button-down shirt.
Isn't that a shame?

Integration

It happens every day
always the same way,
you can depend on it:
the walkers get to school first;
they play outside before the bell.
At eight fifty-six—have no doubt—
the new bus from over the canal
appears, and all the children shout,
“The colored bus is here.”

The Cabbie

I was born around the corner
but that was long ago.
I live in Flatbush now.
We were poor.
No one will ever know
just how.

One small basin in the hall
for everyone to share.
The toilet was outside.
In the winter no coal . . .
and remember: no Welfare.
My little sister died.

We never had enough.
We kids wore those tight caps,
you know, like George Raft,
and we were tough.
For fifty cents we'd slap
some guy around. Or do it just for laughs.

You see that place across the street,
where it says "Mobilization for Youth"?
That was once a Hungarian restaurant
where Teddy Roosevelt used to eat.
I'm telling you the honest truth:
I couldn't begin to count

all the lunches he had down here
just a few blocks
from where I hung around.
Of course now nobody comes here.
It's the blacks
who've dragged the neighborhood down.

A Discussion

“So you live at 1581 Park Avenue.
Used to be a good address.”

“Yes.”

“Now it’s sort of gone to . . .
well, you know.”

“No.”

One Man's History

As a baby I was taught to smile;
my mother wanted a happy child.

As a boy I was warmed by the sun
and fanned by sufficient funds.

As a youth I was given a car;
I planned to go far.

As a young man I dreamed of love,
uncertain what I was dreaming of.

As a husband I stopped hunting honey
and started chasing money.

As a citizen I tried to be
a friend to all humanity.

As a success I nursed my pride,
and then I died.

Touches

Albert

My hand on your shoulder
makes you all edges.
You shrug me off
and hug yourself hard.

Thomasina

That boy you swatted
so hard he cried,
because he touched your hair . .
he says he touched you
because he likes you.

Mr. B.

When you scold a child
so professionally
he weeps
(and after you have written
“good interaction”
in his folder),
do you long to touch him?

On the Outskirts of Town

There was a young messenger
who found himself on the outskirts of town,
outside the wall.

The wall was too thick to speak through,
too hard to crack and too high to vault.

There was a gate,
but it was painfully narrow,
permitting nothing to pass
but sand and sorrow.

Fortunately, the messenger carried chalk;
he began to scrawl
his message on the wall.

He did this continually,
day after day, year after year,
until the entire wall encircling the town
was covered with his writing.
Then he returned to his starting point
and began anew.

But the townspeople, living their minutes
on the other side, did not know.
Sometimes, lying awake in their beds,
they actually heard
the chalk scraping the wall.
But they thought it might be their own breathing,
or perhaps a small bird.
Never did they dream it was a message for the

The messenger grew old.
His hair turned white (partly from chalk dust)
and his fingers became stiff.
Still he wrote on.
He had no other engagements.

In time a second messenger
was sent to seek the first.
He found the old man
lying beside the wall,
too worn to write another word.
The new messenger said a prayer
and took the chalk
from between the dying man's fingers.
Then he began to scrawl
the same old message to the town:
**THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL
WILL WEAR THIS WALL DOWN.**

Dancing on Rivers

An enormous map of Puerto Rico
has been painted on the classroom floor;
a green Caribbean laps the walls.
The teacher asks for origins:
there is a scurrying of Bronx feet
across blue mountains and along red rivers
to Ponce . . . San Juan . . . Arecibo.
These are names to stand on:
red currents rush into bloodstreams.

If I were asked to take my stance,
would I sweep the mind's floor
in search of the Oder ... the Vistula . . .
the spent Hudson that harbored
my fathers' hopes?
I am a child dancing on rivers,
swinging my soul.

Man, Where're You At?

Dear Hector:

You asked me, "Man, where're you at?"

I'm trying to tell you.

I earn bread writing near a stream
that runs between my door and a willow tree.
Each night it trickles north through my parched dreams,
turning them green. At dawn
two mallards make love upon the pond.
There are blue eggs buried on the far shore.

This stream joins the Norwalk River farther down
and forms a sparkling spine
along the back of my lounging town,
emptying at last into Long Island Sound. In time
the waters on which the mallards enlarged
their dawn lap the piers of Triborough Bridge,
sixty miles from my cushioned lawn.

Some days, seeking the waters' source,
I am turned downstream by some civilizing force,
toward the city, toward where the questions are.

Man, where're you at?

A good question, that,

but who would believe an answer fetched so far?

Shade Power

Black is beauty, yes,
and I should guess
that other inner hues also
bring good news
to their messengers.
I mean no slur;
we need not blur our shades:
we were made to be thus haunted,
and being haunted, remade.