
Vegetarian Physics

The tofu that's shown up overnight in this house is frightening
proof of the Law of Conservation: matter that simply cannot be
created or destroyed. Matter older than Newton,
who knew better than to taste it. Older than Lao-tzu,
who thought about it but finally chose harmonious non-interference.
I'd like to be philosophical too, see it as some kind of pale
inscrutable wisdom among the hot dogs, the cold chicken,
the leftover deviled eggs, but I'm talking curdled
soybean milk. And I don't have that kind of energy.

I'd rather not be part of the precariously metaphorical
wedding of modern physics and the ancient Eastern mysteries.
But still: whoever stashed the tofu in my Frigidaire
had better come back for it soon. I'm not Einstein
but I'm smart enough to know a bad idea when I see it
taking up space, biding its time.
Like so much that demands our imperfect attention
amid the particle roar of the world: going nowhere, fast.

All You Can Do: For Benjamin, Not Yet Born

You are something we said last year, and more: you're what came between us, what we did—our best idea yet.

By now you've done almost everything you can think of, standing on your head in the amniotic dark. You've gone nearly as far as physics will allow, an echo made flesh across space and time, flexing your muscle, throwing your burgeoning weight around in the oldest ocean known.

I've felt you kicking at the limits of the only world you've got, ripples growing stronger in the long dark, the luxuriant bed your mother's made for us both. And I can't wait to see your face, your headfirst plunge into daylight. I'll take you still kicking, drawing that first unmitigated breath and screaming yourself some otherworldly shade of red—that age-old declaration handed down in the quickening blood on fire with this new life: forgive me for saying it this way, but from now on it's every man for himself.

You are your wide-eyed parents somewhere way out here writ small, already knowing better: making it up as you go along on sheer impulse. You're all nerve and uncluttered heart. You'll come soon enough to those overwrought first words for what your life's been like so far: the fine-tuned mechanics of crying and feeding and falling asleep and finally crawling into a day so enormous, you'll think it never ends.

But under your own power at last, your tiny kingdom come. Sometimes it will be all you can do to smile that ridiculous smile. It's a wonder anything gets done, here on Earth as it is.

And we'll be right with you, on our knees in your extreme of gravity—humbled or grateful or utterly exhausted just imagining the act of standing up and wobbling, trying to get anywhere with those erratic baby steps before the inevitable crash-landing on a planet that thinks nothing of spinning us off balance for the hell of it.

Thanks to you

and your small brilliance on the horizon, we can already make out voices in the distance, singing the restless everywhere to sleep and waking them later, still a far cry from anything they dreamed. There's no mistaking the discombobulated joy, the death-defying acrobatics of walking into the rest of our lives from here.

New Year's Eve Letter to Friends

Every year the odds are stacked against it
turning out the way you'd like:
a year of smooth, a year of easy smile,
a year like a lake you could float on,
looking up at a blue year of soothing sky.

Mostly the letters you're expecting never come.
Lovers walk out and keep on going
and in no time they're no friends of yours.
Mostly, the sheer weight of days
gone awfully wrong: a tire blown out,
someone's heart caving in,
the hole worn finally through the roof.
Sometimes it's only a few tenacious cells
digging in against complete dissolve.
The smallest strand of DNA, stretched thin
over thousands of years, goes taut
and finally holds.

I've watched men at the Mission staring out
into the middle distance,
putting up with the latest version of salvation,
all the time wondering just
how long until the bowl and spoon.
They've been around enough to know
the good part's always saved for last and
there's no promise they won't make to get there.
Each year cuts our lives down to size,

to something we can almost use. So we find it
somewhere in our hearts: another ring shows up
when we lay open the cross-section.
One more hard line in the hand
spreading slowly out of its clench.

It used to be the world was so small
you could walk out to the end of it
and back in a single day. Now it seems
to take all year to make it mostly back.
And so this is for my friends all over:
a new year. Year the longshot comes home.
The year letters pour in, full of the good word
that never got as far as you before.
The year lovers come to know a good thing
when they find it in the press of familiar flesh.
Walk out onto the planet tonight. Even the moon
is giving back your share of borrowed light
and you take it back, in the name of everything
you can't take back in your life.
Imagine yourself filling with it,
letting yourself go and floating
through the skeleton trees to your place
at the top of the sky.

And here's the best part, coming last,
just after all your practiced shows of faith.
Even now, while you're still salvaging

Clemell - (A)

New Year's Eve letter

what passes for resolve.
Remember this, no matter what else happens:
this year you'll never go without.
It's no small thing you've been in line for,
this bowl and spoon passed finally to you.

IN MY DREAM, COLEMAN HAWKINS

walked right up to me at the corner of West 52nd and Broadway,
and he actually said *Do you know how to get to
Carnegie Hall?* And even in my dream I realized
he'd been dead since 1969, although I still couldn't believe it,
his not knowing Carnegie Hall was only blocks away,
so I figured he'd meant all along to be setting me up instead,
but who was I to deliver a punchline to the Hawk
himself, the royal Bean—to my ear, the unmistakable
heavyweight champion of the tenor saxophone world?
*I'll blow you a real quick chorus or two
if you help me out just this one time, man*—and, no joke,
that's exactly what the late Coleman Hawkins did.
So, finally, I had to tell him: *Practice*. And I guess
he had to laugh: *That's really what I needed to hear*.
Then he thwacked me with his immortal horn, and I woke up
to the coolest breeze through any window, ever, my head still ringing
with every strain of that jazzman's *Body and Soul*.

Why the Bird Dropped You, Marlan

Two large black birds with 8-foot wingspans swooped into a backyard in Lawndale, Illinois and took a 10-year-old boy for a twenty-foot ride, his mother said yesterday.

—from a newspaper story

You're just finding out
what you don't need to believe. 70 pounds,
not enough yet in the world to realize
what your screaming said. To your mother
waving her own arms like wings,
wanting the world to slow down for a second.
To the bird, scared in its prehistoric brain,
just playing with you and the experts who would say
no North American bird like this.
What could you know
over the beating of wings, of birdheart
and your own heart flapping out the ribcage,
over softness of breastfeathers tousling your hair?

Your weight? Not too much for this bird.
Not the scream flying out your small mouth.
Maybe the bird itself, feeling its own hugeness
crowding the day, too suddenly unexpected.
Lifting you like another feather
but straining the limits broad daylight allows.
At night with no one watching
you could have gone farther,
you and this great bird together
no longer a bundle of uneasy grace.

Moving in and out of the dark all night
until breakfast, and your mother calls you down
and you come from wherever you are.
Anything less conspicuous
than a Midwest summer afternoon!

From now on you'll hear a thousand answers to
no question. When you talk with your friends
and the reporters come flocking,
stick to your ten years,
all the facts they want to know.
Later, in color encyclopedias,
you can look for names that fit
the jetblack wings, the 12-inch head,
the rings around the neck and the claws
that came down on your shoulders and had you,
Marlan, had all of them going for awhile.