

Between Parentheses

Does it all come down, at last,
to slipping onto the subway
before the doors shush closed

or not?

To dropping by a bar
for one last nightcap
before the morning flight to Rome?

Or stumbling home instead?

Such minor divisions
between this life and another

The width of a bullet

A hinge

The time it takes a glance
to register

or fall away undetected

The Body-Bagger's Lament

There are 360 ways to die
 in this dying city
And I've seen them all

The thing is how to get
 from where we are—not-dying,
 not yet, anyway—
 to that far place

It's a simple problem:
 the kind of complication
 people work through every day

Until one morning they're stumbled across
 in a weedy lot, pockets
 turned out

Or found standing there dead
 at a stove, purse
 still hanging from one elbow

Or shoveled up in pieces from the tracks

There: done

Problem solved, gap bridged

We are where we want to be:

far away from here

Where it seems like eighty percent of us

die naked

And another seventy percent

die on the toilet

Which means, hypothetically,

that most individuals

will die naked on the toilet

Hard to fathom, but just

ask Elvis

NYPD: Voluntary Disclosure Form

My name is Paul Cortez

My name is Andrea Schwarz

My name is Joseph Weir

My name is Lucyra Turyk

*

Everybody talks

Almost nobody doesn't talk

Should they? Never

Never, under any circumstances

Une grave erreur

*

*You can cut off both of my hands
but I can tell you
I did nothing wrong*

The diamonds are in the bathroom

*I bow down to women, sometimes
I kiss their feet*

I am evil and guilty

*

And what do they talk about?
Love, sex, betrayal
A kind of literature
of the everyday criminal
in which many Hamlet-like moments

lead up to an alibi

*

I am a successful actor

I am a French photographer

I am a homeless man, I am a yoga teacher

*I am a former Women's Wear Daily writer
who disguises himself
in a firefighter's uniform*

I am Robert DeNiro's housekeeper

In Orbit

Say you've fallen gradually in love
with someone who's not quite human:
a kind of plasma
projected from your conscience
Perhaps your wife, dead ten years,
whom you left abruptly

And say her friend, out of comradely concern,
tells your wife of her alien origin
Shaken, she fills with disgust
at her own deception

In Marx's words, What is to be done?

Until now, everything has been a stream
of daydreams
overflowing into sleep
Unable, for more than a moment or two,
to parse *me* from *memory*:

How snow fell onto narrow streets
The taste of a cigarette
 that stays with you for days
A single tree, a solitary train track

Those somber places called houses

Contentment flares up in you
As if you're being welcomed back
 to a lost town
 waiting for you for twenty years

Who else could you have been?
An insect, a mindless clerk, a kind
 of mundane snail?
Instead of being drunk on sights and smells
 of what once was
 and is no more?

From the Moon

Car wreck

Fire

Electrocution

Explosion

At a gas station, a car
 blows up
 the thieves driving off
 with the nozzle still sticking out

We feel somehow we shouldn't gawk
But how could we not?

So we do

At what's tangled, amiss
At what stares back at us
as if into the lens of a camera

*

One minute you're boarding a bus
The next it slams into a train

Or: a small plane plummets
from the sky

Or: a teenage boy
is found floating
at the bottom of a pool

suspended
just above the murky tiles

The grainy quality of the water
that of pictures radioed back
from the moon

*

There is never a human reason
for what happens

The body of Jesus Balzadua, shocked
by 60,000 watts

dangles

at the top of a telephone pole
just like, well, you-know-who in
“Deposition from the Cross”

Or a young boy on a stretcher
who’s been hit by a car

raises his right arm
as if he’s tossing a ball into the air
(remember Spain, circa 1937?)

Consider Bertha Ibaura Garcia
dressmaker
who after discovering her ex-husband
has stolen their daughter

seeks out the tallest tree
in Capultec Park

to leave a note in her pocket
blaming herself

There is the tree
splattered with sunlight
A quiet afternoon

Her head turned slightly,
calmy gazing
up into the branches
as if she's on a Sunday stroll

until you see
the strand of white rope

Or what of that beautiful woman
with her arm draped
just so

over a bent street lamp
her eyes open, impassive
on her forehead a trickle of blood

matching her lipstick

It can't really be happening, can it?
It must be an actress

And, actually, she is:

Adela Legaretta Rivas
struck by a white Datsun
one morning in April

*

Who can tell what's real
what's not anymore

Even in the most grotesque circumstances
it takes a second
to register the punch line

Someone slumps to the ground
The robbers pause in the supermarket
A car swerves across the median
No one answers the door

A New Kingdom

A snowy night

The back of his neck

Walking to the car, in the middle
of the block, suddenly:
a new kingdom

*

No more ink pens
A paper clip? he knows what
a paper clip
does, not what it is

What it is: something else

And then: very bad news
Finding him in front of the refrigerator

pouring orange juice
onto the floor

*

Yes No No Thank You

*

Him thinking: blueberries
Blueberries are the key

Or: re-reading a novel in Dutch
Bike riding in Tokyo
Buttoning the three buttons of a shirt

*

As if a train is whistling through a valley
and we stand there waving
to the far-off travelers

The thing that brought us here
an illness that sounds
like a lovely flower

Consider

The pure gaze of a guy
on an elevator, like someone
who's just found the limp carcass
of a hare, fallen

from one of the apartment balconies
onto a mound of snow

Consider that hollow's red tattoo

Inside his gaze
the awful fate of one
who comes and watches, displeased

yet

unable to thwart or lead
or even bluff

How thick is the ice

wonder those who pass by

Will my husband

sicken further, may a bottle of milk

be faithful to itself

All of us clerks in a small

post office, all of us doctors

with inadequate fathers

From the Second Story

Beloved is the one
 who sits down

Beloved is a reader
 in a blue dress

Beloved are those who kneel
 in a cafe doorway
 to wait in the rain for a bus

Also the nervous pianist,
 the ashen salesman,
 the young schoolgirl who scurries
 through falling leaves

The distressed, the absent, the misfits
 and querulous, the hapless
 candidates and apartment dwellers,
 the aria-singing subway riders

Beloved is the one
 who sits down
 and who suddenly rises

Beloved is the one
 who goes home alone

The one who waits to eat,
 who hurries by,
 who at a staff meeting
 spreads out his fingers knowingly