DISTURBANCES

by

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Introduction

While most of the similar and important trends in American Poetry today symbolize a confident return to traditional credentials, it is very often the singular adornments of these trends that have a more profound effect on the genre. While this is not necessarily a detriment, it should be noted that such movements are usually possessed by a body of ideology undergoing a literary exorcism and tend to serve as a powerful and exuberant reflection of our national distrust for all art.

In truth, much of our poetry today attempts to reassert Carl Sandburg's phlegmatic dictum of a "conditionless condition of the condition," in which the aesthetic notion of poetry's future rests firmly in the jaws of those who are capable of saying all the right things with astonishing regularity, and usually more than once. This shift is further directed by some of America's more prominently fixtured poets who appear obligated, willing, and even eager to embrace a kinder and gentler poetry that communicates less about itself than it does about the infestation of its own image.

Such a shameless sameness of literary trends has generated a great deal of serious confusion in the main. But in the end, it all appears to be in good fun. As prizewinning poet Galway Kinnell so keenly observed recently, "Poetry helps those who help themselves, especially to all the awards." Kinnell, who, in recent years, has been at the forefront of a growing movement that advocates a renewed interest in his own poetry, continues to be a strong voice for the varied and inconsequential issues of our time.

Fortunately, Elio Ligi's poetry has nothing to do with any of this. In fact, his poetry sometimes seems difficult to pin down. Like his music (Ligi is an accomplished composer and featured trombonist with the Portland Philharmonic), his poetry is likely to be noted for a certain special riff, an extra glide, a kick where none is expected, and a beat for which there is no notation. It follows the literary traditions of the language it uses, but it does not hold them sacred. As a result, there has been a tendency for critics to put his work in a category by itself, outside the main body of American verse, in much the same manner as early Negro Poetry.

Ligi first attracted the attention of the Beats in the early Sixties, garnering bemused and scattered praise from Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Bob Kaufman, who once referred to Ligi as "an Italian-American Rimbaud." But it was Lawrence Ferlinghetti who recognized his peculiar talent for obscuring and elucidating with a mix of passion and apathy, remarking once that his poetry was "like a dead bird I held in my hands and wished to fly once more, breathing life into its tiny lungs that I might elevate such a limp
hope to wing again.” Ferlinghetti was speaking of his own poetry here, but the point is well taken.

Critical acceptance of Ligi’s first book of poems, *Stinking and Full of Eels* (1967), was sparse, contrived, and mostly non-existent. Mark Van Doren’s weekly column in the *London Literary Times* commented briefly enough on the book to win Ligi a letter of support on Stephen Spender’s personal stationery, but this later proved to be a forgery. However, in his column notes on the book, Van Doren wrote: “The cacophony of noise and nonsense that retreats and advances on the bloodless battlefields of American academia is a far cry from Elio Ligi’s poetry, which, if given the opportunity under similar warlike conditions, would probably ignore the screams of the wounded and shoot all prisoners. [Ligi’s] poetry is a reminder to his peers and a testament to the ideal that, no matter the cause or influence, poetry is, after all, a losing proposition.”

In 1970 his breakthrough book was published, *Song of the Turkey Hangers*, and he was immediately courted by William Everson and Kenneth Patchen, who would later invite Ligi to join them in a series of readings for the 1971 Breadloaf Conference affectionately billing themselves as “Two Old Goats and a Kid.” “He [Ligi] was as unpredictable as a summer storm when he stepped in front of a microphone.” Patchen would later recall in a *Paris Review* interview, “He gave [the students] both a feeling of wild hopelessness and fierce futurity. Bill [Everson] and I were as mesmerized as anyone by his work. No question, but there was strong resistance from some as to where his work was coming from, where it was going, and where it ultimately stood in relation to his contemporaries. To this day, I still can’t tell you.”

It wasn’t until publication of *Some Accident Between the Grass and My Feet* (1977) and Kenneth Rexroth’s blistering endorsement of it in the *New York Review of Books*, that the controversy surrounding the poet’s apocalyptic vision and black humor brought him the national attention he deserved. If only for that particular issue. Wrote Rexroth: “For some, Elio Ligi can be a disturbing poet. For others, he is simply disturbed, though I suspect the pox of such a judgment is rendered by those victimized by his argument and not his verse. Disturbed or not, it is not for me to decide if others are correct on this point. On the other hand, I often find myself

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*One of Ligi’s early influences reveals a fascinating connection to the poet Wallace Stevens. It was the poet’s grandfather, Emiliano Ligi, who, at the turn of the century, became one of the first to purchase a life insurance policy from the then-young and struggling insurance salesman from Hartford, Connecticut. Lifelong friends until the policy was inexplicably cancelled by Stevens’ company two days before Emiliano Ligi’s death, their kindness for one another was manifested in Stevens’ famous poem, “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” a playful tribute to the elder Ligi’s ice cream cone and container business located on Emperor Avenue in Stamford, Connecticut. In fact, it was many years before it was revealed that the initials “E. L.” to whom the poem was dedicated, did not refer to Stevens’ sweetheart, Eleanor Lake.*
quoting Plutarch, who, upon hearing rumors of Demostenes' great mental anguish, said: 'I suspect as much.'

This presents us with yet another challenge in Ligi’s latest collection, **Disturbances**, which echoes much of what is disturbed and disturbing in a dying world that continually mistakes disease for good health. The book offers itself as a metaphor for trouble, and it succeeds. The confused and confounded brilliance of such poems as, “Military Time,” “That There Is No Justice,” “The Lamplady’s Lampwhite Hands,” and “Dreaming the Suislaw,” cleverly relay a kind of crisis of representation: that particular situation (some call it “post-stoogism”) in which signs start to outnumber and eventually replace the very things they signify, setting the table for an almost futile, incessant and empty crossfire of reference that never hits the mark in reality. And reality is one of Ligi’s determined pursuers.

As one might expect, there is a theoretical bent here. Much of Ligi’s work is predicated on the notion that all experience is structured in advance by dual systems of information control and disinformation revolt, so the experience it offers is usually up/downbeat to the point of animation on the one hand and anaesthesia on the other. In **Disturbances**, a paradox is created when the work reaches back into itself, riding an undertow of artfully disguised satire, claiming the dark and doomed violence of its own absurd voice. This is an essential and powerful cornerstone of Ligi’s edifice, and it is here that he has no equal. His poem, “Another Maniac,” is an excellent example of this creative process, as are the poems, “How We Lived And Let Live,” “The Times You Kill Yourself,” “How Long Have I Got Here,” and the exquisitely brilliant, “I Am Dying,” which is not included in this collection or any other, but is worth mentioning just the same.

**Disturbances** is a triumph of style over fashion, and Elio Ligi is dressed to kill. Though the reader may run the risk of perceptive seeing as a process of paranoid reading, the book’s effectiveness comes from realizing that you simply can’t tell what’s about until you’ve read it completely at least once. A mean task for some, but for others it offers the view that it is the joke, after all, and not the violence, that caused the hair on the back of the neck to rise.

And for Elio Ligi’s money, the joke may very well be on us.

*Paul Ferriano*

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* Ligi’s almost Sveffian dislike for the fellow man prompted him to march in a “Save the Earth” demonstration in Los Angeles in 1988, carrying a placard that read “Bring On The Bomb.” Some of the more radical elements in the movement physically assaulted him at one point, failing to recognize even the slightest error of their actions. As one enraged environmentalist justified later on national television, “He started it!”
“The world is a nettle: disturb it, it stings.”

“Lucile”
Owen Meredith
Going Through Reams

my aunt stabbed my father
in the shoulder with a fork

my father picked my aunt up
threw her down the stairs
broke both her arms

somebody stole my father’s passbook
withdrew his savings

my aunt’s hospital bills
got paid

his pigeons disappeared
from the roof
the family ate stew

there is no mystery here
life is no who-done-it

my aunt was killed by a wolf
in new york city
my father lives in virginia
my grandfather plays tennis in italy

the tower of pisa gets ready
finally
to fall
Death

If I finish the second fifth of everclear
I will not find out tomorrow
I will not miss anything
the birds will perch on the trellis
and shit on the beans
the cat will snick snack at the birds
the phone will either ring or not ring
if it rings I will not answer it
Looking Back Upon My Weeks in the Specialized Treatment Center
I Realize the True Meaning of Nostalgia

for Tithonus

I can be afraid. there is no law
against it in this world
private walker strapped in his cradle
while sunlamps try to scar the craters in
his back but they won’t heal
and walker’s a head with arms
trailing a six foot stump while
black billy groans in the bed beside me
with the big gut he got in the highlands
bad water the captain said
and down the hall the major screams
his cancer to an empty room
tonight maybe someone will kill him
we really need the sleep
last week the shell-shocked greek
threw a fit got himself tied
and tossed mouth-side up
and puked and drowned in it
they’ve tried everything on the major
but nothing seems to work
How We Lived and Let Live

When I was ten around New York
Akis slammed me down with a garbage can cover
after I'd beaten him fair
over a girl.

Two weeks later
when the stitches came out
I got him back
with a brick behind the neck
which cost me a beat in face
a broken nose and glass in my eyes.
I hadn't figured on his brother.

Akis and I got along after that.
He walks with a limp
and his arms shake a little
but my eyes don't focus
and the scar in my scalp
itches me awake in the night.
After All I Have Waited

the snow has finally come
in March in Arkansas
with a roster of names
awaiting grades
and me watching the snow
falling over senior walk

I have waited for snow like this
for all my life
after love and murder
I have stood in snow like this
to see a first friend buried
after a drunken night
of knives after church
after an Irish girl with braced teeth
wet pants and Jesus
after all
I have waited for snow

I have slept in a ditch
beneath a drift of it
and almost lost two fingers
from being covered up so long
and I would do it again
for snow
is what we do not learn from
what has finally come
The Landlady’s Lampwhite Hands

The day we found him the price of eggs
was eighty-seven cents a dozen
in cleveland
boys played ringolevio
on the rooftops
rain fell from boston to fairfax
and the landlady in a pink housecoat
full of flowers
unlocked the door

a bus pulled away for 19th street
with a girl I earlier imagined
would take off her clothes
in a small room to nap
beneath a window fan
and later I would knock

some of our visits are far too late
even when we arrive on time
and all that might have happened
if I hadn’t stopped
to watch her board the bus
is miss the lady with the keys

that girl that day
will never find an end to themselves

I can’t say I haven’t imagined her
forty years from now
the landlady’s lampwhite hands
clutching at her mouth
and him a world away

eight or nine days rotten
between the dresser and
the unmade bed
while I scrounged on his desk
for a note of some reason
for this brutal refusal
to keep an appointment made
more than a month ago

some friend
Against All Probability

A bird becomes a leaf. When winter comes it comes because a bird is gone.

The point at which a bird and tree are fused eternally is called an evergreen.

It is possible to press a bird between the pages of a book like any other leaf.
The First Attack

Great pain he wrote please do not spare
The shadow of this fin behind which I cannot hide
My arm bubbles as if the old unit advanced on my fingers
A charred rubble of soul and muscle behind it
Out of which no new life will arise
Deny the enemy immortality forever
No tree no fruit to cool against the coming hunger
Dead insects inches deep between the soil and the sun
I have not lost my nerve but only its connections please
The flame in his shoulder burst through the veins in his neck
And his fear battered out his eyes until he saw
The face of great pain black and humorless as sand
The capillaries pounding like hailstones on his brain stem
Tore loose his retinas to free the fin
Against the blank wall he stared at
Praying to pain great pain the standard of splendid flags
Missing Death on Holtzclaw’s Pond
	here in the ice on holtzclaw’s pond
tommy shipman saw the darkness surface
and when he told the corpsman
the mud is not a bad place to die
my brother can always play hockey
he was talking nonsense
when he said one day a great ray arose
from the muck beyond cos cob
beneath my father’s boat
and I tripped on the dead man’s nose
but I always dreamt the beast
who trampled down the mountains
and the man who hanged from the elder
while the lady in the white dress
watched from the porch
he was listing the lessons
he had not learned from
three holes in his belly
held no terror for him
how could such small things
make any difference
Night

can hearken to me
I hear it prying up the window
in the outer room
its breath arrest me
even from death
as it crawls across the carpet
I imagine it is not human
yet it means me much harm
I rearrange the covers
pulling my cool feet
back onto the bed
our hearts are magnificent muscles
our blood should be able to help us
we have long got away from the jungle
we have conquered the planet
we will soon claim the stars
what waits by the footboard
has not come for a purpose
still waits
Purge

when buddy came back
I locked myself in the basement
and never went to look
what they built from the body bag
so buddy never died

when spearman tied the blocks around his neck
I bought a fifth
and slept through the service
and snored and pissed
more than myself

what we have here
passes through us
food or information
it does not last

no matter how tightly
we fasten the noose
we cannot hold it in
This Blessed Inconvenience

has nothing to do
with my foot the road gets longer
only behind my eyes
the road gets longer

and nothing to do with the thread
the scar the needle nor the planets fish
in the trees below the mirror
where lumbee hung
their antelope once

our deer we called them
because they never came
some say they
invented the arrow

and we put this down
in our histories the way we speak
to the river only
whenever we read
our words we find
our names no longer
believe us

this blessed inconvenience keeps me walking
at the end of the river
to the end of the road
The End of Exercise

no more of this eternal
infallibility of birds
I've seen the weak ones fall
from a thousand feet
in this mechanical run
to balance the tropics
a handful of featherless jelly to show
no matter what the season is
things die
stupidly
it is better to stand still
and greet it
this dumb finality
without a face
you will never beat it
it never enters the race
Dreaming the Suislaw

I saw a steelhead in the suislaw swimming
high in the black foam above the plywood plant
I was not thinking of music
I was not thinking even of fishing

the end of the world was coming
the lies and the leaders
were finely and finally tied
fishing was what I could and would do
music was everything else

and I was a part written for reeds
and the firethorn strings
and the water was not thunder
and in the sky and earth
was no conductor

we could have played
forever
for nothing
without applause

Author’s note: Dreaming the Suislaw has an originally unintentional misspelling of the river’s name. On the south central Oregon coast there is a river and national forest called the Siuslaw, and I have no idea how the word is pronounced. But the word I heard in my head was pronounced Sooslaw, so I decided to stick with the misspelling, especially since the poem is not about a particular river, but the state of mind of being part of the river.
Ramification

The tree that fell in the forest
But no one heard
Died of shame

Until McKinley Horres came
The tree was a live oak
Among the maples and the locusts and the larks
A part of the wild wood in the hollow
On Old Man Parker's place
And before that Old Man Lake's

It bore its lightning burnt branches
And burls without complaint
Whatever damage the beetles had done
Had failed either to maim it
Or give it a name

Nobody knew this tree was there
Nowhere near a fence
No peculiar stone formation
No ancient junkpile
No initials in its bark

After eighty years
It was simply a middle-aged oak
Among other simple trees

McKinley came in early March
And climbed to wait
For a shot at the deer
The white one with so many points
The locals stopped keeping count
Before it was Old Man Lake's

For nine years now McKinley Horres
Dreamed of that buck
And in those dreams
He waited in a tree like this
Crouched in a cradle of moss-padded limbs
So far from the orchards and the runs
Not even a berry bush
Not even a puddle where a beast
Might stop to drink
So far from his father and his friends
No bullet could make a sound

Most things never work out
The way you dream them
Night trudges in pulling a cold
Dark blanket behind it
And boys in the trees
Start thinking of soup and home

So McKinley started down at nightfall
Stumbled on a slick ooz of sap
And lost his balance
Tumbling down a half dozen rungs
Of live oak ladder
Until his left foot caught
In a crotch and broke his leg

Nobody knew where he was
And he hung there
Wedges in a prong on the tree of his dreams
So nobody heard him
Even though he called

One hour two hours three
McKinley tried to set his foot free
He screamed until his throat bled
He tried to shoot his foot off
Dogs he knew
Had done this with their teeth

He fired five times
With a single action shotgun
Four blasts into his calf

Nobody knows how long he hung there
From a tree without even a name
Ice streamed from his nostrils when they found him
God knows
Where the fifth shell went
Duking It Out

how far can you see from here
depends on what you want to see
what do you mean
it depends
follow that hawk and if he flies
the same way long enough
he'll print a pinprick on your brain beyond
the blue-grey haze
where the nuker is
that's tennessee
you can see at least twenty states
from here on any day four of which
are part of the union
I was talking in miles
sure you were and I was
talking in blood
before this mountain earned its name
its gullies stank
with thirty thousand corpses
from a single disagreement
down there where the gatehouse stands
the red stuff stood eight feet deep
and the wounded slid down this mountain
and drowned like slugs in a beer can
you didn't have to say that
I never had to say anything
The Fifth Season

between even winter and spring
comes a time we doubt
things follow
one from another

this is the fifth season
the season of change
birds do not die
cats eat them
worms in the bird bellies
enter our language
through fingertips
what little logic there is
is not spoken
our hands speak to other eyes
thoughts we haven’t imagined
perhaps the fifth season is
all there really is
when the cat dies
there is never another cat
and when winter gives up to trickery
there is no rebirth
simply a new birth
in which we have not been included
Military Time

I have been working with numbers again
thinking of a shinbone
patterned as a burned guitar
and though I know no Greek
I have been working with numbers
I have tried to prepare for the day
when the year less than zero
throws all civilization
back to the abacus
on that day surely
rats will die of poison
the last osprey will sink
through the surface of her egg
like a walnut in melted butter
on that day I hope to be blind
for I have been thinking in military time
but I have not killed anyone
I tell myself this
I tell myself I have only been thinking
in military time

to catch yourself before you take off
feathers stuck to your arms with wax is not heroic
to sail off to certain death is stupid
to live in a crevice between the coffins
is truly insane
I knock on the boxes
and mouth the words they contain
not to free us
not to memorialize
not even to explain
accepting what Hume said
no cause
no effect
Let's Look at the Rain

here I am typing with a dirty ball
the cat yawns in my lap and hangs
her claws in my belly
the words look gnarly
all the letters with holes in them
gunked with carbon

but today the sun shone
so I don't give a damn about a dirty ball

you see the last time I cleaned this little machine
I had the back door open
and the sun was shining
and as I brushed away
the cat chased the dust
floating the ropes of light
streamed in the kitchen

not a perfect cat my cress
a lot of that dust got out the house
and rode the wind toward the moon

ice formed on the dust
old words I'd already burned
and started to fall

it rained for six months
didn't bother me none
but the murder rate went up

quite a few of the suspects blamed
the weather for their belligerence
fucking weather made me do it man

the majority of the victims were housewives
dusting their homes
not that I miss the housewives much
but it bothers me how many
of those guys on death row now
are maybe there
because I worried about how
my words weren't clear
Finding a Voice

I was walking down the street
When I found this voice squatting
So I reached down opened it up
And what do you know
No identification
No credit cards
Not even a goddamn dollar bill
And it was hot for Christ sake
Must of been a hundred and ten
If it was eighty

I looked around and waved at this guy
Over near the shelter saying hey dude
You didn’t see nobody drop this did you
And he said fuck you asshole
Being not the talkative type

So I took this voice home
It hopped on my shoulder
And nibbled on my ear
When I told it to quit
It starts purring and licking up my cheek

It wasn’t like stealing exactly
It was a real old voice
Though it acted like a pup
And I didn’t figure anyone hereabout
Had use for so playful a thing

But I ran an ad in the paper
Just in case
Cost me seven dollars and fifty cents
Plus tax

I got one call from a lady in Roseway
And all she asked me was
“What the hell’s a voice?”
Why Kafka Was Right

A man walked as far as he could. He had only reached the bottom of the hill when his head split open. In a short while, flies were feasting where his thoughts had been. There were more flies than this man had ever had thoughts. The flies covered his brain like a glove.

"Now hold on," one of the flies objected. "What does he mean we covered his brain like a glove?"

Before I could say anything, another fly explained that I was speaking symbolically. I was making a comparison between the flies' presence on the dead man's brain and the function and appearance of the most important piece of clothing this particular man had ever worn. Gloves had often protected his hands in the brutal winter, and, in particular, they had preserved his opposable thumb, the only part of the human anatomy to set him apart from the higher apes.

The first fly, a smart one, argued that a hat would have been more appropriate. These flies, he pointed out, were covering a brain which was once contained in a skull covered with hair, on top of which, particularly in the brutal winter, intelligent men, even marginally functional men, wore hats to avoid hypothermia. Hypothermia, this smart fly stressed, could result in death, and death, he went on, tends to make discussions about the relative importance of the opposable thumb seem quite silly.

It was at this point I crushed the smart fly.
Bones

all I loved was bones
with the claw mark bones
with the tooth serrate

I could take a pile of bones
and build a fence

I could take a shin
and cave your head in
I could take a rib cage
play the vibes
I could take them bones
and build the world whole
I could dream then
that the bones had flesh on them
and when they moved
there was thunder on the earth
and now I watch the bulldoze men
scraping the hillside out
for pendants and earrings
and what they leave behind
ain’t fit for much
but feeding tulips in the spring
which is what
despite they chewed up all I loved
I aim to do with all that’s left
Along the Way to When We Died

I fished the riffles where the brown trout held
Out beyond the boonies
In the wilderness of almost
And I was at home there happy
It would be dark soon
Already the rain soaked to my waistband
I could have been singing
The insects buzz
Alone altogether in this hearse of a world
I brought discomfort to the fish
What a wonder I was
For one moment lost and listening
Unsure and certain simultaneous
Words come too easily
Loveliness

The rhododendron glorify the darkness
In the Simpson garden
Lamont is on death-row tonight

It wasn't enough he raped the girls
He had to skin them
Stew them
Eat them
Can them
Make gloves from the soft
Pink inside their thighs

We know now something
Was wrong with Lamont
But he did plant the Simpson garden
And it is lovely to look at
A pleasure to breathe deeply

His parents prefer to think of Lamont
As the son who cared for this special place

It's been featured in several
National magazines
The Price of Coffee

The meal that he orders is the meal he will eat. So when the waitress asks, he is cautious: "We aren't speaking universal, are we? Our choices are confined to the menu, am I right? I'm not to be blamed for all this damned disorder, am I?"

"Of course not," the girl in the tea shop says. Although she, too, grows middle aged, it bothers her not, as it did not bother him when he once waited tables.

Now, however, he worries a casual remark might result in great pain, not just to one but thousands he will never meet.

"I'm not really crazy," he says, "I'll have the eggs and hashbrowns with sausage, if it's not too late."

The girl smiles as she writes "E/H/S" on her pad. "May I bring you some coffee?" she asks.

"Of course," he says, and smiles himself, and the girl in the tea shop shouts: "We've finally got the bastard!"

Then out of the kitchen is heard: "Huzzah! Huzzah!" And the men in the blue suits bash the front doors. One of them grabs him by the ear and throws him to the floor. The others kick whatever presents itself.

Coffee is no longer on the menu. On a small card beside the register, it says: "The price of coffee is death."
Witnessing

come up a wind and the sky go black
as that crap dripping down the side
of the stove pipe

come up a big wind gone blow this half
the county to matchsticks
you believe what you hear on the news

look at my neighbors down that way
putting up plyboard
chaining cars to the sides of their house
what kind of sense you call that

gone come a real big wind
gone wipe it all clean
people be digging for chalk
you watch what I say

you could hear already yesterday
in the back of everybody’s throat
you saw the cat fur crackle
and you knew she wasn’t chasing no bugs
you had to move slow as a stone
to lay your hand on top her head
and still you got five six holes
and how about that dog
ever see him so mope

I don’t know about you but me
I’m gonna lash myself to the oak
out front the courthouse
when that wind come in
I want to look it in the eye
just once
Humping in the Bush
	here be that tiger gots a head in its mouth
once belong to the point man
and that snake kill two dudes in demo

we got spiders turn your brain to slush
lizards slither up your cock
and nest in your bladder

that bird eat your eyes out
when you asleep

the mud give you rot
the dust give the itch
the worms want your liver
the bugs like eardrums
the flowers will sprout
in your lungs

don’t eat nothing
don’t come in cans

don’t piss and don’t shit

and when you gots time
keep an eye out
for the enemy

cause he lives here
and he’s aiming
to see its stays that way
The Times You Kill Yourself

in memorium, A.J.

the first time you kill yourself
nobody notices
but that's his job
nobody has to do something
no matter how he hates it

the second time you kill yourself
the birds notice
who's that dumb fucker eating glass they ask
it's the birds' job to curse

the third time you kill yourself
the poets notice
the poets don't have a job
the whole world's a hobby horse to them

the fourth time you kill yourself
your neighbors notice
not bad they say
a little to the left

the fifth time you kill yourself
even your boss notices
where you been boy he asks
wait a minute let me guess

the sixth time you kill yourself
you tell your wife you are sorry
this isn't a momentary madness you hope
she understands

the seventh time you kill yourself
you start telling people about the first time
it was hell you explain
and a downright mess
ruined the rug and your favorite rocker
but people get bored
the eighth time you kill yourself
your best friend buys you a beer
to celebrate your drive
but before you can buy the second round
there is a war
in which your best friend dies

the ninth time you kill yourself
no one sends the letters to your wife
even your parents don’t mourn
let sleeping dogs lie they say
all’s well that ends well

the tenth time you kill yourself
you start to despair
this could go on forever
but it won’t
A Switch Poem

so there would be light to read the bills by
God created the switch
and He told us now here’s how
you turn it off and on

and we said gee God thanks
for the swell switch
and He said just remember what
I created it for

so three weeks later
we got the first bill
and they been coming
like the dark of the moon
ever since
Primitive Myth

the way it began was Adam
who was in charge of naming things
called it a banana
and said it went well with bran flakes
which is why some cereal boxes
got pictures on them

but Eve said nah that ain't right
the banana goes over here
and uhhh! uhhh!
ahhh! ahhh!
oh yes! oh God! oh yes!

and after it was over
Adam admitted Eve had
a keen imagination
but he still thought
the banana went best
with bran flakes
Answering the Door

whatever these assholes trying to sell
you don’t need it
even they know that
which is why they wear the suits
they are not being polite
they are taking notes

you don’t need no goddamn education
just open your eyes
learn how to laugh and say no
to these motherfuckers
say no I’m not sorry
I don’t have the time

rip out the doorbell
cover the door with crushed glass
if enough say no
these scumbags will mass in the streets
like squid on a moon run
sucking their bloody knuckles
and praying to God
let them die
Soapbox

let me tell you what you don't do dig
you don't shitmouth no dipstick's God
cause if his Man don't fazzle and dazzle
with lightning and logic
you gonna find your next door neighbor
with a hammer and a contract
to nail you upside some warehouse wall

you don't talk politics
with people what vote
cause people what vote
elect all those assholes
they want to be rid of
and they be happy to hear
you don't so they can blame
their ignorance on you

you don't talk sex with a divorcee
be studying psychology
got two kids
bruised and bloody
on the football team

and don't tell me I got you all wrong
cause sucker
I ain't got you at all
I Have a Nightmare

All the stand-up comedians
Found work with the government

Night after night
They tell jokes about hunger
They tell jokes about AIDS
They tell jokes about poverty
They tell jokes about queers
They tell jokes about annihilation
They tell jokes about everyone

Let's hear it for the unemployed
Let's hear it for the dying

And everyone laughs
Everyone cheers
Keeping Busy

when I ain't got time to shit
I got it made
like a fossil
like geography

when the bomb burns
my thankless ass away
this lump in my colon
might end up
the eye of a geode
an egg of onyx
or a diamond

such sweet revenge
to become a gem
perhaps to snuggle
in a nest of gold
on the finger
of a future king

each gem and every fleck
of precious metal know
the hatred that I feel tonight

and cancer grows in those
who wear the jewelry
in which the pure
and mindless anger
of every man who died
without time to shit
shines more brightly
than beauty or love
Lucid for a Moment

I once had an ear drum patched
with a plug cut from my buttock
and squished in a cartilage press

I could of said take the skin from my shoulder
I could of said take the skin from my hand

but I've never regretted the choice
and walk among men with their heads up their asses
and find it easy to smile
Another Maniac

I could of killed your dog
he rolls in the spinach
and I say comere boy
and he comes
wagging his stupid tail
he's a dumb dog
with no balls
it isn't his fault
he's got no balls
or he rolls in the spinach
you would say it was my fault
for putting dried blood
down to fertilize
you know I can't kill
your goddamn dog
simply because
you let him run loose
he doesn't know any better
you'd just get another
bigger and dumber and I'd have to kill it too
so instead I've written you this note
to the address on gumby's collar
to say please
keep this dog tied up
because I've been watching your house
and I know what you do for a living
and the next time this dog
fucks with my garden
if your kid's five minutes late
you better worry
Getting By

most suggestions are much too simple to help
don’t go alone
don’t go at night
don’t go in muddy water
don’t go anywhere
anybody spotted them
and most of us take it for granted
prevention is no sure cure
make sure to stop the bleeding
immediately
call for help
there are millions of things you can do
remain calm
smack the attacker firmly on the snout
get your ass out of there
as quickly and invisibly
as possible
some claim any act of valor
making a face
spitting or flicking the fingers
kicking the feet
will scare them off
although these people do admit
when pressed
how this is only sometimes true
still most believe that splashing
clapping and shouting is of value
although studies seem to suggest
the sound of thrashing
is what attracts them
in the first place
all I can say is
you can’t expect anything
to work forever
to see how this is so and even just
wade in and greet it
and wave goodbye
Prettiest Effort Today

I could say the birds
in the red and gold leaves
please me
I ain’t lying
it’s just fine
to sit here on the steps and watch them

I walk down the street
I hear the damnedest voices
I kill that motherfucker I tell you
now duwayne don’t talk like that
I had enough his messing round my head
now duwayne he mean you white enough
I swear I cut his fucking tongue out
and hang it on the door

and on the next block
I kick a raven’s carcass
just a shell of shiny feathers

what ate its life out
ate even its bones
I Read Once That

for every three or four people in a room
one is always looking out the window
and I knew then this one
would never wave
for even should we all come eye to eye
across the empty airshafts
beyond the necessary daily updates
or convivial chit-chat over cocktails
after cheese and crepes
in the same room maybe all of us
would seek the window
be driven to kill for it
each other or ourselves
we can trade only places in nowhere
from which to stare out at nothing
what we share are the symptoms
our disease is the snowflake
our fingerprints
our lips
and so tonight as I prepare for the end
to a kitten not even named
I know only the ghosts of warsaw
can defend beirut
the bomb is no more efficient than the plague
and all there is to mourn is
not being able
I fill my head with shovels
but I have had to pull the blinds
to do even this small thing
Some Consideration

You can spot it in the early afternoon
Abandoned near the lettuce bin
By the woman whose hands
Have forgotten their sense of wonder
Whose hair had no childhood
Who didn’t even care for her dog

There was a man came hunting two six packs of Schlitz
But remembered he needed to fix his spare

Old Mrs. Modlin wanted some Tender Vittles
Mr. Murfin needed milk tobacco and a dozen eggs
The two boys from Lakeview Junior
Still don’t know what they want

Three or four more had a hand in it
Including the girl with braces and red braids
Whose mother had finished the last of the Hope
And sent her for another box

Line up with the loveless at the checkout
A frozen shrimp cocktail two rolls of Charmin
A three-way bulb and a bar
Of deodorant soap
No need to wonder what you are doing here

You made a list last night
And left it on the kitchen table
There’s no telling what you really came for

Often in the middle of the household aisle
Between you and the matches
An empty cart can teach you what
The sphinx should have said to Oedipus
You would have been jerks then together

Nobody’s watching
Give it a couple of chunk-a-chunks
Go ahead if you want put your stuff
In that rattle of crippled mesh
Push it up and down the empty aisle
Until somebody tells you to stop
You could spend your entire life this way

What if everyone thinks you are crazy
There's always something you haven't come for
And in every store there's a cart
Doesn't roll right

45
Cancer

the body became a sea on which
each cell became a boat in which
a lone man stands
harpoon in hand
attempting to fix himself
to somebody else's whale
Poem for Angie

I don’t know what you think
but I think
everything makes me laugh
I don’t know anything
I don’t suppose anyone else knows anything either
I point at something turning the corner
and say did you see that
what did I see I don’t know
I thought it was a man
with an extra nose
and I looked at that man with the extra nose
and he looked at me and winked
and grabbed one of his noses
letting it snap back
against his face
then he did the same with the other
what did you see harold
it was a 57 chevy lowride
with mags with spinners
what did you see martha
that little boy fell and skinned his knee
and his mama I guess it’s his mama
yanked him up like a laundry sack
him all a crying
funniest thing so sad
what did you see merle
huh you talking to me
so you see it’s like this
each of us looking at something
no one else sees
and none of it
I'm telling the truth now and I'm telling it as best I am able
none of it
I swear I've never figured it and I swear I have tried
none of it
I do wish this could make your pain less dreadful
and your death less sure
none of it
sweet baby
means anything
Now You Have Gone

Now you have gone the rain drowns out
The onions rot sets in and paints
Each tomato a face
As old as my grandmother's got
I should have said think
Of the garden do not go
I should have said show me
What hurts I will touch it see
How everything
Dies at my touch
That There Is No Justice

does not surprise me as the spark
between my finger and the doorknob does

footsteps clumping up behind me
even at noon
in front of the precinct house
frighten me more than the bomb

the one bomb bothers me
as much as the dozens and the scores
and the single hate-contorted face
calling for the death of this or that
is more horrifying than the thousands
of millions of people who are willing
to die for what somebody else
has told them to believe

In a past life I was a medic only
who ran to the cry

when the call came there was no time
to listen to the teeth crack
when my boots tromped on the fallen faces
or determine which groans
belonged to the living
and which my weight forced
from calcifying lungs

so whenever I pass the empty cups
of the men who ask for quarters
and no longer remember what quarter means
I imagine their faces on those
who were silent beneath my feet
as I ran to put an end
to the howling
of the pain

Christmas Eve, 1985
Outside Boring, Oregon
The Importance of Questions

we all know where we're going
no matter what directions we ask
go up to the second red light and hang a left

so we go on up and hang a left
when the light turns green
frogs we expect to be green
or magnolia leaves
but never traffic lights
or the cold
where we're all going
despite all the questions
we ask
Relief

hold down your own end
if I have to I'll drown
lungs clogged with the old blood
we left behind!

like the fish
we no longer speak with
the fish no longer speak with us either
they know we are sick
because we eat them
even when we are not hungry
they will never join us ashore
one death is as dumb as another
what a wish is
is prying my hands from the raft
What I Seen Was

a girl of green sequins strummed a stringless ukulele
lipsynching the witness holding fetus photographs
while one dog took aim at a fireplug
and another shoved a banana peel with his nose
an old man slipped in the doorway to penney's
and dropped his cane spit at
two boys with multicolored hair
studded wristbands
pointing up the street
one of them pulling his pants loose
from the crack in his ass
Where I Have Gone

down the street around the corner
children still speak and are not heard
though their voices rustle at us only
their lips bubble and burst
but they do not curse us

though they die
thousands of them even millions
the bugs in their bellies
numerous enough to smother tokyo

on one corner I found the eye of a cat
on a ball point pen

when I fry an egg
I think of the children
even when I fry an egg

this is an age when goodbye
rings in the tunnels
like the silly shriek of an auk

this is an age
of bad yokes

and when the tiny bodies open their mouths
and we have nothing to teach them to say
we say help us help them
without shame imagine that
without shame
Eating Brains

What death is is eating brains
What pain is
And life is
Trying to feed it
And the brain is
Pleased by this arrangement

The brain is only pleased
What You Have Done

Beyond the city the city ruins
Not even a researcher enters
Where lizards still adjust themselves to the sun
Where rain is not welcome
Strangers wave only at mounds in the garden
Where nothing grows and whose fence
Can only be supposed
I walk here preparing to make up a name
Should someone ask I will point to my mouth
Shaking my head as I look to the ground
Where the bones speak softly
And their dusts dance for us
Their splintered calculi grin
Like grim cartoons we are too proud
To give our teeth to
When questioned I must maintain
I have no purpose
How Long Have I Got Here

they wheeled him in emergency
on his way from salem to spokane
with his wife and two kids
dead in the wreckage

they were scrubbing him down
and hooking up tubes
when this eyelid opened on his cheek
and the lips on his chin moved

his face was a mirror of jelly
everyone stopped what he was doing
to listen

that's when he died
Needs

A good set of wipers
A brake job
Two new tires
And an oil change

Less rain this month
And more the last

A camera to catch
This hawk acting like an eagle
That eagle playing the crow

Fresh tinned tobacco
Tabasco
A fifth of vodka
And one glass

No one to talk to tomorrow
No past
Life on the Farm

when george grew up he humped the bed
the oak posts holding up the roof
the water pipes in the corner of the room
the room is grey and most of us
beat our heads against the walls
but george would hump and hump
he made the attendants laugh
and throw cold water on him

between the splinters and the burns
a new girl came to work
so george tried to hump her too
the new girl screamed real loud
and though the attendants laughed
and laughed shhh shhh
some men came in and carried george away

they put him in another room and tied his arms up
I saw him now and then
when they brought him to the room
where the pain was put in our heads
george was my friend
and it hurt to see him hurt in the head all those years
but he kept on humping things
he couldn't talk but I could
barely stop I said
but my voice wasn't strong
and my ears would bleed
because they didn't want to hear me

one day they brought george back
with his balls cut off poor george
he was my friend
he walked past his bed
the oak posts the water pipes
and straight to the wall where he sits
and beats his head against it
like the rest of us
Words of Encouragement

We have prayed for those who died
On the mountain and heard rams
Butting heads reach us
Long after the warriors disappeared
From the ridge
What we heard was a voice
Beneath the ice
Why no one can tell us what it meant
Can not concern us
Focus on the business at hand
That is all I ask
From here we have but a straight climb up
A face few ever attempt
If we reach the top
We might see the ocean
Check your compass
To the south
It is our goal to see the ocean
I know what this means
We have all lost some friends
Let us go on
A major figure in contemporary letters, Elio Emiliano Ligi was found December 7, 1942 in Nagasaki, Japan, and brought to the U.S. at the age of four by his adoptive parents, Mr. & Mrs. Robert Barker.

He published his first poem in the Suwanee Review. He has now published under nearly 400 pseudonyms, and his work includes more than 20 volumes of self-diagnostic hypnotherapy, organic gardening tips, poetry, prose, health hints, and drama, the most recent of which are a satire, The One Minute President (with Paul Fericano, Poor Souls Press, 1986) and a cookbook, The Power Diet (Central Point Publishers, 1988).

An accomplished trombonist and flautist, he has also composed several successful orchestral works, including “Concerto in D major for Sax and Violins” and “Triage Trio for Ubu, Obo, and Ultrabassoon.”

In 1970, then known as Dick Nada, he married noted painter Jean R. Ligi in Pickens, South Carolina, and took her name. Together they founded the Portland Pataphysical Outpatient Clinic, Lounge and Laundromat. This nonprofit organization has provided victims of imaginary illness with imaginary cures for nearly two decades.
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