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**Dedicated to my grandparents:  
Edward V. Burke (1902-1964)  
Rose T. Burke (1898-1984)**



**DICKHEAD**





a guy on the street  
who looks like me:  
I clench my fists  
in case he tries to  
get tough.

## Stabbed

I told her while we were  
lying in bed:  
told her it was over.  
She started to weep and  
I wanted to comfort her  
but could not, would not  
and got up and went out  
to the kitchen  
and poured myself a drink  
and she came out of the room  
a little later  
dry-eyed  
and without any clothes on  
but not really naked  
and said "if I had a knife  
when you told me  
I'd of stabbed you"  
and how glad I was  
then  
that I had told her in bed  
and not in a restaurant.

## **Ballantine**

Whenever I drank Ballantine Ale  
I got mean, or  
maybe I was already mean;  
I don't know;  
I don't think so;  
but  
anyway  
one day  
not long ago  
after emptying several  
of the green bottles  
I got it into my head  
that this big guy  
who had an ugly face  
I'd seen around town  
had somehow  
done me wrong  
and I saw the guy  
on the opposite side of the street  
from me  
and I screamed  
YOU! GET OVER HERE!  
like I was talking to a dog  
and the guy stared  
and I started across the street  
and he ran  
fast  
as I chased him  
to a house  
he ran inside of  
and I followed  
up a staircase

to a door  
where the guy  
stood  
holding an axe  
and I backed  
slowly  
down the stairs  
and left  
just as cops arrived  
in their shiny car  
that I got a free ride in.

## Flaming

The moon is on fire tonight  
and the walls of this room  
are alive with  
rivers flowing  
and vegetables growing  
and lovely shadows and snow  
in black and white like  
TV in the 60's  
and the radio is on to  
a Springsteen song  
"can't start a fire"  
and I have a fire  
in my pants  
that can't be extinguished  
keeps burning me at night  
I get up and jump  
into the bathtub  
but the fire regenerates  
smolders as I sleep  
and in the morning  
a new scar  
I got  
to go with  
the old one  
down the middle  
of my heart.

## Howl's Cavern

My aunt & uncle pick up  
my brother and me  
in their car  
to take us to Howell's Caverns  
in New York State:  
I am young  
my brother younger  
the drive is forever  
the walk from where  
we park  
a hike;  
we enter an elevator  
dimly lit  
lined with chain links  
like a cage  
and we descend  
down  
down  
down  
and I begin to panic  
my throat clenched  
a scream in my breast  
my aunt stands still as a statue  
the cage rattles  
we reach bottom  
get out and walk  
as a guide talks  
about the difference between  
stalactite and stalagmite  
and pools of black water  
shimmer  
ghostly in somber light

and footsteps echo in  
the frigid air –  
“it is beautiful,” says my aunt  
but  
I do not see it  
because  
all I can think of  
is  
going back up  
to where  
I belong.

## Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

I had a bed in my old college roommate's  
room  
in an apartment rented  
by a couple with two kids.  
The husband was a stoner and  
every night we sat at the kitchen table  
and got blasted  
until one day it was discovered that  
the kids had been molested by  
the retired cop who lived next door  
and the husband stopped  
smoking pot  
and got his act together  
but I did not  
and got kicked out  
and slept on park benches  
and in the bus station  
until  
I got a room at the Y –  
a closet-sized suite  
with a window  
and a bed where I could  
sleep without worrying  
about anything  
except the cockroaches  
that ran over my face  
and woke me;  
on clear nights  
I'd look through the upper right  
window pane  
at a star  
shining bright



and that star  
over many nights  
became my star  
my beacon  
my guiding light  
and hope...  
but on cloudy nights  
without my star  
it would only be me  
and the roaches  
and whatever remained  
of the night.

you're lion  
not lamb,  
triumph  
not slaughter

## Mammals & Reptiles

1.

You sit like a boulder  
on the chair  
twiddling your thumbs,  
leather wing tip shoes on a strut  
and Brylcreamed hair shining in  
the electric light's hum.  
Grandma apologizes for waking us  
an hour too soon;  
I read my library book THE AGE OF MAMMALS  
and wait for the hour hand  
on the moon-faced wall clock.  
Outside the sky is black as  
the La Brea tar pits  
where saber-toothed cats  
went to feed but met death.

2.

Swirling black and white clouds war  
above the ridge line of the mountains.  
I climb into the back seat of the car  
when we reach Buddy's house  
and the overhead light comes on  
as Buddy, pumpkin-sized head in  
silhouette, says, glancing back,  
"who is that, Al?"  
I ride in shadow  
on vinyl  
the engine sound  
a lullaby.

3.

The city is a cliff side above;  
smell of cigarettes and beer:

people walk in a drizzle as  
windshield wipers beat time  
to music on the radio.  
Yankee Stadium is drenched and dark  
as dusk;  
a big man in the grandstand catches  
a foul ball in his bare hand and  
stands like the Statue of Liberty.  
Maris hits a bullet into the right field  
bleachers  
and I wonder who caught it  
and how badly it hurt;  
I am scared in the public urinal  
to take my bibet out and pee  
but do;  
after the game is rained out  
I follow you, broad-shouldered  
hippo in the crowd.

4.

At the Bronx Zoo, while you  
and Buddy watch a crocodile  
eat a rabbit  
I hop over to a glass cage  
and watch a cobra rise  
like a rope and  
strike the glass  
before my nose...  
On the ride home you and Buddy  
laugh and smoke  
while I sit, invisible  
and bored,  
staring out the window  
and waiting  
for the Dawn of Civilization.

## Dead Parents

The young female clerk with  
the permed hairdo  
stops me in the aisle of the 5 & Dime store  
and asks

"are you going to pay for the candy?"

"what candy?"

"the candy in your pocket"

"I didn't put any candy in my pocket"

"mind if I look?"

I raise my arms slowly so  
the box of JUICY FRUIT  
held in the wristband of my coat  
does not rattle.

The woman looks confused.

"Come with me," she says

and I follow her to a small dark office

where a store manager sits,

his bald head shaped like a cannonball

nose a beak that could chip through brick;

"we can have the cops come and search you," he says.

I hand the box over.

The woman looks happy.

The manager asks for my mother's phone number.

"My mother is dead," I say.

He asks for my father's number.

"My father is dead."

"Who do you live with?"

"My grandparents."

He looks at the receiver in his hand

then sets it gently into the cradle.

"Get out of here," he says.

## Showdown

As I lifted weights in the cellar  
I listened to the floor boards overhead  
creak  
from the weight of my Uncle's feet;  
I thought of my fist  
landing SPLAT in the middle  
of his fat face.  
His days as boss man  
were past  
and he knew it too;  
and one morning, in the kitchen  
as I combed my hair,  
which I had let grow long  
he asked when  
I was going to get a haircut  
and I said "never"  
and he flinched  
like he'd been slapped  
and stared  
black-eyed  
with the glare that used to  
pin me to the floor like a rabbit  
but this time I glared back  
and we stood  
with the sun burning the roof above  
and the years piled up between  
us;  
and then he turned his head  
and with a sick smile  
fled  
out the door  
as gutlessly

as every other bully  
whoever ran.

## Sophomore

Walking down the street  
alone  
I pass a couple  
arm-in-arm and  
remember walking with my girl  
holding her hand  
to the drugstore downtown  
for a cherry coke,  
careful not to slurp from the straw,  
hearing cat-calls from  
my buddies on the street  
and listening to her chatter  
on our way  
to the cemetery  
where we made-out on  
the soft grass, her softer jacket  
the tombstones granite  
she had to be home by nine  
her jacket always stayed  
buttoned;  
I would have betrayed Christ  
for a touch  
but  
her treasures were locked up  
tight:  
I dumped her for an older girl  
a tease, who dumped me  
and then I began to hang out on  
the corner, drinking beer  
acting tough  
one of the boys who  
went "over the line"



on weekend nights  
to drink  
in New York State bars  
and drive back  
drunk  
along snaky roads  
passing cars like A.J. Foyt  
at Indy.

## **In Praise Of**

The beautiful Shelia O’Ryan  
10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher  
who was from elsewhere  
and was flown in with  
her long lovely legs dangling  
and praised my writing and  
read it out-loud to the class;  
she was graduated from Bryn Mawr  
or Smith, summa cum laude, and  
could speak Old English, she said  
and did we want to hear some?  
Sure we did.

All the guys sat up front  
and Schlonski an offensive tackle  
kept dropping his pencil to try  
and look up her dress  
which I hated him for  
because to me she was special  
like a solar eclipse  
and her praise something I needed  
something I did not get from anyone else  
except coach  
who gave it  
only if  
I knocked someone’s head off  
onto the field.

## Clown

It was a cold day and I was riding the bench  
again and  
I put on a warm-up jacket  
but it was not warm enough so  
put on another, then another  
six jackets  
and I was comfortable  
sitting  
until the jackass of a coach got the bright idea  
in the ninth inning  
to have me pinch hit  
and I stood and peeled off a jacket,  
then another, and another  
and heard some snickers  
then laughter  
and by the sixth jacket hysteria in the stands  
and I went up to the plate  
and struck-out swinging  
on three pitches,  
the last one three feet over my head.

## Comb

Saturday night at the O. C. Buck Show  
we snuck in under the tent flaps  
a dozen of us  
HURRICANES  
red and white football jackets on  
and I stood in the front row as  
a naked girl stripper with a rosy white body  
strutted across the stage  
and squatted in front of my face  
and I must have blushed  
because she said "he's shy,"  
and she stood and squatted in front of  
Schlonski, an offensive tackle, who  
gave the girl his comb  
and she combed the hair between her legs  
then threw the comb into the air  
and it landed at my feet  
but I did not  
pick it up.

## Girlfriend

I met her in the backseat of a car  
parked outside a bar  
in Hoosic Falls, New York.  
She was almost passed-out and  
I was about to; in the meantime we did what we could,  
which was not much.  
I saw her in the hallway in school;  
she was a grade ahead of me.  
We never spoke.  
I never knew her name;  
she probably never knew mine.  
We kept meeting in back seats; one time  
she puked on the car floor  
another time we were going good  
getting somewhere  
when drunks barged in  
and ended  
whatever  
might have been.

old friends dead and gone  
I salute you  
from where I sit:  
on the throne  
of remimisce

## Old Buddy

I stopped in to see my old buddy  
in the old neighborhood  
and  
he did not recognize me  
because I wore mirror shades  
and I thought he might attack  
so tore the glasses off and  
then we sat in his backyard which  
seemed smaller than I remembered  
and when he went back into the house  
to get me a beer  
his mother came out and  
looked at me and said  
“I wondered who the bald man in the yard was.”  
My buddy, who lived in the apartment above  
his parents, told me  
he was divorced after  
his wife ran off with his best friend  
and that he, my old buddy, had  
got religion  
and that  
the Bible  
was the first book he’d ever read  
from beginning to end.

## **Fruit of the Loom**

After having had the shit  
kicked out of me  
in a bar in Central Square  
I walked alone  
up the sidewalk bricks  
toward Harvard and the Charles River.  
The few people I met  
gave me  
a wide berth  
after a gawk at my face  
which must not have looked  
pretty  
and I reached the river bank  
and took my pants off  
then underwear  
which I began to wash out  
but thought hell with it and  
threw them into the swirling dark  
where  
they were later found by an oarsman  
rowing in a regatta  
speared at the end of an oar like a white fish  
species unknown.



## Railroad Tracks

Hanging out on the railroad tracks  
with my buddies,  
a hippie ex-ski bum  
and a psychiatric patient who  
once put a bullet from a thirty-ought-six  
into the church steeple.  
What am I doing on the tracks, I ask myself.  
Wasn't I President of my class in  
high school?  
Didn't I spend a year at the University?  
None of that matters now —  
nothing matters except  
the pot  
and the beer.  
Everything else,  
like the world situation  
for example,  
is  
like us,  
immaterial.

## No Daniel Boone

I hiked up to the base of the mountain  
while wearing a backpack  
and sat  
and drank 3 bottles of beer  
then hiked to the summit  
to live  
like a pioneer  
and did  
for a week  
then walked back down  
and got a room  
in a city strange to me  
and did not die  
even once  
though I passed-out one night  
while smoking in bed  
and in the morning  
discovered  
that the cigarette had burnt  
a fistula  
straight through the mattress.

## **Madame Judge**

The judge, who sat up high  
like God,  
had a cue-ball white face  
and lacquered black bouffant hairdo;  
she looked down at the stiffs  
from the drunk tank  
who filed into the courtroom  
like lost sheep  
as amateur lawyers argued cases in the hall  
and cops stood around with  
their arms crossed.  
I sat uncomfortably  
in a chair  
until my name was called  
then stood  
to face  
the Dragon Lady  
who said to the prosecuting attorney  
“he got off last time – why should we  
let him go this time?”  
A question that hung in the air  
over my head  
like a noose.

## **Eat A Peach**

He was a small guy  
with glasses and goatee  
and the absurd name of  
Weimar and  
he lived down the hall  
in the dormitory and  
he wanted, like me, to  
write, but unlike me,  
he never wrote, or if he  
did, never showed it to me.

He introduced me to the  
Allman Brothers Band and  
to the artistry of W.C. Fields  
and whenever we smoked pot  
in his room he stuffed a towel  
under the door because in  
Kansas, in the 70's, pot-smoking  
was a felony. His roommate was  
a Japanese who would sit cross-  
legged on his bed and watch us  
smoke and one day I said to him  
"fuck you" and he sat bolt upright  
looking like a disappointed Kamikaze  
and said "rhuck-you!"

I was a funny guy back then but a little  
confused and I quit the college after  
three months and afterward wrote  
Weimar a letter, but he never wrote  
back.

## **The Birds**

Feeling lost, as if cast  
adrift and  
into a gray world,  
like a character in an episode of The Twilight Zone,  
I leave my room  
and walk down the street  
to the park  
and lean against the granite base  
of a lamp post,  
sky darkening with dusk,  
and a bird flies down  
and lands by my hand  
and I reach a finger and stroke  
its breast  
and when it flies off  
another lands  
and I pat its head  
and stroke its feathers;  
and a girl, walking past  
slows to gawk  
but  
then the bird flies off  
and so too does the girl.

## The Wake

Two of my nephews  
dressed in dark suits  
like Mafia guys  
sprawl in chairs  
looking like convicts  
awaiting execution  
on either side of my sister  
who has circles under her eyes  
like the mud flaps on trucks.  
Nearby, my Aunt sits  
smiling,  
happy because the nephew in the casket  
is going to get to meet Jesus...  
I kneel by the body  
which looks poured into the box –  
the way they always look –  
and I choke back a sob  
or it chokes itself  
and then I stand  
and look  
for a place to sit  
but  
there isn't one.

## **A Winner**

Driving home from work at midnight  
down the belt-line  
doing seventy in my Altima Thule XL  
in a ridiculously posted  
50 mph zone  
a car far behind  
comes on strong  
maybe a cop  
and I slow to sixty  
and the car  
an old sedan  
slides past  
some peckerwood at the wheel  
and I speed up  
and we head  
neck and neck  
down a dog leg  
to a hare-pin turn  
and the hot shot pulls in front  
and when his brake lights go on  
I cut into the left lane  
and pass him on the turn  
as he almost wipes out  
as I blow through  
the green light,  
yhay  
I've won!  
Won what?  
Won nothing –  
could have caused a fiery crash –  
why'd I do it?  
Must have needed to win

at something.



## Les Perdu

I am lying on the beach  
no one else around  
when a little girl appears  
tears rolling down her cheeks;  
"pourquoi?" I ask  
and she replies in French.  
I search for words to answer.  
We have a conversation  
of sorts.  
"Vous parlez Anglais?"  
No, she does not.  
"Ou votre parents?"  
"Je ne sais pas."  
Lost her parents  
and is at a hotel  
but does not know which.  
Name is Nicolette.  
Takes 5 minutes to get this out,  
my tongue fumbling for words.  
I spot two guys and a woman  
walking past and  
call "monsieurs! Madame!  
Un moment!"  
They come right over,  
quiz the girl.  
"Thanks," one of the Frogs says  
in English,  
"we'll take it from here."

a car stops  
in the street  
woman in the passenger seat  
asks me "are you loco?"  
"yes, I am," I say

## Seat 27-B

We are at twenty-seven thousand feet  
there is an old lady on my right  
she is chewing and fidgeting  
maybe saying her prayers  
she becomes self-conscious when I look  
across her to see out the window  
on my left is an asshole  
with a suit on, Mr. Spick and Span  
he looks like the MC on JEOPARDY  
he is invisible, does not want to be  
touched or looked at or acknowledged  
he reads a New York Times  
he has taken possession of the armrest  
I am in the middle  
stuck  
without a newspaper  
or a prayer.

## East to Cornstalk

The beer cans pile up around me  
on the seat as  
the train heads east;  
I ask every girl who passes in the aisle  
if she'd like a drink;  
one sits and does  
one sits and doesn't  
and the conductor, who said in Cheyenne  
he'd seat a "pretty girl" beside me,  
but never did – gives me dirty looks.  
The teetotaler chick is going somewhere  
in the corn fields; she is impressed by me  
I can tell...  
I lose her though  
and in a fevered dream  
as Chicago looms  
my eyes slide shut like the sun sinking  
below the horizon.  
When I wake I take a room  
with red velvet drapes  
and feel like King Shit  
until morning  
when I tug on my new silken  
J C Penny shirt  
and lug my suitcase and hangover  
back to the station.

## **Flight 2014**

Squashed into a window seat  
my face in the porthole  
looks back at me;  
there is a wing out there  
somewhere  
and a city of dazzling lights  
below  
and a coastline  
and ocean beyond where  
the lights don't shine...  
the stewardess dangles a mask  
in her hands  
with what looks like a giant condom attached  
and my dick rubs against my pants  
and the engines throb  
and the big jet shudders  
and I fly through the dark  
ready to sleep or fuck  
or  
whatever.

## Goodbye Deidre and Patrick

I got disgusted because  
no one would give me a  
ride, and I said “the hell  
with them—I will walk”  
and I walked until I came  
to a pub outside of Wexford  
and I went inside and drank  
with the people, and told  
them I was going to walk  
around Ireland and some  
wished me luck and one  
grave-faced guy took me  
aside to warn me of the  
dangers, especially in the  
north-west, and I thanked  
him and the others and  
bought 3 warm bottles of  
stout for myself and went  
and walked until the road  
was black as tar and my  
feet had disappeared, and  
then a car came along  
and Deidre and Patrick from  
the pub took me to their  
home and gave me a cot  
and I slept until morning  
when I woke and left  
without saying goodbye.

## A Lark Up the Nose of Time

We left Kansas after  
the bars closed  
Ron and Steve and me  
in a station wagon  
that I passed-out  
in the back of  
and woke  
below a huge steel arch  
high above  
like a gate to heaven,  
but it was Saint Louis  
which we bombed through  
all the way to Daytona  
and got a hotel room  
and sat indoors for three days  
as  
hurricane winds drove white sea horses  
to shore and  
branches of palm trees whirled  
like broken helicopter blades...  
On day four we got sun burnt  
and drunk  
and I was so hungry  
that night  
I punched out the Plexi-glass  
of a candy machine  
and tried to eat a candy bar  
old as World War One  
and in the morning I woke  
wet  
from piss  
in my bed

and  
covered the spot  
and we drove back  
out of money  
out of smokes  
and Ron got ugly  
without his fix  
and Steve  
a born-again liar  
told one whopper after  
another  
all the way to Ottawa.



## **The Faamer**

A farmer who looks a lot like  
Georgie Jessel the comedian,  
same graying brush-cut hair,  
glasses — he and I are on our  
way to Middlebury, Vermont  
in his pickup, and as he drives  
he talks about farming stuff  
and as he talks his right hand  
creeps across the seat toward  
my leg. Just my luck, I think  
to be picked-up by a farming  
closet queer, but I need the ride  
and talk to the guy while I watch  
the hand get closer then retreat  
and start the trek over, and I wonder  
if I'll have to break his finger or  
maybe jaw but then the sign for  
Middlebury appears and I say  
“pull over” and the old weirdo  
stops the truck.

## Hot Dog

I returned to New York  
from Ireland  
with no money  
and sat for two days  
in the LaGuardia Airport lobby  
waiting for a 25\$ money order  
through Western Union.  
A church group from Kansas  
sat down around me and  
I debated religion with  
a minister who preached to me on Christian  
charity and  
I put him to the test  
when I hit him up for  
change  
which he gave,  
enough for a hot dog,  
which I ate  
with relish  
as the minister's wife  
gave me a fish-eyed appraisal.

no work today  
except on my tan  
and writing  
this  
immortal tanka

## **Truck Driver**

Stepped out of the ditch  
and let go of the shovel  
and took hold of the wheel  
of a dump truck  
that I had trouble backing up  
and went off the road twice  
stopping the job each time as they towed me out  
and the supervisor  
after the second time  
said "get out of the truck"  
and I climbed down  
but did not take the shovel  
he offered  
because  
I had calluses enough.

## Doughnuts

I got off work at 3 in the morning  
after working another twelve hour shift  
and I drove my car  
to the P & C Market  
where I turned a few doughnuts  
on the ice  
before I parked and  
got out  
and walked to the door  
where some guy,  
who stood looking at me,  
said "I don't care how old you are,  
don't pull doughnuts in the lot"  
and I said  
"FUCK YOU"  
and he blinked behind  
his cock-eyed glasses  
and I followed him inside  
and asked if he'd heard  
what I said,  
but he did not reply  
and I went about my shopping  
too tired to  
give a shit  
or  
take any  
either.

## Whack-A-Nut

I was guard for  
Whack-A-Nut security  
and got assigned  
to an empty factory  
and brought books, a typewriter,  
and radio to work  
and sat  
in a corner  
and smoked weed if I had any  
and hoped no one would break in  
and bother me.  
Stan, my relief, came in early  
one night and said he'd seen a guy  
on the roof and  
said we should go up and  
get the son-of-a-bitch  
and I asked Stan what he would do if  
he caught the guy  
and Stan said "if he's my size  
I'll beat the shit out of him."  
Stan wasn't very big,  
and I refused to go  
to the roof with him.

Another night, I locked myself out  
of the building and  
had to break a window with a stone  
to get back in  
and foolishly threw the rock  
back out  
and when no rock was found inside  
I was questioned

and laid down a line of shit  
to keep the job  
but two weeks later  
was fired  
when the supervisor  
found me with my feet up reading  
a book and smoking a joint  
as the radio played smooth jazz.

## A Man's Work

The clerk at the store said  
“pickin’ oranges be a man’s work.”  
Had to rip the little buggers from  
the tree – like the State taking kids  
out of a home – and the branches  
full of thorns, and the sweat pouring,  
enough to water lawns, and the farmer  
a good ole boy racist atop his tractor  
watching us bleed and sweat.

Tied a noose onto a pole to tug the  
topmost oranges off, wore long-sleeved  
shirts, laid a sheet to catch the yellow balls  
that fell in staccato bursts. A 3 by 5 foot  
bin 5 bucks worth. The farmer began to  
talk-up his daughter to us; Jamaicans in the  
next row out-picked us though: almond eyes,  
coffee-colored skin, they would not stop to chat.

The bins filled slower than a baseball game;  
we got bored, ran out of talk, quit; had to  
boss each other: say “get to work you son-  
of-a-bitch!” Say “how about you, you ain’t  
done shit!” Like that. Cooled off at the  
swimming hole which was no Myrtle Beach  
but cold enough and wet. Listened to them  
bugs screech: WEEP WEEP WEEP! Regular  
as breath. Pocketed our money and headed  
for the coast and the Land of Milk and Honey  
only we never made it, and probably never will.



## **The Fruit Market**

I got sent to work  
at the Fruit Market  
on the Chelsea-Everett line  
outside Boston  
where I sat in a shack  
and checked-in trucks  
entering and leaving.

I wore a sky blue cop uniform.

Before work one day  
I stopped in the hotel-bar  
across the street from the market  
for a quick one  
and realized,  
after I entered  
that everyone in the joint had suddenly  
become quiet  
and I drank my beer quickly  
and left.

During the shift a truck driver  
and his wife  
came up to the shack window  
and he told me they were from  
Nebraska  
and that they had gone into the hotel-bar  
across the street  
looking for a room to rent.

An old guy wearing a soiled fedora  
and a self-effacing woman

cut out of a Grant Wood picture.

“I didn’t think they let things like that go on in Boston,” he said.

“Things like what?”

He nodded to the hotel-bar.

“That place is a whorehouse!”

I lost that job soon  
afterward  
because  
while putting up the American flag  
on the pole behind the shack  
I unthinkingly let the flag touch the ground  
and the boss man –  
a red-faced prick who looked like he had not  
shit in a month –  
fired me.

6 o'clock is  
no excuse to go off  
and get yourself  
annihilated  
by the Mongols

## Unwell Beach

Sun setting on Wells Beach,  
Maine.

I don't think I've liked anyone  
today:

argued with a woman

over a beach chair,

argued with a salesgirl

over price of a sale;

a slender blonde next door

speaking French to her

long-haired boyfriend,

hotel on a street

full of telephone poles

and lines

connecting somewhere.

## **Awake**

I guess I am supposed to be  
awake tonight  
and staring into the darkness behind  
my eyelids  
and thinking of what I'll buy tomorrow  
at the market;  
I guess I am meant to be  
in the dark and  
review my history,  
think of what I've read  
and seen,  
or not think –  
rub my head on the bedpost  
and then,  
finally, dream  
and wake  
to know I'd slept.

## Gods

The gods will come through  
for me  
like the sea to shore  
my life will flame,  
the moon will blaze for me  
once more  
the crickets will cheer me like the hero  
of the game  
I'll walk on flowers  
down honied pathways beside  
crystal waters  
King for a day  
or an hour the hours the sunflowers bow  
and crows call my name  
and rivers gurgle my praise  
oh gods  
you have come through  
like the sun to horizon.

## **Stress**

Woke  
feeling stressed  
8 A.M.  
bedroom overcast  
the telephone blinking  
with a call from work  
asking for more hours of  
my life  
plus a dream  
in my head  
of me escorting a woman  
two girls, two cats  
through busy city streets –  
a job and a half  
and I'm beat  
and have not even  
brushed my teeth  
yet.

#### 4 A.M.

I turn on the light and  
pick up my pencil  
to write  
as I lie alone  
in bed  
a lump of flesh and bone  
my back to the mattress  
below a cold moon  
and dim stars  
that look down  
on the dying  
in their beds  
and the dead  
lying still as stone  
on earth  
where  
the worms  
have won.



## **Escape**

It almost hits me  
the black sedan  
coming down the hill  
and as  
I watch the car,  
sleek and somehow  
sinister,  
I get ready to run  
into the woods  
should the car  
turn around,  
but it doesn't turn  
and I continue  
up the street  
which is now a river  
and I'm in to my ankles  
moving stealthily  
like an escapee from prison  
trying to throw the dogs  
off my scent.

## Wake-up

I just woke  
from a nap,  
an hour in  
an afternoon  
dark with clouds  
and rain:  
get up, I told myself  
there is much to do  
like read all  
of Proust  
or visit Niagara Falls  
and eat  
and drink  
and look out the window  
at the sky  
opening to immensities  
of space  
beyond the dark  
and dismal-seeming day  
which is  
in a way  
quite beautifully  
somber:  
pitched in gray,  
charcoal,  
smoke,  
white slather of clouds  
and sheen of rain  
on metal roof  
seen from the  
window of this  
a.p.t.

## Up & Out

Awoke at 3 A.M.  
again  
and got up  
and sat in the dark  
of the kitchen  
until a wall began to look  
like an Arshile Gorky painting  
then I returned to bed  
and tried to pray myself  
to sleep  
but could not do it  
so lay  
listening to the universe  
which  
does not speak  
and then  
I woke  
10 A.M.  
and quickly got up  
because  
the sun  
the sun  
was up.

## **Bread & Water**

You want me live  
on bread and water  
but I can't;  
I've tried,  
it's a killer;  
I turn resentful  
then bitter  
start to compare  
myself to others  
ask why  
they have  
and me without—  
would you tell me that?  
No, of course not  
because you don't speak;  
okay, so don't--  
just throw me a scrap  
once in awhile  
something to chew on  
that tastes better  
than hemlock.

## **Smiler**

The young nurse comes in  
smiling  
like she never had a  
problem  
or a pain  
and I look up at her pearly whites  
and want to take a rag  
and wipe the smile off her face  
and as she speaks  
I try not to look at her  
or listen  
and finally  
she beams herself  
elsewhere.

## Deep Freeze

Brown and yellow leaves  
swamp the ground for  
miles around  
4 feet deep  
children are lost  
and never found  
until Spring  
thaw  
when whole families  
appear  
frozen solid  
not seen since  
autumn  
when the snow started  
and the woolly mammoths began  
to migrate  
south  
instead of hanging around the  
Freeze Your Ass Off State.

## Monday Morning

I leave the a.p.t. and go to the diner;  
a male waiter,  
but OK;  
I read the newspapers;  
same characters on the streets as yesterday,  
same places to avoid;  
two homeless in the park argue  
as jets fill the blue sky with  
streaming white vapor trails  
and Gomer with a cigarette  
sits beside me,  
talks about the weather  
and asks questions about my job  
which  
I do not answer  
because  
I will be there  
soon enough.

## **Blue lights**

A sign on the roadside  
read STAY ALERT  
and I thought  
better slow down  
but  
I was going downhill  
and decided I'd slow  
on the upswing  
and went flying  
past a State Trooper  
his car  
like a crouching panther  
in the weeds  
and I said god no  
shit  
balls  
piss  
damn  
and slowed to a crawl  
but the cop came after me  
blue lights flashing  
and I pulled over  
fully ALERT.



## **Birdies**

Blue and white chickadees the size of  
my thumb  
and a small cardinal with  
black Quaker beard around its beak  
plus tiny brown sparrows  
in the apple tree below  
the porch  
where I stand in  
dull November light  
below a bird house I found  
and hung  
but none have moved in yet  
because  
maybe too close  
for those  
who do not know  
that  
I am harmless  
unless provoked.

turkeys on the run  
from hunters with  
guns—  
the mashed potatoes  
balk  
at being lumped with  
the squash  
and the cranberry sauce  
laments the loss  
of table space  
to stuffing up  
the orifice  
of the state bird

## Visitors

There is a flying saucer  
hovering  
a big mother  
from the Planet Crouton  
in galaxy X-10  
and with gamma ray guns  
enough to destroy the city  
but for some reason  
they don't  
and when a rope is thrown  
from the craft  
a little man  
climbs down  
to the street  
and goes inside of Dunkin' Donuts  
and asks for the restroom key  
which they won't give  
because he is not  
a paying customer.

## Alone

He lived in a back room  
of DD's Bar & Grill.  
His name was Pete  
or Art or Earl  
and he had come to town  
from somewhere else  
long ago.  
Aloneness clung to him  
like a coat;  
alone in a crowd  
alone in the street  
alone smoking a cigarette  
that he cupped in the palm of his hand—  
his face was a mask  
hammered from stone  
and DD rode his ass  
if he, Earl or Art or  
Pete, did not sweep or  
mop fast enough  
or clean the glasses  
until they shone.

## **From Brooklyn He Is**

Fred wears tinted glasses  
and used to be a speed freak  
when he drove truck for Pepsi-Cola  
but he got diabetes  
and had his legs cut off  
below the knees  
and one day I see him  
walking  
down the sidewalk  
only instead of six-two  
he's five-eight  
with two plastic stumps  
for legs  
and a cane in each hand  
and the stumps  
clunk clunk  
on the cement  
and he's sweating like a waterfall  
because it's hot  
and because he can barely stand  
but when the bus pulls to the curb  
he hikes the steps  
like Hillary making the ascent  
of Everest  
and he waves from behind the tinted glass.

## Dogs

He owed me a shit-load of money  
for the dope  
but would not pay up  
so  
one day I climbed the hill  
across the street from his house  
and lay in the grass  
waiting  
until the fuck came out  
and then I rested the stock  
of my thirty-ought-six  
on my shoulder  
and sited the cross-hairs  
and shot  
the dog  
and that guy  
you should have seen him  
run—  
like a jackrabbit—  
and afterward  
he started to cough-up  
a few bucks  
and I was glad  
though  
I did feel bad  
for that dog.

## Daddy

My daddy lined us up  
smallest to biggest  
eight kids  
like a set of stairs  
and he gave each of us  
a glass  
according to our size—  
the babies got shot glasses—  
and daddy filled  
the glasses with gin  
and when he said so  
we all drank  
and we drank every night  
for years  
and four of my brothers  
a sister, and me  
became alcoholics  
like daddy  
who had a hemorrhage one day  
and went to the hospital  
where he could not drink  
but I smuggled in a bottle  
and stood by his bed  
and watched him drink every drop  
and the next day  
he died  
the bastard.

## Imperator

After I became emperor  
I had a couple hundred  
dirty so-and-so's  
hung on crosses  
outside my office  
and each morning after  
breakfast I'd walk  
beneath them and  
tickle their feet with a feather  
and some would curse,  
call me a bastard  
but  
I tell you  
it did me good  
to see them squirm  
of course  
I could have had them cut down  
and boiled them in oil  
but crucifixion was  
more enjoyable for me  
personally  
because I got to torment them  
longer  
like the one who kept  
calling  
"Abba Abba"  
(and I'd reply "abba-abba-do!")  
a long haired dirty hippie type  
convicted of selling Pablum to children;  
I couldn't stand him  
but  
I have to hand it  
to him  
because



unlike the others  
he never once  
called me  
a bastard.

## Prayer

I prayed to god but  
no help came  
so I prayed to the Virgin Mary  
and she came to my room  
one night  
and asked what did I want  
and I said  
“a woman”  
and she said  
that  
she was sorry but  
she was a virgin and  
determined to stay one  
and why didn't I take  
my next vacation  
in Nevada  
where I could go to a house  
and legally buy  
whatever I wanted?  
and I told the Virgin  
thanks  
for the suggestion  
but  
I'd already done that  
once  
and never would again.

## **Drronk**

He went on a drunk  
and talked everyone's ears  
off—  
a guy who says two words  
a week;  
he's sleeping on a park bench now  
dead to the world  
and dreaming of  
flying saucers landing  
and little gray men  
with obsidian eyes  
holding his hand  
and bringing him aboard  
while talking non-stop  
in a language  
he cannot understand.

## Vote For Shitmore

I ran for Congress  
on the flat platform  
the wooden one,  
and promised everything  
to everyone  
and got elected  
but did not do a damn thing  
because  
between Republican and Democrat  
we're frozen solid  
nothing I could get done,  
nobody can,  
and everyone knows  
we're going over the falls  
in a barrel  
but  
it looks like fun  
to them  
but it won't be  
when the splatter comes  
but  
you tell 'em that  
I won't  
I got promises to make  
and more to break  
too.

## **Fright Night**

We soaped windows  
and smashed some pumpkins  
then we rolled some logs  
out onto the highway  
that caused a major accident  
in which two people died  
then we set a house on fire  
and shot the residents with a .22  
as they ran out  
and hung their bodies up  
in an apple grove  
we chopped down  
and used as kindling for  
a bonfire we roasted a couple family pets  
over  
plus two handicapped people we  
kidnapped from the home...  
It was a lot of fun  
a blast  
but the night was still young  
so we chartered a boat  
and sailed out into the ocean  
and stabbed whales to death  
with a pitchfork  
plus dumped a ton of oil into the water  
and cut-up the fish that died  
and spread their guts  
on the highway  
and watched accidents happen  
as we relaxed  
knowing  
that  
even if caught  
we'd get off with a slap

because  
hey  
everyone is entitled to some fun  
on Halloween.

## Hard-Boiled

I handed the clerk my  
note  
but the dumb bitch  
could not read my writing  
and looked at me as if  
I had two heads  
or was green  
and when I told her “hurry up”  
she acted like she was waiting for the bus  
so  
I shot her  
and then I shot the manager  
who came running out of the office  
like a hero  
and he died on the floor over by  
the pretzels  
and I got out of there  
thinking that  
they both died for a hundred bucks  
which was chicken shit  
but that clerk  
she should have been able to read  
better  
and that manager  
he was just  
a jerk.

## Monkey's Uncle

They played classical music  
to calm the apes  
who were intent  
upon rape and  
mayhem until  
they heard Brahms,  
then they sat back  
and put on the  
tuxedoes the women  
gave them to wear  
and the apes went  
to the ball smelling  
like perfumed frauds  
with their hair combed  
back and during the  
Concerto in E-Minor  
sat rapt and only  
scratched themselves  
during intermission.



good as winning the lottery  
without having bought  
a ticket;  
good as watching  
Ali vs: Frazier  
or Army vs: Navy;  
good as reading the  
poetry of  
Peter Jelen;  
good as a Cadillac's  
engine;  
good as having my cock  
squeezed by  
Miss America.

## **Buk**

Arthur Hoyle writes  
that  
my poetry reminds him  
of Bukowski  
which I take as compliment  
though not knowing  
if Arthur meant it as such—  
Bukowski the truth-say-er  
comedy-maker  
crafty  
sly  
honest  
liar  
who  
drilled his words  
onto paper  
in a hurry  
in a race  
like the rest of us  
against  
big daddy Death.

## Don Corleone

She starts telling me  
about her ex-boyfriend;  
that he is a nice guy  
and fun to be with  
and that he knows everyone...  
and that he is in the Mafia.

The Mafia?

“Yea,” she says, smiling  
“you know—like ‘The Godfather.’”

I lock the apartment door,  
pull the shades,  
and unplug the telephone.

“And does he know that  
you’re here—with me?”

“No. He’s looking for me  
in Boston.”

I peek out a window;  
the street is dark and empty;  
someone could be lurking  
unseen in the shadows:  
someone like Sonny Corleone.

“You’re so paranoid,” she says,  
still with the smile, like something—  
I can’t imagine what—is funny.

I turn the lamp down and think about  
Barricading the windows with mattresses.

Are those footsteps I hear?  
Or the beating of my heart?

## Vaseline

It was her suggestion  
and I said “go get it”  
and she got out of bed  
and her feet  
pat pat pat  
to the bathroom and back  
and I took the jar from her hand  
and spread some goo on her  
as she waited, on all fours  
patient as a dog  
and then I got it inside of her  
past the sphincter  
and into air:  
like fucking a balloon  
but she liked it  
maybe because  
it was how her mother took it  
from the old man  
who beat her first  
and always said  
afterward  
“she’s got an ass that just won’t quit.”

## Dickhead

Sitting in the park  
after dark  
with my cock out  
like a little telescope  
looking for submarines—  
the park is surrounded with  
spotlights and  
maybe a few cameras...  
I wonder if the vice-squad will arrive:

“ALRIGHT BUDDY! What you got there?”

Badges flash:

“Dick out in the park! That’s a five-oh-seven! Book him!”

My cock starts to shrink,  
retreats like a mole into its hole.

I squint at names of Civil War dead on a plaque.

My cock suddenly stands and salutes:  
“suck me suck me,” it says.

“Pipe down!” I say  
“do you want to get us arrested?”

“Eat shit,” my cock says,  
“and also—keep your goddamn hands off me.”

I zip up.

“I’ll try,” I say  
“but no guarantees.”

## **Mrs. Baguette**

Light peeks over the ridge line  
of mountains like a slice of window  
in the night  
and Mrs. Baguette reaches back,  
undoes her bra strap,  
and her tits fall like baseballs  
onto her stomach.

Charlie Baguette comes around the corner  
of the house, his fists balled.

“HEY! WHAT ARE YOU LOOKIN’ AT?”

“What do you think  
dumb shit!  
Your Ma’s tits!  
I think I’ll go in  
and fuck her!”

“NO YOU WON’T!  
I’LL KILL YAH!”

“NO YOU WON’T!  
I’LL KILL YOU!”

“I’ll get my father’s gun!”

“I’ll get my grandmother’s butcher knife!”

“TRY! And see what happens!”

“I WILL! Don’t worry!”

“I AIN’T WORRIED!”

“I AIN’T EITHER! So there!”

“SO THERE yourself!”

Charlie goes into the house.  
His mom has a pink teddie on  
that glows; she winks at me  
from the window; I think I WILL  
go in and fuck her.



## **Doc Morrison**

“Mr. Burke, the doctor will see you now.”

The receptionist holds the door open;  
she has a set of big jugs and  
I try and give her an elbow shot as I walk past  
but she dodges it.

“Hello, Doc.”

The Doc has an uncanny resemblance to the late  
Jim Morrison of THE DOORS.

“How you feeling, m’boy?”

“Awful. My neck hurts. My back is sore. I can barely  
get out of bed in the morning. I think I got rheumatoid  
arthritis or somethin’...”

“Well, at our age we have to expect some pain.”

“SOME pain, yea, but Christ, I’m dying.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it if I were you.”

“You’re not me.”

“Ha ha. That’s true.” He opens a desk drawer and  
shows me two handfuls of pill bottles. “What do you  
want to take?” He spreads the bottles on the desk.  
“These are good...These here will fix you in a hurry...  
These I take myself—even when I don’t have pain, ha  
ha!”

“You’re a character, Doc.”

“Yes, I know. Everyone calls me Doctor Feel Good;  
except the women, they call me Doctor Feel-You-Up...”

You should have seen the one I had in here last week—“  
He stretches his arms out, hands turned inward: “she  
had ‘em out to here...”

“I don’t like taking pills.”

“No? What do you want, an operation? I’ll set you up  
with Dumore in Rheumatology.” He makes a note on  
the  
desk blotter.

“Thanks Doc.”

“Don’t mention it.”

He ushers me to the door.

“How about that receptionist?” I ask.

“Her? You can try if you want; I tapped  
her a couple of times...Won’t give head  
though; against her religion, or something.”

“Well Doc, keep it up, ha ha.”

“I will. I think it’s coming up now. Mr. Mojo  
rising!”

“A rider on the storm!”

“On more than the storm, ha ha!”

“The LA woman!”

“Right! Minneapolis too!”

“Ha ha! So long Doc!”

“So long!”

The receptionist smiles as I approach.

She is ready to light my fire.





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## **Author's Note:**

Not once as a kid growing up in a small mill-town in the hills of North Berkshire County, Massachusetts, did I think of becoming a poet. I wanted to become a Major League baseball player, and if I could have hit a curveball with more facility than I showed, I might have become one. Or maybe not: I had a lot of other things beside baseball on my mind in adolescence. Not poetry through. Only in college did poetry show up, for me, on the radar screen. My college roommate, a tough guy from a similar background as mine, and also an ex-jock like me, not only wrote poetry but read what he wrote to whomever would listen. He was beautiful; militant in his advocacy of poetry, and because of his example I began my first attempts to write a poem. I was nineteen at the time and at my second college and destined to attend two more before awarded a "Bachelor of Arts" degree quantifying me a totally worthless entity to the business and commercial world. A world I remained on the periphery of and low-down on the food chain for a number of years—years during which I thought more about writing poetry than actually writing any. Years in which the idea of being a poet was more enticing to me—and far easier—than doing the work involved in becoming a poet (or even a facsimile thereof). At some point in my later 30's—the exact chronology is beyond me—I published a few poems, but poetry was a sort of sideline to me; prose was what I worked at. Rather than poet, I considered myself scholar, critic, and novelist of the future. That I was 3<sup>rd</sup> rate as scholar, 2<sup>nd</sup> rate as critic, and un-rated as novelist, did not deter me. I published two books of literary criticism in my 40's, and had numerous book reviews, articles, and some short stories published during my 50's...And then I gave up. Quit. Stopped writing and concentrated on drawing pictures; also went to nursing school and became licensed as an LPN. And then I had a heart attack. Or what I thought a heart attack, later diagnosed as arterial

heart disease. Serendipitously, as I see it, I had begun writing again, strictly poetry, just previous to my diagnoses, and after by-pass surgery (triple though I was shooting for quintuple) I began writing daily and with a sort of vengeance. A schedule I have followed these past two years and one that has resulted in the book you hold in your hand as well as a previously published volume (WORDS THAT BURN) and at least one future volume (now in larval stage). The writing has been a lot of work and a lot of fun too and I plan for more of both, so...stay tuned.

*Wayne F. Burke*



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