

The Wisdom in a Rondo

In a rondo the same tune
sings again, again, again,
with something else between.
Why shouldn't your music
resemble your life? The same tune
come back in the same key?
You keep falling in love with the same
woman by different names, you take
the same job you never liked in the first place.
You buy the same house over and over,
on different streets, in different states.
The same toast, the same coffee.
Lead with the same foot in the same
dance, scratch the same itch with
the same finger. All in E major
or whatever key you start
until the last page when the double bar
signals you won't be hearing
that tune any more. Unless
by chance the universe
loves repetition even more
than you and keeps the rondo circling,
searching for a new place to sing.

Addict

No piano for a week.
My fingers find chords under
the covers in sleep.
A page of Beethoven clicks
onto the interior screen,
scrolls slowly toward
the next movement. Even if
your practical self licks
your addiction in daylight,
hands take over when eyelids fall
and the soul never gives up
a single addiction
no matter how white
your knuckles turn while
you feel around for music.

Untitled

After seventeen years of circling,
waiting for the other shoe to drop,
we decided to give up and marry—
and on a cold, sunny Sunday
in an empty rural courthouse, we did.
The guests were all throwing up from flu,
so we ate the nuptial rhubarb pie alone,
wondering if this was the other shoe.
Now three years after, still under icy sun,
we're keeping our ears alert
for any sudden thumps in undusted corners.
So far, so good. We have now
both loved and endured each other
a long time. Let's raise a glass to ourselves:
while the world was careening madly forward,
we parked our souls in the shade of the chaos,
and here we are, still alive, and pie
or no pie, still capable of joy.

January 22, 2009

Earbud

Earbud—a tiny marble sheathed in foam
to wear like an interior earring so you
can enjoy private noises wherever you go,
protected from any sudden silence.
Only check your batteries, then copy
a thousand secret songs and stories
on the tiny pod you carry in your pocket.
You are safe now from noises made
by other people, other machines, by chance,
noises you have not chosen as your own.
To get your attention, I touch your arm
to show you the tornado or the polar bear.
Sometimes I catch you humming or talking to the air
as if to a shrunken lover waiting in your ear.

The Miniaturization of the World

In Papua, New Guinea, or the Amazon jungle, our Stone-Age cousins shrink the heads of their vanquished enemies, to make small whatever they fear. If you were clever enough, you could make them almost disappear. Now fist-size, the right formula might shrink them down further to thumbnail-size. That would satisfy your interior rage, a hollow gourd with a whole village inside that could never trouble you again. On sleepless nights your children could shake the thumb-head rattle for hours to calm you through the long night.

Your new iPod weighs hardly over an ounce, half the size of a playing card, thin and trim. It holds one hundred fifty hours of tunes, all your favorites: Schubert, Leadbelly, Springsteen, Copland, Prince, The Rolling Stones, The Grateful Dead, Handel's *Messiah*. Just insert your soft earbud to enjoy this tiny box of shrunken music on your own long nights.

Spiritual Economy

Like Christians, Jews, and Muslims,
I believe in one true god who is
my father, Big Bill, me his only son,
and all the ghost tribes you can imagine,
some holy, mostly otherwise.
What's my proof? There: that stone;
the loaf of bread; the crow's feathers;
that road splotch of mashed raccoon;
you, should you happen to appear.
I hear god's voice in the "Pastoral Sonata,"
sounding the low-D thump that starts it,
in the crow's cackle, the soft snoring in my head,
the old lady's hummed Alzheimer's tune.
Doesn't everyone believe all of this?
Why should I differ from my fellow humans?
I don't put on the dog, or claim a revelation.
But I do not believe in the economy
even though it claims to have collapsed.
To collapse is to have once existed,
but I've never heard sufficient proof of that.
To participate in IS you must once have BEEN.
No one denies stone, crow, bread,
or fails to hear the D, the cackles, snoring, tune.
But put a trillion on your kitchen table:
piles of millions, certificates of billions,
bundles of derivative credit default swaps.
Still got room for a coffee cup or two?
Light it with a match, watch it disappear.
Whose name was written on it? Mine? Yours?
We need to know to notify the next of kin.
Thus did worldly goods pass back and forth,
from hand to hand. They will go on passing:
the daily procession of the body parts of god.

Mozart Sale

The mail brings news of “Awesome value!”

“The complete works of Mozart!”

“170 CDs for \$129.99!”

“Less than 80 cents a CD!”

“Free shipping while supplies last!”

Now at last we can tally

Mozart’s value to the last cent,

corner the Mozart futures market,

but only while supplies last.

After all, no new Mozart since 1791.

The universe owns all the Mozart

it will ever get. Trust the market

always rising on scarce goods of awesome

quality. Never have humans

needed Mozart more than this day.

Such a price for all of him!

Complete, achieved, boxed and wrapped!

Put in your earbud—play them all

one after the other: concertos, operas,

masses, sonatas, quartets, serenades,

One hundred seventy hours of awesome value,

a week and a day of your life,

wired into this electric crypt

with surround-sound Mozart.

When you unbud your ears, you might

be a different sort of human, but

on the other hand, you might not.

Is that Mozart’s fault? What do you expect

for one hundred thirty bucks? The voice of Yahweh

roaring in a whirlwind?

Senior Crime Wave in Japan

Maybe to restore Samurai honor
Japanese geezers and crones
take to armed robbery, purse snatching,
shoplifting, not gold or diamonds
but fruits, fish, and vegetables.
Since they make slow getaways
with their crutches, canes, bent backs,
they are usually caught and jailed.
“Nice and warm here, soft bed, plenty of food,”
says one eighty-year-old jailbird.
A peculiar crime wave here where
the old are revered for their wisdom.
Poverty? Wrinkles? Loneliness? Pain?
Where’s that noble stoicism
we all counted on them for?
Even your sainted grandmother
means to disconnect you from
the sentimental idiocy of myth.
The old need whatever you own
and more. They’ll get it
one way if not another.

Snow Birds

A month below zero now, we remind each other.
Twenty straight days of snow.
Up in the Cities, the car exhaust froze on the highway.
At rush hour. Made rust and black ice.
Five hundred accidents just in the morning.
Ninety-three, had plenty of money, didn't pay the gas bill.
The company turned off his heat. Froze to death
inside his house, wearing four layers.
Did it serve him right, we ask each other?
And just what does right service mean
in the middle of the annual assault on
human nature?
The Russians have used this mercy for centuries
to save themselves from the likes of Napoleon and Hitler.
What use do we intend to make of it?
It won't save our soul, or our sanity, or even our money.
All those things shall leak away and diminish
under the bludgeonings of its icy rays—
the old shall fall and crack, the intemperate
young shall grow proud flesh, the rest will burrow
down into themselves to try to outlast it.
Most of them will—a little paler, a little sadder,
counting how many times this will happen before the end.
But I will not burrow. I will leave, go
where I sit now in this desert garden in the sun,
remembering everything that I have left,
whatever I was too cold to love, wrapped in
my afghan of self pity and claustrophobia.
I was a coward and proud of it. Fuck you.

February 3, 2009

Pink Girl and Cows

Thirty or forty reddish-brown cows, milk bags heavy and swinging, clump down the dirt road to their driveway, their barn, their relief. A little blonde girl in a pink track suit, maybe eight years old, and two perky black-and-white dogs herd them home, keep them moving. There's no rushing this gang: clump, clump, clump. The little girl holds a switch but doesn't have to use it. She just keeps an eye out for stragglers. One of the dogs settles into the ditch for a quick nap. Not a grown-up in sight, just pink girl, dogs, red cows, the noise of birds: plovers, whimbrels, a pair of snipes cutting up the sky with buzz-saw wings. And all around the girl and cows, an Icelandic meadow in full bloom on this early July afternoon, an almost symmetrically arranged parallelogram of purple lupine, yellow buttercups, white cotton grass, against a canvas of two-tone green: pale cut hay field, dark intense shaggy grass, over it the ice blue arctic sky, sun to the north, there in the distance the sea—still blue glass stretching north to the polar circle, then after a while the polar ice.

The pink girl and her slow cows stop traffic for ten minutes: one car, us. They round the bend to the farm. The still-awake dog sniffs the tires. That little girl, whatever her name—Guðrún, Helga, Jónína—might remember this afternoon with cows until 2087, maybe longer; Icelandic women last a long time. She will not remember the stopped car with the two middle-aged men in the front seat. Will she remember the switch of command in her hand, herding those tons of heavy-hooved, milk-swollen cows to their duty? Or remember the smell of the cut hay, colors of the flowers in the meadow, the sea a mile or two away, stretching everywhere you might want to go?

But why go anywhere else, when you already own this afternoon?

Fried Chicken in Iceland

As if by magic incantation,
first-rate fried chicken legs
appear on the table in Brimnes—
greaseless, juicy, perfect.
What are the spices? asks Nelson,
gnawing on his fourth leg.
He is a gourmand, a connoisseur of wine.
Flour, salt, and pepper, says Donna from Illinois.
Everyone giggles, but keeps eating.
She does not add: knowing what you are doing
because of having done it before
a thousand times til frying anything
turns into breathing. In this regard,
it's a lot like playing music.
Keep practicing until it lives inside you;
then it will seem foolishly easy
to the unpracticed. Everything
is simple if you know how it's done.
That's why dying will come
so hard for everyone.

Chinese New Year Feast

At the Chinese New Year table,
dishes arrive in an empty room,
perfume the air with garlic, ginger, chili,
then the doors are closed to allow
the dead to enjoy their dishes in private:
Grandfather's beloved dry-cooked eels,
Father's fish-flavored aubergines,
Auntie's pork belly in red sauce.
They are quiet at table, quick to finish,
conversation does not distract them,
their quarrels long since settled.
The dead are light eaters, thoughtful of us live ones,
hardly touching a morsel or moving a chopstick.
After a seemly time for food to settle,
the dead invite us to follow, to feast
on their leftovers yet another year,
before we begin to join them one by one
in this silent banquet of history, duty, love,
all the dishes that make us human,
the recipes for poems we live and die by.

Seattle

Not every city is lucky enough for
such a volcano to rise behind it
and a few miles above, close
enough that if it decided
to wake from its long sleep,
it could melt, crisp, bury, flood
even the memory of its suburbs,
cathedrals, banks, public monuments,
all vanished for a thousand years
or ten thousand or for good.
All that ash and lava and debris
would make an impregnable sarcophagus
for a million, or five million,
a better morgue than Dresden or Hiroshima.
Our wars only puny bringers of death.
But this! This has grandeur, but no blame.
We were not strong or ruthless enough
to do this to ourselves, so the volcano,
the voice of god, stomach of the earth
spews up at us, as Revelation says,
in the twinkling of an eye.
Such a mountain should keep a city
shy about its standing on earth's skin.

You see it around every corner,
at the top of every rise, at the end
of the long avenue that bears its name,
off the deck of the rich doctor's house
as drinks before dinner arrive
and the important issues are debated
with wit and earnest intention while
the debaters keep one eye always on it.
To genuflect would be too much:
vulgar, superstitious, groveling,
but maybe a tip of the hat, a discreet
nod to acknowledge the end-master,
there, visible, waiting, waiting.

Gait

As a boy, I remember seeing the old
clumping their slow way along Minneota streets,
shuffling, wobbling, cane taps, hunched backs,
as if each step triggered a shooting pain.
Repulsive, I thought, why can't they move
not like an insect, but like something still alive.
I scurried around them, peeved at their dawdling.
But I forgot them, continued my adventures.
Now they are all dead. A half century after,
I've been practicing my personal shuffle,
tempo shrunk from allegro to largo,
tapping the cane to find dry places on the ice,
O Gunnar, Steingrimur, Avy, Abo,
forgive the ignorant and idiotic boy
who did not notice the intricate steps
of the last dance until he practiced himself.

Mozart with Kathleen

In honor of your death, my friend Kathleen,
I go to the piano, play half the four-hand Mozart
we worked at for so many years.

The bass is sadder now, because the tune
slid over and off the top of the keyboard
and disappeared in the winter air,
leaving this row of forty ivory slabs
interrupted by black wedges of wood
silent and still as a sculpture garden
closed now for the season. But listen—
the ghost tune still sounds deep
in the caverns of the ear, the ghost hands
still searching for the right fingering.
We'll get it right yet, Kathleen,
but only you and I will ever know or hear.

Eleven boxelder bug haiku

I

Careful if you kill him!
There may be an afterlife
for both of you.

Those black spots in your lamp?
Only bugs who didn't make it
into the next world.

Here's a bug trapped,
dried in a spider web.
Where's the spider?

That bug tickling grandpa's photo
can't tell the difference
between quick and dead. Can you?

Praying to Jesus, I note
the boxelder bug crawl
out of his shadow.

II

“Always tell fall's come—
That shed out back's so full of 'em
she moves around by herself.”

“Ma put out coffee cans
full of water. Those bugs thought
they'd found the swimming hole.”

III

Don't fret, bug,
I keep house . . .
casually.

Somehow these
boxelder bugs don't seem
Icelandic. . . .

—Issa (Robert Hass)

IV

The piano string stops trembling
but boxelder bugs
keep dancing.

The boxelder bug—
another thing that will never
be my friend.

—Basho (Robert Bly)

The history of American poetry, or: Oscar Williams
looks at a boxelder bug for *Readers' Digest* books

1

I think I could turn and live with the boxelder bugs.
They are so placid and self-contained.
I stand and look at them long and long.
Boxelder bugs bring me tokens of myself.
I wonder where did they get those tokens?
Did I pass that way huge times ago,
and negligently drop them?

2

So much depends upon a boxelder bug
covered with soap suds beside the white sink.

3

Whose bugs these are I do not know.
His tree is in the village though.
He will not mind me stopping here—
To scoop up bugs before the snow.

4

I was of three minds like a window
In which three boxelder bugs are crawling.
A man and a woman are one.
A man and a woman and a boxelder bug are one.

5

The bug comes in on little bug feet
sits looking over stove and icebox
on silent haunches and then crawls on

6

I, too, dislike them; there are things that are important beyond
boxelder bugs.

Killing them, however, with a perfect contempt for them, one
discovers something like affection for the little bastards—
imaginary windows with real boxelder bugs in them.

7

Fat black bugs in a wine barrel room
Barrel house bugs with wings unstable
Sagged and reeled and expired on the table
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM.

8

I thank you God for most this amazing
bug: for the crawling blackly spirits of trees
with a neat, sleek stripe of red, and for everything
which is unwanted, which is numerous, which is no.

9

I'd rather, except for the penalties, kill a man than a bug,
but the small black wing
had nothing left but a feeble wave which said, "Up yours."
I gave him the big thumb in the twilight.

10

What happens to a bug in a window?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun
Or does it explode?
No. It eats in the kitchen and grows strong.

How they die

They dry up,
turn into light.

Advice

Someone dancing inside us
has learned only a few steps:
the “Do-Your-Work” in 4/4 time,
and the “What-Do-You-Expect” waltz.
He hasn’t noticed yet the woman
standing away from the lamp,
the one with black eyes
who knows the rumba
and strange steps in jumpy
rhythms from the mountains of Bulgaria.
If they dance together,
something unexpected will happen.
If they don’t, the next world
will be a lot like this one.

My Old Friend AT&T Writes Me a Personal Letter

“Dear Mr. Holm,
Post office box one-eighty-seven may
be a terrific place to live, but for you—
it’s more than just a home.
It’s also a place to do serious business. . . .”
Dear Company,
How well you understand
my needs—my life—
how every night we light
tiny candles to dine
on a roast sparrow (nowhere
for leftovers, you know),
drink a small young burgundy
(no space here for wine to grow
old and big), then lie down
on our narrow bed for a little love.
Early in the morning
third-class mail tumbles
down the chute to drive us out
into the street. We only do
serious business here
when blizzards far away
stop the mail trucks or the master
takes a three-day holiday.
It would be nice to move.
Our place is a little cramped,
but we think your offer of
a “telecommunications program
designed exclusively to meet
the needs of people like me”
will make life better.
Please send more details
in a registered letter.
Maybe we should talk face-
to-face: our box or yours?

I notice you, like us,
live in a box, ten seventy-eight
in Duncansville, PA.
That's why you understand.
Sincerely, your old friend,
Mr. Holm.

Lemon Pie

For your last Thanksgiving in Minneota I invited half the
universe,
Holm's single-handed feed-the-hungry, stuff-the-lonesome-
stranger
with turkey and giblets and pie. Already death had winked at you
once or twice from behind its shadowy curtain.

My neighbors pitched in with gravy, bread, and labor. Thursday
morning
Tom brought lemon pies, steaming, acid-sweet smell,
majestic meringues, soaring peaks of beaten egg white.
On the table cooling, you smelled them, found a fork,
and, a mischievous, sweet-toothed boy, were set to violate a hot
meringue,
when I walked in and said, sharp of voice, "Get the hell out of
there!
Those hot pies will be ruined if you dig into them."

"So what?" You shot me an insulted look. "They're only pies.
Eat them yourself." You skulked out into the morning. Toward
night
your snit evaporated, and you resumed your usual grace and humor.
By then I'd grown my guilty conscience, remembering
that you lived under sentence of impending death.

I should have kept my mouth shut, one nagging inner voice
said to another, watched you put an entire hot lemon pie
into your gullet. What a hard business being human—
all we know and remember shadows every simple act.

The next Thanksgiving you lay close to death, all food
loathsome, indigestible. Kept half-alive with cans
of glutinous Ensure, we made a lemon pie to tempt you
into one more small pleasure, but you impaled
the pie with a fork, left it standing upright in the meringue,
and turned away, lost to all joy.

We are who we are until we aren't anything anymore but air.
I carry that steaming pie to my own grave, offering it to you
over and over again, atonement. I hear your wry voice
saying, as it said so often: "Eat dessert first; life is short and
uncertain."

Lightning

for Phyllis Yoshida

You were a nervous man with a calm cat,
Lightning, whose attack mode
consisted of slowly raising one eyelid
or twitching a whisker as if it lived
in an atmosphere of pure molasses.
That cat respected gravity,
practiced only passive resistance to it.
An old friend who loathed cats, froze up
in their presence, liked him. He said,
“For a long time I thought he was stuffed;
then he shocked me and breathed.”

Sometimes after a bourbon or two
you asked guests if they might enjoy
Lightning’s new trick. You grabbed
torso and chest of sleeping Lightning,
held the tan, fat fluff ball overhead,
and waltzed and whirled through the kitchen
for maybe thirty seconds, stopped
and looked up while Lightning with
Republican deliberation stretched one
paw down, touched your forehead,
and held it there while we applauded.

O Lightning was a calm cat who had to be
startled into stretching. He slept at your feet
while you lay restless in your dying,
and then, like us, he outlived you a little while
but never did his trick again.

Letting Go of What Cannot Be Held Back

Let go of the dead now.
The rope in the water,
the cleat on the cliff,
do them no good anymore.
Let them fall, sink, go away,
become invisible as they tried
so hard to do in their own dying.
We needed to bother them
with what we called help.
We were the needy ones.
The dying do their own work with
tidiness, just the right speed,
sometimes even a little
satisfaction. So quiet down.
Let them go. Practice
your own song. Now.