

## *Man Eating*

The man at the table across from mine  
is eating yogurt. His eyes, following  
the progress of the spoon, cross briefly  
each time it nears his face. Time,

and the world with all its principalities,  
might come to an end as prophesied  
by the Apostle John, but what about  
this man, so completely present

to the little carton with its cool,  
sweet food, which has caused no animal  
to suffer, and which he is eating  
with a pearl-white plastic spoon.

## *Man Waking*

The room was already light when  
he awoke, and his body curled  
like a grub suddenly exposed  
when something dislodges a stone.  
Work. He was more than an hour  
late. Let that pass, he thought.  
He pulled the covers over his head.  
The smell of his skin and hair  
offended him. Now he drew his legs  
up a little more, and sent  
his forehead down to meet his knees.  
His knees felt cool.

A surprising amount of light  
came through the blanket. He could  
easily see his hand. Not dark enough,  
not the utter darkness he desired.

## *Happiness*

There's just no accounting for happiness,  
or the way it turns up like a prodigal  
who comes back to the dust at your feet  
having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?  
You make a feast in honor of what  
was lost, and take from its place the finest  
garment, which you saved for an occasion  
you could not imagine, and you weep night and day  
to know that you were not abandoned,  
that happiness saved its most extreme form  
for you alone.

No, happiness is the uncle you never  
knew about, who flies a single-engine plane  
onto the grassy landing strip, hitchhikes  
into town, and inquires at every door  
until he finds you asleep midafternoon  
as you so often are during the unmerciful  
hours of your despair.

It comes to the monk in his cell.  
It comes to the woman sweeping the street  
with a birch broom, to the child  
whose mother has passed out from drink.  
It comes to the lover, to the dog chewing  
a sock, to the pusher, to the basket maker,  
and to the clerk stacking cans of carrots  
in the night.

It even comes to the boulder  
in the perpetual shade of pine barrens,  
to rain falling on the open sea,  
to the wineglass, weary of holding wine.

## *Reading Aloud to My Father*

I chose the book haphazard  
from the shelf, but with Nabokov's first  
sentence I knew it wasn't the thing  
to read to a dying man:

*The cradle rocks above an abyss, it began,  
and common sense tells us that our existence  
is but a brief crack of light  
between two eternities of darkness.*

The words disturbed both of us immediately,  
and I stopped. With music it was the same—  
Chopin's Piano Concerto—he asked me  
to turn it off. He ceased eating, and drank  
little, while the tumors briskly appropriated  
what was left of him.

But to return to the cradle rocking. I think  
Nabokov had it wrong. This is the abyss.  
That's why babies howl at birth,  
and why the dying so often reach  
for something only they can apprehend.

At the end they don't want their hands  
to be under the covers, and if you should put  
your hand on theirs in a tentative gesture  
of solidarity, they'll pull the hand free;  
and you must honor that desire,  
and let them pull it free.

## *Fat*

The doctor says it's better for my spine  
this way—more fat, more estrogen.  
Well, then! There was a time when a wife's  
plump shoulders signified prosperity.

These days my fashionable friends  
get by on seaweed milkshakes,  
Pall Malls, and vitamin pills. Their clothes  
hang elegantly from their clavicles.

As the evening news makes clear  
the starving and the besieged maintain  
the current standard of beauty without effort.

Whenever two or three gather together  
the talk turns dreamily to sausages,  
purple cabbages, black beans and rice,  
noodles gleaming with cream, yams, and plums,  
and chapati fried in ghee.

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## *How Like the Sound*

How like the sound of laughing weeping  
is. I wasn't sure until I saw your face—  
your eyes squeezed shut, and the big  
hot tears spurting out.

There you sat, upright, in your mother's  
reclining chair, tattered from the wear  
of many years. Not since childhood  
had you wept this way, head back, throat

open like a hound. Of course the howling  
had to stop. I saw you add *call realtor*  
to your list before your red face  
vanished behind the morning *Register*.

## No

The last prayer had been said,  
and it was time to turn away  
from the casket, poised on its silver  
scaffolding over the open hole  
that smelled like a harrowed field.

And then I heard a noise that seemed  
not to be human. It was more like wind  
among leafless trees, or cattle lowing  
in a distant barn. I paused with one  
hand on the roof of the car,

while the sound rose in pitch, then  
cohered into language: *No, don't do this  
to me! No, no. . . !* And each of us  
stood where we were, unsure  
whether to stay, or leave her there.

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## *In the Nursing Home*

She is like a horse grazing  
a hill pasture that someone makes  
smaller by coming every night  
to pull the fences in and in.

She has stopped running wide loops,  
stopped even the tight circles.  
She drops her head to feed; grass  
is dust, and the creekbed's dry.

Master, come with your light  
halter. Come and bring her in.