

## Pencil (from "Like" – 2018)

Once, you loved permanence,  
Indelible. You'd sink  
Your thoughts in a black well,  
And called the error ink.

And then you crossed it out;  
You canceled as you went.  
But you craved permanence,  
And honored the intent.

Perfection was a blot  
That could not be undone.  
You honored what was not,  
And it was legion.

And you were sure, so sure,  
But now you cannot stay sure.  
You turn the point around  
And honor the erasure.

Rubber stubs the page,  
The heart, a stiletto of lead,  
And all that was black and white  
Is in-between instead.

All scratch, all sketch, all note,  
All tentative, all tensile  
Line that is not broken,  
But pauses with the pencil,

And all choice, multiple,  
The quiz that gives no quarter,  
And Time the other implement  
That sharpens and grows shorter.

**A Postcard from Greece** (from *Archaic Smile* – 1999)

Hatched from sleep, as we slipped out of orbit  
Round a clothespin curve new-watered with the rain,  
I saw the sea, the sky, as bright as pain,  
That outer space through which we were to plummet.  
No guardrails hemmed the road, no way to stop it,  
The only warning, here and there, a shrine:  
Some tended still, some antique and forgotten,  
Empty of oil, but all were consecrated  
To those who lost their wild race with the road  
And sliced the tedious sea once, like a knife.  
Somehow we struck an olive tree instead.  
Our car stopped on the cliff's brow. Suddenly safe,  
We clung together, shade to pagan shade,  
Surprised by sunlight, air, this afterlife.

## **The Argument** (from "Olives" – 2012)

After the argument, all things were strange.  
They stood divided by their eloquence  
Which had surprised them after so much silence.  
Now there were real things to rearrange.  
Words betokened deeds, but they were both  
Lightened briefly, and they were inclined  
To be kind as sometime strangers can be kind.  
It was as if, out of the undergrowth,  
They stepped into a clearing and a sun,  
Machetes still in hand. Something was done,  
But how they did not fully realize.  
Something was beginning. Something would stem  
And branch from this one moment. Something made  
Them both look up into each other's eyes  
Because they both were suddenly afraid  
And there was no one now to comfort them.

## Olives (from "Olives" – 2012)

Sometimes a craving comes for salt, not sweet,  
For fruits that you can eat  
Only if pickled in a vat of tears—  
A rich and dark and indehiscent meat  
Clinging tightly to the pit—on spears

Of toothpicks, maybe, drowned beneath a tide  
Of vodka and vermouth,  
Rocking at the bottom of a wide,  
Shallow, long-stemmed glass, and gentrified;  
Or rustic, on a plate cracked like a tooth—

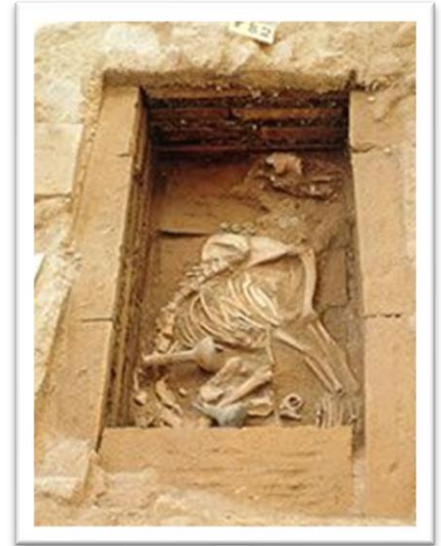
A miscellany of the humble hues  
Eponymously drab—  
Brown greens and purple browns, the blacks and blues  
That chart the slow chromatics of a bruise—  
Washed down with swigs of barrel wine that stab

The palate with pine-sharpness. They recall  
The harvest and its toil,  
The nets spread under silver trees that foil  
The blue glass of the heavens in the fall—  
Daylight packed in treasuries of oil,

Paradigmatic summers that decline  
Like singular archaic nouns, the troops  
Of hours in retreat. These fruits are mine—  
Small bitter drupes  
Full of the golden past and cured in brine.

**An Ancient Dog Grave, Unearthed During  
Construction of the Athens Metro** (from “Hapax” – 2006)

It is not the curled-up bones, nor even the grave  
That stops me, but the blue beads on the collar  
(Whose leather has long gone the way of hides),  
The ones to ward off evil. A careful master  
Even now protects a favorite, just so.  
But what evil could she suffer after death?  
I picture the loyal companion, bereaved of her master,  
Trotting the long, dark way that slopes to the river,  
Nearly trampled by all the nations marching down,  
One war after another, flood or famine,  
Her paws sucked by the thick, caliginous mud,  
Deep as her dewclaws, near the riverbank.  
In the press for the ferry, who will lift her into the boat?  
Will she cower under the pier and be forgotten,  
Forever howling and whimpering, tail tucked under?  
What stranger pays her passage? Perhaps she swims,  
Dog-paddling the current of oblivion.  
A shake as she scrambles ashore sets the beads jingling.  
And then, that last, tense moment — touching noses  
Once, twice, three times, with unleashed Cerberus.



## **Burned** (from "Olives" – 2012)

You cannot unburn what is burned.  
Although you scrape the ruined toast,  
You can't go back. It's time you learned

The butter cannot be unchurned,  
You can't unmail the morning post,  
You cannot unburn what is burned—

The lovers in your youth you spurned,  
The bridges charred you needed most.  
You can't go back. It's time you learned

Smoke's reputation is well earned,  
Not just as an acrid, empty boast—  
You cannot unburn what is burned.

You longed for home, but while you yearned,  
The black ships smoldered on the coast;  
You can't go back. It's time you learned

That even if you had returned,  
You'd only be a kind of ghost,  
You can't go back. It's time you learned

That what is burned is burned is burned.

## Empathy (From "Like" – 2018)

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My love, I'm grateful tonight  
Our listing bed isn't a raft  
Precariously adrift  
As we dodge the coast-guard light,

And clasp hold of a girl and a boy.  
I'm glad that we didn't wake  
Our kids in the thin hours, to take  
Not a thing, not a favorite toy,

And we didn't hand over our cash  
To one of the smuggling rackets,  
That we didn't buy cheap lifejackets  
No better than bright orange trash

And less buoyant. I'm glad that the dark  
Above us, is not deeply twinned  
Beneath us, and moiled with wind,  
And we don't scan the sky for a mark,

Any mark, that demarcates a shore  
As the dinghy starts taking on water.  
I'm glad that our six-year old daughter,  
Who can't swim, is a foot off the floor

In the bottom bunk, and our son  
With his broken arm's high and dry,  
That the ceiling is not seeping sky,  
With our journey but hardly begun.

Empathy isn't generous,  
It's selfish. It's not being nice  
To say I would pay any price  
Not to be those who'd die to be us.

## **Cast Irony** (from "Like" – 2018)

Who scrubbed this iron skillet  
In water, with surfactant soap,  
Meant to cleanse, not kill it,  
But since its black and lustrous skin  
Despoiled of its enrobing oils,  
Dulled, lets water in,  
Now it is vulnerable and porous  
As a hero stripped of his arms  
Before a scornful chorus.  
It lacks  
Internal consistency  
As ancient oral epics  
Where a Bronze Age warrior might appeal  
To a boar's-tusk-helmet-wearing foe  
Who has an anachronistic heart of steel,  
Will of iron—from which metals  
No one has yet forged a weapon,  
Much less pans or kettles  
(Though there must have been between  
Two eras, awkward overlap  
Enacted in the kitchen  
When mother-in-law and daughter  
Wrangled over the newfangled,  
Over oil and water  
In proverbial mistrust,  
Brazen youth subject to iron age  
As iron is to rust).  
There can be no reasoning  
With sarcastic oxygen,  
Only a re-seasoning  
Can give the vessel's life new lease:  
Scour off the scab the color of dried blood,  
Apply some elbow grease  
To make it fast;  
Anoint it, put it once more in the fire  
Where everything is cast.



## Shoulda, Woulda, Coulda (from "Like" – 2018)

The mood made him tense—  
How she sharpened conditional futures  
On strops of might-have-beens,  
The butchered present in sutures.

He cursed in the fricative,  
The way she could not act,  
Or live in the indicative,  
Only contrary to fact.

Tomorrow should have been vast,  
Bud-packed, grenade-gravid,  
Not just a die miscast.

It made him sad, it made him livid:  
How she construed from the imperfect past  
A future less vivid.

## **Aftershocks** (from "Hapax" – 2006)

We are not in the same place after all.  
The only evidence of the disaster,  
Mapping out across the bedroom wall,  
Tiny cracks still fissuring the plaster -  
A new cartography for us to master,  
In whose legend we read where we are bound:  
Terra infirma, a stranger land, and vaster.  
Or have we always stood on shaky ground?  
The moment keeps on happening: a sound.  
The floor beneath us swings, a pendulum  
That clocks the heart, the heart so tightly wound,  
We fall mute, as when two lovers come  
To the brink of the apology, and halt,  
Each standing on the wrong side of the fault.