

'56 Corvette

I'm grateful to the camera for reaching out
sixty years ago and putting a stop
to time, if only for 1/125th of a second,
so that my father and I can sit a little longer
in the nifty white convertible he's just bought
and driven home to take me for a spin.

I'm five years old, and taking in
what the camera can't: perfume of seat leather,
my dad's Chesterfield, and the lilt
of Vitalis in the air as he slips
the little beauty into first, eases out
the clutch, and heads off to be dead
by the end of the year, his liver
finally throwing in the towel.

We smiled as the shutter clicked,
giving the film its sweet slice of light,
and my mother waved and went back into the dark
part of life that doesn't get its picture taken.

Above Illinois

Gazing from my little window,
Light in August
face down on my dinner tray,
I see a glowing town beneath me
spangling the dusk, a town
I've probably never heard of,
and I think about you,
you who are down there
leading my life.

You're a large fellow in late middle-age,
a standard-looking, indistinct sort of man
people think might teach English,
and who in fact does teach English,
just like me, at a small school
no one's ever heard of, someplace like
Midwestern Tri-State Polytechnic,
or Central Pottawattamie University,
or just plain old Riverdale College.

And the quad is beautiful in late autumn,
the red leaves of the maple by Kirby Hall
tear at your heart every season,
and the dark-haired coed walking alone,
eyes downcast—you've peered into the mystery
of her, or tried to peer, as I have tried
at my own little school you've never heard of.

You've pulled off your sneakers and socks
in the locker room after noon pickup games
with guys you've grown old defending.

You've walked down the hallway

of the English Department alone
at the end of the day, not recognizing
half of the new names on the office doors,
wondering what happened to thirty years.

And you've strolled home along Meadowbrook Road,
thinking more or less the same thoughts
you were thinking thirty years ago:
Sex. Fame. Car payments.

And my question for you, as you walk
into the nice little two-story
you and Barb bought for nothing back in '85,
which is exactly like my little two-story,
with your books on the shelves
which more or less are the books on my shelves,
and all the odd knickknacks you've picked up
along the way, which are my knickknacks,
more or less (although the African masks—
where the hell did you get the African masks? Very cool),

the question is,
as your wife kisses you with the *this incredibly complicated
and intrinsically fragile structure we have created
called marriage, with its various subsystems involving kids
and mortgage and health insurance and fidelity,
remains, at least for today, intact* sort of kiss
my wife gives me,
and asks you about your day,
the question is . . .

It's . . . what?

Never mind.

Maybe there isn't a question big enough, actually,
for what the question really is . . . and you,
of course, know exactly what I mean.

Living Will

When the doctor called at 3 a.m.
to tell me that only a ventilator
could keep my mother alive at that point,
I stood shivering in the dark kitchen,
thinking about that word, *ventilator*.

I envisioned a dark shaft of some sort
in an old office building from the fifties,
when my mother was a young woman.
Then I imagined being in that shaft,
somehow hidden away behind a grill
while an important meeting was going on
in a paneled room full of big shots
scribbling things on yellow legal pads.
Millions of dollars were at stake.
Someone's career, maybe even their life,
depended on what the important men did or said.

But I was hidden in the ventilator shaft,
safely out of bounds. I wanted to stay
inside that word for as long as I could,
its syllables like four rooms
I could buy some time exploring.
But it was so cold in the dark kitchen,
and the doctor was waiting.

Happy Hour

The two rather glossy-looking young guys
drinking dry martinis at the bar
use a lot of product.

They use phrases like “convergence trades”
and “fungible commodities.”

In fact, one of them has said
“fungible commodities” at least three times
in the past ten minutes,
causing the other guy to frown
and vigorously tap his phone.

Meanwhile Mike and I
are using phrases like “pretty good Pilsner”
and “three stolen bases” and “maybe not his best work
but definitely worth taking a look at.”

And we are wearing the chalk dust
of Whitman seminars, the herringbone
of committee meetings, and the frayed Dockers
of rejection letters.

All of which causes
the two very attractive
radar tracking devices
sipping cosmos at the bar
in their strapless summer dresses
to swivel attentively and lock on
to “fungible commodities.”