Death

When you’re dead, my seven-year-old daughter explained,

one of the first things you do is get lessons

on how to be invisible so you can come back

as a ghost. And then it’s not

so different from being alive.

I didn’t get her words verbatim, nor did I say

But you may find out, my love, how being alive

you also get lessons on what it is like to be invisible.
Philip Guston

As a boy Philip came home. He was 10 or 11. He came home
then found his father
had hanged himself.

He was the first to find his father.
Philip was the youngest of seven.

His father hung himself
from a rope thrown over a rafter.

He found his father. And he began to draw cartoons. He shut
himself in, at home, in a large closet with its one light bulb, and he’d draw.

Draw draw draw draw draw draw draw.
Repeated, it almost begins to sound
like a crow’s call, or sound like the opposite of snow, nothing white falling from the sky but,

instead, the pencil lead and what hand makes appear
out of a hidden place
or a place that wasn’t there before, that only he
could bring to life.
I’m Writing a Poem about Death

Quote Louis Zukofsky about when “we will lie as faceless as the grass”

then write about being a pallbearer at my uncle’s funeral six days ago.

Allyson, four-and-a-half, comes into the kitchen, drags a wooden chair next to me, stands on it and looks into my ear. She says, “You’re only a skeleton with a costume on.”
Death
  gathers
  faces

we’re all
going home
like that chicken down there
who has scratched the earth clear
of weeds and debris
to find one thing fresh
Kaolack, Senegal

—August, 1982

Second biggest city in Senegal, 100,000, but seems a village. Graffiti is all over, sketches, children’s drawings (by children?) in pencil, crayon, charcoal, paint. A large-beaked bird, six feet tall, on the exterior wall of the cobbler’s little shop. In a bar a penciled man and woman cover a wall as they lean (over the actual jukebox) toward each other.

I take a walk with a young man trying to learn a little English. He wants me to speak to him in English instead of French. As we walk it begins to drizzle. He stops, looks like he is trying to figure something out. Then he asks, seriously, if it rains in America. I solemnly say—Yes. “Then this,” he says, gesturing expansively, “is not news.”
With a shovel, the man down there in a black
smoking field of fallen and standing stalks. A single blank glance
to our passing train.
the widows
in black
are at night
yelling to
each other over
the dirt road
on which they live
separately
voices of complaint
dispute
lower
for gossip
the full moon
sometimes a laugh
usually not joined
dogs from all directions
yap
one woman sighs as if shifting
some burden
they speak
with such energy breaking
the silence breaking it
into pieces as small
as stars
Each second, a grain of sand; the accumulation forms a beach—*God*, when the wave thunders
Loss

to grieve

a loss

someone
who will never

who will never

for all my
future

will
never

come back

who

will

never
Bill,

I saw you on the porch today
writing, slowly bringing
the poem closer

a kite
you lost as a child . . .

A whisper
would’ve sent it sailing . . .
George

Not

that he doesn’t love
Jesus, worked
in a church after
he retired

and when he started to paint
bought a color-by-number
Jesus.

But the two purple irises
and seven yellow daffodils
in a white bowl

he painted by himself, and on
a larger canvas. Each

daffodil bell

a shade of green the
yellow stamen
stands out in

in the living room.

Jesus
waits in the back room, on the blue wall
with icons.
Family Get-Together

Strangers come up to me and ask
if I’m a poet, my brother Andy says. You do

look like a poet, his wife says, laughing.
Well, Andy says, turning to me, you’re the poet

in the family—anyone ever think you’re a poet?
I mean a stranger. Never once, I answer.

That’s cuz, my sister-in-law says,
you look like a butcher. No offense.

Hey, I’m flattered, I say. Butchers
are strong, vital, and occasionally handsome.

Weird, Andy says, you look like a butcher
and you’ve been a vegetarian for what?

About 32 years, I say. Not eating meat
makes you look prosaic, Mom says.

No, Dad says, you are what you eat and
it’s the mammals that are the poets.
Occasionally a poet’s name makes a certain amount of sense (Pound, Spicer). But Levy? An amount taxed? Troops mustered? Except my family pronounces it to rhyme with TV, not bevy, so that puts Levy into the enormous Meaningless Name School of Poets, with Lorine Niedecker a nearby neighbor on one side and Kenward Elmslie going the other way though he has the distinction of arguably having a meaningless first and last as if he himself were hurtling syllables “thanks to a blessed motor disturbance in the Heavens”
Both of Us Lawyers

He tells me what he’d do. I tell him I’m sure that is what he’d do. Trying again, he prefaces the same advice with

“If I were you . . .”
“If you were me,” I reply, after he completes his sentence, “you wouldn’t write poetry.”

The three of us on this long distance call laugh: my father, my mother, and me.
I remember once, years ago,

he surprised me, after I’d asked if he believes in life-after-death.
People wouldn’t believe in Heaven, he said, with a straight face, if they had enough money.

He filled our house with books and I knew how much he loved them, although I don’t remember him talking to me, when I was a child, about that.

If I were he, I wouldn’t read this because it looks like a poem.
The only books of poetry we had were by Ogden Nash. But, no, if I were he, I would read this because, like him, I’d read anything by my son.
In the Eyes of the Hard

“In the eyes of the hard” is what I read in her letter to the judge.

She was telling the sentencing judge all about her life—and her letter,

single-spaced, hand-written, had words jammed together. She wrote that she had always tried
to be good “in the eyes of the hard.”

She’s a heavy woman, plain, her
parents divorced, her own life
without lovers. All eyes are
hard, I thought, rereading her words.
That has been her life

and so she embezzled to make her life
a little better. I reread her words and saw

her h was supposed to be an L
though this capital L curves

in the middle of its bottom line,
as if that line has to cover a stone.

And so what looks like an a is an o pushed
so close to the L and the r

it’s hard to tell what it is. In the eyes of the Lord, in the eyes of the hard, for her

there isn’t much difference; she asks for probation.
Lies

if a lie is white that
color means it
is little, really meaningless

except that it does mean
the liar wants to avoid
telling the truth

and then we have the
beige lies, a little bigger

and so on and so not forth

as the color deepens
and we get to downright
or downwrong or simply

down and out deceit, betrayal
or, to put it sweetly, someone is taking
advantage

the blue lies, the deep blue
lies, those are saved for
love failing

and let’s not even talk
about the two-tone
and the ones so nuanced

they could be
Rothkos
minus the beauty
Spite

blame honed
and thrust
Forgiveness

to give
again, to someone

whom I’d given to
before.

To be
for

giving
instead of

a
gainst.
Busts of Diego Giacometti

Alberto Giacometti made busts of his brother, over and over compressing that face into a slice pressured, touched, pushed all over.
Alberto and Diego’s mother once told Alberto, “You’d never win a beauty contest.” Another time she informed him he looked as if he’d come from a land of dark fogs.

He probably didn’t reply, “Yes, I’m your son.” Alberto made Diego look like he comes, gouged, out of the land of minus.
Dealt

The rat of spaces. The ace of lies. The ten of horror. Deuce of stone. The jack is dressed

in a potato costume, you can see his dark eyes: the jack of insanity. The queen of

addictions is almost nude, her bikini top old, discolored. The king of lies (there are two cards

for liars) is shown in a small room surrounded by corpses. The bumpkeeper

is the dealer, never cheats in any way you can detect. You stare,

rarely with disbelief, at each card. The nine of despair, six of lust,

four of betrayal, three of shame. Five of helplessness. The seven of bitterness and resentment

is a cluttered collage, small dark scenes, ugliness. Sometimes

you manage to discard. Sometimes you feel free.
Sincerity

A man in an orange jumpsuit, sitting in court, knowing he is going to prison but not knowing for how long, speaks to the judge. The judge had said this man wrote a convincing letter last time when he apologized for fleeing to another state while on probation. That was a year ago. The judge gave him another chance and the man ran away to an even more distant place. The judge scolds him for writing another sincere sounding letter. The man explains, “I was meaningful when I wrote that letter.”
Evolution

During dinner my six-year-old daughter says she doesn’t believe any of her relatives, no matter how far back, were monkeys.

My son, nine, says he thinks we are related to monkeys and follows that by declaring he wants to be a Quaker because they’re against war.
Paul Klee, Drafted at 35

—for David Miller

World War I, a red piece of paper from the German government: Klee must enter the infantry. Issued a helmet removed from a corpse. Transfers to flying school, varnishes wings.

Transfers to another flying school, works in the paymaster’s office, finally has a place where he can close a door and be alone. His office near the landing strip.

Planes have canvas skin. After the planes crash and the dead are pried out, and/or washed out, Klee walks over to the mess to cut off pieces of unburnt canvas. He paints in a desk drawer he shuts when he hears footsteps.
Political Poetry

changes nothing. I’m glad.
What if the other side
had the best poets?
(after Basho)

My poems aren’t
really mine. Any more

than a frog
owns its croak

or its splash as it dives
beneath the green surface.

You see the surface translated
into language

ripples. (The frog invisible,
immersed.)
almond blossoms
in grey
dusk
appear
as if their tree
weren’t there
Allyson’s View

My four-year-old daughter
said of the moth beating
at our window,
“It is made of bones and dreams.”
Naked, Short Poems

According to Alice Notley, “A short poem is peculiarly naked . . .”

Ah, peculiar
nakedness

keeps

your attention

a bit
longer.

. . .

The shorter the poem the more peculiar

its
body

parts.

. . .

A long poem
dressed for winter

as the short one stripped
to skinny-

dip in the white
page.
Monet’s Water Lilies

—for Susan Arnold

flowers
floating at every hour of the day
out in the lily-white light of the early morning
of the in the bronze haze of noon
end in the violet shadows of late afternoon
of a life

(quotation by Louis Vauxcelles)
Autumnal Pilgrimages

—for my Mother

Millions
stepping out
(as they do
in Kyoto)
to pay homage to
each of the local

most celebrated
trees, trees famous

for bold reach of
branch or

deep wine-reds mixed
with gold, or just
for the bark, a

sycamore’s gray
smooth bark

which has scaled to
reveal buff
or orange
Emily Dickinson and N

Emily Dickinson: “. . . to N’s I had an especial aversion, as they always seemed unfinished M’s.”

A world of the unfinished next to the finished. A world, for her, alive and emotional, full of seeming, all the way down to where a letter is never fulfilled no matter where it appears.
**My Client**

who committed his crime
drunk and then, still
drunk, confessed to the police
is angry

that he was indicted, keeps
telling me that someone else who did
something much worse
got off “scotch free.”

The last thing he needs to
hear is
his vocabulary is also
in deep shit.
At the Chinese Restaurant

my eight-year-old daughter asks me,
“Human beef would be illegal,” I add. “Why?”

“Eating people is illegal.” “But couldn’t something, like a beef something, just be called human beef, but be made from a cow?”

“Do you think people would want it,” I ask. She says she wants the sweet and sour chicken. She always wants that, though carefully studies every single offering, adding each to her world of possibilities.
Public Transport, Morning Bus

A woman reads a paperback novel.
I wish
I’d written her book. She’s

in her 20s, moving her lips.
It’s seven twelve a.m. If she were reading my book of poems, which poem

would I want her to read?
I don’t know. She wears
no lipstick, the only garish thing about her

is the novel’s bright cover and now
she closes the book and
her mouth, frowns. It seems

she didn’t want to leave those words.
She doesn’t know that, as she read, a man
in his 50s back here

made her the plot and
single page
of his attention.
longing: a wish to reach awash with that wish
Snapshot of Philip Larkin

Young man, isolated

with his complete
volume

of
Yeats pur-

oined

from the
local

girls’
school.
Wrong Number

They hear your voice first.
They wanted someone else.
So did you. It’s a little like
love gone wrong, but so much faster.
Han Wu Ti (156-87 B.C.)

The two lovers in the
courtyard in autumn

are no longer, as the
leaves move around them,

making love

& Han Wu Ti
explains this, saying

The rustling of the
silk is discontinued
In Chinese

put the character “autumn” on top of “heart” to make the character “sorrow.” Wu Wenying, in the 13th century, begins a poem by asking what sorrow is made of.

“Autumn on the heart of a man who travels,” he writes of being far from home.
Vacant Lot Where Empress Once Stood

In Tucson today, on the bus, I passed a razed X-rated club, the lot just dirt now

behind a chain-link fence. All the erections over the years, pointing and pointless, in a place named Empress. As if

any She who has a body we want could rule us forever, pull us around by the news of a face, and breasts, and all the rest, the dreamed-of

reduced to dirt behind a fence, the chain-link like fish-net stockings made of wire, as if air itself rises like a woman’s legs. Open all night. Just like the
dirt is now, the waiting dirt, the thoughtless, unpippled, omnipotent dirt that waits, deep, under every thing we put up.
Poem

We are the authors of this animal,  
the creators of its setting.

The page a white sea.

Our home  
with its great view of the sea.

Any time  
we have

for poems

is a time  
we have good luck.

A time we have  
to listen to.

We are the time of this good luck,  
we are it breathing.
WATCH THE WORLD ARGUE, ARGUE WITH ITSELF

Black ink on an oak table in the law school library. Above it, blue ink, in equally blocky letters: PISS OFF! Under it, in a small, neatly penciled rounded script: Who’s going to teach me peace and happiness?
As

honest as a bird
means nothing

to sing like them
of nothing

but a bird’s
song

surely means
something

we will probably never
understand

fully

in that way
it is like

our lives
Clean Monday

First day of Lent, the day kites are flown.

9 a.m. I open my shutters & feeling the wind, look at the blue for kites.

None, but the old widow across the street has just let out her chickens.

At 10:20 a few shapes gliding in spirals pigeons, taking off from a church on the hill no one in sight holding their strings.
My Crow

I painted my crow green. He said, “You fool, I want and will keep my black wings, my killing beak, my language that reduces nitwits to caw.”
Moving Through The Desert

We sang, we had to
but not aloud.
And we rode
mirages
we rode on through.
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Note: The final line of “Occasionally a poet’s name makes a certain” is quoted from a Kenward Elmslie poem.