

Cover to Cover

Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders
on the chaos of memories. – Walter Benjamin

I don't collect them. They just accumulate,
Tower higher into shoddy columns,
Climbing weirdly like crystal formations
Or pillars of coral. The thought of their weight
Crushes, their coarse traffic of wars I've thumbed
Through, their long summers and snow. They weigh tons.
They slide onto the stove, under the fridge,
Into the tub. They prop open windows,
Serve as coasters. They have traveled with me
And slept beside me. They fashion a bridge
To vanished rooms, sorrows, and suns. Lord knows
Why I haul them from city to city.
I slip them together like bricks. They become a wall,
My greed, my fears, everything, nothing at all.

On Leaving an Old Mirror Out at the Curb

What do I call you at the end? Witness,
Mimic, tyrant of the departed years,
At times flatterer; others still-life, ghost,
Pure pool, twin, ludicrous door, or clearness
Leading nowhere, yet alluring as a frontier,
Great eye, roommate, spy—ominous, silent host.
Despite all you've witnessed and returned,
You recall nothing in your absolute present,
Silent movie, brittle glass bed, leaning gurney,
Knowing only what is shown, nothing learned,
What occurs but never what it has meant,
Will be, or was. Forgive this last journey
Into the earth, where you'll be bent and crack,
Where you'll shatter but be serene as stone,
Free from vanities that bathe the bone,
Razors of cold light lodged blindly in black.

My Father's Dante

You were gone twenty years before I read
The book that draws me faster on to you.
The world you left got worse, and crowded too,
Charon capsized by cargoes of new dead.
I'm midway gone, in a grim winter mood,
Pinned by all I did, instead of what I could.
Among the lessons I failed till now to learn
Is that, however handsome or witty,
We should expect to receive no pity.
We hurt as much from what we half-forget
As from the things we carefully conserve.
You say: There is so much more to observe.
We will descend, and see, and not regret
That we fall, we shiver—we shine and burn.

In-School Suspension

We sweated and dozed like barbarians
In a deer-hide tent at the height of spring's
Roasting heat, crowded in for various
Affronts, crimes, and faults. When one among us

Was handed, from the disciplinarian's
Office, a pink paper slip, listing things
He'd done that were deemed truly nefarious
(To us hilarious) and saying he was

Expelled altogether from school, he heaved
The heavy 1950s stapler from
Our minder's desk and hammered the paper
To his head. The first two staples rebounded

And clicked on the tiles. We were almost relieved
When the third clinched, pressed deeper by his thumb,
And seized subcutaneous hold. This caper
Did it: We were, for once, astounded.

With the form draped over one eye, he smiled
For us, turning slowly in the humidity,
A satanic clown, our own Spartacus
For a sparkling second we won't forget.

We roared and roared in our hot galley, piled
Up laughs till they hid any stab of pity.
We all knew he wouldn't even be missed
As, clutched by the wrist, he loosed one last threat

And was hauled from the room and the door boomed
Shut. We never saw him again. One by one,
We turned our faces downward and resumed,
With the dust he'd raised churning in the sun.

Welcome to all the Pleasures

The wind was wasp and pollen,
Charred pork and dragonfly.

My grandfather—German
With shoulders of granite,

Of beer and blue skies,
Blast furnaces—grew impatient

When he learned that, at four,
I'd still not learned to swim.

He hoisted me in summer air,
Spun me out over

The sluggish murk and let go.
I swear the river had no bottom.

I smacked the sun-fierce surface
With a sharp cold crash,

Then silence and stunned slowness.
I finned and swung,

Hung between what glows above
And what pulls below.