MICHAEL BURKARD
"Shit Story"

Living on meek make-up (not liking how photographs make my face look tight)
I had taken a time to gather up the dog shit which had accumulated all winter and early spring - but finally I did bag it from the water-logged pink wastebasket and plastic bag it had all been wasting in in all kinds of weather and I bagged it again and then again and was going to dump it in the woods near the cemetery so some trees and bushes would benefit and no one would get in the way and this shit would not be in anyone’s way either.
My mother told me a ghost story once when I was afraid of night. The ideal starlight must have had something to do with us sitting there in the low lamplight and she told me - not read. It occurs to me like a surprise ending that I can dump this stuff safely at my place of work in a big bin which takes everything and buries it somewhere in a landfill not too far away. I am looking like a blank I bet because it is a Saturday and so many cars are around. I have taken a sock so I won’t have to wash my hands still one more time and the sock is old and has a few holes in it - but I don’t want a lot of old shit germs to get upon me and then somewhere else on me and who knows where or what I would get sick from. Maybe not. But the cars are all parked for some event and I have to rapidly park next to a hydrant and make a ten yard run with this twenty or thirty pound bag - bags. Bagged it 4 times. And I give it a heave hoping no one will see me least of all security. And then I dash back to the car and the car won’t start. It is not my car it is Dave’s. I had opened the windows all the way for fear of a stench but no. Then the car starts. I pick him up for work and we go to have a coffee and we are smoking each a cigarette outside the big bookstore and I tell him this shit story.
He Can't

He can't remember taking the wrong toothpick -
one already used by someone else at the art opening -
but yes he can - he knows he did it and was not seen.

In one endless useless informational after another
a bullet is loaded and fired by someone of the same country
as the ill toothpicker. Fired at someone innocent in another country.

Nothing is thought of. The night sky is as high up as ever
whether there are more bombs dropping or not. The roadside deaths
continue and continue in about two million or so dreams across the globe
every couple of months at average. You are slow but also safe with me

one dream says to the dreamer.
And the nest and net at small sea bays
say pretty much the same thing
with their almost endless motion - if not on the surface
then underneath.

Like leaves the spider refuses to nibble from.
Like an orange that the boy tossed away instead of eating.
Like the straw the woman sucked her drugs through.
Like the crack in the young adult's ass at the art scene.
Like the wound taken to test the brain before the cancer treatment.

Like all these and all the underclothes of the current globe
no one shoots these bullets more viciously and righteously than Americans.
Nam. Name the villages. Name the severed bodies in Chile.
Name the number of times the napalm burned helpless babies and children.
Name the Middle East. Name the unknown killings. Name the name of the thing
that comes round like a name.
My father wasn't that friendly.
My brother would never sit there,
just left of where you seem to like sitting,
just a short ways from the moist moonlight.
My father wasn't that unfriendly, either.
My brother does sometimes stand.
My sister is not a dollar, I said,
I am not a man.
My mother would call me a man
to my face,
but I would correct her incorrection.
Lit from inside by alcohol,
I would trouble my mother for money,
or my brother for change.
Someone would always give in.
Except I made an exception with my sister,
whom I did not solicit from.
My brother asked about my lies.
My father would have taken to unfriendliness
if he had known about my lies.
My sister knew, through others, but has done
the best she could with me. I think so.
I don't know so, but I think so.
Street X marks the spot where I first said goodbye
to my family. And because of goodbye
I had to begin to create versions of my family
to carry into the world with me.
They would no longer be beside me day to day.
There were so many class mates too who also
would not be beside me either. All the smells
and intimacies we had experienced were now being
irrevocably left behind. Now my smell would be
mistaken until someone or someone's got used to me.
And I had to get used to me too.
Which I had never been asked to do.
And the moist moonlight split a rake in two
in the back yard of the house I had left.
It was the moon's way of telling me
I would be missed by the yard and the house.
The legal light of the moon trying to light my way,
both in the darkness and in the lit day.
untitled

I'm going to put Mr. Nicolai Gogol to bed now. I will read him stories from Isaac Babel until he is fast asleep. I will also sing him a lullaby by Stravinsky - discarded, overlooked by most, except for a few foragers like me who go through garbage both past and future. Anyone's life would improve having been introduced melodically and quietly to the Isaac Babel of The Story of My Dovecoat and Awakening bedside after bedside, night after night.
all the rain

Joan's boat wasn't lost, but it was left there, in the rain, and then in the window open to all the rain

and all the rain appeared like starvation appeared to the man who made lost boats, but once he entered the city could no longer sell them.
Knot

Kafka is plural.
Kafka is the osmosis
I pick from my garden.
When I place Kafka in
a vase I overhear the poem
“The Biography of a Bell,”
by Jennifer Tseng,
“pointing to heaven.”
Kafka points toward the cosmos.
How could he knot? In a
nanosecond he
appears and disappears,
and rain falls.
Karen

I could have told you it would be no good in the supposed City of Hope, Karen. But you moved there anyway. You tried your best to sell your art, and there were signs of gateways now- and- then- enough to keep you at it for a good two years.

Failure is like a ghost. It either is or isn't. Try convincing someone it is and see how far you get before the listener turns his or her head toward the snow that is falling outside the window. You painted with an effective eroticism too, but still someone somewhere - or it feels like that - someone somewhere kept whispering not enough, not enough of this, not enough of that, inexactly. You are living with your aunt in Intercourse, Pennsylvania. You sleep on the lower berth of a bunkbed, only twenty feet or so from where your aunt sleeps. And sometimes in the middle of the night she would like to awaken you with a bolt, that all this could be possible and true - it still doesn't mean there is anything wrong with you. Or with your art. And no dress code for failure or for supposedly falling away from yourself and others during that prolonged stint in the big metropolis.
I Don't Know

I don't know about today or my youth.
I don't know whatever happened to the man
next to me yesterday, and I don't know
about yesterday either. I don't know
if I am naming the world or breaking down,
or what part of the world is breaking down.
I don't know whether "part" should be
singular or plural. I heard that 72 migrant workers
were murdered in a remote part of Mexico,
murdered by a drug cartel, but it is two hours later
since I heard the report, and I don't know anything
more about this yet. I don't know why anyone has
to kill anyone, but then, as Vallejo wrote,
"que poco he muerto!" - "I have died so little."
I don't know if I have died a little or a lot. I know
there have been many times when I felt like dying,
or thought I felt like dying, but who knows, maybe
I was just deluded by some other feeling other than
dying. I don't know. I don't know about the door
or where today's doors will lead - I have an idea based
on past experience, but I truly don't know.
I don't know what is possible and what isn't, although
I feel - that word again, "feel" - I feel as if less is possible,
or there is less possibility in my small world than there was
a few years ago. But what do I know? I could tell you
a slightly strange story about two other poets, both deceased,
one of whom I never even met - but what do I know,
what is the source of my information? I have thought
of telling a story about these two and changing their names
to unrevealing and false initials. I don't know if I would
follow through on this thought or not. I haven't yet.
I don't know if I can tell anyone anything about someone else.
I sometimes feel like someone else, like one of my "someone else's."
I don’t know if this is a true feeling or statement. I wonder from time to time if the cosmos is as large as this analogy: every blade of grass that exists or has ever existed on earth, on this planet, is the equivalent of the earth itself - and this amount so-called resembles the measurement of the cosmos. It still seems too small, this analogy of measurement. No one has walked in to listen to my theory, no one has walked out. I don’t know if anyone ever will, or whether or not I will even talk about it again… I don’t know if I regret this poem or not. I don’t know whether or not this is even a poem.
He, this youth, he asked me 
to talk about suicide, to read from the paper 
I had written about suicide. I didn’t 
particularly want to do this, but I was used 
to being asked about the piece now and then, 
and I don’t know if I thought this was a “now” 
or a “then” - the request that is - although the paper 
certainly seems for me to be a “then.” 
Maybe I was mistaken when he asked me. 
Somehow he didn’t surprise me by asking. 
We hadn’t met face to face until now, this week 
that was, but maybe he had mentioned something 
about the suicide paper before. I don’t know why 
it wouldn’t occur to me to find his asking slightly 
strange, I had written the piece over thirty years before. 
It was slightly flattering, to be asked about something 
one wrote so many years before. Like it must be alive 
and well somewhere, alive and well even if it is a piece 
about suicide. It is a small piece, and it is full - no not full - 
the piece to some degree is relying on bravado. I would imagine 
some suicides depend to some degree on bravado. So maybe 
that part of my own piece becomes or is slightly true, or true 
at least for a moment, before it moves on to the next moment, 
or repeats the moment before. He, this youth, moved on to 
his own suicide months later. I was shocked. I had no idea 
this was coming. Someone close to me who was there said 
Isn’t it strange that he asked you to read your piece about suicide 
back in June? It could be, but it didn’t seem so, or I didn’t think 
it was related to his actual death. But he is dead, he was a suicide. 
He was even practical about it, if that can be said about a suicide. 
I don’t know if this is taking advantage of him or not, writing 
“about” him this way. It really isn’t very much about him. There 
was a lot more to him than I am indicating here, a great deal more.
Maybe an infinite amount of more. More life than could be ever added up, the moments were so many and so much. Even with his being dead, the moments seem still to accumulate in thought or specific memory.
Who Handed Me Falcon Eight?

I am guilty about a house.
Her shoes were more like boots than shoes.
I could not tie my own shoes until I was nine.
Whatever became of the foolproof shoe?
What did I do in or to this house
to require such guilt from me?
Is it because no is part of night?
Was I more lavish than my neighbors?
Did I miscall their dog one evening?
Did I ruin their shoes, their boots?
Did the lunar world know what I was up to
and convinced me of the same?
Did I simply write “s” because I could not spell “shame”?
Did I talk to the second tree about why this happened?
Did the second tree indirectly encourage my guilt?
When I was among the rocks and the fences did I make friends?
Who handed me falcon eight?
I am not my sweater either,
but I know what you mean about wearing certain clothing.
It’s a small Sunday which informs Tuesday of your guilt.
I was warned about that, by my father or my brother or the house itself.
I have a vague memory of being warned.
Adults overhead - now and then too - rooms
in other places upstairs or higher.
The voices sounded angry, like bad water, and I probably wasn’t
intending to report this to anyone, but I did, and I have regret
about this information now. Did I master the garden
as was promised? No. Did I or have I ever
mastered the master? No (who would want to?).
Who is riding in front of the no when the no is in the night?
If I had each of the answers would there still be guilt?
Would the guilt be still or active, intruding on someone else’s life
as it has intruded upon mine? And, finally, where is your sister
when you begin to melt? It saddens me to think of you walking in the rain, near the house, but by yourself. Rothko, the painter, said to de Kooning, the painter, “Your house has many mansions.” That the mansions were inside the house - of course! Where else could they be?
city of his own life

sometimes he wrote "recuse"
when he wanted to write "rescue"

sometimes inside a small handshake
his father could do him no wrong

he was injured too
but told to be hearing voices

he has a thief in his life
but he does not know whom

sometimes the thief took what was to be expected
sometimes not

and it is later much later
when he is full of claw and earth

that he wants to do battle
with the suspicious thief

orphaned like an indictment
orphaned like a rooftop

he has heard these remarks
he does not approve or agree
Between O and 13

I am having a dream. The poet Timothy Houghton is telling me to look up a poem by Donald Justice, it's in The New Yorker. The poem is entitled (and printed as) "Between O and 13." Tim has either remarked or there is a sense in the dream that there is an unusual (although not overly long) length to the poem. It can almost be seen in couplets. Somehow there is an inside sense to the dream poem: within the poem but not in the poem, almost more told to me by Tim, is the information Mark Strand has given to Donald Justice: that if Don can pick a number between zero and thirteen he will be able to delay the Concorde-like jet that Strand is flying upon; if able to delay the jet for even a few seconds, which choosing a number will accomplish, someone will make half a million dollars, and Strand and Justice will also make about that much.

The poem begins with beautiful writing. The information about choosing the number is both present and unpresent in the opening couplets. It's inherent. Justice is the narrator, clearly, in the poem, and is driving. There is a piece of music on his car-radio which is allowing him to experience the number O for the first time. That is to say, he is experiencing this number O. He is experiencing O as a number. This is within the poem but also not within the poem. Then in the poem Justice describes his amazement at both this and at being then at a railroad crossing. The top is down on his car. There is a kind of silver sunlight reflecting off of his car and he looks up to experience what he deems one of the truly most rare coincidences in his life: the plane Strand is on is flying overhead. There is a sense that time is still available to choose a number, that the coincidence of intersecting below with the plane high above will indeed enable a number to be chosen. The couplet shines on the page. The poem continues but stops. The dream stops.

Earlier, when Justice is experiencing the number O, something exotic is taking place, and, even at this moment, now, here, I am having a sense for myself of a déjà vu inside of a déjà vu.