

EXTENDED STAY



POEMS BY J.C. HEWITT

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J.C. Hewitt

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Recovery

Hospital

A hospital is a white shell on a beach
Bleached bare and lodged in the sand
The ocean washes over it
It sometimes buries it
But a hospital remains unmoved by this
Whatever changes could occur already have
Any color it might have had has washed away
Or been ground into the sand
It shines in the sun but people walk around it
They sense that they should not touch it
They should not pick it up and add it to their collection
There is nothing wrong with a hospital
But it is a shell no one wants to own
They want to leave it

They want to walk away

The Days Before

My mother danced at my sister's wedding
Probably the first time
In a long time
We aren't a family of dancers
Someone took a picture
And it stuck around
In her hospital room
For a long time
They put off the surgery
Until after the wedding
On purpose
And I don't know
If that was good or bad planning
Considering what came after
I went by the house the day before
She went into the hospital
We sat around and didn't talk too much
Like most of my visits
I gave her a hug
And took off
I had to work in Phoenix the next day
I tried not to think too much about it
When you have a bad feeling
Ignoring it sometimes seems best
And so I carried on
Worked
Stared at the hotel walls
Thought about other things
And when I called
My dad said everything was fine
He lied but I understand

Driving Down

I wasn't sure if it was the phone
Cutting in and out
Or my father
Unable to complete a sentence
It took me three minutes
To get out of the building
Into my car
And onto I-10
For the long blank space
Between Phoenix and Tucson
In my mind it was already over
She would be gone before I got there
I felt it
I expected it
And I tried to tell myself
That I could deal with it
That these things happen
And people die
It was still hot
The first days of November
And my car had no AC
So I drove with the wind
Blowing down my sweat
Through the rolled down windows
I was hungry
You are supposed to lose your appetite
In a crisis but I wanted food
And felt guilty about wanting it
But I needed gas anyway
So I got a corn dog at the Flying J
Staring at the people around me
Moving through their day
Without any crisis in mind
It scared me a little
That I was still functioning
I hadn't fallen apart
I called my wife from the road
She asked how things were and I said
Bad

The First Day

The waiting room was crowded
With relative of all kinds
The ones I liked
The ones I didn't
And we sat there together
Waiting for word
She was in surgery again
The third time in three days I was told
They were taking out her left colon
Sitting there
Things didn't seem quite as bad
Surgery was better
Than nothing to do but wait
And the doctor nicely explained
That as long as the bowel was intact
She was still worth saving
But without that there was no quality
Left to her life
And no reason to go
Any further
She came out of the surgery
And the report was
Relatively good
Relatively positive
I went back with my father
To see her
Feeling as if maybe
I had overreacted
To all the thoughts of tragedy going through my mind
As we stood next to her unconscious body
We watched as her heart
Beat slower and slower
Until she crashed
We weren't in the room five minutes
Before her heart stopped beating
And we were sent out
As seven doctors and nurses
Went to work to keep her alive
We went back to the waiting room

And in broad
Hesitant strokes
Discussed where she should be buried
Who should be called
What could be done
It was the first time we had had
To talk about these things
For my Mother
Since it was my father
Who had born the brunt of so many operations
And so many expectations
That he would not make it
This time
But my father had always pulled through
In short order
And had never come this close
Relatives shuffled in and out
Food shuffled in and out
Every couple of hours the doctor came
And told us not to lose hope
But I didn't see her again that day
And when I went home to sleep
Sometime past midnight
I did not expect her to be alive

When I got back

The One More Thing

My mother's heart could not
Would not
Beat the way it was supposed to
They had shocked her several times
Trying to get things back in order
But it was not going to happen
So they put her in a coma
They shut just about everything down
That wasn't shutting down already
To let her body get back into sinus rhythm
The natural moment
When the body and the heart
Are working together properly
And everything is in order
Because they couldn't
Wouldn't
Put the paddles to her again
She was already starting to gain weight
With her kidneys shut down she was maybe
Twenty pounds heavier at that point
Bloated
Unhappy looking
Even in sleep
They were worried about the fluid
And we all got together
To pray for her to pee
Because peeing would save her life
We were at the one more thing point
If one more thing went wrong
There was no return
No recovery to be had
And we hovered there
Asleep
Waiting for the one more thing

Nurse Sunshine and the Drama Queen

We called her Nurse Sunshine
She had all the skills
And the thorough immersion
In her job
That you look for
But she didn't have a single
Positive
Thing to say
Between her and my idiot
Drama queen
Busybody
Cousin
My own heart was starting to pound
False optimism
Is all I needed
And they weren't even willing to give that
As my mother's weight rose
With each passing hour
Nurse Sunshine panicked
Over every bad sign
And took pains to remind us
That brain damage was
Most definitely
A possibility
And my cousin hung on every word
Repeated it roundly
Flush with the energy of a crisis
She was only tangentially involved in
Keeping up her constant
Dissonant conversation
Wanting me to feed her gossipy hysteria
I have never
Ever
Wanted to strangle a person
As much as I did that day
As we tried to cling
To every positive sign
The two of them tag teamed
To remind us

That she had no chance
Or at least
Practically no chance

Drowning

They kept feeding the fluids into her
And they kept not coming out
As her weight rose
From 180 until it topped out
At around 270
Every wrinkle disappeared from her face
And her eyes were so swollen
That the doctors couldn't open them
To check her pupils
Every inch of her was stretched
To the point of breaking
And her breath
Laboring through all that water
Grew more and more shallow
Even with the trachea
And the machine
To keep it going
We watched the weak drops of urine
Drip their way through the foley
Rooting for every new drop to follow

Thanksgiving

My wife and I spent Thanksgiving
In the kitchen with my Dad
Snacking on the food her family had provided
Talking about options
And the inevitable
Threatened
Move to a new hospital
The original hospital was ill equipped
For this long and intense a stay
Between MRSA
And a tracheotomy
And the dangers
Of a slow awakening
From a long coma
She was going to have to move
And we dreaded it
The new hospital
With its higher level of care
And pool of specialists
Could get her out of the woods
But it wasn't made for families
And promises
Access would be strictly controlled
The issue now
Was time
How long would it take
To get her stable enough
To move
The issues did not
Make the turkey go down easy
And the day was long and blank
With the sadness
Of the empty holiday
My mother was not awake for

Friday Night in ICU

The scabs in the corner of her mouth
Are starting to heal
Underneath the thick white topical cream
When her eyes focus she sees me
I smile and she raises her eyebrows
The trachea tube in her neck
Moves slightly with each breath
And condensation collects inside
Her heart rate hovers at seventy
Her blood pressure is high but steady
No major peaks or valleys tonight
Her kidneys are back at work now
I watch her Foley bag fill
Calculating the difference over the past hour
She is fifty pounds of water lighter
Than just two weeks ago
When she looked like a pale Samoan
Her eyes too swollen for the nurse to force open
Now she looks something like herself
As she stares at me staring at her
Until she tires and closes her eyes
Sleeping for the rest of my time here
I keep watching

Awake and Paralyzed

Her brain awoke in advance of her body
I don't know how long she was awake
Before she could open her eyes
But that was the extent of it
That and a small curl of the toes
A nervous twitch for the feet
She was trapped
Awake in her unmoving body
She stared at me and I
Stared back
Smiled as much as I could
And held her hand
I sat with my head on the bed
Feeling a kind of relief
Filled with the tension of knowing
That the first steps
Of a very hard climb
Had been taken
I tried to think of things to say
Conversations to have
Without her talking
I gave the sports report
And read a little from the paper
But in the end I had
Very little to say
And felt the frustration
Of ineffectiveness
I would ask what she thought about
During those times
But I don't want to touch that feeling
That fear
Too deeply
Whatever she felt at the time
Is probably long gone now
As the brain washes away
What it cannot handle

The Shifts

The rule was that we would not leave her alone
Someone would always be there
My mother would not
Could not
Die unless she was alone
So we took shifts
For four hours a day it was my time
To sit with her sleeping shell
Listening to the respirator
Inflate
And deflate her chest
Listening to the alarms
When her breath
Or her heart
Failed to make the next cycle
At the right time
The room was alternately too hot or too cold
And my intense
Driving
Fear of hospitals
Left me with a persistent dread
I could not have escaped
Even in better circumstances
As the days carried forward
And we worked harder and harder
To fit our lives
Back into the schedule
Most of the shifts
Were spent alone
I got to know the nurses and the techs
And the Spanish only cleaning woman
Who communicated hope
As best she could
The shifts would continue
For days
Then weeks
Then months
As we kept in motion
To keep our word

The Second Hospital

The first hospital was inadequate
Was ill-equipped
Was too specialized
And so we had to move
To the big mega-hospitalopolis
Designed to care for any
And every problem
With equal disdain
The new hospital was not designed for family
Or for visitors
Or for anything besides
Treating the body
The spirit is an issue
Of little or no concern
Outside of the chapel
We were not put off that easily though
It is amazing what you can get
If you just never stop pushing
And so we persevered
In hard plastic chairs
Continuing our shifts
Onward and onward
We wore gloves and gowns
And sat behind sliding glass doors
We fought security
And a general feeling
That we were just in the way
I was always making up for lost time
Time spent in Phoenix
In hotel rooms
In cubicles
Removed from the action
My sisters
In town
Took the nights
And my father took the days
And I added what I could
My mother would improve
Then fall back

At first we hoped to have her home by Christmas
But the days just kept passing
They were supposed to get her off the respirator
They were supposed to get her physical therapy
They were supposed to offer the care
She couldn't get before
But all of that was as illusory as it gets
At best they were able
To fight off the MRSA
And keep up her dialysis
But as December moved into January
The only thing helping her
Was time
Her body started the slow path towards correction
Fever came and went
Chills came and went
Some days she was yellow
When her liver couldn't keep up
Some days she was bloated
Because she couldn't digest the food
All progress was incremental
But we progressed toward something
Toward some point of recovery
She began to talk
Forcing her voice around the trachea
And that was almost more frustrating
Because we couldn't understand her
And she so wanted to be heard

Passing

The holidays kept passing
Christmas and New Years
MLK and Groundhog Day
The cycle continued on
Gloves and gowns
Uncomfortable chairs
Forced visits to the waiting room
Eventually we moved hospitals again
This one was supposed to help her
Get off the respirator
Remove the trach tube
Get her walking
It was closer to home
And more family friendly
We could camp out there like we did
At the first hospital
This one even had cable TV
So I could sit and watch Meerkat Manor
With my mother on a Saturday afternoon
The nurses at this hospital
All came from somewhere else
Russia
Poland
China
Philippines
They spoke passable English
And were
For the most part
Kinder and more emotionally invested
In my mother's recovery
Slowly
Far too slowly
They weaned my mother off the respirator
We watched her oxygen levels
The way people keep score at a basketball game
Complete with buzzer
Whenever there was a stoppage
The oxygen sensors
With their glowing red LEDs

Would eventually raise blisters
On my mother's fingers and toes
Making her restless
And panicky
By this point they had long decided that Xanax
Would calm her
But it also seemed to reduce
Her respiration
So the balance led to long bouts
Of anxiety and depression
Sometimes she would call out in a panic
Only to not know
Or be unable to explain
What was causing her so much distress
The new trach didn't allow her to talk
So she tried to write down her problems
But her motor skills
Weren't quite good enough
For legibility
Which led to involved guessing games
Most of the time she gave up
With a frustrated shrug
And tried to talk
Which didn't work out either
We were pretty good with the direct needs
Like lotion for her backside
But she had questions
Esoteric questions
Like what happened to Thanksgiving
That were hard to express
The focus was slowly changing
From mere survival
To recovery
No road ever goes smoothly
But the early false optimism
Was becoming a little more genuine
Home was finally a possibility

Snow Together

One night at the hospital
I watched it snow
Which in Tucson is a next to never event
I felt bad because my mother
Couldn't see it through the reflection
Of the lights in the room
And I had to describe it for her
Falling down and collecting on the windshield
Of my
And every other
Car out there
Light snowfall
Are natural attractions
But in the room it only made
My mother grow restless
And I eventually returned to the television
Because that was something she could see
And feel somewhat comforted by

Delusions and Dreams

At some point
My mother started to confuse
The hospital with home
Thinking the view from the window
Was the backyard
And not the parking lot
I would gently remind her
That we were in the hospital
And the nurses were not in the next room
But patrolling an overcrowded hall
Which is why they took so long
To respond to her pressing
The button
Sometimes the Xanax
And other drugs fogged her mind
And she would forget who people were
But only in conversation
Not in person
She always knew who I was
And that was somewhat comforting

Complications and Opportunities

My mother fell and bruised her ribs
One more in a line of setbacks
We have learned to absorb
Some time had passed between bad news
Enough for us to think we were
Almost back to normal
Steps from bed to walker to cane
Steady over the summer months
But now each breath a task
Each breath a reminder that she
Has so much ground left to regain
Before we can relax
She is knitting potholders now
Working on her fine motor skills
But still mostly sleeping
She does not eat enough and she
Gets lightheaded dizzy fuzzy
Which is what made her fall
Nearly a year since this began
Such a long list of things gone wrong
So much to overcome
We get closer to fine and we
Look at how much we have been through
How much we have to lose
We still have time to give to this
We can still reach recovery
But slow so slow it goes

Somewhat Better

The cane is for confidence
She is still afraid of
Falling again
She gets confused
She panics sometimes
So she does not drive
Or go off on her own

For the longest time she wasn't sure
What happened
She didn't ask and we didn't think to explain
Once it was easier to remember
But we are past that now
She knows

Her life has slowly been pieced back together
There are crafts to be made
Weddings to attend
Old arguments to rehash
Trips to take
I don't exactly know
When you plant the flag
And declare recovery
But life is life again
And life is somewhat better

Road

Flying J

Stopping for gas at the Flying J
Soaping the bug guts and dust off my windshield
I am surrounded by shuttle vans
They run from Nogales to Sky Harbor
Luggage trailer tails behind them

As the gas flows
The Mexican families get out and stretch
We all pile into the Flying J
Looking for bathrooms and gum
Sodas and chocolate covered donettes

The border patrol watches the vans with suspicion
Sometimes stopping them to check for illegals
I usually mistake their cars for highway patrol
And drop out of cruise control
Back to 75

You rarely see a shuttle van speed
The drivers and passengers don't want to be stopped
For real or imagined crimes
Where they go once they reach Sky Harbor
I don't know

For our time we share the freeway
The Flying J
The fear of official looking cars
And the desire to arrive

No matter what some philosopher says
For some of us the journey is not the point
But we make it nonetheless

Pothole near the Water Tank at Red Rock

I am driving past the Red Rock water tank
Famished and talking to myself into the darkness
I see constellations and mysteries in the sky
Paul Simon is singing on the radio
The tires wobble and the car falls apart for a moment
Coming back together before I can prepare to panic
Never approaching the ditch I picture myself driving into
The brakes press like dough as I drop to a reasonably unsafe speed
Eyeing the sky I see clouds follow themselves
Like an image wandering lost on a roll of film
I settle back into space and time

Last night at this same spot I saw a rabbit
Careen between two trucks
Safely splitting the pair and making the ditch
I imagine there is water there
A slow drip from the tank
Moving with a settled quality

I pass this squat wooden tank twice a day
I notice it about once a week
One of the pictures of the desert
That form on my windshield
When I feel the need to be observant

I often race past trains at this point
They chug along at sixty
As fast as the deteriorating tracks will allow

Between Tucson and Phoenix
Sometimes next to the freeway
Often out in the scrub among hidden subdivisions
I have managed to spot fourteen water towers
Some are short and squat like this old tank
Others rise up with pointed hoods
Signals of population at a distance
Some follow the railroad
As it separates from the highway near Picacho Peak

If I were a painter I would paint water towers
Each one with its own fog of art
Legs rising into a belly of water

Paul Simon becomes Nora Jones
I turn off the radio
I listen for the train whistle
I hear the road

Occupation at the Red Roof Inn

The army invaded my hotel last night
There was shouting in the hallways
Door slamming
Booted feet pounding

I assume without asking
They are here for the debate
Roads have been closed off
A safe zone surrounds the University
Check points abound
Military aircraft circle the city
Perhaps I will stay in tonight

I lock myself in my room with my books on tape
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* tells me
Who the hell do you think you are running down the army
Give the countersign
Who's in command of this outfit

Clearly I can't escape the metaphor
I am surrounded by the army
Only honest debate can liberate me

Iraq may still be a hot zone
But one look out the window confirms
That the pool has been captured
Can the Whataburger and the Circle K be far behind

I must suffer this occupation for two more days
The debate looms ahead
As I stay couched in my room
Contemplating the difference between responsibility
Equality and freedom
I will be ordering in tonight

Release I-10 and Chandler

Staring at the freeway through my hotel window
After midnight it is mostly trucks
Mayflower
Ryder
Ron's Produce
Swift
My father used to drive for Swift
Before heart surgery and early retirement
Forced him to become involved in life again

The cars are all gathered around the Circle K
The parking lot is a variable that is never null
Two cars replace one then three replace two
And the gas pumps are always pumping someone

ESPN is muttering to itself in the background
Raymer is winning five million at Texas Hold-Um
Consumed in his alien eyes and bartered aggression
That eats all it can find within entertainment and sports

I am waiting to feel one sliver of sleepy
Waiting to close my eyes and dig for a dream
Waiting to form within the covers and forget another day
Waiting to be somewhere else and somebody

I am too old to entertain baseball fantasies
Only a couple years shy of the Big Unit
But I wouldn't mind an inning or two of dreams
I'm not even looking for a home run
Just a gap single and a well-earned walk

I am too old for imaginary superpowers
But I wouldn't mind the clairvoyance for a late night
Run at the World Series of Poker
With the omniscience to spot a poorly-timed bluff

I could name a dozen ways to spend my dream
Excelling at some such sport, advancing at any avocation
Content with the power to beak codes or cloud minds

An ounce of omnipresence and a pound of omniscience

The trucks keep time on the freeway

The Circle K keeps passing customers and gas

The muttering moves on to SportsCenter then off

As I lie down and wait for my moment of release

Late at the Motel

Late at night
That's a given
And hungry
That's expected too

Eliminating the individualized stray thoughts
Is proving to be more difficult alone
Setting myself against
Against what
The tension is out there
I can't find or catch it
But it stays near

Pillow is too hard
Bedsread too slick
Hotel rooms always depress me
Especially alone
Poorly painted impressionism on the wall
Couch a color I wouldn't think of
Lights yellow and sharp

I could turn it all off
But here I am either way
And is it better to be alone with the lights off
I should take up drinking
Or exercise
Whichever would put me to sleep
I'd watch TV
But only baseball or golf would work
Anything else will hold me too tight
And I will be up until morning
So I write because at least something
Comes out of it
Keeps me from staring at walls or curtains or fire alarms
Keep writing
Keep moving forward
Maybe I can sleep after all that

Making it Through August

I am
Sweaty
Grimy
Fat
Angry
Just getting up in the morning
I want this month to end
Before I say or do something I'll regret
I can't have a good day at work
Or even a decent day at home
When I start out wanting to disappear
Run to the north
Run to the forest
Just keep running until I am
Dry
Clean
Thin
Happy
Ready to deal with all the people
I don't want to see
I keep getting up
And hoping for one truly great
Piece of news to get me out of this funk
But at this point
I would settle for no bad news
For just a few days
Of life not going wrong

Early Bird

I get up at five in the morning
I don't remember falling asleep
It must have been just after I ate
Which isn't good
But it isn't the first time
I open the motel room door
And the air is already hot
Or still hot really
It's September
Shouldn't this part
At least this part
Have cooled off by now
I walk barefoot to my van
Braving the sharp pebbles of the parking lot
To search for the shaving cream
I could have sworn I brought with me
But no luck
I will have to settle for bar soap
And hand lotion
A solution I came to long ago
At least I have lotion
It's harder without the lotion
I shave
The first strip of skin doesn't respond well
But then it is ok
I get dressed
Go to work
Get there before the security guards
Have made it to their posts
In two hours I complete every task I had scheduled
A whole day finished
With eight hours left
To stare at and waste
Until I brave the hot air
Back to the hotel room
Eat dinner
And fall asleep
Or watch TV
Or stare at the ceiling

Whichever option the night gives me
I pass the time until I can go home
Driving fast down the freeway
One hundred thirty miles back
Back to my wife
Back to my family
Back to my friends
Back to obligations that mean something
To me

Tuesday Morning

We talk to each other over the gray walls
Lori announces that she is not here
We are not to talk to her
She won't be in until noon
And so she is not here
Casual realities form around us all the time
We imagine we are elsewhere
I have photos of the Indian Ocean
And lakes at sunset
Palm trees at odd angles
A Zen water fountain
By which I mean dry
Though I imagine the water flowing
Across the rocks
Down the steps
Through the five round holes
In the false gray bottom
I take part in conversations
Without formal invitation
Adding nonsequiters
Insinuating myself into everything
If I must hear
Then I should take part
But I imagine
Picture
Invite
The moment when I will disappear
Will not take part
Wander away
It can happen at any moment
Or at least I tell myself that
As I fight the fluorescent headache
Behind my eyes
Closing my eyes and listening
Listening to the endless rattle of activity
Papers getting stapled
Keyboards being beat down
Chairs creaking and popping
The long eye of the copy machine

Feeding on the paperwork

That runs the company
As the women down the aisle
In ever increasing cadence
Discuss Dancing with the Stars
It goes on

Restless

I've been wrapping myself up at night
I've been lying in bed counting shadows
And telling myself stories as I approach sleep

I keep ice water by the bed in case I dry out
Because I don't want to cough too many times in an hour
Or feel my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth
There's a roll of toilet paper in case I have to blow my nose

I won't waste time telling my dreams
Everyone's dreams are meaningless to others
Too often I am awake before the dream ends though
I have to stare it back into the dark

Every day passes to the left while I stay straight
Forget the day though

I am waiting for an excuse to close my eyes
Waiting for a moment when I am more sleepy than tired
And as I wait it somehow comes around
And drops beside me
In that way I continue

Condition Signals

I am staring at the parking lot as it empties
Hardworking party members head off to do
Charity work for the people of Kuala Lumpur
Or maybe it is time for half-priced appetizers at Applebee's
I have many action items to make good on
Alone with the stragglers in their remote cubicles
Before I can search out my own franchise

Each hour dissolves professional into personal
Phone calls and emails and windows
There is a pressure behind my face that could be sinuses
Or disconnection
Or if I have the right fantasy
Could be the eventual manifestation
Of my long-awaited super powers
I push away from the window and head back
To the computer
The cubicle
And the comfort of my action items

My Circle

You are calling
Driving
Away from work
Or to the store
Or out to eat
I know you're going somewhere
You are calling
You are telling me
About your day
About your job
Your classes
Or your family
And I listen
Or at least I try to
You are calling
As you move along
Without the need
For a word from me
Just a grunt
Or a thought
And you'll keep talking
You are calling
Because your father
Doesn't listen
He only whines
About his life
And holds on to his ultimatums
Like love me now
Or not at all
He's leaving but
He doesn't go
And so you talk to me about it
You are calling
To vent to me
Frustrations
Pain
And lies
Not to mention
The car in front that moves too slow

The car in back that drives too close
The headlights in your eyes
Obscuring
The path to your salvation
You are calling
To unload your day
Down onto me
To process
And to leave behind
You know my day was empty
Too little to give away
So I don't talk about my day
Removed from you
Stuck in a cube
Or my hotel room
Trying to accomplish something
You are calling
And I can only listen
I cannot help
I cannot solve
I can only stare at the wall
And try to be there
Long enough for you
To talk yourself
Back out
Of another day without me
I hold the phone
And let you talk
I know you'll keep on talking

Mission Beach

I would go there with my family
Head out into the water
Dodging the constant attack of kelp
Grabbing at my legs
I would hunt the crabs
As they burrowed downward after each wave
Smooth lumps under the slick brown sand
I would stand on the beach and let gravity
And the tide bury my feet
Sinking a little deeper with each new wave
Until I would lose my balance
As I got older I would move out further into the water
Working my way into the deep waves
Without the earth under my feet

After high school my friends and I
Made the trip to Mission Beach
In Darryl's old Datsun pickup
With the Superman emblem
Painted on the hood
Diving into the waves
I landed in the wake
And left a long bloody scrape
On the end of my nose
I dived into the next wave
To wash it off
Surprised that the salt didn't sting
We hit the Boardwalk
I rang the bell with the sledgehammer
Winning a giant inflatable crayon
That I gave to a kid
In the crowd that was watching

The last time I went to Mission Beach
I had just quit a high paycheck job
Without a single prospect for the future
I didn't book a room
I just sat on the beach all night
And watched the waves come in

Feeling the moisture gather around me
Smelling the salt and damp life
Collect in the wind as it blew in
From the ocean

Tucson Meet Yourself

I would be happy spending my weekends at home
But Jeni needs to be out in the world
I've just worked my way back from
She wants to eat out
Go out
Be out

And so we go

We go to Tucson Meet Yourself
The closest approximation of a cross-cultural event
The city is willing to yield

Mostly there are booths of ethnic food
Food and crafts
In that order

There are performances
On two opposing stages
Dancers on one
Musicians on the other

We go in search of brats
Last week's Oktoberfest fell short
Of our level of Bratwurst expectations
We are seeking out the German Club
And the genuine German article
But it seems the Germans have found a better way
To spend their Saturday
Perhaps they have found one last Oktoberfest
And are serving authentic brats to Tombstone or Bisbee

We must settle for the cultures that have come
There are Polish sausages
Costa Rican gallo pinto
Southern barbeque from the Apostolic Church
Stuffed grape leaves from the Greeks
Hummus from the Middle East
Tai egg rolls

Chinese egg rolls

Filipino egg rolls

And finally there is Navajo fry bread topped with powdered sugar
Powdered sugar that explodes white upon my navy blue t-shirt

After the gorging

After the cleaning

We sit and watch darkened ten-year-olds dance stiffly in heavy
clothes

While the toddler behind us repeats that she can't see

As we make our way to the days next preoccupation

Jeni asks if I had fun

She waits for reassurance that it was better to go out
Than to stay in peace at home

The food was good

Last Game

The suite is built for twenty but it could hold more
The first section is the air-conditioned sitting room
With two overstuffed leather couches
Facing each other across a black lacquer coffee table
There are bar stools and a counter
Set before an expansive plate glass window
Where we can stare down at the game
As we eat our brats, hot dogs, hamburgers and nachos
All laid out for us on a separate banquet table
Along with a selection of sodas and bottled water on ice

If we want beer or margaritas
It is Margarita Madness Monday after all
There is a waitress who comes along
Every few minutes to take our orders
The brats smell strongly of pork and summer spices
And spurt not-quite-scalding grease
Coating the tongue in liquefied parsley, nutmeg and fat
When you bite into them
Just the way they are supposed to

The second section is two rows of ten seats
Out in the fresh breezy air
But safely under the protective awning
We can smell the popcorn and watch the people
Walking along the promenade beneath us
Or we can look out at the game
Which is eight to nothing at the end of the first inning
And not in our favor
The sales manager stops by
To ask if we are pleased
And to try and wheedle
A sale for another day
Time is running out though
There will be one more season
Maybe two
Before the team runs off to Reno
For a quickie divorce
And leaves us behind

For a better stadium
And a more passionate following
Than the relaxed
Hate to be inconvenienced
Tucson crowd

I will miss the Sidewinders
Once the Toros
Once my childhood vision
Of what baseball was like
But I accept change
We are no longer a match
Baseball needs passion and Tucson is passionate
About so little these days
A transient town that has given up
Its obsession with old west and community
For a kind of relaxed lethargy
We don't want to arrive on time for anything
We don't want to drive into the sun
In July and August
We don't want to be here at all
Baseball can't compete
With our lack of urges
So a goodbye is coming
And it isn't to be mourned
AAA Baseball is the friend we lost track of
The relative we visit rarely
And with one eye toward the door
Until it is time to leave

For Peter Wild

Still water still burns
You have to go off trail
Even though you know it will cost you
Scratches and needles in your legs
An occasional bout of disorientation
But fewer piles of beer cans
And rusted garbage shrines
Are reward enough

At midnight you can look up to see Orion
Watching over you
And feel alone
Grateful to be standing in the desert
Breathing cool clean air

A little blood on your socks
Is proof enough that you are not imaginary
The limp as you walk home
Is the reminder you hoped for
That you still need to write