

## WAR

When the archivist at Ellis Island met my father  
a few years before his death and asked  
what was the most memorable time of his life,  
he said it was the War but wouldn't elaborate,  
albums and medals stuffed in a box back home.

And when he got sick, the family gathered, waiting  
for the aneurysm to burst, with hospice nurses  
in eight-hour shifts to catheterize him,  
give him shots of hydromorphone for the pain.  
They were professionally attentive, sidetracked  
only once in a while by a magazine, a cell phone,  
the food Mom couldn't stop cooking.

Except for nurse Carlos, back two years  
from a tour in Iraq, who never for a second  
took his eyes off Dad, soaked up his accounts  
of Okinawa, sat with him in the bathroom,  
watched him gaze out the window,  
eased the coffee cup from his hand  
when he dosed in his chair.  
Buzz-cut, laconic, "keep watch" burned in black  
on his neck, this rock from East Newark  
heard in Dad's tired tales the soul we doubted,  
too proud to testify, laced with the prayers  
of the battlefield dead.

So it was surely as the old Seabee had dreamed  
a thousand times: After he went in for a nap,  
Carlos in tow, the rest of us joking, reminiscing,  
making plans in the living room,  
a soldier was the last one to see him alive.

*The MacGuffin (2017)*

## **THE RUSTED HORSE**

Not molded, but soldered and welded,  
he points away from the cabins and cars  
toward the trail-less, chaparral hills.  
Strips have been cut from his sheet metal frame.  
Light and shadow take turns at his core.  
Flies doze on his chestnut haunches.  
Through and around him, a breeze  
flicks up dust and combs back the bunchgrass.  
Sometimes his ribboned mane ripples  
and glints like fool's gold in the valley sun.  
Wherever you are now, is there time to linger?  
Can you hear jays hollering in the maple,  
dragonflies humming the moss-bound pond?  
I imagine you're still not of the landscape  
you inhabit, though the parts of it most themselves  
have taken you in. Where the slope is forgiving.  
Where rain clouds billow but do not rain.

*Prism (2018)*

## LOTTERY DAY, 1970

We're taking infield practice and shagging flies,  
Jersey heat dripping from the bills of our caps,  
"Black Magic Woman" on a distant transistor,  
kids splashing and shouting in the local pool.  
The ribbing and the girl talk are on low.  
Someone hits a ball into the tennis courts.  
A man in white shorts throws it back gently.

In an hour my mother will meet me at the door,  
still in her nightgown, having watched TV all day  
as blue plastic capsules were drawn from two separate drums,  
one of which was full of birthdays.  
A Winston in her hand, her eyes will be red,  
but she'll be smiling.  
All she will say is, "316."

I backhand a grounder near second.  
The shortstop turns two.  
Crickets are out at noon.  
We're all friends— we're all nineteen—  
our moms at home,  
glued to flickering screens,  
while we're out playing the game we know.

*Poet Lore (2017)*

## GIN AND TONIC

To control malaria in India  
they washed the quinine down with soda water  
which was still quite bitter, in fact glowed in the dark.  
Until a bright lance-sergeant with tea-colored pith helmet  
started adding liquor, ice and a thin wheel of lime.  
Not just any liquor, but spirits that reminded him of home,  
pressed dry from white grain and juniper berries  
with names like Gordon's, Beefeater, Plymouth.  
He couldn't have known about  
the boys down at Vinny's telling jokes till the ball game ends,  
the single mom on her vinyl divan after the kids are asleep,  
the software salesman at Logan waiting out a snowstorm.  
He hadn't invented civilization,  
just knew it's a drink you have to keep civilizing,  
forever swizzling the familiar back into the foreign  
until you can taste, perhaps even see  
what you will never have again.

*Natural Bridge (2012)*

## EDITH DID

During Geraldine Ferraro's run for vice president  
as a congresswoman from Queens in 1984,  
one burly heckler on the campaign trail  
questioned how Archie Bunker  
had ever elected her,  
to which she replied, "He didn't; Edith did."  
Which happened to be my mother's name,  
and when Edith Baines took sidestage  
in the top sitcom of the seventies, Edith Klein  
sat right beside her, making it easy for us  
to notice what they didn't do: object or judge  
or burst balloons, say *this is what I want*  
or say *no* to their outrageous men,  
hide the racing form from their fathers,  
or ever miss *Days of our Lives*. Instead  
they wore their brassieres, practiced being  
unembarrassed, learned to type, played canasta,  
and boiled the parts of meat that could be eaten  
no other way. And they understood.  
The black neighbors, the lesbian cousin,  
that their hairsprayed heads would not be pictured  
on the book jacket for *The Greatest Generation*.  
Their superpower was not invisibility,  
but optimism; Fred and Ginger twirling in air,  
that cigarette ash on top of the scrambled eggs  
always pretending to be a cherry.  
Long before all of which, the sailor my mother  
had met in an ice cream parlor prewar  
came back dirty, darkened, craving a son.  
And although the odds clearly favored delivery  
of another just like him—man with two separate hearts,  
one to love and one to deny—  
when he insisted she don his favorite nightgown  
(the chiffon of lace yoke and floral applique),  
with one dry eye and a cauldron of hope,  
Edith did.

*Burningword (2015)*

## OLQM

Not one of the lapsed nuns' girls I fell for later  
could guess what those letters stood for.  
Most knew "Our Lady," a few got "Queen,"  
but the "M" escaped even the most canonical.  
"Mother," they might say, "Miracles" or "Mercy,"  
just not the true punch line to an orange code stitched  
in the lime-green ties of the schoolboys on Arden Street  
and in their sisters' plaid wool skirts hemmed below the knees,  
knees that nonetheless saw daylight furled on the A train,  
saw us public school spuds dazed  
by their doughy blush and the rumbling heat,  
knees that, like all long-clenched things,  
might go anywhere from there, and with anyone.  
So praise the boys and girls with the monograms,  
praise their fathers who believed in labor and country  
and that college was for the Jews,  
praise their mothers slipping through the back door  
of the Kosher butcher for the lean corned beef,  
praise Joe Duffy reading Joyce on the ballyard stoop  
and Danny Simmons with his parboiled face  
carving a hooked cross in the library door,  
praise the land those boys flew off to  
and the red-bandanaed men who killed them both,  
the jade torrents of the Mekong Delta  
and the emerald mists of the Celtic Sea,  
the olive body bags, mossy unmarked graves,  
orange hair and flaming hair,  
praise, too, Maggie Conlon  
who crossed herself before she crossed the line,  
praise all who've had faith  
and those who've had enough of it,  
praise Our Lady Queen of Martyrs.

*The Schuylkill Valley Journal (2013)*

## ON BEING SLAPPED BY A WOMAN I DON'T KNOW

Intermission at the Opera. Saturday night.  
All I know about her is the pageboy cut  
of raven red hair. She stands abruptly  
then uses the full arc of her body turn  
to imprint the left side of my face.  
One contact lens now lodged up under its eyelid,  
a bicuspid stuck to the inside of my mouth,  
my cheek like a pup tent smacked by lightning.  
I had never been slapped by a woman before,  
though there was something about it I missed.  
Bacall giving it to Bogie. Crawford to Gable.  
Deserved. Delivered. On to the next scene.  
Black and white. Though mine seemed technicolor.  
Turns out, she had been twirling one tip  
of her reading glasses between her front teeth  
while the other tip was tickling her ear.  
Which she thought was me, from the row behind,  
flirting, or trying to filch one of her diamond studs.  
Probably some other guy had earned it.  
Or I had earned it elsewhere.  
Edging my hand under Faye Brown's impossible bra,  
her dad glued to *Gunsmoke* downstairs.  
Teasing my ex-wife for airballing a foul shot  
in front of 20,000 fans during halftime  
at the Oakland Coliseum on taco night.  
Asking my mom, just before heading off to college,  
why she let her kids be strapped  
and what she got out of watching.  
I was a good boy once.  
May have been an okay man.  
Though the heart never believes this.  
Needs a sharp reset. A briskly wiped slate.  
That's what I missed. The clarity.  
And the wakeup doesn't hurt much,  
requires no response.  
Just blink a few times, wiggle the jaw.  
Welcome rough justice.  
The curtain is rising.  
Carmen is taking her mark.

*pamplemousse (2018)*

## EYEBROWS

When my sister's nine-year-old son,  
whose dad has skipped to a warmer climate,  
asks how he might know if a girl loves him,  
I describe the way my ex-wife used to tweeze  
the wild as ricegrass ridge  
keeping my unfurrowed brow  
from each uncertain eye,  
plush of her palm cupped beneath my chin,  
fingertips grazing my earlobes,  
her pupils dutiful, like Penelope's  
scanning the glassed horizon.

And her pluck decisive,  
one hand doing work, the other taking care,  
so I felt the favor in the wound,  
took no offense at the thought of improvement  
as the dark, the spindly, the wayward  
met their match on her noble plan.

My nephew has forgotten his question,  
wants only to know if I do my own now.

I tell him don't get used to doing  
too much for yourself.

*Quiddity (2013)*

## TRUXEL ROAD

*for the women of California*

Just another white on pine-green name  
for no place, those hundred-odd drives  
back from Tahoe to the Bay,  
till we turned there a week into August  
where Routes 5 and 80  
cross the heart of a dreamed-up state.

Pam's third-grade boy had dumped a bonsai  
on her mom's pearl rug in Truckee,  
flipped heirloom photos face-down in the john,  
peed on drapes, torn through lawn chairs,  
barfed up pie in the pool. No one home there  
next morning when we dropped by for breakfast  
and the boy still kicking in his car seat two hours west  
where we quit just not to kill something  
at the great washboard arch vowing help for all strays:  
Rite Aid and Safeway, Pep Boys and SleepTrain...  
though Pam just took cider from the shack girl  
with a shiner and snake sleeve tattoo,  
then smiled toward wind-gashed hills  
where her grandma's great grandma once spat chaw  
on the dust of a late husband's claim.

X marks the spot where the women we want  
have a love we can't follow,  
where the souls of Califia's tanned hell-cats  
still hunt boar with gold-tipped spears,  
where Luza Wilson once banked flakes  
in her mattress and oven  
for miners who had muled fifty miles  
just to glance at her sun-bleached hair.

*Red Wheelbarrow (2012)*

## XIU-XIU

My azure-eyed lover complains  
to me that a Jewish boy in school  
keeps telling the daughter  
she adopted in China  
there is no Santa Claus.

So I tell her girl about the time  
I asked my own mom  
if we could just once  
celebrate Christmas,  
then woke to find  
tacked to the wall above my bed  
an orange inside  
one of my father's black socks,

which makes her laugh,  
so we say a prayer for mothers,  
ours and others,  
for the tales born of the deal  
their love makes with the world,

how Gretel's goodness needed  
not only the hook-nosed hag  
and the oven, but also  
the mother she never knew,  
how the moon required  
a raven sky,  
and the breadcrumbs  
an unbroken light.

*Faultline (2016)*

## THE COLONOSCOPAI

There ought to be a Greek name for the ex-lovers who  
(because the clinic won't let you drive yourself or take a cab)  
come pick you up and take you home from the outpatient  
procedure where you were drugged to disremember  
what went on with that sleek, fiber-optic tube.

More specifically, in my case: Christine, when I was 51,  
whose bulimic daughter had drowned herself in the jacuzzi;  
at 58, Lee, public defender whose pederast client  
was out shopping again in the Oakland Walmart;  
at 63, Maria, with four different versions of her father.

I wasn't supposed to be single at those ages, but  
a wife could not have kept it so simple, would have  
had questions, taken care of me in unwanted ways,  
not understood there is an art to forgetting.

And these women, long consigned to the list of friends  
I rarely see, answered the call without asking,  
drove the two miles quietly, past the Shell, the SaveMart  
the park carousel, giving me time to fill my mind again  
with a campout in Haleakala crater, silverswords and  
the eyes of old pack mules glazed by the Milky Way,  
with Hula Hoops naked, leading to reverse cowgirl  
in a rocking chair on a rotten porch in Chico,  
with Mahler's 6th two days after 9/11, the cellists in tears.

The closest might be Mnemosyne, goddess of recall,  
who slept with Zeus for nine straight nights (not  
because he was nice, but because he had experience),  
then bore the Muses, who knew instinctively the need,  
in their work, for memory; not so much of what happened  
but to replace what happened with what can be told—  
field song sung to the grandkids, volta scratched  
on some birch bark, woolly mammoth brushed  
in its own bright blood on the walls of a Spanish cave.

*The Healing Muse (2015)*