

CONTENTS

I. ETERNAL PLAYBACK

The Gravity Soundtrack	17
The Clash See the Future Recording <i>Give 'Em Enough Rope</i>	18
The Tao of Big Daddy	19
Things to Say When I Meet Shane MacGowan	21
The Secondhand Record Store Clerk	23
The Jumbotron Nightmare	25
The Laff Box™	26
Johnny Cash: Live Inside the Gates	27
The One-Hit Wonders	28
Orpheus Retires	30
The Smallest Terminal	32
Science Fiction	33

II. THE EXPRESS LINE TO HEAVEN

That Old Green Light	37
Sweet Aphrodite on a Bicycle	38
The Angels' Share	39
<i>Priscilla Johnson</i> Still Has Hands Like Leaves	41
To Melanin	43
Why We Do Anything	44
Body Shop: 3 A.M.	45
Aunt Molly's Advice to the Exhibitionist	46
Some Girls	47
The Equivalent of Ears	48

III. NEVER-ENDING STORIES

The Secret Garden	51
Little Women	52
Where the Wild Things Are	53
The Little Prince	54
Curious George	55
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	56
Babar	57

James and the Giant Peach	58
Alice in Wonderland	60
Heidi	61
Winnie the Pooh	62
Madeline	64
Peter Pan	66
The Velveteen Rabbit	67

IV. SOMETHING LIKE PRAYER

The Postmodern Cowboy's Regret	71
From a Colorado Giftshop	72
Germantown Prayer	73
The View Below Sea Level, November	74
Yellow	75
Resident Alien	76
Butchertown Sabbath	77
On Childlessness	78
The Dead Letter Office	80
Okay, I'm Invisible	81
Some Nights	82
The Nature of Our Looking	83
In the Thorne Rooms at the Art Institute	84
A Divine Infestation	85
Grievous Angel	87
NOTES	88

Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground.

—Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

You keep eating your hand, you're not gonna be hungry for lunch.

—*The Breakfast Club*

I.
ETERNAL PLAYBACK

The Gravity Soundtrack

Even now, grounded, a song scrap
drifting out a third-floor window
slips through the bare oak limbs,
firing memory: the skin on my back,
shag carpet, a tanktop. A car door
slams and I stop. Were we as thin

and quiet as I see us now through
my Vaseline lens? Me with long hair,
sprawled on your floor, cheap walls
pulsing with bass. Your wild head
an inch away, eyes on the ceiling,
painting in your mind. We were

scared, fatherless kids who couldn't
name the men we loved. We were
something like veal. Outside, a boy
snapped firecrackers, round after
round in the dry August night. You

cranked the volume. We wanted to
see how long we could hold our breath,
waiting, waiting, for spots in our eyes,
the burn in our bellies, for the slow
false rise from the floor, the lifting,
the dizziness that felt like floating.

The Clash See the Future Recording Give 'Em Enough Rope

—London, 1978

Simonon's bored again, you know the look—deliberate vacant, leg twitching, watching war films projected on the wall.

Blood-n-Guts Patton, *Paths of Glory*. Playing along with machine gun blasts, he fucks up the take. 1977, the Jubilee,

over—that new band smell wore off. The Sex Pistols did it first: paramilitary fashion's not enough, Paul's got to play

the damn thing right. Joe claims they're already legends. Well, good thing—they'll be over in five. Strummer's going to die

at home with his dog, no blood on the sidewalk, only 20 footnoted years of regret—long enough to hear heroin anthems pimp family

Caribbean cruises. A pause for all the beautiful jokes to come: the only band that matters selling Jaguars, Baghdad burning to “Rock the Casbah.”

The Tao of Big Daddy

His guitar groans “It’s a Man’s,
Man’s, Man’s World” and it

simply is. When Big Daddy
and The Kings of Love light

the backroom of Lisa’s Oak
Street Lounge, wall panels

peel like tears. They, too,
are perfect, pockmarked

by dull switchblades. Your
intact skin, your wholeness

is not virtue. How could it be?
Big Daddy’s furnace heart

flames. Furious fingertips, O
ten thousand nerves, a spark,

a bathroom wall’s advice—
drugs before breakfast! or

take pills & die. The song,
yes, but Big Daddy too knows

hush: the lull in our constant
battled desire, the carved space

between *yes* and *no*, the empty
filled, finally, when we believe

in the complete, let go of the five
or so inches separating us all.

Things to Say When I Meet Shane MacGowan

I guess you're the incarnate redemption of every drunken Irish father: there's the dinner party story, where the host's baby wailed a chesty yowl for parent or milk, and you rose from the table (barely propped on your elbows through dinner), cradled the tiny person to your filthy shirt and sang "The Broad Majestic Shannon," the sweetest lullaby this side of daylight. At the end, the baby sighed, heavy in your arms like a gift, and you laid it down in a cloud of duckie blankets then keeled over onto your face in the middle of the curious crowd. Still,

you greeted the millennium on stage and alive: more than we can say for my father, long since buried on Long Island, his contribution to the people summed up in small donations to the IRA, in the shape of my brother's face. You couldn't save your front teeth, rotten from abuse, and your beard stores the ashen flotsam of after-hours Dublin, yet you're beautiful, in the way that death-cheaters enjoy an unnatural grace, in the way that "Dirty Old Town" pulls every maudlin gutstring. I'd like to say please don't think you'll be able to do this

for much longer, but maybe you can—and when you finally end up choking on your own vomit and meeting my dad in some afterlife poolhall, he'll slap your back as he pumps your hand, and thank you loudly for keeping his little girl company. Confused, you'll flash that toothless saint smile, stammer some wet-brained apology: *right, sorry and all,*

I could, y'know, have done more—of course you couldn't, of course he couldn't, it's okay, though, can I just say? Shane, I love you. I have all your albums.

The Secondhand Record Store Clerk

The clerk at Better Days knows
the location of each twice-loved album,
he can lay hands on *Dark Side of the Moon*
or *Beggar's Banquet* by closing his eyes
and trailing his fingertips along the cardboard edges
of the covers until his heart murmurs
and his hand knows this is the one.

The clerk at Better Days keeps time
by his piercings, knows that the first
eyebrow was for Julia when she left him,
the bar through his tongue to remind him
of the summer he said too much, each hole
in each earlobe growing larger to match
the years he's spent standing in the same spot.

The clerk at Better Days understands
your hunger for ten years ago, or twenty,
and knows that your high school reunion
is sneaking up and you need a copy
of *Bleach*, *Reckoning*, or *Let It Be* to feel
like a whole single person capable of dancing just
as badly as you did at the prom in rented shoes.

The clerk at Better Days can't name
the trees in Cherokee Park, doesn't know
the difference between a birch and an elm,
can't tell one nervous brown bird
from another, even when they nest in the eaves
above his window, and their babies grow
more hungry and bold by the day.

The clerk at Better Days runs fingers
through his hair, back to front, and sighs
with the weight of a complete discography, leans
elbows to countertop, silently counting
the tanks of gas it would take his ancient
Volvo to make it from this corner to
Miami, or New York, or San Francisco.

The clerk at Better Days ran out of breath
when he crossed the Mississippi and the land opened
like a book; driving I-70 west, he topped out
his lungs to a digital soundtrack, then whispered
into the canyons and let his voice bounce
off mountains that stretched skyward
in surrender, blood slowed to a trickle in his veins.

The clerk at Better Days lies down
during his lunch on the warm concrete and attempts
to hover using only the powers of his mind, tries
to harness this energy of the universe that he's heard
so much about, but grows sleepy and placid
as pedestrians step over him, the sun speckling
his lean torso between drifting clouds.

The clerk at Better Days climbs
onto his roof each night after the store closes
to count neon signs flickering
over Bardstown Road, ticks upcoming shifts off
in rhythm with the BIC lighter chorus
prowling, glowing the sidewalk below,
his own ashes tumbling into an empty soda can.

The Jumbotron Nightmare

Soon, after we have everything,
the electronic billboards will turn
on us. Last year's It Girl won't
wiggle her denim ass. Bud Light Beer
will not sponsor your outdoor
sporting event wedding proposal. Instead,

this will flash—pixels of you,
in ninth grade, telling that guy, his name
burned from your mental rolodex:

you're a fucking loser.

Cut to his face. Part of you, maybe
just your pinky toe, will die
right there on the sidewalk. Then

the rapid eye movement scrapbook
of your little life so far: scorning, conning,
flinching, lying, immolating insects
with sunlight and a lens. Looped
on eternal playback, all PR stripped

for the city to see you—a peeled tangerine,
and you haven't moved since it started,
your eyes swirling like a hypnotized
cartoon, caught between Orwell
and Warhol: fingered and famous.

*The Laff Box*TM

"This is the funny thing about laugh tracks: They work."

—The New York Times on Charles Douglass, inventor (1910-2003)

Even the weakest sitcom jokes have half a chance with that bit of audience sweetening, a social nudge to trigger our reluctant response. Thanks to a lifetime of television's prefab mirth, how will we still know funny if we find it? I find myself, now, laughing

at the worst stuff—a barking, shocked noise, alarming out loud: at a frog-eyed ingénue mowed down by a speeding bus in a stupid movie about death's tireless plan to collect the check, at my friend Joe's running gag about killing the dog next door (ground glass in hamburger—*that's how they do it on Staten Island*). In a more or less

inappropriate world, everything's funny, or else nothing. What I need is a laugh track, strapped to my person, constantly on, to prompt and guide me, to let others know when it's safe to laugh—a wink, a nudge,

then a low-voltage shock, for when we're deaf, finally, to the roar of canned joy. Bury me with my Laff Box, so I can keep on chuckling right into the Afterlife—an endless marathon of reruns, my classic episodes, the "Applause" sign always lit, seasoned with just the right timbre of giggle to encourage my decomposing audience and the voracious, easily pleased worms.

Johnny Cash: Live Inside the Gates

A man spends a whole life getting ready
for Hell, then ends up here. A minute in this joint
feels like eternity—who can think straight
with “Air on a G String” hardwired in his ear?

And the floating, I may need a little time
to get used to it. A man wants solid ground
under his soles: reminds him where he came from,
and where he’ll return—but this? I never seen
so many nuns and babies in all my life, and for once

I’m not hungry, or thirsty, or horny
or much of anything, but my fingers give off
a faint glow—it’s spreading now to the crown
of my head, and I think I need to sit down, unless

I don’t need anything anymore. June likes it,
she’s bossing all the angels, but a man can’t
settle for everlasting peace. Weightlessness
makes my head light—when you’re looking

for the burn, burn, burn, and there’s not even
harmonicas, what’s left for a man? Nothing
ever happening, forever, strumming “Folsom Prison
Blues” on a tiny harp? Heaven’s got nothing
on Tennessee. Now I got infinity left to go.

The One-Hit Wonders

We sit close on this cracked step and watch
the squirrels dance the autumn fugue, rational
on the surface but surely demented by the time
December shrills. They'll sleep, curled inside

dying trees, no memory of furious early
November. They would rather make it look
easy. Yesterday, I saw a fat one leap
to a far branch, and, missing, crash

through the tree, falling three stories
to the street. Stunned for only a beat, he stood
and ran back up the trunk. I don't doubt
who's favored—they run the neighborhood,

drunk on fermented nuts, that unseen hand
guiding their full bellies home, as we sit
on cooling concrete, pouring wine
and planning our futures, never as brilliant

as we were told we'd be. Tell me secrets—
who would you be if you could? Look at us
twitching inside our skins. Maybe only today
we can pretend our great expectations

still stand a chance. When morning rolls over
and gives the alarm clock the finger, throwing
the sun across the sky, the waning autumn light
will be erased, this last cigarette will vanish

from my hand. But here, now, nothing
tastes as sweet as virgin potential—fingerprint

smudged, but protected from measure. Remember
that, when we grow old and seasoned with envy,

stick it under your tongue. Keep it close like the final
unrequited love, like every scrap of slippery light
that will flash us awake, mouths dry and gaping, only
to fade to black, saving itself for another, quicker mind.

Orpheus Retires

Sons of muses know
the score—we follow,
heroic, in mother's footsteps.

It's duty, we're told. That's me
in the couplet, me the allusion,
a metaphor, a cipher: my name

carries weight. Personified
regret, I shorthand weakness,
and so am forced to relive

the worst day of my life
ad infinitum in the pages
of *Best American Poetry*.

What kind of afterlife
is this? Eternal humiliation
so another man won't

have to say *my love, I tried
to save you, but I was stupid
and now you are lost*. Enough.

Find another monkey, try
admitting your own faults
for a change. I'm heading

somewhere sunny, umbrella
drink in hand. Don't call. This time
there's no looking back, and

I'm taking Persephone with me.
Let the Pacific absorb our voices
into the pounding white noise waves.

The Smallest Terminal

Today, the gods of flight are laughing
at my turbo-prop plane—this little winged
coffin brooding on the tarmac,
metal staircase rattling in the breeze.
How many puny phobia incubators
will be swallowed by unforgiving
lakes and prairies before we go back
to trains? When I was young,
I thought only hicks were afraid
to fly. Small planes meant actually

feeling our way through the sky.
Turbulence? A chance to see someone
puke. Lately, only whiskey can get me
on board these anxious toy dogs,
and I can hear every screw loosen,
each lugnut rust. Ancient axles
and belts grind a *Lynyrd Skynyrd* chorus,
and we limp down the runway,
murmuring *Buddy Holly, Buddy Holly*.

Science Fiction

Last night, we watched the moon turn dark,
drank Rolling Rock on cobblestones. Little airplanes
fumbled through the clouds, eager for a look

at the eclipse. How carbon-based we are,
hair, some bone, mostly water. Small, plain,
last night, when we watched the moon turn dark

as morning on I-64: residents of the horse park
robed in mist like coddled bishops, their heads craned,
fumbling through the fog to sneak a look

at my Japanese death trap speeding to work.
And over this hill is another hill. The wax, the wane.
But last night, as we watched the moon turn dark,

I twitched, dumb-eyed, convinced some residual spark
might lift us over roof and brick. Of course we stayed
grounded: fumbling, human, dying for one quick look.

Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter—

lovely to believe, but this morning we are the same
as last night, when we watched the moon turn dark
and we gaped through the clouds, aching for a look.