

CAMPAIGN
for Christopher Merrill

i. *Edwards' Stump*

(Democrat Rally, Iowa City, 23 October 2004)

Find the right slant of sunlight:
that's where the gilded dome sits – there it glisters.

Find a depthless stretch of blue:
that's where the skin-graft flag strains, where it snaps.

A cry for us – patient throng –
over-amplified, blurred; grown blunt to crush the mutters.

Then brute music, a thrust, a thing fraying,
ravelling its own excess. Then just crackle. Then just silence...

The moment bursts and – *wow*,
here comes our game-cock;

he is a very handsome man.

He's tieless and in his shirt-sleeves.
Throat swelled, he jabs the shivering, far-off emblem

unconsciously, punching air,
then breasts such adulation, takes the wave.

After the inescapable
square-dance of syllables,
John goes down in our magma.

ii. *Sharpton's Shout*

(Payne Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church, Waterloo IA, 27 October)

I was remembering the senator's radical disappearance
on my way to Al Sharpton – how he had purely *gone*
and how thoroughly the crowd worked over the site of his going,
how it heaved round a guy the far-off had to infer,
roiling joyfully, in a sexual peristalsis.

Now – O Waterloo, sad-drab town – there's a fresh dispensation
just a scoot away, directions from this youth
in drooped bluejeans, a black, who blanked then seemed to know
of a church where the reverend "speaks 'bout registration."
When we get there, my companion, a tiny, bold Goan
research student – who knows him, only, as "Al" –
shouts straight out the window; a group of peaky whites
– important men, they seem – answer uneasily,
amiably (*everyone's* tense: Lord, there's a lot of tension
all over, from Des Moines to – of course – great Washington),
"Yes ma'am, this is the place, right here, yes, that's for sure."

So we sit down beneath a neon crucifix
glowing pale rosé. We're addressed by the female pastor,
whose note rises to soul-food harshnesses
in the upper registers, bluesy with conviction.
It's uncommonly human here – warm; the two of us
exchange complaisant glances. The celebrant
– sole-pale and slender, finely attuned and erect –
lifts up on high sweet-raucous imprecations
(such *grainy* honey!) and the beauty sounds like enough,
especially when the choir behind her begins
its melodious shouting, all teens, in joy compounding
vehemence and the steadfast breadth of horizons.

And it's fronting *this* that Sharpton risks his shout –

iii. *Kerry's Concession*

(Union League Club, 37th and Park, 3 November)

The stripe of light on the primrose tiling in my seventh-floor bolt-hole's
bathroom – paler than primrose – is the sun-driven precipitate

of a clangorous 10 a.m. late-fall NYC world

that waits on John Kerry, all blankly,

bleakly to concede...

Though he howl, he must turn from the teasing Ohio,
this Manhattan take up its place in the sleepwalk parade.

MY 50th-BIRTHDAY SESTINA

For once I shall write plainly about myself,
just *as* myself. That plasma! But to fold the secret
into a little pocket sewn through the silk of things,
stash a stamp-sized, much-crazed scribble by first waving widely
the spread sheet and laundry morning of bare 'I'
– well, that's what I've said I'm doing. What I'll do.

There's always a raggedy edge to what you do.
– But let's scotch the second person. I mean myself,
my Jackself: the little gape that makes the 'I.'
(A lifetime of dawns with Bellow as my secret
then this a.m. of his death, extinction widely
deplored, yes, hollowly. Bow down. It's the death of things.)

There's always that raincoat held out by the things
come pressing around my table to make me do
the decent: belt up, get out, shine the tidings widely;
but I was glad to keep inside myself
beside myself school mornings when the secret,
dodging my mum, to the mirror whispered "I."

– Possibly morbid themes spun out of 'I'
so it's better briskly to state that all my things
will climax tomorrow when I broach the secret
hip-flask of 50. *Cut*. Look, I've had to do
the documentary thing – whilst mounting myself
atop this form that pins the wing-beats widely –

and the 16th has come round. I'm gazing widely,
steeply, imploringly on mountains I
thread toward Basel. I don't sit by myself
(but I do) – it's my ex-wife's treat. She points out things
of interest all the time but I've this to do
and, as ever was, the leaf transpires in secret.

The same day, after museums, me and my secret
are slumped where the cold Rhine rolls its mute greens widely
outside the hotel window, ex gone to do
her shopping, me left to finish off this 'I'
that's a dim one, and breaking up amidst strange things...
When I get back I'll barely know myself

but shall try what hope can do to make the 'I'
more than a secret, and light constriction widely,
and douse for the life of things – dressed as myself.