

Poetry Series

Lucius Furius
- poems -

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Lucius Furius()

A Charm

Your demure expression,
the unfailing grace with which you meet
the small misfortunes which we meet each day.

Your ready smile, intelligent gaze...
(the eyelashes covering your half-closed eyes) .

The care you take in your dress-
nothing fancy, but always pleasing-
never letting one forget you're a woman.

That warm-red, slightly orange, sweater,
the color of poppies,
so perfect next to your yellow hair....

Let these words be a charm against
all actual physical love;
let them somehow quench the passion
which they are tokens of.

Lucius Furius

A Memorial Poem For Rembrandt (Who Never Had One)

Rembrandt, you maniac!
While other guys were down at the local tavern,
drinking and playing cards,
- or off visiting Paris -,
you were in the studio.
Long after your students had left,
there you were, slaving away.
Did your family get sick of posing?
Others painted us as we seem
- a bit better-looking, I suppose....
You painted us as we are:
proud, sorrowful, hopeful, uncertain.
Where we'd seen only ugliness you found beauty.
The Bible? You made it human:
We felt Christ's pain! Magdalene's astonishment.
You were foolish with your money,
failed to pay your debts.
We forgive you.

You were stubborn, mean, obsessed.
You loved us
only when you were painting us.
We forgive you.

You worked on your own paintings
instead of ones which might have sold at higher prices,
ones which might have paid your debts.
We forgive you.

Because your art is so incomparably beautiful
we forgive you.

Lucius Furius

A Poem Of The Millennium

January 1,1000

Year One-thousand, January One,
starts the new millennium.
The villein, Jacques, in Reims,
wakes to find his world unchanged.
His hut stinks; his flour's wormy.
He fears God's wrath, but trusts His mercy.
Walled in by his community,
set in Christian certainty;
by their fireplace, with his family, sitting,
he plans the plots he'll plant come spring.
The stars above him do not move;
he knows God's power - and His love.

1118

Others loathe such conformity:
their minds and spirits must be free.
Tutor Pierre finds knowledge increase
in the arms of his pupil Héloïse.
Risking life and reputation,
they learn a different conjugation.
(L'Université de Paris's great philosophe
and the canon's niece - in reckless love.)
You think the danger overstated?
Let me remind you that Abélard was castrated
- and the slut confined to a nunnery...
whence she wrote most eloquently.
(*'Though I should think of God, I think of thee.'*)

1225

Dear Francis,
I hear that when you visited St. Peter's
you exchanged clothes with a beggar
and stood all day at the door of the church;
that you asked the people of Gubbio
to be kind to the wolf who was eating their sheep;

that you call birds your 'sisters' and fire, your 'brother';
that you would have us give all that we own to the poor....

- Perplexed in Perugia

Dear Perplexed,

I ask only that you see God's hand in all creation:

wolf, leper, flower, stone -

God gives to each His rain and His sun.

What man is in the eyes of the Lord,

that I am - and nothing more.

1517

Martin Luther says you can't buy salvation;
the individual conscience is the only true religion.

Of intermediaries, he'll have none;

Man is responsible to God alone.

The Bible, being God's holy Word,
must, by each Christian, be read and understood.

Humble toil is a service of God
far surpassing the holiness of monks.

God is terrible in his majesty;
by faith in God, are we made free.

1611

[London; Shakespeare addresses assembled friends as he
retires to Stratford; ... a mysterious stranger rebuts.]

'Despite it surely not being my intention
to slight the worth of imagination,
to doubt the value of our fictive craft,
there can be no question: in their import,
the actual deeds of actual men
must, perforce, surpass the disembodied pen.

This [pointing] is merely men upon a stage;
these, merely words I've placed on the page.'

'Master Shakespeare, I beg to differ:
it is your words which will live forever.

When fiery Phoebus ten million times
has run his course 'round rotund Earth, men will
still be astonished at Lear's great woe,
still sigh with Juliet for her Romeo.'

1711

They've placed Monsieur Voltaire in prison.
This will not postpone the Age of Reason.
Men will speak and write as they see fit,
be governed by laws and the intellect.

1783

[General Washington, at Annapolis, Maryland]

'My friends, I'm honored deeply,
by the faith which you here show in me,
your confidence that these qualities
which served so well in war might now

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to governance be applied successfully.
'I, myself, have doubts:
I fear that battle's clear, cold steel will be dulled
in the gauzy murk of diplomacy.
And though I were suited to this high estate most perfectly
still I should shrink from it.
I think of Caesar,
returning, triumphant, from Gaul,
his heart full of zeal for the good of his people,
who achieved much, but whose lordly rule
gave way to others far less wise....
'There's a name for a man raised above men as a god:
it's 'king'. I'll have no kings!
'Thus, I surrender to you,
the duly-elected representatives of the States,
the outward and visible sign of my authority:
this sword. Let the world take note
that these united States, born under tyranny's yoke,
shall, in word and deed, henceforth
be governed democratically.'

July 27, 1890

Vincent finds his world has narrowed,
(- what wonders he'd seen in la lumière d'Arles! -)
all the things for which he's sorrowed-

rejection by his cousin Kee,
reliance on his brother's charity,
failure of his 'painters' community'-
come welling up....
He walks to the field from which he'd come.
In his pocket, the letter he'll never mail.
The wheatfield he'd so recently painted.
In his pocket, by his chest, ...
the gun.

July 16,1945

[Robert Oppenheimer, near Alamogordo, New Mexico]
If the radiance of a thousand suns
were to burst into the sky at once,
that would mirror the Mighty One's splendor....
I am become Death - World-destroyer.
- The Bhagavad Gita
Everything was so much clearer
when it seemed the Germans might get the thing first....
Now it's all so terribly muddy....
Who knows what these generals'll do with it.
...The radiance of a thousand suns....
That 100-foot tower - completely gone! ...
If we didn't do it, someone surely would....
I am become Death - destroyer of Worlds.

January 1,2000

Year Two-thousand, January One,
starts the new millennium.
The sales-clerk, Jacques, in Reims,
wakes to find his world unchanged.
He's got Internet access! Two cars!
He doesn't fear the universe....
The only group he's part of
is guys who drink at the local bar....
He goes to church, but doesn't believe.
His job, his marriage - nothing is certain....
Even the stars above him move.
He knows God's power - but not His love.

A Youth Addresses The Council

[A child of indeterminate sex- either a delicate-featured boy or a tomboy-ish girl- ,9 or 10 years old, enters the chamber where the United States Council of Artists is meeting.]

'Is this the United States Council of Artists? '

[The Chairman of the Council responds:] 'Yes. Who are you? '

'That doesn't matter. Are all the high arts present? Poetry, Music, the Visual Arts? '

'Yes.... There are people from all the various arts here....'

'The Hour of your Doom is upon you.'

'What do you mean? '

'You've failed to create with feeling.

Nuclear angst no longer excuses you.

Moral uncertainty, the dissolution of society,
no longer excuses you.

The 'Death of God' no longer excuses you.

Human beings have not changed.

We are not the hollow men.

Great art

comes from the heart;

your superfluities will now depart.

'Painter! Isn't it true that the same day you started work on this [holding up a reproduction of the painting 'Incongruities: White Lines, Pink Lines'] you visited a hardware store with a middle-aged clerk whose face was wonderfully sad and quizzical? That as you walked home the pattern of the sun shining through the trees onto the sidewalk was marvelously variegated?

'Composer! Tell me honestly [playing a cassette recording of 'Duet in F Minor for Flute and Woodblock'] that these rhythmless sounds move you.... It's made with the head, completely with the head.

'Poet! Isn't it true that you've never written any poems expressing your deepest feelings: your love of your older sister; the painful growing-apart of you and your wife leading up to your divorce; your hatred of the stuffy academics who denied you tenure; the passion you felt for that Australian girl on Corfu last summer.... Instead you've written these [holding up a book entitled Root Crops, No Metaphors and reading from it:]

translucent, magenta-veined root-tips
push, cell by cell, into humid grit;
dark green, dark-red-veined crowns
expand profligately sunward....

'Great art
speaks to the heart;
your superfluities will now depart.'

Another Council member:] 'Mr. Chairman, with all due respect to this -
surprisingly eloquent- young person, I suggest that we return to the business at
hand which is' [consulting his agenda] 'the allocation this fiscal year for haiku in
South Dakota.'

Lucius Furius

Adam And Eve

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths, ...

- Wallace Stevens' 'Sunday Morning'

In Eden fair did Adam and Eve
live in perfect harmony.

'No plant or animal devoureth we,
only ripe fruit as falls from the tree.'
By bright-green lily-pads in sphagnum bogs
the herons waded gracefully,
bullfrogs croaked their deep, clear calls;
bluebells, delicate yellow buttercups
were rampant; larks sang in the mulberries.

'No pain or hunger knew we there,
only the sameness of Eden fair.'
Even the bounty, the beauty, the civility,
the rich perfection, stretching out like the wall
of the great oval garden, day after day,
year after year to eternity,
grew tiresome.

'No shame in our nakedness knew we...
nor lust, nor desire, nor carnality.'
It's the exogamous, the unfamiliar,
which stirs in us the deepest passion,
the basso continuo of mortality
which gives to desire its piquancy
- of which they knew nothing in deathless Eden.

'We wanted to look outside the wall.
We didn't mean from God's grace to fall.'
Their lack of control, their disrespect
invited tragedy....
But to deny what one feels,
to deny what one is
is to risk even greater calamity....

'God expelled us from the Garden.
Now we'll know death and all that's human.'
Discord... despair.... Are you better off?
Coaxing grain from the cracked, parched earth?
Maybe you paid too much for your freedom? ...
Maybe you wish you were back in the Garden? ...

'There be good inside the Garden;
there be good outside....
There is no perfect Eden.'

Lucius Furius

Babylon

O Babylon! Your God is a sport-utility vehicle, a VCR, and a two-car garage!
You delight in images of killing and artificially-large-breasted women!
Your arteries are clogged with Big Macs and a thousand pieces of Kentucky- Fried
Chicken!

Your God is Technology. Your God is Progress.

Your skyscrapers rise to the heavens! Your astronauts fly to the moon!
You clone sheep! alter genes! make a mountain into a parking lot!
Your fields flower! Your grain-bins groan under the weight of the ripe corn!
But the land of your soul is a desolation.

O God of Henry Ford, the Wright Brothers, and Bill Gates, ...

All the nations adore Thee!

(Pretty soon they'll be ordering Papa John pizza by cell phone in New Guinea....)

Your God is Mammon.

After the movies, after the Quarter-pounders-with-cheese, super-size fries, and
a large Coke,
after the evening news, the Hostess cupcakes, golf, beers, and swimming 20
laps,
the hunger will be the same as the day you first felt it, O Babylon!
the thirst of the soul, O Babylon!

Lucius Furius

Be Free, Kathy

When the cold seeps through your skin,
thinking how many times you've walked here alone
when you might have been lying in the arms of lovers,
warm and comforting,
don't sit there shivering.
You weren't meant for those chains.

You were meant to rise on cool mornings
and swim in deep, clear ponds,
to walk along mountains
and stand at the edges of cliffs,
to gaze at stars -
drawing strength from their fiery motion.

Lucius Furius

Bobby

I cried at Field of Dreams.
It wasn't Dad I was thinking of -
it was you -
us, lobbing that ball
back and forth.

You blossomed: Specht Fans 11 ... Tuesday night. Fireballer Bob Specht
struck out 11 and allowed only two hits in leading the BPO Elks to a 4-0 victory
over Lee Plumbing.

You were ten.
You threw so hard
my hand burned even with a catcher's mitt and sponge.

You stalled;
others caught you.
Age fifteen, and your career was done.

You were musical;
played trombone in the marching band.

School? You did well,
but were never really exceptional.
You defied conventions,
went to extremes.

In college, it wasn't enough to just protest;
you had to join the SDS,
to always be daring the police to arrest you.

You took heroin, mescaline, speed, cocaine.

You were cynical, negative, moody;
scorned all masks and indirection.
What you offered was a ruthless honesty:
in a fake and superficial world,
no small commodity.
You married -
Justice of the Peace, no friends or family.

Seemed happier.
It didn't last;
you divorced.

Talked of suicide, occasionally.
I argued it to be a misunderstanding
of emotions' relativity:
Only the starving understand
the exquisite flavor of plain bread.

You wandered.
Work took us farther apart.

You became obsessed with a married woman
who had no intention of leaving her husband.
Injured your eye in a car accident.
The doctor prescribed corticosteroids.

I fell in love and got married.
You were best man.

And then: P.M., May 20, 1981: A body was discovered in the kitchen of the second floor apartment at 68 High St. by the building's owner, Joseph Albertson. Mr. Albertson positively identified the body as that of Robert Edward Specht, the apartment's leasee. The deceased had received a gunshot wound to the head. A .25-caliber Beretta revolver registered to the deceased was found one foot from the body. The substantial damage to the face and head, consistent with a very close firing range, the lack of any signs of intrusion or struggle, and the written materials (identified as being in Mr. Furius' handwriting) found next to the body, indicate that the wound was self-inflicted.

You'd left a note: 'No hope of finding love. Refuse to live without.'
Was it the accident, the drugs
that made you less communicative?
My marriage? Some inner-driven change?

Would that I could have eased your pain.
You were thirty-one.

Lucius Furius

But Still

You will say it was quite unintentional,
this leaving the building without saying good-bye.
(‘Can’t I depart, just once,
thinking only of daisies and chocolate pudding? ...’)

There are in this world enchanters and enchantees.
It’s only the latter whose hearts are chained to heavy stones,
who could no more leave a room, forgetting you,
than they could, for several minutes, forget to breathe.
How lightly a goddess walks the earth,
evoking smiles in everyone,
but, still, you break our hearts-
like tigers stepping on sparrows’ eggs,
like a deer, walking silently through a strand of spiders’ silk,
taut between trees,
you break our hearts.

Lucius Furius

Casablanca

Oh Rick, if only things were so simple....
If only there were Nazis shooting children,
bullies like Major Strasser waiting to take over,
women like Ilsa -
so beautiful and passionate
that just the memory of their love, just the shadow,
is enough.
We would sing the Marseillaise
and in the air itself,
just breathing in that hot, dry air,
would find all the meaning we need.
But we live in an everyday world,
with everyday human beings.
And we must start again each morning,
with scraps of faith and feeling,
to make the world's meaning in the foundry of our heart.

Lucius Furius

Do Not Think

Do not think because I have a roving eye
that I am any less in love with you.
A knowing wink, a bashful smile, a haughty stare,
these are the terra incognita
which I, beauty's student, must needs explore.

But like Raleigh in Guiana,
in search of El Dorado, thinking of his Bess*,
or Daniel Boone in Kentucky,
it is you I am thinking of, always,
and it is to you I will, Odysseus-like, always return.

Lucius Furius

Girl Of The Tzabarim Dance

If only I could do with my words what you,
with your arms and legs and hands, do,
girl of the Tzabarim dance.

You let your body go.
You let the music and God flow through you.
No false smile; only the subtle bliss
of one possessed by the dance.

The feeling threatens to overwhelm you;
you master it into a graceful gesture, a delicate turn.
You let the music of God possess you.

You dance like the women danced
when David slew the Philistine,
girl of the Tzabarim dance.

If only I could do with my words what you,
with your arms and legs and hands, do,
girl of the Tzabarim dance.

Lucius Furius

Goddesses

Kate Larson, Carol Ulverness-
19-year-old goddesses

I knew at college:

beauty so inward and effortless-

like Botticelli's 'The Birth of Venus'-

that that of even the most celebrated actresses and models
seems to be contrived and self-conscious.

Like all of us, they're in their 40's now-

I wonder what they're like....

Does some inner flame

still illuminate their faces and bodies?

Or were they flowers-

whose petals now have faded and fallen?

Lucius Furius

Grandma's Funeral

I

'She's lovely... so natural.'

A corpse pumped full of formaldehyde.

My grandmother? That prodigious maker of
pies, cakes, stuffing, and cranberry ice?

That lover of Burger King restaurants,
amusement parks, presidential elections, and long summer rides?

Her flushed face is like stone.

This body is a mockery of her being.

(Her fearless motion is done.)

II

She gave us life.

Crass, fond, willful. She gave us life
like turkey and stuffing.

She is the answer to our dark questionings.

Lucius Furius

Here's To Those Who Suffer Voluntarily

Here's to those who suffer voluntarily,
who rise above the mean and merely momentary
pleasure that we feel sitting on a couch,
eating Cheetos, watching reruns of 'The Brady Bunch';

those who exercise, walk fast (raising weights
with their arms in rhythm to their feet) ,
jog, or actually even run -
as long as there's no clear goal in mind,
no Olympic medal, no short-skirted cheerleaders
proffering kisses;

residents of Blakely, Georgia, and Moosejaw, Saskatchewan,
who steadfastly resist removal to California
and similar climes, knowing intuitively
that delight in perfect weather is born in sub-zero winters,
in summer's humid swelter;

those who do without air-conditioning,
using the money for a violin
or books or trips to the local swimming pool;

those who fast, mortify the flesh, -
or at least skip breakfast occasionally,
refusing to indulge every bodily whim,
letting them ripen, at least now and then,
into actual, robust hunger;

monks in solemn Kentucky silence,
some, I suppose, are misanthropes, here I speak of those
with a normal affection for chat and hubbub
who restrict themselves to a reverent silence,
speech being used only in extremity;

blood donors.

Lucius Furius

Herr Generalfeldmarschall Rommel Takes Cyanide

How distant my Swabian* youth seems now.
I made a glider which really flew, you know.*
Not far, but yes, it carried me! I soared!

Some accused me of being a showboat,
of tooting my own horn.... I learned early
that the laurels don't go to the meek or the bashful.

Yes, I was a Nazi. Those aristocrats
on the General Staff* belittled the Fuhrer-
but where had they gotten us?
I liked his enthusiasm and optimism.
We were in a hole; he led us out,
got the economy going again,
restored the Sudetenland and Danzig.
(Danzig where Lucie and I had been married!)

I thought Poland would be the end
but when we attacked in the West
I didn't shrink away.
My troops and I were the very spearhead:
strike quickly; do the unexpected.

Who was I to deny
Germany's world-wide destiny?

The African war agreed with me.
The open space gave a latitude to my strategy
lacking in hilly, forested Europe.

The victory at Tobruk is often cited
as the height of genius, military.
I, myself, prefer what preceded it:
the retreat into Tripolitania-
salvaging men and tanks, shortening supply lines,
lulling the British into complacency;
turning and stinging at Agedabia.

El Alamein: the Fuhrer and I part company.

'Victory or Death', he cabled me.
I disagreed: my men would not die senselessly.

We were desperate for gasoline.
Ship after ship was sunk trying to deliver it.
(Lax Italian security, no doubt.*)

We were outnumbered five to one.
I favored withdrawing immediately,
consolidating troops in Europe.
The Fuhrer wouldn't hear of it.

I flew to East Prussia to confront him.
He'd grown pudgier, more strident-
wouldn't give an inch.
I sensed that not just Africa
but the war as a whole would be lost.
The weight of the forces against us was crushing.
The only question'd been their willingness to fight.
That had been answered at Stalingrad.

I fought on in Italy and in France,
hoping to convince the enemy
that the price of taking Europe-
especially Germany-
would be too high.

I really thought we had a chance
to stop them on the beaches.*
But now that we've failed, our destruction's inevitable.
I've tried to make the Fuhrer see reason:
surrender to the British and Americans;
don't let our country be overrun by Russia.

He condoned murder-
ordered me to kill the French Jewish soldiers
who'd surrendered at Bir Hacheim, * for instance,
(I didn't) - and much more.... And yet,
and yet, I couldn't quite bring myself to wish him dead-
and certainly never took part in that plot-
though, yes, I knew of it... after a fashion....
Defending myself to that group would be hopeless*....

Lucie and Manfred* must be spared
the humiliation of hearing me declared a traitor.

I bestrode the plains of Africa-
Rommel, the invincible-
always with the troops where the battle was most critical.
I was crafty and brave,
dared to act when others shied away.
I was the apple of the Fuhrer's eye;
idol of the German people;
scourge of the British military.
All the world applauded me. I lost-
but only when outnumbered overwhelmingly.

Now I sit in the back of this Opel*-
an outcast, a criminal-
waiting to take a cyanide pill.

We failed to assess properly
the will of other nations to honor treaties
and preserve their freedom.
And, more basically:
Were we right to force our rule on other people?

Icarus-like, we flew too high.

We were bold and strong
but it seems, in the end,
in the end, not supermen.

Lucius Furius

I Left My Mittens In The Smokies

I left my mittens in the Smokies.
It was that night at Maddron Bald on the ridge
after we'd hiked from Davenport Gap -
12 miles, 4,000 feet.
The girl gave us icicles.
Dazed and breathless, we pitched the tent
and scrambled into our sleeping bags.

The morning sun felt good - Sterling Ridge
on our left, Cosby far below to the right;
Mt. Guyot with its spruces and firs;
lunch at Tri-Corner Knob; then down through
the rhododendrons and mud to McGhee Springs.
Raven Fork - the beech tree, the icy water,
the boulders, the sunlight.
Cabin Flats and Smokemont - the rain,
the people with pancakes.

Campfires, backpacks, flapjacks, barley;
sunshine, lichens, blisters, ... wood-smoke.

Lucius Furius

I Miss You

I miss you.
Here at the foot of Mount Royal
(really only a hill) ,
which I climbed this morning,
I miss you.

I ask what's real.
In this clamour of work,
of French and English...
It's your touch that's real,
your eyes looking-at-me-with-love,
your lips.

Here in Montreal,
at the foot of Mount Royal,
I miss you.

Lucius Furius

I Say There Is No Physical Beauty

I say there is no physical beauty.
This skin, this flesh, this bone
are but the clay of which we make our beauty,
the instrument on which we play our beauty.

Witness the failure of funeral directors to please true aesthetes:
the dead Ingrid Bergman lacks the beauty of a living bag lady.

Tennis masters
given K-Mart rackets
win gracefully,
while the high-school violinist
playing a Stradivarius
fails to delight us.

Thus noses, lips, breasts have no beauty in themselves.
Perfect features are easily distorted by
anger, sloth, irritability, or conceit.
But in a rare few
energy, grace, composure, and sensitivity
are blended in such a quantity
that they overflow
and color with an exquisite beauty every pore of the body,
fill with a subtle music every gesture, every word.

I say there is no physical beauty.
This skin, this flesh, this bone
are but the clay of which we make our beauty,
the instrument on which we play our beauty.

Lucius Furius

I Should Have Known

You don't really need me, do you?

Oh, you enjoy being with me.

You enjoy kissing me.

You enjoy having me at your side.

You enjoy playing the games that lovers play.

Perhaps you love me.

But you don't really need me, do you?

What I mean is

you don't lie awake at night thinking of me

you don't leave your homework unfinished because

your mind is tormented by the thought of Lucius

you don't go to sleep at night wishing my arms were around you.

You have your friends.

You have your home.

You have your mother and your father.

You've never been really lonely.

You've never really suffered.

You've never wanted to drive your car off a cliff or

put a bullet through your head.

You've never ached with all your heart.

You've never wanted anyone completely and forever.

But don't feel bad.

It's not your fault.

I should have known.

Lucius Furius

I Will Forget You, Presently

I will forget you, presently.

As leaves of this ailanthus tree, now green,
turn yellow, fall, and are covered with snow,
so memories of you will fade.

But years from now, on a sidewalk in Oslo,
a thirty-ish woman, your distant cousin,
will smile at me as we pass,
and all those feelings, all your beauty's joyous ache,
will come flooding back,
as though it were only yesterday.

Lucius Furius

In Champaign

It promised to be quite ordinary,
that old student/new student/faculty social hour.

I had come to Champaign with high hopes a year earlier,
starting a new career (- and hoping to find someone to love) .
Now, with just three months left,
my studies had been a success,
but I had not found anyone to love.
And now I was thinking beyond Champaign:
where I would go, what I would do with my new degree.

I scanned the faces in the crowd.
Mixed in with all-too-familiar classmates and teachers were new people:
A formidable, blonde-haired woman
with a big voice and a large imitation pearl necklace;
no meek, retiring librarian here; a Valkyrie.
A guy with wire-rimmed glasses in his early twenties;
congenial, but serious; he had studied engineering.
A girl; stylish, extroverted;
loved Faulkner; engaged to be married.
A sensitive, thirty-ish woman; recently divorced;
her ex had stuck her with a mountain of credit card debt.
And you, in a pink dress.
No jewelry, not much makeup.
Nice figure.
Very simple, very pretty.
A wonderful smile.
Obviously bright.
You had gone here as an undergraduate.
You had taught school in Iowa for several years
and now were back to get a Library degree.
You had grown up on a farm.
You were eminently lovable.
You were, amazingly, unmarried.

I felt that I was at an art exhibition in nineteenth century France.
Here was Raffaelli's 'Boulevard of the Italians'
which had sold for 500 francs.
Over here Lecomte de Nouy's 'Ramses in His Harem'

which had brought 1900.

And over here in the corner, neglected,
Van Gogh's, 'The Artist's Room at Arles'.

I felt like shouting,

'My friends, can't you see the beauty of this painting:
its simplicity and purity, its energy; the symphony of its colors!
You have opted for these smooth, conventional paintings
and left this one, the most valuable of all, unsold....'

I felt like hugging you, right then and there.

You were number two or three on my all-time 'instant attraction' list.
But I was wary - so many others had not worked out, why would you?

Our first date was a 'Streetcar Named Desire'.

I put my arm around you during the play and held your hand as we walked back
toward your apartment.

I invited you to 'Bubby and Zadie's' cafe. You refused and offered no
alternative.

I was devastated. So this, too, would come to nothing.

We would walk the three blocks back to your apartment. We would say
goodnight.

I would go home and cry. That would be that.

But when we arrived, my hopes soared: you invited me up to your
apartment. You really just didn't like Bubby and Zadie's - and you liked and
trusted me well enough that the intimacy of your apartment didn't seem
inappropriate. We talked for a long time and kissed. When I left, all traces of
wariness were gone. The coming weeks would not be ordinary.

Lucius Furius

In The Fullness Of Time

... go out into the evening,
leaving your room, of which you know each bit,
your house is the last before the infinite, ...
(from Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Eingang', MacIntyre translation)

The light which strikes my retina
as I look at the Great Galaxy in Andromeda
left there two million years ago.
(Hominids made tools from stone then, but had not yet
learned the use of fire.
Genetic material from certain of these hominids has been passed
from one being to another and now is in my own body.)

Millennia from now, humans who have
colonized the farthest reaches of our galaxy,
laboriously creating and maintaining Earth-like atmospheres,
will marvel that there once was a place so perfectly suited to
human life
that such labor was unnecessary. (Just as we marvel that orchids,
whose precise temperature and humidity requirements would seem
to necessitate a greenhouse, grow wild in the Amazon.)

I cannot believe in a personal God,
intervening in human affairs, but stand in awe
of the terrible force which set the stars and galaxies in motion
- strewing them like so much confetti-;
the life-force running through each living creature,
as straight and true as a ray of light from that galaxy in Andromeda,
willing us to live, grow and be fruitful.

Lucius Furius

Isn't Life A Pile O' Shit?

Isn't life a pile o' shit?

Isn't it a subway ride?

Isn't it a subway ride with people doing crossword puzzles, reading, staring at the advertisements, writing letters, building houses, hoeing cucumbers, eating salami sandwiches, and fucking (to keep it going) - trying to forget that they don't know where they're going or why or how they got there - waiting to be pushed out the window?

Lucius Furius

John Brown

John Brown, you scare me!
You look like a man possessed by a demon.
You look like a man who could kill his son.
You look like a man who believes in a principle,
John Brown.

He drew blood, your son did.
You took him to the woodshed and whipped him;
but then you had him whip you, harder and harder....
now what kind o' crazy-assed thing is that to be doin',
John Brown?

You were a farmer, tanner, wool-trader,
land-dealer, surveyor, shepherd.
Failed at them all, went bankrupt.
But loved your family, held it together,
John Brown.

You lived with black people at North Elba,
seated free black men in your pew at church....
They expelled you, didn't they
- those white hypocrites-,
John Brown?

Your sons murdered pro-slavery men in Kansas,
loud-mouthed, innocent men,
dragged them from their beds, in the name of God,
chopped off their arms, sliced their throats....
You were there,
John Brown.

Somehow you knew
- what were the odds that 200,000 men would die? -,
somehow you knew the earth would be drenched in blood,
somehow you knew rivers would run red with blood....
How did you know? How did you know,
John Brown?

Laguna Beach

Lounging in the dry warmth of the sun,
overcome by the beauty of the green cliffs
rising above the hypnotic blue water....

I think of Mann's *The Magic Mountain*,
obsession with the physical
(not, in this case, disease, of course,
but the sensual) :

skin glowing in the year-round sun;
ripe fruit
falling into one's hand;
air, rich with the smell of flowers....

Wouldn't such pleasure
inevitably dull the mind's keen edge?

Wouldn't Eden's ease
subvert all great endeavor?

Lucius Furius

Letter To Sophie

Garden Parkway YMCA
Dallas, Texas
22 November 1963

Darling Sophie,

Could it be only two months since I let your fingers slip from my hand as that train departed Voronezh station? I fear that this trip was a great mistake....

The boat sailed from Sevastopol as scheduled. Just two days and we were through the Bosphorus/Dardanelles and into the incredibly blue Aegean and the Mediterranean. On September 27 we passed Gibraltar and started the long haul across the Atlantic. The work was not demanding though the ship was quite dirty and not really very pleasant.

We docked at Houston in the state of Texas on October 9. Defecting was surprisingly easy. There was supposed to be work in Dallas so I walked/hitch-hiked here last month. But I have not been able to find any work.

The people here, though friendly, are coarse and brash. The stores overflow with televisions, record players, mink coats, but there are many very poor people here too....

The great American leader, Kennedy, was shot and killed today, driving in his open-topped car along the streets of this very city.

My money is gone; my strength, exhausted. How blithely I left you and Russia behind! I feel my lips brushing the tiny hairs on the back of your neck, your nipples swelling.... Sophie! May you know great happiness and love! I only ask that in the spring when you visit Krymskaya Pond, that you remember how we knelt there, how I whispered in your ear there, when the air is filled with the scent of its cherry trees that you remember what we felt there....

Yours, always, Nickolay

Lucius Furius

Love Is Not All

(After Edna St. Vincent Millay)

Love is not all. It is not meat nor drink
nor slumber nor a roof against the rain.
In the beauty of sunlight falling on water,
love is hardly a major factor.
It cannot stop a bullet
or lift a crashing plane
- or make a stopped heart beat again.
Yet people are killing themselves
even as we speak, for lack of love alone.
It may well be under pain of torture,
starving/dying of thirst,
tested by want past resolution's power,
I'd strike a bargain:
a cup of water for a different life,
a life without memory of you and our children;
I'd trade our love for food. It may well be.
I do not think I would.

Lucius Furius

Melissa

I loved you
from the first.

I loved you
when you were innocent and pure
and helped us with the silverware.

I loved you
when you unloosed your hair
and showed us all how beautiful you were.

I loved you
when you chose him
because he had failed and he needed you.

But most of all I loved you
that day when you ran out of Dascomb kitchen
because you couldn't stand the thought of what you'd done
and you couldn't stand the sight of him.

Everyone thought you were crazy.

Lucius Furius

Mr. Thomas

Upon learning of the recent death of Willard Thomas, I decided to interview some of his former students in hopes of discovering the truth about this controversial figure.

1.

'God, what a man! I've never known anyone who experienced life so intensely. His mind was plagued by unanswerable questions. His body was racked by the suffering of fellow human beings. His soul was tortured by the absurdity of existence.

His life was a struggle with the cosmos.

You could see it in his face.

You could feel it in his words.

And what a teacher! He hypnotized the class. He made books come to life.

We saw him in the meadow with Emily Dickinson,
drunk with daisies and the sunrise.

We saw him lugging Cordelia about the camp,
brains burst, arms aching.

We saw him fling the iron at Moby Dick! !
defiant to the last....

He was obsessed with truth.

He was in love with justice.

He was the hero of a tragedy called Existence
and he played his part surpassing well.'

2.

'Mr. Thomas was an ass. I know you shouldn't talk that way about a dead person but you said you wanted the truth and that's the truth. Every day he came into class with that ridiculous paisley tie and those irritating starched white shirts with the collars curled up at the corners and those baggy pants down to his shoe-tops and that mess of frizzy white hair and that grimace, that stupid idiotic grimace. And he couldn't teach worth shit. His lectures were a bunch of gibberish about 'truth' and 'justice' and there was never any discussion. The only ideas that interested him were his own. He thought of himself as some sort of tragic hero. He was a fool, a fraud, an ass....'

Lucius Furius

My Children, As You Leave Home Little By Little

My children, as you leave home little by little-
first grade school, then college,
your own apartment, perhaps marriage-,
I hope you'll think fondly of these walls which housed you,
the slanted yellow-pine ceiling you lived under,
the warmth you felt there-
thinking of them not as a barrier
which kept you from being what you needed to
but as a harbor
from which you sallied forth to meet the ever-widening world,
to which you retreated in too-strong wind.

Yes, there are bad people in the world,
but the random person driving on the expressway has a mother who loves him
and most- by far the most-
want nothing more - like you- than peace and happiness.

Though I've pondered deeply the universe's mysteries,
I fear I lack religion.
And if I've bequeathed unto you this unbelief,
placed on your shoulders this terrible burden,
I apologize.
It is, perhaps, my greatest failing.
(Are the tools I've given you really strong enough to fight infinity? Strong enough
to deal with our ultimate aloneness?)

May you be
rich and smart but, above all, kind-
known as someone who treats others fairly.

May you find the sort of love
your mother and I have found.

Have children - lots of them!

Return often! not out of filial duty
but rather curiosity:
'And what might those old codgers be up to now? '

Never Transplant A Poet's Heart

Never transplant a poet's heart.
It wouldn't start.
Or, if it did, would stop
at some seemingly minor shock.
The vena cava is much too slender,
the endocardium, much too tender.
It takes a life-time to learn to live
with a heart so horribly sensitive.
Graft the skin and kidneys.
Interchange the brains.
But never, never transplant a poet's heart.

Lucius Furius

No Garden Flowers For Me

No garden flowers for me,
no gaudy, painted flowers
(hotel swimming pools beside the ocean) .

Give me wildflowers -
ironweed and jewelweed,
chicory and Queens-Anne's-lace.

Lucius Furius

Now You Will Feel

'I said I didn't love you,
I said I didn't want you,
but continued to act normal,
to extend common courtesies,
even-
in moments of weakness-
a certain kindness.
'The treatment failed.
Your sickness lingers.
Now you must feel the cold truth of my not loving you.'

Lucius Furius

O Gretchen, Wherever You Are

I remember how you used to care for the flowers
and arrange the vegetables at the stand.
How carefully you drove the tractor.

I remember you coming out of a cornfield at dawn,
soaked with the dew, laboring under your basket.

All the tiny things you looked after -
kittens and toads.

And the strange foods you gave us!

O Gretchen, wherever you are,
I hope you've found peace.

How did you live in that harsh world?
Where did you hide your fragile spirit?

O Gretchen, wherever you are,
I hope you've found love.

Lucius Furius

Oh, Dad!

1

'Oh, Dad, ' cried my son,
with the huge, unrestrained sobs of a five-year-old,
'Justin Borley knocked me down. <sob>
He kicked me <sob>
and called me a loser <sob>
because we lost the game.'
'Does it hurt badly? Where does it hurt?
Let me give you a hug....
Justin Borley is a bad, mean boy.
A few children are like that....
I will speak with his parents....
You must not be; you must always be kind....
Though you can defend yourself.'
'What does that mean? '
'You can knock his leg or arm if he tries to hit you....
There will be many, many other games....
Some you will lose,
but most, I think, you will win.
You will be a champion! '
'What kind of champion? '
'I don't know.... A baseball champion,
a chess champion, a chemist....
You're smart and strong.... You will be a winner! '

2

'Oh, Daddy, ' cried my daughter,
with the heartfelt sobs of a sixteen-year-old,
'I loved him so much,
I wanted him so much,
and now he's gone.
I'll never find anyone else to love;
I might as well be dead.'
'My darling, you are so beautiful and smart,
so pretty and graceful and spirited....
The boys who love you will be as countless as the stars,
as many as the sands on the shores of Lake Michigan....
'You are like a cherry tree,
putting forth its first few delicate blossoms,

which have been blackened by a hard, late frost.

We are sad, but know -

we feel in our hearts -

that this strong young tree will grow,

that its blossoms and fruits will be many....

'I know it's hard for you to believe,

but you will find other boys to love -

not the same as him -

nothing is ever the same -

but, in their own ways, equally perfect.'

3

'Oh, Dad, ' cried my son,

with the quiet sobs of a 33-year-old,

'Is this all there is: we're born, we live, we die;

our children are born, they live, they die....

How dispiriting, how terrifying...

that this universe should be

devoid of meaning and empathy.

We walk on a cold treadmill,

day after day, year after year,

millennium after millennium....

Forsaken.

Why suffer this torment?

Why not step down?

Why not just get off? '

'Some could answer with words about

a 'kind and loving God'....

I can't.

'Fifteen billion years ago, the universe grew in seconds

from a pinhead to a radius of a trillion miles.

The supernovae, nuclear furnaces, forged the elements.

One hundred thousand years ago, homo sapiens emerged

in Africa.

'Your body is made up of those elements,

contains actual genes from that first homo sapiens....

'You say life's a torment.

Sometimes it is.

But I say

for every ounce of suffering

there is, in time,

an equal, exactly counterbalancing,

experience of joy.

You can play your part in this gigantic pageant,
this extravaganza of joy-sorrow -
or not.

But never doubt that your mother and I love you.

You can walk out into the sunlight,
you can smell the rose-blossoms, newly-opened,
you can let your finger be grabbed by the hand -
the incredibly tiny hand - of a baby -
or not....'

Lucius Furius

Pocahontas

Pocahontas, Little Snow-Feather*,
what possessed you to marry that pale stranger*,
to cross the blue, blue Atlantic,
leaving behind your mother and your father?
How naive you were to think they wouldn't destroy you....

But Pocahontas, Little Snow-Feather,
bones-under-England-soil, it is your spirit-
not that of Cortez or Colonel Forsyth*-
your generosity, your love,
which will prevail.

Lucius Furius

Poet On Deathbed Recounts Close Shaves

Death!
seems y've won;
body's resistance,
all worn down.

Flirted in Oberlin ('68) :
frozen in headlights;
jump left -
or right?

West Virginia.
Kinda teased ya:
One-brake bike on
truck-filled highway ('71) .

Asleep at wheel
('77, Tennessee) ,
drove off road -
pillar or cliff...
woulda been dead.

Suicidal,
love-hope lost.
Asking for
oblivious embrace -
you scorned me
('79, Illinois) .

Full of cancer
(hospital, now) .
Ready for cold kiss,
end-pain.
You're a knockout!
Let's dance.

Lucius Furius

Reservoir (Day)

The golfers leave early -
September or October -
it's just you and the hickories,
the asters, the goldenrod -
and the reservoir -
the ripples shimmering eastward.

Steamshovels and bulldozers labored here one summer,
digging a hole for the water,
piling up the earth.

You walk on the bank they made,
seeing beyond the golf course -
the houses and barns,
the swampy gray-brown fields of goldenrod,
the railroad tracks,
the pines.

Your thoughts plunge to the reservoir's bottom
then turn
racing to the farthest field.

Lucius Furius

Reservoir (Night)

It was cold.

Night.

January, I think.

I was wearing long underwear.

I went to the reservoir and played my recorder.

A hope I'd been hoping was done.

I played for the trees and the fish.

Quiet songs.

They eased my heart.

Lucius Furius

Sickness And Art

I

Of course you're right in saying that I'm sick:
No healthy person wants to kill himself....
But those psychiatrists' pills
'd kill me just as surely as this gun:
They'd kill the me that feels.

II

You ask how I'm doing.... I fear, not well....
By all objective measures I should be content,
but the heart mocks objectivity.
I cling to life by the thinnest of threads:
My art is the thread by which I cling....

Lucius Furius

Spankings

I

I've never hit my children.

My own father spanked me perhaps ten times:

for riding my bike on a busy street,

for 'acting up' in church.

I have no nostalgia for these beatings

(as in: 'Sure glad Pa whopped some sense into me as a young'n—
don't know where I'd be if he hadn't.')

He would make me pull down my pants and underpants

enough to expose my buttocks,

position me between his legs so he could hold my own legs still,

bend me over his left leg with his left arm,

and hit me with his bare right hand.

What I remember as much as the pain

is his angry expression: Was he angry at me?

Or at something else?

I believe it was mostly an unpleasant duty;

usually done because my mother had asked him.

They were afraid we'd become juvenile delinquents.

I suppose his own father had spanked him-

and that he, in turn, had been spanked by his father-

a family tradition....

There've been times with my own children-

God knows they're far from perfect-

where I've almost given in to anger.

Somehow I've always caught myself,

always remembered that unseemliness....

II

Our house is kind of ugly from the front, a split-level

with the whole left side facing the street being a solid brick wall.

Our picture window faces the grass and trees of the back yard.

Each morning, no matter how much of a hurry I'm in,

I open the curtains to this window-

that my children might see not just the man-made objects of our living room

but some hint of the grace and beauty of the whole, great, natural world.

Lucius Furius

Star-Stuff

Sweet Earth, each molecule of me has come from you.
Sesame seed, broken into amino acids and calcium,
became my tiny bones; bananas, potassium,
the cells of my brain.

If we could trace each atom back, we'd find
Kansas, Iowa, Ecuador, Spain.

And further still, through unimaginable millennia,
these same atoms - the very same- were flung from a
supernova,
only to recombine, here, on Earth.

'Of star-stuff, are we made.' Carl Sagan said.

And then (when I'm dead)

the same in reverse:

the atoms' slow dispersal:

pulled in by roots, washed by rivers, melted in magma,
blown, finally, to smithereens by the exploding sun....

Star-stuff, once again, become.

Lucius Furius

Swan-Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock

J. Alfred, I'm sick of your whining -
get off your butt and do something!

Yes, I know life is meaningless.
I know you've got a lot of time on your hands.
Of course, tea parties can be boring.
But let me just ask here: 'Is someone making you do this?
Is someone making you hang out with these cold, scornful women? '
Surely a guy like you could find someone to relate to. It's not that hard.

No, you're not Prince Hamlet -
and you're not an attendant lord either.
You're J. Alfred Prufrock!
Eat a peach, for-God's-sake!
Talk to the mermaids!
Just do it!

Lucius Furius

That Magic Summer

That magic summer where we first met and wooed
fades further from us with each passing year.
The words we spoke are gone; the words' tune lingers on.

We'd tasted love-
sweet, imbalanced, temporary-
now longed for the same only more complete,
more complementary.

Intimacy comes easily to some.
Others store their feelings up:
treasure for those who can rightly claim it.

We met at a party for new students,
drinking strawberry daiquiris.
For me, the attraction was immediate;
a bit slower for you, you say.

We were wary; our trust grew quickly.
And we, in the confines of this serious trust,
at last could be
our own childish, playful selves.

We went to movies, plays, folk-dancing;
walked in Crystal Lake Park;
ate; watched your soap opera;
touched each other constantly;
fought; made up elegantly.

And then, as we sat on a warm stone bench
on top of that underground library,
eating lunch,
- heart in throat- I said:

'The pleasure I have known in being with you
for these six weeks is something quite unusual.
And if the same is true for you,
if this's a love which could lead to marriage,
then I will try to find a job nearby,

where I can see you frequently.
But if your love is of a lesser sort, then I
will cast my net this great world o'er
and go where Fortune takes me.'

Then you,
not hesitating a single moment,
flooding my eyes with your radiant smile,
replied, 'It could! Oh yes, indeed, it could! '

Much has happened since,
but I say it was then, that summer, that moment,
love reached the final, high plane
where we, though hardly conscious of it now, still dwell.

Lucius Furius

The Body's Machinery

Marco! One minute you seemed perfectly healthy,
the next you were sprawled on the floor by the drinking fountain
like a sack of potatoes.

(How reliable our machinery is usually-
just think if your car ran 60 years nonstop!)

But, Marco, seeing you there on the floor,
I knew we live at the mercy
of neurons and corpuscles
(our own little wires and pistons)
and when they stop, we stop.

Lucius Furius

The Bushman Speaks

(Note: The occasion for this speech is the arrival of an expedition headed by a European in a Bushman werf around the year 1900.)

This desert is our life.
From the dry earth we gather roots and melons.
Over the endless sands we hunt the gemsbok and the springbok.

Sometimes the ga roots are shriveled and bitter.
Sometimes men are sick with thirst and hunger.

When there is water we drink and sing and clap our hands.
When there is food we eat and dance and clap our hands.

The eland does not come to us and ask to be eaten -
one must know how to make the arrow and poison it
and where to look and how to hide and shoot....

What man is so foolish as to expect more? To expect
the rain to be always falling, his eggs full of water and
his stomach full of meat?

You have strong animals to carry you.
You have much food and water.
Your digging sticks are hard and sharp.
Your shooting-sticks are like lightning.

You are a powerful man and a good man.
I can see that in your eyes.

But what you offer is a dream.

You can give us water and meat.
You can fill our hands with tobacco and perfect beads.

But you cannot give us happiness.
A man can only drink so much and then he is full.
If a man is always eating honey, he tires of it and becomes sick.

And even if all life were sweet -

what man is not food for lions and dogs?

A man who has tasted in his life no bitterness will find death very bitter.

My mouth longs for sweetness
but sweetness brings bitterness
and in the end they are one.

So I ask you:

Take your digging sticks and your shooting-sticks.

And do not leave them behind.

Go to the green lands you came from.

We shall walk in this desert as we always have.

Lucius Furius

The Draft

'23: July 24'

'24: October 5'

'25: February 19'

'26: December 14'

The words went right to the pit of my stomach.

All doubt was gone.

I'd graduate/be drafted in June.

By September

I'd be in Vietnam.

My high school gym teacher had been an Army sergeant.

He stepped on our stomachs as we did sit-ups,

'toughening us up'.

I've had a problem with authority

(unsuited, temperamentally,

to obeying unconditionally) .

I'd be a poor soldier in the best of wars.

But if a job required some independence/ingenuity -

a pilot or a spy, say -

and if the cause was right

(World War II, for instance) ,

I could fight as well as another guy.

I don't like fighting,

but I'm not so naive as to think it's never a necessity.

There's always someone who, given the chance,

will take our possessions and make us their slaves.

So who should decide

if a particular war is justified?

This seemed to be my own responsibility.

Vietnam? I decided it wasn't.

Weren't we protecting a democracy?

No. Thieu lacked popular support.

Wouldn't Thailand and India fall?

No. The domino theory was questionable at best.

Weren't our national interests at stake?

No, not really.
I'd decided I shouldn't fight;
They'd decided to make me fight.

The physical was set for March.
Unless I failed,
I'd go to Vietnam,
go to jail for seven years,
or go to Canada for the rest of my life.

In studying Army regulations,
I found a fascinating chart.
It showed for each particular height
the greatest and the smallest weight
the Army would accept.
I'd heard of people who'd gotten out
by injuring themselves intentionally.
Some exaggerated a minor back pain.
Others faked insanity.
Losing weight seemed nobler;
lying/mutilation, not required.

The low for me was 118;
lose twenty pounds and I'd be out.
(At 5'10', that's pretty thin.
Could I do it and not get sick?)
My parents thought for sure I'd die.

Help from doctors was out of the question;
on my own I studied nutrition.
Cut down on calories,
maintain needed nutrients
(protein, essential fats, vitamins, and minerals) .
Once I found a working combination,
I stuck to it without exception.
Cottage cheese, wheat germ, and fish were staples.
Bored fat cells chose self-immolation.
My weight dropped to one hundred and twenty.

In cases where the weight was close
I'd heard the Army sometimes winked:
('Oh we'll fatten this guy up') .

I decided to lose to one hundred and ten.
Contrary to my parents' fears -
though vigorous exercise made me dizzy -
I really wasn't sick at all.

The Army sent a special bus
to take us to the physical.
Once there, we stripped to underpants,
moved like cattle from each room to the next.
I weighed 110.
They classified me 1-Y
(examine again in a year;
if still unfit, reject) .
Losing again would be inconvenient,
but free of worry since I knew that it worked.

I'd brought some food.
I drank and ate it ravenously.

So what did I feel on that bus heading home?
Triumph? Elation? No.
Relief, sadness, and guilt.
Relief because finally I was free of this mess.
Sadness and guilt because someone else
would be made to go and fight in my place.
It's true this person, on some level,
had chosen not to escape -
but maybe he just hadn't thought it through....
Now for a bold statement from a slimy ex-draft-dodger -
I'm sure you'll think this hypocritical -:
Each of us must be ready to serve.

Responsibility for protecting things we love
can not lie solely with the professional military.
(Future wars could overwhelm them.)

Service isn't always guns.
Service might be joining the Peace Corps
or electing leaders who effectively distinguish
false threats from real ones - and pre-empt war.

Wars should be rare, thrust upon us.

No more propping up tottering dictators.
No more shoving 'Democracy' down people's throats.
No more sacrificing 10,000 soldiers so we can pay a
quarter less for gasoline.

Wars should be necessary and just;
everyone should serve.

Lucius Furius

The Poet Talks To His Former Loves

'Janice, I sat next to you in Latin.
We were sophomores.
You were a cheerleader
but smart too.
The excitement was unbearable
(Cicero; the shape of your sweater...) .
I asked you to play tennis.'
'You did never.'
'Yes, I did.'
'I suppose I didn't want to get sweaty.'
'So then you would have gone with me to a movie? '
'No, I doubt it.... I was a brat.'
'You were divine.
I wrote a poem for you in Latin.'

'Lynda, we met at The Three Penny Opera.
You were an usher.
I was a college student; you were in high school.'
'Yes, a 'townie'.
'I put my arm around you.
I stroked your hair.
When I tried to kiss you on the forehead our noses collided.'
'I was expecting a lip kiss.'
'It was a powerful attraction,
but it wouldn't have worked.'
'No, we could have made great love,
but it wouldn't have lasted.'

'Gina, you lived on that 'hippie farm'
at the edge of town.
I was the 'knowing elder',
the one who'd worked on a real farm.
You were so high-energy, so alluring.
Guys flocked to you:
William and Michael; Davy, back home;
sexually involved with all of them.'
'Not Michael really.'
'You seduced me-
I think you wanted to make William jealous-

not that I was unwilling....
I was, however, impotent.'
'I wanted adventure and, yes, I suppose I did want to make William jealous.'
'Our intimacy awakened me.
I realized what I'd been missing.
Your rejection was devastating.'
'I didn't mean to hurt you.
I didn't know you were so fragile.'

'Carla, I loved you in your apartment.
It was all softness and warmth;
shag carpet, soft bed,
Carole King on the stereo....
We slept together, showered together.'
'I really listened to Carole King? '
'Your parents were divorcing.
You didn't have time for a relationship.'
'I don't think I was ready.'
'Just as I was overcoming my impotency....'

'Sarah, I loved you on a camping trip.
We kissed at dusk in the Great Smoky Mountains.'
'I remember.'
'I felt so connected-
physically, intellectually, emotionally.
You smiled with your whole face, with your whole being.
I wanted to be with you steadily.
You said it wouldn't work.
I guess you were right:
I couldn't love someone who couldn't love me completely.
When we parted,
I cried uncontrollably.'
'Yes,
I remember.'

Lucius Furius

This One Blink

How quick we move from labor nurses' hands,
wrapping us in a diaper, to taxidermists',
artfully arranging our limbs in the casket.....

What matters in this moment, this
one great blink of God's eye, *
is not what we own or've done
but the press of flesh upon our flesh;
the feeling; our Communion.

Lucius Furius

To My Son

I would have given you a perfect faith,
belief, unassailable and absolute;
joy's well-spring.

I offer only a substitute - these poems,
disparate, contradictory,
tempered in truest love and despair.
Use them.

Lucius Furius

We Remember

Do we ever really fall out of love?
No matter how badly the affair ended
some tender moment dominates the memory;
a high-water-mark of our feeling.
It's love's flood that we remember,
not low boredom, tedium, or anger.

Lucius Furius

What Taxes Me

It's not any great tragedy but the mundane,
the quotidian, which taxes me:
haircuts, shaving, the mowing of lawns;
leaf-raking, tooth-brushing, driving to work;
taking out the garbage, matching socks;
flossing, timesheets, getting gas for the car....

I long to be forced to flee at night,
all wits and energy required just to survive.

Lucius Furius

What's True

God waited for Abraham's arm to be actually starting down, the biceps fully tensed.

Nothing short would do; in extremity, we learn what's true.

With a good job, a good marriage, a fine son, I had everything one could expect.

And yet there was a lingering dissatisfaction; a malaise.

It seemed, deep down, that I didn't really feel or believe in anything.

On Saturday morning, August 11, 1990, my three-year-old son and I rounded the corner at the south end of the block where we live. We were out for a walk. (He had been born through in-vitro fertilization, everything else had failed - including several previous in-vitro attempts.) He was riding his tricycle - it's amazing how fast a three-year-old can go on a tricycle with big wheels.... The house next to the corner had tall bushes growing right out to the sidewalk. As we passed the house, my son speeded up. My attention was diverted to men working across the street trimming trees. Their chainsaws drowned out the sound of a car backing out of the driveway next to the house with the bushes. The car was moving slowly and I can see in the slowest of slow motion - I screamed, but I'm not sure just when (there's no sound track to this movie) - the car backing into the left handlebar of the tricycle, tilting it over to the right, my son breaking his fall with his right hand. (As low to the ground as he and the tricycle were, they could not be visible in the driver's rearview mirror at this point.) And, then, the car stopping. Did the car stop because of my scream? Or had the old man driving the car seen my son at the last second before he disappeared behind the car?

I learned instantly with the terrible weight of that tire inches from my son's head,

that I wanted with a giant, horrible wanting for this boy to grow up healthy and to have children of his own who would, in turn, have children of their own, and

that having my wife hate me for losing him would be unbearable.

All the unfairnesses I had suffered in life - ALL of them - instantly became meaningless. Everything was clear.

This is what I wanted; this is what I believed.

Lucius Furius