

DUCK

Ken Sparling

“...say she stopped breathlessly in her corset to lift up a sodden sheet by its hems, and say that when she had pinned three corners to the lines it began to billow and leap in her hands, to flutter and tremble, and to glare with light, and that the throes of the thing were as gleeful and strong as if a spirit were dancing in its cerements.

-Marilynne Robinson, in *Housekeeping*

I'm Truly Sorry That You Want
A Story

I saw a starfish. I didn't want to pick it up or anything. But it was nice to see. I'd never seen one except in pictures. They aren't perfect, starfish. Their points are off some. Like, not symmetrical, you know. I thought, If I could fit myself into that thing, that would be the way I feel sometimes; like I'm pointing out in all different directions, none of them symmetrical, none of them even related in any way to the others; and always changing, like I'm flowing into my own points and then bulging out of them and forming other points where the bulges get real big and then those new points bulge and meanwhile other parts of me are disappearing. You could think of it as when you are young you bulge more than you disappear; but then, when you get old, you start to disappear more than you bulge, until one day, without expecting it, you bulge for the last time, and then the final little vital part of you dies, and you're gone, and all that's left is this calcified something that someone might call a body, but it's just the buildup of old bulges that got solidified when you should have let them go. It's hard to let really beautiful things go. But they don't stay beautiful, so you might as well.

In A Field Somewhere In
Early November

Animals gathered. “Have any of you met Heather?” one of them asked. “She’s quite organized.” That’s when the dogs returned. “We’re not very sophisticated,” said one of the dogs. “Or organized.” The dogs all wagged their tails. “This is huge,” said another dog, “as you say, a real opportunity...you know, to improve.” The tails all continued to wag. “But we’re just dogs,” said a third dog. The dogs' tails all stopped wagging. They looked down at their front paws. “We’re not very organized,” the first dog said.

Red Tractors Rode The Horizon
Like It Was A Road

Dear Joan and Rianna, I just wanted to say how sorry I am. I am sorry for many things. But especially, I am sorry for the way things went last week. This week is a new week, with new things looming, things to be sorry about next week, but right now I'm just hoping to stay on the couch a while feeling sorry for the things that happened last week. We should meet next week to talk about all the things we can be sorry for that are happening this week. I can try to explain some things. You can try to explain some other things. But mostly, we can just be sorry together. How I think all this came about, for now, is that I just wanted to assure you. I have always just wanted to assure you. Try to do a good job. I didn't intend for any of this to happen. I'm really just very sorry for everything.

Should We Spread Some Kind Of
Topping On That

I woke up on the Friday morning with another goddamn bunion. We were planning to have a meeting early next morning, so I got the boys up and cleaned and dressed, ready for the day. I went to the cupboard, pulled out the Starbucks, scooped some into the machine, poured in water, turned the thing on.

Together with your friends, you look to the sky, trading words like prisoners pointing to another, bigger, more collusive kind of future.

I hate boiled corn beef.

My Son Made A Face At Me

Later that night, after I fell into bed with my clothes still on, I kept my eyes open. When K unzipped my dress and pulled it over my head, I leaned forward and let him – I had nothing left to hide.

I remember one time in grade two, Jimmy Grant blew a fart so bad they had to evacuate the class.

Like They Thought They Could Get
Away With Something

The reasons we pursued back then are overcome as our stories blossom and thrive. They are overcome the way evil villains are finally overcome by superheroes. And we realize now that our favourite superheroes fought the villains not for good reasons, but simply for the good. And we are now the superheroes, and we, like our predecessors, pursue the good. So sit now and listen while I tell you a story of good – and a good story.

It Was Like A Tuesday

We soon discovered that almost every shop in Amsterdam sold rubber duckies. There were almost as many rubber duckie shops as there were cheese shops – and some of the cheese shops also sold rubber duckies.

In Paris, we saw the best front door we'd ever seen, but then we went around a corner and found an even better front door.

“We should get to bed,” said the girl. “It’s getting late.” It was Thursday, about four o’clock in the afternoon, middle of winter, dark already, and Jesus was speaking on the radio.

It Gets Dark So Early This Time
Of Year

At some point, Kitty and I went out for a walk. It had been so hot for the last week, but then, this morning when we woke up and opened the windows, the air blowing in was almost cold. We turned off the air conditioning and made some hot coffee. We sat on the back patio with sweaters on and listened to the birds.

He Wondered What He Would
Find In The Treehouse Today

Kitty was away at her sisters for a few days, so I decided to get a little work done, but after reading three sentences of the report I was working on, I had to stop and shake my head – *I'm going to have to look through my files*, I thought, and I laughed to myself a little. Suddenly, I was very hungry.

We Actually Can't Prove Anything

The duck had told the man to save himself, but the man didn't know how to do that. He supposed he could quit his job. Go back to school. But his job was a good job. It paid well. The benefits were good. It hadn't been an easy job to get. He didn't know if he'd ever get another job that paid so well.

Words Is high On My List
Of Words

There are little blue and purple
wildflowers poking up in places.

I have no idea what has happened
just now.

I don't feel afraid.

It Was Like He Hadn't Eaten
In Years

As the hay cart pulled away, I grabbed onto a rope that was hanging from the back and ran along behind, trying to catch up and jump on, but every time I got close enough to grab the back of the cart, the farmer waved a pitchfork at me and told me to beat it. Somehow, I managed to hang onto the rope and I ran all the way to the farm. While I stood outside the farmhouse with the horses, trying to catch my breath, the farmer went in to tell his wife they had company. "I don't know how you do it," I said to the horses, who didn't seem even the slightest bit winded. They shook their manes at me and nibbled on the oats that were in a couple of buckets by the hitching post. The farmer's wife came out. She was incensed. "I can't believe Roger left you out here with the horses. Come in and we'll make you a rootbeer float." I shouldn't have laughed, but I did. The farmer's wife put her hand on my arm. "You poor dear," she said. "I need to pee," I told her.

Just So You Know, I Did Reach My
Sleep Goal Last Night

Water bubbles from the ground between two wet round rocks surrounded by pungent moss.

Jesus Christ steps out onto the grassy plain carrying a single fish.

We've got paper, we've got crayons, we've got our imaginations: so what have we got to do here to make you happy.

Most of the books you see on the bookshelves in my basement are actually copies of the same book; I also have a lot of copies of that book out in my garage.

Nothing Seemed To Equal
Anything Else

Jesus Christ, Mother, are you even
listening to me.

Yes, Let's Go With That

The sun blinks behind clouds that together look like armageddon.

Someone pokes a yellow gun out of a hole in the front lawn of the house across the road. South of us, in the city, rats scurry along streets paved with bones. God is here, in all his glory, but I can't quite locate him.

The edges of my thoughts keep fraying like poorly sewn cloth.

I'm Telling You, It's Never As Easy
As You Think

There was a letter from my girlfriend in the mailbox when I returned home. The bits and pieces of stuff you see scattered on the floor here are random experiments I wanted to do for fun. In one of the alternate universes I constantly imagine, I accidentally throw out a red Christmas tree light that still works. We said some crazy things to each other that day we found ourselves alone together at the bottom of the well.

That's Some Of The Best Fish
I Ever Ate

I was whispering stuff to myself,
ridiculous stuff, meaningless crap,
whispering it to some ghostly image I
held of myself, an image I could see in
my mind, the way you might see your
image in the glass of a window you are
trying to look out of at night. Kitty was
beside me on the couch, oblivious to
my state of mind. She turned her head
to look at me. “Do you want to watch
some TV?” she asked.

I Thought I Asked You Never To
Call Me Here

The girl's eyes were like tiny ponds that had been excavated into her face.

When I came to, I seemed to be on a sidewalk somewhere, and there were feet passing by my face, and parcels and purses dangling overhead.

We like to pretend that the fridge is the universe, and the milk is the milky way, and the eggs are tiny planets that have been gathered by the gods and put in a tray, the way a farmer gathers eggs from under his chickens.

It's Like The Kitchen Is
Mission Control

I went to visit Derek in the hospital.
He was in bed asleep. I watched
him for a while, and then I lay on
the floor beside his bed and went
to sleep myself.

I Knew The Duck Was Out There

I thought I was dying in the middle of the night last night but then I opened my eyes and it was morning.

As God Is My Witness, He Stole
My Comb

After a few minutes – minutes that seem much longer than regular minutes – I can't stand it anymore, and I take the girl's hand and walk her back along the sidewalk to her house. The green and yellow birds commence to gather in the trees around us. Gordy is inside the house, standing by the window, pulling back the curtains a tiny bit to try to see what the hell is going on outside. "The surest route to the core of my life lies over yonder, to the west," says the girl.

It Was Time For The Boys To Go

When the phone rings at 3:20 p.m., I pick up, trying to think of something to say that is clever. Across the yard, a girl perched on a log – her bum extended out behind her, pants at her knees – is watching her pee soak the lawn. It's like when I am crowded into the subway, with seemingly all of humanity crowded in there with me, and I suddenly have a memory, such as being at the beach.

We were busy eating and didn't notice when the light changed.

It Looks Like A Book

It was as though he was watching some sort of meteor shower spread itself across the sky – like a curtain draping the universe where it stretched away to infinity, just beyond the edge of awareness.

The vassals lingered at the fringes of the entourage like marionettes hung from the sky, drooping in the heat, held up by the bands of cloud that edged the lake.

Of or relating to the mouth, he read, and as he read, he touched his fingers to his lips.

He needed to make a decision here.

The sun was like a yellow hole in the sky.

I Tipped The Container And Cream
Came Out

Bruce was dangerous. Addicted. He lived in the east end of town over a laundromat. He drove a motorcycle. He sang at Nick's on karaoke night. His voice wasn't great, but he could hold a tune and he had a great jaw. Cindy was small, wiry, angry, funny. She favoured jello shots. She'd been a boxer in high school. She could really dance.

I Was In That Place Where I
Sometimes Go At Night

Mom was interviewing me over the phone. I was trying to join some group she was part of, and she kept apologizing for the dumb questions she was asking me, saying she had to ask them on behalf of the group. It was hard to understand her. Her words were slurred. I thought, *She's getting close to the end.*

That Guy Could Really Sing

Sometimes they drive; other times they walk. Today, she arrives at a house that has windows on the front. It's a very old house, or like a series of movie sets with open sides meant to simulate an old house, and out the front windows the view is constantly changing, so that sometimes it's a lake in Northern Ontario, and other times an open field with sometimes horses, and beyond the horses, mountains with snow-capped peaks that rise in the distance like god's hair peeking over the top of the planet.

Nothing Like A Sharp Stick In
Your Eye, Eh Nathan

They sent me a book to read and I read it. It was a lot like other books I'd read, but it was also not like any book I had ever read. It was a book about fashion.

Those Birds Are Making So
Much Noise

Benji would have to go outside eventually. It was already 2:00 p.m. and he thought he could hear a car idling out in the street. It would have to be a loud car for him to hear it down here in the basement with all the windows in the house closed.

The tiny birds were back.

Who The Hell Is That
Doing All The Whistling

He would go down to the ravine out back, he decided, and check out the river, see how much water was in it. It was much too early in the winter for it to be frozen. He checked his watch again to see what the temperature was. He would no doubt be able to see his breath out there. But would it be dark already?

It Dawned On Him That Once
Again He'd Slept In His Clothes

As I crossed the plaza and approached the diving platform, the sun was going down, but stray shafts of light still got up over the horizon, painting the tops of the tallest trees in yellow light. People were watching me from folding chairs that had been set up in the plaza. In a way, this was against everything I had ever believed in.

It Occurred To Me That I Might Be
Walking Into A Trap

A couple of years ago, while Mark was still living at home, we were in the kitchen together, adding whipped cream to our coffees, and he had some music playing through his blue-tooth speakers – some kind of 1950s movie soundtrack type of thing arranged for string quartet – and we were both still in our pyjamas, even though it was well past noon, because neither of us had any good reason to get dressed at that point in our lives – and to be perfectly honest here, I still don't.

She Was Fourteen Years Old And
Still Living Near The Subway

He woke. It was early morning, June 15, 1974. He was at the top of the hill on the south side of his high school. He'd slept in the grass again. The grass was wet from overnight dew. He was on his back, feet pointing down the hill. He stared up at the clouds, then stood and walked down the hill toward Yonge Street. He was almost fifteen years old. As he crossed the gently rolling descent, he thought, *Well, if I just keep going in this general direction, I should be okay.*

Heinrich was busy writing his fourth symphony, so Ginger figured she might as well go ahead and put the kids to bed.

It Looks Like It's Going To
Rain Today

She was standing in the front hall.

She still had her coat on.

She hadn't even closed the front door.

Is That Your Phone Or Mine,
The Girl Asked

He found himself in a place where one hall ended and another crossed it at right angles. He could go right, or he could go left. He felt like a lot was riding on his decision about which way to go. He could see into the schoolyard, through the window beside him. How had he gotten back inside the school? There were two cats on the other side of the window, sitting side by side on top of the white wooden fence that surrounded the playground. He could hear footsteps coming up the hall behind him. He decided to go left.

The Dog's Name Is John

Villhelm sat at the wall end of the wooden bench in the breakfast nook, freedom's head nestled in his lap. Rusty Tubbs was at the window watching morning fly away into afternoon, and it made him think of his little brother Nicky chasing waves along the shore of Lake Huron so many years ago.

The boy had brought some papers to the meeting.

I Realized What I Was Experiencing
Was The Spirit Of Technology

I'm still thinking about Rhonda as I rush into the school bathroom and lock myself into a stall. My legs are trembling, and the whole world seems to stand still before me, like those first few seconds just before lunch gets served in the cafeteria and we're all waiting to find out if there is enough food to go around.

I Was Very Gassy That Day At
The State Fair

As I pass the entrance to the kitchen, an old woman in a white apron is standing at the half door handing out coffee tickets to a bunch of teachers. The teachers are lined up along one wall. One of the teachers is a man, a new teacher whose name I don't know, but I saw him yesterday directing the choir as they practiced in the common room at the front of the school, and I realize now that he must be the new guy.

Go As Far Back Into The Classroom
As You Can Go

A man I've never seen before is standing by the chimney, chatting up Ms Bellamy.

Asiago looks up in time to see morning fly away into afternoon, like an old friend named Bill, chasing waves at the lake. They tumble off the dock together under the summer sun, naked, afraid, and falling in love.

"Who's going back for the truck?" asks Marie Claire, but none of the men move from the grassy verge where they are sitting smoking contentedly in the sun.

Where's All That Smoke
Coming From?

Dad wakes me up at 4:30 a.m., takes me out to the car. "Hop in," he says. He opens the door for me, like we're going on a date. I get in. It's only a few steps from the front door to the car, but the rain is coming down hard, and I'm soaked by the time I am sitting in the passenger seat. I can feel the water trickling from my hair. Dad scurries around the front of the car. I can barely see him through the downpour. He jerks open the driver's door, jumps in, and slams the door shut. He sticks the key in, turns it, and the engine fires up. Then he turns to me and grins, like a kindergartner with a secret. A drop of water falls off his nose. He turns back and faces forward, and I do the same. We don't speak. After a short while, Dad turns off the engine. We listen to the rain pinging down against the roof of the car. I think dad misses living in a tent. Within a couple minutes, he's fast asleep, his head lolling back against the headrest. I don't know how he does that.

The Emperor's Proclamation Was
Stapled To A Wooden Hydro Pole

When Aldo looked at the girl across the great expanse of empty parking lot, the girl looked back, but then she looked away as Aldo reached down to button up his trousers.

Maybe I don't have a problem at all, Clyde told himself, maybe my only problem lies in thinking I have a problem, and that's when Jeanette entered the room wearing nothing but a bowtie.

I took a bite out of my sandwich, then went out of the living room, back to the kitchen to get more cheese.

Stay A While

Parky fixes himself a bowl of cereal.

I sit in the living room doing nothing.

Once in a while I laugh.

Jesus, Is That Your Mother
Down There, The Girl Asked

It's like finding sex. Or like not finding sex.
Or like wanting to find sex, but at the
same time not wanting to find it. Or like
looking for sex and not wanting to find it.
It's like looking at sex, then discovering
that what you are looking at is
transparent. Or translucent, like the ghost
of sex. It's like getting fucked by a ghost.
The ghost of sex. Or, maybe it's more like
standing in front of a ghost waiting to get
fucked by it, knowing you're not going to
get fucked by it, and glad in a way, but
also, in another way, sorry.

Blow Your Nose,
Won't You Please

I turn the key and let myself into a new life that I know I must have lived a thousand times before. What hurts isn't so much that this life I'm living now is almost surely a lie, but more the fact that this sort of prevarication doesn't seem to work for me anymore.

For a long time after she was gone, I stood where I was at the bottom of the stairs, wet diaper hanging by my side, smelling the coffee she'd put on just before she left.

Hey Mister, Is That Your Sister?

I couldn't tell if this young woman who was wandering around in my basement was going to laugh or cry, but whatever was going on, it was making me nervous.

I was eleven years old, embarrassed, and alone.

As soon as I recognize what I'm doing, I can't seem to do it anymore.

I sit in the light of the vacuum cleaner.

I don't recognize this house anymore.

She Always Wore A Bracelet
Of Finest Boondoggle

The dead mouse was still there on the floor where Floyd and his new bride had left it when they stumbled up the stairs to the bedroom the night before.

“Who was that on the phone?” asked Janine.

“Arnold,” said Bob.

Dinner This Evening Will Be
Wiener Schnitzel

We were waiting for our baby to wake up. He didn't usually sleep this late. We were at that point where we didn't know whether to put on another pot of coffee and feel blessed for having this extra quiet time together in the morning, or start worrying that something was wrong. We kept drinking our coffee, making small talk, looking up at the ceiling, rolling our eyes at each other in mock disbelief. Finally, Kitty said, "I guess one of us better go up there."

Over There Is Where
The Missus Stays

She was thin, and wearing a black dress that hung on her as though she'd bought it at a time when she was heavier, or as though it had belonged to her bigger sister and had been handed down. She was wearing one high-heeled shoe and carrying the other around as she picked things up off other people's tables. She pulled her purse down off her shoulder and put somebody's salt shaker in it, saying, "Sorry, honey," to the man who was dining alone at the back of the restaurant, "but I need this more than you right now." The man nodded, as if he understood perfectly what she was telling him, and she reached out and touched his cheek before moving on.

Mrs. Haslip Was His Mother,
But She Isn't Anymore

You know how when you're in a house you've never been in, and you're wandering around checking stuff out, and it always seems a bit of a surprise to discover the stairs to the basement behind some random door off a hallway... that's how it felt to me standing out on Flora's front porch waiting for her to explain to her parents that we were just going to the end of the street to get a Coca-Cola.

This thing of growing old feels like something new, yes, but also it feels kind of temporary.

"This is not our house," Anson says to his sister.

We Hired A Guy To Write Jingles, But
It Turned Out His Name Was Irving

There was a dull roar that I knew to be the school bus come to pick up the kids from across the street. There was the squeak of brakes. The roar stopped. It was very quiet everywhere. Then the roar started up again.

Gary Is Taller Than I Expected

In the beginning, we had no stories. We had only our love for each other, and that was enough. Our love was like a barricade with which we were able to hold out the world. We both worked downtown, so we went out into the world each day and saw its ills and brought back our stories for each other, and we were always able to cure one another with our love.