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## Three Odes, poems

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## Ode to Grandfathers

Both of my grandfathers wound up  
with minds like faded,  
tattered flags fluttering  
in the winds  
of their yearning lives.

The one that fathered my mother  
was a man that I barely recall,  
a severe taskmaster,  
so I was told.

He was going down to ruin  
as a drunkard  
when Jesus said to him,  
“Now, Thomas, you know this is not right.”

After that he was miraculous  
and strict;  
he bought a Martin guitar  
and sang hymns.

He had two wives  
and two sets of children,  
the first so light they didn't stir a second look  
in Mississippi,  
the second a set  
who had to be explained  
as servants  
when they went about in the South  
with their tricky pap.

And my grandfather  
was so light skinned.  
because a white man  
had raped his mother.  
He was a veterinarian  
and a government dairy inspector.  
Because he knew  
the ins and outs of the dairies,  
his wife had to churn their butter.  
But he was a provider  
and he educated  
my mother and her brothers.  
The others,  
the first brood,  
from the first wife were wildings I  
wasn't allowed to visit.  
Above all my grandfather  
was a healer,  
locally honored for curing a tubercular  
neighbor with a bushel of oranges.  
What finished him was a leaking roof.  
He climbed up a ladder in a storm  
and tied himself  
to the chimney.  
When he came down  
they took him off to St. Elizabeth,  
a madhouse.  
I visited him once in the madhouse.  
All I keep of that call

are screams and shadows and shouts.

My father's father  
gave us electric train cars  
every Christmas.

When once we stayed with Howard,  
he made us dry ourselves  
with wrung-out  
wash cloths  
after taking our baths.

He was  
a civil engineer  
and a civics activist who  
finagled street lights for the Negroes in  
Deanwood,  
because he knew the congressmen  
who had the District's purse strings.

He calculated  
the arch of the vault  
in Union Station  
and built the grand AME churches.

His first wife birthed an engineer,  
a gangster,  
a clerk,  
and coming last  
the confusion that was my father.

My parent was wounded  
by her early leaving  
and his father's neglect.

After the preposterous Audrey,  
my grandfather's second wife,  
died, my grandfather  
had a cheerful  
housekeeper named Georgia  
and lived on raisin bread.  
In his heyday he had a rose  
trellis at the end of a terraced lawn,  
and there was sun dazzling  
down on the  
whole place  
and chaise  
lounges and lemonade.  
He later ran down  
to where he quoted  
Julius Caesar about tripartite Gaul  
over and over,  
and the woman hired to care for him  
beat him up.

### **Ode to Neutrinos**

When I read  
that 500 trillion  
neutrinos are passing  
through my body every second,

I lost my appetite for gravity.

I knew that I

could fly

if I want to,

and I noticed

that the linearity

of love no longer held sway.

Now time is without direction

and the future

decides the past.

The astro-physico-cosmologists

were trying out

their latest twenty minutes of stand up,

saying that 500 trillion

neutrinos are passing

through my body

every second.

Hearing this I gained

the ability

to be in all places

at the same time.

And when I looked

at myself in the mirror

of time-space

I no longer saw

the charging rhinoceros

of always.

The linearity of love

was now as directionless

as a sunken cargo  
ship on the ocean floor.

The future decides  
the past but paces  
back and forth  
in the waiting room  
of the present.

My transparency  
is the reason  
I am matter  
and not antimatter.

This world of waves  
and stones,  
of sparrows and fires  
is undetectable  
to reality.

### **Ode to Cookies**

Maddie baked me some cookies  
for my birthday,  
not like the madeleines that cast away  
Marcel Proust to row back  
to his childhood.

These cookies eaten one by one  
were successive atolls  
naked to the eye

of any memories,  
like Pacific specks blasted  
by fusion  
and good intentions.  
And when my hand  
breaks away the shoreline  
and I place a fragment  
on my tongue  
I only revisit  
the tragic history  
of sugar and  
the vicious epic of spices.  
As the cookie disappears  
it is a page  
of a book torn from  
a book of fanatical recipes.  
Neruda wants  
to pull up a kitchen chair  
to tell you about socks  
that a friend knitted  
for him in winter.  
I only want you to intuit  
the secrets of cookies.  
Socks are a public affair—  
and anyone who sees your ankles  
can measure whether or not  
you are indeed imaginative.  
But cookies are personal  
and contribute directly



to the health of the soul.

What cookies impart  
must only be shared  
among initiates  
of equality.

Like you I emit  
particles of light.

We build our bodies  
with the food  
of exploded suns.

Like you, the galaxies  
want to curl  
up in my lap  
and go soundly to sleep.

When I reach for a cookie  
I am taking  
a star out of its orbit.

It is round and gleaming  
with thousands of futures.

Now the eclipse begins,  
and the cookie  
passes behind  
the moon.