

The Bequests

In the year two-thousand-two,
My country groaning for relief,
I ask what all the cash might do
That otherwise flows through the sieve
Of campaign ad or legal brief;
And from the fifteenth century
I call Villon, great poet and thief,
To help conduct my inquiry.

François, it's worth your voyaging
Across the ocean and the years,
For what's not spent on public things
Is private profit, mine and yours.
And since you never were averse
To pilfering some extra francs,
We'll squander half this bulging purse
And stash the rest in off-shore banks—

A skim-off insignificant
Compared with what the market bears;
They'll praise our virtuous restraint
In taking modest quarter-shares.
So to our wine (The cost? Who cares
With such a vast expense account)
And let us see what quick repairs
Are possible with this amount.

Item: to the FBI,
A guide dog and a red-tipped cane,
So that when students learn to fly,
But not to land, an aeroplane
And other warning signs as plain
As the proboscis on your face
Escape the federal detective,
At least the dog is on the case,
Though bureaucratic sight's defective.

Item: to the Democrats

We offer a transplanted spine—
Too bad we didn't think of that
Before the party flopped supine
And told George Bush it would be fine
To start a war we shouldn't fight.
We think it's time for them to join
The vertebrates and walk upright.

Item: to the G.O.P.

We offer, Oz-like, a new heart,

François, I feel much better now.
Drink up, and then we'll split the gain.
That island cost too much, but how
We'll relish having peace again!
Although the surgeon's bill's insane,
And HMOs reject transplants,
And guide dogs cost a lot to train,
We're rich, François—and so, to France!

The Boy Who Cried Wolf

Oh, they'd scold me. But then
my mother would brew some tea
and they'd loosen their boots
to talk for hours in the parlour
of stock and crops, the flood
twenty years back; the uncle
who'd come back from the war
one-legged, the aunt
who ran off with the tenor.

I heard each word from my room
where I was banished to bed
without supper. As long as they talked,
the world held promise and danger.

And then it was empty.
I tended sheep
as they shambled at random,
grazing and piling up dung.
The sun had moved, I could see it,
but from mid morning
(when dew dried from the grass)
to just before sunset (when gnats
began turning like dust-motes
over the pasture stream)
nothing but shadows changed.

Was I shaking with fear
or joy that the wolf
finally came? When its teeth
ripped through the arm
I was raising to ward it off,
I wanted nothing—
only my life, already
pouring brightly away.

