

Decent/Descent

I'm stuck at a bad intersection - longest red light in town
I absently turn the radio up and roll the window down

On the curb, six feet away I try to process who I saw
Can't help thinking "Wizard of Oz" - scarecrow minus the straw

I know who he is without looking, flash back to our Little League days
When he was a slick-fielding shortstop, while I played a smooth second base

He'd chosen high-stakes poker as his highway to high-roller dreams
Sadly he lost the ranch and his soul with debts he could never redeem

A diamond flush beat his two pair triggered his steady decline
His bleak abstract: drugs and despair. "WILL WORK FOR FOOD," says his sign

Relieved he had not recognized me, I stare straight ahead and relax
But quickly recall how he intervened in a frightening schoolyard attack

He halted a battle I would have lost, allowed me to save face and skin
James Taylor plays on the radio reminding me *You've got a friend*

I hastily reach for my wallet, selecting my highest bill
Extending my hand, averting my eyes, he takes it but stands very still

Finally he says, "Thank you, Larry." I reply, "You're welcome, Fred"
As I wave, raise my window, hit the gas and run the red

~ Nick Sweet