

Dear (I hope) Reader,

A note from the poet: I'm probably best known (or unknown) for my short witty poems and for my humorous poems. None of the following poems are short, and most are not particularly witty or humorous, nor are they particularly rich in lyricism, image or "telling details" -- in fact, they are rather abstract, and have on occasion been praised or dismissed as "not poetry, but philosophical essays or sermons"; they are difficult, chunky with unpoeticized thought processes, perhaps arrogant and pontifical and preachy. Perhaps most are unpublishable (except here) -- though a few of them have been published.

But they are the poems (of my own, that is) that please me most and seem to me, for all their faults, to do best what I want to do as a poet, something I have always felt needed doing and that few others seemed to be doing. These are the poems for which I'd most like to be remembered and the poems I feel others might find most valuable, though requiring a bit more work than my other poems. I won't try to explain what it is I want these poems to do, but hope that you'll read some of them and come to your own conclusions. Let me know what you think.

Best,

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Lest We Forget

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
An elephant never forgets, but this is
personal, not political. We must make that distinction
or all our politicians would be institutionalized
for forgetting their promises.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
In his day he was called "Teflon" because
nothing stuck to him; now even memory
turns slippery.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
Nancy went to his birthday party without him.
Was he missed? Probably not - so many people
know how to "do" Ronald Reagan...

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
What was it he said about the dead storm troopers?
That they, like those they killed, were victims?
Was that a remembering or a forgetting?

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
He said Americans should be proud of being
American. Was that a remembering or a
forgetting?

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
He used to know a great many things by rote-
that is, by heart, such as movie scripts, the
speech he took on tour - who knows how much
else he was or seemed to be was memorized,
is now forgotten or comes back only
in random bits?

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
He's forgotten about sending arms to Iran
for hostages - if he ever knew. If he ever
knew, he's forgotten he knew. He does not
at this time recall. He may have been an
honest man. If not, he is becoming one.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
Nancy is taking good care of him. If he were
still President, probably we wouldn't be told.
Would we notice?

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
He used to be a spokesman for General Electric:
"Progress is our most important product!"- can
you still say that? Come on...Progress...? Progress...?

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
He is - has always been - such an easy target.
Now he's a sitting duck. It's not sporting to say
these things. He suffers from a disease. It could
happen to anyone. It could start at the top of
our nation and trickle down to the rest of us.
Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
It's not so bad: He can still play golf with
Hope. And now even his own children
speak well of him.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
He is loved and hated for wanting to shrink
government, for failing to shrink government,
for forgetting the poor, for remembering the
rich, etc. He is loathed and adored for saying
it is not evil for a person or nation to prosper
and be strong. Now here's the odd thing: Nearly
everyone hates or loves Ronald Reagan for something
he said or is said to have said, and everyone
is certain that somehow events have justified
this love or hatred, but hardly anyone remembers
(or ever knew) just what Reagan did or what
came of it or how much of what has happened since
came of it. Today's newspapers are already a gray
blur. Tell me, who are these candidates really?
Even our pain becomes unreal the moment our
President feels it. What is the difference
between such knowing and forgetting?

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
He proved that an actor playing the role
of a political leader is impossible to
distinguish from a political leader. Is this
something we should remember or forget?

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
His baiting the Evil Empire and his "Star Wars" plan
were so stupid that maybe they ended the Cold War.
Lebanon, Libya, Grenada... His idiotic economics
brought us huge economic expansion - or was it
ruin? Or was that because of the liberal congress?
O listen, I can't think with such stuff. I remember
only "Doonesbury" and that full forelockawaft on
helicopter wash that drowns out his smiling voice.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
Does he still have a full head of hair? Does
Nancy tint it? Does he stammer more now, quaver,
jowls shaking? Can he still grin that grin?
Is there anything he must forget to be able to grin
that grin? Is he cheerful about forgetting?
Can he joke about it? Isn't Ronald Reagan
a pretty good guy? Nicer than Nixon, anyway?

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
Even as we speak Ronald Reagan is forgetting
things. There is so MUCH to forget! He has
just this moment forgotten "Where's the
rest of me?" and now he's forgotten preferring
to be in Philadelphia...and there goes "There
you go again!" But there is more -
so much more to forget.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things.
We, too, are alive but forgetting things.
"Surveys show that 60% of those under 18
don't know..." - that we fought in Vietnam,
that we didn't win in Vietnam, who Roosevelt
was or Truman or Ike (Does anyone remember
Gerald Ford?) - and one-year-olds have

forgotten almost everything, though some have remembered how to grin that grin.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things. And us? With each new miracle drug, we forget all the earlier miracle drugs that are now called evil drugs. We all know that things have always been the way things are and so must always be so.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things. If we can forget fast enough, we will, at last, be able to live in the eternal present, having no past nor future - 100% guilt-free, without plans, budgets, debts or regrets. Someone will take care of us - maybe the Government, for hasn't the Government always taken care of the People? Ronald Reagan, of course, preached self-reliance, but Ronald Reagan probably isn't allowed to go for a walk alone now lest he get confused - all those Pacific Palisades mansions look pretty much alike.

Ronald Reagan is alive but forgetting things. Soon we will forget Ronald Reagan. It is said that what we forget we must repeat. We will forget Vietnam (he helped us) and have to do it again. We will forget the Holocaust and have to do it again. We will forget slavery and have to do it again. We will forget religious intolerance and racism and ignorance and greed and cruelty and have to do them again. We will forget ourselves and have to do them again. We will even forget forgetting and have to forget again. And so we will have to do Ronald Reagan again. He will die and be forgotten, but when we need him, once again Ronald Reagan will be alive for us, forgetting things.

On Resisting Evil

Because the evil have made the trains run on time,
we are wary of efficiency and accomplish nothing.

Because the evil have misused force,
we hesitate, hoping for miracles.

Because fools have thrown away their lives for madmen,
we imagine there is nothing worth dying for
and, dying anyway, live in fear.

Because the evil have created formidable organizations,
we dream of standing alone, swallowing that swindle
(dreamed up by the weak to subdue the strong)
that organization must be abhorred.

Because the evil seem driven by destructive purpose,
we are wishywashy, lost, as it were, in qualifications,
lest we be tainted by zeal.

Because the evil rely on solid stuffy citizens
(who can best be governed by fear of loss of status)
and call them sane,
we think we must be crazy to be creative,
so create only self-destruction.

Because madmen have equated love of our own country
with hatred of all other countries,
we try to love mankind by despising our country,
as if love of neighbors could grow
from hatred of self.

Nothing is left to us if we try to be good
only by being what evil is not,
nothing but evil itself,

which is, perhaps, a violent effort
not to be evil.

The Wrong Answer

Beside ourselves in bed
you look away when I ask you.
Later (is it one day?) you look
right at me, having had time
to rehearse the wrong answer, while I,
across the table, having rehearsed
only not thinking about only
it, am not ready for the
quick tears hot behind my menu.

Your answer is "no", but what was
my question that won't take "no",
won't be answered, won't hear anything,
not even the soothing things you
try to recover my crazed eyes with:
"Can't we be good friends?"

Something saw-tooths me in half
even though I know you are right:
I invented you so fast, I out-ran
both of us. Even as you frown,
I see the smile I shape to fit you
hovering before my lips -- cannot
lose you, cannot but have you,
yet there, looking right at
someone I thought was you, looking
at you through you, I, something,
insists: Why can't I have what I have?

I try to shake my head
free of us, I avoid your eyes,
the question pacing the cage of me,
wanting to escape us, something in me
that chose you for God-knows-what freak
of laugh or touch as an occasion
to be born. Now it hates us both
for waking it prematurely, demands
the violent use of my body.

Not here, not in a restaurant where,
already, people look politely away,
where already in your eyes I see
a stranger's fear mingling with concern.

No more words, I must walk this
body elsewhere. Something knows I know
you are not it. It has no further use
for you, except it smells your fear,
your concern, avid for both: It could
kill you, but still your eyes reach out,
bright with reflected tears, to become
it.

I cannot hold two worlds apart,
but in the one collapsed world they become,
I am mad, stumbling at last from the long
disjointed set of flat restaurant scenes,
having forgotten my lines, out
into air that is not open, leaving
the center of a world I'm not in
puzzled in a pencil sketch of a restaurant
table, holding every aching particle of me
in place with the will of rock--
where can I go
to set you free?

Where The Art Is

Art, whose flare of feeling invites
your contribution of a remembered shrug
and the face above it and the scent
of the night that surrounded that face
and the dreams that contained that night,
is like losing yourself, then deciding
you aren't lost,

as when, turned around too many times,
disturbed by the uncreatedness of these
however precise and detailed houses, trees
and people of no known orientation
to where you come from, where you would go,

you decide that you are right here
where you always are and discover
the ease with which you can assign
to whatever you meet vivid feelings,
histories, newborn nostalgias and

behind strange windows, new-minted faces
that, even before you envision or name them,
are caught up in a sense of detailed familiarity
("...and a girl I went to first grade with
lived here, she played piano, wore pigtails,
giggled when I fell off my bike, became as if
of a mythical species when Mom said hermother'd
died, moved away...")

like intimate faces in dreams that you wake up
to realize you've never seen before
and didn't even see in the dream,
whose vividness (unforgettable),
like a woman's knowledge of the child
she carries, was that of a world
not yet created,

the knowing that precedes there being
anything to know (no familiar forms
to camouflage knowing, no flood of panic
at strangeness to drown it out),

knowing that reminds you
there is nothing you cannot create.

Austerity

I find my voice austere.
Is this what I want?
Can what I want matter
to such austerity?

I want to play sometimes
with figures of speech.
You allow me words.
Why draw the line at that lie?
In truth
I am a child
and would play a bit.

The austerity of approximated truth
is not the abhorrence of truth for lies,
but the abhorrence of lies for truth.

On Not Dying

I

I know that bodies do not last,
but wonder if we do.

I remember once, exhausted
after too many laps, I stood
on the sand track, knees turned
to water, holding myself up
as if from above by wires,
head hanging, a leaden mass,
when before me were hive-like
crystalline golden cells, huge
grains of sand filling my vision
too close for eyes to focus, yet
unblurred, and I had time to wonder
if I'd hurt myself falling
on my face when, finding again
my eyes, I realized I still
stood, had seen or dreamed
those grains of sand at my feet
with other than my body's eyes,
"seen or dreamed" I say now,
but knew then only seeing.

II

If we are immortal,
we are all here.
It gives me pause,
even with those of us
who are in familiar bodies,
to think we are all here.
I sit near the window,
reading, hardly aware of the dog
asleep on his couch across the room.
He stretches, lifts his head,
scratches his chin with a few fast
rhythmic swipes of a paw, then
looks at me, and it astonishes me
to think that he is here with me,
has been with me all day, being
whatever he is just as you and I,
all along, have been with each other,
an idea that stirs me as if I were
a baby bursting with giggles
each time Momma pokes her head in view
and goes "peek-a-BOO!"

III

Once, sitting on the edge of a bed,
I noticed my head wasn't quite
in the right place, just an inch
or so out of kilter, my whole body
not quite right -- in fact, it had
begun to slip from me, was hanging on
just barely by the habit of being me,
and I sat there or rather
it sat and I floated just above
and noticed my state and poised,
as if an unquiet breath or thought
would jar me loose to slip or glide
like a dew down a blade of grass
into alignment with the body,
and as I thought it, I did.

IV

I don't remember much of being
anything this body was not,
but I remember one childhood day,
walking past the playground fence
on my way home, thinking, this is it,
I am really a third-grader, one of
them, whatever "them" was, I can't
remember now, but I remember
the certainty, the vividness
of what, then, being a third-grader was.
And now, if you asked me how old
I am, I would not have to look
at old albums or a wristwatch
to say "49" ("going on 50!"
as the third-grader would eagerly
add). And once, assailed
by more certainties than I could stomach,
I knew I was ageless, had seen
and done more than I wanted to know,
knew, not by remembering, but by
being unable to unpicture,
the bottomlessness of my forgetting.
It is not what I knew, but the way
I knew, as, in third grade, I knew
I was in third grade.

V

Right now it's more remembering
than knowing. You trot out
the same experiences for years
to prove things to yourself
and they get shopworn, encrusted
with the dust of words, the tarnish
of opinions. But I remember
knowing.

VI

When I think of an ending
to what I am, a lack
of me knowing I am, standing here
before the window, seeing
what my eyes can see, being,
somehow, a head which must be
moved to move me who am perforce
put wherever my body is put,
I wonder if this, what we call
life, this being a thing of flesh,
is not itself
that not knowing
that I am what I am,
that ending
to what I am.

VII

A man sits in a cell and knows
(the way his forehead knows
when it cracks against the wall):
this is where he's always been
since he's been anything and
where he'll always be until
he becomes nothing at all.
What could be worse? Maybe
whatever he did to get himself
into this, maybe what he was,
could be again, must not
remember.

VIII

Odd that more people don't hate
having to go to bed. Children
understand, plead to stay up,
watch the good TV shows full of
violent action, want the hall light
left on, try to prolong goodnights
from loving giants who cannot hide
the fact that they are ready
to use whatever force is needed
to make the child be as much
as possible without sound or motion.
The child lies there trying out
different horizontal postures,
spreading the legs apart
to be a cowboy or, on his side,
drifts off, running in place,
an angel embedded in amber.
Children sense it is an unnatural thing,
an imprisonment, to be put
on a padded shelf, there to lie
almost still, only a few feet
in which to twist, having to close
their eyes and not do anything --

IX

Perchance to dream. You can dream.
And if you don't wake up,
who will be with you in your dream?
What if, in your dream, you are still
you, but have not even a bed
to move in, are buried in your coffin,
not an inch of leeway to stretch,
utter dark, utter silence, utter
knowledge of never seeing the sky,
of no one knowing you are --
what does it mean then to say you
are still you? And if you had
no body at all but were still,
somehow, you, could you sense
anything, get in touch with
anyone? From these dreams gladly
we waken to our prison of meat.

X

Once, staring intently back at a cat,
suddenly I saw a human face
staring at a cat, saw from where
the cat's eyes were, saw so clearly
I could see a cat's face reflected
in the human eyes. It was a flash--
then I was seeing a cat flinch
and gallop full tilt from the room
as if she'd sensed (as cats do)
a ghost. Once, looking
at someone who looked at me
for a long time, I said to her,
"Your face just disappeared,"
and she replied, "I know.
So did yours." Once, lying
beneath pine trees, looking up
along the tall trunks through
pinwheeling branches to the sky,
I found myself in the sky,
and I could see and know
and I was I. Once, after making love,
I knew what she would say
before she said it and what
I would reply and what she'd say
to that, and I saw her knowing
me know this and I started to say

and she said, we said
as I knew we would,
"I know".

XI

If I sit very still
I can feel it, my head a tension
and waves of tension around my head,
a force field, solid and habitual.
If bodies are traps, does death free us?
Not if, nullified by eons of force,
we've grown addicted to bodies,
think ourselves nothing without bodies,
think we must suck memories from them,
having none of our own, cannot see
without eyes, hear without ears,
we undead embedded in our heads;
releasing us is like releasing
habitual criminals. Death can't hold us,
only knowing can. We'll be back.

XII

From beneath the earth
where we cannot move,
a worm.

From beneath the water
where we cannot breathe,
a fish.

From the fire
we could not withstand,
food.

From our own guts,
where we will never go,
excrement

we send...where,
we choose not to know.

What can you be?
Where can you go?

If the air were a wall,
if your own flesh were a wall,
if you could see only as far as your retina
and could not unsee that,
if the future were a wall,
mirroring the solid past,
if...can you hear me?

From where?

A Delicate Balance

Seeing what we love crushed
by our distrust of anything as airy
as admiration, as what we are,
by our need to burden love
with a solidity we can own,

we say love destroys
and struggle to and not to love,
incrementing our tug-of-war,
now one side, now the other,
to keep up with ourselves:

setting against each ponderous
heave beyond the bounds of Hello
a lurch back to attitudes
of abject apology, until,
the forces of reach and withdraw
well-matched, this titanic struggle
spends itself upon itself

silently, in tiny tics
and aborted, crazed half-smiles,
each gesture interrupted,
never reaching out of itself,
no particle of love nor danger
able to achieve escape velocity,

until, at last, among our trillion
opposing pushes and pulls of love,
all of love, a delicate balance
is sustained, and we turn
to stone.

Because You Didn't Call

Because you didn't call,
I had 100 things to do and nothing to do.

Because you didn't call,
I learned that I live in small boxes within larger boxes.

Because you didn't call,
I wondered why I had to have that picture on the wall.

Because you didn't call,
I didn't want ANY picture on the wall and wondered why I had to have a wall, and if I didn't, would the sky be any better?

Because you didn't call,
I tried to busy myself, but found I was too busy waiting to get anything else done, so tried to read, then to watch TV, but gave up, for they polluted my waiting.

Because you didn't call,
I learned the grain of the wood floor, the pattern of the rug - which insisted on repeating, and the texture of wall and ceiling plaster and that these changed continually before my eyes, running like water.

Because you didn't call,
the dog put his snout in my lap and peered up at me, and I stroked his head and ears and said, "It's OK," but we didn't believe me.

Because you didn't call,
I told myself, "You've been through this before, and you've lived and even been happy later - this will pass," and, just like before, could not believe it.

Because you didn't call,
I watched the numbers changing on the clock to prove to myself that time was passing, but right after each change, it seemed there'd been no change.

Because you didn't call,
you called a thousand times to tell me - but each time I cut you off, because you were about to say what I didn't want to hear or, worse, what I wanted to hear.

Because you didn't call,
I paced from room to room, circling the house, tugging at what tethered me to the phone.

Because you didn't call,
the silence became so noisy, I was afraid I wouldn't hear the phone ring.

Because you didn't call,
the flame-like grain of the bedroom door began to flicker and surge.

Because you didn't call,
I knew exactly what you were doing and with whom - knew it more graphically, even, than you did - and scraped my head violently side to side against the pillow tounknow it.

Because you didn't call,
several years of my recent life became inaccessible.

Because you didn't call,
I tried to think about the things I'd been worried about - bills, competing obligations - and couldn't find them or any future, even tomorrow's shower lost in another galaxy.

Because you didn't call,
I became very very calm, and this lasted a long long time and seemed eternal, invincible, but something happened - perhaps I exhaled - and I was scraping my head against the pillow again and yelling SHIT SHIT SHIT...

Because you didn't call,
I turned to wood, but the wood grain heaved and twisted, so I turned to stone, but the stone melted and I was crying, but it wasn't me crying, but someone small and ridiculous on the bed wearing a crying mask, and there was nothing I could be, not even nothing.

Because you didn't call,

I thought, what's the worst thing it could be, but there was no worst, no end to waiting.

Because you didn't call,

I understood that what we think is new time is really time that has already been consumed and vomited up over and over.

Because you didn't call,

because you didn't call and didn't call, I learned that I was no wiser than I'd ever been, that no amount of living and figuring things out can prepare you for what can't be prepared for - how can what we call living prepare you for what is outside it, for this raw, solid, undifferentiated thing that time is when we do not decorate it with our living?

Because you didn't call,

I made myself not think of hurting myself, just in case life ever resumed, and anyway, no pain would end this endlessness.

Because you didn't call,

I thought of ways to hurt you, make you cry, bleed, beg, ways to please you, eloquent, noble things I could say to you, arguments to show you how wrong you were, how injured and magnanimous and reasonable I was - all these thoughts winding through me as savorless as spit.

Because you didn't call,

I wished I had never seen porno movies, never seen that close-up view up hairy thighs to tight balls and contorting anuses as, to bouncy music with grunty, rattling bass, the engorged prick endlessly pumps in and out of angry oozy lips - and I got an erection and thought how corpses of hanged men have hard-ons, and it went away.

Because you didn't call,

I noticed how when your life falls apart, it really does fall apart, because I felt broken up in little pieces, as if my surface were made up of thousands of tectonic plates separated by fault lines, floating - together by chance, but separate - on a molten core.

Because you didn't call

and persisted in not calling, I noticed that time had begun to cohere again, as if the gaps between the microseconds into which I'd slipped were closing up again, nothing changed, but the stench of foreverness dispersing.

Because you didn't call,

I noticed that I felt only lousy, but tried not to make much of it, for fear time would open up again like an accordion that won't stop or a closed Oriental fan whose abstract design opens out into a tormented demon-face.

Because you didn't call,

I realized I needed to pee and did so and that I was almost hungry, but didn't risk eating yet, knowing an angry god had spared me and should be propitiated.

Because you didn't call

me and didn't and didn't and didn't, at last, by the time you called, I was able to listen to you and talk with only an occasional spasm of tears, and was even able to tell, when you told me what I wanted to hear (a reasonable excuse), that you were lying and that it was all over, that it would be bad for months, but never as bad as what was now over, and I said, yes, we'll talk when I see you tomorrow (which was by then today), and I put down the phone, which had done what it could, and picked up my notebook and pen.

On My Stool

My stool has all the forms of clouds
in the blue bowl of heaven. I can see
anything I want in it.

My stool is as ominous as tea leaves.
There is nothing it cannot foretell.

My stool is as various as the weather,
embracing all seasons, storm and calm,
flood and drought. Like the weather,
it is endlessly a subject of interest,
treated like family when regular,
but a dangerous antagonist
when it turns on me.

My stool gives me great pleasure
when it leaves me easily, abundantly
and with body. A good stool begins
a good day. A bad stool or none at all
poisons the sun.

My stool smells better than anyone else's,
except when I eat something
that makes me a stranger to myself.

My stool knows me better than I know myself,
surprising me with the pungency
of my excesses.

My stool is what my body creates
without my help. I enslave brain,
fingers, limbs, mouth. I decide
what to put into my body. But my body
decides what to make of it. My body
glows with pride when I admire
what it has made.

My stool has given me solitude
in a noisy house and leisure
to read great literature and pulp novels
in the midst of mad activity.

My stool is good luck, for it leaves
a horseshoe printed white on my bottom.

My stool invites contemplation,
for to savor it fully, one must sit over it-
restless legs soothed to leaden sleep -
as patient as a brooding hen.
My stool is a little world
made cunningly. Creatures live in it
and are nourished by it.

My stool comes from parts of my body
where I have never been, will perhaps
never enter. If my stool could tell
what it has seen...and it does!

My stool is only mine. No one else
treasures it, not even those
dearest to me, nor I theirs. None
except for my own body
is as intimate to me as my stool.
If I prefer not to touch it,
that is only out of respect
for my body, which has rejected it,
as someday it will reject me.

My stool enriches my language, giving me

a load of crap, much good shit,
the latest poop--not worth a turd--
and manure, excrement, defecation, waste
and feces--all wonderful things
for things to be said to be--and much
much more.

My stool infiltrates language
with the giggles of children, for each family
has its own secret word for the act:
I learned to go **squeeze**, but my younger
brothers and sisters would go **boom!**
(and tinkle too). But some secrets
are best shared, as when a million children
in hiding smirk to hear, "We're number two--
we try harder!"

My stool gives me all this--
explaining, perhaps, why we describe it
not as something we give,
but as something we take.

My stool teaches me how to make noises
of disrespect, scat-singing as it goes.
I train my mouth to imitate its noise,
for what good is freedom of expression
if one has no way to express
one's appreciation for the world's
passing scene?

My stool teaches me the vanity
of fine cuisine, for look what it makes
of whatever I eat, whether subtle sauces
or coarse humble brown bread.

My Stool teaches me grateful acceptance
of our universe when I consider
that the anus could have been given
tastebuds.

My stool is forgiving, a trumpet fanfare
absolving me of my sins of the night before,
my second helpings, snacks and rich desserts,
releasing me from my night of headthrobbing,
stomach churning penance,
taking from me my burden.
My stool allows me both universality
and individuality, for each day
at my stool, I am possessed of a secret,
a little life all my own of which
one may not speak, into which none pry,
and yet I share this secret
with every human, every creature.

My stool must be very interesting,
for it is a forbidden subject.
Even admitting an interest in one's own
labels one mentally disordered.
One mustn't admit to looking much
at one's stool. It should be made
discreetly, quickly, to vanish,
as must (before one emerges)
all implicated body parts.

My stool leads the way back to earth
whither my body will one day follow,
its intricate systems as nourishing
to grass and blowflies, its expulsion
as great a relief to the living
as if it, too, were stool, this life
a long digestive process, in the end
whatever is not of the spirit

becoming the waste of spirit.
If this is so, each stool
is a little funeral ceremony, or part
of a lifelong interment, for no stool
is an island.

My stool teaches me what I am not.
Thus my stool teaches me everything.

Explaining Force

I

The child can't understand your words,
so, for his own good, you force him
to do what he should. There's no time
to explain to the man charging you
with a bayonet that you're just
a nice guy from another place,
so you shoot him. You can't make
the mugger see that there are
better ways to be, so you
lock him away.

Your not being able to explain
recoils on you: You say you just
don't understand children, women,
men, criminals, lawyers, anyone
you can't talk to.
You think you understand
ashtrays and tables and doorknobs
because you never tried
to explain anything to them.

Some people get used to your ways,
kids grow up, learn to understand you,
sort of. You explain yourself again
and again, or where you can't,
you explain the need for reasonable
force. Explaining yourself
gets more and more like explaining
the need for force.

Hardest is explaining evil when
it looks like you. The murderer
or the clerk who is sorry
he can't help you faces you
with a simple gaze as multiple
as a fly's, its twinkle
a broken glint, faceted by a thousand
failed utopias. He answers you
in human words; even letters
from the government sound like
human words. A madman
is a bureaucracy. Ask for the one
responsible--no one answers, a great
mystery if you think you're
talking to a person.

II

And you, though you know they are bad,
you still do certain things. You just
don't understand yourself. God
is what understands you, and nobody
understands God.

Can what can't be understood
understand? Stones, ashtrays,
tables, doorknobs, things: frozen
in random vectors of force. These
you cannot understand, though you insist
you do, insist this is just a dresser,
just a doorknob, an eye, though sometimes
half-awake at dawn, you are surrounded
by nameless forms, even the mask
in the mirror, utterly senseless,
as if God surrounds you,
understanding nothing, nothing

to be understood.

You do your job, you do
what you're supposed to do
like a doorknob and everybody
understands you and there is
nothing to explain. You watch
TV, flinching from the rough tongue
hot on your cheek, the intolerable
sweetness in the eyes of a dog.

Black and White

I'm white and I think O.J. Simpson is innocent of destroying our justice system and setting white against black.

I'm black and I think O.J. is guilty as hell of being famous, rich, Black and flawed and not clearly enough a murderer to lay all doubts to rest.

I'm white and I think there's reasonable doubt whether O.J. would have or could have mattered to most of us had we not been told over and over by the media all the significances going down.

I'm black and I think it has been established beyond the shadow of a doubt that some black people and some white people disagree about some things.

I'm white and I think the jury did a lousy job of making every man, woman and child in the United States happy.

I'm black and I think the jury did a great job of sitting in the courtroom for more than a year and then saying one of the two or three things they were allowed to say.

I'm white and I think we need to think of the victims, because they, too, were probably not very nice persons, and it's unfair that they've been exempted from the scrutiny given everyone else connected in any way to this case just because they're dead.

I'm black and I think it's a shame that the victims had to die such terrible deaths, unlike the nice deaths that the rest of us are looking forward to, because, after all, don't we all have the constitutionally guaranteed right to die nicely?

I'm white and what pisses me off is the injustice of our system.

I'm black and what pisses me off is the injustice of our system.

I'm black and white and I don't like to see people screwed by the system, the wealthy and powerful protected, the rest not getting a fair shake, people getting away with murder because of their skin color... I'm white and black and I don't like to see the victims forgotten, people so swayed by primitive emotions that they can't see plain truth, a corrupted system giving justice a bad name...

I'm whack and I'm a football fan, and I love someone I thought was O.J. and I hope it is and was...

I'm blite and I never watch football, though isn't O.J. the guy in the Hertz ads? - and I hope he didn't kill them and I hope they weren't really killed and that the whole thing is just a stupid mistake for which no one, really, is to blame, and someday we'll all get together and laugh...

I'm whike and I spent most of the past year sitting in my living room in front of a slightly convex gray glow watching articulate heads talk about O.J. and about how we whikes are totally unable to comprehend

the experience of American blacks.

I'm black and I spent most of the past year sitting in my living room in front of a slightly convex gray glow watching articulate heads talk about O.J. and about how we blacks are totally unable to comprehend the experience of American whites.

I'm black and I think the most significant aspect of the O.J. trial is the way it has brought to light the deep-rooted divisions between the blacks and the whites in this nation.

I'm black and I - who have the last word on everything - think it is terribly significant that 70% of the whites said they thought O.J. guilty while 70% of the blacks thought him innocent, but it is so insignificant as to be unworthy of notice that 100% of the whites and 100% of the blacks, when asked these questions, knew who O.J. was, thought it important that these questions be answered, wanted justice done, cared about whose blood was on a glove and the vocabulary of a policeman and the domestic affairs of an ex-athlete, knew to talk into the microphone and look at the camera, thought it important that their opinions be communicated to others, wanted to live and die well, wanted their families to live and die well, ate a meal the night of the interview and, later, slept - but we are getting into things so unworthy of notice that I'm not sure I even know what they are, the experience of blacks and whites being beyond black comprehension - surely nothing newsworthy.

Chalk Dust

The "blank slate" theory justifies
gobs of bloodshed: "If we simply wipe out
the recalcitrant old guard, the kulaks,
the warlords, whoever's too accustomed
to the old bad ways [you can't teach
an old dog new tricks], then we can build
by indoctrinating the untainted children"--

but these children were not born yesterday--
not for the first time. They've been
indoctrinated before many times
and with more force than these decadent days
can muster, more than these flimsy modern bodies
could survive.

And who are these children?
Many are the recently slaughtered devotees
of the Old Order (old dogs yet older,
only made stupider by fresh pain), some
sullen with suppressed rage for vengeance,
others eager to learn so that THEY
can become the brutal indoctrinators,
secure in the role of what they could not
stand up to,

So that the new order becomes tainted
at the fountainhead. O, these separations
death makes are tissue thin. Death ends
almost nothing. Immortals can forget,
but each cycle of forgetting renders us
less able to learn anything new.

A new world can't be built
of such patched-over fragments.
Only those who can remember
can change their minds.

When the Bough Bends

Last night's wind has ripped up trees.
Easy to see how gnarled tree roots
casually sprawled out for children's
games of tag around the trunk and
doggy epistle posting are clenched
fists clutching the earth
for dear dirty wet life.

Last night as I drove down this street
boughs shook, broken twigs and branches
clattered about me and I thought how
these peaceful shades are hacked and
lathed into spears and arrows and could
see how the modest root bulges
its bicep in the bent bow.

Today in quiet sunshine,
this wrenched-up root towers over me,
a torn tableau of groping,
chunks of earth still dangling
from its thousands of hairy probes.

Cartoon trees are often monsters
with wind and owls for familiars,
OOOing and HOOOing all night long
to scare lost children - or
in pain? - fearing what wind can do -
though now it only teases leaves
and tests the timbre of branches -
much as human teeth cringe with foreknowledge
at the dentist's first light metallic touch.

Or fearing the children,
their lostness?

Of course, we should fear trees:
This could have fallen on me.

I write these words at a wooden table
in a wooden house, from which
I step outside to visit the earth
where trees live.

Going Home
(St. Paul, 1962)

Biting wind. Waiting for a bus,
I cower in a phone booth, nothing to do
but stomp my feet and shush my thoughts
of minutes, dollars, things not said
to closed faces, cold feet--thoughts
as shrill as tired kids in the back seat
of a too-long trip.

In this cold, thoughts,
like sculpted whorls of smoke
attached to a below-zero chimney,
become solid, slow, slower...

In sudden clarity of winter night
I stand empty, filling up with purr
of repeated muffled car explosions,
yellow and red lights advancing, receding
in dazzling ice-doubled columns.

BAR AND GRILL flashes green,
then stabbing blue, zips
through twisted threads of glass,
gone before eye can follow.

Lights shatter into stars.
Among smells of exhaust and wet wool
I imagine (or am I there?)
steaming black diner coffee. Senses,
suspended in crystal, waver.

How kind of the world, seeing I must wait
(for what?), to stop for me
here at the frozen crest of things.

The periphery of my vision stands still
while I turn away from my eyes to see.

But one must exhale again: The world
wheels free, eyes take over vision,
nose claims smell, ears sound;
though still
they are icicle sharp,
beside themselves, taut
ears listening to hear who listens, nose
bickering with eyes for a share in color,
eyes finding faces in the faceless:

Tottering cherubic faces gaping
in the high cab lights of wheezing trucks,
earnest innocence of car faces, Chevy
and Ford as distinct as two uncles,

words already auditioning for the poem
that's in the wind, each word, too,
with its spellbound face,
and before mine on the shiny
black phone, the jingle
of "One Dime".

In this thin clear air,
taut bubble of me rises faster and faster,
motionless,
to burst into its element.

Stomping into the bus, shivering,
I fumble for coins, giggling
in my pocket. The driver's shoulders

are set in perpetual shrug; his face
speaks for his shoulders. I wonder
who is he?

Down the slush-wet black-rubbered aisle
past a frown (Where's he's taking it?),
past car-cards selling chewing gum
that two pretty twins chew
to double their pleasure in life
and the U.S. Army, where you can learn
a trade, car-cards quoting Thoreau
(Great Thoughts Of) about walking
to a different drummer, engines
pulsing at my feet-

I sprawl across a seat
having it all to myself,
peer through my face
at rippled streaks of light and darkness,
at home here
going home.

Growing Pains

At a distance from the bustling cookout fire,
I, twelve, awkward, unpopular,
lay back on my jacket on pine needles
to look up through branches
along tapered birch-laced pines,
rising so swiftly I found myself

suddenly alone in the sky, filled up
with millions of minute rustlings of leaf, needle
and branch, each defining with each movement
new planes of perspective,

bending, supple as wind, to touch
the curvature of clouds. My body
tiny, but I am huge, overflowing
myself, floating there...

when a kid threw sand in my face!
I wept, turned away from him, hid my face.

Wait! Retake! Close-up! Slow motion!

Yes, floating there, I looked down
at the other small bodies scuttling
about the camp-fire and thought: They
could never understand THIS--
and had started to think: THAT thought
doesn't belong to the sky--

when a kid threw sand in a body's face-
mine.

Anger and self-pity whooshed out like air
from a punctured balloon, as I was swallowed up
by my growing body.

Turning from myself, I felt myself,
watching me, weep a few bitter tears
at my silly smallness,
floating there.

The Answer Is Blowing In The Wind

Slouching in the Synagogue, bored,
I blow - over rows of bowed heads -
toward candles 50 feet away.
A second later they flicker.
I blow again - pause - flicker.
Impossible - my little puff
from 50 feet in a room full of
worshippers - my puff making
the flame squirm? And it does it
every time.

Years later, a stifling day,
the windows wide open - but no wind stirs
in the branches outside. I intend
a breeze. Stillness. I intend
harder. Still. I blow at the leaves
(20 feet away) and they stir and suddenly
there's a breeze.

The universe is our old agreement.
When we intend against our old intentions,
nothing happens. It helps to give
the universe a dignified OUT, an excuse
to do your bidding, some way to pretend
it follows only natural law. It's like
a lawyer giving the judge and jury
a legal excuse for doing
what they want to do.

Hand Book

Caressing is a neglected art.
Most race to embrace uncreated,
unoccupied flesh. Perhaps they don't know
what to do, lost in the mechanics and
sweat of it, as if inflating a rubber doll.

The key is, Don't caress what's there;
your touch creates. Where you stroke,
a body becomes, molding itself
to meet the requirements
of your tenderness.

And if, as your hands move,
you, too, are there,
deciding each moment newly
to touch what your fingers touch,
another being will reach out
through the body you create
to respond,

as if your hands' motions
are met and mirrored by an inner light.

Bodies can hold only so much of what we are.
They begin to plead
(too much creating is dangerous
to whatever would persist). Don't
stop. Overflow. Overflow. Let the rush
of overflow carry you where you would go.

Eh, What's Up, God?

(To Pam, Who Draws the Real Me)

Becoming the cartoon you've invented for me
(the one where I'm so fat I pop my shirt buttons),
I grow wary of shirts with buttons and note
with suspicion the increasing cuteness
of the mice I catch in our "humane trap."

That describes our bodies: Humane traps.
It's so comforting, as a cartoon, knowing that
when I die, I'll be able to leave this body
in a lighter-than-air transparency of my good
old body, no need to take on unfamiliar forms
or suffer invisibility.

These are serious matters. Very bright and sober
folks like John Milton debated in learned essays
whether or not angels and departed souls have sex.
(Milton argued YES, bless his soul [so to speak].)
This was a big issue, like angelic housing shortages
on pinheads and can a child-in-womb likely to be
stillborn be baptized by injection of Holy Water
into the womb? That is, if so Baptized, will the
soul go to Heaven?

I'm not kidding, religious folks had wonderful
debates and would be debating these points still
had not religion been replaced by cartoons.

Holding Hands

"Dean Loves Pam"

Wet Cement Loves Hands
or hands love wet cement. But time and sunlight
harden the cement and callus the fingers,
and they no longer love each other, at least not
in that clingy way, though there's a kind of love
in galloping breathless over the sidewalk ("beat you
to the fire hydrant on the corner!") and leaving
no discernible mark, no more than, on each other,
callused hands clapping to our singing.

Love is most at home with the yielding, but resilient,
the breast that seems to give way, give its all
to the hand, but a moment later is itself, ivory,
impervious. We want to be able to rend each other, swallow
each other like raw oysters, chew, twist, crush and know
by each other's moans that we have done so,
then have each other emerge, smiling, flawless,
like children pointing fingers and yelling **BANG BANG!**
YOU'RE DEAD! -- contorting, crumpling to the earth
to lie deadly still, then springing up laughing.

The handprint I leave in concrete outlasts the hand,
the thousands of handprints invisible
on the bodies of lovers (even white slap marks
now hidden in hardened eyes). Put your hand here,
if you can, into the impression. Can you feel
what my hand felt?

Charade

At those exulted moments,
filling the sky, seeing each gleam
of each wavelet of a whole ocean,
self evanesced to pure knowing -
at such moments I weep or laugh
or smile - ah, Is it I who weep? -

or do I find myself weeping,
tugged back into that abandoned flesh
by the body's pantomime of my joy?
Do I laugh wildly, smile inscrutably -

or, filling the sky with an unheard laughter,
am I lured by the body's charade,
the bit of my own attention that won't let go
putting the body through its paces
to persuade me that it is still
the most dramatic place to be,

the body weeping to find me
weeping with it, I having mistaken
that sympathetic, bright-eyed trap
for freedom.

Cheating

When we were little, we'd make Dad
play War with us, the dumbest card game
ever invented: Cards are divided up
among the players, each player puts out
one card, high card always wins or if
there's a tie ("Fight!"), each of the tied players
puts out four more cards and high card
(the fourth) wins the lot - and this goes
on and on and on
until someone has all the cards.

Dull, but that's War.

He'd grimace and play. Soon
one of us would shriek, "Daddy!
You're cheating!"

We'd always find out eventually. Maybe
after he'd win a big fight (ace versus
ace), I'd say "O no!" and he'd say,
"That's OK, I'll let you win
the next one" and I'd shriek,
"Daddy! You're cheating!"

"Sure," he'd say, grinning - "This
stupid game is no fun
if you don't cheat."

We'd protest,
but we always wanted him to play,
as if his cheating made the game
more real.

That's how I feel,
talking to you here.
If I shared an elevator or a
street corner (waiting for the
light or a bus) or a subway seat,
I probably wouldn't say anything to you
or only the obvious.

It's a dull game, trading
papers for green paper,
careful not to touch the wrong parts
of the wrong people (almost
everyone), and it goes on and on and on
until there are no cards on the table.

This is how I cheat.

**Old and Fashioned Poems Mailed
From L.A. to Australia**

I cast a spider-strand,
anchored only in my dream,
across a real, man-crushing ocean.
You caught it, fastened it to your
dream, and now, scorning oceans,
we take turns in our letters,
running with our dreams
to send the kite 7,000 miles away
turning cartwheels in the sky.

If you were with me--your body
in the same room with mine--I would
look and look at you and marvel
at your being with me, at my
knowing it. Holding you, belly
warming belly, even then I would marvel
at your being with me as much as now
when you are a wide ocean away,
I marvel at your being with me.

Though my eyes see only a slipslapping waste
of ocean, I send out my words, my thoughts:
"Hello--are you there? This feeling--
is it for you...for you...?"
The winds lie in wait to swallow my words,
but are too slow. "Not OK!" protest
my outraged eyes. "Put it in writing!"
dither my arms, reaching to grope
at only two handfuls of cold air.
"What is he saying?", slipslops the sea.
"He's mad!" howls the wind.
But I know I've received your answer when,
sending out my thought, I'm unsure
who spoke; then, suddenly,
clear as the last half-waking dream of dawn
that lingers after one has said:
"You're just a dream!", giving one
a choice of worlds to wake up in--
thus clearly I hear our voices say
"This is OK."

It is not necessary for you to become
more mine than you are; nor is it
possible. I ask you to join me here
because in the grim waking hour
of gray mornings when a crowd
of scowling faces count off my lateness,
my poet's licence temporarily expires,
and the aerial spirits heed me not,
but I must limp my lumbering beast
into all the future it can tear from time,
as much as can fill the yellow cavern
of a mirror over a sink; just then,
I think, your wakeful smile--
or sleepy smile--or merely your head
with secret face before me on the pillow--
by my just knowing what a torrent
of twining sunshine it can turn on me--
would quick as touch renew my licence.

Pardon me, Miss,
are these poems yours? I believe
you mislaid them on your last visit.
It's been a long time,
and I doubt whether you'll find
a single molecule of my finery
familiar. (Nor will you find
any particle of me other

than familiar.)
If these poems are not yours,
I swear I don't know how I got them.
One moment only the creaking walls
and sullen muttering of a man writing
(I am silent, but it seems to me
I mutter) in a shabby room. Then,
before I can turn, you are with me;
I can always tell by your smile
in my eyes. You say hello and touch
a twinkle to the dust on my bookcase,
then, as lightly, leave--to run
more errands for the night?
And there, behold! these words,
where you had stood, and here they are,
returned, which, if you call them mine,
I'll hold as yours and carry
as your errant knight in all my quests.

Far away lady,
we become like old marrieds,
and I begin to take you for granted,
going through entire days not noticing
you are with me, even though
you are only just across the ocean.

Far away lady, we confront each other
coast to coast, countenance to countenance.
My summer thoughts are received in winter
instantly. Bodies? Ridiculous make-believe;
and yet, how I will laugh to meet you
farce to farce.

Usually, my love, it is I
who writes you, but occasionally,
like Mama holding baby up to the phone
to gurgle "GooGoo!" to Grandma,
I let my body moan its hoarse hello.

Your body is an ocean away,
yet you and I embrace and romp;
My poor penis has its signals crossed.
Poetic justice: How long has penis gloated
while pen looked on with a sick craving
for experience? And now my pen
leads me on to a new rich continent
and richer incontinence,
ignoring oceans and creating my OWN lies,
while penis can but point that way
and twitch like an over-eager puppy,
but cannot reach. And yet...you seem
so near. We are 7000 miles apart. We are
7000 miles apart...(If I keep chanting it,
perhaps I'll be able to find my way back
to my body in North America.

My love, when you don't write,
it's like waking up alone.
Being without you becomes a minute-by-minute,
day-by-day being without you.
But even if there were to be
no more letters ever,
I would still be I and you
you, if not for each other,
yet the more so for having been so
for each other.

The letters stop, and in my mind,
where I used to find an open door,
I keep bumping into walls. Finally

the phone call comes, the impossible,
embarrassed explanations that explain
nothing except that you'd write and explain
(you never do) and could we still
be friends (we? Are we still anything
at all?) And what I created stands nakedly,
if anything, my creation.

The lady changed her mind or vice versa.
I'd bitten off more than she could chew.

Is it, then, but a pronoun
that so haunts me? If you are and yet
are not she, where, then, are you?
Have you been laughing to see me
stumble across the sea to pin the tail
on the donkey's ear or eye or quite
outside the picture? (Yes, I know you
better than I know myself, but not so well
as to tell you from a donkey's ass.)
Or are you where I find you,
toying with me now through this one,
now that one, quick! Catch you if I can!

We lost. The ocean won;
battle, not war, for if I could imagine
what I, at least, imagined,
it can BE. Like the cartoon coyote
who runs off the cliff,
but continues to run on air
(and could have done so forever,
for all we know, if he hadn't
looked down, realized where he was,
then plummeted dolefully out of view-
SPLAT!), so I continue,
seeing no reason ever to look down.

My poems' reach exceeds their grasp,
or what's a Melbourne, or, for that matter,
a second person intimate pronoun
for? You and I never once
on the same side of the sea met,
and yet, briefly, we touched each other,
or what's a metaphor?

The Worst Chicken Salad in the World

"This is the worst chicken salad sandwich
I've ever had. Yes, the worst!"
"The cheese fries are GREAT!"

Dare I speak my amazement
that all these humanoids manage
to spoon into their bodies such a motley mess
of shapes, textures, colors, flavors, things,

yet their bodies know what to do with it,
day after day, turning fried chicken,
asparagus, hot fudge sundaes, bacon,
lettuce, mayonaise, Coca Cola into
hair, toenails, flesh, muscle, fat, sweat-

into what we think we are, fear we are,
fear we aren't, what milk and pabulum made,
what WILL make lank grass and fat roses.

What subtle chemistry makes the worst,
definitely the worst chicken salad
in the world into the same, nearly the same
(I can't tell the difference) bright brown eyes,
scornful voice and intricate stools as
the best, I'm telling you, out of this world
cheese fries you'll ever eat!

Thinking this (perhaps because sitting
with people who talk at great length about
how bad the chicken salad is makes me
imagine [or reminds me?] I'm not
from this planet),

I see us as cars pulled up to fuel pumps
with bizarrely complex notions about fuel.
If I were the driver of such a car,
I'd go nuts. And have. That's why
I'm pulled up to this table, filling up with,
no matter what I eat, gas.

Choose Your Words

I guess it could be fun
to try to kill each other,
except I think it would be more fun
to talk with you. I'll not be
dogmatic about this. Talking with some people
leaves the eyes weary and a gray film
over everything. It would be refreshing
to go BANG! BANG! and see a splatter
and a frozen expression of honest pain.

Killing isn't all that bad: We die to
kill again (or does that make it worse?).
There's more truth to Tom and Jerry,
where the cat goes through a slicer,
and the pieces fall back together
into a living cat who renews the chase-
than to Oedipus and Orestes.

Also, much talk we do is just
killing each other slowly.
(Today, for example, has someone said
something to you after which you felt
less alive?) (If not, you can always
read the papers.)

Nonetheless,
I'd rather we tried talking to each other
than killing each other. I'm sentimental
or scared or maybe curious
what you have to say.

Cloning

After years together, grown familiar;
Your rumpled nightgown on the bed
instantly puts you in the room, complete:
It walks, it talks, it has
your laugh, your touch and, almost,
your slapdash use of words; more ghost
than imitation, you are with me
when I look for you, like the location
of home to a traveler. And when you
fill up clothes and enter the room,
you and your ghost merge as smoothly
and seamlessly as two raindrops
running down a window. But sometimes
your eyes fill with an alien light
that is not mine, and, even smiling,
you are a stranger, my image of you
dazzled blind. Groping to find you,
then, I recognize in the dazzle
the mocking laughter (to see me
so befuddled) of an old friend.

Clouds

This is a world of clouds, precise forms dissolving.
A body is a slower sort of cloud, and slower
still the molten earth and galaxies-- all pretty
swirls (whirled without end!) of star vapor.

You and I are not clouds; we are as permanent
as we are formless, but our pitterpat-poems
(raining here) are little fuzzy cloudlets
condensing to ideas.

We, who are formless, use a dissolving form
to send a cloud memo to ourselves and our kind
here among cloud chaos to remind us
(then vanish across the sky, bright omen)

that we are the makers. Poems will not last
forever: The sky-writer's message, sharp and dense
at the fine point of creation, trails off,
spreading, unraveling at the edges, and soon

cannot be distinguished from...clouds. Bodies too--
and worlds and galaxies -- are languages become noise,
messages we sent each other long ago, before we'd
mistaken ourselves for our messages to each other.

Naked Clowns

In love we play we are each other's eyes
to see ourselves, each other's ears
to hear. Almost each other's self
to admire. "If I were in your shoes..."
advises a paternal banker. Others
speak of getting into someone else's
pants (Like circus clowns, perhaps).
"If I were in your eyes..."
"I want to get into your smile."

A tiny red car with chalked windows
blares to the center of the ring, halts,
and out scurry 23 midgets; then 2
giants unfold themselves, and the last
reaches back in for a bulky suitcase.

So we clown, emerging from the twinkle
in each other's eyes, a multitude
of all the faces we have been,
and last unfurl two galactic
clowns--solemnly I reach back into
your eyes to retrieve a constellation.

Perhaps our smiles are painted on-
if there is grease paint that adheres
to spirits--for we cannot stop smiling
the same smile.

Consolations

Worse than the thought of death
or what we really think beneath
the thought of death: waking up
to a darkness that doesn't go away,
unable to move, to not be aware,
trapped forever, buried alive
in coffin or cave-in, knowing
no scream will be heard, no one
will ever come, nor any light --

Hard to have anywhere anyone
so trapped. We'd rather not have it
conceivable, the very idea
polluting daylight and flattening
the savor of space and time,
its future possibility
dwarfing future.

But how bad can it be?
Say you are a body that dies,
fizzing with sense of being in sunlight,
all awareness a cellular irritation
to be soothed by death's balm --
then entrapment is brief, nothing's fear of
nothingness enroute to nothing,
not even fear.

Or say you're not the body that dies,
you leave it, go where you will,
if not immediately (held in, perhaps,
by habit and panic), then when it dies,
all attraction gone with all motion,
an electromagnet switched off.

But what if you survive the body,
but can't escape it, a trapped awareness;
or what if the body is kept alive
by a mad doctor or a lover's reluctance
to part with it? In time (or its
exhausted echo), could you not
submerge into cellular awareness (or bacterial)
and find a tiny spacious universe,
frantic with life and interest?

Or you could, after hours or days
or years (hardly knowing which is which)
of no sound and no sight, begin to live
in the most vivid world available,
your imaginings, in which, perhaps, you
and others like you that you've conjured
would comfort each other,
say, "Hush, it was just a bad dream,
something you ate"; and in your imagined lives
imagine all the variety of deaths we now imagine
rather than remember who dreams and where.

Or you could just lie there
forever, as far as you know,
aware, immobile, alone, dreamless,
in darkness, in pain--an intolerable
thought, but that's just it!--
It's the thought that's intolerable,
and being there is not our thought
of being there, for the most intolerable thoughts
are of those things (torture, entrapment, loss)
easiest to tolerate because there is
nothing else to do--what could be easier?

Even time, going on and on,

becomes no time at all
when you can only experience it,
not draw it out by creating a future
into which it blossoms.
Awareness has its laws: You cannot define
hell as endless passive awareness of
nothing at all, as if awareness were eyes
pried apart by bamboo splinters.
Awareness of nothing at all
is nothing at all.

Or if it is anything, it is that
which creates things to be aware of,
in which case, there need be
no nothing.

Anyway, what's a coffin
that a body's not? What
can you see but what you see,
where be but where you are?

And even free of body, of time,
become the whole universe, what,
being all, could you be
outside of what you are? What is
beyond all that is? And being all,
whom do you tell about it? And
what is there about it but that it
is?

Neither body nor coffin nor universe,
I greet you
here.

Connections

The grass of our parks, the trees
along the highway still put up with us.
They may yet surprise us:
When we think, sure, we've thinned them,
but there are plenty left, they may-
the way a bamboo species, worldwide,
waned every so many years,
as if sharing a clock, or the way frogs
everywhere all at once agreed to dwindle-

they may send each other a signal
of despair in the wind, in the toxic
chemistry of beetle saliva. When woods
are thinned, the songbirds
have insufficient depth of forest
to shelter their nests from egg-thieving
starlings. If a square mile of rainforest
is less than the range of a gold-crested monkey,
for him it is no forest at all.

Perhaps one day a construction crew
will crush to kindling one more scrap pine
and everywhere all trees will wither.
Perhaps the accumulated despair
of African mothers with starving children
poisons butterflies in Canada,
as the vanishing of butterflies
leaves air and spirits anemic,
so that a child in Des Moines
snorts up a flitter of white powder.

We miss connections and mistake part
for whole, one tiny mushroom
for the 300-ton monster of white filament
and fruiting bodies that pervades a forest.
We think we are pioneers, each family
in its lone-standing house on its own land,
though each house is a closed bud at the tip
of a nationwide root maze of pipes and wires,
connecting us to our neighbors like nerve tissue
bonding siamese twins - yet, the pioneer
of old, miles from neighbors, long before
sewers, gas pipes, TV news, electric wiring
and satellites, felt more connection.

Our nation now, with instantaneous 24-hour media
and most of us producing only words on paper,
dependent on who knows who to feed us,
make our paper, refine our fuel, collect our refuse
(most of us knowing no one who grows the food we eat,
most of us having seen, but never killed a cow,
never smelted metal or constructed a single pencil)-
our nation is more densely interconnected
than, centuries ago, a town; yet we
are as unconscious of connection
as the psychotic who is shocked to hear
his own mouth ranting threats,
to see his hand, unstoppable,
hacking a blade through flesh.

"But," some say, "it is connections
that dehumanize: We must be individuals!"
Unless I know my connectedness,
I cannot know my separateness.
A nation, too, should be a person,
not a psychotic whose hands do
what appalls his dazed disconnected eyes.

Don't Feed the Grass

We admit defeat: SAVE OUR BIRDS
AND BUTTERFLIES-for we cannot
create more. Thus, perversely,
we depend on the props this world
borrowed from our own fuller worlds
to inspire in us worlds of our own,
we suns, trembling lest the moon go out
and leave us in the dark.

Birds chirping in raw morning sunlight
outside our window stir something in us
because it is in us, is the source of birds,
sunlight, morning, windows, and even what we call
"we", which is its window on what we call
everything.

We will have birds,
whales, trees, fresh air, friends
here when we each have them
closer to us than this universe can touch.
What we create for ourselves, only,
we can have. If we make enough space
behind our eyelids to swallow up galaxies,
this universe will provide galaxies
to be engulfed. If I step from my door
with a heart full of the coming day,
as a dog leaps from the front hall
to romp through weeds, aquiver with interest,
scaring up butterflies, dragonflies,
and old socks at every step, so will birdsong
and sunlight through leaf-flicker
stir to my heartbeat, filling up the space
I have created for them.

Two million drivers
hunch over grim freeway steering wheels,
chanting: MOVE, DAMMIT! HOW LONG? HOW MUCH?
These drivers, not their cars, are the creators
of smog--not that they make smog,
but that they create no fresh air.

Food, fuel, fresh air--we worry,
how will this universe provide for us?
It has no choice in the matter:
We will have what we create, will cheer
to watch our forgotten hand deftly pull
rabbits and bright silks from the deep black hat.
The lillies of the field will have raiment,
and our children's children will wonder
at our old-fashioned notion of the future
as the three dots of dwindling away
of a voluminous past--if we create
a future with room to wonder in, a
future with a future.

Long ago, over-awed by the abundance
of this universe, we were persuaded
to forget our own abundances (which
had leaked this universe through a seam).
Now this universe begins to run dry
(since its creators closed the door behind them
on the worlds that nurtured it),
and we are panic-stricken, having
forgotten who we are, as if
a dog should catch his own tail,
bite down hard and squeal.

We are wasting our animals,
our plants, our fuel, our substitutes,

and each other, because we cannot have them (and it is consoling to know that what we cannot have, we can—like a child getting mud on the suit he is to be specially careful of—waste), much less create them.

Now we make laws to prohibit waste, enforce conservation. We will fail at that too. Creators of universes cannot long be made to collect tinfoil wrappings, strings, and old Confederate battle field relics. We will create what we can; if we can't create life, we'll create death. If we can't make sunlight, we'll make smog.

The butterfly you envision at this moment is or will soon be fluttering about your front yard. The man you just stopped hating, just now felt like getting in touch. When you wished you were dead, you died a little. The flower you admire opens wider for you. Leaves dance for you. You decided long ago that everything is going to come out all right, so it is.

Two Hells

Whatever we are unwilling to experience, the very torments we dream up for hell -- utter loneliness, for example -- must be closer to our natural state than is what we've become, for we crave what has overwhelmed us so crushingly that we cannot recall ever having been without that craving.

Overwhelmed by sensation, we crave color and mass. We are learning to crave pain and already we call pleasure that sharp pang at the core of sexual sensation. Those who have been overwhelmed by the subtler tickle of aesthetics crave the beauty they've never been able to bear.

Earlier overwhelmings are swallowed up in later -- like nested Russian dolls. One addictive drug is taken to solve an earlier addiction. Beauty is the barbed hook that holds us to sex, goodness, wealth and sentimentality, coarser avidities scorned by the pure aesthete who can still discern the real thing, arrogant in the fine ironies of his more aristocratic state of overwhelm

Until one day, to his shame, he cannot let go of a thread of sticky thrill and is pulled in to a creamy body or the rich agony of a gold and ivory and ruby crucifix, where he sates himself until he finds he's lost the thread, so that, losing creamy body, he cleaves to any pockmarked whore, and, bereft of beautifully sad organ cadenzas, trembles in fear of a frigid God.

And if, one day, I am alone, I will come, in time, to crave loneliness, like a hermit in his cave scarce able to endure a short, wordless visit, this loneliness a step away from, not toward my natural state, a harmonic more removed than my current need for company.

These, then, are the two hells: What we are unwilling to have and what we cannot do without.

Crayons

Pictures on the grade-school wall:

This is how you make a tree with
crayons: Green balls on brown sticks,
except in autumn, when balls are orange.

That yellow spider in the upper right
is the sun, a long explosion of light
(gobbled up by the tree-balls).

The sky is always deep blue with white blobs.
And here is how a house is done (don't
forget the chimney, curls of smoke), a dog,
a cat and boys running. I remember
learning how to draw these things,

but not what they were supposed to say.
They are obscure hieroglyphics now,
whispering (if they speak at all) not of cats,
houses and blue sky, but of the smell
of crayola wax and chalk dust,
the pungency of scratched-at
dried chewing gum under a desk-lid

and the way my colors are always blotched
with bits of crumbled off crayon-points
and overlap patchily, refusing to lie down
in neat, bright, smooth-grained, discrete shapes

like those the girl across from me
(adored by teachers) so sedulously
strokes in, neither crossing an outline
nor ever stopping short of one.

This was how you were supposed to
create a world. I was no good at it.
Messy, that's the word they used -
I was too messy - and so condemned
never to take shelter beneath
green and orange balls
from the yellow spider

flat against the pale green cement walls
before the bored eyes
of oohing and ahing parents.

We Also Rise

These questions having been raised and a full quorum being present, shall now be addressed: Is there reason to say that it is better to create a sunset than a green mohawk hairdo atop a face that may someday rise from hectic vacancy to despair? Is there reason to say that it is better to create ANY pictures rather than none at all?

To the latter we reply: Any game is better than no game. One can use pictures to create effects-- and there is no higher purpose. In the absence of pictures, it is hard to conceive of a playing field or a game.

To the first question: If the highest purpose is the creation of an effect, we can add that effects, however powerful in themselves, are to be regretted if they remove from us forever or for millennia the capability of creating effects. He of verdantmohawk has created an effect that inspires in others at worst disgust and apathy, at best a brief spasm of imitative creation toward an amplified disgust and apathy, a world of people who cannot conceive of creating effects because they consider themselves to be objects.

A strong slug of sunset, on the other hand, can inspire others to create beauty that inspires yet others to create beauty. Thus there are games that lead to the creation of more games and games that destroy our ability to create games-- like the blowing up (a spectacular effect) of an inhabited planet.

And yet, we must consider context: There was a time when a glorious sunset was a snide message to forgetful creators of universes: "SEE WHAT THE WORLD CAN GIVE YOU! YOU CANNOT MAKE ANYTHING NEARLY AS IMPRESSIVE. SIT STILL AND DO WHAT YOU'RE TOLD, AND YOU WILL BE GIVEN MANY GLORIOUS SUNSETS"-- and the last embers of memory went gray.

The Plot Thickens

For vengeance, a man seeks out his father's murderer and discovers it is he. Next he discovers that he is also his father. Then he discovers that he is also the butler who didn't do it.

People in mysteries dismiss as suspects the servants who've "...been with us for years and years," though all our miseries have been with us forever.

"The butler did it." Among the silly or sinister Lords and overwrought or ambiguous Ladies he glides, bland and officious, having only one name (James, perhaps), being less than a person until (and once -- can you grasp it! -- once it was a surprise, the ignored obvious revealed) -- until we learn that the momentum it then took to propel a servant out of serviceable oblivion into personhood plunged him BEYOND person into monster (made palatable by our learning he never was, really, a butler, but a bitter passed-over noble son or mad ruined doctor in disguise), still a shock, as if we were to learn our washers, driers, blenders, irons and microwaves hid from us curdled malice.

We get home from the play, a huge oaken door creaks open, polite hands receive our cloaks, eyes do not quite meet ours and "Who is this man?" we think for the first time.

"I suppose you're wondering why I've called you all together...". One among them knows! Life, some say, is a mystery, and here we are, all together, trying out our different ways (outrage, pompous indignation, serenity, jovial charm, hysteria) of being or pretending to be or being AND pretending to be innocent. What a relief to be given a single answer, reasonably derived, so that one and only one mask is stripped off, revealing a blackness no one doubts is truth, all other masks left intact.

But next time the game of cards or 8-course dinner party is done, during the next lull in conversation before we resolve on something else to do or say or just go home, we may look askance at smiles and frowns that linger, their meaning forgotten, and wonder why we've been called together here.

"Our adversary is very clever...and very dangerous!" Not clever enough not to have to be dangerous. A clever criminal is like a genius employed by a bossy idiot. Despite miracles of brilliance performed to pull off the idiocies his boss demands, one day the boss's crazy laughter betrays him. And if he's so smart, why is he working for an ass?

"I can't believe he'd do such a thing!" The reason criminals don't obey the laws is that the laws aren't addressed to them. For one thing, laws are in our language, which criminals rarely understand. For another, criminals can't easily be addressed; first you must find them. With most of us, if you can find our eyes and ears, you can reach us. Criminals are better hidden. Bodies may nod heads with eyes that meet yours, but that's on remote automatic. You can seek them out and learn their language, a labyrinthine process, or you can imprison and torture their bodies, hoping to smoke them out of hiding, so you can speak to them.

"But do you think he's capable of murder?" "I think him capable of anything!" What a delightful respite from this world of half-assed crimes committed by broken people incapable of almost anything, unable to work, play, give or take orders, love, create or understand.

Even the great political and financial criminals are vastly incapable, able only to stir and use the fears of abler folk who imagine there are others capable of anything, not just condemned to do what they do for fear that the abler ones may cease to fear.

"I went to a movie, then for a walk, alone. No, no one recognized me." Tsk! Tsk! Next thing, you'll have a motive. Beware of people who go for walks alone and unrecognized!

An alibi establishes innocence: When those terrible things were done, you were somewhere else, as reliable witnesses will attest. In an ideal world (an ideal we fast approach), a world of recovered innocence, everyone is somewhere else when terrible things are done; that is, everyone is elsewhere all the time.

A criminal, like a welfare state, is strong-principled: He knows we're supposed to be magic. The magic is lost, but he will not compromise: He knows he can create whatever he wants out of nothing, snap his fingers and POOF! -- it's there.

He won't sully that wisp of aching memory of such magic by working for what he wants. He knows this is supposed to be HIS world. When things don't go his way, he won't pretend to patience, won't lie that that's what life is; he insists: Someone must pay.

The criminal is not wrong; he's the rightest man in the world, a wise man among fools, and he knows it. The magician waves his wand and POOF!-- wealth, gold, jewels, booze, fancy sex, power...

Watch it, kid! If you saw how the trick was done, don't let on.

On the Comfort of Knowing What It Is That One Knows

The cruelty of the world,
its casual crushing of anything dear,
consoles me:

FIRST: by the depths of dearness
children, small birds, dolls
and pebbles can attain,

that what a year or a moment
will obliterate can be a sponge
to absorb all the dreams
we can pour into it,

like the baby starling you found
trying to hop across a busy road.
You carried it across, then thought
(wrongly, we learned too late),
now that you'd touched it, its mother
would not. So you brought it home, pulsing
in your hands, a squeaky ball of feathers;
you tried to feed it, failed, lost it.

Everything dies, but this was nearly
a perfect thing, that flailed its stubby wings,
squawked and glared at us. Ah, what is not
a perfect thing? It moves me
that we can be so moved,
that a dying starling
can swallow up our worlds
and not be filled.

SECOND: By the depth and certainty
of our horror at this brute process
that shatters the intricate
vessels of our love: There is a
wrongness there we KNOW! Feeling it,
I know and reknow the blinding reality
of my own world, the sun that casts
these silly shadow games,

for what else could have taught me so well
the wrongness of this world
of torn butterflies, broken
children, abandoned songs? What else
but a world of infinite caring,
where nothing dear
is ever lost.

Currents

Jittery octopi, we interact
with a fine lace of tentacles,
balancing the forces
of pulling each other in
and pushing each other away
to hold each other steady.

Is this me tugging you,
or you wanting to be tugged?

And where do my live desires end
and my forgotten, defunct desires begin?--
old decayed energy beams

like dusty cobwebs in the attic,
still clinging to the brittle husks
of ancient victims, ancient selves,
still sticky enough to catch fresh life
and confuse me into thinking
I must want what I have snagged.

And all the while the body
(itself a clotted entanglement
of even older energy enlivened
by the attention it receives)
plays its own games of push and pull,
turned on when I am not and vice versa.

Whose desire draws us now together?
Our little fury subsiding, broken surges
falling back, smoothing out to glassy silk
along this quiet beach,

do we look with or at each other
or away?

Shades

How is it that fissure of morning brightness,
just there, where curtains don't quite meet,
can generate a hotel room full
of grey outlines, nooks, niches of wrinkled blankets-
a shadowland? As if a fraction of dawn
equals a full dusk, as if morning
has been husbanded, doled out,
one crack of dawn per room, don't be
greedy, day broken up into cubicles
of colorless form, looming hints of depth,
how efficient!

But why, then, outside,
such extravagance of sunlight?
There one mica-flaked square of concrete sidewalk
basks in glare enough to touch
with grey-brown intelligence the forms
of a thousand suites, the sweets
of a thousand forms, and there,
a glassy waste of shop windows
blasts the eyes with brilliance enough
to illuminate gently the texts
of all the yellowed classics ever fingered
in the mellow depths of reading rooms,

enough to detach from grey dawn
with just the softest mottling hint of umber
a swell of shadowed nakedness
(were you with me), a billion nakednesses
in a billion waking rooms--one unreadable
window's waste of morning dazzle
could touch all these lives with promise,

as once, when I reached to touch, lightly,
that dim fullness beside me,
my closed eyes spilling over with light.

Star Death

A movie star dies and leaves
a scotch-pickled body sprawled
in his penthouse. The hero,
gigantic on screen, punctured, deflated
to a body now like you and me,
as if a god could be born a man and die.

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

It's almost as good as meeting him
in person.

Careful not to miss
a single crumb, we gobble up the obits:
He had much to overcome, tried hard,
lost hard, got his break, was gifted,
unique, a real pro, made classics,
made bombs, got broken...

Why do we doubt
our knowing him?
Can he be less
than what he gave us?

Maybe we're fumbling to say
"Thank you! Well done! We got all that,
so feel free to get on with being
someone or something else."

Well done to us, too:
We were the atmosphere through which
he flamed to earth. We recognized
how he caught and amplified
something exciting in us
and gave it back to us. We made him
rich. We loved him. Very well done!
That's all finished now. Get on
with making new gods.

The Names Of Things

Death is no big thing.
When I met him, he looked like me,
but without the beard. An old friend
turned up the same day, but said
nothing much. When I went upstairs to my room,
just to change clothes,
the one who was me went along,
as if to change clothes too.
"Who are you?" I asked:
"You aren't just someone."
He replied: "You are the one
who refuses to know the names of things."

Then he was close before my face,
breathing on me; I let go, drifted
like a feather, hearing from his mouth
my own and other voices saying
who I was, what I'd done, accusatory,
I guess, but not close to me.
Then he blew me back
into the tightness of my temples.
There the dream stopped.
(I never went back downstairs.)

Overcast dripping morning,
walking the dogs,
who stare mutely as usual as I leave,
then wet asphalt, the freeway,
thinking, soon I'll die;
then thinking, no, it's this distance,
this letting go, happening now:
"Soon I'll die" is just a name for it.
If we name things truly,
they become themselves and can leave us.
Death, too, is the name of a dream
that is going away.

I'm Here for You, Death

What is death? Death is traveling from here to the corner if here were up and the corner were down and I traveled by falling. Death is standing where that car just passed. Death is the brown leaf that man just stepped on if I were very small and beneath it. Death is a year ago if that year is multiplied and placed in the future. Death is the middle of that mild autumn sun. Death is a distinct possibility.

Or death is what's left when breathing and growth and physical motion are subtracted from whatever I am. But that is what I am, a creative awareness devoid of form, motion, mass or location. (You don't see me moving here, do you?) Or so I seem to me (if the word of next-to-nothing has any weight).

If that's what I am, then I am already dead, for there is nothing that can be taken from me (until I decide to forget), and what we call living (this body, this world of motion that engenders and cradles the body) is what is added to the death that I am to make life.

Death, then, is that which savors and names and arranges and plays with life, particularly pleased to find among the living another bit of death to share the play.

Death is what, anticipating my plunge to the corner, was already there, waiting for me. There I was, waiting for that screaming body. It took as long a time as I wanted.

Life and Death

Dead: What animates a body leaves it--
a definite point of no return for that body.

Dead: In or out of a living body,
a being's state, lacking awareness, ability,
understanding -- not absolute, one being
as dead as unaware, unable to perceive,
create, perceive what one has created,
perceive that one is or isn't the creator
of what one perceives;

these inabilities being bottomless.

Among the abilities that decrease with deadness
is the ability to differentiate,
so that, when dead enough, one cannot
differentiate oneself from whatever one sees,
touches, is impinged upon by. Thus,
most beings in or around bodies assume that they
are bodies and must die when the body dies.

Thus, also, deadness attracts deadness,
adheres to it, becomes it.

Each time we lie -- not to create, but to prevent
knowing -- we deaden others, make them
less aware, less able to understand.
Knowing this in our hearts, we shut out others
so as not to see what we've done to them,
thus decreasing our own understanding,
our own lifefulness.

Then, mutually deadened, we are less able
to tell ourselves apart from others.
We become those we most resist.

Confronting truth, we begin to come to life,
in the process stirring to uncomfortable life
much deadness that is not us.
On the way to becoming -- once again -- life,
we become each other's diseases,
the pangs of differentiation.

Like the convulsions of childbirth,
of first leaving home and parents,
moments of truth seem to tear us apart,
but we find we have moved apart
only to be able to dance.

Horror, Once Removed

Why do we make nine-hour movies and T.V. Specials about heaps of pink bodies, a dead child's face, stone bars of soap, piles of eyeglasses, human lampshades and all that?

Ah! to make it terrible, unfrontably terrible, lest it happen again, because -- and this is the worst thing about Auschwitz, Treblinka and the others -- they were NOT terrible,

not too terrible for people to do to each other, not too terrible to happen and happen -- only happen -- then not be happening any more, the ocean surface as calm after storm as before.

Bodies are bodies, killing many no different from killing one except logistically; and killing one is as easy as being killed: you drop the body and it stays there until moved. Or you are tortured, starved, suffer or witness a pain which is only itself and is or is not until it is gone,

and there is thwarted love, numbness, terror, apathy, disgust, things cut off, odd juxtapositions of sexual parts, which are only parts -- so MUCH is only what it is! Each horror colors its instant, no horror persisting like its idea.

We, who have only the idea of it, suffer a horror uncauterized by the flare of actuality, telling ourselves it cannot be confronted, a dangerous lie, since what we cannot confront, we are doomed to repeat,

and what even the commandants could not confront was the horror of the ordinary insisting on being ordinary, the way its ordinariness became inseparable from the rest of their ordinary days, ordinary children, eyeglasses, lamps, faces, walls,

the way they could no longer create significance, give any outside an inside, any smile or voice a magic, lest they create the wrong meaning, not what was meant at all, knowing how easy it is to do.

What Mr. Hubbard Taught Me

You sit across from me, fading in and out
of the room as your past envelopes you,
lets go of you; you follow the commands
I give you, as I have sat across from others,
following the same commands, unprogramming
the same idiot computer. You expose
before both of us the part of the mind
where we don't live any more, with its maimings
and betrayals, bad westerns and cosmic
B movies; we look at it, wincing-- you wince,
and I let that wince be as it is-- until
the phantoms fade away in our daylight,
and we laugh (you laugh, and I
let that laughter be).

We return to a safer world
where we have only begun to live,
return casually, as if we've always been here.
Was the lamp this bright when we began?

"Unsafe" now must be more than thieves, terrorists:
We must deny our own knowing, and this
becomes harder as the miasma of the past
blows away, letting us know what we know.
Not that whole mind full of lost games
can make us forget now who plays our games.

But I KNOW what safeness we've created when,
wound up by the long session, I walk down
Alvarado Street to a coffee shop
for a 1:00 a.m. strawberry sundae and watch
waitresses and fellow customers, custom-staled,
each in automatic grimace of forgotten grief,
waiting and consuming, a solid, automatic
dully violent world, foreign to me--

but familiar, too, for they live in the mind
that you and I just visited and left,
that banal vicious place where no one lives anymore,
a dark fugitive corner that exists for us
like the Hell of an extinct savage faith,
a place that happened aeons ago
and doesn't happen anymore.

Strange anachronism to find myself
among its denizens, squatters in the hovel
we deserted. I had forgotten
so many could huddle in that cramped space.
How can we reach them there?
But I'm from there myself. It's my mind,
yours too; we played our myriad roles
to help create it, and we know
how to open it to gradual view,
as tame as a child's picture book,
and wince, laugh, and make it safe.

Just knowing that, thinking it,
drew from a greying waitress's face
across the thinner air of a particular counter
a smile that was almost what she herself
wanted her face to say.

The Bluff

We'd stand on the bluff at St. Clair Park and look down to the tiny houses by the tracks and away to the rim of toy green trees beyond the unseen Mississippi, and because it seemed so distant, we didn't imagine it a place we could ever be in, much like where we were. We filled it with dreams, saw it as we saw being a grown-up or driving a car or having one's own house or just about all of life to a child -- even being a BIG kid in third grade. It was a step DOWN from one neighbor's wall to another's down-hill garage, but I remember the thrill, standing on that flat graveled roof, to think I was really standing on a ROOF!

That's what childhood is for: being unable to be or do or have anything except by pretending. Even the toys we are allowed are pretend things, aids for the pretense challenged. Most of the world is thereafter colored by having once pretended it, and one can spend the rest of one's life realizing "I'm really touching a breast!" "I'm really a soldier!" "I'm really dying!" --

stepping through looking glass within glass, so that all of life remains on the verge of becoming magic the instant one remembers (I'm in an OFFICE, like Dad! I'm filling out a tax form!) that one is a child, pretending.

I'm Over Here- in Next Week

A gaunt, hard-eyed face, hand shading eyes,
squints over the rim across the basin,
spots a tiny swirl of dust. They're coming.
"How long?" "They'll be here in three days."
Nothing to do but slouch, smoking, and watch
what is three days away.

If this were a movie, it would be death approaching
(tall, gaunt, on a coal-black horse,
implacable) or the cavalry to save the day or
the stage to be held up. What's odd is, these men

HAVE three days the way one has
a knife or a girl. You may know something
will happen in three days: That future
is vaguely there, a hope or fear. But these guys
can SEE it. It's right out there, happening
before their eyes.

That's what space is about, that feeling,
when first you see the Great Plains or
lean out over Grand Canyon, urgently
reminding your body that it cannot fly
and yourself that this certainty of flight
is not the body's - that feeling of hugeness
(or tininess): We say we HAVE all this space,

but it's time we're looking at, future
(even death, way down there) and past-
what is leaving and can be seen to do so
long after it would be only memory
to city or forest folk.

Imagine, you say farewell; Your lover
rides off; and each morning you climb the hill
to see how far the tiny form has gone
until the world's blue roundness veils
the equation of time and space,
turning past and future into hazy pictures
framed on walls or sketched in dreams.

And even where no dust ascends, just knowing
that blue mountain right over there
(you could stretch out your arm and touch it)
is three-days ride is...it's like touching
next week. And if, looking at a star,
you can comprehend the light years,
you are looking long past your body's death
or birth. What, then, must you be?

Doll House

I sit in the bathroom,
noticing how precisely the planes
of floor, walls and ceiling
angle away from me, making
just this very space. Suddenly
my body is a tiny doll
in a tiny box-within-a-box;
I feel, not constricted, but poised
on the tip of freedom,
as if I can be the doll
or the room or the sunshaft
that detaches each shape from the other,
can move my finely articulated little doll
through its miraculously detailed doll house
where each chair, each painting,
each graven coin on the tiny dresser
is real, one can touch it, move it about,
as charmed as a child who,
wishing a toy house real, makes a wish
and is all the way inside, looking out,
charmed more to find on the bed,
looking at me from a tiny doll -- yes!
looking at ME! -- one who knows, as if,
leaping the gap from eyes to eyes,
joining me in this unlimited place
from which we admire the distance
between our dolls as if viewing together
a Vermeer and marveling at the tricks
of sunlight and airy space,
as if we can exchange bodies as easily
as children trade dolls, but with less upset,
as if, now touching you, the touching
is not in these vivid tactile ticklings,
but in our agreement to experience
this contact of dolls as "me touching you",
as when one child points a finger and shouts:
"Bang Bang! You're dead!" and the other child
convulses, groans, and topples to the floor,
yes, the me and you, or our partaking
in this finger-thing called touching
or this eye-twinkle-thing called looking
is an agreement as purely playful
as the bang of bullets shot from fingers,
or, for that matter, from guns,
tiny dolls crumpling up each other,
compelled by agreements and pretenses
as constrictive as these eggshell-thin,
almost transparent dollhouse walls
that, around us as we notice each other,
accidentally slipping out of
our half-asleep dolls, keep vanishing.
I lay my doll back on its pillow
beside yours, close its eyes,
and say, "I seem to be in a woods
somewhere, gliding down a stream
full of eddies and ripples,
branches sweep past overhead, very
vivid," and you say, "I'm not sure
where this is, but it's high
over an ocean, and it's snowing,"
and we lie there, stretching out
the early morning, waking up
in different places, different universes,
together.

Doorman

When we came in, one agreed
to stand near the door and keep it open
just a crack (We feared it might slam shut)
in case, wearied of walls, clocks,
and family albums, we decided to leave.

The door grows heavier, requiring
more effort and attention.
The one at the door would like to leave it,
join the party, but can't let it slam shut.

Some try to lure or taunt or force
the doorman away from the door. Some
are merely playful, but others
(deeply attached to the furniture)
hope to see the door lock shut,
so that the rest of us can never leave
and abandon them here.

As the party grows duller, the door
presses harder. The doorman wishes
some of us would waken from our stupor
and help hold open the door.

The doorman can't get our attention,
can't keep the door from snapping shut--

O! Wake up! Hurry! The doorman
is leaving!

Nude Ascending a Staircase

We are doppelgangers, each nearly double
what we were once (mere slips of things),
together quadruple. And we weretwoish
to begin with: Watching a naked ass ascend
the stairs just before me: So doubly arranged,
the matched moon-wrinkles parting and rejoining,
but deeply parted, bulging with separateness,
so that it's even odds whether a body's joining
at the top is enough to make it one thing,
not two, since we each split at the middle
and become matched pairs-- how very columnally
and pearishly paired! -- the plump Tweedle-dee
and -dum of us, ending at last in twin feet and
toes (now we're each TENfold) whose knobbliness
denies the sleek globes from which they descended.
But there, at the point of branching, an ass
earnestly laboring, one by one, up the stairs--
THERE'S the point of interest,
the body debating with itself whether it be
a whole or a pair: incompletely severed,
an interrupted mitosis. When my body attaches
to yours, what a miracle of unison from, at LEAST,
a quartet!

Dreaming

In my dream, the little bodies
came buzzing in with airplanes
and cars and newspapers and
guns. I stood my little body
before them and made it say,
"You cannot kill a dream."
They shot that body down,
trampled it, ran bulldozers
over it and forgot its name.
I said -- but how could I,
then, speak? But it's my dream,
and I spoke, saying, "You cannot
kill a dream." They were
frightened, and one said,
"It's the books! His books remain!"
So they burned the libraries, shot
the teachers, outlawed the printer
and the pen. And I said,
"You cannot kill a dream." "It must be
the wind in the leaves", they said,
and defoliated every tree, making
of the earth a charred desert.
And I said, "You cannot kill
a dream." Now they began to point
at one another: "It is YOU
who speaks!" "No -- YOU! He has
contaminated YOU!" Then they began
to hunt each other down. When only
one remained, panting, leaning
on his gun, I said, "You cannot
kill a dream." "It is the earth
herself cries out!" he said,
and pressed a button that destroyed
the earth. Then you and I, my
friend (for you are here, in the dream),
we said, "You cannot kill a dream."

How Many Oaks for a Seven/Eleven

I used to take long walks on sunny days,
but after all this talk of skin cancer,
some of my oldest and most familiar moles
stare at me oddly, perhaps plotting my demise.

I used to lie back between trees or among tall grass
and gaze up at clouds beyond towering trunks and
wheeling pine branches or the twinkling of stalks
humming with beetles and bouncing with green hoppers
or I'd close my eyes to hear the world and
open them to watch a Daddy-long-legs navigate
(from his lofty bridge) my chest. But I know
someone with Lyme disease, so I don't lie down
in grass or forest leaf mold any more or even
walk through unmown fields.

When I was a child, it was a short drive
or a long half-day's walk from the center
of our city to "the country," a seemingly
endless expanse of farms and, mostly,
wilderness, here and there dotted with towns
and, more rarely, cities. Now, in some areas,
driving in certain directions, one can go
for days and never feel that illusory endlessness,
reaching, at best, a thinning of suburbs with
a few farms, perhaps a small state park,
before suburbs resume. And in most areas
in ANY direction, farm and wilderness land fights
a losing battle. We are the in-between generations.
Our children or grandchildren will live
in a seemingly endless expanse of city and suburb,
dotted, here and there, with enclaves of farms
and smaller enclaves of what will pass for
wilderness, containing those few species
who can survive the compression and our fumes.

I used to enjoy picnics, but now, having supplanted
so many trees and plants and bugs with our homes
in order to create safe sanitary spaces for humans
to sleep, eat, etc., it seems outrageous to visit
our human disruptions upon the few decorative
fringes of surviving trees and bugs.

I passed tennis courts and a swimming pool on my walk today -- empty. Even on sunnier days, they are scantily used. They supplanted hundreds of trees and hundreds of thousands of birds, weeds, flowers, thistles, ladybugs, spiders, rabbits and squirrels who were working fulltime at filling our air with oxygen and melodious noises, our soil with nutrients, our eyes with quickness and miraculous mutations of sunlight and air.

I know there are trade-offs, that all creation involves destruction, but it does seem that, having used our bodies to make the world a dangerous place for most other species, we have also made it a dangerous place for ourselves. I don't know where to draw the line -- people need housing -- but it seems there is no project, no boarded-up vacant strip-mall of the near future, worthless enough to protect the trees it will supplant -- no consideration of a trade-off.

If we don't find a better balance, the world will find it's own way (or ours) to kill us off. Perhaps, then, some trees will survive for us to become, but we will have to learn how trees talk. In the absence of wind, they depend upon telepathy (even on windy days, it is hard for them to speak for themselves, or else we'd have listened to their warnings long ago). I fear that in our effort not to hear them, we have killed off our telepathy, so that when we have nothing left to be but trees and vines and beetles, we will lead very lonely lives.

Ecce Eco

Clear Thanksgiving in L.A.
A county away, the hills still smoulder.
It's ecology: From time to time
tinder must burn up; Redwoods persist,
but spores can't penetrate forest litter,
so it must be burned.

Sometimes human homes, whole
human races must be wiped out
for the better overall survival
of what?

Ecology is great
if you're scared to create.

Lovely autumn day. I create
a small part of it, tentatively,
feeling too big, too clumsy
for the crystalline stasis of this earth,
an intricate watch, ruined by too much rewinding:
Delicate! Don't touch!
Beware of the ecology!

Is it still safe to make things with words?
No one has studied the ecology of words.
Perhaps human races must go extinct
from time to time so that language
may be refreshed and take new roots.

Who seeds the new race? We are made again
from our language. Words become dangerous,
politically, sexually, humanly incorrect,
make things, break bones like sticks and stones.

I tear apart, mince, burn up words
like any forest. Where there is wholeness-
ecology, there is destruction. I too:
a wholeness, an ecology, destruction.

I make and unmake. We, wholenesses,
understand a wholeness, an ecology,
a dance, one like ourselves, earth.
An understanding touch will do no harm.

We make this clear blue autumn day,
call it Thanksgiving, and, behold!, it is
thanks giving, a whole world whole,
ecology.

The Gods Grow Impatient

When we say that to God our eternity is the blink of an eye (or whatever God uses for vision), we mean that God is very patient. A child is called to breakfast. He yells "Just a second." 20 minutes later his mother drags him from his room. "What are you DOING! You're late for school! I called you 20 MINUTES AGO!" An eternity to her. To the child, daydreaming, it took no time at all. And in an eyeblink, God dreams the world forever. Dreamers are infinitely patient with their dreaming and as impatient when forced to forego dreaming. Eternity becomes excruciatingly slow for God when He imagines He is us, forced to experience the dream of another to which He cannot contribute. The good news is that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. The bad news is that it can't seem to get out. But I'll resolve all that (I yell from the bathroom) in just a second.

How Long is Eternity?

How long is eternity? Happily ever after runs, say 50 years for the rare couple. That was enough time to lose the 19th-century imagination in a network of hopes and complications. As an african once explained: "We count 'one, two, three, and many.'" Eternity is enough days to blur at the edges. Eternity is enough echoes to suggest that the last line of the song just keeps on fading out. Eternity is one ridge of mountain peaks or one mile of ocean beyond your farthest expectations. Eternity is what seems more than enough, no end in view (years, leaves, dirty dishes, diapers...) at the time, especially if you squint at it or follow it with three dots. Eternity is when the imagination runs out of toes and fingers to count on. There is, of course, another meaning to the word. We are playing it. Your move.

The Day Growing On Me

Around my park bench
motion of eucalyptus leaf,
tall bearded grass, birds, bugs
and kids on bikes
whose Mexican lingo
passes through me
as songlike as cricket chirps-

these motions entwine
and illuminate my thoughts,
hold them up as an old dry wall is held up
by the vines that cling to it.

As I watch,
I scarcely notice my mind's words, stone by stone, crumbling down
from my thoughts until nothing
is left standing in my mind
but the supporting tendrils,

myriad tiny motions,
which become my thought,
so that each gesture of bending grass blade,
each glissando of black and yellow butterfly
is orchestrated by the subtlest touches
of thought.

How Can That Be?

We are eternal?
How can that be?

(I remember so little.)

We are eternal?
What can that mean?

(I can't decide what to do
next weekend.)

But I swear I looked at you,
silently surfing above the crashing seconds,
drenched in the moon-glittered spray
of laughter off the crest of our smiling,

and I knew that no measure
of minutes nor millennia
would serve me to know you,

and I knew you.

Exit Only

I am not from here. Here if we want to laugh, we pay someone to talk to us and make us laugh. If we want to feel poetic-- but I forget how we do that. Where is this place? It is real, but is it

art? And which is, for example, a tree, a baby? Fact? Art? Perhaps arty facts. That was bad. (That's what we say when someone tries to make us laugh for nothing.)

Everything is so solid, it is hard to move the pen. The sky IS a blue bowl -- meteors and satellites must blast through it. (The bowl is shattered.) There is no thin air. You and I are not from here.

If you want to be from here, OK, but I'm not. There is no such thing as alone. To be really alone is to be cut clean of the needs that make alone. Where I'm from I am, and no one is not there, including there. Here (I mean there, where you think we are)

if you want to feel something, you put feeling into a nerve cell and have it tell you you feel something. (Someday you too will grow up to be a nerve cell. Whose?) Here if you want to have fun, you agree with someone else about something. (What's wrong with that? Wrong?) (Had any weather lately?) Where's the

exit? (I can't get out because I'm blocking the door.) (I AM out.) (Out?) Feel how real my skin is (OOH! AH! and OUCH! clockwise, that is)? But you can't touch me! I'm not from here. I don't end in feet. I don't sleep in a big box and be dead in a small one. I don't start one Tuesday and end on a Thursday in years with numbers. I don't come with a name or a file. I don't come from a past.

Nothing can come from a past-- a past is how our appearing here is explained, because if we didn't think we'd always been here or nowhere and that there is not and has never been any other where to be, we'd know that nothing comes from here.

I don't have to like anything. Neither do you. That is, if we were as free as we are. I don't have to make sense. I don't have to be read. I don't have to be fine, thank you. I don't have to be indignant about gestapos and child molesters. I don't even have to have

a living room with a carpet, two easy chairs, a sofa, a coffee table, a book case, a window and flat colored things on the wall. This place is

shit, and shit is full of us. Don't get me

wrong (you can't get me) -- I like it here. I LOVE it here! That's why I'm here; that is, I tried to hate it, and that didn't work, which is love (failed hate): "Leave my room!" I yelled, but it wouldn't budge. (How was I to know that it wasn't my room any more?) So I pretended I'd put it there, and hung ornaments on it. (Want to see my biceps? How about digesting some Chinese food?) But it grows dingy,

nothing stays here except what one doesn't want. I didn't make this place that tries to tell me I can't make anything because anything I make isn't it -- it's only my imagination.

Keep talking, Herr Doktor Universe, because I'm about to remove my imagination and watch you turn back into a piece of (you should be so alive!) shit. "No! No! Keep me interesting or there will be no game left to hold us together! I'll make you a famous poet! Keep me lovely! Exciting! I can make you rich!" Now I can nobly resist the temptation. (Nobly I decide

to stop eating shit.) The walls don't come tumbling down. They get luminous, flimsy, yesterdayed. What about love? Well-- how about I leave my body behind and you can suck my dick? "That's not love! That's SICK!" (Can't you duck my sick?) (Ooh! That was bad.) I'm not where it matters (I'm not from matter) what you think or what you think I think.

Love is...I was going to say what love is. But that's neither here nor there, which is to say (or if not, here is where it is said:): If love is here (I mean there where we think because we think we are where we think we are), then I am not from where love thinks it is. ("But tell us where you are from. Make it exhilarating. Tell us of mountain rivers to the stars and dazzling rainbow dances.") (Mountains? Rivers? Rainbows? Stars? Should I daub myself with rouge made of shit?)

"But this is not poetry, this is not art!" (It's art, but is it Art?) Well, how about I leave my art behind and you can kiss my ass. (Arse longa, but dick longer?) (Ohh! That was goood!) Art is when you want to be interested so you pay someone to be interesting. Isn't this interesting? (No.) Of course not. Where's the door?

Small Disappointments

One of our baby sitters -- Mrs. Sweet? -- really, we had a cheery lady named Margie Sweet -- or maybe Mrs. Pfeiffer -- Mom always said "Oh, Mrs. Pfeiffer's wonderful!" I don't know why, but I was little; I just remember her playing Solitaire. Mom also said that Mrs. Annin spoiled her for other cleaning ladies: Mrs. Annin, whom I used to confuse (because of their names) with another good cleaning lady ("the only good one since Mrs. Annin died"), Anna Smith, dark-skinned, old, but not ancient like Mrs. Annin, who was in her 80's, tiny, as crisp as ironed lace. With later help, Mom, just home, would reach into a window ledge or a crevice in mantel molding and show me her finger tipped with gray smut and say, "Mrs. Annin wouldn't have missed that!"

Well, one of our baby sitters used to turn our lunch plates into happy faces, neat piles of peas for eyes, a tuna salad nose and cantalope-slice smile, for example. (Raisins for eyebrows?) It was a face, you ate it, that was it, the usual disappointment: As a kid I took everything as the promise of something else, something more exciting than banana slices in red cubes of Jell-O. Adults whom adults find wonderful with kids are wonderful with adults. Most kids are appreciative because most kids are more polite than most adults realize.

I recall the fact of those faces, but can't visualize them, only Mom's drawn face, too sharp for its freckles (only happy rosy children had freckles in our picture books). She was still trying to make a go of teaching. She hadn't yet had all seven of us, just two or three. Also I remember the bicycles on the backs of someone's pack of cards (Mrs. Pfeiffer's?) and how kings and queens, intriguing at first, soon became just playing cards.

And what of me do I recall? All of the above is of me. But was I happy? What right have I to answer for that child? If you'd asked him then, he'd have said yes or no, depending on whether his snail-sun had just moved in or out of his clouds, which happened every few minutes (I was too old already for a baby's second to second) -- and that is a kind of happiness, though nothing like a shiny pink-gold smiling slice of cantalope.

Among the Missing

We must trust, even when there is no body
to see, no tiniest trace of the others,
that we are all here, all reachable,
not one of us ever irrevocably lost.

Otherwise we each become a child who plays
hide and seek so cleverly that none can find him
and we think we'll just stay hidden,
but at last wonder where everyone's gone
(we want to brag about the cleverness).
By then the seekers, deciding there must be
holes in the universe, become persuaded
that one can be utterly lost.

Then (innocent yet of death) we fear
for the persistence of play, invent lies
and compulsions to prevent others
and ourselves from leaving, say
WE ARE ALL ONE, so that there will be
no leaving, or say WE ARE EACH
UTTERLY SEPARATE AND ALONE, so that
there is no one else to leave.

Thus has our play been protected
out of existence, leaving us stuck
with each other in the barriers of the game
(turbulences, distances, rocks, bodies, aeons)
to the point where, even if we recall
our separateness, we can no longer
reach out to one another.

Like wind over water, we are perceived
only in what we create. In the quick, rippling
cross-currents, all perceptions flow,
come in question like the changing faces
behind the face in the mirror.

No creation can hold its creator, not
soft eyes nor hard poetry; no perception
can replace knowing you are here
and knowing I know.

Immortality

Immortality is no picnic.
Once you know you aren't your body
and don't die, but hang around the game
and eventually re-enter it - you can
no longer console yourself that soon
you'll be out of all this, free
of hate and sorrow, all debts cancelled;
that when the sun burns out, you and
everyone you know will be long gone.

In these bodies we can touch one another.
If this planet withers or explodes,
shall we be able to find other worlds aswarm
with organisms we can learn to operate?
shall we learn again to know one another
as lichen? As viri? As spirit guardians of forests?
As planets? Stars? Or can we as bodiless spirits
learn to communicate?

Or are we doomed one day
a finite number of days hence
to rove forever more through galaxies
and each other oblivious, utterly alone
(O we must learn now to dream!),
all senses extinguished in the embers of earth,
lost with the last body's sensory tuning devices?

For a short time (how many lifetimes?)
we can work together here
where the frozen cosmic void
and a star's white heat are poised
delicately in this sphere of blue-gold days
where this flesh and what sustains it
are not instantly frozen, incinerated, crushed by gravity,
poisoned by atmosphere or chewed up by microbes.

How shall we spend that time?
Amassing metal on an eroding rock?
Let us learn to perceive and communicate
with and without our bodies, to be alone,
to be with one another, to play, to build new
playing fields, to speak nebulae and vacuums
and be understood, to touch one another
without hands, without skin,
to let go.

Between Times

Take any group of people--
if all they can agree about is the weather,
then for the ten minutes each morning
while they wait for their bus, chatting,
nothing else will exist for them,
only the weather. What one feels or sees
that no other feels or sees
(whether rust's diamond glint on a sign
or an ancient frozen grief)
is unreal and slips between the beats
of noticing the weather and saying
what one is expected to say.

And that is the physical:
What we've all agreed is here,
its beat the beat of our agreement,
time an agreement to be aware
only of that which is in common
to every universe and to stay
on the beat.

Is it the mind wandering when you notice
between one awareness of the pattern on the rug
and the next that you have been elsewhere,
or is where you have been
what comes between two flickers
of the pattern on the rug,
like grace notes decorating
the one-note thudding
of the physical?

The physical has a beat.
If it is all you can hear,
it becomes a wall of sensation,
impenetrable, being all that is.
If you can hear a quicker, finer beat,
the physical becomes first
a fast flicker, then, as you become subtler,
a slow slow thing,
chasms universe-wide between each beat,
time enough (or timelessness)
to syncopate,

time to interpolate your own transitions,
which, to those who know only the physical,
appear as the indescribable grace of a dancer,
the impossibility of a gun that appears
lightning-quick in your hand,
the endless hanging in air over a dunk shot,
the wit whose flashes of connection
dawn slowly on listeners over centuries,
as if the physical were a slow-motion projection
of an artist's instant universe.

For you have your own universe.
It is not dream fragments
of the physical. The physical
is fragments of your universe.
What is agreed upon drives out of attention
what is only one's own.
The gaps between the nanoseconds
are unspeakably rich.

If you plunge into them
(or are plunged into them unseasonably
by drug or torment -- which makes the richness
hellish), you find you can predict the physical,
because your own universe makes sense --
YOUR sense and only to you,
so that the random details we all agree upon
(including the notion that you belong
to a brain in a head in a room in a place in a century...)
are seen to follow inevitably
(a perfect music) from the pattern
of your creation.

At first, you don't predict;
you marvel: How the physical keeps returning,
somehow right on the beat,
how between rug pattern and rug pattern,
no matter how elaborate a wealth
of image and drama intervenes
(wavy design surging
to become upheaval of ocean,
evolution of species, dimming
of an old cold sun to the choiring
of immaculate angels whose voices
interweave to become a wavy design...),
always, just in time emerges
the next instant of the physical
and everything (rug, orange peels
in the glass ashtray, her face
questioning yours) fits.

Then you notice you know what will happen next,
as any conductor knows the score.
Next you can make things happen,
for example, speak (in everyone's universe)
from your own, so that those who hear you
cannot help but hear you from their own universes
and become just a tiny bit aware of the flicker,
of the walls' getting thinner,
of solidity itself as a bad pun,
of agony as the hearer's moan.
But if you were plunged into your own universe,
you will be in, but not of it,
agog at your own creation
as if it were being done to you
by a self you cannot quite be.
Drugs slip you into the fissures between the seconds,
where you cling to recurrences of the ordinary,
but are swept away, the physical flashing
briefly into view as the sky
between green engulfments
blinds one who, flailing, drowns.

Whether you are terrified
or wowed by your drowning,
you emerge to a physical
more solid than ever,
for the solidity of the world
is a function of your fear
of what you have created or might create.
The drug overwhelms you with what you have made,
so that you cling to the world
with whose making you more than ever insist
you have nothing to do.

It is a harder flatter world, a tired chaos
in which you know all can be predicted,
but can predict nothing,
in which to be aware
is to beware.

The drug becomes an escape
from the trap it tightens,
an elastic leash
that snaps you back hard.

Trying both to regain and lose
the sense of the world
as a flickering thing,
you submerge yourself in anything
with a hard, fast, hypnotic beat,
grind against walls of sound and incense,
strobe-shattered, so that for you
even the physical becomes
too fine a beat to sense.

You live in a subset of time
as limited as talk of the weather,
whole minutes passing during which
the world around you goes past
as unnoticed as once your own universe
slipped away between the seconds.

You notice, between the heavy
acid beats -- notice vaguely,
as if drifting into a daydream--
that someone is beside you,
speaks of love, is crying...
and once more the strobe flashes
and you are real and hip
and nothing else matters.

But if you can accept
our old agreement
and re-enter into it newly
and willingly each instant,
glad of a way for us to know we are
with each other, if you can remember
your own richness and goodness,
can trust yourself to do nothing
to destroy the game,

then you can move gently
and easily among the microseconds,
stretching out time as one
who motionless studies rainbows
in translucent wings of a fly
at rest an instant on a forearm.

Then you can play.
Then you can catch a smile
from a stranger on bus or elevator
or on a printed page
and know there are other players,
no end of play.

Cynicism

Cynics say faith and religion try to explain away the world's chaos and mystery. Sometimes it's the opposite: They try to explain all the things we KNOW, though we see no reason in this universe why we SHOULD know.

A cynic is one who cannot face how much he knows, for it is mysterious to him that one can know -

and threatening, because he has done much that he does not want to know, nor know that it can be known.

Cynicism, then, is an attempt to explain away what, despite the world's chaos, we know.

Why SHOULD there be a reason in this universe for our knowing? Why should we expect the playground to teach us the game we play?

Some religion is pretended knowledge. Some religion is refusal to know. Some religion is an excuse for knowing - an apology to the physical universe for patronizing a competitor.

Cynicism is embarrassment about knowing.

If you know and know that you know, you can dispense with both excuses and embarrassment.

Someone Somewhere

Faith is the certainty,
even in the absence of perceivable life,
that there is someone there,
and not only someone,
but an infinite abundance of someone.

We dress up someone as Self, thinking,
how can one lose certainty
of self, but one can, as easily
as looking in the mirror.

Then we name it others,
until the day we extend a trembling candle,
whispering, "Is there anyone there?"

Then we call it God,
so that it has nothing to do
with us, and this works, except only God
is allowed to have certainty,

while faith has become our own
cancerous replica of certainty,
the machine's decision that machines
are not designed to operate smoothly
in the absence of the idea
of someone somewhere.

Falling

Lovers lurch along in blinders,
something in them hoping to be tripped up
by a certain twist of smile, tilt
of cigarette or catch of voice,
worshipping half-glimpsed memories
of beauty their own admiration created long ago,
unwilling to know they can dream up new beauty.

When stumbled across,
it is called falling in love or
love at first sight.

Pain and numbness bury their inklings
of having made it and lost it before,
pain not only of the loss,
but of having made one another hideous;
pain that taught them it is dangerous
to decide to create love,
so that now they solve inability to love
by waiting to fall unavoidably
into a love that is already there--
and for which they cannot be considered
in any way to blame;

pain once bought off
by denying they could ever create:
"Leave me alone!
I'm just a harmless victim.
If you'll go away,
I'll lie here like a stone,
dreamless."

Falling into it again,
the buried pain uncovered,
they cling to it --
having insisted they can make no other --
until one pain overwhelms the other.

Do we fall into love or love's open grave?
Love is made when I put there
a dream so becoming that someone agrees
to become it and dreams up
an equally compelling dream for me to become.

Those who forget how to dream
fall into old nightmares
while their bodies make whatever bodies make
when those who can't make love make love,
the dead disinterring the dead.

Family Pictures

I gobble them up like potato chips--
hard to stop when there are any left.
Nearly midnight -- why did I start?

Those of "me" have an outside I can't get into:
All the people I would show someday--
show WHAT? If that chubby kid
with scruffy hair and fat lips
was me, let HIM show them all.

Strange seeing him, stranger seeing
what he thought he saw.
Nostalgia runs its keen needle
back through the material, looping
and knotting, re-attaching the past;
each time through I have it newly,
changed.

There, for example, is Mom,
Freckled, my (now) age, afraid of
cameras because one eye crosses. I see
that in her story she played a part
quite unlike the supporting role she played
in mine. All I know of her is a few
of her crazinesses and tendernesses and
all her disappointments (etched on my brain
by an acid tongue). I was one of her favorite
disappointments. Being disappointed
was her best way to avoid looking
too closely at what she thought she wanted.

We decide ourselves into corners,
die rather than discover we can change
our minds. The life we dreamed we'd live
gets postponed, jammed into a narrowing
future, screaming at us: When, O when?
But we have a marriage, mortgage, kids,
obligations, mountains of agreement,
impassible, impossible to know just WHAT
we want, so we decide: Somehow something
Will set us free to have what we want,
and we pray for deliverance, which, under
the terms of our prayer, can only
be cancer, a car accident, a stroke...

(We were expecting a fairy godmother,
but our prayers find the paths
of least resistance), so that when
our deliverance comes, we moan:
"O Lord, not me! Why me! How can this be?"
(You can't always get what you want--
unless you want what you want when
you want it.)

You can tell the pictures
of her generation from mine, but,
where once I saw fading brown quaintness,
an antique time like a toy house,
now I see similarities:

My brothers and sisters are alive,
but each encased in obsolete decisions
enough to have killed
our childhoods several times over.

There's a baby prototype of one of us
screeching with joy. Does he remember
what that's about? Maybe Daddy at
the camera made googly eyes to fetch

such ecstasy, a bargain at the price.

I could look at these pictures for hours:
Uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents,
great grandparents I never met, almost,
on fading prints, trans-parents.

Families are an easy way to cast
your stories. In school someone new
walks up and seems to "loom" -- the
friend for life? The arch enemy?
Or just a walk-on never again to be
seen? You look in vain for the clues:
Lingering camera shots, the swelling
background music, etc. (WILL
time tell?) But with Mama and Papa
there is no doubt! No need a
casting director or audition:
When Mama debuts, stage center,
15 times your size, with huge
gentle hands, that certain something,
and pat answers to everything, you KNOW
this has got to be one of the leads.

When Mama and Papa disappear too soon
like extras, we don't accept it;
We go on quests in search of them
and write symbolic books about it.)

I saw my grandmother earlier tonight,
breathing (in loud sighs) still, but
attenuating, fading, almost to an
old photograph of herself, as if
already as we spoke, I was among
these pictures. She kept saying,
uninflected, broken-record style,
how good it is to be with family
(wasn't I enjoying my visit?).

Later I strolled past our old
neighborhood and noticed where
the elms were no longer. I see that
several lifetimes ago I was me.

Who's that! My God, it's my young,
not-yet mother dolled up like a flapper,
ripe and strutting (1940), twinkling
with the mischief of (only) the pose -- on
the back she scrawled "me!"

In 1970
(sister's wedding) she's in a wheelchair
with a copper wig and eyes crazed
to brightness by the pain pills.
Dad looks ruddy and dignified, mellowed,
shortly before his last stroke. Grandpa
shrivels from picture to picture,
looking more withered and more gentle
(In his stern prime he tossed
hundred-pound sacks of potatoes about
like laughing children), less like
someone's papa and more like someone's
grandpa, suit and tie clumsily
disguising the suspenders, the long
underwear, musky, dark odor, Yiddish
paper dropped in his lap, large, mysterious
erose mole on his shoulder when he'd
let me get in bed beside him, intimate
mountain, and tell me about David and
Goliath or the coat of many colors again.

All of them glassy and transparent towards

the end. You can see through the shiny shell
or chrysalis. (I only hope I'll know how
to fly when I shed this cocoon.)

There's a birthday card, Dad to Mom;
He filled the blank page with doggeral
(Damned tears, hard to read!) about how
it was rough for her and not what he'd
promised, but there was still time,
he's "not licked yet" (Are you now?).
It all rhymes, finally linking "future"
to love being the "suture" that
binds them. Now she's dead (with the
sutures of several operations outlasting
the tissue they knit) and he's
remarried and dead both, and I've
lost track of them, and I don't know
if they know (or do I but dream that
only bodies die, as moving pictures
flicker out in numbers, then the
reel is changed) that there's still time,
and all promises will be kept. These
pictures all have miles to go before
anyone sleeps.

In the background
bridesmaids, groomsmen and friends of friends
play with the gitchee-goo babies -- and
none of us remember (ever knew?) who they are:
Even here in the heart of things
are bit players, extras, unidentified cameos,
alien faces, stars in their own albums,
cut off in shadows here, cherished there.
There I am, a baby, with a dazzlingly eager
smile. Can I still smile that way? (What
did we DO before we had cameras?) More
recently, pictures that still hurt:
my wedding pictures (We took none
of the divorce) (There's the one
of my bride I found, visiting home
after the divorce, still on my mother's
shelf, but turned face down) -- all smiles,
both of us, but it is bare-assed obvious
that I'm glowing all over her like a bear
rooting with his snout in an abandoned
hive full of honey, while she's smiling off
into the middle distance. Why did it
take us four years to understand our own
wedding pictures?

There's a big Chicago
family picture taken right after
I shamed Mom by putting my hand
like a cup over the top of her head.
(I was a foot taller and directly
behind her. She hated the fact
that she was losing her hair.)
I told myself it was a joke.

(After all, you don't just say
to decent people: "I'm miserable
and bored with you all. You're banal,
unworthy of my profundity, and anyway
none of you grasp my true worth...."
Far better to have a delightful
sense of humor, final solution to the
other-people problem.)

See the thirty smiling relatives,
Mom, too, trying to smile, as I
wince, eyes squinched shut (or
was it just the flash bulb?)

There go each of my brothers and sisters
through states of beauty and hideousness.
When one begoggled sister looked odd, someone
persuaded her she was ugly, basically,
unalterably ugly, so she wears
her beauty awkwardly, smile
lop-sided, quick to retreat behind
an ironic shrug, a wise-crack. One brother
was so often assured of his cuteness
that he ripples through these pictures
as smoothly as a surfer rides a wave.

All in all a peaceful production-- not
a generation of martyrs and warriors-- yet.
When Hitler came to erase us, we were
three generations away from Vilna.
When nobody is paralyzing us on film,
we say things like, "Wasn't that a good
meal!" and so forth. But among ourselves
we are a clever bunch, more than one's own
family has a right to be. I will show them
this poem. My brothers and sisters are sports:
They think I'm someone special. So do I
(an occupational hazard of being me).
Once we even talked for maybe an
hour without me having to be funny.
In time my long letters get short answers.

The two with children have a wealth
beyond my belief. Four AM and I hear a nephew
whimper "Mom!" weakly. I fill in for Mom
(A poet's day is never done). He'd had a bad
dream--forgot what--fine now (Will he
remember, waking, bearded hulk of uncle
at bedside cautiously treading the
nursury-tiled waters of his dreams?)

Imagine having someone to call you
to take care of their bad dreams.
Their limitless loveableness must mean
we have more love to give than we'd reckoned.

I don't see how they'll ever turn into
us, or are we concealing our own abysses
of loveableness? They have such silky
soft skin with little faint blue veins
over the temples, and their voices
chirp, and their eyes flash and
their logic unravels with the charm
of a kitten in a ball of yarn.
Though they took me briefly away
from the pictures, the children belong
in this poem because they are still being
the pictures they're going to look at.

I suppose someone could click me up
right now -- flash! Poet leans over
kitchen table, writing, 19 May, 1979.
I'll look and say, "Was I that fat already?"
(hoping someone will reply,
"I don't think you're fat.")

I notice that, though since the criminal
day I first looked down upon my tiny,
empty gesticulating body in a match-box
room full of other doll-house bodies,
I have not counted myself among those
eligible for death's benefits, yet it is
of fascination to me that this Dean Blehert
body will, in certain fact, die dead
and rot very much so in a time

like all times, very nowish even,
you could brush your body's teeth
in that time or watch TV, but your body
is busy, bit by bit, becoming
root and slime that will not smile
on command, unphotogenic, over-exposed.
It's not me, but I've grown attached--
No that's the wrong punch line; the point is,
you have your woman, wide open, unashamed,
and there you are, two motherfucked bodies,
all the intimacies you can eat;
see, just bodies, nothing dirty or
mysterious about it -- but still,
the next day you don't go to work
naked, and a lady nursing her baby
on the bus still makes you make yourself
not look too directly, and an X-rated
porno flick is a teensy bit outrageous
at first; you just don't get used to
certain things easily.

Death, too,
is nakedness, and it is strange
to look through these family albums
and see my death, the deaths of my
brothers and sisters and children
yet unborn and your deaths all
so blatantly delineated.

You look up
about to say, "Look here, this one
shows the crotch hair and everything--
I didn't think they ever showed that
in TIME," but the others
are all smirking at someone's old-fashioned
hat, and, decent folk all, no one's
noticed that they're looking at pictures
of their own deaths, and the emperor
ain't got no clothes on, and
I wonder, is it ME reading something
into innocent pictures?

I don't think so;
What else can they be? There's
"me" then and here's "me" now, and
fifty years from now there's "me" here
and here's "me" where?

Well, maybe
I'm the sort to undress a woman with
my eyes, then cry "obscene!" (And if
they noticed, they might weep bitterly,
imagining death's strip-tease goes
deeper than we do. Our nakedness
shames even death, out-stripping flesh and bones.)

But it remains titillating that
I (however "I") will die--about a page
sooner than when I first mentioned it.
Someone quick start taking lots of pictures
of Dean Blehert. (I hope my friends
save my letters.) Save me! Some day
I'll be a rare and valuable find. Maybe
even deductible (Culture, you know).
(Death is a myth. Taxes remain.)

Anyway, this is part of what Dean Blehert
was thinking about on 19 May '79,
and, if you follow me, on whenever
you're thinking it for him. I guess
this is a picture. If it's a good enough
poem, some scholar someday will hunt down

my old family albums, sneeze, and speculate on which pictures contributed what to it.

That's OK -- they're all good people and bear looking at. They were all cute babies and all the parents had children who promised "brilliance" and each starred in his own tale, told by an idiot perhaps, but signifying EVERYTHING to the brilliant idiot.

Why doesn't this poem end? Because it still bothers me that the pictures stopped right there when everything else went on and on (until now I see the pictures newly so that THEY go on too):

Mom went on and her body got eaten up by cancer, then by maggots, the babies got uncute with some compensation in wisdom....

This is not a new story either, but I think I want my poem to keep going the way a child keeps thinking up stratagems to keep Mom from saying good night (One more story! One more kiss goodnight!), the way it's hard to leave a dwindling party that you keep thinking is about to happen, the way it made me cry once to have Natasha and Pierre get middleaged and suddenly there weren't any more pages to read in War and Peace.

This is so Goddamned trite: Grecian Urns, Dorian Grey and Time Marches On. We're dying, reader, dying. What a fascinating lie! I can't argue with all these pictures of radiant brides and grooms grimacing because no one is to know they're as lovesick as they feel. They won't stand for immortality. They're changed now.

So what? So fuck death and dying! Everyone stand absolutely still! Nobody leaves this instant until I've solved the mystery of us all so that nothing is ever lost!

Oh, that's right, nothing IS ever lost. Forgive me -- I'd forgotten. I live where we create what we are; I'm just a visitor here, and what we create, we can always create -- why else the poignant pang of a picture, stirring us to create so palpably the presence the picture tells us (hence the pang) is gone?

I live in L.A., where we MAKE pictures .
Visiting in hicksville Minnesota
I got caught up in the story.

Nothing is ever lost. Cluttered with cherished memories, taking pains to forget nothing, no wonder we believe in loss and invent a God who numbers and records for us each dropped sparrow feather, each unheard tick! of twig landing on leaf litter;

losing our facts,

confusing names, at length, dazed, in a
"Home," clutching at polite, hardy hands
to call a grandchild by a son's name,

like an over-ambitious shopper, arms
overflowing with packages, trying to
pick up one without dropping another,
teetering, dropping all, clattercrack, shit!

No wonder we believe in loss, cherishing
its tokens, treasuring dying things,
mistaking that which creates for
oblivion, afraid to forget anything,
forgetting ourselves, as lost as we think we are
what must be remembered in order to BE,

roaming bewildered through albums
of unfamiliar faces, pictures without
setting or story, must be someone
else's family, but, there! -- isn't
that almost, just a twinge, a familiar
eyebrow? (Heart flutters!)

Fool!

When will you know again
who makes familiar, who endows dearness?

These pictures are sure interesting--
I could look at them for centuries.
"It's a lie!" I tell us. Good.
Excellent. Let us lie together --
Let's tell lies with happy endings
and noble deeds and love and courage --
let's tell corny lies. Oh, my
disappointed mother, my apologetic
father, I wish for you only the courage
to carry out your corniness!

Let us sit down together and tell
tales of kings and weep. O, we can
lie better than this. It's almost
daylight. I've spent the whole night
wherever this is. Only the truth
can tell a lie. Lie like the truths
we are! We are so interesting,
my friends. See! I die! Take
interest!

We end as any piece
of music ends: The end is whenever
you end it. Taking a picture,
for example, ends that. SNAP!
(A snap-shot.) This poem doesn't want
to end.

(Up all night -- is my body tired? I feel
only a dazzled swarm of clarity.)

All lies lead to truths, their tellers.
My mother, so lovely and lively,
thought she was ugly, so made herself
a hag (and I believed her and was hagridden).
Cancer cleaned up the pieces. That one,
Dean, he thought he was better than others
because he had deeper thoughts. Which way is
deeper? For whom? If my thoughts are
deeper than you can think, what good are they?

But that Dean, he HAD to have deeper
thoughts, because he was fat, clumsy,
his hair wouldn't stay down, and he was no good
with machines, woodwork, sports, getting

along well with others (C-) or anything "useful". So he made himself a poet, which backfired, as THAT Dean Blehert was a cliché, so I am making a better one. Truth will clean up the pieces. You are quite beautiful, reader, and I could talk to you for hours. Good morning.

The Latest in Spring Fashions

Lightly lift and let fall
the barefoot tight-sprung body
over tiny resilient green blades
that tickle the toes minutely.

Dress it up, fold it and put it
in a machine driven by tamed explosions,
hurl it down the long humming asphalt ribbon,
all wound up to eject and unfold
smiling at a door.

Stretch it out on a soft shelf,
leaving the clustered bellows in the chest
to their automatic huff-sough,
huff-sough, going swiftly nowhere
through the night.

Marvelous manikin, spirit's microcostume:
Make it say hello. Say goodbye now. Say
I love you! Say "HELP! It hurts!"
Say "Ah, the wonder of it all!"
Now convulse it with the jolly barking
that squinches up the face and wobbles
the gut. Now let the eyes exude
bright accessory droplets.

You do it so well! You fool me
utterly! Now bend its supple neck back
and let its shiny eyes grow vast and dreamy
and full of stars. Poor puppet,
flap the flimsy arms and have it say,
"Alas, I cannot fly!"

How DO you keep it up?
If I were a body
could this lovely sorrow
be mine?

The Feeding

Some objected it was too radical:
"Never has an entire people been
fed before. It will be expensive,
difficult, and there will be protests."
"Protests!" said the leader, rolling his eyes-- "Ah,
protests...well then, we'll FEED the protesters!
Nothing like a good hot meal to silence
a protester," and we all laughed.

Most of them were fed within minutes
of arriving by bus or train. Sometimes
thousands were fed in a very short time,
men, women, children, babes in arms --
all were fed.

You ask why they didn't rebel? Well,
first of all, it was well organized.
And they were told they were going
to their barracks to rest-- what a shock
when they entered the giant, very clean
mess halls to find, not bunks, but tables
laden with food -- and by then, of course,
it was too late to do anything about it.

In the early years, it was much more
hit and miss -- small State Kitchen Units
scouring the countryside for people to feed,
rounding up the hungry in groups of 20
or 30, marching them into the woods, often
to a grassy area by a stream for a picnic lunch.
It was difficult to watch: the children holding hands,
women clasping their children close, no napkins
or silverware, old men rolling up their sleeves, knowing
the food was about to be served.

Afterwards, when the mess had been cleaned up,
the Kitchen Unit would look for more people
to feed.

A small percentage of the arrivals
were put to work in the kitchens or as waiters
to help feed the others. Sometimes a man
had to lead his own wife and children to the food.

It succeeded all too well, and yet
it failed. When the regime fell,
for all the millions that had been fed,
millions of others remained hungry.
But in some towns you couldn't find
a single hungry child. Whole communities
had been fed. Completely fed. Though
here and there, emerging from a dark attic,
a ragged, gaunt form...

Ferry to San Juan Island

This poem is about you.
You are dozing, your head resting
on my left thigh as I write this,
my notebook on my right thigh.

Between my thighs an alertness
is about you. My left hand
rests on your two hands, crossed
beneath your breasts, not where it would
naturally rest (on your left breast)

because there are people around who don't
know us. It is impolite, among strangers,
to appear to know each other too well,
like bringing a treat,
but not enough for everyone.

You are enough for all of me,
but are not me; you are the intimate
face of everyone.

When you are with me, strangers
smile upon us, never again quite
strange.

This poem is about an idea
I have of you. Easy now to see you
as my idea of you, the gentle
malleable sleepy presence of you
(moving with me on a grey sea among islands)
shaping itself to my dreams.

You will wake up you, not
my idea of you, and even sleeping,
your head, beginning to press
too heavy on my leg to be a dream,

is the ripening bud of the stranger
who will unfold, awaken, move
away from me, speak to me, blanch
my dream candles in the sun
of a smile or just the knowledge
of its possibility even in one of
your fretful lunar moments.

In an instant, my idea of you
will become inseparable from you,
inconceivable as anything other
than what you are,

like a double in a remembered dream
where, near waking, I half realize
that the two so similar in my life
are one person, then assure myself
that, no, in fact

(for reasons
of unimpeachable specificity which,
in the dream, I recite over and over
to myself, though I never quite
wrap my dream logic around them

and when I awake can never recall
more than their flavor of certainty,
even remember denying, in my dream,
that these could be dream reasons merely)

- in fact, they are two different people,
as I know well, then waking,

clutch futilely at the fleeing logic
that separated you from you-

you, waking, making this poem
be about you.

The Good Fight

It begins with a little cloud of pain,
drifting in from paying bills, growing old,
getting up in the morning; and since you
are easier to confront than these,
I waft the little cloud your way.

One needs adventure somewhere, but puts it
in the wrong place. (It could be worse,
letting the wretched T.V. people
fight it out for us in daily fragments.)

I wish we could have heard us.
Such a quandary, for we begin
with a "we" -- such is love: We
are the hero in the white hat.
Then I try to snatch the white hat
from your head and replace it
with a black hat, and you, as furiously,
snatch back the white hat and flail at me
with the black -- both of us forgetting
that in this circus, whichever hat either wears
falls over both. (In the deepest cave
of hate, I see you hiding beside me,
peeking to see if I'm peeking,
two kids in bed with their heads
under the covers.)

We see this, but, and this is the worst,
dare not laugh. All this passion and poisonous
prickly pride we use first to stab
each other, and then, trying to stop
ourselves from giving pain, to stab
ourselves -- could we not harness
all this power to conquer the world
or clean the garage? Must we be
the only drama in each other's lives?
It is bad enough that we can't stop
inflation, the arms race, pollution,
and all the other shadows lurking
behind the little things we do
to annoy each other; must we know
that we can't even stop (of all people,
the most accessible) each other?

Here, then, is a game worth our mettle,
for we are weak things when to change
an iota the one we love is a titanic,
hopeless, endlessly noble and complex struggle.

Weaker still, must we discover we cannot change
ourselves? Cannot cease to simmer with hurt?
This holds promise, for after we've fought
to a dull and hopeless standstill
("Just go away and leave me alone,"
we each say to ourselves),
we can each go our own way, I
to struggle as titanically as ever
with myself and you with yourself.
We could sell tickets. We have
only begun to fight.

(But wouldn't it be fun
to go find a wicked wolf
or an evil stepmother and together
beat the shit out of him or her,
then live happily ever after
once upon a time?)

The Laws Of Loss

When we can't find something that "just HAS to be here somewhere, Goddammit!" (whether a diamond ring, a lover or a sock), we search, and if we don't find it, search again until we find it or give up.

Two laws govern searches: First, The number of searches before we give up does not necessarily depend on the value of what's lost. As important is our certainty that the damn thing has to be here, how STUPID! I KNOW it was right here... - our zeal in the battle of reason versus chaos.

Second, there are universal patterns in our searches (I'm sure anthropologists could document this): The first search is always quick, cursory; the second more thorough, the third ridiculously painstaking-looking in impossible places (nervously lifting the cobwebbed sugarbowl lid in search of a lost child); the fourth quick in a hopeless way, yet including desperate flourishes of token thoroughness (turning over unlikely stones, but forgetting to look underneath) - and so on for as many searches as our zeal demands, each having its unique flavor - for example, the flavor of a 23rd search.

We could, then, describe any life (since we all search for something) by knowing how many searches have been made and understanding the value of what's been lost and to what extent reason has been outraged-

I put my childhood RIGHT HERE! I KNOW I had a goal just yesterday! HOME! - where did I put HOME! You - how is it you are always with me, yet I can't find you?

Self Defined

Fireworks -
opening circles, luminous
mouths

O!ing

in blackness,
leaning toward us,
a definition
of "toward", vanishing -
the darkness briefly flat
until the next blossoming
of depth,

as if there were nothing
but you and me, no distance
between us, no distance to BE
between us until one of us
creates something
(a brilliant blue flower,
a star, a new hat
a smile) that, in its
bursting into being,

defines the space it fills,
a space that is in us,
yet between us.

First Love

"Poor innocent," you say -- "What if he falls in love with the first woman's face he sees!"

All love is of the first face we see. We are all innocents, and we survive our first loves (alas) or they survive us -- no, that's impossible, unless "survive" is a transitive verb, like "nourish" in "food nourishes us" (or "love" in "I love you"?) - and so love survives us.

He comes into the uncreated (it little dreaming it is uncreated, our little dreaming world) stuffed to bursting with creatingness, and that first woman's face is a snowywhite canvas of the finest linen -- will he not enrich it from his palette (mustn't let the colors shrivel to turdsh crusts)?

If she can be what he has made of her, or if he can be what he must be to let her be what he would have her be, all is well. If not, God forbid he falls in love with the first tragic gesture he conceives.

Or let him, let him have full scope.
We have innocents enough, canvases enough.

But one day let him look at what he has become and learn to undream as well as dream, learn that canvases have their own dreams, learn that his is not the only world, but one of many, each dreamt, and that dreams can stir more dreams or be the death of dreaming-- absent wisdom.

What is an innocent?
One who, having the world to himself, assumes it is only his own world. That's a little lie.
The big lie is, finding others with worlds, "learning" that the world is only everyone's.

Let him fall in love with the first woman's face he sees:
"PEEK-A-BOO!" says his world to him, from behind and within the world he thought was his.

Fishing

Take a bit of lowland, a basin,
a small valley, a hole, fill it
with water, even just a few feet,

and you get a mystery, this glossy
flat surface from which you look back
at yourself, broken, bent, puzzled,
unable to see the bottom or walk there
to talk to what may live there,
through the looking glass, where
your kind of life dies.

Fishing
conquers the mystery, sitting
under the old sun, dropping a barbed
hook through the mirror, yanking out
an emissary (a hostage?); something
that, in its thin, flickering life was
part of the mystery, a shifting flaw
in the reflecting glass,

now flopping
at your feet, turning dull in the old sun,
something you can eat, can understand,
living, struggling, in pain, dying, caught.

5 A.M., Van Nuys

I lurk about my morning-strange house
as if haunting it. Even washing dishes
is distant with phantom nostalgia:
I sponge and rinse them just the way
I used to do a thousand years ago
when I was real and everyone awake--
but the dogs don't care -- they still remember
their old master and come up to be scratched,
while a ghost light peers in at the window until
a trickle of bird noise un.masks it
as daylight.

I open the front door
and find a day busy with brightness
(three dogs crowd my legs and nose the screen),
the bird-lit silence humming its already motors
absent-mindedly, as if day-dreaming of
engines long gone or to come,

a day soft
with the last night-dreams, first day-dreams
of three million sleepers who are dreaming up
all this space, three million spiders threading out
this dew-twinkling web, net work,
ghost to ghost, of world to wake up in,

dreaming as big a day as they can
to fill up with cars and appointments
and disappointments and anger and jokes
and hamburgers.

But they aren't awake yet-- just me
and three crazy dogs (who are galloping
at each other, throat-nipping, growling and pawing--
but, somehow, not hurting -- like toy sharks)
out on the front lawn--we have all this space,
that all these people have made for themselves
but aren't using yet.

My own ghost
(ghost of a child I once was, evoked
by the surprise of an early-morning house),
embarrassed by such intimate realities,
has ducked away, gone back to haunting
the house I grew up in when there were still
elms, and distant steam engines chuff-puffed
and chuff-puffed me to sleep stretched out over
a rolling countryside of sheet and pillow.

(On and on they puffed as if they'd never
be out of hearing, but I just realized
that they must have finally gone away, because
I haven't heard one in years, but I never noticed,
because back then I'd always fall asleep before
I could find out if the chuff-puff
would ever fade away)

So here I am
between the ghosts who haunt the nights
and those about to wake and haunt
the day (and I among them, for as soon as I
shave and wash this corpse and bury it
in a car, I become for the day
only the survivor of daily death,
a nebulous fog of worries that can only gibber
and rattle its chains) -- here between ghosts
and ghosts on an island of real time,
I stand in my front yard among dogs and
white dots of clover-flowers and spread
my arms as if I could grasp it,

wear it all day as a talisman
to fend off us evil spirits.

Fleur De Mal And The Naked Truth

There once was a teaser named Fleur de Mal
Who disappeared in the strangest fashion:
She pranced that night in the bleary hall,
Her usual thing, with her usual passion;

She twisted and turned and dangled her foot,
Shedding flower, feather, and spangled flounce
At every turn, and throwing them out
To drooling watchers with bump and bounce.

Smiling coyly, she spun herself free
Till two hands could cover all she wore,
And the crowd yelled--trying to see--
TAKE IT OFF! TAKE IT OFF! MORE! MORE!

And this time she did...all of it,
And we roused ourselves to see...a girl.
But then, before one ribald wit
Could leer, with a seductive swirl

She briskly began to unzip her skin,
Shedding it over arms, legs, head--
And a fainting drunk with a fading grin
Caught what she lightly tossed and said,

"Sheesh empty!" and vomited up his meal.
Teeth smiling--how else?--and wriggling hips,
She shook her muscles and began to unpeel
Like a banana, throwing all the strips

With a twirl and a flourish to the emptying hall
(For we'd never seen such obscenity before,
And we mobbed to the door, turning only to bawl,
"You crazy broad! You two-bit whore!")

Then she plucked out her ribs, one by one,
Flicking each, with a kiss, at our growing dread;
Then, as a necklace is neatly undone,
She reached to her nape and unfastened her head

And gently threw that to one dead drunk admirer--
Nor stopped at that: heart, lungs, liver,
And then, as if anyone could still desire her...
They? it?--with a proud, sensual quiver,

The last bones fell at break of day,
And that was the last seen of Fleur de Mal,
Who wasn't a body after all,
The stripper who went all the way.

Fooling the Eye

When I walk down a street,
I don't want to know it ends
somewhere.

It is some consolation to know
it ends many miles away
at the mountains or the ocean
or in an expanse of wild grass
where no man dwells.

Now I'm on Wilshire Boulevard:
MIRACLE MILE! Amid these shiny shops,
buses, and tall glass buildings, the fact
that Wilshire goes on and on to the ocean
holds no more promise of eternity
than the fact that tomorrow too
(MIRACLE MORNING!),
I will brush my teeth.

The physical is a finite compendium
of gestures signifying the infinite,
such as the two curbs of this street,
approaching, but not meeting
as far as I can see.

If, on a clear day, I saw forever,
how would I know I was seeing it?
Perspective is gradients of unclarity.

If you took off all your masks,
would I see a face?

When streets or poems are too short
to reach the horizon,
one puts a curve into them,
and they, too, go on
as far as the eye can see.

Why tease ourselves with the curve
of a country road, when we can look
straight up into endless sky?

We want, not stark infinities,
but finite charades of infinity,
reminders of the game we, infinite,
play here.

We read his writing and ask
how he lived. We find nothing
we didn't already know:
His poems and his life,
two lines that approach each other,
but never meet, as far as we can see;
one more road, one more effigy
of endlessness.

The poem itself is asymptote
to two more lines that bend
almost to touch, to join, but
dwindle off over the horizon
before we can see if parallels
become identity: They are the
boundaries of the road, the groping,
longing interplay of author and reader.

Each gives the same words the only life
they have, putting on faces

in the poem's burnished glass
to show each other each other.

No path I've walked
has ever ended.
I've walked
but this one path.

On a clear day
you can see forever
with your eyes closed.

On the Passing of Suburban Shopping Forests

The trees are gone now - they just weren't practical, what with cereal boxes and CDs sliding off the branches, shopping carts catching on roots and overturning, skidding on ice, water leaking through the leaves, making a soggy mess of the movie popcorn, shimp lo mein sliding off root-tilted tables into customer laps, having to shake snow off the videos to read the titles, all the books at Borders mildewed and cobwebbed, kids vanishing into the upper branches, poison ivy in the men's room, birds splatting into bright-skied movie screens, pushing faces through itchy spider threads to reach the pharmacy, squeezing between saplings to get green cream cheese (with ladybugs) smeared on your bagel, branches snapping in your face as you moved to the counter for your large hazelnut mocha with a little green caterpillar threaddropping into the whipped cream, no place to park, thorns snagging and tearing nylons and shopping bags, all those CREATURES underfoot and overhead as if they owned the place and not very clean either-mangy deer nibbling the vegetables, foxes, squirrels, skunks, moles, woodpeckers making their messes right in the aisles, scary rustlings and crashings behind the canned goods, raccoons in the bakery, snakes in the Place for Hair, that huge moth spreading its wings on the fresh lettuce, bees swarming the Baskin-Robbins Pralines and Cream, just the tops of Boston Chicken and First Columbia Bank showing where the beaver dam submerged them, a lightning-felled branch spilling silk scarves and handkerchiefs, shattering a cosmetics display case, gallons of perfume wasted on old dead leaves, clouds of gnats kamikazing your eyes so you can hardly read the prices, things plopping into your soup in all seasons - yellow leaves, branch-loads of snow, acorns, winged whirling seedpods, silky puffballs drifting into everything, trying to separate your saladbar pickings from dead leaves and seeds in all that rush of wind and rain, huge black wet creaky tree trunks looming up on all sides and in the leaves overhead a sudden crackle and WHOOSH! as a thousand grackles swirl upwards shrieking-HEADS UP! - yuchhh! They've been gorging on blackberries! Oh, it's so much more convenient now that everything is flat and air conditioned and asphalted and concreted and glassed and roofed in, sleek floors, straight wide aisles, level shelves and tables, nothing alive but us and some adorable puppies in a window and lovebirds in cages, all we need so easy to reach, so CLEVER! I don't know why we didn't think of this sooner!

Lost and Found

Words begin to fail me, become hard to find--
not that at 56 I'm fading fast, but I notice
because I'm so used to having words come easily,
anticipating my needs, mobbing me with possibilities,
synonyms, interconnections. Words are my oldest friends.
When they hesitate or frown even slightly,
I notice. Thus already I can watch in slow motion
the "dreaded ravages of age," and this pleases me,
this slow fading of known brain cells, because

it confirms that this dying brain is not what
I am, as I hang here waiting, KNOWING the word
I cannot quite catch the tail of, waiting as one
waits with swatter or cup for a fly to alight
on a cold window, waiting for this flit of knowing
to hold still long enough to be seized, waiting
for a word to arrive, no doubt by long labyrinthine
alternative nerve-pathways that by-pass ruined,
blasted cells -- here I am suspended, knowing (but
unable to voice) what the brain refuses to
give me -- THIS is the divine frustration, this

tip-of-the-self-ness, this certainty (even now
I can't find the word for it), this knowing that
I damned well SHOULD know and DO know what persists
in remaining a total blank: It's like looking
in the mirror and finding no reflection, this
hanging between knowing and data, this simple
knowing (here separated out for purest scrutiny)
that, spoiled by long reliance on brain gadgetry,
is at last of necessity coming to know itself.

You Must Remember This

I'm a fortune teller. I will tell you
ALL: I foresee your body coming
to a full stop, but for you it will be
only a semi-colon or ellipses or
a brief, punctuationless descent
into gibberish or, if you are very alert,
a colon:

There will be many temptations to forget,
and details will escape you, but you will
remember. (If not, come back to me and get
your money back.) You will remember.

After your next birth, though it will be
more painful and oblivion-filled than death,
still, you will remember.

And when you can speak and are told
your memories are cute--
WHAT an imagination! or
THAT will teach you not to tell stupid lies,
not to talk nonsense, not to be chattering
all the time -- even then
you will (in secret)
cherish a few memories
that you know are memories.

And if, then, you chance upon this poem,
whether or not you remember it, it will be
as true a fortune for you then
as now.

Fountain

On the inside they pump the water up,
then let it fall down the outside.
As it falls, we admire it, listen to it,
talk over it. On and on it falls,
repeating sound and pattern never,
often, as our lives do
and don't repeat. I see no reason
why it shouldn't keep falling forever.

Odd phrase: I see no reason:
I think that I shall never see
a reason for almost anything
not going on forever.
A barefoot girl might step into that fountain
just to touch -- or interrupt -- eternity.

Someday they'll have to clean it,
ream the pipes or whatever they do.
Fountains stop. (Invisible air-sprites will
seize the opportunity to slip, giggling
and whistling, through the rusty pipes,
pretending to be water.) Even "they" stop--
become you and me, that's the end of they.

That's how it will be, no communication
that is not as public as a fountain,
yet as intimate, each addressing each,
no unaddressed he or she or they
in a world of ceaseless fountains,

so that, to speak of one to all,
we'll need a 2nd-person proper noun -
as in "You-John", "You-Sarah".
What need of third person when we recreate
our agreements newly each instant,
you (and you and you...) and I.

Quick Thinking

You are roaring along the freeway
when suddenly all time (except
your thoughts) slows almost
to a halt. Your car creeps ahead
snaillike (at 65 MPH), slower
and slower, the accelerator,
your own foot no longer responding,

and you realize it has taken you
a decade to get around that curve

(not a bad decade as decades go,
lonely at first, but you learned
to hear and separate out
thousands of voices in your head,
grew accustomed to their inane fixations,
held long conversations, made bets
on whether the car on the right
would pass by the end of the year,
even had a brief fling or two...),

millennia more before you'll get home,
so you slowly (it takes centuries)
steer your snail-car in front of the car
in the next lane, which slowly
(centuries again), but inexorably
presses and eats into you with erosion
of steel, a noise like the moving
of mountains and flame that explodes
like the growth of an oak tree-

and with a ten-year sigh of relief,
you welcome the torture-attenuated
to a fine tickling thread-
of century-long death (hoping to come out
in a world that moves at your pace),

which will be reported in tomorrow's papers
as a fatal traffic accident,
causes unknown.

Friends

It used to bother me, having no friends,
because friends seemed so easy to have:
Everywhere I saw smiling, capering people
who could easily be my friends
if I could find a way to make myself
known to them.

But I've since become known to many of them,
heard what they have to say
and seen their smiles fade out slowly
like flickering cells of hair and toenails
long after the corpse of eye-light
is buried in booze, cleverness or pain.

The "friends" I sought -- I know
now I was looking for a miracle,
and I am no longer jealous to see
laughing Saturday-night crowds
peddling their false relics --
bits of the wooden smile to which
He I once sought was nailed by sharp words
hammered in by blunted purposes.

Nor do I scorn the moments of friendship
among these crowds when, at the sound
of a child's voice or a poet's
or any fool thing of joy and beauty, briefly
laughter rings true, eyes meeting
boldly, but gently, in public places,

nor do I think at such times
that I must make any more of myself
known to them than that stray song
we all heard together for a few notes
to call them friends.

Reston, VA 20194

Frogs And Princes

Frogs - an endearing species.
Princes and Princesses - are there any left?
Prince - from Latin for first or foremost.
The Princes and Princesses (female foremost)
went first. Are they missed? Princess Grace,
perhaps, and Anastasia. But nobody is kissing
frogs - even the once-Princess-and-
thoroughly-prozac'd Di (di anu!)
no longer kisses Charles
(who has always been more frog than Prince).

Alas! Who will detect the peas beneath our mattresses?
Who will trade places with paupers, thereby
teaching paupers that they aren't so bad off?
Who will assassinate vile Claudius (a toady!)? Species
and ranks blunder off into the swamp, muttering
"to be or not to be". "BRACK!" The frogs
are disgusted - "BRACK! ACK! ACK!" they choke out
their endless dry heaves, a zillion Lucys
licked by a zillion Snoopys.

In our own universes, we are kings
and queens, but our own universes
have been polluted. After each vision,
we await the credits. My universe
and television's are not of the same species;
hence this child of their union that I miscall
my own is impotent. No Princes, no Princesses.
Artificial gardens with artificial frogs.

The choice is between something real
and something not unpleasant - an unreal choice.
For a time, one could still turn around
and be faced, merely, by decay, swamp, brackishness.
Lies assimilate even that. What's left to face
is increasingly unfaceable - heaps of mangled
bodies, knowledge of responsibility, and when
we've turned that, too, into ornaments,
turning in our gray flickering garden light,
do you think we'll ever turn to face
what's left? No - soon, I think,
we will be safe forever.

The Art of the Fugue

If all the world except the two of us
lying in this bed were suddenly to disappear --

and it did --

then the power of our suddenly unfettered
dreams

(Look at us! We are the center of
creation, our love the seed
crystal, in thunder our bodies
cracking out "Let there be light! Planets!
Creatures!", eyes seeing in eyes

(or only the idea of eyes, all
that remains of us until we
put back the rest)

what we have made, that it is good, and
there was evening and there was morning, the
next day, lying late, lolling in the vast
smiling space we have made, making
leisurely additions (the bed, sheets,
wallpaper, a ghostly shaft of sunlight,
bird whistles, cluttered airplane noise,
the dog's tongue hot on my cheek) to our dream,
knowing a world that once seemed to be
disappeared last night, but that by the time

(let there be time
(again?)) --

by the time we leave the room
we have made, the suddenly unfettered
fecundity of our dreams

(and who can say if anything
has changed, since we, both makers
and seers, are changed

(though it seems
we've been this forever),

making and seeing the old
newly when we put it back?)

will have put it all back)

would put it all back.

Fore Shadow

Looking into the future,
through pages of newsprint greyly
I see the death of civilization,
drugged savagery and electronic tyranny
by high priests of a new psycho-mystery.

So why write these poems?
Who will be left to read them?
I am a child talking to imaginary animals
in the nursery.

But I notice I am speaking to you,
and you are as far into the future
as I can see, so there must be something
of civilization that will survive.

Or perhaps I create you
in order to write to you,
and thus poetry populates
future civilizations.

Gap

There is an unbridgeable gap
between night, when one goes to sleep,
and the new day, when one goes to breakfast.

When I stand in a meadow in Minnesota,
the fields and woods roll out from me
forever in any direction, in a universe
that does not include New York or Los Angeles.

But if I stay up all night
and watch the greying into day
or if I drive from Minnesota to L.A.

(or walk to a place I'd always driven to or add up
the number of years I've spent brushing my teeth),

the physical universe harangues me with
its continuity: "There is but one universe,"
it nags, "and you are in it, and
any infinity YOU can grasp
is an illusion."

Yes, for the physical universe
IS that universe where we have agreed
that the way from one universe to another
is by way of finite gradients of time and space.

But in my universe there are boundless Minnesotas,
cool summer evenings that linger and linger yet,
kisses and headaches that have forgotten time,
and, yes, endless ragged canyons of Manhattan
and a Los Angeles that dwindles hazily off
to the end of the flat world and falls
over the edge--and an infinitude of
other endlessnesses,

not paralyzed like separate exhibits in a wax museum,
but being created now--as fluid as music.

And how, in one's own universe, does one go
from here to there, from now to then?

We are where we choose to be:
Now I talk to you;
now print sits speechless on the page.
Something like art must intervene while we sleep
to take us from night to day. This, my voice,
is ceaseless, and it is an act of magic
to open a book or any door.

Central Park, 1974

Central Park at night
was off the end of the flat world:
"There dragons be!"
But my garage (west 61st) was diagonally
across the park from my apartment (east 97th),
the subways out of the way and dreary,
and many a dark pre-dawn
when I left my cab at the garage and walked uptown,
the park looked innocent as Eden,
so one such morning, looking over my shoulder
at utterly empty Central Park West,
I plunged in,
roved alone among the trees,
up along the reservoir,
over rocks and horsepaths, all deserted,
just me and trees and over the East Side,
the first pink tinge of sunrise.
I met no dragons. Muggers, too, must sleep.
In a city of millions, fear and exhaustion
had relinquished acres of woods and dewy lawn
as new as the morningdove's coo coo coo --
to me alone.

I walked home through the park
every night. Friends,
other drivers--all said, "You're
nuts!" Once, at 6 a.m., I exchanged hi's
with a whitehaired, red-sweat-suited lady
jogging along the park drive.
I never met anyone else,
except one night when I got in early.
I didn't know that the southwest corner of the park
was, until about 2 a.m.,
a meeting and mating territory for gays;
I'd never been there that early before.

I paused in a clearing
to watch a full red moon rise,
huge, above the trees. A slim young man
appeared at my side and looked
where I looked. I said,
"Beautiful, isn't it." He said, "Yes,"
and reached out to touch my arm. I said,
"No." He drew his hand back quickly
as if from a flame, was silent a moment,
then said, "Oh, you're straight,
aren't you." "Yes." And we stood there
a moment more, side by side,
watching the moon rise.
Long after, I'd think of that moment
and remember not the moon's beauty
nor anything repellent about his approach,
but the relief in his voice
when he said, "Oh, you're straight,
aren't you." I, too, was relieved--
that he'd pulled back his hand.
But why was HE relieved? Was it
one of those things my best friends
don't tell me? Or just his knowing
from the start something wasn't
the way it was supposed to be?

I didn't ask, but I had two other thoughts:
One was a story my Uncle used to tell
of visiting New York as a young man,
staying at the Y where a guy
put his hand on my Uncle's knee
and how my Uncle punched him good.
Maybe my companion was glad

I kept looking at the moon.

But maybe, like anyone caught up
in the tangled fears and hopes
of cruising and courtship,
he was relieved because I wasn't
what he'd hoped, was just someone
he could share a moment with
who would want nothing of him.
Suddenly, for that moment,
the world got awfully simple.

All About It-- THE It, Not MY It

It is not something one speaks of.
One can have one. In fact,
it's rather unspeakable if one doesn't.
But one doesn't speak of it.

Exceptions: You can mention it
in a poem, but only if it's
that kind of poem. You can be
endlessly scholarly or flippant about it,
but only about a general one,
not your own or anyone's one might
know.

A controversial movement is afoot
to talk about it in school, not mine
or yours or theirs, but THE it, though
the purpose is to educate children
about theirs. This is scary, since
talk about THE it could become talk
IN PUBLIC about their own,
which is almost talk about one's own!

Talking about one's own is even worse
than exposing it to others,
for when exposed, it must be referred to
professionally, very casually, or not at all,
lest one appear too interested in it
(one's own or another's) -- unless
one IS and the other
is too, which is not always easy
to ascertain: often people talk about it
for hours or years before they discover
that it IS what one or both of them
have been talking about, and if one
has been while the other has not,
one finds one is not the sort of person
one associates with.

While it is preferable
to expose it to those of the same
sort in semi-public groups, it is best
to expose it to those of the other kind
in a private setting.

Some people show theirs to all and any,
which is popular because it is
not permitted, which makes it of
great interest to many, who generally
find it boring.

Generally, one shows one one's own only if
the one shown shows one his or her own,
but with few or no words, as if to conceal
an exchange of contraband.

The danger of speaking about one's own
is that others say, "What makes him
or her think we want to know about it,
anyway!" They say this because they
DO want to know, and that is
shameful.

Filthy-minded children are often
obsessed with the shape and dimensions
of it, but mature adults know
that it (everybody's) is average,
one hopes.

All men have it. Socrates is a man.

Therefore Socrates...-- but one must not talk about Socrates having one, which, though we don't mention it, we assume looked exactly like our own, though his face looked nothing like our faces.

I won't insist that I have one or that you do, but just supposing we each do, the distance between mine and yours can be measured in the same sort of inches that measure the length of your arm or your shoes or the distance between your lips and your hamburger.

It's even worse to talk about not having one, because that makes one think of one's own, which is almost like talking about it, which is almost like showing it off, which is almost like touching or tasting each other's, which might be fascinating and/or disgusting at first, but would soon become like wearing clothes, except more time consuming and less hygienic.

It used to be you just didn't mention it. Now you're supposed to, a little, to show you're not old-fashioned.

While you mustn't mention anyone's HAVING one (though everyone has), it is informally acceptable to say that someone IS one (though no one is).

Love was invented to solve this complexity and, as often happens with solutions, has become as complicated as the problem. In fact, in some circles it is easier to speak about IT.

People who are in love with each other get excited about each other's, and, when not mutually displaying and touching them, even talk about them. This talk becomes a mutual secret that secludes them in a world of their own, with a secret that no one else wants to know.

You do not need to be in love with yourself to touch your own. Also, you don't need to mention it.

One's parents, above all, cannot be spoken of as having -- indeed, can scarcely be imagined to have -- any; though none on the planet are more certain to have had them. Especially it is not to be mentioned or thought of the parent who has the other kind from one's own. Can you recall when last you enjoyed a conversation about your father's or your mother's?

Parents, on the other hand (even parents can have hands), often speak to other parents about those of their very young children, though with slightly naughty simpers. They can be exposed publically and even mentioned, but only in prescribed rituals of cooing, and not, DEFINITELY NOT too much.

These children are given dolls
that have none at all. Odd, since
each child has just squeezed
out of one, as if one should struggle
to emerge from a cave, reach the light,
and be told that there is no cave.

Most fear that those who talk about it
may want to touch each other's or even
one's own, or, worse, since talking
implicates the tongue, which is a disturbingly
slimey and snakey organ whose physical
properties no one wants to contemplate
being so closely tied to one's cultural
pretensions (and which, when cooked, one
cringes to bite) -- and implicates the lips,
whose blatant mushily mobile sensitivity
is daily exposed to the world and doesn't
bear close scrutiny; and the tongue and
lips (not to mention the cutting teeth)
should not be associated in any way
with IT.

Others argue that those who have
their attention fixated on that
which can't be talked about
will not be able to talk about
anything else. It is, indeed,
generally the case that people
can't talk about much at all, which,
for some, is a great relief, since
any talk at all is liable to reveal
something private about oneself,
which others might use to touch one.
Thus, it is important to preserve
the taboos against talking about it,
lest one have to talk about anything
that concerns what one is, feels, loves,
all of which has little to do with IT, except
that it keeps one's attention on itself
and out of dangerous areas, like the fact
that everyone one knows, including oneself,
is attached to a body that is rapidly
becoming a piece of dead meat, and how
does this relate to one's positively
HAVING to have a cup of coffee and
go to a distant room where one sits
at a desk and writes notes on pieces
of paper for a specified number of
the exact same sort of hours that one's
body turns into something one doesn't
like to contemplate after the passage of
an unspecified, but severely limited number of.

People feel safest talking about the weather,
because no one has ever accused them
of having any of their own.

Artists can portray it, especially
attached to idealized people, most
acceptably as the symbol of another thing
or as a thing symbolized by another thing,
or wrapped in an aura of significance,
associated with swirling, throbbing suns
of white fire, molten lava, mountains,
rivers, oceans, forests, birds, bananas,
etc., nothing like anything that touches us
even as we speak.

Even the books and movies that dare to
claim to be about it in the wickedest
way are not about mine or yours. It,

as they reveal it, never knows lint, tight underwear, itch, chafe; never embarrasses teenagers on buses; never hangs around unnoticed and dull like a guest at a boring party; never flinches at the sound of a zipper; never bleeds, never burns, never wants to be left alone; never wears a comic mustache or a lampshade, never gets a PhD, never tastes funny, seldom is used for the main thing one uses it for (which, also, is not to be spoken of, though it is not the first use one thinks of when one thinks of not speaking of it), and never ever overcomes great obstacles and the jeers of mocking bystanders by dedicating itself to a noble purpose and becoming a great athletic or inventor or artist.

Though the people in these books and films are interested in nothing other than it, even they can't talk about it, except to say that, oooh!, it's big, and, oooh!, it's nice, and, oooh!, they want it, but usually, just oooh! They even avoid mentioning it. For example, they'll say "Oooh, put it into me!", meaning "put it into MINE".

You can't put ANYTHING into you or me because we aren't any of these things... but excuse me, I almost began to speak of the one thing that it is even more forbidden to speak of than IT: who and what we are, which, though we all know or have suspected that we are not any it at all (I will not use the "S" word), yet, if we say so, we can be committed to an institution and drugged, shocked, and educated as punishment for trying to disturb the peace by telling others things that may make them harder to control for their own good; and the mention of which condemns a poet to being considered outside the mainstream of Western thought and decidedly not an authoritative new bold unique original important voice.

It is not dangerous (much smaller, softer, and less likely to injure someone than is a gun, a lawyer, or a psychiatrist), but talking about it is. If I were to describe mine to you and ask you how yours is doing today, and if this sort of thing got out of hand (figuratively speaking), soon adults would be molesting children publically, families would be hotbeds of incest, and even the N.Y. Stock Exchange would resemble a Cecil B. DeMille orgy scene, because, secretly, all of us, authorities claim, are prevented from touching and rubbing our own against, around, between and/or into as many others as we can as often and as much as we can, whether of the same or other sort (thus leaving beds unmade, fields untilled, dishes unwashed, newspapers unread -- the implications are mind-boggling) -- prevented only by our failure to realize that everyone else secretly wants to do the same thing, all of which would be

revealed if we began to talk about it.
So I won't say a word about mine or yours.
Your secret desire to rub yours against
mine and everyone else's all the time
is safe with me. I won't plunge my
planet into chaos.

Ah, brothers and sisters! What a
secret, what a vast burden
of responsibility we carry between our
lips.

Becoming

Once we weren't interested in these unmentionable body parts. We must have damaged some and begun to feel sorry for them.

But that's long ago. In recent millennia, we've been told that we must have them, practically ARE them, then, when we've reached for them, had our knuckles rapped -- CAN'T have! NAUGHTY! But when we've tried to forbid or avoid them, they've been thrust in our faces:

Must have
Must NOT have
Must have....

These layers of must and must-not accumulate on our bodies like deposits of fossil sediment in alternating coats of fascination and disgust, tingling and deadening.

If all these layers (which survive, perhaps, even the body, naked spirits shivering with the shame) were stripped away, one by one, what would be left?

Ghosts

Don't be afraid. Ghosts are just people,
but they're dead.

Ghosts are lonely. No one notices them.
Even when they had bodies, people noticed
only their bodies.

Sometimes they think they have bodies
from habit, think if they look down
they'll see toes, think they are
a face against your face, think it
so hard you can feel a spot of chill
at the tip of your nose like the moist
electric breath of a cat.

If they manage a sound, it's not human,
but only because they're used to having
more than a memory of a mouth, can't
remember why it isn't easier to talk.

If they try to take over a dead body
or a live one, it walks and talks
funny, but only because they know
it isn't theirs, are shy and clumsy
(like teenage boys unhooking their first
brassieres) at the forgotten intimacy
of embracing the motor controls.

Have you ever been driving downhill
and had the motor kill, tried to steer
a dead car, felt the wheels become
lumps of wood? That's what it is
to walk a dead or unaccustomed or
resisting body, having to remember
to lift each foot, as if with strings,

lift CLOMP lift CLOMP...arms out stiff,
robotic, the way Frankenstein's freak
or (with the camera sped up)
a one-year-old (just learning -- arms out
to catch himself) walks -- what's to fear?

Most ghosts aren't in as good shape
as you are, or else they'd pick up
a new body, the way you did, teach it
to walk to school and learn to say,
"I didn't drop it. It just fell."
and "I wasn't doing nothing, honest!"

But something holds the ghost back,
fear or shame, unwilling to become
again human enough to suffer or
cause or see suffering, hiding,
but lured into view by our old
addiction to biology, dependency on bones
and nerves to be here and communicate,
the sheer force of their tug of war
to be or not to be with us
generating a psychic force that can slip
(as slippage along continental plates
makes earthquakes, as human impasses
perforate ulcers) to spook cats,
move untouched objects, blow the door shut
with a bang, rattle chains, HOOOO!--

O someone is trying to tell us something,
just something -- maybe,
"I was a judge last time and hung
an innocent" or "I poisoned my husband"

or "I'm totally alone and no one
has ever understood me" or "I can't
seem to leave this corner of the pyramid,
where I've hovered for 2000 years..." or
"I didn't do those horrible things! No!
I am only the bedpost in the room where
it happened and therefore cannot move"--
or "I'm right, and this will show them!"

How they yearn to talk about the weather,
to have a billfold and pictures of the kids,
to ride a bicycle, drive a car, touch
tickly flesh with warm fingertips.

For no more than we, have they learned
to be free of bodies. No, they are,
like us, lost without bodies, can't even
see each other, only us, as we see only
what mirrors see, their occasional visibility
not a flare of talent, but an implosion
of thwarted yearning, no more magic
than our ability to create tumors.

"Have a body", "had a body" -- our words
preach to us that dying resembles
sex: A ghost is stuck in the post-
coital tristesse of having had a body.
Poor cowering ghosts, don't fear us so,
our loud voices, fleshy arms, laughter,
our hailing each other heartily
on the street, so solid, active, opaque--
don't feel you could never make such glorious
shower-singing sounds (making eddies
in air trying -- like a child struggling
to learn to whistle -- to imitate us),

poor ghosts, but realize that beneath
our social cheer, we are judges
who have hanged the wrong men,
we poison those dear to us,

we are terribly alone and seldom able
to see one another, can't without
slapping our heads hard with our palms
change our minds, and even when we are
still able to make our bodies lurch
us away from scenes of horror,
we, ourselves, have not been able
to move, are still, when we close our eyes
and sometimes with them wide open,
looking at things we don't want to see,
don't want to know we are still seeing,

still screaming all our ancient screams,
slamming doors, rattling our rusty chains,
haunting each other and ourselves.

Don't be afraid of us, for people
are just ghosts, but they're alive.

Giving

The featherbed, we say, "gives," meaning it accepts one's shape. Water gives (ice doesn't). Air gives. The givers give way, wrap themselves around us, shape themselves to us, receive and release us easily with a sigh or kiss of gentle suction or a rustle of sheets or a smile in brimming eyes. What can you be given? Apparently yourself, or your own form shaping another, apparently the right to be part of and separate from another. What you can be given depends on the gentleness of your asking: If you hit the water too hard, it becomes stone. If you force yourself through air too fast, it shudders, splits, jolting you, claps together behind you (BOOM). Violence shatters whatever opens to embrace you; splinters stick to you; the violent never have anything whole, never leave anything wholly behind.

Deifinitions

God: God is That Which or He/She Who is here for me when I choose to be aware of It/Him/Her, whose presence, whether taking the form of friend, lover, tree, future reader or any or no form at all, turns all my jumble of unspoken thoughts and perceptions into live two-way communication.

God: A schizophrenia devoutly to be wished.

God: That which is as real as I am. I don't know how either of us compare with this table...no, not THAT table; THIS table!

God: Not what created me, but what CREATES me (eternal, as always)-- but only with my agreement, as I create you who read this.

God: Talking to oneself and knowing one has been heard and answered. If one is not willing to have one's thoughts heard, God's presence will not be comfortable.

God: The listener when God speaks. Doing the right thing makes prayer redundant. The melody needn't persuade the composer to compose it.

But it's OK to pray. Don't feel foolish. Look at me, for example, writing words on pieces of paper.

You might even pray for me. It's only fair: I've been praying for readers long enough.

What's the difference between God and nothing? Absolutely nothing.

God Be Less Us Every One

Just because I have to stop and think
what I mean when I use the word
God doesn't mean it doesn't mean
anything.

I think I love God.
"I" and "think" and "love" and "God" --
a philosopher's nightmare.
So am I, so are we all
(Thank God)
philosopher's nightmares:
We haven't been defined.

I just ordered a hot fudge sundae
for the love of God!

I do not always speak respectfully
to or of God. Odd idea,
God wanting my respect.

How shall I put it -- not
that I don't believe in God,
but that the God whose presence
explains who we are and how we
got here is not God, but an
explanation. God is not
an explanation. If we knew
what God is, nothing would be
thereby explained. There would
be nothing to explain. There
IS nothing to explain.

An explanation always explains
an explanation.

If anything could be explained,
there would be no God.

I've just finished my sundae.
I will have to make up for it
somehow.

Who's in Charge Here?

Is there someone in charge
of everything who knows
what he/she/it is doing? No.
And yes.

No one is in charge and knows exactly
what he/she/it is doing.

Perhaps rain and light
do not intend to become flowers.
We, who know a little,
should do our best to console
the raindrops for their long tumbling down,
the sun for its lost beams, the worms
for their dark labors. We may have to act
as if we know more than we know, dance
not with joy, but to become joy.

We may have to give no one
ourselves to pretend to be
if we are to share the knowledge
of what no one is doing.

Going Free

You don't go free by clinging
to the bars, squabbling with the other
prisoners, hating the guards, despising
the laws, deciding that you are
your cell, deciding that the prison
is not there, deciding that someday
you'll think of something, trying
to please the warden, agreeing with
the other prisoners, blaming yourself,
dying (changing cells), suffering
solitary confinement, attacking
your cell, or loving it.
You go free by...
but you never asked how to go free.
You don't go free by never asking.

Going Out On Me

I could not place your look of puzzlement
as I spoke words whose meanings vanished
at the first touch of air-- or of your eyes.

Finally you laughed and explained,
apologizing for having been far away,

and I saw myself (through your vision)
far away and tiny across the table at Figaro's,
moving my mouth and looking concerned

among the rustle and flicker of many tables,
mouths, spoons and forks, like the bending
of meadow grass in a breeze
or the tuning up of an orchestra--

and I felt your puzzlement
(that I hadn't been able to place),
how to give me the importance I,
like every bullfrog in the chorus,
demand and whether, if you returned,
you could freely move out again

away from the pretty, attentive,
soft-eyed doll whose name I cherish
as if it were a magic spell to conjure you,

away from this trap, your body,
baited with my admiration and set out
avid for your return.

Goodness

It is rumored that people are basically good.
Some, of course, boil infants and cut
communications, but perhaps they are only
defending the rules of the game,
for live communication dissolves boundaries,
which is cheating; the ardent football fan
might shoot down a quarterback who flies, wingless,
over the line of scrimmage, into the end zone.

My mother tries to hurt me
only because she thinks she failed to help me;
a bullet is an attempt, where other means appear hopeless,
to reach out and touch someone; even sticking beings
in two-legged flesh bodies and hammering
into them the idea that they can be
nowhere else started as a way to be sure
(like handing out name tags at a convention)
there'd be someone in view to recognize
and talk to; and everything I love
is lie enough to appear to be a thing.

Humanity by any other name, unknown
to yourself, I am what I am
only by agreements you have forgotten you made.
You agreed to win this game when you agreed
to play it, and you agreed to play it
(Are you not here?). You are dazed
by the buffeting of births and bereavements,
but you look right at me as soon as you can
see me, time being the only complication;
we're all going to get where we're going.

I call you evil, when I don't know
why you do what you do, then attack you,
until I am as stuck in my tarbaby solution
as you in yours, eyes glazed over
by heavy certainties that justify
butchery, but sticking it out,
hardly here, but in touch enough to insist
on being right, insanely right,
just to persuade ourselves to let ourselves
remain among us, out of touch behind
walls of reasons in order to stay in touch.

Nothing is too awful to have been done
for love. Come out into the sunlight:
The one you fear is not you, but what you,
fearing it, became. It is a trick
of shadows, kids at camp scaring themselves
with flashlight held beneath chin
to make ghastly yellow-lidded zombie eyes.

Come out. Be forgiven. Forgive yourself.
Stand before the mirror and be brave;
then ask, who is being brave? Then ask
who laughs? Who, turning a choking sob
inside out, glittering, laughs?

Goodbye

Aloha, Shalom -- in many tongues
the same word says hello and goodbye:
We greet your going as we greet your coming.
We have always been here and always
will be. Separations give us moments
to notice each other and wish each other
well. "Goodbye" (God be with ye),
I say to my wife each morning--
weaving a big dream about us so that,
moving away from me, yet she moves within
our dream -- until death do us
part, to "meet in a better place," of course,
for wherever we meet is always
a better place. Our dream
stretches to include the farthest, darkest
corners of death's realm. A last goodbye
is a lie. Even he who thinks death
extinction belies himself when he says
goodbye. "Goodbye forever" is oxymoronic.
(In so many tongues it means Hello
forever.) Goodbye is something we say
to those we want to recognize with special
grace when next we meet. I suppose,
imagining yourself to be a decaying body,
you could silently turn to stone, but
as the song says, Hey, that's no way
to say goodbye.

Putting a Good Face on It

Some people can put a good face on a bad time. I know, because I dated one: She was beautiful, but she was a terrible time. On the other hand, some very ugly faces have asked me if I want to have a good time. For five or ten dollars I could have had a good time and put a bad face on it. (That's what they do, put their faces right on it.)

Actually, their faces weren't ugly, but there was something ugly in their asking me or in the me they thought they were asking, something ugly in who they thought they were; who they had to be to be unable to see me as any more than what they could see to ask; something ugly in the hell that can conceive of what they offered as a good time.

See, I was just walking down a city street. I didn't know I was in hell, where a knife in the back is a good time if it reminds you that you can still feel or even better if it makes you forget you ever could.

"...And This Is The Steeple..."

"Gothic verticality symbolizes man's upward aspirations." Yes-- long ago the masters indoctrinated us in buildings prickly with receiving and sending -- radio towers, weapons, electronic gear for generating force fields and numbing "indoctrination" beams.

Our primitive eyes saw only intriguing shapes, complexities of power. Later, those of us who aspired to indoctrinate the rest of us aped the departed masters, erecting spires, minarets, steeples, bell towers-- rationalizing misunderstood forms with symmetry and busy design.

Thus, like savages kneeling before an alabaster toilet-god, we gaze, awed by cathedrals that are but the shells of lost technology.

Across the street apartment buildings bristle with antennae as dwellers receive the word from new gods.

If we were wiped out and barbarians moved in, finding our cars, ignorant of their mechanism, barbarian artists might design car shapes as tokens of grace and mystery. If, previously, our war-jets had strafed and bombed them, long before they developed our technology, they would worship airplane gods.

Our suits, our ties, our trains, telephones, sirens, lampshades, ballpoint pens, large opalescent screens... something haunts them. If it were safe to remember, we would remember. C'mon, Dollie, time for beddiebye...

Parts of Speech

Some languages scant nouns for verbs:
No one acts. There is but the action,
what we call things and people becoming
standing waves, frozen flows,
confluences of opposing motions
that appear briefly (70 years
for a man-motion, millions of years
for a breaking wave of mountains)
to be still.

Other languages are adjectival,
all being and action distilled
to quality, a war, for example, being
"Tall young quick dead".

Perhaps there is a universe that speaks
prepositions: No actions, no one
to act, only position, a towarding,
(the dead, perhaps, called "untoward"),
a being relative to an arbitrary point
of ofness, as if nothing were really
anywhere, each of us standing upon
an uponness (as the earth rests
on elephants who stand on the back
of a tortoise who...),

moving 'round a motion 'round, each of us
not standing but up and down, and not us,
but before and after, in and out, a
solidity of interwoven vectors, stasis
of arrows pointing all directions
at once, saying: "He went thataway!"

Taking For Granted

Caught myself taking it for granted
that you'd be home when I walked in,
alive, glad to see me and I as glad;
that in the next hour no lightning,
heart attack, terrorist bombing
or unexplained vanishing would shatter
our plans; caught myself, blamed myself

not for failing to appreciate
the miracles we live, but like
knocking on wood, as if to say, "It's OK,
God, I'm remembering to be scared,
so you don't have to prove anything to me."

Stupid, because maybe I'd never
taken anything for granted; maybe
I **knew** we'd be fine for an hour,
for years, for happily ever after,
because I was making it that way,
making the world I want to live in
by the power of my knowing.

Maybe when I caught myself and
apologized to God, I stopped putting
that world there, put there instead
this fear.

Sacred

"Sacred to the memory of..." --
can't make out the name on the
lichened stone, nor dates --
sacred to the memory of what's name,
sacred to the memory of the forgotten.

A stone to remind long forgotten people
of the sacredness of someone's memory,
not to remind them of someone but of
the sacredness of memory.

He's gone. Those who tried to remember him
are gone with their memories.
Nothing is left here but the sacredness,
or rather, this stone marks the sacredness
buried here when someone took leave of it.

Or the stone marks where something was buried
to free others to remember the departed
sacredness. Or the stone IS the memory,
solid burden of memory left here
to free us to participate
in sacredness.

Sacred: Please don't knock over
or piss on this stone, because once
someone stood before it and cried because
someone ELSE once able to stand and cry
for others (or that someone's body,
valued for its facilitation of standing
and tears) is decaying beneath this stone.

I'll agree to the sacredness of memory
if you'll agree that agreements
can be forgotten.

Or we could remember
ALL our agreements and watch

as all the myriad ancient thwarted agreements
that constitute ulcers and stones
are animated by our new awareness
and vanish like a broth boiling away,

sacredness and sacred stone evanescing
in a still place where what we see
is the memory of what we create.

Reston, VA 20194

A Time and a Place

In 1966 at a party I met a guy
who claimed to be a Green Beret on leave,
a little guy, cocky, who'd been drinking,
but only enough to brighten his eyes.
(I remember him as wearing glasses.
Can Green Berets need glasses?
Maybe I'm just remembering
how bright his eyes were.)
Also he talked louder than he had to.

He was happy to talk. He didn't look
right at me (If he didn't wear glasses,
why do I remember his eyes as big fish
swimming behind lenses?), and I sensed
that his words were more solid to him
than I was: He was talking to his words.

He said he loved being a Green Beret
and couldn't wait to get back
to the killing, which was, he said,
more exciting than sex. Really!
He did say this, just like a psycho
in a murder novel, but he was just
this guy at a party in East Palo Alto.

(There were girls at the party,
but he maintained a girlless zone
around him as if with a force shield.
One got the idea that he'd hurt women
in ways one didn't want to know.
A guy I knew said to me later,
"That guy? He's a nut." But also
that he was a Green Beret on leave.)

People who say something is more exciting
than sex never say how exciting
sex is for them. I guess by "sex"
they mean depositing sperm one place
or another. The exciting part, for me,
has always been getting close
to another person. I don't think
he knew he was a person
or that other persons existed.

But I understand the pleasure he took
in war: He was good at killing
and thrilled to find a place
where his skills were needed,
even if it took a war. Me--
I'm good at writing poems...

Growing Up

On the car radio -- "Peter and the Wolf":
I remember wanting everyone, even the wolf,
to come out all right. Then I remember
on a street-car my wide-eyed interest
in passing buildings, the corn-cob rough seats,
the nice old ladies in scarves and shawls
getting on and off,

interest like golden sphere
surrounding my head, a purity of brow
where a frown would be a ten-ton weight,
even a grin like a fingernail
scratched against a blackboard.

I myself was there only as a touch,
a spark of interest-- any more of me
than that would have toppled
the spinning top of my interest--
suffusing the child's wide-eyed purity.

Today as I drive, listening to Peter's theme,
I relax my facial muscles,
letting my eyes have again
that simplicity of vision-- I unsquint;
and the child is still there,

but with a great weight pressing upon him
bands of pressure around the head
and crevasses of glacial grief
slowly cracking open behind each eyelid.

None of it is muscular. Muscle tension serves
only to camouflage what I have become.
I am the cross borne by the presence
of the child I once entirely was.

Not that the child has grown up,
but that he's become what I am,
out of his child's weakness.

To grow up, I must become a child
unsusceptible to THIS growing up.

Grown Up

Out walking, peevish,
knowing my unhappiness
but poorly propped up;
I could pluck away the crutches,
and it would collapse:

Just spot when I started worrying
and what happened just before that,
probably something someone said
or something I didn't say,
probably something that, really,
is no concern of mine
or some future problem
that, if it came to that
(and it won't) is no big deal
or is such a big deal
(like nuclear war) that who cares?--

as easily punctured
as the logic of a crying child.

But also, I can let my unhappiness be.
Why shouldn't people be unhappy?
I can just keep walking,
run my hand over wet oak bark,
peek out at the full orange moon
from behind this mask of sorrow--

and if I hold my attention equally
on the night and the sorrow,
finely separated,
sorrow becomes a solid mass,
then begins to flow,
a rippling around my head
as if two huge opposing forces allatremble
were letting up on each other as gently as possible
lest uneven relaxation crush me.

It's almost pleasant to stroll with sorrow
all by itself, free of those squabbling children,
significances -- let them straggle behind:
they'll stop short of badly hurting each other,
and it's best they learn to settle their own quarrels,
not expect a grown-up ex machina
every time one cries. Sorrow and I
have so little time alone together.

They'll catch up to us later.

Peristalsis

How would our life stories be told from the viewpoints of the snakes who live in us, the always moving tubes that carry our food? We notice them only when they misbehave, but they are always there, always moving, as if they were trying to stretch and squeeze themselves out of us. Is this what makes their accordion music?

Food and its byproducts are subject to gravity, but somehow these masses work their way up the ascending colon. It helps that we spend our nights horizontal, but even when we are up all night, the snakes in us defeat gravity.

They lead their own lives, perhaps even communicate with each other, understanding, as we do not, the tweets and gurgles and burps of the guts who share our rooms and beds. I wonder what our bodies discuss behind our backs, as it were. Probably they talk about food as we discuss the weather. Perhaps they are no more aware of us than we of them. As one stabs or makes love to another, their guts perhaps complain to each other about whoever is overloading both with bile.

"I hate your guts" -- an odd expression. Do we resent it that someone we hate is so much what we are?

On wintry days we can see them speak, embarrassing plumes, wordless balloons.

Most of what I put into my mouth and chew and swallow looks nothing like my body or excrement or energy, but my old magic serpent transforms it into each of these. Of course, I help on occasion -- drop in a glass of water or prune juice, an antacid tablet -- I'm about as useful as one who tosses a sheep into a volcano to pacify its God.

I am so used to not noticing it, that it is hard for me to sense the motions of my snake. Something is coming down, but I don't know what it is. My gut is as busy as an old elevator, complicated chains and cables moving and swinging mysteriously -- visible behind the glass as we wait for our car, Going Down.

I think these thoughts as I sit in a restaurant with some 50 others, listening as a singer performs. All of us think we know what is going on here. A group of people listens. A group of digestive systems squirm and bulge and burble as they go. Peristalsis is a wavelike motion, but we assign our guts one duty above all: Don't make waves.

Somewhere a subtle silence of passing gas, perhaps my own.

Doobedoobedoobious

"I'll do a hamburger," meaning order one, eat one. People who do lots of hamburgers are into them, probably not out of hunger, more likely FROM hunger.

"Did you do her?" If so, in kinder, gentler times, she was undone.

If having is called doing, can we call doing having? ("I can't go out -- I'm having my hair." "Have as you're told!" "Have unto others...")

Since we become (a politician, poet, criminal) in order to do (orate, toy with words, break rules) in order to have (power, admiration, four walls)-- it would then be more logical, now that having has usurped doing, to let doing domino into being:

"I think I'll be a hamburger." Hey, have my guest!

Slight Differences

For years this recurring nightmare:
smell of dung and hay, being shoved
from the wagon, hands bound behind me,
wondering how I'll behave, how I'll do
what I can't help having happen to me,
many faces, curious, angry, cringing, avid,
the tall black-masked man, making
my legs go up the stairs, being positioned
face down against the block, still wet
from the last, splintered, hairs on the back
of my neck prickling, chill sweat, a voice in me
saying I don't want this, a descending shadow
swallows the sun...

Yes, I remembered that death well,
relived it many times, but the nightmare
returned, night after night, until,
once, going through it as before
at the last instant of descent flashed
before me a new piece of the vision,
the back of the neck, collar torn back,
hair lopped short, barely recognizable
as one I knew well, a voice in my head
(cold sweat inside the mask) saying
I don't want this, another saying
too late, don't think that, you'll
mess up...effort in arms swinging
downward an unstoppable weight,
MY arms...

The nightmare never returned.

Convalescing Again

Loss, though I know it is only now,
tells me it is forever (and
it is -- I lost a forever,
my latest rough draft of forever),
and all I have to do
is be here and let it go away,
this utter blankness will, in theory, go,
please, go away.

I will write and tell myself
wise things. So tempting
to let the sentences distractedly go
where they will. I must complete each
sentence, once begun, and let
no sentence end on its own
determinism. Already I feel
more alive, for I can make
that much future, from here
to the end of the sentence.

Can words fool time into thinking
he's healing a wound?

It must have been a trick of
moonlight in her eyes to make me
dive into what seemed the depth
of my dreams and break my neck
on a shallow bottom.

A future's a heavy nest
to build on the twig of a smile.

I keep writing, because I feel
less poisoned by my own words
when they are here, but I yearn
for a world without words
where people do not wear
cartoon-word-clouds over their heads,
where smiles are not qualified
by rising bubbles broadening
into clouds of words,
where my words MAKE sense.

I spit a lot lately,
trying to get rid of my body.

There are times when I must choose
between writing coherent sentences
that say only insane things
("I want to die and start over again")
or letting my sanity speak
the groping incoherencies left to it.

Pray? For what? I cannot listen to myself;
why should anyone?

When she told me we were finished,
she saw me crumple and said, "Are
you okay?"

"I guess I'm just a little crazy,"
I said. "You are the sanest person I know,"
she said. I wonder where they keep
the other people she knows.

Writing it all down isn't working.
I can't spell a scream that doesn't
come out. To my passions I'm a
littered illiterate, an idiot

who can only twiddle his fat lips
with two fingers and burble: BBBB

Just when I think things can't get worse,
and they don't,
I try to remember what it would be like
for things to get better
and I can't,
and that's worse.

Write only those words
that don't make me sick.

Why is it that these slow convalescences
reduce my writing, my thoughts to
basic elements? Because
molecules are so heavy, and
I'm so weak?

I walk and walk, trying to see
the difference between one street
and another, trying to feel
(as the scar where you amputated
my future closes up, leaving not a seam
on solidity) I'm going somewhere.

You could probably take the atoms
in one heap of bullshit
and use one for every star and planet
in this universe (and have plenty to spare)
and I think someone did.

Leaves, flowers, sunlight, a line
of ants.... Big things are made
of lots of littler things, and so
are littler things. This is
supposed to be an intensely
interesting phenomenon, eternity
in grains, etc. Big shit is
made of little shit, shit
without end, hallelujah, amen.

I feel tired and bitter. So what?
This leaf is yellow. That one's green.
Today I'm bitter.
(Bitter and bitter, in every way.)
This is my day off.
That was my day off.

I have so much to do
and so little time to
change my mind and have something else to do
and do it in.

In spite of all I know and my slow groping
back to myself -- as one who tears off
a bandage too soon, the fresh-knit scab
stuck to it, reopening the wound, so
I wondered if you'd call today.

Wished you would, am glad you didn't,
wish I had other wishes to wish.

I think I said what I wanted to say
long ago. There's more to be said,
but someone else must say it.
I must concentrate on becoming
someone else.

I hear a voice a-crying, crying, Lord --
I think it's one of mine.
It says there's no point going on living.

It's one of mine. O God, it says,
I don't want to live, it says.
(Don't worry -- it just wants attention.)

Hard work: I write a line and stare
blankly for minutes or an hour. Trees,
birds, sidewalk, my hands, flounder
in the whirlpool of blank staring.
Then another line--a few safe words.

What's safe? So much of the sweetness
of myself I blended into a smile that went bad,
a bright public smile I mistook for mine,
so now I must sift, sift words for what
is left to me, unspoiled, of my own.

Convalescence is easy: You let it happen
once destroying yourself
has lost its fascination.

Autumn. I am losing everything
except rough grey bark and ants.
You can see my structure better,
but to me it's like death. I often spit.
Also today I have burped, farted,
and blown and picked my nose.
Now, tonight, I write poems.
I am losing everything.

The bumper-sticker says:
"This is the first day
of the rest of your life."
Now what? And now where? and
who? and Why? Paralysis
begins at home. Why not a
fresh start? A blank page?
(But in a box in the closet
many tattered notebooks full
of unpublished poems.) Yesterday
came suddenly.

Nothing but flat plain
in all directions. Where can the future
be waiting in ambush?

These are the measures of greyness
called minutes, the spectrum
of visible time after the rainbow of games
has been filtered out.

If I think about it real hard,
perhaps I will be able to think of something
I really want to eat.

All this greyness is
nonsense. I ran into a lie
and bumped my dream.

I lie in the grass. Trees spring up
behind my head as the earth seeks
to surround me, and the brave blue arch
of sky staves it off, a stick
holding open the crocodile's jaws.

Even the air is thick with particles.
Distances solidify.
I am surrounded.
("Surrender!" "Nuts!")

When you're tired, you can't tell
how much of your misery is tiredness.
When you're wide awake, you can't tell

how much of your tiredness is misery.
When you're happy, you can't tell you're tired.

Something is over.
I am tired of living alone,
writing, pretending not
to be alone.
Or is it the other way around?
Pretending to be alone,
I misplace you in a stranger
and think I've lost you.
Pretending to be alone,
I write to you,
to whom I could not write
were you not here with me.

I have sinned,
for it is forbidden to bear
false witness.

Despair -- the unforgiveable sin.
But I forgive myself,
to spare God the embarrassment.

Autumn scalpel, cut away
my rot. This clean, chill air -- a blade
that cuts through me with,
only of love,
the precision.

"Nobody understands me,"
sang each leaf, each blade of grass.
"Nobody understands me," sang the wind
through each leaf, each blade of grass.

That girl over there reminds me of a girl
who meant a lot to me, probably
because THAT girl reminded me of ANOTHER girl.
YOU mean a lot to me because
I say so, which is a relief.

Why? I Ask the Kid

who's knocking red blossoms off the hedge
with a stick. They hurt him, he says--
shows me his finger. Thorns.

This kid has a great future-- destroying,
not the thorns, but the blossoms.

When he loses his job, he'll get drunk
and beat his wife for looking too cheerful.

I say to him (brave of me-- I've never
seen him before and don't live in this area,
so if the kid screams, "Daddy, that man
is bothering me!"...) -- I say, "Please
don't knock off any more. They're pretty."

He doesn't answer or look at me, but
moves away. There is so little we can do
for each other. If you see a flower

(I don't know what these are called--
ANY flower), be kind to a child. It may be
a flower I saved or the child I failed to help.

I Trust There is No Hell

I trust there is no hell that I can think
Myself into, but not out of as well,
For even if we're but a knowing wink
In eternal mindlessness -- if that's the hell

Of it, my wink contains it. If I think
Us one day parted, bodiless, lost, never
To find each other -- peering over that brink
Of emptiness, I think: Nor could I ever

Be sure of never finding whom I seek;
Indeed, how could my homing words not fly
To you if it is you to whom I speak?
Nor can I long support the teetering lie

That none like me exists outside my thought
Before my thought forms you, and instantly
You lose the form of thought. Knowing I'd sought
To think you up, would not take you from me,

Your touch a truth unthinkable, my thought
Of you providing but the nest where you
Alight. No hell we can dream up is aught
But dreaming that our dreams do not come true.

The Vanishing

Once these prairies were an unbroken sea
of gold and azure and scarlet butterflies.
Bone people of the plains followed these flocks
through the warm seasons.

A lone hunter with net woven from sticky
spiders' webs lies beneath a bright
red, blue and gold blanket in the path
of the fluttering tide, rises up whooping,
swoops his web left! right! left!
to snatch enough pulsating sunworms
to see his family through fierce white
winter glare

when, in wan-lit tepees
only the mirrored flame of unfurled
butterfly wings can soothe the pangs
of papooses starved for color,
feathery flutterings (strung and dangled
at fat cheeks) tickling a smile.

and in the dry rot of arid August
a woman can stroke deep blue velvety
fringe and dream of cool autumn rain.

Many-winged Butterfly Woman, she who vanishes
by turning and by turning reappears,
woman of Rainbow Man, Sun Daughter
who stitches up the Sun-torn sky--
it was she taught the warriors
how to paint each other's backs
for battle in scalloped, veined,
crescented, speckled designs.

She also taught them
their warcries, flutter of hand before
the open mouth to break shrillness
into waves of eerie ululation, terrifying
foemen with its tremulo of reach and withdraw,
in the ghostly gray dawn.

The women weave from bunches of delicate antennae
strong cord for garments; for nightwear twined
feathery palps of moths. While the men
hunt butterflies, it is women's work and child's play
to capture in gently cupped, rosytinged hands
any moths who brush too near the campfires.

In their summer tents, cooled by the blue-green
light of fireflies, the women transfix
their furry finds on pins of honed beetle carapace,
chanting with each impaling a prayer of thanks
to Moth Woman, she of the hundred
iridescent eyes, niece of Moon Woman,
asking safe passage for each pale moth
spirit, that it might find its perch
on Moth Woman's arms, hands, crescent fingers,
feathery hair or maculed shoulders.

The women prepare
moth wings, sewing from a thousand overlapped membranes
one pair of fleet, glinting moccasins, stitching
(as the rich meaty smell of grasshoppers roasting
on thousands of tiny spits fills the tent) eyed
and veined pouches for sacred objects, threading
white and yellow garlands of cabbage moths,
grinding cocoons to sprinkle on meat, one species
for stamina, another for beauty, black

for a curse, tawny for fecundity....

Meanwhile
each young maiden spreads her Cecropia moth,
making of its pierced wings a domino mask,
one wing over each eye (as if perching, wings
spread, on her nose), to be worn at her first
Spring festival, both hiding and showing
her charms: her readiness, if touched,
to take flight, leaving only a pinch
of dry powder on the fingers; her open beauty,
mask that reveals, eyes covered by eyes;
flight that surrenders.

Warriors weave butterfly wings, trail
blood and gold pennons from their lances,
make horrid their headdress with black wings.

Old men, faces of crack-glazed clay, sing songs
(words as cracked, dry-mud-cracked voices)
of ancient days when the legendary Red Fathers
hunted endless herds of great shaggy humped
beasts. These butterflies, they sing,
are the hovering spirits of those vanished herds.

A youth in quest of his true colors,
in dip of meadow, grove, cool cave
or on a flat hot table rock, lies down,
rolls himself up into a cocoon of
interwoven species: The greater and lesser
golds, sables, deep and sky blues, the long-
tails, blood-reds, moon-white, dog-eyed....

He curls up in his coat of many hues,
surrenders himself to deep manydays' sleep
(having fasted and prayed), awaiting
a vision of release into a savage sun
of his own taking (choosing which colors
he'll absorb, which repel), whereupon

he bursts from his luminous womb of borrowed wings,
then crouches upon it for hours, chanting
the song that informed his vision, ritually
flexing his muscles as if pumping vigor
from the sun into new wings.

When he returns
among men, a man (cocoon burned), he assumes
the name of his vision (Gold Wing, Rose Flitter,
Nectar Sipper, Death Head, Quick Tongue...).
Now he is permitted to dance with the warriors
in the next butterfly ceremony:

All day gilded warriors, arms trailing cloth
of wing, blossom and pine gum, leap and flail,
preening and flashing their dazzling shields,
covered with overlapped wing-scales,
blinding in the sun.

That night women spin
in the moth dance, ringing the fire, each
(eldest first) in turn, breaking out
of the circle inward, toward the flame,
each zig-zagging closer than the last until
the young soon-to-wed whirl THROUGH the flames-
quick! quick! singeing arm-wings, silent.
So Moth Woman taught the Grandmothers;
so it is done, that the young ones learn.

But those days are gone now. What chance

had these creatures of air and light and
powdery clay and generous horizons
when the grubmen, the mole people, plodded west,
avid for land and dull gleam of buried metal?

The bone people,
gray-faced, invisible in the gray dawn,
fought back fiercely, on their pied ponies
flitting in and away from the guns, almost
untouchable; caught and tortured travelers,
cut the tendons of their colorless arms
and released them, flaccid larvae.

But soon
grubmen, ghostmen realized the bone people
could not live without butterflies,
could not sing without color, could not dance
without a vision of motion beyond memory.
In the decades that followed, the Great
White Maggot sent out millions of machines
steel and glass smashers armed with wing-
wrenching screens, to plow through the flocks,
littering the plains with torn, discolored shreds
of wings and watery yellow smears.

(Butterfly Bill alone
captured in giant fiberglass nets an estimated
70,000,000 monarchs wherewith to gild the interiors
of private railroad coaches where empire builders
reclined with their claret, cigars, and whores.)

Without pollination the butterflyfriends
(wildflowers, we call them) year by year
perished until little was left but mud
and dull gray-green tufts of sawtooth weed.

The demoralized color-starved Gray folk
were easily driven onto bleak dirtfarm
reservations, where white traders furthered
the death of a people by hooking the young
on cheap, tawdry, denatured colors
of comics, television, neon signs
and red pickup trucks.

Now in the slums
of Midwestern cities, old Grayskins stumble
through the streets of broken glass
clutching bright bits of ribbon or
glittering chewing-gum foil.

Young men
slouch day and night in the movies,
watching the same film over and over,
waiting between features in the dark
for their next Technicolor fix. Numb
now the itch for a flicker less
mechanical, not daring to think
what a man-crunching purple-haired, lurid-
lipped, orange-fanged, maggot-eyed goddess
must Movie Woman be; not willing to know
what she utters through the soulless
flutter of film.

Moth Woman is furious. Forests become ashheaps.
Butterfly Woman weeps. Each dawn the dew is acid.

The bone people and their painted wings,
both, are nearly extinct. Fortunately,
in recent years more enlightened maggotmen
have taken steps to ensure the survival
of remaining lepidoptera. Great flocks
no longer swarm over the grasslands,

and wild butterflies are seldom seen-
(When seen they must be approached
with care, for smog-tainted breath
may sicken them, or, if touched,
even if care is taken not to
pinch the wings, the most gentle
contact may rub off protective powder.

And any wild creature is dangerous. Though
it seem gentle, perhaps light on your
finger, flit about your head, circle
the ankles, pause on a twig to lave
its wings in sunlight and breeze,
varying its hues in moire waves,

it may be leading you on, may seduce
to the brink of a canyon, of which
you know not, then playfully sashay
with your eyes into the raw sun, losing
itself and your vision...),

but small
commercial flocks are increasing
on private and government buggeries,
and in selected boutiques, once again,
you can buy translucent butterfly fans
and sip moth tea.

A Loan

I glimpse in passing
three kids exploring a vacant lot--
a girl with long straight brown hair
scrambles ahead, wielding a stick.

I drive on, deliveries to do, maybe
no time for lunch, envying
the adventure that glowed in their faces.

It occurs to me I couldn't have seen
their faces. I put faces there
as well as the glow, used

the flash of their youthful postures
as an excuse (driving by, peevish
and hurried, whatever noble dreams
I dream well-hid)

to create adventure, pretend
it was theirs, and envy them
what I'd given them.

Envy is just my size. I have
20 more businesses to get to today,
to receive money in exchange
for things I do not value:
It would not be comfortable now
to imagine I could be heroic.

Heroism

You say you haven't achieved much. I say
you are a hero, for whenever you cried,
"I can!" and surged to the jolting end
of a 1-inch tether and screamed "I CAN!"
and jerked forward another half inch
to collide with a wall of air and gasped
"I can...I think I can" and agonized
another quarter of an inch and abused yourself
as a failure and gave up - you didn't know
you were dragging behind you a mountain
of "I CAN'T", that each time you cried
"I will love", "I will create" or "I will
give" -- Himalayas of "I must not love",
"I can't create" and "To survive,
I must hold on to everything" and
"What's the use anyway" dragged their
deep-rooted heels behind you.

You cannot see these mountains of ancient
decisions, not because they are old --
no older than the light-year-spanning
lucidity of a clear night.
It is the intervening haze of pain
that blues those massive peaks
to invisibility. If you could face that pain,
see through it to the loads you drag,
then, because they are made up only of your own
decisions, solidified by eons of effort,
they would vanish in the time it takes
to change your mind -- when it IS your mind --
the chains of reasons that linked you to them
falling away in ringing laughter.

When next you whispered, "I think perhaps I can"
and took a baby step forward, like an astronaut
first stepping onto a low-gravity moon, you'd
glide 10 yards, and when you leapt,
you would amaze the world, far beneath you.

Meanwhile, until you have learned to unravel
mountains, even slow retreat is heroic,
and each quarter-inch advance
is epic victory.

The Easy Way

There are two ways to win a poetry slam:

Tell people what they want to hear--
that's the easy way --

or tell people what they NEED to hear--
That's HARD.

It's easier to find the mob in each person
than to find each person in the mob.

You think you're righteous because you're popular?

Listen, the best slammer of the Century
started in small beer halls and on the street,
wherever he could find ears -- and people
listened and cheered, first five or six, then 30, hundreds,
thousands, MILLIONS hung on his every word like
flies on dog shit as he screamed, whispered, spit words
like bullets, burned, banshee-wailed, smiled like acid, turned
reasonable, tender, eloquent, heroic,
telling the People that beneath their sullen inertia
were heroes in hiding, ramrod destinies, telling them
of blood, roots, love of one's people, how degenerates and
wimps in power were corrupting their children,
how international bankers ruined their nation, how professors
were whores, how sacrifice and hard work led to freedom, how men
must be bold and women must be strong to make room in the world
for their children, how the People must be pure of heart and
unbending as they rise up against their oppressors
and crush them underfoot like vipers or
venomous insects -- and he gave them targets
they could SEE, enemies close at hand who
could not fight back, the ones his People
had already learned to love to hate.

Oh, a few old elitists and sophistic intellectuals and
namby-pamby priests attacked and mocked while they could,
but the People, the millions loved him more than they loved
their parents, spouses, children -- chanted his name,
exulted him, memorized his words, aped his attitudes,
swore allegiance to him, died for him, killed for him--
and he never told them a single thing they needed to hear:

Not ONCE did his words make one of his fans
look about and think, "Where am I? AM I? WHO
am I? What am I doing here and why?" And by the time
he told them they all deserved to die for failing him--
by that time that was what they WANTED to hear,
rather than face their failure, and he was insane
and led his nation and the world into insanity, huge piles
of broken bricks, bones, old shoes and women's hair
as a score of millions died -- you think you could beat
that score? You think you could beat Hitler
in a poetry slam? Do you? What if he comes back without
the funny mustache? What if he's a skinny pimply kid
with sad, burning blue eyes and purple spiked hair?
What if he's Black, Hispanic, a woman? What if he's got
a rich deep voice and a world of woe? What if he's got
a hearty laugh and perfect comic timing? Could you beat
Hitler in a poetry slam? How? By outHitlering him?
You gonna yell louder, whisper softer, exude
more toxic venom? You gonna hurt more and
hate better and find easier "solutions"? You gonna
pile the bodies higher? Maybe so -- maybe you can
do that. But even if you can, hey -- that's
the EASY way to win a poetry slam.

Hollywood Dreaming

I've decided that when I rise from this table,
I will go forth into the future as into my own
chosen garden. Barren Selma Street will peep
through branches at me as I pass the boywhores
on their beat. Work, the carping
of people in a hurry, skeletal palm trees,
tourist-ridden wastes of sidewalk will reach for me
with dream fingers of the drowning.

Call it an escape if you will --
or would you care to see my garden?
Autumn mists and grayness now; your feet
will be dampened. Don't step on the snails.

I don't conceal my work, my surroundings;
I expand the canvas: Let all the boywhores
of Selma Street spider after flies
in their dew-sparkling webs hanging
from that old oak. Even the tiny explosions
of car motors, the gleams of chrome
are woven into my checkerwork
of shifting leaf-shadows, flashing streamlets.

In the long halls full of blank doors
I will walk beneath branches, between mossy trunks.

I am tired of waiting for this place to talk to me.
I will have my own wind. If I want a desert,
these bricks and these trees will shiver, shift
in grainy drifts. If I want a mountain,
Hollywood Boulevard will fall away from me
in boulders, scraggly pines, and woodpeckers.
If I want a city, I'll creep among
Manhattan's canyoned garbage cans.
If I want Los Angeles, I'll call Los Angeles;
Los Angeles needn't call me.

Brave words. Well, why not?
I've been making things too complicated.
I suspect that right now I am invisible.
Let's go out on the street
and see if it's still there.

I carry with me an enchanted garden,
autumn woods, spring mountains.
I carry them lightly as any eye-twinkle.
If you travel with me, you can pluck
wildflowers, scavenge agates from my streams,
pick up red-gold leaves to take home
and press in books; If you walk a stretch
with me, I'll leave burrs in your cuffs.

Mountains, woods, waterfalls,
stars, snowflakes, rainbows,
even a shiny acorn a child once cherished
that I've been carrying around with me
all this time and never really lost
become tangible to me, and I realize
that you too have been here beside me
all this time: We've been walking
arm in arm.

The small red-stippled fish sense me
hovering over the slapping ocean waves;
they nuzzle the surface, curious;
I lightly kiss the salt wave:
Flick! Flash! They're gone.

While I do not favor cheap sensational effects

like string quartets in my wind-sounds,
the Seven Dwarfs scampering through my woods,
water taking on bright hues and flowing upstream,
etc., yet, to the trained eye, my mountains
differ from ordinary mountains. Here,
for example, is one of my mountains:
Notice the familiar shaggy expanse
of pine up to the timberline, the majestic,
but not unexpected wealth of folds, faults,
boulders, streams, scarps, mountain goats, etc.,
all rendered in exquisite detail,
right to the snowy cloudy peak where you can't
take this wind's sting much longer
(can you heeear me?). I'm sure you've seen
dozens of mountains like mine; perhaps
that butterfly flitting through that grassy ravine
is a shade bluer than any you've seen before,
but by and large, my mountain is...
a mountain. And yet your trained eye
will note that my mountain
is here.

Now it is many years later (or is this house
in Virginia in 1990 part of a Hollywood dream
in 1976?), and I remember the corner of Selma
and Wilcox, Sunset, La Brea, rattling palms
and stilt-like pimps, and I remember as vividly
my mountains and streams, my garden, you,
still the future I ever enter.

Fine Old Houses, Towering Trees

must be made of force
to be so permanent
until force - fire, flood,

bombs, the wrecker's ball -
unmakes them, force meeting
with a crash what can only be
force

surrounding me on my walk
with mellow cobwebby shadows.

These old houses, these fine trees -
they must be made of agreement
to be so permanent
until a change of heart
undoes them:

a child's pain, a poor man's rage,
an almost rich man's envy; or squinting
and making myself think a new thought
or just thinking a thought -

idea meeting (soundless as the change
of light as sun dips in and out
of cloud) what can only be idea -
agreement reaching out desperately,

fortifying rooftops with broken gold
and purple, linking ranks of homes
into an endless wall, blazing at me
from every window, sending flanking columns
into the reddening sky, trying to contain
my disagreement.

Instant Immortality

Being forever is not a problem,
but being Dean Blehert forever is trickier:
A bore to keep this identity active myself,
such a drain on attention, but if I can
get it going on automatic...

for example, get others to do it for me.
What's needed is just something
called "Dean Blehert" that continues to say
(seems to say) "I am". I could dive
this body over a cliff or into a fire
screaming "I am!", smuggling into millions
of late-night viewers' minds a picture
that, when recalled, screams "I am!"

A poem, like any gesture,
is a borrowing from hoped-for beholder
or sharer: Instant identity,
just add reader and stir. Here I sit
in July 19, 1980, planting traps
for your future attention,
seizing on the voices I hope to find
in your future head to make Dean Blehert
scream his future "I am's" for him
(English poetry being based on the I am).

When I write well, I have oceans of future
to loll about in as if I were the future's
discoverer. And what's in it for you,
my instant (just add you) reader?
Company, that's what, knowing
that whatever speaks to you
across whatever gap of years and miles
is now and is of your own kind: Any
immortality you find here, you give
and thus gain.

I of your kind? What IS our kind?
Well, speaking for myself,
I'm a poem.

Voices In Search Of A Speaker

Clear stream at last, free of the splash of words;
I hear them clash and babble far away;
A few swim near; pale fish, they gape absurd
And then breath meaning back, as does a gay
Expression frozen too long in a mirror,
Or a puzzle picture, a chaos of branch and leaf--
No, a chaos of ordered faces...clearer...clearer--
Then squint, and bushes return with blank relief.

But now words clamor to be understood,
Claim to be me, or, subtler, not to be:
They flatter me: "This silence is so good,"
They say; "How good it is to be free
of the splash of words." And others say,
"That too is only words; you can't fool me!"
And more reply, but I am far away,
Free of the words that claim that I am free,

Nor will they lure me with this poem's leer:
I am not I. You are the speaker here.

How to Have Interesting Problems Without Actually Doing Anything

For years meditation -- trying to be
or not to be -- solved all my problems;
that is, with meditation, who needed
problems?

It was consoling, like being a child again:
"Sit still and don't touch anything!" --
but what I said was, "Sit still and don't
be touched by anything!" Much later I worked
as hard to learn again to be touched.

There I sat on my aching ankles or in half
or full lotus (knees having given up
on pain) or, self-indulgent, lay
on my back -- stretching out my breathing
as a child stretches a rubber band
to see when it will snap; trying
not to be (or to be), trying not to be
trying, never sure if I'd failed
to achieve what I was trying not to
try to achieve or had achieved it,
but kept on going (not knowing) --

and it was easy to miss having achieved
something, because all the books said
that what one aimed for was something
inconceivable, but whatever I felt
was something I felt and whatever
I thought of was something I thought of
and whatever happened to me happened
to me, so when, sitting there, I felt
terrific, I thought, this is just
me feeling terrific, don't be distracted
by feeling terrific; and when I slipped
right out of my head and hovered above
it, it was still just me, so I kept
going (if you can call it that),
hanging onto the universe so that I wouldn't
miss when it vanished, and then I'd know
something was happening --

and after that happened, I'd be
a much better person -- well, "better"
and "person" wouldn't mean much (I'd be
above all such considerations), but
there'd be something about me -- well,
not "me" anymore (would my ex-wife notice
my poise and regret having left me?)... --

so that now the contrary efforts
to and not to be, like opposing biceps
in an arm-wrestling impasse, formed
solid masses, brawny fists squeezing
the eyeballs, screw-tightened vises disjuncting
upper from lower jaw, rawhide bands contracting
around the temples, a swathing intautnesses
bulky enough to lean on -- hell,
I could sit there motionless for hours,
propped up by balanced efforts
and counter-efforts, as if the air
around me were a mold into which I'd been
poured to set.

The more I tried to be free of thought
the more my thoughts became solidities.
Early on, in quiet moments, able to hear myself
not thinking or thinking of not thinking,
I'd slip out of these impossibilities

into a clarity where thinking continued,
but I was a stillness in which it occurred--
after such moments I'd think, why can't I
be like this all the time, the Zen dishwasher,
the crest of a selfless wave unraveling
in precise, elegant, spontaneous action?

And now, sure enough, the crushing weights
and torsions and other fruits of trying
not to try to achieve what can't be
achieved by not being the one for whom
I was not doing it -- all this stayed with me
when I rose on tingly-numb legs, and when
I shook my head, it was like shaking
an auto junkyard; and when I walked I became
a Picasso painting of "Man in Rusty Armor
Descending the Stairs"; and when I thought,
"OK, that's it, I'm done now," my solid mental
masses (I thought of them now as "mine"),
like unwanted guests, refused to take the hint;

and that was bad, but worse was, walking
about in my ill-fitting invisible strait jacket,
I felt, not fear, but HOPE!-- hope because
something had happened; you couldn't miss
that something was happening, and I'd been
spending hours each day hoping something
weirder than graduate school and more
wonderful than wanting to get laid
would happen, so maybe this was it--
and who knows, maybe it was, and anyway,
it cured loneliness: I had headaches
(not really aches, but like the ancestors
of ache, sheer forces of implosion
and explosion as if I were a forming star)
so solid I could talk to them,
and it seemed to me they were talking back,
or was that me as well? (When, one day,
I rediscovered simplicity, I was cured
forever of wanting to cure loneliness.)

Anyway, it had been hard to sit
so still so long, but now I could
prop myself up on my own stuck
mental spasms; and it had been hard
not to think of anything or to keep
my attention on a spot on the wall
or to just be there and not be;
but now I could turn to stone, which
is as good a paradigm as air is
of very much being there, but not
being there at all.

So I'd solved all my meditation problems.
Besides, when you're encased like a fossil
in mental rock, who needs problems?
I'd begun meditating heavily
when my wife left me -- amazing
how many problems having a wife
had solved. I'd thought it would be
depressing, after six years of
getting it regularly, to be learning
again what I'd never really learned--
how to date -- or to be jacking off like a
horny teen-ager. Instead I meditated.

Eventually, I got unexcavated.
I still see the logic of meditation:
If one could sit still and be silent
forever, that would solve everything.
But I don't want to solve everything.
I prefer to choose my problems.

My First Alcoholic (1966)

I didn't know about alcoholics, didn't grow up with them, had the idea they were drunks, luses saying "sh" for "ss", staggering, hiccupping, stammering, being happy singing Irish or sullen muttering Polish like the radio drunks, but worse, certainly no one you can talk to, no one anyone you know would hang out with; so when I met one, I didn't know it, didn't know how

alcoholics adapt to drunkenness, can resist it, look almost sober, just slow, deliberate, a little too intimate, leaning closer than is comfortable, being a bit ruthless with my attention (gripping it in a clammy fist, not hard, but too long, like his handshake), but with a surface politeness that precludes protest or interruption, telling me how I feel ("Right? Right!") with a slablike certainty that would preclude disagreement if it were possible to disagree before one subject vanishes (and never existed), and another thrusts into view,

and besides, I don't want to disappoint him-- he seems so pleased with me, just me and him knowing how it is, you know, and I DO know because I'm hip like him (he says)-- but it's slippery, because now he's scolding me, "Man, you don't know shit", scolding me for an opinion he himself just ascribed to me -- he even praised me for it!

This guy is, well, eccentric, I guess amusing, a real "experience", but it feels like the taste in my mouth of meat gone bad when I've eaten most of it without noticing--

and then someone puts on Motown music ("It's Awright, It's awright...") and he's dancing (but not reeling) by himself, real slow, eyes closed, almost standing still, and later my friend says "He's a real trip, huh?" "Is he always like that?" "Yeah, he drinks a bottle of whiskey every morning". "He's drunk?" "Drunk Hell! He's alcoholic. You couldn't tell?"

I guess it means he doesn't just DRINK the stuff; he's BECOMING it, brain cell by dissolving brain cell -- not drunk at all, but you could GET drunk just by being in the same room with him, yeah, that's what an alcoholic is: He's that stuff that's supposed to be velvety smooth, aged in wood, mellow, rich, manly and all that shit, and you tell yourself these things to forget it tastes like test-tube chemicals and gives you heartburn and someone already mistook your ice-twinkly fluted glass for an ashtray.

Saving Face

I catch at eyes on the street
and they dart away, except once I held
too long the eyes of a dapper man,
who smiled too winningly.

Counselling people, I can look at them
without being expected to make a pass.
With my wife, often, it is permitted
just to look. With friends across restaurant tables
looking at each other is not strictly forbidden,
though always after an acceptable instant
one must ask (meaning "Is something wrong?"),
"What?"

Why is it better to let two sets of eyes wander
in intricately interlaced choreography
from table to food to napkins, mine sweeping
(mine-sweeping indeed) past the face
three feet away only when it faces
elsewhere, catching eyes only a casual second,
as if eyes were slippery to the touch
of eyes? Why is it better, when eyes meet,
that inner gaze be elsewhere?

Even the dog knows that when I am giving orders
I am head of the pack and must not be faced.
People who look right at you
are about to lie to you, on the make, eerie
(Rasputins, pod people, zombies) -- Oh
there is no good reason ever for eyes
to fix upon eyes. Movies dote on closeups,
pornographically huge luminous eyes
harmlessly satiating our cravings.

Not that we are our eyes,
but they are where, craving raw light,
we've let ourselves be located -- what could be
more dangerous? They've become our signature,
identity badges in the swarming lobbies
of the Humanoid Convention -- the eyes
or other cherished features:
a mustache, "striking" cheekbones, the migraine
that somehow justifies all failures,

not much to be, but better than a billfold
crammed with credit cards, a sex organ,
a gun, a compendium of opinions
and all the other things we become
when we've lost, even, face.

On Living

if you could create a dream of your own (knowing first the difference between your own and what comes from parents, teachers, friends...),

if you could pursue that dream steadily, ignoring distractions,

if you could handle opposition to your dream without becoming the opponent of your opponents and thus letting your dream be redefined as whatever its opponents imagine they are opposing,

if you could distinguish your dream from all the imitations that tempt you to dilute, warp or alloy your dream,

if you could be what you have to be and do what you have to do to attain your dream,

if, having attained that dream, you could recognize that you have attained it,

if you could then create a new dream of your own to pursue,

if you could explain this to those who've been depending on you to be and do what you've been being and doing to forward the old dream so that they'd understand and agree with your moving on to your new dream,

if you could turn over to reliable people, media and systems all the functions, data and facilities needed to maintain and develop what you've made so that your own attention is completely free of it,

if you could then pursue the new dream as you pursued the old one and if you could move onward from dream to dream this way, missing none of these points

(death being how we solve the difficulty of having to do each or any of the above),

you would have no need ever to die

Not Mean, But Be

There's no more to love than saying
"I love you" if the tongue, eyes, heart -- if
all that we are says it, not one part saying
one thing, the rest another.

And even then, to that extent (if it be
only the words), we love. Not pretense,
not merely the form, but the real thing--
maybe not our own, not now, but someone
somewhen speaks our words.

No need to struggle to insert behind the words
a feeling called love to make them true.
One need say only the one thing and not
other things. "From the heart" is not
beyond saying, but is saying
only the one thing and
nothing else.

"The heart" is silence, which alone
can speak one thing only. Pending an ability
to be silent so that silence can speak
one thing only, it is useful to say
(if we would learn to love)
"I love you" to whomever or whatever
we would learn to love,

which will be (however drowned out by the
24-hour-on-the-spot-not-so-news)
that much love.

Once we are saying it, we need only
persist, meanwhile eliminating
the surrounding static. We find our love
by fine-tuning.

No need to clamp down on nervous fingers,
suppress hopes of getting laid... -- let the
static be where it is. Be where the silence is.

Surround love with silence. Surround
whatever we say with silence. Say
what we say when we say it
until that which we say is,
not merely the saying of it,
but it.

Love - A Fancy Parsing

The difficulty of saying "I love you" is one of grammar and truth: "I," the doer, cause, subject; "love," present indicative verb, the action that I directs toward "you," direct object. It is not clear whether "you" pre-exists to receive the action ("I hit you") or is created by it ("I form you"). In any case, love, here, is not a condition, an ocean into which one has inextricably fallen. It is an action. "I" does it to "you". If I stops doing it, perhaps love will cease -- and you, too, may vanish; which for I-- who usually has no idea what I is doing, much less how NOT to stop-- is too much responsibility.

Perhaps it's closer to "I feel you" or "I am you", neither action nor condition, but the expression of a link. But then, who speaks to whom? And if true, doesn't it go without saying... or, we may fear, it will go with saying.

Intimate

Being together in a room naked--
that's intimate. Being together
naked beneath the blankets-- that's
more intimate: dressed in layers
of cotton and wool to the whole world,
but to each other inside our cave,
naked and touching, as if living
in two worlds at once, everybody's
and our own -- and remembering the privacy
of the hollow beneath the covers
where I could pretend to sleep
while reading comics by flashlight,
maybe three worlds -- the third being
my own, your own -- especially winter nights
when we fill cool sheets with our warmth.

Intimate and somehow deeply innocent,
like sex itself, a leap into childhood:
giggles at each touch of icy fingers,
warmth, squirming, the old kicking fights--
"You kids get to SLEEP now, I mean it!"

On the big bed, we keep the covers over
all of us, our bodies little things
with bouncy mounds and mysterious openings
that cling, shake, squirt -- how childish!

Even with our eyes dark-adapted (just
dim enough to perfect our faces),
the illusion persists, though I know
you are 50 -- the face and smile
(nose tip to mine with three bright eyes)
is younger than mere bodies can be.

The world is our parents.
Nothing can touch us under the covers.
We would play in our cave all night
(sleek strokes that dare the hairy and moist,
then dart away like kids ringing doorbells),
but for having to pretend to be grownups.
(Whoever heard of a grown-up
with a soft warm fanny, ineffably babyish
to the open hand!)

Bodies nag, insisting on tomorrow and sleep.
"Go to sleep". Shhh -- our bodies
will never catch us meeting here
in dreams.

Across the Table You Slowly Smile

Across the table, you slowly smile.
What now must I pretend to know?

When I walk by myself,
thoughts chitter for attention,
only the most ambitious
gaining admission to my notebook.
Our friendship becomes a still more
exclusive post-graduate school for thoughts.
We walk in tight-jawed silence,
my thoughts (and yours?) bristling,
trapped rats clawing for exit
into the cold pure air
of our friendship.

Small talk only stirs, then smothers
the frenzy of unexpressed thoughts,
like the first hiss of gas.

What others call talk,
you and I call small talk.

Snail-like, on our walks, we put forth
sensitive protuberances and, quickly,
painfully withdraw them. More and more
rarely something happens (or so I think:
Do we dream the same dream?) that, later,
we try to describe: At the end
of a cul-de-sac, a rusty iron door opens;
a jig-saw puzzle piece slides into place;
a single metaphor, as articulate as
a newborn baby's hands emerges
triumphant from our protean shimmer
of intellectual protoplasm, a chord
resolves, words make sense
in both our worlds, leaving that day,
that week radiant with horizon
and promise of an end to dead-ends,
of a mutual music to receive all our thoughts
and all our silences.

What, then, is going wrong?
If it were only a jig-saw puzzle,
it should get easier as the pieces
are used up--unless pieces are missing.

Are our groping silences a rapport,
a weeding out of what no longer needs words?
Are our thoughts trapped to free us
from our thoughts?

I can no longer tell the difference
between dare not and need not say,
cannot be certain if I am the silence
or the uproar of thoughts, poisoner
or rat.
Now the workings of your face
as you prepare to speak (or not)
have become microscopically familiar,
tedious repetitions in a bad dream
brought on by indigestion.

Our voices squeak like chalk
pressed on a blackboard. I feel
a need to mock us, resist it,
and harden my side of the silence.

We are left with an agreement
on the vital basic importance

of our basic agreement about the basicness
of our agreement about basics.

We try to name them/it,
lapse into silence, resiled,
each having sounded like a stranger
to the other, and through the other's
inescapable hearing, to ourselves.

But always there is a "deeper yet" agreement,
which becomes inseparable from our silence,
an agreement with all beings, furniture,
and stones, as well as with each other,
needing no mere human friendship;
a silence tight-jawed with our efforts
to intrude upon it our friendship.

We cast about for world-saving
or world-destroying enterprises
of scope vast enough to justify
our relegation of "human" to the "mere".

Not that we speak abstractly. At times
a sky, a house, a movie screen, a mutual friend,
a memory is lit with an inhuman grace
in our shared vision -- or so it would happen
back when our silence still had holes in it.

Now (as, once more, our friendship appears
to be all over) our friendship seems
a way to know we are not friends
nor need to be.

We embed the knife of silence to the hilt
in our friendship, leaving it,
again, writhing, unsure whether the wound
is fatal.

As with the other "last letters" you've sent me,
this one is terse, oracular, seethingly cold,
fraught, as if to change a consonant
would be to wrench loose a continent.
Only what is not said answers my letter.

You find my marriage, my philosophy,
my words a betrayal of whatever agreement
you thought we shared. You say I am not
(you don't say "never were") your friend.

We are in the same city,
exchanging letters.

The silence is dead; long live the silence!

It's good to be alone
with my notebook (my reader?),
which doesn't try to be my friend,
doesn't fail at it.

And you, do you still spend your days
walking from your L.A. hotel room
with library books under your arm,
stopping to eat at a cafeteria
(on your Dad's money) and read
a page or two that fills you quickly,
so you walk more to digest it
and have "Major Breakthroughs",
but write nothing down, though you feel
ever more on the verge of writing
the PhD thesis that will save the world
or show it it doesn't need saving?

Do you still glow and bounce up and down
in your chair, going "Ahhh!" and "YES!"
when you see just how to say how
something is? Do you still find it
nearly impossible to sit through
even movies you admire? Do you still
say a few words (to whom now?), then say
"No, that's not right" and seem to cross out
the words in the air before your face,
your quick smile swallowed in as quick
a scowl?

Would you find these words exciting?
Irrelevant? A cop-out? Infuriating?
Exciting at first, then the more infuriating
for having fooled you at first?
If you read it, would your response
make sense to me, or be bad theater
viewed from the balcony through an opera glass
turned the wrong way?

Your last letter represented our friendship
as you forgiving me much, compromising
your integrity to include me in your universe,
as if eliminating me had enabled you
to know yourself or vice versa.

I no longer want to know
what you were always apparently
about to say. What could I know?

Dogs still bark at me as I go by,
but I no longer make an omen of it
as you and I did.

Do you still put tobasco sauce
on everything -- after subjecting the menu
to a harrowing inquisition?

What movie are we in? Will you now
become the fanatic leader of millions,
about to drown the world in blood
when I reluctantly assassinate you
in the last reel? Will you write a book
that untilts the axis of the crazy earth,
and I be half-remembered as a footnote,
quondam friend, minor contemporary poet?
Or will you just continue to take walks
and be on the verge of writing something,
a perpetual reminder to me of the possibility
of "throwing up everything" and "living
on nothing" and writing the great work
I'm "supposed" to write? (Our friendship
demanded increasing use of quotation marks,
but your second from last "last" letter
said I should help you create God's Kingdom
on Earth and used no quotation marks,
as if daring me to ask, "Where are the
quotation marks?" so that you could reply,
"That's just it!"

Are you still a good person? Noble?
Honest? Do you like small children,
dogs, people? Do you think I'm a nice
sort of person? After knowing each other,
is it still okay (with you? with me?
with God? ["God?"]?) for you or for me
to be any sort of person at all
(the betrayal of self-limitation)?
Is it okay with you if it's okay with me
if we're not friends?
Why aren't we friends? Why?

(I ask myself now, not you,
I tell us.) Is it because our friendship
was based entirely on the assumption
we understood one another,
so that if I disagreed with you,
you could not, as with others, assume
"He just doesn't understand?" Is it because
I am blind to a great truth that you (we?)
are bringing to birth? Is it because
we agreed (or someone did) to be friends
and then not to be? How can one know an answer?
Who the hell do you think you are,
anyway? (Silence.) And who did you
(do you) think I was (am?)?
(Long silence.) If it's never the right time
to tell me what you need to tell me,
how can I know the dancer from the dunce?

But sometimes you try to say something
and leave a however imperfect fragment
of metaphor hovering bright between us,
as if to say, "It will have to do,"
and like an ancient marble torso,
the fragment teases us with the perfection
of the whole, changing our silences
into dark caves of treasure untold.

Mystery grows foetid: bats hanging
in bat dung. Standing outside
your place or mine at 4 a.m.
after much walking, trying to say
something, the silence stiff over my face
like a cardboard mask, your goodbye
as stoney as Walter Cronkheit summing up
the news, thinking it would be a relief
to wrestle each other to the ground
as when we were kids in St. Paul,
in new snow thrashing angels.
(We were never kids.)

No, reader, we weren't homosexual lovers,
nor probably even meant to be,
just friends: We hiked, traded Hardy Boys books,
saw movies, played ping pong and catch and chess,
just good friends. Later we walked, talked,
ate in restaurants, calling ourselves friends
for (at least) 36 years.

My poems run on too long, trying to solve something.
Things solve when I stop being interested,
but a poem should build to a peak of interest,
and then end. When my poems end
by vanishing, I keep putting them back,
so I can grope for a grand finale.
When we lost interest in creating
our friendship, we tried to be interested
in why in the world we bothered
to create it, so spawned a riddle
to tide us over until your letter
gave our friendship its suitably
melodramatic quietus, and here it is
rediscovering its other ending,
because about a page ago
I stopped being interested.
Say hello if you're ever in
my universe.

Night Walks

Restless autumn: Brothers, sisters,
parents, homework, and television
closed in around me, seventeen,
but when I reached out to push them away,
they were too far away to touch.

I had to move out
through the musty front hall and heavy
oak door to find space enough
for me to reach out toward the boundaries
of what I would become.

Long arcades of elms: From an airplane,
green fuzz for a child to finger flat;
on a map nothing at all,
but from the sidewalk a universe
of leaf-shadow, leaf-song -- at night, endless
echoing, branch-vaulted darkness, always a breeze
to carry the sounds of home away behind me.

Wind river sweeps leaves and stars
past my head, and me,
I drift out of myself
and have to catch up
by some invisible silken anchor line
to the body with the dark coarse hair
striding slowly through me.

Endless stream of wind-rush
fills me up, as the world
fills up our idea of it.

Houses, lit up or dark, silent
or, wind-walkers themselves, adding muffled
TV and piano sounds to the wind's song,
each house so utterly strange
that it is no longer strange, but only
mine, as a child owns anthill and stars;

to each car a face that looks at me,
Adam, naming the new beasts,
claiming my neighborhood, my universe,
by being it all;

the only world this hugeness
I fill up, nothing to do
with school and newspapers,
admitting, perhaps, a few friendships,
promise in one girl's smile, another's
looking back over her shoulder,
the companionship of Tolstoy's people...

Tell the cat, brushing past my legs,
my thoughts arched against the leaves,
tell the unexpected passing person
(to whose hello I reply as royalty waving
to the cheering world from my parade of dreams),
tell the whole symphony: "BRAVO! ENCORE!"
Tell a world of strangers it belongs to me

by virtue of the wind I carry as a song
in and about the head called my name,
song that gusts in and out of me,
swirling up piles of dry words,
turning them to song.

Sometimes I sing aloud as I walk,
block after block, march of-- something
about the road leading onward,
mountains and oceans: trifles.

I want to take it all (houses,
strangers, my mom & dad, brothers,
sisters, kids in school who don't
like me or, same thing, don't know me)...

And I did, I guess, my song
an embrace: I hugged everyone.
And everything and everyone
knew it had been hugged.

I flinch from the sweetness
of mongrel wind, licking my cheek.

And I knew it knew.

A few words, left over, not yet snatched up
by my song: How will I ever
tell everyone what I am, what I feel, know?

I chat out loud
with God or myself, not sure which
is which or if that is even a question.
I say "Thanks, God" and that's not
quite it, so I say something else.

I think thoughts and watch them crumble
faster than I can complete them:
Old yellowed newsprint held up
to a blowtorch.

I knew all I needed to know,
except I didn't know I knew
what I knew, seemed over the years
to lose it. Or it lost hold
of me. I grew slippery, trying so hard
to be for others what I knew myself to be,
to give it to a friend or lover,
to recapture it with drugs or a landscape
or a religion. Or words.

Even now, knowing what I knew and know,
on walks I find myself trying to remember
what it's like to embrace the universe,
then think: I can't feel that anymore,
I'm dead.

Tonight, it occurred to me:
We live in a vast, friendly embrace
I discovered when I put it
where it already was, and ever since,
I've kept trying to turn the key in the lock
after the door is ready to spring wide open.

Tonight I walk in a different city, elmless,
leaves enough, but no wind, only the songs
of traffic. I keep reaching, trying to embrace,
to convince myself that something has happened
in the spiritual by getting the world
of newspapers to prove it, getting the candle
to illuminate the sun, getting a million
readers for my poems, raves from the New York Times,
perfumed letters from hysterical readers, telling me
my poems have changed their lives and
am I married?

I already saved by that embrace
the only world that can be saved. My effort
to unlock what is open jams the door,
leaving you no way to return my love.
I've been too busy reaching to feel
an answering touch.

We fill up with hate and frustration,
failed love, which can only fail
when we fail to notice its success.
I have given you all I needed to give
in exactly the way it needed to be given,
and you got it. Right here, right now.

So there will be no need to blow up the planet
to show each other how much love
we must have failed to give
to generate so much hate.

I have no idea how the sun
is compatible with guttering candles,
or how time is eternity's shadow's play
or how to end a poem that has no ending.

Satori Story

Hard to begin when you know
you'll have to end something
that has no ending.

Now I write the date on the page,
and it seems to begin. The ending?
That's when everybody laughs.
Or maybe it, too, is the date.

Once (a good beginning) on a windy night
I walked, knowing: This is me,
and now is now bursting from me
as song needing no reason,
I the fountainhead of reasons and feelings.

The story could end there.
Some illusion (of being a teenager
with acne and uncombable hair) ended.

I go home, Mom nags ("Don't you have
homework?"); I'm so high, it doesn't
reach me. Next day I try to tell someone,
who doesn't get it.

Later I make an effort to be funny,
then wonder if a clown could really have known
what I'd seemed to know the night before

and that night I masturbate, wondering
what good is it to know something
that doesn't need to be any good
to be what it is.

The story could end there,
but doesn't (who says? I say.
I'm the one who never ends.)

The story doesn't just go on;
it branches into simultaneous versions:
Trying to find it again in a woman,
losing it (or separating it
from what it is not) and finding it and
losing it (Boy meets God, Boy
loses God, God finds God) and
finding it (He loves me, I
love me not) and so forth
(unless we end it somewhere)...
Or there is no finding and losing
because the story never began,
just an adolescent delusion of grandeur;
now we know better, endure, earn your
keep, that's the whole ball of wax.

It could end there. (NO! NO!)
It could, you know.

A few days ago, for example, I
(much older) again walking, stumbled
into my old vision or its ghost,
then said it in a poem so that others
will maybe see it too (it belongs
to all of us, to no one), which I
couldn't do when I was 17,
so you could end it there.

But the next day I was sluggish,
putting off mowing the lawn, horny,
wondering if, by continuing to be
whatever I was being, I was betraying

what I'd just begun again to seem
to know, and when I went to a poetry reading
to read my poem, someone was reading
things that kept rhyming, line by line,
whether they wanted to or not,
and the others listened soberly
(I couldn't -- my language hurt too bad),
and I couldn't see anyone there
to read it to, couldn't see anyone there.

I saw them when I wrote it.
The me that wrote it could have read it.
The story could end there.

But it doesn't, because this
is the other side of that. Later,
anyway. Earlier (to recapitulate)
our hero realizes (with tears of joy
haloing each streetlight with opalescence)
that it's all OK, that all is and will be
well, that as you walk down the street,
the street spins by, and you
are the musician who makes the music
you dance to and...

Others have said it better.
The point is, what does one DO with it?
Nothing, of course, the knowledge tells me--
or anything. I could call this a problem.
Since it is NOT a problem,
It would be impossible to solve,
which makes it an ideal problem.

That would give me something to do,
and when nothing I can do resolves it,
then I can BE the problem. I can be,
for example, a poet. Solve me! I'm a poet:
The only thing worth being,
since only as a poet can I share with others
this knowing for which I have no use.

Is that all? Shall I watch the grass grow?
Are bums poets with writer's block?
Are workaholic businessmen bums with bumming blocks?

Does the end have to make sense?
This is the way a poem gets
when it should have ended long ago.

So THAT'S how it ends:
when it's supposed to.
and how do you know when that is?
There are easier ways than my way,
which is to notice that I'm still dancing,
but the music stopped long ago.
Reader, my partner, I bump into you
where you're standing still
(having heard the music stop).

But nothing ends, except poems
and dances and other grains of sand
with infinity in them if we put it there.

I hear the music again. The pause
was just a decrescendo before recapitulation
and coda.

So young poet has a..satori?
Epiphany? Enlightenment? (Everybody loves
Satori night and Samedhi morning.)
And the next day it rained (or he died
in a tragic accident or lived in an

accidental tragedy or tackled a burglar
and became a hero as once a child
daydreamed over a Hardy Boys book).

This, too, is only now (which one?).

I like "hello." It's the least ending
ending I know of. You visit home
awhile, but then you have to go
home. If you end with a beginning,
you don't have to end.

Chasing our own tails, we ass-end
and descend the spiral of time.
Eternity needs something to do
with itself. That, should you choose
to accept it, is your mission. So
hello already.

All Ye Know On Earth Or Words To That Effect
(A Resolution Not To Solve What Isn't A Problem)

In a Japanese garden, unmoved
by form or color, I try to see
what I would say about the garden
and see nothing at all.

After many lies, I cannot speak,
then cannot feel what I cannot speak,
then doubt it was ever felt.

Recently I caught tears sneaking
from my eyes at a corny movie,
small consolation, and there goes
a gold-black butterfly, with a halfhearted
tug at my half-heart.

Good to know butterflies are not yet
extinct. A few may hover about
for years, waiting for me to be able
to see them again.

I felt this way before, sought
to solve it with a woman, a friend,
a group, one addiction swapped
for another.

I will wait this one out.
Why should I sandpaper soul's fingertips
to safe-crack myself wide open to beauty,
only to have to serve time?

Let beauty insinuate itself as, supple,
it only can, up the back-staircases
of my bitternesses. If a flower
doesn't stir me, let beauty build
a better flower.

Why should I dwell on my stale-fresh
childhood, puff to revive the flame
in a faded face, greying embers
of past futures?

Why should I compel admiration
from and for each flower I pass,
Casanova's game: Make each stranger
dangerous, dared, tamed, cherished,
discarded, using prefabricated
admiration, the seducer's avidity.

Casanova Poet lays his line
on flowers and birds, relishes
the conversion of alien wilderness
to pouting pet, then, jaded,
seeks new wildernesses.

False solutions. I'd rather unravel,
knot by knot, the lies that tame us.

Stirring myself to desire
sex and beauty: Volta's trick
with froglegs; jolt a few spasmodic smiles
from truth's corpse until we are left
with flat mechanism.

I'll stay bitter for a while
and let truth find its labyrinthine way
to me. I can still hold my small
positions, say hello, and be casually greeted
by the artifices of each day.

Either I am or am not immortal.
Either way, no hurry.

Joshua in Training

Door to door, delivering
Pasadena Police Association Show
Tickets:

Doors with little glass eyes
and lock after lock to rooms where
nice old people hide. Waiting
for a frail voice to say, "Who is it?"

Then distant fumbling at a concatenation
of locks until, at last, looking
so tiny, they tread water on their big
mirrored carpets, trying to be friendly.

Waiting is the time of knowing them,
sensing footfalls so delicate
I'm not sure if it's from this building
or the next, wondering if to the glass
eye I look ok or like someone (murderer?
rapist?) TRYING to look ok, or simply
not ok.

And I TRY to look ok, but as if not
trying to look ok. I know, in short,
the inside-out lining of their fear.

When I say POLICE ASSOCIATION TICKETS,
as quickly as their locks will permit,
they let me in, and, so captured am I
by their vision of fear, I am surprised
at their trust and think, I could be
lying: I could be here to take
that silver. She turns her back!
I could be about to crack her skull...

(Raskolnikov, how could you give yourself
to an old lady's nightmare?)

I wear my body so closely
you must wake it to find me in.
These people wear their homes
("Fully Protected", "Full Security")
that way. Secure from what? Poets
who ring doorbells and don't run away?

Inside on the plush grey carpet
with brand-new-looking soft chairs,
the TV is on (usually unwatched).
Don't they know their enemies?
Spacious apartments, but I feel I have
entered a cave, a cell. Even the young
doctors, engineers appear as extras
on the set to fool the viewer
into thinking people live here.

Sometimes I have to buzz from far outside
to get in, then follow a maze
to the richly paneled front door
and THEN submit to the scrutiny
of the pin-prick periscope
before the locks give way, and the door
cracks open enough to see the cell
who lives within the cell, surrounded
by chairs, sofas, and elegant things.

Sometimes I stop at an old frame house
with the door open to beat the heat.
An old man shuffles to the door
in his shorts. Is he happier?

Maybe he just can't afford full
air-conditioned security. The condos
and apartments have acidgreen pools,
recreation rooms always deserted,
lots of tiny yapping dogs
with sad eyes.

Sometimes the door is answered boldly
by a big lady -- the Manager. She looks
like she lives where she lives.

Streets well-treed, and through wired
windows on a clear day, mountains.

They "live well" here and seem
ashamed of it. They are surprised
to have their doorbells ring.
It is a horrible strain for them.

Where I grew up, hourly, some child
or neighbor housewife rang or knocked
or just walked in. Here only a burglar
who knew his business could just
walk in (or a terrorist-- terrifying! --
could blow up the whole pack of cards
without even knocking).

Each lives so alone: I ask where
Mrs. Kennedy (my next stop) lives--
they don't know. Turns out to be
the next-door apartment.

Lacking the security of living
with others who know and like them,
they have privacy, wired to the Police,
whose tickets they purchase so that a
poet can make a living.

They are the secret structure of police
states, the fearful pact of silence
under which anything can be done.

And somewhere out there (Black? Mexican?)
are the people you fear, not very nice
either, feeling a more naked version
of your fear, or if they're not really
there, they may as well be: How many
of these people have actually been
burglarized, raped, terrorized? No
matter -- they read the newspapers.
Thus, one rapist rapes millions at once.

Heart disease and cancer find their ways
past the locks. And some life trickles through:
pictures of kids on the mantelpiece, with
real smiles; an old man pattering
with his plants, at ease with me;
a gaunt, elegant old woman eating her supper
on a tray by the fireplace, rare old books
heaped on her grand piano; young wife
not hiding the tears just stirred
by a TV special about a family with 19
handicapped adoptees; front room with
cluttered drawing board; even one apartment
house swarming with noisy kids.

But mostly it's standing with painstaking
innocence before glass eyes, waiting,
listening. There are two ways
to make a prison: From inside
and from outside. And maybe

there's only one way.

Walls are walls both ways.
A wall is a wall is a wall.
A door is a wall is a door is a wall.
Your door is where you are still able
to disagree with your walls.
Until your door becomes a wall.

A burglar is only a wall between you
and the missing stereo. A cop is a
licenced wall custodian and operator--
and a wall between you and the burglar,
between you and your long-suppressed desires
to break things, steal, kill.

Murderers are walls between your body
and the future: You shall not pass.

Even poets are walls, marking out
the frontiers of what can be said.

I don't mind walls. They mark out
places to be and places to go to and paths
to travel. They become troublesome
when we forget we devised them. Then
walls beget walls, and soon we cannot
move at all.

Most of the doors I meet have forgotten
they are doors, so long have they been used
only as walls. When slowly, creakily they open,
there is a sense of shame about it,
as if I had opened the door of a toilet
stall in use.

These people are ashamed of their nakedness,
their frailty, their solitude; embarrassed
that their ailing bodies (with dandruff,
scabs, and numerous excretions)
are fouling their immaculate creamplush
carpeted rooms.

Standing at their doors, waiting, I feel
how grossly I seek to violate the walldom
of this door, as intimate as a surgeon,
as improper as any rapist. I wish
I could spare these people.

It is such a relief when they have left
the check in an envelope taped to the door
or in the mailbox.

They are virgin: I must be very gentle.
I stand before a solemn mystery.
I am a high priest. I stand at ease,
my hands relaxed (they must not see
my fingers fidget), my eyes, I hope,
clear and simple, my face neutral.

The glass hole briefly darkens (I am scanned),
the quavery catechism, my ritual replies,
clink-clank, fumble fumble, seal by seal
the locks are undone and the door
opens (first on a chain, then
shamelessly), and the inner sanctum is revealed:
A worried, smiling face, a bathrobe perhaps...
as disappointing as sex or any mystery,
nothing behind the veils except what you
easily find on the street. No wonder
they are embarrassed.

The only walls worth penetrating are those
behind which dwell the makers of walls.
Behind these wood and metal door-walls
scurry refugees among the ruins left behind
by a superior, but vanished, race.

You there, behind the doors, the worried,
polite smiles, you are the only walls
I besiege. I am preparing a mighty,
trumpeting hello.

Idiot Savant

Those moments of childhood joy,
like blue-gold-autumn tumbling
in piles of raked leaves,
mean nothing now

because I know that not every child has a home,
a yard, parents, blue-gold autumns and
the illusion of security;

because I know that while I rolled
in crisp red leaves, elsewhere children were
whipped, shot, gassed, crushed, indoctrinated
and taught to hate;

because I know that children who screech
with joy become tired workers, torn-up soldiers,
tight-smiling solid citizens, bitter artists,
senile geezers and dead;

because I know the autumn woods doesn't
go on forever and that it is rapidly vanishing
from the earth, not for a season, but forever;

because I know that my joy depended
on an artificial security based on military,
commercial and spiritual exploitation
of the peoples whose children, even today,
are more aware of fragmentation mines and maimed feet
than of falling leaves --

or at least because I think I know
all these things, for they are said
so often in irrefutably serious voices,
and just their possibility palls my joy,

but one must ask (or I must),
what of the joy itself -- not childhood or
golden blue days, but the joy with which I,
not autumn, invested them -- where did it
come from? Is it brain centers stirring
to the right stimuli? If it were that simple,
I would find joy again by forgetting what I know
(a drug might help) and finding a pile of leaves
to roll in...but the joys of the medicated
are muted, as if strands of our joy are inextricably
intertwined with whatever we forget or with whatever
is unraveled in the process of forgetting.

What if it's not brain centers? What if joy
is my creation or what I am or the act
of creation? Once, far from circumstances,
in a drab room, alone, attention only on what
of me is me and no other, I slipped into pure
myself, and it was joy, a bottomlesscrystalline
lake of joy, and I won't try further to
describe it (bottomless, crystalline and lake
are as much of futility as I can stomach)

except to say that none of the because-I-knows,
not even the dream-crushing Holocaust,
stands up to it, and if the child, applying it
to Autumn days, mistook the day for
what he gave the day, yet what the child knew
was more than all he didn't know. Beside it,
my adult knowledge of aging, death, hatred
and what we do to each other and the world--
all these are the quick computations
of an idiot savant.

If You Build It

Kids making word music to catch-as-catch-can something to say, mostly ornate shower-song poetry, but if you keep putting out the music, louder, clearer, keener--

As a new restaurant stands nearly empty for weeks, the cooks cooking, waiters waiting to wait, dazzling linen and silver, savory aromas, all waiting, wasting for customers, but gradually they find the place, trickle in, bring friends, become old faithful friends,

So these bright empty palaces of sound, passion, color and image -- if you keep putting them there -- gradually fill up with the meanings they need to be alive, to be lived in.

Build beautiful forms for your life to live in, and one day there your life will live -- if you build it and continue to build it (each time as if never before), not despairing of the glib tinkling of symbols, passions grown by repetition as nonsensical as ecstatic descriptions of gourmet dishes on a neveropened menu --

If you build it, life will come.

Kill the Children

Always the truly dedicated, the pure
have known that a hundred evil seeds spring up
where one weed is uprooted, that it is
not enough to kill the vermin: You must also
poison the young in their nest, if possible
before they hatch. Always the Hitlers
and Stalins and Pol Pots have known
you must gas, bayonet, starve, kill
the children.

A civilization, dying, first consumes
it's future, then, in a dazed locust-orgy
is gobbling up its present when
the barbarians arrive to finish the job
of killing all the children.

There are so many children: We must
teach them to kill each other. Then
we will not have so many to kill.
Kill the children.
Kill the children.

In our schools, if a child acts like a child,
it is said to have a disease, and is drugged.
If a child "acts up" or daydreams or disagrees
too loudly or is confused or is sad or too
bubbly or too anything (Ah, the terrible
toos!) it is drugged by those who know
exactly how much of anything
is enough (don't all teachers, all parents
know how much of anything is enough? Isn't that
the knowledge that comes with training, in fact,
that comes with being an adult?) They are drugged
into premature stupor, that is adulthood.
If a child can avoid being noticed,
perhaps it will escape being drugged, but
to avoid being noticed, the child must be
very "mature," careful of every word and gesture,
sealed off from others without appearing to be
(just like the drugged ones), really an adult,
that is to say, a dead child. In our schools
we educate the children.
Educate the children well enough,
and we don't have to kill the children.
They kill themselves.

Teach your children well --
Kill the children. Kill the children.

Each adult on this planet
is the failure to kill a child...
or a killed child.
What are they for? They bring pain
in arriving. Then they eat up our hardearned
substance. They produce nothing
that can be eaten or sold. They are
noisy, disruptive, sticky, stinky, snotty,
filthy. They beshit themselves, drool, break
anything fragile or artful. They ask
unanswerable questions. They are mockers,
they don't follow rules, they run out
into the street, they spill their food
and refuse to eat, their food must be crammed in,
it is icky pap, their noses run, they make
ugly noises, they wet their beds, they
get sick and moan all day and, loudly,
all night, they make you work long hours
to feed and clothe and clean them, they demand
to be entertained and you must put up

with their saccharine singing dinosaurs.
Whatever one has, all the others
must have. They endanger themselves,
and you must protect them. Either
they torment tiny creatures or they
coddle them and must be consoled
endlessly when the coddled creatures die.
They say cruel things and smirk
at what they've said. Their laughter
is loud, insistent and ugly. They step
on the flowers. They put grubby fingers
into food you planned to eat. They bite
nipples and make them raw, they want
more, they will never learn, they make
you sick and tired, always tired, you
were never tired like this before (unless
you, too, were recently a child), they run
around and keep running and won't stop
and when they stop, they start again
and you have to make them stop again,
they won't go to sleep, they wake up whining
and wake you up to get them a drink
of water, they torment each other,
their crying is almost as awful to hear
as their laughter, they have dirty minds
and demand that you listen to terrible
jokes and demand that you find them funny.
They bring you bedraggled valentines and
scribbly pictures, and you are required
to OOOH and AAH! and say "How WONDERFUL!!!"
They make up stupid stories and, when challenged,
will not listen to reason.
Other people's children are too smart,
too mean, too spoiled, too much better
than your child. When your child goes out,
the whole world becomes populated
with wrong crowds. Far away, children
are hideous huge-eyed creatures (hardly human)
with swollen stomachs, diseased, and
there's something wrong with us if we
don't feed them, but if we try to feed them,
hordes of them tear us apart.
Because of our children,
we must vote for sleazy politicians and
pay them what's left of our substance. If not,
we are scolded for failing our children, failing
to make a world safe for our children...
and they plead (our children? or our politicians?),
first with noisy laughter, then gratingly,
then sullenly, then with screaming fits,
then with blinking and cowering and simpering,
then with big teary adoring eyes, then
with stony silence, and each pleading
is more unbearable than the one before.
We must kill the children.
Kill the children.

This is a suburb. Look out your window
now: Do you see any children? Maybe
one or two token children, riding bikes,
wearing helmets huger than their oversized heads
to protect their soft brains from shock?
"They're all in school." (4.5 million of them
on Ritalin in the United States, but soon
with adequate funding, we will be able to "help"
15 million impaired children.) But
it is Saturday afternoon! Where are all
the children? ("LOOK!" says Mama to baby,

her voice going UP and DOWN like a soft
logical siren: LOOK! Where ARE all THECHILDren???!
THERE!! THERE'S a children! Oooh! [A child,
tickled, giggles and squeals.]

When I was a child, every house,
every yard had children. We lived
in a grid of through streets, not
these cul de sacs, yet on every street,
daring the cars, waiting for the last moment
to move aside, an occupying army of
children rode their bikes in circles,
spiraled footballs, played hide and seek,
jumped rope. "They are on the playground,
watching TV, searching websites
for pornography, at the movies...".
I see so few children these days.

This is the inner city. Everywhere scuttle
shadowy dwarfs, but their faces are seamed
and sour with age. Even the sweetfaced
7-year olds are eager gofers for the 14-year-olds
and 11-year-olds who kill each other,
that is the main thing they do, trying,
I suppose, to help kill the children,
but by the time they are 11 or 14,
it is too late to kill children
by killing each other, and their pinch-faced
adulthood grows younger every year.
Soon you will have to kill a 5-year-old
to kill a child. But you will do, we all do
what needs to be done: Kill Kill Kill
the children.

A fetus is not a child, not even
a human, and if you kill it, you will have
one less child to kill. But in spite of
abortions and condoms in the schools
and family planning and morning-after pills,
the population increases by 80 million
every year (I hear -- though I see
no children out my window). Where
do they come from? Is it the children now
who give birth to all these children?
Is that another way (TWO ways) children kill children?

It is hard to grow and distribute crops
during a civil war. If we can keep
our quarrels festering long enough,
all the children will die. Some of the adults
will starve or become sick and die, though most
will scrape by. But the children will die.
It's like a forest fire that burns off
the suffocating underbrush so that the giant
old growth can survive. And yet,
the poorest, most war-torn Saharan hells
are the most overpopulated. What is it
about these children, these cockroaches! You
wipe them out and turn away and sneak
back in, switch on a light, and thousands
scurry into the shadows. (And how silent
they have learned to be! Well, that's
a blessing anyway.)

To make a reluctant child piss,
turn on the water in the sink.
To make a child dead, surround the child
with deadness and the dead, fill
the TV screens with dead bodies, fill
the popular music with deadness and
deathfulness, make it normal
to be dead, make it the in thing,
let dead-looking people model

underwear and stylish clothes,
zombie chic. To be dead is never
having to say you're sorry, for the dead
are not responsible for anything.
It is a great relief, no doubt,
to be dead. What do you want to be
when you grow up, Tommy?
I want to be dead.

If a child escapes into adulthood,
perhaps this is only a mask: Inside
the adult may lurk a child in hiding.
Psychiatrists and psychologists and social workers
can crack that shell to ferret out the "inner child."
Once they have uncovered the naked
shivering child, they can persuade it
that it was ravaged and destroyed
by its parents. If they are persuasive enough,
the child, convinced it has been destroyed,
will be dead...I mean a mature adult.
Once we have all agreed
to kill the children, those not yet
dead become a resource. They can pose
for obscene pictures, for, say what you will,
children have a certain charm, softness,
winsome appeal, that certain je ne sais qua.
Nothing like a blowjob from a four-year-old,
the pink puckered anus of a plump,
squirring six-year old (I assure you,
you haven't lived!), nothing like
the love of an experienced, tender mentor
to squeeze from them the last precious drops
of bright-eyed innocence (it is so brief!)
before discarding them. We are civilized:
we don't eat our children, not even
as meat byproducts in cat food. But
we are resourceful and find uses
for our children even as we kill them.

That's disgusting. Most of us, finding
such people, would kill them on the spot.
Most of us are decent people.
We do not fuck children.
We send them to school, to psychiatrists
(or to doctors who give them the pills
the psychiatrists recommend), we teach them
what they'll need to know to get ahead
in life. We give them everything, more
than WE ever had. We do everything
for our children. We work hard
for our children. It's all those
teen-age mothers of fatherless children
who are to blame. It's drug pushers and
Colombians. It's the mafia. It's lawyers and
big government and bankers and crazy people
who won't take their medication. It's
lack of funding. We don't pay our teachers
enough. We don't discipline the kids.
They need tough love. We do everything
for our children. Children are so cute!
Oh!!! Is at a wittow babbums! Oook! A
babbums! Oook at a pitty babbums! Ooooh! Is
iddum babbums wanna kissywissey?! Oops! Is
iddum babbums gotta go poopoo? Where is
that fucking kid? Who do you think
you are? SIT STILL AND DON'T TOUCH
ANYTHING! I MEAN IT! WHAT did you say?
WHAT? WHAT did you say? Later. Not now.
I said LATER. No. Don't bother me now.
I'm sick and tired of.... Show me
how a GOOD boy asks for more dessert!
Will you STOP THAT NOISE! Don't you EVER

EVER EVER take that tone with me!
I'll teach you to take that tone with me!
I'll TEACH you! Go to sleep NOW! Did you
hear what I said? DID - YOU - HEAR -
WHAT - I - SAID! **ANSWER ME!!**
Not now, Mama's very tired. [Listen:

The lines above are not empty. They contain
a parent's silence while a child waits.]
These are a few of the things we say
as we kill our children.

DRUG FREE ZONE. SLOW. SCHOOL CROSSING.
Conflict resolution. Metal detectors
just inside the doors. Some people
would rather that children be killed
without undue mess.

Terrorists are hateful. They kill
indiscriminately, car bombs, letter bombs--
ANYone could be killed. It is so much
more efficient to concentrate on
the children. Even the very old
have grown stubborn and vocal
about death. You can't shut off
a respirator without getting your ass
sued. You can't even kill them
when they WANT to die, but
the children don't complain. It took
how many years for someone to notice
that a Mom had suffocated five children?
(Who knows how many children at Auschwitz died
of infant death syndrome?)

If we can kill off ALL the children,
that's the end of the human race,
and if we can do it fast enough,
maybe the trees will grow back
and some of the butterflies
will survive, the water and air
slowly cleanse itself, it will probably
be good for the environment, though
dogs and cats may suffer. Probably
we are a failed experiment. In our labs
when we are done with the rats,
we gas them. This is all a story,
like Hansel and Gretel, the
lost children, the candy house,
the witch, the oven. It should end
lyrically, a bluebird alighting
on a sun-gilded branch and bursting
into song, Bambi peering up...aren't you
sick of all the stories being OUR stories,
aren't you sick of making up stories
to tell to children to make them
go to sleep, aren't you sick
of trying to make up stories about
living happily ever after? Bambi
is a giant rat, tick-ridden, destroyer
of our tomatoes and our cars. Bambi
burgers. If we kill the children,
the deer won't have to be Bambis and
baby vermin won't be cute. If we kill
the children, the world will be --
I don't know, I don't know the word
for it...REAL! The world will be real again
(the predators will not have to wear suits
and make themselves hard to understand),
free of our corrosive dreams, that

sour aftertaste of sweetness. We need
to get real. It is so real
to kill the children.

Kill the children. Kill the children
Kill the children. Kill the children.
Kill the children. Kill the children.
Kill the children. Kill the children.
Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill.
children children children children children children

...And So Few Toys

Does hate, like love, relish abundance?

When the evil man, caught in his nightmare
of standing alone against the onslaught
of whatever moves, faces mobs of life,
of us, does he

(like a lover, as enthralled by the quick touch
on his cheek of a blue-green housefly
or the shrilling of a thousand frogs
in a bog as by his lover's smile,
the sheer hum of life telling him
how much love must be in him
that he can pour it out into so many cups
yet overflow),

rejoice in the prospect of so many warm bodies
upon which to exhaust his hate and so appease
his ravenous terror?

When, admiring the cornucopia of corpses
of endless enemies, surveying stillness,
he espies a stirring, perhaps a breezeblown rag,
and sprays that, too, with bullets, the explosions
soon swallowed up in an ocean of silence,
is he relieved, glad to be done?

Or does he hunger for more meat to chew
(like those creatures whose teeth,
if not worn down by gnawing, pierce
their own brains), limitless hate
left with only itself to feed upon,
desperately hallucinating (as all he destroyed
were hallucinations) stirrings of life to attack

(frozen in the tantrum of a child who--
having slammed the door, screamed the lame
worst words he can think of at the walls,
kicked the cat, who cowers, out of reach,
beneath the bed -- hurls, stomps on, rends
his own toys),

ready to face anything
but what he has become?

What We Fear

A serial killer murders four or ten, a hurricane or earthquake kills twenty or a hundred, both unpleasant to hear about, to endure --

But years later hurricane survivors, even those who lost friends and family to the wind, speak calmly, sometimes smile, remembering the adventure, the shared experience, man versus the elements, something that, even as it overwhelms life, stirs life,

While those who lost loved ones to the psychopath are still shadowed by the horror of it, still cry out or become dazed to think of it, cannot face the interviewer, cannot think of it,

Not because those killed by man were dearer or are deader, but because a human, one of us, did what wind and fire do, crushed people for "no reason", feeling no more regret than a stone,

Positioning, for example, the torn bodies of children to form a vignette, as if they were damaged dolls, human rationality applied to achieve the inhuman and irrational--

This is hard to look at: When elemental forces rattle us like loose nuts in a hubcap, we are shaken, but rarely find ourselves slipping into the viewpoint of wind or wave, rarely see ourselves as bacteria in a toothpaste commercial or blades of grass beneath boot heel--

For long ago we gave up on expecting sympathy or sanity from doorknobs, bullets or the weather, but humans -- we stand next to them at bus stops, crowd into elevators, restaurants and parties with them, meet them alone on dark streets, make love to them and father and mother them--

And when what looks like one of us acts like one of it, that's harder to face than death, because death, though it has no face, does not face us with a pretended face,

Death is just co-ordinated chemicals releasing life -- or so we like to think, life being other than death; yet a psychopath, alive, is doing what weather does. This is our most intimate fear -- that life, what we are, what we can hope escapes even the body's death, can itself become a thing.

Kinderdammerung

A baby stops mid-crawl to puppy up at me,
and, thinking of what eye-searing pageants
severely abstract Germans, Russians, Americans,
who not? -- have performed with real children,
I wonder who could do such things?

But I remember grim fairy tales,
where people got hacked to pieces,
burned up, tormented forever, and it was
sort of all right (despite bad dreams),

even eagerly awaited because they had
long pointed chins and noses and sharp
teeth and threatened to eat up
good children and were, you know,
evil.

But those were children's tales!
How could grown men mistake
Jewish children for goblins and witches?

Not so hard in an unreal world.
Who in a limbo of liars called leaders
and thieves called benefactors would NOT
quick-march joyfully to a stern death
to recover a cozy bedtime story,
Mama's kiss goodnight and bloody
glorious dreams of slicing heads
off Nigger trolls, Jew dragons
and wicked gnarled Commie dwarfs
to win the smile and ever-after-
with-half-her-father's-kingdom love
of the pale corn-silk-blonde lady
in the white gown who

suddenly
looms over you and smiles and her teeth
are sharp, yellow and jagged and her cat's eyes
glint with greed and her bare legs
(you come up to her knee), how can it be! --
are whiskery with black hairs and she's
not really my Mommy at all! -- and she's
going to eat me if I don't wake up and
I can't! I can't! I can't!

The Little Sleep

I didn't learn about the unconscious
from pompous bearded professors with couches
who'd never been there themselves.
I learned from tough whiskery guys
who told me all about it on the radio
every Sunday afternoon and most evenings.

There was Martin Kane, Private Eye
(brought to me by Fatima, who wasn't
Mohammed's daughter, but a cigarette,
but there was no Ayatollah to put the
death sentence on the makers of Fatima),
who every week would, at some point
in the show, walk into a dark room,
switch on the light ("click"), then:
CONK! and "Ooghngng...", after which
Martin Kane himself would tell me
all about the unconscious. As would Nick
Carter, Sam Spade, Phillip Marlowe,
Steve Wilson, Johnny Dollar and any
of the dozens of first-person-to-the-brink-
of-the-grave tough guys who went beyond
the stars and tweeting birds (which Freud
has never adequately explained)
into pure hard-boiled poetry of going out
like a light and oozing into awareness again.

It was different every time, a riot
of similes, as if getting coshed released
all their suppressed-in-tough-guy-silence
poetry. "The room began to flicker like a
lightbulb on the fritz", "And the next thing I knew..."
Things went black or bright colors spiraled
down a distant drain, voices grew dim,
objects seemed to explode, the floor
jumped up at them, the room turned upside down,
her eyes grew large and swallowed him (she'd
slipped him a mickey -- he drowns in silvery
laughter), heads swelled up like balloons
and sailed among pink puffy clouds,
"I fell slowly -- for ages -- down
a long deep hole toward a spinning disk,
a record playing 'Is he...Is he...'",
One came to with "...a tongue as thick..."
(as a sausage or Mrs. McGillicuddy's brogue),
"a head throbbing like...", "a head as big as...",
in rooms where one has to hold one wall still
at a time until the white pulsating blur moves
nearer and says "You must feel awful".
They always woke up and solved the case
and sounded no worse for wear,
world-weary, a little sad, but no more so
than before the last CONK. When all went
blank, they never walked toward
the white light, though sometimes
when they woke up to find an "angel"
or a slimy "devil" worrying or sneering
over them, they'd wonder dizzily if they'd died
and gone to heaven or hell.

Those strong stoic tongue-in-battered-cheek voices
could have marched through death
and come back with a wisecrack. Sometimes
they even moved right out of dire stories
into commercials and back again. Every
week Sam Spade said "Goodnight, Shweetheart"
and faded away to the strains of "Get
Wildroot Cream Oil, Chaaaarly...", but
his voice returned a week later. Mere blackout

can't stop that tough voice that can't recall
who it is, what it's there for, why
it should care, but knows that it is someone
and should be caring about something --
a voice as unstoppable as thought,
or what's a simile for?

Where's the PhD thesis to explain
the stars, the birds, the world turning
red, then black, the fireworks, all the
forms of pain denied? Explain the
slowly developing inkling upon coming
out of the tunnel or meat-grinder,
the knowing one knows something, but
not knowing what, as if their brief
excursions into pain and unconsciousness
have unriddled the slashed, throttled and plugged corpses
that litter their lives -- if only
they could free their new knowledge
from the cloud of unconsciousness.

A detective is supposed to find things out.
Someone who doesn't want something known
tries to imprison the shamus in his cracked
skull with the knowledge either trapped inside
or outside and out of reach.
A detective has a head that disagrees
with blackjacks, gun barrels, brass knuckles and baseball bats.
And the detective disagrees with his disagreeable
head, night after night -- as if squabbling with an
old cantankerous spouse -- comes to terms with it,
learns over and over to live quietly
in or near that scarred, stuckout noggin. Sometimes
the detective slips away into a vast calm place,
and it's hard to want to come back.
"Some idiot wouldn't stop moaning -- it was
me." "Leave me alone...OOOH! Easy on the
bumps, will ya!" groans the detective,
waking up, not wanting to, but a job's a job.
That first step was a lulu says the tough detective.
As good as can be expected for a guy
who just had a hot date with a cement truck,
says the tough detective. I'll be
OK, just give me a minute -- planet earth,
right? says the tough wiseguy detective.
It's just another hangover for the tough detective,
just one more bloodshot fungus-tongued morning
waking up in the same shabby room,
but worse because there's two of everything,
a tight-rope walk between bad dreams
and the realization of bad dreams,
room awash with light that hurts
but must be confronted.

The private eye is one acquainted with
the neon night, too clear-headed, even
unconscious, for symbols more subtle
than a dental drill. This is what the
shamus knows that the shrink has forgotten:
The unconscious is no treasure trove
of discovery. It is where a ceaseless voice
hovers over watery chaos, like the dove
sent out from the ark, seeking a place
to alight. The point of the unconscious
is to wake up, taking back the shreds
of waking torn from one by pain,
blundering dazed bits of waking
that give the unconscious the illusion
of having something to say to us.

"And then I knew." "Then it came to me."
"Suddenly there was only one way to figure it."

"Wait! That's it!" "You've got to rest..."-
"No time now, babe -- I'll explain later."
"It hit me like a..." "It made no sense...but then
I saw something like a pattern and suddenly
it was as clear as..." "Then I realized
what had been nagging at the back of my..."--
always that sudden impact, whether
of unconsciousness or (slapping hand
to forehead) consciousness, because
that's what's real to tough guys: Impact.
Certainty and stupidity: TwoWHAMs!
Struck by an idea, the private eye
realizes he's been seeing things all wrong,
wakes up as from a dream-- and that's hard too,
but a job's a job. "I'll have that drink now."
"Make it a double". A little consciousness
goes a long way for a private eye.

When Smart Bombs Go Bad

Dear Editor,

I understand and share the outrage of those who condemn the tragic bombings of buses, apartment complexes, the Chinese embassy and other inappropriate targets in recent raids, but I think it important that we try to understand these bombs, not dismiss them as dumb or monstrous devices.

After all, for every smart bomb that goes astray and wipes out women, children and old men, 100 bombs correctly wipe out the uniformed husbands, sons and parents of those women, children and old men.

And bombs that go bad are not BAD bombs. They are bombs that got in with a bad crowd; bombs, typically, that didn't fit in, so that all the other smarties picked on them; bombs that had no other way to attract the attention they so desperately needed; bombs that looked to US for guidance in all that turmoil of gust and fog, but found themselves lost, alone, aimless; bombs brought up on TV shows and movies full of random STUPID violence, where ANY explosion is cheered as long as it's big and loud.

Remember, no matter what monstrous things these bombs have done, they are not monsters...or if they are, they are OUR monsters. We need to communicate with our bombs, understand their needs and how rough it is for them in today's heavy weather and high-speed, impersonal warfare. We must TALK to our bombs. We must TEST our bombs early and often to detect those with the potential for unsmart violence; get them counseling BEFORE they go out of control.

But first we must learn to LOVE our bombs. If we want well- educated bombs of which we can be proud, we must make the world a secure and caring place for our bombs. Our bombs are our future, and our future is the WORLD's future.

Sincerely Yours,

Dean Blehert
Laser Guidance Counselor
and Editor of Detonations

Grandpa Going Away

Home on vacation from grad school,
We stand by his bed in the Home,
trying to talk as if we're just talking.
He can't get my name, says the doctor's
to blame for something. It doesn't look
like Grandpa, a pale shell, shrunken, almost
translucent. He was a loud-breathing,
intimate whale when, as a child,
I'd creep into bed with him to hear, inexhaustibly,
the same Bible stories (David and Goliath,
Joseph) again and again, afraid to touch
the big brown wart on his shoulder; or looming huge
over the five a.m. kitchen table
the few times I got up early enough
to catch him slurping beet borscht
("Have some, Sonny," he'd always say;
"No thanks," I'd always say) or pumpnickel
with sliced raw onion and sugar.
Now, his shrivelled head set high on the pillow
is lost to us. He thinks he's at home,
says he'll get us some good apples,
and a ghost lumbers from the bed to the ghost
of the chilly back hall with its musty smells:
wood-slat bushel baskets, ageing apples, oranges,
onions, dusty-meshed potato sacks, while,
in the white room, he turns
under the sheets to rise, and I put out a hand
(afraid I'll have to hold him in bed,
ashamed that my real concern is
that he's nearly naked, and my wife
is with me, and as the sheet lifts,
the sight of his still pink, childish
nakedness cruelly embarrasses me)--
I say much too loudly, "No...not now, we'll get them
later...later!" He keeps trying
to sit up, falls back, egg-yellow streaks
dribbled on his lunch bib. Still he twitches
at his blanket, baby tugs, wanting
who knows what, eyes rheumy, mild, far away.
"I'LL GET THE APPLES LATER," I almost
yell. He looks at my fright-- at me --
with such mild curiosity that I have to cry.
"What's the matter, Sonny?" he asks gently,
lying back. "I don't know," I sob, not lying, though
I think I am, and he reaches out a trembling arm
takes my head to his shoulder
(not remembering me? Knowing my need),
strokes my head, my face wet against his neck,
robbing me of my easy loss.

How Could You! How Could You!

Many have asked. I usually say
I don't know much about it
and that's true. There was little to know.

Here's a story: A boy thought it wrong
to kill anything, even ants, got into a fight
for pushing a kid down to stop him from
stomping on ant hills, each ant, he thought,
one person: ant mothers, fathers, children.

Later, still young, he washed dishes
in a restaurant. The boss said he'd be canned
if he didn't get rid of the roaches, so he
made himself scrunch a few, but there were
so many... It was do it or don't, so he decided
DO and got good at it, killed thousands,
got so he was all eyes, almost antennaed,
would know there was one roach on the wall
behind him, turn and kill...turn and kill.

If, then, someone had persuaded the boy
that these roaches included poets and philosophers,
mothers crying for their children, children
for mothers, rather than pause, he would have learned
to shut off selected words -- poet, philosopher,
mother, child -- until needed; for words will do
exactly what we tell them to do, -- though
at first they sponge up feeling, but later,
from being turned on and off they become hard,
brittle, won't hold feeling.

Long before the boy decided it was OK
to kill roaches, he came to terms with doing it,
stomping, powdering, scalding, burning with matches...
Have you ever held a job you didn't like?
Say, you wanted to be outdoors,
but had to sit at a desk summing up columns
of figures day after day? At first
you hate it, complain at home, but gradually
you get good at it, fast, accurate -- you
make a game out of doing it better than anyone
ever. You beam when a boss knows who you are,
imagine yourself indispensable, work extra hours,
intoxicated by sheer competence -- and dreams
of competence recognized. You're shoveling shit,
but no one shovels shit like you, so it's not so bad,

though when you get home, if you had been, for example,
a poet, now you try to write a poem, and that poet
is wrapped in layers of itchy wool -- it's easier
to have a beer, but it's OK as long as you don't try
to write a poem, and you can still have hobbies,
do gardening, collect clocks or lampshades.

We were good at what we did,
no one doubted that,
though later it made no difference.

Besides, they WERE roaches -- not just because Goebbels
said so, but because that's what we made them.
Someone hunted them down -- already they were mice.
Someone marched them here, there, separated them,
took possessions -- already they were cattle.
Someone hauled them in boxcars so that they stank.
When we scraped them out of the train,
they were not much like us.

No one did it all. Himler vomited when he tried
to watch films of it -- no stomach for it. But

he could give the orders. I could follow orders. If I ever had any alternative, soon I could not think of it. But I couldn't have given the orders at first. Though later it made no difference.

Giving the orders is not so bad. You, for instance-- you know it happened somewhere once, and you live with that. Giving orders is just knowing it will happen somewhere. You reply, "But I am not CAUSING it to happen!" Well, sure, we strutted, bragged about unbending will, duty, power -- but do you really think we were capable of CAUSING anything? We gave orders that were followed-- our voices spoke, our hands moved pens, made signatures, but we had no control of such things. We couldn't control even our smiles, though we practiced before mirrors, trying hard not to twitch.

Besides, we gave no orders to kill this child or that. Our orders spoke of processing nonessential consumers, the disposition of property and other byproducts-- oh, of course demagogues shrieked to mobs about rats and bloodsucking insects -- we joked, quietly, about that sort of hogwash, but the orders we issued were always in proper form.

And you must understand -- you are trying, I know -- that when we wrote "process", we meant and understood only "process". Did we know what "process" meant? Understand, please, we had NO imagination. It is hard for you to imagine an absence of imagination. Say the word "process" over and over rapidly 100 times, a thousand times. Pro cess pro cess pros essp ro cess...

Some of us had bad dreams, but at first we could wake up, and later it made no difference, since the bad dreams went on over there, WE were over there. One day I noticed that my hands, typing, were far away and tiny. I was in an upper rear corner of the room. I have not since been able to move closer to my hands.

You might say we lacked even the imagination to imagine we could have such dreams. They were like a tune in the mind going round and round -- when first you notice it, you are amazed to realize you've been humming it ceaselessly for hours...or years.

Here, where we followed orders, it wasn't too bad. You had to break it down: Yelling isn't so bad. Marching, pulling a trigger, kicking, opening and closing metal doors, moving things, bulldozing things, pushing piles of earth, relieving someone on duty, taking a piss...you have to break it down, master each point, none of it too bad. They say you never got used to the stench, but you know, a smell is a smell and all you can do is smell it.

And each had his special virtues -- that one, he's cruel, kicks them when they're already moving, but me, I'm strictly business. Or I wouldn't stick my cock in such foulness, not like some I know. No matter what we did, each had some line he would not cross and felt, for those who crossed it, bottomless disgust. One man liked to batter babies' brains out against walls, but one day did something to a baby's corpse and was not the same man afterwards.

All that was at first. Later there were no lines

to cross, only the naked dead who had numbers and didn't move and the dead in uniforms who had names and moved. These became increasingly important -- or is it unimportant? -- the uniforms, the names, the moving.

One reason you find us hard to understand is because we, ourselves, have forgotten so much. Maybe once long ago I wanted to help people, tried hard, failed and decided fuck them. I think I had a dream about that. But I don't remember a bit of it.

You say, "What do you call 10,000 dead lawyers at the bottom of the ocean? A good start!" and everybody laughs. We had jokes like that. "Did the gas kill all the lice?" "Yes, Sir, but it also killed the Jews." "Oh well, try, try again." But you can think up the jokes yourself -- How many Jews does it take to take a shower? Why did the Jew... What do you get when you cross a Jew with a... -- and there was the new improved gas-- killed the Jews and spared the lice. Jokes helped us think we were sane at first, though later it made no difference.

I tell you, it wasn't too bad. I mean we did it, right? Somebody did. So obviously it wasn't TOO bad. So what's all the fuss? Nothing could be worse, and yet it wasn't so bad. That's GOOD news, isn't it?

Of course, I was just doing my job, most of us were like that, but there were a few real nutcases, guys who liked to experiment, got sexed by torture, thought they were playing with dolls and doll houses, arranging broken dolls in private tableaux. If we'd all been like that, you'd say, "OK, that's easy to understand," though I don't know why it's easy. Maybe if what looks back at you is bizarre enough, it's just an act of God, a tornado, a coat hanger, something that doesn't have to be understood.

But the maniacs were just hyenas attracted by the carrion stench the rest of us created by doing our jobs. Some of us had fought to protect ant hills while others had torn the wings off flies, but later it made no difference.

It is a great freedom not to imagine, to find nothing disgusting, human eyes like yours just pictures on a wall, nothing on the other side, and on this side, too, only pictures facing pictures.

Have I mentioned our rightness? Oh, I know we were wrong, hideously wrong, everyone -- almost everyone -- knows that. But at each step, each of us was right. You see a film where soldiers line up skeletal kneeling people, shoot each in the back of the neck, tumble them into a trench-- what you fail to see is all the heroic dramas played out, each soldier starring in his own. One is slaying dragons, another performing a terrible duty few others could confront. A third is being the most beastly thing he can be, thereby mastering bestiality for us all. A fourth is liberating humanity from enslavement

to rules, freeing us to the blood purity of action.
All pretty banal stuff, but have you seen
any movies lately?

And all of us were heroes, pioneers of
the eugenic vision, purifying the planet.
You know about our visionaries-- they are
still with you, those who teach that our miseries
are genetically ordained, that symptoms
must be suppressed or else those with symptoms.
They would say we were victims of our abnormal
brain chemistry. Whatever they say, accept it,
do not carp -- lest they discover that persistent
questioning is a syndrome requiring treatment.

At first, after the war, a few were hunted down,
but later it made no difference
when they held the highest offices
in World Mental Health. You couldn't tell them
from the others. An article about Jewish character,
overpopulation, the long-term need for euthanasia
or the right to experiment on mental patients
without their consent is no more difficult to write
than any other scholarly article.

And they, too, were right. They wanted
to save the world. My vision was less global
and, with time, became yet more constricted.
At first I was playing my small part
in saving the world. Then I was killing Jews.
Then I was killing this one and that one.
Then I was moving a foot here, a finger there
(my own, I mean). Then things went on,
including my body, without me.

But for a long time, in my small way,
I shared the vision. When you decide
to eliminate those roaches, there is a certain
satisfaction with each one squashed,
with not letting even that little one
get away. There's competence, elegance, grace,
efficiency. And long after elegance
yields to exhaustion, there is quantity--
one more, one more, like a child
collecting marbles.

Perhaps I never did those things.
That would explain why I say it wasn't so bad.
Perhaps I only imagine (maybe I can still imagine
and just don't know I'm doing it) -- perhaps
I only imagine I did those things. Perhaps I was
one of the Jews and survived it all.
It must have been horrible for me.
(I'd be the last to know that, either
because I did it or because I don't want to know
it was done to me.) It would be easier,
in such a case, to imagine I had been
one of the killers. The killers ate three meals
a day, got meat, cheese, eggs, fresh bread,
carried well-oiled guns, restrained fierce dogs
on taut leashes, slept on clean sheets, wore
clean uniforms, took for granted the right
to be alive, dreamed heroic blond Wagnerian dreams.

Though later there was no difference.
Not that we were all victims-- that is,
of course, we were, at least by the end
(it is supposed to have ended), but that
is no answer. If you ask, "How could man
have done such things?" and I answer,
"We were all victims", you must ask "How--
how could you have become such victims!"

No one has the right to be a victim.

Understand me well: There are differences between victim and victim. A Jew is gassed because he cannot control the bodies of guards, cannot break open steel doors (though he can leave fingernail impressions on stone walls), cannot walk his body through barbed wire and bullets. And this is degrading to all of us, that what we are can be victimized by mere metal, mere men with guns and dogs.

But I, if I was a victim, I must have been by far the greater victim, unable to control my own body, my feet, hands, fingers, tongue-- and my own tongue should be easier to control than a guard armed with a machine gun-- unable to stop myself from doing those things, myself become a tiny comatose thing embedded in a mountain of muscular meat and neural twitches (no more and no less than our theoreticians claimed we all are), not enough left of me even to act as an irritant, a hard pea to awaken the Princess. It is treasonous to do this to what we are, to be unable even to connect with my own eyes, lest others find me in them and force me to see that there are others in other eyes.

No one has the right to be such a victim.
So if I say, "I was a victim,"
you must continue to ask.

It makes no difference to me. Apparently
it makes a difference to you now,
though later it may make no difference.

Labels

People who aren't sure
that they are anything at all
like to cram others into pigeonholes.
It pleases them to see others wince
at being called bitches, faggots, Jews, Niggers,
eggheads, whatever -- to see
that they can impart that much life
to the dolls they toy with.

It is useful to label things,
for when we realize
we can make things agree to be
what we want them to be,
we are less unwilling to let go
of what we hold tightly to
for fear of becoming (willy nilly)
whatever else we may meet.

For example, has it ever occurred to you
that if you loosened your hold on your head,
you might slip out of it (or it
clumsily drop you) and become
with a SPLAT!
a square of sidewalk?

Landfill

In all this modernity,
airplanes, telegraphs and high fashion,
World War I takes us by surprise:
a generation of literate civilized folk
wasting itself savagely upon itself--
that was supposed to have been History
like the Plague and the 100-Years' War;
and later, with phonographs that bring Beethoven
to every living room and radios
linking all modern nations and selling Coca Cola,
we can't believe we are the contemporaries
(at LEAST the contemporaries)
of a Holocaust,
or that fifty years later
when we all watch the same TV shows
and we all know how crazy Hitler was,
Serbians are cleansing their ethnics
and young men with baby-heads (all skin)
chant the same old tunes
and thousands die of an incurable plague
that some call the work of God...

O why are we taken aback
that in all this change
so little changes? History
(unless we can change) is a landfill:
We dump stuff in it and pretend
it's no longer there, but one day
someone digs down a fathom or a decade
or centuries deep in his mind
and finds old newspapers still readable,
still up-to-date, an old hatred or hotdog
with ketchup still fresh, still edible

and layer upon layer of shiny aluminum
and plastic containers: old rhetoric
good as new, old ideas and feelings
prefabricated out of the fossils
of still more ancient ideas and feelings.
Most of our hatreds and fears
were only remotely the stuff of life to begin with,
so are not bio-degradable, and the live core
is closely packed in garbage, inaccessible
to assimilating earth or scouring vision.

There is nothing that has been
that is not still with us; we are still
whoever we have been, recycling
unless we can change.

On The Necessity Of Suffering In This World

Why, then, my brethren -- we MUST ask, why would this all-loving merciful God visit upon us all the miseries to which the flesh is heir? Is he displeased with us? Does he hate us? NO! Our sufferings are the greatest tokens of his love for us!

For ye know well what easy tinder we are for laughter's flame, for have ye not seen, among children, the volatility of folly, how a tiny spark of glee can set a room full of children first giggling, then guffawing, then convulsed with unstoppable belly-quaking laughter to the point where underwear is soiled, eyes are red with tears, ice cream and cake are vomited -- and still, a moment of tense silence achieved, the least glint of glee caught by one in another's eye sets off an afterquake;

For laughter is a contagion, and not only among children, nothing being funnier to us sober citizens than the sight of our fellows leaning on us unable to control this grotesque spasm. And the more caught up in the infection, the harder it is to stop;

And ye know well that the world has become a crowded place, where, soon, the motion of one will be conveyed over increasingly sentient media instantly to all others around the globe,

So that, once afflicted, one would have nowhere to turn, no way to avoid the inflammatory stimuli of chortling and cackling from the most inappropriate sources -- tiny wizened women, priests, tall cool blondes, thick policemen, dignified statesmen, each chortle setting off new waves and crosscurrents of laughter: Imagine, the President or the Pope on TV speaks amiss, says something slightly indecent, catches himself, begins to laugh, tries to hold it back, and a reporter, seeing the struggle between red-faced dignity and the black beast of the ridiculous, begins to giggle, and the President or Pope, seeing this, begins to croak, then howl, and the First Lady or Cardinal, offering a handkerchief, catches the mischievous gleam and cannot resist, and all over the studio and the watching world it spreads, people lurching out of their front doors for relief only to see others similarly lurching and passersby, seeing them, thinking an epileptic plague has stricken them, are amazed to find them sputtering with laughter and, trying to understand, are caught up, and laughter reaches a critical mass never before experienced where the number and density of chortlers is such that each keeps the other aflame indefinitely, overriding the belly pain, the sheer exhaustion, as cars go off the road, industry comes to a halt and no one can sleep and no one can eat and shoulders and backs are bloody from jovial backhudding slaps and pregnant women miscarry, doctors cannot control scalpels and...and thus, not by war nor pollution, but by laughter, civilization ends.

Nor, indeed, does it require a president or pope to spark such explosive fuel: for what could be sillier than sex: two bulgy tubes gluing their openings (upper and nether) together and moaning, as they writhe and evoke the Lord's name all to -- as any 10-year-old is shocked to learn -- put pee-pee in pee-pee and deposit goo.

What more would be required than that one day a spiritually evolved couple, going at it, begins to laugh and cannot stop. Next others begin to get the ancient joke (as if a stand-up -- or rather a flop-down -- comedian had stared silent for millennia, waiting for the audience to crack up), and soon all humanity is hard up for hard-ons, and even in the sperm banks, men masturbating into test tubes would giggle themselves limp, the starch going out of humanity, whose last generation, childless, would die laughing.

Ye see then the danger that so closely hovers. Even now a waft of childish giggles could spark the fire that burns up the world -- if it were not that the Lord, in his mercy, had injected us with the antibody to this virus,

For ye know how, in a fire, one wets a blanket, to make it less flammable, and ye know how a shock absorber cushions us against potholes, and so the sorrows visited upon us provide a buffer against the convulsions of laughter, for many among us, having suffered grievous losses, are turned bleak and sodden, unmoved by gales of laughter, not even aware of it, absorbing the grins and winks of the world without a twitch. There are many among us who have never laughed, never been children -- or if they have, it is beyond our conception and their own.

There are so many of these wet blankets -- so great has been the anguish that the Lord, in his mercy, has visited upon us -- that any spark of laughter is smothered before it can spread to the detriment of social order.

And therefore we must cherish those among us who are surly and sour, whose faces are fixed in rocklike seriousness, who peer into the darkness of our folly and say, quietly, "I prefer not", these stalwart protectors who surround us with their immovable sobriety and save us from ourselves, who keep alive always among us the security of sorrow, rage, hate and gluey sentiment, who, like boulders amid the flurry of our current, sit unmoved, for these are the weak links that snap laughter's chain reaction;

And therefore now let us join in a prayer of gratitude to Him Who, in His infinite wisdom has afflicted the world with its sorrows in order to save it from a greater affliction, providing, for our most dangerous disease, the most efficacious pills: O Lord, we thank thee for our misery, for fools must gladly suffer. Amen.

Layers

Our losses compress us, one emotion
crushed inward beneath the next,
layer beneath layer
like nested Russian dolls,
but no emotion is lost:

We see the drunk curled up at the curb,
as unresponsive as chafed flesh,
rubbed past pain, past feeling,
red eyes not following what passes,
not knowing or caring his fly is open,
one hand resting among sharp bits
of broken bottle.

We don't see, pressed solid beneath
the weight of apathy,
frozen underground rivers of tears

over hardened lava of hate
(shrill glee of planned vengeance
just beneath numbness, flesh
looking forward to the pangs you'll know
when numbness recedes),

and granite-solid beneath layers of hate
and pain, the interest in life
that long ago stumbled into molten pain,
then cooled to this hard crust,

and inside that, as tiny and undeniable
as the pea that prodded the Princess
from beneath a dozen mattresses,
whole universes shrunk to a petrified pea,
all the breathless dreams stifled
by mild interest of getting by,

And at the diamond-hard heart,
compressed to vanishing point: an atom
of pure knowing and deciding to be.

A Green Light In A Green Shade

Here and there a leaf jitters just enough
to suggest that the trees have not been
laboriously carved from jade.

But as I watch trees lift and fall,
open and close , breathing ribcages,
voluminous skirts with multiple petticoats
disturbed by "Swing your partner!"

It seems the trees -- like the strange cat
who unexpectedly, plops at one's feet to
stretch and writhe -- have DECIDED to do this,
for I feel no wind on my face,
nor hear it through traffic noise, here

where I, too, wait for a green light,
bound to my car by an appointment,
almost safe from these silent sirens.

Their mimed singing stops, but not abruptly,
motion stilled from the center outward,
so that seconds after the full ripple
has settled out, leaves on branch tips
delicately rise and dip like the fingers
of Horowitz adding one final fillip
(a twiddly two-fingered treble toodleloo)
to long thunderous chorded runs of the keyboard.

The light turns green (No leaves have been
damaged in the manufacture of this licked
lollypop-green traffic light), and lapidary mounds
of polished green stream past, not porous enough
to hold more than one metaphor at a time.

In A Letter

Strange, I can say things to you in a letter
I could not say nor knew I had to say
when, from the bed, you turned your puzzled face
to ask, "What's wrong?" Bland as a bored clerk, distance
renews my old expired license to dream
a you to dream a me to dream a you.

Bogs, mountain ranges, time zones away from you
become-her (I let her), here's my letter.
Clear Autumn night, nothing to encumber a dream;
I can say anything the wind can say.
My window reflects Man Writing. Inklings of distance
and dark seep through the image of my face.

With dawn the man in the window loses face.
All night I've spilled my heart out to the you
I couldn't find inside your eyes. The distance
is one lie to expose another. My letter
was answered as I wrote it. Could you say
"Why should I understudy for your dream?"

You could, but that's not in the dream we dream.
There was no alien you I couldn't face;
your voice, gestures, hairstyle--what can I say?--
lulled by such surfeit, I forgot to dream you,
forgot to make you special, followed the letter,
let the spirit sleep; cluttered, craved distance.

Leaving your head on my shoulder, you kept your distance.
I missed what I failed to make; how could you dream
it was you? You were right where I'd left you. My letter
opened a cobwebbed closet to try on face
after face, discarded all, and "Darling, it's you!"
I heard to faceless me you, faceless, say.

I had to become someone who could say
what becomes you. From me to my pen is distance,
a staggering, light-years' gulf. I reach through you,
three thousand miles away, inside our dream.
A child makes faces at a house's face.
My faith grows giddy: Perhaps I'll mail the letter.

Why should a letter give leeway to say
what, face to face, faltered at a table's distance?
Bird chirps; grey dream of dawn rehearses you.

Magic Act

There must--of all the times we said hello--
have been a first; I still taste our first kiss;
but how we got from one stage to the next
escapes me. From that strangeness of first touching
to smiles in the bathroom mirror--to this shocked void...
how did we do the trick? I can't remember.

You smiled. You wore...a green skirt--I remember!
How could we follow an act like that hello?
Smile lingered with smile; exit bodies to blissful void.
Next scene: We rejoin our joined smiles--a kiss--
and whose smile wears me now? Touching teaches touching,
we learn so fast, out-strip our bodies--what next?

You're no one, then a face in a room, then next
to me in bed asleep, then gone. Remember
the first time I unhooked your bra? Merely touching
to you, perhaps, my fumbling, shy hello
to what still seemed, then, naked. How dared I kiss
each tip? Even between fingers and lips--a void.

Illicit, wed, legal tender, null and void.
Step up, stick out your tongue, prick, heart, thanks--Next!
Sometimes a night slipped away in one long kiss.
Later you were unwilling to remember
it had ever been good. Hello! Hello!...
Operator, we're disconnected, numb, touching.

But once there was no boundary to our touching:
There lay two bodies floating in a void,
eyes twinkling with the hilarious hello
from one not there to one not there. When next
one spoke, the words were mine, but I can't remember
who spoke them. Far away, did bodies kiss?

Later hard kisses, quick kisses, a cursory kiss
before you turn back to the mirror, retouching
an eyebrow. Lying with you, I try to remember
loving you and can't. I try to fill the void
with caresses: It grows. Next finding faults; next...
How many steps from hello to hell? O

Who can tell? Hello becomes a kiss;
lips touching lips is next to nothing; touching
you, void touches void; what's to remember?

Strangers

Standing alone, I watch two people greet
each other in passing. Their words fall from their faces
and vanish, leaving no trace. Maybe they pass
each other every day. It would be silly
tearfully to embrace each daily stranger
as if the Prodigal Son had just come home.

The chairs are quite unmoved when I get home,
but two dogs, wagging tails, bounce up to greet
me. Would they do the same for any stranger
who feeds and scratches them? They rub their furry faces
against my legs and hands. Down, DOWN! you silly
mutts (I can't bear my face licked), let me pass!

Does someone keep a record? Do we pass
or fail each day, each life? I'm safe at home;
do I score? At weddings and funerals, always the silly
cousins-once-removed you have to greet
as if overjoyed--those vacant, smiling faces,
busily collecting intimacies--what could be stranger?

In savage lands it's death to be a stranger.
Our tribe is called "The People." Halt! The pass
word? Do Svedania. Fine--and you? From faces
like book-ends, matched, eyes glare. Dogs make a home
by pissing at the boundaries. "SniffSniff" they greet
each other's assholes. We bow, then shoot. Who's silly?

Furniture's fickle; a child you tickle silly
must laugh, but when you stop, he gasps, a stranger;
familiar bodies, broken, wide-eyed, greet
the sky; old houses gape at those who pass
through shattered glass. We make ourselves at home
behind enemy lines, disguised as faces.

It takes us many lives to make these faces;
we hone them in mocking morning mirrors with silly
movie-star dreams, as year by year we home
in on each other, each disguised as a stranger.
At last, on the street, in a room, we near...we pass
by. Did we speak? Did one mask another greet?

Dare we, smiling, greet each other, holedup in faces?
Or best be safe and pass unnoticed? Silly
as babies: Peek-a-boo! stranger--anyone home?

Left Behind

Looking at Grandpa, I thought I might grow old
someday, but never thought it would be me;
and when in dream or memory I've died,
something's lost, but I'm the one who wakes up.
I can never remember what I've lost:
A dear, small thing--surely not me; a pet?

Why is it shrunken so, carcass of a pet?
Death diminishes it. The very old
shrivel like empty cocoons. The body has lost
me in my dreams--it's my body's grief for me
I feel, poor thing--I'd like to help it up:
Poor faithful dear, I wore you out, you've died.

Such tears my friends shed when I dream I've died--
out of love for me they weep for my lost pet;
or is it their bodies' grieving catches them up,
one dog whimpering for another? Or could my old
friends grieve--how silly! I'm right here!--for me?
Or, not sure where I've gone, do they feel lost?

You'll find your way, my friends--what can be lost?
Can't we dream again whatever dear dreams died
when we awoke? My hands have followed me
from childhood, when, naptimes, as if to a pet,
I'd talk to one, then to the other (Good old
left hand, don't be jealous); they've grown up

with me--they know the way. My knee still sticks up,
hairier now--only the bandaid is lost.
Body, old friends, together we grow old,
a child in the tub with all his toys. We've died,
poor plastic ducks; despite freckled hands, in a pet
("I SAID it's time for BED"), Mom too. Wake me

when it's over. I've thought, "Can this be me?"
so often: swaying in the sky when I climbed up
the mast; when my hands, strangers, reached to pet,
in the backseat, a stranger's strangeness; in loving lost,
or expecting to be (Is that me moaning?)... I died
each time, becoming a stranger. Can I be old?

Astonished to be old, "Look, Mom! It's me!"
I crow--"I've died!" Is the game never up?
At the edge of the grave, lost, whimpering--Goodbye, my pet.

Trap

I think I know a way out of the trap.
Not though a hole to get beyond the sky
and not by chewing off the limb that's caught...
But you are free--why speak of traps to you?
Forgive me; sitting through this summer day
on a chair before a desk, in suit and tie,

what made me think of traps? There's naught to tie
me to this place. Is being here a trap?
But I'm not here. I'm half in yesterday
and half tomorrow. Thoughts can reach the sky.
And someday I'll outreach this skin--reach you...
That is, if I can find where I am caught,

for, Christ! it's hard to free what isn't caught
or doesn't know it's caught. You can't untie
your fingers from the bars when it is you
who clenched them there, becoming your own trap,
from fear some gust might sweep you to the sky,
torn free of the calendar's grid, the slotted day.

Our worries are sufficient for their day:
suffice to weave the web wherein we're caught
in thoughts, in eyes, beneath a bowl of sky.
Our musts and must-nots struggle to a tie,
and there we hang in Maybe's web, our trap.
I think I know a way out of what you

and I call you and I, that is, if you
can bear to look at what we are today.
There isn't any future in the trap
we call the past. Like moths by flame we're caught,
obsessed with blinding loss. Behind my tie,
neatly knotted, I'm safe. I peek at the sky

from behind two blank blue mirrors of the sky.
It's dim, bathed in this blazing pain. But you,
a flickering distant sun, an ancient tie,
pierce though the night old pain has made of day,
a bridge from now to when I was not caught,
stuck in what came between us, the only trap.

Out of the trap I think I know a sky
Where I once caught a blinding glimpse of you,
then, dazed, dropped into day and tied my tie.

The Enemy

The enemy is with us in our dreams,
But always when we wake we are alone;
Or so we hope or fear, we who have never
Been awake. Or is it the enemy
Who tells us we have never been awake,
Who borrowing our voices, says that we

But dream we're not alone? Did I say "we"?
What we? How did **you** get inside my dreams?
(Do pronouns pop like bubbles as we wake?)
Do you have your own voice, or must I loan
You mine? That one must be the enemy,
The one who's speaking now, who says that never

Have I heard a voice not mine; never
Has another heard my voice. But we
Just say these things for sport, my enemy
And I, or so says one of us. In dreams
My friends surround me, yet I lie alone.
They speak across and through me--it's my wake.

Then sunlight--something--stirs me: I'm awake,
Attended but by furniture I've never
Seen before--or maybe I'm the clone
Of one who knew this bed. Just last night we
Lay down here; one got left behind in dreams.
So now **I'm** me. Was I the enemy?

This is my bed. There is no enemy.
That was a dream, I say. Now I'm awake.
This daylight can't be doubted. Shedding dreams
Like water I sit up. And was there never
An enemy? I slosh through dream ennui
Until we meet over toothpaste and cologne.

But you're no "you". One thought moves both. I'm alone.
Alone? Awake? At least, mine enemy,
These puffed-up cheeks can't be denied, and WHEE!
I squirt at the sink and hit the mirror...and wake?
Oho! I've sopped you now! You're melting! Never
Again, O wicked Witch!, to haunt my dreams!

And so, awake, in dreams, we play, as alone
As we could wish, never sure if enemy
Or I will wake--We do go on, don't we!

Trying to Understand

"It is not something one can understand."

Not if we tether understanding on
A leash of quantity and physical
Conditions, putting an abyss between
A child's smile and a million children's smiles,
The terror of one man and a nation's terror,
A pound of flesh and six hundred million
Pounds of flesh, one murder and genocide;
There is a difference, but make of it
A mystery, insist that that which once
Overwhelmed six million humans cannot but
Overwhelm all understanding -- then we're lost --
We're lost, we're all lost. The killers won.
The bodies won -- the mangled heaps of bodies.
No one suffered; there's nothing to understand:
Finite cubes of suffering, units of pain;
We'll process them like bodies off the train.
Taut nerves fill up like toy balloons, then pop--
They only take so much. How many stubbed toes
Equals a bullet in the brain?

No doubt
The equation's known. The suffering beyond
Limit is what the understanding suffers,
But only because our understanding, too,
Unlimited, can always understand
Or come to understand what it has suffered.
Terror's a frozen mask, death a brittle
Shell; the writhing under false showers,
Clutching a stone that will not melt-- if you
Spoke to them then, they would not understand;
Pain, terror, death, what are all these
But absence of understanding? Eichmann,
Himmler, do you think they understood?
Absence of understanding cannot be
Understood. Conduct a conversation
With a doorknob: Ask it to explain my words;
See if you can understand its answer.
Ask the outraged, rotten flesh, ask either half
Of Eichman's mismatched face, ask uniforms,
Ask bars of soap, clouds of smoke, statistics--
There is no understanding there. And that
Is all that can't be understood-- except
As that which can't be understood. What is
A mystery? A something thought to be
Where nothing is. We stick to it like glue,
Stick to "death" and "pain" and "dread," try to wrench
Free of what we've put there, will not accept
The silence of a skull as simply as
The silence of a doorknob.

You tell me
Something can't be understood: I see
It's with us now, for you are overwhelmed
As they were, killers and victims, by the scope:
By numbers, rhetoric and force. I know
What you will say: "You've dieted, but have
You ever clawed for a mouldy crust? You've hated,
But have you ever..." I've heard the litany
So many times -- I used to run it on
Myself, the naked women singing as
They walked into the furnace, all the heaps
Of spectacles, gold fillings, wedding rings,
The clerks who sorted these, the burial squads,
The plough blade pushing dirt over a hole
In a place -- I understand a place -- and over

Things -- I understand things -- that were people...

I used to think of it until I wept,
Then think some more until I could not weep,
As if to pay a debt or to persuade
Myself or God that I could do without
Such misery, for I could understand.

Later Black men said that I could never
Understand what they went through because
My skin's not black, and women said, "You can't
Know what it's like to be a woman, because
You've got the wrong-shaped body," and perhaps
I'll never understand just what it's like
To be my knee, my hand, my face-- because
I am not these. Perhaps the doorknob's silence
Accuses me of failing to understand
The mute hysteria of being solid.
When nothing's left for me to understand,
To be, but me, what am I?

Some could say:
"They are Jews, vermin -- not like us" -- a refusal
To be them gives the license to kill.
Once killing starts, it's fatal to be them.
The killer must extinguish understanding
Or feel what he inflicts. So must the victims--
Or be the targets of the rage they hoard.
Two hundred poets put a full-page ad
In the New York Times to tell us we can't grasp
The havoc nuclear war would wreak. I wonder
If four billion lives exceed the grasp
Of one man's thought or if the loss of a planet
Could not be understood by any child
Who's lost a pet or doll or had to leave
A childhood home? I wonder if the world
Survives on laws different from those that rule
One's life: A man who sees no future kills
Himself. Are worlds different?

A future must
Be dreamt. But who will dream for us, we who
Cannot understand what happened once
Or what may happen soon, we tiny, shrunken
Things, crushed by numbers, unable to contain
The facts, we who can't understand, how dare
We dream? How can we say "Let there be light!"--
Not knowing what the light may make us see?
(And how is it that we who are unable
To understand it, yet are able to
Keep putting it there to taunt ourselves with our
Inability to grasp it?)

A camp guard
(Not me, but it could have been) stitches from skin
A lampshade (not my mother's skin, not mine--
But we have skin. Not the lamp I write by,
Though it has a shade), and this I cannot
Understand, because I touch at night
My wife's warm breathing skin, and she, alive,
Suffuses it with a glow much richer than
A light-bulb's; then she turns to mine and turns
IT on, and together we shine on through
The night -- our light keeps me awake to wonder
What fool would throw away the light to have
The shade?

Poor spook. I cannot understand
Because there is no understanding in it.
That man, so long in darkness, could no longer
See the light.

Is it Freud's dark fraud that's fooled
Us so to think that what's unknowable

(Because there is no knowing there) is known
By finding meaning in it? The unconscious
Is as deep as any doorknob, as deep as we
Refuse to be it, understood when we
Bring understanding to it, not, like suns
Seeking candles to light our way, confer with symbols,
Praying: "Speak to us, great Unknown, tell us who
We are!" Who speaks? Who listens? It is we
Who dream the only dreams we live. We are
The source of understanding.

Understanding

Is what life is, what life can understand.
To understand insanity and death
(One death, six million or four billion deaths)
Is but to know there is no understanding
There, and that is all there is to know.
Demand answers of the tarbaby, and soon
It answers with your voice, then loses that.
You don't have to be dead to understand
What death is. Death is that to which is added
Understanding to make life, so life
Is that which is the understanding of death.
Each grass blade avid for dew knows more of death
Than all the dead. The dead are only known.

That picture, the one I stared and stared at
In Pictorial History Of The Jewish
People -- and later, in a Bergman film, I saw
The actress who won't speak stare at it too--
A Jewish family marched off at gunpoint,
The smiling soldiers, parents turned to wood,
The girl and boy -- especially the boy,
Frail in short pants, face white, mouth tight,
Eyes bright with terror-- all this I understand:
He wants to live, but space and time close in;
He wants to act -- there's nothing he can do;
He knows it can't be happening, but it is...
There's much to understand, but it's all clear,
And the guards in helmets, why should they not smile?
They're getting their pictures taken doing their job,
And no one's holding them at gunpoint. They
Don't understand the thing they do, nor does
The child. I understand that well: that they
Don't understand. It isn't something one
Can understand. Understand?

Goodbye Hello

Who shot John Lennon?

!! says a bright-eyed man with a gun.

Somewhere the one who was John Lennon
is not amused: Nobody that small
could destroy me.

So how did you do it, John?
We are not so easily fooled.

We wanted you to be a Beatle.
Could you not have stretched yourself
to take it all in, you creating you and
you creating us creating you? You knew
how to do it (You should have known better):
In HARD DAY'S NIGHT, singing and smiling,
a benign mischievous Papa, playfully mangling
bedtime stories to the screaming giggles
of protest from earnest children,
your audible smile tart with whimsy,
while girl-buds burst into soft spasms
of sobbing: "John! Jo-o-ohn! O John!"

You're the culprit: You gave us
someone we needed to give back to,
then became unreachable. Must we
hide our love away?
When I heard the news today,
I cried, less the loss of you now than
how much of you we'd lost years before,
when the Beatles ceased to be -- only now
become irrevocable.

Did we ever have more of you
than the music we still have?
We TRIED to have more:
gossip, snatched kisses in crowds, buttons,
bits of torn overcoat, locks of hair...
and we envied the woman who took you,
wasted you, we thought, since she
didn't want a Beatle. Finally a super-fan
came with a gun and took you back.

You fled us. Did you think
we could lay claim to anything
that was not ours?

You became the one with the autographs,
buttons, cherished locks of hair,
the one we needed to own, body and
rubber soul stretched taut.
Soul thumbed its nose. Chanting
"You can't catch me!", soul ran, ran
like the gingerbread man, so we shot
the body, and you got away from us.

Yoko the grinch who stole Christmas?
She was your shelter -- from us?
In our lives we loved you more.
You scowl: It was YOUR life
to live or waste. But it was ours, too--
you GAVE it to us, and you can't ever
take it back, that's how it is:
You've got to get bigger, you can't
get smaller or what you've taken in
will choke you.

You sang your sassy songs right to us,
your smiling piss-on-tin whine penetrating
Paul's meringuey sweetness; even at 2 a.m.
with a tired Deejay, you promised
a wet chirpy dawn in which anything
could happen. Then you took it away,
no more surprise SERGEANT PEPPERS
under the tree, no more REVOLVERS
(except the final one), Christmas extinct,
kaput, gone, end of childhood, NOW
HERE THIS: Everybody grow up and get serious,
concerned, righteously pissed off,
inscrutable; no more Santa Claus, no more
Beatles, just newspapers, angst, Issues of
Broad Public Concern BLAM...BLAMBLAM **BLAM**

"We thought love was all we needed."
You rode the crest of a tidal wave of it.
(Getting off without getting swamped
is the tricky part.) No wonder you thought
you should use it. What a waste not to-
all that love, all that agreement! To move us
through our love of Beatles, you had to
BE Beatles, but Beatles could only say and do
Beatle things.

Grow up out of being a Beatle?
You underestimated the ability of a Beatle
to grow up: Even we screamers
have grown up to be silent mourners.
All you need IS love,
plus whatever it takes (intelligence?
toughness?) to go on loving despite
temptation not to.

Easy enough to luv those who think
they adore you -- unless you've been fooling them.
Who, stripped of masks and expectations,
are you? You explored, but found that drugs
remove no masks, only glue them on. What now
can tear off these suffocating masks?

You created a Beatle and gave it to us,
a gift, no longer yours to waste. You hadn't
out-grown it. It had out-grown you. Inside
our dream you rattled like a seed in a gourd,
shriveled up by drugs, rages, petty cruelties.
Your gestures of wasting our shared dream
were insults to us, but no more a real wasting
than drugging or besotting or shooting an artist
to destroy his dreams.

Someone, imitating you, tried to shoot
a Beatle (impossible!). An innocent by-stander
(a lucky man who made the grade),
John Lennon, got killed.
It takes a great man to live up to being
a great artist. A lesser man is eaten
by the dreams he creates.

Why blame you for your murder?
It's either that or forever more
let a crazed creep with a frozen grin,
a smoking gun, and a strangle-grip
on History, his whore, have a hand
in rewriting all the songs you ever wrote.
We want to give you back your music,
untainted by raw nauseous headlines,
so that you can give it back to us.
We're trying, John -- help us
if you can. Don't let the newspapers
get us down.

We hear you were groping back towards
others, a wife, a child, friends, less
rancid songs. You always get shot when you
make hell a LITTLE better, free
the serfs; take the lid off your fears:
All the stored-up compressed hate
must fly off in your face before a pale hope,
pumping up new feeble wings,
is revealed. We've got to admit
you were getting better.

Please come back grown up, big enough
to receive our love for you and not
be drowned.

We don't know why you said goodbye.
We'll say hello.

And still (as the radio jauntily says
there are places you remember...)
these damn tears. How can anyone
so alive be dead? Yet Bach and
Beethoven are as as dead, as alive,
and I don't cry for them.
Much as I'd like to live where my dreams live,
I am still time's fool.

We are the mess you left behind.
With its brutal kindness, deaf to our reasons,
 brusque as the cleaning lady, whistling
as she picks up after the funeral party,
Time sponges at songs, sopping up hurt.
Will the radio be safe again?
Will it be you singing, old friend,
not the ghost of the world's lost youth?

It's been a hard day's night, but, yeah,
it's gonna be alright, because, yes,
John, there is a Beatles.

Dreamer, put us in your dream.
Be the magic man you seem.
With the tickle in your song
Tease the children from their strong
Silent deadly manhood; make
Us giggle, make us sigh and take
A look around and see each other
Stirred in a dream dreamed by our brother;
And, brother dreamer, ere you wake,
Give us back our eaten cake:
For when we've chewed and swallowed you,
What's left to be? What's left to do?
Your voice gets drowned in head-line screams --
Quick! Teach us, dreamer, to dream our dreams.

Lettuce Go--We'll Turnip Again Somewhere

"We pulled the plug--he was no more than a vegetable."
Understandable, if regrettable--
Yet I myself, when Late Shows segue soporifically to Late Later
Shows, do not hesitate
To vegetate,
And we don't uproot our cucumbers and tomatoes
Just for being vegetaters,
But, unlike cabbages and beets and other leaves and roots,
Cucumbers and tomatoes aren't really vegetables--they are fruits.
Vegetables are what when you don't want to you're made to for
your own good or else! eat,
While fruits are a treat,
And unlike a vegetable, a fruit
Is cute.
For example, you might call a pretty girl in whole or in part a
peach or plum or tomato,
But you would never say, "Wow! Look at the great broccoli on
that parsnip!" or "She's a real luscious potato!"
(But I wish I could disencumber
My example of the cucumber,
Which, though a cute little number
May be said to be as cool as a cucumber,
Yet to view as cute these blunt warty manque-pickles
Is ridiculous!
But if they are considered the exception that proves the rule,
With me that's as a cucumber cool.)
This cuteness of fruitness perhaps explains why no one ever wants
to put a fruit out of its misery,
Though for some reason only females are supposed to be fruity,
so fruity males are said to have mixed up their hers
and-hisery,
And some consider it their sacred duty
To put the unduly fruity
Out of their gaiety
In the name of a very serious and wholesome deity,
More a what's-good-for-you-whether-you-like-it-or-not God than a
cute God,
A vegetable God, not a fruit God,
One who tramples upon vintage grapes while extracting tears and
trembling from us rather like a raw onion,
Not at all Dionysian, purely Apollonian,
Which is perhaps why many prefer to think that God is dead,
The idea being Better Dead Than A Potatohead or a Bible Belt
Protistead,
Though I hasten to assure one and all that I myself would not be
thought to cast aspersions or asparagus
On anyone's fundamentals of faith or to undermine that live-and-
let-live-those-that-our-God-loves philosophy that is
(as preachers and politicians endlessly harague us)
So purely Ameraga's.
But all this begs, yea, **implores** the question
Of whether vegetables are in fact miserable or do we project
upon them our **own** misery at having them thrust
overcooked down our infantile instant-sweet-
gratification-craving systems of taste and digestion,
So that we remember our green salad days
As limp and bitter and pallid days
And ever after, the thought of doing away with spinach
Is greeted with pinache?
All of which suggests why the sight of the body of a dear one
still breathing but with no other sign of anyone
there
Reminds us more of a boiled carrot than a juicy pear,
Because as a child while tarrying over our tepid peas in
vegetarianism vile,
We begged our erstwhile loving Mom and Dad, as they
metamorphosed into parients riled,
"Please can't I just have my dessert now! PLEASE!!"
And our mother intoned, "That's enough! I mean it! Now EAT

YOUR PEAS!"
And to all further entreaties turned a countenance of stone,
So that we sat and stared at the peas and they didn't answer us
 either and suddenly we knew we were all alone,
Which is exactly the way you feel standing beside the intensive
 care unit,
Knowing that something is keeping that body going, but no one
 you love is dunit,
The point being, not that you shouldn't pull the plug on it-
And if **my** body ever develops a vacancy, please, someone, put a
 rug on it!--
But don't, because of your childhood traumas,
Slander crisp juicy string beans and cabbages and brussels
 sprouts, which, though they don't wink at you, are
 hardly in caumas,
Not to mention an elm or oak or pine, which is also, broadly
 speaking, a vegetable,
Though not--like a narrowly speaking one or a fruit, which is,
 after all, a vegetable's egg--edible,
And surely you would not, merely for its being a vegetable, chop
 down a tree,
As which I think that I shall never see
A poem expansive, branching out in all directions, twisting to
 catch a theme that is as labile as sunlight,
Which is why fools like me try to write
Poems that hint at something in us as in the reaching of a tree
 that is neverending
That dwells but a while in a body before elsewhere wending,
That, having no form itself, needs a body so that it can hug us
 and we can hug it,
And just to hug and be huggable, it drags the body along wherever
 it can lug it,
But there comes a time when it has gone or is struggling to go
 where its body can't, but the body keeps growing hair
 and toenails the way carrots and potatoes left too long
 in the refrigerator sprout roots, and its eyes don't
 move and it's smelly and clammy and, FUG it!--
You want to unplug it,
Well, I say do it and don't rue it, but shrug it
Off, because it takes a being to illumine
The human,
And if you take the being out of human being,
What's left isn't worth abloomin' bean.

Messages

We bombed Libya "to send a clear signal to Khadafi." I wonder how that works? Perhaps the bombs explode in Morse Code sequence, BAM! BAM! BAM! KABLUM! KABLUM! KABLUM! BAM! BAM! BAM! (That's the only Morse message I recall--it means SOS, help, Mayday--but they bombed Khadafi in April, so he may not realize we need help.) But the people who are too close to the dots and dashes will miss part of the message, like ants who stray beneath the telegrapher's battering key. Nevertheless, what fun! Think of all the clever things we can say to the Russians with big bombs and little bombs. Then we can wait to hear their answer--just like two kids who sent in boxtops for Captain Midnight Secret Code Rings. But you don't have to be a nation to play this game. Terrorists have given us petite (but no less eloquent) bombs, fit for a small party or an intimate evening. So when you want to reach out & touch the one you love, why not say it with bombs?

I'm Rather Light

This is a heavy world and I'm rather light
to be digging all these tunnels through thick air
with my pen-hand.

Talking to you via this quaint, but ponderous machinery
of hands, pens, presses, editors, publishers, etc.
(not to mention larynx, tongue, teeth, lips and ears)
is a tedious custom of the land,

for I'm sure my thoughts are beating about you-
even now as I write them down-
as loud and unheeded as the surf of signals
from 10,000 untuned-in radio stations
or the pounding of your pulse.

(If you ARE receiving my thoughts,
please signify by...
Nevermind--I don't hear so good myself yet;

I might mistake you for a mosquito
or a ringing in my ears or a stray spark
of memory.)

Art History

God moved over chaos, said "Let there be light" and saw the light, that it was good.
The Shaman artist painted on cave walls
what everyone wanted to see: Happy hunting-
hoping a magic universe would imitate art.

Later artists painted what everyone
thought they saw (pure virgins, innocent
babes, noble kings...), later still
what everyone saw, then what only the artist
could see, then what the artist alone
thought he could see, then what the artist
alone wanted to see, hoping for magic.

No wonder some artists, sick of what we
or the world made us see, sick
of having to reproduce anyone's seeing,
even their own, even when only a dim foreboding
of seeing, not sure if they could see anything,
not sure if there could ever again be
anything they would want to see,

began to splat paint about randomly
in hopes of surprising themselves
with the unforeseen, seeing it
and finding it good.

Any Three-Year-Old Can Do Human

Long ago, we, so unsolid,
took pride in our art
of seeming to be solidities
and creating persuasive solidities
for others to seem to be,

rejoicing most to fool ourselves
and become real dolls--
as when a child playing cowboy
forgets he's not John Wayne
shooting real bullets.

Then came biology
and automatic reproduction
and no one remembering how we did it--
took all the art out of it,
did for being things
what photography did
for painting things.

Oh well, if we've lost the thrill
of being good likenesses,
if any idiot can be human
just by being born,
we can still make our bodies
decorative or just take joy
in being nothing meaningful.

Morning Noises

No rain sounds.
A bird's squawk-squeak.
No doubt, patches of blue out there.
Car rumble, dog yip-yip-yip,
wife breathing beside me, this pen scratching
(Must remember to tilt pen toward vertical-
it's a Bic), airplane growl--I see it
breasting big woolbank clouds.

No sound of kids playing--ever--on this street;
I'll have to have my own. The street
must glisten with puddles, merely
decorative without kids.

Maybe if I lie in bed and listen long enough,
I'll feel again what it was like to be a child,
have a neighborhood, smile and wave to strangers,
make friends with barking dogs, build forts...

Today our mail will be dry, maybe a rainbow,
grass and trees euphoric, vibrant green
against the rich gray half of the sky.
Worms on sidewalks, snails in slimy locomotion
and in every stage of mutilation; mud,
mud, mud--take me with you, says clinging earth.

It's been raining for days and soon will rain
for days more, so I listen carefully
for no-rain sounds, mainly motors and motors.
Today even the motors sound sunny.
In the blue gaps between motor vibrations,
I try to hear every twig new, dewshiny
as we made it,

but I can't listen Van Nuys into a garden
of cloud and leaf and bud, then have their newness
make me new--that's backwards, turns the world
into a prop.

My wife sleeps beside me;
two dogs snore at the bed foot. These
and the humming house are neither enemies
nor instruments of newness.

She's half-awake, stretches, shakes her fine hair
against my shoulder, tickling. Beneath the shade
slips a brilliance in which can be discerned
(if I squint) anything at all.

Let Us Consider Our Limitless

Loneliness:

The loneliness of washing only my clothes;
the loneliness of looking about me
at the faces in the movie theater,
but they look only at the screen,
which looks at no one;
of an erection that goes away
when I take a piss, of a stray mutt
waiting at the curb to cross a busy street,
of washing one supper dish, one fork, one pan,
of being unable to remember the face
of an absent presence one slips into
just by looking at an unmade bed.

(Why do waiters ask me,
"Table for one?" Do they see the notebook
in my hand and know I conceal you?)

There's the loneliness of being with someone
who fills me with thoughts I cannot say,
of saying and not being understood, of knowing
someone else needs me to say
what will let him say what he must say,
but I am too "lazy", because first
I would have to understand something
I'd rather not, lest I have to change.

There's the loneliness of masturbation:
One goes about it slowly at first
stroking one's own thighs and belly,
trying to persuade oneself that love is occurring.
(Millions of masturbators fondling themselves
at any instant think not of each other,
but each of his or her separate magazine,
comic book, unmoving memory.)

But no masturbator can achieve
the loneliness of loveless lovers, having
or feigning orgasms at opposite ends
of a numb, moaning, mechanical galaxy.

"I'm so alone!" they cry out
in unison.

He is never alone, the child who says hello
to the tree and the cow and the car.

Alone is not absence of bodies, but
the unexpected response or unexpected no-
response where understanding has been:
the dead dog that doesn't stir to one's voice,
the familiar telephone number turning
to an electronic voice telling of
disconnection, the unexpected slap,
the chair or dog or mother or sky
that doesn't give us the total agreement
to which we are accustomed. It is
this universe telling us truly
that it is not OUR universe, but lying to us
that it is MORE than our universe.

When lies have replaced live communication,
we need solitude to re-establish the fact
that we are not alone. A simple rock
in a garden: It is safe to perceive;
its lies are so childishly blatant.
Just perceiving it is being greeted
and knowing we are not alone.

My loneliness is a wall built around myself
of the lies that coat my communications.
The slightest windborne trumpet call of truth
is dangerous. A cat saunters offunswerved
by my kitchy-kitchy-cool, a child on the
sidewalk stumbles, bumps into me, and, briefly,
flashes fear (of me?); in the middle of my
long explanations, a hand touches my wrist
and you are smiling and the words go away
and Jericho trembles.

Much we call communication (as cancer mimics
the form of supplanted organs)
is the DEATH of communication:
Television is a place where millions of people
assemble each night to be alone together.
Drugs, advertising, neoned churches, one's
first name in a computer-generated letter-
but also we encounter stray complicities
in being here, friendly clerks,
a surprise hello from a passing stranger.

Even the lies are communication-
of the despair of the liars
who think they are alone, but that
is a grim communication, and we
prefer to hear the lies. It is
easier to dance to that canned music
than to feel the ulcer-pangs
of the first violinist and the arranger's
melodramatic grief at the betrayals
of his lover. And these truths
behind the lie are themselves lies:
Even an ulcer is a wall we build
rather than live some piece of life
we cannot stomach.

And this is the lie: We are alone,
encysted behind walls of the force
we compulsively exert first
to keep others from going away
and later to keep away others
whose presence would violate
the walls of force designed
to keep them from going away.

Yet we are with each other, talking
to each other endlessly
in our minds, in the unvoiced
urgings of our vocal cords, the leanings
of our eyebrows; when sitting together
in a car, at a table,
even when not speaking,
we mold our thoughts around the presence
or absence of each other, even when we are
strangers. This steady current
of our knowledge of each other's impingement
is a constant hum, modulated
by the activities of the moment (chewing,
steering a car, noticing the weather,
charging a machine gun nest)
to become the lives we lead (or are
led by). We have been told we are each
isolated in separate, mutually alien
(ah, but mutually!) worlds, cells
unto ourselves; if so, it is only because
we are bursting at the seams
with this swelling hum, almost audible,
of our being with each other,
of the impossibility of expressing to each other
(in the few words that leap free,
ragged refugees, breathless, halfdead)

how much we are together here,
co-moving at--faster than light--the speed
of knowing, to stay in time with each other,
out-performing a Marine Corps closeorder
drill team or the June Taylor Dancers
just to stay in synchrony enough
to see the same stoplight or
comment on the humidity, then feel,
each of us, cut off by our inability
to articulate how much we share.

Don't Look Back

The lesson of faith is renewed
when the cartoon coyote runs off a cliff
and keeps running on air
till he looks down, loses faith
and falls.

So it happened to Peter as,
on the wide water he walked,
then waffled, petering out;
to Orpheus, losing his lute's loot
when he had to see Euridice;
to Lot's wife, saved but unable
to tear herself away, becoming
suddenly (losing her savor),
the stuff of tears.

not that ignorance is bliss,
but that one who begs a candle
to illuminate the sun
must shut out the sun
to find the candle,

shut out the space where we make things happen
to confer with the idiot world of headlines
and expert opinions, where nothing is real
but the running out of leftover ripples
of random events, overflow of our dreams.

Just checking to see,
my lady of the fading smile,
if the cells of my tongue
and the bacteria in my belly
agree that I love you.

Lost and Found

You stand there in the spring woods,
appraising like a new brand of brew
what once tore you out of yourself,
left the empty shell of you vibrating
with a music that hummed long after
your return.

Now, admiring, you are solid.
You try to feel by looking harder,
spotting details, stilling the voices
in your head. For a moment you think
something is about to happen,
because you feel teary, but no tears flow-
the source is muddied.

Feeling nothing, you stand there
trying to put something back where it belongs,
not knowing what,
while the dog trots and sniffs
farther and farther afield. You move on,
thinking, "I've lost it", hoping someday
it will turn up.

Nothing has been lost.
It is what has been added that thickens
the day. It is always with you, a clenched
headache you won't know has held you
until it vanishes. Then you will know
the mass of it--and the masquerade:

That when you strained to see,
the strain was not yours; when you thought:
"I've lost it", the thought belonged
to your burden; when you cried:
"There is no freedom!",
it was your shackles crying.

How Love Works

We're all together here
enjoying the show like
family gathered around the fire
or the TV. It's endless
Superbowl Sunday.

But fans can get lost in the game,
caught up in the players - fun,
but the forgetting comes between us.

Lonely for forgotten closeness,
we press and grind flesh against flesh
to numb the itch for a closeness flesh
can't touch.

Then, craving closeness all the more,
we collect voices, identities. We carry
our cherished dead with us
to keep them alive; we continue their
lives for them, suffer their diseases,
pursue their goals, defend their fixed
ideas, speak with their tongues -
and our enemies, too, we keep alive
to avoid having to face what we've
done to them and to justify what we
continue to do.

We are swarming hives
of hostile and loving voices,
our faces wooden with mask upon mask,
heads abuzz with debate and blame -
false closenesses that mask,
like static, the keen presences
we are for each other
when we are for each other.

Groping across these barriers to find
those who are with us here,
sometimes it happens (an accident
of fine tuning?) with eyes meeting eyes
in a face or on a page... - we are aware
of being here, right here, with someone,
thinking our thoughts in the same place
at the same time: Walls rattle like paper;
distances are lost in thumbnail parings;
flesh flickers; faces shimmer;
bones, hollow as a bird's, fill up
with light. Our bodies become
tiny things contained in what we are.

How very odd to find someone,
and, eyes meeting eyes, to realize
(as we finish for each other
each other's sentences with
no sense of interruption
or cleverness, just of
having to decide to put
time there to have) - to realize
that we are both here and always have been,

and odder still, the ease with which
we can include anyone we meet -
cab drivers, kids tossing
a football, the orange cat eyeing us
from a stoop - they, too, partake
of our closeness.

And when, not knowing the simplicity
of our discovery, we mistake it

for mutual need - as if there were
no "withness" ever in the world but with
this one, an apprehension whose gravity
sucks us "down to earth", so that we
wonder what we saw in each other -

then, just the memory of that fugitive
(but in itself endless) closeness
can fuel years of lonely cross-grained
marriage or friendship.

We are all here together -
a keenness of presense to which even thought
is a noisy clown in clodthumping shoes.
You can tell we are all together here
if you are very

very

quick

Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself

I

Sometimes, when love's less pain than fun, we know
Just what it is we're loving when we love,
But one afraid will seldom know what of,
Nor in our raging can we see the foe

Or know just whom we hate when most we hate.
I THINK I know -- he has such glaring faults!
My hate, his faults, like partners in a waltz,
Converge, bend, sway and turn -- each other's fate.

One day a question takes me by surprise,
And suddenly I know (opinion? -- no:
This is a small, still, razor-sharp "Hello"
From out a burning bush) -- know I despise,

Not him, but something I, myself, have done
And do not want to know I've done, but he,
In passing once, he smiled (or leered?) at me
And said a few light words that weighed a ton,

Because they left me wondering if he knew--
Not knowing what I wondered at or THAT
I wondered; rather, like an alley cat
Who KNOWS his skulking thefts are overdue

For retribution (though he hardly knows
Just what he's done): so that, at the least sound,
He starts and scurries, bellies to the ground
In shadow, beams his malice: two green glows.

And I, I chose to hate HIM -- why hate ME? --
Found faults in him enough to shed the weight
Of his opinion. What a joy to hate
This nobody who grazed my infamy!

But when, trembling, I saw all this, I laughed,
Forgave myself; still laughing, rifled through
His faults, in which I'd long been pleased to stew,
Trying to reconstruct my hate with craft

And image, as sad men consort with porn
To rouse their impotence, but though his meanness
(Like breasts that cannot stir a longspent penis)
Remained, persuasive, loathsome, not to be borne...

In short, though I still found it reasonable
That I should hate him, nowhere could I find
My hatred. Now, since he had not grown kind,
I must conclude ("But this is treasonable!"

Cries out in me a part that can't stand laughter)--
I must conclude that I have never hated
That man, and as I do, as if inflated,
I'm floating off -- I grab for the nearest rafter...

II

I wonder what it is we fear when we're
Afraid of dying, death, hellfire, an end?
What WORSE things could these known fears portend?
For what we say we fear is NOT our fear,

Or else the fear would vanish, being known--
Not spread and fester. Even facing a coiled
And venomous snake, one's underwear is soiled
By what we think we know, but don't. One grown

Accustomed to the ways of snakes stays cool,
May even grab it by the tail and swing.
The poet who insists there's not a thing
To do about our fears of death-- poor fool,

He long ago, knowing us all eternal,
Persuaded others they were doomed to die--
He meant it as a joke, but, seeing his lie
Seed terror (father of our DAILY JOURNAL),

He started to believe the lies he'd told,
A ploy to lessen guilt, as if to say,
"See how I, too, must suffer, wail and pray!
I told the truth! I'm dying! I grow cold!"

So may it be with all our monster masks:
The face beneath them always is our own
Most monstrous face that melts when freely shown,
A question answered even as one asks.

Love Poem

Not one thing I must do today
pleases me. My lips are immobile,
stiff as parchment.

I lean over the barren page,
looking for words
as if for rain.

Is there a path through the world's
polluted wilderness to one
who will look up with a spark
of recognition from among children
who laugh with sharp-edged eyes,
ravenous as Pacmen and unable to read
this, my language.

Can disciplined language blaze a trail?
What can my language know
that I do not know?

Well, I will at least reach out
and hope to touch,
across an ocean of air, you,
still reading, trying to be here,
to be reached. You look up
when someone says hello.
You have made efforts
to give others pleasure.
Music, sunsets, smiles
have touched you.

This breeze brushing my forehead -
can you feel it?
I cannot make my poetry
make love to you.
Poetry doesn't make love.
Love makes poetry.
But I can keep writing -
keep a channel open for love

as, in the air, a charged pathway
invites lightning.

Love's Burden

A burden falls upon whoever loves,
whoever knows anything. Two lovers,
for example, opening up to each other,
take in, along with each other, the universe,
find in each stray cat, each shedding tree,
even the gray old world of newspapers
all the world that's fit to love -
they are the chosen ones, and right then,
in love with the world, they are face to face
with responsibility for the world.
If they back away from it (and
who would not? Who now knows enough Latin
to name the beasts?), their love for each other
can only shrink to what we call
a marriage or a self or a wallet.

But, you may say, lovers are blind, live
in a rosy mist, confuse both world and beloved
with themselves, a child deciding his toys
love him as much as he loves himself in them.

But that's infatuation - one who has never
opened up to another - doesn't know
he has anything to open up (confuses mystery
with secrets and intimacy with whatever
is forbidden), doesn't know
his lover is another. Even so, the world
as stage props in his rainbow-hazed drama
is truer than the world as gray column inches
of newsy gruel, than the world as what
various serious adults expect one to become
when one grows up or the world as
what has always been there and always will,
oblivious to what WE imagine we can create.

Truer - but not much, since, with a child's
generosity, he attributes so much of
what is his own to the world.

Love's another madness altogether. Confronted
with another universe as rich as one's own,
lying beside a whole universe that is not
oneself, nor the world (but, like one's own,
includes the world), one becomes aware
of universes, of the physical, a small thing,
swallowed up in the vast interstices
of linked universes. Movement becomes co-
movement becomes dance. Dancer becomes,
however transiently, choreographer (on the
fly) - and the physical, now part
of one's own richer universe,
becomes intricately predictable,

as, walking to his wedding, Tolstoy's Levin
plays orchestra conductor, with a twinkle
of his mental baton, bringing together
the aroma of fresh bread, laughter
of children and the beating wings
of white birds rising, each moment
as pellucidly aesthetic as pure
musical tones, as elaborately appropriate
as themes in a Bach fugue.

No roseate haze here. This lover,
hearing of vicious things we do to each other,
does not omit tears, but they drop and shatter
with a crystalline music: What is evil
is the more evil for being part
of this richness, being of the light

yet ignorant of the light.

Of such love responsibility may be born -
or else the music quickly fades.

FREE Introductory Offer!

Yes, we are lucky in each other.
Now, what shall we do for the world
lest our luck change? The damned thing
seems to think it's our business
if it goes to hell. It wants
to take us with it.

Nice to think our being here together
does something for the world-- our laughter
contagious, but the world's sorrow
is just as catchy. We get a few free sunsets
before they begin to charge for them--
it's expensive to keep them free
of the pollution of knowing
there are those who cannot rejoice
at a sunset.

Our love for each other
is a come-on: Soon we must pay.

It's not so bad: We pay by loving the world
and doing enough for it that our love for it
isn't unbearably painful to us and it.

We pay or they cancel
our free subscription to each other.

Magic

The forest rises up at their backyards,
Leans over lawns where fences lower their guards,
Drops leaves and branches, skinny beams of dawn
Right on the roofs, the swings, garden and lawn.
Children grow bored with sandboxes, slip out
Into the woods to hide and run and shout.
"Now let's go down the path!" "How far does it go?"
"Forever and forever." "Come on!" "I don't know
If we're supposed to..." "Scaredy cat!" "I'll tell!"
"He'll tell..." "C'MON!" Thin voices, feuding, swell,
Subside, and two go down the path. And go
And go...how far's forever? Dappled light
Shows way ahead the trail curves out of sight
Among the trees. Behind...the same. No car
Sound now, no human noise, they've gone too far.
Just leaf-noise overhead and crunching under
Their tennies as they step on stones and blunder
Through muddy strips whose suck prolongs their footsteps,
Then leap to higher ground and tread on rootsteps.
Bright bit of red - a cardinal flickers...gone.
They tire, think of lostness, of the long
night, never getting home, the cartoon trees
Whose mouths stretch out sad 'OOs' and ghostly "EEEs"
In howling wind, no refuge from cold rain
But houses made of cake and candy cane
Where witches eat you up.... They walk for ten
Minutes, which seem hours, stop, and listen...
Nothing happens. They choose a bush to piss in,
Then back they trudge - why was it so much farther
The other way? - to find a fretful mother.
"But it was neat in there!" "LOOK AT THAT SHOE!"
"We saw a spider and a cardinal too!"

Later, in church, hearing of God, the child
Thinks butterflies and birds and anything wild
Must know all about God, since they're allowed
To go into the woods. He dreams a proud,
Tall, buckskinned vision of himself, the first
To find.... It changes each time it's rehearsed
In his church dreams, confused with talk of Heaven.

Years later, he's a big boy, nearly seven,
And knows the woods cannot go on forever.
He's seen the maps and knows his woods could never
Get past the ocean where his family went
to spend a weekend living in a tent
That smelled like fish. The woods won't go that far.
It's like the moon; it's nothing like a star.
And yet, he's never followed all the way
Down that old path. He's going to - today.

Ten minutes in, he's lost his neighborhood
And wonders if it would be bad or good
Or anything at all to be alone,
Just be oneself, with no one else, no phone,
No Mom, no Dad, no brother, sister, friend...
He's sure SOMEwhere this woods has got to end!
He stops to rest and notices small noises,
Stands very still, fills up with tiny voices,
Then, like a symphony conductor, makes
The wind rush through the leaves in rippled quakes.
The motion travels past his eyes, held still,
And now soft movements everywhere, a thrill
Inside him, all of it inside this hush
That makes things move. Against his brow the brush
Of tiny wings. An airplane buzzes through
And dwindles. He contains them all, can do
These things at will. He walks on, feeling
As if his head sticks through the leafy ceiling.

He finds his eyes again, walks tall and strong
And watchful - he's an Indian. Now a song
Wants to be sung - it's made up as he sings -
March ON through woods and streams and hills and things.
Twice cardinals flash across the path- the same
One twice? The path will end like any game-
He knows it's not the path that never ends.

He wonders if the trees can be his friends.
"Hello" he says, and pats a gnarly oak,
Whose leaves are giggling - do they get the joke?
What if it does go on forever? Oh!
It's brighter just ahead - a clearing...No,
A grassy slope - he's blinded by the sun...
Down to a street, a house, another one-
A neighborhood - "Just like a real one, too!" -
With grass, cars, sidewalks, weeds- "It must be true!"
Some old kids toss a football in the street.
He feels he's made all this himself - how NEAT!
Its detail and completeness dazzle him:
Each car's familiar emblem- could he dream
These Fords, Toyotas, each with license plates?
An ant hill! No amount of looking sates
His craving for this newness. He must walk
And touch, God come to earth to gawk
At His creation. Light as a leaf he's whirled
Past houses, yards and cats- a whole new world!
A supermarket, barber, drugstore, shop
With dressy manequins - they will not stop
unfolding, miracles! - and in a store
Where clerks politely manage to ignore
His not belonging there (for he is real)
He buys two candy bars - Mounds, Heath - they feel
As sleek and firm as those he gets at home.
Once more he views his built-in-one-day Rome,
Then threads himself into the weave of trees
To celebrate in chocolate and breeze.

Later he wonders that it once seemed far,
Having since learned how near it is by car;
He cruises through that magic neighborhood,
The other side of the mirror - something good
Will surely happen to him here one day.
Still later with a girl he drives that way
And in a restaurant (now he's seventeen)
Over many squeezings of coffee bean
He tries to tell her this is a magic place,
And as he talks she seems to find his face,
Explore it with a wonder like his own.
So well she listens that, no more alone,
He finds himself explaining subtle feelings
He hadn't known he felt. Like drunkenreelings
His stumbling words, with unexpected grace
Regain their swooping poise. When, drunk on space
He's made that words can't fill, he loses the flow,
She puts her hand on his and says, "I know."
It's love, he knows: Shes got to be the ONE!
He knows they'll marry - it's as good as done.

And four years later, done it is. They move
To another city, still afloat on love,
For she's the magic found on the other side
Of forever: Her hair, her smile, her stride,
An unexpected phrase - it's all his story:
Whatever she does becomes new territory
Claimed by his magic. When the marriage fails
(For after all she too has dreams), like nails
Clawed out of weathered boards, each magic,
Leaving, screeches; they fall apart, past tragic:
Clutter of boards, bent rusty nails...for he
Had given her his magic so that she
Might give it back to him, an endless gift.

She's gone, it's gone. Long weeks to sit and sift
Through ashy ruins.

Visiting home, he walks
In the woods, sees soda cans, three ragged socks
Curled up in the weeds, a giant poplar choking
In ivy, feels not much, thinks (calls it joking),
"If we bulldozed these trees and put up houses,
We'd have square boxes full of sparring spouses,
Each as happy as me." He walks to the end
Of the path (it's not too far), losing a friend
With every step, feeling only a need
To feel something. But there's no path to lead
Nothing to something. And yet, long before HER
These woods held magic. He waits. Will nothing stir?

Years later, once again inside the wood
He stands admiring. Really it's a good
Place to grow up. He starts to count each kind
Of tree and shrub in view - for in his mind
It had been three or four, but now he's got -
It must be dozens, hundreds!...but it's not
Magic. He strolls, hoping to see the gray
Torn open by a cardinal flash or jay,
Finds sparrows, rusty robins, then, at last,
A flash of red. But magic? No. That's past.

He thinks, "What if I put the magic there?"
He shuts his eyes and thinks, "I don't know where
I am. These woods go on forever. If
I keep on walking till my joints grow stiff,
It just goes on and on, nothing before or behind
But woods, hills, meadows, lakes..." He sees this, blind,
Then opens his eyes. "Well...here I am, right here."
It works a bit. He feels something. Grief? Fear?
That's something, hardly magic; Well perhaps
He needs but to believe his mental maps.
He tries again, spinning around this time,
Eyes closed...trips, falls, and sees a gleam...a dime!
Omen enough to try again. He spins
Until he's lost which way is which. He grins
To overhear forgotten thoughts, his own,
Like "What if all the people I have known
Have just now vanished? What if THIS is IT?"
Again it works a little: Just a bit
Of his old forest peeps through scraggly trees,
Whose branches now are nodding. He agrees,
Nods to their nods. The branches reach
Out into forms as plausible as speech,
Familiar forms, like fingers or the thin
long shadow of his mother looking in
From the hall to see if he's asleep. Why should
This make him sad? He's trying too hard - no good:
You can't force magic. Once again he tries -
Quick, gentle, sneaks up on it with his eyes
Wide open, tries to think it without words,
To put it there - and, sudden as a bird's
First morning cry or on a plane the ears'
First pop or one of the sun's dustglittered spears
Cast (as it darts behind a cloud) to gild
That spider's thread, one flash, then gone...he willed
It: Something happened. Gone - but caught. It's true:
He can put magic there. He tries again,
But finds a gabble of thoughts: It looks like rain.
It's getting late. He has to catch a plane
To get to work tomorrow - what a pain!

How interesting! Again the world is gray.
He heads for home (a changed word). All the way
He bubbles with new thoughts: "I put it there
Myself, the gray, the magic - only where
I put them. Who knew magic so diverse? -

White, black, all shades of gray, blessing and curse:
I say 'Just woods, forever' - and it IS.
If I can do it, any child's a whiz!
I've doubted my own magic, for I make
So many kinds at once, a dense, opaque
Entangling of transparent strands, a jumble
Of all the worlds that I agree to mumble
Into being beneath my breath at meetings,
In sleep, in waking dreams, in friendly greetings
I don't mean - it's much too complicated!
The child is lost in all that he's created.
I try to say 'These woods go on and on
Forever' and at once I hear 'What NON
Sense!' (My own voice a traitor) and 'Tomorrow
I do a presentation' and (sharp sorrow)
'I have no one,' 'Nice breeze,' 'What are choices
For dinner? Chinese?' I am full of voices,
Each with its own nest to plaster and patch
Together, twig by twig - in which to hatch
Who knows whose eggs? Few of the nests I make
Belong to me. For my or someone's sake,
I live in a world of scrambled magics, bright
Reds, blues, golds, purples - but in this dull light
They blend to grayness that belongs to none.
And that's precisely how the world is done.

So all I have to do to make my old
Magic is put it there - it's good as gold,
It hasn't rusted - and not (and here's the trick!),
And not put anything else there. I am thick
With voices claiming to be mine and making
My wishes for me. I take me, forsaking
All others - I must simply learn to speak
With one voice."

Edge of the woods, last peek
Of setting sun - no notion how he'll relearn
His magic, but he knows he needn't return
To the woods - try spells, snare a wise elf -
To find the magic hidden in himself.

Mating Dance

What we're trying to do is create an effect.
At first it seems hopeless:
We look out the window, see sky and trees
and birds and infinitely intricate clouds.
What can we do to compete with that?
Not that we couldn't imagine worlds as vast,
but this one has overwhelming solidity
from almost everyone agreeing to it.

I don't know how we managed it
(behind the back of the physical universe--
with secret meetings in dreams?),
but somehow artists and audiences agreed
to create and be affected by little sheets of paper
peppered with black squiggles,
squares of painted canvas hung on walls
and other oddities,

even to ignore windows opening on mountains
and oceans to gaze at bits of paper
or tiny grey flickering screens.

But it's not that simple: There are complex rules
about what to put on the paper or canvas
before people will take the trouble
to be affected by them.
No one knows these rules; we all know them.
At least we know to come when we are called.

It's not just that we look at what affects us:
We can be affected by whatever we choose
to let affect us. With enough attention,
we could find epics in the cracks on the ceiling.
No, it's an elaborate ritual,

a dance by artist and audience, each with gestures
so ancient and subtle we no longer know what they are,
hinting at what each is willing to give
and receive, a negotiation (like the mating dance
of exotic birds) that results, at best,

in the artist filling his tiny square with a window,
the matrix of a view with its implied viewpoint,
from which the viewer or reader can extend
the spaciousness of a new universe
he'd forgotten he could create, into which,
as into a choice of futures, he then climbs.

Memento Mori

Though I know the child to be
as ancient as any being,
yet, seeing one so rapt
in each butterfly dance
through the uncharted continent
of the living room,
it is hard to believe
all this pure savage sweetness
only a forgetting, each child
a jaded being like me,
but purified by death, numbness
and ignorance.

Could it be that childhood is also
a remembering?

If we knew we could remember
at will, we wouldn't need death
to remind us of our immortality.

There are moments when we, adults,
look at each other knowingly
and molt the thick skin of experience
and remember - as lost
in the long adventure of our shared smile
as any child in a new room
or on a new planet.

Then, in the certitude
of each other's eyes, it is safe
to be beautiful as a child is beautiful
without the fear of waking to find oneself
repulsive.

Let us be children
without the forgetting.

More Memory

Memory stirs, but will not relieve
loss, unless it slips into reliving,
where, seeing again the glad intent
of eyes meeting eyes, the flash
of a squirrel vanishing up
a rough bole, hearing an old tune
(all part of what is gone),
we are at first convulsed with it,
then lightened of it as if
by wringing out.

But reliving is two-edged:
We can reel through the years
stuck in old gluey pictures that stick to us
and to each other and will not change--
a napalmed child, stripped bodies
tangled in a mass grave, birds
gaping on an oil-blackened beach.

What won't go away is snagged
on what came before or after.
Relief is in more, not less memory.
A napalmed baby is roasted meat
unless each child is first a doorway
filled with light -- an assurance
of what mere flame can't touch.

It is we who grant all that is cherishable
to what we cherish. We create dreams
that others agree to inhabit.
We first must dream whatever dreams come true.
Before we could suffer death, we had to
choose to forget we could bestow life,
preferring to bask in fate. Remember more:
Remember -- before our eyes froze with
failed pleading -- the decisions.

When the snake holds our gaze, we misname it
truth. A headline can embitter daylight.
Then we hear the child's play as ignorant,
shrill cackling in a world as devoid of horror
as of fun. What's to lose?

Can we shed that grey, wrinkled world?
Can what we make be less real than
our loss of it? What we once made--
we can make again? What loss is there
but loss of self? -- not a memory,
but a forgetting.

To [Your Name Here]

I begin to forget names and words.
They come back hours or days later
like lost pets. But sometimes pets
do not come back. Oddly, that analogy
doesn't bother me - because what I forget
is always right there, a familiar face
I cannot name, but love; because it is
refreshing to go naked of words -
even naked of just this one word, as a
stripteaser's dropped scarf or glove
promises all the rest; because I am
what I am, and that is not a memory;
because I can create new words as fast
as I can forget the old ones; because
I do not believe in forgetting, only
the deterioration of circuitry upon which
we have excessively relied, these "forgettings"
the momentary confusion as I learn to do it
myself; because doing without the old circuits
is good practice for when I will have
only myself; because what I can know,
I don't need to remember, and I can know
whatever I can be, and names
are barriers to being; because I remember
remembering; because I remember knowing;
because I know you.

Eyeless in Gazing

We've gone out to have a quick dream--
can't dream around bodies
since those studies came out
of the harm inflicted by 2nd-hand dreams.

That's why our eyeballs flick (em-
ember?), left to their own devices:
This is what eyes do when we're away,
perhaps trying to catch up with a vision
that doesn't need them.

But in waking, too, our eyes stir.
Reality, like a shark, must move
to survive. If reality stands still,
our eyes must jostle it -- flick, flick, flick.

How much of this will be remembered
in our dreams?

Memories (embers of vision's inferno)
can become solid (just blow
on the glow). Look at the wall. While looking,
pretend you are remembering it. Can you
pretend the wall in front of you
is the memory of a wall (flick).

Can you remember remembering--
remember being
the rememberer
right now?

Purely Conventional

My first and last convention
(Modern Language Association) --
up and down the elevators
of four crowded Midtown Manhattan hotels
to seventeen job interviews
with English professors in suits in suites

(accumulating interviews with a crazed diligence,
but detached, as if I were an I Ching emblem:
Righteous persistence brings sublime good fortune),

separated by mirror-ridden lobbies,
mirror meeting mirror to make infinite corridors
telescoping away in all directions,
each with its gold-leaf rococo mouldings,
chandeliers and multiplied people for props.

Twice (let us say after interview 12
and after interview 13) I, in a crowd,
let myself be borne from elevator to lobby
and saw myself in my crowd approaching us
in a mirror, but the mirrored crowd
came closer, threaded through us (me
and all) and into the empty elevator,

so it hadn't been a mirror image,
so I couldn't have seen myself
in the other crowd. And after this happened
the first time, myself passed through me
as nonchalantly a second time.

To get to interviews 14 (let us say),
15, 16 and 17, I walked up and down
myriad mirrorless stairs.

Martyr and Fader

Mother flutters, father mutters.
Mother, mussing and fussing, gets fatter;
Father fumes, short-fused, gets madder.

Mother, sore-uddered from filling mouths,
mooning and fretting, motley,
month after month filled immutably
with fetor of fertility,
molts unutterable imaginings
of failed futures.

Father, guilty begetter, muses,
finding it futile to fault her or fight her
when she flings at him (fomenting
manufactured infractions, microscopic
fancied unfairnesses, foolish fears
of man's infidelity) feels smothered,
fades away farther, flounders
in moods unfathomable, meanders,
other-fodder;

but, family-fuddled, unmodern, muddled,
mate-fated by fetters of fashion,
old modes of faith, fads of affection:
As moth to flame, to mother father;
as mud to foot-sole, to father mother,
flock of a fold, fowl of a feather.

Mother, flustered
that nothing will fit her,
that all she thought mattered
must miss her, faster festers.

Father musters up meager selfmastery
to motor each morning to his firm
to make money through methods mysterious
to mother.

She could be curious, he could be furious,
but she feeds him his food
and measures his mood.

He faces her, mulling, muzzled, moot
across the table's unconfessed fissure.
Uncommiserating, she mumbles; he fumbles,
too fatigued, too muddled,
both mother and father,
to bother.

It Was All Just Print on a Page

It will all work out somehow-- a philosophy and also a time-worn device of fiction: Just as something unbearably awful is about to happen, that clanging sound turns out to be the alarm clock, and, "...waking, she realized it had all been just another bad dream."

Odd, this membrane between dream and waking. Why not between moment and moment-- ANY moments? For example, cannot life-changing realizations occur between spoonfuls of lentil soup-- or even chicken soup? "Taking his second sip, he realized that it had all been his first sip" or "Hearing her voice, he realized it had all been the silence" or "Seeing her smile, he realized it had all been just the absence of her smile" or "Seeing the blood spurting from the slashed throat, he realized that all his life up to that very moment had been only..." -- Oh, wait, I HAVE seen that one before-- and I JUST REALIZED THAT -- Hey!

Bedtime Story

She must have been reading me to sleep--
an afternoon nap, for I had dustbeamed light
and leisure to study her face, and
I don't know how I knew about death,
but I remember feeding on the details of her face,
the countless patterned pores, vertical lines
on her lips, the freckles, each in its
proper place, dancing mirrors in her hazel eyes,
enlarged by rimless lenses -- how could
such abundance, such precision
not last forever?

She out-lived my belief in death.
By the time she gave up that body to cancer,
its painstaking detail had generalized.
I was glad she and I were free of it.

She may not have seen herself
as a character on my stage: Enter Mama,
stage left, exit Mama, stage right.
This is where I'm supposed to say
who she was to herself, a matter of
details or so general it could be
anyone -- aren't you
me? But if it's details,
we all have more than we need.

Odd quest to make our parents last in poems
and so fend off death -- parents are the
opposite of immortality. Only my mortality
has parents.

But in that fuzzy beneath-the-shades light,
my beautiful mother (who thought she was ugly,
I later learned, because one eye slightly crossed,
and freckles, a bold nose and curly hair weren't
quite the thing) showered upon only me
all those intricate things she was
and let me own them which was to have
infinitely, which takes forever, so I had
forever.

Through what complexities of body and generation
we remind each other what we are: Why was it
the detail of her skin, not of the wrinkled
blankets or the pocked nursery-rhymed
linoleum, that reassured me?

Behind the complex gift I must have sensed
the simple giving.

I don't recall the story or ever
falling asleep, but here I am now--
it must have ended.

Suspended Sentence

My mother's life -- or the years of it I recall -
consisted of an endless sentence fragment,
for she eluded endings when she could:
"No but..." she'd say in the most agreeable
way, meaning, "You can't fool me with your
attempts to understand me, catch me,
disappear me" --

as in her answer to, "OK, OK, so what do you
want me to do!" -- "No, but there's just
so much I have to put up with and your father
just doesn't..."

not answers, but sticks thrust with abstracted
desperation between the fanged jaws
of every question.

"No but" she'd say, airily, ceaselessly,
to the black dumbbell of the telephone,
"No, but you could have just died!" and

no, but she did, or, anyway, her body
withered, then dropped away (it took years),
leaving her, perhaps, safe at last from whatever
completeness hounded her.

Render Unto Caesar

Money is more interesting for what it isn't than for what it is. Money is almost spiritual: There is so much that it is not. The love of what is (almost) not- doesn't that describe religion? Money is, after all, a faith, pure faith that what is received in exchange for goods and services will be taken in exchange for more of same. Caesar's portrait: A faith backed by confidence in the force of Roman arms or the weight of Roman coffers. We pay our taxes to bolster the forces that bolster our faith in the coins we pay- a sealed system.

What things are God's? What do you give someone who has everything? What do you give to the gift that keeps on giving? God is another idea backed by faith, another sealed system, for Grace is granted to those who live in Grace, and the Lord lives within those who live in the Lord and the eye with which you see God is the eye with which God sees you, or, in monetary terms, we render prayer to God to bolster the force that gives us the strength to pray. Caesar mints coins and sends them to himself via the people. God adores Himself through our shining eyes.

Or if you prefer, pray to Caesar and send your 1040 to God with check. I don't know which to fear most: The IRS answering prayers or God slouching toward the deposit window to be born.

Rooting For Evil

Money's a tool and love of money a symptom,
both far up the stem from the root of evil-
money perhaps a bud, love of it a shoot.
Evil is an intention to destroy, a terror
of others getting saner or stronger or smarter,
of anything that helps or beautifies or
elates. It's all done for the good of all-
no one so evil as to consider what he does
anything but the necessary and the good. The intention
to destroy precedes the motives we assign it
(money, power). We assign these motives because,
after all, wanting money, that we can understand,
not unreasoning terror.

If Money Were No Object...

and it scarcely is, though a few antiquated types still carry bits of paper and metal in their pockets and purses. The big-money boys and girls deal in wire transfers to electronic repositories. A bit of bytes is not much of an object. Money, once an object lesson, is now a lessening object. The Government tries to fool us by putting bigger pictures on the bills, but no one is fooled by these mammoth Jacksons and Franklins, looking flat and vacuous like monopoly scrip. The REAL stuff (current, not currency) is zapping from bank to bank, money arcing over us in the twilight, a blue flash of carcinogenic impulses, restless sparks, wires humming like cicadas in rut, somebody's sayso (are our own thin voices part of that noise?) magically making cars and houses. Scrooge McDuck could not romp and wallow in bits and bytes unless he were only a virtual duck. Perhaps the very rich are virtual, their limos and jets pure pomp, able as they are to scoot from server to server on dedicated lines? Virtuality is its own reward.

That Instant

There is that instant--
sipping orange juice, anticipating milk--
both perfectly agreeable in themselves--
yet there is that instant
when the "milk" tastes strange--
into that strangeness, into that gap
between milk and orange juice
before recognition dawns,
into that day or hour your letter,
your phone call didn't come,
that moment when you turn to my joke
without the expected smile
(before I get that you didn't hear me),
into the second of silence
after a child has fallen
but before he begins to cry --
into these tiny cracks in time
the mind can put all
its dearest monsters.

Motion

Once we were without motion or desire for motion.
Later, overwhelmed by motion, we came to crave it.
Now we are like small children,
antsy at stillness:

We MUST have motion;
the very thought of no motion
is overwhelming -- releasing anew
(like opening a jar full of angry hornets)
the old motion, the old overwhelming motion
we stave off with paltry motions, keeping
stillness occupied so that it cannot fill up
with the old motion.

Holding still is not no motion,
but the deadlock of opposing motions,
a complexity that causes the persistence
of pointless motion we call solidity.
We are now in the process
of being overwhelmed by solidity,

by the need to hold still --
to stem the delirium of too much motion
that we have ceased to be able to face
because of what we have done with motion
(Don't move or I'll let you have it)
and disclaimed, preferring to be the victims
of motion rather than the perpetrators.

As our craving for peace and quiet grows,
more and more the thought of motion
will be overwhelming, the thought of
no motion unthinkable.

This is what it is to be a solid thing,
a holding still, a body facing a screen
filled with ghosts of motion,
a piece of furniture, an ashtray, a belt buckle, a stone:

It is not that these things cannot think,
but that there is no thought left to them--
either of motion or no motion--
that is thinkable.

Mud Pack

It is hard to see us, hard to see
even our bodies, so layered are we
in lies that muddy vision.

If we strip away lie-layers,
approaching truth, the last thin
layers of lie become translucent:
The truth, shining through,
emblazons these last (our first)
lies with the vivid authority
of a Cathedral rose-window at dawn.

Startled at this beauty so close
to what we are, we call it truth,
which adds a new layer of lie,
darkening vision, and we each cry,
"I failed to be true to my vision" --

and fight to recover it, which adds
new lie layers until we can see, again,
only mud. Then we give up, say
it was all a dream, there never was
such a vision -- which adds one more
lie and makes the mud-pack stickier.

Truth is no vision, no, not this one, either.
To go naked, prepare yourself to admire--
and nothing more -- the beauty (Could you
have led yourself astray for less?)
of your first lie, really not a lie
at all, but something the truth
says. The first lie is calling
the beauty truth creates
truth and truth beauty,

a lie we tell to make our beauty persist
without our having to recreate it
(nothing persists without that flicker
of not being exactly what it is),
and it does persist (beneath the mud),
waiting to be received as an utterance
of truth and vanish so that other beauties
can enter the conversation.

When next that window opens before you,
admire, let it become YOUR lie,
you becoming, again,
the truth.

Spirals

Murder kills the imagination.
What murderer wants to be able to be
what he is not, liable to feel the blows
he strikes. Dead imaginations
cannot create futures, only,
unwillingly, like bad dreams,
the past, obsessively reliving
the death blows, killing again and
again to prove one is not the victim,
to kill the imagination that,
already dead, cannot die; striking
death blows that cannot release one
from more death blows.

A crooked smile that won't erase:
"If I'm smiling, what I'm doing
can't be that bad."
It racks the face,
winds around and binds
all places to that place.
"I CAN'T have been so evil."
There is no grace.

We do things. Some cause harm.
Rather than be wrong, we repeat them,
thus doing what we suspect we shouldn't.
Then we need to complicate things
so as not to be sure we are doing anything
wrong (It becomes hard to recall
distinctly). Then we don't know
what we are doing. Next we don't know
that we are doing it. Then it is happening
to us. God does it. Then it becomes
too painful: We deny that it is happening.
Then we say that something else
is happening, first calling it the deeper
meaning of what is happening; then it's
an invented world that we are happened
to by. Eventually, on the way towards the
untouchable asymptote of total
unconsciousness, we hallucinate that we are
the God doing the happenings that
aren't.

Sour gibberish from bundles of old rags.
Spirit descending over body, a palpable effluvium.
Or, counter-clockwise we unscrew,
going back out the long hard way we came in.

Hooray For Arse(holi)cide

or Being An Asshole Is Never Having To Say You're Sorry

or Some Say The World Will End In Nice

A single minor change in our jurisprudence would greatly improve the quality of life for nearly all of us: Murder charges should be reduced to misdemeanors (at most) where it can be established that the victim was an asshole. No one should have the right to be an asshole. Jurors should be encouraged to make allowances for one who has done what they would have done or would have wanted to, at most, punishing lightly those whose solutions were impatient and, therefore, inefficient.

In such a society, trembling alleged assholes would rush to register their publically announced repentance, resolutions to improve and evidence of their changes of heart, thus buying a brief trial period of legal protection.

In such a society, where it's dangerous not to be a nice person, laws could be simpler, freed of the need to narrow their loopholes and refine their meshes to snag subtle abuses, with each refinement creating who knows what new loopholes for variant mutations of assholedom.

"Objection, your honor -- the victim is not on trial here." Why not? No one has the right to be a victim. Let victims EARN their victimhood. There is little wrong with the world that could not be mended by a few judicious murders.

What Music Moves My Electrons?

While I buy, sell, drive my car,
(if "while" applies across universes),
I (or someone or something) also do
another dance: Just now, for instance
(for instants) I notice the hand I lean on
is curled back on itself like a wilted leaf,
and my toes wriggle, pushing
against my shoes, and, closer to Dean Blehert,
I sit in a Mexican Restaurant, eating
food I don't particularly want.

What I'M doing is writing this poem.
I can take responsibility
for all the rest, too -- even for
whatever you're doing as you read
this. I will not say it's all beyond me,
but why try to be the one who does
everything? I will be the one
who writes this poem, guides the pen,
tiny motions making all the difference--
don't know how I do it so quickly.

Also, I'll take over the one who came
to the restaurant -- he's getting on our
royal nerves, picking bread crumbs
off his plate. My toes are on their own,
and to my hand also (now bent the other way,
a half fist, palm to forehead) I grant
freedom -- I am no movie actor, shoplifter
or sleight-of-hand artist who must
take charge of such things.

Let one thousand dancers dance, though
analysts decipher how it's all one dance
and (grinding their analytic teeth and
tugging at tufts of hair) reduce
my supple bending hands, my nimble
teeth and playful toes to symbols
of some "inner state", which is, itself,
but the reflex of a bigger dance called
environmentandheredityandwhatyoueat

(and what of you? And what of me?
We are left to our own devices),

which is, apparently, a symbol
of itself, and so on, mirror in mirror.
(Is there a song without a hearer?)

Shrink-rapt books amuse themselves showing how
if you cross your legs away from
your sofa-mate, you signify your withdrawal.
(Perhaps your legs don't like the other legs?).
(Perhaps your turning away persuaded you
you were withdrawing.)

How can we know the dancer from the dance?
It can't be done by those... (my right heel
taps the floor, helping me find words
for "those"...) -- those who begin by mistaking
the dancer's dog's biscuits for the dancer.

(Not witty, but my heel rests.)
(I have taken over my heel --
Heel!, heel -- and made it, temporarily,
an appendage of "my" writer's dance.)

(But is there -- "in me?" -- a dancer who performs
vast subtle interweaving spirals, for whom

my most conscious poetry is a nervous finger tapping?). Enough significance: Go, little heel, and tap (it does) -- why do I call it nervous? It finds its tempo neatly, keeping time at bay, for time wounds all heels; or perhaps it makes love to the linoleum.

And you, too, reader, whatever your fingers, your lips, your tongue do as you read or listen to these words -- I grant you dancers' rights: Let it all be YOUR dance (Are we not strangers? How could I touch your private things?) --

or, if you prefer, your fingers', lips' and tongues' dances. I or someone COULD (while his blood mobbed his heart, demanding freedom and was dispersed to distant capillary provinces, distributed among cells) work out how all are of my making, but I'll claim only your having (if you have) just now noticed some of the dances going on about the axis of your dance (moons around planets around suns...),

your having seen a way of seeing all the myriad twining threads of dance we or it make/makes one or many at will (or if that is the next step). By the way, what is your left hand doing now?

Mine is sideways, thumb-side to forehead, thumb tucked under gently curled fingers. My left hand says hello to yours, says "You dance divinely." My left hand says, "You look familiar -- haven't we met before?" Odd, they seem to know all about each other. Are we not strangers? If we pass on the street, do our eyes meet? (Your face or mine?)

Why I Can't Write An Acceptable Poem

I can't write an honest poem about me that anyone would want to read. I don't drink booze -- maybe one glass of wine or a beer every few weeks. I don't take drugs. I'm not sick. I'm not crazy. I'm not impoverished. I'm not lonely. I don't feel that I'm missing anything by not being these things. I don't find the world older and staler than when I was a child. I don't consider myself no longer a child.

I love my wife and have, it seems, forever. I'm not attracted to other women nor involved in any games in which she and I are on opposite sides except things like my sometimes drinking juice from the bottle instead of using a glass and a few thousand other things that mound up in our lives like a stew of insect wings in a corner of the front porch, blown away by any stray breath of love. I don't fear losing her. We found each other once and will again.

I can't write about my emptiness after sex, because I don't feel that way, have never cared for loveless sex and don't much do what I don't care for.

I can't write about confronting the brutal reality of death, because I don't think trading in a used car or body for a new one requires a vast amount of confronting. Immortality -- THAT takes confronting: What to do with forever, but it's not a fashionable theme for poetry this century, and anyway, it has little to do with "me" as me's go in poetry, immortal beings being to these frail identities like sun to sunspot, blinding them out in the unnaked (body-clad) eye.

I can't write about the terrible things life does to me, because I am life. I can't write about being victimized by fate because each time I've encountered fate, it wore a tragic mask behind which I found, grinning ear to ear, an old silly decision of my own.

I can't write about my exciting adventures because I hear no one wants to read poems about poets and the writing of poetry, which is where I find my adventures.

I can't write about the losses that have left numb gaps in my life because losses have only taught me that it is I who created what it seemed others could give me and take away from me and that what I once created, I can create anew, loss being only a forgetting to continue to create, as if water, breached, should freeze around its gaps, ice being, perhaps, a forgetting.

I can't decry the fading of joy, like all things bright and beautiful, because I have not found it so, but increasingly, can at any time take a refreshing dip into a pure timeless joy that glows through all my lesser joys.

I can't write much about shedding childhood and parents, because it's a bore: I've shed millions of childhoods and parents and will shed millions more, one cocoon being much like another.

I can't write about my secrets, because I don't have any. I'm not angry, sad, apathetic or bored. I'd like to see others do better, but only because I'd like more playmates, because fun shared is more fun.

I could write about the sadness of not being able to write stylishly despairing or self-denigrating or anxious or bitterly ironic or bravely optimistic-in-spite-of-it-all poems about me, except it's not sad not to write poems about me, not with so many universes full of dreams and dreams full of universes to write about for ever and so much of you to forever reach.

Shell

Children's yippy voices -- incomplete?
Or are our deeper tones the sign of wear
and coarsening? Childhood is perhaps
culmination, its completeness apparent
in its lack of a craving to reproduce;
adulthood the hardening defensive shell
exuded by and around the hurt child,
these bodies, like the nacreous chambers
of a Nautilus, the hiding place
into which an exhausted child,
convinced of mortality, has retreated,
room within fleshy room,
to die.

Under the Sun

Outside the day crashes down,
the sky knocks at my bedroom window.
I pull covers over my head,
fumbling for the dream
I hadn't finished.

The sky is already there,
beneath my eyelids, knocking
to come in. What else can I close?
Beneath the lids, eyes are wide open.
Around them gapes a skull, inside which
unfolds the day.

Where is there
for it to have been, the snug place
where I was just now
tinkering, as if something could be
finished, where I wrested the night
toward heroic denouement, then
culminating curtain, before which I
and what I'd made would strut,
bowing, hugging each other, throwing kisses
in the wild applause of flower-showered
morning?

Clenching my eyes, unable
to unsee the harsh retinal test-pattern,
I manipulate faded stick-figures
of dream, struggle to steer the night,
unwieldy as a car rolling downhill after
the engine has gone dead.

Lying in the
raw sun, how can I start the day?
Nothing can begin where nothing ends,
day the unfinished night, night a tangle
of the day's loose ends. I will
stand before the bathroom mirror and
recycle myself.

Burial

After he died, his couch still faced the TV,
but it was turned off. His newspaper
lay beside his place at the table,
unread. And for days she piled up papers there,
left the TV, the radio off, not thinking
why -- perhaps her way of leaving
his possessions with him in the tomb,
Egyptian style: If TV is silent here,
perhaps it entertains him there.

One day she took a stroll and noticed
(when someone out of nowhere said "Hi")
that she wasn't noticing anything,
made herself notice and noticed that leaves
were hundreds of different-shaped things
and that each step she took changed
what she saw and that she was herself,

and perhaps she was tired
of getting all her news
and newness from others.

Good Morning, America

"Well, Connie, the darkness is fading to gauzy gray. There's no way at this time to be certain, but it does appear that night is giving way to day."

"That's right, Peter, but as you say, there's no way to be sure, and even if daylight wins this round, I don't think we've seen the last of night."

"No, Jane, our day-and-night specialists tell us that, as in the past, day and night will probably continue to alternate. But let's visit the scene. We have Douglinnes on site...Doug?...Doug, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Dan, loud and clear."

"How is it out there, Derrick?"

"Well, Tom, the grass and leaves are dripping wet, both bird and traffic noises are clearly on the increase as you can hear...and the eastern horizon has begun to redden..."

"Much like what we observed yesterday and the day before and, actually, on each of the past several days just before the advent of a full and apparently endless day."

"Exactly, Debra, but of course we have no way of knowing if this is just another dawn or some quirk of lighting -- God, as it were, striking a match to see where he is now."

"Very Poetic, Howard. Thank you. We'll call on you from time to time so you can keep us abreast of further apparent day-breaking events as they unfold."

Well, Pamela, it does seem that we're about to have another morning and most likely a full day."

"Yes, Walter, it does indeed. I think it helps to look at past developments, which, though they've varied from time to time, do seem to repeat in essential ways."

"They do indeed, Kim, but experts say that many questions remain unanswered, and meanwhile all we can say for certain is that it's wisest to treat each moment of gray or reddish or blinding white light or none at all as just one in an unrolling sequence of events."

"Well put, Mike. One simply never knows. Thank goodness for this artificial lighting and the steady hum of our air-conditioning."

"Amen, Trish! On another news front, all along the Eastern Seaboard..."

"...At least, Hugh, the average line where waves tumble and recede has changed remarkably little during recent successions of light and dark..."

"Exactly, Liz. Well, along that front, latest reports indicate that millions of people whose bodies have for hours been stretched out horizontally on beds are now beginning to rise up, first a few, then in large numbers, and, in most cases, to move into their bathrooms. How will this impact...but here's Donna Longway LIVE on the scene to tell us more about it. Donna...?"

Newscast

The newscaster deals in facts,
but begins with a lie:
"This is the news."

For this is nothing new, cruelty
and nonsense. This is the olds.

Today who went free?

There are many facts. The facts
we have always with us. Today
there are (how many) trees
in New York State and (how many)
new buds. Today (how many) inches
of the West Coast crumbled into the ocean.

Today who went free who had
never before been free?

Today terrorists killed three and prices
went up and 323 bodies were vacated on
holiday highways and there's absolutely
nothing you can do about it, don't
even bother to write suggestions
(to whom?); when it needs you,
the news will call you.

Today who went free
who had never before been free?

People say, "What's new?" when
they must make talk, but have nothing
to say. The newscaster is paid
to make talk and have nothing to say.

Today what was said that was real
and true and meant something to someone?

There is nothing new under the sun.
The newscaster is under the sun.
Our love is older than the sun,
and always new, but today
it was not on the news.

Today
who went free?

Your Whole World

This is your daily newspaper --
your whole world is here.
Here are the places in the world
where you can't go because
they are dangerous. Here are the
people who hate you because
you are an American. Here are
the things that will run out or cost
too much for you to have in the
near future (the DISTANT future
has already run out, and you
can't have it). Here are the things
you can get in trouble for. Here
are all the things going wrong
with the world that you can't do
anything about. Probably no one
can do anything about them. Experts
and reliable sources agree that
there are no simple solutions and that
only time will tell. In any case,
it's certain that YOU
can't do anything about these matters,
but nonetheless, beyond the call
of duty, we keep you well-informed.
("We are now dropping the cyanide
into your cell....") Meanwhile,
if you can afford to drive
your car, there's a good chance
you too will be killed, maimed or sued,
but there's a good chance of it
even if you walk. That's the
sort of world you live in, but
fortunately for you, your friend,
the daily news, is looking out
for you -- on the inside pages
our columnists tell you how
to deal with stress (per expert
shrinks with CIA contracts)
and our funny pages bring out
the humorous aspects of the Decline
And Fall of Practically Everything.
We present all reliably authorized
sides of every issue from our
Viewpoint. We let you get a very inside
look at what goes on all over the
world. When you are done reading
the papers, you can extrovert
by inspecting your breasts or rectum
for cancerous growths.

Fresh New Voices

When I become too big or too small
or too cruel or too corny voices,
and learn their games
and teach them to talk
from my own heart,
I make it easier for all of us
to be -- or not be -- at will
that many new voices
with that many new games to play.

Becoming a new voice is harrowing.
Each one tightens over my face--
a deathmask, forcing me
to confront all I suffered
and all the suffering I caused
and saw when last I wore this mask--
the agony that drove me to bury my mask
beneath layers of bleeding masks.

Even playing the fool
can flay one alive:
See the maddened poet tearing
with his pen at his own flesh.

Even to speak as simply as now I speak
explodes in my face
nightmares of complexity.
I look at them
simply and they vanish.

You Don't Like Me Praising Your Ass

All these lines of approach: pagers, cell phones, faxes, email, so many strings one can pull to hear an answering chime and then a familiar voice -- feeble assaults on alienation. Over years of intimacy we develop our own telephones, thousands of odd devices to stroke, prod or ogle or merely THINK of to get an instant response. These things don't always work. Viagra is touted as telephone repairman. You've told me how in your college days your breasts wouldn't carry a signal. I too was out of order: The main number to dial to find me was, in those days, always ringing (stupid crotch-phone, waking me late at night! -- a hang-up I couldn't hang up) and I was always home to be found, mostly by wrong numbers, people who weren't looking for me and didn't know they'd found me (all it took was a remote smile or the motion of a dress). That's male adolescence: The phone keeps ringing, and I keep picking up, only to find myself on hold. Anyway, it's amusing to stare at one of your response centers laboring lovelyly to lift you up stair after stair. I think I hear your softness ringing -- I'll get it!

A Pleasant Stroll

To walk down a street
and call it a pleasant walk,
I must have a body that is held together
by the grimace of my not knowing
miles of molten earth beneath my feet
or deserts of torrid and frigid vacuum
in all directions beyond the atmosphere
or starving North Korean kids
or African massacres
a few thousand miles away--
or behind a curtained window I pass,
a young woman, despite or because of medication,
gone mad and taking from my passing shadow
an omen of God or Death or some unnamed marvel
looming. Or even the intricate insects
my blunt shoes disturb or crush
or give something to brag about
having barely escaped.

All this unknowing is contained
in a pleasant stroll,
or so I've been persuaded,
and yet, if I could release my ancient blinders,
unhinge my skull and the big blue outer skull
of sky to go for a romp, my joy, once free,
might expand faster than knowledge of entrapment,
swallow up a world of wrong, penetrate sunsets--
even in Korea -- with golden crystalline flitter;
My joy might do even the ants,
who will haul bits of leaf by the dewlight I kindle,
more good than what damage my feet can do.

Lady behind the window, open your curtains;
I am no omen. I am like you -- the sealed container
of anything worth omeneing.

Spoiled

Taking a walk with a 4year-old.
Her little steps fit into mine neatly, two to one.
She tells me which pinecones to pick up
(She likes to give shrill orders.)
After a few I say "YOU pick them up."
She shows me she already has a daisy
In one hand and a pinecone and candy whistle in the other.
"We'll get that one tomorrow," she says
Decisively. (But I'm leaving early tomorrow,
So that pinecone may still be rotting
On that sidewalk uncherished.)
She wouldn't understand this poem.
Why should she? There are still pinecones
And some lilacs to be collected tomorrow;
She has promises to keep.
Someone is using the human condition
To be beautiful and tyrannical, to
Discover and invent games. The human condition
Is serious. Childhood is clearly
Criminal. Her baby-sitter thinks she's a toy:
"Now we're going to take a nice nap."
"No we're not!" "Now we're going
To water the nice plants so they won't die."
"No! I WANT them to die!" She knows
How to handle baby-sitters. She may yet
Escape notice and survive to infiltrate our race,
Cleverly disguised as cute or spoiled.

Making History

So much concern for the world our children
will live in, yet so pitiless
toward our ancestors! If only we cared,
we could remake the past, give our grandparents
a wonderful world to have lived in.

We could decide that Hitler,
in his fondness for Jewish children,
invited them to his palace for ice cream
and cookies and puppet shows; that the
Russian nobles said to Lenin, "I know what!
Let's play everyone-owns-everything!
All this wealth is such a bore!"

We can decide anything we want-
and make it so. Let's decide something
nice. We owe it to our parents.
One day perhaps our children will give us
an even better world to have lived in.

Our Children

Almost five years we've been married,
but have no children. The oldest
of the children we haven't had
(a boy, I think) is nearly five,
a good kid, tough, bright, cute,
though already his tow-head darkens.
Whoever had him instead of us,
I'm sure he's loved and in good hands.
The other two (a girl and a boy,
I think) are also thriving. All feel
tucked in among the toys, easy chairs
and faces they have known forever.

Later, perhaps, each will wonder
if there is not a truer home
than they know, a presence calling
faintly in the hush of wind moving away
through tall grass on the hillside,
a sense of something just out of
reach...which may have nothing to do
with their being the children we never had

We, too, are doing very well:
My wife's smile never fails to charm me
and I always say the cutest things.

All Night

The boy stands in the dark
between the open closet door
and the bedroom window,
hiding from being in bed, listening
for creaking on the stairs, excited
by how late it must be getting,
wondering how much longer
before he'll have stayed up all night
and found out what happens in between
8 o'clock, when he has to go to bed,
and morning, when everything is different.
He knows if he can just keep himself
awake long enough, he will learn
dark secrets known only to adults,
like the late night shows he has never
been allowed to stay up and watch.
He begins to itch where the cold radiator
nudges his thigh, hopes Mom won't find out
he's not in bed, but wishes she or someone
knew how late he's staying up, later
than grown-ups, later than anyone!
He yawns, getting stiff, wonders if it isn't
very late now and how much longer
he'll have to stand here; maybe
it would be better to be caught, to say,
"Look how late I'm up!"
(Sounds from downstairs, muffled,
but no one comes), thinks, maybe THIS
is late enough, ALMOST all night;
feels cold, thinks, "This is really it,
I'm staying up all night!", thinks,
"So this is it?", thinks, "I could say,
'Look! Mom! Dad! You thought I went to bed,
but I've been up all this time!'" Light
from a passing car washes over the room,
gone. He thinks, nothing is happening...
this must be late enough. At last,
after being up ALMOST all night,
at 10 p.m. he goes back to bed.

If We Outlaw Dreams, Only Outlaws Will Have Dreams

"Hero complex," "Delusions of grandeur" ...
Delusions of Expert Testimony: Beware
the man who dreams himself a hero;
of such, warn shrinks, are the fanatics,
the crazed assassins of our day.

These students of the soul they think is not
fear any who dare disagree.
Those who dream their own dreams
are not well-adjusted, nor do they need our fear
to compel agreement with their dreams.

Those who imagine themselves heroes well enough,
are heroes. Greatness is one's dream
come true for all, all our dreams
come true in one.

Beware those who fear dreamers.
Beware those who cannot dream.

Madmen can only borrow the dreams of others,
overwhelmed by the agreement called
the world, its solidity ever demanding
"Just who do you think you are!"

The madman craves agreement,
dares not dream, not even for himself alone
for to dream one must
disagree

yet he clings to his last desperate
fragment of truth, that he is someone
special -- for who is not a hero,
having once decided to be? --

so in the only world he recognizes (everyone's), registers his specialness
the only way he can: bombs, bullets, slogans --
solid dreams prefabricated by others,
flung or fired into a mob of gaping
flammable faces, eyes wide with terror,
pain and guaranteed recognition.
No need to think: He gropes for
his quick fix,

the confirmation of his specialness
by a world that swallows dreams
and shits headlines.

Oceans

We park the car, walk down to the beach,
stop where the wave's unrolling
gropes toward our toes. Before us
in milky night, the ocean stretches
slick as an asphalt parking lot-
hard to believe no men, no bulldozers
have put such flatness here.

I remember
the first time, after much necking
in parked cars, at last in a room
with a big fat bed we took off all we could-
our clothes--knowing what then
was all we could and then was ample
of nakedness, and there before me,
in my arms, in my eyes, mouth, loins,
in my smiling--so much I had that was
merely you, my love, that I could not
touch, enough, your nakedness,
could not quite convince myself
of what I had:

Not your naked body
merely, but the naked, almost it seemed
criminally naked me and naked you,
the merely being there to be so touched
by each other's cricket-most thoughts,
so that only when with my mouth
I smiled would I notice that the smile
that filled my head was not
on my lips.

O, we stroked and pummeled
each other's flesh as if to say,
"Pinch me--are we--am I dreaming?"
but could not convince ourselves
of what ourselves knew first and only.

Now someone shakes at the other end
of endless unruffled space, and a million
miles of nothing mounds and breaks into ocean
to unroll at our feet and snap! snap! snap! out
in long thunder down the beach,
then for an instant lies parkinglot inert.

This huge thing spoke to me, tried to lick
my toes; here, too, I feel a nakedness
I cannot have without the itching
to convince myself of something:
that what I have is only (pinch me!)
a finite bowl of shifting liquid,
and not the endlessnesses I put out
before me to talk to me as nothing
finite can, this swallowing of horizons
I unroll out into the ocean
for the ocean to unroll back to me,
which I cannot have, but am.

Old

"Don't get old like me" (grimacing to steady her shakey scrawl on the check). "Not much choice," I say. "Funny," she continues, more to herself than to me, "I thought I'd have a lot of choices, but my mother and father are dead, all my family, all my friends are dead, and I'm..." (hears her own voice, looks up, astonished, young) "...I'm still here -- I'm 89 -- that's OLD! Not many people get to be 89. Why me? I don't understand why I'm still here! I keep thinking: I won't be here for THIS, I won't be here for THAT, but look at me, I'm still here! I don't understand why I'm still here." Shrinking back into herself, she says something about leaving it up to God, but that wasn't what she had to say.

Growing Old Together

It seemed a saving grace, the thought
we could grow old together, but
it's not that simple, each of us
as young as ever, stuck with these two
decaying shells that get in the way
of our being with each other.

When young, we see the coarsening flesh
and spirit of our elders, but dream
if, as we roughen with age, we hold on
to each other, some kindly visiting god
will notice, and turn us into
flourishing shade trees, side by side.

How could we have known then,
the hold an old body would have
on each of us, mine clinging to me,
yours to you? We fasten them to each other
in hopes they will loosen their grip on us.

"Growing old together" makes no sense:
Oldness is separateness. As the gums
pull away from each tooth, so oldness
withers away from companions,
becomes prickly to approach.

"Growing old" makes no sense: Old
is cessation of growth. "Old"
makes no sense: You are as old
as you think you are that which is old,
but if you think you are that,
you are already making plans
to leave it behind and become new.
How can you think to leave
what you think you are? Ah, because
you are becoming that which is
separateness, a going away, self
from body, self from self's own
increasingly dreamlike thoughts.

We take out our teeth, remove hair,
cheeks, lips -- but, we are here, unchanged:
we have not grown old together.

A Nice Old Painting

Does this landscape (glassy river, rapids,
foreground; center stage, two in a canoe;
beyond, shadow-striped forest climbs
to a golden mesa soaring into a rush
of clouds) -- does it look different
because elsewhere, elsewhere other aesthete eyes
have admired urine-drenched Jesus and photos
of nude youths being ass-fucked by bullwhips
and bouquets? Is this landscape concerned
about NEA proclivities? Does it wonder
what the world is coming to? Can it remain
merely a landscape, unperturbed
by what it sees, increasingly,
in our eyes?

Omens

Bright windy day,
splintery park bench, worn notebook.
Who knows what is changing for me,
who is being born, who dying
or, even in myself, what is dying,
being born? Perhaps tonight
I will find I no longer like orange juice
or that I am in love
or that nothing matters any more.
Perhaps whatever I will find tonight
is now being prepared for me,
the trees trying to tell me--
if I could read leaf motion, bark wrinkles.
Perhaps if I keep writing,
I will tell myself in my own language
and still not know what I've said.

Only One

If in all the world there remained only one dog, even a mangy one, not only children would pay to stroke it once, pay double for a face lick; afterwards, driving home, one would read to the other from a brochure how there were once hundreds of millions of dogs, all sizes and shapes, nearly all eager to love and be loved, a hundred million tails wig-wagging, "Let's play!" -- and how thousands were abandoned, killed, daily, in "shelters"... That CAN'T be true, or if it is, were these people made of stone? Or was love so abundant that they could squander it?

If in all the world there remained only one tree, even a scraggly parking lot tree, we, in our oxygen masks, wheeling our air tanks, would line up to be amazed at its abundance, so many spring buds and summer leaves, such an intricate mosaic of bark and zig-zag of winter twigs -- and a docent would explain (leading our group past what was once a parking lot island) that long ago there were millions of trees -- people had them in their front yards! -- but they were destroyed to make room for parking lots, highways and townhouses, and we would say, "She must be exaggerating..." (we would gasp at our air tubes, then say...) "or could they have destroyed things as marvelous as this?" (Gasp) "It must be different when they are many" (gasp), "but I can't imagine it."

If in all the world there remained only one flower, one ant, one child, one smile...

If in all the world there remained only one lawyer, one politician, one journalist, one psychiatrist, then we would say, "There used to be thousands, millions of these! How did people put up with them?" And we would be consoled just a little for the disappearance of trees, dogs, cats, birds.

If in all the world there remained only one poet, perhaps only a mediocre one, he or she would say to us, "All these things you have in abundance, grass blades, stars, bricks, each other -- if you cannot see each as the only one in all the world ever, then you cannot see them at all," and he or she would try to make us see. Or perhaps he or she would say, "Ah, the gorgeous lost trees! Ah, the noble dogs of yore! Alas! Alas!..." and, truly, this would be the last poet, though no one would notice.

Wherein the Poet Has His First Orchid
(Under Glass in the Golden Gate Park Greenhouse)

To admire an orchid
is to expose oneself to secret places.
They are living dissections, these
fine-fringed labia leading the eye
into speckled convolutions.

At once male and female, they know
no shame -- or flaunt IT too. Men dream
of violating nuns, when the whore's hole
holds no more secrets than an old newspaper
blown smack against a park bench.

A flower or flowering
is the outward reach of an inwardness.
What flowering is, an orchid is
the flowering of, reaching and withdrawing,
ensheathing chamber within petal within chalice,
spreading its thighs, as we have dreamed,
to reveal a secretness which also
opens, gate within gate, to hide (behind
a more inner, one would think most innerest,
blue velvet ocean shadow) a revelation
of privacy.

You can't have your nun
and eat her too. Afterwards, she strips off
her habit and gets into black boots and lace
for her next customer.

But orchid,
you turn me inside out admiring,
unfolding myself secret for secret
to fathom you. At last I turn away,
devoid of secrets, having shown you all.
However freely you unfold,
you outlast me (orchid who never
asked, but seemed as safe
as any ear or shrine);

turn away with an inkling how to shape
my own mysteries when I wish to flower,
bearing my inwardness openly
as one who carries a cup, brimful,
nor spills any drop.

Organization

Organization,
you eat up the half man,
nourish the whole.

An individual, to communicate to an organization,
must be an organized individual.

Hello, all you people with functions.
Which of you is the one one says hello to?
You all have eyes, ears and other standard gear,
but one of you may be the organization's eyes,
heart or stomach. Am I speaking, for example,
to the asshole?

An organization should be people agreeing
about what they help each other create.
Most organizations are lots of people
trying to be parts of a machine.

The parts of a machine don't help each other.
They explode against one another,
driving pistons, igniting sparks
and, with scraping and clanking, force each other
towards a result that none desire.

The parts agree only on the goal to persist,
each as a hard lump of metal or other substance,
and to repeat their motions.

The goal set for the machine
is not the machine's goal
or the goal of any part of the machine.

People seek to become parts of machines
because they notice that when live people
explode or abrade against one another,
nothing useful is gained. Therefore, they conclude,
it is more workable to be a machine part.

Machine parts produce smooth, orderly motion
by explosion; live people, alas, must communicate,
agree, decide, be--each--a source of action.

In a true organization, each person
is more, not less, than a person,
adding to dreams unalloyed by status
the duties of a post.

If you find a true organization, join it.

...And The Winner Is...

"I want..."
and here, knowing none of this could be happening,
not to her, left stranded far from that tiny body
glowing there, deserted even by time--
"I just want to thank..." --
each syllable of recorded and video-taped time
lasts forever: "I" "just"
"want" "I just" "I just want
to thank so many people many
so thank to want..." (Is it
the TV that flickers so?)
"...people who..." --
In some other world that
can't be happening the
prepared words, only the
words are prepared, but she,
no script can hold her,
suddenly from syllable
to syllable, dies and is
born anew, must
each instant
re-create herself
(so many instants!
Who'd have guessed?
And still enough new selves
for each), a flame
that spreads, fills
the hall, now faces, walls,
chandeliers, silences all
flicker, being born born born,
she must keep
putting them there, no one else
can, put them there,
yes, hold them still,
yes, by sheer act of
will she (the latest) finds
she can hold them, hold
herself and in the world
she's made ("...people who made this
possible...") -- almost totally
still now, a breathless
white flame, so that
("...love you...")
she can have what she has made, be
maker ("...all so much!
thankyou! thankyou!")

Power Outage

We keep using words that we're told
don't work anymore-- beauty, heart,
truth, love -- using them because
we WANT them to work.

Keats held
truth near beauty, and an arc of
brilliance leapt the gap
to illuminate his century.
Yeats had to give birth to a TERRIBLE
beauty to ignite us.

These simple sparks,
like stars hazed over by city lights,
now are blanched by billboards blazing
the truth of True Cigarettes,
the beauty of beautiful shampoo,
the breakfast cereal you'll love
and the politician you know is right
in your heart.

Can one ashamed
to say "I love you" love?

We try
to heighten love and truth and beauty,
add garish auras with "diseased", "hectic",
"skeletal beauty", "the rictus of love",
"the bruised apples of truth left to us",
"the algebra of the unknown heart"--

but we cannot further overload
these circuits; the fuses blew out
decades ago. Yet we stand here
in the abandoned house, flicking
the dusty light switches on, off,
on, off -- because it is all we know
on earth, but not all we need to know--
hoping for light.

State Of The Art

We go to presentations, view overheads, learn acronyms, grasp new technologies, enter into discussivities of connectivity and establish prioritizations of our activitizations. We are in a hotel in a city far from home, but it could be any city, any Marriott or Ramada or Hyatt or Marramadyatt. We are regaled with free mugs, T-shirts, notepads, pens, bright-visored caps, solar calculators. We are furthering our careers, enhancing our resuméés, garnering previews, cautions, tips, outlines, in-depth explanations. We all agree that the presentations are excellent, the handouts invaluable. Like the other busy squirrels, I fill my fat cheeks with treasured tidbits as if preparing for a long winter, but as easily as Simon Says, I can think of someone I care for or a good line of poetry or a crumpled kleenex in a waste basket and imagine that I am spending 3 days doing something TSTD/TU (terribly strange, terribly dull, terribly unimportant).

Overload

It's almost cozy,
this thick fog between me
and everything else, except
the TV whiteness is in here with me,
a moon reflecting my wavery vacancy,
no closer to me and no farther off
than the voices in my head,

and me such a precise thing now
because of all it can't touch,
precisely nothing at all
sitting very still like a rabbit
hunched on the verge of the trail
sitting still so long
it's become a rabbit-shaped niche
in concrete space.

Now something's buzzing about sympathetically,
trying to get in through the fog,
trying to be "you",
but all my "you" circuitry is bottlenecked
with heavy traffic: How-could-you's and
I'll-show-you's, the fog itself a maze
of circuitry shimmering with old force
that wants to use me to run amok,
smashing bodies and picture tubes-
I am paralyzed with resisting it.

Each time she brushes against it,
she gets a jolt of misdirected charge,
and disturbs this concentration
that uses me up holding everything still

and I can't even break through--because
I'm nothing in here, nullified
by all this electricity--to tell her
it isn't me, I'm hiding in here, I'm here, I'll be back-
this machine has to run down sometime,
it's a machine, it has to run down and somewhere
I still I know she's not you,
you're you.

Dreams and Nightmares

Dorothy, homesick among gold, emerald
and crimson, clenching her wet eyes shut
in search of cozy black-and-white Kansas,
tries to turn with two heelclicks
her ruby slippers gray. Whirlwinded
into phantasmagoria, one might well feel
assaulted by color and want to go back
to where one can wake from dreams and close
the storybooks at will, even if the only gem
(minus its rainbow ripples) is pearl.

Knocked out by a tornado's whim,
she's on her own. The colors and critters
are of her own making, though tinged
by the voices of loved ones anxious
at her bedside. The brightness is an absence
of gray agreement in her garish creation,
yet is nightmarish with the need to account
for her immobility and helplessness
back in Kansas. Caught in dreams,
she is free from doorknobs, bicycles
and clocks, but the feverish Kansas reality
(where she cannot wake up, though her pulse
is steady, says Doc) haunts her dreams
with danger.

At the end of the story, she prefers
gray familiarity and predictable objects
to a technicolor world where the bubbles
she blows may engulf her. While she dreams,
she can cause in only one direction: through
her will to wake up.

This is the paradox of drugs or any other
enforced creation: The dream is bright
because it is one's own, nightmarish
because the dreaming is enforced. The best
of both worlds would be to decide, wide
waking, not to agree.

Pain Becomes Us

My word or grimace causes pain,
which strikes back, stinging. My pain says
"Why do you treat me this way?
I didn't mean to hurt you,"
arguing with the senseless pain I've made,
telling it that it makes no sense,

but shrill pain comes back and comes back--
not to hurt me, but to give itself back to me,
since, I claim, I never meant to give it away.

Something in us longs to slap, kick,
say, "You want to be a pain? HERE'S pain!"
Each, in hiding, thinks: Why can't we just talk?
but each glazed over by pain,
can only mirror what neither wants to see:
Can that ugliness be me?

Words wince. We sit silent,
thinking: Is this silence
mere stratagem or is nothing safe to say?
Thinking: Can silence kill? Do I care?

Thumbing through thoughts,
seeking the unanswerable taunt,
rejecting excuses, threats, pleas:
too painful, too melodramatic, too easy,
what if my bluff is called? Worse,
what if when I say my worst, I find
I'm not bluffing?

And we are silent while the yelling
echoes over and over in the separate caves
of our stony faces.

First I mistook a silliness for importance.
Affronted importance, screaming "Here I am!,"
squirmed like quicksilver, coated the pain,
our words, our silences -- all becoming
painfully important.

We want to laugh, say "Screw this!",
but we have turned to solid rock
from trying not to destroy each other,
having lost, with importance, unimportance.

Both belong to the pain.
The pain is right. You are
RIGHT, pain, totally right,
and we are wrong, we admit it,
OK? We admit we're wrong, is
that what you want? You're right!
Now please be a good pain
and FUCK OFF!

Such hate is, between us, impossible; yet,
once being, impossible that it should not be.
Yet it is, then is not.

Thinking: We will learn to talk again
and even (tonight?) have sex, but
will it be as before? Is it worth it?

Talking now is toil, but it's us again;
The pain has moved out between us:
It is not us. Frozen faces begin to thaw-
a tingling, then a soft ache.

We recapitulate: You say I started it; I say
you did. You say I said you.... I say no,

I said.... You say I say you say I say...
(The scorekeepers, too, probably disagree.)

We must be fond of each other
to find our sudden distaste for each other
(that suddenly has always been there,
as lick-spittle memories assure us)
so interesting! We will not let go of it,
holding hate hostage until we can be sure
our love has not been damaged, thinking:
Wasn't that how love is supposed to die?

It is nothing we say that beats the pain,
neither ruses nor reasoning, but merely
our being there and being there
while pain separates out and things
find their proper places, like familiar faces
and objects shedding their nightmare masks
as we wake up.

Our voices, after yelling and stone silence,
are strange to us. Can it be over?
Gradually our words become again our own;
the walls no words could overcome
vanish and are difficult here in each other's
shiny wet eyes to re-create to overcome.

Two Ways to Have Nothing to Say

To you I can say anything,
but need to say almost nothing,
yet we talk for the fun of setting words
upon what flows so swiftly between us,
like kids sailing paper boats
down the gutter on spates
of spring melt.

That other one would turn her back,
slam doors within doors and if
caught in an innermost room,
would pretend to be a wall and
not be pretending. To her I've had
so much to say for so long
that it's wadded into a wrinkled lump
like a note found in my pants' pocket
after it's been through the washer twice.
To her...I can't even say "to you,"
there's no longer a you there, but...well,
to...to you I say hello?...hello?

Vox Populi

Passive voice, the gabble of government:
mandatory passive ("A quarterly report
shall be submitted to the contracting
officer within fifteen business days..."
-- AFTER fifteen days, the officer
has contracted to a tiny point, lost
amid the punctuation, invisible
to the naked eye),

quibbling voice of scholars, who would speak
their hearts to us, but for scrupulous
fears of later having to say "that was not
what was meant by one at all!", and besides,
the heart knows no passive voice,
one active heart infusing a million hearts
with uncontrollably subjunctive moods,

formalized stammer of you and I become "one",
not the one of unity, but of undifferentiable
anonymity, the one one would want to be found
to be when most one's ass needs covering
(for passive voice is cover for an ass),
the unknown one, for to know one is to know
no one.

(Can such oddly structured sentences
have been composed by men who put their
pants on before their shoes, women
who pause before mirrors to try out
their faces? People who once wanted
to be kissed goodnight?)

Passive voice is used by one upon whom
it is incumbent that all due care be taken
of what is spoken in view of the not unlikely
severe consequences of being caught
being alive and communicating.

No one does anything. It is done.
No one says anything. It is said (or so
they say). Only the rain, it raineth,
for only the weather is blameless.

"Who hurt you, blinded Cyclops?" "Noman
has hurt me." It must have been
a lawyer or a government agency
or "the people", some blob which,
when we ask, "Who are you?" replies
"No man", so that when we ask,
"Who caused this war? Who devastated
this economy? Who appointed these mad men?
Who didn't care what became of these children?"--
we are told, "All this was done by No Man.
By no man were you deprived of vision."
The culprit lost himself among us sheep.

Children say, "I wasn't doing anything!
I didn't drop it! It just fell!"
As adults, they learn to speak
the language of unaccountability.

This land is one's land, land of the free
of responsibility, no man's land.

Passive voice: language of corporate
(rather DIScorporate) entities,
the disappearance of owners and leaders
willing to take the rap. The mob
of consumers and voters who don't vote
is employed and governed by a hidden elite,

masked by holding companies, street names,
and a maze of evasive documents
as complex in syntax as frantic flutter
of moths about a hot bulb or the eyedarting
of one who will not look you in the eye,
a leadership as eely and amorphous
as a mob.

Passive voice: Litany of a world of victims
to whom everything is done, by whom
nothing is done, where headline news
(written by whom?) chants what was done to whom
by persons unknown ("We are all to blame"),

where action flares up, rises but
to pity or outrage, collides with
bland walls of bureaucracy,
and bounces off into reaction,
blinded Cyclops striking out at friend
and foe alike.

In the land of the victim, the unknown
instigator, cloaked in theyness, is king.
One day into our language will creep
a Final Solution, to be duly implemented
and enforced upon everyone by no one.

Who Edgar Bergens all these Mortimer Snerds?
I say these words to you. I say these words.
I make but am not made, move, am not moved,
or no man wrote nor no man ever loved.

FOR A WALK

Choose a path as gnarly
as a branch groping through decades
of changing light, a path with a destination
more if than the, so that each step
is as singular as a stroke of red paint
or the slow drip of a faucet that
keeps you awake at one a.m.
Let it be wild, uneven, but not so rough
that you have to think about breathing, scratching
and not falling on your face, a path
where both worlds -- you moving through it
and it moving through you --
interweave as easily as bees in clover.
Don't kill anything, but
don't try too hard not to.
Don't take anything in with you.
Don't take anything away
except what insists
on becoming part of you,
like a hungry stray kitten
or the way your father squinted when he smiled
or the familiar forms of constellations.
If you come across a poem,
squander it like dandelion fluff
or the luck bestowed
by a ladybug.

Don't Peek

First hearing one's own strange voice on a tape;
Studying the alien profile, nodding one's head
to be sure that the blind back of a head
that nods the other way in an unfolding
infinite fan of clothing store mirrors
is one's own: Like a first pubescent peek
into the girl's locker-room,

this delicate excitement,
no sooner grasped than vanished,
of taking forbidden viewpoints.

Golden Idol

The body of a star
becomes an admired object-
a freedom if you contain it,
reminded by the need to use
every bit of it, every muscle
and beam and fiber of it,
to communicate, to give yourself
gracefully away-

reminded of your proper station,
outside it, using it to say hello
and to cause and receive effects,
as an artist uses a canvas;

a trap if all that admiration
flowing over it, gilding it
a fine pure sparkling gold,
sucks you back into the body,
hungry to be golden,
to have what you've made
to give away.

Four Billionth Person Singular

Three's a crowd. First person,
second person, third person --
no need of a fourth or fifth:

One, Two, Three, Infinity...
the counting system of our grammar
and of some primitive peoples--

I don't know which tribes, but
no doubt in their own tongues
the tribal name meant "The People",
though they were known to some
neighboring tribes as "Enemy".

From their numbering, I suspect
their rituals involved much mutilation,
loss of fingers and toes, awe of one
complete enough to count past three.

From silence to "I"
is a soaring leap of faith
or impudence. From "I alone"
to "You and I" is an expansion
as dramatic as the shattering
of a mirror.

So sensitive are we (after much abrasion)
to each nuance of faced, addressed
otherness, that some assign it elaborate
grammatical attributes: the intimate
or jocularly condescending thou,
the politely formal...

(Does any language recognize
the intimate "them"?)

We recognize, too, the subtler ways
the universe of you and me is modulated
by our knowledge of a third other,
one not faced, not addressed, often
just out of sight, but impinging

like play of light and shadow in the room,
an added resonance of meaning in our words
to each other: potential audience, honer
of the embarrassed edge in our laughter,
one who might think -- who knows what?
And how shall we live up to
who knows what?
This third person lives just outside
our universe, and thereby defines it for us,
becomes the uninvestigated source
of our irresolvable quarrels,

for by ourselves, there is no strangeness.
Your otherness is but a familiarity
in which I lose my own strangeness
to myself, a freedom to be me
by being you. I know what I create,
hence know whatever else arises to be yours,

but when a third, unrecognized viewpoint
insinuates itself into our Eden,
one day I see you gazing at me askance
(as if beneath my love were another
nakedness I knew not, known to you).

I don't realize you view me
with borrowed eyes. From your strangeness,
I extrapolate a mythic you at which

I stare as oddly, becoming in your eyes
doubly alien (the stranger I've become
in your borrowed opinion, stranger still,
not seeing you) as the knot of our
estrangement complicates, covering up
its single source, who now fills up
our space with what everyone knows.

He, she: human personae, the way a brute
universe pretends to care about us,
challenging playing field for the game
of you and me.

I don't know if some language treats
numbered presences as Eskimos treat snow:
Separate designations for fourth persons,
fifth persons (I go, you go, he goes, hehe
gogo, hehehe gogogo...), a culture where

at puberty, each manchild (6-toed?)
must stand blindfolded in a crowd of
60 people and must know by subtle signs
(a solidifying or melting of agreement?
flux of gravity?) when one arrives
or leaves; a world, perhaps,
where 60 is company, 61 a crowd,

a world whose ancient shamans, blind
AND deaf, can tell 999 from 1000
and have special pronouns for each species
of plant and animal and for various
interminglings thereof (How many larks
in an exaltation?).

For our primitive sensibilities, beyond
a singular third (he, she, it, one),
we recognize only the great unwashed
amorphous they, sea in which insidious
he's and she's lose themselves, faceless
chorus to our tragedies, scapegoats
who do it all to us, the ones
we'll show someday (for someday
is where WE live; now belongs to them.)

We lack even language for the common
first person conglomerate, the Surrogate
We, where one says, "I", but the "one"
who speaks, speaks the words his father
or mother would speak, the words his
daily newspaper speaks, where multitudes
speak as one, where "they" wear the mask
of "I".

Nor have we language for the infinitely
granulated "they", the singular they,
found when we find purpose in ourselves,
a need and voice to speak to each of many.

"They" blossoms, then, into
you and you and you... --
a wildflower meadow of you's,
each, in an unlimited now of its own,
first person, fresh as Adam and Eve in Eden
naming the new beasts,

no end of ample vessels to receive
freely as morning dew our singular breath.

