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# Assorted Selfscriptings: 1964-1985

Eugene Stelzig  
*SUNY Geneseo*

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Author

*Assorted  
Selfscriptings*

*1964-1985*



Eugene Stelzig

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Selfscriptings  
1964-1985*

Eugene Stelzig

2015  
Milne Library

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# Praise for *Assorted Selfscriptings*

A record of warmth and wisdom, informed by sly wit, passionate compassion, and a sure ear for the music of language and the voice of the spirit—this is the poetry of Eugene Stelzig.

*Stephen Behrendt, George Holmes Distinguished Professor of English, University of Nebraska, Lincoln*

I began reading Eugene Stelzig's poems back in the 1970s. The best poetry sustains us through this life, and I have found that Gene's poetry does precisely that. His lines tend not to leave you, to grow with you over time, to haunt and nurture in equal measure: "How we are leached by time, / how the wonder drains from life / through living / is the unspoken testimonial of the dead." Those lines are from Gene's magisterial "For the Death of My Mother," the longest poem (or sequence of poems) in the book—a remarkable mixture of multicultural autobiography, elegy, and confession, many lines of which are now part of *my* memory. Gene's language surprises us, enacting what he calls in one poem "the quirky demonism / of random circumstance." A "quirky demonism" captures for me the quirky Daemon that seems to inspire most Stelzig poems, where we find "we need to be broken down / to grow again, / manured by pain and joy." These peculiar and powerful poems occupy the "chill margins" that, Stelzig tells us, "are intimately mine," where "waste / space and cacti spine" are "my only crave." What demon/Daemon makes language *do* that, makes language take us into the "long winternights / that move through the soul like / unending freight trains of the dark"? The margins of many of the best poems here are indeed "chill," but poem after poem manures us with the endless wonder of "pain and joy."

*Ed Folsom, Roy J. Carver Professor of English, University of Iowa*

Stelzig's poetry, from first to last, shows a liquidity of discourse that seems to develop from a triangulation of deep intelligence, stealthy self-knowledge, and aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Lenitive and enchanting, these poems, more than most of late, bear reading up and down as well as along the lines.

*Larry H. Peer, Karl G. Maeser Professor of Comparative Literature, Brigham Young University*

In this delight-studded collection, we have the first twenty years of a lifelong love affair with poetry. In addition to considerable erudition, the author brings keen observational powers directed at both the ex-

ternal and internal worlds, as well as a refreshingly self-deprecating wit. Whether recalling his childhood in Post-War Austria, describing an encounter with a “dowsing witch,” imagining hunting elephants in Western New York, or writing tender lyrics to his beloved Elsie, Eugene Stelzig brings us “September Gifts.” He urges us to “let these assorted selfscriptings / disseminate beyond the margins / become and then unbecome you / let them multiply beyond / our simple mees and wees/ disperse us into other spaces and places.”

*John Roche, Associate Professor of English, Rochester Institute of Technology*

Fleet of (poetic) foot, these poems of the “romantic spirit” turn and turn again with wit and wisdom alike, drawing variously from classic literature and a well-lived life to deliver their charm and insight. These are poems to make you feel the heart’s beat and ache—and to make you remember the head believes it rules the heart.

*Lytton Smith, Assistant Professor of English, SUNY Geneseo*

# Preface

*Assorted Selfscriptings* is a selection from the volume(s) of poetry I wrote during roughly two decades, from the ages of twenty-one to forty-two. I found my calling as a poet during my undergraduate years at the University of Pennsylvania (1962-66), where I worked on the campus literary magazine, *The Pennsylvania Review*, which I co-edited in my senior year (we foolishly renamed it *The Handle*). Of the many poems I wrote during those years, and some of which appeared in campus publications (both under my name as well as a pseudonym), I have only included one here, “The Light Watchers,” because it came to me as confirmation of my identity as a poet.

It is always difficult to make a selection from a large quantity of poetry. What I’ve excluded from this collection is poems that no longer resonate with me, or even speak to or for me. I’ve also excluded poems that are now historically dated, like a long verse satire in ottava rima on the Watergate scandal.

This collection consists, to take a title from my favorite English poet, Wordsworth (on whom I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation), of “moods of my mind.” Minds change over time, and so do moods. These poems are from a past self—or more accurately, selves—that I wanted to put on the record. The states of mind recorded in them are not my present self, but perhaps a reflection of the states of mind all of us potentially pass through in life’s perennial journey. As another William of English poetry, Blake, put it beautifully, “Man passes on, but States remain for Ever; he passes thro’ them like a traveler who may as well suppose that the places he has passed thro’ exist no more, as a Man may suppose that the States he has passed thro’ Exist no more. Every thing is Eternal.”

If some of these poems are embarrassingly confessional, I’m willing to shoulder that burden, reassured by the truth of that French saying, *le je est un autre* [the self is another]. These are the selves I have lived through, these are the traces or scraps or remnants—scripts and scriptings—of them. In presenting them here, almost like a dead man looking back at a substantial period of his life, I have resisted the fatal temptation that Wordsworth fell victim to: endlessly revising the poems of his earlier years in the light of the self-understanding of his later years. I have no such desire to revise or correct or rescript my younger self. To quote the Beatles, “let it be, let it be,” with all its myriad and passionate imperfections on its head.

This selection from my younger years does not mean that I’ve

stopped writing poetry. *Fool's Gold: Selected Poems of a Decade* was published by FootHills in 2008, and it is my hope that subsequent volumes in manuscript will eventually also see the light of day.

I wish to express my gratitude to SUNY Geneseo's Milne Library for making this collection available both in print and online versions, and I want to give a special "shout out" and thank you to Allison P. Brown, for taking on this project and doing the hard work of seeing it through to its completion.



# Acknowledgments

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the following publications in which these poems have previously appeared:

- “The Light Watchers” [*The Handle*]
- “Eurailer in First Class” [*Pennsylvania Gazette*]
- “Pied Piper” [*The Cresset*]
- “For the Death of My Mother” [*The Literary Review*]
- “The Wheatland Diner” [*Indiana Writes*]
- “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Teddybear” [*Wind*]
- “Living In,” “Dorothy to William at Alfoxden,” “Young Heine to Old Goethe in Weimar,” “The Sky’s the Limit,” “Changes” [*Sourwester*]
- “Days Done,” “After the Concert” [*Religious Humanism*]
- “Don Jose” [*A Shout in the Street*]
- “Home” [*Crab Creek Review*]
- “Moving to the Country,” “August Harvest” [*The Greenfield Review*]



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# Early Poems

*(ca. 1964-1970)*





# Dear Reader

*mon quasisemblable* if not *frère* or *sœur*  
you whom i havent yet met

gimme a break

lets help each other be  
let these assorted selfscriptings  
disseminate beyond the margins

become and then unbecome you  
let them multiply us beyond  
our simple mees and wees

disperse us into other spaces and places

all books unglued all un  
banished these black marks  
from the white page  
and dotted the blank  
map of the future

let us selve ourselves  
let us spread our parachutes  
and float on thin air  
let us by all means whistle  
in the wind like the winter  
starved raven on the tattered  
fence let us buzz like  
the honeybee in the humming hive

let us heap the bare horizon

for what i mean is  
*immer nach Hause*

# Falstaff's Death Reported to Henry V by Ancient Pistol

*Scene: Winter. The English camp in France. Open country. Snow.  
(enter Henry V and Exeter)*

*Henry* My Lord Exeter, see the tenor of  
our provisions, here set down, enforced  
to the utmost article. The times are hard.  
Needs must we be so. Your hand, my Lord; farewell!

*(exit Exeter)*

Who approaches now? Methinks I see  
the King of Swaggerers, Ancient Pistol,  
he whose banishment I lately did take off  
for brave words upon the bridge at Harfleur.  
What his unmanly heart lacked in timely deeds,  
his brave voice, like alarum's bell tolling  
in calamity, made good in the effect  
on my most ragged soldiers, steeled by  
such harsh music to deeds of glory.

*(enter Pistol)*

And here he comes, strangely unlike himself.  
What now, Ancient Pistol? Discharge, discharge!

*Pistol* Most noble King, I come so charged with grief  
I cannot tune my tongue to note my heart.

*Henry* This argues untimely news, sad melodies.  
Wet powder, alas, ne'er fired a shot.  
Come Pistol, speak thy grief or be discharged.

*Pistol* Falstaff, the prince of flesh, is dead, my Lord.

*Henry* Now hast thou hit me in the heart.

*Pistol* The hulk that drained a sea of sack now lies  
dry-docked on the naked shores of death.

*Henry* Good Pistol, did 'a make a good end?  
Did 'a banter with the Devil's lackeys  
on his journey down to flaming Hell?  
Did 'a use his scorching wit to score

a set upon the pate of Satan?  
No? What use is wit if 'a could not use it  
to outwit the devil of his due?  
Did 'a die of the pox, or the gout, or verily of thirst?

*Pistol* Good, my Lord, of thirst, of a great thirst of life.  
On's end, 'a breathed as Leviathan  
tempest-stranded, gasping in despair, long and hard.  
'A blubbered e'en as a monstrous babe,  
crying God's mercy on a rotted soul,  
and waxed feebler like to a dying fire  
consumed in his substance. His death  
had the taste of ashes. It did rain and rain.

*Henry* Had he reigned his life, he would not thus  
lie sacked. Did I not warn him in his  
banishment? Still do they whisper I was  
the scourge of his age. They say the King did  
kill his heart. And how could I do other  
than I did? As Hal I reigned Prince of Eastcheap,  
but once Henry crowned, how could I countenance  
such Lords of Misrule, such infinite knaves?  
Yet I am sore grieved Falstaff hath sounded  
his last. I grieve to think what then we did,  
and turned the nights to riot, crying "hem!"  
so loud unto the world that it did shake  
the very Palace walls about the King  
my father's ears, and fretted golden  
majesty as pale as snow. Too much of that!  
We thank thee, Pistol, and we dare hope  
that Falstaff's end hath taught thee the start  
of a better life, so that thou may'st not  
betray it upon the gallows, even as  
Bardolph, who thought war's glory was in  
the pillage, and whose lanthorn face is now  
put out by death.  
Ancient Pistol, go, leave us to ourselves.

*Pistol (aside)*  
Leave us to ourselves? A figo for thy feigned grief!  
The Spanish figo on thy French wars! A pox upon thy God,  
thou counterfeit king, thou Styx of saintliness!  
A stinking jordan toast on reformation! I go not to  
the wars to be gelded of my life, but to be gilded o'er  
with guilders, to be armed for a noble return to England.

And may my worst war wound be caught in a French bed.  
What, thou hast killed brave Bardolph for the robbing  
of a country church, and wouldst thyself the French  
Charles rob of crown and country? Thou base king of  
current seemliness, who treatest thine ancient familiars  
like a plague of boils to be lanced! S'blood! A French  
lance for thy troubles, says valiant, war-like Pistol!

*(exit Pistol)*

*Henry (solus)*

Falstaff' dead? What? Is it possible that  
the inimitable rogue who thought all life  
his most especial whore, should now lie  
stomach'd in the cold earth, who ne'er had flesh  
enow when quick to contain the fire  
and raging motions of his appetites?  
Alack, the counterfeit of ceaseless revelry  
is ever confounded by time's true currency.  
Those tavern days ring hollow in my ears.

*(pause)*

Yet, what he lacked of grace, he still graced o'er with  
wit. Alas, your true wit leads but to your true grave,  
when grace is ever the high road to Heaven.  
Yes, there's a time for all things, which this royal  
parasite, this fat-stuffed Falstaff, ne'er did  
perceive. I do remember me of my wild youth;  
Sir John still feeding headstrong riot.  
Yet, he loved me as his proper son.  
I did commit a sort of regicide  
when I put on the crown and cast him off  
like a barren soil, rife with weed and waste.  
Although he was no true staff nor guide of youth  
I did love him in the heyday of his  
reign as my most prodigal father,  
and in the son-like banishment of thee,  
Sir John, I banished my heart, my youth,  
and my humanity.

*(pause)*

Now in the bitter cold of our wars here in  
Gallia, the frost nips at my starving  
soldiers' heels like a pack of baying hounds,  
and even in the heat of victory  
my heart is not well, but waxes chill  
with the winds that rage through our weary camp,  
blowing the snow which blankets all in white.

No, Henry, all fares not well with thee, for  
great Falstaff's heart lies deep in distant  
England's earthy womb. Once I loved thee,  
and hearing of thy death here among these  
mounds of snow, I love thee anew and needs  
must mourn thee as the fabled Atlantis  
in the world of mirth and joy that was my youth.

Farewell, Falstaff, thou blubber whale of wit  
and uproarious fellowship, thou shining  
beefsteak sign of pleasure, thou great good man  
of night-cheer, of sack and song and wenching.  
Thou who wast a huge feeder on the earth  
now feedest it, fattening all England.

*(pause)*

In the purchase of a golden crown, I lost  
a goodly measure of myself. Well, an  
end to such barren reckonings. Time calls,  
and glory waits on the doers of God's will.  
Fare thee well, old friend. Even here in the  
drifting snow, even thus, I grieve,  
I mourn for thee.

# Eurailer in First Class

and if youre in madrid youve got to visit the Prado  
stuffed with worldfamous paintings more than in the Louvre  
and thats saying something Velasquez and Goyas galore and  
Titians too mostly fat women the potato finger of Lechery  
said Shakespeare and Rembrandt and all the other Dutch  
masters even that bizarre Bosch El Bosco in Spanish reminds me of  
Chagall and dont forget that illuminated fountain performs every  
midnight spectacular nooo Lessee thats in Barcelona pronounced  
Barcelonella well you have to go there too famous architecture  
and leather goods and the jumpoff point for the Balearics jewels  
in the sun but overrun these days by hordes of hippyfreaks just  
disgraceful girls with sweaters saying feel me up front eyes back to  
Madrid do go to the flamenco costs plenty but worth every peseta  
and then to get away from it all El Retiro famous park or was it El  
Retiro? water and boats and trees and lovers in Rome you mustnt  
of course pass up Saint Peters the rolls Royce of Western art and  
in Vienna the Heurigen Salzburger Nockerln and Mozartkugeln  
balls you know and the view the view simply out of this world  
Herbert von Karajan the man is musically promiscuous in a Parisian  
cafe was it Lapaix? just a hole in the floor and you have to squat i  
swear like a regular kangaroo those French so crude yet so cultured  
and elegant with their bidets and the Eiffel and the Academie  
Francaise...

# Harvard Yard

Harvard Yard is never so quintessential  
as just after when it has snowed.  
There it remains insulated  
in a sheer fullness of white  
long after the frenzied  
surrounding streets  
have been smutched  
and the splendid snow  
trampled down into a sloshy  
mess knee-deep in places.

Some students en route  
to library or laboratory  
make a moment's pause  
then hurry on.  
A few professors stride by  
iced with self-importance  
oblivious even to

the ever-present dogs  
who frolic here  
racing between skeletal trees  
and generally running amok  
in Harvard Yard.

Statued John looks on  
as he has for centuries  
and wisely keeps his counsel.  
The only creaturely life now

is the yelping hullabaloo  
of floppy, bounding dogs

until the trees revive the spring  
and advertise in full-blown green

and frizzbeeing Harvard men  
watch luscious Cliffies  
primly saunter by

huge with desires silent and unseen  
unlike the ecstatic dogs in Harvard Yard.

# The Light Watchers

We are the light watchers  
And walk past  
Rock cliff river  
Earth and road  
We are Odysseus chainless  
And unbound  
We have seen all  
Heard all  
And prefer to play pool  
In a musty midnight hall  
Carnivals splinter our  
Dreamless night  
But we just walk and talk  
And jabber  
Discuss many things in detail  
Quite analytic  
You might say  
Spectroscope every  
Light and ray and rill  
Perfectly objective on every side—  
We prefer to look, you see  
And never mind  
The ride.



# The Roses of Great St. Mary's

1

The blood-red roses bloom above  
the tomb-stones in Great St. Mary's  
graveyard in the long, star-illuminated  
June nights of Cambridge.

If these graves are only rocks  
with roses overgrown, then let us  
rot into the ground and be as from  
dust to dust and never think of roses.

When I came here two years ago  
the Colleges seemed to me ancient piles  
of fog-shrouded rocks rotting  
into the ground in the dank winter nights.

Slowly the seasons went round  
And opened out my mind.  
I came to bless those medieval  
miracles of stone inhabited

for centuries by the great men who  
came here to learn, reflect, and feel,  
forging dimension after dimension  
in the possibilities of man and mind.

They died.  
Here are the graves of wise men.  
Their greatest tombs are their ideas,  
cradles where new thought

is rocked into fruition.  
Their buried bones burn  
in the ground, holy fires  
in a vigil of the future.

Yes, materialism will rob us all  
of the whole extent of our humanity  
unless we use matter only  
for a new splendour of soul.

Now, in the last incandescence of thought  
In this Cambridge night of roses  
I still have hopes for man not less  
than these reposing in the sacred earth.

2

I sailed for New York the following day  
watching the storms at sea,  
watching the moon between the clouds  
cut a trail of gold across the water.

From the deck of the ship I saw  
The rose-stars dance on the waves.  
To constellate the mind I thought  
in the night there on the sea.

The ship glided into the rust-red  
smoke-stained dawn of the new world harbor.  
I thought of Great St. Mary's graveyard  
and walked away from roses for many a day.

# Stringers of the Bow

Young Master Tell, son of William,  
famed artist of the great strong bow,  
had an apple shot neatly off the top  
of his head by his cool-aiming progenitor.

Tell's son, in a paroxysm of fear  
when he felt the arrow whir  
and breathe on his hair  
as it split the fruit

felt an instant proximity with the dead  
yet lived to see many more  
apple seasons green  
with leaf and fruit.

The poet too is a stringer  
of the great strong bow.  
He aims carefully,  
and runs a grave risk

for he's both master archer  
and master target.  
He's got to take unflinching aim  
and needs must keep a cool head when

letting fly the feathered shaft.

# Pauper's Grave, Arkansas, 1968

One man's body was too long  
so we had to cut off his head  
to make him fit. Later we  
didn't use no coffins.  
I don't know how many we  
shot, you lose count.  
I helped out once on a cool  
March morning when they buried  
three cons. We always said  
they was tryin' to escape.  
We dug a pit, turning up  
the black earth with shovels  
in a fallow field near the prison.  
We piled in the bodies and  
quickly threw the earth back  
in when it begun to rain.  
Later we planted the field  
with corn. In the summer  
when it had shot up full  
and tall, the prisoners  
harvested the crop, cutting  
and binding in the hot sun.

# My Lai Massacre (1968)

Son My, My Lai  
American soldiers  
are murdering today.

When words fail Son My  
the camera eye  
will testify:  
women's, men's bodies,  
babies'  
tortured into the grotesque definition  
of instant gunfire massacre.  
Tumbled helter skelter  
into a ditch gorged and  
swollen with death.  
This butchery is ours:  
Son My, My Lai  
inhuman men have come here today.

A toddler runs from a blazing hut,  
his chest gushing blood.  
His puzzled terrified  
four years' eyes  
are sleep murdering.

Because because is an  
obscenity here,  
because our explanations  
do not explain  
the American dream is a nightmare.

Because of Son My My Lai  
America is murdering today.  
Silent eyes like stone  
O now bear witness.

Manners do not make humanity,  
but kindness does  
which is true innocence  
won by self-restraint and knowledge  
from the ferocity  
of our feral nature.

In this wilderness the mind  
undone by a vertigo of outrage  
falls into the great silence of the age.  
Son My, Son My My Lai  
the inhuman men  
are murdering today.

# Home Delivery

What was left of him after  
the jungle fire fight  
was stuffed into a plastic bag,  
named, numbered, labeled and mailed home,  
shattered flesh and bone confined in  
refrigerated metal hurtling  
through alien skies.

He never believed the patriotic lies  
which sent him to his fire death.

Now, after an officious delivery  
to his parents' city, and during  
the droning service recited  
by the ceremonious priest

He cannot see his father curse  
nor hear his mother cry and moan  
because she may not look upon  
him hidden under the flag-afflicted  
coffin like some dismembered beast.

She isn't sure it is her own,  
she cannot see,  
she isn't sure of anything.

And so she sobs because  
she cannot hear the priest,  
she sobs and chokes on her breath

Because this metal-enmeshed things  
which once moved in her womb  
is now more dead than death.





*From*

# A Little Fire in a Wild Field

*(ca. 1971-1976)*



# Pied Piper

The Pied Piper was playing in the square,  
the rats were grooving in broad daylight  
stoned by the set. “Outta sight!” they  
shrilled, “man, can that cat ever blow!”  
The fat burghers of Hamelin  
smirked in relief as they saw  
the rats in transports at  
the Piper’s unearthly tracks.  
The ratpack whirred, eyes agog:  
“wow, the greatest riff we ever  
heard! man, let’s follow that  
man!” O the Pied Piper piped  
such a set as never yet was  
heard in Hamelin, the rats  
went sheer crazy, the kids  
were as silent as stones.

The Pied Man forced his heart  
out all down the streets of  
Hamelin, the rats padded behind  
in droves, mind-blown,

and the little kids traipsed  
along on tiptoes,  
mesmerized.  
In the guildhall of Hamelin  
the fat burghers smirked,  
the old women slapped their  
sides, rolled their eyes,  
and crooned, “that’ll  
fix them.”

# For the Death of My Mother

*“Und wenn der Mensch in seiner Qual verstummt,  
Gab mir ein Gott, zu sagen, wie ich leide.”*

## 1. The Graveyard by the Lake

Glossing the epitaphs,  
deciphering faded or crusted ones,  
we came on a Sunday afternoon

my mother and I  
with flowers and smiles  
to grandfather's tomb

in the graveyard by the lake at Zell am See

where now she herself lies  
bedded down for eternity  
there in the ground washed

by the clean mountain air and rain.

We were neither gay nor sad then,  
but peaceful, light of heart,  
like the stars at dawn,

silent

blessing the dead,  
carrying bunches of asters and roses  
in homage from the garden at home.

How we are leached by time,  
how the wonder drains from life  
through living  
is the unspoken testimonial of the dead.

Blessed are these dead,  
for here the firs and pines whisper in the sun,  
blessed are they,  
for here the lake-waters lap a peaceful shore.

So fortunate are they  
on this golden day  
of spring.

## **2. Documentary 1**

I was born in Bischofshofen,  
Bishop's Court, that is, Austria,  
in August nineteen-hundred and forty-three.  
Shortly my family moved to Taxenbach  
and then to Zell am See  
the village of my heart  
very near the Grossglockner  
and the majestic range of the high alps.

I remember the foreign occupying troops,  
the American G.I.'s walking the town  
which I considered home,  
with their clumsy generosity  
to children—candy, fruit,  
and gum—and the sheepish  
grins with which they  
approached the women.  
They had steak, and we polenta;  
they looked at us, I think,  
as a sort of white nigger,  
kindly for the most part,  
but condescending,  
these paternal victors  
who were uncle-tommed.

At home my mother would weep  
the nights and days  
out of countenance,  
the schizophrenic leer  
was etched on Christ's face  
in the smoke-stained corner  
of the kitchen, Christ  
so pale and frail  
in the shadows of the room.

My mother clung to me  
like a glacier witch  
with black disheveled hair,  
with deviled eyes glowing

in the darkness when  
they came to take her away:  
what words from her lips cut  
into my eyes  
what fear shattered my head  
when she crushed me to her heart  
in her unending frantic plea:  
*Eugen, bitte, bitte, lass sie nicht...!*  
Oh don't let them!  
the prayer gurgling from her throat  
like black blood:

I drowned in the words of hell  
in the sunshine of my childhood  
on the broken throne of my days

yet grew up somehow  
to live this circus show  
as best I could  
in and out of various cages of the soul.

What countries I have been—  
Austria, France, England,  
but chiefly U.S.A.—  
I have gone beyond  
so that I'm all of these and none,  
although the language of my heart  
has become for better or worse  
English.

## **Documentary 2**

After I almost committed suicide in Somerville success-  
fully half by design and half by accident  
the first thing I saw when  
I went outside was  
a Cadillac hearse driving by,  
and the second  
a huge rat sauntering  
self-assuredly across the road.  
He jumped up and watched me from a porch  
as I, incredulous, went by.  
Not wanting to be superstitious,  
but feeling rather odd  
I forced a laugh

and put it down  
to the quirky demonism  
of random circumstance.

### 3. Memorials

My childhood is a dark forest  
with occasional clearings of memory.  
Strange forms glide between the trees  
in the crepuscular light,  
stranger creatures yet avoid  
the beaten tracks of introspection.

Skiing through the quiet wood  
one Sunday afternoon in early spring  
alone, I paused  
and looked at the sunlight  
burnishing the deep green firs  
with golden lustre.  
It was very still,  
and the more I looked into the silence,  
the more silent it grew.  
The undertone of snow  
sifted by the breeze  
focused the silence,  
and confirmed what now  
I consciously know:

Nature, no matter how beautiful,  
is always another.  
It may tell us things, but  
on the whole we're strictly on our own  
and must make do with what we've got  
within.

Here in my hands a snapshot  
of you I took two summers ago  
on my last visit to Austria.  
Your face is pale  
and distorted with age prematurely.

It looks fissured with grief  
and weary of too many days.  
You suffered much, I know,  
but still your smile sometimes managed

to shine through  
the gloomy cave of your sorrow.

Those who do not suffer  
*sind gar keine Menschen,*  
gay bubbles suddenly pricked  
by death,  
while appalling sorrow fuses the soul  
into a fierce integrity forever.

Your face like a gnarled root  
Is its own testimony  
which the pellucid camera eye  
could do no more  
than simply record.

The furrows of your brow show so well  
the shadows of your cheek tell  
what these words cannot.

#### **4. Words**

Everybody's at them.  
Now the word is violated everywhere  
except in a few minds  
which hang in the balance isolated.

With Adolf Hitler the beast  
came back full strong again,  
tearing the flesh of language  
with its greedy fangs.  
Begin only by violating the word  
and you always end up  
by ravaging humanity.

The calculated passionate misuse of language  
is not merely a literary crime.  
In no time  
propaganda murders the mind  
and then the man.  
The beast, we know, will devour  
both word and man,  
but only through the subtle spell  
of the word may the beast



be charmed, turning to  
the tuneful harmony of numbers,

Prosper's airy song upon the waters.

### 5. Past Time

I can remember much,  
and much I have forgotten:

the bell-like gentian, bluest of blue,  
swaying in the wind high on a mountain slope

a drunken fool urinating on a wall  
with self-congratulatory laughter

the blooming heart of the alps  
where the sun sings all summer long  
freckling and fretting the glaciers away

gaudy inane tourists trooping the streets  
extensions of cameras and binoculars

the summer lake bordered  
for a five-year old by a jungle  
of reeds among which to dream  
the time away all alone

and my mother in the hospital  
in Salzburg  
so near yet so far  
the dreary endless wards like railroad tunnels

fish belly up polluting the shore  
*edelweiss* sealed in glass expensively  
for the city-folk  
fake crystal cages of mountainglory

breaking a leg the first time on skates...  
the *foehn*, lukewarm, roaring down the alps,  
fretting, irritable, from a vast distance  
to blast your cheek  
cable-cars suspended on silver threads

above seas of snow,  
glittering specks in the sun

Christ in the shadows

Children of the war,  
blighted in the seed of our youth  
by a world in whose making we had no say,  
still we were the sun's own ragged crew,  
hardly touched by the guilt and despair  
of foreign occupation which lay  
with the weight of death  
upon the grownups' nightmare world.

Our ignorance was our blessing  
in this lean decade  
of a crazy century.  
Hunger, what was not hunger  
that was not earth or sky  
or flashing lakeside green,  
that was not mother and father  
and way of the world?

These are things I partly remember  
and was told partly later,  
truths colored perhaps by fabulation.

Bartering with farmers:  
a cackling gaggle of geese  
in the mired farmyard  
crowding in on me and nibbling at my legs  
it seems with ferocious clacking  
and I cling to you in sheer terror.

The hearts of these farmers on their rocky  
mountain slopes were harder by far  
than the family jewels  
you brought for bread  
and eggs and butter,  
mother mine.

They gaged their greed  
according to our need,  
flint-dry, shrewd misers,  
peasant crafty, wizened.

Man lives not by bread alone,  
but without it  
sometimes he dies.

When the Americans came  
the soldiers requisitioned our home,  
and played with your prized sewing machine,  
and broke it, of course.  
You cried bitterly, for  
it was the last piece  
of complex regularity  
however paltry  
that finally went smash  
and no one knew  
how life would go on.

I was only two then,  
and do not remember  
except what you and Papa  
told me later.

*o now remember the dead*  
*who were once as you are now*  
*who are now as you will be*  
*in time*

## **Circles**

Standing on the edge  
of the seat of the outdoor  
toilet I looked down mesmerized  
into the black void  
reeling dizzily until  
you made a rush to grab me  
before I could fall.  
You beat me in hysteric fear.

Crossing a mountain brook  
on a narrow plank  
I fell in and this time  
Papa beat me in fear of heart  
gingerly.

Standing on the edge of the deep  
end of the Taxenbach swimming pool  
I stared into the water until

all swam before my eyes  
in concentric circles  
pulling me in to complete the pattern.  
I don't remember falling in,  
only being pulled out by  
my parents' friends whom  
I was with, and whose pale  
anxious faces greeted  
my eyes on reviving.

Having nearly drowned went beyond  
a beating: there was  
a silence in the house that evening,  
and a fretful sadness for me.

And at night the razor blades  
slashing into my pupils  
relentlessly,  
a demon fantasy;  
or me, on the borderline  
of waking and sleeping,  
growing instantly  
vastly tiny,  
shrinking more and more  
in an infinite plenitude  
of all-engulfing empty silent space.  
Revolving concentric circles in my mind  
and I was looking for the hole in space

to let myself fall through  
and be saved.  
from what?  
to what?

## **6. Recitative**

Now you are dead,  
mother mine,  
and have been in the ground  
for many turning seasons.  
I did not attend your funeral,  
but stood at your grave  
a month later  
alone and bowed  
listening to the late summer silence.

I am glad I missed the ceremony,  
for I would have spoken bitter words  
to wither the crow-priest's glib platitudes.  
Thank god with death it all ends somehow.

Who'd be so foolish to  
wish for the endless blight  
of unadulterated immortality?  
This immensity of greed  
needs metaphysical short-circuiting.

I recall your face frozen  
with the chill of hopeless  
doomed age where nothing  
can ever get better  
this side of the grave.

The trees and leaves and snows  
and flowers and clouds and birds  
and the sun tell us of the seasons  
of our lives,  
and all that we can know.

The mind must dance a duet  
with time,  
else wither or shatter  
in disconnection.  
The felt rhythms count  
for more than we can know.

With shame I remember my shame  
at your sickness, my searing shame  
at you, my mother,  
my self-distancing and exile,  
uprooted from the soil  
of human-heartedness.

Solitude is the consolation  
of an empty heart,  
the throne of pride,  
the atmosphere of sorrow,  
the alchemy of insight.  
Solitude, the curse and blessing  
of self-consciousness,  
I owe you good and bad;

I owe you words and thoughts,  
which are a kind of action  
and a kind of anguish.

When you died mother  
I rejoiced for you  
and was glad that  
you were set free at last  
from the unkindness that sets the tone  
in the world.  
Politicians, pimps and prostitutes  
of all feather  
flock together  
and always manage to get on  
at the expense of others,  
but the few good simple honest  
people everywhere  
o my do they suffer.

No words can say it,  
nor deeds undo.

You are free and unburdened now,  
those who cling to the surface  
of life like leeches  
never shall be,  
and in that too is a kind  
of consolation:  
greed always sets the tightest  
traps for itself.

Bitter benediction, bitter words, too harsh, too many.  
To begin and end in forgiveness is the spirit  
of the word. But bitter words must be spoken,  
without them no renewal is ever possible.  
But to be bitter ever after  
surely is a case fit for laughter.

#### Look to the Rose

To forgive oneself  
is to forget oneself  
and open to others.  
Look to the rose!

for Elsjø

It was all gold  
your hair  
it was all shining  
your body  
it was all aglow  
when the sun rose  
and entered through our window  
and when I entered you  
it was all rose blossoming  
it was all dawn.

Look to the rose!

the pointed fragile-sprouted blossom sides  
fanning out to form a crown of glory,  
sun-born in the rhythm that turns the tides

breaking on the weathered rocks, or rushing  
on, out-spent at last in sand-ribbed rivulets,  
unlike the late-summer rose, full-blushing,

brandished, rainbow-splendored,  
but chiefly lovely red:  
o in the beauty of the rose  
is the heart of all  
forgiveness and peace.

## **7. Benediction**

The truth of asters and roses rests on your grave tonight, the  
wind's in the trees,  
the clear stars overhead,  
forget-me-nots in the garden at home,  
the sound of lake-waters by the road,  
and peace in the heart.

Past and future are relative,  
the present touches eternity everywhere  
among the galaxies,  
the mind must a dance  
dance with time,  
the body bloom

and hug its life  
in an inspired breath.

Words my speak of this sometimes  
on festive occasions,  
but for the most part  
the mystery of tuning in  
to the turning years and seasons  
and the constellations of head and heart  
revolving forever fiery in space,  
infinite in and out breathing  
is hidden deep  
in the wellsprings of the heart.

O look  
look to the rose  
to the glimmering morning star  
to the setting sun  
bathed in blood over the mountain's head  
or suspended silently above the sea

in peace of heart look at these  
blessed scriptures of our human season,

time's flaming epitaph glossed  
in smiling breathless wonder:

blessed are the living,  
and blessed are the dead.



# Living In

living in a washing machine isn't easy.  
i prefer the frontal type,  
the ones with the spherical  
plexiglass doors where  
you're not quite so scrunched up  
and dropped in.

you've got a view of the world  
of sorts with nose and forehead  
pressed against the foggy tinted  
glass of the hatch  
the gums oozing lint

tumbled and whirling about  
sopping wet, suds draining  
from eyes and ears and  
the hair a stringy mess,  
like spilled spaghetti.

as long as the setting isn't "white"  
but "delicate" the living's manageable,  
though one is jostled to a frazzle  
and blind dizzy a good deal  
of the time.  
life, after all, is  
an endless alternating cycle.

on sunday mornings it can  
be quite idyllic there  
curled up in a daydream  
like some silly sailor  
in his hammock,

or a soapbubble suspended  
in the summer air until  
some blasted fool of a  
customer drops a quarter  
down the slot and

the water comes splashing in  
and dammit,  
the bubble's burst again.

# The Wheatland Diner

I'm just finishing lunch in this diner  
where I've eaten for the last three years  
when it suddenly begins to move.  
It lights out so damn fast that I spill  
my coffee, and by the time I get the mess  
cleaned off my lap, we're passing  
the town limits. A crowd of people  
cheers us on as we run a red light.  
Pretty soon we're whooshing through  
those wheatfields like a greased surf-  
board and the farmers are so open-  
mouthed their chewing tobacco  
plunks right out. Now it's near  
sunset and for Chrissake we're  
shooting through Death Valley and  
how in hell am I going to explain  
all this to the wife and the boss?

# Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Teddybear

1. teddybears make the best of friends  
because they never talk back and  
just ooze sympathy

2. i called in sick  
and said my teddybear  
would give the lecture

3. he did,  
refusing to participate  
in the questionandanswersession  
afterwards

4. cocktails have never  
agreed with him

5. he seduced the neighbor's cat  
who had an abortion  
not wishing to bear  
teddycats

6. his eyes glint  
in the corners of the room  
on moonlit nights

7. he sighs and searches for lint  
in his paws when it snows  
or i sneeze

8. he's allergic to ezra pound and jellybeans

9. if he refuses to go to  
the potty i tell him i'll replace  
him with a rocking horse  
or a parakeet

10. he doesn't like to go to the zoo  
because he's jealous of the  
tiger's and the zebra's stripes

11. i harangue him when i've had  
too much but he just sucks  
on his cloth teeth and stares  
into space in lotus position

12. he says he'll leave me if  
i don't stop writing about him

13. the rest is silence

# Strange Noises

strange noises split my skull.  
i'm at the bottom of a well.  
the stars are very far away.

faces of people that i know  
paper my walls grimace green,  
mirrors leer antiphonal.

i count the pulse that doesn't count.  
my arteries run riot, ravel,  
and wherever i go  
is where i'm not.

the red of the red of my blood  
reels in antipathy  
as the words parade on  
with craven majesty:

is the moon false or true,  
and what has the sun to say on its behalf?  
saturn interrogates its rings again,  
and wombats are all the rage this year  
in outer mongolia.

must i nod my own agreement?  
i demand it here and now,  
for god's sake, say yes, say yes.

the mind frets the strings  
of its experience  
with shrill monotony,  
i smash my aching head  
against the unseen bars

that thud like pillows and muffle  
the drum of my bruised self.  
deep down my heart  
the greedy bit takes, bites,  
gouges, growls, howls its victory

and searches fathoms further  
for some ultimate blowout strike.  
words are vultures.

the red of the red of my red,  
aghast, turns pale in protest,  
boils, boils, and froths to frenzy.

i'm at the bottom of the unheard well,  
the bucket's rusted out,  
the stars are very far away.

my head's had one too many,  
my best dreams have all declared  
bankruptcy and gone  
straight down to hell.

# On My Thirtieth Birthday

I sit and listen to the spaces  
in which people come and go

the sound of a car coughing up  
a bird startled into flight

a leaf falling in the void

a child crying out of nowhere

I live in the margins  
between word and sound and motion

for in these suspended spaces

I'm silently at home.

# letchworth park

i awoke at dawn and heard the green  
call of the wild wood sounding  
in my blood

it was good that i answered  
for there in the forest  
motionless i heard all  
the voices of the unseen  
birds among the branching  
trees interlacing my field  
of attention with their never  
ending joyful crying out

i felt once more the depth  
of my life that i'd nearly lost  
in the noisy prattle of my ever  
so selfimportant days

returning home for breakfast  
i even tasted what i ate  
and saw the yolk so yellow  
and egg sparkling white



# Planting

It's unromantic work this  
putting of seeds in the ground.  
The sun is behind my back,  
climbing down the shoulders  
of the rolling hills as it  
showers us in red. My neighbor  
hands me the packets,  
tells unpracticed me how far  
apart to space the seeds,  
and my clay-crusted hands  
hold I don't know what  
green shoots to be.  
The finger-digging is tricky  
too, for there are fragments  
of glass and rusted cans and  
wire lacing the ground: feckless  
tenants' remains who used the  
garden as a dump. Such minor  
hazards will repay us in long-  
evening August with sweet  
corn, huge squash gourds,  
cukes, plump tomatoes, beans,  
cauliflower whose moist lush  
taste will linger in our  
mouths through the mellow  
Indian summer and October  
with its fallow light at  
sunset after the days are  
shorter and work seems longer  
and more wearying. My back-bent  
garden task, though unidyllic,  
seems just the right thing to  
take in hand this late-May  
evening when thought seems  
out of place, and idling would  
be nothing more than idleness.  
It's good to touch the future  
even in the shale soil of this  
upstate farm whose poetry can  
wait for more privileged moments  
of sweet doing nothing.

My neighbor grins as he watches  
me finish the last palm-full,  
and hands me a hoe to smooth  
over the shallow furrows. I  
straighten my tired back and  
watch the bay horse behind  
the sagging fence watching me.  
He too must be hoping for just  
the right touch of rain to  
quicken ground and blood.

# December 25, 1974

1

i sailed beyond the tonnage of my days  
this fall striving to tell all:  
about shakespeare, for instance,  
about the romantic spirit, for instance,  
about myself, even.

2

reaching for the place of knowing  
beyond words.  
now it feels so good  
to be void.

3

the moccasined sky moves  
with tufted feet of wonder,  
but those lazy snowmuffs, the clouds,  
waddle at their own crazy pace.

4

yesterday on the lift i watched  
my dangling skitips bisecting the hill,  
sailing above trees and skiers  
and waiting to whoosh like hell.

5

in the plunging moment of snow  
my childhood flared  
as the poles marked off  
the whistling turns.

6

awoke today to a brilliant snowfall.  
now sudden gusts of wind shake the houses  
and the trees that shed white wraps

7

and now again it's just the glistening  
unmoving expanse of the valley  
in its bridal of fine-spun drifted snow.

8

handel on the stereo and then the stones,  
lemony light patches  
flecking the clouds

9

the moment of the mind's pulse  
and the december sun,  
windswept beacon of the sky's shrouded horizon  
watching for the new year

10

that janus season.

# New Year's Day Poem (1975)

loincloths wrapped around skeletons  
stare with pointed eyes,  
children's angular faces and empty bowls  
implore our sleepless nights.

on the launching pad of our benevolent plans  
justice fizzles out or topples down.  
and in the economy of nature  
it has always had  
a very low priority.

sheer numbers engulf  
our bloated apathy:  
so many then, so many now,  
and so many more in the next decade.

arm! arm! and steal a march on time  
for it is very late.  
what's to be done?  
the margin of survival grows constantly slimmer  
for those who flicker on our screen.

Dr. Kitter Witter my cat  
disdainfully sniffs  
the chewey t.v. wowie  
Superkan Katfood  
while the empty thirdworld bowls,  
grown gigantic, scream  
through hall after hall  
of abandoned hope  
and shattered innocence.

what's to be done? and what's to be done?  
the chorus of troubled conscience  
is by now a mere void of repetition.

the thought police will know  
lurking in the sinister recess  
of some dark political alley  
to waylay and rough us all up  
in the coming years

the thought police  
the uniformed but uninformed  
the wasted world, the ciphered ones  
in rigid hateful ranks,  
yes, the thought police will know  
in international networks of  
unending demotic gray.

and in a quieter, subtler place  
further along that unpaved way  
on the twentyfirst station of the cross  
inlaid with razor blades  
and etched with human blood  
some vast supercomputer whirs  
its spidery circuits  
bleeps a million lights

and boots up with a wonderful  
metaelectric appetite

to munch us all for breakfast.

# In King's College Library (Cambridge, June 1975)

Here behind an ancient cloistered window  
again after seven years  
surrounded by eons of ideas  
pressed in books that live  
in the mind  
I look out at a green  
expanse of sun-splayed  
manicured lawn and the  
ageless spires of King's  
Chapel and drink once  
more at the well of peace  
I am so sorely  
in need of.

They say all the cells of  
the body are renewed in a  
seven-year span: so I'm  
a new man, yet the core  
of the old lives here in  
my heart and in the gothic  
stones of King's and in  
the time-polished escritoire  
at which I dream and  
in the very grass.

This place is so much in  
my heart and ever fresh  
to me: slow turns about  
the Fellows' garden,  
the stained-glass oratory  
of the Chapel, the spiced  
ritual of the Hall and  
the arched rhythms of  
the mind sustained here  
in King's library on a  
clear sunshine morning.

It's good to be back,  
I said to myself when  
I saw the spires of  
King's two days ago:  
this June-bright day I  
know I've never been away.



# Purest Form

i live on the circumference now,  
refining the forms of my nonbeing.  
below huge floes of ice drift  
in the dark waters.

there's a column twelve thousand  
feet high. at the very peak  
i perch and survey  
the divine emptiness  
all around.

what a relief from plenitude.  
what a relief!

the air is cool.  
at night there's the glitter  
of the starred firmament,  
then the flamingo dawn flares,  
then the sun dips into darkness,  
spilling itself across the sky.

this is my rhythm now.  
living pure, or pure living  
on the circumference of  
my atmosphere, far above  
where the blood tides heave,  
the agony of mud, the lucre  
of inane doings, the pangs  
of ingrown greed, the perpetual  
blather of fools.

i live on the circumference now,  
serenely poised atop  
my crystal perch

waiting for some vast leap

when my parachutes will blossom  
with silent marvel  
at the utter emptiness  
that redeems the shrieking  
plenitude of teeming  
raucous life.

nothingness is purest form.

# The Sleep of Genius

is long as a frog's moment of terror  
before the snake's icy gaze  
and hot darting tongue.

long as a mummy's yawn  
behind the granite slabs  
of a museum that winds for  
thirty subterranean city blocks  
in daar el salaam.

long as a dinosaur's pinched ribs  
beneath thirty tons of shale  
in what was once a pharaoh's garden  
and now is an abandoned rollerderby  
rink that you drove thirty miles  
on a sleety road to find  
on a lonely saturday night  
in kansas for a blind date  
that never showed somehow.

long as the journey of a dime through an age of ultimate quiet.

long as a *llano estacada*  
without sun or wind  
when all the clocks have stopped  
and your dying breath won't  
tremble a single candle's  
flame and sand slowly  
fills your gasping mouth.

long as a hangover  
after three weeks of hard  
drinking when they are drilling  
the pavement for new pipes  
under your south philly  
bedroom window.

long as the hangman's frayed noose.

long as a silk curtain's rustle  
three miles down the waxed corridors  
of versailles palace at midnight  
in marie antoinette's bedroom that you  
alone the locked-in-for-the-weekend tourist  
can just hear as you pray for dawn  
with your hair  
standing on end.

long as a cat's nap  
in the outer fringes  
of the crab nebula

long as the knowing smirk  
of the mona lisa  
two days from now or  
sixteen centuries ago  
long as her salacious lashes  
or the landscape decomposing  
behind her shawl.

so long

is the sleep of genius

that

i can't

really

even

begin

to

# Saturday Morning

I'm waiting to play basketball  
at ten. It is now nine  
and I've filled my ball  
with fresh air (carefully  
having squeezed out the old  
which didn't give a proper  
bounce any more).

I will meditate for fifteen  
minutes, concentrating  
on the baskets in my head  
so that my outside shots  
will go swishing through.

Shortly before going down  
to the court I will run  
in place, jump and touch  
the ceiling a few times  
for good luck, do knee-bends,  
loosen up my arms, and think  
of positioning for  
the rebounds that are always  
just beyond my mind's reach.

Then I will sit perfectly still  
again for a few minutes  
savoring the dancing moments  
ahead that I've been waiting for  
all week behind the workdays' inane  
clamor of mere busy-ness.

At the age of thirty-two  
I am just learning  
how to play.

# Journeying

*“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita”*

1

At the age of thirty-three  
I feel that I am half-  
way through my life.

This could be a mistake,  
of course, because I may  
only live to forty-eight,  
or alternatively—who knows—  
get to be a hundred and two.

One thing is constant, though.  
I am still waiting for things  
to fall into place,  
for some sort of pattern  
of meaning to jell

or even (one learns to  
be satisfied with less)  
for a hint or pointer  
to emerge in barest  
outline, to whisper  
with half-bated breath  
the intimation of some  
fundamental indwelling  
significance.

Significance?

I know this sounds  
vague and foolish,  
but it's what I've  
always thirsted for  
as far back as memory  
will take me.

2

As a child I was chock-  
full of wonder in a world

of unmanageable possibilities.  
Anything could happen,  
and sometimes did.

The sun changed its place  
in the sky between naps;  
a friend was hurled across  
the road by a motorcycle  
that roared out of  
nowhere. Furling in a  
flag of blood, he was  
whisked by a fire  
engine to a hospital  
where he later gave an  
audience to his dumbfounded  
friends, bragging of  
multiple injuries.

The doctor had the only  
private car in town; its  
lush red leather upholstery  
smelled like roses and like  
old ladies' gloves. It made  
clouds of dust as it rattled  
down the road; it also made  
a noise like incessant  
farting. One lordly day  
I even got up the nerve to  
ask for a ride, which  
was granted. I had to  
walk for miles through  
the dust just to get  
back home, smelling  
like roses and like  
old ladies' gloves.

Anything:

In the springtime the hillside  
became a gurgling network of  
secret underground water conduits  
that we reworked into a system  
of elaborate dams and sluices.  
One night the moon disappeared  
altogether in a perfectly

clear sky. And the village  
priest got drunk and fell into  
the sewage tank that workmen  
had opened up. He emerged  
to general laughter, reeling  
ripe. And for no good reason  
a sister got married to an  
American G.I. and was spirited  
off to Philadelphia via  
Graz and Italy, waving from  
the window of an express  
train with the gestures  
of another world. *Auf  
wiedersehen*. Fare thee well.

And do they wear the same  
clothes in Philadelphia and  
go to school and church?  
Do they play soccer  
and ski in the winter?  
And does the sun shine  
there the same as here?

The first time I visited  
her in the States one of  
the first things I saw  
after baseball and Howard  
Johnson's ice cream was  
a big shiny black bug late  
one hot summer night that  
seemed to move more furiously  
than the Roadrunner in the  
cartoons. It was my first  
vision of the cockroach, which  
introduced new cataclysms into  
the world of my dreams. No  
insect should be allowed  
to move *that* fast.

3

In school I didn't understand  
many things the teachers tried  
to drill into our heads,  
like electricity:



I could use it, like  
everybody else, by  
flicking a switch,  
but where was its  
secret? The teachers and  
the books could explain  
up to a point how it  
worked, and why it got  
from here to there in  
a line, but nobody  
ever said a word about  
what it really was.  
I figured everybody  
knew but me, and that  
I didn't because I  
was just plain dumb.

I still don't know,  
though it took for me  
to become an adult to  
catch on that others  
don't know either,  
really, even those whom  
I still look up to as  
honest-a-god magicians,  
those lucky ones who  
can fix a t.v. in a jiffy  
or make a conked out car  
run again as smooth as butter.

There were so many things  
of which teachers and  
parents and even friends  
knew the how, but not  
the what. I was chiefly  
baffled by the latter,  
and still am at thirty-  
three. Goddammit anyway,  
what's the what of what,  
and why and wherefore  
are we?

And in school I never believed  
the catechism answers because  
they seemed so silly. Why

didn't Christ have any  
girlfriends? Why did our  
priest drink beer and play  
cards at the Gasthaus on summer  
Sunday afternoons? How come  
God threw Adam and Eve out  
of Paradise after they exercised  
their free will to his displeasure?  
How was it possible for the body  
to be resurrected after thousands  
of years of rotting in the ground  
and be reunited with the soul?  
Wasn't that a little much to  
ask of anybody to believe,  
even children? What did  
people do in Heaven except  
pray and go to church forever?  
If the Devil existed, how come  
nobody I knew had ever seen  
him, not even Otto, the village  
idiot? How come my father  
never went to church and groaned  
when my grandmother gave her last  
Schillings at Sunday collection?  
How come God let his only son  
be nailed up on a wooden cross  
by a bunch of beef-brained  
Roman soldiers? Why did people  
have to suffer? die? be born?  
Why did my grandmother scoff  
at the town's few Protestants  
as *the new heathens*?

4

I was sure that all those  
pressing what's and why's  
that I couldn't get to the  
bottom of as a child would appear  
as clear as sunlight to my  
mind's eye once I'd be a  
grownup. So I waited for  
that day of truth to dawn  
somewhere on the hazy horizon  
of the future. Even in my early

twenties I still believed a  
fundamental pattern of meaning  
would jell within a given  
number of years. Sounds  
fatuous, doesn't it?

Well, I'm still waiting for  
things to add up, and for  
the penny to drop, as they say,  
but with a good deal of raw  
perplexity now. Deep down  
I've come to fear there's  
no end in sight to my questioning,  
that nothing ever will come  
clear and plain as to those  
what's and why's, even  
the shape of my foolish life.

5

But then in another mood  
I know full well that if  
things suddenly did come  
together in a fixed network  
of final meanings, life  
could only become  
as dull as hell.

To define is to confine,  
and at best we want to live  
in a world of untrammelled  
possibilities. It's the boundless  
we go journeying after,  
for less than all cannot  
satisfy us thirsty pilgrims  
of the dusty road.

The center of my life,  
I realize now, has always  
been a peekaboo game of half-  
hidden meanings. To sound  
to the bottom of those  
ultimate why's and what's  
for which some ache and on  
occasion even die would

untune the strings of  
the mind's experience  
and short-circuit the  
performance in which we  
all have a part to play  
so long as we remain alive.

It isn't easy to remain alive.

As I approach the half-  
way point of my trek  
through time I begin  
to see that the last  
thing I hope I'll ever  
be able to find is  
the secret of what or why  
that I've been hunting for  
in my own haphazard and  
dilatatory way all these  
years. Any mystery that  
could be simply known—and  
god forbid—put into language  
(no matter how subtle) would  
trivialize the monstrous,  
ecstatic burden of our  
endless journeying, would  
revolt Job anew and return  
Lear anew to the boards with  
a magnificent barrage of  
protestation; yes, would  
dumbfound even Faust's  
impervious striving for  
the unattainable and make  
that Spanish Don give up  
his blessed foolishness.

6

So as I travel on  
toward the second  
half of my days here  
under the sun that shines  
on all of us in some measure  
I'm full glad to know  
that whatever goal consciousness

may signify is as undefined,  
boundless, wonder-full as  
the paths of the stars through  
the billennial skies of time  
and space, and that we are all  
of us single points of light (and  
some focused as intense as laser  
beams) signaling to the unknown  
within and without through a  
glittering universe awash  
with vast tides of  
omnivorous darkness.

And anyway, if you think  
about it, thirty-two isn't  
such a bad age to be trekking  
wide awake without a pocket  
map or compass pointing  
to fixed goals.

I'll just feel my way  
a step at a time as  
I go journeying on  
to where and what  
no one can say.

Maybe I'm even more  
choked up with wonder  
about it today than  
when I was just a boy  
aching for replies  
to my relentless  
what's and why's.

# Turnpike

My skin hums at eighty  
miles an hour.  
Tires sing and twang  
on the warm concrete.  
My sweaty palms have grown  
into the steering wheel.  
A fat bug splatters  
on the windshield.  
I pull out and pass  
a huge truck crawling  
up the grade.  
O shit! At the top  
of the hill a patrol  
car lurks in the grass  
divider. I hit the brakes  
before I shoot by him  
and swallow a heartbeat  
or two. I see in the rear-  
view mirror that he's still  
stationary on the grass.  
Close call! Down goes the  
accelerator, my eyes  
are reeling off the road,  
my shoulders hunched.  
I'm whipping along past  
eighty again as I feel  
the pavement in my fingers.  
I'm triggerhappy on  
the turnpike, running  
a quiet race with myself  
hour after hour. Any  
minute now a thunder-  
shower is going to burst.

# At Home

They squat in front of the tube  
in the livingroom and slurp  
canned beer by the gallon.

Outside it's 99% humid,  
in the kitchen the icebox  
purrs. The baby has wet  
itself again but will have  
to wait until the next  
commercial.

There are more riots in South  
Africa and hijackers are running  
amok everywhere. Undisturbed  
by the evening news  
grandma sits on the Sears  
sofa and knits a coffin  
out of violet silk.  
It is supposed to rain  
again tomorrow.

# Day's Done

These late summer evenings  
the haze rises off the land  
so heavy you can almost seize  
it with your hands. The fields  
are veiled and gauzed,  
mist shrouds trees and  
rows of corn, and the sun's  
a yellow-reddish suffusion  
above the raw horizon,  
waiting to drop down.

At night the sheets are  
soaked with the sweat  
of my free-floating fear  
that no fans can blow away.

Day's done again and  
the jittery wait for  
dawn mines the no-man's-land  
of my self with unstable  
deposits of nitroglycerin  
and I freeze to a scarecrow  
for hours on end.



# Marriage: Point Blank

Two mummies sit in the mausoleum  
of their livingroom and tear  
the winding cloth clean off  
each other's bones.

Furniture invested with eons of feeling  
gone stale looms colossal.  
He thinks of plunging into canyons.

She says she hopes there's a god  
who can see her hidden suffering:

He thinks, for god's sake, let's  
leave god out of this.  
The carcass of the past  
malingers on the carpet.  
Are these stains congealed blood  
or pus or lymph? And who's  
going to make it come clean?

She weeps tears bitter as gall  
and chokes on the fishbone  
of Married Bliss.

Tons of silence press down  
on his neck as he dives at  
the bottom of a black hole  
without a single ray of light,  
unable to surface or send  
a cipher to redeem his life.

The years hang in the balance,  
the scraps of their posthumous union,  
the husks of unlived experience  
and the overdigested emotions  
that ulcerate their very guts.

Shall they make a clean breast of it  
or a hash of leftovers  
and serve it at a mummy feast?  
She's pickled rosebuds in a mason jar  
and kept them on a cellar shelf.  
And he his Sunday feelings  
in the unfinished closet.

Neither dares blink or show  
a hint of pity. Into love's  
crocodile eye they stare

point blank.

Reader, say a prayer for them:  
these who once loved  
can now feel only

the pain.

# Diotima to Socrates

So Socrates the dialectician  
desires to be instructed in the wisdom  
of love by Diotima of Mantinea.  
Dialectics, Socrates, is an art  
that freezes up the blood, but  
I am a midwife who helps deliver  
the beautiful soul's progeny.

Well, then, Socrates, listen well and learn:  
love binds together men and gods, love  
goes between, love lives in the breath of  
poets, sages, priests; love, my friend, is  
the source of the true spiritual beside  
which all other arts are merely vulgar.  
Nature and man are forever laboring  
to give birth, o Socrates—procreation's  
always current—but the true poetry of  
the soul is the longing to be delivered  
of the beautiful, a diviner begetting  
than merely doing the bidding of the flesh,  
though that too can participate the divine.

Even vulgar arts like money-making,  
rhetoric, gymnastics can be based  
on a genuine desire for the good  
and the beautiful, but the usual  
course of these is to get side-tracked  
into mere vanity and self-preening.  
Love, in other words, is a thing of degrees,  
each of which is readily pervertible.  
The glorious moment of the flesh's flame when  
the beautiful in the male and the female  
meet in finest balance and are wholly  
consumed in one another's arms, this pitch  
of the body's and of nature's highest  
flight is easily reduced to mere  
lust for flesh, and from there, further debased  
into a slavish and most gross greed  
for things, the husks and dregs of what was once divine. So much  
for the corruption of the body's  
natural flame, that drugs and goads the world,

but that in its purer, nobler forms can  
make up the lesser dreams of true poets, lovers.

All love, Socrates, craves immortality,  
but the higher forms proceed only from  
pregnant souls, which birth conceptions  
of wisdom and virtue. These are mysteries  
accessible even to you, my friend,  
but there are yet higher, hidden ones which  
I cannot say if you will ever reach,  
or if you can mount aright the gradients  
of love. The way here is to begin with  
the cult of all beautiful forms, then  
to focus on a single one and to create  
from it fair thoughts in your mind, to fathom  
there the innate measure and mold of all,  
which breaks the passions' slavery to that  
one, and opens out our higher being to  
the love of the indwelling form in all.  
Now you are ready to perceive the naked  
splendor of the mind that dwarfs mere outward  
show, that animates any noble law,  
science, art; all measures of the mind that  
move like music, dance like the stars to the rhythm  
of the whole. Purged of all narrow vistas  
of the petty self, you now intuit a  
vast universe of harmony, you move to  
the threshold of a single science of  
beauty everywhere, the kingdom of the soul.

Thus love leads you toward the true end, which  
is the sudden sight of an unchanging,  
primordial order of beauty: there nothing  
waxes or wanes, grows or decays, but remains  
perdurable, intense, refulgent, pure  
like the completest crystal, ruby, pearl  
washed in an eternal wave of the sun's light.  
This, my dear Socrates, is the secret  
pinnacle of beauty, supreme, simple, tensed  
high above the mortal clouds and the dross  
of the foolish, the base, the greedy, the vain,  
the prattling herds who rush in their giddy rounds  
to gull one another in the swamps and  
deserts far, far below, where only  
the natural sun scalds their narrow skulls

and all pledge cheap anthems to the bloated  
goddess of mediocrity triumphant.  
But always a few simple, fated souls  
feel the force of that beautiful form  
in their minds, and love draws them on and up the  
long, laborious path that leads to that  
eternal pinnacle which, if achieved,  
consummates in perfect cosmic union  
the seeds of joy and beauty dwelling in  
the individual soul. Yet of the few  
who travel that narrow, treacherous path,  
o Socrates, only now and then one  
pushes on through to the peak, in spite  
of all danger, privation, unspeakable despair;  
and in that single soul's moment of triumph  
when it touches the top after monumental  
trials of endless effort and aspiration,  
man becomes god, and the divine fulfills itself.  
This, Socrates, is the perfect pitch of  
love that all desire craves, however  
blind or impure, for the godly substance  
within strives forever to complete, to  
express itself without, and although nearly  
all who aspire to perfection needs  
must fall short before the demands of the  
distant goal, those who reach the peak in some strange  
fashion do redeem the rest of us who don't.  
The only truly base are those who never  
strive, content to slumber in the mud,  
for mortal man, my dear Socrates, can  
become a friend of god and be immortal,  
after a fashion, by mounting upwards  
in the scale of love, which is also truth,  
wisdom, virtue, justice, beauty, more things  
all than may be said with words, even between  
the wise.

Hush, now, Socrates, and do not  
question with your clever tongue, but look  
within yourself for the glimmer of the truth  
that is forever beyond the reach of  
any dialectic.

# Ravings of a Mad Dog Poet

I have been as crazy as a mudturtle in a monsoon  
yet thought dazzling thoughts that could wrench  
the continents into new drifts.

I have been as ungracious as a mad dog to good friends,  
I have been as polite as a trained seal  
to the people I despise the most.

I have raged and cursed the fallow dawn,  
chewing my pillow to a cud.  
I have also heard the voices of divinity  
in the first shaft of dawn's  
breaking light.

The Great Wall of China is but an inch  
in the longitude of my dreams  
but I don't have the courage of even one  
and dare less in a decade than I dream  
in the journeys of a momentous night.

I have hated myself, loved  
myself, looked up, looked down,  
looked right through  
my simple self.  
There in my most secret soul  
I have even learned to fear myself,  
which is perhaps the most important.

I've been a strong hater all my days  
giving heart and soul to it.  
Don't show me people who can't hate  
because they ain't.  
Those who turn the other cheek too long  
will end up permanently kissing  
their own ass.

My diffidence is only matched by my pride.  
Sometimes I'd like to kill all the people  
who spout the slogans of the day,  
and sometimes I'd just like to kill myself.

Sometimes I'm plug-ugly and scare  
the crow on the tattered fence,  
and sometimes Robert Redford's just  
a malignant turbaned Hollywood turkey

next to me.

I have been as strong in my ignorance and vanity  
as a skunk.

I am so full of self-contradictions that my soul is at least  
a thousand and one.

I wouldn't want to give up a single one  
even though I see most people don't  
have the honesty of facing up to even  
a paltry begging morsel of one.

I can go from one to a thousand and one  
and all the way back  
in a split second

and never even blink.

# Help

A young skater has broken  
through the ice toward the middle  
of the pond. As she  
keeps trying to pull herself  
out of the water, the firm  
ice keeps breaking off under  
her numbed, grasping hands.

How cold she must be what with  
windchill factor and the failing  
light of the late  
winter afternoon.

Desperately she calls and calls  
for help as she keeps  
grabbing for more ice  
to save her.

Someone toss her a rope!  
throw her a ladder!

But whatever you do  
for god's sake don't  
try and walk over and  
haul her out  
because as you draw  
close the ice will surely  
give and the two of you  
will touch in the choppy  
waters of your meeting

only to drown.



# Somewhere

Somewhere deep in the hold  
of the luxury liner there is a  
hole no bigger than  
an egg where the water  
pours in incessantly.

The Captain can't be held  
accountable, but the hole  
is there nevertheless.  
The liner is so vast  
it could take thousands  
of years for it to sink  
with all its passengers  
and crew swarming up  
on the decks.

But the second waits,  
with eagle eyes it keeps  
a sharp lookout for  
the moment of disaster.

Where is the hole?  
Where is the Captain?  
He who could sound to  
the bottom of this affair  
would be a life-saver  
for sure.

Somewhere deep in the hold...

# After the Concert

I'm the man who folds all  
the chairs after the summer  
evening concerts  
on the lawn.

If the heavens are webbed  
with black I don't  
touch where owls or  
bats perch  
but move  
from row to row  
like a somnambulist,  
harvesting crumpled  
programs, a grumpy bar  
of Brahms, ringing  
Wagner leitmotifs ditched  
behind a concrete post,  
a few Strauss notes still  
cavorting among the rose  
creepers, a half-empty  
beer can on the lawn.

After the furthest voices  
have faded in the distant  
parking lot, the gallery  
of switched off stage  
lights pings out traces  
of heat as it restores  
the equilibrium of the  
spent evening.

Great white-winged moths,  
fried half to ecstasy by  
the brilliant fire of the  
stars, twitch numbly  
on the gravel.

As the bulging ship  
of the moon sails through  
staggered canyons  
of clouds I count  
ticket stubs and  
watch the dumb death  
dance of the moths.

# A Little Fire in a Wild Field

The vast fires of the stars are stoked  
in billion year cycles, but I will try  
what a small fire in a wild field yields.

My master unbuttons in a naughty  
night to swim in. Wild geese do not fly  
that way, where men contend with stars and rage.

And I for sorrow sung that great fires  
burn unchecked, anneal, destroy the day  
to the bone. Little fires fuel the mind.

A dog must to kennel in the rain, but  
I will start a little fire in a wild field.  
Great wheels crash down the hill; the fool will stay.

*From*

# Paralogues

*(ca. 1977-1979)*  
*there are monologues*  
*and there are dialogues*  
*but these are mostly*  
*paralogues*



# Dorothy to William at Alfoxden

Well, there I was at the breakfast  
table clearing away the dishes when  
my brother William called out

“Dorothy, it is the first mild day of March;  
Each minute sweeter than before,  
The redbreast sings from the tall larch  
That stands beside our door.

My sister! (’tis a wish of mine)  
Now that our morning meal is done,  
Make haste, your morning task resign;  
Come forth and feel the sun.

Edward will come with you;—and, pray,  
Put on with speed your woodland dress;  
And bring no book: for this one day  
We’ll give to idleness.”

He always was the sweetest rhymers,  
that darling poet brother of mine.  
Anyway, my woodland dress was in  
a laundry tub, and little Edward  
was sulking because I’d caught  
him in the pantry with his fingers  
in the raspberry preserve, and I  
had to play taps on his hindquarters  
to remind him not to forget himself  
like that again. So he wasn’t at  
all in the mood for taking in the  
first sweet minutes of March just  
then. And as for me, well, William  
had dictated a whole sheaf of lyrical  
ballads the day before—expostulations  
and replies, and tables turned, and  
anecdotes for fathers, and lots of  
lines written in early spring—and  
I still had to copy them after break-  
fast and the dishes.

I'm always Dorothy, his little sister,  
secretary and housekeeper. I do keep  
a journal, though. Be that as it may,  
I still had all this lyrical copying  
to catch up on, so I just called back,  
"Dearest William, you go on ahead and  
feel the sun; enjoy the blessed  
power that rolls about, below, above;  
I'm too busy just now making clean  
copy of your spontaneous overflows  
from yesterday. So run along, dear  
brother, and drink the spirit of the  
season, while I trim a new goose-  
quill and set to work."



# Demon

the demon stalks,  
i shut my eyes,  
the image stays.

long hair trails  
the afternoon,  
black, blond, red, brown

strands exacerbate  
the mind's pulse  
to fevered pitch.

what have i done  
*this* to deserve?  
why do all other

forms dematerialize  
before such pure  
sufferance of

iridescent beauty:  
rise and fall of  
breasts, sway of

thigh, curve of  
back, for god's sake,  
even turn of

ankle! why this  
burden, weave, burn  
of speechless craving,

wordless wonder  
so dumb-struck  
with demon forms

that never stay  
the mind's pause,  
stanch the flame?

# Hungry Eyes

the hungry eye bleeds the world  
thirsting for the forms  
it contains.  
desperado cockroach skittering  
across the surface of a ground  
always in retreat,  
vampire prince in exile  
seeking to render all  
that elusive latency  
a radiant presence  
in the pulsing  
here and now.

Voyeur prism, all-  
hungry globes to swallow  
the globe, incorporate  
the banded flesh,

your unstilled longing  
for form upon form  
deconstructs, scatters  
the self, bonds its  
movement to a further  
movement:

craven eros  
where harbors  
your home?

what place can sustain  
what vehicle contain  
your frozen motility?

what irrefrangible flight  
loft you to some still point  
to anneal your  
hypertrophied need?

as eyes bleed  
only the silence speaks

# Television

Pellucid center of the world you claim  
to scan, cool bright eye, clear lens of a stage  
you set as much as mirror, what bold train  
of thought could undo the myth of the age  
you have mastered with such a subtle spell?  
So crude and crass, so very quiet and well  
reticulated with fiction the sheer fact  
that your bought retina projects life forms  
you lie to reflect in an unseen pact  
between the viewers and the viewed. So norms  
of a seeing we have made ourselves are  
taken for the iron rules of some fate  
apart from us; and scope, range, limit, bar  
of what we're made to see, we see as innate.

# Heidegger's *die Sprache spricht*

as if we were in need!  
no record needs the day  
of how it was spent  
when the voice finds  
itself, no calendars  
of before or after.

*die Sprache spricht:*

creatures of difference,  
bread and wine born  
between earth and sun,  
tolling that silence:

words speak.

as if we were in need  
of more or less  
when the word bears  
the bread and wine,  
still syntax of  
the living air.

as if we were in need  
when voices vowel  
the day, as if we  
were in need when  
need itself  
finds a voice.

# Syllables

billboards syllable the night,  
elongate its silence.  
a crack widens as it is crossed.  
the hand of a friend  
clenches to a fist.  
the noise behind the screen  
of noises jells to a massive  
statue that governs the  
annealed foreground.

the ringing of a bell  
slides ten years back,  
fifteen, across the hard  
surface of time,  
and everything is  
and is not  
the same.

the stones of buildings  
or brooks burden the  
moment because their  
epic vocables cannot  
be voiced by any tongue.  
the mouth can't shape  
their substance into human  
forms, nor the mind  
bear their bulk

although teeth flash  
in different rooms  
behind caviar and  
crackers as the void  
syllables drool down  
the sides of cocktail  
glasses in bejeweled,  
ringed hands that cast  
skewed shadows into the  
spaces between all the  
words that have ever  
been vocalized.

# Burial Grounds

there surely are too many teeth,  
and libraries the graveyards  
of teeth. some ivory even on  
those polished shelves,  
so that the boards bend  
beneath their gathered  
mass seeking to sink  
back into the earth  
and become like those  
elephant burial grounds  
in India that we read  
about as children.  
and then somewhere in  
the thousand-year future  
some exotic ivory-hunter-  
museum-curator will come  
with a vast paraphernalia  
and dig up all that hidden  
wealth and stuff it into  
lucid cases with learned  
labels as ladders to a  
forbidden past,  
moving his teeth,  
  
moving his teeth.

# Blackout (NYC, July 14, 1977)

when the light  
failing to gather  
decenters itself

the dark is on the make:  
into buildings,  
down subways,  
through our mouths  
and eyes.

denuded parking lots  
lour, advertising signs  
shroud the evening in  
mute embarrassment.

bereft of the cover  
of light the true  
shapes of the city  
spring into action:

the violator fuels his  
torch, shows his erection  
to the secretary cowering  
behind her tinted curls:  
she only senses  
what's *there* for her.

the professor is blind  
before his text in the tomb  
of the auditorium,  
and his mike, like  
the priest's, announcer's,  
geek's won't cut  
the silence.

the avenues and back  
alleys have a life of  
their own as the police  
and the policed confound  
themselves under the bright  
arcs of floodlights  
rushed to location  
without any script.

the shape of city is  
the crouched beast of  
the dark which the fled  
light would tremble  
to deliver.



# Don Jose

Don Jose rides the level  
sands on his stoic  
dromedary, not looking  
before or after.  
what would be the point,  
after all, of such  
vantages. the sun,  
a giant squid, hugs  
the horizon for  
which he heads. he  
meets a woman by a  
tent whose waveblack  
hair shrouds the sands.  
she cries, "I burn! I  
burn!" so she burns,  
he thinks, she'll always  
burn. so much for her,  
he reflects to the  
placid rhythm of his  
desert horse as he  
keeps crossing to the  
line of the horizon.  
one by one his tracks  
melt in the sand as  
that odd woman moans  
through the tent of  
her hair as if it could  
make a difference.

# Shadow

Shadow came,  
Shadow said,  
“man o man  
you dead.”

I gulped, goggle-eyed,  
and turned my head away.

Shadow came,  
Shadow soughed,  
“I am the voice  
of the far-down  
earth, arteries of  
coal and diamond,  
oil-charged aortas  
under desert dunes,  
muscles of mineral,  
volcanic bowel  
rumblings; my granite  
nerves measure the  
globe where no  
sweating miner’s  
lamp has ever  
probed, no rig’s  
bit; fire-tongues  
of the liquid core  
below the cooling  
tides, streams,  
lakes, I am.

My throat holloes  
far, swags your  
neutral trim with  
lava bursts,

I am the Shadow man  
of rock bottom,  
toursured with wide  
rivers of scorching  
light, hear my  
heart's sheer clarion  
or feel the desert  
sun strip the flesh  
from your bones,  
faltering headman you,  
more fool than fool.”

Goggle-eyed I gulped  
like a flounder on  
parched ground and  
turned—o grief to  
say—my gills aside.

# Souls of Light

I have seen, been, done,  
felt many things over  
the years, but last night  
lying in your arms for  
the third time that day  
every movement was the  
thing itself, every touch  
a final coming home:

O Elsje Elsje lying in  
your arms such tenderness  
I never knew there was.

What two souls of light  
could do through all that  
dark was within easy  
reach of quiet hands,

and did we ever sail so  
smooth under a milkmoon  
sky on that shoreless sea  
spellbound through the night.

# Cross Country

*“Inmitten des Seienden im Ganzen wost eine  
offene Stelle. Eine Lichtung ist. Sie ist, vom Seienden  
her gedacht, seiender als das Seiende.” –Heidegger*

So quiet blazing white a day I have not seen.

When one pushes the heels firmly  
down the wax particles on the ski  
surface lock onto the snow crystals  
firm enough to make a sort of  
launching pad for the skis

the manual explained.

After our halting beginners’  
efforts we achieve an extended  
push and glide rhythm,  
loping with cinematic ease  
through acres of white.

Our thoughts too get a sort  
of purchase on this land,  
grip steady enough to push  
off and move swift,  
silent, clear.

To and through the woods,  
and then a wind-  
swept clearing.

A German philosopher said  
that poetry too is a kind  
of clearing (his name an  
omelet of heather and eggs),  
Teutonic sage rapt with  
abstractions that accumulate  
like snow.

You drift in your full-down  
parka over the snowfield  
like a blue swan on a frothing  
tide, azure Elsje luminous  
above the endless white.

You glide back home,  
I push on into the orange  
feathered dusk.

Shotgun reports of far-  
off hunters I never  
see go: pop, pop, pop.

Two dogs stationary in  
a field I pole into,  
one brindled, one big  
black with spiked  
collar and sparkling  
teeth, make my heart  
take a turn. As they  
begin to lumber along  
a row of trees at the  
border of the field,  
suddenly some large  
brown game bird explodes  
skyward out of the branches  
as the dogs and I stop  
dead in our tracks:  
flip flop, flip flop  
goes my heart.

Dogs and bird are gone  
and in the aftersilence  
the grip of my hands on  
the ski poles eases as  
the image of a belly-  
speared hound slips  
out of my mind.

Under the sickled skylamp and  
the first diamond stars high  
up, before the full rush of  
dark, I stand in a pale wash  
of light at the top of a  
hill in an eerie clearing,  
eying the shadows of the snow-  
draped bushes, the far-away  
village lights sprinkled  
against a crimson horizon,

glittering necklace  
of the coming night.

I gather my thoughts to shoot  
down the hill on target for  
the bull's eye of a trail  
opening into the woods. Twice  
I take a wild spill because  
I can't make out the mouth  
of the tunnel as I speed  
closer, tumbling over and  
over in a delicious failure  
of nerve. The third time,  
right on course, I plunge  
into the dark heart of the  
wood effortlessly as occasional  
branch-tips whip the top of  
my head. Once there, I  
let myself fall on my  
back, having achieved  
the day.

On the way back to the farm  
looming large now in the waning  
light I stop and watch a burst of  
wind sweep a thin current of  
granulated snow with tremendous  
velocity over patches of  
perfectly polished lustrous ice  
(proud salvers of the winter air)  
and gust wildly up the valley's  
tree and bush-dotted slope  
wrenching from its mastered  
irregular shapes noises no  
words could hope to match,  
material syllables of the  
frozen ground blasted sky-  
ward with stunning force,

bullied voices of the wood,  
throat-wails, ice horns, stone  
reggae, bitter stubble whistlings,  
fluted wind zingers, sheer  
ice shrieks, earth words

as odd and old as  
these my thoughts.

things thoughts sounds words

merge and settle for a second  
on the screen of consciousness

and then go poof

like the fir-topping of fine  
powder snow exploded by the  
bushy touch of a doe's tail  
bounding by underneath,  
and the flying moment of snow  
settles down and jells  
into a quiet blazing white.

These fields, slopes and woods  
we crossed today in full winter  
will never yield our tracks  
even to the moist heat of mid-  
July, nor our lives their  
crystal instants beyond  
reckoning, forever formed  
and found anew.

So full and white a day I have not been.



# Paralogue

After working your way  
down ill-lit corridors  
that make the Pentagon seem  
a cinch, you've come at last  
to an off-white rectangular

room, unfurnished, windowless,  
no pictures, chairs, no door save  
the one you just blundered through.

White light so bright it blinds  
your eyes suddenly floods the room.

To turn back now would seem  
beside the point: the very  
thought of retracing your steps  
gives you the creeps. No place  
to go, and you know that you can't  
hang out in this empty space  
forever. So where to now,  
you clever young spelunker?

Why has the cat got your tongue  
just as that pool of white light  
drains inch by inch through the floor?

# Dream Log 1

A group of people in a decorous *salon*, familiar yet strangers. A large bluegreenyellowbrown globe in a corner. Eddying currents of afterdinner conversation. A very selfassured boy—strong, handsome, about ten or twelve—is telling me with much energy, enthusiasm, and a wealth of detail, about the geographic features of the different continents. I, who have always been absurdly ignorant in geography, listen, impressed, delighted, amazed, and inquire: “did you learn all that in school?” “No,” he exclaims contemptuously, as if school were a haven for the stupid. “Are you kidding?” interjects a refined looking *grande dame*, who I didn’t know had been eavesdropping, “he learns all that strictly on his own, they don’t teach them *anything* in school.” True, true, there’s no denying that school today is pitched at the lowest common denominator, and never at the gifted, I reflect. And suddenly I feel much concern for this clever, precocious child, for his inquisitive intelligence, his bright learnedness, and I am thinking of a diplomatic, non-condescending way of warning him that much intelligence will bring him much suffering as a grownup; to rein in his brains by all means before it is too late and the harm is done—at least to keep his knowledge to himself, because the ordinary detest nothing as much as learning. Just as I am ready to speak, people rush to the window because there is some sort of commotion outside. Curious, I make my way there too, and see on the street below a motley troupe of entertainers making friendly, ritual gestures of greeting and invitation to some sort of show. Suddenly I get it: the circus is in town! The advance party bows, they do tricks, there are bright reds, yellows, blues, the whites of clowns’ faces, balloons floating to the sky. I am particularly amused by a redvested trick rider prancing on his trained Lippizaner whose hooves keep sliding on the slippery pavement, yet who always manages to maintain his precarious balance. At the end of this little performance the troupe bows, and in departing deposits presents on the sidewalk, including a fancy and expensivelooking bottle of liqueur which everybody in the room seems to have their eyes on, just waiting for the act to leave so they can rush down and be the lucky one to carry off the prize. Just then a wonderfully tall circus giraffe and a bulky elephant appear on the street. The giraffe bends down its endless neck, and with great verve, picks up the bottle and straightens out its neck again—its head is now at the level of our secondfloor window! The elephant is visibly jealous; he wants the bottle too; he lumbers over to the giraffe; his

vast trunk stretches all the way to the giraffe's distant mouth and nimbly snatches the bottle out of it, clutching it with a tremendous elephantine smirk. What huge grey greed! I'm at once delighted and nonplussed, and wake to the noise of my own silly laughter, a bright wash of colors still jangling in my head, sounds jingling in my ears. And—strange to say—yawning lazily and rubbing my eyes, I feel as fresh and as bright as the dawn.

## Dream Log 2

The bluegreen lake at Zell am See, emerald  
in the setting of my senses, childhood's  
undimmed jewel. But on the narrow shore bold

housing starts sunder water from the woods  
climbing sheer up the mountain slopes. I shudder  
to see the wide scar of a road winding toward

bare summits lost in haze. I climb on up  
past what was once all wild, shun a boat shop,  
a service station a mile later, tap

my head in disbelief as a bold claque  
of trailbikes goes stuttering by, speechless  
I am, far past grief or hope. Turning back

I see David Caspar Friedrich forest  
kings stretch their green gothic limbs right up to  
the sky. My eyes travel up trunks that attest

huge force. Sudden I am lifted, hurtled  
higher than trees, mountain peaks, clouds, mist,  
to a sheer skyblue expanse of light. Startled,

I find myself gazing down at a glass  
box, a sort of crystal display case  
at whose center rests an open book I face

with wide open eyes, spelled way beyond (what  
I ever was, am, might be) by big, bold-  
face type, black marks on white. Strange script

fixed beyond the dance of life  
invites me: so clear, crisp and bright  
those simple letters printed on the page.

# Perhaps

Have you ever sensed the light  
ice crystals of empty silent  
space course through the stream  
of your blood for an incalculable  
duration between one heartbeat  
and the next? Have you ever  
heard the firm tent of the firmament  
tear and shred, and glimpsed what  
is beyond to appall your glib  
mouth? The sky unseamed and no  
way to word to void interstices  
across which the mind forever  
shuttles? Have you ever in a  
frozen splitsecond of nonbeing  
sensed that the sound of a needle  
dropping into a glass of water  
in Afghanistan would set you  
off on a triumphant pilgrimage?  
Perhaps you're ready then  
to get to a beginning.  
Perhaps you even can.

# Paraline

I am riding the line of the horizon now  
close behind my shadow which I chase  
and flee. The fleet-hooved stallion  
knows that shifting line, and keeps us  
right on target, moving as it moves.

If I can keep us on this line  
I need not look before or after  
but gallop wind-free with the velocity  
of dreams. No idle noises now,  
only the scritch of rocks at noon,  
the taut reins hissing in the wake  
of the sun, the flashing hooves  
playing out the centered line  
through earth, water, air and fire.  
The stables never asked us when  
we left what we meant to do  
nor where we thought to go.

# November Moon in Bloomington

Like a blank frozen syllable  
you lurk in the sky  
too remote from me  
and unapproachable through  
any ladder of thought.

Paleyellow Novembermoon,  
shrouded Turnersun, so unconscionably  
other, more sunk into yourself  
than Northland Friedrich could  
ever unfold with visionary  
dreaminess of color, brute

midwestern moon, so unsayably different  
from what we ever are,  
unendingly thin cipher  
your blank syllables shatter  
the vessel of my spirit  
into tenthousand arctic smithereens  
and there's not the prayer of  
a word that could merge them again

you skysail so full of silver so far  
up there, incalculable point, so  
charged yet void that I could bite  
my tongue to pieces to speak

you, wretched moon, frigid old  
vagabond of the long winternights  
that move through the soul like  
unending freighttrains of the dark,

you inhuman sliver, you unknowable  
you which makes me shiver.

# Never Quite

She found her way to many men's arms but none of them ever found her. She forgot that she had failed the history of tenderness, so that all these moments were the rehearsals of unfeeling, the void *frisson* that never quite... what? True, she felt, but these feelings were never quite *the* feeling, so that always in the after she knew herself somehow betrayed like all those times before. She didn't burst into any new seas, and her many lovers found no green continents of joy but gasped like drydocked sharks in the nets of their numbed senses. Her fingers played no such songs of flesh as could balance a star, and what hands touched her keys only brought forth a dwindling repertoire of off-key tunes. And every spring such a bright rush of flowers and blue light to pain her wide-open eyes and appall her hungry heart.



# Miraculous Escape

Why did the rotund husband  
as he came home drunk one  
night to the big stone house  
on the Chemin des Poiriers  
overlooking Champagne sur Seine  
enter by way of the cellar stairs?  
And why did he fall right down  
a deep well smack in the center  
of the basement that wasn't  
there the day before and that  
was never again seen after  
that night? And why was he  
able to make such a tremendous  
ruckus so far down the wellshaft  
as to wake all the sleepers  
in that huge house so that  
they all rushed right down  
to the cellar and managed  
somehow to extract him from  
the mysterious well in which  
he was so solidly sandwiched?  
And why didn't he have even  
a scratch on him as he emerged  
clamoring at a great rate about  
the outrage and indignity of  
falling down a sudden well in  
his own house in the middle of  
the night? And how did such  
tragedy averted turn into a farce?

Surely the answers to these questions  
are as important as to any  
that could be asked.

# Luther's Blues

*(for Luther Allison at the Bluebird,  
Bloomington, Indiana, December 8, 1978)*

Blue haze, red ceiling lamps, a float  
of raised faces on a sea of shadows,  
scent of booze, grass, flesh. Swatches  
of talk turn to glad whoops, moans, whistles,  
yells as Luther and his band launch  
off into their set. How the frantic bursts  
and shrieks of the elongated notes ease my  
deepdown ache, ill will so rampant that I  
can't begin to utter it. Luther plays that raucous  
electric bluesguitar like it's a part of his own  
body. Wailing bloodbeat, soulwoe overflow  
the dayworld barriers that keep us all apart.  
The pulse of time becomes a space in which  
audience and band are one, where sound is as  
material as a pitcher of water, a piece of  
driftwood, these swaying breasts of a denim-  
shirted teendancer. I feel it in the blood now  
that music makes good will as Luther wildly  
works the wailing strings like a lover  
disclosing perfected passion. The ecstatic  
touch that banishes before and after is upon  
us with its mastery and we are sung beyond  
ourselves to a place that opens only after  
years of deepdown devotion to the demands  
of an art where that which is distinctively  
human can emerge spontaneously, as if  
by accident, for the first time here and  
now, and always when true music  
sounds the soul.

# Young Heine Calls on Old Goethe in Weimar

When still green in years, a mere  
stripling of Apollo's art, cheer-  
ful and bold I footed it to  
Weimar in Saxony, through  
an August countryside, to gaze  
on Goethe reign above the haze  
of summer in Olympian calm.  
The dusty banks offered balm  
in the shape of juicy plums  
which I relished. Many suns  
in the firmament of literary  
fame had paled before my contrary  
gaze, but this god dazzled me to a dot,  
for Goethe shone above the lot  
of lesser fry who claw and scratch,  
connive, intrigue, and hatch  
plots on the lower slopes of Parnassus  
like bugs stuck in thick molasses.  
His outward figure matched the form  
of his mind; calm, to greatness born  
the clear gaze of his eagle eye;  
in accord with earth and sky  
his firm and noble bearing, unmarred  
by low humility, the reward  
of worm-like Christian piety  
which with a surplus of sobriety  
clogs our cheerless latter day.  
But before I go astray  
and preach or whine, let me  
get back to Goethe: so free  
his face, and yet his stature grew  
when he spoke, and when to you  
he'd stretch out his hand it was  
as if his index could give laws  
of motion to the pathless stars,  
and his smile stop Titans' wars.  
Supreme like Jupiter, father  
of gods, he stood, why bother  
to tell you of his eagle and

the bunch of lightning in his hand?  
I thought to address him in Greek,  
but before my simple and weak  
phrases could be turned I guessed  
that he spoke German. The rest  
was youthful folly: in my awe  
I could hardly move my jaw  
but stammered that the plums I ate  
between Jena and Weimar were first-rate.  
Many a long drear winter night  
I'd dreamed under the moonlight  
about the sublime, profound  
and clever things I'd say to astound  
the famed sage when I'd meet him.  
And when finally my fond whim  
came true I could only bleat  
that the Saxon plums taste sweet!  
But Goethe smiled. He smiled  
with the very same lips that beguiled  
Europa, Semele, the Danae, not to mention  
ordinary nymphs who caught his passing attention.  
Goethe died March 22 of last year.  
*Les dieux s'en vont*: only Europe's kings are still  
here.

*from*

# Alcatraz of Hope

*(ca. 1980-1981)*



# Strand of Hair

Once in the back of an old classroom  
I saw how a single strand  
on a full head of black hair  
canceled out a lifelong dream  
as if it had never been.  
I sat in my chair  
in great despair  
and watched my world  
founder on a thread  
as thin as air.  
That was years ago.  
I've traveled everywhere  
through a world of hair  
but still in my mind I'm  
frozen to that chair  
like he who made man  
was chained to his rock.  
You might say a single  
thread gave me a lifelong  
shock. And though my heart  
beats and I do what I can  
to shuffle through my days  
a single black hair  
will never let me be.  
Though friends give me a hand  
I no longer know who I am,  
nor where.

# Lazarus

When the words of that strange  
preaching man called him back  
from his untroubled sleep  
the sudden light blinded  
his eyes as he staggered from  
the grave, trailing bands of  
white linen between his wilted  
hands. Pale like his shroud,  
he wished for the silence of  
the ground betrayed by the voice  
that exposed him to crude day.  
But then his squinting eyes  
fell upon a Magdalene standing  
by the bearded Judean's side,  
and again he saw the thick  
locks of black hair snake  
down past the full curve  
of the thigh, felt the shape  
of breasts, savored a whiff  
of honey or senna. As his  
dead rod rose to the pulse  
of desire he was almost  
reconciled to his new-found  
breath. And he pitied  
the speaker who had the power  
to recover others' lives yet  
knew nothing of this in  
his own. And Lazarus walked  
right past Christ  
in bliss.



# Foundering

We build up an habitual hebetude,  
clothe ourselves from naked life  
for whole decades on end until some  
odd alarm of first spring, a sudden  
quirk, a soundless blow sledge-  
hammers us to smithereens:

the fleeting touch of a hand,  
for instance, or the way a pink  
tongue will suck across a row  
of teeth, or the brute  
locking of thighs.

The hurt of being thus fractured  
is a birth pang, as if  
we need to be broken down  
to grow again,  
manured by pain and joy.

Ever so sudden today I was  
sped in a yellow butterfly van  
across a velvet plain

then sang in a Pacific of  
anemone hair like a school  
of ecstatic dolphins

then fisted the thick white  
mists of the sky as a sceptered  
thing of the clouds

and then again sat on my worn  
sofa in this too dull and proper  
room and in the mirror watched

a tear wash my cheek,  
flotsam bead of my foundering

on this monster reef  
which breaks and breaks  
and makes me whole.

# Night Noise

All through the night we can hear  
the huge roar and whine  
of straining engines, and  
in the lulls the backup  
beepers of construction trucks.  
Even when we reach to touch  
we can't ignore it.  
Great floodlights chase  
the dark and watch the dirt  
churn under colossal blades  
and claws. In the early  
morning monster metal insects  
with ribbed rubber wheels half  
as big as a house go clattering  
down the dirt road that runs  
by our place. They are finishing  
a highway less than two miles  
from what used to be our quiet  
retreat in the country. On the  
evening news we watch long gas  
lines in Washington, Pittsburgh,  
Buffalo, Boston, New York, although  
the stuff is now a dollar a gallon  
and rising fast. The energy  
crisis pinches believer and  
scoffer alike, but at the  
center of this road-building  
ruckus there's no crisis of  
will nor failure of nerve.  
That sound and fury will slice  
with brute precision between  
farmland tilth and village drowse.

It knows no doubt, it's sure  
of what it's about, and we  
whose night rest is sorely tried  
deplore as much as we admire  
its intransigence. Just as  
the gas runs short the Interstate  
snakes to completion. Not even  
the planners ever claimed it would

bear much traffic, but it had  
to be built. “To be defeated in  
our victories doesn’t make  
much sense,” whispers the voice  
of my intelligence. But our cats  
are not fazed, nor the bumblebees  
by the chestnut tree, nor the rats  
in the rotting barns.  
They disdain to let on  
about what we don’t know.

# Trite Mykonos

Whitewashed windmill against thatch  
of brightblue sky, freak pet pelican  
in a sidewalk cafe, chalkwhite winding  
alleys, stuccodry sound of cicadas  
in the olive trees, crowded bus to a  
quiet beach, fat lazy lunches followed  
by wine naps, waves crashing against  
the rocks of a postcard harbor in  
the evening breeze, coastline under  
the blazing belt of the Milky Way:

twelve student summers ago  
I spent a few days on Mykonos;  
off and on I've fantasized about  
living a whole year on an outoftheway  
island in the Cyclades in a little  
beige cottage watching the sun  
slide up and down the azure  
Aegean, writing some unoriginal  
poetry, rereading a few good  
books, eating and sleeping  
simply and well.

Someday maybe I will go: get  
the year off, save enough to  
see it through. Someday, sure,  
but in the meantime these ordinary  
tourist snaps will have to do.

Trite, hell yes, but true.

# Dialect of Unknowing

Perhaps I can stay to hear  
the edge of buildings. And  
taste those brave asphodel  
salads when they cavort  
at the elephants' ball.

I cannot permit the numbed grief  
of my senses to hasten my  
leavetaking. They shall yet  
know themselves for what they  
are, and bow to each other's  
wakened selves with mandarin aplomb.

I will wait for the full sail  
of my words to steer star zones.

I must gird myself for my absence.

Then is when the prom of my perplexity  
is sprinkled with green carnations  
on question-mark tuxedos.

My pocketwatch ticks me on  
as overdue, yet the gala  
invitations to the performance  
of my splayed vowels and consonants  
keep flooding in.

I will toy with these until  
I know better because  
I know no better.

The whatnot grass, the crass bluejays,  
the stumbling yellowjackets of late  
October, my candy-striped pajama top  
astride a redandwhite director's chair  
harass me with their persistent  
certainties. Still I shall  
postpone being's dossier.

I must dither with all these things  
until I can sound them in a dialect  
of my remotest unknowing.

With the false modesty of middle  
age I must eat of that tart  
tree that mumbles that no  
better can be had.

I want to wait so as to be able  
to simply say: this is where  
the chips fall. No asking  
*why*, only grasp the *there*.

I no longer hanker to construe  
the sentence of my being.  
The faint trace of a few  
things on a few words  
will do to plot the axis  
of my bewilderment.

# White Wood

From the cozy hearth at the center  
of the farmhouse I can hear  
countless ice crystals flurried by  
the whitemooned winternight  
plead with a zillion teensy voices:

*come to the dark heart  
of the February wood  
and be like us.*

Only I can hear these minuscule  
diamond choruses trill above  
the hum of the shifting winds  
and slanting drifts. Across  
the blanched fields  
they sing to me.

And I must leave the lure of  
my woodfire and go in the bare  
strength of my bitter need to  
sit an unsculpted statue  
in the blind snow,

to hold my blank vigil  
beyond any profession until  
the first light of dawn  
flecks the new horizon,

to squat in terminal silence  
through the concert of the cold  
until an expiring breath  
congeals my lips,

I an ice crystal among ice crystals  
in that unbroached singularity  
of benighted snow.

And dark even at  
winternoon is that dark  
heart of the white wood.

# The Wall

1

The motherwall only delivers us  
to another which never gives.

2

It had been there as long  
as he had been.  
He thought:  
what if one could  
fall down from it,  
Humpty-Dumpty-like?  
But he never could conceive  
of the possibility of  
positioning himself.

3

To cram the void self  
had been his plan  
all along but there  
was the wall which  
could not be breached.  
Nor would tangents help,  
and ladders there were  
none high enough.

4

The lines in his hands  
began to match its  
fissures; print of  
palm and stone grew  
so close it was hard  
to tell them apart.  
It was only when  
the wall became his  
touch that he nearly  
forgot that the wall  
persisted in his cells.



5

Often he wanted to run  
upon the wall like a  
Roman upon his sword  
but the wall was  
everywhere.

6

Always between absence  
and presence, granite  
of wall, unmitigable,  
his unstinting need  
circumvented by the  
unalterable other.  
His thought came to  
assume the outline of  
that uniform limit,  
languaged it as a  
structure of what  
was lacking: wordwall.

7

He penetrated women  
only to touch the rough  
surface of the wall.

8

He knew if he could posit  
the wall as the condition  
of his freedom (rock  
boundary that disavows  
all east and west,  
past or future)  
then...what?

9

He dreamed he could dance  
with himself in pure  
presence beyond any  
parenting, loss or

begetting, but there  
was the wall, now  
the line of the horizon,  
now the concrete an  
inch from his nose,  
now his stone-palm:  
his Alcatraz of hope.

10

The invisible wall  
became his need so well  
that in his perennial  
running up against it  
he found his lack  
substantiated, his  
need affirmed by that  
limit to his will.

11

He thought it might  
yet be possible to  
define himself through  
his negation, to  
trust himself to  
the absolute difference,  
to jog the long mile  
of his stone self.

12

He thought and thought  
the wall.

# Gorgon

Snake eyes, you have turned  
my eyes to stone.  
One of you would have  
been enough for what  
the three of you have  
done for me. Poisoned  
looks, and then some.  
I'm frozen now for keeps.  
The hand can't find  
the sword to settle  
your score. The pen  
is jammed between  
my fingers above  
a page as blank  
as any arctic waste.  
Snake eyes, you who  
came unasked to my  
annulment, you who  
have chilled my  
very teeth,  
eschewing any curse  
this only return  
to you I make.

# Needle's Eye

After the inane agonies  
of the millennial cranium  
I have now learned to profess  
nothing. Unmaking of myself,  
chastened by those inevitable  
finitudes. And so many passing  
moments I had mapped as  
a crossing to the remotest  
stars. Now I must not  
even dream of them.  
So far they are behind  
me now in the illusory  
profound of my most  
private space. To hold  
to the present is not  
to cipher, to be as  
empty as any wind, to  
not let others teach  
you what you no longer  
care to know, to  
confess yourself  
a derelict of aspiration's  
endless etceteras.  
Profess it now,  
the huge vacancy  
of the needle's eye  
after the needle is  
no longer there.

# Plastic Surgeon

Nature gave you one face  
but I make you another.  
I remove a rib, mold and  
trim it like a bow, insert  
it to straighten your misshapen  
skull. Delicately I push the sponge  
of your brain aside as I operate  
around the optic nerve without  
blinding you, reposition your  
eye-sockets to allow an  
unobtrusive gaze to fall  
upon an altered world. My  
hand delves in your dark  
and bloody mouth, my scalpel  
moves with the precision of  
instinct and experience honed  
for years; my gleaming pliers  
crack your upper jaw which I  
let float free in your soft  
membrane and then reposition  
and anchor in new flesh  
moorings; I stitch up  
the lining of your mouth  
without ever beholding what  
it is my aching fingers do.

Today I cut, crack, saw,  
chisel, peel, slice, scrape  
and mold to recover the first  
innocence of a face that never  
was but as the map of your hidden  
hopes. My only plastic is  
the transfer of the gleam in  
my eye to the remodeled planes  
and lines of your facial bone,  
tissue, skin; my only design  
is to make your gross visage  
over into the form of love  
you carry within and now  
suffer the torture of having  
stamped on your outer shell.

All this I labor to deliver  
knowing the great hurt I cause  
is to sculpt where your cruel  
genes betrayed you with such  
crude and casual abandon  
toward your true and shining self.

My only craft is to unfreak you.

# Triumphs of Paranoia

Twenty-four hours a day  
the invisible cuckoo clock  
ticks just for you. Only you  
can hear it, or see the trillion  
connecting fibers that make  
your brain the central  
switching station of the globe.

By your whispered wish  
gold prices drop precipitously  
in all the money markets of  
the world, the Russians steal  
a march on Kabul, an ayatollah  
tyrannizes a country, or a French  
philosopher cashes in his  
existential chips. And henceforth  
doughnuts shall have no  
holes in the middle.

Although you number mighty  
enemies among the power  
brokers of East and West  
you are certain even in  
the agony of your persecution,  
like Christ crucified,  
of the final vindication  
of your supreme mission.

Next to you hydrogen bombs  
are mere matchsticks.  
Your faith in your own  
omnipotence has gone beyond  
anything; you can afford to  
smile benignly upon the foolish  
doubters you have honored with  
token confidences of your  
grand designs: the skies will  
remain blue for now: so much  
you have intimated to them.

You take a certain comfort  
in the knowledge that you  
rule by silent fiat an age  
in which even Presidents'  
wishes are minutely foiled.

As the last straw of your  
megalomania you have granted  
yourself the consummate wish  
that your empire shall never  
know any bounds.

Supreme you sit at the center  
of your universe, disdain  
in your self-assurance to  
destroy all those poor  
wretches too obtuse and  
obdurate to acknowledge  
your omnipotence. And all  
earth's insects sing  
only your praises.



# Pet Phobia

Every dwelling you move into  
seems already occupied by them.  
They are the world's most prolific  
breeders but shy to put in an  
appearance in broad daylight.  
They prefer to announce their  
presence in the crossing from  
dark to bright. Behind bathroom  
and kitchen baseboards they lurk;  
at will they roam the deep night  
until the sudden flick of a switch  
shoots them like errant bullets  
across floors, sinks, countertops  
and walls for cover. You've also  
seen them late on hot summer  
evenings whizzing over city  
sidewalks with the self-assurance  
of infernal messengers. And you  
have become well-schooled in  
their different sorts, from little  
brown to big black, having watched  
them indoors and out with the mounting  
fascination of horror in places as  
diverse as Philadelphia, Grand Bahama  
Island, Bloomington, New Haven, Crete.  
You have collected lore from obliging  
friends, one of whom, a zoologist,  
told you of palm-sized ones in the Amazon  
Basin and of a species in Madagascar  
that can hiss. And your discovery  
that the long brown outdoor ones  
can even fly gave you a new insight  
into the apocalyptic possibilities  
of getting the creeps.

With eyes agog you have learned  
to stare at the blur of their legs  
and brittle carapaces as they scurry  
and whirl from the light. They have  
splintered the quiet of your dreams  
as you have crunched them underfoot

by the scores in vain. You know in  
the ageless folds of your brain  
that they have been since the beginning,  
that they will preside as honored  
guests at some black parody of  
the last judgment, that only  
their evil feelers will quiver  
when the rest of the universe  
is frozen into stony fear.

To appease the dark powers you  
have finally adopted the cockroach  
as your pet phobia, yet you  
sincerely doubt the olive  
efficacy of such an offering.

So whenever you so much as  
catch a glimpse of one  
the frame of your world  
cracks and you swoon.

# Litany of an Expiring Mouse

The bright dribbles of my red  
are already congealing on  
the evening porch where in  
tomorrow's heat black flies  
will buzz and wanton.

Two huge fur fists slam me  
down whenever I try to  
focus my blurred resistance  
to make a dash for the lawn.

Two eyes like close green moons  
giggle, fangs close on my heaving  
sides as I jerk and wriggle through  
my last gasps. My velvet skin,

silk flesh are deep-furrowed by  
feline claws, my final sense is  
searing pain pitched against hope-  
less whiskered odds. Teeth will

do the oldest work when my dry  
eyes sponge up the moist night  
and giant jaws scissor off my  
hinder parts. Only my marbled

guts will greet the fluted dawn  
as the trophy of my playful  
hunter's careful snack. In  
the pedestrian agony of

a torture enacted through  
eternities my cuddly purring  
killer and I affirm the first  
blood bond of a nature

back to which you who have beheld  
all this in rapt and stunned  
attention really do not  
want to get.

# Hands

Each day the old man's sinewed  
hands push the boat against  
the tide, but the tide always  
pushes it back against his  
calloused palms. Although  
the boat is never launched  
the struggle is daily renewed  
where land and water meet.  
His friends, long since pensioned  
off, shake their heads and  
take their ease by their  
peat fires in their seaside  
cottages. They have grown  
weary of even watching the tide,  
the ancient's hands baffling  
the sea and the seasons;  
theirs are folded lazily  
over contented paunches.  
They think them wise.  
But the aged veteran of  
the tide's mighty leap  
and swell is lean and strong  
as a board that bends but  
never breaks. He knows  
he cannot lose as long  
as the tide has not won  
from him his will. His  
heart brings hope to  
a hopeless task, his  
salt-sprent shoulders  
and arms loom large  
against that inevitable  
surge as his spread hands  
forever front the elements.

# Winternight Dream

*(January 1981)*

It has to be winter,  
not soft-gurgling spring,  
nor full-blown summer, nor  
autumn bursting and wan,  
but a harsh winter so  
chill that you spit ice  
into the ferocious air.

In the cold clasp of cruel  
February you will savor an  
austere solitude far from  
the glad yelps of perennial  
summer's tourist pack,  
frivolous notes of  
a slight interlude.

In some out-of-the-way spot  
where no trails lead to your  
rough cabin deep recessed  
in the Adirondacks you hazard  
an odd blend of soul-vigil  
and hibernation.

Here you will have to shoot  
or trap what you eat, or  
live off what stores you  
managed to carry with you.  
The woodburning stove on  
which you cook also keeps  
you warm as the Northern

storms rage about your  
hideaway. You've even had  
to cut and split the logs  
which save you from the bitter  
cold. There are no other  
guests save the elements  
and you in arctic communion:

unless you count a few  
classic books: glittering  
works of the mind clarified  
by time in the night of  
our blood. These and

yourself you will scan in  
the far-off woods like  
the blazing print of  
the Northern constellations  
before dawn when silence  
fills the air like snow

cold comfort of a season  
when you know that only  
self-teaching has any  
lasting value and that  
in such a monastery  
of the mind more learning  
may be had than in our  
landscaped universities  
with all their mummy lingos

that can never glow like a  
wood fire or a singular  
movement of thought in  
the dim Northern night  
when the chaste winds blow  
the snow foot-high about  
a cabin in which you sit  
stoking the flames' slow burn.

# Unbidden Guest

A pheasant came to us to dinner,  
though unasked. Hurl'd by  
a huge gust of wind,  
he crashed against the front  
of the house with a great  
shock, like a shotgun blast.  
Broken-necked he lay  
with his graceful head  
askew, his fiery plumage  
drooping by the frozen  
shrubbery. And instantly  
a red carnation bloomed  
beside his shattered  
mouth: blood on snow  
screamed so bright  
my senses reeled. His  
limp body still warm, I  
carried him to the wood  
block where I split fire-  
wood and chopped off his  
head. Elsie bled and gutted  
him in the kitchen sink,  
then baked him slowly  
in the oven. His lean and  
gamey flesh was garnished  
with an improvised sauce.  
What this midwinter storm  
brought and our hands  
prepared sat in our soothed  
Sunday stomachs leavened  
with a dash of guilt. Why  
should we not take unabashed  
what the season gave unasked?  
Never had we hoped for this  
yet our eager mouths drooled  
at the feast like any predator's.

# The Sky's the Limit

O I wish that I wished I were  
riding through the Tyrolean orange groves  
in a pristine Philippine submarine  
jostling those humdrum pippin days,

that the amber Aztec moon wore penny  
loafers and cracked the cinnamon pavements  
with silver dragons flashing bloodphosphorescent teeth,

that vast and vapid feline gods would spit out  
the maudlin world like a huge psychedelic  
furball and schnorr themselves to infinitely  
multiple orgasms,

that hilariously hyperactive future museums  
in Moscow, Rome, Washington, Peking and Paris  
would celebrate for millennia plus the high  
mass of our collected follies for the gaudy  
boardwalk adoration of a credulous past  
worshipping with party hats and hyperborean bloomers  
our cuckoo images on sandalwood mosaics silkscreened  
across flamingo triple helixes of liquid onyx,

that the white haze of all possible cumulus clouds  
would gather itself up into a humongous  
tropical avalanche to stifle our madcap  
filibustering pomegranate heresies,

and I wish that our wishes were like  
a million Bedouin rice puddings with blue  
whirlybird wings against a mauve sky  
veering and sheering in all directions at once,  
singing with huge camel beaks full of  
Saharine silence, hump-swamped with light

and I a merest flibbertigibbet dot rising  
against that sand-dune horizon  
flinging and singing myself

like a rice camel forever on the equatorial wing  
into that pledgeless and insurgent sky.



# Gnostic Song

O Manda, Manda d'Hayye,  
sealed in my senses five,  
noise-numbered by the shrill  
world, weary I am of that  
bleak Tibil and the endless  
traveling through  
the bitter eons.

A son of song and light  
I am, O Manda, thrown into  
this black hole, this  
labyrinth of fear where  
the gross dance of  
the generations holds  
me down.

Far have I sunk into the well  
of space and time, cruel  
Rutha keeps me from  
the shining sky, spark upon  
spark of my bright being  
dispersed into the dark.

The strange world falls  
through me, Manda, and  
Kushta knows me not:  
I am weary of that barren  
Tibil. Hurlled from  
the axle of light  
I seek to pass the Suf  
Sea, I seek to regather  
my far-scattered bundle.

A mere captive I am,  
cast into foul sleep,  
almost drunk with my exile,

yet my mouth still is full  
of light, my head full of  
air, and my heart,

O Manda, Manda d'Hayye,  
my heart is forever set  
upon the stars.

# Changes

Bitter changes are coming.  
The house you seek to buy  
will turn into a maggot  
hive. Your friends will  
go thousands of miles out  
of their way to avoid  
seeing you. The quick-  
silver ponds will freeze  
in July this year.  
The lapdog next door  
will howl until your  
blood boils and you  
shoot his master in  
the head to find some  
relief. New right para-  
military units in green  
will run wifeswapping  
maneuvers in your neigh-  
borhood. Your students  
will begin to instruct  
you about how dreams  
operate when cost  
accounting is at stake.  
Various jellicose mosquitoes  
will suck all the juice  
out of your stereo.  
The brackish lagoon of  
your hopes will harbor  
weird lunar alligators  
with lapidary jaws,  
and the hawsers of the  
runagate ship of your heart  
can only find moorings  
on the orange quicksands  
of your purloined fantasies.  
Thalidomide babies with  
homicidal octopus limbs  
will sprout among the  
tomato plants in the garden  
you never sought  
to cultivate.

# Professor of Desire

Desire doesn't fail,  
only we do.  
We lead stunted lives,  
stifle wishes as true  
to steer by as some  
north star of the soul.  
We betray our best.

And what for?  
Small praise  
great asses bray.  
We renounce from fear.  
We shake in our shirts  
and compromise only  
to hear ourselves applauded  
as wise at last.  
Only *we* are lost.

Wishes plead a truth  
we ignore at our  
cost. And that what's  
past faces you on  
the perilous way.

It makes no deals  
with the you  
you've never been.  
It quakes, jolts,  
pulls you until  
only your shadow's  
left to accuse a  
heap of tatters  
you've displayed  
in false pride  
with lying eyes.

No corrupt politician's  
cribbed patter  
can see you through,  
no Dirty Tricks,  
no silken purse.

That extreme passage  
you will have to hazard,  
your shadow sifted  
to accuse a you  
sorted to a pip.

Professor of Desire sez:  
“pride of patience  
is a scarecrow,  
pride of prurience  
fool’s gold.  
Strangled wishes  
make no hay:  
there ain’t no use  
to getting old  
if you haven’t  
lived today.”

# Weed Thoughts

Thistle-like weeds who have  
begun to sprout and bristle  
in astonishing numbers on  
my untended lawn,  
I gouge rootward around  
your prickly spears with  
a long-bladed tool  
wishing I were a better  
surgeon as I make brash  
gashes and unsightly  
earth-marks which I  
assume will heal just  
like any flesh wound or  
even quicker. Unlike a  
physician I wonder  
whether my cutting is  
to cure or only serves  
my human wilfulness.  
As I dump you in a  
weedpile I have some  
doubts whether in the  
economy of nature I who  
do the weeding count for  
more than you the weeded  
though I can't honestly  
say that such thoughts  
give me so much as a  
moment's pause. Why  
then I think them  
I do not know.

# Lukewarm

It's that sort of lukewarm day  
when the leaden sun makes no  
promises save such as you  
entertain through wishful  
shills you refuse to credit  
when they gloze on the threshold  
of desire in some back room of  
the wax museum of your mind.  
That sort of day you know  
so well you hardly notice  
it. Such suns melt no wax  
nor can the luxurious touch  
of an ungloved hand break  
the hard rock of your  
unquarried heart. All this  
you know until knowing  
goes numb, like a hand  
calloused with too much  
handling, its shake a  
lax snake refusing to  
coil in a skin  
old as death.

# Torn Ligament

Like the air you take  
your body for granted  
until something goes  
awry. Invisibly it does  
its job; you only notice  
it through the absence  
of its powers, or arrested  
processes. This once meek  
ankle now breaks your  
stride—ouch!—this  
broken string now turns  
your song into a groan.  
Now you need a third leg,  
you hobble with a cane  
like some arthritic horse  
sent to haul a giant  
load up an interminable  
hill. Gravity, once your  
kindly dancing master,  
now pushes the spiked  
ground against your  
stumbling foot. You are  
preoccupied by missteps,  
by stairs, by how to  
lie in bed, stand in  
the shower, by how  
long this thing you  
never cared to know will  
keep on harassing you.



# Hour Test

Under the lifeless spell  
of neon tubes twenty-seven  
students are hunched over  
bluebooks, sweating answers  
to my test. Such power  
I have never learned  
to relish. I can almost  
feel their thoughts skitter  
through the stifled air.  
Later I will do my grader's  
job, my head sunk down like  
theirs are now, hands on  
sweaty temples. Here I can  
observe them with neutral  
sympathy, sensing that  
answers that can be lipped  
or penned do not address  
real questions. Take for  
instance Virginia Woolf:  
why doesn't that busybody  
Mrs. Ramsey ever make it  
to the (overly symbolic) light-  
house with her oedipal little son?  
that's a question I daren't quite  
pose to these adolescence  
ripe. God knows that nobody  
ever gets anywhere, though  
we're always on the move,  
feet, wishes, or pencils  
flying to reach or cross  
some finish line.—Thus  
I mull my useless thoughts  
as the neon-oppressed class  
strains toward the short-  
term insights of an hourly.  
The invisible vulture,  
Hope, squats above the academic  
sweatshop clock on the wall,  
its vile beak sunk  
in my puzzled brain.

# Man's Best Friend

will pee, barf, chew  
on your Persian rug

dig holes or leave huge  
turds on the front lawn

begin to howl just as you  
are falling asleep

drag half the back yard  
up and down your house  
the day before the dinner party

jump on your back just when  
you and your lover are heading  
for mutual orgasm

growl and bare his teeth  
at your guests, then  
minutely sniff their genitals

keep you from ever going on vacation

and generally run amok  
when you least expect it.

if any of your relatives  
did such things you'd be  
ready to sign on the dotted  
line to have them put  
away for keeps.

instead you pat him on  
the head and call him  
a good boy.

# Waylaid

Afternoon sunlight through study window

wind billows white transparent

toward me

the fullness of being

unable to speak or write

fills room

plum blossom print curtain

waylaid by

mouth full of plumlight

silent I sit

# Centering

The bars of a bare and simple melody rightly heard can become the echo of the song of songs, make palpable for the first time the note of the beginning, before the empty hiss of space was, or that fatal tick of time. The work of art dwells in the before-the-start. The first outward speeding ray in the dark chasm of an undifferentiated universe is refracted through the prism of the mind, broken down only to be forced by reflection into its proper plenitude. The beginning's indiscriminate profusion of explosive energy is still sorting itself out in the allotropic mines of consciousness to get some purchase on itself. And we, yes, we—who and whatever we may yet turn out to be—can, with the printing house of the mind, limn the traces of that first setting forth with all the works of man. As mere matter plunges outward with nothing but entropic momentum, the mind's gravity seeks the center with all deliberate calm.

# Hope

*(Once Again)*

The man who dares to hope brings  
balm to bitter wounds.

The man who persists in hope  
prolongs the agony of fools  
and children's laughter.

He saves the future from itself  
by salvaging shipwrecked dreams.

With bare hands he builds dikes  
against despair, knowing  
that is all there ever is.

The man who holds on to hope  
is a lifer who refuses  
the easy break to stay  
for the full term of his  
sentence, who will sing  
stripes as he breaks hard  
rock in a humid field.

The man of hope fills  
the void center of a zero  
with miracles of his own  
making; always he's lured  
by the bait of his own heart  
beyond the moment's  
bleak finalities.

The man whose hands seize hope  
is pushing a great rock up  
the hill of his horizon to  
a place he cannot see but  
nevertheless believes is there.

The man who hopes will place  
high bets where he does not know  
the stakes or game he's playing in.

Only the man who hopes earns his fate  
even when seeking to alter it.



*From*

# Moving to the Country

*(ca. 1982-1985)*





# Moving to the Country

You moved to the country to put down roots, to drag refractory cattails from the pond's mucky bottom, to dig prickly thistles like a fiend, to plant a few seeds in the garden in late spring, to stain your fingers deep purple and strain your back and scratch your hands raw reaching for blackberries by the bucketful in mid-July, to jounce your lazy middleaged innards on a Sears riding mower, to sit through the red red September sunsets sipping upstate sherry on your redwood deck, to attend to nothing but early morning birdsounds the whole summer through, to find and lose yourself in a precarious balancing act, to cancel the racket of the world by not answering the telephone's shrill, to merely vegetate, to plumb the weathered strength of fieldstones, to cast off the burdens of others' days, to think your own thoughts, eat your own lettuce, tomatoes, cukes, and melons, to stack or stain or saw wood, to build a fire in the wood stove on the coldest wintermorning, to be snow bound in December, windswept in February, sun burned in June, to be as barren and rigid as the November earth, to dream like the clouds, grumble like the autumn winds, to be as numb and dumb as the high noon lizard basking in the August sun, to be as green as the midsummer corn, to hang high in the air and then plunge like the hunting hawk, to move with and through the seasons and yet never move at all.

# Winter Hunt

Because they leave no prints  
in the snow and because none  
have ever been sighted there,  
hunting elephants in winter  
in upstate New York takes  
consummate concentration  
and an unbending will.

There are no long-barreled  
big-game guns for sale in any  
of the local sporting goods  
stores, no carriers or guides  
to be had for hire at any price.  
The full-bearded natives with  
the gun-racks on the rusted-  
out pickup trucks are as  
uncommunicative as the trees  
and as surly as the frost-  
bitten coyotes scouring  
the abandoned state parks.

The deer season ended weeks ago;  
the landscape's void of any  
purpose save for your lone  
search. The tall tales of  
the gray mammoth beasts with  
those huge trunks and gleaming  
tusks go back to long before  
the Indians whose descendants  
still retell them over sixpacks  
on their reservations. You  
know they're there; your  
spirit-eye sees a massive herd  
loitering at the border of a  
birch wood at orange dusk scooping  
up the phosphorescent snow with  
triumphant trunks. You will  
track their lumbering canvas  
hides through insensate winter  
days and nights until they fade  
into the torrential downpours  
of early spring. Your only  
token of success will be an

April mouthful of acid rain,  
a misted-over, silver-barreled  
elephant gun without a single  
notch, and that itch in your  
trigger finger for the passing  
of another fall.

# Home

Home is what and where you trust.

The moment when you don't  
have to prove yourself  
but can approve of  
even your mistakes.

Home is the place where  
your face is the moon's  
face, where the water  
you sample turns into  
the wine of your hopes,  
where the line of the horizon  
hums to the vibrato of  
your dreams. It's the un-  
choreographed ballet where  
your furthest past and  
future selves dance a  
loving *pas de deux*, where  
you and your shadow meet  
to the alleluias  
of your blood.

Home is when your lions  
and lambs, eagles and snakes,  
lie down to mate for your  
greater good, and where,  
beyond any mere calculus  
of others or otherness  
you are simply true.

# Bare

After I forced myself out of the warm bed at the first  
fallow light of dawn and tramped through the damp chill  
June fields down the hill to the rockhard brookbed to  
watch the sun rise from behind the hill's horizon, and  
after I trudged back up the path to the dirt road leading  
to the farm

I saw

the sun's rays strike  
and focus the tiny branch  
tips of a small bush  
at a certain peculiar angle  
that shattered the blinders  
I've always worn  
and for an instant  
before my hooded sight  
surged back  
the bare world  
poured through  
my eyes

# August Harvest

For three hot August days now  
I have been harvesting stones  
with my bare hands.  
With growing confidence  
my eyes have scouted yard,  
field, and pit for the no  
more than three-inch thick  
slabs that I must have.  
My sore fingers have learned  
to pry them from their earth  
habitats, exposing their moist  
underside to the plangent  
light of day. The weight  
of several big ones stacked  
like primeval plates has  
staggered me battling  
gravity for hundreds of  
feet upfield, the inertia  
of their noiseless eons  
pulling against my straining  
back, thighs, knees. Like  
a mere beast of burden I  
have sweated their odd  
shapes and sizes out of  
the earth, have pushed  
myself to the limit to  
confound myself with nothing  
more than matter. In losing  
the difference between their  
years and mine I have found  
the hard sheerness of rock,  
have felt alone at the base  
of my spine the enduring  
presence of stone.

# The Water Witch

*(in memory of Ray Tead)*

On the third day in the hideaway house you bought in the Groveland hills the old hand-dug farmwell runs dry. It refuses to recover as days turn into weeks: neither prayers nor curses nor wholesale hopes help in the least. So you check out the local grapevine for the best dowser. Since he doesn't have a phone you drive long miles over back roads to find him in a falling-down house in Conesus that looks like a Northern version of Dogpatch.

The ageless water witch with his cheek bulging with chewing tobacco and rotten stumps for teeth and who smells like he hasn't been in contact with water for years scuttles through the tall grass at dusk with his glossy eyes and nose pointing up in the air like a bird dog's on the scent. The forked cherry stick rotates between thumbs and forefingers of his upturned hands. He is scouting out the main veins which a few minutes later he will trace out on a pad of paper along with scribbled rows of tiny figures. When he holds his battered wristwatch over the center of what he claims will be your well the second hand stops dead in its tracks. He puts your hand on his wrist and tells you to grip it tight: you do, and with a sudden exhilarating rush up your spine you feel the downward pull as the divining rod turns and turns to the distant source in the cool

ground. He lets you feel his palms still hot with friction.

The well is witched. After calculating his figures at the kitchen table he informs you how much water—four to six gallons per minute—how far down—eighty feet—you will have. Don't go over eighty, he cautions, or you'll have egg water (meaning sulfur). He adds that around May and September 15 you'll have a touch of it anyway. And then he tells you the story of his life... After you have paid him the agreed on fee of twenty-five dollars, you believe, and you do not believe.

The following week a sixty-eight year old well-driller with a 1943 army surplus truck (same year as you) sets up over the staked spot, scoffing at water witches and their misleading ways. He has emphysema and had a heart attack twenty years ago, but climbs on his tall rig as nimbly as a monkey and brings you pounds of cod he caught on a fishing trip last week to Gloucester. He hits water at thirty feet and stops at seventy-nine when he's getting four gallons a minute. The water man's prediction is pure coincidence, he claims, and cheerfully informs you that you do have sulfur. But you're damn glad to have whatever water's there.



After the well is hooked into  
the house plumbing and the pipes  
are flushed of mud and grit  
the first glassful you hold up  
to the light sparkles like  
expensive crystal and tastes  
better than any Perrier.

# Turning Forty

At forty one begins to learn to live with one's failures. I didn't say accept, for that would be to die, like a cactus taking its bare spines as the last word. No, no, I'm not ready for that yet. But of failures and shortcomings, o lord, how many, and how rife I am with them, how rich! To be sure, to be rich in defeats is in itself a sort of accomplishment, like being a veteran of arduous wars, like some eagle-tufted relic of an Indian chief displaying his cicatriced wounds years after his last battle has been fought—o those prides of failure, those loud brags, lord, keep me from these as well. Let them simply be—failures: no more, no less: as a poet, first and foremost, as a critic and a scholar, as a teacher, as a husband, as a son and brother, and over and above these fractured selves, as a human being. The poetry in me has almost died in the unstillable thirst to put myself in print, for god's sake, to get published at any cost, though this vanity has had some soothing lately in the newer knowledge that those too soon in print are too soon out of print, forgotten almost before they are known. And also, what an embarrassment to be known before one's time, before one's voice has found and formed itself, or worse yet, to be caught with one's sticky hands smack-dab in the poetic cookie-jar, filching sweets that cloy from various mouths that are not properly one's own, to be kissing the void air with others' made-up lips! At forty it also seems to me one should be able to write off early failures like early successes, to itemize and deduct them in the IRS of one's so careful conscience. O lord, let me be indifferent to my various stupid vanities, let me bide my time without ado and clamoring, let me be as a bear or a groundhog in winter, let me hug the earth even if the frolics of spring are never sprung for me, let me be rid of my goddammed ego, and, lord o lord, let me become that most impossible and difficult of simple things:

merely myself.

# Inland

*(“though inland far we be”)*

My once infant feet are now  
time-shod. It's been years  
since my toes have touched  
the sea. Inland so long  
I've been that I've quite  
forgotten there are such  
things as shores. Those  
mighty waters are the merest  
lispings of memory in my  
inner ear. This mainland  
air's like dry ice on my  
lame brain. I wouldn't  
know how to stand on  
point where the mountains  
front the tide. Do they  
ever? do any such geoscapes  
exist save through the prism  
of my dreams? Gradually  
I've become aware of  
everything I've failed  
to become though I insist  
that the sentence chiseled  
on the wall is merely a  
crazy stenciling on  
flames (and may the flames  
take all). Maybe if I stay  
inland long enough the sea  
will come to me—maybe an  
artesian well will burst  
like a geyser in my  
discommoded garden, and  
like some retired seal  
returning to action I'll  
plummet back to those  
fabulous depths below  
the flood: speechless  
quite at feet splayed  
to fins and arms be-  
flipped, a sea-changed  
me will glide down  
aquamarine avenues  
of amber light.

# Poet Marginal

I mouth the words that none  
can hear in the margins of  
this blind canvas of your  
world. For sure you own  
it, proud. Hanging by  
nothing but a phrase from  
your metal frame I need  
no ears to hear, I need  
no tongue to praise.  
When like sharp cacti  
spines my vexed vowels  
slice holes in your no  
show vistas you will  
choke on my blood welling  
up in your prim mouths,  
your shredded tongues  
stuttering sanguine  
epitaphs. With a full  
and sincere complicity  
of silence my anemic  
lips will seal themselves  
to your frozen border.  
Such chill margins  
are intimately mine,  
such dumb peace my  
nowhere reward, waste  
space and cacti spine  
my only crave.

# About Trees

Trees make no demands  
even on dogs nor do they  
signal with their eyes.  
To the despair of ships  
and planes they straddle  
the earth. With equal  
ease and without ever  
expressing a preference  
they are turned into  
firewood, houses, and  
metaphors. Trees let  
the wind speak with  
itself; trees guard  
firmly the secrets of  
our early years.  
Politicians do not  
shake their branches  
which vote only with  
leaves. Trees do not  
charge their tenants  
rent nor do they talk  
back to their spouses.  
Trees have never fallen  
from paradise; trees  
can become poems but  
poems naturally never  
can be trees. Trees  
know no resentment  
but quietly harvest  
the casual music  
of the skies.

# Mimy Bird

I'm the ubiquitous Mimy Bird.  
I'm equally at home in Hollywood,  
any corporate headquarter, university  
administration, or the White House.  
I can fluff my feathers like yours,  
tuft for tuft, or twist my beak  
precisely into your scowl. My  
head droops with yours, I can  
front the gust just as you do.  
I squat on the same powerline  
in the rain, feather for feather.  
I pick at the worms in the grass  
peck for peck with you; when you  
sleep, so do I; you wake, and  
I do too. You think I'm only  
your double when really I'm  
your counterfeit self. You  
rise, you soar; I rise, I  
soar. You twitter, I twitter;  
you build your nest, I build;  
you mate, I mate alongside you,  
tit for tat. I can even mime  
myself, for I'm the ubiquitous  
Mimy Bird.

# Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages they liked to think  
of the World as a Book.  
The Author was understood,  
His intention explicit in every line.

Approaching middle age I too  
like to think of the world  
as a book.

We who are the print are none too  
clear to me; there are lots of  
typos, comma splices, misplaced  
modifiers, sentence fragments,  
and general redundancies just  
as in the freshman themes I'm  
condemned to read by the thousands  
after having done an advanced  
degree in Truth and Beauty.

There are blank pages too, and  
missing chapters which challenge my  
ingenuity: as for the Author and  
Title, your guess is as good as  
mine. The Table of Contents reads:  
More of the Same. Index there  
is none.

No library I can imagine could  
house such a Text. There are  
intermittent rumors that it  
is long overdue and will be  
recalled at any moment now.

# Appropriating the Land

Early autumn is rife again with  
the hoarse groan of heavy farm  
machinery. Familiar fields are  
ripped open and tilled, dozers  
smash down trees already sold  
to loggers. Tons of earth are  
shifted according to the neat  
notions of cost-accounting minds.  
No, mechanized modern farmers  
nature do not love (nineteenth  
century Wordsworth to the contrary)  
save as it can reap quick  
cash crops: nature's mostly  
there to pay off heavy machinery.

A head with headphones attached  
bops atop a monstrous combine,  
the operator's mesmerized by the  
fractious urban rhythms piped into  
his ears as his huge ribbed wheels  
criss cross criss cross acres he  
neither sees nor knows. He's  
the owner's son; it is or will  
be his some day. And what, pray  
tell, is ownership? What's whose,  
and why? By what deed, title,  
or right? Can our senses stake  
out a claim, or do we own  
what we own only with our  
wallets and various pieces  
of paper? Can mere love  
establish title? If yes

then I'm the true owner of  
these sloping conformations,  
I and you who take their pulse  
daily in our random rambles,  
who cross these rolling hills  
again and again in winter on  
skis when they are void of  
machinery, a mere wilderness



of windswept snow, who survey  
all this through the seasons  
with our senses and our souls,  
who take their measure in our  
stride and study their hazy lines,  
who chronicle this world with our  
hearts and take in their changing  
appearances from the ash-yellow  
cornstalks of late autumn to the  
rain-sodden lowlands of first  
spring. We are the true owners,  
and so is our Afghan hound who  
flows across the fields like  
the wind, who marks her spots  
and knows every foot of ground  
by its particular scent, and even  
more the deer hold it in perpetual  
trust for the vanished redmen  
in their shy glide between  
the trees and their tail-high  
bounding over fences; and the  
lone-ranger raccoons own it who  
stake out their claim at night  
on the dirt roads frozen by the  
headlights of our car, and the  
darting chipmunks own it, and  
the butterflies who ride and slide  
upon the air, and the groundhogs  
who make a fat waddling beeline for  
the culvert, and the russet fox  
whose brush whooshes across the  
trail before you know it's been  
there, and all that teeming life  
owns it whose countless generations  
inscribed their deeds in fur, bone,  
feather, tooth and blood eons  
before these flinty grasping  
farmers sunk their metal fangs  
into this ancient land to gouge  
and spoil the scheme of things.

# Unless

Why can't I bear to even look at  
any of the countless poems I've  
written over two decades or so?  
Fear of or indifference to the  
grimacing faces of ghostly selves  
in the elongating corridors of my  
dim past? No, it's more likely that  
my dreams have gone bust: the imperial  
argosy of my dreams has apparently  
foundered in a drawer full of dust.  
Those terse rejection slips which  
deck the walls of my private gallery  
have become the scripture and tomb  
of what I once aspired to be.  
I've touched the graveled bottom  
of poetry for so long that I've  
quite forgotten that there are  
such things as a broad expanse  
of white sails merging with a  
pastel sky or the cry of seabirds  
fathoming the unstilled salt air.  
And my ending is despair unless  
I be relieved not by the kindly  
regard of the readers I've never  
had but by the quiet strength of  
a sun-splayed summer rock, by  
the simple prospect of the slim  
tips of my crosscountry skis  
bisecting the endless plane of  
an upstate field with geometric  
precision on a windy winter  
afternoon, by the laughter of  
friends or the subtle touch of  
a loving hand, by the spirited  
babble of a little child or  
the shy glide of the bluebird  
through the recumbent  
summer wood.

# Paths

The undiscovered paths you haven't traveled may lead you to a clearing. Empty mouths don't dare, chewing-gum teeth masticate *the known*. All shortcuts have led you far afield. The main road you took is a by-pass that goes right by. How to turn? Not like a weather-vane spinning to prevailing gusts. Making a few choice politicians *sauter en l'air* (though perhaps well-deserved), won't do: they're only the symptom of the wrong turn, the dead end, the ring road. And bloody hands can't grasp the light.

The conditional may be only a grammatical pointing: it doesn't guarantee anything, only provides an opening to the horizons of the possible—of what may be, maybe. Grammar is a slide zone, not a word-screen: the launching pad of the hypothetical, the heuristic *what if?* And if there is a clearing it's surely blocked by megatons of advertising, slick mindwarps (thanks bill blake) of public relations that keep us perpetually looking the other way, goggle-eyes stuck in the back of our head.

Positioned in language, shifting foundations, how to make a start? Placed by words, why *not* proceed? "What *if* the clearing is only words?" whisper the demons.

Let them. All you know today  
is that the paths you've  
avoided are a clue, not  
a key. Clues are there  
to be pondered. The kinds  
of clues you seek have no  
solution but if you're willing  
to track them all alone on  
the paths of your heart they  
may take you to the white light  
of a clearing where you may  
be in a position to begin  
for the first time to ask  
a real question, to find  
no answer but to grab with  
your own hands the terms of  
a problem beyond all the  
nostalgias of your past.

But first you have to uncover  
the invisible paths you've never  
hazarded, to see a subtle pleat  
in the landscape of the completely  
given, to hear the one false note  
in the old song of yourself that  
might set you on the right track.

That first first will be like  
climbing up the rockface of  
a frozen waterfall with your  
bare hands and feet.

# Geneva Summit

1

Not too many weeks ago in Mexico City  
a monstrous earthquake shook several thousand  
people dead. Everybody wanted to help  
in the desperate struggle to extricate  
those pinned alive under tons of rubble.  
The world's hopes hung on them,  
dying only with the faint cries of  
a helpless boy who never was found.

2

In dour Calvin's city by the romantic lake  
they will preside in several days at the summit  
of global superpower, Russkis and Amerikanskis  
with their nuclear arsenals that hold the world  
hostage in an overbalance of terror. Ad nauseam  
they will talk Peace, yes Peace, only Peace,  
by God and by Lenin, Peace, only and above all  
Peace, but piece by piece they will continue  
to heap up their weapons systems in a hypertrophy  
of mutual fear and distrust which we captive  
citizens of the world dare not even comprehend.  
"Peace" they will say, these princes  
of the world's darkness.

3

Communiqués will be issued hour by hour  
simultaneously in nearly all the world's  
tongues, yet none of them will be "frank" or  
"productive" or even bear the slightest  
resemblance to human speech. And with peace  
they will of course have nothing whatever  
to do. O for a single human voice at that  
death-dealing summit, o for the single syllable  
of a Socrates, a Christ, a Lao-Tzu and so many  
more true princes of peace who of course are  
never heard at these sabbaths of power.

4

Last week in Colombia the volcano Nevado del Ruiz burst through the roof of the sky and over twenty thousand lost their lives in an apocalypse of melted glacier ice and mud. Everybody who saw the horrific images broadcast to the world wanted to help: millions upon millions of hearts went out to the homeless survivors in a primal bond of human sympathy. Anything to help, where even the best and quickest remedy can only be too little and too late. For we citizens of the world want only to help in spite of all that terrible dying.

5

*Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint.*

A silent unseen partner smirking Mephisto sits at the Geneva summit. He's well versed in the inhuman lingo of the opposing leaders and their handlers who despite their twisted rhetoric are all of the same party as they pass around a kind of AIDS of the mind. In his knowledge that everything that has ever come into being is fit to be destroyed Mephisto is the proper impresario of our age of Nuclear Angst. He winks at the negotiators as he hands them implements to sign meaningless agreements; he cracks polyglot jokes with the international claque of sycophant reporters, he drools Peace and Mutual Understanding after the two sides have conspired to continue fueling their inveterate lusts and fears.

6

On the evening news the grief-etched face of a Colombian *campesino* tells how his wife and children were swept away before his eyes in the terrible flood. I who hardly know Spanish know only too well the meaning of his words. The tears on the mask of his ferocious face speak plain enough to the human heart, speak with awful power to and for all of us frozen in the very impotence of our good will. The final news image of the volcano's

horror is his ageless peasant's form dwarfed by an ocean of mud. Swift and silent the television camera cuts back to Geneva and the smug smiles of high-ranking diplomats who toast each other's masks in full view of the assembled paparazzi of power. Then as the public relations clichés bubble into the champagned air to the relentless clicking and flashing of cameras, the Anusol commercial suddenly floods the screen.

# September Gifts

Out for a morning walk in the Groveland hills I saw a two-inch baby salamander cross the path in front of me. Because I had never seen one before my mind reeled at what magic had come my way: a gift of the deep earth! a gift! So I stood solemn guard at the crossing of this miniature dragon lapped in unseen tongues of flame, and wished it safe passage. So delicate this smidgen of spotted crimson against the moist brown earth, infinitesimal spark of the starred firmament's fire, frail life's first setting forth.

The burden of all being seemed to rest on it as it felt its way to the other side of the path with the assurance of the newly-fledged who give themselves to the eternal difference with the noblesse oblige of ancient blood. Sure a sign this was of what was to come whose meaning I could not yet guess but whose promise I must trust and honor. As a further September pledge the following day a falling leaf zig-zagged into my open waiting hand: had I sought to grasp it I never could have, but this nine-pointed confirmation of the season danced toward me on the very rhythm of the air and with a perfect reflex my fingers closed on all that fragile promise.