

FATHOM'S EDGE

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Investigating elements of the creative process in the work of three poets: James Wright, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, and Pegeen Kelly. Each poet deploys a different method for access to those experiences that lie at the edge of accessible language. Each method is discussed and its deployment illustrated. Wright leads us from the sensory world to the supersensual.

Schnackenberg makes use of the formal device of the fairy tale. Kelly immerses in the logic of dreams. Drawing on Elaine Scarry's theory of the imagination, the case is made that the poetic act is a dialectic between the poet and the sensory world, in which perception and imagination are equally important.

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PART I
IMAGINARY KEYS

One of the core things poetry enables, at its best, is access to those realms of experience seemingly beyond the reach of normal discourse or description. I refer to that area we might label the supersensual or the transcendent, those rarefied summits of human experience that forever exceed language yet must somehow be captured with language in order to be communicated. Most of our human language relates to the objects and interactions of sensory experience, so that we can place ourselves in an embodied world. I peel an apple. You tie a shoelace. This is sufficient for the majority of our everyday affairs. Yet when it comes to the subtler depths of human experience, something else is required. In attempting to communicate the particular sadness of an opportunity missed, never to be recovered, a simple reach for everyday vocabulary is no longer sufficient. We must now invoke the wordless via words. Language must induce in the reader the kernel of a recognition, a recognition that begins a cooperative process of construction between poem and reader, and the language used is a catalyst for this. That recognition may or may not take place without the language, but it is not the language itself. Arguably, all language signifies the inexpressible to some degree, even when speaking of apples and shoelaces. However, the pressure of the ineffable from these instances does not feel urgent most of the time. It is when we feel a drive to express something subtle or unique—a private insight or a new wrinkle in the human experience—that the matter acquires urgency. Yet we then discover that readily available structures of language do not exist for the purpose.

I will be discussing three approaches to capturing the inexpressible in poetry, making use of a selected poem from three choice poets. James Wright uses the sensory world to lead us into the supersensual. His method, I will argue, uses objects and scenes of everyday experience as the narrow end of a trumpet that opens out towards infinite spaces. Brigit Pegeen Kelly, in contrast,

transforms the world of our experience into a magical space where different rules apply, rules that seem to borrow from the logic of dreams or a mythic interaction with the environment deeply stained with all kinds of subjective meaning, as if subject and object blend into an “omnijective” domain in which neither can be completely separated out again. Finally, Gjertrud Schnackenberg uses the pre-existing structure of a formal fairy tale (*Sleeping Beauty*) as a kind of casing, a surrounding structure in which to work and through which to show us, again, a surprising vantage on the familiar. In this case, as we shall see, she opens an unusual space within the fairy tale, and enables us to look out upon the world from the inside surface of suspended moment.

We could choose to describe these various methods as tools for creating a temporary union between the immanent and the transcendent, between the world of our immediate sensory experience and whatever conception we may hold of the world beyond it.

Speaking of the tension between the immanent and the transcendent in the poetry of James Wright, Andrew Elkins tells us:

At times, Wright speaks as if a meaningful life is to be lived with one’s feet planted firmly on Earth, and we hear the “language of immanence”: values are to be found in the things of this world and our life among them...In other poems, those in which we hear the “language of transcendence,” Wright implies that all meaning is elsewhere, off this earth, above it or below it, and we find passive heroes and heroines, listening to the music of the spheres rather than the rhythm of the seasons.

Although James Wright may be floating between the immanent and the transcendent, he is largely caught in an updraft from the former to the latter. In the poem “Lying in a Hammock at

William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" (henceforth referred to as "Hammock"), it is the humblest details of nature, closely observed and exquisitely rendered in language, that sprout angelic wings.

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly

Asleep on the black trunk,

Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.

...

The droppings of last year's horses

Blaze up into golden stones.

A few clods of dung, a blowing leaf, a black trunk: hardly a toolkit for a facet of Heaven, and yet Wright transforms it so, all the more effectively for the poem's great transparency of image and language. How does he achieve this exactly? The conjuring of the bronze butterfly against the dark trunk is an example of what Elaine Scarry in *Dreaming By The Book* would call "radiant ignition": the setting of an object in motion as a luminosity, a bright figure against a dark ground. But the butterfly does more than this. It leads us into a spatial expansion.

There is a build up to unbounded spaciousness in a poem which is itself rather compact and bounded. "*Over my head, the bronze butterfly*" and "*A chicken hawk floats over*" along with "*Down the ravine*" and "*To my right, in a field of sunlight .*" Here we have height, depth, and width opened up without the effect seeming contrived, or greedy for attention. The poem becomes a window through which we look out into a much *larger* space, but this largeness is not limited to spatiality but extends into category, for which the use of spatiality is a kind of sign.

This theme is taken up, for instance, with the cowbells that “follow one another, *into the distances of the afternoon*” and the “droppings of *last year’s* horses, *blaze up* into golden stones.” This blazing up, conjuring as it does images of ascendance and transformation, again draws attention to the infinity of the sky, the domain of the bronze butterfly and the chicken hawk. The fact that it is *last year’s* horses gives us extension in time, resonating with the final line of the poem, *I have wasted my life*, which spans an entire lifetime. Time is also a kind of space that swells here, growing towards this final unspecified boundlessness of the poet’s entire earthly experience. The cowbells follow each other out of the sensorial world and into a larger, unbounded category—*the distances of the afternoon*—where we must infer the nature of their continued existence in an expansive time and space. Thus dung sits timelessly, rises on a semblance of flame, attaining almost to golden bricks on the streets of the New Jerusalem. The flowers stagger outwards until they merge with a limitless horizon. The net effect is that the eye, like Odilon Redon’s “strange balloon,” mounts towards infinity.

We could consider the resource of the imagination readily available to the poet as a sort of “library” of images or archetypes that can be drawn to the creative task. A strand of visionary experience has always done this, as if to bring form and outline to the inexpressible, it creates a shape out of the alphabet blocks of creaturely, embodied experience. To have a hope of catching another person’s subtle meaning, we must glimpse the mystery in the lens of language. The lens is a useful image, because what we are striving to glimpse by its application is too subtle to show up without “special tools.” Moreover, a lens “creates” as well as displays. It is a participating force in the unique image arising, and the characteristics of that image are at least in part dependent on the lens. The lens may be a custom structure too, like the wide angle or fish eye

lens, assisting us in seeing an unusual vantage, an extended field of view. It is an apparatus for that purpose.

In using the term transcendent, I do not mean exclusively a concept of objective spiritual transcendence, if there be such a thing (though I certainly include that), but any feeling, thought, or state of being that is somehow beyond ordinary reach. Outside of poetry, we have a fragment of popular language that describes this problem: “you would need to have been there.” To lose a sweetheart, to raise an autistic child to recover from an illness within a whisker of death, all leave within the person a trace that cannot be communicated by everyday use of language. The poet, though, cannot be satisfied with “you would need to have been there.” It is her job to take us there, no matter how difficult the commission. Language *is* her special lens, and in it we must see the things which otherwise could not be seen.

Wright is not appealing, principally at least, to an intellectual comprehension, but to a “soul seeing,” that if only we could see the world like this all of the time, our experience would be transmuted into something other, into something at the opposite end of the scale from Sartre’s “nausea.” In *Nausea*, inanimate objects take on a profound sense of existential menace to the perceiver. He or she feels directly threatened by them, as if they could unravel the self or render existence worthless if examined too closely. It is not that Wright’s achievement and nausea are fundamentally different things, just that the current is reversed. Instead of allowing natural objects to feed you with meaning and a sense of embedding, belonging, Sartre’s perception of objects sucks meaning from you in an almost vampiric way, leaving you dissociated and alienated. Yet both suggest a polarity of meaning attached to the experience of those objects.

Wright, though rooted in immanence, opens a door to the transcendent, allowing the world to be more than its natural self. The experience is of expansion, not claustrophobia. Well

chosen finite objects are the devices that lever us into the infinite. A butterfly or a string of flowers lead the way into greater spaces. The emotional feel is positive, an opening out. In Sartre's vision, by contrast, we are trapped by the mundane, as if it has ambushed us. The world becomes less than its natural self; a dysfunctional perception, a paranoia. This is not necessarily to be avoided, and has the potential to tap a poem-forming current of itself, but is of opposite sign to Wright's "Hammock."

In Brigit Pegeen Kelly's narrative poem "Song," with its strange singing of a decapitated goat's head hanging in a tree, we travel an interwoven braid between the world of the senses and the world of dreams, without ever being entirely sure where one ends and the other begins. By giving us permission to inhabit for a short while a different world, with different rules, we are enabled to see and hear more. This is what the best of "otherworld literature" does. The lens it holds up does not show us another realm, but our own realm. We see ourselves, our hearts and souls, through the externalized shapes and rhythms of the fantastical, subtle or explicit.

We discern early on in this poem that we are not in the "real world." Yet it is the real world that is spoken of, very much the real world of blood and hewing and fear, a world where boys hack the head from a goat by sweat and main strength, finding it "harder work than they had imagined." A rending sense of loss, too, is not easy to capture in the concrete, yet through the imagery of the severed goat's head, the boys who lose their morally straightforward selves in the deed, and the girl who knows that harm has come to the goat, but she does not know what harm. She knows only "In her chest a bad feeling/Like the feeling of stones gouging the soft undersides/Of her bare feet." This imagery, conjuring as it does her feet like oysters almost, gouged by a sharp instrument, concretizes that dread, incarnates it in physical sensation. This fierce hacking and gouging imagery is a counterpoint to the ethereal also present: the singing

head, the lyrical feel to the lines. The very goat's name, Broken Thorn Sweet Blackberry, seems to capture this duality of the poem, almost as if to show, the sweet can only be attained or known through wounding by thorn.

The fantasy glass of this poem, like the image in the hall of mirrors, shows us ourselves, but enables us to "see around corners" into aspects of our psychological or spiritual selves normally (or conveniently?) concealed among mercifully incommunicable abstractions. It makes our insides visible, as with the boys in the poem, performing what they perhaps thought at the time was a mischievous or wicked prank, but where the wickedness lingers in the air and haunts them, for which the referent in the fantasy glass is the goat's ethereal song drifting through the air. The very idea of goat flesh singing is thoroughly disorienting by itself. It jars us where it hurts: in the unconscious, like an arrow shuddering into wood.

The first two lines of the poem transport us immediately into a surreal world.

Listen: there was a goat's head hanging by ropes in a tree.

All night it hung there and sang.

We know that goats' heads don't sing, so up front we are being asked to leave the shoes of the strictly literal world at the door. Yet it is not that world itself we leave at the door, it is our commonplace perception of it. The world comes with us, transformed. The first line contains nothing unable to exist in that literal world, and its juxtaposition to the dream world status of the second line sets the tone for the poem, a tone that carries right through it. This setting face to face of the real with the fabulous is what gives the poem its remarkable energy. As we pass deeper into the poem though, the two aspects are never again pressed up against each other as

hard as they are in the opening two lines. Rather, a section of dreamlike events will prevail for a while and then, like a change in the wind, the next few lines will revert to realism. Yet the effect is not one of fragmentation. These nuances are bound together effectively by the carrying force of the poem's mood, rooted in its own songlike quality. In the lines preceding the following segment and through the segment, we are entirely in the realm of dream logic:

Then the heart sang in the head, softly at first and then louder,
Sang long and low until the morning light came up over
The school and over the tree, and then the singing stopped....

There are no stanza breaks, but we pass immediately from this into:

The goat had belonged to a small girl. She named
The goat Broken Thorn Sweet Blackberry, named it after
The night's bush of stars, because the goat's silky hair
Was dark as well water, because it had eyes like wild fruit.
The girl lived near a high railroad track. At night
She heard the trains passing, the sweet sound of the train's horn
Pouring softly over her bed, and each morning she woke
To give the bleating goat his pail of warm milk.

We are no longer explicitly in the realm of the fabulous, but we are bridging back to the real world through the imagination of the girl. The descriptive language, however, is still

resonant with the fabulous and helps to glue the bridge together between the explicit dream logic and the real world: “the sweet sound of the train's horn /Pouring softly over her bed.” This image invokes the mercurial and causes us to linger in its ambience. The net effect is that we do not lose our hold on the poem’s dream voice entirely, even when we step fairly solidly into the real world as the poem does next:

She brushed him with a stiff brush. She dreamed daily
That he grew bigger, and he did. She thought her dreaming
Made it so. But one night the girl didn't hear the train's horn,
And the next morning she woke to an empty yard. The goat
Was gone. Everything looked strange. It was as if a storm
Had passed through while she slept, wind and stones, rain
Stripping the branches of fruit.

We are now entirely in the real world. However, even in this section we are reminded that “she thought her dreaming made it so.” Though the magical transformations are now constrained to the girl’s imagination, they remain present for us in the flow of the poem’s ideas. The mood of the poem too carries something of the world in the imagination of a child. A world where the core assumption is simplicity and goodness until an unaccountable absence calls forth her dread. A world in which inanimate objects come alive and are saturated with emotional meaning (the train’s horn pouring, like the warm milk she gives the goat; the night’s “bush of stars” like her beloved goat’s hair). And a world in which the goat grows because she dreams that it does. We are on the inner surface of her magical realm, while at the same time being able

to see beyond it (even at the simple level we know things in the poem she does not), but our sharing in her realm of imagination makes the loss we know she is about to bear more poignant.

The work done in the first two lines to give us both sides of the mirror (real and fabulous) pays off later in the poem with the ability to step with greater ease, like Alice through the Looking Glass, from one to the other. The song-like language effortlessly smoothes over the variations, as it were, in magical density. We need only consider what would happen if the poet had not set this up, if instead the first eight lines consisted of literal realism followed by an immersion into dream logic like a sudden plunge through thin ice. Unless the poet was very careful, this could be disorienting to the reader. She might not be willing to accept the branch of the fabulous, held out to her so late.

It seems to me that the real and the dreamlike in this poem can be thought of as the light and shade in a masterful painting composition. We know that both the light and the shade are there, if we choose to analyze it that way, but the effect of encountering the canvas is Gestalt. We are not aware of the light and shade as “separate aspects” unless we force ourselves to see things that way. Similarly, if we were to remove or cut out, as it were, a very shade-rich area of a larger composition or canvas, we would lose the context that it has within the composition and the act itself would be artificial. Kelly’s “Song” is like this. We can see aspects, or these two different strands of the real and the dreamlike in the whole, but the crucial perspective is the whole, the completed canvas. It is neither possible nor desirable to separate them out as they were never intended to exist separately. Moreover, the relationship between the two, as in the fine visual composition I am using as analogy, is immediate and resonant.

The poem’s ability to tap a dreamlike quality is a large part of its powerful hold. Here is a realm of the fabulous that we are all familiar with. A portion of the work has already been

done for the poet, by nature. When evoked with appropriate language and imagery, our own ability to represent dream logic takes the words of the poem, lifts it in our imagination like a kite, and lets us fly with it. The dreamworld is a world of mercurial transformations and magical connections. We are already familiar with the 'feel' of such a world, as we dip into it every night. The language and imagery of the poem (the singing head, the heart transiting from the body, the emotion inextricable from the object) all invoke for us our own long familiarity with dreaming experience and help us enter it (to some remembered degree at least) while in the poem. The logic of dream is also used in many fairy tales.

Aside from the explicit depiction of physically impossible events (the heart flying from the body to the head), the musicality of the poem dances us through events in a faerie dance:

They sat up in their beds, and then
They lay back down again. In the night wind, the goat's head
Swayed back and forth, and from far off it shone faintly
The way the moonlight shone on the train track miles away.

And also:

The head hung in the tree. The body lay by the tracks.

The head called to the body. The body to the head.

This is no gay step of a pied piper, however. I mean a faerie dance of the original folkloric fairy, the dangerous fairy, the ambiguous fairy who cannot help but wound the world even as he gifts it, where glimpsed brings simultaneously a loss.

“Song” shows us the heightened language of fairy tale. The tone of narration, the repetition, and the cadence is part way reminiscent of a song or an oral telling. It calls forth a sense of performance and thus the spoken traditions of folklore and fairy tales, polished and enhanced by numerous tellings.

We have thus far seen two very different approaches to extending the range of capturable experience. Left to itself, experience runs away from us, save for those fragments that cling to language by a kind of static charge. The poet must increase this electrostatic force so that more of experience is caught in its field of influence. The sophistic adage that no one can tell a blind man what the color blue is like, may be true. We can’t tell him. Yet this does not rule out the possibility, nonetheless, that there may be some other experience, a feeling, a subjective state of being known to both the blind man and the seeing man, which nonetheless captures some resonance or similarity, in an emotional dimension, to the experience of beholding blue. Something is captured. Not the whole thing. Never the pure thing. But some shell or resonance of it, which again yields recognition.

The current between the immanent and the transcendent flows in both directions. We can travel to rarified states of consciousness and experience, snare whatever we can in our flimsy mesh of language and drag it back down with us, so many angel wings caught in a fishnet. Or we can take the ordinary objects and events of experience and raise them towards the extraordinary, as Wright does, towards the mystery residing at the heart of all things. In the hands of an able poet, an orange slowly moldering on a kitchen shelf or an old shoe sitting on its side in the sun can attain to transcendence. The special lens of language is used to show us the ordinary, transformed to the sublime, and we might just be able, with Blake, “to see the world in a grain of sand.” We need not be contemplating objects of cosmic scale to be shown feelings of cosmic

scale. But this has to be earned. We are taking language on its most difficult and subtle voyage. The default state is to fail, not to succeed. If mere conversation could do these things, there would be no need for poetry. It requires a special project, and by using language in poetry as a custom ground lens, we are striving to see something indirectly, rather than directly. To see it perhaps, as the astronomer sees the image of the sun's eclipse projected from his lens onto a white card. We do not wish to make the mistake, as the Zen saying goes, of "mistaking the pointing finger for the moon."

A more explicit use of the fabulous than is found in "Song" occurs in Gjertrud Schnackenberg's "Imaginary Prisons," which takes the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty as its starting point. In the poem, as in the tale, the characters are caught in a timeless moment, but in the poem we travel into the subjectivity of the temporally suspended characters to imagine, as it were, their dreams. We move through a series of stills depicting the context of each character, but in which there is (paradoxically) a tremendous amount of dynamic tension, like a taut elastic band. For instance, the ruler's brother is frozen, contemplating for a hundred years a crack in a china platter that disproves his theory of perfection. Schnackenberg grasped that with the backdrop to the poem already established as the fabulous (the reference point of a famous fairy tale), the internal tension in each vignette had to focus on the human, or the cosmic concerns of the human as they open up from our limited perspectives. Thus, an astronomer gazes outwards through his telescope, two aspiring lovers stand poised for conflict over the same maiden, the madman stares transfixed at his platter, forced to contemplate flaw and perfection, entropy and divine order. The narrative telling is simple here: you don't try to improve on what the fairy tale does best. The poet understands this. Rather, we see the hundred year curse from the inside as if it were an actual event, with real people caught in the amber of their fears and obsessions. Using

this device gives us a lever by which to purchase a conception of the universe as timelessness, or of death as the timelessness that awaits each human being. Relating this to my discussion of the immanent and the transcendent, Schnackenberg seeks to ground the transcendent within the immanent (the opposite current from Wright). By this I mean that large metaphysical categories such as time and timelessness, mortality, and immortality, abiding and disintegration, are encapsulated in time-splinters of imagery, somewhat like the shards of a mirror broken on the floor. The entire world is seen in each shard, but from a slightly different view. Schnackenberg finds her niche in the negative spaces between the major events of *Sleeping Beauty*. In the original tale we might only wonder briefly how it might be for such a character, trapped for a hundred years, a scenario which eerily reminds of the real world patients afflicted by sleeping sickness as described by Dr. Oliver Sacks in *Awakenings*. In the poem, however, we linger in those spaces, and the strange timelessness of events acts as a bridging state or interface between the mundane world and the transcendent. We feel as if we are caught in one of those ultra-slow-motion hummingbird shots, where the film slows to a standstill. What we see, again, is the familiar world, but we are seeing it through a very special lens, a lens in this case which telescopes time.

The chief success of “Imaginary Prisons” is to seize upon a large scale abstract concept (timelessness and its relation to the human condition), and then use the apparatus of fairy tale to render it in the concrete instance. As with Kelly’s “Song” the language and imagery is sometimes that of the dreamworld, although, unlike “Song,” here we are imagining characters who are explicitly dreaming rather than the world itself transformed into a dream. An example is the arrested poet, this arrest symbolic of the temporal standstill experienced by all the characters:

And dreams his angelfish are drawing near
The paper he's spread out across his table,

Like candle flames they flicker as they whisper
The letters he transcribes, and back and forth
Their wobbling reflections through the water
Give to the page and underlight of fire
As if fire were a property of paper.

A lot is packed into this short burst of imagery. The dreamlike movements of the fish and their whispering of 'meaningful things' invokes the dreamstate. As with many images throughout the poem it flirts with images of death and final, irrevocable undoing. With "his angelfish are drawing near" the poet makes us think, perhaps, the *angels* are drawing near, i.e. death is approaching. Then, "as if fire were a property of paper"; the paper already carries its destruction within itself as we carry the certainty of our deaths within us from birth. I draw evidence for this elsewhere within the poem too, as there seems to be an underlying leaning towards predestination:

The future in the past is fixed forever,
Like words locked up in pencils, webs in spiders,
Like flames imprisoned in the match tip's sulphur.

The “words locked up in pencils” directly connects to the poet, whose sharpened pencil is the cause of his arrest, and the frequent lingering on the consequences of the curse, throughout the poem, underscores predestination, as a curse is a form of predestination. It is almost as if the poet believes that ‘God’ (or the life-generating force however conceived) is predestined to create the world just as it is. I hear an echo of this idea in:

These faces one by one among the roses
Bear witness to the private agony
Of what it means to have a single purpose.

But *whose* single purpose? The individual purpose of each character is different, only the singular nature of it remains identical. The implication seems to be that God cannot escape from the singularity of his own purpose, nor ultimately from the Sleeping Beauty timelessness that lies in wait at the end of whatever temporal adventure has been set in motion. As the poet expresses it towards the end of the poem:

I’ve learned to make a study of the hour
When grander schemes that mock our calculations

Reveal that we’re the emblems standing for
The consequence of what we cannot master.

In other words, we are done to, we do not ourselves do. We are victims of enormous forces, for which we are merely the sign, as indeed this poem is a sign, earthing as it does these abstract

concepts into the seeable world of curses and dreaming images. A good example of this grounding is the axe image, where the imponderable of time's slow process upon us is rendered visible, first by telescoping that process, and second by embedding it in strong, experienceable sensory detail:

And witnessed to the end the work of briars

As, blooming through his slowly loosened fingers,

They carried off his ax as if it were

A weightless toy among the waves of roses.

Our viewpoint here, as reader, is the "god's eye view", beyond the temporal suspense of the characters. We can dip into it and out of it, concertina the temporal process and then expand it again like a Christmas decoration. The characters themselves, in contrast, are locked within their eternal moment. We could say, therefore, that with Schnackenberg the "special" property of the lens is the way it bends time. By altering our time sense (again, very loosely calling to mind the time lapse nature footage) we are made to see the world anew.

Having now examined three poems in depth, can we say anything further about the process or processes by which images or forms condense out of a seed idea or moment? How does this process function? The question is difficult and it seems inelegant to deny that there is an element of mystery here. Elaine Scarry argues that imagination, when set beside perception, is attenuated and lacking in vitality: we can scarcely conjure an object or a face anywhere with anything approaching the vividness of a simple sensory experience on a sunlit day. This is

certainly true, and makes biological sense. The threshold of the dreamstate is greatly attenuated during the day, so that the categories of physical experience and interior representation do not get confused. This is, for instance, so that primitive man did not encounter a predator, mistake it for a projected imagination of one, and fail to take the appropriate action. I cannot realize by interior visualization alone the extraordinary fractal detail of a wind-swaying tree, the subtlety of light and shade, the play of shadows on the trunk. At best I can consciously call to mind a “low resolution” remnant of such a thing, with the larger structures and shapes represented, but with most of the detail missing. In this sense then, imagination becomes a mimesis of perception. when used as a kind of ‘guided imagery’ from a writer or poet this mimesis can draw closer to the reality.

Yet it seems to me that this does not go far enough. While it is true that we see with the eye, it is truer still that we see with the mind. It is the mind that makes sense and form of what is seen; in other words, imagination is part *of* perception. It is a component, as it were, of seeing. Were this not so, it seems doubtful that interior representation would be possible at all, certainly any creative version of it. I see the creative act as a *dialectic* between perception and imagination. The one cannot do without the other. Without the stimuli of perception, imagination has no “working materials.” However, without the faculty of imagination, without the mysterious dark matter or subconscious aptitude which is capable of shaping those raw materials into novel and creative productions, what we end up with is something like the searing mimesis of the autistic savant: faultless in draughtsmanship but also eerily soul-less.

We can agree with Scarry that poetry more closely approximates the immediacy of perception than does narrative. It has a visual and aural presence on the page, and a tactile sensation in the mouth with the sounds. This activity helps to call the creative forces of the

unconscious out of the dark and into action, so to speak. Of these forces *themselves* not much can be said (they attract the name unconscious for a reason), but we can detect them in their outcomes, just as we can detect the collision patterns resulting from cosmic rays with the atmosphere in the beauty of the aurora borealis, without necessarily having to glimpse cosmic rays directly.

When James Wright engages with the sensory world around him in *Hammock*, he is engaged in this kind of rehearsal. Sensory experience is arriving on that loop, turning through language in the conscious and unconscious minds of both the poet and his reader, and re-emerging as experience transformed in the minds of both. Even in cases where this loop is not so obvious, such as the other poets discussed in this document, the cycle is merely delayed rather than absent entirely. Kelly or Schnackenberg (may) not have the sensory input of a lazy summer afternoon pouring in on them as they compose their lines, but this is only because they have already ingested a huge wealth of sensory experience to the unconscious and are calling on that. The dialectic is still essential; the action of the “return stroke” (from poet back to world) is merely delayed, or processed through other departments first, such as fairy tale.

The process of dialog can also be recognized from other artistic pursuits. Many composers work directly on and with their chosen instruments in the evolution of a piece. An idea may be realized on the instruments, fixed on a recording or performance, which in turn will give the composer further ideas to enhance the piece. The final product emerges from this dialectic process. We could make a similar observation about a painter and her canvas. While it might be possible, following the legend of Mozart, to realize an artistic epic “directly from the head,” as it were, I suspect this is far less common than supposed.

We have seen, then, how the project of earthing the transcendent (or raising the earthly towards the transcendent) is less unchartable than we may at first imagine. I have sought to remain open to the nature and mystery of the transcendent while identifying possible landmarks (or tools) in this terrain, and sketching in those features on a map in no way seeks to collapse or bottle that mystery. What I was looking to identify was at least a partial set of tools or enablers for bringing the ineffable into the realm of language, and hence to conscious awareness via poetry. A large part of this abides in the poet's ability to bring us into contact with the sense of the transcendent within ourselves. With Kelly, it is the invocation of dream logic and imagery to break us out of the strict left brain. Wright's finger points towards the moon, leading us out of the world, but we get there on stepping stones of blazing dung. Schnackenberg references a formal structure of fantasy (and a pre-existing fairy tale) to lubricate our way into the secret spaces, then holds us there by invoking a series of timeless moments.

Pulling back from the canvas, we can see now how the three methods work in the big picture. At the beginning I introduced our poets as using three unique approaches to the coupling of the immanent with the transcendent. Kelly transforms our own world into a world of fairy tale. Schnackenberg transforms the world of fairy tale into our world, by means of the timeless moment. Wright launches us from the familiar world, not so much into the fabulous, as into the infinite and the eternal, and yet, paradoxically, we are enabled to glimpse these through everyday things and events.

I close with this important concept of the dialectic, which I described above in terms of imagination and perception, but which we can extend, I think, to the question of the artist and the 'receiver' of her art. The project of rendering visible the ineffable, whatever techniques may be used at the atomic level, is always a *conversation* between poet and reader. A poem is in no

sense just a set of cue cards to spark memory in the reader. It is more like the relation between iron filings and a magnet and the striking shape that the two make together. The reader supplies the iron filings (memories, perceptions, incidents, unique life experiences) that serve as raw material for the 'magnetic field'. Without these, without this ferrous dust, no shape, no sacred geometry can become visible at all. There is no poem on earth could bring revelation to a true Kaspar Hauser: one side of the dialectic would be amputated. On the other hand, the iron filings alone are not (usually) sufficient to create the geometry. What the poem holds out to the reader is an *opportunity for seeing* in a certain way. It is something capable of gathering together those iron filings, or a catalyst for a possible arrangement of them, an event which will (again not *necessarily*) ever happen if the filings are simply left to themselves. The revelation provided is an emergent property of both components, magnetic field and filings, poem and reader.

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PART II
FATHOM'S EDGE

I

The Shore

He wasn't down by the shore that morning
when the elephants rose from the sea,
their black heads breaking surface,
the eyes, just above the waterline,
fixed on some point in the faraway trees.
And all the while rising.

You may not know this man
yet he would seem familiar enough.
The silhouette hunched over
the childhood cot.
The supporting hand by the grave.
A father, or brother, or son.
And he would be a man ablaze with language.
At the zenith of that power,
his words shimmering like the bright flanks
of fish shoaling against the sun.

He was unaware, then, as the treachery of his body began,
those fell shapes mounting towards the shore,
a black mass moving silent, unseen,
beneath a raven sky taut with stars.

The first signs of approach were simple things,
the stiffness of a smile, the meaning of a word
that crumbled as he reached for it,
like a snowball, too soft to throw.

And as the peril heaved ashore it transcended
to absence;
the mouth of a dragon devouring the sun,
a dark rose burning its blossom
from the edge of the dictionary until,
by stealthy ruin,
it consumed it all.

Were the shadows, too, like dragons
in those final days,
when he stood, a well rounded pebble,
among the once-familiar shapes of his library,
the withered petals of language at his feet.

Only his words,
those tiny arks turning outwards on the waves,
will bear his memory from shore.
Perhaps there is in this is a kind of redemption.
Not from the foe itself, not that.
But at least from the finality of its triumph.

Mind's Lantern Flickers Low

If trees were a God,
what creature would they make?
What rough-made shape, stooped there in its hood,
would call the old ones from their houses,
a wet cross painted on its back.

Wild roots speak of us, you know,
when the sun goes down.
Brown tongues wagging in the earth.
icy drops, falling from leaves,
Tap quietly, like hammers
on the plumbing of prison rooms.

Dark wood stretches in glee,
like a neck.

If I could fill my mouth with ageing things
and munch that rot,
would a chlorophyll light ignite the skull,
and march me to some precipice
the green beams shining from my eyes
like headlights in a Chinatown fog?

Please Excuse My Son's Absence, As (He Believed That) His Chin Had Turned Green

Okay, let's see what we've got here.
Ah yes, there he is, our morning hero
launching from his bed like a cannon shot in medieval shipping.
Or like one of those balls sold by Mr Mcallister in a window jar,
those jars full of stink and too much sunlight,
the kids all holding their breath as they dipped,
and the balls bouncing high, so high—
we'd squint into the sky's furnace and think they'd never come down.

Flirty with danger when it suited him, our boy,
with snakes in his pockets,
and fireworks up his sleeves on the school bus.
Damn near killed by earth, water and fire,
yet such a wimp;
bursting into tears at the threat of strange food,
or the reflection of his raincoat,
running alongside him in the snow.
Afraid of scurvy, fairies, and the human appendix,
all riding out past him,
in quest of more deserving foe.

There he stands, nostrils flaring
hated shorts in the shivery breeze,
snapping like sails to a turn in the wind,
and that nose the rudder,
steering towards the shadowy headland of adulthood.

The expressions on his face like one of those flip books.
In photographs, well, usually a blur.
Or supernaturally still—
a living thing dipped in liquid nitrogen.
That deep, preoccupied frown,
serious—but not quite persuasive,
a policeman shrunk in the wash.

And somewhere way behind those eyes,
verses perhaps.
Fluttery, embryonic things
like bats dangling in the viscous dark,
awaiting their far-away dusk.

Or like meat rolling in a soup.
at just that tasting moment,
when the chef pulls a face,
the kind of face high-g pilots make most of the time,
and drops it back in for another ten years.
“This one’s not quite done.”

Poet—medium rare.

But true to form he couldn’t wait,
writing poems so dreadful,
he reversed into genius in the parking lot,
exchanging license and registration.

It’s late now.
Blanket drapes the mirror, as always,
but the ghost of the streetlamp abroad on the wall.
Watching stars walk across the bedroom ceiling,
a sudden taste of egg for no reason,
looking for cracks in the world to fall through.
Too late, he’s asleep.

The Dolittle Scars

Will those gathered here outdoors
know a stencil is among them?
The hand that draw my outline,
aching with stardust and the ghost of language,
gives no quarter.

Is there an assay for grief's permissible latitude?
The shape of an iris, the wetness of a nose?
Do words bear a grammar of moments shared
across a gulf spanned only
by glistening ropes of DNA?
Were it not for women
frowning sideways in severe hats
we might call this our cleanest love.

I listen to the speaker,
but his words become bottles traveling in wells,
colliding away and away from me,
they race into the macular dark
faster than I can reach for them.
I stop trying.

Yet there is solace here.
The voice ripples to a flexion of mere being,
an aboriginal drone vibrating the sand of me,
but softly-
 it declares our common creaturehood,
like ants stitching me into the loamy earth.
Assimilated.

I sit there in the turf,
a Picasso gesture for the benefit of others.
But within the skin's event horizon,
composed entirely of absence,
I am a frown of dark matter, its unknown mass
bending textures of meaning
along sweeps of borrowed gravity.

For a few moments it unmakes me.
The world flakes to uncharted becoming.
I breathe out runes, I hurtle glassly,
I pull back, I vibrate like a star,
I shout greenly, and my shout is a sigil hanging the moon.

I lost a friend today.

The Burning

They menace me again,
those trees, crackling on the hill.
As if to unseen fire.
Those brothers three, like witchfinders,
shrouded to accuse.

What tortured thirst drives your stretching wood?
What yet nameless pain,
groaning like toothache,
from the ancient jaws of life,
struggles for a rest that never comes?

Their tortured hands, like mine, flex upwards—
mechanical claws, their gears grinding,
in the biting wind.
Thinking, what is *this*, and now *this*?
And just, what is it all?

Their black flames spasm skywards.
And I travel with them,
like a mote loosed from a bonfire.
Until the whole world is this burning,
and the flesh of this burning.
And there is no rest for all the sky.

II

Phone Call at the Party

Forecast: no ashes today.
Just March laughing in its cold, hard boots.
And back he comes down the whooshing road.
That good old road, the same,
where he tripped and cracked his front tooth.
A launch

like Armstrong,
clearing the tower of his boots.
And the Eagle, crash landing on the sidewalk,
Orbital decay.

Those same boots.
And he still splashing with smiles from the river,
arrives like a small whirlwind, vortitized. His

mother's face.

Intuition sparks like a flint.
He is already turning, no words spoken but
Everything. Already. Said.
And the blue sky sliding, sliding.
And his mother saying
 "I have something to tell you."
And he saying
 "Wait, there's something outside."
But there's nothing outside.
God, there's nothing outside.
And he just wants to turn,
he just wants to run,
back to the splashes,
back to the river.
But they can't be the same now.
They can never

be the same: he is *told*.
And the blue sky sliding.
And then he is inside where,
Everything has become these
Silly. Smallest. Things.
 Until the entire world is those boots,
 and the tightness of those boots.

And his mother saying "Let's get them off."
And he wants to hit her or something,
for talking about boots.
And pulling, pulling off the boots.

Then he is standing.
His mother has become a policeman.
"Your father is at rest now son."
Arm on his shoulder,
And the silver, silver buttons on his tunic.
Will he ever forget that silver?
The only tears he sheds, crying into those buttons.

Later he wants to peek.
Into the bedroom, to see the—
His mother says he shouldn't.
And they come.
And they take him from the house so quick, like robbers.
Swoosh—out!
Like down a chute.
No parade, no fanfare.
Just the cold clanking of trolley metal.

And now it is dark.
And it's raining, God it's pouring.
At dinner he laughs, yes he laughs.
Flirting with the panic inside.
And the dark night knocking

on his head.
And the rain, rain, rain.

The Soul As Memory

A memory of a place I have never been
haunts through the keyholes of my spirit,
like the winged muttering of Vespers,
or the small sound of sheltered leaves
stretching in a cloister.

It has a name: Mont Tombe
But what does this tell you?
Google its face to a hundred thumbnails,
wring droplets of history from its tide-thrashed walls,
until it pleads for stone mercy.

But still you will not know.
And I cannot give.

A friend jokes that if he
passes me a plate of mashed potato,
I will begin carving,
my back stooped over the sublimated food,
my eyebrows drawn in, like a penitent.
Rocking, rocking.

It has another name: Mont St Michel.
As if, in easy spoonfuls of history,
we make the numinous digestible.
And don't think I haven't thought of this:
leading a donkey down some long tarred-over track,
or hefting a sack of grain,
my breath cold as a bell in the Medieval dawn,
a misplaced ricochet of self did not
in some sense incomprehensible,
once pass by this way.

But that is too easy.
So I eat my potato
like a good Newtonian boy,
and pretend alongside my peers,
rocking beside their own meals the world over,
that the answers, though plainly not to hand
will be along any time now.

The Muse

I stare at a page white as a virgin bedsheet.
It draws and intimidates,
like a fall.

The caprice of your kind is renown.
I seek you in the thin places,
the graphite shadow beyond the lantern,
The traveling breath in the back of the closet,
You elude.

Your shyness is a strategem,
a chess fork on the human soul.
I resign.
Jerked like a puppet, its sewn eyes beading,
it seems I must.

Is today the day? I ask.
Will I chew on words fibrous as rootbark?
The sly contraction of a fairy iris.

Or will your tossed hair flow like language
and priestly vestments.
A bridal train sighing past
in the mind's pillared dark.

We of War

You are the lost, the fallow deaths,
the books of barely written lives.
Those shapely volumes, sculptured bones,
page after yellowed empty page,
now winds alone,
leaf through your sullen tomes.

Drafted fresh with youth you came,
to war's brown bloodied fields.
How soft your hold, your childish grip,
your bones dream white their grinning dreams,
your drumstick hearts that beat their brief tattoo.

You who will die today, know this:-
We too are servants of a greater cause, and like you
rear up at battle's gurgly horn,
drafted since the world's grey dawn,
to discharge our weary burden.

He carries: bread? No—limply slung.
What cracking, gun or bone?
And what deep well his startled love?
We sift the fallow deaths.

You are the fallow deaths, you walk,
the bells that ring, the bones that break,
this dust your life, this wind your breath,
you are the fallow death.

What candles burn for you, my child?
And in our soils, what grave?
This shattered stone? This muddy pool?
What incense marks your passing sigh,
In the long gray gulp of the guns?

What book inscribes your stuttered name?
What loving finger—
trembling only with its passion,
traced this perished smile,
where *we* now must begin?

And we see again faces in lightning,
your sorrows squandered in rain,
for the hand that feeds the squatter's flame,
that crimson flame,
within your homely skull.

You are the lost, the bones that talk,
these bones the pins that stretch—
the pains,
no flesh can bear.
Your blood runs freely with our earth,
and love's startled photograph
stares skywards from a rancid pool.

What light then to outshine these deeds?
And which the dark to cover them?
What bones strike anchor in the earth
for mourning carved so deep?
And where the wind to blow away,
these ichor tainted soils?
For in that soil, what blooms could grow,
Knowing simply what they do?

Wish them no rain,
this shattered fruit, these broken halves,
your own.
Lest you forget, lest you forget,
for main, like rain, forgets.

Do not pity us, we are blind.
The one mercy that we own to balance
the dreadful knowing that lifts now with our pulsing tide,
the many shapes
of One.

As swathes we come, in tallowed fields,
of slick and burnished flame.
The ravens flock,
where death rides out,
to eat its own dark head.
The gunning now is done,
but we, not *we*—

the worms that ride the sockets of the skull.

Thoughts Near a Thinning Tree

No warning from summer skies.
The clockface splits.
And from the stormy crack sighs out,
grey sands, grey:
of the dead.

Buddha sneers from the apple trees,
Russell smirks, rain on glass,
the world burned out to a smoking shell,
reflecting only
the lunatic rictus of the self.

Each pebble scribbled with
the naked terror of absurdity.
Each new thought shoeless by its shore.
The birds do not sing.
They heave, burdened, towards some carbon sun,
their eyes holes in wood,
the gaping mouths of children.

Open and close your monstered hands,
easy the horse of your fear.
What is this fragile thing, Man,
who comes so far, so hobbled,
to spill the chalice of his life,
the frozen waste of stars?

III

Endlessly

The timepiece on the dash reads two minutes to Bengal,
the tiger not the place,
and motorists honk like gulls,
squabbling over scraps of precious time.

If we could reach down Darwin's fossil throat
and pluck some Doolittle wire that still
In that hoary dark suspends,
would we hear what they might tell us, the gone?

Would we hear from Martha
last of the passenger pigeons,
who died on September 1st 1914
when the Dragonhide Clock still only
marked the year.

And when we finally sink the dolphins
like so many wartime frigates
holed beneath the waterline,
will they sign off with Douglas Adams
"Goodbye, and thanks for all the fish".
Or will their silver voices tune a lament,
piping us aboard the skeletal deck
to mirrored rooms, where,
like fierce manikins, our wired jaws chewing,
through to an iron future,
we contemplate our own orphaned reflections?

Endlessly.

Ruby in Desert Velvet

I come, a reluctant pilgrim to this solitude, again.
And the desert night,
made more by its vastness,
watches me through the bowed glass of eternity,
with the eyes of a wary animal.

It's been one of those days, where, like Neo
I wish I had chosen the blue pill.
Pregnant with emptiness, I hope perhaps
that the earth herself may fill me up,
in this unlikely place, amid these towering jars
of silence.

And in the penguin huddle of my creature core
my heart, to salve its arctic sting,
would settle even for a velveter kind of nothing.

Something twitches,
And for a moment, it seems, I tremble on the brink of recalling things
we all once vowed to forget,
with time itself a hoax so deep
that the shock of it explodes from my chest, again,
like a small bird taking flight.

But it is not enough.
It is never enough, and I rage to want it all,
to know it all,

as if, in some skewed Castaneda moment,
Einstein himself were to throw wide the green doorway of a cactus
and stand there, fuming with immortal vapors,
his wild hair streaming in electric wind like the silver tresses of a comet,
to lecture me, benignly of course, on the meaning of existence.

Or would I just fall away into the sky?
A human windmill tumbling towards the galaxy core,
the strange broadcast of my plaintive love,
like the distress signal from a doomed probe
as it stretches longer and slower in the gravity well,

dwindling at last to an unrequited radio-shriek
down the thirsty gullet of a black hole.

Or would you later come upon me here,
all throaty-woo and gold-fleck feather?
By shock of revelation, wholly transformed into an owl
lying freshly dead on its back,
its big orbs blasted wide to the sky,
but that small horny-plated beak
still twittering impossibly with fragments of cosmic truth,
like a bicycle wheel slowly running down.

Or perhaps, some Shakti serpent charmed at last up the pillar of my spine,
I might spontaneously combust, candling away in the wilderness,
my perineum blazing like a low-slung star.
And in the middle distance, somewhere, the semaphore figure of a lone saguaro,
directing wildlife like a traffic cop,
until the hazard is past.

To cross, just to step over some invisible longitude of the soul,
where love's mortal shell, broken and fractured like a sucked-out egg,
is once again a wholesome curve.

They say that the image of Brahman, if made too near,
Is Brahman himself, as He is.
Yet I want you to grasp that I *see* you.
Burning there.
Burning there, there.
And I know if I take but one step closer,
It may be as if
I have never existed at all.

My fear tugs back and at once you are gone.
The night hangs limp, like a bird neck, broken,
and the stars so many skin flakes on a cheap, black suit.
Slowly, I walk back to the car.
My head, I imagine tracking redly through the darkness,
like a flare dwindling on a hillside,
like a coal.

Notes from a Mildly Autistic God

I

If we could flush the ghost from the body,
a coin slot in the neck, for communion wafers,
massaged gently down the throat,
their white cascade a pinball clanging in the ears.
What would be the change?

II

If we could turn off some switch in the head,
where language has its cluttered source,
would we then discern, perhaps,
that words are merely bear shapes for the meanings they convey.
Rough and shaggy as twice daed things
we require only:
their halo outline in the mind.

III

If we could name the day when the comet comes,
Its lewd eye riding the sky's cowl,
would we rave the prophet, our spines folding
like paperclips.
Or would the meek botanists,
their sex-tide rising like cress,
break down the observatory doors
to ride the brass hips of a telescope?

I Lost Myself One Morning

Something casts me like a fly
and I float on those wide, mathematical curves
into water that strives to sing of green blood.

I don't like singing, so I break onto shores
of old discontent and file down the language
of long dead relatives into spears, bloody
with the wagging of Irish tongues.

The tongues chase me into libraries
where books whisper of paper things,
and the treachery of the atom
that split before it was questioned.

But I don't like questions either,
so I leave before the owl of the desk
its mouse instinct rising at last,
staples my heart to an archive.

It seems as if I fall into a bag
all of autumn, and climb back out
along the ladder of my bones,
to a place where hard things
rage in a stone.

I slit my vein, and the blood
is a music that seeps into
faraway people blinking awake
on a yellow morning Chinese with trees.

When the heart squirts no more in the cage
of my meat, the earth splits its skin
and its chalk seduction seizes my ear,
forcing my head down a staircase of whispers
to the quench of a box.

Dark Matter

Listen,

it's convenient to believe that we simply die,
that we sink into the bliss of our unraveling
like a cheek into a satin pillow,
laced with ebbing suns.

And is it not convenient
to believe that we continue,
that our breath lingers on the window pane,
that the mind's lace,
won't blow and tear,
like cobwebs in a fanged wind.

But I confess to the suspicion
of no escape,
that the bright and the dark
are Janus faces of a deeper story,
like the strobe on a weather vane,
so quick and so bright, so quick and so bright,
that if we didn't wrench our gaze away,
our screams would burrow into wood.

Suppose we don't rise to our being
like so much bread, warm and freshly broken,
but like fierce twists of flame vaulting from a crater,
not to seek the answer but to blaze the question,
a terrible question existence itself can't fathom
save to body forth the world.

IV

There Is A River

I

Somewhere in bare summits far behind,
where memories fuse in primeval glass
and forms scroll inwards to utterance,
a strength that could be water gallops new,
unbridled, from a stony gap,
its dark mane puissant with night.

Our tepid senses cannot discern this thing.

But in the troubled quiet of our homes,
that mountainous quiet after the graveside or the crib,
we feel its pressure at our back,
Like the pressure of the sun
on the muscled necks of our fathers
as it pushed them through the fields towards another day,
And we pray that we are strong.
Strong enough, not to grip
the arms of a chair,
or brace our feet against a wall.

Like the rationed moisture in us all,
straining at the cell,
frothing by the edge of the tongue
to stretch towards its unseen moon,
so the River, under bridges, under cities,
unwinds along its epic darkness,
rolling like an eye behind a lid,
like fever.
And again the tired men rise,
lifted by a swell they cannot name,
to labor in the sockets of their ancestors,
their hats pulled low against the gurgling in their ears
their lunch boxes grasped,
white knuckles on a branch.

II

An old Oriental
dying in his simple home,
arches his back as the river flexes through him,
fighting to change course.
Moth wings beat at his neck.

Perhaps form too is a kind of memory.
A speaking in shapes that strives to know itself
in the dark groping of its own unconscious,
bearing our names towards some unknown Delta.

I remember you now, river.
But will you remember me?

A swirl or eddy drawn in scattered sands,
colors blazing under Buddha sky,
a tale that was once myself.

Or the infant bawling in its hovel,
the man with a face like the work of a painter's knife,
for whom a seat or a warm potato
was all the wishing of the day.

Our blood hums the tune that defeats us.
The eye wears out in the seeing
but still:
Do you see how, slowly, we turn?
Knowledge is a falcon
long slipped its hood
We are borne,
like magnets on floating leaves,
drawn to a lodestone hanging like a moon
beneath our own horizon,
fading like the ribboned cries of children,
their voices long on the wind.

III

I see the waters sweeping past the window panes,
floating behind the headboards
of sleeping girls, their white necks shining
like reflections from a chalice.

And on:

into shadows dark as old men's pockets.
Into swirls of coffee ancient as the world.

Is life then the mirror in which God sees himself?
A summons from the dark, like the cold drawing
that pulls the sleepwalker from his bed.

Or is the unconscious itself the bed
from which we rise?

Ghosts pressing us into the light
that we might drink of it,
And share it with their lusting hands.

I seek again for the Chinaman,
but I no longer hear him above the sound of the river,
And down the street, six stiff-backed men bear a makeshift coffin,
the water fierce at their legs.

IV

An elbow of birds turns sharply in midair,
a streak of spilled ash
above the widow hurrying with bread.
She leans hard into her future and her song
is a lament. The same song
that sails the church prow way downstream.
The same song that grinds out the stone of her face,
and her mother's face, and a masonry of all faces
back to the beginning.

The same song as the humming in the telephone wires
forty generations later, and the child bent forward in a field,
screaming at the poles, because he knows it is God
calling the world collect.

As she passes me by,
the birds are gone.
And the ash is on her forehead.

The voices are leaving me now.
They merge and vanish at the radiance point,
the estuary.
And I realize I know the answers
to none of the questions.

I know only that there was a river,
and we were in it.

Space Junk

I cross between a frown of buildings,
my shadow sweeping the ground like the moon's fatal edge;
a satellite veering towards destruction.

It all seemed so easy when I boarded the flight,
between a clench of fog and a chasm
deep as absent ambition.

I sit just back of the business section,
watch ruby cufflinks winking in stellar choreography;
swerving, blasting off in anticipation
of the next PowerPoint opportunity.

Yet deep in the sacral pit of myself
gravity owns me,
like a pheasant dangling limp on a wire,
it's deep-cut neck swinging towards Mecca.

The smoke drawn through the long thin reed
of the cabin, so many last reminders.
A contrail of bridges in flames.

Now I wonder if my several parts might separate
with a blonde flash and a slow tumbling motion.
The earth too shrugging me off;
see under lost property.

Slow Glass

I envy your fear.

My fears do not pucker the night,
do not gather the hem of darkness
to a linen face thrusting in the window.

They do not shuffle, some malformed shadow
lurching in a clock tower, awaiting its chance
to gnaw on time's frayed edge.

Neither do they blaze in the street, a cannon.
Or shrink in an attic, from a stethoscope.

They mine the salt of my bones,
a slow plunder, the quiet erosion
of a soldier wearing down the years
through metal rain.

A headstone knocking on the patient sky.
An old woman knitting in the reed-thin night.
a bird, eyeless, watching my bed.
The continental drift of the flesh.

V

The Ebbing

As I look down on our dying cat this morning,
dawn leaning hard into the tall screens,
I wonder, how can it be this time already?
It seems that I still hear the echo of your plaintive calls,
as we released you on the carpet Savannah of our home
a minute and a lifetime ago.

Continuity and boundary.
So they say that death too is both a process and a break.

Like a fool, I've left the mercy dash too late,
and now there is only this vigil.
The ebbing, a gelid presence in our house,
an extra dweller who hung his hat unasked,
following from room to room.

When I lift him, it's as if
He is absent already,
too delicate for a living thing,
like a pressed flower discovered in the pages
of a forgotten book.

For months I have watched the grim descent,
the slow betrayal of bladder and bowels,
the morning he woke up blind,
his thin neck stretching, as if to see past it,
not knowing, not comprehending,
what could had happened.
Death is always an ambush.

We yearn for the simplest things,
for zero to be less than a mouth,
or the heartbeat, more than a bird
knocking in a hollow tree.
That spools of breath,
circling through us all,
may yet unwind to blessedness.
The flesh made word.

There is, when the moment comes
a solemn fascination, the hidden observer

holds me to watchful stillness.
As if, in the darkening of that eye,
It bids me see the closing of my own.
And with it the illusion that the companions
of our years are ever, were ever, ours.

A Song of Sarajevo

Do you see the sparks in the rain my friend,
for those who must die tonight.
Do you taste the metal along the wind,
will they know the terror that comes,
their names blowing over haunted ground.
Can they riddle the cracks
of my bruised and punctured city.

Your footsteps are smoke,
a sky stretched thin with phosphor ghosts,
running through spaces that are gaps in rain.
You touch them in ways beyond all words.
By being there
simply doing what you do.

See their small figures run,
from street to ruin-shadowed street.
their footprints damp with borrowed light.
Lost in gunfire, the voices that,
in spite of all
keep talking.

But you have found the beauty of my fire-scribbled sky,
the adrenalin thunder of night,
the blue light back of the shattered streets,
that is somehow a revelation.

And that face among others, those eyes, which
seeing through the fretted tapestries of horror
yet pick you out, wherever you are
among the complex passages of rubble.

And I'll tell you a secret:
angels too
are blind in the smoke.
You have run the gauntlet of impossible terrors
to the love that surpasses.
My friend, my blue ghost burning
with the naked life that glows brighter
in the face of death.

The shadow in the window raises its arm.
But I am the soul of this city.
So run now,
I have cut the wire that was your death this day.
You are the Angel of Sarajevo
who brought laughter to my children.

The Ghost Less Pale

My yesterday, it swirls,
like hauntings of some half-glimpsed truth.
A world of chestnut fire,
and river light.
I loved her: what was her name?

In distant summers,
when the blood swerved in tighter loops,
and the world itself a clay,
pressed from muddy water and sun,
but a loose clay,
the kind small hands could shape, collapse,
and shape again, before the day ran dry.

Isn't there something I have lost?
This bind of being mature,
that smiles are barbed about with spoils,
and gray winds moan,
past shuttered playrooms of the soul,
where memories float in shafts of gold,
winking like captured jewels.

And sometimes through that dappled wood,
when shadows yawn and evening stretches thin
the rusted light,
time touches time;
and for a moment just,
it is myself that blusters by.
But years are deep and nature wise,
man and boy fade through.

I still recall a splintered voice,
that face without a name.
and late on in that romance,
on the brink of supper,
a kiss—
like a small candy stolen from the kitchen,
When the grownups were distracted.

Magma

I lean into
the sunburned edge of September,
among trees so wrung out by
the rumor of their yellows
that love is just a slanted wish
dragging the river.

So what is this bevel
that follows under my feet as I walk?
A pressure against my soles
like a caldera buoying me to:
some act of self-immolation.
Yet also lifting me to see,
like a kid over a wall,
the mistakes which, again,
it seems I am destined to make.

The birds defy their tessellations
somewhere in the upper branches,
weaving void to void,
the air stitched green with screams.

Was I simply born without an earthquake sense?
Or does it have to be earned,
like the many shapes of woodland life
that even now seem to whisper
“quick, make ready, here he comes”
as they rush to settle their accounts?
Whisper in stinging mockery of the Upanishads:
“Here he comes; here comes Shiva himself”.

(untitled)

A whip soaked in blood lying in a pool of sand and sunlight.
An infant's head lolling, heavy as the moon.
The first bird call, wounding a sky.
A crack of lightning splitting rock like an axe.
The endless sound of chariot wheels grinding like migraine.
A shadow in a doorway, in the time of Christ.
Blood loose as rain.
A child with facial sores stealing a rotten banana from a caveman.

Shaven heads laved in blood, shining globes floating past the bushes, spears.
The untreatable screaming in a hospital ward; monkey calls in the neural dark.
A child with a skull crushed by a stone, a banana skin nearby.
A boy chewing gum, a man coughing with his cheeks, saying "heh, choked on cigar".
Rain loose as blood.
An old man laughing at an abandoned railway station, one tooth infected black.
A girl with pigtails screaming herself blind.

Ancient horses in a field too damp to walk, dying soon.
A rifle crack. A pitcher leaking juice. A bug scuttling into a crack.
An old man's head lolling, heavy as a fruit, heavy as a fruit.

Fathom's Edge

What does it mean to wake in the night with no head?
To leave footprints in the tall dark, past clocks standing hypnotized
in the shadows of their own time.
Or to glimpse in the mirror, if courage allowed, simply a statue,
Its face rubbed off by the rain?

Only the headless know.
Our slim, scratchy thoughts scrabbling to leave their mark
on the surface we call our lives.
Or to declare at least some semblance of boundary,
like the slow, rhythmic creak of the rocker on the deck,
where now you sit,
its rusty metronome the only heartbeat
to localize the self.

A hand rises to brush—ah no!
How our habits damn us.
And you fiddle instead the ring, like the circular argument
that binds us to a moment.

Perhaps just then they are the hands of a grandmother,
on a rocker like this,
In a Mississippi long ago.
Or perhaps they are the hands of all grandmothers on all rockers.
Or all old men in from the fields,
their sight staggered with whiskey,
their backs busted with work.

The small cry of a creature in the woods
a phalanx of echoes.
The primal cries of all mothers at childbirth,
of widows keening, their black tongues snapping
like rags in the wind,
of all creatures in all woods,
and all cries that may ever be.

The night threatens to bear you,
the slow flesh of all this dreaming,
grumbling its way to a far away sea.
And you feel yourself passed along the trees' green argument,
by woody hands ancient and tough,
towards a dawn somewhere west of a revelation.