

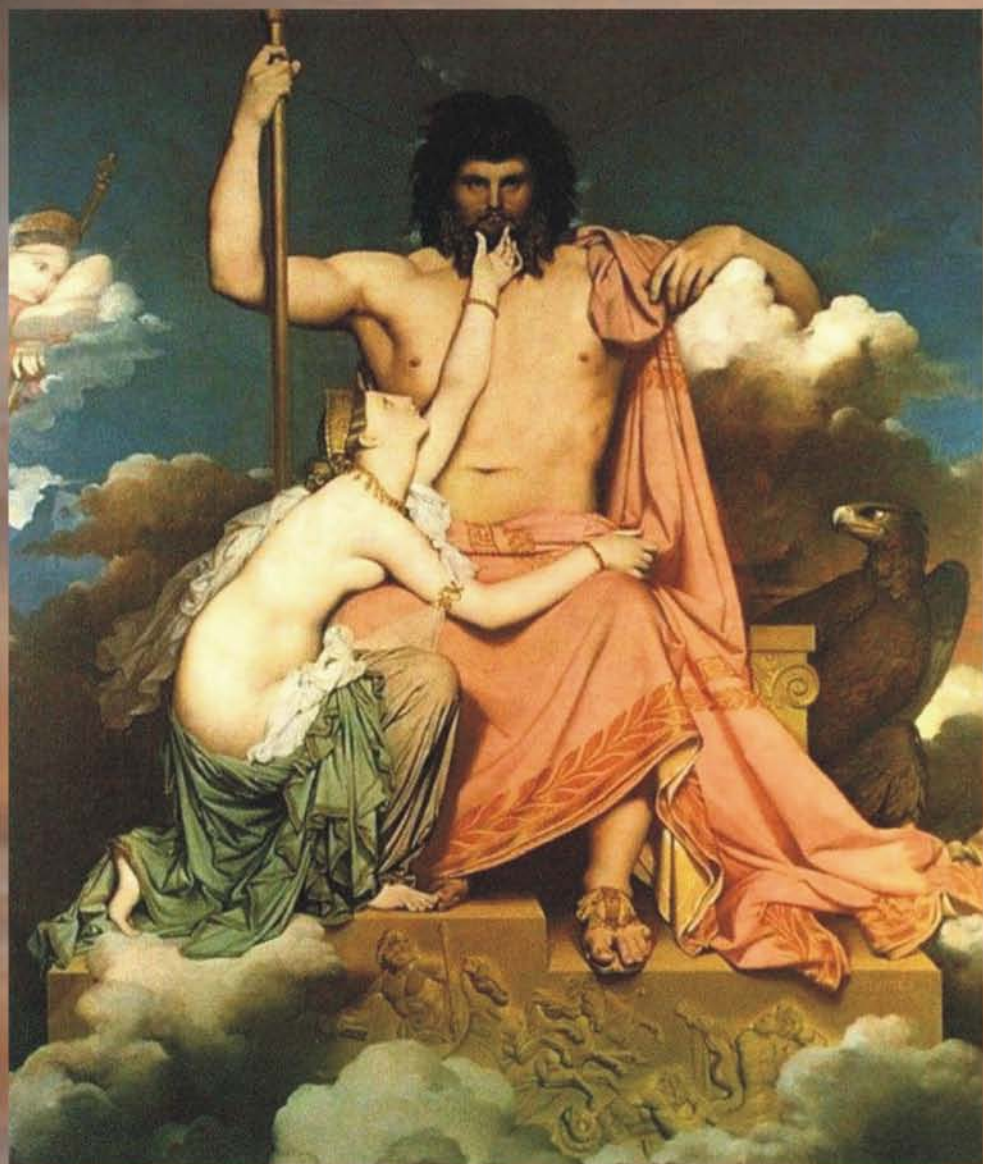
POETRY IS DANGEROUS...

...And few poets are more hazardous to complacency than Brett Rutherford. Who would have guessed that poetry — America's most-avoided art — could come roaring back in a big, wide-ranging book of provocative, understandable, beautiful poems? This book may change how you think about poetry.

Praised by Robert Bloch and Ray Bradbury for his dark and supernatural poetry — of which there is a good chunk in this book — this poet is also much more than a master of the macabre. His autumn poems, and other writings centered on nature, astronomy, and man's place in the cosmos, are heir to the grand tradition of such diverse masters as Shelley, Whitman, Hugo and Jeffers.

Although the poems are mostly free in form, they are striking in language and Romantic in spirit. Whether writing about Clyde Tombaugh's discovery of Pluto in 1930, or the darkest secrets of Greek mythology, these are poems that tell stories and tell them clearly. And when he turns to the hard, real world, in poems about the World Trade Center disaster, or the fall of the Soviet empire, or the ages-old invasion of Korea by Japanese warlords, Rutherford writes as a humanist who sees individuals always able to choose between good and evil. If gods and monsters and supernatural events seem always around the corner in his work, that's part of the grand tradition, too, all the way back to *Beowulf* or *The Iliad*. Our myths speak to us, and we are hungry for new ones. Take up this book, take a deep breath, and plunge in.

THE GODS AS THEY ARE, ON THEIR PLANETS



**New Poems by
BRETT RUTHERFORD**

THINGS SAID ABOUT BRETT RUTHERFORD'S POETRY...

Rutherford is first and foremost a storyteller. He writes poetry for an audience, one that he feels would come back to poetry if only there were poetry to come back to.—*Radio Void*

Fantastic, rebellious poetry!— *FactSheet 5*

Some of the most powerful poetry I've ever read.—Frank Belknap Long

Real poetry! Wonderful!— Ray Bradbury

The Rutherford poetry is a delight. I am in complete agreement with his comments on the state of poetry in America today, and pleased that he has chosen to go against the current. His work is his most eloquent argument.—Robert Bloch, author of *Psycho* and *Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper*.

Equal parts Poe, Shelley, Lovecraft and Bradbury ...composed with a firm sense of poetics and orchestrated with a respect for poetic tradition....Though written in free verse, they scan with a rhythmic coherence, a dividend of precise word choices and the embedding of alliterative phrases in the line. —Stefan Dziemianowicz, *Crypt of Cthulhu*

This prolific poet who celebrates H.P. Lovecraft and Poe has reached an assurance of craft and in mood... an extraordinary poet, a neo-romantic perhaps, but also Ovid blended with Virgil.—*Home Planet News*

The High Priest of Providence's ghoulie underground...—*The Nice Paper*

Shudders aplenty here, poetically nuanced...ranges across the supernatural spectrum with the fervor of Poe and the aloofness of Lovecraft.—Paul DiFilippo, *Asimov's SF Magazine*

Be afraid. be very afraid ... Like Lovecraft, Rutherford integrates terrestrial terrors with a more sublime, or cosmic, dread.— Justin Wolff, *The Providence Phoenix*.

(About *Poems from Providence*): Like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, this great book might avail us of endless hours of poring at leisure, enriching us, and, yes, ennobling us.... Rutherford can be appallingly tender and appallingly sorrowful...he can be funny, very. He can be inspired by joy. He can be profound. This is marvelous heady rich stuff...—*Dusty Dog Reviews*

Also by BRETT RUTHERFORD

POETRY

Songs of the I and Thou (1968)
City Limits (1970)
The Pumpkined Heart (1973)
Anniversarium: The Autumn Poems (1984, 1986, 1996, 2005)
Whippoorwill Road: The Supernatural Poems (1985, 1998, 2005)
Thunderpuss: In Memoriam (1987)
Prometheus on Fifth Avenue (1987)
At Lovecraft's Grave (1988)
In Chill November (1990)
Poems from Providence (1991)
Twilight of the Dictators (with Pieter Vanderbeck) (1992)
Knecht Ruprecht, or the Bad Boy's Christmas (1992)

PLAYS

Night Gaunts: An Entertainment Based on the Life
And Work of H.P. Lovecraft (1993, 2005)

NOVELS

Piper (with John Robertson) (1985)
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AS EDITOR/PUBLISHER

May Eve: A Festival of Supernatural Poems (1975)
Last Flowers: The Romance Poems of Edgar Allan Poe
And Sarah Helen Whitman (1987, 2003)

**THE GODS AS THEY ARE,
ON THEIR PLANETS**

**Poems by
BRETT RUTHERFORD**



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Weird Tales*

and *The Akashic Record of the Antarctic Astral Convention*.

Some of the poem are revisions or expansions of works that appeared
in the books *The Pumpkined Heart, Whippoorwill Road,
Prometheus on Fifth Avenue, Songs of the I and Thou,*
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**THE GODS AS THEY ARE,
ON THEIR PLANETS**

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

A fountain pen
a yellow legal pad
a cup of tea, a symphony —
these set the stage.
The empty page is one
of an infinity of silences.
The pen is a loaded gun,
cannoning lines and dots
onto the whiteness.
This page is but a clearing,
the tablet a wilderness —
guidelines are there,
but they are not a map.
Fall in — you'll find
no bottom, no sense
of beginnings and endings.
Wolves lurk within —
no compass
will help you navigate.
You may slip on a comma,
wind up alone and desolate
because a colon misled you.
Three dots will send you flying
into a black-hole time warp.
Here is danger. Poems
may change you forever.
I *mean* to change you forever.
It is too late to turn back.
I've got you, guest
in my little book.
I will not leave you behind.
Here is my hand.
Read on!

BETWEEN THE PAGES

All that I am is here,
even if what I am
eludes you.

I am pressed here
between these pages —
petals and stamen,
dust and pollen,
veined leaf

What scent
upon the yellowed page?
Try sandalwood and pine,
patchouli and mummy powder,
singed moth,
shadow of raptor wing,
a raven's passing,
a flit of bat,
a memory of lilacs.

You read my lines,
inhale me,
repeating my words,
my broken thoughts.

I am on your lips,
I fill the air
with green tea tension,
spark from your hair
to the nearest conductor,
then up and out the window.

Sing me to sparrows!
Teach the ravens
my autumn madness!
Recite to owls
my midnight charms!

ENTRE LAS HOJAS

Todo lo que soy
está aquí
aunque lo que sea
te eluda.

Me aprieto aquí,
entre estas páginas —
petalo y estambre,
polvo y polen,
hoja venosa.

¿Cuál es aquel aroma
en la hoja amarillada?
Supones sándalo y pino,
patchouli y polvo de momia,
polilla chamuscada,

la sombra de ala de un águila,
el paso de cuervo,
los murciélagos volantes,
una memoria de lilaces.

Lees mis líneas.
Me inhalas,
repetiendo mis palabras,
repetiendo mis ideas rotas.

Sobre tus labios, nazco.
Yo lleno el aire
con la tensión de té verde.
Me salto, una chispa, de tus cabellos
al conductor más cercano.
Entonces yo vuelo ascendente,
y parto por la ventana.

Cántame el poema
a los gorriones!
Enseñales a los cuervos
mi locura otoñala!
Recítalas a los búhos
mis encantos nocturnales!

WHY POETRY?

My book I write for all to see,
of things as they are
or wish them to be —
no private thoughts concealed,
bright words, not camouflage,
spark gap to reader's consciousness.

My trees, although they stand
for many things, are trees.
The self herein
though confessing little,
expresses all,
words hammered hard
on the anvil reality.

My wrinkled leaves
go not to Heaven,
that silent boneyard;
they fall to earth instead,
food for the common eye.

My books heap up unread,
an obelisk, a spire
of ink and cursive lettering,
a pyramid of utterings,
a shrine of sound.

If these words please you,
nameless reader,
to whom I am a faceless voice,
if but one stanza leaps afire
and makes you sing it,
then the heart-blood of my pen
is worthy.

What makes a poem great?
It is great if it leaves you —
as the earth always is
when the first snow falls —
astonished.

ANNIVERSARIUM: AUTUMN POEMS

IN CHILL NOVEMBER

*The leaves be red,
The nuts be brown,
They hang so high
They will not fall down.*
—Elizabethan Round, Anon.

The snow has come.
The leaves have fallen.
Long nights commit the chill
low sun and flannel clouds cannot disperse.
We walk the park, stripped now
to mere schematics,
vision drawn out to farther hills
now that the forest is blanked
like flesh turned glass on X-ray negative.
These woods are sham so near the solstice,
play out a murder mystery of birch and maple.
The riddle is who's dead and who's pretending?
That witches' elm with clinging broomsticks —
is it deceased or somnolent?
Which of these trees will never bloom again:
A Lombardy poplar stripped by blight—
A maple picked clean by gypsy moths—
A thunder-blasted pedestal of ash—
A moribund sycamore whose only life
came in a few vain buds
(growing like dead men's hair and nails,
slow to acknowledge the rot below)?
The ground's a color cacophony,
alive, alive!
the treeline a study in gray and brown.
Now who can tell
the bare tree from the dead,
the thin man from the skeleton?
Which denizens of wood lot shed these leaves?
Which is a corpse? a zombie?
Which one is but a vermin shell?
Which treads the night on portable roots,
festooned with bats,
sinking its web of trailing vines
into the veins of saplings?
Which stalwart oaks will topple,
which trunks cave in to termite nests?
How can we tell the living from the dead?

It's just the month: November lies.
October always tells the truth.
You could no more fake
the shedding of leaves
than simulate a pulse in stone.

Only the living fall in love,
only the living cry for joy,
only the living relinquish that month
in red and yellow shuddering!

The pines,
those steeple-capped Puritans,
what price their ever-green?
Scrooge trees, they hoard their summers,
withhold their foliage,
refuse to give the frost his due.
Ah, they are prudent,
Scotch pine and wily cedar,
touch-me-not fir and hemlock.
They will live to a ripe old age
(if you can call that living).

Love! Burn! Sing! Crumble!
Dance! Wind! Fall! Tumble!
Into the wind-blown pyramid of leaves!
Spin in a whirling dust-devil waltz!
Leaf-pile! Treetops! Tramping on clouds!
Weightless, flying, red-caped October!

THE FENCE

Town fathers, what have you done?
Last night I returned
(I vowed — I made the lake a promise)
intending to tramp the lane of maples,
read with my palms the weary tombstones,
feast with my eyes the clouded lake,
lean with a sigh on founder's headstone,
chatter my verses to turtles and fish,
trace with my pen the day lily runes,
the wild grape alphabet,
the anagram of fallen branches,
all in a carpet of mottled leaves.
The mute trees were all assembled.
The stones — a little more helter-
skelter than before,
but more or less intact — still greeted me
as ever with their Braille assertions.

The lake, unbleached solemnity
of gray, tipped up
and out against its banks to meet me.
All should have been as I left it.

Heart sinks. The eye recoils.
My joy becomes an orphanage
at what I see:
from gate to bank to bend
of old peninsula,
across the lot
and back again,
sunk into earth
and seven feet high
A CHAIN LINK FENCE!

Town fathers, what have you done?
Surely the dead do not require protection?
Trees do not walk.
The birds are not endangered.
How have your grandsires sinned
to be enclosed in a prison yard?
As I walk in I shudder.
It is a trap now.
A cul-de-sac.
I think of concentration camps.

For years, art students painted here —
I hear the click of camera shutters,
the scratch of pens,
the smooth pastel caress,
taste the tongue lick of water color,
inhale the night musk of oil paints.
Poets and writers too,
leaning on death stones,
took ease and inspiration here,
minds soaring to lake and sky.
At dawn, a solitary fisherman
could cast his line here.
Some nights the ground would undulate
with lovers
(what harm? who now would take
their joy between two fences?)

The fence is everywhere! No angled view
can exclude it. It checkerboards
the lake, the sky, the treeline.

They tell me that vandals rampaged here,
knocked over stones,

tossed markers
into the outraged waves.
Whose adolescents did this,
town fathers?

Yours.

Stunted by rock and stunned by drugs,
they came to topple a few old slabs,
struck them because they could not
strike *you*.

Let them summon their dusky Devil,
rock lyric and comic and paperback,
blue collar magic, dime store demons —
they wait and wait,
blood dripping from dead bird sacrifice
until the heavy truth engages them:

The dead are dead,
magic is empty ritual,
and stubborn Satan declines
to answer a teen-age telegram.

Fence in your children, not our stones!

TO THE ARC OF THE SUBLIME

In nights beneath the stars,
sometimes alone — sometimes
with one I loved
(in futile or secret urgency) —
I have outwaited
the rise and fall of Scorpio,
arc of its tail
stinging the treetops.
I have traced the inconstant moon,
the indecisive Venus;
feel more assured
by the long, slow haul of Jupiter,
the patient tread of Pluto
(whom they pursue
in their frigid outer orbits
I cannot guess)

Such solitude,
millennia between
the fly-bys of comets,
perhaps is why
they need so many moons,
why rings of ice
encircle them like loyal cats.

It is lonely in space,
far out
where the sun is merely
a star among stars.
It is lonely in autumn.
I sit in midnight woods.
A trio of raccoons, foraging,
come up to me,
black mask eyes of the young ones
interrogating the first cold night,
the unaccustomed noisiness
of bone rattle maple leaf
beneath their paws.
How can I tell them
these trees will soon be skeletons,
the pond as hard as glass,
the nut and berry harvest over?

These two are young —
they would not believe me.
Their mother rears up protectively,
smells me, scents out
the panic among the saplings,
the smell of rust and tannin.

We share a long stillness,
a moment when consciousness
is not a passive agency.
Our sight invades the countryside,
embracing everything —
sleepers in beds in a concrete tower —
earthworms entwining in humus rot —
goes up and out through the limpid sky,
streaming past moon —
— moon's lava'd seas —
out, out, to the arc of the sublime,
tracing the edge of great Antares,
leaping to other galaxies unafraid.

(Let space expand as though the worlds
still feared their neighbors!
Let miser stars implode,
their dwarf hearts shriveling
to cores of iron!)

We are the scourge of entropy.
We sing the one great note
through which new being
comes out of nothingness.

Does it have meaning,
 this seed-shagged planet
 alive with eyes?
Is earth the crucible,
 sandbox of angry gods,
or is it the eye of all eyes,
 ear of all ears,
the nerve through which the universe
 acquires self-knowledge?

But these are weighty thoughts
 for man and mammal!
We are but blood and minerals,
 upright for an instant,
 conscious for but a moment,
 a grainfall of cosmic hourglass.

Yet I am not ephemeral:
 I freeze time,
 relive moments
 chronicle the centuries
re-speak Shakespeare,
 beat out the staves of Mozart,
 read the same books
 my forebears knew
 make of old words
 my wordy pyramid.

I am the one
 snapping the pictures of solar systems,
 sending myself
 an outside-in self-portrait.

I send my name and signature
 on bottles spinning past Uranus.

I am the one who asks, *Is it worth it?*

I who hear the X-ray wind reply, *It is!*

I am the one who would not stay in caves,

 I was discontent in the treetops.

I wanted to be bird and whale and rocket.

Ever, o ever more mortal now —

 — friends falling away like withered leaves —
still I find joy in this subliminal shrine of autumn.

My hand is full of fossil shells

 picked up from the lake shore rubble,
 scallops enduring with the same rock faith

 (its implicit minimum vocabulary):

I live, and the increase of my consciousness
 is the span of my life.

OCTOBER STORM 1998

First night of the tenth month,
a roaring storm hits town:
thunder from every side,
flash after cataclysmic flash
of blue-white lightning.
Transformers hum
and tempt the storm-stab,
birds hunch in branches,
cats dash
from one dry porch to another.
A set of solitary car lights passes,
distorted in sheets of rain,
taillights at the corner
like the haunted eyes
 of a carnivore
 who has just learned
 he is the last of his kind.
A siren signals a distant fire.

Lightning comes closer,
closest I have known in years.
I open the window,
smell of ozone,
watch as a nearby tree goes down,
raked by the fingernails
of a coal-black thunderhead.

I hold the new jade stone
on which a Chinese artisan
has carved my nascent Mandarin name:

Meng for the dream, the world
 in which all poets dwell —
Ch'iu for the autumn, my chosen
 province and capital —
Lei for the thunder
 of the mountain-striding storm.

I am the Dream of Autumn Thunder,
and this storm has called my name,
marked the day of my arrival
in the mysterious Middle Kingdom.

AUTUMN LYRIC

Autumn has come
on splintered foot —
there is no stealth
in crackling leaves,
no sweet perfume
but apple rot,
the humus smell,
the acrid smoke
of fireplace wood.
Berries are dry,
the summer pods
untenanted.

Cynic squirrel
packs up his store —
(where one would do,
he buries two) —
not seeds enough,
he must have more!

The birds have flown —
they never learn
how gray bark speaks
of empty beaks —
they chase the sun
to tropic zone.

Two walnuts hang
on withered branch/

inside each shell
a sleeping eye/

inside each eye
the idea

of spring to come.

AUTUMN

A Fragment by Alexander Pushkin, 1833
A new English paraphrase

“To the drowsy intellect, all things are possible...”
Derzhavin

I

October! It comes at last. The grove shakes
from naked boughs the last reluctant leaves.
The road is iced with autumn’s chilling breath —
I hear the brook behind the turning mill,
but the pond is still; a neighbor with dogs
tramps to the distant fields — his hounds disturb
the peace of forest, his horse’s hoof-falls
knock down and trample the winter wheat.

II

My season now! Spring is a bore to me.
The dull thaw: mud everywhere thick and vile —
Spring dizzies me, as my mind obsesses
daydreaming, my blood in giddy ferment.
Winter’s austerity is what I need,
white snows beneath a whiter moon — what joy
to glide airily in a speeding sleigh
with one whose clasping fingers burn like fire!

III

The fun of it, skating steel-shod on ice,
tracing a pattern on the river’s face!
The air aglow with winter’s festivals!
But even Winter palls — no one can love
six months of snowfall — even the cave bear
in his drowsy den would say “Enough, now!”
Sleigh-rides with jolly youths grow tedious,
and we grow quarrelsome cooped in all day.

IV

You, peach-fuzz Summer — you I could cherish,
except for heat and dust, and biting flies.
These bring dullness. The sated heart wears down.
Our inspiration is a dried-up creek.
Iced tea is not enough; we turn to drink,
we rue the Winter hag, whose funeral
served up wine and blini. What little chill
we get comes from the freezer, sweet and cold.
We spoon out ices, and we think of snow.

V

No, the end of Autumn is not admired:
But I, reader, will hear no ill of her;
She is the unnoticed child, the wistful
one, way down the line of gaudy sisters.
Her quiet beauty is the one for me.
Her bare-tree starkness, I frankly say
makes Winter's edge the finest time of all.
I love her humbly and so silently
that I alone, in leaf-fall, deserve her.

VI

How can I make you see, Spring-clad lovers?
It is like loving a sickly maiden,
doomed to a consumptive death, pale-skinned
with that ivory pallor and passive gaze,
too weak to hurl a reproach at this life.
Even as her soul expires, her young lips
curl up in a ghost of a febrile smile.
She does not hear her grave being readied.
Today she lives — she is gone tomorrow.

VII

Season of mournful pomp, you live for me!
Your valedictory beauty, mine!
(Or am I yours — tranced and captivated?)
I love to watch as Nature's dyes dim out,
the forest full court in gold and purple,
turned to paler shades in hoarfrost reaping.
The noisy wind tells me its secrets, pale skies
concealed by the billows of darkling clouds,
holding the sun back, frostbite hovering,
whispered threats of grizzled Winter — I hear you!

VIII

I bloom afresh each time the Autumn comes.
The Russian cold is good for me, I think!
The days' routines regain their old relish.
I sleep and eat in proper proportion.
Desire awakes — and I am young again!
My heart beats fast with rejuvenated
blood — I'm full of life like a newly-fed
Dracula — a lightning-jolted Franken-
well, anyway, you get my meaning, friend!

IX

Bring me my horse! The steppes are calling me!
On his back, glad rider, I'll thump and thud,
fill the dale with my echoing thunder.
His shining hooves strike sparks, his streaming mane
repeats the wind like a Cossack's banner.
The bright ice creaks when we cross the river.
But the days are so short! Already dark!
I read my book in guttering hearth-light,
nourishing immortal longings again.

X

And in the silence sweet I forget you
(Sad to admit, but everyone and all
seem not to be when I'm lulled by fancy.)
Sit there — empty — wait for the Muse to come —
I am troubled again with lyric fever.
My soul shakes, it reverberates, it wants
to burst the dam of reticence, I dream
of how the verses I've not yet finished
will pour down Time, cross into languages
unknown to me, leap continents and seas,
the children that my visions bore, upright
complete and singing for all to hear them!
Invisible throngs fill me — demon? Muse?
ancestor poets? poets yet to come?—
Take me! Fill my reveries! Make these songs!

XI

So I'll say everything I meant to say.
The brave thoughts have come — rhymes run to meet them
on winged feet. My fingers reach for the pen,
and the neglected pen says "Ink! And where's
that yellow tablet whose narrow green lines
seem always to pull the right words downward?"
Just wait — a little tea — just hold the pen —
wait calmly and the verses will follow.
Thus a still ship slumbers on a still sea.
Hark: chimes! now all hands leap to the rigging.
Exhale! the sails are filled with ideas,
they belly in the wind — the groaning mast —
the monster poem moves to deep water —
the harbor far behind the foaming track.

XII

It sails, but where is this ship taking me?...

ON RECEIVING A GIFT OF BOOKS IN EARLY OCTOBER

for Barbara Girard

The books are falling from the trees:

The Birds of Swan Point Cemetery
still forest green

with wide-eyed saw-whet owl
pleading for continued foliage,
months more of fat brown mice
before the meager winter comes.

Here's Fraser's angry Wood King
guarding his oak, his paranoia

old as *The Golden Bough*,
his staff and sword crossed,
feet firm in the circle

of abundant acorns
not even the squirrels touch,
fearing his wild words.

Not well concealed,

that oily Aegisthus
woos married Clytemnestra
amid the thinning sycamores.

Troy is far off, the war is long.

He'll never come home, that
ungrateful king, *Agamemnon*.

Now here's a well-used leaf,
pock-holed already with frostbite,

red with laughter on top,
brown with wisdom beneath,

I read at random:

"War is so savage a thing
that it rather befits beasts
than men —"

old friend Erasmus, your *Praise of Folly*.

Here by the stately laurel

falls a wreath, twined round
with bands of gold, not far
from the supple columns
of the Athenaeum,

and the voice I first heard
in timeless tales of gods and heroes
spins out *Mythology* as truth
from the pen of Edith Hamilton —
o welcome leaves

from when the world was young.

Pruned branches piled for an auto-da-fé
sing and crackle:

Here burns Voltaire,
Candide and his beloved Cunegonde.

Pangloss intones as flames roar up,
of the best of all possible worlds.

The Grand Inquisitor warms his hands,
is not amused as pine cones

volley down,
needles of truth in evergreen pursuit,
crows mocking

as Trevor-Roper tells all
in *The European Witch-Craze*.

Some of this autumn fall is dangerous:

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman
a perennial leaf that will not wither,

brave Mary Wollstonecraft's
appeal to higher reason,
awaits its vindication still.

And here's *A History of the Primates*.

Are men descended from hairy apes?

Just ask a woman.

Here's Forster's *Maurice*,

a novel its author dared not publish,
a brave, tormented book

about a man who dared
to be happy

in his love for another man:

I hold you, reticent English leaf,
press you into my own heart's book

and will not let the earth
consume you.

And now the wind gusts out

and upward,

ah, too many leaves to count now:

Jung and Proust,

Lawrence and Leopardi,

so many books unread

so many leaves one upon another,
mountains of you

like toppled libraries,

pyramids of poems to kick through
and millions more still waiting
to fall!

AUTUMN SUNDAYS IN MADISON SQUARE

Stately old sycamores, sentinel oaks,
fan-leafed gingko and noble elm,
year by year your patient quest for the sun
has sheltered such madmen, squirrels,
birds, bankers, derelicts and poets
as needed a plot of peaceful
respite from the making and sale of things.

Poe lingered here in his penniless woe.
Melville looked up at a whale cloud.
Walt Whitman idled on the open lawn.
(Sad now, the ground scratched nearly bare,
Fenced off against the depredating dogs;
the fountains dry, while standing pools
leach up from old, sclerotic water mains.)

Four chimes ring for unattended vespers,
no one minding the arcane call,
not the bronze orators exhorting us,
not the rollicking hounds unleashed
in the flea-infested gravel dog-run,
not the grizzled men in boxes,
so worn from the work of all-day begging

they're ready to sleep before the sun sets.
A thousand pigeons clot the trees.
The northwest park is spattered with guano,
benches unusable, a birds'
Calcutta, a ghetto a bloated squabs
feasting on mounds of scattered crumbs,
bird-drop stalagmites on every surface!

Daily she comes here, the pigeon-lady,
drab in her cloth coat and sneakers,
sack full of bread crusts, and millet and rice,
peanuts and seeds from who-knows-where.
Still she stands, in the midst of offerings,
until they light upon her shoulder,
touching her fingertips, brushing her cheeks

with their dusty, speckled wings, naming her
name in their mating-call cooing,
luring her up to lofty parapets,
rooftop and ledge, nest precipice
where, if *she* could fly, she would feed their young,
guard their dove-bright sky dominion
from hawks, the heedless crowds, the wrecking cranes.

Across one fenced-in lawn the sparrows soar
in V-formation back and forth,
as though they meant in menacing vectors
to enforce the no-dog zoning.
Amid the uncut grass the squirrels' heads
bob up, vanish, then reappear
as the endless search for nuts and lovers

ascends its autumn apogee. But here
the squirrels are thin and ragged,
road-kill reanimated harvesters,
tails curled like flattened question marks
as every other morsel offered them
is snatched by a beak or talon.
Descending birds make calligraphic curves

as branches twine in spiral chase of sun.
Nothing is safe from scavenging —
trash barrels tipped for aluminum cans,
the ground beneath the benches combed
for roach-ends the dealers crush and re-sell
to law clerks and secretaries.
Even the cast-off cigarettes are taken

by derelicts and nicotinic birds.
Certain my notes are tracking him,
a storm-tossed schizophrenic darts away.
Beside the World War's monument
(ah, naïve time, to conceive no second!)
an Asian woman gardening
adds green and blossom to the shady ground

amid the place-names of trampled Belgium,
forest and trench of invaded France.
(Not her war, certainly, not her heroes,
yet her soft blooms, as from a grave
whisper the names of the now-dead warriors
and sons who never come to read
of Ypres, Argonne and the barbed-wire lines.)

A welcome bookstall has opened its doors,
as if to lure the passers-by
to read, to dream, beneath the timeless elms —
but who can sit, immersed in book,
as suicidal leaves cascade, as hands
shaking and thin, trade crumpled bills
for bags of bliss in crystal, crack or powder?

Is this the potter's field of shattered dreams?
The copper arm of Liberty
once stood at the northern end of the square.
The trees once soared. Now roots eat salt,
brush against steam pipes and rusted cable,
cowed by courthouse, statues frowning,
Gothic and Renaissance insurance spires.

Only the branches, forgiving, forgetting,
redeem this purgatory place.
A Druid stillness draws here at dusk-time,
squirrel and bird and runaway
equally blessed as the hot-ash sunset
gives way to the neon-lit night,
city unsleeping beneath the unseen stars.

IN PRAGUE, A TREE OF MANY COLORS

*for Jan Palach, Czech martyr,
who set himself on fire January 16, 1969
to protest the occupation of his country*

I am born, I am sown.
I am screaming as the sun tropes me out of the earth.
I am dragging in my tendrils the hopes of spring,
I am pulled, exhorted into summer. The light
deceives me with its deaths and resurrections.
I must be straight. I must not believe
the mocking sun and its revolutions.
I must wait for the ultimate paradise,
the world's light redistributed for all.

Much passes beneath my shadow:
crowds press to marriages and funerals —
the upright grooms go in,
the silver-handled caskets come out,
the church, the state, the people
move on in soot and sorrow, day to day.

Why do these people whisper always?
Why do so many avert their eyes from me?
Why does neighbor spy on his neighbor,
reporting every oddity to the men in black?
Why do I hear the rumble of thunder?
Why does the symphony break off?
Why have the women gone to the cellars?
Soldiers and tanks are everywhere!
The streets are full of Russians and Poles,

Hungarians, Bulgarians, East Germans—
all of East Europe has come to crush us!
Men with fur hats speak swollen, Slavic words.

Death is here. The smell of blood is here.
My roots touch the entrails of the hastily buried.
Anger is everywhere. I hold my leaves,
make camouflage for lovers, conspirators.
Students rip down the street signs
and hide them in my upper boughs—
the invaders drive in circles
and cannot find their destinations.
I open my bark for secret messages,
encourage pigeons to carry the word
of where is safe and who is betrayed.
Here comes that student, Jan Palach,
the ardent one, the solitary dreamer.
He stuffs his coat with my fallen leaves,
fills his cap, book bag and pockets with them.
He is the icon of our unhappiness:
he will open like a triptych of gold
into a flame that will embarrass the sun.
When he exfoliates in gasoline
I am with him, burning, burning,
leaf by dry leaf exploding for liberty.

SEPTEMBER IN GOTHAM 2001

This is New York, and fall
has caught us unawares.
From Palisade bus I view
the gap-toothed skyline,
a forest whose tallest trees
are suddenly missing.

In Gotham, they say,
strange breezes from the south
make certain elders remember
downwind from the death camps.
There is talk of stolen watches
from shops beneath the rubble,
the discovery daily
of severed limbs.

Month's end, I walk all day in midtown,
with shoppers determined
to do something normal,
eat Szechuan lunch, browse
books, consider new software.

Like many others around me,
I pick things up from the counter,
 then put them back —
everyday urges seem so trivial.

There is not one note of music.
People keep stopping
 to stare nervously
 at the Empire State,
 like frightened squirrels
 in the shadow
 of a threatened sequoia.

The sycamores in Bryant Park
beam back the sun,
 an interrupted medley
 of overhanging clouds
 that pause, then part,
 then scud away.
Seedpods of honey locust fall,
curl brown like overdone toast
 on the pavement,
but the delicate leaves remain above,
 still adamant green.

It is not till night,
 till I turn the corner on Lexington
 and spy the dark hunched shell
 of the Gramercy Park Armory,
that I see the leaves of *this* autumn,
 its *feuilles morts*,
taped to tree trunks, walls and windows,
 tied to a chain link fence,
 row on row to the end of seeing,
flapping in rainstorm, tattered, tearing,
soon to be ankle deep in the gutter —

these album-leaves of anguish
burst forth with human colors —
faces brown and pink and salmon,
oak and ash and ebony,
the rainbow of human flesh,
 of eye-flash —

visages still in their conquering twenties,
snapshot in happy moments,
 embracing their brides,
 babies on knees,
license, yearbook, graduation photos,
smiling at beach or barbecue,

ink fading or bleeding now
in the sky's abundant tearfall.

In the language we use
for the recovery of wayward pets,
these posters beg the impossible:

IF ANYONE HAS SEEN HER —
MISSING — MISSING
LEFT SHOULDER SCAR —
A DOLPHIN TATTOO —
MISSING — MISSING
HAVE YOU SEEN ME?—
MISSING — MISSING
PLEASE FIND ME
MISSING — MISSING

WORLD TRADE CENTER

—*September 30, 2001, New York City*

RUNAWAYS

I want to report a disappearance.
No, not exactly, not a person.
No, not a pet. Lost property?
What's missing isn't mine to lose,
 but it has certainly vanished.
The tree — the tree in front of my house
 is just plain gone.
Just yesterday I raked the leaves,
the first red flags of autumn.
The maple was there. I touched it,
traced with my hand its withered bark.
Today it's gone, root, branch and leaf.
Just a hole in the pavement,
a heap of soil, a trail of clotted soil
down and around the corner.

Nothing disturbed my sleep.
No chain saw, crane or dynamite
 chewed, toppled or fragmented
 my splendid shade tree.
I have no witnesses
except the baffled squirrels,
the homeless begging sparrows.
My neighbors seem not to notice —
 they're Mediterranean,
 prefer the sun and open space
 to my shady Druid grove.
I'll plant another tree, I guess,
though I'll be old before
its boughs can shelter me.

I wouldn't have come —
I would have borne the mystery alone —
except that — how do I say it? —
I think it's happening all over.
I notice trees. I walk the park,
maintain a nodding acquaintance
 with birds,
keep time by the blossoms,
the fruit, the rainbow of flame
when October exfoliates.
This morning the park —
I counted — I actually counted —
is missing three maples, two sycamores,
one each of elm and beech,
crab apple, peach and sassafras.
There's not a sign of violence:
no broken trunks, no sawed-off limbs,
no scorch of lightning.

Just holes in the ground,
deep channels where roots withdrew,
and where each tree had been,
a trail of gravel, worms and soil
 out of the park,
 onto the pavement,
 then — nothing.

Who's taking them, you ask?
You're the policeman,
 the missing persons authority.
I don't think anyone's taking them.
 I think *they're* leaving us.
Maybe they're going north to Canada.
Maybe they've had enough
of crime and dirt and corruption.
Maybe they'd like a little freedom,
a little peace and quiet.

You'd better investigate.
Imagine our city if this goes on:
Central Park a treeless dog run;
Park Avenue and Fifth
 two blazing corridors
of steam and sweat
 and screaming cabbies.
What would we be without our trees?
We brought them with us from Europe,
 our Johnny Appleseed inheritance.
For every wilderness we leveled
we came back planting, pruning,
framing our starry vision
with tamer treelines.
They civilize us, connect us
to the earth and the seasons.
Without them we are savages,
wolf eating wolf on the pavement,
a handshake of scorpions.

Find them! Beg them to come back!
Ask them their terms!
Get the mayor to negotiate!
Promise them we'll do better.
We'll clean the streets again,
restore the parks and riverways.
We'll serenade the trees with Mozart,
outlaw rap and raucous riveting,
we'll do whatever it takes!
How could we go on without them,
Leafless, treeless, barren and dead?

THE GODS AS THEY ARE, ON THEIR PLANETS

VIKING

I did it.
Who would have thought
that such a hulk
of rivets and scraps
could cross a sea of space?
You named me for voyagers,
for men who ravaged harbor towns
content with seizing
their women and gold.

Cool were the hands
that made me. Few cheered
when I embarked in flame.
No one expects a golden bounty
at the end of my crossing.
A strange tide carried me
weighted, then weightless,
then tugged to ground again,
devoid of passenger
and pilotless,
not even a goddess
carved on my prow.

Little was left of me
when I touched down in sand.
I did it,
before the alien hordes you dreamt of
could launch *their* fleet,
I touched this desolate
and long deserted ground.
Well earned, the name
you gave me. I dared
your greatest dream and won.
Salute me, my maker:
I invaded Mars.

THE GODS AS THEY ARE, ON THEIR PLANETS

Thanks to intrepid Viking,
the patient Voyager,
Magellan's fly-bys
we know our gods and their planets
in pockmarked intimacy
as never the ancients knew them.

The beauty of Venus is tarnished now.
Her sallow, cratered visage,
her veils of cloud an imposture.
The hag fools no one
with her stripper's guile.
Her touch would rend you
with its flaming talons,
her crack-lip kiss
would scourge your face away.
Her nipples spout
sulfuric acid.
If this is love, then howl alone and die.

Where, Mars, is your warlike clamor?
Your smoking steeds are chunks
of rubble,
Deimos and Phobos afraid
of their shadows!
How can you rage with your
dry-ice hairpiece,
your tideless, shipless, waterless seas,
wheezing in your dismal atmosphere
too weak to hold in oxygen?
You are a skeleton in armor,
a pyramid of swords,
boneyard of useless causes,
fighting words.

Long have we feared you, Ares.
Now ignorant armies clash for naught,
steal empty victories
for the vanity of chariots,
the price of ooze,
the pride of petty warlords,
hollow in red planet's retrograde.
Your drum is dead.
We have touched you
with our robot hands,
sifted your sands and found you
lifeless.
The light you cast on Troy
and Carthage
is not incarnadine with blood —
rust is your sigil now, codger god!

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

The photos from Hubble are unmistakable.
The light that just now reaches us
from hundreds of millions of years ago
shows one great galaxy, grand as our own
skewered by a vast invader,
another swirling spiral,
its equal with hundreds of billions of stars,
two vast ripaws of matter and energy
flaming in perfect focus. Astronomers
slap one another's shoulders, mark spots
where blue orbs signal the birth of stars,
as suns collide and black holes suck nebulae
into their bloated wormholes never satisfied.

I see the photographs on newsprint, two
red-orange disks the size of quarters.
Around me they scream, "The millennium is coming!
Two years until our computers won't start!"
Those interpenetrating galaxies get less concern
than what kind of sex the President is getting.
Did no one see what these pictures really mean?

Alu marana echtho karani.

For eons, the invading disk advanced —
a thin ribbon at the peak of the heavens,
then a cloud, then, at last, the juggernaut.
For eons, the outer arms collided,
and then the burning core where stars
are numerous as grains of sand.
It will go on for eons more.
We shall all be dead, our sun expired,
before the last picture reaches here.
Does no one see the horror?

Alu marana echtho karani.

How flaming death rained down
upon the lizard men of Kra'ath?
How the peaceful Quer'hem, who spent
ten thousand years on a poem
saw all their fragile cities ruined,
how their blue limbs burned
as a great red star engulfed them?
How the lonely and ancient monks
in the basalt temples of Irlamadá
refused to leave their ancestral home
as it plunged into a methane giant?
How the great race of starmen
whose ships had spanned half a galaxy
sped from one world to another —

so many they saved! so many
they never reached in time!
And no one who watched
the night sky's cataclysm
dared say a beneficent god
had made this universe.
Nameless forever now the tribes,
clans, castles, walls and emperors,
upon a hundred million worlds
rich with life, but too young to know
the meaning of the exploding sky —
all they did and dreamt, for nothing!

Out on the rim of one spiral arm,
the one-eyed Chroniclers —
a race whose fortune it was to survive —
built a vast dome and projected there
the stars that had been. They sang and wept,
struck gongs and sorrowful organ notes,
as one by one they vanished again,
like candles snuffed by a terrible hand.

These things, and more,
have come to haunt my dreams now,
and the certain knowledge, too,
as the astronomers tell me,

that the great Andromeda galaxy
is heading towards us.
It will come. It *will* come. It will *come*.

Alu marana echtho karani.
All is destroyed but memory.

AUTUMN ON MARS

for Ray Bradbury

On Mars the black-trunked trees
are dense
with summer's crimson foliage.
When dry-ice autumn comes,
the oaks singe sickly green.
The land is a riot of airborne olive,
chartreuse and verdigris,
green fire against a pink
and cloudless sky.
The sour red apples go yellow sweet;
the wind-blached wheat
forsakes its purple plumage;
cornstalks are tied in indigo bundles;
eyes flicker ghoulishly
as candles are set
in carved-out green gourds.

Grandfathers warn their
terrified children
of the looming, ominous blue planet,
roiled with thunderclouds
and nuclear flashes,
that warlike, funeral-colored Earth
from which invaders would
one day come,
decked in the somber hues of death,
withered and green like dead-pile leaves,
armed to the hilt with terrible weapons.

"I've seen them!" an elder asserts.
"They have two eyes,
flat on their heads!"
Eye stalks wiggle in disbelief.
"They walk on two legs,
like broken sticks!"
Multi-jointed leglets thump in derision.
"They speak in the animal octave,
and they bark like krill-dogs."
The children shriek in red and purple.
"No way, Old One!
Don't make us think it!
How can they talk without twinkling?"

"Their rockets go higher with every turn
of our world around the life-star.
Earthers will come, thick on the ground
like our thousand-year mugworms.

They will kill us,
take our females captive,
burn our egg domes,
eat our aphidaries!"

A fireball slashes the pink horizon.
Two hundred eye-stalks follow the arc.
"That might be one
of their robots now!
Their probes are watching everywhere!"
Now fifty Martian youngsters scream,
shrieking in ultraviolet tones,
crab legs scattering in every direction.

The Old Ones smile in five dimensions,
sit down for a cup of hot grumulade
and some well-earned peace and quiet.
"It's not nice to frighten
the young ones,"
the eldest muses, "but it wouldn't be
autumn
without a little Halloween."

PLUTO DEMOTED

No longer a planet, they say!
Pluto, Hades, Yuggoth, Nine
is now a nothing,
a rock among rocks
despite the tug of its companion,
silent and airless Charon

Now you are a "mini-world,"
an oversize asteroid
tumbling in dustbelt
so dark and distant
our sun is but a blob
of wavering starlight.

World of death and darkness,
methane, monoxide molting
in every orbiting,
shunned by the sun that made you,
must you now be snubbed by man?

How demote a planet
so lustrous in history.
It has its gods! It has its gods!
Can they evict
the Lord of the Dead

with just a say-so?
What of the millions of souls
whose home was Hades?
What of beautiful Persephone
who shuttles still
on a high-speed comet
for her six-month residency as mistress
of the underworld?
What of the heroes and philosophers,
the shades of pagan times
who teem those basalt cities
warming the Plutonian night
with odes and songs and serenades?
Are they to be homeless vagabonds,
slowed from their distant heartbeat
to the stillness of absolute zero?

At first, it was "Planet X,"
out there somewhere
because Neptune wobbled,
nodded its rings
toward Death's domain.
Then a Kansas farm boy
obsessed with the stars
ground his own mirrors
built his own telescope
with car parts and farm equipment.
Hailstones destroyed the farm crops.
The telescope survived.
The boy sent drawings
of Mars and Jupiter
to Lowell Observatory —

Come work for us, they said.
He hopped a train, had just enough
cash for a one-way fare.

And then, in monk-like hermitage
he toiled at Flagstaff,
comparing sky photographs,
hundreds of thousands of stars,
negative over negative to light,
searching for celestial wanderers,
planetoi, asteroids, comets
that moved when everything else
stood still in the cosmos.

Clyde Tombaugh, twenty-four,
surveyed a sky
where fifteen million lights
the brightness of Pluto twinkled
but only one was Pluto.
He found it.

They sought him out
in his retirement,
those fellows
from the Smithsonian,
asked for his home-made instrument
for their permanent collection.
"Hell no," he said,
"I'm still using it."

I would as soon
forget Kansas as Pluto.
Tell Tombaugh's ghost
his planet is not a planet!

I can see the old man now,
just off the death-barge
he hopped from Charon,
greeting the Lords of Acheron,
that rusted tube of telescope
under his arm,
scouting a mountaintop
for his next observatory.

Pluto, Hades, Yuggoth, Nine!
Change at your peril
a thing once named!

POETICA LOVECRAFTIANA

MAKER OF MONSTERS, MAKER OF GODS

Birthday Verses for Frank Belknap Long

How cold the sphere where all the gods are dead,
How grim the prospect when the end seems near!
How few deny the soul in age's bed,
Not brave enough to risk another year

Outside the soothing balm of Paradise.
Yet who, I ask, brings you this message bright —
God's hooded broker or a devil wise
In promise, slaving to steal the light

Of your assumed immortality?
Beware these masked intruders, all of them!
God's hall and Satan's hot locality
Are only a sly imposter's stratagem.

O poet good and gray, have courage still.
It matters not that gods retire or sleep.
We are their makers, who fashion or kill
as suits us, the gods of the air or deep.

No matter that your hand some days is frail.
That hand has summoned monsters and entwined
The earth's sublimest beauties in a tale.
No matter that the falling years unwind

The scroll or turn the pages dry and sere.
Poe's *Bells* and Gotham's storied steeples seize
Your spirit, soaring from Providence to here —
To ancient barks adrift Aegean breeze —

To Mars — to plains where gods and heroes dwell —
To charnel pit where ghoul contends with rat —
To limelit stage where vampire victims swell
Their last aortal ebb into a bat-

Deep hunger's all-consuming rage of red —
To aliens serene at crystalline gates —
Robots implacable — and demons dead
Until some stumbling fool reanimates

Hibernal horror with a taste for blood!
What need of god's incense and litanies
When every twist of pen compels the mud
To yield up dark, bat-winged epiphanies?

Fear not. Walk on among them unafraid.
Soul-snatching monsters are as dead as stone.
Hell's a blank corridor, its lord a shade.
TERROR you did not fear to tread alone

Shall buoy you up, with WONDER at its side.
Lovecraft you called the kindest man you knew,
Refused a priest the day before he died,
Said he preferred a sky where Night Gaunts flew.

That is not dead which leaps to poet's eye,
Where neither friends, nor gods, nor monsters die!

DREAMING OF UR-R'LYEH

1

All roads lead north from this frozen city.
Some days the errant sun cannot decide
 just where to raise its flaming orange head—
instead it rises everywhere:
four globes of light in an opalescent rainbow,
taunting Antarctica with phantom light.
And then for months the sun disk stays away,
warming the tropics and leaving this land
a block of cloud no star can penetrate
with its thin shaft of consoling beacon.

I walk the ruins of Ur-R'lyeh,*
 Earth's oldest uninhabited city,
a fair place before the world tipped downward,
before the great blue harbors filled with ice.
All other cities are copied memories,
all other pyramids less perfectly formed,
all other domes and temples childish toys
beside what sleeps beneath this glacier.

The things that lived and sang here were not men.
Strange limbs they had, eye-stalks and bird-like beaks,
sense organs that drank the ultraviolet,
voices that clicked and trilled through twenty octaves.
Yet sight and sound's deep symmetries drove them,
as in the human psyche, to Beauty's thrall.

2

Lost penguins arrive here from time to time,
stand hungry and hypnotized for days, as wind
howls over the ancient air shaft openings,
making the ice-locked plateau resonate.
This is the anthem of Antarctic woe —
thirteen deep notes in modal succession.
In dream I come here often, walk solitaire
upon the windswept basalt promenades,
admire four suns through ruby windows,
drink from dark obsidian goblets,
discuss with the white/black avian sentinels
the meaning of glyphs beyond translation.

The wind's mad organ relentlessly pipes,
the depth of note conveying the shafts' abyss,
the unthinkable depths of crystalline city,
carved into stone pre-Cambrian, the keeps
where multi-limbed minions mined out
the now-dead heat-taps to the core of the planet.

The tones that should be random, repeat this song.
Has anyone heard such music before?
Perhaps we hear it everywhere, from bird to whale,
as an unheard, underpinning harmony,
the oldest earth enigma's passacaglia.
Bass line invisible beneath a string quartet
(whose range is but a gnat-buzz against the cosmos),
droning to Andes in Inca-harps electrified,
mantric harmonies soaring above
the haunting trill of Tibetan bowls,
the echo that answers the mournful Pan pipe
heard at the edge of a November wood,
the solitary faun's lamenting love call.

3

Only a handful can pluck this dream, this song,
as only a few can walk the rim of madness,
gazing the surfaces dead before racial memory,
touching without terror the things that came before,
loving beyond mother-brother-breeding love
the purely non-human,
the vast, rich impersonal cloud of atoms electrified.

The Song of Ur-R'lyeh may nest in nightmares,
may hatch its egg in fever's heat,
may force a lover to break off loving,
turn a sane world to a screaming asylum.
Your third eye, third ear, third brain are growing —
no stopping the eye-stalk, the throbbing heart,

the new way of seeing things from impossible angles,
hearing at last the cries of the distant stars,
the impatience of ocean to swallow the moon,
the yearning of magma to fertilize space.

You touch an oak and know its history
 from taproot to sun-ache twig-tip.
This song is fugue for the ego transcendent,
calls you, as it calls all beautiful runaways,
all mad, erotic hermits, all solitary climbers,
to the City of One
 beyond the City of Many.

*H.P. Lovecraft placed the Cyclopean ruins of R'lyeh in the South Pacific, and probably was inspired, as was A. Merritt, by descriptions of the island of Ponape (Pohnpei) in the Caroline Islands, where more than 90 prehistoric stone structures were found underwater. Lovecraft later wrote his novel, "At the Mountains of Madness," which placed an unnamed, pre-human civilization in Antarctica. We are dreaming, perhaps, of the same place, which I call Ur-R'lyeh.

Lovecraft fans are always debating how to pronounce R'lyeh. It should be pronounced with the R' as a sustained, trilled "r" and with "lyeh" as one syllable pronounced "lee—yeah" (the "yeah" like the "ye" in "yet.") If you can't pronounce it, you may be eaten upon your arrival there!

THE TREE AT LOVECRAFT'S GRAVE

This solemn spreading beech
was once a perfect hemisphere
of waxy red-green foliage.
Now it is crippled and sere,
scarred by the pruning
of diseased limbs,
trunk bared, a twisted bole
in the form of a petrified heart.
Its gnarled roots rake earth
with a death-row desperation.
Within another hollowed bole,
(eye-socket for a Cyclops)
malignant mushrooms proliferate,
caps and stalks angled sunward.
The schoolboy gashes
where fans have carved initials
(their own and HPL's)
widen and blacken,
the once-proud limbs
tattooed with NECRONOMICON,
HOWARD P. LOVECRAFT '99,
even a whole sentence
about the primacy of fear,
runes ruinous to a living monument.

Still, the furry beech-nuts fall like hail
to the delight of squirrels.
Still, the hard brown kernels issue forth,
each a perfect blueprint
of a perfect tree —

or have the roots, tasting the calcium
of author's bones, the humus rot
of eye and brain and memory
mutated the germ and flower anew
so that these seeds transcend
to sentience?

Gather these nuts, then,
and harvest them.
First they must hibernate,
for the beech remembers glaciers.
Then they will germinate,
pale tentacles in search
of anchorage,
until the red-green engine
of stalk and leaf
is ready to catapult
into the sun-chase.

Will these trees move
of their own accord?
Will their root-claws crave blood
and the iron-rich earth
of a crumbling grave?
Will the branches sway
on windless nights?
Will fox-fires and will o' wisps
paint impossible colors
on bud-ends and blossoms?
Will beech nuts burst
to pale blue eyes
insomniac astronomers
with perfect vision,
counting the Pleiades,
numbering the galaxies.

And will they speak
the patient sonnets
of their greater lifespans,
the long-arc'd lines
their waving branches beat?

And somewhere within them,
does *he* smile there,
transmuted poet and dreamer
subsumed into the eons?

Are those *his* thoughts
that make them tremble
at every sunset,
his elder gods they fear
might swallow the sun
as it tosses in darkness?

Is he lord of their nightmares,
giving them Dread,
the obverse of the coin of Joy,
Fear, the companion of Wonder?

I regard the ailing tree,
the modest gravestone.
The tree will die. The rain
will wipe the letters clean.
Only the whispered words,
the lines the fingers trace
from one yellowed book
to another
endure —

I hold the burst nuts in one hand,
a book of Lovecraft's tales
in the other.
I study the cloudless, blue,
deceptive sky,
the lie that conceals an infinity
of screaming stars —

Oh, these roots have read him,
they have read him.

UNDER LOVECRAFT'S GRAVE

*A little play for four voices, read at
Lovecraft's Grave, 2002*

i
Listen! The worms, always.
Millions of teeth,
earth-moving cilia on pulsing tubes,
the parting of soil, the tiny pop
of subterranean surprise
as a cavity opens
the drip, drip, trickle, drip
as rain water instantly rushes to fill it.
A mole like a distant subway car,
snuffling about for edible roots.

The put-a-put sounds advancing,
retreating —
all the dead can hear of automobiles.
The door-slams (count them!)
of nearby visitors —
clickedy-click high heels of the women,
bump-thump of the men and the boys.
That's on the pavement —
upon the lawn
the sound of someone walking
is always *just so quiet*
that the dead are always imagining
they hear it.
Is that someone now? Is it night or day?
What year is it, anyway?

Beneath the earth, inside the casket,
inside the shroud or winding cloth,
even inside the mummified skin,
the shriveled organs, inside the bones
where the marrow is flaking to rust,
even inside the brain,
a desiccated thing

no bigger than a walnut,
consciousness clings.
(How do I know? From the *whispers*
I hear beneath the willow-weave,
the message no wind
alone could have invented.)

Their eyeless sight *sees* shades
of blackness,
their earless ears are perfect receivers
for what their lipless mouths
have to say.

ii
*If you had taken more milk as a child,
you might have lived to eighty, Howard.*

No one wants to be eighty, Mother —
forty-seven was painful enough
an age
to come unnailed and fall apart —

Does it still hurt?

No, Mother,
not since the autopsy, anyway.

*You just never listened.
I should have kept
you home more, I knew it.*

Now, Mother —

*But I couldn't bear to look at you.
That face! — how like your father's.
When you were off at school
I could go out
and face the world. But even so,
the people on the streetcar knew —
how they'd whisper —
That's Suzie Whipple Lovecraft,
the one whose husband....
the one with that hideous child...*

**YOUR DADDY'S AT BUTLER,
YOUR MOTHER, TOO.
PRETTY SOON THEY'LL
COME FOR YOU!**

My God, who was that?

Some child three plots over, Mother.
You know he does that when we
raise our voices.

**THATS MY SON
YOU'RE INSULTING!
A LOVECRAFT FACE IS A
DISTINCTION.**

Now see what you've done, Mother —
You've awakened Father again!

*Lantern-jaw! Son of a traveling man!
That freakish long face! Drawing monsters
on every sidewalk! No good at games!
The mothers would send me notes:
Your Howard is not permitted to play
with our Joshua. Our old cat Flavius
will NOT come down from the tree,
and something awful has taken root
in the rhododendron garden.
I will not have my children pronouncing
Arabian spells and Egyptian curses
at our Christian dinner table.*

That must have been all over town!

Ah, my Arabian Nights!
Playing at Grandfather Whipple's house.

**GOOD! A HIGH SPIRITED LAD!
TOO BAD I WASN'T THERE
TO SEE YOU
TO MANHOOD, HOWARD!
SO MUCH I COULD HAVE
TOLD YOU.
SOME BOOKS YOUR MOTHER
NEVER SAW...**

I found them, Father. They were very ...
instructive.

*And I took them away! Such filth!
And what a horrible turn he took.*

A mere nervous breakdown, Mother.

*We had to take him from school.
The shame of his father's death,
mad at Butler; his grandfather's death,*

*our move to the apartment
where we had to share
with common people.
The shock of finding
we had so little money.*

Somehow, Mother,
none of us ever actually
went out and worked: not you,
not me, not the Aunties
(let's not disturb *their* sleep, please!)

**SEE, THE BOY HAS SPIRIT.
SOMETHING YOU ALWAYS
LACKED AS A WIFE —
NO WARMTH, NO ANIMAL
SPIRITS!**

It's all animal with you, you madman!

Mother, Father, enough!
You've made your peace.

*You in your hospital bed, drooling,
with that leering face,
repeating obscenities,
boasting about the women
you had ruined!*

**YOU WITH YOUR
NIGHT GAUNTS
STREAMING FROM
THE CORNERS
WITH NEEDLE FINGERS!
I COULD NEVER TOUCH YOU,
AND FINALLY NOT EVEN A
SHADOW COULD!**

**GO TO BALTIMORE, HOWARD!
THERE'S A NEGRESS THERE
WHO RUNS AN
ESTABLISHMENT.
ASK FOR THE DWARFS.
THEY'RE SISTERS,
AND ACROBATS.
YOU CAN'T IMAGINE
WHAT THEY DO!
AH, BUT I SUPPOSE
THEY'RE DEAD, NOW.**

What's that! Is that YOU touching me?

NO, SUZIE, IT MUST BE —
ONE OF THOSE WORMS,
THE ONES WITH
A THOUSAND LEGS.

I know it's you. I can't bear it.

**YOUR DADDY'S AT BUTLER,
YOUR MOTHER, TOO.
PRETTY SOON THEY'LL
COME FOR YOU!**

*Howard, you promised me
there would be no right angles
anywhere in my casket.*

That's right, Mother.
I checked it myself.
Everything is angled in some way.

You are sure?

Yes, Mother.

*I must be sure. They come out
of the corners, you know.
Right angles are weak places
through which they come and go
from their cold and sunless world
to feed in ours.*

*First it's a grazing
against your cheekbone.
Then one touches
the small of your back.
Razor-sharp talons,
long, melon-shaped heads
and no faces*

No faces at all! I know, Mother,
I invented them
in my own nightmares!

*Real! they are real!
Filthy things, like dust rags,
ammonia on their breath
and old blood —
hovering, holding
you down,*

*touching,
touching!*

**WHY DIDN'T THEY BURY YOU
AT BUTLER, ANYWAY?
YOU ARE A TIRESOME WOMAN!**

*You! freeloader! whose family
plot is this anyway?*

Mother! Father! There are people here!
A dozen at least! Hear them!
There's the poet, and that actor
who imitates me! Pretty damn good!
And all the others, too! They're back —
I think it's my birthday —
Quiet, quiet! Listen to them! Listen!

FRANK AND LYDA

*The last days of Frank Belknap Long,
American horror writer*

Life was not kind
at the last
 (hell,
never had been)
insult piled
 on illness,
illusions shattered
 almost daily.

His sheltered poems
sang of Greece,
of gods who, dead,
were still more feeling
than a drained
and faded crucifix.
His tales were gentle,
though treading horror
in Lovecraft's shadow.

Stooped now,
 his shabby gait
 so mournful,
clothes so baggy
 that strangers
 handed him quarters.
They did not know

those bony fingers
wrote sonnets and tales,
of the dusty trunk
where his last unfinished novel
awaited his renewed attention.

Then came the stroke,
cruel snap of synapse —
week after week
in St. Vincent's.

We had just met.
We had talked of his poems,
his Lovecraft memoir —
his boisterous wife
intruding everywhere
with incoherent chatter
of Chekhov plays,
of Frank's world fame,
of her childhood
among the Yiddish actors
thrust from Russia
fleeing the Tsar's pogroms,
to Shanghai
to Canada to California.

I liked them both.
I called her *charodeika*,
enchantress,
she called me
Britannica.
We talked Tchaikovsky,
Akhmatova and Pasternak.

Now at St. Vincent's
Lyda's mad wheelchair
glides in the corridor
as she pigeonholes doctors,
nurses, orderlies,
telling them all
her Frankele is a famous author.

He lapses in
and out of memory,
recites "The Gods Are Dead"
to completion, cries out
as Lyda maligns his hero,
calling him *Lousecraft*.

"Lovecraft! Lovecraft!" he shrieks

in the thinnest tenor, cracking.
"He was the kindest man I knew!"
Lyda goes on

about her trip to Moscow,
"You'll see! They know me there!
They haven't forgotten my family!
They're meeting me
at the Aeroflot terminal.
And I'll come back
and open my bookstore in Chelsea
in that huge loft I've chosen.
And Frank will be there,
sign books for his fans every day.
Ray Bradbury wrote,
and Stephen King is sending us
ten thousand dollars."

"My wife," Frank tells me,
"is an alcoholic,
and a manic depressive.
What can I do?"

I visit Lyda at home,
watch roaches crawl
across discarded magazines.
I argue with her
as she opens the trunk,
tries to throw out
Frank's manuscripts.
I put the papers back,
distract her with a pile of envelopes.
"Let's clean up this," I say.

We throw away bank statements.
Decades of misery blink before me,
whole years in which
a mere three hundred dollars
stood between him and the Reaper.

Soon Frank is home,
confined to his bed,
then to a hobbling walker.
Lyda throws parties,
serves wine and cold cuts
amid the thriving roaches.

Her new dog wets
Frank's manuscripts.
The kitchen sink
is a mold terrarium,

feelers and tentacles
amid the dishes.

She announces her plans
for Moscow and Tel Aviv,
for her not-yet-started memoirs
of the Yiddish theater
as she swigs her vodka
and sings Tchaikovsky
in a bleary contralto.

“Why did you marry me?”
she hisses at Frank
as an argument dies down.

“My mother had just died,”
Frank answers bluntly.
“I didn’t know what to do.”

She tells me in French
how, despite her many lovers,
she was still a virgin
with her husband.

“J’ai un problème sexuelle,” she says.
She kneads the things
that once were breasts.
“We couldn’t do it.
“His hernias got in the way.”

Once, Frank had been
an armchair Bolshevik,
led on by Lyda’s memories
of the Jew-oppressing Tsar.
Now I tell him
of Lenin’s crimes,
how the order went out
to shoot anyone
with hands uncallused.

I call Lenin, as I often do,
a filthy murderer.
Now Lyda shouts,
“Watch what you say!
Watch what you say!”

Frank’s 82
and doesn’t know
what Stalin did.

I left one night
amid the shrieking
and screaming,
just couldn’t go back

rode home with a friend
and found myself saying,

“So this is how it ends
for a famous horror writer.”

My friend says,
“So this is how it ends
with a marriage.”

* * *

Death came, but not an end
to the indignity —
Frank’s body lay
for months in the morgue,
unclaimed, unspoken for
while Lyda bided time,
cashing the pitiful checks
that came in his name.

Then to a potter’s field
where what he dreaded most —
to mingle with the crowd,
touched by their dirt
and violence,
alone without
a woman’s caring touch —

befell him,
a frail ghost jostled
by addicts and derelicts,
mere revenants of animated meat.

Soon Lyda passed.
Then Frank was retrieved,
his body moved
to a distant family plot.
Alone at last
in the clear white light
of blessed solitude.

THINGS SEEN IN GRAVEYARDS

AFTER THE STORM

Dead night. I tramp the midnight lane
of yews and mausoleums.
The air resounds with muffled cries:
a cat? a wailing ghost?
a child abandoned, exposed
to gusts and rain and fatal chill?

I think of Roman fathers
exposing their infants on hilltops —
or, far more likely in this
ignoble time, a furtive birth
dumped from the back of a passing car.

My eye expands into the moonless dark.
I brush against the rain-filled leaves,
push through the hedge
until I find the source:
on a mound where six markers
neatly grew,
a tree had crashed upon an infant's grave.

Sleep, sorry ghost,
from your Indian awakening!
Was it not here the Iroquois
made secret pledges to moon and stars?
Did they not tell of jumbled boneyards
where felling trees brought back
the dead —

not whole, but with the jaws and tails
of animals, were-things with fangs
and claws and antlers, hoofed hands
and legs attached at useless angles?
Hence their horror of disturbing bones!

Something ascends before me, a blur
between the graveyard and the pines:
I see the outspread wings of an owl,
the twisted arc of its talons,
but it regards me with a human face,
a tiny death-head in a feather shroud,
withered and wise and ravenous
for the mother milk of the skies.

HART ISLAND

Ferry cuts fog
in Long Island Sound,
baleful horn bellowing

a midnight run
unblessed by harbor lights,
unknown to the sleeping millions

convicts at the rails,
guards behind them,
dour-faced captain at the helm
a face and a pipe
and a dead-ahead glare,
an empty gaze that asks no questions
offers no advice

A careful mooring,
cables thicker than hanging noose
bind ship to pier;
pilings like pagan columns
bind pier to Hart Island

Convicts shuffle to the end of the dock,
guards behind them with billy clubs
hands tensed at holster.

You fellas better behave now,
the captain mutters,
just do what you're told.
And no funny business,
another voice warns,
'cause anything could happen to you here.

The prisoners shiver at moonless
expanse
of blackened water,
dead shell of Bronx one way,
bedrooms of Queens the other;
clap their hands, blow on their fingers
to fight the chill.

Guess you would freeze one speculates
before you could get to shore.

Just do what you're told,
the biggest con admonishes.

*I been here before. Do what
you're told and then it's over.*

Eager to earn
the early release,
willing to dig and lift and carry,
they turn to the foreman.
He points to the tarp
that covers the cargo.
They lift the tiny oblong boxes,
frail as balsa
thin pine confining
the swaddled contents.

What's in these things?

one asks, taking on three
stacked to his chin.
Over there, is all the foreman says,
pointing to mounds
where a silent back hoe
stands sentinel.

These be coffins, the older con explains.
Baby coffins.

They lower the boxes
into the waiting holes,
read the tags attached to them:

Baby Boy Franklin

Carl Hernandez

Unknown Baby Girl, Hispanic.

The adult coffins are heavier,
two men at least to carry each one.

They can joke about these:

Heavy bastard, this Jose.

Carla here, she musta wasted away.

But no one speaks about the babies.

The convicts' eyes grow angry, then sad.

Later the mounds will be toppled,
the soil returned to the holes,
flattened and tamped
with a cursory blessing
by an ecumenical chaplain.

These are the lonely dead,
the snuffout of innocence:
crack babies

AIDS babies

babies dead from drive-by bullets
babies abandoned like unwanted kittens
dumpster children

No wonder this island cries in its sleep.

NIGHT WALKER

Still in her nightgown,
the gaunt old woman,
nearly a skeleton in satin,
sleepwalked through lawns,
onto a well-known path
passing her mother's grave,
barefoot between the Civil War
cannons,
out the back gate,
then down the slope to the river.

Imagine her walk,
oblivious to gravel,
untouched by thorns,
then over rail and tie
without a splinter,
then down the bank
to the waiting waters!

Cats she'd once fed
watched from the dark
of rhododendrons
but did not go to her.
I saw her, too,
mute and astonished
as she passed the monument
where I recited *Ulalume* —

The cold chill current
did not awaken her,
lifted her up from her wading.
Weeds and crayfish
merged with her streaming hair.

She sank, her gown
a luminescent ribbon.
Her life dissolved
in unseen bubbles.

Who beckoned her?
What star deluded her?
What long-dead lover
called from the mud
of the river bottom?

AN EXETER VAMPIRE, 1799

She comes back, in the rain, at midnight.
Her pale hand, not a branch, taps the glass.
Her thin voice, poor Sarah Tillinghast
whines and whimpers, chimes and summons you
to walk in lightning and will'o wisp
to the hallowed sward of the burial ground,
to press your cheek against her limestone,
to run your fingers on family name,
to let the rain inundate your hair,
wet your nightclothes to clammy chill,
set your teeth chattering, your breath
a tiny fog before you in the larger mist.

You did not see her go before you,
yet you knew she was coming here.
Soon her dead hand will tap your shoulder.
Averting your eyes, you bare your throat
for her needful feeding, your heat, your
heart's blood erupting in her gullet.
You will smell her decay, feel the worms
as her moldy shroud rubs against you.
Still you will nurse the undead sister,
until her sharp incisors release you
into a sobbing heap of tangled hair,
your heart near stopped, your lungs exploding,
wracked with a chill that crackles the bones.

The rain will wash away the bloodstains.
You will hide your no more virginal
throat like a smiling lover's secret.
Two brothers have already perished —
the night chill, anemia, swift fall
to red and galloping consumption.
Death took them a week apart, a month
beyond Sarah's first night-time calling.

Honor Tillinghast, the stoic mother,
sits in the log house by the ebbing fire,
heating weak broth and johnny cakes.
One by one she has sewn up your shrouds—
now she assembles yet another.
She knows there is no peace on this earth,
nor any rest in the turning grave.

The storm ends, and birds predict the sun.
Upstairs, in garret and gable dark,
the children stir, weak and tubercular,
coughing and fainting and praying for breath.
The ones that suck by night are stronger
than those they feed on, here where dead things
sing their own epitaphs in moon-dance,
and come back, in the rain, at midnight.

Exeter, Rhode Island's "vampire" case of 1799 ended with the exhumation and destruction of the corpse of Sarah Tillinghast after four siblings followed her in death by consumption. They burned Sarah's heart and reburied all the bodies.

GRAVEYARDS I'D LIKE TO SEE

1

An animal cemetery
with obelisks
and stately groves
of redwood.
No mongrels here,
no stones for Spot
or Flossy,
for parakeets or hamsters:

These stones are serious,
basalt polished black,
shiny as obsidian,
noble as a Pharaoh's monument,

in honor of the Trilobite,
the wheeling Pterodactyl,
and up on the hill,
a double-doored pyramidal
mausoleum, ten stories high,
housing a skeleton
of the King of Kings,

loudspeakers roaring
the hunger calls,
the territorial warnings,
the mating imperative
of Tyrannosaurus Rex.

2

Dead trees, parched grass,
sinkhole and swamp
surround the stepfathers' graveyard,

one tiny fence away
from the witch-elm Aeldema
where stepmothers' ghosts
rise from potters' soil
to screech their complaints.
Crows flee the spot.
The barren trees
sprout fungoid terraces.
The branches clot
with drooping, rabid bats.

All night, all day,
the angry spirits
mutter in vain.
No one listens —

the scorned sons are free,
the beaten daughters
a thousand miles away.

Dry earth cracks
around the nameless markers,
as sunken mounds
are upthrust suddenly
as though the earth
would spit them out.

3

On a featureless plain,
a potters' field for bigots,
a noisome heath
where nothing grows,
and feral cats
gnaw desiccated rats.

The weathered pine planks
that serve for tombstones
are spray-painted
with ghetto epithets,
rotten with termites,
ringed with slime mold.

The bone-dry yard
is a place of nettles,
skunk cabbage
and poison ivy.

Last home for famous
TV evangelists,
faith healers and con men,
grasping politicians,
hooded supremacists,
grumpy class warriors,
Mayflower lily,
Panther and Klansman
subsumed in stew
by the tolerant earth,
the indiscriminating
worms.

4

Somewhere in Europe —
that boneyard
of murderous ideologies —
let's have a solemn memorial
for ideas whose time

has come and gone —
last resting place of *isms*
and *ologies*,

a place where splinter sects
who slaughtered one another
for their version of God
lie head to head in silence.

Crows come by the hundred,
convene in the abundant oaks.
The shrill debates are endless,
committees and caucuses,
congresses and parliaments.
The ground is spattered
with their philosophizing.
And every one of them
wants to rule the earth.

Stones in a standing pool
argue forever
on the proper method of baptism.
An empty chapel
is alternately seized
by ghosts of every sect
who promptly banish all others.

Two hillsides have hundreds
of facing cannons
not rusted not retired
eternally on alert,
cannonballs piled high,
fuses and powder dry,
ready to roar and thunder
as the crows keep tally

Catholic *caw* Huguenot
Anglican *caw caw* Roman
Christian *caw caw caw* Muslim
Muslim *caw caw caw caw* Jew

each shot resounds
in boom and crow-cloud.
smoke settles,
the senators return
to the golden oaks

war without end.

THE HARVESTMAN

Day fell. The cooling sun careened and set,
an orange flare behind the broiling hill.
August is full upon the town, and yet
the lakeside grove is desolate and still.

No gravestones bear my surname here —
(my forebears have vanished to scattered dust) —
yet this is where I contemplate a bier,
a monument, a poet's shattered bust.

This burial ground of proud and prudent Scot
is now a blasted place of toppled stones,
storm-blasted trunks and layered, fungal rot,
tree ears and bell-shaped mushrooms white as bones.

The ancient limestone markers, tumble-tossed,
cast off like cards at the end of a game,
speak of loves played and grand illusions lost,
fragmented now to letters from a name,

scrabbled by giants or angry, spiteful youth,
treefall, or lightning's vengeful, jabbing pen,
first from surname pulled like a broken tooth,
birth date from death, there where of it, the when

now jumbled like a madman's ransom note.
Words carved in stone as certain history
confound the reader now in jumbled quote,
turning church'd facts to puzzled mystery.

Upon an obelisk of limestone, cold
with the chill of glacial remembering,
beneath the wizened shade of maples, old
with a century's Novembering,

a host of Harvestmen ride skitter-skit,
legs tracing Braille of infant's monument.
Daddy-Long-Legs! sly arachnids, unfit
for sunlight, silent raptors, demon-sent —

Why do you writhe and twine those wiry limbs
(too many to count as they crouch and leap)?
Why herd like worshipers entranced by hymns,
then fly like clerks with appointments to keep?

One moment you're here in a skittering tide;
then, as my shadow touches your eyes,
you race to the obelisk's other side,
the way a tree'd squirrel is caught by surprise.

We play out this Harvestman hide-and-seek,
round and round the moss-fringed, ancient grave,
'til I can almost hear these monsters, meek
and voiceless, moving in a song, a wave

of primal hungering. Bad luck, cursed crops,
they say, if you kill one. Better to dread
their venomless fangs, their sinister drops
from overhanging branch or dusty bed!

What do they eat? What do those tiny eyes
seek out and chase amid marble and slate?
Leaf-litter bugs, dead things of any size,
trapped beneath fangs and feeders (eight!)

Are you the harvesters of suicides?
Do the soul buds of babies appease you?
Do you drink the tears of abandoned brides?
Does the mist from rotting coffins please you?

Your mouths are not for speaking, Harvestmen.
Your secrets, like the truth behind the stones
(how did they really die, and why, and when?)
are told in your thousand-leg dance on bones.

Night now. The knowing moon will rise and set,
an umber globe behind the misty hill.
Pregnant autumn is in the air, and yet
the still-green grove is desolate and still.

All night, ten thousand eyes are watching here,
shepherds tending their ectoplasmic fold,
forty thousand spider tendrils, fear
incarnate, soul vampires, patient and old!

Harvestman, Harvestman, whom do you seek?

THE EAR MOUND SHRINE, KYOTO

1

Korea, 1597

Too many heads, my lord!

Too many heads!

How to get home
a hundred thousand

of these Korean keepsakes?

Our ships are laden with gold and silver,

jade and ceramics,

inlaid cabinets,

silks and scrolls.

If we leave them behind, my lord,
the men will be furious.

We have to prove the extent of our
triumph.

Our honor is at stake.

We have burned their palaces,
looted their pathetic little temples,
turned all their mansions to ash,
squeezed the last coins
from the rural landlords,

but we shall be seen
as idle braggarts,
robbers of tombs and empty houses,
unless we pile the skulls
at Toyotomi's feet.
What will the general say?

The leader deliberates,
talks with his captains
of ballast and measures,
the weight of captives,
then calls his men
to the hilltop tent.

Cut off the ears,

he tells them.

We'll give the general
a mountain of ears.

If ears are already missing,
we'll take the noses.

As for the rotting heads —
line them up
along the sea-cliff.
Let them face east,
eyes wide,

mouths open
in suitable terror,
a warning to all
of our superior power.
Drink to the general —
a thousand years
to Toyotomi Hideyoshi!

2

Japan, 1598

The ladies lounge
in the treasure chamber.

Look what Hideyoshi brought us!

They test the furniture,
line up the vases —

these for spring,

these for autumn —

chitter with laughter
at pornographic scrolls.

Do Korean women really do that?

Their fluttering robes
and cherry-stained lips,
their dancing fingers
and playful eyes
ignore the line of captives
seated on wooden benches
before the general's chamber.
More Koreans pass through daily —
women for the taking
for a life of kitchen labor,
sad old scholars
with mandarin whiskers
destined to tutor
the general's nephews,
rosy-cheeked boys
for the monks
and opera masters.

There is another room
that only Hideyoshi enters.
What does he do
in the "Chamber of Ears"?
The servants say
the smell is terrible,
flies and rats everywhere.
Not even burning camphor
can mask its charnel aroma.

They know he requisitioned urns,

boxes and baskets of all dimensions;
they know that thousands of ears
are piled in pyramids
from which they tumble daily,
each fleshy nautilus tilted
a different way.
The general arranges them for hours –
something not right
about an inverted ear, he says.
He thinks of sorting lefts and rights —
what odds against
the reuniting of ear lobes
of just one victim?

This has been going on for months.
Not one of the concubines
has gotten pregnant
since the ears were delivered,
and the soldiers rewarded.
If this goes on, what of the dynasty?
A servant tells the oldest wife:
It can't go on. He'll tire of it.
The ears are black and shrunken now
like poison mushrooms.

The general stops speaking
to his subordinates, calls in
a scribe to issue written orders.
I am spied upon, he tells his minister.

Toyotomi's nights
are not given to slumber.
He spends three days
in the Chamber of Ears,
comes out white-haired
and foaming at the mouth.
Fever's bed claims him.

The ears, it seems,
have been *listening*.
The general has good ears, too.
He knows that something fleshy
fumbles about in there —
and not a rat — one living ear,
or a pair of them,
among two hundred thousand dead ones,
spying his words, his plans,
waiting to fly on ghost wings
to the Korean fleet,
to tell Admiral Yi,

his nemesis,
of every weakness.

Before he dies
in a black-face fever,
with trembling hands,
throat choking
as though pressed down
by invisible stones,
Toyotomi utters his final order:
Bury the ears! All of them!
Put a stone shrine above them.
Guard the place. Let nothing escape.

3
The Ear Mound Shrine, Kyoto, 1998
Caretaker, gardener,
shrine attendant,
one old man of eighty,
sweeps up the cigarette butts
a careless wind deposits
at the base of the Ear Mound.

A plaque commemorates
the ancient invasion
four hundred years ago,
the massacre,
the burial of Korean ears
in hopes of atoning
the angry spirits.

It is silent here in Kyoto,
the odd stillness of tree and stone,
of the looming, stark monument —
more than silent, I think.
This place takes in sound.
It is *listening*.
It would hear a whisper,
a wish in the subconscious.

There is an annual ceremony, I am told,
a burning of incense,
a proper prayer.
But is it heard across the water?
Tenfold ten thousand ghosts
gasp on the Korean seashore,
waiting for apologies they cannot hear,
scanning the east
with doleful demon eyes,

ghost hands on their
ever-bleeding cheeks,
mouths open still.

The place asks: *Have you learned?*
Does life still sever life?
Is the thread from sire to son
to be left unbroken now?

At dawn, the raked earth
stirs around the monument.
The tiny pebbles levitate,
grooves, channels, wormholes
into the ancient mound
push out like tiny volcanoes.
Then hordes of pink antennae
burst out at the trumpeting sun.

One hundred thousand
hatching butterflies!
Clouds of pink and salmon,
vermilion and cherry,
spread their matched wings
in endless mutation,
whirlwind of *cho-cho* maidens,
warrior moths,
mandarin and concubine,
scholar, musician – all butterflies,
glyphs on their wings
of all the ancient families,

ascending on an updraft,
cloud of every color
heading westward,
westward to sing
to the ghosts who called them.

ACELDEMA, THE FIELD OF BLOOD

Why does the wind howl so?
Why, in this holy land
will neither Jew nor Christian
bury their elders here?
Why no flowers ever
in this monochrome graveyard?

This is cursed ground
where nothing wholesome grows.
Markers and monuments
are toppled by earthquakes,

names weathered off by wind-sand,
communal stones from plague times
(mere icons of contagion)
a potter's field, rock sepulchres,
dry hills honeycombed
with doorless, nameless tombs.

Here slaves and foreigners,
assassinated strangers, whores
and their discarded fetuses
mingle their bones and dust.

The twisted fig trees
grew old and died –
a single olive tree
leans on a wall,
its black fruit withered,
leaves yellow and black
with leprous patches.

Here a millennium of graves
is untouched by robbers –
for even the lowest of thieves
will not seek plunder here.
Whatever is put here
stays here, untouchable.

The shadows at dusk
skulk by like beggars,
furtive penumbras
fleeing to better darknesses.
It is a ghostless place
save for the owner's spirit.
If you would find a man
and love him,
as teacher, soul-mate, friend,
and in one night,
betray him,
so, too, would your soul-poison
envelop the land you bought —

the place you gave away
to everyone and no one,
your charity to corpses,
desolate Aceldema,
deeded for thirty
silver pieces, Judas!

MRS. WEEDEN, OF PAWTUCKET

Someone exhumed
in dead of night
heart of Pawtucket,
blank eyes of empty factories
the only witnesses,

exhumed Elizabeth Weeden
dead eighty years now —
ripped off the lid
of her sarcophagus,
lifted the coffin
from a trough of water
(What smells?
what scraping beneath
of clawed, albino rats?)

came in a pickup,
backed over tombstones,
ripped up the shrubbery
to get at her —

but nothing went right
for these amateur ghouls.
The fine box shattered
like so many matchsticks.
The skull went one way —
shroud tearing like spiderwebs
as bones fell everywhere —

not white in the starlight,
not white in the beams
of their furtive,
terrified flashlights

but black,
digits and vertebrae,
femur and rib-cage
dark as the quill
of a graveyard crow —

They fled with nothing.
Next day I stand
with a Pawtucket detective
who asks me what sense
I can make of this.

I'm not sure.
But last night was Lovecraft's birthday.
In his "Reanimator" tale
a man named Ezra Weeden
is the first revived from the dead,
from the "essential salts" in his grave.
Even in sunlight this tomb is hard to
read.
It says "E....ZA... WEEDEN."

A shard or two of bone remains,
black on the stubborn green of lawn,
and everywhere, in tatters,
fragments of shroud appall the sun:
the color is rust, and brick,
persistence of blood, unclean,
outlasting worm and tree-root,
a color which, once seen,
can never be forgotten.
I do not want to see its like again.

TWILIGHT OF THE DICTATORS

THE EXHUMATION OF GOETHE

Weimar, Germany, 1970

By all means do this at night,
while Weimar
sleeps, while even those whose job
it is to watch
the watchers, sleep. In merciful dark,
the third shift silence when
the local electric plant
shuts down for the Good of the State,

take a cart — no, not a car,
a hand-drawn cart —
dampen its wheels so your journeys to,
and from, and back
to the foggy graveyard are soundless.

Do not awaken the burgers!
Here are the keys
to the wrought-iron gates —
mind you don't rattle them.
The crypt has been purposefully left unlocked.
You need but draw the door.
The cart will just squeeze through
(Engineer Heinrich has measured everything!)

Open the sarcophagus as quietly
as possible.
Watch the fingers! Don't leave a mark
on the hand-carved cover.
Be sure it's Goethe, the one with a "G."
We don't want his crypt-mate Schiller
(too many anti-People tendencies).

Lift up the whole thing gently.
The bones will want to fly apart.
Only the shroud, and some mummified meat
keep him in the semblance of skeleton.
Just scoop the whole thing up,
and into the cart like a pancake.

Here's a bag for the skull. Don't muss
those ash-gray laurel leaves.
We plan to coat them in polyester
after we study that Aryan skull

whose brain conceived of Faust,
Egmont and sorrowful Werther.
We're going to wire the bones together,
strip off that nasty flesh,
maybe bleach him a little,
make a respectable ghost of Goethe.

Who knows, if he looks good enough,
in a relined sarcophagus,
we could put him on display.
Come to *Kulturstadt!*
See Goethe's body!
Even better than Lenin!
(Can we say that?)

We'll pipe in lieder and opera.
Tour guides will be dressed as Gretchen.
Maybe a fun house
with Mephistopheles,
and sausages at Brander's Inn.

Ah! the cart is here! The bones,
yes, the bones. Unfortunate, the odor.
We can work on that.
The colors, mein Gott,
(excuse the expression)
they will not please —
over there, Klaus,
 if you're going to be sick —
It's such a *little* skeleton —
was he really so short?
The books said he towered
over his contemporaries.
So much for the books!
And the shroud — that color —
not at all what we imagined.
Perhaps the opera house
could make a new one.

No, the project is cancelled.
Poets are just too — flimsy.
Next time let's exhume a general,
Bismarck, the Kaiser,
someone with a sword and epaulets.
Armor would be even better.
The People want giants!

WINTER SOLSTICE 1989

December skies are ominous:
gray walls of cloud
obscure the universe.
Even the sun is secretive,
a burnished coin
in miser's pocket,
a hooded monk,
a bashful Cyclops
now in, now out of snowstorm,
avoiding the north like a criminal.
Whoever thought that such a sun,
such arctic windblasts,
could herald liberation?
Who knew what anthem
 the wind blasts bellowed,
what symphony the arctic snows
had scored on skytop?

Joy, thou source of light immortal...
Beethoven's hymn
 and Schiller's Ode
played by an East/West orchestra,
sung by a chorus
eager to substitute
Freiheit for *Freude*,
a burst of happiness
sparkling from Bernstein's eyes
as he conducts them.
"Freiheit indeed," he says,
"and not a single bullet was fired!"

Crowds fill the public squares,
shake fists at balconies.
In Hungary the People's Party
abolishes itself;
wire cutters make souvenirs
of barbed wire barriers.

In East Berlin they planned to shoot
protesters, crush their placards
beneath the wheels of tanks:
the generals depose the leaders.
Dumbfounded border guards
read orders to let all citizens through,
protest to newsmen:
 "This means no jobs for us!"

Hole after hole, gate after gate,
the hundred mile barricade shatters.
Guard towers fall like dominoes.
Two Germanies embrace and weep.

Daughter of Elysium...
In Prague, the workmen knock down
a neon hammer and sickle
from the local power plant.
In Poland the workers remove
the frowning bronze Lenin
no longer managing
his bankrupt shipyard.
The Russians who once
gave tanks to crush rebellion
now tell the Czechs
they'd better reform — and fast!
The aged leaders of Belgrade,
encrusted lords of Sofia,
tremble and surrender rule
to the astonished populace.

In Bucharest they spit
on portraits of Ceaucescu—
whom but a month before
they eulogized
The Danube of Thought,
Genius of the Carpathians.
Soldiers begged
for a place in the firing squad,
loaded and fired
before the order was even uttered.

It takes three days
at the blowtorch
until the frowning monolith of Lenin
the king of workers
in his suit and vest
dainty fingers
that had lifted no tool
toppled to the jeers
 of the crowd.
A flatbed removes
 the humbled colossus,
cheek to the ground,
his exhortative gesture
meaningless.

The workers chant
no *Internationale*.
His bronze should crack
to hear their anthem today:
No more Communists!
No more
Communists
ever!

The boot has lifted
from the face of Europe

IN THE STREETS OF MOSCOW AND ST. PETERSBURG

Idol-smashing multitudes, I salute you!
Cut off Lenin at the kneecaps,
then lift his noos'd neck
at the end of a wrecking crane.
Topple Dzerzhinsky from the KGB
he built.
How imperious he looked in his
bronze overcoat,
now nothing but a tumbled derelict!
Marx's face is daubed with splotches,
red paint, white paint —
his imperium now reads
**WORKERS OF THE WORLD
FORGIVE ME**
Prostitye menya...prostitye menya...
The dying words of Boris Godounov!
Do not stop at these beginnings,
O Russians long suffering!
Rip that mummy from Lenin's tomb!
Scatter the bones of Stalin to the dogs!

What to do with all
the toppled monoliths?
Melt them down for bells!
I hear new bells in Moscow tolling,
Low the notes, melancholy
the harmonies.
Bells of iron, bells of bronze
Bells of the sorrow of a million kulaks.
Bells to shatter the walls of Lubyanka,
topple the last towers of bitter Gulag.
Ring them all in one great
universal chord!
Let the largest orchestra ever assembled
play the Overture of 1812!
Cannons bursting!
Fireworks over the onion domes!
Swing the clabbers!
Lenin's head is a church bell!
Stalin's a row of jolly carillons!
The brow and beard of Marx intoning
Glory! Glory! *Slava! Slava!*

STALIN AND SHOSTAKOVICH

It's three in the morning and snowing in Moscow.
The streets are dark — but here and there a light —
a solitary bulb throws out its beacon:
a yellow beam from Stalin's workroom,
steady when the Great Helmsman has an idea,
tilted downward as he studies his lists,
casting a shadow of his giant hand
 as fountain pen
makes check marks next to offending names.
Tomorrow those names and their owners
will separate forever as People's Enemies
become "Former People."
The offices of Ministries are well lit, too —
memos to write, conspiracies to ferret out,
coffee to drain by the cup, by the gallon.
(If Comrade Stalin can work all night,
who dares to leave his tasks unfinished?)
At the Lubyanka Jail, one basement window
emits its light in slitted segments.
One could see —
 if anyone dared to press his face there —
an arm with a truncheon — a mangled visage.
Dim slots of light — a doorway — come on and off.
Men in black coats are framed there.
Then slashing beams and feral tail lights
precede and follow the Black Marias.

2

The clock chimes four.
Another lamp is burning, too —
another hand makes nervous tick marks
as Shostakovich blocks out chords and melodies.
Even the vodka and cigarettes
are quite forgotten as the climax approaches.
Eyes blur with staves,
 sharps dance like angry snowflakes.
He cannot concentrate.
 Half his brain is *listening*.
 Not to his inner Muses —
 not tonight,
 not any night this year —
listening for the Black Marias.
A car glides by — too slowly?
Someone is running at the end of the block —
 why, at this hour?
An interval of silence — too long, *too* quiet.
A truck stops — how long
 until the doors swing wide
 and heavy-footed steps

echo from the building fronts?
A street lamp winks out; across
the street a curtain parts,
a candle moves once
across a table —
is it nothing— or a signal?
He cannot go to the window and look.
Watchers in raincoats
dislike being spied upon.
It's never wise to stand in a window, anyway:
rocks have been thrown
by zealous members of the Communist Youth
rocks with notes
that read: **SHOSTAKOVICH—PARASITE—
FORMALIST!!!**
What if one of them took a gun to a nearby rooftop-?
Open season on Formalist Anti-People Artists!
His hands make notes in jagged gesture.
*Staccato—staccato—agitato—
Attaca subito—*

Stalin condemned his last opera.
What will he think of this symphony —
its Mahleresque, giant orchestra,
its jarring, piled-on harmonies,
its bleak and withering quietudes?
Will this, too, be a “muddle instead of music?”
How can he help being himself?
He writes not what he wants,
but what he has to.
He tries to be grand — it comes out bombast.
Tries humor, only to ooze sarcasm.
He has no smile that convinces —
could a lobster smile
while dangling over the cooking pot?
He must put everything into this symphony.
It may be his last, anyway.
Ignoring the clock, he labors on.
This page: the whimper of the beaten.
There: the shriek of the victims' widows.
There: the whining voice of the apparatchik.
This horn sounds a denunciation.
This oboe betrays a friend for a dacha.
This violin divorces its partner,
disclosing her unacceptable class origins.
A clarinet warns of rootless cosmopolitans.
Let them guess what it's all about!
To hell with their need for uplift!
Rub their faces in the ruin of Russia!
Let them try their dialectic on this one!

3

Stalin works on. He sees the name
of Shostakovich. A memo asks:
Arrest and interrogate?
“I like a tune,” he says to himself,
“and now and then even a poem.”
The chastised artists would come around.
They’d write their odes and symphonies
to Russia and Comrade Stalin.
They’d do it willingly.
They’d trample one another for the privilege.
No action at present, the dictator writes.

4

Done for the night, the weary composer
dons coat and shoes, tiptoes
out door to the unheated hall.
Suitcase beside him, he curls up there
between the elevator and the apartment door.
Tries to sleep, tries not to listen
to the spiderweb sounds of the dying night.
The suitcase is packed for a long journey —
a cold one.
Better to wait in the corridor, he thinks;
better not to wake his sleeping wife and son
if this is the night that makes his life
another unfinished symphony.

THE PIANO UPRISING

A Dream, from the Dark Years of Poland

1

Troops at the border; all weapons are confiscated.
Advisors in place, an abundance of secret
police. The informers are always willing.
The Church, pretending everything, doing nothing,
locked in the stasis of state against god,
the people's servitude a foregone conclusion.
The men are drafted into the army.
The miners and workers uneasily obey
the order to stay at their critical jobs.
The women wait in endless queues,
 their shawls and kerchiefs aligned
like segments of an endless tapeworm
 kept at the edge of hunger.
The meager stores can barely feed them.
The cattle and chickens and eggs go East,
 get eaten by the well-fed army,
 leaving a handful of dwarfish cabbages,
 the ubiquitous potato, the accusing spaces
 of emptiness on the collective's shelves.
Women work in the steaming kitchens,
 coaxing soup from skeletons,
 bread from rye, a bottomless pot
 of cabbage ends and sausages. Somehow,
 everyone eats.
They put aside an extra helping
 for the buxom and blonde granddaughters.
At night, or in slices of stolen afternoons,
 youthful and agile-fingered,
girls master the dancing of eighty-eight steps,
play on thousands of legal pianos —
the old Mazurkas, the Waltzes, of Chopin.
No one has thought to outlaw the instruments.

As Nadia practices in Gdansk,
Lidia plays grandmother's spinet in Krakow.
A school piano in Warsaw
 hums by itself in resonance.
No one knows they play to one another,
that the Polish girls have long ago ceased needing
to guide imprinted keys in their etudes.
No one suspects they are secret weapons,
 strings drawn taut,
 brass frames like crossbows.

Determined and sinister, shining and black
 as coffins in a showroom,
they bide their time rehearsing

the *Revolutionary Etude* for the people,
the *Marche Funèbre* for the martyrs,
roulades of Paderewski held in reserve.

The police think nothing of the white-haired tuner —
he goes from home to home, adjusts,
re-strings and tempers,
adds unusual parts to the pedals.

An abandoned piano factory springs to life,
new models in crates on the loading docks,
the shipping manifests immaculate.
It seems that everyone is getting a piano.
The Minister of Finance shrugs. The economy
opens an eye and goes back to sleep.
The Minister of Culture smiles:
music without words is a harmless
expression of the people's art.

2

Nadia practices in Gdansk.
In Krakow her grandmother's
piano is waiting.
In Warsaw the instrument
she studied on
hides in a cellar
(the piano underground).
Then from a million radios
a great C resounds,
eight octaves thick,
a *Resurrexit* of brass and wood,
a rhapsody of unity,
harmonics to the nth degree.
Casters unlock, wheel guards
are thrust aside.
Grands roll through empty apartments,
tiptoe impossibly
down curving stairs.
Spinets swerve out
from alleyways.
Baby grands dart
from tree to tree,
play cat and mouse
with the traffic police.

The sergeant leafs through
reports of abandoned furniture,
scratches his head in puzzlement.

It is, of course, the piano rebellion.

The pianos are coming:
wheeled piano tanks
death black, coffin-shaped,
polished and retrofit
with well-tuned armaments.
They all play Chopin in unison —
the *Military Polonaise*.
Their lids drum open and shut like jaws,
rolling on tractor tires, juggernauts
rumbling bass notes, the *r-r-r-rum-ta-tum*
of Polonaise audacity.

The battle begins:
Pianos crash from the rooftops.
A phalanx of interlocked pianos
take the field, sound boards locked
in invincible wedges.
Flying pianos buzz over the airport,
their black and white teeth
rat-tat-tat arpeggios,
down with ease the clumsy MIG fighters.

They drive the generals into the sea.
The troops desert,
lock arms and dance
into the countryside.
File clerks toss documents from windows,
topple file cabinets,
pour chicken soup on bureaucrats,
sing *r-r-r-rum-ta-tum* in the hallways.
Cornered in public squares
the secret police deny everything,
their crimes, their ranks, their names.

In Warsaw the sweating minister
of secret police and internal security
shouts on his hot wire to Moscow:
“Not royalists, stupid, *royali*, pianos!
it’s an uprising of legions of pianos.
Tell them — tell them the pianos are coming!”
The connection is broken by a piano wire.

Instruments re-gather in the countryside.
Flying Becksteins invade Soviet airspace,
lead missiles cat-and-mouse
back to the planes that launched them.
(Whoever thought a *hammerklavier*
could turn right angles at Mach 2?)

The Polonaise goes on.

Others conduct guerrilla war
to the shifting beat of Mazurkas.
Lithe and supple assassins
hunt down the Russian advisors
(those white enamel spinets,
fast on their wheels,
eager to leap from a third floor window
to squash a fleeing foreigner!)
Steinways roll through Warsaw,
 Polish flag on their sides,
Bösendorfers to the rescue at Lidice,
Baldwins at the border to reinforce them,
Becksteins fight shoulder-to-shoulder
 with lowly domestic models.
Antique pianos in square cases
 come apart at the joints but fight;
half dozen harpsichords at the windows,
watch wistfully.
 Their quills fly out like arrows.
A tiny virginal bursts its frame
 to whip a visiting professor of Marxism,
draws blood with snapping steel wires.

The highway is clogged with black Volgas.
Battalions of Russians fall back in retreat.
And this is but the start of it:
As Anna practices in Leningrad,
Irina plays grandmother's spinet in Moscow.
A school piano in Odessa
 hums by itself in resonance.

HORRORS!

THE ANACONDA POEMS

1

Some want to come back from death,
reliving their human folly
again and again,
life after dreary life
until they get it right,
then slide down the chute
to soulless oblivion.

We who don't care for perfection
are doomed to come back as animals.
Do we return
 according to our habits,
 the heaped accounts of karma,
or can we choose?

I choose,
study the animal kingdom
for the soul's best condo,
the leafiest turf,
the longest return engagement.
Choosing is hard for a hermit poet.
No herd instinct for me,
no hive or flock or pride
 if you please.
Let me be something
solitary yet strong,
lordly and unapproachable.
I search for incarnations
on top of the food chain.
I'll eat
 but not be eaten
hunt but elude the hunter.

At last I find it —
the giant anaconda.
Female I'll have to be —
the males are nothing.

Mother of all snakes,
I'll grow to thirty feet,
spend all day lazing
in the waters of the Amazon.
Nights I'll wait
at the edge of the river,

when deer and rabbit,
panther and lemur
come to drink.
My fangs attach
to whatever approaches;
I throw throw my coils
with amazing speed.
The astonished prey
immobile, breathless
as I squeeze squeeze
 squeeze
to heart-stop stillness.
Compacted to sausage shape
the still warm animals
slide down my gullet,
my inward turning teeth
guiding them onwards.

I have no enemies,
swim unconcerned
among piranha
 electric eels
 and crocodile caymans.
Not even my prey
seem to notice me
as I mount skyward
to the treetop banquet,
my green and black camouflage
matching the dappled forest.
Parrots and toucans
 I eat like candy.

Only the monkeys fear me
somersault screaming
at the sight of me —
Oh, and the hairless apes
in the jungle villages:
I need but show my tongue,
my unblinking eye,
to make them run away.

Taking the sun
on a bank a-burst
with yellow blossoms
I am a jasmine empress
irresistible
to the males of my species.

I sense them coming,
feel the grass parting,
a dozen today
twining about me.
I turn with them,
move toward mud.
Hours we coil together —
puny as they are it
feels good everywhere —
one of them will find the spot.

2
I stow away
on an airplane's cargo hold,
emerge at La Guardia,
hitch ride on a luggage rack
through tunnel to Manhattan.
I mean to eat my way around —
a big green worm
in the big green Apple!

City Hall park has plenty of trees,
pigeons abounding.
I study the populace,
learn how to move among them
with camouflage and mimicry.
This is going to be easy.
I will have my fill of man-food.

Homeless Anaconda
a garbage bag
unraveled to wrap me
gets me a night
in the city shelter
(lots to eat
but it needed washing)

Hip-Hop Anaconda,
plenty of room for me
in those baggy pants.
Ate well on 125th Street
but had to spit out
gold chains and a boom box.

Transvestite Anaconda
prowling the piers
in matching alligator
accessories. Honey
I could just eat you alive.

An Anaconda Dowager
draped in furs
indulging my sweet
incisors
with the ladies
at Rumpelmeyers.

Roller Blade Anaconda
knocking down doormen
on Central Park South,
scarfing up poodles
at the curbside.

Painted purple,
welcomed as Barney,
I am Day Care Anaconda,
turning a jungle gym
into my cafeteria
(I really must start
counting calories!)

I'm unadorned as
Bowery Anaconda —
an hallucination —
acquiring a taste
for marinated men
left out for the taking
in cardboard boxes!

The Anaconda Nun
in her floppy habit
waylays worshipers
in the nave of St. Patrick's.
Irish O'Connor
wouldn't know a snake
if he saw one.

Now I am
Steam Tunnel Anaconda
need time to digest
all my victims
time to prepare
for the progeny
already swelling in my belly.

I'll winter here in warmth,
no rent no taxes,
won't need a green card
welfare or Medicaid

They can't zoo or jail me
I have immunity
endangered species status.
When my seventy-five babies
emerge from manhole covers
on Easter morning
on lower Fifth Avenue
they'll already be citizens —
American Anacondas!

THE SPIDERS

Nature is not all birds and squirrels.
Under your feet cruel orders thrive.
Things you cannot dream of
or should not dream of
feed upon one another;
things feed upon them,
every predator a prey,
every parasite sucked dry
by some relentless nemesis.
Look on your lawn —
eight-legged priests in bloated ease
tending their silken tapestries,
a dark cathedral for arachnid gods.
Watch how the chosen victims struggle,
captured in weed-strung ziggurats,
flyers downed, pedestrians waylaid,
sailors shanghaied and paralyzed.
This silken Karnak laced in dew
that only glimmers in early morn
before the sun erases it,
what do these gleamings signify?

Necropolis of wolf and garden spider,
eating a billion souls and wanting more;
male spiders blind in a frenzy of sex;
black widow brides
with hour glass bellies;
egg sacs swelling with the death
of the universe.
Barn spider giants on sunlit stones.
The skitter-skit of daddy long legs,
insane horsemen of hunger's apocalypse.

A million spiders in your uncut lawn!
Eight million legs, two million
venom fangs!
How many eyes? Some of them have
more than two!

They never sleep! They can live forever!
Their stomachs expand to any size!
They have been at it
for a hundred million years!
It is better not to think of them.
They do not want you to be
aware of them.
Their webs are meant to be invisible.
They kill and eat and train
their offspring silently.
There are more of them every year.
Tear up this poem
and do not think of them!

KNECHT RUPRECHT, OR, THE BAD BOY'S CHRISTMAS

Don't even think of calling your
mother or father.
They can't hear you.
No one can help you now.
I came through the chimney
in the form of a crow.

You're my first this Christmas.
You're a very special boy, you know.
You've been bad,
bad every day,
dreamt every night
of the next day's evil.
It takes a lot of knack
to give others misery
for three hundred and sixty
consecutive days!
How many boys have you beaten?
How many small animals killed?
Half the pets in this town
have scars from meeting you.
Am I Santa Claus? *Cack, ack, ack!*
Do I look like Santa, you little shit?
Look at my bare-bone skull,
my eyes like black jelly,
my tattered shroud.
My name is Ruprecht,
Knecht Ruprecht.
I'm Santa's cousin! *Cack, ack, ack!*

Stop squirming and listen —
(of course I'm hurting you!)
I have a lot of visits to make.

My coffin is moored to your chimney.
My vultures are freezing their beaks off.
But as I said, you're special
You're my number one boy.
When you grow up,
you're going to be a noxious skinhead,
maybe a famous assassin.
Your teachers are already afraid of you.
In a year or two you'll discover girls,
a whole new dimension
of cruelty and pleasure.

s
Now let's get down to business.
Let me get my bag here.
Presents? *Presents! Cack, ack, ack!*
See these things? They're old,
old as the Inquisition,
make dental instruments look like toys.

No, nothing much, no permanent harm.
I'll take a few of your teeth,
then I'll put them back.
This is going to hurt. There —
the clamp is in place.
Let's see — where to plug in
those electrodes?

Oh, now, don't whimper and
pray to God!
As if *you* ever believed in God!
Cack, ack, ack!
I know every tender place
in a boy's body.
There, that's fine! My, look at the blood!
Look at the blood! Look at the blood!

You'll be *good* from now on?
That's a laugh.
Am I doing this to teach you a lesson?
I am the Punisher. I do this
because I enjoy it! I am just like you!

There is nothing you can do!
I can make a minute of pain
seem like a year!
No one will ever believe you!

Worse yet, you cannot change.
Tomorrow you will be more hateful
than ever.

The world will wish you had
never been born.

Well now, our time is up.
Sorry for the mess.
Tell your mother you had a nosebleed.

Your father is giving you
a hunting knife
for which I'm sure you'll have a
thousand uses.

Just let me lick those tears
from your cheeks.
I love the taste of children's tears.

My, it's late! Time to fly!
Cack, ack, ack!
I'll be back next Christmas Eve!

*Knecht Ruprecht, from German folklore,
is St. Nicholas' evil twin, who punishes bad
children.*

MY LIFE AS AN INCUBUS

1
One iron-black night of summoning
I found and tried a book of spells
(low Dutch and loathsome Latin
ciphering, peppered with Hebrew,
dotted with phrases in Coptic Greek).
It was rubbish, I muttered —
an alchemist's meatloaf —
the stupefying nonsense of Kabbala —

Yet there he stood — a hoary demon,
now in, now out of surrounding mist.
He wavered, he groaned, his
half-blind eyes avoiding me —
he *would not stay* unless I spoke,
would not obey
till seal and sigil bound him.

I read the name
that charms the Furies,
invoked the tone,
wordless, that gods incarnate

must heed, the chord
that binds eidolons to the chains
of matter.

The demon smiled, then.
What would you have, or be? he asked.

I am a thing of books and fancies,
ill-versed in animal passions.
The world of joy has passed me by.
I want—

Your youth returned? he shrugged.
*A simple thing! A lover or two—
A legion of girls or boys
Enslaved to your newfound beauty?*

I am no Faust! I answered.
My soul's no petty thing
to trade for a common morsel,
a Gretchen, a bone-dry Helen, no!

I want to be that which
no one refuses —
a being of night whom none can resist —
unsought yet irresistible —
then tender lover when love is needed,
the forceful one when force
is secretly desired.

An incubus! he marveled.

Incubus/ succubus! I would be both.
Make me the world's nocturnal visitor,
winged, strong and passionate,
invisible and cruel.

*Men have sought such companions,
the devil extemporized,
yet none have sought to be
the thing that pleased them.
I'll give you two to own,
a good diversion
from your moldy books.*

Enough of books!
They brought me thee,
shape-shifting broker of souls,
gave me the power to ask no end
of favor from the Stygian realm.

Make me a prodigy of wantonness!
Both incubus and succubus?

Either at will. I want to play
these mammal passions to the hilt.
There lay the coins you must accept
(The devil scowled at the false tokens),
There are the bounds of Pentagram
I can erase and set you free...

He raised his hand to stop my words.
*Enough, enough, my sorcerer:
I see I must serve, and well,
or you will summon me for worse.*

*Be then, what you will.
I render you unseen, unseeable,
unloved yet irresistible—*

He muttered here Plutonian spells
that I half-heard, half-felt
as my prolonging limbs caught fire
and wings splayed out my spine.

Oh, I am beautiful,
enormous, strong!
Now up and out — the night is mine!
So many calls to make:
the list is long!

2
Incubus, male god
with overarching lust —
Succubus, a female hunger
as big as the moon,
I rise yin-yang, contrary mist,
across the silty river, trail steeple tops.
I wing above a Midnight Mass,
mock hushed and kneeling choristers
with Orphic songs
of unappeasable desire.
The buzzing litanies pass me by,
scatter like gnats beneath my pinions.
Through walls and windows
I hear too well
the human longing held in reserve,
trapped in music and television
monotone.
This psychic babble does not
distract me.

I spot the easy prey, hear sighs
from open windows, youths
self-pleasuring, dreams arcing
to climax.

I squeeze into a shuttered room.
Your room —
you of all on earth I have chosen.
You're reading poetry, your dream
an abstract reverie. The way I want it:
passion where passion is most denied.
I am there; the corner unreached
by lamplight
can barely conceal my massive outline,
the silhouette that ought
to make you scream.
You drop the book. You nod
into slumber.
My talon-fingered shadow extends
to you,
until my darkness covers you,
breath matching your breath,
heartbeat in unison,
hands cupped in hands.

Amazing! I can undress you
with wish forms!
Cloth parts, the buttons explode —
you are naked.
My subtle tongue explores you,
tastes salt
from the cup of your palm.
I follow the pulse
from wrist into brain and I am *there*

with purple flowers
mechanical bees,
a magellanic cloud
of jasmine and light/

you turn in your sleep, we tumble,
my imperceptible hands guide hips
and legs to a full-length embrace
where/
festive domes coalesce
from amethyst,
the sound of horns
cracks frozen air,
a field of quartz
gleams gold in sun/

encircling me with arms
you gasp; the tremors that drain
your flesh and your sunburst skull
into me, conclude and quell
into heavy sleep/

I drift off languidly,
gorged with the seed of a race
of dreams.

SNOFRU THE MAD

With a name like Snofru ¹
you'd better be good
as a Pharaoh,
as a survivor.
Would the gods laugh, he wondered,
when his weighing time came up —
his heart against a feather
on the fatal balance —
would tittering among them
make his recitation falter?

A careful planner,
he lays *four* boats in his pyramid,
one pointed in each direction —
he'd launch all four
so his soul could elude
the Eater of the Dead.

Grave robbers? He'd baffle them,
build *three* great pyramids
for Snofru the Pharaoh —
hang the cost!
He'd bury an imposter
in each sarcophagus.
The gods alone would know
his final resting place,
a well-appointed tomb
whose architect he'd strangled.

As for his Queen Hetephras,
dead these three years now,
he left her innards
in an alabaster jar,
yet carried her mummy away.

Nights, he unwound her wrappings,
kissed her natron-scented lips,
caressed her sewn-up belly,

then carefully restored
her royal bandages,
her mask and jewels.

His courtiers avoid him,
smell death despite
the unguents and incense.
An impudent general
eyes his daughter.
There is talk, there is talk.
He will neither make war, or peace,
turns back ambassadors

as he spends his days divining
how to turn his eye-blink life
into the gods' eternity.

One night he slips away.
The upstart will assume his name,
bed his black-eyed daughter,
inherit his unused pyramid —
the better to advance his stratagem.

With pride and pomp
he circled his name²
on a hundred monuments,
but he is far from Memphis now,
speaks to his servants
in but a whisper.

Soon he will join Hetephras.
His journey ended at the judging hall
he'd watch as the proud
were judged and eaten,

then take his place, unsandaled,
plain as the commonest slave,
at the table of the gods.

1. Snofru or Snefru was Pharaoh in the Fourth Dynasty and the immediate predecessor of Khufu (Cheops), builder of the Great Pyramid. Historians are baffled as to why Snofru built himself three separate pyramids.
2. Snofru was the first Pharaoh to enclose his name in a cartouche.

THE WAKING DREAM

Tonight it comes to me, rolls off
the rounded moon that fattened
all week with premonition,
drops in a brownish haze
a frozen thunderclap of thought,
a distillation of drums, a bell
anticipating alarm. It comes!
Telegraphy on bristling hairs—
no need to send a thunderstorm
to tap it out on hills or burn
the message on the trunks of trees —
I hear it! I taste
the spice of ashes on my tongue
before my mouth can say it,
a thought as bitter as cyanide.

Ripe with your fate the earth
bears it like fruit: the rain
that hangs its hair on clouds
withholds the whispered secret —

You woke me from dreaming
into a deeper dream.
Your face appeared
inside my skull
pleading for a neck to fasten to,
your beauty reduced
to fingertips of wind on spine,
dressing itself in rags
of others' memories.

Long I remembered you,
then fought to forget you.
I walled you away; brick
by brick I lost you,
stopped seeing you
mortared in other faces.

Now how little I know!
How tall were you, anyway?
How old? What shade was that
within your irises?
What really pleased you?

Your profile is pressed
into my seabed,
yet it is one pale fish
you search me for,
crying out telepathically,

preceding thunderstorm
in rasp of air,
dropping a thread
to anchor us
against awakening —

I open my eyes.
I almost see you.
Yet which is real? You,
semitransparent above me —
or the doused lamp
beyond the bowl of wings?
You, almost perceptible again,
or the hole inside the sun
to which my outer dream
still plummets?

There is perception
unbearable to know or name —

foreknowledge that fills
the sky with its
concavity, takes root
between my waking
and your invasion.

Have you called to me
because our past
still joins us?

Or is your spirit
vagrant now,
drifting from bed to bed,
seeking a shelter?

while on your own cold sheets
who broadcasts dreams —
you,
or the mouthless, earless
socketless Lover
who seizes your breathing —
Death?

POEM FOUND ON THE NECK OF A DEER KILLED IN THE BLACK FOREST, GERMANY

1
“We’ve met before,”
he smiled, all teeth
and grin, dark hair
upon the back of his hand,
eyebrows
that nearly joined,
a sense of tension
in every muscle
poised. We leaned
into the sun on his balcony.

“I don’t think so,”
I started to say,
but his assuredness
unnerved me.

“Down there,”
he pointed to the forest,
wave on wave of fir and ash
surrounding his castle.
“When you were something else,
we met, I’m confident.”

A serving tray was proffered.
He took a skewered tidbit,
inhaled the scent of broiled lamb.
I chose a celery stick.
“Herr Baron,” I told him,
“I’m quite a stranger here.”

“And yet I’m sure of it.”
The bitten lamb bled
upon his lower lip.

“A prior life?” I jested.
“You don’t look the type
to fall for reincarnation.”

He didn’t blink.
“There’s only one life, I grant,
but one can *go on*
for many years.”

“You can’t be over thirty.”

“I watched the army of Bonaparte
from this very balcony.”

I thought: *madman*.
He caught it, hurled
it back with a laugh.
He touched the scarred place
on my shoulder,
that tender, five-lobed
birthmark I hate,
as if he saw it
through my jacket.

“You came for your poetry,
so I feed you a little madness.
You’ll indulge me, I hope,
by staying a week
to browse our books.
My wife is a fine cellist—”

He pointed within,
where the quartet assembled
for the afternoon’s concert.
“I’ll warrant the *Grosse Fugue*
is an ugly thing.”

“Beethoven’s worst mood,
I agreed. “He dares you to listen.”

“Wait till you hear what she makes of it.
And you must stay till Sunday next.
We’ll play Mozart,
and the moon will be full.”

I froze. “The moon?”

“That’s what connects us,
isn’t it?”

I sat in silence
as the quartet struggled
with Ludwig’s mad fugue.
The Baroness was fierce,
struck sparks with her bow,
 leaned back
as though giving birth
 to her cello.
Her yellow-green eyes
looked past the music,
beamed at the Baron

and, at moments,
locked on mine.

She looked pleased
at my astonishment.

2
When all the guests departed,
I stayed. The books,
 occult and classic,
consumed me. They kindly sent
my meals into the library.
The Baron came and went,
the Baroness and I
talked Mozart, Bach and Handel.
Days passed.
The quartet’s Mozart
was fine Vienna pastry,
mannered and elegant
where the deaf Titan
had thundered his counterpoint.

At last the moon came up.
My turret room,
at the top of a winding stair
was solitude itself,
still as a monk’s cell.
I walked to the courtyard,
paused at the gateway,
a winding path on the side
that led to the forest below.
I heard a distant waterfall.

All were asleep. They would not know
if tonight — this night when sleep
was unthinkable — I tramped
till dawn in the out-of-doors.

3
The deer that a full moon lures
to leaves and spangled fruit
awakes in me
this summer night.
In innocence of fawn
I want to taste moss,
the bite of berries tinged
with green; exult in wind
that bears the scent

of pine and hemlock boughs,
an elder wind I must have known
before I woke as a man.

My clothes come off.
I roll them up, tuck them
in a crevice between two rocks,
crouch naked
as startled flesh adapts to air,
then rise. I am one with night.
Moon's eye does not accuse me.
It rolls in a cloud
that lids it black, to haze,
and then to amber again.

Blood flows to neck, to knob
of undeveloped antler.
This moment I know my destiny.
I writhe in suppleness of fur,
clack hoof on stone,
hands gone,
two legs now four,
strength and speed
if I but learn
to use them.

4

The memory is fresh.
I never rejoined the herd
that wintered south
with the slanting sun.

I waited here,
oblivious to shapes
that stalked me,
lulled by the moon,
oblivious to tread
of the padded feet
concealed in the roar
of the cataract.
They were upon me,
rending and tearing.
I toppled in terror,
felt fang at my throat,
my entrails ripped
as claw and snout—
triumphant wolf-howl
as the moon ran red.

I opened my eyes.
as the vision ended.
I was man again,
I was at the place
below the falls
where waters calmed.

The Baron's castle
loomed high above me,
a crenellated silhouette
the moon was grazing now—
how had I come so far?
Had I run in my dream,
run as a deer can run,
bounding through trees
and over boulders?
My shoes were gone!
I had come all this way
without a bruise or pain.

5

What am I now?
Can I wish-form
myself into an animal,
climb back to the castle,
resume my rational,
unmagical self
before the moon has set?
Or will I run,
a naked, bleeding fool
across the courtyard
in full view of the servants
as the sun rises?

I close my eyes,
beg the moon's mercy:
return me to my starting place.
I feel it happening again,
that strange pulsation
of skin to fur—

and stop myself
in tingling terror
as padding feet
draw near—

two pair of eyes
regard me,
great dog-like things
with lowered heads,

jaws open
and slavering—

one leaps
and has me by the shoulder,
claws raking flesh away.
He rolls me over.
The she-wolf on my belly
tears at me,
her muzzle inside me,
gorging on my venison.
Our destiny complete,
we merge. She-wolf
becomes the Baroness,
he-wolf the Baron.
We all resume two-leggedness
in wane of moon.

6
As my host had said,
Were-things never die.
We just go on.
I limp to a cave,
where I fold in
my coiled intestines,
lick the ripped tendons,
stuff clay into my ruined throat.
I will spend the winter healing,
flee Germany, start over.

Or is it my destiny
to be caught and eaten,
caught and eaten,
an eternity of prey
for these eternal hunters?

This time I will not forget.
I write this poem on tree bark,
carry it always with me
in a leather pouch,
burn it in my memory.
I am not the moon's prisoner.

NO MAUSOLEUM, PLEASE!

It's addressed to "Occupant,"
this personal letter
that opens with
*Does the thought
of underground burial
disturb you?*

Should it?
Your mausoleum,
clean as a shopping mall,
dulled to white glove
cleanliness,
Lysol and lilac scent,
invites me to sterile
decomposition,

a place where my rot
will offend no one
a place where the
—ahem!—
elements
will never intrude.

My friends will be grateful
for multiplex viewing rooms
the day of my interment:
*Now Showing: Rutherford,
Matinee 2, Features at 8 and 10.*
Thanks to the strains of Mantovani,
their ears will not be hurt
by coffin lid hammering,
clod fall
of filthy soil.
No one gets wet or muddy.

Who needs a box
secured against the *elements*?
Indoors, an urn will do.
No one can see
behind the marble slab
if I'm encased in Plexiglas,
stuffed into Tupperware,
or neatly cataloged
in office jiffy bags.

Who needs a stone,
a monument,
statue or obelisk,
subject to weathering

and lewd graffiti,
risking neglect in weed field,
when they can etch my name,
my tombward tangent of years
in crisp Helvetica,
when I can have my numbered niche
where visitors can sit
 (yes, sit!)
 upon a cushioned stool.
The sound track pipes in
 Autumn Leaves
while they remember me,
swap recipes,
brag about their computers.
No flowers to buy! No weeds to tend!
See you again next year!

Here is my will and testament:
I want to lie in the cold, cold ground.
Embalm me if you must, but leave
the rest of me intact.
A plain pine box will do.
Then come and read me your poetry.
Read one of *mine*
 if it pleases you.
Leave trinkets and flowers,
plant shrubs and vines,
 send riot root down
 to sweeten me.
Let fall an ice cream cone,
 strawberry melting,
 vanilla veining down.
Return at night for solitude.
Make love across my coffin bed.

Even if no one comes
 I'll have the rainfall,
 the cooling frost,
the pulse of never-tiring worms,
influx of iron and silica,
outpour of carbon and calcium
until I *am* the elements,

until the weed you crush,
the soil you tread,
the air you breathe,
the stone you cup
 in palm of hand
are all from *me*,
the poet in the cold, cold ground.

ONE DAY'S NEWS

from *The Jersey Journal*,
Nov. 21, 1995

Five years before millennium
and here is one day's news:
An Oklahoma teen
is chained in a well house,
burned with an iron,
scalded with bleach,
shocked with high voltage.
Give back the money!
his tormenters scream.
He didn't take
his mother's
drug dealing treasury,
but she won't hear it.
Beat him! she tells her husband.

Well-oiled gears
crave Aztec offerings.
An escalator rips off
three tiny toes
from the three-year-old girl
on the New York subway.
A leaf shredder sucks
park worker's hand
into the chopping blades
in maple-red Hoboken.
A head and a leg
wash up in Newark.
Cops say they match
a torso found
in an unmarked suitcase.

Thieves shoot cabbies
in back of the head,
then strip off their socks
to get their money.

Wanting a baby,
an Illinois woman
kills her pregnant rival,
cuts open her abdomen
with a pair of scissors
to deliver a boy.
She flees the scene,
but not before
she slashes the throats
of the woman's other children.

At jail, she says
“So what’s the problem?
Just why am I being charged?”

Down in San Juan
the livestock are killed
by *chupacabras*,
goatsucker vampire
that drinks the blood
and eats the innards.
Two cats, five goats
and twenty parakeets
already murdered,
the baffled police admit.

Sufficient to one day
is the evil thereof.

THE DEAD END

Far west, beyond the numbered avenues,
there is a street,
 accessed by a curious courtyard,
a peopled lane
where lost on a moonlit but foggy night
you seem to know the passers-by.
House numbers seem too high,
 the street signs are illegible
but you feel recognized, and safe.
Each casual stroller,
 each idling window shopper
seems known to you.
They, for their part, impart a smile,
an instant’s head-nod,
yet still pretend they do not know *you*.
And then it comes to you—
the vague acquaintances,
childhood friends you moved away from,
once met and nearly forgotten lovers,
all of whom suddenly—or so they said—
 just up and died.
You never saw a body.
The service was over before you heard.
The players reshuffled and life went on.
You never quite believed it, of course,
 and now you have the proof:
they all just moved
 to this brick-lined street,
took up new names and furtive jobs
 caretaker, night watchman

lobster shift foremen
invisible cook in the diner kitchen
night workers in office towers
unlisted phone, anonymous
in nameless lodgings.

I found the street once, then lost it.
I’ve never managed to find it again,
can’t help but wonder
 about those houses —
brownstones and bricks
 and a high-rise tower —
whose windows were those
 whose curtains parted,
whose astonished eyes saw me
 and pulled away?
Wish I could go up and read
 the nameplates,
knock on a certain door or two,
resume an interrupted dialogue,
give or receive an embrace
 I’m sorry I never shared.

But all too soon
 I’ll be there anyway,
an anagram, a pseudonym,
a permanent resident
of Incognito Village

SON OF DRACULA

I was the pale boy with spindly arms
the undernourished bookworm
dressed in baggy hand-me-downs
(plaid shirts my father
 wouldn’t wear,
 cut down and sewn by my mother),
old shoes in tatters, squinting all day
for need of glasses that
 no one would buy.

At twelve, at last, they told me
 I could cross the line
to the adult part of the library
those dusty classic shelves
which no one ever seemed to touch.
I raced down the aisles,
 to G for Goethe and *Faust*
 reached up for *Frankenstein*
 at Shelley, Mary

(not pausing at Percy Bysshe!)
then trembled at lower S
to find my most desired,
most dreamt-of —
Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

This was the door to years of dreams,
and waking dreams of dreams.
I lay there nights,
the air from an open window chilling me,
waiting for the bat,
the creeping mist,
the leaping wolf
the caped, lean stranger.

Lulled by the lap of curtains, the false
sharp scuttle of scraping leaves,
I knew the night as the dead
must know it,
waiting in caskets, dressed
in clothes that no one living
could afford to wear.

The river town of blackened steeples,
vile taverns and shingled miseries
had no appeal to Dracula.

Why would he come
when we could offer no castle,
no Carfax Abbey, no teeming streets
from which to pluck a victim?

My life — it seemed so
unimportant then —
lay waiting for its sudden terminus,
its sleep and summoning to an Undead
sundown. How grand it would have been
to rise as the adopted son of Dracula!

I saw it all:
how no one would come to my grave
to see my casket covered with loam.
My mother and her loutish husband
would drink the day away
at the Moose Club;
my brother would sell my books
to buy new baseball cards;
my teachers' minds slate clean
forgetting me as they forgot all
who passed beneath
and out their teaching.

No one would hear the summoning
as my new father called me:
Nosferatu! Arise! Arise! Nosferatu!
And I would rise,
slide out of soil
like a snake from its hollow.
He would touch my torn throat.
The wound would vanish.
He would teach me the art of flight,
the rules of the hunt
the secret of survival.

I would not linger
in this town for long.
One friend, perhaps,
I'd make into a pale companion,
another my slave, to serve
my daytime needs
(guarding my coffin,
disposing of blood-drained
bodies) —
as for the rest
of this forsaken hive of humankind,
I wouldn't deign to drink its blood,
the dregs of Europe

We would move on
to the cities.
The pale aristocrat and his thin son
attending the Opera, the Symphony,
mingling at Charity Balls,
Robin to his Batman,
cape shadowing cape,
fang for fang his equal soon
at choosing whose life
deserved abbreviation.

A fine house we'd have
a private crypt below
the best marbles
the finest silk, mahogany, brass
for the coffin fittings
Our Undead mansion above
filled to the brim with books
and music...

I waited, I waited —
He never arrived.

That year I had a night-long nosebleed,
as though my Undead half
 had bitten me,
drinking from within. I woke in white
of hospital bed, my veins refreshed
with the hot blood of strangers.

Tombstones gleamed across the hill,
lit up all night in hellish red
from the never-sleeping iron furnaces.
Leaves danced
 before the wardroom windows,
blew out and up to a vampire moon.
I watched it turn from copper
 to crimson,
 its bloating fall to treeline,
 its deliberate feeding
 on corpuscles of oak and maple,
 one baleful eye unblinking.

A nurse brought in a tiny radio
One hour a night of symphony
was all the beauty this city
 could endure—
I held it close to my ear, heard Berlioz'
Fantastic Symphony: the gallows march,
the artist's Undead resurrection
amid the Witches' Sabbath —
my resurrection. I asked for paper.

The pen leaped forth
 and suddenly I knew
that I had been transformed.
I was a being of Night, I was Undead
since all around me were Unalive.
I saw what they could not see,
walked realms of night and solitude
where law and rule
 and custom crumbled.
I was a poet.
I would feed on Beauty for blood,
 I would make wings of words,
 I would shun the Cross
 of complacency.
A cape would trail behind me always.

HUNCHBACK ASSISTANT TELLS ALL

1

My dear Mrs. Shelley —

won't do — she's neither 'mine' nor dear

To Mary —

sounds like a dedication

when nothing of that sort's intended

Madame

so cool, polite and very French,

that will do.

Madame —

No doubt you suspect, if you have not heard

of the *sensation* caused by your romance,

newly translated to our Alpine tongues.

Neither the French nor the German booksellers

can keep enough of *Frankenstein*,

or *The Modern Prometheus*.

The bookbinders are up all night

preparing the slender volumes

for the fainting sight of the ladies.

Nothing else is spoken of, and little else read

at our little University.

I have studied your book, Madame Shelley,

and being more intimate than you

— or anyone else yet living —

with the facts in the case of Frankenstein,

I must hasten to write you,

that you might correct the grievous oversight

of omitting my role—my *pivotal* role

in the great endeavors,

the tragic conflagration.

I am Fritz,

poor old one-eyed, limping Fritz

the hump-backed,

unbaptized son of a priest and a nun,

a throwaway

raised by gypsies.

I will spare you nothing,

for only the sum of what I am

can justify what I was

to Victor, his bride and his monster.

2

You never mention me, Mrs. Shelley,
but I was there from the start.

I saw him at the medical school.

I always went to the dissections

(I have, you see, insatiable interest
in human anatomy.)

I loved to watch those perfect bodies,
naked and cold,
white as marble statues,
opened and disassembled
by the knowing hands of the surgeons.
I took my pad and crayon with me,
drew every line and contour—
the man's bold lines,
the woman's curved exterior—
the coiled horrors within,
the entrails unraveling,
the mysteries of the ensorcelled brain!

Then suddenly I noticed *him*.
His jet-black hair, eyebrows of Jove,
his burning eyes intent upon the scalpel and saw,
absorbing each surgical thrust.
I saw him and knew,
knew from the start as one soul knows another,
that he perceived beyond life and death.
He saw me drawing, and nodded, and smiled.

From that day forward I drew only him,
intent no more upon the surgery,
I sought to capture the fire of his pupils,
the furrow on his brow
as some doubt troubled him,
the gesture his hand made
when his mind made one
great thought from two
of a professor's ideas.
Cupping a handful of gelatin,
gray and convoluted,
the lecturer shrugged and dropped it,
"Is this the seat of knowledge?—this organ?—
Is this the soul writ here in nerves and ganglia?
No one knows."

The orbs of Frankenstein replied
"I am the one who *will* know."

Hunched in the darkest nook
of the students' wine cellars
I heard him complain,
"It's not enough to watch
those well-rehearsed dissections.
If only I had a cadaver —
one of my own —
I must know the inner workings of life!"

How could I bear to hear him suffer,
he who should want nothing?
That night I robbed a mausoleum—
a rich man's grave easy to plunder,
a simple job of claw and crowbar,
a lumpy sack and a handcart.
I dumped the sack before his door and knocked.
He came in nightshirt, candle in hand,
looked down at me in startlement.
"For you," I said. "Your own
c—c—ca—cadaver," I stammered.

He did not seem surprised. He took
one end of the heavy burden, let me
come in with the rest of it.
"It's very fresh," I assured him.
"He was only interred just yesterday."

I waited. He stared at me.
"How much do you want?" he asked.
"Oh, nothing!" I answered.
"You must want something for this!"
"I want...I want." I could not say it.
"Tell me." He looked a little kind, then.
I think he understood.
"I want to serve you," I told him.
"Serve you...always."

3

We worked on happily —
my shovel and cart,
his saw and scalpel.
We found a more remote
and spacious laboratory,
paid for with gold
(how I laughed
as I melted each crucifix,
stripped village churches
of their gilded adornments!)
I turned the wheels
that made small lightning
leap over the ceiling vault.
I bellowed the gas
that lightning condensed
into the glowing elixir
that made life scream
into inanimate matter.

Our workroom was madhouse—
old vellum books and amulets

heaped up with bones of animals,
crystal and astrolabe,
the surgeon's shining tools,
the charnel pit
 of amputated limbs.

In madness we succeeded.
 We howled
as tissues dead or rotting
quivered and multiplied,
as hands flew off
in every direction,
 eyes rolled
 and irises dilated
 in lidless horror,
brains roiled
in their captive tanks,
their spine stems twitching
with inexpressible longings.

Then we threw all
into a vat of acid.
"These are but preludes,"
he confided to me.
"What next?" I asked.
"Shall we raise the dead?"

"No, Fritz, I have no use
for the rotting dead. Most men
are little more than animated meat,
unfit for the one life given them.

"We shall make a being new,
a manufactured man."
So raptured was he,
 that saying this,
he fell down senseless.

I put him in bed,
 undressed his senseless form,
stroked the white limbs
 no scalpel had scarred,
then limped to my corner
where I slept like a dog,
like some great hound
who had found his god.

Then *she* came — Elizabeth.
 At first I hated her.
 Her finery mocked me, her manners
 impeccable, her accent *just so*.
 Though he had never mentioned her,
 they were betrothed, in love
 since childhood, it seems.

Daily she came for tea,
 tried to win me over
 with pastries and gingerbread,
 plied Victor for news
 of his abandoned studies.
 As one upon another
 each Ingolstadt don
 came up for our mockery
 (except our idol Waldman)
 her awe increased.

I liked her laughter,
 the way blond hair exploded
 when she threw off her bonnet,
 the Alpine sky in her eyes.
 Yet I hated to watch
 her chaste little kisses
 that fell on Victor's blushing cheeks,
 they way their hands
 would find each other.
 One day we were alone.
 I had to make excuses
 while Victor dissected
 a youthful suicide
 we'd fished from a stream,
 his copy of *Werther*
 still in his pocket.

Then she told me
 she was an orphan too,
 her name not Frankenstein
 like those who raised her
 as Victor's "cousin,"
 but Lavenza.
 Frau Frankenstein had found her,
 one of five babies in a hovel,
 kept by peasants
 to whom she'd be
 a careworn Cinderella.

She was a fairy child,
raised by the Frankensteins
on music and poetry.

She knew nothing of what we did.
The sight of blood, the surgeon's saw
would fill her with horror.
How could she hope to companion
this man who walked with gods?

And then it happened.
She touched me.
A passing thing, really.
A piece of gingerbread
from palm to palm,
but then she lingered,
pressed fingers against
my inner palm.
"You are so loyal to Victor,"
she said,
"so you shall be dear to me."
She never flinched
at my twisted visage.
Her eyes saw past
the hump and its shadow.

Dear to her! Dear to her!
That night I scaled
the boarding house wall,
watched from a tree
as she undressed,
then drank some warm milk
at her bedside.
I watched in slice of moonlight,
her breasts and bosom
in lonely heaving,
her legs this way and that.
Had Victor ever lain with her?
Might I, "dear friend?"

Next night the milk
was tinged with laudanum.
I crept beneath
her silken beddings,
buried my face
in her virgin globes—
oh, I was light upon her,
like the fairies she dreamt of.
Once she cried out,
"Oh, Victor!"

I stole away,
the scent of her golden nape,
those wondrous nipples
with me always.

5

Next night more laudanum
was in Victor's red wine,
cheap vintage we bought
to celebrate the surgery
by which the suicide's heart
now beat in a headless torso.

I carried him to bed,
removed the blood-stained smock,
sponged off his fevered brow,
watched him in candlelight
as his features softened,
his eyelids fluttering
in pulse of dream-state.
I lay beside him,
touching, oh! everywhere.
Twice he cried out;
once, he held me
without awakening.

I crept away in bliss,
mad as a moth in a lamp shop.
Now, when they talk of marriage
it is a happy thought.
I can be wed to both of them
as long as the laudanum holds out.

6

Damn the chemist! The sleeping draught
wore off at the worst of times.
The master knows all. He woke from his sleep
as I perched at the foot of his bed.
My nakedness repelled him. He hurled
me out of his window into a haycart,
damned me, warned me never
to return to my room in the cellar.
What could I do? To whom could I go?
I took a whip from the half-wrecked cart,
climbed up the stairs to the empty laboratory.

He would need me when he ascended.
A storm was coming soon. The lifeless shell
up there was nearly ready for animation.
I would hand him the whip.

I'd beg him to punish me, hurt me,
but let me stay for the great work.
I wanted to see his eyes
 as his being stood before him,
hear his cry of god-defying blasphemy
 as man took control,
and named the day of dead's arising.

7

My god and punisher returned.
He found the whip, and used it.
For days I lay not moving,
 my lacerating flesh alive,
 my blood congealing
to the scabs I was proud to wear,
the stripes of his forgiveness.

He sent me out on a sacred quest:
a pair of kidneys but hours dead,
a male, with "everything intact."
I understood what was needed.
As I prowled the street for drunkards
I conceived a monstrous jest.

Our being must be superlative,
and I knew just the man.
Jean-Christophe Weiss was the talk
of every student in the beer hall.
He boasted of his conquests,
how women fainted
 beneath his exertions.
The Ingolstadt brothel would not admit him
 unless he paid a triple rate.
Mothers warned daughters to turn away
when his languid gaze caught them.
Their faces reddened as he shopped the stalls,
one hand on an apple or a loaf of bread,
the other lifting a veil, or a skirt.
It was said that certain widows
happily opened their doors to him.
One night he leaped from the balcony
of the nunnery of St. Genevieve's
and what happened there
not one of the sisters would tell.

I did not wait long to find him.
Like me, he knew how
 to evade the curfew.
I caught him emerging
from a certain garden gate

(a house with three comely daughters).
One blow to the head
with my crowbar,
then into the sack he went.)

The surgery was flawless.
Once more I watched
as disconnected tissues,
loose veins and nerves
like roots from a flowerpot
quivered, electrified,
sought one another
like amorous eels
and *connected*,
how the rent flesh closed
beneath the sutures:
weeks of healing
completed in minutes!

If Victor recognized
the organs' donor,
he never showed it.
I know he looked
again and again

as our perfect being's
perfect manhood
rose and fell
 rose and fell,
as vein and synapse
made their connections.

"Cover him!"
he said at last.
"My God,
 what a monster!"

8
"The kites, Fritz! The kites!"
With these words all
was forgiven — he needed me.
The howling storm raged.
Day became night as roiling thunderheads
collided like contending Titans,
black rams butt-heading the Alps
 and one another.
The rain came down
 in undulating sheets, blown
 this way, that way.
Right over us, two airborne lakes

smashed one upon another's cheek
and fell, exploding. Roulades
of thunder echoed everywhere.
Streams became torrents, meres rose
and swallowed astonished sheep and cattle.
As every shutter in Ingolstadt
clamped shut, we knew the day
was ours. No one would see
the sloping roof of our old mill tower
slide open to the elements,
or how the scaffolding rose up,
and I within it, high as the steeples.
From safe within my insulated cage
I unfurled the kites on their copper wires.
Up they went, hurled eastward,
then back again in gales contrary,
till they soared taut and defiant,
o'er-arching the blackened granite hill
whose woods surrounded our workplace.

I did not fear the lightning.
I sang to it, danced it down.
"Strike! Strike!" I screamed.
"Come now, ye flames of Heaven!
Waste not your energy
on those pitiful pines.
I am the bait,
so come for me —
I am King of the Gargoyles —
I am deformity incarnate —
blasphemer since infancy —
robber of graves and churches —
rapist and fornicator!"
I was the spider, the wires
my webs to lure God down.

It came! I howled
as the great light jabbed toward me,
reveled in the thunder's drum,
exulting as the kites survived
lash after lash, boom upon boom.
Blue, green and amber sparks
spun, danced and plummeted.

I could not see below,
but I knew what was happening:
how Victor captured it all below
in those vast and hungry capacitors,
how the hot wires sparked and smoked
as the current transferred

to the vat of green elixir
in which our creature bathed —
how all its flesh, unable to die
(and yet thus far without the will
to live) would join the ranks of creation.

How long I played there,
tempting with soliloquies
 the angry sky,
how long the kites
drew power downward
till they fell in tatters
I cannot tell.
I was deafened and nearly blind
when the master drew me down.
He led me to my corner,
said I would see in a while.

My ears already made out
the master's song of victory
as he cried out "*It's alive!*
 It's alive!"

He robbed the gods
of more than fire or gold —
my master, *Frankenstein*,
the modern Prometheus!

MILKWEED SEEDS

The air is full of milkweed seeds —
they fly, they light, they fly again —
they cling to leaf, to cat-tail,
dog fur and hedgehog quill.

They burst out of pods
like wizened hags,
white hair pluming on witch winds.
Do not be fooled
by their innocent pallor:
the sour milk sac that ejected them
is made of gossip, spite and discord.
Pluck this weed once, two take its place,
roots deep in the core of malice.

Cousin to carrion flower
and pitcher plants
they fall on sleepers who toss in misery,
engendering boils and bleeding sores.
These are no playful sprites
of summer —
they go to make more of their kind —
and if one rides through an open window
it can get with child
an unsuspecting virgin,
who, dying, gives birth to a murderer.

Just give them a wind
that's upward and outward
and they're off to the mountains
to worship the goat-head eminence,
pale lord of the unscalable crag,

Evil as white as blasted bone,
his corn-silk hair in dreadlocks,
his fangs a black obsidian
sharp as scalpels,
his mockery complete
as every dust mote sings his praises.

Do not trust white, winged
and ascending to heaven!
Beware, amid the bursting flowers,
the sinister pod!

HEARING THE WENDIGO

There is a place
where the winds meet howling
cold nights in frozen forest
snapping the tree trunks
in haste for their reunion.
Gone is the summer they brooded in,
gone their autumn awakening.
Now at last they slide off glaciers,
sail the spreading ice floes,
hitch a ride with winter.
Great bears retreat and slumber,
owls flee
and whippoorwills shudder.
Whole herds of caribou
stampede on the tundra.
The Indian nods and averts his eyes.
Only brave Orion watches
as icy vectors collide in air.
Trees break like tent poles,
earth sunders to craters
beneath the giant foot stamps.
Birds rise to whirlwind updraft
and come down bones and feathers.

I have not seen the Wendigo —
the wind's collective consciousness,
id proud and hammer-fisted —
to see is to be plucked
into the very eye of madness.
Yet I have felt its upward urge
like hands beneath my shoulders,
lifting and beckoning.
It says, *You dream of flying?*
Then fly with me!

I answer No,
not with your hungry eye above me,
not with those teeth
like roaring chain saws,
not with those pile-driving footsteps —

I too avert my eyes
against the thing that summons me.
Screaming, the airborne smiter
rips off the tops of conifers,
crushes a row of power line towers,
peppers the hillside with saurian tracks,

then leaps straight up at the Dog Star
as though its anger
 could crack the cosmos
as though the sky bowl were not infinite,
and wind alone could touch the stars
 and eat them.

WEST OF ARKHAM

West of Arkham, the hills rise wild
where alder groves are still uncut.
The hawk can spy the boulders piled
by savages till stones abut

their brothers in a gapless wall,
the stern geometry within
an unknown god's abandoned hall,
altars oblivious to Sin.

Pillars of gneiss, hand-hewn and still
(their bones are now dust
 who made them!)
waiting for one with book and skill
to find the eon-spanning gem

whose mere exposure to the stars —
upon the utterance of chants —
will break a god's confining bars
and sunder men like scattered ants.

Chaos will come, and I its priest
will be, if *I* can mouth the rite,
voice not man yet more than a beast,
mere words that can a planet smite!

I will be lord of this great palace,
while down below, in veining rivers red,
the Old Ones shall sport,
 and slay for malice,
till those who mocked me
 are eyeless and dead.

THE GRIM REAPER

*paraphrase of an old German
Folksong, "Es ist ein Schmitter,
heisst der Tod"*

There is a Reaper and his name
 is Death,
and though he kills, he kills for God,
and though his blade is sharpest of all
he stands at the wheel and whets it,
and when he is ready
 we must be ready, too.

O fair little flower, beware!

No matter what is green today,
the Reaper's scythe will mow away.

His blade never misses
 the noble Narcissus,
down from its plinth
 the lovely Hyacinth,
the Turk's Cap lilies fall —
 harvested, all!,
the meadows' roses dear
now toppled and sère.

O fair little sister, beware!

Will he take everything
 in sidelong swing
 of the blood-edged scythe?
While tulips are falling,
speedwell flying, blue tops
 into a bluer sky,
silver-fringed bluebells crying,
doomed phlox not gold enough
 to ransom its beauty
against the swish, swish
of the Harvester.

O fair little brother, beware!

But now I defy you, Death!
Your holocaust night
gives way to dawn.
I stand amid the scythe-cut lawn
and scorn your reaping.
Pass by! pass by!
(But if you turn, and your red eye
turns back to seize me suddenly,
then mow me! take me away to be
the newest bloom in Death's
dark flower pot,
a blossoming of interrupted thought,
deprived, yes! of pen and speech,
and power,
but still I would defy you: no flower
of all earth's millions is the last!)
Be happy, my fair ones! Live on! the noble

SALEM

At Salem
the burying ground
is a garden of stones,
an orchard of oaks.
Acorns burst to grow,
tombstones erase
their shallow tattoos,
becoming anonymous—
Death's heads
and angel wings,
bad poems
consumed by moss,
the promise of Heaven
like Confederate money.

Still there is some
justice — an oak trunk
engulfs the stone
of a solemn Puritan,
roots clinging like
rabid dogs.

He doomed the innocent
as witches and wizards,
to infamy and hanging,
to a farmyard burial
in family shame.

Imagine this—
his grave invaded
by inexorable roots,
the frail box split,
his gradual awakening
as vampire tendrils
invade his ears,
his mouth, his nostrils,
the circling of taproot
to snap his neck,
his arms and legs
broken and useless.

Doomed to immortal
consciousness
(the Life Eternal!),
nerves and ganglia
a web of pain receptors/

An old woman
condemned him to this.
She spoke the words
on a Candlemas midnight,
took from the hanging tree
where her mother's mother
died innocent,
the patient acorn of revenge.

She wrote his name on it,
pushed it with thumb
into the loam of his grave,

traced runes in blood
upon his stone,
danced the wild dance
of his resurrection —

sang things that the wizened
old ladies of Salem never knew

as there were no witches
in Salem
then.

THE PUMPKINED HEART

APPALACHIAN IDYLL

I have seen it:
the slantbrow horror of the hills
the runt church hatred
the pyramid of ignorance
the wild eye of moonmalt killers
trigger poised, the gaping despair
of the women from chickenfeed dawn
to mattress-thump midnight.
The eyes of the children are eggs
dream-snatched and scrambled,
guttering lights of intelligence.

The idyll image is flawed: weeds,
hills clotted with battered shacks.
 a firetrap barn,
 a wrecked-car planter,
 a thicket of corn,
 a rusted mailbox.
Their cookie-cutter faces
 are all alike—
hoe-broken wives and hard-
hand boys, the spark of will
wet-snuffed by beatings
 and Bible water.

Father begets daughters
upon his daughter;
brother has sister;
a visiting niece
is passed from bed to bed.
Children of uncertain fathers
are swapped from house to house,
Cinderella to stepmothers
who rage with butcher knives.

Saturday they go to town,
smelling of hay and manure,
buy lard and flour and cooking oil,
wind up at roadside taverns,
drinking till pleas of
Daddy let's go home

irk them into the wobbly ride
down single lane highways
to the tar-paper house,
the chicken coop, the night
of burning, ignorant stars...

The sleep of reason breeds
 the hill people.

THE MOLESTER

There was a chill place
amid the heat and brambles,
past blackberry hedge,
a place where acrid fumes
and coke oven smoke
could never intrude —
a spring-house, a covered well,
a cobwebbed corner
 of pumps and pipes.
The door creaked open
to admit me. Here
I could sit in solitude,
pretend there was another door
to a treasure cave,
a golden city,
a waiting spaceship.

One day a man was there.
I sat beside him
on the cold stone lip
of the gurgling well.
His whispered words
were barely louder
than the distant trucks,
the chirring cicadas.

His name was Eric,
a young man, yet
bigger than my father.
He asked about my mother,
how pretty she was,
too bad she's already married;
I told him about my
first-grade teacher,
the friends

I would see again
in second grade in the fall.

I brought him cookies.
He taught me things.
Once, I touched
the soft blond beard
that glazed his cheekbones.
I could tell him anything.

One day in the car
I mentioned Eric.
“That’s all he talks about,”
my mother explained.
“That’s his friend,
his imaginary
playmate out back.”
My father grew angry.
At home, they shouted
and sent me upstairs.
Cars came, men tramped
into the house and the cellar.
I heard many dogs barking,
my mother’s voice answering
no to someone’s many questions.

The spring-house was locked.
I stayed indoors
all summer.
I never mentioned Eric again.
No one ever asked me anything.

Years later I heard
of men who slept
in the nearby foothills,
setting up camp
in abandoned ovens —
draft dodgers and hoboes
who skulked and begged
by the roadside.

Years after that I remembered him —
a kind voice in the darkness,
the trusting man to whom I said
“I’ll never tell ... I promise.”

THE PINES

Grandmother Butler
grew up with the pines
that dotted her acres.
Her father
first planted them,
edging the house,
the gravel drive,
the property line.

She watched her daughter
who once could leap
the saplings
grow tall and straight.

Her parents are gone now,
her husband vanished,
her daughters grown and married.
She sits on the porch
and communes with the trees.
Some skirt the house —
she walks soft needle loam
to her raspberry patch.
Squirrels are there in the branches.
Black snakes steal eggs
from the hapless robins.
Jays and crows,
cardinals and tanagers
live tier by tier
in their sheltered nests.

Each season a song —
bird twitter spring,
storm hum summer,
cone-drop in autumn,
the groan of trunks
in snapping winter.

They are an orchestra
eternally in tune,
black pyramids at night
against the burning stars,
a comforting wall
against the whippoorwills,
the mountain lions,
the howling winds.

One winter day
she’s digging down
to the dregs of her coal pile,

filling a pail for the stove,
when a great truck
lumbers in,
piled high with coal.
Two men follow
in a long black car,
tell her they'll dump
as much as she needs —
enough to last her
through widow's winter,
all the way to April.

She hesitates.
They mention her neighbors,
Wingroves and Sweeneys,
Ulleries and Dempseys.
She lets them dump the coal.
All they want is a signed receipt,
oh, and they'd like
to trim a few trees
for the nearby sawmill.
She hesitates again —
they mumble some words
about another delivery
next winter.

She signs.
Hard winter sets in.
The ziggurat of coal
diminishes to sludge,
black dust in melting puddles.

She goes off in spring
to visit her daughters,
hold their new babies.
When she comes back
the pines are gone,
all of them
reduced to stumps,
except the two
that sheltered the porch,
her acres exposed
to passing cars.

All night the animals
scream in the forest.
Homeless squirrels,
nestless sparrows,

hysterical robins,
even the prowling wind
with nothing to rub against,
makes angry vectors
among the boulders.

Then she finds the paper
in the kitchen cupboard,
reads with her glasses
the fine print over her signature.
Far off, the ripsaws mock her
as she reads and repeats
what she gave to the strangers —
not just once but forever —
like a contract
with a rapist,
her rights, her
timber rights.

MIDNIGHT WATER

Things told
to frighten children:

*never drink water
at the stroke of midnight —
you'll choke,
fall dead of a heart attack —
this happened to one
of your many cousins.*

We lay awake
at grandmother's house,
no one going to the kitchen,
no one lifting
the dented tin cup,
the old enamel dipper.

Even if midnight waters
didn't kill —
in the dark
a bug might be there,
a hairy caterpillar,
a centipede sipping,
ready to be swallowed,

or a chunk of moss
from the cold spring,
floating unseen in the bucket,

sliding like slug
into the dipper.

Pitch-black nights
the grandpa clock
ticked and chimed
above the wheezes and snores,
the whippoorwills calling,
waiting like you
for the pre-dawn hours,
the safe water.

AND THEN WE GOT USED TO THE ATOM BOMB...

We thought the world would end soon.
We huddled for omens: nightly
the television spoke disaster —
sat by a faux-log fireplace
that burned but was not consumed
with pipe-smoking professors
whose worst-case scenarios

*high-altitude detonation
firestorms hyperheated steam
plutonium half-life millennia
of runaway mutation
universal death, sudden only
for a minority,
but for the majority
a slow torture of disease
and disintegration**

filled our waking dreams.

*The men who know the most
are the most gloomy.**

Somehow their worried wives
afraid to bring more children
into a nuclear winter
saw their way to garden and cook,
raise their soon-to-be-cindered
boys as though, somehow,
it would all come out in the end —

an explosion of blond energy
played all around us,
model airplanes aloft,
their bomb-bays open —

in their world, pilots returned,
bombs were recovered
from the carpet pile,
the cat's fur,
reloaded, re-used
on enemies who never perished.

We listened to Bertrand Russell,
on a well-played record,
reading his latest warning,
co-signed that fateful year
by Einstein on his death-bed.
“First we had the atom bomb,”
the Englishman intoned —

—the plastic airplane darts again —

“and then we got used
to the atom bomb,
and so we developed
the hydrogen bomb.”

—an even bigger bomber model
descends from tiny hands —

*Shall we put an end to the human race
or shall mankind renounce war?**

and an ice-cream truck melted
somewhere in Japan in mid-
tune, while children
with rising sun nickels
danced into chrysanthemum
fireballs —

It is too late, he said,
to be invoking god —
the god of bullet holes
and amputated stumps
and useless dead.

It is too late, he said,
to be waving flags —
what color blood and honor?
which side of civil war,

holy war, muddled
ideology, can claim us?

So Russell and Einstein say,
as simple as sunlight,

*Remember your humanity
and forget the rest.**

I came to tears upon those words —
the danger all too real
that these small boys
would be bombed — or bombers.

Strange, they are grown now.
The world did not explode,
but not for lack
of military effort.

GRANDMOTHERS

Grandmothers know
the things we have no names for:
the blood of birth,
the severing
of umbilicus,
how to lay out
a corpse in the parlor,

how to wring a hen's neck
with one sure gesture,

how to swing a sure stick
to kill a copperhead,

how to turn memories
into a comfort quilt,
forgiving what's past
with the patience of boulders.

When the men talk darkly
of war and disaster,
they wisely digress
"That rainy spring
we had so many berries —
was it 'forty-eight, or nine? —
I think this year will be like it."

FRAGMENTS, WRITTEN AT TWENTY

1

Who shall celebrate
what no one has sung since Walt,
that crazy lover,
took Death in his arms?
Who shall take the whole of life/death
flesh/skeleton, birth/decay,
remembrance/forgetfulness?
Who shall love this barbed wire planet,
these scrambling apes
who dream like gods
and slay like panthers?

2

We are the bandits of being,
heroes on borrowed time
oblivious to Death
because we rob him blind
with every flaring sunrise.
Days do not end
though earth spins on beneath us.
These are the days of youth,
and only what we win now
can be kept.

Stand now at the crest of your days.
Of all that befell you yesterday
you are the proud negation.
You have taken pain — do not inflict it.
You have been scorned —
turn not your back
on battered genius.
They taught you lies — undo the lies.
Your family denied you — find friends
and love them never failing.
Fate made you as you are —
be the cause of all that follows.
Make no complaint against the universe,
for not a door in the starry waste
is closed to you.

Earth, hear my newly minted credo.
I fling my torch into the heavens.
I will add to the fire that made me
a laurel wreath around the sun.
I make a new song
to astonish the planets.

TABLEAUX FROM A PENNSYLVANIA VILLAGE

1

Spotlit to the last,
the thunderheads recede
southeast, in sunset red,
like hoary-headed thespians
unwilling to exeunt
without a proper flourish.

Inside the clouds
the stubborn lightning
flashes, as if another act
of *Hamlet* or *Lear*
required its luminance.
The last of day,
trailing the curtain of eventide
rolls off the storm's advance
into the night's
dark amphitheatre.

2

The Bats At Dusk
See them now,
in their new-bird pride!
The bats — presumptuous mice —
take wing, *up* on a twilit wind,
down into a gnat-rich dusk.

As ducks float south
the backs of white mallards
turn like the final page
of a silk-lined novel,
flap shut in sun gem's fall
from weeping willow tapestry.

From the bridge I eye their
cooling retreat
passive in downstream current,
while celebrant fledermice
beat on at the stars.

3

At the Lake Shore
Old men give the orders;
young men march and die;
the dead lie in their graves
and dream of returning.
The maples have built a palisade,

gray warriors stiff at the lake edge.
They bend their grave green heads,
brush shaggy seeds at the water's verge
cast like orphans into the battlefield.

They argue on tactics,
give orders to saplings,
shake in a windy tumult
of arthritic limbs.

They are the generals, the Lake
their blind old nemesis.

They have contained him
for a thousand years.

One day they know they will cover
and absorb him.

His Majesty the Lake must be content
to weave millennial plots,
gnawing on pebbles,
feeding on creeks and rainfall,
tolerating a man-made dam
that deepened him.

He dreams of expanding his border,
goes nowhere,
weaves decadent breakers
against the shore,
hunched in the kettle the glaciers
carved him.

He frightens no one, looks
to a mystic cloud
for auguries, sleeps afternoons,
interrogates the fish and flotsam,
tries to read the Braille of rain drops,
traces the ice cracks in dead of winter.
No one betrays the army's secrets.

Now it is spring. The officers conspire,
summon from sun and dew
a seedling explosion.

They raise a line of green colossi:
rusty, belligerent day lily dragons
issue their challenge to cowardly waves.

Others are drafted, too: spies creep
toward the water in a bed of moss.
Fern leaves unfurl in flagrant banner.

Foot soldier mushrooms
pop up everywhere.

Roots furrow underground,
touch hands and hold.

One sleepless night the King makes fog,
 clouding the warriors'
 senses in fairy mist.
 Then comes the rain —
 an equinoctial deluge.
 A night of rain—a day —
 a night again.
 Waves pound against the stony edges,
 muscles renewed
 and tendons vivified,
 he roars like an ocean, spews tidal spray.
 The army breaks, then mends,
 then holds.
 Where roots had lost the soil
 to cling to,
 the tree falls willingly
 to make a barricade
 of leaf and limb and sundered trunk.
 Where water attempts to break the land,
 a rope tough vine, a wild-rose thorn,
 a dead tree pike shaft punctures him.
 Howling and humbled the King retreats.
 His waves recede to mirror stillness.
 At dawn the silver orb of Venus
 looks down and sees herself;
 bird echoes bird; each cloud
 his symmetric brother.
 The tangle of flora begins to heal itself.
 Who won? Look at the lake edge now,
 see that parade line pluming there,
 as day lilies burn against the light!

4

Stormy Day in Spring

No one goes out on these cloudy days.
 The forest is empty. A willow tree
 burns in first green, vibrant
 against a red-gray skillet of clouds.
 Was green ever greener than this?
 This is the secret hue of spring,
 saved for the rainy-day elite!
 They are all indoors
 with damp umbrellas,
 their soggy shoes drying,
 while I am here on the stream bed
 alone as though their world had ended.
 Give me this brooding, north-born sky,
 the ardent chill of this windy noon —
 give me a little sun — a beam or two
 to slice the scudding rain clouds.

Splash rainbows on the canopy
 of gray and brown and emerald.
 Give me this — there is nothing sweeter
 than this encompassing embrace!
 To be a man, alive, alone
 surrounded by willows
 and senseless rain,
 to be at the apex of consciousness —
 to feel the very pulse of life evolving —
 green! green and alive upon the world!

THE TOWN IS STILL ASLEEP

The town is still asleep.
 The sky is pale with quickening light.
 Quenched, the long night of stars
 swirls under the earth, but one,
 that silver planet Venus, holds
 over the ice-haired lawns
 a vernal promise: that love is not lost.

Walk through the streets
 with birds and the clatter-clack
 of streetlights as they change;
 feel a tremble as the chill of night
 dies in a sunburst from the trees.
 Witness the signs of entropy:
 a vacant house whose owner died;
 a fallen elm; an abscess in the line
 of shops; a broken pane. It will
 all change. Unlike the fixed bright stars
 the homes are not immutable. I hold
 my book, which is all I may carry away:
 which reads that love will come again.

WATER MUSIC I

You flow. You do not understand.
 The spring has eked you
 out of the earth.
 You fell from the storm,
 you barely coalesced
 before the journey began.
 A gust of wind from a cloud's dead eye
 blew you onto the clay of the north.
 You roll downhill, impelled by gravity,
 jostled by roots, inhaling minerals,
 fall to a pond, where spawn of frogs

grope in the eye of batrachian sun.
At the end — a hesitant stream.
The grass barely parts in your path.
By noon, you have come to the lake,
your flow anonymous, your voice
a cancellation of wave forms.
You fear you are the plaything
 of the world,
toy of a god
whose cruelty is your solitude.

You flow, you do not understand.
You cannot feel your strength,
your shoulders against a dam,
your spirit overtopping barriers.
You are insensible of reeds, of rust,
the thrust of fish, the wear of shore,
the notes you leave on agate.

Do you know you are incompressible —
that steel would split
 before it would compact you,
that your ice can rend the hull of a ship?
Do you know you are the stuff
 of comets,
 emblazoned by sunlight,
your tail as long as the gap
 between planets?
Do you know you are going South?
How far you have come you
 cannot comprehend.
You do not know who awaits you!

SPRING EARTH

Somewhere it is always spring —
here, too, perhaps
within these barren trees.
The thought, the *idée fixe*
the twig to be
outlasts the snowstorms.
Its double helix symphony
sleeps on in xylem,
unravels in sequestered leaves.
Some seeds refuse to sprout
until a winter has seasoned them
(wise monarchs outlive
 their enemies).

Earth thaws.
Tendrils reach out
beneath me.
Seed's urge unjackets me,
soaks me to root in run
 through falling rain.
I taste the sky:
 lime and raw iron,
 phosphorus and calcium,
inhale the animal sweetness of air,
soak up the sunlight,
open a cotyledon eye,
banish the frost
in bacchanalian riot.
It is time! It is time!

SPRING FROST

Weep not for the lilacs,
 the withered oak,
 the cherry blossoms
 burned by night frost
 this millennial May,
for the aborted pear,
magnolia buds shivering,
shoots shocked,
seeds warned
 to wait
 for another warming.

Life somehow goes on
after false promises.
The young replace
the immolated ones.
We forget
there ever was a winter.

Trees lured by sun
reached out with tentative
green-tipped fingers.
It was a spring
of fool's gold
 and false truffles,
snakes shuffling back
into the earth's
eye sockets.
No right to life
for the aborted seeds.
This is how Nature
sorts the strong.

THE OLD GRAVESTONES

Names last, dates fade, deeds disappear.
Try if you will to read these stones —
earth clots around inscriptions,
moss rubs like moist eraser.
Even in best light you cannot read
their rhymes of what heavens they earned
or paid that others should think so.
Stonemason's script rubs down to worm-lines,
elegant esses and effs are mere wrinkles.
Would anyone know if the stones were swapped,
if pious spinster's stone became confused
with an outcast wench's marker,
if brides and grooms and stillborn babes
exchanged their names and families,
half-breed with minister,
hermit with midwife?
What a terrible stew at Resurrection
if these stones were needed,
carried like credit cards
to the last communion!
Even the wind, and windborne waters,
shorn of the lake and incontinent clouds
work bald forgetfulness in granite.
Easy to read **BORN**.
Born is everywhere.
Born as we all are,
but *when* is gradually erased.
Zeros and eights and nines
curve into shallow depressions,
sevens and ones to cuneiform,
thin lines and gashes.
Easy to read **DIED**
but isn't that obvious?
Death dates and *Aetat* ages
wink out in wind-rub.
A few are blank,
carved and waiting
for sleepers who never came.
(Fought in a war —
no body was found —
went to the city —
ran for a freight train —
or just plain *never died*?)

Names. The names linger.
Eye leaps from letter to letter,
fills in the biblical
and well-known names.
The sculpted angels are armless now,
the willow tree stones are toppled,
others were reinstalled
on broken pediments
with bolts and metal braces.
Do they toss in their sleep?
Do stones fly up
like lumpy pillows,
tilt down
to shade unhappy eyes?
I too would turn
if line by line
and page by page
the universe erased me!

AN AWESOME PLUMMETING

Just when I think I've seen it all:
counted the branches too many times,
worn down the leafless sky with stares
at the pregnant north; just when the metaphors
for leaves go bald — that's when a granite bell
sprouts like a mushroom from the hill
to mark a grave I've never seen before.
Do skeletal hands below still clasp
a useless hand-pull? Did frugal relatives
ignore his request for a working alarm,
doing the sensible Scottish thing
with this clapperless, toneless thing of stone?

Just when the measured snowflakes look alike
and I come here haunted by Tchaikovsky's muse,
an awesome plummeting occurs —
the shadows, first, spew gray upon the snow banks,
then fans of whiter whiteness settle down
upon the astonished wilderness of gray-green lake.
Just moments ago Prince Siegfried drowned
in the arms of the transformed swan,
just moments since the despairing harmonies
sent me fleeing into the barren trees,
now half a thousand swans arrive,
bobbing serene as never ballerina danced,
still and majestic, curved necks
an endless armada of question marks.

Did they hear, through my chimney,
the cataclysmic ends of the swans of the mere?
Are they fleeing some Rothbart enchanter?
Or does this pilgrimage follow *Swan Lake* everywhere?
The swans are mute. They have no answer.
Soon they will arrow up in near silence,
vanish in low-hanging feathery clouds,
lake water resonating one great chord,
the oboe, the harp, the tremulous strings.

IRISES

Before a certain bridge I cross each night —
my eyes are bent downward so as to miss
who does or doesn't come to that window —
I study a cottage's garden plot.
I have never known who lives here,
but have grown to know that militant line
of soldier irises in purple plumes,
their wind-rumpled hoods on defiant spear-ends,
the constant bulbs as certain as sunrise.

By day the flowers welcomed visitors —
hived bees and humming, brazen dragonflies,
by day they shamed the variable sky.
(By day I see that your windows darken
concealing your presence or your absence.
Only your door mouth, opening and closing,
admitting and ejecting visitors,
confirms to me that you are tenant still.
Your lovers' faces smite me with smiling;
if they're dejected I take small hope.)

On moonless nights I man the silent bridge,
brood on the madness of water lilies
that choke up the swelling, algae'd outlet.
I peer over the dam-edge precipice
at the shallow, tamed creek bed far below.
The irises are there like sentinels,
dark eyes a-watch beneath those still petals,
the hidden golden stamens scolding me,
the patient bulbs oblivious to love,
serene as Buddhas, requiring nothing.

Within your casements a galaxy stirs,
a sphere of light in a candle centered,
then other spheres, then moving silhouettes.
One is your cameo, then you are lit.
Moving to music now, your arms might close
around another's neck. Your visitor eclipses you,

his night enfolding you,
your ivory breast his evening star,
his your heartbeat till morning's dim crescent.
(O double Venus, which of you is true?)

I turn back to my sleeping irises,
black blooms in owl-watch, consoling friars.
All day you give me eyes-arms blossoming;
all night you silently companion me,
never mocking this madness of loving,
dying of perfect beauty, and alone.

AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

The mountain is not the object of climbing.
Nor does the act of climbing suffice.
To climb is to achieve the height
 from which, alone,
you can describe the overarching beauty
of a curved horizon filled with summits.
It is not the triumph of reaching a top,
but the sudden, dizzying knowledge
that what you scale is but a hair
on the bristled beard of the cosmos.

See now the range of upthrust pyramids
on which you perch, a giddy rider
on the hump of a thousand mile camel,
a spec on the Andes' anaconda.
Blue peaks, pure snow, kingdom-encompassing
rainbows, stark shadows as lambent sun
inks fold on fold of airbrush color
upon the distant ranks of staggered hills —
all this you spy, and something more:

upon each mountaintop
 the form of another climber,
your brother who stands, regards you,
 eye to eye your equal.
Or sometimes you see the spike and banner
where an explorer has come and gone —
sometimes a peak is vacant, but, lo!
 a figure is scaling upward towards it.
Your rock is narrow, the way
 so difficult that none may follow you.
Is it the same for each who struggle
 out of the shadows into the sun?

You cannot turn back, belong no more
to the settled valleys,
where they see only your shadow
and fear it.

Down there, they hone
their knives and swords,
covet their neighbors' acres.
Their cannons spark
this way that way
in the distant gorges,
their river-hugging cities
engulfed in flames
as each invades the other.

The gods and their mountains
look down in scorn.

WATER MUSIC IV

To be is to have been with these waters; to be
is to have roots in bleeding earth,
from mud, that oozing formless mother squeezed,
is to have known the longest path downhill —
falling, fierce drops from the blistering clouds —
or to be born as dew in pre-dawn light
or to come as crystal. solemn in frost.
or to spring from the rocks' deep airless streams,
chill child of the darkness, full of tumult.'

To be is to flow, formed and yet formless,
bubbling with atoms' singing bravado,
proud of a charge, an affinite valence,
a molecule's journey defying death,
reflecting yet fleeing the sun's hot lamp,
alive yet buoying the leaves of decay,
carving trails everywhere, here mingling,
there feeding hungry roots, there wearing down
some arrogant hillside, toppling its trees —
to move with a certainty of purpose,
knowing the land is shaped by tireless ions.
To be, however small, yet know yourself
the *sine qua non* of spring and summer!

To leap, however deceived, to hot air
into the trap of a motionless pool
over the brink of a cataract, down
to the inky depths of an ocean trench, —
all are the same to you, no place an end,
at home alike in gill and gullet, one

with even the loneliness of glaciers —
To know your destiny, the truth of your being,
borne from the source by your own charge.
To know is to reach by any means
an end which no other essence compels;
to be, and to leave where you pass
your subtle fingerprint upon the hardest stone.

AT THE WOOD'S EDGE

*(A translation into verse of "Okayondoghsera Yondennase: Oghentonh
Karighwateghwenh," from the Iroquois Ancient Rites of the Condoling
Council: Preliminary Ceremony)*

My son, I am surprised to hear your voice
come through the forest to this open place.
You come with troubled mind, through obstacles.
You passed, my son, the grounds where fathers met,
whose hands we all depended on. How then
come you in ease? You tread the paths
our forebears cut, you all but see the smoke
from where they passed their pipes. Can you
be calm when you have wept along the way?

Great thanks, therefore, that you arrive unhurt.
Now let us smoke the clay pipe together.
We know that all around us enemies
each think, "We will not let them meet!"
Here, thorny ways that bar — there, falling trees —
in shadowed glades, the beasts that wait to slay.
Either by these you might have perished,
my son. The sudden floods destroy; dark nights
the vengeful hatchet waits outside the house;
invisible disease is always near.
(Each day our mortal foes are wasting us!)

Great thanks, therefore, that you arrive unhurt.
What great lament if any had died there
along the way, and running words had come,
"Yonder lie bodies, of those who were chiefs!"
We, who come to mourn another, would cry,
"What happened, my son? — Why do you not come?"

In time of peace or peril we do this —
ancestors made the custom, demanding:
*Here they must kindle a ritual fire,
here, in the light, at the edge of the woods,
condole with each other in chosen words.*

TILLIE

Steel-town Tillie
was my first bag lady.
As a child I trailed her,
just out of reach
of the miasma of sour milk
and spoiled meat.

She stopped before the five-and-dime
to comb her thinning hair,
mouse brown now streaked
with yellow-white
no manner of primping
could beautify.

She had a Hepburn face,
high cheekbones.
She'd stop in every doorway
to see herself mirrored
and re-arrange her scarf.

Dogs sniffed the oily stains
that marked her bundles and rags.
Starving birds pecked
at the trail of crumbs,
burst buttons and candy wraps,
the lengths of multi-colored thread
that dropped through her bottomless
pockets.

Don't ask her age, how many
winters she'd tramped the streets —
how many weddings and funerals
she'd watched, like the uninvited fairy
from the shadowed, latter-most pew.
(She had a wedding once.
Days later, her husband abandoned her.)

She'd talk, if you ask,
of her house on the hill —
new furniture just in,
painting in progress,
wallpaper sample books
thumbed through.
She doubled back
when no one watched
to the abandoned car
by the railroad tracks,

where she slept,
cradling her packages
like swaddled infants.

Year by year
she was gaunter, thinner.
Finally, they cornered her,
shoved her screaming
into an ambulance.

Word spread around town
of an abscess gone wild,
a hole in Tillie's neck
where everything she drank
gushed out as from
a cartoon bullet hole.

They paused in the taverns,
in the vomit-scented Moose Hall
with litanies of "Tillie, poor Tillie!"
On side streets,
her shadow shambled without her,
frail as a moth wing,
picked apart by moonlight,
scattered by cicadas,
waiting to reassemble
if she returned
to her appointed rounds.

song of youth (1967)

have you stood wordless with an
anthem
no notes can sing?
the forest at dawn, the stars at
midnight,
the thunderclap's echo
create the lyrics and sing my song.

have you run naked
through woods in the rain,
brushed clean by leaf-cup fingers,
lay languid on a boulder
moonbathing drunk
with the white rays' beaming?
the wayward wolf,
the cliff with its weathered face
its beard of clinging trees,
stand with me.

have you known where
the fires of creation arise,
the lid-lift of cranium
as thought explodes

like newborn galaxies —
or do you feed the fire
and never see the flame?

Your/my I-thing are the same.

have you said *I am I*,
a solitary entity,
treating alone with the universe
and knowing it,
and seeing yourself a speck in the
cosmos,
still laughed and said, it is good,
this joy of oneness?
or do you hide from you
your temple and tomb
from whom there is no escaping?

will you die for god,
a nullity,
a madman's playmate,
psychotic city stomper,
hungry for offerings?

or will you live
because in a world
abandoned by idols
Aristotle lived,
Beethoven lived,
Shakespeare lived,
or will you, sorry carpenter,
sell nails and cross to your own
assassins?

temples, I topple you —
churches, I scatter your gold —
priests, I drive you out —
cross and altar I cast into the sea.
let every man find his
third eye beaming,
his account with the spirits overflowing,
his eyes bright and his hands clasped
in the joyous handshake and greeting
that only the free can grant to the free.

stand in the clean sun:
invent and speak

your newfound name
free of clan and parentage.
be the one among many,
one even among the solitary ones.
still, we are brothers:

my I-thing and your you-thing I-thing
are the same.

1967/rev. 1996

OUT OF SEASON

All over? Hardly!
Those red leaves are not gone:
they are under the snow,
protecting the gentle grass.
They will go brown,
wear paper thin,
veined like the hands
of tiny mummies.

They will endure the ice,
as I do,
remember the night
when you lay upon them,
remember that moon,
umber, carnivorous,
that called them down
to garland your hair —

my curse is memory,
and not to stop loving
the moment of your surrender,

writing your name
on these thousand banners
of blazing maple,
while you have already
forgotten mine.

ENVOI

Edinboro Lake, Pennsylvania 1969

Goodnight my starlit cup of lake,
my sky-enclosing kettle of stones,
my graveyard grass where long
before dawn I watch the waves,

as eaten galaxies implode and shatter,
as near Arcturus plummets under,
gone in black ripples into the inky depth
of the lake from which no light escapes.

Not even Venus can penetrate beneath,
not stars as vast as red Antares —
with but a blink the mere
consumes them.

Tree branches arc in ardent circles
around the muffled street lamps.

The leaves all lean toward Polaris,
but get no messages from vacant space.
The maples here are Chekhov women,
immobile yet convoluted, their spires
a-twist in their outward yearning.

Now the fog comes trailing in,
lapping the lake mist into its tresses,
weaving the stinging fronds of frost
it will leave as winter's prophecy.

The last canoes have long withdrawn
(fish hang inert like tea bags, sleeping,
and fishermen lay in quilted dreams).
The frogs are falling silent,
the huddled ducks have vanished,
the paper-thin fluttering of bats
shuts down as the moon descends
behind the trees and chimney tops.

Here is the heart of life's memory,
in stillness so fine
a spider would dread disturbing it,
and here, as I bid
this haunted place my farewell benediction,

I join the ghosts of yesterdays
(Oh, many myselfs are walking here,
weeping and laughing
by the old high fence,

in and upon the sleeping lake,
myself in a hundred moonlit crossings,
myself on the ice as I ventured out
to hear winter's ominous timpani,
its gusts that drove me back
to the shore)

Tonight I make another ghost, my last.
Stars will not sing so well where I go,
nor waves reveal the cosmos singing
in a hard place of steel and glass.

Goodnight, my lake-lit cup of stars,
my stone-embracing kettle of sky,
my dawn-wet grass where lapping waves
sing solemnly to crumbling graves,
my youth, my heart,
my first-found home.

AT THE VERGE OF SPRING

When the snow, which veiled the slumber of lakes
withdraws in mist, and when speckled earth
is damp with leaves' regenerative breath,
I return, as I must, where the willows
raise up their green, rebellious banners
against the looming Canadian clouds.

When the fog, which hailed the warming of earth
raises its skirt over spring-swollen streams,
I come with books in the fold of my arm,
regard how white violets kiss the sun.
Gone are the months of frozen endurance
and dreaming of love through the trackless stars.

Now earth unburdens its hoarded harvest.
Things stir in ice-numbered crevices, seeds crack,
a million legs quiver in webbed cocoons,
gelid eyes open in buried eggs,
and the tightly wound fern, a universe
of foliage wound into a fractaled fist

tenses, as do the nuclear maples,
the bacchanalian twist of grapevine,
the never-retiring undulant grass,
the cannonade of peeping crocuses —
all are waiting for a signal to explode.
Veni, veni Creator Spiritus.

SCRAPS

It is a trust.
A box for each of you
sits on my shelf,
opened from time
to time to add,
subtract, refine
your stored essence.
Some are trinkets,
a souvenir of youth,
a lost moment
in an aging house,
an empty setting
for a lost sapphire,
a frayed ribbon
from a forgotten gift.

Still I keep them,
a row of tiny
sepulchers
among my rarest books.
On rainy days
I rearrange them.
In dark of winter
when a friend
becomes a former
friend, a new box
joins its brethren.

It is a trust,
this little mausoleum
of lost souls,
young hopes
and broken promises.
Inside the box
your better moments wait
unentangled,
kneeling to no one,
man or god.

You are in there
as I saw and loved you,
a sunburst on canvas,
a day lily cantata,
an ardent poem,
your hands
 amid the clay,
your tapered fingers
 arced in arpeggios.

I will keep them.
Though you are not
what you were then,
though life has clogged
your arteries with grief
and demons taunt you,
I will keep them.

One autumn day
you may return
in quest of dreams,
in need of fire,
that spark of self
that nearly died.

THE TEA PARTY

New neighbor girls have settled in.
We hear the squeals and screams,
the mother calls and father scoldings
through the open windows.
An angry hedge divides us in back,
though our houses lean together,
shingles and sagging porches
almost blending, identical
weeds abuzz with bumblebees.
The low-slung church
of solemn Mennonites
sits glum and silent
across the street.
The girls' names are Faith and Abby,
my mother tells me,
ten and seven in stiff blue dresses.
Their parents never speak to us.

Just up the hill, behind a fence,
white-washed and cedar-lined,
Charlene and Marilyn,
 the Jewish girls
live in the great brick house
(anything brick
 is a mansion to us).
I play canasta with Marilyn (my age),
learn to admire her parents,
watch as they light
 the Chanukah candles,
move among them summers
as hundreds congregate
at their swimming pool.

Their mother loves opera,
but not, she says,
not Wagner.

One August day,
an invitation comes,
crayon on tablet paper,
for tea with Faith and Abby.
My mother says, *Be nice and go.*

I sit in their yard
with toy furniture.
The doll whose daddy
I'm pretending to be
has one arm missing.

The tea, which is licorice
dissolved in warm water,
is served in tiny cups,
tarnished aluminum,
from a tiny aluminum teapot.
I want to gag
from the taste of it,
but I sip on and ask for more.

Now Faith addresses me.
"I'll dress the baby
and we shall take her to church."
"Oh, we don't go to church,"
I told my newfound Mrs.

"Never, ever?"
"Not even once?"
I shook my head—
I've never set foot inside a church.

"That's just what Daddy told us!"
Abby exclaimed. "You'll go to Hell!"

"You'll go to Hell and be damned!"
they chanted,
"You'll go to hell and be damned!"

"What else does your Daddy say?"
I asked them. "He says
you'll go to Hell and be damned,
because you're atheists and heathens."

Faith looked fierce,
She poured more tea
and made me take it,
as if it were holy water,
as if I would drink
baptism by stealth.
She raised her cup daintily,
glanced and nodded
at the fence and the cedars.
"Charlene and Marilyn
will go to Hell, too,
right to the bottom
of the flaming pit,
because they're Jews
and murdered Jesus.

Would you like ice cream now?"

TWO, GOING ON THREE

We moved a lot.
Each neighbor hill and hollow
distinctly named:

Gibson Terrace
post-war bungalows
stuck together,

laundry hanging
on wooden accordions
shirts and pants billowing
in the tiny yard

I could walk now
so I did —
wind spun me around —
it rained —
the houses looked alike —

a kind girl brought me home
to a spanking

* * *

I won't eat eggs
hate the yolks
that look like eyes

my mother seats me
outside in sunlight
says *eat those eggs*
eat them for daddy

the sun behind her
a yellow orb,
spoon poised
to feed me

my birthday comes
and Christmas —
I make a row
of tiny trucks and cars
from the tinsel tree
back into the kitchen

where bacon sizzles
and the eggs,
scrambled,
no longer terrify

* * *

Everson

behind a roller rink
whose music and clatter
keep everyone awake

all night the lights
burn through the slats
of the venetian blinds
I sit in my crib
and see the spiders spinning.
They make their webs,
catch tiny moths and flies,
make little white mummies.

one night they find *me*.
I cringe in a corner
as hairy legs cross
the lighted stripes on my sheet
I scream for mommy
she comes in
doesn't see them
doesn't believe me
tucks me in tight

back they come
from beneath the crib —

others drop down
on silk parachutes —

I am still and silent
as they move about,
weblines crossing
in the light above me.
Then I see one
at the edge of my vision
one left another right

They sensed me
sensing them
so they have come for me
A tiny voice says
No one will come
No one will hear you
We can do anything.

by morning my face
is covered with spider kisses,
I am potato head swollen
rushed to a doctor
for witch hazel ointments

My mother learns
a lesson in dusting

* * *

I dream of flying
free in the air
all the way up into clouds.
Night after night
I learn to levitate
right off my bed
up to the ceiling
then out of the house
and over hill and valley.

I tell my mother
how easy it is to fly.
She points to the zenith
and shows me an airplane.
Then she draws a picture,
shows me wings
and spinning propellers.
if you put your hand out,
she tells me,
the propellers would chop them off,

*then cut the rest of you up,
just like a meat slicer.*

now in my dreams
I fly over cloud tops,
but always an airplane chases me
closer closer
I look back at my feet:
razor propellers are closing in.
I see the pilot's
cap and goggles.
I fall I
wake up screaming.

Now when daytime airplanes come
I run to the house
cover my ears against
the meat grinder engines.

* * *

after my bath
the afternoon paper
fills me with questions.
how do those symbols
turn into words you speak?
what is that thing
in the picture?
*that's a tank, my mother says.
it's like a car,
but rolls on those rubber treads,
see—they go round and round
just like this rubber band
around my fingers.*
what's underneath? I ask.
if a tank ran over you
what would happen?

*it would pull you inside,
she told me. Yes,
when a tank gets you,
it pulls you in and chops you up.*

she wants to get a vacuum cleaner.
it works just like a tank:
things go inside
and are never seen again.
I think I want to live with grandma.

THE OUTCAST

The boy is not like
the others.
Their bikes ascend the hill,
storm down like whirlwinds.
He always walks, their wheels
a dervish dance
whose physics baffle him.
He passes the practice field,
hopes no one will notice him
as he carries his books
on the way to the library
(they don't wear glasses,
don't read anything
between June and August).
He has no idea
what their cries mean,
why it matters
that a ball goes
this way
that way.

When they let him come,
he runs with some older boys,
over a fence he can barely scale,
watching for dogs that bite,
to the forbidden
apple tree.
They climb to reach
the great red ones.

From high above
they taunt him,
dare him to join them
at the sky-scream treetop.
He stands below.
Climbing a tree
is one of many things
he's not allowed to do.

They talk about baseball
and BB guns,
the cars they'll drive
when they're old enough,
the names of girls
whose breasts have swollen.

He reaches up
for the lower branch
takes unripe apples,
unmarred by bird or worm.

Walking alone,
he sees a daytime moon,
wonders how Earth
might look from its craters.
He goes home to his comics,
to the attic room
where aliens and monsters
plan universal mayhem.

*Don't eat those apples,
his mother warns him.
They'll give you a stomach ache.*

I like them, he says.
Green apples taste better.

WATCH DOG

The thing that had been a puppy once,
running at heels,
delight of the kitchen, carried
like an infant despite
its dubious parentage,
welcomed on laps in the living room,
stretched out for the petting hand,

was now that skeletal hound
on stilt-like legs,
a yellow-eyed, encrusted cur
at the end of a chain,
in a cloud of hopping fleas
by his little death-camp house.

He ate his designated scraps.
He howled as the moon
rotated in its own imprisonment.
He barked dutifully at cars,
at interloping rabbits,
at the free dogs standing
at the forest's edge.
I was four when he licked my cheek —
thirteen, when I thought:
Death cannot come soon enough
to close his eyes.

ENGLISH BREAKFAST

i
*Grandmother died yesterday,
a little girl tells me at breakfast,
and Mommy says we'll inherit something.
How English, I think.
The teapot hides
in a quilted cozy.
The sugar is cubed,
the silver spoons polished
by the Irish maid.
Not one pinched face at this table
can extrude a tear.*

ii
*On the street, a moving truck
is engorged with furniture.
Its double-doors close.
A thin, pale woman
looks back at the Tudor
house, the round hill,
the enclosing oaks.
I suppose I shall miss it,
she tells her husband.
It had too many rooms, anyway.*

They drive off. The house
settles and sighs audibly.
A branch falls
from an embarrassed maple.

iii
*My father, whom
I have not seen in thirty years,
tells me of his memories:
Your grandfather took me out
for a beer once.
I was twenty-six
and in the army.
It's the only time
he ever really talked to me.*

When I write, I call him "Old One."
He signs his letters,
"Don."

THE NOSEBLEED

1968

Dizzy and bloodless I am wheeled
into the emergency room. Nosebleed
for hour on hour has left me senseless.
This is a very Catholic hospital.
A nurse with clipboard demands my name.
She looks with scorn at my hair and beads.
“Bet you don’t have no job?” she sneers.
“I’m a student. At Edinboro.”
“Drugs!” she says. “They’re in here
alla time.”

“Nosebleed,” I say.

“I don’t use drugs.”

Nosebleed, she writes,

as I choke on clotted upheave.

“What’s your religion?”

“None.”

“I gotta put something here.”

“Say *atheist*.”

“Well, that’s a first.

I don’t know how to spell that.”

“A—T—H—E—I—S—T.”

“You could be dyin’ here
an’ you wanna say atheist?”

“You want me to lie on my deathbed?”

She snorts. “I should put down *Protestant*.”

They wheel me in. I’m in and out
of consciousness. Later I wake
in a deserted wardroom. I want to know
how long I’ve been here, how much I lost.
I find the cord and buzzer
that says it will summon a nurse.
I hear a distant bell ringing,
hear voices at the nurses’ station.
Words fly to me like startled birds
“Appendicitis”

“Babies”

“Pneumonia”

then “The hippie in 15-B”

A male voice laughs. “We’ll make up
something special for that one.”

I ring the bell again. No one responds.

I wake again at mid-day.
They wheel in food on a cart.
A plate is put before me —
amorphous meat, a glistening heap
of masked potatoes, some soggy greens.
I take a spoon of potatoes
wondering *real* or *instant*,
bite down on razor shards of glass,
put hand to mouth and see blood streaming.

Rip tube from face spitting rush
for the bathroom
 rinse rinse spit rinse
swabbing the blood with a towel
tongue bleeding gums bleeding
dressed myself hastily
left there no one stopped me
walking walking hitch-hiking southward
glad I never swallowed
my special hippie atheist breakfast.

A WING OF TIME

This village street will always split me —
 half in the gray-fringed present,
 half quarked away in time
from dull today to that brilliant
 yesterday — a day I am not yet
 twenty and the maples seem shorter,
 the houses whiter, the sky
a bluer blue through eyes unclouded.

I stand before a dingy storefront.
Back then it was a dress shop
 with but a single mannequin.
Next to it was Gorman's
 steamy laundromat
churning students' underwear and towels,
a nickel-dime-quarter juggernaut
accumulating lint and buttons.

Above the laundry, beyond that rotting
window frame, was my first apartment.
Was it fifteen dollars a month I paid
for two converted office rooms,
 a hallway bathroom and shower?
Are those the same curtains still,
tattered and colorless as I found them
and left them? The same glass,

certainly, through which I watched
the leaf-fall, lightning, snowstorm,
the neon light of the Hotel Bar
(no one under twenty-one admitted!)

I see the pale green painted wall
not changed in grudging landlord years.
I climb the narrow stairs, pass down
the beer-corroded corridor to my door,
whose frosted glass was once gold-leafed
with some insurance agent's name.

Do I do this? Are my hands, nervous,
solid enough to knock, or am I dreaming?
My tap on the glass is real enough.
A thin blond woman answers, puzzled.
I tell her I lived here as a student,
 oh, many years ago.
Could I just stand here a moment,
look out her window at the village green? —

where someone, in unintended irony,
has placed the town's own name
in giant wooden letters,
 as though the inhabitants
 needed to be reminded,
the traveler admonished.

A wave of heat rolls through the trees outside.
Were it a wing of Time, whose darker side
enfolds the past, what memories appear?
I see the vanished store whose wooden frame
extends into the square, a blur of green
as sycamores sawed down or thunderstruck
burst back to view. A sigh of life unfurls,
the lake regains its water lily bloom,
long-dead sparrows rebuild forgotten nests,
and on the street, departed friends go by —

Squat Bertha goes to get her mail. Next door,
her restaurant slides to its bankruptcy,
unpaid employees and a sheriff's sale.
I heard her scold her harried waitresses
for wasting moldy pie. *Do it like this!* —
a sweep of knife across the furry crust —
now serve it with a smile! Above her store,
she had her quart of beer, remembering
the brothel she ran in her Erie days.

The men in her rooms are boarders, students.
Deans and professors eat at her table.
Head high, she's almost respectable now.

I see four shadows in the alleyway —
three high school boys and a retarded girl.
She goes there often. They catch her there,
against the wall their prying hands adept
at raising her skirt, stealing quick pleasure.
After the shadows mingle, pressed on brick,
sneakered feet scatter in every direction.

Outside the bar, the college boys loitering
swoon as Jamie and her sketchpad pass them.
Her tied-back hair jet black, her almond eyes
Eurasian orbs of challenge and surrender.
Her breasts move through their dreams
 like wrecking cranes.
Her siren silhouette, voice-song, Muse-call,
perfect things, untouchably sufficient.
It was enough that she existed here.

Now others pass: a student prince who died
in megalomania, tumor madness;
the tragic bronchial artist coughing,
imagining consumption's early death;
one, two, a half dozen for Vietnam,
whose jungles would cripple or kill them
(one whose body was never found, looks up
as though his ghost and my vision had locked);

my best friends, the mad and sad ones, strolling
on by as though I still awaited them —
the best of their time, the dreamer drop-outs,
acid, depression, poverty and war
cutting its swath through my generation.
In this interval a hundred have passed,
known and unknown, the loved and the yearned-for,
all of them still before their beginnings,
not drinking the poison of compromise,
not marrying lies, not yet denying visions,
not using youth to engender monsters.
They do not see my future looking down,
not one of them seems coarse or mediocre.

And there, impossibly, I see myself,
a younger form, approach.
He has a funny, bouncing walk.
His eyes are wide with poems.

He enters through the door below,
his footsteps sure upon the stair.
I turn, I face the darkened hall.
I will hide until he has passed.
He walks toward his future,
I, my memories. Which of us has
the better bargain, I do not know.
I think he was very foolish
to linger here,
as I was foolish to return.

Yet this is what I learned:
I always thought others the meteors,
racing on by, too hot to touch,
never quite seen or palpable.
I thought the world a-spin
away and beneath my grasp,
yet here it sits, slow in its orbit
as a banana slug.
And now I understand it:
I was the meteor. *I am* the meteor.
I blaze through. Eyes grow wide,
then I am gone. Nothing remains
of me but these etched words.

THE LITERARY LIFE

POETRY MOTELS

A Helms amendment
to the arts budget
surprises everyone:
a Poetry Lodge
in every major city!

The artist's rendering
is out of *Beowulf*:
a great mead hall
where bards convene,
drink tankards of ale,
pot after pot
of exotic tea.
Poets do readings
around the clock.

Yet something's wrong
with this Tudor palace.
Feet stick to the carpet.
Wallpaper grabs you
like vampire Velcro.
Sit once on a bench
and you cannot stand.

A giant eye glares
through the leaded glass.
The senator intones:
*Poets check in,
but they don't check out.*

REGAINING THE MUSE

Silent this voice for more than a year!
My head now bowed with other laurels,
I am back to poetry and its finer lyre.
Time and this book alone
shall tell if I am stronger now —
or if the shining, word-wise daemon,
whose gaze and beckoning
I shunned and spurned
like the advances of a rasping crone,
shall now return to guide my pen.

Muse! come to the window I deck
as of old
with that solitary flame
that you alone can see!
Here the paper, here the pale blue lines,
the furrows I plow again
with fountain pen;
bones, rock & root the silences
I move away to plant a newer crop:
sonnets to scrape the bellies of clouds,
elegies whose solemn tears
tap roots into the strata of dinosaurs,
lyric sprouts that will contain
whole languages.
Beware my harvest, for dragon's teeth
lurk in the words I plant today!

The Muse will take me back.
Have I not given everything
to consecrate myself to her? Like all
who serve poetry I gave my youth,
heedless of age's hunger and need.
I gave her blood, though she in turn
could never give me bread! Look at me:
the scribbling thing I am,
addict of adverb and adjective,
drunkard of Orphic utterance,
I am what she made me.

THE RIVALRY

You have him now.
You call me on the phone to gloat,
to read me back the very poems
I might have written
if he had stayed with me.
He's fickle, though.
Whole nights he'll keep you
there, the candle lit,
the ink point dipped and dried
and dipped again,
awaiting the turn of the knob,
the press of hands
upon your shoulders,
the soothing tenor that says
"Go on, I know you can
do it!" The chaste kiss

that pulls the chosen words
to the tip of your tongue,
the fingertips
upon the small of your back
that make the pen move faster,
the fury in the feather bed
as you hold him
and the Remington pounds on
in unassisted typing.
He can leave you
speechless, wordless,
worn to a stump and steaming,
with only half the words
that galloped through you
caught in your exhausted diary.

He'll stay
until the wine is gone,
until the coda of the Ninth,
with luck
until advance or royalty
replenishes the fridge,
but he is not *yours*

any more than he is *mine*.
He has a little book.
There is a list.
There is always a name
about to fall from his lips
as he has his way with you,
a name with too many
syllables, or too few.

While I pretend to sleep
he reads my manuscripts.
Sometimes he laughs,
sometimes he reads aloud.
(One poem he tucked
into his Levi's,
and I cannot find a copy.)

He has your name and mine.
He knows just when to call us.
I'm a little relieved
to know he is with you,
to know where he is at all.
Tell him, if he gets restless,
that I am thinking of him,
and I'll return the favor.

Maybe we'll both write hundreds
of poems this year,
sharing this slim, blond, bearded
lover, keeping him earthbound,
wearing him down to domestic,
that unreliable Muse.

POETRY READINGS

are like that:
your exit solitary
as your arrival

not to be fooled
by the promiscuous heap
of coats at the door,

or the applause
which scarcely conceals
the shuffle of chairs
and notebook leaves;

or those obsidian eyes
that beam back everything
one says, fit neither
for sight nor self-
reflection.

Sometimes you leave
with but the taste
of one great poem
lingering —
sometimes it was yours
to give.

Like that,
you say, yet I have
hope for more than that,
for poems more bronze
than potato chip, epics
more fire than glutamate,
lyrics more subtle
than sweeteners,
hungry, pit bull verse
anaconda twining
piranha bite
nerve end and ganglia.

Instead you tell me
I'm doomed to hear
a reading of limericks,
some office memoranda
and passionate bills
of lading; perhaps
some neolithic chants
recited by chanellers
for the dead;
the angry howl
of class struggle —

my poems, I say, want touched,
bristling with verbs, tongued
with significant commas,

lonely, they do not sleep
well alone, resent
an audience of one.
They turn in their bed,
accuse me
when I come home
like that.

PATHETIQUE SYMPHONY

We come to the windows
on rainy nights.
Dogs bay behind us.
We press our hands and faces
against the panes.
The waltz beyond the curtains
lures women and men
to brazen whirl,
hands so daring and confident,
slim waists turning,
strong legs keeping time.
We hear the beat
but not the melody,
we see the figures
but not their visages,
barred by lace and lock,
senses numbed by leaded glass,
by the storm behind us.

Do they know we are watching?
The servants pass by,
trays heaped with wines and sweets.
No one comes to the curtain,

no lady, alarmed, cries out
and points toward us,
no one observes
our hunchback silhouettes
in lightning fire.

No carriage came to take us.
But then, we do not *dance*.
We are in rags — the beggar's children,
half breeds and excommunicants.
They dance to threes,
we only hear five/four in thunder time,
lopsided beat of the lame man's waltz.

One day we'll sing at their misfortunes.
One night we'll dance
upon their graves.

DECONSTRUCTION IN WISCONSIN

He is the perfect critic.
He brings his subjects home,
bribes them with promises of glory.
Then he drugs and dissects them,
fries their biceps in a skillet,
stews their livers,
eats their hearts.

The dull knife was chosen for cruelty.
The victim should *hear* as well as feel
his flesh being riven,
veins torn with rip saws.
He has ruined seventeen authors
already
and still working on his doctorate!

He is not fastidious:
torsos of sonnets in the 'fridge,
a headless novel beneath the bed,
fragments of verse in maggoty array
upon the chairs and tables.

His victims' intentions,
their very will to life,
can only make him smile.

He knows better.
His is the discerning eye.
He is here to deconstruct.
Attend his lectures and he'll
reveal the secret:

Literature is meat.

UNEMPLOYED

to the Modern Language Association

A Muse, disheartened, walks the streets these days,
not in accustomed neighborhoods, no longer visiting
the solitary lamplit room, the airy loft or garret.
Her diadem is shattered, her tresses shorn.
Her robes trail in the gutter. One of her sandals is torn.
Gnawing a stale roll she tells the counterman,
“It wasn’t always like this, you know.
I was somebody. No one I favored
was ever quite the same again. Poems and symphonies
have been named for me.” He shrugs,
refills the pitiful spinster’s cup.
She eyes her soiled bundles, piled by the door —
all she owns — a wand, a sheaf of paper (blank),
a music score with empty staves,
an artist’s pad uncharcoaled,
a wad of amorphous clay.
“So what?” another diner jibes.
“We all got troubles. The banks have closed.
The crooks have looted everything.
Even when you get a job,
the goddamned government takes half
of everything!”
She sips her coffee silently. Alone of all
the downtown derelicts she’s bankrupt by decree.
Over and over she reads the wadded clipping
from the English professors’ convention,
where it was solemnly declared:
CREATIVE GENIUS DOES NOT EXIST.
She doesn’t know where to sleep tonight —
the library porch with the pigeons?
the stairwell next to the museum?
the alley behind the college bookstore?
Or perhaps, if this goes on,
the shallow depth of the tar-black river?

DEAD POETS

thirteen thousand lady poets
Poe said
gave all their verse away —
no wonder he starved!

too many poets,
 that's the problem!
too many living
poets,
not enough glory fodder
to feed us!

what's a poet to do?
Become a Dead Poet!
It's a guaranteed path
to glory, fame and im-
mortality!

There's the Memorial Reading.
Your friends will come.
Writers who barely knew your
pen verse in your honor.

Then you appear
in the best anthologies —
something about closed brackets
around your years
seems to appeal to editors.
Critics discover you
(they never feed on anything living)
repeat your words
and have their way with your meaning —

no one cries rape
when words are ravished —
It matters little that your neighbors
have forgotten you —
already the next tenant
shops for oven cleaner/
new tools in the garage/
oblivious traffic hums on the bridge/

It does not count
that everyone you slept with
is bedding down
with the worst surviving haikuists,
that even your best beloved
has put your books in the cellar —

what's temporal fame
when someone can write
a doctoral thesis
on your use of caesura,
your bittersweet alliteration?

So do it quick —
perish and publish!

WHO CAN BE A POET ALL THE TIME?

Who can be a poet all the time?
The sons of rich fathers,
 remittance men —
spinster heiresses with hyacinth hair,
 filling long sheets with
 delicate verse —
the wrinkled don retired at last
 to his monument of sonnets —
the very young — the truly mad —
 the Muse-possessed
(not just visited, *inhabited*
by the poem-urge) —

But for the rest of us,
 being a poet
is at best an illusion,
 at worst a vice.
A thing of glory, certainly;
 honor or profit?
 not in this age!

We migrant poets must distill
 into a hundred poems,
the brandy of *their* thousands,
lift up our frail mimosa leaves
beneath *their* sky-
 consuming oaks.

They are at it, day and night.
The mail truck groans
with their outgoing manuscripts.
They teach this stuff.
Honest to God, they are paid to do it!
They sniff at one
 another's résumés.
Their blurbs adorn
 each other's jackets.
They are weighed down with medals.

The rest of us must steal these hours,
scrawl debtors' ink
 on dime-store paper,
consort with the Muse
 as though adulterous,
secret as those frenzies
in the alleys of Sodom
between the angels
 and the damned.

In the anvil world we live in
we are impractical, slothful,
lounging for adjectives
when we should be "working,"
shouting our newfound lines
against the surf,
 to the dead in graveyards,
to the astonished grackles
 on our window ledge —

absolutely useless, this
non-commercial, anti-
 Puritan ethic obsession —

Except that for these moments
 we would nothing trade,
knowing that those who follow us
would forfeit fortunes
 for such a poetic seizure,
 for a mouthful of words.

DIAGNOSIS OF E.A. POE

Poe, rabid? Never!
A doctor avers
from a yellow medical chart
that Edgar died
in Baltimore,
not in the drunk
delirium
of the election night gutter,
not walked like a zombie
from poll to tavern,
tavern to poll,
signing ballots in shaking hand
as Edgar Montresor
and Allan Pym,
Hop-Frog De La Poer
and Edgardo Prospero—

no, not this,
but a terminal case
of *rabies*.

The question is
what bit him?
Was it a fleeting bat,
a crouching wolf
in some graveyard,
a foaming-mouth hound
at the tavern door,

a squirrel
he reached out to feed,
ungrateful!

Or out of the inky night
did a red-eyed raven
descend, raking its claws,
its unforgiving beak
across his forehead?

Poe, rabid? Never!
He was immune, I say!
He had the scars
of wounds long healed —
the pestilential bite
of the critics,
of his Judas Reverend
Griswold,
the lamprey fangs
of New York lady poets.

Note: After Poe was driven out of New York society by squabbling admirers, and after the New York poetesses interfered in his courtship of Sarah Helen Whitman, a Providence poet and eligible widow, Poe disowned them all, writing, "I shall forever shun the pestilential society of lady poets."

AGAINST THE WRITING OF SONNETS*

This is a concentration camp for words.
Barbed wire is twisted every other beat,
Five steps to posts where perch
the sickly birds
Who caw and mock the drum
of marching feet.
Say there is order here, that granite Will
Can herd our random, halting thoughts
to rhyme;
Say, if you dare, that you would
rather kill
The genius than reveal the tyrant's
crime;
How you prefer the ordered life to one
Where Chaos and the subtle spark of fire
Might topple gods with but
a phrase begun
And uttered freely with an untuned lyre.
Sing hard, and let the prison pillars fall,
Crushing our captors, guards —
and Muses—all!

* William Carlos Williams rejected the sonnet as a "fascist" form.

RHAPSODOMANCY

At loss for inspiration I turn
to my *Occult Encyclopedia*,
open the book at random
to see what curious lore
I might deem worthy
of a passing verse.
Maybe a curse,
a spell, an oracle or two...

The book falls open
somewhere at "R,"
I let my finger
(the oracular one)
fly out the to the left
until it touches.
I look and read.
"Rhapsodomancy," it says,

"Divination by means
of opening the works
of a poet at hazard
and reading the verse
which first presents itself
oracularly."

I laugh.
So poets don't need
advice on magic.
We *are* magic.

OF THE MAKING OF BOOKS

1973
What is it about ink
poised over virgin paper
if pen, a word at a time,
why not a press,
page upon page repeating?
Plate, blanket, roller,
compressor, roller, sucker, gripper
(the guts of unromantic offset
supplanting Gutenberg)
the lift and thrust of the sheet
no hand has touched,
the slurring commingle
of ink and water in foaming fountain

till stanza follows stanza
canto and chapter —
sheaves to be folded and sewn
into a hundred books,
five hundred books!
I call it *making paper babies*,
my dingy loft on Sixth Avenue
a hatching hive of chapbooks.

I sat on the fire escape
outside my soot-grime windows.
The moon has long since set,
street dark in cast-iron canyons.
It is insufferable August —
I want to sleep in coolness —
the press churns on behind me,
the infeed pile diminishing,
the finished sheets descending.

I know its sound like a heartbeat,
just how long I can linger
before the ink needs tending.

I watch the late-night drifters below:
rag pickers and winos and psychopaths,
a junkie laden with burglar tools
 eyeing each storefront,
some swearing brawlers
 from the lesbian cycle bar
 around the corner,
the blur of cabs with rolled-down
windows,
blear-eyed drivers barreling
 in homeward trucks,
the dilatory patrol car
 beaming the doorways for sleeping
bums
 or a glimpse of frenzied sodomy.

Inside, I empty the paper bins.
It is three a.m. I can still print
another signature, wait out
the early dawn on the fire escape.
I cannot sleep anyway.
Sometimes it seems I work for the
machine.

There has been little profit in this,
yet everywhere I go in this rusted city
poets are gathering.
A multitude of hands lift up these books
in chorus they chant
Just off the press

My latest

Please buy one

1996

The cast-iron street is floodlit now
 the columns as white as marble
bed bath and book and clothing stores
draw thousands here. I always pause
to look up at the forgotten loft
where I began my consummate folly.

I have dragged this book madness
two decades now. My closets explode
with unsold volumes,
 projects half bound
and then abandoned, the beached whale
guillotine cutter in my bedroom.

The poets I published are dying off:
the Village Sibyl Barbara Holland gone,
now Emilie Glen, my poetry mother.
I hear it said at her memorial
that these things mattered after all,
that little books are voyagers,
bottle messages into indifferent seas,
rockets to the future.

In this world of too many books,
so much bad verse and rotten prose,
it is hard to believe it.
Yet it was thus with Poe,
Whitman and Dickinson.
Barbara haunts Morton Street,
 and Emilie, Barrow.
Only their books wing onwards,
perching on brownstone rooftops,
flapping their shiny covers,
ready to plunge when least expected,
open to that page,
that singular poem,
that line with its magic
in words that stay.

**FINALISTS — CHRISTIAN LADIES'
POETRY SOCIETY COMPETITION.
MARCH TOPIC: "BABIES"**

I. INFANT BREATH

Dictated by Maudlin Carroll

~~(Note to self: Must win this!
What to write about babies?
Cute? Dead? Fetuses?
No, no, *sick* babies!)~~

O baby pink and soft,
O Heaven's gift,
so feeble at my bosom
~~(can I say bosom?)~~
wheezing and crying.

You cannot sleep
for God the Father
who sees & knows all
has given you asthma.
Your every breath
is a gagging Golgotha.

How can this be?
Is it something
the parents did?
Did Satan creep in
to the nursery?

Out, Satan! Out, Demons!
Mistress Maudlin on her knees here.
I may be only a babysitter,
but I'm better than medicine.
Throw those pills away!
Open a channel! Open a channel!

I hold the baby against me.
It's wheezing, wheezing.
I pray, squeeze,
pray
squeeze

~~(Note to self:
look up correct Saints to evoke
from Catholic Encyclopedia)~~

Oh, thank you, Lord.

The baby is quiet now.
Completely quiet.
Hardly breathing.
Not ... breathing.
Oh dear, what have I done?

~~(Note to self: don't send this
to the Christian Ladies'
Baby Contest)~~

~~(Note to self: burn this.)~~

**II
MY BABY
by Chastity Mugwich**

See my baby.
It's sicker than yours.
No fault of mine,
no crime passed on.
Clean I am,
washed by the Lamb
of all trace
of Original Sin
(no ring of crime
around this collar!)

Your baby is plain,
its sickness vulgar.
Asthma! Poppycock!
Look at my baby.
His tiny hands and bleeding,
holes in his ankles
the size of penny nails.

Of course he's crying!
look at that gash
in his torso!
Lift his ringlets now
and see the perfect circle
of never-healing
little thorn pricks.

My baby is special, you see.
He has the holy sickness,
Stigmata!

III

MY LITTLE ANGEL

Name withheld by request

My baby doesn't cry.
Look how he beams.
See that glow
above his forehead.
It's not the sun:
it follows him day and night.
See these presents:
mountains of toys,
fragrant spices,
gold bars and platinum
from his trio of godfathers.

Say what you want.
Make fun of me,
unwed mother.
You'll all be sorry
when my little boy
splits the earth
like a walnut
and all the dead pop up.

Laugh all you want
at my food stamp life.
I hear you whispering
as I nurse my little one.
I know you're watching
in the silence beyond
those pillow-covered walls.
I'll never tell,
I'll never tell
Who the father was.

NOT A LOVE SONG, NO, NEVER THAT!

THE SHY ONE

What use to tell you now —
you've held these poems in your hand
like objects made for someone else —
that *your* mahogany eyes
inspired these orphaned odes?

I polished them
that you might see yourself,
transformed
in coat of myth
within their glassy hearts,

to no avail.

Our dialogue descends
to means of gravity:
this ode I'll wrap
around a meteor.

Perhaps when you wake
to find my verse
has cratered your lawn,
perhaps when the hole
in your roof gapes out
upon the streaking Leonids
of my passion,
you might perceive,
at last,
a personal intent
to my art.

THE COMPANY OF EAGLES

Your promises loom ahead of me,
the swelling egg of them
ready to burst
at the nudge of a clock.
The phone wire, door chime
repeat expectant silences,
anticipate your wingbeats.

Your promise
of an intimate visit,
the *just the two of us*

at the corner of your beak —
what will come of it?
Those predator eggs you guard
may come between us,
and if they hatch,
what then of dinner and wine
and candlelight?
Will the eaglets shrug
at my proffered feast,
go off instead
to some mountain eyrie
to preen and pick their feathers clean?
Or will they just pose
by the dining room door,
sip tea with their beaks,
stamping a tango
on my harpsichord?

Will they stay for the night,
make nests of my furniture,
pick my wallet clean for stuffing?
Will they be satisfied with poems?
If all the flock, unlettered,
go streaming away
when the lights are dimmed,
will you remain
to hear me out,

to loan me your wingspan,
your shadow, your mute
but overarching company?

Perhaps your icon is false,
your place on flag and coin,
seal and warplane
not merited.
Bird-killing bird,
rabbit hunter,
assassin of squirrels,
sneak thief of cub and pup and kitten —
what kind of country
picks a raptor bandit
for its emblem, anyway?

MAKING LOVE IN UNLIKELY PLACES

the places
have not changed:

our deerwatch tree

the tombstone seats
that sheltered us

the nightpew darkness
of candled church

where we once loved
the same birds nest,
the same dead sleep,
the same god promises
his immanence.

you always asked
why here?
because our loving
carved an anchorhold:

I undress you forever
beneath this tree

press you lake-wet
against this stone

drop sacrilegious kisses
in our pew-length fall.

It never ends
because the place endures.

ODE 15

1

Another year,
the sun resembles itself
but does not fool the trees
who shun its cool imposture.
Buds open reluctantly,
their slanted eyes askew
with annual doubts.
It is never the same,
each lap of light a ghost
of former springs, each ray

a waning monument
from where a darkling star
gluts space
with ever diminishing mass.

The universe forgets itself—
an idiot sun implodes
into a fathomless mouth,
both feaster and food
adjourning to nothingness
at the event horizon.

The earth spins blindly on.

2

I have not lost you.
Your disassembled eye
rides in another's skull today.
Your disconnected arm
hooks onto mine at dusk.
Tonight before I sleep
your mouth surprises me.
It is better this way—
each bit of you a ghost
returning on an X-ray wind.
Each day an icy shard of you
drops off some glacial height
onto an unsuspecting face,
as though the gods that made you,
singular, had tried to make another.

The universe deceives itself.
Though ardent spring explodes
upon the feathered fields,
it is a new spring, slate clean,
the past — if there is a past —
amnesia'd in wormhole transit
to the fiercely blazing present.
I wait in solitude. If ghosts
present themselves, they'll rage
because they cannot say their names.
If phantom faces seem to be yours,
I love them for the lie they speak
of being you.

ODE 22: A HAUNTING

There is a time —
the unseen interlude
between the twelve-top
and the descending one
(the dark-side moon
of the clock face) —
in which you await me.

The painted stars
upon that vault of heaven
can neither set
nor circle the Pole Star.

The trees
on that horizon
have turned resplendent gold,
but no leaves fall
upon the perfect polygons
of paving stones.

The moon
hangs full in copper hues
a permanent sphere
no longer dieting
in giddy cycles.

The night
bears warming breezes
but no hint of dawn.

You are there
like the sleeping stones,
the eternal dead,
the ever-refilling
sea —

I cannot join you.
Not for me
your geologic stillness,
your celestial patience.

My clock
ascends to midnight,
tumbles to dawn.
I do not count the heartbeat
between dimensions,
never taste water
at the cusp of poison,
never permit silence
to reveal your breathing.

It is enough
that you are there,
a ghost in my synapses,
psychokinetic
within the pendulum,
a spring that never relaxes.

You are my bottle imp
of unsought kisses,
a jinn from whom
I make no wishes.
Asleep,
I am beyond your
eye-blink affections,
your mercury promises.

Your name
is not the one I call;
your immaterial hand
is not the one I touch;
your form is not
the pressing thing
that pins me to the bed

as I hear the chimes
and count thirteen.

FRONTIER

Frontier is defined
as that which beyond
which is irrevocable danger:

eternal dusk
beyond the clearing of forest,
the padding wolf,
the lurking Savage/

a book of white pages
where no pen has gone,
dune after dune
unstained by ink/

the distance between us:
our hands have not yet touched
and hesitate as though
some killing amperage
lurked in opposing poles/

the terror of first buttons,
of touching turned explorer,
of the point beyond play
where fiercer passions lie/

frontier at last is seen
as where you cannot go forward
without becoming citizen
of my dark kingdom,

and where I cannot
return without some victory —
a champagn'd kiss,
a falling together,
a storm-lit moment
of sky-impaling joy.

Or is it our doom to stand,
each at our wall,
because you wait for some divinity
to raise you up to lofty love?
How long until you learn at last
that gods were never men,
nor mortals divine?

ODE 14

You think you are alone.
I watch your hands
flash white
at turn of page,
follow your eyes
from line to line.
Hands do not blush,
the reading eye
cannot avert,
the mind

does not suspect
my omnipresence.
Counting the beat
your fingers trace
these lines.
You even whisper them
as though my ear
were intimate.
You never suspect
I dream of *you*,
touch back
your outreached consciousness,

concealed like boy in shrubbery,
lover in moonlit garden,
writing a serenade
anonymous,
stalking this poem,
alert between letters,
casting my net from stanzas
to catch you.

CONTACT

I know we said we'd never —
but for a moment today
we passed a foot apart
on the angry pavement,
sun in your eyes,
the snow in mine.
The edges of our shadows touched,
an overlap of gray penumbras.

My shadow dips down to page
with its own pen.
It gets there first,
mocks my writing
with invisible ink,
writes words
in a nearly forgotten tongue —

*O nuit cendré,
sous l'ombre de la lune—
la où un spectre resuscité
se chante,
son sang éteint d'une rouille noire,
son oeil Cyclope,
comme un abîme d'onyx...*

Translation: O ashen night
beneath the shadow of the moon—
where a risen ghost
sings to itself
its blood a black rust
its Cyclops eye
like an abyss of onyx...

ODE 8

What I would say to you is not in words.
Lips move to speak it but fall to silence.
Your name poised there on my inhaling breath
Refuses to go out again exhaled.
You passed, and did not know I called to you!
What matters your name suspended in air,
when you could speak to me in flush of neck,
in blood's rampaging beat, in arching back,
in thrust and out of quickly tautened thighs?
You comprehend my eyes when they blurt out
what I would seize, and what surrender.
My thoughts have burned your flesh, my ardent will
has rent the wall, the room, the barricade
of cloth between us. Give me but one touch,
one chance to change the no upon your lips
to the animal yes within your limbs!
Your arms reply to unsaid sentences,
your soul comes forth from lonely catacombs
to join with me. We are a rhapsody
of fingers dancing, hair entwining, legs
in a quilt of crab and spider quivering,
until a flash of lightning consummate
thunders and flares to pass between us.
Who gave? Who took? Whose seed is where?
Make we a child? a poem? a demon of air?
What I would say to you is not contained in words,
though I must be content to live in them.
This hollow rib-cage symphony of one,
unpartnered dance of single skeleton,
is how my melancholy half calls out,
summons in silence what no words can dare!

NOT A LOVE SONG, NO, NEVER THAT!

1

At last I have found you,
but you do not know you are found.
We dance a circle;
you move as though you know the step —
you do not know the melody.
Each turn centrifugal pushes us out
from the center where all
must finally touch.
You make no gesture to hold me,
but every parting says *Come back*.
If my eyes speak truth, the midnight hunger,
you pretend not to see it.
It is, perhaps, your kindness not to.
Like a sparrow I take my shreds of encouragement,
make them a pillow in the shape of your torso,
an incomplete reflection
a shattered Greek marble
that I embrace before sleeping.
I resolve never to tell you,
unless by chance you read this,
how you have companion'd my dreams,
how I would trade the touch of your fingertips
for an empire of another's kisses.
I shall be impossible to dislodge
from my seeming friendship. My roots
are deeper than I can let you know.
I can endure your silence, your absence even.
I can make airy transcendence of all
except your ultimate refusal.
Ah, that I delay! That is my stratagem!
You must never suspect that I love you!

2

Expecting you'd never love me
I had no stratagem. Defenseless I lay
like tree refusing a hurricane,
bending to its airy thrust,
enduring in silence its hammerfist.
And thus you came, uprooting me
from sense and reason.
I was upright, impossible to touch
except in formal ways
(so much in a handshake, a hand
lightly laid upon shoulder).
Now I am horizontal, pinned
beneath your will,
your arms my sky, your breath
the outer limits of my cosmos.

Lightning erupts
 between our fingertips,
empires expire
 before our tongue-filled kiss
 exhausts itself.
The secret I kept is no secret.
You had read between the lines.
The reconstructed gods, perhaps,
came to your dreams and said
the things I dared not tell you.
I pull you down toward me —
 it is as though I embrace a world —
 fierce with eagles and ruby'd heart —
 pulsing with rivers subterranean —
At last you have found me.
I did not know I was found.

3

This night I have bound you.
 Soundless you lay in your moonlit bed.
The dancing is finished now,
 the candles guttered, the incense dead.
The symphony of contested wills,
the tug-of-war and centrifuge
led to the touch that kills.
Your terrified screams revolt me —
your shudder when I touch you tenderly
slaps me as magnet fields repelling —
but still your eyes say *Stay!*
You push my overarching frame
 yet hold your strength at bay.
Your midnight hunger is for pain,
for pleasure taken at your body's cost.
It is my kindness to refrain
from seeking the false coin of your consent.

My eagle talons shred your breast —
You gasp and bleed and call for more—
I'll wing you up into my eyrie nest,
Embed my beak in your aortal core.

Though you're alive and wishing death,
I will dismember and reassemble you
within my house of broken idols —
god busts, fragments of athletes,
storm-tossed remains of graveyard angels.

You love this violence
 but never tell me so,
 unless by chance I read it

when I invade and spy your dreams.
I was with the incubus, the succubus,
the Cossack, the Nubian
the Grand Inquisitor,
the sailors, the motorcyclists,
the Roman legions
who peopled your moist and passive nocturnes.

Theirs was an empire of lust,
mine the throne.
I am the Emperor twice deified —
already dead
and thus impossible to kill.
You cannot dislodge my iron embrace,
my root has entered you.
You can endure my motions, my molten fire:
you may even grow to like them.
But that I delay! That is my stratagem.

Now my unwelcome face is all you see.
I am the thing you loathe, that loves you —
the hunchback, the phantom, the night-bred bat,
the child the mother scorned, the father beat,
a thing the grave refused, condemned
to stalk the shadows of your undead sleep.
You must never divulge that you love me.

LIGHT YEARS

Love someone, cold star,
that I may someday hear of it.
Love anyone, blink out
if you must to black hole suicide
to prove the depth of your feeling.

Go nova! Fill up the galaxy
with the news of your passion.
Make our sun blush
to see the blaze of your triumph.

Be not like me, a sullen star,
a white dwarf, dwindling,
a tremulant pulsar,
bypassed by all
in this expanding
universe.

ODE 19: LOVED ONES

Loved ones, the early dawn's
illusion-loves
seem still the finest
 though rippled dead
in the sea of years

Loved ones
 for whom mere sight
 was swooning,
 words full
of double, triple meaning,
eternal prospects,
 each falling into
 and out of
as certain and final
as the death of dinosaurs.

Loved ones
 afloat a haunted lake —
desperate trees,
 bone-dry bird nests
 a brambled heart
wintering on promises,
 utopias delayed
 in permafrost,
star-speckled night
 nerved with nebulae.
Yearning was more
 than having,
as every elm tree
 leaned with me
toward the absent beloved.

Loved ones
 outgrew those student days,
 subsumed to normalcy,
 sank like a stone to suicide,
 took up the faith.
The stars I named for my beloved
 shrug off their brightness, shamed
 at their worldly outcome.

Pursue the Beloved,
 a Sufi advises me.
It seems I hurled them skyward —
 Andromeda and Venus,
 Mars and Ganymede—
I am too fixed a star,
 my orbit limited

(evading black holes
 of death & depression,
wobbling a little
when some new planet approaches)

Loved ones
 escaped me:
the more they changed
the more immutable
the past became,
as what they were
and what I am
danced endlessly
in Autumn air.

ODE 20: DESERT SONG

To you, who in the West
sift sand and sorrow
in the shadow of scorpions —
I send you Spring.
Your swollen sun
has seared the desert,
parched the throat songless —
the rap of rattlesnakes,
drum of earthquake,
suffice for sonnets —

Your brittle wind
comes cloudless
bearing a hostile clarity.
It is a place
where nothing much happens
except by stealth,
like the subtle growth of cacti.

A semblance of love
rolls by in sagebrush,
a furtive kiss
like a coyote in the scrub,
your heartbeat alone
in ghost town stillness.

Turquoise and silver
are sky and water
petrified, fit wealth
for mummified warriors,
hammered and joined

so that no flood
or thunderbolt
can break their geologic calm.

Come back
to the enveloping East —
our hanging gardens still
bloom and blossom —
to hills where rain clouds linger,
where symphonies spring
like astonished ferns
from every stream bed.

Leave to the desert
its golden nuggets,
its neolithic defeats,
its meteor-scarred wastes.
I send you this sprig of lilac,
this magnolia explosion,
this weeping willow branch,
this bloom of carnelian cherry.

RENUNCIATION

I rose at dawn, looked down upon
the length of you asleep there,
moon-like, your naked back
 curved down
to slightest waist, the white of you
more luminous than silk, and softer.

I lay back down beside you then,
cupping the curve of you against
my sleepless breathing. Your stillness,
a pearl's perfection in the shell —
did it ignore, or take me in?
Was my entwined embrace your wish,
or a thing you merely endured
below the threshold of wakefulness?

It was too real — not real enough! —
this summer night — this thing you said
you always wanted, yet withheld,
a consummation I wished too,
yet kept at bay like a tiger.

Now one night's storm has sated us.
It was the grape — not you —
 that spoke.

By the time you said you loved me
it did not matter who I was —
only that I was there, and willing.

Riding the southward bus, I watch
the gray New England towns go by.
I gaze as things become themselves,
emerging from mist and darkness:
these are not trees, but power poles,
clouds are not blankets or curtains,
but mere confluents of vapor.

I lean my cheek against the chill
of glass. I could be no one now,
a cipher in a rattling morning bus,
going from nowhere to nowhere,
eating my lunch without thinking,
ignoring my fellow passengers,
hollow as a serial murderer.
My hands that touched you
now want to hide from me.

The day draws on, and still
these brickwork towns are all alike.
Which one do you live in, anyway?
What color are those eyes of yours?
What bridges, streams and rotting mills
are yours, what sunsets
 and diving crows,
what steeples penetrating your view?
Is every spinster shutter yours,
 are yours the hands
 drawing those shades to darkness?
Are these drear trees the same
 sad troop that line your garden?

The rancor of my leaving you
pursues me thus like an ash cloud.
Tall buildings loom, New York
a tombstone row of granite, glass.
It must be five o'clock — by now
 you've read the letter
I propped upon your table top.
I close my eyes. It rains
inside my face.

TRIPTYCH

i

Eros,

you are a child no more:
you have grown ripe for mouths to taste,
tongued tender neck to shoulder line
breast taut and sloping down where firm
yet yielding to a poet's fingers
what dragons beneath the belly
in longing flesh awakening!
I set my eyes upon you now
in your statue-perfect moment —
ah, winged-foot *kouros*, do not move!

Beneath your sandaled tread the earth
indents and hardens, hungry clay.
You swim the sea, delight the waves
foam-white with arm- and legstrokes bold;
when you turn back, the ebbing tide
tugs out and downward, desperate,
like a disappointed lover.
Sea beasts thrust up green tentacles,
amazed at your beauty, craving
the hoarded air in your rib cage.

Your vanished body, diving, mocks me.
You cannot drown! The gods have much
to utter through your vocal chords!
A lifeguard zephyr transports you
above, beyond the crashing surf.
Eyes closed, you ride on mist and cloud,
immobile as marble, your hair
a boreal banner of gold
across the blind, astonished sky.

You do not see the eyes that watch you,
do not acknowledge worshipers;
your youth an uncrossable chasm.
I hesitate to speak, my hand
in greeting grasps you too lightly.

You flee the seven-hilled city.
I watch from a bench on the summit
as you hurtle down Angel Street.
Long I linger, long I watch for you
as you turn down the twisted lanes.
But you are always departing —
your future is too much my past.

You are too beautiful to touch,
almost too beautiful to live
in our tawdry and tarnished world,
unbearable Phoebus, a searing star!

2

Philia,

more rare than lust, more lasting,
desiring all and yet beyond desire;
the unseen walker-beside of dreamers,
first ear to my poem, fresh from the pen.
You are the comforter of solitudes,
the perfect *thou* in silent communion.
For you the bread is baked, the teapot full,
the door unlocked, the sleeping place secure.
If you come for a day, or forever,
it is the same to me — what's mine is yours.

I swear I shall not pass a day with you
unless it be filled with astonishing things.
At night, the room you sleep in breathes with me,
the darkness between us webbed with moonlight,
cicadas heralding my dreamless sleep.

Scarce half a dozen times I've met you now,
soul mate and artist and fellow outsider.
How many leagues we two together walked,
how many ancient stones deciphered! Worlds
turned within us as we riddled science;
with thought alone we toppled cathedrals,
lived in all ages and nations at once,
counted as friends the poets and sages.
(These the mingled streams, the parting rivers,
the memories that are always with me,
friendship true in a world without honor,
with brothers who choose us, and whom we choose.)

3

Agape,

rarest and last of all the affections
you are the solace of the spurned,
of those who cannot trade
in beauty's coinage,
the vestal hope of those
whose love outlives the body —
you are love's eidolon.

You are the stillness preceding dawn,
the hush that follows the thunderclap:
you are lord of all benevolent silences.

Even the unremembered hermit
can find your silken threads each morn,
dropped like fine ash from the burning stars.
Where you recite your enigmatic verse
tribe, shade and totem slip away,
and all become ensoul'd in one great heart.

ii

My beloved is three-faced,
triptych in unity.
Approached, he hesitates
to give his name.

One name is not enough.

Lust is too quickly slaked
to hold him long, the vows
of hollow fellowship too soon betrayed.
No one suspects the aspirant god
in his bones, defying weight,
yearning toward the zenith.

Am I to be your lover,
brother,
fellow spirit?

Is my yearning for hair and bones?
For hearth and soul mate?
For winged companions to Olympus?
I do not know,
cannot define
my troubled and troubling affections.

And as for him,
Adonis, Atys, Adonai,
who knows what he means
by being beautiful?

THE WATCHER

The love that does not touch,
that makes no penetration,
requires no mirror back to verify
that what is real is real.

This love excels all lovers.
The unmailed letter superior
to the letter returned unread,
the passion that leaves the eye
as a gift to beauty.

Love thus, in secret, and love again.
Enlarge the heart
(O it has many chambers!)
If the loved one be as oblivious
as a fieldstone,
so be it! Moss clings, sun warms,
water wears down —
there are many ways
to make love to granite.
You say the love you give
is not returned to you?
Leave to the bankers
the keeping of balances,
the squeezing out
of interest.

Love is returned, somehow,
in the ease of future loving,
the cavalcade of youth
pressing on by
as you watch from the café window,

marveling there is so much in you
beaming back at them,
so many qualities and curves,
neck napes and striding legs,
sungold, raven black & pumpkin hair,
and the gemstone eyes
of onyx, turquoise, emerald and hazel —

what would they be
if you were not there to love them?
what coal mine darkness
would they walk in,
if we did not spark them
with our admiration?

Be not jealous of touching.
Does not the air,
thick with the ghosts
of the world's love cries
press down upon you?
Do not the star lamps
warm you? Does not the tide
crash out your name
upon the lonely cliffs?

Without desire, the universe
would cool to neutrons;
the whirligig of being
would slow to a stop.
So storm out! radiate
your unsought affections,
the passing poet, taking nothing,
giving all.

SUMMER STORM

I am standing in the rain.
The summer cloudburst
clots the sky, soaks me
as I stand in the unmoored grass
behind the summer cottage.
The clapboards, streaked and shining,
reflect the corrugated bolts
of jabbing lightning. I stay
until the rain-lash wears me down.
I have left your easy sleep,
your clutching arms,
in the attic that quakes
with thunder and wind,
air like lost bats against the panes.
I lay down rain-wet beside you.
The candle is guttering,
exchanges flashes
with the expiring tempest.
In me, a furnace burns
within a heart of brass.
In reason's engine
there is no rain now.
I watch you turn and toss.
I try to feel nothing.
To think that you love me
is hubris anyway.
All of your nights are sudden storms.

HERE AT THE MILLENNIUM

CHILDREN OF ATLAS

Out of my sloth and sorrow I am called to write
a hymn to struggle in the name of Mars.
What does life want but more life?
 a shield, but a sword to clash against it?
These cold winds brace us: we are of the North.
I am the herald of a war-like spirit.
Why are so many babies being born,
 if not to lean
their shoulders against the weight of planet,
defying its old inertia, its downhill entropy,
to lift, strain upward and onward,
to make a path to the very stars.

Beat, drums, a march of rising beyond—
we shall not fall into the flame.
The pit has not been made to contain us.
We shall take hold of this mighty sphere
with force of will—and peals of laughter.
We are the owners and drivers—not slaves—
 not tenants to tremble and bend the knee—
 we are of the earth entirely,
capped in clouds and rooted in iron,
 not apart from Nature
(not even the basest thing we do
comes from anywhere but Nature).

We are the destiny of carbon's unfolding.
One man spends seven years on a symphony;
one waits with a knife in an alley.
(Somehow, both are the same—
 somehow, very different.)
We are all the children of Atlas.
 We need only a burden big enough,
 a sphere our own and a place to push it.
To the old in heart, the death-fearing,
 the envious and self-defeating
we have one message and one only:
Stand back! Make room! We are coming!

FIRST SNOW

i

Dwarf roses, faded, leafless,
twisted branches gray and brown,
intricately overlaid
with pristine snow, pyramidal
tracings of every line and arc
in flakes of falling crystal.
There is not a breath of wind
to disturb this perfect canvas.
Suspended within
 the latticework
a thousand rose hips burn
like sour radishes
or petrified cherries,
a memory of blushes
and blood-flushed passion
caught unawares by winter.

ii

An hour later, I pass again.
The snow's calligraphy
is still untouched by wind.
Rose hips still beam
their ruddy messages.
The sun has slid
across the ice-sky
to its low-slung zenith
and one hundred
astonished roses
have opened their petals —
 dying as fast
 as they unfurl,
their wilting edges burned
by unkind frost,

virgin Juliets
no sooner born
 than entombed.

The suicidal blooms
lean to the sun, pleading
their disbelief of darkness,
the impossibility
of sudden perishing.

Love comes unbidden thus,
as the capricious rose.

THANKSGIVING THOUGHTS

i

Although base Nature made us
 and will have its way,
we bow our heads in thankfulness
that we do not live in a universe
where all the food is gray.

ii

Just halfway through
the holiday repast,
the room explodes
in fisticuffs,
 drawn knives
and a pool of blood
on the dining room floor.

That's how Thanksgiving ends,
as every hostess knows,
if too small a bird provokes
an insufficiency of stuffing.

iii

Sixth place at table
reserved for Squanto's ghost.
Over the steaming corn,
turkey and gravy,
cranberry red
he utters the words
his people would one day rue:
"Welcome, Englishmen!"

iv

Apocryphal feast
we learn about
as we droop
from sauce and stuffing:

An immense turkey
stuffed with a duck entire,
its swollen cavity
crammed with a hen,
into whose bosom
three pigeons,
stuffed with quail,
each tiny quail
engulfing one minute
hummingbird.

As we walk home,
wine-warmed and down
in our vigilance,
will some vast hand
sweep downwards
from the kettle-black sky —

and after a suitable
cleaning and marinade,
will we be stuffed
in turn inside
some vast and whale-like
cavity, waiting to bake
slowly and tenderly for those
who know Earth
as The Food Planet?

IMPROMPTU

after a painting by Riva Leviten

There are things the hands remember,
things we could do in darkness,
things that come back as fresh
as childhood.

Round, round, ready, write!
the teacher chanted
as our tiny thumbs fumbled
to balance the ink pens.
Pages of ovals and calligraphic lines
on blue-lined tablets,
all hands in unison
as the steel-nibbed fountain pens
flew like determined birds
between the line above
and the line below.

Nervous at blackboards
we stood with chalk,
elbows and arms everywhere —

Round, round, ready write! —
making large the magic letters
that opened books and history.

The hands remember after all.
Pick up a pen,
and the arm still traces
the early morning drill
of militant Palmer

who wanted every Christian boy
and girl to race
across a page as fast as a typewriter.
No sloth in those fingers!
No deviation from those capitals!
Elide those letters into a graceful form!

The hands remember,
though the mind forgets
each improvised or memorized
note once played on a piano.
One year I practiced
in midnight classrooms,
in an unlit organ loft
until my hands could play the notes
without my eyes' assistance.
If I play for a day,
last year's music rouldades up;
for a week, and a decade
of music is back — from where?

The mind remembers —
vast Plato's cave
with a tiny door.
What stuff gets in —
flitting about
the greater darkness?
The words we read
are all there,
so too the music our ears
embrace and echo
in nautilus of nerve cells.
Somehow the things
we shouldn't know
stay in there, too:
forgotten cruelties
wiped clean
on the external slate,
the fluttering bats
of a lifetime
of migraines,
the counting house
of unforgiveness,

and the darkness
in which we dream,
the void preceding
then following
our desperate years.

Hands wash themselves
in midnight,
begin to vanish,
take forms
of fluttering half angels.
Yet they are stamped
with trembling music,
tattooed with staves
they'll twitch to remember
even if amputated.

The old mind
peers out its upper door
into the too-bright
universe,
beckoned again
by those vowels
inscribed on slate,

the voice of a long-dead
teacher intoning

*Round, round,
ready, write!*

DUSK

Red-purple dusk
streaked with a bridge of clouds
mirrors itself in placid waters
(sea viewed from rushing train).
Our hemispheres between —
an unlit earth of willows
and treetops, wired poles
and slanted steeples —
lies like a dream in black cotton.

Full tree and bare tree
stand side by side
in the violet blaze,
one a fulsome silhouette of youth,
the other a waning skeleton
X-rayed by sunset.
Streetlights blink on,
shatter this tensed moment
when two immensities poise
like cupped hands

to cancel the earth.

Now one by one the edison flares
spark on in darkened windows.
Dusk brings on fear,
sun's death
and greater darkness.
We huddle, dine, deluded,
in our dim circles of finite light,
while the night sky opens its irises
into the orbs of watching wolves.

AS IDOLS FALL IN THE AFGHAN HILLS

What to do?
What to do?

Mail a Mullah
a thousand portraits
of Bodhisattvas.

Airdrop a hundred
thousand little Buddhas
on tiny parachutes
onto the streets
of Kabul.

Mate giant Japanese
Buddhas with Godzilla,
send their offspring
to the Afghan Hills
to sit serene
in lotus pose

(but watch their fire-breath
melt Taliban tanks
and send the soldiers
shrieking!)

Sky-write
LORD BUDDHA
from border to border
in every known language.

Or wait for Karma
to burn the burners,
shatter the shatterers,
silence the mouths
of the speakers of law?

(No time, no time
as the dynamite explodes
a Buddha head
from fifteen hundred
years ago.)

Let Allah, Buddha
Christ and Brahma
rage like comets,
moth fluttering
around the Man Sun.

One vanity makes them,
A greater vanity destroys them.
Yet a child with hands in clay,
in the mud by the riverside
will make a new god
with broad shoulders
far-seeing eyes,
a forgiving visage,
a palm extended
for the benediction
of unbearable Beauty.

This parched land
needs its memories,
its slender share
of human fairness,
against the dark night
of goats and dynamite.

SIX CHRISTMAS VERSES

CHRISTMAS DINNER

Spoiled meat and green potatoes,
Sour milk and black tomatoes,
All mixed in with something found
Sprouting from a graveyard mound.
Don't eat Grandma's mushroom stew,
If you know what's good for you!

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Fall to the carpet! Cover your head!
Go up the stairs and keep to your bed!
There'll be no presents for us to see —
There's a rabid bat in the Christmas tree!

A DECEMBER CUSTOM

When Sarah wanted the men to kiss her,
She stood just where they
couldn't miss her.

She took them all beneath the door —
Yet none of them came back for more.
The moral's plain — it only figures —
The mistletoe was full of chiggers.

OUR HUNTING FATHERS

The snow was white, the snow was red,
When hunters shot the reindeer dead.
They tossed the sleigh into the lake.
Hoping to hide their worst mistake,
They torched the old fart
in his crimson suit,
Opened his bags and divided the loot

JINGLE BELLS

Carolers came to the end of the lane
(They thought they'd cheer
the widower Miller).
If only they'd known
the old man was insane,
Dreaming the dreams of a serial killer.
He asked them in for some
Christmas cheer,
Plied them with candy
and soda and beer.
They stayed and they laughed
till they almost cried,
Then choking on poison
they promptly died.

APPALACHIAN MARY

O wonder of wonders! O day so lucky!
The Virgin Mary will visit Kentucky!
I hear an angel crying, "Hark!
See Mary's face in that twisted bark!"
"No—there she is!—and I'm no fool—
See her eyes in the swimming pool!"
"No, here! No, here! Come see it,
please—
Her folded hands in this
moldy cheese!"
"T-shirts! T-shirts! Buy souvenirs
Before the apparition disappears!"

THE 'POSSUM

Opossum along the refectory wall
licks the underside of discarded meat wrappers,
thin snout just fitting the oblong hole
 in a tipped beer can —
it has a furtive, mustache kind of life,
darting from shrub to shrub in lamplight.
It has a wife somewhere that barely tolerates it,
pink-skinned offspring it is too stingy to feed.
Its best game is to be pathetic and inoffensive,
to play dead, to feign an empty wallet,
to always arrive at the cusp of dinnertime,
to sidle up to one with those colorless eyes.
He's not quite bold enough to beg,
too timid to steal the rat's larder,
content with grubs and offal that come easily.
He makes his home in a steam-pipe cellar
where other albino night things dominate.
He is the lowest of the low, for even they
cannot quite think of what they should call him.

TWENTY-YEAR NEW YORKER, AFTER HIS EXILE

Though I thought I had shed it,
this city has grown on me,
 my head-top soaring
 amid the clouds
 fingers outstretched
 toward the harbor goddess.
I am all of it —
 luster and greed,
 poet and dreamer,
 Helmsley and Trump
 lording it over the slums of Lorca,
 twin baby carriages
 with baby investment bankers
 scooting past squatter punks
 pierced and tattooed in rage,
 the towers clean and classic
 for an Age of Silver,
 the canyons squalid and smoking
 with phosphorescent agony.
I can be all and celebrate all,
 make my inkwell of the things
 you dare not think of:
 the crumbling infraworld
 of steam pipes that, bursting,
 cook office workers like lobsters,

the rivets and spikes that loosen
beneath the wheels of the subway,
the furtive shadow
that gives itself in doorways
to random takers.

This is Atlantis, Babel, Gomorrah and Tyre,
The Temple of Dendur, Tyrannosaur,
Ming, Ch'ing and Tang ceramic
Carnegie Hall, the Opera, the Symphony,
the thunder thump of *1812* in the Park
The nights of undulating ecstasy
sparking still in a hundred thousand eyes
in the city that will not sleep
and will not surrender its secret yearnings,
the pagan embrace of gods in underwear
towering over neon flesh amphitheatre
Times Square unsquaring America
into Dionysian dervish naked dancing.

I am the weed lot strewn with mattress springs,
the chaste fountains of Lincoln Center,
the pride of the library lions on Fifth Avenue.
long-legged Athena strides here in the sunlight—
behind her, a crack Medusa beckoning.

Forward or backward? Where will this city go?
Where its inhabitants?

Jack hammers and dynamite
remake my countenance,
revise my profile.

I am always fleeing this city to save my soul.
I am always coming back
to make it anew in marble.

REVELATIONS

as out of the burning bush
the meteor's heart
the hieroglyph
the tablet
spoke god

it said
I am the sum of all that is

I have never
 written a book
 dictated a law
 taken a wife
 sired son or angel.
I do not answer plea or prayer.

love whom you may.
eat what you must.
the planet is yours,
 stars too
if you can reach them

but neither out
nor inward seek me.
I am not at the Pole Star
turning orbs mechanical.
I have no wish to visit your dreams.

I am and will be a mystery,
the riddle between zero and unity.
How could death bring you to me
when you cannot discern me now?

Go, now, and tell your brethren
that god's wish
is to be left alone.
I have spoken
and will not speak
again.

ARABESQUES ON THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

1
Bad Dingo rides
the Staten Island ferry
dusk till dawn,
clinging to rail
nestling an all-night
tumescence,
hard at the sight
of the robed lady,
 vast,
unapproachable.

He's stalking her,
biding his time.
Some night
 there'd be a fog,
 a power failure.
He'd come up behind her,
 prodding the small
 of her spine
with his imperious knife,
jostling her bronze buttocks
with his ardent flesh prod.
She'd drop the tablet;
 the torch would sputter.
He'd push her off her pedestal.
Bad Dingo would give it to her good
 the way he did to all the white ladies
 in parks and stairways
 and subway cars.
This would be the rape of all rapes,
 the pinnacle of his career,
 the ultimate boast
"See that toppled goddess
 in the harbor —
she ain't so proud now
since someone had her,
 made her moan.
Bad Dingo had her,
 stuck it to the Statue,
white lady Liberty!"

2

In Chinatown,
Mrs. Wang mounts
a quiet rebellion
against the ways of the elders:

She has done all
her mother has asked her:
married the boy
 the stars ordained,
bore sons and daughters
 in regular order
burned joss and incense
 at every altar
 sending ghost gold and peaches,
 phantom cars and televisions
 Hong Kong Hell dollars
 to the teeming, greedy dead.

Now her husband travels,
 has mistresses, won't talk
 about his gambling.
Her children are gone
 married to foreign devils.
Her round-eyed grandchildren
 won't learn Mandarin,
 won't send joss riches
 to her when she is dead.

Now she becomes a whirlwind:
She sells her jade and porcelain,
cleans out her savings account,
buys an airline ticket
for San Francisco —
from there, who knows?

She pawns the statuette
of pearly white Kuan-Yin,
the Goddess of Mercy
whose only blessing
was endless childbirth
and washing and ironing.
On a whim she buys another
to take its place at her bedside:
a foot-high Statue of Liberty
with batteries and glowing torch

she leaves it for her husband,
her wedding ring
on its spiky crown

3

Today two New York titans
switch places:

A grumpy Green Liberty
strides up Fifth Avenue,
crushing pedestrians in verdigris.
Her sandaled feet
send buses flying,
kiosks shattering.

Her great head turns
among the office towers.
She reaches in,
pulls screaming executives
through razor edge panes,
undresses them
with her copper fingers,
discards them to the pavement
twenty stories below.

The man she wants
is not among them. He's got
to be blond, and a screamer,
a yielding but unwilling male
under her stern metallic nails.

Uptown, she finds him:
a curly-haired messenger,
cups him in her palm,
drops her tablet,
rolls up her sleeves
and starts the painful ascent
of the Empire State Building.

Downtown
on Liberty Island
King Kong wields a torch,
incinerating all passing freighters,
capsizing the passenger ships.
He hurls great boulders skyward,
picking off airplanes one by one.
He is guarding the harbor now.
He is a real American
and he knows his business:
Stay out.

 Go home.
 No foreigners
allowed.

QUACK

No wonder you're depressed
with all those demons in you.
Just take this pill
 stare into the light
till you're very sleepy
 very sleepy
 very . . .

The Devil's there,
(I knew it!)
got his talons in you
ever since the funeral
you don't remember
when you went face down
into an open grave

Another demon got in
when your daddy raped you
on your seventh birthday
(of course you can't remember
but you will)

you have three bad sisters
all sharing your psyche
each taking a turn
at making your life a ruin
(your mother aborted them
so their souls moved in
to be near you)

This is going to take
one hell of an exorcism.
Last session I discovered
an animal possession—
no, nothing awful,
a harmless duck
who never migrated
when death took him,
but we'll have to evict him
down to the last feather.
Good thing you have insurance.

Those Angels chattering
in Aramaic
are quite a nuisance
when you talk in your sleep,
came in when the nuns
did that awful thing to you
you say you can't remember.

We'll need a specialist
to clear them out.

Don't even consider suicide.
There's so much more
you need to remember:
the Montana Satanists,
the livestock orgies,
your uncles' lewdness,
that early miscarriage
you keep on repressing.

I count a hundred
and twenty inside you.
Ten dozen personalities,
all of them neurotic.
You're one for the journals,
more characters together
than all of Dostoyevsky.

Sign here, and here, and here.
Use each of your names—
that's S-A-T-A-N,
an "x" for the duck will do.
Aside from the drugs
and the hypnotic sessions
we'll have group therapy
to iron things out
among the lot of you.
(Blue Cross alone
will spring for a hundred thousand.
God, I love psychiatry!)

BOSTON LUNCH COUNTER

The chili has no beans.
The salad has no greens.
The pumpkin's rotten.
The chef's forgotten
how to make chicken tarragon,
and to wash
 after using the john.
The flies are delighted.
Two rats have been sighted.
(That's bad, for you see,
there used to be three!)

GUTENBERG'S HELPER

*On the rediscovery of the
formula for cleaning types and
presses, c. 1456**

Johannes Gutenberg, my master
would vouch for me, were he
alive to honor my telling.
I saw the first white sheets,
limp and virginal,
pressed wet against the type,
those brooding Latin letters
bound in like bees
in a leaden hive.

I watched them turn
the patient screw
that wedded the inked form
to the hand-made paper,
then peel away the miracle—
God's Bible in pristine text,
a monk's month of lettering
passed off in the blink of an eye.
Hard work it was:
hundreds of letters and pairs of letters
to pick and sort and reassemble;
the thrill of firing the furnace,
casting the molten lead
to *a*'s and *e*'s and *æ*'s.

They called him a madman,
impractical, a dreamer,
but when we finished,
from alpha of Genesis
to omega of Revelations,
a song and a cheer burst forth
from the humble shop in Mainz.

You will not find my name
in the annals of the printing art.
I was the merest boy,
not an apprentice, even.
I was not paid a pfennig,
but there is something of me
in every page of Gutenberg.
Ink, like blood, is thicker than water.
Old type must shed its black
or red ink scab
before another page
can be assembled.

So I was there
to make the great Elixir,
the secret noxious solvent
to clean the type
and the inking balls.

I was *Wasser Johann*,
he of the great bladder.
Free beer they gave me,
a barrel of ale
at my disposal.
Daily my personal springs
replenished the reservoir
of pungent fluid.

I was the flood
overtaking Noah;
an ague overcame me
to turn my Nile
Mosaic red;
I screamed one day
as my kidneys parted
for the passage of Israel;
mine the waters
of Babylon, of Nineveh.
I'm a modest man, really!
It's not too much to say
there'd be no Gutenberg
without his *Wasser Johann*!

*Preparation of the leather so it would accept ink required the skin to be soaked in urine and squeezed out a number of times. ... After a day's printing, the leather was removed from the balls and soaked overnight in urine to keep it supple. Washing up the type after the form was printed also relied on the ever-present yellow liquid, creating a latrine-like stench in early print shops that one can only imagine must have helped keep the secret of the 'black arts' secret." —Randy Silverman, "The Origin of Printer's Ink," *Graphic Arts Journal*, April 1994.

NEMESIS

i

If you are Cobra,
King of Death,
then I am Mongoose.
Slither away!

If you are Lion,
slaying all,
I am the Jackal
who steals your prey.

ii

If you are Danger,
stealing sleep,
I am Pleasure,
there till dawn.

If you are Martyr,
killing for God,
I am the Ifrit
who leads you on.

iii

If all your Ends
are justified,
I am the Means.
Ignore the blood.

If you are Noah,
saving beasts,
forget the people.
I am the Flood.

iv

If you are Lot's wife,
looking back,
I am Sodom,
still calling you.

If you are Caesar,
dead in Rome,
I, Queen of Egypt,
am weeping, too.

THE STERILE SQUASH

One glance from Mrs. Trog
and my porch vine withers!
This hump-back widow
has the evil eye for sure.
She has no time
to change a light bulb,
but can linger here to stare
at the florid blossoms
of the squash I've nurtured,
spilling from pot
across the porch rail,
clinging to cracks
in the paved-over yard.
One by one she darts them
with her steel-gray orbs,
her kerchief twitching
over her rigid coif.
The fat orange blossoms
quiver with fear,
the florid leaves
brown at the edges.

These vines will be spinsters, now.
No bees will come and play here;
only winged wasps
like nattering nuns
will hover, warning away
all pollinating visitors.
Sunlight! slant away!
Nor'easter! bring on
the rotting microbes.
This garden is cursed!

A block away,
in her darkened house,
my landlady drinks tea,
smiles at a dusty vase
of plastic roses,
beside the urn
of unremembered ashes.

VERMONT IMAGES

for Don and Laura

1

The trees are everywhere,
straight as arrows.
The rocks abound,
sharp-edged for tomahawks,
or smooth for grindstones.
The sky is screaming
with warrior clouds.

How sad to see
the abject Abenaki
joined by their blond
half-children,
dancing a pow-wow
in a college gymnasium,
unseen by sun
and cloud and badger,
ringed by vendors
of New Age regalia.

Do I see angry Manitous
at the wood's edge,
turning their backs
on this shabby magic?

2

The year has expired
on the mountain slopes.
Blueberry bush
with mottled leaves,
unclaimed fruit
blue-back and shriveled.
A solitary grasshopper
poised on a branch
outliving his welcome
as frost approaches.
Whose woods these are —
black cherry and beech,
white pine and alder —
Frost's poems posted
where paths converge —
lines to read aloud and ponder —
as the trees mark their places,
reseed their tribes.

Trunks trooped like ranks
of opposing armies,
ready to flag
in crimson, yellow,
or green-brown camouflage.
We are peaceable,
preferring tree-bark solitude
to the world's wars —
but look! seed bullets fly
at rival mountains —
squirrels scavenging
the hand grenade pine cones.
Seed pods fly parachute
into the helpless valley.
Every seed covets
the empty upland pasture,
life against life
for a little space,
a piece of sun,
a root in the rocky soil.

3

Black crows descend
upon a field of pumpkins,
claws down on frost-
fringed globes,

then corveaux rampant
on golden orbs,
right claws raised,
right wings extended

flock falling everywhere,
yet each upon
his chosen fruit
assumes the same
athletic pose.

Is this the way of Wotan?
Will they go off in threes,
in perfect formation,
swift as a dream,
a premonition,

casting their shadows
upon the doomed,
a flying scythe
hastening with names
to the Lord of the Dead

three ravens fly
for every death, they say,
their caws identical
to rip a soul
from its casing
(like seeds they crave
at the heart of pumpkins).

4
Mist-shrouded mountains.
Alders,
upland pastures with
stubbles of harvested cornfields.
Birch skeletons
on the dark slopes,
inverted white thunderbolts
as though the earth
would chide the sky
for its acid rain weeping.
Mist rises like steam
from pastures,
yesterday's sun-heat
hoarded by wheat root,
reluctant radiant
this rocky ground.
Tiny red leaves of maple –
explosive love letters
inscribed at night
like Tatiana's declaration
to haughty Onegin.
The missives are everywhere.
The trees are expiring
in their adolescent
passion.
Letters unread,
mocked by the wind,
crisping to unintelligible
wrinkles as winter comes.

How the earth
and all its tenants
yearn for embracing —

for a harvest this once,
without reaping
for an October that lingers
till springtime,
banishing in pumpkin splendor
the sad, drear days of solstice.

DEAD PRINCESS

Not huntress, but hunted
Not chasing the antler'd stag
but run down like the fallow doe
Not arrows, but flashbulb quivers
fell you, hands reach
to seize your garlands,
tear some trophy
from your dying.

Not princess, and not yet goddess —
Your temple a marble tomb,
an island inaccessible.

Gamekeepers cross
in a humble rowboat,
leave flowers for you
as at an altar

London becomes a pagan festival,
where every living flower is cut
and laid amid tears & sobbing
as if to affirm in desiccation
that all must die,
that bloom once cut
is never resurrected,
no matter how many requiems.

Proud state that claimed permit
from Jove
to trample the far horizon
calls now for this mere mortal
to be sublimed at once to temples:
grave and grove and mourning day,
sacred to Diana.

CAVE DEUM

For once, dyslexia is truth.
The letters dance
and re-arrange
to make mundane
and seldom-heeded messages
an egg-hatch of deeper meaning.

CURB YOUR GOD!
the sidewalk placard urges
(I look in the gutter
for feathers or angel hair.)

THIS BUILDING PATROLLED
BY VICIOUS GUARD GOD!

Icon of Doberman
red-eyed and drooling
on a wooden sign.

BEWARE OF GOD
the windows scream out
behind geranium pots,
crisscross of burglar gates,
a holy muzzle waiting
for the hapless intruder.

A little mercy, at least, in
NO GODS ALLOWED
(EXCEPT FOR SEEING-EYE GODS)
BY ORDER OF NYC
HEALTH DEPT.

A god chases a cat,
another god barks,
while yet another genuflects
to anoint a hydrant.

What revelations emerge!
See how the citizens
dragged by their leashes
walk round and round,
pulled by a howling caprice,
a quadruped perspective,
losing the tug of war,
always back home
with the same god they left with.

Some use their gods
to fend off strangers,
some train their gods
to fetch or kill.

I see it now,
the truth made plain.
Oh, my Dog, how can I tell them?

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Shakespeare's Gay Bar
on Christopher Street—
now there's a roster of royalty!
That dark one, brooding, military,
wins sympathy with his battle scar,
then smothers his lovers with a pillow.
Richard the Second's been had
by absolutely everyone,
a poor, limp, passive thing.
Richard the Third is into dungeons.
Young Hal hangs out with Falstaff,
a chubby chaser.
Old Hal is a pompous bore,
gives speeches while inspecting
the troops.
Old Henry the Eighth
had dozens of lovers
(one hot season,
then off with their heads!)
There's poor old Lear
in his long underwear —
the Fool is always with him.
That's Danish Hamlet playing pool,
loon-crazy and going on
about his mother.
Titus Andronicus works in the kitchen
and does a mean stew.
Gloomy Macbeth, counting his change,
thinks the bartender has cheated him.
That spot-lit table aglow with gems,
false breasts and curls
and boy/girl charms
is throne tonight to Cleopatra,
black-eyed and shrill and sharp
as an asp,
waiting for Caesar, Mark Antony
or any Italian worth dying for.
Take your pick. They know their lines.
You need not seek an audience—
just be one.

ARTICLES OF FAITH

Things are in the saddle
And ride Mankind.
—Emerson

I will tell you of
a man, a horse, and a journey.
There are as many ways of telling it
as there are pearls in the sea.

The man lets go the reins.
The horse knows the way.
The end of the journey is predetermined.

The rider is mad
The horse is a fool.
They see the cliff, but cannot stop.

The horse thinks,
*There once was a man
who chose this journey,
but now he is dead.
I can go where I please,
but I choose to follow his footsteps.*

The man thinks The horse thinks
there is no horse there is no man

No journey, either,
since neither starting point
nor end exists.

The horse sees a mare,
the man a maiden.
In summer meadow frolicking
the journey is forgotten.

Spurs bite, whips sting:
the rider shows no mercy.
The famished horse
 plods on.
Water has been promised,
and a mountain of oats,
someday, at the end of the journey.

Fearful Fearful
that the horse that the man
 will choose another
rider horse
 he
shoots tramples
 his companion.

Alone in the desert now,
he has defended his honor,
fulfilled the Commandments.

The man sees The horse sees
 some good in
the horse. the man.
 He asks the other:

*Did you decree this journey?
What if there is no point
except the journeying?*

*What if we have
 already arrived?*

FROM SALEM FORWARD

for Matthew

how the daughters turned
 against the midwives
 whose wrinkled hands
 had swaddled them,
denouncing them
as Satan's mistresses

how the five-year-olds
squirmed on the video,
prompted and prodded
until they told of teachers
who flew through the air,
led them through tunnels,
touched them
down there

how a mother intoned:
*and your daddy beat you
daddy beat you*

beat you
beat

as the day approached
for the custody battle

until the coin of the realm
among the Salem girls,
tot and prosecutor,
mother and child
becomes the adder's kiss

and what never was
becomes what is.
How long does it take
for a lie to be unremembered?

Some Pilgrim girls confessed
to the pious fraud,
shunned, unwed,
to die unshriven.

Brainwashed children
will scream their way
from nightmare to dawn,
a world without horns
and dark penetrations.

The son will judge the mother
and walk to his father's side.

MISER

An hour has passed since I saw it.
There. In the middle of the floor.
Gleaming beside the coffee table.
Right below the soda and wine.
Why doesn't anyone see it?
Back and forth they go.
Talking, reading their poems.
The men. The women.
They fill their glasses, tumble ice.
Their merry eyes are everywhere
except that place on the carpet.
What's wrong with them?
Don't they know the value of money?
A whole quarter. Just lying there!
Four of them make a dollar.
Pick up twenty —
 that's a five dollar bill.
Forty make ten dollars. There!
Another one just passed it by.
Oh! under a shoe now. Out again.
So bright. Why can't they see it?
My glass is empty now.
Not too soon to be thirsty again,
especially when it's free.
I could just walk over.
Bend down to the table.
Fill the glass. Take the ice.
Put the glass down for a moment.
That's it. I'm doing it.
Ice first, but not too much.
You get more to drink
 with less ice.

Now take a breath.
That's it. I'm doing it.
Reach down. Take the quarter.
There! One smooth motion,
into the palm, into the pocket.
I did it. I got it.
No one saw.
Twelve in the room
and no one said
Hey, that's mine.
A whole quarter.
My lucky day.

HANDICAPPED GAME PRESERVE, WEST VIRGINIA

Deep in the brush
an undulating torso
in a red plaid hunting jacket
pauses, a half-
formed hand
thrusts knife
into a groundhog.
They prey is small,
the blood
a demitasse of crimson,
the tiny heart,
fast lungs palpitating,
astonished eyes
reflecting the hunter's
thalidomide smile.

A half-mile in,
another hunter waits,
warm in his cap,
his leather Harley jacket.
He has come a long way
for a man in a wheelchair —
not even motorized —
came the hard way
up an incline,
through the trees.
If he waits quietly,
a deer will come,
a squirrel will stop
within his cross-hairs.

His wheels are locked,
but still the gunshots
may topple him.
he doesn't mind the challenge,
can call for help
on the cellular phone.
He'll never track
the things he shoots,
nor take a deer
home for the freezer.
That's not the point.

He hates the fleet deer,
the nimble squirrel,
the agile raccoon.
Make four legs three!

Maim them!

Make them limp!
Fill the forest with
scarred, stumped animals!

HOUSECLEANING

Three empty sparrow nests inside
my air conditioner!
Like something out of Breughel,
beaks and claws protruding
from the louvre vents,
straw everywhere & eggshells,
feathers and down and wing-dust
(no wonder I wheezed and sneezed
all summer!)

How proud they must have been
of their impregnable shelter,
battleship gray,
out of the hawk's eye,
beyond the talon snap
of the fiercest raptor.

They have raised their young
and gone, flown free
among the lindens and sycamores,

chirping defiance at my landlady
who long ago chopped
her rowans and flowering pears,
paved over her garden front.

"Trees no good," says Mrs. Trog.
"Plant trees and you get birds.
Birds and squirrels. No good.
No good."

Last night I dreamt of moving
to a Tarzan tree-house,
cool and lush amid the vines,
birdsong everywhere,
squirrels welcome.

We pay our rent with acorns
and our house grows bigger,
wider with each passing year.

LETHE

Deliver the fruit of the garden of Lethe!
White horse of sleep at home
in his stable,
mane of coca and hemp leaves,
wreathed in poppies, breathing a cloud
of Hypnos' hashish, feeding on hay
mixed with ergot and mushroom brew.

White horse of sleep
draws a black coach through city streets,
pauses in alleyways,
lingers at school yards.
Bags and vials, syringes and pipes
scatter like toys as the occupant
lures with promises of instant joy.
Boys fight for the offered prizes.

Mothers shake fists from fire escapes
as the white horse passes.
On curbs, on broken bench,
in frame of rotted door,
the sleepers have fallen.
Others fans out to sell their treasures.
There is never enough.
Someone must always pay,
even here where no one has money,
or someone must die.

White horse pulling
a great stone Juggernaut,
iron wheels burred
with shattered bones
grindstone steam roller
making lithography of skin,
cheekbones and brows,
limb and arm of backbone
spread out like a map,
dreamers lives snuffed
as though they had never
been.

The mothers' sons
are crimson smears on the sidewalk.
Mica glints mockingly
as blood dries to flaking rust.

At the fashionable club
the white stretch limos
arrive and depart,
arrive and depart.
A movie star falls to the pavement,
dead of an overdose
at twenty-two.
Inside, the revelers
compare the merits
of various white powders.
No Juggernaut comes for them.
The white limo doubles
as a hearse when necessary.

They are politically correct,
vegetarian, even.
They are supporting
the produce
of the endangered rain forest.
Nothing could possibly hurt them.

THE ISLES OF GREECE

PROMETHEUS ON FIFTH AVENUE

One kind of hero draws no veils,
no fainting ladies, hides not
in St. Patrick's, binds no virgins
to their rosaries,
shuns candles and goes naked
down Fifth Avenue.
Bronze fleshed, he walks
unnoticed, sees the morning
flush of fire on windows half-mile high,
ignored by cold-eyed men,
oblivious girls, the passing eyes in
buses bent on headlines, paperbacks.
At the peak of mob-time, he stops.
He and the sun flash gold together.

Here's Rockefeller Center.
Above a pagan tree a-lit with lights,
atop an ice rink decked with world-flags
he is astonished to see *himself*.
One gleaming statue rises, words
in stone to celebrate Prometheus
are carved behind/

Two gaudy spinsters
cross the plaza, way to Mass. One frowns
at the sculpture's nakedness, its leap
from earth to challenge the heavens.
"I think it's not heroic at all,
why put that nude and vulgar carving
right over our beautiful Christmas tree?
I mean, if it's a god, isn't a god
supposed to suffer?"

"He has always been there, my dear,"
the platinum harpy rejoined,
"That's Saint Prome-something.
They nailed him good, right onto a rock,
left him for birds in the sun."

"How dreadful!

Then he died?"

"I think he suffered a very long time."

"Why, why?"

"Why?"

"Why did he?"

What did he do?”

“He died for someone’s
sins, I’m sure. Just like Jesus. I read it all
in *The Book of Saints*, with the Sisters.
There’s just no other way to be a hero.”

“Saint Prome? Saint Prome? I think it’s
coming back to me now, Matilda.
I think they named an orphan’s home or —”

Running, he

fled the place, flew on a swift wind
to Caucasus, climbed the purple mountain,
stood high on a snowcap, blasted by wind,
greeted the deathless vengeance of Zeus, hurled
himself from cliff to cliff, rose unwounded,
cursed, crying the wrath of the last hero.

PROMETHEAN EPILOGUE

Feast worthy of Titans!
Put on the cauldron!
Stoke the flames!
Onions! Potatoes! Yams and bread!
Invite the guests
to the hall of Prometheus.
We’re having
vulture with stuffing!
Come, tear its breast —
there’s always more —
a hundred years of rending
for every year it tore at *me*,
drumsticks unending,
a cornucopia of gizzards.
The bird shall feed a legion,
and a legion’s heirs.
I’ll even sell its flesh to mortals,
unknown nuggets of poultry,
dropped by the ton
under the golden arch
of sweet revenge.

ATHENA AND MEDUSA

She may be wise, that owl-eyed
Athena, but she's Greek
and steeped in spite. Her wrath
against Medusa just has no end.

It's not enough to have
the Gorgon's never-dying head
(thank you, brave Perseus!)
stuck to her shield,

not enough to make her watch
(she who so adores male beauty)
as handsome warriors petrify
on seeing her serpent-
wreathed visage

not enough
that her parched lips thirst,
her black tongue
 aches for nourishment,
while wine and victuals
pass through her mouth
into a sodden heap
at neck-base

not enough that the name
 Gorgon
makes women shudder
and men avert their eyes
lest the thing they crave,
 hard upon soft,
becomes the stillness
 of rigor mortis,
an eternity of marble

not enough that mind
 should suffer:
she's shipped Medusa's body,
pure as alabaster,
(no hint of monster about her
from dusk till dawn)
to a brothel in Smyrna
where drunken sailors,
for a few spare drachmas
pile into a dark room
to hump a headless maiden

not enough that midwives
 come annually
to deliver up her monsters —
winged things with Turkish
eyebrows, egg-shell
objects that only Harpies
would dare to hatch

Oh! not enough! and all for spite,
for that day she found Poseidon,
long-limbed and sleek
entwined in the Gorgona's arms,
in the dark confines
 of Athena's temple —
buttocks and legs and bellies
spread on her very altar!

(Is there no place the gods will not go
to have their way with a woman?)

She could not punish
her father's brother-god,
but she seized Medusa,
twisted her golden, braided hair
into a gnarl of hissing serpents,
cursed her with the petrifying glare,
wild eyed, leering, black-tongued —

her body goddess-fair by night,
by day a winged monstrosity,
rough skinned with
 overlapping scales,
arms ending in razor talons.

*Go to some island unknown to me,
Athena cursed her,
Go hide your shame and pray
 I forget you.
Conceal yourself in sea caves,
or sink-hole chasms where sunlight
will not reveal you to men or gods.*

For this, her wounded vanity,
five thousand years at least
Medusa paid, and pays, her debt
to Wisdom's darker side,
implacable and cruel.

BURNT OFFERING

Anakreon, to Harmodius:

About that letter, the fervent one,
the one you hinted you'd sell when I die,
 mocking its shaking autograph,
 intimating the scandal —
I know your threat is false.
Last night in my sleep I saw
your hands on a crumpled scroll,
the thrust toward a sputtering lamp,
the tiny screams as my words,
my awesome and unrepeatable vows,
my praise of your unworthy beauty,
collapsed and withered
 in a blue-green flame.
You brushed the ashes from your
 gentle arms —
they scattered, mingled with dust motes,
rode a moonbeam in a moment's leap
toward ghosthood, then dissipated.
This time, no Phoenix rose.
He who burns love letters
 offends the Gods.
You dare undo my holy madness
 with little papyrus hecatombs?
They will sting you, my salamander
 syllables.
Try and love anyone now!
 Your sunken cheeks
and pale complexion will
 drive him away.
All will know you are pursued
 and haunted.
You will wish you had kept
 the living scroll
when you see how Love,
 an ash-faced Fury,
comes back from Acheron,
hungry, and needful, and unforgiving.

DIALOGUE

Harmodius to Anakreon:

Your latest scroll's unread,
the seal's unbroken, too.
I send my servant hag
to hurl it through your window.
(How passers-by will laugh
to see a withered crone
scaling your garden wall —
they'll say Anakreon
now plunders graves
as well as cradles.)
Shamed now perhaps,
you'll stop those ardent letters.
Don't put me in your poems.
Don't ask me to read them,
don't pay to have them sung
at your next banqueting.
You're nothing but trouble for me.
You could be my uncle,
 my father, even —
so no more loving glances, ever!

Anakreon to Harmodius:

Cupid's bent arrows cannot return.
Cruel one, our secret is out.
My passion is over
before its egg could hatch.
I did not name you, or confess it.
You did not mind my admiration,
you did not mind my poems, even.
Now that your brass-faced vanity
refuses me and scorns my gifts,
I am not bound by modesty.
Henceforth I wear the badge of love
not in the heart-held lining
but on the sleeve for all to see.
Let people judge who is the baser fool:
I, the unloved lover, or you,
the worthless object of a great Desire!

PROMETHEUS CHAINED

after a painting by Riva Leviten

to be read with Beethoven's Prometheus Variations, Op 35
(sections of the poem alternating with the Variations)

1

The gods did not do this blasphemous thing:
the Titan banished to the mountain heights,
draped in iron chains to a platform of oak,
eyes closed, a shadowed hulk unseeing, hunched
like an animal in some hunter's cruel trap —

this deed was not the grim command of Zeus,
Poseidon did not stir from ocean trench;
Mars did not polish his shield, nor Athena hers.
Blame not jealous Hera, nor Vulcan's forge,
despite the dark treachery of metal work.

2

They did this. *They* put him here.
Those little creatures with the monkey eyes,
the ones with all those fingers fluttering.
Someone said he made them from lumps of clay.
Prometheus didn't. He found them scampering
from tree to cavern to waterhole,
a fornicating horde of unformed talents,
flea-bitten, screeching, night-chilled,
terrified of lion, wolf and vulture.
They ate whatever the earth provided
or whatever dead thing no jackal touched.
They sang as they shared their pitiful raw feasts.

3

Some mornings one of them did not awaken.
Some mornings an infant stopped breathing.
They ate their dead silently
 so the vultures would not get them.
Those were the days they did not sing.
They walked about silently
gnawing on bones whose shapes
 disturbed them.

4

The solitary Titan,
 outcast among the gods
 and last of his kind,
 sat quietly and watched them.
They took him for part
 of the landscape, a hillock,

a man-shaped terrain
in whose shadow they rested.

He watched their women,
their young at play,
their ritual matings
en masse beneath the moonlight.
The songs they sang
the skin drum rhythming —
the struggle toward harmony
pleased him.

5

Prometheus considered the gods—
their arrogance, amours, wars and jealousies,
the way they fought for dominance —
no room for Titans in their universe! —

and he had thought:
there is as much god in these monkey-things
as there is monkeyness among the gods.

And so the great idea had come to him.

6

Cursed be the day he conceived of it!
Whatever was he thinking?
He made himself visible to all of them.
One morning the sheltering hill
bent down, and opened its two
great blue eyes,
forming a face and two extended hands,
bridging their language of grunts and nouns
with the pure Attic of Olympus.

They ran screaming. He waited.
He called them back in mother words,
fatherly admonitions. He shook an oak
until the acorns covered the ground.
He pulled up edible tubers, found fruit,
laid forth the bounty of things
it was safe to eat.

One by one, they came. They tasted,
ate and slept as he gently taught them
what of the earth was wholesome
and what dark herbs belonged
in Pluto's garden.

He showed them the seed, and the seedling,
and the furrow, and the harvest watch,
and the sweet sunrise of waving grain.

7

If he had left it there,
they would have been but farming apes.
But oh, no, he could not bear their hunger,
their night fears, their mindless worship
of sun and moon and lights in the sky.

So he took one boy aside,
taught him all the words of the gods,
and showed him how to make a fire.

But what is fire for? the stripling asked,
trembling at the torch he held.
Prometheus answered:

*That which cannot be eaten
fire transforms into food.
The beast you now fear
will fear you when it sees the flame.
The other secrets, you will discover.*

8

The memory turns to gall
as the Titan shifts in his chains.
Fire he gave them forged those chains.
Fire he gave them melted the tar
with which they blacked his bronzed limbs.
Now they are spewing oil
from Pluto's kingdom;
they mine heavy metals
that even Vulcan will not touch.
They will ascend the mountain soon
with gasoline, and napalm,
or something ominous
they call a "thermonuclear device"
to dispose of him once and for all.

Presumptuous monkeys!
they claim they have pried apart
the indivisible atom!

9

Weekly, the humans' Grand Inquisitor
comes to call on Prometheus,
a little man in self-important robes,
like a portable black thunderstorm.

His hawk-face is blue with ague.
(Pestilence is everywhere in their cities now.)

He comes to inspect and tighten the chains.
He will make his report to the Ministry,
and assure the Faithful
that the blaspheming Titan
will soon be no threat —
after the final solution, that is.

10

The Titan ignores the blue-faced visitor.
He knows him well, but will not deign
to lift an eyelid for such a devious gnat.
This is the one who came for wisdom,
asked who the gods were and how they came to be.
Prometheus mistook him
for a fellow seeker.
He asked how the gods as the Titan knew them
meshed with the gods the monkey-men
had recently invented.

The Titan revealed
his own discovered truth:
that the gods are fools and rogues.
That they are only gods because bigger,
stronger, and older than others. That Titans
had come earlier and been defeated
(all but one!). And before the Titans,
others, world-spanning, time-defying
entities who hurled whole galaxies
at one another in eons-long struggles —

insect gods, reptile gods, unspeakable beings
with tentacles and eye-stalks, leaping
from space to space and age to age,
and behind all gods the crawling Chaos,
which only the great *I am* of life-force
prevents from devouring it all —

He revealed this, and more —
of thirty-two so-called creations
that rescued life from nothingness —
and every one followed
by a madhouse of life,
striving up from mud to the stars.

11

When the human repeated
the Titan's theogeny
to his assembled ministers
they shouted *Blasphemy! Blasphemy!*
They came from all over —
the learned men
whose fathers he had taught to read —
they recited proofs
 in a language but recently forgotten
that their *own* god — a monkey-Zeus —
had made the earth just recently,
and only for the use of monkeys —
especially for the monkeys
 who believed in monkey-Zeus.
(All others were to be put to death,
 or made to serve in silence.)

12

An eagle arrives,
lights on the Titan's
massive forearm.
Prometheus laughs bitterly.
"That old device again?
Fine for abducting boys.
Or have you come to add feathers
to my indignity?"

The eagle says nothing.
Its glacier eyes pierce him.
He tries in vain
to throw off the raptor.

"So, Zeus, you come to gloat!
Acorn-eater,
Cronus's vomit-ball —
go back to Rhea's nipples,
or hide behind Hera."

"Proud to the last,"
the eagle finally responds
in a parody of god-voice.
"Did I not warn you
about the human kind?"

"I see your hand in this,"
Prometheus replies,
"filling their little minds
with holy madness.
I taught them the way of knowledge."

“We scarcely noticed them,”
the eagle insists,
“until their arrogant prayers
polluted the atmosphere.
They have a plaything god
who forbids other gods
their proper commerce.”

“They have gone mad,”
Prometheus conjectures.
“Their little monkey-god
was bad enough
with his orangutan beard
and stone tablets.

“Now, according to some,
he found a virgin,
begot a son on her,
sent the son down
to teach the humans.
They killed him.
Then they felt sorry
and decided he rose
from the dead.
Then the son promised
to bring them *all* back
if they worshipped him —

“There goes Hades!”
Zeus laughs.

“Each time the little
Inquisitor comes,
the story has changed,”
Prometheus complains.
“Finally they called me
to make peace among them.
I went, down there
where their great stone towers
follow both rivers
to the sea.
I heard them. I drank
their new-pressed wine
(good as yours on Olympus, too!)
Their sermons made me sleepy,
or so I thought.
They had drugged my wine!

“Days later I woke
to this prison of chains.

Then came the tar —
they hauled it by the truckload.
Three times they have tried
to burn me to cinders.
Three times my Mother the Earth
has healed me.”

13

“Should we open Tartarus,”
I wonder?”
old Zeus proposes.
“One swipe of a berserker Titan,
your elder, snake-footed brother,
and their cities would topple.
Or we could send Poseidon’s Kraaken —
a million nightmare tentacles
and one consuming beak
with appetite enough
to consume their species —“

“No!” says Prometheus.
“Much as I hate some of them,
the best of them are better than us.
No! listen, or swoop below and look!
Their towers gleam in the sunrise.
Bridges, aqueducts, fountains and spires,
women in jeweled splendor,
boys in the glory of their summer games,
the poets, the orchestra of viols,
flutes and trumpets. For every word
I taught them they invented twenty.
They can stride the planet,
take the stars.
I want to see
what they do next.”

14

Swirling black clouds
cascade from nearby mountain ranges,
a storm of discord, woe, suspicion,
a hurricane of malice and pestilence,
a bee-swarm of lies, boils and tumors,
wing-dust of a generation of Harpies.
He sees it hovering —
he knows that only he
stands between it and the city —

hag-things with multi-jointed
spindle legs, splayed knees,
elbows and ankles
at insane angles,
broom down
with their companion rooks
to hurl their curses at the earth.

This is Pandora's cloud,
a convocation of evils
all destined to make misery
of so short a life,
pain-edge creeping
just past the prime,
making old age
deaf, blind and crippled.
No wonder the poor creatures
go mad in droves!

Zeus knows the cloud —
he fluttered down
from out its fore-wind.
“Let's see how god-like they'll be,”
he taunts the Titan,
“when their flesh erupts in boils,
when they watch their young wither,
and their parents revert to infancy.”

15
“You cannot help them,”
the Olympian boasts.
“Their little lives are like fireflies.
And now their higher wisdom
tells them to kill you!”

“A long list of gods
has tried to kill me,”
Prometheus replies.
“I am the last Titan
now that poor Atlas
has lain down petrified.
Perhaps my race is run,
but I have not yet tired of it.
Can you say as much,
you moth-eaten god?”

16

As the eagle flies off
to the comforts of Olympus,
the promise of apples
that grant eternal life,
Prometheus hurls
his final taunt.

“They’ll learn the truth
that will empty your temples.
Aphrodite’s wrinkles
will crack her marble likeness.
Apollo and Mars, Hephaestus,
Poseidon will all be the stock
of laughing school-boys.

“I go to cinders and funeral smoke,
but I take all of you with me,
household gods of a dead race!

“There *were* no gods.
There *are* no gods.
There are only
monsters.”

THE DEATH OF QUEEN JOCASTA: A NEW SCENE FOR SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS REX

SCENE: The Royal Bedchamber in Thebes. A bed with bedclothes and pillows at center stage. The Chorus of Old Women enter individually from the edges of the stage and meet at the front and center of the stage.

WOMAN 1

I did not think to find you here today.
Your house was dark. The plague is everywhere.

WOMAN 2

Apollo—or Hekate—has spared us,
sister, but all around us dead are piled
in doorways or stacked like logs for burning.
Here comes my brother's wife. Thank Zeus you are
still among the living! What news bring you?

WOMAN 3

We are called to the palace. Death is not there,
but worse than Death. Chasing his oracles,
and running from oracles past, our king,
sharp-witted Oedipus who beat the Sphinx,
has brought down horrors on Thebes.

CHORUS

We knew it!

Cursed is our city with plague and starving.
Help us, sisters, to bring an end to it!

WOMAN 1

Shepherds and farmers come not to market.
The fisherman, spying our funerals,
the columns of smoke and the circling vultures,
avoid us and sell their catch in Athens.

WOMAN 2

Disaster begins in the royal house,
and all the people are doomed to suffer.

WOMAN 3

But why are we summoned? Keep to our homes,
I say, until the Lord of Death passes!

CHORUS

Cursed is our city with plague and starving.
Help us, sisters, to put an end to it!

WOMAN 1

Listen! Oedipus stands stunned. The murder
of old King Laius is now unraveled.

The blight of unsolved crime brought us the plague
as punishment from the angry Furies.
The killer of the old king ... *is* the King,
who came a stranger to our grieving Thebes
and wed the widowed Queen Jocasta.

WOMAN 2

But Oedipus and she are happily wed,
blessed by the gods with four inheritors.

WOMAN 3

The sorry history of King Laius
has been told and retold by the gossips.
But Oedipus killing Laius — not that!

WOMAN 2

So the gods knew the truth, and did nothing?

WOMAN 3

Have not many kings killed those before them?
Greece is full of tyrants, ripe for plucking.

WOMAN 1

There is more, sisters! Laius was hunting.
His escort knocked young Oedipus aside
to make way for the king's passage. In rage,
possessed by fury he could not explain,
Oedipus took sword and killed them all! All!
He never knew from their rustic attire
he had killed the king of Thebes! The gods knew,
fermenting their vengeance like vinegar.

Then Oedipus, saving the Thebans once
and for all from the dreaded Sphinx,
came to us. Shrouded Jocasta he took,
these twenty years our king, and her husband,
these years he lay with his victim's widow.

But here it is, Sisters: horror piles deep
on horror in this world, this serpents' nest:
Know now that killing Laius, Oedipus ...
has ...slain... his... *father*. And marrying her —

WOMAN 3

Laius, the father of Oedipus! Then...

CHORUS

Cursed is our city with plague and starving!

WOMAN 2

Jocasta is wed to her cast-off son,
the baby King Laius hurled from a cliff:
the one of whom the oracles warned him,
the king-killing son, wedding his mother!

CHORUS

Help us sisters, to bring an end to it.
We bow to you as eldest among us.

WOMAN 1

(looking from edge of stage)

They stand in horror within the palace:
Oedipus, Creon, nobles, messengers.
News spreads like a bee-hum outside the walls.
The sky is red with shame, the sea pauses
as though the very waves would shun the wharves.

WOMAN 2

Only Queen Jocasta is moving — look here!
Her long robe flutters amid the columns.
She comes! Her face is a mask of horror.

The Chorus withdraws to the edges of the stage and turn their backs to the center of the stage.

Enter Queen Jocasta, in disarray, her hair flying all about her, her robe disheveled. She hurls herself onto the bed at the center of the stage and tears at the bedclothes in fury and shame. She howls. The Chorus of Old Women emerges from the shadows and surrounds her.

CHORUS

Jocasta, Queen, Look up and attend us!

JOCASTA

What? All of you here? Old women of Thebes!
I did not ask for your counsel today.
How dare you intrude on my day of grief!

WOMAN 1

We have come, as is our right, to question.

WOMAN 2

Who is your son, and who your husband now?

WOMAN 3

And what will you do to placate the gods?

JOCASTA

I am just come from the court, from Creon,
my brother, and Oedipus, my — but how
can you be here already to taunt me?

CHORUS

Faster than falcons flies the bird of woe.

WOMAN 1

We watch and listen.

WOMAN 2

We who never sleep.

WOMAN 3

We who guard the morals of the city.

CHORUS

Sacred to Hera and us, is marriage.
Bound we are all to the proper customs,
without which men are beasts, and women, whores.

WOMAN 1

Jocasta, you are Queen, we the Elders.
You are bound to speak, and to speak truly,
by the laws of Thebes and our sisterhood.
Did not you dance with us on the mountain,
in those old rites no man may see, and live?
Are you not sworn to hear us, as always?
Consort of Laius, what was your duty?

JOCASTA

To Laius, nothing! You are women. What bond
can woman have to her son's murderer?
He took my first-born child. By the oracle
driven, he cast the healthy infant boy
I know not where. Some cliff or cavern.
Strong cords bound his ankles together
so the helpless babe could not elude
the lion, the wolf, the high-soaring eagle.
I thought him a tiny bleached skeleton
lying in some dark ravine, forgotten.
No grave, no stone, the very memory
erased as though I had never borne him!

WOMAN 1

Yet he lived. He grew. He came to your bed.

JOCASTA

How dare you accuse me now of knowing
what no one could have known of Oedipus?

CHORUS

How like *you* he looks! We guessed it! We knew!

WOMAN 1

Did you not see the stranger limping in,
when god-proud he saved the city and took
in a mere few days your fresh widow's shrouds,
and made of them your second bridal veil?
Where was your decency, Queen Jocasta?

JOCASTA

You hypocrites, you ate at my table!
Woman to woman I tell you this thing:
I knew King Laius dead, and wished him dead,
and I would have kissed the hand that killed him.
(She stops with horror at what she has just said.)
The gods ensorcel us — they make us speak,
until our words convict us of murder,
yet we did not kill — of lust, when never
a thought of anything but solitude
was what we wanted — and now of this thing
that no one could have imagined to be!

If I am bound to speak the truth, then hear!
I did not care to find the thieves who killed him.
I rejoiced in a murderer's murder.
In all the latter years of our marriage
I made the choice we all have right to make:
to bear the heartless man no children more.
I gave him death for death. Ointments I had
from Hekate's sisters, ground by moonlight.
You — you were the one who secured them!
(Woman 3 turns her head away in denial.)

You!

Some bitter herbs to resist his seed,
and some I used to expel his daughters,
his sons, his shriveled progeny I dropped
into a hole at the back of the garden.
They are still there. I do not regret them.
I wanted the line of Laius to end
with him — his death ended my misery.

WOMAN 2

So hasty a bond to the unknown youth
was unbecoming a widow. Laius
was bad, for you and for all the kingdom,
but you betrayed our women's dignity
to grovel at the feet of a stripling!

JOCASTA

Did I choose him? Chaste on my throne, all veiled
in widow's raiment I sat to greet him.
Thebes could not have a mere woman above it.
I all but gave in to Creon's ruling,
but many there were who did not trust him.
They used me, just as they used Oedipus.
The council of *men* made up the marriage.
In three days I was wed to the hero.
Where were you, old women, to speak for me?
You saw me, a queen in name, a plaything
for politics and the exchange of crowns.
There you sat at my second wedding feast,
your lewd eyes all over my groom's young face,
your gossips' fingers subtracting his age
from mine and laughing at my supposed luck.

WOMAN3

Did you never guess and dread the whole truth?
Speak now, Jocasta, to save your own life!

JOCASTA

The truth need never fear the light of day.
In premonitions only did I know it.
Waking the first morn in sun-rays, I spied
the hard scars upon his naked ankles.
He said he had always been thus. I shook
from head to foot in dread and denial,
and then the young man made love to me, my
shudders of fear gave way to deep desire,
and I vowed to never think it again.
Such bliss could only come with gods' consent.

WOMAN2

And you never again suspected him?

JOCASTA

Once I called him "my boy," and he fled me.
So we came to better bed-time names:
"Old man," he was, and I his "little girl."
And if I knew, within my secret heart
he was my son, it was my joy to love,
to bind him near me thus, as blood to blood.
He chose me. He wanted me. He loved me.
If you believe in gods, this was their work.
No man was ever more Aphrodite's slave,
nor any wife more awed by Hyperion,
for yes, to me, he was the sun and moon.

CHORUS

Taken in crime, they always cry, "Love, love, love!"
Taken in sin, "It was too dark to see!"

WOMAN1

You have all but confessed it. You knew him!
How could you bear his children, monster queen?

WOMAN2

Will you lie and wait for your grandson, too?

JOCASTA

With joy and dread I bore him those children.
Is it not thus with any woman? And
when I was shown Antigone's visage
wrapped in the royal swaddling cloth that morn
I said, "The gods sleep. This is no monster."

CHORUS

Lowest of women, you profane the gods!

JOCASTA

Look at my children, all four of them, look
at the eyes and brow of Eteocles
my son, our son, the son of Oedipus!
Watch Polynices, our other fair son
slay the fleet deer with a single arrow.
Look at my fair Antigone and say
that the gods have cursed us. Ismene, too,
our youngest daughter, and our dearest pearl.
How could the gods have blessed us in this guise
if they intended to blast and destroy?

WOMAN 3

Unnatural woman! The gods look down
and scorn you. Furies will hound your children
until they rot as unburied exiles,
unwelcome in any Attic-tongued city.
Dare you say we are unpunished in Thebes
when the streets are clogged with the dying?

JOCASTA

I am not an unnatural woman.
I yearn and love and bleed like all of you.
Do not believe those lying oracles.

WOMAN3

Your life is forfeit, Jocasta! Hera
has spoken from her dread throne. Hearthstones crack
and ovens eject their bread unheated,
nor brides nor grooms can consummate their vows,
nor even may the dead be buried, incense
falls down and fails to go up to heaven
so long as your marriage bed stains the earth.

JOCASTA

Get out of here! I curse you, hateful crones!

CHORUS

Your life is forfeit, Jocasta! Yield it!

JOCASTA

I am my children's mother!

WOMAN2

A vile womb
through which generations pass to and fro
like the open gates to the marketplace!
Now they'll all cry "Thebes! The Incest City,
Where father and daughter, mother and son,
brother and sister all sleep in one bed!"

CHORUS

Your life is forfeit, Jocasta! Yield it!

JOCASTA

Never! Your gods are a fraud. I hate them,
as I hate your hypocritical ways.

WOMAN1

(aside to WOMAN 2)

She neither repents nor dignifies death
by taking timely exit upon this world.
Hand me the rope and I'll do it myself!

WOMAN2

(aside to WOMAN 1)

Here, knot it well. We'll let her hang from there,
where that great beam runs over the ceiling.

JOCASTA

Get back, you childless crones! What right have you
to judge a queen with four bright promises
for a thousand years of glory for Thebes?

CHORUS

We speak no more. Our hands will silence you.
(They close in around Jocasta. Their robes conceal her.)

WOMAN1

(to WOMAN 2)

Send word to Creon that Jocasta died,
alone, an honorable suicide.

WOMAN2 runs from the stage.

FINIS

ABOUT THE POEMS

WHAT IS A POEM, ANYWAY?

Poets are notorious for coming up with manifestos and pronouncements. Everyone has a powerful opinion that what he writes, and what his friends write, makes up the *real* poetry, and what everyone else does is *not* poetry.

I've made some pretty strong pronouncements myself about the ragged-right-margin, confessional babble that has posed as poetry — a wheezing old man with a walker who still calls himself “*avant garde*.” I've also railed against the primitivist strains in poetry — rock lyrics, rap and much of “slam” poetry is just spewing, often by people who have read no poetry.

Well, what is poetry to *me*? It is a form of writing, sometimes narrative, sometimes merely descriptive, that has a paraphrasable meaning, and employs poetic devices such as rhythm, alliteration, consonance, rhyme, or assonance. Poetry is aware of what has been written before; it builds on earlier poets (which is why a depressed teenager at an open mike is almost never a poet.) Above all, poetry is imaginative — it taps into myth, symbol, and magic, and uses imagery to convey and reinforce its message. The final ingredient is that the language itself must be beautiful, imaginative, striking.

Good poets first acquire the craft to write in established forms, and, later, the skills to break the rules. Even so-called “free verse,” when it is worthy, employs some of the traditional devices, often in subtle and shifting ways, but there nonetheless.

To rhyme or not to rhyme? I avoided it for most of my life in my own work, even though I love my Romantic poets and my Poe. Rhyme is a dilemma, precisely because it is difficult to do something with it that has not been done many times before. Almost anything can be said in rhymed verse, but all *verses* are not necessarily poems. Greeting card verse and most song lyrics may be poems “by the book,” but they are not *good* poems.

There is another level to poetry, and this is the part that cannot be taught. The “born” poets acquire their craft early on, and then turn the details over to their subconscious. They gain the ability — not all the time but when they are “tuned in” — to write long stretches of highly polished poetry almost as if dictated to. It's either a form of insanity, or it's inspiration. This is what poets pray for — and we sanctify it by calling it the visitation of the Muse. The Muse-inspired is the Bardic voice, in which the power of creation seizes the poet and takes him places he never expected to go.

The experience of writing, and of reading, this kind of poetry is like having the top of your head lifted off. This is the poetry I live to write, and to read. My belief in this will explain my impatience with poets who aim too low, and who seem to have a deficiency of psychic energy and imagination.

When a poet of this sort has the misfortune to be a religious fanatic, he writes holy scriptures and founds religions. It is a sad fact that good poetry redeems us, but the poems of religious fanatics lead to wars of conquest and extermination. Plato may have been right to be suspicious of poets.

Perhaps one of the reasons that saner poets cling to the idea of the Muse or spirit guide — think of Dante guided by Virgil through Hell — is that this view of things keeps us in our place. As poets, we may be privileged to envision things that ordinary mortals do not, but we are still ordinary mortals, and the Muse only grants us glimpses of higher things.

Having said that, and dared to put myself, from time to time, in the League of Super-Poets, I hasten to add that all esthetic definitions are man-made, and are unique to a culture. Everything I say about poetry might be nonsense to a poet in another time and place. What Chinese poets in the Ming or Song Dynasties considered to be their craft is very, very different from what we do.

Poets in Greek, Latin, Arabic or Japanese, ancient or modern, likewise do what they do with radically different conceptions of what makes a good poem. I cannot only say what is true for me within the literary tradition that I am part of. And I add that I have read, or tried to read, many other modern poets' manifestos or statements about poetics, and I find most of them incoherent, not to mention intolerant of any other view of poetics.

I am saying this just to explain a little of why I write and how I write. Although I have taken pleasure in writing a few poems with a formal structure, it is usually a challenge I set for myself, not something done out of a feeling of necessity. Most of my poems are improvisations. Iambic pentameter comes naturally to me and I often compose in it without thinking; other times I consciously use short lines and seek to use rhythm and repetition to hold a piece together. Sometimes there is a formless, prose-like "recitative" or warm-up exercise, before the truly poetic passages kick in.

A few poems took me years to finish. Sometimes I had to wait for the "Muse moment" that gave me the right rhythm and opening line. Other times I have written an entire long, unplanned poem in one unbroken stretch, as though possessed.

In almost everything I write, I anticipate a voice speaking or reading the lines, and a listener, rather than a page reader. For this reason I strive for lucidity. Even if the idea I am conveying is complex, I want to convey it in language the listener will grasp. I regard a written poem as a script for oral reading, so I do not play visual games with typography. If my language seems unusually restrained in this age of vulgarity, it is because I respect my reader. In this entire book, sex and mayhem abound, but there is only a single four-letter word.

Respect for the reader takes another form, too: don't speak unless you have something to say. The "dear diary" school of poetry is not for me, because most writers lead boring lives. We are not, most of us, fighting bulls, dodging bullets in battle, or exploring Antarctic wastes. Po-

ets who sit around reading poetry, and reading mind-numbing books of criticism, are going to have very little to say that anyone wants to hear. Most of my own reading is in history, science, the classics, philosophy and, of course, my favorite genre, horror. Homer picked the Trojan War to write about because it was the most important thing he could find. I write about colliding galaxies and religious fanatics blowing up Buddhas and office towers because these things *are* important.

Repeatedly, I have had people come up to me after poetry readings and say, "I'm so relieved and so surprised. I understood what you were saying. Why don't other poets do that?" Why, indeed? I say this, not in boast but in challenge to the next generation of poets. I am tired of watching people squirm in their seats during the reading of avant garde nonsense, and *blaming themselves* for their inability to make sense of it. Trust your judgment, reader. If you smell a skunk, it probably *is* a skunk.

ABOUT THE POEMS

Why explain anything? Some poets take pride in baffling their readers, and ensuring that critics will have fodder for their master's theses. I like to add these brief notes to my books, in which I say what I might say in a live poetry reading, by way of explaining why or how something came to be written. Sometimes I feel that an audience needs to have certain terms or mythological characters explained. Since I have many readers who are not poets — the gods be thanked! — I do indeed get notes of thanks from readers, saying that these back-of-the-book comments made the difference between puzzlement and pleasure. So I continue on my perverse way, having my say. I will try to be brief.

BETWEEN THE PAGES was written as a prelude to my *Anniversarium* cycle of autumn poems. Its images are a good preview of my weird Gothic-Romantic perspective. The poem is followed by ENTRE LAS HOJAS, my Spanish version of the same poem. I am

seized with the desire to be a *hemispheric* poet, so I expect to do more translations into Spanish. I welcome and celebrate the joining of cultures that is now occurring — we pasty pale Anglos need some Latin passion.

ANNIVERSARIUM

IN CHILL NOVEMBER came from the simple observation that late in the season when all the leaves have fallen, you cannot distinguish (especially from afar), a living tree from a dead one. The idea of dead trees lurking in a living forest like zombies or the Undead intrigued me. At the end, though, is affirmation.

In THE FENCE, I return to my favorite old country graveyard in Northwest Pennsylvania and discover, to my esthetic alarm, that a rustic 18th century graveyard at the edge of a calm lake has been completely wrapped in a chain link fence. An unfortunate development for a place whose natural beauty I have celebrated for more than two decades!

After an autumn evening in the woods in Rhode Island, I found myself writing TO THE ARC OF THE SUBLIME, which incorporates, in its cosmic musings, some lines from one of my earliest poems. I wrote this in the 1996 edition of *Anniversarium*: “The poem brings me full circle to who I am today, standing firmly on the strange rock of who I was at twenty. Although I am certain to use some of the same themes and images again, I have grown certain that, with this poem, the integral work called *Anniversarium* has at last been completed — more than 22 years after its inception.”

I was wrong. Although this poem is a summation of my transcendental outlook, I was to write more autumn poems. In the forthcoming new edition of *Anniversarium*, I divide the old and new poems into “Ring 1” and “Ring 2.” This poem ends Ring 1.

When I wrote OCTOBER STORM 1998, I was immersing myself once again in Chinese opera and literature, and I had

recently acquired my Chinese *nom de plume*. The ferocious thunderstorm that rocked New Jersey that month — the most violent I have ever experienced — yielded these not-at-all exaggerated images. On a magical level, if you named yourself “Dream of Autumn Thunder,” you get what you ask for.

Somehow I had never read Pushkin’s immortal and unfinished poem of 1833, AUTUMN, until recently. It hit me like a thunderbolt. Pushkin and I are poetic brothers, and I have had Russian gloom under my skin since I was sixteen. I can remember teaching myself the Cyrillic alphabet so that I could sing Russian folk songs and opera, and I devoured all the standard Russian classics in translation. But this poem is special, because it inhabits the same world as my own autumn poems. At first, I decided to leave the poem alone, because it has been exquisitely translated, preserving its beautiful rhyme and meter. But finally, I decided to render the poem in my own style, and here and there the Muse possessed me to add a few lines, all in the spirit of the poem, of course. I found, in Stanza 8, that Pushkin employed some kind of word plays that seems impossible to translate, and here all the translators seem to stumble. My solution was to make up my own abruptly-interrupted whimsy. I used Dracula and Frankenstein in them because I wanted something that my friends would instantly recognize as “Rutherford perverse quirks,” and the sudden interruption is the equivalent of my stopping when everyone rolls their eyes as if to say, “There he goes again!” I have said more than the usual few words here because some people have strong feelings about translations being literal. I believe that brother and sister poets must be free to adapt one another in their own manner.

ON RECEIVING A GIFT OF BOOKS IN EARLY OCTOBER — This is an exercise. I received a big box of gift books from my friend Barbara Girard, and I let them tumble onto the floor. The poem is an instant improvisa-

tion based on peeking at the books at random.

AUTUMN SUNDAYS IN MADISON SQUARE PARK took some years to write. I lived near the square in the 1970s and worked near it in the 1990s, so it is a place deeply rooted in my consciousness of Manhattan. I invented a new metric form for this poem — don't ask me to give it a name — to avoid having it all in standard iambic pentameter. I used journal notes with vivid descriptions of the park, its trees, animals and human denizens, to try to sum up the feelings the place evoked. Since I wrote the poem, the park has been completely renovated, so the decrepit conditions described here no longer exist. This is now a piece of Manhattan history.

IN PRAGUE, A TREE OF MANY COLORS belongs here as an autumn poem, but it is actually part of my "Twilight of Dictators" cycle, too. I first wrote this poem in 1970, when the events portrayed in it — the students' defiance of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia — were still in the news. But my style then was not up to the challenge, and this poem languished for many years until I did some research on the invasion and the actual details of Jan Palach's death.

The opening stanza is a little abstract. Here I have the tree in the square speaking, and it is mocking the Marxist jargon of the time. This swiftly passes on into the actual narrative.

SEPTEMBER IN GOTHAM 2001. The destruction of the World Trade Center is impossible for me to write about with almost totally losing all emotional control. Since I spent two decades of my life in and around New York City, the attack on New York is personal. I arrived in the city in the last week of September for a book publishing party for Annette Hayn, and I stayed at a hotel on East 31st Street. The Armory, a few blocks away, had been a command center for some of the World Trade Center rescue efforts, and the walls of the building and all the fences for blocks around were covered with flyers

showing the faces and names of victims, with pleas from family and loved ones, "Find Me," "Missing," "Have You Seen Me?" New Yorkers were standing in front of these posters, weeping uncontrollably.

My poem is a small attempt to describe just that limited view of the tragedy. The posters were disintegrating in rain and wind, and were becoming the fall leaves of 2001. More than this, I cannot bring myself to write.

THE GODS AS THEY ARE, ON THEIR PLANETS

VIKING is my tribute to the pioneering space probe to Mars. Having the space probe speak for itself was fun, ending in the ironic reversal of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*.

THE GODS AS THEY ARE, ON THEIR PLANETS plays modern astronomy against Greek mythology. We now know that the planet Venus is blistering hot, with an acid atmosphere, and that Mars is a cold, dry, rust-colored desert. This poem contrasts these facts with the two gods of the same name, Venus/Aphrodite and Mars/Ares.

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE was provoked by hearing a poet of religious bent trotting out the old "argument by design" to prove the existence of God. Such a perfect universe as ours, so the argument goes, could only be created by God. I had just recently seen the NASA photographs of distant, colliding galaxies, and I mentioned this as my rebuttal, saying, "If you lived in one of those galaxies, you wouldn't believe nature was designed by God." For days after this conversation, I continued to think about the NASA photos, which I had seen in *The New York Times*. Then I began to dream about them, and this poem rapidly came to pass. The line "alu marana echtho karani," translated at the end of the poem, is in an imaginary language from one of the distant planets. The poem's title, of course, refers to Philip Wylie's famous screenplay and novel.

A shorter version of AUTUMN ON MARS was written several years back and counted as part of the ongoing *Anniversarium* series. I made it longer and elaborated on the anatomy of the imaginary Martians, with a wave of the tentacle to Ray Bradbury (whose Martians were admittedly far more humanoid). But no one can say “Mars” and “Halloween” in the same breath without evoking the Master of *The Martian Chronicles*.

PLUTO DEMOTED was written when it was suddenly announced that the planet Pluto, in some astronomers’ opinions, was too small and insignificant to be called a planet, and should just be a numbered object out in the cold depths of space. I had long wanted to write a poem of tribute to Clyde Tombaugh, who discovered the planet in a stroke of almost incredible good fortune, and this seemed the time. The name “Yuggoth” was used by H.P. Lovecraft to describe the ninth planet before it had been discovered and named.

POETICA LOVECRAFTIANA

I moved to Providence partially as a result of a literary pilgrimage I made to see the homes and haunts of horror writer H.P. Lovecraft. But until I moved here, I wrote nothing about him, even though his stories were a powerful influence on my adolescence. My poems about Lovecraft are scattered throughout all my books, and in the published edition of *Night Gaunts*, my biographical play. This book contains the newer pieces. Needless to say, these poems will give more pleasure to fans and readers of Lovecraft than to those not familiar with his bizarre and astonishing work. (I hasten to add that I am *not* influenced by Lovecraft’s mostly horrid verse.)

MAKER OF MONSTERS, MAKER OF GODS was a birthday poem for eminent American horror writer Frank Belknap Long. I met Frank Long when I was asked to conduct a television interview with him about his mentor, H.P. Lovecraft. We became friends — I only regret meeting him so close to his decline

and demise. We had been neighbors in Chelsea almost two decades earlier, but had never met.

DREAMING OF UR-R’LYEH has strange origins. I was invited by Peter Lamborn Wilson to contribute to an “Astral Convention” in Antarctica. The premise was that all the participants would think or dream about Antarctica simultaneously, and submit whatever they wrote as a result for publication. The resulting book should, alone, be convincing evidence that there is presently no telepathic power in the human psyche. People saw and envisioned exactly what they were inclined to see, principally sex, drugs and anarchy. My own “waking dream” was influenced by Poe and Lovecraft, specifically Lovecraft’s Antarctic novel, *At the Mountains of Madness*. I had also read a book about Shackleton’s Antarctic expedition, from which I obtained the descriptions I used of solar and atmospheric conditions. There are many things about this poem, considerably expanded since its first publication, that I still can’t explain. I won’t try.

In THE TREE AT LOVECRAFT’S GRAVE, the lordly spreading beech tree at HPL’s burial site is the center of attention. This poem has now joined the small collection of ceremonial pieces performed occasionally at HPL’s grave.

UNDER LOVECRAFT’S GRAVE. HPL is buried next to his parents in Swan Point Cemetery in Providence, a spot visited annually by hundreds of the author’s fans. This poem, actually a mini-drama, is written to be read aloud by four or more voices, with change of typography giving the cues. We hear Lovecraft, his mother, his father, and a dead child, all speaking from *inside their coffins*. In the first part, an above-ground narrator sets the stage.

FRANK AND LYDA is a highly condensed account of my strange friendship with Frank Belknap Long and his tormented wife, Lyda Arco Long. Al-

though Frank and I had splendid conversations, and I came to appreciate his poetry and the gentle spirit of his short stories, everything was overshadowed by his wife's advanced mental illness. A sad ending for a fine writer.

I hesitated for a while before writing this poem. Have I been cruel to poor Lyda? The outrageous things she said and did were repeated for anyone who set foot in the Long house. Lyda was always "on stage." And so, she still is.

THINGS SEEN IN GRAVEYARDS

Over the years I have written dozens of poems that use cemeteries as their settings, from country graveyards to vast garden cemeteries like Mt. Auburn or Greenwood or Swan Point. Sooner or later I will publish them all as a book. This book includes some newer entries in this series, along with a few older ones revised.

AFTER THE STORM takes us back to Edinboro, Pennsylvania where, in a more modern graveyard, I heard an unearthly wailing. The ideas for this poem come from studies of Iroquois lore. Among their beliefs was the charming notion that chopping down a tree over old bones would bring dead animals back to life.

A newspaper account of a prison work detail sent to an island burial ground in New York harbor prompted the poem, HART ISLAND. It is not a fantasy.

In NIGHT WALKER, I witnessed an elderly lady sleepwalking, and only found out two days later that she had walked into the nearby river and drowned.

New England vampire lore is thin, but the Exeter, Rhode Island case of 1799 has poignant details. The idea of dead family members coming back for brothers and sisters is common to many cultures, and is probably based on an attempt to explain why many members of the same family died one after another. Before Pasteur's conception of bacteria as a cause of disease, such cases seemed to be God's work,

or the Devil's. AN EXETER VAMPIRE, 1799, is written mostly in lines of nine syllables. I felt, somehow, that this evoked the feeling of passivity among the Tillinghast children.

GRAVEYARDS I'D LIKE TO SEE is another variant of my ongoing series, this time with more satirical intent.

I started THE HARVESTMAN several years before it finally spun its web to completion. It's a very formal poem, taking its cues from Grey's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." Harvestman is the British name for the opiolid creature, spider-like but not a spider, that we call the Daddy-Long-Legs.

I read about THE EAR MOUND IN KYOTO, and a ceremony commemorating the 400th anniversary of the burial of the ears from 100,000 slain or mutilated Koreans. The poem is fanciful in detail but accurate in history. The ears were taken, and the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (actually a great hero of feudal Japan) did die suddenly just a year after the ears were brought to him as trophies. Japan still refuses to return the ears; hence this poem.

I read about the desolate burial ground of ACELDEMA, THE FIELD OF BLOOD some years ago, and saw a chance to tell its history. Reading this poem aloud to those unfamiliar with the name is very effective.

When I speculated publicly about a possible Lovecraft-cult connection to a Rhode Island grave desecration, a Pawtucket police detective invited me to the scene of the crime. This is related in MRS. WEEDEN, OF PAWTUCKET.

TWILIGHT OF THE DICTATORS

The poem, THE EXHUMATION OF GOETHE, is based on a detailed newspaper account of the "maceration" of Goethe's skeleton by the East German government in 1970, in an attempt to turn the great poet's remains into a tour-

ist attraction, like the mummy in Lenin's tomb. Most of the details here are factual.

WINTER SOLSTICE 1989 celebrates the incredible events following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The concert referred to in the poem was given by Leonard Bernstein, conducting an orchestra of musicians from East and West. In the great final chorus, the German word for joy (*freude*) was replaced by the word for freedom (*freiheit*.) I was then, and remain now, astonished at the lack of jubilation in the West over this remarkable series of events. We should have been dancing in the streets.

IN THE STREETS OF MOSCOW AND ST. PETERSBURG is another celebration, noting the amazing images of statues of Lenin and Stalin being toppled. A world-wide broadcast of a concert featuring the *1812 Overture*, with brilliant fireworks over the onion domes, reinforced the idea that a new age had come. I am sorry that Russia is troubled once more, and that gangsters and strongmen have replaced the party bosses, but I hold confidence that things will get better, even if takes another revolution.

STALIN AND SHOSTAKOVICH is based on Russian history and known biographical facts about Russian musical giant Dmitri Shostakovich. This is an attempt to portray a time and place, and Shostakovich's state of mind as he composed his Fourth Symphony, one of the towering musical works of the century just ended. The symphony was never performed during Stalin's lifetime.

THE PIANO UPRISING – I had a dream, back in the dark days when Poland was still firmly under Soviet control, of all the pianos coming to life and driving out the Russians. And all to the music of Chopin, Poland's great exile composer. I outlined this poem in the 1970s, and at least three times I attempted to write it, yet never found the right voice, the right line length. By the time I finally found the key — the rhythm of the Polonaise — Poland was well on its way to shaking off the

Russian yoke and its own crippling dictatorship. I hope this fantasy pleases nonetheless.

HORRORS!

THE ANACONDA POEMS was inspired by reading, in the Science Section of *The New York Times*, about the sex life of the giant anaconda, the world's largest snake. The speaking voice of this poem is very much like that of my dear friend Emilie Glen, whose passing was in my mind as I wrote the poem. I think of it as a poem she would have written. Emilie was a voracious reader of natural history and it permeated her work.

THE SPIDERS was a tidbit in my early book, *The Pumpkined Heart*, merely a nature observation about spider webs on an early morning lawn. This expansion puts spiders in context as worse-than-vampires. As my uncle Bela says, "The vampire drinks the blood. But the spider! the spider drinks ... *everything!*" My friends Pieter Vanderbeck and Robert Dodge contributed to the arachnophobia of my household with their lurid tales of New England barn spiders. John Crompton's informative book, *The Spider*, was also an inspiration.

KNECHT RUPRECHT, OR THE BAD BOY'S CHRISTMAS — While reading over some piano music by Robert Schumann, I came across a piece about Knecht Ruprecht, the dark companion of Santa Claus who punishes bad children. I invented all the imagery surrounding him, trying for a Brothers Grimm atmosphere. The piece turned out to be a very effective actor's monologue, and it is one of my perennial hits at readings.

MY LIFE AS AN INCUBUS is an expansion of a shorter poem, a fantasy about becoming a gender-shifting incubus/succubus. After a rereading of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, I added the opening section detailing my bargain with Mephistopheles. This, too, is a strong piece for performance, and I recall one eerie party at which I read this, with

three Gothic maidens kneeling around me with flickering candles.

SNOFRU THE MAD was based on reading about the Pharaoh's life and times in Gardiner's *History of Ancient Egypt*. Snofru, or Snefru, was Pharaoh in the Fourth Dynasty and the immediate predecessor of Khufu (Cheops), builder of the Great Pyramid. Historians are baffled as to why Snofru built himself four separate pyramids. Snofru was also the first Pharaoh to enclose his name in a cartouche, the round-cornered rectangle that has ever since enclosed a Pharaoh's name.

When Gardiner noted the "unpalatable" thought that Snofru had built four pyramids, the whole idea of this poem sprang forth in my mind, completely formed. The historical details in the poem are correct, but I have invented the mad Pharaoh's reasoning.

THE WAKING DREAM was written just after the premonition of the death of a loved one. The premonition turned out to be false, but the vision was an intense one: a disembodied spirit, waking me from a sound sleep, all but crying out: "Remember me! Remember me! What did I look like? What did I mean to you? Quickly, quickly, or I am lost!" Then, the sense of the Loved One's spirit dissipating, becoming nothing.

POEM FOUND ON THE NECK OF A DEER KILLED IN THE BLACK FOREST, GERMANY (originally titled "Reunion") is my contribution to werewolf lore. It is much expanded from the original version, with a substantial plot change. In the early edition of *Whippoorwill Road*, my protagonist was the host and the werewolf the guest. It didn't read well, and making the werewolf the host also allowed me to add the Baroness werewolf as well. I wrote the first version after enjoying Jack Veasey's very affecting little werewolf poem, "Handful of Hair."

NO MAUSOLEUM, PLEASE is a satire that was prompted, exactly as the poem says, by the receipt of a direct-mail

flyer promoting clean, modern, above-ground burial. I regard those above-ground places as twisted and unnatural, kind of a Horn & Hardart automaton with corpses stuffed in the food bins. No thank you!

ONE DAY'S NEWS shows that the real horrors are all around us. We hardly have to invent them.

THE DEAD END is based on a dream — a not uncommon dream of being among those who are dead, in a strange zone where they have taken up residence.

SON OF DRACULA was originally a very short poem in the *Anniversarium* cycle of Autumn poems — a remembrance of a childhood fascination with Dracula, an adolescent nosebleed, and a brief October hospital stay in which I saw a graveyard on a nearby hillside, lit up by steel mill furnaces. A revision turned it into something more profound — a very specific memoir of childhood angst in the coal towns of Pennsylvania, and, at the end, my rebirth as a poet. This is also one of the first poems in which I tapped into my childhood for material.

HUNCHBACK ASSISTANT TELLS ALL. Despite all my years of watching horror films, I had never written a Frankenstein poem. This long cycle of poems, which will almost certainly have a sequel, comes entirely from the world of the great Universal horror films of the 1930s and 1940s.

Mary Shelley never gave Dr. Frankenstein a hunchback assistant, so I let Fritz the hunchback set the record straight. And since we are in the tabloid era, this is a hunchback whose sex life (real or imagined) has quite a few surprises in store for the unwary reader.

The creation scenes, involving not only electricity but an animating elixir, will strike a chord for those who have read Lovecraft's tale, "Herbert West, Reanimator."

The hunchback's proclamations during the storm scene indicate he has ab-

sorbed not only Mary Shelley, but a little of her friend Lord Byron as well.

The reference to Werther in the poem is to Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a book which provoked a number of adolescent suicides.

MILKWEED SEEDS started out as a little, wispy, nature poem. A trifle, which I have now turned into a new mythology.

HEARING THE WENDIGO is about the legendary wind elemental supposedly known to all the American Indians from the Great Plains to Hudson Bay. Ever since Algernon Blackwood wrote about the Wendigo in his short story set in the Canadian woods, it has become the stuff of campfire stories and late-night ghost sessions, almost endlessly embellished upon. Everyone who tells a Wendigo story adds something to it. During my college years in Pennsylvania, my friends and I revelled in inventing new twists and details about this invisible, smiting monster.

WEST OF ARKHAM is a Lovecraftian poem. The opening line is an echo of the opening of HPL's "The Colour Out of Space."

THE GRIM REAPER is based on an old German folksong which was set as a choral piece by Brahms. The original German of this folksong was set by Brahms in his *German Folksongs for Four-Part Choir*. This paraphrase changes the original's rather conventional "die and go to Heaven" ending, and I chose to end each stanza with a different line rather than retaining the original refrain, "Beware, fair little flower!" The original song verse uses this refrain three times, and then "Be happy, fair little flower!" at the end.

SALEM is based on seeing a tree whose roots were wrapped around a gravestone in Salem, Massachusetts.

THE PUMPKINED HEART

The phrase "The Pumpkined Heart" describes the landscape of my native Pennsylvania, and was the title of my

third chapbook. These thirty-odd poems are about my childhood in Appalachia, my college years in Northwestern Pennsylvania (Edinboro with its beautiful little glacial lake), and my early years in New York.

I did not start writing about my childhood until just a few years ago. I don't care much for "memoir" unless the events remembered serve a higher purpose.

APPALACHIAN IDYLL comes from memories of the countryside around my great-grandparents' house outside of Scottdale, Pennsylvania. My maternal great grandmother had sold moonshine during the Depression, and her house was a four-room structure covered with tarpaper. I spent some summers there. I remember driving past it some years ago with some friends, and seeing, with a sense of vague horror, the even smaller, one-room house in which my grandparents lived, and where my mother was born. "That's not a house," said a young boy in the car, "that's a tool shed!"

THE MOLESTER is fiction. And it is fact. I suddenly remembered having an "imaginary playmate," and was struck by the abruptness with which that activity ended. I filled in the rest in this invented poem. The more I embellished it, the truer it seemed – or was I really remembering? It was only after I started working on the poem that I heard the stories about draft dodgers and other runaways hiding around the coke ovens. It makes a good tale, and makes one question the standard assumptions. What would be the outcome of this story today? Would the boy be hypnotized and interrogated into making up bizarre confessions? Would the young man in the spring house be sent away for life, unable to prove that "something" did not happen? I like the ambiguity which this poem leaves with the reader.

My great-grandmother, the former moonshine seller, died when I was ten or eleven. I have vivid memories of visiting

her, and hearing about her Alsatian forebears. She was tricked into signing away her timber rights, which I recount in *THE PINES*. I changed the story a little. She was long dead when they came to cut the trees, and it was my grandmother (her daughter) who came home one day and found the trees cut down.

In *MIDNIGHT WATER*, I remember childhood summers in the woods of Pennsylvania, and the odd things we were told to keep us from roaming around at night. Since the house was surrounded with a blanket of enveloping insects, mountain lions and bears, it was not such a bad idea to stay in bed until dawn.

AND THEN WE GOT USED TO THE ATOM BOMB. One of the Edinboro college professors whose house was a gathering place for the student intellectuals was Norman Lee. It was at his home, surrounded by his children (if I am remembering correctly), that I heard a recording of Bertrand Russell's powerful antiwar speeches. An early version of this poem was in my first chapbook, *Songs of the I and Thou*, but it was not very precise. I went back to the source documents and added material to make this poem comprehensible to today's reader. I think it gives a little glimpse into how terrified we all were in the late 1960s. Lines in italics and marked * are exact quotes from the Russell-Einstein Manifesto of July 9, 1955.

GRANDMOTHERS is based partly on my grandmother Florence, who could behead a chicken, kill a copperhead, and pick morel mushrooms in the woods. Is there anything in world better than a grandmother's home-baked bread?

FRAGMENTS, WRITTEN AT TWENTY is made up of several journal entries from my college days, and from my half-year stay in San Francisco in 1967. They are infused with the spirit of Shelley and Whitman. These lines are my declaration of intent to "make a new song to astonish the planets."

TABLEAUX FROM A PENNSYLVANIA VILLAGE comes from journal notes, impressions of the seasons, the flora and the fauna of northwestern Pennsylvania. A mere description, startling or beautiful as the experience might be, does not always translate into a poem. I keep these notes and turn back to them, and, sometimes, many years later, I realize that a certain thing seen is *right* for a poem I am working on. "At the Lake Shore" is the most ambitious in this little set. There is an intensity about nature in places where the warm season is short, and when you know that the ground you live on was scoured by glaciers, you gain a sense of how nature works over millennia to make the landscape what it is.

If water had a consciousness and needed a pep talk, *WATER MUSIC I* would be it. Although I wasn't thinking about it, it is certainly an anthem for all of us born in the Aquarian age. *WATER MUSIC IV*, later in the book, is an extension of the same idea. (In case you wondered, *Water Music II* and *III* exist only as journal notes, not yet written. Maybe someday.)

SPRING EARTH is almost 20 years old, and *SPRING FROST* was written just after the turn of the millennium, when a savage May frost nipped a lot of trees in the bud. I thought they made an intriguing juxtaposition.

THE OLD GRAVESTONES could have been part of the "Things Seen in Graveyards" cycle, but I have kept it apart. Again the setting is Pennsylvania, although it could just as well be New England, with its tasty old graveyards. The graveyard at Edinboro, when last I saw it, was a mad jumble of broken stones. Many older stones had been so worn that the inscriptions were almost illegible, and this provoked the whimsy of this poem — what if we had to carry our gravestones like little calling cards to the Resurrection?

AN AWESOME PLUMMETING recounts one of those co-incidences that happens to poets. Just minutes after I finished listening to Swan Lake in the dead of winter, I walked to our little lake, just in time to witness five hundred migrating swans descend onto the water for a brief visit.

THE IRISES is a poem of obsessive love, a topic of great import to gloomy adolescents. Many will recognize themselves in this poem of brooding, passive, hopeless, jealous affection.

AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD came out of a prose-poem passage in a letter I wrote to my friend Tom Fitzpatrick. Fortunately I kept a copy, sensing that this wanted to be a freestanding poem. Its message to other artists — that they are not alone — is a vital one.

AT THE WOOD'S EDGE is a translation/adaptation from the Onondaga. I spent my childhood on Pennsylvania lands soaked with the blood of the French and Indian War (the American branch of the Seven Years' War). As a result of this history, there were no Indians to be seen. My father's grandmother apparently threw the family — and perhaps the whole town — into turmoil when she let it be known, when she was quite elderly, that she was an Indian. Although I have traced the genealogy back to her parents, and found one distant cousin who spoke of a family photo with "a young girl in Indian braids who doesn't look like the others, and we wondered who she was," I cannot prove or disprove my great-grandmother's assertion. Native American children were taken from their families; Indian people were driven out of New York State and Pennsylvania, to Ohio and later to Kansas; farm families could and did adopt children so as to have extra hands to work. No one knows. Nonetheless, growing up with the whispered legend that "your grandmother was an Indian" had its effect on my imagination. When I arrived in Edinboro, which had been a festival grounds for the extinct Erie Indians, I grew even more interested in Ir-

quois lore. That led to me render the opening passages of the Iroquois Funeral Rite into blank verse. It is a passage of tremendous dignity, almost classical in its nobility and restraint.

I spent my high-school years in a sad, depressed town, and one of the few things I care to remember about it is told in TILLIE. Years after leaving the place, I heard this tale of Tillie's downfall.

The all-lower-case title of "song of youth (1967)" shows that I was still under the influence of "modern" poets. I still like this poem, with its Beat inflection and its word-play. It's one of only a handful of college-boy poems I would still want anyone to see.

Like the opera farewells that go on and on, ENVOI has been much revised. The problem is that I said goodbye to a place, and kept returning. Now that a decade or more separates each of my visits to Edinboro lake, I was able to revise this poem with a sense of finality. It's also easier now to accept the fact that one place does represent "my youth, my heart, my first-found home."

AT THE VERGE OF SPRING was being revised as I was listening to Mahler's Eighth Symphony, with its setting of the ninth-century hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus* (Come, creator spirit). As I listened, and wrote, the descriptions of unfolding spring became more explosive, and as the Mahler chorus burst into its greatest crescendo, I found myself writing the Latin words on the page. I remembered too, that Lucretius begins his great *De Rerum Naturum* with a hymn to Venus, as the force behind the earth's regeneration in spring. So when I use these Latin words, it is in the fullest pagan sense.

SCRAPS is a personal poem I kept locked away for many years. It is my memorial for all the young artist friends who drifted off to drugs, suicide, or simply to marriage and babies.

THE TEA PARTY takes place when I was in the third grade, and I had little girls on both sides of me — two Jewish girls in the big house next door, and two Fundamentalist Christian girls in the ramshackle house on the other side. The memory of licorice-flavored water, served in tiny aluminum cups, still makes me gag.

TWO, GOING ON THREE was an attempt to relate my earliest memories. I can remember my second birthday, and this poem includes many of the concrete memories, including being attacked by spiders. My mother, with her fear of machines, also makes her first sinister appearance in my poems here.

THE OUTCAST pretty accurately describes my childhood. I did not go to church, learn to swim, ride a bicycle, join the Boy Scouts, or do much anything else that other boys did. I wasn't allowed.

WATCH DOG could have been one dog, or two successive dogs, that lived out their miserable days at my grandparents' house. For the sake of drama I made it a single dog.

ENGLISH BREAKFAST is about how emotionally repressed we English are. Even generations removed from the mother country, we just can't emote.

THE NOSEBLEED is a true account. People today would find it hard to believe how divided our country was during the Vietnam War, and how much hatred there was toward "hippies" among the rednecks. As an adolescent, I was afflicted with occasional nosebleeds which could turn life-threatening. Once, I lost two and half pints of blood. So this was serious business that took me to St. Vincent's Hospital in Erie. I still believe that I narrowly escaped death at the hands of some demented kitchen worker. Friends and teachers did not believe me when I tried to recount my story, and I left for New York City shortly thereafter. I never told the story again until I wrote the poem. It may be OK now to look like a hippie, but our presidents and many other elected of-

ficials still publicly declare that you can't be a decent American if you're an atheist.

I put A WING OF TIME on the shelf for a long time. It seemed self-indulgent, just a memoir of a time and place, even if it did have some happy language in it. I wanted the poem to succeed, but I wanted it to have a meaning. It only came to me a few days ago, and I was able, at last, to write the final stanza. The poem suffered from narcissism, solipsism, even — the feeling that the poet is the center, watching people and places pass by. In reality, I am the one passing. I haunt the place more than it haunts me. It is not writing poems about me — I, in motion and on the way from one eternity to another, am hurtling by and writing about it. I am the meteor.

THE LITERARY LIFE

Like most poets, I am guilty, guilty, guilty, of writing poems about — writing poems. It's irresistible, the more so because the process of writing remains mysterious even to us. Fiction writers can have good days and bad days, but can write and write and write. Poets have to wait. I thought it would be a good idea to put all these types of poems together: the Muse complaints, the shop talk, the digs at critics. So the poems here are fodder for writers, and fun for those who spend a lot of time thinking and reading about writers. For everyone else, maybe, a pass-me-by.

POETRY MOTELS is a risky poem. People get it today, since Jesse Helms is still remembered as a nemesis of the arts, and since "The roaches check in, but they don't check out" is still remembered as an ad slogan for Roach Motels. A few years from now, this won't be funny and it will need footnotes. Sigh.

REGAINING THE MUSE was written after a long hiatus of depression, during which I wrote no poems. In fact, it seemed futile to be a poet. It is in some ways, tongue-in-cheek, since the Muse is chided for making me poor. I am rich in

poems; I am poor because I have no money.

THE RIVALRY provoked a stern disapproval from poet Ree Dragonette. She read an early draft and replied huffily, "Whoever heard of a male Muse?" I wrote this poem for my friend and fellow poet Claudia Dobkins, and our respective sexual orientations made the poem make perfect sense. And it is a nice twist ending for those who don't see it coming.

POETRY READINGS expresses a lifetime of disappointment coming home from poetry readings "like that" — frustrated because there was nothing worth hearing. Luckily there were times, especially New York in the 1970s, when the poetry scene was vibrant and magical. We were out every night at readings, and we wrote poems back and forth. I am glad I saw New York when that was still possible.

PATHETIQUE SYMPHONY comes from two different sources. When I hear the second movement of Tchaikovsky's Pathetique Symphony, I hear a fractured, melancholy waltz, as though the dancers are seen by outsiders who cannot take part. The composer writes his music in 5/4 time, so it is not a waltz at all. And when I hear this music, I always think of young Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, sneaking onto the grounds of the Linton home, watching a party and its dancers through the windows as the dogs advance to attack them. From this I made my poem, which moves on to become an anthem for all "outsiders."

DECONSTRUCTION IN WISCONSIN was written while a lot of people were making fools of themselves writing articles using (or abusing) this approach to literature. I decided that Jeffrey Dahmer, the serial killer, was a perfect symbol for the Deconstructionist. Dahmer, for those who don't read about such things, brought home young men for sex, drugged them, killed them, disassembled their bodies in

various ways, and stored body parts in his refrigerator for later dining.

UNEMPLOYED is another little dig at Modern Literary Theory. The headline "Creative genius does not exist" managed to escape from an MLA convention and found its way into the general press, where said statement, and literary theorists, were much mocked. I thought of my Muse, and wondered how she would fare in a world which no longer believed that there were "special" people who created great art. It's also ironic that everyone in academia wants to be the recipient of a "genius award."

DEAD POETS covers one of the perennial ironies of being a poet. I know I will be world-famous fifty years from now. I have watched few brief flurries of interest around a few poets immediately after their deaths, including other poets who scarcely knew them trying to elbow into memorial readings.

WHO CAN BE A POET ALL OF THE TIME? was a disgusted reaction to seeing, in succession, a good dozen mediocre poetry books, all of whose authors wrote blurbs praising one another as great poets. Dana Gioia summed up this state of things very well in his essay and book, *Can Poetry Matter?* Things will remain rotten in poetry-land as long as these folks jam the bookshelves with their mostly uninteresting writings. I grit my teeth when I sit in an audience made up of eager-to-be-published poets, and watch them all applauding a celebrity poet who spent 45 minutes reading unintelligible baloney. No wonder so many people hate poetry.

DIAGNOSIS OF E.A. POE is my reaction to a newspaper account in which a learned physician "solved" the mystery of Poe's death, claiming the poet died of rabies. I had been reading a good deal about Poe's last year, so this is my sardonic take on the good doctor's claim, with apologies in advance to "lady poets."

RHAPSODOMANCY is another of those “coincidences,” of the sort that happens to poets. We ask for it.

OF THE MAKING OF BOOKS was written when I found an abandoned attempt to describe, in verse, my days running The Poet’s Press in New York City. I countered this with a present-day reflection, realizing that the little books I produced did indeed mean something. I have had depressed periods when I gave it all up, but I always crept back when I found poets worth publishing.

In FINALISTS — CHRISTIAN LADIES’ POETRY SOCIETY COMPETITION, I poke fun at a gaggle of born-again poets who infest various poetry circles. Some of them claim they channel their poems directly from God. This wouldn’t be so awful if they had any talent, but it seems that the Christian god only dictates truly bad poetry. In this poem, I have three religious poets submitting to a contest with the topic of “babies.” Maybe this is a little cruel, but at heart I do not view these people as simple and honest as they seem. Some even steal their bad poems from already-published books of bad religious poems. All my life experience tells me that self-professed holy people are often con artists. Note: the words with overstrikes through them are intentional.

NOT A LOVE SONG, NO, NEVER THAT!

Very few of the poems in this section of the book have ever seen print before. I have held them close to me. They reveal little, since my “love poems” are almost always about wanting and almost never about having. I have led a largely solitary life. But I guess it is “now or never” to put these poems out there, and among them are several of my favorite children, however painful the birthing. Over the years I wrote many little poems of yearning that I simply called “Odes,” writing them, numbering them, tucking them away.

I use a lot of astronomy in my love poems. I should really stop, but this is a “conceit” that works well for me, and suits our age well. After all, we are the first people on earth to know what our outer planets look like. In THE SHY ONE, I sent a meteor to get the loved one’s attention. ODE 15 is full of references to black holes and you’ll need to know how they work to make sense of the poem. CONTACT uses a concept I picked up in astronomy, the penumbra, to describe two shadows touching when the poet passes the loved one. LIGHT YEARS urges the loved one to become a supernova. In ODE 19 repeats the astronomical references in its next-to-last stanza. I read a lot of science fiction as a kid, and I was one of those chemistry set kinds in junior high who made stink bombs and blew things up. So it is no affectation for me to fall in love and use Newtonian physics to describe the magnitude of my affection, and how far and how fast people have run away from me.

NOT A LOVE SONG, NO, NEVER THAT! is not really about any specific persons or events. It started as an experiment in writing. I wrote the first section from the point of view of the Lover, who has found his ideal, but has sworn never to reveal his perhaps-unwelcome affection. The poem is free in form with no advance planned structure. Then I set out to write the second part, mirroring and reversing the images from the first part, and this time from the point of view of the Beloved. So I used part one as a map to write part two. Then, for the third part, I went to part one, and imitated it in the same order, and this time the point of view is The Monster. The Monster gets the better of it, and once he is speaking, he gets carried away, and has more lines than the others. I did not plan it that way; it just happened. You can psychoanalyze this if you wish.

RENUNCIATION was written several times, and as it is factual, it lacks astronomy or monsters. It is just me, as a young man, regretting a journey I made in pursuit of an obsessive folly. Actually,

it is a sequel, some years later, to “The Irises.” This is a bitter poem, but it has lines in it that make me want to keep it. It is not kind to me, or to the other, who hadn’t the slightest inkling of the depth or violence of my emotions. It was all in my head, and it burned away in the great storm of this poem.

TRIPTYCH is the most personal of all my poems to date, and it also took the longest to write. I have re-written it from top to bottom at least three times. Three different people would see themselves in this poem if they cared to read it, but this does not matter to the reader. This poem says everything I have to say about Love in the abstract. The Greeks knew best, and had three different words for Love. No one has seen the final version of this poem — until now.

THE WATCHER is a recent poem. My friend Hal Hamilton introduced me to the term “flaneur,” which is a Parisian word describing one who delights in walking around, or sitting in cafes in order to watch all the passing beauties. I take great delight in sitting outdoors on Thayer Street, enjoying all the splendors of college-age youth passing by. This is my ode to these visual delights — there are living things out there as beautiful as Greek statues.

SUMMER STORM is from way, way back – a summer night in Pennsylvania when I lived in an attic garret.

HERE AT THE MILLENNIUM

CHILDREN OF ATLAS is my anthem against angst. Walt Whitman looks over my shoulder and nuzzles his beard against me, whispering, “You tell them!” I see the human adventure as only beginning. When the sun goes supernova, when the Andromeda galaxy collides with ours, we must be somewhere else.

FIRST SNOW has a most mundane origin — a walk past the tiny roses bushes that line the parking lot of my local supermarket. The sudden blooming of the

roses amid the snow, timed so that the passing poet would see them before and after, was another of those serendipities of the Muse. The last two lines just leaped into place.

When I first met the artist Riva Leviten, she took me to the Providence Art Club and showed me a splendid encaustic work that was hanging there in a group exhibit. “What do you make of it?” she asked. I surprised her by extemporizing the essence of this poem, IMPROMPTU, and the next day I presented her with the poem. We have been great friends ever since. You don’t really need to see the work to appreciate the poem, but the two together would be dynamic. Unfortunately, Riva has misplaced the work in her gallery/storeroom of thousands of works. If it ever turns up, I shall get a photo of it and place it on my website.

DUSK was seen from a train hurtling (or should I say, creeping) south from Providence to New York City.

AS IDOLS FALL IN THE AFGHAN HILLS was my spontaneous reaction to the horrific actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan, who destroyed the world-famous giant statues of Buddha. Of course, this was only a prelude to what would follow.

SIX CHRISTMAS VERSES are doggerel, written to fill out the Christmas booklet that originally centered around my Knecht Ruprecht poem. I hope it is not my fate to be remembered *only* for these wicked verses.

THE ‘POSSUM was seen one summer night, creeping along the wall of the Brown University Refectory.

I moved back to New York City in the early 1990s, tempted by an intriguing publishing job. In TWENTY-YEAR NEW YORKER, AFTER HIS EXILE, my emotions of homecoming are expressed. I suppose I will always be a New Yorker.

In REVELATIONS, I say everything I have to say to people who think they know what God wants. I know what God wants — he told me.

ARABESQUES ON THE STATUE OF LIBERTY centers around New York's only actual goddess-figure, one I take very seriously. I delight in seeing all those Statue of Liberty miniatures being sold to tourists. I get weepy when I take the Staten Island Ferry and get to pass close by Liberty Island. One day on the ferry I saw a man standing alone at the railing, staring at the Statue with an intense expression of hatred. That stayed with me. Then, a few days later, I was in Chinatown, and I saw an elegant Chinese matron rushing down Canal Street, carrying one of those miniature Statues of Liberty. Just a few hours later I was at the Empire State Building, thinking about King Kong's tortuous climb up the side of the skyscraper. These images all fell together in this poem.

QUACK is based on a news account of a therapist who was prosecuted for fraud, pretty much as described in the poem. He had a patient with multiple personalities — dozens of them — and he charged the insurer for *group therapy* for all the personalities, which included demons and animals. From the tales I have heard, psychiatry has to be one of the most debased of all professions today.

NEMESIS is a new poetic form. I invite other poets to write "nemeses" of their own. In each stanza, the last two lines must be the "nemesis" of the first two, and the last line of stanza 2 must rhyme with the last line of Stanza 1. I wrote four of these, but there could be any number of them strung together. Any takers?

THE STERILE SQUASH is one of several poems featuring "Mrs. Trog," my former landlady in New Jersey. She is actually a composite of the worst features of a mother-daughter duo.

VERMONT IMAGES is another creation from journal notes, this time recapping my first trip to Burlington, Vermont, and to some of the haunts of Robert Frost. My hosts, Don and Laura Merit, also took me to a pow-wow (my first) of the Abenaki Indians, which I found depressing since it was held inside a gymnasium. The fourth section is my reaction to the upland pastures and alder forests through which we walked, reading excerpts of Robert Frost poems which were posted on signs along the way.

DEAD PRINCESS is, of course, Princess Diana, and my pagan nature responded to seeing the outpouring of British emotion (there isn't much of that in the universe!), the vast hecatombs of flowers, and her very classical final resting place). She got everything except a new constellation.

CAVE DEUM (Beware of God) is a playful piece, starting with a little dyslexia and poking fun at organized religion, my favorite opponent. People sometimes ask me why I'm so tough on religion, and I always answer that my Druid ancestors were burned at the stake.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE was written, yea, many years ago. I never go into bars of any kind, but I peeked in a window one day and thought I saw at least four Shakespeare characters inside, drinking beer and looking exceedingly gloomy. So there you are.

ARTICLES OF FAITH is my only grown-up poem in which typographic means are employed to break up the text into parallel streams. I don't know how one person would read it out loud, so I don't intend to pursue this line much further. I've had people send me "con-

crete poems” over the years with words every-which-way on the page. I asked one poet, “What am I supposed to do, stand on my head or do somersaults while I read this?” He never spoke to me again.

FROM SALEM FORWARD is yet another commentary on the psychological abuse of children by parents, and the ways in which “truth” can be manufactured.

The appalling poem titled HAN-DICAPPED GAME PRESERVE is based on a newspaper report. I don’t make these things up — there’s actually a place where men in wheelchairs can hunt, maim and kill animals.

HOUSECLEANING comes from my house in Weehawken, New Jersey, whose owners had paved over the front garden and removed the trees. Mrs. Trog makes another appearance.

I was never a very successful “hippie,” since I think taking drugs is stupid.

Like everyone else in my generation, I dabbled, and was unimpressed — if someone thinks that watching multicolored diamonds bleeding down a wall is “altered consciousness” and a gateway to wisdom, I pity them. During my Haight-Ashbury days, I followed my own path, and drugs were really not part of it.

LETHE was an old piece in which I used the image of the Juggernaut, which crushes people like a steamroller. It concentrated on showing how the poor are the real victims of drugs. I left the poem and did nothing with it, and then I realized that I had to counter this with something about the arrogance and stupidity of the “beautiful people” and their drug culture, which has much to do with why so many people think drugs are wonderful. The outrageous and needless drug death of the talented and beautiful young actor River Phoenix (who had the public persona of a squeaky-clean vegetarian) finally gave me the point of reference for the end of the poem.

When I give readings and talk about poetry, I am sometimes asked whether

drinking “helped” Poe or Dylan Thomas, and whether drugs “helped” Coleridge and the Beats. You only have to look at the burned-out wrecks that these artists became to realize that their (our) loss is what they might have done had they stayed at the peak of their powers and lived full lives. Consciousness — especially the poet’s consciousness — is all we have and all we need. Imagination provides the rest. That, plus a cup of good tea.

THE ISLES OF GREECE

PROMETHEUS ON FIFTH AVENUE was written back in 1970, and it used to be one of my “warhorse” poems at readings. I had not looked at it in years, and then realized that it should companion the other two Prometheus-themed poems in this book. Revisiting the poem, I discovered it was far less lucid than I had remembered, so I have revised it. The poem is based on the contrast between the Art Deco statue of Prometheus at Rockefeller Plaza (the 1933 work of sculptor Paul Manship), and, just a block away, the blackened pile of St. Patrick’s cathedral. (Yes, I know it’s been cleaned, but it was soot-black when I wrote the poem and for many years thereafter.)

The design of Rockefeller Center, with its bas-reliefs of Greek gods, always symbolized for me the true spirit of 20th century New York. St. Patrick’s always represented to me the worst of mankind’s repressive heritage. I sought in the poem to counter one world-view against the other. Man is not a sacrificial animal, and a god, as an extension of man’s qualities, is even less so. Prometheus is the antithesis of Jesus, and I am proud to call him my inspiration.

In PROMETHEAN EPILOGUE, the liberated Prometheus gets a little revenge on the vulture who had so long tormented him.

ATHENA AND MEDUSA gives the little-known background of how the hideous Gorgons came to be ser-

pent-headed monsters. There's a moral to it all, too — it is not given that those who are smarter are also blessed with kindness and empathy. Who is the worse monster in this story?

These two shorter poems, BURNT OFFERING and DIALOGUE are part of a small set of imaginary poems between the tormented Greek poet Anakreon and the beautiful young Harmodius. A glimpse into another world.

PROMETHEUS CHAINED was inspired, in a flash, by looking at a tiny painting by Riva Leviten. This miniature shows a hunched figure, blackened, covered with chains. Below him is what appears to be the skyline of city. Above him, menacing clouds swirl, with hag-like creatures flying in storm-clouds. Next to the hulking, imprisoned Titan is a tiny figure in a hooded robe, his face a hideous blue, looking ever so much like a malevolent monk. On the prisoner's breast is what appears to be an eagle.

My friend Riva says she has no idea what the painting means. What I have just described above may or may not be there — it's a very abstract work and some of these details could be just random turns of the brush. But the moment I saw the painting, I said, "Riva, this is the story of Prometheus, only it's a new version. Prometheus has not been made captive by Zeus. The humans have betrayed him, chained him up, covered him with tar. They mean to kill him. Zeus has come, in the form of an eagle, to gloat."

I went home, and wrote this poem. When I saw that it had many discrete parts, it occurred to me that it could be read aloud with musical interludes, and the Beethoven *Prometheus Variations* came to mind. I have not yet had a chance

to have the poem performed with the music, so I am not sure how well it will go, but my instincts tell me it will be a good fit. This is a very important poem for me, and it sums up some of my latest thoughts about myth, and what we can do with myth.

THE DEATH OF JOCASTA had a fascinating origin. In a class I was taking last year on Modern Critical Theory with Prof. Tamara Bolotow at University of Rhode Island, a class assignment consisted of writing a brief essay on any play in our anthology, using our choice of critical theories. I chose *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, and, not satisfied with the abrupt offstage suicide of Queen Jocasta, I decided to write a feminist essay on how Sophocles treated this tragic woman who does the "proper" thing, killing herself when she discovers she has been married to her own son for twenty years. I slept on the project, and when I awoke in the morning to write the essay, I said aloud, "Jocasta did not kill herself!" I opened the computer, intending to write my essay, and instead wrote a complete new scene in blank verse, "The Death of Jocasta," in which she tells her side of the story. The ending was inevitable, but I was surprised when the final, rhymed couplet just landed on the page.

This scene, with Greek chorus, was given a staged reading in April 2004 at Brown University by The Writer's Circle. A number of audience members mistook it for a new translation of a lost scene by Sophocles. The dedicated work of the actresses helped me to refine the scene and work out some lines that were less than clear. Thanks are due to Rose Pearson for choosing this piece for her workshop.