

Sonnets 1 - 240

Don Yorty

1

Looking at the springs, sitting in the sun
something at my nape begins to tickle
like the wind's moving a hair there, fickle
on my bare neck between the scalp and trunk.
I'm reading the poet Bill Kushner—Ah!
His April Poems are wonderful to hold.
It's April and I'm here with Bill—But no
Something's crawling on my skin. Is it? What?
I scratch and it vanishes like a thought
forgotten, but it's not. It walks. I pick
from my neck a beautiful round red tick
with many tiny moving legs, enough
to turn my thoughts from Bill to blood and death.
It knows I'm here, where I wanted to rest.

2

Every time I come it is the same, stream
running without end down the mountain stairs
rocks, giant eggs and heads of dinosaurs.
Elegant woods, soft, expanding gently
over everything, a promised dream
of health, happiness, not bombed little kids
without limbs, politicians getting rich
off suffering—Away! I want to be
among unfolding ferns and skunk cabbage
where the warm bright sun thaws the ground still cold
like Christ raising Lazarus. As I grow
old it seems possible to really love
even the startled snake scared in the leaves
but man—Who threw this bottle in the stream?

3

Silent morning, about to rain. Birds sing
conversations in the willows. One lone
dove coos and makes everything beautiful.
Cachito, quiet at my feet's sleeping
curled, paws over his nose, pointed dark ear.
Now I hear a bus down Avenue C
vanish, gone in its fumes. Voices appear
coming home or off to work. Way up here
I was happy, not a thing did I want
or fear unsure of what was real or not
then I heard my voice talking to myself
then the twittering of birds then a dove
then shouts of someone crazy on the block.
I thought I was alone, but I was not.

4

Jimmy, you let your dogs shit where they want
and you don't pick it up. It is your fault
when unsuspecting others come and walk
through the crap or their toddlers catch some bug.
But you're the one who's most unfortunate.
I would rather not have lived than be you.
What you do to others you do to you
and your dog's shit's the very least of it.
I think you've not been loved; you steal, don't give.
Once I wanted to kill you with a rock
smash your head in behind the hill—And fuck
no one would have known, but I let you live
and though I know your suffering's thorough
it's still my fault it's not a better world.

5

When I think of all the lovers I've had
it's a blur, I'm afraid, of quantity
but there was quality in quantity
angels found in the common crowd, riffraff
whose amorous wings, far from this fact called earth
took me up in heavenly abstraction
from the orgy really to the action
of orgasm when remembered or birth
or flame or premonition, Adam Eve.
Who can tell us what has been? For love you
have to wait, be as chosen as a Jew.
Love's not Godot though and fortunately
when I think of Love's smile softly I can
remember those lips. Whose? I've forgotten.

6

The flies and itching heat are gone at last.
Lovely autumn, just a walk from my door
golden and energetic, I adore
you here with me steadfast as the promise
of middle age. Birds rustle in the leaves.
Or are they footsteps coming from behind?
No, it's only a squirrel I turn to find
close to the bench as unafraid of me
by the East River in East River Park
which was built from the rubble of London
bombed, brought back, ballast in the emptied hulls
of battleships returning to New York
in World War II. Who really knows what was?
Brown and yellow, red they fall, spring's green buds.

You weren't the sort of friend to come and go.
 Then one day the spit dribbled down your chin
 and your chapped lips that never stopped talking
 of Raphael and Michelangelo
 grew silent. I knew that you had suffered
 more than I could know though I know one day
 perhaps I'll know. Right now I don't. I'd say,
 "Do you want us to say The Lord's Prayer
 together?" It seemed to give you comfort.
 Oh the nonsense of this world! Who can't see
 that we all come to this, both enemy
 and friend? It's so absurd not to love
 love till the end. In my pen when the ink
 runs out, are my thoughts somehow diminished?

We met by chance in a shadowy place
 not too far from the sea with enough light
 that we could look each other in the eye
 while another bent over your phallus
 whom you left then abandoned in the dark
 like peeling off a layer of your lust
 to come to me, the kernel of yourself
 directly, not stopping. I was the mark
 the spot, all calm, the center of your storm
 invulnerable place found in a dream
 where you could undrobe and embrace. You seemed
 like a friend I was seeing again or
 a familiar stranger who somehow knows
 the silent tender acquaintance of souls.

When I put headphones on it's like I'm deaf.
 The world goes by silently on its own
 like schools of fish in an aquarium
 or New Yorkers who appear to my left
 my right again almost like trash or leaves
 scattered by a thoughtless wind. I am not
 alone but it feels that way without sound
 until my CD spins Carlos Vives.
 Clapped to my head he sings, his song the world
 all that there is: Colombian rhythms
 that move my hips and rump along with them
 till in my ears and all around me whirls
 even the stranger who sits down to rest
 drawn from the soundless crowd to this park bench.

To know the truth we need to talk and read.
 Two at least must do it, talker talker
 writer reader revealing things that we
 already know so absolutely sure
 of our own selves because somebody else
 was there to tell us. Ramón Jiménez
 I know I lived because you did. You help
 me see all that I am, the new sunset
 sunrise, butterfly and happy sparrow
 God in the blue sky, the unparalleled
 burro in the meadow, joy and sorrow
 light and shadow reflected in the well.
 You can talk to friends even when they're dead.
 Their voices appear like words from a pen.

11

Work will overcome evil like the grass
covers dirty hypodermic needles
dog shit and broken glass. Good does prevail
while evil's jagged edge is dulled at last.
Anarchists threw bottles to hear them crash
and never bothered, spoiled brats, to sweep it up
not blaming themselves when children don't come
but let their pit bulls tear the tire to trash
where children used to swing. All day long they
gerrymandered the park bench to drink, drug
take a long piss when the beer filled them up.
Parasites can't pervade a healthy place.
Work scared away the lazy, forgotten
and children play where they once vomited.

12

Curtis, when we cleaned out your room I took
some of your books and the Mexican scarf
I bought you. Now it's mine. You could say ours.
It's stained in spots. Should I clean it? I look
see some of your blood, a cigarette burn.
I think I'll wear it like it is, mindful
of how you engaged the world in thoughtful
conversation. There's always more to learn.
I know with your scarf wrapped around my neck
it's curiosity keeps me going.
I'll never be afraid of death wanting
to know what's going to happen next.
Even when you went crazy I enjoyed
answering the phone and hearing your voice.

The hunter and the deer are in the woods.
 Right now no gunshots explode the quiet.
 Only the wind's unafraid to riot
 in a few leaves, shaking the branches good
 the living skeletons of wintertime.
 I hear some crows as far away as clouds
 flying down in circles starting to caw
 over the blue valley having just spied
 a doe's butchered guts steaming on the ground
 where squirrels rifle acorns and a young pine
 chopped down for Christmas has let a branch lie
 green as the summer when the insects sound.
 I hear a car come droning up the road
 father and son inside with orange hats on.

I'm happy when the day begins and I'm
 happy when it ends. I like to wake up
 and start again and I like to sleep. Does
 this mean I'll be happy dead or alive?
 The morning sun shines warmly on my head
 through the cold window. I'm reading a book.
 People get kidnapped, kidnappers wear hoods.
 It's tense and sad, by García Márquez.
 Interspersed with a few ironic laughs
 shadows of ladybugs move on the page
 elongate words, cast from the windowpane
 where they really crawl. An old lady has
 to be taken out and shot. I could cry
 as the year's trespassed by the new and flies.

It is snowing, it snowed, and it will snow
but the city won't cancel public school.
I have to go to work, something I do
whether I'm paid to or not. It is cold
outside. "Inside is warm." Did I say that
before or was it something that I dreamed?
Warm's a good sound. I teach people to speak
English. We know from opposites like cat
and dog, happy, sad, right, wrong, night and day.
Don't be afraid; we learn from our mistakes.
Repeat after me, "We all strive to say
the same thing." We understand and translate.
We laugh and say, "In the land of the blind
the man who is king has only one eye."

The setting sun and I are way above
the clouds and far below us I can see
the snowy ground. A man in front of me
puts headphones on. Almost everyone
is watching the movie. I see the earth's
a dark coal, a dying ember. The west
glows red and thin till it like the thinnest
eyelid closes and the day's gone, a dearth.
My destination is Salt Lake where friends
and perhaps fame await. In the window
I see myself transparent as a ghost
staring through my reflection. The heaven
grows dark with light. From a crevice of clouds
a star comes out and shines in my eye now.

I did something I wasn't going to do
Made the wrong choice and now I hate myself
Could cry, am so depressed, but why feel through?
Some jazz plays not far off. Oh what the hell
It's the first day of Lent. I'm at the gym
One guy has ashes on his head. Right foot
going through the jockstrap, I'm poised standing
on my left. To lose weight not to gain it!
Why oh why is it so hard to be thin?
Is thin handsome? Truly what's perfection
is finding joy in your own reflection.
I am ashamed I'm complaining. I am
like the masochist who says God is Love
then hangs Him beaten bloody on a cross.

I hate the month of February. I'm
glad it's short. If you have to live up north
for one thing it's cold. I do like them both
the hot and cold, but as I grow old I'm
much more inclined to the south and the sun
and its warmth. Today's not winter but spring.
The climate's changed. Here comes the sun. Birds sing.
Cachito's at the window I've opened.
His head first peeks, then his whole body's out
along the windowsill five stories up.
I whistle and he comes back in, abrupt
as if I'd given him a warning shout
afraid that he might fall. Do animals know
where they are? Well, when they don't, they howl.

My hands are numb and yet the sun is bright.
It's early spring when death becomes alive.
Crows caw, geese honk and the mallards quack at
the pond. The ice is gone, but at the back
of the barn there still was snow to be found
looking just like white flowers on the ground.
March and April are my favorite time.
Cold youth thinking only of itself smiles.
They are attractive in the photo, my
parents, young sailor and his happy bride
who has grown old and struggles up the steps
I slowly rise behind, waiting to step
into the kitchen which is warm unlike
the waking yard outside stabbed with wild chives.

Just as I write two hawks above the trees
fly fast away. Shadow of a buzzard
passes over my shoulder hopefully.
I was expecting rain, impeded start
but the sun's come out, made the day open
as a pursued lover turning might smile
and kiss me on the mouth. Surprise! I am
chosen and as happy as can be while
everything gets worse. Soldiers still fight
in Iraq, a stupid god awful war
I hadn't wanted, but then who am I?
The wind blows my pages while I write for
those killed in battle. Wind, give me the breath
the word eternal not alive or dead.

The butterflies of spring are small and dark
not colorful and bright like butterflies
of summer hovering from flower to flower
in beauty's camouflage. Two butterflies
on the asphalt road laid with silver stone
though small stand out. Because they're dark I see
wings lined with white flutter and rise up, gone
in blurry jagged flight through the bare trees.
Where branches, rusty buds blow in the wind
there I lose sight of them like a prayer
vanishes when other thoughts intrude. In
the woods a bird whistles and I'm aware
of the three notes, a path I do not know
although I've walked here many times before.

The fortunate fish escaped from the net
knows what it is like to go to heaven.
Is life the net? Is that what Buddha meant?
Are the holes in the hands the nails nail in
not only bleeding, but open, the wound
the way out? No one answers the question
what is it like to be dead? Very soon
those we love are and we do follow them.
We go where love goes though it be the end.
In Iraq they say militants kidnapped
three Japanese humanitarians
and plan to set them on fire. More yet
yes much more suffering. Will it ever
stop? The wise may stop, but the world never.

Today class was canceled. I didn't know.
 It's Sunday afternoon. Battery Park's
 over there with its benches and bowers.
 I've never been there really so I'll go.
 Parks are the same. Whether it's Tuileries
 or Chapultapec, there are birds, trees, squirrels
 the insane with the sane. Here the whole world
 comes to see the Statue of Liberty.
 Though we speak many tongues, every word
 was the same gurgle in a baby's mouth.
 Observing tourists I can figure out
 who strolls in love and who strolls together
 for protection. Families stroll, children
 run. I'm in class too sitting in the sun.

The sun is bright reflected on water
 shimmering it to pieces. With too much
 light I'm blind. They say when we see God up
 close we die. I'm pretty sure I've never
 looked on God up close but every day
 along the way see God in every face.
 We try to add God up in countless space
 and God keeps coming. Generations, waves
 burn around the Statue of Liberty
 sparkle and ripple the Hudson River
 lapping its fire right up to me. We are
 all in flames and existence I can see
 flies up completely still on outspread wings
 a seagull hovering against the winds.

My cat and I play chasing each other.
 He jumps while I write and then stretches out
 full length in back of the warm computer
 to claw my hand when it comes in sight. Ouch!
 Ow! I say, but Cachito doesn't care
 about a little cry. Now if I die
 and go to heaven, it wouldn't be fair
 if Cachito dead and gone couldn't fly
 to meet me. Hand in paw forever
 like friends jumping from the World Trade Center
 or tourists who're caught in stormy weather
 we will go or we won't go together
 having fun. What's a little blood? I scratch.
 Cachito bites me and I bite him back.

Petting my cat is like remembering
 the tenderness of childhood. Once far off
 I used to retreat to the valley, soft
 between my mother and father sleeping
 and unafraid of any nightmares then.
 Woods now are full of murderers and ticks.
 There were Indians when I was a kid
 hiding in the branches, but only friends.
 I couldn't imagine real things like thorns
 that meant me any harm. Running alone
 through briars, swamps I jumped from stone to stone
 as unharmed as the bee caught in the Rose
 of Sharon's petals that I closed buzzing
 against my fingers unstung but touching.

Everyone's seen a sunset. Some are glad.
Some are sad. Everyone sees the sun set
with different eyes, laughs or cries, but each loves best
what each fears most to lose and what each has
each holds from harm asleep in their tired arms.
My mother held me walking through the woods
to sit me on a hill to tie my shoe
as if it were a city stoop. Ants swarmed
over me pinching my clothes and skin, stung
me like Willa Cather said it snows on
cemetery and farm. Mother was wrong
to have thought it was ours, the town she'd flung
me down on, her little boy in danger
who ran away a scared confused stranger.

Writing's a thing of opposites, putting
on clothes, taking them off, whispering shouts
starting a fire and then putting it out.
You don't want to burn the pages. Writing
flames, when words are on fire, they take flight
toward the horizon in an open mind
and they're more combustible when they rhyme.
Very much like birds words fly out of sight
before us on our journey. What's thinking
but flying, following thoughts? Why are they
always words? Love's the word I strive to say
to you, believing it the place where striving
ceases, there pain ends, and even the best
of words. Love we'll remember after death.

It wasn't love—I only thought it was.
 It's true there is no fool like an old one.
 People who believe in ghosts do see some.
 The halls grow dark and there they are because
 they're what we think they are full of powers.
 The mind is a real place where thoughts abound
 with speech and ears that listen hearing sound,
 giggling leprechauns and flying saucers.
 Do you ever think when someone's raving
 in the street, some pathetic lunatic
 it isn't he's the one who's really sick
 but us buffered from the truth he's seeing?
 What's most important? Why do you think so?
 Do you actually know what you know?

In the early dewdrop chilly morning
 I'm alone gardening. What a delight!
 It's been hot and noisy. Now's a quiet
 tranquil dawn. New York City's still sleeping
 tired out. It was loud. Don't wake the city.
 I want to hear waking in La Plaza
 beds of dark roses and gladiolas
 sparrows chirping in the willows. Beauty's
 a lot of work and Manhattan's landscape's
 a flower itself of stone, desire and sweat.
 Yes I am determined and alive yet
 with time to spare but not one hour to waste.
 Reader, you might not know this ages hence
 but my hands are dirty as I write this.

Today for the first time in my whole life
I can't find the phone. Where did I put it?
I'm so confused that it scares me. I quit.
Am I crazy? This is way too much strife.
Maybe it's Alzheimer's. Attached to cords
you could follow you'd find phones at their ends
in the old days. Now they're where you put them.
When I see people talk to themselves or
gesticulate in the street they are not
necessarily nuts but on their phones
talking to somebody. No one's alone
anymore. Times change. There's nothing about
it you can do, but if you don't change, you
don't move, and you're run down by the future.

A cawing crow gets louder and louder
invisible bird disturbing my thoughts.
Another joins in and one becomes us
as I too am drawn in and get closer
taken up in a fight in a tree top
about what? Shut up! Life's a clamor, more
unexpected than not, discordant more
than concordant that won't stop till it stops.
The cawing crows turn into splashing cars
on the nearby highway. It rained all night
lightning and thundered, noises that I like
when I'm warm, inside and the storm is far.
Ah! there's a lull quiet as my cat is
watching for moles and mice by the trellis.

Animals are afraid of the same things
 we are, but we are afraid of more than
 them. Perhaps it is better to be an
 ant up on the wall or the cat watching
 it. My cat wants to sit in my lap and
 though I'm already writing with notebook
 on knee, pen at work, up he leaps and looks
 for a place to curl and rest around my hand.
 Cachito lingers to get comfortable
 but he can't, and jumps to a shelf, sniffs at
 ivy that is plastic—Can't chew on that!
 Noise of a truck grows on the road, rumbles
 ominous sounds that Cachito does mind.
 Me too, but I've no one to hide behind.

I'm ready sitting on the dock looking
 at all the work before me. Today's sun
 breaks from the tree tops and the sparrows come
 and start to dart disturbing the floating
 sky rippling on the pond where I've noticed
 an aquatic plant has invaded from
 where I don't know. It is an alien
 spreading oval leaves over the surface.
 Green long purple slimy stems have rooted
 in the muddy bottom where I must dive
 to wrench and pull them from the dark that I've
 always been afraid of. But determined
 I'll weed what promises with its presence
 to drag the swimmer down if I let it.

A little spider on the written page
looks up at me. I do not bother her
nor does she me where I have come to lay
myself down in the grass like a brother
Queen Anne's Lace crowning our heads and blue tufts
of wild anise. This field used to be corn.
Now Daddy's old and doesn't do that much
work. It's a luxury to have been born
where I can see eye to eye with flowers
swirls, spirals whose minuscule white petals
blanket the whole ground, white as another
page where I may write but never settle
just like this meadow I am sitting on
will rise back up itself when I am gone.

I see how strong a fragile thing can be.
Look! A butterfly comes fluttering
over its own reflection hovering
out in the middle of a pond so deep
and close you'd think no insect strength could last
the distance needed to reach land, yet up
it goes above the wide-mouthed bass that jumps
and death itself waits for it to stick fast
get soggy and drown. Like a visible song
singing against all odds in gusts of wind
that ought to knock it down, it's carried in
every breath beyond the half sunk log
coming to spread its beating wings and soar
vanishing in the branches on the shore.

I overturned the rowboat planning soon
to row, looking as I turned it over
for water snakes or wasps in their paper
nests, but there was nothing there, it was true
so I reached out to get the oars and saw
appearing in a quiet growing swarm
hornets, a hundred or so out of the warm
earth from a small hole in alarm and awe.
Around where I had plunked the old boat down
I woke them up to come out and inquire,
“Who’s shaking the ground?” They seemed like a fire
I’d somehow ignited, jagged soft sounds
I’d stirred in the water, my hand through fronds
the murmuring grass, a breeze off the pond.

The last two swallows swoop down over all
going toward the barn flying from sight.
In ripples of wind out of the west light
dies in many clouds and in darkness falls
on the pond. Shadows in leaves, the trees grew
black in flat silhouettes against the sky
losing detail, keeping form. Good-bye. I
too become invisible. A few
Fireflies blink, the crickets and katydids
chirr and a frog croaks making me feel it
is my soul. But that’s the night. Bats fade, flit.
What I’m writing is vanishing. What was
I thinking? I can’t see my way home nor
the branch across my face suddenly formed.

This is a place of solace. What's sacred
is partly made by humans. Here's remained
a quiet glade forgotten and unclaimed
till my brother found it while he hunted.
Who would want to leave it? In the woods, old
as a hundred years or more, sandstone carved
and laid with great care is circling the dark
spring's bubbles that are churning the sand cold.
Constantly moving—it will never freeze—
the water is delicious, wide and deep
where I've come down the steps to kneel and steep
my hand cupped and about to drink at ease
and at peace with my brother standing there
a quiet man even quieter here.

I was in the pond for two hours today
diving down to pull up the matted roots
of the invading plants as the day cooled
with dark clouds masking the sun. On I stayed
until my hands and fingers wrinkled and
now I've caught a cold. You ask was I dumb
to do it? No. Though I grew numb, work's done
and tomorrow's going to storm. My plans
are do what you can, then wait and see. Here
I am. Today's gloomy and so heavy
I could pull it like a curtain ready
to reveal what's really behind, the gears
of existence turning. Ouch! Flies biting
keep me from writing. The rain is coming.

At any moment it's going to rain
making the world for miles around all wet.
As the sky's growing darker the leaves get
anxious—Or is it me? No, I remain
calm on this comfortable rock and see
it's the branches above start to rustle.
Crickets chirring whir. Wild anise tussles
with the wind while the butterflies and bees
cling to its blue petals. Delicious leaves!
I chew on one; it's sweet as the first drops
hit my shoulder quick as bullets—Cold stops
me from writing this. Yow! Where was I? Geeze
It's like I bleed. My pencil tears the page.
Here I have to stop and let the storm rage.

In an abandoned web the ringneck twined
with its tail held fast in the twisted strands
which I gently tugged at with careful hands
not wanting to break the delicate spine
of one so young. When I went in the house
my father said, "Your cat is killing snakes
in the cellar." I went straight down to shake
that cat and say, "A snake is not a mouse."
It doesn't help though. One was real little
like the one I'd just saved and crawled away
but the other one's beautiful length lay
severed in three. I was glad it was still—
But oh! the upper part opened its jaws
and coiled into a howl that wouldn't close.

You do not tell a snake which way to twist
its limb nor cats where they can or can't walk.
And the same holds true for the sonnet, its
thoughts are its own. Through me you hear it talk
say what it wants. I'm the dumb man who shows
his hands for meaning. What are words? They are
signs that tell you it's dawn, but the dawn goes
independently on its own, and words
are no different. I like my words, don't get me
wrong. I work hard, and am the one who strives
for you, as important as me, to read
what isn't me, but meant to be. What I've
left you, reader, are these words I'm writing
that will tell you when I'm gone it's morning.

I hear Dad's chainsaw echo down the field
cutting firewood for December's stove. Her
knife in hand Mom chops the cabbage she'll seal
in jars pouring boiling water over
it first with a tablespoon of sea salt.
Come November she'll have her sauerkraut.
Summer yet, but going, and not the fault
of summer that it goes. I want to shout
"Don't go!" but that won't stop its going though and
feel it in my bones. I put away the
stuff that stays and pack the stuff that goes. A
wasp falls down along the windowpane and
curls up on the windowsill. Leaves burn
and swallows go before they can return.

Everything's happening at once. Ugh!
Exhausted, nothing done, at a flower
where I just saw the most beautiful bug
I thought about staying for an hour
to simply watch that spectacle of real
gold and black, indigenous art deco
on an indigenous plant. Ever feel
that you're from the beginning of time, old
as anyone who's felt the same warm sun?
Two rocks on the road become gray squirrels
with bushy tails. Look how they run! Here comes
a car, an awful squashing crushing world.
In a tree the squirrels mock me. They squawk
and chatter, "You can't catch us!" On I walk.

It's the same moon, but a different world.
When we were only little boys at night
we looked at this half moon glowing as bright
outshining all the stars. Now lights unfurled
by passing cars shine brighter and I can
count six planes in the sky without trying
blinking like fireflies in the cold dwindling
irrelevant as distant toys. A span
of time has wrinkled and changed our faces
yet what has changed? Friend, here we are at last
returning with the moon to hug steadfast
like the mountain stream gone many places
never really strays or ever parted
having always flowed from where it started.

Come on, Old Sun, I'm rooting for you. Please
 break from the clouds and make the morning warm.
 Send all the rainy cold up north to freeze
 the melting icebergs and undo the storm
 about to come. Let me get something done
 if one small task. Let it be good. Inform
 the Fates to grace today. Let work be fun.
 I'm only human, vulnerable flesh
 and blood. There's lots to do. Let me choose one
 job to concentrate on and accomplish.
 Around me is a forest where I've come
 under the trees to clear a little brush.
 Help me see the briar from the berry
 what to let live and destroy completely.

Morning puts me in touch with everyone
 who's gone before sharing this worldly space
 lifting their eyes as best they could to face
 another day, the same new rising sun
 born on the windowpane. An old midwife
 mother told me during delivery
 you don't so much deliver the baby
 as the baby delivers itself. Life
 knows when to come out. Hey, the deeds of ants
 and men have changed this planet. I teach. School
 is where my students come to learn the rules
 the best they can to speak English. The plant
 that's on the windowsill works like the rest.
 I breathe, you breathe, we breathe, it breathes one breath.

I have just understood what a gift is.
The woman rushing to catch the train finds
she made it in just as the doors behind
close. Gratefully exhaling then she gives
me a smile seeing I am the watcher
in on her adventure as her breasts quake
in the lurches of departure that make
them sway together under her sweater
my understanding being as they shook
inviting bodice of an urban goddess
not bothering to hide herself, happiness
isn't modest and could care less who looks
on our otherwise mundane way, a gift
letting me join her joy before she sits.

I am singular and we are plural.
I see us walking on the busy street
and waiting for the bus. Each day I meet
him, Walt Whitman, whose kind face I see all
over the place. Or I am in his brain
because I think that poet isn't dead
anymore than I live. Grass in his stead
comes through the sidewalk's cracks. Let it remain
unnoticed as the air we breathe. New York
City is just a poet's thought and we
are written on the page eternally
living then as well as now. Yet time's short.
It's important to talk and say what is.
I think of him. I am a thought of his.

The sun is going down on New York Town.
The tugboat tugs the barge with all its might
The young boy does a wheelie on his bike
The currents of the river swell with sound
It's really getting dark, but there is light
on the water and the sky reflected
in bright ripples along the west, not red
in this sunset, but a radiant white.
Light glows among the topless spires and spreads
giving all of southern Manhattan life
going where it goes without any strife.
How easy it does seem to die. That said
mustn't cry. Happiness makes us fearless.
We're light and go with light no more no less.

It's so depressing having this damned cold.
Wait a minute, I have to sneeze. Achoo!
Sick is having nothing to inspire you.
Me, I cannot write. Yet I will unfold
the paper, spread it out nice and flat, get
my pencil and begin at once to face
the empty page which is the only place
inspiration can be captured and set
as you would a diamond placing it
to sparkle with an ever changing light
in the precious nuanced angles of sight.
Easy to say. It's action makes it fit.
Even doing today what stays half done
tomorrow I can finish and go on.

It's in the doing that you get the strength
to continue what you do and succeed
at last. Experience is what you need
and if too young for that, then faith at length
will get you where you want to go, step at
a time, when heart and mind are one. If not
the heart will start to go, but then will stop
never wanting what the mind wants. My cat
contented sleeps away the morning while
I write carefully carelessly.
I'm not perfect. I make mistakes I see
and cross out. I don't erase. I smile. My
pencil's lead ends before the eraser.
Cross it out and go on. It's easier.

Why is there never ever enough time?
Why can't I linger longer on the strand
with book or lover or pencil in hand?
Why is it that I have to die? Sublime
inspired thoughts may last beyond the grave
but are our lives something that we'll forget
gone in spite of protest? "Wait a minute!
I still have got important things to say.
Hey, I'm not finished yet." I just woke up
and it's time to get out of bed myself
wash, dress and put things away on a shelf
where I'll forget them like a broken cup
a favorite I've saved until too full
I'll throw it out, not finally time's fool.

I'm cleaning into every corner.
I don't want any dust. When I am through
the sun will shine in clear windows and you
will see the majestic willows over
across the street are looking back at us.
I promise. You used to see the World
Trade Center from this room. It kind of whirled
around and then was gone, a lot of dust
covering us, smoke and a burnt bad smell.
But that's now long ago and a busy
city like Manhattan is always dirty
so when somebody sweeps it, you can tell.
Like editing words, clearing clutter shows
honest as a poem the surface below.

I remember you because you look like
someone I already know or knew, not
good looking in the common way. So what.
Do looks really matter? Thoughtful and kind
you'd make a good lover, always faithful.
Beauty just lays there and wants you to do
all the work, write sonnets, adore and coo.
Beauty's lonely. I was once beautiful.
You'd want the best for me till I'm better
than what I am, changed by the manifest
understanding that you can't go against
the flow of knowing nothing's singular
nothing is alone. As I write this down
I wish that I were smiling, but I frown.

Lovely old tree covered with moss and vines
your leaves have fallen and the driving rain's
soaked you from top to bottom. I remain
here with you glistening too straight and fine
writing a poem under your naked limbs
immovable and resolute as you
who can be made into a house or flute.
Even my pencil's made of wood and in
my hand, old tree with me both near and far
we move, your written leaves along the ground
the earthworms too below us digging down
happy I'm sure to be just who they are
there in your clutching roots shunning the light
I need so much to see the words I write.

Is it necessary to rhyme, to be
nailed down to a certain philosophy?
Inside the walls of our skulls are we free?
What if we didn't have the eyes to see
or ears to hear a word? Would we feel thought
like sun on a cold day? The squirrel shows thought
scurrying up the bark where a smart moth
has thought to camouflage itself. I fought
with my thoughts in a familiar woods
lost and afraid my thoughts were not that good
until I stood with trees and the sun there
in the spring where bubbles broke into air
as if below some giant belched out its
breath after puffing up and saving it.

The cold makes me aware I'm in my skin
and never can get out of it. My hat
and gloves I'd thoughtlessly forgotten at
the start, zipping up, putting both hands in
my pockets, my scarf gone around each ear.
Thanksgiving was warm and wet. Its moisture's
formed little balls of ice without measure
over the forest's floor. Startling the leaves a deer
takes off, white tail up, though I've no rifle.
The earth hardens under foot not of course
like a phallus or hate, but more like a corpse
the worms won't eat till spring. As beautiful
as the cold is it is only the dead
can stay. We'll drink wine by the fire instead.

None of my CDs are in their proper
covers and I can't find the song I want.
Outside a dog is barking, barking. Why
won't it stop? The day is dark and dreary
raining wet and cold. I will need a huge
umbrella wherever I go. Details
dictate what I do and I know I must
watch out. I'm peeling an onion now.
This layer's rotten, what follows is not.
Here some may stop and not peel back the truth
of what turns out to be good for future
nourishment. Why fault a little onion
and curse and rue the day? Hear sad Billie
Holiday sing happily come what may.

Things are often more beautiful at a
distance, but not you. The closer the more
inevitable you become. Before
I thought beauty was what I saw, that the
superficial awed, but I was wrong. Your
skin is really you as fragrant as the
rose whose tenderness exudes its soul. A
truth is always true. I am no longer
young and though I know you would like to kiss
you must think of the future and begin.
Love though sinless would be completely sin
if from your lovely limbs more loveliness
doesn't spring. This spring is my sacrifice
and joins me with you in begetting life.

Bird in the tree you are singing to me
as if you know and care that I am here
each note intended to put in my ear
a song. What is alone can be pretty
sharing itself, staccato between the
profound pause and stillness near and far.
Unseen the melody is all you are
bird off on some limb that is budding a
leaf as I write listening and the winds
and other choruses, even the car
screeching its brakes do not startle, just are.
The cat licks the hair on my leg and winds
around a thigh, it too meaning one thing
this sonnet is taking shape while you sing.

I was up late and woke late too, sleepy
with a dull brain to figure out the day.
Right from the start Cachito's in the way
biting on my ankles so carefully
he doesn't make them bleed holding his paws
around one foot hanging on from study
to living room. Pay attention to me
is what he is saying, dragged as he bawls
a plea common to all. There's lots to do
and it's soon time to go, but in the hall
Cachito wants to play. What if I stall
surrendering just a minute or two
and let go of the day, throw him to catch
his tattered toy mouse to run and bring back?

Where is the snow that only yesterday
clung to the four corners of the sidewalk
and in the rectangular playground stalked
freezing the toddlers thawed out now who play
under the spiraling buds grown so thick
on every sprouted limb they poke green
as the grass between the cracked macadam seen
already in the sun? The warm wind licks
the daffodils and hyacinths awake.
Me too. I couldn't sleep if I wanted
to. Instead I will walk with contented
old friends through Central Park, going this way
or that following a path. Just talking
of practically nothing will be something.

Cachito brought me a mouse while I slept
 waking to find the gift dead at my hand
 when all at once the mouse jumped up and ran
 for the surrounding shadows. The cat leapt
 after, out of the dark batting the mouse
 into the air. It stood its ground when it
 came down into the same predicament
 squeaking a futile defense. The cat pounced
 and caught it in its sharp and gentle jaws
 alive like a delivered baby, raw
 fetus with its fur torn off, a red ball
 licked well beyond recall, what I just saw
 up on its haunches bravely cowering
 nothing now—ah! but nothing was something.

My Spanish-speaking students ask me where
 the English language comes from. I tell them
 from the Anglo-Saxons, but the conquest
 of England by France made their native tongue
 lower class, so crude and illiterate
 that even to this day fuck, fart, and shit
 aren't said in polite society. We're
 ashamed and self-hating hearing our Dame
 English is partly French. I ask, "Is there
 any French in Spanish like rapprochement
 or double entendre?" They all adamantly
 shake their heads no, no, no, till one student
 looks at the rest and says, "There's déjà vu."
 They have to agree: "Déjà vu, that's true."

I used to clean cat vomit up, but now
 I don't unless it's in the path I walk.
 Otherwise it can stay unlike broken
 glass or garbage with day old fish in it.
 In less than an hour or less than that
 the cat comes back to lick and eat it up.
 You have to have the patience to leave it
 forgotten as you should an argument
 on politics. To change your mind you must
 change yourself and some people are afraid
 to be someone else. Have you ever met
 a racist who wasn't stupid? It is
 sad but true, you can't make a rock into
 a jewel no matter how you want to.

Had I left sooner or later it would
 all have been different, but I didn't
 and got into two arguments, one in
 a store and one on the sidewalk about
 the neighborhood with two freeloaders who
 do nothing, yet want something for nothing.
 Today is Good Friday. You know something?
 The world's violent. I stop at a stoop
 to scribble this on the only piece of
 paper that I have, using the back of
 a pack of batteries on the flat of
 the cardboard, what space I can make use of.
 A young man leaving looks at me askance
 as if I'm someone crazy here by chance.

Happy children hunted for eggs and went
 bursting through the bushes. I hurriedly
 made love before that unexpectedly
 standing up expecting any moment
 students who didn't come. Morning's over.
 The afternoon has found a warm bright sun.
 Today was many people, now they're none.
 It is only you and me, dear reader.
 The shadow of my pencil's on the page.
 Don't think I'm writing of the tomb. I'm not.
 We hid the eggs and kids turned over rocks
 or climbed a branch, things we did at their age.
 "I'll see you next year," one smiling boy said
 biting off a yellow marshmallow head.

As the Pope is dying it is raining
 in New York. I'm remembering the last
 time that this happened—Time goes so fast!
 I was in Philadelphia cooking
 in an Irish pub. One of the cooks was
 upset that the new Pope had suddenly
 died. At the Vatican the Papal See
 was having to choose again. The month was
 October and it was also raining
 pouring. Thunder shook the cook with holy
 terror as he worked over the flames, God's
 judgment somehow on him and frightening.
 Although the Pope had died in far off Rome
 here there was lightning in Philly his home.

If you can tell me, "I can't," then you can.
 If you can spell cat, you can spell anything.
 This is what I tell my new students when
 they falter stammering and stuttering.
 "Go talk among yourselves, participate.
 Write. Don't erase. Cross out mistakes. Go on.
 Neatness gets no points. Why? Because it's fake.
 Be spontaneous. Do what you want. Have fun."
 "But what about people who are crazy,"
 you ask, "or East Village anarchists who
 do nothing, but fuck things up and then leave?"
 When you see enemies and hate them too
 wanting to kill or maim at least causing
 them pain, say, "Good morning," and keep walking.

Gay guy walks by in extremely tight pants
 nothing left to the imagination.
 Crazy man sings who is a Jamaican
 by the accent he relentlessly chants
 not scaring off anyone in the park.
 Other than that it's quiet on this first
 day of spring. Winter's dead. Smile. Painful birth
 is over. Warmth is in the breeze, in dark
 there's light. The sun is finally shining.
 Maybe he can walk, the man who's about
 to approach in the wheelchair, his hand out
 asking for money. He could be faking
 but I grab at my change and hold it out
 giving him the benefit of a doubt.

Loose pencils make everything dirty
 rubbing against them. If you don't contain
 them in a box in your bag don't complain
 because you have to expect that really
 and can't begrudge the smudge. Gladly I sit
 write with this uncontained pencil of mine
 trying to measure the mile I've just climbed
 which is not the same mile as I walk it
 in the city from schoolhouse to flat park.
 I love New York, don't get me wrong, but way
 up the mountain on a rock I can take
 off my clothes for a little while and start
 to rest until the rain and cold make me
 dress again. There's nothing like nudity.

I saw the bluebird first, its beating soft
 red breast. Young water snake, I looked for it
 next settled near the dock but it hadn't
 risen yet or already'd slithered off.
 The pond's cold. I won't dive in. It is flogged
 by nasty winds abstractly shattering
 the sky on its surface like leaves fluttering
 while real fallen ones nearby jump like frogs.
 I'm so happy I can't believe my eyes.
 The barn swallows have returned from the south
 coming like a promised kiss on the mouth.
 Friends are welcome even when a surprise.
 Pleasant remembered all but forgotten
 thoughts bring the warm sun with them when they come.

After a windy night the ground is full
of wilting blossoms on broken branches
that are scattered all around. Their chances
looked good to grow and bear fruit unmindful
of summer lightning and the autumn fire.
Oak leaves so young their color's not yet green
linger yellow and there is still a gleam
on the red edges of acorn buds. Dire
fate has placed all of them here on this dark
unbending branch that refused to give way
and snapped where their heavy bearded stem stayed
attached to pliant bark becoming hard.
Poor things that have to end before they start.
What did God have in mind? It breaks my heart.

It is cold enough that my urine steams
the dark dead leaves spattering them even
more darkly. My own constant smoky breath
vanishes in the branches overhead
where the new unfurling leaves themselves could
be soft hazy flames burning off the wood.
Right now there is no end to what I hear
which is the quiet. No human sound's here
but the loose pencil on the page forming
the words you read. As I write I'm seeing
faces form in the bark of trees around
us watching. Now an insect's voice whirs round
kind of like a distant singing woman's.
Even alone humans come to humans.

Frog eggs or clouds reflected in the pond?
 Frog eggs. Everything has its opposite.
 If you have happy thoughts, you'll have sad ones.
 Just thought is what I try to meditate.
 Startled the mallard hen bursts from the breast
 and flies low over the water leaving
 a dozen eggs there in her grassy nest.
 Anything sudden might be death coming.
 That's why we jump at sound. That's why we jump
 at sights abruptly perceived, fast awake
 when the sudden snake uncoils, not a stump
 out of sight. Not that we're afraid of snakes.
 The black fly caught on the frog's sticky tongue
 was comfortably there then poof it's gone.

I've just spilled some coffee on Bernadette's
 new book leaving the aromatic stain
 drying on the pages that will remain
 as long as her words are there. Those sonnets
 of hers smell so good you can taste them. She
 does put a lot of food in a poem.
 There might as well be coffee on them. Mmmm
 reading Bernadette will make you hungry.
 Baudelaire says poets and cooks must really
 appeal to all the five senses to keep
 us present. Bernadette could cook, not sleep
 in the East Village where the night's noisy
 so she left us to live in the quiet
 country. That doesn't mean she won't riot.

A squirrel just walked across my shoulder
 like I wasn't there and didn't matter
 part of the bench, a kind of nothingness
 who thought for a moment that a hand pressed
 on him like an old friend's familiar
 enough to touch him, but that's peculiar
 and much more likely a panhandler's strange
 intruding one about to ask for change.
 Or could it be that suddenly a crazy
 man was about to grab and strangle me?
 Calmly getting ready for a fight I
 saw the bushy tail right between my eyes
 not a friend's or beggar's fingers uncurled
 no murderer's. Death shrank into a squirrel.

Right now I am sitting in the best spot
 in the park. Here the sun's still coming down.
 Some terrible happy little boys are
 tearing up a bush in a game of war.
 In a slower less violent race a
 cripple walks by dragging his left leg that
 I hardly notice looking at his face.
 He's handsome, but also keeps his own pace
 which gives to him, more than his beauty, grace.
 A man shakes his cane as if to give chase
 to the boys who do take off running past.
 The ravaged bush is almost as it was.
 Off the old man goes himself with his cane
 tap tap tap tap tapping taps all the same.

Old childhood friend, how are you doing on
 this day the politicians have chosen
 to remember you and those like you who
 go off and die in war? I know for you
 it wasn't patriotic duty. As
 I recall, you were confused, mad at yourself
 fallen out of love with the girl you'd knocked up,
 and went to Vietnam. Your son's grown up
 has children of his own. Your folks and mine
 are still alive and lunch together. I
 looked for your name on the black marble wall
 so many names I couldn't read them all
 sobbing and wondering why it is right
 I am still here and you were sacrificed.

I'm cooking while I write this sonnet
 poaching asparagus sprinkling them all
 with some chili powder shaking the stalks
 squeezing on a lemon. These tastes will set
 and mix as the vegetables lose steam
 and begin to chill. Heat, boil chicken broth
 an onion and garlic. Spoon off the froth.
 Dice tomatoes and dump that in. Then clean
 chop parsley and water cress together.
 Wait letting the soup reduce simmering.
 Kill the fire as you drop the herbs in
 to enhance their color and their flavor.
 Overcooked food fades on the tongue. Food's heard.
 Say bread. You see and smell and taste the word.

My mouth is as slimy as a warm snail.
Walking down the mountain navigating
sharp rocks and the loose snapping sticks lying
in wait to strike at my legs on the trail.
All that is wet is oozing out of me.
My perspiration soaks my clothes and skin
and makes my face a place where things can cling,
part of a spider's web, dead moth, a leaf.
Kneeling at the spring, I lower my hand
and bring a palm of it up to my mouth
gulp, dip and gulp and when I've had enough
splashing my neck and face as the deer and
green flies settled to drink my drying sweat
fly off again. The end of thirst is rest.

My only brother with his bulldozer
pushed the brush away from the day lilies
uprooting thorns and sumac completely
around the bed revealing for Mother
those common flowers in all their glory.
Now if only she'll come to look at them
making her way to the lower yard and
sitting on the old swing near the swamp see
how the hard green stalk shooting up becomes
petals sharp as comets like the fireworks
are going to explode on July the Fourth.
Look, here she comes to watch the explosions
as the night with a swallow swoops above.
There's nothing animates us more than love.

It rained all around us, but here last night
the valley got soaked, not in the mountain.
We saw the lightning and hoped uncertain.
The heat and biting flies are gone. My sight
is like I took off my glasses, subtle
haze, loss of definition in a mist.
The luxurious gusts of wind I've wished
for have come across the water, ripple
and bathe me with the promise of a storm.
How calm the world is waiting, the brown field
the dried up grass. More and more I can feel
drops of rain on my arm begin to form
as the wind grows heavier with the wet
like notes a bird sings that aren't finished yet.

As I put my nose in milkweed blossoms
their resemblance to lilacs reminding
me now of the cold early spring sniffing
up the heavy fragrance happily some
bees move around me in such a good mood
none of them try to sting and keep humming
along my skin and the flower grazing
and finding there what will be honey food.
Fluttering butterfly startling my eyes
sticks its slender black thin proboscis in
the abundant overflowing. Walking
home patchouli's in the air, a surprise
that's wonderful because I like the smell
but if you don't, it must be living hell.

She completely sparkles, the girl talking
 to her father in a conversation
 that must be a little funny because
 she starts to laugh as well as talk, talking
 of her final destination perhaps
 leaving this very morning on a trip
 from Lancaster on the platform going
 east to Philadelphia, New York and
 every other point. Then her mother
 who's been watching men working on the tracks
 finally joins in and starts to point this
 way and that—Which way is the train coming?
 Each wears a shirt a shade of blue, the girl's
 with stars. Above the sky is blue. Clouds swirl.

At the wedding not only the living
 but the dead are also here and all those
 who aren't born yet, here I suppose because
 there are more of them than us not living
 with the sea and pines to our right and left
 ghost relatives and babies yet to bloom.
 Life is a garden seeded by the groom.
 At Pat and Grace's wedding I was Best
 Man. There I gave a toast about the love
 that had brought all of us together
 a love that's still bringing us together.
 I see old friends Tony and Sylvia
 sit, the past present. Here comes the bride. Wow!
 We stand and all look back to what is now.

We'd be just as comfortable naked
 but keep some clothes on anyway just
 in case shy hikers should stumble on us
 sunning by the stream. The unexpected
 often happens watching what's all around.
 You point out the bright cardinal flower
 and I the heron that looms before our
 eyes gone in the lumbering air unbound.
 We talk of favorite authors, Catullus
 Whitman, Hawthorne, intimate as lovers.
 I wish that I'd brought some Willa Cather.
 If only you'd come to read her, I trust
 you'll find her as I do, that violet
 there clinging to the cliff. Do you see it?

The poet slides on her bottom stubborn
 as a turtle over slippery stones
 sitting inching picking up the large ones
 that hinder her path dropping them to form
 an island in the current that's rushing
 at us. I make my way down the stream's slope
 walking as best as I can, waver, grope
 ready to fall and hurt myself descending.
 Then safe up to my waist, then to my neck,
 "What is that flower?" I ask. "Jewel Weed."
 "It's beautiful. I think we're in Eden."
 "We are. I can see a snake," Bernadette
 says—it is peeking from the rocks—and glides
 spreading out her arms swimming by my side.

Cooking something is like you're saying it
 saying just what you think when you make food
 I mean give words to it. Poets are good
 cooks. Even after her stroke Bernadette
 can still bake a chicken, prepare and stick
 it in the oven, bring it out just right.
 Phil grills sausage and sets them in our sights
 thick sensual ready to bite. Who mixed
 the salad with herbs from the woods and greens
 chilled and tossed naked with fresh vinaigrette?
 Who put the bread and cheese here? Bernadette!
 I cut lemons, my fingers straining seeds
 squeeze over ice and vodka, no small feat.
 Reader, join us if you want to. Let's eat!

To be understood words are objective
 yet we understand them subjectively.
 When Willa Cather writes, "The long main street
 began at the church, the town seemed to flow
 from it like a stream from a spring," the prose
 forms naturally from the simile.
 Do you feel it as I do when I read
 that words not only are but also live
 from church to street to town to spring as if
 the stream itself were writing the sentence?
 Cather is here with me in the present
 bringing from the past continuous gifts
 words that are as real as the broken fence
 I built with dad to keep the horses in.

On a road of crushed salamanders, snakes
 and butterflies I make my weary way
 listening to a woman sing who makes
 Mali her home thousands of miles away.
 In Pennsylvania Africa's close
 as the green limbs that are brushing my limbs
 when I pick their acorns from them. The toad
 skins under car wheels pressed in macadam
 resemble Roman mosaics. I pass
 mosaics of grasshoppers. Catullus
 breathed molecules of air I breathe and pass.
 I want to hear the yellow jackets buzz
 on a corpse and turning the music down
 hear the airplane above, a louder sound.

Last year my father had a little stroke.
 "Merry Christmas," he says and then corrects
 himself: "Happy Christmas." That's a mistake
 he realizes after he says it
 and lowers his head. This in reference
 to my own birth on August the 15th
 which is today. How many important
 and unimportant facts come crowd our heads
 to their eminentest extents added
 the very first minute we remembered
 the word to say exactly what we meant?
 Oh where is it? The word I need to name
 both you and me. "Happy Birthday," Daddy
 finally says laughing triumphantly.

Music turned off, I look at milkweed pods
 Howlin' Wolf vanishing back into time.
 They were all purple flowers the first time
 I saw them. On returning they are not
 resembling spiky space ships now the shape
 and color of okra, though near the top
 they are turning purple where the sun stops
 first to touch them. In ageless light they've aged.
 Time is a gentle rape, the bruise the color
 of the lilac spring autumn's beginning.
 I was listening to a dead man sing
 and accompanied him on another
 song. In memory the sweet blossom stays
 though at its stem not a petal remains.

Where there's a will there is a way. After
 her stroke my friend Bernadette could no
 longer write by hand but lo and behold
 she could type. Her words continued after
 all, books full, and since then she has written
 one of my favorite poems. Into the world
 the unborn baby pushes and uncurls.
 Bernadette learned to walk and read even
 the subtitles in *La Muerte de un*
Burocrato and *La Ilusion*
Viaja en Transvia. Real visions
 come to poets who know we suffer and
 die, yet pain can begin more than it ends
 healing hurting bones and making thoughts mend.

When I was small Dad was always killing
 the cow, the pigs, one by one beheaded
 chickens that flopped and sprayed a fine thin red
 around the yard, squirrels that went flying
 from the white pine into the attic shot
 down with the twenty-two that also killed
 the copperhead. God I was thrilled
 standing by my Daddy. Pow! Pow! Pow! Not
 now. Even the groundhog's safe when Dad goes
 on his tractor chasing it down its hole.
 Have fun. Sure Death comes even to the mole
 already in the ground. What Daddy sows
 the crows, the deer and wild turkeys get. He'd
 rather watch a groundhog now than kill it.

Mother is cooking marinara sauce
 for three of her grandchildren who'll soon go
 back to college. It's a darned slow process.
 At Uncle Al's I picked each tomato
 as ripe and as red as it gets. Poaching
 peeling slicing Mom finally dumps them
 in the pot gasping heavily struggling
 to breathe, maintain her heavy self and
 ease the necessary doing, chopping
 onions and peppers. The garlic and dried
 basil I shopped for are thrown in bringing
 all of the spices bubbling side by side.
 To condense taste to its essence simmer.
 Mother proves Love can satisfy hunger.

Reading Vygotsky I want to write down
 a word I've not heard of—involution
 Hmmm? Is it opposite evolution?—
 and look it up later. Notebook open
 I planned to jot it here but instead wrote
 a sonnet about Mother and forgot
 the word in marinara sauce. Sonnet
 finished, returned to Vygotsky, the word
 is still right there where it remains unknown.
 I won't write it now as the solution
 but will remind myself with a poem
 adding words I don't know or want to know
 better: concupiscence, algorithm
 exegesis, satrap and amalgam.

That caterpillar is so beautiful
 at its jagged hole in the milkweed leaf
 pitch-black, white and yellow, I can't believe
 it's condescended, incredible soul
 to share some time with me. The more I look
 the more I see the ants move without rest
 a solitary wasp, a frosty nest
 of caterpillars in their tent, who took
 the tree hostage and eat the branch alive
 growing so strong they'll soon break from that cloud
 and rain on us. Overcast day's a shroud
 upon the shoulders of the world. Me, I
 see pods purpled by the approaching cold
 looking like corpses beginning to mold.

Yellowing leaves say it's soon time to leave.
 The acorn's fallen to the ground, snail shell
 without its snail, fox shit with the seeds of
 digested berries in it, styrofoam
 cups hikers have thrown away. What do they
 think? That I'm the maid who's come to clean it
 up? Oh no! Fuck. I sat on the snail shell
 I'd put in my pocket. Just heard it pop.
 Darn it, shucks. There it is all in pieces
 sharp and spread out on the sandstone looking
 like parts of the rock flecked with speckled pink
 pebbles where I have come to read and rest.
 What I write is meaningless I suppose.
 Reader, don't stay if you don't want to. Go.

Garden stripped bare by my father even
 and square, August's last scallions are rent
 where radish seeds now planted will augment
 autumn's table. Beyond was forest, then
 this rolling field. Where the groundhogs fatten
 used to be acres of corn. I saw with
 summer gone it dried to its very pith
 rattling stalks full of fattening rabbits and
 grasshoppers using up the last warm sun.
 Who remembers the forest or the field?
 You'd have to be old to know they were real.
 Without the corn the pheasants have all gone
 and I'm going too, back to the city
 back to—oh déjà vu!—reality.

I woke up from a dream before daylight.
 I'd dreamt I tried to make a living plant
 into a work of art. It didn't work.
 Trying to make it sculpture-hard it died.
 I was in a room with other artists
 who were more successful than I was so
 I thought I'd try to sculpt the mothers of
 Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Don't ask me why
 I don't know, but what I did do was put
 some pebbles in a bowl and splash them with
 a hose showing the whole world how water
 over a dry dull stone will make it shine.
 Now other things come to take up my time.
 Sleeping I worked. Awake I work. I'm tired.

Swallows gather on the electric wire
 one after the other in a row. I
 approach as some fly up and swarm the sky
 hundreds of them sweeping out. I'm inspired
 watching them burst and swoop and blend and flow
 into the blue as far as I can see
 like premonitions of eternity.
 Over the pond, the house, the world they go
 well no not go, but going. Or is it
 only the agitations of my soul?
 I was up early this morning thoughtful
 of New York working before dawn. Visit
 unfinished, my mind goes with the swallows.
 Here I have to stay but it can follow.

I let down the umbrella on the dock
 enclosing the wasps inside who've summered
 up in the ribs. I had to do it. Not
 only is it sunset but September
 the summer is almost over and I
 must go back to New York to work to live.
 I'm sorry, guys. Unsettled now they fly
 around my head, yet still stay off. We lived
 let live. They came and went while I below
 wrote and read without incident. Black wasps
 are curious, not inclined to sting though
 walking on your skin. Even now not cross
 accepting it as soon they will the cold
 back and forth they go settling in new folds.

Today I picked Uncle Al's tomatoes
 for the last time. Many were over ripe
 rotten, had cracked or fallen. I was tired
 but constant and making an effort to
 exercise, bent holding my abdomen
 in reaching into the vines to find them
 ready and easily pulled from their stems
 taking a lot of green ones putting them
 at the bottom of the baskets. When in
 New York I will give some to friends and keep
 the rest for as long as I possibly
 can because there is no better eating
 than a tomato from a man who knows
 how to plant it well and then make it grow.

I created the world with the first word
 I spoke connecting myself with the real.
 Then I could even close my eyes and feel
 what I'd set in motion with the first word
 I had spoken. Perhaps it was water
 perhaps it was a snake or sun coming
 through the branches. Right now I'm creating
 because I was told to by Bill Kushner
 whose hands look like sandstone with sudden flecks
 of pink in them, asterisk fingertips
 or constellations of stars. From his lips
 he commands, "Write," and my hand starts to, quick
 blurred. It's difficult to see what's living.
 Is it from the dead we get our bearings?

How do you teach someone something they don't
 know? The first thing that comes to mind is by
 example. Look your students in the eye
 and then smile. Otherwise they won't
 smile at you. Understanding comes from love.
 Say, "I am happy you are here. Welcome."
 Let yourself resonate on their eardrums.
 To show someone the meaning of above
 you have to say to him or her, "Look up,"
 and they must want to lift their eyes or else
 the vain struggle will be against themselves.
 What seems to some a stone, some crack a nut
 to eat the waiting kernel that's inside
 or plant it to make plenty more besides.

Out of the ordinary there will come
from time to time the good and very brave
extraordinary, someone who can save
us from our own damned selves and make us one
humanity. Children take Rosa Parks
for an example, a common seamstress
who sat herself down in a seat she was
told she couldn't. Some said she was too dark.
Justice became evident and the fact
that a quiet woman can unsever
people divided, sew them together
nobody free till all are freed at last.
One little candle gives light to the night.
Truth is simple. It's visible. It's sight.

At a distance covered by the early
morning snow they look like celestial
angels prepared soon to hover over
the manger of some unwanted savior
sleeping and warm in swaddled clothes. On closer
inspection they are only milkweed pods
whose husks cracked open and exposed white fluff
rain soaked and snow froze, seeds black as tadpoles.
They all seem natural as flying birds
on high though not alive allowing life
to take flight from their broken gaping sides.
Gutting themselves they died yet tomorrow
the sunny cold will come to dry their fluff
and wind will take them up like making love.

Almost December, Thanksgiving over
 outside is frozen once again. The warm
 TV is on and logs burn in the stove
 as I'm eating Aunt Fern's dried tomatoes
 desiccated skins like mummies from the
 pyramids. Yum Yum Yum all of her love's
 ripe on my tongue as I soften them up
 moistening spots, the harvest of August.
 Suddenly last summer is in my mouth
 Katydid and fireflies live in the spit
 and what had seemed hard and dead's a red sweet
 salamander slipping between my teeth—
 Just one of the things Aunt Fern's present is
 I'd be satisfied if this were heaven.

This day fits my unquiet spirit. It
 is cold but not cold—No, actually
 it is. Still the pond melts. You cannot see
 the fish. Can't skate or swim in it. And it
 is raining ice. Can't take a walk. I'm sad.
 Help Dad stack logs he cut last year and split
 dried out and ready to be lit. I'll sit
 by the fire and read Hawthorne instead, glad
 at the thought of it. Glad too the crows move
 on the snow, peck through all the garbage Dad
 left them this morning. ¡Feliz Navidad!
 Joyeux Noël. Cake! Shrimp shells! Caw Caw. Who
 knows the words to change Us into We
 to excite good will everywhere and peace?

On a milkweed pod there's a white tuft of
black seeded fluff clinging like a terrified
hysteric dangling from a cliff. I huff
and puff, but it won't let go and take flight
from its husk, dry and brittle broken stuff
that it clutches desperately to stay
until my urging breath blows strong enough
to send it off. Up it goes, out—Away!
Then like an inconsistent memory
or second thought it spins and turns around
coming back down from where it came now free
to idle in the leaves on the cold ground
where any birth seems to be frozen yet
white and trembling and resembling death.

Dusk comes as I look at the Egyptian
temple by the reflection pool and the
crocodile, pink-flecked marble circa 1
A.D. as old as Christ and older than
me. It was a cold walk from the subway
cold as this smooth stone I am sitting on
near a father holding his happy son's
hand dangling from him at an angle. Hey
when this boy's as old as I am I'll be
dead and that old temple there will still stand
just as it is in mid-town Manhattan
unless some comet hits us or the sea
has risen. Mundane facts keep us present
forgetting, remembering the moment.

Light comes down on Saint Francis through the cleft.
 The Illuminator we do not see
 only the Illuminated who bleeds
 out of his hands. My friend Bill Kushner left
 the hospital this morning at long last
 the noon sun shining down on his bright pate.
 The poet asks himself, "Is it too late
 to start again? Should I forget it? Fast
 life goes on whether I do or I don't
 make it to the cab at the corner. Fuck it.
 I might as well write another sonnet.
 Just what the world needs, another poem."
 The poet lives unwanted and then is
 wanted when dead. Home is where the light is.

"How old is your son?" "He is 9 o'clock,"
 my student says and the class laughs as well
 it should. My student laughs and cannot stop
 nor can anyone. We laugh and the spell
 goes on unbroken. Everyone shakes
 in on the joke, happy to be sharing
 understanding the premise and mistake.
 Laughter engenders laughter as kissing
 kisses: just watch the teenagers do it
 on the park bench. Laughter is forever.
 That's why Buddha laughs. It was expensive
 my old sweater. Cachito clings closer
 sticking his nails in. Let the cat claw it.
 What the heck. Life goes on and Death doesn't.

There is a springtime clarity to things
before the long summer comes to cover
everything with leaves. Old Lancaster
Valley's in the hazy distance going
on and on, farms and roads all that you see.
For miles and centuries it's been spreading
starting from this mountain where I'm standing
until the past blurs out of memory.
Through budding twisted branches what I took
for cloud perhaps is rolling smoke and ash.
I remember last night the sunset was
coming at me like headlights when I looked
back at the trees in silhouette ablaze.
Today may be that fire from yesterday.

Over the ferns and the treacherous rocks
popping out of the steep ground like the heads
of dinosaurs I come watching my steps
so I won't fall or slip or have to stop
till I'm drinking at the falls. Where the stream
comes winding down through the wet woods splashing
I remember when I was three looking
in this stream on a winter day. Daddy
carried me most of the way. I wasn't sick
just cold from the deep snow. Fish were swimming.
How could that be, the world frozen but in
the spring minnows still moved? It was magic.
Life was no different than a fairy
tale I understood immediately.

As I'm reading Elizabeth Bishop
something tiny crawls onto my body.
What insect is itching my back? I see
the spider on my hand and blow it up
into the air. And ants walk on me like
I'm a path through the forest up the hill
another one, another one until
I'm tarmac too where flies land and take flight.
If you don't want this to happen don't take
off your clothes and lie down in the leaves. Come
what may I'd rather be naked with some
ants crawling over me and flies that make
my skin tickle. To be totally free
let it be. God, the sky is pretty.

Pat, Happy Birthday on your sixtieth.
I really would like this little sonnet
to be one of the greetings that you get
embracing you and giving you a kiss.
So much more does happen in the past than
in the present. Time keeps moving, adding
on more to us. Natural as breathing
a breath are two friends when they meet again
talking of what's gone on and what it's meant
since they last met. No other tongue can tell
what friends say now. Here is wishing you well.
The past is not the past when you're present.
Not only has it been good to know you
but you are something to look forward to.

Out of the old dead roots comes life itself.
Milkweed shoots shooting up from the cold ground
have made my mourning happy to have found
them here unfolding leaves out of themselves.
Where do we go after we've departed?
I've been wanting to find her, my old teacher.
She told me I could write, my believer.
Without her there wouldn't be any art.
Now that she's gone I want to walk and talk
again along this mountain road. We'd see
in sprouting milkweed there is poetry
her words as well as mine the written stalks
a poem where she has gone. We'd talk of how
one way or the other life is travel.

As little bats swarm in the Chinese dawn
bringing back form to the world, the humid
air appears like a smoke accompanied
by cicadas and chirping birds so warm
and thick it's like moving through webs or gauze
or chest deep in water pushing myself
forward. An old man walks fanning himself
with a round fan and shouts. I have to pause
for breath. There's no place to sit. I will sit
on a step where eggshells and cigarette
butts already rest. How many worlds! It
boggles my mind to think back home friends sit
down with friends for drinks and conversations
their day about to end as mine begins.

It is so hot before you run you sweat.
 Fanning himself a man and his wife walk
 holding hands. He sings and she doesn't with
 just as much force. It's dawn. The lighter it
 gets the more the runners start to come. The
 man shooting baskets soon is many all
 caught up shouting and jumping for the ball.
 Other arrivals lift their arms and bend
 touching their toes before they start to run
 calling to each other words I don't know.
 All I can say's "Good morning" and "Hello."
 I can't read one word that's on the wall, none.
 There are more words than anyone can learn.
 Most stories go untold as the world turns.

Where'd the moon go? It was here a minute
 ago. The day's taken me by surprise
 suddenly the horizon and the sky
 the towering clock and the jogger's sprint's
 near and as clear as the words that I write
 preceded by my hand jotting my thoughts
 knuckled and thick with veins. God, it is hot
 yet joggers jog and the man and his wife
 walk holding hands while he sings, "La Dee Dah."
 Everything is happening at once.
 I know this thought's driven some people nuts
 and I stay on the edge of it myself
 insanity, a precipice and death
 just a breath clinging writing drenched in sweat.

The bats come to Wuhan when the night comes
 over East Lake wide, dark, flat and in flames
 on fire at first but the conflagration
 magnified is only the reflections
 of the tiny giant smoke stacks spewing
 up sparks. One thought becomes another. Fuck!
 The Yangzte was dirty and yellow—Yuck!
 I saw heads and an inner tube bobbing
 not Chairman Mao's of course who swam across
 years ago. Other swimmers do it now.
 For all his mistakes they still like Mao.
 Why? Because he was persistent. Crossing
 the sky more bats than I have ever seen
 hover, devour, convene and unconvene.

They come down the steps and over the lawn
 avoiding the sprinklers so as not to
 soak their books or themselves. We have a few
 minutes before class starts, and somber calm
 faces greet me for the most part—I'm wrong.
 There is a smile and then another one
 comes up and says, "I want to bring you some
 flowers. What kind do you like?" It is wrong
 in China to tell a student, "You choose."
 Teachers make all the decisions so I'm
 supposed to tell this young woman what I
 want her to think and say and write and do
 but I've no idea what flowers grow here.
 "Bring what you like," I said. They're still not here.

"Teacher, I don't know what a pig pen is."

"What's a pen?" "This is a pen," some students say showing them. "That pen contains ink. Pens can contain pigs. Pig pen. Ink pen." "Ink is a noun just like a pen is. How can nouns be adjectives?" "English is an easy language that uses one word for many things. We pen stories and pen the pig." Now still seeing some puzzled faces I draw a swirled tail on the board connecting a rump to a back, ear, and head until a pig appears. The class laughs seeing me draw two vertical lines through horizontal ones fencing that pig in once and for all.

In 1937 Japanese soldiers made the Chinese go dig big holes outside of Nanjing and then pushed them all in suffocating them. It is easy to see that there are snobs in history. For us Tang Dynasty was the strongest. Back then the Chinese looked down on the rest of the world but that's not the case today China is not so great so we are more modest unlike the Japanese. We do have snobs who live in Shanghai. Of course there are snobs in Wuhan too. We can hope for the best. Perhaps life without snobs is a nice dream but it's better to dream than not to dream.

The students look amazed or perplexed at
 us American teachers who have stopped
 to surround a ragged little dog with
 matted hair that's starved to the bone. Corliss
 pours water on the steps for it to drink.
 I have a boiled egg in my pack and crack
 it open trying to separate shell
 from egg scattering it and breaking it
 up. The dog aware of yoke starts to eat
 leaving the white—Can a hungry dog do
 this? The custodian comes with a broom.
 He's mad as hell. He's pissed. Don't we get it?
 It's going to die and we have left a mess.
 We might be teachers, but we're idiots.

China is a beautiful kite stuck in
 a tree. America's a beautiful
 kite stuck in a tree. They're two beautiful
 kites stuck in a tree. In China men can
 beat their wives publicly. In the States men
 can't get away with that but they are free
 to believe whatever they want even
 when contrary to all of the facts and
 re-elect George W. Bush president
 a man who has caused more deaths in Iraq
 than Truman when he dropped the bomb. In fact
 all we've killed are enemies since Truman.
 China, America stuck in a tree
 high up in the branches. Who'll set them free?

The quiet aftermath of disaster
 dangling in the sunlight in a tall tree
 only decay to ever come after
 falling apart vanishing in the breeze
 where every now and then someone looks up
 to wonder what it was that went so wrong
 that what should be below is there above
 not high up in the sky but upside-down.
 Kite with a tail of yellow, blue and pink
 triangles entangled in the branches
 is sagging on its string—Who'd ever think
 such a beautiful thing could end like this?
 I know that whatever the reason is
 it doesn't belong there, but there it is.

Once again the heat is unbearable.
 There is a wind, a hot wind with wet heat
 from the rain, off the lakes and the Yangzte
 not really as wet as it's been but still
 damp beneath my shirt, dark spots spreading there
 sticking to my skin as cicadas chirr
 and some of my students passing on their
 way to class wave at me as I wonder
 "Where are the dragonflies?" I am under
 vermilion blossoms in an arbor
 without any shade. I am weary too
 preparing myself to begin to move.
 The dragonflies must also be weary
 because they've gone and left me here alone.

Dragonflies aren't accompanying me.
 They are hovering in my memory
 like a want or a wish. There is a breeze
 and yet I sweat without any relief.
 The mourning doves nearby in the uncut
 grass lift their heads peeking above the tufts.
 Huh? What? They were just there? Where have they gone?
 The world's disappearing in the dull sun.
 I've one more class to go before I'm done.
 What more could my tired students want? Now some
 ants move on the floor and one's moving on
 my shoulder. "Begin. It will be over."
 That's what their eyes are telling me. "Teacher
 please start or we'll never get out of here."

"Today and tomorrow is all we have.
 Yesterday, no matter what some will say
 is gone," I write, but as soon as I do
 the wall I'm leaning on says, "I will still
 be here when you've gone. Yesterdays grow out
 of me and break and crack my clay with their
 own desires that have nothing to do with
 mine day after day." The bird-filled air drowns
 out the wall but not for long because a
 basketball bounces Boing! Boing! And the bird
 vanishes into the laughter of men
 all the words they know accompanying
 them as they run and shout throwing the ball.
 It is time to say goodbye to you all.

The sun is on the mountaintops and yet
 the rain comes in drops so small I'm amazed
 the page isn't wet. The sun has refused
 to stop shining on the highest green peak
 that looks more than anything like the breast
 of a woman with her nipple. Around
 us the waves ripple and the wind turns the
 page like an impatient hand. We people
 stand firm against it and don't blow away
 though the flag flutters as well as the skirt
 of the woman waving as she looks down
 at the rising yellow Yangtze that heaves
 and moves our crowded boat just like a moored
 bull moaning to break from its ropes and go.

The world is full of beautiful women
 who are fertile and ready for love. Look.
 Anita rests. Tara's stretched on the deck
 hands on tummy flattened breast as the gorge
 opens and allows us to pass. Adi
 sits with her dark eyes looking straight ahead
 Christine with her back to what's coming is
 looking back at what has been. Theresa
 plays cards. Adelia's falling asleep.
 The sun and passing mountain seem to be
 leaning on each other the way Amy
 and Alyssa do just now reading books.
 Sharon, let down your hair for us to see
 the warm breeze blow through it. Where is Annie?

The rainbow's disappearing above the
 mountaintop. In the spreading darkened clouds
 the sun shines down on the new buildings the
 centralized government has built to house
 those whom the rising Yangtze will cover
 if they don't move higher. What we now see
 will soon be gone, that dock, that ridge, that town.
 The surrounding children can't understand
 change. It is the old in the crowd who can.
 Is the man frowning my reflection or
 one of those people who has come to spy?
 Some are so friendly! Do they listen and
 report what I and other teachers think?
 It's true dictators care what poets think.

As swallows swoop above the boat begins
 to move although all of us people here
 stay still hearing the horn announce we have
 let go. The leaves of the rooted bamboo
 bend and sway. Mountains go back and further
 back into the clouds. The little boy's foot's
 tapping as he plays his computer game
 entranced as I am watching him. Oh to
 be a little kid again! There are things
 I'll never know, but I can see the wind
 that turns the page turns the wave as the night
 begins to turn the day darkening me
 and the fluttering lady next to me
 turning to throw her rind in the Yangtze.

Out of the dark the steep mountains come. At
 first a line and nothing more appears on
 either side for a long time then there's light
 inside a house, someone sleeping who woke.
 I am all alone along the Yangtze
 whose sides are high, pure rock. No one lives there
 but singing birds awake before the sun
 gives shape to where they sing. I see passing
 towns put here before the waters rise to
 house millions of displaced inhabitants
 time will eventually cover after
 all like water or the clouds covering
 the mountaintops that also seem to press
 us down into the present world's contents.

There are rice paddies and the lotus pools
 the farmer in the field, his little dog
 gone jumping through the stalks, the plodding ox
 the low houses with terra cotta roofs
 the sleeping teachers sprawling in the bus
 and outside here and there a little house
 containing ashes of a child or spouse
 stands in the field. A heron like a ghost
 takes off slowly through the vast sky's gray swath.
 Will it rain and make the land wetter yet?
 Where the red lotus rises it prevents
 us from seeing into the muddy depths
 where it secretly spreads itself to bloom
 welcoming us into the present gloom.

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The woman in pink by the lotus pool
seems like a flower herself. Her wide straw hat
hides her face, keeps her anonymous. That
could be a man. No sun today. It's cool.
The crop is abundant and overflows
its banks disguising the water and land
where the land is as flat as a pool and
one place is as green as another. Go
but always be careful and when you step
remember. Notice where the woman is
where the ox will only stretch out its neck
and that one heron is always present.
Then you won't fall in where the bountiful
lotus rises feeding both wise and fool.

142

The obligatory bit of struggling
out of the arms of comrades into the
arms of chaos, customs, checking luggage
departing which is also arriving.
Suddenly strangers seem significant
until you remember where you're going
as you're forgetting where you've been, putting
on the seat belt wondering if we're meant
today to live. Who's that sitting over
there? A terrorist? Clouds are in the skies
and water is in the oceans. There is
Manhattan below me. There's the Chrysler
Building and La Plaza Cultural. There's
where my home's been for almost thirty years.

Goldfinch balanced on the sunflower's head
 flies off swaying the plant just like the wind.
 The sun comes up the trees and lies down in
 the field where a red hawk begins to spread
 its great slow wings breaking from the branch. Cloud
 like Magritte's so real I feel it's a round
 cotton above my head to swab a wound
 if one occurs. Near the barn I've allowed
 Cachito to examine groundhog holes.
 Hey, Cachito, ground hogs are really fat
 but they can fight. Watch out! Ah, but a cat's
 a cat and lives like that. I think we all
 do things that get a lot better and change
 yet like the cat stay pretty much the same.

The crows go calling, "There is bread, there is
 bread in the field, hot dog buns that have been
 thrown by a man who doesn't seem to want
 them." It is startling how the news travels
 fast. Suddenly black wings break up the air.
 What seemed so far is really near. More than
 what's good becomes a happy memory.
 We are born and are who we are because
 we were loved or loved and beaten or just
 beaten like so many colored pebbles
 that are shaken and come to rest in a
 jar. I'm glad I've thrown the bread causing all
 of this commotion coming from the pines
 and sky. The cawing's comforting; it's mine.

As I'm editing my China Journal
 across from me on the horizontal
 flat amputated willow branch perches
 a red-tailed hawk that's just caught a flopping
 pigeon whose soft breast feathers it starts to
 pluck out to get at the heart. Some people
 wondering what others are looking at
 look up themselves and for a moment stop
 what they are doing, the baby strollers
 parked in neutral, dogs on leashes waiting
 for their masters. Children on the way to
 school dance in the fine feathers falling down.
 One child jumps up to catch the floating stuff
 and gives it to another with a hug.

I am alive and you are dead. Here on
 my end the conversation hasn't
 quite ended but judging by the silence
 on yours it has. A sad cold day is
 here for now, dark afternoon, April snow
 flitting by the window, hurrying ghosts
 going home. When the frogs at dusk begin
 to sing for love in the smoking pools, it
 would be absolutely great to talk of
 anything—A poet, the Romantics
 Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth—But it's too late.
 No more! Today's a stone. And it is cold!
 George W. Bush is still president.
 Oh even to sit and complain of him!

These sonnets have been difficult to write
 enough to begin and not finish. They've
 lain like skeletons—a little finger
 a little skull—stuck in a drawer. Are they
 rotting or taking form, flesh come to bone
 or corpse? I have almost given up hope
 treat my liver for Hepatitis C
 with an injection once a week, six pills
 a day that tire and overwhelm me with
 worthlessness. Everything turns to shit
 stinks and vanishes. The poet's verses
 addressing the flower and tomb born well
 or beheaded one day won't be thought of
 even as you read them with the knowledge.

I owe you the best sonnet ever though
 you criticized mine so often I'm not
 sure you ever really liked them. You knew
 all the rules of Latinate grammar and
 English and American literature.
 You gave a sixteen year old Naked Lunch
 and Our Lady of the Flowers to read
 novels that, it is true, don't mean much to
 me now but back then in the boondocks were
 everything possible. Intelligence
 dispersed into the clouds, where does it go
 these valuable things we come to know?
 Where would I be now without you? I know
 I don't know. Where do all of our thoughts go?

I wake the snakes on the way to the lake
 coiling in leaves, slithering at my feet
 half-seen in the low branches, thick brown waists
 headless, tailless stone still in wait for me
 to trip them into slithering again.
 Are they going to bite? I doubt it.
 They're enjoying themselves too much and slide
 on in the fear and excitement of my
 approaching steps. Without ever really
 seeing them slip into the rippling depths
 on the briar's edge of the round abyss
 water snakes have taken the day with them.
 Here comes the night. Everything fades from sight.
 A frog peeps. There is sound, song but no light.

On a hot night in Wuhan you knitted
 me a scarf for the wintertime. It was
 a wonderful thought. No teacher could want
 a better student than one gifted with
 foresight: the future will be the present
 and when that cold day comes yours will keep me
 warm. Now in New York the sun is beating
 down on everyone in Stuyvesant
 Park while in Wuhan under August's moon
 you fall asleep. Rest well. May your future
 gestures be as visible a measure
 teaching us that to give is to get too.
 The gift you gave you've yet to get to know.
 One day you will not change it for the world.

My feet are resting in the alfalfa.
 Bumblebees cover and bend the blossoms
 even further down than the warm wind is
 blowing through them. Out on the water
 reflected transitory clouds turn light
 into shadows over me and the world
 around. An unfurling dragonfly's whirled
 to the back of my hand. Its round green eyes
 shine and loom up bigger than its body
 a thin blue breathing stick that is attached
 to transparent wings full of dark veins that
 move together and apart then quickly
 go leaving me here alone with the woods
 on one side and on the other the pond.

There was a brilliant bright light spreading
 on the water contagious as fire but
 just as I went to write about it it
 wasn't there anymore. For a whole month
 in China I lugged all my stuff over
 my shoulder until I tore the muscles.
 Trying to write now is unbearable.
 But cicadas sing. Does the wind bring them
 or my own desire for them? Here comes
 the light again moving along the stems
 beyond my present reach yet in the sweat
 my beating heart brings in glistening drops
 out of my skin. I'd forgotten. The pain
 with every other care has gone away.

The silence of the afternoon and the
 splash of the fountain are interrupted
 by a sound that sounds like a growling dog
 making me turn around to face what's a
 car accelerating going quickly
 away. I'm lucky it wasn't a dog
 because the dog would have been bigger than
 a sudden dog should be coming at me.
 That snarling looming dog I knew I heard
 wasn't there. A good thing I didn't scream
 jump around like some nut making people
 jump who were near. Night's coming to the park
 bringing the dark I've learned not to be scared
 of knowing there is mostly silence there.

It hurts to play guitar. It hurts to write.
 Happiness has written its name on my
 heart, though it's still hurting both day and night.
 I'll write through the pain, love through the pain. I
 know one day it will stop, the pain I mean
 not the love or the work. Breathe, stretch and breathe
 though it smarts, relax the shoulder and reach
 for what you want beyond your fingers. See
 what you need and go and grab it though you
 gasp, "Ouch! Ow!" Just tell yourself, "Don't fight it!
 Give in and be determined that you must
 do this and win surrendering." Truth's
 simple isn't it? Under the masseur
 you scream and scream, but still you breathe. You're sure.

The aroma of your groin comes to my
nose as I raise the coffee cup reading
what I just wrote though the words fail even
as I look. All my fingers giving off
your scent mixed with the milk and cinnamon
blur my senses. I write to not forget.
The two of us in candlelight oozes
from my leaking pen. You can't escape, my friend.
Go and lift your macho weights at your macho gym.
Your body's smells bring you to me again
picking me up, throwing me into bed
taking off your glasses squinting finding
me giving me kisses making loud smacks.
A kiss once given can't be taken back.

The time has finally come. I can wrap
Sharon's knitted scarf around my neck a
few times before venturing out in the
cold where the sidewalks are icy. Perhaps
I will fall as soon as I'm out the door.
But there is a buoyancy in a gift
that lets me skate and slide too but not slip
buying food, wine and a few presents for
the party tonight. It's been a good year.
My liver is better and I've taught some
great classes. Finally a book is done
as best as I can write it. My good cheer
is happily given. Merry Christmas.
Appreciation's easily expressed.

There is almost nothing left of it, a
solitary tortuous—No, tortured—
stem, twisted pods at the tip of the rod
broken top, the pinnacle gone, toppled
completely down but not let go hanging
on by a thread wound round fibers sticking
to its stalk, dried up tufts that never got
to float in the wind staying stuck instead
though most of their dark seeds have fallen now
germinating in the very same ground
where they were born. I write this with a script
so cold and thin and sloppily written
if I don't rewrite it when I get home
no one will ever know what I just wrote.

Like the dried up dead wasp with its venom
gone rolled up on the windowsill like a
ball of dust my mother slumbers with her
head bent near a bowl of fruit Pat Maples
sent listening to Ella Fitzgerald
sing, a dying lady and a dead one
sharing the moment I am sharing too
taking a break from the navy bean soup
whose hambone is left over from Christmas
with its stock simmering in celery
carrots and onions. "The trembling trees
embrace the breeze tenderly," is really
not true on this stark dark December day
—No, the music's always true while it plays.

The beauty of the words comes partly by
 intent, partly instinct, by what's given
 a gift. So's the luck we artists get. Go
 where you want to go and really go there
 in the direction you are going. Do
 your painting or sculpting or singing a
 song, whatever it is you are leaving
 behind, your worthy thoughts. Daddy's leaving
 land and a pond. Mother is leaving me.
 Ladybugs leave more ladybugs crawling
 everywhere, well, not everywhere
 but if you look there's one on the ceiling
 one by the light. The fire leaves ash, goes out.
 Cachito meows. I leave you reading now.

I can't leave until I write a sonnet.
 I am lucky the woods are beautiful
 and who says I must follow any rules?
 The woods are cold but not so cold I can't
 stand here on this mountaintop keeping my
 promise to stay until finished. The sounds
 of far off cars and a lone distant cow
 mooing out of a barn have helped these lines
 along allowing me to make a dent
 but is there any worth in doing what
 I say I will do or making a lot
 more facts that just are not that relevant?
 Here comes a car, a man, a woman and
 a cat from the woods to be fed. I'll end.

My nephew has long fingers that can spread
 to B major where the B major is:
 You only learn guitar by playing it
 and Daniel is more dedicated
 than I am, but I keep playing the chords
 I know and they all do turn out somehow
 Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow
 which we're going to perform for mother
 pretty soon. With the rain's spitter spatter
 on the roof and the apple tree shaking
 its branches against the window wanting
 to come in and join us, they are comrades
 in our endeavor. All here have a say
 becoming a part of the song we play.

I can't find Judy's present anywhere.
 and I was looking forward to seeing
 the Margaret Rutherford DVDs.
 Did I drop them? I thought I'd taken care
 though I was loaded down. The more you have
 the more you have to lose. You cannot hold
 more than you can actually hold
 without dropping what you can't. Life's travel
 and we are always getting back to the
 essential: Love carries you, not you it.
 A gift's not lost once given though you've let
 it slip. Still, darn it! I hope that someone
 worthy picks her up. That would ease the sore
 of not having Margaret Rutherford.

Dear Thom, here are some poems and sonnets
for you this New Year, 2008.

I hope like the brand new day they are a
beginning again what you haven't
yet finished, a life that's worth reading, a
chapbook as old as you are and older
still when you read from the earliest
one traveling on to South America.
May my past in your present create a
future understanding. I'm serious.
Don't laugh. You open a book curious
to know what you don't and hope words will make
conclusions from your doubts assuring you
of who you are—Well, here these are for you.

It's a wet July the seventh around
four AM. Lightning comes vertically
down resembling the chicken claw I found
in my soup last night when I arrived. Gee
where does the Time go? Wow! Another stroke
goes horizontally across the lake
illuminating my face in the dark
I can't see but feel immensely. The great
Wuhan sky wanted to know who I am
and seeing I'm a friend says, "You're no stranger
to me sitting where you like to sit and
though you want to jog there will be time for
that tomorrow. You have been here before
and know for sure surprises are in store."

I wake up at four in the morning, make
 coffee and play guitar. A pretty bat
 is flying in the sky right there where that
 dark cloud stretches to touch the pine. Daybreak
 begins spreading forming all the branches
 to the right of the roof crowning the round
 clock telling that time has finally wound
 twenty to six as the dark vanishes
 gathering in shadows between the leaves
 on every limb on every bush
 and tree. To the strumming of my chords—Whoosh!
 one no two no three four bees happily
 find blossoms. Are the butterflies late?
 They'll come when they come. It's I have to wait.

In English when we pause to think we go
 Uhhh. In Chinese they go, Mmmm. Both have the
 same effect: when we stall for a word a
 sound is better than silence. My student
 had to think fast on his feet in the speech
 contest. He was asked, "If you were left on
 a desert island, what three things would you
 want?" "A book, pencil, and some blank paper,"
 he said remembering a poem I'd taught
 by Bill Kushner: "I was born here, poor and
 distraught of a deadly combination:
 a pen, blank paper and a thought." The poem
 made him forget what he was thinking. Glum
 he made us squirm when he didn't say, "Mmmm."

The butterflies have been here through it all
 my sadness and my happiness as well.
 No matter what is going on or how I feel
 I am at the center of my poor soul
 a void wanting to be filled by something
 beautiful. A simple slice of the knife
 would end it all. The blind man with his wife
 passes by fanning himself while he sings
 Auld Lang Syne in Chinese, but the sound of
 the tune lets me know what it is. Daylight
 begins moving on the limbs and invites
 a fluttering that comes to make me sob
 whether I want to or not. All I know's
 a butterfly comes, a butterfly goes.

"You are the flower and I am the grass,"
 the young man says to the young woman.
 "I am the flower and you are the grass,"
 the young woman says to the young man.
 "You are a bird and I am a fish." "I'm
 the sand and you're the wind." Difficult
 as it is, a Chinese couple with eyes
 closed sit forgetting they are opposites
 on a stone step so passionately kissing
 they don't see the kite in the tree or me
 who writes, "Nor do they know what they begin
 might end at any moment." The crazy
 man lies down by the Tai Chi dancer
 Dad kicks the ball his baby runs after.

Grass, flowers and some tiny trees have grown
 through all the cracks and crevices of the
 bleachers on the Olympic Field. What does
 this mean? That no one sits here anymore
 to watch a game? If I had more time I'd
 go around and pull it out from the sides
 of the comfortable stones, but I'm
 only here for a little while so I
 will do what I like and write what I think
 will last written on this page writing fast.
 What I really would like is to relax.
 Teach class! Oh wow! Just now a little skink
 appeared surprised and vanished in the weeds.
 So little time! So much to love and see!

My last class, working on a lyric, is
 supposed to be thinking English, speaking
 and writing English in pairs. "One brain plus
 one brain equals one brain," I tell them. This
 is true although brains aren't uncountable
 nouns. Classes end with everyone singing.
 Tomorrow's going to be Frank Sinatra
 Jay Chou, and Madonna. That's it, Fort Pitt.
 Did you know Stephen Foster from Pittsburgh
 Pennsylvania only went South once
 on his honeymoon and died in New York
 a penniless drunk? Art is one thing, the
 artist another. "Class, you have five more
 minutes and I want something beautiful."

I'm not facing the morning sun today.
For once I am looking the other way.
No rising blinding light is in my eyes
but a horizon of tree tops, skyline
of sloping light, swaying branches with a
kite caught swaying too with its colorful
tail turning freely above the shifting
clouds layered and as soft as many thin
strands of cotton stretched and then pulled clearly
through the vast blue—That kite's been there three years
now reminding me of those who voted
for George Bush twice in a row paying no
mind to Iraq or the changing climate.
Who can't admit they're wrong don't move. That's it.

Two does appear and drink. They're elegant
reflected in their rippling of the pond.
A third dashes and jumps, cinnamon fawn
splashing with its hooves enjoying the fun.
I love when unexpected creatures come
unaware til they, though not I, have had
enough and turn to leave, heading into
trees and disappearing into bushes
shivering the goldenrod. Now the sky
recollects itself. White clouds on the pond
grow as immense and ominous as God
unfathomable yet peaceful and blue
allowing a butterfly to pass through
and what I write to end in quiet.

"My body is dying," my mother says
which is different from what I would say.
"I am dying," is what I would say. The
first time I thought about death was on my
way to Hershey Park. Daddy was in front
driving. Mother was in front too. I—who
would have been seven at the time sat
in the back seat with my brother Scott who
would have been four though I could have been six
he three—Who knows why? Scott started to die
in front of my eyes shriveling up old
into a skull and then nothing at all
but I didn't cry out or find it scary.
I knew I was facing reality.

This fallen tree was never here before
but maybe I'm the one who's never been
here before. Where am I? I know I am
near the spring and will soon find it over
there or maybe behind those trees. But first
I'll sit. I'd be twenty feet off the ground
if this tree were still standing. It fell down
splitting the forest floor leaving a birch
untouched whose unscarred bark I want to chew
on and get up, tearing off a leaf, some
of the stem. Lucky tree, you taste so good.
Mmmm I could stay awhile enjoying you
but I can also walk with you and savor
and when I get to the spring, I'll rest there.

I can't find the spring. I did know these woods
but what was once wild somebody bought and
fenced off. Paths grew shut and where milkweed stood
along the old road the county came and
cut it down. It's not there to write about
except of course that it's not there to write
about. At the spring I'll silently shout
when my shivering face in a circle of sky
gives way to shivering trees in my cupped
hand. Then finally swallowing I will
have my fill. The trick is not to give up
knowing there's time enough to watch until
a flock of wild turkeys under a tree
run into the shadows and become leaves.

There was a transitory spider's web
clinging to a metaphoric branch of
birch that I undid stupidly touching
it as I was going down the mountain
side, the troubled spider in the middle
clinging to a strand of its work in the
wind. Happily I see what I had hoped
to see climbing back up. The web is here
again. Dear spider, you do not know how
glad I am that you've done what I'd undone
delicate, strong and glistening. These words
will be a sign post telling the passer
not to reach for your tantalizing string.
The poem touches and leaves it hanging.

Every song must come to an end. At
 some point you have to stop; though in fact in
 many ways the song goes on, it's done. Of
 course you can play another song in some
 other chords even play the same chords but
 in a different way or order. Music
 will go on until the music's over
 which is when the sudden silence stretches
 out both its arms and calmly holds the noise
 down or back is more like it because if
 the noise goes back it will keep on going
 till it dies but going directly down
 bounces back up and ricochets unless
 some dullness in the ground can swallow it.

On behalf of my family and mother
 I would like to thank you all for coming.
 She spent her last years mostly nodding in
 a chair. Seeing so many of you are
 here is really a testament to her.
 At five feet four inches tall she was small
 but with a great big heart with great big arms
 that were capable of holding you all.
 Some said she was too generous, that she
 was giving to a fault, but if giving
 comes from love and God is Love then Love
 can never be at fault or give too much.
 My mother had her faults, all do, but in
 that capacity to love she didn't.

In the devastating cold early spring
I watch the vultures glide from one side of
the sky to the other. There's a stalk of
dried up milkweed over a log leaning
uprooted with half a pod still on, its
seeds like every word in a poem
that were yearning to take form have fallen
on fertile ground. So little's green now. Just
babies yet, the leaves of a common weed
begin to peek—How they will grow and reach
and spread to the size of elephant ears
which is what we used to call them when we
were kids pulling them out with great flappings
imagining what it's like to have wings.

I hear the geese at first far off flying
in the distance and curious look up
to find them near the horizon slanting
forward like sentences being written
across the sky in honking changing lines
until they're gone. Over the rocks the stream
at Walnut Run splashes down clogged with sticks
from last year's storms. Minnows nose up this flow
like ripples they swim in below fooling
predators. Everything begins to grow.
At the corner of my eye dead leaves
shake on a branch that seems dead too except
at the very end of every stem
sharp golden buds are ready to open.

As the Labradors black as night splash in
 the morning light and swim in the current
 up to their necks going for the mallards
 that fly away before they get to them
 it is about to rain and a chilly
 cold rain it will be, clouds in clouds coming
 over the hill and stone fence darkening
 the baaing of the sheep, the many sheep
 who stop and look at me curiously
 waiting for what? For me? A nettle stings
 and midges fly around my feet. England
 must be many things but it is surely
 this. To find my pen I had to retrace
 my steps. Burnsall is the name of this place.

I do not know the flowers in the moor.
 Some are blue, and some are yellow, and those
 long and bending purple—Foxtails? Foxgloves?
 There is so much I do not know. I know
 the sky is huge. In it the clouds don't seem
 to move although the wind around me moves
 everything including me or moves
 my hair at least, the grass, the limbs of trees
 the rolling hills going up and down the
 dale where the stone houses are moving too
 mixed in the clouds that now begin to move
 the day sunny and blue but cold. From the
 grass paws click claws on the path, Spaniels
 come running fast before their master calls.

"If precious stones weren't hidden, would we think
 very much of them?" I think about words
 before I say them stuttering afterwards
 never witty like the English. English
 is what I speak, but I'm not English. "This
 egg is not cooked." "The egg isn't cooked?" "No,
 it hasn't been cooked." "It looks cooked enough."
 "Well, it won't come apart." "Shall you send it
 back then or pretend that it's poached?" "Young man
 young man, yes you, young man, you took my bags
 up the stairs yesterday. Would you be as
 kind as then and bring them back down again
 today? Oh yes, it is a bit of luck.
 Down I should think is easier than up."

I sit among the buttercups and sheep
 shit—How beautiful the world is even
 if you're sick—O wonderful sun come down
 come all the way down and make me strong. Sleep
 or the lack of it, dreams where the demons
 grapple—perhaps they're taunting angels—
 have exhausted me and left me mangled
 but the stone is warm that I sit on
 and in the boughs above the doves have filled
 their coos with waking roses opening up
 for the new day, all ready to go but
 me. The omens are good sit where I will
 full of woe. On dandelions dark bees
 hover in my mind and cover poor me.

So here I am another place again.
Yesterday was full of trials and errors
beautiful sights and accidents. Terrors
gave way to a serene lake and looming
clouds impossible for the sun to come
through. Here we are about to. You're almost
the moon beyond those clouds, Cyclops
of Ullswater. I see you, you me. One
moment changes things. Sheep we wear and eat
eat up the mountain baaing as they go
up the slopes between the creek and the stone
walls ages old hands formed and let go. We
must let the stones go, let go of them all
or there will be nothing not even a wall.

The little sparrows on the rocky wall
are taller than I am or the castle
is—In fact, they're the tallest of the tall.
Then off they go with little care at all
I write about them—They have better things
to do while I am left without a wing
full of feathers to help me soar and sing
like the sparrows. Poetry must have wings!
There they are again on the highest cliff
with light and the wind preening their amber
limbs perched I know with ready mates after
a night of gathered sleep. What would I give
to see what they see? Almost anything.
What would they give for a thought for a wing?

I lost my pen that I had lost and found
 again in the grass by the River Wharfe.
 Not any pen will do. Pat understood
 and gave me one of hers, a choice of two.
 I chose the better one—At least to my
 mind it was—It's with what I'm writing now
 a fine black line—I had had blue—But it
 isn't so much the color as the weight
 in the comfortable flow of the ink
 easing the words that it creates going
 on to the next. What would they be without
 an understanding friend who had a pen?
 They'd be unsaid, and I'd be going on too
 not the way I wanted to, but had to.

Open the window and let in the air.
 This room is close and dark and dim and bare.
 The curtain drawn shows there's a world out there—
 Scottish morning—The sky cloudy and clear
 and like a clock three ravens on a peak
 say that it's nine, and twelve, and three if peaks
 were clocks and ravens on them time. Even
 from bed there is a lot to see. Moss and
 grass like it up here living off the tiles
 and gutters. How many hours of miles
 until the Isle of Skye? Morning like me
 cloudy and clear and hurrying slowly
 only the nine o'clock raven remains
 reminding me it's time to start the day.

Behind is a sky of blue, in front of
 that a cloud comes softly apart. A patch
 of blue appears through that. At
 the very top of the roof it forms a
 peak on whose left edge a raven sits
 abandoned by its mates. Why does it wait
 letting me sketch it, no Dorian Gray
 but immortal in its way doing what it's
 always done perched above a city where
 many battles have been fought? It's looking
 for the end to fly down and start pecking
 out the eyes of unfortunate men. Where
 you will be eating, Raven of Stirling
 is Iran if you fly there this morning.

Flowers have feelings. Top-heavy foxgloves
 are proud—although they're not—their bottom was
 once their top—growing highest in the bunch
 petal after petal full of itself
 white, purple in dotted circles inside
 and out inviting bees to come in them
 and buzz. Quivering like lovers they hum.
 You do not have to move to move the bee.
 The highest bud above opens and sees
 that it has come from those below and bends
 humbly to bow to the blossoms at home
 with birds and an old tree still bearing nuts
 like me who has to go wake his friend up
 more like the bee I suppose than the foxglove.

Foxglove, how did you get here among the rocks? Tell me as best as you can. Speak the language of flowers. I want to know why you are here alone next to the sea, why you aren't in a garden with your family somewhere near the dock. On this slippery hill of rocks that can't hurt you like it can me, I have scaled them all unharmed drawn to your beautiful bowing to the dawn. I was worried you weren't happy but see here comes the bee and in she goes. Mmmm that must feel good. It does. Our destinies change minute to minute. Today, let's see: the sky, the land is clear and so's the sea.

It's the end of the day. Play, fiddler, play! The girl by the wall is pretty after all, and the boys are fine and fair. The sun has gone behind the clouds so I can see the mountains and the sea. The Chinese and Bengali lasses snap their fingers and shake their asses. Bengali girl's earring flashes and catches the peeking sun that illuminates her fun and casts in flames across the bay the dim boats coming in. Young man against the dark wall smiles. Shall I? The music stops and voices fill the place already here where they've already been. It's when the music stops I notice them.

In fact like all of human kind the rocks
 along the narrow beach are all somewhat
 alike yet each entirely different.

We pick them up, Pat and I, searching
 for the ones that really touch us, the ones
 we want: perhaps they are somewhat like us
 love at first sight, bending our bodies down
 examining delight or finally
 not delighted letting them drop but oh
 the ones we want, spots or lines throughout
 touching them them touching us. Does the cloud
 want to touch the mountain or the mountain
 the cloud? Does the stream go down the rocks
 or the rocks up? Do rocks pick friends, friends rocks?

Some sounds you can stand and some sounds you can't.
 That clanging of something metal hitting
 the iron mast I could go to sleep with
 —But not now of course. Right now I want
 to write having woken up, not a soul
 around but me before the dawn. Time for
 thought before a thought becomes a doubt
 —Just write it. The sea becomes so bright
 it's hard to see the castle collapsed in
 to a grassy mound gape wide in ruin
 dark hole a hollow eye inside the light.
 No bloody Vikings now, only the Scots.
 The world is so beautiful—A silly
 thought I think—Why can't we live in peace?

Although I want to sleep I must get up
 to write this. The past is many places
 bringing us to the present. On the Isle
 of Skye the fishermen come in from sea
 drank their tall ales listening to John Lee
 Hooker still standing in their Wellingtons.
 “Aye, he’s wailin’!” Here I am: a window
 open to a garden: flowers and trees
 each with a bird singing perfectly in
 Inverness. Am I here? Here I am!
 The same three words are slightly different
 depending where you place them. Lochness is
 just down the road. I don’t believe in dragons
 but I’d believe my eyes if I saw one.

I haven’t an idea in my head
 except the morning sun behind the roof
 has risen high enough to come and soothe
 my aching neck. Michael Jackson is dead.
 Life is one surprise after another
 One could never say shock—We know
 something is always coming down the road
 eggs and salmon then a flat tire later
 on—Whatever might happen on the moor
 soon’s yesterday. Dark clouds chill the garden
 and wind stirring the pine overwhelms and
 blows Americans back to their room.
 Farrah Fawcett’s dead too no longer now
 on her way out stopping to smell the flowers.

At Clava Cairns the hands have come and gone
 arranged the stones to their rhyme and reason.
 We can only guess the song, the text, the poem
 where the calendar sun comes pouring down
 on us, what's next, a walk into a mound.
 What are seconds to a stone? O moments
 big as years! There is wind, a bird that sings
 silence but for our footsteps making sound.
 Culloden's down the road. There on a day
 two hundred sixty three years ago six
 hundred Scots were slaughtered by the British
 in a matter of minutes. Someday
 the Scots will rule, someday the stones will talk
 someday we'll know it all and if not not.

Packed again and about to go over
 the river and through the moor a wee bit
 more—Just Edinburgh. They say that it
 is beautiful. We'll see, discover.
 I'm ready and not dreary like today
 reflecting yellow trees in a dull door
 where curtains with branches have made it more
 like a room with a view of yesterday.
 The mighty hills of Skye come back to me
 unpacked by memory—Castles, foxgloves
 —A gull passes through the reflection now.
 Foot on knee, my writing desk has gone to sleep.
 Foot on floor, I have to start to move it so
 slowly a raven caws, "Come on, let's go!"

It seems the fog is rising from the stones
like very chilly smoke without a flame.
Edinburgh's been waiting centuries
to catch fire. Every chimney is the same
standing in a row, gull on one master
of all. The cries from its great throat cover
the men below who've made a mob and shout
about a game they've lost, but what is worse
Somebody else won. The sky's a
wide dank overwhelming sheet some goddess
has hung and might grab at any moment
to wring out. What's behind or happens next?
All I know, there's a gull above us all
on the cobblestones of Edinburgh.

Out of the drizzle and the fog boys dressed
up like soldiers come although they're more the
hands that wind around a clock changing the
guards. In the cry of gulls and a Scotch mist
outside the castle's walls they stop and
click their heels turning as if they're on
a wheel as they take off and put back on
bayonets. I feel no more protected than
when I hadn't seen them, yesterday's children
becoming men with a wife at home or
a girlfriend or a boyfriend—Who knows? Love
brings us all together and makes us want
to kiss. And then a bullet stops the rest.
The tomb of the unknown is up ahead.

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I am walking between two narrow walls
a place I'd get stuck if I were fatter.
On the way you can't meander. If not
in retreat you can only go forward
no other choice but to walk directly straight
ahead as monarchs must have walked condemned
to put their heads on the chopping block though
this passage leads to life, grows wide into
a field and other fields divided by
the winding stone fences that have been piled
carefully for centuries keeping
in the sheep grazing there above. Here one
sheep is baaing by itself. It wants out.
I'd like to help but only see the rocks.

202

I'm a feather for you, Honey. Don saw
me and thought of you. There's nothing quite like
being interrupted by a nice surprise—
Not with a banjo though or stars that fall
on Alabama—Just a slim feather
with an edge of blue tinier than small
but pretty you have to admit, special
with my tip of white fallen from a bird
you probably know because you do know
birds. Don only knows that I'm not a leaf
from a tree or a stone whose destiny
was the ground, but a kin to wind I've flown
from Pennsylvania hoping to please
when you open the letter and see me.

Most of our fears are very silly. Last
 year the state trimmed along the mountain roads
 and then no milkweed grew and it was so
 because everywhere I looked it looked as
 if there never had been any milkweed.
 My mother was dead, that was the present.
 But back from Scotland now in the present
 I see more milkweed than I've ever seen.
 Virtual fields of it nod in the wind
 and the weight of the sucking bees hanging
 from them humming in the sunny beams
 on every purple limb beginning
 to give this morning fragrance not sadly
 for a flowery funeral but for me.

Balanced on a sharp huge cold mossy rock
 I'll dedicate this poem to you and
 everyone back to 181
 and a few more yet to come because they're
 because of you inviting me along
 for mornings of leisure at hotels, dales
 and moors, seashores where I could sit writing
 sonnets forgetting problems in New York
 refreshed by the sights and sounds traveling
 listening to Keats, Baudelaire and you of course
 inspiration in inspiration's
 overflow when you have the time to think
 and feel though you feel you don't feel at all
 you keep writing and it's good after all.

I bought my sister Jenny a teddy
 when I was visiting Edinburgh.
 She opened the box and took the bear out
 squeezing its cheeks and kissing it quickly
 on the lips. "I'll call you Scotty," she said
 informing him, "You are out of that box
 forever. Wait till you see where you're going
 to live! In a real pretty room with a
 whole lot of friends." Then her finger
 started to nod his head. "Hurray!" Scotty
 said, "I will never be lonely again!"
 and started to clap his paws again and
 again. "I'll never grow up," Jenny grinned
 at Dad: "It's too much fun being a kid."

Every snake I saw today turned out
 to be a stick, the first one this morning
 was big, its head and upper part rearing
 off the ground provoked as a besotted
 Scotsman ready for a fight; it was a
 branch broken from a pine that had impaled
 the ground. Another came along the road
 twisting itself into what it was
 a stick that took its own good time to form.
 Right now I see that that could be a snake
 down there where my ankle dangles naked
 from a rock coiling half hidden in thorns
 and shadows but do you know what? That mouth's
 only a stick when I figure it out.

This is what I love about my brother
He didn't kill the rattlesnake that struck
at him when he was walking in the woods
but pushed the ferns aside afterwards with
his walking stick to see it twist aimed at
him a yard in length and thick flickering
triangular head that hadn't bit him
and let the venom out because venom
is to be spent paralyzing a bird—
It couldn't swallow Scott worrying it
with the stick a little bit to hear it
rattle. But that was it. My brother is
a hunter who knows where he is. A guest
doesn't murder. He'll never crush that head.

I'd rather watch fireflies than fireworks
pressing against the dark. "They're vicious beasts,"
Dad says: "All they do is have sex and eat
their prey by the light they make. There's the first
one now!" I look watching it glowing go
out quickly back into the dusk again
flickering up the wood going off and on.
It disappears then shows the arbor's post.
The sky has its stars, the earth its fireflies
that come to give us light as the light dies.
On Judgement Day they say that souls will rise
—Stories I've heard around a campfire—Eyes
opening with a familiar regard
knowing who I am knowing who they are.

I learned that Michael Jackson died from the
 newspaper left at my hotel door in
 Inverness though on first seeing his face
 I thought it was about the concert soon
 to take place in London. Back in New York
 I teach a class next to the Apollo
 and have to push my way through crowds that come
 to pay their respects writing on the wall
 there. I see not only Americans
 but Chinese holding pens, French, Arabic
 and Spanish that's been written. All drawn here
 hear a universal chord, a boy who jumped
 for joy. Some say he wasn't a poet
 but it wasn't about the words, was it?

So far this morning there've been lesbians
 saddling up their horses, a gold tiny
 feather that had fallen, and a sunny
 bunny close enough to see the dark veins
 run thin and red through its pearlescent ears
 before it hopped away. The lesbians
 are coming through the trees. I imagine
 them bare-breasted about to appear
 in a chorus of birds. I am so glad
 I'm here. This mountainside is freeing
 me from ambition's leash and worrying.
 It's the milkweed I think. Last year, a sad
 year I thought it was no longer here
 but I see bees and blossoms everywhere.

It's better to know something than not to
 know it no matter what it is. For an
 example take the Daddy long legs that
 has come into my vision crawling on
 my leg—I've known Daddy long legs since I
 was a kid, known many of them. Never
 has one ever bitten me yet. "Yes,"
 what I know says, "How beautiful it is."
 "How beautiful it is," what I know says
 as I go to pick it up gently of
 course plump round body and one two three four
 five six legs delicate striding along
 so much existence in so slight a thing
 walking on my hand like a world turning.

The night comes with a chill not on but in
 my skin—A spider web at the end of
 summer stretches in the wind. Decayed dock
 sways with my weight swaying and sways. Water
 striders molest a fallen fly whose wings
 have trapped it there wet lifting itself up
 but not out—The striders striding in and
 out are biting it with small bites that make
 me think of pain and hate and spite and life
 of health and money to pay for it and
 even Afghanistan and Iraq then
 a bass comes in a splash—Splash!—swallowing
 all of them. All that's left is rippling in
 continual circles that keep spreading.

Among hurrying leaves falling like rain
 among people hurrying every which way
 a Chinese American father skips
 towards me on the sidewalk with his kids
 on either side one daughter on each arm
 hopping along in their gray uniforms
 out of the rush hour windy morning
 becoming life-size approaching soaring.
 In a tie and suit with a briefcase too
 Dad leaves the ground the way his daughters do—
 We almost touch! So close! Away they go
 leaving me with leaves following me in
 class to begin. No matter what happens
 or the day brings I'll smile remembering them.

Picking up some live ones and throwing them
 in the trash. They'll soon be dead anyway—
 I'm not doing anything rash. Hallway
 my bedroom, the guest room and even
 in the bath ladybugs are everywhere
 you walk softly and crunch under your feet
 making a sound you'll hear between your teeth
 when you eat Rice Crispies with your fingers—
 Snap! Crackle! Pop!—before you pour on milk
 dried up old ladybugs breathing their last—
 Ah life, it goes so slow and then so fast.
 The snow outside rolls on as smooth as silk
 undisturbed by my old lame father's feet
 stretching clean up to the jagged dark creek.

Where Sara once sat is covered with snow
 and so is the mountain and so is the road.
 The couple was afraid of me at first
 and turned to go, but turned round in a burst
 of second thought and have started to jog
 up the hill towards me pulled by their dogs.
 If my charming Sara were here she'd hold
 out her hands and bring this all to a halt
 but she has gone down south where it is warm.
 We're best inspired by love. Dogs with masters
 or masters with dogs, which one is which one?
 When Sara was little not long ago
 she would have said this morning's sun's shadows
 were zebra stripes stretching along the snow.

I'll take this bottle with me when I go
 Not now—Some hiker dropped it passing on
 Impossible Hill, a mountainside of stone
 made visible by human heels and hooves
 Sharp and steep—Don't fall!—Below is Walnut Run
 Above the power line—Buzzards one by one
 take off from steel and wire into the blue
 horizon fading like they always do.
 The woodpecker tapping a log becomes
 a thought. What's the difference between a sound
 and a song? Well, a sound can make me jump.
 Startled birds are in a bush and when I look
 a fox, no, a coyote saunters off
 —No, a wood god beckons me to follow.

Seeing an earthworm drying dying on
 the stones, I picked it up sticky and threw
 it back alive to thrive in the wet woods.
 It's such a playful wind you'd think something
 was in the limbs shaking them. The towel
 flying from the dock like a pink magic
 carpet has now only flopped on the pond
 slowly moving vaguely like a drowned corpse.
 I can see the sun on every leaf
 moves every tree with shimmering. Shining
 green flies though beautiful bite and make me
 take off my clothes like the day I was born
 to swim back and forth and swim back and forth
 and then get out for the wind to dry off.

When you're lost in the woods every place
 becomes a path. Rain especially will
 come pour on the mountain ripping a place
 for a gully all the way down the hill
 resembling footfalls not raindrops although
 this is a path the rain has swept—I take
 a step and then take two then know I'm going
 in the right direction—No, my mistake.
 The ground's become full of twigs and acorns
 map of dead things and things about to live
 familiar as anything. Let me think.
 "Which way should I go?" My writing shadow's
 dark as the ink on the acorns and twigs.
 I don't know where I am. I'm everything.

I want to write something about you but
 I'm not sure what—You are not with me now
 so you are in my thoughts—We are in love
 the two that becomes one. You ask me how
 I know. Today was cold. I didn't expect
 the sun but it has come to make the cold
 day warm. Unexpected as it was Love
 gave me what I wanted; it didn't want.
 Spent, owed—Bad karma spilled—Impossible
 —The last sip from the bottle no surfeit
 can fill. Want wants. Love loves and cannot kill
 like too much sun and too much water will
 take a green plant and shiver it dull
 and where you thought there was is not at all.

The sawed off willow branch across the street
 looks like the vertical log where my dad
 used to chop off chicken heads. It's a round
 circle of feathers and some blood, round as
 the world, round as my knee that is bent on
 the windowsill propping the paper as
 I write, flesh a proxy desk. The world is
 what it is and we had best accept it.
 The pigeon's agony is over
 returning it to molecules on this
 cold cloudy day. Although the feeding
 hawk remains no one looks up because
 the feathers that once fell are scattered
 on the sidewalk with the other litter.

221

At 63 I've started to compost
in La Plaza, a park I helped to save
starting in 1987 and
succeeding in 2002. Some things
take time like a poem you want to write
or onion skins and carrot peels rotting
to loam. A lot gets done in the dark out
of sight. The evidence tells us not to
give up. You have to remember it's not
always fun. Sit down and do it and it
will get done. From my window you could see
the World Trade Center till 9/11.
Another building rises there making
its appearance. My friends, the ends begin.

222

What is understood is understanding.
What has been told is doing the telling
In a mirror: reflection and figure
Is conversation remembered alone
Long after the guests have gone. A poem
And the words and tastes in memory linger
When what you mean to say comes on its own
Who doesn't like a comfortable dinner?
When everyone sits down together
Think of furniture in a happy home
Think of a bird then think of a feather
Another way of looking at a thing
Reread. It's always a new beginning
A poem is never over, never.

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 What is understood is understanding.

On a sad day of losses big and small
 someone left a flowerpot in the hall
 that wasn't money or plenty of time
 but if I wanted it, the thing was mine
 alive for sure because hint of a leaf
 sharply and green was beginning to peek
 out of the moss like the point of a knife
 pushed out of the earth by the Hand of Life
 if life were a hand and it held a knife
 but not to slash my throat—No, life was kind
 at a closed door in a shadowy hall
 a little thing but I could have it all
 this amaryllis to be. Happiness
 was free and up to me and always is.

Something is first every step of the way
 something beautiful often does happen
 with every step you happen to take.
 Near Newport on the coast of Oregon
 out of a sea that was too cold to swim in
 we picked through the driftwood the tide was leaving
 for what we liked or didn't like picturing
 where each had come from and where they had been.
 From a tree to a branch to a stick worn
 and thinned, tossed and turned in the whittling waves
 they are gathered here at last in New York
 far from home—Or are they? Gentle wayfarers
 in a bowl no longer rolled in the sand
 but rolled in the currents of Akram's hand.

Idea maps show the relationship
 of your ideas to a chosen question
 like "Is Online Dating Safe?" A pigeon's
 excrement splattering on my bicep
 interrupts my writing process messy
 the way birds like to do it with their piss
 mixed with their shit. I look up. Bottom fixed
 points at me in the distant gravity
 ready to be happening. There it is!
 An avoidable drip that I didn't
 see coming because I was busy with
 my lesson wanting all of my students
 to organize their thoughts and find the truth
 but sometimes there's no arguing. Just move.

My bad ideas come out of fear and
 my good ideas come out of being
 fearless. The good idea comes first, then
 I doubt and that is when the bad idea
 comes. "First thought, best thought," Allen Ginsberg said
 and though I don't always agree with him
 there's a whole lot of truth in that. "Go with
 your first thought, impulse, love," Alice Notley
 told me once, "and nine times out of ten you
 will be right. Can you live with that? One wrong
 you may keep or discard? It's yours to choose.
 When the first thought is best and that's how you
 go, the last should be best as well. Just do
 it and fuck them if they can't take a joke."

A homeless woman with her legs spread on
 a park bench looks ready to shit. Good God
 she is pulling her pants down with paper
 towels about to do it. Vacationing
 anarchists are camped out by the water
 fountain. It is hot as hell and you can
 pick your stench. Skateboard boys and a girl on
 a table start to move to a tune playing
 only for them on their clinging headphones.
 Girl slaps boy—I told you it was hot!
 Preamble to a fuck—Never too hot
 for love. Girl snatches his hat, puts it on—
 Cherry bomb explodes. Boy jumps, swings shirt off
 and spins like a top in all of the smoke.

The sky is blue, the clouds are white, the birds
 Fly in and the birds fly out of sight in
 My window five stories up, my building
 So recently surrounded by water.
 Cars floated by and two boys died quickly
 Crushed by a mighty falling limb, the hand
 Of God some people said. Sea took the land.
 Our street swelled smelled of sea and was the sea.
 A hundred houses burned in Queens. Power
 Is off. Some walk the streets looking to see
 A place to charge their cellphones or food to eat
 Just like the cave men did. How much are
 We worth? Garbage the car, the man, the bus
 When the hurricane comes and covers us.

Akram walks forward, but his head's not raised
 more like a rhino charging, defensive
 or afraid barreling ahead. Swallows
 dart down from the sky to harass him, but
 he only sees the ground where the daisies
 and asparagus live. How wonderful
 the world is Akram has finally noticed
 blowing on a dandelion he holds
 in his hand sending the parachute seeds
 up disappearing away from him
 to bloom again same time next spring. His breath
 has let them. White butterflies flutter
 and the daisies nod in affirmation
 and acceptance of everything Akram.

There is a lot of wind in the mountain.
There happens to be some chimes as well.
The wind has many throats; this little bell
is made of metal; the chimes are wooden
pieces sawed and painted wearing away
telling the wind's story in a hurry
like snakes make a ruckus over the leaves
down the rocks to the valley far away.
"It is happening! It is happening!"
The bell rings as the rain starts to pitter
patter on the trees making me shiver
holding my notebook close as I'm running
page after page for a time hid away
waiting like the chimes for something to say.

Fluttering robins louder than my singing
are violent on the lawn where they're fighting
over a worm—No!—I'm wrong. As quiet
as a junkie gets sticking the needle
in no matter what funny business
preceded it—Like a junkie suddenly
silent one bird enters the other shooting
the life force so still it makes me stop
playing to watch what I thought was a war
being fought not a dawn of creation
in a dandelion fog. The robins
hop and pull together to come apart
as I put the guitar aside no thought
no sound at all but for the rain that falls.

My mother pulled the black snake from the bush.
 Long snake gone from fleeing to being held
 twined around her arm and opened its mouth
 but mother only laughed and let it twist.
 Her friends who had come to party at her
 barbecue wanted whiskey sours, not this
 and yelled "Theresa!" parting like the waves
 did for Moses when his raised scepter hissed.
 My mother held on through the yard toward
 the house, the cellar steps, down to the dark
 cellar itself. "Go, find the mice. They're yours,"
 she said letting it go to the shadows
 going back to her friends and the roasting corn.
 That was my mother from the day she was born.

Life is like jumping across the rocks.
 I got myself here and now I must get
 myself out. Huge as a dinosaur head
 and as old if not older is this rock
 I'm writing on as naked as a lizard
 sunning itself. The insects on my skin
 have come to me or I guess I to them
 though they will stay when I go. Home is far.
 Now I steady myself, balance, ready
 to stop my fall and not slide to tumble
 into thorns and ticks below, then struggle
 to climb back up, knuckles numb and bloody.
 Life is really like a poem and how.
 If you want to get there, be here now.

Back at the beginning is like a dream
 Back at the beginning's like waking up
 Back at the beginning not everything
 is formed. The pond is not a pond, it's a
 big hole some giant with a shovel has dug
 up. I know this place and yet I don't, yet
 I know I'm home—Here is where I was born.
 How do I know? Here I feel safe and sound.
 Here I have flown to write and become old.
 The sun's going down. Night will sing its notes.
 I am what I am no matter what. I am
 not able to look. Can you see my face?
 Am I a bird or a man or a snake?
 The stars are hid that led me to this place.

In many ways the tree looks like the cloud
 In many ways the hawk looks like the crow
 sharing the same profile and the same form.
 As the trees bend and sway out of their boughs
 a long polar bear comes. Athena was
 Zeus growing in size breaking free from
 his mind. I see a hawk—Or's that a crow?—
 on high looking down for a young swallow
 to swallow. From above like an arrow
 parent swallows attack the predator
 who's too big to turn around and swallow
 the swallows who follow with more swallows
 nipping its back until it flies away
 then in the clouds the swallows stay to play.

Riding out of Philly on the Amtrak
 train I see a boy in the seat in front
 of me like a ghost on the windowpane
 full of joy and awe at the passing world
 the rising sun just like him reflected
 on the blinding glass and steel skyscrapers
 a brightly burning ball around a fire
 above us all giving us our eyes. We
 are so small and yet the ones who see it
 all. I left the last pepper hanging in
 the garden this morning, a gleaming glint
 still lingering for Dad to see and pick.
 The light makes me feel somehow eternal
 that pepper and now Philadelphia.

My brother is on one side of the pond
 and I am on the other. His fishing
 line goes out, his dog lies quiet, chorusing
 frogs are the only sound, and the moon
 half full giving enough light makes distinct
 the shifting shapes of silhouetted bats
 flitting in and out, four or five perhaps.
 This makes me glad. The bats almost extinct
 are not it seems dead yet. The sunlight glow
 behind the trees and the old power line
 did die. I've seen it do this many times.
 Night hides my careful words written just so.
 Over across the water's my brother
 I cannot see or hear, but know is there.

I threw the oyster crackers on the lawn.
 The sparrows came, the cardinal, the squirrel
 and the opossum, but not my father.
 The oyster stew is defecated, gone
 That meal is done, but on the lawn shadows
 move, half-figured forms for what I've thrown.
 The same old sun is setting in the sky
 a thinning line outlining trees with light.
 In living eyes that close the glowing dies.
 Perhaps that's why Dad didn't close his eyes.
 All that I know, all that I see, the stream,
 the house, the trees will share the dark with me.
 Memory glimmers abstract with tears
 remembering in seconds seventy years.

My sense of order is always to clean
 but under the covers Cachito sleeps
 a bump I see—Outside it's 5 degrees.
 Snow covers everything. Cachito breathes
 and I'm relieved to see he is alive
 watching him fall and rise knowing in time
 he will get up to eat, defecate, cry.
 I'll make the bed in that allotted time.
 Now I'll let rickety Cachito stay.
 Whether made or unmade, changed or unchanged
 in bed he will dream of far away prey
 the mice of yesterday. We humans change.
 Bad habits, pretty morning gossamer
 become with age an iron chain or worse.