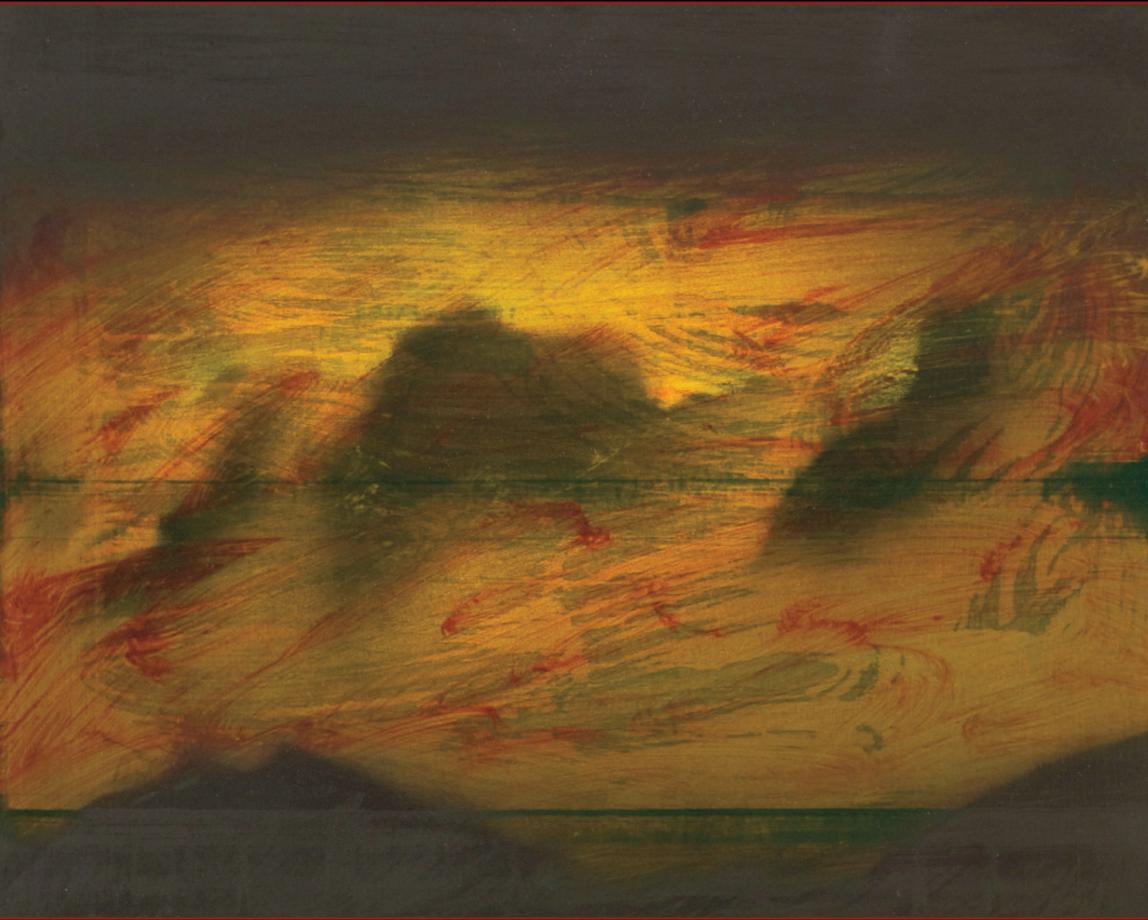


ALAN STEPHENS

Selected Poems



## Selected Poems

BOOKS BY ALAN STEPHENS

- The Sum* (1958, Alan Swallow)  
*Between Matter and Principle* (1963, Alan Swallow)  
*The Heat Lightning* (1967, Bowdoin College Museum of Art)  
*Tree Meditation and Others* (1970, Swallow Press)  
*White River Poems* (1976, Swallow Press)  
*In Plain Air* (1982, Swallow Press)  
*Water Among the Stones* (1987, privately printed)  
*Stubble Burning* (1988, Robert L. Barth)  
*Goodbye Matilija* (1992, Living Batch Press)  
*The White Boat* (1995, Buckner Press)  
*Away from the Road* (1998, Living Batch Press)  
*Collected Poems* (2012, Dowitcher Press)  
*Selected Poems* (2012, Dowitcher Press)  
*Running at Hendry's: Sonnets* (2012, Dowitcher Press)

Alan Stephens

SELECTED POEMS

*Edited by A.A. Stephens*

Dowitcher Press  
Santa Barbara, California

Acknowledgments are given to the original publishers.

Copyright 2012 by A.A. Stephens

[alanstephenspoems.com](http://alanstephenspoems.com)

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Cover art: Tom Stephens

Book design and composition:

Valerie Brewster, Scribe Typography

ISBN 978-0-9857812-3-1 (hardback)

ISBN 978-0-9857812-2-4 (paper)

3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

FIRST PRINTING

Dowitcher Press

[www.dowitcherpress.com](http://www.dowitcherpress.com)

*For Fran*



## Contents

### FROM *The Sun*

(1958)

Small Song	3
The Baby Cockatrice	4

### FROM *Between Matter and Principle*

(1963)

Be with me ...	5
Hap	6
The Open World	8

### FROM *The Heat Lightning*

(1967)

Second Evening	10
Tree Meditation	11
Elegy: The Old Man	21
The Summer	24

### FROM *Tree Meditation and Others*

(1970)

—suppose the words came in	26
To Fran	27
The White Dog Truth	28
Variation from a Theme by Marsden Hartley	29
Desert	30
Moon, Rain	31

Various Presences	32
Late to Pray	34
Scribbling Poems on a Visit Home	35
A Day in the Back Country	36
The Heavily Watered Whiskey ...	42

*from* The Michigan Quarterly Review (*Fall 1967*):

Thinking of Roethke	43
---------------------	----

FROM *White River Poems*

(1976)

Piah (Part I)	45
Jack	48
A Bundle of Colorow's Things	51
Ouray	57

FROM *In Plain Air*

(1982)

Autumn: Island	59
The Fall Plowing Back Home	60
The Man of Feeling	61
At Los Olivos and Alameda Padre Serra	62
Mid-October	68
Night Piece	70
A Puff of Smoke	71
First Deposition	77
Pure Perception	78
The Gnomes	79
Work	80
Late Song: Ambush	81
Second Deposition	82
And These	83

Five O'Clock	84
Dec. 19, 1975	85
A Young Slug on the Counter	86
In the Canyon	87
End of September	89
Reader Listening	90
... and leaving, then,	91
Third Deposition	92
Fragment	93
Winter Child	94
In the Habitat of the Magpie	95

*from Manuscript:*

Lion Camp	96
The Leaves	97
Demonology	99
Winslow Homer at Seventy-two	102

SONNETS FROM *Running at Hendry's*

(*In Plain Air*, 1982)

After Work: Foreword	103
Down Here After Being Kept Away ...	104
Commotion	105
<i>Liberté, Fraternité</i>	106
Running with My Sons (Two of them ...)	107
Running with My Sons (Fifty-one runs ...)	108
More Hap	109
God-light	110
Running Late, Having Held the Class ...	111
And the Fat One Gripping a Bottle of Wine	112
Colleague with a Notebook	113

Loiterer	114
Light Like the Beautiful Trout Fly Name ...	115
Running in the Rain, High Tide	116
Running in the Early January Cold	117
Willetts under an Overcast	118
Big Waves in Wind ...	119
Old Rocks out in the Late Light	120
A Quiet Fourth (Homesick ...)	121
A Quiet Fourth (Fran and I ...)	122
The Other Runner	123
Dog-days I	124
Dog-days II	125
Anniversary	126
Sanderlings Here	127
Night-piece	128
... continued	129
The Desolation Light	130
News	131
Heron Shapes at Dusk	132
Heron Totem	133
Sunday Run: Starting Out	134
In Public: <i>Liberté, Fraternité</i>	135
What the Sea Muttered	136
Topophilia	137
Running at Sundown and Dark	138

FROM *Water Among the Stones*

(1987)

I. To My Matilija	139
II. Festivity	142
III. On a Hillside	143

iv. Catch and Release	144
v. Study of Wild Oats #1	145
vi. The Harbinger	146
vii. Study of a Baby Rattlesnake	147
viii. At the Concert, After a Day Up There	148
ix. Homage to W.C.W.: The Prickly Phlox	149
x. Visit	151
xi. Draft from the Matilija	152
xii. Study of Wild Oats #2: The Fisherman	155
xiii. John's Lizard	156
xiv. A Leopard Lily	157
xv. In Late March Up There	158
xvi. The End of Something	159
xvii. <i>Yucca whipplei</i>	161
... and a low wind in the alder grove	163

FROM *Goodbye Matilija*  
(1992)

Dream Vision	164
After-words	175

FROM *Stubble Burning*  
(1988)

These too, for Fran	177
Martial of Bilbilis	178
Old Man Afraid	179
The Morning of Glenn Gould's Funeral	180
The Two Fields, Where I Used to Live	181
Geron at 3:00 A.M.	183
Geron the Heron	184
Sophocles: <i>Antigone</i> 332-372	185

*from Manuscript:*

In Sleep in the Early Morning	187
Fran	189

FROM *The White Boat*  
(1995)

Long Shadow Instants at Hendry's Beach	190
'For the life of a man comes upon him slowly ...'	192
The Watch Dog	193
An early spring day ...	194
Manzana Cow and Dragonflies	196
Fall in Spring	197
A recent spur-of-the-moment hike ...	198

*from A Few Aspects of the Moon*

Dusk—city and harbor lighting up below	200
How fine if Tsukioka ...	201
Going to Pine Mountain again!	202
One for the laments our time begets	203
Out to mail a letter	204
At 3:00 A.M. out of bed	205
Darkness comes on ...	206
I lie awake in the small hours	207
Well, moon, enough of these	208

*from With a Half Hour to Revisit Yoshitoshi's  
One Hundred Aspects of the Moon at the Museum*

The general is seated	209
The two scholars with their oarsman	210
Stillness of evening: Murasaki	211
The White Boat	212
'Is the Universe Trivial?'	216
Ballad of the Subfusc Day	218

FROM *Away from the Road*  
(1998)

Fragment on a Theme by Ausonius	220
Gerontic	221
Back in 1946–47	224
Two Pieces out of a Winter Morning	225
High Summer	227
Under Cricket Music	228
Homage to Gensei	231
Herders Moving a Flock Down Highway 395	233
A Memorial in the Neighborhood	234
Three Studies from Two Days	238
A Pull-out by the Sespe	240
Away from the Road	241
The Fox	244
Reflecting Pool	253
A Sip of the Manzana	262
Names of Trout Flies	267
 <i>from Manuscript:</i>	
A Portrait	274

<i>Author's Notes</i>	277
<i>About the Author</i>	279
<i>Editor's Note</i>	281



## Selected Poems



FROM *The Sun*  
(1958)

Small Song

“Turn on the hose,” I say.  
I kneel down on my lawn  
To watch the water play.

At the depression where  
The tree is set, it fills,  
Transvisible as the air,

To level, tentative,  
Then, trembling, overbreaks.  
Its boundaries always give

Where the clear instants slow.  
I stand, walk toward my house.  
Shade slips. Place is aflow.

## The Baby Cockatrice

I'd read of the vast reptiles, maybe seen  
Some musty drawings of them, years ago.  
The rumor that such creatures have once been  
Will make a child fear, idly, *They are, now.*

Preoccupied and happy, I had fished  
Well through a June day on Commotion Creek  
And had my limit; now the water rushed  
In shadow, mostly. Almost at the lake

I climbed the bank, tired, quiet. There he was.  
He happened; total; there. He barely lay  
A finger long—bone mouth and ruff and claws,  
The plated body, and shock on shock, the eye.

And once I turned, all I had been stayed there  
Whole in a gaze where no more could occur.

FROM *Between Matter and Principle*  
(1963)

Be with me, powers  
of the tongue I love,

sources of clarity in  
the turns of life:

that the slow action of the  
understanding and the motions

of the rapid feelings  
breathe in unison—

health howsoever brief.

## Hap

*a picture postcard to my own boyhood*

There is containment by small  
brown mountains, by the Channel  
waters that run in upon  
the shores and sleek and litter  
the sand; the pale firm islands  
shut in the swarming lights and  
cross-moves of the Pacific—

as if a topographic  
ordering of the desires  
lay ready; in season, low  
clouds will form, and, thunderless,  
come in changing rapidly,  
set loose their spattering rains  
and sweep off, torn by short winds—

the diversity of shore,  
hill, and gorge is clarified  
with stands of rough, bulbous oak,  
a luminous sycamore  
here and there, somberly thirst-  
ing eucalyptus, mustard  
washed yellow over the slopes—

nicely scaled for the human  
eye, under a small soft sky  
suggesting that, if you wished,  
you might walk to what you see  
anywhere here, observe it,  
and make your way back during  
the morning hours, through the trees.

Under the ordinary  
bright gentle light of the place  
I look in across a fence  
at a bed of wild grasses  
stippled with alyssum, with  
a few native poppies—slight,  
chill orange, snipped out finely.

A poppy is struggling  
and the others barely shake;  
one of its petals comes loose,  
wavering down a kind of  
creek of air. Son, you could choose  
at such times to be happy,  
yet free of your happiness,

knowing that its root is hap—  
I'd have had you arriving  
so as not to be bemused  
in it; say, splashing ashore  
as one of a colony  
of Greeks fresh from disaster  
who glance about expertly.

## The Open World

I drive up on the headland  
to campus, to finish  
some last chores—down through the gaps  
between the big buildings a  
wind's coming in, clear, heavy,  
coursing the Channel from the  
open seas to the northwest.

It is cold—and could have crossed,  
a week since, the Aleutians  
from waters far back over  
on the curving of the world;  
it looks to be intently  
cleansing this place of used air  
in corners, of particles

on walks and in shrubbery;  
students—of the few still here—  
crossing between library  
and dorm are minor figures  
blown bare and vivid in the  
strong sparkle of the light, the  
bleakness is energetic

as I enter South Hall. But  
the main switch has been thrown, the  
windows locked tight—the air's dead  
that had been well divided  
and held in bright dry spaces

as of the mind itself, for  
some feat of our attention—

as if a mind, having been  
closed down, left a bitterness  
suspended here—a mind grave  
and perhaps magnificent,  
that had again been failed of,  
and was again awaiting,  
fatefully, some dominion.

So a term's done; I hurry  
and finish my chores, leaving  
as if I'd been driven out  
so as to meet with this wind—  
an unoccupied roaring  
inside my ears. At the tip  
of the headland the sea is

racing and the eye plunges  
and ascends alertly; and  
the bottom of the sea, some  
intricate system, surely,  
as of conceptions left un-  
tended, bears those contorted  
currents and lashed surfaces.

*Santa Barbara, California,  
August–September, 1962*

FROM *The Heat Lightning*  
(1967)

Second Evening

The sense of the real thirty years back in this clearness—  
I could hold with my eyes, it seemed, the body  
of the air; it was like standing at a fast stream  
up in the mountains, seeing down through the water skin,

through the fine streakings of light, gripping in my vision  
the whole crystalline heaviness of the water—clearness  
right down to the toothed edges of the elm leaves,  
almost black, stationary against the streaked colors

in the sky; cats emerged from under the granary, and taking  
no notice of us, disappeared in high weeds; Seeley's Lake  
started shining through the mild darkness; lights came on  
near it, an uptilted glitter; heart's desire picked up.

About then I might stand up casually, half thinking  
of those cats out in the weeds, and with hands in pockets  
take a turn out on the lawn, and stop, and seem to myself  
to be in the clear dark like a trout in its pool.

Later, air movement in the elm: night proper had begun.  
One or two of us would rise, re-enter the house; and others  
follow, I too, and meet in my turn, at the threshold,  
the shock of the day's heat held still in the house.

## Tree Meditation

*πότνια ἀγλαόδωρ ἄρηφόρε ...*

— EIE ΔΗΜΗΤΡΑΝ\*

In this country, of the few  
native trees the commonest  
is the cottonwood. Settlers  
planted it for windbreaks, for  
shade; it grows in giant rows  
on irrigation ditches,  
and stands over the houses  
shading them in the summer  
all day; it grows in the draws  
and in great dark glittering  
groves on the North and South Platte.

It takes the classic tree shape—  
a round symmetrical crown,  
a trunk short and straight and thick;  
up close, you see that the leaves  
grow in loose swinging bunches  
out on the periphery—  
the interior is gaunt  
and the few major branches  
form powerful, still arches  
that contrast with the quick leaves  
throwing off sharp bits of light.

Considered thus, the whole thing  
suggests perception combined

\*From the closing lines of the *Hymn to Demeter*, referring to the lady herself: ‘Queen, giver of shining things, bearer of the seasons....’

with imperviousness. But  
I turn to one specimen:  
viewed up close its old trunk  
with its deep rough crevices  
and hard ridges covered with  
sharp protuberances is  
a badlands: there's nothing here  
to penetrate to, it says;  
impassive, unmoving, dead.

Whereas the leaves, with their fine  
patterns and movements that take  
the eye are transitory  
and expendable—thousands  
of them in agitation  
all over, to the one trunk  
almost featureless and like  
nothing that's alive, whereby  
the tree lives—holds out and lasts,  
standing over the big ditch  
steady and astir also.

The brown water runs past it  
in the summer; in late fall,  
the ditch dry and the weather  
dry, the leaves turn a brilliant  
clear yellow—it is startling,  
the rough shining globe, against  
the clear sky. The leaves fall then  
in the ditch and are still bright

and new-looking when the snow  
covers them, below the wood  
that stands patient in the air.

The tree has had its full growth  
for some thirty years at least,  
bears its multitudes of seeds  
regularly—small white dots  
in cotton that expands vaguely  
and goes aloft on breezes  
looking supremely idle,  
to drift up against fenceposts  
and weeds and along the sides  
of farm buildings and upon  
the crops, irrelevantly.

The tree having grown from one  
white dot, you know that of course  
on the microscopic scale  
in the seed's interior  
it worked as distinctively  
as it does here, fully grown—  
below those microscopic  
particulars, well below  
the molecular, there lay  
at last vagueness, though; vagueness  
is ultimate. Thence it came,

thither doubtless it will go;  
but here it stands out clearly

against a sky, it traffics  
with the world intricately  
and persistently, fastened  
by many ways into things;  
moving to the world's movements  
its cotton drifting thickly  
through the air on certain days  
in midsummer is a sight  
ordinary and solemn.

I spend half an afternoon  
underneath this glistener:  
in a light breeze the leaves make  
a fine pattering sound, like  
gravel sliding down a slope;  
if the breeze strengthens, the sound  
becomes a voluminous  
general hissing; stronger still,  
and the hissing becomes a  
roar of massive excitement—  
as if a cyclone had struck.

All these sounds are the sounds  
of her present, passing, while  
her trunk and limbs, hard things, dream  
permanently, beneath sound  
the dream of air and rock  
and water, things around in  
inorganic splendor.—Now  
from the leaves I can tell how

at its quietest the air moves  
in eddies, isolated  
short currents, streams with dead spots ...

Each leaf in a given bunch  
is behaving differently;  
none are the same size or shape,  
all are versions; one flapping  
while another seems to whirl  
though in fact it oscillates;  
another swings hectically  
back and forth while its neighbor  
hangs still; one flops over and  
back, now, slowly; another  
vibrates, the whole cluster sways.

I single out one leaf: it  
begins to tremble, then wags  
violently. The breezes  
start, quit, and start up again  
all afternoon. The musings  
of the tree, on one calm day.  
Now agitation up high;  
below, not a leaf moves. Now  
a breeze pours through the whole tree  
and it rattles—the polished  
leaves clash stiffly together.

Is all this movement purely  
decorative. Is a leaf

normally agitated,  
or still; or is this movement  
needful to the tree's workings.  
Are the movements troubles. Or  
merely the life of the tree—  
neither necessary nor  
irrelevant; its queenly  
life—not indifferent,  
its impartial experience....

Three times I had the same dream  
about this tree, in boyhood.  
But I must explain—the trunk  
for all its harshness, its lack  
of fine structure, mere rocky  
crevices and ridges, still  
was vulnerable, of course—  
a fungus got into it  
near the point where the branches  
arch up—the bark turned spongy  
and brown, a depression formed.

The affliction seemed to me  
dangerous; I was distressed.  
A fluid like clean water  
seeped from the place. Yesterday  
when I examined the trunk  
I saw clearly, down one side,  
the stain left by the fluid;  
though the spongy depression

had largely healed some time since,  
in one spot I found some wet  
soft bark; it smelt like moist earth.

That is the site of the dream.  
I approach and a cavern  
slopes upward into the huge  
interior of the tree.  
At the threshold I look up  
and see on the crest in light  
(a regular, clear nimbus)  
a great deer standing quietly;  
in the cave's natural dark  
the deer is wholly visible.  
It looks at me; its eye shines.

I have no inclination  
to approach any closer;  
according to the dream's plan  
I've had a look at my life  
which is all I was to do—  
that was the feeling at first;  
then the sense of the dream changed—  
the deer was merely life  
itself, being presented  
in repose for a moment,  
so that I could look at it.

So the tree stirs readily  
in my mind—stirred yesterday

when I saw some of its kind  
being felled a mile westward,  
the great sections of the trunks  
and limbs like fallen big game  
in Africa—great females  
slain and strewn about—but what  
is this but an incident  
I drove past the summer day  
they fell in a solid world.

Underneath the tree, grasses—  
bluestem, wild rye. A kind of  
sharp-edged grass bends evenly,  
as if combed, over the bank  
of the ditch, trailing its tips  
in the brown water. Woodbine,  
planted by a bird dropping,  
doubtless, grows here—it would come  
from an old vine in the yard,  
set out by some grandparent.  
It is flourishing in here.

A pretty place. The milkweed  
is blooming—clusters of dull  
or dead pink flowers, spikey  
petals set on a flesh-like  
protrusion, a hole  
opening in the center  
shaped like a five-pointed star;  
the sweet odor's attracting  
not only bees but ants—large

black ants with legs that raise them  
high off the ground. On the road,

close, cars pass. In the grass lie  
small branches shed by the tree;  
the bark on some has loosened  
and come off with the passage  
of the seasons, and the wood  
is bleached out. A few of these  
look like antlers. As I turn  
to examine one of them  
a funeral procession  
passes—black Cadillacs, then  
a long line of every-day cars.

They bear the dead and mourning  
to the new cemetery  
put in just beyond this farm—  
the mourners preoccupied  
matter-of-factly. I feel  
like waving to them, but check  
the impulse. The tree stands on  
this thirty foot strip of ground  
between the road and the field;  
beyond, now, is not only  
the graveyard but new houses.

So the traffic is heavy  
on a road which in my youth  
was silent, usually—  
three or four cars going by

during a morning, perhaps.  
Coming across on this ground  
from the road, through the bluestem,  
to see the wild geraniums,  
I came close to cutting my foot  
on a beer bottle fragment.

Still it is a pleasant place.  
I notice along the base  
of the great trunk a blackened  
area—from an old weed fire,  
I suppose. There is a weed  
whose name I don't know—dark green,  
tall, it too is blooming now—  
greenish-white little flowers  
in closely set clusters like  
clover-blossoms.—Sacred ground,  
as our life is not; and ground

inevitably profaned;  
maybe inexhaustible,  
too, in its way.—Yesterday,  
cutting into a seed pod,  
prodding it with the knife point,  
hunting for the small white seeds,  
trying to find some pattern,  
I saw a small white spider  
emerge from the packed cotton  
and, while I watched, go racing  
away across the table.

## Elegy: The Old Man

Edging between the truck  
and the wall I work back  
to the far end, past the concrete,  
onto the original dirt—  
triangles of broken glass  
shine among the old straw;  
I make out a hame-ring,  
yellowed and fly-specked; a mended  
strap, cracked and with salt  
from dried sweat still on it; high  
on the wall, hung there  
perhaps by my brother, to be visible  
and out of the way,  
an old ‘silver’  
harness buckle, a heart shape  
set in the center, catching  
the half-light where it bulges—  
a bit of the bold old  
finery of a set of harness.

I take it down. The heart is starred  
with corrosion, dented on one side—  
the whole buckle’s bent awry,  
across the concave underside  
a spider has stretched a web:  
in the quiet I can hear  
the strain and give of the fabric  
as I poke at it ... nothing  
underneath but a trace of fine  
reddish dirt. I blow it out.

Regarding in the half-light  
the heart's convexity, I consider  
(in the heart's half-light)  
taking the piece home with me....

The buckle and such scraps  
are like the notions surviving  
in the gaunt, brittle, half-dark  
interior of an old man  
and the barn an old man  
lasting into this other world  
maybe in a subdivision  
in California: he has come out  
to live with one of his children,  
and runs the power mower  
once a week. He actually  
cuts the grass, the barn  
really shelters a truck;

the old man finds himself  
wearing a sportshirt,  
the barn is carrying  
in its inner flank a stack  
of grease-gun cartridges.  
The barn still holds the smell  
of harness leather, and manure,  
and feed and the like—faint,  
dry, distant, the fragrance  
persists like the manner  
of an earlier day in the speech  
of the old man.

My sons may never know  
how satisfactory a place  
a barn is to take a leak in,  
and this is a barn, since you can still  
do so, in the brown half-light,  
the comfortable seclusion  
—as for the dead in here,  
I think of them long since busy  
at burying their own, as I make my way  
back out, toward the day-glare.

## The Summer

The birds keep to their routines.  
The big cottonwood glitters.  
In the approaching heat  
of the middle of the day  
the elm makes little movements  
now and then, like a dozing horse.

And on a distant county road  
the sun bangs for an instant  
on a windshield, flashing  
like a signal; no reply.

A big butterfly, strongly  
constructed, yellow with black  
ribbing and trim, works the air  
between the house and trees,  
disappearing from time to time  
around the corner of the house  
or inside one of the trees,  
reappearing abruptly.

I come out after breakfast  
every day, and sit writing  
in the morning shade. Clear hours!  
Butterfly's in the foreground  
frequently; tall dusty weeds  
by the road; small house, trees, fields,  
in the middle distance; then  
the pale, vapory mountains.

If I look up from my page  
the butterfly is often  
the one moving thing in sight.  
I watch him rise at the end  
of a glide with a broken,  
tottering movement, working  
his way up to a high bough  
then not alighting, but merely  
poising in the air above it  
and veering briskly off. Well,  
he's not after anything.  
A kind of extract of this  
place, having worked free, he stays;

his apparently hesitant  
turning this way and that is  
just delighted watchfulness.

Afternoons he spends mainly  
resting. And nights  
on a weed stem, I suppose,  
stiffening with the chill,  
the stem knobbly with dew when  
the morning sun first strikes it.

FROM *Tree Meditation and Others*

(1970)

—suppose the words came in  
the way a flight of blackbirds  
I once watched entered a tree  
in the winter twilight;  
finding places for themselves  
quickly along the bare branches  
they settled into their singing  
for the time.

## To Fran

Out in the rain all afternoon  
hands and neck chilled—  
some trouble, anger

and late supper, the rain  
smacking and clicking  
outside the room

plenty of chablis  
our sparse reflections  
on the black window glass

where space comes pouring in  
all the way in  
from between the stars, in past the blacked-out moon—

desolately it enters the room  
and streams around your shoulders  
without harm—how curious—

and enters my grizzled beard  
stopping when it arrives  
at the skin warmth—

~

it must be we belong in it—at once remotely  
and intimately; the way a shepherd's fire at night belongs  
in the distance on a desert upland

## The White Dog Truth

I make out the white bulk in the dark—  
the dog approaches at a quick pace  
and goes by showing no interest in me,  
and such is the quiet of the street  
I hear the clicking of his toenails  
on the blacktop, quick, business-like,  
even half a block away, the sound  
growing fainter very gradually  
and already, while I keep an eye  
on the wire-thin half rim of light  
the moon shows in a sky jagged  
with trees along the bottom—  
already this encounter, the white bulk passing  
in the dark, the diminishing click  
of the toenails along the stretch  
of silence back there, cannot be forced  
not to have been, the lords of creation  
themselves will have to submit to  
its having been, if they should find it  
some day blocking the way of a desire.

## Variation from a Theme by Marsden Hartley

Hartley, summer was plainly for you,  
    remarker of joined clearnesses, plover noticer,  
    savorer of 'infant clams' and campestris, among the opulence,  
    'the look of bright everlastingness'

But it is not for me, in summer  
    it seems there's nothing to do  
    but continue what's become obvious, greens  
    overlapping soberly, whitening sky,  
    stationary August.

An upper rocky field, and the way  
    begins to open, a few bright  
    stubble stalks leaning among the clods, nearby,  
    and red light flickering in the distance, on the blue flats  
    where they're burning off the cattails in the sloughs,

And 'shall the cold flowing waters  
    that come from another place  
    be forsaken?'—I'm on my way  
    up to a wind-swept place  
    of darkness, snow, and some lights, and further on  
    a granite cave, icy water on its walls  
    black flecked with white and pink, the good  
    lair dark I dream to; start down fresh from.

## Desert

This bad country in the late afternoon wears us down,  
The rocks with their dead purples,  
The scabby cactuses, trees with tiny oily leaves

And thorns so big they're visible from the road,  
Shrubs that look made out of old wire. Finally it all says:  
*That hard life of yours couldn't live out here, the bad country*

*Would free you of it;* then the spirit, turning  
Ruthless as it was in the days of the anchorites,  
Could have a respite and stand empty on some hillside.

## Moon, Rain

Homeward, and how sudden  
The round white moon  
Above the winter poplars  
(Bunches of broomstraws)  
And the gray  
Of the sky in that quarter  
A silence for the moon statement  
And she is indoors at this hour  
And the moon not visible anyway  
From down in the canyon  
This was yesterday—  
Today where she is, at the window  
Rainy light on the faucet chrome  
And on the sheath of wet  
On the tree, the bare  
Apricot the rain sparely decorates  
A knop of silver  
Here and there, before  
The window where she is

## Various Presences

Coming back to the house through the dark  
I see a flashlight come on  
at the dark window of Tim's room—  
as I enter he trains it on me  
and greets me.

He has climbed out of his bed  
to look at some tomato worms again  
which he put in a can today with fresh tomato leaves  
fragrant with the scent  
of tomatoes themselves—  
he explains: he could hear the worms  
chewing the leaves in the dark,  
he imitates the sound for me,  
a slight sucking sound.

The broad scars or scabs  
on tomatoes are made, I suppose,  
by these worms. We sit a moment  
watching them in the flashlight beam.

Big fellows, a clear, light green,  
built high and rectangular  
like boxcars, and with a thorn  
like a rose thorn set in their hind ends;  
on their flanks are stripes,  
diagonal, crooked, black with white edging;  
between each stripe is an imitation eye—  
we look at it, it looks back at us,

a clear black pupil  
rimmed with a delicate white tissue  
that makes the eye appear to glisten  
with moisture. The expression, we decide,  
is that level, considering regard  
you meet in the eye of a toad  
or a lizard.

## Late to Pray

All around the infrequent little towns  
(a few gaunt old stores still in business,  
elm-dark residential streets half-way  
abandoned, a broken-hearted silence in them)  
lies the shining wheat country, gold white  
and open, all visible or else nothing;  
hill gleams above hill to the smooth rim  
of the horizon like the sight of excellence itself.

If you are still holding out here, every street  
an elm tunnel opening at either end on the dazzle—  
in the afternoon silence all the bright grain  
standing motionless takes on a distant look;  
and is again a goddess, with child,  
and absorbed in that, in being nothing more.

## Scribbling Poems on a Visit Home

Poor little bastards, is  
no provision being made  
for their future?

They just scatter like beans—  
the pod splits and curls back  
spring-like, and out they fly

during these dry August afternoons  
while the tremendous, dazzling thunderheads  
white as the original white

of creation, build up in the west  
like the springtime fathers that drenched  
fields they knew not at all,

and passed through never to return.

*August 27, 1967*

## A Day in the Back Country

### I

Strong cold gusts rake the ridge;  
I drive into the east light;  
The roadside wild oats shake,  
Glisten delicately  
—Silver for a girl's wrist.  
But here sea haze to right,  
Mountain chasm to left,  
Against their small clearness.

### II

Miles, and nobody, then  
Two helicopter crews,  
Machines idling nearby,  
And this whole back country  
Seems theirs—they criss-cross it  
As they please, their faces  
Interested, easily  
Looking out over it.

### III

More miles, and I wonder  
Am I lost? A deer stands  
Quietly in the road,  
A flowering up, it seems,  
Of the dust of the road  
At just this moment,  
And the road itself wild.  
The deer walks off, down the slope.

IV

Down steep, tight curves, jolting.  
A strange rattle starts up  
In the steering column.  
Mudholes from the ooziings  
Of roadside springs. And there,  
The shine of the river  
Winding in the open  
Valley. And no one down there.

V

Much of that day is gone.  
Half careless as I was  
Of it—since it was mine,  
I chose that, rather than  
Become cautious with it;  
So, much of it's well gone—  
Into my bones, maybe;  
Certainly out of reach.

VI

Sycamores and alders,  
Grass turning a bright brown;  
In the vertical light  
The loud water ablaze,  
Skimmed by green-backed swallows—  
Hawk, black in the distance,  
Calling down at it all—  
Now from these I recall:

How in the unknown  
River with nothing  
Promised came the jolt  
And quiver of the  
First trout (thereafter  
How readable were  
The pools and riffles!)—  
How then I kept on  
Fishing past lunch time  
Knowing the fatigue  
This would mean; then ate  
Somewhat hurriedly  
At last with my boots  
On a log to dry—  
How I went downstream  
Barefoot, astonished  
By the pain! each small  
Rock made its own pain—  
How slowly that pain  
Drove back the idea  
Of a pleasant walk  
Barefoot to that pool  
Downstream; how I caught  
Two fine trout while each  
Move I made meant pain;  
How the log had spurs  
On it, like pinpoints,  
Entering my bare feet  
When I came back; how  
In midafternoon,

Tired, I took my last  
Good trout, at a bend  
In dark blue shadow,  
Under a rock ledge;  
How then I rested  
In some tall grasses,  
How they hissed loudly  
With the gusty wind  
While I on the ground  
Lay in still air; how  
I thought of sleep, slept;  
And woke in changed light,  
Glare and shadow strange  
On the water—late  
Afternoon now! How  
Fishing back upstream,  
Seeing the water  
From the other way—  
Alien—chilled me;  
How in my fatigue  
I went by riffles  
I'd have fished, before;  
How in that estranged  
New-shining water  
I caught two more trout,  
And, leaving them cleaned  
On a streamside rock,  
Turning back found one  
Moved—then saw the snake  
That moved it, his jaw-

joints unfastened, whole  
Head of fish inside  
His mouth, his own head  
Startlingly deformed,  
Eyes looking close-set  
Now that the small head  
Had been stretched so wide;  
How, motionless, he  
Watched me, knowing well  
That I might kill him,  
How his eyes asked, "Well,  
Will you?" and waited;  
How, as I held still,  
He moved, ever so  
Slightly, stealthily,  
Looking right at me.  
How I went upstream  
And from being tired  
Lost three lures in quick  
Succession, thinking:  
I'm skin-tight, aching  
With this day, bone-cracked  
By it, like my friend  
The snake with my trout  
All but disabled  
By the good fortune.  
—Time to crawl home, then,  
And sleep it off. How  
A big, bushy-tailed  
Ruddy coyote paused

On a stony spur  
And watched me a moment  
As I drove toward him  
On the road out; how,  
Truth to say, the sight  
On my return, of wife  
And sons distressed me  
—I distressed myself  
Among them, come back down  
As I was, unfit  
For human converse,  
Drunk with the dry, bright  
Liquor of the day.

## The Heavily Watered Whiskey of This December Sunlight

... if time is friend  
or enemy? we stand still  
by going and go  
standing still:  
along a hillside this  
midwinter afternoon,  
“An old thing to be doing”—what?  
“Filing down a trail like this,”  
I tell her, the pleasure of it  
that we are partly roused ancestors, or  
as if we were an old trellis  
with a young vine in it  
where now the air is moving  
birds visit the grapes  
the season lives  
a sunny and windy freshness  
so ancient—this  
or nothing for us.

## Thinking of Roethke

*by the McKenzie one evening*

To the heaven of ideas I should prefer  
A heaven of events, such as Roethke knew,  
Or so I think as I watch the McKenzie running  
Fast and smooth, blue-green to where a rock  
Jolts it into a tumult, uprearing, clear white,

Surging and surging (and louder, it seems) as night  
Advances. Well, Roethke, dead now about a year,  
Leaned quietly to heed places like this one.  
I light the Coleman, the near boulders and fir trunks  
Are suddenly cloven—black shadow, flat white light,

And a jumpy glitter on the black current that shows  
Between the trunks. Sticks in my little fire  
Redden and bend. The time passes. It passes; quiet.  
How plainly I am here, in this flat glare.  
The world is some kind of concentrate, clearly.

A mayfly, delicate green, high-winged, alights  
Awkwardly on my arm—from a long stay under the river,  
Through many moltings, the thing has come up  
For the air and the light: ephemerid; 'ephemeria  
Phroneontes.' It flies off smartly into the dark.

Things are faithful. The fir trunks in silence, in it  
Like reeds in a pool, the river jarring against its rock,  
The small hot fire, the vivid and matter-of-fact insect—they  
Take place, a deep relief, as I look around to see  
With Roethke in mind a last time before turning in.

FROM *White River Poems*

(1976)

ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION OF SOULS AND SELVES

*... Then flush the world in earnest. Let yoursel' gang,  
Scour't to the bones, and mak' its marrow holes  
Toom as a whistle as they used to be  
In days I mind o' ere men fidged wi' souls,  
But naething had forgotten you as yet,  
Nor you forgotten it.*

— HUGH MACDIARMID

PRATER FOR A SECOND FLOOD \*

Piah

(PART I)

Is a self  
so precious, Piah? I think sometimes  
a self is an unnecessary growth, a kind

of wart, at best  
harmless, not too unsightly—irritated  
it will grow troublesome, at last maybe malignant.

Or sometimes it is  
an instrument, to be rightly proud of,  
that works well, is even perhaps attractive and amusing—

\**Toom* is empty, *fidged* is moved.

or even an article  
of some elegance and beauty; to be  
dismantled or discarded, though, if it becomes

in ‘this world of fleeting  
trials and choices,’ out of place  
or out of date, a piece of outsize bric-a-brac—I know selves

that should be, like some great  
and now elaborately ugly Nootka woodcarving,  
propped in the ethnic room of a dusty provincial museum....

But commonly a self  
is a more modest thing, something improvised  
by the spirit, over a stretch of some years, for daily use—

use that’s no easier  
on it than on any other implement;  
scratches, corrosion, dented and mended places in time

may give it its pathos  
and dignity—some old carpenter’s tool, handle  
broken and taped, blade nicked but smooth and bright still.

All this says nothing of  
the temporary selves made for special  
occasions, and sound and true for their purposes,

or of that self of selves  
which is like those marine creatures  
made up of different animals, no one kind

able to survive apart,  
each kind providing in its own way  
for all the others—a Portuguese man-of-war of a Self!...

## Jack

In photographs the light flashes  
Off his big cheekbones  
Which are as definite as fists  
While his eyes flash  
With their different light, looking out  
At the quick, hard  
Movements of his own world.  
He is not a sufferer.

Sure of himself, for the reason  
That he has thought out  
And made for himself—made by hand  
You could say—a weapon of a self,  
A self for hard use. He named  
Himself—Nicaagat,  
Who appeared from out of the desert westward  
One spring, and joined the Utes.

Some say he had White blood, some  
That he was part Mexican  
Or Paiute or Apache. Sold as a boy  
By the Ute chief Walkara  
(The one who castrated the boys he sold  
To Navajos for placid herdsmen)  
To a Mormon family. They raise him—take him  
To church, send him to school.

Get him a job: six months  
Driving an ice wagon  
In Salt Lake City and he vanishes

To reappear the Ute  
He remained to the end. Such a man  
And the world are brothers wrestling.  
He does not forget which of the two of them  
Is the elder and will win.

Be a Ute for all you're worth.  
Marry a Ute wife,  
Take your people each year into the mountains  
For the hunting, summer and fall;  
Trading and (no purist) rations in winter;  
Fight the Sioux (with Crook—  
'Jack's callous ferocity startled  
Even Crook's veterans');

Dance the Bear Dance, dance  
The war dance and sing  
Its one word song the tribe name  
*tsiuta* all night long,  
Slow the Whites down with words:  
You come see about dis.  
Why all dese soldiers want to see too?  
Ain' no trouble dere.

You come. I show you Meeker  
Ain' beat up. Lot of soldier  
Come to Agency, women get scared,  
Children get scared,  
Young men maybe dey want to fight.  
Old ones say No fight,

But maybe young men don't hear  
Old men—then trouble.

When the troops come on anyway  
Slow them down with bullets.  
And when more troops come on  
Use words once more, gain a month,  
Gain half a year.... When the tribe  
Is driven out at last  
From its country, when the Ute self's broken,  
Not to break along with it.

No, be separate again, be one Ute,  
If that is possible—a teamster  
Once again. Then some soldiers, questions  
And a sudden argument  
About a horse theft and 'Jack was wounded  
As he ducked into a teepee.  
When the soldiers pulled down the teepee  
Jack ran into another.'

I remember him by what it took to kill him.  
'He was protected from our bullets  
By bales of robes and rawhides.  
He fired his carbine and killed  
Sergeant Casey. I then caused a shell  
From a mountain howitzer  
To be fired into the teepee in which Ute Jack  
Was barricaded, killing him.'

## A Bundle of Colorow's Things

### HIS PIPE

It lies in a glass case,  
the bowl cut from red stone  
rubbed smooth, the stem  
carved of some pale wood.  
on the stem's upper surface  
a tortoise, a deer's head,  
two ears of corn  
laid side by side, and  
the head of a mountain goat,  
all in a row, spaced evenly  
in high relief, each detail  
clear-edged. From the dead  
air of the case the pipe  
calls up in its workmanship  
a carver hunched with his knife  
on a sunny winter morning  
in a quiet so intent  
he does not know he is happy.

### HIS PICTURE

A huge face. Wide heavy cheekbones  
and big hacked-out looking nose,  
tired intelligent glittery eyes —  
glittery as black grease. A sharp-cut  
straight wide sulking mouth.  
Beneath the lower lip and the cheekbones  
emphatic black shadow, counterpart  
of the light aglare against his forehead.  
A willful face, an eager face.

COLOROW IN *THE DENVER POST*

In '88, the year before he died:  
'The Whites have asked for Colorow's removal  
And the latter persists in staying on the ground.  
He is by nature ugly and mean-tempered  
And cannot be scared off or bluffed away.  
This, coupled with his notion that he owns  
The land, which has become a passion with him,  
Has made it very unpleasant, and at times  
Dangerous for the settlers.'

HIS SMALL JOKE IN A UTE COUNCIL

...The old man said to the whites:  
All right, we give you some land  
For your presents, only  
You must take it away with you.  
We do not want your land  
Lying around over our country.

HIS ANCESTRY

His father was  
a Comanche, his mother  
a Jicarilla Apache.

WHAT SOME SAID HAPPENED TO HIM ONE DAY

Carl Adams, the man  
who was born Karl Schwanbeck,  
kicked Colorow downstairs  
for waving a revolver  
and calling the Governor  
liar, damn liar, goddamn liar.

WHAT HE DID AT MILK CREEK

When the soldiers crossed over  
the Reservation line, the Utes  
met their advance and stopped it.  
And then Colorow, the clown  
with the enormous belly,  
showed the Utes the way to hold  
the soldiers inside the pits  
they had dug when caught in the open —  
hold them there breathing the stench  
of their own dead horses,  
and no water, tasting their own sweat  
in the glare of the hot sand-flat.

MR. WOLF LONDONER'S COLOROW STORY

When I kept store in California Gulch  
Colorow used to come in for some trading,  
And I'd ask him to dinner, being afraid  
If I didn't he might take our scalps. One time  
He came with five squaws, and they ate and ate.

Colorow'd take a spoonful of soup, and spit.  
Spit alongside the table, a villainous thing,  
But I durst not say a word. When they were finished  
Colorow mumbled something in Indian  
And one of the squaws gave a buckskin to my wife.  
She hardly knew what it was or what to do with it.  
I was in the office later when Colorow  
Came back. He was a terribly big Ute —  
Blocked out the light and darkened the whole front.  
He stood there holding his stomach with both hands.  
I was a little afraid, about the dinner.  
He said, 'Heap sick.' I said, 'Been drinking whiskey?'  
'No, eat too much. Want doctor.' — 'Doctor's gone,'  
I told him. He said, 'You give me medicine.'  
Now I was kind of scared. I did not know  
But what he would go for me. I thought the best  
I could do would be to give him some Epsom salts.  
I knew it wouldn't kill him. I got a cup  
And filled it, nearly, and he had a hard time  
To get it down, and had to take a great deal  
Of water with it. Then he went away.  
Next morning, going down to the gulch  
For a pail of water, I met my friend coming up.  
He must have weighed 275, usually,  
But now he looked like an umbrella cover.  
We stopped, I thought I had better face the music.  
'No good. White man heap bad.' — 'Why, Colorow,  
What is the matter?' — 'Pretty near die. Want doctor.'  
I helped him up to the store. Then I fetched the doctor,  
And when I told him what the trouble was,

He said, 'How much did you give him, for \_\_\_ sake?'  
'I gave him a tin cup full,' I said. He said,  
'Why that was enough to kill an elephant.'  
'Well,' said I, 'it hain't killed Colorow.'



... Everybody's Indian,  
Even the Indians',  
Old many-souls!  
How many times  
Defeated (and the soul —  
That temporary product  
Of an obstructed spirit —  
Discharged like a breath, and the mind  
Gone oddly quiet, as in  
The aftermath of a burst of rage),  
Only to turn up elsewhere  
Unexpectedly  
In full force  
To the end, with the old  
Abrupt talent  
For getting into action!

To die of old age  
In your own lodge,  
And on the White River  
(Oh, far downstream, in Utah) —  
Of the many souls  
This last one, so light,

Like a puff of smoke!  
Going up in stillness  
Out of the hacked-out  
Huge old self, that had been  
So much photographed  
For the papers;  
That had supplied them,  
And the Utes, also,  
With the materials  
For so many stories;  
And that was a good, workable  
Ute self, now  
Lying still for once,  
And solid, heavy; yes,  
As if it had been fashioned  
With chisel and hand axe  
From a tree trunk.

## Ouray

A clear mind  
and a liking for action.

When the brother of his wife Chipeta  
tried to kill Ouray with a knife, for giving up

Ute land in a treaty,  
Ouray broke the man's wrist and threw him in a ditch.



There being Whites  
by the hundreds of thousands out here

and Utes  
by the hundreds, to place the obvious

first, each time  
he thinks, is his solitary distinction, and

crushing a Ute,  
compromising with a White

impartially,  
in honor of that first thought,

telling lies  
to White commissioners, without hesitation

expelling the old chief  
his adoptive father, when the old man would not

deal with the Whites—  
what are these but tesserae in his mosaic

integrity  
whom it suited Ute and White to call corrupt.

He had for company  
Chipeta and his own accurate thinking.



In group photographs  
it's always Ouray that sits, hands on knees, front and center,

fully there, solid,  
alert, his gaze direct and ready to meet

with full attention  
the attention of anyone looking at him here

as of—right now:  
it is an expression that doesn't yield *anything*.

FROM *In Plain Air*

(1982)

*And let me in these Shades compose  
Something in Verse as true as Prose.*

— POPE

Autumn: Island

*after Jorge Guillén*

Autumn, an island  
with a severe  
profile, watches the combers with their crests  
that waver, race forward  
to their glistening destruction.

A love for line, and  
the grapevine is stripped  
of its overlapping green

and a small basket  
filled with clusters  
out of—good luck: sealed in them  
a balancing of dreams  
about things possible.

From secret high spirits  
a clean style; wisdom the more definite  
as it becomes the more inconspicuous, a plain  
branch above the hurrying colors.

## The Fall Plowing Back Home

Young, and I burned the world away  
Ahead of me, anywhere I went,  
With my personal blaze.

Now the world is filling back in.  
How I like the plain details,  
Complete with shadows, in the low sunlight.

When did I empty?—it's as quiet in here  
As a cobweb furred with dust.  
Let the harness on its peg

Harden, let the green build up  
On the battered brass knobs of the hames.  
This old manure scent is dry, and very fine.

Long blades of the afternoon  
Slope in through the drop-siding,  
Slit the dimness. The light wind

Of late afternoon carries clearly  
The fly-buzz of a whole fleet  
Of tractors, over the flat brown fields.

## The Man of Feeling

Let it go on, he says,  
The sweet, steady humming  
Of time, and leans again  
In the light of the lamp, outside  
The gray and dripping day,  
*Its* light entering the window and setting  
Its pewter-colored shine  
on the back of his hand, his books  
In reach, the three or four people  
He loves best, at their own doings  
In the near middle distance  
Of his life this wintry day  
As he enters his fiftieth year,  
Let it go on,  
That sweet hum, let there be  
No end to it, ever.



Curious how ready he is to die  
At moments when he looks around  
Quite happy with things—driving  
Through town this afternoon,  
Heading home, looking forward  
To dinner and the evening with *her*,  
The town so pleasant in the clear, late light  
Reflected from the white undersides of clouds  
Pushing out over the rooftops  
From the mountains, the air  
Chill, fresh off the ocean—

## At Los Olivos and Alameda Padre Serra

Below St. Mary's retreat  
In its greenery, on its hill,  
Are some unowned olive trees  
Backed by a stone wall  
In a crook of the busy street.  
You can visit them when you please.

Though trucks gear down and brake,  
Growling and hissing, and cars  
Whoosh by the place all day,  
The light's clear there, the gray  
Grove whitens, when it stirs,  
As if for its own sake,

The ground is packed and bare  
And stained bright purple and black  
From the unpicked bitter fruit  
That spurt from underfoot.  
Walking, I do not lack  
For quiet in that air.



Winter dusk, and I peer  
From the stone bridge nearby  
Through alder and sycamore  
At the stream racing high  
And red with mountain mud  
And listen till I hear  
Under the water-roar

The streambed boulders thud  
And see them gone dead white  
and silent at this spot,  
And the last pool sunk from sight,  
And the clear, weightless current  
Of the air quivering hot  
Over the solid torrent.



A place being manifold  
With more than the eye can hold,  
Was I once Spanish or Greek  
To like these gray trees so—  
Or a solitary kid  
From the dusty plains,  
Much to wonder about  
Inside himself and out,  
Sent to school in town,  
Shown a few things to know,  
While, in a country drowse,  
All but completely lost—  
Who came at last to seek  
Clearness in all he did,  
And had for all his pains  
The thing in itself clear  
And the meaning disappear  
—A strange curse to bring down  
On much that he loved most;  
Latterly come to stray

Under these twisted boughs  
Of the old wisdom, where  
Mixing leaves with air  
Off the sea below  
This is what they say—  
*Σοφία* first was skill,  
What a craftsman knew,  
Physician, sculptor, smith,  
And it is so still,  
Being just a way  
Not a thing to keep  
Or a state of mind  
That we stiffen with  
And go slowly blind—  
But an act of mind  
In the course of being,  
Going with our seeing;  
To sit still and know  
Is itself to do,  
In our moving through  
With the rest of things;  
Standing here, we go,  
Passing we stand still  
(So the gray grove sings  
Whitening on its hill)  
Till at last we see  
Or rather, learn to guess  
In our doubleness,  
That awake we sleep,  
Sleeping we're awake,

And all these mixtures mean  
That no thing can be  
For its own sweet sake;  
Clearness has its source  
In the Vague and Vast—  
Shapeless, these two last,  
While clearness's green leaf  
Shapely bright and brief  
Consummates their powers;  
That the seen and unseen  
Send into each other  
One another's force,  
Separated die  
Quicker than cut flowers—  
As for what you write  
(Rustles one old tree)  
Why, Athene knows  
Every poem goes  
No matter at what height  
Over rails of prose,  
Length on length on length  
Shoved by smoky strength  
Straight and smooth and bright,  
And the ugliness  
Where the iron is mined  
Of necessity  
Has a dignity  
She could not but bless  
—If she, brought to birth  
by Hephaestus' axe,

Shouting her war cry,  
And without a mother,  
Were the blessing kind.



Such is what I heard  
When the branches stirred  
In their dialect;  
Now I look around  
And this bare dry ground  
Prompts me to reflect  
No man walks beside  
Athene the clear-eyed,  
She was born complete  
Of the bright-lit myth  
Where she keeps her distance  
From the shadowed earth;  
From the twisted trees  
Standing here, for instance,  
Catching the sea breeze—  
Slow to grow and bear,  
Whether here or elsewhere  
Cultivated stocks  
Grafted to the wild  
(Mixture in the shoot)  
Able to hold out  
For the dusty farmer  
Through the longest drought,  
Grappled in the rocks;

The black, bitter fruit  
Yielding a clear oil  
That once symbolized human  
Plenty and good will,  
Bitter turning mild  
In the hands of skill  
For the kind of peace  
Households need—all this  
Sponsored by a woman  
Who was born in armor  
And who bore no child.

## Mid-October

And such  
things as he achieved are  
to him now as its ringed  
wood to an old tree, firm  
and of the essence  
and utterly remote  
from the present quick  
movements of the leaves, whereas  
from the most recent  
of a varied assortment  
of misjudgments in the life  
the pain is as keen  
as it is familiar, joining  
the life's quite particular  
griefs that, subsiding of course  
in time, run fresh nevertheless  
as when, years back,  
they arose, while it is now, now  
with the first cold wind  
of the fall blowing  
down the empty road  
that he's walking, one more  
aging man, lights  
from the house windows  
piercing now here now there  
the wind-roughed trees,  
the first leaves  
to be torn loose in the season  
skidding wildly past him,  
he gaining the hilltop,

looking across the canyon  
at the mountain, trickling  
headlights along its road,  
the trees roaring now and  
dark below, their wrenching  
tops catching the red  
of a last flare of the sunset.  
No car passes. Nobody else  
out here. The wind hurries  
its new, clean, cold volumes of air  
through the big vacancy between him  
and the mountain: old elation,  
come of this icy freshness  
in things in their clearness,  
shapes—in the sharp air  
of this one deepening dusk—black  
now and unreturning,  
though a man travels  
no more than a tree.

## Night Piece

Last night I lay awake  
beside my sleeping wife  
at four a.m., and listened:  
wind sifted through the pine tree  
and made a branch tip finger  
the roof above our bed  
as if reflectively.  
Then I went in my mind  
the way the wind was taking—  
down through the winding canyon,  
shouldering past the trees,  
and onto Hendry's beach,  
across the channel waters,  
gaining the channel islands,  
and then the open sea  
and moving by itself  
over the dark swells  
and nothing more to seek.



My dear slept on beside me  
I knew; I had for proof  
her light breath on my cheek.  
The branch kept fingering  
the same place on the roof.

## A Puff of Smoke

When my old friend writes to me  
Of the 'stark fact that the mind  
Appears to be infinite  
And to have nothing to do  
With the scientific "law"  
Of dispersion'—I don't know,  
I'll have to write in reply,  
Maybe it is infinite  
As the world of numbers is,  
His purlieu. Immortal, though?  
Why, it's an activity,

And it stops. Smashing the skull  
Ends it—the anesthetist  
Interrupts it, telling you  
Mildly, 'Let me see how wide  
You can open your mouth, now,'  
And the next thing is a flood  
Of bright gray light, followed not  
By immersion in darkness,  
But a moment's consciousness  
That the light's gone; and then  
Not even darkness. Nothing.

What is this nothing? Nothing.  
Where is this nothing? ... Think how  
When a reader finishes  
His reading, as an event  
Of his attention, it is  
A memory—a different  
Event. His book's an object,

Gathers dust among objects  
In no terrible darkness  
Or emptiness, but only  
In things around, continuing.

There are no gaps in the world.  
If spirit's intermittent,  
A flickerer that at last  
Goes out, the body goes on,  
Disintegrating only  
To other bodies. The fine  
Chemicals...! (While the body  
And its habitat were what  
Spirit had burned for its warmth  
And light. In the beginning,  
Spontaneous combustion.)



—Conscious again; shaking, cold,  
Interstellar cold sunk in  
To the middle of the bones.  
No doubt from the shock. A new  
Numbness down there, and fresh pain,  
And a meek feebleness, and  
Morphine, all teach the spirit  
How it sits reliantly,  
Precariously, astride  
Its old mule, the body, now  
Tottering along strange roads.

I am still musing upon  
The horrors that shape themselves  
In the gray country of drained  
Vitality, foul places  
And presences that we two  
Innocents visited, with  
A sighting one night (eyes closed)  
Of death's door, going past it  
In the hospital basement:  
Bare concrete, tall, wide, unmarked,  
Set flush in the concrete wall.



The stunned spirit monitors  
The shocked and wounded body  
And itself; and puzzles how  
The mind includes the body  
The body includes the mind  
Equally.

—I remember  
Using the body the way  
One drove a car when a kid:  
To see what it could take, from  
A curiosity quite  
Disinterested, from anger

At a world so impassive  
And clearly uninterested  
In the spiritual (no  
We would not have used that word),

Authority of energies  
Our own yet not our own; and  
From exuberance.... When young  
We are I think but distantly  
Attached to our bodies, being  
Ill-informed still on any  
Necessity we live by.

Years pass and we sink into  
The body. Now warily there  
I find I take a kindly  
Interest in the more or less  
Faithful old mount (that is  
When fairly healthy), wryly  
Admiring its survival  
Of pain sickness and danger,  
With recollections of work,  
Food, sleep, love, talk; of places  
Where for moments all was well.

And one day we are body,  
And nothing more. Though spirit  
Is instructed by the body  
Not the other way around,  
It's in the spirit only  
That instruction can take place  
—Of what grand elaborate sorts—  
While a definition of  
The body might be: What knows,  
Really knows its lessons, so  
Is a fully accredited

Member of the cosmos. While  
The spirit, born ignorant  
Of its own rules, and the world's,  
At the end has, at best, earned  
Only a provisional,  
Temporary membership,  
Still more ignorant than not  
(Which must befit it, must be  
Of its nature)—and at worst  
Will be all but blackballed (yet  
Never quite, even at worst?)....



Home again! I write my friend,  
And at such a time as this—  
To be driven home and see  
On the way people's fruit trees  
Bright with blossoms in back yards;  
And on the hills above town  
New green from the recent rains  
After a dry winter; that  
Was a piece of good timing  
I tell you; and once at home  
Green fresh outside the windows.



Still, what the wan spirit knows,  
After its late adventures,  
Is a world surrounding it  
As nicely put together,  
And frail, as the seed crown of  
A dandelion; and I walk,  
Gaining strength, the grassy hills  
Through the wildflowers, little  
Fire shapes in the green, fading  
Here and there with the approach  
Of summer, and its routines.

## First Deposition

A trout stream in the high Rockies,  
my wife's laughter, a little brass whale  
from Taiwan, the sight from my study window  
of the two blue hills above the trees,  
all kinds of cats, the high desert  
of northern Nevada, all particulars  
concerning the life and writings of Pope,  
the time of sundown and just after,  
the grammar of any language, a flawless  
sea urchin shell found on Hendry's beach  
and kept around and looked at  
almost daily for ten years now,  
all the birds, the look of Greek on the page,  
cottonwood trees in summer, glistening  
above the ditches in the dry country  
of the west, the words of English songs  
of the period 1580 to 1620,  
the smell of lumber, of the iron  
in a hoe as you file it, of a horse;  
bolts of fine woolen goods;  
the Indian head nickel; rain,  
snow, sunshine, wind, darkness,  
the game of poker, discovering used bookstores  
in large cities, the clear recollection  
of the house and farmyard of early childhood;  
driving through streets to meet someone  
at the airport, at an hour, late or early,  
when you are not usually out; bare trees;  
the rhythms of iambic trimeter;  
granite boulders; coffee; the coming  
of the early darkness of December.

## Pure Perception

And I woke up this morning  
    To nothing on my mind.  
Friends, it was putting to your ear a watch  
    You had forgot to wind.

It was walking through the half-dark  
    Of a sales barn after the sale;  
Litter and echo; light from a far door  
    Falling still and pale—

Was the barren clarity  
    Of a February sun  
And you look up at a stony peak and see  
    That the stone is stone.

O all day long the air  
    Will move clear, cold, and thin  
Over things that have come up too near to me—  
    It will razor off my skin,  
    And no event within.

## The Gnomes

Months pass and still  
they come squeezing out—  
little deformed pre-poems  
between crammed duties  
and whatnot, the attention  
wrenched this way and that.

Keeping their distance  
they look at me  
with their lopsided faces, one eye  
higher than the other,  
in those eyes the light,  
a pale, clear green,  
of an unworldly  
wisdom; they stand there quietly  
for as long as I look at them.

## Work

And I wake up,  
yeh, it is dawn,  
the young helper, waiting  
pale and serious  
outside the window.

## Late Song: Ambush

I see my bones lie white  
And shining in the Light,  
I need the darkness here  
Inside me to repair  
Old purposes much frayed,  
Or shelved, being so ill-made,  
Parts of my life now broken  
For clear thoughts left unspoken,  
Things I uttered, too,  
Made some of it run untrue,  
Of all that's mine alone  
Little fit to be shown—  
With more work crowding in,  
A fresh page to begin,  
And a recent bad mistake  
To fix, lest the Light break  
And my case still not made,  
My meanings all waylaid,  
And all I am lying clear  
With no interior,  
And my bones sprawled out white  
And shining in the Light

## Second Deposition

Sometimes I look inside  
and see a mountain slope  
in Colorado. There  
my grief comes trickling down  
from the packed snow of my hate  
freshly, spring after spring,  
through darkness under fir trees.

You've seen such places, maybe.  
There breed the little wild trout,  
the brooky and the cutthroat  
in their icy brilliant colors,  
there, under branches sagging  
or broken from the snows,  
the thin song of mosquitoes  
criss-crosses the chill air,  
there, tiny colored stars  
on the dark of the wet moss,  
a few mountain flowers tremble,  
fine roots washed in snow water,  
the colors clear and cold  
—almost too small to notice  
should you stray under there,  
certainly too small to pick.

## And These

Out of an occasional delight  
in those icy vacancies  
that stretch away  
from the 'comforting stench  
of comrades'

mostly  
of a simple, bi-partite  
structure like the fungus  
living with an alga  
to make a lichen, some  
2,000 species of which  
inhabit the Arctic, fastened  
to rocks, pieces of bone,  
cast-off antlers, so cold  
and barren and dark  
their situation, some of them  
may grow only during one  
day in a year—in the long  
darkness each bright patch  
holding fast to its object.

## Five O'Clock

Just before hitting the turn  
and entering the down ramp  
hunched up and tensed again  
and the little new moon in the west  
by herself in the early darkness  
cocked backward so jauntily  
on the steep downward slope  
into the wintry ocean

Dec. 19, 1975

A malformed and much sophisticated world  
it is, and I in my fiftieth winter of it  
with a few ordinary things known, matters of doing,  
matters of desire, and there's the full moon  
in the workshop window again,  
with its old silent abruptness, light  
held cleanly inside its firm rim,  
lifting so clear and cold  
over the wintering poplars—scrawny  
columns of brush upfountaining  
through how many years? over  
the worn and frozen lawn, grove  
and grass burning white together

## A Young Slug on the Counter

Brought in unawares—suddenly  
Airborne as he was clambering  
Over the *Times* in his cruise  
Across the rainy sidewalk  
In the early November dark.

And now on the move again,  
Singlemindedly, belongingly,  
In the warm lit kitchen,  
His rain-freshened, mucousy skin  
Glistening, clean as the porcelain tiles;

And meanwhile, to imagine, still  
Travelling through his tissues  
Toward the immaculate dark  
At his center, the phosphorus-cold glow  
Of his wonder: shy, by itself, slow.

## In the Canyon

More distinct  
than ever we

can be,  
their ways

remotely  
crisscrossing ours,

gods  
each

with his one  
virtue

(or maybe two  
or three)

by itself  
simple,

disclosed  
with such unintended

sureness and  
so glancingly

passing across  
the eye-piece

of our  
complicated and

clumsily aimed  
attention



Of birds the big flicker  
his cry from a treetop clanging  
in the first light: how to begin.  
And the deer, for the body's lightness, surprised  
at mid-day, russet and a hint of antlers  
over the green bushes then gone,  
as if he had not been in motion but hanging there  
when the whole forest shifted a little  
and concealed him—  
the bear for knowledge  
in detail—there is no other—of his terrain, and  
for his unhurried gait  
that takes him so rapidly  
where he wants to go, his company  
his solitariness—and for his capacious  
robe of sleep for the long cold and darkness,  
and in the new grass by the footpath out back  
the green and yellow striped  
garter snake that shows every time  
how innocence startles,  
the snail for his hush,  
the grasshopper, of insects, for alertness  
and his lucky look

## End of September

However it may be with me  
Lying wakeful in the old bed  
This night is cool, fresh, quiet,  
Moon-blanced, a few late season crickets  
Trill under the oaks across the road,  
Some of the moonlight, coming through  
The pine tree by the window,  
Burns like lumps of phosphorus, on the bedclothes.

## Reader Listening

Rain now with dark coming on  
after the chill clear day, and it makes  
coming against the roof a roof of sound.  
Many mild little comments,  
with the occasional loud drop,  
the faint ones, the pitch  
differences, the many drops striking  
at almost the same time, the  
individual sounds still audible  
in the general run of sound as the rain  
comes down heavier, loudening  
on the roof, the sense of this change  
belonging with the sense that comes  
when an animal one has been watching—  
say a bear, soaking himself in a creek—  
suddenly & calmly changes position—  
when on the window ledge  
a series of drops begins falling,  
starting up an excited little  
local tempo, and then, oddly, slows down  
and at last stops while the heavy rain  
continues

... and leaving, then,  
for that first companion  
of your mere existence (before  
you established relations even  
with yourself, or your human mother)  
the immense brood-beast  
the natural universe, where  
for instance Homer's 'dark earth  
and starry sky and strong-running ocean'  
are a corpuscle eddying—

not

to be home any more,  
with a consciousness like the house  
built joist and stud and rafter  
in time, in human lengths, not  
to pause even at the nestling  
of chemical to chemical,  
but entering those subtle barrens  
where billionths of seconds go,  
under the whole show  
(leptosome to the last!),  
into the sheer and clear  
orderliness of chance  
where the numbers do their dance  
of no location—haunt,  
if what I've read is so,  
of Heisenberg, and Planck,  
and the quiet magister, Gauss

## Third Deposition

The lamp throws a pleasant warmth  
on the back of the hand, its soft white light  
floods shoulder fingers pencil note pad  
and desk surface, notes on old soiled scraps of paper,  
the Hölderlin, the glasses case, the black bowl  
by Blue Corn, the Hokusai Fishermen Draw in Their Nets  
While a Poet Meditates in a Distant Hut,  
the Porsche ad, The City Porsche, cut out  
of an old *Time* years ago, a blue-silver 914  
driven by a blonde up a hill in San Francisco,  
the 0.5 liter earthenware coffee mug,  
the drafts of a poem, “migraine’s fancy  
stitching” a phrase at the corner of the eye,  
piles of old letters—the latest from Helle—  
a lucite box of dry flies, clippings of reviews  
of books wanted, a lump of turquoise and  
a piece of white granite veined with green  
from the Snowy Range in Wyoming,  
white glue, a pen light disassembled  
its batteries exposed, a bit of paper folded so  
that a quote from Pope sits up, and crawling across  
all this comes the black cat, Christmas, so much  
admired by the family, cautiously lowering  
and lengthening her body, one glossy paw  
testing for a spot to sleep in, settling instead  
for the window shelf, hind quarters on a *New York Review*,  
front quarters, and cheek, on an old rabbit pelt,  
a paw curled over her eyes.

## Fragment

... Self

the sly continuator; peevish; writhing  
knot of flat-eyed appetites,

no one of which ever notices  
the others it's tangled with; old

shapelessness, incessantly bringing on  
disorderly assemblies of shapes;

busy attractor of swarms  
of gnat-miseries with its sweat; deep

well of pity for its own plights  
and tireless accumulator of grievances; inflamed

and swollen with the merit  
so gained, with gleeful resentment

concealing its own indestructible  
talent for moderate happiness; constantly

aching to be changed into now this  
now that icon of calm felicity

## Winter Child

Never mind now, I am delighted,  
my happiness is complete—  
the individual human now recedes  
with his motley moderations  
on moderate little earth  
these days of October,  
November, December, when  
the mother darkness and cold  
come back and the father light  
wheels low, aslant, unconcernedly  
withdrawn into remoteness,  
in the extravagance  
he blazes with, and we  
come back into the mineral  
sleep (a little way) from which  
rousing so keenly  
in the cold  
we see and hear nothing  
but the Heart's red fires in the dark, in  
the end Silences  
where reign the archaic King  
and his Queen, that was  
before him, in the Beginning.

## In the Habitat of the Magpie

Oh, we will get out of here  
Where everything's impure, not clear,  
Where, as they say, it's all shades of gray,  
Won't we, old self (though time I fear  
Is getting on...)—like the magpie  
We saw springing up today  
Lightly from his putrid meal  
On the pavement, his feathers  
Such a fresh black and white.

FROM MANUSCRIPT

Lion Camp

Venus in the darkness of early October  
flashes away above the black tip  
of the hill behind Lion Camp.  
No one else here, so cold.  
Taking my old GI blanket I step into the open  
and stand wrapped in my own warmth, like a Bedouin  
or an Arapaho. Not a sound. No insect,  
nighthawk, or owl, the stream so low  
it runs without noise  
among the dry boulders. I hear my breathing.  
What a good garment a blanket was in the old days  
for speculative thought, and personal dignity,  
arms not free for work, or love, or fighting.  
But I've come away with too much  
on my mind, and like none of it,  
and can only hold it  
like a man standing carefully with an armload  
so unstable he can't put it down.

## The Leaves

Is it the stationariness  
of misery that makes it  
so bad for the mind?  
Motionless over his desk  
under the steady brightness  
of a small lamp, he hears  
with pleasure the wind  
in the darkness outside.  
Sometimes it thuds on the house.  
The house creaks familiarly  
as if a big animal had bumped it  
casually, in passing. The noise  
of the sycamore leaves  
rasping across the blacktop  
comes in over the hum  
of the heater, and some music turned down  
on the radio. It is the world  
out there, clear of him,  
and holding him.

So: sitting enclosed  
by his light, he and his light  
by the windy darkness,  
with this hangover pain  
from a day's work in unwisdom,  
what comes to him is no  
illumination but, more useful,  
a passage from the Journals  
of Degas, with its incidental  
and modest wisdom: "The bustle

of things and people takes one's thoughts  
off one's troubles. If the leaves  
of the trees were motionless  
how forlorn the trees would be  
and so should we!  
There's some kind of tree  
in the garden next door that moves  
with every breath of wind.'

# Demonology

## EXPOSITION

1. Yes, it's distressing, the demon appears in you as quietly as, say, a large pimple appears overnight on a teenager's nose.
2. In dreams he sometimes resembles a man, sometimes the demons in old pictures—greenish, a baked-looking skin. He changes rapidly.
3. In your contest with him, you may think at times to ignore him, having observed that he thrives on attention: the thought that you have succeeded in this, though, is a signal to him to come rushing back with a furiousness that will astound you. You discover he is more serious than you yourself have ever been.
4. He can, at times, what with the energy and vigilance he has appropriated in you, almost acquire the shape and size of a good man.
5. Almost. His weakness is that he can be contained. He lives inside the life of his host, helping himself to it generously, and can't surpass his host in magnitude. When he wins, it's by reducing his host to his own considerable size.
6. He is obstinate. One may take comfort, if one can, in reflecting that courage is superior to obstinacy.
7. He is mature. No matter what the shape he takes at the moment, the lines and surfaces are firm. Observing this, you understand that you are the child you were, and had better set to learning, as that child learnt.
8. His obstinacy, maturity, energy, ingenuity, and seriousness enforce a desperation which, for good or ill, demands action, and there's the whole point. The demon comes straight from the Nature of Things. His message is simple: keep moving, you. Hence his own resourcefulness in suggesting new arrangements, finding opportunities.

9. He cannot be ejected. There's no place to send him. Though Christ drove some demons into a herd of hogs, and the hogs rushed off into the sea, into what could he have poured the sea? Or as Whitehead observed: 'There is no escape from the totality of the universe, and exclusion is an activity comparable to inclusion.'

So. If the demon can't be ejected, maybe he can only be made to disappear, right there within you, as—light from a 40-watt bulb disappears in light from a 100-watt bulb. Light bulbs? It seemed barren. Say, then, the way a pool in a dry creek bed disappears once the creek begins to flow again. I stopped on that. It was late, a cold wind, blowing hard since sundown, now was beating more noisily than ever in the darkness about the house.

#### NARRATION

During the night a creek came to mind, and a real one, back in Missouri, outside Columbia, on the hilly and still half-wooded place owned by a farmer who let me hunt squirrels there: frost weather, the clear colors of the hickories and oaks in the still air startled me every fall when I went back in where the hunting was best along a creek with a corn field on one bank which the squirrels raided in the morning and evening twilights and along the other bank a wooded rise where they nested. The creek this time of year after its spring and summer noise and glitter

was all but dry—its bed silent; clean, round, white  
stones, some leaves and dry twigs  
lodging between them. The creek wound away from your eye  
like a deserted roadway. But at one sharp bend was a pool,  
deep and long, crescent-shaped, and clear, despite  
the leaves steeping in it that had recently fallen  
and now lay stuck to the bottom stones, their colors still fresh:  
coming toward that pool once I saw my first kingfisher,  
stationed over it on a twig, watching for frogs;  
here the squirrels came to drink, leaping over the creek  
from the treetops on the opposite slope into the sycamore  
that rose beside the pool. Then they spiralled cautiously down,  
I sitting there motionless for maybe an hour before one came—  
sitting head back, watching the tree where, a hundred feet  
up in the air, its huge branches had ample space  
between them, its bright leaves, separate, moving a little  
now and then in the October air, the high blue dry air;  
through the silence would come an occasional miniature crashing  
in the deep leaves up the far slope as a squirrel  
rushed over the ground from one tree to another  
and I waiting, my .22 across my knees,  
watching those white, calmly zigzagging upper branches,  
and their yellow leaves, hung balanced in that air.  
There was no demon there.  
The demon, too, was there.

## Winslow Homer at Seventy-two

Broken apart in wrinkles, some  
the disturbing sort that fork across  
the skin without following  
facial contours: the eyes  
narrowed, heavy-lidded,  
looking what seems a hard challenge  
down at the camera, but is only the neutral  
jolting energy of complete attention  
long since involuntary, peremptory and definite  
as a bolt of lightning when a branch of it  
pokes into a night sky twigs and all, his occupational  
affliction and his happiness.

SONNETS FROM *Running at Hendry's*  
(*In Plain Air*, 1982)

*For head with foot hath private amitie  
And both with moons and tides.*

—HERBERT

After Work: Foreword

Home, then out of the canyon and inch past  
Shopping center, school; inch over freeway;  
Veer with the creek that notches the pale clay  
Headlands and I am at the place at last.  
The shoreline hereabouts runs east and west.  
Clear days there's islands to be seen, any day  
Sky, sand, waves, light, birds, dogs, people. I'd say  
Late in the day in winter is when it's best.  
Down the long, slant beach, and the wave-tips catch  
The sun's low fire, the wet sand's all red light,  
The shorebirds eat red light—and all goes gray  
The moment you turn back the other way,  
Cliffs, sea, and sky a great cave, in dead light;  
And the fresh darkness settling, in the stretch.

Down Here After Being Kept Away  
Three Weeks by Sickness

How much I missed this place. While I've been gone  
The season has turned, the winter birds are here,  
The sand is firm, clean, smooth, and the air clear  
With a wave flashing cold in the low sun  
Under the slow wingbeats of a pelican  
That three pilfering gulls keep swinging near,  
Whimbrels and godwits and plovers and killdeer  
Work the sleek shallows, I begin to run:  
Easy, now. But I swear the beach gives back  
My footthuds like the tightly stretched buckskin  
It looks like here, the blazing water track  
Of the sun's running beside me—coming in  
The old ocean commotion and the dark mass  
Of a jogging girl's hair jouncing as we pass.

## Commotion

Under a low fogbank, the blackish tone  
Of its belly darkening the waves and sand  
And cliffs that block all view of the high land  
Where the town sits in sunlight, I'm alone,  
The beach is bare, the hard brown sand slopes down  
Steeplly to the low tide. From where I stand  
No jogger rounds the point to scare the band  
Of godwits from their meal. I'll start my run  
Together with the dark sea running in  
From a horizon turning steely bright  
(Sun finishing its run where the fog's thin)  
While jaegers and gulls keep up a running fight  
Whirling sharp black against that piece of sky  
The beach and cliffs run toward and likewise I.

*Liberté, Fraternité*

More fog.—Have you seen a gross, heavy-legged deer?  
Or in a flight of terns some with the bill  
Twisted and blunt, some with stub wings, some small  
As wrens? Imagine an ectomorphic bear.  
No, shaped by the shapes of water and earth and air  
They move in ruthless grace and crucial skill  
Unfree and strong and evenly beautiful,  
Unprovided with souls, completely clear and here.  
I pass a poor old woman, six foot three,  
Mannish, who has a heron's jerky stride,  
Just as a well-built fellow passes me.  
Next, hairy breasts swinging from side to side,  
An obese youth rounds the point; and better weather  
Brings many another of us out here together.

## Running with My Sons

Two of them home by chance the same weekend!  
I fight a fear that's like Ben Jonson's fear,  
Of being too glad of having them down here  
Running abreast with me on the hard smooth sand.  
And all the better it is for being unplanned:  
I have no heed for shorebirds, or the clear  
Sunlight inside the wavelets rippling near,  
Or other runners, or the familiar blend  
Of surf- and gull-noise.—One of them sprints away  
Spattering through the shallows like a pup,  
I say to the other "Don't let me hold you up,"  
And off he spurts. I watch them happily.  
How they shine! across the difference of years,  
And will shine in my day fears and night fears.

## Running with My Sons

Fifty-one runs with nineteen and twenty-three  
Thinking “by hap of happy hap,” the phrase  
Cast by the crude old Tudor well displays  
The kinship of happiness and luck ... I see  
From the corner of my eye how springily  
The boys are striding, how their breathing stays  
Easy and light. Not so with them always,  
Both once rode crutches after surgery.  
We round the second point and they run on  
Into the haze, down beach I’ve never run,  
While I turn back, and think of how that stretch  
They’re running is like the years I’ll never reach;  
And think helplessly, how will it be for them?  
It’ll be the same and sharply not the same.

## More Hap

Bad omen in the morning and once more  
Late in the day, encountering face to face  
Two sons of bitches, each at a time and place  
I'd never seen either one of them before.  
And the day, picketed by this polluting pair,  
Went wrong; running in the dusk I now retrace  
The slight brain-lurches that put me off my pace ...  
The slippages of heed that are my despair!  
So I run along full of my latest blunder—  
And everything's still, but a distant simmering  
From the sea, the light rakes low, the tide is neap,  
In the strange peace I nearly halt in wonder  
At water in thin clear layers wavering  
On the flat sand—a kind of shining sleep.

## God-light

Low dark cloud-cover and ocean make a pair  
Of jaws held just apart; in the opening,  
Where I now run, no room for anything  
But the cliffs, now bleakly pale where they are bare.  
At the horizon, a low, cold light just where  
The sun has set; I watch it briefly cling  
At the sea's rim—clear God-light, the real thing—  
While I run on through suddenly darkening air.  
Under the cliffs are sanderlings and plovers  
Busy with their last feeding for the day;  
And a few people—a lone girl there, two lovers,  
An old lady with her dog; and part way  
Down the cliff ahead a house hangs, with a flight  
Of stairs down to the beach, and window light.

Running Late, Having Held the Class on  
Herbert Overtime to Look at Three Lines

Deep dusk, the quarter moon strong enough now  
To show in the wave's flank with a fish-like glitter,  
I run on the dark beach thinking, This is better  
Than the delicate orange clouds two days ago  
In pale green sky, too pretty. (Are there no  
Other runners here, for once?) Thinking, That wetter  
Sand there shines like some membrane, this twitter  
Of sleepy sanderlings says it must be so  
That I'm the last one out, that subdued roar  
Of water's a not-word I have heard before,  
And suddenly there comes the one thing more  
I ought to have told the class, that not elsewhere  
In English is that thought thought—and see how clear  
And passionate and quiet it is there.

And the Fat One Gripping  
a Bottle of Wine

Blazing November. The wrongness of this weather's what  
Makes my being here for anything all wrong, the sea  
Having gone slack and pale and bland and summery,  
The air since the first light this morning dry and hot  
And motionless. Broad day's brought everybody out.  
There goes a runner threading through a family  
Straggling along in street-clothes. Surfers unseeingly  
Step around three elderly ladies. All tramp my holy spot.  
I run on sand where multitudes lay and strolled and sat.  
It's scuffed and stale. And heading through the overused scene,  
Around the last point I see alone out on the flat,  
Where the sand's newly wet, one fat girl and one lean  
Briefly link arms and dance, whirling this way and that  
Over their clear, prancing reflections in the sheen.

## Colleague with a Notebook

Beach wide and flat. I run, dully, on a sheet  
Of neutral-colored light, slipping along  
In the wet is a blurry quarter moon, a tongue  
Of water pushes in quietly over the wet,  
Quick-sliding, low-hissing, its tip of foamy white  
Entering up the sand. Then I'm among  
The seal brown, seal high rocks—old seals and young  
Seaward they slant, alertly—exposed of late  
By the winter tides ... slowly, on the way back,  
Darkness coming, the horizon turns a bright,  
Deep orange-red, the exact color of the throat  
Of a cutthroat trout! Pass a man writing a note  
(His camera's set up) and look back—beach black  
Where he stands, crossed with great slashes of light.

## Loiterer

But the water—a half-inch deep there, sidling in,  
Rumpling to sharp little ridges, with elegant  
Black shadows, in the level light ... riplings sent  
At an angle through other riplings cross-hatch, then  
The surface quiets, and, smooth once again,  
Shivers all over ... two tiny waves, blent  
Head-on emerge, each going the way it went ...  
New water foams in, slides back clear and thin:  
The lovely loiterings, with darkness coming on,  
Stay with me as I finish up my run,  
Having had to hurry all I did today.  
And nothing done well, getting it all done.  
“That most exciting perversion,” said Hemingway,  
Of such forced haste; the feelings fray and splay.

Light Like the Beautiful Trout Fly Name:  
Pale Evening Dun

Cold spatter of rain, then wind. Last night the tide  
Covering the beach and sliding up the rocks  
Along the cliffs, driving the sanderling flocks  
And me elsewhere, now a beach five yards wide  
All kelp-heaps and scattered stones, and a rock-slide  
At the point, wet shale in jagged blocks  
Angled for twists, foot-slitherings, bone-shocks;  
And pooled and trickling water on every side.  
I rock-hop past the next point. Here the air  
Is quiet, the ocean crump-crumping its tons  
Well out from shore, the nearby water still ...  
Stretch of smooth sand! with a boulder here and there,  
Standing alone—black rock, gray water, duns  
Of wet sand, cloud-roofed, in the even light; so beautiful.

## Running in the Rain, High Tide

Rain slanting past and no place here to run.  
In the cold deepening dusk there comes the roar  
Of water much too near; as the car door  
Caught by a gust swings wide, I see the brown  
Waves smack the cliffs. Well, head for the next beach down.  
Bulldozers have gouged it up and gullies pour  
With the runoff, crumbling, forcing me to detour  
Through garbage to the blacktop (it's near town).  
I run in a dazzle of streetlights and car lights  
My glasses streaming, and splattering along  
Alone, think of the swaggering word invictus;  
And sprint back through the drench against a strong  
Headwind, wearing as the car comes into sight  
A combination grin and runner's rictus.

## Running in the Early January Cold

The near water heaves bright gray, then deepening  
Outward to a dark horizon line as keen  
And aloof as the evenly moving, clean  
Crest of a wave, or the edge of a gull's wing:  
That pale sunset out there hasn't anything  
To do with me, with its cloud whorl, its icy green;  
There's nothing in the few people I've seen  
To catch the eye, and take away the sting  
Of the raw cold look of things; and thinking I run  
Upright and briskly, I see my shadow: a tall  
Pinhead aslant on stilts, going at a crawl  
Along the sand; and in that room today  
The neutral silence, I feeling in all I say  
The desolateness of what's barely begun.

## Willetts under an Overcast

This new and winter term is a stopped wheel  
To push against, it budes and rolls back  
Into its rut in a hard-frozen track  
Through the inside country where I think and feel:  
Outside the willets land for their evening meal,  
Their lifted wings exposing elegant black  
And white zigzags, beside the tidal slack:  
Gray clouds, gray ocean, and the light still and pale.  
Whatever was missing from what I did today  
Is the second overcast to run under here,  
I puzzle and puzzle under it all the way  
To my turn-back place—willets again, a pair  
Alight on a black rock offshore, crying *kerlear!*  
Teetering prettily, above the sloshing gray.

Big Waves in Wind and Clear Cold Sunlight,  
and the Intelligent New Secretary  
from the Main Office

Clear from the entrance I could see the spray  
Glistening above the cartops like the snow  
That banners off the drifts in a big blow,  
And once I'm running I watch the falling away  
Of waves heaved house-high, and the steady play  
Of the cold light on wave-slopes bursting snow  
Over the snowy rush and crush below—  
Too much for surfers: wave-watchers here today.  
And up the beach, a girl sitting quietly  
On a big rock, with those waves roaring in.  
And it is Marilyn, I recognize  
As I come near; sun lights her gold hairpin,  
And I start wondering if her blue eyes  
Are seeing more than the rest of us down here see.

## Old Rocks out in the Late Light

Chill air and the sea sunk, like a lake  
In drought-time, back from the gray sand,  
A bright place the size of a man's hand  
On the waves, where the light comes through a break  
In low clouds. And the striped rocks. They take  
The eye between flat sea and land,  
Humped, leaning, pale band by dark band,  
Green-bearded, dripping, with pools that quake  
In the raw breeze. Here's one pokes out  
At our cliffs a heavy upper jaw  
That with the lower grips in its maw  
The sand I cross. Surely the brief light  
Is holy, and holy the darkness light  
Makes when it goes, but not that snout.

## A Quiet Fourth

Homesick, building a fly rod on the patio  
All the fresh sunny breezy morning; a calm blue  
Sky and green leaves close me in. Low tide's at two,  
And I'll run then. —The dusty parade and rodeo  
Took place in town, all right, forty-five years ago,  
A thousand miles away; fireworks afterwards, too,  
And then the ride home on the dirt road, winding through  
The cool fields in darkness, hearing the water flow  
Over the weirs; and then our dogs, at the driveway turn.  
—And winter's the time for Hendry's Beach; therefore I'll write  
This one, to do for my few summer runs down here:  
Beach flat, trampled, sea flat, slack and warm and clear;  
People little black figures against the big silver light;  
Close up, it's beer can, frisbee, radio, sunburn.

*July 4, 1978*

## A Quiet Fourth

Fran and I much alone this bright mild day  
With the boys scattered, friends too, mostly, so  
It's Sousa and Ives out on the patio  
(And how subtly the Ives lets the attention stray);  
Then work on a fly rod, later get away  
For a run at Hendry's, when the tide is low.  
My last run down there was six weeks ago—  
Summer crowds, and a new fee I won't pay.  
But on the Fourth you want a crowd, I learn,  
So down I go: beach flat, sea calm, clear, warm.  
In and beside it, in every tint, size, form,  
People, with frisbee, radio, sunburn.  
—Drive back, see centered formally on a top stair  
A beer, beneath a flag limp in the cooling air.

*July 4, 1978*

## The Other Runner

*Recalling, during a drought, a rainy day last year*

Wind spread the rain across the glass, I hearing it  
While reading Milton all day long, and looking up  
From time to time, to wonder when it would stop,  
And then forgetting rain, in the warm room where I sat.  
Then arriving at the beach: yellow-brown breakers lit  
From under a slowly lifting ledge of cloud—the tops  
Catching the level blaze, and darkness soon to drop,  
And for my run the sand wave-beaten hard and flat.  
I ran alone, leaving some saunterers behind,  
Beside a set of fresh footprints so far apart  
I couldn't match them long, and slowed my pace, resigned;  
Thinking of Milton, no, of every excellence,  
How it exhilarates and humiliates the heart;  
High waves nearing both sets of our footprints.

Dog-days I  
Rain-running Recalled

Hard wind, rain; I the only one out here.  
Wind on my back, rattle of rain on hat,  
Hissing of rain on sand, and beyond that  
The noise of the big waves; and small and clear  
A whimbrel's call in the din as I draw near  
A roaring down the cliff and over the flat  
Hard beach—an hour-old river I halt at,  
My glasses streaming. The world is a bright smear.  
Into a gale now, and the ocean sound  
Drowned out by the new howling of the air  
Around my head, then even louder pounds  
The *hough! hough!* of my lungs inside this blur  
Of boisterous air, cliffs, water—startled mind  
Along for the ride, body with its old kind.

*August 11, 1978*

Dog-days II  
Incidentally Recalling a Dying Seal

—Not that its old kind give a damn for it.  
For us who live here, the impersonal  
Bright quiet gaze of that dying animal  
Put rightly the relation of the fit  
And unfit both, to that of which we're knit.  
And once the indifference is mutual  
Shall consciousness here in the individual  
Turn with the whole? the light of light be lit?  
I know I saw that seal dying his death  
Half sunk into the sand, on the sunny shore  
In the tide-wash: with each wave coming in,  
The sand sucking him deeper than before,  
The water swirling over his head again,  
Subsiding, he catching another breath.

## Anniversary

Life's uneventful, and while we were gone  
The season turned; the winter birds are here  
And the crowds gone, and the salt atmosphere  
Is sharper, with a low hazed-over sun  
Laying its wide and glittery roadway on  
Gray ocean that looks lonely. Like last year.  
—Over the cliffs two hang-gliders appear,  
Slope in and land nearby; I start my run.  
Sand smooth, smooth! for a runner or a flyer  
In this gray light and chill air's misty blend  
And the sanderlings, lively, lovely, never tire,  
And the sun suddenly lights a deep red fire  
Up on the sand, using a beer can end,  
And all of it makes up my heart's desire.

## Sanderlings Here

A low fog bank to run inside today,  
Wave-noises muffled, near cliffs blurred and pale.  
Fog-puffs come down, each spreading a black tail,  
A black bill aimed at the sand. And a slight gray  
Movement ahead suddenly swerves this way  
And a whole flock gleams cleanly purposeful  
Against the drifting vapor. Now they all  
Vanish up there, sheering themselves away.  
And near the finish, a flat stretch, bits of shells  
And pebbles lift a little and begin  
To travel along the water ahead of me—  
Sanderlings, running in the fog or else  
Low-gliding, I here running heavily  
As faintly they shape unshape and shape again.

## Night-piece

Lying in the long dark, insomniac,  
I see it clearly: sea and beach and air  
And a red winter sun, down low, for fire,  
For the fourth element made out by the Greek  
On Sicily's coast two dozen centuries back—  
Fire that'll turn me into atmosphere  
After I'm dead, and ashes tossed out where  
Maybe they'll wash ashore. I hear gulls creak,  
And put my being in with the elements  
We share with the whole show, rather than  
With the odd creature in it that is man  
Or with my self, still odder ... till the tense  
Weavings of wakefulness begin to fray  
Loosen and come apart and float away—

... continued

Not bad, for night thoughts, but as Hemingway  
Noticed, night thoughts on recollection,  
Deep as you went for them, don't pass inspection  
Laid out and drying in the light of day.  
Something on which there is not much to say,  
Sheer Nothingness, once more escapes detection,  
Though disciplined minds can reach by indirection  
What the imagination hides away ...  
Yes, *darkness, sundown, water*—take your pick  
Of pictures: wings, a little boat, dark blue  
Of gentians, you can't make any of it stick.  
So human, moving, lovely, and untrue.  
By the fresh light of morning being bound  
To thought that makes the phrase, if not resounding, sound.

## The Desolation Light

I came down here one dusk and the beach was gone.  
The winter tides were easing it out to sea,  
Shelving it down and down, when suddenly  
A storm came through and scoured it to the stone—  
A jumble of stone; and the sky having done  
Its damage loosened up, pale vacancy  
Between a lot of ragged cloud debris  
Scattering fast, foam yellow and waves brown,  
The sea, too, loosened and sprawling, sunk so low  
That stubs of rock under for months now showed.  
Air darkened as if a curtain had been drawn,  
And shining as if for meditating on  
Was a tidepool that the gray light had filled  
To brimming where a simple stillness held.

## News

RAVAGED BY NATURE, says the local News,  
BEACHES ARE DYING—naturally I read on,  
How one day these thin margins will be gone  
For good, new sand held back by the dams we use  
On our best streams while the sea slowly chews  
The old away, back to the cliffs and down  
To the stones. And nowhere then to run or sun.  
Any dark place can say what else you'll lose:  
The canyon air that floats the alder leaf,  
The light on the creek, and the creek too, will go;  
And the ground under, where it had to flow.  
Your sons, and the dear woman who is half your life,  
And the two eyes you see both with and through  
Will go; and your skeleton; and your spirit, too.

## Heron Shapes at Dusk

I know the heron that's made this beach his own  
Between the headlands, slants like a poised spear  
Invisible in the driftwood where I peer—  
And there he goes now, flapping off alone.  
Later his shape breaks out of some gray stone  
That the low tides leave bare this time of year,  
Then further down, in deeper dusk, lifts clear  
Where only a black tangle of kelp had shown.  
Then over by the cliffs, in the near dark there,  
I see a heron shape become a girl  
Hunched with her trouble there on the driftwood.  
The shore a place of human bad and good,  
Not herons now, so stony stark her stare  
At the late red fading from a cloud-swirl.

## Heron Totem

Up the long beach, a flock of sanderlings  
Will swoop past a ridge of ocean roaring near  
(Their white chests flashing), tilt and disappear,  
Or pelicans line up, dark, heavy things,  
And form one body with a dozen wings  
Approaching me head-on, or godwits flare  
Warm cinnamon wing-linings on the gray air  
When they veer off in the big flocks winter brings.  
I love them all, and most this homely one:  
Color of driftwood, among the bustlers, the wary  
Swervers, he leans inquiringly, and waits.  
Slow, frail, ungainly, set for the long run,  
Silent with hope, by nature solitary,  
He picks his spot, stands still, and concentrates.

## Sunday Run: Starting Out

At the water's edge a baby smacks the beach,  
*Seriously*, then casts me a grave look.  
A woman wades along reading a book,  
Surf tugging at her legs. And the gulls screech,  
And a girl makes a staggering run and reach  
For a frisbee through a haze of charcoal smoke  
Sharp-scented in the cool air, from a nook  
Under the cliffs. We brown and burn and bleach.  
And the sober sun, half through the afternoon,  
Throws iris-leaf shapes, and squarish glares of light  
Along the rollers, sends a quick-sliding thread  
Of light along a crest, and overhead  
Makes on a softball on its climbing flight  
In the blue, a tiny daytime quarter moon.

In Public: *Liberté, Fraternité*

A photographer sets his tripod up and waits  
Among various types down here for the sunset;  
The unlovely public—whatever it is creates  
Us bungles us.... And no colors as yet;  
The scuffed-up sand shines gray where it is wet.  
The place seems idly jostled, by the gazes  
And glances of all these folk, their grunts and phrases.  
On the bright gray they bulk in silhouette.



And home now, out of the salt atmosphere,  
With these things written as I pleased I feel  
The doubts crowd in (like a real crowd, watching me  
Running along down there), each all too real  
And undisguisable deformity  
Passing in plain view, in the open here.

## What the Sea Muttered

*With a variation on a theme of Goya*

*You haven't kept the reader busy enough.*  
I know, I know—it comes of my long affair  
With the clear and ordinary; all my care  
May fail to hold the intensity in the stuff.  
*Too many off-rhymes, rhythms strained and rough,*  
*You crash the delicate old barrier*  
*Between octave and sestet.* I declare  
My shame before the masters. *You sheer off*  
*From the whole truth: not even writing of*  
*That day you found you'd fallen out of love*  
*With running down here, much less of harder themes.*  
—The reason sleeps, and monsters shape the dreams  
Which are the things we're doing in broad day,  
The monstrous half-done.... *Nolo contendere.*

## Topophilia

Cold dead light, and the beach, from the long rain,  
Like a mud-flat under this low cloud-cope; though where  
Sun lights the cloud's far edge a pane of clear  
Yellow sky joins it to the steady line  
Of the horizon; and tiny and black, and fine  
In detail, an oil rig sits precisely there  
On the skyline, like some miniature  
Electronic component, the thin struts showing plain.  
And the space out there clear and empty and fine,  
Ready for God to fill—like an Inness, a Lane,  
Or even a Hopper: and I think of their  
Frank and mystical love of light, and plain  
Shapes in the great vacancies of air,  
And taking comfort in the bare and spare.

## Running at Sundown and Dark

Well, it's a pretty sunset—sherbet green,  
Orange, even some raspberry, streak the sky  
From sea horizon to cliffs. Pelicans ply  
The offshore reaches and fishing boats careen  
On big waves, giving substance to the scene  
With their everyday skillful efforts. Meanwhile I,  
Pondering a talk that may well go awry,  
Run on the tide-zone's particolored sheen:  
Mind pawing obsessively at certain unclear  
Distinctions.... Pass two more runners; lovers, one pair;  
A lone girl walking slowly back. It's night  
When I come in, distinctions still not right,  
Past black stumps in the water just off shore—  
Surfers, in the dark there, waiting for one more.

FROM *Water Among the Stones*

(1987)

*To the heart that has felt it and that is the  
true judge, every loss is irretrievable  
and every joy indestructible.*

— SANTAYANA

I

To My Matilija

Where the canyon walls  
Close in, and the air cools,  
And the little green trout flick and hover  
In the clear green pools  
Between the falls  
Where that sturdy solitary, the slate-gray dipper, year round, sings  
Till the steep stone rings  
Is where I'll go, still unforgiving  
Of others' and my own poor past  
(How keep my mind clear and not curse  
Doings that make life worse?)  
And be, Matilija, your lover  
When I am dead, and at long last  
Won't have to make a living.

~

*As for the agony  
Clenching in me:  
My own and others' imperfection,  
Killing delight ...  
On those clear pools my own reflection  
Is broken light.*

*And in that steep stone cleft  
What will be left  
Of me is not the middling lover  
Here, of a wife  
With whom he gladly would live over  
A second life—*

*Nor that one who'd begun  
A better son,  
Friend, father in his own thinking,  
Than he became—  
So maimed in the doing (heart here sinking)  
And yet the same.*

*Say all these disappear  
Into the sheer  
Fire of that anger—what's remaining?  
Stranger, the sight,  
Say, of the tall slim pale wild oats leaning,  
In the late light,*

*Beautiful, on a stony rise  
Before your eyes,  
While you stand making out a crossing  
Down where the stream  
Slips roaring through boulders, and the spray's tossing,  
And the alders gleam:*

*At such a moment, here  
I'll stand, tho' not appear  
But be coincident with your seeing  
The shining scene  
And in that moment have my being,  
Unhuman, and serene.*

*“This for the birds of pleasure ...”*

---

II  
Festivity

The early morning air at streamside—  
    criss-crossed, hung  
With an intricate lace, then long  
    streamers, of the birdsong  
As I tie on a fresh Royal Wulff,  
    size 14.

*Note:* The quotations at the top of the poems are taken from Isaac Walton’s *The Compleat Angler*, except for the couplet from John Weever above XVI.

III  
On a Hillside

There's a movement, and a snake suddenly underfoot  
    sliding in the heat, through the dry tangle  
Of brown grass and thistles, dead stalks  
    of wildflowers. A California Kingsnake it is,  
In plain view; he's entering the rock-pile  
    beside me, out on his rounds.  
The fresh enamel gleam of the close-fitted  
    scales unblurred by the dust  
He goes upon, his bands of ivory and black,  
    crooked-edged, ride motionless  
In his gliding. Now, fine-tapered tail-tip quivering  
    into thin air, he inches  
Himself through a tight bend. Now  
    a three-inch section of him shows  
At an opening, the bands like box-cars  
    travelling past steadily.

*“Oh me, look you Master, a fish, a fish ...”*

---

IV

Catch and Release

Now the wild trout comes in, tired out—in from the roar  
and splintering light at the falls past the bend  
Just upstream—in through the glass-smooth stretch here  
that travels dark green, clear, noiseless, over a great slab  
Of sandstone—in toward the black shadow and the dank, sweating  
stone fragments tumbled to the water’s edge  
Under the cliff.

He looks transparent as he nears  
my hand, the green ridge of his back  
Being exactly the green of the water. Fine and icy,  
hard to the touch, he waits quietly, gills working,  
After a last strong slippery lunge, the mist-bow colors  
intimated nicely in the polished steel of his flank.  
And my Royal Wulff makes a striking rosette  
in military scarlet, green of peacock, white, cinnamon,  
Against the dark shine of his jowl.

Released now,  
he drifts sideways a bit, hesitant, hovering under  
The opened fingers, next to the fast current. Then bolts,  
himself a green smudge above the distinct  
Shadow shot downstream, skimming the white bottom sand  
in the sunlight then suddenly accelerating  
Toward the scant shade of a young alder standing straight  
on the far bank, thin-branched, its leaves just opening,  
A lyrical green light in them; and, back here now,  
on the hands, clean chill scent of trout.

## Study of Wild Oats #1

Wild oats agile in the wind  
at day's end, along the dusty track  
going down-canyon—*Avena*  
*barbata* said the flora, 'common  
weed of waste places  
and open slopes'—now  
frantic in their innocent  
agitation, twitch and thrash, now  
looking but the more graceful  
as they swing violently,  
the strong sun of this late evening  
burning white through the dried-out  
husks that dangle, spaced  
evenly in the loose  
open panicles, little  
shining spearheads, all of them  
pointing one way and the whole  
shining stand bending lower  
under a stiffer wind—they  
vibrate, bright rustlers, shy  
hissers of early summer  
under the brown, still mountain,  
its flank filling with shadow—  
later on, after nightfall, and  
the wind down, their exquisite  
shapes standing motionless  
unbroken in the clear night.

“... *offering to you a short contemplation ...*”

---

VI

The Harbinger

You soon drop down to the place,  
taking the turn-off, an hour  
up-canyon, from the main trail.  
Willows and an old, broken alder stand  
along the far side of the pool,  
above the crossing. Trout lie  
out near the middle, now holding beside  
the main current, now drifting backward  
a foot or so, and, slow-finned, easing  
forward again, looking faint  
above their shadows; the pool,  
with the air quiet, all sleek,  
till a dragonfly scrapes it,  
or a fish takes a fly wrinkling it.  
On the near bank huge boulders  
obstruct your way upstream.  
There, just this morning, lay  
the Alpo can, on its side, new,  
empty, clean, on the clean sand  
under a shady overhang  
of sandstone. What a brisk blare  
the orange and blue of the label;  
how tight and sure, the fit of the label.

VII  
Study of a Baby Rattlesnake

The little rattler sleeps on, snug  
On the sunlit sandstone boulder, tho' oak shadow  
Laps over him now. He has tucked in his head  
Near the center of his close coils and folds.

It is getting on toward mid-morning.  
His luck still holding, there in the open,  
Against a cruising hawk or kingsnake,  
He collects the stillness of his boulder, and its warmth,

Into a fine heavy medallion,  
In his dark bronze markings.

VIII

At the Concert, After a Day Up There

The succession of bright scenes passes through  
involuntarily, over this fine old music:  
you, Matilija, in the sun, spilling among boulders,  
flashing in the shallows, pooled  
beside damp shady stone, quick sway of leaves.

*“They were old-fashioned Poetry, but choicely good ...”*

---

IX

Homage to W.C.W.: The Prickly Phlox

The tiny alpine flowers, tundra  
blossomers in the Arctic, the wildflowers  
of these coast mountains, say  
this prickly phlox, this April  
in the hard canyon wind  
down the Matilija, amid  
the drab hugeness and harshness  
all around, half frozen, by gravity  
gripped and splayed; bitten,  
wrinkled and dried by the heat,  
whipped by winds, burnt down  
to a black stub by wildfire—  
look, made small, made  
definite, here it roots,  
under the brush, in the rocks  
with its clean pink petals  
arching back, flared from their centers, all  
straightforward ardor, distinct  
in its requirements and opening out  
completely with a delicate fragrance:  
intricate and exquisite grave system  
of living, in this just-sufficient zone  
of indifference where, for now,  
the big and little forces,  
just balancing, cancel out,

amid which protection  
unprotected (the physical universe  
being Greek, as under that hard  
to make out, fearful 'justice  
of Zeus' you find in Homer  
or Sophocles)—to feed,  
to flower, again and again  
to bear and be, in toughness  
and delicacy, this strictly  
conditional existence, small,  
swift, incidental beauty, persisting.

x  
Visit

Patch of wet sand there  
by the water's edge  
Packed with butterflies  
doing what—drinking?  
Till one tottered upward  
to circle me, then others,  
One or two at a time,  
and for a moment  
I had going around me  
in the playful silence  
A big wreath of butterflies,  
that broke away then  
And went staggering high  
above the Matilija

XI

Draft from the Matilija

Down off the burnt-off slope  
    for a drink, the big snake  
Stops me on my way  
    home at mid-day  
To responsibilities (miles from here  
    in what is, for the U.S.,  
A well-built little city)—how  
    quietly he lies,  
In slow, slack curves, broken  
    by shadow, among three rocks,  
Lowering his chin daintily  
    to the Matilija.



Having paused to judge of me  
    by tonguing the air,  
He resumes drinking now,  
    letting down and lifting  
His U-shaped, thin, flat jaw.  
    On and on he drinks, taking  
A very little at a time,  
    unhurriedly  
Slaking the whole length  
    of his thirst.



Earth's a great harsh gaunt garden  
    here, made of spiny chaparral,  
And cliffs, bare crests, dry stony slopes,  
    the fan that opens, desolate,  
Scattered with boulders, below  
    this canyon; and, running through,  
Narrow, bright and chill among its stones,  
    the Matilija.—Born  
Somewhere in all this, on his own  
    from birth, in the fit  
And hard gloss of his scales,  
    eye of translucent, dry horn,  
Or some clear stone, for his seeing, strange  
    but, still, seeing:  
He lifts his head at last, done  
    with drinking, and without haste  
Or hesitation winds out over the water—  
    not toward the far bank  
But downstream, steering purposefully  
    between the rocks, the current  
Very fast down there, he lifting his head higher,  
    moving rapidly now with an air  
Of matter-of-fact eagerness into the loud water  
    smashing itself solid white  
Among the boulders jammed together  
    below, where he vanishes.



What is it, to be? Slowly to find yourself  
    already alive to some place, alone with  
Purposes already forming; what is snake  
    intelligence but intelligence  
First and last, snake experience  
    but wholly experience?  
No king of darkness, no god, but something  
    as good, I think.... To live,  
To live and at midday there, to be  
    a snake completely, very thirsty,  
And drink your fill, at length, of  
    the clear Matilija.

## Study of Wild Oats #2: The Fisherman

It is something unhuman in us,  
doubtless (serene,  
Though, for what it's worth)  
which now has that figure  
Pausing a moment, as if interrupted,  
on a stony rise, to see beside him  
A stand of the slender  
wild oats bending  
A little stiffly, shivering,  
each long, smooth, hollow  
Pale stem filled to the top with late sunlight,  
the husks even brighter, swinging  
Under their spikelets, ablaze, in shape like  
narrow fine-pointed lance-heads,  
Or, sprung open, bird-bills held wide to call—  
and the creek below them  
Splitting to pass between boulders,  
roaring and misting,  
The mist carrying away rapidly  
on the up-canyon breezes,  
Over the boulders the cold shadows of alders  
beautifully sidling.

XIII  
John's Lizard

The little lizard waits—slender  
fingers outspread  
And long thin whip of a tail  
straight as a ruled line.  
Resting quietly on John's palm,  
having been caught  
With a looped fiber from a stem  
of grass, he tilts his head now  
To hold both John and me in his calm  
direct gaze: entirely  
In the moment. Things Florentine goldsmiths  
hammered, enchased, smoothed,  
He resembles in elegance; likewise  
the Samurai weapons—stirring and  
Practical. By day he hunts and suns, by night  
sleeps undisturbed,  
His blanket, his roof, his local government  
the starry universe.

XIV  
A Leopard Lily

The other flowers are long  
finished, and mix  
With the dead weeds and grasses  
on the slopes, in the gullies,  
Among the rocks. So for you,  
leopard lily—  
Tired as we are, late  
in the long day—  
We leave the trail, cross  
through the charred brush  
To see you: against  
the black hillside  
Sending your tall stem  
straight up, your five  
Great bright flowers tilted  
at various angles  
Way out from the stem  
like bells swinging,  
Not knowing—or maybe knowing—  
the festivities are over.

*“No life, my honest Scholar, no life so happy and so pleasant,  
as the life of a well-governed Angler.”*

---

xv

## In Late March Up There

Under the hillside ceanothus  
in pale bloom, blooms  
A nightshade, bright fresh blue  
in shadow. Here below,  
Sits a tiny stone-colored frog,  
looking very knowing in his stone niche ...  
Bitter scent of skunk on the wind, ahead  
old tortoise on poolside rock  
Head and neck outstretched,  
sunning his throat.  
And the fishing's in low, clear water  
the sun pouring straight down,  
And scarce cover, just the shelving  
shale and the boulders,  
The set of difficulties  
slightly different  
At every run and pool. Working  
upstream, a happiness near complete,  
Among such quick-to-declare-themselves  
factualities.

*“But now the sport is marred, and wot ye why?  
Fishes decrease, and fishers multiply.”*

—JOHN WEEVER

---

XVI

## The End of Something

I have come here late in the day.  
Now the light is failing, and  
What I've just seen's the dead  
gleam of aluminum,  
The shape of something, across  
a half mile of chaparral,  
Up near the lovely pool  
where the snake was drinking.  
When the end of something comes, often  
the signal is ironically  
Slight. Goodbye Matilija.  
By the time I reach it—  
It's a house trailer, laundry  
flying on a line  
Strung on the low bluff  
above the pool—  
I have passed two others,  
assorted bulldozers,  
Dump trucks, trench-diggers....  
Nothing is ours,  
Matilija, I well know.  
How often though

Through how many years—but  
time to go: to  
Go and pack out with me  
my useless grief,  
Of which neither this place,  
which I know I've loved  
Too much, nor any other,  
will bear a trace.

XVII

*Yucca whipplei*

This big capsule  
I plucked green  
reaching high  
along the stalk  
late this spring,  
and week by week  
let it brown,  
and wither, and crack.  
Pick it up  
and shake it now—  
*Cha cha* it  
whispers here  
in my study  
*Cha cha*  
*Cha.* Faithful,  
dry, and shy  
sound of the promise  
of *Yucca whipplei*,  
calm presence  
sending high,  
out of its fierce  
tipped-with-spines  
rosette of blades,  
that stout stem  
tapering green  
above boulders,  
in dry gulches,  
in strong sun

on stony slopes,  
breaking out  
its white blossoms,  
a great cone of them,  
curled and tumbled,  
where, in the quivering  
heat the light  
comes in and is creamy,  
cool and still; where  
the mind can go  
when it wants to.



*... and a low wind in the alder grove —  
or is it the little waterfall? —  
mutters from ancient Isaiah thus:*

Thou hast multiplied the nation  
and not increased the joy.



FROM *Goodbye Matilija*  
(1992)

*All stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no  
true-story teller who would keep that from you.*

— HEMINGWAY

ON THE NORTH FORK

Dream Vision

Well, it's an old affair—  
Stronger than ever, though,  
This twenty-seventh year  
That I've been coming here.  
The memory stays clear  
How other places, too,  
Brought transient happiness;  
I was just passing through  
And therefore could avoid  
Seeing them destroyed.  
But much the same is so  
Matilija, with you  
As from the first I knew:  
I have been passing through—  
The difference being, here  
Your ruin, though delayed  
A bit will be, I guess,  
The one I'll stay and bear.

~

At the ranch headquarters, which  
you have to walk through  
to get up here, an old  
yellow Lab with flabby,  
drawn-down dugs and, this past  
year or so, a bad shoulder,  
stands waiting to greet me, in  
her usual quiet good humor.  
I am an old admirer.  
Last year she'd still join us,  
lame as she was then,  
to fetch the sticks she'd have  
one or another of us fling  
again and again into  
the icy currents.

She can just bear  
the pain it costs her now  
to take a step. As I push on,  
she stands there a bit, before  
making her way back to the porch.  
Her eyes half close with the pleasure  
from our meeting, her tail wagging  
just a little, reminiscently.  
Still the enthusiast; while  
in her whole manner you see  
her unreluctant recognition of  
the scope left to her now, including  
the clear if receding view  
of how, with her, things used to be.



Over and over the gods  
Fail what they came to guard;  
Yours too, poor little stream,  
With your lower crossings all  
Dry stones, bulldozer-scarred;  
Slammed through by mountain bikes  
I wonder what god likes,  
That's now having his day  
(Sees 'em come slashing down  
At top speed on their way  
To get trucked back to town),  
All your bright-bodied trout,  
In your shrunk pools, jerked out  
By jerks with spinning rods ...  
Well well, let me be fair,  
The herons took their share.



The upper gorge: rest stop,  
Midday; and half asleep  
I hear your waterfall,  
Maybe six inches tall,  
Through alder and foothill ash  
Gurgle hiss glug and splash  
Between your banks and steep  
Clean sandstone, that goes up,  
Up to the yucca, small  
With distance, along the top.

A coolness on my face  
Breathes from the whole place—  
Your remnant song, that seems  
Reflective, now, subdued,  
Sounding entirely good.



*With such things on my chest,  
And with my Thermarest  
Between me and the stones  
And sticks, to spare old bones  
That have no flesh to spare—  
Outstretched, with eyes covered  
Beside this upper reach,  
With your much dwindled stream  
Still making itself heard  
I went down into sleep  
Through the leaf-shady air.  
In my sleep came a dream,  
And in the dream (I swear)  
A vision, then a speech,  
Abrupt as a sonic boom,  
That broke into the hush  
I faced in a long room  
In which I used to teach—  
Broke, then went on in a rush,  
In which the vision hovered.  
Here it is, word for word:*

Our little earth's a goner—  
As anyone can see  
With or without a book,  
You only need to look—  
The whole revolting disaster  
Being inflicted on her  
North south east and west  
Now uncontrollably  
Coming straight at us faster  
Than anybody guessed.  
Once and for all, right here,  
Come drop with me, a tear  
For her, as dwelling-place  
For us, the one earth-race  
That hasn't belonged here  
From the outset: the ones  
Whose hearts have been elsewhere,  
In this or that Elphame  
I won't take time to name;  
Neither would I seek  
To parcel out the blame:  
By nature, so to speak,  
We are space aliens.  
The space, between our ears.  
How lately we have known  
That we are on our own.

And after we are gone?  
(Be sure that we'll be gone.)  
Well, after we are gone,

If anyone should care,  
So goes one prophecy  
Fitting in its grandeur,  
And true, for all of me—  
A various multitude  
Of the bacteria  
Will rule the biosphere,  
Their center everywhere,  
Humble inheritors  
Guarding the true and good;  
And all we've understood  
Of all that has most mattered,  
And, understood, have spoken  
In music, paint, words, stone,  
In number, and the rest  
Till it all stood complete  
As nearly as could be—  
And perishable, though  
After each overthrow  
Learned all over again  
And more still—all this broken  
In ultimate defeat,  
The litter of it scattered  
On earth *that spinning sleeps*  
*On her soft axle, while*  
*She paces even, and bears*  
*Thee soft with the smooth air*  
*Along* (that's as she crossed  
Our gaze in *Paradise Lost*)....

For us, though, let's not grieve—  
Nor turn in treachery  
On our own kind, at heart  
Finding life hard to leave,  
Finding it sweet to be  
Even if in prospect  
Only, for the most part,  
As certain sages claim,  
And likely to be wrecked.  
And deeply as fear goes,  
Having in view a good  
That, clearly understood,  
Comes always at great cost  
And always incomplete  
And sooner or later lost;  
Even so, to repeat,  
Our being remains sweet  
Under the deepest fears,  
In human hardihood.

*The vision paused, then said,*

Last night I heard a song  
Coming through leafy air—  
Though fading before long  
It sings on in my head:

The earth that once made us,  
Being the same earth that made  
The dragonfly, the deer,

Lizard and mastodon,  
Worm, leaf, stone, bright green blade,  
Hill, river, and so on—  
When we, in what we do  
Ravage it all—this, too,  
Is a natural result  
For us, the boldest one  
Of all her experiments;  
In which to fail, long since  
We've learned is not a fault.  
Experiments mostly fail.  
Ours had a good long run.

“Many the wonders,” so  
Sophocles long ago  
Remarked, “and of them none  
To match us.”

Let that be  
(With ambiguity  
Worked in by history)  
Of all that we can see  
Of what, now, we have done,  
The thing to reflect on.

*Just so the voice-vision spoke,  
And cold and stiff I woke.  
Whether the dream was so  
I'm not the one to know.*



Pretty tired coming back down  
today, too. Birds are difficult  
to identify against this light.  
Sudden black shapes bank and vanish,  
light flashing, uncolored, off a wing,  
a glossy back. Meanwhile just ahead  
beside the trail the little sycamore  
with its as yet entire and at the moment  
motionless set of yellow and bronze leaves  
has lit up like a lamp, backed by  
the cold shadow of the great ridge  
where the sun just now touched down.



The whole day I've been alone.  
And now I see a woman  
a fair distance away,  
standing just off the trail,  
and looking up intently  
into the dark treetops,  
quite unaware of me  
under my big daypack  
approaching through the dusk.

Since she still hasn't moved  
I click my walking staff  
against a trailside rock  
letting her know I'm here  
before I come too near

and perhaps startle her.  
She gives me the briefest glance  
and goes back to her gazing  
and soon I am drawing near her.  
She is a tall, plump woman,  
well into middle age,  
dressed in T-shirt and jeans,  
looking as if she'd just  
stepped outside the house:  
no hat, no jacket, no  
binoculars, no daypack;  
up here alone, it seems,  
maintaining this rapt stillness  
in the stillness, as the birds stir  
high up in the foliage,  
darkness a half hour off,  
the canyon chill increasing.  
“There’s a lot of birds up here,”  
she says, an eagerness showing  
a little, and a slight shyness,  
under the factual manner.  
I nod and mention seeing  
some signs of bear up above.  
She rounds our meeting off,  
“We saw bears on Pine Mountain,”  
releasing us to resume  
the solitudes we broke,  
she mine, that is, I hers.  
I go and she stays on.  
I meet nobody else

The rest of the way down.  
The appearances all say  
she has come up here alone  
and on the spur of the moment.  
It is dark when I reach my car.

## After-words

Each of us varyingly  
Has come here from the ocean,  
And once here each waits  
On a set of varied fates  
Now and then not kindly. Still,  
Despite my streamside vision,  
I've left off sermonizing.  
The frayed old pack I carry  
Back down this long-loved trail  
Contains no remedy.

My spirits have stayed high.  
If asked for a reason why  
I'd use this mystery  
In indirect reply:  
The blinded Samurai  
Taira no Tomoume  
In Yoshitoshi's print  
Declines to stand apart,  
Fights in the thick of it  
Bearing, as talisman,  
A poem-slip, that says  
*Even in darkness, one  
Can see the moon with the heart.*  
But there's no moon in this print,  
No indirect sign of it,  
In shadow, or weapon-glint,  
For us with eyes, to see.  
(It is this print alone

which is without a moon.)  
Say Yoshitoshi meant  
To say a no-moon is  
An aspect of the moon  
Which he cannot omit,  
That once, there was no moon,  
And that there'll be no moon  
Again, in time; that these  
Twinned non-existences  
Accompany the moon,  
It never goes alone;  
Which a blind Samurai  
Found with his darkness-eyes,  
Leaving him battle-fit  
On ground two no-moons lit.

*Note:* The print is number 33 in Yoshitoshi's *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*.

FROM *Stubble Burning*  
(1988)

*And let thine own times as an old story be.*

— DONNE

These too, for Fran —

Poems are not what you head for  
When we go into a bookstore.  
Handed these, maybe you'll recall  
How, without fail, when they were small  
The boys brought home their dinosaurs  
(The long flanks brightened up with flowers),  
Houses with slanting chimneys, trees  
Of course, a dog complete with fleas ...  
We taped them to the walls and doors  
So you will understand with these,  
The bringing of them makes them yours.

## Martial of Bilbilis

Nothing in Rome escaped his glance, he understood  
    This touchy sort of verse,  
And mixed the poor ones with the good:  
Your even book, he said, is worse.

Old and fed up this son of Bilbilis went home,  
    A harsh hill town with a cold  
River below, that shipped to Rome  
A lot of iron, a little gold.

## Old Man Afraid

Whiskey of youth once mine,  
White fire straight from the coil  
    Of a hidden still ...  
Cool, dark I keep the wine  
Of age, that yet may spoil,  
    Or handled, spill.

## The Morning of Glenn Gould's Funeral

Hearing him now on the car stereo —  
That's as he wished it when alive —  
I look for browsing deer, and slow  
For the tight down-curves as I drive  
Through deep oak shadows  
Over the back way to Ojai.  
The October day burns quiet bright and dry  
In the brown meadows.

The thing he's playing's a rocky-riffled clear  
Mountain stream of a piece by Bach:  
The bright quick-moving length of it's here  
Along with sun and oak and rock  
O brief survival  
Glittering in the light and air  
And in the dark unbreakable silence there  
The new arrival.

## The Two Fields, Where I Used to Live

*Nothing lasts, and ... in that very fact lies some of  
its glory; the sadness ... is really not so terrible.*

—ISAAC DINESEN

Where each oat tassel turns  
    in its own air  
On its own white fiber  
    well out from the stem—  
And the barley beards out, rasping  
    the fingertips,  
Both oats and barley bending  
    bright metal they made  
Of brightness, dryness, heat  
    in authoritative silence—  
The fields two shining rectangles,  
    below them, black there  
In the tangle of rough grasses  
    at the fields' end,  
The shade of the big glisteners,  
    cottonwoods that found  
The little stream underground  
    before it rises  
Where the three fences meet, where  
    the gully opens,  
Where in the quiet the redwings  
    sway the cattails:  
Small grain fields of our high country  
    with the cold mountains lifting  
Above you the crooked line  
    of their crests!  
The whole scene nears and clears  
    now, across fifty years—

Though now, where the great trees grew,  
    now, where the stream came up  
Whirling a little bright sand,  
    the traffic vrooms—  
Though the houses of strangers stand  
    where the grain bent,  
With its own innocence and  
    wisdom implicit—  
The whole scene nears and clears  
    now, across fifty years.

Geron at 3:00 A.M.

August, a full moon.  
Avoid that window. The lawn  
Is cold white marble.

## Geron the Heron

*A fragment*

There, leaning alone,  
A thin crooked dark shape inside the blaze  
Of the low sun and the blaze-back of the sea:  
Now the breeze freshens, lifting his scant crest. He  
Is finishing this one more of certain days  
He has made his own.

Sophocles: *Antigone* 332–372

There is much that's wondrous, much that awakens dread—  
Nothing more so than the human, *Sophocles says,*  
*In the best description of us ever made:*

This creature crosses the gray sea in the winter  
With the storm-winds, making his way along  
In the troughs of the billows,  
And of all goddesses the one greatest, Earth  
The undying, the tireless—he wears her down  
With his plowing back and forth, year after year.

The light-witted race of the birds he takes,  
And the tribes of the wild beasts, and the swimmers  
Through sea-deeps, in the meshy folds of his nets,  
This busy-thinking human.  
With his tactics he masters the field-dwellers,  
And the hill-ranging animals; shaggy-maned  
Horses he reins in, he yokes the necks  
Of the powerful bulls he brings down from the mountains.

And speech, and wind-quick thought, and living  
In a city together, he taught himself, and how to avoid  
The bolts of storms, and having to sleep out  
In cold clear weather. He is all inventiveness.  
Never does he go bereft of means into  
The future. Death alone he cannot contrive to elude; though  
From hopeless diseases he has found escapes.

Cleverness surpassing all hopes he possesses  
In his plans and devices; by which sometimes to evil  
Sometimes to excellence he creeps. Honoring

Earth and her laws, and the sworn justice  
Of the gods, he may thrive in his city.—Shun him  
When he harms what's good out of recklessness,  
Shun the contagion of an arrogant cast of mind....

FROM MANUSCRIPT

In Sleep in the Early Morning

... I had begun hearing  
a voice that was mine  
blent with another's  
both unknown and familiar  
as it said matter-of-factly  
'... have a cup of coffee  
with God,' and I sat down  
at the bare wood table  
in the tiny and quiet  
odd-angled café  
while Vincent van Gogh  
drew up a chair  
across from me, God  
there inside him,  
I saw from the outset,  
there and nowhere else.

And though it ended  
with both a strong voice  
and a text in Perpetua  
saying 'God exists. God exists.'  
(and of course me impressed,  
though I'm no believer)  
the great thing was  
how van Gogh and I  
were both leaning forward

for some unhurried talk  
over coffee on how,  
in the exigencies (as we found,  
they're unpitying, changeless)  
of these most ancient arts,  
paintings can be painted  
today, poems written.

## Fran

*a fragment*

In company, in taking pleasure, quite without fuss,  
And zestful, and at once alone,  
At least apart, and here with us,  
She knows that nothing is our own,  
Is almost shy  
In a quiet personal to her  
With room for other thoughts to occur.  
Her spirits, high,

No timid moderation there! And yet not bitten  
By this desire and that, like me  
Who goes through life being smitten ...  
How her laughter comes out free  
Racy and full—  
Though good comes compact with bad  
And justice from the gods is baffling, sad,  
Or terrible.

FROM *The White Boat*

(1995)

*Reality doesn't last very long.*

— SIMENON

## Long Shadow Instants at Hendry's Beach

The sun is going down over the slack  
Pale surface of a sea at minus tide.  
It is large and its light is rich.

Streaming across the water, it  
Picks out in bright jags  
The crust-like foam which rims  
Low-lapping crests easing shoreward.

Onshore the light is soaking into the white, soft-looking  
Fur of the flank of a black-lipped Samoyed  
Which is standing there quietly. The light is shaping  
Itself to perfection onto the contours of  
The strong legs of the girl who owns the dog.

She's in shorts and sweatshirt; idly  
Dabbles her toes in the thin ripples  
Of the backwash; head down, mind elsewhere. The light  
Smooths itself with a finishing intensity  
Over the figure of a crippled girl:  
She is laughing politely while she shrinks

(But just perceptibly) from an Irish setter  
Which has just come dashing madly up to her  
While its owner, a thin little girl  
Of perhaps seven, mortified, is frantically  
Calling out to her 'She likes you!'

And hurrying forward... *All of it equally*  
*In this lovely, momentary light*, thinks a bent old man  
Taking it in, who just then, with a start  
At the unlikeliness of it, separately

Becomes aware that he has been feeling  
Like a boy this whole day. *Which has not happened*  
*Before*, he reflects. *Wouldn't expect it to again.*

*Late December, 1992*

‘For the life of a man comes upon him  
slowly and insensibly ...’

—*Jeremy Taylor*

He puts down his book — it is  
the works of one of the number of  
the old poets he still loves very much, has  
loved for a long time — and noticing  
the loveliness of the weak light  
of the winter afternoon sloping in  
and lying so bleakly and hesitantly  
and quietly on the rounded upper  
surfaces of the bare branches  
and knobby twigs of the trees  
he can see from the window,  
he thinks, *And that, just as  
it is just now — that is plenty.*

## The Watch Dog

The terrier barks. I look up from reading and find the afternoon is over. Voices—some people going by, their movements just detectable through the high hedge. They are out for a walk on this first spring-like evening of the year. The terrier stays tensed—ears forward, she keeps watching on hind legs at the window. She barks again—two sharp hard barks, for good measure. The light is mild on the new green already flecking the old, stubborn dark of the oaks crowding together up the steep slope opposite, mild on our apple tree divided by window squares, its thin crossing twigs still bent from last year, still bare. The street is quiet again along its length, moments are all we have.

An early spring day on  
the upper Santa Ynez, exploring, doing a little  
fishing, bringing in his daypack, along with  
trout-flies and lunch, the paperback  
Greek Anthology made  
by Peter Jay

Here were no noises of high-up water  
dropping over rock ledges, nor had herders,  
in the first big storms last fall, left behind  
propped against trees their roughed-in  
woodcarvings of the girls of groves, nor were there  
young women in cut stone standing under the falls,  
smooth beneath their thin dresses of the  
creasing water; nor was there any tablet left here,  
by a late-summer traveller, in thanks  
for the shade and grass and running water.  
He had leaned his fly-rod in the fork  
of a weedstalk gray from a year  
of the weather, and sat reading  
Leonidas, and eating a sandwich. Below him  
sprawled the remains of an enormous oak,  
long fallen, the underparts softening  
into dirt. The chill green fire of  
the week-old grass worked into them, and on  
downslope to the little river running clear  
in sunlight. A pair of young oaks nearby  
checked a cold wind. He was alone  
the whole day in that backcountry. Once  
he put the book down to rest his eyes on

The gods  
of the Greeks  
long gone, the  
nature of things  
from which they  
arose is as  
it was and  
will always be.

the two oaks. They would move only slightly,  
briefly, in the gusts. Fresh in their strength,  
crisp, pitiless, splendid from stem outward  
to their clear leaf-limits, hard trunks  
stone smooth, stone colored, they were OK  
as the small deities of this steep place.

## Manzana Cow and Dragonflies

—there was a red lizard, brick  
red—and a red cow in the creek,  
showing through the willows, sloshing  
awkwardly upstream bawling  
frantically for her calf,  
which she had lost somehow.

Diving from overhead  
came skipping across the pool  
where I had caught the rainbow  
two dragonflies—Chinese red.  
Then an electric blue  
dragonfly shot by too.

Then finest of all came one  
(Christ! this was years ago)  
the color of the air.  
I could best see her where  
she floated on the stone  
in shadow-duplicate,

distinct where she was not;  
seeming, herself, almost  
her own faint-featured ghost  
over her charcoal show  
of self on things below;  
and free of anguish there.

*1982, 1992*

Fall in Spring  
(Blue Canyon)

During that time he was nearing  
the far side of his own autumn,  
with its grants of a certain number  
of clear, still days, with a fugitive  
richness of colors against the dusks  
coming early across chilly ground.  
And in that place, on that day, wondering  
if there were trout back up in there,  
he had caught a small one in the pool  
above a crossing, and letting him go  
stood for a moment, looking at the pebbles  
in their different colors, in the shallows there,  
thinking—not sadly, but as the outcome of a rough  
calculation—This may be the last time  
I'll be up here, and do this. And so it was,  
on that shady feeder stream, in that steep place.  
He recalls how the road down to it had turned  
to a little mountain stream, along a stretch  
where the water had shifted its bed in a storm;  
that he saw some *Mountain Bluebirds* in migration.

*1983, 1991*

A recent spur-of-the-moment hike into  
the back-country on the watershed  
just to the south

In this fifth year of drought  
the Poison Oak has turned  
the scarlet of October in  
mid-June—an early quitter.  
Before noon feeling worn out—  
hot and out of breath, glasses  
sweaty, up here with scant water and  
no food, he was resting on a shady  
boulder out in mid-stream.  
The little stream had led him on.  
He had not thought he would  
go so far up in. Dry  
through much of its course,  
here the Matilija still  
ran—slow, low, clear. (And  
not potable.) Through the heat-tremors,  
high on the stony slope, in full sun,  
a scattering of that early scarlet showed,  
in with a stand of the satiny white  
flower-like dried bracts  
of the California Ever-  
lasting. It made a fine mock  
wildflower stand astir  
in the quivery glare  
and gusts of baking air—dry air  
streaked with faintest tangs  
(was he imagining this?) off  
the chaparral, off Yarrow,  
off the bitter and the minty

herbs, the occasional rank  
sunflower, the six different sages,  
the streamside Bays, the Yerba  
Santa, that tastes bitter at first,  
later on, cool; all the while, from  
upstream and down there came  
the different water sounds  
over various distances, changing  
with the swerves of the light wind,  
the occasional gusts. This was one  
of the times when the more carefully  
you listen to the water, the less  
you can tell whether it's partly voices  
of hikers approaching upstream  
or down, blent over the middle  
distances, varying in pitch,  
in loudness—or is nothing but noises  
of the water going fast  
through the shallows, or slipping  
over low sandstone ledges, or pooled  
behind jammed boulders and splitting  
into narrow falls—sounds  
filtering through the shadowy Alders  
and Bays, mixed in with their rustlings,  
carried by the air currents  
over water currents, or glancing  
off the damp stone of a cliff, in  
the near day-long shadow and coolness  
of the narrows not too far up from here.

*from* A Few Aspects of the Moon

Dusk—city and harbor lighting up below—how quickly the Mission grounds become all but deserted. She wanted us up here tonight to see the full moon rise, having suddenly recalled such a visit many Octobers ago. And these others, left over from the day here?—The two young Latinas idling, idling in silence by the lavanderia? That young male lurking (what for?) by the big arch? The middle-aged bald businessman up on the colonnade, pacing slowly back and forth, in shirtsleeves, head down, puffing hard on his stub of a cigar?

‘There it is,’ she says. Immediately the young man slips out of the tree-dark behind us for a look. It is switched-on stadium lights down by the beach, behind some trees

and this wait’s tedious. We go for a walk. The moon edges up from trees on a hill and as we pause someone behind us says ‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it,’ and stops beside us to add, ‘We used to watch it from the back porch.’ An old man, he crosses his grass to his car, we round the corner, head down the street—she looking over her shoulder, for the back porch.

How fine if Tsukioka Yoshi-  
toshi could be standing here this dawn  
at the window to see the white moon hanging  
a little while from the white limb  
high in the sycamore and the big flicker black  
in silhouette against it, clinging to  
a thin, jointed, sharply-bent-down twig  
and jabbing the whole length of his bill into one  
of our hundreds of prime, dead-ripe persimmons.

Going to Pine Mountain again!  
after many years, and just because yesterday  
a friend spoke of his own recent visit.  
The moon will rise and entangle  
itself in the huge old pines up there; and  
when that happens—I'll be exactly where?

One for the laments our time begets:  
where I grew up the October moon  
used to rise huge from behind  
the Arms boys' paintless barn with its gambrel  
roof and rooster vane, on the round hill  
across the draw two farms away—  
fit for a thirties postcard photograph.  
Both Arms boys are dead. The barn got torn down  
and its weather-silvered boards hauled off for use  
in bars, barbecue joints and such—as for  
the round hill—the 'dozers flattened it  
for fill. What the moon rises on over there  
tonight is not worth glancing toward.

Out to mail a letter  
and there it is—  
the midmorning moon which  
Stravinsky in his last year  
of life, after surgery,  
said he was pale as  
(a glass of champagne  
left standing overnight  
was the air the day  
Stravinsky died,  
the sparkle gone).

At 3:00 A.M. out of bed  
with a belly-ache, see  
no moon, only how dead  
white are the red  
bricks of the entry, how black  
a roof-post shadow can be.

Darkness comes on. My 65th  
birthday nears in the dark  
of the year, dark of the moon  
too: dark I have never feared,  
but liked even when small; *e.g.*  
getting warm under heavy  
covers in the icy room,  
sure of the coming on  
of sleep, as I lay alone  
in the familiar silent dark  
upstairs. — Truth is, with you  
though, moon, I can get into  
difficulties: have sometimes a  
nagging unease at finding  
myself in your presence, have felt  
more than once terror  
at your full white face, can  
be resentful at the  
thought of your thin light  
diluting the dark; dark  
that Homer called the holy dark.

I lie awake in the small hours  
and think how in the heatless  
mind-light of a dream I never see  
a shadow. Very pale shadows  
of the old pine tree are moving  
hesitantly, back and forth,  
in the folds of the thin curtains, and  
it is a half moon in the clear night.

Well, moon, enough of these  
that your Yoshitoshi, who left us  
a hundred moon-prints, started  
me up on. You don't mesh with our  
calendar or clock, or day  
or month or year, you claim  
your own month—*mooneth*—with its  
bunch of ill-fitting moon  
numbers, 29 (days), 12 (hours),  
44 (minutes), and tonight you are  
complete, O smooth one, and in  
that matchless silence you  
command, how you keep  
perfect now at your maximum  
brightness that delicate, clean rim,  
as of what metal, hammered thin?

*from*  
With a Half Hour to Revisit Yoshitoshi's  
*One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*  
at the Museum

The general is seated  
cross-legged beside the lamp  
in the closed-off inner room,  
on his knee rests the hand  
gripping his suicide knife,  
the just unsheathed blade  
upright. Under his gaze,  
on the floor, lies the poem  
he has finished. It speaks of his  
part in a disastrous defeat.  
The tiger's head on the wall,  
a great strip of shaggy pelt  
looped around its neck and  
hanging to the floor, glares off  
above and past the seated man.  
—Where, however, is the moon? Look,  
the moon is in his poem.

It is a summer moon.

The two scholars with their oarsman  
have anchored under the Red Cliffs.  
A little moon lights up the water  
from a great distance, the water  
is rippling, the cliffs lean  
among themselves. The scholars wait.  
Eight hundred years before them  
Su Tung-p'o, coming here with friends,  
wrote of the cliffs, the  
little moon so distant, the lit water.  
The scholars wait—for the way to be in  
the presence of the moon, and water, and cliffs,  
in that full understanding  
possessed by Su Tung-p'o.

Stillness of evening: Murasaki  
is sitting chin in hand  
at the writing desk, set up  
for her on a balcony of  
the temple retreat; above her  
a lantern glows, suspended  
from an unseen roof-timber  
over the railing; and blocked  
in part by the lantern, shines  
the full moon: a line-up  
of three lights—Murasaki  
being the greatest of these—while  
everywhere both visible and hidden burns  
the fourth light Yoshitoshi.

## The White Boat

*To close out the year*

Light fading and the marsh  
Wide now with the tide out,  
Darkening, sky pale, bright  
Patches of water near,  
Bright streaks of it far off  
Over the flats. Bird-cries

Cross the stillness: black shapes  
On the water-shine,  
Willet, Whimbrel, Godwit,  
Feeding in a hurry,  
Much back-and-forth movement,  
Quarrel-cries. Curved bills, wings

Clear on the after-glow,  
Curlews glide in. Chitter  
Of a Kingfisher: low  
Whir over the water  
Shoreward, to a dark tree.  
Heron, dusk-blue in dusk

Where the sandy path bends  
By the marsh-edge, listens  
Dead still in mid-stride.  
Air ripples the distance,  
Small boats drift, fishermen  
Hunched on the water-blaze.

Sky over the spit's gone  
Smoky red now; low lights  
Along the north bay, more

On hills across the marsh  
Jump, air-jostled. A last  
Puff of warm land air dies.



From the boat basin now  
Through the late dusk the white  
Rowboat comes sliding out  
On the still water, white  
Reflection under it  
Slides along upside down.

Oarsman's figure just  
Visible through the dusk  
Moving off rapidly  
In the silence, without  
Noise of splash or creaking,  
A good hand at the oars.

Night Heron flies over,  
Squawks once, the marsh is dark  
Inlaid with thin pale strips,  
Oarsman rounding the point  
Now heads up bay and boards  
A sailboat at anchor.

Breeze now, the bay glimmers,  
And that oarsman's in fact  
A girl, her silhouette  
Miniature in distance;

Wearing a dress, her long  
Hair and long skirt blowing—

She sets out to work on deck  
Without delay, bending  
This way and that, cranking,  
Lifting, rearranging—  
Every movement practiced  
And quick and unhurried.

Then the girl goes below,  
Is all; her disappearance  
As brisk as her other  
Doings. The boat rocks, stays  
Dark on the bay's paleness.  
Then light at a porthole.

Night nears now, fishermen  
Heading in, clear voices  
Come small over the flats,  
Birds settling in, restless  
Bustlings, creaky cries, some  
Still feeding in tide pools.

The fishermen arriving  
Cut their motor and coast  
On the quiet water  
Of the small-boat basin,  
Through the dark a man's voice  
Sounds close in the stillness.



This is how it is here  
And will and will not be  
Again, these small doings  
Each an end, a beginning,  
A middle, overlapping  
Momently, here only,

This year, and then next year  
Again, especial, late  
In the day then, in late  
December, this is how  
It will be, and not be.  
How it is here.

*Morro Bay*  
*December 19, 1979; 1992*

## 'Is the Universe Trivial?'

*(Title of forthcoming lecture by physicist up here from Cal Tech)*

And is the answer 'Yes'?  
I have a hunch it is.  
I know I'd leave the hall  
Uncomfortably full  
Of mathematical  
High-powered subtleties  
I couldn't even guess  
The strangeness of, much less  
The forces that they show  
Held in their symbol-net;  
So I'm not going to go.  
I have a hunch it is,  
Though; having lived in it  
For sixty and more years  
And heard the news one hears  
From the astronomers,  
Of bent space going on  
And on and on and on  
Before you've well begun  
To drift much past the sun;  
Where, for people at their lives,  
Roads and rivers and trees,  
Bookstores, gardens, cafes  
And theaters, and baseball,  
Music, and pictures, all  
You get's dark vacancies  
And silence going by  
With your occasional  
Physico-chemical  
Huge whirler hurtling through

Their remoter distances  
(Airless, and what is more  
Too cold or hot for you)—  
Urania declares  
That if your ship arrives  
You'll be freeze-dried, or burned  
Precipitantly away—  
There's inconceivable  
Violence ashore.

—I have a hunch it is,  
So far as we're concerned,  
Until it comes to us:  
We hold it in our heads,  
We featherless bipeds.  
—Where it alone begins  
Is where the meaning thins:  
A horror, truth to tell.  
Here's paradise, there's hell:  
Oh yes, it's trivial—  
Apart from the not-so-small  
And inescapable  
Fact that it has us all  
    By the short hairs.

## Ballad of the Subfusc Day

Gray inside, and the overcast  
Outside is staying put  
When I get down to it at last  
Doors and windows shut.

But words don't crowd in now, the way  
They did last week for me—  
Gave them some shoves and there they lay  
Fitted like tesserae.

Silence. I probe with a broomstraw  
Inside a lampshade pleat  
An odd shadow I just saw:  
An earwig lands on his feet.

Oily and slim, he trots along  
My desktop, hunting a crack;  
I place him where earwigs belong,  
Between two bricks out back.

More silence. I get up and gaze  
At the woodpile and pine tree  
Thinking of certain sunny days  
And wishing I might see

The big Fox Sparrow, say—the one  
Last year who came and went,  
His sides and back rainy-earth brown  
And a magnificent

Central chest spot, irregular  
And bold—as for his song,  
He was a rich, clear whistler.  
Nothing in him not strong.

What did I see out there instead  
But a rat—a young one, shy,  
Intelligent—almost, as my wife said,  
Pretty, in silvery gray.

He matched a silvery stick of pine  
I'd left there, at the tip  
Of which he paused, working his fine-  
ly whiskered upper lip:

The first rat here we ever saw.  
And we two stood entranced  
Watching him daintily withdraw.  
And the dull day advanced.

And inside, in the same gray air  
Alone once more, I sat  
And made place for that seemly pair  
The earwig and the rat.

FROM *Away from the Road*  
(1998)

Fragment on a Theme by Ausonius

*Remembering early fall evenings on the Upper North Fork, Matilija*

... now that the evening star is bringing on  
earlier the day's last light and its shadows,  
how many minutes more will that calm reach  
hold the bright tan hillside? and the dark bay leaves  
make dark bay leaves on the surface along the bank  
of a pool there? and toyon berries, dead ripe by now and  
hanging by the fistful, put their redness in your riffles ...?

## Gerontic

Item in the paper:  
‘In people over sixty the  
sweat glands have begun  
to deteriorate.’ It is  
yet another touch  
on the hair-trigger  
of this horror at what  
has been happening  
to him.

How quietly  
the small disasters arrive  
and form up in this  
irreversible disaster  
old age. Every change  
now, is for the worse.  
‘There’s no future in it,’  
he jokes to a smooth-faced  
young friend, knowing they belong  
to different species now.

He’d been thinking  
about the young waiter in  
the Hemingway tale,  
who declares, ‘An old man  
is a nasty thing.’ The kid’s  
exasperated: it’s closing  
time, his girlfriend  
is waiting for him. The old  
man, the one remaining  
patron, quite drunk, has,

with his dignity  
intact, just ordered  
another brandy. The older  
of the two waiters defends  
the old man, quietly  
and well. The other, not  
disputing him, serving  
the old man his one more  
brandy, sticks to  
his own opinion.

He folds up the newspaper.  
Nothing to be done  
but make 'Spinoza's  
laconic agreement to  
conspire with necessity,'  
phrasing he had copied  
(from whom? he's forgotten)  
years ago into a notebook.  
As for the knowledge and  
wisdom of old age, such as  
they may be, their basis  
and most of their substance  
he had built up, well  
before he was old, back  
when thoughts and perceptions  
came at propitious times  
unsought-for, quick and clear....

Mid-July, down the back-country  
streamside trail  
he loved most, the stream  
slow and low, mid-day  
air quivering  
above the scrub, how  
he'd pour sweat, soak  
his heavy belt clear through.

*July 21, 1994*

## Back in 1946–47

We'd turn first to those poems by him,  
when the new issue came out, though knowing  
they would just be studies of flowers—  
brief, accurate, vivid—different  
individual flowers, their shapes, their  
positions and balancings on their stems,  
small movements special to them, the varying  
gradations of light and shadow  
to be watched for in their interiors—  
quick-moving, elegant poems, though.

He was one of the crowd of us vets  
on campuses right after the war.  
He kept to the edges, was of us  
but not among us. His laconic  
observations—offered quietly with  
his hands in his pockets as always  
(we never saw him with a book)—were admired,  
not least for their genial and ever-  
inventive use of the meager stock  
of the stale obscenities in soldier talk.

None of us could say just when  
he left that campus, on its hill  
above the then pleasant city,  
across which we could see, through  
the then clear air, the blue Rockies  
looking near. You could find his poems  
back there, in the library basement files—  
that is, if the files still exist.

*May, 1994*

## Two Pieces out of a Winter Morning

### I. UP CLOSE

On the far side of the crossing  
Where the stream swung under a cliff  
There was a big boulder, roughly the shape  
Of a bull bison lying down.

A low-leaning oak shades it in the heat  
Of summers up there. Winter sunlight (often subtle,  
As there, in its treatment of what it crosses)  
Reached in and warmed it a bit on the south end.

It was a stopping-place. That day he only paused  
And keeping his pack on leaned with a bare hand  
On the shoulder of stone at the north end. The cold  
Stored inside it from last night went into his palm.

He saw for the first time that the stone  
With its dark iron tones, deep in chill shadow,  
Bore a crop of lichens, round patches, with edgings,  
Flower-like in many shades of subdued

Yet luminous grays. Among them grew irregular plots  
Of moss, some olive-green and very bright, even  
In that shade, some a fresh brownish green, in velvety  
Low mounds: a sort of park for the eye to wander in

For a moment or so. He let be, those days, the enigma  
He'd studied for years—the attraction that all  
The boulders up here have exerted on him, in all  
Their shapes and sizes: say, showing their backs

In the rapids and slow runs of the streams,  
Or flood-crammed onto canyon floors, or poised,  
Huge and single on the slopes (one over a pool  
He used to fish), or choking the side-gulches,  
Or standing here and there in the open grassy places,  
Or paired and flanking the trail at one bend he knew.

## 2. OVER THE FENCE

You went in between big orange groves  
On the way up there. The trees,  
Standing in long straight rows  
Each row and each tree in it  
Spaced the same, were once  
Skillfully tended. Neglected later,  
Yellowing, some of them  
Already dead, they were some more  
Speculative real estate, though that morning  
As he drove through they were still  
Sending equidistant shadows  
Aslant over the black-top, between which  
The low-going sun had laid flush a row  
Of wide palings, pure light: they hurt his eyes,  
One after another flashing an instant  
Before vanishing smoothly under the tires.

*Mid-December, 1993*

## High Summer

She moved so fast  
sometimes—in the house  
and out and back in  
in one rush—but unruffled—  
just from her usual  
abounding energy  
that one time  
the dog sat up  
and began barking  
from sheer excitement.

# Under Cricket Music

*A fragment*

## I

Crickets from where the hill is steep  
And dark under the oaks across the street  
Keep up a clear and brilliant *threep* — *threep* — *threep*,  
    A little harsh, with a quick beat,  
Filtering through trees the jounce of harness bells,  
These late fall nights, somehow, from some place else —

## 2

Some time else. I remember, though,  
Mainly the sound, with much else fallen away,  
Leaving nostalgia with no place to go.  
    A team heading home, end of the day.  
Would the small bright bells chink from tugs, or hames,  
    Or bridles — I don't know.  
I cannot even recall the horses' names....

## 3

At a small hour I again awake;  
In the live silence one cricket's creaking on  
Slowly, now, muted, but without a break.  
    He's quiet when I wake at dawn:  
Trim bit of reality for in between  
    Dreams, and oblivion,  
That take their turns all night on the inner scene.

## 4

Oblivion that slides in, recedes,  
 Slides in, all the while floating all that is,  
 Is best of all — ‘Come, sleep,’ come dark that feeds  
     Into the veins cool nothingness —  
 The old poets, broken, wrote their loveliest  
     That the god might dip misdeeds,  
 Fears, all, in the deep sleep of the old psychopannychist —

## 5

And yet just yesterday I fought  
 Afternoon drowsiness off to watch how each  
     Curt stroke of Nicholas of Cusa’s thought  
     Bore him on, into a bright reach  
 Where Infinite and Finite co-inherited  
     And the mere world on a taut  
 And shining gossamer of wisdom reappeared....

## 6

A rocks-crawling-with-rattlers dream,  
 Dream where each act, as Clausewitz said of war,  
 Is simple, and very difficult; trout stream  
     I know I’ve visited before  
 (But where?) flowing opaque with sewage; gray  
     Steep vacant street, dark store  
 And office in a strange, vast city where I stray

7

Dread-filled, and what am I doing there —  
And my son is a puny baby, putting by  
His pitiful few possessions with great care  
    Next to him, on the rug. As I  
Laugh hard, he crawls off, thin-limbed, spirited,  
    On his own, to disappear  
Through a dark opening, sloping below his bed —

[left unfinished]

*ca. 1979; August 23, 1996*

## Homage to Gensei

Last night I lay awake  
From some sound in the night  
And pictured I could take  
(Knowing that I could not)  
The firm and quiet way  
Of the gentle monk Gensei,  
Who watched from his Grass Hill  
(Three hundred years away)  
Beneath a favorite tree,  
Or from his leaky hut,  
Travels of crow, cloud, sail;  
With some food and wine  
Welcomed the always rare  
Visit from old friends; wrote  
His poems, though unwell  
Much of the time; read; gave  
Lessons, again while sick,  
Kept clear of pedantry  
(And all he wrote of it  
Rings true of it today),  
With his goose-foot walking stick  
To keep him company  
Took walks, kept his mind free  
And agile as the air,  
Transcending tragedy,  
Under his bent old pine  
With writing brush in hand  
Quiet at close of day  
Saw out the evening sun  
Across the shadowy land.



Slight rustlings in a tree  
And a slow car going by  
Returned me to what's mine,  
What it had all come to,  
What I still had to do  
With my own dwindling days.

## Herders Moving a Flock Down Highway 395

A thousand sheep crowding the mountain road  
Make it look like a dirty-foam-capped river  
In this dim light. They've blocked the truck ahead.  
His double chrome exhaust pipes snort and quiver.

He needs to be getting on, and so do I,  
And all those headlights behind us, stopped at dawn.  
The road is narrow, the mountain stops the eye  
Rightward, thin air on the left goes on and on.

Sleepy, hatless, uncombed, after a night on the ground  
In the clothes they're wearing, two herders amble  
Behind the flock, and the three dogs in sight  
Keep the flanks neat—make a rare laggard scramble.

What leads the flock is a burro, while a third  
Man wades along in their midst—now and then waves  
A bough torn from a bay tree over the herd.  
Dew soaks their wool and the dark, fresh bay leaves.

Across the blat and clatter, through the daze  
Of recent sleep he sees us apparitions  
With a wide, flashing, and incurious gaze  
Now that we creep past in our own conditions.

Now that we creep past in our own conditions  
And catch in the dawn, along with the ancient moral  
Of simple sheep, and shepherds, and our ambitions,  
Reek of damp wool, pungency of torn laurel.

*Early summer, 1982; August, 1996*

## A Memorial in the Neighborhood

It is a young oak tree and a stone  
with a bronze plaque in it, for  
a boy who lived all his life  
in a house up the street from ours,  
near the park entrance-road. He died in  
his room over the garage, a suicide.

His mother had her memorial for him  
placed on a piece of ground scraped bare  
and packed hard, in the weedy area  
at the upper end of the park,  
between the creek and a trailhead  
where you start out for the back-country.

We never knew, but knew of  
the family. I glimpsed the father once—  
handsome, dark-haired. Took off when the boy  
was small, and the brothers grown  
and gone; among the cousins and uncles  
were artists and actors; some widely known.

The boy himself was a painter,  
quiet and shyly friendly  
the one time when I met him. After  
his death we would see his mother  
now and then, for a year or so,  
then she sold the house and left.

In her grief (I'm supposing) she left the choice  
of a stone and the placement of the plaque  
to the stonemason. It's a puzzle  
that the man should botch that simple job: why choose  
an unshapely, lopsided stone? and then set  
the plaque in violently askew?

Later, somebody in the mix  
of the people using a public park—some one  
of those whose furtive doings make for  
that slight, pervading taint of evil  
in the air of a park: as here, over the boulders, the creek,  
and trees and grassy open places—someone

took the trouble to batter a big chunk  
off that poor specimen of a stone.  
So it stands there now, in a place where boulders  
of all sizes abound in a variety of fine  
rounded shapes, tablet shapes, shapes of mountains  
in miniature with ledges, hollows, cliffs; and then,

a back-country peak stands over us all  
down here, in our houses deep in trees, and for  
situation, and shape, this peak is a match  
for Fuji, I swear; and mornings, ocean air,  
evenings, canyon air, moves in the trees here, it's all  
a garden here, violated variously, but a garden.



The words the mother chose for  
the plaque could not be more plain.

*This tree was planted  
in memory of*

then the name and the two dates—one morning  
I stood there and did the subtraction  
in my head, getting the number of years,  
months, and days that the boy lived.

The young oak has grown tall now, straight-stemmed,  
well above the thick stakes it is held between,  
its crown shapely, its leaves rich dark green  
with the special shine all living things have in  
their youth. Around it its elders lean, in their contortions  
from crowding, as is their nature; fallen limbs under them.



This Christmas, as on every Christmas,  
now, for fourteen years, decorations have appeared  
on the tree. I went up there early  
one weekday morning, when nobody  
would be around. I wanted the time  
to study them and not get stared at.

A huge bow of shiny red plastic is tied  
on the trunk this time. Globes covered with some  
shiny synthetic fiber hang from the branches:

twenty-three red ones, two blue, and in no discernible arrangement, have hung there weeks, now, past the holiday season, fraying and fading, in

this winter's rainstorms. They'll be taken down, always have been. They don't get forgotten about: the choice, arrangement, and handling of them do not matter, Taste doesn't matter, behind them being the grief that stays on, alive, under whatever the rest may be by which living gets done. There to be visited, on its occasions.

*December 18, 1994*

## Three Studies from Two Days

*The Upper North Fork, Matilija, 1986*

### I. LATE IN THE DAY

Part of the thin shadow  
of a weed stem  
Cutting the trail solidified  
into a lizard  
And ran away, still  
shadow-colored.

### 2. PHOTOGRAPHING AN UNCOMMON WILDFLOWER

Now it's been found.  
Shapely and fresh dark blue,  
Fine-stemmed, neat-leaved,  
On the baked-white ground—  
A subject, magnified, swaying there  
In its prime,  
A foot away,  
Difficult still  
To catch, on this dry, stony, steep hill  
(That would kill  
Its garden cousins in no time).

You lean, shaken with late-in-the-day  
Fatigue, and with one knee  
Wedged between rocks, one eye  
At the eye-piece, water-blurred  
By the hot breeze,  
The other shut tight, by  
Sweat and two crawling flies  
Whose cohorts whirl above—  
You'll wait till it holds still ...

Unlikely place for both flower and you  
To choose (all but absurd  
For you to love).  
Still, there you both are, each in your way  
(By reflex) hopeful, too.  
The least breeze shakes your prize,  
In its brief stay,  
As naturally  
As fatigue and more shake you  
At sixty-two....

### 3. THE LIZARDS OF LIZARD FLAT

Just ahead of us they run, stop, run, stop, their transit  
Building a structure light and elegant,  
Jointed with pauses,

Extending itself in segments (with time out  
For slewing sidewise to look back at the humans)  
Like shooting bamboo.

## A Pull-out by the Sespe

For years this stream ran clear.  
I'd fish it alone, all day.  
Then came the long drought. Now  
we stand in the familiar  
dirt pull-out, drinking coffee.  
When the off-and-on breeze hits,  
two young cottonwoods begin stirring  
on the near bank, half their branches  
still green, the others yellow.  
We watch their all-over shivery  
hard twinkling leaves  
throwing off flakes and  
sharp flicks of light, at all  
angles, continuously: all the while  
the leaves send out their sounds  
of running water, as if in recollection  
of the stream they grew up by; which is  
now silent—dusty stones, weeds. Someone  
has hung a jumbo empty  
Frito bag carefully  
on a bush on the far bank.

## Away from the Road

### I

#### FOR A GREAT BASIN BRISTLECONE PINE

For picking a high place,  
unsheltered; using shattered rock  
to thread roots through to the poor and  
shallow soil; strong at extremes: in  
relentless winds, only a few  
cushion-plants for company  
on the last ridge twisting up, up  
aslant in thin bright-blue air,  
slow swerves in its multiple  
twistings, in its grain its warm  
colors staying fresh in this dry cold  
through the centuries—tree that is one wild contortion  
from its sprawled-out clenched-down root system  
half-bared by erosion, to the snag  
of its tip, single existence in  
among existences which sustain  
and assail it at the same time: what else  
is there to be found—you cannot  
imagine the nothingness of the before  
and after—you get no further than  
the silence of stone, of a standing bristlecone  
in the terrific fixity of its achieved exertions.  
Still there is a certain casualness in  
its leaning into open space, and  
in its reach for air and light up here  
there's eagerness not anguish. You see it  
in the jaunty half-twirl of  
the barkless twig at the top.

FOR THE ASPENS AND COTTONWOODS  
UP ON BIG PINE CREEK

Just the one branch lifts,  
hesitates, and subsides  
in small splashings of light.



Half-waking in hemlock shade  
he lies listening, eyes still shut:  
is it the voice of a young woman  
that he hears upstream? But it goes on  
earnestly, eagerly, the tones  
explanatory, never pausing  
for a breath, never varying  
in volume: they are water-sounds.  
He opens his eyes and sees  
three aspens full of light,  
one of them against the dark  
of an old pine, all three quiet  
at the moment. Onset of boredom  
both with the sounds of the creek  
upstream and the aspens alike  
involuntarily declaring themselves.  
A faint breeze that hasn't yet  
reached him strikes the trees, making  
a kind of silent clinking  
with fine spikes of light from  
the leaves in movement....  
Fairly good logs can be made

from aspens for barns and sheds,  
also a good quality pulp, though  
as fenceposts they rot out fast.  
What they are best for is  
catching light in high air  
and sending it uselessly out. When  
he walks over to these three,  
he leaves the daylight,  
and stands inside aspen light.

3

FOR THE UTAH JUNIPER

They find in ruins of the Anasazi  
(the name in Navajo: the Vanished  
Ones, Old Ones, Old Enemies)  
juniper roof-beams, still sound,  
juniper-bark torches. Slow growers,  
roots fed into sandstone, the junipers  
dot the scene to the horizon, holding their dark  
over the pale rock; in summer light  
lightless; grave green the year round,  
stolid; tragic trees, for the long haul,  
their coarse black blunt flame-shapes  
leaving the sandy canyon bottoms  
to the cottonwoods, those gleamers  
and glisteners of brief summer,  
quickly undone, stripped and stilled—  
non-participants in the bitter winters.

## The Fox

*In the year 1954 of a bygone era*

Fall came and he took a leave  
(certain he could not sit through  
another graduate class—not  
yet), wrote a bit, taught one class—  
he liked to teach, they needed  
the money he put with what  
she earned at her office job.

He'd fish the small stream that ran  
below the cliffs at the edge  
of town. They ate what he caught;  
ate the blackberries, soft-ripe  
large ones, that grew at streamside.  
They made some blackberry wine,  
once, from a small bucketful.

And sometimes he went hunting.  
He found a good single-shot  
.22 in a cluttered  
second-hand store outside town.  
It was old but well cared-for—  
smelt of gun-oil, and the bore  
was bright, clear of corrosion.

Through friends who rented one floor  
of a farmhouse out from town  
a mile or so, he'd obtained  
permission from the owner  
to hunt on his land—squirrels,  
the man said, had been raiding  
the cornfield he'd not yet picked.

He parked in the yard at dawn  
on the first day he hunted  
and walked up a wagon road  
that wound through leafless gray woods.  
The trees were unfamiliar.  
Once he had edged in among them—  
he'd heard a squirrel chatter.

The trunks stood close together.  
How the land lay further in,  
he could neither see nor guess.  
Another squirrel chattered  
further in. He retreated  
to the road, and felt relieved.  
As he went on, the woods thinned.

In a clearing by the road  
stood a small persimmon tree,  
leafless in the reddish light,  
the first one he'd ever seen.  
He walked up the grassy slope  
for a closer look. In the quiet  
the bright fruit hung motionless.

He never saw another person,  
nor a sign of one, back here,  
nor even any livestock.  
He had come out here in part,  
he now knew, for the stillness.  
There were no noises here—  
only sounds, to be listened for.



Once his wife had come along  
with him and a friend, hunting  
at dusk, just outside the town.  
The friend brought down a squirrel,  
it ran off, he and the friend  
lunged after it, stumbling, on  
rocks and downed wood in deep leaves.

He recalled her clear laughter—  
clear of derision: to her  
the chase was pure comedy....  
That night they ate squirrel he  
had shot. Like chicken, they said.  
But no—an alien tang  
which cooking, and seasoning,

could never quite rid it of  
caused them an uneasiness  
that, though slight, had persisted  
like the strong scent of the fresh  
pelt still in the kitchen. And  
bits of the underfur, pale,  
hard to see, stuck to the meat....

On one late November day  
he came up the wagon-track  
through the stands of long-bare trees,  
mild sunlight came slanting in,  
the different trunk-shadows  
ahead of him were soft gray.  
He stepped through shafts of the light.

He heard the far, crashing sounds  
of squirrels making long leaps  
through the leaves from trunk to trunk.  
The persimmon tree stood now  
stripped of fruit—the strong, thin twigs  
stayed bent. The road left the woods  
and turned, to follow the edge

of a bluff that overlooked  
the farmer's bottom-land field—  
light streaming through the ripe crop  
made it buckskin-colored now.  
A creek ran past the far edge  
of the field, big sycamores  
on the near bank caught the light.

The far bank, though, steep and dark,  
dense with trees and undergrowth,  
looked cold, dank, in its deep shade.  
A breeze came up as he watched.  
He heard the rattle and rasp  
of the dry, sharp-edged, stiff leaves  
of the corn. He walked on down

watching for any movement  
that was not caused by the breeze,  
went past the head of the field  
to the creek. The breeze died down.  
He'd seen crows, but no squirrels  
except one pair that vanished,  
high in an old sycamore.



He sat under that same tree,  
on the stream-bank, his feet  
dangling. He could hear water  
going past slowly, hidden  
under leaves, among the stones.  
A clear, crescent-shaped pool lay  
along the bank, just upstream.

The bank there was undercut.  
The massive trunk of the tree  
let down a tangle of roots  
over the pool. The water,  
motionless, mirrored the roots.  
Leaves on the pale bottom-stones  
lay draped, their colors still fresh.

For those few moments the place  
had magical properties.  
This stayed clear and fresh, for him,  
from then on—the time of day,  
and the season, did their part  
no doubt, and that cold, dank slope,  
and the bright field at his back.

The air stayed quiet. The day  
would soon be cooling, a slow  
flow of air would wind downstream,  
its chill seep into the folds  
of his clothes; but this air still  
was mild. As he watched, the light  
weakened on the chalky-white

undersides of two big limbs  
the tree had sent out, level  
and winding, over the creek.  
The limbs remained motionless.  
He listened to a trickle  
of water dripping over  
a rock ledge, somewhere below.

He heard a dry, light rustling  
far up past the bend upstream.  
For all its slightness, the sound  
came to him clearly, the air  
having been still for so long.  
He looked upstream and waited.  
What appeared around the bend

was a gray fox. It was tired,  
and came on, down the center  
of the streambed, at a slow  
steady trot with its head low,  
its tail level with its back.  
It held its eyes straight ahead  
as it drew near where he sat.

They were eyes dulled by fatigue.  
Mud had soaked its legs, belly,  
and flanks, and matted the long,  
fine fur of the underside  
of its plume. The fox went by  
sparing itself the effort  
of a glance aside at him,

and rounded the bend downstream.  
He listened till the dwindling  
rustle of leaves had died out,  
and then he kept on listening  
in the new stillness around  
for some minutes. Well, he thought,  
he has built up a good lead.

He pictured the fox moving  
through the coming dusk and dark  
downstream toward settled country.  
He could not convincingly  
see where the fox then might go.  
He was getting up to leave  
when he first heard the foxhounds.

The far-off, varied baying,  
oddly melodious, came  
drifting in through the stillness.  
—Yes, they're a long way upstream.  
And this creekbed that the fox  
chose for its course, is a choice  
course for a pack of foxhounds.

He did not stay on to watch  
the pack go by. He gathered  
his gun and rucksack and left,  
glad he had brought a flashlight.  
He knew this breed was tireless.  
They'd stream past, wild-eyed, long ears  
flapping, tails up and waving....



One mild spring evening two years  
later, as the dusk thickened  
toward darkness in the soft air,  
he came back down to his car  
as he'd done five or six times  
since the day he saw the fox;  
but this was for the last time.

He still carried the rifle,  
from habit, and his liking  
for it. But lately he'd come  
just to take the track up there  
between the trees, to the bluff,  
then down to the creek, to see  
how things were out there that day.

He had done all you did for  
the degree. They were leaving  
that place, for one with no woods  
but plenty of cactus; then  
on to a place with ocean,  
and mountains. They settled there,  
knew the mountain trails, the streams,

knew shores after winter storms  
left them stony, driftwood-strewn;  
knew the salt-marshes, russet  
in winter, where shore-birds came  
from the far north. Certain days  
they've had there stay in his mind,  
none more detailed, none clearer,

than the day he saw the fox.

*August 11, 1996*

*Note:* The ancient Greeks saw that such places were sacred and had a goddess. You disregarded her at your peril. She was Artemis, and as my *Oxford Classical Dictionary* words it, 'her proper sphere is the earth, and specifically the uncultivated parts, forests, and hills, where wild beasts are plentiful.' Not to have been able to spend sufficient time appropriately in such places would have made me waste away in the other phases of my life.

## Reflecting Pool

Time: the middle hours of a day in late December

*I, who love walking, and who always hated riding, who am fond of some society, but never had spirits that would endure a great deal, could not, as you perceive, be better situated.*

— WILLIAM COWPER, *THE LETTERS...*,  
(EVERYMAN LIBRARY NO. 774, p. 201)

The sound of a waterfall down below  
had made him turn off the trail; now  
he was working his way down,  
crouching to get under low  
branches, shoving aside or  
snapping off the smaller stuff,  
his boots skidding, his cap  
snatched off once, his pack  
twice lodging against a limb,  
stopping him dead with a jolt,  
making him bend even lower  
to go on. He was sliding sidewise  
when the falls and its big pool  
came into sight. He was here  
for the first time.

Just below him,  
a boulder sunk into the slope would do  
for a seat with the vantage-point  
he wanted, once he'd found stones  
to fill a wide cleft in it  
and cleared away some intruding  
thin branches and twigs.



He eased off his pack and sat, still catching his breath. He'd come out near the foot of the pool, where the ripples were pushing upstream in shallow arcs evenly spaced. The waterfall was bright white, small and steady. It dropped from the V formed by a pair of big, clean boulders up above. *And it can't be improved upon*, he thought.

He was out of sight from the trail above, and from the far bank where the slope was steep and the trees and the undergrowth too dense for a hiker to force. He was alone with the place.

He worked out of his pack the box he'd squeezed a big sandwich into. He positioned three river-stones on the slope, to set the box upon. It was almost level. He drew out his thermos, steadied it between his boots, and with the edge of a piece of flat, thin sandstone that had broken cleanly, loosened and levelled the soil between two rocks, unscrewed the thermos cup, and pressed the rounded bottom into the ground, rotating it back and forth, to make a socket for the cup to stand in; and then slowly filled the cup with coffee. He replaced the stopper and laid the thermos on the slope,

its base against a boulder. There was no spot to stand it on. Then he ate, and watched the yellow leaves revolving at the lower end of the pool. They went counterclockwise. Those in front of him travelled upstream, then swerved back across the water, rejoining the main current where it drove against, then along, the far bank. Then, slowing and swinging on back around, the leaves came toward him on the quiet water. Alder leaves, brilliant where sunlit, bright in the shadows.

The whole place lay held in the water-fall noise.



He would come up alone to see  
what the day here would be like  
this time, on this or the other  
branch of the little river.  
He had been doing so since the days  
when few people came up here. He still  
liked the hidden edge of danger  
here, and the change from the useful  
and not so useful routines  
at home. As he walked along  
taking in things around, his mind  
might, on its own, work at some  
persisting difficulty in some of  
his reading, or in some writing,  
and the lacking thing arrive by itself,

he getting it down without delay,  
having learned that his memory could  
not be trusted with it. The other day  
he had read in Aubrey that Hobbes  
when at work on *Leviathan*  
often took walks and kept a pen  
and inkhorn in the head of  
his walking-staff, so that when 'a  
notion darted,' he could write it  
down, on the spot.

— Coming up here  
was no escape from any  
bad time he was having. He'd learned  
that the bad time tagged along.

He liked walking up here  
with his wife, with his sons,  
with a friend or friends.  
When you are here with others,  
the place is the occasion and  
being with others is the event.  
Those were good times.  
Memories of them stayed  
lively. Always his need  
to go up here alone was  
for the place itself. In time  
it became a physical need.

~

Within the water-noise he was hearing the *buzz-buzz* of some small bird. He couldn't identify it. Now, still buzzing, the bird approached in stages, keeping hidden, causing no movements of the leaves that might give away its position, but keeping on the move and both scolding him and sending out the news of his presence here.

No voices, no other sounds from above of people going by up on the trail. The U.S. Forest Service built the trail, he reminded himself. Trail that leads on into these mountains — and then on back down to the narrow dirt road, that takes you down to the locked gate, where the blacktop begins, that takes you winding back down toward.... His sense of things here today was temporary. Well, so was any sense of things. He thought of the phrase 'the lightning flash of reality' in a van Gogh letter.



One soft spring day many years back, he was on the trail along the main fork, nearing a stretch of the stream he considered his. You reached it by a hard-to-make-out way through the scrub. He told no one about it, he'd never seen anyone else

on it. The stream was beautiful, and it had many trout in it.

Out of view in his pack was his new pack-rod, and his other tackle, all of it first rate. It had taken him years to get it all together, one item at a time, mostly. The day before, a dozen trout-flies had been delivered Air Mail, Special Delivery, just in time. They rested now in the clear box they came in, next to his reel, in the pack (he kept all his tackle out of sight until he got down to the stream) and his mind was on them. They had come from Livingston, Montana. They were tied by local women, mostly middle-aged, sitting at long benches. One year there had been a photograph of them in the catalog. The flies were packed and shipped (by another such woman, maybe) upon the arrival of his order, check enclosed. The money it was that brought them. His dozen Royal Wulffs had come bobbing down from Dan Bailey's on a rivulet of money—liquidity, that was the lingo; cash flow, that his job had turned into; job he was, well, spending his life in. He saw the whole country afloat on money. All things were

soaked in it (including money  
itself) so that from them money  
could be squeezed. A great convenience,  
no doubt. Too bad about its power  
to pervert.... *On such a day  
as this, in such a place — what a topic,*  
he'd thought, his eye alert once again  
to any slight change portending  
danger to the place: this narrow  
road, grassy and weedy down  
the middle, dwindling vaguely into  
the trail up ahead, was a great threat....

He had turned off and made his way  
down toward the stream, easing through  
the stiff, abrasive chaparral, clambering  
over boulders, crossing several gullies.  
He was fifty miles from home. Inventing  
the wheel, Ford Madox Ford had written,  
was where we had gone wrong. He'd laughed  
when he read that. It had come to seem,  
some forty years later, his consideration  
of it fitfully persisting, plausible.  
He tried to recall the title of that book.



He was midway through lunch when he saw  
the quick indistinct movement, deep in the pool.  
Getting out his binoculars he soon found

the two trout: six-inchers, like twins.  
The floating leaves made excellent cover for  
the pair moving slowly below them. Their bodies,  
being the green of the clear green sunny water,  
looked translucent, their shadows were inconspicuous  
among the shadows of the leaves and of the flat  
stones on the sandy bottom. He watched the pair  
hover, and then cruise, with an easy flick  
of fin shifting direction, assured and  
unhurried among the shifting pillars of  
the shadows of floating alder leaves.

He no longer fished. His tackle stayed in its cabinet.  
One day soon he'd divide it among his sons.  
They could cut cards to settle any disputes. Now  
he was content with just coming up here.

It was one of those places that has  
a radiance of its own. You could see it  
when your state of attention was right.



The whole pool was lying in one cold shadow.  
He replaced the empty thermos and box  
in the pack, worked the binoculars back  
into their case, and passing the strap over  
his head, hung it over his right shoulder so that  
the binoculars rested on his left hip. He hoisted  
the pack and shrugged into it, buckling

the waist-belt, tightening the shoulder-straps.  
The pack had some weight to it. He always carried  
what he would need if for any reason  
he should have to spend the night up here.  
He secured the binoculars to the waist-belt  
with a thong, buckled the chest-strap, turned  
away from the pool and its waterfall, fought  
his way back up to the trail, and once again  
headed back down into what lay outspread below.

*December 19, 1994*

*Note:* The title of Ford's book is *Great Trade Route*.

## A Sip of the Manzana

A long time since he'd been here,  
and now, it was against  
doctor's orders ('... and stay out  
of the heat ...'). He had come up  
through the deep sand of the trail,  
at mid-day, through the dry  
fiery air summers bring  
up here. Back of him lay  
the campground, where he'd parked,  
two horse-trailers nearby,  
and a single, sagging, small tent.

Now he slogged along, through  
sand (loosened by hooves)  
hot and white in the white  
blaze of over-head sun,  
and no movement of air,  
his face heating up,  
his skin staying dry—  
only ten minutes  
to the grove of big oak,  
digger pine, cottonwood,  
and the slow-shifting, black-  
shadow shelter they gave.

Near a scatter of boulders  
with air tremors above them,  
in the dead grasses and weeds  
and low, twisting shrubs  
drought-stricken and prickly

on the rise he chose,  
he sat eating his lunch,  
taking drinks of ice-water  
from a small thermos.  
The plan: he would use  
ten minutes to get here,  
say twenty to eat  
and take in what was here,  
then ten more to return,  
then drive back to the cool  
blue of the coast. He stuck  
with the plan.

From his spot  
on the rise, he looked at—no,  
watched, a young digger pine,  
slender, airy; sunlight slid  
up and down its needles  
whenever they moved. Nearby  
stood its tall forebear, hung  
with old, long-opened cones  
in heavy, dark clumps,  
their scales tipped with claws.  
Beside it three sycamores  
towered, limbs sprawling out  
in the air, and a cottonwood  
flickered—its glossy leaves  
swivelling on those thin, flat  
stems set at right angles  
to the leaf surfaces—

they made a light clatter  
as a lazy air movement  
eased its way through the boughs,  
and the digger pines hissed  
and the sounds of the river  
out of sight from this rise  
came in more distinctly.  
Now and then a bird crossed  
from one tree to another  
while keeping the silence  
birds observe at mid-day  
in the midsummer up here.

At his feet, under grass-stems  
low-leaning, or snapped off  
cleanly at the base, lying  
full length in the dirt,  
still sleek and bright-pale  
in this shade, lay last year's  
weather-discolored  
cottonwood leaves, their  
high polish ruined, though  
some still showed as luminous  
where brushed now by light  
sifting down through the boughs  
of the oak just above him.  
The few oak leaves among them  
had kept their dull brown—  
weather-proof, tough—their  
hard, convex surfaces

with clean, scalloped edges  
gripping the ground  
with the just-visible  
sharp hooks at their tips.

Once a doctor, treating  
some other affliction, had told him  
'No alcohol' and thereupon  
at the end of the day,  
he would take one swallow  
of no substitute, but  
absolutely the real thing,  
straight from the bottle,  
in its full—if transient—  
restorative powers  
(then he let the ritual  
lapse).—What had Saint Ben  
said, in his shining iambs,  
but the whole truth?—'In small  
proportions we just  
beauties see: and in  
short measures, life  
may perfect be....'

*On that rise, with the great trees  
around and above him  
with their sounds and movements  
and with them the distant,  
fitful sound of the river,  
he had entered a state*

*he'd not gone there to be in  
(if he had, he would never  
have entered it), and of which  
he was not aware—was not able  
to be—while in it. It was  
something he'd know of,  
and be able to visit,  
only afterward.*

## Names of Trout Flies

Out of his mail, which was heavy with catalogs, he pulled the early spring numbers of the catalogs of Orvis and Dan Bailey, and on this gray day of this bleak February turned to the pages of splendid photographs in color of the trout flies. Dan Bailey's number lined them up in rows of six, stacked seven high. Inset on one page was a photograph of a vast brown meadow backed by mountains, light blue and with many peaks tipped and streaked with snow. Barely showing at the far edge of the meadow was a thread-thin scratch of light: the river over there.

The front half of a heavy trout in close-up, speckled jet-black on light green, loomed in an inset on one Orvis page of nymphs. A hand suspended the trout just above a blur of rapid water. One clear drop of that water was hanging midway along the jutting jaw of the trout, another from one knuckle of the hand. The fly that the big trout had taken had been removed. The hand was about to release the trout.

~

Glanced at,  
they formed a fine, small spectacle,  
the rows of trout flies. On impulse  
he made a rough count: three hundred  
or so flies across eight pages  
in the Orvis. Dan Bailey showed,  
across thirteen pages, around four  
hundred fifty. The little order form  
in the corner of one page was for a book  
of patterns and materials for more  
than a thousand classic and contemporary  
flies.

Without their names, the trout flies  
would just be their exotic materials  
tied together and trimmed — feathers  
(Guinea, Peacock, Silver Pheasant, Jungle  
Cock, etc.), hair (Northern Whitetail,  
Coastal Deer, Yearling Elk, Antelope,  
Moose Mane, etc.), specimens of fur,  
of silk floss, of chenille (Regular,  
Tinsel, Short Flash, Long Flash, Ultra),  
French Wire (gold, silver, copper, in  
Small, Medium, and Large), and so on.  
The trout flies have their names, though.  
Hard to match them for liveliness and  
unexpectedness in certain sequences  
or pairings the names come in: bright  
miniature assemblages of the language  
into not-quite-compositions, with  
their fleeting intimations, so that

each fly has its aureole, hovering  
just out of reach with just sufficient  
resistance to a filled-out meaning  
you could take hold of.

The names  
entranced him when he was a boy,  
he remembered. He was pausing here and there  
at the name beneath the photograph  
of a trout fly in its row. Some names  
had their accidental beauty, some  
an unaccountable oddity (e.g.  
Bead Head Blood Mohair); some  
a satisfying plainness (Joe's Hopper,  
this with the most recessive of  
aureoles). He turned to the first section  
of Orvis flies and began sampling.  
Pale Evening Dun (his favorite, in  
the beauty category), Halfback  
Nymph (a combination that can't  
be imagined), Rat Face McDougal, Green  
Drake, Light Cahill, Hare's Ear, Blue Dun,  
Dark Spruce, Royal Wulff, Grizzly  
Wulff, Quill Gordon (one of the oldest  
of patterns), Yellow Stimulator,  
Marabou Muddler, Royal Trude, Elk  
Hair Humpy, Blonde Wulff (the family  
of Wulffs is large), The Professor,  
Green Double Humpy, Renegade,  
Female Adams, Adams Dry, Hairwing  
Bluewing Olive, Silver Doctor (another

old one), Golden Fluttering Stone, Cow Dung (he could never reconstruct pathways by which the mind in search of a name for a new trout fly might arrive at Cow Dung; however, Cow Dung it was, for what is a still serviceable old trout fly), Blue Quill, Bitch Creek, Cream Crane Fly, Olive Peeking Nymph (vivid little almost-picture). He looks up again, thinking of the light skittering across fast water, the calm shine of water full of leaf reflections at a bend; the sudden cold clamped into his legs through his waders, the almost alarming force of this particular current as he entered some wide water moving majestically in near-perfect silence through one mountain meadow; pool under a single leaning tree, white uproar in the narrows, and he balancing there on a boulder....

Looking down again:  
it was the Irresistible catching his eye, then Zug Bug, and South Fork Sally, and Gray Fox, Hare's Ear Flashback, Parmachene Belle (another of the old ones, still good), Madame X Rubberlegs, Grizzly King, Heavy Bitch Creek, Brown Matuka, Gray Ghost, Black Leech, Adult Blue Damsel, Royal Stimulator,

Brassie, Spruce Fly, Babine Special,  
Jack Scott, and the Royal Coachman  
(striking handiwork of the man of  
that title who served Queen Victoria).

He got down a brittle, yellowing  
1949 paperback and located the page  
displaying “The Preferred Flies  
in 1892.” All but two were listed  
in his new catalogs.

He himself  
in the last eleven of some sixty  
years of fishing, used just one fly,  
in one size: the Royal Wulff  
(a variant, by the master  
Lee Wulff, of the Royal Coachman)  
barbless, size 14. The other flies  
he had chosen over the years —  
dry flies, wet flies, in many sizes,  
streamers and nymphs and muddlers  
and the big stoneflies — flies for various  
times of day in every phase of  
the trout season, lay shut tight,  
each kind in its own compartment  
in a clear box, the boxes stacked  
in the dark of their cabinet.  
Whether the trout took his Royal Wulff  
or not, he had been satisfied.  
He’d caught enough trout. If, now  
and then, he took and let go another,

he admired as always the all-out startled indignant struggle of a wild trout, even a small one. (Planted trout — pellet-fed, soft-bodied from a life of finning in one place side by side in hatchery ponds — he shunned.)

In the last two seasons he had left his tackle at home, content with walking along a stream by himself, content with a leisurely survey of things, with the occasional prolonged observation of this or that; with sitting still.

To do otherwise now, to take up active fishing, would be like taking up years later one of those books which, as he read it, became the signal event of that time in his life. And such a book, once read, had then become (while his mind went on to other books and other concerns) an occupant, vivid and quiet in him. If one day years later he took down the book and read into it a little way, he'd find it was still alive there in him. There were only a few such books. The physical book, the one that got dusty, he would dust, and put back on its shelf.



He became aware, belatedly, that  
a long narrow elegant isosceles  
triangle of blazing sunlight  
had been lengthening across the carpet  
from the lower pane in the door  
behind him, and had just arrived  
at the far edge. The room had filled  
with an early dusk of its own. The afternoon  
had gone by, and he eased himself  
out of his chair, dropping the catalogs  
onto the catalogs sprawling in their basket.

*Late February, 1995*

FROM MANUSCRIPT

A Portrait

... she wakes, and with the same  
quick start and buoyancy  
heads without hesitation  
along her usual ways—those  
trim routines she fashions  
through ordinary days—  
yet in an instant, game  
for the unscheduled jaunt,  
spur-of-the-moment spree.

So far as I can see  
she's lived her life out free,  
somehow, of the bad passions  
(but knows well—forgivingly,  
I've learned—the ones in me);  
free of the wants that claw  
and gnaw at others so  
for this and that; has no  
taint of that vanity,  
ambition for her sons.

She's no worrier. Is brave,  
those close to her can attest,  
as her youngest son knows best,  
whose life she dived to save  
in the Rogue—a fast river  
well-named from those it drowned.

She's quick to understand  
the good that comes to hand  
in the course of things, for what  
it's worth. Her gaiety  
at any flash of wit  
confirms its quality.

And I saw just last night  
her yet again fresh delight  
at seeing the moon rise ...

*August 22, 1996*



## Author's Notes

### FROM THE NOTE TO *TREE MEDITATION AND OTHERS* (1970)

The poems are descriptive meditations rather than meditative descriptions—I mean that they are first and last about subjects, not objects, despite what may be appearance to the contrary. They arose usually when I had some time to myself, which perhaps gives them their pre- or post-social character, and they are put as plainly as I could manage.

### FROM THE NOTE TO *IN PLAIN AIR* (1982)

Years pass and there continues in me a preoccupation with what it is to be in the physical universe, with its always individual near-at-hand doings and beings, human and otherwise; the whole show shading off into immensity and vagueness, and (however splendid or frightful or dull or, ultimately, unimaginably strange) with its bare unrelenting factuality hurtling along impassively as it does, in a kind of final dignity. Some sense of this preceded by a long time the writing of the poems, I suppose, and has something to do with their unreconstructed realism and particularity.

Something else. Among the new poems are poems I wouldn't let out by themselves but that—like an “openwork” line in a stanza—make their contribution to the ensemble: what counts for me in any collection is less the individual poem than the individual life, finding its way somehow, anyhow, directly and otherwise, into the whole work....



## About the Author

Alan Stephens was born December 19, 1925, in Greeley, Colorado. He grew up on the family farm there, and served in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Thanks to the G.I. Bill, he attended Colorado State Teacher's College (now the University of Northern Colorado), the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Denver, and the University of Missouri. He received bachelor's and master's degrees from DU, and a Ph.D. from Missouri.

Stephens taught English at Arizona State University from 1954 to 1960, with a year at Stanford on a fellowship (1956–1957). He joined the faculty at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1960 and remained there until his retirement in 1989, except for a year at DU (1967–1968). He was a founding faculty member of the College of Creative Studies at UCSB.

He was married for 60 years to Frances Stephens. They raised three sons. He died July 21, 2009, at home in Santa Barbara. He may be found in his verses.



## Editor's Note

This selection is drawn from the *Collected Poems*, but also includes a few of the unpublished poems Stephens circulated privately over the years, and one that appeared only in a periodical. The arrangement is chronological, for the most part. The unpublished poems are grouped with their published contemporaries.

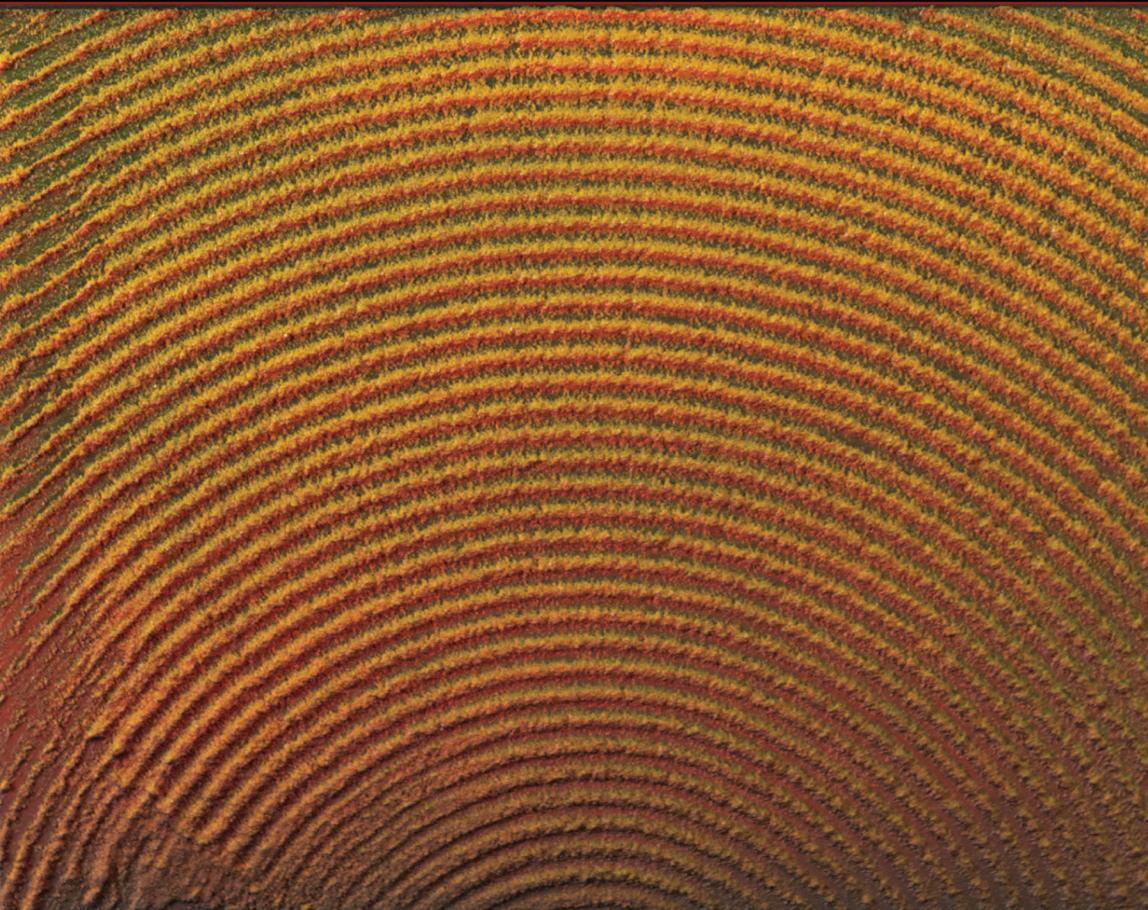
Different versions of certain poems appeared in various books and in a compilation Stephens made in the 1990's. The revisions were always slight, except for omissions from *The Heat Lightning* (1967), a very limited edition, when selections were republished in *Tree Meditation and Others* (1970). From all the variants, I have chosen what seemed to me the best versions, favoring the originals when in doubt. In some poems, I accepted certain revisions but not others.

I made some changes in punctuation, spelling, and italicization, but I have preserved Stephens's idiosyncratic use of single quotation marks. In a few poems I revised phrasing a little, or deleted a word or a short passage. These revisions were based on an early manuscript (the sonnets "The Other Runner" and "... continued"), on revisions Stephens penciled into his copy of *Goodbye Matilija* ("Dream Vision," "After-words"), or on my judgment of what he would have welcomed ("The Open World," "The Summer," "Elegy: The Old Man," "Tree Meditation," "Thinking of Roethke," "Third Deposition," "And the Fat One ...," "Lion Camp," "Study of Wild Oats #2," "After-words," "The White Boat," "Under Cricket Music," "A Portrait"). In making that difficult judgment, and in other respects, I was glad to have the counsel of John Wilson, John Ridland, Tim Stephens, Robyn Bell, Bob Blaisdell, and Jace Turner.

I thank Dan Stephens as well, for his brotherly support.

—A.A.S.





**Dowitcher  
PRESS**

Cover art: Tom Stephens, *The Heat Lightning*

**POETRY / \$20.00**

ISBN 978-0-9857812-2-4



9 780985 781224

52000