

The Piercing Blue of Sirius

Selected Poems 1968 - 2008

by

Larry Kimmel

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this hunger, tissue-thin

Blue Night & the inadequacy of long-stemmed roses

*The Piercing Blue
of Sirius*

Selected Poems 1968 - 2008



Larry Kimmel

A WINFRED PRESS BOOK

The Piercing Blue of Sirius
Selected Poems 1968 - 2008

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To Robert Francis
&
Floyd McAuslan

Matthew
&
Kathleen

*the blue,
the piercing blue of Sirius.
more you will never share
the nuances are mute
– art's first hard lesson*

CONTENTS

from:

BRANCH AFTER BRANCH

TAKING NOTICE

Taking Notice after a Long Dark Night	1
Maple Keys	2
Jack-in-the-pulpit	3
E.H. Shepard's Painting of Eeyore's Birthday	4
After Reading an Epic Fantasy	5
Paths that Crossed	6
The Weight of One Small Death	7
View from a North Window	8
Each Stone	9
November Gold	10
Feeding Chickadees in Winter	11
Branch after Branch	12
I Step Out on My Porch Near Midnight	13
Crossing the Connecticut River	14
The Winter Woods	15
Spring Beauties	16
An Easter Morning	17

PEDAL POINT

Pedal Point	21
-------------------	----

A CUP FULL ALL SEASONS

A Cup Full of Seasons	31
Posterity	34
Catnip Tea	35
Home of the Brave	36
In Memoriam	37
Wooden Chain	38
The Class Ring	39
October Elegy.....	40
Regret	42

UNWORLDLY WIND	45 - 55
----------------------	---------

from:

AS FAR AS THOUGHT CAN REACH

AFFIRMATIONS

Think Big	59
Of Facts and Facets	60
Of Coins and Card Houses	61
Yes You Can	62

from:

THE NECESSARY FLY

41 Haiku	65 - 75
----------------	---------

from:

A RIVER YEARS FROM HERE

There is a River Years From Here	79
The Latch	80
Steel Town	81
Eleven to Seven	82
The Sliver of Steel	83
Member of the Club	84
Black Ant Experiment	85
The Wasp & The Spider	86
On the Verge of Autumn	87
And Other Important Things.....	88
Evening Walk	89
Japanese Lanterns	91
Tidings	92
The Putting Away of Rookie	93
The Johnstown Flood	96
Star	102

more from:

AS FAR AS THOUGHT CAN REACH

9 POEMS

Once in a Parking Lot	105
Red Squirrel	106
To Not And Wish You Had	107
Reflections on a Windowpane.....	108
Rose in Window	109
Of What Significance	110
The Chronicler	111
Seeking the Hermit-Sage	112
New England Palms	113

from:

BLUE NIGHT

& THE INADEQUACY OF LONG-STEMMED ROSES

Blue Night (short poems)	117 - 148
73 Cherita	151 - 187

from:

BETRAYAL ON MAPLE STREET

LEGENDS

The Winter Owl	191
Manger	197
A Fine Farewell	200

KEEP ON KEEPING ON

Keep On Keeping On	211
--------------------------	-----

THE TEMPERATURE OF LOVE
(a sequence)

The Temperature of Love	219
The Bruise	220
The Pearl	221
The Compact	222
The Egg & The Pearl	223
An Offering Mean and Poor	224
The Lesson	226
The Loft	227
After the End	228

from:

THIS HUNGER, TISSUE-THIN

70 Tanka	231 - 254
----------------	-----------

THE LIGHT OF A DISTANT HILL

The Light of a Distant Hill	257
-----------------------------------	-----

The Piercing Blue of Sirius
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TAKING NOTICE

from:

Branch after Branch

Taking Notice after a Long Dark Night

The dew is not yet burned
from the orchard grass—

Crows range the open sky
on easy wings—

To the north,
a chain saw pitch-shifting
gnars a tune—

The forsythia is yellow, the lawn,
salt-crusted with Spring Beauties—

A wasp dangles by—

To the north,
a great conifer falls, sputtering
like firecrackers—

I raise my coffee mug, greet
the acrid bite—

How clear, how crisp the air!

Maple Keys

May caught us in a fall
of maple keys,

showered us with the sting
of pure potential,

rained down her dizzy burden
on our shoulders,

paving this quiet street
with small misfortunes.

Jack-in-the-pulpit

*"You kids stop that now.
You'll harm it sure"*—the
Jack-in-the-pulpit by
 Gramma's back porch.

O so carefully we scrunched
 the upright Jack,
where he stood like a spike
 in his purple pulpit

'neath that lick of a canopy, only
 to hear his
scritch-scritch-scritch.
 That was his sermon,

you see, and how Jack, the preacher,
 ever survived our
curious fingers, our
 inquisitional thumbs

to evangelize another day,
 is a marvel indeed.

E. H. Shepard's Painting of Eeyore's Birthday

This framed print reminding me
of childhood playgrounds,
this pastoral scene where
"Pooh and Piglet look on as
Eeyore tries to put the balloon into the jar,"
got stuck in time
and just in time for just
beyond the vanishing point
a threat to childhood brews,
like the foreboding presence of Mordor,
like storm clouds on the horizon
of a picnic.

After Reading an Epic Fantasy

Quite suddenly, full blown,
out of the chubby cheeks of an infant wind,
a leaf landed on a mud-puddle,
like a strange, crude vessel launched
on a fathomless café au lait sea.
It tacked eastward for seven ticks of time
then lost its course in a birthday candle blow.

Later, by the sun-shrunken mud-puddle
that had beached the curled brown leaf,
an ant swam a minuscule cove.
But it was a gigantic monster,
and I saw the horrific peril of yet another episode
in the epic from which I'd been excluded,
too huge to be viewed
even as a comprehensible god.

Paths that Crossed

Along my back porch bannister, teetering
with all the caution of an afternoon bibber,
he carries his barley body with hauteur
above the dust, on eight hair-thin stilts.

In the long, hot afternoon the mind meanders:
"daddy longlegs (or harvestman if you prefer);
race: arachnid; color: albino—"

Albino. The mind shouts. The word becomes
the generator and I
the electrical impulse lost
in the terrible circuits
of superstition. (Will it be plus or minus?)

Nonetheless, with a child-learned deftness
I catch one silver wire and place this aberration,
this frosted transistor
teetering along like a mechanical toy,
on solid ground.

I let him go. I let him go but not
without a shudder and not
without note
in this, our long, dark chronicle, together.

The Weight of One Small Death

When I lifted the dead sparrow
from the lawn, it was light,
incredibly light: lighter
than a sheet of paper; lighter
than the bird alive; nearly lighter
than the weight in hand,
which was light – light
as the thought of a bird.

View from a North Window

For a moment, the sun
on a red barn, dying,
on dry fields still as a gold death-mask
warmed yellow only to the eye
beneath the winter-prophesying sky,
before night's shadow gathers the last straws
of afternoon to its scrawny breast;
the sun on a red barn, dying,
resurrects a lone child, playing.

Each Stone

What they left behind them
are the stone fences.

Each stone,
 now covered by a patina of lichen;
Each stone,
 grayish-green, here,
 in the clean November sunlight;
Each stone,
 once held between two palms.

These stone fences
are their Stonehenge
to us:
miles and miles of hand-felt care
falling back into time
through the clear November air.

November Gold

In the aging afternoon,
at the far edge of the lichen-hued pasture
on which the remnants of last night's
snow lie like tufts of cotton,
the bleak branches of old pear trees brighten,
on and off,
beneath the surfing clouds,
catch November gold
between the surfing clouds,
in the hoary snarl of their broken fingers,
while beyond the pasture and the trees,
fields the color of copper lighten,
on and off,
all as though attached
to some neon advertising apparatus,
quietly flashing the hopeless SOS
of an age,
soon to slip into the western horizon, forever.

Feeding Chickadees in Winter

Already accustomed to the procedure,
it isn't long till one
flutters down from the sky to clutch
the edge of my hand;

a moment more to twitch and eye
the seed in my palm, select
two or three, and flit away—

—such delicate talons!

the sensation lingers, engendering
a tenuous ache

—a millet of love.

Branch after Branch

Slats of clear gold sunlight
and snow like fur on every branch
and every branch after branch after branch
as far as thought can reach . . .

I go to see if our road's been plowed.
The many small birds melt
before my boots and frosty breath.

Branch after branch, vast in its snowy hush,
the universe is as big as you think it is—

and maybe one or two trees more.

I Step Out on My Porch Near Midnight

Snow,
flecked by moon made mica.

Cold, windless air—even
the roar of the woods
is faint tonight;

And faint, too,
the creak
of my leather jacket—faint

As the rigging of a galleon
heard across the seas of time . . .

While overhead
Orion faintly flickers.

Crossing the Connecticut River

A day of rain
in February and
from the bridge
in Sunderland,
the river—

broad and flat
and grey
like gunmetal,
and in parts,
sheening—

the trim of trees
along both banks,
drab plum and
pigment of iron—

very lovely,
very steel,
like a lithograph
in some

old tome—tomed
for posterity.

The Winter Woods

What presences around the cabin pressed
my consciousness through
the ghostly night, that now

in the winter morning sunlight,
like hoary skeletons, tease
the eye? The dead and the dormant

all alike; but come the leafy season,
green by God, will separate the dead
from the living.

Spring Beauties

Each year I mark the stationary progress
made by a cluster of Spring Beauties,
that at a distance are a band
of some religious sect arrayed
in frail lavender gowns, leaning
southward into the nearly impenetrable grass on
an endless pilgrimage, remarkable
for being at once onward yet having
no apparent point of departure or arrival.
I look on, fascinated
by their adherence to a persistent paradox,
and also by what they are—
spring beauties – beautiful flowers.

An Easter Morning

I flung open
the window
one daffodil morning;

in came
the clamoring chimes,
tormenting,

with faulted
intervals,
some weary hymn—

quite suddenly
prodding
a childhood bruise.

PEDAL POINT

**

*Dim of afternoon and snowfall-gray,
Where in shadow of buttressed wall she comes,
Stands with me—mute—on the first stone step of three
Above a path that passes through winter-drifted hush
Of churchyard monuments, to cross a footbridge into
Wooded-darkness of winter woods beyond—
The small stream trickling under ice—
The silent snowflakes*

falling

falling . . .

I woke!, sad of a wish for what there never was—

. . .

Down-shifting now, trav'ling fast over yellow leaves pasted to wet
macadam (roller coaster stuff),
The rain-dripping woods on either hand,
The lasting lavender dusk of dream on my mind, and on
the radi-♪ *o-o-o sweet baby* ♪—voice you'd love
to sleep with,
And I am 3 decades back in Elyria, where evenings once settled
on amber fields, like dusky lingerie still warm . . .
Where at the ragged edge of town waited Tate's Tavern and the
almost nights of certain unlikelihoods, never ending . . .

. . .

The russet woods; Elyria; the dusk of dream; the lost city of Ys
. . . amber, violet, rust motifs,
And like a dark pedal point, the agonies my steadfast father
suffered, that for all my acquiescence, metaphysical,
I know not what to think,
The mind adverts!

But *o-o-o* that radi-*o* voice, that curl of blue smoke, and the years
touch thumb and finger—
And there's Syd, the very picture of a black face in negative, come

to front his band at Tate's that Halloween, laughed our
collective asses off—
And what might my father have made of my nights at Tate's?, out
of his steady life and pasture ways (I am uneasy that
the dearly departed thumb our brains for lack of books),
And his faith and my faith, being what they are, the same end by
means unreconcilably expressed

♪ ... *but o sweet baby* ... ♪

They don't mesh: his kingdom a hillside acre; my trek into
the orchid night . . .
His last act, to match new stone work with old, and each old stone
hand selected from Penn's sylvan legacy—I remember,
was there,
4 years old with a joy buzzer in my guts, knowing it to be
a borrowed truck that had got its differential hung up on
a mossy ledge . . .
Then some 18 odd years later, me again,

*lone firefly pulsing through endless forest of unending night,
ceaseless odyssey, epic eternal . . .*

And now, the bottom of Thompson Hill Road and the old
palomino: pensive old guy; hammock-slung and yellowing
like ivory; constant as any old friend;

♪ *ol' pal o' mio* ♪

With back, rain-stained; and tail, lank to his fetlocks; he grazes
lightly, the green October grass.

. . .

Coming along the valley road, the radio now an irritant: I punch
punch punch the station settings, give Frank the finger
(‘that's life’), and twist it off,
And looking up—see! that the Halloween flare of the great

pasture maple has guttered out—last night's winds, no
doubt,

♪ *don't let Satan fff it out, this little light of mine* ♪

Devil be damned!

I sing of a siren and a sunken city—

. . . Ellingtonian tones, city by Hammett, with lone
nocturnal saxophone, or Mr. Eliot's violet hour
transposed to Johnstown, Pennsylvania . . .

The black and purple emery of a certain evening gathers over level
clean-edged roof lines (grainy like a newsprint photo,
if you look intently)

And me, a kid, aching for the imagined one night stands of an era
gone, thinking the desolate streets I walk, a poetry, when
over a café curtain—What?!

A barmaid intent on fixing a red red garter circling a round white
thigh caught in a fishnet stocking, black; and me, a kid,
taut and taunted, teased beyond reason . . .

That wonderful evening
(barmaid, my ass)

That wonderful evening, so like that Ys-z city of perpetual purple
twilight dreamed—but J'town, Steel Town, with its
wine-stained sky . . .

. . .

After 45 years in the mills, after 45 years a machinist, without
the qualifying loss of a finger, so not a machinist after all,
but still a hero, what the surgery did.

17 hours they labored and for what?

What Lugosi did to Karloff in "The Raven," 1935—though,
in fact, a heinous accident enacted slow-motion on
the surgeon's sterile plank, 1990.

Now further along the valley, I see, in pelting rain, a half-a-

hundred Guernseys, munching as they mosey northward toward the wooded hillside, its reds and golds subdued in the pelting rain, and think, 'he would have smiled at such a sight.'

. . .

What the surgery did.

17 hours they labored, opened the head from behind the ear forward, like a book cover, read the malaise and scraped the bone clean of the fatal thought; the censorship done, 'a closed book,' 'all sewed up,' leaving the knowledge of pain, unspeakable.

Yes. Unspeakable.

For a closed book doesn't speak, can't swallow, has a broken eye, the twisted face of a movie monster; but the mind clear, cognizant of the happened horror, and lucid to spell out home concerns on a clip board alphabet,

The least, the last I could do, draw him an alphabet large enough.

Inside my chest a scum bubble foul of grief swells, till one great 'SOB' bursts, having taken me unawares, as has so often happened this past year . . .

Can't afford to think on it.

Even a philosophy large enough to contain all the trees of an endless forest that holds in its whispery green-dusk all mysteries, cannot, or has not as yet, informed me what to think—

Branch after branch after branch as far as thought can reach, the Universe is as big as you think it is, and trying to think it 1 or 2 trees more, I think—

What if, lost, you came to a shack in the forest—found in the half-light beneath the leafy vaults where shone a beam of sunlight, a hermitage . . .

Found there, a hermit-sage. One like those marvelous saints of Ys—say, Guérolé, in all his ascetic excess

**

(the brackish water; the few loaves twice a week, mixed with ashes; the praying right straight out for 7 hours, arms held level over gravity),

O wondrous excess set against such wickedness as Dahut, princess of the Mary-Morgan sort—

"But Hey!

I can sing of waters what washed a town away . . . "

. . .

JOHNSTOWN, MAY 31, 1889.

The approaching flood water was heard as a continuous thunder. My grandmother heard it.

Though only 5, remembered it.

Saw the second-story wall burst in as they clambered for the roof.

It was a 40 foot wave that came on the town, that day. A rolling brow with a 'death mist' hanging over it. And before it, by a split second, a force of air knocking small frame structures flat. Now there's the grit of an American epic, having that needful national character of a people. 'Snatchy grabs' on the playground. Remember? A greed that grabbed a town away, complete, as a hand that scoops up marbles at the recess bell, or dice (after a bad throw for 'us'). And no one called to make an account. Yes,

I've all that in my veins, and Ys I know.

Can I do it?—

Sing

(in long alliterative lines of longing)

*Whoop the warp of watery bells into being,
Call up towers and domes and castles,
From emerald waters till high over all,
Higher than the highest pinnacle of all,
Cry the pewter castle of the pagan princess,
Cry the Korrigans castle, grandeur against God
By the pagan princess, wild unruly Dahut—*

Can I do it?

*Say the several sylvan saints of Quimper,
Shout the sieges of Grandlon, and sorrows whisper,
Bellow the grief and speak the grievance,
Sing the polyphony of flaw and treachery
To the last speck of the splendor lost . . . ?*

And still farther along the valley road, the all Summer summer-long
baseball field in rain.

. . .

Last Spring, across this same faded field, a large smoke plume hooked
and flowed up river, a river itself, turning quite blue
as it thinned amid the hillside trees, of the winter rusted,
rested woods . . .

Last Spring, on an apple bough, a fat-backed bird turned
sideways—revealing his identity—and the next day two more
of his kind eyed me from a crocus lawn. ‘An infestation
of robins!’ I thought, and thought,

‘He always saw the year's first robin’ (though allowed as how
that February robin had likely wintered over).

He could look down, anytime-anywhere, and find a four-leafed
clover, it didn't take him long, and then it came to me
as it comes to me now, that I will always see the first Spring
robin first, find the four-leafed clovers . . .

And now ahead of me, the town of Colrain nestled at the base
of the mountain, with its old brick church: blue-roofed,

white steeple aslant . . .

. . .

Was it just two years ago, Christmas, that we came early through
the valley, the air clear and cold, and there at the mountain's
base the little town of Colrain?

How still we saw thee, in the morning light,
With a kinked plume of smoke moveless over each and every red brick
chimney (a greeting card picture if there ever was one),
And in the house beneath each smoke-?ed roof, Christmas, about
to happen to each excited boy and girl, always anew since
the advent of this unique event—

Then up the mountain we went on our way to a Boston Christmas,
that winter morning, yes, two years ago—

. . .

Today, down-shifting to take the mountain (the windshield wipers
bowing & scraping),

The subdued reds and golds of the mountain trees up and ahead,
My thoughts in shades of amber dusk, and dusk of dream;
in shades of Ys, and lone nocturnal saxophones . . . amber,
violet, bronze, or rouge motifs—

And underneath it all . . .

The grim incessant drone of a grave insistent tone

A CUP FULL OF SEASONS

from:
Branch after Branch

A Cup Full of Seasons

The cup
was a tin cup bearing
in bas-relief a cast
of five figures from
a nursery rhyme.

First Season

At breakfast on cold mornings
sitting by the oven
getting warm enough on one side
for both sides
and looking out the frosted window
over snow-laden hills
to hills ice-blue in the distance
and being cozy beside the oven
scorched on one side
still shivering on the left
I'd drink my dark brown Postum
hot from that Winter cup.

Second Season

Over the fresh plowed field
by the fence line
where trees grew
with barbed wire deep in their guts
and brush grew up through stones
picked and piled there
from years of spring-plowed fields

ending along the fence line
where the dying cherry tree loomed over
the budding dogwood
where the maple sap ran down
the elderberry spouts
to drip into buckets
that sat on stacks of stone
there I'd take a taste of sugar water
cold and sweet from that Spring tin cup.

Third Season

Down by the barn in summer
towards evening
big green flies caroused the manure pile
outside the small barn
that held some rats, an uncle's car
and standing big-eyed and docile
in the dusky stall the cow named Betsy
who allowed herself to be milked by Grammy
who sitting on a three-legged stool
in the dusky stall milked Betsy
amongst the fragrant hay and dung
the first squirts torrent sounding
in the hollow bucket
there amongst the dust of chaff and straw
I'd have a Summer cup
of animal warm and frothy milk.

Fourth Season

Up hollow
below the Mennonite Church
down the road a way by the creek
where we had fished
for chubs and minnows the summer long
in the shade of the giant oak
its red leaves falling now
down on the weathered building

blowing inside the weathered building
right there in autumn
with all the good smell of apples
ripe and bouncing up the clanking belt
spilling red from the clanking belt
tumbling down to the grinding
clattering machinery below
right there in autumn
I'd have an Autumn cup of cider
sweet and warm from that noisy press.

The cup
was a tin cup bearing
in bas-relief a cast
of five figures from
a nursery rhyme.

Posterity

I once found a butterfly whose wingspan was a good
three inches of untold colors—a butterfly like the paper
airplanes I used to decorate, then toss from the porch
to fly

high over the dirt road below,
and
high over the field beyond;

the field cropped by Betsy the cow;
the field with spindly thistles
like scaled-down radio towers—

like those airplanes whose wings,
wings crayon-ornamented or tablet-ruled;
wings that cut the air, that razor-slit a slot to slip
through, beneath that strange sunlight peculiar to August
Sunday afternoons—

like those airplanes,
—the butterfly, whose wings in death were fixed
for flight.

Catnip Tea

When your mother sent for Granma,
it was *ring around the rosy* as rosy you lay
in bed between the twisted sheets, for
the sure notion of that grave gentleman

was yours. But after Granma came
and frisked you for flushes and fevers
and gave her prescription (which was a kind
of diagnosis and prognosis, as well),

gave her prescription in those two
familiar words—CATNIP TEA—you
ascertained you'd not be needing
a winding sheet; gleaned you'd be oki-dokie

real soon; fathomed you'd resurrect next day—
and you did.

Home Of The Brave

For three days Grandma's best milker frothed at the mouth, then died—clearly poisoned. A year later, old Mike Kovitch, with a skin full, said:
"It a shame about that cow, someday I tell you

Mister Mahler," and so we knew what we already knew, and Grandpa spoke true when he told us a desire to see justice done would only result in something else dying or burning down, and all

Grandma had said to old Mama Kovitch was:
"Those aren't your cherries to pick," it being Grandma's one cherry tree and she counting on the crop for preserves, and old Mama Kovitch

had gone off mumbling: *"Me think this free country,"* no different than any other time.

In Memoriam

John Ira Bowman 1884-1974

Aged ninety, he said to Milly, his daughter,
*"Something goes out of life when a man can't
plan his work the night before and see it
through tomorrow."* Later that year, shortly

after the untimely passing of a son-in-law,
he said, *"Milly, now there'll be someone
over there to meet me."* And that night
the last of the strokes took him, taking

a week to do so. I believe life to be
a continuum, and having experience
of others gone before me, why not him?
Sometimes I think a stern grandfather

(still the very image of a stoic) frowns down
on once-honed tools that I've let rust.

Wooden Chain

Found in an attic and given to me, years back,
this wooden chain of three links, holding
the shackle of a lantern-like cage, a cage
of four corner-bars that hold, in turn,

a wooden ball the size of a marble, on which you
can see the fly-eye faceted flatness of
the knife's work, yet perfectly round, and all
this marvel carved from a single piece of wood.

I ponder its pedigree, as no one remembers
who carved it, and ponder, too, how the works
of an artist live on, have a life of their own,
taking their chances about the same as any

progeny, and further ask why it is
that old half-known things so tease the mind?

clasping my dad's hand
as once he gripped his father's hand
whose hand had once . . .

The Class Ring

I hold in my hand a ring. Moxium High.
Class of '58. The initials my own.
Within weeks, I'd left it by a public sink.
Loss noted and steps retraced—both

immediate, but ... *c'est la vie*. Seven
years later it returned, having found
its way to the alma mater with its
postal pedigree, some half-dozen

other Moxiums. A worthy scholarship,
the particulars of that seven year odyssey,
which remains mute within the zero of
this prodigal trinket of youth, inanimate

wanderer, whose encircled secret rests
upon my palm, yet forever beyond my grasp.

October Elegy

After the burial she walked with me,
Where tall trees, standing in a clear
Sunlight, cast strict shadows across
The drive—a woman just past fifty,
Elegant and gracious, lovely to see.

"You came all the way from Maine, they say.
You must have been very fond of Kurt,"
Meaning her brother, my uncle by marriage,
and that was true.

A far hill seemed the reds and golds
Of an old tapestry kicked against
The horizon, while the branches near
At hand were clad in tatters, and one
Old oak in rags of penny-brown.

"You were just a boy when I left home."

That, too, was true, and true still,
The infatuation a boy once felt
For her—though now as mellow as
A bronze medallion smoothed by the wear
of a quarter century.

She took my arm, her white-gloved hand
Around my sleeve, and we walked awhile
In silence. Her step was steady, stately,
Despite the cant of her narrow heels
On the cinder drive. And leaving the drive
We crossed a quilt of yellow leaves,

Regret

Rosa Pearl Zimmerman Bowman 1884-1975

The log house, also, the homestead,
seemed smaller with the furniture gone.
And in the empty room that was once the kitchen,
there was a scrape mark, a crescent scar, worn
in the wide-plank floor

*" ... and all I can figure is,
Grammy must've, for years, dragged
her foot getting up from the table. She had
such bad arthritis, you recall,
and she could never sit still for a moment,
always doing for others ... "*

And I did
recall, that and other things—

And if I could see her again ... if I
could see her again, I would not be impatient;
if I could see her.

UNWORLDLY WIND

from:

Branch after Branch

Winter Cottage

Unworldly wind, and dark the midnight forest. So cold the
branches click like antlers. Beyond that, not much to
know.

*in the black of nothing—
phantom bucks
battle*

Spring Woods

Skunk-cabbages that yesterday were green napkins folded
to stand upright, now forge the bog, swarm the wooded
hillside . . .

across the path
a snake
too cold to care

After the Spade

Tossed and meant for the field, but hanging looped and
limp from an apple bough, the snake's carcass.

after the spade
three inches and the tongue
still flickering

Strange Harvest

His first day home on the farm, unscathed by combat, he
loses an arm to the combine harvester.

last night
a sister's auburn hair
this morning white

Bright Days

Bright days, hand-in-hand—what a friendship we had then! You said, "The river is shampooing its hair," and we played Pooh sticks from its bridge.

that glint
in the forest -
where did it go?

Herr Stein

I can still hear Herr Stein saying: "... but it is a good F, in fact, if there was such a thing as an F+, that's what it would be."

at the nursing home
explaining myself
to a puzzled man . . .

The Doe

As the headlights touch her, her legs fold to unfold on the
far side of the fence where she isn't . . . having vanished
into thin dusk . . .

gone -
but the wonder
of blood and spirit
remains

October Morning

High and motionless, the hot-air balloon seems painted on the October sky. Its flame, the distant roar of a Chinese dragon.

so vivid -
her fresh
tattoo

Winter Lightning

Revealed as being himself, I hate a favorite uncle for not
quite being my childhood hero.

talking of old times
as dusk crowds the kitchen window
winter lightning

From Now On

She sleeps beside me bathed in moonlight. Saw what I
saw, know what I know. Great sex still, but no heart
for lovemaking.

is this it?
an empty canoe
on a river
slow
as from now on

Another Take on Saturday Morning

Would like to be dark-haired, handsome, lean as a hickory,
famous, and have a sense of well being—all on the same
day.

greying at the temple
and still “the poem”
unwritten

AFFIRMATIONS

from:

As Far As Thought Can Reach

Think Big

The Universe is as large as we think it is, and maybe just
a bit larger.
And all the reasons one can name for failure are true,
Up to a point.
They are true in that we believe them,
But they are not necessarily true to the laws of the Universe.
In other words they are not Truths.
They are true to our individual belief systems, but they don't have
to be.
We don't have to believe them.
We can change them and find that the new beliefs are just
as true,
And if in alignment with Universal Truths,
Even truer.
The Universe is much larger than any limiting belief, if we are
willing to think beyond that belief—
In short, think big.
Because the Universe is as large or as small as we think it is,
And all the reasons one can name for failure are true,
Up to a point.
And as a point is fairly small when it comes to Universes, think,
rather, to the far edges of imagination—
And know that there is more.

Of Facts And Facets

A fact is a fact, and we can't change the past,
That's a fact.

But we can change our point of view and see things differently,
which is as good as changing the past.

Think of a huge cut diamond, large as a dinosaur and displayed
like a dinosaur in a museum,

A diamond of ten thousand facets that we can walk around
and view from all sides.

What if we first noticed a facet of this huge diamond whose color
we didn't care for, say the yellow-green and purple
of a bruise?

And what if we didn't trouble ourselves to see it from any other
point of view?

That one facet is all we would know of this huge fact, and we
would go away feeling bruised by the experience.

But if we walked around this diamond, so that we saw its other
facets, we might well see a deep sea-green or a lovely
iridescence and leave the exhibit improved by our
experience of a changed point of view.

The past is the past, and it is what it is,

That's a fact,

But we can see it differently,

And that's a fact, a well,

And seeing it differently is to make it different,

Because, fact is, our only reality is what we perceive to be our
only reality.

And that's a facet of fact to consider.

Of Coins And Card Houses

Some things are not favored by Heaven. Who knows
why? Even the sage is unsure of this. Lao Tsu

Every coin has two sides, each being of equal value.
Nature supports both good and evil, alike.
And yet to be creative is so much more than to be destructive.
Think of the patience and painstaking dexterity, required to build
a house of cards, and how easily that card house can be
felled by a fist of impatience.
Still, there is a time for destruction.
Since two things cannot at the same time occupy the same space,
it is sometimes necessary to demolish a building in order
to replace it with a new one, a better one.
And sometimes it is necessary to erase a first draft from
a computer disk in order to accommodate a second draft,
Or to dismantle the superstructure of an outmoded belief system,
in order to construct an updated belief system in
its place.
But if nature supports both dexterous fingers and hard hitting fists,
alike,
And it does,
Why does heaven seem to prefer heads over tails?
Even the sage shrugs. But it does, it does.

Yes You Can

You can change your reality.

Yes, you can.

All things and all circumstances result from thought, and you can think about anything you wish.

And if you desire a thing or a circumstance, see it in mind until you feel it in heart and in soul without doubt—

And it is yours.

Know what you want and concentrate on that.

Do not deny your current reality, however!

Recognize it, name it for what it is, then put it aside.

Dwell only on what you desire, and dwell, too, on those experiences which have worked well for you in the past.

Inner images become outer experiences, experiences of both things and events.

This can take time, usually does, but it nonetheless does occur, come about, take place.

Know what you want,

Know what makes you feel good about yourself.

Know what brings you into a workable unity with others.

Dwell on these things, concentrate on them. There are laws of thought, as there are physical laws that govern our physical realities.

Flowers watered thrive, while weeds (their existence not denied), left unwatered, wither away.

Or vice-a-versa—your choice.

from:
THE NECESSARY FLY
new & selected haiku 1995 - 2006

Spring

pussywillows behind
the Court House ... the smart click
of high heels

maternity ward
mine the only home-picked
wildflower bouquet

"Just look at the mud
on your pants!" ... in his fist
violets for her

this fluid snake -
really not much more
than a roving esophage

Summer

no work today -
even with shutters shut
the sun's too loud

the sticky sound of tires
on noontime asphalt -
lemonade 10¢

at Kate's Diner
under the plastic cake lid
- the necessary fly

a screen door bangs -
all past summers summarized
in one brief report

the first cicada -
one long sizzling syllable
says it's summer

shaking the stone from her shoe -
a white opal swings
from between brown breasts

on the porch
by moth light we sit -
not a word between us

stuck for an answer
I lower my eyes -
her ten red toenails

a snake released -
the feel of it
stays in my hand . . .

touch-me-nots
the big plump pod about to burst
- couldn't help myself

Autumn

rolling a spruce needle
between thumb and finger
- harvesting the scent

after a day's debauch -
webworms webworms webworms webworms
along an evening cherry branch

watching the loggers work
I rub my paper cut

one after the other
three crows become one
with the fog

honking
 a wedge of geese
heading . . .

her answer tatters away
 with the wind
 seagull's cry

her spinet closed
 for the last time -
 a vase of bittersweet

yellow leaves at year's end
 small griefs haunt
 my footsteps

Winter

where snowflakes become ocean
she takes my arm
- the cry of gulls

big soft snowflakes -
seeing her smile
I unbuckle my frown

this bitter bitter night -
a wild wind warps
St. Brigid's bells

wassailing -
so cold the rum
can't find our toes

away from the party din -
Jupiter's bold shine
among black boughs

moonlight
and the crunch of snow underfoot . . .
her brown brown eyes

potted
shamrocks
folded for
the night

two cups
of cocoa
steaming

through bleak branches
a white moon ... on the snow
a shadow orchard

in snow
and stony silence, her name
graven in granite

over glazed snow a spider crawling toward the end
of February

after a winter of boots
a certain spring
in my step

Non-Seasonal

Maple Street my shady past

she speaks of her past . . .
 on her face the window prism's
 iridescent bruise

late sunlight
 climbs the hotel wall -
 cigarette by cigarette

the restlessness of leaf shadows on a crimson couch

stars in a black sky -
across the river a clock
strikes one ... strikes two

spray and the seagull's cry
her elegant footsteps
in wet sand

in all but one room
a death -
this Victorian homestead

after his stroke
a safety razor—the strop still hanging
by the door

from:
A RIVER YEARS FROM HERE

haibun & poems

There is a River Years from Here

All day, thoughts about a river, years from here,
a creek, really, that flows without a name through the
green-dusk of an ageless woods,
and how I sailed there a galleon,
a halved walnut shell with its wedge of paper sail, beneath
the spread of a great old maple tree, where the
creek pooled below the chicken coops;
and how the leaning woods peered over my shoulder in
those days when salamanders were dragons;
and how I searched for neither gold nor fame,
but for treasures among the water polished pebbles,
despite humidity, mosquitoes, waterstriders,
"dragons,"
and the great granddaddy of a crawfish, who hung out
among the stones, that were really boulders, below
the pool;
and how the chickens just loved a crawfish tossed over
the chicken mesh—but not the great granddaddy,
for it would have been a sin and a shame for such an aged
monster to end up chicken feed.
All day, thoughts about a river, years from here, that flows
without a name.

torrent in Spring
a trickle now—in youth
my Conrad river

The Latch

With its miniature rock gardens, grape arbor, and roses (roses everywhere, like a child's experiment with rouge); with its neatly trimmed grass along the flagstone walks; with its birdbath (strategically placed, as was its willow tree)—the backyard had all the aura of a formal garden.

In that lawn (just large enough to frame a family portrait), hemmed in by a wire fence disguised with honeysuckle vines and marigolds, one somehow achieved a sense of privacy; even a sense of seclusion from the nearby neighbors. While outside, a narrow broken alley ran between two rows of other backyard lawns.

All this (after all these years), like the fragments of a dream at noontime. Except for the latch. Substantial as a candy stuck in the throat, the latch remains in mind, as if I'd just stepped out of that microcosmic Eden into the narrow alleyway this early morning, closing the gate behind me with a *click!*; closing the gate behind me *with all that is before time began* locked! in a single syllable, for all time.

in a shaded spot
the ruins
of a sundial

Steel Town

after devouring fifteen
thousand men daily
the dragon stretches twelve miles
along the river
and sleeps fitfully at night

though its breath poisons our breath
and its belches bruise,
with a plum-rubescence glow,
the black horizon

still we would not murder this
sleeping *brutus* for
its fire bakes our daily bread

Eleven to Seven

night shift—
see that the chute stays open
the mesmerizing spill of ore

the salamander glows cherry red
Camel lit by a touch

night shift—
pulp novel, every second page
dimmed by dust . . .

2 a.m., thermos of coffee
sandwiches, cake

night shift—
3 to 6, the longest hours
2nd pack of cigarettes

over the PA system, an argument
'god-damn hunky'

night shift—
through the sky hole, snowflakes,
the faint gray light of dawn

showered and ready to punch out
"take care, roads are icy . . . "

The Sliver of Steel

When Carl's steam-powered sawmill blew up
in Shade Hollow,
three men were injured, one killed;
and then there was Ed Jacobs,
who walked around as if dazed all afternoon.

And when evening came,
Jack, his brother, found him "out back"
watching a sunset, "unlike himself."

Doc Schaffer found a pink spot
beneath Ed's chin, and a pink spot
on top his head.

The whip-poor-will night found him dead.

Member of the Club

there were 5 of us
in the hollow
and every summer there'd be the club

president
vice-president
secretary
treasurer
and member

I was always the member

• • •

one summer
there were only 4 of us
so there had to be a

president
vice-president
secretary/treasurer
and member

Why?

Black Ant Experiment

The black ant,
 placed on the chip of Arctic CO₂,
 ran
4 to 5 centimeters
 rapidly slowing
 (a cheap wind-up gadget
quickly spent) till
 frosting over, it stopped;
 froze,
with one leg held high—
 a statuette sculpted of zinc;
 a micro-monument unto itself,
the victim of an idle science.
 And when nudged
 by a childish finger—
broke in half.

The Wasp & The Spider

In the dust a wasp and spider caught
My boyish eye where they grappled and fought

Just when the spider broke free and ran
From the wasp that circled and circled again.

The spider's eight feet bought a foot
More desperate life for him till fate

Turned kamikaze and power dived down
On him. The sting was true! The brown

Back dimpled, doubled, rolled—a stricken
Ball of frenzied splinters, kicking.

The wasp backed away, became poised.
Arch-backed, wings spread, sure of her poison,

Gangly-legged now, her delicate toes
In the dust, she circled the stiffening throes.

The fight was done but I stayed stooped
Until the last leg slowed and stopped.

On the Verge of Autumn

I'd seen her about town often enough—pleasingly plump, neatly dressed, with snow-white hair that belied her age, and such blue eyes. And now we were sharing a store front over-hang against the sudden downpour. She must have been about my age, no more than forty then. A classic merry widow, if widow she was.

To be sure, we talked about the weather and other important things, till at length I found myself saying: "*... but I don't drink wines anymore.*" To which she replied, making the moment memorable: "*Oh I know, wine used to make me so romantic, but now I just get spacey.*" It was about then that the rain lessened and she decided to chance the drizzle.

As I said, I'd often seen her around the town - often - but after that I never saw her again. The image of her running across the parking lot, in neat spiked-shoes, dodging puddles with a pleasing bounce, a tabloid tented over her snow-white hair, is the last image I have of her.

on a grey day
 in a grey town
 a sprig of asters

And Other Important Things

The meadow rolls away into the woods. The house is hidden below the crest of a straw mulched garden. We are sitting on the sun-warmed grass talking of things soon to be forgotten. Already, I've forgotten the breed names of the penned chickens—the white, the russet, and the dark brown ones with the orange and black plumage behind their necks.

Absent-mindedly, she feeds them grass, one blade at a time, as they mill and chorus a reedy background to our talk. I'll not remember till later how the window of a door once betrayed her loving gaze on my back.

I tell of my son's first botanical lesson in the woods last week, while the youngest of her two daughters treads barefoot over the glistening straw. When I finish she says: *"There's a small stream down there. It dries up in the summer, but in spring it grows skunk-cabbage and other important things."*

"And other important things," I echo, remembering. And she, too, remembering laughs an old laugh unsettling the present moment momentarily.

As I adapt to the rural mother displacing the urban musician, with whom, shoulder to shoulder, I'd copied manuscripts one winter, the hapless separation I'd held so precious these past five years dissipates without pain or sorrow.

we bid farewell
the white silence
of a falling petal

Evening Walk

The heat still rises from the fields and road mingling the essences of grass and dust. I enjoy these solitary walks after a day of manuscripts and notes.

*her diary—
if only I hadn't forced
its tiny lock . . .*

The dog runs ahead, circles, explores a field of buckwheat, then checks back with me before another tongue-flapping foray. He always returns as if to explain himself and ask permission.

*once in a moonlit orchard
what might have been . . .*

A great dead tree stands in arrested motion, as if tossed by an airy turbulence, the perfect sculpture for a stormy life, its barnwood gray set off by forest green.

*jazz
and the neon, nylon nights—
your fame is everywhere
old friend
I am stretched with longing*

Today, I noticed that autumn's tarnish has touched the tree outside my window. In a month or so, it too, will show its structure.

*and the autumn woods
so lovely that you want
but don't know what it is
you want—
it only makes you sorry*

The serene violence of the sunset, that flared briefly like an opened forge, is now replaced by a gray veil.

*stemless in the dusk
the Queen Anne's lace float—
the path grows luminous*

The dog has gone ahead now, not asking for my permission. He will be waiting at the back door. I crest the last hill to home and see an orange moon low in an orchid sky.

*as night takes over . . .
walking knee-deep
in the chirring
of crickets*

Japanese Lanterns

By the doorstep, so country common a thing to see
—Japanese lanterns. Some five of them, reduced

to their skeletal frame, more delicate than lace,
caging small orange bulbs—bulbs burning bright

by the doorway this dim December afternoon,
suggesting something still to be occasioned.

snow flurries -
stacking an arm load
of firewood

Tidings

Across the room,
the tassel beneath the hanging pot of ivy,

looks like an angel in a hula skirt
come to sing carols from a leafy songbook.

Happy are the objects that make their own poetry
—and happy, too, those who can see

tidings of great joy in a fray of yarn.

sunlight on red oak
newspapers heaped
with ground pine

The Putting Away of Rookie

Pop and Mom

"Pop, you've got to do it soon,
It isn't right to let
Him suffer. Hear? This afternoon,
And then you needn't fret."

"You tend your business, Mom, and I'll
Tend mine," was all he said,
Then poured a coffee, stirred awhile,
Before he dunked his bread.

Pop and Rookie

"Come here old *Hund*." Pop sat on
The back porch in the wan
November sun. The dog, upon
Arthritic legs, had gone

To use the apple tree and now
He tottered back. "We old'uns
Have got to keep a hold, somehow,
On all the time we've stolen."

Pop to Kurt

"All right, I guess. I can't complain.
Mom's been carryin' on
This noon, in regards to Rookie again,
That's all. I see you've gone

And put the shop in good repair.
The plumbing craft has passed
Me by with all this new styled hardware.
That's what I said. Mom sassed

Me good, but she don't see it plain—
What do you mean, you'll do
It for me? He's in no real pain;
If there was reason to

I'd tend to it myself. That mean
Old hound's as good as me."
All this to Kurt who'd never seen
Pop act but stoically.

About Rookie

Rookie: a khaki-colored hound,
Born in 'forty-two,
Hence the name; a rover bound
To be, three times, the view

Some irate farmer held along
The barrel of a gun;
He shook at sight or sound of one,
The fear was still so strong.

Mom and Kurt

"Kurt, you've got to do it soon.
It isn't right to let
Him suffer." "I know. This afternoon,
Mom, then you needn't fret."

"It's not like Pop to let it go;
You know he can't abide
A man who puts off duty." "He's slow
About what he'll decide,

That's all." "There's nothing to decide.
He knows what must be done."
"He knows but—" "Kurt, he's gone inside
The shed; you fetch the gun."

Kurt and Rookie

The old dog trembled when he saw
The sun glint off the rifle,
But struggled to his feet, still trustful
Of Kurt, whose word was law.

They walked across the copper meadow
Into the leafless wood;
Among the rags of autumn, below
The giant oak they stood

A moment, silent, as old friends will,
Then Kurt began to dig.
When he had finished, the woods was still;
Kurt pointed with a twig

And Rookie stepped into the ground.
Above them the white-gold sun
Had tangled in the trees. Kurt found
It hard to lift the gun.

Pop

As Pop came out into the wan
November sun he caught
A whiff of wood smoke wafted on
A sharp, west wind, "So autumn's gone
(He heard the distant shot)
And winter's come," he thought.

The Johnstown Flood

May 31, 1889

At the beginning only the high waters from the rain swollen
rivers flooded the streets.

• • •

We had come down to Johnstown the day before to visit with my
aunt and uncle that lived on Locust Street, and to see
the Decoration Day celebration, the parade and other
festivities,

And by then it was late and a long ride home by horse and
buggy,

But still we might have gone home that night, but my aunt said:
"Stay and see the flood," not knowing, because this was
nothing new to the Johnstown of those days, the high
rivers and the flooded streets,

And so we stayed the night.

• • •

And the next day we were to go home, but it had been raining
hard all night,

And the streets were flooded, and the rivers were still rising,
And so we stayed on till noon to see how things would go.

• • •

And after the noon meal, my father and my uncle sat at the
kitchen stove with their boots off and their feet up on
a coal bucket, drying their stocking feet by the heat of
the stove.

And I recall their debating whether to free the horses at
the nearby livery stable, as the water had already
reached the poor animals' fetlocks some while ago,
And the waters were still rising,
And the rain continued without ceasing,
But they thought they'd wait and see, not knowing.

• • •

And while they were talking at the kitchen stove, with their feet
up on the coal bucket, the water had begun seeping in
under the door unnoticed, till one of them put his
stocking feet down from the bucket.

• • •

It was then my aunt and mother took my baby brother and me
into the brick building next door,
The brick building that was a millinery, whose upper floors were
the living quarters of the woman who ran the millinery,
Took us to those upper rooms, where I was given a doll
to play with,
And there, in those upper rooms, I sat on a bed playing with
the doll, not knowing,
While my mother, and aunt, and the woman who ran the
millinery talked of this and other floods, not knowing.

• • •

Not knowing, till my mother heard the sound and, through the
upstairs window, saw a wall of water rushing toward us,
A wall of black water rushing toward us, with a long rumbling
sound like continuous thunder.

• • •

Knowing now, my mother called down across the yard to warn
the men, where they still sat by the stove in the room
at the rear of my uncle's house.
And knowing now the truth of her words, my aunt grabbed up
my baby brother and took me by the hand,
And not knowing just what, I thought to take the doll
with me, but at the last moment put it down on the bed
because it wasn't mine,
And knowing not what, the men must have come quickly, for we
were all together now,
And quickly we fled the room by an attic stairway,
And just in time, for I remember seeing the front wall burst
inward as we clambered up the stairway,
And quickly my father and uncle dragged us with them through
an opening to the roof just as the roof lifted
and floated away,
Floated away toward the swirling debris in the backed up water
at the stone bridge,
Floated for an interminable time, with shouts, and screams, and
cries to God, and sorrowful sights all around us.

• • •

And after floating to the stone bridge, not knowing what next,
Clinging to the roof, not knowing what next,
Drifting toward Kernville, not knowing what next,
Our roof broke up and we were forced again to jump and claw
our way onto another roof floating nearby,
And after Mother, and Father, and I, not knowing what next,
gained that nearby roof (though we nearly lost Mother
to the black water),
And after leaving behind my aunt, my uncle, my baby brother,
clinging to the broken roof,
And after floating in interminable fear on the endless debris-
strewn water, amid the cries and supplications, not
knowing what next,
And after seeing the three left behind rescued at an upper
window of a school building on Napoleon Street,

I looked up into my father's troubled face (I can still see that face today) and though I was only five years old, I said, knowing it was so, "*Papa, God will save us,*" and he answered, "*Yes.*"

• • •

But we were not safe yet, there was a time still to drift with what sights and sounds around us I cannot say, though I can still see a woman in a flaming church steeple I can still see her waving arms— I can still see no one to rescue her— I can still see her leap into the water— I cannot erase from my mind this woman, trapped by water in the flaming church steeple.

• • •

And there was debris of every sort,
And there were shrieks and crying outs of every sort,
And there were others on roofs, like ourselves, and
There was nothing you could do,
There was nothing you could do for others,
There was nothing you could do but pray.

• • •

And then there was a house across the street from the school building where my aunt, my uncle, and my baby brother had been rescued,
And there we floated, finally,
And there we were also helped through a window to a second-story room,
And there, a woman in that house gave dry clothing to my mother and put her to bed, for my mother had been badly lacerated when my father had pulled her onto the second roof, and she was surely in shock,
And there I remembered the doll I'd left behind because I'd been

taught not to take what wasn't mine (it spites me to
this day).

• • •

And then I had an intense desire for a drink of water, and begged
and begged, till the woman in that house gave me water
from the tap,
But it was muddy and did not stay down.

• • •

And then I was persuaded to lie across the bed at my mother's
feet,
And there I lay hearing the groans and cries and the crushing
of buildings that went down in the water outside,
And saw that the sky was lurid (but did not know that it was
from the burning wreckage at the stone bridge till later)
And then I slept till morning.

• • •

Of the day after I can remember waist deep water, and men
making walkways of boards,
And people going over the walkways to the hills,
And our family helped to Sherman Street, where another uncle
gave us food and loaned us a horse and buggy,
And I can remember the four hour trip home at night, and
the moonlight and the large, fleecy clouds,
And can still see the cloud shadows coming and going on
the hillsides, and remember my fear of the shadows
moving toward me,
My fear that they would engulf me as the flood had engulfed so
many the day before,
But I never let on.

• • •

And when we were almost home we met another uncle on his
 way to Johnstown with a wagon load of supplies,
How they knew to do so, how they'd heard of the flood, I
 don't know,
There weren't any telephones in those days,
Not way out in the country where we were:

• • •

Yes, of the day after, I can remember all that, that
And my greatest loss—the doll.

Rosa Pearl Zimmerman Bowman (1884 - 1975) was the author's
maternal grandmother. This prose poem is based on a taped account,
as well as the author's memory of many tellings.

Star

In his ninety-third year he complained of seeing only one star in the sky at night, saying that it was "a sign of the last days," there being only one star in the heavens at night.

"No, Dad," his youngest daughter would say, "It's only your eyes."

But he was not persuaded and would go off to find his dime store glasses, go off to the dining room to read the news by yellow lamplight, while Nora graded papers on the kitchen table, as she had for thirty years. This was in harvest time and the evening star was Venus.

Winter wrapped them warm around the wood fueled range and when the crocuses peeped above the drab grass once more, he again took up his post on the porch at dusk, and with it his same complaint of two seasons past.

"It's your eyes, Dad."

But, "no," it was "a sign," he'd say. And in a way—

What difference to the man who encounters a sign, if the letters are painted on or all but the letters are painted on? The sign still reads the same. Still reads the same.

wild geese overhead -
where the homestead stood
only grass

9 POEMS

more from:

As Far As Thought Can Reach

Once In A Parking Lot

"... my stress lay on the incidents in the development
of a soul: little else is worth study ..." ROBERT BROWNING

Talking in the parking lot across
from the library, where it is shaded
by tall maples, we hear this *chit-chit-chit*
and, wondering, we look up and see a squirrel

watching us from a high branch,
while rotating the nut he's gnawing at.
Seeing us see him, he stops his eating,
stops his busy little teeth, and stops

the *chit-chit-chit*. Silence. Eyes meet eyes.
Then ... he scampers to a higher branch—
and we? I don't remember what we said
or did that day, after the squirrel, or before

the squirrel. Recall only an incident
whose soul-value was its greater value.

Red Squirrel

In summer sunlight the red squirrel scoots up
and down the apple tree, free from all concern,
while the cat watches from the window, and
I from behind the screendoor. Next he runs

along his highway through the greeny treetops,
his highway in the sky, his highway
invisible to me, once run. And now he
takes the shortcut home, leaving branches jostling,

where he's leapt from tree to leafy tree—not
suspecting all the eyes that tracked him. I
suspect we, too, live free of inhibitions
we might otherwise be feeling, if we but knew . . .

And now on ground he swirls
 around around
and rounds the corner,
like water
 down
 a
 drain
 .

To Not And Wish You Had

Think of it. Jenny Wade. The only
civilian causality of that three day battle
at Gettysburg, eighteen-sixty-three.
Killed in a kitchen while baking bread.

Killed by a bullet that strayed through the door,
which, as a lad, I saw, and the hole, too,
that the bullet made, enlarged and worn smooth
by all the fingers that had verified

the fact. I did not, myself, with finger, further
wear away the truth, for propriety's
own sake. (For we, I understood, were not
so common as to do as common does.)

But I wish I had. Still, to not and wish
you had, is also an experience.

thirty long winters
a misplaced fidelity
still rankles

Reflections

In the dark depth of the one clear
pane of mine, I saw her love gaze
on the back of me, and in that same clear
glass, looked her in the face—saw

her darkly, until she saw that I
watched her and turned those loving
eyes aside. And when I turned to
face her, in the here and now, I saw

nothing of this affection. O,
her loveliness was ever hers,
and her cheer was ever mine, but
we were never again so intimate

as when we met in that clear, black glass—
that dark,

ethereal

otherworld.

—

frost-starred window -
I stare through my reflection
into the moonlit orchard

Rose In Window

A small snow sprinkles down—dandruff
through scraggly trees—and dawn's gray
effusion grieves for lack of color,
lack of warmth, lack of leaves, for lack

of all, but also framed within
the window, a narrow stem, sprouting
up from an oboe vase to end
in a ruby explosion or

a scarlet napkin, unfolding.
Against the lack you are too
richly crimson, rose in the window.
You are a red, red torch in the midst

of a dim awakening—yes, rose you are
and are beyond all reason.

Nefertiti –
was there ever such a woman?
what I wouldn't give
to stand in her aura,
know what she thought of her world

Of What Significance

For some years now, this phantom tableau, often seen.
A knight; a snowy field; a barberry bush,
its red berries bright above the snow, but
prickly to the eye without its leaves. The knight

on a palfrey beside the bush, and all environed
by clear air and hush of snow—an expanse
of snow bounded by a distant smudge. A smudge
which is forest. And like the forest, the middle-

distance vague, as well. Details adverting
from any tic to know, like peripheral
presences which will not be confronted with
a stare. Turn, and like that! they aren't. Unlike

the knight; the snowy field; the barberry bush;
and this—words without voice—this: "The Christ Child."

The Chronicler

Quill, scriptorium, ink of pokeberry,
a lasting stack of parchment. I see myself
in a tower overlooking a mountain pass,
with a ribbon of road below that follows

the twisting glint of a khaki river. A scant
traffic passes—carts, wagons, families on foot—
from which I deduce fires, famine, armies
out of control. A world in flux

or ended. Another not perceptibly begun—
begun, regardless, in this scripting now
of a past for what future? Have I brothers?
No matter. A lavender twilight enralls me,

enchants this hour of my lonely work. I
am he who lives to scribe the chronicle.

Seeking The Hermit-Sage

I see myself on a mountain, an old man
loafing in sunlight, who long since came seeking
the hermit-sage, who not finding him,
lingered, among the pines, a night, a day,

another night and day, to this very hour.
Loafing, I finger the beads of incidents past:
recall the earth-cave found beneath an oak;
the foraged-food enough; and the learned-fire,

friend against winter; the rude hut built;
and the quieting of mind, which I compare
to the slow clearing of muddied water. And now,
on this ledge, as an old man reflecting, loafing

in sun-warmth, it simply comes to me that I
am he, found at last—the hermit-sage.

New England Palms

Somewhere between weed and tree, the sumacs that jungle
my unkempt property. I like them. My neighbors don't. I
call them New England palms.

cliffside cottage
blue hills in the distance
here I could be
a Ryōkan
or a Han Shan

from:
BLUE NIGHT

Of Destiny and Moonlight

In the moonlight the quilt has no color.
Is a patchwork of different darks, only.

In the woods the hoot owls are calling each
to each and my destiny is three score spent.

This afternoon you visited, wanting to talk
of old times. It seemed an adultery to comply.

Lying here, awake in the moonlight,
I recall an ingot of sunlight that lay

on the floor between us, a wrenched geometry
of gold that could not be lifted.

Enlightenment

A disc the yellow of old ivory, and then,
for the first time in a life oblivious,

it comes into focus, the face of the man
in the moon. Not just a disease of pock

and shadow, but the full faced caricature,
the same as seen by you, unknown illustrator

of my Mother Goose, fellow artist
once maligned - now vindicated.

This moonless night
This hush
of falling snow
 By lamplight
 your five haiku . . .

stark from the shower
to answer the phone,
she dons a robe
of the finest distance

- the girl with spring desire

I stick with the
weather

the erotic jive
in her eyes

shuts
down

selling flowers,
she wears
nothing but
the briefest briefs
beneath her dress

lovely to see,

but her snippy way
withers
my fine bouquet
of notions

in his tree house,
red as the rose
that newly sprung
this June,
he blooms with shame -

having blurted out
his secret

on the terrace

under the stars
we talk -

the rub of wind
my velvet

along
the narrow sidewalk
as two lovers pass me -
the snag
of a privet on my sleeve

*“okay! okay! he's everything a woman wants.
now what's for supper?” -*

the petals
of yesterday's rose lie around the vase

MIDNIGHT

you phone from another hemisphere
to say you're through with him -

a black widow
stands
on the ceiling

we did what we could
read their letters, figured their taxes
good neighbors they -
now just a cellar hole
and the lilacs in spring

from a 19th century Yankee diary

Killed my hog.
Broke my heart.
Went to work.

after the nights

of pills
and
prayers
and
sad songs - you,

my Androcles

after
the many sunsets
viewed

through an ashen blur
of migraine -

only the sunsets now,

as if there'd been
no blur

The Room Behind

Always conscious
of the room behind,

and its too familiar
furniture, and

the weary
rearrangements of

its too familiar
furniture,

I have watched the world
through windows.

reality
is what you think it is
and facts are faceted

pick a glint pleasing
to your eye

think what you want

A thought dwelt on
can only grow -

and a weed is a bad thought
where a flower should be.

A thought dwelt on
is a thought given water,

but a weed deprived of water
withers away.

of the suicide
who burnt himself
for Peace—
activism or
individual instance of insanity?

thinking
about Rodin's *The Thinker* -
thinking,

mind
over
matter matters

or nothing matters

tomorrow
is the best day yet,

giving us hope
and other
unusable tools

for today's
jury-rigged work

the fountain nude
forever bent
to pluck a bronze flower
think of it
and revel in uncertainty

silently in a snapshot

you are saying something
and look wonderful saying it

the fall leaves are gray
and your smile
is forever

Learning to Float On Your Back

You believe
it can be done, yes,

that the water
will support you, certainly,

but
there is a moment

when you must finally relax
and let it happen—

this is called
Knowing.

Consider the Inch-worm

hunch stretch

bunch reach

each inch

a measured movement

each movement

a moment's pleasure,

each sure inch

by inch—the inch-worm:

and I, too,

would find the good

in each inch of time

along the branch of always . . .

in a pool of lamplight my pensive art

under a gunmetal sky
the goldenrod's strong yellow

mystique is where you make it so

a door
waits
to be opened

Clay Tablets

all these years
dropping pebbles into a well
the small splash
of a poem's acceptance
then silence

yes, yes
it's the work that matters
not fame
still
I don't write for a wastebasket

for posterity
I suggest publishing
on clay tablets
your local landfill
as good a depository as any

Two carved their names, enclosed them in a heart,
And still their love grows deep by beechen art,
Though they've been twelve and twenty years apart.

Whether the goldfinch displaced
The orange leaf which fell
In that quick change, or replaced
The leaf, I could not tell.

Midnight and the mind meanders ... memory
and imagination - nation enough for odyssey . . .

Up above this world of care,
Han-Shan, old hand at solitaire.

the stir of curtains
on a clover scented evening . . .

in my fingers
the feel of his logic—
Johann Sebastian Bach

roses
and wrought iron fences

the novel long deferred
memory
without meaning

only grass
where the homestead stood

even here
I am far
from home . . .

the usual sorrow
at the usual hour

in the lustre
of the silver tray
the red rose
darkly

somewhere
in the kiss of dawn
a ruby explosion
loud
to no man's eye

an impossible math this
but over the years
inch by inch
how many miles
of sex?

spring breezes open nightgowns

smiling
she lets her knees fall open

!

Lacuna

And in those days,
when living as if there were no tomorrow,

I woke not to a new day, but rather to the rewinding
of a watch. On the wall of the room where I slept

and changed clothes hung a three week calendar
that skipped to someday. Podunk and Now.

At Moonlit Window in Negligee

Secretly, through slitted eyes, I watch.
Once in the Strasbourg cathedral she drew me

into a niche and put my hand where she needed me.
Since then all that was romantic in me has

fallen away. Cliff into ocean. Put your ear
to the conch shell of my used to be.

Nude #27 & Musings

She has turned from a dormer window, clothed
in a sheen of sweat, peach in hand. This world

of dust, indeed. If fruit grew on mountain cliffs,
I'd turn recluse. You know I would. But here

in the fertile, I wipe my chin, endure her mocking eyes.
Fear some unspittable aftertaste.

Meadow Gospel

Where the grass is luxurious, she lies
with an arm across her eyes, her skirt to mid-thigh.

What the mind can't spit, you live with
as a kind of shrapnel or you digest it. Food

for a healing growth. Enabled by the cooperation
of opposing wings, a butterfly lirts about her.

Dropping in On an Old Neighbor

Once promiscuous as a carnival ride she spends
her days in a trailer watching television and smoking

five packs of cigarettes. Thin as a rail and hollow eyed,
she doesn't remember me, and I wonder that I ever thought

her erotic. From her tin can hovel, canned laughter
follows me down the moon bright path.

New Property

Scent of hot grasses. The sun a coin
of molten electrum. In a white dress

of thin muslin, her areolae bloom
dark as the plums warm from the tree.

With a thirst like this there's no help for it.
You thief and wipe your chin,

laughing at the myth of ownership.

...

Wicked pretty
with eyes the blue
of burning alcohol,
eyes
to fuck a heart.

Vienna

can't remember
if there were pictures on the wall

can remember
how it was to enter her

the deliciousness

nude
in a stifling room
she opens her legs

positions the cello

outside
the sticky sound
of mid-day traffic

arriving by shaded streets

the apartment empty
no forwarding address

how it ended
one Viennese
afternoon

crossing the Piazza San Marco - me

The Photographer & After

outside the concert hall, after *The Photographer*,
Glass shattered by a taxi's blare.

at the reception,
a tinkle of ice in cocktail glasses, as across
the room a woman lifts her wine glass
at the very moment I lift mine—world wide,
how many others? and what might Philip
be doing this very moment—wherever?

later,
in the square, a frozen fountain spirts,
making of itself an ice palace.

once,
walking winter streets past
yellow window shades, the perfect female profile
- happened!

once,
outside a Fasching party on Gaisberg—stars
the size of Christmas lights.

—think of it!
to have been Mohr & Gruber, to have written
Silent Night

One Tree Island

holding my eye
she undoes her blouse
my strict attention

an arch smile
then photons clothe her

wavelets lapping toes
the forest lake
there to receive her

wading out
till her breasts float
voices

diving under
a flash of bare bottom

she waves
from the one tree island
an exaltation of larks

in a shade of pines along the lake's edge
I clothe her
in a bikini of kisses

Woman Playing Guitar

Her breast
fit
like a fruit

in the curve
of the small guitar,

and I
would have been
her Picasso,

some
Spanish afternoon.

**Waiting and Then Not Waiting
for a Green Light
In Greenfield, Massachusetts**

The red pulse of three turn signals and the click of my own
—a serial music, more for the eye than the ear.

Images of unseen birds sweep the rear window of the car ahead,
like a school of neon tetras through an aquarium glass,
but swif' swift—each concise image pulled awry,
as the flock, itself, is warped, is bulged—is gone.

An hour ago: Gray whispery wisp of a man standing
a little less than the librarian on duty:

*" ... I have always been very sensitive,
very creative —yes-yes— have been all my life,
very sensitive, very creative ... "* and on the street
outside the library, a drunk grabbed a parking meter,
stiffened—heaved

—well there you have it,
a hot lunch. And now it is—the awaited shift from red
to green—the tachometer needle jumps.

(When you redline
on fear you redline, and everybody has a battlefield,
and it doesn't matter where or what the battlefield
when you redline).

I still have 20 minutes on a meter
in Brattleboro—but that's another town, another state.

"REDLINE MY HEART 3-PERSONED GOD!" I'm coming home,
home to meat and potatoes and look at that!—

old apple tree? or bonsai and me incredibly shrunk?

All these years, I have been wasting, wasting, wasting the poem.

THE INADEQUACY
OF LONG-STEMMED ROSES

a collage of cherita

1

crossing the churchyard in winter

on a headstone
her name yet not her name

the electric instant
before
I hurry on

2

after twenty years, again the room

the room my son
has rented unbeknownst

the room where I woke
to a carpet of spiders
that weren't

3

her naked presence sleeps
what price
this priceless femininity
on the glass-topped nightstand
catching my eye
a moon-coin

4

Thanksgiving Day
candles and wine
a 3 lb. turkey
snow falling
through maple branches
a man and a woman . . .

5

family barbecue

burnt offerings
the '*chock*' of croquet balls

old, her eyesight gone
she sits apart
faintly smiling

6

link after link

this wooden chain
a family keepsake

no one recalls
who
carved it

7

so that was that
now, breaking a dry stem
into bits
watching
the river
flow

8

along Steingasse
a rose cut
by a switchblade
an old woman scolds
mein Liebchen
laughs

9

close on the clubhouse turn

thundering hooves
thud the earth

stunned
I stand
with brimming eyes

10

a table set for two - a roast in the oven

the phone rings
in a white dress she goes out

whether by choice
or chance - she steps
into traffic

they'd nothing for Christmas that year

a cut spruce by the roadside
the luck of a pheasant to run over

not a tale
to tell
at a New Age gathering

biting the head off
the gingerbread man first,
I tell my 5 yr. old

that it's more humane
and
part of our oral tradition

13

for rent
a cliffside cottage

sumacs jungle the property

here I could be
a Ryōkan or
a Han Shan

14

cruel words

viewing the moon together
though 500 miles apart

the inadequacy
of long-stemmed
roses

"hast du Feuer?"

shying away
she leaves her sly smile

where she stood
a twist
of blue smoke . . .

urban midnight

in a pool of yellow lamplight
his craft or sullen art

after long illness
an el Greco
in the garret window

17

two days - five storms
sheets of water hissing
over hillside pastures
going to work that morning
boulders block
the way

18

home at last
the cat sniffs and sniffs
the damage
the car
more hurt
than was the bear

159

19

hoarfrost

10,000 apple drops
lie in the untended orchard

in the kitchen
a floor board
chirps

20

Stille Nacht

outside the Capuchin Monastery
cold toes - rum

the Mass finished
Turkish coffee
at the Astoria

21

carolers

a cloud before
each oval mouth

and toes so cold
the rum can't
rouse them

22

after seeing you off

taking the path along
the canal

a rustle of
leaves
underfoot

23

October sunlight

hearing her love-laugh
from another room

staring at a knot-hole
in the red oak
flooring

24

up before the others

world wise or world weary
I don't know

do know
home isn't home
anymore

25

mission house rules

in by nine, sober & a shower
– come morning,

coffee & oatmeal
never tasted
so good

26

swimming hole

like frogs, my cousins
with their farmer's tan

that picnic field
by the river - will I ever
see it again?

27

Caribbean cruise

three days without sight of land
yet looking up tonight

a nugget
of
real estate

28

death and distant thunder

the question
I dare not ask

a spring breeze fingers
a
hemline

a few friends gather

mulled wine
the sweets of sophistry

after the last guest leaves
standing under
the starry, starry sky

a trail of clothing

briefs
by the bathroom door

from the shower
a song I didn't know
she knew

St. Mark's Square, Venice

a pigeon rides my head
for several steps

I feel
- how shall I say -
blessed

our luck to be alone together

in this coolness of stately pines
your extra warmth as I enter

not wishing to litter
we bury the unnatural
under a stone

33

power outage

no candles
can't find the flashlight

the copper tea kettle
lit
by a ring of blue flame

34

the radiators bang

cod liver oil washed down
by fresh squeezed orange juice

he sits by the oven
warm on one side
shivering on the left

she turns from the moonlit window

her breasts
cradled in her arms

and how I ask
are we to be
just friends?

across an expanse of field a shack

at this distance
a white-bellied man with tits

thumbing my way
across
Ohio

it's her wedding tomorrow

she comes to me in the night
saying

*"this
will have to last
for a long time"*

overnight a winter wonderland

chickadees flit from branch to earth -
feed, squabble, and return to branch

only
to be
reborn

not one car all afternoon

offering me
a brimming glass of water

wishing not to fault
the stay
by staying

skiers down from the slopes

in the gasthaus, stein
after stein - gemütlichkeit

stoned under a starry sky
snow banks higher
than windows

41

the others have gone to town

my buddy's wife
dressed only in her loveliness

and no one need know
says
her smile

42

New Year's Eve

I, a stranger in a strange land
invited along

schnapps & kisses, glühwein
across the river
AstoriAstoriAstoria

43

a sultry day
passing the tobacco shop
I inhale deeply

the recall of a life
now no more
than literature

44

beyond the window, a bony dump*

as late as 1946
each classroom heated by a wood furnace

in summer
from the mine's maw
cool scary air

*slag heap

teasing the mirror, she strips

not wanting to waste
the few good years she sees

in the study below
her scholar husband
living a life of braille

his clothes to charity

unpacking the suitcases
of the vacation no longer awaited

finding
the Valentine meant
for today

47

stepping stones across the river

in the green-dusk of the woods
a taste of teaberry

in the coolness
surprised nipples
pucker

48

the smell of wet charred wood

by the rillet
a patch of violets in bloom

who will feed
the chickens
now?

Saturday morning

*“you kids stop bouncing around,
you’ll make the dough fall”*

button button
who’s got
the button

“... and don't expect me back”

morning now
smoke from a neighbor's chimney

saw grass
showing
the wind's way

51

hitch-hiking a coal truck stops

six miles farther on
an invite for coffee

in the kitchen
chickens and a fridge full
of Schlitz

52

rainy night outside Ray's

blue neon gleams
on the wet parking lot

it happens
and he's down and dead
justlikethat

53

dust & flies

while 3 drunk buddies fix the car,
she stands at the screendoor

bare breasted
drink in hand
watching

54

miles davis & blue lights

at this hour
some of the girls dance topless

at this hour
a spider slowly
yo-yos

55

raspberry picking

as she turns to me
a swift cloud shadows her face

like
forgotten
sorrow

56

“light?”

in the casino where she stood
a twist of blue smoke

sleuthing her through
the sun bleached streets
! seeing her nowhere

57

sudden downpour

in a church portal we wait
talking of Egyptology - me,

trying not to notice
the sodden cling
of her dress

58

festival lights

holding hands with a stranger
along the red-ribboned river

somewhere the faint bells
of a sunken city
under sea-green waters

in the market place

dust and dung
a fly riding the piper's finger

threading the crowd
a woman in white
magical as a unicorn

a bead curtain sways

long long stockings climb
a dark stairway

when I was a lad
and prince among
the apple carts

61

seeing you again
and so much of you
in your string bikini
evening's wild colors
flung
on sky and water

62

the 10,000 things
a hidden path
leads into the mountains
in a hut
the old poet lives
alone alone

63

henge

under a blue sky
buttercups slope away to the sea

a long way from here
the headstone
awaiting me

64

summer heat

on the porchsteps
9 red toenails, 1 to paint

young though she is
she's already a few
good secrets

65

newly anointed
a shadowy figure in thin muslin
her braceleted arms raised

of man's first dawn
bison on cave walls
shards & dust

66

you're gone

the rain rivulets down
our café window

how to say it?
Venus de Milo handcuffed
to a museum mind

67

museum tour

appearing and reappearing
braless in t-shirt

valued at more
than all the naked
statues

68

wineshop girls

quarreling
as they pretty and prepare

and did you find,
Tzu Yeh,
your gold orchid friend?

69

and when
the bough breaks,
my love,
fond notions
aren't worth
a tinker's damn

70

trapped
in the patina
of a 60 watt parlor
sipping tea and
smiling politely - the hypnotic
drone of decay

71

a streetlamp

casting a path over snow-melt
where five pines stand

that's all it takes
one moment an insomniac
the next a tourist in Færy

72

don't care much

for rasping dogmas
or chiseled tenets

my way
more like the wind
in the willows

winter solstice

outside the chapel's plain-glass window
the wind-stirred bittersweet

here by the woodstove
warmth
among friends

LEGENDS

from:

Betrayal On Maple Street

The Winter Owl

The windowpanes were edged in frost, and we four cousins bunched to see the screech owl perched on an apple branch above the drifted snow.

"He might be sick," Kate said.

"No! He's sleeping. He's *just sleeping*," Freddy replied.

"He's most likely hungry," Gramma put in. "Poor thing, they don't often come in this close to dwellings unless they can't find food in winter."

"Do you think he's starving?" Kate frowned.

"I'll put some hamburg out in a moment," Gramma answered.

"Won't he freeze?" Bess wondered.

"Yeah. How do we know he isn't frozen dead already?" I asked.

"He was alive this morning," Gramma said. "I thought for sure he'd frighten off when Pop shoveled the path, but all he did was close his eyes and turn his head as if he scorned to watch."

Then Gramma, crossing to the yellow stove that drew its heat from naphtha, added:

"You kids go play in the dining room. I can't have you bouncing around in here, you'll make the dough fall."

Wet cloths covered pans of rising dough on the kitchen's two broad radiators.

"He'll freeze," decided Bess.

"He'll be all right," said Freddy, "as soon as he gets something to eat."

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In the dining room, around the walnut table, in the circle of the chandelier's dim light, we kids became jewel merchants. A wealth of buttons spilled from a quart tin box, and we were in business.

Feverishly we sorted through them; scrutinizing each with an expert's eye; watchful for a button's value in another's eye; haggling, threatening, shouting—"I saw it first!" "No you didn't!"—till from the kitchen this ultimatum:

"If you kids can't get along in there, you can put the buttons back in the box this minute."

We got along.

We valued the buttons at more than bickering, being allowed to keep one button each, each time the buttons were allowed.

I found the best button ever, that day, a gilt edged hexagon (most likely brass), framing a thumbnail opal Abstract, with an eyelet behind, so not marred by sewing holes. A great find destined to button, some other day, the simple fabric of a priceless lesson.

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At noon, we found the kitchen table changed. The pans and mixing bowls, the sifted flour, the rolling pin, the measuring cups—all gone. And in their place were jars of jam, a pat of home churned butter, and Betsy's own rich milk in a pitcher, and cold stewed apples, and warm bread so fresh you could roll it back to dough between your thumb and finger, and for dessert—the promise of one cinnamon roll apiece.

"He's *so* small. Do you think he's a baby owl?" Kate asked—I answered:

"He's a screech owl. That's as big as they get."

"Still he's awfully small."

We all peered out the frosted window and saw the winter owl still perched on the low branch above the pathway cut through knee-deep snow.

"Did he eat any of the hamburg?"

"Not that I noticed, Kate."

"I hope he isn't sick."

"Why would he be sick?" Freddy wanted to know. But no one

knew or no one said.

Then Gramma ladled out the barley soup, a steaming bowl for each of us.

"Now don't go bolting your food, Michael," she said to me. "You don't get all the nourishment you should, eating so fast."

I slowed down as best I could.

"Wasn't he scared of you, when you put out the meat?" Kate asked.

"I was afraid he'd flush, but he never so much as blinked an eye."

"That's because he's sleeping," Freddy insisted.

"Couldn't we bring him in?" Kate asked.

"Let's give him a chance to feed on his own and then we'll see. And stay away from the window," Gramma added, "He can probably see our movements in the house."

I couldn't help but feel the wintry scene beyond the frosted window. I liked the look of the tangled apple branches etched against the gray-white sky, and the hillside's snowy sweep with only charcoal-sketch suggestions of what the world had been before the age of snow.

But it was the owl who made the afternoon.

On the twigged branch that sloped over the path, like an arm reaching down to lend a hand, he slept—hunched with cold. And as I watched him a feeling, dark and deep, stole over me, the kind you get from a grim tale told at bedtime, the kind I got from the dark painting hung in Gramma's living room.

"He might be too weak to feed himself," Bess posed. But no one answered.

We were busy with soup and arguments of what to do that afternoon, while Gramma sipped her coffee lost in thought. And then, as promised—one cinnamon roll for each of us.

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The stairway opened both onto the kitchen and the living room, and with the door shut to the kitchen but open to the living room, we played a button game which we called "school."

Kate was the teacher first, and stood facing her pupils—

Freddy, Bess, and me—who sat crowded together on the first of the two steps to the landing. Behind her back she changed a button from hand to hand a number of times, then held her hands straight out in front of her for me to guess which hand it was that held the button.

Each step was like a grade in school, and you progressed from grade to grade by right guesses. A wrong guess kept you where you were, and two wrong guesses put you back a grade, unless, of course, you were already on the bottom step. I made my guess. Kate flashed an empty hand—"Too bad"—then mixed the button behind her back a second time to test the next student—Freddy. And so it went.

I enjoyed this game as much as any, but that afternoon with the dim of winter at the windows and the living room in dusk, as it always was, but even more so that day, I couldn't keep my attention on the game.

Above the old upright piano hung the painting that had always haunted me. Inside its gilt frame all was night, and shadow within shadow, and a yellow moon fleecing the night clouds above a black castle, a castle so deep in shadow that I knew of its existence only because I'd climbed on top the piano once to see up close what the picture was about. It had been painted years ago by a relative long deceased. And looking at the painting that afternoon, I wondered who she was and felt a dark something, the same as I had felt at lunch time, looking out the frosted window at the sleeping screech owl on the apple branch.

It was a brooding mood that made me want to be alone. So after a few more turns I quit. I said I didn't feel like playing anymore, and that made Freddy mad at me. But Kate said that a person had a right to their own feelings no matter what those feelings were. And I agreed with her.

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In the kitchen, looking out the frosted window to see the owl, I saw how dim, how dark the afternoon had grown, and guessed more snow was on its way, and next I saw the owl still perched among the wickerwork of twigs, and though a gust of wind ruffed

his feathers, he still sat on, supremely unperturbed.

"I wouldn't hang around the window, Michael," said Gramma. "Our movements in the house might make him fearful."

I stepped back, but waited for that sense of brooding to come over me cloud-shadow-like, and when it did, I left the kitchen window for the living room.

The game was over. But Freddy still wouldn't talk to me. Then Bess said that she was "tahred" and laid down on the braided rug between the living and dining rooms.

"You'll catch a cold," Kate told her.

"I don't care."

"Get up, Bess, or I'll tell Mother when we get home."

So Bess got up, and for a time we milled around the dining room, argumentative and bored, till finally we gathered at the frosted kitchen window.

"Did he eat the hamburg?" Freddy asked of Gramma.

"He hasn't touched it, so far as I can tell."

"Do you think he's sick or just hungry?" Bess wanted to know.

"If he was just hungry," Kate said, "I think by now, he would have tried to eat the hamburg."

"Unless he's afraid of us," I said. "He probably can see our motions in the house."

We all stepped back a step into the dimness of the kitchen. Then Gramma said:

"I'll just go out and bring the poor thing in. I can't see sense in waiting any longer. Bess might be right, that he's too weak to feed himself."

We gathered close around the window to watch. First, a bitter cold burst in on the kitchen's fragrant moisty-warmth, and next, we saw Gramma cross the porch and step down into the pathway cut through knee-deep snow.

We watched, and the wind flapped Gramma's apron, and a few grey hairs streamed from her bun.

We watched, and the owl sat stock-still with his eyes closed tight, right over that narrow path where Gramma walked.

I watched. My guts electric waiting for the burst of feathers that would happen at the moment of capture.

But when Gramma reached up for the sleeping owl there was

no burst of feathers, no effort at flight, or attempt to flee, no struggle of any kind.

Gramma had simply reached up and taken down the owl from his perch, the way you'd take a jar down from a cupboard shelf. And when she re-entered the kitchen's warmth, holding the little owl so close, she said:

"I blame myself. I should have acted sooner."

Manger

From somewhere—distant thunder.

Though to the far southwest we could see the cable of the Untersberg cable car—seven miles off and two feet thick—and gleaming in the sunlight, a spider-thread draped from peak to plain. Then, we were in a woods, walking among stately pines.

"What happens if a guy doesn't get relief?" she asked.

I didn't know what she was driving at.

"What happens if he doesn't have a girlfriend?" she asked. "A boy I used to know, told me that *it* builds up. What happens if that goes on too long?"

"Nothing happens."

"I thought that maybe that's how rape happens."

"No. I don't think so."

I still didn't know what she was driving at.

And then we came to where the stately pines gave way to meadow. And there we found a manger.

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The manger was chest-high and had a roof and was filled with hay, freshly cut, and stood among the pines, where they were well-spaced and gave way to meadow. And even there the distant thunder reached us, though beyond the woods' edge the meadow lay bright with sunlight.

We were still talking of the wonder of a manger, there among the pines, when a sudden flash of lightning blanched the meadow and a clap of thunder broke right over us, and next we saw a sheet

of rain sweeping across the meadow toward us.

And when we felt the rain that rained down through those tall, straight pines, we climbed into the manger and lay, side-by-side, in the sweet scent of the fresh straw, and listened to the rain's patter on the manger's roof, and were dry.

And when I rolled over on my side and kissed her, she kissed me back, but in a bit she drew away and said:

"If Oskar knew that we were here like this, he'd beat you up."

"Who's Oskar?"

"My old boyfriend. I thought he'd be the death of me, but now I wouldn't tell him anything."

And then she shivered in the chilled air, and I didn't kiss her anymore.

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We just lay in the manger and listened to the rain and after a bit she pretended to sleep. I was sure she pretended. And I lay beside her, uneasy, because my experience with girls was not much more than a boy's experience.

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When the rain ended, I let on that I was waking her, and she pretended to awake, and stretch, and not know where she was at first. And then, when she had fully awakened from her pretend awakening, she said:

"I guess nobody would want to kiss a girl who falls asleep on them or shivers."

And I said that I guessed not, though this time I understood her meaning.

"You could have raped me."

I protested.

"I wouldn't have called a policeman if you had."

I was puzzled by this statement and so she said it again, but with this difference:

"I wouldn't call a policeman if you did."

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And then we got down from the manger, and I can still see the way her skirt snagged on the rough of the manger's wooden side, and the pose she struck, and the long, coy look with which she held me, hiking the skirt a little higher, before she freed it from the rough of the manger's slabs.

I knew what I was supposed to do, but lacked the confidence.

Well, in the many years since then I've come to see how each experience has two sides, like a coin, each side having an equal value. But even so ... that call still rankles.

A Fine Farewell

I was too early, so I stopped for coffee. The curbs were still piled high with snow, but the morning sunlight slanted down on a street of dishwater slush. There was hardly anyone around.

Inside the restaurant, the same stingy sunlight came through a window that read BURT's, backwards, and fell across a bunch of men talking at a round table in the window. To my left, the waitress was rattling dishes behind the empty counter. The coffee she had brought steamed on the table in front of me. I lit a second cigarette from the one I was smoking and listened to the talk of the men at the round table.

"I'd have hated to be the one that found her," one of the men was saying. "I don't think Petie's gonna be good for much on the job today."

"Naw. He won't be. He's already went home," put in another.

"They say she was half undressed, and when they turned her over they couldn't have told she was a woman by her face."

"How'd they identify her?" asked a little guy they called Spoodie.

"They have their ways," put in a big, simple, round-faced guy. He said it in a tone of unholy dread.

"Who was she anyway?"

"Someone new to the neighborhood, I guess."

"I won't know her, then?" asked the little guy.

"No, you don't need to worry about that, Spoodie." There was a general, small laughter to this.

"It's like the murder two years ago," said a square-built bully of a guy. But nobody picked up on it and the group drifted off onto other neighborhood ills. And I drifted off into why I was here this morning.

I'd come to see Nancy. We'd been separated more than a week now and she was staying over here in West Oakwood with a stupid friend of hers. I'd come all the way across town to talk with her and here I sat with a coffee in front of me, lighting a third cigarette from the second.

Over a week ago, on Christmas Eve, Nance and me had gone to The Hungry Lion downtown and had a lobster dinner, my first lobster dinner, ever, and Nancy got to laughing at the way I "attack" the lobster and it looked like we might bury the past, maybe.

It had been my fault. But now with the offending girl out of town, it wasn't too hard for me to think of starting over with Nancy. I could understand how Nancy might feel otherwise, but we were having a good time, just then, and I felt hopeful. It was the first we'd had a good time since last fall when Nancy asked just what was going on.

That was the hardest thing I had ever had to do, was tell her. But she'd asked, and I thought she deserved better than a lie. Now, I wasn't so sure.

When we left The Hungry Lion we took a streetcar, then walked the last six blocks through a fine, feathery snowfall. It was beautiful. When we got to the apartment I was feeling real tender towards Nancy and I started hugging her and fooling around some. I liked feeling her through the smooth, new dress she was wearing.

She didn't exactly put me off, but she wasn't real friendly either. But I thought, "Well, the girl's like that. Sometimes you got to say it right out, 'Do you want to do it or not?' And then you'll know one way or the other." Mostly, the one way.

But tonight it was the other. "Why would you think I'd want to do that?" she pretended surprise.

"Come on, Nance," I said, "why not?" I shouldn't have asked. The whole lobster dinner was a waste. "Why not?" I insisted, and thought to myself, "You always got to hear it, don't you?" My mood was getting ugly. "Why not?"

"Because "

"Because what?" I snapped. I was mad now. "Because of ... that?" I asked, meaning the business with the girl who'd left town, but Nance wouldn't answer.

"Well?"

"And other things."

"And other things? What other things?"

"You know. Everything." She looked and said it so wearily, I felt sorry for her. "All of it," she added, throwing up her hands half-heartedly.

I could understand it, but I didn't like it. I started in on her, all the while saying, "Sssssh, sssssh, the neighbors will hear," to everything she answered. Finally she put on her coat. It was the white, wool coat she'd sewed herself last fall. "I'm leaving," she said.

"Where will you go this time of night?" I wanted to know. I was worried about her. She'd never gone off like this in the middle of the night. I was worried for her and scared for myself.

"Somewhere," she answered.

"At least tell me where," I asked. "At least give me an idea."

"Maybe to Alice's."

She got her purse from the coffee table and I grabbed it and took out the car keys. She grabbed for them, then started to hit at me and kick. Dropping the keys, I grabbed her by the lapels of her coat.

"Let go, you'll tear the coat." She kept struggling though, and scratched me good along side the face. I pulled her in close to me so she couldn't get at me again like that. And then she went hysterical and all I could do was keep on holding on to the coat and hissing at her not to wake the neighbors. I always hated the neighbors to hear us. But she kept on being hysterical.

Then a seam in her coat made a rending sound and fast as that she wasn't hysterical anymore. "Don't tear the coat," she said, coldly and evenly. I didn't want all that hard work torn either, and I let go my hold on the coat.

We were okay now. "I'm sorry, Nance," I said. But she just calmly bent for the keys. I put my foot over them. I didn't want her to go off into the city night like that. I was scared for her out

there at night. I kept my foot over the keys. I didn't want to be alone that night, either. Not like that, with things wrong between us.

She straightened up. And we looked at each other for a minute and I could see she meant it. She was leaving me.

At the hallway door I said, "I'm sorry, Nance. I never meant it like that. Not any of it." She didn't say a word.

"Be careful out there."

She went off down the stairs without the car keys. I leaned over the railing and said in a harsh whisper,

"How're you going to get to Alice's?"

"There'll be a trolley."

"Not this late."

She didn't answer, and I just let her go. It must not have been midnight yet, but I didn't know that. I went back into the apartment. I felt awful. Then I picked up the keys from the floor and I opened a window. The yellow curtains stirred in the cold air. They had a wide, orange fringe at the bottom sewed there by Nancy when we'd first moved in, because they'd been too short for the new windows. "Nance. Nancy," I called out the window, but not too loud. Again the cold air stirred the curtains.

She was standing below where the streetcar would stop if there was a streetcar this late, and she would not look up. She was standing so lovely in the feathery snowfall, her black hair all spilled over the white of her coat. "Nance," I tried again. Still she would not look up.

Just then, as luck would have it, the two little old ladies from across the hall, who never went out nights, came out the front entrance of the apartment building three stories down. I couldn't imagine, at the time, what they'd be doing out so late Christmas Eve. They came out the apartment building door and said, "Hello," to Nancy.

"Nancy," I shouted down, "you forgot your keys," and she looked up through the streetlight and the falling snow and I tossed the keys the three stories down to her. They landed with a *chink!* on the sidewalk, disturbing its dusting of snow.

That had been Christmas Eve and the next day was wretched. I thought I might kill myself, not meaning to do it. I felt that bad.

I was lonely, too. Two corners and a jog over was St. Mary's, full of people, but I didn't feel right to go there. I wasn't Catholic. And then there was the bus depot downtown. But when I went down there it depressed me, as always, only more so because there I was sharing the holidays with the winos. I never thought I'd end up alone on a holiday.

I went back to the apartment. I'd have got drunk, but there was nothing in the place to get drunk on. Nancy and me hadn't been in Pittsburgh long enough to have the kind of friends you could drop in on, on Christmas Day, at least I couldn't think of any. At last I took a train up to my mother's in the country, which I hated to do, but I kept thinking I might kill myself by accident if I didn't.

That was more than a week ago. Now I was here, sitting with a coffee in BURT's in West Oakwood, chain smoking as always, and waiting for it to get late enough in the morning to see Nancy without disturbing her birdbrained friend, Alice. It had been made clear to me on the phone last night that I wasn't to show up before ten this morning. So I knew to stick to that.

I don't know what I planned to say. I felt angry at Nance, but I didn't like being alone. It wasn't her fault, I knew, but I kept remembering things like they were her fault and thinking of things she had done before we'd met that bothered me still. You know how that is. You know you are wrong, but the wrongness feels too good to give up, like prodding a bruise.

Any rate, I was sitting there chain smoking and sipping coffee from a cup with a brown crack in it and hearing, in between my thoughts, these guys talking about the murder that morning in their neighborhood.

There was this square-built bully in a plaid shirt and he was saying how it was like the murder they'd had around there two years earlier. He was bragging how he and his buddy, mostly himself, had found the body and was bragging how upsetting it was to him.

" ... and there she was with her skirt up over her face and all bloody between the legs ... "

I didn't like hearing that. Things like that always troubled my mind when I heard them. They made me too sad.

I ordered another coffee. I'd come all the way across town to

West Oakwood to see Nancy this morning after what had happened between us Christmas Eve, and I didn't need to hear what I had just heard. Nancy and me had been separated over a week, now, and Nancy was staying with this *non compos mentis* friend of hers, Alice, or Alas, or whatever, a real sicky, if you ask me, who kept telling you how she was in a state of grace because she hadn't fucked any of the guys she went out with since her divorce two years before. She was Catholic, she said, and a priest had told her so. A professional cock-tease, I thought. Great way to get killed, I thought. Great company for Nancy at a time like this, I thought. But you can't pick your friends' friends for them.

I was sitting there feeling pretty sorry about the whole business and I didn't need to hear any more sorry stuff about women, but I couldn't help hearing this guy in the plaid shirt, bragging. He was saying for the third time:

"I was the first one to find her. It was 'round back of Hendrick's Hardware. Me and Slate were delivering that morning. And I went around to the side entrance to open up and there she was in the cellar well. I'll tell you, after the war I thought I could stomach anything, but finding her like that made me sick."

"She was only twelve years old, wasn't she?" asked one of the men in the sunlight at the window.

"Yeah, she was the Clements' youngest," put in another.

"They say she knew the murderer or it wouldn't have happened."

"Yeah, he was a neighbor."

"Wasn't there supposed to be something between them already?" put in the big guy with the round face.

"You can't believe everything you hear, Ted."

"That's for damned sure," put in another.

"I heard she was pregnant and going to cause trouble ... or something ... you know ... maybe ... " said the little guy called Spoodie.

No one answered.

I lit another cigarette off the last. The second coffee was hot and black, but not so good as the first. The second cup is never much better than colored water. Then the bully in the plaid shirt got hold of the conversation again. "Big man," I thought.

"Bragging asshole," I thought, but listened anyway.

"... so we went knocking on doors to make a call to the police, you know, but no one would open up." He said it all indignant that no one would open up.

"You gotta understand, Hugh," said another of the men, "they were mostly housewives with kids and their husbands were gone off to work already ... "

"I know that, but this was an emergency."

"They didn't know it was an emergency. They were afraid. How did they know who was at the door? It could have been anyone."

"They might have thought you were the murderer," put in Spoodie.

"Spoodie's right, that's all you hear about on the news these days."

"They should have opened up anyways," Hugh grumbled, then went off again with his talking. "The first place we went to was the murderer's." He said it in a low, weird voice, like he was talking about some secret rites or something. He looked around the table and waited a moment. Then he went on.

"And that's where we ended going back to. The second time we knocked, his mother let us in, and we made the call from there. Course, we didn't know about him at the time. He came down from upstairs while I was on the phone. Just as cool as a cucumber. I wouldn't have suspected him in a million years. Later, he said he was relieved to hear us making the call. Can you imagine that, 'relieved?' A thirty year old man living with his mother like that ... makes you sick."

"That's the way them kooks is," said the big, round-faced guy. The winter morning sunlight through the restaurant window made a simple moon of his pasty face.

"That's the truth of it," someone said, and they discussed the truth of it among themselves for a while, their neighborhood abounding in kooks it seemed. While they were still discussing it, I got my jacket off the back of my chair, left a tip, paid the girl at the counter, and was gone.

I never liked to hear about a woman being bothered and it was worse hearing it was a child. Straight murder seems just another

way to die, but being molested first is too awful to think about. You can't think about it.

On the street, all was grey, sharp, and wan. There was little traffic this time of morning, but what traffic there was went by with a *sloosh*, through the grey, juicy slush. There weren't many people on the sidewalks, either. The sunlight slanted down and got in your eyes in that particular way that winter sunlight does. I turned up my jacket collar. My feet were cold. All I had were a pair of loafers worn through in the sole. I slogged on.

I found nasty Alice Buttski's place easy enough. It was a drab, frame, double-family house, number 47, with a huge porch. I'd seen it before. It was tucked in between some older houses. The neighborhood dated from the turn of the century and was partly run down, but not too bad. Along its curbs were huge, leafless maples whose roots lifted and broke the sidewalks.

When I came up on the porch I was still wondering how things would go between me and Nancy. So I wasn't noticing everything I might have or I might have noticed something.

When I got to the second floor and turned down the dim hallway to where I remembered Alice's apartment to be, I thought, maybe I should have phoned again this morning to make sure old Alice was prepared. But, no, she could go on a rampage if she wanted. It had all been set. She knew I was coming.

When I got to Alice's door it was ajar. I knocked on the door jamb, not wanting to push the door open by knocking on it. Just in case.

When I knocked I heard Alice's voice inside. "Come on in, it's open." I should have noticed something out-of-the-way, maybe, but I didn't.

I pushed open the door and there in a diffusion of grey sunlight, slouched in an old easy chair was Alice, wrapped in a nude-colored bathrobe, her coffee cup poised in mid-air; and behind her, half turned from a shelf of books, stood a man in a shabby suit; and to my left, another man in a policeman's uniform, his back to the window.

In the pale light from the window, they were a wax museum tableau, with six fixed eyes fixed in three expressions of uncertainty. And I, uncertain too, looked past the man in the

policeman's uniform and saw outside the window. And saw that
outside the window the sunlight through the bare branches looked
strange ... bleak ... unreal...

And that's when I knew.

KEEP ON KEEPING ON

from:

Betrayal On Maple Street

Keep On Keeping On

Making my way along the winter streets
at the violet edge of day, enticed
by neon, flickering deceits
that keep me keeping one foot further on;
I don't recall—never knew the reasons,
scarcely see the change of season
anymore—

more and more,
this monotony of hours
spent in rundown downtown bars
erodes like water from a dripping tap.

In an alleyway,
between a church and all night bakery, I stop
to light a cigarette—

And there, stirred
by a *Föhn* of oven fragrance, I recall,
I once had what I wanted,
but still wanted and wanted what?
I never knew.

And there, for a moment, stirred
by an air of fresh baked bread, I embrace a time
by time distorted—a mere *Gasthaus* of a town
so briefly dwelt in, this pinprick *Heimweh*
is not mine to say.

Then wondering

if there might not be some brand new brand of aspirin
to stump this seven year long ache
for an amputated youth, I step, again,
into the evening wind, wanting again,
and again not knowing what I want, feeling
inside my chest, again,
the smoke's familiar tightness, again knowing
the city's limits—
that nowhere to go, no one to know feeling.

* * *

At last, or finally, I sit once more,
couched in the rumble of a tavern,
booths along one wall,
a bar, bar stools and all
the people together
doing the same thing together
not needing to speak together
to be together.
Strangers in companionship
—that's a tavern, and shaded lights
and perchance sights
of certain wiles and certain smiles, and guiles
all hip and lipstick;
the body warmth; the smell of beer and smoke;
the signs
concerning ales and wines,
the electric signs
of whiskeys, tonics, gins, and Coke;
and perchance the chance
to slip into companionship.
But even this glow passes,
and you're left among the glasses
that froth and ring the table tops.

Her drink is tasted; mine is gone,
another ordered; the cluttered mirror betrays
a calculating gaze;

then with familiar disgust I follow
the forlorn ploys that ply me onward,
onward to the roads I've traveled
to turn the turns ahead.

*I always hoped beyond the bend—
I know it is the same beyond the bend,
always and all the same,
but still I wait to go around again,
though the meaning's grown lame,
of late.*

However, it's not roads or women I speak about,
couched here amid this cloud of mumble-jumble, rent,
from time to time, by shrieks of lightning laughter;
couched here among the ocher glasses
that having frothed go flat; here
where the jukebox blurts its not uncommon malady. No,
roads and women are not my meaning, but
seeing as the skit's begun,
I speak the famous line, and so receive
the fateful answer that taunts me more to cling
a moment longer for a further fling.

*Although, what difference?—
this long straight stretch of track I'm on just steady narrows into distance.*

* * *

While we walk the empty streets
I want to talk;—again, I want to speak;
I want to share with her or someone anywhere
some small conceit
such as has cut me through, complete,
the way a glint off metal cuts the eye by day;
I want to say:

"Yesterday, soft as smoke in the gunmetal sky,
one pink wisp flit and died

as tall and taller buildings fingered
steely clouds while evening lingered ...
an atmosphere so purple, bleak, and grey
one might have said, 'It's like Buffet.'

"And then this evening, how nice it was,
the first snowfall
casting the city in strange chiaroscuro,
big, silent flakes —you know the type—
and afterwards the sloosh of traffic
whose tail lights ribboned red on pavements wet and black,
and later still—
the maple streets of yellow window light.

"And even now, as we walk this windswept street,
a plum-rubescient bruise swells in the southwest sky,
inflicted by
a steel mill that lies along the river's edge;
a twelve mile dragon who sleeps and fumes
along the river's edge having first devoured
a thousand dozen drudgers ... "

*And I,
who know no why for our invention,
also keep keeping on by obscure intention;
and wonder what use words at all,
for how could I tell just how
those bells,
distant and out-of-tune,
just now, prod
some childhood bruise?—
And I wonder why I try.
And wonder, have I learned nothing along the way?*

* * *

This forgotten edge of town
—a labyrinth of shambled dwellings
where dilapidated shades can't hide

the naked bulbs within.
Our footsteps echo; a gust of wind
ransacks an alleyway, pirouettes, grins
—flashing icicle teeth—
and vanishes on down the street;
something stirs in a sheltered corner;
brown weeds in a vacant lot poke through
an inch of newsprint snow, where shadow-like
against a broken wall of brick,
a coughing topcoat doubles, hacks, and spits;
then, in an icy freight train rush of wind,
a beer can rattles rattles rattles rattles rattles along the street;
this deserted street
where streetlights sometimes aren't
and partially burnt-out marquees mark
establishments among the ruins
in the dark
between the signs of EAT and BAR & GRILL
a warehouse stands in one-light gloom,
and as we pass at this late hour she reassures
there'll be no problem with the room.

* * *

Now, drawing the shades against the flashing
of some neon claim, I turn
and can't help note the question of it all;
I watch all but her necklace fall.
Then something said,
a nod of head, a certain smile
and for awhile
at least a little while upon the sheets ...

*But even as I bend to meet
the turns I take,
I'm anxious to be on the straight again,
preparing for another bend.*

A dim lamp lights the room

and casts the image of a chair
across the threadbare rug
to where a brass rail bed fits snug
against the further wall;
an out-of-season spider crawls
beneath a shelf;
beyond the dirty yellow light
a hunchbacked shadow fights itself.

Later, when all is sad and done,
and one by one
I pick my clothing from the floor,
she wants to know if there'll be more.
"Probably," I say,
not meaning it her way,
and by the door
she wants to know again
and when.

I recall as I descend the stair
her stare, level, over knees hugged white,
and even more, the sight
of naked toes that gripped a dingy mattress edge
—I pause ... but no—
And on the empty street again,
amid a feathering of snow,
I turn my collar against the cold.

*It was the same
and always and all it was not my aim.*

THE TEMPERATURE OF LOVE

a sequence

The Temperature of Love

In a feathering of snow;

outside the apartment,
whose yellow windows
Scrabbled comfort;

in the cold shine
of a streetlight
through clicking branches—

the temperature of love!

• • •

Hot from the heat of her body,
the key
was more than I had ever hoped
to hold
of her warmth.

The Bruise

with the bruise that clouds
her white thigh showing

not Botticelli's
but mine standing in a tub

with hands not delicately placed
but calmly at the sides

with chestnut hair cut short
and eyes cinnamon-to-ash

striking the saddest chord
in a melancholy mode not Venus

Amy
clouding my reason

The Pearl

*The sickness of the oyster
is the pearl.* Durrell

This nettling pang, this grain of sand,
with which I must cohabit this shell
till my luck runs out
is just my luck and calling;
a faith
to which I must adhere as the barnacle adheres
or this irritation and its fruit
are for nothing,
and I will have been wounded
for all the tides of the ocean
and to no avail.

The Compact

The compact mirror gave a dim, distorted view
of that which lay behind her
as she fixed her make-up
on the sidewalk of the wind-swept avenue.
For a moment,
I was not part of the geography overshadowed
by that Botticelli face marred
by the thin, white scar above one narrow eyebrow;

how I hated her
for her reflection.

The Egg & The Pearl

When the egg, the bond, we had
so painstakingly shaped
—cracked— and ran mucus
and pus through the fingers of my
astonishment, it was as though she had died—

And I walked the unreal streets
of midnight sun, rubbing
dim the braille of my dime
destiny in a pocket of indigo—

Till one morning, in the midst
of mourning, it dawned, with Damascan
brilliance, how I might minus
to plus my fortune —simple—

pearl pearl a new belief
around grief's insistent grit.

This symbol ** is used where double-spaces fall on page breaks.

An Offering, Mean and Poor

I am the flowering at the end of a long, bleak stem.

I am the flowering
after the flickering flirtations
of the neon, nylon nights,
and the winter sidewalks
past yellow window lights;

I am the flowering at the end
of the ending nights of unending melancholy,
nights of cigarettes and barroom folly;

I am the flowering
after a certain pinprick dread
tormented me down the narrow years,
like a tiny bee about my head;

I am the flowering
after the invalid shut the door
on a room weary of an ever rearranged decor;

(I would mend my mind)

and after my brown-eyed mother's God frowned
beyond belief —Jesus, was He ever friend—

and after the egg of one flesh cracked
leaking mucus and pus
through the fingers of my astonishment

**

(though in a woman's love laugh,
beyond an apartment wall,
I found that one half of mankind was all
the world to me)

after all this—

*(I go on trying trying to thread
a needle by candlelight)*

after all this and much untold,
I am the flowering at the end of a long, bleak stem,
a posy offered to you, Kathleen,
out of the effects of my days on this earth,
an offering, mean and poor,
offered for reasons obvious and obscure.

The Lesson

Where she lives in a room with a few things
I was a fool,
fool to wish comprehension
of an incomprehensible mathematics.

I should have accepted the calculus
of uncalculated love,
and the friendship of her body,
unconditionally;

I should not have asked
for the equations of time past,
should not have asked.

The Loft

There in the loft,
 where we had two mattresses
and between them
 a hurricane lantern,

I watched you sleep—saw
the grain of your hair flow
 dark
over the pillow and one white shoulder

laid bare by an errant quilt,
 a spill
of walnut over linen over almond;
 and heard

the wild wind ransacking
 the wastes of winter
in the edgeless black around us;
 heard it

rage around our parenthesis
of lantern light and love,
 our space capsule
between yesterday and tomorrow,

 our bubble (oblong) in a level,
I wished would never tilt.

After the End

Perhaps I felt the way a woman feels
who knows she is barren. I certainly felt
as if I had watched the world through windows,
as if I did not belong to the human race.

Slayed my dragon, though, by George.
Took him in the soft of the underbelly,
laid him out long as life.

But for all of that, the tail keeps sweeping
the distance, keeps on twitching like a snake's
that will switch till sundown.

What I want to know is, how long will this go on?
Till sundown . . . the sundown of sundowns?

from:
THIS HUNGER, TISSUE-THIN
new & selected tanka 1995 - 2005

again tonight
along the color-ribboned river
I feel its frail insistence –
this hunger, tissue-thin
behind my breastbone

hearing your fame
 on the radio, I go
 walking streets of leaves –
longing to see you, I ache,
having no success to speak of

looking down
on that distant page
of meadow –

a railroad train straight as a sentence
and I too mountain high to read its noise

along the river
where trees are glad with leaflets,
she had to tell me –
later, pitched across the hotel bed,
I wept

a drizzly day,
with yellow leaves pasted
to wet black pavement -
returning the library books
she left behind . . .

the girl
could have done better
in White River Junction
than run into my arms
and the set-
ting
sun

Rorschach treescape
and moon fleeced clouds . . .
how unlikely,
against a yellow windowshade,
this perfect female profile

when I think
that we may never
meet again . . .
this hillside of aspens
endlessly fluttering

I've come again
to this oak-gripped bank,
who knows why? –
recalling our last time here,
I watch a red leaf drift out of sight

standing in the green-dusk
of the woods looking out –
how bright the meadow . . .
how odd this reluctance
to step into brilliance

in maple shade,
trying
to match mind
to pond, thoughts
to trout

at twilight the flame
in the bush is candlelight
caught by the window –
nothing more, nothing less
– is what you make of it

frost-stars on the window,
hills in the purple distance . . .
if I thought
it'd do some good I'd rave
of things invisible to see

a thistledown floats
over grass and Queen Anne's lace
this yellow afternoon . . .
and what have I to do
with tumultuous times?

around the campfire
singing with the others,
I flick an unworthy thought
from my mind –
a spark from my sleeve

THE WAY OF THINGS

in the grey distance
the line between sky and hillscape,
barely discernible –
without faulting the facts
memoir becomes legend

standing among stately pines
disgraced and alone in my outcast state
yet always,
always an integral part
of the universe

to pick up the beach
grain by grain, how long?
in eternity
no time at all, I think –
the endless hour glass trickles trickles

first light
morphing into shadowless dawn
perfect stillness
what I am I am
right here right now

* * *

streetlights
illuminate the maples
from within . . .
was it so much, my love,
to expect the truth?

the tilt
of her head to undo
an earring –
fortresses crumble into
winter moonlight

this time, she tells me,
she's telling the truth –
between us
I watch the struggles of a wasp
drowning in peach juice

“I couldn’t help myself”
that’s what she said,
and all this long day’s journey into night
 imagination
 an intolerable jingle

at the window,
after our long night, raindrops dripping
through copper leaves –
say what you like,
there’s no one truth in such matters

sweet scent of lilacs
I watch a bee question cluster
after cluster –
this endless ache for intimacy
what good is it?

the dawn's gray effusion grieves
for lack of color,
lack of warmth –
all I know of love
wouldn't fill a sonnet

this long sidewalk
with its clatter of penny-brown
oak leaves –
 all my good days
 faded to illegibility

embroidering & embroidering –
over the years
the best of her creativity
spent
on an old affair

in the night-fog
a yellow bruise
where the streetlight was –
any truth is better
than indefinite doubt

still angry,
I hear an acorn
bouncing down
the branches of the oak –
my fist flowers to catch it

looking up, I gaze
at the faded reds and golds
of an autumn hillside –
the story in the old tapestry
not at all what I remembered

at the chapel window
the wind-stirred bittersweet . . .
lately,
and I don't know why,
great age seems unnecessary

in eternity
how can it matter much
but still
that dim December afternoon
I might have been there

these first cool nights
a neighbor burns apple wood . . .
it's not so much memory
that comes wafting back
as a trace of legend

just walking sidewalks,
a stranger
in a strange town,
when a child from his lawn
says “hello”

lonely
in my haste to nowhere
in particular
a sidewalk robin
gives me the eye

I'm just saying
how good it is to see her
when suddenly
she sticks out her tongue –
catches a snowflake

on the station platform
in a feathering of snow
I see her first –
in my chest
a stop-motion rose . o p e n i n g

having run out
of propane
we go to bed early –
her warmth the length of me
this winter night

geraniums in a windowbox,
a young wife leaning out
to tend them –
 when did my heart
 become a fist?

here where the river
is wide and smooth
and red leaves drift by slowly –
here ... remembering when
the dream was clear

touch ... touch ...
the skipping stone hits
the farther bank . . .
suddenly I am old
and understand nothing

the river snakes
across the plain into
the blue distance –
it's not so much a fear of what's to come
as of nothing left to do

NEW TERRITORY

while I slept
it snowed
and a tree fell
old age
uncertain as a winter road

some things
are never going to happen again
others
never again, that way,
and still others, never

having entered new territory
– a tundra at dusk –
I await,
anxious and somewhat fearful,
the undefined adventure

* * *

on the kitchen table
daisies
in a green bottle
all I need
everything I want

since morning
3 pears on a green plate are 2 –
alone
I craft these wintry lines,
the afternoon silent as granite

a dozen
roses are a dozen
roses,
but one rose
is a friend

MY HELPLESSNESS

in the park
a mockingbird holds forth –
feeling fetal again
only skirt fever
keeps me erect

magnolia petals
cluttered around the ruins
of a sundial –
my helplessness
before a woman in tears

discussing plans
for the annual fund raiser –
painfully aware
that beneath the white dress
there's a woman

so foxy
the new clerk at the gift shop –
watching now
the river slip beneath the bridge
I'm in no hurry to go home

trying to look her in
the eye as she explains
the Egyptian mummy –
her nipple-ring outlined beneath
the museum t-shirt

level clean-edged roof lines
against an evening sky
the tune of an era gone
my long-legged, lean and lovely,
where are you now?

* * *

lined with locust trees
a small street I love
its main event a pastry shop
and the sparrows
the small quick sparrows

in the light
of the hurricane lantern,
the walking stick
by the cabin door –
friend enough this winter night

back home
walking with a favorite uncle
toward the stream's source –
no longer a common alphabet
to spell our affection

the war ended,
he brought home from the Isle of Capri
a 'real' cameo
imagine its enchantment
there on the oil cloth table top

heads or tails?
well if it's heads, there you have her
Mrs. Wallace Stevens
in bas-relief
and still only a dime

the blue,
the piercing blue of Sirius.
more you will never share
the nuances are mute
– art's first hard lesson

using the wind,
by allowing the wind
full play –
this butterfly, not much more
than a folded piece of paper

TWO FOR LI PO

bleak branches
strung with constellations
– Colrain and now –
imagine, the same geography
once extolled by Li Po

that Li Po, drunk,
leaned over the boat's side
to embrace the moon
and drowned . . . ?
sure, I believe it

* * *

red as sunrise
tOmatOes alOng the windOwsill
 too many shadows
 too much reflection
time for something plump in the hand

first light
and again I'm brewing coffee –
like an ant
on a moebius strip
this dailiness of survival

for fifty years
through all the weathers
of the mind,
I have loved the world with my eye
. . . if nothing else, that

ever a pebble
in my shoe
since that one false step
on the beach
at Marblehead

walking
the railroad tracks
alone –
more and more we live
our parallel lives

what delighted me most
now leaving me
petal
by
petal

THE LIGHT
OF A
DISTANT HILL

The Light of a Distance Hill

It was winter and two travelers were crossing a plain to the same distant hill. Night came and they stopped to warm themselves by a fire, and talked with its keeper, a man of many seasons.

The first traveler soon said, "I must be going." The second traveler was more cautious, and he said, "It's a long distance to cover by night in the best of weathers and here, tonight, we have the added hazards of snow and winter winds."

The firekeeper suggested that they wait. He told of a light which always appeared on the distant hill soon after nightfall. He was sure of it. It had appeared every night of his memory since becoming the firekeeper many years since. By this light they could direct themselves more surely.

The first traveler said, "Well, I'm not sure of your light, but I am sure of my step by day or dark." And with that he pushed off into the bleakness of the black winter night. There was neither moonshine, nor star shine.

At length, the light appeared on the distant hill as the firekeeper had said it would. The second traveler, though still cautious, had become anxious for his destination also. He had hung back, uncertain, but now he was certain that with the light as a guide he could brave the hazards of the winter plain by night.

The firekeeper tried to cheer him, saying, "Your fellow traveler, wherever he is, will now see the light as you do. He will surely be at your point of destination when you arrive." The second traveler was not so sure, however, for he knew his companion of the road to be more likely to follow his nose than keep an eye on the intent of his journey.

The second traveler walked on through snow and over ice, through gullies and barberry bushes, keeping his eye fast to the

light of the distant hill. Even the bleak branches of a stand of winter trees could not keep the light from his steadfast gaze.

Towards morning he arrived. The light was a lantern hung high on a post by the barn of a hillside farmer. The second traveler asked after his companion of the night before and was not surprised to learn that he was unknown to the farmer and his bustling wife.

And after he had warmed himself and eaten of the wholesome food provided him, the second traveler went back into the winter cold to find his companion; and when he had found him huddled beneath a barberry bush, the second traveler noted how erratic were the footprints that led to the man's sparse shelter, and how straight were his own footprints of the night before, passing nearby on their way to the hillside farm—straight for having kept his eye steadfast to the light.

And so it is that he who travels the straight path finds first the hearth of man's desiring, and having done so goes back into the winter wilderness to find his errant companion to show him the way of the straight path home.

And if any would know this parable, let him go out into a field of freshly fallen snow and walk its width, looking to his right and to his left; and when he has crossed it, then cross it back again, this time keeping his eye fixed to an oak or a hickory on the farther side. Then let him see in the footprints of those crossings the truth of these words, that in the years to come, when there is need, he will remember this lore and know to look to the light of that distant hill.

About the Author

Larry Kimmel was born in 1940, in Johnstown, PA. He holds degrees from Oberlin Conservatory and Pittsburgh University, and has worked at everything from steel mills to libraries. Now self-employed, he lives with his wife in the hills of western Massachusetts.