

Collected Poems

Volume III

Edward Locke

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THE ION THAT TURNS THE QUEST INTO A QUESTION in
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TO AN UNADOPTABLE CHILD in *SKYLARK*
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FOR ELISABETH AND JANET

FOR DAVID

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Poem on Sunday	1
Napping in Winter	2
Food for Janet	4
Displacement	5
Entering Another Year	6
Last and First Day	7
Weekend	8
I Kid You Not	9
Forever at Six A. M.	11
Pursuing the Contract	12
Else-Things	14
Green Bank	16
Lake Placid and Mirror Lake	26
Brave Bolton	28
Country Road	29
Repercussions	30
Graduation	31
Ant on the Wall	32
The Book of Retirement	33
I Hate Rings	35
Fulfilling the New Year	36
To an Unadoptable Child	38
Mother's Greeting	39
Silent in Charity	40
To Desert Spaces	41
Here and There	42
Forever and Ever	43
Italian Interim	44
Edinburgh Cemetery	45
Time Pieced	47
Nursery Rhyme	48
A Tale of Two	49
Accident	50
Birthday	51
Demands	52
Citadel	53
Arguing	54

Waking	55
New Year's Again and Again	56
Loss	57
A Christmas Vision	58
Christmas Night, London	59
The Rose Ballad	60
She	61
The Dark Zodiac of the Unicorn	62
East River	63
Each a Way	64
Pietra Dura, from the Red Fort	65
Divergence	66
Farewell Thinking	67
Making Up	68
Here's Looking at You	69
The Question of Life Everlasting	70
Metempsychosis	71
Deep as the Ocean Falls	74
The Mirror of the Sea	75
I Read in Schopenhauer	76
Daybreak	77
Finding	78
Woods	79
Reverence and Irreverence	80
Bullfight	81
Sting Ray	82
Brute Confidence	84
Sheath	86
Neither Brothers nor Underlings	87
Discard	90
Raft on the Susquehanna	91
Small Dunes	92
A Western	94
Assemblage	97
Miranda upon Caliban	98
Epithalamium	100
Bold Hugs, Bold Sorrows	101
Time Out	103
She Dances Between the Dance	105
Candles and Crowns	106

The First Fetus	108
The Chink in the Wall to Bottom	109
Termination and Indetermination	110
Air, Earth, and Flow	111
Mortification	112
Unity of Style	113
Don Quixote's Midnight Ballad	115
Juan	117
Ballad to the Ballad	123
Fleeing the Asylum	125
Paine to Blake	126
The Visit	128
From Michael Straight's Autobiography	129
To a Poet	130
Knighthood for Christopher Ricks	131
Cyrillic in Black and White	132
Pasternak	133
Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg	135
For William Troy	136
Gap	138
Dylan Thomas	139
Distinguished Vision	140
Doubtful Therapy	141
A Point of Time	142
On the Idea that Anti-Semitism Is Soluble in Art	143
Another Birthday	144
Long Journey into Light	145
Long Journey's Night	146
To Max Schreck	147
Upstairs	148
Encounter	149
To St. Cecilia	151
Looking Like Puccini	152
At the Museum	153
Fish Music	154
Paths	155
Dear Theophany	156
Color Coordinates	159
Vanishing Point	160
Michelangelo	162

The Four Questions of Jacob Epstein	168
Ancient of Days	170
Distancing	171
Galileo to Milton	172
Babeuf	173
Herr Young Professor	174
From the Diary of Jane Addams, Age 10	175
Goodbye, Amelia Earhart	176
Sermon for Today's Teresa	177
For Anne Morrow Lindbergh	178
Thinking of Uta Hagen	179
Formatives	180
Marsyas in Italy	181
Sage	182
Yitzhak Rabin at Evening	184
Messages	185
Hiking on Sunday	186
Reject	188
Washing Up	189
Boys Are Boys	190
An Age of Consent	191
Revelation	193
Conversion	194
The Obscurity of the Clear Heart	195
To Cybele	197
Lost Empire	198
Ruminating	199
Letter to One Perhaps Still Living (1987)	200
Pearl	201
Ordinary People	203
A Haiku	205
Conscientious Objects	207
Last Briefing	208
The Freedom of the Philippines	209
The Form of Flattery	210
The Inn	211
Ararat	212
If We Cannot Live for Something, We Will Die for Something	213
Bespeaking the Spooky	214

Vessel	215
Aide	216
Domino, 1941	217
Concentration	218
Distant Skies, Distant Signs	219
Cities	220
Nuevo York	222
Town Dump	224
Jerusalem, the Higher Greeting	226
Waste into Waste	228
Fourth Avenue	229
Permutations	230
Taxi Standing	231
We	233
Flow	234
The Ion that Turns the Quest into a Question	235
Note to the World	236

POEM ON SUNDAY

My second wife, though a different person,
Is really the first. I never let her know.
Sometimes I discern the samenesses,
And as for the differences,
What does it matter, since I do not let love go?

My first son, who is also my only,
Has already forged his own way to grow.
Sometimes I discern our samenesses,
But as for the differences,
What does it matter, since I did not let love go?

My first life, since I am only a person,
May well be the last. If it should not be so,
Sometimes I may discern the samenesses,
And as for the differences,
What will it matter, since I will not let love go?

LAST AND FIRST DAY

Snow dozes
And the brain tumbles into the new year.
Flakes slumber into the city like a great weight,
The push of irrecoverable memory.
Everything gestates, even forgetfulness.

Chill penetrates,
Temperature translates Maine into its cold echoes,
Degrees undermine,
The moose on the frontier face downdrafts of Artic mist,
Yet folded under the thin gray photomaps of the cortex
And its whirls
(An atmosphere of a billion gates and flurries),
Animal remembrances perk like morning coffee.
Wit drains up its lonely childhood:
A phylogenetic slowness sow-nosed,
Platypus-billed, lemur-tailed.

A mole of comprehension creeps below
Our past Decembers, evolves
Alongside the primate thalamus,
Below slopes that glisten
Atop our medulla's instinctual valleys,
Alongside the skidding inner clock,
Below pons whorls hiccupping onto the terraced fields.

Midnight designs the solstice into witness.

WEEKEND

I'm fond of navigating the night.
– Valéry

I lean across. The current is my guide.
The Charles is what I cross without a sail.
I'm in a rowboat and we're splinter-frail;
The crosswinds scold my stray attempt to glide.
The Charles is what I cross without a sail,
No motor and no throttle open wide.
The crosswinds scold my stray attempt to glide –
My boat's a Lancelot whose questings flail.
No motor and no throttle open wide,
The boat seeks some swerved penchant as its Grail,
But slowly, for my eyes deal with blackmail
Where misadventure beckons at low tide.
The boat seeks some swerved waiting as its Grail;
My bearing and the errant waves collide;
Though misadventure threatens from each side,
Deep bays are worth my every chance to fail.

GREEN BANK

I

FRIENDSHIP BY DETECTION

The National Radio Astronomy Observatory, located in a secluded valley of Pocahontas County, West Virginia...was selected...because the area...is well shielded....

– Official brochure

Green Bank is a landscape within a grounded thought. It beckons –

Many ideas are scenes for personal exaction and joy –
And perseveres as an intemperate quaver
Charting the sky's scales,
And as an equity of motion
Like the moon's schedule calling people and sea waves
Forward, to trap gravity into time
And catch the balance of time.

That we might unearth why we do from what we do,
Green Bank narrates first what our surroundings average,
Filling partialities of our breathlessness, so we may listen.
Green Bank is also the electron making the full atom
The shape of something. It is a conception of our mind,
Nevertheless indulging its astro-silviculture of wind and
poplars

(It knows we braid it in brainwork,
Yet what a gracious prisoner, to behave like merely a rugged
vale) –

A stream, a pebbled galaxy to walk on, arrangements of frogs
Soloing like minute green comets across the grass.
This saddleback is itself Green Bank, and it holds
To the sweeping dishes white within the sun
And the shadowy dishes white against the moon,
And dittos what we think –

And so, the inside tale of a star
Falls into our biographies.

These cross-reverberations of peaks and near-stillness,
Composing all Green Bank, quiver out to the universe:
It is a mutual hearing, a friendship by detection.
There is a moonscape of sleep to our waking;
There is an earthscape of ancientness correcting the course
Of our love-making; we have brought something nearer
From the furthest farness that exists, farther than we ever
 hearkened to,
Like the distance from one man to himself.

Bolt in, Green Bank – and wake in the lives
We are writing for each other.

II

GUIDING LINES

Diversification of discoveries and the opening up of new
points of view...are inherent in the progress of knowledge.
 – Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*

Green Bank. The Ultima Thule of radio waves
Is an easy drive from Monticello.
Can it by surprise attend on Jefferson in death?
Will that be its special quality,
To pick up the extraliminal pieces of Jefferson's tones –
A jam of ramming frictions miles away
Exclaiming, "I was Thomas Jefferson, farmer.
I burned within the young idea of democracy;
I was smoke-dried into it."
Is that its ivory-network sine qua non,
To focus the lips of the past, the lips

Of the fathers of America in the replicating chambers of
their graves?
Then, screening from present breezes
Every witticism elders like Adams denounced and every
subtlety
He murmured, Green Bank will soundwave into our eardrums
Only those who float like dreaming cellos
And join in the unseen chorus desiring their significance be
re-called.
As this meshwork tunes into them, will they engage
The meanings they meant between the lines?

For not only can Green Bank's dishes pry and aggrandize,
But dissociate and select. Their tapes record what they face
Though the attitudes differ.
Let them also post Paine, Melville, Whitman, Hawthorne,
Each emitting currents of uninterrupted individuality, though
linked;
These are not the gods' celestial messages
(Which are of indifference coterminous with infamous
passion,
Or despair parallel to their energetic laughter),
But each American's vibrant re-telling of a similar-peopled
memoir:
Their buffetings into the curio of Just Around the Corner.

These family-history particles, caught peeking
In half-nooks of constellations off the solar prominences,
Fold continuously below
Into who knows what plethora of impulses,
What arrays of scintillating strophes – yet,
As in poetry readings, the audience must be one person only.
What if the premises of Green Bank's induction
Were a theater coiled with echo, and the further we enter,
The more a bold malevolence throbbing in the plenum
Threatens our fate? Let us suppose our system
Of financial subservience and ruler-servant farce and drama
of impoverishment,

The tooth-and-nail membranes scratching at a living,
The unclimbable gaps in any honest chaos,
Thundered to thrust itself into each person's chest on this planet,
Into all black garbage holes and all sunny cornfields:
Green Bank conducts each call, meets every volume –
Wouldn't we stumble on glottals and grunts, grapple with
 lisps and lacunae,
Every whisper a screech?
And would our vowel-type telescopes hint those yells
Secretive in their implosive O's, and menacing
Off-key in a time-space warp hurtling toward us?
Suppose nothing impedes that stressful act;
No ineluctable transference sparks warning.
Suppose Green Bank locates that nebulous terror
But does not confess it even as the discrete rattle
Sinks into Green Bank's amperes and haywires its measures.
What could we conclude
But there was no such ecliptic connection, no attentive
 collective force –
Unless and until we concede
That we who have minted each armature
Shaped a circuit to fail purposely
And resist our governance, that in reality
We have insulated ourselves from the oracular myths of the
 universe.

Where, then, do encompassing astronauts wind up,
Who were once upon a hullabaloo for forever-and-a-day?
It may be everything is or will be known, except how we
 know
And to what end.
Imagine *how*, *to what end*, twisting around each other
In the way of sequencing consequences:
Along the intricate estuaries of the Milky Way,
The *hows* and *to what ends* bob in multiple inlets
Like marsh gases clinging to fulgent matter.
Those helixes advance even if they turn pterodactyls –
Or maybe where other biologies rule, a bird-cloned people

Weaving through pods of gorging Crabs!
But Green Bank engages in no separate instrument and flight;
Both are unified, both contacts are already present,
The *eeks* are grasped and eager to greet
The patchworks of smiles of welcoming persons
Courageous in the tears of expectancy.
Alert in the heeding of Green Bank, the people of green earth
Embark in airships for a visit, cousin-like,
Along arcades our metal interferometer reflects,
And on the lambent tracks marked by *how?* and *to what end?*
 they search
Even in sleep for those unimaginable values
The cosmos, like a child, has hidden under the pillow it
 rests on.

Now, in what is efficacious though not effacing, Green Bank
 decides
What is sacred is what is admitted. The sanctity
Of cliqueless, classless children, in no way infinite except in
 dignity,
Amplifies their small presence
As they switch from the frequencies of dying stars
To those near-silences,
Those trembling states
Where they may audition at the thresholds.

III

DOWN THE PATH

If I cried out, who would hear me up there....
 – Rilke, *First Duino Elegy*

“Satyajit,” calls the sun, “Wake up.
Follow the obsessed Hindu lawyer, the Mahatma,
As he emerges from a million caves
Where mixed ideals, contradictory portraits, preach to reel

Buddahood

Away from fissures of benightedness, and he enters the
cottages of Muslims,
Though knives thread the kitchen drawers –
Then, tramps to temples where the slap-happy Krishna
Saved from rancid milk the sculptors setting out
To drink from hollows an image of the merciful.

So completes our filmic journey through difference and
indifference,
Sweetness and inebriation, greed and sacrifice,
All resounding with the flaws of gods and awesomes
Whose vanity requests a close-up
Still closer to earth's center.
In such a spirit that quack doctor and ducking husband,
Gandhi,
Eagles over the muck of Delhi; the wings of his flock
Focus and reverberate through the opening credits
Of tomorrow's quiet dawn that will urge us to speak.
In India the sprockets of Ray's light are pulled through skies,
Illuminating the chess games of both older and newer days.
There music and orchards cross a film's boundaries
To seize famine, bringing glimpses of children –
There tracking shots, although Apu's wife's death
Ushered in the ignorance of feeling unwanted
And shook learning to its knees,
Shall steer us into other mornings.
Satyajit, source of resources, your movements
Take my stillness where it wants to go.”

Green Bank displays itself as a receiver of each intimate
recital
Of an invitation, translated into: *Whatever you hear, touch* –
An offer shouted through childhood and hoarse with poets'
similes.
Even, from ancient sadhus, the roaring lecture of the *Gita*
Must be flowing still enshrined in the Ganges and
Brahmaputra
Toward our own ready-for-anything mountain receptor –

Though the *Gita's* quanta of antiquity
Missile our continuum with a bursting staidness, a showered
stasis.

Strange, here in the noble selflessness of that hymn to
obligation,
In Green Bank's Upanishads of incoming morality,
Some feudal ideal pre-cuts, pre-slices,
Pre-arranges the lessons into a divine context of lord and
slave,
Wealthy and serf, blueblood with *noblesse oblige*
Versus humble *glad-to-be-of service*, the dichotomies of fixed
power
Society in its semi-natural way
So frequently streams into its channels.
Perfection in the assigned role uplifts the riser,
Cries this precept of the *Gita*.

But why is Arjun, like the Roman Aurelius, merely content
With where he finds himself and faithful to where he finds
himself?
Those spaces suit stars,
Yet stars control no future.

Our privileged place sits cemented like a filthy slum stoop
Supporting an urchin who never weeps for help,
Has little scope, and knows his position as the one setting
Each normal evening lofts itself upon, and closes upon.
It is a destiny holding together, time out of mind,
By stringing landlord and strung outsider.
Being is believing: cited blindly, the song of spiritual
aristocracy
By assignation lets a certain few own those steps
Forever's gamins call home.

These lenses of Green Bank magnify and elongate
The lovely *Gita* cursives and record the hymn by graphs
Combined with jots pouring in

From the thousand doctrinal sagas legacied to offspring –
Asia's and our own.
Meanwhile, other supernova-like lyrics
And whitedwarfed sonnets
And giant red epics with pulsating rhythms rotating,
 dwindling, expanding,
Signal there are rival loomings (with touchstones of sacrifice)
To this storied vacuum the *Gita* sermon offers –
Those cast in the blood of every Hindu child.

IV

INDETERMINATE COORDINATES

...not one crevice that wouldn't echo annunciation.
– Rilke, *Seventh Duino Elegy*

How nothing can be deduced, if we are tentative enough.
How mastery cannot be proven, if we are grim enough.
No premise but is based on cautious love, no promise
But accepted on the foundation of a rock
On a pebble on a grain of sand on a tidbit of trust,
And even uncontrollable desire and devouring appetite –
Forces implying action from a distance –
Run closely through starred fissions
For the confidence of a riveted partnership.

Green Bank asks for physicists who would care to hear
Nincompoop rainbirds and orange dinosaurs,
For astronomers seeking attack claws
Beyond the rational question of domination.
Who hived these workers here, to hexagon what frighteners?
On what alien green bank where labdanum and bdellium
 are drunk
Could they be eavesdropping?
They hearken to the pitch of our universe's earliest hum
Which sieges the fantastic mind, but has a no-quarter-given
 entry

To moor its special query of possibility there –
Like the eerie shriek of lightning over a cage of towers
Splitting its insides outside, to slump groundward,
Never within the girders.
With what other brave message would the first tenure of time
begin?

It must resemble the triumphant tale of the handicapped:
Appreciation clapped with death –
Two one-armed old soldiers at a spectacular arena
Where each may applaud by banging the other's hand.

The break with one's past when a daughter leaves home –
Space is chilling and terminal like that.

Earth, too, is transformed after we listen to the golden
asteroids,

Blackbordered plasma, Magellanic clouds;
Earth is more of one's habitat but with less of one's past.
Our spy-anvil named Green Bank, in a dip in a hill,
May be sensing this hour a verdant bank of time
Where meadows appear as minutes, and the immature
brook

Comprises all we have considered as the future,
And the present is signified by a butterfly resting
On a moment of great moment.

When the winged insect flies on, eavesdropping will end
for us.

And now Green Bank hears just that alighting of a butterfly.
Isn't this action from a distance, this love of the butterfly
Flying to the green current of time, a thrust
That makes of the past a present and symbolically stands
For that renewable hope all grass truly tries to be?
How odd when the grass itself says goodbye.

A mildly melancholic stirring overrides the rising spirals
Of nature unveiling itself. That is our definite knowledge.
It swells into a few factors:
A disappointment in people, a shame for a trifling act

Committed twelve years ago, a life full of tempest in
a teapot of affection,
Deteriorating tympanums, distraction with interference.
In the zigzag racing of genes,
In our poor village of entropy, we try to clarify
That the body's eyes, these radio arcs
Distilling and metering who knows what affinities,
Reflect in their vibrations
Our own deep-set acoustics testing all orders of friendship.
Light up the noise. Blow the trumpet of E square.
Signal with smoke blanket
From these neural mountains across mute reaches.
The gendering earth excites the universe with patterned
morning songs.
They will see, whoever they are. They will embrace earfuls,
whoever we are.
We will monolog into a reversed Green Bank
Equal amounts of return.
The static in our backgrounds must be challenged.
We will confront the log of human emotions recorded
In each equation: nothing is relative
But Green Bank makes it so; nothing is absolute
But the digital tines will vary; no tongue can fork
But each inquisitive rictus must chant the angle; no
melancholy Dane
Can live but in the porches of our ears, now touched white
And constituting Green Bank;
No sweat can trickle down the brow but might become an
adventure
To thunder into Green Bank's verdure of sound;
No ideas will shimmer into any rangefinding brain
But the eons will grasp them,
For they will resonate down Green Banks everywhere
And register with the definite article, the struggling verb, the
penetrant metaphor,
Of every person who dares to hear another's voice.

BRAVE BOLTON

And have you recovered, Winston, my writing chum,
Has the agony in your face,
The hardest place to treat,
Wagoned west to the Rockies, retreating
To merely tongue in cheek? That throbbery
Now sleeps in a serer shrubbery
Hidden far from the palate
Refreshed birds sing on.

Where was that wakeful duel?
Within the ghost town of the trigeminal –
There a kind of con man Trismegistus
Conjured the maddening robbers of peace,
The sneaking pilfering of peace,
The incessant holdup of peace.
It was that very Tombstone phantom
Who in an enfeebling three-gun attack rode
Your frontiers of reverie
Toward the edge of a cliff of torment.

Winston, you have borne
The Lewis and Clark in your bones
To a new expedition, where painlessness reigns.
Now you are that sheriff, Wyatt Earp,
Your pen in your holster, inkslinging
Through your town to keep order,
With no syllable daring to take more than its due,
And you are that sharpshooter Wittgenstein,
Being the case of everything poetry is.

COUNTRY ROAD

Our car progresses palely down the route;
The asphalt moonlight bumps no-number doors
And mailbox gardens shabbily in file
 With bloodroots scrambling, green-licking the route.

I ride the moon-paved shoulder. *Never before,*
You quiver, *no, not here.* The wind dissolves
To ashen air, collapsed as if it crashed
 Against some grief not visualized before.

You turn, a question where your lip-wings are;
My eyes respond, *Yes, here – this curve, this elm.*
Meanwhile the wheels roll on where grills of more
 Screened porches lean and other bloodroots are.

ANT ON THE WALL

This is Wellesley College! Crush that ant!
No twice-segmented
thrice two-legged creature may climb the inner sanctum
of this student-delicious cafeteria.
Squash him on the pristine wall!
Here, all read while they eat and absorb what they read.
The mussed coiffeurs, the frilly salad bar,
and on red garbage bins,
a graveyard of trays awaiting the great washing: all these
throwaways
will become as nostalgic as dirndl clouds
snuggling the moon over Wellesley Lake on crisp spring nights
and as romanticized as Venus in featherstitched saffron blouse
sharing a Nobel with Adonis
to these laughing goddesses who, snuggling to Kafka and
Nietzsche
for four years in bed, will graduate luckily
with a tiny black smear in the mind.

TO AN UNADOPTABLE CHILD

Child, behold the ardor in Kamakura.
The Sikh, Muslim,
Agnostic Humanist,
Christian – each travels
Encomiastic meters
To one Buddha.

Hushed and sitting frozen
In your welcoming trance,
Age like the prince
Who sanctified others –
Remember him,
And be chosen.

MOTHER'S GREETING

She stopped, convulsive,
To gasp a bit,
Strayed on the balcony,
Her dusky hair hall-lit
In the wrap of the morning;
A stubborn chill adorned
The glass door. I approached
To sermonize on father
Recently mourned
And worth every moan,
When she turned – smiling,
Under-covering me
With the robe of her voice:
"Just watering the sunrise."
My tears fell luminous.

HERE AND THERE

...almost every possible mode of song makes itself heard; and Nature, whence it originates, also receives it again.

– Hölderlin

My father's birthday was the day after mine,
And the family joke?
I was a day older than he.
Yet it held a truth –
My poetry announces my father.

The refugee from the Latvian ghetto
Arrived to the settlement house, the pushcart,
The housing ad code of *Churches Nearby*,
Meaning, *Stay away, Jews*. He labored,
Like the shark, in a sometimes blood-curdling milieu;
If he rested, the breath would be knocked out of him.

School had been first; sixth grade loomed
Not with success for the thirteen-year old
With little English, and he fell to fifth grade
As if a predator chased him. So to fourth,
And at year's end, he graduated
From kindergarten and went to work.

And I grew up with a transliterated name
And this extra set of parents:
Wedded words.
He and I came to the surface.
We broke the wave of America over our backs.

A TALE OF TWO

Divorce bitter, and two boys so tiny,
their cookie-coterminous mother
meant more than blowflies
landing upon the decks of petals;
so young, father vanished
like the night light in the morning,
and when father borrowed them
and they were packaged for shipment,
they bellowed a ransom of tantrums
to keep non-kidnapped mommy;

so infantile, each weekend with daddy so long,
two days so brimmed with sleep
and pancakes and stumbling
and growing darkness rubbing against them
as it squeezed
through the doorscreen,
that when father car'd them home,
they sobbed that, though deposited
at the knees of a woman they recalled,
it was daddy abandoning them.

WAKING

The full length of the glass backs
The bedroom door: I look complete
From heel to ear;
At night it lacks
Purpose, exhibiting bare head, creased feet.

Enduring pajamas (checks and jags
And stripes), I doze while two shut lamps
Blend me to bed
Where dreams in rags
Tatter my rest as they must the true tramps.

And how is it at dawn, prior
To dressing, before the prim world scorns
My slouch-cap image –
Peeking at the mirror,
I, sockless, shoeless, bear a crown of thorns?

Others besides martyrs have suffered –
Some in greater, some sharper, downfall –
Why always do I,
Comparing our scarred
And brutal destinies, seem so small?

SHE

Where am I going, vine-like? Where's the lattice
The roses of the blushing wives festoon?
For twelve weeks
My stalk presumed my grasp would hold,
Yet nothing clung. Why am I left alone?

Where is my share? I groped in expectation,
And marked time patiently: now fourteen weeks –
Yet spreading roots
Won't join me in a pas de deux
Of intertwining steps, or touch my stakes.

Surely the goods of earth are meant for all.
If love is democratic, I've no vote –
Sixteen weeks on,
The gluey lips of shoots nearby
Kissed red October's light, but I was late.

There is no automatic love, it seems.
It may not come, pass by, leap forth or grow,
And twenty weeks
Of watching tendrils twirl and reap
Have pressed me to the wall. I'm crumbling, too.

FAREWELL THINKING

Remembering being a lie stamped
On a falsehood, I enjoy recollecting
Old conversations,
As, after my spree, she: “You are comical, *monsieur*.”
And I, replying, “Yes, that is my tragedy.”
Her sum of sweetheartism is zero-sum,
 So my computer naughts admit if units twoing
 Were passionate enough for Turing,
They are coupling enough
For me: that’s memory talking, the left
Or right stuff of a shifting cortex, whichever
Controls chaff.

My thoughts whip and spiral outward, but I am no
Galaxy: brainstormers are the disordered *comme il faut*
Of the day – yes, we were infants
In a testy mood, tenuously separating
 Just forty years ago.
As I conjure pasts, recalling in an uncertain, uneven
Way how they begin, how backspacing went forward,
I deny her accusation I play an hysterical game.
Then, her pressing embrace stiffens and parts –
As do we from home.

We had pulled our tricky selves out of an evening hat,
And flew as doves until midnight tucked our wings
Into its black vest that keeps the inexplicable
 Magical. And once, abed at dawn, she invoked
 The sun as her true religion. “You are its sacred text,”
I ventured. Turning, figuring I again had joked
In excess, she smiled, “Place your head
On my sleeve, with your hand here,” and looked
My way in reprieve,
Like Magdalene to her foolhardy beau,
That I was forgiven for all the dark things
I constantly perceive.

MAKING UP

Nature hates to be uncovered.
Even bare rock, if you wait,
And Nature outwaits everything except the universe,
Will crumble to soil and entertain lichen, sedge, marigold,
Will blend with the plants so intimately one day,
Nature won't recall which was first born.
So I, my dear. I wait in bed to be overspread.
I am already littered with patience,
Curtained with slow evolution.
Some day I will disjoin and grow you,
And as we lose sight of whether we are copper or silver foil or
zinc,
We will loom restive with details of the crosswired sun
And the unsheathed moon.
We will forget which of us was which originally.

I READ IN SCHOPENHAUER

I read in Schopenhauer
A biological quirk
Which I could verify
In any standard work
Or, having a specialist
Within the family, phone.
But I prefer no check
And choose the barely known –
How some bluebottle, female,
May err in one blind flash:
Instead of dropping eggs
In edible putrid flesh,
May lay them in the blossom
Of *Arum dracunculus*,
Deceived, deprived of legacy
By the strong cadaverous
Malodors of this plant.
I take this as my truth:
That nature's shabbiness
Aids or sepulchers youth –
So there's a certain justice
True and truly fake
Which causes lonely death
To progeny who wake
To starve: that those who hatch
Where no mistake's allowed,
Who settled on the lie
That rot must mate with match –
Though infancy kiss petals,
Die duped, die disendowed.

DAYBREAK

Snow geese in mass.
We gawk at no lake communion,
but at white-hundreds of birds
barefoot and surpliceless and self-busy
like heaped unrepentant snowflakes.
As one sidles and one sideslips,
while the wisdom of air currents squawk loudly,
honking bits of the upwardly mobile blizzard
storm and heel toward clouds
kindred-looking
and artfully scudding Montana rimrock.

These birds veer northward to Calgary.
The wheel of wings never urge ground orientation
as when days ago
webbed feet at the water's snarl succumbed
to mobbing and paddling and tangling the waters
in assemblages of similar fowl.
Here, high, as more tolerant drifts of groups,
they may bear more easily
the later humility of coming down.
Now supplicating winds
attend their heads tucked toward and nearing home.

DISCARD

The rose in a small nosegay authenticates
Traces of wicker where it was tossed carelessly,
And the basket preens, beginning to understand
How we're perfumed through another's presence.
In the rose imagination, having read history,
It pricks Rilke, dies of worm in Blake's hand
And scents a language secretly living Yeats.
Next morning, the corsage wafts hence
In a diminutive transfer of residence
To a garbage fill. It uplifts the land.

RAFT ON THE SUSQUEHANNA

Toward Safe Harbor, Wyalusing, Dauphin,
Wapwallopen –
from the Juniata's West Branch –
dawn with carte-blanche
outlines a Susquehanna raft and a river man.

The Susquehanna nods and underflows
into waterways
of quiet country. Whatever I become,
I drift like the raft, calm
and gliding toward where the land dies.

A snaking calumet, peace is the river,
this frail mover
bending past the grass's tribal shores –
and a star behind the stars
shifting shifts, that more stars may uncover.

Not things, but the quarantined
in things – a hidden trend
teaching the Susquehanna secret bailiwicks
where lonely shipwrecks
await beyond where its emptyings blend.

That search from within a serenity,
while breathlessly
treetop spiders bungee to the sweetbriars –
who resists such lures?
So a man on a raft on a river floats by.

A WESTERN

I

THE KID

This is a tale without a beginning.
It always was.
This is a story of the tale winning.
It always does.
What comes out better than country or countrymen?
What they're fashioned in.

Now this h'yar kid was not you or I.
Now this h'yar kid saw his mother die.
These freebooters were carrying shooters
(The brothers Alias) –
Nothing they daren't.
They shot up the bank and a stray bullet sank
Into the kid's materfamilias –
His last parent.
And the child grew up wild,
Invading any ground he could grab
For grub.
He was nothing scared and nothing daunted.
He just grew up haunted.
What was it? Blood.
The underneath-the-red-skin most have least understood.

If you've no quarrel I'll come to the moral
Pretty soon. Fire's near out. Hear me out.
He killed or maimed all the false-named
That could run, walk or crawl.
Sheriff will bear me out.

When I first gathered this material,
Going from town to town,

Thinking to uncover some nugget of a serial
And write it down,
I stepped inside a bar where they said he drinks,
To find if all were fable.
After I had inquired of several things,
The stranger put a knife through my hand on the table.

I don't know if he's single or wed.
"Very unsatisfactory!"
I don't know if he's alive or dead.
"Bah! You call that history?"

II

BUFFALO HUNTER

Somebody claiming he was his uncle
Gave me some papers, the Kid's chronicle.
So this, from my report
(Of a sort) –
What he did,
From the sober mouth of the Kid:

Wanderer: This is a westering without beginning.
Sperm to virility, there is no rest, but going:
St. Lou to Abilene, where white men won,
Or goldenly mining Oregon
Where still the native stragglers live on weeds
And weaken to hackled women
(Not raped, yet looted) –
Whatever strength food and water gave me
Turned into nothing that could save me:
Plains elk, hunted by the Injun
I later starved, transmuted in me and transmuted me
To indigestible deeds.

Prairie: Across the Great Divide, I stowed my man-killing
gun,

Saved it for pronghorns, cats, what beasts the sun
Baked in the prairie earth and steamed out loping:
Jackrabbit, brown bear from the sloping
Woodshade – who in our night bit through my arm,
As he did slumbering Charlemagne
Of legend, warned in vain
Of terrible veined redness to come.

Buffalo: Mine was no sleep, though a dream ended
For Charles, for me, and all the thousand men dead.
Reformed from rifling the not-very-rich into standing still
With lung-mashing whiskey on an autumn hill
Where dawn sideburns the early snow
With a cold, questionable pride –
Wrapped in the stinking hide
Of their own, I grinned and slaughtered the buffalo.

Spurs: The spurs that scar the horse spur him to where?
I knew what Crow thought: through brook and lair,
We had besmirched unterritorialized life –
That severing with a dull knife
Where edges heal, yet bleeding never stops.
I who had sought to redress –
Not falsify –
Poor drunks stumbling into my murderousness,
Now crimed a savage bitterer than I,
And where now are Injun hopes?

Brand: Whatever I fingered, I shattered someone else –
Myself as well. The gun backfires in the pulse.
Yet mother told me of dying Roland's horn
Which startled Charlemagne; upborne
By that tale, I dream each kind of warrior turns
Down the valley of Roncevaux –
Even the shooter of buffalo –
And his death is a sound for which a king returns.

CANDLES AND CROWNS

As, at fifteen, I feared the Nazi conflagration,
Now their opposite, Max Beckmann,
Who in two hundred self-portraits
Sophisticate to clown, “no whining for mercy and grace,”

Haunts me as if only Germans pulled us
Out of the creeping world
Past ourselves through panzer love,
Into slow one-by-one pictures of our images burning.

I believe that for an Anglophile I go strangely Teuton –
My first wife born in Speyer,
Second descended from Hamburg moilers.

Marlowe and Milton speak to me
Every day,
But my midnights are Germany.

As long as my face saturates itself
With similar reading glasses,
I belong in and bulge in this Beckmann-painted background:
He himself champs on burgundy with rolled tobacco
While we, mere tuxedo-apes against canary walls,
Grunt in the adjoining room our guerrilla conversations
In soft porn and guttural graffiti.

We squashed, aslant aristocrats squeeze together
And view in "Girl With Yellow Cat (On Gray)"
The hugging of a who-knows? animal
And threats of revenge by a demimonde blonde.
Indeed, in all of Max, behind his oiled poseurs

Rat-smug and bug-hatted, we lurk behind the lines
Possessed of the look of a godless, Charon-cold fish.

During our fatal journey toward manacles
And a sphinx birdwoman,
Ignoramus gnomes stare us into dreams that are die-agnostic
In which we behold canvases hanging scratched
By Nazi prefigurers with an abracadabra perspective –
Jaundiced candles and crowns flaming out
Our supply of air left.

Feathers and knifeblades are equally tossed
By sailor Max from a bay as beautifully blue-frightening
As Shakespeare's eyes, if they were not, had a right to be.

Biographies in aggressive whites and blacks
Reflect at evening onto the reflecting moon a retrospective
Of prison bars, fetters and green-vertigo masks:

All these escapees from an era's asylum –
From the grammar of Grimm
Brushed behind each frame –
Ferry their madneses across transnational waters
While each triptych of isled and misled persons
Attracts our fate by marrying
Into the loneliest sense the body acknowledges.

THE CHINK IN THE WALL TO BOTTOM

When ogres age into a human size,
Their frightpower shrunk to pulled teeth no one buys –
Who can surmise how huge their loving was? –
 They laud their fled loves gladly,
 For that is all their muse.

Fairies who puff their lives through a mystic ring,
Who flutter from blue to pink, no deeper pang,
And hug but in dramatic semblancing,
 They laud their fled loves gladly,
 For that is all they bring.

Old gnomes whose stop-clock face means one blind leap
Toward mountain crags, who sleep in nooks that seep,
Hang icicles in their hearts where no suns grope –
 They laud their fled loves gladly,
 For that is all their hope.

Young elves renew, clowning each day in turn
Within their heights of folly stem from stern,
With silly laughs from doctors' slaps when born –
 They laud their fled loves gladly,
 For that is all they learn.

While we exposed to love through cracks, conspire
To ask: should we have ever dared desire
Had we known yearning would be so entire?
 We laud our fled loves gladly,
 For that is all we are.

BALLAD TO THE BALLAD

Like cliffs, those plain years shone, though worn:
Love clinged to dawn and both unmisted.
We with arc'd light displaced their sun
And have forever lost it.

Long years ago Lord Randall drank
The poisoned cup instead of fealty,
While many a man languished his life
Through Barbara Allen's cruelty.

Those hawks, such horses, lakes or hounds,
Each lover, single-crossed and pallid,
Scattered in tales like molecules
To constitute folk ballad.

In cities – flesh's surrogate –
We read on quiet Sunday mornings
Those elementary metered rhymes,
But barely gauge their meanings.

How shall a world this complex reach
Across the era's, the nation's chasm
To where simplicities dominate –
Regard, ruralism,

That reverential love which only
Rare persons each to each may minister,
Or if the motives stabbed and choked,
They seemed so trimly sinister.

Death in a trice for clear ideals –
And some few, recently in battles,

Heard at the last sight of our flag
Old rhythms where new death rattles.

But, soldiers, read of honor's line,
And those who knew which killings crossed it –
We who will die in later wars,
We have forever lost it.

FROM MICHAEL STRAIGHT'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

When Straight rented his Cambridge flat,
His friends stayed late at night
And made such ugly racket that
The man above took fright –

He'd knock the pipes with febrile arm,
With feebler breath would curse
The students who, not meaning harm,
Made difficult evenings worse.

The news said Housman died. The boys,
Absorbed, turned records high,
For upstairs no one whined of noise.
Never ask me why.

A POINT OF TIME

Each poem arises on the third day.
Each cadence on the third day peeks.
For the first hours, our ambiguity nerve

Blooms, like the translucency infants
Wake to from their first nap. We call it,
Demarcation. On the second day, controlling logic

Expresses itself less lightly, as a revision
Of the begun version, but not as reversion,
For the body rocks, creation shivers.

In the modern universe, unlike the old globe
Where direction bespoke a fixed way of contemplation –
Down or ascending, northward or east –

To pretend thinking rises is not quite safe.
We mean it extends, a bit as the sun
Slides shinningly through its rays, slantingly.

I do not believe in a god returning to forward
Missed ethereal messages, but I hold
That after such revision comes transparency's past,

Where the world sees through the baby's laugh
And beholds the burgeon of its origin.
This is the teething light, this, the third day.

LONG JOURNEY'S NIGHT

Because of the hold it has, must art
Tighten every personal tether?
O'Neill took a family apart
To put a play together.

Crammed dramatist, realist, this fellow,
But his father, mother,
Rest in death on a famous pillow
Without a feather.

UPSTAIRS

There is a doorway fronting high hopes
Where, straw put down in front of,
The armors of chagrin and mortification –
A clattering army of levers, axles
And persistent wheels – may pass
Noiselessly under the window.

Papa Haydn, dying, the bed lamp dim,
Received Napoleon's speechless homage
And near-mourning and far judgment
This way, as in deferential triumph
French fighting wagons dragged artillery
Across the vibrating dark stones:

So, like the general, may my esprit de corps
Compose at the last moment
Adjustments for passage – a kingdom
Of my respects; may I cobble
Together, toward difficult victories,
The silence befitting the journey.

TO ST. CECILIA

On the birth of
Cecilia Paula Sofie Platzek

Rutherford listened, and heard that it was good.
Six days he was silent, and it was an orbit's creation –
Earth's hymn, nuclear hum until a seventh day stood –

When Bohr burdened electrons into spin
From the spun cell of an equal force sign,
And Russell with melodies no angel could begin

Bravo'd that heavens could not be ungainlier.
And it was the eighth day, Einstein igniting the text
Of mass bounded and light soloing forth manly

In expansive strides beyond the bend after next:
So may these thinkers labor into the endless year
Of St. Cecilia's, of her arrangements in our vexed

And sound-blurring world – for no researcher shall hear,
However chalk is re-pointed and blackboards complexed,
Where her harmony speeds to or the coming from where,

Unless she return to their score, pause, stave off fear,
Arrange a trifle upbeat for the goings and gones
Of enchanted physicists with their gruff peer

Into marked breaks clattering their correlations –
So they might trust with St. Cecilia, if only they dare,
Antiphonal choirs patterning through the dawns.

DEAR THEOPHANY

I

"A row of lilac hills...."

He charcoaled only the light he could see his invisible God by.
He knew where it was found and how it arose in forays.
But within Vincent's eyes,
Purple thistles had already died of an overdose of summer.
He had already slit the atom of the sunflower seed
And offered it to the finch.

Recall when Gauguin was entraining?
Paul informed him how in Tahiti
The women polished their nails with island dawns,
How each moon is a mystic sorrow,
How he must avoid the pretension of decorating with the infinite.

And the ex-pastor regretted his farewells could not fully be
South Sea,
Though they held suns – comprised of spattered gods;
Gangrene wraths – of near-vacant pool halls;
A heaven – where syphilitic stars offer their sincerity to the
barley.

II

The last potato fires have died down.

The calligraphy of Vincent's early religious dreams
Had curved into the failing signs nighttime imposes.
The comet became his particular prayer,
Recited in swift flashes.
For the clutching upstretched trees – like his penury,

Breath must be sufficient.

In the hot field next morning,
The standing painter blocked in the matter of fact:
Daphne-wise in daylight under the bursting noon,
And harried by a hundred chasing crows,
Van Gogh fitted his branching yellows into a shattering frame.
His brother could not sell
Nor Christianity re-make
In a credible image
This classical portrait of a mad artist.
Each button was urgent, as in Lear. Each searing through
 geometry
Was an energetic expulsion from the Temple.
In letters, he brushed Theo into his sight,
Who smiled at Vincent,
And at how much of the world's rigidity wept incontinently
In a few canvases bunched on the kitchen floor,
And at how much of the world's solidity should be weeping
For a few canvases bunched on the kitchen floor.

III

A pair of rough farmer's shoes, nothing else.

Some of his worst days:
Vincent, whose Theo would lament him
For six months before a near-twin death,
Cursed at the less than that bountiful number
Of artists brothering through his room.

What was needed was a laundress baptizing him with care –
Though she wash her snot in his sympathy
And blow her nose again and again in his clean sleep,
Her natural sinuosity would draw accuracy into the land

And an identity into his fingers.

In kerchief matching his hair, outrageously-holed sepia trousers
And drip-dappled shirt,
He felt earth mourning him alive.
In the wheatfield,
Sun rays tripped over briars; what he breathed in
Turned bramble. Each aphid, where it crawled on his leg,
Was a gunshot as he rambled through the reminding day that
chanted:

Vincent, paint olive groves enough
And Christ will wander in them.

VANISHING POINT

Now in the hour that melts with homesick yearning...
– Dante

I live in the world where Being
Has no being – the world of John Dewey,
Sacred but not holy.
I live as a ward of American language
Framing and parsing his pluralism
At its most sight-seeing, fright-seeming extreme.

I visit Vermont, examining kingbirds on broken-nose hills,
And the vain snow-mustached firs,
And in the background there is maturing Dewey,
Living elsewhere but remaining in these rugged hills.
In Vermont winter, where the wind blasts in every direction,
His words, like New Year's,
Wring out our blustering politics:
The writings on democracy turn
Into so many natures,
The rewards of breakouts are greater than those of break-ins.

Now and in coming months when hopes like hemlocks
Spirit their roots in the conceiving ground dormant
With enormity, almost as in a Sistine,
The soon-to-be gray haired American philosopher
Sedately de-scaffolds old platitudes –
His hands in the same stroke showing an idea's matter,
How to exile the irrelevant abstractions
With no gap between outrage and courage,
Citation and excitement.

Here is intelligence that dreams, and re-awakens you –
Like Eve changing old habits already,
Wrought by the painter who, in the Carmine
At some early period of fifteenth century time,
Pictured to perspective the *Expulsion* of Eve,

The beginning of the sense of a being wronged.
Something has disappeared – there are lines of cutback,
New difficult distance. Even unto the north mountain ranges,
She must deal with the Dewey-fraught possibilities of choice.
Of revolutionary consequences. Of testing.
Of bravery in the face of.
Of loss before recovery, however difficult.
Michelangelo with his own broken nose
Marked his youth human when Massaccio made her howl.

ANCIENT OF DAYS

Lions with abundance share – if lions are men:
Now, by the fire in the rock circle with wood scarcer
Than in his boyhood wrighting, when Pylos was unsinkable,
The amphoras behind him full with oil
Advertising him opulent,
And a miniature bathtub proclaiming him king,
Nestor felt the younger wind from the ocean nearby,
Though the doorway was insulated with old age and shut.
It was the calling of Agamemnon to Troy.

If his inimitable wisdom could be written on stone,
And generations by deciphering partake of his den's hoard
And brain's arcana, Nestor could thank even Furies;
But passed *on* had become passed *away* (though not *death*),
And he like any sage had grown weaker and smokier
Down the sacrificing ages, eventually to crisp into a pietism.
“Maybe truthless, certainly certaintyless,” he heard
His saturnine voice rip through the throne room.

Nestor peered at his gold mask of Neleus, in *his* reign
Protector-warrior and, as well, lord of the experience
That larders the grain and locates villages,
Now embodied disarmingly in this owl-possessed son,
Who emphasized: fishing for riches, terra-cotta trade,
The deep ballast of a new bookkeeping method.
But, full-bodied Helen? Nestor hoped never to see her.
She might diminish one generous thought.

As he looked at his staircase leading to a chamber
Carguing faded ship models and father's clay tablets,
Where failing sight might read, Nestor buckled on war clothes
As, he considered, the only way never to be forgotten.

FOR ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH

The earth is justified in the sight of the star.
Each silent witness notes how short life shatters –
And, once, length seemed competitive, we cared,
But who dies first, who second, no longer matters.

MARSYAS IN ITALY

How did it happen that when Benito,
Editorials incised,
Looked sunward, vowing to pilot to uplifting skies –
"Grant wings to our people," he gasped – Apollo,
Seeming humanized,
With implacable rays scored graffiti into his eyes?

MESSAGES

The brain is diathermic to the skin,
Directing twitches, spasms, kneejerk footprints,
One mass hysteria of nuclei,
Endless nerve endings.
Scratching flesh,
We scrape cords wary of the next reception,
Unrelaxed and teetering
As a gray cell rings once more.

We servant carriers in tender states
Await that thrumming doyen and his warps:
The mind's transformations,
Deviations on call.
Faithworthy downstairs maids emerge along the body
And repress their rage;
There is no payday but the sovereign's death,
And theirs.

Yet, what though, like bareback riders, we evolve
Ringmaster-ridden, the only mutiny
A pratfall, or fearful balance?
We are the circle and the audience –
In axon, dendrite, node and myelin sheath
Flow all of Shakespeare, all we hear of God,
All that, with orders toward perfection,
Cracks the whip.

CONVERSION

He transforms to what others plead.
Mosaic law being love reckoned,
Pythagoras' tones being forms beckoned,
Buddhist prayers calming a prince's need,
Why shouldn't we in a second
Discover and be glad
Of what we always had?

TO CYBELE

Earth, Mountain Mother, in whom we find sustenance...
Dweller in great golden Pactolus....

– Chorus in *Philoctetes*

I

Caraway commas, poppy colons, sesame bright periods,

Sprinkle yourselves on loaves, in the pocket of pita,
The resonance of rye,
The muffin of a moon rippling through butter.
Grain golds my stomach lining like olive oil
The interior of the shaping pan.

II

I hold ears in my hands. I trust sheaves.

The bin of the universe contains many chafing suns
And their breads – hot Sirius white,
Polaris a mounded and cooled challah,
Saturn's disc the matzoh on Passover eve,
Distant Aldebaran designing the asterism G, perhaps of
Gluten.

III

Earth bakes and bakes in the oven of the solar system.

Sun-sered wheat, where is the water
You drenched inside all these weeks?
Gallons from dew, rain and the farmer's sweat
Thriving in the groundswelled buds of the East.
I partake of this brown bread. It slakes my thirst.

LETTER TO ONE PERHAPS STILL LIVING (1987)

From the Mediterranean benthos –
from its half-quixotic crawlers – westward,
north of unexpected Gibraltar apes and grottoes,
phantoms of liberty
and end-trails of fossilized democracies
and idealistic swallows falling
died into the sierras.

Spain is in exile, not you, Ramon;
all imaginations wait for your returning step.
Now in contemporary contorting-architecture herds,
bellowing tourists, stamping
onto the Lorca-dead roads,
enter the arena blind
to how bullheaded guards
once snorted and rampaged;
scarves around revolutionary eyes
dangled in – your and yours only –
Catalonia.

Pushing northward and westward, I follow your drift
toward the lethality of the world's indifference.
And will you blush
if I call you maternal?
At times I see you crucified, but mostly,
when my eyes sink toward evening
and I recall castanets outdoors
prolonging into the whine of shells,
I watch Spain bleeding in your arms,
testifying with silent lips,
shaping from the darkening Pyrenees stone
pietas of unending meditation.
...Ramon....

THE FORM OF FLATTERY

When hordes of rebellious angels in tears
Threw down their spears in heaven, surrendering rank,
Jealous that Eden was the preferred location,
They loped ignorantly in Hell's icy spheres,
Before topped by fire,
More as if they were struggling polar bears

Than humans in paradise. Not always intelligently,
They imitated people by frenzy-fishing, hibernating
Long periods, gobbling garbage wherever strewn,
Never endorsing heat when temperatures fell a degree,
Yet often hitting it right:
Coats stained with blood so obviously.

THE INN

The year stormed like a drunken host
Sinking, with frozen eyes and a smaller laugh.
Into the brevity tuned a trip hammer,
Out of the winter sang the lark,
Out of the lightning sang the Sunday,
Out of the Sunday sang the chamber,
Out of the chamber sang the ghost,
Out of the ghost sang the bush,
Out of the bush sang a pine tree,
Out of a pine tree sang one needle,
Out of one needle sang the nostrum,
Out of the nostrum sang the lark,
Out of the host sang the traitor,
Out of the traitor I sang all day.

BESPEAKING THE SPOOKY

Glass in a spyglass: we in-the-know know
Its greatest desire is to be ensconced, no blind sides, and know –
A woman of mystery in her chamber never saying no.

A tightrope walker with scope. A paymaster
To those who sing the sacred secrets of their master.
Asterisks who risk, when they can, only another imposter.

Betrayal and its portrayal are ideally complicated;
Thousands of idealists have been implicated,
Their strengths offered supremacy – but none ever placated.

Mata Hari in mattress matters international
Seduced herself, as if whoring for the skinny was natural.
Praise those causes that hoodwink all for their nation's all.

Dupe and scoundrel are tools of the soundboard trade,
But the biggest chump is he who strayed
To sacrifice for the top brass's rodomontade –

Hell, hand the silver-spooned, those elite, futures that are bleak;
They go murderously overboard at the slightest leak,
Squelch the genuine question, punish each slight lack,
Despise their dearest spies for hard imperfect luck.

VESSEL

Heavenward, peakward, swoosh
And swoosh to my pubescent head –
I rise, sexually
Aflutter on this Olympic brink.
Eagle-saved, I'm jerked from con men
Who gore naiveté out of rubes,
From yokel schools
And grapefoot clods, from scapegoat stink,
From logorrhea of strafing
Village gossip – to deathless legend.
Homeric strands
Adorn, and future Helens interlink,
My panpipe lays – may I
Predict? I'll juice their magic
And Zeus their passion! Plow Delphi
Priestesses into their origin!

But – Ganymede, no. Un-wing. No fool
Child shepherd's lofted here for spunk.
Off-argosy
Your dreams, transship them home to kine and kin!
Scram, Ganymede, reverse and tiddledewink
Strong myths navigating our fecund Greek
Topsoil – where oat growers
Steer mysteries, where Spartans dine on famine.
Bolt, loner boy, milksop
To these ingenuous, fanfaronading boobs:
Although I prop their love,
My vein is sculpted Jew, black suede my skin.
I'm shafted here
With each minority allowed this close:
Where gods go forth,
I bear the cup, but they'll not let me drink.

AIDE

As in the feast of Belshazzar
Not noted by the zealous scribe
Blowing the Bible like a bubble aslant
His page, the worm from cutglassed mead hymned far
The triumph of the deathless tribe
Of Israel – from David's house,
What birth a humble handmaiden shall bring!,
No one in all that glare remarked the chant
And form, though it was greater than that God
Should write, that any worm should sing,

So of the warning sentiments
Windprinted on tent walls of ice
Within the drifts and press of unexplored
Re-shifting and uncoded Arctic rents,
Peary could not hear Henson's voice:
*The unobserved are parts of things,
But overlooked near finger bowls, white wine,
Brave vistas, bravos, toasts!* Although ignored
By northern lights and southern, Henson filled
Both tin cups with earth's polar shine.

CONCENTRATION

He explained to me, with great emphasis, that every question
possessed a power that was lost in the answer.

– Elie Wiesel

The half-witted sibilance of the evening larches
Replies. The conch, too, moans bubbly answers
Near the boulder disrupting the seabed

In the harbor of a million before-Christ sailings. Greeks
With olive-tree tongues and Slavs with amber-filled vowels
All heard clashing responses in their natural eardrums.

It was as if time thought, and chuckled at the comeback.
Pharaohs persisted; shells like Socratic shards
Bullied the waves, while gambel oaks rustled.

Wait. The pasts are silent.
It is as if an owl flitted.
What was your inquiry? cedars of Lebanon demand.

We suppose we have forgotten, the conchs conclude.
Perhaps we never knew, strident mangroves demur,
And shift their roots. Caesars sail for other ports.

And now, in our own day, we clarify that probe
Re-hearsed hermit crabs, cicadas, ancients of Baltic strides
Or Mediterranean gifts, never rightly reconstructed.

There is an old man who lives among the rusty pipes
Of what was Birkenau. Ask him for the question: if response
Is hopeless, knock twelve times on any unmarked grave

Within the mist. Knock five times. Knock once. The query
Has only to be lifted from the still-hissing stones
Which lisp what they possess into the perfect ear of night.

CITIES

How I envy Cavafy! He had the procession
Of Alexandria – Ptolemy and Callimachus, Forster and
Durrell,
Himself and the delta older than the autochthonous tribes of
the dunes
Filtered through pharaohs,
While I have – dare I name it – Brooklyn.
The Hudson. New World purée.

You who live after us, if you chance on this poem,
Know there was quaintness in the mention of Brooklyn –
The common eloquence of cannelloni,
Giant beef frankfurters sold
From elephantine steam wagons (mastodons squishing
mustard) –
And then, day's end, in the quiet homes, a shuttered verb.
It was not unknown.
The gutters strutted in no chintz of Fifth or Central Park West,
No conga spidering down a Broadway glistening web,
Just lines of poverties of peddlers vending razor blades,
Toothlessnesses of immigrants,
Fire-escaped sultry summer eyes,
Rope-hanged galliarding boxers near menstrual bloomers,
And in Coney Island,
A bowery of rickety barkers shilling for crowds,
And street graffiti re-designing our curbs on desire.

Some say, only the dead acknowledge birth in Brooklyn:
If they could float it off from Queens,
Five million other-borough denizens boast they would;
Yet, if we drifted, our three million and more
With muggers, con men, insurance salesmen,
But also with synagogues and candy shoelather
And the movie theater *Livonia* nicknamed *The Dump*

And the only children's library in the nation
To conceive its own entire building, out of Eleanor Roosevelt,
If we left America for the Ellis Island of Antarctica
And the penguins took us in,

I would shiver contentedly, remembering how,
With tens of thousands of born-elsewheres,
As a boy I took constitucionals under the boardwalk of Coney
Island

On Tuesday nights during the War
Where, smiling at the Statue of Liberty and its glow,
Fireworks – and their long trails of ascending accents,
Kinetic with bursts as illuminating as Cavafy's lines –
With hues of deep blood lit the sands and the ancient water
And our city with shorelines verging on marvels to step
off into.

TOWN DUMP

It is as if my cerebrum often rips apart
Into a heap of throwouts, a cache of raw edges
And of whatever butchers slice in their dreams –
Even, as in Masada, abandoned trails of junk
Left behind by movie crews and tossed off a cliff.
My ruminations on occasion pop up
As works in twenty volumes of slobbering patches, inkspotted
pages –
Whichever sadist goals abused my attention span.

Today, because my brainpan from its savant avant garde cells
Dropped an apothegm that remained unwritten
(A brassy telephone tromboned,
Or some atrocious neighbor knocked upon the door),
I mislaid the passage in my head, at once occulted;
I drive to this, my rubbish pile inside my cerebellum
Or whichever capricious area grabs my creations before they
bloom,
To find my cogitation and ask why
This was so trashworthy, my reasoning so quick, to disappear
Before paper could identify it into recognition.

What will I come across, along, upon or into?
I most fear inside me that needle in the thoughtstack
Waiting to fill one vacancy
With a rusted phrase, a hackneyed, trusted metaphor
Making play while the sun shines.
And so I skid along banana skins in my brains,
This midden of memory: however landed,
Welcomed, jeered, ignored –
Spreading amid the litter of forgotten letters,
I skim the waste of earthly elements.

At times I cheer
To contemplate that kidnapped aphorism well entrenched

Where five-grain pitas pulp with dated tags:
Let nouns enrich the mind if this is so;
So let them fructify as lenitive
And golden lyrics among cans labeled peas.

I walk as if cast off into garbage filth found in every town dump,
Except these are ideas: torn haiku,
Suet of beef in strips (worries about meat fat?),
A no-titled box of dishwasher soap (am I suitably clean?) –
Contused, unwholesome bits from hordes of pumpkins
In Halloween shock, with uneven teeth and concave pates:
Every roundness but the perfect circle.
Around me, disjecta membra tantalize rapt birds that scoop
But never nest, cry awkwardly
Through beaks adrip with crusts of coffee grounds,
And bring sea salt
Onto the morning grabs and gulps for early breakfast.

There are trashbaskets of the fantasy,
Receptacles with cracked pictorials I framed,
Where my subconscious hovers white-winged,
Impetuous, compulsive and out-of-bounds;
There my beginning explanations of the universe
(With their desperate reachings) track for words
Like gulls that have a way of coming too far inland.
Too close to my fingertips is this personal debris, toxic at times,
Too much of what I want is here, and too often hidden.
I am old, there may be syllables by the billions
Fallen unnoticed beneath another comely sentence.
I rank those sad infinities of the missing
As my opportunity to grasp a past. Mostly, I learn to whirl
Among less obvious lobes not designated
And near some railroad yard of synapses,
For the slipped-through and the rejected –
Even in attics, in not-Times Square forests, in bins
In a crowded garage, in now-crumbling schools and Brooklyn
beaches
I frequented as a child, hoping to discover those absences
I had not known lost.

FOURTH AVENUE

Pulling up the shades
To reveal the *Store For Sale* open,
Lebenthal thought
How some of his somewhat dustfree books
Still contained warped pages
Which, if read, could straighten a buyer's life.

The threat of retirement's boring minutes
And binding hours
Untitled his brain. Rent-burdened, foxed with taxes,
Aged seventy-eight with sales decreasing,
The bent bookseller cataloged
Slowly in his head the first ring and voice mail
Of the day: "When do you close?"
The question was a cold river.
He paused, shivering,
And replied, "Do you mean tonight, or forever?"

WE

are waiting to be somebody's past.
– J. Bronowski

I am the remnant of a human failed in breath,
The inner sanctum for flesh sailed
Before the sail's invention,
The tick of hope my restive pulse missed, once.
It is the generous air shall crumble my bones
Unless some good scientist drills me home –
 Arranges not arbitrarily my angles on the floor,
Calipers my sockets, varnishes and sets me up.

Shall I be gazed into remarkably intact
In a dim hall, my fossil footprints proving
Homo que-sais-je? had toes,
Possibly a mind?
"Note purpose in the vanishing thumb," the sign
Declares androgynously, without implication,
 Appealingly in the brush-off language
The future sputters about the foreshortened past.

Where museum typeface increases our minerals
And placards contain our patient petrification,
I am teased between Linnaean categories
And imaging my heirs' projections
Carrying cousin-ization from behind
 Their classifying Latin roots
Into the radiation of even more ancient stars.

In the basement workshop, here in hushed labs
With these tools endowed by me, wisher-well,
May my successors and beneficiaries hear
Over glue bottles and preservative jars,
From drawer Y of the bottom file in the corner,
 On whatever date,
The carbon scream me through.

NOTE TO THE WORLD

I have gone out this afternoon with William James
For a brief walk
To discuss our lives in small talk.
If night descends while we are away, note our names
But lock the door
Against every imagined inquisitor
(Though, for amusement, not to every non sequitur) –
And do not respond if you think you hear us knock
No matter how gently
Or urgently.
There are reasons why we may not return.

Edward Locke

INDEX OF TITLES

A Christmas Vision	58
A Haiku	205
A Point of Time	142
A Tale of Two	49
A Western	94
Accident	50
Aide	216
Air, Earth, and Flow	111
An Age of Consent	191
Ancient of Days	170
Another Birthday	144
Ant on the Wall	32
Ararat	212
Arguing	54
Assemblage	97
At the Museum	153
Babeuf	173
Ballad to the Ballad	123
Bespeaking the Spooky	214
Birthday	51
Bold Hugs, Bold Sorrows	101
Boys Are Boys	190
Brave Bolton	28
Brute Confidence	84
Bullfight	81
Candles and Crowns	106
Christmas Night, London	59
Citadel	53
Cities	220
Color Coordinates	159
Concentration	218
Conscientious Objects	207
Conversion	194
Country Road	29
Cyrillic in Black and White	132
Daybreak	77
Dear Theophany	156
Deep as the Ocean Falls	74

Demands	52
Discard	90
Displacement	5
Distancing	171
Distant Skies, Distant Signs	219
Distinguished Vision	140
Divergence	66
Domino, 1941	217
Don Quixote's Midnight Ballad	115
Doubtful Therapy	141
Dylan Thomas	139
Each a Way	64
East River	63
Edinburgh Cemetery	45
Else-Things	14
Encounter	149
Entering Another Year	6
Epithalamium	100
Farewell Thinking	67
Finding	78
Fish Music	154
Fleeing the Asylum	125
Flow	234
Food for Janet	4
For Anne Morrow Lindbergh	178
For William Troy	136
Forever and Ever	43
Forever at Six A. M.	11
Formatives	180
Fourth Avenue	229
From Michael Straight's Autobiography	129
From the Diary of Jane Addams, Age 10	175
Fulfilling the New Year	36
Galileo to Milton	172
Gap	138
Goodbye, Amelia Earhart	176
Graduation	31
Green Bank	16
Here and There	42
Here's Looking at You	69

Herr Young Professor	174
Hiking on Sunday	186
I Hate Rings	35
I Kid You Not	9
I Read in Schopenhauer	76
If We Cannot Live for Something, We Will Die for Something	213
Italian Interim	44
Jerusalem, the Higher Greeting	226
Juan	117
Knighthood for Christopher Ricks	131
Lake Placid and Mirror Lake	26
Last and First Day	7
Last Briefing	208
Letter to One Perhaps Still Living (1987)	200
Long Journey into Light	145
Long Journey's Night	146
Looking Like Puccini	152
Loss	57
Lost Empire	198
Making Up	68
Marsyas in Italy	181
Messages	185
Metempsychosis	71
Michelangelo	162
Miranda upon Caliban	98
Mortification	112
Mother's Greeting	39
Napping in Winter	2
Neither Brothers nor Underlings	87
New Year's Again and Again	56
Note to the World	236
Nuevo York	222
Nursery Rhyme	48
On the Idea that Anti-Semitism Is Soluble in Art	143
Ordinary People	203
Paine to Blake	126
Pasternak	133
Paths	155
Pearl	201

Permutations	230
Pietra Dura, from the Red Fort	65
Poem on Sunday	1
Pursuing the Contract	12
Raft on the Susquehanna	91
Reject	188
Repercussions	30
Revelation	193
Reverence and Irreverence	80
Ruminating	199
Sage	182
Sermon for Today's Teresa	177
She Dances Between the Dance	105
She	61
Sheath	86
Silent in Charity	40
Small Dunes	92
Sting Ray	82
Taxi Standing	231
Termination and Indetermination	110
The Book of Retirement	33
The Chink in the Wall to Bottom	109
The Dark Zodiac of the Unicorn	62
The First Fetus	108
The Form of Flattery	210
The Four Questions of Jacob Epstein	168
The Freedom of the Philippines	209
The Inn	211
The Ion That Turns the Quest into a Question	235
The Mirror of the Sea	75
The Obscurity of the Clear Heart	195
The Question of Life Everlasting	70
The Rose Ballad	60
The Visit	128
Thinking of Uta Hagen	179
Time Out	103
Time Pieced	47
To a Poet	130
To an Unadoptable Child	38
To Cybele	197

To Desert Spaces	41
To Max Schreck	147
To St. Cecilia	151
Town Dump	224
Unity of Style	113
Upstairs	148
Vanishing Point	160
Vessel	215
Waking	55
Washing Up	189
Waste into Waste	228
We	233
Weekend	8
Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg	135
Woods	79
Yitzhak Rabin at Evening	184