

## *Published Poems...*

I have not written a poem in nearly 15 years. Some of the reasons for this abstention, little noted by the world at large, are explicated in the essay elsewhere on this site entitled "The Greatest Goddamn Thing that Ever Was (And, at this Rate, Will Never be Again.)"

Others may be inferred from my modest ratio of published poems to unpublished ones, of which I've included a few at the end of this string.

Re-reading these poems in 2007, I am astounded at how long-ago they all seem, and how often I reverted to tropes of darkness and themes of sadness. Though prone to fits to depression, I am not an especially dark person – I spent much of my childhood playing sandlot baseball and touch football, and most of my twenties either working, reading, or going out in search of fun – but all of the fugitive and fleeting moments of sadness I did experience seem to have seeped into my verse.

This is a poem about a small town in Illinois called Sycamore, and some even smaller farm towns nearby. It's my favorite of all my poems.

### **Two Unequal Parts**

I.

#### *The Town:*

A woman waiting flat on the plain, fertile  
But worn, since the last glacier flirted at her  
Skirts, died, and left her sediment and loam.

#### *By the Tracks:*

Petrified in sky, derricks and cranes jut  
Huge from their gravel bed: Elbow and knee,  
Limbs of tangled lovers, exposed to every eye.

#### *Department Store:*

Dust, string and swirled ash fan the floor, fossil  
Trails of flattened spawn. Needles, coral buttons  
And crooked wheels, in little bins like caves.

#### *House by the Tracks:*

Dish-water infinitely black, bits of soap,  
Shining islands, on the top. When a train goes by  
The tilted porch, they spin, and then they stop.

#### *Greyhound Station:*

Figures like dolls waiting for the night bus,  
The lights so bright they hear them with their skin.  
The paint, a stream's dry bed, is cracked and thin.

#### *Better Prospects:*

Outside, a bus, returned for the last trip out,  
Engine on, lit from within, horribly roaring  
Like the white heart of an iceberg, dying.

#### *Another Night:*

The air, a delicate jelly, seemed full of moon,  
Ready to break, a flood begin. But the night  
The couple left – only a shifting wind.

#### *Camping Trip:*

Down Highway One they drive; souls of barns  
Slip past, tree-shaped holes, the rich black country  
And the glowing sky, lit by the unseen city.

#### *D'Arcangelo:*

Only this, and the other signs they pass:  
An incandescent shell, a black leaping deer;  
Above, a great white globe, with a red star.

*The Tremor:*

Miles off, in a little swamp the color of  
Emeralds and mucous, a badger dies  
Of a light in the brain, a single heron cries.

*The Cabin:*

It rained all weekend, and then at sunset  
They emerged. Beneath their feet, the darkness  
Slapped, washed in buckets from the chalky sky.

*Shifting Colors:*

It looked like the end of something, last flakes  
Of light falling like scurf: the sky, glimpsed  
Through dark limbs, like flesh, chafed and reddening.

*Behind Them:*

And in the West, the whole night a red tide,  
A sea of swarming diatoms, teeming  
Out of the black sac behind everything.

II.

The night of their return, he cannot sleep,  
But feels her presence as he walks the streets  
This barren hour. Above, the elms incessantly

Sway, though no one's awake to see –  
Or because, this once, someone's awake to see.  
From just hours ago, her image returns,

Her cries – it was like holding in his arms  
A meadow, moaning in an autumn rain.  
And the trees in concert, lost in a stormy sky.

This town will take on the love of one hour  
As well as it has the estrangement of years.  
Elks Hall, feed store, tavern, and then the plain:

The familiar set, the enduring scene:  
A man walking past the little stores  
And the one neon sign that's always green.

But over man and town, an older show:  
Miles high, older than ice, older than loam,  
Like milk and sperm, the night clouds gently flow.

*Re: Arts and Letters, Fall 1990, Volume XVI, Number 2*

### **At the Milan Zoo**

Dear sister, we ate dried chestnuts  
as we walked among the dim and weed-  
invaded cages, and today I cannot recall  
if we ever saw a single animal.  
Now that we are back in our homes,  
I want to ask you,  
are there any left in that old land?

All I recall is a bitterness  
most weary and obstinate and bland.  
It would not break. It would not bend.  
It would not mewl or weep.  
It would not shout, or beat its chest, or roar.

It only spoke, in words that came from you.  
They were words I'd never heard before.  
They were a careful metaphor  
for the trivial horror of taunts and hurts  
that our poor childhood together endured  
and that ended years before.

The chestnuts were like chestnut-flavored  
rocks. We ate a few and tossed the rest  
into the poplars, onto the sunlit walks,  
and into a cage that must have held  
a thing poor and matted that does not stir.

*Re: Arts and Letters, Fall 1990, Volume XVI, Number 2*

This poem is based on vivid memories from childhood of gazing at a thrilling picture of a whale battling a giant squid in a book called *The Golden Book of the Sea*.

### **A Father Looks at His Son's Picture Book**

And here, spinning in a pitch cellar of the sea,  
Caught in the artist's lurid light,  
Is a whale spun and stripped  
By a horror-headed squid – a party favor, ribbon brained –  
Soon, itself, to be torn in chunks and gulped.

Drifting in the silence of the closed book, he  
Remembers the last time he rode the ocean,  
The night of the crying whales, their sounding lost,  
In the dark streets of the sea, like children...  
How he'd thought, when their weird pipings had passed

The stilled boat, of the city, those stifling nights  
As a child, after games, by the window:  
Down streets sunk to the tar in darkness,  
Those calling voices, more desolate than snow.  
And he on his bed, book lost in his hands, like now.

Suddenly he wants him there, wants to grab  
Him, hug him, the distant kid, strip him of all fear!

*Xanadu, Spring 1988*

The last of these three haiku, "What is lovelier..." could be interpreted in any of three ways: As a commentary on relative aesthetic worth, as a miniature disquisition on evanescence and mortality, or as a child's observation. You be the judge...

### Three Haiku

All along the tracks  
To the grain elevator,  
Little corn plants sprout.

Remember? We'd chase  
Fireflies all summer long.  
Here are more we missed.

What is lovelier  
Than this glass of cherry pop  
In the summer light?

*Modern Haiku*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, Summer, 1986  
("What is Lovelier...") also appeared in the anthology  
*The Rise and Fall of Sparrows*, edited by Alexis Rotella, Los Hombres Press, 1990.)

This is an actual dream I had while staying at the Mohonk Mountain Lodge in the Shawangunk Mountains in New York, rendered in the repetitive form of a sestina, the closest verse analogue I could find to the feeling of helplessness and inescapability one often has in the midst of a nightmare.

### Nightmare Occurring in a Mountain Lodge in Upstate New York

I stir to my brother's sobbing –  
We are back in our beds at home.  
I rise from my sleep to offer help  
But my jaws are cemented shut,  
Clenched with such force that my eyes ache.

Why is there no one at home?  
The rooms all are empty or shut,  
And the walls don't just echo, they ache.  
My lips are contorted with crying  
But are helpless to ask for help.

I float through the halls of our home  
To search for a thing that could help.  
But my brother no longer is crying –  
As I beg his touch for my ache,  
He snickers and folds his arms shut.

I stare in a mirror and the ache  
That defaces my mouth with its crying  
Begins to disappear. I'm home,  
After all, with parents to help,  
And my lips are not sealed, just shut.

But their lids long ago were shut  
And my brother has long since left home.  
My mouth slides apart and the ache  
Steals back, for now I am crying,  
With my jaws stuck open, for help.

I'm lost at home, my heart squeezed shut  
Against an ache no one can help.  
Far beyond crying. My eyes are shut.

*New Collage*, Volume 19, Number 2

This poem appears in my novel, *Cherry Whip*, and in that context is supposedly the work of the protagonist Hiroshi's father, a Zen poet.

Poetry's a joke!  
I walk boldly down the street,  
Confident I'll die.

### **Photograph of the Poet's Daughter**

*1948*

A ring of children dance above the dead.  
The sunlight's dusty or the dusty glass?  
The tilted plot above the crooked street.  
The doll abandoned in the withered grass.

The grass is grey behind the daughter's head  
Who turned with such obeisance at his word  
That as the camera shuttered she was lost,  
The skull transparent, features soft and blurred.

*1986*

And blurred her voice beneath the dusty frame  
And in her voice a grave, sententious tone  
That comes from him who snapped that fleeting shot,  
Who snapped that word, who chiseled as in stone

The sentences that made his local fame.  
And now her words emboss the empty air  
And when she walks beneath the eyes of oak  
The sunlight finds her grey and withered hair

That is his hair who lives beneath the stone.

*Rambunctious Review*, 1988, Volume 5, Number 1

The "kana" referred to in this poem is one of the Japanese alphabets, or syllabaries.

### **Haiku**

Practicing kana:  
I press the tip of my pen  
To a tiny gnat.

*The Mainichi Daily News*, November 20, 1989

This poem is written in syllabics – alternating lines of six and four syllables.

### **A Certain Urban Novelist**

Say that city is  
A lithograph  
In its strict adhesion:  
Streets slick and grey,  
Snow congealed on the grass.  
A cenotaph,

Say, vague echoic horns  
Frozen somewhere  
In a tomb of cross-hatched  
Streets, steel blunted  
And sealed beneath the snow's  
Surgical glare;

Trees, crawling the distant  
Snow banks of sky  
Like moss, delicate, thin,  
The drifts clouding,  
Blanking the growths as stone  
Is scrubbed by lye:

And the sight, the severed,  
That can't engrave  
These sights on any brain,  
Floats free of life  
To speak from the dense page,  
The empty grave.

*Rambunctious Review*, 1989, Volume 6, Number 1  
First-Prize Winner, 1988 *Rambunctious Review* Poetry Contest

### **Haiku**

Loaded down with ice,  
the power lines faintly hum.  
Over them, the stars.

*JAL Haiku Anthology*, 1988

### **High Rise**

From the simultaneous spastic  
dance I know the two apartments  
are watching the same channel  
a blue transcutaneous  
wince or a tic spied in a  
mirror as the flickering  
lake laps at the pilings  
of the glassy building  
filled with the irreducible  
poisons I mean the lake  
that our desires narrowly  
channeled but exponentially  
stacked add up to leaving  
a turquoise ring but scum never-  
theless around the edge of the glass.

*Rambunctious Review*, 1989, Volume 6, Number 1

Inspired in part by the old dioramas, since replaced, in Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History. I have a feeling those spooky old exhibits inspired a lot of poems over the years. Written when I was twenty years old, which I hope explains any infelicities.

### **The Night Watchman's Dream**

I.

The small zoo ship sways with the swell,  
and inside, a giraffe rocks, toylike,  
over a thousand miles of grey spume.  
In my dream, I am the giraffe,  
neck bent against the twelve-foot pen.  
My horns probe everything:  
grey flakes of velvet cling  
to the splintered wood where, for two weeks,  
I have been trying to rub the walls away.

In the further dream, the moon swims greenly  
in a black hole in the veldt  
where I gather to drink with others.  
The night of insects ticks and reels  
in its black container of sky.  
Letting my hoofs slide through the cool mud,  
I brace like a derrick and ease my head  
toward the dirty water. I see my eyes reflected  
brown and wet, not quite crying,  
atop the rippled moon.  
The ship falls on. Now my hoofs  
slide back and forth through bloody gravel,  
and where my hide is scraped away,  
the wet flesh gleams and runs  
like a round fruit, laid open.

II.

Pacing my rounds, thrusting my flashlight  
before me, I watch the corridors  
unfurl like a history  
walked and walked, a repeated dream.  
My pale beam illuminates, here,  
two walrus crooning to the sea;  
there, a muscled man praising the sun  
even through the museum night;  
there, agonized scrapings on stone –

history is a scraping on stone on wood  
on parchment on metal  
then on the sky, rising cool,  
glasslike between us and all.

My beam slides off the glass, and I pace  
deeper into the museum.

III.

The next time I dream, my legs are broken.  
Collapses, I peer out of the cage  
of my tangled legs at a piece of my hide  
plastered to the door. Falling

down to sleep, the pool of water again.

IV.

In the deepest room, hanging  
heavily at the back of the museum,  
is the giraffe. Laying myself  
against the glass, I peer  
into the dark case at my gaunt  
shadowy dream.

My beam spreads into the case,  
and glassy eyes spark out at me.  
But this animal, stock, dumb,  
and frayed, has stood now for thirty years.

I continue my rounds. At dawn,

I swing open the great, brass-studded  
doors of the museum. Later,  
light and people pour in through the doors.  
A gaggle of tourists confront the sun,  
a yellow light bulb.  
Old black men with cigar-stub thumbs  
sweep the dust from around the cases  
while I drift, asleep in my own dust.

V.

At the last, I huddle on the gravel.  
Gazing into the hole  
that is now always before my eyes,  
I don't know if what I see is the crawlers,  
skimming the surface of the water,  
or the insects streaming for the moon.  
Just before I die, I make the first  
sound of my life: my throat constricts  
and creaks like some ancient door,  
slowly closing.

*Seems*, Autumn 1974

### **An Absurdist Play**

The scene is the earth. A concrete apron  
Covers the stage, pole to pole. There is  
No theatre. The concrete stretches grey  
And bare as the eye can see, a bas-relief  
Of the sky. A stock figure is knee to chin  
In a ball in middle ground. Behind him  
Is nothing, and it does not concern him.  
Before him, myself. I am not concerned.

It has been this time for quite a time. My  
Stomach holds a shifting load of splintered  
Glass. My brain is filled with penny nails.  
I, the audience. I, the man, lope up  
To the stage's apron like a hound, and dash  
On my fours to the wings of the world.  
My dog's eye whirls up, blackly grows,  
And whirling with it, wholly dark,  
Holds in its dot the ends of the earth.

*Windless Orchard*, 26, Summer 1976

Alternating lines of ten and eight syllables.

**Autumn: Ohio**

I.

The power lines come straining out the land.  
The power plant behind the fence,  
Off the road, landscaped and flower-  
Hedged, holds the air hummingly tense  
With the faint leakage of the purely planned.

The land is studded like a circuit board  
With storage tanks, broadcast tower,  
Telephone poles: The common sense  
Of level plain and human power.  
Nothing stops us from what we're headed toward.

II.

Late day, sky descending like an ocean,  
Silent, vast. Down the south, clouds scud  
A path of red sand; metal moans  
Darkly, at edge. Gathered to flood,  
The wind stirs the road to brittle motion

And the cold comes, of something about to die.  
Birds drift beyond an air that hones  
Their quick guts to imminent blood,  
Their thin song to the coldest bones,  
A black flight, through the streaked and endless sky.

*Poet Lore, Autumn 1975.*

Also written when I was twenty. I'm not sure where this dark vision came from; I suspect I was influenced at the time by an Ivan Albright painting.

**V.F.W. Nurse**

Her eyes brim like the downturned bottles  
that spill through the veins of the hot men  
who clutch their beds as last outposts  
against the busy soil.  
She comes bearing cool linens:  
wraps them in the white flags,  
buries them in the snowy depths  
of her lifelong accumulation.  
In the cabinet, still more glass drops  
hang, unbroken.

At home, she unbuttons slowly,  
so that the confessor behind the mirror  
will miss none of it.  
She lets her thumb linger  
over the various stains of decay  
stroked into the whiteness during the day.  
Then she lets the coat drop,  
and with it, all her apparel.  
In a roil of flesh, her bosom folds in,  
and out smooths her abdomen  
laced with long sores  
where the roses grow and twist.

*Seems, Winter 1972-1973*

## Correspondences

I.

Reading in the bathtub, nosing dry pages  
like a horse, I can hear quiet traffic  
washing the black air, a bus soughing into  
a station, across a distant river.

A car pulls into the parking lot below:  
putting my ear to porcelain: voices,  
confused as gravel, between the muttering pipes.  
Then, somewhere in the bathtub, a door slams.

II.

A baseball bat, found at closet's bottom,  
scarred like a whale, grass-stained, light as a bone.  
One swing, bits of dust drifting to the ceiling,  
and I smell it, the field by the overpass,

butterflies crushed in the sun, juice of weeds,  
and a boy rounding second, forever  
(the darkening air unbearably dim)  
one leg out, one spraying the dirt, forever.

*New Collage*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1975-1976.

The editor of the journal this poem appeared in described me as "Edgar Allan Poe among the backpackers."

## Exaggerations

1.

Wading in the river, I can feel  
Above my head the moon-damp cliff,  
All the world's height, behind me, there.

2.

I float on my back, lost, and see tilt  
The great black wall of the night  
Over the cliff, now no larger than myself.

3.

Panicked, I clamber onto the bank:  
There are things at river's bottom could suck  
Your eyes out, through the bottom of your feet.

4.

Later, making camp, I think of  
Firefly sperm, other things I've never seen,  
Brush my arm, brush the back of my neck.

*Windless Orchard*, 26, Summer 1976

## *...And Some Unpublished Ones*

Like the other haiku I've written, most of these are not precisely traditional – though it could be argued that, by definition, no haiku in English are. Most, though not all, retain the seasonal elements of the traditional Japanese poem, and all are in the 5-7-5 syllable form, only because I find it to be neat and pleasing.

Regarding the last haiku in this group, back in college, my girlfriend and I caught a firefly and released it in a movie theatre, whereupon it glowed intermittently in front of the screen throughout most of the movie. We were easily amused in those days.

### **Twelve Haiku**

On the T.V. show,  
Women walk in a garden.  
My parakeet chirps!

The crippled Monarch  
Tumbles across the beach, lifts  
When the cold wind blows.

Outside my window:  
Cold rain, lightning, swaying trees –  
Billion-year-old sky.

Unlucky from first  
To last, the bright leaf plunges  
Through the autumn night.

A gap in the trees –  
Black winter sky, or a lake?  
The moon is confused.

The whole block flooded:  
Men hauling pumps and hoses,  
Children, plastic boats.

Outside the restaurant:  
Red neon, wet lipstick,  
And the cold spring rain.

Sparrows flock about  
Stalks frozen in the dark ice,  
Slide when the wind blows.

Remember? We'd catch  
Fireflies all summer long.  
Here are more we missed.

Imagination  
Lacking, that cow swats at flies  
Like all the others.

A woman sewing  
In a dark window under  
The burning heavens.

Who let the firefly  
Loose in the dark theatre?  
Our twilight movie!

Two of my favorite lines from my own work are in this poem: “The wind was warm like bread and butter,” and “the gale force of what is real.”

### **The True Subject**

This was an afternoon early in fall  
In a tavern at the top of the hill.  
I had a few beers while watching football  
On a T.V. tilted from the ceiling  
Like an eye brimming with tears.

Later, head  
Vague from hunger and drink, I stepped outside  
And – stung by a gentle breeze, the gale force  
Of what is real – sobered. Then, headed home,  
One house from the fifth stop light down the hill,  
Four green and one red. The whole long prospect  
Was trees all breathing, and the breeze lifted  
As I strode

hard by the other taverns  
And the auto-parts shops, their windows black,  
Machinery or tables in their depths.  
Neon signs, planet-colored, floated up,  
Transmission Repair, Draught Beer and Deep-Fry,  
Charged by the juice of what they symbolized.

Then past apartments as the air filled in  
With scattered clumps of dark like good, black dirt,  
And sensual windows slowly arrived  
With illicit glimpses of the commonplace,  
A woman grasping a dish in two hands,  
A back wall with a plaster crucifix,  
A goldfish turning, a white pot boiling.

Then a newer section, the brick houses  
That share a common yard like boats drifting  
On a pond littered with forgotten toys,  
Rakes and hoses, plastic boats and flowers.  
The sidewalk crisp below, I skirted by  
Tree roots slowly bursting through the pavement.  
And the wind was warm like bread and butter.

And then it was my house, trees all around,  
The trembling bushes and the roaring surf  
Of the autumn’s last air conditioners,  
And I tucked in my shirt, stepped up the walk,  
And the afternoon collapsed to one point  
When my hand touched a whorl in the wood-grained  
Door,

a moment unbearably absent,  
Like all of the others in this poem, guilty of  
Criminal disloyalty to the real.  
I grope as if the groping renders more  
Than one ten-thousandth of what’s truly there.

That street goes on in its breathtaking way,  
Guileless, green, already almost forgotten.  
But this was my street and my commonplace.  
Nothing else is so worthy of this poem –  
Weak and unworthy – that passes for praise.

### **Wintering In**

The quail poses on the post.  
The air is colder than his breast.  
One glittering eye

Faces fields to the south,  
The white, ridged stream,  
And the even files of spruce

That make a blue lane of the sky,  
A long boulevard, out.

Everyone else is gone.  
Breaking stalks, I turn to my home  
At field's end. For his part,

He blinks, poses still. The dusk  
Folds the fields all around him, grey  
Closes all the roads. Sleeps.

All night, the unhuman post is warm.  
Still the air is darker than his breast.

A little bit surreal for a love poem, but I like it. Written for my wife, Susan, when we were first dating. It's written in syllabics – twelve syllables per line.

### **Love Poem**

The sun lies with its head and shoulders in the trees,  
Bruised by branches, pricked, bleeding, running out of time.  
I haven't the urge to stir, run through those red trees,  
And carry that broken body back to our home.  
Suicide, it's bound to die, nothing to be done –  
And why should I, with a steadier light, all night,  
Burning like a small star in the space of my arms?

A friend read this poem and said, "yeah, so where's the explanation?" Probably why it was never published!

### **The Explanation**

Not houses in a solid block  
Entered into as given fact  
But a wall exposed by an empty lot,  
Its bricks alive with molten light.

Or roofs of houses in early night –  
Shining against the wild sky  
With such shyness, such bravery.

This poem was written while I was vacationing in Italy, trying to reconcile myself to the fact that my girlfriend at the time, Suzanne, who was back at home, was about to break up with me. This is also written in syllabics – in this case, six syllables per line.

## **Vacanza**

### *I. Waking*

The dream was badly lit  
And dubbed in Italian  
Like last night's T.V. show,  
*Superman* in Pisa,  
Leaping *l'edificio*:  
Jabbering, out of sync.  
In the Old World dark  
I stagger from my bed  
And wake my cheek against  
The warm green T.V. screen,  
As yesterday I pressed  
With all my sleeping weight  
Against Borghese Park.

An in the morning leave  
My dream-dulled underclothes  
As on a road the skin  
Of something crawled away.  
Legendary creature,  
Nocturnal hotel snake,  
Invisible to maids,  
Drowning away my days  
Beneath the Roman sun  
Amid needles and ruins  
That other creatures left.

### *II. The Dream*

But west five thousand miles,  
A handful of miles north  
And twenty-four years past,  
I'm crouching in the dark  
Along Lake Michigan,  
And pulling from the shore  
Fistfuls of dripping sand  
In odd, familiar shapes.  
I place them in a ring  
Beneath the throbbing moon  
And rinse them with my tears  
That will not cease to flow  
As if they were the lake's.  
Or so the dream had shown.

Upon the melting sand  
I trace with my child's palm  
The shells I'd left in Maine,  
My shining-green-eyed cat  
That didn't see the truck,  
The kite my mother tore,  
The trout I never caught:  
Everything I'd treasured  
And lost, or never had,  
And now they're mine to wash,  
Take to my waiting home,  
Hold to my heaving chest  
And never lose again.

But I let them float back  
To the warm lapping lake  
Where, face-up, floats the face  
And water-braided hair  
Of the one I love now.  
I sit up in the bed  
Where no one else has slept  
And try to be awake...

The mouth burbles open.  
It speaks in Italian:  
“Why don’t you go back home.  
You aren’t wanted here.”

And, waking, hear her say,  
“I’m waiting for you there.”

Once again, syllabics – lines of ten, ten, and seven syllables per stanza. About a very remote and isolated country road I stumbled upon in northern Oregon.

### **In the Manner of All Contamination**

This road has taken a sounding too deep  
Into a land too dark, as if there are,  
On this earth, places too far,

And this old highway, with its wheel-crushed tar  
And dirt, had slid, helpless, over the steep  
Edge of earth, into the deep.

By the road’s edge, an abandoned store glows  
And flickers: SET-UPS BILLIAR S BEER ND WINE:  
Overhead the buzzing sign

Is a dim, insidious power line  
From which an ambient voltage arose  
And charged gas, so neon glows.

This poem is written in the style of one of my favorite poets, Randall Jarrell, and concerns itself with many of the same themes he wrote about. The setting is the Lincoln Square neighborhood of Chicago, which used to be mostly German, and near where I was living when I wrote this poem, in my early twenties. I sent this poem to Jarrell's widow, Mary, with some trepidation, but she sent me back a lovely note that I still have.

**Randall**

(A German neighborhood in Chicago)

I would have been one of your poems, I think.  
Wasting an afternoon in the library,  
Sniffing in the heat and the steady tick  
Of the last, archaic radiator,  
I was thinking of you, what you'd have thought  
Of me – a child – at times, at least, when I read –  
And not a child, with real beasts, like yours.

I pass beneath the darkness of El tracks  
On a forest floor of snow and trampled butts,  
Mulch of candy wrappers and magazines,  
The slatted winter light, the black and white:  
And emerge. This is the way I go home,  
Past the *konditorei*, with its purple  
Bears to eat, the pyramids of plaited breads;  
Past the butcher shop, the butcher hefting  
Silken cuts or massive string-wrapped roasts  
With arms reined by ropy veins;  
Past delicatessens, with their baffling  
Cheeses, the cold aesthetic packages,  
And the propped, sleek bottles of *Liebfraumilch* –  
Mother's Milk in bottles! – and the women  
At the counters, their silent, cold-faced warmth.

Waiting for the light, I sight down a quiet street  
Utterly changed by the presence of snow  
Above the German, the cooking or sleeping,  
The unknowing heads. Their prized bungalows  
Could be woodsman's houses, for all they know,  
Where things could happen, the bricks almost glowing...  
Places of the impossible life!  
(Of course they aren't.) And then I think, not sure  
How it makes me feel:

“But there they are,

There they are always, living their day  
As the day before, cooking, or sleeping,  
Or reading...”

And yet, reading! The son  
Of a son of a German could live in, say,  
*That* house, in the cold room beneath the roof,  
Reading after school or playing sick,  
With Jules Verne, or Doyle, a cat at his feet  
And a bowl of cereal in his lap;  
Ten-year-old's glasses on top of his head  
As if his blind hair could see the plaster,  
Or would want to, of the unchanged ceiling.

The light jumps down to green. A face turns back  
To the page. A man with books in his arms –  
Me – crosses the street safely, as you once  
Failed to do. Sometimes, only change is left,  
The worst kind, that we'll sometimes glimpse. You knew!  
Mostly, there is only the wish, or no wish,  
Only an ordinary block where people live,  
Only a boy pretending he wants to change.

Save us, only, from a real life, the life  
That wishes really to be changed.

This poem is based on my nebulous recollections of the patchwork of sensory impressions, woven together in a sort of pre-verbal fugue state, from which a very small child constructs his world.

**Beginning With a Line by Me**

From a map of breezes and pavement cracks  
I built a shifting ghost-town in my brain.  
It was never the same, that town, because  
It was built of the breezes that crept across  
Every web and weed I had ever dreamed.

It was a dog's dream, at that, for all I knew  
Were the bucket, the stoop and the crippled bug  
And the trembling threads in the nap of the rug.  
Slight it was, and sweet, the bee-motioned breeze –  
Ocean-scented, with the liquor of trees –

That led me around my deserted town,  
Until speech detained me, and pulled me down,  
And only a trace, evanescent, remained:  
Those fragrant streets, viewed from underneath,  
Were a forgotten dream's white and twisted sheets.

This poem was written when I was living in Japan, during the height of its economic dominance, when it seemed, just before a decade-long recession struck, that its ascendance was unstoppable. The last stanza refers to the massive green nets that were draped around buildings under construction in Japanese cities, as well as to the controversy over the Japanese hunting of whales and the other forms of environmental despoilation they committed.

### **Expatriate, Waking**

The rising sun assembles itself in the East  
With matches, scraps of silk and kerosene,  
And, hot off the line, lacquers our door before  
The pale plodders stateside even dream it.

Like all we consume, sunlight is made here,  
And in its export West, warms only those who work.  
Witness these pigeons, diligent at dawn:  
Setting the tone from below, they're selecting

From a soggy salad of string and twig  
Sufficient bits from which to build a home  
Across the yard from, and a comment upon,  
In its sense, and compact cleverness, ours.

Outmanned in every sphere is how we feel:  
We've the better materials, not they!  
But across from my office has materialized  
A nineteen-story tower in the time it took me

To skim three magazines and eat a bun.  
I swear, an hour ago, it wasn't there:  
Just a lot of rubble, flattened sacks of rice,  
And a crumbling cistern choked with twiggy moss.

Now, nearly done, its bloody beams are dressed  
With massive, block-wide, kelp-green drifting nets  
That sift the swimming breeze and hide the doomed  
Whales, spirits, haunting its empty halls.

### **A Frustrated Young Man**

In a tangle of all he'd ever wished,  
He lay awake. "Child, you're lucky to be  
Alive to feel the breeze, to see, to smell."

"Oh, Lord, if you could get my poems published,  
If you could make the girl I love want me,  
I swear I'd still love *just life* just as well!"

## Haiku

A silver-haired bum  
Plucks a cigar from the curb,  
Carefully dusts it.

The lost calf bellows.  
A hundred cows find themselves,  
Mouths open, lowing.

Far above a road  
Thick with mud from autumn rains,  
A gull floats in light.

The starling loops, soars,  
Holding in its beak its prize:  
A bit of french fry.

Asphalt lot. Children  
Catch none of the leaves they chase  
From the dying oak.

In the green meadow  
The brightest thing is the mirror  
On a rusted truck.

In the mists and rain,  
Red lights by the switching yard.  
The warehouse trembles.

That crow's brittle cry –  
It reminds me of something,  
But I can't say what.

Old Wisconsin road –  
Stillness, and clear autumn air.  
Not a poem in sight.

My little nephew  
Gazes at the butterfly,  
Cries, "more high! More high!"

Chipping sound, far off;  
Otherwise, the woods are still.  
A few snowflakes fall...

A single light shines  
From the snow-custed farmhouse –  
A baby's wailing.

In a sidewalk crack:  
An ant, struggling with a crumb  
Amid crumbling leaves.

On the autumn road  
Black shadows of branches slip  
Over the oil stains.

Everything I've done,  
All I've read and all I've seen –  
All are in this poem.

Garbage cans rattle  
In the rising wind, branches  
Shake against the clouds.

The crooked old man  
Crows: "Everything that transpires  
Is reality!"

Waiting in the car:  
Weed shadows on the windshield,  
Crickets in the springs.

The snowy side street  
Is colder on the windows  
Of the barber shop.

These few footprints mark  
A gleaming expanse of snow –  
The still-shining moon.

Oysters and lemons –  
Gulls call in the winter dusk –  
On a blue platter.

A squirrel, three floors up,  
Scrapes at my window for food:  
The winter twilight.

An abandoned house.  
A dog hunts the icy yard  
Under streaming skies.

A walk after rain.  
Mirrored in puddles, one grey cloud.  
You should be ashamed!

The stench of lilacs.  
The old woman behind me  
Looks behind *her*, too.

Eating sweet oranges  
On a warm night: my tooth throbs  
And my fingers burn.

The kitten's afraid  
To let its paws touch the snow  
Its first time outdoors.

The small town in spring –  
The huge elms never still, tossed  
By birds and crickets.

The Texaco sign  
Is missing, leaving a hole  
For a stream of gnats.

An abandoned farm.  
A dog lopes the icy yard  
Under runny skies.

This dark theatre  
Where nothing will ever play:  
The winter forest.

I have discovered  
A hole in the universe  
In my body's shape.

Coffee in the cup  
Trembles as she takes her seat;  
Her loose-fitting dress.

Is life worth living?  
When she bends over like that,  
You still have to ask?

## A Memory Play

(After seeing a production of “The Glass Menagerie”)

Later that night I'd lifted up from sleep –  
My body obeying my baffled head –  
And thought I was back in the bed and room  
I'd shared with my brother when we were young.  
Though certain I was grown, I couldn't say,  
In the billion-dotted darkness, where I lay,  
The real walls receded, crayoned, changed.

I searched for the sad door I hadn't seen  
Since seven other homes had intervened  
And thought I could limn the dim, familiar lines  
Of wavering walls descending out of time  
Like the stars you know you see but then you don't  
But only sense at all because the sun  
Has deferred before their feeble lights again.

I'd lifted up from sleep and fallen back  
Into a crack between the bed and the past,  
And, seventeen years since I'd left my home,  
Again in my sleep I wandered those halls  
From which the souls I'd left behind emerged  
And, stirring to a deeper dark than mine,  
Helped to make a memory play begin.

With the houselights down, in a scriptless scene,  
My cast had mingled out of sense and time,  
Their day-diminished stars allowed to shine.  
So my wife at her breast had nursed, say, Rick,  
Who after school I'd scouted gutters with  
For interesting trash when we were six:  
All my pals, and the odd adults we'd be

And all my family spirits but for one,  
Mingling, for an act, in the happy gloom.  
And seconds before I'd awakened to dawn,  
My brother appeared through the scribbled scrim  
To join us in our early lives again:  
Made better in my mind, and whole in his,  
A child again, and seated beside me.

The way you'd once dreamed your sister could be:  
Not happy, but, in the candlelight, alive.  
You turned around and looked into her eyes  
Back when you still could sleep. Before all the lights.  
Before the substances and sun that lightened  
And faded everyone you wanted to see.  
Before the first act. Before you were Tennessee.

This poem is based on E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*.

**Forster's Mrs. Moore**

A snug seam under mountains of muslin,  
She played at pretending she'd never been born.  
There wasn't a thing to think of, of course,  
But what a specially precious nothing  
To think, a stolen sweet for that sickish  
Damp day before tea, a something-she'd-never-know  
Deeper than the sums she didn't know either,  
Or her unplumbed primers. A mystery only she  
Could have, that even her mum couldn't solve.

Anyhow, she left that land. And found herself,  
Decades down, in a glum inguinal cave –  
A genuine nothing – in the Mirabar Hills,  
A flintier text than even her books.  
Reflective, but unrevealing, that round room was,  
Until matches flared and Mrs. Moore was mirrored  
By a shrunken, wavering, ragged flame  
Of a girl, and her horrible fetal echo:  
Her unknowable sweet un-me, at last appeared.

It only remained to meet her. Meantime,  
She dwelt in a blanketed black like that hole  
And uttered from the purdah of the partly dead  
That "nothing is different from anything else."  
Some others, who'd gathered the way she had been  
Held her hard thought to their shadowy hearts  
And, bearing earthenware saucers up to her tombs,  
Chanted: "Esmiess Esmoore! Esmiess Esmoor!  
You knew us, gentle lady! You knew! You knew!"

**Untitled**

Because I heard this song and not  
that because of the pressure of the pillow  
on my cheek slightly  
different than any other possible  
night I dream this dream and not  
that it haunts me  
but there is no one "that" indeed  
infinite "that's" what could you have  
been o my children  
my neglected ones because  
I did not dream you make you  
real you will not ever breathe.

But dream maybe  
on your own without  
the stupid brain to  
intercede make up  
your stories little  
children live inside  
my pillow perhaps or in the black  
brain of all possible  
worlds concoct a wild unlikely  
one-in-a-billion  
child me perhaps.

**Untitled**

On a cool March afternoon  
We walk to the café for an early dinner  
After she goes in I step back  
For some reason  
And look at the immense albumen  
Sky sliding behind the black  
Buildings  
The first time I've seen it

In how many years I'd forgotten  
It had existed  
Sliding as I said  
Behind the obdurate  
Buildings  
Making not a  
Connection a complaint.

A childhood memory now  
A falcon perched on my wrist  
It blinked once  
Then the eye  
Slid past my vision  
Too immense  
It did not chasten me  
Not then.

This was written while teaching in Japan. The prophetic dream was related to me by a student in her mid-twenties.

### **English Lesson**

She sat down and smoothed her brown leather skirt  
Over her slender legs, so nicely at odds  
With that shiny round face like a plump custard pie.  
“This day, I want to talk with you of a dream  
Of the future that I know will be true.  
In this, I am a princess, Chinese, I think,”  
 (“Plincess,” she said, and “sink,” but never mind.)  
“And I am wearing a red brocade dress,  
And I am carried by two oxes, very big,  
One male, one female, up a thin road  
In an old wooden cart that bounces and bumped.  
It twist around the mountain that I cannot see.  
But I know I was going to a castle  
At the top of the mountain that isn’t mine,  
And I know the prince there will seal me  
In a wooden box the same as this cart,  
And I will live in this box on this mountain  
For always, like a pile of rottened vegetables.”  
“It sounds like an old story from the past. Do you  
Know the difference...” “It is the future,”  
She said firmly, gathered up her Louis  
Vuitton bag and, looking distantly at me –  
Very small and planted firmly in the now –  
Left my little room at the bottom of the hill.

These last three poems were written in college, but I still think they have some good moments. The last two are technically not unpublished – they appeared in a college literary magazine.

### Wedding

They had driven since dusk,  
And had lost themselves in the blue mystique  
Of a brooding, private country suburb,  
Taking the curves beneath the sandstone bluffs  
Where the homes loomed over like layers of slate  
And the shadows of oak trees fell like webs,  
Clung, and bloomed along the sliding windshield.  
Sixty miles to someone else's wedding,  
Only the motor's hum.

Essential components,  
Light and shade, wove themselves before their eyes,  
Patch and spill resolving into landscape.  
The final vision was the country club –  
Shining like ice at the end of the road,  
Fragrant with music, the faces like lights  
Along the railings – and all at the edge  
Of the woods. An hour they stayed and watched, there  
In the distant party.

They made themselves alone  
After the bride and bridegroom disappeared  
And stole to the back through the portico,  
Down to the wordless twin of every crowd,  
The woods. Behind them, strains of violins,  
Like the brief hint of breeze before a rain.  
Ahead, the presence of shrubs, barely touched,  
A stiffening oil straining to the tips  
Of their tight, wrinkled buds.

Down at the forest's edge,  
Where the lights were out, he pressed her against  
A shadowy tall tree, and held her there.  
And as he kissed her, he barely could glimpse,  
Shady as awnings, some clouds fixed above  
A blackened lawn like a lost land sprawling –  
Air so dark she seemed to him like a fawn,  
Blending with the shadings of the background.  
He had to have her then,

But she refused, stroking  
Her light dress, which, she said, could have been ruined.  
Then he looked odd, a way she'd never seen,  
And he kissed her hard, running his palms up  
Through her hair, brushing her small earrings off.  
A grandmother's gift, they were gold and jade,  
So she dropped to her hands and knees in the cool  
Silky grass, but she couldn't see a thing –  
Something she'd long regret.

"Let's not look too closely"  
I felt like telling her, when she would say  
I hadn't the means to give her comfort,  
Was impractical – or that I frightened her.  
Near the end, when I loved her even less,  
She said, 'Every road I've picked's been shadowed,  
Just ahead, thought the first steps seemed so bright.  
As if someone could bear it always light!  
It wasn't only her

I had to have that night,  
But the whole expanse. I felt we were drowned  
In the shadows, little animals lost  
On the great whirling floor of the forest.  
So nearly perfect, I wanted it all –  
Meaning her. I'd forgotten, as always,  
The way we can touch the woods, the darkness  
Or a woman, and think it the person  
We want, and not the world.

But it's the person, too.  
I mean, even the ones we've never loved.  
They're part of the world too, and the great gift  
Is embracing it all, dismal or bright...  
What nonsense. She was right, I don't need her,  
But I'm still the same: Some dim autumn day,  
After a rain, among the smudgy leaves,  
I'll see, gleaming from wet grass, bits of jade,  
And I'll want her again."

### **Rembrandt's Supper at Emmaus**

A moment before, only a canny  
Pilgrim welcomed by your kind  
And ignorant disciples.  
Then you broke bread,  
Blessed it, and a great stone  
Of blindness rolled from their eyes.  
They beheld  
A glowing, and you vanished.

Their acceptance meant there was a point  
To your return: Nothing was lost.  
You stayed no longer than a  
Bubble, all rainbow – and burst.  
But long enough for them to link  
Their knowledge of the miracle  
With what they now had to do.

Anyway, you knew you'd stay,  
If not always in kindness, or worship,  
Then in a painting, someone's  
"aesthetic appreciation,"  
A kindness and a worship,  
Rembrandt's and ours.

Pictured full-face, behind a little table,  
Your two disciples seated,  
Staring at you,  
The servant boy leaning forward,  
A little slower to comprehend,  
Conscious of you, your feet  
Clumsily modeled, as if sprouting from  
The table's ancient wood,  
The room dark,  
The clothes dark, and the great stone  
Wall behind you dark:  
Because all the artist's attention,  
And theirs, and ours, is on the glowing face.

Caught in this swimming  
Moment of recognition, a Kirilian  
Aura, or ghostly  
Ectoplasm, your head burns  
Like the front of a train  
Roaring from the tunnel of the pagan  
Past, out to our century  
And the Rembrandt Bible in my hands.

And yet, this very painting,  
Seen in the Louvre, was different,  
Small and drab, in a room off the great hall.  
It didn't remind me of the print I love.

That print  
Used to make me think  
Of childhood rides on the subway,  
Roaring, even now, beneath my feet.  
What I could see through the window –  
Nothing – was my picture of what you saw  
That long night on the hill,  
Upright in air, shrouded  
By the black impasto of sky.

And later, the print suggested  
A metaphor, secular, of the world's rebirth:  
The servant boy walking in his sleep,  
Stumbling at the tunnel's mouth,  
About to awaken to  
The stunning junction of the future,  
Holding forth to you the joint  
Of meat, the meat of myth –  
Your soft, girlish face your mother's,  
Expectant and receptive.

And other vulgar subtleties  
That reproduction has accrued.  
Thoughts that never could occur  
In the timeless setting of the Louvre.  
I am suddenly ashamed  
To call that painter's worship "art,"  
To think you'd wish to live on only  
In a painting, confused  
With memories of childhood,  
Sophistries of rebirth.

Yet these connections are a thrill  
And a constant awakening, a kind of love.  
Re-birth is once.  
Reproduction is connection, not  
Original, but finer for that –  
A copy, re-imagined and continual.

A moment before, only a canny  
Pilgrim, welcomed by your kind  
And ignorant disciples.  
Now you break  
The bread, bless it – a great stone of blindness  
Rolls from our eyes – and we behold  
A glowing...

## The Divorce

Today, ten years after the real divorce,  
ten years of silence broken only  
by the thin, continual slap  
of paint – you tell me the papers have come.  
Father, this brings to mind  
how you'd steal off at dawn to the river  
just blocks from the busy street,  
how you'd stand all day before your easel  
in a brittle wilderness of crows,  
picturing, with your liverish, trembling  
hands, those overblown trees.  
It brings to mind Mother, too,  
sleeping painfully late on those days, waking  
to blank bitterness and wild hair.  
One afternoon, when you returned,  
she ripped your paintings from our walls,  
threw them down the stairs where they tumbled –  
the trees, the houseboats,  
the portrait of the mestizo girl, remnant  
of your last, careless trip to Mexico,  
the year before the marriage –  
like babies to your feet.

Last year, hearing of the plans,  
I sent you this poem, written at eighteen:

He squinted mightily, as though to mold  
Within his eyes the stream that whirled and spun  
Beneath his brush's quaking strokes. The sun  
Sank low behind the weeds, and loosed its hold  
On leaf and twig. And so the river died  
In dusk, and so the painting, lost from light.

The river washes through the weeds of night  
As the muddy pigments, barely dried,  
Framed and hung, resume their whirling course  
On the living room wall. All in a row,  
A dozen sections of the river flow  
Down to the workshop, and back to the Source.

This meant something, I know, to you,  
you with your permanent squint,  
you with no workshop she'd ever allow,  
you with a trunk full, a basement full  
of green canvases, rotted, uncared for,  
as though dredged from river's bottom, not the sky.

Fault, like inspiration, lies muddied at the source.  
But last year, visiting home,  
I took a walk along that bridge once again,  
the bridge above the sunken woods around the river,  
saw those great trees boiling in the trembling wind,  
grander, more dismal than a Ruisdael,  
saw the continual splitting of the leaves, their wild

millioned fragmentation, like unkempt hair,  
in that mild twilight wind, darkening out of all art:

And saw that image as her, Father, the one she must live with,  
not you.