

***we touch  
the sky***

**ROD McKUEN**

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CHEVAL  
BOOKS

—  
SIMON AND  
SCHUSTER

—  
NEW YORK

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Finally, for Jean  
*la vie, une vie*







Only the birds  
are able  
to throw off  
their shadows  
—Vladimir Nabokov





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### **Author's Note**

*I have always thought of myself as a man of the elements, realizing that my best ideas and, for me, the nearest thing to knowledge have sprung from the realities of nature: the sea, the earth, the sky, rather than from books of history, religion or philosophy. And so, my life and work are filled with references to seashells, living close to the ground, ballooning, biplaning and hiking heavenward.*

*Fifteen years ago, I completed a trilogy of poetry and prose: The Sea, the Earth, and the Sky to be read and recorded with music. The Sea contains many private thoughts that later formed the basis of a book, Listen to the Warm. The Earth was the genesis for such works as Fields of Wonder and And to Each Season. Few of the things I originally wrote for the album The Sky ever made their way into one of my books until now.*

*The past five years of writing and rewriting, I've gathered together into a trilogy in book form some of the same elements I used in recording The Sea, The Earth, and The Sky. Though meant as an overall work, each volume stems from a single encounter or idea. The books and records utilize the same canvas but are painted differently.*

*In this final volume are eulogies for three friends who died in 1978. One killed himself before he*

*reached the age of thirty, and appears near a poem I wrote about him in 1972. Another died just as he had passed his seventieth birthday. A third died at the age of forty-nine, outliving by ten years his doctor's expectations. For twenty years, in a partnership, we wrote words and music together. Now I continue to write verse for him.*

R.M.

April 1979, New York City

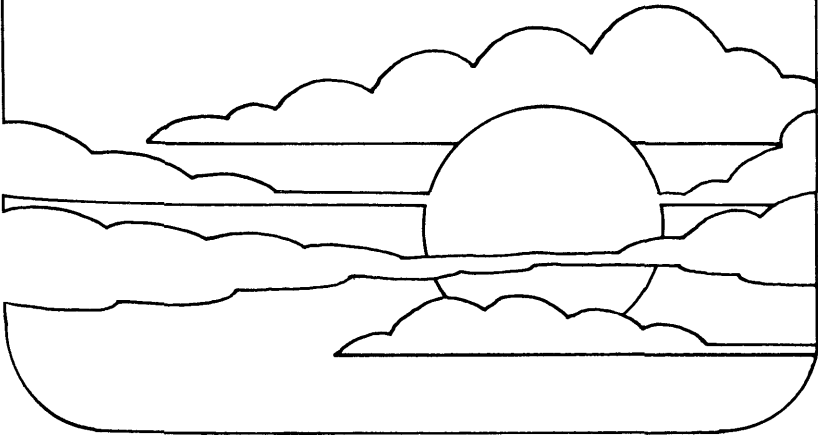
**CONTINUATION . . .**

*With one more hour  
another day perhaps  
a time of concentration  
we could rise up  
surpass, surprise ourselves  
and all of our ambitions  
maybe even thrust  
an unclenched fist  
through an empty cloud  
or pass a golden galaxy  
and with some patience  
and no little practice  
even touch the lower sky.*

from "Coming Close to the Earth"



**CLOUD BUSTING**







## **BREAKING AND ENTERING**

*You've but to push your fist through mist and haze  
to penetrate the clouds. Easier for the dreamer,  
harder for airplanes.*

*The man who's dead to dreaming lives within a  
cloud of his own making and so his chance of en-  
tering the stratosphere is scant. I close my eyes to  
dreaming, only long enough to dream.*

## ELEMENTS

Each man rides the elements  
or pauses in reviewing stands  
as they pass by.

To know the sea  
you must plunge into it  
not once but often  
till the water's foe or friend  
become a habit.

The quickest way  
to learn the earth  
is sifting ground  
through ungloved hands.  
Touching the sky  
is easy,  
once you've found  
the ladder.

## **JUNE FLIGHT**

Airborne—free  
running with the sun  
diving down the day  
jumping through June—  
Above the world  
part of the shell  
of some new world.

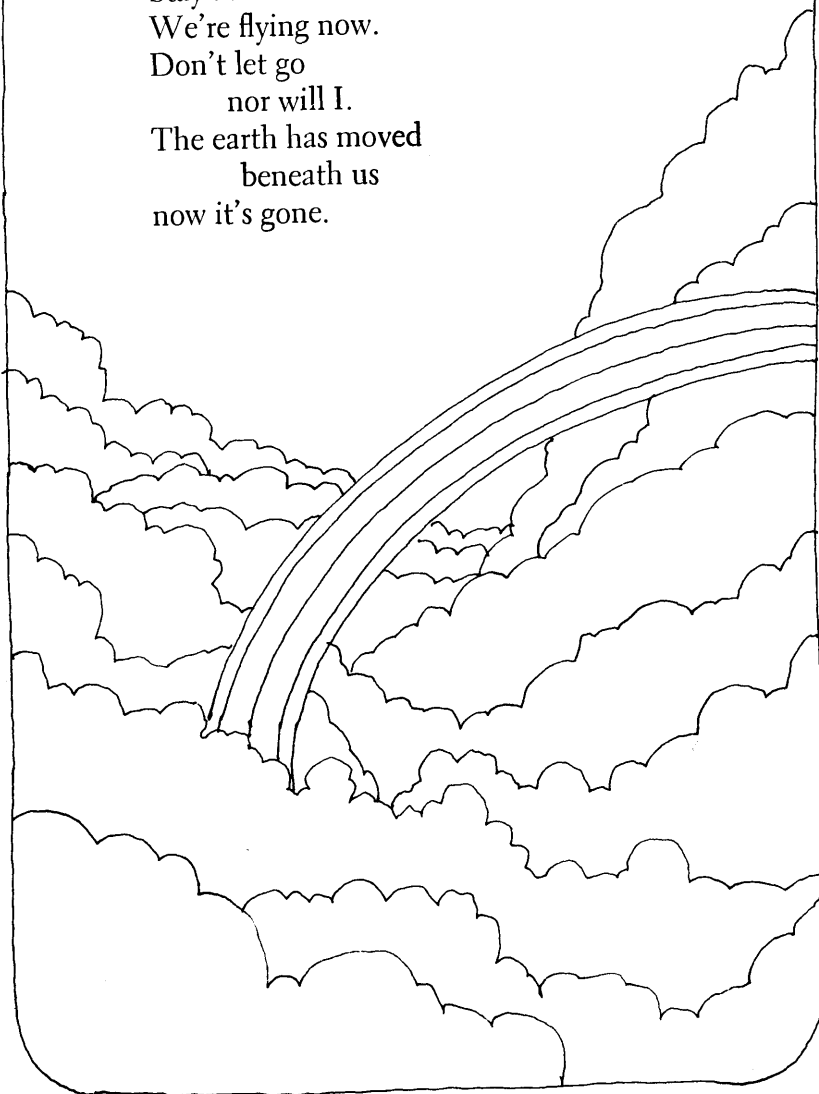
Now end over end  
dipping with the down draft  
hold on to me—I'm falling.  
Catch me if I do.

Together  
let us climb up  
high enough to see  
how much of heaven  
                  is reality  
and what's invention.  
Though no skybound ladder  
                  yet exists  
your arms loose about me  
seem a starting point.

They carry me aloft  
when they encircle me.  
I'm free while touching  
just your forearm.

Those fragile, gentle arms  
like vines that wind around  
the strongest brick or board  
till neither's sure  
of who's supporting whom.

Stay awake.  
We're flying now.  
Don't let go  
nor will I.  
The earth has moved  
beneath us  
now it's gone.



## **COUNTRY POEM**

Something pulls me  
back and forth  
across my country.

Seasons, yes  
and seas at either end.  
There are cities  
I'm obliged to visit  
in the business of business  
and curiosity  
has more than once  
been my travel guide,  
but something deeper  
tugs at me,  
won't let me go.

It's as if my destiny  
is to inch by inch myself  
across the sprawling land  
until my dust is ready  
to mingle with the earth  
I've run and crawled on  
all my life.

Until then  
I'll surely be a nomad  
never finding roots  
                                  or home  
or always finding them  
wherever journeys take me.



The push-pull  
of the wind,  
the magnet moon  
that more than  
once a month  
fills up for me,  
again the tides . . .  
None would be enough.  
Something more.

Nothing in a world  
of pretty places  
ever once approached  
the love I have  
for my own land.

I could not  
catalogue or list  
what I've found  
                    and find  
within the borders  
of my country.  
It would take  
another lifetime  
to set down on paper.

With this first life  
                    half over  
I cannot waste  
the second half  
in writing words  
                    of praise  
or seeming propaganda.

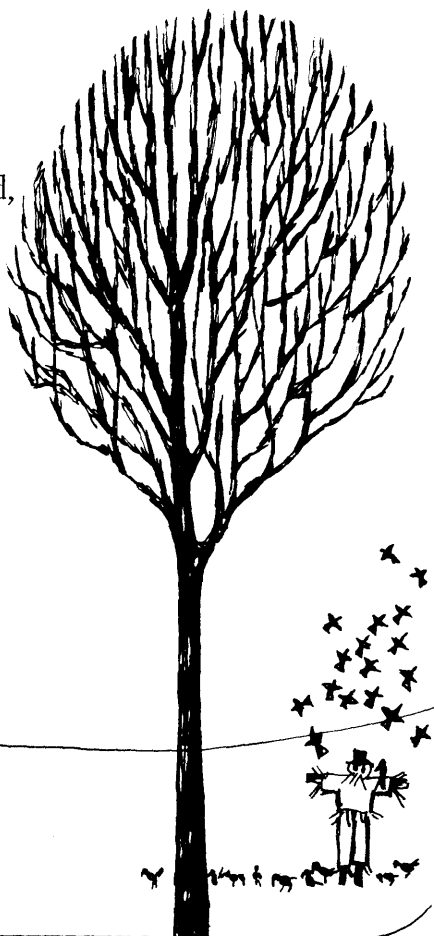
But what a need  
I sometimes feel  
    to yell back  
through the years  
to Whitman—  
*Hey there, old man,*  
*I hear your same America*  
*and it is singing.*

To visit Flat Rock  
one more time  
    and hunt up  
Sandburg's ghost  
just to reassure him  
*yes you made*  
*our Lincoln live.*  
*We go on loving*  
*you as well as him.*

I'd like to toss a pebble  
in the pond at Walden Pond  
and as it sank  
and made an ever-growing  
circle

Say Thoreau aloud  
a thousand times  
till all the birds  
flew off to practice  
calling out his name.

Again it's not  
the great men only,  
those who loved  
the language and the land,  
it's something else.



I suspect  
that deep inside  
my country's center  
right or left of its  
wide throbbing heart  
the gravity's so strong  
that none of us  
will ever be  
master or mistress  
of our destiny,  
especially knowing  
that we're ill-equipped  
to even half give back  
what the sprawling land  
has given us.

## **LITTLE TOWNS AND PRETTY PLACES**

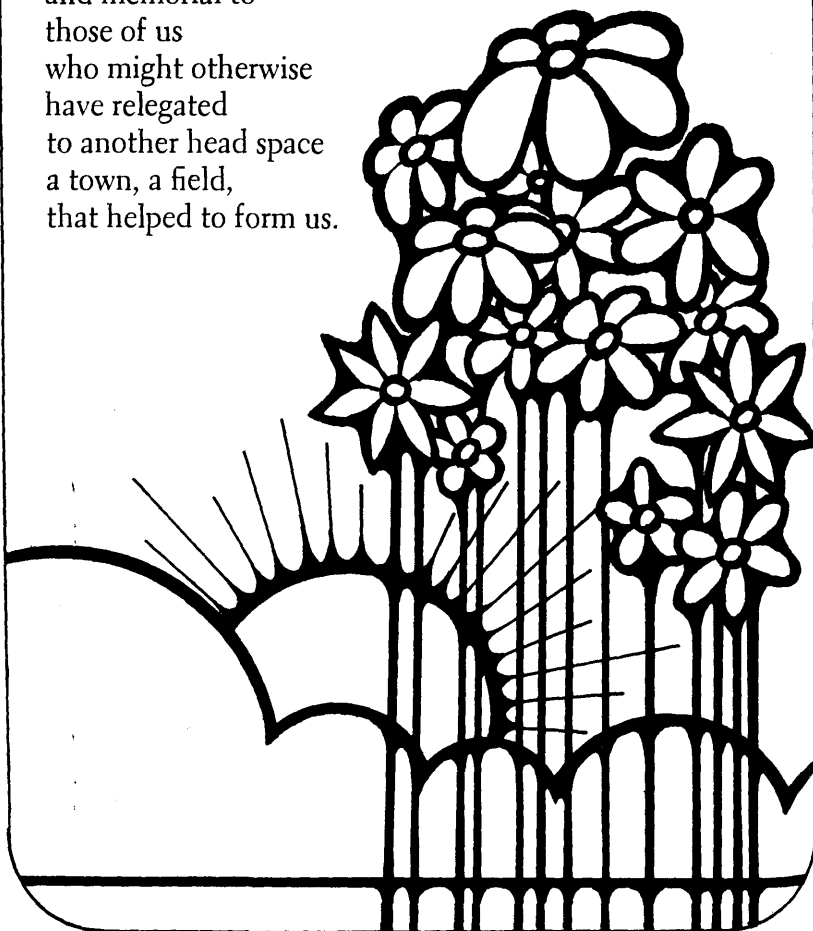
Not the world's end  
or its beginning,  
little towns and pretty places  
are remembered lovingly  
and well.

Because we had the time  
or took the time  
to get to know them  
they are the Calentes,  
the Alamo Junctions  
and the Somersets  
of little worlds,  
within our world.

Sometimes a certain tree  
calls up the memory  
of one whole town,  
or the branch that broke  
and survived two summers  
as the whittled  
                    well-worn crotch  
of a favored slingshot.

Jaw breakers  
and red licorice candy,  
the monthly present  
when the grocery bill  
was finally toted up  
                    and paid.

Somebody's skeleton  
of somebody's kite,  
dangling and flapping  
month on month  
from telephone-wire  
graveyards,  
forgotten by the child  
who lost it,  
but a memory  
and memorial to  
those of us  
who might otherwise  
have relegated  
to another head space  
a town, a field,  
that helped to form us.





The little towns  
with one church spire  
and half a congregation.

The pretty places  
garlanded better  
than they no doubt were  
by our recollections  
with inspired truth stretched  
past the breaking point  
of grown-up imaginations.

How much is true  
I cannot know  
                    or speculate.  
But while others  
dwell on old Legionnaire picnics  
or the day the sheriff's car  
went through the window  
                    of the bon marché,

I remember clouds  
arranged in special ways  
or in a disarray of such design  
it must have been deliberate  
                    and true.

In the little towns  
I've traveled through  
or settled in for summers  
          or the week's end,  
the pretty places  
always seemed to be  
above whatever hill  
or high school campanile  
dominated near and far  
          horizons.

The pretty places  
were the skies  
whether filled with slender clouds  
          or clustered ones  
in bouquets or bunches.

Mostly after twilight  
with no screened-off porch  
or hammock swing  
that might suggest a chance  
for relaxation,  
or in crowds  
where others boast or brag  
or put down hometowns  
the memory starts.

Little towns  
and pretty places  
begin to dominate  
the consciousness—when alone,  
in conversation, or with company.

The loudmouth  
or the school bully  
remembers, embellishes,  
talks often of the girls  
he lured into the locker room  
or settled down with in the tall grass.  
The corporation head recalls  
his peanut-butter-jelly lunch.

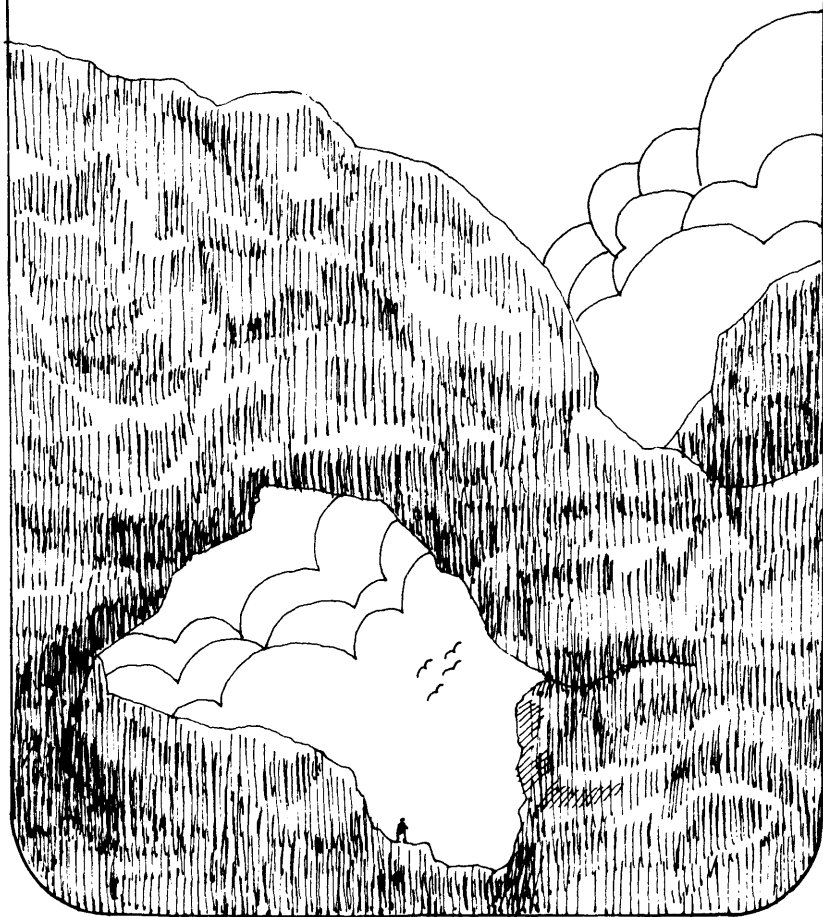
The inverted or the shy  
remembers books that took  
four months to read.  
And there are the endless stories  
of certain grades—or high school plays,  
*Our Town, Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*  
*The Nineteen-Fifty-Nine Review.*

Harry, or was it Lionel  
always won the lead  
but couldn't make rehearsal  
after school  
and still win on the football field.

I fall somewhere in between,  
or not within a group at all.

Hung up on clouds  
or wishing to be hanging there  
I tell anyone who'll listen,  
I suspect few do,  
about the many mornings  
that slid past mid-day  
helped into long afternoons  
by the most extraordinary clouds.

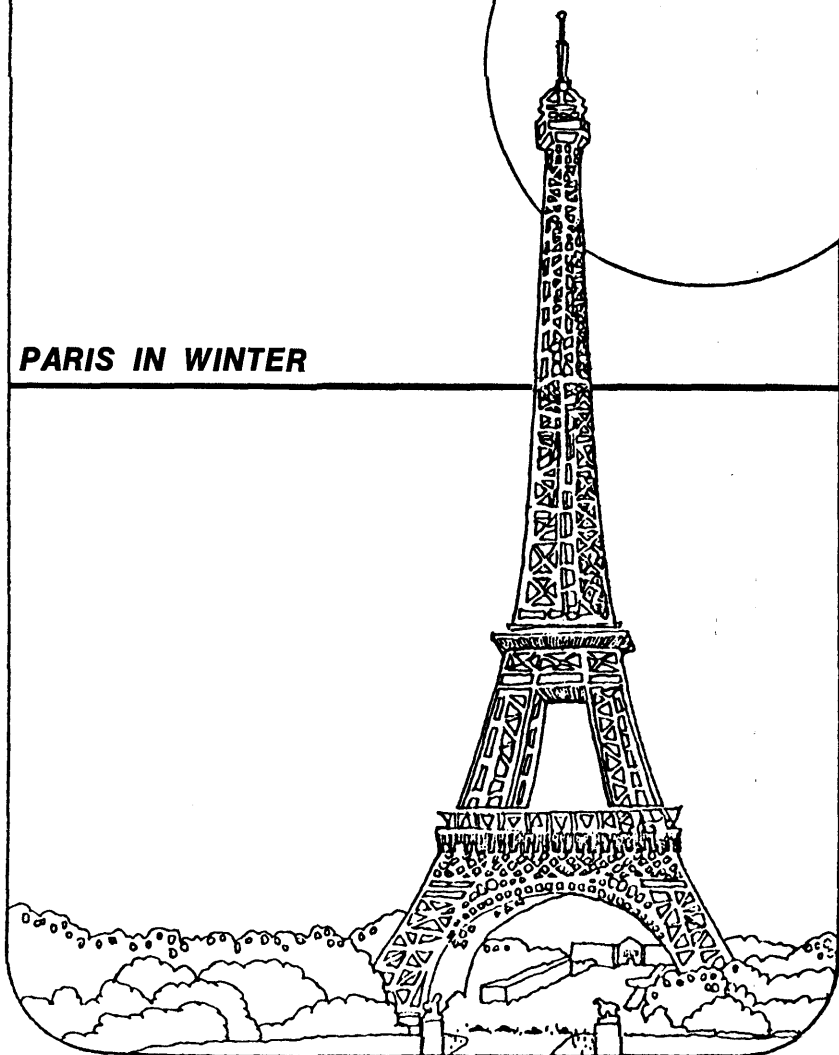
Those skies  
I've never seen in cities  
are to me the essence  
of all the little towns  
and places I found  
pretty.







**PARIS IN WINTER**





## **WINTER AGAIN**

*Seldom have I carried anyone, though I've tried.  
But, oh, the times when I've been lifted high by  
love, transported. Once in winter . . . a friend or  
lover's unselfish thought, transported by an idea  
culled from someone else's ideology. Once in  
winter . . .*

## **JEAN, ONE**

Noc-Noc had a party.  
I remember that I came in white,  
my flesh beneath  
an off-white parka  
pale as any winter.  
I must have wanted to be like  
that never-ending Paris snow.  
And like the snow  
I melted deep into the crowd.

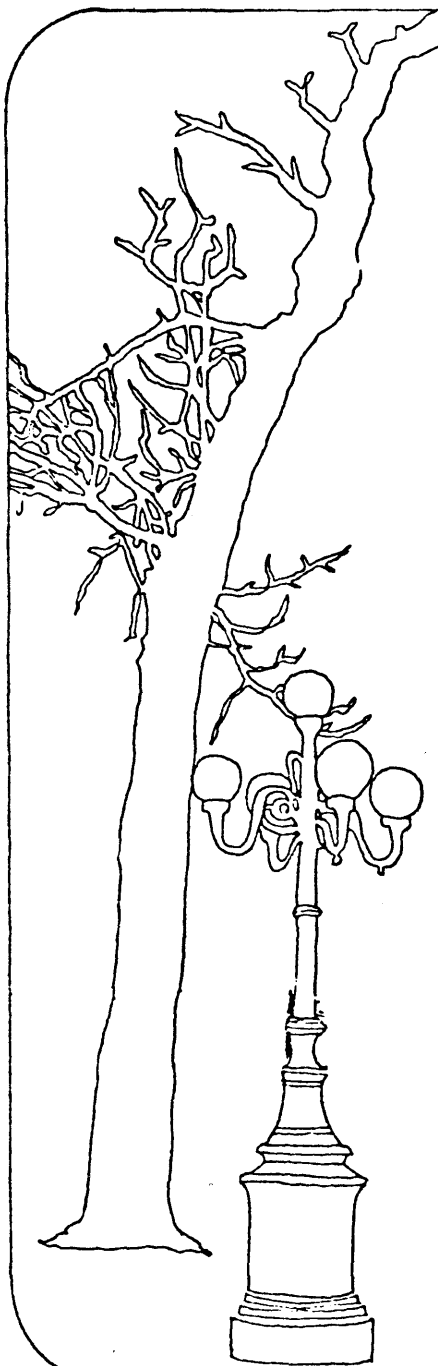
Heady with new hangups  
brought along across the ocean  
I wanted to remain unnoticed, uninvolved.

Carefully I picked a corner  
                    staked it out  
and built a wall,  
real enough to make  
penetration impossible.

The Epiphany pie was passed  
I sliced the smallest piece—  
though I was eager for insurance  
safe balm or palmistry  
spelling out the year ahead.

As those things happen,  
and we are not to know  
                  just why they do,  
you came through the door  
sometime after nine o'clock.

No exploration,  
no initial glances.  
The night was moving  
not by hours, but by inches.  
No testing, feeling out,  
we left surveillance  
to professionals  
becoming innocents  
                  and amateurs  
for that one evening.



Then  
like children  
through the streets  
we stumbled ran and ran  
eager to be home  
in that hotel room bed,  
discovering the truth  
we knew already—  
that we would fit  
each other's contours  
doped and groggy  
or alert.

Passion the penultimate.  
Need the know all.  
And something more,  
a kindly survey  
of each other  
eye to eye  
body to body  
unafraid.

I cannot conceive  
of anything we did not  
or would not do together.  
You were all the angels  
                    in the Abbaye  
who had waited patiently  
exploring other bodies  
through the years  
then giving all the stored-up  
knowledge you had come upon  
                                    to me.

It mingled with my own  
until the larder of our learning  
was flowing over and overflowed.



Having come back  
to a favored city  
after too long a time.  
My need spread over you  
                    and into you  
like a mantle of want.

I held back not a nod  
                    or wince.

I was  
I am convinced  
no motion or emotion  
stayed fastened  
to its mooring place  
and no clocked-off hour  
was wasted or ill-spent.

The morning  
and the night  
and another morning **came**  
each went away  
as we grew stronger  
because the pouring into  
                    one another  
came from each of us  
in equal measure.

Pleasures  
of the pleasure dome  
not known to me  
are well known now  
as I look back  
upon my sojourn  
into your Samarkand.

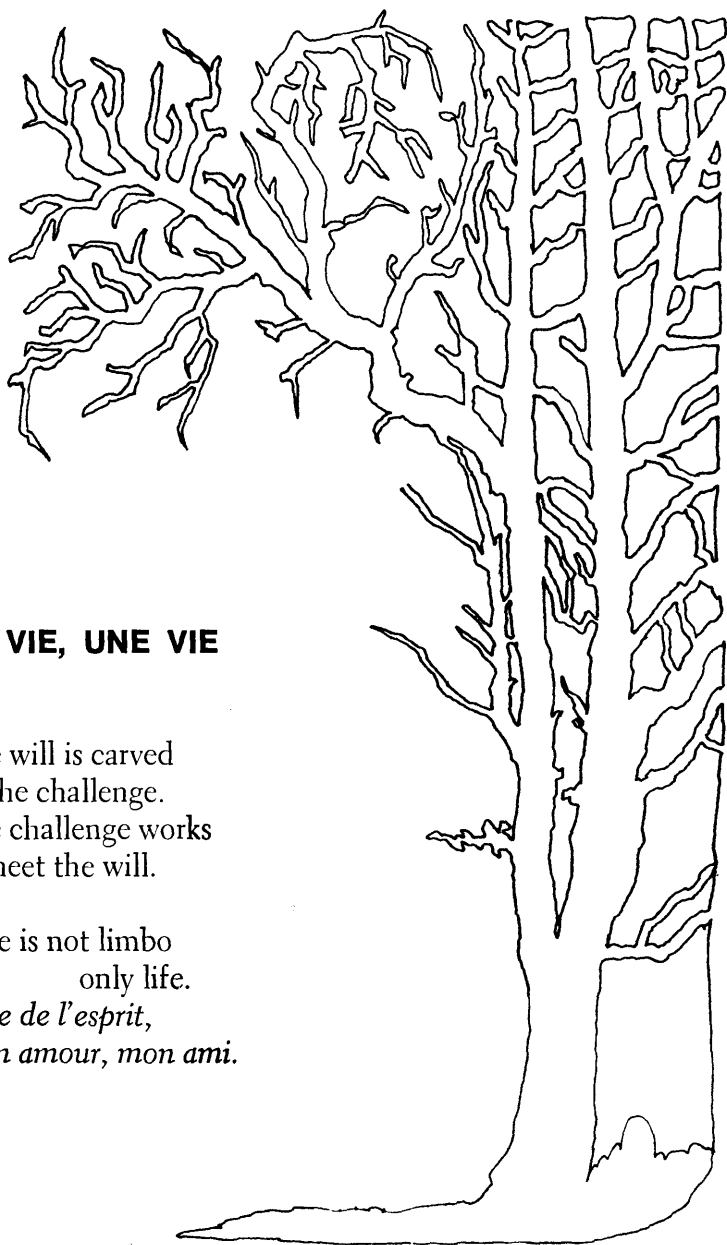
So it was  
we squandered  
all the silence  
and knelt together  
in the endless night  
that stretched through days.  
Your face was like  
    a mirror  
and like Narcissus  
I looked into it  
with longing and with love.

Whatever else the Paris winter offered  
    stays a mystery.

## **JEAN, TWO**

Let the revolution  
die a-borning.  
No morning war  
could ever fill  
our pushed-together  
single beds.

No quarrel  
worth the quarreling  
has yet been able  
to move us  
from within these walls  
to the public garrisons.



## LA VIE, UNE VIE

The will is carved  
by the challenge.  
The challenge works  
to meet the will.

Love is not limbo  
only life.  
*Luxe de l'esprit,*  
*Mon amour, mon ami.*

## **JEAN, THREE**

*Passing through.*  
Words not passwords.

So much devotion  
in so little time.  
So strong a bond  
without the strength  
to bind it.

Cymbals striking in mid-life  
echo and then fade  
without elaborate orchestrations  
or repeat bars  
to make them play  
                    and play again,  
reverberations are not heard.

I left.

You went away.

Things to do.

The outside world  
had finally caught us  
or was catching up,  
though sometime  
in that time together  
we had each agreed  
without the other's prompting  
that our mid-lives  
so different and so set  
in their predictable directions  
had become a single road  
a single life to be lived out  
two-gether.

You wrote.  
I didn't answer.  
I called.  
You weren't at home.

I wrote to you.  
The letters didn't reach  
their intended destination.  
You called. I was away.

Friends would tell me  
                  how you were.  
I'd arrive in Paris  
on my way to somewhere.  
Noc-Noc would look up  
as if to say  
*You're one day late.*



I was a lifetime late  
or maybe one too early.

Can you hear me, Jean?  
When I don't know what to do  
out of habit, I do nothing,  
or walk on clouds  
just above the rooftops.

Can't you see me, Jean?  
... *the clouds are so low*  
*you can touch them . . .*



*And so*  
I must be easily  
within your reach.

The echo of us  
is filling up  
    the emptiness  
without, within.

Paris  
out of kindness  
offers nothing to me  
when I visit now.  
Unable to afford me *you*  
it gives me only Paris.

I believe what happened  
know it as I know  
the alpha and the alphabet.  
Only the omega  
is disbelieved and hard  
to comprehend.

Is truth absolute  
when it is happening  
or made more honest  
by remembering?  
I leave the riddles  
in a pile for you.

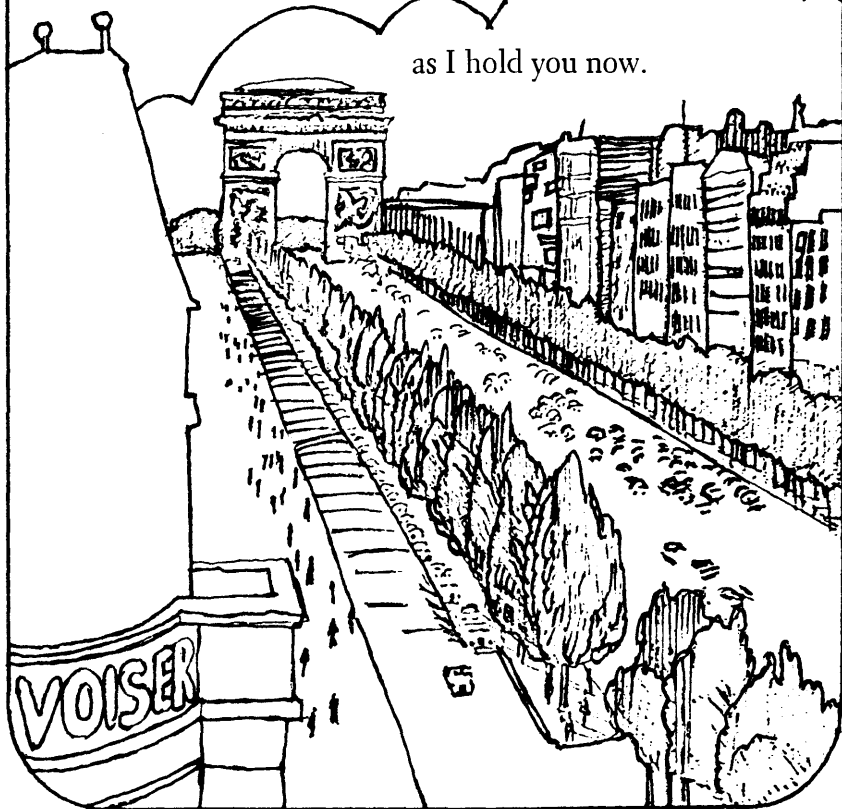
I am not puzzled  
but my grief is such  
that those who've seen me  
in familiar Paris streets,  
head bent and plodding,  
find my actions puzzling.

Seven times in this past year  
I returned or I passed through  
some part of Paris.

Though you were gone  
I held you every time  
even though your face  
and form and footfall were absent.

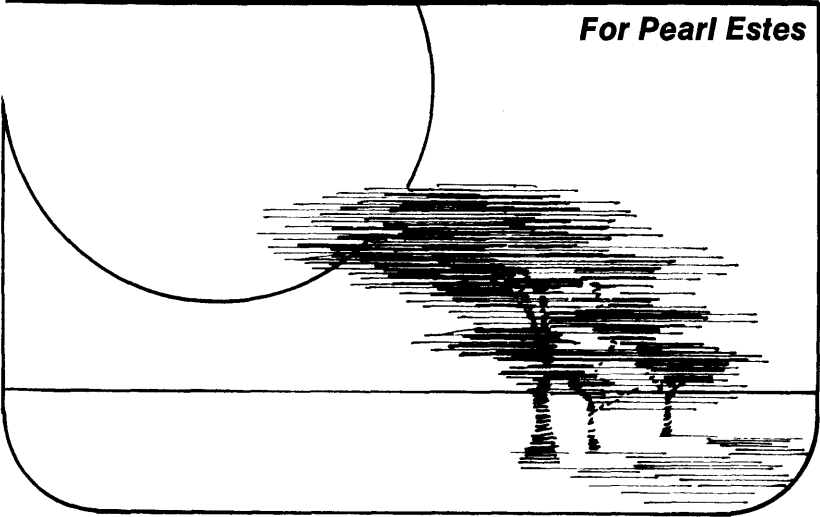
I held you

as I hold you now.



**APRIL IN THE UNDERWORLD**

*For Pearl Estes*



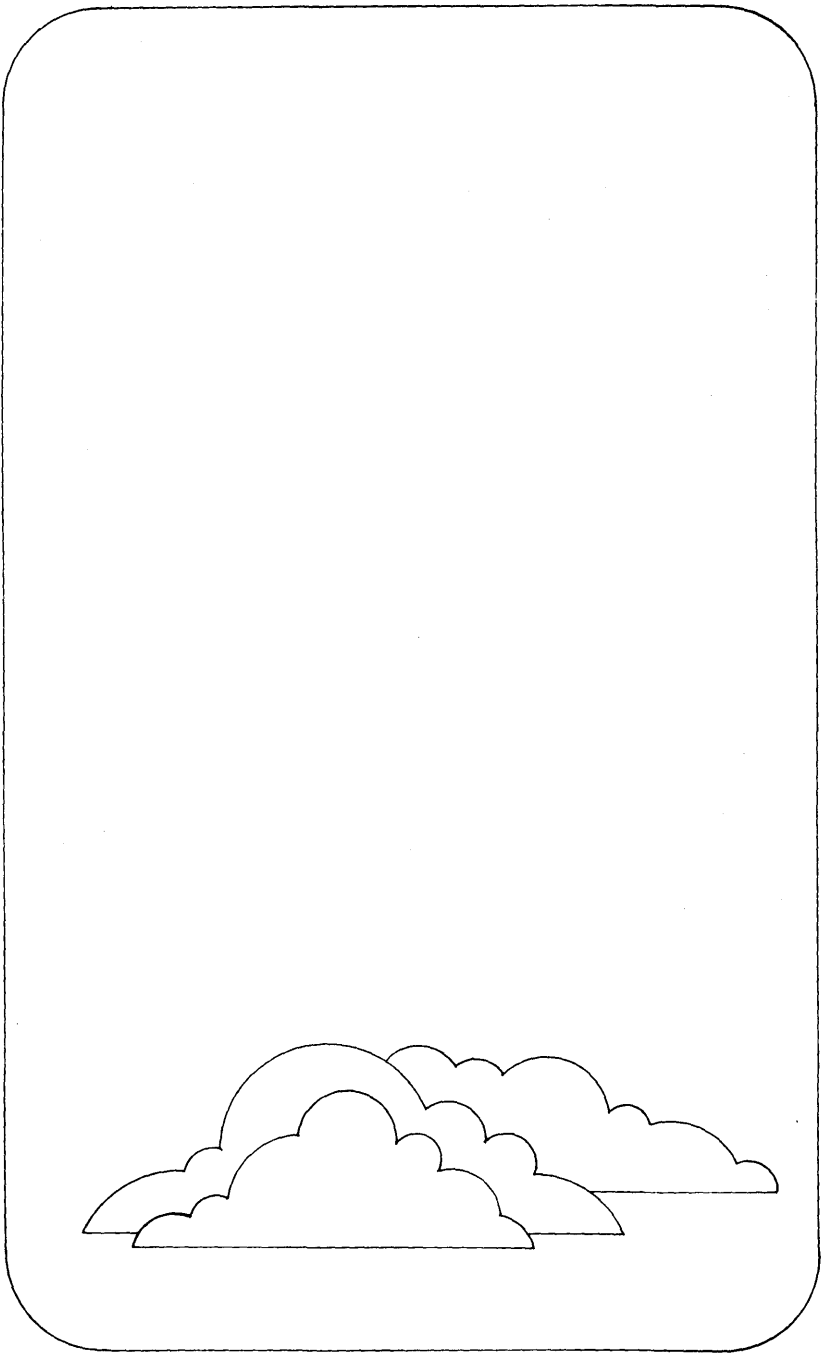


## **APRIL 1978/SOUTH OF MOSCOW**

*South of Moscow on the road to Susdal we passed great clusters of birch that alternated with pussy willow round and fuzzy even up above the April snow. I made them stop the car not once but twice so that I might gather armfuls of willow and bring them back to Pearl.*

*I knew that April would be difficult. So many anniversaries come that month and I was in another world, not just away from home. Breakfast every morning with Pearl and Bob made it easier. I never thought of you once. A dozen times a day, yes. Never once.*

*And John helped. And Elana, Maya, Mark and Roman and Fred and Sascha. They never knew it but they helped. You were past forgetting and they would insure that I would pass remembering off as just another accident in the young spring day.*





## **APRIL IN THE EAST**

Another field of snow  
the sun begins to slice  
each knoll or tree  
that blocks its view  
until it strikes a lake  
and falls from sight.  
I mourn its going  
as I mourn the now gone day.

The birch so straight and strong  
will not let the wildest storm  
bend it to its knees,  
one in every hundred hundred  
is uprooted and falls down  
and only then by accident.

The pussy willow  
of this countryside  
is new to me.  
Not reeds this time  
the way they have been  
    all my life  
but great trees  
each bud an out-of-season  
    Christmas light.

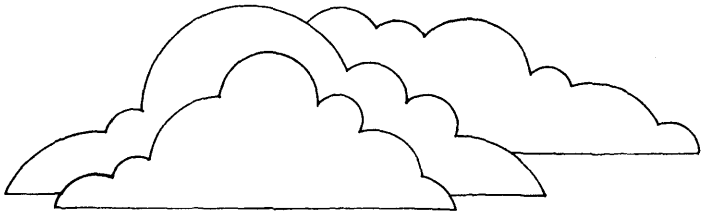
Birds and beasts and man  
are standing in a line  
waiting for the thaw.  
No sign as yet that April  
will be anything  
but parts and pieces  
of December's past.

This winter  
has been long.  
Let the snow make up  
new rivers not yet named  
or reinforce the old ones,  
let the green come sneaking  
down the hills again  
and climb the pines.  
April be not March or Monday  
be yourself.

Yesterday  
I tumbled  
into Friday  
missing half a week.  
Even stones are hurrying  
I don't know why.

## **AFTER STORM**

Wave over wave  
of simple sunlight  
sets my eyes to dancing  
or to staring straight ahead  
hoping I can cause sun spots  
to come together  
in a single blue.  
Not just a haze  
of happiness  
absolute  
a steady blur so  
it will make life even,  
if unreal.



## OLD HOUSES

I love old houses  
    for their smells,  
their must and dust and mildew  
and for what they've been  
to people I will never know.

The character  
of calked-up cracks  
means more to me  
than plastered walls and pretty paper,  
walls that play the neighbors' music  
when the radio I love  
    has gone to sleep.

The faces of the old  
are like old houses  
every line's a highway  
from the past.

And so I love old houses  
and the people who sit rocking  
on their sagging porches.





New coats of paint  
will brighten them  
and gloss on smiles  
but the master painter still  
is the brush and box  
of weather  
and time the only artist  
willing to take time.

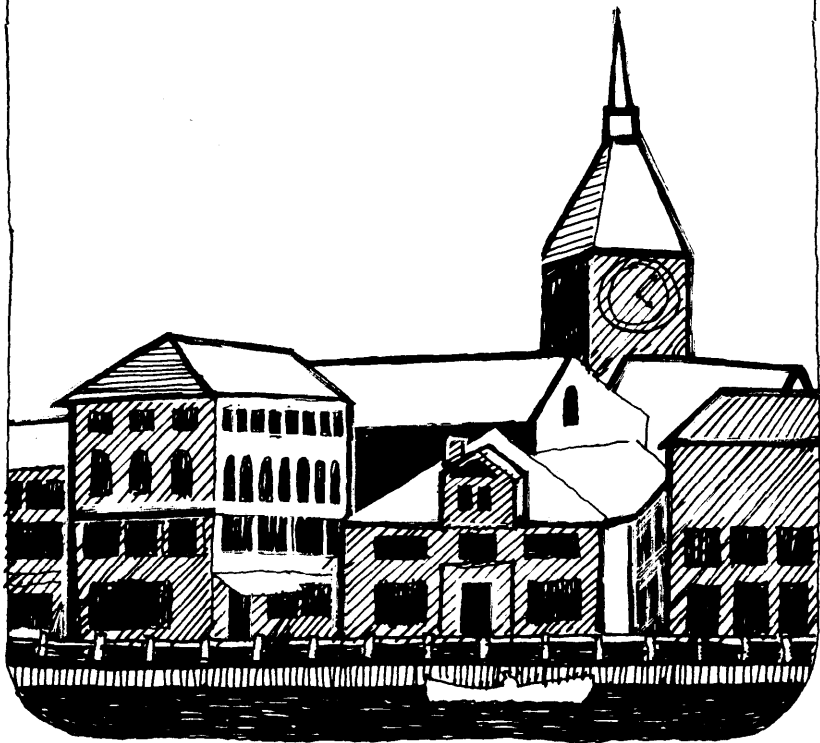
It's proven on the fronts  
of houses old and getting older  
and the faces of the elderly  
not old at all, but seasoned only.

Old faces  
are the premier class.  
Old houses closing in at second.  
Not necessarily in age  
but in history  
undramatic but imposing.

Whistle me a tune  
I ask a man  
of undetermined  
                    years.

He does so  
smiling afterward  
as if no one  
had thought to ask him  
such a question  
or put a like task  
                    to him  
any time before.

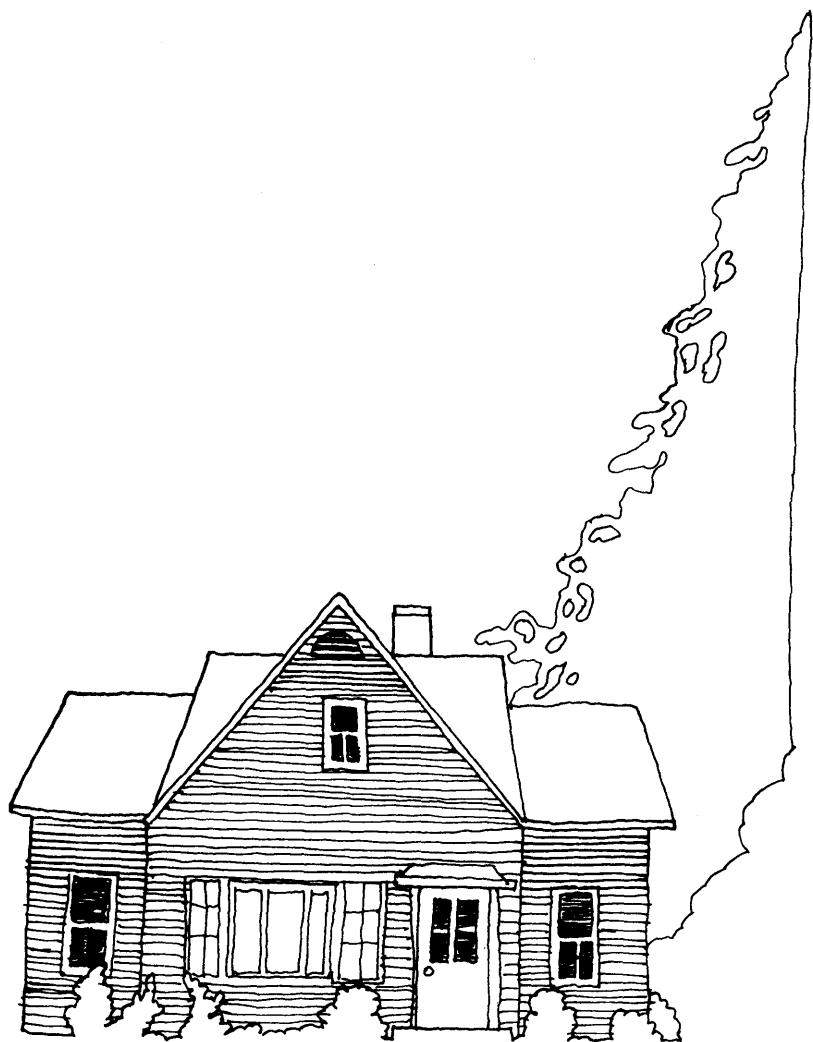
I could drift along  
the canal Grande  
perceiving dwelling places  
sinking slowly  
and not feel sad.  
Old houses earn  
the right to die  
to crumble  
and be gone  
with no tears shed.



## **OLD HOUSES, THREE**

Somewhere in childhood  
the pull of boarded buildings,  
shacks and half-built mansions,  
condominiums and constructions  
                    of every kind  
began to seize me and even silence  
disconnected tunes  
that I was  
humming  
in my head.

Later while a drifter  
I'd seek out  
abandoned dwelling places,  
moving in and dusting,  
sometimes calking, walls  
then papering them  
with last week's newsprint.  
I tried to make these  
transient places home  
for the duration of my stay  
without disturbing  
original intentions made by  
the master or the mistress  
who long ago decided on  
yellow kitchens and flocked paper  
in the hall.

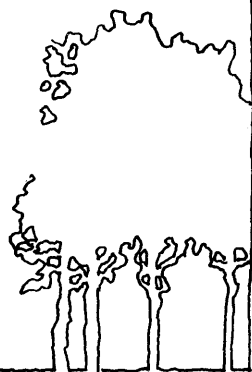


Sometimes  
even when a house  
began to die beneath me  
I stayed on. Even now  
I can't abide the wrecker's ball  
his booted army in destruction hats  
his torch, his wrench, his crowbar.



**COMING THROUGH THE TREES**

***For Camilla Snyder***

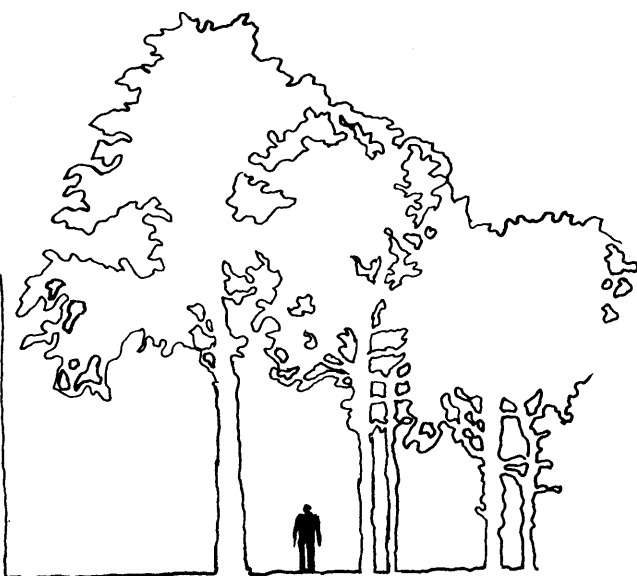




## COMING THROUGH THE TREES

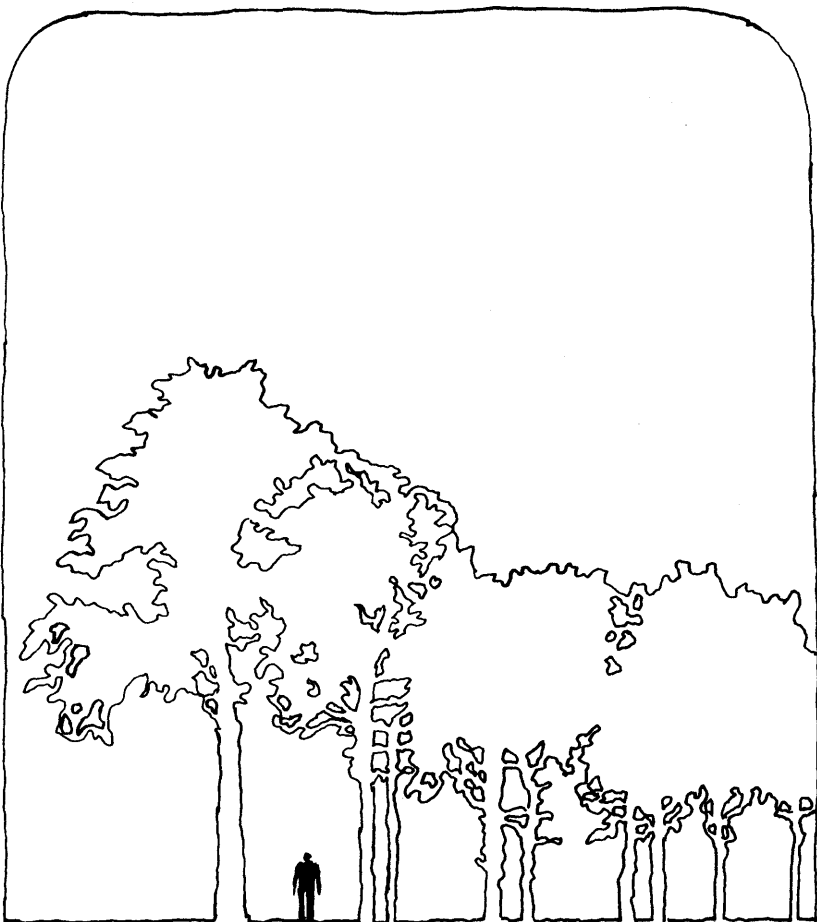
*Some years ago I finally saved enough to buy and build around me, a proper house. Through the years many places in that house, on those grounds, have become special to me—nothing more so than the window looking from my bathroom into pine trees. My security, every morning and part of every day when I'm at home. This year the trees were trimmed and thinned. Now wide paths of sunlight travel through the branches, not unlike a stained glass window. Even more birds come now and I feel more air.*

## THROUGH THE TREES

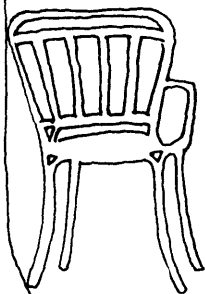


A saviour, maybe  
coming through the trees  
a person not yet known to me.  
Perception tells me it's a friend  
or will be.

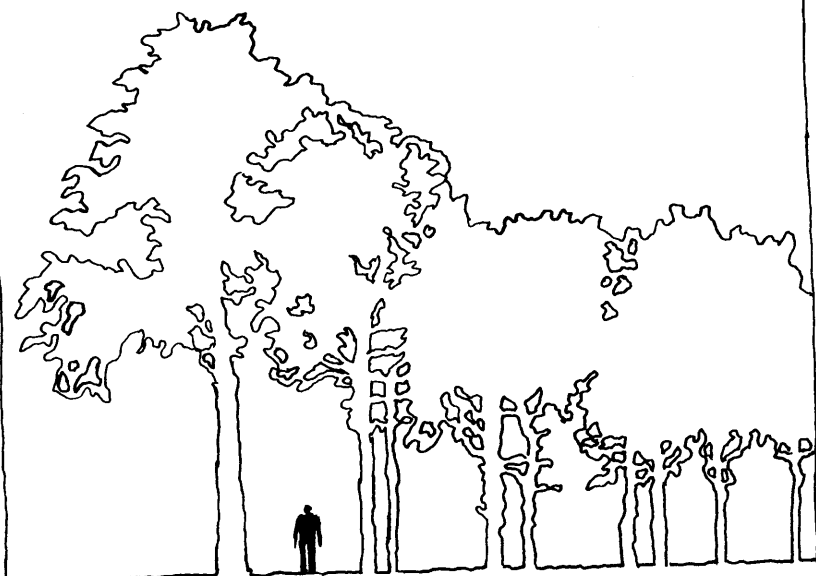
How I know this  
I am not exactly sure. But I do.



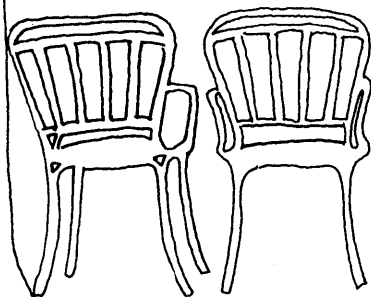
Within an open space I place a chair.



Surely one who's come so far  
will find it useful  
as a resting place.  
Perhaps the sight  
of one lone chair  
will slow his walk.

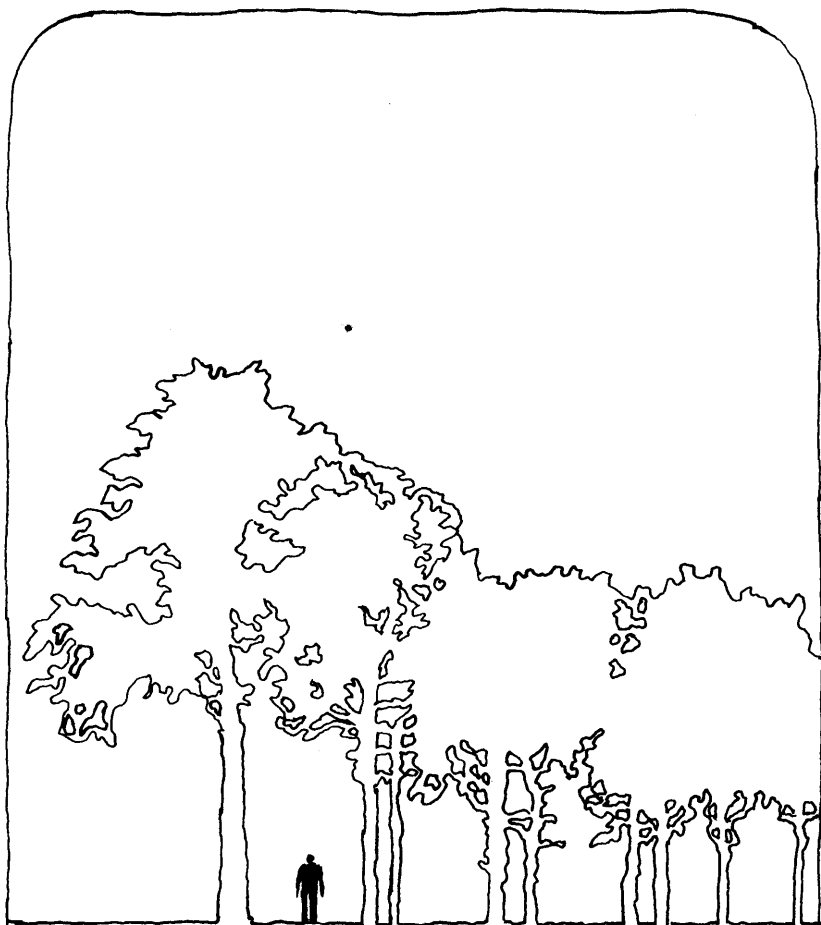


We can talk if he is willing.

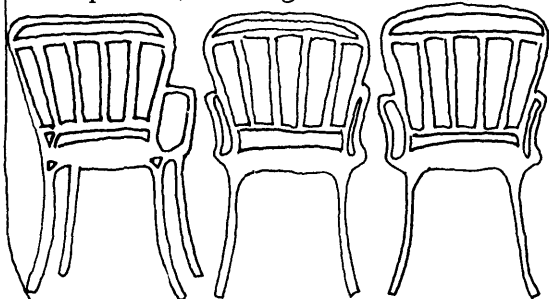


He is.

I see it in his gait.  
Though coming forward  
or standing still  
he looms no larger  
than at first.

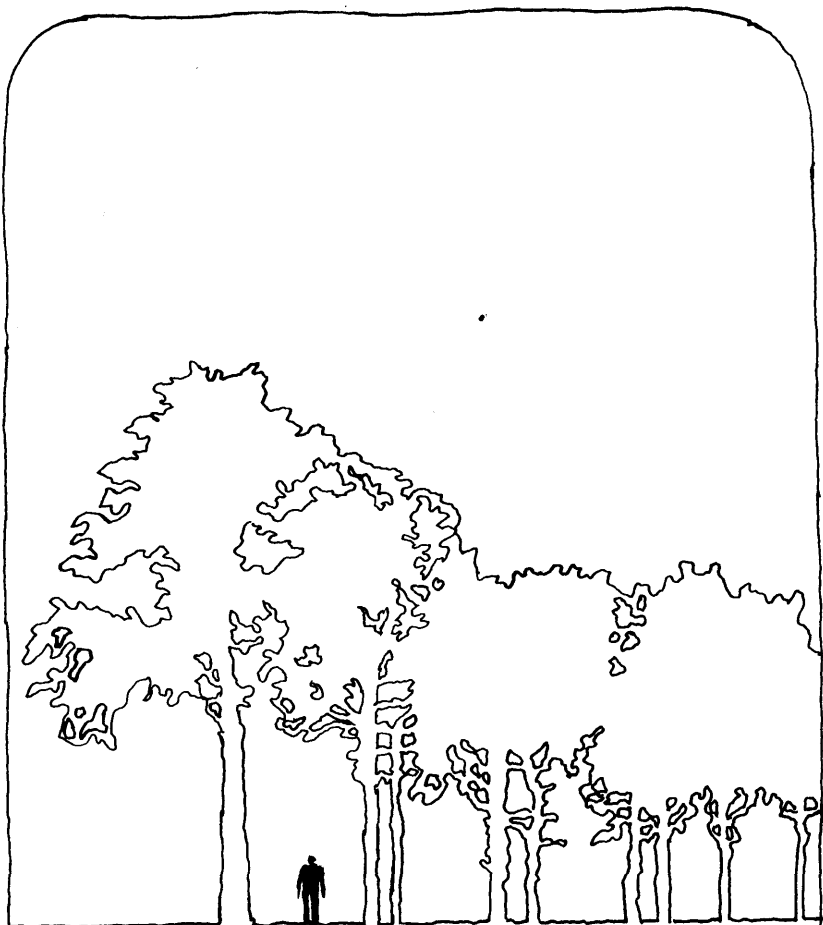


Impatient, I arrange more chairs, four

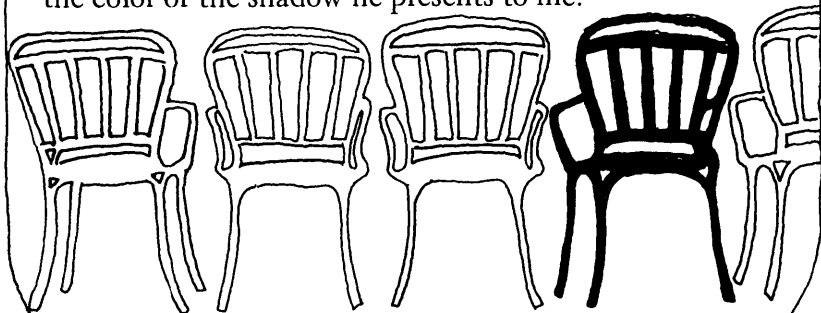


within  
a row.  
He may  
have  
friends

who quietly bring up the rear.



For him a fifth and special chair  
the color of the shadow he presents to me.

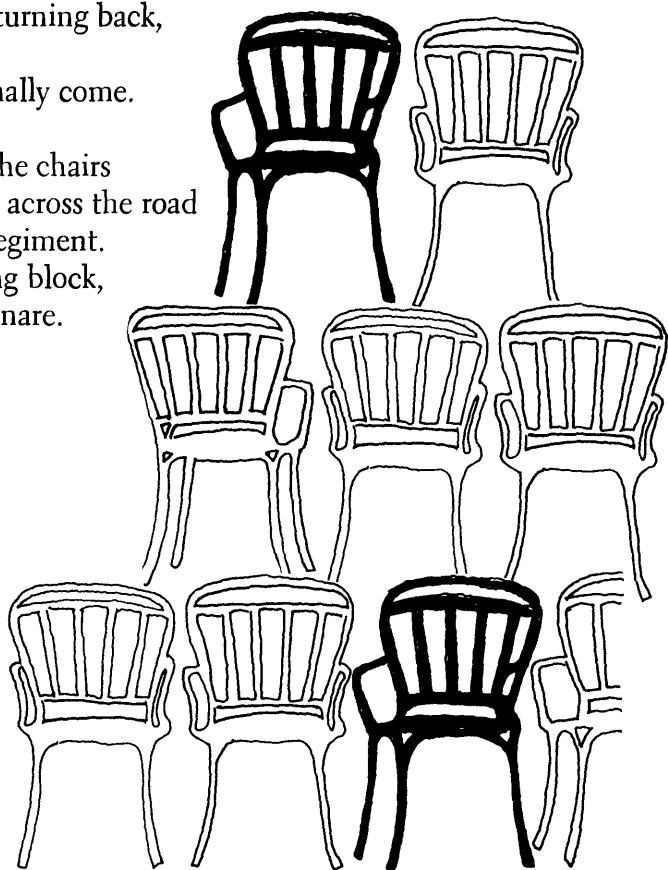




Horizons having slowed  
and trees a mere mirage  
the stranger too  
has slipped into the mist  
or cloud.

I did not see him  
turning back,  
so forward  
he must finally come.

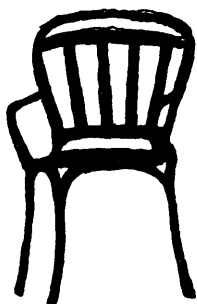
And now the chairs  
I've placed across the road  
are like a regiment.  
A stumbling block,  
a fence, a snare.



We move  
from taking little interest  
in our fellow man's ideals  
his wants and needs  
to the luxury  
of never troubling  
with any needs  
but those  
of our own selves.

What we need most  
is some *one* else  
while still remaining  
resentful of intrusion.

Without the intercourse  
                    of conversation,  
debate or non-debate,  
whole sections of the brain  
battle, blend and bleed  
                    are sealed off  
and once the door is shut  
on any hallway, in the head  
it seldom opens up  
                    or out again.



I only wanted company.  
Talk of weather  
and the time of day.  
No agenda planned  
or Robert's Rules  
need have been applied.

From year to year  
it seems we graduate  
from talking little  
with each other  
to talking not at all.

Come forward.  
I am waiting still.  
Perhaps this man  
who briefly loomed  
and then was lost  
on the near horizon  
has a Jean, a Helen  
    or whatever  
who tarried long enough  
within his life  
to love and be so loved  
    then went away.

I have learned,  
though late in life,  
to listen and commiserate  
    and I will.

## POINT OF REFERENCE

Time is nothing without clocks.  
Break the wristwatch  
and the aging still continues.  
but time grows muddled  
and confused.

Pull the blind on sunshine  
and the dark will keep us  
in the middle night.

Without a calendar  
we have only cold to show us  
when the first full winter day  
arrives.

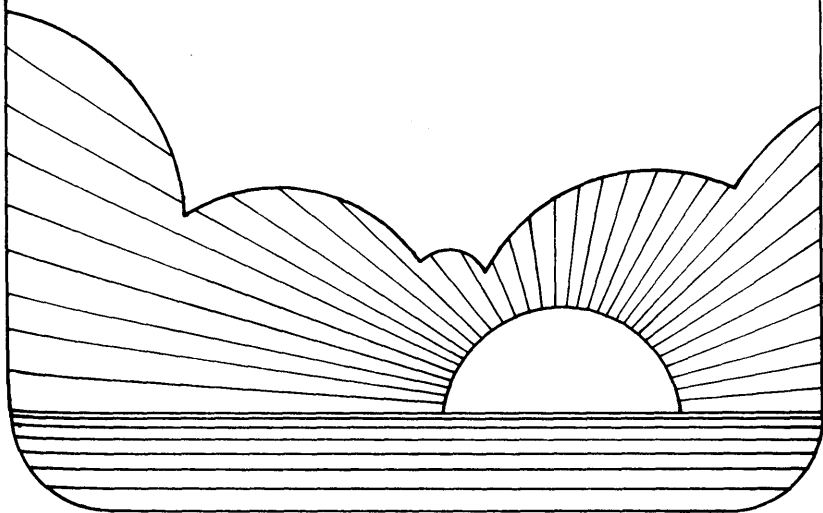
The engine coughs, wheezes, stops,  
the heart within the body  
shrinks or slows  
then finally halts,  
the traffic light still works  
or fails on unseen meters  
based on timing and on time.  
Time is nothing  
without clocks.





**SUN SPOTS**

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## SUN SPOTS

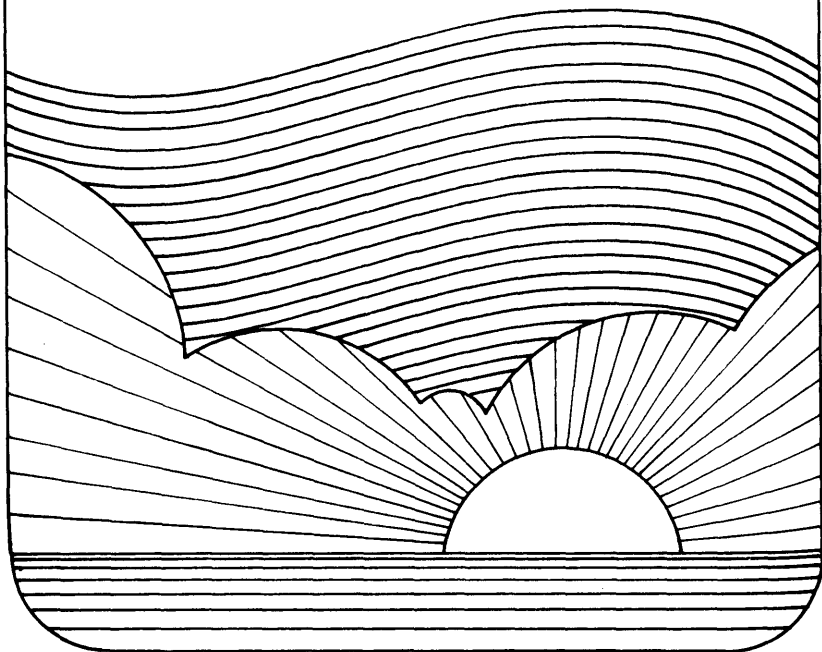
*It may be that an ordinary act of love makes us feel extra-ordinary—though what is so ordinary about an act of gentleness toward another, when we are told by preachers, teachers, and the over-reachers, of these times, that we should concern ourselves with self.*

*I allow no cult or culture as a stand-in, when I'm caught thinking just of me, I alone am guilty. The trick is being wise enough to catch myself. The treat is knowing some mistakes I've made, I'll not repeat again.*

## EXERCISE

Your bare shoulders,  
young and lean  
growing older  
in the sun.

Turn slowly  
so that I might see  
your breasts again.



The corners of your eyes  
but just the corners  
                    frown.  
You haven't smiled  
and yet you do.

The sun's approval  
won so easily  
and he's been making  
                    love to you  
all day.  
Aware of my turn now  
he slips behind a cloud.

Later  
I'll begin to make  
new tunes for you,  
music you can bend  
and sway to  
while seducing tomorrow's  
or the next day's sun.

Hurry now.  
One virtue lacking  
in my brain  
is patience.

## SO LITTLE SUN

It may be that the sky  
has no top at all  
and love is only  
    what it is—  
the coming together  
of people who need.

Finding out the names  
of those among us  
    we can trust.



Skies of every color  
changing into other colors  
                    every day  
but so little sun  
to fill our black lives.

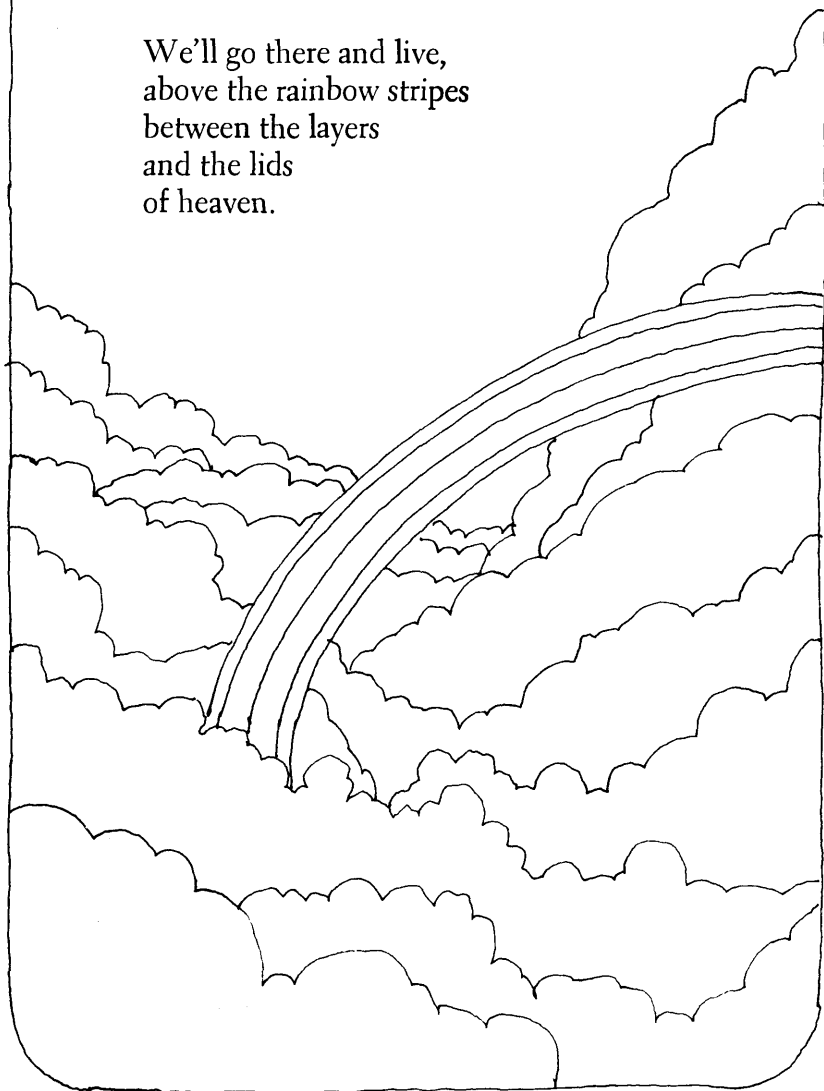
It may be that the sky  
is layered differently  
to every different eye  
and some eyes  
know a dozen different  
colors of the sun.

My eyes  
have lately  
looked on you  
                    so often  
they only see the sun  
reflected in your own.



Stake me out a piece of blue,  
light blue if you like  
away from everything.

We'll go there and live,  
above the rainbow stripes  
between the layers  
of heaven.



# THE BUTTERFLIES ARE DRUNK ON SUNSHINE

The butterflies are drunk  
on sunshine  
they weave and reel  
against the garden wall  
seeing no one,  
imagining themselves unseen  
they forage through  
the budding fruit trees,  
sigh and smile between  
snapdragons  
and the phallic foxglove.

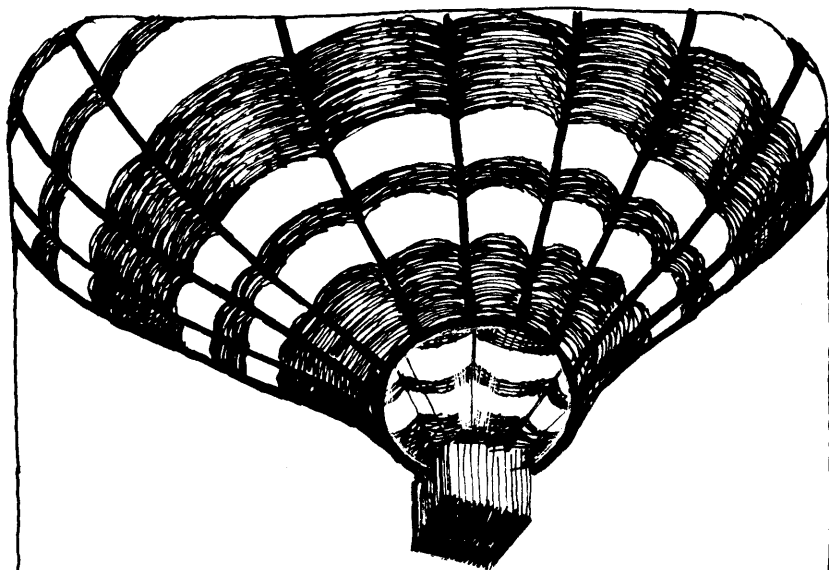
Behind the house  
and unaware  
you paint your toenails  
and frown at your reflection  
in the dirty window glass  
as I call out to you  
coming from the porch.

So goes the summer  
hour to hour, day to day.  
You worry yourself  
with something  
that hasn't any name.

I pretend that worry  
will not come into your eyes  
unless I prop them open  
with a kind of confidence  
or will them to be so  
with new indifference.

How can I presume such easiness  
with you  
and still remain so insecure?





**FLYING FREE**

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## **TWO WAYS OF FLYING FREE**

### **ONE: HEADING UP**

*Up at 6 A.M., I track the near horizon while the sun is tracking me. Topping trees, and skimming lakes, hopping over barnyard fences like a skater on a pond trying to be dangerous by feigning figure 8's to gain attention. I never thought that I'd come any closer to the heavens than to climb a tree. But my balloon now lifts me higher than I've yet been lifted—takes me farther down the road than I've yet gone. I'm careful not to tamper with the unknown except to make it better known to me.*

## TWO: MOVING BEYOND

*On Monday evening, the twenty-second of May, at exactly 9 P.M.—Pacific Daylight Time—Ralph James Wass went into a bean field across the street from his apartment in Costa Mesa, California, and placing a .38 caliber revolver against his head proceeded with a single shot to take his life. On the twentieth of July he would have been thirty years old. Though I will evermore be sad, I was not surprised to hear the news. It could not have been an easy journey to travel, lamb-like, in a world of wolves.*

*On the go, the twenty-ninth of April in New York City, I turned forty-five. That same morning in Moscow, Roman Karmen turned toward the wall and said: "I'm going," then, in agony, he died. He had passed seventy, but he should have gone to ninety-five. He worked toward his death, slowly, methodically and well. Ralph rode toward his in a Hudson or raced it on a motorcycle.*

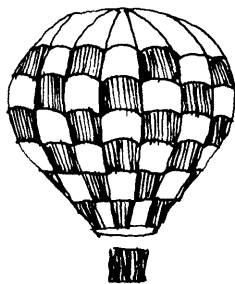
*Then, Brel in autumn. It took ten years of death's round rattle before he finally stumbled and was gone. Despite official word, I know that he still walks the waterfront and sails the middle sea. Even now, he's perched upon the bedpost ready to advance another joke.*

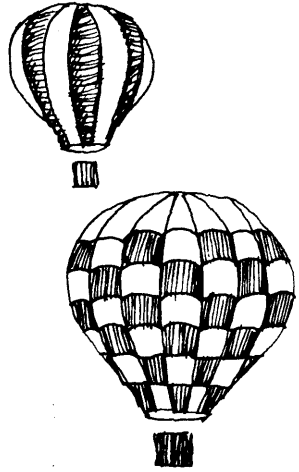
*Though each man will now fly free, without them I feel bound.*



**BALLOON ONE:** Perris, California

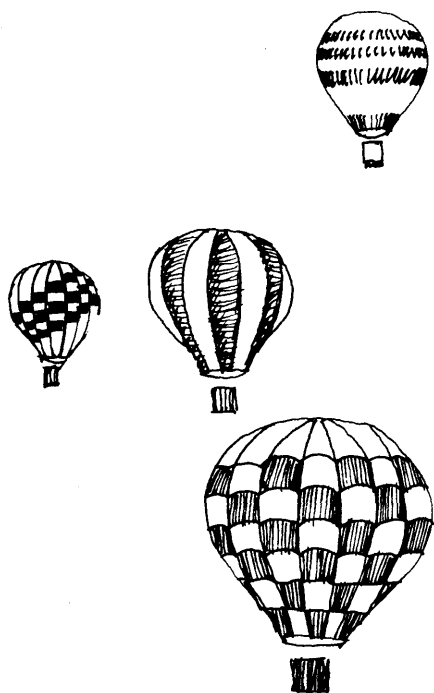
The first is up,  
or going up.  
It lifts off slowly.  
Twin fires combine  
like some eternal flame  
to push and prod warm air  
into that vast compartment  
with its seven-story ceiling.





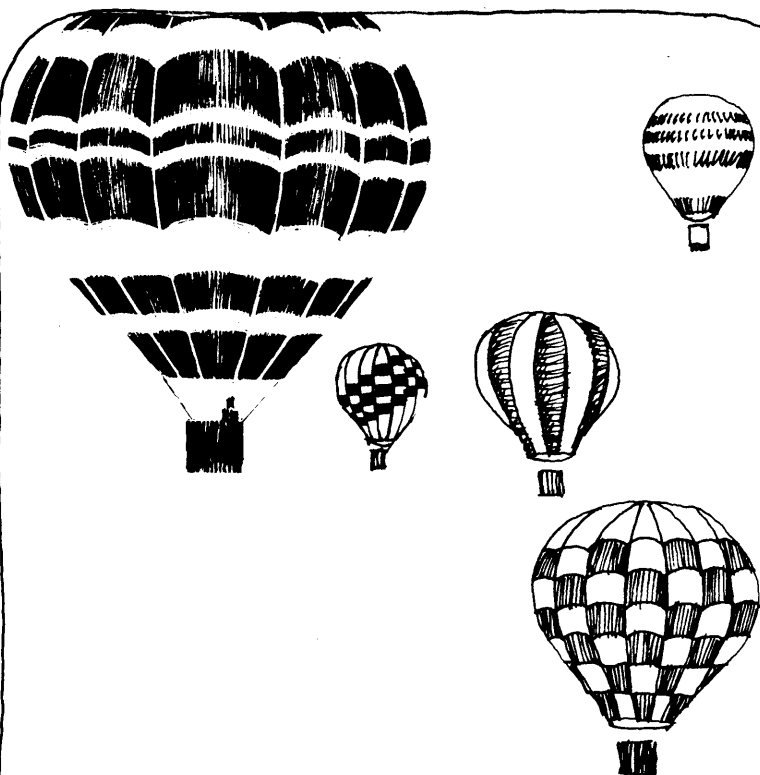
Soon the quiet,  
soon the clouds,  
as now another  
tufted circle  
    is entering  
the angel's playground.

Two there are  
they could be  
harbingers of hundreds.  
A space age army  
    or armada  
seeking space.



The grass still wet,  
the sky just opening  
woodchucks scatter in the lea  
as foot by foot  
and yard by cubic yard  
the air is channeled  
forced into another  
and yet another  
bright and billowing balloon.

Crows are crowing  
*hold the tether*  
don't let go  
until we all let go.  
Now douse the fire  
and finish off the coffee.  
The mist once heavy  
as the heavens  
    now subsides  
as up we go—  
fast at first  
then slower, slow.

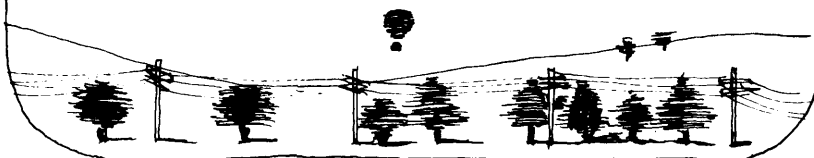


Below us  
all the world  
spreads out and opens.  
Now, the sky  
begins to glow  
around, above us  
rim to rim  
one horizon to another.

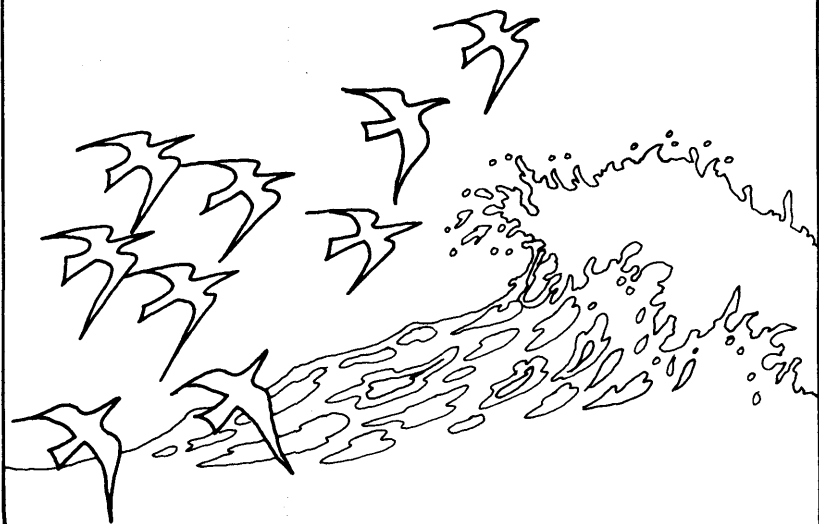
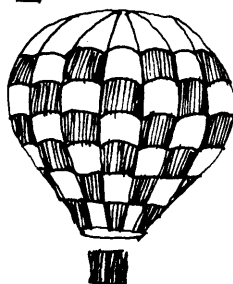
Dogs and children  
chase our shadow.

Along the coastline  
we dip to skim the water,  
then rise higher to avoid  
an early splashdown.

Reach out and grab a handful  
of the nearest cloud  
as we sail even with  
now past the sun.



Far below  
birds track our course.  
If this is not land's end  
coming up,  
I know no better  
finish line.



**BALLOON TWO:** Durban, S.A.

Six A.M.

the chase truck's  
out of fuel.

Never mind  
we'll still be in the sky  
by sunrise.

Seven and we're up.  
Low hills first  
and then green trees  
a farmer shouts *come down*  
*and have a cup of tea*  
as on we sail.



Now a village  
and the natives scatter.  
We wave and bravely  
they shout back,  
hang on  
while we slip  
                slowly down  
to top the trees.  
Bumping, scraping  
                feather-like  
the topmost branches.  
You let loose  
a Texas rebel yell.

Eight.

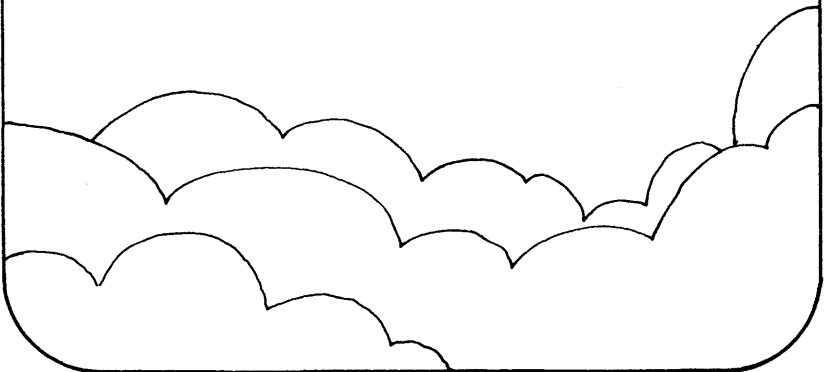
The morning sky  
is now red diamonds  
and as many different shapes  
and sizes

as the sectioned fields.

We'll skim the lake  
at left and just ahead,  
or set down in the meadow  
just below that far brown knoll.

Not now.

A little higher first,  
a little farther yet  
surely something lies beyond, beyond,  
beyond.

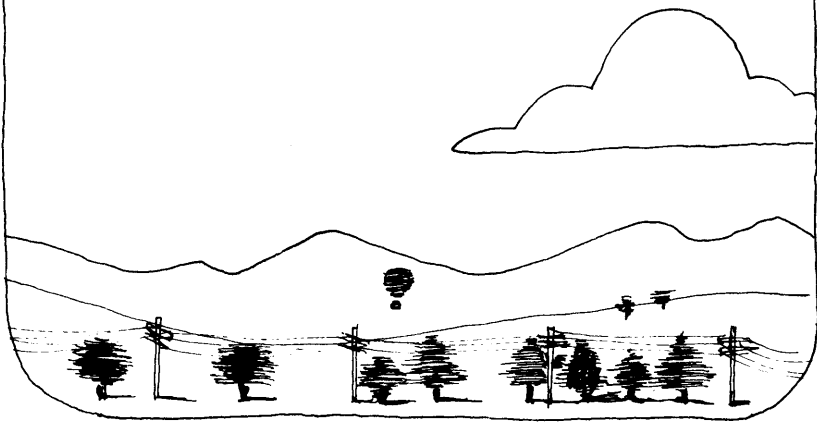
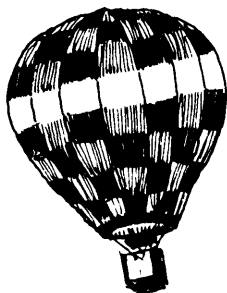


Look!

The chase truck's catching up.  
Fire up again.  
Beyond that grove  
of blossoming trees  
we'll *lose* it.

Stand still!, look up  
then scatter  
over half a dozen acres.

Three white birds below us  
pay no attention  
as our shadow scrapes them  
like a passing cloud.

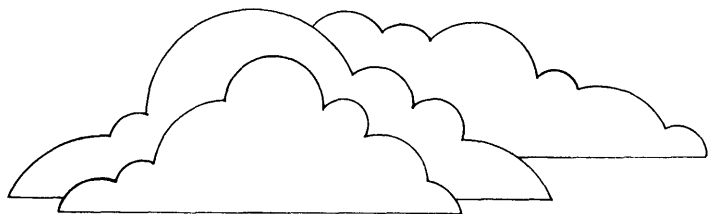


Not quite nine.  
Two fuel tanks still unused  
we can sail straight through  
The Valley of a Thousand Hills  
and not come down till noon.

The trees we're topping now  
    have only tops.  
Above  
the slightly superstitious sun  
plays hide-and-seek  
but warms us anyway.  
The day is opening  
now hills beyond  
    the front hills  
show themselves  
    as we come near.

Cane fields  
stretch out  
along the left  
on the right side  
chicken farms  
and chicken farms.

Unexpectedly,  
more clouds ahead.



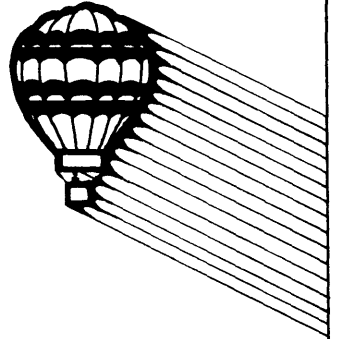
A black girl running  
                  down the road  
hides behind  
                  the sugar stalks  
peering at this aberration  
                                  in the sky  
confident that she  
                  can spy on us  
                  and not be seen.

We let her keep her secret  
and wonder what she'll tell  
her unbelieving friends.

*Hau! Did you see?  
Men looking,  
but they couldn't find me.  
They fly in painted egg  
they cook it  
light the fire.*

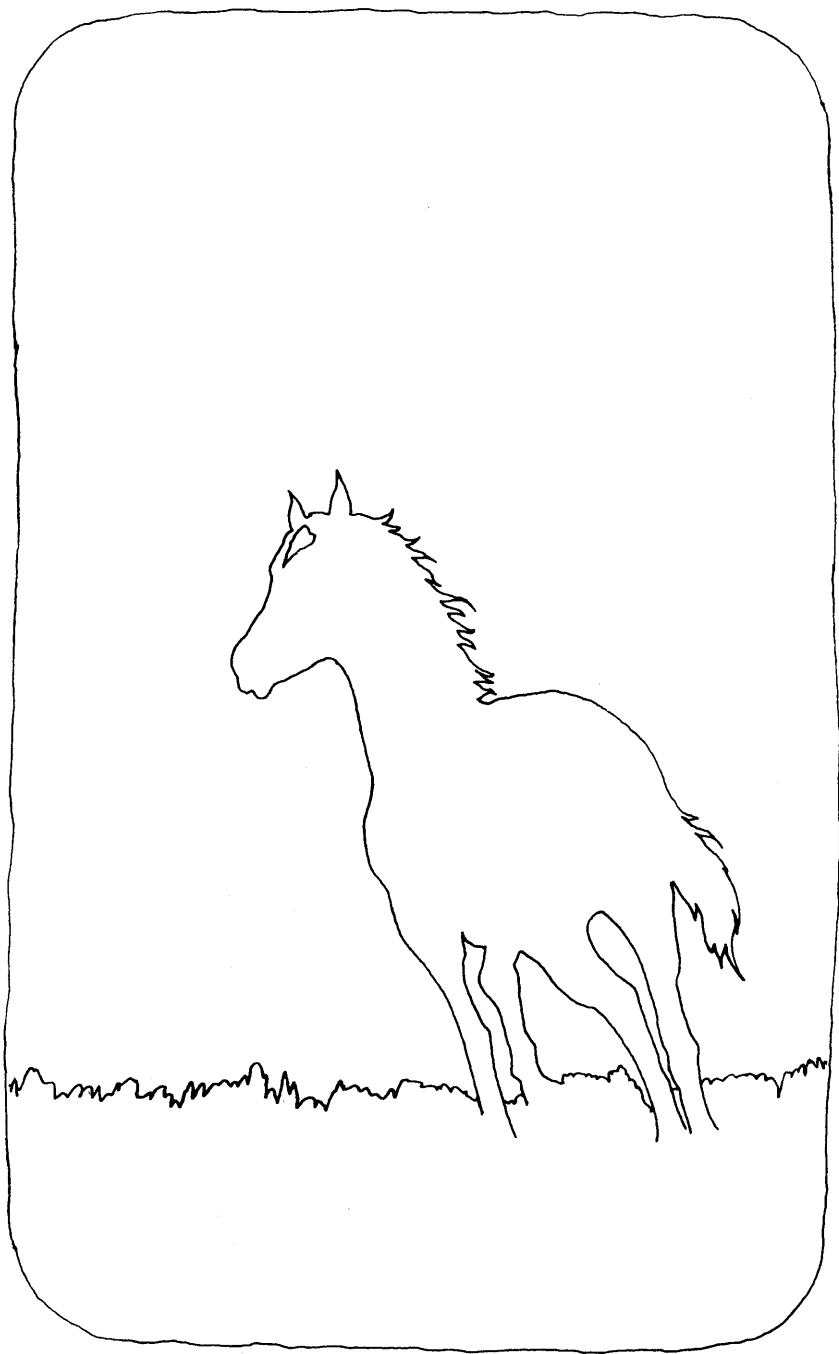
*Hau! A big egg.  
In many colors.*

*Hau! In the sky!  
I threw it with a stone.  
Hau! Egg run away.*



A startled springbok  
    leaps into the air  
and now another and another.  
They bound across the valley,  
    gone.





**RALPH**

(Written in spring 1972)

Someone wrote of you  
that people work a lifetime  
to attain your natural innocence.  
I believe that to be so,  
for on seeing you  
the first time out  
I remember that I felt  
as though I'd come upon  
the living Christ.

I'm sure that when  
His tongue was tangled  
Christ nodded out of shyness  
and that He needed other men  
as you do.

You have to be a man  
to care for other men.  
Isn't that why God built flesh  
around the spirit of His son  
and made Him visible?

Jesus on a motorcycle,  
hair helmetless and blowing  
in the hard wind,  
eyes flattened back  
against His face,  
riding through the northern night  
safe inside the skin of Ralph.

## **RALPH JAMES WASS (1948–1978)**

I loved you Ralph  
not as disciples  
love their Christ  
but as one man  
grows to love another  
                    for himself  
and for what he  
cannot be himself.

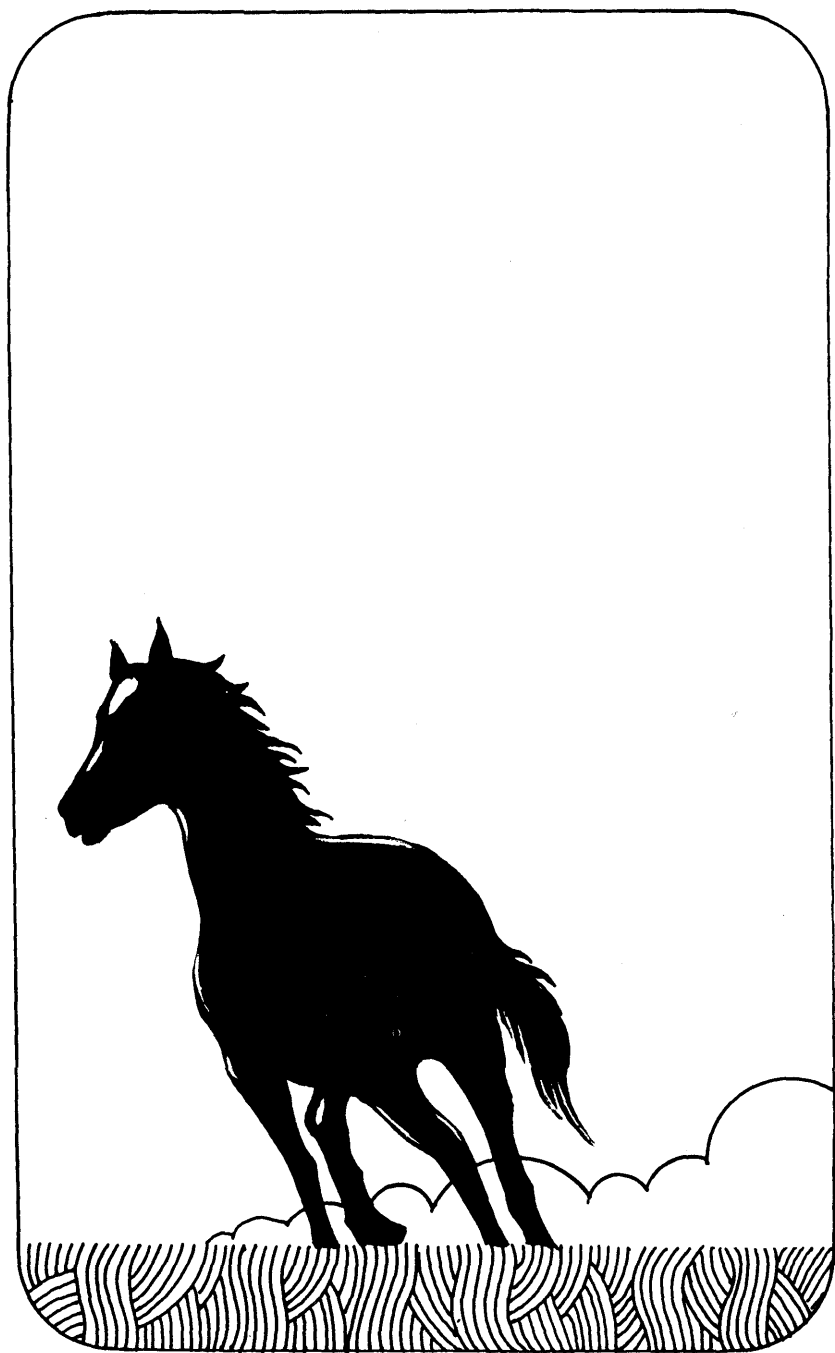
I never knew you  
to be mean  
                    or petty.  
Can I say that  
                    of anyone  
that I know now?

You must have needed  
                  someone  
in that final hour,  
I wasn't there—  
and I was one  
of only five  
who gathered  
to remember you  
an hour before  
the wind received  
                  your ashes  
between the coast of **Catalina**  
and the mainland.

Christ had his disciples  
and there was one  
                  among us  
who killed you too.  
He halted just this side  
of pulling back the trigger.

While rummaging  
amid the little that you left us  
(there were no photographs  
and all the negatives  
                    were fuzzy) ,  
I found a silver ring  
that you had hollowed out  
and made with your own hands,  
it hasn't left my finger since  
and you, yourself, continue  
pounding in my heart.

The loss of you  
is compounded  
by my inattention  
in the months  
before you took your life,  
you're now held up  
as idol and a blueprint  
for how I think  
all of us  
who come into the world  
                    from wherever  
should treat each other.





## WHY I'M WALKING THROUGH THE UNKNOWN WAR

Long dead old women  
clinging to their lives  
in nineteen forties Leningrad,  
young mothers, after factory shifts,  
making cookies out of rancid flour  
and turpentine.

Children licking paste  
from off the papered walls,  
*to live another springtime*  
*to laugh another fall.*  
And all the while the winter,  
like a hundred thousand miles  
of unscarred birch moves in.

Trucks skate across  
the frozen Ladoga  
with their ammunition cargo,  
held down by curled  
and flapping canvas.

Children now criss-cross the ice  
pulling coffins  
off to bury yesterday's dead family,  
their own they hardly got to know.  
Thrown up on the screen,  
this newsreel footage  
ten feet wide  
three times that age  
is newer than the newspaper  
lying lifeless next to me.  
Finally I close my eyes  
more in desperation  
than in rest.  
Young men's faces in a line  
captured by the frozen lens  
of Roman Karmen—  
all dead now  
even if they once survived  
three winters at the front.

I think of birch trees  
with new bark,  
the music of it  
already starting in my ears.  
Spring buds everywhere  
children full and smiling  
but still that line of faces  
will not leave my head.

Twenty-one flights up  
the snow in New York's newest  
                                blizzard  
swirls amid the concrete canyons  
and falls to where I'll find it  
within the coming hour  
piled in four-foot drifts  
as I hike the two long blocks  
to my warm hotel.  
Again that line  
of young men's faces  
not one resigned  
                                or undetermined.

It seems to me  
the living owe the dead—  
those struck down  
by known or unknown wars  
a viewing or an overview.  
Even though we cannot see,  
the holocaust through  
                    their dead eyes,  
there should be  
a telling of it  
even if it's but a try.

## ROMAN KARMEN (1906–1978)

Roman,  
let this be your epitaph,  
*I tried and I succeeded*  
down a lifetime,  
    round a world  
from peace to peace  
only by coincidence  
    war to war.

But epitaphs  
are not enough  
when the moss  
has finally covered  
you and your high-walled  
    resting place  
that soft green comforter  
will be as safe for you  
as any honor guard  
or well-locked gate.

Last year  
as I was finishing  
the work that you  
          allotted me  
I always felt  
your breath upon my neck  
heavy if you seemed  
to disagree with my way  
          of doing things  
light—and almost never there  
when I knew you gave  
          approval.

And how your friends  
                  resisted me,  
protecting you  
and all their memories  
even at your death.

It is the measure  
of a man well loved  
when friends left behind  
become caretakers  
of such elusive things  
                  as dreams  
not fully realized.



Sleep well.  
For your ideas  
    and ideals  
belong to all your countrymen  
and they will protect  
the lessons and the need  
                    to know  
even if the teacher's  
    moved ahead.  
The seeds of Socrates  
have never stopped  
    repopulating.

So it will be  
and so it is  
with what you've left.

What you may not know  
or never realized  
is that you narrowed  
                    boundaries  
and some have even  
come down altogether  
in the year  
that you've been gone.

**From "I'M NOT AFRAID"**

(Jacques Brel – Rod McKuen – 1969)

*What is for real?  
What is false?  
All of us seem to be  
caught in a waltz  
turning around,  
                turning again.  
When will the dancing  
                ever end  
as for us, you and me  
our eyes are open  
we can see  
both of us know  
where we've been  
why must we both  
go dancing again  
are you afraid,  
I'm not afraid . . .*

## **JACQUES BREL (1929–1978)**

Reason is  
the shortest road  
to freedom.

Poets know that  
even in the midst  
of dreaming  
or trying out  
our songs upon ourselves.

And poets always go  
in quest of freedom  
not just for themselves  
but for every man  
whose mind has been  
too long in chains.

I learned  
the worth of freedom  
from your mutterings  
                    and frowns  
even now I see you  
looking up from some  
                    newspaper  
to read aloud today's injustice  
pausing on the peeks  
                    of paragraphs  
to wonder how the world  
or one man anywhere  
can offer cruelty  
for lack of courage.

Love is  
the only easy way  
                    through life.  
And who'd have thought  
that such an easy road  
is paved, repaved  
and used so often.

The *chansonier*  
will tell you  
which road is the sure one  
and he's dependable  
as guide and go-for,  
because he wants  
                    to get there too.

I learned  
the worth of love  
from all the many ways  
                    you said it.  
Pound for pound  
more ways of loving  
came from you  
than all the hate  
most men amass  
throughout their lifetimes.

You left behind  
so many primers  
on the subject  
that generations  
coming up  
then moving to oblivion  
will find life's starting place  
                    with greater ease.

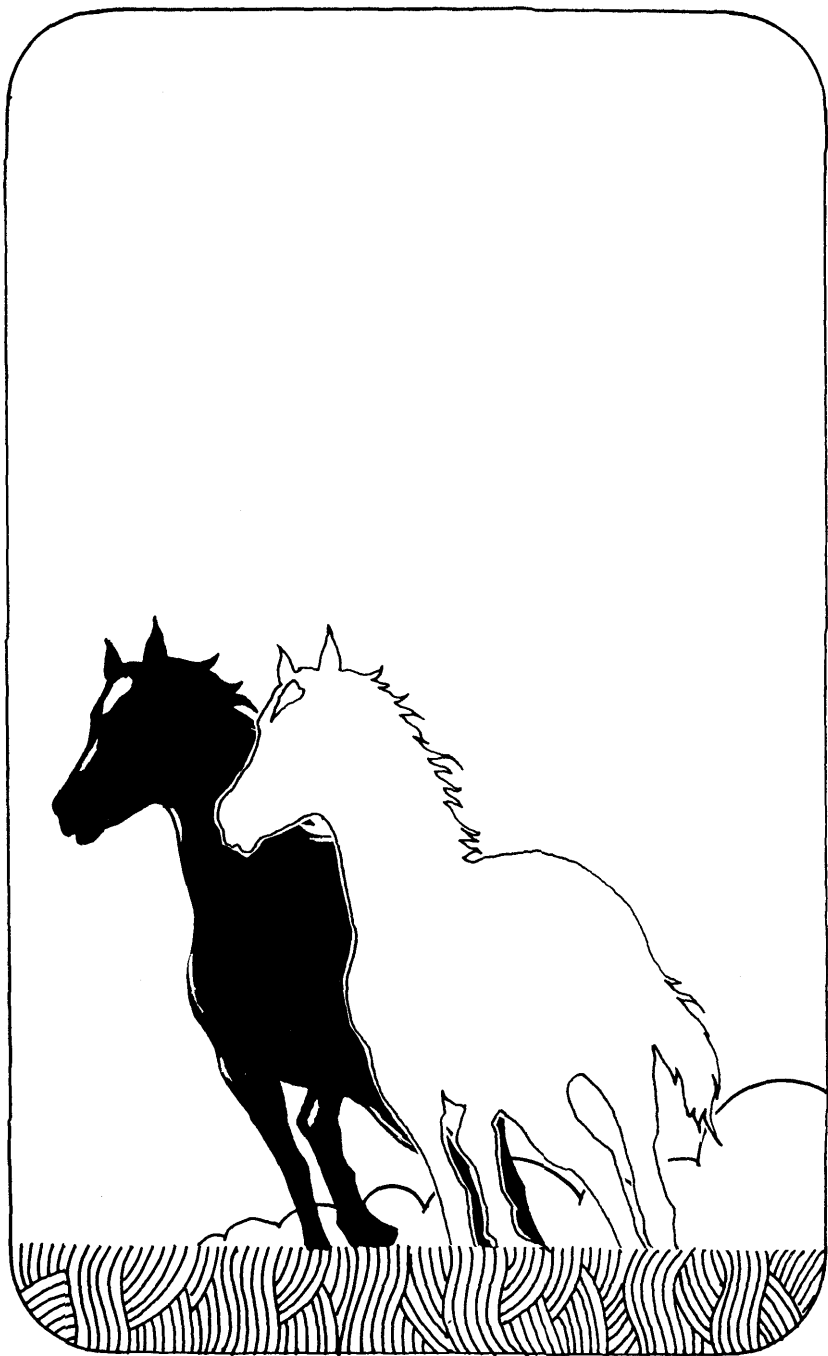
But dammit—  
there are far too many  
mysteries you made off with,  
mornings you took with you,  
that none but you will know.

I envy all those unlearned couplets  
you hadn't yet set down.  
Instructions to the world  
and even some to me.

Now only JoJo  
will hear you laugh  
and share again your private language.

If only I'd have been there  
for that final minute,  
just to say *Ne me quitte pas*.

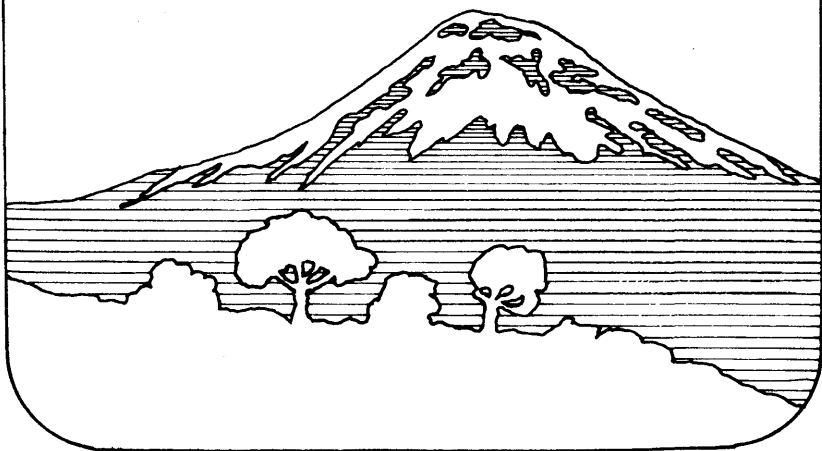






**IN SUMMING UP**

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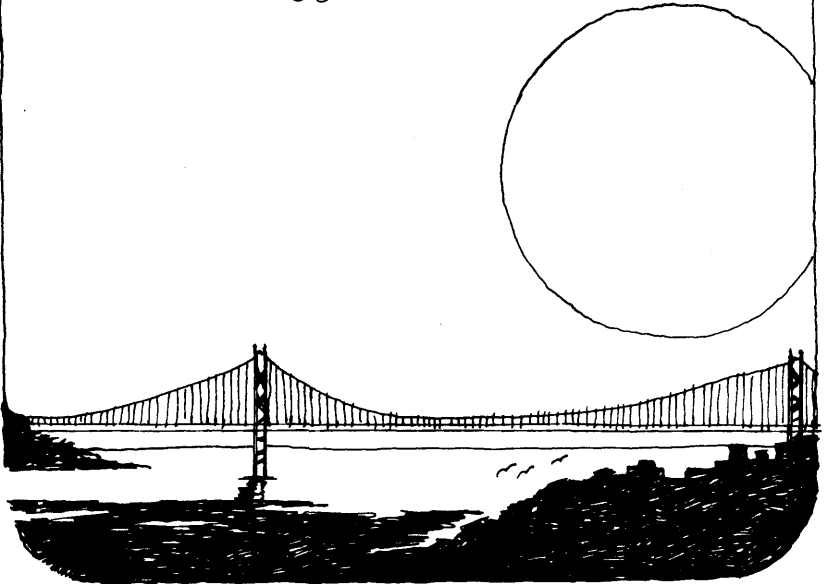
## **RUNNER**

*I have no time to hate, I'm in a hurry.  
But I've got all the hours in the days  
still left to me to waste on love.  
And what a waste of God's free time to  
not love readily and straight ahead.*

## IN SUMMING UP

It's a long way back  
to San Francisco  
and the starting point  
where I learned  
to make up truths  
and make them so  
for those who shared  
my pillow and my life.

I know that I'm accountable  
and that the bill  
is adding up  
mounting like a hill  
of shifting grain.



One day I'll come  
face to face  
with bigger animals than I  
then I'll be carried off  
the way the cats  
were taken by coyotes  
from the backyard hill  
one summer.

Till then  
even if it's only my own words  
that keep me company  
I'm not alone.

The animals are coming  
and I wait.



### PHASE THREE

I think I'm managing  
the turn quite well  
I'm almost sure of it  
I even find myself  
greedy for the coming day.

I'm stronger now  
because of time and  
                                thunder.

Without the push  
                        of thunder  
and the grace of time  
I would still be looking,  
but always with a sense of hope  
                                and wonder.



I can handle hope  
as well as heartache  
life as well as living—  
(how unlike they are  
as different in their way  
as death and dying) .

I can keep a smile on  
long past its due  
and think beyond  
the time of thinking  
once the process has been  
set in motion.

The elements  
did that for me.  
The sea, the earth, the sky  
(created by God in that order)  
are not unlike a well-served meal  
and in that order.

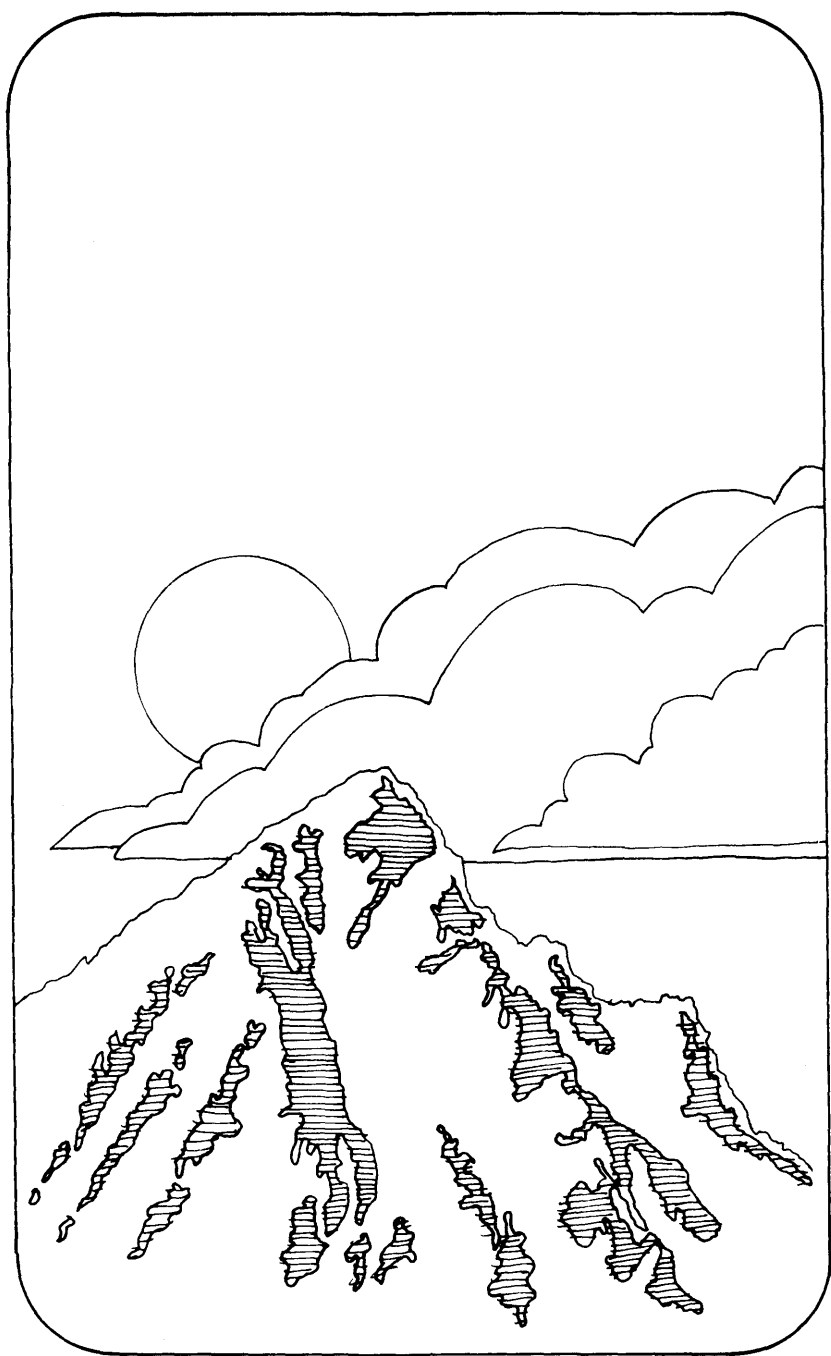
At first the fish or soup,  
followed by red meat  
that only lately stalked the **ground**.  
To finish off the dinner  
in a proper way, fowl,  
the partridge or the quail  
knocked lifeless from the **sky**.

A lesson in all things.  
Morning, afternoon and night,  
youth, the middle years and age.  
Even the blessed trinity  
was manufactured in a *three*.

God worked in order,  
leaving us to sort out  
some order for ourselves.

I have the *sea* around me,  
however wild it's there  
and it's dependable.  
When I come closer to the *earth*  
I'm able out of true reality  
to assess my proper worth,  
without extremities or exaggerations.

Though it takes  
the hardest effort  
to reach the heavens,  
when finally  
we touch the *sky*  
contentment like a cloud  
will suddenly surround us.  
Trust me.





## About the Author

Rod McKuen's books of poetry have sold in excess of 17,000,000 copies in hardcover, making him the best-selling and most widely read poet of our times. In addition, his poetry is taught and studied in schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries throughout the world.

Mr. McKuen is the composer of over 2,000 songs which have been widely translated. They include: "Jean," "Love's Been Good to Me," "The Importance of the Rose," "Rock Gently," "Ally, Ally, Oxen Free," and several dozen songs written with the late French composer Jacques Brel, including "If You Go Away," "Come Jeff," "Port of Amsterdam," and "Seasons in the Sun." Both writers have termed their writing habits together as three distinct methods: collaboration, adaptation, and translation.

Mr. McKuen's film music has twice been nominated for motion picture Academy Awards ("The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" and "A Boy Named Charlie Brown"), and his classical works are performed by the world's leading orchestras. In May, 1972, the London Royal Philharmonic premiered his Concerto No. 3 for Piano and Orchestra and a suite, "The Plains Of My Country." In 1973 the Louisville Orchestra commissioned Mr. McKuen to compose a suite for orchestra and narrator entitled "The City." It was subsequently nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

His Symphony No. 3, commissioned by the Menninger Foundation in honor of their fiftieth anniversary, was premiered in 1975 in Topeka, Kansas. Recently he completed the libretto and music for *The Black Eagle*. He calls the full-length work a "Gothic" musical.

In July 1976 two new McKuen works were premiered at St. Giles Church, Cripplegate, in the City of London. A Concerto for Cello and Orchestra and the first major symphonic composition written for synthesizer and symphony orchestra: Concerto for Balloon and Orchestra. In April of 1979, the composer-author had three full-length ballets premiered in Pittsburgh. He is presently composing music and the libretto for three more ballets to be produced in Pittsburgh during the coming season.

Last year Mr. McKuen was named by the University of Detroit for his humanitarian work and in Washington was presented The Carl Sandburg Award by the National Platform Association as "the outstanding people's poet, because he has made poetry a part of so many people's lives in this country."

For nearly a year Mr. McKuen has taken a sabbatical from concerts and touring to work on the television documentary series *The Unknown War* as poet, composer of the film's score, and co-adaptor, with producer Fred Weiner, of the scripts.

Having recently taken up residence in New York, the composer-poet now divides his time between Manhattan and the California coast.