



Walking Toward the Sun

Edward Weismiller

foreword by W. S. Merwin

WALKING TOWARD THE SUN

ALSO BY EDWARD WEISMILLER:

poetry

The Deer Come Down

The Faultless Shore

The Branch of Fire

novel

The Serpent Sleeping

translation

The Young Concubine

Walking Toward the Sun

Edward Weismiller

Foreword by W. S. Merwin

Yale University Press New Haven & London

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Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Fairfield Medium type by Integrated Publishing Solutions, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Weismiller, Edward Ronald, 1915–

Walking toward the sun / Edward Weismiller ; foreword by W. S. Merwin.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-300-09358-6 (alk. paper)

PS3545.E473 W35 2002

2002016707

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

for my children:

Mariana

Georgia

Peter

Charles

Merie

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Foreword by W. S. Merwin

C ONTINUITY, extension, maturity, indeed survival, in a single talent as in the history of an art, are certainly rarer than the exciting occurrence of talents in the first place. It is bound to be so, but more attention may be paid to the discovery of new gifts than to their subsequent development. To use the word “promising” about early talent is perhaps somewhat misleading, for talent, as the passage of time makes clear to us, allows hope but does not in fact promise. A talent cannot remain as it is at first, and as it moves and changes, and as the life it was born into proceeds in uncertainty, both of them encounter unforeseeable obstacles and risks and alterations of all kinds. The life of every artist who continues to practice an art recasts a story with different turns, fortunes, attritions, and what is made of them, each life unique and yet enacting an ancient progression. And there are of course talents that fade out on the way and for one reason or another are not heard from again. But in considering both the earliest appearance of talent and its eventual metamorphoses (if it arrives at those) it is worth

keeping in mind the word “original,” so often used to describe newly recognized talent, and sometimes in order to claim only that the talent seems different from many of its contemporaries. But the word, and its own origins or what we can posit of them, refers to beginnings, to beginning, to setting in motion, and at the same time to being, to the present. It alludes to the beginning that is in the present. And in that sense it is integral not only to the earliest manifestations of talent but to every moment of a talent’s authentic development.

Since 1919 the Yale Younger Poets Series has been bringing out its books of previously unpublished poets, a praiseworthy enterprise of faith and discovery, a revealing record in the history of American poetry in this century. As the series is concerned with first books of poems it is directed toward introducing talents not known before rather than in following what becomes of them later. In 1998 Yale University Press published an anthology drawn from the series, edited by George Bradley, which is in effect (with his introduction) a full and vivid history of it, shedding light upon its continuing presence in the literature of the century and upon the individual poets, and the judges from the beginning until 1997, with selections from the poets they had chosen. Here are those who went on to write and publish in later years, and those who did not publish again. There are some who, when read now, seem not to be there at all, and some, like Muriel Rukeyser, whose writings are as vital and audible as they must have been when they were first published.

In the autumn of 1997, at a public occasion, an older man introduced himself to me, and because of the nature of the gathering we began by talking about poetry. I was impressed by everything about him: dignity and urgency, directness and expression, and his love of

poetry. He had been a Milton scholar for most of his life. And he told me, with a certain diffidence, that he was the oldest living poet who had been first published in the Yale Younger Poets Series. That had been in 1936, the year after Muriel Rukeyser's first book. When I asked, he said that he had published two books after that one, but he said no more about them—it is easy enough for books of poetry to go unnoticed. With that we were separated and I wrote down his name, thinking to look up those books later, when I had a chance.

A few weeks after that, I received a manuscript of poetry from Yale University Press, written by the man I had met, Edward Weismiller. The letter accompanying the manuscript informed me that Weismiller, then eighty-two, not only was the oldest surviving poet published in the series but had been and remains the youngest to have been published in the series.

I then turned—with particular hope, I confess—to a manuscript that, quiet though the writing was, and with no display of sophistication, seemed to me often to be original in several ways I have mentioned. It was not like any other, just as a mature face is distinct from any other. The poems were evidently the fruit of a long period of time, in which they had ripened slowly. There was nothing showy about them, but they were in some respects remarkably candid, direct, unadorned, setting forth moments of pleasure and humiliation with a kind of transparent acknowledgment and with the dignity I imagined I recognized as that of the man I had met.

Later I looked at poems from his first book, *The Deer Come Down*, and was not surprised to find that there had been nothing pretentious in what he was writing when he was twenty-one, either. They were watchful pieces, their language pure and savored, reminding me somewhat of the beautiful (and neglected)

poems of Robert Francis. In this collection, composed more than sixty years after his first one, Mr. Weismiller's poems have lived past some of the richer texture of his early writings and have grown still plainer. Mr. Weismiller is a modest man and has lived devotedly with his modesty and his awe, his disappointments, and his recurring though sometimes rueful delights. He has arrived at what, in his writing at least, appears to be a full frontal self-appraisal, neither mocking nor whining, and, along with nakedness, humor.

Look how ugly you've got, the flowers say to me
Every Spring. And I, well, I
temporize, what else . . .

And then

The fool of a long day,
I have accumulated
Nothing to say.

I wake to a sky
Of water mixed with light.
Is it early? Late?

Heavy with rain, a tree
Moves on with all it holds
Too slowly to see . . .

As I had hoped there would be, there is an entire life
behind these poems.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following magazines for permission to reprint poems that appeared originally in their pages:

*American Scholar, Atlantic, Encounter,
For Poetry, Georgia Review, kayak, Kenyon Review,
Nation, New Republic, New Yorker, Poetry,
Poetry Claremont, Poetry Northwest,
Saturday Review, Slate, Virginia Quarterly Review,
Yale Review, Yankee*

I

A Scene

How much time has passed. The great root
has spilled the wall.
The children put on years and went to look for fruit.

Against earth late flowers are pressed.
The air is still
and cold. Leaves tick with frost.

In the old wood the paths of foreboding
are choked with light.
A fading shadow of bird-flight
lifts from the grass.

The brook runs its course. In the field
brilliance has grown.
The great tree will never yield.
The wall is down.

Monster Poem

Larger than what I am used to thinking of as life
and uglier, it stomps up out of the lake
(which is beautiful) trailing from its clamped jaws
as from a half-packed valise, torn water-flowers.
Seeing me, it narrows its small eyes, snorts gigantically,
swings its antlers down, charges, then
veers, and crashes off among the dark trees
which are beautiful. My heart pounds.
Mountains ring the scene.

And walking among high fields once
in Vermont, I stopped, my heart pounding,
when there rose close to me on heavy wings
a bird bigger than birds are.
It labored off through the shaking light
to disappear among trees.
I do not remember a cry.

Up from the open lakes,
up from the gold fields
they rise, the monsters.
I could not have invented them.
I think and think about the trees.

Sunken Forest

Where the water ran
there is now nothing. Shadow of leaf and stone
drown in that darkness; are equal shadow
where the bright scattered sun
fails at the water's surface, and the spell
is not cast. On the reeded shores
gray skeletons collapse to the still water,
the bones of trees entangled; out farther,
like broken pikes, the tops of dead pines
totter and ruin in the unseen wind.

The odor is
of patience.

Of sleep. This is a map
of sleep. The spell
not cast. An old man, an old house filled with rooms,
most in darkness. Tomorrow the same.

The Tree in Front of the Old People's Home

(Washington, D.C./Atlanta, 1981)

The ribbons they tied on the small tree were for the
children, who would not grow
old. They hated being old,
hated it, but this was different.
They had started in winter tying the ribbons on,
red, green, passersby
added their contributions, by March
the tree was a fist of color in a world
still dark and cold.

Then spring came, the small fists
of leaf clusters pushed out, burst,
the birds were back, the tree blossomed,
they could see the ribbons less and less.
Nothing had been solved, but the whole world
was yellow-green and blue and pink and white.
They had longed for spring,
they had not thought they cared what birds made nests of,
but this was different. They had spent their lives
thinking that only they could make signs,
and that still seemed true, but
now they felt cold, wondering
what it would be like not to have to.

Tales Out of School

Jeremy could not fly.
Stars hung in the air
at night ice-bright
and far up there.

Robert thought up a place
where no one hurts or spoils;
wooded. A quiet face.
The blue was hills.

A shining hunting knife
for Christmas: the edge would last.
And no scream could be heard
earth spun so fast.

But slowly others starve.
Nobody knows why,
or how it feels, to starve.
Not close by.

I sit and write my book.
Love with her antic train
spellbound and silent crowd
the windowpane.

I fly to see a friend.
Earth's colors fade from air
somewhere below the clouds.
Down there. Down there.

The boy

posturing to wake lust
in the mirror, wakes his own
and returns, later, to the morning
unreasonably sad. The meanness passes
and day begins.

At school he finds his friend
absent, a teacher he likes
cross for some reason.
Fires two thousand years old
fail to illuminate history
(Room 317; Miss Ganz).
He travels, and returns.
The day passes. On the way home
a man looks at him
like ice with eyes.

There is a note
on the kitchen table, food
in the refrigerator. For no special reason
he wanders instead downtown, touching
lampposts on corners, a girl's face
drifting through his mind,
McDonald's gold. The cold lights
of cars pass, people pass and pass,
he stops,
voices from many places call "Return,"
and he has homework,
but cannot go home.

Quail

It has become
speech, the sound a
quail's wings make when it
takes flight from the grass somewhere
near my feet. There is a
rising chuckle,
abrupt, mirthless, a dry
scolding of the air,
then silence, the
direction of which I
almost know.

The speech, the silence
linger. They say
not "Fare
well"
but "Where
the plain secrets of my content
lay, you came, caring
nothing. If
you had not come
I should be
there
still."

After the rain, it is like morning again: a bird
(withdrawn so long) speaks, cordially; another
threads a tree with song.

The sky's descending gray torn, our eyes
walk out and through, out through the world.
Color lifts up its ranges.

But odors slow us; water touches
with many hands; rose and rotted wood
engross us in air.

And as at dawn, a thin bough, close, fences calmly
a storm of light. Snail and earthworm
long since set out on their journeys.

Brooded over

by the tall shadow that unfolds the stars.

The Trees

South and southeast of
the skyscraper trees,
they settled
for chapparal, manzanita, live oak.
Small things moved back.

Above the desert, shoals
of stars swam
the arched night sea.

Joshua trees. Smoke trees.
Later a few settlers would
plant tamarisks, thin windbreaks.
Across the mountains
small, dusty towns rose,
sycamores in the parks.

The towns are cities.
Along the coastal highways
windbreaks of eucalyptus ravel
in the salt air. Somewhere
a mile-long avenue of pepper trees
leads nowhere, from
the past. This air
floats great branches like a sluggish sea.

The groves
die: avocado, walnut, unpruned and unwatered
citrus still sweet with stray clusters of
blossom, bone-white, paradise
forfeit. You have to decide

what you want, and what you're willing to pay.
The rich suburbs hold
dominion over palm and pine
in the same block. Elsewhere,
steel, dry rivers, a murk
of mountains, inventories
of disturbed sand.

Against
the steel-gray-gold last light
of evening, palms burst
like black fireworks, making
a dry sound.

The stars
have not moved. The trees
cannot buy water.
The small things
that have watched
have enough.
The ocean
has enough.

Pacific Midnight

The beach was clean, washed clean. The tide was falling.
And still the waves rolled in as though they were searching
for something left behind, something they once had
owned, that the land held now unprized in its possession.
There were clouds. It was snowing moonlight. In the silence
the dark curlews ran, engaged with the water
intricately as it ranged the beach, and following
swiftly as it curled back, pulled backward, failing.

I have seen unequal wars; I have seen dancing.
But the curlews' shifting grace was the waves' confusion.

Suddenly I saw the intensity of the dark birds, the hunger, the danger,
and the enormous ocean casting—.

Was this true? Is what can be said true?
All my words like empty shells draining through the sand.

The mindless ocean still powerful on its thin verge.

The Water Gardens

The sun in its good time
waked me. A world
of water awaited, gray and gold
in a cold wide half-circle of small
liftings and collapsings, a restless dance
down to the deep roots
of the rocking garden
planted out of sight.

The nameless particulars of the water
called me. With no way to lose
I swam out in my answering skin
to a place sufficient
where the light and the salt
kissed me in two,
and the two halves of the sweet world
closed on my openness.

It was a peaceful dance time and the water
taught me. Yielding
a thousand small ways, I lay
alive to everything, the vast
fullness of emptiness, winning back
enough of the lost gold of days before
from the traveling sift of amber under water,
and thinking nothing
of the love of the light for surfaces,
not seeing, nor concerned even to name
anything deeper, anything
settled: the dark,
the suppressed garden of the dark.

Bay Island

Some night you will go to your door, and there
you will smell an unknown fragrance sweeter than
 jasmine,
frail as the scent of a thousand single flowers,
but there will be no flowers, and it may be winter;
a stubbed-down searchlight will play across the clouds,
a salt mast creak, gulls follow,
the dark water bring home distance.

It is the night. It was always the night.

Carolina Beach

At low tide you can walk a long way into the Atlantic
without surrendering. The low waves break
peacefully around your ankles, your knees, and farther out
sweep unsteadily past. Finally, though,
you lose your footing. A line of pelicans
flies across as though this were their watch, and
they do watch, but not you. You are in
the water's keeping, but are not
its concern. You must watch
yourself. As in any world.

Salt reaches down your throat, your eyes
burn. Seagulls
cut silent arcs, or wheel, screeching
like metal parts unoiled. You swim,
tread water, sometimes
scissor to turn away from the shore, or toward it.
In the house
the president had said we are seeking peace
aggressively, which is how you have to do it.
It is a little
like sailing west to reach the East, and
as everybody knows, that worked.

You swim and swim, and stay
in the same place. On the horizon
a fishing boat stays in the same place, like a house,
then leaps a mile, but it is you
who have turned. Though in your unsteady

floating you misread
sometimes, there is nothing out here
that is not true. You must swim back
to the world in which you belong, however
hard it is to walk the last steps to shore
through the low waves that break and pull back and seem
to want to pull you back,
though they want nothing.

Roulette

A spoke of the sun spins
and the eye cannot follow.
I can come to no conclusion.
The light turns round.

A bird lifts to the center
of the sky, and blazes.
I can come to no conclusion.
Full day is over.

Neon lights the west.
Neon lights the east.
The dark has run down.
I can come to no conclusion.

2

Short History

Inward all rot and unattended pain,
the dinosaur stumbled to bed in ferns
no gardener had named. Aeons of rain
blur my window. My eye turns

away, to the stuffed chair, back to my bed,
the table by my bed. A cut glass vase
stands there jammed with ferns and spikes of red
gladioli. The ferns are there for grace

I guess: *Pteridophyta*. I cough.
I smoke too much. I shouldn't when I'm sick,
but where's my lunch? That nurse is always off
somewhere. Will I get lung cancer? Thick

as tears the rain falls, and I have tried
to read my book, but what's between the lines?
Some lists that Adam left me when he died.
Out in the rock garden, Eve stands and whines.

An Early Conversation

The man spoke first.

“This is His world.

His sun.

His garden trees: ours but His shade.

His impossible full

radiance He has for us fondly broken
into the flowers’ colors.”

“Beautiful” she said.

“I see a space there for the Bower.

But what can I

plant around it, or transplant,

that will grow richly in that pure soil

in this sun

till, summers deep, the leaves have fallen?”

The Metamorphoses

North of north, citizens were holding
cold straps, riding. I do not
finish journeys, so turned off that dream.

South of south, mountains of meringue.
Egret feathers.
And east and west, spices and all that.

Woke once more to the centrally located
dream, smoking, with a TV aerial
up my ass, all the comforts
except home. Nomad
of the one place, I pretend I see colors
through windows. I did see
a tree once. It shook me.

I'll take any heart they give me, though,
that some mother is through using.
Will they make any shit
I cannot eat? I doubt it.
Anything that can be refrigerated, I'm for.
Later.
I expect to be here a long time.

A Beached Whale

“Hospital officials say they go to great lengths to make sure a donor is dead. Before a heart is taken for a transplant, the donor must have had no brain waves for at least 24 hours, no reflexes, no breathing, no muscular activity and be certified dead by a team of doctors not connected with the operation.

“The heart is kept alive with a respirator, which forces air into the lungs and keeps blood flowing through the dead body.” [From an article in the Washington Post of August 4, 1968.]

This is a different dark.
The ocean is on a plate.
I want to dance,
said the live heart in the dead body.

I throw blood
like a rainbird.
What for? How long?

Later I might dream.
Mountains the color of knives. Lichen.
When can I dance?
said the live heart in the dead body.

I want to hear
something else.
Love is slow to start,
like a clock.

Ask me what I know.
I have too much room.
Where can I dance?
said the live heart in the dead body.

Onegin

She married, her heart
so nearly blank
you would have thought you could
see yourself there as
in a mirror, read there
the one sentence
you need not
spell out; that is
to us illegible.

You were not impatient
enough. How many years
would it take,
and then how many
to circle the earth
blindfold, your faith
in emptiness, until
the Prince of Nowhere should
summon you to walk
one evening in the ballroom
of a palace swaying with
costumed ghosts, rented
from an expensive past?

Your friend, the angry
poet, is not here
to learn, as you are; but language
is gone, a sailing
of gowns across endless stages, a swirling
as of snowflakes, and the cold
moon stares. *Why did you do it?*
The question is
of no importance, but what did you

think it meant, when you
fired blanks, when you
fired into the snow?

Delay, delay. But
no matter. All are dead now.
The Prince writes no more letters.

She is yours.

Dialogue of the Dead

1. Time is on our side.
2. Nothing breaks our lines.
1. The wind rises, but there's nothing in it,
nothing in the wind, falling, breakdown,
or travel nowhere. We need not mount
the gray-hided sea. When sparrows fall
south from the sun, we least of all attend.
Love hastens winter. The earth lies
2. Nothing breaks our lines.
1. still when it turns. All this we see
with our wide gaze.
2. N . . .

A Field on Delos

This stone troubled the earth. Fallen
out of design,
its form gone like a pure smoke,
pieces drifted down and apart in the dark,
it lay broken that had stood whole,
and troubled the earth.

Who should teach it what it was?
The sun, first;
and so men helped it to the light.
It could not stand.
Paler and heavier than smoke
it lay broken, fragment and stranger,
in sun and rain.
Here or there, two stones touched as brothers;
the rest
scattered indifferent in the field.

But who in the long fall and drift of time
keeps his brother? Who knows what he was?
What chance is?

We stand and stare.
The light smokes around us.
What we see is history, we say:
wholeness. We are trying
to understand. To recollect.

Stubborn, blind,
uncomprehending,
we stare over the whole field.
It lies broken.

There, in the sun, spring's youngest flower,
without memory and without dreams,
smiles on the calm of unrelated stone.

A Girl

(Oxford, 1982)

I saw the girl in the pale dress and lavender stockings
as she walked under a chance spray of lavender blossom
trailing over a high garden wall; and suddenly
the world's colors came into accord as they had not
in just this way before; in the pillared town all shapes
stood finally proportioned, or turned in their slow dances,
and she—but she had moved on past, and I turned quickly
to find her before all colors should cloud, shapes crumble,
and saw her, incomplete, slant, just turning a corner,
just beginning to fall, slight column broken away,
across the lavender-flowered field of memory.

Sea Horse

You might think it would leap the waves
in a white fire of foam
racing, eyes mad with what might
be delight:

a runaway, or loosed from a god's
team, galloping in its vast
pasture. But this one
was the size of a brooch, thin, and red-gold, and still.

The children had sent for it
from the Atlantic.
It arrived by air in a pouch of seawater containing
all it needed to sustain life as it crossed the continent.

Following instructions
we made it a small, nourishing ocean
in which it anchored itself upright
to a strand of seaweed, and, staring jewel-eyed

at nothing, slowly faded white
and died.

Houses

The wind blows through more houses than I know.
No longer through the bones of an unmanned king
who had taken too little care of too much; whose
daughters had taken less
time, for less thought. It is our way. Some things
we practice not to know.

The wind
blows through more houses than stand ajar in
the city's open heart, on through
other doubled caves, tunnels, exposed
tree dwellings, raveled bark,
way-stations of grass.
Between all things is terrifying space.

Over the years the crevices in the red rock
open, uncertain life creeps in, the wind blows,
the rock dwindles.
What I do not know is
what I would shelter or do shelter, what houses I am,
strange to my understanding, that will fall.

Letter Found Blown Against a Fence

Fat chances spread their fat thighs
and the bed breaks. Straightening

gracefully however back up, arranging my
things, I stroll into the hall. Someone else

's house is always a challenge, don't you think?
Coffee pots thumbing their way off all the tables,

it's like a movie! Stimulated,
I leave the house. I'm looking for work. Oh,

the splendor of the sky! I love life,
I can't help it. Soon I'll tell you where to send money.

I just wanted you to know that I'm thinking of you.
I don't know when I'll be home.

“—So Full of Sleep—”

*(Title from Canto 1 of Dante's Inferno as translated by
Charles S. Singleton)*

Mid-way? Or past? The wood
clearcut,
all cover gone.
If this is a place,
it is so only
because I ask it
where I am.

Where to find water?
At the sun's foot
patches of fog
compound the light,
lift.
I can see what blinds me.
Shapes.

The ghosts
of shining beasts
leap
inconsequent
on the hillside.
What was their danger?

Water can be
fouled, but cannot
lose its way.

Around me
scrub growth, broken
styrofoam, the rusted

lids of tin cans.
Cardboard. I pick up
a crumpled box.
Trojans.

This
emptiness furred over
with dingy particulars
is real. Reality
leads us nowhere,
drops us
deep into others' dreams.

Armida

On the island love endures, its acts
exquisitely drawn out.
The one natural season is summer.

The budded rose of your sex, the thorn of mine,
swell in all the gardens.

Beasts of silk charge the air
with breath, a catching sweetness.
Birds thrill
the eye.

Far up
planes hover; around,
the green sea is crazed to stone.
The harbors are empty.

The planes dart off, leaving
the sky its unearthly blue.
I do not know how you brought me here.

I am seventy.
A hole works toward the toe of my left sock,
My mind shames me.
Not one struggle is over.

What are the needs of magic? Would not
some other life have been more worth capture?

Do you not sometimes make mistakes?

Love that twisted vine

involves this flesh of mine

winds me from sleep to sleep
takes heart and trenches deep

the gestures of my walk
tangle
a whisper talk

drifts through and fades my speech
the world beyond my reach

goes by goes by
but where they live who die

where love that changeless rose
both is and grows
I do not know
who knows

One-Sided Conversation with Henry

re the poetry circuit

One thing they do, they pour their emptiness
into bed with you. I screamed once—
had been quarreling with sleep, and was shook.
She said, masking her suspicions, Look,
none of my courses has any relevance,
don't you understand? Oh I said yes.

There's a well-wisher in the bathroom now.
She's had all kinds of men, her roommate says,
but she's never had a poet. Get ready.
You could maybe cement yourself shut. Unsteady
Henry, alone worth solid praise
and love, for deep eyes, and some songs sung,

wavers between not saying *Does it not seem to you that we
have been here a long time now?*
and not saying *Might it not soon be permissible to take our
leave?*

Around all us, ice cubes ring like bells.
When Henry does not ask them questions, how
can I not answer? who anyway may well perceive
that there ain't noplacE else.

Private Services

for Dylan Thomas, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman,

The death of song's accomplished in the air;
earth plumes itself. Certain sounds
tumble, uprooted, through the empty miles
and lodge somewhere, it may be; but the skies darken
and winter from the north of time drifts in
and chokes up all but silence.

I have seen
flight, the air's amazing uses; heard
the radiant birds bursting their throats with what
they could not save, and heard the harmonies
that could not save them. But all pattern ends
at the light's edge; and all climates are
killing; and what renewal is, is not
clear to the weathered eye.

A Fairly Common Story

featuring the Muse

"Low is cold," she said slowly, "and tired
is not high. Quit
bringing me
down. For awhile just
go, will you, and give me time to breathe?"
Mockingly, "Of your grace,
give me breathing space."

So I went and sat down in the next room.
I could hear her breathing. At first slow,
after awhile
faster and faster. She said "Oh!"
She said "Oh, wow!" and twenty-three seconds later
"Oh, *Howard!*" Well, I walked in.
It was Howard. Younger than I am, OK,
OK, a better poet, but in my own house?

And I can work up some nice—.

I said, "OK, but in my own house?"

Howard rolled off, his backside toward me. She
raised up on one elbow, naked rose
and gold, oh beloved! "Listen,"
she said. "What I do is
my own affair, is that clear? As for you,
if I have to say it, save up.
You may write one good poem when you're ninety-seven."

She said,
"I sincerely hope you live to *be* ninety-seven."

I cannot help it. She is so beautiful.
And whatever she says, her voice is
so beautiful.

Poem

"That a bear brings forth her young informous and unshapen, which she fashioneth after by licking them over, is an opinion not only . . . common with us at present, but hath been of old delivered by ancient writers."

—SIR THOMAS BROWNE, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Book III, Chapter VI.

I did nothing—
ended my hunger,
then slept.
There were others.
I dreamed
my fur grew,
snow came and drifted up the cave mouth,
my heart opened, and a bee crawled out.
Under their lids
my eyes caught blue fire.
I saw
the wind, and snarled.
Everywhere I curled there were claws.
I fought
rock, and lost,
branches, and lost,
water, and lost.
I could not think
my breath.
My belly opened and a bird flew in.
The sky tried to follow.
Swollen
clouds drift
through my blood.
I cannot close, am used,
my sleep their forest.
When will I wake?
Loosed
voices speak from me

sounds I can make nothing of.
Admitting pain
I tear my body
and it is done:
flowers push through my fur,
the bee thaws,

and there is something with me
that I have forgotten into life,
wingless,
unimaginable,
curled close.
I turn to it my whole body,
my tongue.
What I feel is not love.
This is mine.
It is not yet quite
finished.

3

Moving

I live where you do, in rooms
like packed boxes,
with windows looking out on streets
dirty but usable.

In my mind I search out
places I have been
where things happened that had meanings
I might now understand.

In one direction, the streets here
lead to open stores,
in the other, to banks
where money lies low.
Going farther either way
would be taking a trip, or moving.

And I *will* move, if only
to try to find out
what happened to me here,
what it meant, just being
in a place like this.

A fish jumped
A branch trailed
A bird slipped in
the leaves
clapped softly

I always listened:

to near festivals of birds praising
worms, praising
Wisconsin:
sun: I listened

by lake and leaf, pool, trough,
to celebrations of the descents of water;

listened
to bees' huge privacy;

the grass
whispered how tall, and
fruit thumped down through;

the horse, the cows,
sang only what was right;

even when the wind
translated the far and over with
into another language
also unknown
I listened,

I always listened

/ my mother was
crying /

City Limits

The words meant something. It was as though
places were their own maps, and what we walked on
were pink (say) up to a certain line, where,
decisively,
green, or blue, or
some darker color
overruled . . .

The city
was not large. Toward its edges
the houses grew flimsier, appeared to lose
each other's support; but when the streetlamps
came on at dusk, the houses
seemed to move forward a little, form
a company, stand straight in the pride of light.

I lived on a farm
a mile out into the country, and when
after school, after studying at the public
library, I walked home,
often it was dark. I would march
the blocks to the edge of light, then step out
into the dark, trying to walk as steadily
along the road, looking back sometimes, till
the city's lights
shut their doors, and I was alone.

*In the wood, the palaces of evil
filled with sound as a cup fills with water . . .*

I was frightened. Things
emerged, never clearly. The stars
did not care enough.

When I got home,

my father, who had done all the chores, would say,
“Why are you so late.”

Not all things change, but
nothing is as I remember. Tired
of the ferocity of human concerns, of their
greed for their untasted food,
I have tried to find
again the certain line, and beyond that
the place where the lights shut their doors, but
the city, the city has grown.

I need its support. Still
I want to walk
out, I want to be afraid
of something besides myself, or you. I want to be
in the dark, in a space with no edges, squared
to nothing, and though
I need love, as I have always needed love,
I want the stars to shine, and not to care.

How should I think long

upon the white of that skin?

She goes, and it becomes

flower petal,

ivory,

the moon, chalked with night.

And that is a different journey

from the intent room

where her love

rivered with blue

that white skin, that white skin.

Thought; Song; Speech; Silence

I.

The world being white and dangerous, men keep cars
dark behind rigid doors, and in the street
the dark and no man walk, and only stars
shed light thinly on fields like shields of sleet.
How shall I come to you?

2.

If there were not such eyes
to laugh at sleep
blue would mean nothing

If earth had not such hands and
warm surfaces
brown would be no color

If you had no such mouth
to stop breath
what could be red

Where does light come from?
 The darkness of my house you might say
 only she could dispel,
 but I am not sure.

Or you might say sunlight streaming through the window
 would turn the trick,
 but I am not sure.

Or coming in from outside darkness I might
 suddenly fear what I might bump into
 and flick the switch.
 Then would the dark be gone?

Who killed the king's daughter, and the dragon
 wedded—some prince
 far from his land—was that I?
 In the dark.

What dark?

Cunning, and mad,
 I know what someone said.
Let there be rot—.

No, that's wrong.

They sing very small songs: the bird,
the box wound up long ago
too tight. If the air were smaller would
the song show?

The box is out of scale.
The wood has no grain.
The handle will not turn.
The music will not play.

The bird is new.
His brief flight I have heard
traced through the trees, and around
the trees, and between trees.
His colors, seen, are voices.

The box—I do not quite
remember, but doubtless it was I who over-
wound it: *That tune again*.
Long ago.

There may be more birds than one.

Night. In that folded flight
no color. Nothing heard.
The box filling with profound
and unintelligible sound.

Aubade

In the river of waking no one drowns
though the drowned float to the surface there, grinning.
Another day of loving you.

Or not you. A girl I made up, once,
of colors, and motions: smiles, kisses,
dark hair, soft skin. A shade of lipstick. Words.

Or not loving but flowing or being flowed
out of the dark to the same spot on the same shore
always, always; and waking too close always

ever to push away into the deep currents of
travel I bump the shore this good morning
grinning, beginning our day apart.

One-Sided Conversation #—

It's got so
the crease in my trousers remembers better than I do.
Knots keep slipping, the paths all
betray inclinations of their own,
at last I see the light not at the end of the tunnel,
I get lost, start over
obviously not at the beginning.

The beginning I can't reconstruct.
I could make it up: deck chairs side by side
or the hot dunes after a stiff hike
or the top of a mountain no one else wanted to climb to
and the whole sky blue—.
I know I'd never seen anyone as beautiful as you were
but I can't remember what you looked like.

And what were we going to do? Have children—
we did that.
Be kind to each other? understand each other?
I wake up in the middle of nowhere
and there's a letter from you
(the postman knows where I am, if I don't)
and I tear it open, but it doesn't tell me much.
I can tell there was something I didn't do.
Was I supposed to get groceries, pick up a prescription,
have my glasses straightened?
Were we supposed to get somewhere, or meet somewhere?

Well, let it slide.
That's what the mirror says,
when you turn away.

Song Under My Breath

Back where the eyes are closed
I looked to find someone
I love.
I wondered, Is it dark?

Back where the head is turned
away, I found her.
She was walking downhill
and could not hear me.

Back where the seed is cold
I wait. Maybe for her.
Maybe for spring,
if this is winter.

Realizations

1.

Spring Morning

The confidence of sparrows! and my
hesitance—. I think
They have forgotten already, and would
laugh, but must
regard my shadows. I walk past the park.

Time has again wrung flowers out of the dark.

2.

The Wino in the Men's Room of the Springfield Bus Station

The doors of all the booths have been removed.
That'll show 'em.

Ugly,
not bright, nor particularly able, all the same
having more of everything than anyone wants,
his hungers as tyrannical as a handsome man's,
he sits
and, his closed face splintered with fury,
publicly masturbates.

The Soliloquies

The body says:

The mind: my moonlight.

It holds nothing real.

It entertains the dead.

Cold, what can it know?

Let it wake

I turn from it to my possessions.

The mind says:

Not for long can the hands grasp.

The nerves
dance, whirl with, freeze to; but the song
vanishes;

helpless at length, the eyes their opals
relinquish;
with what thing pleases us we struggle to couple,
and from it fall.

It is late now;
and how should the body learn to be wise?
Desire is for the red bird on the bough.
It flies.

Sitting too high in the house, I have to
make an effort, I can only
imagine rooms below too full of furniture
pitching on waves of darkness; dust loosely
sifting itself; the corners
atilt with eyes.

I wait, and they wait. Up here
one turn of the head
is the universe: light painted on the inside.
Color has spread through all the fields of glass,
and everything is white.

The basement fills with water.
That smell could be walls rotting, the imagined
sound roots pushing, sap or water
at work struggling to take the dust
elsewhere, for good.

What do the eyes have to do? I can see
enough, in unsettled space. And if
down in the house
cluttered rooms amass their dark, heavy voyages,
who would go? Up here, still,
God! how the sun shines!

Like animals, we grow

solitary, cranky,
in plain sight;
not lone as the killer;
our flesh no sweet prey;
unafraid

and odd
as growth at the high line, as
bramble-thin
fields clubbed, thorned;
ground given up
by the stiff plough;

eroded, we show
the once-volcanic,
cold; what
gentleness of form
surrounds is worn,
as in sculpture;

we take
away the breath of
the young who love
art; while we,
like all we know,
turn artifact, turn

without warmth around
a remote sun,
deaf with no call,
choked with no name,
and seek, if any
one, the one
to blame.

The Flowers

Look how ugly you've got, the flowers say to me
every spring. And I, well, I
temporize, what else . . . But it's them, isn't it?
Everything all at once, and then nothing—
self-crumpling, self-discarding paper; sticks.
It's them, not me. Oh, miracles
upon miracles, you think you'll never lose
those fragile shapings of light—God's plenty.
Then gone. And it's up to you:
especially in the dark, it's up to you.

Finally

it's been too long, you can't remember,
and among the words that moved in when the flowers went
you do things that—.

Not once,

not one year have I been sure that they really would
come back, or—lately—even that I'd ever seen them.

Then one day, or week,
the words turn water, soft earth, in a rush
of green, the flowers
are all around, reds, yellows, pinks, lavenders, light blues—.

I never left.

OK, I say, you see me.

This Spring: for Luverne

Now to the care of air spring like a sound
drifts, and round
the new leaves a pale sun weaves
frail and bright its running water light.

Song the day long! What floats? the song? a tree?
Sweet buds burst
but thirsts of bird and bee are half for flight.
What climbs? From earth, yet free,
rise through the rimed grass all eyes
flowers whose vivid shades deny that all
passes, and will fall.

Last fall my sister died; a winter came.
They passed, those days.
And something still of her
now to the care of air lifts, and stays.
Now I can speak her name.

Because There Is Time

The fool of a long day,
I have accumulated
nothing to say.

I wake to a sky
of water mixed with light.
Is it early? late?

Heavy with rain, a tree
moves on with all it holds
too slowly to see.

Because there is time,
what is spilled—light,
a bird, its nest—
is always caught.

My children sleep late, full
of all there is to say.

In silence leaf and word
continue, and are lost,
and are expressed.

What my mind holds,
what it has spilled,
I do not need to know.
Long ago
the fool was blest.

Walking Toward the Sun

I read. A mouse of night nibbles the lines.
Glaucoma. I am fairly
used to this, to the dry hunger
of the dark, that will take
anything it can get
without fighting.

Abruptly

I close my book, get up, walk through
my blurred, familiar rooms, and
go outside, seeking
daylight, the world of large
things. Across the street
the sun is burning the buildings. I wince and
turn away, walk, as it seems, away.

Walking toward the sun I cannot exactly
see: the strong light
seizes my eyes. Ahead, it
dissolves surfaces; a gold shimmer
drowns the cars, parked or moving. People
appear, in part vanish, struggle
in silence to be whole. But silence
lives elsewhere: motors hum, shoes scuff or clack,
brakes squeal, dogs bark, the sun
sings. They say that
if you look straight at the sun
you will go blind. People, things,
will vanish. The great hungers
of the dark are shrouded
in light. We are all
walking toward the sun. Like everyone else,
I must go into the shadows
to see.