



STILL HERE,  
STILL NOW  
ROBERT PACK



STILL HERE, STILL NOW

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# Still Here, Still Now

ROBERT PACK

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Robert Pack is the Abernethy Professor of Literature and Creative Writing Emeritus at Middlebury College. He is the author of nineteen books of poems, most recently *Rounding It Out* and *Elk in Winter*, both published by the University of Chicago Press.

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*For Patty all the way*



. . . and laugh

At gilded butterflies . . .

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (*King Lear*, V, 3)





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## I. FOR YOU AND YOU





## ANOTHER MARCH

Another March, and in chilled trees thick sap  
Begins to surge — a fact so fundamental I  
Embrace its deep impersonality;  
Yet it is I who feel it even though  
I surely could be anyone. So, too,  
Our life together, reaching back  
A half a century, recaptures you  
While planting daffodils in autumn mist,  
Gleaming tomato stalks in May, as if  
I read about us in a gilded book:  
Our story's rounded with its end, just as  
Returning seasons change and merge —  
The thrum of summer I remember as  
A hummingbird suspended at a rose —  
Becoming one, as we are one, and full  
With ripeness and with ruddy ripening,  
Forever vanishing, forever there,  
Forever gone and irreplaceable.

## FACING YOU

When I say, circle, I select the moon  
Or sun, or I select my wedding band;  
I offer to expanding space this plucked  
Revolving apple in my outstretched hand.

And for variety, elliptical  
Eggplant or tapered pear also can please,  
The streaked breast of a bleating meadowlark,  
The reaching arc of flowing willow trees.

Look there, my love, an indescribable  
Meandering of yellow butterflies  
Descends upon an oval pond crowded  
With luminescent lily pads — like eyes

That contemplate swirled clouds as if  
Even elusiveness might be defined,  
The vanished years we share, dissolved  
Into a garden's purple mist: a kind

Of tendered thankfulness. And so I name  
Your spirit's likeness with fresh forms without,  
For turning inward to myself alone  
There's only fading thought to think about.

## PAUL SEES MORE LIGHT

I fainted dead away beside the plate  
Of juicy shrimp that rainy evening meant  
To gather critics there to celebrate  
My lecture on poetic form, intent.

Revived among dark faces circling me —  
There was my literary ally, Paul,  
Who leaned down hazy close — I could well see  
Distress upon his sunken face for all

The losses our long friendship shared; concern  
From him passed into me and made me limp.  
A doctor took my leaping pulse to learn,  
Was I allergic to such foods as shrimp?

Up from unconscious depths came my reply:  
“No, but I am allergic to free verse.”  
The “Oh” that lunged from Paul’s tight lips, his sigh  
On hearing my smart-ass remark (no worse,

I think, than some he’d heard before) remains  
The most melodious to sooth me when  
My stressed-out heart speaks of its beating pains,  
Its bare regrets. Paul told the doctor then:

“He’s not yet ready to give up the fight;  
I’ll know when Bob’s near death; he’ll be all right.”

## FLUTE MUSIC AT NOON

I watch you walking with your flute  
Head high across a purple clover field;  
The air is still, warm leaves are mute,  
Silence is still to be revealed.

Flute notes upon moist lips just mean  
Just what they are, a silver melody,  
Expressing nothing in the scene.  
No correspondence I can see

Between your aura and the hue  
Of purple sweetness swirling in the breeze  
Is needed to enhance the true  
Attraction that the aching bees

Perceive, as I perceive the notes  
Composed together, one by silver one,  
On which your passing presence floats  
Until you vanish in the sun.

## YOU ARE THE ONE

Here's what we know — incredible  
as it may seem, since we can't get  
our minds around the concept of  
blank nothingness: Space/time began  
when Big Bang generated everything;  
that's right, there was no time, no anything,  
before the Big Bang start, and so the laws  
that govern nature as we know them now —  
the interplay of energy and mass,  
the formula  $E$  equals  $m c$  squared —  
came into being when space/time commenced.

But whoa! How did those laws know what  
to formulate if they were not  
already written somehow in the void,  
in some Platonic realm, even before  
there was a single universe in which  
the laws of math could operate — perhaps  
as paradigms for freedom within fate,  
or maybe for the need to hold desire  
within some limits of constraint?

Did not these laws then have to be,  
from sheer necessity, transcendent laws —  
laws that a math professor might  
be tempted to define, “Pi in the sky,”  
laws that the wild-browed Einstein speculated  
God Himself would have to follow since  
He'd have no choice if He desired  
to fabricate one universe that worked?

How can these two conditions equally  
be true at once? I'm sure you'd like to know.  
How can the cosmic laws of physics come  
into Big Bang existence only when  
existence starts its evolutionary journey  
to its consummation in inventing love,  
and yet precede existence in some realm  
where numbers dwell, timeless and absolute,  
where Pi unfolds into an unknown end?  
My mind whirls in a vertigo when I  
attempt to comprehend such things.

But that's enough of small talk for tonight;  
all that I meant to say is that you are  
the only one, the one and only one  
to hold me steady in this swirl of stars  
and dust in an expanding universe.  
What chance is there you'll go to bed with me?

## THE BLUE VASE

After our son was born  
(he's now gone out into the world)  
my wife acquired a blue transparent vase  
that she discovered among junk  
congested at an antique store;  
she placed it on a table  
by our kitchen window  
where it would reflect  
eastern then southern light  
of the reliably revolving sun.  
Over the years, I've passed it by  
a thousand times or more,  
admiring its glimmering blue  
though only at a fleeting glance.  
Yesterday as white sun arose,  
the blue vase seemed to beckon me,  
compelling me to pause  
exactly in the interval  
through which I was about to pass.  
Transfixed, spellbound, I stood  
there in the morning's ambient glow  
an hour or more, watching  
the sun's first beams caress  
the curving surface of the vase,  
casting a star of stippled light  
upon the table top of inlaid ivory  
as if a message or a sign  
had been encoded there.



Still in a kind of trance, I wondered: What  
could this reflected light  
in interplay with its reflection on  
a tabletop — on which my wife  
had set a basket of bananas, oranges,  
green apples, purple grapes and plums —  
what could this cornucopia of color  
be symbolic of? And what had that design,  
contrived by law and chance,  
to do with our son's birth  
or with my wife's fortuitous  
selection of a lucent vase  
to apprehend the morning light?  
Surely, I thought, some purpose  
must be there to be discerned  
to complement that radiating harmony  
of ripened fruit and colored light.  
And then it came to me as in  
a counter-revelation:  
I'd tried in vain to find  
some revelation there beyond  
what she had carefully arranged  
and that precisely was the failure I  
could now possess and call my own.  
All that I needed to believe was true  
had been composed only  
with blue light and with varied fruit,  
only with multicolored fruit  
and blue reflected light  
reflecting into deeper blue.

## MOUNTAIN DAWN

From where I watch in my pine-paneled room,  
the mountain range, about ten miles away  
and to the east, displays its silhouette  
as it obscures the rising sun; and then,  
just as the sun appears, an edge of light  
ignites the snow-packed mountain top and brings  
its crevices and slopes into relief.

And so a day in the home stretch begins,  
although my thoughts turn to beginnings  
other than my own: Big Bang, of course, comes first  
when, out of sheer nothingness space and time  
commence with just a quantum fluctuation  
according to fixed laws we still obey;  
this idea — absence, nothing, nothingness —  
I try to grasp in feeling as in thought.

And then the leap miraculous to life,  
stupendous trick of prestidigitatious  
replication by a genius molecule  
with consequences unforeseeable  
even beyond divine imagining  
is what in reverence I dwell upon.

But so, too, death was born, and that would not  
have been so bad if consciousness of death,  
what most we have become, and are,  
had not inflicted us to live with loss  
made permanent, aching the more  
the more we love. Only the animals  
were spared, only the teeming grasses and

the sweet serenity of swaying trees.  
The birth of inwardness made us suppose  
that we must be some awful aberration,  
some grave mistake nature had stumbled on.

Mother oh mother, the beginning of  
your irreversible oblivion  
began a year ago; I picture your wide eyes  
and your round face with an astonished look,  
asking what could have separated us  
after a lifetime of our talking every  
indistinguishable day — talking of what?  
What does it matter now? It seemed as if  
words were enough to keep us in our lives,  
to keep blank, gaping nothingness away,  
back in its quantum void where absence is  
not burdened with awareness of itself,  
or where the sunrise on a mountain peak  
illuminates only azure sky, only  
the shadowed slopes and shaded crevices.

## NO RECONCILING

No touch remains but shivering;  
Wan autumn's misty warmth is spent;  
No reconciling, no forgiving  
The way you were, the way you went.

Hunched crows sit silent on a branch  
Where raucous cries rent the stunned air;  
I see white emptiness advance;  
I see your absence everywhere.

I see you where a butterfly  
Once rested on a sunstruck stone  
Blindly ablaze as you walked by  
Alone — content to be alone.

I see you where the dwindling stream  
Fumbles and arcs around the bend;  
I know such disappearance means  
Endings recalled prolong the end —

As I do here in my embracing  
Shifting apparitions of loose shade,  
Defining what I now am facing:  
The flutterings your last light made.

## TORNADO CONSOLATION

One cannot tell a hospital stood here;  
The rubble just as well could be a church.  
How many are still buried? We all fear  
More dead will turn up in tomorrow's search.

No water, but a coke machine still works.  
A radio without a listener  
Plays songs of unrequited love; the quirks  
And twists of human longing rend the air.

There is no one to blame, no one to hate,  
And yet the dead remain exactly so;  
Profoundly mute, they've nothing to relate,  
Though I imagine they'd be cheered to know

This was not caused by terrorists within  
Our midst, or punishment for human sin.

## MOONLIGHT MIRRORINGS

I woke from midnight sleep to watch  
The full moon shimmer in the lake;  
Moon doubling mirrored in my mind,  
Reminding me for her lost sake

That's what thought does — thought multiplies  
Upon remembered thought to cling  
To what is gone and make it stay  
In glimmers of past vanishing.

But she stays gone except perhaps  
For my uncertain saying so,  
And so reflections of the moon,  
The way the wash of waters go,

Reveal how once I waited there  
Beside the lake, expecting her  
To step out from behind a tree  
And make what thought desired occur.

And there I am, still there beside  
Moon water sipping at the shore,  
As her not coming comes again,  
Repeating what I never saw.

## THE STORY'S END

I'd like to live on for a while —  
a day, a year, a century —  
not merely for the sake  
of hanging on, but to find out  
if humankind is able to avoid  
nuclear war, the final war  
of clashing ideologies.

In this survivor's interval  
I could continue to enjoy  
the pleasures that allow me  
to forget all goals beyond  
just ordinary satisfactions like  
my strolling by a lake  
with purple sunset in the clouds  
and swallows swooping from their nests,  
making smooth arcs  
that seem to organize the hills.

And yet my deepest motive  
to extend my life — despite  
the evening sun's consoling warmth,  
despite the wind's low melody  
among the wafted willow leaves —  
is to discover how  
the human story ends, and thus  
to know what I might make  
my one life mean right now.

I circle slowly round the lake,  
walking in rhythm with myself;

I sway a little with the swaying lily pads,  
returning to the house we built  
so many unrecorded pleasures past  
where now you wait for me  
beneath the doorway's shaded arch.

Why can't my homecoming  
suffice? Why can't I be content  
just with a greeting, an embrace,  
the image of two swallows  
as they swoop and dip and spin?  
What greedy curiosity demands  
I know if humankind survives  
until the sun collapses on itself —  
an ending I can comprehend.

I see you standing there  
within the doorway's gathered shade,  
wafted by music from the willow tree,  
thinking the thought I can't avoid,  
thinking my questioning is vain.  
Shall I construe my wish to know  
if everything we love gets lost  
as an attempted hymn of praise?  
Or must I chant it as an elegy?



## LOGICAL SPECULATION

For sure, it's easier to fabricate  
A virtual universe, a fake,  
Than one that's actual, composed of stuff  
Obeying laws that make life possible,  
Including consciousness, if given fourteen  
Billion years, but under fixed conditions  
So particular and finely tuned, like getting heads  
Four-hundred coin flips in a row, that they  
Defy chance as a workable hypothesis.

The odds against our really being here  
Strain all credulity, so maybe it's  
Not that far-fetched to speculate a man —  
Let's say a brilliant scientist who was  
Rejected by a woman whom he loved —  
Light years away in a dim galaxy,  
Decided to design on his computer  
His own version of a world that is  
Inhabited by people who believe  
That they are absolutely real, and that  
Their species' history of violence  
Actually occurred. They take on faith  
The fabrication of a warring past  
Within the fabrication they're alive  
Right now, bearing the brunt of present time.

Dramatic and compelling, yes,  
And yet these people realize their life  
Seems flawed, imperfectly contrived, as I  
Myself confess to that suspicion since

There's something quite incredible about  
What surely is excessive suffering —  
As if our world's designing scientist  
Had been compelled to share his emptiness,  
As if he might be someone else's thought.  
How's that scenario for likelihood?

Tell me, could a computer genius with  
His heart's desires remaining unresolved,  
No matter how advanced the culture he  
Inhabited, let his own suffering  
Affect him when inventing somebody  
As kind as you, although he knows you are  
A simulation? And, a simulation, too,  
I walk along a tangled woodland path  
In flaming autumn, missing you, your touch,  
Your undulating voice, baffled because  
Your absence is so palpable to me.

And so I picture you strolling the beach,  
Circled by raucous gulls, where you once lived  
Before your mother died, recalling how  
You greeted me that windy afternoon  
While standing in the doorway of your house,  
Inviting me to step into the shade  
Of inner rooms, their purple atmosphere,  
Seem so unreal as I remember them.

But they seem real as well, the colors and  
The silken shade, and even unreality,  
My thinking about thinking about thought,  
Seems real, although I cannot hold your image  
Steady in my mind. I ache for you —  
Perhaps the same ache that he aches —  
Your presence and your whisper and your touch,

Wishing to bring you back and hold you here,  
Before the wind I feel within my bones  
Blows your remembered face away like sand,  
Leaving gray driftwood lifting up gaunt arms,  
Before his bright computer screen fades out to black.

## GRANDSON

His father piled the colored blocks  
up to the level of his eyes, so he,  
a force of Nature like a blast of wind,  
could knock them down,  
knowing his father right on clue  
would build the tower up again  
for him to scatter on the rug, as if  
it represented the whole universe,  
and yet without harm done. The blocks  
seemed tumbled in perpetuity —  
the future right before my eyes  
to contemplate, for me,  
the father of a father of a son.

And he would turn his head  
to make sure that I was observing him,  
so that his laughter spanned  
our generations there, spreading from him  
to his observing father, then to me,  
the father of a father of a son,  
and back again, renewed, revitalized,  
and ready to again move on.

I was astounded he assumed  
that he was living in a funny world —  
a sense he did not learn from me  
or even from his dad; no doubt  
he had been born possessing it —

a gift that Nature in its laws  
of continuity bestowed on him.

And so, when perched upon  
his high-chair throne, discarding food  
this way and that as if there never  
could be famine in the world,  
feasting with the entire family,  
his mom, his grandmother, his aunt,  
the would-be chieftain of the clan  
clapped his commanding hands  
and beat them on the tray — applause  
for me to imitate, and him to imitate  
my imitation. This, too, appeared to him  
hilarious, and every one of us  
joined the hilarity; laughter, for sure,  
had power to suffuse the universe.

But after mom had put him into bed,  
and sleep suspended laughter in the night,  
his father told me of the operation  
that he faced, his shoulder muscles  
had to be tied up to hold the bones  
within their sockets, and that meant  
he'd have to change his occupation  
as a landscaper; he'd have to start again  
defining who at heart he was,  
no longer keeper of the shrubs and trees,  
stripped down to his identity  
as husband and as father to a son.

What laughter then could I  
recover from such stunning news?  
There was indeed a message

to be heeded from these facts: we all  
must persevere no matter what  
the obstacles; our love of children  
must remain enough to keep us  
doing what we have to do.  
But is there laughter to be found  
In grim necessity, in Nature howling out  
what seems to us the logic of a whim?

And thereby I proclaimed this to be so;  
apostle of absurd defiance, I  
crashed my fist down upon the wooden table  
where we sat, and then my son,  
in instantaneous response,  
slammed his hand down so hard  
he made the flaming candles  
shudder in their wicks. We caught  
the glitter in each other's eyes,  
and in that moment we both realized  
a revelation had occurred — a revelation  
that released our laughter once again.

We laughed beyond all reason  
and beyond restraint, our uproar like  
a banquet of the drunken gods,  
our mad tears overwhelming us,  
until our mutual cacophony  
awoke the baby from protecting sleep  
with cries confused and terrified.

Confused myself, hopeful without  
convincing evidence, I still  
have one remaining blessing to bestow:  
the wish that some unbidden day my grandson

will inherit laughter of another kind —  
laughter most human in its sympathy —  
to add to what already lies within  
his muscles and his bones, when he,  
whose voice contains wild mountain winds,  
becomes his generation's caretaker,  
the father of a father of a son.

## COMFORTING

I am aware you are aware  
I think about what it might well be like  
to live your life, to wake each day  
into a body made of hidden places  
different from my own,  
to share our sorrows and our fears,  
and thereby to be comforted.

As evening thickens in the room,  
encroaching on the changing shapes  
and colors of the dwindling fire,  
I feel your fingers reach out  
to my cheeks to touch, to soothe,  
like incandescent words that know  
precisely what they mean to mean.

And so I feel that you must feel  
precisely what I feel  
in feeling that I know  
what your most hidden feelings are,  
touching my cheek, touching my thoughts,  
as words — like reaching fingers — touch  
when rightly used and thus believed,  
thus rightly felt and understood.

And so I know you know  
what soothes my mind even  
as deepened evening light  
obscures our tightened room,  
evoking in us the same sense  
of darkness and of loss — of binding loss



that holds the two of us together  
in what feels like an embrace  
as I throw wood upon the fire  
as if it's not too late to light  
some long-extinguished star.

    Your fingers on my face pull back,  
their cooling sense remaining  
even though their touch  
has been relinquished to the dark;  
the fire flares from inside itself,  
the yellow orange and the orange red  
linger a second in their afterlight,  
and yet the room still closes in:  
I know that you can tell  
I now must be envisioning  
some great collapse of space and time,  
some final black-hole pull,  
consuming everything that we  
have clung to, everything we've loved.

    The dwindling flames recede,  
as all flames do and must,  
the orange yellow and the orange red,  
dissolve into one dense,  
undifferentiated dark — a dark I know  
you know I know you know  
that seems to be expecting our return  
into some unimaginable realm,  
deeper than knowing what each other knows,  
beyond our need for comforting.

## II. SHORT AND TALL TALES



## REINCARNATION

I told my friend that in my former life  
I'd been a mother duck; "Impossible,"  
Was his immediate reply, "you can't  
Repeat yourself in two lives in a row."  
But I contend he's wrong, for when I was  
Sixteen I had two luminous white ducks  
And kept them in a pen I tended with  
Devoted care. The hen laid six sleek eggs,  
And every morning at the surge of dawn  
I checked her nest to see if all was well.

One night, as the indifferent stars looked on,  
A weasel stole into their hutch and ate the eggs  
That I alone had been assigned to guard —  
Though one spared egg was only cracked, and when,  
Amid ripped feathers scattered all around,  
I tapped it with my middle fingernail,  
A baby duck popped out. I'm sure you've heard  
Of imprinting; well then, I was the one,  
The moving thing, chosen to be the first  
That duckling saw; and so it was, Nature  
Herself had thus decreed I was assigned  
To be that duckling's Mom. So picture him  
Following close behind me where I walked  
Along the fern-dense path or by the pond  
Or back into his hutch when bedtime came.  
I'd put him in the pocket of my shirt,  
His head poked out, when I sat down to read;  
I swear he was especially content

If I would read to him out loud — which shows  
How much of human meaning, too, resides  
In intonation and one's tone of voice.  
Men would be wise to take account of this.

Nothing concerned me but the welfare of  
That baby duck, and it delighted me  
To learn, many confused years later, that  
Right after birth, for several months, embryos  
Are female until a hormone-driven rush  
Of grim testosterone turns some genes male.  
And so it cannot be denied; I started out  
With Mom potential which by chance I was  
Permitted to fulfill, despite my friend's  
Assertion of impossibility.

At summer's end, I knew the time had come  
To send my duck into the world, and so  
I put him in the pond and said, "Goodbye,"  
Wishing him happiness — what else can Moms  
Or any parent do? He visited the pond  
At intervals, when yellow maple leaves  
Graced the still water mirroring the clouds,  
Then he was gone, although I watched for him  
Through many amber summers afterwards.

I wonder now what my next phase will hold,  
And if, when by the pond, I'll see my duck  
And recognize him among other ducks  
Amid a whirl of whiteness as they rise,  
Or if my friend is right to think that I  
Have used up my identity as Mom  
And better get on with a father's life,  
Wary of weasels and swift violence.

## LITERARY RAVENS

It was a sparkling Saturday in June —  
A perfect day to drive an hour to town,  
To browse the open marketplace,  
Bump into chatty friends,  
And purchase the fresh vegetables  
Grown by our local farmers  
And laid out in luminous display:  
Lettuce and radishes, carrots,  
Baby potatoes — white and red —  
Scallions and spinach, testifying how  
Amazing Mother Nature is  
When She's in harmony  
With cultivating human care.

Returning home, we found the floor  
Of our garage completely strewn  
With bottles, cans, discarded paper,  
Orange and banana peels.  
I realized that I'd neglected  
To roll down the rumbling door,  
Thus leaving garbage pails  
Exposed to swooping ravens  
Who had emptied them. And here's  
Where my adoring hymn to Nature,  
My domestic saga of contentment,  
Touches on what some of you,  
Only the skeptical, incredibly  
May find incredible.

Corrected papers on the floor,  
Included drafts of odes that I  
Had recently composed about  
These shining birds, praising  
Their patience and persistence,  
Their unusual intelligence,  
Evoked their curiosity and, no doubt,  
Their vanity, as well, and tempted them  
To read my rhapsodizing poems,  
Translating them into their own  
Raucous vernacular.

They had, of course, admired them  
And searched the teeming bounty  
Of the tumbled garbage pails  
For every luscious word  
Their appetites could find therein.  
I hope that you'll agree  
No other explanation can account  
For how the poems' revisions were  
Deliberately arranged  
Upon the telltale floor which otherwise  
Would have to be explained merely  
By chance or randomness.

And in that glow of revelation I,  
Enraptured and serene, considered how  
Poetic art conjoined with Nature  
Make a pair, as man and woman do,  
Helpmates and complements,  
And how, when merged with mind,  
With soaring, speculating mind,  
Inchoate Nature can reach out

In order to express Herself,  
Thus giving substance to the very thought  
Expressed, adding to what is real,  
Transforming ordinary fact  
Into the highest visionary form.

My moment of transcendence passed —  
Such moments, we all know, can't be  
Sustained — and then my job was just  
To tidy up the aggravating mess,  
Restoring order to its mundane state.  
My wife called out when I was done,  
“Next time we go to town, make sure the door  
Is closed so ravens can't get in.”  
I felt chagrined, I felt let down —  
I kicked the damn offending door —  
But wishing to assure her that  
One mess like this was quite enough  
To help complete a perfect day,  
All I could think to say was “Nevermore.”



## HAPPINESS

So what then might you single out  
as the most happy moment of your life?

The memory that leaps first into mind  
is swimming in a lake to nowhere  
in particular, feeling my body's glide,  
easy and smooth, stroke by untiring stroke,  
as if I could go on forever with  
no need to rest, no need even to think  
of anything but being where I was,  
right there, right then, the luminescent water  
sliding out and dripping from the curve  
made by my lifted arm, catching the sparks  
of slanting red and orange evening light.

Is that all you might mean by happiness,  
just bodily well being, the illusion  
nothing will change — the moment so complete,  
contained within itself, that it might seem  
as if it were eternity? Shouldn't  
your one defining moment be much more  
than fleeting pleasure, more than freedom from  
disturbing thoughts of time, ongoing flux?  
Shouldn't high happiness involve someone  
you love for whom you make a sacrifice  
to carry you beyond your single self?

Well, we were driving home that foggy night,  
having an argument, the crudest kind  
of argument about how much she spent  
on a dumb hat, and what made it still worse —  
the hat was shiny black, a color she  
well knew I hate; hot red or cobalt blue  
would say to me that she had purchased it  
to please my taste, fashion be damned,  
but no, it was all black, prophetic black.  
A car pulled out from the oncoming lane —  
there was no way of my avoiding it,  
so what I chose to do was spin our car  
sharp to the right hoping the impact of  
the crash would land on me and maybe she'd  
survive. In that huge instant as the glass  
splashed on my face like sudden water from  
a swimmer's arm, before my widened mind  
ironically went black, I was content  
with what I'd done, more than content; I'm sure,  
beyond my fear, I felt pure happiness,  
the kind you asked about. I'd passed the test  
that my philosophy required: I was  
the person I'd prepared myself to be.

Does that defining moment still provide  
meaning enough to take you to the end  
your dark philosophy foresees — and can  
proving you truly loved her, still outweigh  
all that you know about the suffering  
nature inflicts upon us all, to which we add  
the special curse of human cruelty:  
betrayal and ingratitude and bombs?

When I woke from the week-long coma I  
was buried in, the busty nurse told me  
that I kept blurting out, “the hat, the hat!”  
and though she couldn’t fathom what I’d meant,  
she knew then that I’d make it back to health.  
My wife, wearing her hat, arrived to fetch  
me from the hospital, and I’ll admit,  
black as it was, the hat looked good on her.  
I laughed and she laughed in response and I  
laughed at her laughing, she in turn at mine,  
and maybe I should rank that moment as  
the ultimate in happiness I have enjoyed  
because we shared absurd defiance without  
hope that must rely upon a wish  
for some transcendent meaning to emerge.

That’s evidence enough for you to claim  
your faith in laughter will enable you  
to make it to the end; that’s why you find  
delectable the knowledge that before  
“pursuit of happiness” was linked with “life  
and liberty,” by father Jefferson,  
“pursuit of property,” Locke’s pithy phrase,  
expressed a goal that’s realizable.  
How lowdown practical, how crass, how crude,  
how undeluded and inspired Locke was!

I must confess I secretly had hoped  
you would have held out longer in requiring  
that I embrace something more than laughter,  
more than blood sacrifice that can’t escape  
the blackness in its need to rescue loss

by one's embracing loss — something noble like  
the world remade through visionary art.  
That's it! I'll write a book called HAPPINESS,  
certain to make me rich — people will pay  
good money for advice on how to live.  
I'll buy a farm with lots of acreage and build  
a mansion for my wife. Some comic scenes  
will be quite autobiographical.  
And though dazed children starve in Africa  
as mothers wail up to the skies for them,  
and soldiers cut the throats of prisoners  
as always they have done, what harm, I ask,  
can the pursuit of carefree happiness  
do to whatever pleasures that mere chance  
or universal law indifferently  
allow: a hat tipped toward the waiting void,  
or swimming on a summer afternoon  
to some shore nowhere in particular?

## FOUR GUYS CROSS MONTANA

“The Last Best Place,” UNOFFICIAL STATE MOTTO

The one alone remaining of us four,  
yet stubbornly alive, with memory  
enough to care, I still recall  
our journey to Montana  
just to see new sights — mountains  
imposing in austere indifference,  
moose or big-horned sheep or elk,  
yet what I treasure most is how  
we made each other laugh;  
I still can hear triumphant laughter  
rippling down the blur of years.

We drove across the rolling prairie,  
undulating like a female body's curves,  
enjoying our own teasing company;  
by midday, voices harsh with thirst,  
we stopped for lunch and beer  
in a small village indistinct  
except for the big-breasted bartender  
at the CELESTIAL BAR AND GRILL,  
where right above the mirror facing us  
a bold announcement there proclaimed:  
IN GOD WE TRUST — THE REST OF YOU PAY CASH.  
Defiantly we did.

On our way out of town we made  
a wrong turn on a one-way street,  
guffawing all together since  
the arrow on the pole had slipped  
and now was pointing down, confirming

what we knew already of our fate,  
proud fornicators that we were —  
or wished to be. And then  
more confirmation came  
as the town prophet on the street corner,  
sporting his jaunty cowboy hat,  
deranged or drunk, warned us  
the world was coming to an end.

We took delight in speculating that  
four ordinary guys obsessed with ass  
had been elected to receive  
personal revelation of apocalypse,  
and this delectable idea  
was further cause for our hilarity —  
as if hilarity was born  
within the marrow of our bones.

“It’s fun to share such fun!”  
we freely, blissfully concurred,  
and got back in our car to travel on,  
deciding that we’d spend the night  
at some extravagant resort  
and stalk girls by the swimming pool,  
sharing gross jokes whose innuendos  
celebrated body parts as if  
sleek limbs or loins or lips  
were able to enjoy life mindlessly;  
but then to elevate our thoughts  
we chose to take a scenic route —  
nature in her sublimity —  
along a recommended mountain road.

As we descended through the pass  
of clustered evergreens, we witnessed

pale blue lupine in patched sunny intervals  
and mule deer grazing by the road;  
we were content as they, at peace, serene,  
and I still hear triumphant laughter  
rippling down the blur of years.  
We passed a windless lake  
reflecting the whole mountainside  
and then, together, all at once, we saw  
a painted sign with upturned mouth  
and dotted eyes — a smiley face —  
above a weathered cemetery gate,  
which read: THIS IS THE LAST BEST PLACE.

## THE STUTTERER

The story that I promised you  
about my friend, the stutterer —  
well, here it is: We'd argue if  
we ought to send our troops to war,  
and when it looked as if I'd win  
the argument, he'd blurt, "Easy, b-Bud,  
for you to say," and I'd be stopped  
by laughter not by reasoning.

He told me he once had a friend  
who stuttered worse than he. His friend  
explained how it began: when he  
was just a skinny brat at camp,  
his bunkmate was a stutterer,  
and he, with boyhood cruelty,  
would mimic the embarrassed kid;  
his joking made him stupidly  
oblivious to that kid's pain.  
By summer's end, the mimicker  
became the stutterer; he has  
remained afflicted to this day.  
But that's not where my story ends.

I have a student in my class  
who stutters when he's called upon;  
a gutsy kid, he does not let  
this sole impediment prevent  
him from expressing his ideas.  
After he spoke in class last week,  
to my appalled astonishment,



I stuttered when responding to  
his stuttering, as if some monster  
guilt had warped my empathy;  
for the remaining hour of class,  
I willed myself to slow down my  
remarks so that my words came out  
composed as I intended them.

The fear that I could not control  
the words that make me who I am,  
according to my choice, disturbed  
my breathing and my blood, and now  
I'm almost stopped by this same fear  
I'll stutter as I speak to you,  
and you won't want to marry me.

## ARGUING FRIENDS

Whether we fought because we disagreed  
Or simply just enjoyed a good debate,  
Was hard to tell, but politics, of course,  
Brought forth the passions closest to our hearts,  
With baseball next. We both were Yankee fans  
From boyhood on, but I, disdaining all  
The dough they had to spend, switched my allegiance to  
The Sox, rejecting my past ties, gaining  
An Evil Empire to do battle with.

We differed most in our opposing views  
Of whether we were right to send our troops  
Into Iraq, whether democracy was possible  
In that part of the world or not. I thought  
We had to try, but feared the worst: that war,  
Atomic war — since human nature has  
Not changed — would come about, and he feared most  
That liberties at home would soon be lost.  
We each respected what the other thought,  
Yet hints of strain were inescapable.

What bliss when finally the Red Sox won  
The series after being three games down;  
Justice achieved its shining moment in  
An otherwise uncaring universe  
Where Yahweh left us to defend ourselves  
Among a multitude of enemies —  
A sentiment we shared. Sometimes  
We'd fight about an issue less intense  
Than war; he was an advocate of Choice:

A woman's body is entirely  
Her own, and she should have the option when  
To keep the fetus as she so desired.

But still I think that I one-upped him with  
My definition of parental choice,  
Claiming that parents had a moral right  
To opt for an abortion of their child —  
Since they're the ones supporting him — until  
The age of twenty-one or else until  
The child is able to support himself,  
Whichever happens to come earliest.

So on it went, neither of us giving way,  
Unable to persuade the other who  
Had made the more compelling case, and yet  
We both remained committed to the idea  
Dialogue, debate, and reason were  
The sole alternatives to force for nations  
When their faiths or ideologies  
Or economic interests clashed. If just  
We two could not become a model for  
How reconciliation might occur,  
What then could worldly hope be based upon?

Once he invited me to dine with him  
At an expensive Chinese restaurant  
In swank downtown New York. A six-course meal  
Was followed, as required, by ritual,  
With fortune cookies, and my pick proclaimed:  
Confucius says: "A fool just by himself  
Can't win a war." Surely, he'd written that  
As some kind of a subtle joke, contrived  
To re-enforce a point, but what it was  
I only could surmise and had to guess.

His cookie read: "Confucius says a fool  
Alone cannot negotiate a peace."  
If he, as I suspected, had arranged  
To write them both, how did he know which one  
Would go to him and which one I'd select?

He smiled and paid the whopping bill, then reached  
Into his bulging pocket and pulled out  
His Yankee cap and placed it jauntily  
Upon his head; in reciprocity  
I graciously doffed back to him my old  
Red Sox chapeau. Then we walked out, my arm  
Around his shoulder, his on mine, together  
In the neon multicolored night,  
The clear cacophony of the shrill street.

## THE TEACHER SHAKES UP HIS CLASS

Most of the students in my Shakespeare class  
Had come from homes with violated vows;  
They doubted that their lives would safely pass  
Without nuclear war or private woes:  
Their failure to find meaning in the mess  
Of all the battling ideologies,  
Their fear that daily work was meaningless.  
The bard's *Macbeth*, although a rousing read,  
Did not depict for them the harmony  
In marriage or in childrearing they sought.  
I watched the students scrutinizing me.  
"Have you been married long?" one blurted forth.  
"Forty-five years" said I. Their breathless pause  
Was followed by spontaneous applause.

## BROTHERS

The month was February and the time  
Just when the moon comes up and shadows stretch  
Across the silver undulating snow.  
It was bone-aching cold, and windy, too,  
With swooshing noise that blundering wind makes  
When bludgeoning among the evergreens —  
So dark their outlines merged into a blur.

My wife and I were dozing by the fire  
When rhythmic knocking at our carved oak door  
Disturbed our separate reveries, although  
Our sleepy conversation took us swooping back  
To when our children lived at home, which seemed  
A storyteller's once-upon-a-time ago.

We had assumed that no one at that hour  
Would visit us, remote and solitary in the woods  
Where we then lived, so I felt apprehension  
When I opened up the door and saw a woman  
In a cape which shuddered in the wind  
Like wearied wings still pulsing after flight.  
Her forehead caught the moonlight's silver glow  
Obscuring her dark eyes, which made me feel  
That she was watching me from far away  
Or from some fading, legendary time.  
I asked her in, but she remained unmoved  
As wind gusts kept on flapping at her cape.

She claimed in her raised tones that she had come  
To pass along an urgent message, yet  
She wouldn't tell me what it was until

She knew for sure I was the one she sought,  
And she insisted I reveal some things  
That would disclose my true identity.  
I told her that our children had left home,  
But that we were determined to remain  
Here in our hidden forest home, despite  
Its isolation and slick icy storms,  
Where I was working on a book about  
How people must endure life-numbing loss —  
Try to endure is what I meant to say  
As swirling wind kept swishing at the door.

“You have a brother,” said the messenger,  
“A twin your mother gave away at birth,  
Thinking that she could not support two boys;  
He has no children of his own and needs  
A family’s support before it is  
Too late; he asks if he can contact you  
Or if you feel that too much time has passed.  
The fact is he’s not well — a truth that you  
Must take into account, although you  
May be wondering about my motives  
For suddenly arriving unannounced  
On such a windy, frozen night as this.  
My reason is I think you need each other,  
And I’ve come because I want to help;  
Does that seem unbelievable to you?”

I was so shocked, so unprepared for news  
Like this that no words came to me; a moan,  
A little moan, foamed at my twitching lips  
And bubbled there, but would not shape itself  
As thought. What thought? What could I think?

Should I consider this good news or bad —  
A brother reaching out to me for help?  
My heart went out to him as if he were  
Indeed my twin, and yet this surely was  
A grave intrusion on my inner life.

“He really is not well,” the messenger  
Went on as if in answer to the words  
I failed to say; “perhaps that can explain  
Why you two look alike, especially  
When shadows sculpt the downturn of your mouths.  
I think a rumor’s reached him that you are  
Completing a new book; you might assume  
He’d like to be in it and that he wants  
The life you have not shared with him to be  
Recorded there. I think he thinks you can  
Give substance to his ache of emptiness.”

“What kind of airy substance could that be?”  
I queried her, assuming that she knew,  
As if she had once lived and cared for him,  
As if his sorrows were her sorrows too.  
“I’ll have to make him up,” I said, “invent  
A life out of what might have been; maybe  
I can depict him married to the girl  
Who in one breath rejected me because  
She doubted I had talent to succeed.  
It still hurts even now when I recall  
Attempting to persuade her she was wrong.”

“That’s good,” was her reply, her voice clear as  
A soaring flute, “those are the details that  
Your brother wants included in your book —  
Details in which your lives are intertwined



So nobody can tell whose life is whose.  
What children then will you invent for him?  
Will they be more successful than yours are?  
Will they attend him as his sickness grinds  
To its grotesque, inevitable end?"

She seemed caught up in asking questions such  
As these, but then an upsurge blast of wind  
Spread her cape out to signal her the time  
Had come to leave. I felt relieved, the wind  
Had chilled my bones, she was encroaching on  
My privacy; uncannily, she seemed  
To reach inside my thoughts as if she were  
Aware of things I barely understood.  
I wondered in my spinning mind if she  
Was improvising what she chose to say  
About my twin, describing him as ill;  
Could she have thought that up in seeing me?

"I think you'd better leave," I said, "the wind  
Is getting wilder now; the temperature  
Will drop to zero when the moon is high."  
My wife called out across the shaded room,  
"Maybe she should remain with us tonight;  
Invite her in, maybe she's lost her way."  
There was more I could ask, I thought, although  
Her cape kept pulling at her shoulder blades,  
And I conjectured that I had choice  
Of how to let her influence my book.

So there she is, still standing at my door.  
That windy pause is where my book will end,  
Giving me time to figure out what ought  
To be included there, depending on  
How much I need this brother in my life

To make it more complete, depending on  
What I can do for him to help him bear  
The illness of his final days, his thoughts,  
As his white face, from chin, to mouth, to cheeks,  
To eyes, comes closer to resembling mine.

## PRIDE AND LAUGHTER

I am a primatologist; I do  
believe humans are just creatures, too, special  
only in that we know ourselves as such.  
At our research compound, which simulates  
their native habitat in Africa,  
we study chimpanzees in social groups.

My young wife, carrying our infant son,  
his face squinched up into a round-eyed stare,  
joined me to watch the romping chimpanzees  
at raucous play: to our astonishment,  
Mimi, who recently had given birth,  
came to the fence and held her infant up  
in ostentatious, proud display before  
my beaming wife as if proclaiming that  
“Our mother bond transcends our differences.”

I felt left out, for what, indeed, had I  
to boast about of such significance?  
But serendipity prevailed that day.  
Coco, an adolescent male, had watched  
these mothers showing off, and secretly  
he filled his mouth with water and approached  
the chain-link fence where we still stood, a look  
of somber import in his steady eyes;  
he leaned as close to me as he could get,  
drew in a mighty breath through his wide nose,  
then squirted the held water in my face.

He paused to guess what my response would be,  
and when I showed not anger but surprise,

he rolled upon his back, kicking his legs,  
and started the pant laugh that chimpanzees  
are famous for. Laughter is contagious,  
as you well know, and so my laughing made  
him laugh the harder and soon both of us  
were uncontrolled hysterical, bonded  
by our shared understanding of his joke.

We males had found our own identity —  
a little trivial, perhaps, compared  
to sacred motherhood, but not to be dismissed  
within the universal scheme of things —  
or so says science in asserting what  
we humans are, in search of dignity,  
what we can honorably do between  
our making babies and just having fun.

## THE ECSTASY

I followed those four chimpanzees across  
The tangled forest floor for half a day —  
That's what I do, observe, describe — to see  
Where they were headed for on what, I guessed,  
Was territory still unknown to them,  
Where they might find a solitary chimp  
From some outlying tribe who'd wandered by  
To browse, so they could corner him, tear off  
His testicles and leave him there to bleed  
Slowly to death. That is what we know now  
Primate raiding parties do; that's how they deal  
With their competitors for food and sex,  
Although our anthropologists, for years,  
Chose to believe that only humans showed  
Such warlike violence. But no, it's part  
Of our inheritance, going way back  
Beyond what written history recalls.  
Then suddenly the forest opened out  
Onto a precipice of rocks beyond  
Which tumbled down a waterfall, its spume  
Catching the blazing midday sun and making  
Little rainbows everywhere. The chimps,  
Stunned by the sight, stopped absolutely still,  
Transfixed, hair on their necks upright and stiff.  
To my astonishment, one threw his arms  
Up in the dazzling air, soon followed by  
The next until all arms were waving as  
They leapt around each other in a dance.

No doubt about it, they were worshipping  
The waterfall in something very like  
Religious ecstasy, and I was awed  
By their capacity for awe; I was  
A creature wondering at wondering.  
In that illuminated interval  
Those raiding chimpanzees wholly forgot  
The mission they'd embarked upon, lost in  
Their rapture at the waterfall, and I,  
The watcher there, enraptured too, aware  
Of the millennia that brought me here,  
Aware of murder that they could forget,  
Wished only that I could be one of them.

## THE KING'S DILEMMA

When he espied her in the marketplace,  
Her basket frugally replete, her hair  
Pulled tightly back into a braid, her eyes  
Cast downward in true modesty,  
The widowed king — his first wife owned and ran  
A candy store — fell instantly in love,  
And would have then and there proposed to her,  
But for his fear that she might choose  
To marry him because he was a king.

What could he do? He could return disguised,  
Say, as a carpenter, and woo the maiden  
From emotions he so deeply felt.  
But what if he persuaded her with sighs,  
With promises of lifelong faithfulness,  
With swoonings of unquenched desire, and she  
Inevitably learned he really was  
A king who lied to her, would she not have  
To turn him down for his deceit, given  
The expectations of her innocence?  
Was it impossible, the king opined,  
For power to be joined with poverty?

And so the king's advisors recommended  
He read Kierkegaard to see if he  
Could help the king unravel his dilemma  
Of position and intent. He found  
That the philosopher regarded kingship  
Merely as a metaphor for God,  
Rather than yearning flesh and urgent blood —

A God who had Himself to figure out  
How humans might reciprocate His love  
Without mistrusting it. Puzzling, he thought,  
And even worse, the maiden symbolized  
The human soul, its longing to transcend itself.  
Something vaguely obscene, it seemed to him,  
About this parable, it didn't fit;  
He had no meaning other than himself,  
An ordinary guy but for his wealth,  
With one failed marriage that caused bitterness,  
And, although beautiful beyond the norm,  
The maiden was a woman, nothing else,  
Not to be overly idealized  
He warned himself from past experience,  
Attractive for her worldly attributes.

It's true, he loved her in the worst of ways.  
"To hell with it," he thought, acknowledging  
The swelling in his royal britches was  
A resurrection of the sort he understood.  
Still, he was flattered by the wild analogy,  
Comparing him to God, a parable  
In which he means more than he wants to mean  
Or needs in order to give his desire  
A purpose to fulfill itself for what it is.

When he approached her in the marketplace,  
Wearing his velvet cape with ermine trim,  
He instantly declared his burning love,  
Explaining how he'd had to overcome  
His insecurity, and there was just  
A fleeting moment's pause before she smiled,  
Sweetly accepting his proposal as  
She asked, "Have you been reading Kierkegaard?"



## GRIZZLY PRAYER

Yes, I believe you when you tell me that  
you have concern for my immortal soul;  
you want to know how I can possibly  
face death, death lasting for eternity,  
with no faint expectation, not a twinge  
of yearning hope for an earned afterlife  
achieved through good works or through pious prayer.

Here's why: during my recent surgery  
my heart stopped for a second; when I woke,  
there on my chest I saw the raw round circle  
where the doctor zapped me back to life  
with an electric shock. I'd seen no light  
serenely, softly beckoning to me  
when for that instant I was dead, nor did  
I hear a Bach chorale to welcome me  
to a more peaceful realm. But I'll recount  
my most miraculous experience:

When hiking up a path in Glacier Park,  
adding a white-winged crossbill to my list,  
I was astonished when a bear lunged out  
from right behind a huckleberry bush;  
he stood immense on his hind feet as I,  
without intent, blurted "Oh God!" out loud.

The stream I walked beside then ceased to flow,  
the leaves on the grey aspens went stone still,  
dark clouds turned luminescent in dark sky,  
three ravens stood transfixed on one stiff bough,  
and in that instant's stillness God appeared.

“You atheists are all alike,” God said,  
“when trouble comes you call on me for help,  
but I don’t mind, it’s just what I expect.”  
I was chagrined, of course, and didn’t want  
to disavow my skeptical beliefs,  
but God continued soothingly: “Here’s what  
I’m going to do,” He said in His base voice,  
“I’ll turn this bear into a Christian bear,”  
and pointing with His finger as immortal  
Michelangelo depicted him,  
God had the grizzly clasp his paws together  
in the gesture of a holy prayer  
and — this, I fear, may strain credulity —  
the creature spoke distinctly as you hear  
me speaking now. I never will forget  
his piety: “Oh, Lord,” said he, “I want  
to thank You for this meal I’ll now receive  
as blessing from the bounty of Your hands.”

But as the bear was looking heavenward,  
I bolted with more speed I’d ever dreamed  
my legs possessed, and scuttled down the path  
with bramble cuts and bruises on my shins,  
the scene behind me just a blur, the clouds  
reshaping in the sky, and that is why I  
have agreed to meet you here beneath  
this ancient tree, to share my puzzlement:  
What shall I wish for in behalf of needful  
creatures of the earth who live by prayer?

## THE RABBI'S SPIEL TO HIS CONGREGATION

After three days of unrelenting rain  
my bottom floor was flooded and I had  
to move upstairs. The sheriff and his deputy  
arrived in their rowboat, equipped with just  
an outboard motor; they informed me that  
I was required to leave the premises.  
“No way,” said I, “God will resolve this as  
it pleases Him, and I have always placed  
my faith in the Almighty Lord.”

And yet  
it kept on pouring, so I had to go  
another story up; some bland official  
from the state appeared in a sleek,  
thunderous motorboat, proclaiming that the law  
required me to evacuate.

But no,  
my faith in God demanded that I stay,  
and stay I did, amused with thoughts of Noah  
in his ark, and like the classical  
Midrash interpreters, I entertained myself  
with questions like: where were the animals  
allowed to poop, problems arcane and yet  
quite practical. But still the rains came down;  
I had to move onto the roof until  
a helicopter came and told me through  
a megaphone, I absolutely had  
to leave at once. My faith prevailed, and yet

the littered waters rose, and so, of course,  
I drowned.

The next thing I recall was standing  
on a line, waiting my turn to voice  
my disenchantment to the Lord. “I kept  
my faith in You, and You abandoned me,”  
said I with chutzpah quite Promethean.  
“Schlemiel! Stiff-necked schlemiel!” cried red-faced God,  
laughing His rousing laugh divine, “I sent  
a helicopter and two motor boats!”

I slapped my head. “Dummkopf!” I shouted  
to myself. I should have realized that God  
performs His miracles through worldly means,  
not by suspending nature’s laws; and that’s  
the lesson God engraved upon my mind.  
Then He returned me here (by helicopter,  
not by any fancy means) to speak,  
attending friends, to you, and tell His joke.

You ask where in the Pentateuch the Lord  
reveals His humor or His irony —  
well, everywhere you look if you look in  
the spirit of what helps our tribe endure.  
Here’s one example among multitudes:  
providing Sarah with a son when she  
is long past menopause; for irony,  
naming him Isaac, which means laughing one;  
can’t you imagine the astonished eyes  
bulging out in papa Abraham’s pale face?

Example two: when God declared to Moses,  
“I show my mercy unto those to whom  
my mercy shows, and I show grace to those

to whom my grace is shown.” Hilarious  
evasiveness, I’d say, a joke, a joke divine,  
whose meaning lies in what we make of it.

But I can’t answer any more such questions  
since my time is up, and you can hear  
above the rising tides of fervent prayer  
the whirl of blades reflected in the sun —  
my helicopter waiting on the roof.

## REDESIGNED

Demonstrating that we can reverse the aging process in [a rat] that shares 99 percent of our genes will profoundly challenge the common wisdom that aging and death are inevitable.

— Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near*

This thou perceiv'st that makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

— William Shakespeare, sonnet #73

What if Ray Kurzweil's prophecy is right  
so that our children will be able then  
to redesign their bodies and renew themselves,  
thus making us the last in history,  
the generation at the human edge,  
constrained by our biology,  
fated to age, evolved to die?

Shakespeare believed  
mortality makes precious what  
we must relinquish in the name of love,  
that our humanity's enlarged by loss,  
shared sorrow sounds our deepest harmony.  
If this heartbreakingly is true,  
would a mild summer's afternoon  
with languid clouds and lunch upon a lawn  
in conversation with one's wife  
about one's children's going forth  
be emptied of the poignance that  
awareness of mortality possessed  
when time was running out on us,  
when choice invested time

with singular significance —  
one face beloved among a multitude,  
one history to share?

I do not want to age or die,  
but neither do I wish to live forever  
without urgency or tears,  
transformed into a deity  
who lives forever without consequence.  
Although I'm curious to see  
what happens next, then after that  
and so on till the sun collapses on itself  
to bring the human saga to an end,  
I do not wish for immortality,  
though I do wish the Bard of transience  
walked alive among us still.

But who can get his mind  
around the thought of ageless youth  
so alien to how our genes  
have fashioned us: to be survivors  
only through our mortal children's lives?

Even in this vexed inquiry,  
this groping in the humanly unthinkable,  
this flicker in the noon  
of who I am and who, no doubt,  
my father was, and so on back into  
the mist of origins, I question how  
my redesigned inheritors  
might well remember me, someone  
who clings to summer warmth  
while watching a careening bee  
seeking the nectar of a flower,  
his temporary moment in the sun.

### III. MEDITATIONS AND FOREBODINGS





## MEDITATION OF A JEW

A Jew myself, I hope  
the Jews in Israel destroy  
the terrorists in Lebanon  
despite my more impersonal philosophy  
that “alle Menschen werden bruder”  
as Beethoven engraved that sentiment  
deep in my heart  
in his 9th symphony.

Music — if only humankind could  
reinvent itself though music  
at its most exalted and sublime  
and we could beam out Bach and Mozart,  
Brahms and Beethoven  
into the farthest galaxies,  
proclaiming we’re a peaceful species,  
worthy of their trust,  
to other forms of life  
who’ve mastered hatred, ended war,  
through willed intelligence  
and they’d be safe to visit us.

But trapped on crowded earth  
which now seems like no more  
than just an acre to be shared,  
I can’t escape the thought  
terrorist hate exists beyond a cause,  
beyond the explanations that  
probing psychology provides,  
and thus, I fear, beyond control:

they hate because they hate,  
that goes for hating children too,  
as they have done  
for nearly two millennia.

    This is the best that I can do  
in trying to explain  
what seems just inexplicable,  
including killing in the name of God,  
and I can find no hope and no  
redeeming music in belief like this;  
I must throw up my hands,  
although I know prayer is in vain.

    I tell myself my hatred  
follows only from their hate;  
I claim we have a basic right  
to live accepted and in peace.  
Is that too difficult  
for human nature to achieve despite  
what cutthroat history reveals,  
going way back to when  
we were ax-wielding tribes?  
And yet “Choose life that you may live!”  
the grieving Yahweh said to Moses,  
thus implying that a choice,  
a blessed choice, is possible.

    The rubble, mixed with blood,  
torn flesh, and splintered bones,  
glitters right now in noonday sun  
as if some natural catastrophe,  
an earthquake, a volcano,  
or an asteroid colliding with the earth —  
some force indifferent

to human suffering —  
caused devastation so extreme,  
and yet was only nature  
doing what it does without intent,  
with no wish to do harm.  
Yes, that would be believable.

But maybe it's the Devil's work,  
a Devil, entertained by spectacle,  
despising Bach and Beethoven,  
a watcher of TV, reader of newspapers,  
a weapons connoisseur,  
maybe this is his work.  
Ah yes, though seemingly incredible,  
this makes persuasive sense;  
it just can't be that we  
would do this to ourselves!

## MOSES

Caught up between the stiff-necked multitude,  
Exhausted and complaining, and his God,  
Blasted by desert wind and sand and sun,  
Lips parched and cracked, Moses called out for help,  
Imploring Yahweh please to intervene  
Since hostile Nature lay in His control.

“Speak to the boulder,” Yahweh said, “it will  
abundantly bring forth fresh water for  
Your people and their flocks.” So Moses took  
His rod and tapped the boulder twice, and lo!  
A spring gushed out to slake each thirsty throat;  
The people cheered — it was a miracle!

But then to everyone’s astonishment,  
Yahweh, now furious at Moses and  
His brother Aaron, now accusing them  
Of lack of trust because they failed to do  
Exactly as He said — speak to the rock,  
Not tap it with a rod — decreed that they  
Would die without their ever entering  
The honeyed land He’d promised to them all,  
The stiff-backed, wide-eyed people gathered there.

Incredible! For such a small offense,  
So petty and so technical, Yahweh  
Denied to Moses — his true favorite,  
As if he were old Yahweh’s chosen son,  
The one He talked to face to face — reward for trials  
Moses had endured, from Pharaoh’s wrath,  
To terror at a voice that gave commands

Out of a burning bush, to isolation on  
A mountaintop of thunder where new laws  
Were given to augment His covenant.

So what sense can I make of this? Can such  
A father God be jealous of a man  
He's loved as if he were His son? Is this  
Why all creation's Lord forbade the fruit  
Which would confer upon a human eater  
Immortality and thus drove Adam  
From the Garden into wilderness?  
Is this the same Creator who renewed  
His covenant by telling awestruck Moses  
Just before his death that "I, your God,  
Will circumcise your heart" to make His laws  
No longer seem imposed, but feel as if  
They now were part of nature as it is?  
And is this God the one who in the name  
Of holy love offered to Moses yet  
A final choice between His blasting curse  
Or blessing, death or life, advising him,  
Exhorting him, "So now choose life!"

And stiff-necked like the rest, how can I hold  
The two together in my mind — a judge  
Who is accuser and protector both,  
Both coldly punishing and merciful?  
Or is my questioning just angry rant,  
As if I, too, were an abandoned son  
Who can't accept blind nature as it is,  
Whose wisdom is confused uncertainty,  
Who has no comfort he can give to friends,  
Whose consolation offers nothing but  
A barren boulder in the desert wind?

Where are you now old father of the laws  
We need as guides if we can choose to live,  
Now as imploring tender throats are cut  
And bombs fall on the innocents who sip  
Cool drinks still hopeful in the bright cafes?

## DARWIN'S BEETLE

With my new hip I'm able now to walk —  
I am not finished yet — and so I hiked  
Out to the woods to test my stamina,  
But, sad to say, I tired and had to rest.  
As I sat down on a decaying log,  
My hand descended on a beetle which  
I placed upon my palm to contemplate  
The bond I share with other living things.

As a young man, Darwin would walk into  
The countryside to seek rare beetles he  
Could add to his collection: one clear day  
He came across two beetles, snatched them up  
And headed briskly home, pleased with himself,  
A beetle in each hand, to mount them each  
According to its color, size, or form.

On his way back, eyes down, he spied still yet  
Another specimen not seen before  
And hotly was compelled to capture it;  
But since both hands were occupied, he put  
One wildly squirming beetle in his mouth  
To free a hand, but yuck! the beetle then  
Excreted something acrid on his tongue,  
And Darwin had to spit it out; repulsed,  
He dropped a beetle from his hand to clasp  
His burning mouth, and he returned with just  
One specimen as trophy for the day.



That episode took place some years before  
He sojourned forth to the Galapagos  
Where he collected untold multitudes  
Of specimens, of subtle variants,  
Finches that differed just according to  
The sizes of their beaks. And there his first  
Great revelation of how things evolved  
Through struggle or eventually died out  
Began to take shape in his thoughts, although  
He never did forget the day the angry  
Beetle fouled his tongue and thwarted him.

Imagining how Darwin felt — as if  
It were my own experience — I taste  
The panicked beetle's desperate excreta  
Darwin spat out in disgust that day,  
Saving itself from its apparent fate  
Of being pinned to represent a blink  
In nature's purposeless experiment  
Of hungry life competing with itself.

As I displayed the beetle in my palm,  
And I beheld its shimmering, I thought  
I could imagine its dire point of view  
Equally well, how on returning home  
The beetle's entry in its diary  
Might have recounted its horrendous day:  
"A monster put me in his mouth and tried  
To eat me but I managed to escape;  
I'm a survivor and my fertile seed  
Will surely take dominion of the earth."

And so, no doubt against the scripted rules  
Of struggle for one's progeny alone  
Written in every palpitating cell,  
I caught my breath, stood starkly up,  
And flicked the cringing beetle from my palm  
To send him on his inconclusive way.

## BREAKING NEWS

In Baghdad yesterday a terrorist  
blew himself up and killed nearly one hundred  
ordinary people lined up hoping  
to be hired for some construction jobs.  
They took the risk of standing there to feed  
their families. Against whom did the anger  
from their widows' grief direct itself?  
What worldly sense could they have made of this?

In paradise a brown-eyed virgin was  
assigned to greet the martyr and reward  
his sacrifice. I wonder if she would  
select this same man if she had the choice  
under some other circumstance. How can  
her role in this be understood if one  
looks from her point of view? There is so much  
involved, so much to take into account.

Two hundred rockets rained on Israel  
not caring whom they hit; no one was hated  
in particular. Indifferent,  
they seemed beyond blame like a hurricane,  
just part of nature as it's always been.  
There's nothing new here for the Jews; they've known  
such wrath for two millennia. No man  
who's capable of reason will assume  
that hate will have some other end besides  
long-prophesized apocalypse. Would Jews  
be better off, I wonder, if they, too,  
believed in some consoling afterlife?

There is so much to take into account:  
passions, theologies, assumptions, facts.

A girl, just eight years old, was raped, tortured,  
buried alive. I can't imagine what  
went through her mind. Perhaps we could explain  
one part of this if we were certain that  
the rapist was abused as a small child.  
Should some small portion of our sympathy  
go out to him? Was he neglected or  
unloved? So much remains obscure, so much  
is hidden in unfathomable dark.

Four days ago our cat got out the door,  
but she did not return as she had done  
so many times before. Baffled, dismayed,  
I looked for her down by the stream, thinking  
she'd need to drink; I looked for her within  
the aspen grove, thinking she might feel safe  
within its shade; I looked for her along  
the meadow's edge — maybe she might catch voles  
to keep herself alive. Only by chance,  
by luck, I found her miles away last night  
in a deserted owl-infested barn.  
Perhaps she got confused or thought I had  
abandoned her. So much uncertainty —  
always so much to take into account.

Who knows what her fate would have been if I  
had not arrived in time to rescue her?

## ACADEMIC PARTY

I was invited to a cookout at  
a colleague's country house to celebrate  
the ending of the academic year  
with lots of people that I didn't know —  
an opportunity to chat with scholars  
teaching other disciplines than mine.

I told a young biologist the thesis  
of my recent book on Shakespeare is  
that characters who seem immutable  
in their identity can be transformed,  
miraculously it would seem, by choice,  
an act of will that comes from who knows where —  
like Edmund, the arch-villain in *King Lear*  
who, just before his death, proclaims, "Some good  
I mean to do in spite of mine own nature,"  
though swift time runs out before he can  
save Lear's good daughter from his own command  
that she be hanged. My puzzled colleague  
grudgingly replied that he could not explain  
a transformation so complete, without  
some antecedent cause, with knowledge he  
possessed; "People are always what they are,"  
his certitude proclaimed, and he walked off  
to join a conversation at the bar.

Abundant food was served to sanctify  
the year of our accomplishments, seeking  
new knowledge and new truths: grilled salmon steaks,  
a loin of pork, a roast of venison.

The hours passed by quite pleasantly  
since I was in my party haze, and then  
at coffee time a group, unknown to me,  
assembled in a circle by a hedge  
of lilac bushes coming into bloom.  
Our country's policies abroad emerged  
predictably as topics for debate;  
I listened as I'd learned to do, although  
I'd heard these selfsame views expressed before.

One man — I never found out who he was  
although he wore slick lizard boots — held forth:  
“In Israel,” he said, “the ruling men  
all beat their wives and rape their daughters in  
their kosher homes.” Hardly believing what  
my ears took in, I looked around the circle  
where dessert was balanced on each knee,  
expecting someone would dispute the man's  
astonishing remark — or so it seemed  
to me, the only Jew attending there,  
but no one spoke a disapproving word,  
as if his claim might be believable.

After a pause, I challenged him: “Would you  
have made such an outrageous claim  
if you had known a Jew is present here?”  
Did he assume, I asked my inner self,  
that anyone would find him credible?  
Did he subscribe to that old forgery  
that Jews were plotting to control the banks  
and thus control the world? He looked at me,  
but he did not reply; he just got up  
and disappeared among a chatting crowd,  
only his lizard boots remaining in

the confines of my memory. Still worse,  
no blank-eyed colleague there came up to me  
to sympathize for the affront that they  
surely had recognized as such. They sipped  
their final sips and silently they too  
dissolved among the mingling celebrants.

“What shall I make of this bizarre event —  
the faceless lizard-man’s horrendous words,  
the silence of complicit bystanders,”  
I asked myself. “Shall I consider it  
a lie of choice or choicelessness? What more  
might I have done? Should I inform my hosts  
as they shake hands with their departing guests?  
I’m sure they’d be aggrieved and mortified.”  
But I decided NO — no good could come  
from my humiliating them. My choice  
was just to let the matter go, though one  
can see that choice still festers in my mind.

As I walked to my car to drive back home,  
my wife’s assuring arm locked tight in mine,  
I noticed Venus had just risen in  
the western sky — an observation that  
a literary man like me might well  
enjoy for its ironic contrast with  
the hatred I had just endured, the lie  
of hate that loves itself — as if I lived  
within a poem where blind insanity  
was shown for everyone to recognize.

But not that night. Better the sun’s eclipse;  
better an ice storm cracking branches down  
upon the roofs of sleeping families,  
of dreaming fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,

on everyone who does not know, and does not wish to know, exactly what is wrong, though some must choose to realize as they wake to the world that something terrible has happened and is happening.



## RAIN IN AUGUST

I have had some success before, so I'm  
Inclined to try again. During the drought  
I prayed for rain last summer and it rained.  
Here's what I figure is deducible  
from that result: just modest prayers will  
sometimes be granted only if one prays  
to the right god. My fixed assumption is  
that one must never overreach, and thus  
cautious restraint and modesty remain  
essential to my strategy. One can't  
pray only for oneself, although it would  
be hypocritical pretending one  
had nothing personal at stake — no god  
would fail to see through such a blatant ruse.

So following these rules, I prayed for rain,  
not everywhere on earth where crops are dry,  
or even everywhere throughout the state —  
I feared that would be overreach — only  
right here in this vicinity. Right here  
there are enough fruit orchards, ranches, farms,  
resorts catering to clientele who like  
their vistas green, to make a neighborhood.

My model was the biblical Elijah  
who had challenged all the priests of Baal  
to supplicate their phony god for rain  
with the ironic touch that maybe Baal  
was sleeping and thus couldn't hear their cry.  
"So call him louder!" was Elijah's taunt,

assuming they were praying to a god  
who wasn't there at all, did not exist.  
Let me repeat myself: one should not pray  
to any deity who doesn't care —  
of which there seem to be an awful lot —  
or one without sufficient power to grant  
a reasonable wish, a sage request.

Maybe my modest prayer was merely luck;  
that is, of course, a possibility  
I should have mentioned from the start.  
What person with the smallest speck of reason  
in his head would not consider that?  
The gods may be constrained by principles  
of quantum randomness, but how this works  
is barely comprehensible to me.

Then in a thunderclap this thought occurred —  
that my entire strategy was wrong:  
if one prays to a minor god one gets  
minor results. And so I asked myself,  
had anyone gone all the way and wished  
for total change, conditions on the earth  
completely different from what they are?  
Such prayer might have immense appeal to an  
aspiring god with pity in his heart.

So here's my new list of requests, hoping  
THE major god will like my propositions  
and will then resolve to try them out:  
First, eating's got to go. You can't have life  
depending on the taking of some other life;  
creatures must be designed to thrive only  
on water and on air. Then, sex between  
a man and woman has to be revised;

sex causes jealousy, mistrust, and hurt  
that comes from differing dependencies.  
Mothers and fathers equally will do  
the necessary nurturing; why should  
male breasts be wasted and not put to use?

Surely there's too much grief and suffering —  
more human kindness is the cure for that —  
though sorrow seems to deepen us in doses  
small enough to bear and overcome.  
But I'm uncertain what to recommend  
about mortality. That's tough because  
I can't imagine how eternity  
might be arranged to work. What age  
or time of life should be made permanent?  
Too much preoccupation with oneself  
when one is young disqualifies youth as  
the right condition for eternity;  
and, strangely, I would not want to forgo  
the melancholy of declining age,  
the soothing air of slow forgetfulness.

Maybe I need to give more thought to this;  
Maybe I'd better only ask for rain.

## MOUNTAIN MEDITATION

The snow-topped mountain range  
across the eastern sky,  
electric blue as dusk comes on —  
that is the view I've chosen  
now that old age shapes my needs,  
the view my study window  
in the house we had our son design  
looks out upon as if it were  
an inner view into myself as well.  
Late winter afternoons  
sunlight upon the heaped-up snow  
transforms the blazing white to blazing pink,  
then darkens into purple  
with its own internal glow.  
Indifferent, austere, spectacular,  
devoid of meaning to console  
upon which I can meditate, I dwell  
upon the human history of cruelty,  
so vast that it defies depiction, yet  
I still believe somehow  
ultimate destruction might be  
avoidable, controlled  
by kindness, what at best we are, unlike  
tornados, floods, or hurricanes,  
earthquakes, and epidemics, accidents.  
But surely what I wish cannot be true,  
hatred and war, vindictiveness,  
must be as much a part of nature

as the seasons are,  
and even if a lawful god designed it so,  
I cannot worship him;  
I won't allow myself to long  
for immortality of any kind —  
even a universe  
where in some obscure place  
pulsating life can make itself at home.  
I close my eyes and picture suns  
collapsing and extinguishing themselves  
in space that thins to nothingness;  
I see a summer cricket silenced  
beneath his once protecting stone.  
And yet I am consoled, at least in part,  
or partly so, by late vermilion light  
now changing on the mountain peaks,  
because I choose to make this spectacle  
signify what I am,  
because for now it's here,  
as you and I are here — as if that's all  
we need to know, trembling together  
in the impersonal, chill air  
of the transfigured mountain's afterglow.

## FLOURISHING BIRCHES

Eight seasons after I had planted them  
to complement the evergreens —  
cedars and spruce and firs and pines  
that dominate this mountain landscape  
in Montana where we dwell —  
these glowing birches thrive  
just with the aid of watering  
(and pep-talk flattery from me)  
reaching above the soaring chimney  
of our hewn-log home.

A stranger cannot tell  
I've given teeming nature  
this transfiguring assist;  
the chickadees approve  
since now they have smooth branches,  
free of prickly needles,  
they can rest upon  
while taking feeder turns  
(my bounty always keeps it full)  
which in their thankful minds  
must seem miraculous.

But here's the rub. What if  
a deity who's inexperienced  
at fabricating worlds —  
with this one his first try —  
whose special pride is  
improvising evergreens,  
suggesting life has power to endure,

might understandably be vexed,  
thinking I'm interfering with his own  
preferred original design?

Though there are weather zones  
that set a limit to the range  
where trees can grow within  
their designated boundaries,  
not every tree that can survive this cold  
will be found flourishing  
in this zone where we've made our home.  
Maybe that is because the deity,  
familiar with his balmy realm,  
just wants to have his way,  
and if he's mad enough,  
he well could lay a curse, a blight,  
upon the land to make sure  
his displeasure is well understood.  
We've seen such blight wherever  
humans settle in.

But here's the reasoning  
my own delight in trees prefers:  
I think the world was organized  
intentionally incomplete  
so we could add to it,  
collaborate in the creation  
with a friendly deity, one  
open-minded, not competitive,  
and thus enjoy a sense  
of shared and mutual ownership  
we both can celebrate.

And yet much evidence  
suggests this cheerful view

may not be accurate:  
an inexperienced creator —  
(what did he do before he went to work?)  
having conceived of trees for shade  
and for the virtuoso shapes of leaves,  
their moody movement in the wind —  
might well foresee pleasure  
could quickly turn to greed for property,  
and property could lead  
to fighting over ownership.  
Perhaps our inclination to possess  
clinches the case for leaving worldly things  
exactly as they are  
with evergreens and aspens quite  
sufficient on this mountaintop.

But birches fit this landscape  
perfectly; no sensible deity  
could possibly consider otherwise  
or fail to join me in admiring  
changing hues of yellow leaves  
birches bestow to autumn air  
in what feels like exuberance.

So maybe there's a message  
to be found in my uncertainty  
of what to augment or to modify  
and what to leave alone,  
on how much pleasure is appropriate  
for just a temporary world;  
maybe I've got the deity all wrong  
in how I have invented him walking  
unblemished woods and fields of paradise  
while contemplating trees



designed and suitable for earth;  
maybe there's more I need to know  
as I breathe in the chill autumnal air  
of how to tend my little patch  
of cultivated mountain land,  
bestowing blessings on whatever trees  
are able to survive  
and can with care  
be made to flourish and to grow.

## WEDDING CEREMONY

I still can see her in my freshman class,  
self-possessed and always in control,  
eager to try out her views, yet wary  
not to intimidate her classmates by  
revealing how much more she'd read than they,  
how much she understood. And I can see her  
on her wedding day, so luminous that I  
could think that harmony might win  
the ancient war against discord,  
spirit and rebel body might be one.

The only Jew among the many guests,  
I'd driven half across the state  
to read a poem that would contribute to  
the ceremony she had modified  
where stoic Shakespeare says  
awareness of one's own mortality  
can "make thy love more strong," a concept  
we had shared through many afternoons  
of worried talk.

The wedding was arranged  
to take place at her parents' mountain home  
within a clearing between evergreens,  
the folding chairs lined up in rows,  
waiters efficiently replenishing  
all snacks and drinks, everything organized;  
but then a squall of unexpected rain  
threatened to drive the wedding party  
in the house against her father's will,

despite his incredulity that what  
he planned might actually be thwarted  
by a chance event.

I still can picture how  
the dark clouds parted and the sun appeared  
as if determined by command; and thus  
the threatened ceremony had begun.  
Her grandfather, with great white eyebrows  
and a matching beard, a curled forefinger  
that seemed ready to reach out to touch,  
sat right up front beside me since we both  
were scheduled to recite a poem  
before the minister began the legal part  
that followed his uplifting words about  
the holy spirit's presence there.

But just as he had neared "I now pronounce,"  
Grandpa's control gave out: he leaped  
from his discarded chair right past the couple  
and the minister and went behind a tree  
to urinate as nature in that instant  
had decreed. The setting sunlight added  
dazzle to the golden arc he made,  
his version of a rainbow-covenant with earth,  
with frailty, with finitude, and he returned,  
unfazed, a grin upon his face — or so  
it seemed to me — back to his chair to hear  
the minister's concluding words.

Soon afterwards, the consummating message  
having been bestowed, taking my turn  
on their receiving line to shake the hand  
of the ecstatic groom — the golden arc  
still blazing in my dazzled mind —

waiting my turn on the receiving line,  
I then leaned over to embrace the bride,  
my doubting student, my inheritor,  
who whispered in my heated, Hebrew ear:  
“Where would I be without my grandfather?”

## THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

Despite my wobbly legs,  
despite forgetfulness, old age is not  
without its compensations — such  
surprising ones as lowered levels  
of testosterone. So mazel tov to me,  
I am at last relieved  
of the compelling need  
to win and to compete,  
and thus I can more readily  
enjoy the triumphs  
and successes of my friends  
(though not my enemies —  
I am not talking about miracles).  
And lust, thank Yahweh, praised be he,  
(I mean biology, of course)  
has finally abated  
and removed the need  
to exercise control, day in, night out,  
in order to remain true  
to commitments and ideals.  
Oy weh! What a relief!  
How wonderful to be  
master of my desires  
or what remains of them,  
concerned with sorrows  
far beyond my own — a sentiment  
for which I can admire myself  
and yet remain within

the strictures of humility.  
Ah, yes, humility, a word which means  
composed of dust — the dust  
to which we must return,  
although we still insist  
the chosen people is  
what we have always been.  
And now in my declining years,  
for just a while, a promised interval,  
Peaceable Kingdom, here I am —  
I'll take my blessings as they come —  
where lamb and lion do lie down  
together out of sheer fatigue!

## AFTERLIFE

After two years of being dead, my Mom  
has not contacted me with information or  
advice. That's not like her at all.  
Perhaps she's sitting by a misty lake,  
watching the sunrise mirrored  
as the ripples reach the pebbled shore,  
with her beloved sister whom she missed so much  
in her own final years, talking about —  
what else? — their kids.

No doubt she's still concerned,  
but with a difference now — now she's detached  
from what is still our suffering,  
the grief we feel, and go on feeling, when  
we contemplate their deaths. No, suffering  
cannot be justified as needed to give  
meaning to the world: whoever thought it wise,  
it is a bad idea; no one can take  
pain on themselves to help somebody else,  
not even parents, husbands, wives;  
not even the most sympathetic god.

So there they sit beside the lake  
beneath a wafted willow tree,  
its boughs lit up with goldfinches;  
they're quietly content to be together  
once again, but not so happy that  
their happiness prevents them from remembering  
that there is nothing they can do to make

their children's losses anything but what they are,  
their own, yes, inescapably their own,  
as I sit thinking here beside a misty lake,  
watching the waves repeat themselves,  
waiting for Mom to tell me what to do.



## SURVIVAL

We need hope to survive, we need a goal  
that's reachable on our own fragile earth,  
acceptance of each other if not love,  
stirred by the consolations art can bring,  
remembering the sorrows we have seen,  
remembering the harm we each have done.  
Yet how impersonal our weapons are:  
we cannot know who gets obliterated  
in a flash; their childhoods and their loves  
must be retold to make them permanent.

The TV broadcasts of whatever war  
is in the news are meant to entertain  
not to appall; we are not shown the face  
of anguished death as Homer chanted it  
to his awed listeners who understood  
the irony that brash Achilles' shield,  
made by a god, could not postpone his death  
or bring his friend back from his crusty grave.

The storied past endures, and so I can  
still picture when the Holocaust commenced:  
the riots now recalled as Kristallnacht  
for all the smashed-in doors and shattered glass  
the Nazis and the looting citizens  
strewed in the Jewish stores: the bakeries,  
the groceries, the gleaming candy shops,  
as neighbors grabbed whatever didn't burn,  
their friendships wiped out in indifference  
once thought unthinkable.

The Jews who saw  
that worse was yet to come sought to escape,  
although some stayed — the pianist Birkenfeld  
who organized an orchestra in Lodz,  
right in the ghetto's smoking heart, performed  
Schubert and Beethoven, trying to cheer  
the victims in discord as if they could  
appeal, if not to absent God, at least  
to rousing music that might still express  
the hope for unified humanity.

But then the ovens of the Holocaust  
occurred and these atrocities must be  
recorded with the rest, though how dare one  
speak openly of the unspeakable;  
it happened and forever will remain  
a part of human history for those  
who choose not to forget. We all have seen  
the spectral bodies bulldozed into graves,  
nameless and irretrievable beyond  
what power we have to grieve, beyond remorse,  
beyond what sacred pity can reclaim.

And now at home, in my worn leather chair,  
I'm listening enthralled to Beethoven  
on speakers whose benign technology  
can make the music sound as if I were  
attending a live concert like the one  
at death-defying Lodz, although some wish,  
some incredulity, tells me I'm safe,  
no swastiked police patrol the streets,  
no missiles streak across the bludgeoned sky  
toward Tel Aviv, Hebron, Jerusalem.

But if I'm wrong — the end will come, and if  
it's thinkable that even memory  
will not survive beyond that final flash,  
I hope I will be able in that pause,  
in that last instant, to compose myself  
and turn the volume up to hear the swell  
of Beethoven's Third Symphony, the chords,  
contained as a crescendo in my mind,  
defiant and triumphant chords that rise  
and drift out in the silent emptiness  
of unredeemable indifference.

## CHOICE

In the decisive year he died,  
an exile from his longtime home,  
the year that World War II began,  
Freud wrote of his great fear  
that humankind with instruments  
designed to kill like nothing else  
previously conceived  
(and this was still before  
the atom bomb was dropped)  
had finally achieved the power  
to wipe out human life,  
with not a moment left to write  
the poems of remorse,  
as if extinction were our deepest,  
most collective wish.

His lips and jaw set tight against  
the cancer that afflicted him,  
he wondered if the god of death —  
whom he called Thanatos —  
might have in this extreme provoked  
his equally immortal adversary,  
Eros, god of love,  
to summon up new strength and will  
in the defense of life,  
just as the Hebrew god, in whom  
the stricken Freud no longer could believe,  
had warned the aged Moses:  
people had to make a choice

whose consequence was either  
to be cursed or blessed: "Choose life  
that you may live," grim Yahweh said.

But how can Cupid's bow,  
inconsequential when it comes to war,  
contend against the weaponry  
that human genius has produced?  
Freud feared our hearts and minds  
are fired by power to destroy.  
What argument for sympathy  
can win the case against historic  
hatred hardened with the passion  
to confirm and justify itself?

Sigmund, determined doctor  
who would cure us of our guilt  
for being what we are,  
where would you put your faith right now  
as we stand on a precipice beyond  
even the brink you knew so well?  
What anguish for our children's sake  
do we have strength to build upon?  
How can we reinvent our dreams?

How strange, how fleeting strange,  
that I am asking this right now,  
my own days dwindled to a few,  
watching effulgent yellow  
in the birch tree by my window  
blaze in October light as if,  
closing my eyes, I could  
extinguish every thought but this —  
the yellow leaves against  
a hanging cloud, the cloud

streaked purple and streaked blue,  
the breeze-stirred yellow leaves  
unraveling the tree —  
as if this image could be held  
and be a balm, a consolation like  
the white indifference of eternity.

## CONUNDRUM

All right then, let's assume  
modern cosmology is accurate,  
astonishing though it may seem,  
that there was neither time nor space  
until Big Bang occurred;  
nothing, a total void, prevailed —  
if nothingness can be conceived  
despite this palpable, fine word  
that designates absence as absolute.  
The laws of nature then commenced,  
and only then a universe  
of mass and energy began  
its history of change, with change itself  
both means and destiny.

But whoa! Here is a whopping problem  
and a mighty paradox  
which can't escape our scrutiny.  
How did this plasma soup of nature know  
what laws it was determined to obey?  
There has to be an abstract realm,  
as Plato premised in his cave, in which  
the laws of math abide, and always have,  
before they entered into space and time.  
Although not physical themselves,  
these laws gave birth from nothingness  
to unimaginably hot quarks,  
controlling how they would combine,  
becoming atoms and then molecules

as matter cooled and space expanded,  
thus allowing me, in only  
thirteen billion years or so, to strut  
my strophes on this planetary scene.

And yet, how can such laws exist  
before the medium in which they can exist  
itself exists? I think, in thinking this,  
in thinking the word “nothingness,”  
I may have spun myself into a vertigo  
in which thought can’t contain itself,  
in which thought thinks what can’t be thought.

So what you have before you here  
is an embodied, thinking poem,  
and as a poem it therefore must convey,  
according to fixed laws of poetry (my own),  
not merely an idea, but how it feels  
to savor an idea within a mind  
that is not floating somewhere off in space,  
but here, right here in howling winter by  
a fireplace warming my tired bones,  
yet not at ease for reasons that  
my probing is not certain of:  
maybe because there’s so much  
hatred out there for us Jews; maybe  
because my grandson lives so far away.

But I’m not in a self-exploring mood  
for meditating on the circumstances  
of my life. Although it makes me feel  
minutely insignificant —  
one snowflake as a blizzard passes through —  
I must admit I like to dwell  
on cosmic mysteries; I like



the pure impersonality  
of evolutionary narratives,  
the very concept of causation, how  
new transformations then transform  
old transformations, wondering  
what they are destined to achieve — perhaps  
more consciousness among the galaxies,  
perhaps more peace for humankind.

A realm of numbers and equations  
that's beyond what's merely physical,  
beyond mortality, and grief, and loss,  
a realm that theoretically cannot exist  
whose laws we live by every day!  
How absolutely baffling, my dear friend,  
and elegant; how wonderful  
and how appalling just to be right here  
on whirling earth, warmed by a fire  
and safe at least for now, today,  
where I can think about such permanence  
amid such vanishing, and have my say.

## IV. LANDSCAPES AND SELF-PORTRAITS



## IT'S MAY AGAIN

It's May again, and I'm still here to breathe  
The wafted fragrance from the lilac bush  
Because there's no work left for me to do,  
My work is done; for better or for worse  
I've finished what I would become, what I  
Completed and have been, and so I'm free  
To loiter in the fragrance of a lilac bush,  
To feel the soothing sun as if its warmth  
Were meant for consolation, meant for me.  
The lilac bush, the streak of goldfinches  
That glitter in their springtime hue — I'm here  
To smell, to see, to meditate, no more  
Strained laboring to be just what I am,  
No urgency except to pause and watch  
Goldfinches in their golden fluttering.  
I'm here, I still am here, with nowhere else  
To long for or to go; and so I listen  
To the booming of an early bee  
As if he, too, is happy that it's May  
Right here on earth, ready for what a bee  
Needs to be ready for, and so I say  
I'm ready to remain here longer in  
The lilac air, to breathe the scented light  
Of what remains of this remaining May.

## BUTTERFLY

“What comes out orange in the morning and is very bright?” the earnest teacher asked her kindergarten class, to which my son replied, “A butterfly.” He was marked **WRONG**, and at our interview she said “Perhaps he’s not quite ready to be learning at the kindergarten level.” Her answer, **SUN**, was just too obvious for him; I pictured her transformed as punishment Into a slug beneath a rotting log. This story soon became a treasured part of family mythology; my son began to take delight in it, and so when summer came, he lay down in the field one blazing noon and placed a little dish of sweetened water on his forehead as he waited for a butterfly to land. Behold, one did — my laughing son had been anointed by a monarch butterfly; at my suggestion, though reluctantly, he chased and captured it. Urged on by me, he mounted it on cotton under glass in a carved frame engraved with antique gold. His teacher praised him roundly for his care in saving it, but on my birthday he presented it to me; I hung it right above my desk, and there it has remained for all these half-attentive years, glowing

and undiminished in a misty longing  
to believe in something permanent.  
The night I got the phone call from my son  
that I was now a grandfather — a wish  
I'd dreaded never might come true — I had  
one of those super-vivid dreams in which  
the dawning sun appeared as if it were  
a giant monarch butterfly whose wings  
caused wind to stir and lift astonished leaves,  
disturbing the sleek surface of the lake  
with whitened swirls and foaming crests. And when  
I woke, still shivering and feverish,  
I saw an endless undulating stream  
of butterflies all navigating south,  
orange and black against the cobalt sky,  
as if they suffered no uncertainty  
of what was lasting right or lasting wrong,  
or where they'd chosen to be heading to.

## TAMARACKS

Now comes the turning of the tamaracks,  
The only evergreen to lose its needle-leaves,  
From yellow-gold to gold to golden bronze  
And their reflections which the lake retrieves.

And I am wondering if pleasure from the past,  
Which soon of course these sights will be,  
Brings sadness in the knowledge that they're gone  
Or restoration in their memory.

Do I see what is there as there? Or is  
My sense of modulating light so strong  
That gold already now seems bronze,  
And even naming bronze as bronze seems wrong.

Yet there they are, I see them in their glow;  
I see them doubled in the lake  
As if my eyes, unlike my shifting mind,  
Are of this world, and won't make the mistake

Of losing touch with happiness  
By asking trees to give what they can't give —  
Gold meaning or gold permanence —  
But only live as ghostly colors live.

## SPIDER

The first few yellow leaves, still on the tree,  
Proclaim what is to come, like messengers.  
But I have heard this message many times;  
The future is exactly like the past  
With autumn coming back, and so red leaves  
And yellow leaves, though they delight my eyes,  
Seem more like memory than prophecy —  
As if I've been where I have yet to go,  
And thus the present is enlarged for me.

Though I had not expected it — and not  
Within the realm of likelihood — a spider,  
Dangling silently from silver thread,  
Drops to the lowest yellow leaf as I'm  
About to snatch it from the tree, as if  
To claim that leaf to be his own. But why?  
Surely his reasons are inscrutable  
Like quantum randomness, which makes his motive  
Like my whim — and that amuses me  
And adds my laughter to the scene we share.

Is it not true that humankind desires  
To feel connected to this planet where  
We try to make ourselves at home, not just  
As chance survivors passing swiftly through  
Some phase of evolutionary time,  
But residents because we will it so  
Since willing is what we've evolved to do?

And thus I fancy that I'm bonded to  
This miniature spider as we share



This flick of time, this space, this preference,  
And I will let the yellow leaf remain  
Unplucked upon the maple tree so that  
He's free to spin his perfect web today  
And he can do, as I myself have done,  
Exactly what it is within his nature  
He aspires to do, so that my watching  
In this morning light may make us one.

## IT'S ONLY WIND

It's only wind — clawed roots are strong enough  
To keep tall trees upright — not a tornado  
Or a hurricane; I don't hear bulldozers  
Or dynamite or bombs. The animals are safe  
In caves, or underground, or in their nests.  
It's only wind, and yet wind could grow worse,  
Which something in me does anticipate,  
Something perhaps that has to do  
With what I am, what everybody is,  
Something that always was and cannot change  
Despite our efforts and our best intents.  
What can it be in us that's bent  
On ripping, smashing, breaking, causing pain,  
Just like streaked winds stirred to a storm  
That has no consciousness or choice  
Except to be exactly what it is  
Without remorse or sympathy that we  
Are born to learn and comprehend.  
Yet even sympathy gives way to wind,  
Wind of our own devising, wind of hate,  
As if the children in the street are threats to us  
And must be stopped before they're big enough  
To take revenge for previous revenge?  
I hear the widow's voice now tuned to grief;  
I see blank faces of the passive poor;  
The thief feels safe in the dark alleyways;  
The liar counts his money in the bank.  
But I will not put up with it; I won't allow

Our nature to continue being what it is  
As if the lashing winds are just the same  
As you and I, yes, you, my ancient enemy.  
I'll hold my groping blind hand out until  
We both confront our unrelenting hearts;  
If we embrace, my dagger poised to thrust  
Into your back, and yours to thrust in mine,  
Maybe at last, appalled, we will take heed,  
Remaking what we have been made, though wind  
Uproots tall trees as it has always done.

## BEAR GRASS

Here in northwest Montana in the spring  
Blooms a big flower — bear grass is its name  
Because bear eat the fleshy leaf sheaths after  
Winter sleep has much depleted them.  
They bloom in intermittent years, stark white,  
Composed of a dense pulsing multitude  
Of tiny petals like a galaxy —  
Or so it pleases me to think of them.

Yet each third year or so, they manage to  
Coordinate, another thought I like  
To contemplate, appearing all together  
As a tidal surge in unison  
And fill the forest with a scented glow,  
Eerie as moonlight on a cloudless night.

They are extravagantly beautiful —  
No one could possibly think otherwise!  
So maybe watching this effulgent scene  
Should be considered happiness because —  
Although I add my thoughts to what I see —  
It is impersonal, thus capable  
Of helping one forget true sorrows one  
Must call one's own — sorrows that signify  
The story of one's only life, events  
Already fixed and inescapable:  
A blank-faced parent's loss of memory,  
Desertion by a longtime trusted friend,  
A child's prolonged disease and death. Such thoughts  
Cannot for long be banished from the mind.

But who says only happiness that lasts  
Can be considered happiness at all?  
And who says we're designed for happiness?  
So watching bear grass this white spring, even  
For just an hour, in which they bloom as if  
Delighting in each other's company,  
Will have to be enough and must suffice  
As happiness. I will it so, and so  
It is until unknown events contrive  
To take me somewhere I don't want to go;  
And may the bears soon satisfy their needs  
Where they can pause and eat and stay alive.

## SPRING RAIN

Lush and luxurious, the maple leaves,  
after light rain, illuminate themselves,  
or so it seems to such a watcher as  
I've been and am, who is astonished still,  
still wondering grim circumstance has not  
changed everything I love — the look of leaves,  
the way my looking looks to me as if  
I stood outside myself and could perceive  
my shaded self illuminated by  
the glow reflected from the maple leaves.

A northern oriole alights upon  
an upper branch as if his instinct wish  
is to give focus to the scene, as if  
he knows my mind will welcome and absorb  
each luscious image earth provides, so I  
can make what's lush into what's lush still  
by adding what is most impersonal  
about myself, what grinding age has not  
negated or destroyed — the simple gift  
and unacquisitive delight of looking  
at a world that didn't have to be.

And yet it is — a world that will not grieve  
when no one's there to watch an oriole,  
after warm rain in this remaining spring,  
lift and depart in the quick silver light  
of an illuminated maple tree  
and disappear beyond imagining.

## SLEEPY DOG BLUES

His body has begun to fail, my dog  
of fifteen faithful years,  
as mine, too, has begun to fail:  
diminished eyesight, hearing dulled.

He twitches in his sleep,  
pursued, perhaps pursuing, ready  
to be aroused as in his lusty days,  
though this may be my own  
perverse imagining.

Yet he is spared the need to mourn  
the loss of parents and of friends,  
though when his sibling died  
a year ago, companion to us both  
throughout these vanished years,  
I do believe he moped about the house  
at least a month; but maybe I'm  
projecting my own grief on him.

At least I know he is not tempted by  
the strained illusion of an afterlife —  
the curse that came unbidden when  
our human consciousness evolved  
and turned our one-time dying  
into everlasting death,  
death lasting through eternal time.

But now he jumps up on the couch,  
rebel against my weak authority,  
as he has always done,  
(with just a little help from me),

and stretches out, absorbing  
all the comfort that he needs  
merely through touch, his nose  
deliciously upon my lap,  
still wet and cold, still cold and wet.

It is as if his senses are  
triumphant as they've always been, and wise,  
and so I picture him tail up, still  
undistracted and serene, sniffing along  
the scented fields of paradise.



## SUNRISE

The sun, about to rise into my sight,  
makes the mute mountain's shadow  
shudder in the lake, its trees  
emerging greenly at their tips;  
for just an instant sun rays seem to pause  
as silhouettes of birds streak past,  
too fast to be identified or cause  
their names to take shape on my lips.

And then, with a titanic thrust,  
the orange orb appears not yet too bright  
for me to set my gaze upon  
and watch blue silhouettes of fleeting birds  
transfigured in the spreading light  
become identifying words.

I must have stood here in this spot,  
seeking conceivable serenity,  
perhaps a thousand years ago,  
or maybe only yesterday,  
and witnessed what I witness now,  
the mountain peak still patched with snow,  
the glitter on the water as  
white lilting waves lift up and sway.

And maybe I'll return tomorrow or  
a thousand years from now,  
to seek to reassure myself  
that nothing changes in the way  
light shapes the mountain's shadow  
on the lake to start another day,

repeating what has gone before,  
without elusive memory, content  
with what is there and nothing more.

But happiness, a moment's kiss  
whose moisture holds a moment's breath,  
now reawakens in my restless mind,  
composed of pleasure vanished in a wisp,  
ten leaves blown down to five, to two, to one,  
like disappearing birds,  
and so I stare at the emerging sun  
that changes only to return to what  
it was, to what I still can keep.  
And when I'm ready with my words  
to welcome some concluding sleep,  
rocked by the pulsing wind upon the lake —  
though I'm not ready yet —  
perhaps I'll think there's nothing left for me  
to mourn for, nothing for me to regret.

## SUNFLOWER

Large luminescent yellow  
outer petals in two undulating rows  
serenely complement  
the middle circle made of minute sepals  
tightly clustered to suffuse  
their own distinctive lemon hue.

Both circles are in perfect harmony  
with pale green radiance  
that flows from this bold flower's core  
as if proclaiming to the universe,  
"Observe me here, I'm beautiful!"  
and in spontaneous response,  
I blurt out, "Yes, oh Hallelujah, yes!"  
assuming some acknowledgment  
from me is certainly required here,  
although I show restraint  
and do not rub myself  
against the flower's beckoning  
to help it propagate itself  
throughout the open spaces  
out there in the glowing fields and hills.  
The sexual dance is not the role  
I'm given here; I leave that  
to the insects and the birds,  
certain the chickadees will eat  
its nutrient and oily seeds  
when they are ripe.

And so I am content to watch,  
content to be a spectator.

I think I understand  
how evolution works, creating beauty  
as incentive to make love,  
but I am puzzled as to why  
beauty — the thing enclosed  
in the idea — emerged to be  
admired for itself alone  
so that all passion holds me here  
without a propagating role to play,  
only desire to observe.

So, too, I understand why  
our large brains evolved — so we  
could learn how best to hunt  
and where to find our sustenance  
and how to get along with our own kind;  
learning is practical,  
it's what big brains do well.  
But I cannot explain the leap  
our species made in wishing to know things  
just for the sake of knowing them.  
Why do we need to know about black holes,  
that there's a limit to how fast light goes,  
or comprehend the painful facts  
about ourselves — how we are thrilled by war,  
how killing helps us to deny  
our own mortality, the burden  
of our unrelenting consciousness?  
And what good does it do to realize  
even our solar system must collapse  
upon itself and meet its fiery end?

Bright flower of my choice, my own  
by virtue of my loyalty,  
have I abandoned you  
by turning inward for an interval  
as if my first allegiance must be to  
what's in my mind? Well, once again,  
I will renew my vow to watch  
your colored circles, luscious yellow,  
innuendo green, as if  
they are the only certain world,  
timeless, ongoing, and yet still,  
a world in which I know myself  
as if I were not here at all.

## ILLUMINATION

A swirl of snow arrived last night —  
Wet snow, the kind that clings to trees;  
The forest is composed of light  
This whitened dawn, and only these,

Silence and light, delineate  
The laden pines, cedars, and firs,  
Tall tamaracks. So I relate  
Their glittering as it occurs,

Their saga of serenity,  
Without words of embellishment,  
Round phrases meant to rescue me  
From what's to come, my dark descent.

Indeed, I am not needed here,  
Nor does it matter where I go,  
Or if new whiteness will appear,  
Except to say that this is so.

## OLD MAN WALKING

We could conceive that all the conditions for the first production of a living organism [existed] in some warm little pond . . . that a compound was chemically formed ready to undergo more complex changes.

— Charles Darwin, letter to Joseph Hooker, 1871

It's balmy April and the maple buds,  
All swollen red and now prepared to burst,  
Beckon me forth to make my first spring hike  
Across the field and down the woodland path  
To sit beside the overflowing stream  
And watch its eddies and its swirls, its crests  
When leaping over stones, its spume and spray,  
Its rainbow mist that arcs the scene.

I'll sit on a smooth outcropping of rock,  
Entranced by light reflected from wet stones,  
Light shimmering where water undulates,  
Staring at the stark spectacle without  
Insignias or tokens of my friends  
Who've died within the year; I will return  
To see curled water swoop within itself,  
To dwell upon the wafted splash of light,  
Determined only to observe.

Maybe  
Old legs can't carry me so far this year;  
Maybe I'll pack my lunch, but then turn back  
Before I reach the stream if my hip won't  
Obey my will's command; maybe for me  
A final age of dwindling has begun,  
And I'll return home with my blood subdued,

With disappointment shadowing my eyes  
And only memory to serve as light,  
My friends receding as I think of them,  
Compelled to mull about our origins,  
How water is our universal womb.

My fear was accurate, although I tried  
I couldn't make it to the chosen stream  
And had to rest upon a rotting log before  
I headed back, vowing to try again  
In May or June, inspired, as Darwin was,  
By "grandeur," nature's blind ability  
To fabricate new complex forms, grandeur  
Contending with profound dismay at nature's  
Wastefulness — famine and violence,  
An unrelenting process that began,  
So awestruck Darwin would surmise, merely  
By random chance in some warm little pond  
According to a shift in chemistry.

Well, I'm not ready to give in to gloom;  
Perhaps next month with the incentive that  
The fullness of spring blooming brings —  
Bounty exceeding ravenous decay —  
I'll give my legs and hip another try  
To hike me to the stream. I've gotten fond  
By now of all my groping body parts,  
Although no longer can I count on them  
As once I could, just to enjoy, to be  
Aware I am aware, to be in touch —  
With what exactly I don't know, to watch  
The spume play on the surging water that  
Still seems to welcome the indifferent light.



## MIDDAY MOTHS

I am high stepping through the rough tall grass  
Sparkling with daisies in the uncut field;  
Meandering, I brush a path to pass  
Through constellations of white moths concealed

Within their shaded midday resting place  
Until chance footsteps stirred them into flight.  
They populate my planetary space  
As if to rearrange the fractured light,

As if berserk with awe, as I am now  
Just watching them, quite unprepared as they  
To know how to respond, just watching how  
We're all propelled in our own startled way.

So what shall I, enraptured, make of this —  
This whirling plenitude of randomness?

## THIS INSTANT NOW

Right here, this instant now,  
watching a nameless stream  
whose waters leap over protruding rocks  
and then flow twisting forth  
as if a message were inherent there  
which careful watching somehow  
might disclose, I see stark noonday sun  
in its reflected light,  
effulgent in its vanishing,  
this instant here, this here right now.

Reflections on the water's flow  
repeat a theme in which what is  
right here, this instant now,  
might well shine forth  
at any place or any time, and has —  
one day lost in a multitude of days —  
according to an unconsoling law  
my watching faithfully obeys.

A sudden surge of wind reveals  
the image of my face right here  
upon one rock above the water  
as I watch, the foam my beard,  
a crevice in the rock my down-turned mouth —  
a face that vanished right now  
in the blazing instant it appeared.

Nearing an end, my own,  
among an endless multitude of ends  
stretched back as far as I can see,  
I am no closer to where comfort was  
or is or might forever be,  
unless I find it merely in the sight  
of water washing over gleaming stones,  
reflections on which I reflect  
and thus contain somehow,  
even as liquid light eludes my witnessing  
right here this instant now, and now again,  
and now and now and now and now.

## V. TWO EPILOGUES



## THE WAR TO END ALL WARS

Despite the fact that I've lived long enough  
to see the cold war end, the Berlin wall  
come crashing down, nuclear weapons  
used only as a threat to counteract  
a counter threat, I fear next century,  
incredibly, may be less kind to all  
of us as the scenario of fate  
unfolds according to what nature is —  
I mean our own, what we must be at heart.

I still cringe when a noise resounds, even  
an urgent human voice addressing me  
from right behind my stiffened back, as if,  
with fast reflexes I've inherited  
from our long evolutionary past,  
I'm able to avoid oncoming bombs.  
There's nothing new in how I still react.

My mother as a Russian child survived  
pogroms and blasts from raids; she'd hide  
inside a closet when a thunderstorm  
occurred. For her, the basic difference  
between blind Nature's random violence  
in storms or floods, and human viciousness,  
deliberate and willed, had been obscured.  
But she could find no consolation or  
no innocence in the apparent fact  
that people, like the elements, do what  
they are designed to do — to fight, to hurt,  
according to our native genius in

contriving instruments that make us more  
what we have always been. And yet we ask:  
Is it too late to choose to change ourselves —  
perhaps if we get desperate enough?

We have survived so far, though not without  
tremendous suffering, starvation we  
have caused, forced marches in the gouging sun;  
only two atom bombs have been deployed  
in half a century of brutal strife  
about just whom the one god really loves  
and whom he therefore wants us to destroy.  
It's true we haven't quite gone all the way  
in letting roiling hate obliterate  
our sympathies — at least not yet, although  
we're almost there, almost at the sharp edge  
where genius to destroy, the genius that  
defines us most as if technology,  
inherent in our genes, waiting its time,  
has brought us to the brink where now we are.

Who is this "us"? Whose panting faces do  
I conjure up when hot revenge bristles  
my startled hair and burns inside my heart?  
Because I mourn my own mortality,  
do I indeed want everyone to die?  
If I cannot survive myself, do I  
desire to have all humankind go down  
into the stinking mud along with me?  
Can that face be my face or are there others  
hidden in the hills, or else behind  
pocked doors in alleyways of city slums  
who wish extinction for my kind because —  
because we don't believe what they believe.

So here I am again distracted by  
the ideologies that seem the cause of why  
we hate and why we kill, prepared to fight  
the final futile war, despite the fact  
that everywhere on this tormented earth  
mothers protect their children, fathers risk  
themselves to aid their wives, their friends, sometimes  
for strangers pleading by the road — as you  
cry to me now or maybe I to you.



## MAKE-BELIEVE MY MUSE

I'm slumping at my desk, bereft,  
my chin cupped in my hands,  
my window open to a summer day  
with red-tailed hawks that circle  
in an updraft visible to them  
as if they had eternity to hover there.

My muse, her wings transparent  
as a darting dragonfly's,  
a silver pitcher in her hand,  
swoops with a whirl into my room,  
waters my plants, then flies to me  
and whispers in harmonic tones,  
"I before E except after C."

I like her sense of humor,  
and I'm gratified, of course, to get  
attention or advice of any kind,  
but my mood darkens when she says,  
"I'm sorry but I bring bad news —  
the poem that you write next  
may be your last; but don't lose cheer,  
I bring good news as well:  
thinking this poem may have to serve  
as your own epitaph will help  
increase your sense of urgency  
in choosing what to write about."

Pleased with herself, unhurried, she  
then waters all my plants again,

my jasmine, ivy, baby's tears,  
and vanishes from whence she came,  
afame in her reflected light,  
in the bronze dazzle of the morning sun.

Inspired by her, I ask myself what theme  
might represent who I most truly am  
in summing up my lifetime of depicting  
trees and birds and animals and us  
as here, astonishingly here,  
yet equally perceiving everything  
as vanishing into an emptiness  
imagined as beyond imagining.

Themes of endurance and defeat  
besiege my mind as inescapable:  
the suffering of humankind,  
betrayal, war — a mouth without a cry  
expiring on a scorched-out battlefield —  
how humankind collectively cannot  
control blind hatred in deluded hearts.

The knowledge of each other  
that a couple shares in silence  
after years of tending children  
in their bottomless dependency  
also seems immemorial to me  
and might possess the ache to shape  
into a soothing song of sweet lament.

Maybe friendship might be my most  
defined, distinguishable choice —  
praising those who maintain their loyalty  
when one's position and one's power are lost,

one's titles, gone, and all one has to offer  
is one's caring and one's company.

Each theme seems worthy of a final poem,  
so how can I choose only one?

I need another lifetime to decide,  
a lifetime like the first — the same wedged geese  
still flying through — that honors what  
it almost perfectly repeats, although  
such wishing constitutes another theme.

Maybe my choosing something small,  
believable, so the mere fact of it  
seems casual and insignificant,  
might happily suffice and be  
the proper subject for my final poem.  
Maybe a luminescent dragonfly  
who rests by chance a moment on a leaf  
of that familiar twisted apple tree  
beyond my window's opening  
to which wild turkeys, wary deer,  
come in late fall to browse and eat  
fermented apples on the wobbly ground  
says everything I need to say  
about my passing and my being here.

And yet perhaps I'd best content myself  
just savoring the resonance of words,  
their undulating sounds like water  
flowing over stones, like notes  
that can be given order, given form —  
a rainbow melody that means  
what each rapt listener feels that it means:

some pitched high with excitement like  
a word containing the bright letter I,  
or one made melancholy with a wailing E,  
a vowel echoing itself, as in eternity,  
or one that crisply puts forth C,  
as does companionship,  
composed in its exquisite brevity.

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