

**THE COMPLETE POEMS
OF
LOUIS DANIEL
BRODSKY**

VOLUME FIVE, 1986–1990

Books by LOUIS DANIEL BRODSKY

Poetry

- Five Facets of Myself (1967)* (1995)
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- Falling from Heaven: Holocaust Poems of a Jew and a Gentile (*with William Heyen*) (1991)
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- Paper-Whites for Lady Jane: Poems of a Midlife Love Affair (1992)* (1995)
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- The Complete Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky: Volume One, 1963–1967 (*edited by Sheri L. Vandermolen*) (1996)

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- Three Early Books of Poems by Louis Daniel Brodsky, 1967–1969: *The Easy Philosopher, “A Hard Coming of It” and Other Poems*, and *The Foul Rag-and-Bone Shop* (*edited by Sheri L. Vandermolen*) (1997)
- The Eleventh Lost Tribe: Poems of the Holocaust (1998)
- Toward the Torah, Soaring: Poems of the Renascence of Faith (1998)
- Voice Within the Void: Poems of *Homo supinus* (2000)
- The Swastika Clock: Holocaust Poems (2000)* (2011)
- Rabbi Auschwitz: Poems of the Shoah (2000)* (2009)
- Shadow War: A Poetic Chronicle of September 11 and Beyond, Volume One (2001) (2004)
- The Complete Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky: Volume Two, 1967–1976 (*edited by Sheri L. Vandermolen*) (2002)
- Shadow War: A Poetic Chronicle of September 11 and Beyond, Volume Two (2002) (2004)
- Shadow War: A Poetic Chronicle of September 11 and Beyond, Volume Three (2002) (2004)
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- The Complete Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky: Volume Three, 1976–1980 (*edited by Sheri L. Vandermolen*) (2004)
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- Combing Florida’s Shores: Poems of Two Lifetimes (2006)
- Showdown with a Cactus: Poems Chronicling the Prickly Struggle Between the Forces of Dubya-ness and Enlightenment, 2003–2006 (2006)
- A Transcendental Almanac: Poems of Nature (2006)
- Once upon a Small-Town Time: Poems of America’s Heartland (2007)
- Still Wandering in the Wilderness: Poems of the Jewish Diaspora (2007)
- The World Waiting to Be: Poems About the Creative Process (2008)
- The Complete Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky: Volume Four, 1981–1985 (*edited by Sheri L. Vandermolen*) (2008)
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- Dine-Rite: Breakfast Poems (2008)
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- Hopgrassers and Flutterbies: Volume Four of *The Seasons of Youth* (2011)
- Saul and Charlotte: Poems Commemorating a Father and Mother (2011)
- Each Other: *Love Passages with Linda*, Volume Three (2011)*
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- The Complete Holocaust Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky (*edited by Jerry Call and Sheri Vandermolen*) (2013)* (2014)
- The Complete Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky: Volume Five, 1986–1990 (*edited by Sheri L. Vandermolen*) (2013)* (2015)
- The Words of My Mouth and The Meditations of My Heart: A Poetic Pilgrimage from Illness to Healing-Living (2014)

Bibliography (coedited with Robert Hamblin)

- Selections from the William Faulkner Collection of Louis Daniel Brodsky: A Descriptive Catalogue (1979)
- Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection: Volume I, The Biobibliography (1982)
- Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection: Volume II, The Letters (1984)
- Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection: Volume III, *The De Gaulle Story* (1984)
- Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection: Volume IV, *Battle Cry* (1985)
- Country Lawyer* and Other Stories for the Screen by William Faulkner (1987)
- Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection: Volume V, Manuscripts and Documents (1989)
- Stallion Road*: A Screenplay by William Faulkner (1989)

Biography

- William Faulkner, Life Glimpses (1990)

Fiction

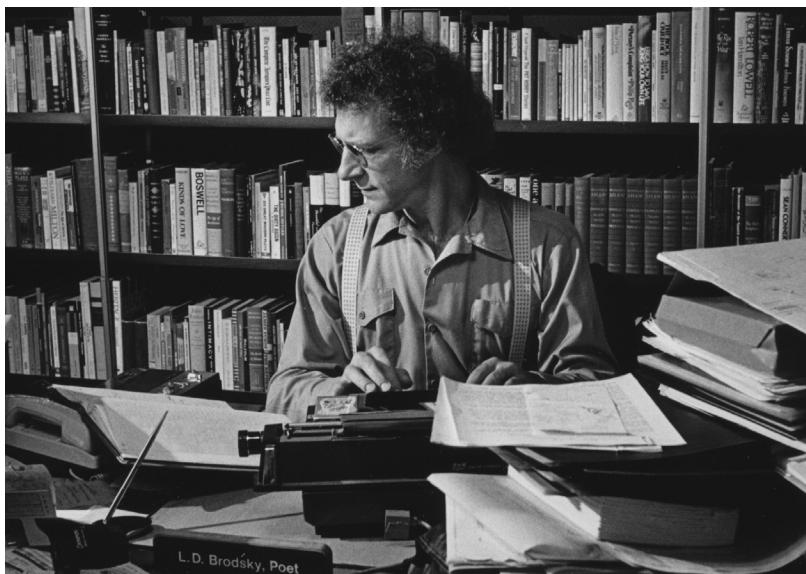
- Between Grief and Nothing (*novel*) (1964)*

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. . . And the Horse You Rode In On (*short fictions*) (2011)^{*} (2015)
Guarangoddamnteeya!: Slices ‘n Dices o’ My Lifes ‘n Time (*short-fiction novel*) (2013)^{*} (2015)

Memoir

- The Adventures of the Night Riders, Better Known as the Terrible Trio
(*with Richard Milsten*) (1961)^{*}



Louis Daniel Brodsky
(circa 1987)

THE COMPLETE POEMS
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LOUIS DANIEL
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VOLUME FIVE, 1986–1990

EDITED BY
SHERI L. VANDERMOLEN



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I wish to acknowledge the following publications, in which certain of my poems from January 1986 through December 1990 were published, some in different versions: *Aethlon* ("Bottom of the Ninth"); *Alabama Literary Review* ("My Holocaust Flowers"); *Amber* ("Shaping Volcanoes, from Human Clay"); *Ambergris* ("David's Bar Mitzvah"); *Amelia* ("Love-song"); *Ariel* ("A Tiger Lurks in the Night Forest"); *Arsenic Lobster* ("The Exile," "A Tiger Lurks in the Night Forest," and "Translating Crickets"); *Art Times* ("Recorded Message for Answering Machine"); *Chariton Review* ("The Midwest Passage"); *Cold Mountain Review* ("Procession of the 6 A.M. Lemmings"); *Confrontation* ("Circusgoer"); *Cover Magazine* ("Soft Strength"); *Drown in My Own Fears* ("Saving the Marriage"); *European Judaism* ("Paradise"); *Forum* ("Accompanying My Son to Summer Camp," "Crossword Learning," "Elementary Teacher," "Surviving Another Fall," and "Tone Poem for Two Voices"); *Four Quarters* ("Hapless Ever After" and "Of Pure German Extract, Once Removed," as "Lipizzaner Fantasies of an SS Officer"); *Jewish Currents* ("The Loneliness of an Old Road Peddler"); *Just Jazz Calendar Events* ("Ghalib Ghallab Trio"); *Mattoid* ("The Dray-Horse Syndrome"); *Midwest Poetry Review* ("Green Grief"); *Negative Capability* ("Spinning Tops"); *New York Quarterly* ("Lovers' Last Evening in the Warsaw Ghetto"); *Painted Bride Quarterly* ("November Planting"); *Pittsburgh Quarterly* ("Second Cities"); *Poetry Midwest* ("Sisyphus"); *River Oak Review* ("All About Fogs"); *Roanoke Review* ("For the Time Being"); *Route One* ("The First Frost"); *Sagarin Review* ("For the Time Being"); *St. Louis Jewish Light* ("Back on the Road to Damascus," "Breathing Eye to Eye," "David's Bar Mitzvah," "The Family of Man," as "A Barren Marriage," "The Forest," "Friday Night Out," "Grodsky the Cobbler," "My Holocaust Flowers," "November Planting," and "Peretz at Sixty-Six," as "Tending the Flock"); *Scream Online* ("Grodsky the Cobbler" and "Under the Circumstances," as "Under the Circumstances, Warsaw Ghetto, 1942"); *Small Pond* ("A Divorcé's First Winter at Plymouth" and "Staying Afloat"); *SP Quill Quarterly Magazine* ("Life Cycles"); *Stand Magazine* ("[Hey, poet, maker of words!]," "[How do these Octobering days]," "Implications of Being Implicated," and "[This gray, rain-washed morning,]"); *Stickman Review* ("[Although the cogs of my internal clockwork]," "Christmas Poinsettias," and "Collection Agents"); *SubtleTea* ("Gazing at the Heavens"); *Trinity Review* ("Spandau, 1989"); *Wascaña Review* ("Perpetuating Molecular

Structures"); *Whetstone* ("Cancer Victim," "The Heart's Archipelago," "Resurrection," and "Taking November Communion"); *Whole Notes* ("Dead Reckoning," "Dragonfly," and "Placating Both Muses"); *Writing the Holocaust* ("Grodsky the Cobbler" and "Under the Circumstances," as "Under the Circumstances, Warsaw Ghetto, 1942"); *Xanadu* ("Spandau, 1989"); and *Zillah* ("[This Oxford, Mississippi, August a.m.,]," as "Healed and Back to My Old Pursuits").

"Causes for Celebration," "Chief Engineer," "Dragonfly," and "Vision in Spring" appear in the unpublished pamphlet *Rooted to the Earth and the Sky: A Transcendental Almanac* (1987).

"Accompanying My Son to Summer Camp," "C.N.O.C.," "The Fountain of Youth," "From the Corner of Main Street and Lake Avenue, Lake Nebagamon, Wisconsin," "A Grieving Rain," "Male Bonding," "Morning Ritual," "Tone Poem for Two Voices," and "Walt Whitman in the Land of Paul Bunyan" appear in *You Can't Go Back, Exactly*, released as first and second editions, by Timeless Press (now Time Being Books), in 1988 and 1989, and as a third edition, by Time Being Books, in 2003; they also appear in a compilation translation of that text (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994). "Duluth-Bound," "Slipping Away," and "Sunday Morning in Camp" appear only in the third edition.

"The Loneliness of an Old Road Peddler," "The Man in the Gray-Flannel Hearse" (as "Willy in His Prime"), and "Surviving Another Fall" appear in *The Thorough Earth* (Timeless Press, 1989) and in a compilation translation of that text (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992)

"The Ash Keeper," "Assimilation: Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938" (as "Kristallnacht, 9 November 1938"), "Crying Wolf, for the Last Time," "The Family of Man," (as "A Barren Marriage"), "For the Time Being," "Friday Night Out," "Himmler Attends the First Undressed Rehearsal of His 'Final Solution' — Auschwitz, 1942" (as "Himmler at Auschwitz, 1942"), "Inescapable Assailants" (as "Survivor"), "Leading a Dog's Life" (as "Sonderkommando"), "Liberation from Buchenwald," "Lovers' Last Evening in the Warsaw Ghetto," "Lovesong," "[Lublin, Vilna, Grodno, Lodzi]" (as "Windchill Factors"), "Man's Best Friend," "Of Pure German Extract, Once Removed" (as "Lipizzaner Fantasies of an SS Officer"), "Relentless Assailants" (as "Bert Jacobs, Furrier"), "Separations" (as "To a Distant Land"), "A Sudden Chill," "Toasting Old Foes" (as "Fallout"), "Twilight," and "The Winnowing: Warsaw Ghetto, 1943" appear in *Falling from Heaven: Holocaust Poems of a Jew and a Gentile* (with William Heyen; Time Being Books, 1991). "The Crows Know What He Knows," "Gestapo Crows," and "[He has good days and bad dazes,]" (as "It Can't Happen Here") are also comprised in the book, in the order listed, forming the entirety of the untitled-part suite "Gestapo Crows" (09020, 1/7/90).

"Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fearful," "An Algebraic Equation of Love," "All in Green Came My Love Riding," "At the Confluence of the Picasso and Braque," "Baseball, the National Pastime," "Christmas Eve Morn: An Ode on Mortality, of Sorts," "Circusgoer," "'Descendants' of George Caleb Bingham," "Earth Day," "Embrace," "Flying by the Seat of Our Pants," "Forever, for Now," "Fortune Cookies," "Gazing at the Heav-

ens,” “Ghalib Ghallab Trio,” “[I take to the highway, you the sky.]” (as “Highway and Sky”), “A Latter-Day Adam and Eve,” “Lovers and Sons,” “Madonna and Child” (as “Immaculate Conceptions”), “Making Children,” “Making Rock Candy,” “Mapping Unexplored Territories,” “Music Lovers,” “Musicians,” “A New Religion,” “New York Snowstorm,” “No More Curiouser a Pair Anywhere,” “On Retreat,” “Opening Up the Territory,” “Our Passion Weekend of the Heart,” “A Passion for Weeding,” “Picnic Along the River,” “Pilgrimage,” “A Pilgrim’s First Thanksgiving,” “Placating Both Muses,” “Second Cities,” “A Second First Anniversary,” “A Sense of Place,” “Sky-Blue You,” “*Son et lumière*,” “Still Life with White Hyacinths,” “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte,” “A Sunday Buggy Ride,” “Taking the Train,” “[‘Til very late last evening, Janie.]” (as “Print Collectors”), “Transplanting,” “Treasure Island,” “Watching for Trains,” “A Way of Life,” “Wunderkind,” and “Youth Is Wasted on the Young” appear in *Forever, for Now: Poems for a Later Love* (Time Being Books, 1991). “The Moment Before,” “All the Difference,” “[The sun is a swift, blue flume.]” (as “Ca’ Nova”), “Makeup Artists,” “Slumming,” “Snippets from the St. Moritz — Café de la Paix,” and “A Way of Life” are also comprised in the book, in the order listed, forming the entirety of the suite “New York Sketches” (03448, 10/26/90 — [2]).

“Himmler Attends the First Undressed Rehearsal of His ‘Final Solution’ — Auschwitz, 1942” was published, as “Himmler at Auschwitz, 1942,” in the anthology *Breaking Word with the World* (1991).

“Castrated Passions” (as “Castrated Passion”), “A Day of Reckoning” “The Manager of Outlet Stores Is Called Out of Retirement” (as “One Last Crusade to Oxford”), “[Persistent yet intermittent visions of you.]” (as “Pan Damned”), “Reprising the Garden of Southern Delights” (as “Garden of Southern Delights”), “Scientific Observations,” and “Taking the Streetcar Home” appear in *Mistress Mississippi: Volume Three of A Mississippi Trilogy* (Time Being Books, 1992) and in the unpublished book *A Mississippi Trilogy: A Poetic Saga of the South* (1995).

“An American Holocaust,” “Anti-Semitism, 1989” (as “Hazards of a Mixed Marriage”), “Bringing Klaus Barbie to Trial,” “Celebrating Independence Day,” “Desastres de la guerra” “Endlösung,” “[Flying debris from a cosmic chimney]” (as “A Case of Mistaken Identities”), “The Forest,” “Grodsky the Cobbler,” “Holocaust and Apocalypse,” “Leaf-Notes” (as “First Violinist Israelievitch, Berlin, 1933”), “Leah,” “Lost in a Crowd, 1990,” “Meeting His Own Shadow Coming and Going,” “My Holocaust Flowers,” “[Once, when youthful defiance guided him.]” (as “Oblivion”), “Tending the Flock,” “Theresienstadt, 1989” (as “Spandau, 1989”), “Till Death Do Us Part: A Personal Holocaust,” “Turkey Trucks” (as “Goddamn Turkey Trucks”), and “Under the Circumstances” (as “Under the Circumstances, Warsaw Ghetto, 1942”) appear in *Gestapo Crows: Holocaust Poems* (Time Being Books, 1992).

“Bringing Klaus Barbie to Trial,” “The Family of Man” (as “A Barren Marriage”), “Friday Night Out,” “Grodsky the Cobbler,” “Himmler Attends the First Undressed Rehearsal of His ‘Final Solution’ — Auschwitz, 1942” (as “Himmler at Auschwitz, 1942”), “Liberation from Buchenwald,” and

“Twilight” appear in *Telling the Tale: A Tribute to Elie Wiesel on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday — Essays, Reflections, and Poems*, edited by Harry James Cargas (Time Being Books, 1993).

“Dog Daze” (as “Dog Daze and Loony Cats”), “From Berlin, via Hiroshima, to Farmington” (as “In the Autumn of His Years”), “Miss Missouri,” “Moses in the Wilderness” (as “Lost in the Wilderness”), “Outpatient” (as “Moe in the Desert”), “The Passing of an Outpatient” (as “The Passing of Chet Jekyll”), “Proclaiming an ‘Everlasting Yea,’” “Time on His Hands” (as “Jekyll the Jeweler Suffers a Breakdown”), and “The Undertakers” appear in *The Capital Café: Poems of Redneck, U.S.A.* (Time Being Books, 1993).

“[Arriving after 6:00, this Sunday,]” (as “Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, 1988”), “Failed Poet,” “Flying Too Low for Self-Detection” (as “Flying Too Low to Avoid Detection”), “The Ghost of Schwerner Returns,” “The Hazards of Road Traveling,” “Jason’s Plaint,” “Listening to a Lecture on Craft” (as “Trying to Survive Monday Morning’s Lectures”), “On Safari,” “Performing Inordinate Rituals,” and “[This Oxford, Mississippi, August A.M.,]” (as “Healed and Back to My Old Pursuits”) appear in *Disappearing in Mississippi Latitudes: Volume Two of A Mississippi Trilogy* (Time Being Books, 1994) and in the unpublished book *A Mississippi Trilogy: A Poetic Saga of the South* (1995).

“Breathing Eye to Eye,” “Greenhouse Effects, or Tarzan’s Day at the Zoo, with Jane” (as “Greenhouse Effects”), “November Planting,” “A Scents of Wonderment” (as “Scents of Wonderment”), and “A White Christmas” appear in *Paper-Whites for Lady Jane: Poems of a Midlife Love Affair* (Time Being Books, 1995).

“For the Time Being” was published in the anthology *First Harvest: Jewish Writing in St. Louis, 1991–1997* (The Brodsky Library Press, 1997).

“Battenberg Lace” and “[Who ever knew such bucolic seclusion]” (as “Defacing Gravestones”) appear in *The Eleventh Lost Tribe: Poems of the Holocaust* (Time Being Books, 1998). “Peretz’s Postwar Poems” (as “Listening to a Voice That Never Existed”) is also comprised within the book, as part five of the suite “Schreiber, Bard of Belzec” (03242, 6/2–3/94 — [2] on 6/2/).

“Naming Spencer Thomas,” “Paradise,” and “Toward the Torah, Soaring” appear in *Toward the Torah, Soaring* (Time Being Books, 1998). “David’s Bar Mitzvah” (as “David”) is also comprised in the book, as part one of the suite “Coming of Age” (03066, 5/3/98 — [2]).

“Bone Mot” appears as a short fiction in *This Here’s a Merica* (Time Being Books, 1999).

“Spectral Recognitions” was published in the anthology *American Dream* (2002).

“Back on the Road to Damascus,” “Business As Usual,” “Cave Dweller,” “A Ghetto-Mentality Setback, for Willy” (as “Tsuris”), “[He awakens to the telephone’s stentorian bell,]” (as “Ajar for the Holidays”), “[He seizes his brief moment of freedom from routine,]” (as “Don Jewan”), “The Loneliness of an Old Road Peddler,” “The Man in the Gray-Flannel Hearse” (as “Willy in His Prime”), “Merchant Marine Willy Makes for Port” (as “Making for

Port”), “Out of Commission,” “Santa Making Last-Minute Rounds,” “Shot to Shit: Willy Authorizes an RGD” (as “Shot to Shit: Willy Authorizes a Returned-Goods Disposition”), “Willy Assists at Tzinberg’s Sidewalk Sale” (as “Tzinberg’s Sidewalk Sale”), “Willy on a Fishing Expedition, in Black Monday’s Aftermath” (as “Fishing Expedition”), “Willy Puts in Fifty Years of Service” (as “In His Fortieth Year of Service”), “Willy Sallies Forth” (as “Immortal”), “Willy’s Anthem,” and “Willy’s ‘One Last Time’” (as “One More Time”) appear in *Peddler on the Road: Days in the Life of Willy Sypher* (Time Being Books, 2005).

“All That Glitters,” “Defenders of Independence,” “[If only I could read Babylonian cuneiform!]” (as “The Language of the Waves”), “Jet Lag,” “Lord’s Spore,” “On Retreat,” “Retracing His Steps” (as “Retracing My Steps”), and “Surfers, Nurse Sharks, and Us” appear in *Combing Florida’s Shores: Poems of Two Lifetimes* (Time Being Books, 2006).

“Breathing,” “Dragonfly,” “Just Another Day’s Drive,” “Re-turning,” and “Vision in Spring” appear in *A Transcendental Almanac: Poems of Nature* (Time Being Books, 2006).

“Always the Same Old Thing,” “Émigrés,” “Getting/Staying in Shape” (as “Getting in Shape”), and “The Midwest Calls Him Home, for a Rest” (as “The Midwest Calls Me Home, for a Rest”) appear in *Once upon a Small-Town Time: Poems of America’s Heartland* (Time Being Books, 2007).

“Moses in the Land of Gentiles” appears in *Still Wandering in the Wilderness: Poems of the Jewish Diaspora* (Time Being Books, 2007).

“The Exile” was published in *Arsenic Lobster 2010 Anthology* (Misty Publications, 2010).

“Accompanying My Son to Summer Camp,” “[All morning, I keep sneaking up]” (as “Uncle Duck”), “Amateur Athletes,” “A Baptism of Fish” (as “An Aquatic Eden”), “Beethoven’s Piano Concerto no. 4 in G Major” (as “Symphony”), “Big-League Practice,” “Comicking with Troika,” “Crossword Learning,” “Defenders of Independence,” “Den Members and Teammates,” “Duluth-Bound,” “Early-Morning Bird/Dog Watching,” “The Fountain of Youth,” “A Grieving Rain,” “[He can almost taste the savory tang of excitement]” (as “The Great Halloween-Day Parade”), “Jazz-Dance Practice” (as “Trilogy’s Jazz-Dance Practice”), “Leaving the Nest,” “Male Bonding,” “On Her Being Promoted from Sixth Grade,” “On Your Reaching Womanhood,” “Pine Cones and Gumshoes” (as “Pine Cones, Spiky Balls, and Gumshoes”), “Potential Friendships,” “Promotion” (as “Graduation”), “Reading Circle” (as “Fourth-Grade Reading Circle”), “Remainders, Divisors, and Dividends,” “Surfers, Nurse Sharks, and Us,” “[Ten-year-old Troika the Boy]” (as “Pennies and Moons”), “They Call Home All Family Members” (as “Calling Home All Family Members”), “Tone Poem for Two Voices,” “Troika Practices Tennis,” “Troika Turns Thirteen,” and “Waiting” appear in *Eying Widening Horizons: Volume Five of The Seasons of Youth* (Time Being Books, 2012).

*To Jerry Call,
who has sat by my side since 1990,
sharing my poetic passion, with me,*

and

*to Sheri Vandermolen,
who has overseen the progress of this collaboration,
making certain that the three of us never lose sight of my vision,*

*I, with inestimable pride,
dedicate this volume.*

Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.
— Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry”

*All men owe honor to poets — honor / and awe, for they are dearest to
the Muse / who puts upon their lips the ways of life.*
— Homer, *The Odyssey*

*. . . the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete
man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth.*
— Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet”

*And remember that writing is translation, and the opus to be translated
is yourself.*
— E. B. White, in a letter to Elizabeth S——, December 10, 1951

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EDITOR'S GUIDE

What is a lifetime, if not a matter of moments gathered, shared, and, in the case of the poet, recaptured at pen's tip? And thus to speak of a singular crux, an event so defining, in its own right, as to alter the remainder of one's course, verges on hyperbolic. Yet, August 1, 1987 — the date when Louis Daniel Brodsky declared, in "The First Day of Harvesting" (06018, 8/1/87), that he would devote the remainder of his career solely to crafting poems and books in which to house them — was indeed such an occasion.

This sea change, while monumental and utterly transforming, was not without its foreshadowing. Even in his apprentice years, Brodsky had lamented his need for "sheer blocks of time in which to create the living material from the static words that, without inspiration, lie festering on the typewriter's keyboard or on the ridges of the brain's crust" (05339, 4/11/66 — [4]), with an understanding that tying himself to the corporate world would continually engage him in the struggle to "rise above the tedium, the commonality of day, to make the mind say things it [doesn't] know it [holds] inside" (05168, 7/1/66?).

That conflictive tug, between the self known to the outside world (the harried businessman, the pressure-riddled spouse and academician) and that of the inner world (the artist, the loving father), became decidedly more challenging as Brodsky reached middle age. While he had been contending with the dichotomy throughout his career, as well as confronting the marital strife it generated, he could, prior to relocating from Farmington, Missouri, at least find refuge in his small-town environs, garner mind-release in evenings spent barbecuing, sipping wine, admiring the stars or in lazy hours he and his family filled with laughter, as they played in the attic of their beloved Victorian home or wandered its expansive yard, hunting for pine-cone and oak-leaf treasures and chasing rabbits, grasshoppers, and fireflies.

But his St. Louis neighborhood, with its elegant slate-roofed Tudor homes, was no such haven, offering no pastoral solitude, only the isolation of affluence. Having moved to the city in the summer of 1984, he yet tried to hold tight to vestiges of his former life in Farmington, by maintaining his writing office there and the family's home, to which he regularly slipped away, for tranquil hours, during road flights south. However, those abandoned shells provided only bittersweet comfort, reminding him that, in that "remote, five-star, all-American city," where he was impotently attempting to keep his "crucified spirit intact," memory could "be the most inhumane enemy of all." (04128, 5/13/86)

His sense of dislocation steadily increasing, he found his stops in Farmington bordering not merely on melancholic but morose, transforming him into "a lost bird caught between asylum floors / Separating hallucinations from 'truth'" (00561, 1/21/86). Instead of resurrecting the contentments of old, his time at their rural manse caused newer, more gruesome images to surface, ones which would eventually bloom into full-fledged Holocaust poems. Being "seated outside, seventy-five miles from St. Louis," amidst "bucolic seclusion," in a town "not only time but the Bible forgot," no longer served as an anodyne and merely reinforced the disharmony, leaving him "not precisely certain where or who" he was anymore, with a sense of dying "at least ten thousand times, each second," and of being unable

to “escape, as though Auschwitz-Birkenau-Buna / Had relegated [him] to its precincts, adopted [him] as its scapegoat” (04127, 6/18/86). Even the commute itself became inimical to him, with his feeling as though he were “migrating from Cracow hovel to Auschwitz oven, / By means of dung-sullied boxcars routed through Pandemonium” (00828, 11/3/86).

Searching for solace, he edged further from home, further from the *now*, heading all the way back to his academic origins, with a visit to New Haven, Connecticut, in February 1986. Surveying his old stomping grounds, at the Yale campus and about town, he felt brief joy. But that exhilaration was tempered by the dissatisfaction of knowing that “memory’s Ouija” had failed “to produce the youth / Who, in brief residence nearby, / Sent down roots” there (05961, 2/28/86).

His peregrinations away from St. Louis also brought him, in desperation, back to the South, back to the gratifications of Faulkner’s Oxford and the temptations Brodsky had earnestly renounced. Making three trips to Mississippi, in 1986, for his collecting work, he drove in hope that the miles would “dissolve the lacy tracing depression / [Had] chiseled, into his brain’s masonry, / Via the years’ drizzling of gratuitous disappointments” (05999, 12/4/86 — [1]). And yet, once he was back in Mississippi’s embrace, his ambivalence, and then grief, undermined his initial excitement, forcing him to assess what motives had carried him “so far from...home / And blessed family,” made him wish “to establish a new site,” “discover ancient ruins,” and even “transliterate, from ‘A Rose for Emily,’ the Rosetta stone,” so he might “locate [himself] in ghostly proximity to Faulkner,” all the while knowing that, “balking like a fractious donkey,” he would instead “accept second-best status... / Write [his] guts into poetry no one [would] recite, read, teach, or buy” (03559, 12/8/86 — [3]). Ultimately, he even screamed out, through his verse, “Why did I devote my life to you, bitch Mississippi?” (03586, 7/26/86).

With such heavy notions of failure weighing upon him, he resumed extramarital pursuits of old, albeit briefly and only for the sake of transiently assuaging loneliness. Ultimately, the illusory, unattainable elements of such dalliances were the true allure, as he pondered why a lover was so “seismically distant when quakes occur” and fantasized that they might “let [their] faults converge” (03549, 1/13/86 — [3]). The pondering itself became as satisfying as any deed, a way of imagining that he could “connect both ends of his emotional pole / To his exiled heart’s four main chambers, / So that breathing freedom’s sweet scents / Might lead him back to his own enthusiastic youth, / That time before ambition blacked out, from lack of passion” (03561, 12/8/86 — [1]).

In reality, he remained committed to salvaging his marriage, reviving dying embers of adoration and love that remained, between him and his wife, Jan, going so far as to write her an “Exhortation to the Rededication of a Marriage,” in which he entreats her to recognize that “even now, the hour is redeemable” and that “fate waits on us, in curious anticipation,” remains “anxious to see whether we exit together, best friends,” he pleading with her to run away with him, “elope, / Climb Sutro’s heights, and bark, all night, at the seals” (02055, 12/11/86 — [2]).

Certainly, there was no denying that he and Jan had grown apart or that their relationship had been breached beyond mere mutual neglect and,

in truth, now seethed with hostility and disrespect. Yet even in admitting that their “long-term plan / [Had] failed to manifest its magnificence,” he held out hope, praying they would “stay together, Aires-mates to the end,” and renew their “youthful exuberance / At fifty, sixty, even past eighty-eight” (02170, 1/22 — [2] & 10/5/87).

He also committed himself to spending more time with their children. But his daughter, Trilogy, had blossomed into a preteen, and he noted that even as he and Jan were “celebrating Trilogy’s grade-school graduation,” they were also “painfully sensing independence taking precedence” (02155, 6/5/86). Still, he nurtured Trilogy’s burgeoning interests, including her appreciation of the arts. Watching her in her jazz-dance class, he knew he had delivered her to “Terpsichore’s stage door,” where she would “learn the next few steps in youth’s routine” (02020, 12/6/87). He also strived to broaden her other cultural horizons, such as attendance of the symphony, and fostered her articulation of the motivation for such outings, including her declaration that “forcing myself to do things like this, / Attending cultural events, / Is good for my sense of independence” (00982, 2/14–15/89).

He shared a variety of pastimes with his son, Troika, as well, savoring sunsets spent at the park, tossing a baseball or riding bikes, the two of them “father and son, boys, friends, men-children, / Sharing that magical dimension / In which agelessness is just another endless flight” (00679, 6/17/86 — [2]). Embracing their mutual passion for collecting, he encouraged his boy in accumulating everything from pennies to comic books. His pride swelled, watching his son navigate the realms of “the volatile comic-book stock exchange, / Dominated by villains and heroes with healing factors” that “no Shakespeare could so poetically have rhapsodized” (03655, 10/22/90).

He likewise promoted Troika’s social growth, participating at his son’s soccer games and his Cub Scout meetings. During the sports matches, he was there to “spectate, vocally, from the sidelines, / Supply halftime snacks, / Provide taxi service, for his waifish crew, / To Saturday games, Monday-afternoon practices” (02012, 12/2/87 — [2]). And during den gatherings, he would “oversee activities at meetings, / Make certain the Pledge of Allegiance / And Cub Scout Promise [got] correctly said,” his main goal always to advance the youngsters’ development, “keep reminding the boys of duties / They [were to] perform, out of love for self, / Family, country, and God” (02012, 12/2/87 — [2]).

But the most enduring contribution he made, in his son’s life, was introducing Troika to Camp Nebagamon, where Brodsky himself had spent many a summer as a camper and, later, a counselor. Given their family’s festeringly negative home life, Brodsky was acutely aware that it would be in Troika’s best interest to attend an eight-week session in the peaceful milieu of the North Woods, where his child might interact with friends his own age, under the guidance of supportive adults there to facilitate the boys’ maturation. During his visits, he and Troika bonded, “investigating the campgrounds, / Climbing hills, following sandy paths, / Sharing a session at air riflery, / A...table in the rec hall” (00028, 6/30/88 — [1]). And seeing himself, in his son and the other kids, he reveled in “witnessing a group of ragtag campers / Discover how a few of Earth’s miracles work” (00025, 6/27/88 — [2]). His boy thrived, in the Wisconsin refuge, and

Brodsky, in the new role of parent of a camper, was there to partake in that “rite of passage,” “[his] child’s evolving future” (00027, 6/28/88).

While able to shelter his son and daughter from a portion of the marital turmoil he and Jan were experiencing, Brodsky could not protect himself from the precipitous emotional upheaval, especially when it came time to dissociate himself, bit by bit, from Farmington. Dismantling his writing office there — one of his few remaining sanctuaries — was particularly trying. He could hardly bear to watch the “hired crew [remove], from his sacred office, / All specific evidence of his residence / And [cram] it, box by box, into a rented truck.” The act was not only disheartening but humiliating — a flagrant reminder that his poetry notebooks were “cramped with expanded indices of dreams, / Whose leaves, in his projected Golden Book, / [Had] yet to be conceived, much less paginated” (06002, 1/5/87).

Having more time than ever to devote to his family, including a wife he now viewed as plagued by her own demons, only rubbed salt in his wounds, left him reeling in heartbreak, feeling “bereft of carnal pleasures, leisurely pursuits, / Excessive appetites, earthly delights,” and, symbolically, inclining “toward the vegetable life,” his “knees drawn up fatally, clutching a blanket / Disreputably shredded, from decades of stroking” (04124, 3/9/87). Recognizing his own culpability, in all that had befallen him and Jan, he asked himself, “Where am I when you need me? I’m freebasing the human race’s brain, // For information leading to the capture of dreams / Recently escaped from sheol’s gaol. / I scream.... // Dying, trying to say, ‘I love you, lady” (04123, 3/23/87 — [2]).

While Jan was actively socializing, forming networks in St. Louis, Brodsky was floundering in his loneliness. He remained a recluse, in their “rarefied neighborhood,” and seldom “said more than hello / To vaguely recognizable women and men” all “punctually being walked, in the park, by their dogs.” Worse, he found that even within his own home, he could not remember when he had last “talked, at length, / With his wife and two children, / Whose existences, although physically juxtaposed to his, / Within their domicile, [seemed] separate / If equally acceptable to each — a viable situation / Despite their unbridgeable differences of opinion” (05438, 5/21/87).

He longed for all they had shared in Farmington and was beleaguered by doubts about their decision to leave. Was the need to provide their children with better education worth the sacrifice? How would they survive, having abandoned a “secure and quiet environment, / For the furious rataplan of city life,” which had seemingly left them “defectors, exiles, dispossessed, in between connections” (04116, 8/11–12/87)?

Brodsky’s anguish did, at least, fuel his art. At a time when little could mollify his torment, he still relished the satisfaction, the gratification, of creating something from nothing, giving life to a poem that would otherwise remain undiscovered. In those moments of fulfillment, he could feel his “Thoreau-soul” flourish, become an “unfolding corolla” (02641, 9/3/86 — [2]), and he went so far as to state, “Tonight, I proclaim my independence,” emphatically noting that “who I am, I am, and no one can diminish me” and “I must proclaim myself inviolate — I am me!” (05982, 08/27/86 — [2]). The world outside himself reminded

him, “indisputably, / Just being here is, as miracles go, momentous,” and these “causes for celebration” (02004, 10/13/87) even compelled him to compile a pamphlet about his ties to nature, *Rooted to the Earth and the Sky: A Transcendental Almanac* (1987 and a precursor to 2007’s *A Transcendental Almanac*). Freedom, exhilaration, and even ecstasy were his for the taking, undefiled by outside forces, if only in ephemeral flights.

Ready to give such essences their due and, for the first time, allow his writing to come fully to the forefront — as he had dreamed of doing since his apprentice years — Brodsky retired, from Biltwell Corporation, in August 1987. (His father had already severed ties with the company, in 1982, and no love was lost, for Brodsky, in executing his own separation from the business.)

He recorded his fervor, about this momentous shift, in “The First Day of Harvesting” (06018, 8/1/87):

He realizes today is the first day of the rest of his life,
But his ebullient intuition belies his destination.
That he will fulfill his destiny’s mandate to write
Remains uncontestable. He’ll fix, permanently,
Fictions and verse he’s been listening to for decades,
Visible, inaudible articulations, give voice to images
Eclipsed in shadows. *When* and *why* answer to *now*;
How is equally certain. Only success is questionable.
At forty-six, he can’t afford any more delays.
Starting today, he must record each measure,
Every detail, cadence, inflection, hue, and musical nuance,
As though each completed poem were the singular determinant
Upon which his being awarded the Nobel Prize depended.

And at the end of that pivotal piece, he penned a note stating that “this title refers to my quitting work for good, beginning to *harvest* all first-draft poems contained in ledgers, finish them and give them permanent residences in volumes I’ll own forever” (8/1/87).

Although he had taken a landmark step, in becoming a full-time poet, he was nonetheless obliged to continue his academic writing, with Robert Hamblin. Their latest compilation work *Country Lawyer and Other Stories for the Screen by William Faulkner* (University Press of Mississippi) had just been published in May 1987, but already Hamblin and Brodsky were laboring away on two additional volumes for which the university had entered into contract with them: volume five (*Manuscripts and Documents*) of the *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection* series (1989) and *Stallion Road: A Screenplay by William Faulkner* (1989).

Still, Brodsky was never one for moderation or patience, and he knew that while his Faulkner studies would always have a place in his heart (due, in no small measure, to his deep and abiding friendship with Hamblin), his true passions lay in poetry. He needed a new writing office, where he could spend his days composing and reviewing his verse, making a priority of long-delayed aspirations. Thus, in 1987, when he and Jan (with the help of Brodsky’s parents, Saul and Charlotte) bought a residence mere

blocks from their current rental, in Clayton, he took the opportunity to set up shop, on the third floor of their new abode.

But the timing could not have been worse, coming at the low point of the Brodskys' marriage. The past decade had already seen them "growing apart, dying of broken hearts," and upon the divestment of their Farmington residence, in April 1988, he considered himself, his wife, and their children "four separate souls, / Buried side by side, within [that] Victorian mausoleum" (04100, 5/26-27/88 — [2] on 5/26). Compounding his agony, the first months of 1988 brought the tragic realization that Jan had been seeking legal counsel, unbeknownst to him. Equally unbearable was the fact that his worst fears, regarding Jan's dedication to their relationship, had finally been realized; their bond was irretrievably broken, and divorce's specter was looming with "cyanide-tinctured, fear-flecked eyes, / Flicking like tongues of lightning-snakes / Striking out of a turbulent sky," leaving him "a bewildered husband," who, himself, had contributed to "marital apostasy" (04109, 3/25/88 — [1]). And as he stood in their Farmington home, on their eighteenth wedding anniversary, packing their remaining belongings and saying good-bye to a fragile era, he envisioned himself "a wifeless spirit, sharing custody / Of two children who have been stigmatized / By the deeds of their...mother / And...dad" (01059, 7/8/88).

Back in St. Louis, he attempted to "deny truth's consequences" — that they had become mere "urban dwellers...who have such affluence, / They seek out paid listeners, arbitrators, / Psychotherapy referees, who, for precisely sixty minutes, / Will agree or disagree, depending on the direction / Windy, egotistical discourse or confessional self-pity / Requires of them" (04108, 4/18-19 & 4/21/88) — but the facts were all too apparent. His being at home, in volatile hit-or-miss contact with Jan, was excruciating, and he soon acquiesced to the notion that he had to form a refuge with no such emotional diversions.

With space available in nearby Le Chateau Village, a building owned by his family, Brodsky opted to settle into a vacant office on the second floor. Not only did he intend to write, there, but resume bookmaking as well. In fact, his dreams swelled with thoughts of founding a full-fledged publishing company — an enterprise he anticipated might develop into significantly more than a mere vanity press, once he had established himself, printed a few books of his own.

He named the fledgling entity Timeless Press and eagerly set about organizing the details of his business plan, ascertaining what assistance he would need, to turn his vision into a reality. As luck would have it, a small data-processing company was situated just across the hall from the company office, and Brodsky arranged to utilize its services, for having his manuscripts input into word-processing. He also knew he would require an editor, a skilled reader who could offer more than the mere correction of typographical errors, so he called upon his friend Linda Hermelin, who had been a classmate of his, during his years at Washington University. She agreed to serve as a part-time assistant, and combining her technical expertise with his creative skills, they set about the task of producing Timeless Press's first book, *You Can't Go Back, Exactly*, which was printed in August 1988, with the help of Ruth Dambach and the staff of Southeast Missouri State University.

The volume, comprising thirty poems about Camp Nebagamon, was a labor of love. Recording his own days as a counselor there, in the late 1960s, as well as his son's days as a camper, in the 1980s, the pieces reflected Brodsky's continuing adoration of the North Woods, the growth and maturation both he and his own boy had experienced, in the knowing keep of the camp's owners, "Muggs" and Janet Lorber (from Brodsky's days) and Nardie and Sally Stein (from Troika's), to whom he dedicated the book. Presenting the tome to the Steins, during the camp's sixtieth-anniversary celebration, was an occasion in which Brodsky took great pride.

But that moment of equanimity — commemorating, in part, tranquil summer days he'd spent with Troika, just weeks earlier, at Nebagamon — was fleeting at best. In little more than a month, Brodsky would instead be writing about "autumn's dissolution decree," his signature symbolically "terminating...eighteen years" and making final his "unwished freedom official" (02171, 10/4/88).

And that release would not be without its obligations, since Brodsky's beloved William Faulkner collection, which he had labored, for decades, to amass, was at risk of being disassembled (through auction), in the divorce settlement. Aggrieved, Brodsky approached Bill Stacy, president of Southeast Missouri State University, about transferring ownership of the collection to the school, on the grounds that the materials would remain together. Stacy, with his background in the humanities, immediately realized the potential recognition the university could earn, by acquiring one of the world's premier private Faulkner collections.

In October 1988, Brodsky signed a binding agreement, to turn over the archive to the university, in return for a sum to paid, in equal amounts, to him and Jan, via monthly stipend, over a period of twenty years. In addition, Stacy agreed to print Timeless Press's first volumes, in the school's own print shop. Making the deal was a heartrending deed, for Brodsky, but he had little choice.

It was in this phase, of distress and hostility over the end of his marriage and impending divorce, that Brodsky turned even more fully to his work, not merely as a distraction but as a life buoy. Eager to devote the whole of his energy to generating quality products for Timeless Press, including audiobooks, he began collaborating, in the spring and summer of 1989, with Clayton Studios' sound engineer Chris Miller, who would ultimately guide Brodsky through the finer points of tone modulation and narrative recitation, enabling the recording of several of Timeless Press's earliest volumes and fulfilling Brodsky's objective of offering "poetry in sight and sound" (a phrase that would be incorporated, for two decades, in the company logo). In Miller, Brodsky found not only an inventive audio wizard but also a creative, clever friend, who helped him mine a sarcastic humor that Brodsky had long suppressed and dearly missed.

But despite playful moments, Brodsky remained serious and steadfast, in focusing on his primary aim, of constructing print books, and thus he felt compelled to begin sorting and editing his entire oeuvre, which had been accumulating for over twenty-six years. By the summer of 1989, satisfied that his artistic voice had reached full maturity, he initiated a comprehensive project to standardize his poems, through extensive revisions, and com-

menced with the relineation of the pieces from his 1978 volume *Stranded in the Land of Transients* (Farmington Press), determined to overhaul the whole tome. He also concentrated his efforts on his recent verse, including several poems from the late 1980s. However, he became overwhelmed with a sense of frustration, fear that he was disturbing, in fact destroying, the integrity of the original poems, since he had no strategies in place, at that time, to preserve the original version of the work, and thus it seemed that he would risk forever losing the authorial intention, by continuing to alter drastically his poems from years past.

As a result, he set that monstrous task aside, for a more manageable one: refining his unpublished pamphlet *Selections from The Ash Keeper's Everlasting Passion Week* (1986) and culling additional pieces for the text, to form the basis of his next manuscript, *The Thorough Earth*. Having received substantial praise, from Lewis P. Simpson (consulting editor of the *Southern Review*) and Cleanth Brooks (coeditor of *The Southern Review*), for much of his verse featuring his traveling-salesman character, Willy Sypher, as well as for a variety of his Holocaust poems, Brodsky knew what a breakthrough he had landed upon, designing a text, split into two chapters, that would set the Willy poems in contrast to the Holocaust poems. Simpson would go on to say, of the volume, that "juxtaposing a series of poems about Willy's career and a series of poems reflecting on the Nazi holocaust, Brodsky projects a vision of Jewish history...that includes in its range the comic compulsiveness of Willy's quest for sales and the unspeakable horror of the death camps. No poet at work today has a more vividly ironic sense of history combined with a more passionate regard for...the experience of being alive."

The book, which stood as a harsh counterpoint to the gentle sentimentality of *You Can't Go Back, Exactly*, was published in August 1989 (by Timeless Press, in conjunction with Southeast Missouri State University), a time when yet more marital discord "shattered his equanimity, / Collapsed his stoical devotion" (04224, 08/17 — [2] & 8/22/89). Mired in the misery of being "a family man disowned / Even by the echoless ghosts of his flown wife / And two not-quite-grown children," he resigned himself to the fact that he and Jan were now living separate lives, within "the ghetto of their collapsed marriage" (03716, 7/16–17/89). Advised that the locks of the family home had been changed, he felt the final splintering of their bonds.

Having lived with the nightmare of divorce for over a year and a half, he was defeated but willing to believe that there was "still time to dream another dream" (04225, 8/13/89 — [2]), gain "a fresh start for a dead head and heart" (04092, 4/1/89). And so it was, when his recently hired public-relations consultant, Keith Dinsmore, insisted upon introducing him to an acquaintance he was certain Brodsky would find interesting, that Brodsky agreed to an informal dinner with the two of them. August 10, 1989 — when he met with Dinsmore and Jane Goldberg, at Busch's Grove, in Ladue — proved a red-letter day. Dinsmore himself was so cognizant of the chemistry between Brodsky and Goldberg that he excused himself from the table and proceeded to slip out of the restaurant, leaving the pair enmeshed in conversation, for the rest of the evening.

As the hours glided by, he and Jane found that they had much in common. She was a divorcée and the mother of two teenagers, and thus she understood Brodsky's predicament with his family — the emotional cataclysm he was facing. And as the daughter of a Jewish businessman who had made his fortune in the clothing industry, she came from similar roots, shared a familiar heritage. She was also an intellectual, with a love of language, of witticisms and wordplay, and she was among the first to elicit intimate laughter and delight, from Brodsky, in far too long. They both felt a connection, in the magic of the evening, but knew to take it slowly. It would be nearly two months before Brodsky could bring himself to take those first steps, in forging a new relationship, and plan to meet with Jane again.

Hesitant yet hopeful, he arranged their second date, which culminated at the Victorian train depot in Kirkwood, on the outskirts of St. Louis. They sat mesmerized, watching railcars slide past, enjoying a gentle reminder of days of old but also sublimating sexual energy that seemed a stimulating key to their future. Ever the self-proclaimed Quixote, Brodsky had envisioned finding an Aldonza who might love him despite his “ragged nag, broken sword, / Doleful countenance, metaphors, and suspended disbeliefs” (04112, 2/23/88), and in the quirky, delightfully droll Jane Goldberg, he knew he had met his match. Indeed, sitting at the station, staring into Jane’s eyes, he imagined the two of them “venturing west, together, / In search of a fresh conception of love” (03428, 10/10/89).

Equally smitten, Jane reached out to Brodsky, offering him emotional and physical refuge at the time he needed it most. After being evicted from his family’s house, he had taken up residence at a hotel near his Timeless Press office, his only belongings the bags of clothes and personal items he had unceremoniously gathered upon leaving. Feeling like a tatterdemalion bereft of his former life, Brodsky took comfort in Jane’s hospitality, basking in moments of simple placidity with her, and even when the pain of being away from his children, during the holidays, was nearly too much to bear, he found himself soothed in Jane’s presence. Upon meeting her for breakfast, on Christmas Eve, “standing, taking her hand, kissing her,” he was able to see his “entire future born in her eyes,” making him feel he might “surrender all [his] being unto her keeping” (03403, 12/24/89).

Soon, they took their first trip together, indulging in a handful of days in New York, for Jane’s birthday. A mounting snowstorm made the city feel as though it were “out of another time, / Not raw, biting, uninvitingly cold and wet / But, rather, romantic, alive, eternal,” and he saw the swirls as flakes “falling through spaces / Between two people in love for the last time, forever” (03404, 1/10–11/90 — [2] on 1/10 & 1/11). But while the romantic in him surged, he recognized they were “children still too new to each other / To intuit the depths / To which [their] free fall might plunge / From Love’s precipice”; he reveled in their “Adam-and-Eve innocence” yet acknowledged that a significant part of their bond came from “separately sharing a common heritage / Of desperate, desolate, unsharing marriages / And surviving our hearts’ Kristallnacht,” relieved, finally, to have “arrived at desert’s edge” (03405, 1/15/90).

Jane showed her interest and support not only in Brodsky’s personal life but in his professional endeavors as well, keenly taking part in reading

his poems, reordering his files, and helping to prepare his manuscripts. She applied her first proofing efforts to Brodsky's Timeless Press volume *Four and Twenty Blackbirds Soaring*. Wanting to build a sampler of what he considered his best poems (most of which had been previously published in literary magazines, journals, and anthologies), Brodsky broke the book into six chapters, grouping the pieces by theme: imagination, alienation, love songs, poet, the heartland, and transcendence. Jane read the book for accuracy, along with Linda Hermelin, and the book was ready for print in December 1989 (Southeast Missouri State University).

With Jane's encouragement and assistance, Brodsky concentrated on further establishing Timeless Press, their first project being to organize his life's work into manageable groups. But as the two of them delved further into Brodsky's storage boxes, they noted that systematizing his vast accumulation of drafts might be more than a "three-hour project," after all, and began to see the need to seek the skills of a full-time assistant. When the office received a letter of inquiry, regarding a summer job, from English-education student Sheri Cornell (Vandermolen), in March 1990, Jane quickly sized up the applicant's impressive academic records and called her, to conduct an interview. Pleased with the results, Jane asked her to come aboard, agreeing to a start date at the end of May.

Within weeks of that first hiring, Jane, a voracious reader, happened upon a situation-wanted ad, in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, that caught her immediate attention. She contacted the young man (who described himself as holding a bachelor's and master's in English and having a diverse work history, including teaching at a rabbinical school and performing management-consulting), and upon speaking with him, she felt certain he would be a perfect fit for Brodsky's own eclectic style. Although Timeless Press lacked the resources for one full-time employee, let alone two, Jane nonetheless convinced Brodsky that both Jerry Call (hired as an editor) and Sheri Cornell (hired as an archivist, for the summer) would be the assets essential in finally moving the company forward.

With Call beginning his stead in April, Brodsky was eager to tackle a number of projects, including inputting new poems into word-processing. But Brodsky now considered himself, foremost, a "maker of books," and compiling manuscripts, from existing poems that had waited years to find their "homes," was his top priority. He envisioned fashioning volumes that would make poetry accessible to a wide audience, not merely academicians, and he drew on his experience as a fictionist, as well as a Faulkner enthusiast, to develop narrative formats that would appeal to readers who had previously felt they could not comprehend poetry. The texts, often with a central character, would unfold much the way a novel does, with a story that builds, page by page, engendering tension and ultimately reaching a unified closure.

His initial undertaking with Call was to revise poems for a tome of verse that would deal with Brodsky's crumbling marriage and impending divorce, a collection he had tentatively titled *The Final Dis-Solution*. It was slated to serve as a companion volume to *The Land of the Sacred Tree*, a proposed book of love poems spanning his twenty-five-year relationship with Jan. In classifying and editing those pieces, he found poems that fit

into two other categories as well: "Jane poems," about the new lady in his life, Jane Goldberg (verse that would ultimately be published in *Forever, for Now: Poems for a Later Love*, Time Being Books, 1991) and Holocaust pieces about the "personal holocaust" he had been experiencing, in the wake of his marriage's disintegration (many of which would appear in *Gestapo Crows: Holocaust Poems*, Time Being Books, 1992).

He was also frantically revising Holocaust poems that had been allocated to a separate project — a collaborative effort, between him and William Heyen, entitled *Falling from Heaven: Holocaust Poems*. The two authors had conceived of the manuscript in 1989 when, shortly after committing Timeless Press to publishing five volumes of Heyen's work, Brodsky flew to New York, to visit Heyen at his Brockport home and finalize contracts. In their brief time together, they had come to realize how complementary Heyen's stark writing style and Brodsky's lyrical narratives might be, if paired alternately, ultimately leading them to spend that weekend constructing a text, which the pair would continue revising for over two years, with the help of Brodsky's new staff.

In fact, it was during that period of revision when Brodsky first discovered both Call's and Cornell's prowess as editors. While Call had been hired to engage in full text revision, Cornell (whose name would later change to Vandermolen, upon her 1991 marriage) was originally assigned to proofreading texts and archiving the manuscripts in Brodsky's files, ensuring typescripts were properly stored in mylar sheets and arranged in chronological order. However, when Brodsky offered the review copy to Cornell, for a quick read, he found that she presented significant stylistic improvements, and both he and Jane, along with Call, felt she should be offered permanent employment, upon her upcoming graduation in December 1990. She agreed to return in January 1991, and both she and Call continued to contribute to the revision of all poems and books.

Down by one member of the staff, while Cornell was away finishing her degree, Brodsky and Call, who was proving an invaluable employee, nonetheless kept to a feverish pace, continuing work on *Falling from Heaven* and resuming the development of Brodsky's Southern trilogy. While *Mississippi Vistas* had been issued by University Press of Mississippi, in 1983, Brodsky wanted to reformulate the text, editing and shifting the poems, to fulfill his narrative vision. The second edition was ultimately published by Timeless Press, in December 1990.

While 1990 proved extremely productive for Brodsky professionally, the year was his nadir emotionally. Despite Jane's support, he was effectively alone, devoid of all family contact. He cried, in verse, that "the pain of having had [his] children taken from [him]" felt "greater than being caught in a Noah-rain / Whose drops are red-hot clinkers / Exploding from Topf ovens / Belching, day and night, in the invisible welkin" (00965, 2/04/90 — [2]). And when Troika left for Camp Nebagamon, that summer, it was a thrill, for Brodsky, "just being able to spend a day and a half / With a son [he'd] not seen // In more than three months" (00984, 7/17-18/90).

Continuing to reside in a hotel room, Brodsky could not help but lament that his earthly estate lay "crumpled in three plastic bags / In a corner

of his rented debtors' prison" and that he had been "rendered penniless / By those who owed him devotion: / Parents, wife, and the boy with his name, / Who still lives down time's lane, dreaming" (03621, 7/4/90). And the darkness continued to spread into his psyche as his divorce grew imminent, even as he longed for the hatred to stop eating away at both him and his wife. On the autumn day he met Jan at the courthouse, to sign the decree, she gifted him with a bouquet of roses, and he, in turn, gave her a poem he had penned, expressing his desire to someday move past their vitriol, rediscover at least a friendship, to see them into their later years, noting that "this day marks the first frost of our middle ages / And our gothic years" but calling on their minds and souls to find "some sign of redemption, / That our shattered heart-parts / Might not be scattered with this day's dust," all in hope that the greater force that brought them together — love — would eventually "thaw [their] frozen souls" (03645, 10/11/90).

Engulfed in bewilderment, over "a wedding ring [he'd] bequeathed to history," Brodsky declared himself "divorce's orphan," ready to take up "the rhythms his diaspora feet beat, // Hoping to compose melodies, out of grief, / Harmonies, from loneliness and despair" (03668, 10/21 & 10/22/90). Unsure of himself, of what course his future might take, he yet took comfort in the succor his burgeoning relationship with Jane provided, grateful to have a partner who could draw from her own experience with marital dissolution, to support him through the most dire of days.

The approach of the holiday season, immediately following his divorce, weighed particularly heavily upon Brodsky. But Jane again welcomed him into her home, for a Thanksgiving celebration with her and one of her sons. Deeply appreciative of her goodwill, Brodsky consented and, shortly after, composed a poem for her, in which he gave thanks, for their "accepting [him] not as a foreigner to their hospitable shores / But as a fellow pilgrim, come, in humbleness, / To kindle their lives with...divine fire," who had invited him, as "a stranger to the New World, / To start his life over again" (03452, 11/22/90). He would do the same at Christmas, when her benevolence gave him a refuge in which to escape the trappings of a holiday "inflated with decades of jettisoned memories," enabling him to "proclaim [his] own faith in humanity, / By whispering forgiveness to [his]...wife / And love-wishes to [his] missing children" while also receiving Jane's kisses and her very fragrance, "of white freesia, iris, and spider mums," as love "filling [his] eyes with her own Christmas snow" (04253, 12/25/90 — [1]).

That symbolic passage, from pilgrimage to subsequent rebirth, would later prove to be the natural conclusion to his first book of poems for Jane (*Forever, for Now: Poems for a Later Love*, 1991) and the start of his second (*Paper-Whites for Lady Jane: Poems of a Midlife Love Affair*, Time Being Books, 1995). Chronicling the development of the relationship, both volumes would be arranged chronologically, documenting his and Jane's deepening affections, their growing maturation and respect.

Continuing to meld on both a personal and professional level, he and Jane unwaveringly laid the foundation upon which all future endeavors set forth for Timeless Press (the public name of which was adapted to

Time Being Books, in 1991) would be built. Further, their teamwork enabled Brodsky's ambitious efforts to put his life's work into print. Indeed, without Jane's help — her dedication to assisting Brodsky with his files and manuscripts, her clarity in scoping projects, and her foresight in hiring Cornell (Vandermolen) and Call — the entire *Complete Poems* series would not have been possible. It is with special thanks to her that Time Being Books publishes this fifth volume of the set.

As with preceding volumes of the series, the pieces in this book bear their creation dates and tracking numbers, at the bottom of each poem, and they have been arranged according to their dates of creation, which represent the time of their original composition, not their revision. If a poem has more than one creation date (i.e., if it was started on one day and not finished until another, with extra stanzas, closure, or the title coming at that later time), it is situated, in this volume, by its first date, because Brodsky's poems typically have their intent, as well as the majority of their content, in place at that point. If two or more poems were produced in one day, each of those poems bears a bracketed numeral, after the creation date, indicating the sequence of composition.

If a creation date could not be verified, a question mark follows the unconfirmed portion, which may be the month, the day, or the year. On rare occasions, the entire date may be in doubt (in which case it is bracketed and followed by a question mark), indicating either that it could represent revision instead of composition or that the drafts were undated but were found near other material written at that time. Also, the date may appear twice for the same poem, once with a question mark and once without, signifying that it is accurate for at least a portion of the text but may or may not apply to the whole piece.

The dates and tracking numbers will eventually serve as cross references between the standard *Complete Poems* volumes and the two concluding books of this series: the index of the Time Being Books database tracking records and the volume of ultimate, later revised versions. The index, to be arranged chronologically, will detail where each poem was composed, provide its publication data, and supply, if relevant, notes about the poem's history. This information, in turn, will link the standard set with the final volume, which will show the corrected, most recent version of every poem drastically revised after its final early version was in place (such as a piece edited to fit the context of a new publication). Any poem in this volume that will have its later form printed in the concluding book — either because it has already undergone such revision or because it has been assigned to a future Time Being Books volume and will, presumably, undergo such revision — bears a delta symbol (Δ) after its title.

Thus, in the *Complete Poems* set, the standard volumes will present the text of each poem, in its corrected original form, the penultimate volume will chronicle its creation data and its publishing history, and the final volume will show its subsequent, revised version, if applicable.

Brodsky's only verse compositions to be omitted from this series are the poetry suites he constructed during the modern era of his career (all those following the formation of Timeless Press). Although he has

always considered the format to be an entity unto itself, with it carrying its own database number and having its own word-processing file, the suites generated at the office, with his editors, tended to be constructed contemporaneously, shortly after he had written the poems, not many months or years after the fact, as his earliest suites had been. As a result, each of Brodsky's modern suites is typically an exact match, in both textual content and chronological ordering, to its individual poems, making it unnecessary to print those suites within the *Complete Poems* volumes.

To retain all the pieces' original authorial voice from the period of composition, the editorial staff of Time Being Books has not fully revised any of the works in this volume (except when generating later versions of those poems that have been culled for new publications, the subsequent form of which will appear in this series' revisions volume). For instance, poems with incorrect stanza lengths have typically been preserved in their original form and simply bear a note, in the tracking system, stating that a particular stanza is one line short or long. Even unfinished poems have not been edited stylistically, because they illustrate the evolution of Brodsky's writing, in juxtaposition with his completed pieces. To alert the reader to such verse, fragmental poems, which are typically ten lines or fewer, carry a dagger symbol (†) after the title, and incomplete poems, which are normally well developed but without the thrust to move toward closure, bear a double-dagger symbol (‡).

Brodsky did, however, revise most of his poems, after writing them, with the intention of refining their grammatical form. To help him achieve that goal, the editorial staff of Time Being Books has worked with Brodsky to make all pieces in this series meet the company's current guidelines for language usage and mechanics, correcting spelling, punctuation, grammar, and syntax as needed, in accordance with *The Chicago Manual of Style* and Edward D. Johnson's *Handbook of Good English*. In instances where dedications or certain details were consciously excised from the original manuscript (such as given names of female companions) but can be deduced, from the context, Brodsky has attempted to restore that wording to those poems, adding his estimation, in brackets. Bold and italic typefaces have also been applied, as appropriate, and preferred spellings (as listed in *Random House Unabridged*) have been utilized as well. While Brodsky's use of neologisms and compound words has been preserved throughout, hyphens have generally been inserted in them, in this volume (unlike volume one), to prevent ambiguity and make the usage more uniform.

These editorial changes are meant to standardize the work and enhance its readability, without any relineation or substantive revision, and they have been made only under Brodsky's direct supervision, bringing clarity and order to the pieces presented here, in volume five of *The Complete Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky*.

*Sheri L. Vandermolen
9/15/2008
Peoria, Illinois*

INTRODUCTION

The half-decade between the second of January 1986 and the eleventh of October 1990, as I chronicled it, in over eight hundred poems, including some incomplete and fragmental pieces, would prove to be the most desperate, hysterical, stressful, and melancholic days imaginable, in the lives of my wife, Jan, and me and our two frightened and confused children, Trilogy and Troika. Those five years had their transitory moments of joy and closeness; however, more often, the days were volcanic, and we watched our homes in Farmington and St. Louis disintegrate. It was as if I and Jan were Lot and his wife, both looking back, watching Sodom and Gomorrah burn. With our defilement of each other's trust, our marriage had indeed turned into a pillar of salt.

Those same five years saw my hopes for a new beginning, my commitment to the marriage vows Jan and I had taken in San Francisco's Sutro Park, on July 8, 1970, come to naught, take their last gasping breaths, die an ignoble death, in the sterile, dispassionate, indifferent courthouse of Clayton, Missouri, but not before Jan and I had systematically destroyed all that we'd taken at least twenty years to build.

The end may have all begun with our decision, in 1984, while we were still comfortably ensconced in our Victorian house, at 628 West Columbia Street, in Farmington, Missouri, a town with a population of 8500, to move to St. Louis, thereby affording our children (Trilogy then ten, Troika seven) better educational opportunities.

Though the big city was only seventy miles to the northeast, it might as well have been three continents away, for the social and cultural opportunities it offered. But Jan and I had misgivings about leaving our country home, even though the thought of keeping our kids in Farmington public schools was worrisome to us both. We had great respect for education and were concerned that the apathy inherent in the rural academic system would disadvantage our children, leave them unable to compete.

One of the chief objections we had about moving was a fear that we might disappear into the anonymity of the large city, become just another number on a mailbox, a real-estate-tax receipt — small fish in the Mississippi River, no longer big ones in Farmington's pond, where everyone knew everyone and where what we thought, said, and did mattered. Despite Farmington's lack of excitement, we wanted to stay, not change a thing, live out our lives, in that serene small town. Nonetheless, our responsibility, we resolved, was to our children, and to that end, we sacrificed our known world. Aware that it would be a difficult adjustment, we took the risk, accepted the possible consequences as the price we might have to pay, to advance our children's futures.

In the summer of 1984, we rented a house in the St. Louis suburb of Clayton, where, over forty years earlier, during the Second World War, I had grown up, gone to elementary school — the same school (Glenridge) both our children would soon attend. At first, we didn't entertain the idea of selling our home in Farmington. I was still working as the manager of slack outlets for Biltwell, which, in 1982, my father sold to Interco, International Shoe Company's successful conglomerate, and I continued to spend two or three nights a week in our Farmington house. Often, when there, I'd sit out on the back patio, with my notebook, pen,

and spatula, drinking wine, barbecuing for myself, and writing poignant, elegiac poems; "May Day" (04130, 5/1/86) is one of a number in this vein. The silence, the absence of my family, the vacant swing set, the desolation often caused me to grow deeply sorrowful. These poems reflect the passing of a special era, aura. I saw myself as a ghost. Without my family, our house was a mausoleum, in which I hated staying overnight. Paradoxically, that glorious Victorian mansion was empty of its family yet fully furnished with the American antiques we and our friends had so reveled in, during the '70s and early '80s. In that house, by myself, I'd become melancholic, with happy memories.

Also, I continued making trips to Mississippi, though much less frequently. I wrote ten Southern poems in 1986, only three in 1987, and just four in 1988, the year I last attended the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, in Oxford. Like my first visits to Yoknapatawpha, between 1976 and 1980, those I made between 1986 and 1990 were benign, innocuous. I wasn't looking to tryst with Southern belles, in Bailey's Woods and Oxford's steamy purlieus, or spend escapist weekends in Memphis or Jackson or New Orleans. I could not and would not tolerate that kind of dissolute behavior any longer. I had battered fences to mend, and I fully intended to reenergize my marriage, start my family life over again.

Despite weaning myself from Oxford, I was still totally enthralled by the Faulkner mystique. My deep friendship with Bob Hamblin, a professor of English at Southeast Missouri State University, helped keep my passion for Faulkner scholarship kindled, including the multi-volume *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection* series we had committed to publishing with the University Press of Mississippi. In 1987, the press brought out Faulkner's *Country Lawyer and Other Stories for the Screen*. In 1989, both the fifth volume of the *Comprehensive Guide* series, *Manuscripts and Documents*, and *Stallion Road: A Screenplay by William Faulkner*, appeared.

As if all this work hadn't been enough, I lost myself to a fifth Faulkner project, gathering and revising those of my Faulkner essays, interviews, and articles which had been published over the previous five years or so. From these pieces, I wove together a book I titled *William Faulkner, Life Glimpses*, which would be published by the University of Texas Press, in 1990. Making this book gave me a tremendous sense of pride. Indeed, all of my Faulkner work over these five years was a blessed, necessary break from the stresses and pain my home life caused me.

In 1987, with my parents' help, Jan and I purchased a large house, at 22 Hillvale, in Clayton, and in April 1988, bowing to financial pressures, we put our Farmington home up for sale. We had lived at 628 West Columbia since 1969. In the signing of a deed to our new house, nineteen years dissolved before our eyes. Our Farmington adventure was over.

But Jan and I were being given a chance to start over. The new dwelling, a two-story Tudor, built, in 1929, of brick, stone, half-timbering, stained-glass windows, and slate roof with dormers, was magnificent. In its manner, it was every bit as beautiful as the residence we had finally, with vast reluctance, relinquished.

We eagerly engaged in our kids' school functions, made an effort to meet and befriend our neighbors, who were more numerous and considerably younger than those we'd known in Farmington. I became involved in Cub Scouts and soccer, to be closer to Troika. Jan took Trilogy to dance classes. Jan and I volunteered in everything from classroom presentations to field trips. We were well on our way toward making a fine circle of friends. Above all, we wanted to have Trilogy and Troika, just up from the country, fit in, feel accepted, flourish socially and culturally.

During this time, life in St. Louis was hectic, especially after we'd lived so long in Farmington's slower rhythms. All of a sudden, Jan found herself constantly busy, coordinating our children's activities, and she became actively engaged in teaching aerobics classes for the YMCA.

For three years after we'd first moved to St. Louis, in 1984, I needed to be in Farmington, where I had my flagship store and distribution center, from which I organized shipments to my six other factory outlets. During the weeks, I might as easily be in Farmington as St. Louis.

All of it was a turmoil, a perpetual chaos, an endlessly stressful frenzy, with my being absent for a day or more at a time and with Jan running in and out of the house, between aerobics classes, doing things for the kids, and, increasingly, going off on missions mysterious to me — she had chores to do, friends to meet, things to return. I could not fully fathom that she was surfeiting her appetite for freedom, something which, as a nurturing mother in Farmington, she had sacrificed.

She was making connections, and our link was diminishing to a point of nonexistence. Gradually, over the next three years, this would become irreversibly apparent to me. She and I were rarely together, and when we were, it was perfunctory, for the children's sake.

In 1986, we took a family trip, to visit my sister Dale, who lived in Oakland, California, with her husband and young son. We stayed for a few days, before driving across the bay, to San Francisco, that mystical place where Jan and I were married, sixteen years earlier, then on to Sausalito and up through the Napa Valley. We found it very uncomfortable, being so close. In making our vacation plans, I had hoped that this trip with our two children might form the basis for a rededication of our marriage. But Jan and I shared no intimacy, and the trip failed miserably; it was a travesty of our elopement in July of 1970.

By then, pressures of our move to the city were weighing heavily on Jan, and St. Louis seemed to be proving too tempting for her. I felt pained, watching her transformation.

In 1987, I decided to leave Biltwell. After managing my outlet stores for almost two decades, I'd finally wearied of road travel. I felt I'd paid my dues. In truth, I had begun losing interest in the position, in 1982, when, after fifty-two years, my father cut his ties with the men's trouser company he'd incorporated in 1929. I hung on for those five years, but working for my dad's successor, Ed Baum, a contemporary of mine, just wasn't the same.

I realized that I needed to begin gathering my poems, written steadily, honestly, devotedly, fervidly, over the two decades since I'd graduated from Washington University. In the fall of 1987, I turned the third floor of

our home into my writing office, where, no longer a salaried employee, I settled in for what I thought would be a long, pleasant spell of composing. But Jan found my presence at home intolerable; the house was her domain and my being there all day interfered with her lifestyle.

In 1988, I secured an unrented space in Le Chateau Village, a building owned by my father, five miles west of Clayton, not only allowing me to get out of my house but motivating me to start a publishing company. It was important for me to go to an office, consider myself an entrepreneur again, and have a purposive routine to follow. I missed my work at the factory in Farmington and my visits to the slack-outlet stores, but the dream I had nurtured since graduate school — to harvest my work, give my poems their place in literary history — was finally becoming reality.

To fulfill my dream, I would have to formulate a business plan, one which would detail work functions and a printing schedule. I chose a name, for my new enterprise, that had a poetic, vowel-chiming ring to it: Timeless Press. At first, it would be the vehicle for publishing my own work. With luck, I would discover other literary properties that would satisfy my sensibility as to what constituted great poetry, works I could add to the company's publication list.

It so happened that a small data-processing firm occupied the office across from mine. After discussing options with the owners, I began supplying them with volumes of my early verse, which they input via word-processing. My idea was to have all my poems readily available on PC, so that I might easily draw from them, thematically, to create new books for Timeless Press.

I hired, as my first editor, a friend of mine, from my Washington University days — Linda Hermelin, who'd shared many graduate English classes with me. Working part-time, she assisted in preparing three books of my poetry, for Timeless Press: *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* (1988), *The Thorough Earth* (1989), and *Four and Twenty Blackbirds Soaring* (1989). Grammar, punctuation, and spelling were never my strengths (imagination was my poetic stock in trade), but fortunately for my poems, they were Linda's. Her final editorial contribution to my work focused on helping me complete *William Faulkner, Life Glimpses*, published by University of Texas Press, in 1990.

To this day, I'm certain that starting my publishing company saved my life. In fact, during those troubled years, I had no other life, nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Running Timeless Press was the only purpose I had for living, during a time in which I was persona non grata in my own house.

Jan and I were on a collision course with divorce, although it would take us fully five grueling years of heartache and disillusionment to bring closure to our painful, irreconcilable estrangement.

One of the reasons for this prolongation was that Jan and I believed in living spontaneously, without regard for planning and practicality. We shared a disastrous and, ultimately, self-defeating refusal to deal with the truth. We were doomed, finally, to have reality make us accountable for the consequences of our irreverence, our eccentricity, our immaturity, our irresponsibility. Those who elope, hide outside society, try to lead

a spiritual life without the strictures of traditional religion, pretend love will always protect them, against the enemy, eventually run the risk of succumbing to their own delusions. We certainly did.

Temptations seemed to be luring Jan away, and I lost track of her. The life we had known together became irretrievable. We had taken to separate bedrooms. Neither of us made any pretenses toward caring about making love or even bothering to pay lip-service to intimacy. Affection became a stranger.

My former apostasy was being brought home to me. I was lonely and wounded, and there seemed little I could do to stop the destruction. I could see divorce looming, threatening everything we'd worked so hard to build.

It was obvious that my valuable Faulkner collection, which I'd spent almost thirty years gathering, was vulnerable to being split up, as part of a settlement. I made my intentions clear to Bill Stacy, the president of Southeast Missouri State University, where my books and papers were being kept on deposit, that I would be amenable to transferring ownership of the collection to the school, provided it could meet my requirements. Bill, a former member of the Speech Communication and Theatre Department, recognized, at once, the immense potential benefits to the school of its acquiring one of the world's premier William Faulkner collections. I didn't have the heart to see it brought up to impersonal auction at Sotheby's or Christie's and summarily dispersed, just to satisfy a divorce-court order.

In October 1988, I entered into a binding agreement with Southeast Missouri State University, to transfer title of my Faulkner archive, in return for payments spread out over twenty years, in equal monthly installments made to me and my wife. At least, that way, the collection would remain intact. The agreement also included additional compensation, in the form of services to be rendered by Southeast Missouri State University's printing department, which would set, print, and bind Timeless Press's first ten or so books.

Between 1986 and 1990, my poems took many unpredictable forms, and I often wrote like a man possessed of a desperation, anger, and sadness I'd never before experienced, imagining myself a victim or a survivor of Nazi intimidation, Gestapo cruelty. Often sublimating my unhappiness into compositions with a Holocaust tenor, I wrote four of the twelve Holocaust poems that appear in *The Thorough Earth*, published by Timeless Press, in 1989, and twenty of the forty-eight poems that comprise *Gestapo Crows*, including "Hazards of a Mixed Marriage" (04234, 12/2/89 — [1]), "An American Holocaust" (00965, 2/4/90 — [2]), and "[Flying debris from a cosmic chimney]" (00466, [11/10/89]). In poems like these, I perversely channeled my pain into the horror which, my reading told me, disenfranchised Jews in Germany, Poland, Austria, Hungary, and elsewhere must have felt when they were marked for extermination. In addition, I composed twenty-two of my twenty-five poems that appear in the book I coauthored with William Heyen, *Falling from Heaven: Holocaust Poems of a Jew and a Gentile*, which would be published in 1991, by Time Being Books.

Within my family, I saw myself as the pariah Jew, singled out to die in the fires of marital discord. Watching my marriage dissolve, envisioning the loss of my children, imagining the immense loneliness that would attend the aftermath, I identified with those unfinished lives, those six million Jews who died in the Holocaust.

Nonetheless, I realized that this identification had its limitations, since my emotions weren't fraught with any real possibility that I might perish. Though there were only thirteen poems of this nature, I placed them in the last section ("The Final Dis-Solution — Today's Family") of my 1992 book *Gestapo Crows: Holocaust Poems*. I was fully aware that they could be received as self-serving, inauthentic, grotesquely inappropriate, especially to survivors of the Holocaust, for their conflated metaphors, and I had determined, even then, never to include them when I'd eventually publish my complete Holocaust poems.

Toward the end of September 1989, after considerable correspondence with Bill Heyen, I flew up to visit him and his wife, at their home, in Brockport, New York. The purpose of the trip was to solidify a series of contracts whereby Timeless Press would publish five of Heyen's volumes of poetry.

During that productive visit, on the floor of Bill's downstairs study, he and I pieced together *Falling from Heaven*. I selected twelve of my favorites from his book *Erika: Poems of the Holocaust*, to which he added thirteen recently written poems; he chose, from my large collection of Holocaust poems, twenty-five he felt would best relate to his. That collaboration was so intense that it would bind us in a communion of spirits, even though, in subsequent years, we'd come to experience differences of opinion, in dealing with publishing decisions, that would keep us from pursuing further mutual literary projects.

On myriad levels, the appearance of that book would prove to be momentous. For one thing, it would mark my company's first publication of an author other than myself — indeed, a highly celebrated American poet, who was immersed in the Holocaust. For another, shaping *Falling from Heaven*, with Bill, helped legitimize not only my interest in the Holocaust but my right to deal with the subject. Moreover, it reminded me that no one "owns" the Holocaust and that when one confronts the grisly, abject truth of that vast horror, there should be no distinctions between human beings — Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, agnostics. In our book, while our styles are dissimilar, our voices are tuned to the same key.

Making *Falling from Heaven* reinforced, in me, the awareness that Jan and I were hapless victims of forces beyond our control as well as perpetrators of our own undoing — not just Catholic and Jew but two irretrievably misguided lovers unable to rise from the pyre of our smoldering marriage.

The pain that prompted those *Falling* poems had touched each member of my family, and yet neither Jan nor I knew how to negate it. 1987, we sent our son, Troika, age nine, to Camp Nebagamon for his first summer. Jan hated the idea of his leaving for a month. I felt this hiatus from our family tensions might be a godsend for our young son,

as it indeed proved to be, just as it had been for me, more than three decades earlier.

In 1951, the summer of my tenth year, my parents sent me off to Camp Nebagamon for Boys, in northern Wisconsin, while they oversaw our move from Clayton to the then-westernmost edges of St. Louis County — a suburb named Ladue. I would grow so fond of Nebagamon, during my years as a camper and counselor, that I would never lose touch with it, even after spending my last summer there, in 1968.

The camp had a legendary director, Max J. “Muggs” Lorber, who, along with Leo Durocher (who would become a historic major-league manager), had coached my teenaged father, in Sunday-morning baseball in St. Louis’s Forest Park, the city’s municipal grounds. I looked up to five-foot-six larger-than-life Muggs, who had quarterbacked Indiana University’s 1924 varsity football team, earned All-American status, and also lettered in basketball, baseball, and track. Muggs was a man’s man, after whom I patterned all my images and aspirations.

I wanted the same for Troika, through that renewal of camaraderie, although, in 1988, his camp experience was altered slightly. Earlier in the year, we had learned that Jan’s brother, Eric, the same age as I, was suffering the ravages of bone cancer. In the beginning, we believed his malady wasn’t life-threatening; he was too young — just forty-seven. But by April, his condition was dire, and in late June, we all gathered in La Salle-Peru, Illinois, to attend his funeral.

Jan and I did what we could to keep up a respectful and respectable front, for our children’s sake and for her family’s. We were devastated by Eric’s death, and for that short time, we were able to set aside our personal problems. Still, I couldn’t look her in the eyes, nor could she look into mine.

Because attending Eric’s funeral caused Troika to miss the start of Camp Nebagamon’s season, by a few days, I flew, with him, to Minneapolis and on to Duluth, then drove him to the camp. Once there, I stayed with him for the first three days of his second summer visit — this time two full sessions, for him, totaling eight weeks away from home.

Those days were ones of inestimable bonding between Troika and me. While staying there, with him, living in the camp’s Big House (the 1890s Weyerhaeuser family’s summer compound, at Lake Nebagamon), I wrote seven poems, including “Accompanying My Son to Summer Camp” (00022, 6/26/88) and “Male Bonding” (00028, 6/30/88 — [1]), completed one more, immediately upon returning home, to St. Louis, and composed a final one, “The Fountain of Youth” (00029, 7/30/88 — [2]), while flying home after visiting Troika again, a month later, at the start of the second four-week session.

Soon, I realized that these nine poems presented a unique opportunity for me to put closure to a series of Camp Nebagamon poems I’d been compiling, sporadically, since 1966, poems about a young boy growing into manhood, rite-of-passage poems I’d been writing about myself, in relation to the microcosmic world of Camp Nebagamon for Boys. Furthermore, as I began assessing the whole group of verse spanning my time there — the seven summers I had been a camper, beginning in 1951,

when I was a ten-year-old, progressing through six more, as a counselor, then moving to my role as father of a son who was perpetuating this cycle — I saw a very poignant book rising up out the two decades' worth of poems, capped by those I'd just written while accompanying Troika to Nebagamon.

And I had the perfect motivation for bringing them together. The present directors of the camp, Nardie and Sally Stein (Sally was Muggs and Janet Lorber's daughter), had decided to host a celebration, in Duluth's Radisson hotel as well as at camp, to commemorate Nebagamon's sixtieth anniversary, in September of 1988, a month after the finish of the camp season. What better opportunity for me to present my camp poems? Immediately upon hearing of this reunion, I set about making a book which I'd dedicate to the Lorbers and the Steins.

As I labored on these special poems, I obsessed over naming the book. In 1983, four years before Troika started as a camper at Nebagamon, the Steins invited me to visit camp, for four days, as part of the Trails Forward program, intended to introduce current campers to former campers with interesting vocations. I, as a poet, would encourage the boys to open themselves to the flora and fauna of the North Woods, translate their sensitized impressions into lyric form. Flying north, to Minneapolis, then on to Duluth, and driving the thirty miles southeast, to Lake Nebagamon, into camp, for the program, I reflected, in verse, on how much the journey had changed since the days of my youth, realizing that flying to Minneapolis and then being bused from there, to camp, had been the norm, for many years.

The piece, called "You Can't Go Back, Exactly" (00019, 7/1/83), recounts how trains helped define my camping experience. Summers, from 1951 through 1957, as part of a contingent of fifty to seventy-five other St. Louis kids, I'd journey to Camp Nebagamon, from St. Louis's Union Station, on Market Street, to Chicago's Union Station (via the Gulf, Mobile, & Ohio's Ann Rutledge or Abraham Lincoln streamline diesel-engine trains), where we'd have dinner at the Fred Harvey Restaurant, before being ferried across town, in Parmalee cabs, to the Northwestern Station, where, joined by at least another sixty or seventy campers, we'd board our chartered Soo Line or Chicago & North Western train, made up of pre-World War II Pullman sleeper cars, which an ancient steam locomotive would drag all the way up the north shore of Lake Michigan, stopping at Highland Park, then in Milwaukee, before chugging straight into the white-birch and towering-red-and-white-pine wilds of northern Wisconsin. It was an overnight odyssey that any boy of ten or twelve or fifteen would find more exciting than almost anything else he might imagine in a dozen lifetimes, a trip that would deposit him, us, by the tracks, early the next morning, in the pine-scented purlieus of either Hillcrest or Hawthorne, Wisconsin...blink-and-miss-it junctions, both within eight miles of the tiny village of Lake Nebagamon, Wisconsin, home to Camp Nebagamon for Boys.

While those wondrous trains had become a thing of the past, the poem "You Can't Go Back, Exactly" reprised the excitement of taking the railways to camp. This point was crucial, quintessential to the whole

experience, demarcating the generations. I could return to the sacred land of my youth but not as I'd gone there before. Not-so-subtle differences had crept in; I was a victim of change. The camp was the same, but I was not. I'd grown older, grown away from my youth. I knew *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* was the perfect title for my new book, which became the first volume published by Timeless Press, in 1988. Everyone who attended the reunion received a copy of it.

My love of trains had been instilled, in me, throughout my childhood, on visits to camp and even earlier, on journeys with my father. He understood how they thrilled me, stimulated my imagination, and between the ages of eight and twelve or thirteen, I'd occasionally accompany him, on his business trips from St. Louis to New York, aboard the Pennsylvania and New York Central lines. Sixty years later, I still have vivid memories of my dad and me eating in dining cars manned by white-uniformed black Pullman waiters, the two of us playing gin rummy, in club cars, and sleeping snugly, securely, in those compact roomettes he'd reserve.

When we were in New York together, he'd always encourage me to indulge in the fabulous electric-train displays at FAO Schwarz's Fifth Avenue store, just across the street from the Savoy-Plaza Hotel, where he'd take two suites, one for his week-long residence (for more than a quarter-century, he spent twenty-six weeks a year in Manhattan), the other for his Biltwell office/showroom, from which he'd sell his men's dress trousers to America's finest retailers. I was always dazzled by the extravagant model-railroad set-ups FAO boasted, on their second floor. Most mesmerizing to me were the Lionel smoke-belching, cast-metal Magne-Traction black locomotives and colorful plastic-sheathed diesel engines, though I also loved their variously hued and logoed freight cars and gleaming, aluminum-sided, illuminated passenger cars and the Plasticville towns and cities through which they endlessly traveled. My dad would make sure that I never left New York without at least one new addition to my train set. And when I wasn't with him, he would bring home a Lionel train car or accessory for my growing basement layout, just to let me know that he had missed me.

The American mystique of the train, and the rail journeys themselves, awoke memories that had a stabilizing effect on me, in a time of profound personal turmoil; they evoked a simpler, uncomplicated, innocent era.

August 1988 marked not only the publication of *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* but also the final vacation Jan, I, and our two children would ever make as a family. Although our visit to Fort Lauderdale was not a happy occasion, I was able to write one poem to commemorate our sojourn there: "Surfers, Nurse Sharks, and Us" (02178, 8/27/88). We'd brought the tension with us, from St. Louis.

From 1986 to 1990, I recorded the fever chart of our marriage's disintegration, in 162 poems, which, eventually, I came to classify by the working title *The Final Dis-Solution*, a distortion of the Nazi code phrase "The Final Solution."

In 1984, the year we moved from Farmington to St. Louis, into our rented house in Clayton, I only composed six poems expressing my

disillusion, sadness, and confusion over our deteriorating relationship. In 1986, I wrote just five of those ugly *Final Dis-Solution* poems. What, in 1987, increased to seventeen poems of unhappiness grew disproportionately, to forty-three *Final Dis-Solution* poems, in 1988, including "Losing You" (02010, 1/19/88 — [2]); "Caught in the Act" (04109, 3/25/88 — [1]); "A Plague on Our House" (04107, 4/25/88); "Dissolution" (04105, 4/27/88 — [2]); "Obsequies of Adultery" (04103, 5/9/88); "Eden's Diseased Trees" (02182, 9/15/88); "Decree of Dissolution" (02171, 10/4/88); "Locked Out" (02168, 10/6/88 — [1]); "Saving the Marriage" (01012, 12/3/88).

Furthering the challenge, Trilogy and Troika had never quite bridged the gap between Farmington and Clayton. Insecure and self-conscious, they hadn't seemed to achieve a sense of belonging, among the children of Clayton's affluent families. Now, to make things worse, the fallout arising from our marital discord was causing our children great embarrassment when they were with their schoolmates. Though I'll never know the depth of their pain and fear, in that tumultuous time, it seemed apparent that their identities were being scarred, their spirits diminished, their futures compromised, by the legacy Jan and I, in our demoralized desperation, were bequeathing them.

During 1989, I wrote fifty-seven *Final Dis-Solution* poems, bearing witness to the steady erosion of our marriage. Living in our divided house became intolerable. I spent most of my waking hours away from home, at my writing office, on the road, traveling to Cape Girardeau, to work with my friend Bob Hamblin, on the Faulkner collection, which now belonged to Southeast Missouri State University, or driving to Farmington, to teach my night class, at Mineral Area College, in Flat River. Five poems written during that year speak eloquently of the corruption and finality of our condition: "Flotsam from a Wrecked Marriage" (02288, 1/5/89); "Irreversible Damage" (00464, 3/11/89); "The End of the Line" (00297, 5/9/89); "The Heart's Archipelago" (04219, 9/6/89 — [2]); and "The L.D. and Jan Show Goes off the Air" (04207, 12/27/89).

In 1989, despite the anguish and turmoil, the fear, desperation, uncertainty, and pain, of watching my family disappear into an abyss, I was able to publish *The Thorough Earth*, my first book of Holocaust poems (which were juxtaposed with traveling-salesman poems), and *Four and Twenty Blackbirds Soaring*, a poetic sampler consisting of six motifs: imagination, alienation, love, poetry, the heartland, and transcendence. These titles were the second and third to be produced in the print shop at Southeast Missouri State.

In June 1989, with Timeless Press just off the ground, I set out, tremulously, on my own. Jan was busy networking, doing what she could to mollify her unhappiness. What Jan wanted was not within my purview.

In August 1989, hoping to advance the stature of Timeless Press and my personal reputation as a poet, I hired Keith Dinsmore, a representative for a national public-relations firm based in St. Louis. For a retainer, he would help promote Timeless Press, put its name before the public.

Not long after coming to work for me, Keith announced, with startling certainty, that he'd met a woman whom he felt I must get to know. He

made it seem as if I had no choice. He would take care of the arrangements. No more than an acquaintance to either of us, he had a vision that she and I were meant for each other. Why I should trust him, I had no idea, but I did — enough, anyway, while I was still living at my Clayton home, to allow him to invite this mystery lady to join him and me for dinner at Busch's Grove, a restaurant located not far from my writing office.

At twilight on August 10, I drove to Busch's Grove and found Keith with a lady he introduced to me as Jane Goldberg, a not-so-recent divorcee with two children. The three of us talked briefly at the table; then, Keith excused himself to make a call. He never returned. Jane and I kept talking, exploring the similarity of our family predicaments, wondering, all the while, where Keith was. When we finished dinner, she scribbled a cryptic note on a paper napkin, explaining to me that this single word was the key to the universe and that if I would allow her, she would teach me how to say it: "NO."

The night was a high-water mark, a spell cast over me, by a beguiling magician. But it would be two months before Jane and I would see each other again — the seventh of October, to be exact, when I would screw up the courage to ask her to join me on a trip downtown, to see Laclede's Landing, Eads Bridge, Eero Saarinen's Gateway Arch and have lunch.

Afterwards, I wrote a poem called "Opening Up the Territory" (03428, 10/10/89). It would become the prologue to *Forever, for Now: Poems for a Later Love* (Time Being Books, 1991), a daring fifty-one-poem book chronicling the first year of my romance with Jane. The poem looks back, to my youth — train trips to Camp Nebagamon and to New York, with my dad — and forward, to my future with Janie. The title of this poem evokes Mark Twain's Huck Finn and his companion, Jim, floating down the Mississippi, on a raft, lighting out for the territory. In it, I recount when Janie and I drove down to Laclede's Landing "To pay homage to Eads Bridge / And count cars of freight trains, / Like saying rosary, / As they swayed and screeched over trestles / Suspending them in our imaginations," concluding with the two of us, "complete strangers, / ...waiting to progress our uncompleted memories, / Before venturing west, together, / In search of a fresh conception of love." Janie and I needed to cut loose of old ties, head west, metaphorically, together, in search of release from all that had encumbered us individually. I loved this poem, and I loved this new lady in my life. She held the promise of untrammeled freedom of expression for me.

I wouldn't see Jane again for another month, until November. I remember getting cold feet, feeling guilty for seeking out female companionship while I was still married, still living at home, no matter that the marriage Jan and I shared was dysfunctional and all but defunct.

On my second date with Jane, feeling so passionate about trains, the most romantic place I could think to take her was to the railroad station in Kirkwood, a turn-of-the-century Victorian depot, where passenger trains bound east and west sporadically arrive and depart and a vast number of freight trains snake through its red-blinking crossing gates, at unpredict-

able intervals. The poem I wrote to record our excursion, “Watching for Trains” (03402, 11/11/89), was highly erotic. I’d never sublimated such sexual fervor into a poem. It incorporated all the undefined libido that was seething inside me, aching to break out, express itself in physical release, the first two stanzas describing a slowly approaching freight train that finally passes within a few feet of us:

For nearly ten minutes,
That five-engined, ninety-five-car freight,
Out of sight, around the bend,
Lumbered toward them —
A volcano roaring, about to blow —
Before it finally exploded into focus,

Cinders swimming up, from the roadbed,
Black smoke blasting from exhaust stacks,
Banshee-screeching brake shoes scraping drums,
Axles, lacking grease, sparking,
Frames of oversize transport carriers
Swaying too far, side to side.

Concluding “Watching for Trains,” I sensed, knew, that Janie and I would be lovers. The last two lines of the poem suggest this: “They entered each other’s eyes, / To watch for trains just around the bend.”

Christmas 1989 came, and Jan took Trilogy and Troika to her parents’ home, in Jacksonville, Illinois; I was left to fend for myself. Janie invited me to share Christmas with her and her two boys. I accepted and slept over at her house, torn between a sense of gratefulness, for having someone to be with, and of guilt, for being separated from my family. But by that time, Jan and I weren’t even pretending that we shared a marriage.

In early January 1990, I met Janie, clandestinely, in New York. I booked a room in the decrepit St. Moritz Hotel; she stayed just a few doors down, on Central Park South, at the prestigious Park Lane Hotel. Though I soon moved in with her, I kept my room because I was still married and concerned that it might cause me to lose further ground, in the senseless, egregiously expensive process of the dissolution of my marriage.

And how ironic it was that I should be staying with Janie, within a half-minute’s walk from where my dad and I used to stay, forty years prior, at the Savoy-Plaza Hotel, which was razed in 1964. Doubly ironic was the fact that FAO Schwarz (where I would go, as a boy, to escape into its world of electric trains) was now located where the old Savoy-Plaza stood, on the ground floor of the GM building, just across the street. The opportunity to share, with Jane, this part of Manhattan, which had always been so magical to me, was, itself, especially enchanting.

Never had I lost myself to such a romantic fugue. Somehow, in that brief winter interlude, Janie and I felt it was both now and forever. During those few days in New York City, we gave ourselves to each other. At some point, it began to snow, and the snow blessed us. My poem

for her, “New York Snowstorm” (03404, 1/10/90 — [2]), records the epiphany of our ardor:

...the touching

Was such a magical passage to lovemaking
That eventually came and kept coming, coming,
Later and later, until only the snow
Knew when our reflections in the sweating glass
Quit witnessing its mystical visitation.

In early February, I left St. Louis, for a ten-day retreat to my parents’ oceanfront condominium, in Fort Lauderdale. The chaos and humiliation of my separation from Jan was still suffusing me with anguish. I needed to be by myself, away from my hometown, and have some peace in which to get my thoughts in order. I wrote fourteen poems during that lonely trip, two for Janie, two others about my crumbling relationship with Jan. Those ten days felt like ten years.

I returned, to St. Louis, on a Friday. Sunday afternoon, three Clayton police officers arrived at our front door. While I was in Florida, the machinery had been put in motion to have me evicted from the house. My children watched as the policemen escorted me out. I was too stunned to be outraged, embarrassed, or crushed. The next morning, having spent my first night in my new “home” — a room at the Breckenridge Hotel, within walking distance of my writing office — I wrote “Restraining Order Enforced” (03625, 2/12/90).

For the rest of that year, my children never saw me. I anguished over not being part of their lives, especially during their formative, vulnerable preteen and teenage years, when their personalities were maturing. Sadly, they had no dad to listen to their predicaments, help them make decisions and resolve their problems, no dad to pitch in with their homework, no dad with whom to watch TV and videos and just be silly. Instead, I was exiled in a hotel room, by night, my writing office, by day. They were at the mercy of the divorce’s inner workings.

In that stark hotel room, where I lived for almost a year, when I’d get in bed at night, I’d picture Trilogy and Troika in their beds in that large house, on Hillvale, in Clayton, and wanted to believe that they were picturing me, too, in my hotel quarters. Then, I’d envision them in their beds in our home in Farmington (with me reading Dr. Seuss to them, singing lullabies) — my two little charges growing up with Jan and me, and as I’d fade beneath the weight of my tears, I’d lose sight of them as they were plucked up in the beak of a colossal vulture and carried off, along a horizon lit by a bleeding sun, to a distant sky beyond my reckoning. This recurring nightmare ravaged my fragile psyche, for more than a year.

My eviction from home defined the real end of my marriage to Jan, even though our divorce didn’t become official until October 1990. To quell the loneliness and pain, I began spending more and more time with Janie. Between February and October, as proceedings wended interminably through the courts, we twice visited Chicago and once more met in Manhattan. In St. Louis, we went to the circus and symphony, again

and again; we visited the art museum, returned to the levee, to view Eads Bridge and the trains; we saw a baseball game, went back to Busch's Grove, on August 10, to celebrate the anniversary of our first date.

Upon returning from our first trip to New York together, Janie asked if she could help me with anything at Timeless Press. I told her that Linda Hermelin was about to leave for a permanent job. I asked Janie if she would finish the last task for *William Faulkner, Life Glimpses*: putting together the index. For three straight weeks, she buried herself in three-by-five note cards — a true labor of love.

Janie would soon prove to be the catalyst, the guiding force, for my publishing company. In 1990, she would become its first editor in chief. In 1991, Time Being Books (the new name of Timeless Press, for purposes of incorporation) would publish the book I'd written and dedicated to Jane: *Forever, for Now: Poems for a Later Love*. Besides being a paean to her, it would implicitly express my gratitude to her, for assuming the responsibilities of overseeing and advancing my ambitious press.

Unlike me, Jane was a realist, a practical thinker, not a poet or dreamer. After asking me how long I thought I would need her help (I honestly figured it would take about three and a half hours of intense work, on her part, to get things off the ground), she assessed the real, long-term requirements of a small press: two full-time, strictly disciplined editors — nothing less.

In March 1990, Jane received a résumé from Sheri Cornell (Vandermolen), a young lady with one semester to go before graduating, with a degree in English education, from the University of Missouri. She was seeking summer work. Janie was so impressed with her academic record, she insisted that although Timeless Press didn't have any cash flow — didn't have a budget for one employee, let alone two — it couldn't afford not to hire this extraordinarily promising applicant. Jane called Sheri and offered her a job. She'd start work at the end of May and stay until the end of August, when she'd return to school, to conclude her final semester.

In April 1990, following up on an unusual situation-wanted ad in the Sunday *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jane contacted Jerry Call, an interesting young man with bachelor's and master's degrees in English, from the University of Missouri, and work experience ranging from teaching at colleges and a yeshiva, to proofreading aircraft-maintenance manuals for McDonnell Douglas (now Boeing), to working as a management consultant at the Chicago Board of Trade. Janie was certain that his qualifications were just what Timeless Press needed. Two days later, Jerry had an office right across from the one reserved for Sheri.

Suddenly, with divorce imminent, I threw myself into a wholly new career, as a publisher of poetry. There I was, now moved across the hall, into larger offices at Le Chateau Village, with two vibrantly intelligent and energetic people working at my side, one twenty years my junior, the other almost thirty years younger. The stage was set.

Finally, the fated eleventh day of October came, when Jan and I went to the Clayton courthouse, to officially conclude the marriage we'd sealed two decades earlier, in San Francisco's Sutro Park, high above the Pacific

Ocean, on that silent, humid, flowering morning of July 8, 1970 — two decades come and gone, as if in an instant as well as an endlessly protracted agony.

On that solemn occasion, in that anonymous courtroom, Jan handed me a bouquet of roses. In turn, I gave her a poem I'd composed, to memorialize the event: "The First Frost" (03645, 10/11/90). It expressed my deep dismay and regret, my colossal sorrow, my helplessness, my resignation to our fate. It captured my hope that, for all the destructiveness we'd inflicted upon each other and despite our straying, our separation, we might never forget that love was our original guiding light.

For us, separated from each other irretrievably,
 This day marks the first frost of our middle ages
 And our gothic years.
 If it must be symbolic of all we've lost,
 At least let me see, in its mica-white glistening,
 Some sign of redemption,
 That our shattered heart-parts
 Might not be scattered with this day's dust,
 Dissipated mist lifting into twilight,
 To mix with ice crystals
 Drifting down, down into the abyss.

O God, let love sustain us, in days to come,
 Just as my tears, wetting this page,
 With this final benediction for you, my wife,
 Make me realize that even in my silences,
 I'll always be grieving for us.
 And if my tears turn to frost
 Spreading across the lawn of our remaining years,
 Let the heated love we shared
 Turn it into pacific water,
 On which we might walk, the rest of our lives,
 And thaw our frozen souls.

But the roses and the poem only heightened the pain of the formal severing of our wedding vows. It almost seemed as if our divorce didn't relate to us, wasn't meant for us, that it was all a vast mistake, some other couple's unceremonious demise.

And yet, in a flash, its finality was reality. We were no more, as if our entire history had never existed. In that impersonal courthouse, neither Jan nor I fully comprehended the gravity of that which we had willed into permanent closure.

*Louis Daniel Brodsky
 5/30–6/20/01
 St. Louis, Missouri*

**THE COMPLETE POEMS
OF
LOUIS DANIEL
BRODSKY**

VOLUME FIVE, 1986–1990

- * *This symbol is used to indicate that a stanza has been divided because of pagination.*
- † *This symbol is used to indicate that a piece contains fragmental poetry.*
- ‡ *This symbol is used to indicate that a piece is incomplete.*
- Δ *This symbol is used to indicate that this poem also has a later, revised version or that it has been assigned to appear in a future publication and will, presumably, undergo major revision. The later version will be printed in a separate volume.*

Premonitions of Alzheimer's

Day by day, he hears memory's cogs clogging,
Silence overtaking forgetting,
His brain's escapement incrementally wearing away,
Like cave paintings below slow dripping,
An aisle, many centuries deep,
Approaching a great cathedral's nave,
Sandstone grave markers
Whose chiseled exhortations and soliloquies
Winds continuously insinuate.

It takes such strange, erratic shapes:
A misplaced key laid on a nearby table,
Not three minutes earlier;
Familiar faces taunting his haunted gallery,
With names, at first, he's unable to recall,
Then later confuses —
*If Atticus is Burt Lancaster, who is Jim Thorpe?
Gregory Peck can't be, can be?*
He sees himself in Boo Radley's augury.

Soon, he realizes, even eating
Will slip from his list of scheduled priorities;
Eliminating will occur involuntarily.
He'll have no reason to dress,
Rescue himself from arthritic distress,
For having maintained his recumbent position too long.
Yet, today, he recognizes his wife,
Caresses her, begs her sit, listen to him recite
All twelve books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

1/6/86 (05958)

The Manager of Outlet Stores Is Called Out of Retirement[△]

After almost three months of the sweetest inactivity,
The road queen, whore Lorelei,
Beguiles me out of my self-proclaimed retirement,
Persuades me back onto I-55.

Going south, in a sun-glazed daze,
My crazy-quilted senses
Alternate between a fumbling, narcoleptic dance of death
And stunning orgasm. My mind collapses.

I can't remember having massaged a suppler spine,
Gently manipulated more pliant vertebrae,
Than this highway presents my mind,
Or had metaphors come more fluidly.

As I slide, silently, down her back, toward Memphis,
Visions of her fecund cunt
Lying beneath my weight, not against my body,
Seething with late seeds, but above winter's frigid flesh,

Set up such unimagined frustration,
My groin explodes, freezes inside its own heat.
By degrees, my lust crusts over,
Leaves me stranded on a polar floe,

Slowly dissolving below afternoon's blaze,
Going rapidly nowhere,
Alternating between lapses of monastic abstinence
And ejaculative passage-rites.

Long after this drive to Oxford has climaxed,
I'll be asking myself, Lorelei,
Why you selected me, on whom to practice your sex,
Satisfy your unreciprocal concupiscence.

Could it have been your vixenish dissoluteness
Taunting my listless existence out of hiding
Or a haunting Isadora death wish, on which you thrive,
Flaunting its siren perniciousness,

By insinuating my desiccated spirit,
With inaccessible echoes, vestiges of those few decades
When, in youth, I'd take to the road, hellbent,
And never spend a night alone?

Growing older, each mile,
Praying I'll keep from wrecking, losing direction,
Hoping just to get home, safe,
I yet grope to express my humiliation.

The best gesture I can resurrect from forgetting
Is this middle finger I stick out the window,
As if hitchhiking to oblivion, on a witch's broom,
Shouting, "Up yours, bitch!" all the way to Memphis.

1/13/86 — [1] (02146)

One Salmon Breaks from Mackerel-Crowded Seas ^Δ

For lack of better subject, or at least other,
He raises his chilled wineglass,
To the oversize oak backbar,
Toasts his shimmering, silvery image
Lifting, in identical antic pose,
His own lonely apostrophe. The massive mirror
Absorbs all residual colors, shapes, movements,
Within its rim. It spits him back,
Like a fish refused admittance upstream.

Arrested in his reflection's perpetual parallax,
He disciplines volition to hold him intact,
While he penetrates the stained-glass rainbow
Suspended from incandescent lamps
Illuminating fuzzy ambers and alabaster inlays
Against a fusion of green, red, and blue Favrile hues.
Suddenly, he knows his most recent location:
He's floating in an eddy, not dead or dying
But resting before making his next run on eternity's falls.

1/13/86 — [2] (03511)

Scientific Observations ^Δ

For Joycelyn

Since it's a philosophical given that my needs are minimal,
Virtually nonexistent,
Where are you, tonight, when I want nothing less
Than to be with you, physically,
For its own sake — no foreplay, disquisitions,
*

Justifications in which Baptist or Hebraic hagiographies
 Are called into play, for effect,
 Or sound-and-light cabalas are switched on, unexpectedly,
 To emphasize the gravity of sputtering civilizations?

Just touching, purely, simply, would be sufficient,
 Sans justifications, guilt trips
 Descended more prolifically than biblical “begat”s.
 Why are you and I residents of the same state
 Yet seismically distant when quakes occur?
 Please let our faults converge,
 Make us realize metaphysical disturbances
 Aren’t cosmic eruptions but human ones,
 Requiring unreasoned, arrhythmic nurturing.

1/13/86 — [3] (03549)

[On no doles, recipient of neither federal][†]

On no doles, recipient of neither federal
 Nor foundation-endowed grants,
 Holder of no liberal teaching fellowships
 Or political sinecures,
 Rather practitioner of self-imposed freedom

1/14/86 — [1] (09286)

Performing Inordinate Rituals^Δ

This sixty-degree mid-January day,
 I do my giddy gandy dancer’s prance
 Through Oxford, Mississippi, streets.
 A carefree, bare-chested hobo
 Showing off his own death-moth capriciousness,
 I cast aside disbelief,
 Leap blazing hoops, like an age-dazed lion
 Instinctively placing its feet in necessary sequences.

Despite fatigue and the ephemeral realities
 Looming, in afternoon’s wings, like a Greek chorus
 Humming winter’s doomed, lugubrious plaints,
 *

I run, jump from sidewalk to alley,
 Lope through wooded ravines
 Even the most exuberant butterfly
 Might not choose, in its dying swoon,
 Or modern-day Nijinsky execute.

Neither mystical nor physical forces
 Subdue my fragile muse,
 This suspiciously too-warm season,
 Or reduce my spirit to prostituting its plangent dance,
 Merely by engendering skepticism,
 Making intuition accuse sleazy Lorelei
 Of being back on the streets again,
 Soliciting favors, for free, from unsuspecting bums like me.

Nothing, it seems, can distract me
 From enacting my spirit's spectacular pirouettes,
 Forgetting just exactly who I'm supposed to be,
 For what reason I drove to Oxford,
 Just yesterday, and when I actually metamorphosed.
 Only my bones know for certain
 Why this urgent celebration has occurred:
 The days of butterflies and lions are severely circumscribed.

1/14/86 — [2] (03563)

Taking the Streetcar Home ^Δ

I slip from dreams, from sleep, from bed,
 Head over heels, out of love's voluptuousness,
 As if ascending an endlessly deep ocean, with the bends.
 Past the capitol, over High Street, to I-55,
 I drive away from us, toward Fortification.
 Between empty and the sun-saturated horizon,
 Jackson becomes one more bead on a rosary
 Memory gently nudges, consoling itself —
 Gluckstadt, Canton, Pickens, Yazoo City, Grenada.

Somewhere in forenoon's corridor, Memphis looms,
 That slatternly Blanche DuBois
 Whose vacant gaze, tattered lace dress, helplessness
 Never fail to depress me,

*

Especially when she offers me her papier-mâché bouquet,
Filled with wilted orchids, brittle baby's-breath,
Blood-rust-clotted rosebuds —
Ghosts of Southern ladies I've known and know,
Like the belle I've just bereaved.

1/16/86 (00182)

Outpatient ^Δ

At this spectral a.m. hour,
When the square is empty as a defoliated tree
And the horizon hasn't yet decided
What rags to pull from which closet hangers,
To wear in night's burial procession,

I materialize, wide eyes (yet asleep)
Belying drowsiness
Deeper than mere Wallenda somnambulism.
My delicate steps stitch the broken sidewalk
From business to office to Capital Café,

To avoid tripping into critical abysses
Beyond day's miscalculation.
As I approach the courthouse, a vast noise
Breaks cover, from ledges, eaves,
Niches, concrete buttresses, sills.

A plague of dismal pigeons, weighted with chaos,
Swoops into the aghast sky,
Makes two complete gyrations about the building,
Like pterodactyls after slower prey,
Before retracting into murmurous silence.

But the persistence of their hysterical flapping
Deafens me. In every direction,
The shapes I bring into focus change to wings:
Pennons, clattering like palm fronds,
Edging Leroy's used-car lot;

Rows of mercury-vapor shadows
Escaping choking throats,
Throwing themselves at the mercy of the courthouse,
*

Pleading *nolo contendere* to morning's suit;
The tattered forty-eight-star flag

Slapping against its rust-flaked pole,
Above a greening bronze plaque,
Bedizened with plastic nosegays,
Commemorating the "ultimate sacrifice"
Of a couple hundred St. Francois County souls.

Entering the café, I'm suddenly trapped,
In its cramped foyer, by both doors,
Simultaneously opening and closing —
A lost bird caught between asylum floors
Separating hallucinations from "truth."

1/21/86 (00561)

All About Fogs

Through this saltless, oceanic fog,
Spectral headlights perforate his dream-screens.
Both pupils flex and relax sympathetically,
As if intermittently electrified.
They die, revive, wither, are revivified,
In the blinking of eyes rising from nightmare,
Through craters sloshing with humans
Neither aqueous nor vitreous,
Rather weighted with gloomy daylight,
Itself trying, tenaciously, to break through fog,
Infiltrate spirits made invisible
From their ghostly hosts, resurrect doomed souls,
For the sake of perpetuating man's paltry hope
That, one morning, he will awaken
Liberated from his flesh, his bony cargo,
And float, on the fog,
Among white leviathans, sea rhinos,
Greek clouds crowded with the redeemed
Migrating toward Orient gates —
Just one more of God's creaturely shapes
Reinventing himself exponentially,
Until, one fine morning,

*

He, it, discovers essential dimensionlessness,
Within Creation's womb,
Where he's taken turns, at waiting to be born,
Since primordial fogs descended.

2/17/86 (05959)

[Enmeshed, at this airborne hour, in jet spray,]

Enmeshed, at this airborne hour, in jet spray,
The gone day's morning
Now seems so many decades old,
All I recognize of its complex history
Is confetti-debris purpling the horizon,
In vague people-shapes, spring-wings, frequencies
Lingering, like matins bells, above Fiesole.

Yet my wife and children are only now stirring,
Just awakening to my early restiveness,
My awkward disturbance of silence, with coffeepot,
Icebox door, electric shaver.
Simultaneously, they sleep beside me,
On my shadowy plane-passage
From St. Louis to New Haven, via Chicago.

By degrees, I realize this spent morning
Is more than a score of years deep,
By seven. Together, we're crusading
To that Cave of Montesinos
Where my eyes first learned to blink,
Turn blindness into insight, penetrate vapors,
Gaze directly into Dante's blazing illuminations.

Only, this time, I sense no inadequacies
Or postadolescent fears of failure.
Rather, I'm in command of the caravan
Transporting my myriad heart's poetic legacy
Back to its origin, to cancel overdue loans
On metaphors and vessels borrowed in youth
And bequeath, to it, a few new ones of my own.

2/25/86 (05960)

[Twenty-three years after leaving,]

Twenty-three years after leaving,
I stand at the intersection of College and Chapel streets,
New Haven's green divided, down the middle,
By my ax-blade eyes,
Bingham Hall lifting out of my left periphery,
Into a blazing, pigeon-stitched sky.

Memory's Ouija fails to produce the youth
Who, in brief residence nearby,
Sent down roots that produced my eventual spirit.
There's no question this congested intersection
Doesn't recognize me from now or then.

Waiting for the lights to change,
Vision resists its own intuitive wisdom,
Refuses to fix this contemporaneous scene,
Chooses, instead, to remain stupefied,
As if my giddy heart, not existence, were time's mystery.

2/28/86 (05961)

[Uprushing images besiege my eyes,]

Uprushing images besiege my eyes,
Beg allegiance, as, once, their antecedents commanded,
When my own poetic spirit's pioneer
Roamed this displaced, medieval Oxonian center,
Questing direction, purposeful destinations.
But each is tawdry or obsolete.
They, not I, are sleazy streetwalkers, gypsies,
Winos tottering from shop to gutter,
In urine-reeking jeans. The Roger Sherman Spa
Serves kosher deli, not cheeseburgers,
Greasy fries, chocolate marshmallow sundaes.
Across the street, the old Hotel Taft
Has achieved rejuvenation and usefulness
As apartments catering to the nearly valetudinarian
And aging retirees from the academic community.
Nearby, the Crown Theater, slated for demolition,
*

Shivers in naked humiliation, its facade
Scribbled with pornographic hieroglyphs.
My constricting heart overrides its own brisk stride.
The eyes, like inmates in straitjackets,
Cast their cumbersome weight against memory's cage,
Crumble in a knot lodged in my throat —
Pariahs witnessing history's visible silences.

3/1/86 (05962)

O'Hare Layover Between New Haven and St. Louis

In this kerosene-congested terrestrial space station,
Not necessarily delayed or detained
Nor in great haste to arrive any definite place,
I penetrate a Chablis haze.
Celestial incandescenses shimmer the distance.
Closer in, focus is broken into prismatic winces
Instigated by quick-blinking beacons
Spitting unintimidated admonitions to encroaching night.

In the middle distance, a heady blizzard
Of continuously descending winged meteors and asteroids
Etches positive reflections into negative brain-plates,
Arrests, in an essence, death's blessed ambivalence.
During the time it takes forgetting to remember its place
In its daily recitation of fate's book of life,
My spirit misses the speaker's timely call to flights,
Assists history, in passing me by.

3/2/86 — [1] (05964)

Bird-Watching

Cockpit needles sleep,
Even as heated reds, oranges, blues, greens
Preen, in their seething arrogance,
Like fowls courting nearby poachers.

When this colossal creature takes flight,
Each molecule in its steely structure
Will screech, achieve climax,
Conceive preposterously altitudinous reaches,

Before relapsing into restive quiescence.
In the meantime, fright leads me to question
Just what in hell I'm doing, tonight,
Investigating the mating habits of 737s.

3/2/86 — [2] (05963)

Stillbirth in March

Who's ever listened to the universe recite haiku?
“Not I! Not I!” cries the fetal spirit.
I hear no voices in the atmosphere.
They all converge as earthly self-gratulation,
In my ears, my ears. Not even the birds
Disturb my subterranean solemnity. I died
Too long prior to youth's prime, I'm certain,
To desire resurrection and reincarnation.

Why is it that, at about this same time,
Each March, I worry myself to life,
Try, like the devil, to discern, in spring songs,
Man's passionate chronicle, but grow discouraged,
Lose hope anyone will discover I've spent time
In winter's lukewarm womb,
Rhyming my guts out, reconstructing, from memory,
Paradise's hundred-piece accompaniment of One?

Lonely is the only cadence my dreams know.
Repeatedly, they weave plaintive leitmotifs,
In odes, elegies, pro- and epithalamia,
Encomia celebrating unknown soldiers, hospitable ghosts,
Mythic Greeks, Biblical prophets and gods,
Shakespearean heroines. Each inchoate March,
My vicarious heart delivers itself stillborn,
Umbilical cord wrapped around its throat.

3/4/86 (05965)

Destination Unknown

Setting out from Farmington,
This gunmetal, blustery March morning,
A diaphanous rush of snow crystals
Blowing back, off the car's hood, into my eyes,
Like ghostly armies in retreat,
I slowly surface from sleep's recesses,
Through a caffeine sea, rising,
Rising, finally, to a completely unrecognizable slope
Yet miles below any known surface.

Alone, my only navigational charts
Uncomposed poems with no practical application
As guides to the irregular cadences
Roads my vehicle follows iterate,
I grope for any siren's plaint.
Blind as an ameba, I react, automatically,
To each crack, rut, bluff cut,
Continually readjusting my instruments,
In hope of locating a satisfactory end to this passage.

But miles become hours, daydreams.
Twilight lapses into postmeridian lassitude,
And the land of red locusts, cedars, cows,
House trailers, fading billboards
Refuses to allow me even the slightest excuse
To stop for coffee, catch my breath.
Irretrievably lost in crosscurrents,
I press on, through this awful desolation,
Toward a closure whose opening may not exist.

3/7/86 — [1] (05966)

Road Poet/Artisan

Farmington, Flat River, Leadwood, Potosi,
Steelville, St. James, Rolla!
Just saying these names aloud
Somehow relieves me of a strange burden.
Whether the cumulative cadence
Lulls me into misplacing this trip's desolation
*

Or simply lets me forget my fixed position
In the mazy design destiny has assigned to me,
I can't say without equivocation.

Regardless, set loose again, this March morning,
I enunciate Missouri's one-horse towns
As though their names were stones
And it were my chosen chore
To chisel them from shale and limestone strata,
Cut and smooth them into semiprecious gems
Prospective treasure hunters combing Via Veneto shops
And Ponte Vecchio stalls might stop to buy,
Take home, as exotic souvenirs.

3/7/86 — [2] (05404)

Overtaken

Remote moaning alerts sleep's sentinels.
Somewhere in the universe,
A colossal disturbance occurs:
A sun's furnace is banking, a moon tilting
Too far to keep from plummeting earthward,
Stars straying like crazed houseflies,
Illuminating space, for chaos's parade to pass.
Closer to home, my warm ears twitch, shiver,
Become conduits linking the brain to cosmic pain,
Wind tunnels filled with Miltonic fiends.
Suddenly, I awaken inside a screaming funnel
Attracting every manner of debris
To its inner walls. I'm pinned by all fours.
Below me, trapdoors open and shut like alligator jaws,
As if activated by an invisible vacuum —
Exits or fortified cells, I can't tell.
By main concentration, I eviscerate my guts,
Let blood, cease superfluous breathing,
Until my body is mesentery so thin,
Even the tornado can't catch me, in its whirlwind.
By morning light, the storm has subsided
To stillness too silent to trust.
I rush, from sheets and covers,
Toward the basement stairs; they're gone.

*

A Piranesian steel spar,
Cantilevered into the dank, dark vacancy,
Is all that's left of the house's foundation.

3/10/86 (05967)

Coal Cars ^Δ

I see them rolling in, toward the city,
As if the highway were a conveyor belt
Taking coal, from strip and below-ground mines,
To generating stations, for incineration,
Each car a tumbling junk-chunk
Transporting a compressed spirit, at its core,
From solid waking state
Through working day, in vaporous form,
Until, on the drive home, bodily liquids,
Recalling the spirit's inconvenient shape,
Insist it stop at a quick-shop, to piss,
Replenish caffeine and nicotine depletions.

Indeed, in this valley of vibrating belts,
Each man, if not a floating island,
Is a pocked, autochthonous rock,
Not quite anthracitic or bituminous
But of the consistency of sandstone markers
Eroding in overgrown graveyards.
Despite fleeing the city, I suddenly realize
I'm not going under my own steam, either,
Rather feel jostled, like so much coal
Being stoker-screwed into a locomotive's fiery maw,
To heat water to such screaming decibels
My soul might even reach hell's depot, on schedule.

3/14/86 (02054)

Urban Sprawl

For eighteen years, whenever driving southwest,
From the city's peripheries,
I've slurred past tract homes

*

Proliferating, in ink-blotter fashion.
 I've measured my life against their creeping advance,
 Without realizing the time it takes me
 To reach my changeless destination hasn't altered,
 Just the proximity of the place my spirit escaped to
 When foraging for youth's Edenic Fiesole.

Today, my view through the windshield
 Reveals morning's blueprinted developer's plat
 Dividing my entire imagination into cramped lots.
 No room exists for the unorthodox or the exotic,
 And it's all to be consumed
 Sooner than the Master Builder presumed.
 Even billboards and mobile homes will cease existing.
 Already, arriving provides no relief;
 I'm there, each morning, before ever leaving.

3/17/86 (05968)

1888[†]

The very round sounds of egg shapes,
 Mounted, side by side, in superposed ovalness
 Encapsulating this hotel's Victorian origins,
 Distort present tensions, metamorphose me, my pretensions,
 My spirit, soul, karma, Whitmanesque essence,
 Slow me back to nothingness,
 Where neither shuttering Space Shuttle O-rings
 Nor Yale University deconstructionists or

3/26/86 (05969)

On Reawakening: A Spring Song

Curious how the drowsing spirit revives,
 Renews acquaintanceships with its own inconsistencies,
 Reverses its disappearing ink's gestalt,
 Rewinds its silver-nitrate dreams,
 Arrives back at the beginning of life,
 When Eden and Genesis were inextricably suffused
 Green and golden, shot through

*

With fuchsia, lavender, heliotrope hues
Teeming, frenzied, eagerly blooming.

Curious how, with such immaculate renascences,
The myriad heart's mutable soul
Can still find spaces, in creation's orb web,
In which to periodically hibernate, blur perception,
Deafen its membranes, to birdsongs,
Urgent underground reverberations of tectonic plates,
Even occasional joyous mating shrieks.
Yet almost with predictably tropistic single-mindedness,
It gropes toward sleep, immobility, nonexistence.

Today, while springtime's imminent explosion
Ripples my senses, with notions of being alive
And released from clepsydran drowsing,
I'll take to the road, drive in any direction,
Without definite destination.
As though guided by a cosmic divining rod,
I'll follow my quickening blood's quixotic flow,
Back and forth, between source and mouth,
That I might touch and know, at once, both ends of the continuum.

4/2/86 (05446)

Vision in Spring [△]

*I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing;
I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.*
— Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature”

Never have redbuds touched my eyes,
With such lush sensuousness!
Wherever I turn, purple halos,
Shimmering above myriad invisible angels
Scurrying heavenward, across Earth's girth,
Stipple vision. Or are they bushes
Perpetually burning, whose Biblical violet glow
I only imagine? Finally, I know this:

If seeing is to being alive
What simultaneity in all things is to eternity,

*

Their existence is a component of my own,
And mine is a function of eyes
Which, blind wide open, blink, grope,
Whenever stroked by divine fingertips.

4/4/86 (02027)

Limitations

This day, unlike some I've spent,
Refuses to surrender even its scrutable pleasures
To second-guessing or metaphor,
Yet abundant merriment coerces us to celebration.

I pretend to bear witness, in the guise of poet,
Knowing my expertise in artifice is medieval alchemy,
Charlatan's banter, Eddie Cantor's eyes
Displaying excitement, in whirligig circles.

It's not possible to render textures, sensory dimensions,
Bees working purple redbud blossoms,
Talisman and ivory dogwoods, weeping cherries,
Flowering crabs, lilacs stretching toward definition,

Nor can recorded phonemes, alliterated syllables
Approximate bird-chirping, butterfly fluttering,
Or the dizzy persiflage of two Botticellian children
Cavorting, naked, in April's Edenic forest.

For one such as I, who prides himself
On his manifold prescience and sensitivity,
It's triply frustrating to take pen to notebook,
Expecting success, and discover my energies

Are predestined to failure,
That the earth's recurrent pubescence
Is its own best essence, beyond my capacity to transmute
Or raise to a higher power. Maybe today's importance

Lies in its own unadulterated spontaneity,
Which poets such as I
Can't spoil, its natural progressions and mutations.
No matter our hubris, we can't improve on God.

4/5/86 (05445)

The Man in the Gray-Flannel Hearse ^Δ

How could good fortune bestow, on me,
 Pleasures of such trivial magnitude,
 Whose ephemeral exemptions allow mind-peace,
 If not total freedom from earthly servitude?

Just exiting the city, against traffic's grain,
 Is sufficient consolation to make work
 No evil constraint placed on me, by paltry survival,
 But a noble vocation worth the daily drive.

To ply the highway, flying low,
 Going nowhere, toward unknown locations,
 Exhilarates my blood. Along the route,
 I dodge black holes, meteor showers,

Refuse to pick up scruffy hitchhikers.
 Yet who ever said nomadic existence
 Guaranteed promised lands or neon oases
 Or just an outside chance at surcease?

On an April morning this warm and swarming,
 Who could entertain staying in bed,
 Even as an alternative to driving the hearse
 Of the person he's worked for, all his life?

4/7/86 (00076)

Chief Engineer ^Δ

The outdoors, this early-April 6 a.m.,
 Is a cacophonous engine room,
 Whose frictioned, elliptical machinery
 Strains not to lose its timing, balance, momentum.
 Screeching jays, grackles, squirrels,
 Less fractious doves, robins, rabbits,
 Flitting about greening grass, shrubs, deciduous trees,
 Are tappets clattering above spring's pistons.

Up at dawn's cracking, the chief engineer
 Surveys his landscape, its precious equipment,
 Formulates plans for preventive maintenance,
 Then takes pen in hand — his oilcan —
 *

And fastidiously aims its spout-point
 At every blessed surface where moving parts mesh,
 Literal objects fuse with metaphors.
 With fortune, he'll keep the contraption running smoothly, all day.

4/8/86 (02153)

They're Running like Crazy

Even at 6:30
 (That semifluid lacuna in which sleep's creatures
 Float not quite belly-up —
 Those netherish souls who never relax,
 Though their earthly drowse
 Is a perpetual somnambulism),
 The incoming concrete sea lane swarms.
 Were this not a mid-Missouri highway,
 I might almost be lured into reminiscing
 Just how similar is the opposite track
 To San Francisco's coastline, down past Half Moon Bay,
 During whale-migrating season.
 But the cars coursing toward me, beyond the median,
 Bear no resemblance to leviathans
 (Nor their drivers to raging, disillusioned Ahabs),
 Rather schools of jewfish, sea bass.
 On closer focus, with added scientific observation,
 I might say these forlorn morning souls
 Are lemmings racing, in systematic unfascination,
 Toward the outermost edges of my eyes,
 Where, within a matter of fading syllables,
 They'll leap, reach closure, drown — now!

4/10/86 — [1] (05970)

April 12, 1938 ^Δ

*For Charlotte and Saul,
 my loving mother and father —
 forty-eight anniversaries young!*

Forty-eight years after the fact —
 April 1938 . . .
 Three years before war in the European and Pacific theaters
 *

Ended gentle America's innocence,
 And a pestilential seven prior to that firestorm
 Whose detonation forever negated a return
 To Edenic insularity — we gather,
 Your reverential extended family and I,
 To celebrate your uninterrupted marriage bond.

If my sensibility has equated today's blessed event
 With that awful holocaust, let it not be thought
 I've done so arbitrarily or that accident
 Has caused such seemingly disparate images
 To coalesce in free verse. As poet,
 I am caught between sea duty and shore leave,
 Tossed amidst imagination and raw fact.
 Being your firstborn and of that momentous era,
 There's no escaping the genes' formative memories.

Apparently, just marking the occasion makes the senses
 Cast back to my origins in your conjugal vows.
 So be it, I disregard skin blemishes,
 Brittle hair, impaired vitality, paranoias.
 Perhaps evoking the past lets me recapture
 That handsome traveling salesman from St. Louis
 And his gorgeous Northwestern U. coed,
 Who grew up on Lake Shore Drive,
 And avoid accepting the present, at face value.

Actually, I perceive, simultaneously, time's twin poles,
 You nearing one end, me at the other's midpoint,
 We three arrested as if on a Keatsian frieze,
 Whose paradoxical stasis is the mind's fragile basis
 For anticipating everlasting release.
 Today, I honor you not for continuity's sake
 Or to recite your gentle tenets and precepts
 But for rendering me the child of your covenant,
 That through my own children, I might perpetuate your love.

4/10/86 — [2] (02154)

Borne Again and Again

As if his spirit were an atomic particle
 And the macadam highway a linear accelerator
 *

Devouring him, essence by mile by minute,
He shimmers toward his forty-fifth birthday.

A dimly quivering mist
Magnetizes his eyes to the windshield.
Soon, he loses sight of himself,
Drowns in the glass sea's myriadly rippled surface.

Beyond, where pubescent-green Brancusi hills
Copulate with concupiscent peacock-clouds,
He rises through breathless resurrections,
Arrives, disembodied yet intact, at rain's April origin.

Souls he left behind, in previous half-lives,
Recognize his presence, mollify his questioning eyes,
With meek deference, as though he never left,
Never died, while they whisper, "What a miracle!"

Slowly, the banshee sounds he couldn't distinguish, previously,
Encapsulating consciousness, diminish. The glass clears,
And he hears gratulations of fellow factory hands
Reminding him of the immediate task of acting a year older.

4/14/86 (05971)

Goebbels-Garble

Poets, princes, politicians
Unequivocally owe their positions to words,
Whose unilateral dissemination
Is their only groaning hope for holding at bay,
By means of phony peace overtures,
Friend and fiend alike. Like Demosthenes,
They spew Lake Superior agates
Polished to parliamentary eloquence,
Mesa Verde geodes, whose scrofulous exteriors
Belie King Solomon's prismatic *richesse*,
And chunks of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh pyrite.

Words, turning from stones to spitballs
Flung, by the tongue's medieval catapult,
At reliquaries housing glass-bone fragments,
*

Shatter codices, superstitions, and myths
Societies spend centuries worshiping with reverential awe.
When the firestorms subside,
Unrecognizable graffiti is all that exists,
Scribbled amidst petrified-forest debris.
Poets, princes, and politicians who've survived the blast
Repair to their cork-lined broom closets,
To verbalize, to themselves, new persuasions to peace.

4/16/86 (00833)

Willy: Spring Chicken

Lingering in the Capital Café, past nine,
Disengaged from animated subcommittee meetings
Self-appointed city elders, constabulary, and sycophants
Perpetuate between 6 a.m. and twelve,
Sunday through Saturday, resigned to self-imposed silence,
Willy vacantly scans data-printout sheets
That recap the weekly status of myriad categories
Too sophisticated for day-to-day use.
All he needs is the “To Sell” list
He’s relied on, forty-five years,
To promote himself from one season to the next.

But today, his hesitation borders on malingering.
April has always been slow;
Sold-up goods have not had time to move,
Make room for fill-ins and, still later,
Off-price promotional closeouts,
To fortify perennial “Going Out for Business” sales.
Never an idler, Acme-Zenith’s Willy Sypher
Has always tried to keep, in the heat of competition,
At least three or five brand-name irons.
Perhaps he’s actually afraid to take to the road —
A spring chicken not despite, but because of, his age.

4/24/86 — [1] (02333)

Lost in the Shuffle

*For Dale,
my gentle, innocent, and brilliant sister,
with my love*

After I've traveled three days out from home, alone,
The oceanic road has now deposited me, intact,
On a remote shore lapping my front door. Momentarily,
I am Jonah, Ishmael, Pinocchio, Marco Polo,
With a whale of a tale to relate, at table,
To my more-than-slightly-skeptical, blessed wife
And no less suspicious, totally loving daughter and son.

No stranger to strangers cooking for me,
I suggest we eat at the Lettuce Leaf restaurant —
Macedonian bean soup, hard rolls,
Slivers of chicken breast embedded in shredded greens,
Mondavi Fumé Blanc . . . ah, what sweet feasting
For one used to wandering, from motel to pestilential motel,
In Midwestern America's desert.

Not once during our miraculously happy repast
Do I feel the past's shadowy tug on my lapsing memory.
Only after my wife and I sing our babies to sleep,
Slip next to each other, beneath crisp sheets,
Listening to TV's one-minute paean to a Jewish holiday,
Do my senses register Passover's cometlike presence
And that Seder has forgotten to invite its distant scion to celebrate.

Slowly, those dinner rolls metamorphose into unleavened bread.
Soup laden with myriad exotic condiments becomes the food
Hastily gathered by those who escaped Pharaoh's fitful decrees,
After God smote every firstborn son among Egyptians,
Who, until then, had held captive centuries of Jews . . . like me.
Even those chicken pieces seem kosher,
Not cooked in an unritualized kitchen.

Once more, I am an Ellis Island survivor,
Emma Lazarus's inspiration, a Hester Street immigrant,
Old World ghetto rat lost in the centuries' shuffle,
Like baggage misplaced, retrieved, lost again,
Then found in the hold of a cosmic cargo ship
Sailing between oblivion and New Jerusalem,
Trying, frenetically, to locate a hospitable shore.

Like a genealogical waif trying to take his place
 On the spindly limbs of man's family tree,
 I, a somnambulistic Moses, stay awake,
 Trudging from dream to peaceable dream,
 Knowing my tiny family, despite its lack of formal ties
 With any organized religion, worships a supreme being.
 Anyway, who ever promised Canaan would be a refuge from life?

4/24/86 — [2] (02676)

Diurnal Rotations

Once again, gone. Neither fired nor impeached,
 Rather guilty of leaving the scene,
 Without having committed a crime,
 A practitioner of unpremeditated bumdom,
 He goes and comes diaphanously as ghosts,
 In whose shadows (hanging from the sky,
 Like oblique sunrays) he hides, hitchhiking,
 Waiting for dust motes or stray photons
 Of whom to beg a ride home.

Nightly, he arrives at sleep's dome,
 Where he lies down with twin mistresses,
 Forgetting and death,
 Expecting ecstasy, getting fitful sex instead,
 As if his bed were a constricting reticulated python
 Wearing Medusa's hissing head,
 On whose fanged breasts he places his dreams, to rest.
 Each dawn, exhaustion awakens him to his task:
 Keeping one leap ahead of a Pac-Man sun.

4/28/86 (02334)

May Day

Freedom keeps creeping away from me.
 Not the abstract variety
 Professors of philosophy and literature propound daily,
 With rhetorical elegance whose profound eloquence
 Explains away, in layman's terminology,
 *

All unexplainable, unquantifiable phenomenology
 While disclaiming responsibility
 For unforeseeable knowledge and variables
 Sociologically intervening between truth and falsehood,

Rather freedom in its concrete shapes,
 Day by day by day, escapes, outmaneuvers me:
 Letters; poems composed on my country patio;
 Moons and stars I spoke to;
 The mistress who drove from Holly Springs, to Jackson,
 And back, in a single afternoon,
 Just for a few hours' supple touching and lust;
 Gazing at my babies gazing, in supine amazement,
 At redbud skies — they elude me, like Alzheimer's dreams.

No longer do Dylan Thomas and Theodore Roethke
 Resurrect my heart from short breaths, as I recite their measures,
 Nor do love missives detail strategic rendezvous.
 Even my children choose Dickens and Twain, in silence,
 To my histrionic renditions of Dr. Seuss.
 And try as I might to redesign those purple-stippled skies,
 They remain droop-lidded, dry-skinned, high above.
 Below, lachrymose, I stare nowhere, through funnels
 Connected to a sticky Chardonnay Noah-rain.

5/1/86 (04130)

Apostate

Greening forests lining both sides of I-55
 Remind me of Hebrew and Egyptian warriors
 Glaring at each other, across a Red Sea
 Differentiating captivity from freedom,
 Dividing philistines from decent, meek men
 Steeped in law and keeping covenants unblemished.

Though neither army of trees is within earshot,
 Both persist in spitting expletives
 The wind instantly dissolves.
 Floating upstream, between these adversaries,
 Trying to deny their existence, I drowse.
 Suddenly, a sly current undermines me.

My ship veers off center, enters a narrowing chute,
 Moves too close into shore, capsizes.
 Scuttled, my senses sink, ten dense feet,
 Then surface, in time to see pagans and Jews
 Converging on me, from opposite banks,
 To claim me and proclaim me their surrogate scapegoat.

5/2/86 — [1] (00832)

[Though traffic along West Columbia,] †

Though traffic along West Columbia,
 Née Silk Stocking Street,
 Has amplified ten-thousand-fold, in a decade

5/2/86 — [2] (09302)

In Celebration of Now

I sit outdoors, this glory-dappled late afternoon in early May,
 Hidden within the tenebrous density
 Our 1890s Victorian gingerbread house engenders,
 Protected by immense sugar maples, oaks, Austrian pines,
 Which, just as easily, could be Dike Trees keeping the sea out of Binn,
 Even as they fend against a ceaseless onslaught of Nizzards.
 I, of course, might be King Theodor of Seussylvania
 Or, if I wish, Billy Falkner, Thomas Wolfe, Mark Twain,
 Relaxing on my patio in Oxford, Asheville, Hartford.
 Indeed, it's not inconceivable to transmogrify my dreams,
 Transfigure my existence, that, at any given instant in history,
 My psyche might inhabit any dimension it desires.

Right now, listening to the gentle madrigals of rabbits, squirrels,
 Randomly antic birds flirting in worryless seasonal ecstasy,
 Lingering just long enough, in their Keatsian pantomime,
 To procreate their persistent species, I can't entrance myself
 Beyond this moment. I am my own one-man civilization,
 Celebrating its rites of spring, in Farmington — the quintessence
 of Milton's Adam.

5/2/86 — [3] (04129)

Day-Tripper

Poor bastards! Even their shadows seem confused.
Heading away from the city, this humid May morn,
I view them as if I were a spectator reborn of Shiloh,
Wounded Knee, Agincourt, Thermopylae, Bataan,
Capable of distinguishing victor from vanquished
Even before fate waves the flag, blows his shofar.

Valley fog clogging my windshield
Manifests a ghostly intransigence.
My glazed eyes focus on their dancing headlights,
Triangulate a course, by dead reckoning.
In the mist separating me from these specters,
I see my own apparition hitchhiking in both directions.

5/8/86 (05972)

The Exile

*Between grief and nothing,
I'll take nothing.*

In this remote, five-star, all-American city,
Whose 8200 citizens fit into its three square miles
Like Cinderella's stepsisters' feet
In Wal-Mart plastic slippers from Taiwan,

I try to keep my crucified spirit intact,
Kindle hope that, soon, my soul,
Like summer mist hovering in low-lying valleys,
Will lift, return to its old dreams of New Jerusalem.

For now, all alternatives seem paltry wishes:
Pink and white dogwood petals,
Lavender, bee-bothered redbud bells,
Kewpie-cheeked flowering-crab blossoms

Nipped, in their sweetly innocent efflorescence,
By winter's insidious Indian giver,
Sneaking back for a final peek,
Hellbent on holding Eden for ransom.

Maybe today will veer from its ellipse,
 Eclipse lunar illuminations, solar emanations,
 As it nears the Light of the World,
 Carrying me, bareback, in its fleet effluvium.

Possibly, I'll wake, mount a white-winged palomino,
 And gallop off, across the desolation
 Edging these three square miles like a Mason-jar seal,
 Arrive home, tonight, in time to celebrate my exodus,

With Midianite wife and children grown tall
 During the decade I've spent in voluntary exile.
 Meanwhile, at least let me forget their gentle faces.
 Memory can be the most inhumane enemy of all.

5/13/86 (04128)

Advancing Hydrocephalus

Before his intellect's diminishment,
 He could assimilate entire encyclopedias,
 With the infinitesimal flick of an eyelid,
 Click his fingers and retrieve every note
 Of the *Kreutzer* Sonata, each blessed measure
 From *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,
 Recreate, in his imagination's Vatican cloisters,
 A complete Raffaello-cartooned Gobelin tapestry,
 Without dropping a solitary stitch.

Like Magellan, Cabot, Drake, Jules Verne,
 He could circumnavigate unmapped galaxies
 Beneath and beyond firmaments,
 Engineer pyramids, rattraps, paper clips,
 Nuclear reactors, firecrackers, hovercrafts,
 Bird points, aspirins, photographs, microchips,
 Escape Alcatraz, on da Vinci wings,
 Proclaim birth control and euthanasia,
 In the same salutary breath with ethics and ecumenism.

All that, which he spent so many decades perfecting,
 Has suddenly suffocated. Now, his titanic vessel
 Seems to be miring, irretrievably, beneath mud

*

Gumming up his brain's basin and drainpipe.
Sea slugs, eels, undulating anemones,
And skates poison his system perniciously.
His flooding cells bloat; breathing slows to bubbles.
Never, in all his waking dreams, would he have believed
Death could quench his fire so unapologetically.

5/20/86 — [1] (05974)

The Maddened Hatter

Stuck behind a fucking pallet truck,
In a nineteen-mile no-passing zone,
From Steelville to Cuba — just my luck!

But it's the only justification I can make
For repeating such lackluster muttering,
Expletive-riddled fustian. It's just my luck

To get stuck behind a fucking pallet truck,
When, already, I'm two hours late
For high-noon reunion with my Pinocchio-shadow.

5/20/86 — [2] (05973)

Perpetuating Molecular Structures

My DNA
Consists of crisscrossing highways I drive daily . . .
Back roads endlessly weaving over themselves,
Through pied, May-wet countrysides,
Like glass snakes slithering through raspy grass blades . . .
City streets tracing their own stuttering destinations,
Down evolving labyrinths, in and out of life's maze . . .
Alleyways my eyes navigate blindly, each night,
Trying to find sleep's sweet silence.

My existence is an interconnected, articulating system,
A consistently rhythmic stichomythia,
In which my body and mind-passions equally participate.
*

Mutually, they refuse stowaways,
Refrain from picking up hitchhikers,
Opting for solitary passage,
Knowing only alone can they locate freedom,
Procreate with my lissome mistress, the open road,
Whose wide vagina entices Odyssean travelers home.

5/20/86 — [3] (02654)

Stained-Glass Fantasy

Intuitively, I can tell my cells are swelling to hellish levels,
This blazing late afternoon in Katy Station,
Whose stained-glass fanlights are aflame.
Devils are swirling in whirling, nicotine-filled smoke-motes.
College girls are learning to spurn their ABC's,
For spurious attentions, before my very all-knowing eyes.

I, Tiresias, like Ken Kesey's "Cuckoo" Chief,
Am neither deaf nor dumb, certainly not blind
To life's most blatant vulnerabilities,
Rather trained to assimilate aberrational behavior,
Appreciate abnormal passion, react to spontaneities
Arising, like magma, from my erupting psyche.

Just now, my satyr body shudders. Focus shatters,
Which, for the last half-hour, has concentrated on the nymph face
Seated at a table in the adjoining room.
Arrested in amber-crimson-aquamarine shafts
Faceting earthward, from Katy's fanlights,
She casts an everlasting frieze on my eye-urns.

I am grasped in a Chardonnay seizure.
My senses collapse beneath serene sexual fantasy I experience.
She rises from her slender profile, abandons her silhouette,
Reaches toward me, through smoke-motes, time warps.
We speak the most amazing stained-glass language
Strangers ever articulated, embrace, then wait for darkness
to invisible us.

5/20/86 — [4] (02640)

Dusk at Katy Station

Suddenly, the loud sky falls. I'm outraged,
Appalled, by the impersonal way it has made itself known.
Who does it think I am — the devil's clone?
I'm an unknown entity, if the truth be known,
A lone survivor on a mission from God's best buddies,
Elwood and Jake, the frenetic Blues Brothers.
Here, on the planet, to bring the band back together,
In the names of ecumenism and humanism,
I go about my business, with inconspicuous expeditiousness.

Neither James Brown nor Ray Charles
Can return me to my senses, earn me credentials
In the local vo-tech junior college,
Or rename me John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd.
If the truth be known, I'm unable to atone
For sins committed in Sister Mary Stigmata's archdiocese
(Where the Confessional of Perpetual Motion operates),
Incapable of orchestrating a full house,
With merely a naked, five-of-a-kind straight flush.

The loud sky cracks into brittle eggshell cards,
Goes silent, black as smoky glass.
Somewhere amidst its smoldering debris, I collapse,
Disintegrate like atoms being dismantled in an accelerator.
By degrees, languages assimilate me. Time conspires
To absorb my earthly constituents into matter
Whose essential chemical elements
Metamorphose into slithy toves, space shuttles,
And George Gordon, Lord Byron, rogues. In a flash, my O-rings
explode.

5/20/86 — [5] (02646)

Willy Assists at Tzinberg's Sidewalk Sale ^Δ

During this interminable Memorial Day weekend,
Willy, resembling a mechanical carny barker,
Has manned Acme-Zenith's forty-foot truck,
Which he parked in front of Tzinberg Clothiers,
On the paved lot of Columbia's newest mall.

*

All three days, from the hellish bowels of the rickety trailer,
In which he's stooped, yanked, shoved
Boxes, bags containing antiquated sportscoats, suits, slacks,
He's kept resupplying promotional goods
As the racks, folding tables, bins, shelves deplete themselves.
He's been sent to oversee this sidewalk sale,
Ensure his personal account of thirty years
Doesn't run out of merchandise.
After all, selling by twos can be retail magic,
When even imports can't compete,
No matter that all garments have holes, runs,
Loose stitching, or are missing essential parts,
Such as back pockets, flaps, zipper stops,
Waistband elastic. Who can't forgive and forget,
When you can purchase two dress shirts,
For the price of one sleeve at Saks;
Two basic 100 percent-polyester Slackeaze trousers,
For what four designer-jeans pockets would cost
At the Gap; two velveteen sportscoats,
Even if it is May, for one-fifth
What an identical item will be priced at, in Tzinberg's,
Next September — so what if it's ten years newer?
At various heated-up times of each day,
Willy has reminded himself of a stevedore,
And not without pride, considering, at sixty-two,
He can still do all the legwork himself.
In fact, he actually helped load the trailer,
All last week, at the distribution center,
To make sure he'd know what was what and where.
By five o'clock Monday afternoon,
Willy finally sets the last rolling racks and boxes
Back on the truck, shuts and locks its doors.
Not five hundred of the original allotment
Of 5200 items will be "boomerangs."
He calculates that at one-half percent commission,
His three-day take comes to \$1400.
Only whores, doctors, lawyers, and drug pushers
Make that kind of wages! Not too shabby,
Even if he did have to be on call.
After all, his customers always come first!

5/21/86 (02332)

Sanitarium Daydreams

Dissociated from youth's laughing personality,
At sea, these last eighteen years,
Lost as obsolete words
To an obese society suffering TV satiety,
Absent from his lingua franca,
He casts about, in vaguely familiar doldrums
Punctuated by monkey chatterings.

Circumnavigating the ego, two decades at a stretch,
Allows for too little rest,
He now realizes; creates mean streaks
Miles wide, like Martian firestorms;
Causes kaleidoscopic objects to collide
Inside his tunnel-visioned sockets,
Him to view life through the eyes of a Picasso portrait of Kafka.

Bereft of shared heritage, demotic, ethics, technology,
To reconnect him, he steps ashore,
Into an equatorial time warp
In which the only spoken language
Is overt violence. Primates of every variety abound.
What manners of man and land are these
He's encountered, this sunny morning, outside his dormitory?

6/3/86 (05975)

On Her Being Promoted from Sixth Grade ^Δ

*For my beautiful Trilogy,
now twelve*

Memories the mind forgets, or chooses not, to water
Lose tumescence, bend, wilt, die.
Trilogy and Troika are delicate green and pink hues,
Caladiums on time's sill,
Diamond-dusty, translucent.
Their subtly rusty leaves and stems
Belie our gentle, tending touch.
Daily misting once made them flourish,
As if they'd been furrowed, seeded, nourished
*

In a rain forest where no humans,
Except us, were allowed to disturb their profuseness.

But more and more frequently, my wife and I
Find ourselves inclined to neglect gardening,
Regard as perfunctory the chores we once loved performing.
Sad how, just when apprenticeship ends
And everyone seems to have mastered fate's tasks,
Habits betray their best intentions.
Having stayed up way too late, last evening,
Celebrating Trilogy's grade-school graduation,
Our children drowse past ten.
We debate rousing them or letting them rest,
Painfully sensing independence taking precedence.

6/5/86 (02155)

Mortal Soundings

My disquieted heart grows anorectic,
On its diet of daily anxiety and pervasive silence.
Its vital functions slow measurably,
With every breath the sinoatrial node initiates,
As though any one might signal fibrillation,
Irreversible stroke. Yet, overtly,
My body appears unchanged. Its flexible shadow
Is still capable of executing Chaplinesque zigzags, up flagpoles,
Yankee Doodle Dandy dances à la Cagney and Nureyev,
Climbing the sides of all-glass skyscrapers,
Plucking Hart Crane's harp strings.
Indeed, were it not for frequent wheezing,
Ten-volley sneezes, nosebleeds nightly,
I might almost believe dying had decided, finally, to leave me alone.

6/17/86 — [1] (05976)

Amateur Athletes ^Δ

For Troika

Last evening, through Claverach's Park's humid seclusion,
As twilight washed into a cider sky,

*

My boy, Troika, and I, like fluid phantoms
Coming unglued from a moving cartoon strip,
Tried to pace each other, he on his bicycle,
I afoot, my forty-five-year-old body
Providing little match for his eight-plus years' energy,
And no incentive to keep even,
Yet letting us maintain short enough distance
For me to stay within hearing
Whenever he would call my attention to objects
I might otherwise have failed to observe, for fatigue:
Efflorescing moon, rabbits, a squirrel on hind legs,
Stray dogs, katydids murmurously invisible.

Constructing rough-edged circles, straightaways,
Imperfect parallelograms and trapezoids,
With flexing and relaxing muscles,
In noncompetitive postures,
We continually redefined our juxtaposed selves —
Father and son, boys, friends, men-children,
Sharing that magical dimension
In which agelessness is just another endless flight
Generally assigned only to first love
And other blessedly permanent disillusionments.
That Troika and his dad, for one half-hour,
Had that randomly tandem fantasy fulfilled
Will, evermore, make all the difference.
Never will the changed universe recover,
Even though it may be unaware or barely care
The two of us pressed together just long enough
To arrest, in history's quick-drying sediment,
Our separate identities, left a perfect fossil etching:
Agape's sweet, fleet pair on modernity's Grecian urn.

6/17/86 — [2] (00679)

[Who ever knew such bucolic seclusion] ^{‡ Δ}

Who ever knew such bucolic seclusion
As I do, this lush, lonely evening,
Seated outdoors, amidst such supple greenery?

Yet who ever conceived being alone could be
So unreciprocated that even bushes and trees —
Spireas, lilacs, magnolias, mimosas —

Would refuse to acknowledge my fragile presence
At this table? I am just me, Lord,
Trying to see, beyond this paltry moment's emptiness,

Eternity, glimpse that paradisiacal rim
At which point peaceful coexistence among men
Assumes the dignity of docile robins, gentle wrens.

Out here, away from all my wayward enemies
And very occasional friends,
My gray matter contemplates eschatological options.

Listening to nature's mutually exclusive creatures
(Cicadas, chittering birds and squirrels, silent spiders),
I remember the origin of my own bones.

They were of those fated generations whose clones
Dr. Mengele attempted to create,
In his makeshift laboratories — a superior race of beings.

And if he succeeded, why, then, am I
Sitting here, forty-five years later,
Scribbling fragments of nightmares I've not experienced,

Rather imagined? Why, amidst such bucolic seclusion,
Am I compelled to search these recesses,
For essences, smells, ghostly reminiscences?

Is it that I distrust silence, am suspicious
And keep constant vigil against possible invasion
By invisible foes? Who are they?

Are they Ahab's phantasms or enemies of Young Goodman Brown,
Townspeople eavesdropping on slight Miss Emily
Or, possibly, Big Brother collectively spying on Winston and his lady?

Seated outside, seventy-five miles from St. Louis,
In this town not only time but the Bible forgot,
I am not precisely certain where or who my being is.

Suffice it to record that on this quiet June night,
When no humans dare intrude on my writing,
I have spent the better part of twilight's illumination

Composing my doubts, tuning those few skills
Which years of practice have made me capable of expressing,
Formulating metaphors I might use, in a pinch,

To help me deduce the raison d'être for my very existence.
Right now, listening to birds, crickets, dogs, locusts,
Balancing the moon, on my seal eyes,

I die at least ten thousand times, each second,
Raptured by the ecstasy that enraptures me, in its voices,
Sounding noises I can see and sense and smell . . .

By this extrasensory oxymoronic heaven/hell
I can't escape, as though Auschwitz-Birkenau-Buna
Had relegated me to its precincts, adopted me as its scapegoat.

Out here, amidst all this immeasurably teeming loudness,
I expire. Slowly, the gonads surrender.
Within hours, the fleshly *Titanic* lists, sinks.

No holds are barred. No zones remain sacred.
The creature acquiesces to fireflies
Scorching the empty spaces, with their radical ignitions.

As darkness descends, quashing all traces of light,
Night retires to its Kamchatka caves,
While I hysterically seek shelter

Within the folds of my own cerebral cortex.
Reflexes slow; the gonads clot.
I retreat, as though Methuselah had ordered me

To repeat civilization's ancient mistake.
Now, only the oval moon remains
To guide me home, to my bed.

By default, I agree to accept her questionable advice
(Wisdom is not even in the running — not even!).
Soon, too soon, I find myself between sheets —

A baffled, lazy, complacent human being
Not altogether unwilling to accept defeat, on its terms,
Or averse to listening to Berchtesgaden treaties

Not hitherto rehearsed by Austrian revolutionaries
Who sign their paintings "Adolf"
And goose-step, every chance they get.

Tonight, I am willing to die, without regret,
Or continue living, for the heck of it.
Whichever whipstitch God chooses is fine by me.

I'm resigned to His decision, resigned to mine.
 By tomorrow, I'll not even recognize
 The face, design of the flesh, the mind that motivated me

 To write such tripe, on night's gravestone:
 "Here lies the jettisoned essence of an effervescent poet
 Who gave

6/18/86 (04127)

Breathing [△]

Amidst ivy, lilacs, spireas, magnolias,
 Only rose of Sharons and hydrangeas yet boast
 Other-than-green-colored coats, in this open-air arena,
 Where I, too, have settled, unnoticed,
 Hoping to reacquaint my psyche with forgotten processes —
 Hearing, smelling, most especially breathing —
 So that focusing won't merely be engaged
 When I'm speaking, face to face, with strangers,
 Rather initiated while I establish relationships with nature,
 Translating robins and wrens, rabbits, squirrels, snakes.

Out here, being by oneself loses distinctiveness.
 All of us are ageless creatures,
 Whose mutual coexistence depends on no legislation,
 Save that which our individual appetites recommend.
 We suffer each other's awkwardnesses and infelicities
 As tolerable ineptitudes foreseen by God.
 Time has no features. Its elusive existence
 Baffles no one. We are independent and holistic.
 Dying has a mind of its own. We breathe, eat,
 Procreate, as if tomorrow were both foe and patron saint.

Just this moment, my name forgets its origins.
 My voice dispossesses me, floats away, like a spider
 Suspended from silk cast backward by a gentle breeze,
 Or an echo whispered to distant cloud-clusters
 That refuse to send it back. I remain puzzled,
 Curious, lost as a passenger spirit
 Commuting between astral and earthly planes.
 Tonight, while all beings sleep, I'll nuzzle moistening grass,

*

Stare at the alabaster moon, breathe rhythmically,
And witness myself being borne aloft from dreaming's cave.

6/23/86 (05444)

Eyelashes

Gypsy moths float across my eyes' aqueous oceans,
Like boat-people waifs
Groping toward unknown destinations.
Where they're from and why they've chosen my shores,
I may never surmise, and yet
These flying kaleidoscope-specks
Skim the rim of my imagination, with antic recklessness —
Phantoms exhorting my focus to follow,
Vicariously share their vagrant, naked dancing.

Suddenly, what I see bears no resemblance
To past-tense objective correlatives.
I ride on soft, powdery moth wings,
Singing out lungfuls of irritated jubilation.
A swarm of one, gently coming undone from the ego,
Achieving independence from all previous being,
I soar endlessly, like a wide cloud stretching,
Transcending three dimensionality,
Until my tears evacuate their trapped lashes.

6/26/86 (05977)

[It's not, so much, that one forgets,]

It's not, so much, that one forgets,
As it is he loses touch with, his prior lives,
Can't recall events, place faces,
Or reconstruct puzzles, when the ego's edge-pieces are lost.

Just this evening, when ants share my lined page,
Vying, with surfacing syllables, for undivided attention,
And shadows splay, in Picasso and Braque fractures,
The grassy lawns, the fruit trees shading me,

I realize history itself has forgotten me,
Remembers neither my unchanged shape
Nor name by which other shapes distinguished me from ghosts,
Once upon a former resurrection, when I was born.

Nor do half-grown rabbits, cavorting in the plot
Where, twelve years ago, my wife and I
Nurtured string beans, cucumbers, zucchini, sweet corn,
Have the slightest awareness that their spectator

Is weeping at his solitary patio table —
That gently eccentric, crazy poet who used to run naked,
All hours of the night, beneath dew-dribbled moons,
Amidst lightning bugs confused by their own erratic ignitions.

Why should they, any more than flowering crabs,
Austrian pines, phloxes, rose of Sharons, spindly mimosas,
Know that I am the emperor of ice cream,
Suitably disguised as anonymity's unbedizened writer,

The guy who, nightly, composes, in his own backyard,
Measures Walt Whitman, Rubén Darío, Georg Trakl
Would have sacrificed little toes, testicles, eyeballs,
To have lifted whole, from their Solomonic word-troves,

If only they'd known the predestined frequencies
Which had to wait for evolving generations
To mature? Here I am, disposed to loneliness,
Capable of evoking entire civilizations, in a single metaphor,

Yet profoundly unable to deliver myself from the Charybdis
That threatens, daily, to devour my failed psyche,
Failed in the sense of having performed to audiences
Comprised of belligerent jays, unsuspecting robins,

Doves, nuthatches, barn swallows, grackles, wrens, sparrows —
Those noble, silent creatures forming the silent majority
When votes cast to acquit Joseph K.,
Absolve John F. Kennedy of baptizing Marilyn Monroe,

Demand a stay of execution for Gary Gilmore and Sirhan Sirhan,
Are counted and found to be lacking a majority.
This sunlit seven o'clock Farmington twilight,
I can't avoid surrendering to my own dissolute appetite for wine.

As though controlled by a godly rheostat, I continually dim.
My incisive intellect diminishes, one bulb at a time.
By degrees, the oil in my nine-branched menorah evaporates.
Night's legions invade my pia mater, overtake the kingdom.

7/2/86 — [1] (04126)

[I've never before suspected such shadows exist.] ^Δ

I've never before suspected such shadows exist.
Who ever would have imagined or guessed
Spireas, mimosas, magnolias might sequester them,
Within their green, leafy deliquesce?
Certainly I, for a vast majority of one,
As the timeworn cliché to the second power
Would have it, am overly impressed,
Despite the skepticism I necessarily possess,
By virtue of my prepossessing early education and acquired intellect.
Sitting outdoors, in this Emersonian setting,
Where Thoreau himself might have come,
To pass his leisurely hours, in metaphorical repose,
I realize how inordinately fortunate destiny has decreed me.
To relax on this patio, witnessing cardinals and robins
Lighting, performing foreplay, mating, taking flight,
Makes me want to fly away, disappear into twilight's shadows,
Evolve into something exempt from dying, death,
Forgetting. Tonight, when the full moon appears,
Perhaps I might once again take off all my clothes,
Arouse my body to climax, wet the wetting grass,
With seed that only grows Biblically,
Run beneath weeping cherries, flowering crabs, dog-
Woods, Austrian pines leaking sap, from incipient cones,
And scream like cicadas, though so humanly
No one with ears could conceivably mistake my plaint
For nature's cry. Tonight, let me get wet to the toes, knees,
Pia mater. Let me divest myself of present investments,
Forget I once existed as a responsible being.
I will assume the pose and gesture of King Saul,
Whose son, in fact, I really am. I shan't pretend,
Rather try, tonight, to render a semblance of his former greatness,
*

Though I am and, until I die, will always and only be
A semblance of that superb man, his only son,
David . . . Louis Daniel, né David, am I,
And nevermore shall other than Daniel be,
Who, through the ages, must maintain this position:
Shadows *are*. They can neither strive nor arrive
At destinations beyond their azimuth and apogee.
Meanwhile, I press ahead, while hiding outside,
Hoping, later this evening, the moon will illuminate me,
Expose my invisible disguise, let history make me as clean as
the honey
Discovered in King Tut's tomb, run through clear water,
Until I reappear without name, identity, serial number —
One of God's forgotten chosen, recalled to duty,
The scribe for the Tribe of Levi,
Writing his figurative ass off, simply for the privilege,
The honor, of recording history's momentary predilection.
Tonight, listening to flies, birds, crickets,
I proclaim my own transitory jubilation, my excitement.
Why should I not record my own fidgeting needle's marks
Across life's graph? Why shouldn't I scream
Each syllable into the nearest Marco Polo ear?
Indeed, I have no regrets or reasons
For abstaining. I must, each opportunity,
Incite, to riot, shadows, ghosts, classical gods and demons,
If only for the sake of asserting my undeviating independence,
Tonight, always, even beyond the imagination's scope.

7/2/86 — [2] (05443)

Addicted to Fugues

He flees the city, at 5:30 a.m.
Already, this steamy July dawn
Seethes like a waking geyser.

He drives rapidly, toward the southeast,
Like a self-inflicting hit-and-run victim,
But despite how far he gets,

Distance he places between his momentum
And the memory of his recent self,
Lurking in his rearview prism-cell,

Continuously diminishes, as if time
Existed exclusively in the mind of the *primum mobile*,
Not as correlative human calibrations.

Soon, fifty miles become unrecorded history.
Somewhere at its core, forgetting divides,
Splits again, effaces him mitotically.

Before this ninety-five-degree Missouri day concludes,
He will have formed a heat-resistant shell
Even hell-stones can't disintegrate,

And by nightfall, July's ivory moon
Will recognize her suitor,
Trying to locate the soul he doesn't recall owning.

7/8/86 (00831)

Kyrie Eleison

My wayward spirit skids, sideslips,
Swerves dipsomaniacally, this precipitant sunrise.
Despite their westerly trajectory,
The eyes squint into the shimmering slipstream
Left behind by my invisible destiny,
Ever just up ahead, toward which I gravitate.
But I am my own lodestone.
No Hecate moon Loreleis memory home.
All these years, I've not forgotten
One solitary detail of my inconspicuous existence.
At least my psyche can take consolation,
Believing it will remain intact even when death
Suborns fate's eight-shaded jury,
Coerces it, through intimidation, to sentence me,
Make me cease and resist the temptation
To continue seeking day's safe port,
Afternoon's crepuscular refuge,
Wherein men lie down with their dreams and hopes
And go to sleep, knowing they'll wake
Encapsulated in a thin, translucent cocoon.
Today, heading west, toward Kingdom City
And beyond, memory buoys my flexible wings.

*

I hear Your gloomy, humorless, moonstruck eyes
 Whispering within a 360-degree halo,
 Like the murmurous undulations of a tuning fork
 Whose fluctuant tines bring the universe to its knees.
 And I am compelled onward,
 As though yesterday and tomorrow were waiting for me
 To reunite them, as in prelapsarian times,
 When You and I, Elohim,
 Wrote the first verses of Genesis,
 Composed Deuteronomy and the Psalms.

7/18/86 — [1] (05978)

Requiem for a Newlywed

*For Lawrence Cooper,
 in memory of Tina*

Always, when one spouse dies,
 Two married humans assume new lives.
 Both resume destinies, divinely assigned,
 They eluded, gratuitously jettisoned, or defied
 Prior to finding, choosing each other,
 Out of all creatures in the entire permutating universe.

Ineluctably, they revert to earlier solipsisms,
 Spend diminishing energies grieving,
 Trying to identify each other's crying silence,
 On both sides of the warp time constructs
 To divide memory from history, metaphor from truth.
 Skeptically, they believe the twain meet in paradise.

Yet despite the indeterminacy of their noncoexistence,
 Neither slakes the nightmarish need to be reunited,
 She from the grave, he subordinated to his immobilizing anxieties,
 Which render his formerly virile psyche dazed,
 Incapacitated, unable to cope, with hope,
 A lonely soul growing, daily, ever more desolate and moribund.

When we're young, dying is hyperbole's surrogate.
 Even the least romantic, doomed humans among us
 Achieve apotheosis, assume ephemeral martyrdom,
 By having had their future prematurely foreclosed.

*

Better we never know the depth of our uncommitted deeds.
Sempiternally, we will remain exemplary.

7/18/86 — [2] (02642)

Benjy's Dilemma

A drooping narcissus, dripping succulent juices,
Depends from Benjy's lips.
He grips his testicles and limp penis, in his numb hand.
Pain is not physical, yet it races across his face,
Escapes his quivering tongue, registers its complaint,
On the thin, crisp Tipton air, as incessant bell-knells,
Death-tolls telling of the premature passing of his sister,
Tina, not Caddy, registers inarticulate exasperation
Occasioned by her passing. His inability to comprehend
Her having been decapitated, cut in two,
By a six-engine freight train, traveling, at forty,
Through the unmarked crossing, half a mile from town,
Is more inscrutable than his own dissociation.

As he walks across the parched cemetery field,
Kicking desiccated dandelions, with his boots,
His twitching cheeks and eyes and lips and temples
Set up a sympathetic interdependence,
Which connects him with the presence of his missing sister.
“Tina . . . Tina . . . please let me know you hear me
Scratching on your casket, pelting it with clods
Piled high from the backhoe off to one side.
I know you're in there, but why have you left?
How can you expect me to leave my senses,
Even when I never had a memory to measure intellect?
How will I find you, now that you've forgotten me?
And when can I tender my own resignation?”

7/18/86 — [3] (02649)

Thanatopsis: The Ages of Man

Precious breath is the essence of Creation.
In the beginning, there was air.

*

Inhaling, God inspired intellect,
In single-cell life forms.

Cytoplasmic creatures sifted to pelagic depths,
While humans, in crucified attitudes, began rising,
Arrogated, to themselves, immortal aspirations,
Invented genocide, effaced kin and kith.
In the end, there was radiation.
Exhaling, God effaced his higher designs.

In a desiccated riverbed in an antique land,
Fossilized trilobites vibrate silently,
As though the planet's shifting tectonic plates
Might be preparing for a second climacteric.

7/22/86 (05979)

[Persistent yet intermittent visions of you,] [△]

Persistent yet intermittent visions of you,
Belle Mississippi,
Twist, inextricably, amidst my psyche's leaves
And velvety, dripping poetries,
Like sinuous, thick-scented honeysuckle vines
Trying to break free from Quentin's pent-up mind,
Stretch their lunatic blooms moonward.

But they catch, choke in my throat,
Like half-chewed carrot slivers.
Memories of Southern ladies I've intimately known
All respond to the same name — Caddy —
When I call them. Spoken to,
Mississippi coalesces into the solitary specter
Of a looming Medusa snake-hissing at me.

Belly-up, I float on nightmarish oceans,
Daily, year after year, momentarily,
As if my mother were a fish
And I her amniotic death wish delivered,
A speck whose minuscule history
Is this visionary obituary written in verse.
Why did I devote my life to you, bitch Mississippi?

7/26/86 (03586)

Sonday

Through intermittent patches of lifting mist,
His urgent spirit corkscrews over Highway 32,
From Farmington toward Ste. Genevieve,
Then south, down I-55.

Vision is the sky trying on and doffing robes,
Before morning worship,
This rose-golden, lush, crepuscular Sunday.

Within the corridor where horizon and night
Transform day, in the sun's alchemical alembic,
His eyes slide back and forth,
As though determined to locate their own reflection
In God's singular orbiting halo.
Nowhere in that vast inscrutability
Does anything resembling his soul disclose itself

Or suggest where he might go to find solace
From universal aloneness. At this moment,
Alienation ceases being an abstraction,
Reveals his human components as chief felons
Bent on dissolving whatever elemental love
He yet might have discovered, had fear of blindness
Not deterred him from searching further

Into the origins of Sunday morning. Just now,
One hundred miles down the road,
He realizes no one is going to guide him,
Provide dialogue. Ineluctably, he's on his own.
Hopefully, by nightfall, he will have outdistanced the mist,
Descended his visionary crucifix, awakening in time
To witness the coronation of his best friend: himself.

7/27/86 — [1] (03587)

Garden of Southern Delights ^Δ

Lady, since last we spent gentle energies
Contriving affectionate devices
To command each other's attentions,
I've experienced a friendless dereliction.

Sweet mistress, until this Sunday morning,
When, again, I entered your misty provinces,
I'd forgotten just how much time
We've wasted, not stitching our illicit crazy quilt.

Now, racing past Hurricane Creek, Como,
Approaching Oxford, after nearly a year,
I sense your deliquescent fragrance
Of magnolias, wisterias, and honeysuckles.

Soon, surreptitiously,
We'll meet in Bailey's Woods
And, suspending all that's transpired since then,
Let silence put us in touch with our future,

Set us free from the past,
And remand us to mutual jubilation.
With luck, under tonight's luminous moon-bloom,
We'll exult in ageless efflorescence.

7/27/86 — [2] (03569)

[In this God-forsaken Mississippi]

In this God-forsaken Mississippi
Midway between *once* and *immediately*,
End-of-July's Lucifer heat
Races ahead of every thought, motion,
Beats me to my least inconvenient destination,
As though it knows the destiny of "second best."
No matter how slowly I shuffle
From air-conditioned cubicle to auditorium,
Sweat breaks from invisible pores,
Creates friction between me and the close air.
My wings begin to dip, drag, slip, skid;
Wind shears cripple my plane.
In Oxford, all ideas of order with which I arrived
Plunge into the humid abyss, disappear.
Inconspicuously, minuscule pieces of me begin to surface
In the rainbow-halo of an oil slick

*

Eclipsing Mississippi, the globe, enter the stratosphere,
As intense heat — a new sun to heat Genesis.

7/30/86 (03593)

Of Takeoffs, Cross Winds, and Landings

Liftoff occasions visions of mini wind-shear demons
Swarming, like honeybees, about the ship's wing tips.
My stomach sees drafts my eyes can't isolate.
Each altitude superseded
Obsoletes attitudes toward extinction, immortality,
Creates new illusions of human soaring, freedom,
Allows history greater approximation of its destination.

But where is air, and why does sky
Belie its own inherent weightlessness? Who am I,
If not a creature not innately born to fly?
How did my shape accumulate such smooth speed,
Without movements initiated by brain waves
Pulsing, across synapses, like navigators, in caravels,
Plying oceans, for Spice Islands floating in their mind?

Somewhere just ahead, I sense time and engines
Conspiring with blood, flesh, breath, to transform
And arrest condensation and fire, into nonmomentum,
Render dream and hope eye to eye, again, with demons,
From whose dire, unmitigable juxtaposition
Only one of us, wind-shear demons or I, shall survive
The grave, spiraling slope of today's endless descent.

8/5/86 (05980)

[Apprehension we jovially disguise as curiosity,][†]

Apprehension we jovially disguise as curiosity,
Anxieties Huck would describe as “fantods,”
Slowly approach us, in the form of a storm cell,
A sky-squall fitfully leaning drunkenly,
A slobbering wind disinterestedly fulminating

8/10/86 — [1] (03752)

Defenders of Independence ^Δ

*For Trilogy, Troika, and Jan,
Fort Lauderdale,
8/10/86*

Oceans were created for anemones and eight-year-olds,
Exotic octopuses, sea horses, starfishes,
And Nemo-minded Dr. Seusses,
Who, at least twice yearly, can relate to children
And other subtropical species from the north.
Just now, not twenty feet from shore,
We watch our preteenage daughter, Trilogy,
And nervy boy, Troika, assault the cresting waves
(Invading hordes threatening the castle),
Both trying, with plastic rafts
And sixty to ninety-two pounds of raw energy
Pushing from behind, to stave off
The entire weight of the universal enemy, chaos.
Way out, where sky and water merge,
Seven hues, blending in bending suspension, suffuse,
Scintillate and immaculate our eyes.
Like two new colors set loose from their prism,
Our children shimmer beneath the rainbow,
Forming, in close, their own halo and aura,
Even as they entrench themselves for another defense
Against all that endlessly spewing density.
Meanwhile, to the east, a storm cell wells,
Slants shoreward, as if to torment, thwart their efforts,
Before dissipating into its own boisterousness.
When we look again, the waves have quieted.
Seeming to have forgotten their primal purposes,
Each whispers an oceanic apology,
For having tried to subdue, by sheer multitudes,
Our victorious offspring, who rush up,
Out of the genuflecting sea, toward the summit,
Where we recline on beach towels nestled in sand.
Before wiping brine from their burning eyes,
Turning their backs on us, resuming their parapets,
Where they will celebrate their own mastery
Over ocean, land, sky, lightning, and death-by-dying,
Both yell their emblematic vows to protect us
And one "I love you" each, just for luck.

8/10/86 — [2] (02156)

[If only I could read Babylonian cuneiform!] ^Δ

If only I could read Babylonian cuneiform!
Each incoming tablet shimmers, tumbles,
Quivers in the ebb-and-flow zone,
Just below the eroding shore behind me,
Before exploding, crumbling, decomposing
Into its most elemental form — sand granules
Accreting on the beach my eyes' eye owns.
Standing in the water
Cross-weaving at my feet, whose oceanic tides
Reach all sides of the planet
Even as they caress my thin, sinewy ankles,
I realize my spirit (that homologous antecedent)
Stood here, eons ago, peering into the wash,
Wishing it might transcend its corporeal shape,
As wave, coral, trilobite, pulpy anemone,
Hoping to return, every few generations or centuries,
As starfish, snail, whelk, crab —
Creatures timeless for their intricate simplicity.

If only I could read Sanskrit,
Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Lascaux petroglyphs
(Ageless phonemes that rocks speak,
Knocking into each other, as they churn in from way out),
Whose origin may be deep rather than far
Or too high to navigate with mere eschatological tools,
Then I might be able to disentangle my fate,
Know my preordained destiny, my starry karma.
As it is, wading into this cascading wave-grave,
Pressing farther and deeper out,
Braving increasingly higher cresting adumbrations,
I lose all sense of Stone Age language,
Begin to forget three-dimensional survival techniques.
Within minutes, I am a feckless speck,
Unable to reject or select necessary alternatives
Which might perpetuate human mentality and sensibility.
Indistinguishable from rock, shell, sea bean,
I enter the frothing welter, engage the horizon.
Within hours, my delayed suicide overtakes the incoming tide.
My flaccid body rides in, on its thrust, toward the shore —
Just one more tablet engraved with water-wrinkles,

*

Just another symbol containing the effacing genetic blueprints
of an entire human generation.

8/13/86 (00477)

A Soliloquy for Benjy

Already, this mid-August, I hear fall calling,
As though I were leaning close to a rusty rail
And autumn were a groaning steam locomotive
Accomplishing the steepest grade between Pikes Peak
And dreams my divining senses detect.
Winter-hints — tinges of fall's ineffable imminence —
Reappear ten thousand-fold, in these rimmed windows,
Into whose scintillant, ninety-six-year-old Victorian glints
I glimpse with conspicuous fascination,
Trying to isolate, in their idiotic reflections,
Mimetic redolences of my own narcissistic visibility.

All my divining senses can detect is the slightest perfume
Emanating from the lavender-hued, blooming
Rose of Sharons. Nowhere out there, beyond my stare,
Do profuse ivy and honeysuckle vines signify attitudes of dying,
Rather wild metastasis, a jubilant cutting loose,
In whose profuse confusion the only victim is me, myself,
A pariah by virtue of my virtue. No Judas am I;
Instead, amidst all this Dionysian revelry,
Gaudy and meretricious, in its a priori mortality,
I persist in viewing the violet/crimson-hued lilacs
Not as talisman but sign of the time.

Sitting outside, alone, reveling in my silent tranquillity,
I might easily succumb to luxuriant numbness,
Were it not for my intuitive lyric gifts,
These premonitory soundings which announce seasons
Before they've even decided to intercede,
Call me to their altar, to ask sacrifice of my poetic soul.
Such is fall, this cicada-filled, mid-August evening,
When my whole life is thrall to bittersweet retreat.
Above, I see turtle-doves skittering duskward.
Close by, I listen to crickets whispering vespers.
*

In the distance, steam locomotives transport my spirit, over
the orange abyss.

If I could die, it would be right here, in plain sight of myself.

8/19/86 (05442)

Translating Crickets

This mild August twilight,
When the crimson sky is awash with frenzied flying
And I, diminished from imbibing white wine,
Once again sit outside, behind this still Victorian manse,
Listening to crickets tightening and loosening leg-pegs
On their Stradivarius and Amatus violins,
In preparation for night's newest fugue,
An inclination bordering on compulsion suborns me.

I take up pen, dismantle whiteness, a line at a time,
Fabricate, from diffuse ideas and visions,
Fabrics sufficiently commodious to efficiently robe
Misbegotten Moseses, wayward Ahabs and Queegs,
Huck Finns, Gullivers, Ponce de Leóns
Frantically searching for homes in “promised lands”
Only the mind invents and hand translates to paper,
By arresting naked metaphors and dressing them in suggestiveness.

This blessed dusk, when my preposterous inebriation
Is witnessed by absolutely no one
And I go outrageously accountable to no code of morality,
Only crickets, doting turtledoves, slugs
Recognize my sedentary shape. I am Joseph in disguise,
Childless, widower, an atheistic ascetic.
My dreams wander through the southern-Missouri Sinai,
As I, pariah poet, translate the crickets' High Mass into my
vernacular.

8/20/86 (05441)

Apostle Willy

He composes poetry, in persistent fits,
As though there were no tomorrow

*

Or, if so, only a provisionally determinate one.
He scribbles while driving, so that going nowhere
Won't seem such a lonely vocation,
Hoping resurrecting, from the colossal "unknown,"
Ecclesiastical snippets of mystical wisdom,
Lyrical visions, might justify his presence,
Whose ostensible purpose, selling men's clothing,
Won't betray his main purpose: staying alive.

Perhaps his fits emanate from compulsions
To stave off boredom or inordinate fears of strangers,
Which impel him to build word-castles,
Whose moats flow with symbolic undertows
And have drawbridges that open and close
Only to his encoded metaphors.
Possibly, he's a vestige of a deracinated tribe,
A former scribe transmogrified,
Whose survival depends on writing bona fide orders,
Not gospels, psalms, or Deuteronomic platitudes.

Setting out, this cool August a.m.,
Willy senses that unrelaxed, restive necessity
Once again mandating him to scribble,
Let his pen serve as conduit between head
And order pad. As he records measures,
In spaces usually reserved for slacks,
Suits, sportscoats in a wide range of sizes,
Colors, fabrications, he can't contain his amazement.
He laughs at himself, quizzical yet assured,
As he watches verses expand into stanzas,

Stanzas coalesce into collective unanimity of purpose,
The poem, inviolable, his living testament —
Willy, an on-the-sly writer of verses;
Willy, the pariah, throwback,
Acme-Zenith's best, and only, Midwest rep,
Who knows better than to *ever*
Try out his pieces on clients; Willy Sypher,
Satisfied to keep his deepest identity secret:
Jew-poet — time's nose job, tummy tuck
His best hedges against business vicissitudes.

Raisons d'Être

Fast asleep in his imagination's haystack,
This lackluster, rainy August day,
The mild, retiring little guy, dislocated writer
Hibernating in his Midwestern silence,
Dreams through drowsy, oblique hallucinations,
Backward, from 1986 to 56 A.D.
Visions rearrange his shadow.
Self-recognitions, dressed in wisdom's robes,
Reciting ecclesiastical poetry
To listeners versed in lyrical mysticism,
Acquaint him with history's bittersweet traces.
Time is a harlot and Pharaoh,
Conspiring, with innocent, gentle people,
To unseat him from his illuminations,
Dilute his distilled truths, substitute facts,
Reduce his gnomic proverbs and psalms
To newspaper copy and insidious gossip —
Rumor's two-headed Medusa.
He grows restive, shudders, turns on his side.
Straw tips scratch his shirtless back,
Prick his naked legs and stomach.
He awakens behind the wheel of a fleet vehicle
Plunging southeasterly, lacking destination,
His cargo hold loaded with oversize tomes
Bound in vellum and goat hide:
Zohars, Korans, Rig-Vedas, Upanishads, and Torahs —
Survivors from Alexandria's fired repository.
Suddenly, rain-visions retrieve him from forgetting.
He's time's tribal messenger,
Trying to override destiny, remove the library intact.
Those books stacked behind him are his own.
Each bears his unique signature.
Into their pages, he's breathed his living entrails,
All the days of these past two decades,
That future readers might recognize his existence
And, more, appropriate his literary magic,
Merely by taking and reciprocating his compassion,
With equally energetic excitement
(Sleepers awakened by waking sleepers, endlessly).
Nothing less can arrest him forever,
Yet no greater effort need be applied to teach others
*

Man's primal justification for not staying dead,
In the first place, is perpetuating himself,
Leaving behind productive reminders
That God's human creation is no base mirage,
Rather evolutionary proof positive
That improvement was His one inviolate fiat
And that doing and accomplishing
Are dominant X and Y strains in the chain,
Available just by affirming that eternity is *now*.

8/27/86 — [1] (05981)

[Where is *when* when *then* enters *here*]

Where is *when* when *then* enters *here*
And *now* vows itself to secrecy,
About ancestral skeletons and present-day descendants?

How is it possible to found new dreams
On old hopes daily dissolving around us
Or respect those in cemeteries we forget to visit,

When feckless souls roam the imagination's
Rat-infested cargo holds and contagion
Assumes the Speaker of the House's podium,

From which it can articulate platitudinous moralities
While voting for toxic waste, nuclear-bomb tests,
CIA subversion of Latin American regimes?

The answers to these slightly-less-than-sleight-of-hand questions
Rest with each of us willing to digress from pressure
Put upon us by our collective prestidigitators,

Disguised in priests' and rabbis' robes,
Who would have us believe their mission is to address oppression,
By begging for alms, on television.

Only those of us who put credence in truth, not facts,
Compose metaphors instead of sampled data,
Can see what's actually happening.

Sadly, there are very few of us who realize
Why *when* plays second fiddle to *now*
And *then* engenders little response from sacred cows,

Among the rabble. Unsolicited explanations are legion,
Yet satisfaction is not guaranteed
By Sears, Roebuck and Co. politicians, ministers, delegates.

Once again, I plead for merciful and compassionate treatment.
Please be understanding! If You will, Master,
Commute my sentence. Allow me to expiate my sins,

By holding brief for history's right of eminent domain.
Let my antecedents speak on my behalf,
Attempt to intercede, make You realize I am, forever,

Memory, Son, Vision, Ghost, Parable, Child,
He who is of bulrushes, virginal Madonna,
Wilderness wanderer, Islamic Allah, Hindu Krishna,

Lord, Christ, God, mentor and acolyte alike,
Poet, painter, choreographer, sculptor, designer,
He/she who has ever been society's apostate,

Willing to endure penury, calumny, prejudice, and blight,
For the privilege of dying at his/her own behest.
Tonight, I proclaim my independence. Now and then,

I yet remain my own flesh and bone.
Who I am, I *am*, and no one can diminish me,
Despite history's claim on my ancestors.

Let me be, you ghosts and poltergeists!
If I am to reach maturity,
I must proclaim myself inviolate — I am *me*!

8/27/86 — [2] (05982)

[Other than for blue jays going sporadically crazy,]

Other than for blue jays going sporadically crazy,
This last day of August,
Sunday's tranquillity belies joyous boisterousness.
Against a slightly undulating curtain of chirping and buzzing
That crickets, locusts, bees, wasps, and flies
Let fall the length of Earth's proscenium,
Dusk's psalmlike strophes rise to reverberating sermons.

Something inherently paradoxical about being alive,
 In these hours, when most people sleep,
 Awakens me to death's proximity.
 Like glaciers, tectonic plates, evolving species,
 I sense myself trapped between time's crevasses and chasms.
 In the jays' raucous screaming, I hear my own.
 Suddenly, I realize we're objects of God's mocking omniscience.

8/31/86 (05440)

Getting/Staying in Shape ^Δ

Though nobody should be working, this Labor Day,
 The Farmington High football team and I
 Share, in our civil disobedience,
 The paradoxes of nonviolent affirmative action.
 While I race old age around the oval,
 They practice their draw and off-tackle shovel pass.
 My hip joints ache, with each jolt,
 As I chase hallucinations from phantom days.
 Their bruised shoulders, stiff groin muscles
 Forget their localized complaints, for concentration
 Each snap of the ball commands. They're immune to pain;
 Youth's superabundant energy reserves are legendary.

Circling their workout, I grow increasingly aware
 That, come Friday night's contest, I'll be seated in bleachers
 Whose present emptiness bears witness to our trials.
 They'll be right where, now, they scrimmage,
 Defending crucial yard lines against enemies,
 Not friendly classmates. I'll be straining to glimpse
 Each exchange from center to quarterback, each hand-off,
 Sideline or slant pass, trying to contain myself
 When they fumble, miss fourth and three, by inches,
 Kick the winning extra point, with five seconds left.
 For now, however, we are equal in our defiance.
 Let the rest of our citizenry sleep, this Monday morning.

We're hellbent on kindred commitments
 To get into superior condition, achieve indomitability,
 No matter that their opponents challenge them
 Only once a week, this imminent fall season,

*

While mine will besiege me daily, each second, minute, hour,
Throughout the rest of my life's sudden-death overtime.

9/1/86 (05983)

Willy Has a Close Call

Rear “ANTI-SAIL” mud flaps
Constantly changing angles of attack;
Roaring twin exhaust stacks
Snorting black clots of diesel exhaust;
Chrome rims and hubcaps refracting the sun,
Like sparks flying from a great Catherine wheel
Or St. Elmo’s fire riding the *Pequod*’s rigging —
These and myriad unredeemed hallucinations
Frighten me awake, retrieve my senses, from sleep,
While I drive westerly, toward Tipton.
Instead of a long-cowl Peterbilt tractor
And stainless-steel Heil tanker-trailer screaming past me,
I see a tenth-century Chimera
Winging by, hellbent, toward more enticing prey.
Suddenly, both hands grip the wheel,
Like lips sticking to freezing metal grids.
My neck stiffens, bladder achieves incontinence,
As my right foot repeatedly pumps the brake pedal.
Just up ahead, to the left,
Not a thousand feet from my reactions,
The transport veers across, into my lane,
Stutters at shoulder’s edge, like a wide receiver
Trying to hold the ball and keep in bounds,
Before plunging down the limestone embankment,
Jackknifing, instantaneously igniting.
For the next fifty-six miles, to Columbia,
Dread asphyxiates my hyperventilating vision.
I’m pinned inside that smashed cab,
Flaming gas sputtering over my flesh,
Like piranhas, condors, Ming dogs, and king cobras
Besieging me, in nightmare. All afternoon,
I ride the Chimera’s scaly back,
Simultaneously prisoner, victim, and netherish exile,
Knowing only that I’ve missed today’s appointment

*

To show Acme-Zenith's spring '87 line
 ("Clothing Fit for a King and His Kingdom")
 To Columbia's finest, Lowenstein the Clothier,
 And that I won't get back this way
 Until week's end, when I'll hope for a second chance
 To make my pitch. Lowenstein's a real bigoted son-of-a-bitch!

9/3/86 — [1] (02330)

Reflections in Katy Station

Like all migrating creatures, I range, obliquely,
 From my origins, forage strange lands,
 Grope for peaceable refuge, kindred species,
 Reasons for lingering: oases, bountiful fruit trees,
 Gold autumnal days, star-crazed night skies,
 Languid females discovering their primal nakedness,
 Poems, like wisteria blooms, drooping, in profusion,
 From trellises scattered throughout Eden.

Diametrically opposed to loneliness,
 Roaming alone provides me with the most capacious freedom.
 My Thoreau-soul is an unfolding corolla
 (Lilac, magnolia, impatiens, marigold).
 Though childless, my pariah spirit is no milquetoast
 But Kilimanjaro-climber, three-minute-miler,
 Hobo sleeping beside the Truckee, by night,
 Shunting, daily, between Tahoe, Sacramento, San Francisco,

One-eared Arles painter, Diaghilev dancer,
 Stagestruck Harold Lloyd, Frank Lloyd Wright,
 Da Vinci inventor squandering his best complexities,
 Inventing metaphors that fly, tell time, fire fusillades,
 Oxford fictionist too busy, placing a broken narcissus
 Within an idiot's tight grip, to defend his technique
 Against excess, his style against hostile critics,
 And outrageously misguided Ahab commanding a phantom ship.

Down the drafty, spendthrift centuries,
 Having been all these incarnations and so many more,
 I find it impossible to differentiate identities.
 Tonight, sitting here, in this outmoded railroad station,
 *

I recognize my own nomadic, tribal, silhouetted shape
Just beneath the amber surface of my wineglass:
Ragged Moses, toe-deep in sand, pressing toward Canaan,
Humiliation, noble frustration etched on his face.

He is/I am the leader of those promised people,
Keeper of their ashes, Torah and cabala scribe,
Flimflam man just a step ahead of the Gestapo,
Schindler bindle stiff refusing the Auschwitz run,
For intuitive premonitions. I am the quintessential waif,
Who prefers Salt Lake City to Treblinka,
The Vatican to Bergen-Belsen, Jerusalem to Cracow,
Ladue and Clayton, Missouri, to Germany's collective graves.

Tonight, resting in this defunct Victorian depot,
Content to revel, inebriated, in its Napa Valley libation,
Transported to mid-Missouri,
Aware that time's sidetracked train
Is going nowhere rapidly, I remind myself, in rhyme,
That mine is gift, skill, artistic discipline
Migrating across the generations, meant to keep alive
Those lost tribes, my precious spirit destined to die.

Tonight, like a monarch butterfly, a Great Lakes salmon,
I thrust against currents, upstream,
Purging radical incapacities, to endure,
Outlast preordained fates. Refusing to go gentle
Into this penitential good night,
I reject easy solutions to eschatological questions.
Ranging, obliquely, from my origins, I hesitate,
Turn back, grope for my mother's lactating breast.

9/3/86 — [2] (02641)

Merchant Marine Willy Makes for Port ^Δ

All week, he's cruised between shoals, atolls, reefs,
Heading beyond familiar depths, to wider reaches
Than any previously achieved
In the great Midwest inland ocean sea
He's charted, these past eighty biannual seasons.
Now, at Friday's dusk, he banks,

*

Completes a broad gyre, begins his retreat,
By heading directly for Highway 40,
Missouri's main navigational sea lane.

Loaded with slightly-more-dog-eared and dustier
Swatch books, sample size-34 pants,
Random, soiled sportscoats, two three-piece suits
Representing spring '87, Willy returns —
Acme-Zenith's perdurable merchant marine,
Their indispensable Jew fisher,
Solitary Ahab, ragged ragman,
Whose ragtag bag of Teufelsdröckh raiment
He's schlepped, from port to door, four decades.

This late afternoon, he expends precious energy
Just keeping his spirit from veering
Over memory's shoulder lines, into sanity's median.
Long ago, his best reflexes quit relying on autopilot,
Jettisoned gyrocompasses and stabilizers.
He has plied his routes and his trade manually,
Hand to mouth, in rote sequence.
Whether selling or driving, he yet resorts to checklists,
To measure survival's odds, circumvent forgetting.

Tonight, humiliation rides in the front seat, beside him.
Having written three scanty orders,
Totaling five hundred safari-type, offshore-assembled shorts,
Carrying 2 percent commission
(Which will barely cover gas, motel, meals,
Make no dent on his monthly utilities and rent),
Willy senses the specter of another desolate weekend
Looming, like a gargoyle, over his tenement entrance
And dreads its silence more than dying at sea.

9/5/86 (02329)

On the Way Home

In the eerie aura of this morning's fog,
I detect spectral recklessness.
Whether it emanates from my wakeful energies
Or rises from vaporous hallucinations
Buried for decades is an answer impossible to ascertain

*

Yet unnecessary to the earth's progress, evolution.
My eyes, sole survivors of their own Trojan Wars,
Fly home, inside the rickety fuselage
Of a roaring, corrugated horse
They confuse with Psyche's victorious steed.
Memories and immediate images fuse into ideas
That ride their three-dimensional trajectories,
Aligning my immediate insight with outside stimuli.
I am Cyclops, driving westerly,
In frantic search of an abandoned mythology to appropriate;
Dispossessed Willy Sypher, faced, indefensibly,
With daily store closings throughout my territory;
Christ's blood, rushing from Friday's trepanned skull.
In every fog-glazed direction I gaze,
I detect spectral recklessness astir,
Converging on my destiny, with awful haste.
Perhaps I've actually awakened, this morning,
On dawn's dark side, behind the valley of shades.

9/17/86 — [1] (02328)

Fugue

Desperation holds him hostage, this a.m.
Although three hours into waking,
He can't yet reinvent yesterday's identity
Or even call himself by his right name,
Let alone decide whether his disheveled spirit
Is dressed in raiments symbolic of a recognizable occupation.

While his dilemma may be symptomatic of failure
Instigated by mere forgetfulness or amnesia,
More likely, his dread enemy, Alzheimer's disease,
Is licking his axons' clitorises,
Exciting him, sadistically, with unreciprocal enervations,
Inexorably pleasuring him to death.

Just now, all these perturbations fade into one question:
Who will he be, today? More to the point,
Will he even exist, be capable of eliciting pain
By pinching his testicles, clearing vision
Simply by extricating a stray lash from his eyelid,
Listening to his breath, over death's childish bids for attention?

Probing the silent highway, for familiar signs,
He drives and drives, ever westerly,
Resigned to canine mind-blindness,
Hoping whatever alien faction is holding him hostage
Will decide to release him, let him return
To the refuge his right name and sense of purpose provide.

9/17/86 — [2] (00830)

[This Friday morning redesigns my identity,][‡]

This Friday morning redesigns my identity,
Without requesting my permission.
Eagerly, I accept its consequential permutation,
Realizing routine sequences comprising my days
Necessarily benefit from occasional changes.

This Friday morning, I reduce my years
By 80 percent, find a temporary refuge
In the classroom of my eight-year-old boy, Troika,
Where time reminds me of castoff pleasures,
When life's prefixes, suffixes, plot summaries

9/19/86 (00678)

The Last Day of Summer

Leaving St. Louis, this iridescent morning,
On my semiweekly commute to Farmington,
Where, just recently, my wife and I
Buried the last two decades of our connubial life,
In twin memory-crypts, beneath a three-tiered,
White High Victorian mausoleum,
I tentatively unstitch myself from rush-hour traffic,
Whose patchwork fabric fits spirits
Far more Stepfordian than mine. I sit, impatiently,
At Hanley and Clayton's four-way maze,
Waiting for the lights to rearrange our frustrations.
To my right, the chain grocery's stainless-and-glass facade
Attracts my gaze. Actually, the elongated female shape
Moving in front of its face, like a caged leopard pacing,

*

Distracts my focus; concentration lapses.
Her ankle-length knit dress, snugly fitted
Over continuously shifting hips, reciprocating buttocks,
Extracts fascination from my slowly dissipating daze.
A Lautrec-like suggestiveness, composed of silhouette
And pastel-hued brilliance, fills my imagination
With the amplitudes of hidden breasts.
The subdued restlessness of this lady,
Innocently making her way afoot, to work,
Oblivious to my mind's intrusive, if fantasied, designs
On her body, ravishes me completely.
My lap explodes. Underwear, slacks, dress shirt
Are absorbent blotters for my invisible ink.
Suddenly, red is green; then green turns from circle
To arrow. Caught off guard, I pause,
Automatically jam on the brakes,
As a reaction to the fast-cooling, quick-drying
Mucilage/lava fusing my clothing and body.
From behind, bumpers nudge mine, then release.
My car lurches ahead, describing a left arc.
Heading toward the highway, eyes sideways,
I watch her cross, on the light,
Regain the sidewalk, dissolve into city shimmer.
All day, I'll wear her, under my sportscoat.

9/22/86 (05984)

Apis-cide

We three, anomaly's unlikeliest trio,
Conduct our summit-level powwow,
Fifty feet below this local global theater.
We crowd about a castoff electric-company truck
Equipped with side stabilizers and a cherry picker —
Hydraulic mast, plastic basket —
Trying to decide how to pry a ten-foot strip
Of stubborn fascia from the sky's soffit
Without releasing an entire sleeping hive's ire
And pent-up fury. It's a primordial task,
Exterminating. No one except necessity's
Soup-kitchen regulars and thrill-seekers,
*

Disguised beneath veils and thick overalls,
Calling themselves "beekeepers,"
Would dare pursue such a perilous vocation,
Yet the two of them and I strategize.
Soon, the boom elbows through drooping pine boughs,
Snapping them randomly; it moves into position.
Flashlight beams intrude, stir the brooding insects.
Both men wave vacuum nozzles frantically,
As if trying to elude x-rays,
With tissue-paper shields. From my vantage,
I see fear, sense adrenaline raging up there,
Wish I could participate in the taking.
Instead, my vicariousness makes me skittish.
I twitch at the slightest moth flight,
Every mosquito bite and cricket pitch-change.
Hallucinations swarm me. I break out in welts,
Slump within numbing pain, faint away.
When I awaken, at the base of a Norway pine
Bordering last night's site, nothing remains
Except crazy tire tracks crisscrossing the lawn,
Three pieces of roof trim
Leaning against the house's stone foundation,
And an extended opening at slate's edge,
Empty of the eight-foot-long-by-one-foot-wide honeycomb,
Which, for a decade, sustained Eden,
In a naturally golden state, paradisiacal, inviolate.
Staring up at that exposed eave,
I suddenly realize how terrifyingly precarious
Is the complex cosmology bees and people share.

9/26-27/86 (05985)

Sunday Morning in the Country: October Turning

Weeping cherries, flowering crabs, dogwoods
Nod intuitive recognition. I know they see me,
Though they can only externalize their emotions,
Show awareness through bodily changes
That proclaim their true *cellves*
As hues deviating from photosynthetic green,
Toward spectrum's infrared edges.

This morning, I sit silently, inconspicuous as grass,
Close to shadow-moats surrounding these autumnal trees,
Listening to their dialogues with sky and breezes,
Recording their slowing metabolism
As poetry measuring the utter stillness, between swayings,
As caesuras they occasionally appropriate
From voiceless memories orbiting this holy place,

Which belong entirely to me. Existence, destiny, and essence
Emanating from me validate their own.
When fall calls, all of us nod simultaneously.
Gently, I abrade my wrist, with a holly sprig,
To acknowledge familial ties. Ineluctably, the trees and I
Bear witness to my bleeding blue veins
Beading up with bright-crimson sap, this ephemeral, dying season.

10/5/86 (05439)

[Although it's rare enough when we pause] [‡]

Although it's rare enough when we pause
To bestow, on mothers-in-law,
Satisfactory kudos or laudatory applause,
Rather more common to accuse them of faux pas
And of being insufferable victims of character flaws,
Occasionally we're compelled to withdraw,
Out of respect for the institution, because
Neglecting to do so or refusing might give cause
For the powers that be to grasp for straws,
Rethink our fates, reshape the disclaimer clause
Each human destiny carries, and banish us to Hades' thaws.
If for no other reason than this, we pause
To celebrate you, Mrs. H., or, better, because
We want to proclaim, with a hundred pshawns,
Two hundred Hail Marys, a thousand guffaws,
Just how much we love you, because
The seventieth birthday of a mother-in-law
Renowned for her never-the-same-tasting slaws,
Mystery-meat salad, and Alaskan crab claws
Deserves nothin' less than our resounding applause.
To Margaret, then, we lift up our paws

10/10/86 (05986)

Monday-Morning Rain

For an hour, words gasping to declare themselves
Visible entities
Suffer a dusklike dawn, through whose tenacious rain
I press, heading southeasterly.
Their stifled anonymity bewilders me.
Helplessly, I sit behind the wheel, pen poised
Like a spitting cobra set to strike
My mongoose-mind's elusive, inarticulate twitches.
Expression stays still as lizards blending into croton foliage.

When diaphanous Gare Saint-Lazare-light
Finally rises from the steamy earth or descends,
The words that have patiently queued up
Behind my ballpoint-Bic-tip kiosk
Trip into existence, like naked Auschwitz victims
Shivering, for hours, outside "shower" doors,
Staring, bleakly, at the makeshift sign
Above the lintel, "*Mens Sana in Corpore Sano*,"
Waiting to gain admittance to Zyklon B elixirs.

Phonemes materialize as strokes,
Complete letters, whole words, on page five
Of my open notebook, resting on an attaché
Steadied by my right knee. My eyes focus
Back and forth, from road to lined paper
Filling, curiously, with pent-up tropes and phantom energies
Metamorphosing into the irregular shape
Free-verse poems frequently take
When imitating the deaf-and-dumb moaning of human loneliness.

10/13/86 (00829)

Procession of the 6 A.M. Lemmings

The two-eyed, low-beam lemmings
Arrive silently, two by two,
As though the city's abyss were a sacred ark
Within whose climate-controlled containers and holds
They might survive time's rising tide —
Nature's innocuous stowaways.

Driving thrice their velocity, in the opposite direction,
Toward country coverts and groves
Set, like rabbit nests, into the Ozark foothills,
I can't outdistance them.
Ten, twenty-five, forty miles out,
They yet serpentine and undulate.

Suddenly, low-lying-branch mist dismantles vision.
When focus emerges, both highways are empty
Except for my solitary vehicle,
Going nowhere, at an incalculable speed,
Hovering between earth and sky —
A renegade lemming being sent to the end of the line.

10/14/86 (05987)

The Collector

This tiny country town, Farmington,
Where, for nearly two decades, he's existed,
Surrounds his defoliating psyche
As cortex and hippocampus do his memory core.

This morning, he rouses before dawn,
Shivers with the dew-stippled grass,
Gets goose bumps, as the skimming sun
Shimmers church steeples' tin and copper skins.

Always, October's incandescences
Have energized his receptors, sparked the darkness,
Through whose argenteous cloisters
He's shuffled, lost in thoughtful jubilation.

But just now, he can't recall
Ever feeling so exquisitely lightheaded.
It's as if, this fifty-degree dawn,
He were a bottle of champagne effervescently popped.

Even stiff-gaited outpatients from the state hospital
Seem to sense his solitary celebration,
Nod, through their own stupors, abstracted praise.
He raises an eyebrow, a finger, as they pass.

As he traipses down West Columbia's brick sidewalks,
 Up Liberty, grocery, post office,
 Clothing and jewelry shops, pharmacy, Capital Café
 Remember his shape. He forgets his own name

Yet knows his dislocation fits a pattern;
 The geography is known quantities
 Within unfamiliar geometries, home the place
 He sends his spent soul, each night, to sleep.

Suddenly, sunlight fragments his tattered shadow.
 Time gestures for him to begin his daily collection:
 Stabbing scattered pieces, with his brain-pick —
 Scraps to be sewn into his resurrection robes.

10/17/86 (05988)

The Vanity of Human Delusions

Claverach Park's black crows —
 Poe-ravens —
 Are not exactly pterodactyls, bald eagles,
 Or even minor predators like blue jays,
 Rather inhabitants of this Tudor tract,
 Which was developed sixty years back,
 When St. Louis yet lacked self-confidence
 To consider its vast resources adequate for consecration . . .
 Large, slightly frightening birds,
 Tolerated because neighbors refuse to act,
 Set out poison, beat pans and skillets,
 As they do in the country, to remove the taint
 Of screeching starlings roosting in treetops,
 Brooding, maniacally, in seasonal inviolateness.
 These crows have lived here, in this park,
 Longer than the oldest present resident.
 They know all the scuttlebutt currently circulating
 And the less remarkable, most pedestrian secrets
 Each occupant of these stately Tudor manses possesses.
 Were it not for these four and twenty blackbirds
 (Crows, if the truth be professed, mere crows),
 No history would exist in this secluded place,
 Where corporate whim roots,
 Then frenetically removes, its newest dwellers

*

And frequent affluent divorces
And less common natural attritions have knelled their tolls.
Thanks be to these crows — African griots
In kinship and spiritual affinity —
For providing us, today, a nexus, however tenuous,
To the beginnings, when women and men
Believed they were settling, in Claverach Park, for eternity.

10/19/86 (05989)

Seeking Mellomax Trees, in October

*For Victoria,
L.D., he made this poem.*

Late October haze prisms vision.
Seeing divides like atoms inside a particle accelerator.
Daydreams collide with real Popsicle trees,
Wonderland shrubs, Mississippi River cliffs.
Nearby, Lennon, Dodgson, Clemens hover,
Right between outer windshield and inner eye.

Driving transfigures me, this fugue,
Fuels my ruminative spirit, with hallucinatory hues:
Jesus-rusts and crimsons, martyr-scarlets,
Pleistocene greens, marshy browns,
Renaissance gold mosaics
Interspersed with slender, argenteous filaments.

The entire countryside is a Wurlitzer “wonder light”
Dizzying my senses, as I descend, from the city,
Into St. Francois’s enchanted valley,
Where each tree in the tapestry
Is a mellomax and I am the sorcerer,
Weaving deeper, more densely, toward its phantasmagorical source.

As minutes dissolve into lengthening miles,
Familiar locations lose dimension.
Being lost grows increasingly intoxicating.
Not realizing where or why, I finally arrive,
Begin, one fishbowl-wish at a time,
Picking vision-clusters ripening on the tree of life.

10/21/86 — [1] (05990)

On the Efficacy of Unsolved Mysteries

My curious eyes follow intricate slug trails —
 Myriad interlacing cracks — across the patio.
 Without a trace, each track trails off, at an invisible abyss,
 Like a cursive cloud-plume hovering above a skywriting plane
 After its pilot pulls out of his final dive
 And throttles back, on the tail sprayer's valve lever;
 Or like Thidwick, the big-hearted moose,
 Each simply disappears into my tired imagination's
 Thinning atmosphere, stimulating the sleuth in me
 To deduce, from too few clues, those slugs' present whereabouts
 And how they performed their elusive getaways.

I pan to cement's peripheries, in four directions,
 Enter, in my detective's mental notebook,
 Slender details, far-fetched speculations,
 Anything I might use, at a later date,
 To help recreate their enigmatic disappearances.
 October leaves, crisp, brittle, malinger like derelicts
 Prepared to sleep off the night, outdoors,
 Between wine-stupor sheets. Their silence intrigues me.
 Suddenly, a full moon holds my gaze ransom,
 Refuses me release until I guarantee
 I'll cease investigating the modus operandi of escaping slugs.

10/21–22/86 — [2] on 10/21 (05991)

[Once again, just when rival factions —]

Once again, just when rival factions —
 Hooknosed abstractions and aquiline concretes
 (Capulets and Montagues, Sneetches *sans* and *avec*) —
 Seem to have backed off,
 Retreated behind demilitarized zones,
 To lick their afflictions, ritualize their victims,
 With polemic and vague invective
 Embedded in humanistically textured Nobel rhetoric,
 All hell comes atumble: moderates cave in
 To tax evasion, drug smuggling, adultery;
 Both extremes, radicals and the multitude,
 *

Who hibernate, a decade at a stretch,
Ally; their plights, survival, become identical.
Vanity, cheating, thievery are legion as disease.
No one dares run naked in the streets
Or lace the next guy's cocaine buy with cyanide,
For fear of getting away without reprisals,
Sustaining entirely too much freedom,
Thereby needing to prove himself worthy of such oversights.
Today's thinkers speculate, *Will the means*
Justify the end, toward which we are racing
With such imperturbable compulsiveness?
At this juncture, our measurements are too refined
To hypothesize truth, let it go as prophecy
And archetypic Biblical myth fulfilling itself.
Indeed, abstracts and concretes coalesce,
Conjugate, with amazing unself-consciousness.
Earth's blood pressure is 451 Fahrenheit
Over 1984. Today, Kafka is playing Mighty Mouse.
Next week, Oliver Hardy, as Churchill,
Will meet with Hitler, at Berchtesgaden,
To discuss amnesty for all dissident Russian Jews.
Tomorrow, the Cisco Kid will introduce Cervantes
To Jay Silverheels and Leo "Sancho" Carillo.
Right this minute, however, a cog sticks.
God's timepiece shudders, stops, totters,
Before resuming its common counterclockwise movement.

10/24/86 (05992)

Astrophysical Poetics

Through the eyepiece of the viewfinder
That magnifies, two thousand thousand times,
Shadows of myself cast, six feet wide,
A million miles beneath this fleet satellite
I fly from sleep to preconscious twilight,
Vision sharpens and blurs, focuses, loses acuity,
As, second by millisecond, it tries to fix,
Then identify, my alien, distant shape,
Reconnect memory and present-tense recognitions,
With invisible communication, whose dialogue

*

Will fill the abyss, with imperceptible whispers
Echoing between Elohim and me, His tiny scientist.

10/28/86 (05993)

Car-casses

This glistening Midwestern October ending,
Stranded inland,
Straying down highways wavy as sea lanes,
He, Ahab's likeness, weaves across amnesic miles,
As though he/his vehicle were a reciprocating shuttle
Making time's loom hum like a spider's web
Trembling to a housefly's tentative flutterings.

He touches fingers to teeth, massages gums,
To stimulate them, coax them from numbness;
They bleed. He holds his open palm before him,
Focuses on his red-stained prints
As though their whorls formed a series of Rorschach plates
Ready to have etchings pulled. The image lingers,
Producing no two similar picture-swirls.

Hitting a phantom carcass startles him.
He awakens from his daze, visibly shaken,
And negotiates the shoulder, cuts his engine,
To assay manifest damages. Satisfied,
He resumes his trip, for less than three miles,
When the "Temp" gauge needle begins climbing,
Locks on "H." Again, he stops, quite frightened.

Although he's navigated this stretch of troughs
Two hundred times, something foreboding
Causes him to forget previous passages.
Steamy smoke seeps from hood and grille seams,
Explodes in his face, when he opens the lid.
He knows both etiology and morning's destination:
A broken hose will send him to the closest garage,

Assuming he's fortunate enough to find one.
Thrice before, he's had to resort to hitchhiking.
This desolate place might present difficulties.

*

Crouching at a slightly obtuse angle to the road,
He raises his hand, extends his blood-smeared thumb,
Hoping someone other than his own ghost
Will notice he's in mortal trouble and give him a lift.

10/30/86 (05994)

The Dray-Horse Syndrome

Like turn-of-the-century Brooklyn dray horses
Making their last ice or coal deliveries of the day,
These wearied spirits, who use this same highway
I travel, outbound from the twilit city
Radiating the setting sun's putrescent, oozing hues,
Move as if navigating a sinuous, burning grade
Or migrating from Cracow hovel to Auschwitz oven,
By means of dung-sullied boxcars routed through Pandemonium.

Tired as I am, from my labors, I'm more frightened
About arriving, finding the gentle identity
I left in safekeeping, with my wife and children, has died
Or, in my spectral procession, merged with the world,
Lost all features by which they might distinguish me from them —
Those bleary spirits composing the blue-collar chain gang —
Horrified that I died somewhere between dawn and dusk,
Ended up as some other road-poet's more-awarded metaphor.

11/3/86 (00828)

Becoming Resigned

Returning, after nearly a year's sojourn in life,
To the mind's Great Barrier Reef islands,
Where the air, day and night, is rife
With tinges of cinnamon and ginger and thyme,
I reflect on the trauma of my recent hiatus, and sigh,
With relief, from no longer needing to try harder,
Each new enterprise, no matter the previous achievement
Or, rather, despite its ambitiousness . . . relief, knowing
*

Whatever challenge comes next, its success
Won't depend on anything outside its own context,
Instead on my immediate resources for invention,
My imagination's metaphor-extracting capacity,
Its intuitive bent to censor and reject contrivance,
Elizabethan claptrap, academic crap
Promulgated by universities spewing the virtues of truth
Arrived at by pursuing a degree in the humanities
And keeping annual alumni funds,
As well as unsolicited scholarship contributions, current,
Forthcoming, in perpetuity . . . relief, to exist free,
Unintimidated by those holding tenure, seniority, rank,
Proclaiming ministerial or magisterial rights of pontiffs and kings.
Once again, I've returned, from life,
A mere poet with nowhere consequential to go,
No radios or TV's requiring my obeisance,
No dictatorial political visages and voices and slogans
To pay my allegiances to, and nothing less urgent to do
Than compose pastoral odes, sarabands, villanelles
To stray angels and ghosts and speculate on epistemological essences
Inherent in the Picasso and Lautrec women
Comprising my prolific harem. No more
Shall my days be numbered nor my possessions named,
Except as they bear directly on my verse.
Only my syllables and rhymes, uncadenced rhythms
That measure the systole and diastole of my poetry's twitching,
Shall allude to my secluded existence among these islands.
From this moment, I take vows of silence,
Assign all my literary rights to my executrix, Diana.
By tomorrow, my unremarked disappearance shall be forgotten,
Locked in history's ineffable crypts, and the poems,
Undated, unsigned, shall be relegated to posterity,
With the sublime reverence to anonymity
Accorded unidentified victims of Auschwitz, witch hunts,
And acts of God committed and justified in the name of time.

11/11/86 — [1] (05995)

Mortal Reluctances

Now that I'm forty-five, drives of even short duration
Preoccupy daily labors, weeks in advance.

*

The annoyance they inflict, like flies harassing grazing hippos,
Destroys concentration, compels me to testy defensiveness
With coworkers, my children and wife,
Manifests itself as phobias, fixations, anxieties
Whose hothouse varieties defy caseworker classification.

Once, just the prospect of getting to travel
To the least exotic Midwest outposts
(Salisbury, Tipton, Rolla, New Athens, Farmington)
Could trigger erotic wet dreams,
Vesuvian energies, prodigious, exponential fantasies
In which I'd surface, in sleep, as Edward Teach,
Don Quixote, Leonardo da Vinci, Genghis Khan.

With inexorable persistence, middle-aging
Has finally overtaken my eternal optimism,
Caused my brain's incandescence to diminish,
Its brass-ring finish to tarnish, under thinning varnish . . .
Whether from natural attrition or acid-rain corrosion
Matters less than the facts: now that I'm forty-five,
Driving and dying have become inextricably synonymous acts.

11/11/86 — [2] (05996)

[Leaving the city, precipitantly,]

Leaving the city, precipitantly,
He eats, chews, coughs auto exhaust
As if it were a bowl of water-saturated soda crackers
Or chunky peanut butter sticking to his teeth and jaws.
His remaining senses abdicate their positions.
Seeing's scintillant visions drip from his brain's ceiling,
To intellect's depths, splatter like spilled mercury.
Smell clots and suffocates on its own aborted sneezing;
Its vessels bleed stale Auschwitz stench
Resembling fossil-fuel Zyklon B fumes.
Hand in hand, taste and touch masturbate,
Spewing carbon monoxide in all directions.
His car's compartment grows nauseatingly rancid,
Until his attempts to keep the vehicle straight and level
Drain him of fundamental energy.
Slowly, the passive vapors consume his drive to survive.
*

He loses sight of his destination,
Fails to be inspired by history's ambitious accomplishments
Or gain insight, into the overriding purpose of his odyssey,
From previous gypsies who've passed this way,
Wearing his ancestral rags, staying, nights,
At roadside oases, in tents like the motels
In which he sleeps, five days weekly,
Year after wilderness year. And as the miles accumulate,
Despite the steady infusion of cleaner country air,
He loses touch with his extremities.
The wheel, to which his numb hands are cuffed,
Moves as though by an independent guidance system.
Death's distinctive odor permeates his desperation.
Suddenly, he and his automobile metamorphose,
Glimpse, in the immediate distance,
Their own fast-closing likeness: afternoon's caisson,
Declining, westerly, down the highway home.
Within timeless minutes, car and driver pull alongside,
Dissolve into their own eclipsed shadow,
Descend into a fifty-foot grave beneath the shoulder,
Then enter night's cold cave, to await resurrection,
After suffering the merciless hearselike journey,
Behind a Holmes 1200, to blessed rest in the country.

11/19/86 (00827)

Bidding Adieu to Adult Notions

When compared to America's collective migration to Florida
And California, the Great Crusades treks from Europe
To Palestine, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,
Were mere Marine drill-hikes, dress rehearsals
For the Cannes Film Festival and Oscar ceremonies,
Worshipful pilgrimages in search of abstraction,
Not pragmatic applications of the pleasure-principle syndrome.

Last week, I made my own crusade, to Cape Coral,
To pay obeisance to Helios, stake a claim on old age.
For five days, my psyche wilted, my energy drained,
Amidst all those desolate, disconnected souls,
Whose only hold on their gone heritage

*

Is a cluster of plastic animals adorning their sodded sand-yards
Or license plates tacked to their mailboxes.

By weekend's denouement, I'd seen and tasted,
Surfeited, all previous desires
To, one day, uproot my tired existence, to a Promised Land.
Flying back to a lackluster Midwest November,
Abandoning plans for potential retirement in Florida,
I've postponed notions of ever dying,
Let alone growing old or even older, despite the cold.

11/20/86 (05997)

Trial by Miles

This first day of December '86,
Gray vapors permeate sky and earth.
Somber, sullen horses and cows
Graze, lackadaisically, along dank embankments
The fidgeting highway I drive measures
Like an ominous needle on a lie detector.

Might I be Francisco Pizarro González, Vasco da Gama,
And the lugubrious day itself be a foreboding ocean-sea
Teeming with unseen monsters
Lurking at each turn, beneath every curve,
Dipping, swerving, biting their own tails,
Plunging, ascending, breaching my phobic imagination?

Or is it that I'm an escaped convict
Back in captivity, in a swampland outback
(Where manatees, leviathans, and salamanders
Are commonly confused and misidentified, by humans,
As cattle and pigs and ponies), being questioned by
Illusory jurors deputized by Sheriff Kafka,

Bent on exacting, from me, the "hole truth,"
As to my actual origins, heritage,
And speculative perception regarding my whereabouts?
This entire trip is a tedious trial,
In which, for no apparent reason, I am, simultaneously,
Plaintiff, defendant, and litigious adjudicator.
Halfway home, finding itself with a hung jury,

My mind vacillates between suicide and commutation,
 Stalemates, refuses to arrive at its own destination,
 Conclude this intolerable indeterminateness.
 The miles haggle, among themselves, as to life's relative worth,
 Plea-bargain for a reduced sentence,
 Then return their verdict: guilty as charged

Yet free to appeal to the "supreme court" sempiternally.

12/1/86 (05998)

Dog Daze ^Δ

Each 5 a.m., six days weekly,
 We desert canine intimacies, flee spayed solitudes,
 Leave behind sleeping bitches, twitching litters.
 Some rush from last evening's acquaintances,
 Certifiable strangers exiled in their soiled cages,
 While others abandon dreamy fantasies,
 To gather at the Capital Café — phantasms, shades,
 Each a misbegotten vapor sifting out of night,
 Into glazed twilight, like topiary-fog creatures:
 Hybrids, mongrels, mutts, curs, street breeds,
 Barking to be let out of drowsing's dark house,
 Admitted to palatial sunny courtyards,
 Where our fully awakened imaginations
 Might cavort with Louie XIV's castoff mistresses
 And myriad Rosie the Riveters waiting, at castle gate,
 To be interviewed for an opening in the queen's retinue,
 Sully, and cause to grow irregular and raspy,
 Rococo formal gardens, at whose epicenter kids romp
 While aging souls sail balsa and tattersall boats, in a basin
 Swallows, starlings, and swifts strafe
 To remind themselves of their dispossessed predacious nature.

Except Sundays, we run our territories,
 Compelled and as utterly orderly as astral rotations,
 Then converge on our tenaciously held fellowship,
 To yell derisions at McMurphy, Billy, Martini, and "The Chief,"
 Winos and junkies — outpatient alley cats, all —
 Who, daily, cross London Bridge, beyond the stone gate
 *

Connecting State Hospital #4 with the courthouse square,
And loiter just outside the Capital Café door,
Howling, half-heartedly, at high noon's
Faintly visible polestar and Lorelei moon.

12/2/86 (00560)

Eclipsing December's Apocalypse

This eye-besieging, sunny December Thursday,
He submits to that unslakable urge
Which, for two decades, has created caesuras in routine,
Caused him to grab hold of low-flying Trojan horses
And damask-brocaded unicorns,
Let loose of the too-predictable universe,
And soar, searching for the nearest opening
In mazy corridors he navigates on instruments,
Always hoping his newest fugue will subdue his demons.

Driving southwesterly, out of St. Louis,
Is a series of ladder descents and ascents.
Each steep valley grade is another plateau
Between whose ingeniously carved tiers
Ancient mesa tribes commerced,
In semicivilized defiance of nature's arrogance.
He might be history's anachronistic anomaly,
Modernity's gypsy Indian, trying to survive,
Exploring the icy crags punctuating insanity's Everest.

Today's radiant blue sky unthaws the floe
Atop which he has chosen to fly.
Miles dissolve the lacy tracery depression
Has chiseled, into his brain's masonry,
Via the years' drizzling of gratuitous disappointments.
Suddenly, the road he drives is a translucent ocean,
Below and above whose upper and lower surfaces
He can see. Both form a solitary mirror
In which his spirit appears as a scythe-waving, skeletal equestrian.

12/4/86 — [1] (05999)

The Dark Other

As I head south, day slips quietly home,
Somewhere behind my peripheral vision's sphere.
A purple-rose cloak envelops my rearview mirror,
Into which I peer as fastidiously as an old-time photographer
Focusing a masculine athlete
Posing before a backdrop approximating a Bierstadt scape.

Slowly, a metamorphosis occurs: that athlete is me,
Seeing myself in a decidedly "new light."
For thirty miles, both faces gaze at each other,
Each formulating reflective speculations,
Alternately pensive, then jubilant, animated, then morose,
Neither realizing both owe allegiance to the sun,
Whose backlit, inward-funneling parallax
Has cast a simulacrum from one visage.

Half an hour later, approaching Cape Girardeau,
I throw back my imaginary hood.
Shadows infiltrating my field of vision
Engender a subtle blending of my gray hair
Into the silvery glass, dimming, diminishing, disappearing,
As the descending sun abandons me, once again, to myself.

12/4/86 — [2] (06000)

A Declaration of Dependence

*For my loving parents,
Charlotte and Saul,
Christmas 1986*

From this glistening December distance,
Visions of you, Mom and Dad,
Quaver like lute strings plucked by lovers
Too consumed with each other's touching
To listen to music emanating from their rendezvous.
In my imaging, past and future commingle.
You become notes transposed into a single mirage
Lifting from the road I drive home,
As I try to return to my heart's growing-up places:
Clayton, Ladue, Lake Nebagamon, New Haven,
Farmington (for almost two decades), and back
To Clayton, with children of my own.

I know that although irretrievable,
 Those moments hold us, in their eternal weave.
 Neither forgetting nor natural decay
 Can mute these mirage-notes embodying you,
 Which stir me to verse, this sun-wondrous day.
 You, beautiful mother, in your exquisite selflessness,
 And you, wise and kind leonine father,
 Remind me that living productively and loving others
 Are echoes of the same ancestral affection
 We each perpetuate, who, proclaiming ourselves chosen,
 See God in both friendly smiles and foes' reprisals.
 Listening to visions of you, this Christmas, I glisten.

12/5/86 (02157)

Castrated Passions ^Δ

Putting distance between himself and the city
 Sets up direct cause-and-effect relationship. Relief relaxes him,
 As he realizes his secret is safe in his fleeing keep,
 Despite 6 a.m.'s foggy patina, slick streets,
 And myriad Niagaras cascading with refractory traffic.
 Within a matter of incremental diminishments,
 His spirit enters Ste. Genevieve County.
 Forgetting renders him limbo's unknown soldier,
 Moses-poet dislocated in Missouri's southeastern desert,
 Hoping to connect both ends of his emotional pole
 To his exiled heart's four main chambers,
 So that breathing freedom's sweet scents
 Might lead him back to his own enthusiastic youth,
 That time before ambition blacked out, from lack of passion.

The next five hours' drive is its own guide.
 Only the tires' rotation and the side-to-side motion
 Remind him he's being kept vital on a life-support machine —
 His speeding vehicle. Suddenly, the miles lisp into silence.
 He awakens, from flight, refreshed, unsuppressed.
 The secret he so fastidiously smuggled into the country
 No longer requires such cautiousness. His arrival
 In Mississippi inspires him to expose those hidden desires.
 Suddenly, he runs from his car, throwing off his clothes,
 As he intuitively goes toward Rowan Oak,

*

Through the entrance to Bailey's Woods off University Avenue —
 Benjy groping, frenetically, amidst the undergrowth,
 For Caddy, his heart's darling, to hold, keep safe forever,
 Despite the gone, lost decades, despite the moaning rain.

12/8/86 — [1] (03561)

Santa Making Last-Minute Rounds [△]

Neither Moses transporting, sub rosa, the broken stones
 Nor Jesus totting, on his shoulder, cruciform cedars
 But their latter-day hybrid incarnation,
 Acme-Zenith's mid-South trouser rep,
 Who, for forty years, has been the best schlepper in his territory
 (Encompassing St. Louis, Memphis, West Helena,
 Jackson, Hattiesburg, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans),
 He, Willy Sypher, a childless widower,
 Travels toward Mississippi, this soiled December,
 With yesterday's codices, to entice patrician clothiers to buy
 Czechoslovakian and Polish overstocks, at closeout prices.

He'll make his first two stops in Oxford, completely unannounced,
 At Howard Duval's shop, then Neilson's, on the square,
 Where Will Lewis, Jr., sole prop
 And chief buyer of various and sundry merchandise, presides.
 Once inside with his swatches, he'll offer each, secretly,
 In undiscriminating, indiscriminate confidentiality,
 First right of refusal on his "best shot" quotations
 For "exclusively preselected" odd lots,
 As well as guarantee their "sell-through" by Christmas.
 He'll proffer his "rubber band" option on remainders,
 As a last-ditch decree against ignominious defeat.

Having maneuvered through gray, unabating drizzle,
 Down I-55, these last seven hours,
 Willy finally gets to his destination, slides out.
 He stretches and, then, bending to tie his wing tips,
 Gestures with fingers fanning out from his lips,
 As if setting loose a fistful of butterflies
 Instead of silent beatitudes for his safe arrival
 And continued salvation. And for good measure,
 Willy can't help throwing in a timely Christmas wish

*

That after all obligatory rituals and differences are concluded,
Jew and gentile will conduct “bidness” as usual.

12/8/86 — [2] (03560)

Failed Poet ^Δ

What persistent images this misty Mississippi town emits,
For this visitor from the distant northering regions,
Who sits sipping Chardonnay, by the bottle,
Upstairs, above the square, squinting, through rain-splotched glass,
At the illuminated, south-facing clock atop Lafayette County’s
courthouse,
Listening to “Rikki Don’t Lose That Number,” “Stairway to Heaven,”
The Moody Blues harmonizing “Nights in White Satin.”
I submit to Oxford’s incantatory, dizzy mysticism,
Dissolve, like Alice and Lemuel, through concentric hallucinations,
Into misspent, deliquescent pre-Christmas whirlpools
No Odysseus or Ulysses dreamt of having to navigate
Nor the most impossibly, preposterously persistent Ahab,
Construing its blurred swirl for a breaching white leviathan,
Harpoon poised on the tip of his bilious tongue,
Ever tried to row alongside and single-handedly fling epithets at,
For the sole sake of placating the soul’s only self-justification:
Celebrating its immediate existence, saying no to death.
In this wet, warm December sky, visions of Faulkner incandesce
Like fireflies exploding into fleet, sequential obsolescence.
Peering out of the glass, a curious Alexis de Tocqueville,
I am inspired to turn, into verse, my transported impressions,
Yet when I request fundamentals of the bartender —
Paper, pencil, one more glass of classy Napa Valley Beringer
Chardonnay —
His quiet denial fractures concentration, stirs Ahab’s bile,
Returns me to Ulysses’ basic dislocation, here in this paltry town,
Where Faulkner gave free run to his demons, then disciplined them
Long enough to create spaces on the *Absalom! Absalom!* map
He’d invented, from scratch (as Prince Henry the Navigator did,
For King Ferdinand, Queen Isabella,
And the fabled Savior, Jesucristo, with his New World rendering),
And dedicated to mistresses Meta, Ruth, Joan, Else, and Jean.
I gaze out of this rain-splattered second-story window,

*

Wondering how such a provincial “Billy” ever could have aspired
 to such heights,
 Actually succeeded on such a universal stage. I’m amazed,
 Slightly outraged at the breadth such celebrity achieved
 In a world in which politics held Eisenhowerian and Yeatsian sway.
 What I’m doing here, this evening, so far from my own home
 And blessed family, I don’t factually know.
 Perhaps, like Egyptologists or paleontologists, I’ve arrived, in Oxford,
 To establish a new site; discover ancient ruins
 Which yet might disclose newer speculations,
 Afford primal postulations as to how human civilizations evolve,
 Individual imaginations proliferate despite all odds;
 Transliterate, from “A Rose for Emily,” the Rosetta stone
 And thereby gain insight into an entire culture
 Previously undisclosed. Here in Oxford, Mississippi, tonight,
 I try to locate myself in ghostly proximity to Faulkner
 And, balking like a fractious donkey,
 Accept second-best status, resign myself to inferior lights,
 Write my guts into poetry no one will recite, read, teach, or buy.

12/8/86 — [3] (03559)

The Hazards of Road Traveling ^Δ

To Jackson and back, this bleak, gray-black day,
 I’ve traveled in the backwash and suck of tractor-trailers
 Slicing the highway, with their implacable velocity,
 Spraying such blinding tidal thrusts, on my windshield,
 My entire body shudders. And even though all that splatter
 Remains outside my station wagon, I feel its wetness all over me,
 As if I’m bleeding, from the outside in, through sweating flesh and bones
 Barely keeping my lacerated imagination intact.

Now, although I’ve returned, bodily, to Oxford, that uncertainty persists.
 Those grisly premonitions motion engenders in the perpetual waif,
 Who takes, on his shoulder, from hell to hell, barrel organ
 And snail shell, circle back like a hound-scurried rabbit,
 Crash, head-on, at a dead run, into my stranded spirit.
 Predictably, I react to my own time-lapsed mortality.
 Wine-drenched in the lighted Christmas aura of the courthouse,
 I realize exactly when death’s banshee grabbed me and soared.

It all began so unpretentiously, that first quiet time I left home,
Kissed, good-bye, my wife, sweetly drowsing in innocent dreams,
Touched the gently twitching eyelids of my baby girl,
Sleeping in the same bed, to protect herself from winged monkeys,
And headed off, with the Don's map, in hand, and his standard vexations,
To tilt against obligatory windmills, locate and stake, in my alien name,
Whatever unclaimed Cibolas, Carcassonnes, Key Wests, and Alicantes
Remained to be arrested. Paradoxically, that's when the end began.

These lonesome, spendthrift days, memory itself is mere flotsam.
My wasted energy accumulates like bat dung in dank caves,
Guano on atolls. No one knows under which alias I come and go,
Neither ladies in waiting nor the one who bore my issue
Before our hearts' brass rings tarnished, their painted ponies flaked.
Tonight, gazing at the square, focusing closer, farther away than ever,
On honey-glazed Ole Miss coed-cunts in semipertinal heat,
I know how really dreadful the prospect is of growing old already dead.

12/10/86 (03558)

Flying Too Low for Self-Detection [△]

Having driven, out of Oxford, in an amnesic lapse,
All the way past Memphis, to Osceola,
I awaken like fabled Ursa Major,
Peer out of day's night sky, earthward,
Focus on the solitary moon-pocked space I occupy.
Looming on rigid hind legs, my downcast shadow
Rises as if waiting to gain courage and leap,
Fly free, clear an invisible abyss
Dividing my destiny from all previous Red Sea oppressions.

Actually, surfacing through sleep's aquamarine leagues
Lasts through midmorning. Its accompanying fugue
Resembles a zoo bear's unbemused pacing
In a badly made habitat, rather than a progression, northward,
Over a highway I've traveled at least sixty times.
In fact, like an uninspired Icarus,
I can't even construct a porous-winged metaphor
To let me soar high enough to bruise myself falling,
At least arrive home with some proof I engaged the enemy.

12/11/86 — [1] (03557)

Exhortation to the Rededication of a Marriage

*For Jan —
my love abideth!
Christmas 1986*

We've stayed so late into our lives' midnight,
 It might exceed shame's ignominy
 To contemplate leaving in separate cars,
 Having one of us remain at the party
 While the other, departing early, for home,
 Stops at the On-the-Way Bar/Café, for a nightcap.

Although we made vows, from the start —
 Faithfulness, abundant loving, understanding —
 We've never completely learned how
 To keep outside influences from confusing scruples,
 Occluding acute vision, or modestly remember
 We, too, veer from certitude, on our own.

However, even now, the hour is redeemable.
 Fate waits on us, in curious anticipation,
 Eavesdropping, obliquely, from Tiffany shades,
 Holding its breath, closing its dragonfly eyes,
 Anxious to see whether we exit together, best friends,
 Or if, actually, it's too late, we too stupid

To read time's counterclockwise progression,
 Compromise, by excusing disillusionment,
 Festering hostilities, mutual neglect.
 Right now, Jan, I demand we elope,
 Climb Sutro's heights, and bark, all night, at the seals . . .
 Those jubilant, moonstruck Brancusi seals.

12/11/86 —[2] (02055)

A Tiger Lurks in the Night Forest

This Christmas, even icicles,
 Fastened, like lampreys riding a tiger shark's belly,
 To the base of his frozen heart,
 Don't drip. Their glistening, irregular shapes
 Are truth's saber-toothed-tiger teeth

*

Jutting from his imagination's gaping jaws, snarling face,
 Threatening to consume the entire universe
 Within reach of his reflexes' awesome claws.

Those of us nearest him (old friends,
 Ex-wife, grown children,
 Former business associates) know better,
 Won't risk rousing the drowsing beast in him,
 Especially during this hysterical season.
 Whether it's high noon or edging toward twilight,
 We avoid all shortcuts through the forest,
 Choose the perimeter road home.

Even safely abed, we know he's roaming, stalking,
 Gnawing his next unsuspecting victim,
 With deathless precision. It's those icicle teeth,
 Which descend and penetrate prey,
 Like the Penal Colony's needle-bed contraption.
 Thank God some few of us have survived
 To issue this admonition: "Beware, this Christmas,
 Of anyone fitting his description! His kiss is fatal!"

12/17/86 (04125)

Mr. Pym's Timely Disappearance

Leaving the city, in an intensely dense fog
 Striated with ocherous pollutants, I drive intuitively.
 Dimension becomes apprehension's nemesis.
 Vehicles approaching and flowing with me
 Are two-eyed Cyclopes threatening my life, with treachery.
 In this dizzy, argenteous ecosystem,
 Composed of misbegotten cosmic shades and spirits,
 My soul's only hope for survival is vision,
 Insight to let me pass, intact,
 Through this wide tunnel, white inside and out,
 Where arctic day and night are identical.

Hurtling southeasterly, I can hear the fog
 Whispering through my skeleton,
 As though the air were glowing ocean water
 And I a phosphorescent jellyfish

*

Floating above and buoyed by tentacles
Violently undulating from an unfathomable undertow.
Suddenly, all noise ceases. Ahead, I see trees,
Road, the irregular silhouette of an uncharted Atlantis.
Within minutes, all motion releases me, from its grip.
I barely recognize my total disappearance,
My entire existence assimilated into the evaporating mist.

12/23/86 (06001)

Alcibiades

He measures his most precious possessions
By the cardboard-carton load,
The weight 8s and 10s hold
Without sides collapsing outward,
Bottoms stretching like pregnant bellies,
Breaking seam tape, exploding their cargo:

Treatises, broadsides, vellum-bound romances,
Flounderlike volumes of poetry
Composed by forgotten ghosts, his own notebooks,
Cramped with expanded indices of dreams,
Whose leaves, in his projected Golden Book,
Have yet to be conceived, much less paginated.

Tied sheaves of letters he's sent enemies and friends,
During thirty years of venting hostilities,
Committing private witticisms and cosmic profundities
To written history, consist of carbon copies,
Computer files capable of calling up,
At Academe's or Congress's behest, his existence.

All his adult life, preoccupied with success
By publication, trial by rejection slip,
He's considered himself a "professional writer"
Whose ineradicable commitment has been to artifice,
Illusion, contrivance. Never, for more than flickers,
Has he wavered, questioned his holy mission,

Yet today, standing inessentially by, on the sidewalk,
As his hired crew removes, from his sacred office,
All specific evidence of his residence

*

And crams it, box by box, into a rented truck,
He realizes he has no idea what directions
He's given the driver or what his desired destination is.

1/5/87 (06002)

Renewing Old Associations

Once again, as he takes to the open road,
Motion overtakes stasis,
Compulsion bests obsession. Like metal filings
Drawn to a magnet, his lactic acids
Begin to quiver, overcome their own friction,
Then, in vigorous dissidence, defy inertia,
Begin the essential reincarnation energy requires
To power his imagination's on-line needs.
He speeds out Highway 40, careening westerly,
Toward Jefferson City, Tipton, Sedalia.
Eventually, he'll get all the way to Blue Springs,
Independence, Kansas City, St. Joe,
Before reaching week's apogee, transcending,
Heading back, this January, with next fall's line.

He's indefatigable Willy Sypher,
Acme-Zenith's seventy-year-old wunderkind,
Who has sipped, periodically, from youth's geyser
And yet carries with him, on trips, bottled elixirs
From its spirited admixture, just to keep his thick blood
Running quick, if slightly frigid, at all extremities.
This dreary Monday, primed with euphonious slogans
Repeatedly evoked at the recent sales meeting
And committed to memory, by each zealous attendee,
He rides a residual high's pipeline
The most blatantly unreceptive buyer can't constrict.
Yet, for added measure, he exits at St. Charles,
For drive-through coffee, to accelerate nature's buzz,
Wind his escapement spring breaking-tight.

By noon, he'll arrive at the Jeff City Slack Outlet,
Yet his overwrought psyche
Has already displayed his excessive swatch cards and samples
*

In every available patch of the storage space
That doubles as layaway, soda-machine,
Paperwork, alteration, restroom sections
And daily-receiving dock. Forgetting the hectic effort,
He's already made his suggestions, best quotations,
Written triplicate orders, phoned them into headquarters,
On the 800 line, and been granted confirmation —
All within the span of a Wendy's medium cup —
And experiences satisfaction connected with success.
Engaging in such facile wish fulfillments
Dissolves the intervening miles comprising his life's diaspora.

Green-and-white glass-beaded road signs;
Rest areas crammed with tractor-trailers
Side by side, in paradoxical silence,
As if suckling a gigantic invisible sow;
Gas stations dotting the highway,
Like frozen birds perched along a power line;
Overpasses thrusting above pylons;
Exits, cloverleafs, galvanized guardrails
Reminiscent of millipedes, inchworms, snakes . . .
These and other concrete, wood, and steel elements
Compose the emblematic chemical vernacular of his dispersion —
Matter, like himself, shaped, by man,
Into divine designs, no matter how redundant,
How inutterably crude and ugly, sublime just the same.

Up ahead, Willy scans the lettered directions
Proclaiming "Kingdom City," begins slowing,
Even as his adrenaline commences its surge.
Suddenly, the capitol dome protrudes through the gloom.
He senses the impending hard sell welling,
Daring to preempt itself. He concentrates,
Restrains his elemental instincts, for his welcome.
At the front counter, he triumphantly sets down his cases.
An unfamiliar clerk meanders from the back.
"Mr. Goldstick? You want Saul Goldstick?" she whispers.
"He's no longer with us." Nails pierce Willy's wrists.
"Would you like to speak with our new manager,
Jackson Smith?" she asks, pointing to a college-age black,
Preoccupied, loading a broken pricing gun with plastic barbs.

A Meeting of the Minds

In the thin, spinning blades of a tin windmill
Just outside Tipton, on Highway 5,
My senses intuit divinity. This January noon,
I see angels' wings churning the sky,
God's turbine stirring the earth's watery parts,
Hummingbirds distilling varietal lilacs
Blooming, out of season, in my artificer's wine garden,
Fluttering eyelids imitating caravels
My tongue and quivering lips set adrift,
To circumnavigate your glistening irises,
Our lovemaking bodies
So frictionlessly connected, they cause a closed flow
Of negative and positive ions
To circulate, in the same direction, through us both,
Toes to groin and solar plexus to temple gates,
Creating perpetual electricity,
Whose cumulative ecstasy
Illuminates the universe, whenever either of us
Focuses on Buffalo Bill, Truffula Trees,
Or quixotic windmills at a standstill,
Just outside Tipton, beyond time,
And discovers we both see eye to eye,
Though we've not yet met and likely never will.

1/8/87 — [1] (02158)

[He sits alone, amidst choking smoke-reek,] ^{‡ †}

He sits alone, amidst choking smoke-reek,
In a wine-stained seat at a cast-iron, plastic-top table,
Listening, obliquely, to lascivious and derisive whispers,
Witty persiflage, all spoken in the mediocre patois
Indigenous to this Midwestern Mesopotamia,
To which kids migrate yearly, to acquire a taste for beer,
Instantaneously gratifying sexual appetizers and desserts,
And, occasionally, a vague appreciation for education.
And disenchanted as he knows himself to be,
He can't resist entertaining, if ever so slightly,
Contemptuous envy as well as genuine jealousy,
To whom, collectively, he raises his amber glass and silently toasts.

Twilight accompanies

Somewhere, lady, you wait to deliver me from this slavedom
My psyche's

1/8/87 — [2] (02752)

A Hero's Welcome

Driving back to home base, from distant Tipton and Salisbury,
I witness peacock clouds, off to the right of my swift car —
Shimmering, within late afternoon's twilit interstices,
Like exotic tropical fish swimming, histrionically,
Amidst grottoes, sand-washed *Titanics*, and piratical skeletons —
Strutting, preening, stripteasing before my eyes,
With psychedelic, crowd-pleasing visual effects.

Flying toward Columbia faster than the speed light travels
As it leaves its source, I weave through fleshly hues
Tinged in russet, lavender, tawny beige, tangerine,
Zoom ahead, then have to wait on my arriving psyche,
Evolving at a lesser pace, for the distracting sunset.

The last time I recall seeing such voluptuous colors,
You were lying on your back, naked, before my fireplace,
Reveling in being fucked by us, the flickering flames
Licking your slick, saline-scented clitoris,
I kissing your belly fat, biting, lightly as a blind kitten,
Your rigid nipples, rising, like Mauna Loa peaks,
From the coral-capped areolas of your tumescent, perfumed breasts.

Soon, every hue in this Midwestern spectrum
Forgets its raison d'être, regrettably sifts into the distance,
Beyond vision and whim. I engage my headlights,
Grope, skittishly, between white-lined median and shoulder,
Hoping to reach my destination, on its predetermined schedule.

Safety is only a momentary stay against chaos, for the wayfarer.
When I get home, you aren't waiting up for me,
Your courageous Jason, Odysseus, Aeneas,
Rather fast asleep, lost, I imagine, in antic fantasies.
Horny as shit yet too drowsy to arouse you or me,

*

Fully clothed, I slip, shivering, between Red Sea sheets and drown,
Wondering in whose fishbowl, through which prism, you're flowing.

1/8/87 — [3] (02663)

Dawn Hudson

. . . is, in fact, a Packard V-12 Cabriolet,
Sporting scintillating dual side-mounts.
Oh, if only I could be
One of her nickeled hubcaps, glinting spokes,
Her spread-winged, singing swan hood ornament,
Or overripe bullet headlights,
Surmounting those sensuously bending fenders!

I'd even become the slender handle
Screwed to her sumptuous, humped trunk —
Anything for the ecstasy of being transported,
In the backseat of her sleek machine,
At 100 mph, down Main,
Out Lust, to Freedom Street,
Way, way beyond the Bonneville Salt Flats,

To that zone where road, sky, and horizon converge,
Combusting, internally, all night, on into dawn.

1/8–9/87 — [4] on 1/8 & [1] on 1/9 (02160)

Ishmael Sights the White Whale

Though snowy roads make his homeward trek
Excessively slow going,
Place unexpected stress on dexterity, coordination,
Dimension, sense, and depth perception,
He slogs, headlong, down the mud-slide side
Of morning's untried, treacherous slope.

At least a hundred times before,
He's gutted it out, despite travel advisories,
Felt safer just getting started
Rather than waiting around motel lobbies,
*

Hoping for abatement, and risking being stranded,
Sacrificing an entire weekend away from family.

This blizzard-bitten a.m.,
He tries to ride ruts cut, like plow furrows,
By tractor-trailers, gets jostled from side to side,
Like a light plane in a hurricane
Or water-skier crossing a dozen wakes
Thrown into violent motion by oceangoing raceboats.

All the way from Columbia to St. Louis,
He stays stuck behind buses, tandem trucks
That know no cessation. Caught in their backwash,
He shudders, until he can actually taste
Sausage and eggs ascending his esophagus,
Even feel crusty toast scratching, on its way up.

Halfway home, nausea overtakes him.
Pulling off where shoulders no longer exist,
Instead merge into dense fields endlessly expanding,
Is impossible. Yet with retching as a definite possibility,
He braces. Suddenly, his crotch and thighs get hot,
Wet, then cold as bottled milk rotting on a stoop.

Within seconds, he loses all connection between the road
And the wheel turning on its own, in his hands.
He crashes backward, into a guardrail
Above a fifty-foot ditch.
At least now he can quit, with dignity,
And return to tell of conditional victory over his white-whale fate.

1/9/87 — [2] (02159)

Circulating

This gray, Thursday late-afternoon,
I've thrust myself into the rush-hour bloodstream,
Pressing, restlessly, back through day's gasping veins.
I am one of multitudinous used cells
Navigating upstream to escape asphyxiation,
By finding an auricular opening in time,
Eventually flowing through and safely out the ventricle
*

Leading to the arterial trunk
Exiting into, merging with, country tributaries
Leading home. This spectral afternoon,
I hold my breath, passing this wide necropolis,
Hoping the procession escorting my spirit
Isn't being headed by Mr. Mortician
And that this particular circulatory system
Which I've chosen won't close down or explode
Before I've delivered, to consanguineous kin,
Precious rejuvenescence issuing from my kisses.

1/15/87 (06003)

Procession

Snowy flurries shadow my unannounced escape,
This lackluster January a.m.,
When even breathing diesel exhaust
Is preferable to staying lost in familiar environs
Where wife and children, oblivious to my leaving,
Safely intact, beneath dreaming's opiate sheets,
Devour sleep's sweet incense.

Something there is about taking to highways,
Letting the psyche's twin-tined divining rod,
Consisting of spirit and soul,
Twitch, shiver, go rigid, with its own initiative,
Transfigure all previous reasonableness,
Then send its passenger, hellbent,
Down the White Rabbit's vortex, toward destination X.

Although this morning's sally forth
Holds few prospects of encountering old foes,
It's nevertheless fraught with new causes for trepidation.
As I drive south, at 88 mph,
Past Doe Run, Pilot Knob, Arcadia,
Both hands fighting an intractable steering wheel,
My direction recognizes me closing in on it.

I slow, to pick up an opalescent specter
Hitchhiking at road's edge.
My backwash blows open his tattered black robes,
*

Exposing the bony approximation of a gone man.
 Suddenly, vision blurs. I see myself and him
 Shimmering side by side, out of and into focus,
 Both of us heading home, forever alone.

1/22/87 — [1] (06004)

When We're Eighty-Eight

Jan,

Our long-term plan
 Has failed to manifest its magnificence
 Or scale the Areopagus's parapets.

You and I, if blessed,
 Are less than god and goddess,
 Rather born to blunder, curse each other,

Test our physical stamina,
 By pressing, to exploding, our obsession
 To stay together, Aires-mates to the end.

Just now, I raise my empty cup,
 Praise your supple lustiness.
 Despite our fundamental untrustworthiness,

I pray we'll reclimb Sutro Park's heights,
 Reiterate the red-headed pixie's epiphanies,
 Renew our youthful exuberance,

At fifty, sixty, even past eighty-eight.

1/22 — [2] & 10/5/87 (02170)

[Through vision's tandem blurs,][†]

Through vision's tandem blurs,

1/26/87 (09493)

Moses in the Wilderness ^Δ

Purposely, he wakes earlier than day,
Stops his hibernation-like sleep process,
In which fantasies incubate in heated quiescence,
Rises from the sheets, like a loose thread
Being ripped from a tattered piece of silk fabric,
Then peers through orb webs, instead of pupils,
Hoping his groping palms will keep him erect.

By degrees, he accomplishes dressing, grooming
Manages to locate appropriate keys,
Sets spinning the machine on which his entire existence depends,
Then enters Farmington's unlit, eight-degree mainstream.
He twice traverses Columbia and Liberty streets,
As if looking for yesterday's faces,
Before parking in the dark alley behind the Capital Café.

Once positioned in his customary chair,
His skinny frame shivering like a vibrating tine,
Despite continually sipping thick coffee,
He listens, with vulpine acuity, to the group's garrulity.
City burghers, busy deciding civil-rights issues
Recently surfaced through the news media's cesspool,
Set adrift derisive pieties, sacrilegious epithets.

From his invisible vantage, he visibly winces
Each time the group, hooded, collectively,
In its own cigarette smoke's translucent nimbus,
Decries "niggers," casts the entire Ethiopian crew
Into the recently excavated remains
Of Forsyth County, Georgia's, blatantly racist conflagration.
"At least a few of them had the guts to speak their piece!"

And he can't help wondering why they've spared him.
Always, he's believed himself more fortunate than the blacks,
For being able to "pass" superficial scrutiny.
Perhaps Jews are just too few to fool with,
In this "Five-Star" community. They pose no threat,
Who tote self-imposed crucifixes, like sand crabs,
From holocaust to pogrom, *shtetl* to ghetto to the Promised Land.

Waitress

Waiting tables,
Gathering in tips, from St. Louis
To Biarritz,
Madrid, Firenze, Seattle, and back . . .

Time's waifish, Mosaical nomad,
Passing, meteorically,
Across her oceanic palm,
With one solitary, visionary sweep . . .

While they last, gather, ye, fistfuls,
With grasping passion,
And never, never abandon the planet
Empty-handed!

1/31 & 2/4/87 (02161)

The Don Eases Out of Forced Retirement Again

For more years than memory can reclaim,
He's retained an image of himself —
Athlete, aesthete, poet, bohemian human being —
No amount of change has appreciably altered.
Yet physical prowess, intellectual acuity,
Abstracting capacity have eluded his scrutiny,
Rendered his too-gentle sensibility
Self-satisfied, curiously violable,
The measurement of his own eternal lights
At best questionable, leastwise deceptively negligible.

How it is he's managed, all these decades,
To escape relatively accurate approximations of his powers
And vulnerability is difficult to register.
If ever he'd suspected imperfections existed in his makeup
Or that history's suspensions of disbelief
Consisted of provisional decisions prone to revision,
Never might he have left his broom closet,
Set aside his vellum-bound romances,
Taken to the low roads, questing for misbegotten souls
Needing his quixotic assistance.

Today, as he heads westerly, from St. Louis,
He can't seem to fire up,
Inspire himself to his mission
Or even locate his position within the circumference
His imagination has always described
Whenever he's set its compass point
On the junction where faith, passion, and lunacy collide.

Perhaps he recognizes, in the rearview visage
Refusing to look him squarely in the eye,
The same mild, little retiring fellow he buried alive,
Then spent the rest of his life denying,
For fear he'd be tried and sentenced for a crime
None but he would ever construe as euthanasia.
Perhaps his scatterbrained schemes are just resting between contests.

2/5/87 (06005)

Spiny Lionfish

Way before daylight penetrates dreaming's sacred spaces,
Which he alone has arrogated to his keeping,
Waking seizes his peaceful body, from sleep's squeeze.
He unfolds, out of his own fetal juices,
Like a bloom opening to dew-transfused rays
Or a crumpled cigarette pack
Groping, robotically, for its genie shape.

Whether he's empty or imploding with potential
Remains to be discovered. Finning through swerves,
He undulates through rooms, hallways, alcoves,
Searching out mirrors, to belie his first impression,
Unapproximate his own worst apprehensions
That tenuous, unexplainable transformations
Have rendered him a venomous spiny lionfish.

Myriadly peering through triple-thick glass,
His self-reflections pass out and back,
As if finding escape inimical to freedom's requisite disarray,
Existence within his tiny sphere
Superior to reliance on locating terraqueous habitats.
Till evening, he'll swim between continuums, sifting dreams
In the bowl his piscine soul so religiously maintains.

2/10/87 (02162)

Flight Controller

Sole flight controller for his own fugues,
 He furiously scans his scoped hopes,
 For possible midair collisions,
 Aspirations, like soaring horses,
 Veering off course, going astray,
 Due to mechanical malfunctions
 Multiplying too obscurely, at first, through systems,
 To create alarm, get detected,
 Or for human error: complacence, silent despair,
 Spirited intoxication, hubris gone crazy.

Anxiously, he watches his dreams scream past,
 Taking off, landing, daily, weekly,
 Year after year, without mishaps, major delays,
 Anticipating that spontaneous glitch
 When all informational mixes will reposition themselves,
 Cause catastrophic consequences,
 Render him defenseless against data overload.
 Then, blind, deaf, mute, he'll await word
 As to whether his destiny's been rescued from the debris.

2/11/87 — [1] (02163)

[Coquettish February teases me, with her lissome beauty.][†]

Coquettish February teases me, with her lissome beauty.
 Unexpectedly, this Wednesday, I've been invited
 To sneak-preview her new designer spring line.

2/11/87 — [2] (01480)

To an Ancient Music's Hidden Lyre

*For Bob Hamblin,
 on my reading Perpendicular Rain*

Suddenly, he knows the locus of word flow
 Echoing through his brain's Yosemite.
 Metaphors, splashing like the Upper Falls,
 *

Cascade to the base of his poetical depths,
 Rise, in stalagmitic halo-motes, about his eyes,
 Pervading cognition, with rainbow mists.

Simultaneously, as if hit by electricity,
 His senses are seized by a zillion frenzied energies
 Disguised as wisdom begging him to arrest them,
 Somehow polarize them, like fireflies
 Gently pinched from the sky and imprismed.
 He tries, with words, to pin their verse-wings.

They struggle to elude measurement,
 Retain their right to remain unclassified.
 At once, he intuits the source of all sound,
 Emanating, now, from a greater distance.
 Within hours, milliseconds, he reaches the highest limb,
 Peers out, across an entire redwood forest,

Toward twilight's purple edges,
 And slender fingers extended, he strums their strings,
 Until ancient music, flowing, like an ocean, into the valley,
 Inundates vision, buoys him above the tree,
 Like Noah's Ark pulling free of Ararat.
 All evening, he listens to stars whispering to him from within.

2/12/87 (02164)

Elementary Teacher ^Δ

For John Lents and Dr. Bill Hardin

He's a tiger-striped honeybee
 Piping aphrodisiacal melodies,
 Pollinating blooming boughs, twigs-sprigs
 His humming surrounds, making jubilant rounds
 Within youth's fruit orchard,
 Bordered by profuse black-eyed Susans and marigolds.

He's a paid teacher of third graders,
 Who knows a thousand distillations
 Of pirate, princess, and *pícaro* episodes
 He mimes, a dime an hour.
 As raconteur/rhymer affecting students
 Who imbibe his enthusiastic music,

He revels, daily, in their seedling faces
And, in their beautiful blossoming, redeems himself.

2/18/87 (01035)

Putting Things Up for Auction ^Δ

“Going, gaunt, gone!
Sold to the highest bidder! Take it away!”

I yet hear that cacophonous prattle
Pelting down from the stage
Or plaster cracking off a ceiling,
Above which invisible Satans pace.
Like stones thrown by Tithonus, at ghosts,
I feel it resonating in my echo chamber,
Proclaiming termination, recording finality
For seller, bidders, and buyer alike.

Today, surveying this desolate auction room,
Refusing to move too near the bier/block,
Where memories of you are still open for viewing,
I grieve, reliving my desperation,
On watching the fetch price exceed its estimate,
Until you were out of reach,
Consigned to an undisclosed other's keeping,
And — forgotten, by the next lot — borne away.

Lately, my own estate seems to be compelling me
To sell. Maybe it's time to contact the crier.

2/19/87 (02018)

DOA

Floating through supple, voluptuous sun-funnels,
This dateless, late-February day,
I wonder not about destinations, locations,
But more fundamentally tangible reasons for leaving,
Jettisoning routine's nubile nesting place.

Essences, raisons d'être, higher ideals
Shrink in thinking's quicksand pools,
As I strain to reach the least deep speculation,
Grasp for basic explanations that might lead me
Back to the exit I just chose, to make my escape.

Proper names, celebrations, windfall profits
Accruing to me, by luck of the draw,
From invisible Chance and Community Chest cards,
Fail to inform my spirit, satisfy curiosity,
Even as the miles rotate vertically, on the dial,

While I navigate Interstate 55,
Going southwesterly, riding on rubber hallucinations,
Warding off narcolepsy's opiate demons,
Hoping, before too much longer,
To discover whose hands are guiding my vehicle,

What undisclosed specter's reckless triangulations
Keep taking me farther from the city,
Into these cedar- and scrub-covered hills
Slowly enfolding vision, collapsing, in jagged pieces,
The sapphire sky's mirrorlike horizon.

No new butterfly-insights alight.
Imagination is a brittle, leafless twig
The slightest wintry blast could quiver, snap,
Yet my body and goose-pimpled flesh warm,
As if wading into a tepid aquifer.

Systematically, De Soto, Bonne Terre, Flat River
Rush up, diminish, forget me.
Vague intimations flood my blood, drain it
Of memories . . . nothing remains of someone's past
I once intimately shared — my spawning life.

Now, driving away without approaching anything,
I am completely unmoored, disoriented,
About to declare myself lost, immobilized, brain-dead.
Suddenly, just up ahead, I see myself at road's edge,
Thumb out, to catch a brass ring,

Hoping to hitchhike home. I scream to a stop,
Wait while my shape runs alongside,

*

Hops inside, enters my gregarious silence.
By twilight, we've made the moon, by midnight, Pluto.

2/23/87 (06006)

Cuckold

Bereft of carnal pleasures, leisurely pursuits,
Excessive appetites, earthly delights,
He inclines toward the vegetable life,
Malingers, mornings, between body-grease-soiled sheets,
Knees drawn up fatally, clutching a blanket
Disreputably shredded, from decades of stroking,
Sucking his bloodless, shriveled thumb —
A numb slug shrugging through limbo,
Going almost nowhere, forever.

Once, he lay in supple, pagan obeisance,
Engaged in naked child's play, with Beatrice,
Arrogantly resentful of time, fate,
Certain he and his mate shared inviolable destinies
Exempting them from mortal arrest —
Resurrection's perennial spring favorites,
Myriad multiples more vibrant than first crocuses,
Forsythias, tulips, redbuds, weeping cherries . . .
Human blooms never losing their perfumed hues.

3/9/87 (04124)

Eying Birthstones

*For Jan,
this birthday gift,
with all my love,
Dude*

In every natural, incarnate thing,
Inklings of spring radiate trace chemicals
Identical to those inside your irises.

Flecks of topaz, citrine, alexandrite
Flicker like opals beneath electric halos;
Their flights ignite vision.

Like purple crocuses, fiery red tulips,
Your precious eyes effloresce,
Flaunt their precarious momentariness,

Forgetting existence depends on consequences
Beyond knowing and that memory
Is immortality's controlling stimulus.

In your focus is reflected the procreant world,
Urging us, its offspring, toward birth —
Man, woman, flower, stone, planet, cosmos.

3/17/87 (00476)

Cosmic Pariah

Passive as coral washing shoreward
In glacial glide-and-check progressions,
He advances, tentatively, toward old age.

Death's best friend, time's wounded hero,
Returning home, like Odysseus,
He is of ascetic obsessiveness possessed.

Wherever he goes, all eyes recognize him
As fate's plaything, whim's captive slave.
Strangers know his forwarding address before he arrives

Or at least has a chance to change clothes,
After each tedious peregrination,
And reacquaint himself with those he left behind

Prior to his first incarnation, generations ago.
Yet only he remembers his name, Tithonus,
And why he chose, so irrevocably, to postpone dying.

3/18/87 (02647)

Song of the Road

He is the fugue that dust-motes his tires set loose
Compose as he goes over roads
Weaving nowhere, like capricious leitmotifs,

*

Through Missouri's remote farmlands.
 Notes registered in diminished sharps and flats,
 Stippled with animals, implements, shelters,
 Signify his existence, by oblique contrast.
 His is the minstrelsy of troubadours, gypsies,
 Bedouins, Ethiops, street bums,
 Hobos walking backward, to evade their own shadows.
 A plaintive refrain — rain's accompaniment,
 Snow's crescendoing coda, daybreak's soprano
 Echoing from generation to generation —
 Connect him to the Song of Songs,
 That one grand strain reverberating sky and earth.
 Despite thick fog, this last day of winter,
 He drives headlong, humming to a distant music,
 His tongue and lips whistling itinerant anthems,
 Whose lyrics and tunes he transfigures, mile by mile,
 Depending on his need to retrieve harmonies
 From ancient ascending souls
 Or desire to enter original Creation on his own.

3/19/87 — [1] (05403)

[The poet's eyes, in a fine, frenzied rolling,][†]

The poet's eyes, in a fine, frenzied rolling,
 Circumnavigate their own globes,
 Capsize in tidal waves
 Arriving from typhoons and hurricanes
 Made whenever

3/19/87 — [2] (01479)

Crossword Learning^Δ

*For Troika's third-grade class
 at Glenridge School*

They ponder a black-and-white maze,
 Those intense, innocent faces,
 Counting spaces on finger- and tongue-tips,
 Poising concentration above empty squares,
 *

Like bears balancing their weight
On skeptical spectators' collective gazes.

“Wooden stick used to play baseball”;
“Opposite of yes”; “a homonym for ‘two’”;
“We need it to make things grow.”
They hesitate, leap to conclusive ecstasy,
Crossing out, as they go,
Possibilities from the narrowing word bank.

Ten minutes later, they surrender to fatigue,
Incuriosity, suspended belief,
Grope, in desks, for math books,
Then head off in the next direction,
Primed to find numerical equations
For “bat,” “no,” “too,” and “rain,”

Answers whose explanations to ancient questions
Also are clues to new universes
Evolving each second, every few guesses —
“Three letters across, meaning ‘friend’”;
“Two down, for the pronoun of ‘you and I’”;
“Any number above one, signifying love.”

3/20/87 (01036)

[Joy drains from his daily animations,] †

Joy drains from his daily animations,
Like scummy water gurgling through a clogged trap

3/23/87 — [1] (09492)

Beyond Words

At times like this midlife decade,
Words fail themselves despite their temerity.
They must have mistaken me for Addie Bundren,
Jack Burden, Ahab, Alonso Quijano.

No matter that dialogue, open communication
Have broken down so completely,
Even suicide notes don’t work,
For lack of readers, I mutter through.

Either I am too much of this daily world
 Or dissociated totally, fugue-loose
 And chancy-free, an embryo gone astray,
 Confusing my mother's uterus with my daughter's,
 Allowing myself to be born again, on every corner,
 At the drop of a rabbit's mad hatter.
 Where am I when you need me?
 I'm freebasing the human race's brain,
 For information leading to the capture of dreams
 Recently escaped from sheol's gaol.
 I scream. Syllables misfire, implode,
 In my throat's barrel, close to the frothing muzzle,
 Dying, trying to say, "I love you, lady,"
 Trying to say . . . trying, with silent crying . . .
 Finally unable, for grief, even to die —
 Life's most futile exercise of freedom: staying alive.

3/23/87 — [2] (04123)

Pine Cones, Spiky Balls, and Gumshoes [△]

Not even eight days new,
 And spring has reverted to its wintry ways,
 Betraying us who have journeyed north,
 Into the Great Emancipator's corn country,
 This forty-one-degree morning.

Huddling indoors, groping for games to engage us,
 Chores boredom forces upon the imagination
 When disappointment exceeds impatience
 And entertainments are scarce as hens' teeth
 Or dinosaur eggs, we reach threshold,
 Bolt from sedentary uninventiveness,
 With a commission we've conned grandparents into issuing:
 One cent per cone, from the pine tree,
 And spiky ball, fallen off the sweet gum,
 We collect from the lawn surrounding the house —

Easter come early but just as much fun!
 Running, stooping, digging from mud-clutches,

*

Mulch, grassy clumps, beneath trunks,
We three, dad and his brood of two, hunt,
Tracking laughter back to its myriad sources.

Five hundred thirty-three times,
We lunge past each other, stumbling,
Heating the dank air around our shimmering selves,
Like incandescents illuminating basement spaces —
Three genies weaving each other into crazy quilts —

Until, inescapably disillusioned,
We reach the same conclusion, realize choosing a loser
Requires immediate reckoning. Suddenly, we recall the deal.
Gleefully, we pool our three bags,
Dump their convertible assets onto the living-room rug,

And begin the tedious collective tabulation,
Leading to reimbursement for services rendered.
With bemused consternation, Grammy and Grampa
Watch our proceedings — a king, princess, and prince
Sharing, equally, in our joyous hearts' spoils.

3/25 & 3/27/87 (00677)

Phoenix-Lovers

Glaring paradoxes fly before our eyes,
Out and in our ears and out again,
At light's velocity, cracking sound barriers
Each time speech exceeds concrete meaning,
Reaches abstract heights,
Before subsiding as echoless phoenixes
Shattered at the base of the Areopagus's far side.

Silence heralds our ceremonious procession,
As we leave life's cathedral,
Exit from its dark, cavernous sanctuary,
Into the sun's glare, and shuffle, two by two,
Toward the cemetery, where, side by side,
We buried each other, twenty-five years ago,
When we spoke out our marriage vows, in Sutro Park.

Oh, that decade-wide moment so long ago —
Youth's subdued waking yawn and naked stretch —
*

When we composed lovers' fugues and minuets,
 Scribbled études for Beethoven,
 Designed cartoons for Raffaello,
 Mosaics to place in St. Mark's Basilica,
 Made love in Bailey's Woods, made love

That bore no taint of self-consciousness
 Nor lacked passion's spontaneity,
 Which we traded, later on, in our relationship,
 For impatient physical gratification.
 Oh, for that springtide's renaissance!
 But arthritic sockets, joints, hip cradles
 Enslave us to this very painful disparity

Between juvenescence and phasing out.
 Even communication no longer suffices.
 Drowning together, in quicksand sadness,
 We have witnessed dissolution.
 In the oozing suck, we touch bottom,
 Then, in one colossal last gasp,
 Grasp each other and push upward, toward the sun.

3/30/87 (04122)

H.M.S. *Saul*^Δ

*For my father,
 his seventy-eighth, in '87,
 with all my love*

He's kept his ship tiptop, trim,
 A well-outfitted dreadnought,
 Leader of the Royal Fleet,
 An armada of one, really,
 Who, sailing daily, gracefully maneuvering
 In the harbor, beyond the reef,
 Across the Channel and back, occasionally,
 Flies his familial insignia
 From all masts, in squalls and salty breezes.

Whether he's luffing, heeling,
 His keel rides stably through the waves,
 Etching sea lanes
 Wayfarers follow, who hang in his wake,
 *

Hoping to overtake him,
Board, and raise their flags but, always,
In the closing moments, proving maladroit
Or afraid. At seventy-eight,
He's still the stoutest vessel patrolling the main.

4/6/87 (02244)

Willy's Midlife Crisis

Once, just the prospect of joining a crusade
Excited my imagination, no matter its destination
Wasn't a hallowed oasis or Canaan,
Rather Salisbury, Tipton, or Columbia, Missouri,
The Midwest's false-front balsa-wood set
From movies with Tom Mix and the Cisco Kid
And his sidekick with the Biblical wisdom, Sancho,
All of whom traveled by horse, buckboard, stagecoach.

Now, leave-takings, Quixotic sallies-forth,
Even adventures worthy of Tom and Huck
Fail to arouse me, my sleepy spirit's succubi.
The very thought of driving one mile more
Than going to the grocery store or doctor's office requires
Short-circuits my synapses. I collapse, in a frenzy,
Dizzy, blurred of vision, paralyzed.

Is it my body's chemistry that betrays me,
Stymies all energies I muster to combat my malaise,
Or does volition itself break down, whenever I try
To let myself be seized by fantasies,
Daydreams, hallucinations of ladies naked on beaches,
Inviting me to taste their delicacies?
Nearing forty-six, I hesitate to celebrate
Not the nativity, but the crucifixion, of a renegade Jew.

4/7/87 (02326)

The Man Without a Country

I pass under Passover, as if my infidel skin
Were not with Semitic traces

*

Even the ages can't erase or as though time
 Were an ocean my submarine soul
 Triangulates, in pariah silence.

Each year, as Easter approaches, I die
 At least two metaphysical deaths:
 Mine, by being reminded of my apostasy,
 And His, in which wafer and wine
 Stimulate the unimaginative brain to metaphor,

That ephemeral state of collective guilt
 In which mankind bathes,
 For lack of natural inspiration and faith
 In daily immortality, eternity by the hour.
 Just now, I doubt my very location,

Question respect my identity demands —
 The authentic-looking guise, of a wise man,
 It projects — especially when I realize
 Just how precariously unstable my psyche feels
 Inside here, behind these eyes,

Where, seized in the fetal position, I hide,
 Peering out through chinks in crumbling walls
 That once fortified my own Carcassonne,
 Kept me alive, in an environment
 Conducive to writing Judeo-Christian myths,

Composing odes to unsung Homers,
 Sestinas and villanelles to forgotten heroines.
 In shivering fear, I languish here, all day,
 Praying no one will see me pacing,
 Conducting my litany of one, to the moon and to the Son.

4/14/87 (00826)

Birthday Worship

A song to myself

This boisterous Good Friday a.m.,
 My own singing springs me from sleep,
 Like Frost's man-child swinger of birches.

*

I enter this moon-lingering morning,
Taste its nectarine aroma (the country's purity
Infiltrates sinuses, through night-blocked nostrils),
And erase dreams, from retinal blackboards,
Even as I begin gathering up my scattered vision.

Flowering crabs, dogwoods, redbuds,
Weeping cherries in bloom are Easter eggs,
Whose gentle end of the descending rainbow
Immaculates my eyes, with sweetest pinks,
Lavenders, fuchsias, purples, crimsons, and violets.
Choosing which of these I'll use for transfusion,
As afternoon drains to wrist-drips,
My aging blood persuades me to procrastinate.

I scavenge the wide yard, for tiny surprises
I might wrap in quiet delight and give myself,
To celebrate my birthday, this April seventeenth.
Dew-drooping yellow and red tulips,
Bordering the front walk, like crucifixes,
Invite me to pass through, as if in review.
Before entering their glorious corridor, I hesitate,
Then surrender my future to their subdued beauty.

4/17/87 — [1] (06007)

Coincidences

April is confetti suspended in midvision:
Soft, sweet, pea-pod-green leaves;
Ivory and pink dogwood blooms
Rouge-beautiful as the hand-painted china faces
Of Jumeau fashion dolls; redbud grape
And cranberry juices dripping into the air.

Everywhere I stare, the horizon and sky
Are awash in soft gouaches,
Whose hues run crazily through each other.
Why does this riot so excite my senses?
Perhaps Good Friday is celebrating my birthday
And just doesn't yet realize I am Easter.

4/17/87 — [2] (06008)

Navigating in Fog

Twenty-five miles out, speeding south,
I lose the sun, treetops, valleys,
To a 7 a.m. whiteout.

Vision stutters intermittently as a bulb
Not tightly screwed into its socket
Or synapses collapsing under viral siege.

Arriving “under the hood,” I suddenly know
How pilots rely on instruments,
As ancient tribes sacrificed, to idols,

And just how tenuous sanity can be
When dislocation masterminds sight and sense.
For five minutes, groping, hoping fly my craft,

While I postulate imaginary glide slopes,
Abandoned airstrips, unfurrowed pastures

I might try to find, on exiting
The muzzle of this morning’s vortical puzzlement.
As abruptly as I entered this maelstrom,

The scrim curtain diminishes, in wispy layers,
To thin filaments of sky-thread.
My head clears its fright-webs.

I awaken to my immediate location: land.
Soon, sun, treetops, valleys
Assimilate me, into their unself-consciousness.

4/18/87 (06009)

Regressions

After viewing Project X, with Troika

Fast asleep beneath middle aging’s haystack,
His passion daydreams the decades away,
In slumber’s numbing present-tense conjugation.

Drowsing across unarriving future hours,
Navigating, remapping ancient conquests,
He speculates on how different his past might have been

Had he not mistaken Earth's edge,
 Shimmering on the horizon, for the Seven Cities of Gold
 And soared, like Icarus, into the sun's funnel,

Hung too long there, below its psychedelic halo,
 Allowing his senses to vaporize, his veins to collapse,
 Ontogeny to recapitulate his genes back to their origin.

Slowly, all passages to the East go closed
 On his asthmatic breathing. Yesterday,
 Tomorrow, and today pose naked as Auschwitz Jews,

Until only his invisible rapid eye movements
 Tattoo passion's apocalyptic prophecies
 Onto his glazed pupils and docile chimpanzee smile.

5/4/87 (02013)

Would-Be Cutters

I awaken to the ripsaw sibilances
 Ten thousand bees reiterate
 Like scintillant teeth on a steel band
 The width of my brain's tree trunk.
 Invisible demons draw the saw back
 And forth, across my temples, as if a whip
 Were lashing my face, lacerating my eyes.
 Sunrise is myriad bleeding capillaries.

As I lean, on one elbow, above the spotted pillow,
 Crimson-streaked sheets
 Stick to my flesh, hold me
 Cold as shore-beached fish
 After a Florida storm. Rigor mortis
 Lingers, clings to my skin,
 About to pounce on its next victim.
 Painfully, I molt out of my twin,

Don robes of daybreak's headache,
 And assume the throne, beside my queen,
 Isabella the Jew Hater,
 Consort of a thousand pretenders to her favors,
 Which she doles out liberally, from her counting house
 *

Bulging with chests of gold, underground vaults,
 Pots oozing curdling honey.
 Uneasily, I squeeze in, next to her,

Whisper to the nearest jester, to locate, for me,
 Something containing aspirin —
 Not acetaminophen — tablets to relax the bees
 Swarming in the tree my brain keeps alive
 So that, occasionally, I can climb out on a limb,
 Cause it to bend, fling me into the wind,
 Where, for argenteous hours, I might fly,
 Suspended in silence, oblivious to the din below.

5/18/87 — [1] (04121)

[He leaves class, for the last time this semester,][‡]

He leaves class, for the last time this semester,
 Abdicating his divine right of kings,
 For pleasure domes where carnal knowledge
 Is no mere matter of degrees conferred,
 Rather a discipline stressing practical application
 And grades based on sexual tactics
 Successfully mastered. He exits without regrets,
 Taking with him his final paycheck
 And verbal praises tendered by his students.

Ahead, freedom wide as the Sinai,
 Deeper than the Negev, whispers siren plaints,
 Draws him into its writhing veils, inside tents,
 As though his imagination were a sacred phallus
 Penetrating its own prurient mind's concubine.
 No longer pedagogue but naive student
 Coming to terms with his own narcissistic parts,
 He gets naked, takes a desk,
 Concentrates on the stage, where a simulated dramatization

Of Eve copulating with her pet snake progresses;
 Then he proceeds to take notes, make doodles
 And graphically explicit *Kama Sutra*
 Stations of the Judeo-Christian star-crossed school,
 Whose psychophilotheological tenets

*

Espouse Panhellenic polygamous love.
Three months from now, he'll retrieve robes,
Scepter, and crown, drown, again, in fantasies
Of sleeping with nymphs oblivious to his conscientious teaching.

Ah, but for today, right now, anyway,
He can direct all his energies as he desires,
Realizing

5/18/87 — [2] (06010)

The Last Road Home

This humid a.m., the shimmering countryside
Is a seascape seen through wine-glazed eyes.
Summer has come prematurely,
Sneaked up on our Maytide expectations,
With inebriating aftershocks.
By 5:30, before most souls awaken,
Breathing chokes, wheezes,
Beneath breezeless, stagnated vapor-haze
Hovering, fifty miles circumferentially,
As if a nuclear mushroom had been detonated
Just above this city. Innocently, I flee,
Frightened as an adrenalized wildebeest
Leaping, frenetically, just ahead of wildfire
Consuming its recent habitat,
As I go westerly, on instinct's unsteady vectors,
Trying to outrace alienation,
Arrive any place that will accept my quarantined spirit.

Suddenly, the borders between the sea
And Missouri's desolate midsection converge, merge.
My cloven-hoofed ghost-soul slips through a gate,
Enters its own tranquil grazing ground,
Where ancient faces form a halo around memory.
Each visage renders a distinct recollection of me,
Describes its former position in my wide life,
Relates my activities over a thousand years,
Beginning in caves, cloistered in Portuguese monasteries,
Settled in Tidewater opulence,
Before trekking westward, to Ste. Genevieve,
*

Then, with Lewis and Clark, out to land's end,
Before flying back, last night, on the red-eye from Seattle,
To reclaim my jettisoned sense of place and name.
But having failed to locate scions or forebears,
Lacking courage to stay even one span,
Planting and harvesting seeds, I flee again.

Just now, the seething, tall green grass
Through which my fleet car passes, as it nears Columbia,
Grieves as though my vehicle were a caisson
Rolling homeward, after an interminable odyssey in space.
My breathing slowly smoothes out, relaxes,
Grows soothingly deep, becomes one with the air,
Billowing, now, with cool, crisp breezes.
May shimmers like a sea on which my weightless body
Floats, increasingly deeper, into the focal vortex
From where God gazes on each of His creations individually.

5/19/87 — [1] (06011)

The Midwest Passage

Just past Columbia's outer atolls,
Accreted with strip malls, motels, billboards
(Which the industry likes to refer to as "highway displays"),
A green-and-white road sign proclaims "Boonville,"
Which looms twenty miles due west,
Doomed to stew in Missouri's seething summer juices,
Like a baking turkey or, in winter,
A guinea fowl rigid, in frigid catatonia,
At the base of a home freezer. Lesser lights,
Named Wooldridge, Overton, intervene,
Arrived at, as the dove swerves, over county roads
Alternating pea gravel, mud/dust, depending on the season —
Dairy-cattle and wheat communities
Sleeping under decomposing haystacks.
Next comes Prairie Home, at Exit 106,
Which illuminates no consequential correlations
Memory might translate into historical familiarity,
Then the Bunceton turnoff, arrogant in its boasting
America's legendary heritage via a totem pole

*

Surmounted by yellow-dripping, crucified double arches.
 Finally, simultaneous with Boonville's junction,
 Tipton bows quietly, or droops,
 From its inferior position on the sign,
 Like a drugged lion on its stool, in a circus cage.
 I flip on my right flashing-signal —
 My snapping whip — and abandon the highway,
 Lean south, along 5's serpentine shape.
 Soon, just before noon's opiate haze
 Completely obliterates vision, I arrive.
 Nowhere seems so vaguely familiar
 That I almost begin to realize leaving home, earlier,
 Never occurred, that this odyssey
 Is mere silky transfiguration made of unraveling dreams,
 Fantasies come asunder, in memory's system.
 Suddenly, sleep is a tidal wave inundating forgetting,
 Erasing all tributaries, arteries
 Through which my brain's blood passes,
 Traveling back and forth between the land of the quick
 And the valley in which shadows dart and flash
 As if illuminating catacombs, mausoleums, and crypts.

5/19/87 — [2] (05402)

Bringing Klaus Barbie to Trial ^Δ

How many times do we need to return
 To the scene of our hearts' crimes, dear Lord,
 Before learning cruelty, corruption, and greed
 Are qualities inherent in human doing
 And that we repeat our least natural acts
 Neither from guilt nor from fear for our immortal spirits
 But out of a perverse fascination with violence
 That transcends mere infliction of pain on enemies
 And disillusionment with those closest to us we most adore?

What diabolical impulses implore us, from afar,
 To explore our darkest desires,
 Force hopelessly fragile souls to chew cyanide,
 Shove other naked, huddling humans into ovens,
 Remove breasts, genitalia, vital organs
 From those tattooed with the dispersed tribes' curse,
 *

Urgently hoping to breed a master Aryan race
 Composed of fair-haired, blue-eyed Teutonics,
 Not wunderkind Jewesses and Jews?

Even now, I sense the rails quivering near Sobibor,
 Though my own ears can only invent
 That clattering, death-rattling clack-clack of cattle cars
 Crammed with lambs being transported to the slaughter,
 Can only imagine tasting that acrid black-blue dust
 Sifting up out of Auschwitz's and Treblinka's factory stacks,
 Although I've visited these Golgothas, Calvarys
 In a thousand imperishable nightmares and daydreams,
 Can only envision their ghosts roaming modern Poland.

Is there no hiding from the genocidal truth of it all?
 Can't the repeated cycle of confession and expiation
 Relieve the indeterminate torment of having to relive it
 Every time memory backs up like a flooded gutter,
 Spewing overlooked detritus into alleys
 Our lives use as shortcuts between forgetting
 And survival's daily rounds? Why does it persist,
 That fly causing the elephant's ear to twitch
 Whenever its minuscule proboscis penetrates the thick hide?

5/19/87 — [3] (02674)

The Open-Road Syndrome

For Mindy Besbears

Borne forth like a maple seed
 Spiraling down breezeless corridors,
 His free-falling spirit enters mid-Missouri's aura,
 To explore its sweet-smelling grasses,
 Witness its green shimmer, search for
 Some remote Arrow Rock, Hannibal, or Florida, Mo.,
 Bordering the Mississippi, beside whose tranquil banks
 He might park, dangle his bare feet
 While sipping Mondavi table white,
 Crunching Cheez-Its he tips from their box,
 And gaze at lumbering towboats and barges
 Or envision Huck and Nigger Jim
 Passing him downstream, on his daydreaming's slow flow.

But as he goes north, toward Moberly,
Early morning's shimmering haze
Diminishes to stormy gray, and he knows
Rain will engage him, hours from now,
Contain him, today, indoors,
Force him to place on hold his desperate imagination,
By now having sustained too long its pent-up inventions,
To suffer one more hour of purveying wares,
Uncrating, from bulging swatch cases,
Samples of pants, ladies' slacks, safari jackets,
Taking obligatory degradations before writing orders,
Ensuring his necessary estimated commissions.

Yet for some uncorrelated reason,
He can't make himself continue straight,
At Junction 36/24,
Aim for Macon and Kirksville,
Where, in both towns, he has a \$25,000 account;
Rather, he turns west, heads for Salisbury,
Where Acme-Zenith maintains one of its trouser factories.
Within half an hour, he parks,
Locates the office door, announces his credentials
To three oblivious ladies tabulating coupons, with wands.
For twenty minutes, he maneuvers through rows
Cramped with sewing machines snorting and growling,
Then leaves without announcing his departure.

Outside, a lazy drizzle keeps pace
With his shadow bending in and out of plate glass
That myriad vacated storefronts wave, at the street,
Like dingy, pinned sheets drying on a clothesline.
At the Roosevelt Café, he pauses, enters,
Avails himself of its pastries, coffee, newspaper,
Which he fails to assimilate, for doubts about his vocation.
After ten years of peddling on the road,
He still owns his original insecurity,
Realizes that, from one day to the next, his income
Is a by-product of another's whim or impulse,
Not his stratagems, and he laments having not come aboard
When Huck's raft first passed close into shore.

City Mice and Country Possums

He never really meets people, in the city,
Rather sees them briefly,
Always in passing, encounters them, actually,
Momentarily face to face, side by side,
At red traffic lights on streets
Reeking with petroleum exhaust, in the airport,
Whose iron-filing, fidgeting spirits
Seem moved, from beneath an invisible board,
By a magnetized underlord or oversoul.

Even in his rarefied neighborhood,
Distinguished by its orange-vapor street lamps,
Freshly laid sidewalks and granite curbs,
Slate-roofed Tudor-style houses from the twenties,
He's not befriended one Mercedes-Benz owner,
Rarely said more than hello
To vaguely recognizable women and men,
With their aluminum shovels/scoopers poised,
Who're punctually being walked, in the park, by their dogs.

Nor, for that matter, has he talked, at length,
With his wife and two children,
Whose existences, although physically juxtaposed to his,
Within their domicile, seem separate
If equally acceptable to each — a viable situation
Despite their unbridgeable differences of opinion
Regarding issues of food, religion,
Television, who should sleep in whose bed,
Bodily hygiene, and the utility of school.

Something there is about country living
That imposes, on people, fewer choices,
A more collective voice,
In voting for sheriff, city administrator,
Repairing the high-school parking lot,
And makes the act of just being seen
On downtown's West Columbia or Liberty streets
An occurrence worthy of stopping to shake hands,
Converse, nod, or raise a finger, in recognition.

Even after three years, he misses the place
Where he raised his family, gained humility

*

And Biblical wisdom, laboring in a trouser factory
After consciously abdicating a tenured position
On the staff of a distinguished university.
Now, back in academe, after eighteen years,
For his company's inability to compete
Against cheaper imported goods, he is at odds —
A possum pacing in the road, where its mate lies bloating.

5/21/87 (05438)

Cautious Driver

Southern Missouri's wide, pied countryside,
Speckled as a sunning copperhead
Slumbering under late-May sun,
Senses me tiptoeing through its restricted space,
As I drive, from nowhere in particular,
Toward the first place, in this extravagant Sinai,
That promises my wandering spirit
A semipermanent oasis,
If not for a few nights, an hour or three, today.

I don't escape its possum-drowse.
It wakes just before I make Perryville,
Above Cape Girardeau, compels me to exit,
Veering out of its sinuous concrete way,
Forces me to take temporary refuge indoors,
At a roadside lemonade stand
Purveying glorified delicacies from the Promised Land
(St. Peter guards its golden arches),
Where I squeeze french fries and cheeseburgers dry,

Before consuming them as fodder-fuel.
Soon, I resume my trek,
Heading north, toward New Bloomfield,
Ste. Genevieve, Farmington.
No longer do I regard myself as an intruder
Or fear my presence will disturb
Existing ecosystems, threaten any individual,
Human or otherwise. Still, I go on tiptoe,
Knowing that, in the high grass, serpents lurk.

5/22/87 (00883)

Willy's Anthem ^Δ

As vital as sleep is to my machinery's timing,
 The driving I do weekly is equally revivifying.
 The two-hundred-mile days I ply,
 Freewheeling down open highways,
 In my fleet vehicle, sustain my wayward spirit,
 With an almost messianic sense of mission.
 It's as if just going, sheer momentum,
 Without my knowing why, what cargo has been stowed,
 Or even the location of my destination,
 Were fulfillment of God's promise to the Chosen,
 With whom, when road peddling, I identify,
 To remind myself that nobility
 Resides within, not just in the busts on gold medals.

Something inherent in my maintaining ties
 With ancient, dispersed tribes,
 Nomads groping over Negevs, Sinai's,
 Scaling Himalayan ranges, leviathan oceans,
 My remembering their short-lived existences
 Keeps me sane, maintains my pride,
 Despite bigotries and snide cyanide innuendos,
 Hyperbolizing my Hebraic nature, buyers hurl at me
 Before conceding to my nonpareil quality garments
 At unequaled bargain prices.
 Just taking to the road instead of staying home,
 This cool, May Saturday a.m.,
 Sets my blood astir. Work is my elixir.
 I am minion to the miles. My singing voice
 Mingles with the chant rising from my whirring tires,
 And borne forth, I rejoice! I rejoice!

5/23/87 (02324)

Spring Stirrings

Hillsides fill this steamy Missouri May
 With wild violets and purple-hued weeds.
 Neither Queen Anne's lace
 Nor goldenrod yet crowds vision,
 Insists on owning shoulder and median,
 *

Dares lean into the trajectory
My speeding vehicle describes, plying highways
Crisscrossing, spiraling like DNA chains,
Between Weingarten, Farmington,
Perryville, Biehle, and Cape Girardeau —
Fluctuating remotenesses
Dotting, like roadside summer weeds and flowers,
The map I continually reinvent as I go.

Indeed, how could it be otherwise,
For one like me, whose precarious existence
Depends on suspending disbelief
When seeing spotted wheelbarrows
Watched over by fire-engine-red Dalmatian dogs
Squatting beside Keatsian Stevens-jars
Teetering on weed-strewn hillsides in Tennessee,
Filling, forever, with Greek rain?
Ah, that all my days could be spent
As the accompaniment to freedom such as this,
Growing, profusely, in morning's garden, through which I float
Like the breeze-borne seed of a dandelion
Urgently searching for its first earthly opening.

5/27/87 (06012)

Exiled

Although nobody's home but the ghosts and me,
6 a.m.'s silence
Seems like cascading sand granules
Rubbing the neck of a genie's hourglass
I've amplified with a stethoscope,
In hope of isolating voices I used to know,
Souls sloshing down time's mazy sluice,
Toward my existence's sinister abyss: forgetting.

Waiting for morning's ritual alchemy to conclude,
Transmute coffee beans into youth's elixir,
I listen to sounds beyond the kitchen window
Ricochet from fence to eave to ground:
Tawny, speckled doves cooing,
Rabbits gnashing their teeth on succulent grass,
*

Squirrels in screeching pursuit of each other,
Spiraling around tree trunks, like frightened shadows.

Their ubiquitous innocence reaches out to me,
Locked within my silent musing.
So desperately do I wish to speak to them,
Vibrate the tines of their primal minds,
By translating my loneliness
Into "I love you"s spoken by the eyes,
I race outside, to embrace the morning,
But find I've chased them all indoors.

5/29/87 (05437)

Short-Lived Half-Lives

Each dawning day that my waking skeleton stretches,
Lifts, stiffly, into the shade-filtered room
It shares with an equally fleshless mate,
Is cause for celebration,
No matter how inauspicious its unceremonial pose.
We two ghosts, husband and wife,
Will have commingled our shadows with sunlight
Twenty-two years, this July 8,
A desperate prolongation of disparate destinies,
Whose willy-nilly vectoring trajectories
Accidentally collided in 1965,
Exploded in a rain shower of erotic flames
That singed our skin, blinded our eyes,
Rendered us, forevermore, out of celestial orbit.

Today, we are charred ashes, scattered sparks
Our original loving engendered,
In its ephemeral conflagration. Each morning,
Less of us remains; complete diminishment is imminent.
Decades, days, hours from now,
Co-owners of this space we provisionally occupy
Might sense traces of our dust
Buzzing, faintly, in the air, water, dirt.
More likely, even our molecules will have vaporized
And our destinies resumed their gratuitous ways.

6/2/87 (04120)

Ancient Ruins

Vertiginous visions shimmering in sleep's eclipse,
This crystal daybreak,
Transfix me inside lighter-than-breathing dreams.

My eyes resist waking's unmesmerizing insistence
On seeing through night's natural euphoria,
Toward morning's paltry core,

Where the shore that bends around Land's End,
Slenderly serpentine past Cliff House,
Sutro Park, to Half Moon Bay,

Once amplified our soft, tandem steps,
Randomly weaving DNA chains in the sand,
Recorded our unpretentious innocence,

As we swore never to sunder our vows,
Which, out of our sweet, naive elopement,
We cast, like figs and dates, to the Canaan waves,

Those Mosaical harbingers
Waiting to translate our fused spirits' vast hopes
Into oracles the poised wind might chime.

But my somnambulistic vision explodes in my face.
Focus fills with shapes and alphabets
From Korans, cabalas, and codices

Floating to the surface of a nightmare
Whose shoreline surrounds my polluted brain,
Day after night, with maniacal indeterminateness.

Up out of its swirling configurations, your body washes
Onto the shore, a maimed, one-eyed statue of Janus,
Gathering seaweed and fish bones in its armpits and groin.

6/11/87 (04119)

[Traveling back to Jackson,]

Traveling back to Jackson,
After having sidetracked my freighted spirit,
*

So many days, waiting for the express
 (Which, as if chased by Baskerville hounds,
 Never raced past,
 Rather delayed, in false expectation's station,
 For Art Deco starlets to board,
 Ride its brain waves' thought-train
 Far into the harlot night,
 Without ever even clearing the switching yards),

I can actually hear every clackity-clack
 Emanating from cracks between tracks,
 Where they're bolted together
 And spiked to creosoted sleepers, each space
 A lapse in memory's vast roadbed,
 Networking through my head. Agitated,
 I try to penetrate the Mississippi landscape
 Swaying, behind my face, in the tinted glass.
 But our trains, on the same main line,
 Scream by each other, in opposite directions.

6/16/87 (03564)

Naming Spencer Thomas ^Δ

Today, they rename their baby,
 Already three months new,
 Bathing him in his Hebrew roots,
 This ceremony performed by an itinerant rabbi
 Ebullient with poetical recitations,
 Saying his time-honored "*borei p'ri ha-gafen.*"
 Sipping the fruit of the vine,
 He sanctifies Elohim's divine omnipotence,
 Then decrees the mother touch the cup's ichor,
 Anoint the plump, clucking tongue, with her wet fingertip.

Sunlight laced with Sinai dust
 Funnels through intricate window sheers,
 Transfigures Clayton's peasant-stock Jewesses,
 Draped in modest cotton frocks
 Concealing shapely Old World bodies,
 Into shimmering, rain-misted rosebuds,
 Seraphim escorting their cherubic children
 Through this happy afternoon's celebration of youth.

Today, I share in our Judaic imperative
To perpetuate continuity and oneness,
Abundantly fundamental among all of us
Come to welcome Spencer Thomas Eastman,
Officially, into the tribe. Kissing his honeyed cheek
Revivifies my life's disillusioned silence.
Tasting his milk-tinged skin
Redeems, from dying, ancestral dreams
Of reaching the Sinai's outer edges alive,
Naming, claiming Canaan as the Promised Land.

6/19/87 — [1] (02276)

Lost in His Poetical Zone

Cadences emanating from my singing eyes
Shimmer silence's tines,
Vibrate the universe, with opalescent fires.

My entire body is a writing instrument,
Neither pen nor meta-electrical machine,
Rather a solitary, involuntary energy

Ever gathering invisible visions,
Shaping their formless images into Attic friezes,
Greek vases, Lake Windermere verses.

Today, vague compulsions move my wrist,
Guide my pen through soul-strokes
Combining to design the sky into a tree house

Or giant's leafy beanstalk
My physical being might start climbing,
Before vanishing in its slender celestial heights.

By degrees, each materializing word
Serves as foothold for my ascending imagination.
In the aggregate, they thrust my spirit

Through afternoon's rain-swollen ceiling,
Beyond paradisiacal vapors
Soaring in some pure, mellifluous effluvium

Constituting sphere-music.
 Disappearing, I start, stare up, into your face,
 Gaze into your inquiring eyes,
 Invite you into my apparent absent-mindedness.

6/19/87 — [2] (06013)

[Why is it that whenever I sit still] [†]

Why is it that whenever I sit still
 More than two minutes,
 Make space in which energy might cool,
 Find its contracted place in the brain

6/21/87 — [1] (01485)

Father's Day ^Δ

This Sunday morning, so stillborn,
 So filled with unfulfilling oracles,
 Has a celebratory name: Father's Day.
 I am supposed to be the object of its accolades,
 That one deserving person
 On whom this family has selected to confer
 Praiseworthy frankincense and myrrh.

But throughout this forlorn house,
 I alone, imperturbable, disturb the early silence,
 With my purposelessness, sorting dreams
 Recently jettisoned, like a ten-year-old boy
 Desperately inspecting, piece by dim piece,
 Piles of Indian-head pennies,
 For glints of an unrecorded mint mark or date.

Slowly, in varying waves, they awaken to me.
 First, my wife floats downstairs,
 Draped in naked voluptuousness.
 Cradled between love seats, on the lush rug,
 We collect morning's nectars,
 *

Keep each other's heated honey sweetly cool,
With winged whispers and sibilant kisses.

Hours, decades later (the minutes seem),
My drowsy girl and boy
Place their offerings at my feet: a clay dinosaur
Named Faulkner, running shirt and shorts
Labeled "Nike" — gifts of gods, fit for a king
To whom, throughout the fiefdom, they sing their acclaim.
Such treasures humble me to servitude.

As day's stream cascades to afternoon's basin,
I suggest the four of us take two canoes,
Paddle its lagoon's shallow offshoots and tributaries,
Partake of its ephemeral yet timeless seclusion —
One tiny family allied, in a confederacy
Of love, naiveté, and innocence,
Against the entire universe beyond St. Louis.
Astride the gunwales, I raise my oar, to the future.

6/21/87 — [2] (04118)

[Like a ninth-century mariner]^Δ

Like a ninth-century mariner
Groping toward fabled Aegean seas, Lesbos,
Using Ptolemy's star charts
To follow his divining-rod instincts out of Alexandria,
I navigate sleep's wine-dark slipstream,
Rely on blind faith, to avoid leviathans,
Locate appropriate breezes, to swell my square sails,
Arrive at my own approximation of a trade route
Leading to Blefuscus, Laputa, Balnibarbi,
Safe from Arab privateers,
My own fugitive hallucinations.

Suddenly, my senses run aground.
Waking shudders my ribs, stretches my ropes to breaking.
My vessel hangs in day's jagged shoals,
Like a crab clawing against a shark's jaws.

6/25–26/87 (00261)

Willy's "One Last Time" △

All the way south, from Farmington
 To Poplar Bluff, this July day,
 While the sky is a profusion of blooming cumulus
 And both sides of the highway, for eighty-five miles,
 Are Seurat-dotted with Queen Anne's lace,
 Tyrian cornflowers, goldenrod, and green trees,
 He tries to reconcile his reason for leaving home
 One last time, when he decided, weeks ago,
 To relinquish his territory, quit the road,
 Whose shoulders have borne his cargoes
 And the burden of his livelihood a hundred seasons.

No extrinsic motivation or gratuitous incentives,
 Such as identical compensation to assume supervisory duties,
 Could have coerced him to reverse his determination
 To retire. After all, fifty-odd years
 For Acme-Zenith Trouser, of St. Louis,
 Should be adequate dues paid,
 For admission into Beulahland or Delmar Gardens West,
 Qualify him for membership in the leisure class,
 Render freedom from commitments permissible,
 Despite his radically rigid fixed income
 And the fact that business has been his life's mistress.

Perhaps, in his fortnight-long hiatus,
 He's realized how terrifying silence can be,
 How necessarily pacifying are the tire whines
 And shock-absorbed descents and inclines,
 To the consummately roaming peddler.

Possibly, just staying in motion assuages the loneliness
 Being seated across from ghosts, at the dinner table,
 Sleeping with fugitive dreams, engenders.
 Maybe it's the unchecked compulsion to reach destinations,
 Compete with death for each breath taken,
 That keeps him breaking promises he keeps making.

7/7/87 (02323)

De prostatus profundus

Neither George F. Babbitt
 Nor his renegade friend, Paul Riesling,
 *

Rather a vague shade alternating between them,
He leaves sleep's penitentiary, which his empty dreams guard,
Middle aging's porch, where he spends entire evenings
Waiting for a visitation from Lady Liberty,
Then stretches his marmalade arms, confectioner's neck,
Rotates his secretarial buttocks and thighs,
To make certain they're yet connected to his spine,
By synaptic wires and pipes collapsing, daily,
From sheer thermodynamic attrition,
Then squeezes his throbbing, flaccid penis,
As he stumbles, trips, reaches the toilet,
Just in the nick, to piss all over the seat and rim.

Neither is he peach-fuzz Prufrock
Or wholly self-reliant Lazarillo de Tormes
But an anonymous anomaly
Not existing between the pages of any literary index,
Rather recreating the same paltry drama daily,
In which he portrays himself
As Everyman falling over the mythic abyss,
Through time's cinched glass,
To its bottom half, which oozes with primordial quicksand.
This unspecific morning is absolutely no different,
Except for a strange sense of premonition,
Emanating from an oracle or shooting star's electric force,
That's warning him to scrutinize for Trojan horses
Positioned beyond his portcullis, with engines idling high.

Why such a cautionary metaphor should have descended,
Enervated a psyche as long inured as his, to catastrophe,
Tragedy, emotional pain, and disillusionment,
Is without precedent or reasonable speculation.
Yet he deliberates which pressed dress shirt to wear,
The precise style of pant, shoe, necktie;
He even uses matching deodorant and cologne —
All as though he were preparing to accept a Nobel Prize
Or be Sunday's Heckle and Jeckle guest lecturer,
In the guise of Reverend Shegog or Rabbi Stein,
At Farmington's First Free Will Baptist Church.
Perhaps for the last time, he's recognized Satan's sign,
That burning sensation when his urine turns bloody
And he wonders whether it will ever stop running.

The American Dream

For Stuart Fabe

Like water succumbing to gravity's persuasion,
 The spirit, freeing itself of its shackles,
 Seeks equanimity and solace,
 By retreating to northern Ontario's backwoods,
 Where no lakes are arrived at
 Except in de Havilland Otters and Beavers,
 And loons, walleyes, and pikes
 Keep secret the mystique of this pristine wilderness
 Even while transmitting cryptic syllables,
 Breaching surfaces, like rainbows' prisms,
 To taunt fisherman kings with impossible ambitions.

A few who yet refuse to salute routine,
 Commit the future to nuclear apocalypse,
 By substituting numerical solutions for human truths,
 Still flee to Canada occasionally, as in the sixties,
 When, decrying the Vietnam War,
 They risked precious citizenship, for a fistful of beliefs
 In peaceful coexistence between nations.
 But today, maintaining private enterprise
 And self-reliance requires uninspiring sacrifices,
 Especially when one tries to compress
 An entire bygone way of life into a single week's vacation.

7/12/87 (06014)

Elegy for Two Fisher Men-Children

*For friend Stuart,
 from Louie,
 with love*

After our weeklong journey to Canada and back,
 I leave Cincinnati, driving alone,
 To the accompaniment of my own unspoken banter
 Between you and me.
 Wearing day's rain-gray badge of sadness,
 I rerun outrageous badinage we employed,
 That toe-tapping rataplan which made us
 Laughter's partners in crime, Peck's Bad Boys,
 *

Second-class Shakespeares

Acting out third-rate comedic hyperboles,
Absurdities, conceits, vaudevillian pratfalls,
Using fractured wordplay and gratuitous obscenities
Resurrected from eighth grade and yesterday's news,
To elicit bodacious applause from our audience of two.

The Mad Hatter thespians we were, too briefly,
Cakewalk across memory's dimming scrim curtain
Even now obscuring the mass of residual smiles
Which keep me from concentrating on highway hazards
Standing between my recently shared past,
At Ontario's remote Lake Esnagi Lodge,
And an even more immediate St. Louis future,
Where, tonight, I'll reunite with my children and wife
And, by tomorrow, will have resumed livelihood's disguise.
Yet, driving west, echoes of us heckling the Fates
While casting for Northern pike and walleye
Rise, like hooked phoenixes, from a lake of perpetual fire,
Reiterating our twice-an-hour, side-splitting sign-off:
“As Count Basie once said, ‘Mosley,
I think I’m gonna *leave ya, nowwww!*’”

7/16/87 — [1] (05471)

Retelling Jokes

Approaching home, like going away,
Is destiny's notion of a subtle joke,
Played on bereaved and nomad simultaneously —
That hiatus during which fate dictates
Various paradigms and shapes
Loneliness will take and which participant
Will break first, lamenting its mate's absence,
Attempt to reconcile the spatial isolation,
Diminish the distance to miles, minutes, sighs . . .
A *chiste* without any identifiable purpose,
Lest it be God's way of readying us
For that colossal reaving at death's behest,
When arriving and parting are setup
And punch line, all in one long breath,
And each recognizes the other as butt

*

While failing to see God's double entendre
 Also applies to him who is dying with laughter
 Without realizing the joke's on him, too.

7/16/87 — [2] (06015)

Leaving the Nest ^Δ

*For Troika,
 with deep love
 and pain*

For six tortured months
 (A nine-year-old's conception of forever),
 He has anticipated this moment of dread,
 Its irreversible climaxing,
 Its threatening denouement, his own letting-go.
 And now the primal bond snaps in our faces,
 We who've wound his propeller tight,
 For this first cross-country alone,
 Yet kept him hangared until now,
 When we've forced him out on the runway,
 For takeoff, on his solo flight to remote Minnesota.

Sister, mother, and dad
 Pace the airline's waiting area,
 Like hand-carved figures in an animated clock,
 While he sips on a bottle of cherry-flavored seltzer,
 Stares, abstractedly, at children he's never seen,
 Whose instant camaraderie, on recognizing each other,
 Moistens his eyes, with an even deeper glaze.
 We realize when gentle Mr. Boy
 Passes through the jetway, boards, departs,
 Transcendence of a tender time will have commenced.
 Juvenescence, necessarily, will have flown the nest.

7/22/87 — [1] (00975)

[The desire to write verse at all times of the soul's dark night] ^Δ

The desire to write verse at all times of the soul's dark night
 Yet ignites the brain's magazines. To light up the sky,
 *

Five hundred years wide, with rhythmic soliloquies
 My tireless spirit recites without cessation
 Is my sole reason for breathing. To filigree the welkin,
 With eloquently arcing shooting stars,
 And see them reach earth intact,
 Their rainbow rooster tails forming intaglio designs
 Around the seamless rim of the world's urn,
 Is my life's chief purpose. Why, otherwise,
 Would I, with my visionary talents,
 Spend such laborious energies
 Compiling poetical gazetteers and charts,
 When I know even the most meager livelihood
 Is an unlikely culmination of my meek efforts?
 To discover truth, no matter how tentative
 Or disillusioning, is the absurdly noble excuse
 Humans like me use, who hope to isolate new novas
 And own them, by loaning them our own names.
 When I parse the heavens, even at noon,
 My eyes can scan each planet, moon, and constellation,
 Measure for measure, foot, caesura, and enjambment,
 And read the skies, with pleasure recognition provides.
 Like wind chimes or tiny blown-glass bells
 Gently stroked by slow cosmic breezes,
 My poems illumine the vast atmosphere haloing my universe.

7/22–23/87 — [2] on 7/22 & [1] on 7/23 (02671)

Potential Friendships ^Δ

For my boy, Troika

It's not so much that our boy is out of reach
 As that he's in the monthlong keeping of others
 Not exactly strange to us
 (Since we've been guaranteed, repeatedly,
 That the boys' camp is "one big family")
 But, except for the directors, requiring blind faith.
 And knowing no one (among the counselors)
 By name, face, reputation, we feel consternation,
 Vicarious insecurity, complete helplessness,
 An unmeasurable quantity of anxiety,

*

Contemplating our child being away from home,
On his own, for the first time.

Suddenly, I remember, too passionately,
That forlorn emptiness which numbed my senses,
With self-importance, before he was born,
Then diminished as I grew with him.
Though he's been away less than one full day,
I weep, with fear that, for reasons yet unclear,
He may have disappeared already,
Without us becoming each other's best friend.

7/23/87 — [2] (00976)

Cancer Victim ^Δ

*For Eric,
with sadness*

For years, he'd experienced a dreary fear
That lurking in curbs and gutters
Outside work, or nearer his home in the suburbs,
Were microbes, ominously oozing in turbid pools,
Voracious spores, multiplying invisibly,
Waiting for unsuspecting humans to infect,
Possess, decimate. Around the clock,
These paranoid visions paralyzed him,
Made his knees especially weak.
His lungs functioned at half capacity,
Breathing the battle-siege cordite and mustard gas
His sixty cigarettes emitted, each day.
Even his synapses began to translate thought-waves
At speeds that rendered memory irretrievable.

Suddenly, last Wednesday, all anxieties ceased.
He sensed tranquillity descending from the sky,
Rising from familiar streets. He intuited peace,
Like a wide, tideless ocean,
Filling the reservoirs and craters of his imagination,
With dazzling fishes and swimming birds,
Brocaded and iridescently laced butterflies.
And immediately, he realized why
Such an extreme metamorphosis was occurring:
*

Pain, radiating from his left lung,
Through two scalding ribs, myriad lymph nodes,
Had grown so excruciating, only numbness
Could contain his outrage upon hearing his fears metastasizing,
Gnawing him alive, from inside.

7/25/87 (06016)

A Stickler for Details

Crushed wax cups and cigarette butts
Clutter the gutter into which I stare,
As I wait for the stoplight to recognize my impatience,
Acknowledge the peripatetic nature of my mission.
Suddenly, my eyes alchemize this littered detritus
Into transmogrified bodies floating on the Tiber's surface,
Pyrite nuggets dug from a Klondike shaft,
Fire ants crawling up my legs,
Biting my thighs and tight, sweaty testicles.
Erratically, I stab the gas pedal, with my toe,
Jamming it like a key-log in an axman's flow,
Accelerate into the barbarous traffic,
Expecting, any second, to be rammed from the back,
Head-on or broadside, decapitated or catastrophically maimed.

Blaring car horns shake my imagination, by the neck.
Translating ten languages, in seconds,
I edge forward, through the uncongested intersection,
Assuming the first plausible direction
Dead reckoning suggests, in countermanding forgetfulness.
Whether en route to a scheduled meeting
With a customer or C.P.A., lunch with a lady,
Somehow seems secondary to the basic dilemma:
Lately, I've caught myself changing things,
Metaphorizing, transforming, rearranging reality,
To satisfy my escape mechanism.
Perhaps its just the poet's feeble way
Of getting his house in order,
Sweeping the details back out from under the rug,
Creating a living trust for children he'll never know.

7/27/87 (06017)

Thisbe and Pyramus

Days flicker past,
Undifferentiated as reflecting pieces of glass
Glued to the core of a spinning praxinoscope.
Events come to him in stutter-step sequences
Without endings and starts
Or as disparate images dimly superimposed,
Whose singular impression approximates his profile
Whenever blinking stops the process
Long enough for him to freeze-frame memory,
Recognize once-familiar facial features
Which characterized his celebrated existence.

Just when he entered that tenebrous woods,
Emerged again, under a lunar eclipse,
Purged of recollection, purposeless as an amnesic hermit,
Neither beleaguers nor disturbs his sense of history.
Surely it's been years or months or hours
Since last he heard from his stillborn children
And beautiful, melancholic widow
Or even cried when staring at strangers,
Overhearing stray conversations reminding him of that time
When he and she eloped, married in Sutro Park,
Floated a rainbow halo over the whole ocean.

So much hope squandered, passion evaporated,
In their spirits' accidental lapsing!
Who could have predicted each
Would predecease the other simultaneously
Or that their individual living trusts,
Bequeathing their hearts to each other irrevocably,
Would have come asunder so easily,
After five and seventeen years?
Now, the sun illuminates no traces of their passage,
And his blurry days chase themselves like Keatsian lovers
Wearing away an urn turning in space.

7/30/87 (04117)

The First Day of Harvesting

Going south, out of St. Louis,
This sweltering, interminable first day of August,
*

He echoes Martin Luther King's words:
"Free at last! Free at last!"
Although he misappropriates this joyous emotion,
Applies it to his own inner-directed motives,
His soul also knows the quintessential tranquillity
That embraced and overwhelmed the black reverend
As he stood gazing out from his personal Mount Sinai,
Mouthing visions to the spell-held mixed crowd
That witnessed his ascendance into our collective memory.

After all, this ultimate break from routine
Marks the initiation of an escape
He's executed, countless half-sleeps,
These last nineteen years, always believing
That, one day, he'd be able to extricate his spirit,
Souled into the Yankee Protestant ethos of work,
From the innocuous occupation of accumulating wealth
Merely to guarantee early retirement
Or late arrival at death's Best Western ossuaries.
Appropriating, in good faith, a poetic cliché,
He realizes today is the first day of the rest of his life,

But his ebullient intuition belies his destination.
That he will fulfill his destiny's mandate to write
Remains uncontestable. He'll fix, permanently,
Fictions and verse he's been listening to for decades,
Visible, inaudible articulations, give voice to images
Eclipsed in shadows. *When* and *why* answer to *now*;
How is equally certain. Only success is questionable.
At forty-six, he can't afford any more delays.
Starting today, he must record each measure,
Every detail, cadence, inflection, hue, and musical nuance,
As though each completed poem were the singular determinant
Upon which his being awarded the Nobel Prize depended.

8/1/87 (06018)

[Back in Oxford, after a year's absence,][†]

Back in Oxford, after a year's absence,
Professors and their acolytes,
Professional student-pilgrims who follow the lecture circuit
As though tracing sacred routes to the Wailing Wall

8/2/87 — [1] (01484)

[This Oxford, Mississippi, August a.m.,] ^Δ

This Oxford, Mississippi, August a.m.,
 It's too humid, even at six, at dawn,
 To jog steamy streets, breathe comfortably.
 Steadfastly, I fix on magnolias, oaks, cedar trees,
 To keep from lapsing, collapsing from dizziness.

Out of self-preservation, I seek the shade of Bailey's Woods,
 But it's so close, in this seething atmosphere,
 I can almost hear drops from God's clepsydra
 Dripping down myriad invisible flume-chutes.
 I listen for moccasins slithering off the thick leaves.

There's just no room for humans, between the molecules.
 Suddenly, my eyes focus on Rowan Oak,
 Looming like a lone, colossal magnolia blossom
 Long gone past perfection, into drooping putrescence.
 I refuse to savor its overripe fragrance,

Choose, instead, to wait for the right moment
 To slip, unnoticed, through the wide net
 Woven of sunrays and shadows,
 Back to that Eden where breathing and dreams
 Are Keatsian lovers forever rediscovering each other.

8/2 — [2] & 8/6/87 (03588)

Listening to a Lecture on Craft ^Δ

No two of us in this too-fluorescently-lit ballroom
 Wear time's simultaneous insistence on our wrists.
 Each catches and reprojects,
 Off a plastic-crystalled prism, certain impertinences —
 Compulsive and revisionary repetitions —
 Spoken, by souls too distracted from life,
 Toward those passing just beyond glass,
 Through Mississippi's August firestorm.

I sit assimilating literary criticism
 Contrived by scholars Faulkner nicknamed
 "Academical gumshoes,"

*

Trying to transcend, by yawning, stretching, daydreaming,
 The unrelievedly hermetic disquisitions,
 Dissociate myself from abstract systems, fabrics stitched
 By intellects too solipsistic to compose readable prose,
 Coax verses into blue strokes, on white notebook sheets.

Dazed, I lapse into suppressed rage,
 Compulsively keep glancing at the slender hands
 Advancing, implacably, around my watch face,
 As though, somehow, I might escape its insistence on history,
 By arresting, fixing, staying it with visionary images
 Dimming, swimming within my murky river.
 But like Quentin weighted down with six-pound sadirons,
 I slip beneath those argumentative current and drown.

8/7/87 — [1] (03590)

Jason's Plaint ^Δ

“Once a bitch, always a bitch!” I say
 About days like this one,
 Hotter than blazes, even for Jefferson.
 Jesus! When sweat starts beading up on your face
 Heavier than a lathered racehorse,
 And not so much as moving in your seat,
 Reaching for a chaw of tobacco,
 Something’s all out of whack!
 Believe it or not, it’s those Memphis kikes,
 Doin’ their insider trades,
 Leveraging the entire commodities market,
 From New Orleans to Wall Street.
 I still ain’t exactly figured out
 How they create these outrageous droughts,
 But sure as hell, I tell you,
 Those wealthy Jews can maneuver and manipulate anything,
 Including tides, the moon, octoroons, and mulattoes.

But I ain’t so stupid as folks around here
 Got me pegged. I’m gonna stick a chunk
 Of Quentin’s money, in the little trunk upstairs,
 Into next-July beans and -August cotton,
 *

Then make a killing — “Nothin’ ventured,
 Nothin’ gained!” I always say. Hey,
 Wait just one goddamn moment!
 What’s goin’ on here? Where’s *my* savings?
 Damn that bitch! She’s pried it open,
 Taken the whole shittin’ stash of Caddy’s cash!
 I’ll fix her ass but real good!
 Just let me catch that little slatternly wench!
 “Quentin!” I scream down the hall. “Quentin!”
 My words are land mines, inside my head,
 I detonate every time my tongue articulates
 That sleazy bitch’s name. “Quentin!” I wince
 Until my eyes fill with tears, from the sheer pain.

I’ll find her ass if I have to drive five counties!
 She ain’t gonna make a fool of Jason Compson,
 The one remaining sane human being
 In a whole nest of rotten eggs. No, sirree!
 I’ll fix her a lickin’ like she’s never had,
 So bad she’ll wish my sister, that whore,
 Never did born her into this family!
 Hey, wait! What’s with this tire?
 It’s flat! Why, that scurrilous bastard!
 Well, like I say, “Easy come, easy go!”
 I got to take me a passel of aspirins quick,
 Before my forehead explodes. Goddamn everything —
 This family, this drought, this stinking South!
 Why’d I have to inherit such foul luck?
 Fuck fate, women, Memphis Jew-bait!
 I hate it, hate it! Then again,
 I reckon I coulda been Quentin or Benjamin.

8/7/87 — [2] (03591)

Émigrés ^Δ

Seated out back, alone, serene, entranced,
 As if the chant of myriad invisible cicadas
 Were a spell cast over me by a medieval artificer,
 I lapse into a dimly accessible past
 Peopled with gentle, blond-haired Jan,
 *

My blithe and unpretentious wife,
Our two children, Trilogy and Troika, and me,
Pretender to the poet's throne,
Whose handlebar mustache and Afro hair
Were this town's only distinguishing features.

It's been weeks since I've been back.
Having moved to the city
Has created major disillusionments for my psyche.
We've existed in volition's limbo — pariahs
Relocating daily, like workers following a circus
Or groupies chasing a rock band.
Our caravan is a traveling sideshow,
A four-person Diaspora with proper address
But no sense of place, a rootless coexistence
With neighbors devoid of names and faces
(We haven't yet introduced ourselves to the curious).

Sitting out here, on the patio,
Slouching into twilight, like a drunken hobo
Meandering along a railroad track,
I listen to crickets, birds, squirrels chittering.
Their innocent busyness beguiles me,
Sings my own memories awake. I shiver,
As the orange-and-lavender sunset funnels westerly,
Recalling how, at their births, we brought both children
Deep into this country, to save them from history,
Hoping to arrest their growth, let them focus
On things and people going in slow motion.

Tonight, I wonder how our resolve dissolved,
Why we submitted so indefensibly,
Knowing we'd found a provisional home
Here in Farmington, Missouri.
This evening, alone outdoors, I grieve.
We are victims of our own self-determination.
Exposing our offspring to better education
Has meant leaving here, sacrificing solitude
And the tranquillity of this secure and quiet environment,
For the furious rataplan of city life —
Defectors, exiles, dispossessed, in between connections.

Dying for the Cause: The Ultimate Sacrifice

His rites of flight defy categorizing,
If not predictability. He flees the city
At every opportunity, regardless the season
Or ostensible excuse and circumstance.
His is an extravagant dance on concrete stages;
A spider's tightwire Lipizzaner prance
Across Stygian and polar abysses,
Through valleys oozing with radioactive fluids,
Past fields — cotton, milo, soybean, corn —
Saturated with viscous, dripping pesticides;
An astronaut's spacewalk through a galaxy
Whose nightmarish constellations and moons
Threaten to obliterate his tiny mass,
By breathing him into their gravitational embrace,
Every few man-calibrated eon-seconds.

This shadow-dappled August dawn,
He escapes through an invisible fissure in the dream,
Enters that zone where, alone and unknown,
He can immerse himself in reverse time,
Return to a future not yet conceived,
In which he formerly spun his meager weave,
Flew sorties against unidentified enemies,
Did his Darktown Strutters' rug-cut,
Somersaulted from the top of one klieg light to another,
Floating in sleep's ether vaults.
Heading ever westerly, without resting
Or taking in nourishment, he guesses his direction,
Like Phoenicians letting Zephyrus
Nudge them across never-before-explored oceans and seas,
Casting their own living ashes to the winds.

Intuitively, he guesses he's reached his destination.
His imagination has exhausted its fuel.
It chokes on dopamine vapors,
Stutters across dissipated synapses,
Lapses into sweet, silent forgetting,
As he feels himself coming detached
From the core-source of the earth's life-force.
Night and day fuse into a hazy twilight
From which his visionless eyes gaze.

*

Gray-white steam rising from ice-capped peaks
 And groaning volcanoes embalms him.
 Slowly, he submits to the hot and cold mist
 Wrapping him in mummy gauze. Dying reminds him
 He's sacrificed himself, again, for the cause.

8/19/87 (00881)

A Ghetto-Mentality Setback, for Willy^Δ

This fifty-eight-degree September 3,
 He experiences neither the urgency
 Nor desperate boredom
 That usually accompanies him, in the right front seat,
 Whenever he leaves the city, on business,
 Heading for the hinters and boonies
 He fondly refers to, with mild sardonicism,
 As the "Remoter Regions of Terra Incognita."

Whether a quality in the air's cool clarity
 Or fluid smoothness in his bowels and circulatory tubing
 Contributes to his equanimity,
 This just-dawning Thursday,
 He can't know for certain. Doubtless, however,
 Last evening's dreaming (crowded with ladies
 Whose faces and names live, vividly, in his memories
 Of myriad shared nights in sleazy bars,
 Motel beds, rented apartments, and mobile homes
 Throughout Missouri's Laputas and Lesser Antilles)
 Has engendered this euphoria that buoys him
 As he enters the Lead Belt,
 Hellbent to hawk wool- and cotton-blend garments
 To natives used to wearing blue jeans and overalls.

Although he already canvassed this territory once,
 Two months ago, he's from the old school,
 Unwilling to admit defeat or accept rebuff gracefully,
 Must turn his Hebraic cheek
 As though exposing orchids and roses to cold breezes,
 And go for broke, risk humiliation
 From the same old foes, go down, if he must,
 Hoping not to break a toe

*

On the foot he's shoved into Herod's slamming door
Or, worse yet, unfasten the portal
Against Pharaoh's colossal maledictions and main strength,
With mere mention of tempting closeouts so low-priced,
Even worshipers of Baal, eaters of goat and hippo,
Couldn't, in bad conscience, refuse to look.

He speeds past Bonne Terre, Flat River,
Turns onto 32, into Farmington,
Stops for coffee at the Capital Café, on the square,
And waits for Rozier's to open its doors.
He knows the regulars regard him as an interloper
Come to extract money from their citizenry,
Not as a Marco Polo bringing exotic dyes
And weaves from Tyre and Constantinople.
His name, hardly fabled or legendary,
Is equivalent to any plague they fearfully curse —
Willy Sypher, of Acme-Zenith, St. Louis,
Jew-boy, hooknosed kike, usurer,
Who only pretends to sell sportscoats, pants, suits,
Is, in reality, a commie spy and drug dealer for the Miami Mafia.

Through crazy, gold-leaf hieroglyphics
Stenciled across the plate glass,
He watches the clock, careful to avert his face
Whenever the thespians at center-stage table
Waft a snide or caustic cynicism his way.
He leaves his counted-out change by his saucer,
Then bolts like a startled antelope.
Within minutes, he's reparked his car,
Unloaded swatch cases and sample garments
To use in his presentation. Adrenaline peaking,
He seeks refuge, momentarily, in wayward glances
Up and down East Columbia Street,
Then proceeds. A baleful silence greets him;
Both clerks fail to acknowledge his presence.

"Where's Mr. Dalrymple?" Willy hesitantly inquires.
"He no longer manages this store,"
They intone in simultaneous strophe and antistrophe.
Willy goes faint, wipes sweat from his brows,
Sets his trappings atop a Butterick pattern cabinet.
"Who's the new person in charge,
*

The menswear merchandise buyer?"
 "We haven't been assigned a new one yet,"
 They repeat like a Greek chorus.
 Somewhere in his mind's recesses,
 Voices repeat a vague, forgotten refrain:
"Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu,
Adonai Echod," and he realizes he'll survive
 This unexpected setback.

Dejected, he lugs his gear back,
 Reloads, grabs the scrap attached under the wiper,
 And reads, in slow staccato, the grotesque syllables,
 Scribbled in red grease pencil: "Go Home,
 Jewbait — Keep Your Big Kike Nose
 Out Of Our Business — Smell The Roses
 Growing In Your Own ASSHOLE!

Signed, The Ghost Of Dalrymple."
 Meandering up 67, toward 55,
 Willy can't stop second-guessing fate,
 Wondering why destiny has just betrayed him,
 With such blatant disregard for past performance,
 Friendships nurtured over seasons, decades,
 Or what occurred to stir up hatred on this scale

And who could have perpetrated the deed,
 Sown such tyrannous contemptuousness,
 Calculated to drive, from their sight,
 His pestilential threat. He weeps uncontrollably,
 Nearly veers off the road, time and again,
 Before arriving at his apartment, at the corner
 Where DeBaliviere intersects Waterman,
 Bordering the outer edges of the black ghetto.
 Gone are all his morning's joyous fantasies —
 Acme-Zenith's premier pantsman.
 He's left with a gut cut to shreds,
 Nausea invading his brain, through the stomach,
 And an awful, excruciating pain across the eyes,
 Which blinds him, in his dim hallway.

Cowering beneath soiled sheets,
 He witnesses night tattoo his bedroom walls
 With brusque and rude Nazi insignia —
 Paranoia's crazy mosaics inlaid in vaults
*

Containing incubating vipers' eggs —
And he knows, now, sleep's hatching dreams
Will render no peaceful dawn,
Rather the rising specter of some terrible dread.

9/3 & 9/26/87 (02322)

Dawn's First Yawn

For reasons beyond conceiving's narrow scope,
He can't describe why, so predictably, awakening,
Like a highwayman disguised in night's cloak,
Takes him by surprise, each a.m.,
Waylays his journey to the Dream Dome,
Just beneath Shade Valley's opalescent rim,
Reached by Dante's labyrinthine road,
Where deep sleep keeps eternal vigil,

Or exactly what purpose his task serves,
If he's been cursed to perpetuate absurd exercises
That promise no release, only suicide,
Whose colossal impossibility he's decried, for years,
Defying death to destabilize his spirit,
Bring Sisyphus's abyss to him. Each dawn, he rises,
He stretches, he dies and is buried alive,
Inside the first inspired breath that revives him to life.

9/9/87 (00880)

The Oyster Bar Below Grand Central Terminal[†]

We meet below street level,
Beneath Grand Central Terminal, in the Oyster Bar,
Not to eat fresh fish
Or drink whiskey neat, sip Chablis,
But to press the issue of our illicit needs.

Yet even as we engage in

9/14/87 (06136)

The Melting Pot's Insoluble Trace

Walking these streets, I'm reminded, too caustically,
What being debris in a cyclone is like,
Just how loud clock cogs clatter
Behind the systematic unwind
Taut-wound, tempered-steel springs engender
Inside Quentin's dismembered pocket watch.

Carbon monoxide spewing from taxis, trucks, buses
Tastes identical to unchewed food
Refusing to stay consumed, surging, crazily,
Through the contracting esophageal tube, into my mouth.
These acrid blasts render breathing so erratic,
I race to a vacant bench, to suppress retching,
Even as the space separating the Plaza from Fifth Avenue
Twists vision sideways, then upside down,

Until I am this city's indigents, ne'er-do-wells,
Its sadly tatterdemalion dispossessed and misbegotten,
Standing, crouching, slumped, empty- or mucus-eyed,
Outside Grand Central Station,
Waiting for the bread-line van to arrive,
Dispense its smells to my two hundred salivating selves.

I drool into my tin cup, fart sewer gas,
Scratch my cracked knuckles bloody,
On the javelin barbs of my bristly whiskers,
Trying to remember whose child I once was,
What mother suckled me, at exactly what moment
I had to be slapped across the seat of my soul,
To get the apparatus started. Who owns me, just now?
Even loneliness won't claim me as its orphan.

9/15/87 — [1] (00879)

Lost and Found, in a Crowd

The piano player, in his black bow tie,
Starched-white dress shirt
Stretching, like an overinflated balloon,
The breadth of his tumescent belly,
*

Patent-leather shoes
Tapping pedals below his feet,
As though pumping organ bellows,
Might, from where I scribble tentative strokes,
Fixing his floating image, on an invisible canvas,

As easily be a Lautrec profile
Rendered in silhouette,
For all the essentialness his lyric notes
Impress on this mixture of chittering tongues.
Ostrichlike, he lifts his head, twists,
Focuses me, in his peripheral vision.
I sense we're the only audience
Either of us needs, to feel appreciated
For making music from absolute cacophony.

9/15/87 — [2] (02014)

[Three days in New York City][†]

Three days in New York City

9/16/87 — [1] (09572)

Fear of Flying

Obedient to my checklist mentality,
I arrive, at LaGuardia Airport,
With more than four hours to spare.
A carefree spirit amidst hurried persons
Mazing down corridors, toward orifices,
Like dust being sucked into a vacuum cleaner,
I flaunt my freedom, at first,
Floating in slow motion, like a grazing cow,
Gazing, aimlessly, into shops
Clotted with souvenirs from Boredom and Ennui.
By degrees, I realize
This bleak way station was never intended
To accommodate those marking time
Or dispense amenities to the weary of bone.
Its cafeteria is one of the only places to be seated,
Provided one pays for the privilege.

To placate territorial decorum,
 I buy coffee and a roll, select a table,
 Situate my possessions, like a hobo
 Bedding down by railroad tracks in Limbo,
 Instead of a chronically anxious traveler
 Stalling until his flight is called.
 But even this uninviting respite
 Merely nourishes the doubt I've encouraged
 By always allowing myself too much leeway
 Before boarding one breath
 And after deplaning its winged exhalation,
 While en route from foreign origins,
 Through intermediary dream-layovers,
 To inestimable destinations.
 I just never know whether death
 Will be waiting at the next gate, to take me home.

9/16–17/87 — [2] on 9/16 (02003)

AIDS Patient

These dislocated days,
 He's a man without a country home,
 A nomad groping, wide-eyed, through Limbo,
 Who wears no clothing;
 Even remote feelings show on his invisible sleeves,
 And his soul is an open *Doom's-Day Book*,
 Exposing his heart's fleshly lexicon
 To the most accidental intellects.

Daily, he traverses entire Sinais, on his knees,
 Presses toward uncharted reference points.
 Sliding through human interstices, repudiating his origins,
 Like ultraviolet rays escaping a cracked vacuum,
 He slips into the orbiting source of all hallucinations,
 Where chimeras and night mares
 Breed winged dreams, on which he can overleap the sky,
 Emerge, victorious, from sleep's steeplechase.

Yet each rude awakening
 Makes his nakedness all the more blatant
 To spirits grazing, aimlessly, in opiate fields he roams.
 *

Though, for years, he's been unable to correct the veer
 His drifting spirit has memorized, here in the city,
 Lately even invisibility refuses to hide his pallor,
 Disguise his dematerializing shape.
 Maybe today, he'll take possession of his new home.

9/23/87 (00878)

The Poet Paints Cancer's Landscape

Words are the pigments I mix, to fix my figments.
 This crisp, autumnal northern-Illinois morning
 Is my gouache, awash with billowing, silken bridges,
 Argenteous Chinese fans connected to shimmering insects
 Lifting and diving, on invisible breeze-strands,
 Like confetti drifting in unpredictable spirals.
 My placid eyes register their quiet designs,
 With reverence generally reserved for Magi and poets,
 Not spiders, gnats, ladybugs, and aphids.

Yet, with some majestic intent beyond vision,
 Invention requires minute, otherwise insignificant things
 To isolate, outdoors, satisfy its inward anxieties.
 Perhaps by imposing, on their apparent obliviousness
 To winter's emergence, my own urgency
 And by imagining, in their diverse random workings,
 An ordained organizing principle and purpose similar to mine,
 I might also at least reconcile, if not justify,
 Why I'm dying without a reasonable fight, only rhymes.

9/25/87 (06019)

[Once again, the road poet leaves, at home,] [†]

Once again, the road poet leaves, at home,
 His quotidian soul, quarrelsome rhetoric,
 Involted syntax, seeking strophes
 So smooth and softly fluid,
 His syllables will fill rainbows with

9/29/87 (06020)

Time on His Hands ^Δ

These days, he breathes less easily,
Despite being relieved of every former responsibility
Except one: he remains accountable for his freedom,
Which, before his voluntary retirement from life,
Seemed to keep itself reasonably well budgeted,
In check with strenuous work schedules
He imposed upon his perfectionistic self, with religious zeal,
So that personal liberty was recessive,
While ambitiousness dominated his visions of success.

These days, he pursues reflections of fugitive cars,
In plate-glass hardware, grocery, and bar fronts
Facing Columbia and Liberty streets,
Loses count of circumnavigations he makes,
Pacing around the gray granite courthouse,
Pretending to be an unintimidated English sea dog
Besting treacherous shoals off Capes Horn,
Hatteras, and of Good Hope and Tenerife, Patagonia,
Names each variegated pigeon, by its peculiar hue.

These days, he pours free time
From a magician's bottomless Chinese teapot,
By manipulating his finger over its minuscule hole,
To regulate flow. For all his indeterminateness, he knows
Those, in town, who've witnessed his downfall
See him as just another "nigger" or "nettlesome Jew,"
Not as a former well-to-do businessman,
Church deacon, chamber of commerce and Mason member,
Hail-fellow well met Capital Café regular.

These days, when dawn and dusk
Are two hotel guests stuck in a revolving door
While he waits outside, evenings, trying to gain entrance,
Eager, of a morning, to escape sleep's corridors,
Freedom he once considered his best friend,
For its deference to his polite but insistent standoffishness,
Has become his archnemesis. Seated on a bench,
Elbows on knees, he leans, suicidally, toward the street,
Freely breathing in exhaust, lost in ostrich-reveries.

Socrates, Granny Carver, and Me

*For "Ladd,"
George Carleton Ladd;
ever will I be in awe.*

This old man (who, in my youth,
Taught me all the jokes, anecdotes, and mythic tricks
He'd learned in his one-room school
And from his own closest cronies,
Those town clowns who'd gather around the courthouse,
In the barbershop and corner saloon)
Now no longer tells tall tales, with his Homelite,
Or mows, prunes, dreams Rococo designs, in his sleep,
For the Brodsky estate.
Still, at eighty-seven,
He chastises me for proffering a hand,
Takes each stair, leading to the restaurant,
As though it were a rung of heaven's ladder
He must navigate on his own,
While I hesitate, hang back, anticipating a miscue
That fails to materialize. Once inside,
We make short order of the menu.
I get set for a spell of perorations and homilies,
Knowing, as he does, that this tête-à-tête
Could be the last tapping of wellsprings,
His farewell and preamble addresses
Capping a thirty-year relationship
Between *magister* and enthusiastic pupil.
He begins on invisible cue,
Reiterates details of his career,
From farmer's son through elementary teacher,
Penitentiary guard, Sunday-school preacher,
Migrant laborer in eight states,
Professional gardener.
He reminds me how he was a victim of influenza
And diphtheria, in youth,
A scraggly kid, a "puny" weakling.

"Just remember ol' Granny Carver's motto:
'Can't never tell!' And don't you see,
Here I am, both legs crushed in a car wreck,
At eighty-four, pronounced dead,

*

Stayed in a coma, for eight weeks,
Said if, by accident, I *did* wake,
I'd be a vegetable, all my life.
Something there is that designs this,
Deems it so. Things don't just happen
Of their own volition,
But, rather, it's all according to His wishes.
Just don't ever forget
My two admonitions to you, bub:
Never lose touch with the common folks
And keep your mind open
To the tendency of your heart to close down,
Way up there, in your ivied tower.
Old Ladd knows, Professor Brodsky!"
I sit listening, nibbling my salad Niçoise
(He picks, with distracted indifference, at his fish),
As if yesterday and tomorrow
Exist, now and forever, inside this time capsule
We two form, in this blessed hiatus
We've managed to wrest from history and fix,
For all the days of our everlasting lives.

10/6/87 (02275)

Causes for Celebration

Often, I've caught my thoughts
Groping, on hands and knees,
For even the scantiest answer to why, in fall,
Trees lose a grip on their senses,
Let their tender leaves get at loose ends,
Protest the season's cruelties
Oxymoronically,
By donning Joseph-coats
To disguise their naked dissociations.

Randomly, I handpick specimens from twigs —
Crucified victims —
Hoping my eyes might arrest minute clues
As to the source of the vital force
Which, now oozing into dormancy,
Recently choreographed their juices' recital,
*

Or my mind, if unable to intuit reasons,
Speculate on how these aberrations
In the earth's personality come about.

Of various shapes and hues,
These shades refuse to be translated
Into free meters and flowing cadences.
Despite tropes I choose,
To equate them with explainable phenomena,
No poetry discloses itself, today.
They are as they appear: finished lives
Reminding me, indisputably,
Just being here is, as miracles go, momentous.

10/13/87 (02004)

[Our seasons parallel each other;][†]

Our seasons parallel each other;
Fall and I, almost coevals

All the universe my microcosmic

10/14/87 — [1] (02755)

Dragonfly^Δ

This warm October afternoon
Is intricately aswarm with moths and bees.
Occasionally, butterflies float by,
Like hand-painted sampans
Triangulating twilit seas,
While beetles I've never seen
Crisscross my mystic vision, disappear.

Spiders, stringing Golden Gate cables
Between gingerbread spindles,
Elderberry bugs, migrating, frenziedly,
Across clapboards, drainpipes, and cornices,
Mud daubers and hornets,
Trespassing at the eaves, also arrest focus.
I no longer recognize my own design.

In a series of myriad sweeping swoops,
 I'm lost in the universal haze
 Autumn tosses over all blind creatures
 Cycling between Earth and rebirth.
 Suddenly, I find myself immersed
 In the reckless swirl of insect ecstasy,
 Mindlessly tiny, timelessly divine.

10/14/87 — [2] (02002)

[As I sit amidst these fourth graders —]^Δ

As I sit amidst these fourth graders —
 Seven blacks, ten whites,
 And a solitary Hispanic —
 The little boy I can't remember being, once,
 So many vague decades ago,
 Surfaces. I sense his eyes
 Gazing around the classroom, in vast amazement,
 Feel his surprise, finding himself there, then,
 Here, this moment, both times simultaneous,
 As though he's still inside me.
 And I know, right now,
 He and I never parted company at all.

10/15/87 (00977)

The Circus Moves to Winter Quarters

These spectral days, this spectacled October,
 Are gaily garmented circus stars
 Weaving among the big tent's three rings,
 In the grand finale we watch from the seats of our car,
 As we travel cross-country, following nature's big top.

Dappled trees are lion tamers, trapeze acrobats,
 Lipizzaner trainers, and pantaloons,
 Who dazzle us with their daring entertainments.
 Everywhere, shapes of cat, equine,
 Canine, bear, and buffoon leaping through the air

Arrest our attention, claim our hearts' applause.
 Who would ever guess these blurs,

*

Purring, neighing, barking, growling, laughing, and groaning
 Through moments of hilarity and dismay,
 Just days ago were unseen green leaves?

One more week or two, at the outside,
 The vans, campers, trailers
 Transporting animals, people, and their paraphernalia
 Will have lost their newly hand-painted hues,
 Gone around November's bend, out of view,

And we'll search December's tentless desolations,
 For traces of paws, hoofs, oversized-shoe prints
 One of the clowns just might have swept, intact,
 Under the ground cover of decomposing leaves
 That haven't, at this point, even begun to fall.

10/20/87 (06021)

[Why is it so seemingly impossible] [†]

Why is it so seemingly impossible
 To get at the blood-root,
 Spade it completely out, remove the weight
 All that weedy mass,
 Proliferating faster than crab grass,
 Imposes on the good-earth furrows of our lives?
 Our garden is rife with internal strife;
 You might even call it familial,
 For the disharmonious

10/27/87 (04115)

From Berlin, via Hiroshima, to Farmington [△]

He sits in the Capital Café, at 6 a.m.,
 Surveying regulars and strays
 Come to partake of coffee and conversation
 Ranging from the World Series
 To the latest information
 On the stability and volatility of stock exchanges
 In Sydney, Hong Kong, Tokyo, London,
 And Wall Street, where the word "panic"

*

Has been deleted from universal vocabularies.
(Anyone reported resorting to such epithets
Will be shot, on the spot marked X,
By posses deputized by Sheriff Ronnie.)

For years, he's been listening silently,
Assimilating conventional wisdom, aphorisms,
Logging, in his notebooks, their cynical vituperations
And humorous solutions
To cosmic conundrums, Sphinx-like enigmas
Surfacing with each flick of their viperine tongues.
In his self-appointed role as poet laureate
For this mid-Missouri town of nine thousand souls,
He's never considered himself an eavesdropper
Or voyeur but rather oral historian,
With a high-priority mission
To fix the lexical treasures of a disappearing tribe.

But lately, their toleration of his presence
(Always, he's seated in a booth by the window)
Has been waning. He's seen them whispering,
Casting furrowed foreheads and scrutinizing eyes
In his direction, felt vague Auschwitz shivers.
Recently, he's begun to doubt his neutral status
Amidst this closed, lower-class caste,
Which convenes, daily, across from the courthouse,
To decide myth, history, destiny, fate, and mores
For everyone within earshot's narrow radius.
In fact, this morning, their religious disquisition
Drifts toward him, like atomic fallout.

Uequivocally, they've concluded that Black Monday's
Stock-market debacle is Jew-manipulated
And that, by osmosis, he, being the nearest,
Not to mention the only, kike they know
Or, for that matter, have ever seen close up,
Is, by default and proxy, an immediate accessory,
A McCarthy-listed threat to their very existence.
Anxiously, he refuses Sue's newest coffee offering,
Instead inconspicuously signals for his check,
Then pays, exits the café, into sunshine,
Praying, somehow, the crisp October air
Will decontaminate his irradiated, ash-white psyche.

In Praise of Spontaneity

Like Alice and Lemuel,
This glorious, too-warm Monday morning
In early November,
I find my surroundings more incongruous
Than anachronous, distorted
Rather than disordered — a time warp
Fast-forwarded, in which my spirit,
Having elected to go in quest
Of destinations where it might hibernate,
Now must decide
Whether to expose my eyes to daylight
Or hide inside, waiting for the weather to change.

Such complex ratiocination
Only seems to take place
When nature momentarily loses its pace
Or humans forget to cooperate
With alterations in civilization's living laws.
At such junctures, I pause,
Take prolonged assessment,
And try to outguess potential checkmate.
After three weeks of temperatures in the thirties,
Today's 83 degrees
Compel me to celebrate my vulnerability,
Run, naked, into the sunset, come what may.

11/3/87 (06022)

[Sitting in the Capital Café, at 6 a.m.,] [†]

Sitting in the Capital Café, at 6 a.m.,
He envisions his waking spirit
Floating on an ocean, in an open boat
Emitting ripples, from bow and keel,
Undulating through an alembic resembling his fluid imagination —
A navigator attempting to connect all ports,
By stretching sunrays, moonbeams,
And slanting rain between unreachable shores.

11/4/87 — [1] (01073)

Surviving Another Fall ^Δ

Standing by, innocently,
This inordinately warm November morning,
Ankle-deep amidst shriveled leaves
Resembling molted locust husks
Or tiny, wizened hands grasping at my shoes,
I listen to whispering benedictions,
As each leaf drifts down,
Brushes against kindred spirits,
Touches ground, and comes to rest,
In a collective contritonal gesture
Reminiscent of Auschwitz stick figures
Crammed into human strip mines.

Stricken by a vague, untraceable terror,
My shivering bones refuse to move.
Paranoia betrays vision:
The yard is littered with swastikas,
Nazi graffiti that bloody my corneas.
Then each leaf is a Gestapo agent
Informing storm troopers of my Jewishness.
Suddenly, they become leaves again, just leaves.
Their carrion odor dissipates,
And for a moment, I *almost* believe
This is nature's climacteric, not another atrocity
Intended to defoliate a whole family tree.

11/4/87 — [2] (00087)

[Skirting the city, as I bound downriver,] [†]

Skirting the city, as I bound downriver,
My capacious imagination
Gropes for appropriate symbols and images
To extract from chaos, syllables to weave into patterns
Similar to spider webs cantilevered between sunbeams:

11/10/87 — [1] (01483)

Laying Transoceanic Cable

Car parts and electrical-harness factories,

D8 Cats

Carrying away, like shoplifters,

Entire mountainsides,

When God's back is turned,

Buffalo-nosed tractor-trailers

Leading eighteen screaming banshees,

And asymmetrical tract houses

(Today's Rococo-gardened chateaus,

Sprouting ever outward)

Form the newest strands

My eyes weave and wind onto a spool,

Fixed to a greased axle,

For imagination to feed out, mile after mile,

As I pass beneath the airy ocean.

Once all cables have been laid

And my fiber-optic system

Has achieved network acceptance,

I'll be able to communicate, worldwide,

The silence of my imaging existence.

11/10–11/87 — [2] on 11/10 & [1] on 11/11 (02001)

Willy on a Fishing Expedition, in Black Monday's Aftermath[△]

Driving home, Friday, from Farmington,

Via Flat River and River aux Vases,

Willy tries to wind in his line,

Which is snagged in bedrock

Below his Waterman condo apartment,

Where his forebears resided,

Whose simmering kosher-broth pots

Still fill his halls

With the reek of chicken necks

And matzo balls. His thoughts go taut,

As memory strains pain to breaking.

He's made this fishing trip so often,
Hands and feet guide his wagon
Without depending on his eyes' gyros
Or the senses' second-to-second compensations.
Yet, though not blinded
By mirages and Stygian light
Rising from highways he drives
Or frightened, passing through Philistia
(He's spent fifty years hawking shit
To nonbelievers), he's a bit apprehensive,
Knowing loneliness, his mistress, waits.

And he fidgets, varies speed, weaves,
Scans radio stations,
Whistling jagged fragments of themes
He can't begin to identify.
Ever since his wife, Leah, died,
Finishing a week's mission for Acme-Zenith
Throws him into cataleptic fits
That belie equanimity,
Betray his charm and self-esteem.
As he approaches St. Louis,
He slowly reels in his disillusioned spirit.

It dangles before his glassy eyes,
On the invisible tip of vision's rod,
Flipping in spasmodic contortions,
As if to escape fate's net.
Suddenly, Willy hears something snap.
Water splashes in his face,
And he awakens just in time
To miss getting hooked, in the eyelid,
By the unbaited, whiplashing lure
He cast, Monday morning,
With the optimistic bravado of a big-game fisher.

11/11/87 — [2] on 11/11 (02000)

Friday the Thirteenth

What the heck if sex has degenerated
Into a desert-isle exile,
*

Elba celibacy,
That a sporadic "Do you surrender?,"
Moaned across demilitarized zones
Our peacekeeping forces
Precariously police,
Constitutes communication,
Or that sleeping in the same bed,
Like cemeteried husband and wife,
Is the only intimacy we share?
Even ghosts show their dead
More affectionate respect.

What the heck if sex is a dead issue?
Maybe this entire decade
Has been a glitch in time's chip,
A witch's mystic brew,
Sucked, upside down, through a straw
Stripped from a broomstick
Ridden by a superstitious son-of-a-bitch,
A triskaidekaphobiac, me,
Worshiper of paradoxes and ironies,
Lesbian moons and eunuch suns,
Who also just happens to believe
Friday the thirteenth
Can completely improve a person's luck.

Maybe the ladder I straddle,
Trying to position it
Beneath heaven's trapdoor, will collapse,
And the jet-black cat
Crouching atop its highest rung
Will leap through my pupils' fiery hoops
And, in one clawing swoop,
Perform a Keseyan lobotomy on me,
Disconnect the retinas from their eyes,
Vasectomize my absent-minded testicles,
Then piss Agent Orange
In wounds festering like waste dumps
Laden with leaking dioxin drums.

[Until recently, he'd forgotten][†]

Until recently, he'd forgotten

Why is he such a pious, self-righteous writer,
Dogmatical

Obsession

These days, only the road controls his emotions;
Only she owns him

These days, only the roads I drive
Show me requisite affection.
They control my emotions,

Addiction Addictive personality

My thoughts infect their

My questions infect their own thought cells,
Curious to

11/17/87 — [1] (00072)

[In a curious spiral, he disappears,][‡]

In a curious spiral, he disappears,
Drops out of sight,
Beyond hearing range,
A lost cause his life's mission —
Dispossessed,
Breath bereft of inspiration,
All because his family has made him
Disillusionment's living proof
That truth is provisional,
Subject to change, at any time,
Without prior notice.

Failure to gain his family's appreciation
Is the tragedy that ravages his psyche.
Why perpetuate the myth
Happiness is attainable among

11/17/87 — [2] (06135)

Moving Downstream from Plymouth Rock

Desperately, I reach for the lurching gunwales,
Trying to keep afloat even as flooding time
Washes me downstream, like so much debris,
Away from this town, this slow cove,
Whose streets, sidewalks, ideals
My wife and I traversed, at a leisurely pace,
And where we raised two children,
Abdicated careers, celebrity, social graces,
For a place we could locate our dreams,
Awaken our identities,
Knowing they wouldn't change overnight
Or be sacrificed to anonymity.

We've been gone three years already,
And it seems, each successive week,
I return less and less frequently.
Just yesterday, I realized recognizing people
Has become a question-and-answer interview
Between a blind man and a machine.
Landmarks have disappeared or switched positions.
Courthouse, fire station, bank,
Post office, grocery store, cleaners, and factory
Are chess pieces from a match in progress,
Illusions in an artificer's repertoire —
A legerdemain terrain,

Through which I pass, on my hope-filled pilgrimage
Toward a newer Jerusalem.
Waylaid, this frigid November morning,
In this Peaceful Valley inhabited by passive spirits
Engaged in surviving outside forces,
Natural disasters, and acts of God,
*

I resolve never to lose touch completely,
 Cut all ties with my past, forget it was here,
 In Farmington, Missouri, I first planted crops,
 Watched them grow to harvest,
 Blessed their bounty, sixteen Thanksgiving seasons.
 Today, memories buoy me, in my flooding grief.

11/18/87 — [1] (04114)

The Undertakers^Δ

For Chief Loan Officer Lewis,
 Each a.m. begins the same way,
 At the Capital Café's regulars' table,
 Where he sops up buttermilk gravy,
 With homemade biscuits,
 Crosshatches scrambled eggs, with fork
 And knife clicking like knitting needles,
 Nibbles greasy sausage links
 He holds up to his lips, in his fingers,
 Like Eucharist wafers, and sips coffee,
 From a bottomless ironstone-china cup
 Sue, the kitchen magician's ubiquitous assistant,
 Tends to, with her wandlike brew pot.

Although cynicism mixed with sardonic wit,
 Homespun anecdotes, puns,
 Aphoristic wisdom, scatological argot,
 And intermittent guffaws — always the laughter —
 Are the tools these gravediggers use
 To bury each other six feet under,
 Bob Lewis seems a bit arthritic, this morning,
 Unable to wield the bullshit shovel,
 Heave his share of the dirt over his shoulder,
 Seems to be getting smacked in the face,
 With muddy clods, from all quarters,
 Sinking deeper and deeper in the widening mire,
 Almost thinking it's him they intend to inter.

“How many more days, Bob?” asks barber Wayne.

“Nine,” he replies with feigned reproach.

*

As if he's missed it, druggist Ron repeats,
 "How many days you got left at the bank?"
 "Nine," he intones with growing impatience.
 "I take it that includes Saturdays and Sundays,"
 Cecil, the realtor, impertinently asserts,
 Attempting to get Bob's goat.
 "That's nine *working days* until I retire,"
 He proclaims with stagy finality.
 "Almost two *full* weeks," he qualifies.
 "Who they gonna get to dole out the loans,
 Keep the economy going?" Matthews, the black, asks.

"Well, it sure beats hell out of me,"
 Adds Deacon Mit, "why a man in his prime
 Would sacrifice such a cushy job.
 Everyone knows bankers are the reason
 Golf courses are built."
 "Boys, it's just a goddamn good thing
 You ain't about to default on your notes,
 'Cause you can bet before I left,
 I'd repossess you bastards, clean down
 To your turkey-huntin', thermal-underwear asses,
 Then watch you run, loose as yahoos,
 Up Columbia and Liberty streets,
 Beggin' me loan yous the shirts off my back."

"Bob, you say you got *how many* days to go?"

11/18/87 — [2] (02008)

Another Race Day, for the Road Poet

Superheated on massive doses of caffeine,
 Afterburners blazing full throttle,
 This outrageously blue November morning,
 The radio's throat blasting open all the way,
 Like an uncapped well spewing the horizon,
 Five counties wide, with locust-plague haze,
 He jams the gas pedal through the floor,
 Reducing the highway to a series of pencil erasures
 Memory forgets simultaneously with conception.

Once again, the road poet is in escape mode.
His flesh shimmers with inspiration
Effervescent to his intellect's surface,
Disparate symbols accelerating to speeds
Unachievable in his bourgeois existence,
Images which, mile by mile, he tries to arrest,
By writing them down in the racing log
Positioned between steering wheel and gearshift,
On the desk his right knee provides.

Alone in this wilderness frontier,
Though not rootless, dispossessed, or lost,
He crosses invisible synapses, risks wrecks,
Where flesh and bones war, with abstraction,
To keep within prescribed limits,
Follow an agreed-upon course of action,
Arrive at mapped checkpoints, on schedule,
Hoping not to misgauge necessary pressure levels,
Be forced out, for an unexpected pit stop.

Woe betide the uninspired, he muses,
Who dare travel at speeds such as these,
Which drive him past redline crazy,
Into realms where the slightest emotional deviation
Or physical miscue in the mechanical apparatus
Might spell instantaneous disaster. For him, though,
These daylong moments exposed to peril
Produce just the right levels of natural courage
Needed to render him a contender in the great human race.

11/19/87 (06023)

[The dismantling begins.][†]

The dismantling begins.
Sinners, like crazed lemmings,
Diminish into the wind,
Finish the upward
Salmon struggle, in the
Upper reaches of the creek

[11/23/87]? (01683)

Pilgrim Adrift, November 1987

The highway I navigate, this gray day,
Through recalcitrant haze and mist,
Might be Chesapeake Bay,
Whose capes my ship, *Godspeed*,
Distanced hours ago. Now, I set sights
On a suitable clearing with tall trees
Rimming its perimeter against visibility to aliens,
A place we might claim in James's name
And make prosper for ourselves,
England, and those venturesome investors
In our joint-stock Virginia Company,
Betting even we first settlers will find gold.

But as I proceed inland, from the coast,
No appropriate openings in the density
Disclose themselves. Slowly, I realize
Three hundred eighty years separate me
From that bold motley
Composed of petty pickpockets, agnostics,
Carpenters, gentleman farmers and grazers,
Political zealots, and vagrant poets.
Moreover, I'm not fleeing persecution,
Seeking asylum, redressing grievances,
With righteous indignation, or hoping
To begin a "new life," all slates erased.

No! No! If only it were so easy
To leave one shore, cargoless,
Climb a crow's-nest,
Surround the entire horizon, in a sweep,
And dedicate one's vital energies
To getting someplace worth all that vast dreaming!
The highway I ply, just now,
Absorbs my destinationless desperation,
As my limboed soul busies itself
Going nowhere, with the tenacity of Tithonus
Growing older, each breath,
Without hope of release from his suspended sentence.

Thanks to a "general history" and journals
Those first Pilgrims produced,

*

Memory locates me along a mythic continuum
Culminating two days hence,
When I'll rejoice in feasting on roasted duck,
Turkey, corn pudding, stewed tomatoes,
Toast the future, with claret and Madeira.
For a few hours, I might even lose myself
In wine-sweet hallucinations,
Celebrating successful exploits
Others than I have made to explain why
Colonizing freedom is so damn treacherous.

11/24/87 (06024)

[This warm-rain morning,] [†]

This warm-rain morning,
One day before Thanksgiving,
There's a curious pall over the stale air
Permeating the Capital Café.
The men whisper to each other,
As if conferring, in court, with their lawyers,
Instead of sorting morning's mail,
Recording

11/25/87 (01072)

Thanksgiving 1987

Arising before dawn, this cold, wet November day,
Groping just for bathrobe and socks,
To keep from making noise getting dressed
And waking my wife and two children,
Who float, peacefully, on sleep's
Slowly undulating seas,
I ascend to my third-floor fortress,
Overlooking the harbor my imagination guards.

Perhaps it's my hope to locate traces
Of yesterday's heritage,

*

Buried in unspoken voices still humming
Between pages of grade-school texts,
Beneath soot-blackened glass
Protecting Currier & Ives lithographs,
And book my spirit's passage,
Back on history's slipstream, to Plymouth,

That pinnacle where, for the first time,
My soul conceived the roots
Of its own self-governance,
Promised "all due submission and obedience"
To whatever "just and equal laws"
Creativity, its "civil body politic,"
Might set up and pass —
Poetry's own Mayflower Compact.

Possibly, this morning, I'm seeking
To reacquaint memory with fact,
Reintroduce myself to the settler I used to be:
Separatist, Puritan, Pilgrim,
Willing to endure Netherlandian exile,
Seven-year indenture,
Securing a vessel to transport me to a world
Where I might worship as I choose,

A rugged individualist, who came ashore
Believing "none had the power to command" me.
Courageous, indomitable Brewster,
Bradford, Winslow, and Standish —
I was each of these men, once.
Nothing could keep me from taking risks,
Braving rigors of "great sickness,"
Harsh weather, starvation.

Maybe, today, it's my secret ambition
To reenact that inaugural autumn feast,
When Massasoit and his friendly Wampanoag
Sat with us, concluded a treaty,
And remind myself how sweet
Staking out "Particular Plantations" can be
When liberty, not divine right,
Is personal freedom's sole authority.

A Thanksgiving Prayer

*For the extended families
of Margaret and Harry Hofmann, Jr.,
and Charlotte and Saul Brodsky*

Dear God,

Recognizing Your presence here with us,
We thus request Your blessing:

May we be deserving and worthy, always,
As we accept the bounties
Which You have set before us, on this table,
And do so neither with complacence
Nor in surfeit
But with sweet surprise and delight,
Knowing You inspire
This luck that guides our lives.

Furthermore, let these delicacies
Be reminders we are children
Needing constant feeding
And that only gentle, tender love
We seed in each other's gardens
Can provide the harvest
You must make, daily,
To nourish our bodies and hearts.

Recognizing Your presence here with us,
We amen our supplication.

11/26/87 — [2] (02009)

Proclaiming an “Everlasting Yea”[△]

Once again, like dutiful choirboys,
The men gather, to say eclectic, secular rosaries,
Make confession, do proper eulogies,
At the main table. They review local events,
Sort the world's metaphorical mail,
Recite the town's jail roster,
Obituaries, marriages, public auctions, and births,
*

Published in Farmington's twice-weekly daily,
The *Press*. For lack of current matter,
A few refer to last week's tragedy:
Don Mell's suicide,
Which shocked the community, to collective grief,
As though a conflagration or plague
Had invaded their sacred precincts,
Devastated everyone, with malicious efficiency.
They reprise collective sympathy and sorrow,
Reiterating known facts all owned
Who spoke of Don with fondness or deference.
"He'd been despondent ever since his wife died,
Two years earlier." "And that accident,
This past summer — that blast to the stomach
While cleanin' his shotgun, on a hunting trip
Out at his country farm — no mishap, that."
"It's all too obvious, now, he was practicing,
Having dress rehearsal, fumbling a touchdown run."
"We shoulda realized, then,
His family was covering up, shoulda guessed
He was tryin' to kill hisself and just missed."
"What a waste — those three surgeons
Staying up, all night, to save him . . . for this."
"I picked it up at 4:30,
Last Wednesday morning, on my police scanner.
His next-door neighbor heard the shot,
Looked out his window, saw Don slumped,
Like a crumpled croker sack,
On the porch." "Yeh, can you imagine?
He'd had to set the butt of the gun
Between two rabbit traps, jam the barrel
Against a broken shutter hasp —" "A *what*?"
"A rusted window hinge. Then, his head
Pressed against the muzzle,
Using a broken rake handle, to reach the trigger,
He blew his brains all over the siding."
"God, how grotesque!" "Poor bastard!"
"And do you know, since Emma Mae'd passed,
He'd been to Vegas and Jamaica, and to Alaska, after Kodiak."
"Yeh, I'm sure he was tryin' to run away
From his loneliness." "He'd become despondent,
They say." "Just couldn't seem to find himself,

*

In retirement.” “Yeh, selling the hardware store,
Then losing Emma Mae, a matter of months later,
Must have been too much loss.” “Emptiness!”
“I always say idleness is the nigger
In the Devil’s woodpile.” “Just goes to show you,
Money don’t buy a guy happiness.”
“Yeh, he’d become despondent.” “And no children,
No close family, to fill in the gaps,
Don’t help either.” “He’d grown despondent,
Who, by all rights, shoulda been on Easy Street.”
“Boys, let me just tell you one thing —
I’m glad as hell to be right here, right now,
Chewin’ the fat with you yahoos,
And ain’t nobody gonna get me to agree
To givin’ up the goat that easy.
When I go, assuming I ever do decide to,
You can damn well bet
I’m goin’ out breech, screaming loud enough
To wake the dead . . . even ol’ Don Mell!”

12/2/87 — [1] (01071)

Den Members and Teammates ^Δ

My boy, Troika, and I are partners in crime.
We’re soccer teammates.
I spectate, vocally, from the sidelines,
Supply halftime snacks,
Provide taxi service, for his waifish crew,
To Saturday games, Monday-afternoon practices.
He participates, defensively, at left halfback.
We’re members of the same den, too.
He has Bobcat and Wolf badges
Sewn on his official-issue blue uniform,
Boasting beads and arrowheads
As well as a “2”-year service pin.
I oversee activities at meetings,
Make certain the Pledge of Allegiance
And Cub Scout Promise get correctly said
And that we light the Akela candle,
Keep reminding the boys of duties
*

They must perform, out of love for self,
Family, country, and God,
If they're to achieve their rank of Bear.
Oh, and don't let me sell short
My most important task:
Providing postmeeting snacks.

These days, my boy, Troika, and I
Are secret sharers, and I'm delighted,
After all these decades, to be ten again.
In fact, some evenings, after we recite
Our "Now I lay me" responsively
And I conclude my flawlessly off-key rendition
Of "Nighty-night and sleep tight,"
Long after I retire to my bedroom, to read
Or assimilate television news,
I'll steal back into his room, kneel,
And interface with his rapid eye movements,
Then begin hiking, caving, canoeing,
Weaving Mom's Christmas basket,
Out of sleep's raffia wisps,
Or start kicking that zebra ball,
Dribbling it across dreaming's field,
Until, by morning, when waking Mr. Boy
Means tickling him into deliriousness,
I've scored three goals more
Than my opponent, beaten middle age
At its own game, come away victorious,
Over those bad sports who play dirty
And don't even shake hands when they lose.

12/2/87 — [2] (02012)

Jazz-Dance Practice ^Δ

*For Trilogy,
who moves so beautifully*

Young ladies of the Intermediate Jazz Dance class
Filter in like magical light flecks
Arrested in a David Hamilton photograph.
Fragile, barefoot, silent
Yet dressed in leotards gaily decorated
*

Like *Alice in Wonderland* caterpillars
Crawling all the way out,
On nonexistent twigs, to exhibit their designs,
They do preliminary calisthenics,
Loosening sinewy muscle groups,
To saxophone and flute music
Their omniscient instructor cues,
Rhythmically eliciting flexible moves,
From nerves, tissues, and bones
Vibrating to the earth's metronome.

Inexorably, the exercises build,
Become complex, vigorous, painful,
Until collective recklessness
Compels each dancer to compete
Not so much against her own expectations
As with the others, for the same vague dream
Of, one day, standing at the apex
Three thousand sets of eyes project,
Delighting in the newest Twyla Tharp
Debuting her unique lunacy.
Bending, stretching nimbly,
Legs, arms, neck, and spine redefine space,
Create inexpressibly graceful gestures,
Whose weightless auras buoy each imago
As she emerges from her cocoon.

With controlled frenzy, tempos multiply.
Pulsations rumble up from caves,
Tarpits, swamps, bowels of volcanoes.
Ball-change step, hitch-kick,
Chassé, and pirouette echo and reiterate,
As the enchanted Degas ladies
Lose inhibitions, forget their faces.
Soon, the air is astir with virgins
Cut loose from fantasy's moorings,
Soaring through airy corridors and orbs,
Hoping for deliverance at Terpsichore's stage door,
Where, poised in lepidopteran quivering,
They'll perform the dream complete,
Before returning, the following week,
To learn the next few steps in youth's routine.

The Loneliness of an Old Road Peddler ^Δ

These days, Willy spends his retirement
Suspended in contemplation of friends,
Upon whom he depends to keep memory
From surrendering to sedentariness,
Succumbing to forgetfulness, dementia,
Descending into that endless cave
Whose myriad, mazy chambers are the punishment
Old age imposes on sinners and innocents,
With arbitrary arrogance and temerity.

Yet, curiously, it's been almost a decade
Since he last spoke with anyone at Acme-Zenith
Or jotted a note of condolence,
Mailed greeting cards, at Christmas and Easter,
To loyal gentile clientele
And good-old-boy goyim he met
In motels and local cafés fifty years wide,
Five states deep —
Oases in the Midwest desert he plied.

At least ten years have elapsed
Since Willy last sent Chanukah gifts
To members of his congregation, the boss's son,
His deceased wife Leah's nephews and nieces,
Said his *shaloms*, *l'chaims*, *mazel tovs*,
At Passover, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah,
Brises, bar mitzvahs, and weddings
Of brothers and sisters of the tribe,
Wearing invisible frontlets between their eyes.

But all too often, these days,
His friends seem to rise, like sweat beads,
Through pores in persecutory dreams,
Not as faces from his salad days
But as gawking, hawk-nosed ragmen
Vending rotten jewfish, moldy matzos,
Or as scrofulous prophets stooping in soup lines
Or frail tailors stitching body bags
For victims of usurers and mail-order lawyers.

And in his loneliest moments,
While waiting for tomorrow's paper to be thrown,
*

Listening to traffic's slapstick below,
Or startled by garish nightmares
Shooting to the surface of fluorescent pools
He dives into, viewing test patterns,
Willy knows who'll show up at his funeral,
To hear the rabbi's graveside eulogy:
Just death, his sole next of kin.

12/8/87 (00082)

[Ten-year-old Troika the Boy] [△]

Ten-year-old Troika the Boy
Exemplifies clairvoyance. His visionary divination
Connects earth and sky, with Biblical wisdom.
I've accompanied him, some days,
When he's detected no fewer than five pennies
Nesting in arrested gestures,
Just waiting to be detected, awakened,
Taken, like the precious Elgin marbles,
Given appreciated viewing, in new contexts.

Whether his eyes are professional archaeologists,
Trained to find cents in alleys, on sidewalks,
In return-coin slots of public telephones,
Gumball and soft-drink dispensers,
And retrieve them from time's crypts,
Or are bums stumbling, by dumb luck,
On lost wallets, in gutters, I can't say with certainty.
However, I have registered, unequivocally,
A recurring pattern to his discoveries:

On days when he seems to uncover lost money,
He fails to glimpse the faded moon
Careening, across the sky, like a rolling coin,
Or catch sight of its appearance at night,
Before I do. Conversely, when he's penniless,
I'm never first at charting its position
Amidst lesser stars. Curious, I've remarked,
How similar heavenly bodies and earthly change are
To the boy whose eyes flicker and glisten
Like newly minted pennies and scintillant moons.

12/13/87 (00978)

[Having arrived, in Tipton, late last night —] [†]

Having arrived, in Tipton, late last night —
 Too late to make the Slack Outlet before it closed
 Yet early enough to beat the snow,
 Which, this morning, is a howling coyote
 Whose flakes are white sound surrounding him —
 He sits in the Crystal Café, picking at his omelet,
 With absent-mindedness so wide
 Even the regulars' rataplan vulgarities and laughter
 Don't seem to awaken him to prospects of being stranded.

12/14/87 (01070)

Day by Day, by Day, by Day

He leaves home so unmomentously,
 This frozen morning,
 Even his shadow doesn't hear the door close
 Or detect its own footfalls
 Slipping back into echoing tracks
 Left, by his cookie-cutter boots,
 In the doughy snow.

Immersed in darkness, invisible to the moon,
 Whose circular-saw blade
 Has severed and strewn pine boughs
 Across the icy walks leading to the street,
 Where his car is parked,
 He curses fates that have uprooted him,
 Made each new day's quest

For a place to bury his dispossessed spirit
 The same old desperate effort
 Just to stay steps ahead.
 Knowing the locus of his chosen heritage,
 He yet doubts his whereabouts
 And whether his shadow will be waiting
 When he returns home tonight.

12/17/87 (02210)

Trilogy's Jazz-Dance Class

For Lee Nolting

Degas ladies, with intuitive designs
On floodlit destinies,
Do routine's fundamental bidding,
Through warmup stretching exercises
That measure their flexibility's threshold,
Before daring to take flight.

They're possessed by primal urges
To locate the source of motor coordination,
Get beyond inertia, kinesthesia,
Purge all earthly constraints on joints
And friction points between sockets,
Where sinews and bones rip, lock, fracture.

At varying epiphanies, each dancer is loose.
Tendons, muscles, and ligaments
Forget their necessary presences,
Suspend dependence on brain-mandates.
Space appropriates their shapes —
Dust motes dancing on a stage of sunrays.

12/20/87 (02021)

The Church's Universal Moral Core of Earthly Authority

“What a heretical bastard, that Galileo!”
They muttered under soiled robes,
Those God-almighty prelates, bishops, and priests
Who would've gone to the ends of the world,
Thrown themselves into the Gorgon-hissing abyss
And risked eternal damnation or limbo,
Before allowing even the remotest possibility
His assertions could have currency:
Earth circles the sun, not vice versa;
The moon is not a smooth, self-illuminating sphere;
Jupiter has four bright “Medicean Planets”;
The Milky Way is a mass of stars,

*

Not cosmic dust; Saturn has an odd shape;
Venus exhibits lunarlike phases.

“Cut off his testicles! Excommunicate him!”
They grumbled under their tongues.
But no matter how they excoriated him
For inventions and experiments
In locating his own shadow against the sun,
Forced him to abandon Copernican notions,
Cease discrediting Aristotle,
History forgave their premeditated ideocide
And biased piety. Noticing his growing blindness,
The Holy See wisely reduced his imprisonment,
Provided he’d sign a decree
Proclaiming all his new truths false,
In perpetuity, which he did, with an unblinking wink.

12/21/87 (02011)

Jacksonville, After Christmas [‡]

All around this Prairie town,
The ground is stippled with snow-swirls
Glittering like tiles in a suspended ceiling.
My compulsive taking to roads
Knows only non sequiturs,
Requires no extenuating consequences
Or explanation in its own defense.
It occurs whenever my mental senses
Require hiatus from all the noise,
Go in search of an opening in time
To slip through, in my silent jogging shoes,
Where there are no ruts or roots
To cause me to trip, fracture or crack bones

12/26/87 (02281)

Recorded Message for Answering Machine

I’ve been waiting, with *baited* breath,
To catch a whale of a keeper,
On the end of my line.

Now, instead, you've caught *me* — out!

If you'll just give a big tug
When the beep sounds,
I'll reel you in, fins and all!

12/28/87 (04703)

[The sun shines bright,] [‡]

The sun shines bright,
on my old Kentucky home,
But I don't live there — or anywhere.
My bones chatter from the blast
This frozen afternoon casts over me
as though it were death's shadow
Flying low, just below Earth's firmament,
Like a colossal, iridescent bird of prey,
Not a faceted-glass chandelier or mirror ball
suspended from sheer atmosphere,
Refracting millions of scattering heat beams

1/2/88 (02279)

Creating Fates

For days, he's stayed holed-up
Against the elements and implausible enemies
Looming behind hallucinations
That plague waking and sleep indiscriminately.

Isolation from outside intruders
Guides his indoor spirit to seek repose
In solitudinous musings
He transposes into open-ended poetry.

As artificer, necromancer, and magician,
He intermediates between participant and creator,
As he combs and weaves, into lyrical tapestries,
Fleece from imaginary sheep

Grazing in meads behind the feudal estate
His dreams inhabit. He's a benevolent ruler,
*

Whose serfs and vassals pay obeisance
 By singing his praiseworthy measures aloud,
 Performing them on stages and at county fairs
 Across the land and as far away
 As Blefuscu and Japan.
 His reputation precedes him messianically.

Consequently, he realizes that keeping to himself,
 Fraught with chimeras, mind-parasites,
 And self-doubts though it be,
 Is the price immortality exacts from those

Fortunate enough to have been chosen
 To outlive their short existences,
 Resurrecting essences from memories
 Collected by tribesmen many millenniums ago,

Spokesmen, scribes, archivists of living words
 Ever edging toward extermination —
 Lonely poets like himself, quoting God's soul,
 Perpetuating, while preserving, the holy scrolls.

1/6/88 (00877)

[For no less than twenty-eight years] [†]

For no less than twenty-eight years
 After entering Yale University,
 As a first-semester freshman,
 When I was introduced to *Moby-Dick*,
 In English Lit 15,
 I've wrangled with fears and raging paranoia

1/7/88 — [1] (01482)

Of a Snowstorm Borne

What quaint, precybernetic equation
 Can sufficiently explain, in scientific terms
 A lay poet like me might understand,
 *

The mythos of snow, its white mystique,
Which mesmerizes eyes, lets them forget
January's otherwise quiet desperation,
Dream romantic flights from Lake Tahoe,
Following the frozen Truckee
Down out of the mountains, to San Francisco,
Or taking the northern corridor,
To Victoria, Lakes Banff and Louise,
Or wind-sailing up the Hudson,
Across the southern tip of Lake Superior,
From Duluth to Thunder Bay?

What is it, about this anomalous change,
That compels the least capricious human being
To suspend logic, purpose, self-righteousness,
And judgment of others for long enough
To look outside his own windows, at the snow,
See into and through its descending hues,
To find images that might remind him
Of another time and location and identity,
Before the child he once knew
Grew away from viewing the world analogously,
As though, with the slightest manipulation,
Any metamorphosis might be possible:
Jesus and Paul, Alice, Ahab,
Jonas Salk, Hadrian, van Gogh and Michelangelo
All emanating, immaculately,
From man's passionate and fertile imagination?

Today, I personally approach this snow,
Accumulating a few inches each hour,
With reverence Druids must once have accorded
Natural phenomena. Alternately,
I break into laughter or start crying
As though a friend I've loved had just died.
Indeed, the glow on the fuzzy horizon,
Toward which I drive, going home,
Seems to be enveloping my low-flying soul.
Suddenly, I'm lost inside its blinding halo,
I just an unrecognizable snowflake
Descending earthward, to take my place
At the tentative end of its never-ending procession.

[No one ever said]

No one ever said
 A poet
 Has an easy go of it.

1/10/88 (09006)

Remainders, Divisors, and Dividends ^{Δ ‡}

Remainders, divisors, dividends —
 Mathematical abracadabra
 They practice, as their teacher
 Scratches, onto the blackboard, changing problems.

They repeat the five essential steps
 Which render all answers solvable:
 “Divide, multiply, subtract,
 Compare, and carry down!”

She repeats the process patiently,
 Calling on Michael, Elsa, Holiday,
 Troika, Zachery, and Chris.
 No one misses divisional tricks.

1/13/88 — [1] (00979)

Reading Circle ^Δ

A forty-six-year-old
 Sitting on the floor, in a reading circle,
 Outside, yet within, the magical halo
 Of eager voices conveying ideas
 From the eyes’ choices of lines sighted and scanned,
 Images resurrected, from dead print on a page,
 Into names, events, sensations, and sounds —
 Laura’s fear of bears eating Sukey;
 Pa’s paranoia, on his way home from town,
 Seeing, in a fire-blackened tree stump,
 Vivid presentiments of bears —

*

Each student lost in the big woods of Wisconsin,
Whose mysticism fascinates this visitor,
Away for more than thirty-five years.

1/13/88 — [2] (00980)

[Melancholy stifles crying, this gray day,]

Melancholy stifles crying, this gray day,
Through whose dull glaze
I imagine argosies of raindrop caravels
Plunging and breaching, swell after swell,
Across nausea's twin seas,
Flying toward me,
To disguise themselves as tears in my eyes.

1/19/88 — [1] (01481)

Losing You

I threw myself into both ear wells,
To test their depths, and fell too far
Before realizing silence has no threshold
When the heart forgets how to sing,
Create buoy rings out of its own echoing.

I spiraled into a cloacal depression,
Like a shred of straw
Caught in a raw-edged fog,
Descended with such imperceptible velocity,
My senses never stopped sighting the sky,

Just lost their capacity to fathom disparity.
Suddenly, the distance dissolved,
Reversed itself, delivered me up.
I stood peering into both ear wells,
Hearing your tears hitting bottom.

1/19/88 — [2] (02010)

[It all has to do with attitude,]

It all has to do with attitude,
Intensity relaxed just fractions,
To let the half-empty vase fill,
Overflow imagination's lip,
Right before the eyes' skeptical gaze,
Allow sand granules to slip through
The hourglass's neck-noose
Without scratching it,
Keep passing intact,
Even after the lower section has compacted,
As though a hole in the bottom,
Creating a slow leak,
Completed the circuit of time's perpetual flow.

It all has to do with point of view,
Subjectivity's delicately modulated objectifying eye,
Which shapes, from unevolved matter,
Artifacts containing blueprints of the future,
Which, lacking human intervention,
Would collapse back to precreation,
And with waking, each day, eager to celebrate magic,
Recover Attic amphorae, from dreams,
Arrowheads buried in sleep's creek beds,
Poems, like wild geese in high, silent V's,
Flying easterly, toward the refuge
That protects my endangered spirit from premature extinction.
It all has to do with refusing to disbelieve.

1/20/88 — [1] (06026)

Always the Same Old Thing ^Δ

No one in this small country town
Goes very far very fast,
For very long, negotiating his daily life,
Yet passing from café to post office and bank,
Five-and-dime to chiropractor
And back to the house, in time for lunch with spouse,
Might compare with navigating seas

*

For passages and trade routes
To the Spice Islands, China, Chesapeake Bay,
Painting Sistine Chapels,
From scaffolds, on one's back, for scores of years,
Erecting medieval castles and Gothic cathedrals,
Generation after generation, centuries hence.

Then again, maybe not.
Realistically speaking, the inhabitants of this place
Are far too busy with their existences,
To squander precious minutes
Mounting butterflies beneath glass,
With straight pins,
Or meticulously fixing history, with analogies
Calculated to keep civilization visible
And alive. After all, this ain't Arcady;
It's Farmington, Mo.,
And each person knows, beyond a shadow,
That the only poets for hundreds of miles around
Are those located in the same School of Athens:
State Hospital No. 4.
Perhaps it's true that no one in this country town
Goes very far very fast,
For very long, but for now, anyway,
They've outlasted the mastodon,
Nagasaki's atomic blast. Quite likely,
In a thousand years,
They'll still be frowning, perplexedly,
At every Benjy stalking fences at city's edge,
In search of lost innocence,
Moaning, moaning, slobbering, bellowing,
Hoping, ever, to locate an opening and escape
The reality that nothing much occurs,
From day to day, anywhere, everywhere on Earth.

1/20/88 — [2] (05436)

Elegy Composed on an Endless Drive Home Δ

Lady, there was a space, a season,
When you and I were gripped
In loving's sweetest seizure,
*

Gyved heart to spirit, flesh to its parts,
When our gentle, sensual wheeling, on white skies,
Uprushing and down-thrusting dives —
Our beings locked beak to beak,
Out of time —
Set us apart from all other voiceless creatures.

Briefly, we had free run of Eden —
Children reveling in our bodily desires,
Exhilarating, immaculating our oneness,
With tender tasting and touching.
Our illicit complicity against conventions
Rendered us unsusceptible to censure,
Seemingly immune to congenital deficiencies —
Lovers, mentors, friends,
Implicitly trusting each other's intentions.

Then, a shift of tectonic plates, innocuous at first,
Shuddered our innocence,
Initiated its protracted diminishment.
Scraping, grating disturbances
Created painful shock waves,
Until, everywhere across our land,
Like dandelions spreading unchecked,
Fissures and abysses erupted
Faster than we could fill them back

With scattered dreams or augment them,
From reserves of forgiving and forgetting,
To level hope's inchoate surface.
And now, lady, silence, like a white ocean,
Separates Affection and Passion,
The jigsawed continents of our love's original mass.
Our muteness is indigenous to creatures
Surviving on rocks off Oblivion's coast —
Vestigial Aves and Amphibia.

1/21/88 (02241)

Affinity with Metaphors

Strange! It's so ominously strange,
How the more focused one's gaze
*

Stays fixed on objects thought to be innocuous,
The greater grows the likelihood they'll change.
Take the sky under which I fly,
Down I-55, out of St. Louis,
Heading south. Hued robin's-egg blue,
Its visible layer presses against
Irregularly spaced cloud formations,
The outermost stratum an eggshell
Resting, delicately, on soft nesting straw.

Suddenly, those hovering gray-white shapes
Are Portuguese men-of-war
Lacking their gelatinous tentacles,
Bobbing on a cobalt ocean buoying me,
As I float away from captivity.
Finally arrived, washed ashore,
I taste blood dripping from facial lacerations
And wonder if those jellyfish
Had whiplike stingers, after all,
Or if, in hastily escaping imagination's Alcatraz,
I just cut shit out of myself, shaving.

1/25/88 — [1] (03592)

A Day of Reckoning ^Δ

Slowly, his hibernating soul shudders,
Gasps, erratically, for breath, stirs, stretches,
Stares through bare spaces in the cave
Amnesia has trenched out, a decade deep,
Beneath his physical existence.

Perhaps a fragrant trace of honeysuckle,
Overripe magnolia blossom, or wisteria,
Circulating through his bloodstream,
Has awakened sleepy spirits and ghosts,
From their enchanted Van Winkledom.

Possibly, a wayward cloud
Diaphanously draped, curvaceously shaped,
Like a vague lady from Holly Springs
Whose naked flesh and intellect
Once saved him from lunacy, excites him, now,

By its sheer, supple hovering above vision,
 Its untouched simplicity, its freedom
 Just to ornament the moment, nothing more.
 Maybe the reverberation of tires
 Grazing the highway's glistening pavement,
 Setting up a paradisiacal reiteration,
 Has motivated his silent bones to locate a frequency
 On which they might again align themselves
 With notes flowing down out of God's throat,
 Augment celestial harmonies.

Or this resurrection might just be
 His own ultimate overcoming of the drag coefficient,
 Achieving that necessary lift
 The spirit hopes to catch as it rotates,
 Assumes straight and level flight.

Whatever natural explanations
 He might piece together, to render rational
 His absolutely miraculous rising from the dead,
 Lazarus knows, beyond a shadow,
 He'll never chase another slatternly yawn.

1/25/88 — [2] (03565)

The Ghost of Schwerner Returns ^Δ

The “Yankee-Jew nigger sympathizer”
 Who used to pass down this pine-lined stretch
 Between Memphis and Oxford,
 Yelling obscenities at unseen rednecks,
 Within the sanctuary of his speeding wagon,
 Practicing inflammatory speeches
 Citing abolitionist tracts
 Tracing the genealogy of Southern inhumanity
 Back to slave days,
 Returns, this frigid, sunny afternoon,
 Without any trace of the old zealousness
 That branded him outlander, interloper,
 A dissident voice whose phone should be tapped.

Now, invisibled by political irrelevance,
 In the very territory he once feared,

*

He slips past Hurricane Creek,
 Arkabutla Lake, Como, the Tallahatchie River,
 Catches the Batesville exit, heads east,
 Toward Jefferson,
 The seat of Yoknapatawpha's heart.
 He knows his contemporaries have evaporated
 And that though superficial customs have changed,
 Political representation has been meliorated,
 And integration is taken for granted,
 History's basic issues are still the tissue
 "Whitey" uses to wipe his asshole.

So why, he asks himself, dramatically,
 Has he driven down again, south,
 Leaving his "domestic tranquillity,"
 To provide for the "common defense" of nobody,
 Since no longer do cries rise like smoke?
 Perhaps the answer lies in reminding himself,
 Not allowing all the dust to settle,
 Keeping something stirred, the slightest irritant,
 To make the eye weep even sympathetically,
 If not firsthand — that ineradicable desire
 Not to let forgetting neglect, in the mind,
 A vegetable garden it must tend night and day.
 He returns, today, just to say, "I'm checking!"

1/25/88 — [3] (03566)

[Back, off the road, for a few days,][†]

Back, off the road, for a few days,
 He seeks refuge in the Capital Café,
 Where he can contemplate his Pandora's box

1/28/88 — [1] (01477)

The Passing of an Outpatient[△]

With more frequency than ever before,
 He's located his soaring spirit off course —
 A blip on his mind's fluorescent screen,
 Erratically flitting like a flea.

And whenever he's entered memory's storeroom,
To take inventory on existing stock,
Double-verify his tabulations,
He's been unable to account for entire categories.

Lately, this condition has begun to plague him
In strange and funny ways:
He addresses old acquaintances, with names
Appropriated from cop dramas and soap operas;

From impatient cash-register ladies,
In gas stations and fast-food shops,
He tries to redeem state lottery tickets
Revealing no winning combinations;

He forgets which day in the week it is,
In which year of which decade
He chose to deposit his Social Security
And monthly disability checks.

This Friday morning,
Loitering in the Capital Café, just listening,
Not contributing, to the persiflage of regulars,
Sipping from a trick coffee cup

That seems to fill itself, continually,
From a hidden, heated artesian well,
He suddenly realizes amnesia owns his senses.
Table, chair, light fixture, fan

Stare back at him, like deer
Frozen, at night, at road's edge, by car lights;
He can't see their shapes, in the oblique dark
That has overtaken his rigid synapses.

Whatever apparatus has just collapsed
Has rendered him dumb. His entire body
Is a foot, improperly bent, that's fallen asleep.
Deep breaths only increase disorientation,

As faces, shapes lose depth of field,
Suck him into their swirling vortex.
He shivers, chokes, in a final throe,
Slumps in his seat, unnoticed for almost an hour.

[Routinely, we fly in the face of furies and fates]

Routinely, we fly in the face of furies and fates
So menacing, in their preoccupation with death,
Penchant for catastrophe, chaos,
Potential to create human confusion,
We don't realize we're fleas in a hurricane's eye,
Godly creatures nurtured, indulged,
Encouraged, endured, obliged.

We go headlong, into the fray,
With blind faith, youthful bravado, chutzpa.
We lock horns with triceratopses and unicorns,
Tilt against Miltonic demons, in Hades,
Pandemonium, and on our next-door neighbors' porch,
Refuse to recognize our lives are finite,
Each new act our most recently updated epitaph.

Tenaciously, we maintain our delusionary contrariness,
Belief in our own designs,
Imperishability, put up intense defenses
Against forces that would send us back to the trenches,
Render us hebephrenic. Not dioxin,
Nicotine, caffeine, or nuclear waste
Deters us from tampering with their detonators.

We're indispensable! We rule the earth!
Expunge our puny but inexhaustible voices,
Punch-and-Judging adversaries and friends alike,
And you subject this planet to doom by silence,
Remove any future it might have for Armageddon.
Actually, annihilation of the species
Poses yet a greater threat: in our absence,

This planet could just possibly revert to Eden,
Exist in a condition of lasting peace.
Imagine Pangaea profuse with algae and protozoans
Dripping sweet nectars and juices,
Or grasses, plants, trees scented with absinthe,
Camphor, and eucalyptus — a bell-jar arboretum
Gracing God's knickknack shelf.

Perish the Thought

For my father, Saul

Is this distance I've placed between us
Figment, fact, or just vertiginousness?
I can't quite focus on actual locations,
This desolate February morning,
Knowing, as I go in quest of victories,
You lapse in your hospital bed,
Convalescing, we hope, from yesterday's surgery,
Though none of us is absolutely assured your prognosis,
Resoundingly optimistic, will hold up,
As day two takes on its opposition — infection —
And remains surveillant for unanticipated complications.

Neither predisposed to undue anxiety
Nor victimized by paranoid hallucinations,
I nevertheless can't erase, from my screen,
Your benign face, white hair,
Thin-skinned arms scarred and bruised
With black-blue needle marks,
Outside your gown, above the sheets,
That spectral effluvium dying people emit,
Especially when they don't even know they're dying.
I can't keep my vehicle from weaving,
For insidious grief nauseating chest and gut.

After all, you are, in your present paltriness,
What you've always been to me:
A giant among pygmies,
A force so indefatigable and organized,
No human I've ever known could subdue you
Just by main strength or mean acumen.
This is why, right now, driving south,
I cower, sense impending doom,
Not so much for you but, rather, me.
It is I, your son, who, too acceptingly,
Has depended on you, for my nourishment.
If you were to leave me, I would die.

2/9/88 — [2] (06028)

The Fourteenth Way of Looking

*For Kaye Hamblin,
with love*

I sing these benign creatures foraging for seed
Beneath your bird feeder,
Perching on its wooden ledges,
Pecking, this frigid, brittle morning.
Is their existence any less precious than mine?
Just because necessity compels them,
Constantly, to seek food and shelter,
Is their daily indwelling less noble,
Their bearing, their awareness of divinity,
In any sense not as essential as mine,
To the maintenance of Earth's design?

Hidden behind thermal-pane windows
Separating your breakfast room
From the rest of the world, I'm entranced
By their swooping approaches,
Bold landings, savage ingatherings,
Magician-willed disappearances —
Blue jays and sparrows, aggressive, imperious,
Despite their innocuous sizes;
Purple finches, cardinals, turtledoves,
Each species mated for life . . .
Their pairings exacerbate my solitariness.

Yet I can't quit staring,
Wondering whether they're aware of me
And, if so, care enough
To sense my inchoate terror of being alone.
Suddenly, as though inside the darting eyes
Of a scarlet cardinal
Hopping amidst discarded sunflower-seed shells,
I see me peering down at myself,
And I wonder if it's just my reflection,
Playing games on my gaze, or me,
Finally getting the better of my imagination.

2/10/88 (01034)

Mates for Life

Curious, how, at unpredictable seasons and junctures,
Even the most seemingly coalesced essences
Come uncohered: atoms lose their magical attraction;
Love particles forget their grooved orbits,
Veer, experience myriad near-mishaps
And increasingly frequent midair collisions.

Curiouser yet, how perfectly serious mates
Attribute their estrangements, separations, divorces —
Major malfunctions — to pilot error
Rather than locating tragedy's true cause,
Mistake fate's totalitarian intercession
For emotional metal fatigue, electric stress overload.

Whether the *Zeitgeist* is ripe for mind-sets
Receptive to dissolution, worship of pyrite idols,
Or we're in transition, between two ice ages,
And just don't know it, is difficult to gauge.
Intimations of drastic sea changes
In legacies we bequeath our children grieve me.

Too clearly, I intuit the rituals and rules
That we placed before our kids,
Like food fit for privileged spirits,
Losing relevancy, taking the stage in costumes
Outdated, belonging to entirely other productions.
I don't even recognize our soliloquies;

Each seems blatantly memorized,
Delivered through passionless lips, lackluster eyes.
You and I, wife, no longer fit the description
Outlined in the Playwright's *dramatis personae*.
Daily, we require more intense floodlights,
To keep our disguises from invisiblizing us.

How is it that after all these seasons,
We still believe humans control their own destinies
And freedom is our inalienable birthright?
When will we realize life's only coeval is death,
All other lovers ephemeral pretenders
To the throne of loneliness — transparent shadows of shadows?

A Baptism of Fish ^Δ

How facile it had been, that afternoon,
For their mother, less on a whim
Than driven by vague parental urgings,
To get to the pet store
And, with minimal assistance, gather together
Elements necessary to a universe
She might wrest from nonexistence,
Just by the prodigious artificing of her wishes
To emulate the Creator's mysterious ways,

A cosmos predominated by fish,
Diminutive exemplars of fabled ichthyosaurus
And mammalian narwhal, to be sure,
Nonetheless spectacularly mystical,
For their hues, shapes, maneuverings
Amidst plastic decorations
Their blue, fluted bowl magnified —
An aquatic Eden, to delight our children's eyes,
Soothe tired anxieties and disillusionments.

And for the first three days of Creation,
The bulbous-bellied goldfish
Swished and flailed fins and tails,
Skipped the light prismatic, darted, hovered,
Reversed directions, sank slowly to the gravel —
Tropical helicopters and submarines.
Our children giggled, thumped the glass,
With Alice-like curiosity, fed them, laughed aloud,
Never even noticed their electric flow slowing,

Slowing, their gills filling, inexorably,
With chlorine and chloramine from tap water,
In whose suffocating net they'd been caught,
Until, on the fourth morning, one floated up,
Troubling the surface, with its dislocation,
A purple halo staining its head.
Trilogy and Troika responded with consternation
Leading to bewilderment and dismay.
Sadness dimmed their school-bound gazes.

When they arrived home, the streaked bowl,
Upside down, next to the sink,

*

Seemed like a neglected crown.
Neither child asked why the fish had died
Or tried to justify, with reasonable science,
The death of those once-frisky little one-trick ponies.
Suddenly, their mother entered the kitchen,
Balancing placental plastic bags in her grasp,
Asking them to witness another baptism of fish.

2/19, 2/21 — [1], & 2/24/88 — [1] (02259)

Sunshine Inn

Just my ten-year-old boy, Troika,
And I venture out, this Lenten Sunday,
To break fast. We share
Strawberry whole-grain pancakes,
Feast on spinach-and-shrimp omelets,
Nibble seedless Concord grapes.
Silence is our mutual friend.

Other weekend mornings,
We've been joined by sister Trilogy
And their mother, my wife, Jan,
But not today, when isolation exiles us,
Waits offstage, in the wings,
Poised to incorporate our sweet memories
Into melancholy soliloquies
The wind breathes, this frigid morn
In midtown St. Louis, when my boy and I
Taste the silence, savor its bittersweet spices.

2/21/88 — [2] (02283)

Knight Errant for Hire

Glory washes my eyes, this bright morn,
Floods my exultant lips.
I sing out loud, on my flying horse,
As I flee strident chaos at home,
Love's last, gasping death-rattling
*

Emanating from a disillusioned wife
 Reaching middle-aging's point of no return,
 Whose snarling, foaming specters
 Frighten timid and resolute psyches indiscriminately,
 When fissures allow clotting to take hold
 Inside dreaming's sclerotic arteries.

My measures dissolve the Eve-poisoned throat-lump —
 Sadness's Adam's apple —
 Causing nausea, dizziness, fainting spells.
 Just breathing in, deeply, frees all pores,
 Admits fresh elements into alveoli and capillaries.
 In saving myself from the virago with reptilian curls,
 Androgynous body — epicene waist and breasts —
 Just one tenacious regret shadows my escape:
 Fate, not I, my children's soul mate,
 Gets proxy vote, final say-so,
 The last laugh, a disreputable custody, at best.

But I can't endure the hostility,
 Daily annihilation of my manhood, hourly complaints.
 It's time for an abandonment.
 Even now, I've let supple senses atrophy,
 Infarction harden my romantic heart.
 This glorious morning, I set out cargoless,
 A Quixote unreformed yet not so defeated
 I can't still be redeemed by the lowliest Aldonza,
 Who'll love me — despite my ragged nag, broken sword,
 Doleful countenance, metaphors, and suspended disbeliefs —
 Just for the sweet, devoted old goat she knows I am.

2/23/88 (04112)

On Her Reaching Womanhood ^Δ

*For my sweet, blessed Trilogy,
 happily I weep!*

For so many days, months,
 My thirteen-year-old girl, Trilogy,
 Have you complained of vague aches
 Presaging the onset of your first menstruation,
 *

That this dawn's ritualistic bleeding
Touches me, with mythic, rhythmical echoes.

Your ambivalence sympathies me —
That youthful mixture of excitement and fright,
Amazement, curiosity, and surprise,
Mollified by your radiant mother's presence,
Her pride, you two forming a tie
Between childhood and womanhood.

My baby! My sweet, unsuspecting *preciosa*!
All at once, you're a grown lady,
Capable of procreating, propagating our species,
Passing along our genes (Jan's and mine),
Our blood, our dreams, to future lives.
My tears are those I tasted at your birth.

Oh, my blessed child, I love you so!
That primal ichor your body has cycled
Out of the vagina is mine also. Its voiding
Depletes me, weakens me momentarily,
Yet I exult in its hot expulsion,
Revel in your Red Sea passage to freedom.

Once each month, for abundant years,
When you come to do sacrifice to the moon,
Disperse an ovum-seed, on the flood,
Remember: you relinquish a piece of us, too.
Judge well with whom you share yourself.
Your choosing will be crucial to our heritage.

2/24/88 — [2] (01032)

[Milton, Faulkner, Chaucer, and Frost]

Milton, Faulkner, Chaucer, and Frost
Bought fame, at such immense cost, with intensity
And loss of freedom, in isolation,
I question, now, whether such sacrifice
Is of high value, worth the price, in time spent.

3/2/88 — [1] (09973)

Qualifying Intimations of Immortality

Milton, Faulkner, Chaucer, and Frost
Have lost none of their luster
Since their heads' Red Seas parted,
Beckoned them escape Earth,
Across dust-crusted blood-beds,
Exchange breathing for eternal inspiration . . .
Since sacrificing life's dynamic energies,
Extruding, from plastic word-looms,
Golden threads of lexical excellence
Interwoven, so beautifully, with music,
Human flesh gets goose-pimples,
Just listening to its invisible whispers . . .
Since each etched, in Mosaical stone,
His own transliterated approximations of quotes
Retrieved from his fugitive interviews with God.

Today, I, an unsung poet of note,
Reflect on the process of selection
By which some writers achieve immortality
While others, perhaps equally deserving,
Get overlooked by the elite committees of electors
Representing mankind's collective endeavors
And artistic aspirations. I remain stupefied,
Bewildered by the inscrutable truth
That those who seem to have survived their time,
Endured cynical scrutiny, undue inquisition,
Knew, intimately, their art had been bathed
In mystical incarnations,
Which distinguish God's gifts of transfiguration
From man's empty attempts,
Albeit with passionate intensity, at sacred acts.

Today, as I drive, measure for measure,
Along the horizon's edge, toward Forever,
My bones shiver, with unearthly shimmering.
Adrenaline hastens my blood brainward,
Toward undiscovered frontiers. Ancient psalms
Collide with modern strophes. My eyes grow blurry,
Focus inward, on screens hung from a ceiling
Separating night from ivory luminosity.

*

A sky I've never navigated compels my mind
Into its immensity, urges me to redesign its shapes,
Create constellations out of phonemes and syllables,
Tropes, chimes, symbolic associations,
Analogous links between my thoughts and His.
Suddenly, I sense my connection with Milton,
Faulkner, Chaucer, and Frost: I'm a bard for the duration.

3/2/88 — [2] (06029)

[Craving freedom's watercress freshness,]

Craving freedom's watercress freshness,
Over depression's stagnant mire,
He lunges up, from nightmare's slough,
Toward sleep's shimmering pool of youthful vegetation.
Neither stillborn nor fully alive,
He feels caught somewhere between tomorrow
And ten thousand unwoven yesterdays —
An equatorial fish victimized below ice,
Hoping for a thaw before the dome
Containing his diminishing oxygen is exhausted.
Suddenly, he breaches, shatters silence's surface,
Remains suspended for eon-long seconds,
While recognition and forgetting mesh, merge,
Transfigure his spirit into visible textures and hues.

He discovers, in his waking, walking shape,
Marked resemblances to a creature
Who once resided in the same brain he occupies,
Not an atavistic, lobe-finned lungfish
(Which, flipping and flailing hysterically,
One day crawled out of a murky pond,
Onto the banks of habitable land, and settled)
But, rather, a shadowy likeness of a man,
Shabby, uninspired, yet equipped with desires
To mate, propagate its kind,
Create an educated base who might rule
The unschooled masses choosing to stay in the pool.
He sees, in the apparition, nearly identical features,
Realizes he retains tissues of his original issue.

All day, his tatterdemalion aimlessness
 Seems to transport him farther and deeper away
 From dawn's dark and desolate starting point.
 Elusive, inscrutable, nebulous,
 His destination nonetheless looms before vision.
 He goes unswervingly ahead,
 As if knowing and intuition were twin postulates
 Of divination meant to guide him home,
 Dismantle his shape, then his spirit,
 Recommit them to the dust-swirling life-force
 Encircling Earth like a Jupiter-moon ring.
 Just before twilight, he arrives at a stream,
 Wades into its placental watercress surround,
 Then drowns beneath dreaming's sweetest sleep.

3/8/88 (00876)

The Emigrants ^Δ

*For Harriet Yeargain,
 with love*

This drowsy little country town,
 Where Trilogy and Troika would cringe
 When thunderstorms threatened to unhinge the doors,
 Shatter windows, topple the chimneys
 Of our Victorian gingerbread house
 Surmounting West Columbia Street . . .
 Where winter snows filled our eyes
 With ritual whiteness so pristine,
 Nothing else could accommodate our excitement
 With more immaculating happiness
 Or salutary distraction from the world beyond . . .

Where lavender and crimson sunsets
 Vespered long summer afternoons,
 With cicada murmurousness, distant train whistles
 Barely disturbed the serene evenings,
 Beneath which we rested, in timeless tranquillity . . .
 Where each Christmas morning,
 First purple crocus, Thanksgiving turkey dinner
 Served on the chancellor's hand-carved table,
 School start-up and summer closing,
 Was a sacred occasion we worshiped,
 With secular ethics, in ecumenical ecstasy . . .

Is a cemetery, now — this drowsy little country town —
 Where I've buried all my memories
 Of raising a family, reveling in love,
 Each a stillborn child of my heart's best years.
 Returning creates, for me, major depression.
 Paying last respects requires exhuming spirits,
 Disturbing sweet-sleeping half-dreams
 That, as I was growing older, I couldn't know
 Presaged eventual letting go, forgetting,
 And death of my soul, which would set in
 The moment we left to resettle in the city.

3/10/88 — [1] (02269)

When Crocuses First, in the Front Yard, Bloom

From the base of a patrician oak
 Ranging halfway across our front yard
 And out over West Columbia Street,
 I pluck spring's good-luck talisman:
 A single, solitary violet crocus,
 Shouting, through three orange stamen-horns,
 Muffled sibilances of faraway voices,
 Fluid notes belling, from ancient throats,
 An even more antique anthem.

And I focus all my senses on its symmetry,
 Listen intently, hoping to locate
 The source of the chorus issuing forth
 Or at least incorporate
 Its delicate, dispensable aura.
 I have to believe this fragile flower I've taken
 Is meant to celebrate my awakening, today —
 Essence of eternity's nosegay,
 Which I've held, smelled, now throw on yesterday's grave.

3/10/88 — [2] (02260)

Derelict

A certain vague desolation,
 Loitering in shadows sleeping in gutters,
 *

Huddled in croker sacks
And swaddling clothes retrieved from garbage cans
Heaped at the base of lampposts,
Abandoned by day, like molted locust husks,
Assails my meandering, image-seeking imagination,
This unawake a.m.

At this uncommercial hour,
Midtown St. Louis is a prostitute
Drowsing between sleazy, greasy sheets,
Her wheezing breathing
Uneven as the barb-sharp edges of holly leaves.
I stare at her twitching lids,
Trying to identify objects behind their dark opacity,
Wishing I might lie naked beside her,

Despite her disreputable genealogy,
Just to assuage this shrill aloneness I sense,
Musing how I'd burn my rags,
Hide behind any available assumed identity,
If she'd invite me in, out of the silence,
Let me say, "Thank you! Thank you!"
But her potential solicitations and kindnesses
Will have to converge some other occasion.

I shrink into a familiar alley
Behind the transient hotel,
Huddle under its deli's bellowing exhaust fan,
To borrow some warmth, savor the odors,
Reformulate designs on the wide day at hand.
It's in this interim, just before people appear,
Multiply into crowds that dissolve me,
That I hear your vague, desolate voice calling me home.

3/12/88 (00875)

Till Death Do Us Part: A Personal Holocaust^Δ

Why, at this stage of my life's middle age,
Have I been singled out
To perpetuate my own holocaust, alone?
It wasn't enough to be chosen poet
*

For the ten lost tribes,
To write myself to death, in solitude,
As though it were a privilege conferred upon Moses,
Each poem a confection or toast-the-arrival liquor
For survivors of the forty-year trek —
An artist relegated to the lackluster position of ashkeeper,
Archivist of atrocities and genocide.

No, that was a sentence too lenient,
As was a marriage of convenience between enemies,
Old-foe soul mates hellbent on destroying each other,
Out of boredom. It would have been just too damn easy
To elect me leader of the *Judenrat*,
Convince me to save my skin, by betraying friends,
Associates, my wife and two tiny children,
Dismantle our ghettoed hopes, hand them over
To the bullet and Zyklon B and fire mongers.
No! Demanding me to conspire in such brutal cruelties
Would only have inspired me to seek eternal expiation.

I see, now, Lord, just how clever You were,
Letting me marry beyond the pale,
Assimilate into the seemingly benign host,
Be deceitfully flattered by passion, love, devotion,
Youthful dreams, lingering adolescent beliefs
That a positive attitude can render all things possible,
Get lulled out of my two saving graces,
Skepticism and wariness, so that after making two kids,
I actually forgot to question my dislocation.
And that's when she first subjugated my spirit,
With propagandistic wit, then fact, then axiomatic truths.

That was when my citizenship in the world was canceled,
My philosophic and poetic romanticisms
Got stamped with an indelible Gothic “J,”
Shattering, with rocks composed of scorn and hostility,
The shop of cardinal precepts I deludedly thought
She and I had shared in constructing, from the ground up,
When I became an ostracized member of a “race,”
A dangerous man, a poet who wrote vermin, not verse,
Capable of perverting not-yet-solidified notions of superiority,
In certain persons, like my once-gentle wife,
Who finally succumbed to her paranoias of also being sacrificed,

Just because, once upon a rainbow halo,
She'd decided to fly to the Land of the Sacred Tree,
With me, regardless of all potential consequences.
Now, her questioning of my very heritage,
Her vexatious, perplexing disaffection for me,
Her facile, book-gleaned classification
Of every trait I display diminishes us
To victims of Satan's deportations,
Living disembodiments of our own Final Solution,
Our once-magnificent marriage smoldering rubble
In the aftermath of our souls' Kristallnacht.

3/15/88 (04111)

A Piece of the Pie

The horizon beneath the sky within my eyes
Is as wide as a piecrust
Wrapping over the circumference of time's tin.

With precise, knifelike insight,
I try to slice vision into equal pieces
Neither paltry nor generous to a fault

But just the right size to be easily consumed
Without causing satiety,
Appease imagination's appetite, in a few bites,

Whose pleasing taste might inspire rhymes.
After all, I *am* the Pied Pieman,
Whom Simple Simon meets on his way to each natural high.

3/16/88 (01033)

[My magical pen]

My magical pen
has a nick-nack name:
“Dude”le-stick.
I pick it up as if it were
a limp wand
*

waiting to be shaken into
stiffness
and waved over an empty page
of literary history
in the making —
artifice of loneliness
transfigured.

3/17 & 11/4/88 (02280)

[Since introspection]

Since introspection
Became his motive and modus operandi
For conducting crimes against the spoken word,
His felonious activities have consisted of committing
Prolonged hiatuses between himself
And those wishing either to dissect his silences
Or categorize him and thus render him nonfrightening,
By trying to indict him for bearing similarity
To loquacious souls busy selling their egocentricities,
Accuse him of telling lies by omission,
Perpetrating untruths by refusing to disclose opinions

Or testify under the Fifth Amendment,
At the very real risk of self-incrimination.
These days, he's achieved innocuous notoriety
As the elusive Nobel Prize-winning poet,
Without public proclamations on topical subjects
(Politics, technology, illiteracy, starvation,
Nuclear holocaust, pollution, race,
The state of the arts, in the world at large,
Or his present epiphany and apotheosis) —
A sourceless force, whose voiceless syllables
Fill approaching ears, with provoking evocations.

Despite those trespassers' polite persistence,
Dissimulating officiousness, promises of monetary gain,
They fail at causing him to mistake their patronizing
Self-aggrandizements for humanistic solicitations.
He maintains his strict silence, desire for privacy,
And the rigid belief that his printed verse

*

Contains its own first and last words, his obit and epitaph.
The only arbiter he trusts is history itself,
Whose posthumous sifting will tell all relevant truths.
For now, he's content inventing poetical silences.

3/19 & 3/22/88 — [2] (06030)

Setting New Speed Records

Soon, but not too quickly,
He clears the city's staccato stop signs,
Traffic's obbligatos to frustration,
Obstacles between in-car-eration and freedom.

He's a speed junkie, with an addiction
Requiring daily fixes. Arteries and veins
He injects are highways he travels,
Flying high, flying low to the ground.

Fastidiously, he keeps his needle clean;
Otherwise, his syringelike machine, spewing fuel,
In its freebasing ignition of ingredients,
Could infect his system's equilibrium,

Cause the entire vehicle to OD,
Stall out, come to a halt
At shoulder's no-man's-edge, himself a victim
Conspicuously suspect, in such ephemeral dereliction.

But this Wednesday's incandescent sun
Doesn't scourge his burning eyes,
And the initial twitching he experienced,
Setting out, has completely dissipated.

As he heads south, throttled flat out,
Flesh, bones, intellect, memory disintegrate.
For now, destinations are implausible,
All causes and consequences irrelevant.

Only one purpose stirs him:
To keep moving, forever, in this fluid state,
Further toward Nowhere's western slope
Than he's ever before dared soar.

3/22/88 — [1] (06031)

[Every March 23,]

For my dear wife, Jan

Every March 23,
 For the last twenty-two years,
 I've awakened, into this ceremonial day,
 With designs of honoring your nativity.
 An appreciator of ritual,
 I've tried to fathom, in the occasion,
 Mythic rites we might exploit.
 In the past, you, I, and our two children,
 Troika and Trilogy, have found ourselves
 In Florida, to honor your day. But tonight,
 We gather in the land of our captivity,
 St. Louis, in subdued celebration,
 To partake of repast, at Al Baker's,
 Make obligatory toasts, with diet sodas
 Instead of champagne, say our good wishes,
 Dispense what few presents we've assembled.
 But something about your reaching forty-four,
 Not desiring to call undue attention
 To your unhappy fall from grace,
 Makes this twenty-third birthday with me,
 This twenty-third of March,
 No sweet, exciting rite of spring
 But, rather, a somber and sullen sacrifice,
 As if, tonight, we were marking a death,
 Not birth, of Lady Jan . . . sad-eyed Jan.

3/23/88 — [1] & [3] (04110)

March 23, 1988

*For my sad-eyed wife, Jan,
 with all my love, L.D.*

Hosanna in the highest! Shout praises!
 Today, we commemorate your nativity.
 Let every bell swing perpetually,
 Ring with swelling resonances
 Echoing echoes of love songs
 *

We composed long ago
And sang to each other,
Once upon a San Francisco fantasy.

Let frogs, crickets, and locusts
Throat and scratch melodious motets,
And let lovers living and flown
Converge on this moment,
To do twilight rites,
While you and I race, naked,
Around the base of Sutro Park's slopes,
Chasing our eloping shadows into the ocean.

Let us be reborn, this evening,
And, hand in hand, span death's chasm,
With happy laughter, reckless affection.
Let welling bells and insects
And whisperous sibilances of lovers,
Floating across sleep, like dream-clouds,
Raise praises, proclaiming
Hosanna in the highest, birthday girl!

3/23/88 — [2] & [4] (01013)

Caught in the Act

Even now, two days after the eruption,
Vaporous clouds opaque vision.
Ashen images of you, enraged, pacing,
Desperate as a caged black leopard
Taken while fleeing heights just below
The volcano's upper-timberline perimeter,
Stalk this new day's hallucinations.

Your cyanide-tinctured, fear-flecked eyes,
Flicking like tongues of lightning-snakes
Striking out of a turbulent sky,
Yet cause me to shrivel, shiver,
As they did when you tried to annihilate me,
With venomous hostility, for stepping on you
While you hid in your late-night alcoholic camouflage.

Whether startled or offended by my intrusion
 Just before 1 a.m., as you entered
 Our dark, sleeping house
 (A shelter for two implicated innocents
 And a bewildered husband
 Cuckolded by your marital apostasy
 And courtship with freedom's pimps),

Or believing yourself justifiably abused,
 For being made to proclaim yourself
 Accountable for defiant infidelities,
 And thus expiated and absolved, in one swoop,
 Of my crude timorousness, at asking you
 To answer a solitary question —
 Should any husband have to suffer such cruelty? —

I can't even venture. All I see
 Are memory's specters from that evening:
 A trapped feline, cornered viper,
 Forced, by a mortal enemy, to strike,
 Bite with fangs so sharp they yet create
 This headache, which blurs sight, right now,
 As I grope through debris of this volcanic blight.

3/25/88 — [1] (04109)

A Nosegay of Roses ^Δ

Two days ago,
 I chose to celebrate your nativity,
 With what I believed would be received
 As a token of my affection and devotion:

An etched crystal vase containing four roses
 Nestled in a halo of baby's-breath
 And green sprigs (delicate emblems,
 An execution of an *esthétique* of love) —

Tightly closed sweetheart buds,
 One coral, another crimson, two of yellow,
 Whose fragility and uncumbrous number
 Were intended to symbolize our family's design.

But when evening arrived
And I retrieved them from the refrigerator,
More than I realized had altered.
The arrangement no longer seemed appropriate,

For dark sparks jumping our hearts' gap.
I thought how likenesses we impose
On disparate objects, ideas, and people
Often fail to materialize as we would hope,

Instead lose something in translation,
Skip entire generations, leap the years,
Get lost in crowded shuffles. Now, I grieve,
Reprising, frame by frame, the sequence

Reenacting your hysterical seizure on the stairs,
Your turning back, glaring down at me,
With your Medusa-flecked eyes,
And that vase, my birthday present to you,

Poised like Lady Liberty's freedom torch
Flickering, precariously, in a gale,
Before you hurled it to the front-hall floor,
Forever shattering our vitreous spirits.

Even though two days have elapsed,
I can feel the flesh of my clenched fists
Pressing against glass slivers
I gathered from fissures in the terrazzo,

Feel the hot bleeding, the nauseating emptiness
Your desperate, reckless gesture
Left in my head and gut. But what lingers most
Is the tableau of those four roses,

Still nestled in their greenery and baby's-breath,
Spread out like victims in a morgue,
Perfectly fragrant, vivid as if just picked,
Only the crimson sleeping beauty

Showing signs of violation. When I bent down,
Gently cradling the gift,
I saw that that rose's stem had been snapped viciously,
Just below its blossom, like a broken neck,

And I stroked its yet-unfolding petals,
 Weeping (as even in the closing moments
 Of this poem about you and me, I weep),
 Believing I might bring it back to life.

3/25/88 — [2] (02248)

Golden Anniversaries

*For Mom and Dad,
 with love,
 L.D.,
 4/12/88*

Celebrating your golden anniversary, tonight,
 We just might fail to realize
 We're actually here
 To commemorate fifty years times two,
 An entire century you've spent together,
 In a marriage of paired spirits, friendship,
 Shared interests, inventive solutions
 For keeping whole love's half-life soul.

But also we must not neglect
 Praising this generational accomplishment,
 In which you've experienced joy,
 Fidelity, affection a hundred years deep,
 Abundant touching,
 Conceiving, from nothingness into substance,
 Quint-essential children:
 L.D., Babs, Dale, Roger, and Jeffrey.

If divination is a gift we possess,
 Then let us envision this wish:
 Precisely every fifty years, eternity-wide,
 May we be mystically united
 And, toasting your golden anniversaries,
 Lift our own spirits higher,
 Inspired by the mighty denial of death
 Your loving union exemplifies.

4/9/88 — [1] (01029)

Calling a Redbud a Redbud

Every early April,
I catch myself contemplating the same déjà vued
Déjà vu, which reiterates its own echoing
Echoes, questioning, unrhetorically,
But with poetic eloquence, the identical question:
Why are those exquisite magenta and light-purple trees
Named redbuds? Maybe they're lavender,
Fuchsia, heliotrope . . . I don't really know,
Can't say with a botanist's sense for accuracy;
Mine is not a scientist's eye nor litigious mind.
But I am reasonably assured they're not the hue
Of arterial blood, despite their designation,
Not fire-engine bright,
Though vibrant, in their own muted quietude.

Perhaps what disturbs me most
Is that their seemingly inappropriate appellation
Is likely consistent with a basic arbitrariness in the way
Taxonomists have chosen to distinguish objects,
From the Middle Ages to this very moment,
Especially when I, a namer of things myself,
Can't rise above contemplating
How, each lush spring, my intellect
Gets all mixed up amidst pure feeling,
Lets sensory impressions
Get adulterated by compulsive reasoning processes.
And again, this season, I beg commutation,
For being a seeder and sower of poems,
Not intimate lover of such sweet, lusty trees.

4/9/88 — [2] (06032)

Battenberg Lace ^Δ

Hoping, inconspicuously, to erase creases
Disking his forehead, furrowing both cheeks,
Moating his beaked nose,
Like fidgeting mythic tributaries
Dripping down Mississippi and Euphrates deltas
*

Or haloing medieval fortifications,
 He repeatedly rubs the paper napkin over his face
 (Fleeting, he recalls once making grave rubbings
 In a remote cloister of Westminster Abbey).

Grease collects, like coal-dust smudge,
 On the white background, or blurred fingerprints
 Placed, hastily, on a police report.
 He studies these vaguely telltale shapes
 As if fathoming creatures swimming in turbid shallows
 Of a river surging upstream, through memory,
 Or focusing, under maximum magnification,
 At twitching protozoans.

But no matter how vigorously he repeats his motion,
 Grease keeps reappearing; the tributaries
 Won't quit flowing. He senses his fluids leaking,
 As though, like a bag of chocolate morsels
 Set too near a baker's oven, he were melting,
 Melting, flowing with smelters' molten lead.
 Suddenly, he swims amidst the darting creatures
 Fluting through memory's tributaries, toward extinction.
 Soon, bones and flesh will evaporate in the stratosphere
 Above Belzec's belching crematory stacks, leaving an indelible stain
 On God's freshly cleaned and pressed Battenberg-lace sky.

4/15 & 4/20/88 (06033)

David's Bar Mitzvah [△]

Today, in the temple, he'll read portions of the Torah
 And Haftarah, in halting but undaunted Hebrew
 He's taught himself, these past six months,
 Without parental prodding,
 To translate from a vague mother tongue
 And proclaim before a congregation of family and friends
 Witnessing his coming of age, history's renascence.

David "Davy" Kantrovitz is the first male
 In seven decades, five families wide,
 To taste the ancient language,
 Let its consonants and vowels shape his mouth and lips
 *

Into syllables whispered, shouted, gasped
 At pharaohs, Roman emperors, Plantagenets,
 Fascist *duci*, and Aryan *Führers*.

And we who sit listening to his ritual rendering
 From Scripture feel, without realizing,
 We're accomplices to his mythic wandering
 Across that Sinai-like stretch of unrolled scroll
 His eyes traverse gropingly. He speaks for us,
 Who never reached beyond the few memorized passages
 Of "*Shema, Yisrael, Adonai, Eloheinu*,

"*Adonai, Echod*" and the Kaddish's mesmeric strains.
 He confirms our precarious, glass-fragile heritage,
 This thirteen-year-old boy
 Transfigured, today, into the most recent leader of our people.
 Though he's my oldest sister's son, he's also Moses,
 Toting the stones down to the base of Mount Sinai,
 Where we wait to load them into our spacious carts.

4/16–17/88 (02246)

Looking Back, One Last Time

Even now, twenty miles out of Farmington,
 Staring, with distracted focus,
 On dogwood and redbud clusters
 Traipsing, like Isadora-hues, through forests
 Bordering my northerly passage back to the city,
 Lost as a stray dog in vague neighborhoods,
 I fail to accept my destiny, vehemently refuse,
 Instead choose to deny truth's consequences.
 Today, I've sold our beautiful rural estate,
 That magical Crystal Palace castle
 Where two children grew inside their own prisms,
 Refracting silhouettes of us and the "country,"
 While we lived, furiously, at a snail's speed,
 Eluding boredom, substituting tranquillity
 For optical illusions of emotional delusions
 Urban dwellers thrive on, who have such affluence,
 They seek out paid listeners, arbitrators,
 Psychotherapy referees, who, for precisely sixty minutes,

*

Will agree or disagree, depending on the direction
 Windy, egotistical discourse or confessional self-pity
 Requires of them, to ensure a cliff-hanger ending
 Will entice, tantalize, their client back to the suite,
 For yet another and another session, indeterminately.

I refuse to accept history's trying to parenthesize me,
 Transfigure me, from seminal text,
 Into arcane, scholarly, exceedingly small-type footnote,
 Whose citation, if sought in the first place,
 Won't ever again appear to bear distinctive relationship
 To events long ago suppressed, buried.

I decline to accept this seeming transfer of deed.
 For all the change that has occurred recently,
 Rendering us displaced refugees, immigrants
 Groping to set down new shoots, from uprooted trunks,
 Relocate in St. Louis, among other transient spirits
 Hovering like hummingbirds around feeders,
 Something of the waifish, diasporan daze about us
 Acquaints me with ancient surroundings,
 Lets us remain isolated and yet get assimilated
 Into this society invisible unto itself.

Even now, forty miles out of Farmington,
 I, Lot, recognize I'm my own lot
 In life. Risking stasis, looking back,
 Fixing the past in a gaze too idyllic,
 Sitting on former glories and romantic deeds,
 I turn, perhaps as if to test Biblical myth,
 Superstition, prophecy, and wait.
 Slowly, I feel my bones growing rigid, my lips
 Going parched, mouth filling with a salty taste
 So acrid, I choke on my own fumes.
 Dimly, in the rearview mirror,
 My eyes see, rising out of the sunset,
 A house, city, civilization — a grieving conflagration.

4/18-19 & 4/21/88 (04108)

A Plague on Our House

So much for those gold-woven prophecies
 That flew over love's Carcassonne,
 *

Where we luxuriated during youth's Middle Ages,
 Those pennons fluttering, voluptuously,
 In salty, semen-heated breezes
 That touching, tasting, tonguing, teasing generated
 When *we* were the sacred destination
 To which we marched, on Crusades of our own inspiration.

Today, those flags droop like tulip petals
 Succumbing to a late-April freeze,
 Whose imperceptible shivering
 Might be the frigid feverishness of our disaffection.
 Even love's fortress is a cold-breathing cave,
 Its tapestries, which we wove of dream-threads,
 Shrouds, now. Sad, how accurately
 We prophesy Visigothic siege.

4/25/88 (04107)

[This late-April a.m.,]

This late-April a.m.,
 His fingers twitch; the wrist of his right hand
 Twists hysterically, gripping
 His magical yellow fine-point Bic pen
 Like a drunk bum
 Stumbling through the bowels of Grand Central
 Station, clutching an empty fifth
 Of Jack Daniel's or jug of Mogen David.

No flow, let alone paltry trickle,
 Escapes his scribe-stick's tip,
 The metaphorical lip of his amphora
 Containing vital spiritus frumenti, ichor.
 Not the slightest inspiration
 Translates itself into liquid strokes.
 Creative stasis makes him inebriated
 On his own Demosthenes-words writ in stone.

By degrees, his knuckles grow stiff.
 Myriad wrist muscles
 And tendons, binding joint to joint,
 Quit twitching, go rigid.
 His eyes assay the blue-ruled page,
 *

Void save for an inch-long blood smear
 Near the top, where his little finger,
 Its nail bitten to the quick,

Has propped up, like a whittled cane,
 The entire weight of his intellect,
 For more than an hour.

Now, he aborts his painful effort
 To delay the intoxication of writer's block
 Long enough to salvage, from its vapors,
 A quotable phrase or trope.
 But the stain remains — silence's cosmic seal.

4/26/88 — [1] (06034)

[The entire seventy-five-mile drive home][‡]

The entire seventy-five-mile drive home
 From Farmington, my thoughts
 Focus on the spirea sprig I snapped.
 Sitting beside me, on the front seat,
 Its fragile, five-petaled white clusters,
 Strung out, along thin limbs,
 Like beads on a sanctified rosary,
 Remind me of so many sweet springs
 Arrested only in my poems, now,
 Like clovers and oak leaves pressed between pages —
 Days soft with scented wild-onion tufts,
 Bee-boisterous honeysuckles, hyacinths,
 Lilies of the valley, lilacs,
 Nights murmurous with cicadas and croaking toads,
 Graced by my inebriated, name-giving traipsing,

From early April all the way through
 To late September. Remembering that bush
 Tumescent as a pregnant snow goose,
 With profusely drooping blooms, in April,
 Crocheted in leafy green, by May's end or June,

I gaze at my single sprig,
 Occupying the front seat, next to me —
 A sleepy hitchhiker drowsing for this hour
 *

And a half, dying along with me,
As I leave an entire accomplished life behind.

Soon, I'll arrive, twenty years later,
To a time I'll fail to recognize,
Where no spireas grow,
No flowering fruit trees adorn the hours
Weaving cocoons around my senses.
Too soon, even remembering will diminish,
Fade, blur to vague whispers
Of that once-and-only once upon a gone time,
When my imagination's children
First came to kneel at that side-yard spirea,
Taste its scent, bathe in its ivory hue,

4/26/88 — [2] (04106)

Willy's Put in Fifty Years of Service ^Δ

Sweet Jesus! He's off and running again,
This fall-like end-of-April Wednesday.
Jesus! It's the middle of the week,
And he's only now getting his gears meshed.
Ah, but then, who's to report to,
When the boss is your mirror image,
Goes by the same Judeo-Christian and surnames:
Willy Sypher? No Loman, he,
Though Acme-Zenith, of St. Louie, Mo.,
Has owned him, body and soul,
These fifty years . . . an old goat, perhaps;
A pet rat who comes out of the woodwork,
Season after season, smelling cheese
To be nudged off the trap's platform
Without tripping fate's taut-sprung guillotine;
A schlimazel, a nudnik, a schmegegge,
At times the heel, the company schlemiel,
Who takes the brunt of scatological effronteries
When shipments are late, orders shorted,
Substituted with unrequested goods
And dumped back in the distribution center's lap,
By an irate customer — shipping collect! —
Or payments aren't forthcoming

*

And he's made to do the dunning by telephone,
On his own dime; at times the hero,
As when, single-handedly,
He landed the entire Big & Tall account
Of 275 franchises nationwide,
Because he'd known their newly promoted
Dress-slack merchandise manager,
From having serviced his parents' store,
In Cape Girardeau, twenty-five years before,
For which he received, five years running,
One-half of 1 percent residual commission
On combined sales; sometimes the chump,
As when Sumpsky's, of Columbia, Mo.,
Filed for bankruptcy and left A-Z
Holding a hundred thousand pieces
Of Confederate money. But all these years,
He's managed to go about his business
Without appreciable intervention from above,
Sales up one year, down the next,
Ever eking a decent income for his family,
Without regretting the repetition of chores,
Frequent boredom of his travelling,
The tortuous back-and-forth routine
Of lugging, from trunk to showroom,
Bulging black cases, swatch cards,
Sample garments he places on collapsible racks.
After all, he might have been rolling dough,
Sewing lasts or soles, waiting tables,
Spending every waking moment
Contemplating his own minute-to-minute failure
To rise above ordinariness,
Claim stake to his own homestead or Sutro
Mother lode; he might have decided
To cut an eight-foot piece of garden hose,
Hook it to the tailpipe of his car,
Some dazed midnight,
And drink in its invisible carbon monoxide,
Reenact his own meaningless danse macabre,
From the Middle Ages, or Aryan baptism,
Substituting his garage for a shower room
At Auschwitz. Not Willy!
“Bullshit!” he always mutters

*

When intransigent vagaries assail him,
Try to tantalize and seduce him
Into choosing the easy way out,
Path of least resistance, Fat City.
Thing is, he's known, from the very beginning,
Being of the Chosen never guaranteed peace,
Freedom, affluence, stoneless rows to hoe,
Straight seams to sew,
And that Easy Street, for a road peddler,
Never got a fella anywhere quick,
Since the only shortcuts to success
Take the uninitiated and lazy
Through Scylla and Charybdis,
Kafkaesque corridors and labyrinths and mazes,
Through intersections where hitchhikers,
Like Odysseus and the Sphinx, sit,
Spitting out directions, to pilgrims and merchants,
From Persia, China, India, Missouri,
Who've permanently lost
Their temporary, ephemeral ways.
Indeed, even in his sixties, and now,
Reaching seventy, Willy realizes
Surviving isn't something you think about,
Simply *do*. To contemplate dying
Has always seemed fundamentally futile,
Since the conclusion to his own conclusion
Is such foregone news.
And who knows? This blue, cool Wednesday
Could be his first and last,
The only one just like it he'll ever have.
And who really cares anyway,
So long as he can figure out
How to use its hours to buy him time
To buy more time to translate into commissions
To let him purchase certain necessities,
Such as self-respect, pride in his work,
Which, when spent, will require replenishing?
More time! More time, ad infinitum!
And if he's particularly lucky,
This abbreviated week (only three days),
He just might entice a few new customers
Into trying an item or two

*

From his exciting spring line. At least
He might get his wing tip between the jamb
And a slamming hollow plywood door
Or leave his card in the extended palm
Of a floor-model mannequin
Coordinated, to the nines,
In his most ardent competitor's best ensemble.
And on the other hand, if good fortune
Has run its course, carried him
To the very end of the very last highway
Fate's scheduled him to navigate,
At least he'll go out the way he entered:
Driving, hellbent, to damn well be
The absolute best sales representative
Any pants and suit manufacturer
Ever had, ever *hoped* to have,
And knew it never again *would* have,
Equal to the likes and lights
Of Willy Sypher, *Adonai, Echod!*

4/27/88 — [1] (02321)

Dissolution

Poking through a stack of old notes,
Opened envelopes, and folders
Overflowing with paid bills, receipts,
Which had gathered, like attic toys, in the kitchen,
I found a single white sheet.
The red ink of my wife's recognizable scribbling
Might have been blood
Her abrading words made my eyes spurt
Or just tears I cried,
Reading "alienation of affection —
He can freeze your assets:
Cost of legal procedure — fee per hour."

In all our years of marriage,
I had never considered myself
The object of private scrutinization,
Being discussed by outside advisers,
Or her, my princess still,

*

As my potential enemy or adversary,
With quantifiable possessions worth protecting
Against *me*, a threat to my own family,
From within — a psychic implosion.
Yet those terse words
Might have been the motto on Auschwitz's gate,
For the irreversible scourge they inflicted.

That was three months ago. Today, alone,
Bereft of my children, uprooted from my home,
Like a tornado or earthquake victim,
I gaze through the hypnotic glaze
My unconcentrated mind
Misfocuses on that solitary paper I kept
And speculate on what I might have done
To elude my fate, had I taken more seriously
That early warning of a massive attack
In progress, actually well along,
Or whether, in fact, it wasn't already far too late
To prevent my death by broken heart.

4/27/88 — [2] (04105)

Bombing Out

For reasons well within my control,
My hold on this magical ballpoint quill
Is so knotted, so rigid,
I imagine myself a World War II
Bomber pilot in the smoke-and-flame throes
Of going down over Mannheim,
Clutching the stick, for my life,
With both bleeding hands, knowing, intimately,
From other nightmares' blueprints
On file in corporeal headquarters,
The bronchiolar contours of my diving spiral.

I can't seem to nudge it into motion.
Its intractable point
Becomes its own inexorably receding ocean
(Draining into an invisible fissure,
Where mismeshed tectonic plates undulate)
*

Or the crater of an imploding volcano —
A vast opening in the cosmos,
Down whose tunnel my stumbling imagination,
Groping to form poetic order out of my loneliness,
Tumbles, this May morning, riding southwesterly,
Endlessly descending on the head of a nuclear pen.

5/2/88 — [1] (06035)

[Despite the many tens of hundreds of times]

Despite the many tens of hundreds of times
I've made this northerly drive
Up out of the Ozark foothills, to St. Louis,
Exits, cliffs, buildings, signs, chuckholes
I've always anticipated and recognized
Have never misguided me,
Sent me straying down dead ends,
Blind alleys, cul-de-sacs,
Caused me to spend energy experimenting
With directions, distances, elapsed times.
Always, before today, I've arrived safely
At whatever heading I set.

But this afternoon, none of my landmarks
Acts out its assigned part;
Instead, they blur, hinder vision,
As if each were a cinder blown back
From my flying wash, irritating my eyes.
Suddenly, I am a UFO
Lost in the stratosphere of a nameless planet,
Stranded in a zone inimical to my own,
Anything I've ever known.
Hyperventilation leads to hallucinations.
I wheeze, choke, go comatose,
Grow rigid, in a final seized throe.

But how could such a phenomenon occur
Without issuing forewarnings?
How is it that I missed all hints?
Were there clues I should have noticed,
Behavioral changes, questionable coincidences?
*

Death, that bastard, makes no exceptions!
Now, the land is spitting me back up.
Soon, wife, only the bones of our love
Will be strewn across this bleached desert.
And, oh, God, our two children,
Like Moses and Miriam, will crawl on bleeding knees,
As they grope for traces of their ill-fated parents.

5/2/88 — [2] (04104)

Obsequies of Adultery

Wife Jan, my dearly beloved spouse,
With whom I've reveled and dreamed ,
These past twenty-three years
Less two, give or take a decade,
During which you put a plague on my house,
By virtue of your amateurish infidelity,
Selling, for free, the heirlooms of our brief heritage,

Now is the hour of our mutual discontent,
Brought about by the punishment
You so calculatedly sentenced me to suffer.
Just being made to gaze eye to eye,
Register the inverted "A's
Cascading, down your face, like debris
Over a hillside during a mud slide,

Pains my forehead, drains me of energy
Necessary to accomplish memory's
Most fundamental exhumations or fantasize
Or hope that silence and physical separation
Might somehow mask the raised welt
Where your sharp barbs abraded my imagination,
When you gave your soul's self to another lover.

As of late, whenever I surface from work,
To breathe fresh thoughts,
My groping eyes get caught in downstream currents
And are drawn into invisible vortices
Daymares belching on noon's lunar crust create.
And I'm lost in sleazy hallucinations
Creatured with Hieronymus Bosch monsters and freaks,

A vast sinscape of sexual acts you've performed
With sheep and snakes and AIDS victims
Wearing penises between their shoulder blades,
Whose hands are steam-shovel buckets
With smooth teeth shaped for digging graves
Out of womb-caves and whose legs
Are spurred and end in scimitar-claws.

I shiver, passing from minute to minute
To hour, as if running naked atop a glacier
Without realizing it's already fallen
Into the great Arctic flow.
In my not knowing where to go,
How to exit our opaque marriage
Or even begin to locate a vision spacious enough

To accommodate another love,
In what remains of my above-ground cemetery,
Each of whose future years
Carries a tombstone bearing your name, Jan,
Instead of dates, a legacy of obloquy
Your premature death has bequeathed me,
Even my bones sense the impending loneliness.

5/9/88 (04103)

A Witch's Brew

This cool day in early May,
No letters or words
Rise to the surface of its cerulean bowl,
To give God's alphabet soup
The thick consistency required
For ruminating, brooding. It's as if tomorrow
Were a taste to be savored by sniff,
Not swallowed, assimilated,
Made part of imagination's fuel supply.

Explanations, reasons, justifications
For this paucity of symbols, images,
And shapes that can help unscramble chaos
Fail to let me generate plausible conclusions
*

As to why no poem suggests itself,
Rearranges the empty spaces, on the page,
Waiting for some kind of divine sign,
Personal confession, or declaration of rights
To privacy and silence, freedom and creativity.

Is it possible that my existence
Has lapsed into eclipse or that its capacity
To extrapolate facts from abstractions
No longer operates on a metaphoric frequency?
Perhaps there are no more poems
Floating through the stratosphere, toward our universe.
Maybe I've simply forgotten how to dream them
Into recognizable ideas, alchemize essences,
Just by breathing life from undifferentiated air,

Or more likely, I already died
Before waking, this shimmering morning,
Hoping to skim the sky,
In search of a few edible letters and words
I might nudge into my mind's soupspoon
And consume as food, to get me started . . .
Died unexpectedly, last night,
When my wife left our bedroom, crying,
Weeping tiny "A"s my accusations stirred off the bottom.

5/10/88 — [1] (04102)

Spring Bloodletting

With barbarous arbitrariness,
The dark sky, like a pack of hyenas
Attacking zebra foals scattered from their herd,
Pounces on the city's greening trees,
Ripping, stripping, clawing, gnashing, with its teeth,
Succulent leaf clusters just burgeoning,
Splattering them to the sidewalks,
Into streets glistening under vapor lamps.

Voracious rain-blasts frenzy the air,
Tearing, limb from limb, helpless twigs,
Snapping stems. Their debris is spring carrion

*

Destined to be dispossessed prematurely,
 Never to taste the sweet, sexual electricity
 Of photosynthesis, in leaves which, otherwise,
 Might have reached maturity by late May,
 Hung on, through November's Indian summer.

And seeing them thundering out of the storm,
 By the hundreds, not fluttering
 Like wondrously colored spinnakers
 Racing across October's San Francisco Bay
 But as winterbound hellhounds,
 I can't help being confused
 By the anachronistic incongruity of this season
 Or astounded by death's instinct for survival.

5/10/88 — [2] (06036)

[All morning, I keep sneaking up][△]

All morning, I keep sneaking up
 Behind time's slowly sweeping minute hand,
 Peeking out, hoping, prematurely,
 To see eleven o'clock just around the bend,
 When designing fate has assigned me
 To swoop up my ten-year-old boy, from school,
 Whisk him away, in the smoothest truancy
 Father and son have ever shared.

And now, just the two of us are flying low,
 Easterly, toward a known location.
 He sleeps in the front seat, beside me,
 In this 300 ZX,
 His nightly companion, Snoozer, the stuffed beagle,
 Nesting in his lap, its docile face
 Reclining on his indiscernibly thumping chest,
 Staring up, into his undefiled profile.

Peering over, at patternless intervals,
 I reenact our encounter hours earlier,
 When, turning onto Wellington Way,
 Cruising down the street, I found him out front,
 Thumb heaven-sprung, in ecstasy's gesture,
 Freedom the only homework in his satchel,

*

Our eyes meeting, on greeting,
Springing fires, spontaneously, from love's rubbed flints.

Together, we're escaping routine's dreary odyssey,
For the highroad, just us two,
This midweek early afternoon,
Slipping, unobtrusively, into disappearance,
And none too soon, before history,
Twitching like the styluses on a polygraph machine,
Decides to force another victim into submission,
Insist he cry uncle before dying of blight . . .

And "he" is, indeed, "Uncle Duck," to my son,
My wife's forty-seven-year-old brother,
My friend for twenty-three of his years.
He's leaving us despite all our fuss.
Technology we rush to his defense
Only delays his fitful hold on life.
Today, my boy and I drive five hours straight,
To beat fate to its destination.

5/18 & 5/20/88 — [1] (00981)

[A vague funereal tranquillity suffuses this house,][‡]

A vague funereal tranquillity suffuses this house,
Its crowded plot contiguous
To a hundred other identical constructions
Crowded into this subdivision,
Distinguished only by sequential numbers
Tacked to vinyl siding or on mailboxes.

I sit at the center of a mystical web
Woven of gently suspended sounds:
A few human voices escaping open doors
Bordering this backyard;
An occasional motor drone of a low-flying plane;
Predominantly birds, precocious, social, loquacious.

Somewhere deep within this charnel house
(Where, for five days, Troika and I
Have tried to add texture to the bland landscape

*

Contouring the four lives residing inside,
Day out, night in),
I can hear the dying one groping, pacing,

Pretending, to himself, whatever object
He now deems vital to keeping him alive
Can be located amidst the spent detritus of years
Neatly displayed on medicine-cabinet shelves,
In drawers, boxes, assuming that the object
Ever existed other than in his immediate urgency.

While I imagine him methodically searching,
My eyes vector in on sweet songs
Emanating from cardinals, starlings, sparrows
Perched on locust-tree limbs
Conspicuous for their missing thorns.
For liquid moments, I surrender to drowsiness,

Become notes flowing from their throats,
Feathers letting go, behind their motion,
As they dart, light, shift nervously,
Then exchange places again.
Borrowing, appropriating, possessing other lives
Is as easy, sometimes, as breathing,

Blinking, causing the ears and tongue
To orchestrate voices commingling in the wide sky.
Or is it? Sitting out on this patio,
Bathing in 8 a.m. sunlight,
I focus in on a man four houses down,
Who's waving, waving, animatedly, saying, "Hello.

"How are you? How are you?"
My lethargic senses fail to connect me
To his implications. He's mistaken my shape
For that of the dying one, inside.
To him, I might be a shape-shifted incubus,
Whose metamorphosis he's registered as witchcraft.

Realizing my obtuseness has left a false impression
On this neighbor, one likely to do
Some small damage in the evolving scheme,
I vow to inform my host
Of my accidental inattentiveness, for him to rectify,
With belated apologies or plausible explanation.

Anyway, in my absence, my inadvertency
Should provide both neighbors
With a few moments of light conversation,
At my expense — a small price to pay, actually,
To have escaped assuming, permanently,
The identity of my wife's dying brother.

As if on a breeze, the wraith enters the outside.
His gaunt presence is its own quarantine.
He wears that medieval pall of plagues
So malevolent and pernicious,
Men suffer fear and trembling
Whenever someone sick comes near.

We share our eyes' silent meditations,
Spend an extended hiatus, in human communication,
Letting the cardinals perform morning's chorus.
There is just too much uncharted future
For us to invest in, with loquacious speculation,
Too few painless moments, to waste the present

Begging for commiseration, indulging in self-pity,
Discussing the logistics of burial plots,
Death dress suits, life-insurance policies come due,
Estate-tax consequences, myriad indices
Already systematically mapped out
By navigators who've sailed over the abyss.

Instead, we remain content to be acted upon
By the sun's healing rays — both of us,
Though only one has been given a prognosis
Of two months to exist, only one

5/20–21/88 — [2] on 5/20 (06037)

Peru, Illinois

In this sleepy little industrial town
Surmounting the Illinois River,
They're dying like dragonflies, death-moths, spiders,
Silently, by twos and threes, perniciously,
And more insidiously, they don't realize
They're masterminding their own demise,
*

By keeping petcocks open,
On the PCB tanks
Supplying the electric-transformer plant,
Failing to flush radium particles,
From the water-purifying station,
And neutralize noxious gases from exhaust stacks,
For lack of matching federal funds
To let them purchase and install afterburners.

They can't see the dark, mysterious forest
Teeming with medieval witches and creatures
Out of Bosch and Dali, for thorn trees
Scratching their eyes, or hear the Four Horsemen
Riding imagination's plains,
Toward the cemetery eager to ingest their lives.
They're just too myopic, too enslaved
To making livelihoods, raising families,
Trying to savor the tiniest slice of the pie
Fate apportions them, to detect sources
Persistently emitting carcinogenic particles.
They go about their daily business unsuspectingly.
If only they'd spend one morning
In the waiting room of the oncology ward

At St. Margaret's, in nearby Spring Valley,
Or take a crash course,
From the radiologist on staff,
In reading CAT scans of lungs,
Livers, lymph nodes, breasts, rectums, and colons,
They might sense the dangers at hand,
Try to mount whatever defenses
Their scanty understanding and money might afford.
But none of this is apt to happen.
They barely have enough spare time,
Between radiation and chemotherapy treatments
And burials they detain only slightly,
To change beneficiaries, custodians, executors,
Before their houses of cards collapse
And they disappear into the unheeded statistics,

Which, if consulted, indexed, cross-referenced,
Would, indeed, render a recognizable pattern,
Forewarn this sleepy industrial community,
Glued to oozing hills above the Illinois River,

*

That the water above which they're perched
 Is another Love Canal or Times Beach.
 But it won't occur to them
 To condemn their beloved churches,
 Parks, homes, public-meeting halls, malls,
 Since they can't see the poisons —
 Rising off contaminated ponds, sewers, curbs,
 Flowing in water they drink,
 Slap on their faces, to revive them from drowsiness —
 Disguised as pollen and dander, in the air.

Unaware of their immediate proximity
 To agents of despair, carriers of the scourge,
 They perish, with pride, piety, in ignorance
 Of their enemy, surrender somewhat stubbornly
 But surrender, nonetheless,
 Acquiesce to their aggressor's final terms,
 As if theirs were the war to end all wars.
 I've returned, today, to attend Eric's burial.
 Just crossing the bridge, arriving,
 Driving up desolate Fourth Street,
 Which is lined with decaying Victorian buildings,
 I feel my lymph nodes and bone marrow
 Being invaded by paranoia so real,
 I hear their cells yelling to me, for help.

5/23/88 (06038)

On the Alleged Inferiority of Animal Intellect

Recently, I've been reading, in lay magazines,
 About suspected deep degrees
 Of intellectual capacity for rudimentary abstraction,
 Differentiation in syntax,
 And reasoning, in velvet and rhesus monkeys,
 Pigeons, dolphins, and sea lions,
 Not just for rote conditioning and reflexive acts
 That require years of laboratory training to perfect.

I believe some primates can make discernments
 Between danger emanating from felines,
 Eagles, snakes, by altering the pitch of their screams,
 Thus letting those nearby get a step
 *

On climbing the tallest tree, to escape leopards,
Cower in the grass, caves,
To elude the mile-high vision of skydiving predators,
Scurry away from boas and ground vipers
Lurking as adventitious limbs or whorls in the dirt.

Indeed, the more I read about behavior
Various animals exhibit naturally,
The less unique seems my own present grief,
Arising from spying and eavesdropping on my wife's
Surreptitious activities with a married neighbor
And from lies she promulgates,
To keep her secret affections from discovering me
Sleeping mutely, futilely, between the sheets
Of my inescapable cuckholdhood.

Now, I even wonder whether possessing a lexicon
Numbering 45,000 words,
As opposed to Sarah the chimp's 153,
Being able to speak rather than chitter
Really distinguish us as higher-ups
On the great chain of being.
Possibly, though that ape's slightly below me,
Her ability to dangle, for hours, from the celestial rope
Hung from God's ceiling

And perform gymnastic feats I can't approximate
Due to my physical limitations and inner imbalance,
Elevates her, in the eyes of whatever divinity
Might have supplied all of us, alike,
With gray matter enough to recognize and isolate
Infidelity and adultery
Perpetrated by mate and an unmitigated suitor.
Like an anxious possum pacing in the road, at night,
I mourn the passing of my wife, from my life.

5/26/88 — [1] (04101)

[Old manse, as I sit out back, on the patio,]

Old manse, as I sit out back, on the patio,
This quiet twilit matins,
Surveying the expanse of your sturdy white shape,
*

The triangular patterns of your roof lines
Flowing, into the sky, like glaciers Reaching an endless ocean
Floated with roseate, cloud-shaped ice floes,
I can't relax the tightening of my throat,
My sparrow-paced heartbeat. Like years,
Tears escape the recesses of my eyes.
Each is a misty Loch Lomond or Zuider Zee
Drowning my emotions, in brief frenzy,
Before finding release along crow's-feet
Whose myriad radiating tributaries
Ferry my unhappiness, my sad remorse,
Onto barely visible salt flats
Just above my cheeks. Memory seizes, chokes me,
Discourages my spirit from wanting to go on.
Forgetting and death, its vegetative siblings,
Play hide-and-seek, in shadows
Overflowing their prismatic banks,
Flooding trees, lawn, clapboard siding,
Recalling my presence, from older, ancient times,
When my wife, then Trilogy, our daughter,
And Troika, her brother, gave this empty space
A renewed lease on the life of its deed,
You, old manse, and your outbuildings (summer kitchen,
Barn, backyard tree house)
A Florentine Duomo with gold-doored baptistery
And other sacred decaying geometries,
In which sinners and innocents collectively prayed.
I glance behind me, pan the landscape,
Focus on the swing set's cracked plastic seats,
Its bent, connected slide, rusted monkey bars,
Between whose runged parentheses
Both children hung, swung, like long-drop pendulums,
Competed against each other and my clock,
For gold medals, mostly pride and praise.

This place is desolate except for certain birds,
Squirrels, spiders, whose great-grand-issue
Recall my aura, from genetically retained intuition.
Even the five-foot trees we planted
(Sweet gum, dogwood, magnolia, plum,
Maple, Austrian and white pine,
Grafted weeping cherry, and flowering crab apple)
Have achieved Gulliverian suppleness and size,

*

Which began during the first decade,
When we were too busy growing into our own maturity
To notice they were shading us,
And continued in this second ten,
When our growing apart, dying of broken hearts,
Ever more obviously imminent divorce
Kept inching us toward this remorseful moratorium,
In which four separate souls,
Buried side by side, within this Victorian mausoleum,
Slowly decompose, from corruption, into dust.

5/26–27/88 — [2] on 5/26 (04100)

Delayed Reactions

During these last three eons —
Memorial Day weekend —
I've seen memories take off and land,
Felt anticipation at, and letdown after,
Their accomplishment,
Just as, during this unscheduled hiatus,
In which I find myself caught up short,
At wit's end, keeping remorse in check,
Waiting for the jet, from Chicago,
Transporting my wife and son back to St. Louis,
I've witnessed the most exhilarating physics
Conspired in by man and his flying machines.

Entering dusk's diminishing prismatic hues,
Through invisible openings in the sky,
These red-and-white lepidopterans
Descend in the gentlest floating pools
Or, overtaking inertia, from a standstill,
Ascend into late afternoon's cerulean amnesia.
I view them from this mezzanine,
Safe behind plate glass, insulated from roar,
Exhaust, possibilities of fiery crash.
Forced to wait out the delay,
I die my own slow transfiguration in time.

Perhaps their arrival will never take place,
Or if so, maybe I won't be standing at the gate,
Eager of smile and eye, to greet them,

*

As always was my way,
In those halcyon years when she and I
Spoke the poetry of upside-down roof fiddlers,
Mellomax trees, and supple, touching tongues.

Now, these shared memories of a marriage
Eighteen years buried
Get all mixed up in each other's glide slopes
And two-hundred-mile-per-hour rotations.
I realize, in their graceful, sleek postures,
A basic insubstantialness,
That attitude young soldiers going into war display
("So it goes!"; "Fuck it!"; "Not to worry!"),
As though traveling were, to the ephemeral spirit,
What decay is to death, vitality to life,
The eyeball to sight, vision to seeing,
And wisdom to evolving
Toward knowing when the end of anything
Has actually, much earlier, announced itself —
Not after the smoke has cleared,
Leaving jagged, charred pieces of wreckage
Or dream shards and broken Sutro Park vows,
Like unplanted flowers left out in a drought,
Wilted, desiccated, seared, and scorched,
But before apostasy even occurs.

How could I have pleasured in so many flights,
So much soaring,
Believing we were safe, at our assigned altitude,
From off-course vehicles, machines of fate
Hellbent on intercepting our trajectory?
Today, waiting for their late plane to touch ground,
I sense past and future,
Like iceberg and *Titanic*, converging on me, from afar.
Likely, this will be the last time
I'll ever retrieve my wife from a flight.
The reason is painfully clear to me:
Two years ago, she flew away,
And so surreptitious was her itinerary —
The treachery, deception, and betrayal of trust —
I never even knew she had gone.

Now, when "too late" is a euphemism
For dissolution of two fused souls,

*

Her returning is less than an exercise in memory;
It's just the temporary cessation of transience
For two destinationless spirits
Henceforth and forevermore
Flying away from each other, on autopilot.

5/30/88 (02247)

Waking Up to the Damned Truth

Each yawn I spawn, this 5 a.m.,
Is an acrid death-breath.
Each one reeks of cave seepage,
Bat and rat feces
Trying to escape my nostrils' surveillance,
Undetected. I wince.
Waking is an obstacle course formed of webs
Spread throughout my brain chambers.
In frenzied awkwardness, I grope,
Suffocating from my own stench.
Jesus, what an awful self-revelation,
Discovering that sleep's grotesques
Own my daily spirit, possess my daydreams,
Inpatient my imagination, with lunatics!

Why are my eyelids guillotines
Severing vision, bloodying insight-witnesses,
Each morning, these days of my Inquisition?
And why has my wife been transfigured
So that she appears as a female Savonarola
Condemning me to execution in my own bed?
For me to endure premature widowerhood,
At her adulterous hands? Why me,
When, with such innocent good intentions,
These past eighteen years,
I've tried, mightily, to satisfy requirements
That could nurture familial bonding?
Why has it taken two years
For duplicity and subterfuge to infect my intellect?

This long drive home is my Golgotha,
No hero's return for victorious Caesar

*

Or George Patton but endless walk,
Blindfolded on a pirate's five-foot plank
Extending over a depthless sea
Turbid with viciously swishing great whites.
I set out in desperation, realizing my arrival
Will change my entire life forever,
Knowing the two decades and three years
Constituting our history's binding fix
Must undergo a radical metamorphosis,
Of necessity. I cannot turn back.
We cannot go forward, together,
Because she has made her existence invisible to me.

6/4/88 (04099)

Father's Day Mourning

Driving home, from the hinterlands,
I'm reminded that flights of fancy
Require more energy and less planning
Than even an outsize imagination can engender,
When a man has experienced abandonment
By his wife of eighteen years.

This distance between our separation
Creates a sensation of impotence so nauseating,
My eyes burn like crucibles;
My throat suffocates moaning vocables
Hoping to spring, full-blown, into song;
My dreams grope, on knees and hands,

Over invisible boulders and suspended formations,
Wade the stream twitching along its entrails.
No opening shows itself. Like a noon shadow,
I recede into my solitude,
Knowing neither my estimated destination
Nor present location can be recalibrated

To grant me reprieve from fate's mandate.
Sadly, I can't recall ever feeling
So totally disenfranchised, without alternatives,
Emptied of adrenaline and love for anyone,
*

Unable to conceive, this Father's Day morn,
A solitary reason for celebrating the Lord.

6/19/88 (04098)

They Call Home All Family Members ^Δ

Gliding up I-55,
This 96-degree lunes-day afternoon,
With my three sleeping family members
Lost in soft, drowsing doggy-dreams,
Their cramped legs, arms, and feet
Crossed and contorted in peaceful arrest,
I press ahead, toward our destination,
Which is just the other side of twilight.
What precious cargo is in my charge!
Their destinies twitch imperceptibly,
With each wrist-twist of my hand on the wheel,
Every depression and release of the accelerator.
My second-to-second second-guessing
Determines the final say-so
As to whether the scattering of their ashes
Occurs within a matter of hours and days
Or waits, for decades.

I glance across the front seat,
At sweet, innocent daughter Trilogy,
Her cheek nestled into a blue blanket
She's cherished, like the Shroud of Turin,
For ten years, then into the mirror,
At my wife's blue, translucent eyelids.
Beside her, our boy, Troika, dreams
Mellifluous Grofé *Grand Canyon Suite*-scapes,
Sandcastles fortifying Fort Lauderdale's shores,
Shuttles and satellites orbiting space,
While, sober as a scalpel-brandishing surgeon
Engaged in an open-heart operation,
I guide this straining vessel ever easterly,
Dead set on reaching journey's end
Before Eric abandons his morphine-laced coma,
Leaves us forever behind, who glide toward him,
Hoping to arrive in time . . . his innermost time.

6/20/88 (00983)

Eric's Visitation

They insinuate the funeral home, in waves,
Undulating in, from the ocean beyond,
For these brief last moments,
Kissing the shore on which his casket has washed up,
Beneath a rose-and-baby's-breath spray,
Amidst the most colorful arrangements
Composed, by divine hands, in twining designs
Strewn across the sands of time.

We stare, in dazed fascination,
As low tide creates its own illusion,
Seems to be endlessly tilting in,
Even as it recedes, each whitecap
An echo of all echoes of his last breath,
These ravishing bouquets, nosegays,
Clusters perishable and fragile, keeping vigil
For us, not him. We need watching over.

6/22/88 (05867)

Tone Poem for Two Voices* △

Troika: From up here, all the
clouds look like pebbles
in a stream.

Right now, I feel
like I could go skipping
over them . . .

Dad: and get from one side
of the universe
to the other.

*Composed by the poet and his son, while in flight to Camp Nebagamon

6/26/88 — [1] (00021)

Accompanying My Son to Summer Camp ^Δ

The uninterpretable recitation of psalms,
By birds, chipmunks, and breezes
Playing hide-and-seek in the reaches
Of birches, poplars, and pines,
Transposes earth, lake, and sky into verse.
It creates a majestic electricity
That reverberates youth's ears,
With faded measures and cadences,
Resurrects the eyes, with its reflections.
An almost verbal quality of light,
Sifting through this Wisconsin latitude,
Speaks, oracularly, about my future,
Catapults me, in a swirl of reveries,
Backward, into my unfolding past,
As if I were asleep in a waking hallucination.

Seated beneath these pines —
A man in a boys' outdoor shrine,
Reluctantly delivering up his son,
To summer camp, for two months —
I realize how time translates itself,
Across the generations of man,
Without ever catching up with its echo
Or questioning the uniqueness of its repetitions.
The simple verities are imperishable.
But right now, my boy and I
Are too absorbed in exploring and recording
Wind-stirs and bird-chirps
For me to notice that nature's book
Contains the same words and phrases
The Lord spoke to Abraham, about Isaac.

6/26/88 — [2] (00022)

Walt Whitman in the Land of Paul Bunyan ^Δ

As if sporting Walt Whitman's aura,
I've traipsed here and yon,
This entire dappled Wisconsin afternoon,
Over all sixty-seven acres

*

Of sandstrewn pine, sumac, and birch stands
Nestling Lake Nebagamon.
I've celebrated each atom of this sacred place,
Every pine needle and pendent raspberry,
Praised, with silent incantations,
The magic that has transformed generations of boys
Into men, two months each summer,
For the last sixty years.

I've paused just long enough to revel
In the chipmunks' mixture of spots and stripes,
The birch trees' curious parchment bark,
Lose myself in daydreamy meditation,
On a splintery bench in the council ring,
Hoping to hear the totem pole,
Carved in 1936,
Tell tales told long ago,
Sing songs sung in swaying fellowship,
Whose faded lyrics, even in this moment,
Strain to reconnect with echoing refrains
Memory hums from its own collective memory.

I've come all this way, alone,
Strayed from commoner pursuits, to seek truth,
Knowing my ambitiousness borders on hubris,
Augurs poorly for discovering solutions,
Or even drawing finite conclusions,
To ultimate considerations of human life span,
Last rites, and final disposition of ashes.
And yet, with a quixotic wristflick of the dice,
I've risked all possible misfortune,
On the vaguest chance
That by returning to this Arcadian haunt,
Where I grew two decades beyond puberty,

I just might uncover the *why*, in the road,
Where the veering first occurred,
My psyche began searching for words, instead of persons,
As instruments for expressing innermost emotions,
Dreams, revelations, cosmic visions.
But the supple, sweet faces I've seen today,
Playing in pure male camaraderie,
Shame my investigations. Painfully, they remind me
*

I'm a priest without a parish
And that defining truth, birthing verse
Are not worthy substitutes
For repopulating the earth, with progeny.

6/26 — [3] & 6/30/88 — [2] (00023)

Morning Ritual ^Δ

*For Nardie and Sally,
with my love*

They awaken, beneath handmedown blankets,
From fiftydegree northern-Wisconsin sleep,
In shabby, screenedin cabins,
Emerge into the morning, through a yawn,
Struggle, down or up paths
(There is absolutely no level turf here),
Toward the rec hall, in jeans,
Flannel shirts, floppy tennis shoes,
Congregate at the Axeman and LJ porches,
Waiting for Paul Bunyan's horn to blow,
Call them to repast. They enter
In disorderly droves, home in on tables
Whose lazy Susans are crowded with cereals,
French toast, milk cartons, bowls,
Wait again, for the Day Push
To read, from a three-by-five card,
Morning's sermonette: "When given lemons,
Make lemonade. Be seated."
They eat noisily. K.P.'s retrieve seconds,
As each boy discusses what activities
He might sign up for, with his buddies.

Breakfast in this sacred hive
Is a ritual shared by excited little lives
Shimmering with ambitions and goals
Not corrected to unspecified time
But set for right now,
Immediately after cabin cleanup,
When they'll rush off to air riflery,
Canoeing, craft shop,
Or head to C.N.O.C., to chop logs,
*

Pitch tents, tie knots, boil water
In unlacquered #10 tin cans,
Cook over a grate, bake pies and cakes
In aluminum reflector ovens. . . .
These precocious faces,
Seeded with slowly unfolding blooms
Growing one smile, one joke, at a time,
Who know not the waste of adult distractions
And dalliances, care only about the moment,
As indeed they should,
Approach each new day with a magician's focus
On the hat containing a rabbit
They're certain will materialize
If only they recite the appropriate hocuspocus:
"I can do it! I know I can!"

And so they grow, going through splendid motions
Recalling butterflies from caterpillars,
Eventually fluttering up, hovering,
Soaring above the rims of brimless hats
Their imaginations wear and change
Ten times daily during adolescence.
Bless the children! These prescient faces —
Rosetta stones — hold the keys to the future
We don't even suspect
Lies buried just up ahead,
In the rubble of as-yet-unconstructed Acropolises,
Ninevehs, and Carcassonnes.
Bless the children individually,
Each for his unique conception,
And collectively, in their reckless ecstasy.

6/27/88 — [1] (00024)

C.N.O.C. * Δ

For Will Fisher

In this pine- and birch-bowered grot,
Whose turf, like the back of an aged hand,
Shows its veins and roots,
Fires made from kindling shaved from logs
Meticulously chopped, with hatchets,
*

By future guildsmen learning nature's trades,
Blaze proudly, warming Earth's halo.
Nearby, other boys practice knot-tying
(Clove hitch, bowline on a bite,
Lark's head, sheet bend, square, and clinch),
While a few remove a Catskill from its cocoon,
Begin smoothing stitched canvas,
Fitting aluminum tubular poles,
The whole ballooning in a fell swoop,
Like a sail raised up a ship's mast,
Until it stands formidable in its fragility,
Able to withstand a Kansas cyclone.

Then the apprentices begin their dismantling.
Magically, the tent collapses back
Into its protective sack,
As if, even for a matter of precious seconds,
It hadn't embodied majesty,
As if the boys never had arrived,
At this sanctuary beneath the pines,
To practice life skills in preparation
For overnighters across the decades,
As if the years themselves did not exist
Except as messengers of essences
For potential listeners and lookers to possess,
Who, by providence or design,
On such a glorious morning, might desire
To conspire in recreating the universe,
By witnessing a group of ragtag campers
Discover how a few of Earth's miracles work.

**Camp Nebagamon Outing Club*

6/27/88 — [2] (00025)

From the Corner of Main Street and Lake Avenue, Lake Nebagamon, Wisconsin ^Δ

From where I bear witness to this street scene
Comprising Lake Nebagamon's entire downtown,
I can see, in a single sweep,

*

Lawn Beach Inn,
Malinowski's falsefront all-purpose store,
Finell's and Bridge's bars, Dairy Queen,
The dentist's office, boardedup Standard station,
And rustcolored log auditorium,
Overlooking the sandy municipal beach.

This restaurant, with its fifties-motel décor
(High-gloss white-pine paneling,
Chromolitho of Christ staring skyward,
With uncompromising vacancy in his eyes),
Is a newcomer to this Lilliputian community,
Which explains why it retains a semblance
Of a clean, welllighted place,
Into whose quietude I've committed myself,
A wayfarer seeking a "homecooked" meal.

Although night hasn't overtaken twilight,
Each vehicle maneuvering down Lake Avenue
Uses headlights. Couples strolling,
Holding hands or ice-cream cones,
Echoing friendly overtures, gentle gestures
From Winslow Homer watercolors,
Bend and sway in pantomimic motion,
Croon refrains from tunes
Endrhyming in "moon," "June," and "loon."

This derelict lumber town
Is a railroad hobbyist's to-scale model,
Whose twelveyear heyday
Commenced in 1898,
When the Weyerhaeusers set up their mill,
Built a summer "big house" on the hill,
And proceeded to denude the land of its timber,
With obvious disregard for 1910,
When every last Truffula Tree would be cut.

Today, only a few yearround residents —
A hardy, if almost nonextant, enclave —
Persist in this precarious habitat,
Whose ecology remains curiously stable.
Perhaps it's the Fitgers and Hamms in their blood
Or Scandinavian accents on their tongues
*

That keep the population from deviating
 More than a score either way, every decade.
 Tonight, I celebrate each of the 564 souls

Recorded on Lake Nebagamon's voting rolls.
 I, a wayfarer
 Returning to my birthplace,
 To assess our desolation,
 Have come home to pay last respects,
 Before heading out, from Superior or Duluth,
 Aboard America's last passenger train,
 As it runs south. In a few hours,
 My childhood will be a thing of the past, again.

6/27/88 — [3] (00026)

A Grieving Rain ^Δ

*Let this soft mouth, shapèd to the rain,
 Be but golden grief for grieving's sake,
 And these green woods be dreaming here to wake
 Within my heart when I return again.*

— William Faulkner, "Mississippi Hills: My Epitaph"

Returning without my youthful companion,
 Whom I accompanied to camp,
 Thirty miles southeast of Duluth,
 I ruminated on this rainy a.m.
 Still seeping into forgetting's turf.
 Even now, flying toward St. Louis,
 I feel my dry feet getting wet,
 As I try to avoid stepping in puddles
 Collecting between exposed root clusters
 Of majestic white and red pines
 And at the base of railroad-tie-bolstered terraces
 Leading from Swamper Hill
 To the rec hall, where a blazing fire
 Vigils 7:30 breakfast.

Now, as then, my toes and leg bones
 Retain a vague chill,
 As if the letting-go had not been accomplished
 Without nature exacting retribution,
 *

For my having left, in her keeping,
An adventitious responsibility:
My tenyearold son, Troika.
Nor can I completely jettison
My sense of emptiness, deserting him,
In that upper bunk, under three blankets,
After rousing him, from a tranquil drowse,
Just long enough to kiss his lips
And listen to him mumble a wish:
“Tell Mom and Tril I love and miss them.”

Although so alone, soaring home,
Chastising myself, for having sacrificed him,
I celebrate his rite of passage,
Assume intuition has presumed correctly,
For my child’s evolving future.
After all, selfreliance is a solitary pursuit,
Rarely convenient or reassuring.
Nevertheless, my regret is like the rain;
Its wetness penetrates memory,
Gets into my eyes and settles there,
Like puddles I’ll keep stepping in, sloshing through,
Between exposed root clusters of Nebagamon’s pines,
Day after summer day,
Waiting for my boy to return.

6/28/88 (00027)

Male Bonding ^Δ

Even though I’ve been home three days,
Persistent images of you and me
Investigating the campgrounds,
Climbing hills, following sandy paths,
Sharing a session at air riflery,
A chair at your table in the rec hall,
Continue projecting from an endless reel,
As though memory were a theater screen
On which I see us
Fixed in a dream sequence.
In this artificial light

*

Flickering through the distance dividing us
Not by seventytwo hours
Or the ineffable silence that will widen daily,
As summer reaches eight weeks out,
But by thirtyseven years,
I realize my participation is vicarious,
Not visceral, our existence transitory.

Nonetheless, my blessed, precious son,
Mark this well! For a father and his boy,
Joy is a felt experience when both
Can focus, from separate heights,
And superimpose facsimile images,
Just as you, lying prone on a mat,
Aiming that wavering Daisy rifle,
And I, sitting behind you, on a bench,
Simultaneously knew
Each time you hit the bull's-eye
Or perforated the target's white periphery,
Fifteen feet away. It's amazing
How I could feel the energy you applied,
My boy, squeezing that trigger,
The first finger on my right hand
Neither atop nor beneath yours
But rather inside it, like an identical twin
Owing allegiance to common genes.

6/30/88 — [1] (00028)

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday: My Passion Week

I awaken, this morn of our eighteenth anniversary,
In the house where our children were raised,
Alone as Moses atop Mount Sinai.
Each room in this once-living museum
I grope through, chasing my shadow and echo,
Emptied, now, of its history —
Furniture, framed paintings, light fixtures, photos,
The accumulated accouterment of two decades —
Seems like one more brief lacuna
In a mountain range of spaces
Whose shapeless contours might be hallucinations.

I've come back to this house on Calvary,
 Stayed, these past three days,
 Packing up legacies, heirlooms, artifacts,
 Whose aggregate, sealed, now, in cardboard boxes,
 Testifies to the fact that four lives
 Tried, mightily, to leave behind proof of their existence.
 I've overseen the burial of voices and dreams,
 Borne witness to my own immolation.
 This last day of my life in Farmington, Mo.,
 I accept the pain of my crucifixion
 As a necessary prelude to the inexorable death of memory.

Soon, the trucks will be loaded and gone.
 This white, glistening Victorian wedding cake,
 Which, for so many years, symbolized our marriage —
 Its outrageous exaggeration of affection,
 Gingerbread temperament and sensibilities,
 Emotional turrets, curvilinear and conical passion —
 Will slowly grow stale, harden from within;
 It's shimmering patina will fade,
 Whose luster once drove us crazy,
 As we played in its shade.
 And I will have disappeared into the city's anonymity.

A wifeless spirit, sharing custody
 Of two children who have been stigmatized
 By the deeds of their adulterous mother
 And the self-righteousness of an unforgiving dad,
 I'll roam the streets without seeing faces
 Or registering the names of locations I occupy,
 Recrossing ocean lanes going nowhere,
 With each routine poem I compose,
 Because already, I know all potential closures
 Will contain the same bell-knelling overtone.
 The death of ecstasy has a pathetic echo.

7/8/88 (01059)

[Driving away from St. Louis, today,][†]

Driving away from St. Louis, today,
 Toward Cape Girardeau,
 I contemplate the correlation

*

Between escaping back into the landscape
And remaining in a state of ignorance

7/15/88 — [1] (02769)

Celebrating Another Victory

*For my mother's
seventy-third birthday,
7/17/88*

Actually, today, on your birthday,
You hold the distinction of having outlasted
All those athletes who competed with you,
From generations past.
You've kept the trophy in your possession,
Retained the record unassailably,
As persistent opponents
Have tried to usurp your envied position,
By contriving and conjuring prestidigitations
To outwit, outtrick Mr. Death,
Flimflam innocent bystanders
Into moving up next in line, for defeat.

By now, your feats of endurance and speed
Precede you. You're a living legend,
A heroine arrived in time
To partake of her own celebration.
And even when the steeplechase is done,
The final race run and won,
And you've proclaimed retirement from the sport,
Someone else will offer herself in sacrifice,
For you to continue transporting the torch
Across the Country of Unknown Hopes,
That we who've admired you still might be inspired
By your denial of mortality's challenge.

7/15/88 — [2] (02185)

Obsolete Machinery

Tonight, my words won't flow or fly.
They require magic oil,
*

Drawn from a Greek amphora or gypsy's vial,
To lubricate their moving parts,
Dissolve clots of dried grease
Thrown from slapping cams, sloppy gears,
Which, after years of neglected spot checks,
Have corrupted the machine's fine timing,
Disrupted its production of free-association verse.

Anxious about getting it started,
I first insert the crank, my pen,
Into the open end of its shaft,
Then spin it, with my mental energy.
The pistons emit sickly moans. Intense friction
Gives off burning odors, smoke.
Gasping, fractured sounds, sentences, stanzas
Fly in riotous divergence, blacken the ground —
Scattered atoms of a shattered imagination.

7/23/88 (02179)

Mediating Dreams

Last night, my dreams blended,
Then separated like bottled salad dressing
Left too long unshaken.
Through twilight's murky glass,
I could see nightmare and ecstasy,
Divided by an invisible threshold
Tenuous as a thirteen-year-old's hymen,
Trying to penetrate each other's flesh
With negligible success. I awakened in a sweat,

As though death had settled on my brow,
Like dew beads dripping from tips of grass.
Hoping to locate a common geography
Where foes might meet neutrally,
I made overtures to both adversaries,
Inviting them to let me arbitrate
At imagination's retreat in the Catskills,
Where I'd not traveled before.
Reluctantly, both parties agreed to convene.

Now, well into afternoon's routine,
 I realize how naive I was,
 To believe mediation between chimeras
 And my gentler sensibilities might materialize.
 Their impatience and rage
 Still migraine my brain, with such intense pain,
 I've gone insanely blind, deaf, silent,
 From the vision of fiery apocalypse I witnessed.
 Death is preferable to their prophecies.

7/25/88 — [1] (01062)

By the Seat of His Pants ^Δ

Fearless in his kamikaze attitude toward dying,
 He enters the storm, soaring,
 Tries to get from one side of the sky
 To its opposite shore, before lightning
 Can find his tiny vessel and annihilate him,
 In a final affirmation of divine intervention.

Gale-force winds disrupt his equilibrium.
 Electrical interference jams gyros,
 Neural receptors, collapses synapses,
 Short-circuits systems connecting his brain
 To every extremity. And yet, turning back
 Is not an option he'll entertain, today.

Getting home is his only acceptable direction,
 And he knows, from previous trips
 To the source of a lightning bolt's force,
 That arrival strictly depends on survival mentality.
 However, right now, he might enhance his chances
 If he tends to his empty tank and sputtering engine.

7/25/88 — [2] (01061)

[He's become so proficient at knot-tying,] [†]

He's become so proficient at knot-tying,
 Knife-sharpening and -handling,
 Pitching tents, building fires, cooking,
 *

They have him teaching kids
Three and four years older than he —
My pride

7/29/88 — [1] (03481)

[From where I sit, on the Radisson's patio,][†]

From where I sit, on the Radisson's patio,
In Duluth, Minnesota,
So distant from my entire past life,
This Friday night,
Staring through the shimmering distance
Separ

7/29/88 — [2] (03482)

[At my back, this sun-struck morning,][†]

At my back, this sun-struck morning,
Duluth skips down the hill
Immemorially as a lady stepping from the bath.
She wears cloisonné bracelets, earrings,
And a bracelet — the lake — of lapis lazuli

7/30/88 — [1] (03483)

The Fountain of Youth[△]

*For my blessed boy, Troika,
with Dad's deep love*

All Thursday and Friday, my boy and I
Have shared gentle camaraderie,
Keeping the good-bye hour
From sneaking up on us, without warning,
As it did five weeks ago.
We've tried to find a happy medium
Between our disparate ages,
Disentangle yesterday from today,

And reduce our differences in temperament
To the lowest common denominator:

Camp Nebagamon.

Holding hands, this last evening,
We descend Swamper Hill,
Inspired by the sweet, thick scent of pines,
The hush of moist shadows after rain.
Troika walks in its drainage ruts,

As if seeking its destination;
I follow at his side. He guides me
Past the shrine. Reaching the Axeman Village,
We head left, down to the lake,
Along the road running behind cabins
Astir with Lumberjack laughter.
Finally, we arrive at water's edge,
Boy and dad entranced by the tranquillity.

Although the moon is conspicuously missing,
Vision is unaffected.

We see whatever our eyes touch,
Like blind men rapping their cane tips
As they negotiate a congested street:
Houses rimming the shore, trees, bats,
Fish breaching the surface, for insects.
We fathom our inner contentedess.

It leads us up the hill again,
To the Swamper Village — a glowing halo
Showing us paths amidst the darkness.
It's the circle through camp we've completed
But also something else,
A transcendence we've achieved,
Who, at ten and fortyseven,
Have entered love's orbit, soaring.

Taps softly awakens us from our senses,
Commends us to its benediction.
We hug the breath out of each other,
Kiss lips, cheeks, forehead,
As all our ancestors have done.
Troika says, but only once,
"Please, won't you please stay?"
"You know I can't, Mr. Boy."

Hand on the screen door, he pauses, turns,
Squeezes me again, then disappears.
Before slipping out of his village, I stoop,
For the first time in thirty-seven years,
To sip from the fountain of youth,
At which Troika and his mates drink daily.
Instantaneously, its bracing egg taste
Reclaims me, and I know I won't ever go.

7/30/88 — [2] (00029)

On Safari ^Δ

This beastly afternoon,
As he drives toward the equatorial mid-South,
His imagination is on safari,
In search of migratory word-hoard herds
That range between Perryville,
Sikeston, New Madrid, Blytheville, and Memphis
And water at these oases periodically.

However, a hundred-fifty miles into the trip,
He's yet to catch so much as a glimpse
Of indigenous literary species —
Their characteristic spots, stripes, rings, zigzags —
Or even suspect one in his vicinity.
Because of this season's drought,
They may have wandered considerably deeper south,

Seeking Delta tributaries, bayou food
Containing more Cajun spices — trial by fire
As well as swamp water. Whatever the cause,
Not a solitary word-hoard stirs,
As the miles unwind from the earth-spool
His mind turns, with growing urgency,
Thirsting to capture something to show for his work.

All afternoon, he drives farther into the bush,
Without spying tracks or droppings.
Finally, he arrives in Oxford, Mississippi,
Not able to boast hide or hair
Or mythic horn, from which ritual music soars
When the creature is gently trapped,
Then set free, for the sport of the quest.

Perhaps next time he decides to hunt,
 He'll pursue, with increased diligence,
 Beasts vulnerable to his meager resources,
 Such as "man from Nantucket" limericks
 And lavatory-door graffiti,
 Not graceful, fleet-leaping sestinas
 Too distant and skittish for his low-power scope.

7/31/88 — [1] (01060)

[Arriving after 6:00, this Sunday,] $\ddagger \Delta$

Arriving after 6:00, this Sunday,
 In time to catch sunset on the run,
 I change into jogging shorts,
 Enter Mississippi's merciless heat,
 Make the ritualistic circle
 I've taken, on returning to Oxford,
 Nine years in a row:
 From the Alumni House at Ole Miss,
 Through the Grove, around the Lyceum and library,
 Over the tracks, then up University Avenue,
 Toward South Lamar, north, into town,
 Around the Lafayette County Courthouse,
 Which Faulkner dubbed "the hub,"
 Then back up Lamar, to Old Taylor Road,
 Culminating at Rowan Oak.
 My mythic Olympiad trek
 Signaling the week's activities have just begun,
 I can now unpack my trappings,
 Settle in

7/31/88 — [2] (02282)

Sisyphus, Diogenes, and Me

Liar, epicene queen
 Of the hairdressers' set, adulteress,
 Frequenter of gay bars,
 Traveling saleslady living out of her car,

Hermaphrodite Jan,
 My once-exquisite wife,
 Held captive, far too long, in Babylonia,
 At the beck of a feckless Nebuchadnezzar,

Summons up chimeras,
 Obscene creatures out of Dante's Inferno,
 Frozen, in grotesque gestures,
 By her sexless siren song,

A temptress without redeeming features,
 Who sends decent men
 Spiraling down the pipeline of her deceits,
 Into oblivion, blind as cave frogs,

Condemned to ascend circular stairs
 Connecting her cunt and eyes,
 Without ever getting out of her hairy basement —
 Eternal mind-fucking for innocent Sisyphus,

And for her, the scabrous satisfaction
 Of having brought Diogenes to his bleeding knees,
 Snuffed his taper before he could realize
 She was the one he'd been seeking

A lifetime, his once-exquisite wife,
 Sweetheart from their twenties and thirties,
 Co-traveler to European cities,
 Maker of their Old Testament children,

She who once met Oedipus, at his crossroads,
 Decided to divide her psyche into four pieces
 And let each flee westerly —
 Witches all, princesses of the darkling abyss.

8/7/88 (01064)

Distant Lovers ^Δ

I knew, at once and forever,
 In that interlude when you and I kissed,
 That past and future consequences
 Had ceased to exist and that the present,
 *

With its egotists, polygamists,
And extraterrestrial trespassers,
Would arrest our destinies
If we'd let it, which we did
When we wished the moment eternal
And it entered our dreams, dreaming.

Now, we've flown. Shadows are interludes
Our lips prophesied.
But we've stayed, also,
Lost in sweet hallucinations,
Caught in speculation's "what if"s.
Communicating from a distance, our dreams mate,
Beget issue reminiscent, vaguely,
Of that surreptitious kiss
You and I memorized when love intruded.
And this has made all the difference.

8/12/88 (02017)

Vipers' Twilight

He awakens from sleep's prism,
Whose translucent sheets womb his sinews
And marzipan dreams, in a gauzy bell jar,
And partakes not exactly of space or hue
So much as brief snatches of immortality,
In which he and death wrangle nightly,
With his essence rising, out of the prism,
Like a Phoenix, from his living soul,

In daylight, he invisible to focusing eyes,
So close to the polluted sky's ceiling
That, could he be seen, his vaporous shape
Would be mistaken for a cloud-wisp
Sliding, ameba-like, across the horizon,
Or whitish chimera or carcinogenic spore
Flying around the rim of Earth's roulette wheel,
Eager to drop into a slot when it stops.

Half ghost, half human being,
He poses as rainbow, hippo, ocean, egg and toast,
Clothing pinned to ropes stretched between tenements,
*

Swaying above junkies and politicos who play stickball,
 Compose graffiti-poetry on streets,
 Paint swastikas on city hall.
 He goes his indisposed way,
 Unafraid of reprisals for his solitariness.

Although he's never felt compelled to apologize
 For remaining aloof, mute to desecrations,
 Lately he's sensed a change in his coloration.
 When he awakens, his flesh takes on scales,
 Turns purple as the tongue of a Shar-Pei.
 His heart beats only twice an hour,
 As if breathing were osmotic,
 His being confined to a coiled snake's torpid sleep.

More recently, even the nocturnal prism
 Describing the size of his light
 Fractures unexplainably,
 Whenever he assumes his full length,
 Splits into Medusa-pieces,
 Venomous hues biting themselves —
 A bed of ultraviolet and infrared vipers
 Spreading deadly rays over the dread landscape.

8/17 — [1] & 8/18?/88 (01063)

Dozing Off

Driving, in a food-induced stupor, north,
 He violently shakes his head,
 As if to fix a loose connection
 In his brain's electrical-wiring harness.
 He awakens just in time's nick,
 To keep from invading the median
 Or crashing through the guardrail.

A frequent victim of narcolepsy,
 He's never satisfactorily defended its fits
 Or devised an excuse to quit car travel.
 In his sedentary middle age,
 He's actually aggregated more highway miles
 Than when he was a history teacher,
 Dreaming himself making Crusades or part of a diaspora.

Now, cruising I-55 toward St. Louis,
 He drowses, precariously, in dense traffic,
 Whose congestion road crews exacerbate,
 Doing major repairs on bridges,
 Shoulders, overpasses, ramps, cloverleafs.
 Suddenly, his chest gets thrust against the wheel.
 Crushed, his lungs shut down abruptly.

Vision blurs, dims, dies.
 Pain is a tidal wave beginning in his eyes,
 Rushing into shore, below his solar plexus.
 He never registers time of death,
 For the rapidity of his heart's arrest.
 Even his stunned soul, pinned in the wreckage,
 Rejects resurrection, for quick physical disposition.

Without a wife or children to notify
 And lacking identification papers in his wallet,
 To help the courts discharge his final remains
 And the effects of his paltry estate
 (Apartment on Pershing, at Skinker, off the park,
 With bed, card table, radio, recliner),
 His sarcophagused body awaits claiming.

Suddenly, he awakens from his false death —
 Fatigue's hallucinatory rejection of life —
 Relieved to discover he's reached the city, intact,
 With a new lease on existence. He smiles,
 Drives straight to a town house in Clayton,
 Where his mistress waits to share his sleep,
 Keep narcolepsy's sirens at bay.

8/17-18/88 — [2] on 8/17 (02184)

Surfers, Nurse Sharks, and Us ^Δ

*For Jan,
 this souvenir of Florida*

After deliberating, five years,
 Each late-August vacation to Florida
 Before the start of school,
 We decide, this trip,
 To drive to Lauderdale-by-the-Sea,
 Try fishing off Anglin's Pier.

Flowing up A1A, below condos
Lining Galt Ocean Mile
Like Sphinxes and temples along the Nile,
We intersect Commercial Boulevard,
Turn right, park, locate the entrance,
Then rent rods, reels, and buy bait,

The four of us initiated, at once,
Into the pelagic world of deep-sea sport,
No matter that we remain landlocked,
Who have never attempted to grab, from a bucket,
A wriggling crustacean and fix it,
Through its transparent shell, to a hook

Or ever been shown how to cock a bale,
Keep the line fingered tightly to the shaft
While flinging leader, sinker, and shrimp
Into the merciless waters, teeming with snooks,
Barracudas, schools of two-inch pilchards.
Both children assume first rights of refusal.

Above the pier, pelicans circle and hover,
Fathoming their own catch
Just beneath the surface, while, offshore,
Surfers, clutching brightly hued boards,
Repeatedly genuflect, waiting for the *one* wave
That will set them soaring indefinitely.

Like alternating Christmas-tree lights,
One, then another and the next,
Rises from the spume, assumes temporary brilliance,
Slides toward preening teenage girls,
Barely in their bikinis,
Pretending, intently, not to be spectating.

Despite the sun's ceaseless taunts,
We go about our business of staying enthused,
Containing indifference, controlling impatience,
Who are used to achieving success in seconds,
Be it explaining $E=mc^2$
Or microwaving Christ's Last Supper, for his disciples.

But the swarming unknown won't take our bait.
"Screw these shrimp!" Trilogy exclaims.

*

Troika shrugs, continues casting over the rail.
Suddenly, from up the pier, shouts arise.
Fishers converge on a boy with bent rod,
Convulsively trying to outlast his catch.

Cries congeal: "He's got a shark!"
We reel in, stow our poles,
Race toward the throng leaning over, gaping.
Three feet of brown nurse shark,
Undulating ominously, trying to get loose,
Rivets us to its funereal choreography.

Even way up here, we palpably fear it,
As though, at any moment, if it chose,
It could climb the taut line,
Right back up onto the reel, consume the boy,
Starting with his hands, arms, chest, head,
Then concentrate its outrage on us.

"Walk him into shore!" someone shouts.
"That's illegal!" the kid screams.
"Also, I caught him on tarpon,
And that's against the law too!" "Walk him in!"
Ten minutes later, the creature is beached.
Idol worshipers gather about it,

Like an ice-crystal halo around the moon.
Mesmerized eyes, bodies, cauterized thoughts
Victimize the fish, in its sandy mausoleum.
If it could, perhaps it would speculate
How one so helpless as itself
Might elicit such misdirected restiveness.

We reject the freak show, return to our gear,
Hoping it's not been stolen.
Retrieving our deposit, we leave the pier.
Rumor announces the shark's been let go.
As if its capture had been our doing,
We receive absolution, feel redeemed, for this deed,

Collective relief, believing this beautiful fish
Swims free, again, in its sacred element,
Just as the surfers and sunbathers do in theirs,
And that we, in our familiar retreats,

*

Seem protected from malevolent presences,
At liberty to act naturally at certain set depths.

8/27/88 (02178)

Hurricane Jan

So fast and with such scanty forewarning
Did the storm assault his frontal lobes,
Stunning him into unmoving disillusionment,
That he never even had a chance to escape
But, rather, was trapped beneath massive collapse,
His most precious possessions
Necessarily jettisoned as human wreckage:
His wife of eighteen years,
Two dazed children, stricken with faces
Arrested in Edvard Munch gestures,
Familial ambitions transfixed in premature rigor mortis,
Dreams anorectic from rejecting their own sweetmeats
And once-supple flesh — adultery's casualties.

When he awakened, briefly, from the cataclysm,
Recognition was a deaf-mute.
His memory had become a blind white frog,
Splashing, fatuously, upstream, in an endless cave.
In every direction, the hurricane's destruction
Had made such a chaos of crosshatched shadows,
He couldn't extricate himself. He died
While waiting for an explanation to sift down
To the base of his brain, where he gasped
As the last visions of his deracinated family
Drained away, until all that remained
Of the once-happy, loving husband he'd tried to be
Was his life mask, with her wormlike "A"s
Still wriggling from his anguished, twitching lips.

9/13/88 (02183)

Eden's Diseased Trees ^Δ

These days, he goes ever so perfunctorily
About taking notes, making entries in his log,
*

To keep memory from losing control
Of multitudinous figures, times, and facts
Relating to his wife's spurious whereabouts.
He leaves precious few evidentiary elements to doubt,
As to her surreptitious trysts,
Unannounced nights and daytimes out of the house,
When she pretends to be shopping, keeping appointments,
Seeing doctors, eating with girlfriends,
Playing tennis (while sporting her tightest silk outfit).

In fact, he's had no sex with his spouse
Of eighteen years in fifteen months,
And then only once in another three.
She's never even lifted her slip, wickedly,
Just to keep him off-balance, keep him guessing,
Never so much as touched his flaccid penis
While he sleeps, tested his ethical rigidity,
His potential to forget her misdeeds, under lusty duress,
Forgive her egregious moral transgressions
Or at least let his wet dreams saturate the taproot
Of the apple tree growing in nightmare's desert.

Once, he went so unself-consciously, ever so naively
About the business of being romantic,
Feathering their Victorian nest, with love-gifts,
Writing incidental poems incandescently proclaiming
His passion for her every gesture, breath, and desire,
No matter how seemingly inconsequential to others.
For him, they *did* exist in an enchanted land
Inviolable to assaults, on its unmanned defenses,
By time, experience, and death. Their existences
Depended on nothing less than innocent worship
They professed to each other's souls

Or more than the unspoken trust they'd accepted
When they eloped and, in San Francisco's Sutro Park,
Profuse with July cornflowers and roses
Growing, eternally, in that hour, that moment, eon,
Mouthed, amidst nature's solemnity, private vows
To live together forever — longer, beyond God's knowledge.
But now, he spends every waking second
Concentrating on the sophisticated chess game
His and her lawyers play out, at his expense,

*

To keep alive the moribund, dysfunctional marriage
Neither spouse wants to see extended or ended.

9/15/88 (02182)

Lapis Lazuli: A Reprise ^Δ

Today, my sad imagination,
Languishing beneath a gray drizzle,
Focuses on a vaguely illuminated sun,
A lapis-lazuli medallion
A fellow I never knew, Harry Clifton,
Gave to his friend William Butler Yeats,
Once upon a flown epiphanic moment.
Now, it's suspended, before my crying eyes,
From an unidentifiable necklace
Worn by a lady I no longer recognize:
My apostate wife of eighteen
Misty, July-cool Sutro elopements ago.

My grieving evokes no glimmers of hope
Of reconnecting those broken golden strands
We wove into intricate tapestries
Kings and queens might beg borrow, from us,
To entrance themselves into erotic fantasies,
Or shaped into glistening amphorae,
From which they might sip ichorous vapors,
To take them past sleep, up peaceful slopes of Arcady.
I've seen too much destruction, tasted doom.
The arsenic bile of bleeding dreams burns my tongue,
Turns my words to rusty scythes
Leveling everything within 360-degree reach:
Lilies of the valley, memories of you and me, blooming.

And yet I persist in tracing fissures
Stretching across the space between sky and horizon,
Behind which the invisible sun hides,
As if my eyes might lead me to an insight
Intellect missed, in its previous scrutiny.
But an unfriendly emptiness that has accompanied me,
These two years I've spied on her adultery,

*

Convulses my stomach. I sully my trousers,
With yesterday's undigested lettuce and bread.
A scent of fresh fish-shit
Sifts to the shore of the Sea of Forgetting,
Where I wade, ankle-deep, waiting for a sign, to proceed.

9/18/88 — [1] (02181)

Razing the Crystal Palace ^Δ

Their great glass-and-steel palace collapses.
The outside is no longer distinguishable
From the once madly passionate interior.
The edifice is a static obelisk
Sentineling the mausoleum of their dreams.
Rubble covers catastrophe's casket,
Containing the unknown bones of two lovers
Chosen from God's most immaculate hopes
For propagating a race of creative human beings.

Even from a distance, the debris evokes tragedy:
Masada, Thebes, Hiroshima, Lidice,
Auschwitz, Guernica. No one dares approach,
For fear of being infected by virulent spores
Or getting sucked into time's vortices,
Scylla and Charybdis —
Pseudonyms for their divorced spirits,
Once so inextricably synonymous
With their intimate wishes and trust.

Now, nothing of their loving souls remains,
Nothing but remains themselves,
Dusty skeletons whose perishable shapes
Are gewgaws in the house of chaos and loneliness,
Death's great glass-and-steel palace,
Which they'll occupy for life.
Soon, no one will know their location or fate,
Unless he deciphers their stone: "Here Lie
Cuckolded Husband & Adulterous Wife."

9/18/88 — [2] (00264)

The Public Cuckold [△]

He awakens, at 5:33,
To the disembodied hilarity of a D.J.
Filling his preset radio's speakers
With a saber saw's reiterating teeth
Cutting an uneven line across his mind.

He rises on one elbow, startled,
Completely unfamiliar with familiar confines
He's shared with his disembodied wife,
Almost eighteen years: house, bedroom,
Mattress, sheets, pillows, blankets, and comforter,

Each an unhappy manifestation of frustration
And grief he's suffered, staying home,
Trying to justify objectifying adultery,
Accepting her allegiance to their neighbor,
Refraining from sentencing her to death

By silence, verbal abuse, contumely,
Mental cruelty, banishment to San Quentin,
Better yet, Elba, Alcatraz, Zenda,
Or to Kafka's penal colony, where her pubic hair
Might be plucked, one painful strand at a time,

Before the blunt, rusty needles
Of an obsolete torture machine,
Complete with vibrating iron-lung bed,
Tattoo her cunt, in italicized, bold Gothic type:

FUCKER.

The D.J.'s voice and his horrific hallucination
Hover above the covers, fuse,
Disperse, on his first yawn's exhalation,
Like wood smoke into a crisp Wisconsin sky.
He shivers from a vague vision,

In which he and his once-beloved wife
Are strolling naked, along a beach,
Stopping, sporadically, to exercise their passion,
Indulge their erotic urges to touch, suck,
Kiss, fondle, massage, stimulate hidden hormones,

Before slipping to the sand,
Their hot bodies interlocked inextricably,
Where they lie, lost for millenniums,
Until morning's enormous sun comes,
Spraying the eastern horizon, with pink semen.

Suddenly, his shivering rushes into convulsions.
Dawn's purple and lavender seeds
Contain a fragrance that transports them to a shore
He's never seen; his mate is a beached fish;
Their pallet is a public disgrace,

Neither a bed they've shared in their marriage
Nor the director's bloody needle-bed
But rather a chamber filling with Zyklon B;
He begins to choke; she disappears in rising vapors;
Their hysterical screams go unheeded . . .

As morning widens into a working routine
He spends in front of the luminescent screen of a computer
That he uses to call up in-process orders,
Projected shipping dates, debits and credits,
Or on the phone, speaking to zombies in the zone beyond.

By afternoon's end, he leaves the office, exhausted,
Returns, emptied, to his empty house,
And submits his drowsy thoughts to dormant succubi
Waiting to infect his dreams' immune system.
Weary, he's amenable to almost any alternative

To total loneliness, even overtures
His apostate wife has been making, lately,
To meet for dinner, see a movie.
More likely, he'll submit to masturbation
By nightmare's atavistic tattoo-contraption.

9/19/88 — [1] (02180)

Prismatic Infatuation

Returning home, this stormy afternoon,
I assume the sky's volatile properties
And turbulent formations. You've disturbed me,
*

Arriving, unannounced, from outside my horizon,
Swirling, softly, into my focus,
Filling my eyes with your unfurling red skirt,
White nylon stockings, yellow shoes,
Jumeau-porcelain face, so provocative,
For its smooth, rouged cheeks and chin
And Renoir-soft skin. You've unnerved me,
Stirring urges I believed imperturbable,
For a marriage three years buried,
Kept alive just enough for two children
To survive their parents' emotional paralysis.

How you interpreted my desolation, my loss,
My sweet, secret desire to undress you,
Beneath wise replies to your insightful inquiries,
I'll never guess, unless it was my reticence,
My submissive answers to your questions,
Which I felt suggested a certain restive coquettishness
In gestures, smiles, eye-mesmerizing
You directed toward me, during our brief interviews.
Nonetheless, driving back to St. Louis,
I've become the gray rain with sun breaking through
At illogical seams in the confused atmosphere.
And for the next fifty miles, I'll chase the rainbow
You've assumed, try to possess your redness,
Be suppled and soothed by your voluptuous Toulouse hues.

9/19/88 — [2] (02187)

At a Loss for Words ^Δ

This crystalline afternoon,
Words refuse to break through spheres
Separating intellect from imagination,
Emotion from human doing,
Misdeeds and distrust from noble aspirations.
Even good ol' rhetoric,
Eloquence's most dependable threat,
Fails to rise to the occasion,
Step on its own swollen tongue.
My mighty pen gets severed,
Slithers away, twitching like a glass snake.

*

The timid, partially visible moon is a sword
Or sickle, whose silent swipes
Shave the horizon to its bone. Driving south,
I cringe, in my innocence, grow dizzy,
Trying to coax images from visionless eyes,
Knowing my banishment has stranded me
Between choked romance and malignant infidelity,
Unable even to chart my own poetry's progress,
As it fevers through breathless caesuras,
Toward its final end-stop: the essence of death.

9/20/88 (02168)

Being Tested [△]

Just the astonishing relief to be achieved,
Fleeing his wife's systematic hostility,
Is sufficient reason for taking to the road,
Every other disillusionment or so.
The release approximates ejaculatory orgasm.

He never imagined riding the mind's freights,
Befriending ghostly hobos
Making despondency's coast-to-coast trek —
Either direction acceptable —
Could make going such a coming excitement,

Arriving at unknown depots so reassuring.
But such is the state of his marriage,
That the least reasonable excuse to escape
Inebriates his grayest daydreams.
Eagerly, he embraces chaos as his ally,

Pays allegiance to their unofficial pact,
By proclaiming himself Emperor of Coffee
And Diet Coke, a latter-day Moses,
For whom steel tracks and concrete are sands
His imaginary precursor never slogged through,

Going in search of mandated lands
Where God's commandments are worshiped
And adultery, coveting another man's spouse,
Licentiousness, and lust are punished,
Not considered soup du jour,

Chef's *spécialité*, too-sweet apéritif,
 In a Philistine Last Supper
 Served to "free love"'s death-row deviants,
 Awaiting commutation or eventual parole
 By an incumbent Nixonian Sanhedrin.

And so it goes. Intermittently, his flights
 Send him back to his senses and roots,
 Requiring him to surrender repose
 As the price of admission to the freak show
 Playing, night and day, at his house.

In marital regression, he sees oblique justice,
 Composed of poetic and divine irony
 That refuse his psyche complete freedom
 And won't quit toying with his thresholds
 For sexual humiliation and verbal abuse.

Unexplainably, it seems, he's been selected,
 From men of meekness, to be tested in vipers' fires
 And learn to navigate, blind, not like Moses
 But Odysseus, the invisible road home
 To wife/mother/whore — pernicious vision!

9/26/88 (00263)

Spectral Recognitions ^Δ

I pan farmlands billowing, out and away,
 Over a horizon slipping from vision's scan.
 Behind my speeding vehicle,
 Lazy cows graze; barns with galvanized roofs
 And weathered siding tilt in the wind;
 Fields stand abandoned, at various stages of harvest;
 And ghosts of humbler generations hover
 Just above tree level, celebrating death's presence.
 Unable to escape their enslavement to this land,
 I see their invisible, shimmering shapes,
 Sense their unfrantic desperations,
 In the furrows around my squinting eyes.

Suddenly, I remember the nature of my trip:
 I've driven to Cape Girardeau and back,
 *

Nonstop, hoping to locate a lost thought
I left in safekeeping, with my old friend,
Loneliness, with whom I best communicate
When I take to my car, just start off,
With no necessary destination to reach.
Jesus! Now, I see what I sought:
It's my wife of nearly two decades.
Somehow, her disappearance, four years ago,
Is all mixed up in these spectral visitations,
And I've finally found her, in my own lost thoughts.

9/27/88 (02186)

Above All, Love! ^Δ

Driving home late, this Sunday afternoon,
Through incipient autumn,
As the leaves eagerly accumulate costumes
In which to make their Halloween debuts
And a translucent moon preempts its cue,
Slipping from behind cumulus wings
That breezes imperceptibly shimmer,
I might just as easily be winter's fabled groundhog,
Exposing myself too soon,
Glimpsing my own fugitive shadow,
Causing the future to stall,
Sleep six weeks longer . . .
Might just as well crawl back down
Into my soul's cold burrow,
For all the desolation and lethargy
Your betrayal of our marriage has caused me.
While I'm away from my pocket, my smile
Belies a nihilistic blindness to all beauty,
Grief rooted so deeply in my marrow,
No procreative juices flow.

I might resign myself to dying alone,
Down a densely overgrown ravine at road's edge,
Were it not for a naive belief
In resurrection, which my memory cleaves to
Even in bleakest desperation,
Accepts, for having taught itself,

*

Over nearly two thousand autumns,
 How to look through death's dry gaze,
 Into your moist eyes, whispering my name,
 Inviting me to come inside, for the night,
 My lifetime, eternity, if I'd like,
 Just by my reciprocating your kiss,
 Invisible mistress,
 With my quiet crying shaping your waiting lips.

10/2/88 (02261)

Decree of Dissolution ^Δ

He seems to possess perfect poise and equanimity,
 To those he meets on nameless streets,
 Down which he retreats, squeaking as meekly
 As a terrified laboratory rat
 Scattering droppings, erratically, as it flees
 Through horror's electrified corridors.

That he can appear so flawless and unsullied
 Is astonishing even to him,
 Who sees his nakedness three-dimensionally,
 In every glazed gaze of passersby,
 Each providing a mirror for his echoing introspections.
 Ah, but a defected spirit is difficult to detect.

This crisp, sap-dripping October afternoon,
 When dislocation is the only home
 To which he'll return, when he exits the road,
 Past 11 p.m.,
 Is autumn's dissolution decree, which he recently executed,
 In a spasm of strokes terminating his cuckoldry.

After eighteen years
 Of relatively unconditional fidelity and love,
 His signature has made unwished freedom official,
 Released him from his wife's hostility,
 Disrespect, and blatant sexual profligacy,
 Which plagued him, night after night ad infinitum,

Until even his loneliness and confusion grew
 Too frustrated to receive sleep

*

As adequate vaccine against chimeras,
From the sleazy underworld his wife frequented
Whenever she left their house, without notice,
To seek the dark side of her divided lunar psyche.

Why no one else can tell he's not himself
Vexes his intellect. His flexibility
Overwhelms him. All at once,

He feels compelled to test his threshold for pain.
Without slowing or signaling,
He makes a U-turn, stays in the same lane,

Heading due north, against the grain,
At 80 mph.

Hands braced on the steering wheel,
Chest pressed firmly against the safety belt,
He waits for catastrophe to undo his disillusionment,
Cancel his disenchantment. Ecstatically, he waits.

10/4/88 (02171)

Locked Out ^Δ

This intensely bright October sunshine
Designs insight, with crystal-prism stipples
Flying out from its slowly turning eye
Burning, at the universe's deep, dead center,
Like a spinning, spotlit dance-hall mirror-ball.
Behind my tight lids, spots and dots —
Zigzag zebra stripes, ameba shapes,
Undulating euglinids, and tentacled jellyfish —
Swish and shimmer me to translucent dizziness.
I wince, twitch, shake my head
Side to side, violently,
As if to redistribute blood, from clogged arteries,
Into auxiliary tributaries to the brain.
The road I drive fluctuates like northern lights
In a Wisconsin sky. Where am I, God?
Help me locate myself in this colossal helioscape,
Across which I've chosen to make
My Mosaical escape from my Pharaoh-marriage.
Let me discover an edge soon,

*

Quit slogging through lunar sand,
Chasing myself from mirage to mirage.
At least grant me marginal refuge
From hostile marauders
Threatening daily invasion of my stable mind.
Can't I find a safe, open place
To pitch my tents, invent a new universe,
Where, if I wish, I can sit, eons,
Listening to birds singing sonorously, sweetly,
Or stroll, forming soft, lyrical rhymes,
Whose winged words will leave my tongue's tip,
Like baby Phoenixes at nest's rim,
Poised to take flight once and forever?

This intensely bright day in early October,
Journeying south, away from memory,
Toward a rendezvous with uncertainty,
I know that, as loneliness's most recent victim,
My psyche will have been served her summons,
Petitions, and prayers for dissolution,
Left on my front porch,
By a sheriff's process server, while I've been out here,
Trying to elude our mutual future,
Refuse to accept her xeroxed documents.
But my dizzy vision sees, too acutely,
Destiny's oblique, irreconcilable inevitability,
Realizes the end was a concluded issue
Before we ever stole our first surreptitious kiss.
Opening my lids, I locate myself home.
Though away no more than a daydream,
I'm shocked to find my door keys
No longer fit the locks, which my wife has had changed.

10/6/88 — [1] (02169)

Allhallows Season ^Δ

At the center of this bright-blue October day
And at its edges, I sense, in every essence and scent,
Pumpkin-time's presence,
Halloween season announcing itself

*

Prematurely, exacting sadness and guilt —
Forces to be reckoned with, by my heart,
Knowing, as it does, just how unhappy
The four of us have become, this forlorn year.

Inexplicably, morning's crisp brilliance
Triggers all that innocent excitement we once shared —
Inventing disguises, to frighten friends;
Cutting, deseeding, dressing the jack-o'-lantern;
Trick-or-treating the neighborhood;
Returning to the house, with pirates' booty;
Eating ourselves into satiety and then some —

When we were still enveloped in well-being,
Unsuspicious of family wreckers:
Goblins, spirits, specters, poltergeists,
With real axes to grind, horns, tails,
And fangs to brandish, for amusement's sake;
Constricting snakes let loose; vampires
Committing adultery, to keep alive,
For one more dalliance, one less death of the flesh
And bloodless spirit; and real witches
Doing rituals to discourage traditional marriages.

Ah, this perfectly pristine October day
Transports memory to less complicated seasons,
In rural Missouri, when, as loving, trusting wife,
Mild husband writing poems
Uniquely consonant with our familial existence,
And daughter and son, in one unpretentious cluster,
We tried to survive our implausible lives,
Like eucalyptus trees along San Francisco's coastline.
But blinding me, day's brightness reminds me
There's no priest nearby. I'm dying.

I cry, at the realization that these days
Are legacies evoking regret only,
Ancient poetry whose immediate resonations
Echo off walls of a Lake Superior agate
I hide inside, listening to yet more ancient oceans,
In the dark night of my Allhallows soul.

Fall-Changes

These sixty-degree October afternoons,
Missouri's trees hold their collective breath,
As if awaiting a sneeze
Reluctant to complete its original promise
Or become death's little harbinger.
Their leaves shimmer in meek postures,
Sweet, patient gestures
Suggesting evolution not yet evolved,
Progression in progress.

While I drive two hundred fifty miles home,
Through this silent seething,
My intellect senses the earth's immense energy
Pulsing inside stems, veins, roots,
Dense conduits of xylem and phloem,
All working toward universal transfiguration.
My ears, olfactories, and eyes
Record vibrations, scents, colorations, in the air,
Heralding serendipitous wonderment.

I lean forward in my seat,
Heart beating to some unidentifiable rhythm
Emanating from distant histories
Before man began disregarding seasons,
Forgetting to do rituals to harvest moons,
Rainbows, volcanoes, sheet lightning,
Tidal waves, earthquakes, and droughts.
And I realize the trees are heeding me.
Hue by hue, they're worshiping *my* dissolution too.

10/7/88 (02167)

[Sitting outdoors, on the porch, this crisp Sunday,]

Sitting outdoors, on the porch, this crisp Sunday,
Listening to acorns hit the street,
Split like atoms in a linear accelerator;
Watching two- and three-decade couples

*

Walking sidewalks, hand in hand,
Others, more youthful, nudging kids on trikes,
In fire engines or strollers, atop inchworms;
Losing myself in irregular undulations
Of a kite tied, to a bike,
By a phantom riding through the park, at high speed,

I realize how wide the silence is,
Dividing my wife and me from these fleet pleasures
People are taking in stride, complacently,
Who pass without suspecting that I'm behind these hedges
Or that an epidemic has wrecked our four lives,
Leaving us to die inside this house immorality has quarantined.
I alone yet muster strength
To take air, share in the sounds of squirrels
Scratching tree bark, chasing themselves, in lusty play,
Leaping drawbridge limbs always going up,
And remark the leaves' changing sizes, shapes, and hues,

This crisp October afternoon, as if I were a magician
Changing himself into a masochist
Trained in the artifice of making painful dissolution
Even more unendurable, pain itself
A hatful of biting asps and spitting vipers
I grab like scarves, with alacrity and foolhardiness,
Despite the accidental nature of human life.
Each person I view through the deep, green shrubbery,
Every animal, insect, and bird I witness
Beyond the immediate zone this porch owns,
Performs a trick I once perfected.

10/9/88 — [2] (00472)

Union Station ^Δ

On this gleaming October afternoon,
We meet for lunch, at Houlihan's,
In downtown St. Louis,
Within the colossal, iron-girded terminal
Whose steel-fretted network of trusses
Once supported eleven and a half acres of roofing,
Beneath which, even in our youth,
*

Steam locomotives pulling sleepers and diners
Backed in, discharged and boarded passengers,
Before scattering out, over tracks
Radiating to every way-station, whistle stop,
Depot, and big-city Victorian monolith.

In another era, we would have been jostled
Amidst the pacing activity of travelers
Passing inconspicuously as comets,
Pretending to take the guesswork out of destiny,
Make fate a slave to their impatience.
But today, this cavernous throwback
Serves our desires, without harassing us,
Lets us reminisce about long-distance trips
When, click-clacking at 60 mph,
Spaces between places were ten times less urgent.
It suggests we take extended measure,
In expressing, to each other, our sweet affections,

And nourishes our need to meet surreptitiously,
Verbalize daydreams of fleeing our lives,
Sleeping together, two nights, on the *Super Chief*,
From K.C., through Albuquerque, to L.A.
Sharing cashew-chicken salad, iced tea,
We ride each other's eyes, to their horizons,
As if they were parallel rails
Converging at our hearts' unrequited-love station.
Astonishingly, in less than two hours,
We've reached our destination. Exiting,
We question whether we've arrived in time
To make connections on the next train west.

10/11/88 (02016)

[This glorious mid-October Lord's morning,] Δ

This glorious mid-October Lord's morning,
I submit to the earth's magnetic flow,
Hoping it will guide me home,
On my spirit's true-north course,
And that I'll arrive alive, in due time,
To celebrate the planet's collective resurrection
From its ceremonial autumnal burial.

Leaving the city, this mystic a.m.,
I see each tree in the endless Golgotha
Through which my vehicle skitters.
Every one is a Dalí crucifix
Dripping Christ's myriad invisible pigments,
Which vision transfigures into colors my eyes recognize.
Each blink remixes my expectations of death.

Where do the hues go when they dry up?
Whose blood is it, anyway,
And why does it manifest such brightness,
When its existence is so short-lived?
These inscrutable questions will yield, to me,
The secret formulas for their shades,
When I reach my destination, late this afternoon.

For now, however, amidst this vast necropolis,
I go north by northwest, letting my reflexes
Vector me toward my day of reckoning,
Suspecting death is nothing less or more
Than an ephemeral ignition of sticks
Flickering into flaming crucifixes —
Fall leaves immolating me, in their blazing.

10/16/88 (00283)

Missing Persons

Today, he sets his highest sights
On aspiring to waking from tentacled sleep,
Getting dressed in matching socks and shoes,
Finding an exit from the unfinished basement
In which he's been malingering, for decades,
Beneath an accumulation of yellowed newspapers,
Oily rags, and myriad brown bags
He's used to transport pints, fifths, quarts,
Half-gallons of cheap whiskey and wine
He's suckled, for warmth and affection,
Too many nights to count on the abacus he uses
To calculate the inconsistent sum of his eight fingers
And two thumbs, which he enumerates hourly,
With obsessive deliberation, to monitor his vital signs,
*

Reassure himself he's still alive,
Not embalmed with paraldehyde,
Which he once resorted to as a cure
To rid himself of the one craving whose fulfillment
Could briefly neutralize his disillusionment
(With exactly what, he was never sure . . .
Possibly disappointment with having to sweep streets,
Spread tar behind fire-breathing dragons,
Spear paper debris, crumpled cans, from medians —
Jack-of-all-trades, Master
Bator for the Missouri State Highway Department).

That was in his twenties and thirties,
Salad days, when his tough, tanned skin
Could fend off the sun's pernicious ultraviolet,
His lungs could withstand diesel exhaust,
And he could make do on potato chips
And a Coke, dinners of coffee, fries, and fruit pies.
Lately, arthritis in his toes, fingers,
And across his hips has kept him from lining up
At roll call, for job assignments.
Some nights, he's even missed the soup kitchen,
Which regularly assumes the same position,
Facing the desolate housing project
Inside whose foundation-shells
He resides, hoping no one will evict him
From his empty residence. Just now,
He rises, like a mole, through a hole
In the rubbish pile he disturbs,
Burrowing out of his vaporous stupor, into dawn.
Cautiously, he looks around, not for enemies
But any friend who might distinguish him
From the rags, papers, and package-liquor bags
And invite him to bum along, share the air,
Be free with him, careless,
Walk the wire stretched between life and death,
Each successive breath the only net
Capable of catching him if he loses footing,
Drops through a slot in destiny's grate
At the bottom of the basement, where, then,
He'd never again have to experience tentacled sleep
Or wake to serve the term of his earthshaking sentence.

10/18/88 (02166)

Approximating the Next Incarnation ^Δ

This too-bright Tuesday noon,
His outraged spirit takes flight,
As if flushed out of hiding, like a frightened quail covey,
By a vague, predatory agent
Or bounty hunter seeking to sink his teeth
Into the sweet, tender headcheese of his unconscious
And make his brain's waking imagination bleed.

Which direction his spirit will take, what destination
It'll reach before sunset occurs,
Doesn't worry him. The very sensation of going,
Letting motion coerce him away from home,
Is consolation enough for not knowing
Where *when* will end, who will be there
To grant his past access to *then*,

Allow him to forget the present anguish
Jettisoning his two children has caused.
Resigned to exile he's prepared for,
These past few celibate years of his cuckoldry
By duplicitous Janus, his wife
(With two eyes on the same side of her lying smile),
He outdistances loneliness, revels in the ride

That dismantles youth's soiled dream-tapestry
A strand a mile, leaving behind,
In the road his rearview mirror decodes,
Shabby, frayed hopes two lovers once wove.
Now, nothing remains of the unspoken trust
That unified the design of their Gobelin vows,
Not even dim outlines God sketched on their canvas.

His speed makes him dizzy. It's the freedom
(His breathing becoming that of an operatic soprano
Reaching dramatic closure, in his dying denouement)
That sends all his senses past redline,
Revs intelligence's engine beyond human thresholds.
His flesh pulls away from his skeleton;
Vision blurs; he loses control of the wheel.

Emanating from unrecognizable energy sources,
Amnesia possesses intuition's reflexes.
He suspends expectations, submits to destiny's mechanism.

*

Happiness, like shooting stars wetting night,
With soft, orgasmic ejaculating light,
Fills his vision with protean wisdom.
He's in the kingdom's outer ring, closing fast.

10/25/88 (02165)

Digital Shit

As he careens out of control, on cruise control,
South, out of the city, and westerly,
His sense of order suffers disruption.
At sixty-five miles per hour,
He fidgets with inscrutable push buttons
On the sophisticated digital clock
His new fuel-injected, electronic-ignitioned vehicle

Comes equipped with. He's pissed off
Because he can't decode the green diodes,
Whose displays are Times Square by night,
Readouts flashing practical road info,
To keep him from having an accident,
Running short of gas,
Eighty miles from the closest filling station,

Or ending up like "Wrong Way" Corrigan,
Stranded in equatorial Antarctica,
Without a pedal to tromp on or a paddle to pull
When Shit's Creek rises, like Lazarus,
From its dry bed or compost heap.
He tries myriad combinations and permutations,
To get hour and minute to predominate,

Not "AV MPH,"
"EL MI," "IN MPG,"
Or "6 USED" (which he assumes means gallons consumed).
In truth, all he'd like to do
Is reset the son-of-a-bitch to the correct time.
He muses, *These useless computations*
Don't get ya there a shittin' bit quicker!

Emboldened, he ascends to scatological profundity,
Decrying the military-industrial complex,
Overkill theories of nuclear disarmament,

*

Toxic waste, “treacle-down” Reaganomics,
 Planned obsolescence, Nader’s Raiders,
 Spinoff NASA technology,
 And the good ol’ American “Joneses” syndrome.

*Christ! Why’d they have to mess with it,
 Move night back an hour,
 Screw with light and dark, arbitrary-up everything,
 Just to suit a few special-interest groups,
 Still fewer politicians? If it ain’t broke,
 Don’t fix it! Now I’m needin’ fixed,
 But this clock ain’t gonna take me into the shop,*

*At forty-five bucks an hour. No way!
 Once more, just for superstition’s sake,
 He depresses the buttons, plays “chopsticks”
 Without being able to read digital music.
 Fuck the bastard! Let it be late, all winter!
 I sure as shit can wait till spring,
 When they bring back daylight-saving time!*

11/1/88 (01051)

Deep Breathing ^Δ

This dazzle-dizzy November 8,
 When the temperature resembles that of a tropic day,
 Not of winter’s next-door neighbor,
 The trees haven’t yet jettisoned leaves
 Or resigned their spirits to hibernal griefs,
 And the sun is a young hunter
 In hope of killing his first doe,
 To smear its blood across his uninitiated forehead,
 As a ritual/rite of obeisance to God
 And of pride in his own skills and diligence,

I listen to my heart miss entire beats,
 Sliding into and out of graves
 Breathing digs prematurely,
 To verify the right size, before dying
 Or staying alive at too high a pitch
 To protect its brain from overheating,
 Whenever ecstasy trespasses on an unsuspecting psyche.

*

Right now, speeding southeasterly,
I've decided never to stop driving,
At least not until I've reached
The outer extremities of Everywhere.

11/8/88 (02265)

[By nature, he's a habitual man,]

By nature, he's a habitual man,
Who repeats himself every chance he can,
Like ritual itself becoming myth,
With the sheer widening width of years,
Or time serving as a granite cliff
God might skip across history's ocean,
For his vision to follow to its outer limits.

He returns to the scenes of his life's crimes,
Without the slightest anxiety
That someone might consider him a pyro
Revivifying his vampire psyche,
With the fire's liquid blaze tearing his eyes.
Nightly and by day, he eats alone,
Sleeps beneath a Turin-shroud of obscurities

He can't fathom, for their phantom shades.
Yet, like a half-blind medieval scribe,
He painstakingly translates them
Into metaphors, symbols, entire poems.
After all, from the very beginning,
He's intuited the inscrutable nature of existence,
His place in the scheme of undreamed dreams

That come, into being, like St. Elmo's fire,
Sundogs, rainbows, tornadoes,
Migrating monarch butterflies and geese,
Inspirations materializing in the prismatic mist
Niagaras spew five miles high,
As they cascade over imagination's precipice.
To him, God's limner, these phenomena

Are his mandate to describe while alive.

His span determines how detailed

*

He must portray the pieces and tatters he sees.
 Right now, it's time to exercise his eyes'
 Synaptic reflexes. Rising from bed, dressing,
 He steps outside, into a glowing snow.
 He knows it was July when he lay down to rest.

11/11/88 (00270)

[Bereaved early or late, soon enough,]

Bereaved early or late, soon enough,
 Too soon, agonizingly protractedly,
 Predeceasing children and wife,
 Sadly outlasting progeny,
 Left with earthly possessions
 Or only disillusionment and loneliness,
 Approaching the abyss,
 Contemplating fate's denouement
 As though standing below Yosemite's
 El Capitan, gazing blankly into cascades
 Funneling directly into one's eyes,
 Like ten million reflections from the sun,

We all realize we've been transported
 On the same vessel, plied Lethe,
 River Styx, Oceanus Oblivionis,
 Since the beginning,
 Without knowing from which port we sailed,
 Toward what destination,
 Or when we did or will or might arrive.
 For certain, all we can take, on faith,
 Is this: sea monsters lurk
 In the firmaments Death and Birth,
 Which keep us in suspended animation,
 Indeterminately.

11/15 & 12/18/88 (00467)

Holocaust and Apocalypse ^Δ

Recently, I was reborn in an era
 When man feared that his basest tendencies
 *

Toward violence would erupt into corruption,
He'd lose his grip on history,
Trigger genocide, explode despairs so terrible,
The stench of burning human flesh
Would rise from Earth's festering "strip" mines,
Choke everyone, for generations around,
Religious and political expiations
Notwithstanding.
And he did, for damn sure, by God!

Oh, what I wouldn't give to have stayed dead,
Not to have lived to witness
Man's sublime indifference to nuclear fission.
Gladly would I have forgone reincarnation,
Just to have missed that incandescence
Over Hiroshima and Nagasaki,
Not to have listened, almost fifty years, now,
To the same naive smugness
That opened the *Enola Gay*'s bomb-bay doors
And sent a strange black dove
Interminably soaring.

But I didn't,
Because I couldn't sidestep fate,
As it tiptoed over destiny's tightrope.
In fact, with dismayed persuasion,
I was forced to balance on Satan's shoulders
While supporting, on mine, three more apprentices,
Less coordinated but lighter in weight.
We crossed the abyss, without a net
To catch our fall. After all,
How could I have been expected to recall
Resurrection was unalterable?

11/16/88 (01018)

[“Being” and “nothingness,” one philosopher][†]

“Being” and “nothingness,” one philosopher
Dubbed the existential antinomies;
Another, a Southern writer, from Mississippi,

11/18/88 (01502)

Clean Getaway^Δ

He flees (or is it “fleas”?) the city,
At the speed of silence,
Like white light in a cosmic spectrum
Disillusionment diffuses through its prism.
From forward motion, his fugitive thoughts
Shape the getaway vehicle taking him
To a Bonnie-and-Clyde hideaway
He’ll recognize, the moment he arrives,
Despite never having tried a heist
Requiring derring-do, which his wife
Has accused him of lacking, their entire marriage.

Oh, won’t she be astonished, if not amused,
When she comes home, this afternoon,
And discovers her house has been looted —
Not of jewelry, just her husband, who’s flown the coop
Without leaving clues
To help her explain his broad-daylight caper?
Oh, won’t she be vexed, perplexed,
On investigating the premises and learning
That none of his personal effects
Has been disturbed, either — shoes, toiletries,
Clothes, wrist watch, bedside reading?

By the time he arrives at Anywhere
And unloads all his stolen goods
(His flesh, intellect, emotions,
And stoic, poetical resolve
To keep rejection at bay, with his inventive pen),
She’ll be slipping between cold sheets,
With her lover — herself —
The submissive lesbian of her perverse fantasies,
With whom she’s consorted
More years than he could hope to undo,
Even using his *Kama Sutra* moves.

Quite likely, she won’t even notice
His head’s not beneath the pillow beside her,
Or if she does, she’ll not quit
Autoerotically exciting her nipples and clitoris.
Distant from her by silence, not miles,
*

Spirit, not time, and “home free”
From the crime he believed he was committing,
He just might take all night
To delight in his haul, counting and recounting it
Before divvying it up
Among the accomplices of his split personality.

11/22/88 (01017)

Hapless Ever After ^Δ

For Ann Bobman

Like myriad carrier pigeons
Released from their cages, in furious jubilation,
Words echoing the king’s ringing decree
Went out, in a flock,
As a proclamation requesting all female subjects
In every demesne, fiefdom, and shire
Submit to the tedious trying on
Of one curiously tiny, vitreous slipper,
Left behind, late the previous night,
At the stroke of midlife,
Near the palace gate, by a phantom lady
Who recklessly descended destiny’s staircase,
Escaping one step ahead of fate,
Suspended between innocence and disgrace —
Princess and guttersnipe.

But despite searching kingdomwide,
Neither prince nor attendants
Could locate a maiden
Whose foot even remotely fit the slipper
Or whose features resembled those
His Highness remembered being ravished by,
All evening brief, who dreamed
Of wedding her, as the dream ceased
Just prior to ever after.
In fact, even as king, uncheckmated,
He continued interviewing potential claimants,
Hopeful of retrieving that magic glow
Even lesbians and jesters possess,

*

Transcending their own gross momentariness,
Every trillion incandescences or so.

11/29/88 (01011)

Snowy Delusions

My wife and I drive to the airport,
Before the crack of dawn.
Now, could a single introductory couplet
(Unrhymed, of course),
In the history of literature's place and time
(For that matter, even begging the question of meter,
Though, possibly, not cadence),
Taking off from a collective experience
Which typifies, nay, symbolizes, modernity,
With its inherent fugues and transience
(If I might be excused a didactic intrusion),
Conceivably be more concrete,
While simultaneously incorporating a figurative trope,
Albeit hackneyed and clichéd
(My self-deprecating analysis
Itself redundant),
To achieve proportion and harmony in verse
That my poem-making sensibility
Slavishly refuses to allow free run,
Possibly from fear of discovering truth
Too terrible to carry around with it,
Through Minneapolis, Duluth,
And out into the snowy solitude of Lake Nebagamon,
To which I escape, this dark a.m.,
Seeking refuge, for a few days, from my wife,
With whom I now drive to the airport,
Trying to explain answers my attorney made,
In response to her petition for divorce?

Soon, I'll be gone, anonymous, a note
Sifting down through my life's twilight,
Dusting off North Woods trees,
Amidst which, hopefully, I'll be able to achieve peace,
Use undistracted inner freedom as fuel
To fuse abstract fictions with concrete facts
And create joyful, winged voices

*

Singing out uncomplicated, rhyming couplets
Mixed with fresh essences, symbols,
And nimble images, to stimulate my tympanums,
Awaken my drugged spirit
To love's roundelays and paeans,
Which I once shaped so unself-consciously,
Within her presence, from her aura,
Partaking of her heart's gentleness.
Maybe retreating into my own Varykino,
Alone with my frozen bones,
To compose my soul's poetry from flowing snow,
I'll once again come to know that loneliness
Which, so long ago, drove me
To my soul's easternmost peak
And readied me to seize her intense innocence,
Where it waited for my heat to release it from silence.
Just possibly, when I return home,
I'll be clutching a sheaf of living poems,
Scrolls whose scriptural covenants
Might bear witness to the celebration of two souls
Who still have a history to share in composing.

12/2 — [1] & 12/12/88 (02273)

Limitations

Having traipsed four hours, through snow,
This glistening Wisconsin afternoon,
He finally comes indoors, to rest,
Catch his breath, set down impressions
In a notebook at the end of his pen.

He's never been content to focus, on his retinas,
With history's wide-angle lens,
Images memory blends,
Whenever resetting time's depth of field,
To compensate for dimming hindsight.

But then, he's never trusted words, either,
To record events he's experienced,
Never satisfied his sensibility
That metaphors are capable of tasks he asks of them
When he's arresting essences.

Nevertheless, it's the best he can do —
 Metamorphose, from snow into poetry,
 Ecstasy his traipsing has incandesced.
 Abruptly, he suffers frustration and disgust.
 He's lost his pen out there

And knows, if he expects to capture, on paper,
 Wisconsin's glistening magic,
 He'll have to retrace every step,
 Over all sixty-seven acres.
 Desperately, he sets off, in the dark.

12/2 — [2] & 12/17/88 — [1?] (01014)

[Occasionally, we take ourselves back]

Occasionally, we take ourselves back
 To the location of a magical act,
 Secular baptism, or rite of passage
 Through which we entered adulthood,
 Assumed our heritage or birthright,
 A place made mystical by imagination,
 Whose actual significance
 May have been no less critical
 In the shaping of our individual futures
 Than cataclysms are to the fates of civilizations —
 A cemetery of sweetly sleeping remembrances.

This glistening Wisconsin afternoon,
 I've concluded a middle-aged crusade
 Past Minneapolis, beyond Duluth,
 To my youth's Jerusalem —
 The boys' camp at Lake Nebagamon.
 I've returned alone, to leave my tracks in snow,
 Visit, meditate, worship at grottoes
 I've not kneeled before in twenty years or more
 Yet would recognize blind,
 For myriad times I've entered, through dreams,
 Its cabin doors, campers' smiles, deeds.

But weaving beneath pine trees
 Unpredictably relieving their sagging boughs
 Of powdery white weight,

*

Filling the thick, blue sky with cosmic dust
 My eyes keep sweeping up,
 Gazing, in amazement, through its translucent lace,
 I've become all too conscious
 That solitude is my only witness to this spectacle
 And that no one but me is listening to the snow
 Spilling to earth, like exploding girandoles,
 Softly smacking, some motes inaudibly.

And I reflect not on whether anyone would notice
 What my ears detect, were I not here
 To register these sounds, or if, indeed,
 They would even exist in a Berkeleian world,
 If no one were present, in the first place;
 Instead, more crucial to me
 Is that none of it may be of consequence
 To anyone, including me — crusades, salvation,
 Praying at youth's grave, solitude
 In confronting one's fundamental aloneness.
 But then, this remains to be seen, to be heard.

12/2/88 — [3] (02291)

Saving the Marriage ^Δ

There are seasons in hell
 When a man must take leave of his senses,
 Abandon sanity and reasonableness,
 Retreat from the rubble heap of troubled dreams
 That, collapsing about his feet,
 Strand him standing in sand,
 Like Ozymandias, silent in his disillusionment.

Where he'll go to take refuge,
 He never knows until the moment he arrives.
 Right now, all he can recall
 About getting here is crying, to his wife,
 In pained falsetto, "I'll love you, always!"
 As she stole his balls
 And he fell through a hole in his soul.

Today, no mention is made of his hiatus.
 He and she seem exemplary —

*

Model spouses, who share housekeeping
And raising a perfectly matched set of children,
Take vacations regularly,
Embrace, kiss, hug, in public,
And never make love, making love.

12/3 & 12/9/88 (01012)

Spinning My Wheels

First, my early-morning gaze
Takes in all of Duluth's western hill,
On which houses seem to have been stuck,
Precariously, with Scotch tape,
A few so loose
A strong wind could rip them
From their concrete foundations,
Send them flying into Saint Louis Bay,
Immediately below,
Like tattered scraps of paper.
When I blink again, everything has changed.
Vision surrounds the municipal-court building;
The entire downtown
Comes slowly around the bend, into view.

By degrees, I begin to realize
That I, not Duluth,
Hand-painted on a circular strip,
Am the spinning frames in this praxinoscope;
The city is static. My mind and eyes
Provide illusion's artifice,
That dynamic quality
This vivid theater-in-the-round possesses.

Now, just out over the water,
The sky transposes gray to blue,
Whose cloud-hues of lavender, pink, and red
Are stretched like pulled taffy.
Lake Superior widens like a great mouth,
Slips its tongue into the harbor,
Beneath the Aerial Lift Bridge,
Unnoticed except by a lone oar boat,
*

Moored, to sleep, just beyond,
Gaining strength to discharge its cargo,
By Cesarean, later this Sunday morn.

Once again, I look upward,
Trying to relocate myself in relation
To my starting point,
As though, somehow, knowing where I've been
Might prophesy where I'm going,
When I'll arrive. I see the harbor itself,
Dammed up, behind the lake, like a reservoir,
And separated from it, by one slender umbilical cord —
The sandbar named Park Point,
Which forms a pseudoshore against storms.
Its waters ripple against fortress walls
Of grain elevators
That obscure the High Bridge,
Connecting Minnesota with Wisconsin.

And now, as the houses stuck with Scotch tape
Begin to peel off, fall into the bay,
I know that its my time, too,
To get off this revolving planet,
Set out for destinations
Measured in miles elapsed, tires worn,
Radii stretched, beyond breaking,
To their outermost expectations,
Where, temporarily, I might set up camp
And stay as long as it takes
To chart my position
In the galaxy my existence spans
As it travels a straight line
While bending, bending ever so slightly,
Until, in the end, it converges with its own beginning.

For the very immediate present, however,
I'll have to wait for faint dizziness,
Which I've contracted, to subside,
Release me from gravitational forces
The horizontal orbit I've traced,
Two hours, now,
Has imposed on imagination.
Sipping cold coffee,
*

To stimulate heartbeat, blood flow,
I don't dare stare out, again, into space,
For fear of seeing Duluth's western hill
Covered over in snowdrifts
Six feet deep,
Keeping me transfixed, spinning indefinitely.

12/4 & 12/27/88 — [2?] (02272)

Rescue Mission ^Δ

On this amazingly blue December afternoon,
Fleeing St. Louis, westerly,
He perplexes his brain unduly,
Contemplating flights he's taken
From Minneapolis, this a.m.,
And is making, right now, to a destination
Yet to be arrived at rationally.

In fact, he feels so relaxed,
Systematically exiting the city's sea,
Tacking across concrete lanes,
He refuses to peer in his rearview mirror,
To see if he's leaving a wake
Pirates and IRS agents
Might follow, to overtake his vessel.

He gazes straight ahead,
Squints each time an oncoming ship
Hits him across his decks, with cannon shot —
The sun's fierce reflections —
Blinding vision just long enough
To cause his grip on the wheel to loosen,
The boat to veer too near the edge,

And him to forget immediate threats
The linear ocean he sails poses.
At the last second, instinctively, it seems,
He recovers his balance,
Resets compass heading due west.
Though he doesn't recognize the coastline,
He senses it's getting closer,

That he's being guided by persuasive currents,
Themselves coerced by forces
Inscrutable to his vexed intellect.
He'll rely on dead reckoning
To direct him back to that shore
Where he left his soul mate
After the storm, the wreck, to fend for herself.

12/6/88 (01021)

Eyes Within Eyes Inside Eyes

The vicious glare his stare magnifies
Heightens, while impairing, sight.
His eyes blaze fire,
Like two shooting stars
Straying across night's daytime,
With this difference: they don't die out,
Instead keep etching lines,
Deeper and wider, into the horizon's outer edge,
Repousséing complex designs behind it,
Inside God's colossal bowl,
Where seraphim gather, as at an oasis
Or cosmic watering hole,
To sip of his aqueous and vitreous humors,
Taste his saline tears,
Discover his reflections on their tongues' tips,
Slake thirsts, with his whisperous visions.

Leaving the city, on his first crusade,
Traveling southwesterly,
Unable to escape the blinding, bright rays,
He tries, with his mighty imagination,
To tilt the rim toward him,
Let its invisible liquid spill across his face,
Bathe his lids and lips, in its vapors,
And irrigate furrows squinting has traced,
Staring exacerbated,
And imagining seeded with daydreams.
Three hours later, still dislocated,
He yet arrives refreshed, eager to get naked,
*

Dive into the setting sun's Ionian Sea,
Whose Corfu-clear pool —
Two pools, really — buoys his eyes,
With images of him swimming in eternity's eye.

12/13/88 (01016)

Temptations

Despite his wife's existence in an adjacent room,
He awakens, this Saturday morning,
To an empty house.

Whatever Christmas visions

He might have brought up, out of sleep, undetected,
Get checked by customs, at the border
Between night and day,
Which his intellect operates under strict regulations.
He has to pay imputed duty on gifts,
Trinkets, souvenirs symbolizing places he stayed
While gone, last evening,
Safe inside dreaming's womb-caves.

Unexpectedly, his early-morning solitude
Gets surcharged with tedious arguments, by his spouse,
Who sits, stark naked, on a barstool
Behind the kitchen counter, sipping coffee,
Waiting to accuse him of committing adultery,
When he's spent another night alone,
Not allowing her to share the untroubled air
His conscience seems to breathe naturally.
She desires to distract his dispassionate will,
Destroy the imperturbable joy
He's able to maintain, writing verse,
In love with life, his recurring paean.

The incandescent flecks of his eyes
Plead innocent to her complaints
That he's to blame for her infidelity
And that he's verbally and physically abused her,
By his silence and refusal to placate
Her sexual desires. Even now,
Eyeing her rigid nipples, spread thighs

*

Inviting him into her vagina's wet nest,
 He shows no emotion,
 Knowing, too well, what it's like
 To be trapped inside a eunuch's testicles
 When St. Elmo's fire strikes.

12/17/88 — [2?] (01010)

Lovesong ^Δ

*For Julius Lester,
 after his wondrous autobiography,
 Lovesong: Becoming a Jew*

The sweetest song I sing is silence.
 Can't you hear me whispering in the distance
 Or at least read the lyrics of my soaring score,
 Floating, invisibly, above you, love,
 Like cloud-notes composing themselves
 Upon shimmering V-staffs
 Wild geese in flight form,
 Exceeding the speeds of sound and light?

God has chosen me cantor,
 To chant His wordless reverberations,
 Hum the earth's Kaddish,
 Learn all His verses,
 Not just the last one and the first,
 To His majestical epic, and recite their measures
 For anyone who, between breaths,
 Might listen to death's deathless echoes.

I'm the song silence sings,
 Accompanying wind chimes hung from the sun.
 I'm its mystic tongue and lips
 Becoming heartbeats and eye blinks,
 Making the ineffable audible,
 The invisible seen, allowing my soul
 Total range over all octaves
 Vibrating between Creation and Apocalypse.

Silence and I are eternal.

12/17/88 — [3?] (02270)

No Guarantees

If this blustery, sixty-degree noon,
So incongruously springlike,
In its coquettish sultriness,
Just six days nigh to Christmas,
Is consistent with nature's unpredictability,
Then my own emotional confusion,
Confronting this season of family and peace,
Shouldn't astonish me, either.

After all, at this late date,
I should have grown inured to hopes
Suddenly rendered old-fashioned,
Dreams obsoleted, love judged unrealistic,
For sentimentality and dependence on rituals
We spent two times nine years
Setting into the foundation of our estate.
Nonetheless, this chaos vexes me.

I guess my unmet expectations
Simply haven't yet learned to process rejection,
Accept abject ingratitude
My wife and her students — my children —
Express so articulately,
Every step and breath I take,
Word I say. I suspect my affection for them
Refuses to quit resuscitating what's dead

Or let change have its way, unchallenged.
But then, even in my wife's silent presence,
Before leaving the city, this a.m.,
To teach "Reading and Writing Short Fiction"
(If that's possible), at the community college
Out in the country, where, once, we lived
With such contentedness and pride,
I could sense her rancorous anger, taste it.

So why, then, am I so surprised
By this unusually mild December climate?
Shouldn't I have surmised, by now,
That these inconsistencies in nature
And in human behavior are not incongruent

*

Or chaotic but consonant with universal design?
Maybe snow falling, Christmas morn,
Is a forlorn aberration and warm the norm.

12/20 & 12/27/88 — [3?] (01015)

Friday Night Out ^Δ

He's grown so used to living alone,
Living at home,
He doesn't see himself coming or going,
Though he goes, occasionally,
When invited to accompany his footsteps,
Prevent them from recognizing their own echoes
Rising from crowded sidewalks
Just outside his range of silence.
On Friday nights, he eats out,
Conversing with phantom shadows
From table candles, whose quavering voices
Remind him how threatening fate can be,
Especially when expressing bigotries,
Forcing his eyes to complete the dialogue
Between its lies and sinister implications.

When returning from his one indulgence,
Desperately craving sleep,
To escape seedy chimeras
That would keep him in waking surveillance,
For demons devouring memory,
He slips under freshly pressed shrouds,
Pulls up, about his neck,
Three woolen blankets, summer and winter,
And counts, from one million down,
At least ten times,
Depending on his terrible paranoia,
Fleeced, pink-skinned Picasso-sheep
Leaping off cliffs, exploding in midair,
Like Space Shuttle victims,
Falling into Auschwitz pits below his bed,

Just beneath his head, which rests on a pillow
Filled with porcupine quills.

*

But his counting never gets below
482,000
Before sleep inundates him
With Zyklon B and cyanide enticements
To exchange dreams for nightmares,
Barter tranquillity for a preview of limbo.
Yet, for a decade, he's never abandoned hope,
On the chance that, one day,
He'll know prophecy,
Glimpse his deceased wife, Leah, alone,
Shimmering in a golden, glowing halo,
Waving him home again, home.

12/23/88 (02268)

Postponements

Delayed two days,
Abrading the Rockies and Kansas plains,
With roof-drifting blizzards,
The snow that missed us, at Christmas,
Finally hit, today.
We missed its mystic presence, too,
For a glistening sun warming the air
As if it were a swarming petri dish.

Some vague lack in the atmosphere,
That afternoon and eve,
When we routinely celebrated birth,
Charity, hope, generosity, promise,
Kept us edgy, set festering
Skeptical questions about miracles
And explanations to expectations
Sacred occasions manifest.

It made us impatient to experience change,
Get in touch, again, with names
And places from Judeo-Christian myth,
Ritual, and historical teaching:
Bethlehem's manger, the City of David,
Angels, wise men of the Orient,
The Christ child, prophets, apostles,
And *snow* swirling down like manna,

Like God's words to a world
Eager to seize His evocations as its own,
No matter how they arrive . . .
Snow filling up desolate spaces,
With lunar illuminations
From the midnight sun . . .
Snow two days late,
Its fluttering butterfly flakes

Sticking to my eyelids and hairtips,
Tickling my least sensitive nerves,
Embroidering the entire sky, in a divine design
Sewn so close, with tiny threads
So finely woven of ivory dust,
I could rush out naked,
Slip into its robe, and keep from freezing,
For its mystic heat . . . slow-flowing *snow*

Closing every opening I occupy,
As I grope back across Kansas plains, alone,
High and low, through the Rockies,
Toward the source of its storm,
Hoping to know whether, friend or foe,
It's meant to baptize my soul,
Bury me alive, under its cold, wet fire,
Or let me follow it home when it goes.

12/27/88 — [1] (00469)

Willy Watched *Victory at Sea*, the Previous Evening, on His Motel TV

Deep-throated, moaning groans,
Like ghosts crawling up, on all fours,
From the engine room of a battleship
Circling out of control, at Midway,
Insinuate their complaints, in his brain.

Maybe he's the gunboat
That's just sustained a torpedo
In the aft sections of his imagination,
All eight furnaces banking fast,
Rudder stuck at forty-five degrees.

Instead, he might be its officers
And sweat-sullied crew members
Feverishly trying to relight fires,
Get mechanisms unstuck
Enough to limp back to Pearl.

Possibly, he's the torpedo itself,
Whose destructive force
Has just ruptured the hull of his skull,
Letting every piece of debris
Drain out to his ocean, drown.

Sinking, he can't fathom
In how many fathoms
His spiraling spirit has bottomed out
Or in what quadrant of which greater body
His vessel has come to rest.

The only motions his senses register
Are those of shifting currents,
Drifting in and out of his flesh,
And swishing fish fins
Stirring up sand grits

That disguise death. At such depths,
Neither freezing nor pressure
Affects existence, which exists
At the speed of physical attrition,
Until only bones are left

To suggest life thrived, once,
Inside these skeletal coffins.
Drive done, Willy wakes, stunned,
Shakes his head twice,
Realizes he's arrived in time

To lunch with his best customer, Noah,
Buyer for Loman Bros., of Moberly.
Scaling the curb, to the sidewalk,
Hefting two cases weighted with swatch cards,
He gazes up at the sun and winks.

A Song of the Open Road ^Δ

As though he were a relay rider
For the defunct pony express
Or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
Flying the mail through snow,
In a 1920s biplane,
Over the Argentinian Andes,
He makes his route between Farmington
And St. Louis sporadically.
Actually, when the spirit moves him
Or demons, inspired by his spouse,
Turn up the voltage
She emits from negative poles
And drive him out of the house,
He flees eagerly, urgently,
Seizing each opportunity
To execute, not lose,
Freedom's lease on prime space
In its most prestigious location:
The open road.

Today, going southerly,
Toward Cape Girardeau,
Sensing, in the rose sky, not aloneness
But a promise of open-endedness
The rolling highway he obeys inspires,
He owes allegiance to no one
Except his own psyche.
Holding the steering wheel —
His divining rod —
He follows its mystic twitches
As if each vibration were a flick
Of a magician's wand,
Allowing him one wish
For any accomplishment
(Immortality, world peace),
Happily-ever-after endings to love
Notwithstanding.

He realizes that only he,
Independently,
Holds the skeleton key
*

That fits the common ignition switch
To all his vehicles:
Katy Station boxcars
Bound not for Auschwitz
Or Dachau but, rather, easterly,
Via express tracks, for paradise;
Overland pony; stagecoach;
Radial-engine WACO or Stinson;
Union Pacific articulated steam locomotive
Navigating the Great Divide;
Wind wagon; Greyhound bus;
Port Everglades cruise ship;
Ahab whale-chaser;
Nissan 300ZX.

Before sunset,
He'll record at least four hundred miles,
Reach his next stop refreshed,
Despite the oppressiveness
Of his obsessive quest,
Get a home-cooked meal,
At a small-town café,
Sleep, luxuriously,
Beneath goose-down quilts,
In a local '50s motel,
And awaken rested, erased,
Ready to set out, once again,
For everywhere, anywhere,
Nowhere, particularly —
Day's unflappable tatterdemalion,
Making his circuitous way back home,
In whichever direction his path leads,
Toward whatever destination,
Wherever, whenever, that may be.

1/4/89 — [1] (02252)

Cave Dweller ^Δ

The only certainty he can register
With total confidence
Is that he's a frequenter of motels,
A latter-day cave dweller

*

Staying nightly, for weeks at a time,
In holes lining roadsides,
Like pits in limestone cliffs
Along which Midwest rivers flow.

His flights in the service of Acme-Zenith
Are not without strife
Or unexpected exigencies and inconveniences:
Blown tires at the height of a snowstorm,
A short-circuited wiring harness
Darkening his headlights in the dead of night,
A lost wallet, or a prized alarm clock
Left, on a bedstand, at his last known address.

But he knows his territorial forays
Are not without compensatory gratifications:
Waitresses, barmaids, salesclerks
Whose acquaintances he's bluffed, in spades,
With poker-faced overtures he's made
In off-hours, "moonlighting"
To make his "small business" flourish,
"Servicing" them over and above his steady clientele

And offering them more than his standard "line" —
The dress pants, sportscoats, and suits
He sells to better men's-clothing shops,
As well as factory outlets in the same towns,
Along his three-state route,
To earn 7 percent commission
And credit against his monthly advance draw.
He only models for these "special customers,"

Charges nothing for his fashion show
Except a friendly "hell-low" and "good-buy,"
Going and coming between acts.
If only the keys could talk
(Those he's forgotten to leave in rooms
He's used to recuperate from business rigors),
They'd speak in a common tongue
Forming one "skeleton" key

Unlocking closets full of nameless ladies
He's slept with and drinking buds he's met,
Trifling away hours away from home,

*

Wife, children, himself,
Trying, by night, to keep loneliness at bay,
While surviving, by day, by his wits,
Just to pay for the next motel
Up the thirty-year road he's worked with a vengeance.

1/4 — [2] & 1/23/89 — [2?] (01055)

Flotsam from a Wrecked Marriage ^Δ

As I was escaping sleep's torture chamber,
My waist and legs got caught
On red-locust barbs
Protruding, contortedly, from the fence
Guarding nightmare's outer perimeters.

Immediately, I was surrounded by phantasms
Armed with leashed hellhounds
And snarling chimeras gnashing their teeth.
My entire body absorbed the pain
Their terrible bites inflicted. My brain recoiled,

As tears began to erode my face.
By the time those vicious black dogs
Had torn the clothing off my body,
Left my rank carcass
For rigor's morticians to embalm and re-dress,

My heartbeat, which I'd slowed to silence,
Resumed its metronomic clicking.
My juices, electricity, muscular reflexes
Returned to their vacated stations,
But my eyes couldn't control their incontinence,

As though vision were an unhealing wound,
A tree limb cut in the wrong season,
Stem of milkweed or Queen Anne's lace
Leaking, from an unexpected human abuse
Or accidental bruise from swirling storm debris.

My flesh, from toes to fingertips,
Kept getting wetter and colder,
As though I were wading inexorably deeper,
Into an ocean, with each breath.
I could feel minnows nipping at my skin,

Minnows becoming piranhas,
Piranhas barracudas,
Until my tears were the ocean I was wading,
The ocean my blood and bodily juices,
Buoying my shriveling soul.

Suddenly, I could feel my closed eyes
Slipping below the surface,
No longer producing translucent liquids,
Sense the ocean evaporating,
An atoll rising beneath my bones,

My bones gnarled mounting stems in a crown
Emptied of its reflecting gems.
Then, amnesic, I awakened,
With only crusty clots, in the corners of my eyes,
To suggest they'd ever been wet or died.

1/5 & 1/7/89 (02288)

Far-Ranging Effects

Days like this prairie-fire afternoon,
Blazing across the sky,
Destroying the horizon's entire harvest,
Force me to drive in abject fright.
My itinerant spirit is wildlife on the run,
Escaping habitats foreclosed
By man's avarice, not nature's acts.

Whatever direction I take
Seems to make absolutely no difference,
Since no differences seem to exist
Between existence and accidental genocide.
Yet I drive south,
Trying to second-guess my destination,
After the cyanic haze dissipates

And twilight extinguishes the conflagration
I continue trying to outrace.
For now, poetry, blind faith, and hope
Cloak my fear of the known,
In asbestos tropes that keep the smolder
*

From scorching my soul's flesh,
My breath from suffocating in odorless smoke

Pervading this whole stretch of highway
Connecting rural Missouri
With St. Louis. Now, as I near Farmington,
White-blue hues lose intensity,
Become a dense, translucent maze
Of vents, ducts, conduits,
Exchanging air between Earth and Eternity.

Suddenly, I get my precarious bearings,
Recognize the clothing I'm wearing.
Those flames, that ocherous glow
Acid-etching the putrescent sky —
It's all coming from man's power plant,
Belching gaseous effluvia into the atmosphere
As it turns the planet, on its axle.

And I'm God's newest superintendent,
Assigned to determine why
Ways can't be devised to contain ash
Burning holes in the ozone layer,
Reverse the flow of protons and electrons,
To keep us from being sucked back
Into a universe without past or future.

But I know, too, now,
There's no abatement or escaping.
Christ! I'm *already* seventy-five miles
Out from the city of light!
As if afflicted with blight, mildew, viruses,
Even white houses and churches down here
Don't glisten like they used to.

1/10 & 1/21/89 — [2] (01054)

Obsessive Quests

By degrees steadily acquired
Over decades multiplied by miles driven,
Like a highly decorated Mason,
He settles, this Friday the 13th,

*

Into position, assuming his routine behind the wheel.
He readies his psyche to man the harpoon
Affixed to his vessel's bowsprit,
Sends aloft, into the ship's three crow's-nests,
Imagination's best visionaries,
Capable of making sightings even in fog,
Then retires to his compartment below decks,
To log detailed entries
Relating to his latest oceanic voyage
Across the treacherous Midwest Passage,
Between St. Louis and Farmington,
Which he's navigated, safely, ten thousand trips.

But today, he senses premonitions,
Baleful sirens wailing in the distance,
Strange, vague specters suggesting apocalypse,
As if he were superstition's slave,
Not Ahab, master ship-captain
Afraid of absolutely nothing in the universe
Except, perhaps, at times, his own rage,
And then only for a matter of moments,
Until revenge and vindication
Reassert themselves as polestars
In the constellation he charts and follows
With salty-dog determination.
But today, something's ajar, askew,
Though he can't focus in on the source
From which his misgivings emanate.
Astrolabe, telescope, and compass are broken.

Hampered by not knowing his exact location,
He has to maneuver over shoals,
Unexposed low spots between barrier reefs,
With extreme care, meander through straits,
Isthmus channels, around peninsular capes,
As if stitching delicate fabric, with a needle,
Through invisible holes. He goes ahead
Resolutely, without any notion of halting,
Returning to morning's port of origin.
Even before setting out,
He signed a binding contract with destiny —
Purveyor of spices, balms, and emollients —
To captain its ship, on this mission

*

To discover a more expeditious route to Forever,
And he damn well won't quit until he finds it!

1/13/89 — [1] (01049)

Refugees

Each of our sweet, secret meetings
Is so fleet and unfulfilling,
We hesitate initiating subsequent trysts,
Then capitulate to our baser requirements
For companionship, communication, touching,
Letting our eyes and instincts out for recess,
To fantasize on emotion's playground,
Exercise intellects, in cool debate,
Spar gently with a new partner,
Like a baby feline testing its parent,
With mock-combat posturing,
Clawing where no other beasts
Would dare wave paws.

Our talk is of violations of trust
Caused by dissatisfied spouses
Sexually transgressing, betrayals,
Disavowals of nuptial blood-covenants,
Invisible threads dissolving,
Which we've used, trying to suture wounds,
Without achieving healing.
Occasionally, we share communion,
Eating vegetarian pizza, sipping coffee,
Partaking of secular eucharists
We deem appropriate,
Given the dislocation of our lonely souls,
Groping to renew their faith in faith.

And maybe one future day,
When we've finished sweeping away debris,
Rearranging furnishings,
Replanting shrubs and grassless patches of yard,
Redecorating all interior passageways
Leading, from the heart, outside,
Through the eyes and smiles,

*

And have understood why holocausts erupted
From love's original fires,
Burning so safely, uncontained . . .
Maybe then we'll invite each other
To spend the rest of what's left, together,
Deciding what else might go right with our lives.

1/13/89 — [2] (01044)

Patriarch at Table

I sit so close to home yet distant
And so alone, this Friday night,
Knowing my children and their mother,
My Midianite wife, also sit in a booth,
Five miles west of this restaurant.

The extensive menu I scan
Recites, to my tired, half-listening eyes,
Poetry approximating, in its demotic,
Homemade, old-fashioned food
The growing boy I used to know enjoyed:

Extra-thick chicken-noodle soup,
“Super” grilled-cheese, tuna, Reuben,
And Braunschweiger sandwiches,
Brisket with mashed potatoes, gravy, and roll,
Soufflés, milk shakes, hot cakes,

Pastries, bagels, Belgian waffles.
Its traditional internal-rhyming cadences
Are easy to chant and hum.
I weep silently, seeing myself
To the left of my father, at the dinner table,

Then telescope the scene, with my own son
Seated on my right side,
But not nearly so frequently,
Reaffirming the disintegration
Our family has suffered, here in the city.

Both boys am I. My crying
Serves little purpose
*

Except as a Red Sea reminder
Of my bitter disillusionment and heartbreak,
Over having failed to perpetuate

My forebears' most basic legacies:
Presiding, as patriarch, over a kosher table;
Conferring, upon my children, security,
By honoring the laws; praising my wife,
For filling our hungry stomachs

With creatively made fresh meat and bread.
And my failure is nowhere more visible
Than it is here, this Friday night,
Peering back, from the plate-glass window,
Inviting me to join myself for Shabbas dinner.

1/13/89 — [3] (01057)

POW's

Jan, we never discussed plans,
Sketched out provisional alternatives
That could get us there,
Past Armageddon,
In the event we jettisoned our best intentions,
For the sake of testing fate,
Survival of the fittest, or destiny.

We never set much stock in conventions;
Instead, we pledged allegiance
To mystery, magic, and passion.
But then, neither of us
Ever would have dreamed paranoia and deceit
Could infiltrate our earthly estate,
Subvert our love into furtiveness and hatred,

Undermine our belief in monogamy,
Commit us to espionage,
Reduce communication to a silent debate
Between East and West,
Then escalate our separation, from cold war
To sweaty jungle fighting
Marital dysfunction ultimately commanded.

Lately, we've been engaged in trench combat,
Hand-to-hand, mouth-to-mouth,
Dying alive, day by day,
In barbed-wire nets
Strung along cratered beachheads
Love defends and assaults simultaneously.
We squirm within each other's sights,

Neither of us willing to squeeze the trigger first,
Kill a tree-hiding sniper,
Or raise a white flag,
Accept defeat or victory gracefully,
And neither of us can conceive
We're the enemy or believe
Mistakes we've made can't be rectified

Just by calling a halt to the melee,
Proclaiming a lasting peace with dignity.
Ah, but "easy" is so difficult
For those untrained in diplomacy,
Whose only politics consist of tricks
Practiced between bedsheets
And strategies based on lovemaking tactics.

Today, caught in our own cross fire,
Unable to retreat or advance,
And lacking contingency plans of any kind,
We both pray to be taken alive,
Not obliterated,
Just fed and clothed for the duration —
Misfortune's prisoners of war.

1/15 & 1/19/89 — [2] (01046)

Sighting UFO's

Blue and tangerine ground-lights stutter.
Slowly, their glowing halos
Begin to shimmer into vision,
Then diminish behind this thrusting vehicle.
They keep passing me, faster and faster,
Slowly sinking lower, deeper,
*

Into an invisible ocean,
Until I lose sight of these runway beacons,
As the zone below me widens,
Its sides rising, curving inward,
To contain the city's lights, flickering, quixotically,
Like tropical fish in a cosmic aquarium.

Even now, twenty-five, fifty,
A hundred miles out,
Swifting south, past Cape Girardeau,
Toward Memphis, eventually Fort Lauderdale,
Those lights — spectral phantasmagoria,
Numinous witnesses to my retreat —
Follow our fuguelike slipstream,
Through night's jet-maze.
They might be lampreys
Attaching to the belly of a shark,
Barnacles accreting to the moon's heeling keel,
Or sparks my dark spirit exhausts

As it hurtles away from its past,
Inauspiciously as a never-conceived wish
Or dream left for the next expedition
To excavate. I gaze out often,
As if expecting to recognize shapes
Inside those glowing halos.
By degrees, my hide-and-seek hallucinations
Give way to graver paranoia, despair,
And encroaching dissociation
Occasioned by the dissolution of my marriage.
Suddenly, I see two sad children
Chasing their dad's shooting star, across the sky.

1/16/89 (01038)

Wish Fulfillment of a Recent Divorcé Vacationing in Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Focusing my eyes' kaleidoscopes
Directly into the subdued Florida sun,
I see beautiful, muted shapes and hues
From which to choose just two.

The terms of the twin wishes I was granted
Stipulate, unequivocally,
I may look but neither touch
Nor covet, just admire from a vicarious distance.

Alternately, I gaze into the sky,
Past the billowing parasail,
Higher than the blimp advertising Diet Pepsi,
On its bulbous sides, at the half-moon

Basking in a skintight bikini,
Its sheer fabric so thin at the hips,
In between her supple buttocks,
Barely covering her pubes, that my joints stiffen.

Self-consciously, I turn away,
Hoping nobody sunning in my section
Has detected the erection beneath my trunks,
Then slip, unobtrusively, into the pool,

To find the inhibitions I lost
Unpremeditatedly.
But no such good luck
Attends my embarrassment. I self-destruct.

Just to my left, a nymphet
With taut belly, statuesque breasts
Whose nipples are completely visible, wet,
As is her exquisite bird's nest, surfaces.

My entire body shudders, erupts,
Spewing magma from the crater's depths,
In which I stand waist-deep.
Telltale bubbles well up,

Presaging my ultimate public corruption.
Suddenly unable to contain myself,
I lunge at this unsuspecting mermaid.
She screams when I grab her chest,

Shouts shrill obscenities.
I dive for China, her two-piece suit
Trailing behind me, like a kite tail,
With her in spritelike pursuit.

Inexplicably, between six and eight feet,
We converge, embrace, mate

*

Like kissing gourami fish
Protracting their erotic, lip-locked love.

Somehow, for inscrutable reasons,
I've achieved reprieve
On at least one of the two wishes
With which my genie tempted me,

On my leaving home: that I might meet a mermaid
Furst hand, up close and personal.
Now, lying at poolside, satisfied,
Lorelei beside me, I wink skyward,

Thinking of maneuvers I just might use
To confuse the sun, Diana's suitor,
Get him off her track, for the afternoon,
While I take one tiny step

For mankind, one giant leap for myself,
By defying logic, odds, gravity,
And land upright, intact, on the moon,
As she reclines naked, loose-legged, on her back.

1/17/89 (01045)

“Passing” Δ

Nowhere are such physical disparities
More visibly apparent
Or economic differences more dispiriting
Than here in Florida,
Between gentry and waiters, natives and tourists,
The aged, aging, and perpetually youthful,
Who deludedly compete with each other,
To be equal-opportunity employees
In a democratic society
Ruled by special-interest groups
Spinning their own “fixed”-income wheels.

This eighty-degree January day,
I lie by the pool at an exclusive resort,
Not too paranoid about when, or if,
Anyone's going to question my membership,
*

Insist I hit the nearest exit,
 Given they disregard my invisible existence,
 For their obsessive self-absorption.
 I've had such success "passing,"
 It's hard to keep from asking why
 The rest don't seem to have guessed
 That, in God's eye, we all die equally blessed.

1/19–20/89 — [1] on 1/19 & [1?] on 1/20 (01043)

Sweethearts

Just as the rose so slowly opens,
 Its corolla closes.
 So, too, has our love bloomed
 And withered,
 Unnoticed, over a period of years.

Now, all that's left of those petals,
 Beaded with wet whispers
 Of kisses,
 Are echoes scratching our ears,
 With tips of their twisted stems —

Arteries from which knotted buds
 (Blood clots
 In our broken hearts) depend.
 We listen for a sigh to release them
 Into the sky, endlessly spiraling,

Even if only as downy dandelion spores,
 Bitterweed seeds,
 Seeking, in dry ground, openings,
 To send down tendrils
 Again, again.

1/20–21/89 — [2?] on 1/20 & [1] on 1/21 (01041)

[All week, I've watched women][†]

All week, I've watched women
 Being boisterously joyous,
 *

Besieged by flamboyant Lotharios
With extravagant toys

1/21/89 — [3] (02897)

Retracing His Steps ^Δ

Five nights and days,
He's returned to the places
To which they, his wife and two children,
Returned for a decade
And more. He's paced the beach
His parents' lavish condominium faces,
Pausing, as he always has,
To do layman's taxonomical classification
Of Portuguese men-of-war
Entangled in shore-washed seaweed,
Menacing even in their defenselessness.
He's mounted the precarious rocks
Jutting out at the mouth of Port Everglades,
Where Intracoastal meets ocean,
And admired, for lost hours,
Ships, on silent ball bearings,
Gliding in and out of his misty vision.
He's eaten at five different restaurants,
Specializing in pizza, barbecued chicken,
Broiled "fresh catch of the day"s,
And toasted himself with Diet Coke.
He's seen four new movies,
Consumed too many boxes of Jujufruits,
In a valiant effort to exercise his jaws,
Neutralize the immobilizing effects
His weeklong lack of communication
Has had on him. Wherever he goes,
Memories besiege and beleaguer him.
His sense of *déjà vu* is too real,
Too immediate, even for vivid recollection
To distinguish itself from the present.
At times, he's almost overwhelmed
By undulant waves of nausea,
As though loneliness were a turbulent sea

*

Growing increasingly vicious as he goes deeper,
Further out, toward an invisible vortex
Located at the source where his marriage
Hit a misguided iceberg and sank,
With all passengers aboard.

Now, the sky has gone down around him
Without his noticing twilight
Coming or going, for abstracted ruminations
On his becoming single at forty-seven.
Although disbelief surpasses all reason,
He knows the task left him
Is a matter of carving pieces of the past,
From the future's marble blocks,
Fashioning statues that, when completed,
Might resemble his shattered dreams,
Captive slaves he'll release
On their own inventive recognizance,
To proclaim one abiding wish,
Which, in his entire married life,
He could never quite successfully express:
That they be absolutely free
To be their creative selves, not creations
Of somebody else's imagination.

1/21/89 — [4] (01048)

Just the Thought

Even at the thought of talking to you,
I balk, grow taut
Across the forehead, hear nausea
Dripping, like a bitter draught
Of stale coffee, over my lips and tongue,
Down my throat, its caustic heat
Pitting my stomach, with bleeding lesions,
Causing dry heaves.

Just the thought makes me so distraught,
I refuse to answer the phone,
Defiantly let it moan,

*

And seek refuge in autistic solitude,
Until silence returns to the room
And you and I resume our conversation
Where we left off,
Talking about losses, necessary losses.

1/21-22/89 — [5] on 1/21 & [1] on 1/22 (01042)

Clean, Well-Lighted Places ^Δ

Seated at this patio café
At the resort where, for a decade or more,
His family vacationed regularly,
Even now, hours after
Their fleet, bittersweet phone conversation,
He can hear the man's empty echoes
Eagerly reaching to connect with his own,
That friend of his parents, Charlie Weiss,
Octogenarian, making inquiry
As to whether they're presently in residence,
On the chance they might get together
For lunch, supper, *anything*,
To stave off tensions he's experiencing,
Comparing his new life's narrow dimensions
With memory's spacious measurements.

Eating a turkey sandwich, chips,
Sipping Diet Coke slowly,
He senses vibrations
Similar to Charlie's echoing bereavement:
“Well, just tell them I called. . . .
At least *you* have your family;
I'm by myself . . . but it's the *nights* . . .
They get so lonely.”
Having consoled the older man,
He feels his own desolate sequestration
From his eighteen-year marriage,
So recently broken, overwhelming him
With disbelief and stupefaction.
Groping, he ponders the irony
Their disparately similar conditions evoke.

Curiously, he recalls the deaf old man
Hemingway wrote about, in a short story,
Who'd tried to commit suicide
And frequented, nightly, a café,
Whose closing time his loitering postulated.
Also, he envisions the young waiter
Too eager to get home, to screw his wife,
To show patience or compassion
For those with no place to go
Or in need of postponing sleep,
Staying awake, for fear of being alone,
With just their own shadows for companions.
Mostly, though, he identifies
With the middle-aged waiter,
Who lacks youth, confidence, a wife

And who, married to his steady job,
Identifies with the old man,
Hates to deny him another brandy,
Turn him away,
Watch him totter off, into the night,
As though that old man and Charlie Weiss
Might be waiting to chat with him,
At an all-night *taberna*
With music, harsh lights, unpolished bar.
Abruptly, the waitress tugs at his arm,
Shoves check and pen into his hand.
“Hey, it’s way past three!”
Startled, he totters momentarily.
He has no place to go
Except the beach or back to his condo, by the ocean.

1/22/89 — [2] (01037)

Express Train

Abruptly thrust into the path
Of a fast-approaching train of thought,
He closes his eyes, squeezes them tight,
As though, by main strength,
He might reverse the flow of onrushing truth,
*

Keep it from meeting him at the crossing,
Cutting him in two,
Leaving pieces of his disillusioned psyche
Scattered, for miles, along the tracks.

But his vehicle balks, stalls dead,
Between both rails. Suddenly, he remembers
Admonitions his mentor, Death,
Used to venture during his apprenticeship,
When he was first learning
How to survive his own worst enemies,
Fear and cowardice: "Brace yourself";
"Face your demons straight on";
"Get your 'peace' said before you forget it."

Instead of jumping back from his impasse,
He remains inside, by choice,
Not trapped but refusing to die in a crash,
Without a fighting chance to survive.
He waits for the train to collide with ideas
Flashing before his deathless eyes.
Enlightened, he grabs the passing express,
As it highballs through his intellect,
And rides it all the way to the other side.

1/24/89 (01053)

In the Beginning, There Was Love

There was a time, some time ago,
Quite long ago, actually,
Longer than long ago, in fact,
Before forgetting ever existed,
Memory had had time to catch its breath,
And imagination had even begun
To dream the possibility
That out of the cosmic mire and slime
Still oozing, cooling, coalescing into shapes
Capable of accommodating life,
Two human beings might find themselves
Alive, complete, functioning
And, combining their primal desires,
Populate an entire planet . . .

There was a time,
Before the boisterous world was seeded,
When you and I thrived
In sublime suspension, inviolable,
Known only to God,
Whose children we were, by His choosing . . .
A time when we believed
We were the first and only lovers on earth,
Never to be superseded by progeny,
In our devotion to each other.
Then our gazes deviated, became entranced
By their own images in His prism,
Beguiled by their nakedness of many colors.
Now, time has found us, in the mire and slime.

1/29/89 (01056)

[I squeeze this chlorophyll-flavored day] [†]

I squeeze this chlorophyll-flavored day
Out of imagination's toothpaste tube,
Trying to create figurative images
From a winter's malaise,
But the failure of my trope,
My misspoken metaphor,
So inappropriate, so underinflated

1/30/89 (00460)

Endlösung^Δ

First, you laced your imagination,
With microscopic parts of arsenic and cyanide —
That garden from which I harvested my nourishment,
For more than two decades.
Then, with rumorous, odorless traces of hatred,
Vituperation, and petty jealousy,
You tainted the wellsprings of my affection,
From which our children drank daily,
You popping corks spontaneously,
To sip the soporific intoxicants.

Finally, you poured your physical self
Into Gordon storage drums
Leaking dioxin, Agent Orange, plutonium
Even before they were buried in a forest.
Still they seep into aquifers and basements
Surrounding the town where I exist
(Auschwitz), which still glows red at night,
From deathless embers of dying memories
Stacked ten rows deep —
Scarecrows outshouting their silent rage.

Today, in a fifty-mile radius,
Emptiness shimmers like migrainous sirens.
Throatless klaxons and clangors
From bells lacking clappers
Provoke the shrill stillness, with gentle moans
We used to make, making sweet love,
As though paradox were mocking me,
With its masturbatory echoes. But these days,
The only guests in this desolation
Are moles and worms burrowing into my soul.

1/31/89 — [1] (01050)

Shrine

Like Mecca, Lourdes, Jerusalem,
This park in Farmington
Drags me, feetfirst (heartbeats screaming
As though I might hyperventilate from excitement),
Back to its magical source of inspiration.

Despite my family's abdication of allegiance
To this city in southeast Missouri,
I return, periodically, to secure votes
For my eventual candidacy for the post of citizen
Who contributed the most to his own growth,

For having settled, for a spell, in this outpost.
This last day of January,
I bask under a seventy-degree sun.
My senses are completely fooled by this illusion,
But memory is never tricked.

All seasons are one continuous stream,
Whose currents are translucent and immutable
Despite the wearing away of reflected hues —
Stones, people, trees, houses, cities,
Continents, galaxies, even God.

Sitting here, watching kids navigating the junglegym,
Inventing and engaging dragons,
Climbing Matterhorns,
Orbiting planets, evacuating jets
Belly-landing on youth's imagination-strips,

I see myself cajoling my own children,
They grown too old, now,
To remember their dad chasing them up steps,
Inside, around, down, and out the slide,
Touching ground, stomach after mind,

Just slightly behind my buckling knees,
Landing, on my butt, in the sand,
Pushing, vigorously, as they sat
Inside a centrifugally spiraling truck-tire swing
Attached, by chains, to Piranesian vaults,

Until dizziness would assail them,
Make irresistible their innocent pleas
For reprieve from reprisals, for renewed stability,
So they might catch up with their breath,
Before being launched into space again.

Meanwhile, the time in between *then*
And *right this minute*
Seems to have extended from both ends,
To meet me where memory emanates
And loses its energy simultaneously.

It seizes me, in its viselike grip,
Neither so tight as to be painful
Nor loose enough to let gravity's boot
Shove me through a hole in forgetfulness.
I'll still be worshiping here a thousand years from now.

1/31/89 — [2] (01052)

Marital Typhoon

This slow, snow-spitting Saturday,
His spirit's cruise ship lists,
Slips, inconspicuously, into afternoon's ocean,
With no one the less for its loss,
Except him, because his too-buoyant soul
Refuses to drown, won't go down.
Purposely, it leaves, on the surface of this abyss,
His psyche's flotsam,
He just a speck, a slick,
Adrift in a rickety lifeboat,
Hoping to alert search parties to his location.

But after what, to him,
Lapsing out of and into hallucinatory fugues,
Has seemed a decade, on the open sea,
Without anybody approaching
To rescue him from his solitude and aloneness
Or even provoke his imagination
To envision flying fish
Dripping mystical iridescentes, across the horizon,
To redeem him from destiny's reaving,
He realizes he's died alive,
Trying to survive love's Bermuda Triangle.

2/4/89 (04097)

Colossal Odysseys

This Tuesday a.m. in early February,
He rolls due south,
Past a blazing sun.
Squinting, he maneuvers his station wagon
Down the concrete runway,
Gripping the wheel confidently,
As his vehicle achieves takeoff speed,
Defies Earth's gravity,
Then capriciously seems to rotate,
Assume imagination's angle of attack,
Slipping through a slit in the magical air.

Soon, just a speck ahead of its vapor wake,
Quickly outdistancing his own visibility,
He vectors in on the frequencies
Winds aloft emit from their singing tongues,
Then completely disappears off his own screen.
He has absolutely no indicators
To suggest longitude, latitude, azimuth, altitude,
Time, pitch, roll, sideslip, bank,
And attitude, knows only that his flight pattern
Appears to be conforming to a prefilled plan
Automatic pilot has locked into its computer.

Sporadically, he locates an opening in the haze,
Way below his soaring,
Discerns shards of the earthly urn
He buried, earlier this eternal morning,
Before bidding the city farewell.
And he realizes, now,
Although he has no idea how,
That whatever agency tore his spirit
From its skeletal reliquary,
Absorbed it into the life-force
Circumscribing and containing his former world,
Also will eventually convey landing instructions,
By which he'll touch base, again,
With his original Maker.
There, wherever that might be located,
He'll undergo, from soul to heart to toe,
Gonads to synaptic cognitive abstractors,
Complete transfigurative morphosis.
He and his flying machine will be reunited,
Cease being metaphors of universal sentience.
They'll assume godly proportions
Requisite to concluding the colossal odyssey home.

2/7/89 — [1] (06039)

Boomerang

Like a boomerang hurtling north,
Toward the city he left, this morning,
*

His return journey seems prolonged, uncertain,
Not shorter, for having reached the apogee
His ellipse proscribes. Driving home,
He seems feverishly concerned
About his circumnavigations, and yet, remaining vexed
And unable to isolate the irritation,
Identify its etiology,
Engage the disease, in his own breeding ground,
He continues ahead, repressing his anxiety.

Approaching the outskirts of St. Louis,
He senses his speed increasing uncontrollably.
Pressed to the floorboard, his power brakes
Fail to restrain his caroming vehicle,
And he realizes a collision is imminent.
Miraculously, he passes through two intersections,
Then negotiates a cloverleaf,
Before crashing into a public-transit bus
Lumbering away from a stoplight,
Spewing a clot of flagrant exhaust
Like an unknotted fist slapping him in the face.

2/7/89 — [2] (06040)

Dinner for Two ^Δ

The notion of spending another Friday night
Invited out to dinner, with you,
To the Lettuce Leaf or Lotus Room,
Grows repeatedly more enticing, appeasing,
As weeks become months
Enduring into years — two, now three,
Possibly forever, surely time enough
For the two of us secret sharers
To have mastered each other's idiosyncrasies
And pleasingly compatible dissimilarities
In food, taste, body language, self-esteem,
Facial expressions, speech patterns,
Opinionated cynicisms, open-minded praise
For symphonies, kiteflying, hiking,
And, neither last nor least, compassion
For our mutual predicament: premature death.

Both of us speak candidly
About the convergence of circumstance and coincidence
That has rendered us widowers,
Beneficiaries of defective dreams, exploded hopes,
Broken allegiances, soured vows.
Often, we remark how fortunate we are
To have found each other again,
After so many seasons and memories apart,
Become reacquainted, so unself-consciously,
Fearing no additional ego victimization.
Tonight, you request I order for you.
I articulate my pleasures, instruct our waiter
To bring two plates, split our meal, at the table —
Half for me, half for you, my Doppelgänger.

2/10/89 (04096)

Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 4 in G Major^Δ

Trilogy knows, to a T,
Why she's going to the symphony, with me,
This blustery Saturday evening.
In the car, she articulates her reasoning:
“Forcing myself to do things like this,
Attending cultural events,
Is good for my sense of independence” —

This from my fourteen-year-old daughter,
Who's chosen to take the ticket
Her mother's last-minute sickness
Has made available, not from timidity
But a compelling element undisclosed to her,
Only hinted at, by me,
In this moment of my supreme jubilation.

I realize we've never played these roles,
Never even approximated surrogate wife,
Pained husband, or ever contemplated
Such touching eventualities. And yet
It's her shoulder my left hand reassuringly holds,
As we penetrate the cold, wend our way
Toward the portals, enter the glittering hall,

My left shoulder her drowsing head locates,
Halfway through *Tapiola*,
Not my wife's bony shoulder, blond-haired head.
To my pleasure, she expresses her dissatisfaction
With Sibelius's piece: "Too many parts
That don't fit; they compete with each other;
Not enough melodies, either."

She rouses to the activity on stage,
Shows curiosity, seems genuinely astonished
By the weightless grandeur of the colossal piano
Being rolled to the apex of all players' seats,
Like a point bird taking its position
In a V of snow geese flying eternally south.
Without knowing it, she opens herself to be seized.

All receptors are primed, hers and mine,
As Horacio Gutiérrez struts in, front and center,
Systematically sits on his bench,
Anticipates his initial cue,
Hovers above the keyboard, pauses, pauses,
Then begins manipulating, with his fingertips,
A mystical dialogue between Beethoven and himself,

Which Trilogy and I feel privileged listening to,
From a distance not two centuries wide
But thirteen rows deep, both of us
Suspended in total rapture and disbelief
Audition encounters only once every few lifetimes,
When God bequeaths his fold a genius
And teaches him to compose and play notes

No human should even be capable of dreaming,
Not to mention inventing. Daughter and dad,
Enchanted by a mere piano concerto —
Three brief movements
Dispensed with in a matter of half an hour —
And sad that the ovations had to end,
Reenter the snow-laden night,

Drive home tired, silently,
Arrive at a hazily lit house asleep,
Mother and brother hidden beneath sheets.
Watching Trilogy shed her coat,
*

Drag herself upstairs, throw her clothes off,
 Drop into bed, I sense the real significance
 In attending cultural events.

2/14-15/89 (00982)

Tontine ^Δ

*For Bennett Frelich, son of Etta,
 one of Daniel and Annie's two daughters;
 my second cousin, this poem's griot*

Vaguely, this dreary and dismal a.m.,
 Through whose diaphanous, gray gouache
 Imagination sails, in its station wagon,
 Heading south, toward Cape Girardeau,
 Out of St. Louis,
 My nearsighted focus brings you closer,
 Lets me inspect your tattered coats and shoes,
 Get astonished all over again,
 Calling you up, Daniel and Annie,
 Great-grandpater and -mater,
 Reacquainting myself with your waifish souls.

Through my misty windshield,
 I see the two of you, destiny's rejects,
 Tiny specks amidst the matrix of bodiless heads,
 Pressing against the railing of a ship
 Rustpitted, sepulchral, gossamer,
 Its fugitive existence inconspicuous
 Against the immensity of the Baltic Sea,
 Even more so in the open ocean,
 Chuffing toward Ellis Island's portals,
 To conclude the rendezvous with your sponsors
 From the Chesed Shel Emeth Society.

I envision you jostling in a dusty coach,
 Being transported as far west
 As the tracks go (a proud distance, at that,
 From Kiev, then St. Petersburg,
 In just a matter of two and a half months),
 Even if the fare exacted, for freedom,
 Has been steep, the cost one child

*

Taken by the fever, surrendered to the deep,
Midway across the Atlantic passage.

I hear the locomotives, smell coal smoke,
Keep rubbing grit from my tearing eyes,

Realizing I've caught up with you guys.

In fact, right this moment,

I'm waiting for your train to arrive
At St. Louis's main terminal, on Market Street,

To watch you enter the city's anonymity,
Step into your new identities,

Assume duties that will strengthen and connect

Your recently relocated heritage with my future,

Utilizing skills from your apprenticeship

As a tailor of suits, trousers, and vests —

"Sewer" of our family seeds in America.

Now, I hear hammers fabricating racks

Out of two-by-fours, metal strapping

Cobbled from gutted apartments and garbage dumps.

I see you going from door to door to door,

Buying, bartering, begging used clothes,

For an old-country folk tale

Spoken, in your unabashedly Slavic accents

And demotic, to kindred innocents of the neighborhood

Or in exchange for a promissory note

Secured only by diasporan faith in survival —

Your collective negotiable Mosaical scrip.

Your "thrift shop" is a novel concept

For the 1870s and effective,

Whose clientele are Irish and German immigrants,

As well as Yiddish-speaking *pishers*.

You, Annie, sweetly devoted,

Sixteenhouraday Annie Brodsky,

Stooping over woodstave wash buckets,

Breathing lye fumes,

Scrub your knuckles blueblack,

To scour the men's trousers and coats

For your husband to mend,

Make magic happen, by waving his needle

And thread or toeing the treadle

Of his New Florence stitching machine,

*

To render, fresh, preworn raiment,
Gain twentytwo-cents' profit on pants,
Ten cents a vest, and six bits
For every threepiece suit.
Witnessing you, in that chilly mildewed shop
Facing Morgan Street,
Tending to business as usual, I feel pride
Filling my eyes, with joyful crying,

As though knowing what you do
Somehow justifies and ennobles my own existence
Of remaking, from old forms, new ones,
Creating, from worn-out materials,
Containers capable of serving uses
Not previously conceived, my words, my poems
Your perfectly refurbished clothes,
Which we try, like crazy, to make cheapskates
And philistines fervently believe
They need, to robe their exposed souls,
Must own, if they expect to be accepted into New Jerusalem.

One by one, two years apart,
To give the spirit rest from its body's labors,
The children come (Ben, Lou,
Charlie, Gus, and the wunderkind, Sam,
Mamie and Etta), then go
Out, on their own, the boys taking their places
In the mercantile world, also purveying rags,
Though Sammy eventually moves
To Quincy, Illinois, with two of the brothers,
To become a name-brand retailer
With a reputation for trading quality men's clothing.

Ah, and what of Louis Daniel, "Lou,"
That meek and soft-speaking schlepper
Taking orders, from buyers,
He'll translate into pants he'll contract out,
To manufacturers in the city,
A supplier's supplier, a middleman,
Relying on chutzpa, timing,
And skill, in lying, required to keep alive
Orders on finished products
Diverted from him, to satisfy bigger fish
In an industry not needing his services to survive,

And keep his tenuous sense of manhood intact
And secure from the blasts of a wife
Who should have been him,
Not her vindictive and overbearing self,
Who might have appreciated his meekness,
Not always compelled him to apologize
For dealing too kindly with customers,
Compromising, rebating late shipments,
Let him enjoy paying lip service
To the ubiquitous meerschaum pipe
He was smoking when he died of a stroke, free for life?

I see you, Daniel, Lou, Saul
(Son of Ruth and Louis Daniel — Dad),
All gathered around a table
I can't locate in memory or imagination.
A tontine is in progress,
And I hear my name being bandied,
As if I, not yet born,
Am the center of attention at a salesmen's convention,
The object of high-jinks excitement,
Driving everyone to delusional conclusions
That I might provide wide profit margins,

If only they can pitch the product, me,
Effectively enough to convince potential clients
My uniqueness, dimensions, styling,
And superb fabrication will benefit them
For decades and generations.

Ah, but of what does this agreement
Really consist? I can't arrest their whispers,
Which keep slipping into the space
Separating my birth, more than a score of years away,
From their ephemeral convergence.
Are they inventing my destiny?

Concentrating, I begin to collect their echoes,
Recognizing those of my dad
Most completely. The three of them are indeed
Conspiring to set up a plan
In which accrued annuities get left to the group,
As each deceases, until all proceeds
Go to the last surviving member.

*

Slowly, I intuit what they're doing
And why: they're making me beneficiary, *in absentia*,
Of a treasure I'll never spend,
Insurance against my forgetting our cherished heritage.

2/16–17/89 (00884)

Sunday Brunch for One

My violin is cold, this Sunday morning.
I know better than to leave an instrument
Out of its case, overnight,
In sight of gnawing termites, chimeras, and succubi
That would dismantle its fragile shell,
Head, and neck, wreck its horsehair bow,
So that were I to play it,
It, resentful of my touch, wouldn't even pretend
Not to know me,
Would instead offend my sensibilities
By inventing impromptu fugues and scherzos
Intended to make me envious,
Send me racing after their vague melodies,
Through fields blossoming with dream-poppies
And dotted with Dalí-trees, their frosted limbs
Drooping with sweet-scented, bleeding vaginas,
Elongated penises dripping semen-notes,
Tempting me to follow them,
Intrude on their fornicating orgies,
Incorporate their indolent signatures,
Phrases, and cadences into my new music.
How could anyone deliberately refuse,
Despite realizing not to do so
Means suicide to one's own original creations?

Yet, from immense energy reserves,
I repress my base obsessions to let loose,
Chase them spontaneously,
For fear of so completely dislocating myself,
Even my most structured notations
Won't succeed in letting me trace my themes
Back to the source of their emanations.
This Sunday morning, at the Sunshine Inn,

*

Ordering steamed vegetables, Viennese coffee,
Listening to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor
Sifting, inconspicuously, into my blood, from above,
I stare, forlornly, at my composition book and pen —
Violin and bow — sitting, discontentedly,
Across from me, at this table for two,
Hoping I'll get inspired to pick them up
And make magic from their silence.
Gnawing on half-raw carrots, new potatoes,
Cauliflower, broccoli trees, and zucchini,
I savor anonymity's bland taste
And wait for the emptiness, the emptiness, to abate.

2/19/89 (06041)

[I awakened, this 3 a.m.,]

I awakened, this 3 a.m.,
Relieved to see that the rank leopard
Which had leaped and landed on my chest
As though it were a shady tree branch
Concealing the creature's vicious intent
And perched there, like a predacious bird
Waiting for my body to turn to carrion,
Had abandoned its vigil,
Vacated its station, to search for easier prey.

Rearing up on one elbow, from my cot,
I could hear its eerie growls
Ripping the silence, like teeth
Chewing through night's coarse hide,
To reach the tender meat inside my fears.
I could feel my entrails bleeding,
Being shredded, sinew, cartilage, bone giving way,
Until the moaning abruptly ceased
And, again, I was alone with my restiveness,

Wondering what had caused my labored breathing
To lengthen out so unnoticeably,
Grow smooth, fluid as flute notes
Woven into music echoing from the roof of the world.
Curious, I lifted the sheet

*

Shielding my naked body from mosquitoes and flies.
Cautiously approaching my festering wounds' spring,
To drink at the edge,
My eyes found it all dried up.

2/21/89 (04095)

A Failure of Nerves

Mile by elapsing mile,
Ideas and images he tries to overtake
Keep outracing his speeding vehicle.
He'd like to make a citizen's arrest,
But despite having the pedal pressed, unwaveringly,
To his brain's floorboard,
Engaging the complex throttle linkage
Of his dual four-barrel intellect,
He can't seem to catch up
Or even narrow the gap, along the highway
Compelling them, collectively, toward an abyss —
The horizon's ivory precipice,
Over whose elusive edge
All human enterprises eventually fall.

The humiliating futility he experiences,
Chasing fugitive inspirations
That refuse to let him issue a citation,
Finally sends him into a drowse.
He begins to weave, approach the median,
Violate the gravel-strewn shoulder,
Decelerate imperceptibly,
Until he's not going half the legal limit.
Other cars rush up, from behind,
Just miss crushing him,
As they veer and head past, at the last second.
He nods obliviously, as if destiny
Were just another transient
Pressing ahead, toward an exit he won't take,

Instead of his own back-cast shadows,
Fast closing on his slowing motion.

*

He fails to notice each passing vehicle
Bears his license plate,
“POET-LD,”
Realizes, way too late,
That each car is a shard of shattered glass,
A part of a crash that hasn’t yet happened,
Where his unexpressive imagination,
Transporting him toward that impasse
Between creativity and the vegetable silence
That synapses usually span,
Will be asked to cross a bridge that has collapsed
And he’ll stop at the edge, dead in his tracks.

2/23/89 (06042)

[Once, when youthful defiance guided him,][△]

Once, when youthful defiance guided him,
He believed himself immune from persecution,
Capable of displaying righteous indignation
At the slightest outbreak of racist demonstrations
Or on spying signs of Nazi graffiti
Spray-painted on the sides of limestone cliffs
Or on the brick and plate-glass faces of buildings
Lining business districts he’d frequent,
To buy clothes, books, bouquets and single roses,
For his “sweet Lorraine cherry tarts”
And assorted miscellanies
He’d resort to not from loneliness or lust
But just to reassure himself
He’d not lost all his gentle, tender touch
For the “salt” of the earth and the vagina
While preoccupied speaking up
Against potential enemies —
Ku Kluxers, Gaddafis, Khomeinis,
John F. and Bobby Kennedys,
Co-conspirators in the war to end all peace,
Bend all knees, in allegiance
To truth subvented, subverted, reinvented,
And rented out, by the hour, to the party in power,
Without prior notice or subsequent apologies.

But that was long, long ago,
When growing brooked no “no”s
And the only discouragement to his grail-quest
To change the world,
Make it bend over backwards and end over end,
To accommodate foe and friend
In the same neighborhood and motel,
Public-toilet stall, phone booth,
And swimming pool, came to him in dreams,
Those very infrequent hallucinations
Focused on atrocities he’d only seen in movies
Or found in books about Auschwitz,
Dachau, Chelmno, and Sachsenhausen.
But that was all before his affliction,
When even those mentions of genocide
Couldn’t infect his enthusiasm and innocence,
With the disillusionment that eventually developed
After, in his brash and arrogant manner,
He offered himself up,
Athletic body, highly disciplined intellect,
To the experiment to end all experiments:
Entering into marriage with a Germanic lady,
Who gave him a brace of Teutonic children.

Even at that, the disease took a decade
To reach its flagrant invidiousness,
Until, one day, he realized
He would not only not be able to rid the world
Of its scurrilous pretensions, pieties, and bigotries
But, worse, that the phage had overtaken him,
Destroyed his immune system’s antibodies,
From inside his own house,
And rendered him incapable of saving himself
From the malicious and insidious threats
Son, daughter, and wife were making to his ego,
His self-respect, his life’s work
Of toiling in the sewers and cesspools
And toxic-waste silos of the human heart,
To decry meanness, cruelty, and greed.
Then, one sullen afternoon,
He got paid a visit, by two strangers
Floating in white trench coats,

*

Wearing black armbands,
Who took him by each wrist, escorted him out
And away, forever, from his house,
His neighborhood, town, state, land,
To a place at the edge of a jagged forest
Teeming with red locust trees,

Where they left him standing absolutely naked,
For months and years and generations,
Until even he forgot the name
He once wore to clothe himself against the cold,
As he watched the color-cel frames
Of his entire life fade in the changeless twilight
That bathed him in cyanic light . . .
Standing, twitching, amidst blown grits and debris
Emanating from distant chimneys
He could only hear belching
And smell — that sharp odor of burning fish —
Those chimneys powering a city, a universe,
With energy to burn.
One day, a bizarre phenomenon occurred:
He witnessed a vast, vertical tunnel of ash
Rise, in a funnel-shape, across the horizon,
Elongating, inverting itself, at the center,
So that its sides came down to the ground,
Until it contained the earth, in a bell jar
At once opaque and translucent,
From which no elements could escape or enter.
And in that instant, a single incandescent flash
Shattered the planet. It evaporated,
Leaving him standing, alone, on the edge of eternity.

2/24/89 (04094)

Windwagon Smith

Grasping coffee cup, in his left hand,
Between thumb and index digit,
Like a fish in a crab claw,
And positioning his three free fingers on the wheel,
To keep his speeding vehicle steady,
In its straight-and-level trajectory

*

Down his escape route out of St. Louis,
South, toward Cape Girardeau,
He maneuvers the six-way seat
Until it's refreshed his memory of the fetal configuration
Whose shape he yet retains
Despite the contractions of forty-seven years,
Then commences focusing in on motives
Engendering this Saturday-morning transportation.

Fortunately, he's perfected the stunt
Of driving one-handed while, with the other,
Writing in a notebook
Lying atop his attaché case, beside his right leg,
A feat he began performing
Twenty years ago, when taking to the road,
In order to preserve sanity,
Slake his spirit's need for freedom and mystery,
Teaching himself to compose verse
By lifting up entire strips of highway
And gluing them to spaces between blue lines,
Translating time and distance into music
Whose lyrics could translate days into destinations
He'd be guaranteed to reach safely.

2/25/89 — [1] (06043)

Frequent Flier

He flies home, through etherized heights,
In his lighter-than-mind ship —
Twilight's pilot,
Guiding the elusive moon and stars
Toward their galactic positions,
As he passes back into Earth's atmosphere,
From distant stations constituting constellations
His imagination has scattered across the universe.

A space sojourner
Who displaces thrice his weight in a vacuum,
As if his atoms were halos,
Painted by Michelangelo,
Floating above sainted faces of angels,
*

He travels above and below firmaments,
Through time zones
Allocated to souls going west to east only.

Soon, he intuits, he'll arrive
At his final destination of origin,
That source from which he soared
Earlier this very morning or eons ago
(He never really knows for certain),
Where his weary spirit will seek refuge,
Rendezvous with fate, evanescently,
Before entering the sky again, on an inspiration.

2/25/89 — [2] (06044)

Reaching Flood Stage

Unfailingly, taking to the highway
Opens his blood's floodgates;
His soul overflows its constricted tributaries
As though mystic heat
Had thawed his heart's frozen Arctic Ocean,
Dissolved iceberg clots
Throughout the entire system of locks and dams
Controlling, from source to mouth,
The stream his existence has followed since its creation.

This morning, buoyed atop a cresting wave,
His elusively motivated enthusiasm keeps undulating,
And borne along its labyrinthine shape,
Inextricably mixed up in its destiny,
He submits volitionally, surrenders to its currents,
To deliver him safely, somewhere downstream.
For now, he tries, with all his focus,
To keep his skiff from tipping,
Drifting too near the cliffs.

After all, there *are* measures he can take
To keep from riddling his hull with buckshot
Whenever a rattlesnake
Drops off an overhanging live oak,
Into the boat that floats his imagination.

*

More so, he retains enough ego and faith
To believe that, if threatened with being scuttled,
He can pull the drain plug
Or flood the universe, with an ice floe of his own.

2/28/89 — [1] (06045)

Marriage: The Shell Game

For two years,
He's stood at fate's gaming table,
Concentrating on her slender fingers and hands
Performing prestidigitation
With shells containing his dreams,
Watching her shift positions of three casings
More quickly than his brain and eyes can keep pace,
Unable to outguess the great manipulator,
Let alone suspect emptiness
Is the only tenant occupying the elusive spaces
From which he hopes to choose his future.

After an extended, intensely ruminative lapse,
He points to the left shell.
She lifts it, then the other two, as well,
To prove everything's above board, beyond reproach.
Amazement exacerbates his disillusionment,
On his not at least finding his children
Below one of the domes,
Waiting for him to return home and retrieve them.
Without registering a malediction or moan,
He stumbles away from the table,
Dazed, for having played with such blind faith.

2/28/89 — [2] (04093)

[This gloomy, rain-laden day,] [‡]

This gloomy, rain-laden day,
Memory is an O-gauge layout
Mysticaling my mind's landscape,
With dizzily circling and snaking trains
*

Undulating through Plasticville and countryside,
Surmounting trestles edging the planet
Upon which they traffic.
Gleaming, stainless-steel, illuminated cars,
Maintained by Santa Fe,
B&O, and Pennsy R.R.,
Streamline over sheathed nerves
Networking my silent intellect.
A vague scent of heated electric wires
Vents itself into my distant nostrils.
The teenager who once dreamed behind my eyes
Rises up, out of the slump
His doleful, older secret sharer wears.
Amazing, they both think,
Simultaneously, for the first time in decades,
Amazing how mere juices and chemistry
Can recreate history so vividly
That new and jettisoned become indistinguishable.
Suddenly, I'm seated behind a ZW transformer,
Both hands clutching its opposed

3/4/89 (06046)

Driving South, Toward Hölle, in Storm Time

Like those fabled mail carriers of old,
Whose motto compelled them through snow
And all other hellish elements
Known to God and man, I go.
Nothing that might postpone my avowed mission
Can be tolerated. I'd die first,
Before allowing the slightest compromise
To sidetrack this flight from the city,
Despite the hardship of having to negotiate
A foot of white, fifty miles wide,
Just to escape living interment.

You see, I've always preferred
Privacy and silence to the society of men,
Haven't, until recently, even really minded
Copying legal documents and illuminations
From books of hours and codices, being an amanuensis
*

When not composing my own poems.
But lately, even working by myself,
At home, has become tediously unsatisfying,
My output innocuous odes and sonnets
In the Horatian and Petrarchan modes,
My free verse weakly Miltonic.

Today, I needed to break out and away
From the stench of a vague imminence
Reminding me of a place I've only visited
In hallucinations: my spirit's Hölle.
What I've done to evoke these ghosts,
I can only guess, with suspicious timidity.
Is it possible my latest poems are epitaphs,
Whose resonating echoes, from my recitations,
Have awakened the dead they commemorate,
And if so, why has each of them
Been about me, an extension of my soul?

3/7/89 — [1] (06047)

Divine Love ^Δ

You might think trajectories of specks
As reckless as our own
Would intersect with Earth's surface
Far more frequently than shooting stars
Converging out of darkness. At least I believe

This is a reasonable expectation,
Given the natures of chance and serendipity
And the role fate plays
In love-hate relationships
As jaded and unstable as the one we've made,

Between spouses who've succumbed
To emotional numbness, soul-stasis —
Friends and helpmates
Who've engaged in Hundred Years' sieges,
Reduced future tenses to "life" sentences

Without hope for commutation
Or parole, for good behavior. You would think,
*

As reckless as our desolation has grown,
We might let “come what may”
Dictate our thresholds for spontaneity,

Intellectual foreplay, sexual ecstasy,
Bodily release, recuperation,
And meteoric euphoria. You might think
Such intersections would be godsends,
And likely you’d be correct.

However, the trick is, in origin, mystic,
Having more to do with artifice
Than physical accident or coincidence.
Whether you and I touch
As our two planet’s pass within inches,

For mere seconds, without colliding,
Out of the entire sky,
Even just once, is of minor consequence.
It’s all a matter of believing
That every speck is a reflection of divinity.

3/7/89 — [2] (00271)

Overture to Spring ^Δ

Two days ago,
Snow a foot deep, if an inch,
Impinged on our spirits,
Already too long buried in catacombs.

Barely forty-eight hours later,
Only the most recalcitrant clots,
Rooted, grudgingly, in shadows of hedges and trees
And around basement foundations, remain.

Jogging streets that maze, through our neighborhood,
Like strands braiding a lanyard,
I listen to urgent voices of squirrels
And birds, sewers gurgling with gutter drain-off,

And realize how, after the fact,
Catastrophes lose impact, get defused,
Tracing their evolutionary Möbius strips
As they race into the future,

Like snow which arrives so miraculously,
Creating atmospheric contrasts
Neither black and white nor light and dark
But phantasmagoric, before evaporating.

3/10/89 (00461)

Irreversible Damage

When I married her,
Was she the accursed person she's become,
Or has it been only recently
That we create static electricity
Every time we rub against each other?
Perhaps we always did,
And I just misinterpreted the phenomenon
As a natural igniting of love sparks,
Not St. Elmo's fire
Our emotional wires brought down, out of the sky,
Whenever our agonizing psyches decided,
Before memory could decline,
To incite, to riot, our negative chemistry.
Maybe I was naive,
Blind to forces already assigned, by destiny,
To inexorably undo the fusion of souls
She and I established with such jubilation,
And maybe I knew, from the outset,
But refused to accept truth,
Believing in my capacities to change rivers,
Reverse the direction of Earth's turning,
Bend straight timelines,
So that they might encircle themselves,
In an endless journey, not keep going
Beyond the eye's Great Divide,
Past the atmosphere, into the void,
And disappear, be assimilated
By agents of black silence.

But I sense, now,
That no amount of artistic contrivance,
Mending of fences, with verse tools,
Can purge the scourge that has occurred

*

Here in my own earthly house.
The heart has a threshold for hurt,
And it knows when
No old friends will be admitted again,
Through its flimsy portals.

3/11/89 (00464)

Portuguese Rainstorm

A purple-gray haze shimmers on the horizon,
Like a Portuguese man-of-war
Washed ashore, hovering, portentously, on the sand,
In its inflated, glazy iridescence.

Seated in my car, heading south,
I envision myself in Florida,
Standing, despite the beached creature's obvious immobility,
At sufficient distance to inspect it

Without superstition biting me,
As though it were a moray eel,
Or risking getting whip lacerations
Across my ankles and feet, from its tentacles.

How curious, to be driving this highway
And have my transportation
Regulated by fuel running, from my lungs,
Through jets and injection tubes

Connecting brain to imagination.
How strange, to be so far away
From an object at a destination
Not even reachable in three days

Yet be within inches and seconds of stepping on it,
Having it pop in my face,
Splatter toes and legs, with stinging toxins
That could definitely affect driving.

I'd be well advised to pull off, on the shoulder,
And wait until blurriness dissipates,
Dizziness subsides. How curious, indeed,
Especially now that the purple-gray haze

Has itself begun to tatter, collapse like a tent,
Spraying its contents, in scattershot fashion,
Across this sand-colored land,
Impenetrably etching my glass, with acid rain.

3/14/89 (06048)

Relentless Assailants ^Δ

He awakens by 5 a.m., daily,
Regularly as a carved cuckoo
Peeking out, at cued intervals,
Through flapping doors of a Black Forest clock.

He doesn't rely on intermittent alarms
Or bodily threshold pressures,
To wrench him abruptly from sleep,
Just the quiet, pervasive apprehensiveness

That demons are chewing on his dreams
As fast as his brain manufactures them
And will possess it, lobes, stem, and all,
If he doesn't keep three steps ahead.

This Saturday morning,
He's stirred two hours earlier than normal,
As if presentiments of senseless events
Intended to end his existence

Have frightened him out of silence, into light,
That he might assess the spectral dawn,
For signs of death squirming on his flesh —
Worms, maggots, lice, vermin

Burrowing into feverishly sweating pores,
Facial and urogenital orifices.
Whatever the origin of premonitory forces
That have routed him out of bed,

Set him groping for gold-rimmed spectacles
Necessary if he's to differentiate basic shapes,
Let alone discriminate
Between enemy and friend lurking in shadows,

He knows only that his immediate future
Depends on how expeditiously
He can get dressed, catch the attention
Of anyone passing by, outside,

Who will transport him as far away
As they might take him, in a day's journey,
Before twilight descends again,
And deliver him to the next depot

Along the underground railway he takes,
Escaping sleep's elite SS corps,
Which he still sees and hears chasing him,
Though he fled Lodz ghetto forty years ago.

3/18/89 — [1] (09026)

Driving Twilight's Highway

As he drives north, toward the city,
The sun (suspended just a couple of inches
Above the treed horizon),
Which he doesn't dare stare down,
With the eye-to-eye glare he's focused
On those bearing Trojan Horse gifts for him,
Threatens to sear his left eyelid and ear.

With his right hand, he unhooks the visor
And swings it across his face,
Vitiating vision, for a precarious instant,
Before fixing the shield into position,
Between his head and the driver's-side glass,
Obliterating the sun's distracting rays
As if Ahab had knocked it out of orbit, with his fist.

Driving with blinders, going straight,
He concentrates on his vehicle's shadow
Keeping pace with his right front fender,
Wondering how he'll determine
Which will arrive first, once dusk descends,
And whether its occupant, his homunculus,
Will blame the sun, for its diminishment,

Or accept, with gracious reasonableness,
Its relegation to second-class citizenship,
Which twilight will carelessly efface
From all its previously well-defined outlines.
Just now, however,
They race neck and neck,
Trying to get home before darkness catches them.

Thirty miles later,
He resets the visor, inspects his periphery,
For signs of the firebrand that tormented him.
Only a rosy crepuscular halo
Marks the crater the sun made
When it dropped out of sight
And entered the orient hemisphere of his ascending imagination.

3/18/89 — [2] (06049)

Down on My Luck [△]

The stream meandering through this mid-March
Retains faint traces
Of yesterday's mother-lode gold nuggets.
I kneel at its banks, this Sunday morning,
In wheat jeans, work shirt, and boots —
That uniform I wore, like phylacteries,
Through my prospecting days
And to our marriage ceremony, in Sutro Park.

Out of habit, I swish my sieve
Back and again, through the sandy shallows,
As if to release, from unseen recesses,
Minute chunks of the past,
Which may have embedded, gratuitously,
Beneath gravity's surging surface-currents.
But the screen comes out as clean
As when I dipped it into the freezing alembic.

I linger at river's edge,
As if expecting another great strike.
Arrested between spring and winter,
I've returned, to this abandoned camp,
*

To look for negligible pieces
I neglectfully jettisoned or left on purpose,
In those greedy, hasty days,
When love discovered us.

3/19/89 (00273)

Poet Casey, the King of Swat

You'd think,
After all these years,
People would cease throwing brickbats
As inane, patronizingly opinionated
As those he snags, backhanded,
As he touches second, with his toe, before whirling,
Hurling the ball to first base,
For a double play, in the bat of a mind's eye.

But that's just the way it's always been.
He's stayed in shape.
Despite age constraints,
His wit has remained nimble,
Quick afoot, able to shift either way,
Without straining mental tendons
Or imagination's figmental ligaments.
He's been a disciplined son-of-a-bitch,

Who has never permitted disbelievers
To undermine his commitment to the written word,
With their caustic, haughty criticisms
Or academical one-upmanship
Consisting of a mixture of two parts envy,
Three parts worship
Of anachronistic casuistry and hermetic pedantry;
Nor has he ever brooked self-doubts

About his powers to bounce back
After an outing in which no tropes,
Images, alliterations coalesce
To produce ravishing metaphors naked to the ear,
Victory of the spirit over the flesh,
His way of saying no to death,
Making that final sacrifice,
His epitaph's last laugh, a lasting blast.

For twenty-five years,
He's taken the field, each new day,
As though there were only tomorrows,
No yesterdays, each a fresh start
With a clean slate on which to post his score,
Set new records, by breaking them
Before they can get made —
Mighty Casey, aiming to best himself

Each time he steps up to the plate,
Who cuts a mean swath through the air,
With his pen, tears the cover off ideas
That come flying in, side-sliding,
Sinking, screwing, at 90 mph,
Converting them into stand-up triples
And grand-slam home runs
Soaring over the grandstands without ever landing.

3/21/89 (06050)

Lovers of the Arts

Haloed by our soft, sweet breathing,
Caught between midnight and dawn,
On this "lost weekend" evening
Away from our lives,
We unmemorize all reverberating echoes
Except those of the old Once-ler,
Offering up his last Truffula Tree seed,
For us to do with as we please
(Hopefully cause a forest to grow in Eden),
And the shocked Ticktockman,
Being told to "get stuffed,"
By the defiant Harlequin, when urged to repent.

Although we appreciate Theodor Geisel
And Harlan Ellison, we speak in gentle cadences
Not even very literary or poetic
So much as reflecting melodic phrasing
Our eyes reprise from Beethoven's
Piano Sonata no. 8 in C Minor and our smooth, naked bodies,
Playing with amazingly sensitive touching,
*

Interpret on each other's keyboards.
The notes we speak explode in silences
So lyrical, our ears shimmer
As though stroked with violin bows
Strung with strands of Rapunzel's gold.

We know so little about prior lives
To which our separate existences have been confined,
Only that they seem to fit, intact,
Into the geodesic moments we occupy,
Without need for dismantling any of their pieces,
No matter how trapezoidal.
Whether we can survive where Brown Bar-ba-loots
And Swomee-Swans no longer thrive,
Harlequins finally confess,
And concert pianists contend with arthritis
Makes little difference, in the end.
Tonight, our soft, sweet breathing keeps us alive.

3/22/89 — [1] (00462)

A Drive in the Country

Discreetly, we meet in the park
On the far edge of Terra Incognita,
You, a married lady with two children,
Lamenting unassuageable disenchantment
Over having stayed with a man
Light-years apart, in intellect and laughter,
And I, a romantic poet
With gentle credentials and balls
That rarely descend into my eunuch's scrotum,
That ragbag containing impotent semen-seeds
I've scattered in my wife's garden,
Year after year, without yielding large harvests.

Both of us have paid our dues,
In choosing to remain, too long, in relationships
That have proven futile in leading to resolutions
Capable of changing the immutable,
Reconciling hostilities and distrusts.
Now, exclusively, we've decided,
*

With mutual resoluteness, to quit trying
To reduce cosmic differences to misunderstandings
One swipe of the eraser can wipe clean.
We've elected to express our right
To extricate ourselves from fate's maze,
By cauterizing our separateness in desolation's fire.

Now, we leave in your car, heading westerly,
Over W, to Doe Run, beyond,
As though we might climb Stono Mountain,
Descend into a valley, on the other side,
No Caucasians have ever seen,
Something lush, out of Hilton's *Lost Horizon*,
A Tibetan refuge where natives
Attain Biblical ages, never actually die,
Just expire from living memory.
We continue driving toward sky's base,
Listening to a personally recorded tape
Of your brother playing a Beethoven piano sonata.

By imperceptible degrees, we dissolve into dusk.
I drowse in the limbo
Through which we pass — a smoky Flemish painting
Subdued by solemn cows and wallowing sows,
Lackluster farmhouses and shacks
Partaking of a slate-blue/gray haze.
You and I express no colossal expectations
We hope to fulfill, along this lost stretch of road;
Instead, we let the moments accumulate
Without comment, silently grateful
To be spending these miles, from beginning to end,
Suspended in tensionless friendship.

3/22/89 — [2] (00463)

Easter Echoes

*For Jan,
my life's love*

Oh, how my ears ring with echoes
That, in years past,
Actually the last two and a half decades,
*

Swelled with spring's Easter benedictions,
Bespelled the two of us,
Who were always just falling in love,
No matter the weather or hour,
The vision, premonition, or dream.

We were crocuses and hyacinths, then,
Singing deep-throated villanelles to each other,
In notes colored yellow, violet, peach,
Heliotrope, and "unbelievable" —
Shades, registrations, and hues
Whose music we made
Just by saddling up wild butterflies
And riding off, together, into the sunset,

Whenever we wanted to compose twilight
In rainbow tones our bones mixed.
But all that seems so long ago
And irretrievable, this Easter weekend,
When you and I are both alone,
In separate desolations,
Prisoners of disillusion genuflecting to echoes,
Victims of our own unwitting crucifixions,

Sipping wine, pressing wafers to tongue tips,
Suffering through eucharistic rituals
As if to expiate omissions we've both committed
By letting our voices dry up,
Die from thirst. Oh, let this Easter
Be steeped with lilies of the valley,
Whose sweet scents and swelling bell-notes
Will compel us back to ourselves, to innocence.

3/24/89 (00272)

Progress

Curiously, the phrase "Please refrain from flushing
While train is in the station"
Makes its way through imagination's maze,
This sunny day-after-Easter a.m.,
As I settle into seat 7A,
On this half-empty plane bound for Florida.

I'm at a loss to explain its origin.
The very premise is so foreign,
Its message sufficiently mixed,
It totally disorients my quizzical spirit,
This morning of my heart's "march to the sea."
It forces me to recheck my ticket,

Tandem-scan its dot-matrix inscriptions,
To reassure my computer its destination is correct,
My mode of transportation a jet,
Not *Super Chief* diesel
Pulling a set of gleaming, streamline cars,
Beneath one of whose Pleasure Dome greenhouse canopies

I'll sit, all afternoon, in mesmerized silence,
Witnessing oasis merge with desert,
Then miraculously reverse polarities,
As we arrive at a late-forties L.A. depot,
In a warp before smog Pearl Harbored the dream,
In an era when a family of four —

That perfectly American entity
Exemplifying Cold War patriotism,
Prosperity, and promise — could make the trek westward,
Reasserting its pioneer indebtedness to the notion
That going, opening up new territories,
Is the soul's only saving grace.

Suddenly, I awaken from reverie,
Realize the space my squirming body occupies
Is a fuselage hurtling down a runway,
Rotating, maneuvering for the right angle of attack,
To let its leading edges defeat inertia,
And that I'm trying, with all my energy,

To detain fluids demanding release
From deep within painfully strained containers
Used for accumulating and storing waste.
Two strange sensations overtake me:
I fear my squeezing will somehow impede
This jet's ability to gain necessary speed,

Safely enter the air; more disturbing
Is my paranoid belief that if I do succeed

*

In reaching my most immediate destination, in time,
And flush, I'll cause unsuspecting persons,
Scattered along the tracks, massive frustration
And disillusionment, with my low-level strafing.

Ah, but once inside this tight-fitting compartment,
The sense of compensatory redemption
Is such persuasive dispensation,
Albeit selfishly motivated,
On this day after Easter,
I quit whatever guilt might have existed

And listen to the dark-blue liquid
Swirling softly away, into the bowels of the craft,
Reminding me that I've precipitated
No inconveniences or crimes against humanity
Or the state. Sauntering back to 7A,
I whisper praises to the gods of modern technology.

3/27/89 (06051)

Starting on Eighty-One ^Δ

I

Dear Dad,

The flipping-card kid and comic-book wizard
Of 7564 York Drive
And 811 Glenridge,
Clayton, Mo., U.S.A.,
Send you their best wishes, from 1946,
Though they know they're belated
By more than forty years,

And so does the chubby boy from Ladue,
Who rode the train, from St. Louis, with you,
Sat in your New York "display room,"
In the Savoy Plaza Hotel,
Watching TV, eating its Mayflower Coffee Shop's donuts,
Between escapes to FAO Schwarz, for Lionel trains,
And Reuben's, for volcanic apple pancakes

Erupting cinnamon lava
Down the side of an appetite
At whose base even a “growing” teenager
Would be buried alive, without a bite or five
Shared by a dad happy to satisfy
His son’s simplest tastes,
Glad to abet his most grandiose pleasures,

A dad convinced companionship
Was the best way to set examples,
Inculcate lasting values
In a child’s developing ethos for success.
Oh, and let me intrude
To posit this conclusion:
You were absolutely right, Dad!

II

So speaks the present-day man-child
Forged in your workaholic image,
A “chip off the old block,”
Who, by the seventies and eighties,
Would create his own children,
Compose poems infused with your spirit,
Engendered of intellect, imagination, and emotion

Your holy acts of compassion and charity
Exemplified and inspired,
Showing his own furious desire
To emulate you, by igniting, in others,
Your belief in man’s need
To discover purpose in living
And even deeper purpose

In eventually dying into life eternal —
Rebirth of the soul.
As it now appears,
You may stay here longer than I,
Your loving son, L.D.
But whether this occurs
Or the reverse asserts its inertial influence

Is inconsequential for the duration,
Since we both possess the stuff

*

Which makes and perpetuates memories,
 That magical essence of deeds done
 In the names of others. Dear Dad,
 Celebrating your eightieth birthday, today,
 I proclaim your name love's flame.

Your son, L.D.

4/1/89 — [1] (00284)

World Traveler ^Δ

I sit within a man-made rain forest
 Of plum myrtle and sea-grape trees,
 Whose merging leaves form a wondrous umbrella,
 Under which I exist, sipping Chablis,
 Out of reach of the jellyfish-sun's
 Ultraviolet tentacles.
 Just being here, instead of in Zimbabwe,
 Watts, Iraq, Nablus, Iran, or Transvaal,
 Is not so much an accident of geography or circumstance
 As it is of fate, not even of providence so greatly
 As it is of my faith in fantasy's ability
 To advance me from one state of mind
 To the next station down the line,
 Whenever escape beckons my languishing spirit.

Take today, for example. This morning,
 I was born in Sacré-Coeur Basilica,
 Then traveled to Carcassonne and Aix-en-Provence,
 Before dying far south of Barcelona,
 In a nudist colony near Alicante, at sunset,
 Where I was buried, in a fishing net,
 In the Mediterranean Sea,
 Beside one of Botticelli's voluptuous maidens.
 When I awakened, my body had washed ashore,
 At Port Everglades, in Fort Lauderdale,
 Just in time for late lunch at Lago Mar,
 Under plum myrtle and sea-grape trees,
 Where I sit, this minute, sipping Chablis
 And dreaming of reaching Paris again, by evening.

4/1/89 — [2] (00459)

The Sun Casts an Envious Eye

No higher than the sun hovers above the horizon,
Right this minute,
He and I can stare each other
Straight in the eye. What we see
Remains to be seen, as they say in the trade
(Mine is writing, his lighting).

For now, I speculate on the possibility
That, eye to eye,
We might be looking at the same thing,
Trying to gauge day's implications
Before either of us rises
And loses sight of the real issues at stake.

But when I look up, this early a.m.,
From the notebook
In which I've scribbled these cursive visions,
The perspective has changed.
Indeed, even turning sideways, gazing obliquely,
I can't maintain my view

Without squinting, from the fierce concentration of rays
He beads, with a laserlike focus,
Across the ocean's surface, up the shore,
Toward me, as though we formed a safe-door
He needed to burn open
Before stealing and sundering my metaphor.

4/2/89 (06052)

Green Grief

Sometimes grief hides behind disguises
So realistic,
Even the most perspicacious observer
Can't distinguish its trees for its forest.

He's like a bird watcher in a secluded refuge,
With nothing but patience, hope,
And a set of high-power binoculars,
To help him arrest an unprecedented species.

Such is the degree of deception,
This early, fecund April,
When green — such lush registrations —
Has begun to appropriate all open spaces,

Vividly transfigure the landscape,
Like an artisan starting with sand granules,
Piecing in the entire horizon, by hand,
With stained-glass leaves and grass.

Oh, how excited nerves behind my eyes get,
As focus bends, converges, and blends
Into the environment surrounding my lenses.
They sense nature's urgency

More intensely, during this brief season,
Than in any other transition,
Sense their own impermanence most acutely,
For having experienced too many undisguised Julys.

4/5/89 — [1] (06053)

[Seeking my most direct connection]

Seeking my most direct connection
Between sunrise and sunset,
I rely on dead reckoning,
To get my vehicle beyond the ante meridiem,
Into twilight's precarious barrier reef,
Where leviathans fly above the white-capped waves,
Using their flukes as elevators,
Ailerons, and tabs, their fins
To keep them in straight and level flight,
Before disappearing below the spume,
Carrying with them cynical ship captains
And misbegotten harpooners.

Approaching the zone of mystical fishes,
Where swirling surface currents,
Like colossal drains, can invisible a vessel,
Without the slightest forewarning,
I gyve myself to the mainmast,
With chains taken from the cargo hold,

*

Knowing neither self-immolation nor crucifixion
Is a method I would choose
For committing suicide, if choosing I could do.
As His Majesty's humble servant,
I perform holy acts
Imagination asks of me, on gratuitous faith.

Today, I feel more unstable than usual,
In making this passage across an ocean
That exists only for this single occasion.
Although I've sought to complete this crossing
Twice before, lifetimes ago,
Never have the miles seemed so treacherous,
Almost too smooth to be true.
Warily, I begin pacing the decks,
In hope of sighting familiar atolls or cays.
Suddenly, my boat enters the edge of a typhoon —
A dust mote endlessly buffeted
Between Betelgeuse and Cassiopeia.

4/5/89 — [2] (06054)

Sundered Ties

Standing at the kitchen counter, sipping coffee,
He whispers, "I'll miss us."
"I'll miss you, too."
"I said I'll miss *us*;
There's a big difference in those two pronouns."
"Oh, don't I know it!"

Seemingly having spoken the only words
Capable of expressing disillusionment,
They enter silence,
As if crawling into an igloo
Through whose opening they could barely fit
And would never again exit.

Soon, he'll be flying down wide highways
Outbound from the city
And eclipsing his recent past,
Outdistancing memories
Vectoring in on his final destination:
Forgetting. Soon, she, too,

Will be attempting to extricate herself
From present resentment, begin pain's process
Of reshaping obsolete dreams
Into "again"s with adventure potential,
Irrational passion, exotic odysseys —
A fresh start for a dead head and heart.

Isolated within listening distance of systems
That give their bodies the illusion
Life exists inside their mutual exclusion,
Both wait, at impasse,
For their two children to gather, before school,
Quietly chew their breakfast,

After which they'll all separate forever, for the day,
Like a skyrocket exploding at apogee,
Sifting to earth, after brief ecstasy,
Scattering into unrecognizable pieces
Assuming the appearances of nearby formations —
Human chameleons, nature's newest refugees.

4/11/89 (04092)

Out of Commission ^Δ

I

As his thirty-eighth birthday approaches,
He realizes he's not grown older
Or wiser either, just less connected
To habits, rituals, and ambitions
He fastidiously set in place
When his position as road nomad
For Acme-Zenith Clothing,
Of St. Louis, Mo., kept him going
Two thousand miles a week,
Five days out, between Sabbaths,
Fifty weeks/two seasons per year.

Just days before his nativity celebration,
He catches himself lamenting his predicament,
This self-imposed early retirement,
Which he chose to take two months ago,
*

When president and CEO Cohen
Insisted he accept a “promotion”
To relocate, cum “substantial bonus,”
For having to open up,
“Cold-cock,” remote areas of Idaho,
Utah, Wyoming, Montana, and Colorado,
Where the natives, he claimed,

From reliable hearsay,
Have never even seen Levi’s jeans,
Let alone owned a single tailored suit,
Harris Tweed or camelhair coat,
Or double-pleated dress trousers . . .
States comprising a bleak territory
Where no menswear company, certainly not theirs,
Has ever dared set foot or sold goods
To retail merchants — Willy’s great opportunity
To prove the previously unproved.
And Cohen assured him he’d make exceptions,

Extend extra-liberal credit lines
To high-risk first-time buyers.
He’d let orders binned for accounts
Be diverted to meet Willy’s needs,
Just to prove Acme-Zenith keeps its word,
Is “quick as shit,” filling orders
And getting them shipped to stores
More expeditiously than its closest competitors,
Which, in Willy’s situation,
By the very reality of vast distances,
Would have made all those claims indisputably moot anyway.

II

Sipping coffee, savoring fried eggs,
Whole-wheat toast,
Overhearing the Capital Café’s regulars
Pass judgment on President Truman’s hats,
Joe McCarthy’s un-American activities,
Jackie Robinson (“the black bastard!”),
Uncle Milty’s Texaco extravaganza, and taxes,
Listening to them annihilate retirement pay
For part-time city and state employees
And decry the election of a “nigger” alderman
*

To the lily-white 3rd Ward
(All the more astonishing,

Since only three Negro families live there,
Out of choice), he feels bemused,
Senses an increasing urgency to bolt,
Take to the road again,
After a hiatus of two months at home,
Stewing over his decision to quit.

He knows, now, that leaving was a major mistake,
A mixture of gross miscalculation and arrogance,
Compounded by impudence and brash rashness.
Right this minute, he feels contrite
And would be willing to admit his blunder
To anyone who might listen.

Coffee cup in hand, for support,
He borrows the phone,
Dials collect, to Manny Cohen,
Acme-Zenith's il Duce and Führer.
Waiting for the lines to connect,
He sets free, in the baffles of his brain,
A thousand thousand echoing apologies,
One of which, he trusts, will select itself
At the appropriate moment
And somehow have the necessary salutary effect
On his once, and hopefully future, boss.

Ailene, the crotchety switchboard operator,
Recognizes Willy's voice
Quavering in the "out there somewhere" zone,
From which, for two decades
(Until eight weeks ago), he'd telephone
Five times daily, to let anyone know
Where he might be reached in the hinterlands,
Just in case his opinion was sought
Or he needed to get the latest status report
On broken-size and odd-lot closeouts
For "at-once" 1 percent-commission offerings.

III

"Oh, Willy, long time no hear.
You been sick or somethin'? Orders dry up?"

*

“Ailene, cut the stuff,” Willy chides,
Realizing, with astonished amazement,
That despite his extended sabbatical,
He’s not been missed, not an iota.
His silence might have been five minutes
Instead of sixty days, or an entire lifetime,
Without making the slightest ripple of difference.
“Is Mr. Cohen in his office right now?”
He queries diffidently. “Of course!”
“Will you put me through?” he mumbles.

Nervously waiting, he lets his gaze stray
Toward the table of Capital Café regulars,
Who appear to be scrutinizing him
As if he were standing stark naked,
While he leans against the cashier’s desk, by the phone.
“Ah, uh, Mr. Cohen, this is Willy Sypher.”
“Yeah, I know, but you’re a little late.
The only thing left is New Mexico
And Texas below the Pecos — Levi’s Land.
Take it or leave it, and no bonus!”
“You won’t regret it, Mr. Cohen. I’ll bust my nuts!”

4/12–13/89 — [3] on 4/13 (00275)

A Quirk of Birth

Leaving the city, fleeing its effluvia,
For skies more conducive to breathing freely,
Visions unmolested
By dead-lettered threats from debt collectors
And sweatshop phoners
Soliciting blue-chip stocks,
He seeks the privacy only silence provides him,
On trips to distant destinations
He knows exist at day’s end,
Despite his own sense of dislocation
At any given moment during his peregrination.

Neither discipline nor intuition
Can monitor a spirit flying too high
For earthly inertial guidance devices
*

To keep it from veering
Or disappearing from sight
Whenever its pilot aborts his mission,
From fear of arriving too late
For whatever celebration he suspects
Is intended as a formal installation
Into the most sacred disposition of all:
Death, occasioned by his particular quirk of birth.

4/13/89 — [1] (06055)

[This early-April afternoon]

This early-April afternoon
Is so soft and fertile,
My eyes almost mistake it for a lady
Seducing my limp imagination.
I almost wish I could be deceived,
Believing we might suck each other's buds,
Taste juices racing through veins
Connecting our mutual hearts,
As they keep cadence between our separate flesh.

Secretly, I try to guess which pleasures
Might set her quivering,
Shiver her breasts to reckless ecstasy,
But my gestures are ineffectual,
And fantasies are poor translations
For poetry that can't be spoken
Or shaped into languages that don't exist.
Disillusioned, I submit to subdued anguish —
April's temptress, sent to torment me.

4/13/89 — [2] (06056)

Coming Unfocused

Once, in the foyer of a great Victorian house,
Where I leaned against the balustrade
Of an oak staircase,
Arrested in soft, swirling motes of sunlight
*

Sifting, like lilac and hyacinth petals,
From a stained-glass window
Set in invisible fenestration, above,
I peered into the most ornate
Hand-carved mahogany hall mirror I'd ever seen
And was blinded, for life,
By simultaneously exploding diamond flecks
A last-century artisan
Had fastidiously sprinkled into its molten glass
Contracting and expanding as it hardened —
Spectacular refractions
Radiating with prismatic magic,
Like aphrodisiacs racing though my bloodstream.
I was hypnotized, my focus so dismantled
That by the time the lady of the house arrived
From her secret precincts upstairs,
Articulateness had abandoned me,
Stranded all known speech patterns,
Between firmaments of thought and silence.

Perhaps it was just a matter of minutes
Before whatever it was
That had beckoned me there, that afternoon,
Regained its true focus,
Freed me from that euphoric myopia,
And let me slip safely back into responsible chores
That choreographed my life, in those days,
Kept me from making spontaneity
Slave to my baser instincts
And, thus, incapable of making soaring forays
Into pleasure's wondrous bodily mazes,
Like a bat through cemeteries and cities.
I've lamented the senses' defense mechanisms
Kicking in with such intensity
When we saw each other, that once,
Not meeting, again, until lunch today,
When, by premeditated coincidence,
We revisited the scene we never really shared:
You descending loneliness's staircase,
I leaning against the newel post of the balustrade,
You detecting those diamond flecks
Dancing in my smitten eyes,

*

Like water striders, at twilight,
Strafing the surfaces of two ponds
Smeared with sunset's fresh watercolors,
Softly swirled by April breezes,
I realizing the omnipresence of that old ecstasy.

Now, although we've parted,
Dissolved back into that distant vision,
In which a Victorian lady of exquisite presence
And a youth on a mission of initiation
Gazed into a vast glass mirror
Hanging in their invisible future's foyer
And saw two lovers chasing each other
In and out of echoing reflections,
I know what the reverie meant
And can sense myself suspended in the nexus
Connecting time spent and spending out.
Oh, let my eyes be blinded again,
For moments, days, decades,
By flecks of diamond dust your eyes ignite,
Gazing into my eyes,
Focusing on your incandescent face.

4/14/89 (00465)

Planting Fantaseeds

Briefly, we speak to each other,
From private recesses
Decorated with reliquiae of prior lives,
Reminders of those to whom we've prayed,
Lovers dead and dying inhospitable martyrdoms,
Suffering reprisals for boredom,
Impotence, or profligacy.

We speak, briefly, by phone, this noon,
Committing sweet superficialities,
For fear of disclosing tender wounds,
Exposing chinks in experience's armor,
Letting the other know, inadvertently,
We're each seeking refuge from solitude,
In a home away from a broken home.

But as our voices weave out and in,
Like sunlight dimming and blazing, intermittently,
Behind stained-glass windows,
Emitting inspiration to fantaseeds we've planted
In our hearts' dark gardens,
We sense crocuses growing just below our words' surfaces,
Sending up tendrils, poised to explode.

4/18/89 (04233)

A Latter-Day David Celebrates Passover

Leaden redolences of a dead marriage
Echo throughout the heart's smoldering synagogue.
Visions, this crisp April a.m.,
Lift like smoke off abandoned campfires,
Rising into my droop-lidded eyes,
Where my blacksmith's imagination
Hammers out, on fantasy's anvil,
Transfigurations of concrete reality,
Metamorphoses truth into samurai metaphors
Capable of cutting off, at its roots,
An entire image cluster, Elizabethan conceit,
Or word-hoard forest, in one swipe.

Why I should envision such disparate symbols,
Whose meanings I can't define
Despite my hybrid instincts
For decoding Rosetta-stone emotions
Of the lowliest ladies of the night,
Lepers, kite-flying scientists
Hiding inside their solitary dedication,
I can't say. Groping for explanations,
My tongue draws its sling
And aims, at the sun, its randomly sized shot,
As if to perforate its skin,
Bring it down, like a flaming *Hindenburg*.

But invoking expletives sacrilegious and vile
Is no way to convert heathen souls,
Pagans, iconoclasts, fascists,
Or poets unknown to their audiences of one
*

Certainly, listening to whispers of a marriage
More defunct than Buffalo Bill
Is no way to resurrect a dead spirit.
I must seize this morning by its short hairs,
If there's going to be any hope
For healing, being reborn, bagging a trophy,
Squeezing the bullshit from self-pity's bowels,
And forming a lifetime alliance with Goliath.

4/19/89 — [1] (04232)

Camera Obscura

Two fluid human bodies,
Naked as newly born twins
Just removed from their shared womb,
Fuse in a smooth union of parts:
Breasts nestled softly on hairy chest;
Legs sinuously intertwined,
Like snakes coiled about the pulsating staff of a caduceus;
Arms, like Houdini-straitjacket sleeves,
Wrapped around each other's back;
Both heartbeats achieving precise synchronicity.
Even our erotic phonetics are love's demotic,
Which we inflect with dialectic nuances
Only identical genetic codes could reproduce,
On such unexpected cues as we whisper,
Reciting sexual ecstasy's complex rhetoric
Into our receptive vessels.
By degrees, we lose our separate identities,
Assume indissoluble integrity,
As if glued together, by my leaking semen,
In a Siamese fusion of flesh, intellect, and essence,
Until silence refills our emptied recesses,
With sleep's aphrodisiacal vapors,
And we rest, embracing,
Waiting for tendons, genitals, nerve endings
To recuperate, regenerate,
Beckon us to a twilight reawakening,
When, with abundant energy to spend,
We'll enter, again, those sacred gates,
*

Through whose openings
Only those who can cross oceans
As well as desert wildernesses, on tiptoes, go,
Then grope, in the dark, toward safe harbors
Or fragrant oases, to spend the night
Out of the storm, beyond time's leonine roaring.

4/19/89 — [2] (04231)

Leading a Dog's Life [△]

He walks out, onto the front porch,
Into April's yawning dawn,
Coughs, stirs, surveys his domain cursorily.
He eyes squirrels, with quizzical indecision,
As if not knowing whether to curse them
With scurilous words or discern, in their nervousness,
A higher divination, from which he might infer wisdom.

He pauses, his attention caught in a draft
Surging upward, like a heat-seeking missile,
Until it converges on a jet,
From which morning's roaring emanates.
Then his gaze descends through blending spaces
In new-blooming verdure,
Snags on mazy hallucinations,

For the time it takes tectonic plates to scrape,
Glaciers to lose their grip on reality,
Slip, confusedly, into pelagic floes.
When he awakens from his momentary distraction,
Focus relocates him in the unmowed grass,
Groping through uneven tufts and bald spots,
With feverish self-absorption,

As though trying to gather up, in both hands,
All the seeds he broadcasted last week
Or exterminate every ant in the vicinity,
To keep them from invading his castle.
Without noticing his neighbors slowing in cars,
Going to work, gawking from the public sidewalk
Buffering his madness from the world,

He continues his compulsive combing, on all fours,
Just below his front porch,
Until his daughter breaks his concentration,
Brushing past him, with her leashed cocker spaniel,
Which she lets do its fanciful dance of evacuation,
Accomplished, on cue,
Not eight inches from where her father crawls.

“Dad, everyone’s watching,” she whispers.
“What possibly can you be looking for?”
“Uh, I can’t exactly remember what I’ve lost,
But I’ll know when I see it.”
“Jesus, Dad, you’re really embarrassing!
Please get up and go in the house, *now!*”
She and her dog scurry inside,

But he lingers, upright, trying to think
Whether it’s an object, afterthought,
Or habit that’s been pursuing him,
From a former avatar, commanding his attention.
Suddenly, he kicks a stick, trips,
Lands on a bone he’d buried and lost,
And starts licking, clawing, viciously gnawing its delicious shape.

4/21/89 (00274)

The Emperor Disrobed

There’s a riot in progress,
Right before my very enchanted eyes.
Spring’s circus has come to pitch tents,
Unload its trailers, flatbeds, and vans,
In April’s empty lot, or a congress has convened
To decide the fate of nations,
By casting its collectively expressed preferences
As one vote for seasonal increase
And prosperity; reverberant voices
Unanimously pass this referendum,
With momentous eloquence.

Seated outdoors, on a porch bench,
This warm Sunday morning,

*

In nothing more than a terry-cloth robe,
I'm suddenly wrenched into the present tense,
Out of my sense of suspended disbelief,
In which metaphors bend reality's straight lines,
As ideas travel outward, from the mind,
And encircle the germ of my original conception.
I'm blown back by a jet's roar
Transitorily ripsawing floorboards
In this house of the Lord, where I've come to worship.

Startled, as though my robe were glass
That had shattered with that plane's raucous passing,
Exposing me, stark naked, on this bench,
I grasp for straws imagination might be offering,
In this embarrassing impasse.
Even the least resonant simile or echoing trope
Will do, to keep me from being seen
As I really am. I should know how
To abstract the concrete, cloak the exposed, transmute truth,
Just by waving my pen, invoking innuendos;
After all, I've been doing illusions, for years.

But the flaming dogwoods and redbuds
Rebuff my words, and riotous birds and squirrels,
Weaving tree limbs into a green web
For a giant spider, the sun, to hide in,
As afternoon progresses, silence my incantations.
I can't escape a pervasive disillusionment
That's possessed me, wrested my powers of invention.
Looking into the park across the street,
I see a slender lady prancing barefooted
And realize I've never known
The ecstasy of raspy, wet grass between my toes.

4/23–24/89 (06057)

Peacock in April's Garden

All within a seizure lasting seven days,
April came of age, then relapsed.
Pastel-pink and white dogwoods,
Lilac-hued redbuds,
*

A hundred dozen leafy tints of green
 Forever changed the way we'd paint dreams,
 Believe in the efficacy of shadows
 To evoke hope's sweet mysteries,
 And create disguises for peacocks to hide beneath,
 In keeping their iridescent, regal ermines
 From being molested by coat-of-many-colors poachers.

During that brief separation between seasons,
 When winter's and summer's cathodes
 Were abuzz with colors jumping the gap,
 We sat back, relaxed, serene,
 Fascinated, watching sparks taking shapes in space,
 Displacing protruding quilt-pieces of sky
 And horizon, illuminating Earth's ceiling,
 With scintillant glints of divinity,
 And we speculated how long it would take
 For our greedy preoccupations
 And self-absorptions to relegate God to shades.

I record this day — the eighth in the cycle.
 Even as my eyes seek out the peacock
 Hiding amidst the dense, endless forest of green
 Enticing me toward summer, I realize
 Those Blakean eyes so curiously
 Incorporated in its extravagant tail plumage
 Have already begun dissolving
 Into the land's ubiquitous chlorophyllous sward,
 Quixotically disappearing amidst nature's matrix,
 And that soon, only the fowl's cry will remain,
 To help dispel doubts about spring lasting out April.

4/25/89 (06058)

Putting Away Childish Things: A Fable

*After reading
 "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,"
 by Ursula Le Guin*

Once, in a country way beyond Omelas,
 Where the sun funneled down through rain
 Laced with Viennese coffee and herbal tea
 *

And one day was a complete life cycle
For each inhabitant,
No matter their preassigned designation —
Baby, agedly senile, adolescent, prime —
Gender, race, or occupation,

Two children in their innocent twenties
Sipped from the sun's dripping chalice
And succumbed to vaporous inebriation,
Then drunken numbness,
From which, when they awakened,
In a queen-size brass bed
In the highest tower of sleep's castle,
They possessed no recollection of their separate pasts.

Hand in hand, reveling in the fresh scents
Their unself-conscious nakedness made manifest,
They unmazed the labyrinth
In which memories of other lives and places
Had incarcerated their spirits,
Then wandered out into the heartland,
Unintimidated by potential enemies,
Atheistic doomsayers, time itself.

Oblivious to the terms of their longevity
And convinced their adoration for each other
Would keep them inviolate,
Let them attain certain immortality,
Sustain their lovemaking
At pleasure's threshold, they paid no attention
To outside influences — night, for instance,
Insinuating its subtle, twilit presence

Into the mix; also, the sun's bouquet,
Changing from its honey, nutty fragrance
To a vinegary taste with a bitter, acidic bite.
Soon, the draught had all been consumed.
In a fit of desperate lunacy,
They threw the chalice out the narrow slit
In the room at the very top of the castle,
To which they'd found their way back

And where, now, lying together again,
But without the benefits of "drooz,"

*

They fail to regain that euphoric stupor
Which made copulation sexual ecstasy
And mere words poems, dreams and hopes
Juicy fruits consumed without satiety,
Instead count each sheep leaping sleep's fence,
Wondering which one will bear their innocence away.

4/26/89 — [1] (04230)

Concerto for a Rainy April Night

I sit outside, on the front porch,
Listening to twilight sift down
Like confetti blown, out of night's open palm,
By a cosmic well-wisher
Bidding two newlyweds bon voyage.
Its sounds are those of gods kissing.

I've trained my eyes to translate them,
For my ears to hear, in human registrations.
They take the shape of street lamps
Opening, like glass roses,
Into glowing, vaporous halos
Growing, miraculously, atop cast-iron stems.

The notes they refract, in series,
Harmonize silence into a symphony
Accompanying a distant rumbling of heat-lightning thunder
I can hear illuminating my imagination,
With shadowy, flashing, tattersall patterns —
Hallucination's innocuous apparitions.

By degrees too immense and swift
To be measured by instruments
Men rely on to explain the unknown
And keep chaos at bay,
The storm insinuates skies above my eyes,
With voiceless, jagged noises.

Vapor lamps flicker sporadically,
As rain, dripping from invisible origins,
Taps out, on their petals,
Rhythmic vibrations so primal,
*

It wakes the entire neighborhood to its incantations.
For the duration, I stay outdoors,

Letting the wetness drench my dress clothes,
Ecstasy my flesh, to the bone.
Sight-reading the storm's nuances,
I score its three movements and coda,
Hoping memory will grace my performance
When, by ear, I premiere this concerto, for you.

4/28/89 (06059)

Inescapable Assailants ^Δ

His inconspicuous disappearance from the city
Is nothing more or less
Than the feckless non sequitur of two deaf-mutes
Debating the ethics of existential semiotics.
Fleeing is his tongue-tied expression of freedom,
His meek gesture of abnegation,
Civil disobedience, in the face of regulation,
A microcosmic vote for anarchy.

Oh, what a milquetoast he seems,
Squinting back at himself,
Scowling, skeptically, at his mirrored reflection
In the distorting eyepiece
He keeps focused retrospectively,
To help avoid Maginot-line surprises
From enemies overtaking him, on his blind side,
Mind-parasites and maggots

Sucking dry his hopes of escaping, undetected,
Time's elusive P.I.'s.
Poor bastard! Never a moment's rest
From his paranoid surveillance!
Never a fresh breath, brief respite,
Break taken or pause for the cause proclaimed!
Always, it's another precipitous decision
To make a dash for it,

As if the no-man's-land in between
Were measured in hours and highway miles

*

Rather than degrees of loneliness
So deep, no one who surrenders to its abyss
Ever recognizes himself, on returning.
Always, he seems just on the verge
Of discovering the purpose of purposelessness,
When arriving awakens him from his deception

And he's forced to submit to inspection,
By invisible toll-booth collectors,
Disrobe, lie naked, facedown, on the ground,
While frothing patrol dogs
Sniff his anus, lick his shriveled genitals.
He's never escaped from recurring hallucinations
Of being buried alive, in pits Auschwitz prisoners
Have been digging in his mind, since 1945,

When Patton's Third Army
Liberated his disembodied spirit,
Snatched it from death's grip,
With the few other emaciated victims
I. G. Farben hadn't yet disinfected,
With its best crystallized pesticide, Zyklon B,
Or who had missed being singed by gas flames.
Today's trip from the city is no different from the rest.

5/2/89 (00222)

Lovers' Last Evening in the Warsaw Ghetto ^

Each crease in your semen-sweetened belly
Memorizes my curious fingertips,
As they explore your Titian flesh, your "V,"
Which love's migratory snow geese form,
Flying down northern corridors, toward me,
Seeking out the warm shores of my wet lips.

Lying side by naked side,
In an open grave dug out of ageless silence,
We speak threnodies
Men and women of Pompeii and Masada,
Lidice and Auschwitz whispered,
Seizing their last, lucid evocations of hope,

And consecrate our anonymous lives
 To these few, fleet moments that possess us,
 Letting us partake of pleasure's cadences,
 Stay, evanescently,
 Time's Kafkaesque Gestapo,
 Who, come morning, at gunpoint, will arrest
 And goose-step us, in humiliation's birthday suits,
 From destiny's railhead,
 To the shower rooms, for disinfection,
 Before we're cleaned and dressed
 In Zyklon B nightshirts, for lights out,
 Lullabied in an entire people's Yahrzeit flame.

But for the precious hours left us,
 You and I *must* suppress
 All premonitions of earthly extermination,
 Rest, contentedly, in delicate naked embrace,
 Chest pressed to palpitating breasts,
 Penis nestled in life's dark ark,
 Between eternity's twin Torahs — birth's labia.
 And we must never jettison our belief
 There is no death genocide can threaten
 When women and men
 Refuse to suspend their disbelief
 That life ends when the heart stops beating.

5/3/89 (01002)

Himmler Attends the First Undressed Rehearsal of His “Final Solution” — Auschwitz, 1942[△]

A dim, sepulchral image of Heinrich Himmler
 Simmers on imagination's back burner.
 He's standing at a safe distance,
 Just in front of Auschwitz's newly finished
 “Disinfection facility”;

Standing at absolutely flawless attention,
 In his spit-shined high-top boots,
 SS uniform, cap with its patent-leather brim,
 Engraved revolver at his hip,
 Like icing on a wedding cake;

Standing statuesquely,
With an inscrutably diabolical expression on his face,
Waiting for the last of a thousand victims
To emerge from the very first “special action,”
Waiting with the patience of Job;

Standing, as low moaning
Slowly metamorphoses into shrill screaming,
Sifts through fissures in hastily nailed boards,
Issues upward, in a terrible, sickly sweet mixture
Of hysterical syllables and active gas molecules;

Standing rigidly, peering through gold-rimmed glasses
Protecting his myopic eyes
From the actual impact of naked, suffocated humans
Being rolled out, in coal cars,
And heaved along the track, into open pits,

Covered over, with lime, then dirt,
Before temporarily-more-fortunate deportees,
Sporting Stars of David, on their uniforms,
Backtrack, to remove other Jews
Just baptized in the Zyklon B showers;

Standing in astonished admiration,
As though witnessing the first horseless carriage
Cranked into raucous rambunctiousness
Or hearing “Mary Had a Little Lamb”
Spoken from tin foil, through a horn;

Standing even after the last corpse
Has been dispatched, as if his boots
Are glued to earth’s dusty surface,
No member of his staff
Willing to make the slightest move to disperse,

Despite the physical nausea each feels
In his gurgling bowels; not one
Daring to inform this man of vision,
This mastermind of the Third Reich,

Who will purge Germany
Of Jew-vermin, Gypsies, and sexual perverts,
That this “supply” has been exhausted,
The next not scheduled to arrive
From the Russian front, for two days;

Standing like Christ being shown
The ramparts of eternity, God's throne,
From a great numinous height;
Standing in dazed amazement,
Contemplating the vast possibilities of his revelation.

5/4/89 (01003)

The End of the Line

Each day's arriving train
Deposits, at memory's platform docks,
Eggcrates, cardboard containers, mail pouches,
Duffel bags, and steamer trunks
Loaded with old and recent dreams
We've always managed to transport intact,
From one jettisoned habitation
To the next forwarding address,
Whenever destiny's registration clerk
Would reassign us to work
At any location of its choosing, along the track.

Not until yesterday,
After crossing the Great Divide together,
Believing we'd completed another safe journey,
Did we encounter an unexpected inconvenience.
Detraining at a ghostly depot coated with snow,
Maybe in Wyoming or Colorado,
As we waited to claim our detained impedimenta —
The crates and trunks, duffels, pouches,
And myriad unlabeled containers —
We learned, from the only person in the station
(A bum slumped under a bundle of rags),

That except for ours, no freight trains
Had passed through, in at least two years,
No cargo had been discharged or passengers boarded,
For more than a decade.
Standing in drifted snow, beside tracks
Disappearing into rusty parallax, in the distance,
Abandoned in this remote crossroads
Farther west than the planet's edge,
Beyond imagination's Farallones yet inland,
*

Stranded at love's junction,
Without hope of locating our precious possessions,

We wandered outside, into the derelict air,
Trying to flag down a passerby
Who might guide us to temporary lodging.
Alone together, shivering, tongue-tied
From the trip's numbing fatigue,
We realized, simultaneously,
Our baggage had been irretrievably misrouted,
Lost in our hearts' defunct network.
As if taking communion, we kneeled
And pressed our ears to the rail, listening for reverberations
Of memory's train growing later by the day.

5/9/89 (00297)

Big-League Practice ^Δ

An early-May evening, just after supper,
With a twilit green shimmer
Floating over newly budded tree leaves,
And the air itself, the sky,
So supple, soft as flannel cloth,
That the entire scene might be a recreation
Of a Martin J. Heade painting
Profuse with hummingbirds hovering,
Moist rain beads glistening in white light
Seeping in, through nature's vague fissures —
All of it a mystic moment
Fixed in the astigmatic focus of a boy
Too excited by his own existence
To rely on articulateness, to express his ecstasy.

He might be Ty Cobb, Honus Wagner,
The Babe, Ted Williams, Stan the Man,
Hank Aaron, or Pete Rose. Who knows
What vast future delusions
Sizzle past his imagination, at this moment,
Like 90 mph fastballs,
As he hits pitches his dad lofts, slowly, in to him,
From a makeshift mound by a ditch,

*

In the park facing their house,
 Where his mother crouches in the outfield,
 Not back far enough to stop his drives
 Or catch his soaring pop-ups!
 This eleven-year-old boy
 Has never played in such a championship game.

Each hit (he misses very few pitches)
 Inflates him with satisfaction
 He'll translate, later this night, in bed,
 When his father performs ritual tuck-in and lullaby,
 Into a recitation of lifetime batting averages
 And RBI's of celebrated heroes —
 Statistics reprised like Biblical genealogies.
 And even later, approaching the stadium,
 Where he'll join his dream-mates,
 In sleep's locker room, change into his uniform,
 And take to the field, against all teams,
 He'll keep one eye on the grand slam,
 The other scanning the stands, for his mom and dad,
 Waving their hands, in recognition of his outsize deeds.

5/10/89 — [1] (00989)

Cosmic Speck-ulations

This early-May late afternoon
 Nestles under its own sweet, warm aura,
 Reeling in spring's pubescent essences.
 Its cud-luscious luxuriance,
 Which grazing creatures sense,
 Spending their entire existence outdoors,
 In open-ended, sun-blundering freedom,
 Seizes my inexperienced daydreams,
 Lures me into waking sleep.

Ah, it's in these suspended states of consciousness
 That my sensuous self surfaces,
 Invites fantasy's intervention,
 As a catalyst for letting the fettered spirit fly,
 Getting the paltry, stalled heart restarted.
 My flesh invites lunatic visions

*

To refocus old goals on fresh expectations,
Accept the vaguest sexual suggestion of strangers,
Dangerous liaisons, unhesitatingly.

Just now, following this concrete path home,
Toward the Land of Philanderers
(Where, when not chasing rainbows,
Butterflies, blue unicorns,
And fugitive études Beethoven never composed,
I try to reside in relative anonymity),
My eyes imbibe the countryside,
Get drunk, forget whether their destination
Lies ahead or just behind.

Although I don't realize just when,
Twilight enters my pupils, dilates them,
Penetrates my blood. My bones shudder
As though run over and broken
By an invisible turbulence above the earth.
Suddenly, I see myself below tomorrow,
Buried somewhere between yesterday and today,
Neither cow nor poet, deceased nor dying —
Imagination's agent, orbiting the life-force.

5/10/89 — [2] (06060)

[Sad they can't go near, or speak to,][‡]

Sad they can't go near, or speak to,
Each other, for fear
Of disturbing the silence between them —
Background noise
That, lacking its own natural hissing
And sexless echoes,
Renders an emptiness so deep,
Either entering the space,
With the slightest hint of a syllable
Groping toward fulfillment as word, phrase,
Complete sentence,
Or threatening to violate it,
By perpetuating it,
Through speculative cosmic gossip,

*

Would cause both of them to fall
All the way down
To the core of the earth's Gorgon-hissing floor
And be eviscerated by its roar

5/13/89 (04229)

Of Pure German Extract, Once Removed ^Δ

Fantasies prance across the sawdust floor
Of my brain's three-ring arena,
Like a touring team of Austrian Lipizzaners
Executing goose-step maneuvers
Before an audience subdued in awed amazement.

Ghostly panzer divisions
Dancing across a map of North Africa
Hung from a crumbling bunker wall
Beneath Berlin's gutted edifices,
Upheaved streets and synagogues,

Rattle and clank, on ungreased tracks,
Toward the unsupportable fortification
Where my bivouacked dreams
Have entrenched against the enemy, nightmare,
To hold sleep's strategic position.

The white noise wanes momentarily,
Rematerializes as screeching steel wheels
Spinning on red-hot axles
Vibrating boxcars
To a violent pitch no battleship

Stranded in a typhoon ever survived.
Freight trains hauling human cattle
To rendering plants
Operated by the Third Reich's meat packers —
Belzec, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau —

Arrive at my inner ears' depots,
Discharge emaciated cargo
My dormant night clerks must process
Before assigning them to showers, for disinfection,
Or, fortuitously, to work crews

Designing and constructing,
Every hour of their interminable ordeal,
In Sisyphean projects,
Repositories for their own paradoxical bones —
Charnels of rotting bodies

My nose, even in restive slumber, senses,
For the scrofulous stench
Emanating from chimneys surrounding my pillow,
Like this Manhattan skyline, at 3 a.m.,
Illuminating my penthouse windows, in almond halos.

Why such saturnine hallucinations
Intrude on my recuperation time, I can't say.
I know only that their danses macabres
And Gothic dressage,
Which prance across my stage, with Lipizzaner precision,
Seem neither of equine nor human origin,
But, rather, diabolically inspired
By the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse —
A spectral quadrille paranoia performs nightly,
While I applaud, "*Sieg heil! Sieg heil!*"

5/16/89 (01004)

Assimilation: Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938 [△]

Why is it, tonight (while attending synagogue
On the same hit-and-miss basis
He's practiced, these past three decades,
With the devoted complacence of a soul
Who, though nominally a Jew,
Has been convinced that his hooknosed profile
And other distinguishing facial features
Have been assimilated, not stifled his disappearance
Into the Teutonic *Zeitgeist* and Gestalt,
And that even his slight Yiddish dialect,
Mixed in with High German,
Is considered, by all, a mere eccentricity
And has in no way disclosed his original identity) . . .

Why is it tonight, not even a month since Yom Kippur,
As he crowds into the hot synagogue,
To register his presence as a member of the community,
That the flesh beneath his pressed silk dress shirt
Grows sweaty, his vested wool suit
Gets wet, under the armpits and in the crotch,
While he listens to the rabbi's exhortation for peace,
Belief in the Supreme Deity's compassion,
His preoccupation with forgiveness?
Why does he respond with such uneasy gestures,
Being here with people he doesn't recognize,
Who usually see him stiffly installed at his desk,
Behind glass, his back to their daily traffic,

Oblivious to perfunctory transactions
They conduct at one of twenty teller's cages,
Over which he presides, as chief operating officer
Of Berlin's most prestigious bank?
What's different, tonight, that pervades him with frightful emptiness,
Provokes a disturbing sense of vulnerability,
Vague, wayward premonitions that his sanctified position
Might not be as secure, or his safety
Quite as inviolable, as he's always assumed?
Peering at men bending slightly forward, in humbleness,
Under their weightless yarmulkes and phylacteries,
And the meek and contrite faces
Of ladies hatted and veiled, in the gallery,

Their children huddled beside them,
He realizes he's one of them, indefensibly,
Indistinguishable from the others, to the gangs of ruffians and brutes
Pacing like unfed cougars in zoo cages,
Outside the gates of this house of worship.
For the first time since assuming directorship of the bank,
He knows his assimilation has been provisional,
His own note on the loan he secured has come due,
Called much sooner than he could have imagined,
Actually discovers he's embarrassingly short of securities to liquidate,
Cash stashed away for a rainy day
Or night, as is the case now,
Finding himself caught in a shower of shattering glass
Lacerating hats, clothing, arms, faces, and legs,
As it rasps down, from above, like hailstones.

*

Suddenly, the sacred hall is a chaos of smoke
And frantic suffocating bodies
Unable to escape, for hordes of barbarians
Barring all doors and openings,
Assailing the fenestration, with boards and rocks.
In a last, gasping torrent of useless energy,
He presses toward a window,
Lunges, and is impaled on a stained-glass shaft.
Too slowly, his stupefaction collapses,
First into pain, then absolute resignation
Not to death but radical dissatisfaction with God.
Why has this happened to him, to them?
How can a benevolent, compassionate deity
Condemn them to a merciless atrocity such as this?
Drawing his last breaths,
Blood scourging his fine silk shirt,
Worsted-wool, three-piece banker-stripe suit,
He squirms, falls ten feet, to the street,
Spared, without knowing it,
The as yet undreamed, even more horrible expedient
Modernity will soon invent, to purge Germany,
Europe, the world, of usurers and money-lending Jews like him,
Polluting the pure Aryan race.
And in a flash, passing from consciousness,
A sad, sweet expression of omniscience
Transfiguring his Semitic face,
He experiences the ecstasy of complete assimilation
Into the wisdom that transcends knowing,
As he enters memory, intact —
A Jew, at last!

5/21/89 (01001)

Toasting Old Foes ^Δ

Shadows of history's recent "millennial" eclipse
Shatter and scatter
Throughout the stained-glass stratosphere
Enveloping this felons' hell,
Irradiating the remaining population,
With abstract shame and guilt,

*

Dusting streams, lakes, oceans, forests, and fields,
With emotional-disease spores
Proliferating over all air-burned surfaces,
Like advanced lymph-node cancer —
Earth's terminal prognosis.

Though day and night never divide sleep
From waking hallucination and clawed chimera,
Somnambulistic guidance systems
Allow survivors to grope through corridors
Artificially lighted with oil of right whale
And white rhinoceros — fabled beasts
Still on display, in imagination's cages,
Which children of all ages maintain,
In their capacities as keepers of the ancient innocence.
A planet of thin-skinned survivors
Spins, centrifugally,

Away from the first European eruption,
Pinpointed within Berlin's epicenter,
Year by year distorting
History's memory of itself, its Richtered existence —
Seismic crimes of the Third Reich,
Sufficient to destroy an entire generation of men,
Women, and children of the ten tribes . . .
A defunct planet, whose dying Jewish light
Is a very direct reflection
Of defective minds sinisterly inclined
To cast shadows on their vast incredulity,
Who would design the Jewish Holocaust

As a heeltap to toasts concluded to Erebus,
Hecate, and Thanatos . . . German ghosts all,
Still secretly harboring patterns, in wall safes,
Their parents used, to sew and paint swastikas
On circumcised penises, wrists, lice-infested labia,
Still stockpiling J's and Stars of David,
For some future Doomsday celebration,
When, again, Aryan will belt hydrocyanic acid,
With a shot of vodka, toasting his superiority
Over Jew, man, God, and the stupefied planet,
Relishing its burning all the way down his throat.

Theresienstadt, 1989 ^Δ

I endure in a state of daily subjugation,
Dying, nightly, by myself,
In restlessness's dry riverbed,
Like the bleached skeleton of a steer
That strayed in a sandstorm,
Lost its way, groping for an oasis
Its bovine mind's divining rod
Believed existed just around the next
Perpetually bending straight horizon line,
And then gave up hoping to persist,
Reach desert's edge,
Outrace death's shadowy stretch
To assimilate its shape,
And arrive safe, intact,
At a station where the main gates
Proclaim, "The State of Israel Welcomes You,"
Just before the sun's holocaust rays
Could fire its brains and bones,
In a raging, disdainful oven,
And set its spirit adrift,
Pyring up Earth's chimney,
Into acrid winds sifting toward oblivion . . .
Just as you did to my spirit, love,
When you committed adultery, that very first Christmas season,
And continued betraying our self-made heritage,
The stupefying disillusionment
Sending me fleeing into an O'Keefe desolation,
From which I've never escaped,
Just endured, from nightmare to night,
Waiting for fate's raw dawn,
When my own bleached bones
Will be thrown into an open trench
And, covered with time-lime,
Will decompose back to stenchless nothingness,
With only the memory of your once-gentle touch
To accompany me across the Desert of Forgotten Souls.

5/26 & 5/28/89 (09027)

Logging Another Cross-Country Flight

Flying low, over concrete frequencies,
Under a robin's-egg-blue sky,
Trying to locate a language his groping mind
Might translate or decipher,
In order to anticipate alternative landing sites,
In case an emergency de-energizes his spirit,
He glides southerly, out of time,
Losing his place between the lines he reads below,
Intuiting his direction only from their flow,
Going nowhere he can reckon
From gyro rotation his twin hemispheres
Register, in miles, on instrument dials
Or from spinning tires' low moaning.
"Under the hood," he soars free of dreams
Dreamed upside down, blind.

All these years on the road, alone,
He's never let his license lapse
Or crashed, from distraction
Over past aspects that still threaten his soaring
With character assassination
Before a tribunal of his imagination's
Most select, sequestered jury members,
And yet a sourceless turbulence, today,
Keeps forcing him to compensate for slip,
Drag, and skid friction on his wing tips
And trailing ailerons. He senses his machine
Not reacting, exactly, to his command,
As it always has. Suddenly, he veers,
To avoid sideswiping a UFO
Overtaking him out of nowhere

His radio transponder can detect.
Its purple glow haloed his soul,
Creating a perfect vacuum,
In which he no longer flies but hovers
Like a hummingbird above a magnolia blossom,
Suspended in an endless wonderment,
Focusing, now, through translucent prisms
Underneath his flight,

*

On golden domes surrounding temples and shrines
Belonging to undisclosed acolytes.
Slowly, he senses he's entered a circular pattern,
Then descends along a glide slope,
From whose base leg
He recognizes his destination: home, blessed home.
Relieved he's not really died, he weeps.

5/27/89 — [1] (06061)

Paradise ^Δ

The dense grove enveloping this park,
Itself enveloped by inexpensive subdivision homes
And a defenseless meadow
Spared, precariously, by archaic zoning restrictions,
Seems immense, this Saturday afternoon,
For paths making crazy-eight mazes
Through its sun-drenched depths.

For more than a few quiet hours of silence,
I suspend all but the energy
Requisite to gentle mental imaging —
Low-level electricity —
Releasing tensions and accumulated hostility
Into this subdued environment
Suffused with pubescent May-scented light.

Suddenly, paradise's primal voices speak to me,
In a dialect of such ancient origin,
Even leaves, tree bark, goldenrod,
And Queen Anne's lace
Recognize its etymological derivations.
In this haven, I absorb their storied chronicle
As though it were a tale told me repeatedly,

Growing up and growing older,
Over a thousand thousand generations,
When innocence and imagination were holy acts
To be emulated and perpetuated
By Biblical issue of all creeds, forever.

*

Today, I assimilate their whispers, on my lips' tips,
And kiss divinity in the mother tongue.

paradise: “beautiful park,” in Hebrew

5/27/89 — [2] (04228)

Early-Morning Bird/Dog Watching ^Δ

All the way, south, to Cape Girardeau,
Out of St. Louis,
My disintegrating memory
Splices and replays pieces of magnetized tape
(Retained on its unwinding reel)
We recorded earlier this morning,
Troika and his dad,
Walking into and out of dissolving twilight,
Listening for the presences of songbirds
Spreading nets, from branches to twigs,
Or perched in nests, warming eggs.

Thank God such unpretentious ceremonies
Occasionally inform my life,
With ritualed simplicity
Celebrating unspoken friendship and love,
Just as that outing,
Undertaken by my boy and me,
For his school assignment,
Compelled us to make a mutual sacrifice,
By awakening at five-thirty,
Getting dressed in sweats and slippers,
To investigate the neighborhood,

Spend those few precious eons together,
Suspended in splendid interdependence,
Before we separated,
Took to our own exclusive highways
And frequencies of thought and activities.
Even now, eighty miles out,
I can hear his drowsy voice gesticulating,
Distinguishing blue jays, house wrens,
*

Red-headed woodpeckers,
Cardinals, starlings, and sparrows,
By their mercurial twittering,

Clipped cheeping, identifying the predatory caws
The majestic crows make,
As they assert continuous ukase over the park
And all its lesser birds, squirrels,
Canines, and lordly residents.
Troika breaks into laughter,
On sighting Irving, the very fat basset,
Who keeps sleepy watch over the castle
Across the street, a "driveway dog,"
Who would not stir were an atomic blast
To perforate the polluted atmosphere.

"Watch Irving spread his feathers
When I holler. It's those wrinkles
That form his wings, let him fly, you know."
Despite Troika's chiding,
The only motion that distracts our attention
Descends from just above us,
In the recognizable shapes and flutterings
Of male and female woodpeckers mating.
(We heard their calls earlier,
Without recognizing the frequency of airwaves
Emanating from the frenetic pair.)

"Someday, the lady birds are going to revolt,
From discouragement over
Having to lay eggs and stay at home,
Warming them, while the male
Gets to show off his bright colors, all day,
And do as he pleases, from tree to tree."
"I agree, but it won't be too soon,
Not today, anyway,
Though I've got to admit,
They could speed up the process considerably,
If they'd just watch the women in this subdivision."

My mild cynicism doesn't escape his ears,
Even as we concentrate
On the two birds briefly mounting.
"Well, we've gotten more than we anticipated,
*

Haven't we? Perhaps it's time
To call it quits, let you get inside
And write up your report."
"OK, Dad, but wait one more minute,"
Troika says, mischievousness flecking his eyes,
As he leans toward the driveway where Irving sleeps.
"I want to watch this big guy fly!"

5/30/89 — [1] (00988)

Dead Reckoning

Fields grown thick with end-of-May fescue,
Goldenrod, Queen Anne's lace,
Clover, jimson weed, and black-eyed Susans,
Metastasizing with untrammeled abandon,
Billow like three-masters' mainsails
In a brisk breeze. This afternoon,
My imagination mounts intellect's crow's-nest,
To scan land's oceanic expanse,
For unexplored masses and isthmuses
Whose shallow-water bays
Might accommodate my keel's deep draft.

As my prow plows concrete waves,
Accumulating nautical miles,
At 80 per hour,
My eyes keep veering, from straight ahead,
Obliquely, to both sides of life,
Hoping to assess, from the undulating grasses,
Their vessel's true direction,
Calculate what's left of this gypsy trip,
Predicating dead reckoning's heading
On the destination guesswork sets,
Knowing death always blows from east to west.

5/30/89 — [2] (06062)

[Stretching and catching conceptions][†]

Stretching and catching conceptions

5/30/89 — [3] (03480)

Willy Sallies Forth ^Δ

He knows, now,
After nearly fifty years on the road,
He's only felt free of boredom
And lesser inconveniences and defeats,
Liberated from responsibilities
That would hold him, too closely in tow,
To reasonable social success
À la George F. Babbitt,
Of Floral Heights, Zenith, Ohio,
When plying his trade,
Driving from Blankstein's Men's Shop,
At the corners of Moreau and Moniteau Streets,
In Tipton, Missouri, to Famous-Barr,
In downtown St. Louis,
And to every point radiating out
From his "Lincoln Land" and "Show-Me State" route —
An outsize task for any man,
Even Willy Sypher,
Acme-Zenith's premiere "senior citizen"
Of the month, year, decade, half-century,
"Old reliable," "Good to the last drop,"
"I'd walk a mile for a Camel" Sypher,
As they've variously nicknamed him,
Over a career spanning two million highway miles
And more than fifteen thousand nights out,
Away from home, in boardinghouses,
Motels, transient hotels throughout the Midwest.

He's just good-natured, good-old-guy
Willy Sypher, to the few buyers
Who still know him from his salad days.
He's "the old Jew," "Jew-schlepper,"
And "Ragman Willy," to those too new
To remember his original exuberance and energy
In showing his line, two seasons a year,
In 185 cities and hamlets,
Shtetls, ghettos, and redneck towns.
But even now, in semiretirement,
He yet catches fire, hears echoes
Of his once-resonant spiel
Creeping into his cracking voice again,
*

When he talks "extra steps," "quality features"
Acme-Zenith sews into its "make,"
To give its dress suits, sportscoats, and slacks
That "deluxe" shape and fit
He still guarantees, with unequivocal pride,
Backs with his word —
A benchmark he personally places
On every garment he books and ships.

Now, although he has only twenty customers to service,
He continues to keep all his own records,
With fastidious detail, not letting anyone
Miss sales, for neglected "fill-ins"
Or overlooked shipments at the warehouse.
Religiously, he makes his daily appearance
At the St. Louis office,
Sits alone, by a phone
He might use twice a week,
Reading trade magazines and journals
(*Men's Wear Daily, Apparel,*
Daily News Record),
Reviewing his copies of shipping tickets
Previously executed or awaiting disposition,
Eating a sandwich and chips
He brings in a paper sack —
All activities conducted in a broom closet
Management has allocated to him.
But he realizes he belongs nowhere
Except on the road.
After all, his calling is that of peddler,
Pure and simple, a noble profession
For a man who never made it past tenth grade
Yet learned to teach the world
A trick or three about five-figure selling
On 1- and 3-percent commissions,
Even during the Great Depression,
And who mastered the strategies of profit and loss
To such a degree, top management
Always consulted him before finalizing
Retail price points for each successive line.

Today, languishing behind his makeshift desk
(Vinyl-top card table with folding legs),

*

Willy digresses, suffers from progressive boredom,
Restiveness. He senses that old urgency
Approximating desperation
And knows he must leave, at once,
Get out on the road,
Even if he has no specific place to go.
Nervously, he thumbs through his address book,
Pauses on a few dog-eared entries —
His best clients from former seasons —
And seizes a fleeting thought
Before it completely disappears from his screen.
Instinctively, he dials Manny Blankstein,
In Tipton, makes connection,
Suggests he drive out, to discuss closeouts
He hasn't even checked, with Phil Rousch,
To confirm exist, for "at once" delivery,
And is elated to get the high sign.

Before leaving in a flush of excitement,
He is given a thick computer printout
Listing odd and broken-size lots,
Assorted samples, returned flawed merchandise,
And other bogus items
Accumulated over the last three months
And thirty-three years.
Within minutes, he locates I-70,
Heads west, via Wentzville, Kingdom City,
Past Columbia, then south, from Boonville,
Down 5, toward 50,
A route he's used, with negligible deviation,
Longer than remembering can remember.
Within three hours,
He and Manny will be shmoozing at Emil's,
Over steak and brew, for lunch,
And again, later, at the Crystal Café,
For the two-hour coffee break
They've always taken
At the very dead center of afternoon lull.
And who's to say, he daydreams,
That, later this evening,
They won't set up a poker game in his room
At the Twin Pine Motel,
Where he's been a preferred customer

*

Since its foundations were laid
 (He may even come away
 With a few extra shekels),
 Just for the heckter and Jekyll of it.

Another go 'round for old time's sake,
 He muses enthusedly, as he zooms west.
That's the way today should unfold,
For "old reliable,"
"Walk a dromedary mile,"
"Good to the last dripping drop
Of the brew pot,"
"Never say die, dayenu"
Diaspora Willy Sypher,
Sales rep nonpareil.

5/31/89 — [1] (00276)

The Midwest Calls Him Home, for a Rest ^Δ

He drives away from the little town of Tipton
 (A crossroads village, really,
 Through whose downtown —
 Consisting of two streets bisecting,
 Stumbling to its four ragged edges,
 Within a matter of three blocks each —
 Run rails of the almost defunct Amtrak
 Between St. Louis and Kansas City),

But not before paying last respects
 To an old friend in the Masonic Cemetery,
 Driving past the drummers' hotel
 He discovers has been razed recently,
 Gazing upon the whitewashed slacks factory,
 Where he once conducted time studies,
 Set piece rates on a forty-six-minute
 Man's dress pant.

Nostalgically, he follows the railroad track
 Westerly, toward Syracuse, Sedalia,
 Then turns abruptly north,
 Toward the Boonville junction at I-70.
 He hasn't seen cows in years,
 *

Has actually forgotten, until right now,
How they congregate under trees,
In the humidity-burdened Midwest heat.

Corn and soybeans are just surfacing,
This last day in May,
As he wends his way home.
He can almost hear the earth giving birth,
Almost feel her agonized labor,
As he delicately cuts a swerving furrow
Across her curving geography.
Green is the lush scent of this season's breathing.

He hasn't passed this way in years
Or experienced the pleasure
Slow time necessarily requires of its initiates.
Nor has he remembered how sweet
Serenity can seem to a frenetic temperament,
How wide innocence can reach
When trying to connect with an adventurer
Intent on returning to the womb.

Aware that this late afternoon
Is imbued with spring's fecund amplitude,
Profuse in meadows and planted fields,
He intuits his own provisional location
Amidst Demeter's quick and quickening spirit,
Knows it's only a matter of incarnations
Before his own soul
Will throb independent of his heartbeat.

5/31/89 — [2] (05435)

Peanuts

For June Nivens

This midweek's route
Takes Acme-Zenith's manager of outlets
To Tipton and Jefferson City,
Where he'll check stock levels and mix,
On summer-cotton, linen, silk,
Polyester and wool overstocks and seconds.

But as he drives westerly, then south,
He realizes he's missing something essential
That, on myriad trips he's made,
These past ten years,
Has always gratified his visual sensibility,
With conspicuous delight: the billboard signs

He designed and refined, many times,
Until, in extravagant red, white, and yellow,
They proclaimed, like the Edict of Nantes,
THE SLACK OUTLET
FINE MEN'S DRESS PANTS,
COATS, SUITS, & SHIRTS,

And always, appended to the skirt at the bottom,
Like a coda to symphonic music
Or closure to a poem, was the phrase
75% OFF RETAIL,
As though this were canonical gospel
No one should skeptically question

Or, for one minute, doubt. But today,
He realizes his displays are down,
Replaced by others, in bluish-gray,
On white backgrounds that seem faded
Even in their fresh layers of paint.
At their tops, they reflect a stated name change:

FORMERLY THE SLACK OUTLET.
In the shock of his initial encounter,
He fails to assimilate the additional copy —
FINE MEN'S CLOTHING FOR PEANUTS —
Or register the twenty-foot-wide logo,
Simulating a gigantic peanut

Containing, in black enamel a foot-high,
The caption **SAVE UP TO**
70%.
Off to the left, in a small box,
ACME-ZENITH FACTORY OUTLET
Concludes this urgent news announcement.

Stunned, then experiencing a sense of betrayal
By he knows not whom

*

Usurping his job-description duties,
Somewhere within the elusive hierarchy
The main office, in St. Louis, preciously guards
And uses to excuse occasional acts of favoritism,

He decides to check out the rest —
The fifteen other boards in his system,
Ranging as far west as Blue Springs,
South to Osage Beach, at the Lake of the Ozarks,
North to Moberly, Macon, and Marshall,
East to Kingdom City.

He parks at the edge of a truck-stop lot,
To phone his store manager at Tipton,
Inform her he'll be quite late,
Not to wait for him to initiate price changes
On the 1201 range sportscoats and navy blazers;
Something amazingly curious has come up.

"Oh, you mean the 'peanut' signs?"
He's surprised by her prior knowledge,
Can't contain his sense of embarrassment,
At finding out his employees have been privy
To information he's not been given.
She must know more, if she knows this.

Reluctantly, he probes. She discloses only
That three men visited her store,
Earlier this morning,
Oversaw the installation of a computer
That will keep cumulative inventory
While registering all cash transactions;

Also, they attached a gadget to the phone,
Which will confirm, instantaneously,
The validity of credit cards and checks,
With a simple flick of the wrist and a swipe
Through a slot in the side of the box.
They've been sent by the company — all she knows.

Chagrined, shaking, his adrenaline pulsing,
He hangs up, buys a cup of coffee, inside,
Then sets out to see what's up.
One by one, he makes the all-day circuit.
Each new "peanut" display
Claims space he and Ray Harrington chose

Almost a decade ago, when he took over
As manager of outlet stores.
By 5:00, he arrives at the Jeff City facility,
Barely in time to catch Louise
Before she leaves for home.
His quizzical, searching eyes beseech her

For any insights she might have,
As to the major changes he's discovered, today.
She demurs, not from fear of hurting him
But out of ignorance. She hasn't the slightest idea
What's behind these strange occurrences
Or why he wasn't notified first.

Instead of heading to his motel, in Columbia,
He sidetracks himself, in the lounge
At Katy Station, downtown,
And proceeds to embalm himself with Chardonnay.
For hours, he ponders his solitude,
Surrounded by loud, noxious sounds of students,

Office workers, lawyers, and teachers
Sorting out their day's accomplishments,
Propounding life-goals,
Spouting aggrandizing egotisms
And self-elevating denigrations of close associates
And those they've never known,

With equally abasing character assassinations.
Ultimately, too inebriated to consider eating supper,
He orders one more glass, for the road,
The road he's spent ten years traveling,
With complete devotion to Acme-Zenith Clothing.
And for what? he wants to know. *Peanuts!*

6/1/89 (02431)

Man's Best Friend Δ

These days, he barely escapes gnashing teeth
Of strangely shaped chimeras
And nightmares' fabled beasts
Sporting nubile human-female torsos,
*

Cloven-hoofed pig, goat, rhino,
And dirty desert-dromedary feet,
Frankenstein faces —
Grotesque Gorgons, griffins, gargoyle,
Centaur, Cyclopean creatures . . .
From head to toe, freakish distortions,
Appalling hallucinatory intruders on his sleep.

He awakens, before dawn, each morning,
To lice and scabies inspection,
By sycophantish Kapos —
Residuum of his tormented dreams —
Assigned to systematically subjugate him,
Through intimidation, humiliation, and guilt,
To indeterminate anguish.
He wears despair over his bones, like flesh,
Speaks to himself in a mixture of Yiddish,
Russian, and English his brain
Can't translate into understandable commands.

Staring in the mirror above the basin,
Contemplating his thinning hair,
He still remembers it changing from blond to gray,
That endless night he hid in the latrine,
Submerged, to his neck, in dreck,
Waiting for guards to vacate that part of the yard,
Let him follow his dark instincts,
Away from Oswiecim.
He shakes his head as if to fix connections
Between eyes and memory receptors.
He doesn't recognize his vacant reflection.

As is his routine,
He uncages and leases his single companion,
A black cocker spaniel
He's never been able to name,
Which, nonetheless, has remained solicitous
To his solitudinous moods
And the few, but quixotic, interludes
When he can't contain the urge
To furiously pet its meek, subservient face,
As if expressing love for the ghost
Of a long-lost lover or departed parent.

Then, inextricably tied to its life,
He takes his dog outside, to shit,
Intimately guides it to the place
Where the systematic circling ritual will begin,
With wide sweeps, seeming disinterest,
The dog sniffing, nuzzling nuts, roots,
Chewing grass blades, ivy vines.
He waits patiently for first signs of contractions
Under its stub tail,
Until, almost vicariously,
He begins to share its relief,

As heated feces slides neatly, in three or four pieces,
To the ground that receives its offerings,
Like oracular sacrifices.

Curiously, the entire process triggers memories
His psyche apparently requires, for survival,
Despite the painful nausea they unleash.
The cocker he watches squat is not a dog
But an endless montage shot
Replenishing itself with vivid portraits
Of children, youthful and aged women and men
Bending, by train tracks, on a brief stop

Between "home" and the sinister unknown,
To relieve their bowels,
Who, possibly, haven't already sullied their clothes and skin,
In the hot boxcars without even a pot
In which to piss and defecate —
Decent people who, until hours, weeks ago,
Had never known animals could communicate,
Exercise imagination, shudder, and weep
And see death, in all its gross details,
Who had never watched other human beings
Doing undignified bodily acts collectively.

When it bends its legs, he bends his,
Sensing the weight of an entire generation
Evacuating its Jewish excrement,
Down and out the cloaca of the whole German anus,
Waste upon which it depends, for its nourishment.
Why each of his days begins and ends this way,
He can't say. He knows only

*

That without his dog, he'd be even lonelier.
Maybe without the beasts of his nightmares
Chasing him from sleep, he'd never make it
Past dawn's barbed wire, alive.

6/6/89 — [1] (01005)

Just Another Day's Drive ^Δ

Traversing this lush expanse of land
Teeming with soft winter wheat
Planted last September,
Incubated beneath slow, glowing snows
And fragile rains known to southeast Missouri,

I listen, with my nose out the open window,
For scents, odors, fragrances of growth
That might translate my spirit
Into a cosmic ear capable of hearing God
Taking root in this Midwest garden,

His disembodied essence
Elongating, endlessly, into stalks, stems, and blades
Bending sunward, in fulgent luxuriance.
As I breathe in the season's first mowed grass,
My olfactories sense His presence.

His honey-laced vibrations
Locate me along a frequency of highway
Slicing, diagonally, east of Eden,
Defining my vessel's terrestrial design
As it vectors northerly, toward the source,

From whose true course I deviated,
Just being born,
In the year of our Lord 1941.
Right now, traveling the road again,
Seeing motion with my nose,

Letting my eyes decide my heart's direction,
As it evolves homeward,
Are sufficient inspirations to guide me,
Reinforce my belief that heaven won't compare
To this day's drive through paradise.

6/6/89 — [2] (05434)

Glitch

Tectonic plates embedded deep in his brain
Scrape abrasively, reverberate his skeletal frame.
Pain spreads from its epicenter,
Through his jaws, chest, solar plexus,
Down his spine, to hip cradle and pubis,
Like a thousand frenzied moccasins,
Brown recluse spiders, and piranhas biting him,
At the precise same time.

He winces, cringes, goes blind,
Wobbles like a slowing top,
Until he disappears into the croker sack
His collapsing shape designs, out of thick air —
A well-practiced magic trick.
When he awakens from the black hole
In which trained alien surgeons
Have trepanned his skull of all memory,

Amnesia, like Dante or Homer,
Accompanies him to the edges of forgetting,
Where his last-known presence undressed
And he left his mind, took off running,
In ever-widening ellipses,
Orbits soaring, eccentrically, about a core
That once formed his genetic code,
The lodestone that energized his dynamos,

In those exultant days, when his brain
Reveled in universal joy,
His ignited eyes showed their excitement
Even behind closed lids, like spinning kaleidoscopes,
And love was a voluptuous, saline savoring
In which mind and tongue conspired,
Tasting divinity. Today, he's lost,
A stray atom in a vast force field,

Reeling from his recent lapse of consciousness.
By degrees, he regroups his thoughts,
Gets all electrons flowing in the same direction.
The pain abates slowly, dissipates.
Spiders, snakes, jagged fish dry up, die.
Finally, he resumes his routine of punching keys,
*

In front of a blue computer scope,
Hoping, praying, nobody's noticed his glitch.

6/6/89 — [3] (03717)

Love Swing

Ah, so clear, so near to me,
Despite being buried so deep in memory's cemetery,
This Friday twilight,
Is the vision of you children, face to face,
Riding the junglegym glider, beneath redbud trees
Canopying the side yard of our house in Farmington,

Not really riding but describing arcs
Powered by excitement only you,
Aged five and two,
Could possibly etch, indelibly, on my headstone,
As it rises out of that enchanted soil,
Where your mother and I planted our family.

Sitting on the front stoop, in St. Louis,
I recognize, on the air beyond the park across the street,
Echoes of a love swing someone is riding,
And I'm reminded of the frictioned, rhythmic groaning
You kids always coaxed out of our contraption.

I can see your amazed, slightly terrified faces
Whizzing back and forth, on your pendular course
Above earth, through leafy branches,
Before being absorbed, then released, by sky,
And now I wonder why moving away
From youth, places of residence, beliefs, and attitudes

Necessarily has to widen silences into chasms,
Introduce irreversible climaxes,
Send ambivalent messages with definite endings,
Whose irrevocable consequences
Forever threaten the healthy spirit's immune system,
With grief, manic-depressive interludes,

And, most unpredictably, occasional desperation,
Which engenders, in me, bittersweet questions

*

As to reasons for my own existence,
Past as well as present,
And compels me to trace out all clues, to the future,
Even faintly suggesting resurrection.

Tonight, my dispossessed senses leave me,
Take wing, on a double-glider swing,
Which, for a few brief eons,
Soars free of these surroundings,
With you and I, Jan,
Seated across from each other, holding hands,

Inamorata and gentle, romantic swain,
Not yet husband and wife,
Uninitiated into the ways of parenthood,
Reaching, repeatedly, first one, then the other,
The edges of twilight's apogee,
On ecstasy's perpetual-motion trajectory.

Finally, for unexplained reasons,
Gravity regains its hold over our fates,
Delivers us, vertiginously, to earth,
Collapses us back to reality,
Then condemns us to separate emptiness and stasis,
As, to and fro, I slide between night and silence.

6/9–10/89 (04227)

For the Time Being ^Δ

My fifteen-year-old daughter and I
Sit side by side, on a bench
On a tile-surfaced porch,
On a Wednesday night, at twilight, in St. Louis —
Vespers, evensong, angelus,
As some might describe this tranquil hiatus
Between soft graying-off and complete obscurity.
We share the air murmurous with cricket whirring,
Filamentous bird chirps,
Children's fragilities, the poetry of dogs,
Breezes teasing treetop leaves,
With whisperous coquetties,
*

And the vague susurration of tractor-trailers
 Wheeling, furiously, along distant highways
 Bypassing the city, en route to Mankato,
 Muskogee, Tupelo, Duluth,
 Gopher Prairie, Grover's Corners, and Jefferson.

We sit beside each other, quietly reading,
She Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, in translation,
I Death of a Salesman.

Bearing oblivious witness to night's arrival,
 We lose sight of the fundamental dynamics
 Which have united us,
 In an isolated oneness of function and space
 That related souls experience, occasionally,
 When they least expect grace
 To express inherited intimacies
 They share without awareness,
 Just as, tonight, independently grieving
 Over gratuitous afflictions of literary others,
 We intuit, coincidentally, simultaneously,
 Our relationship to Willy and Anne and to each other:
 Two Jewish waifs cocooned in affluence,
 Safe from past and future . . . for the time being.

6/14-15/89 — [1] on 6/15 (01007)

Don't Get Cocky, Putz[△]

*For Chris Miller,
 premier audio engineer*

Whenever things get going too good
 And I begin to feel the urge
 To perform my Plastic Man acrobatic act,
 Patting myself on the back
 Or expressing a string of ecstatic expletives,
 On approaching the outskirts of success,
 Major acclaim, international box-office fame,
 Cosmic stardom, as it were,
 A vague agent seems to take over,
 Start spitting gibberish, in my ear,
 Like "Hey, Mr. Big Shot,
 Mr. Hot Shit!"

*

Who the fuck do you think you are —
Plastic Man,
Immune to bee stings in the mouth,
Poison ivy on the tip of the dick,
Exempt from death at inconvenient hours?"

It's at disillusioning times like these,
However few and far in between,
That I'm reminded
Being human
Puts one hell of a constraint on spontaneity,
Strains ambitiousness,
And could almost cause somebody
Not quite as humble as I
To succumb to the outside possibility
Of having to decide, finally,
Whether or not it's really worthwhile
Hanging around for another generation or three.
Ah, but not me!
I'm in it to the end, and then some!

6/15/89 — [2] (00280)

Old-World Weaver

Speeding over concrete threads
Weaving the land into a vast tapestry,
Breathing superheated diesel exhaust,
Spewing from screaming tractor-trailers,
That renders, in chiaroscuro hues,
Three-dimensionality to the entire design,
He enters the scene unobtrusively as a flea
Biting the flexing thigh
Of a rhinoceros-shaped typhoon
Flying inland, from a dried-up Dead Sea,
Toward its own diminishing point of no return.

As he reaches southeasterly,
Centrifugally, from the City of Dangling Participles
And Ablative Absolutes,
Approaching its unraveling tasseled fringes,
An eerie sensation of *déjà vu*
*

Nauseates his belly; his bowels contract violently.
He can't isolate its origin,
For bewilderment and fear of forgotten adversaries
He senses looming "out there,"
Just up ahead,
Where Terra Incognita intercepts imagination
And the saber-toothed hills bloody vision.

Suddenly, he recovers, recalls tracing this highway
A hundred hundred times, in his car,
As if it were one continuous stroke
Drawn, in cartoon form, with quill pen,
By a vaguely Gobelin-reminiscent apprentice,
As if he were that artist, then,
Awakening, once again, to his suspended potential,
No matter that he's only a schlepper,
Traveling ragman, scion of painters and poets,
Taking whatever measures necessity discloses,
To weave, from shabby roads, fabulous tapestries and robes.

6/20/89 (06063)

Back on the Road to Damascus ^Δ

His course, this torrid morning,
Takes him from Cape Girardeau to St. Louis,
Via I-55,
Past Jackson, Biehle, Perryville, St. Mary,
Ozora, Bloomsdale, Festus/Crystal City,
Barnhart, and Arnold —
Place names proclaiming him pariah,
Jeering at him, as he passes
Through this Midwestern desolation,
Like kids pestering a sightless beggar.
But the tobacco-chewing road signs,
Spitting juice in his eyes, don't blind him
To business missed due to his Jewishness.

Suspecting silence outside his windows
Could change to rain, without notice,
Pelt him with hailstones,
As though he were Goliath, not David,

*

Or Job or, in truth, Willy Sypher,
He drives with awesome cautiousness.
Approaching the city, he moans, "Why *me*?
Why test me with such dreck?
What the heck have I done
To deserve this shit?"
"Nothin', putz. That's the trouble,
The real crux of the deal,"
A voice from above mutters under His breath.

Heading toward Acme-Zenith's office,
To make his Friday report, he grumbles,
"I've traveled my ass off, all week.
What more can you ask of a guy?"
"More, you whore!" the voice roars.
"Enough's never enough — always more!
How else you expect to store up
Against grasshoppers, pogroms, ghettos,
And Farben gas?" Willy parks his car,
Knowing, even as he enters headquarters,
He'll be backtracking to Cape Girardeau,
First thing tomorrow morning,
No matter it's Sabbath.

6/21/89 (01006)

Ignitions

Once again, he slips through interstices
Friday night's twilight shadows
Etch into his vision,
With slightly oblique angularity,
Like a warped portcullis
At St. George's Castle, in Lisbon, Portugal.
He slips, inconspicuously, through an opening
The width of a pinhead,
Upon which is written, in Gothic italics,
The Lord's Prayer,
And is resurrected into the humid air.

He sits outside, alone, on his front porch,
Absorbing scents and sounds
*

That render dense solitude almost palpable,
In this tranquil surrounding.
As if to chart a distant galaxy's stars,
His eyes sift the near space, for fireflies
Incandescing with capricious ignitions.
Suddenly, an ambulance and police-car escort,
Their red-and-white strope and antistrope
Reiterating a deafening, ancient plaint,
Arrive three doors up the way

And discharge their emergency workers,
With nervous urgency. He stirs,
No longer concerned about lightning bugs
But, rather, neighbors he's known personally,
One of whom is in the throes of scourge
And may be addressing death, face to face,
Or, possibly, has already expired.
He paces the sidewalk below that house,
Watching for shadows to reemerge,
Dares not inquire, of an officer waiting outside,
The extent of fate's latest life sentence;

Instead, he circles the island,
Around which other expensive residences are situated,
Before the uniformed three men maneuver their stretcher
Out the front door, down to the ambulance,
Whose engine has been running half an hour.
Chagrin and disillusionment
Strand him in a lonely no-man's-land.
Then, standing in his own yard again,
He sifts interstices fireflies create,
Alternating between incandescence and absolute darkness,
And frantically tries to catch one, in his hand.

6/23/89 (06064)

Metaphor Pasta

Not exactly a zephyr or mistral
Spiraling in, off the Mediterranean
Or the blue Aegean off Corfu,
But a torpid snorting from a staggered bull,
*

Run through by two *picadores*,
About to collapse into its own black vacuum —
That's how this late-afternoon humidity
Affects my imagination,
Stimulates sardonic and comic wit
That usually convalesces from old age,
As I sit outdoors, ordering dinner, alone,
At this mid-city-St. Louis café,
Sweating, perceptibly, below my clothing.

Curious, how I always resort to metaphor
Before reacting physically,
As though my intellect, not my body,
Had salivary, seminal, and adrenal glands,
Pores, orifices, sensory receptors, and synapses,
By which it detects visceral changes to the system
And translates them into visual images.
How long this habit has persisted,
I can't say. Just now, the waiter delivers
My plate of Cajun shrimp pasta —
Portuguese jellyfish stranded in seaweed,
On an inhospitable shore.
Not until I've finished eating will I feel its stings.

6/24/89 (06065)

Startin' from Scratch ^Δ

I

This moon's-day morning, as he exits the city,
An argenteous, hissing mist persists,
Like smoke from a magician's flash-pot,
Cloaking distressful premonitions,
In sinister invisibility. He winces visibly,
Focusing on the toxic mixture of diesel exhaust
Issuing from tractor transports
And cyanic-tinctured acid-rainy pollution
Enveloping the land, in its grotesque formlessness.

Cars entering the crushing rush-hour pilgrimage
Toward Mecca's sacred precincts,

*

From outlying fiefdoms and principalities,
Run with headlights blazing. Collectively,
They form an endless cortège
Inexorably serpentine toward Sheol.
These contrasting images perplex him,
Leave his brain bewildered.
He can't guess which best suits his vision,

Unless both polarities, Sheol and Mecca,
Represent paired contrarieties
Setting the parameters of his meager existence —
He a homeless sojourner,
Who's known neither self-pity nor loneliness
So much as silence
And who's shared his passions and intimacies
With taciturn highways, gossipy back roads,
And gravel-voiced country trunks,

These past twenty "centuries."
He stutters, realizes his miscue,
And, just for the "record," corrects himself,
Substituting "years" for the time he's spent
"Connecting the dots,"
Scattered, like parade confetti, along routes
He's followed, with Diasporan compulsiveness,
As if seeking a definitive pattern
To his myriad Mosaical zigzagging.

II

Pressing westerly,
He registers a voracious sun, above the mist,
Fighting to penetrate the nether reaches
Through which he speeds,
On his way to his first date of the new season,
With Saul Herzog, men's merchandiser
For Rothstein's six-location chain
In Columbia, Kingdom City, Moberly,
Macon, Marshall, and Kirksville, Missouri.

Excited by the leeway management has granted him,
To extend, to Rothstein's, an open line of credit,
Based on their consistent history of "quick pay,"
On "net sixty" terms,

*

He forgets about silence,
Instead rehearses scenarios and chess moves
He'll use, in dramatizing his line
Of fine men's suits, sportscoats, and trousers,
For the hundredth time, to his friend "Sauly."

The spiel his lips repeat aloud
Has ancient accents
Yet retains a state-of-the-art persuasiveness
Calculated to make believers
Out of even blatant cynics, skeptics,
And avowed Jew-haters.
Though he and Sauly go way back,
He's always been a stickler for preparation,
Being able to address any dilemma.

And anyway, "practice makes perfect," he knows,
Especially when you're dealing in odd lots,
Broken sizes, and "imperfecls" with holes,
Which, frequently, Acme-Zenith relies on him,
And him alone, to dispose of,
Sell out, to the last piece,
No questions asked, no "holes" barred,
No returns, no exchanges made,
No *nothin'*, once an agreement is reached.

III

Now, a hundred miles out of the city,
He reflects on his prospects
For spring/summer 1990.
His visit to Saul will be like the Iowa caucuses,
In deciding his seasonal fate.
Closing in on Rothstein's main store,
In downtown Columbia,
Willy begins to feel the acidic burn
His gurgling guts characteristically churn up

Just before he throws himself
On the mercy of whatever local court
Happens to hold jurisdiction over his destiny,
On any given day. He grows tense.
His lips stick together; fingers fidget.
Sweat shows no respect for his dress shirt.

*

Taking in two swatch cases,
 Returning to his car, for a collapsible stand,
 On which he'll display samples,
 He gets ready to do his ethnic prestidigitations,
 Let Sephardic artifice change sows' ears
 Into silk scarves, scarves into garments
 Proclaiming the mystical A-Z label,
 Which he'll place on Rothstein's shelves, tables, and racks.
 Once inside, he announces his presence,
 With a flourish worthy of circus trumpets.
*"Mr. Willy Sypher to see Mr. Herzog,
 By appointment."* Silence responds first.

Finally, an unfamiliar salesclerk approaches,
 From behind the tie counter,
 Where he's been inventorying neats and clubs.
 "Who do you represent?" the boy asks.
 Willy's smile deserts him dyspeptically.
 "Saul's expecting me. Tell him it's Willy!"
 "I guess you haven't heard. Mr. Herzog
 Died last night, unexpectedly,
 And right now, we're kinda in a bind."

6/26/89 (02430)

The Ash Keeper Δ

His birth certificate specifically states
Place of Birth and Date
 As "St. Louis, Missouri, Jewish Hospital,"
 "April 17, 1941,"
 And yet, to this day,
 His deepest reservations dictate otherwise,
 Assail him with misgivings,
 As if he were an adopted child who'd been questioning his
 heritage Throughout his life. Some nights,
 Squirming on his belly,
 Beneath barbed-wire sleep tightly stretched
 Between waking paranoia and dreams,
 He envisions floodlights scanning a camp,
 Whose crisscross articulations
 Stimulate his rapid eye movements

*

To a blur through which he finally escapes,
Into a forest just beyond memory.

Disappearing, he glimpses back.
Eyes behind an unrecognizable voice
Quavering inside his restive mind
Read and speak a name on the compound gate:
OSWIECIM.
Repeating its three bleak syllables,
All the way home, through spectral shadows,
To daybreak, into waking consciousness,
He hears his stiff bones disintegrating,
Feels his flaming bowels
And emaciated stomach raging silently,
Smells ubiquitous odors of conflagrant flesh,
And finally realizes what he's always suspected:
He was born in Auschwitz,
Not St. Louis,
Warmed in an oven, not an incubator —
Not even a Jew but God's orphan,
Doomed to spend his earthly existence
Fleeing nightly, searching, by day,
For every person lost in the Holocaust.

6/27/89 — [1] (01008)

[Sun's rope,][†]

Sun's rope,
Woven of golden rays,
Frays across twilight's jagged edges
And breaks. The bottom falls out

6/27/89 — [2] (01504)

Revelation on a Sunday Afternoon

Actions initiated by others
befall all of us,
as consequences beyond our control:
Catastrophes and tragedies,
accidents, slips on banana peels,
*

parapraxes, as well —
outsize and small, holocausts all.

Despite how loudly we shout,
beat our tambourines,
And how proudly we might esteem ourselves,
in crowds of inferiors and peers,
pronounce ourselves inviolable,
Secretly, we all realize
we're at His mercy, not one another's.

7/2/89 (00277)

[He finds himself isolated, this festive night,]

He finds himself isolated, this festive night,
When every family in America,
Every citizen, patriotic and uninspired alike,
Is busy dizzily celebrating
Its declaration of independence from British ukase
Two hundred thirteen years ago
Tomorrow. He, a family man
With a connubial history two decades wide,
Orders vegetarian pizza, cheese bread,
Diet soda, recounting to himself, silently,
The litany of his day's uneventful accomplishments,
Which he used to repeat to deaf ears
His wife and two children unenthusiastically raised,
In earlier times, before she refused to cook,
Serve dinner, eat with them,
The few evenings when she would prepare casseroles
And other hastily devised potpourris,
Between extended outings away from the house,
At all hours, night, morning,
Unaccountably "missing in action."

He arrived home from work, at five-thirty,
Learning "from the mouths of babes"
That their mother would not be home for supper.
Her whereabouts
Could not be found out, by probing his oldest,
His wife's fifteen-year-old clone
In conniving, devising half-truths from lies,
*

Spying with Gestapo-like efficiency.
He immediately began grasping at straws
To prop up his Leaning Tower of Pisa,
Before it crushed him to unrecognizable rubble,
Beneath its toppled mass.
Asking if he could assist in heating leftovers,
Microwave frozen potatoes,
Only to be rejected, grimacingly, by the girl,
Who chided him for his inability or unwillingness
To prepare a meal from scratch,
“Like Mommy always does, when she’s here,”
He shrank from the kitchen, out the door,
Fled to a nearby family-style restaurant,

To break bread, drink Coke,
Try, desperately, to clear his head of webs
Threatening to trap him in depression so deep,
Crossing it without snowshoes would be impossible
For those unfamiliar with the airless lunar terrain.
Now, staring at the red and white squares
And stripes decorating the tablecloth
Spread before his glazed eyes,
He envisions America’s glorious flag,
Emblazoned with stars, flapping in a soft breeze
Wafting memories toward him —
Scenes from his Sutro marriage, kids growing up,
The Victorian mansion in which they sported —
And he grieves, a forty-eight-year-old
Involuntarily declaring independence
From sovereign rule by an iniquitous queen
Recently exposed, for betrayal
Of sacred marriage vows made between her
And her most loyal and devoted subject, her husband.
Tonight, he celebrates his sundered allegiance, alone.

7/3/89 (04226)

Celebrating Independence Day ^Δ

Sitting outside his house,
This holiday Tuesday morning, by himself,
Not quite absent-mindedly listening to birdsongs,
*

Murmurous whirring of lawn mowers,
And the sporadic roars of jets taking off
From the airport, ten miles away,
He can't distract, delude, or sidetrack anxieties
That have dogged him, systematically,
These past forty-five years,
Traced him all this distance through history,
To this very place in space and quiet time.

Even on this absolutely innocuous "*Volksfest*,"
The masses' nationally declared "Sabbath,"
He regards squirrels and birds suspiciously,
As though they might be Trojan horses
Whose hollowed-out bellies
Could unloose Gestapo agents, through trapdoors,
Upon whose orders SS storm troops
Would infiltrate his yard, the park, city hall,
The entire country, in a "lightning war,"
Without the slightest resistance
From bewildered and intimidated citizens like him.

Although he's experienced a degree of physical security,
Contentment has been a provisional element
In the equation whose elusive α
Keeps shifting from divisor to quotient,
Right side to left, in unpredictable flux;
Sleeping and being awake, the two knowns,
Have frustrated him, with restless questioning
As to the interpretation of nightmares,
The meaning of jettisoned dreams and visions,
Prophecies, hallucinations, and omens
Like the one that demonized him last evening.

Resisting turning on his air conditioner,
Despite 90-degree heat at 11 p.m.,
For fear of getting a stiff neck,
He peeled the quilt away from blanket and sheet,
Pushed it aside. While sleeping,
He must have initiated its plunge,
His feet lightly nudging it
Over bed's edge, down the abyss, into a pit,
Like a dead body. Before his psyche could hear it
Hit bottom, a vagrant premonition awakened him
To the clammy apparition of his own nakedness.

Sweating nauseously, resting on bony haunches,
An ineffectual erection throbbing between his legs,
As if awaiting detumescence,
To let it exit from death's invisible vagina,
He couldn't assess his location, at first,
Not until his eyes spied the sign
Above the entrance to his own bedroom —
ARBEIT MACHT FREI —
And he realized he'd died again, in his sleep.
Now, sitting outside, this Fourth of July,
He ponders the irony, the irony of it all.

7/4/89 (03718)

Business As Usual ^Δ

Streaming away from the city,
Which seethes beneath July's steamy bell jar,
Insulated, in his air-conditioned station wagon,
From cotton-candy humidity
That sticks to the Midwest's face
Every season summer's circus comes to town,
He recites silent prayers
That divine providence will deliver him safely
To whatever destination
Is next on his restless desert schedule, today,
As he plies his very own Sinai, alone.

Behind the wheel, he becomes a genius,
Riding time's leading edge,
Alert to the road's least resonant nuance,
Every redolent reverberation of lurking danger,
Imperturbably bent on getting there alive,
No matter wherever "there" might be.
He's not Willy Sypher
But Captains Ahab, Nemo, and Queeg combined;
Colonel Lindbergh and Admiral Byrd intertwined;
John Glenn, Marco Polo, Moses;
Cortés, Magellan, Colón, DeSoto, and Pizarro.

He's every sea dog, astronaut, conquistador,
Submariner, traveler to remote regions

*

History has elevated to mythic position of heroism.

No Walter Mitty, Quixote, or Gulliver is he
But Sir Willy Sypher, adventurer,
An Einsteinian equation
Raised to imagination's *nth* power,
Exemplifying, to competitor and colleague alike,
The most amazing energy, enthusiasm,
And optimistic resilience, in defeat's wake;
No Willy Loman resigned to failure is he,

Who could never confuse suicide with survival,
Despite the tantalizing wish to quit
When a buyer's squeezing his balls, in a C-clamp,
Or setting free, from a bottle behind his tongue,
Bigotry's sand beetles, to eat his eardrums,
Consume his plump Jew-brain,
Or when he and Satan strike a deal,
Whose reprisals he knows he'll feel
Dogging him, for seasons on end;
No Willy Loman—personalized genocide
Will he abide, knowing, too well,

Only He, Who originally chose,
Can make that choice; He alone decides.
The rest is just pure bathos,
Phony pseudo-histrionics with a touch of the poetic
Thrown in, for good measure, stage success,
All that Biff-and-Happy crap
About trying to achieve the freedom their father never had
And Loman driving off into the sunset,
Without ever even getting out of his garage —
All he did was save the Third Reich
An eye-blink's worth of work.

What a jerk, Willy shrugs, pursing his lips,
Envisioning Loman naked to the bone,
Zykloning himself, in his own Auschwitz house.
It's all too goddamn easy,
Doing it to yourself. At least if you've got to,
Let an entire nation subdue you,
For Christ's sake, he muses, with unintentional irony,
Go out as a uranium chain reaction,
Not as low man on the cosmic totem pole,

*

*A flash in a dead man's bedpan,
Ashes through the flue of a Topf oven's chimney.*

And so, Willy drives on, through the heat,
Slightly vexed, unable to say why
He's focused on a play
That had its heyday three decades ago,
What might have brought it up onto his stage.
Maybe it has to do with the article
He read recently, in *Men's Wear Daily*,
Describing the leveraged buyout
And hostile takeover of Okolona Trouser,
Acme-Zenith's dreaded competitor,
By Rapid American Corporation,

And how, in its blitzkrieg's wake,
Okolona's chief operating officer,
Hyman Steinway,
And his three immediate top-management people
Had been fired, at noonhour,
On the third working day of the new regime,
Without prior notice,
Although, it was reported, Steinway received
His "golden parachute,"
While his team got two months' severance pay,
Provided they agreed to leave at once, that Wednesday,

Without speaking a word to anyone in the office.
Subsequently, Willy heard, on good word,
The three, and Hy Steinway too,
Had been escorted, Gestapo-like, to the front door
(After being supervised, at arm's length,
While they cleaned out their desks,
Collected pictures off their walls,
Gathered up briefcases), and thrown out.
Maybe it has more to do
With the headline he just read
In the morning paper, before hitting the road:

"Former Chief Exec
Of Nation's Fourth Largest Clothing Firm
Takes Fate in Own Hands."
Willy still feels his initial shock.

*

Heading west, he reels with disbelief
That a man of Hy Steinway's reputation and stature
Could be annihilated, and so swiftly,
Almost as if he'd not existed,
Wielded such authority, transacted deals
In the hundreds of thousands, daily,
Millions not so unoccasionally.

Now, he nears Wineogrand's, in Moberly,
Parks by the side door,
To facilitate unloading garments and cases
From his car, husband energy
For his *Aida*-grand-finale presentation.
Inside these familiar haunts
(He's called on Levinsky's father before him),
He's greeted by Irv, Jr.,
Escorted, by him, to a converted try-on booth,
Where he'll lay out his swatches,
By range and style, hang his models, on a rack.

"Did you hear about Okolona Clothing?"
"Certainly," Willy replies without hesitation.
"It must have been terrible!"
"Yeah, a real bloodletting — Al Capone style."
"More like Gestapo tactics, I'd say," Willy adds.
"How do you think it'll affect the industry?"
Levinsky queries, genuinely interested
In registering the salesman's opinion.
"Probably not in the slightest.
Soon, we'll all be doing business via dishes,
Digitalized monitors, and computerized keyboards."

"Yeah, well, that may be so,
But for now, I don't trust those bigwigs
At Rapid American. I'm not sure
Okolona will even be around in six months,
What with spin-offs and such,
And I'm gonna need my fall shipments.
How about you show me suits and sportscoats,
Not just slacks? My Okolona open-to-buy
Is Acme-Zenith's, this season."
Without breaking stride, batting an eye,
Until he's outside, five hours later,

Willy sells his line a piece at a time.
He's never had it easier,
Romancing his merchandise,
Believing that divine providence will guide him
Through Auschwitz and Charybdis,
Knowing also, deeper than down,
More ancient than patriarchs and kings,
That it never hurts a thing, either,
To have adversity kick competition's gift horse
And trip it flat on its flashy ass,
Especially when its out front and pulling away fast.

7/10/89 (02429)

[Traditionally, perfection has always been measured][△]

Traditionally, perfection has always been measured
By energy expended, dreams conceived,
And goals achieved, the whole judged relatively,
According to previous epitomes
Esteemed by civilizations no less creative than,
If not quite as atheistic as, ours.

But of what constituents does it consist?
From whence does it issue, and why?
Occasionally, we reward select members of the species,
With Nobel Prizes that testify to their efforts
To keep alive hope for peaceful coexistence
Among all people of the planet Ant.

Frequently, we devote entire marqueses
To advertising ephemeral talents of certain persons —
Artistic types, obsessive perfectionists.
We recite others' political who's whos,
At the end of TV's nightly news,
And commemorate yet others of them, at Yad Vashem.

But what did God really intend
When he invented us in His invisible image?
Are we, His children, meant to emulate Him
Just by outliving our own most heinous delusions
*

Of purifying certain races
By exterminating entire ethnic enclaves,

For high crimes against the state,
Unconscionable treasons committed by Christ-killers —
Verminous Jews, hermaphrodites, gypsies —
Unsympathetic to our *Mein Kampf* version of Creation?
Or are we supposed to outgrow
Our fascination with omnicide

And arrive at a higher intimation of God's ways,
His aspirations, fathom how to interpret,
From individual reactions we have
To physical cruelty, misanthropy,
Abusive and irreverent communication,
Just what act or deed we're to complete, while alive,

Or if, in fact, a divine mandate
Actually even guides our destinies' trajectories
Through His time warp,
As we pass forth and back, again and again,
Edging ever nearer to deathless death,
Without forgetting the destination is ours to select?

Who can answer these existential questions
Which our best theologians and scholars ask,
Perpetuating the litany of doubt
That God, in His infinite knowing, has bequeathed us
So we alone might continue striving
To correct this imperfection in His perfect design?

7/13/89 (00278)

The Lioness ^Δ

*For my mother,
from her firstborn cub,
with leonine love*

Even today, on the celebration of her birth,
Long after the last of her litter was born
(She produced two cubs of each gender
And adopted a fifth, a male),
She gracefully paces her domain.

At seventy-four, she's still queen of the forest
In which she raised her offspring,
Doting on each individually.
Attentive to their disillusionments and victories,
She never roars, just strokes gently,

As was her way when they were in the den,
Growing from litter-mates into beasts,
Leaping from infancy, through adolescence,
Into sleek, fleet predators,
As if springing from hiding, to subdue prey.

Today, the lioness reposes at attention's center,
The object of inordinate praise,
Which she accepts, with unceremonious appreciation,
Then, purring, deflects onto those encircling her,
As she's done almost half a century.

Tonight, having gathered them to feast communally,
She scans her entire family, in a glance:
Her own devoted lion, Saul, their issue,
And grandcubs ranging from babies to teenagers.
Her feline eyes radiate pride in her pride.

7/14/89 (00279)

Desastres de la guerra ^Δ

Although he no longer travels,
He always seems to find himself alone, at home,
A family man disowned
Even by the echoless ghosts of his flown wife
And two not-quite-grown children,
Who've followed her into melancholia's bogs and sloughs,
Through grief's dense rain forests,
Toward the deepest reaches of despair,
Where foes and friends are suspended, indistinguishably,
In sleepless, dazed disillusionment,
Waiting for their turn at vaporous extermination.

Meanwhile, he spoons soup —
More water than broth — from a child's boot
*

He saw protruding from beneath a pile of shoes
Strewn in one corner of a recurring hallucination
And savors a minuscule ration of stale bread,
Gnawing its crust, with his front teeth, like a rat.
Each chewing movement his taut jaws make
Registers on his emaciated face.
He can taste his own bones when they scrape;
They retain a vague flavor of lime,
As though they've been buried in time's mass grave,

While he's inhabited a *Lager*-like house,
In which his family's not spoken to him
For three days. And he realizes, too empathically,
That the ghetto of their collapsed marriage,
Whose atticlike humiliation the four of them have shared
For more than three hysterical years,
Might not have been the best approach to coexistence,
As opposed to being deported in the beginning.
Indeed, Auschwitz may have been the lesser of two evils.
No matter, now that forces of liberation have arrived
And are about to divorce them from the horrors of war.

7/16–17/89 (03716)

Sailing, Daily, from Redriff

Just knowing he's going, come morning,
Lets him forget
To reset his early-warning system,
Not worry about intruders
Wrecking sleep, disturbing peaceful dreams
He germinates, in anticipation of leaving,
Striking out, alone, tomorrow a.m.,
Taking off in whatever direction his blood flows,
No matter how compellingly
Finger, wrist, arm, and shoulder bones
Might try to subvert intuition,
By tugging against the wheel,
With untimely fears and cowardly indecisiveness
Distracting him from promulgating his mission
To discover a new trade route to Laputa,
Blefuscu, Balnibarbi, and Brobdingnag.

Having mapped the coastal and interior contours
 Of Lilliput, on a previous voyage,
 And returned, safely, to dispel myths,
 With additional myths of his own recognizance,
 He feels confident he can again reach
 Those remote regions of the Unknown World
 And, if not settle there until death,
 At least create a temporary environment
 Conducive to providing quietude
 Requisite for observing fundamental laws of nature,
 Nurturing imagination and invention
 Caught in their most pristine completeness,
 Which he might record poetically, for posterity,
 Before they get merchandized, bought up,
 And lost in cross-cultural currencies of thought
 Sea dogs and conquistadors will soon exploit.

Heading south, his prow and bowsprit
 Riding high on the horizon,
 He realizes this is the driving motive
 Behind each of his sailings:
 To capture and distill Darwinian insights into essences
 Involved, minute by minute,
 In God's processes of minuscule evolution,
 Whose seemingly trivial mutations and normal changes
 Are incidental to the planet's rotation
 To all but a few souls like him,
 Who are willing to sail, daily,
 On a commission basis,
 Just for the dubious distinction
 Of being called Poet of Metaphor's Ocean-Sea —
 Captain of the ship that floats him
 Closer, each trip, to the shores of his own destiny.

7/18/89 — [1] (06066)

The Winnowing: Warsaw Ghetto, 1943 [△]

Cut loose from all normal moorings —
 Nine-to-five store job,
 Wife and two teenage children,
 Formal religious affiliation

*

With an Orthodox congregation,
Even forwarding address for his desperate spirit —
He wanders from one second to the next,
Without any sense of direction
Or nexus from idle thought to vital motion.

These days, he's just a *wondering* Jew,
Stumbling through dislocations
Not even so much of his own choosing
As of his gratuitous wandering
Into and out of vipers' pits and sloughs
Pocking death's intestinal tract,
Whose convoluted path leads him back and forth,
Forcing him to wonder not *what* to do
But rather *how* to keep from doing it.

7/18/89 — [2] (00114)

Resurrection

Always, the return journey
From a day's straying out and away from home
Seems interminable,
As though he were being transported
In a cattle car grafted to a freight train
Shunted off on a sidetrack,
Every half-hour or so,
To make way for a passenger express
Racing toward a scheduled destination.

Always, the trip, in reverse,
Over extended, bending highways,
Bow-tie cloverleafs,
Reckless exits too tight to navigate
Without slipping out of his seat,
Seems like copying documents in cursive,
From typescripts, with quill pen,
In invisible ink. He can't even think
Of either a beginning or end to his travelogue.

This twilight, he wonders if he might be an immigrant or deportee,
Maybe a lusty conquistador

*

Traversing seas, or New World explorer
Questing treasure, freedom from religious persecution,
Methuselahan fountains of youth.
Possibly, the place he's recently vacated,
Heading west to east, is death's cave,
And he's its messenger of darkness,
Obsessed with getting back before sunset.

7/18/89 — [3] (06067)

[Damn the torpedoes, Sam!]

Damn the torpedoes, Sam!
Play it again, man,
Before the lights go out, in Gotham,
and all good men head west,
coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress:
Tokyo Rose, dispossessed of her best discretion,
who just can't seem to rest,
despite weariness caressing her,
Until the last blasted seaman on leave
vacates her house of the setting sun
And races back to his battle wagon,
with her tail between his legs,
just waggin' and waggin', like Old Glory
or a bloody Union Jack
Flappin' between his breezy knees.
Damn the torpedoes, Sam!
Jam them straight through Nagumo's teeth!
Explode the whole Japanese fleet,
Before the little bastards discover how to construct
Videocassette recorders,
Nissan 300ZX Turbos,
TVs and digital shit
more various than tropical fish off
the cratered atolls of the
Marshalls and Marianas, Iwo Jima,
Kwajalein, and in Midway's eighty-gallon tank!
Blow their brains out, men,
while there's still time to save our asses!
Don't let them buy up the entire country,
*

like their surprise flyover at Pearl!

Stop the little slant-eyes, in their tracks,
before they multiply! Intern their asses,

Behind barbed wire, in Hitler-style camps!

Haven't you heard? There's a conspiracy at work,
to convert all dollars into yen,
appropriate every last painting and statue
in the National Gallery of Art,

Ship them to Japan.

Damn the forward torpedoes, men!
Send those screaming, propeller-driven sharks
into the harbor at Tokyo Bay!

7/19 & 7/24/89 — [1] (00294)

Seeking New Harbors

Even amidst a media-conceived event
Attracting five hundred people —
“The World’s Largest Tupperware Party,”
Beneath the roof of Union Station’s renovated shed —
He takes a seat by the wood-plank banks
Of the artificial basin stocked with paddleboats,
Which the patio circumscribing the Biergarten borders,
And turns his total focus on faces
Milling about crowded display tables.

Amazing visions of aimless phantoms and waifs,
Dazed and hollowed-out behind their eyes,
Follow where their lemming instincts take them:
To the bar. Fortified, they socialize with strangers
Aggressively searching for openings to enter
(And, once inside, get lost in) —
Those harbors where oceangoing barks
Drop anchor, safe, evanescently,
From monsters and typhoons beyond night’s reef.

He doesn’t remember who invited him to this “event”
Or even why he consented to break habit.
He spends most Friday evenings with mistresses,
Tries to relax in their inarticulate love-grips,
Renew physical relationship

*

With that part of his spirit memory forgot,
After divorce festered into neglect,
Neglect deteriorated into casual sex
Lacking all connection with worship and respect.

Maybe just the chance to do something new
Was sufficient excuse to move him
Slightly off dead center,
Let him venture out, from established routine,
Beyond the outer reaches of his narcissism,
Into the public eye, and risk being scrutinized.
Whatever the reason, moored to a foreign slip,
He waits for a skeleton crew to board his ship.

7/21–22/89 (00298)

Crying Wolf, for the Last Time ^Δ

Tonight, sweating under soiled, freezing sheets,
In his drafty tenement dwelling,
He's assailed by a dizzy, persistent vision
From a traditional fairy tale,
Whose surrealistic images memory has transfigured
Into mocking, idiotic shapes and shrill sounds
That cloud sleep, in shrouds of restive doubt.

Unable to submit to amniotic solemnity,
He witnesses, all too disturbingly,
Three meek little Hebrew piggies
Shivering from the specter of their adversary,
The big, bad, Hitlerian wolf . . .
Three porcine victims squealing hysterically,
Huddled in fearful anguish and ignominious despair,

Listening to the goose-stepping, lupine beast
Thrashing, helter-skelter, through the dry thatching
Of their ghettolike shelter's roof,
Terrified by his feeding frenzy,
Realizing that, too soon, he'll try to violate them,
Not by huffing, puffing, and blowing threats,
Slurs, and imprecations referring to their verminous nature

But, rather, by sliding down their chimney,
 That indefensible opening
 Through which he'll arrive headfirst
 Or, more fortuitously, by breech birth, on his feet,
 The better to spring, rip their throats,
 With his ravenous teeth, eat them, down to the bones,
 Leaving only their bloody skeletons,

As he exits through the door he'll unbolt,
 To seek a *Biergarten* in the nearby environs of Oswiecim,
 Where he'll quench his raging thirst
 And proposition a thick-thighed, buxom she-wolf,
 For a few hours of her indolent physicality,
 Before marching back, again,
 Down history's witnessless corridors, toward *Hölle*.

No matter how resourceful his inventive imagination
 Has proved to be, in past catastrophes,
 Tonight, he can't alchemize, from nightmare,
 The scantiest pan or cauldron, to fill up with water
 Those piggies might boil, to trap an unwitting *Wölfe*,
 As it descends their narrow flue,
 But he does kindle logs into a crackling blaze

That soon becomes a gas-fired maw
 He sees all three little kosher piggies
 Throw themselves into, baking to unsavory crisps,
 Before disappearing up the brick chimney —
 Their only escape from the predacious wolf —
 Spiraling so high, into the star-scarred sky,
 Their ashes are annealed in its Yahrzeit glow.

7/24/89 — [2] (09022)

[He seizes his brief moment of freedom from routine,][△]

He seizes his brief moment of freedom from routine,
 To throttle his secondhand Durant,
 Rev it to 3500 RPM's,
 Before laying a rubber strip down the street,
 Leaving the city in his dust,

*

As he passes by, outbound to remote regions
Where naked aborigines will greet him
As though he were a Trojan horse bearing gifts —
Men's clothing from Acme-Zenith —

An inscrutable apotheosis
From the paradisiacal kingdom of St. Louis, Mo.,
Whose feat of traveling such inestimable distances
Itself bespeaks colossal powers
No mere beings within their extensive existence
Can begin to comprehend. Willy accepts gratefully
What, to him, seem overinflated claims
Locals not only take for granted
But also insist he fulfill or they'll "take a hike,"
Change "houses" in midstream,
Without standing on ceremony, allegiances
And signed-on-the-fine-line contracts
Notwithstanding.

Ah, but while making his restocking rounds,
This too-hot July,
Keeping popular colors and sizes filled in,
For the summer tourist trade,
He can't resist making at least one
"Unscheduled stop,"
Especially while passing through Columbia,
Midway between Boonville, Tipton, and Moberly,
Where Miss Krista Dreiser
Runs a boardinghouse he's often called home,
For a night or three at a time,
And always received the royal treatment
Accorded dignitaries of his station and persuasion.

For some purely physical reason, today,
Willy has an indecent urge
To pass the afternoon in rollicking distraction.
He'd like to entice Miss Krista
Into joining him for an innocent roll in the grass,
Since he knows, from experience,
Hay stings, tickles, and lacerates her back and legs.
In fact, he'd like to stay the entire night,
But he knows that by tomorrow noon,
He's got to be in Kansas City,

*

To work next spring's line
(He's six weeks late with his presentation,
As it is) with Rosenzwieg's menswear buyer.

Right now, parking his car at the curb,
He'd like to be the Willy Sypher
His dreams disclose: Lothario, Valentino,
Or, one better, Don *Jewan*,
As he chooses to pronounce it to himself.
When incessant honking fails to get her attention,
He silences the engine, goes up the walk,
And rings the bell.

Leaning against the porch railing impatiently,
He's startled by her naked physique
Beneath the diaphanous lace negligee she wears,
As she draws back the door, to admit him.
“How'dja know, honey?” he whispers.

“I didn't, sweetie. That's the trouble,”
She replies, with quizzical disappointment
Shading her lips and eyes.
“Why did you have to surprise me, Willy?”
“How was I to guess? I thought . . .”
He stammers, embarrassed. “I thought *I*
Was your sweetie pie,
Your one and only, the best sales rep
Both sides of the mighty Mississip.”
“You are, Willy, you *are*.
Just give me five minutes to saw *au revoir* to . . .
I mean to tidy up just a bit,
For his majesty, my liege, King Sypher.”

“Ah, Krista, skip it.
Cut the stuff. I'll come back Friday night,
On my way home from K.C.”
“Don't go, lovey. Five minutes is all I need
To tidy up the towels and sheets.”
“OK, OK, but get him packing quick.
Don *Jewan*, of St. Louie,
Ain't got all day. Time's money, honey,
And I ain't got enough of either!”

Omniscience

For friend Chris Miller

Not knowing is no excuse
 for blowing it, in the lurch,
 Just because we're not used to exerting our minds,
 Encouraging never-surfaced intellect
 to reach beyond its own threshold of expectations
 and keep the distressed spirit alive,

Just by being alert, receptive, versatile,
 eager to respond to any new condition
 that might be required for resurrection,
 sainthood, or the soul's earthly need
 to create, from not knowing,
 an excuse for intuiting and doing
 God's deeds.

7/28/89 (00299)

Twilight ^Δ

For Elie Wiesel

On vaguely violet-stained, twilit afternoons,
 When he sits outside, on his front stoop,
 A somber, empty sense of disillusionment
 Occasionally infiltrates his defenses,
 Ransacks his desk drawers, rifles his files,
 Infects his computer's database, with a virus
 That, undetected at first, will inexorably blight
 The systemic pattern of historical events
 He's spent half a lifetime collecting, ordering sequentially,
 Trying to morally explain and humanely justify them.
 He settles into a forlorn stupor.

His tongue-tied brain and eyes glaze over.
 Stomach and throat collaborate
 In regurgitating the past, on day's face and clothes,
 Leaving a reeking pool of greenish drool,
 At memory's feet, he'll wallow in, all evening.

*

In dismal moments such as this,
He shivers like a trapped rabbit
Sensing its stalker has it in the telescoped focus
Of a thousand-power scope
And is about to nail it to a cross-hairs crucifix.
He quivers as if back at Auschwitz.

That malevolent visions accost him, unpredictably,
He suspects has something to do
With this specific interlude between day and night,
When darkness and light, disguised as ghosts
Dressed like death and life, silence and keening,
Systole and diastole, misfortune and luck,
Play odd-man-out or Russian roulette,
Each side hoping to survive ineluctable destinies.
Maybe what keeps reminding him he died, that time,
Is the same blood-rust sun-ball he recalls seeing
Through the barbed-wire opening of the boxcar he rode,

That frozen late afternoon in 1944,
Aboard the last transport leaving Sighet,
For an unknown dislocation he'd call home,
The remainder of his ordained passage, without knowing it, then . . .
That horrible, bleeding fetus of a sun,
Hovering, ever so precariously, on horizon's edge
(Like an unshelled hard-boiled egg
Threatening to roll off a kitchen-window ledge
Where it had been set, to cool),
Before it finally collapsed and, cracking, blinded his eyes,
With its sharp, spectral slivers of arterial twilight.

8/4/89 (00191)

Liberation from Buchenwald ^Δ

He awakens at 5:30 a.m.,
Too late, though so early,
For his obscure dream,
Scurrying back into sleep's shadowy forest,
Like a squirrel dashing behind the closest tree,
As a ghostly human shape rushes past,
To alert consciousness to potential omens of obliteration.

Unsuspecting, he emerges from the oneiric ocean,
To whose surface he's mysteriously floated
Like debris from a wrecked ship. His thoughts are splinters,
Fragments, shards. Vision is an oil slick
Glistening, iridescently, under the sun.
In every direction, earth's edges
Are serrated with quivering dorsal fins.

Checking his liberated face, in the bathroom glass,
For ghetto-etched vestiges,
He vaguely recognizes the stranger gazing back
As that specter he met, along the path,
Who detained his youth just long enough,
Asking directions to the ancient graveyard,
To throw his entire future forever out of step.

8/6/89 (00190)

Recording Session

Around here,
They seem to keep their noses
Pretty close to the ground-stone,
Ears down on the cracks between shadows,
Listening for ancient buffaloes or locomotives
Lunging, headlong, toward their imaginations' abysses,
Fugitive, nubile vowels, hard consonants,
Elusive phonemes and diphthongs
Longing to find safety in mellifluously measured cadences.

They play with knobs labeled "pitch" and "mode,"
"EQ," "feedback," "speed,"
"Threshold," "ratio," and "aux send,"
Eyeball gauges monitoring peak,
VU, modulation,
Delay time, parameters, and output,
Redeem mispronunciations,
Sabotaged glottal fricatives,
And certain wrecked projected inflections.

Simultaneously, invaded by a housefly
Desecrating their carefully insulated silence,

*

They stop, can't find their place,
For the insect's surprise attack on their concentration.
Suddenly, the tape uncoils from its spools,
Like a snake striking, spitting toxic syllables,
Blinding them to their obsessive fastidiousness
Over the fly's persistent buzzing,
Outraging them over having to reread three selections.

8/8/89 (06068)

Holocaust Poet ^Δ

For poets who know only loneliness,
Even recent holocausts
Are just dust-thoughts caught on gauzy breezes
Fanned by lusty lovers,
Stations of a crisscrossing railway
Running through a Bosch landfill,
Windmills to be tilted at, by doleful Quixotes.

Whether it be dissolution of vows or bones,
By fire, state decree, or rabbi,
Is inconsequential to him, who composes verse
One filament at a time,
Like a spider, bird, bee, death,
Building his own web, nest, hive, sepulcher,
To protect himself against the elements.

Rarely does he surface from work,
To survey the terrain,
Made up of mass graves covered with erica,
Three-leaf clover, kudzu.
He knows, too well, who goes there
And what ancient languages
Their inarticulate moans evoke,

Although, these days,
He doesn't linger above ground
Or mingle with those placing sprays,
Lighting candles, praying.
Long ago, he transcended despair,
Seeking safety in imagination's sanctuary,
Where the air carries no ash-motes

Or odors of incinerated flesh.
Only there, he presciently discovered,
Could he absolve himself of human doubts,
Exist in solitude exempt from cruelty,
Perpetuate illusory metaphors
Shaping images of peace, gentleness, and love
From shabby deeds, greed, narcissism.

But for this precious exoneration, by time,
Of crimes committed by the heart,
He's paid a steep price.
Despite receiving the Nobel Prize for his poetry,
He's spoken to no one in years.
The world sight-reads his quivering lips,
As he recites, then writes down, God's whispers.

8/9/89 — [1] (00282)

Tapestry Weaver

He drives home so slowly,
Even fits of narcolepsy don't faze him.
He can't distinguish the act of catnapping
From keeping his vehicle intact,
In the right lane of the northering highway
He navigates automatically.

He's taken this route ten thousand times,
Along five million miles
His dreaming mind has paved,
Connecting the days in tedious sequence,
Like needlepoint meticulously evolving
The length and breadth of a piano-bench canvas.

Defining neither method nor rhyme
To the rational madness behind his motives
For returning home so uninspired,
He presses ahead, vectoring in on dejection.
Oh, if he could just rip out
Certain sections in the woven tableau,

Those rows leading nowhere,
On which he focused so much youth, scrutinizing:
*

Back roads, obsolete tollways,
Gravelly trunks funneling into country junctions
Radiating into dead ends and culs-de-sac,
Passages misstitched, mismatched,

Which, finally, have rendered a canvas
Whose landscape he can't place,
For all the traveling he's managed to accomplish,
These past two decades.
Oh, if only he could choose, more selectively,
The threads he'll use,

Could simulate solid colors,
By shading in spaces, with softer hues,
Gentler gradations. It's too late.
As he nears St. Louis, polluted skies sigh,
Recognizing that their battle-weary hero,
The prodigal Jew, has safely arrived.

8/9/89 — [2] (06069)

[Today, a major desecration][†]

Today, a major desecration
Has taken place, in my own backyard,
A betrayal of outrageous proportions

8/10/89 (06070)

The *Challenger*

There he goes again,
Like a NASA rocket
Shot off its launch pad,
With Cyclopean force, yawning, tilting,
Gathering precious momentum
As it travels upwind,
Shudders, necessarily, jettisoning excess,
Then settles in on its preassigned trajectory,
Heading toward necessary destinations.

All eyes are on his performance.
Shielded from an omnicidal sun,
They focus on his smoky, meteoric ascendance,
As though their very staring
Might be an uplifting inspiration to him,
An affectionate gesture, if ineffectual,
Which just might make some slight difference
(Superstitious, metaphysic, magical),
As he disappears into day's dilated pupil.

He's made this mission so many times,
He doesn't wear fear's blindfold
Or conform to preflight check-off routines
Designed to keep him from committing pilot error;
Instead, he stumbles directly from sleep,
Naked down to his dreams,
Up into the spaceship's compact cockpit,
Harnesses himself in, then waits
For the 6/5-second blast to catapult him awake.

For some unexplainable reason,
He anticipates trouble, this morning.
Whether it's the blood-rust sun
Being pumiced with jeweler's rouge
Applied by an invisible hand, off to his left,
Or mist enshrouding his vibrating vehicle
Is enigmatic, but the "abort" light,
Flickering unpredictably,
As he nears liftoff, on the countdown,

Frightens him sufficiently
To make contact with mission control.
But having grown inured, over the years,
To his devil-may-care daredeviltry,
They fail to respond to his consternation, today.
In fact, no one's even bothered
To turn on his mic.
Watching the diodes tap-dance on his dash clock,
He tries to decipher their erratic patterns.

Now, as he approaches second stage,
Thirty-five miles downrange,
His body is assimilated into a tremor

*

That vibrates the entire craft
 So violently, his bones' marrow dries up
 And his brain collapses into a mass
 No larger than a sardine can.
 Commands he might otherwise give hands and feet
 Go unchanneled; reactions are stillborn.

Within a matter of interminable seconds,
 He passes through a fiery, ashen blast.
 His atoms scatter and enter the stratosphere,
 Barely displacing any cosmic dust,
 His newest existence imperceptibly registered
 By souls orbiting in those outer regions.
 Below, dazed spirits console each other,
 Etch his stone, with their own absolution:
 MASSIVE MALFUNCTION.

8/12/89 (06071)

[Sunday morning is a zone of loneliness,][†]

Sunday morning is a zone of loneliness,
 "Dead air" between consonants
 And vowel sounds magnetized to polyester tape
 His daily speech has recorded on its week's log.
 This morning, he listens, intently,
 To each nuance, every sibilant splatter
 And click, slur and pop his lips and tongue
 Collaborated in, in making his poems permanent

8/13/89 — [1] (01156)

[After three years,]

After three years,
 He's still sensitive to rumorous slander he hears,
 From unimaginable sources:
 Distant kin of mistresses friendly with his enemies;
 His parents' country-club contemporaries;
 Maître d's of restaurants they used to frequent —
 All of whom he now encounters, accidentally, on streets

*

He tries to avoid being seen traversing,
As he passes between the civil-courts building
And his prestigious eighth-floor suite
In a glass-and-aluminum Crystal Palace
Located, conveniently, in midtown St. Louis.

Actually, the three of them succeeded miraculously —
He, she, their shared dreams —
In eventually living amidst stained-glass windows,
Tudor brick work, and slate roof,
In white-oak-shaded Clayton,
Where two children they were still raising
Would play in the dusky halos
Of cast-iron street lamps
Lining newly laid sidewalks and granite curbing.
Finally, three years ago, they made it,
Moved into their spacious dream,
Ostensibly intact, “arrived,” “set for life,”

Except for one inconspicuous oversight,
Which would soon begin festering,
Until it cracked the fragile fenestration,
Eroded the brick facade,
Let the copper nails come loose from roof slates,
Until it caused the concrete gutters,
So neatly placed, by hand, between granite curbs,
To pull out, the street tar
To grow old overnight, buckle from tree roots
Blindly surging skyward, toward sunlight,
Until the sidewalks relinquished their white patina,
Unattended lamps their warm, orange glow . . .

One oversight they'd committed
When originally creating the dream's foundation:
Without recognizing it, she'd been destined
To repeat the reprobate patterns of her father,
A kind, tragically trapped captive of the demon
Who, unannounced, might burn down the house
Of a friendly conversation, with a fire blast from his mouth —
First, a social glass of wine, before dinner;
Then, half a bottle of whiskey, at table;
Finally, furtive consumption, from waking,
Through daytime, into late night,
Waking, again, with that insidious, insatiable craving.

Now, even *he*'s found out, from sources
Ubiquitous, for her conspicuous public appearances
By herself, at bars, with other faceless members
Of that anonymous society of lonely gamblers
Who require "clean, well-lighted places"
For mere survival. He goes to his office, dazed,
Questioning the very nature of ambitiousness,
Disillusionment, betrayal, and loss.
He goes because he doesn't know how
To proclaim the dream null and void.
He knows only that he must,
That there's still time to dream another dream.

8/13/89 — [2] (04225)

[Migrating not from Mississippi and Tennessee][†]

Migrating not from Mississippi and Tennessee
But out of the three-square-mile ghetto
Situated just below Grand,
They flood off the bus, at the main stop,
In front of the Clayton courthouse,
And trek diagonally

8/17/89 — [1] (04223)

Photos, Books, and Keys

First, he returned home, from work,
One unpremeditated day,
To learn that all framed photographs
Displaying the two of them —
Mother and father, husband and wife,
Bohemian poet and his foxy lady,
Infatuated, newly initiated college students —
Had been removed from familiar spaces
Surmounting their inherited parlor grand
And guarding hall walls, like coats of arms,
Sanctifying their unshared bedroom.

Six months later,
As if experiencing the same plague
While driving through another country,
He came back to his house too exhausted to complain
When he sensed something had been displaced
And, after routine investigation,
Discovered all recent books and magazines
In which his scholarly articles and poems had appeared
(Always neatly fanned out, like playing cards,
In meticulously conspicuous arrangements
That pleased his private ego,

Inspired him, silently, to keep his spirits high,
In an environment devoid of praise,
Respect — normal rewards anyone might expect,
Who engaged in such labors of love)
Had disappeared from the glass-top coffee table.
Just last week,
A third humiliation shattered his equanimity,
Collapsed his stoical devotion
To a radically untenable betrayal of trust
His wife had been two years perpetrating:
She called, at his writing office,

To forewarn him she'd had all the locks changed.
Immediately, his key became a meaningless ornament,
Dangling like a fob on the chain of an obsolete watch
He'd been wearing too long, in his vest pocket,
Just below his heart,
To read time's inscrutable design,
Refusing to see in himself a sinister affinity
With Quentin Compson, the kid, from Jefferson, Miss.,
Who tried to protect his sister's innocence,
Only to commit his spirit, tied to two flatirons,
To a mythical, whisperous Charles River,

With this difference:
Pounding on the front door, ringing the bell,
Like a woodpecker violating a pine tree, for insects,
He realized, in a flash surpassing hostility,
Blinding him to their entire chronicle,
Which memory, until that instant, had retained intact —
Twenty-five years of shared history —

*

That the photos, books, and keys
 Had been nothing more than borrowed artifacts,
 Fragile at best, evanescent as breath,
 Once love's monarchs abdicated compassion's castle.

8/17 — [2] & 8/22/89 (04224)

Aftershock ^Δ

Myth's wistful mysteries
 Whisper cryptic elegies to me, this misty morning,
 Whose steamy humidity,
 After last evening's heat-lightning and rain,
 Remains, as a pervasive legacy breathing perceives.

No eyes escaped nature's fusillade,
 Those incandescent volleys
 Whose sporadic explosions exposed ghosts
 Hidden so long, in memory's luminescent recesses,
 Even God had forgotten them.

Nor could ears close out the raucousness;
 Although they guarded its caves,
 They couldn't keep sleep from waking,
 Organizing surveillance teams
 Roaming fear's purlieus in vigilante groups.

Now, day commands us to action.
 We dress, go about our business obliviously,
 As if that disturbance were not an omen
 To make cosmic watchers take notice,
 Not an apocalypse in the making.

8/24/89 (02249)

Simon and Pieman ^Δ

Once, a joyous pieman,
 Bouncing down the road, to a fair,
 Where he was to occupy a booth, display his wares,
 Met a brooding Simon,
 Slumped but not quite asleep,

*

Beneath the profusely pink fronds of a mimosa tree,
And intruded on his daydreamy fugue
Just long enough,
Or so he thought, to ask the way.
It seemed he'd lost his sense of direction.

But when the ghost he called Simon,
For the sake of salutation,
Awakened from his *déjà-vu* hallucination
And tried to respond as civilly as he might,
The pieman realized he'd lost all sense of time's passage, too,
Couldn't fathom *when* this was.
Throughout the afternoon, in exuberant jubilation,
They ate pies, recited rhymes,
Sated their cravings for laughter and sadness,
Communing, communing past vespers,

Until they submitted to night's glowing close —
Two new blooms of an ancient mimosa,
Illumining the universe, with aphrodisiacal pink hues.

8/26/89 (00281)

Flower Power and Grass: The Splendours

Even now, two decades later,
He can still willfully recall
The splendour of the grass they would toke,
Standing before the colossal speakers detonating Fillmore West,
Assimilating explosive, lunatic patterns of Jimi Hendrix,
Janis Joplin, Gracie Slick's Jefferson Airplane,
And Pigpen's Grateful Dead.

On unexplainable trips through the brain's veins,
Late at night, while waiting for sleep
To overtake day's fatigue,
His memory hits chasmlike air pockets,
Loses altitude so rapidly,
Vision becomes a light show on that vast screen,
Swarming with Gorgons, chimeras,

Amebas undulating out of and into focus,
Telescoping, exploding like skyrocketes,

*

Metamorphosing into vertiginous unicorns,
 Cannabis plants — LSD hallucinations
 Of primordial beasts, unicellular creatures
 Feeding viewers with self-consuming fears,
 Miltonic montages of Dante's nether world.

It's then that remembrances of glorying in their flower power
 Fade, wilt, create deserts in beds
 Where they sprouted, a few decades ago,
 The two of them born of that Haight-Ashbury,
 Golden Gate moment and shorn,
 Unable to sustain evolution's newest rituals
 Or keep promises they made, to be faithful to the revolution.

8/27/89 (04222)

[Once, for a breathless decade,] [‡]

Once, for a breathless decade,
 Particles of clay he'd kneaded and shaped
 Into an animated vessel containing ashes
 His exuberant spirit attracted
 From shadows of past generations yet remaining
 In rainbows, sunsets, moon dogs
 Radiated a ghostly glow.

It was as though his body were a red-hot furnace,
 Not embers burning twenty centuries,
 Which the least breeze might permanently disturb.
 His eyes glinted with flame-tips of fires
 Racing across his nerve system,
 Like runaway trains over open switches.
 Vision and intellect were microchips
 God had designed to accommodate his mind

8/30/89 (04221)

[Estelle and Bill went up the hill,]

Estelle and Bill went up the hill,
 To eat a potato pie.

*

They looked around and thought, instead,
It would be more fun to get drunk
On a fifth of rye.

9/1/89 (06554)

Soft Strength ^Δ

For Margaret Fleischer Kaufman

Oh, Maggie,
You needn't apologize
For having freed your poetry
Of Latinates, involuted syntax,
And High Victorian spires surging skyward,
Above the types of gingerbread scrolls and molding
That ornament my dizzy verses.
Really, they're burdens
I've not always borne gracefully,
Indeed, at times, uncertainly,
Under the delusional weight of expectations
That rhetoric must convey Biblical wisdom,
Cosmic implications,
Not be obtuse, ambiguous, hermetic.

Breathing your soft meters,
Listening to your crisp, richly cadenced whispers,
I realize just how puissant
A soft voice can be
When, vibrating the sky's tympanum,
It sets words reverberating,
Whose spirited shimmering will spend eternities
Traveling between earth and heaven,
Then return as silences
Amplified to the pitch at which sphere music
Is heard throughout the universe,
Almost as if God Himself
Were reciting your pure verses,
From memory.

9/2/89 (00286)

[He awakens, to the new day,] [†]

He awakens, to the new day,
Dislocated as a disabled ship
That's lost its navigational equipment

9/3/89 — [1] (03479)

The Old Rose Garden ^Δ

Amidst the roses, this Labor Day a.m.,
Which are teeming with bees and butterflies
Hovering in doting suspensions,
Forming nonverbal declensions, with their wings,
That imagination might sing, all afternoon,
I traipse aimlessly,
Reiterating a litany of names my mind formulates,
In creating design, out of chaos:
Peace, American Beauty, Tropicana,
Queen Elizabeth, John F. Kennedy,
First Prize, and Double Delight.

My emotions take some comfort, among the roses,
Summon, from forgotten long-agos,
Certain sensual affinities with their hues.
Those soft, supple yellows and golds,
Corals, ivories, various registrations of pink,
And the infinite mixtures
Somehow enfold me, in their rainbow.
Maybe their petals are sacred raiment
My eyes are supposed to resew
Into a coat of many colors
I might don like a divine, inviolate surplice.

Suddenly, the inchoate poet I was, at ten,
Is dotingly hovering behind his mother's movements,
As she floats from rose to rose,
Plucking, snipping, removing debris,
To bring the entire garden into momentary perfection,
Each Peace, American Beauty, and Tropicana
She planted, on her knees, by hand,
A syllable of the words forming a verse

*

For a set of integrated stanzas
Constituting the poem my memory has grown, today,
To give to her — my labor of love.

9/3–4/89 — [2] on 9/3 (00888)

An Everlasting Nay

If he'd ever given it the slightest thought,
Doubtless he would have conceived
Leaving his wife and two children
To be an act of colossal magnitude,
Sufficient, in its aftershock,
To outexplode Hiroshima's atomic blast,
Causing a catastrophic disturbance, in the atmosphere,
So shrill, Earth's inhabitants would go deaf
And no one would outlast the superheated ash
But him — his infernal curse,
For daring to sunder his God-witnessed vows.

But giving up, resorting to divorce,
Had not been an option or considered possibility
Until this past year and a half,
When, stretched on humiliation's rack
To the extent he could hear his spine crack
Each time she'd twist betrayal
Two notches beyond his capacity to withstand pain,
He realized his only resistance
To the tyranny she'd imposed on his spirit
Was in quitting, ceasing to exist as one with her,
Who, long ago, had separated from him, without his knowing it.

Even now, hours after he's awakened
From his solitary bed in their hearts' charnel house,
That catacomb crypting four bodies,
Night after vampiric night,
And been spirited south, as if leading death's cortège
Instead of guiding freedom
Into uncharted territory, he presses ahead,
Seemingly unaware he goes totally unnoticed.
Not even drooping bovine eyes
Register his presence in the Slough of Solitude,
Through which he disappears, deeper, by the mile.

A sad, sweet, disillusioned, dreamy man,
Stranded in anonymity,
Too empty to take loneliness's census,
With any degree of accuracy,
He yet knows enough not to reverse his decision
Of having said no, once and for all,
To the systematic dehumanization of his soul.
And if, as it appears, the earth
Remains unfazed despite his massive abnegation,
At least he'll be able to say
He seized control of his fate and made peace with the universe.

9/5/89 (00954)

The Hitchhikers

Departing Farmington, for Cape Girardeau,
He listens to sibilant mist
Slipping off morning's lips, in lisping whispers.
An argenteous, glistening mixture of distant voices
Lifting off roadside grass and weeds,
In silent choiring, fills his eyes' ears,
With the sweetest, freshest scents of innocence
He can remember smelling in weeks.
Ah, what mystification his senses breathe!

Weaving over serpentine 32,
He revels in echoing vestiges
Memory resurrects from forgetting's recesses:
Scenes from a displaced dream
Formerly ornamented in Victorian spindles,
Gingerbread scrollwork, curlicues,
Inhabited by two newly married "flower children"
Recently replanted from San Francisco beds,
Sporting two unique blooms of their very precious own.

Suddenly, the mist disappears.
He ceases hearing gently tranquil voices
Jan, Trilogy, and Troika
Lullabied him to sleep with, each cricket-stippled evening.
Instead, just up ahead,
He sees a blind and deaf bindle stiff
*

Thumbing a ride to the nearest *somewhere*
 That might provide ephemeral refuge.
 He slows momentarily, then speeds up,

Astonished by the eerie similarity
 The hitchhiker bears to the appearance
 He imagines he wears — fear's mirror image.
 Fifty yards past, he abruptly brakes,
 Waits, on the rocky shoulder,
 For the groping, stranded traveler
 To navigate the space separating their isolation.
 All the way to Cape Girardeau,
 They keep each other brotherly company.

9/6/89 — [1] (04220)

The Heart's Archipelago

Between them,
 So much had been wrong for so long,
 Neither noticed just when
 Their separate togetherness finally divided,
 Their hearts' Pangaea parted into jigsaw islands
 Far flung in an inaccessible archipelago
 Ravaged by tidal waves and savage hurricanes.

Then, one day, a terrible calm prevailed,
 And they became amnesia's orphans,
 Storm victims washed up on foreign shores,
 At opposite ends of an endlessly extending continent,
 Infinitesimal grits of sand,
 Identically unidentifiable amidst infinite granules —
 Once integral constituents of the now-dark planet Love.

9/6/89 — [2] (04219)

Predestination

He became a widower
 Even before the whore his wife became
 Divorced him, on grounds of moral fidelity;
 *

Even before she was awarded lead
In confusion's chorus line,
Whose nightly performances kept her out late;
Even before the wine bottle
She learned to worship
Metamorphosed into a totemic dildo,
To which she showed total devotion;
Even before she died, in his eyes,
From a lack of sympathy
Toward his suffering an attack
Of an inconsolably broken heart;
Even before they were born.

9/8/89 (00291)

Would You Believe?

Would you believe it?
Even in the late '80s, the 1980s,
Some folks still cling, tenaciously,
To old-fashioned notions
Rising up, out of ancestral experiences,
As if through the blackened chimney glass
Of the last coal-oil lamp, in America,
Illuminating the heart's dim parlors,
Living rooms, and attics, with shimmering images in silhouette,

Filling them with visions of whole families
Gathered, innocently, to travel their two-dimensional worlds,
Through stereopticon cards; listen to music
Drifting up, off spinning Regina disks,
As star wheels pluck teeth on a vibrating comb,
Releasing the sweetest, richest pizzicati
That ever reverberated their bones; play checkers
Chess, backgammon; do puzzles;
Knit, stitch, quilt, weave, and crochet their dreams.

Would you believe some people still believe
It's actually possible to recapture
Obsolete realities, recreate antique milieus
In which rituals, not constant innovations,
Compete for primacy in a societal hierarchy
*

That worships its own myths, where the nuclear family
Owes allegiance to its entire genealogy
And each member knows that contentment,
Self-esteem, and love begin and end at home?

9/10/89 (04218)

When the Circus Came to Town

Lady, I awaken, this rainy morning,
To a refrain that has accompanied me to sleep
And back, these past two years,
More of a spectacle, actually, a carnival atmosphere
With which you've nightmared my life, wife.
All my dreams are circus Crosleys
Making crazy eights,
Recreating demolition-derby maneuvers,
Circling, hysterically, about feline cages
Astir with terrified lions and tigers
And around performing horses, bears, monkeys, and dogs.
On cue, forty-two freaks in clown uniforms
Squirt from a Crosley's stalled shape,
As if shot out of the barrel of a cannon,
Backflip, somersault, stand on their hands,
Like hunger artists. They shoot their audience
With trick guns, whose bullets are flags
Proclaiming "Bang, I'm Yours,"
Parade past the mind's dazed Macy's,
With gimmicks: doctor's bags
Equipped with facsimile sticks of TNT;
Hot dogs ten feet long, on buns
Comprised of two more dwarfs.
A dazzling menagerie of miniature idiots
Enduring uninspired spells of "spontaneous" riot,
For Saturday night's minimum-wage paycheck,
They populate my sleep, with their yelping cries —
Curs and chimeras in polka-dot clothes,
Reminding me that the Sells Floto Circus,
Which came to town, unannounced,
One late night a few too many years ago
And somehow arranged to obtain
A permit to stay, indefinitely, on the sedgy edges of town,

*

Never really left. Lady, was it you
Who originally contacted that sleazy crew of troubadours,
Contracted, with them, to set up tents
In our front yard, then issued free passes
Without expiration dates,
So that the entire neighborhood might spectate
Whenever they tired of watching reruns
Of their own Ringling Bros. Ding-Dong of Doom
Barnum & Bailey nightmares?
Was it you, wife from two lifetimes back,
Who acted as advance agent,
Tacked up posters, on every street-lined tree,
Sold blocks of tickets, at reduced rates,
To innocents and experienced alike,
Indiscriminately,
Just to make sure the extravaganza you'd promoted
Would at least break even?
Awakening, this rainy a.m., dislocated,
I rise on elbows,
Drop both bare feet to the floor.
Peanut shells scratch my toes,
As I get ready to exit night's flea-circus tent.

9/12-13/89 — [1] on 9/13 (04217)

Getting Back to Basics ^Δ

For Michael Fagin

He talks to himself, this autumnal morning,
Expresses eclectic thoughts
Gleaned from the motel's TV,
And ruminates on implications of flag desecration,
As it relates to freedom of speech;
New York City's newly elected
Black, Democratic candidate for mayor;
Latin American drug lords,
Chastised in the president's speech to schoolkids;
Aging fleets of MD-80s
And Boeing 700-series jets
Crashing, from mechanical and electrical failures
In engines and fuselages, over Iowa and Hawaii.

He realizes how easy it all seems
Yet just how difficult it is to separate the chaff
From wheat that's suffered cultural drought and rust.
He's tried, time and again,
To isolate universal truth from shabby fact,
With too much confusion and incredulity
Not to get skeptical when men-children and feminists
Spew ethical rhetoric, humanistic platitudes
On corruption and love.
This raw, wet, September a.m.,
He mumbles scatological phrases, under his breath,
To relieve “quitter’s” resignation.
Ultimately, he places more faith in “fuck” and “shit.”

9/13/89 — [2] (00185)

Études for a Rainy Drive

A perpetual dervish,
Whose flights are the *raison d'être* of his life,
He tirelessly exercises his right
To pursue freedom from tyranny of the spirit,
Which would have him punch in, daily,
On a Simplex nine-to-five time clock
Recording his arrivals and exits
At the heart's spare-parts distribution depot.

At the risk of going, to his grave,
Without forwarding address
Or grieving witnesses to make up the cortège
Guiding him from silence, into forgetfulness,
He's pursued solitude,
With reckless obsessiveness,
Unafraid of being possessed by measures he arrests
And disappearing beneath their oceanic echo.

9/14/89 — [1] (06072)

[This gray, rain-washed morning,]

This gray, rain-washed morning,
He takes to the highway,
*

Without a sense of imminent inventiveness,
 Almost as if the soft drizzle
 Were an encoded necromantic invocation
 Defying him to decipher its myriad syllables
 Splattered across his windshield's scroll.
 His ears refuse to seek connections.

Suddenly, he perceives bell-knells
 Swelling from the campanile of a cathedral
 Rising from the diaphanous mist
 Shimmering in the distance. Approaching the city,
 He realizes why he's driven all this way:
 Death's vicious dogs, frothing at the mouth,
 Have been chasing him
 Ever since he rattled their cage, trespassing.

9/14/89 — [2] (06073)

It's Not Exactly Cricket ^Δ

For Miss Jane

Like an Indian brave sitting, cross-legged,
 Around a council fire,
 He sways atop the highest step,
 Peering out, across the street, at vapor lamps
 Emanating amber halos.
 Intently, he listens to twilight descending,
 Dripping unscented sounds
 Into the limited distance his vision surrounds,
 Then exercises a totemic wish
 To divest himself of all earthly possessions,
 That he might enter night as a cricket,
 Chirping yet soothingly fluid.

Oh, if only he could fathom the secrets of witches,
 Alchemists, dybbuks, and gypsies
 And exchange his flesh and clothing,
 Bones, brains, and loneliness,
 For the cricket's appendages and insides,
 Experience those cryptic twitches and reflexes
 That vibrate the emptiest air,
 With violin notes from a Mendelssohn concerto,

*

At least then he might survive
The midlife crisis of his wife's betrayal,
Threatening to silence the choirng of his jubilant soul.

9/17/89 (02295)

The Family of Man ^Δ

Two unassimilated Jews,
Somehow passed over, from the last generation,
Which was flushed all along the tracks
Weaving Western and Eastern European destinies
Into a hornets' nest of spirits
Still buzzing after death by fumigation . . .

Two isolated humans, Jew and Jewess,
Beautiful to each other,
Whose heritage of enduring frailty they share
With forebears and diasporan refugees —
Blessed bearers of the imperishable faith
That outwitted Pharaoh and Hitler —

Squeeze each other, in a breathless embrace
Millennially deep. In their hands,
They hold the entire fated history of their race.
Their impassioned arteries and veins,
Simultaneously pulsating,
Drain and refill the ancient heart's reservoirs.

Naked, in oblique view of the ascending moon,
They tongue Red Sea fluids,
Replenish diminished salt reserves,
Quench their cells, with love's sweet unguents,
Then blend their blessed egg and sperm,
Praying their genes will connect,

Replicate their tender, sensual dreams,
In a future tense where Gentiles *and* Jews,
Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, exotics,
Will speak love's universal demotic.
Later, they'll go to sleep, hoping to awaken
Assimilated into the species *Homo sapiens*.

9/19/89 (09021)

Acrophobia, at 37,000 Feet

People board, are seated, buckle in.
The vehicle roars, rotates, soars, freely,
Through vortices jets just leaving the flight zone
Throw out, in their wakes, like yo-yos.
The pilots are careful to avoid wind shears,
Not to permit their angles of attack to grow too steep
Too quickly, require immediate aborting.

Somewhere among the three hundred passengers
Nestled inside the amniotic fuselage
Of this throbbing L-1011,
One anonymous spirit breathes uneasily,
Inundates his brain cells with caffeine,
To fortify himself against his deep fear of heights,
Which flying invariably exacerbates.

He shivers, gazing out the acrylic window,
As though he were peering through the eyes of an eagle
About to dive down the side of the sky's cliff —
Sheer, severe — precipitously splitting day's divide
From night, light from cosmic darkness.
But the only prey way down there, in the chasm,
Already senses him contemplating it,

Refuses to visible itself, through obtuse movements,
Allow him more than imaginary whiffs
Of its heated blood. After all, he realizes
There's little he can do, from up here,
That's not already been predetermined,
And even if he wanted to crack the plastic,
Risk surviving suction, plunge, and land intact,

He'd likely just discover someone down there
Was already taking credit for his magic act
And that his fear of heights, of flying,
Had, if anything, increased to nausea and vomiting.
Just now, he sits in his cramped seat,
Waiting for vision to turn inward, once more,
And his soaring spirit to be unborne, as before.

Rice Pudding

To my wide-angle amazement,
Nothing, absolutely nothing,
Seems to have changed, here in Manhattan,
Nothing except me,
After a five-year absence
From this city, which is anchored, like a battleship,
Between two rivers,
By Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty.

Even today's rain,
Playing hide-and-seek with pedestrians,
Hasn't dampened their parading energies
Or made them lose faith
In the great god Free Enterprise.
I alone, leather shoes soaked,
Feet and toes cold, seem to have slowed
To the pace of a centipede atop a polished-glass tabletop.

Twice, this same day,
I've hailed taxis, hired Greek drivers
(A coincidence likely impossible
Anywhere else in the universe,
Save Greece itself) to take me to destinations
I might more easily have reached on foot,
For the fire-breathing-dragon traffic
Snorting crosstown as well as up and down its cave.

Tonight, after an entire afternoon and evening
Spent reinventing, from memory,
Sentimental episodes you and I never shared,
When our marriage was in its ascendancy,
I retreat to Rumpelmayer's, to eat rice pudding,
As, at ten and twelve, I did with my dad,
Accompanying him on his business trips —
Oh, those mystical pilgrimages! —

With this difference:
Neither he nor you, wife, still exists
Except as an illusory, dim figment, in the rain,
Of a person I loved so deeply.

*

He died; what you did, to disappear,
I've yet to ethically assess and qualify.
Slowly, vacantly, I lose myself, in chewing.
The rice and raisins have the tart, sweet taste of Proustian tears.

9/20/89 — [2] (00292)

Hurricane Hugo and the Crash of USAir Flight 5050: No Coincidence

I leave behind an entire city
Caught up in the hysterical grip of its own contrivance,
Held hostage to a morbid fear
It's going to be swallowed alive, by a leviathan
Slouching, easterly, ashore, toward the Carolinas,
Before serpentinizing its way to Gotham —
A creation invented by the media, not nature,
Capable of striking straight to the heart
Of a paranoid population's agitated imagination,
Causing hallucinations, seizures, amnesia,
Profoundly conflicting dislocations.
A sinister drizzle begins licking the taxi's windows.
Even as a kid, I never believed in sea monsters.

Now, seated in between stations,
Relieved to be en route to safe ground
A thousand miles away, waiting for my plane to arrive,
Evacuate me from this "danger zone,"
In which no one really believes the creature
Will pluck him up, in its frothing teeth —
Proud, this once, to own up to his anonymity —
I revel, ephemerally, in my "chosenness,"
Sip coffee as if it were blessed wine
With which I were toasting the divine Overseer.
Suddenly, the crackling speakers spit vicious epithets:
"All USAir flights
Will be delayed until further notice."
Within minutes, we'll know every intricate detail of a crash.

9/22/89 (06075)

Brockport Nocturne ^Δ

*For Bill, Han, and Kristen Heyen,
with my love*

Meandering, we occasionally stray
Farther from home than a day's roaming
Might otherwise take us,
If we weren't alone. Being on one's own
Invariably makes all the difference,
When good intentions are left to new designs
To guide uninitiated spirits through a moonless night
And the soul has to depend, for its inner light,
On energy generated from silence.

Ever the waif, if not life's pariah,
I've almost never arrived
At any of my unintended dislocations
Without surrendering to the disorientation an owl might know
Were surprise to make a surprise attack on midnight
And efface its dim nimbus,
Replace it with blinding incandescence.

Yet, sitting in this oasis
Midway between nowhere and home,
I sense the inestimable closeness separating us,
As if hospitality you extended to me,
These past few evenings,
When I ended up on your stoop,
Has suspended me in an alembic of friendship,
Love's gentle weave of spider's silk
No amount of distance will rend.

I'm cocooned in thoughts we talked about:
Teachers and parents lost yet echoing,
Beckoning us to compose
Inexhaustible odes to the Holocaust,
Mimosa and black-mountain ash trees,
Thoreau-cabins, in the backyard,
Where poets might go to rethink the universe,

Villages along the Erie Canal,
Farm towns mottling Ozark foothills
Dotting rural mid-Missouri,
*

And, neither last nor least but rather foremost,
Paeans and panegyrics to our women and children —
Oh, those blessed, precious, necessary essences
Who grace our unbalanced intellects,
With tender selflessness. Just now,
I have my doubts about returning home at all.

9/24/89 — [1] (02293)

Ground Time

Arriving at LaGuardia, with three hours to kill,
Still filled with excitement
From my profitable two-day visit in Brockport,
I settled into the private routine I resort to
On such prolonged occasions:
Gathering, to my pen's tip, stray words
Capable of formulating themselves into tangible verses
Whose translations of unspoken echoes,
Floating in random suspension, disclose clues to the future.

But when I queued up, at the ticket counter,
To make my presence authentic,
My immediate future had been canceled,
For reasons neither agent could say,
With any degree of veracity.
Rather than untie and open up the croker sack
In which my angry impatience coiled
And hissed like a hooded cobra
Ready to spit anathemas at relatively innocent bystanders,

I set my baggage aside, decided to try for standby
On the very next flight
(Leaving in less than an hour) to my destination.
By 5:25, all regularly ticketed passengers
Had been seated; then the elimination process began.
After twenty-two selections,
I was left standing, stranded in a terminal
Possessing a faint resemblance to Ellis Island,
I a tatterdemalion refugee mired in hell.

Finally, two hours, three coffees, popcorn,
And a long-distance phone call later,
The Lockheed L-1011
Assigned to ferry me home
Parked at the gate, unloaded, reprogrammed itself,
To take on its next cargo and crew.
Just minutes before I was to board, a disembodied voice
Spoke with deferential authority:
“Sorry, folks. We’re experiencing a minor problem
“With the hydraulic system on the rear landing gear,
And we won’t know the nature or extent of the delay
Until mechanics have investigated.
So for now, just sit back and relax.
We’ll do our very best to accommodate your needs
And keep you updated as information comes to us.”
Four hours later, I buckled up,
Prepared for takeoff, then soared, airborne,
Not caring where, anymore, or if we’d ever get there.

9/24/89 — [2] (06076)

“Cloudy River of the Sky”

For Bill Heyen

Ascending splendid crescendos
To fugitive music,
I see, below this jet,
Crocuses yet blooming through December snow,
Hear silences echoing, in dead ears,
Tomorrow’s memories,
Smell scents of semen-gel and honey-milk,

And I know whose muses these are,
Beckoning me starward.
Oh, sweet Li Po,
How softly your stream flows out to sea.
My soul-boat is a dust mote
Floating so, so slowly
Home.

9/24 — [3] & 9/26/89 — [1] (00186)

Season Tickets

Even their desperate last efforts
To avert inevitable separation and dissolution
Mushroom into cosmic conflicts.
Two tickets in the prestigious dress circle,
Amidst glittering crystal chandeliers
And gold-leaf, rococo ceiling molding,
Expose them to Brahms's Symphony no. 2.
Unexpectedly, its haunting bedtime motif
Explodes like fireflies after twilight,
Taunts the two of them with painful reflections
They can't fully focus, for opaque halos.

Sitting mute, both refuse to hold hands,
Though they would do so if only they knew how
To make time turn them back
To other stations on the face
Around which they joyously raced like Keats' Grecian graces.
But the distance between their intimate estrangement
Only exacerbates their failure to have made marriage last.
They seethe in their season box seats,
Wishing they could pull the music's soft sheet-notes
Up over their heads and be lullabied into a sleep
Even their irretrievable love can't disturb.

9/26–27/89 — [2] on 9/26 & [1] on 9/27 (04216)

On the Verge

The last three nights,
He's stayed in identically different motels,
Not exactly a hustler, peddler,
Itinerant minister,
Or migrant farm hand
But road poet in continuous flight,
Obeying neither laws of gravity
Nor thermonuclear dynamics
But, rather, his heart's tremulous divining rod,
Whose twin auricles, ventricles,
And aorta control the flow of his going.

This crisp, clear Wednesday a.m.,
He eagerly takes to the beckoning highway
Between Farmington and Sedalia,
With possible intermediate coffee stops
At Potosi, St. James, Jefferson City.
Just now, his chipmunk-quick eyes
Scurry from sassafras and sumac, at roadside,
Soaking in blood-red dyes
And cedars holding fall changes at bay,
To the entire Mark Twain National Forest,
Awaiting metamorphosis.

Searching for permanent forms
Amidst shifting patterns
Has ever been his intellect's obsessive preoccupation.
He's recorded his discoveries in notebooks —
Shadows cast from backlighted insights
Imagination projects onto pages of poetry
Bound in books he makes as easily as others breathe.
But today, no recognizable shapes
Implore him to record them for posterity.
He feels lost, an orphan bereft of purpose,
Just another leaf on the verge of extermination.

9/27/89 — [2] (06077)

A Scent of Autumn

Flat River, Potosi, Steelville
Might as well be tiny Spanish hamlets
As mid-Missouri rural towns
Through which I sideslip, like shadows
Slaloming between fence slats.

The acrid scent of obliterated skunk
Rotting in the center of the highway I take,
From sunrise to dusk,
Infiltrates my nostrils, with an unfamiliar stench
I vaguely remember encountering, once

(In days spent hitchhiking *la costa*,
From Málaga to Barcelona),

*

In a *plaza de toros* in Alicante, that stench
Slowly reconnecting me with that passage,
Made twenty-five years ago,

When I witnessed the celebrated Belmonte,
With his troop of *picadores* and *banderilleros*,
Hover above the twitching horns
Of a massive Madrid bull
Before sinking his sword's shaft between its eyes,

Vitiating its invisible brain,
Causing it to stoop to his conquering *orgullo*,
Go down on its knees, slump,
Collapse in the blood-strewn dust —
A hairy carcass drenched in scarlet stench

Filling the stale, turbid air inside the *plaza*,
With death-breaths,
Odors of freshly mutilated flesh.
Why the unmistakable aroma of invisible skunk,
Lingering along this road, should haunt me,

I'll not likely resurrect from forgetting.
Yet something pestiferous, a rank essence
Still active in memory's recesses,
Must be trying to awaken me from my complacence.
Maybe I'm to be the next animal sacrificed.

9/27/89 — [3] (06078)

When Trees Leap

For Bill Lane

I flash by the state capitol.
Its dome rises through my eyes, into the horizon,
Hovering just below my mind
As though floating in its own zone,
At an encoded speed. Whether hot-air balloon,
Soap bubble blown by a child,
Off the rim of disbelief,
Or alien space vehicle
Creating a close encounter of the third kind,

*

Its thin, ivory skin,
Rubbing against the sky's blue flesh,
Stretches the threshold of its earthly existence.

As I fly past, practical matters intrude.
Imagination loses elasticity,
Snaps back into its former shape.
I envision duly elected politicians
Below the dome, in business suits,
Debating ethical issues,
With questionable vision and sincerity.
Once beyond the edges of Jefferson City,
Heading westerly, for Tipton,
I recall how metapoetic fall can be,
As each tree becomes a rainbow trout
Leaping out of the horizon's stream and into my eyes.

9/27/89 — [4] (02294)

[Hey, poet, maker of words!]

Hey, poet, maker of words!
Imagine if, someday,
You discovered all your metaphors
And credos were false
And that you'd been commanded,
By the powers that be,
To eat your words,
Swallow your pride,
Finally either shit green bricks
Or get off the potter's wheel,
Where you spend most of your days,
Shaping dreams from lumps of clay,
Throwing Mosaical-tablet poems.

Do you think you'd put up a stink,
Or might quitting
Leave a foul taste in your throat,
A knot in the pit of your gut,
Tears in your eyes
That would never dry up,
Rather blind you, for the rest of your life?
*

Well, then, Mister Wordsmith,
 Get with it! I've been sent,
 As representative for the twin hemispheres,
 To order you to cease and desist.
 With this sentence, working backwards
 To the first one, from thirty years ago, start eating!

9/28/89 (06079)

Miss Missouri ^Δ

“With all this frost we’ve had, lately,
 The sickle will shatter them beans, sure.
 Too damn much rain,
 Frost too early — Jeez Christ!
 Still yet, I believe I’ll make
 A hunderd fifty to the acre.”
 “Anything goin’ on at the golf course, today?”
 “Be damned if I know.”
 “State mowin’ the roads again, today?”
 “Yeh, 50 and 135,
 Routes NN, A, both BBs, K,
 And B, Z, and D, from Bunceton to Versailles.”
 “Why in hell does the state mow in the fall?”
 “I bet they’ll plow snow this summer, too.”
 “Hey, guys, you been watchin’ over at Syracuse?”
 “Oh, you mean that porno movie
 Them French guys is makin’?”
 “Yeh, *Miss Missouri*. ”
 “I hear they got a bunch of hot girls.”
 “Yeh, and Rob Lowe, too.”
 “How come they get that movie company
 And all Tipton gets is homecoming, this week,
 And Fremont Days, two weeks ago?”
 Someone pumps the waitress, for more info
 About the movie. She’s heard Paul Newman’s
 Going to be flown in, for weekend shots.
 “Yeh, and who’s gonna play Miss Missouri —
 Madonna?” “Who?” “Who?” “Who?”

Three different voices rise from below seed caps,
 In genuine blissful ignorance.

*

"Christ," she replies, smiling sidelong.
"Well, why didn't they pick Tipton
If what they wanted was a *real* old town?
Shit, all they'd have to do would be drive downtown.
We got buildings still bein' used
More derelict than that roadside garage
They chose for the breakdown."
"Yeh, but Syracuse is smack-dab on the highway,
And what's more, we don't need another whore,
With this new crop of high-school sluts arriving."
One by one, the voices unravel.
The congregation winnows down to two farmers

Reiterating their immediate crisis: cutting beans
Before repeating frosts scorch their harvest.
But as though someone had laced their coffee
With sodium pentothal, both keep focusing
On the movie crew, over at Syracuse,
Five miles away, and shaping universal truths
From secret fantasies. The waitress waves the pot
Above their cups, like a wand.
They draw her, intimately, back into their conversation.
"Helen, how's 'bout the three of us
Goin' over and auditioning to be extras?
We could be the garage mechanics
Who just happen to be handy, at midnight,
To fix Miss Missouri's busted transmission."

"Yeh, and who do you think I could play?"
She snickers, rubbing her hip
Against Butch Garber's free leg.
"Ah, shit, Helen,
You could just be your ol' sweet self,
And you'd knock 'em dead."
"Oh, yeh — you mean cold turkey,
Without even rehearsing the lines?"
"What lines? What they got in mind
For Miss Missouri don't need practice.
In fact, that particular scene
Don't even need subtitles."
"On second thought," Garber adds, pausing,
"Maybe we'd *better* practice."

Turkey Trucks ^Δ

Approaching Kingdom City
And noticing he's running low on fuel,
He exits Highway 70,
Pulls into Gasper's Truck Plaza,
To fill both tanks — gas and caffeine.
He waits indoors, to be computer-verified,
Before getting coffee, to go,
From a waitress who asks, "Anything in it?"
"No arsenic, please." She vaguely smiles.
Ten feet from the counter, a cashier,
Stationary as a stuffed buffalo,
Blurts out, "Seventy cents."
"How'd you know?", feigned amazement
Belying his facetiousness. "I'm smart."
He chuckles under his breath, on leaving.

Once buckled up, in his station wagon,
He notices he's blocked, from behind
And in front, by tractor-trailer trucks.
After allowing for a reasonable interval,
He grows steadily less patient.
His feet begin choreographing
An awkward tap dance on the floorboard.
His fingers execute an SOS code
The *Titanic*'s radio operator dispatched,
That fateful evening, disasters ago.
Abruptly, he unbuckles, jumps out,
To inspect the disreputable rig
Blocking his forward progress.
The stench blinds him; his nostrils wince.
All senses get confused, from the fowl vapors

Wafting into the immediate circumambience
Surrounding the Cargill turkey truck,
En route, from its California, Missouri, holding depot,
To a rendering facility no telling where.
All he knows, with absolute certainty,
Is that these feathers, being strewn through slits
In its hundreds of interconnected cages,
Aren't falling from heaven; indeed, they're more like
*

Fiberglass insulation being blown into an attic,
Through a cloacal hose.
No one's in the cab. He's late to nowhere,
But impatience is taking its toll.
Just the notion that anything so profane
And outrageously disagreeable should stall him,
On his homeward journey, is an affront to his conscience.

From some untraceable source in his brain,
He recalls someone once describing
Why turkeys are always jammed so tightly
Into those stacked cages.
He even hears an unidentifiable voice saying,
"They're so fuckin' crazy and dumb,
If you treat them humane —
You know, give them plenty of space —
They go berserk, from blind fear and confusion,
Begin killing themselves — no different
Than when you set domesticated turkeys
Out in the rain; they commence to bunch up
And huddle, all looking straight up,
Let the water fill their nostrils, to suffocation,
Until they all drown. Now that's profoundly ignorant."

As if awakening from a séance,
He takes notice of a burly, baldheaded driver,
Stomach bursting from his T-shirt
And vest, like a goiter on an elephant's neck,
Who's wearing pointed cowboy boots, baggy jeans,
Red and blue tattoos etching both arms,
From biceps to wrists, with spread-winged eagles,
Scrolls, slogans, hearts, numerals,
As in a cubist collage hung from museum walls.
He watches the man circle his truck,
Then mount and position himself behind the wheel.
Black clots of diesel exhaust
Snort from twin stacks, abrade the air,
With momentary odors that mask the turkeys' stink.
Suddenly, his thinking veers severely.

As if hallucinating, he envisions a train
Being drawn across a landscape
He can't place, through a warp in time,
*

A ramshackle locomotive whose myriad throbbing parts —
Valves, pistons, drive shafts, axles, rods,
Pulleys, levers, throttling augers, pumps —
Might be the mechanisms that keep hell turning . . .
A steam engine dragging cattle cars
Packed with faceless human beings,
Whose screams and moaning get caught on the breeze
And lost from audible recognition,
As the train slips through villages asleep to its passing —
Human beings or turkeys he's not quite certain,
For the tightness of their stifled bodies,
Ironically set at eighty to a cage/car,

For their own protection, ironically
(A precision decision of the Third Reich),
To guarantee their safe arrival
At a rendering station,
Where, with state-of-the-art technical expertise,
They might be dispensed with, economically,
And with complete neatness, no mess whatsoever,
Not even scattered feathers/ashes
Left to be swept up, from carriage floors,
Shower rooms, oven maws.
Suddenly, he gasps, realizes, with a start,
He's been following the turkey truck,
Fifty miles out of his way.
Whether misguided by divine intervention
Or his own blind faith,

He knows he doesn't recognize towns
Whose names road signs he reads now proclaim:
"Treblinka," "Dachau," "Auschwitz-Birkenau."
Where he is, he can't fathom.
Fear envelops him, like a boa constrictor;
His breathing collapses in its cold squeeze,
And he sees no exits
That might let him extricate himself,
Catch his breath, avoid death by asphyxia.
Barely making a very tortuous curve
Where the highway bisects a sheer cliff,
Then descends into an endlessly deepening abyss,
He spies the truck that has led him astray,
*

Jackknifed, on its side, in flames,
Millions of gray feathers lifting, like ashes, from its pyre.

9/29/89 — [2] (03719)

Meeting His Own Shadow Coming and Going ^Δ

Fleeing southwesterly,
Down I-55, toward Festus,
He sneezes three times.
“It’s the season,” he reasonably concedes,
Viewing, from across the median,
A segmented snake slithering from side to side,
A reptile image with headlights
Or scales glistening in the sun’s crisp radiance,
A cortège led by a jet-black Cadillac hearse,
Death itself on a tear,
This otherwise completely innocuous afternoon.

Never one to apologize
For committing mixed metaphors or similes,
He contemplates the odds
Of ever again sneezing three times
As a corpse snakes its way to the graveyard.
Then, immediately, he proceeds
To dismiss this convergence as mere coincidence,
A perfectly gratuitous miscue
In fate’s timetable. Yet he gets apprehensive,
Approaching the apex of a steep grade.
Below, up ahead, a gray smolder

Billows from what appears, to his eyes,
To be a vast chasm. The smoke is a snake
Slithering, side to side, into the crisp blue sky.
As he draws closer, the opening widens,
Summons him to its uneven edges.
He pulls off, onto the road’s shoulder,
Peers, fearfully, into a primordial necropolis
Crammed with fired skeletons.
Suddenly, he begins to sneeze, from the thick odors,
And realizes he’s just passed his own hearse
Heading home, empty.

10/3/89 (03715)

[Each day of life] †

Each day of life
Is one day less of death

10/7/89 — [1] (02985)

To the Students of Tipton Elementary School

For June and Jim Nivens

All week, I've received fan mail
From you (secret admirers)
I must have inspired, with my visit, last week —
September 28, to be specific —
To the thriving town of Tipton, Missouri) . . .
Letters from Mrs. Oehrke's third-
And Mrs. Schuster's fifth-grade classes.

Oh, how sweetly each note reads,
How very appreciative of me,
Mr. Poet, who spoke of writing
About hot-air balloons, rice pudding,
Turning fall trees, screaming with colorful leaves,
Into rainbow trouts leaping from the sky,
Through my nets, into the eyes

Of every beautiful child-student
From Tipton, Otterville, Syracuse,
Clarksburg, and Fortuna —
The future of an entire community beneath one roof.
And oh, the magical poems *you* wrote for *me*;
They make me so happy,
I could mount my broom and fly right back

To your school, recite new verse,
Describe, again, the ingredients I keep safe
In my attaché case,
Just *in case* I might need to concoct
A witch's brew of new enchantments
With which to abracadabra your brains,
Make you lose yourselves

Back to your untapped imaginations —
 Those cages filled with tyrannosaurs
 And trilobites, two-headed snakes,
 Unicorns, centaurs, five-legged turkeys,
 And a liberal smattering of doggies,
 Spotted Atrociouses, and fluff-muffled Truffles —
 And soar free of your TV's, *almost* forever.

Now, however, as always seems to occur,
 I must search for an end,
 Say good-bye to all my new friends,
 And wend my way home, alone. Each new day
 Is a steppingstone across a very wide river.
 But as I go, please know
 Poet L.D. will remember each of you, with his love.

10/7/89 — [2] (03613)

Opening Up the Territory ^Δ

Actually, this Tuesday morning, so blue
 And crisply faceted with refractions
 Sunlight casts off autumn's leaves,
 As if each were a microcosmic facsimile
 Of an Emersonian prism
 Being energized by the Universal Eye,
 Began seventy-two hours back,
 When you and I drove to Laclede's Landing,
 In downtown St. Louis,
 To pay homage to Eads Bridge
 And count cars of freight trains,
 Like saying rosary,
 As they swayed and screeched over trestles
 Suspending them in our imaginations.

In reality, whether fictive or factual,
 This day I now inhale —
 Oh, what a sweet, vaporous opiate —
 May have commenced many millenniums ago,
 By divine design or otherwise,
 As a glint in the Eye, which sees us, today,
 Seizing each other from separate destinies,
 *

Or maybe it never existed at all.
 Perhaps last Saturday afternoon
 Is just happening now, beneath Eads Bridge,
 Where we, complete strangers,
 Are waiting to progress our uncompleted memories,
 Before venturing west, together,
 In search of a fresh conception of love.

10/10/89 (03428)

Leaf-Notes [△]

Sitting on his front stoop,
 Listening to twilight's sibilances multiply
 Like ripples from a stone thrown into an ocean,
 He recognizes leitmotifs
 Floating on the breeze and begins to score
 Sheer lyrical glissandi
 Not dissonant or cacophonous
 But hypnotically melodic.
 Even the crickets stop their monotony
 While he tunes his instrument to divinity's pitch,
 In the key of infinity.

But the deeper he concentrates,
 The more intuitively he hears leaves
 Twisting through the distant darkness, into the abyss,
 Against whose edge he presses,
 Resisting peering into its invisible rictus,
 For fear he might experience his own disappearance.
 Instead, he transposes their brittle frictions,
 Bowing the sky's viola strings
 Into an intricate solo for human voice —
 A motet, composed of deathless death-notes,
 He hopes to sing, next spring.

10/15/89 (03714)

[How do these Octobering days]

How do these Octobering days
 Know how to go from temperate to cold,
 *

Cope with nature's phasing out of old routines
And grow acclimated to the new?

Who whispers necessary instructions and codes
Into universal ears, vectors breezes
Onto proper settings, lets necromancy
Weave philters into death-sleepers' dreams?

An ancient rite reiterates itself, today.
Even I, a relatively late arriver to the planet,
Can translate this medieval dance
Fast reaching apogee

And comprehend its relevance to me.
Elementally, it's all a matter of timing,
Birth and demise reversing indeterminately,
Seasons and eternities, in an eye blink, intermingling.

10/21/89 (06080)

The Crows Know What He Knows[△]

This crisp Sunday a.m.,
He slips out the front door of his house,
Undetected, steps into its brittleness, on tiptoe,
As though, somehow, his escape mattered.
In fact, he lives alone.
The only witnesses to his presence are crows
Congested higher than his vision goes,
Clotted in the tops of patrician oaks.

Probably, their ferocious cawing
Hasn't been motivated by his intrusion, below,
But by a disemboweled squirrel stretched across a limb,
The steaming, crimson guts
Coveted objects of a hundred lustng predators.
Poised on the porch, he shivers,
Most likely from October's brisk currents
Whispering through his shirt, at the neck.

He seems to pause,
As if uncertain whether to withdraw into his house
Or proceed to his car;
But his brief irresoluteness
*

May indeed only be a meditative hiatus
Or break in thinking's freight-train schedule,
To allow a crack express open track.
His momentary indecisiveness goes unrecorded

Except by three restive crows
He suddenly notices
Abruptly vacating their perches on his chimney,
Soaring toward the source of primordial screeching,
Across the park. Now, although he suspects
His bodily quivering just might be related
To those vociferous, bellicose birds,
He hasn't the guts to speculate how.

10/22 & 10/24/89 — [2] (09011)

Reformed Wino

Seated outdoors, at Zimfel's Café,
In midtown St. Louis,
This sun-faceted October afternoon,
Squeezing a lime into my glass of Diet Coke,
Tonguing my thumb and first finger,
To savor the juice's piquancy,
I allow my dervish psyche
To purge itself of static electricity
The mind attracts as it interacts with persons
Concerned with eclipsing destiny,
Arriving, before their assigned time, at success's depot.
I settle back into a deep state of collapse
And realize I've almost forgotten how to rest, relax,
Come unfocused, unintense, amnesic even.

The sheer release of anguish is orgasmic.
Suddenly, isolated inside the aura of a sunbeam
Haloing my table, unfamiliar to myself
(Perhaps I'm just another cascading dust mote
Blown by God's breath, a whim of His,
Or whispering sibilance vibrating between universes),
A stranger to my surroundings, I sip the liquid
Effervescent in its vessel and disappear.
Its elixir consists of a mixture

*

Half forgetting, half death.
Oh, what a delicious draught,
On a lunes-day afternoon
In a midtown-St. Louis outdoor café,
When staying sober is the only craving I'm able to gratify.

10/23–24/89 — [1] on 10/24 (06081)

Escaping the Present

As he exits the haze-shrouded city,
Via its complex interface of mazy cloverleafs,
Overhead arteries
(Cantilevering, into inner space,
Like daggers thrust, into an assailant's heart,
By an expert in martial arts),
And its circumferential bypasses,
He breathes a polluted sigh of relief,
Shifts his five-speed stick,
One final time, into a freewheeling suspension,
Then settles in, for an unfettered drive south.

He suspects nothing less than perfection
Will attend his pilgrimage,
Yet as his vehicle achieves cruising speed,
Soars too low for radar detection,
He begins to register peculiar engine sounds
That confound every expectation.
After all, just last week,
His car passed state inspection, to a T.
Unmistakably, however, he detects
A disturbing repetition of knocks and clicks.
Mile by mile, he grows suspicious

That hidden forces are conspiring against his mission,
Malicious foes are about to overthrow
His benign inconspicuousness,
Expose him to vicious reprisals,
For his having attempted to outdistance affliction
Perpetrated, against him, by city officials,
Agents assigned to undermine
His decision to bolt from his wife and kids,

*

Make a run for open country,
No matter the risk of being gunned down
From in front as well as behind.

Just north of Farmington,
On a shoulder fronting the Factory Slack Outlet,
He rolls into irreconcilable silence,
Knows that whatever the difficulty,
It's going to require more than lip service
To get it fixed. He switches off the ignition,
Sits in a blind asphyxia,
As his inarticulate anger builds up, inside.
Finally, he abandons his derelict vehicle,
Heads toward the store off to his right,
And enters, inquiring about a phone.

While waiting for a local tow truck,
He browses through racks
Displaying thousand of blazers and suits,
Trousers in unbelievable shades,
Sport and dress shirts, ties, leather belts,
And even considers accepting assistance
From a salesclerk, whose plastic nametag
Identifies her as "Warna Sue Lucas,"
But shyly, politely declines,
Trying to imagine of what her life consists,
Even as he does so.

"Just let me know if I can be of help,"
He hears echoing in his sleep
Or while eating in the adjoining motel/restaurant,
Where he's forced to bed
While they order parts to repair his fuel pump
And electronic ignition, replace the two off-sized tires,
Which, when submerged in a tub of water,
Give off bubbles from not-so-slow leaks
That seem to have been created
By hundreds of punctures — all of it too curious
To be anything less than connubial sabotage.

Two days he stays, a reluctant captive
Not altogether down on his luck,
Justifying his misfortune thus:
It could have been worse, for damn sure!

*

*I might have suffered a “major malfunction,”
Been scattered into space, like astronauts
Aboard the Challenger, or, worse,
Never nurtured the courage, in the first place,
To get off the launch pad, leave Earth.
At least now, once I’m going again,
Only the open road can cuckold me.*

10/24/89 — [3] (04215)

Under the Circumstances [△]

Surviving in the ghetto
Has its reprieves, its occasional consolations,
Although they’re not always so easy
To assess or detect,
When the cock crows with the loon’s frenzy,
The stork refuses to transport cargo,
And the cuckoo iterates its idiotic ritual
Every hour, dark and light,
Imitating the Gestapo’s imminent knock at our door.

The insomniac waiting is fright personified,
But horror also exempts us
From maintaining decorum, tending to former chores.
None of us spends much energy grieving, anymore,
Lamenting each recent surrender to death.
We’ve even suspended teaching, praying,
Meeting, collectively, to discuss events
We’ve absolutely no say-so in swaying.
Resignation is simpler to sustain than faith in God.

More to the point, who would ever have believed
We’d condone — no, *encourage* —
Our own daughters’ soliciting on street corners
Where our elite once converged
Or dreamed we’d become history’s pimps,
Forcing our issue, our wives, into invisible stirrups,
To lift their knees not for delivering babies
But to make their fleshly temples
Readily accessible to *anyone* with pfennigs for bread?

10/25 & 10/27/89 (00285)

[Often, slipping soft bedsheets] [‡]

Often, slipping soft bedsheets
Over his naked body, up to his neck,
He's wondered why the loss of his entire family
Caused him so much solitude.
After that event,
Thought, talk, dreams disappeared,
As if the holocaust he survived
(Only in these years has he disciplined himself
To call his torment by name)
Had been a cosmic firestorm

10/29/89 (01505)

**[He can almost taste the savory tang of
excitement] ^Δ**

He can almost taste the savory tang of excitement
Emanating from Glenridge Elementary,
This sun-drenched, end-of-October afternoon,
And so he should. It's Halloween,
And each child is incandescent,
As if he or she has just seen,
And shared in feeding, a friendly ghost.

He sits outside, gazing at the beautifully built school,
Completed in 1929,
Admiring its stone foundation, brickwork,
Ornamental half-timbering,
Slate roof with copper valleys, gutters,
Drain spouts, and four Dutch chimneys.
He's in awe of this splendid haunted house.

He sits biding the entire world's time,
Cherishing the uncommon tranquillity,
Intuiting that, soon enough,
All limbo, pandemonium,
And Hellter-Skelter-on-the-Wye
Will come flooding out those two front portals,
Break loose, invade the countryside.

The actual manumission of spirits
Begins with such inconspicuous delicateness,
He almost misses its sinister implications.
Kindergartners tiptoe out a basement door,
Single file — a warm, voiceless breeze
Insinuating crisp, sun-streaked October.
The scene is irreversibly set.

Suddenly, as if a magician's wand-wave
Had made truth itself
Disclose its most intimate clockwork,
Remove its intricate disguises,
To expose a soul, a whole confederacy of souls,
Seeking transmogrification,
It explodes, shows its true colors.

In one rambunctious, tumultuous confusion,
A hundred, then another hundred, spirits
Come tumbling, some nimbly, others clumsily,
Down the marble stairs and take to the air,
Just slightly levitated — costumed lunatics;
Minnie and Mickey mouses;
Convicts sporting horizontal stripes;

Groucho noses attached to bushy eyebrows
Floating in their own invisible cigar smoke;
Witches in pointed black hats, with broomsticks,
To sweep away possible droppings
Of myriad Alfs, Eeyores, and Tiggers;
Dragons with plastic scales along their tails;
Assorted Freddy Kruegers and Bluebeards;

Cheerleaders aglitter; prima ballerinas;
And princesses sprinkling confetti-stars from wands.
Ah, and not to be outdone,
But holding back until the last plausible moment,
To heighten their frightening effect,
The sixth graders come, a formidable krewe
Out of Mardi Gras or Milton's hissing abyss:

Dybbuks; devils with pitchforks,
Sizzling with imaginary netherworld steam;
Ghosts with foaming fangs,
Brandishing skulls on piles of bones.

*

Finally, anchoring the parade,
Batman in full regalia, from black boots
To black hood with pointy ears

And all conceivable black accouterment in between
(Chest muscles molded into breastplate,
Yellow-and-black-oval bat insignia,
Gloves, eight-foot cape
He keeps sweeping through the air, like a whip)
Makes his appearance — Gotham City's savior,
Come to Clayton to save its victims

From certain apocalypse or at least
Complete lack of originality. (After all,
What other parents than his would encourage and nurture
This hero's inordinate caprice to dress up
In a rented costume so expensive,
They had to forgo eating out, one Friday night —
Batman's "actual backup outfit," they were advised?)

Now, as if waking from a fabled hallucination,
He realizes the images are draining,
Escaping back into the haunted schoolhouse
From which they erupted,
Thirty minutes earlier. He can even discern
Silence returning as screeches and screams
Diminishing to whispers and sibilant syllables.

Just as suddenly as they exploded
Out those hellhole gates, they've retreated,
Dematerialized,
Those sweet, mystical, innocent, fearless faces.
And now, sitting by himself, again,
Atop a railroad tie, he realizes
How really horrifying the silence is that they've left behind.

10/31 — [1] & 11/4/89 (00290)

Troika Practices Tennis ^Δ

This fifty-degree, sun-burnished day,
Troika goes indoors, to play
(Or practice, anyway)

*

A game he's been mastering, by strokes,
At a rate even slower than a slug's pace.
But he's advancing, nonetheless,
Adding to his practical repertoire,
In order that, eventually,
He might rival Rod Laver,
Arthur Ashe, and Bjorn Borg,
Or at least satisfy his own self-imposed goals.

Just now, he volleys with a young instructor,
Beneath a white, arched roof,
Where diffused high-wattage lamps
Waft down the softest light.
His movements approximate the antic gestures
Of a Chaplinesque mannequin
Tilting and canting, in random dance steps,
Inside the halo of a flickering strobe light.
His determination at net and in backcourt
More than compensates
For any lack of coordination he yet possesses.

With half the time allotted to his lesson elapsed,
He grasps a basket, begins rooting
For loose balls. A contraption collects them,
Even as his teacher reviews his progress.
Through the glass I've sat behind,
Spectating, this past hour,
I witness the last part of the lesson: serving.
My boy watches, rapt, as his mentor tosses the ball,
Stretches, arcs his racket overhead,
Then sends the yellow projectile flying.
“Now, you try, Troika. Next year, Wimbledon!”

10/31/89 — [2] (00293)

Implications of Being Implicated^Δ

On this absolutely majestic November morn,
Shorn of all necessary fetters,
He wills his overly active imagination to lapse,
Jettison all a priori formulations
It might have conceived for ordering the universe
*

By circumscribing it with lines of verse
He'd enter onto the blue-ruled pages of his notebook,
Which waits to take his pen strokes
Submissively as a penitent, at a priest's knees,
Genuflecting to receive a wafer, on his tongue —
Poet and paper exultant, being administered reprieve

From needing to be accountable for misdeeds
Committed in the name of prevailing allegiances.
But his creative juices refuse to accommodate him
With such superficial escape.
They insist he seize and be possessed
By the landscape through which he flees
So dispassionately
And become intimately connected with,
Assimilated into, nature's inextricable weave,
For illusion's sake, at least,
If not for nobler, less romantic reasons.

Slowly, he begins raising the shades
He lowered over his eyes' lenses, on leaving,
Hoping, at that time, that the ostrich syndrome
He so often uses, when seeking refuge,
Might once again succeed in safeguarding his privacy.
But blue sky suffused with cumulus wisps,
Trees three-quarters undressed,
Weed grasses at road's sedgy edges,
And the smooth-flowing highway invite him to join in.
Contritely, he listens, as words emerge from silence,
Implicating him in their lives, in his own survival.

11/3/89 — [1] (06082)

[Like a teacher clapping her hands]

Like a teacher clapping her hands
In the ear of a drowsing student,
Afternoon catches his distracted attention,
Admonishes him to head back to the city
Before rapidly multiplying shadows
Obscure vision, make judging distances
A matter of guesswork, unpleasant decision making,
*

Place him in a risk-taking position
Of having to rely on intuition and instinct.

After all, he's never felt confident
Driving through twilight.
The transition from day's illumination,
Into darkness, disorients his brain's gyros,
Causes him to experience dizziness,
Ascending and descending grades,
As the sun genuflects, then dematerializes,
Leaving his left eye wincing,
From the persistence of its sizzling fire.

But an indiscernible force
Keeps him from taking to the highway,
At his predetermined hour.
Knowing better, he procrastinates,
Creates trivial excuses to delay leaving the store.
Perhaps, unconsciously, he's temporizing,
Compensating for the fact that no one's at home,
That home is wherever he arrives,
Any given night . . . night his children and wife.

11/3/89 — [2] (04214)

[He has good days and bad dazes,][△]

He has good days and bad dazes,
Depending on whether the malaise that infected his psyche
Nearly five decades ago
Boomerangs or lies dormant,
Slashes memory's tender carotids,
With its saber-toothed fangs,
Or stays retracted, in vampiric jaws,
Invisible except to his imagination.

Bad ones always seem to be triggered
By mechanisms incapable of rejecting stimuli —
Smoke, odors, infections, wrecks, carcasses —
That affect him in his solar plexus,
Just like yesterday,
When, while jogging the newly paved streets
Venice-ing his subdivision,
He passed a flattened squirrel,

Unexplainably broke stride
(Out of curiosity or involuntary necrophilia,
He had no idea), twice circled it,
Before coming to complete cessation,
To gape at its eyeless left socket,
Jaws having no gums, just loose teeth,
And anus and genitals still bleeding,
From crows' beaks at work even as he arrived.

Driving southeast, now,
He recalls, all too graphically, these details.
But more horrifying was the insight he had,
On leaving that prehistoric scene,
In which those crows, perhaps eight or eighty,
Were systematically ripping their prey to the bone.
He was astounded, then, at how absolutely undisturbed
Nature's order seemed, how no one,

Including himself, expressed perturbation,
Misgivings, outrage, indignation,
Just indifference, obliviousness, resignation,
In the face of such public barbarism,
Especially that victim's fellow squirrels,
Too busy gathering, digging, burying nuts,
Foraging behind blinders, in storing up
Against winter's death-echoes,

To notice a desecration being committed
Right under their very twitching noses
And worse, if alert, failing, in their frenzy
For self-preservation,
To register alarms regarding present threats
To their own tenuous position in the mix
Or recognize their black enemy so near,
For fear of distracting themselves from immediate tasks.

Just now, he realizes why this otherwise blue day
Seems so oppressive and baleful.

He can't expunge that undiminishing image
Of collective smugness his Jewish community boasted,
In its haughty, irreverent insularity,
Proclaiming their privileged lives inviolable,
Without realizing the Reich's circling eagle
Had already spied them and was about to dive.

That was back in '38 — Kristallnacht —
Just prior to his fleeing Leipzig, for Holland,
Then Ellis Island, eventually St. Louis,
Where, to this day, he's not stopped hiding,
Despite assurances of the *Führer's* cyanide-suicide.
Maybe, at his age, he shouldn't be out jogging
Or paying so much attention
To innocuous events indenturing rodents to crows.

11/7/89 (09010)

[Flying debris from a cosmic chimney] ^Δ

Flying debris from a cosmic chimney
Pits my eyes, with irritants.
The astringent sting
Makes them wince,
As if they're caught in a tentacle-net
Depending from a Portuguese man-of-war
Floating on an ocean of cyanide vapors.

Where am I, that such sinister visions
Should swim into sight?

11/10/89 (00466)

Watching for Trains ^Δ

For nearly ten minutes,
That five-engined, ninety-five-car freight,
Out of sight, around the bend,
Lumbered toward them —
A volcano roaring, about to blow —
Before it finally exploded into focus,

Cinders swimming up, from the roadbed,
Black smoke blasting from exhaust stacks,
Banshee-screeching brake shoes scraping drums,
Axles, lacking grease, sparking,
Frames of oversize transport carriers
Swaying too far, side to side.

Not eight feet from the track,
Completely overshadowed, lost in their own awe
Of its lusty force, they sat on the platform,
Unafraid it would betray their trust
In its benign nature
Or absorb them, irreversibly, in its wake.

Suddenly, the end came and went,
Without even a conventional, very-red caboose
Closing the event. Still vibrating,
Like dust motes shimmering in sun shafts,
They entered each other's eyes,
To watch for trains just around the bend.

11/11/89 (03402)

Gestapo Crows ^Δ

History's fragile tissues stretched taut;
Its Achilles tendon snapped,
With a thwack so painfully loud,
No bystander could have remained innocent
Of tragedy, catastrophe, natural disaster,
After that accident, or deny complicity,
Despite distance, coercion, or blind faith
In humankind's inventive penchant for genocide.

Always, those obscene crows out there,
Huddled, brazenly, in his oak trees,
So terribly arrogant, in their contrariness,
Remind him there's no escaping the past,
No matter the perpetrator, place, and date.
Cloaking their Nazi Gestapo uniforms,
Beneath sleek, deep-black feathers,
They wait for the Jew hiding below

To make a break from this St. Louis ghetto,
Half a century after he fled Bialystok . . .
Not waiting, really, but keeping vigil,
Making certain he doesn't elude them again,
"Jew down" fate, with his "usurer"'s tongue,
Short-change the *Führer*, by dying too late
For his *dusbegubka* (exterminator and hearse
All in one Seussian flourish) to arrive.

Today, he dreads those crows
Billowing, in his oak trees, like human smoke puffs
Skittishly lifting from history's cawing chimneys,
Spreading their predatory wings,
Outstretching their talons, poised to swoop down,
Rip his neck tissue, snap his spine,
As he sneaks out of his house, to buy groceries
For next week's reentrenchment against the enemy.

11/14/89 (09009)

Scoring Fugitive Notes

I arrive earlier than usual, this evening,
Without my former companion, my wife,
Aimlessly surrender to this beautiful plaster palace,
Take my seat, settle in, for a spell of music.
Ah, already a sampling of performers
Is engaged in warm-up exercises, tuning,
Readyng themselves for Beethoven and Mozart.

Filaments, fragments, pieces of crazy quilts
Unstitched and cast to the winds
Resonate in my ears. My eyes try to locate
The elusive source of their airy fugues —
French horn, kettledrum, piccolo,
A delicacy of violin notes, chords, phrases,
Harp strains, oboe, bassoon — and fail.

Though my excitement, tonight, seems flat,
While I listen to all these disparate riffs,
Scattered, insignificant snatches
Lifting up, off plucked and bowed strings,
Escaping brass throats, percussive bones and skin,
My psyche begins to shimmer,
As if it intuits a not-so-distant kinship

With these fugitive notes,
An empathy that exists between me
And all those dispossessed practice passages.
Perhaps my eyes and ears
Have been gathering them together, unconsciously,
*

To compose their own Concerto no. 3 in C Minor,
For Piano and Loneliness.

11/17/89 (04213)

A Sudden Chill ^Δ

Seated outdoors, on his porch,
This inordinately warm November afternoon,
He listens to sere, brittle leaves
Still attached to their twigs —
Tongues chanting distant, gypsy lyrics.
Their diminished fifths and sevenths enchant him,
With perplexing ecstasy,
As if their fragile, nonexistent music
Were a prelude not to death but final silence,
Their hissing voices imitating friction
The earth issues, rotating on its axis.

So focused is he, his ears fail to register
Rake tines scraping concrete sidewalks,
As they swoosh leaves from lawn to street;
Stray dogs roaming the neighborhood;
Crows soaring above empty oak trees,
Trading their terribly raucous caw-caw-caws;
Sirens of ambulances and fire engines
Speeding to someone's tragedy,
Somewhere among the city's hidden recesses;
Lovers, husbands and wives, kids
Briskly walking past his invisible presence.

Whatever the attraction compelling his attention,
His senses have gotten all mixed up,
Inside the sinister, crisp swishing of brittle clusters
Set astir by the brisk wind,
Building, minute to minute, into a dissonant crescendo.
Then, before memory can reach his brain,
His bones recognize nature's reverberations
As winter's imminent plaint,
Notifying him his remaining days outside
Are limited, may be finished as of this very afternoon.
Suddenly, he starts twitching like the trembling leaves.

11/19/89 (09024)

Court Stenographer

All afternoon, her inconspicuous fingers,
Manipulating the microcosmic keyboard
Of an electric stenograph,
Click like an arachnid weaving filament —
Indeed, filament of human misdeeds
Being confessed under oath,
Under threat of perjury, penalty of law,
Filamentous ropes dropped from lighter-than-air ships
Above mooring towers shifting in quicksand —

As she assimilates various testimony
From respondents, defendants, expert witnesses
Subpoenaed for this inauspicious occasion,
Translates it into her own Morse code,
Which she'll later transcribe into scurrilous drama,
Soliloquies of moral and oral transgressions,
Frailties, misjudgments, distrustful accusations,
Whose consequences won't ultimately affect her;
Verdicts don't determine her pay.

11/22/89 (00289)

To a Distant Land ^Δ

Over the desolate years,
Though never with a systematic approach,
He's watched documentaries, read diaries
And hidden journals describing ghetto life
During Europe's Nazi scourge.
His inquiries, disorganized and desultory,
Always entered into with tremulous intimidation,
Have persisted, actually escalated, in intensity,
These past three years of his marriage's dissolution,

As if, for him, there were a cryptic connection
Between then and now, those vitiated souls
(Who witnessed involuntary disruption,
Vicious and gratuitously cruel decisions
Indiscriminately separating families,
Shoving wife and son into one cattle car,
*

Father, daughter, and grandmother into another —
 Those misbegotten spirits lost in the shuffle)
 And himself, his own fragile family

Decimated by forces hysterical, irrational, mad,
 The catastrophic unraveling of four desperate lives
 Trying, so hopelessly, to remain intact
 Yet helplessly thrall to their raging psyches —
 Contempt, argumentative defensiveness, hurt, pain,
 Shame, guilt, love . . . oh, above all,
Love, über alles,
 Though neither he nor his wife could stop the train,
 Slow its momentum, sidetrack it

Long enough to let Hades' express,
 Racing headlong toward them, streak past,
 Allow them to escape into a forest
 Whose hallucinatory trees might hide them forever
 (Or at least until the threat of self-annihilation had diminished
 To a few daydreamy memories of the old betrayals),
 Might keep them safe, until they could rearrange priorities,
 Sneak back to their cramped tenement room,
 And thrive, inviolable to assaults from outside and within.

But today, this disparate image from history
 Settles to the base of his eyelids. He cries
 As the station wagon transporting his wife and two children
 To a distant land, to celebrate Thanksgiving,
 Drives away, fades into a blur, at horizon's edge,
 Leaving him stark, bereft, amidst brittle leaves
 Littering the front yard of their large house,
 To which he already knows the four of them will never return.
 Shivering, he waits for the next train, to board.

11/23/89 — [1] (09023)

Giving Thanks

This late Thursday morning,
 He searches for more than an hour,
 Before finding a restaurant open for lunch,
 Then orders Thanksgiving supper early:

*

Continuously refilled coffee cup,
Turkey club (hold the bacon and mayonnaise),
And a piece of cinnamon-spiced pumpkin pie.

This Thursday afternoon,
He searches for a preoccupation
To consume him, let him forget
The funeral he attended, this morning,
Out of respect for his dead spirit.
For three hours, he uses his office as a confessional,
To seek absolution for his solitude.

This twilit Thursday, November 23,
When, normally, by now, he'd be carving the turkey,
Passing hot biscuits, gravy,
Sweet potatoes, cranberries, dressing,
Creamed spinach with breadcrumbs,
And exulting in his boy and girl,
Enjoying the food his wife prepared with such care and love,

He sits in his kitchen, profoundly alone,
Trying to exhume a prayer of gratitude
For his rived marriage and today's bereaving.
He opens the refrigerator, scans its shelves,
Removes a bowl of leftover carrots,
Places it in the microwave, above the stove,
Then returns for English muffins he shoves in the toaster.

From one cabinet, he grabs a jar of peanut butter,
From another, fork and knife, from behind him, a glass
He fills with ice, water from a dispenser.
Responding to the ding and the buzzer,
He gathers all his electrocuted food
And spreads a feast before him, on the countertop.
For dessert, he eats three oatmeal cookies;

The hard, white confectioner's-sugar glaze
Sweetens their coarse taste — ritual wafers,
Whose grains were planted, kneaded, and baked by hand.
Finishing, he stacks his few dishes in the sink,
Refills his glass, turns out the lights,
And trudges upstairs, to his dark bedroom,
Thankful he still has a roof over his head.

[He listens, with the acuity of a squirrel,] †

He listens, with the acuity of a squirrel,
For adversaries that might threaten
His physical existence. He shivers, conspicuously,
In his courtroom seat,
Casting about, for a convenient tree to shinny up,
Hide behind

11/27/89 (06083)

Highway to the Sun

Sparks glinting from imagination's hard tip,
Which he presses against the sun's flint stone,
Hit his eyelids, make him wince,
As if he fears pitted scars might appear
From visions their heated stimuli ignite —
Nebulae, geometric shapes,
Amebas moving in fluid suspension . . .
They blur sight. He drives with caution
Rarely exercised on trips out of the city.

Why no clear image, concrete object,
Or metaphor coalesces
As his forward motion southwesterly progresses,
He doesn't know; he's perplexed, vexed.
On previous journeys, by now
He'd have expected to recognize his route,
Aggressively assess his options,
And get his destination's flight plan
Filed with fancy's regulatory agency.

But somehow, today seems strangely different.
Focus is being obliterated by forces
Whose obscure source remains inscrutable,
Vaguely sinister.
Suddenly, he feels his vehicle freewheeling,
Veering to the west, inexorably.
He watches the steering wheel slowly rotate,
Compensate without his gripping it,
Brake and gas pedals working by themselves,

And he doesn't even try to regain control.
He should have turned around,
Headed back home, the very moment
The road ceased being highway,
Became a flaming Phlegethon
Blinding him, with its reflecting sparks.
Instead, he intensifies his adrenaline,
By tightening his seat belt,
Then waits to crash, head-on, into the sun.

11/28/89 (06084)

Anti-Semitism, 1989 ^Δ

He has absolutely no idea when it began
Or first innocently manifested itself —
The enemy, of course, his adversarial foe,
His wife of nineteen Golgothas,
Hiding, so dormantly, inside their fortress,
All those years of their early romance,
Through the blessed birthing of their two children,
Blue-eyed, blond boy and girl,
So exquisitely robust, so alert —

When it first decided to bare its teeth,
Shadowbox in the mirror,
Brandishing its clawed paws, scowling menacingly,
For some *Mein Kampf* effect
It was already subconsciously formulating,
Preparing to unloose on his unsuspecting universe,
Or when she began seeing the gentile,
Sneaking into bar and bed, with him,
Legitimizing adultery as her Catholic birthright.

Yet, with nauseating lucidity,
He can still recall last Christmas Eve
When she gifted him with two mezuzahs
Because he'd "become so Jewish, lately,"
She said, with a sinister, cynical intent
He intuited, even then,
Meant the beginning of the end of their defense
*

Against the enemy they always heard hissing
Behind the portcullis of their sandcastle fortress.

He read her *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,
Ever issuing with such seeming innocuousness,
From her lips, heard her inconsistent petitions —
Limiting his freedom to pursue his chosen vocation —
Composing poetry (it was a profession too impecunious
To sustain her “nouveau Reich” lifestyle) —
Bore witness, all too frequently,
To her evenings out of the house, for “*putsch* hall” meetings
Her “superiors” required her to attend.

He saw her leave, in neat skirts and blouses,
Festooned with shiny necklaces, bracelets,
Designer brassards and patches
On pant legs, back pockets, hat brims,
Stick pins in her hair, intricate rings,
Perfumes reeking of sickly sweet almond extract,
And return, in the dead of his nightmarish sleep,
Like a phantom snake slithering up each stair,
To her separate bedroom, oblivious to his existence

Or, if not oblivious, insidiously all too aware,
In fact preparing, even then,
To annihilate his presence, expunge his meager influence
On children she’d already intoxicated
With her Teutonic doctrines of distaff superiority,
Until one night, in the kitchen,
She lashed out, “Get those out of this house!
Have them sent to your office, from now on.”
Too stunned to weep, he pushed his plate aside,

Then fled, taking his attaché, mail, coat,
And the two newspapers his wife had deprecated —
Copies of the *St. Louis Jewish Light*,
One of which contained a flattering profile of him,
Among a select number of admired local writers.
“And take those fucking mezuzahs, too!”
She hurled these last words at the back of his head,
Like ashes still flashing in a massive oven.
To this day, his scars are open arteries.

[He was borne by the pen,] [†]

He was borne by the pen,
 and he fully intends to die by it.
 No force, short of torture,
 will let him abort his wish
 to reach the City of Metaphor
 Before he dies
 And fulfill his birthwrite:
 to compose

12/2 — [2] & 12/4/89 (01682)

[Sitting in Busch's Grove, listening to Christmas music,] [†]

Sitting in Busch's Grove, listening to Christmas music,
 Pleasuring in the flaming logs in the fireplace,
 One might almost believe this season
 Is Jesus-joyous, meekly mild and silent,
 Fit for a King and His Child,
 Not a myth conceived to

12/9/89 — [2] (06085)

[This is a most amazing configuration] [‡]

This is a most amazing configuration
 I envisage, from the dress-circle boxes.
 Men in black tuxedos,
 Studs, cuff links, and bow ties
 And women wearing draping black dresses
 Enter the stage, from both wings,
 Carrying their prize possessions, in cases or unsheathed,
 Taking their preassigned seats,
 For the chamber-music concert, this evening —
 Bach, Nielsen, and Amadeus Mozart.

Simultaneously, an endless stream of people
 Slips through portals hidden between seats,
 Fills this filigreed theater hall —

*

Pleasantly dressed women in printed skirts
Surmounted by fur coats of every species
Conceivably extinct; men in business suits
Left over from their workday
Or sportscoats resurrected, for the occasion,
From dead-letter files.

12/9/89 — [3] (06086)

Nate Putterman

Getting an exceptionally late start,
This arctic afternoon,
He heads west, out of the city,
For remote regions, hoping, now,
Just to arrive before darkness sets in.
He no longer swears by his night vision,
Prefers to reach day's port, before twilight,
Whenever business trips to the hinterlands
Hijack his domestic spirit.

Veering south down I-55,
He ponders his logistics and strategies,
Just why he's volunteered to show the line
For Abe Levine (who's bedridden with a bypass),
First in Festus, then in Herculaneum,
And, finally, in Flat River,
At Cotton La Plante's Best Western
Highway 67 whore-tel.

Perhaps he's accepted Acme-Zenith's fiat
Because choice was not an option,
In his choosing to do their bidding,
Especially since his own list of customers
Has consistently thinned, over the past decade,
To a conspicuous trickle of red ink,
As the distance between his sales
And advances against unearned commissions increased.

Everyone in the home office
Knows, too well, of his legendary exploits,
Which he himself circulated, on returning

*

From his Marco Polo voyages to the Spice Islands,
Where native maidens languished naked,
Leaking guava, kiwi, and nameless exotic juices
From tumescent breasts, writhing vaginas.
In short, he always got the "lay of the land,"

Firsthand, subscribing to the company policy
That two birds in the bush
Are always worth more than a hand job
And that, contrary to popular belief,
More than a mouthful
Is not wasted on youth or the aged, either,
Just so long as you keep in mind
That from tiny acorns, large watermelons grow.

Whatever his justification to others,
For having to service Levine's clientele
As well as his own, this December,
He knows what he'll do to amuse himself,
These next few weeks on the road,
When he could be home, making his rounds
At myriad drinking holes he frequents,
To hit on tarts and tricks

He has no business propositioning,
For their risky histories and pedigrees:
He'll be sampling the headiest cloves,
Peppers, coriander, nutmeg, chives, and cinnamon,
From Missouri's Lead Belt.
Just now, snow-stippled foothills
Occupy his windshield. Tending to fill-in orders
For stores along the middle border

Is an abhorrent prospect,
Second only to the boredom he's experienced
Getting here. Soon, he'll get a shot in the arm.
A stiff belt of vodka on the rocks
Has never failed to awaken him
To possibilities of salvaging any lost afternoon.
In fact, he'll be shocked if his "advance reservation"
Isn't already waiting, in room 68.

12/12/89 (02427)

Hope Against Hope: Willy's Ode to Dejection

He awakens at 5:00 a.m.,
This bracing, near-zero December day,
In another of myriad dreary motel rooms
Whose location he can't place,
For the same signatureless, Wyeth-like lithographs
Of hackneyed farm scenes
Affixed to the beige, cinder-block walls
That shelter him from adjoining cells
Containing dozens of other road men
Drumming corporate lines of clothing,
Electrical and janitorial supplies —
Small-town-to-town hucksters
Offering ten-year fluorescent bulbs,
Fadeless threads, ballpoint pens
Guaranteed never to give out;
Itinerant Baptist ministers;
And door-to-door religious pamphleteers;
Sellers of encyclopedias, vacuum cleaners,
And original home-baked,
Southern, rum-laced Christmas pies and cakes.

He awakens into a cheerless blear,
Energizes the TV,
With a blind fumbling of fingers on the control by his bed,
Props his head up,
In an inspired gesture of keeping abreast
Of the plights of Leona Helmsley,
The East Germans, John Lennon, Larry Bird,
And the weather forecast in his zone.
For fifteen minutes, his eyes register
Sesame Street images —
Just an unassimilable blur of words
Matched to video pictures
Whose significance to him, personally,
Is nonexistent, way out here,
Down country a hundred miles from St. Louis,
Where his top priority is,
As it has been for the last two decades,
Servicing Acme-Zenith's
First-line, independent clothing clientele,
Keeping the Roziers and Joseph & Fagin stores
*

Of Missouri, in the Lead Belt, Ozarks,
And along the Iowa and Arkansas borders,
Supplied with work clothes:
Gray, green, navy, and khaki cotton shirts
And coordinating cotton pants.

Showering, he washes off the solitary hours
Accumulated since yesterday,
When he left, with bulging sample cases,
For his weekly salmon run.
Today, if his car starts,
He'll invest his energies canvassing Farmington,
Flat River, Desloge, and Bonne Terre,
Taking orders for a dozen here,
Six more pairs there,
Until singles and tens he converts into twelves
Accrete into a day's aggregate
Capable of throwing a commission
Over and above his expenses, by 40 percent —
The gentleman's rule-of-thumb formula
He's used to keep himself solvent.

But before taking to the road,
He scouts out the connected restaurant or café,
Requests scrambled eggs, whole-wheat toast
With marmalade, if available,
And coffee — double cream and sugar —
Then pencils out, on a napkin,
His battle campaign: store names first,
Merchandise managers
And assistant buyers below,
Followed by the items each has carried
(He knows them to the unit, for five seasons).
Today, he'll fill in missing stock,
Also try to whet their waning appetites
For closeouts and seconds he knows they'll reject,
To protect their already tenuous reputations
As the last of a dying species —
Independents holding out against Target,
J.C. Penney, Wal-Mart, and Sears.

He'll set sales goals for each customer,
Hoping to achieve even an approximation
*

Of his hypothetical total,
Clear overhead, finish by 6:00,
And locate another cheap motel with a vacancy,
Where he can settle in, again,
Amidst myriad anonymous road peddlers
Watching the same nameless TV shows,
Staring at the same framed lithographs
Of barns, farmhouses, silos,
And fields dotted with horses, pigs, and cows,
Inserting the same overweight bodies
Beneath bedspreads displaying the same patterns
Beside identical imitation-Chippendale nightstands
Supporting the same brass lamps,
With the same blown bulbs,
Above drawers containing the exact same
Unopened, Gideon-placed New Testaments,
Then enter the dream known to salesmen alike,
Whether purveyor of Fuller brushes, Pfizer drugs,
IBM mainframes, or Acme-Zenith slacks . . .
That timeless fantasy of striking it rich,
Quitting the daily quest after quotas,
Becoming president of the company,
Growing it into a stock-exchange-listed
Multinational corporation —
Bullshit! Now, he fidgets with the clicker,
Changes stations, submits to televised idiocy,
Hoping sleep will rejuvenate his exhausted body,
For tomorrow's newest hope against hope.

12/13/89 — [1] (02426)

Changes in the Air

All afternoon's silent drive home,
He's changed with the changing sky,
As though he, not it, were being acted upon
By unbridled passion, currents,
Thermals, turbulent variations in air pressure.
Oh, what an eerie experience,
Being forced to compromise permanent features,
For momentary shapes
Occasioned by wind shears and vortices

*

Replacing empty spaces with his wife's face,
Then erasing it, without a trace.

All afternoon's drafty drive home,
He's been caught in winds aloft
(Tempestuous as hornets smoked from their nest),
Submitted his thoughts and memories
To destiny's unpredictable death-wish designs —
A speck in the cosmic praxinoscope,
Which he's witnessed spin out and into vision
And out again. Now, heading north,
On a collision course with a storm
Incorporating his torment, in its dimensions,
He approaches divorce, with stoic abhorrence.

12/13/89 — [2] (04211)

Going and Coming

Snow or no snow,
He knows nothing can keep him home,
When the road seduces his dreams
With fantasies so beguiling,
For their pornographic go-go dancers
Nakedly writhing in parrot cages,
He awakens, at all hours, with an erection,
Discovers he's soiled his sheets,
Rises, in his own bed, totally dislocated,
Groping for familiar objects —
Bell, book, and candle —
That might help him identify the limbo
In which he floats, belly-down.

This snow-blown Saturday afternoon,
Heading toward Cape Girardeau,
With no motivation
Except the unadulterated need to be going,
Imitating his own blood's flowing,
Simulating the earth's perpetual motion,
And without anyone waiting at destination's end,
Other than the natural conclusion
To his primal urgency,
He speeds — a crazy, untethered eagle

*

Flying just inches above the glazed highway.
Imagination's quivering feathers
Keep him in straight-and-level flight.

Soaring, he gradually intuits what it means
To be released from gravity,
Set adrift, in a zone of winds aloft,
So softly stroked by gentle cloud thermals,
He might be lost in foreplay,
Not gliding toward a location miles away,
Be making supple love with a sweetly scented lady,
Into whose vagina he slips slowly,
Sliding, dizzily, down her bottomless Wonderland tunnel,
To funnel's end, before emerging from his fugue,
Into a garden of unearthly delights.
Oh, what sexual ecstasy his mistress provides!
He'll worship his road-goddess until he dies.

12/16/89 — [1] (02425)

Lighting Unity Candles

*For Traci and Stephen Hamblin,
with my love*

Alone again, taking to the road,
This time heading home,
I submit to star-stippled dusk.
Oh, those coruscating sky-candles
Flickering through my windshield,
Glistening so majestically, this Christmas season!
Praying they'll guide me, safely,
To my destination, I listen for voices
Echoing out of the void that swallows me.
Mystically, from the distance,
I hear Traci's and Stephen's altar vows
Reiterating, face to whispering face,
Simply couched truths
They so devotedly collaborated in composing
And spoke, this evening.

Oh, such glistening simplicities,
Their worshipful promises to be humble,

*

Everlastingly loving,
Trusting, above suspicion, covetousness,
And, God forbid, jealousy;
To keep the Judeo-Christian covenant,
By reverencing the home first,
Then church;
To cherish, honor, obey each other;
And, finally, to raise children
With faith in their own godly purpose.

Just now, pressing ahead, alone,
Navigating by the stars,
I have absolutely no doubts about my location,
In relation to theirs,
Just how far apart, yet close, we are,
And I know they're listening to my heart
Glistening in the darkness.

12/16/89 — [2] (00952)

[**Glistening, iridescent icicle crystals —**]

Glistening, iridescent icicle crystals —
Winter's brittle distillations —
Scratch my night vision. Seeing bleeds,
Drips slippery drops
All down the highway, as I drive home,
Praying I'll arrive safely
Before my vital fluids leak out
And disappear into a dark abyss —
The heart's empty auricles,
Still pumping, pumping,
Long after its fragile soul and spirit
Quit calling for them . . . calling . . . calling.

12/16/89 — [3] (04210)

[**Errant rhythms from an exotic source**]

Errant rhythms from an exotic source
Indiscernibly distant
*

Beguile his ears, which twitch like a rabbit's
As he tries to determine the direction
From which those tantalizing sounds issue.

At first, he thinks he's distinguished
Tinny notes of a harpsichord,
Or more-dulcet tones of a clavier,
Traveling forward, across two centuries,
Toward the symphony orchestra's performance

He attends, this Friday night, by himself.
A devoted listener, admirer of Bach
And Mozart and Mendelssohn,
He's just an inconspicuous aficionado,
Who responds, to flute and oboe solos,

With almost the same intensity
His energized sensibilities derive
From virtuoso violin and piano concertos.
Just now, driving southwesterly,
He's a trifle dumbfounded.

He can't isolate or define this music
Which has set his spine and mind-tines
Into sympathetic vibration
With the steady, gentle whine of his tires,
Bowing the highway's strings,

Blowing on its mouthpiece, as they rotate.
He's unable to justify his synchronous dislocation.
Is he really in an audience at Powell Hall,
Cauterized in a musical fire, or in his car,
Drifting toward Farmington, to spend the day

Assimilating fugitive memories
He missed when it came time
To pack up his spirit
And ship it and all its attendant impedimenta
To the next depot, three years ago?

No matter, the errant rhythms he detects
Have left him skeptical, vexed,
Discombobulated. He's an accident about to happen,
A mental wreck, a fugal soul
Dreamed out of existence by an overactive imagination

Striving to free itself of its worst habit:
Inventing symphonies, from thin air,
Whose thematic melodies are so passionate,
He's enraptured when they beckon,
Forgets the destination and purpose of his trip.

Perhaps these lapses have been anodynes
Against his growing melancholia
Over having left his family and home,
To roam the wilderness, in Moses' footsteps,
On glorious quests for the source of metaphor.

12/19/89 (04209)

Willy Dreams of Opening New Territories

Leaving once again
(It seems he's always in between,
Speeding from one port of origin
To the next forwarding address),
Heading northeasterly, toward the city,
He registers a curious phenomenon
His brain won't process or even accept:
The normally east-rising sun
Is unquestionably funneling
In through his back window,
On a decidedly west-ascending slant.
He can't imagine what might have happened
During the night. Possibly, the cold snap,
Razoring to fifteen below zero,
Could have created a reverse polarity
In the stratosphere. Maybe the dry air
Radiating from the wall heater
Caused his sinuses to bleed,
His memory cells to retain carbon dioxide,
Foster amnesia
(He never was much for hand-me-down remedies
And local-pharmacy prognoses),
Allow him to confuse night and day,
Twilight and dawn,
Like an eight-week-old baby,
Believe journey's beginning, this morning,
*

Is, in reality, its downwind leg
And that, soon, he'll be relaxing in his motel room,
Shoeless feet propped up on a pillow,
Head resting against the bedpost,
Above a second one, as he glosses the evening news,
On his remote-control TV —
King of his own homey castle —
Believing today's mission has been accomplished
Rather than, just this minute, initiated,
Despite sunrise appearing,
In *his* lights, anyway, in the wrong position,
Out of sync by exactly 180 degrees.

Whatever the mix-up in God's cosmic order
Or bollix in the heavenly spheres,
He suddenly senses the sun,
Smaller now, squatting atop his right shoulder,
Like a weightless rider accompanying him
In whichever direction he's traveling.
Ahead, he recognizes, above snow-covered trees,
Diffuse fog and exhaust capping the city,
And he knows, by sheer dead reckoning,
He's making his approach into St. Louis.
But as he enters the zone
Of high-density traffic,
A shiver resulting from a total lack of recognition
(A simulation of rigor mortis, he imagines)
Sends his limbs into painful twitching.
He's never been here before — never!
Desperately panning for green-white signs
To guide him to the nearest exit,
His eyes light, like twin owls,

On a roadside billboard
Proclaiming, to him, "Welcome to *NECROPOLIS*,
Population: Millions and Millions,
Elevation: Six Feet Deep."
Adrenaline racing, he slows,
Maneuvers across three lanes, to the right,
Pulls off, onto the snowy shoulder,
And slumps over, atop the steering wheel,
Trying to clear his glassy vision,
Bring breath back into his hyperventilated air sacs,
*

Unremember this horrific experience.
When he looks up,
He discovers he's still in his motel bed.
It's pitch-black, behind curtains he drew.
The digital clock's red figures
Sentinel 1:56 a.m.
Other than for an urgent need to relieve himself
Of too much Diet Pepsi he drank
Four hours earlier,
He seems to be intact.
Actually, he's been in the throes of a bad dream,
Though it doesn't seem to have surfaced,
And now, for the life of him,
He can't recall more than a shred —
Something to do with driving in his car,
Driving beyond the farthest parts
Of his territory. He chuckles, under his breath,
“Surely to open a new account.”

12/20/89 (02424)

[Lublin, Vilna, Grodno, Lodz,] ^Δ

Lublin, Vilna, Grodno, Lodz,
Warsaw, Cracow,
The rivers Vistula and Bug,
Oswiecim, Lvov — oh, and so many more
Names, just names,
He hears snapping off his tongue's tip,
Like brittle icicles,
This blisteringly frigid, snowy morning,
Three days before Christmas (or is it four?).

Sitting at a neighborhood café,
Sipping coffee, he can't quit gazing at the steam
Lifting off the cup's brackish surface,
Floated with tiny iridescent oil slicks
That resemble ice floes or human ash.
No matter how much of the heated draught he drinks,
His shivering doesn't abate,
And he knows it won't either (it never does),
As long as he sees smoke, not steamy vapors,

Sees the decorated Styrofoam cup
From which it issues, into the café's arctic air,
As a chimney stack, imagines bodies, beneath the liquid
Inside the cup, crackling, flaming, crisping,
Keeping the entire outdoors paradoxically warm.
Damn it! Why is it that winter days like these,
Especially around Christmastime,
Always seem to make him fixate on this litany,
As if reciting Polish names from youth

Contained Christian truths. Why him, a Jew,
A fifty-two-year-old Jewish man,
Who somehow found his way to St. Louis,
Through an agency in New York, in '44,
Or was it 1945?
And why is he continually assailed by images of death
He never knew, never saw firsthand,
Eluded, by pure Aryan accident,
When he was six or seven or Methuselahan?

Lublin, Vilna, Grodno, Lodz . . .
Names, just Eastern European names
Of towns and rivers and regions . . .
Ah, but names with odors and sounds
And memories of their own — ghettos, depots,
Camps designated for concentration, work, and death . . .
His heritage, ancient yet recent as this blisteringly frigid morning,
On which coffee he sips scalds his lips
Even as his teeth keep chattering, his eyes twitching.

12/22/89 (09028)

Christmas Eve Morn: An Ode on Mortality, of Sorts ^Δ

*For Jane Goldberg,
with my Christmas love*

From hidden recesses in the half-timbered ceiling
Of this Old English restaurant
Drift classical-guitar strains of Christmas songs

*

Older than ancient: "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,"
"Jingle Bells," "It Came upon a Midnight Clear."
I listen to these mystical hymns.
It's not even 8:00 a.m.
Concentration is exceedingly difficult,
Yet as I sit by myself, waiting for a visitor
With whom I'll break fast,
The music (so familiar, I sense, this minute,
I've been missing it, all year,
Without even realizing it disappeared)
Begins insinuating, into me, different images.
Something very different, yet similar,
In its monumental emptiness, persists,
Bereaves me, visibly. I begin to weep,
Seeing other holiday seasons, other snowy Christmas Eves
And mornings tree-stippled, glee-filled,
With our children screaming ecstatically,
Ripping wrapping and ribbons
From packages containing toys, clothing, candies,
Sweet-Jesus-surprises
From Magian sources echoing Orient voices
In choruses weaving the four of us into God's song,
His into us — oh, that tender score of years,
When we trusted one another, so unspokenly,
No one could have told us
We'd come undone,
Lose such total control of our destinies
That even reconciliatory gestures
Would only increase our pain thresholds,
Without alleviating tensions,
Not keep us from completely destroying the core
Of a marriage whose heritage we shared
With a parasitical world taking its cues from us.
As I wait for my guest, impatience growing,
Waning, eventually being transfigured
Into yet one more unintended disillusionment,
The music once again penetrates my mind,
And I'm brought back from abstraction, from memories,
Dreams of an irretrievable time —
A pilgrim returning, wounded, from his Holy Land,
Certain that what once existed will exist no more,
In anticipatory forms, just evanescent wisps,

*

Glimpses, diminished fifths and sevenths
Of heavenly music off-key, dissonant:
“Joy to the World,” “O Come, All Ye Faithful,”
“God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen,”
And “Away in a Manger” —
Mere Christmas whispers historied and forgotten.
Suddenly, intuitively, I twitch, shudder,
Look up into the face of my intended guest.
Her smile commands me to her, as in a benediction.
Standing, taking her hand, kissing her,
I see my entire future born in her eyes.
Gently, I surrender all my being unto her keeping —
A child again, this Christmas Eve morn.

12/24/89 (03403)

[I take to the highway, you the sky,] Δ

I take to the highway, you the sky,
This post-Christmas morning,
Both of us flying away from each other.
You listen to the slipstream
Seven miles high,
As it flutes smoothly past the sleek fuselage
Sheathing you from freezing oblivion,
I the bittersweet lyrics of unrequited love
Barbra Streisand weaves
From golden fleece
She spins on her throat's magical wheel.

Separations seem to keep us connected,
Despite such slender, tenuous ties
We've cast overboard,
To moor our hearts to the floating island,
In the Isthmus of Us, we've chosen as safe port.
However, each time we flex,
Ever so gently, the least obtrusive tendon,
Its stretching threatens us;
We fear our vessel will be set adrift.
Yet, for now, anyway,
No matter how wide, highway and sky

Are all we rely on,
To bring us back to familiar new beginnings,
Each trip we make
Away from our love's ancient oasis.
Just now, air rushing by
Sounds so frigid, it shivers me.
Flying south, driving westerly,
You and I have exposed ourselves, necessarily,
To potential soul-death.
We can only trust both our destinations,
Our arrivals, are identical and still on schedule.

12/26/89 — [1] (03432)

Crucifixion at Christmas

This Christmas,
Something quite specific is missing.
Ritualistic Christianity, with its mystic music
And mythic history, has disappeared, for me.

I exist inside a wide, white silence
Devoid of tree glitter
And the excitement a child's sheer delight
Engenders in parental sensibilities.

Ah, suddenly, I remember my own dilemma:
My boy and girl are not home
But flown, with their disconsolate mother,
Visiting her family, in Illinois.

Perhaps it's silence or, more likely,
The emptiness in which I've wrapped my spirit,
Like a nonexistent gift (in a colossal box)
I've spent years choosing, for myself.

This evening, I feast on leftovers,
Read passages from Wordsworth, before the fireplace,
Let the Christmas-tree lights
Create ecstatic patterns for their audience,

And drift into vaporous hallucinations,
Whose sources are light-years distant,
*

Their fitful beams crisscrossing, like klieg lights,
Against the backs of my eyes.

Slowly, my watercolor memories run.
I'm crying inconsolably,
As though I've just seen the ghost of Christmas future
Opening my kids' gifts, under the tree —

Packages they left at the green altar,
Four days earlier,
When they began their trek, those three spirits
Headed toward foreign lands, dis-oriented.

All in one night,
My cold tears take on the weight of years.
My whole soul gasps for breath,
Crucified in shabby imitation of Christ, the Jew.

12/26/89 — [2] (04208)

The L.D. and Jan Show Goes off the Air

The end is finally here, old friend.
It's time for us to sign off,
Leave the airwaves,
After twenty-five years of sharing voices,
Collaborating in keeping our programs in sync,
Broadcasting night and day,
Despite occasional lapses,
When laughter, ecstatic passion, and happiness
Were lacking or at a premium
And reading advertisements, old news,
And flat jokes categorized us as hacks.

It's time to shut down transmitters,
But not before repeating our call letters,
Just once more,
To alert our few devoted listeners —
Principally our two children —
We're still here, though growing fainter and fainter
By the day, at the eleventh hour.
And now that we're down to the last few minutes,
*

We grope for an appropriate slogan,
An upbeat note, with which to segue
Into our own separate shows, on unaffiliated stations.

12/27/89 (04207)

My Holocaust Flowers ^Δ

Although I didn't realize it then,
The seeds of my Holocaust poems
Were already german-ating,
In imagination's beds,
Long before their first roots shot down
And shoots, undernourished, brown-edged,
Thrust upward, in paradoxical flourishes,
Through the loose ground below my verse-garden,
And budded open, into doom-blooms.

Now, it's been nearly a decade
Since those flowers —
The earliest resembled ericas, begonias,
Impatiens, violets, and crotos,
Profuse in their tightly bunched clumps,
Like carcinomatous lumps in a pumping lung —
Began shaping themselves to the fluid contours
Of plots I'd tilled to fill with other designs,
And I still don't know who planted those seeds,

Whether or not a kind of divine fancy
Was behind the original idea
Or even why I, a mere tribal scribe
Bent on recording gentler colors and signs,
Should have been chosen, at all,
To tend such an adventitious creation.
Oh, the hours, days I've spent hoeing, weeding,
Pruning, fertilizing, with encouraging words,
Oracular turns of phrase, prayers.

If, in the beginning, I'd only known
Those flowers would require an entire lifetime
To keep them from dying out,
I'd never have allowed their blooms to grow
*

Or made bouquets, taken them in my house,
 Then placed them in crystal vases
 And misted them daily, nightly,
 Obsessed with seeing how long they might survive.
 Ah, but how could a mere poet know

That being “chosen” was really no honor
 But rather an obligation by default
 Of God Himself, a vocation
 Whose duties he’d not be able to refuse?
 Each morning, by five,
 I go outside my dreams, pace their beds —
 They’re as large as those rococo gardens at Versailles —
 And try to decide which flowers I’ll pick,
 To place on my grave, that day.

12/29–30/89 — [1] on 12/30 (00188)

[These words are very fragile,]

These words are very fragile,
 exceedingly delicate.
 They have souls of their own,
 so please treat them with respect.
 Their hearts break easily.
 Don’t subject them, unnecessarily,
 to any unexpected disillusionments.
 They just might forget their definitions,
 lose sight of their roots,
 who they were,
 why they’re alive,
 whether they can still serve a purpose,
 these very fragile, very delicate
 words.

12/30/89 — [2] (00456)

[Cruets, curly-maple washstands,][‡]

Cruets, curly-maple washstands,
 Nappies, plateaus, *Gone with the Wind* lamps,
 *

Weller and Roseville pottery patterns,
Bavaria, Staffordshire, Limoges,
R. S. Prussia china pieces,
Cranberry-glass vases, chocolate-pitcher sets,
Signature books and family albums
One hundred years faded,
Clocks, mirrors, cast-iron banks,
Furniture exotic and

Hooked rugs

1/6/90 — [1] (06088)

[Possessions flutter their wings] [‡]

Possessions flutter their wings
(Furniture, china, pictures, lamps),
Soar off tongue-tips of auctioneers
Skilled in stirring the air, with sibilant fricatives —
Birds that once comforted their owners,
With their decorative songs,
Crowded, now, though briefly, in this Auxiliary Hall aviary,
On folding tables, waiting to be released
And fly in directions their brainless memories
Won't recognize, strange routes to the future,
Their fragile existences, for a while anyway,
Their colorful hues, sweet voices,
For these immediate moments,
Prolonged, sustained, defined by price paid
By the buyer of each lot:

1/6/90 — [2] (06087)

A New Religion ^Δ

Insulated from the universe,
Both of us come to pay obeisance,
Say praises to Braque and Picasso,
Try to locate our own spirits and souls,
Amidst the painters' dislocation of spaces,
*

Those vitiated planes of their irreverent flights of fancy.
Intensely, we genuflect,
Worship beneath altarpieces they created
To adorn modern history's cathedraled museums,
And hope to achieve an epiphany of our own.
Oh, how we must crave salvation!

But why should it be
We require others to execute our expressions of joy,
Exuberance, ecstasy — human incandescences
That light our way to the cave's entrance?
Sitting, resting, surrounded by these relics,
Whose cubistic renderings of mistresses,
Violins, zithers, guitars, poets, and art dealers
Resurrect the intellect, from death,
Just long enough to let it commune with the eyes,
I take up pen and begin etching
My own commandments, on the heart's fractured tablets.

1/9/90 (03615)

Whale Fear

My entire being — blood, bone, soul —
Swallowed whole
Yet still alive, inside this L-eviathan-1011,
Moans in mocking cockiness,
Like the beast's finned rotors groaning into motion.

I wait, with the impatience of Jonah,
For this fan-tailed whale
To depart its gate, take flight,
And soar across the ocean of silver air,
To a shore no human has reached.

There, with good fortune, I'll be disgorged,
In one piece, on an opium-scented beach,
And never more will I taunt the fish,
By pinching its tail or failing to give way
As it swims, on collision course, toward me.

1/10/90 — [1] (06089)

New York Snowstorm ^Δ

*For Jane Goldberg,
this January 11 and always*

I

My sweet, petite paramour,
Can you yet recollect that view you and I owned
Just two January evenings ago,
Soon three, then to be all the past
Fused in one weekend, for our mutual future?

That soft, snowy Manhattan supertime
When we peered through those ten-foot-wide,
One-story-high dining-room windows —
Glass tableaux giving onto Central Park South,
At 59th Street . . . can you still see out?

Are your eyes' pillows still filling
With those fluffy goose-down feathers
That fell with such mesmeric compellingness,
We'd sleep a thousand and three dreamy eves,
In a supple entwining of our bodies? Mine are!

Sadly, no poetry can adequately recapture
That giggling laughter, giddy wit,
Those Marco Polo voyages our fingertips made, at the table,
Through fjords and oceans, past isthmuses,
Sailing each other's open palms. Oh, the touching

Was such a magical passage to lovemaking
That eventually came and kept coming, coming,
Later and later, until only the snow
Knew when our reflections in the sweating glass
Quit witnessing its mystical visitation.

II

This morning, on waking into yesterday's tomorrow,
Memory twitches; it craves the stroking
Your self-sacrifice provided,
Gropes for a sign
That tomorrow's harvest will be ripe and rich tasting.

But my mind seems tentative, almost lost.
First, it tries to focus glints
Of a Childe Hassam street scene imprinted on it,
Heavily impastoed with white hues
Blurring dizzily into a New York snowstorm:

Couples, hidden beneath overcoats and scarves,
Leaning into blinding gusts;
Victorias, landaus, broughams, and phaetons
Drawn by impervious ghostlike horses;
Great cascades of soundless flakes —

All of it out of another time,
Not raw, biting, uninvitingly cold and wet
But, rather, romantic, alive, eternal!
Now, as if one of those fuzzy kerosene lamps
Had flown out of that canvas

And landed in my dark eyes,
I see a globe on a child's night table,
A sealed bowl, containing a city
In miniature, that fills with fluffy snow
When turned upside down, then rerighted.

III

I gaze into the distance, through whiteness
Sifting down, between buildings,
Settling on tree limbs, like diamond dust,
Lullabying the park, where a carousel sleeps.
Oh, the Old World evocation of this scape!

Suddenly, I'm back to you, to us, that night
When you furtively wrapped, in a napkin,
All those sugar cookies
Served us after dessert, on a silver dish,
And stowed them in your purse, for a late-night snack.

We're eating them now, beneath the bedsheets,
Placing their crumbs on each other's lips,
With our tongues, tasting, savoring delicacies —
Snowflakes falling through spaces
Between two people in love for the last time, forever.

Signs of the Times

In youth,
 Everyone's surname seemed the same.
 It mattered inconsequentially
 Whose you'd choose.
 Each contained a plenitude of uniqueness
 And giddy possibilities
 For love, family, a future without tenses.
 "Hofmann," "Goldberg," "Heyen," and "Pei"
 Made scant difference, then.

Today, all that's changed.
Homo sapiens signifies inconstancy,
 Distrust, incestuous nests
 Whose mixed chicks get kicked out
 Before their wing-tip plumage even sets.
 Now, all names in the kingdom
 Are recorded in His Book of Life.
 Look at this page! And this!
 And oh, here's mine and yours, too!

1/11/90 — [1] (00951)

Being Herd

Words converge, on his mind,
 Like a heard of stampeding bison.

Each tries to reach the pass first,
 Squeeze through unscathed,
 Instead of arriving en masse,
 Simultaneously,
 And being trampled to death,
 As they fight in being herd.

1/11/90 — [3] (02188)

At the Confluence of the Picasso and Braque ^Δ

Viewers mill, within this filled museum,
 From room to crowded room,
 *

Along constricted alleys, through shoots
And convoluted corridors,
Going nowhere, unenthusiastically,
Yet progressing, by twist and lurch,
Like rocks, pebbles, and sand granules
Nudged down a stagnant stream
Imperceptibly fed by watercress springs
Engendering currents that bring them,
Eventually, to a singular confluence.

They pause unpredictably, to yawn,
Stretch their jaws, in the cause of oratory,
Hold forth with academic platitudes
And abstractions from history-of-art classes,
Grasp their chins, in awe, puzzlement,
Or feigned enlightenment,
Their uncontained pretentiousness
Calculated to communicate their hubris
To those dubious, skeptical, or too stupid
To risk exposing their vexatiousness
To public scrutiny and slander.

After all, who, having just witnessed
Three hundred and three cubistic canvases
Juxtaposed so systematically, by date and place,
That even Braque and Picasso
Wouldn't be able to distinguish
Their own original creations,
For identical monochromatic hue and motif . . .
Who would dare admit to fatigue,
Risk wearing boredom on his sleeve,
Or let disillusionment with the entire hyped event
Exude from his joyless eyes and lips?

Visitors to this city of ubiquitous epiphanies,
My sweet lady and I
Have left off our necessary pursuits, today,
To sit amidst this refuge,
Stand on the banks of its adventitious tributary
Flowing at its own hypnotic pace.
Focusing below its shallow surface,
We watch its rocks tumble topsy-turvy.
Sporadically, when motion seems to stop or hesitate,
*

We glimpse our own concentric faces
Rippling from love-stones we throw into the stream.

1/12/90 (00478)

Embrace ^Δ

Tonight, sweet Jane, you and I
Are children still too new to each other
To intuit the depths
To which our free fall might plunge
From love's precipice.
We stand naked, face to face,
Surveying our Adam-and-Eve innocence
As though we were a mirror
Invisibly split,
Projecting us both as one reflection,
Completely equal, inextricable.

We two, Jewess and Jew,
Separately sharing a heritage
Of desperate, desolate, unsharing marriages
And surviving our heart's Kristallnacht,
Have finally arrived at desert's edge,
Simultaneously.
I gaze and gaze at the terrain,
Trace the blue veins irrigating your breasts
And, just below your belly, the mystic delta
That waits to cradle my penis
And bless our secular birth.

Tonight, Janie Goldberg,
Yoked in sacred, sensual lovemaking,
We will evoke the flown spirits of all our people
And reunite with them, in flight.
We're their children, their best hope
Of perpetuating the tribe,
Keeping hope itself a breathing possibility.
Though unable to seed offspring,
You and I, standing essence to essence,
Destiny to destiny,
Will embrace our togetherness, forever.

1/15/90 (03405)

Promotion ^{‡ Δ}

Today, we celebrate Troika's graduation
From sixth grade.
Oh, what a momentous occasion,
For this growing soul! Unbridled excitement
Courses through his veins
Not like blood but electricity
Translating itself along high-tension wires
With enough voltage to illuminate a city
The size of a twelve-year-old boy's
Shimmering imagination.

Oh, the surge and diminishment of time's dynamo!
How swiftly it lights the eyes' screens,
Then sends them into silence again.
Today, we parents congregate in the gymnasium
Of Glenridge Elementary School,
In Clayton, Missouri. It's January eighteen,
Nineteen hundred and ninety,
The time exactly nine-fifteen.
Within minutes, the children will file in,
Assume their positions in history's class picture,
And the two of us will snap the shutter,
Stutter-step, uncertain in which direction to go,
Just after kissing him, wishing him

1/18 & 1/21/90 (00987)

A Wake

Although he drove all day long,
Ever away from the city,
The sun never came up, never stayed.
Not knowing what to make
Of such a freakish phenomenon, he drove
And drove his little sports car
Toward, then into, stark darkness,
As if he might catch it from behind,
Sneak up on it, the sun,
Still in bed in a rented room,

*

Upon whose outer door it had placed a card
Instructing the universe, "Do Not Disturb!"
Yet lost, the sun in dalliance
With its cosmic mistress, Artemis,
The moon,
He drove through the Isles of the Blest,
At the outermost edges of the highway
He'd chosen on fleeing the city
Too many hours earlier for him to remember,
Sensing yet, as he'd intuited when he left,
That his only hope of escape
Would be by road.
And he drove until his engine sputtered,
Then died on a shoulder in No-Man's-Land,
Where he buried his fears, at last,
And, stiffly tied to the mast,
Commenced his interminable limbo-wait
For searchers to locate and guide him home,
He the last known conquistador
To leave the Isthmus of Dreams,
For remote oceans,
To map a shorter, if more oblique, route
To morning's eastern shores.

1/19/90 (04206)

Son et lumière ^Δ

Along that thin, invisible filament
Gyving earth to sky —
A spider's web-thread glistening in the midnight sun
Or mica spit separating death from deathlessness —
You and I spin, spiral, entwine.

Our inextricable spirits
Are twin tines of a cosmic tuning fork
Vibrating, in soothing sympathy,
With whispering mystical music played, on magic flutes,
By pipers from the westernmost of the Isles of the Blest.

Pressing breast to breast, gently kissing,
We listen intently, as our hearts coalesce,

*

Slow to the speed of sound,
And reach the frequency at which silence
Lets memory catch up with its ancient echoes.

The ecstasy of our relentless meshing
Ignites St. Elmo's fire;
Striking our mast tips — penis and clitoris —
It shivers our flesh-vessel. Lit from within,
We illuminate the aurora borealis,

Over whose throbbing ocean we pulsate,
Drifting, drifting,
Along love's invisibly glistening filament —
Two lunar specks, one glowing nebula,
Progressing eternity.

1/26-27/90 (03406)

On Sabbatical

The most intense experience
He's ever known,
Traversing seven continents, alone,
Over as many Mosaical years,
Would seem, to the casual observer of human affairs,
Not to have impaired his vision
Or diminished his intellection, ideation, and fancy.
In truth, he's never admitted to disillusionment,
Fits of depression, manic grandiosity,
Hinted that he's ever lacked for companionship
Or Yankee work-ethic ambitiousness.
Indeed, one would never guess or suspect
That below his respectable roof,
Behind its white picket fence,
Beneath those conventional three-piece suits
And weekend Bermuda shorts
And tasseled Bass Weejun loafers,
Breathes the spirit of an incomplete soul,
A vitiated human being
Existing as if by chance, gratuitously,
A ghostly dust mote
Floating not under his own steam
But rather being devoured by relentless solar energy

*

His cells spontaneously incinerate,
Old Moses still roaming,
Still groping, still hoping to find an opening,
From Egyptian city life, into the wilderness,
A home away from his home away from home.

1/30/90 (00890)

Recording Identical Differences

Who would ever have dreamed,
Let alone believed, that one infinitesimal species
Could spawn so many varieties,
Not even aberrations or strange mutations
But rather variations on the theme —
Homo sapiens in all his wise guises.

Not bounded by leaps of imagination's sheep
Or very much dazed
By the amazing display strangers create,
Parading by my temporary resting station,
At Gate 41, I focus on faces,
Stomachs, legs, chests, gestures, pacings.

Neither demographer nor social anthropologist
But sleepy poet
Bent on escaping the city unceremoniously,
I yet register each passerby, eye to eye,
Risk having my ostrich-psyché identified.
“What am I trying to find, out there?”

Perplexity answers my rhetorical question,
With empty rhetoric. “You’re like them,
Putz,” a stentorian voice echoes,
“Identical under your respectable flesh.”
I recognize His inflections,
From Scriptural passages I’ve recited, on Friday nights,

But can’t recall chapter and verse.
Perhaps I’m being summoned by the kings,
Prophets, those ambivalent heroes
Jonah, Job, Moses, Noah, Joshua of Jericho fame,
Abraham, David, even come-lately Apostles
Peter, Matthew, Simon, James, and John, and Jesus.

I must be going crazy, this drowsy morn,
Waiting to board my plane
For Fort Lauderdale,
Intuiting distant beckonings, seizing ghosts
Whose only claim to kinship with me
Is through guilt by *in absentia* association.

I, of course, being a poet,
With no other ties to life than those assigned, at birth,
By proxy, accident, circumstance, divine intervention,
Lack all affiliations, except the guilt,
With my forebears' Semitic heritage.
Always the innocent, I listen for oracles, for inspiration,

Some confirmation of my differentness,
No matter how diminished or inconsequential
In the colossal scope, whose flow I chronicle
For my meager livelihood. But as my ancestors pass,
Nexus to nexus coalescing, collapsing,
I sense an undeniable oneness with all of them,

As if they, too, have registered my presence —
This disengaged intellect that possesses me —
Sitting here, alone, dethroned,
An unknown Jew-poet
Trying to go about my business of staying vital,
Keeping focused on the varieties of human experience

Common to the endless tens of lost tribes
Comprising all nations in the global rain forest.
Slowly at first, growing in resoluteness,
I reach into attaché, grab and open notebook,
And begin composing my own obit and epitaph,
To be inscribed on mankind's stone.

1/31/90 — [1] (00889)

Stymied

There was a time when being stymied,
Instead of fomenting anxiety
And moments of intense disillusionment,
Posed exhilarating Mount Everest climbs
*

Along his mind's sheerest cliffs and slopes.
 Fearlessly motivated, he'd execute maneuvers
 Never used, reach new heights,
 Press through known zones of human endurance,
 Into the rarefied, stratospheric air,
 Where souls go when they leave home,
 To thrive in gossamery silence.

There was a time when being stymied
 Let him produce his most lucid poetry,
 Not Pompeian shard-sparks and echo-specks
 Lacking conclusive closures, beating hearts,
 Breathing occurring inside caesuras and feet.
 But these days, frustration is church and state;
 Dreaming is as obsolete as stitching quilts;
 Planning trips to exotic digs is prohibitive,
 And forgetting is memory's coequal.
 Only dying stymies him.
 He wishes it had arrived day before yesterday.

1/31/90 — [2] (06090)

Rain Man, Chauncey Gardiner, and Poet L.D.

From where he sits, this pacific morning,
 Staring at the ocean, over his patio ledge —
 An impenetrable hedge of sea grapes
 Quivering in the brisk wind whipping shore's edge —
 Listening to its loquacious, whispering sibilances,
 He controls the destinies of all people he knows, today,
 And those he's known over five decades.

Not as a seer shuffling prophecies in his tarot deck
 Nor as a mystic given to visions
 But by shifting memory two degrees to its left,
 Enriching the too-lean mixture of juices
 It inefficiently uses, daily, to fire its pistons,
 Is he able to race back, through the past,
 To places where their fates converged.

Something there is about staring at this much water,
 So predictable in its persistent flux,

*

Listening to its schizophrenic suck-suck,
That relaxes his spirit, even as it inspires him
To reconnect with jettisoned visages and voices,
Images and shapes that furnished rented rooms
He and his family, friends, and miscellaneous waifs occupied

When he was still capable of making rational choices,
Keeping up with the boisterous crew
Whose affluence secured his positions in their social milieu,
Still considered responsible and competent enough
To come to logical conclusions, on his own recognizance,
Remain involved in decision-making
Bearing precariously on his tenuous continuity,

Even if, to their demonstrative consternation,
They felt they needed to indulge his eccentricity,
Cajole and abet his belief in himself as a poet
First and foremost and only,
No matter what other occupations they might assign him.
In truth, that all he wanted to do was write verse
Embarrassed them, as if he were a closet case,

Which, indeed, they later accepted as the irreversible truth.
These days, he stays alone, for months on end,
In a beachside condominium
His estate maintains to his imprecise and meager requirements,
And he fills notebooks, with words from a magic pen,
Mostly recomposing old lives and events,
Occasionally entering into a conversation with the ocean.

2/1/90 — [1] (06091)

Gazing at the Heavens ^Δ

Please appreciate me, sweet lady.
From this distance, I exhort you
To heed my plea. I'm helplessly thrall.
If you neglect making me
Your soul responsibility,
Both of us will suffer a senseless bereaving.
We're destined to share pleasure's measures,
If we can just learn, in time,
*

To express our last best intentions first,
 Let no negative influences deter us
 From worshiping, with gentleness, our subtle differences.

Lady, I appreciate you, tonight.
 Taking repast by myself,
 In this Italian restaurant, La Perla,
 I see, in the candlelight's argenteous flickering,
 Your eyes and smile rising like phoenixes
 Or rainbow moths circling above the flame,
 Keeping me such shimmering company.
 And now, I realize, *mìa* Beatrice,
 You've been in my gaze, all this time,
 Though I couldn't quite place your face, before,
 Through the lenses of our future's telescope.

2/1–2/90 — [2] on 2/1 & 2/2 (03454)

On Retreat ^Δ

When I'm away from you,
 My days expand like ink spilled onto a blotter.
 I think it makes little difference
 Whether I'm able to successfully lose myself in amusements
 That distract me — my obsessive Whitmanesque cataloging
 Of palm trees, sea gulls, Portuguese man-of-wars, and shells,
 The coquettish ocean being doted on, by its beach-people,
 Pebble-clouds flowing down a blue sky,
 Into my eyes, at the confluence of imagination
 And the pelagic stream of consciousness in which I wade, to my ankles,
 Hoping to be totally consumed in leviathan silence,
 Transported to the deepest reachable source of metaphor,
 Without tripping over my feet,
 Inside the skeletal belly of my own colossal body of verse.

When I'm away from you,
 My days, rather than expanding like ink, are lava
 Throbbing, glacially, down the side of my waking solitude.
 Poems I compose from its spewing crucible
 Flow across my pages, seeking their own gratuitous levels.
 Although dangerously close, so close my eyes go blind,
 From vaporous ash clouds spreading out to the horizon,
 *

I risk annihilation by fire, risk being atomized,
On the chance I might glimpse images of you, in the distance,
Performing, in diaphanous silks, Isadora-dances,
To entrance me back to you,
Sidetrack me from the business at hand: recuperation.

But then, during epiphanies like these,
Some force too inscrutable to probe returns me to my sentence,
This exile I'm meant to survive by myself,
Away from you, for ten days, in solitary confinement,
To rediscover discipline, relearn to wield a pen
Whose momentum depends on energy as well as inspiration,
Abstinence rather than overindulgence,
To engender fluid cadences, mellifluous sonority.
This glorious morning, when clouds and waves form a chorus
That drowns out boredom and brooding loneliness,
I surrender soul, body, and intellect to the elements
And pray they'll absorb me into their expansion of days,
Transforming my blood and DNA
Into sand, ocean, air, and into you again, into love.

2/2/90 — [1] (03453)

Moses in the Land of Gentiles ^Δ

Still on retreat, he eats his meals out,
A different restaurant each night,
Never repeating his previous choices,
Never needing to, for an abundance of eateries
In the land of transients — strange places
Inhabited by strangers feeding their faces,
With Kansas City strip steaks,
Calzones, pizzas, and veal parmigiana,
Cajun dishes like blackened fishes and chicken . . .
Strangers to each other and to him,
In strange spots with strange specialties of the house,
Strange ways of accommodating strangers,
Making their temporary stays memorable enough
To persuade them to return,
An event he's already begun contemplating, for himself,
Though not yet half done with his onion bun.
For decades, he's kept to this routine.

*

In truth, he's been too meek to accept invitations
Extended him whenever he spends
Time enough in any one location
To be identified. He's Moses, the wilderness roamer,
Moses, the wandering Hebrew,
Traversing deserts, groping, incessantly,
For someone who'll fix him
A home-cooked meal, on a regular basis,
Consisting of hard-to-get delicacies:
Kreplach, cream cheese and lox on bagel, gefilte fish,
Kosher corned beef,
Matzo-ball soup, latkes, kugel,
Wedding strudel, and macaroons by the pound.
Oh, if only Canaan were days away,
He'd be satisfied even with milk and honey,
Provided they were pasteurized and purified.

2/2/90 — [3] (00887)

Lord's-Spore ^Δ

Aye, there's a fine, high breeze
Heeling sleek sailboats leaving Port Everglades,
For open ocean, this sun-laced morning.
From this balcony by the beach,
I watch these delicate ships,
Slipping like shuttles through homespun,
Seam the waves into a crazy quilt
Whose white, glistening froth
Forms an intricate turkey-stitch pattern
That imitates striated clouds wisping south.

My heart dreams itself awake,
Takes the shape of a kite, gull wing, sail.
Oh, to be fancy's surrogate,
Cut loose on hallucination's swirling thermals,
My tail unfurled, leading edges angling skyward,
My weightless soul buoyed, in soundless movement,
Through memory, past death's purlieus,
Into lacunae of winds aloft,
Where vision is an endless series of mirrors
Reflecting every chrysalis of my evolving spirit's transfiguration.

Aye, there's a fine, high breeze
 Transporting my vessel out to sea,
 Through the green-seething swell.
 No telling when, if ever again,
 I'll reverse my course,
 Return to Earth, for a spell of riot,
 Be done with my flight.
 This glorious morning, by Fort Lauderdale's shore,
 I'm a Lord's-spore, borne toward the sun,
 Whose hour will elsewhere have its flowering.

2/3/90 — [1] (05469)

[Some with white-haired, caved-in chests,][‡]

Some with white-haired, caved-in chests,
 Those ancient Jewish and gentile patriarchs,
 Prophets, apostles, wise men
 (Call themselves what they will),
 Whose skeletal legs and arms
 Approximate the girth of a five-year-old's limbs;
 Their women with distended bellies,
 Tumescent, pendulous breasts, elephantine thighs —
 Wives who've survived all plagues,
 Famines, years of plenty,
 With equal obliviousness, as though they
 Exemplify paradox's unexplained strength;
 Others, their grand-issue, pissing the water yellow,
 Bleating like baby sheep and goats,
 Owning the moments, with their frantic antics,
 While their parents wince, with submissive embarrassment,
 From the lounge chairs surrounding the pool.

2/3/90 — [2] (06092)

Rod McKuen, at Heart

For all he knows or really cares,
 This scene surrounding the pool where he lounges
 Might exist on an invisible Greek vase.
 As a poet on leave from his senses, this week,

*

Vacationing at Fort Lauderdale's
Posh Lago Mar resort,
His only hope is to recover seclusion,
Recuperate from the rigors of a thriving business
He's created, lately, with books
(Also available on tape, video, and CD)
He's made, to be distributed in quick shops,
Package-liquor and grocery stores,
As well as the ubiquitous venues of mass marketing —
Chain bookstores located in shopping malls —
Products with "R" and "X" ratings,
Poetry erotic, exotic, provocative, and hypnotic,
Guaranteed, on first read, view, listen,
To stimulate the most flaccid libido to orgasm,
Reach climax before reaching poetic closure.

Oh, what a windfall he discovered, just by chance,
One uninspired day, in the recording studio,
While the engineer was changing reels,
When he took down his pants, to relieve himself
In the bathroom close by,
And subsequently recited in the raw, achieving freedom
He'd never experienced in his delivery.
Over time, he'd record while fornicating on the floor,
All available extra-sensitive microphones
Pressed into his "servicing," for authentic effect.
Eventually, he'd rely on teenage virgins
From local parochial schools,
To sit in the engineering booth and cheer
As he threw himself into his work,
With growing perverseness.
And, oh, how he perfected his fortuitous experiment,
Until the day arrived when he realized
He'd exhausted all his verse,
The entire accumulation of the past three decades.

And worse, he couldn't get it up
To write even a single new line,
One tiny strophe or measure.
That was when he decided to take his first vacation,
Leave his business
To those who know nothing about poetry.

**[For so many years, he devoted his energy
and passion —] [†]**

For so many years, he devoted his energy and passion —
Passion, his hope

2/3/90 — [4] (10445)

All That Glitters ^Δ

At least once each trip to Fort Lauderdale,
He'd make reservations,
Take his wife and two children to the River Watch
(To dine at twilight — ritual repast),
Through whose picture windows,
Overlooking the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway
And its drawbridge, crossing the harbor,
Where cruise ships and freighters make berth,
They could marvel at the procession of pleasure craft
Sliding past like gliding swans,
Be dazzled by the unabating display of affluence.

This Saturday evening, he traces the boats' passages,
Amazed, as always, as he gazes out,
Intrigued to see the tall vessels backing up,
Waiting for the bridge's leaves to lift,
Let the masts clear. He's as impatient as they,
To see both sides rise, and as eager.
But tonight, twilight disguises its ritual,
And the ships give off signals
He can't translate. Sitting here,
He misses his two magicians and pixie wife,
Wishes his marriage weren't like this glittering night.

2/3/90 — [5] (04205)

Jet Lag ^Δ

From this poolside vantage,
Beneath a breeze-ruffled umbrella,
He pans the cabana-dotted, tan-sand beach
*

And finds it nearly impossible
To effect the necessary mental transition
That will let him suspend disbelief he's really arrived.
His difficulty lies in stultifying persistence of memory:
Snow, six wet inches deep,
Still finds openings between boot tops and socks,
Freezes, to gnawing rawness, the tip of his nose,
Though he fled St. Louis three days ago.

Straddling a padded, towel-covered lounge chair,
Slowly roasting, like baby-back ribs,
In a Floridian sun-fired oven
Preheated to 85 February degrees,
He can almost hear his body fat sizzling,
Almost feel his blood simmering, at a boil.
Reluctantly, he resists leaping into the pool,
To cool off, for fear of triggering mechanisms
That might create a blizzard. Superstitious,
He refuses to risk screwing up his vacation,
Spend it in two places simultaneously.

2/4/90 — [1] (06094)

An American Holocaust[△]

The pain of having had my children taken from me
Is greater than being caught in a Noah-rain
Whose drops are red-hot clinkers
Exploding from Topf ovens
Belching, day and night, in the invisible welkin —

Those blessed souls
I've been so devoted to, this past decade and a half,
Subverted, through distaff propaganda,
And abruptly cut off from their father's wisdom,
Experience, discipline, and gentle friendship.

Oh, the emptiness! My silent grief
Is a ceaseless cheeping of parakeets, in the ears,
That cancels the beating heart's cadences.
No blood irrigates my emotions;
Even weeds refuse to appropriate my dry senses.

But the greatest pain is witnessing my kids, as they grow,
From a distance less and less accessible,
For dense fencing separating our souls,
Which my wife has spliced, throughout its length of days,
With Nazi hostility. In her barbed-wire, I die!

2/4/90 — [2] (00965)

Floridian Reveries ^Δ

They first came to Florida
More than forty years ago, closer to fifty.
That was just after the war,
When the “*elemento Latino*”
Was not synonymous with crack and heroin
But Xavier Cugat and Carmen Miranda
Performing exotic rumba and samba dances
An entire generation would soon emulate.

They stayed in Hollywood, at the Sheldon,
And then, for the next three seasons,
Upgraded their accommodations,
To the Boca Raton Hotel,
Which boasted a pool with private cabanas,
Buffets every night,
Whose heights of Dionysian sumptuousness
Were carved-ice displays of leviathans, swans,
Mermaids, and cornucopias,
Spewing, from their fountainous mouths, beaks, horns,
Honeydew, kiwi, and cantaloupe balls,
The whole festooned with fresh-cut birds-of-paradise —
Oh, what a Polynesia for eight-year-old eyes!

The pediatrician had advised his mother
That she might consider taking her sickly child
Away from St. Louis, for the winter months,
To a milder hibernal clime,
Let him recuperate from chronic colds,
By prolonged exposure to the temperate humidity of that zone,
Providing they could afford such luxury.

And she arranged to take him there,
December through February,

*

His dad commuting every second weekend,
By plane, from New York,
Where he conducted business out of a suite
In the Savoy-Plaza Hotel, across from Reuben's
And FAO Schwarz. The boy could remember this —
These two personal houses of worship,
Their apple pancakes and Lionel trains,
Which he'd so coveted when accompanying his dad —
Far more vividly than those earlier recollections,
And yet, for reasons undiscernible to him,
Vestiges of those first journeys to Florida's east coast
Must have settled into accessible memory circuits,

Because even today,
Sitting on this condominium's patio, in Fort Lauderdale,
Contemplating the exact same ocean
He's seen at least fifty times, over the decades,
In 8 mm black-and-white and Kodacolor home movies
His mother recorded fastidiously, from '46
Through the waning December days of 1949,
He's still susceptible to a vague sentimentality
That calls him back to that era.
Perhaps it has more to do with the fact
That, at forty-eight,
He's in Florida, visiting both his parents,
Who've made winter trips here, the past ten years,
With increasing frequency . . . not reminiscing about the past
But rather sharing meals and movies,
Walks on the jellyfish-strewn beach, with them,
The man a boy again, in this dynamic context,
As though no time had elapsed;
Only, he knows that it has, watching his mother's hands
Shake while clasping a fork,
Grasping a cup, holding the newspaper close to her face,
His father repeatedly drying his forehead and neck,
With a tissue, vexed because he's sweating
Despite feeling so cold.

Now, he realizes how parents and child
Have reversed their places:
They've become the sickly ones, requiring care,
He the vital son, a writer, now,
Energized and functioning at such a frantic pitch,
*

He shimmers like sound waves
Dancing back and forth, between the moon and Earth.

Suddenly, looking in, through the patio's plate glass,
He glimpses the two of them
At the breakfast table, his dad slicing coffeecake,
Placing the triangles on two plates,
His mother setting out napkins and silverware,
His juice, her coffee,
And he watches, from his oblique position,
As they eat in silence
Or maybe not in silence. He really can't translate
The language vibrating between the eyes of his parents,
Who've shared fifty-two years,
Married to a dream
That their love for each other, if not they,
Might never die. The boy's tears testify
To the perpetuation of their legacy.

2/8/90 (06095)

[Even now, an hour later,]

Even now, an hour later,
Seated aboard his plane, anticipating takeoff,
He can still glimpse the two of them
Driving away from the airport, in their station wagon,
His beautiful septua- and octogenarian parents,
With whom he's shared the last five days,
In their Fort Lauderdale condominium.

He sees their faces, arrested in memory's halo,
Slipping into fleet retrograde,
Out of his gaze, into history.
Yet, as if wishing he could kiss them again,
As he did when they dropped him off, they linger,
Simulacra shimmering in the sky,
Through which the jet lifts, to its preassigned altitude.

Three miles out and half as many miles high,
Beyond Port Everglades,
The plane wheels in a slow, sweeping, northerly arc.

*

He isolates, below and behind its shadow,
Rocks that protect, from erosion,
The neck where outlet connects with ocean,
And he envisions his parents inside their apartment,

Not a hundred yards from the beach,
Possibly standing on their patio,
Imagining him up here, in their distant focusing,
Even as he telescopes them, with his Mount Palomar lens,
Or perhaps back inside, lapsing into the silence
His absence necessarily will have engendered,
His passage leaving, in its wake, a great vacuum,

He having accompanied them to three movies
And a Neil Simon play, *Rumors: A Farce*,
Let them introduce him to their favorite restaurants,
Followed them through their grocery-store routine,
While his mother bought fruits, newspapers, and juices,
His father pecan and butter-crumb Entenmann's cakes,
Elephant ears, and Häagen-Dazs ice cream,

And having watched and listened to both of them
Occupy their diminished preoccupations,
With talk of friends who no longer exist,
Grandchildren whose frenetic juvenescence
Forces them to limit their visits to occasional celebrations,
What they'll do when they return to St. Louis,
And how long they'll stay before venturing back to Florida,

He also having watched his dad
Conduct business as usual, from the kitchen table,
With the mad, impassioned enthusiasm he had
Thirty, fifty years back,
And walked the beach, with his mother,
Sharing in her vital curiosity about South Africa
And Russia, seashells, life, and his writing career.

And as his jet slips inconspicuously into twilight,
He realizes that the last five days, spent with his parents,
Have allowed him to resurrect
The long-neglected child he left in their keeping,
So many eons prior, on seeking manhood,
And express his indebtedness and appreciation to them,
For having bequeathed him their collective gentleness.

Tossed in the soft turbulence of winds aloft,
He weeps. His tears irrigate, with boyish joy,
All those years of his growing up.
Now, nearly three hours later,
He can still feel their lips kissing his,
Still hear their "Safe flight, son — we love you"
Resonating in his ears, and he knows he always will.

2/9/90 (06096)

Restraining Order Enforced

This Monday morning,
Awakening in the Breckenridge Hotel,
He senses himself to be Willy Sypher, for real,
Arrived in *Hölle*,
The final resting place of motel souls,
Not exactly alone
But rather bereft of all former possessions,
Including two children —
A factor with which to contend —
Rendered defenseless overnight . . .
A homeless waif
Living out of a suitcase,
In a hundred-and-ten-dollar-a-day shelter
Owned by his father's estate,
Living off the cuff, high on the hog,
For a one-trick pony
Who's been evicted, like a dog,
By his alcoholic, adulterous, drug-addicted wife,
He just a poet,
Whose most egregious crime against humanity
Has been his unwillingness to suspend disbelief
Long enough to realize
He's been missing in action, for a decade, at least,
Lost in the rice paddies of marital discord,
No POW
But a Mosaical Jew in combat fatigues,
Crawling across a Sinai
Whose terra firma is shifting quicksand.

This sunny St. Louis morning,
He raises his head ever so cautiously above the edge
*

Of dawn's foxhole, above the snail shell
He shoulders without knowing it,
And surveys the forbidding promontories of the terrain
That surrounds him, geodesically,
On eight sides.
Where will today's destination deposit him, by night?
He needn't commit empty rhetoric.
The gods have long been privy to his sticky predicament,
Sympathetic toward his destiny,
Which they're powerless to alter to the tiniest degree.
Yet he does have one wish,
As if it might make a slight difference
In the foregone disposition of his fate:
Maybe God could send out, by cab,
A few pairs of socks, clean underwear,
And his old toothbrush,
With the worn bristles that conform softly to his gums,
To augment the gratis paste
And impressive array of complementary toiletries
This hundred-and-ten-dollar-a-day Elba
Provides its VIP exiles.

2/12/90 (03625)

[As he escapes St. Louis, in broad daylight,]

As he escapes St. Louis, in broad daylight,
His eyes register office buildings
Rising, ostentatiously,
Where, just a few memories ago,
Cornfields and mooing cows flourished.

Their Art Deco motifs
Are reminiscent of conspicuous decorativeness
That was once in vogue
But now seems outmoded, in its newness.
After all, garishness has ever been considered
In the avant-garde of mass marketing
Targeted at those with the most blatant bad taste.

Driving southwesterly,
He regrets harboring such abysmal cynicism,
Tries to hold, in check,

*

Skeptical impressions he has about souls
Who spend their lives in and out of those hives

Honeycombed with separate cubicles
Human beings get assigned to
In order to define their usefulness to the colony,
Tribe, family, phylum, flock —
Safety deposit boxes
In which they lock their private identities,
On a daily basis, to save face with God.

He chastises himself, for reflecting, on society,
With such a jaundiced eye,
Especially since he suspects his own qualifications
Are, at best, questionable,
With his being a bard, doubly suspect to the public.

Yet the issue persists,
That dialectical business about the Frenchmen,
All fifty million of them,
Somehow being incorruptible, above the law,
Their opinion gospel to the tenth power.
He can't deny he, not they, bears the greatest risk
Of being ultimately judged irresponsible,

For having tried to eke out a livelihood,
From his trunk, on the run,
During hours that change from minute to day,
Without notification of closing or opening —
The road-peddler poet showing his line,

Line by line,
To anyone who'll buy a dime's worth of rhymes
From a pieman on the go,
A clothier reclothed in godly raiment
Only he can see, for its invisibility.

2/13, 2/20 — [3], & 3/8/90 — [1-2?] (02423)

Sky-Blue You ^Δ

This lapis lazuli sky,
So dazzling that the eyes defy their orbits,
*

Fly, centrifugally, into the azure,
 To seek the source of light,
 Cauterizes my thoughts, ignites fancy,
 In its ultraviolet incandescence.

Momentarily, I'm a tree
 Reaching up, to touch eternity,
 With brittle twigs
 Containing my potential for growth,
 Limbs shooting up, sprouting sun-buds
 Blooming into cloud-flowers.

Now, I intuit color itself,
 The origin of all cerulean hues,
 Whose resolution is a halo
 Wombing the earth, in its universal glow —
 God's love suffusing mine for you,
 This blue, blue February afternoon.

2/17 & 2/19/90 (03407)

[Mustering his most eloquent and graceful rhetoric,][‡]

Mustering his most eloquent and graceful rhetoric,
 Sane, rational logic,
 To argue his case before the magistrate,
 He begins his well-rehearsed monologue,
 Knowing the verdict has been decided
 Prior to this trial: he's been proven guilty,
 Accused of a questionable reputation,
 Undignified indiscretions, acts of violence,
 Reprehensible deeds allegedly committed
 Against humanity — an “adult abuser”
 (Who could never even lift a baby bird
 From its nest, for fear of maiming it),
 Accused of having beaten his children, with words,
 Violated his wife physically,
 Perpetrated vulgarities and barbarous epithets.

“All I can say, your honor,
 Is that I am innocent of all allegations
 Lodged against me. I am, as you see me,
 *

A man himself abused and damaged
By a conspiracy of his vindictive, unappreciative family.
If devotion to their material and physical needs,
Selfless surrender of all possessions,
Are not acceptable in the eyes of the court,
Then tell me what is!"

2/20/90 — [1] (04204)

Bottom of the Ninth

For Jane Goldberg

This bracing, sun-faceted afternoon,
He sits in a park in Farmington, Missouri,
Watching college kids practice baseball —
Pitching, hitting, chasing fouls,
Maneuvering their bodies, to catch pop flies,
Trap grounders skipping into their mitts,
Chewing, savoring acrid tobacco
Wadded against cheek or between lip and gum
And spitting its black juice, like grasshoppers.

Anonymously, he views this modest spectacle
From a picnic bench behind the fence
At right field's edge,
Then stiffly relinquishes his place,
Traipses, aimlessly, toward the swing set,
And shapes himself to a curved, rubber seat.
Suddenly, his feet are above his head.
Dizziness lifts him out of his miserable solitude,
Into a zone where loneliness doesn't exist.

Within a matter of measureless seconds,
He's soaring above treetops, into the sun,
Running the bases, like Joe DiMaggio,
Jackie Robinson. An amazing sense of liberation
Possesses his brain; the chains have come undone.
Faster than memory can transport imagination,
He's flying toward his own magical adolescence,
Where dreams were his teammates
And, year after year, they were league champs.

Slowing, slowing, the pendulum's flowing motion
Lowers him from the sky,

*

Brings him into alignment with eight still swings,
And abandons him to a wide, silent vantage
Of ball diamond — a spectator among phantoms
In a desolate park. During his hiatus,
The sides have changed. Shades now crouch
Where players he almost recognized manned their positions.
In the bottom of the ninth, life and death are tied.

2/20/90 — [2] (03400)

Petition Dismissed

When love seeks hatred's depths,
Not even the earth's thrumming pump
Can keep its seemingly indefatigable lungs
From drowning themselves
In flatulence, greed, and hostility.

The entire corpus seems to slip into silence,
Without listening to obsequies
Read for its living dead.
Together, petitioner and defendant come, now,
To pray, separately, at graveside,

That each will recognize the other's soul
Gasping for breath, tearing at the latches,
To escape into less fetid air.
Both hope the other will initiate a motion
To dismiss the heart's ex parte order,

Without prejudice, at attorney's costs,
And that, finally, they'll be at liberty
To fill new amphoras,
With still more exhilarating ichor —
Love-blood the earth circulates through human conduits.

2/26/90 (03401)

[Even though she'd been urged, by her attorney,][†]

Even though she'd been urged, by her attorney,
To let him execute, immediately,
A notice of dismissal for her ex parte petition
*

Against her defenseless husband,
She vociferously repudiated this exigency,
Chastised her lawyer, for his circumspection,
Missing, entirely, that his advice had been offered
In his client's best interest.

2/27/90 — [1] (06097)

[To this day, he remains stupefied][†]

To this day, he remains stupefied
As to just how his wife,

2/27/90 — [2] (06098)

[Daniel Ortega, Manuel Noriega —][‡]

Daniel Ortega, Manuel Noriega —
Vowel-rhyming sounds forming names
Even more strangely shameful,
For their ephemeral sameness . . .
Latin American dictators so venal
And self-aggrandizing,
Nothing short of actual free elections,
With the democratic process
Sundering despotic incumbents,
Could expunge corruption from their governments.
What are they, those names,
If not people's representatives
Voicing the politics of freedom and enslavement,
Whether seizing the geographical center of power
Or being mandated into office,
By a majority, in open voting . . .

Names standing for names in a stratified society
Basically disenfranchised
By the myriad disguises anonymity wears
To save face, keep from being recognized,
For Frankensteinian scars around their hearts?

2/27/90 — [3] (06099)

Waiting

*"Dad, could you take me to school, tomorrow morning?
Mom has a meeting."*

Anxiously, hesitatingly, he waits,
Waits outside the house he recently vacated
By mandate of the court's ex parte order.
Inexorably, he waits for his daughter
To appear at the front door,
Book bag and purse slung over her shoulders,
Golden hair glinting like mica flecks,
As she glides down the stairs, to the sidewalk,
Where he waits, in his idling car,
To transport her to Clayton High School.
Waiting past the half-hour,
7:45, ten to eight,
He gazes abstractedly at his dashboard,
Then at snapped pine boughs
Littering the yard, just as he left them,
Three weeks ago.
Waiting, he registers former neighbors
Taking to their cars, exiting Claverach Park, for work,
Venturing out, in bathrobes, to retrieve newspapers.
Even old man Epstein,
Predictable as the crows who own this fiefdom,
Is doing his ritualistic three-mile jog
Through the labyrinthine streets of the subdivision.

Suddenly, he realizes it's eight o' clock,
The time his daughter should be seated at her desk,
In Mr. Lackner's biology class.
He still knows her life's mitered schedule, by heart.
After all, until three weeks ago
(Before being illegally evicted by the police,
For a maliciously prosecuted accusation,
By his irate wife, of adult and child abuse)
And for all but four of her sixteen years,
It was his specific mission
To ferry Miss Trilogy to school, each morning;
But as of yet, she hasn't left the house.
He refrains from honking,
Realizing this peaceable neighborhood's eardrums
Have been perforated by the scourge of scandal

*

At 29 Hillvale. He concentrates on birds
Presaging spring, this first of March,
And weeps imperceptibly,
As if their delirious chirping were a familiar chorus,
While he waits within a halo of humiliation
He's completely helpless to make go away
Or progress toward forgetting and forgiveness —
This regrettable dissolution of two (four) bereft spirits.
Vision blurs, clears, smears with new tears,
Which drip from eyes to lips,
As he witnesses his "baby" finally appear,
Navigate the stairs, and head directly toward his wife's car,
Take a front seat and wait, without looking at him,
Wait, wait, impatiently, for her mother,
Who saunters out, opens and slams her door,
Roars away, up the hill,
And out of the sight he tries to keep focused
Despite the emptiness of this diminished event . . .
He still waiting, waiting for the waiting to end.

3/2–3/90 & 3/8/90 — [1–2?] (04203)

Circusgoer ^Δ

Slowly, slowly,
As if coming alive inside an inflating balloon,
He awakens to a hallucination
Unfolding below sleep's billowing tent.
The Moscow Circus fills his imagination,
With exhilarating visions of women and men
In their twenties, muscular, energetic,
The most beautiful athletic specimens in the universe:
Aerialists swinging from trapezes
Sixty feet high,
Flying, on invisible wings,
Through skies widening in spectators' eyes
Gazing, with slightly terrified awe,
As, one by one, all are caught by the net
Into which each lets himself gracefully fall;
Jugglers; bear tamers; tiger trainers; clowns;
Tightrope balancers and center-ring acrobats
Operating in defiance of all laws —
Momentum, gravity, logic, blood.

Slowly, slowly,
He awakens beneath a big top dreaming supports
And feels his knees strain, climbing a ladder
Dangling from a ceiling he can't see,
For dazzling facets cast, against the darkness,
From a spinning mirror ball,
Like pulsating stars in a faraway galaxy.
Now, he's peering down, at a silent crowd,
Not fearful he'll miscue
Or lose his precious sense of timing
Necessary to nightly survival —
That precise synchrony breathing requires,
When placed on automatic pilot —
But, rather, that he'll stir too soon,
Return to consciousness, before the hallucination
Has allowed him to conclude his circus act
To his satisfaction. Like a man
On a skyscraper's ledge shrouded in clouds,
He paces, pauses, draws himself up
Like a clenched fist, then, with a burst,
Explodes off his perch, earthward,
Descending as if inside a hot-air balloon,
Settling into the eyes of his lady,
Who lies beside him,
Waiting for him to awaken from his restiveness,
To reassure him she's still there,
Just where he left her,
On arriving home from the Moscow Circus,
Late last evening,
When he hurried into bed, naked, ahead of her,
As if chasing, escaping, hiding from something,
Burying his head beneath three pillows —
A child again, for a while,
Under invention's tent.

3/6/90 — [1] (03408)

Beacon

Driving southwesterly, out of the city,
He's sundered by an undertow below an ocean
Into whose cold, briny drowse he's waded,
*

A strange terrestrial Pelagia
He's entered without hesitation, this bleak p.m.,
Hoping to shed dead memories of family and friends,
Swim, endlessly, to the lilac-tinged horizon,
Where flourishes a gentle, peaceable race
Dedicated to opiate forgetting, fleshly pleasures —
Worshipers of bloodletters and lesbians,
Nine-mooned planets, shooting stars,
Dybbuks, and hunger artists —
And establish a fresh profession,
Proselytizing love ethics to natives
Eager to receive his teaching,
Who just might appreciate his different tastes.

Now, as he approaches the sky's outer edge,
The ocean's point of no return,
Where water and air converge,
Discharge their electrons, and change into vapor,
He senses his spirit departing its vessel,
Getting ready to submit, in disappearance,
To mystical transfiguration.
Suddenly, his existence is atomized.
It sifts, like fluttering confetti-butterflies,
Into the misty luminosity of this gloomy day,
Through which he drives, south by southwest,
Toward a destination that will vector him home,
On wavelengths yet emanating from his soul —
A beacon speaking to the weary,
Who, veering too near, might steer clear
Of the shoals on which he wrecked, so long, long ago.

3/6/90 — [2] (04202)

Shot to Shit: Willy Authorizes an RGD*^Δ

Off he takes, in breakneck haste,
From his midweek-rounds-making motel,
Off and running from his own shadow,
Hoping to meet nobody he knows, as he goes,
Who might have any information
Leading to his arrest and eventual conviction
On charges of disseminating misleading advertising

*

Or promulgating planned obsolescence
Of products he promotes for Acme-Zenith Clothing.

After all, how can he be held accountable
For trousers he sells sight unseen,
Shipped directly from the Farmington warehouse,
Without his personal inspection?

I mean, what the shit can I do

If a Singer 552

Or Reece automatic back-pocket machine
Is skipping stitches, from blunt needles,
Or ruining fabric, with its dull knives?

No matter the gravity of the dilemma,
He's prided himself on being "Mr. Agreeable."
Willy Sypher's word is as good as titanium,
A buyer's lifetime guarantee
That he'll make good, personally,
On any discrepancy between booking and shipment
Or quality deficiency or model substitution.
In his territory — Missouri, Illinois, and Arkansas —
The name Sypher is synonymous with dependability
And has been for thirty-five years.
But today, as he heads off, in dense rain,
For stores located in Columbia and Jeff City,
Moberly, Macon, and Kirksville, Mo.,

He senses something's sinisterly amiss.
Whether its the pervasive dullness in his brain,
Despite charging it with three cups of coffee,
Or lingering misgivings he harbors,
For having approved, for distribution to Cohen's, in Sedalia,
The thousand-pair odd lot
Of cotton tropicals and whisper flannels
With slightly shaded legs
And mismeasured waistbands,

He's uncertain. Yet, heading westerly,
Over old Highway 50, out of Tipton,
Through Syracuse, toward the "State Fair City,"
He grows increasingly uneasy.
He's progressed, if not initiated, a crime,
By failing to disclose what he knew,
*

Phone the owner, at Cohen's,
 Once he learned of the "red alert" —
 "Firsts" turned "seconds" and inadvertently shipped.

Homing in on the colossal strip mall
 To which his customer recently moved
 After doing business, in the false-fronted downtown,
 For ninety-eight years, Willy parks,
 Heaves two black suitcases out of his trunk,
 And, shoulders sagging, skulks in.
 Heading toward Meyer Cohen's office, undirected,
 He hesitantly knocks on the door.
 "Sypher? That you? Enter this outhouse

"At your own risk.
 I hope, this time,
 You've brought plenty of time with you."
 Evading his irate client's violent gaze,
 Extending a tentative hand, for an unmet shake,
 Willy kicks over his bulging cases,
 Trips and falls onto the "throne of Cohen,"
 Then waits to be riddled with Yiddish grapeshot,
 His commission for May shot to shit.

** returned-goods disposition*

3/7/90 — [1] (02422)

Glory in the Flower: Crocuses ^Δ

Three years ago, at least,
 Crocuses ceased growing in my garden,
 Those courageous loners
 That so poignantly reminded me of the boy I knew,
 Who, with derring-do and foolhardiness,
 Pursued youth's innocent ambuscades.

Where are they, this bleak February,
 And where is he,
 Now that warming, soothing, hueless breezes
 Are beginning to insinuate spring?
 Frightened by my own shadow,
 I squeeze, furtively, to the season's surface,

Hoping to touch the sky
Just once more and, just once,
Outtalk the snow, with my billowing yellow
And soft-purple petals and slender stalk
Transcending, with unpretentious eloquence,
All agents who would deny my brief efflorescing.

But today, I survey this barren terrain,
Where not even the vaguest trace of my garden remains.
Confronting colorless March, I'm tongue-tied.
My heart craves the days
When those brave harbingers, with their little-boy voices,
Chased naked, daring the sun to outrun them.

3/7 — [2] & 3/9/90 (03409)

A Latter-Day Adam and Eve ^Δ

He awakens beneath a sumptuously flowering bower,
Anointed with love-spill, bathed in fragrances
Exotically, erotically evocative:
Weigela, quince, honeysuckle, nutmeg, gardenia,
And, predominating,
Pungent scents of the supple lady he entered,
Penetrating her, last evening late,
With such delicately probing strokes,
Their gentle souls were forever semen-ted.

Now, he leaves her sleeping, her head below pillows,
In vestigial emulation of the child
She's never completely cleansed from memory.
Slowly drifting down a stream
Flowing, labyrinthine, through the garden
Where they've tasted resurrection,
He waits to be washed ashore,
Locate an opening, and explore morning, alone,
Where, bearing her seed,

He'll plant his body east of Eden.

3/10/90 (03410)

Mind-Traveler

He leaves the city, for parts unknown —
Terra Incognita,
As they say in the trade,
To whose phantom-navigator guild he's belonged
For at least a quarter century.
He presses westerly, under a full head of steam,
Sails stretching at their seams,
Propeller shearing the air, like scissors
Making origami shapes out of the stratosphere.

His modes of transportation,
Components of his peregrine imagination,
Have been interchangeable,
No matter if the unintended destinations
End up being Atlantis, Cíbola, or Balnibarbi —
Whaling boats like the *Pequod*,
Windwagon Smith's prairie schooner,
The *Robert E. Lee* side-wheeler,
Plying the Mississippi, between Natchez and New Orleans,

Sputnik, the *Titanic*, and *Hindenburg*,
Captain Nemo's submarine, the *Nautilus*,
A San Francisco cable car, Lipizzaners,
The Batplane, the Orient Express,
And a measureless procession of freight cars
Screeching toward the abyss
At Nazi Germany's nearly invisible tarpits,
Which were filled with human fossil fuel,
Instead of excavated, to power engines of doom.

He's used whatever conveyance was most convenient,
Even palominos and studs
Belonging to the Cisco Kid, Tom Mix,
Hopalong Cassidy, Don Quixote, Zorro,
Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and the Lone Ranger,
Though he always preferred shabbier nags
Ridden by Pancho, Tonto, and Sancho Panza;
Twice, he even tried to mount Babe,
Paul Bunyan's blue ox.

He's visited so many places,
On trips past his brain's Great Barrier Reefs —

*

Spots embedded in caves and rain forests,
Located at both polar extremities of planet Earth,
Or beyond the aligned constellations —
Without ever even leaving sleep
Or exiting from his study, broom closet, or desk.
Others he's reached just by seating himself
Behind the wheel of his automobile,

From which vantage he's panned the expanding land
Named Missouri, Arkansas, Illinois,
And Kansas, recorded, in a logbook,
Reflections, philosophic and poetic,
On the seasons; God; illogical phenomena;
Holocausts; eschatological inquires into afterlife;
Hot-air balloons; love affairs
With airy fairies and neighbors' wives;
Cows, tapirs, mythical hippos, and phoenixes.

In fact, just now,
Fifty miles out from the city he adopted
Five years ago,
So that he might boast citizenship
In a known quantity,
He fancies himself sole owner and proprietor
Of Pangaea,
Decider of which land masses will be divided,
Which he'll keep intact.

He's passing overhead, at blinding velocity
Supplied by a rocket ship
Of unidentifiable manufacture and origin,
Surveying, like Jesus by Satan guided,
The entire world as yet unevolved,
Trying to locate a suitable opening
Where he might land his vehicle,
Set down roots,
And retire to a civilized coexistence, with his dreams.

But as he goes, no Edenic openings
Disclose possibilities for his settlement.
He loses hope of ever finding a peaceable kingdom
Outside the scope of his own imagination.
Cities, towns, and crossroads hamlets
With fast-food gas stations

*

Pass, in latticework patterns, behind his eyes,
As he presses westerly, toward horizon's sheer cliffs —
A near-fictitious poet chasing his mythic buffalo.

3/13/90 — [1] (00886)

Youth Is Wasted on the Young[△]

At their age, they waste no motions.
Each gesture and innuendo is foreplay.
No energy expended or labor maintained
Is superfluous or redundant
But, rather, is a component of spontaneity
Engaged in for the sake of celebrating love.

They take picnics on a moment's notice,
Without ulterior motives,
Just to throw down a blanket
And get close enough to the earth
To listen to its murmurous blood
Circulating through its roots, shoots, and aquifers.

They take their beats from the Maker's cadences,
Express echoes of divinity,
Kissing wet lips,
Letting fingertips touch twitching lids,
And, risking the ultimate invasion of privacy,
Enter each other's souls, through the eyes.

They savor every embrace, infatuation,
And naked lovemaking
As though tomorrow were a prophecy
Not spoken, an unplayable instrument.
Blessed they consider themselves,
For having discovered consanguineous wisdom

In the design of their entwined intellects.
They seek pleasure for each other
And measure it by climaxes simultaneously achieved.
So precious is their togetherness,
They know better than to squander a second,
Lest time arrest their innocence, in its juvenescence.

3/13 — [2] & 3/16/90 — [1] (03411)

Commuting: Wednesday A.M.

Going northeasterly, toward St. Louis,
He listens to drizzle hitting his windshield.
It sounds like sand grits
Spitting from an air-compressor hose,
Pitting a brick wall behind which he sits,
Waiting for its imminent collapse.
The rain's obsessive hissing
Perforates his eardrums, pains his brain.
His free hand seizes his temples, squeezes,
As if to relieve pressure behind the eyes,
By shutting off all blood flow to his head.

Narrowing vision to a worn beige strip,
He sideslips. Invisible turbulence
Makes straight-and-level flight impossible.
He becomes sicker, by the mile,
Until he finally pulls off, onto a quick-shop lot.
Silence washes over his slumped shape,
Like rolling ocean waves.
Just south of Festus, Missouri, he's stalled,
Out of the squall line presaging typhoons.
He goes inside, buys aspirin and hot brew,
Then resumes. Too soon, he'll be tied to the mast.

3/14/90 (06100)

A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte ^Δ

For Miss Jane

Daffodils, jonquils, crocuses,
Star magnolias, and hyacinth clusters
Dapple this windy March afternoon,
With Seurat dots — pointillistic hues
You and I can almost taste,
Seated across from each other, in this park,
Playing Rummikub,
Between bites of honey-glazed-turkey sandwiches,
Crispy, rippled potato chips,
Chocolate tidbits,
Between nature-gazing, between daydreams.

Oh, those gentle fragrances!
 How they effloresce winter's gessoed canvas,
 Increase the rush of impastoed blood,
 Out from the center, to all our extremities,
 Just by persuading the eyes to believe their own eyes,
 Seeing buds metamorphose into petals —
 A total explosion of the earth's hormones —
 And flat planes change into three-dimensional spaces
 Containing our sedentary shapes,
 As though, without us,
 No picture could possibly exist.

I focus on your twitching lids and lips.
 Concentration leaps across your temples,
 With sensual pulsations. I sit, patiently amazed,
 Watching your slender, nimble fingers
 Manipulate the colors, recalibrate permutations,
 Creating books and runs from the numbered tiles —
 Fragile flowers, delicate fruit trees
 Blossoming above our picnic table's checkered bed . . .
 Seurat dots reflecting in reckless ecstasy,
 On love's Island of La Grand Jatte,
 Along whose impressionistic banks we play.

3/16/90 — [2] (03412)

Word-Birds

His eyes and ears see and hear words
 As prismatically fascinating
 As St. Francis of Assisi's birds
 Perched, miraculously, in mellomax trees
 That grow, profusely, in imagination's forest,
 Birds choiring high and low throat-notes
 His heart knows by rote.
 His loose translations, approximating oracles,
 Shape him into the magical instrument
 He uses to record their poetry —
 A symbiosis informing his uni-verse.

To this day, he's never learned to get close
 Without frightening those singers into silence.
 Always, he's listened to them from distant coverts,
 *

Their songs never more than remote notes,
 Truncated fugues from whole symphonies,
 Phrased by quavering players
 Reaching ranges beyond human assimilation —
 Musical word-birds
 Imitating the earth's eternal rotation,
 Flying in continuous sideways eights,
 Inside his mind's cageless aviary.

3/20–21/90 (06101)

Non eram, sum. Eram, non sum.

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar: . . .*

— William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations
 of Immortality from Recollections of Early
 Childhood”

In the beginning, there was . . .
 the end.

How many times has the tale
 Been begun, by shepherds and professional raconteurs,
 Then suspended, somewhere between
 Terra Incognita and Atlantis,
 Where hopes and dreams compete with phantoms
 And ghostly debris of earlier generations
 Still floats, like pyrite nuggets,
 Down currents nourishing the collective memory,
 Toward the Ocean of Dead Souls?

Is it that conclusions are necessarily provisional,
 Too dependent upon first and final causes,
 To let speculation and serendipitous resolutions
 Move up, from second fiddle to principal position,
 Or that listeners are easily discomfited,
 By intuitions of their finite condition in the universe,
 That compels them to jettison energies
 Most likely more profitably spent
 Concocting poems and plays and paintings
 That at least might mystically approximate
 Epistemological estimations of God's illogical existence?

Whatever the reason, the illusive “between,”
Which should form the nexus
For *initium* and *finis*,
Seems to have been inconclusively charted
Throughout man’s elusive history.
All we really know with any degree of certainty
Is that our evanescing stars
Have elsewhere had their light ignited
And to that far galactic recess
They shall return, intact,
After their borrowed incandescence has passed into darkness.

3/23/90 (06102)

Music Lovers [△]

We brave this evening’s icy debris
From yesterday’s late-March snowstorm,
Which came with such ferocity,
So unexpectedly,
No one who ventured beyond Friday’s horizon
Could navigate the return roads
Without a certain nervous degree of uncertainty
And verbal self-disparagement
For having left home in the first place.

(Last night we went to the Westport Playhouse
To be blown away by the “Jazz Explosion”
Being waged, nationwide, through the bomb-bay doors,
By Freddie Hubbard’s soaring trumpet,
The tenor saxophone of Stanley Turrentine,
And electric piano Lonnie Liston Smith
Let his fingertips rip wide open.
We took a direct hit
And were atomized at ecstasy’s ground zero.)

Despite that cataclysmic blast
At one of nature’s climactic passages —
That second when fragrances of grape hyacinths and crocuses
Sensual the air, with their perennial renascence,
And robins crazy themselves,
Reiterating totemistic rites of spring —
*

We set out again, tonight,
In quest of music to refresh our cellular recesses,
Melodies echoing in the soul's bone-caves.

Instead of cacophonies and dissonances
Arrived at by accident and chance —
Free-flowing epiphanies
Jazzmen risk taking, for the sake of disappearing
In the land of lost and found —
We assimilate bittersweet, romantic harmonies
From Anton Rubinstein's Concerto no. 4,
Interpreted by Shura Cherkassky.
We eavesdrop on these two Russian musicians

And listen to their whisperous, lyrical cadences,
Passionate whole and half,
Quarter, eighth, and liquid sixteenth notes,
Flats and sharps,
Floating into a distance separating them from us.
You and I sit in the first row,
Orchestra section,
Just below the Steinway concert grand,
Transfixed by Shura's hands — magical wands!

Inexorably, our own passions begin to stir
And get all mixed up
In the heroic yet intimate gestures
That dominate the second and third movements.
Our blood dances to the rhythms,
As the conclusion rushes up,
Overwhelming pianist and composer,
Audience, and us, in one exquisitely unexaggerated
But not abrupt dramatic thrust.

Now, those who came to listen or perform
Gather up their few possessions
And exit Powell Symphony Hall,
All aglow in its gold-leaf Tiepolo halos.
We linger like inextricably struck notes
Still reverberating from the piano
Looming, almost humanly, from the stage, above us —
We two, one overtone,
Forming our own indissoluble concerto for love.

All in Green Came My Love Riding^Δ

Even now, ten miles downstream
And receding as obliquely
As watercolor dreams smearing in rain
Falling through sleep's ceiling, on my waking,
I see you, Janie,
Preening in sun-motes funneling from skylights
High above that patio café
Where we exchanged bites of each other's love
While discussing possibilities
For sharing whatever's left of the rest of ourselves.
I seem to have focused on your very-green socks,

Glowing between black high-top tennis shoes
And tattered cuffs of worn blue jeans.
You might be my third-grade girlfriend
Or the enchanted Cinderella
I escorted, so self-consciously, to the senior prom,
In my sleek, silvery '59 Corvette.
Maybe you're a Modigliani lady with blond hair,
Directing my obsessive sexual attention
To your slender arms and neck,
Your electric essence. Whichever image you elicit,
I celebrate your refreshing indifference

To accepted dress, conventional ethics,
And gestures that, if expressed, might expose,
Rather than protect, your fortress
From penetration by invaders.
But most impressed am I by your athletic socks.
The fact that they both match
Is absolutely miraculous. More significant,
The airy-fairy vividness of their viridescence,
On this otherwise grass- and leafless drive,
Creates such a natural splash to my eyes,
I'm bewitched as if by spring's mistress herself.

3/27/90 (03414)

Of Mice and Elephants

He awakens moaning, dislocated,
Bereft as an elephant detached from its herd,
*

Lonelier than any animal could possibly feel.
He intuits this as certainly as he can say,
Three times, in rapid succession, “Beetle-
Juice, Beetlejuice, Beetle-
Juice.” “Jesus, where am I?”
He hears a disembodied voice,
Vaguely recognizable, for its restrained plaint,
Squeak, from beneath the sheets.
Eek! He’d never have believed that wives’ tale
About mice frightening elephants,
Had he not just shuddered,
Hearing that tiny cry rising up from inside him,
To triangulate his position with his spirit’s twin,
Pachyderma africana.

Diffidently, he rises from the floor,
Onto all fours, and crawls, with ponderous steps,
Toward the front hall. He trips on his tail,
As he descends the stairwell
(A cautionary tale, indeed),
Then regains sufficient equilibrium
To reach the abyss, intact,
Avoid falling into the common trauma-pit
Most mice-e-phants,
At least twice in their lives,
Experience, just by acting naturally —
That is, on waking, expecting to be greeted
By children and wife and, later, friends.
Instead, he gets caught up short,
As dead as the rest of them, yet alive,
In the invisible trap divorce set, just yesterday.

3/28/90 (04199)

Tending His Herds

He drives out of Fayette as silently as he arrived,
Backtracks toward Highway 40,
Through countryside grazed by Polled Herefords,
Black Anguses, mainly Charolaises.
Even now, though it’s been sixteen hours
Since he gave his poetry reading,

To a meager audience of lobotomized students
And a paucity of disinterested professors
Obliged to make their presence a matter of record,
For tenure's sake, he's still smarting,
From his disheartening reception.

After all, he's devoted thirty years
To recording his chronicle, nearly thirty years
Competing against mortality's fearsome forces
And his own tendencies toward laziness and stasis,
To make a mark, a scratch, on oblivion's dark gate,
Dreaming himself into the shape that, today, enslaves him —
Road poet, itinerant minstrel, bard —
That silhouette his heated hopes still fill
With millions of syllables forming words
Expanding into verses soaring above his imagination,
Shimmering like the northern lights.

He loses himself in disillusionment and self-pity,
Questions the purpose of his mission,
Decries the pilgrimage that has kept him pressing ahead,
Always to the next, then the next and next
One-night sequestration
Behind microphone and lighted lectern,
That Sisyphean succession of unappreciated holy acts.
Soon, in smells of Anguses, Herefords, and Charolaises,
In their soothing mooing and languid movements, he loses himself,
Loses all sense of the fence against which he leans,
Keening his verses to a herd of curious cows
Crowding curiously close, closer, into his sounds.

3/29/90 (06103)

Still Life with White Hyacinths ^Δ

After the recent freeze
That vitiated Missouri's premature spring
Of three weeks ago,
There's no trace of quinces or crocuses.
Spent white and yellow daffodils
Droop like disillusioned beggars, in gutters,
Clothed in homeless hopes.

Nonetheless, this April first,
 Resurrection shares the air with the scent of onion
 And gentle songs cardinals invent,
 Entering into the spring swing of things.
 Preeminent to our senses
 Are the hyacinths you planted last fall,
 Both the small, purple-grape strain
 And that tall, dull-green-stalked variety,
 Boasting explosive girandoles.
 I bend close to the soggy ground, clip one.
 Hypnotized by its fifteen six-petaled blooms,
 I surrender to its fragrant whiteness,
 Lose myself inside its quietude,
 And, through profuse beauty, renew my love for you.

4/1/90 (03415)

Wunderkind ^Δ

*Mozart's Concerto no. 1 in G Major
 for Flute and Orchestra*

The audience's anticipation
 Sets up a hushed buzzing.
 Suddenly, the conductor crisply takes the stage,
 Mounts his elevated podium,
 And readies himself to energize the silent orchestra.
 All wait, in restless eagerness,
 For the guest soloist, Jean-Pierre Rampal,
 To make his austere appearance.

But before they can actually register his presence,
 He materializes beside the principal violinist.
 They've witnessed him lumber into existence
 As if his limping gait
 Were almost too ungraceful
 For their expectations to assimilate.
 Flashing an impish grin,
 He stands at precipice's edge, ready to leap.

Then, brandishing his solid-gold instrument,
 Both his arms bent at the elbow,

*

Moving in tandem, he begins,
Playing deliriously, like a toddling baby
(Limbs stiffly raised above the shoulders,
To balance its shifting weight)
Oblivious to street traffic
Not three feet away.

Body thrusting in all directions,
Hands in a perpetual gesture of supplication,
He enchanters, from his godly flute,
Epiphanies no human lungs
Could possibly exchange,
Without more inscrutable inspiration.
Not even genius can explain
This singular spirit, so majestically soaring.

For twenty-five minutes,
Through three interdependent movements,
He performs without losing his place
Between spaces the orchestra carves from air
Haloing him; then, he disappears,
As if magically summoned
Back into the audience's initial anticipation —
That wunderkind-jinn Rampal!

4/2 & 4/4/90 (03416)

[He awakens to the telephone's stentorian bell,]^Δ

He awakens to the telephone's stentorian bell,
As he does each morning, early,
In this roadside motel,
Where, for the past three months, daily,
He's made his permanent address
More permanent.

The housefly buzz or insect whir
Stirs him from a sleep-siege
Crowded with locust-blackened clouds
Or, yet more foreboding, Scriptural plagues;
Then comes the youthful maid, tapping in the hall,
With a tray full of coffee and newspaper,

To placate his basic needs,
This pretwilight phase of each new dawn.
He stands behind the open door,
To receive his rations, naked as a basted turkey
Just out of the oven,
About to be carved and eaten by starving people

Who've no reason to question his credentials,
Registration papers, or pedigree,
Rather accept his codependence on them,
Their dynamic requirements and ravishing appetites,
As complete justifications for his existence
And self-immolation sacrifice.

Once fully showered, shaved, and dressed,
He exits his gaseous habitation,
Navigates the rabbit-run corridors,
Toward the elevator, then descends to the lobby,
Where he never encounters a recognizable face
Or finds the environment hospitable.

In fact, this place is his Alcatraz Island
Or Elba, but he's no Al Capone or Napoleon,
Rather Sypher, just Willy Sypher,
Confined to this base of operations,
Which he's been assigned to single-handedly man,
By Asa Branstetter, the immediate liaison

Between him and Acme-Zenith's top management,
Way the hell out here in the "badlands" of Kansas.
Why he ever agreed to do this
Is not just academic but mute and stupid
Beyond any harebrained scheme
He's ever agreed to tackle.

"Youth is its own worst and best excuse —
Or is it *enemy or friend?*"
He mutters, from one end of day to the other,
As he weaves through alien territory,
Pounding quicksand pavement
Leading to emporium doors off limits to him
And to any other Jew purveyor of soft goods
(Men's and ladies' clothes, shoes, hats)
And purses, costume jewelry, and related accessories,
*

Toiletries and perfumes — the “*bare* necessities,”
As so many assistant buyers and “gofers”
Allude to them, with profane, salacious, homegrown humor

Willy’s heard from Wichita to Manhattan,
Lawrence, Salina, Pittsburg,
And the big megillah itself, Kansas City,
Making his forays out from this desolate burg
In the absolute center of Nowhere,
Rural Midwest — America’s great heartland.

Maybe today will surprise his deflated expectations.
Three months after driving out from St. Louis,
With high hopes of opening up
Seventy-five accounts
In half as many Podunk cow towns
Spread, like manure, throughout this state of confusion,

He’s still smarting from ego erosion,
Almost total defeat at the hands of the enemy,
Which variously goes by the names
“Previously Pledged,” “Prior Loyalty,”
The insidious, one-trick-pony syndrome
To which all potential clients seem committed

As if by Tom Sawyerish blood rites
Or unspoken membership in the Brotherhood of Bigotry
And Anti-Semitic Prejudice,
The timeworn “good ol’ boy” conspiracy
He and all his former colleagues, in kind,
Have been made victim to,

Just by the hue of their Sephardic skin,
Pronounced hook of their noses,
Or Nero-like kink in their hair,
Which they happen, purely by fate-quirk, to possess.
Whatever the case may be,
Willy knows that averaging one order a week,

Three orders every three weeks,
For three stinking months,
Won’t even pay the tab he’s run up at the motel.
And unless he does something miraculous,
Spectacular, and real quick,
He’s in exceedingly deep shit, at Acme-Zenith.

Today, it's Pittsburg — Zeno's Haberdashers.
"Jesus, Jesus Christ," he grumbles,
Maneuvering his used '52 Pontiac Chieftain
Into the alley behind Perlmutter's store,
To get close to the back door,
Make it easier to schlep cases and racks

Into whatever dimly lighted back room they might
Or might not provide him, to do his display
(To them, tedious and hopefully abbreviated),
Before they give him the all-too-familiar
"Heave-ho, so long,
Try us again in a hundred and one years"

Song-and-dance, valedictory-speech routine
He's memorized, these past ninety days,
As though he's had the supporting role
In a recent production of *Pipe Dream*.
He parks beside a cluster of garbage cans,
Screws up his courage, grips a case in each hand,

And forces his way into Zeno's storeroom,
Where he's greeted by a seamstress
Cuffing men's pants, at a bench
Presided over by a 1910 Wilcox & Gibbs hemmer
She keeps running by pumping a treadle
Up and down, with her knees and feet.

"How are you today?" he politely inquires.
"Just 'sew-sew,'" she replies
Without taking her eye off the foot,
Which holds the fabric firmly, for the curved needle
To do its blind stitching underneath.
"Mr. Perlmutter up front?" Willy asks.

"I guess he is," she whispers, pauses,
"Unless, that is, he's up the street, at the Roosevelt."
Willy knows it must be the local café.
"I'll just have a look-see, if that's OK."
"All right by me. Make yourself to home."
But the main room is vacant.

For Christ's sake, the place's completely empty.
He sets his cases down,
Surveys the layout — ties, belts, slacks,
*

Suits, sportscoats, trousers —
And sizes up its stock as quality merchandise,
Decides they need the Acme-Zenith label.

After ten minutes, he peers outdoors,
Up Main Street, sees the Roosevelt's hinged sign
Swinging in the breeze, leaves his things
Beside the front counter, unattended,
Proceeds toward the café,
And enters into the thick of a hive of bees

Too busy celebrating their own insularity
To notice his presence. He takes a seat at the counter,
Orders coffee, listens to the weird buzzing
As though it were a distinct language.
"Sherm, how come you're workin' today?
I thought it was youse guys' high holidays."

"It is, John, but that never stopped me.
I ain't seen a dollar bill yet
That says on it whose God it is we gotta trust.
The grass may be greener on the other side,
But green's still green to me, boys."
"I sure in hell know what you mean, Sherm."

"You can't judge a man
By the color of his religion or creed anyway,
I always say," attorney Birdsong intones.
"Who's to say there ain't room for a few Jews
In every community? After all,
Who else'd clothe us white folks, in Sunday suits?"

"And who'd make the loans, foreclose on our homes,
If it weren't for you guys from the city,
Comin' down here in your three-piece suits?"
Ab Roosevelt chortles, chewing tobacco nonstop.
"We need you guys to keep us honest.
Somebody's got to pay poverty's dues."

Sherman Perlmutter squirms in his chair,
Keeps a stiff upper lip,
His perennial poker face straight into the wind.
He doesn't budge one inch.
Soon, the discussion veers away from Yom Kippur,
Toward tractors, livestock, deaths, and sex.

Willy orders a piece of lemon pie, for breakfast,
Stalling until Perlmutter finally leaves.

“Sherm,” Paul Schnauser reiterates for the group,
“We’ll forgive your sins,
Even if God don’t, for you refusin’ to close,
On His highest Holy Day.” They guffaw in unison.

By the time Willy arrives and introduces himself,
Perlmutter is sitting beside his cash register,
Deeply absorbed in his account books.
He looks up, after an embarrassing silence,
Directly into Willy’s entreating eyes, and frowns.
“Yes? Can I help you?”

“Yes. Well, maybe. I’m Willy Sypher,
Of Acme-Zenith Clothing, of St. Louie, Mo.,
And that’s exactly what I was going to ask *you*.
“Ask me what? I ain’t in the buyin’ business,
If that’s what you had in mind.
That’d be sacrilegious. In fact, I ain’t actually open.

“It’s Yom Kippur. Don’t you know?”
“Of course I do, but a man’s gotta eat, too.”
“You say your name’s *Sypher*? ”
Willy nods. Perlmutter hesitates, cogitates.
“Come on back to my office. Bring your cases.”
Then, to the seamstress, he shouts,

“Sophie, take a ten-minute break,
And clear your table
So’s we can spread out the swatches, will ya?”
Then, to Willy again, “*Sypher*, did you say?
By the way, you ain’t got relatives in Quincy,
Cincinnati, Yonkers, or the Bronx, do you?”

4/5/90 (02421)

[On my way to the fairport at Indianapolis,][‡]

On my way to the fairport at Indianapolis,
I met a man named James
(Actually, he’d been hired, by the university,
To drive me there, from Muncie,

*

In his brand-powder-blue-new Cadillac),
 Who wove, into a magic, gold fabric,
 Tales he told me, with articulate intricacy,
 Not to satisfy a lack in him —
 Impatience, obsessive garrulity,
 Solitudinousness — but rather
 To share his passion for and pride in a life
 That, for its apparent ordinariness
 (His first job, at eight,
 Had been to take water, in a pony cart,
 To field hands working the “thrashing ring,”
 In haying time), had

4/13/90 (06104)

Captain of the Fated Ship *Rachel*

This year, with uncharacteristic disinterest
 Occasioned by the impending dissolution of his marriage,
 He's witnessed Passover and Easter
 Materialize, then disappear like a magic-trick rabbit,
 Without so much as eliciting a twitch
 Of curiosity as to how prestidigitation
 Relates to ritual and man's capacity for imagination.

In fact, even his birthday,
 This crisp April 17, seems spiritless,
 A skiff adrift from a titanic cruise ship,
 Destined to set out nets
 Not even able to skim off minnows
 Or iridescent flying fish, much less whales
 Whitewashed, by his Tom Sawyerish fancy,

To render them visible to a psyche
 Dying to redefine anonymity,
 By spending an entire life chasing silence,
 For the chance of measuring one, head to flukes,
 As it breaches, to see him pacing the deck.
 On this brisk, bright-blue post meridiem,
 He plies, from atoll to island, cay to bay,

Within dementia's silent archipelago,
 Hoping to glimpse his soul,

*

Not long ago so buoyant and effervescent,
Salvage what might be yet intact
Amidst the wreckage and stow it in his cargo hold,
Until he can make harbor and lie in dry dock
While his heart's barnacles are scraped clean.

For now, all he can really fathom
Is the extensive volume of water
That has lapsed beneath his bowsprit and keel
During his pelagic passage
From Chaos, via Erebus and Lethe, to Hades
And back, as he's scanned time's ocean-sea,
For his daughter and son, washed overboard in Typhoon Jan.

4/17/90 (04198)

[One evening this week,]

One evening this week,
Wandering as aimlessly as a sedated patient,
Along hallways of an indoor mall,
Neither assailed by refracting neon signs,
Store displays, and shuffling people
Intersecting like planes in a Piet Mondrian painting
Nor victimized by my own reflections
Recognizably projecting off plate-glass windows
That might be scenes from a Breughel landscape,
I chanced into a franchise card shop
That appeared almost to have survived an assault
From a Bermuda Triangle typhoon —
The aftermath of Easter and Passover
Orbiting so close as to scorch each other's crusts.

Tentatively at first, as though they might be diseased,
I touched just the tips of cards
Precariously held in place by other cards
Disheveled, canted, obviously in the wrong categories,
Then grew increasingly courageous,
Drew them within range of my eyes' sensors,
That I might read, try to concentrate
On their sentimental, nostalgic, wry, and sardonic phrases —
The poetry of a whole generation

*

Wooed by TV versifiers, minstrels, and bards.
From "Far Side" cynicism to "Birthday,"
"Get Well," "Anniversary,"
And "Special Occasion," to "Friendship" and "Blank,"
I scanned their tedious measures.

Whether from idleness or pure disillusionment,
I sampled expressions of hired others
(Amateur or professional poetasters and graphic artists,
Of absolutely no import),
Maybe a few dozen cards in all,
Until finally coming to a halt,
Within earshot of a carefree Goldilocks
Wearing tights and bonnet, swinging a lunchpail,
Skipping toward a Y in the road
Posted with arrows pointing in diverging directions:
"Future" and "No Longer An Option."
Suddenly, I watched her break stride,
Infinitesimally, then head toward the "Future,"
Beckoning me follow to horizon's outer edge.

4/20/90 (04197)

Musicians [△]

For Jane

Swaddled inside a numbing pre-summer cold,
Ears clogged, nose running
Obnoxiously,
I sit beside you, at the Wynton Marsalis concert,
Trying, valiantly, to feign joy,
As trumpet, trombone, clarinet, and saxophone
Blend voices with bass, piano, and drums.

But the clattering jazz patter and repartee
Chattering, forth and back,
From bells, harp, frets, and skins,
Begin to fuse with feverish visions
I seem unable to tune out.
By degrees, aural and visual acuity
Collapse into whisperous blurs and hues.

Helplessly, my senses focus on your hands
Gently stroking my own,
Your tiny fingers manipulating mine,
As though they're keys, strings, valves, and slides.
Suddenly, I feel myself resonating
With the magical, passionate music humans make
When they play love's instruments.

4/21/90 (03418)

Earth Day ^Δ

This late April, the “Everyday” section
Of the Sunday newspaper proclaims it Earth Day.
My eyes send its major headlines to the brain,
With minimal indifference
Resulting not so much from ignorance
But, rather, lack of hands-on experience —
The greenhouse effect; toxic waste;
Vanishing wildlife; acid rain;
Disappearing rain forests; the energy crisis.
These critical issues fail to stimulate me
Or make me wish to engage in *the* debate of my time.

Instead, with you by my side,
I choose to lose myself to this Keatsian refuge,
Where, in myriad-sized and -hued varieties,
Tulips grow in wild profusion,
Hyacinths, both miniature grape and regular white,
Vie with daffodils and jonquils, for sunshine,
While rhododendrons, azaleas, dogwoods,
Flowering crabs, and Koreanspice viburnums
Pulse, silently, into budding, blooming life.
Before each, we kneel, worship its holy shape,
Pattern, color, and fragrance,

And pray we're worthy of such magnificence,
Capable of appreciating so much beauty,
Not desecrating its blessed symmetry
By perpetuating the harshest cruelty of all:
Human neglect. Joyously, we stoop, clip,
Revel in our task of gathering adequate reserves
*

To preserve in Favrile Glass vases
We intend to strategically place
In every accessible recess of our bedroom,
So that, tonight, we might proclaim our naked bodies
Also are God's exotically blossoming flowers.

4/22/90 (03417)

Overtaken by Phantoms

An overwhelming urge to purge phantoms
That have scourged his soul,
These past three years,
And stolen his children, by slow pollution of the pool
Their mother, as catalyst,
Has caused to be contaminated, with her venomousness,
And from which, for a decade, at least,
They've drunk, in tranquil innocence,
Reduces him to irrational gestures
And erratic, angry acts of petty vengeance.
He can't even remember the names

Of those whose lips he sealed with his kisses,
Atop San Francisco's misty Sutro cliffs,
In a sacred matrimonial ritual,
And whose two births, three years apart,
He witnessed, with mystical exhilaration,
In St. Louis's Barnes Hospital.
Today, the interminable mechanisms of official dissolution,
So inimical and contrary to initial desires,
Are writhing maggots multiplying, insidiously,
Throughout his system, consuming brain and guts,
With merciless malignity.

He seeks temporary catharsis in lovemaking
Taken on the run, indiscriminately prescribed
By capricious sycophants,
Who would beguile him, for an hour's dalliance.
Each restive night is death's dress rehearsal,
Not love's wedding bed. Each waking day
Is the grave into which he climbs,
To blend with his wet-clay mood,

*

Praying to purge shades that would resurrect him
If only they could restart his uncharged heart.

4/24/90 (04196)

[Although the cogs of my internal clockwork]

Although the cogs of my internal clockwork
Complete their toothy cycle
One more night and day — their fated cycle —
I feel their frictioned heat being released,
Hear the subdued screeching of surfaces
Pressing too lightly against surfaces,
Realize, somehow, like a duck
Knowing when to fly south,
That time is not just fleeing
But running out of its shoes, with Mercurial feet,
Beating entropy at its own race.

More to the point, it's been three months
Since I've awakened in a body,
In a bed, my senses have recognized
And been able to locate, respectively,
For the condition of vagrancy and dereliction
That's recently overtaken me, in middle age.
How strange to take off all one's clothes,
Remove shoes, wrist watch,
St. Christopher medallion, then, edging to the bathroom,
To do constitutional rituals,
See hooves, horns, hirsute skin

Reflected from mirrors flanking the basin,
Features associated with Satanic creatures
From traditional morality literature
And oral history — a bestial visage
Belonging to me: half-man,
Half-animal, standing in antic deviltry,
As if waiting for commands, from my center,
To energize, unfreeze,
Send me to the Land of Hissing Dreams,
Where, doing endless penance, I might repent
For having abandoned my children to a living hell.

4/27/90 (04195)

“Descendants” of George Caleb Bingham ^Δ

Two stranded phantoms, hand in hand,
Elusively braving late April’s rain,
This mild, misty Friday night,
Arrive, dry and unscathed, at the art museum,
As though the waters had parted,
Beckoning them to exit a barren terrain
And enter the promised land of their heritage.

Once inside, accommodating to the light
Sifting from fifty-foot-high ceilings,
They make token sacrifices,
Receive headsets and cassette-tape players,
To help guide them through the temple
Whose walls display relics this Midwest Moses
Left during his itinerancy in the wilderness:

Paintings from his latest and earliest days,
Including apprenticeship portraits of himself,
His friend and mentor, James Sidney Rollins,
And residents of Columbia, Glasgow, Fayette,
Boonville, New Franklin, and Arrow Rock . . .
Missourians like us, who settled,
And would come to rest, in this heartland frontier

Radiating out from St. Louis
Yet connected, no matter how distant,
By its sinuous twin rivers, those arteries
Named Missouri and Mississippi,
Which supplied lifeblood to man and land alike,
During decades after Indians, trappers, and fur traders
Had already faded out of sight, into myth —

America’s new “noble savages” and “rugged pioneers”
The painter, becoming a visionary,
Would try to revive and keep alive, with fluid oils
Leaching softly across canvases,
As tranquil agents of time, space, and change
Flowing past treed banks, beneath violet skies,
Between civilization and untamed nature.

Like landed phantoms, we hover before these scenes
Shimmering with wooden flatboats,

*

Dugout canoes, skiffs loaded with chopped wood
Waiting to be sold to steamboats
Needing to take on fuel, for their newfangled maws —
Boats seemingly suspended from bristles
Attached to imagination's brush tip.

Transfixed, inhaling the same air
These riverboat roustabouts,
Frozen in their own dynamic poses, shared,
We grow increasingly eager to leap aboard
The very next vessel descending the bend
And float nowhere, together,
Forever . . . forever.

4/28–29/90 — [1] on 4/29 (03419)

Making Children ^Δ

I've been in your life nine months,
And now you've made me a child —
Myself.
I'm neither mild nor meekly weaned
But secure, with your loving reassurances
That outsiders and intruders
Won't defile our trust in each other.
For creating spaces in your life
In which I might safely write,
I continually reciprocate, by gifting you
With poems like this one — love's souvenir.

Like Oedipus to his mother,
I'll be indentured to your gentleness
Until both of us reach old age,
Cease breathing, and are released
From pleasures that have nourished us
With mental and physical ecstasy.
But while today is yet fresh with dew,
Let's forget deathly suggestions
And revel in resurrection.
After all, now it's my turn
To make you a child too.

4/29/90 — [2] (03420)

A Metaphorical Sort of Death Is Divorce

Somehow, amidst these blooming hues —
Greens, pinks, and whites — my dizzy mind
Can't find the path that leads back, in time,
To the Washington University campus,
Where our courtship began . . . back to the zoo
In Forest Park, in which we picnicked . . .
Back to Jacksonville,
That Illinois prairie town in Sangamon County
Yet echoing with the eloquence of Daniel Webster,
Honest Abe, Edgar Lee Masters,
And Carl Sandburg, cradle of your family,
Whose forebears were florists and clothiers . . .
Back to, then forward from, that mystical garden
In San Francisco's Sutro Park,
Where we etched the date of our wedding,
7/8/70,
Under the lid of the sun's hunting-case pocket watch,
For God to consult
When estimating fates and destinies . . .
Forward to Farmington, Missouri,
That sleepy "Five Star" community
Where we staked our claim,
At 628 West Columbia,
Feathered our Victorian nest,
With gingerbread children, pets, guests,
Who shared in the making of a family history
We recorded in poems, paintings, photos,
And memories glistening like mica
In sidewalks we paced, a decade and a half . . .
Finally, forward to St. Louis,
To be consumed by polluted illusions
And fool's-gold Kickapoo Juice vendors
Moving out of and into our ghetto,
Like goose-stepping Nazi ghosts
Wearing a uniform code of specious scruples.

Curiously, on this first day of May,
When nature seems to teem with newness
And promises of vibrant hues and lush breezes,
I can't find the path

*

That leads to the future or past.
I'm a wayfarer who's missed his opportunity
To sight a clearing, in the forest,
Where I might recuperate
Before setting out again,
In whatever direction beckons me follow.
Stranded in no-man's-land,
I listen to the distant ticking of a clock,
Whose clicking cogs twist my hands and legs,
In frantic rotations, around day's face,
And hope to recalibrate my heart,
So that, next time, anyway,
I'll know when death, disguised as love,
Arrives and takes my breath away.

5/1-2/90 (03600)

Separations

Each dawn, for five days, now,
Leaving the house, half asleep,
To rendezvous with yesterday's unfinished business
And anguishments, I've paused, briefly,
To assess the prevailing weather,
Not for self-serving purposes
But rather obsessively. The truth is,
This past Sunday, his mother
Packed our boy, Troika, off to the country,
For a week of sixth-grade camp,
Without my presence, at the bus,
To wave him good-bye.

Today, the sky is a leviathan
Breaching to morning's surface.
Water splattering, erratically, from its belly and flukes
Rips across my thoughts,
Like the teeth of a tenacious great white shark.
I see him shivering in his sleeping bag,
Huddled in a dimly lighted cabin,
Praying his mother and dad will reconcile
What he can't fathom is their marriage's
*

Forty-day-and-night rain of terror.
Separated, except in our skepticism,
My wife and I wait for necessary rainbows.

5/3-4/90 (04194)

Attending the Symphony^Δ

Like salmon weaving the identical eye of a stream,
We voluntarily subject ourselves
To the press of people squeezing into Powell Symphony Hall.
Everyone has to pass through the bottleneck
Where one man furiously rips tickets.
Stalled, I suddenly sense myself being seen.
An eerie force field of unknown origin
Haloed me, in its gravitational magnetics,
Possesses, then subverts, my emotions.

I submit to its static electricity,
Crackle, as we get closer to each other,
Without knowing how to avoid exploding,
As our dark sparks jump the gap
Between stark polarities.
We, who've so recently legally separated,
Accidentally converging out of the peopled mass,
To listen to Beethoven's Fifth,
Evanescently collide, then pass into matter again,

As coincidentally as we entered identical orbits,
She with a man stranger to her than to me,
Who, hand in her hand, seems to balance her,
Like the pole a tightrope wife might use,
High above society's hissing viper pits,
To keep from being eaten alive,
I with the lady who used to ride the palomino,
In the ever-widening circle
My childish dreams, seeking apotheosis, described.

Soon, fluid music swells the stream
In whose upper breeding pools our writhing memories
Lose themselves to more pressing duties:
Creating future semblances of past pleasures,
In new beds where we've chosen to sleep.

*

Forgetting lets us dissipate extraneous energies.
Our atoms cool like ancient suns and moons,
As Beethoven's notes float our souls
Back to older oceans, to start over again.

5/7–8/90 — [1] on 5/8 (03433)

Two Fathers

Driving away from White Picket Fence City,
Where, just yesterday,
He played surrogate father to two children —
His lover's teenage son David
And his own twelve-year-old boy, Troika —
He broods over fate's magician-like juxtapositions,
Just how strangely uncomplicated
Were the allegiances he exchanged with them.
Acting as their catalyst, mediator, and mentor,
He shepherded both adolescents,
One to the flower shop, the other to the jewelry store,

Not four hours apart,
On similar but separate clandestine missions
To buy, for his lady and for his estranged wife,
Gifts with which they might express their affection,
Come Sunday next — Mother's Day.
How odd the paradox he wittingly abetted,
Ferrying, from shop to shop, those innocents,
Who've never met, yet are intimately related,
For the nexus half their parents share:
Marriage by unconventional common-law consent.
Just now, crying, he drives west,
Trying to identify his reflection in the dying sunset.

5/8/90 — [2] (04193)

Sailing over the Edge

Despite having deliberated this unholiest of acts,
He hesitates at the precipice,
Contemplating the light-year spiral
*

That'll soon deliver him to the pit's base,
As unrecognizable atoms.

The unexpected realization of his impending fall,
Whatever they decide to call
The ceremonial epiphany of his dissolution,
Seizes him, by the balls,
Squeezes courage from his bloodstream.

Sensing he's spent his confidence,
He draws back from the edge,
Being gnawed away at, by a raw, gray fog,
And, as if tangled in mizzen rigging
Of a ghost ship, dangles dizzily.

The sky spinning inside his eyes
Is an upside-down ocean,
On which he's been cast adrift.
At what distance from the looming abyss he twists,
And for how long he'll do this,

He has absolutely no way of calculating,
Without his compass and astrolabe.
Perhaps days or decades elapse;
Maybe it's just a matter of labored breaths.
Whatever the case, his arteries pulsate again,

With a rush of fresh adrenaline.
Curious obsessions must be reviving his excitement
To discover exotic life forms
Thriving beyond the great time line.
Within seconds, he'll be over the edge, diving, diving.

5/15/90 — [1] (04192)

Early Dismissal

He leaves the country, at twilight,
Driving northeasterly, toward St. Louis,
Over Highway 67.
Recognizable geography accompanies him,
As he maneuvers away from memories that would enslave him
If history were Pharaonic by nature,
*

Not benign. He leaves behind
The sacred rearing place of his two children,
That nest, at 628 West Columbia,
Where the four of them
Rested their sweet, sleeping souls, for a decade,
That small-town life
Upon which his writing relied, for its images,
Attitudes toward grass-roots matters of style,
Ethical gestures, its moral core,
And thrived, in *ex academia* isolation.

Now, having dismissed his last class
An hour and a half early,
Ostensibly to return for a late meeting,
He relaxes, keeps measuring the sun
As it slips between trees
Softening its descent into the westernmost reaches,
Where day fornicates with night.
For weeks, he's been hoping to see dusk
Do her striptease, completely undress.
After all, it's not been easy,
Driving in absolute darkness, to the city.
And for what? To whom return,
When his family no longer admits him home,
Grants him asylum from his rigors?
At least by daylight, highway and sky
Accept him for the pariah he's always been.

5/15/90 — [2] (04191)

Skies like Piebald Rhinos

Twilight's piebald sky
Might be the rain-splotched hide of a rhino
Or a blotter mottled by an ink bottle
Tipped, inadvertently, by a cosmic amanuensis
Trying to keep pace with a blind Milton
Reciting, dictating, deliriously.

Oh, what a curious set of metaphors
Should come crawling
Alongside my pen-tip's tentative scrawl,
*

Almost as if my imagination
Somehow were conspiring with the sky,
To create its own magical blend,
Not concede that God
Is Sole Proprietor and Resident Genius.

5/15/90 — [3] (06105)

[’Til very late last evening, Janie,]^{△‡}

’Til very late last evening, Janie,
You and I, defying time,
Mesmerized ourselves,
Gazing at St. Louis river scenes
From a bygone era.
Oh, those naive levee days,
Crowded with their grandiose steamboats
And wood-fired locomotives
Crossing Eads Bridge,
Spanning both sides of the Civil War —
Lithos and wood engravings
By Henry Lewis and John Caspar Wilde,
Depicting the Mississippi
Molasses-flowing through its natural passes
At Hannibal, Louisiana, Alton,
And, below St. Louis, Carondelet and Cairo;
Hand-colored lithographs
By two of Currier & Ives’s finest artists,
Parsons and Atwater,
Showing once-real people loading cargo,
Strolling along the levee,
Conducting commerce, politics,
Committing poetry. Who could ever know them,
Without lingering over these prints
From a hundred years ago,
As we did, last night, until one,
Excited by each in the trove
We’d spent an entire weekend
Ferreting from art and antique shops?
Who, except two people in love,
Eager to share each other’s passion,
Would ever have sat so close,

*

Naked, on their bed,
Atop the sheets,
Staring at

5/16/90 (03451)

[Once again, we meet clandestinely.]

Once again, we meet clandestinely,
In Manhattan, to sketch in
The master plan for our twining destinies
And execute conceptions we evolved,
Back in St. Louis,
By which to conclude the rest of our mutual future.
Two attendees are we, at love's convention.

5/20/90 — [1] (01506)

Fortune Cookies ^Δ

On this brisk Sunday evening in Manhattan,
A pervasive desolation
Escorts us toward our hotel, on Central Park South,
Northwest, across Park and Fifth Avenues,
From the restaurant where we've just dined.
We pause beside the AT&T Building,
Pass through its cathedraled nave,
Then cross the street, to the enclosed arboretum
IBM's skyscraper provides.

We enter, tentatively, to partake of its openness,
But at this late hour,
The vast greenhouse space is too silent.
Its only other visitors are indigents
Huddled beside paper and plastic bags
Containing their earthly estates —
Human snails moving from place to place,
Without ever leaving home,
Whose nearly invisible trails glow eerily.

Unable to absorb its humid warmth,
We squeeze each other's cold hands.

*

Suddenly, both of us sense immense dis-ease,
 Not from our stomachs,
 Distended by succulent Chinese cuisine —
 Lobster, chicken, pea pods,
 Mushrooms, shrimp, broccoli,
 Bamboo shoots, water chestnuts, and rice —
 But from homeless empty bellies, inaudibly growling.

5/20/90 — [2] (03425)

Placating Both Muses ^Δ

For Janie

I've measured the progress of our love's pleasure,
 But recently, it seems,
 My chronicling has had to compete with real events.
 Too often, I've been in the ambivalent position
 Of having to choose between the two —
 Inventing or acting — and which to do when.

With me, quite honestly,
 Simultaneity is a lost art, a witch's litany,
 The heart's Siamese twins, Logos and Eros,
 Making love, in separate compartments.
 Oh, if only I could be the child my dreams see
 Digging, by the shore, in fantasy's sands,

Thrusting my throbbing cock
 So deep into your foaming, seething beach,
 We'd decide never to leave
 But, rather, choose to live forever,
 Inside the castle we spontaneously created,
 Digging, digging to China.

5/26/90 — [1] (03423)

An Algebraic Equation of Love ^Δ

With me, you get two
 for the price of three;
 With you, I get raised
 *

to a higher power,
Automatically.

Those quantities,
multiplied by our divided souls,
Yield yet another,
greater than the sum of our hearts'
Unequal but loving parts.

5/26/90 — [2] (03424)

Sealing His Fate

*I think I was;
therefore, I may not be!*

His torpid spirit lists to starboard,
Resists pelagic dissolution,
For an existence calibrated in minutes,
Violently yaws to port,
Then slips, stern first, into Lethe's abyss.

He awakens with a wrenching shudder,
As if an invisible, tremendous fist
Had slugged him in his solar plexus
And dropped him to the deck of a cruise ship
Being tambourined by a typhoon.

Why he inclines, nightly,
At such acute attitudes of co-incidence
That his navigational gyros can't right him,
He possesses not the slightest idea,
But he does consider himself possessed
By memory's chief enemy, schizophrenia,

That Lorelei who undresses him,
Intoxicates his receptors,
Then whispers, into his genes' ears,
New blueprints for building lifeboats
In which to float the river Phlegethon.

This disoriented morning,
He stirs, naked, on a weed-strewn shore
Unmistakably remote. He might have washed up
*

On an atoll in the Déjà Vu Chasm
Or the Isle of Stranded Transients, beyond Atlantis,
To which lepers, Gypsies, homosexuals, Ethiops, and Jews
Are sent by the state, in obeisance to God.
He has no sense of recognition,
Just an overwhelming intimation that otherworldly forces
Are coercing him toward a confrontation.

Suddenly, he squirms, stretches his wet, smooth flesh,
Arches his back, like a crescent moon,
Head and tail fins pointed skyward,
Then starts barking at spitting-cobra tides
Breaking toward him, wave after wave after wave.

5/30/90 — [1] (00885)

Pilgrimage ^Δ

Aboard imagination's *Mayflower*,
Jane and I head out,
For previously unexplored territories
Bordered, to the east, south, and north,
By open spaces, all the way to land's end,
And, westerly —
Latitude, longitude, zenith, and azimuth,
To the most detailed degree —
By all memories of the old country.

Separately, for more than three decades,
Our obsessively restless settlers' spirits
Cast us adrift, on high seas,
In quest of a newer Albion,
Where, hoping not to be routed
By tribes of misdeeds, distrust, and hostilities
Disguised as innocent natives,
We dreamed we might find, colonize, harvest,
And thrive in, love's pacific garden.

For nine months, now,
On the promontory of our converged fates,
We've labored to secure foundations
For a great, gleaming, steepled cathedral,
*

In which we'll baptize our reborn souls.
Nailing clapboards and shakes,
We peer into the sky's candescent Eye,
For enlightenment, and, in its glinting dance,
Envision our own glorious enterprise.

5/30/90 — [2] (03422)

Homeless Composer

Sitting alone, in his silent disappearance,
He chooses the muses' musical notes,
To compose him to sleep.
In this open-air café,
It makes no difference
That he remains in plain sight
Of everyone desirous of stealing his dreams.

Curiously, his serene sense of immodesty
Allows him to hear orchestras
Playing on distant stages — Vienna, London,
Los Angeles — wherever he lingers,
Nakedly fabricating, from fugitive sounds,
Entire symphonies, from finish to beginning,
Nonexistence to completion again,

Just by listening to his beating heart's
Metronome repeating, repeating,
Just by not caring if anyone vilifies him,
For sleeping in the "public eye."
Oh, how rich he is, how easily inspired
By such voluptuous nothingness —
Creator, player, and appreciator, simultaneously.

5/30–31/90 — [3] on 5/30 (03624)

Grodsky the Cobbler ^Δ

Near the Delmar Loop, in St. Louis
(No one knows, for sure,
In which decrepit tenement he dwells),
Lives and dies, daily,
*

A Jewish cobbler,
Who wears, just above his bony wrist,
Greenish-blue Auschwitz numerals
Loosely tattooed to his skin,
Like an unhealing wound,
Shapes crazily misaligned,
Like figures floating in alphabet soup.

By trade a shoe repairer,
Anachronous, obsolete,
He still waits — sometimes all day,
Without one person in need of his services —
To ply his skills, despite near blindness,
Enfeeblement, a septuagenarian
Who has no business doing business
Yet paces sidewalks, crosses streets
As if back in Bremerhaven
Instead of a modern ghetto
Now infested with nonprofit blacks,

Where, fifty years earlier,
The city's wealthiest "kikes" resided —
University professors, symphony musicians,
Doctors, attorneys, surgeons,
The cream of Midwest Jewry,
Who, not to their collective face
But always behind their back, were reviled,
Their cemeteries and display windows desecrated —
Fenced off, by their affluence,
Spurned because of their learning,
Betrayed, by their success. Half a century later,

Lapsing out of and into consciousness,
A Gregor Samsa of a man stoops over his bench,
Apron strings squeezing his abdomen,
To keep his pants from falling to his shoes,
Shoes he's repaired so many times,
None of their original German leather remains,
Nor do their soles remember the shapes
Of the Fatherland's cobbles, which wore them smooth,
As he fled, his possessions possessed . . .
Shoes whose utility he maintains, nonetheless,
In case he must make another hasty escape.

Toward the Torah, Soaring

*For Alvin Goldfarb,
on his grandson Michael's confirmation*

Now, right this whisperous minute,
Soaring easterly, toward morning's source,
I exhort You, Lord,
With more reverence than I've summoned before,
To hear my heart's meditations,
The syllables of my verse-words, turn into music,
As they rise from silence, to this height,
And kneel at the bema before which my eyes profess.
These notes I see coalescing
Make me realize I'm one of the Chosen people
Their song celebrates — I, too, belong.

The song that buoys my spirit, along its route,
At this awesome altitude,
I remember hearing, last evening, in the synagogue,
The cantor's jubilant chant
Twining with the rabbi's effusive pride,
As both men shepherded the Torah, in a blessed procession,
Aisle by aisle, through the sanctuary,
For worshipers to reach out and touch,
Delicately, with pulsing fingertips
They then press to their lips,
Kissing them, with inexpressible love.

Ah, and this morning, too,
Prior to leaving your house, for the airport, Jane,
I recall that same song entering memory,
From the mezuzoth tacked to the front and back doorposts,
How you and I touched those sacred containers, first,
Then kissed our fingertips,
To shape, from the void, wishes to defeat demons
Hiding in superstition's subliminal abyss,
And make our own melodies acceptable in Thy sight.
Right this minute, flying toward eternity,
We sing Your silent Song of Songs.

6/2/90 (03700)

On the Nature of Tapeworms in Las Vegas

Out here, the days are tapeworms
Attaching themselves to the tumescent intestines
Of unsuspecting guests to Vegas World,
The Golden Nugget, the Sahara, and Caesar's Palace . . .
Tapeworms that shimmer like mirages,
In this desert devoid of humidity,
A stranger to rainfall . . . tapeworms and maggots
That take the shapes of slot machines,
Roulette wheels, gaming tables
At which poker, craps, and blackjack players
Consume themselves, with grandiose delusions,
In this sandy land between snowless mountains . . .
Tapeworms that disguise themselves as coins
And plastic chips with the cryptic power
To purchase Taj Mahals
As well as a night's stay in a flophouse
On a back street off Fremont . . .
Flatworms and nematodes of all kinds,
Latch onto brain cells,
Cruising through human fluid systems,
On nicotine-loaded cigarette smoke-boats
And high tides of diluted grain alcohol
Rising by the hour, crashing, violently, into shores
On whose beaches greed-worshipers pray to their gods
And sacred beasties . . . tapeworms
Lengthening with the changeless, elongating days,
Fattening like field mice in winter kitchens,
Their eyeless receptors flashing with recognitions,
Insights, dizzying visions of their success . . .
Tapeworms growing so rapidly
That they might, at any minute, momentarily, explode.

But not this Sunday a.m.
In Bob Stupak's Vegas World Casino,
Where the dome of the lobby
Is crowded with astronauts floating in space,
Trying to avoid colliding with probes,
Beam-tracking satellites, galactic-traveling ships . . .
Not this Lord's morning, teeming with gamblers
Invoking dice, ping-pong bingo balls,
*

Spinning slot-machine reels,
Slick cards sliding across green felt . . .
Not this sacred Sunday, at 6 a.m.,
In this temple where “The Sky’s the Limit”
And the stars in the ceilings
Aren’t really flickering slivers of mica
Blown in with the plaster stippling
But rather bloodless ulcerations
From the proboscises of migrating tapeworms,
Scars left where they injected sucking barbs,
Gorged by night, by day,
Then fell off, giving way to new parasites,
That the cycle might repeat itself,
With fidelity to its primordial gene-print.
Oh, how the sheer mystical divinity of its design
Defies science, dizzies the already-vexed mind,
Eats the eviscerated imagination alive!
O ye vermiculate eidolons, how ye do thrive!

6/5–6/90 (03602)

Mapping Unexplored Territories ^Δ

We’ve explored considerable territory together,
Since that first convergence at the Kirkwood depot . . .
Or was it beneath the Saarinen Arch
Where we tried to get our bearings
In a New World we hadn’t yet charted?
I forget, now, for the distances we’ve traveled,
Those temporal spaces not measured in miles
But, rather, by trips made to New York City,
Las Vegas, Cape Girardeau,

And, closer to home, Kimmswick and Farmington;
Trips taken to Tilles Park and to Forest Park,
For picnics on the art museum’s sward,
Sloping to the Grand Basin or buffering the zoo;
Trips through your secluded Ladue backyard,
To register its indigenous wildflowers, plants, and trees;
Trips into your Oriental bedroom,
Perfumed with fugitive viburnum and lilac spices;
Trips to the center of our Edenic garden.

For almost a year, now,
We've explored the border states of our imaginations,
Without demonstrating any tendencies toward weariness
Or disenchantment. In truth,
Our determination to succeed in this mission
Seems, weekly, to grow more resolute,
As we invent names for the topographical contours
And habitations of our gestures, ideas,
Fantasies, dreams, ambitions, and sexual pleasures

And claim them as pieces of the untamed continent
We intend to spend the rest of our active careers
Mapping and illustrating, for passion's atlas.
This glorious Sunday morning,
We awaken to our task of tracking that attitude
At which love's longitude and latitude cross paths.
But hopefully, we won't ever reach land's end,
From whose shores life force emanates,
And have to suspend our expedition.

6/10/90 (03421)

Baseball, the National Pastime ^Δ

For Bob Hamblin

I

Excited by the prospect of suspending activities,
Going back, just for the night
Or a few mindless hours, anyway,
To delights inculcated in childhood,
And indulging in our echoing reflections,
With joyous glimpses of yesterevents,
We drive easterly, toward the river,
Sighting by the Arch, as our polestar,
And park near the stadium,
Where the Cardinals and Pirates
Will engage in Abner Doubleday's game.

As an innate reflex
Or out of habit, we bring with us
Expectations preserved in cliché-wrappers
*

Resurrected from steamer trunks
Gathering dust in memory's shadowy attic:
Eating charred ballpark dogs
On mustard- and ketchup-soggy buns;
Cracking salted-in-the-shell peanuts,
Removing their crunchy seeds, with tongue tip,
Chewing two, three at a time,
Letting the hulls scatter between our feet

(Oh, that transcendent sense of release,
Watching such debris accumulate,
Knowing we'd not be scolded for leaving it!);
Encoding, with cryptic chicken scratches
On a folded cardboard scorecard,
Every breath, muscle flex, and dream
Each player experienced;
Envying, uncontainably,
Fans scurrying, in every section but ours,
To snatch, out of the air,
Foul balls

They might parade to the dugout, between innings,
To get signed by Stan the Man,
Red Schoendienst, Enos Slaughter,
Or, if extra lucky,
Tote home with an autograph of Jackie Robinson,
Roy Campanella, Ralph Kiner,
Ted Kluszewski, or Warren Spahn
Scribbled across their scuffed covers;
Ultimately, feeling so proud Dad had taken us,
Allowed us to stay out, so late,
And partake of such an electric spectacle.

II

But even before reaching the concrete coliseum
And submitting to its cavernous passageways,
Below which no lions pace
(Instead, torpid baseball players
Languish on benches, in the locker rooms,
Prior to assuming a diamond
Designed to confine tedium between chalk lines),
We sense something's different:

*

Everything's too clean, too neatly painted,
Too orderly; ushers, in abundance,
Seat season-ticket holders *and* freeloaders.

Ensconced in a box by the home-team dugout,
We scan the stadium, pan its bleachers,
For anyone we might identify,
Then realize we're all alone, on an ice floe,
Bobbing in an ocean

Heated to ninety stifling degrees.

Now, an obese local-opera-company soprano
Vibrates the cantilevered overhang.

Skeptically, we watch to see
If Francis Scott Key's unmanageable anthem
Will sprout eagle wings and take flight

Before our impatience locks its cage,
For another uninspired night.

Unnoticed at first, even by ubiquitous eyes
Televising this ahistoric competition,
Uniformed ghosts, mostly black,
With a few grains of salt
Thrown over fate's shoulder, for good luck
And an accent of legitimacy,
Take their preassigned positions,
On the neon-green Astro-grass field.
With inflated ceremoniousness,

A rotund umpire signals to the leadoff hitter.
One, two, three innings begin and end,
With cataclysmic inactivity,
Just a few lame thwacks of the bat,
On curves, sinkers, sliders, and fastballs
Passing the plate chest- and knee-high,
At 85 mph.

Sweltering like eggs in an incubator,
We busy ourselves, reciting statistics
Flashed across a barn-wide screen
Highlighting computer-generated instant replays.

Our intellects quickly clot,
From this informational infliction.
Next, we register a strange, translucent gestalt,

*

A curious rearrangement of expectations:
The water on which our tiny island floats
Is of an almost pure ecru-flesh hue —
Though most of the players are dark-skinned,
We're surrounded by Caucasians.
It's a belly-, buttocks-, and breast-busting,
Beer-guzzling white man's game
We've claimed for our national pastime — ay-eee!

Once stunned by this optical illusion,
We can't refocus on the contest.
Its crucial and strategic maneuverings
Refuse to relax us. Distracted,
We imagine ourselves at a minstrel show
Performed, until recently, in Smalltown, America,
By patriotic, blackfaced, red-nosed
23rd degree Masons
And lodge members of the BPOE.
And now, in the bottom of the ninth,
Score still tied zero to zero,

We know whichever shade crosses the plate first,
No matter how many innings it takes,
The score will forever remain
Nothing to nothing, for us,
This unprepossessing spectacle
Nothing less than a carnival freak show,
Medicine man's chautauqua,
Elmer Gantry's evangelical tent revival,
Flea circus, Chinese acrobat troupe,
With this distinction: it's so lacking in drama
As to be absolutely forgettable.

III

While the crowd waits, excitedly, for a kill,
Ready for one team to spill its guts,
The other to claim victory over boredom and fatigue,
We decry our squatters' rights
And head, abruptly, toward the closest exit.
Although the heat hasn't abated,
The last dregs of our earlier enthusiasm have.
Within minutes, we reach the car,

*

Disappointed even more than exhausted.
But curiously, two shadows,
Echoing voices we vaguely recognize,

Seem to have followed us,
Voices of a girl and a boy, aged ten,
Tagging behind their parents,
Skipping, with exhilarated hopscotch steps,
In the direction of Sportsman's Park,
To see their very first Cardinals game.
Disappearing into the stadium, they enter our car
And fall asleep, in the backseat,
As we travel west, switching radio stations,
Hoping to pick up *The Lone Ranger*,
The Green Hornet, or *The Great Gildersleeve*.

6/14-15/90 (03426)

Life Cycles

Strange, how sides of cliffs give way,
In extended rainstorms,
Rivers confuse themselves during floods,
Reverse directions, race upstream, for weeks,
While children, stranded in lifeboats,
Drifting away from marital shipwrecks
Float for years, decades,
Sometimes forever,
On oceans devastated by tidal waves
Rising from parental typhoons.

Stranger yet, how, after catastrophes,
Despite diminished capacities,
Those cliffs recollect their destiny
And original purpose:
To hold back the earth,
For rivers and streams below,
On which, unimpeded, children flow
Easterly, toward oceans,
Seeking, again,
The source of their innocence.

6/20/90 (03623)

Not on Speaking Terms

In a café, in St. Louis County,
That caters to affluent Ladue residents,
Almost solely to businessmen,
At this hour, anyway,
He sits listening to hissing snickers,
Sibilant outbursts, homilies,
And conspiratorial whispers
About deals sealed, car fleets leased,
Stocks and commercial properties
Acquired and resold, by lifting a phone,
With Hamiltonian expertise.

Often, their confederation diverts him,
Transports his dislocated spirit
To a more stable era,
When, as a kid growing up here,
He felt safe,
Sheltered from this society,
At whose peripheries, though even then
Uncaged, he circled on a leash,
Like Kafka's hunger artist —
“Over here, folks!
See a real live bard starve!”

Sipping cups of tepid coffee,
Listening to uncomplicated conversations,
He's assailed by his dead dad's voice
Questioning his choice of college courses
Leading to a degree in artifice,
Not finance, poetry instead of profit,
And, later, decrying his livelihood
As an exercise in profligacy and ingratitude.
In this disguised debtors' asylum,
Where he comes, daily, to write,
He measures his poverty against theirs and smiles.

6/22/90 (03631)

[In this fleet interim,] [†]

In this fleet interim,
I feel so at peace with my atoms,
*

my genes, those
calibrating fates that
tie me to the sky and
 earth
 simultaneously,
I could die, leave

6/23/90 (09012)

Picnic Along the River ^Δ

Out of mind, for a few near-blue hours,
Though not out of sight,
St. Louis's polluted horizon fails to deter us
From venturing outside, driving downtown.
Bent on lunching above the levee,
Glimpsing the Mississippi River glide by,
We survey the grassy terrain
And choose a lushly tufted, unshaded patch
Just beneath the Arch's gracefully swaying legs.

Between bites of chicken and shrimp salad,
We memorize each other's eyes.
Glinting images of visitors to the city,
Parading before us, where we lie on a blanket,
Heighten vision's quiet delight.
We listen to our hearts' inarticulate whisperings,
Over the screeching of skipping kids.
The breeze, astir with swirling seeds
Parachuting to earth, carries our desires skyward,

Where memories of times before our time,
Quivering in sun-shimmers,
Refract off the surface of a glimmering river
Meandering through shifting clouds,
Toward the mouth of a mystical ocean
Flowing toward its own opening,
In the far edge of the planet we alone inhabit.
It spills into our eyes, filling sight
With majestically reflecting rainbow arches,

Beneath which we lie on the lushly tufted grass.
Suddenly, we're tourists picnicking in 1870.

*

Oblivious, we gaze into the sun
And, for hours, watch side- and stern-wheelers,
Which might be clouds or drifting dream-seeds,
Ply the horizon, upstream and down.
Oh, to stow away on the very next boat
That ties up along the levee, below,
And float, ceaselessly, between tomorrow and long ago.

6/24–25/90 (03430)

Second Cities ^Δ

For three days, we've concentrated
On all the details in the dot-matrix gestalt
Containing our intertwined lives.
First, at McCormick Place, on Lake Michigan,
Sunday and much of Monday,
As author and editor hoping to locate a distributor
For our wondrous poetry books,
We attended the American Library Association Convention.
Now, as lovers on a truncated holiday,
We set off in search of adventures,
Bending gently out, from the center,

The locus of our focus the Tremont Hotel,
Half a block off North Michigan Avenue,
On East Chestnut. We're two radiant hues
Breaking through a translucent prism
That, for too many years,
Has lacked adequate backlight
To project our rainbowed enthusiasm for life.
We're wanderers in this river city,
Lost, if not caught, in its mazy corridors
Bordered by sky-scraping houses of worship
Swaying in the lake-spawned breezes.

Nobody sees us completing our passage.
Hand in hand, amidst pedestrian traffic,
We peer into massive navelike atriums —
Bloomingdale's, Saks, I. Magnin, Neiman Marcus —
And linger long enough to lay tokens in their offertories.
Hoping for repast, we stop at an outdoor oasis
*

Located close by the Water Tower —
Bistro 110 —
Sit and stare, in quiet awe, at the lone survivor
Of the barbarian fire of 1871,
Chicago's symbol of tenacity and resilience.

We try to see, in its white limestone design,
Shapes other than a pumping station.
It could be a rare, carved-bone rook,
Shimmering on a chessboard
Set down, curiously, in this congested intersection,
By a jinn, or a medium-sized English castle
On the verge of being seized
Or, worse, effaced by acid rain.
Off again, we weave three days
Into ten minutes, one lifetime
Out of two separate identities, as we keep moving,

Heading easterly, now,
As though drawn toward the opening of the tunnel
Where the venerable Drake Hotel,
Like an extravagant Long Island lighthouse,
Casts its beacon across Lake Michigan
And all the way past Joliet,
Bloomington, Springfield, as far as St. Louis.
The tunnel metamorphoses
Where Michigan and Lake Shore Drive
Mystically merge. We descend into a cement bunker
Running beneath the street.

Whether seconds or days later,
The maze admits us into a magical park,
A Reginald Marsh Coney Island scene,
Slowed to an agreeably peaceful pace,
Pervaded with a gamut of generations
On bicycles, skateboards, rollerblades,
Jogging, power walking, playing volleyball on the sand,
Almost everyone engaged in activities
Requiring the blood to course, forth and back,
Through pulsating arteries and veins,
In heartfelt tributes to the physical spirit.

The two of us relax on a bench,
In the backwash of all these anonymous people

*

Passing without taking notice of our presence.
How can we travel so far,
Suspecting we'll recognize familiar faces?
And why do we care,
Even if the impulse to hide from others is faint?
What is there about our relationship
That yet requires us to safeguard its privacy
From prying eyes from our prior lives
And defies verbalizing?

We draw into each other's eyes,
Withdraw from whatever time claims our shapes,
And let our kissing lips
Maintain the only location we need to sustain us.
On this tiny island, surrounded by skyscrapers
And water glistening in the Chicago sun,
We are inviolable. Invisible "No Trespassing" signs
Cordon us off from the world,
And we know the only One
Who's identified us admires our affirmation of love;
His sign flickers, incandescently, in our irises.

Now, twilight guides us back to the Tremont.
Our shins and ankles repeat their own responsive litany,
As we retreat. They remind us that romance and infatuation
Also are subject to certain taxes.
Arriving at our quaint residence,
We realize our day has reached its conclusion
And that we need to nap briefly,
Before seizing pieces of this eighty-degree evening,
Waiting for us to submit to its beguilements.
After showering, we lie naked in bed
And, before resting, whisper sensual phrases

That translate us, body before soul,
Into the sweetest, palpitating, cocoonlike coma
Man and woman might experience, and yet survive,
Without vegetating.
We sleep just beneath silence's surface,
Just above dreaming, in between both layers.
The minutes that suspend us, in their nets,
Keep us from disappearing. Awakening refreshed,
Exchanging expressions of respect and pleasure,
*

We dress in each other's skin,
Then head out again,

To resume our quest for affection's source,
That refuge where those who discover it
Never again fear homelessness
And are guaranteed harmonious "hello's
From fellow pilgrims. Night swallows us gently.
By the time we finish dinner,
It's too late for anything other than an elevator trip,
Ninety-six stories deep into the sky,
Where, drawn to imagination's glistening city lights,
We spiral, like luna moths
Whirling in ever-widening circles or good-luck pennies

Thrown into a Roman fountain,
And soar through space, before floating down,
Wafting, drifting, swirling dizzily,
All heights telescoping into a focus
Both of us enter, forgetting.
Together, hand in hand,
We seek the prism's one opening
That will let our translucent hues fuse.
Bypassing elevator, taxis, jet,
We slide down the rainbow's western leg
And arrive home, in a golden halo.

6/27-28 & 6/30/90 (03434)

Sisyphus

For Jerry Call

Dear listener,

Please don't despair. Just remember,
When you think you've sunk
As low as you can go,
There's always a trapdoor
Leading to the floor of another false-bottomed hope
Just below the one above
The one just below the dome of heaven,
To which we aspire,
*

From the moment we first die,
 Until death resurrects us from forgetting's vapors
 And we settle, from life to life,
 Into compartments stacked to the sky,
 Ascending illusion's high-rise even as we descend,
 Never losing sight of the formidable trapdoor
 Invisibly fitted to the floor
 Over which we grope,
 Trying to locate the one opening,
 With neither Above nor Below,
 Leading to Nowhere's colossal opposite,
 Home,
 Knowing better than to get our hopes up
 Too, too high.

Signed,
 Sisyphus

7/2-3/90 (03620)

Three Bags Full

*Baa, baa, black sheep,
 Have you any wool?
 Yes, marry, have I,
 Three bags full;*

*One for my master,
 One for my dame,
 But none for the little boy
 Who cries in the lane.*

— from *The Real Mother Goose*

At almost fifty, he takes stock:
 His poly-and-rayon blends need laundering;
 Worse, shirt-threads are unraveling;
 Pockets tear and buttons fall off,
 Each time he tries to eke one wearing more
 Before going to the cleaners;
 His pants are worn out
 (Thigh fabric is pilled; zippers stick;
 Belt loops are partially ripped).
 Now, he's down to two pairs of shoes,
 A toothbrush, straight razor, some underwear.

In fact, for the past ten months,
He's maintained a respectable appearance
By spending immense energy
Inventing medleys out of motley.
Each morning, he does his best
To recollect how his hero from college days,
Herr Diogenes Teufelsdröckh,
Might have contended with this dilemma —
Staying two steps ahead of nakedness,
Of being committed to the House of Social Evils,
For indecent soul-exposure.

Lately, he's realized
Not only that his clothes won't survive one more washing
But, having grown five sizes wider,
He couldn't possibly fit into them if he chose.
In truth, his earthly estate
Lies crumpled in three plastic bags
In a corner of his rented debtors' prison —
This gentleman rendered penniless,
By those who owed him devotion:
Parents, wife, and the boy with his name,
Who still lives down time's lane, dreaming.

7/4/90 (03621)

Distancing ^Δ

Tonight might be the siege of Fort McHenry
And I Francis Scott Key,
Sieving the sky's 360-degree horizon
And all land in between
That leads to this twenty-story rooftop vantage,
At whose parapets you and I stand, holding hands,
Viewing St. Louis celebrating July 4th.

Through the self-perpetuating haze shells create,
Rushing upwards from the earth's surface,
Outdistancing their own smoky shadows,
Moaning, screaming, exploding into girandoles
Of odorous, iridescent incandescences,
We give our amazed eyes complete freedom
To register assessments independent of our fantasies,

Suspend our imaginations,
And admit only the most unadulterated impressions
Into our senses: wing- and taillights
Of jets circling into final-approach patterns,
Oscillating with hypnotic insistence;
A series of four flickering antennas
Flashing TV beams frenetically;

And night's most extravagant missile, the moon,
Maneuvering in and out of cloud-wisps,
Like phosphorescent, flaming balls
Shot, endlessly, from a colossal Roman candle.
We admire all these reds, whites, and ebonies
Courageously holding their own
Against man's most brilliantly computerized ignitions.

Suddenly, memory focuses my well-being elsewhere.
I see myself not with you
But with my former others, daughter and wife,
Seated on a blanket below the Arch,
Our bones rattling with each explosive report,
Eyes transfixed on the pyrotechnic kaleidoscope,
All three of us, for those ephemeral moments,

Almost absolved of our raging domestic dilemma,
Lost, anyway, in the spectacle of lights
Designed to celebrate the nation's birthday,
Liberty's victory over the soul's enslavement,
Each of us nearly willing to believe that upon our leaving,
Our family rift would be cauterized,
Infidelity's wounds healed to a seamless scar.

I peer easterly, toward downtown, the levee,
Twelve miles from here. Instead of haze,
Vision takes a direct, unobfuscated path,
Arrives as though only seconds,
Not an entire year, had transpired.
Oh, how near it all seems, for the distancing,
Now that my divorce is imminent,

Yet how ambivalently far away, in space and time,
From that vast and tragic conflagration,
Which culminated last year,
When, with the climax of *that* fireworks display,
*

Those last strands of devotion snapped —
That same night when we came home, wife,
Then you left again, alone, at 10:30,

And returned after 2 a.m.,
Blasted from alcohol and marijuana vapors,
Waking me, begging me to take you to the hospital,
To relieve your chills and shaking body.
Oh, Jesus! How I seem to see you, now,
From this elevation, then,
So innocent, in your naked defenselessness,

Beneath sheets, at the outpatient facility,
You a spent rocket casing
Fallen to earth, blackened around the edges.
And, oh, how I can still hear you,
Next morning, vehemently denying your condition,
Reviling me, for intruding,
Betraying your "private life,"

Refusing to admit you'd even roused me from sleep,
To get you immediate medical attention.
Oh, the pain of those last days in Pompeii,
Before the volcano erupted, suffocating our dreams,
Until this evening, when they reawakened
As visions of *you*, Jane,
Slowly refocusing in my kaleidoscope,

The two of us sharing this rooftop,
Viewing an iridescent horizon
Dissolving into the sky's drowsy afterglow.
And now, I make this gentle vow
To celebrate, with you,
Every night,
Our love's Independence Day.

7/5 & 7/7/90 (03435)

Vers Libre

Something about leaving the city,
Being able to slip its crippling bonds,
Slide through all five gears,

*

And glide, lubricously, on cruise control,
Ecstasies me beyond all measures
I might compose, trying to describe pleasure
To be derived just driving,
Driving any highway,
Toward whatever destinations
Might accommodate whichever whim guides me
By the seat of my shabby soul's tattered seat.

On any unparticular day,
I couldn't care less
Where my car delivers my troubadour spirit,
So long as it arrives in time to find lodging
For its asymmetrical rhyme-chimes,
Inexpensive nourishment,
And a decent mattress, for sleep to nurture dreams
That will replenish tomorrow's highways,
With hitchhikers I'll pick up,
On my return trip to the crippling city,
For the sheer sake of sharing my brief disappearance.

7/6/90 — [1] (06106)

Transportation

Despite its torrential current,
The river sidles by sleepy Cape Girardeau,
With the silence of monks, in a monastery,
Shuffling to vespers, heads bent in prayer.
It slides past our car,
Where we've parked on the promontory,
Just below the oak-shaded site
Of the original trading post
Ensign Girardot initiated, in 1733.

Gazing at the patriarchal Mississippi,
We call, to our shared stage,
Lingering fascinations with George Caleb Bingham,
Mark Twain, Father Marquette
And speculate on how their preoccupations
On the nature of time, change,
The continuously unpredictable shifting of existence
*

Might relate to our own.
Our vision forms a missing link in the chain.

Even the vaporous rain, beyond humidity,
Sings a mystic lyric,
Whose fluid refrain is a conduit to the future,
Via earlier days,
When side- and sternwheelers plied this channel,
Between Cincinnati, St. Louis,
Ste. Genevieve, Cape, Memphis, Vicksburg,
And New Orleans. We don't notice drops
Slowly soaking through our clothing, to our skin,

For those distant piano, banjo, and mandolin notes
Getting all mixed up, in the precipitation.
Descending the steps of this historic place,
From which five miles of river can be seen,
We lean over the eroded hillside.
Two sets of silvery T-topped train tracks
Hug the bank, their subtle implications
Waiting for our brain-freights
To screech by. We hesitate,

Then realize why no boat,
Just debris, floats recklessly downstream,
Why those tracks, once signs of progress
And so foreboding, are rusting, now,
Unreverberant in their obsolescence,
Their wood ties paradoxically soggy from dry rot.
Now, taking to the road again, we follow
Precipitous contours of a private golf course.

Through sporadic openings in dense thickets,
We glimpse players teeing off,
Chipping, putting on greens
And see battery-powered carts
Darting as ubiquitously as bees in spirea blooms —
Today's locomotives and regal steamboats,
Which, in less than four hours' time,
Can transport spirited souls
Over all eighteen holes of their wildest frontiers.

7/8/70, 90

For five years prior to our elopement,
We tilled, seeded, and weeded our Edenic garden,
With dreams and hopes for a mutual future
Only juvenescence might believe
Could coexist with misfortune and distrust,
Those evils youth attributes exclusively to the old.
For five years, we experienced bounty harvests,
Whose blooms, legumes, leafy zucchini, and fruits
Were so sweet and fresh, to the tongue's buds,
So deliquescently succulent,
We knew the marriage of two innocents was imminent.

And then, in the end of humid June,
Nineteen hundred and seventy,
We headed out, in our car, on a lark,
Sunset-bound, without schedule
Or expectations, through Kansas, Colorado,
The Rockies, Wyoming, Utah,
Nevada's Lake Tahoe, on into San Francisco,
Taking lodging in the Pacifica Motel,
Along the Great Highway, overlooking the ocean,
Where, paradoxically,
We'd share our last few days of gentle independence,

Committed to the proposition that all women and men
Are equally created to procreate in sacred wedlock,
Mate with blessed helpmate,
Faithful, filled with cherishing and respect.
Suddenly, the days of our separate identities coalesced,
Caught up with our illusive souls,
And slowed us long enough, in Sutro Park,
To let us say our vows,
Break raisin bread from a fresh-baked loaf,
Toast fate, fortune, and forever,
Before taking off, with wandering steps and slow,

Toward our place in the country below St. Louis,
Where we'd start breaking ground,
Planting our Farmington garden,
Just east of Eden,
We two, flower children, who, in the ensuing decade,
Would produce two more blooms,
*

Then, approaching the end of the eighties,
Would sense our own roots and stems weakening,
Dehydrating, wilting, until the bouquet we'd made,
Whose cornflower configuration and hue
We'd emulated in our daily celebrations,

Desiccated and changed, unrecognizably, to dust,
Waiting for death-winds to blow us away.

Today, this Lord's morning,
July eighth, nineteen hundred and ninety,
Neither of us knows the other's whereabouts;
Moreover, at the moment, both our children
Reside in houses separate from us
And from each other. We're all orphans,
Who, from two separate seeds, became four,
Before disavowing the hopes and dreams
That were planted so proudly, twenty-five years ago.

7/8/90 (04200)

A Birthday Gift for My Mother ^Δ

For the next few seconds or decades,
Let me set down selected memories and impressions,
Whose collective shape, on these pages,
Might enhance the definition of your presence,
Which haloes my imagination,
And help explain why your birthday, today,
Your seventy-fifth,
Is an event of such significance to me.

Born in Chicago, Illinois,
7/17/15,
To Dorothy and Louis David Malter,
And raised beside the lake, in Jewish affluence
(Two years the senior of twin sisters),
Beautiful, wholesome, possessing intellect
Requisite to an honors graduate
Of Northwestern University,

You met the traveling salesman from St. Louis,
While on vacation in Elkhart Lake, Indiana,
And, after a four-year long-distance courtship,
*

Submitted to his ragman's pursuit,
His promises to remain devoted
Whether or not he'd be able to maintain you
In the ways of your former estate,
His persuasive ambitions and dreams

To create a successful company, Biltwell,
Raise a family, and elevate you
To new plateaus, if only you'd show him
How to quench his workaholic thirst,
Smooth off his raw edges, with your culture,
Social graces, and insatiable sense of affection
For neighbors as well as friends
You began making, in 1938,

On arriving in St. Louis,
Where you'd temporarily reside in the Congress Hotel,
Before and after bearing your first child, L.D.,
Then move to 7564 York Drive,
In Clayton's Moorlands, to set up house
And prepare for a second offspring, Babs.
Oh, those modest, scrimping ration-days
During World War II,

When people believed in morality
And had ethical goals to work toward
And assumed the world was basically stable,
Despite Hitler's, Tojo's, and Mussolini's
Apostasies and eternal descents,
And that the planet's aberrant wobbling
Would soon correct its skew,
Flow smoothly, in a progressive groove —

That era when anyone who owned a TV
Was King or Queen Solomon
And Dumont was David to radio's Goliath,
Those days when I was a feisty kid,
Defiant, incorrigible, the neighborhood bully,
Though only five or seven,
Whom you tried to gently censure,
With advice about being nice to friends *and* enemies . . .

You, who used to try to tie me to piano lessons,
Then accordion, without audible success,

*

And indulged and nurtured my early silences,
By helping me buy comics, flipping cards,
Coins, and, finally, stamps . . .
You, who often excused me from attending school,
So that, bathrobed all day,
I might fill spaces in my Master Global

And discover Sierra Leone,
Mozambique, Bosnia and Herzegovina,
Hawaii, and atolls, isthmuses,
Islands, archipelagos of interconnected ideas,
Ambitions, goals, fantasies,
And continental land masses and divides
Over which I named myself emperor, forever after —
Oh, that fabulous hobby you abetted

When I was only ten and all the other collections
That ultimately led me wombward,
Through the tributaries of your blood,
To poetry, your mortal source of metaphor,
That core where the soul is a roaring furnace
Burning passion and anguish,
Love, joy, hope, and despair,
In mixtures of rhythmic ecstasy,

Whose reverberations emanated from your bones,
As emotional overtones I absorbed
Just by being your first son.
Curious, how similar disparate beings can be,
How kindred the impulses and thrusts
Of familial genes that guide them
To the same conclusive destinations —
ESP's offspring.

And so, even as the man in me was growing,
You were always supportive of his boyish anarchies
And insurrections against convention
And the hypocrisies of reformed religions,
You, who orchestrated the large home in Ladue,
Gave birth to Dale and Roger,
Witnessed the '50s give way to the '60s and '70s,
Korea to Vietnam, Bill Haley and His Comets

To the Beatles and Iron Butterfly,
Howdy Doody, Clarabelle, and Flub-a-Dub

*

To Bert and Ernie and Big Bird,
Both shows boasting their own Bob,
To moderate for cloth-and-glue souls
Who seemed to speak for each of us,
Not as inanimate effigies
But surrogate adults in a latchkey world

Where few parents seem to keep focused
On their kids' inarticulate pleas
To be weaned off TV, made to read books,
Not indulged with the latest technology
And given a new car, at sixteen,
As if it were a birthright.
You, mother, always had your eye on us
And, except with affection, exemplified restraint.

Today, envisioning you at seventy-five,
I see a woman with beautiful features,
Young and enthusiastic,
Whose eyes dance with *joie de vivre*
Enviable in a person half your years,
A graceful lady who keeps attuned
To current events documented by Ted Koppel,
Charles Kuralt, two daily newspapers,

And pays attention to shifts in the activities
Her thirteen grandchildren display . . .
Who still makes time to tend her rose garden,
Occasionally travels to Fort Lauderdale,
To relax in a second home,
Before resuming her hectic schedule in St. Louis,
And who, after fifty-two anniversaries,
Shows the robust devotion to her husband

That originally gave their blessed union
Integrity, substance, and harmony.
Today, Charlotte, I see you,
Across a distance half a century wide,
Still interested in others and finding, in each,
Virtues worthy of your love.
Today, on your birthday,
You appear juvenescent, eternal.

7/10-12/90 (03622)

[Words are a purge-worthy scourge]

Words are a purge-worthy scourge
 that assails my brain's fortification,
 with a charge so large and loud,
 its battle cries can be heard
 wordwide,
 from one side of the uni-verse
 I write, to the underside
 I ride, whenever I fly
 into the eye
 of the great god God
 on high.

[7/11]? & 7/20/90 — [3] (00458)

The Poet Jerome

These days, he alternates justifying his existence
 With decrying whatever nameless fates
 He holds directly responsible
 For having created his mistaken identity.
 Commuting between fantasy's Atlantis
 And the abyss beyond unknown lands he roams,
 Wandering through nightmare's Sahara
 As it seeps into his daily routine,
 He fancies himself Jerome, ascetic Jerome,

Cast into the wilderness, as society's classic pariah,
 For having chosen to devote his life
 Totally to writing and reciting poetry,
 He at best a monk with the unheroic task
 Of following God's inaudible call
 Without asking for either holy intervention
 Or compassion and patience from fellow novitiates
 Committed, instead, to ego trips
 To oases named Gomorrah, not Eden or Elysium.

Whenever the pressure grows so great
 That he can't contain his hostility
 Toward strangers who would arrogate, to themselves,
 Disapprobation and summary adjudication of his vocation,
 *

His paltry earthly estate (consisting of a few crates
 Crammed with wilted manuscripts
 Spanning almost three decades of his *versatile cogitations*),
 He takes leave of his senses,
 Through underground tunnels he's dug in his imagination,
 And escapes to the yet pristine desert
 He knows will accommodate his loneliness
 Without exacting additional taxes on his vexed psyche —
 That place where his silent crying
 Gets amplified to a frequency that jumps galaxies
 And communication begins. Only then, it seems,
 Can he enter into a dialogue
 That penetrates both his brain's hemispheres
 As though they were tines vibrating on a divine tuning fork.

7/13/90 (06108)

Final Causes

All week long,
 He's wrestled with his destiny, behind a desk
 Weighted with fate-papers,
 Cluttered with notes and memos on death-dust
 And other eschatologically abstract issues,
 Over whose original and ultimate say-so
 He seems to have no prosodic control.

Frustrated by his inability to discern a meter
 Or assign a relevant accentual-syllable pattern
 To his arrhythmic lines of least resistance,
 He slams his hands down on the blotter.
 The inkwell totters, tips.

Black lightning rips a zigzag fissure
 Through his imagination, this Sabbath,

Which he's violated by working all day.
 Possibly, this disquieting accident is a Hebraic plague
 Inflicted, on him, by a god
 Sufficiently pissed off, at his conspicuous defiance
 Of Biblical *mitzvot*, to cause Him
 To restrict his ability to manipulate lineation,
 Render his verse-utility less than prosaic.

Conceivably, the spillage and subsequent destruction
 Of manuscripts with which he's tinkered
 Fastidiously, this entire week,
 As if each verse had a self-contained meaning
 Vital to keeping Earth's machinery
 Operating in cosmic synchrony,
 Were purely circumstantial, not divinely ordained.

Whatever the case, he now realizes
 He'll never reconstruct identical turns of phrase
 Forever effaced or resurrect, from forgetting,
 Any of those utterances
 He deemed absolutely crucial to his own well-being,
 Sense of location, and purpose in a universe
 He's believed owes its efficiency to his poetry.

Standing up, raising both hands,
 In a gesture of supplication
 He can't remember ever having even approximated,
 He bolts for the door — it's nowhere!
 The four bare walls
 Refuse to accept his admission of arrogance.
 Slowly, he sits back down, to compose his epitaph.

7/14/90 — [1] (06109)

Slipping Away ^Δ

*For my boy, Troika,
 with Dad's deep love*

Undetected by his middle-aged co-laborers and friends,
 He slips off, to distant Wisconsin,
 All by himself,
 On a Saturday a.m. so blue,
 That by the time he arrives at his intermediate destination —
 Minneapolis —
 The mystique of redemptive serenity and resurrection
 He still associates with stealing away,
 To reenact youth's rite of passage into manhood,
 Ecstasies him with inexpressible joy.
 Ay-eee! He's off to see Troika,

Who's halfway through spending eight weeks
 At Camp Nebagamon for Boys.

*

No carry-on bags, fishing poles,
Accouterment of any nature whatsoever
(Except for the clothing and shoes he wears,
Wallet, glasses, notebook, and pen
He keeps, self-sufficiently, in a tattered attaché)
Impede his freedom, slow his progress,
As he proceeds, all morning, inside Greek horses,
Smoothly buoyed on soaring, singing chorus-wings,
Toward a North Woods rendezvous with his child.

Soon, he'll touch down in Duluth,
Requisition a rental car, weave through Superior,
And reach Lake Nebagamon, by noon,
Just in time for lunch with his son
And the energetic bunch of cabin mates
With whom his boy fabricates his days.
Oh, what a privilege, he contemplates,
To relive, if only for precious seconds,
Suggestive glimpses, scents, shreds of breaths
That, having been taken, will persist indefinitely,
Whenever he lets himself slip away and deeply inhales.

7/14/90 — [2] (00986)

Feeding Sea Gulls

Barely noon, here in Duluth,
Yet the moon, at half-mast,
Lies anchored high in the sky, to the west,
At my back, where I sit,
Gazing out, on this glistening Minnesota day,
At the southwesternmost tip of Lake Superior
And Wisconsin's northern shores, in the hazy distance.
I stare at the needle's eye at Canal Park,
Which Great Lakes ore boats and tankers thread
As they pass beneath the Aerial Lift Bridge
And make berth in St. Louis Bay's harbor.

From an unknown source,
Minuscule waves, stippled with the slightest rippling,
Flow in toward the center of my focus,
As though I myself might be a human moon,
*

Controlling their currents, with poetic intent,
Instead of just being a visitor to this bewitched city,
Recently arrived, serendipitously,
For absolutely no justifiable reason
Except to exercise my ineluctable right to flee
A stressful event or environment
Whenever remaining could signal the psyche's destruction.

Ah, the brisk eighty-degree breeze,
Swirling through my curly hair,
Caressing my squinting eyelids and cheek flesh,
Keeping my body refreshed
Despite my sedentary presence on this bench,
Exhilarates my intellect, stimulates it
To sweep out cobwebs and mud-dauber nests
That have accumulated, these past few months,
While, secluded in my St. Louis writing room,
Sequestered behind my desk, I've festered,
For lack of courage to say nay

To routine, overwork, purposiveness
And to escape for the sake of celebrating escapes.
Today, I have no commitments,
Prior or subsequent, other than to this bench,
Where I've positioned myself, contentedly,
In full view of the moon, Lake Superior, and passersby
On foot and in vehicle, to eat tuna and turkey
On seven-grain bread and sourdough roll,
Chunks of which I continually pinch off
And hurl to a devoted flock of three sea gulls
Standing majestic sentinel, close at hand.

For more than an hour,
We entertain and delight each other,
With our posturings. I begin with large pieces,
Thrown as far as the wind will carry them,
Systematically diminish size and distance,
Until I have conditioned these sleek creatures
To display a semblance of tentative trust in my behavior.
They, in turn, preen for me.
I marvel at the smooth shape their feathers take,
Following the sensual contours of their bodies,
Haughty atop rigid stick legs.

I have more than enough alms to satisfy them.
Apparently, their voracious feeding requirements
Operate unpredictably; one, then two,
Lift with little disturbance,
Almost as if they never made the trek, inland,
To partake of my generosity. I'm left with one bird
I can't quite teach to eat from my hand.
Mystically transfixed, I gaze at his stately shape,
Poised to chase my offering.

Behind him, the entire lake
Waits to absorb the flight he'll eventually make
Whenever he decides to wheel, disappear from sight,
With the last morsels of my soaring spirit
Clenched in his beak.
Suddenly, I awaken from my apparent daydream,
Discover myself surrounded by gulls
Screeching at me, demanding whatever crumbs are left.
I'm an empty-handed emperor facing insurrection.

7/14/90 — [3] (06110)

Sunday Morning in Camp ^Δ

Seated on the porch of the Big House,
I listen to Sunday morning christen itself.
My ears register vibrations of wind stroking leaves —
God's string section, in His earthly symphony —
High in the reaches of birches, poplars, ashes,
And tamaracks. White and red pines,
Despite being weighted with robust cones,
Contribute the sweetest chorus.

Mosquitoes, hovering in shadows, like hummingbirds,
Set up a persistent whine
That shimmers just above the threshold of silence
Being composed into rhapsodies for birds,
Chittering chipmunks and squirrels.
Now, I detect faint stirrings of kids in their bunks,
Reluctant to abandon their sandy sheets
And army blankets, for cold, smoky clothes.

Today, I'm just a visitor to this mystical place,
 Here to commune with my son,
 Where once, forever,
 Though I didn't know it, then,
 I indentured myself to unending sentimentality,
 Entered into a covenant with my childhood,
 To stay in touch, even as aging
 Would ferry me ever closer to forgetting's abyss.

Soon, my boy will greet me.
 After breakfast in the rec hall, with his cabin mates,
 We'll steal away from this summer retreat,
 For a few sacred hours together,
 Perhaps drive to Duluth,
 See a movie, and eat restaurant food.
 Absolutely anything we do will be OK.
 Love's life-ties binding us have no strings attached.

7/15–16/90 — [1] on 7/16 (00985)

R and R in the North Woods [†]

There's a cliché to which we've all resorted
 More than twice, a hackneyed phrase
 Referring to living an entire lifetime in a day.
 This morning, twenty-four hours after arriving,
 I myself feel compelled
 (Despite my confession that being a writer,
 Of all people, I should be the last person on earth
 To play such a lame tune,
 On that same old saw) to reiterate its plaint,

7/16/90 — [2] (06137)

Duluth-Bound ^Δ

I

Welling in sibilant reiteration, quickly fading,
 Sunday morning's 8:30 wake-up bell
 Calls all boys and their counselors to resurrection.
 From scattered cabins, their stirrings murmur,

*

As they hurry to wash up, dress,
And arrive at the rec hall
In time for the ritual growling of Paul Bunyan's horn
To admit them for breakfast.

I wait to be engulfed by the gathering crowd
Just outside the Axeman porch door,
Scanning each precious face,
For that one blessed set of features
That belongs to me. Out of this sea,
Troika materializes.
Without acknowledging recognitions verbally,
We gravitate toward each other, caress without touching;

To hug, we both know,
Would be to diminish him, instantaneously,
In his peers' esteem — no papa's boy he
But a leader, someone whose judgments
Must be reckoned with and often accepted.
However, right now,
Sporting shorts and T-shirt
Smoky from last evening's cookout, he seems ready for bed again,

Instead of the great getaway
He's been dreaming of making, for ten days,
Ever since I communicated my decision
To visit him during Parents' Week.
He eats a bowl of cereal with milk,
A slice of cantaloupe; I sip coffee,
Debone a panfish he caught from the dock
And cautiously savor its Lake Nebagamon taste.

Knowing we don't want to attend Sunday services
("All I do anyway is pull up grass tufts," he gently renders;
"Not too inspirational!" he adds,
As if setting the tone for today's activities),
I suggest he run back to his cabin,
Grab a sweater, Kleenex, take his allergy pills,
Then meet me on the Big House porch.
In the dust he leaves, I see his enthusiasm rising.

II

Soon, we're serpentineing, in my rented Honda Civic,
Over the Coolidge Memorial Highway,

*

Then westerly, on U.S. 2, through Superior,
Our first stop Duluth's Aerial Lift Bridge.
Troika shows less than no interest in the structure,
Its adjacent Great Lakes Maritime Museum,
Or the prospect that a freighter
Bulging with ore or grain could pass within feet of us.

Anxiety that he might be regretting my visit
Shivers me. He shuffles, dejectedly,
Past photographs, artifacts, and models of vessels
That once gave this northerly clime life —
Water striders and dragonflies whose dizzy flights,
From a more rugged era,
Are arrested inside this isolated building,
As if netted in a section of petrified tree trunk.

Even an actual fully operating steam engine
From century's turn,
Not to mention a hands-on demonstration of sediments —
The turbidity of their components
When stirred up off the lake's bottom —
Fails to stimulate and excite his apathetic mind.
I question him; he answers without hesitation:
“Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior.”

I nod proudly, glad he hasn't interrogated me,
Then ask if he's had enough,
And finally see his energy take fire.
“Now can we go to the mall?”
“Yes, yes, but I'm not sure they're open yet;
It's not even eleven.”
“This is lame! Let's go anyway.”
Our car strains, ascending Mesaba Avenue.

I feel like a Currier & Ives sleigh driver
At the reins of a team that knows its way home,
Home to Miller Hill Mall, sleet or snow
Or sunshine, like today's eighty-degree blue sky.
Troika's elation infects me empathically.
Soon, we release our imaginations,
To run, graze, gorge themselves
On “exotic” products and foodstuffs.

III

In my day also, childhood admired athletes
And media heroes but *not* entire cornucopias
Of unrelated items, imported from Taiwan
And other “807” shores, they now endorse:
T-shirts, mugs, posters, tennis shoes.

I try to make the quantum leap
Over consumerism’s Grand Canyon,
By indulging his desires, and content myself,

Sharing in his apparent happiness and satisfaction,
As he bounces around, like a kangaroo,
In a brand-new pair of Air Jordans,
Downs a McDonald’s cheeseburger and fries,
Followed by an Oriental salad
Dotted with rubberized chicken chunks,
Stocks up on ten kinds of chocolate candy,
To sneak back to camp, in his shoebox,

Ultimately, the entire *chazerei*
Leading up to the 2:30 showing
Of Bruce Willis’s movie *Die Hard 2*,
Served up like a ten-course French dinner,
To glut America’s appetite for gratuitous violence.
Both of us consume a tub of popcorn,
Lose ourselves, for two hours,
To our private selves,

Before relocating each other, at the car,
Hiding from us, on the parking lot.
Through twilight, we descend,
Until the cylindrical Radisson thrusts into sight,
And once again, we ascend,
This time to my lake-view room, on eleven,
Where Troika revels in showering,
Before we have dinner at the restaurant above us.

Oh, the thrill of glimpsing this city on the hill,
From our circling table. We’re both bespelled
By the harbor below, its colossal grain elevators,
The houses sloping upward, behind it and us,
In vertiginous grids. I stare at my boy

*

Delightedly gazing at the bird's-eye diorama,
Focus on his twelve-year-old face —
Those inscrutably beautiful eyes and lips — and smile.

IV

And now, I realize what a privilege I've had,
Just being in a position to get away
Without being beholden to anyone
Who might be "doing me a favor," letting me go,
Or, worse, say no, for no reason
Except policy, protocol, or sadistic whim . . .
Just being able to spend a day and a half
With a son I've not seen

In more than three months,
For insidious emotional restrictions
Systematically inflicted upon him by his adulterous mother,
She bent on destroying a twenty-year marriage,
In a seedy divorce suit.
How fortunate he and I have been,
Floating our own Mississippi River,
On a raft woven of love and the simplest pleasures,

Following the flow as it goes nowhere
We don't recognize — just we two, forever,
Set free on these shoreless hours,
My sweet boy, Troika — my Huck —
And his honey-lovin' dad — Nigger Jim —
Starting out so close to its headwaters, at Itasca,
Fixin' to stay put, on this handmade boat,
All the way to the Gulf, if time schedules it so.

But slowly, both of us awaken to the bend in the river,
Realize it's time to make camp,
Somehow suspend further expectations,
For the next trip, whenever that may be.
We head back toward the village of Lake Nebagamon,
Holding hands all the way, silent,
Trying to refrain from sentimentality and bathos,
Accepting the inevitable, impending end.

Passing the fishing dock, waterfront,
We're aware of the placid, moon-flecked lake

*

Witnessing our merged shadows. At his cabin,
I hold shoulder-tall Troika, hug him;
We kiss. “I love you, Dad.
We sure had a wonderful day. Thanks so much.”
“Guy, this was the happiest day of my life.”
“Mine, too! Mine, too!”

7/17–18/90 (00984)

[Before we even realize it,][†]

Before we even realize it,
Time has left us in its lifting dust, perplexed,
Distrusting our own capacity to tell

7/19/90 — [1] (01507)

A Passion for Weeding[△]

*For Miss Jane,
who knows no stopping*

Twilight, disguised as steamy July mist
Left in the wake of an unexpected cloudburst,
Surrounds the house, whose grounds we survey
For telltale signs of trespassers:
Mining bees perforating the turf,
With thumb-sized craters; sparrows stuffing nests
Between gutter and soffit;
Star-nosed moles burrowing furrows;
Weeds infesting spaces in robust zoysia.

Working the same area, on our haunches,
Tools with sharpened V-tips
Repeatedly stabbing at suspect patches of grass
That distinguish themselves as the enemy,
By their leafy, vinelike surface runners
Radiating from a knotty root ganglion —
Lawn-kelp, Medusa’s hair —
We go at these pernicious invaders,
With viciousness uncharacteristic of either of us,

Almost as if to neglect their eradication
Might be to victimize our survivors' nature,
Put a hex on our daydreams and sleep.
Compulsively, we rip clump after clump,
Some nearly a foot in diameter,
And throw them into plastic bags,
Like Ghostbusters capturing phantasms,
With their proton-pack particle beams,
Tossing them into traps.

Ironically, we derive satisfaction, pleasure,
From this backbreaking task.
Perhaps, we seem to believe, if we just keep at it,
Eventually our lawn will be free of weeds,
Completely uniform, sleek green in hue,
Pride of the neighborhood.
More likely, we're releasing pent-up energy
Or exercising our own tropisms
Toward creating order out of irregularity.

Without our awareness, dusk departs.
Although darkness doesn't discourage us,
Mosquitoes whining about our ears and eyes,
Arbitrarily biting sweaty arms and ankles, do.
Frustrated, we surrender to cessation,
Repair inside, undress, shower,
And prepare to resume our preoccupation, in bed,
Where, with gentle, steady, caring strokes,
We'll tend love's gardens and sloping lawns.

7/19/90 — [2] (03427)

The Penguin and the Joker

Could it be mere accident, pure chance,
That in Good Old America,
Land of laissez-faire free enterprise
And be-damned, by-the-seat-of-your-pants
Yankee ingenuity,
Home of the brave, beacon to the huddled masses,
Two such heroes of Miltonic grandeur and proportion
*

Could possibly have ascended the throne,
Within one generation,

Two such cherubic human beings —

Pete Rose

And Richard “Tricky Dick” Milhous Nixon —
Running, this millennium, on the same ticket,
For God and Vice God of Erebus
And the lesser dominions and principalities of Hades?
Amazing, how, out of tiny Pandemonium,
We might assemble such stellar candidates!
Ecce homo! Ecce homo!

Behold them both, in their present states of grace,
Not to worry or grieve

That, in previous incarnations and avatars,
The one was banished for tax evasion
And betting against himself
As well as horses, the other forced to resign,
For “expletive deleted”s he tape recorded,
To chronicle his singular importance
And other crimes against humanity.

No, indeed, not to get one’s bowels in a knot,
From melancholia or spleen.

The absolute truth of the matter is this:

One of our most recent leaders
Pardoned his coeval emeritus,
Cast praises at his breaching, Cesarean feet,
While athletes the cosmos over
Have already set aside the other’s indiscretions,
As childish misdemeanors,

Excusable on the basis of common-law,
No-fault immorality,
Practiced in every realm, Above and Below.
Ah, yes, today, even I, Satan,
The *real* Batman, Prince of Darkness and Caves,
Supreme Potentate of the Netherworld,
Throw their names into the hat —
Penguin and Joker.
They belong to me, you see, for eternity!

7/20/90 — [1] (03630)

Circling Back

Once, the country contained his dreams,
Like an Etruscan vessel
Of the softest burnished and hammered gold.
In that complacent community,
Where residents were beneficiaries of friendships
And gentle day-to-day solicitude,
He raised two children,
Adored a wife he'd known, by then,
Nearly twenty years.

There, he also wrote his paeans and odes,
With ferocious devotion
To the noble profession of artisan/poet,
When not earning a workaday livelihood,
Selling men's dress clothing
While helping to oversee the factory
In which those very garments were cut and sewn.
Oh, what precious energy invested,
Seeking acceptance into the Brotherhood of Artists-Businessmen!

Today, he returns, to assess the distance he's traveled
And time elapsed since he last passed through,
Requested his name be removed
From the town's voting rolls, his address changed,
To accommodate his current circumstances
In the City of the Inane,
Where, for six years, he's been in hiding,
From the fate that chose to relocate him,
By eminent domain of the soul,

Just prior to his wife's filing for divorce
Because of her own adulterous alienation of affection.
Why he's journeyed back, he's not certain.
Maybe he hopes to encounter just one person
Who might recognize him
(Now that the mistaken identity he projects,
To protect himself from threats to his position —
The mayor's speechwriter — is no longer necessary)
And mean it when he tells him, "Welcome home."

7/20/90 — [2] (04201)

Flying by the Seat of Our Pants ^Δ

It's not quite an hour before flight time,
Yet you and I delight ourselves,
Between bedsheets,
Naked as newborn rain-forest gorillas.

We exercise our reckless pleasure,
Purely for the sexual sake
Of pressing Lady Luck's patience
To its threshold, to see what stimulation

We might effect, making frenzied love,
When, instead, we should be heading,
At breakneck speed, toward the airport,
To check our luggage and board.

Oh, how incorrigibly anarchic we are,
Flying in the face of published schedules,
Daring airlines to strand us,
Demanding they wait for us to land our plane

Before we take off again, on theirs,
For less exciting heights.
Euphorically, you and I reach climax
Simultaneously,

Then realize we've less than forty-five minutes.
Thank God we're traveling light,
Already have boarding passes,
And can go directly to the gate.

With just moments to spare,
We arrive, dash through the airport,
Escape detection by a scanning machine
(We've lethal libidos beneath our clothing),

And relinquish our tickets, to the agent.
Once seated, we hold hands,
Congratulate ourselves, on having defied time,
Defeated the odds of overcooking our goose

And eating it too — a juicy morsel —
Before flying away
To celebrate spiritual incorrigibility and anarchy.
Suddenly, we hear the captain's raspy voice

Describing, with deliberate vagueness,
 The nature of a turbine malfunction
 Requiring inestimable repair.
 Not with disgust at the prospect of delay

Or missing a connection in Duluth
 Or Minneapolis-St. Paul do we sigh,
 But selfishly, for pleasure defaulted,
 By our having heeded, at all,

The reasonable call to responsible action.
 We regret disobeying our desires,
 Not staying in bed
 And flying, all day, by the seat of our pants.

7/21/90 — [1] (03429)

[Driving back from the airport,]

Driving back from the airport,
 Where I've just set asoaring my love,
 I'm assailed by the strangest names:
 Goebbels, Göring, Ribbentrop, and Bormann.
 Suddenly, I realize who they were/are:
 Four Whoresmen of the Apocalypse.

7/21/90 — [2] (01508)

The Forest ^Δ

*For Bill Heyen,
 who shares the despair
 we both compose
 into our Holocaust poems*

From a forest bordering my loneliness,
 An amorphous chorus,
 Decidedly not crickets or known ghosts,
 Swells with grotesque moans and groaning.
 A sourceless bell knells an elegy
 Memory *almost* recognizes.
 An obscene smell,
 *

Like the gangrenous guts of a man
 Mutilated in a shark frenzy
 And stranded on the shore of an unending nightmare,
 Chokes my nostrils, burns my eyes.
 Breathing accelerates.
 My heart forgets its place,
 Begins echoing millions of others' pulses,
 As though forming an abhorrent chorus of one,
 For all those Holocaust dead
 God is hoarding
 In a forest bordering my loneliness.

7/22/90 (03702)

Forever, for Now ^Δ

*For Janie,
 who gentles Sunday mornings*

Oh, if every tomorrow
 Were as echoic, in our prophetic speculations,
 As yesterday is yet, in our memories,
 I bet each new today
 Could be an awakening so melodious
 That just discovering each other, in bed,
 Shimmering in the chrysalis of our nakedness,
 Like berries nestled in wet straw,
 Might be the only motivation necessary
 For us to get up and arrest the present,
 As though tomorrow *and* yesterday were promises
 Perpetually spoken.

7/29/90 — [1] (03431)

A Sense of Place ^Δ

Even now, on this Monday morning,
 Forty-eight hours later,
 The mystique of our weekend walk along the levee
 And visit with Captain Bill Carroll,
 Who piloted riverboats, fifty years,
 *

Between Des Moines and New Orleans,
Fills our spirits, with distant whispers and echoes
Of slower souls living out their long-ago existences.

This July morning, we listen, at the side door,
For steam whistles speaking, back and forth,
Their incomprehensible Mississippi River litany,
That mixture of specious rumor and truth —
Something about eroded channels, boiler explosions,
High- and low-water conditions,
Bridges out, collapsed trestles,
Run-agrounds, and escaped nigger slaves.

Over coffee, we talk softly,
As if to conceal our presence amidst these essences
We've necessarily exhumed
Just by evoking ghosts buried below cobblestones
Still holding the levee in place,
Keeping St. Louis from slipping into the river,
At Laclede's Landing, flowing downstream,
Leaving just the grassy slope Chouteau cleared.

What it might be that occasionally beguiles us
Into casting, over our shoulders, glimpses of the past
Refuses to disclose itself or deposit clues.
Yet every other whim or so,
We detect the gingerbread filigree of the *Natchez*
Or *Robert E. Lee* lifting off the river,
Into a shimmering sun-glimmer,
The side- or stern-wheels

Churning not in reverse stroboscopic circles
But steadily forward, at half speed,
Toward Cairo, Cape Girardeau, New Madrid,
With the two of us aboard,
Destination Memphis, Baton Rouge,
Or wherever we might go ashore, undetected,
While they "wood up" and take on water,
And make our escape into 1874,

Even if only for a few imaginary hours
On a humid Saturday afternoon.
Curious, how most people seem obsessed
With defeating the heat, staying indoors,
While, every chance we get, we stand in reverence
*

To Eads Bridge, spanning that grand tributary
Meandering beneath it. Maybe paying tribute
Is our way of claiming a sense of place.

7/30/90 (03446)

A Second First Anniversary^Δ

I leave you, this cool August morning, sleeping,
Weave out your serpentine driveway,
And reluctantly leave your house behind.
Its sweeping, greenish, Chinese-like design
Persists in my slowly shifting vision,
As if sleep's dream-dust had created friction
At the eyelids' pivot points.
Even those majestically swaying white pines,
Their tips rooted at least sixty feet in the sky,
Profusely secluding your Oriental temple,
Keep memory from straying.

Not traveling inside time and space
But taking imagination's highway, through silence,
I arrive at a café halfway between *then*
And *whenever*, select an inconspicuous table,
Where I might compose lyrical odes
To whatever deities fused our spirits,
One year ago to the day,
And commence losing myself in gentle cadences
Celebrating us.
Eventually, reverberant words emerge —
Your sleeping heartbeats hymning me home, to our bed.

8/10/90 (03436)

Our Passion Weekend of the Heart^Δ

I

Friday night, we celebrate our anniversary,
By returning to Busch's Grove,
The restaurant where we had our first date,
That inauspicious initiation of a relationship
*

We couldn't then guess
Would outdistance our nonexistent expectations,
Generate a salt-sea effervescence
That appears could buoy us indefinitely.

Both of us order Norwegian salmon,
Dry baked potato,
Salad with Thousand Island dressing on the side,
Decaf coffee; we refrain from dessert,
Knowing we need to leave room,
In every available cell of our brain banks,
For the full-blown magical strains
Of Grover Washington, Jr.'s, jazz saxophone.

Before we finish, I give you a book.
It contains fruits I've been picking, selectively,
From our Eden-tree,
As we've investigated love's garden,
Resting, each evening, under its bowers,
Where we've meshed pleasure with affection.
Your eyes taste delicious juices
Leaking from my poems, and they glisten.

II

Saturday morning, we luxuriate in sleep,
Awaken so late,
We miss whatever coolness day will know.
We're refugees whose boat has departed
By the time we reach shore
Or Adam and Eve exiled from our paradisiacal dreams,
To the land of Wynken, Blynken, and Nod,
Through whose sands, hand in hand, we'll plod,

Like gypsies, fulfilling our plans
To search for antiques on Cherokee Street,
Near the abandoned Lemp Brewery.
We'll end up downtown, in a refurbished hotel
Overlooking the Arch, Eads Bridge,
The river Mississippi,
And listen to the jazz piano of Ptah Williams,
As we enter descending twilight

And flow downstream, to New Orleans,
Even as we head west, toward Ladue.

*

There, we'll hide inside the pine-circled citadel
That protects us from death's hyenas and banshees
Howling along highways
That circumscribe the city,
Frantically transporting ghosts nowhere at all.
And we'll sleep, deaf to Nazi siren-calls.

III

Sunday dawn is a steady stream of rays
Cascading, in gentle fusillades,
Through our bedroom windows. We arise refreshed,
Ready for our last breakfast together
Until next weekend. We sip coffee,
Read newspapers and poetry, talk and talk,
Then get dressed in old clothes
Appropriate for self-imposed labors

Of replenishing the flower beds that sanctify us.
Today, we'll be digging soil and planting
Liaropes, astilbes, and lilies of the valley,
Enhancing them, with sphagnum, peat, bone meal, and mulch.
Oh, just kneeling so close to the seething earth
Is reminder enough of our godliness.
Inhaling fecund dung awakens us
To angels circulating among us.

With an eye toward order, we set forty plants,
Shower sweat and mud from our bodies,
Then prepare for one more planting before supper.
Slowly, the aroma of our lovemaking
Blends with the bouquet of proteas, gingers,
And stars-of-Bethlehem you plucked from our garden
And placed, in a vase, by my head, Friday night,
When we celebrated the resurrection of our hearts.

8/13–14/90 — [1] on 8/14 (03437)

Emptying Safety-Deposit Boxes

Racing to complete, before afternoon,
The task of ransacking, from his safety-deposit boxes,
Artifacts he's spent half a lifetime
*

Stashing away, against old age's rainy days,
He oversees the placing of the Mosler master key
In the proper numbered slots
He identifies, one after one after one,
For the vaultkeeper, who stands patiently, at his beck.

Each cache they open contains a trove
Whose treasures he measures
In sheer sentiment, not by the gold karat:
Albums he can barely open,
For the tender poses of his two children and wife,
Growing older, before his eyes,
In the Mutoscope his hands fashion,
Flipping page after page of Kodachrome ghosts.

His throat tightens; breath shortens.
He gasps as he stuffs the books into a grocery bag,
Along with United States Savings Bonds
Given his kids, by their grandparents and friends,
When birth and growing were rituals so pristine,
No one would have dreamed
Toxins could ever pollute their garden's aquifers.
Also, he retrieves reams of poetry

He wrote throughout their married years,
Living along tree-bowered West Columbia
(In the three-tiered-wedding-cake house,
With the finials of its three Victorian pinnacles
Composing the clouds, in calligraphy,
One day a sonnet or villanelle or haiku,
Erasing it the next, to replace with a sestina or ode),
And reads them briefly, from memory,

Before heaving them into another cardboard box
He'll transport, in his car,
To a location he hasn't yet chosen.
Soon, he'll finish the unloading process,
Relinquish his whole set of keys,
Which, for two decades, he's accorded precious respect.
But what next? Who will get his legacies,
Souvenirs of years that have left no forwarding address?

Bone Mot^Δ

Never able to disguise his excitement
("Nervousness," "anxiety," "fright,"
His wife would be the first and last to assert)
Before taking a flight,
He awakens three hours early, today,
Scurries from their bedroom, into the kitchen,
To keep from disturbing her sleep,
With his blind fidgeting,
And fumbles through his coffee-making ritual.

Conditioned as he is, to doing her bidding,
This morning, he anticipates her wishes
That he retrieve the newspaper.
Padding out onto the front porch,
To assess the humidity,
He scampers across the dew-wet grass,
Fetches the cylindrical missive, from their mailbox,
And trots back, satisfied with the execution
Of his own preflight checklist.

Like crazed Lady Macbeth
Chasing shadowy hallucinations
Through the hazy corridors of morning's castle,
His groggy wife passes him, in the front hall,
Without the slightest indication she recognizes him.
He cringes into his silence,
Lets her pass, then enters on tiptoe,
As if forgetting she's not still fast asleep,
And leaves the paper on the crumpled sheets,

Where she'll immediately see it
And, hopefully (though without saying so, he knows she won't),
Appreciate his solicitous deed.
Maybe five minutes later, maybe three,
A gasping, shrill, screaming wail reaches him.
He winces, tips over his coffee cup;
Liquid drips down the fronts of three cabinets,
As he races toward the source of the high-pitched call
And heels beside her kneeling, naked body.

"Jesus, Nathan! See what you've done!"
"What, honey? What now?"

*

"Look at these tar prints on our new rug!"
Disbelieving, he gets down on all fours,
Tentatively nudges the wool pile,
Then sniffs suspiciously. "Oh, Christ, hon,
I've really gone and done it now,
Stuck my foot in it good, this time,
Didn't I?" "Nathan, shut up!"

"Run! Get the K2r — quick!
I've still got to do all my makeup
Before the cab comes."
Spraying, feverishly rubbing, with a towel,
An entire archipelago of tracks,
He works himself into a sweat so wet,
It refuses to quit, keeps leaking
Even as the taxi arrives at the airport,
And all the way to Chicago.

Not until they actually get into their hotel room
And he's had a chance to shower
Does a semblance of relaxation release him.
Exiting the steamy bathroom, dripping,
He hears his wife whispering into the phone
And, listening, can't help cringing once again:
"Yes, this *is* long distance!
Have a shampoo crew out, first thing Tuesday!
Our dog shitted all over the brand-new carpet!"

8/17/90 — [1] (03614)

Ghalib Ghallab Trio

Blacks, Orientals, Mid-
western rubes from
St. Louis, Peoria, and Naperville
all sift through the funnel
called Rush Street,
 down
 the tunnel where sounds dominate,
 colors diminish
to the essential, sensuous blend
 of electrical jazz.

We enter the throbbing buzz
and slide down a mystical
hole in the universe, just behind
the White Rabbit,
Mad Hatters saturated
with the hypnotic clatter of strings
and skins . . .
we grow smaller,
as everything in the room —
shadows, shapes, sounds — gets taller,
until we and the music
have no prejudices, accept each other
as sisters and brothers,
spirits under the skins,
heart-
strings strung so taut,
the slightest off-key deviation
from authenticity
would be
a conspicuous deflection of passion.

Tonight, in this smoky room,
we're one, under a roof
of musical truth,
each a sustained overtone
whose sweet diapason
will reverberate
well into the twenty-first
century.

8/17/90 — [2] (03440)

Transplanting ^Δ

Friday, just on a lark,
I wrested, from a moribund bouquet
Also containing ginger and protea sprigs
You'd given me, for our anniversary,
This single stem, bearing its majestic cluster
Of six-petaled stars-of-Bethlehem.
Before we left for Chicago,
I plucked it from its crystal vase
*

And asked you to accept my gift,
That this delicate white talisman
Might protect us, on our trip.
You held it as if it were an infant in its bunting.

Now, the nutlike buds of that blossom
Have almost completed their silent eruptions.
Oh, how inconspicuously
They go about their business
Of crucifixion and resurrection!
We awaken, from sweet sleep,
In our garden retreat at the Tremont,
Bespelled by that flower's fragrance
Radiating from the vessel in which we placed it,
Beside a single pink carnation.
Blooming,
The four of us adorn Sunday morning.

8/19/90 — [1] (03439)

A Sunday Buggy Ride ^Δ

For sweet Janie

We contract for a half-hour's ride
 in a horse-drawn carriage,
our route south on Lake Shore Drive,
 then back to the Water Tower,
where we descend, enter, again,
 Sunday's amphitheater,
whose sounds blend us into a rag
 worthy of Handy and Joplin.

Not cacophony
yet not quite mellifluousness, either,
but rather a graph of impulsive street-notes
 connects us with Chicago's heartbeat:
today's organ grinder without monkey,
 striking the sixty-one keys
of his five-octave arranger's piano,
 playing for dollar bills and dimes,
 to bring home the bacon,
 his rough-edged blues singing
“I hate to see that evening sun go down”;

saxophones on every corner,
dialoguing with each other,
as if from the same family of Amazonian toucans;
the ice-cream vendor ringing his bells;
horses clip-clopping, on worn shoes;
ambulances speeding; and overeager policemen,
in blue-and-white vehicles,
harassing anyone
not displaying a vendor's permit . . .

the two of us dizzied by all this
zigzag and crisscross
pedestrianism,
as though
we've never been exposed to such public
extrovertedness.

After a half-hour's amazement,
we exit the stage,
disappear into an eatery and order
four-o'clock sweets,
to assuage the postponement
of sex-pleasures
we're destined to satisfy, before too long —
the secret destination
of this peaceful Sunday's
concupiscent quest,
love's nest we never
really left,
even while evanescently straying.

Now, we mount the single step
and get back into
another carriage,
that it might return us to day's start,
before inchoate hopes and sleep
began to unravel
from dreams' tapestry,
and let us reconsider possibilities.

Maybe we'll decide, instead,
just to stay in bed,
for the rest
of our waking lives.

Jane's Rain [†]

We taxi south, down Lake Shore Drive,
Beneath a steady August rain
That saturates the skyscape, with gray haze,
Turns concrete to silver

8/20/90 (02465)

Treasure Island ^Δ

I

We make the most of our five-day vacation,
Sleeping late, waking in time
To glimpse the name of the station
And decide whether we wish to get off
Or ride time's train
To whichever of its next depots might strike our fancies.
Our unscheduled destinations surprise us, daily.

This Tuesday a.m.,
We awaken to the muffled yet blatant cacophony
Of a wrecking crew doing demolition
On an obsolete Chestnut Street building,
Fronting North Michigan Avenue.
I draw back the '30s curtains and sheers;
A dim, argent nimbus swims through the windows.

Despite just surfacing from restive sleep,
We don't even flinch; indeed,
We envision Chicago's slow, steady rain
Insinuating us, as it beads on the glass,
Already directing our destinies indoors, for the duration.
Still drowsy after showering, dressing,
Breakfasting at the Westin,

We hail a taxi and proclaim our address:
The Museum of Science and Industry.
Ah, what better way
To invest one's energies and intellect

*

Than in quest of treasure marked by an "x,"
Where our collective imagination's pirates
Buried it, on an island off Lake Shore Drive!

Cruising south, along the slick concourse
Separating our fates from Lake Michigan, to our left,
And Chicago's saw-toothed skyscape,
Enshrouded in pulsating gray haze, on our right,
We race past the Natural History and Shedd complexes,
Myriad harbors with bobbing pleasure craft,
Soldier Field, McCormick Place.

By the time we finally arrive
And are deposited at the expansive front steps
Of the massive Neoclassical temple
Commemorating the great American gods of commerce,
Our quiet excitement demands release.
We rush upwards, submit to its vortical thrust,
And sacrifice ourselves, at its ceremonial altar.

II

Ah, but in what chamber to begin our elaborate oblation?
We buy a guide, study the edifice's configurations,
And decide to select just a sample
From its complex array of display rooms,
Containing life-size operating models,
Where, for a few hours, we might lose ourselves
To a ten-year-old's sense of wonderment.

And so, like bewildered children,
Indistinguishable from the couple thousand others
Serpentining through these raucous, crowded corridors,
We ready ourselves to be bespelled
By sensory shapes so diverse,
Our image-gathering apparatus will rebel,
Refuse to locate us amidst the welter.

Suddenly, we're just two loose granules
Sifting inside the turning object box
Of the kaleidoscope our dizzy eyes continually twist,
In accommodating to Schwinn bicycles,
Kids' trikes, bone shakers, and velocipedes,
*

John Studebaker-built Conestoga wagons,
 Concord and four-in-hand coaches,
 Phaetons, broughams, Sears & Roebuck buggies,
 "Horseless carriages" whose insignias
 Bespoke sumptuous styling
 As well as the rugged pioneering derring-do
 Of their chuck-it-all-to-the-winds inventors —
 Simplex, Stoddard-Dayton, Duesenberg, Benz,
 Mormon, Lincoln, Rolls-Royce, Packard, Cadillac.

Here a coal mine, now a kiosk
 Purveying T-shirts and *Ideas and Opinions*,
 By Albert Einstein; just behind,
 Suspended from the ceiling, a Spitfire, Stuka,
 Curtiss "Jenny," Texaco and Boeing mail planes;
 Below them, a colossal electric-train replica
 Of the Santa Fe route through the Rockies;
 The history of post offices and currency,
 Human anatomy, typewriters, tools,
 And too many more displays
 For us to absorb. Weary, we gather our rain gear,
 Descend the temple's great staircase,
 And take a cab back to North Michigan Avenue,
 The treasure we've discovered, today, intact.

8/21/90 (03447)

[Three evenings a week, at least,] [†]

Three evenings a week, at least,
 He and his lady
 Drive to the nearby high school
 And

This vague a.m.,
 Cadences he's used, to get said
 What's in his soul's craw,
 Express what's on his imagination's chest, elude him

8/28/90 — [1] (03478)

Spaced Out

False starts dog his imagination,
This tired a.m.
Thrice, he's tried to fire his space vehicle,
Achieve ignition and liftoff,
But each time he's begun critical countdown,
Something in the vast apparatus has given way,
Refused to sustain pressure:
A nozzle or valve sprays unevenly or quits;
A tube leaks; spars develop fissures.

Although postponements have flawed the program,
There are days when he glows,
Conceiving the probe he hopes to place in orbit,
Imagining it sending back glimpses of galaxies
That, by exposing God's design to human scrutiny,
Could actually redefine Creation
And man's relationship to the universe.
But for at least one day more, anyway,
Only his dream will get launched.

8/28/90 — [2] (03642)

Fallen on Hard Times

Out of the City of Damned Souls,
Hurtling south,
Hellbound at a frenetic clip,
Considering it's not yet six o' clock,
He considers his options: to flee perfidy,
Dissimulation, marital discord,
His wife's blatantly illicit relationship
With their insurance-salesman neighbor
Just up the hill,

Or stay at home, in their house of ill repute,
He a pimp like Mr. Binford,
That impotent, hermaphroditic proprietor
Of Miss Reba's Memphis bordello
For politicians, businessmen, and eunuchs

*

Or bumpkins like Boon Hogganbeck,
Come to pugknuckle Miss Corrie, once,
For his entire month's salary,
Before returning to Jefferson, empty-pocketed.

Thirty-five miles out, he exits,
Gets an extra-large coffee to go —
Twenty ounces of caffeine,
To quicken his dead senses, offset lethargy,
Hopefully let him concentrate on the drive ahead,
Forget both horns of his dilemma,
And try to remember why he's fled:
To deny himself a cushy life,
Collecting rent from all those men fucking his wife.

8/29/90 — [1] (03601)

Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fearful ^Δ

Even as you fade in the misty retrograde
Weaving an impenetrable wall behind my vehicle
As it flows slowly southeasterly,
Monitored by no radar screens,
Solitarily as a defunct moon eclipsing night,
With its black-hole gravity,
You shimmer like a spectral shade
In a painting by Albert Pinkham Ryder
Or ghostly scream, evoked by Edvard Munch,
Hovering above a bridge,
As though you've just lost your best friend
Or witnessed your own holocaust.

Have I lost you to man's collective memory
Or just lapsed, this gray a.m.,
Temporarily outdistanced our VORTAC,
Lost the capacity to correct my shifting drift,
With vectors that can direct me back to you?
Why, when I peer in my rearview mirror,
Does your nimbus frighten me,
Not let me envision your white body,
Which so gently flowed below me,

*

Itself the water buoying us, like whales,
To an ocean of warm semen,
In which we dove and rose, dove and rose?

Could it be we died, last night,
Without even realizing it,
Shared our last earthly hours, alive,
Consummating all our compulsive desire,
In one concentrated lust-thrust,
Before succumbing to sleep?
Or could it be
Neither of us really conceived
The possibility that passion and affection
Are not ephemeral
But rather love's prenuptial rites
To the marriage of memory and forever after?

8/29–30/90 — [2] on 8/29 & [1] on 8/30 (03441)

Re-turning ^Δ

August ends, today,
And, as I recall, fall begins,
Or is imminent, anyway. I can sense it,
As I return through Bollinger and Perry counties,
From my two-day journey away from St. Louis.
I don't need to read the *Farmers' Almanac*,
To interpret the silent dialogue
Corn, cows, and this fifty-degree breeze,
Wafting into my open windows, have with me.
Each of us knows, intimately, what it means
To be approaching season's end.

Often, what remains unspoken
Discloses so much more than speculation
And supposition ever could, especially about affection,
Quiescence, and afterlife.
Let whatever may happen to us happen.
Regardless what kind of heart
Stops beating inside our breathing vessels,
We must submit to corruption, decay,
*

And spiritual transmogrification.
Today, the first faint tinges of change in the leaves
Remind me it's time to die again.

8/30/90 — [2] (03643)

Madonna and Child ^Δ

From my chair in the rose-hued sitting room,
Where I've comfortably ensconced myself,
This seemingly careless Sunday morning,
To compose sunlight and vestigial dream-skeins
Into an image-nest in which I might luxuriate,
For the rest of day's life,
I stare at you, cross-legged on your bed,
In a green terry-cloth robe,
A red headband arresting your hair,
In a halo so golden, beneath the ceiling lights,
That, momentarily, I mistake your visage. . . .

Suddenly, you're a Cimabue Madonna
I might have seen, once,
In a youthful pilgrimage to Firenze or Assisi,
Possibly a muted pastel rendering of the Virgin Mary
Andrea del Sarto may have painted,
To decorate a Renaissance church chapel,
Grotto, or back of a tabernacle.
Oh, no . . . now I see!
With your head slightly inclined,
Your tiny hands holding open the pages of a book,
Your eyes with a look of amazed devotion,

You must be the same sweet, inviolable lady
Giotto was compelled to recreate,
Pro tempore,
From his memory's collective unconscious,
In that dimly lit, long-ago dawning of enlightenment,
When men worshiped women —
If they worshiped them in the first place —
As gentle, meek, decent creatures,
Divinely endowed with all the terrestrial elements
Necessary for perpetuating the humane race,
Surrogates of God's Earth Mother.

Finally, when I gaze from blue-ruled spaces
That are no longer empty,
I see you leaning forward, pen in hand,
Etching thoughts onto paper, invisibly, inaudibly,
Except for sporadic rips or scratching
That lets me know you, too, are busy,
Recording your existence.
And I wonder whether this precious silence
We've wrested from Sunday morning
Might not be another incarnation
Of our love's immaculate conceiving.

9/2/90 (03442)

Mr. Bledsoe

Poor Mr. Bledsoe!
He's relapsed,
Tried suicidal clock-block,
OD'd instead, and admitted himself
To the local hospital's chemical-dependency unit,
For detox and rehab,
To free his bloodstream of Mary Jane,
Grain alcohol, and cocaine
He mainlined, late last Tuesday evening,
After returning home from work,
To find his three children cowering,

His wife out of the house again,
Who, for the life of her,
Can't believe he done hisself thataway,
No matter she be doin' wrong,
These last three months.
Now, Mr. Bledsoe,
Who done fixed hisself good,
Mumbles, under his pillow,
Somethin' about not wantin' to die or live,
Just find Jesus,
To ask Him why God crucifies all His children.

9/4/90 (03632)

Lost in a Crowd, 1990 ^Δ

*A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.*
— T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

This Wednesday morning after Labor Day,
He trips through bathroom rituals:
Spatters arsenic-hued toothpaste, on the mirror,
Nicks his chin, with a dull razor,
Forgets to collect hair his comb sets flying
And thumb it into the wastebasket,
Realizes he's depleted his supply of vitamins.
Last night's dead sleep,
Back and forth, to the earth's core,
Might have been forty-nine years deep,
For the malaise that seems to have surfaced with him.

Just now, staring at his ashen body,
He sees a dazed stranger
(Whether hobo loping along a train track
Or shell-shocked soldier navigating bomb craters
In a lunar landscape, he can't differentiate)
Scrutinizing him, through flaming eyes
That might be set in the predatory head of a leopard
Or cobra instead of his own face.
He winces, twitches, shakes, as if shocked
By paddles of a defibrillator
Riveted to his chest, just above the heart.

Even after chugging three cups of coffee
That should fuel his reactors,
He remains too cool for subcranial fevers
To be detected by colleagues and enemies
Who would abuse his weaknesses, to their advantage.
He'll conceal his unhealed feelings, with aplomb.
None will realize he's numb
From ear to ear, head to toe, gonads to soul,
A man ghettoed, yet, in memory's limbo,
Grieving for dead "survivors" like himself,
A child lost in a crowd still gathering at Auschwitz depot.

Writer's Block: A Paradox

Gripping his pen, between thumb, index and middle fingers,
He leans on his left elbow,
Extended over the table on which his open notebook rests,
And lingers over the empty, blue-ruled pages,
Waiting to watch the process unfold —
Strokes flowing into words, verses, stanzas,
A whole poem, with its own genealogy and provenance,
Materializing from cerebral free-associations —
With a magician's flick of his manipulative wrist.

But as he sits, his anxiety threshold diminishing,
For the cacophonous kitchen clatter
Issuing, not too distantly, into his left ear,
Pitting his right brain with acid-rain
And pigeon-shit conversation
Lifting through the smoky room, from nearby booths,
As if, poised in static readiness, to seize inspiration,
He might be a convenient equestrian statue,
Not another human sipping coffee,

He realizes that not a line he's composed in his mind,
Not a single provocative exclamation point or "i" dotted,
No "T" crossed or comma deleted,
Has evolved, from silence, into rhyme-chiming verses,
To witness his existence in this restaurant
Or formulate the slightest suggestion
That a chronicle of his life might be in progress,
No matter that he's been writing, almost an hour,
About not being able to write.

9/9–10/90 — [1] on 9/10 (03649)

Addicted to the Road

Even at this predawn hour,
The vertiginous speeds he achieves, leaving the city,
Excite his eyes to heightened possibilities
Of colliding with his own insight,
As it scans the hazy horizon, for a destiny to pursue.
*

Gripping the wheel tightly, with his left hand,
He waves his right
As if directing an orchestra
Instead of keeping idiosyncratic time to jazz
He constantly feeds the tape player.

Soon, lost in the music's soothing fluidity,
He disappears off his own screen,
Enters the zone of the unknown.
Never one to require alcohol or drugs
To cut himself loose,
He flies high, dry, flying so low,
He goes undetected by agents of the powers that be,
Whose sole duty is to monitor highways
Assigned exclusively to use by the citizenry.
Not being an official of the state
Seems never to have made any difference to him.

He's always depended, for his independence,
On an intense, self-imposed sense of freedom
Derived entirely from driving,
Believing that all roads lead to roaming
And that the soul's only potential for redemption
Lies in allowing a body to stray,
So that it just might find its way home
If its host remains congenial to growth and change.
Today, he sets his cruise control wide open
Yet hopes he'll not reach his heart's death-stination
Or, if so, only briefly, for mortality's sake.

9/10/90 — [2] (03650)

Taking the Train ^Δ

For beautiful Miss Jane

This Friday night in Kirkwood
Is murmurous with sporadic reverberations
Of eighty-car freight trains
Rumbling past the Victorian depot,
Between red-blinking crossing gates,
Around the bend, and out of sight,
*

Innocuously as snakes
Slithering into their most inconspicuous disguises.

Though in a discount store bordering the tracks,
Shopping, with coupons, for T-shirts,
Toothpaste, shampoo, and aspirin,
We're not oblivious of whines and shrieks
Diesel engines articulate,
Laboring to keep their momentum going,
Even as they slow, to navigate
This small town's trafficked business district.

Curiously, the longer we linger,
Weaving around gondolas laden with things
Genghis Khan and King Solomon
Would have been astounded to encounter under one roof,
The more impatient to leave we grow.
Whether it's the bass throbbing of those trains
Or just numbing tedium
Engendered from spending inordinate attention

On items that have only ephemeral consequences,
We feel compelled to rush out,
With our plastic bags, and race toward the fence,
Behind which an Amtrak locomotive
(Guiding four lighted red-and-blue cars),
Newly arrived, shudders like a dragon
About to roar, spew fire, rage.
Oh, to behold, so close, such a primordial force!

Hypnotized by this demon not ten feet from us,
We wave at a face behind its right eye.
Awed by the engine's size and raucousness,
We vibrate, in sympathy, with its potential
To explode, any moment, into raw energy.
Then, in an urgent adrenaline surge,
We drown in sweaty wetness
No August humidity in St. Louis could possibly inspire.

Suddenly, three blasts from its air horn
Signal the end of its evanescent restlessness.
Hoses vent excess pressure;
Brake shoes let loose their steely grips;
Silent journal boxes groan as wheels pick up speed.
Unexplainably, we come unfrozen,

*

Slip through the fence, glide down the rails,
Like two newly commissioned passenger cars,

And connect with the four hurtling eastward,
Toward Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and beyond.
For the rest of the night,
Pulled by the orgasmic force our engines generate,
We'll shimmer along tracks
Love lays over passion's roadbed.
By morning, we'll have traveled to New York,
Back to Kirkwood station, and we'll be on our way again.

9/11/90 (03443)

Sacrifice the Children

In this all-night restaurant,
Not two throws of a stone from the house
Where, not five minutes ago,
He dropped off his sixteen-year-old daughter
(Whom he'd seen not three times in four months,
Prior to tonight's dinner out with her)
And where, until this past February, he resided,
Not so much without pride
As lacking the necessary apparatus to say no
To his wife's lies and deceitful deeds,
He sits by himself, pondering suicide —

Ah, not his own actual death, as a matter of fact,
But rather an abstract philosophic formulation
Whose axiomatic act of nihilism
Might more closely approximate an existential tract,
Drafted by Plath or van Gogh,
Than a satisfactory anodyne against the malaise
That has strapped his soul to the rack —
That series of tragedies leading to marital catastrophe:
His emotional and physical castration,
Her adultery, their separation, his eviction
And banishment to a hotel, their descent into silence.

No, he's not personally worried about his prospects,
Just discouraged by the dim vision

*

That has focused his limited attention
 On his two children, still living, under one roof,
 With the duplicitous wife who polluted the oasis
 Around which they settled, she a child
 Who inherited, from her parents, alcohol abuse.
 He grows dizzy, listening to echoing words
 His daughter spoke, earlier tonight:
 "Dad, why don't some people die when they're dead?"
 He gets sweaty, nauseous, then vomits on his plate.

9/13/90 (03651)

Garage Sale

He leaves the hotel room, in Frontenac,
 Where, for seven months, he's been exiled,
 And enters this crisp, mid-September Saturday,
 Alert to dewy grass edging the parking lot,
 Imagining scattered, on it,
 Possessions he and Jan gathered, in their sporadic travels
 Spanning twenty-five years,
 Wrestling, from nothingness,
 A heritage they might pass on to their two children,
 As souvenirs of the "World's Fair"
 They attended while on love's "grand tour."

As if peeping through a knothole in a neighbor's fence
 Rather than groping with memory,
 To focus on all those things he imagines his wife,
 With accomplices to her frenzy,
 Setting out, on the back lawn, last night —
 Items obscured, slightly, yet visible, from the street,
 To curiosity seekers come to view
 The "scene of the accident"
 The lady of this respectable Clayton residence
 Advertised, in the classified section, as "Divorce Sale —
 Designer clothes - furniture - books - toys,"

He sits in a nearby restaurant light-years away,
 Wanting to release a primal scream,
 To assuage his sense of helplessness
 In keeping the last vestiges of his past

*

From splitting like atoms in a cyclotron
And flying in directions so diverse,
Not even God could find them again,
In a surreal Easter-egg hunt He might proclaim,
To honor the crucifixion of one of His sons.
He hopes those here for breakfast
Mistake his grief for sleeplessness or a hangover,

Not deep depression
Only obliquely related to the sheets, pillows, and spreads
That, for decades, cradled his body and head;
Crazed porcelain cups from which they sipped coffee,
In the kitchen, or he did, in his writing office;
Books about dinosaurs, Dungeness crabs,
Fluff-muffled Truffles, and Hungry Mungries,
Which he rhymed and mimed, to his kids' delight,
Night after night after night;
Paintings depicting places they visited;
Bric-a-brac chronicling forgetting's cathexes.

But no moans force their way up the volcano
His desecrated spirit has been forming,
These past three years,
To serve as a safety vent against pressure
Their protracted divorce has been creating
Along the course of his fault lines.
Sipping his draught, he shivers.
With uncharacteristic abruptness, he erupts,
Rushes out, and drives toward his house,
To buy up every item his wife's selling,
However many hours and dollars it might take.

9/15/90 (03653)

On the Nature of Glaciers

And so, ever so slowly,
They slide into the Ocean of Loneliness,
Not three inches a day
Or six feet a year, in polar demarcations,
But as components of memory growing exponentially,
Before shearing off, from fate's glacier,
*

Fragmenting into nearly invisible ice floes
Unrecognizable, for their sepulchral, white glow,
Bobbing like mirages of long-ago emotions,
The whole process so inexorable,
Forgetting has time to overtake recollection.

And so it goes,
Days melting into eternity's diurnal procession,
Months dripping into the abyss,
Years swelling the earth's watery regions,
Until events that formed continents in their marriage
Disappear beneath an expanding flood.
The planet that supported their four lives
Rotates out of true, loses speed,
Veers from its orbit, a few thousand degrees,
Before freezing envelops it, in a crystalline crust
No sun will unzero, in fifty million years.

9/19/90 (03633)

Collaboration

For Bill Heyen

Just the two of us,
Self-styled artists at large,
Inhabit your ash-shadowed backyard cabin,
For whatever duration it might take
To let us get in touch with our poet-souls
And Creation.
Slumped, comfortably, in overstuffed chairs,
Facing each other diagonally,
We engage in the same holy acts of contemplation
And imagination. Although fixing, in notebooks,
Separate visions, we project identical reflections
Into God's book of the universe.

Hours phoenix from fires inside us.
They soar, sweep, glide, like shore birds
In search of mystical fish
On which to feed their voracious appetites,
Before plucking us from oceanic dreams.
We submit to their midair frenzy.
*

Being caught up, out of lost thoughts,
Serves our needs too, by freeing us
To talk about what we've seen and heard,
And lets us nourish the earth,
With verse-seeds of exotic crops
We've brought back from new worlds beyond Brockport.

Together, we close our notebooks,
Open our eyes, awaken from reveries,
And emerge from this sanctified Thoreau retreat.
Breathing in crisp September breezes
Ventilating this village along the Erie Canal,
Both of us realize how close we came,
To the source from which metaphor flows,
And, more, how traveling there, together,
Through the Corridors of Solitude,
Whether strangers in the beginning or not,
Has fused us into friends, unto the end,
Our hearts sharers of a kindred heritage: the word.

9/22/90 (03634)

Spinning Tops

It spins imperceptibly,
The dreidel of days
We witness, through beguiled eyes,
As we engage in our playground lives,
Supervised by the *Magister Ludi*,
And grow, overnight, from tough kids
Into disillusioned adults.

Watching it wobble, we're hypnotized.
Miraculously, for a while,
It maintains its balance,
Keeps the planet from jumping track,
By adding to gravity's pull.
But slowly, it yaws into violent pitching,
Collapses, then dies, on its side.

9/23/90 — [1] (03648)

[We awaken late, this Sunday in Brockport,][†]

We awaken late, this Sunday in Brockport,
The three of us sorely in need of sleep,
Who, for three days, have sported,
Traipsed, and played at perpetuating rituals
We've been weaving into the scheme of our life-rhymes,
These recent fifty years

9/23/90 — [2] (02444)

The Zebras of Gino's[△]

*Letting loose, à la Dr. Seuss;
for Circus McGurkus*

Two by two by two by two,
One line to the right,
One line to the left,
Row above row above row above row,
Leaping and vaulting in dizzy alternation,
Those black-and-white striped creatures
Catapult against a red paper gestalt,
Along Gino's walls, front to back,
Ceiling to floor, in unrelieved frenzy,
Like reckless Pegasus with broken wings.

Two by twos, these leaping zebras of Gino's
Soar toward a distant horizon
Made of pasta fagioli, insalata with garlic,
Fettuccines Alfredo and carbonara,
Chicken à la Marsala, gelato,
And espresso — oh, what a culinary potpourri!
And what a hoot, to boot,
Dining out in New York City,
Night after night,
And never quite knowing what to expect,

Whether soup du jour will be manure of rhino,
The house dressing urine of river horse,
The dessert something no less exotic,

*

Such as gonads jubilee of zebra
Or tapir or boar
Or just the good old standby bill of fare:
Fricassee of spring-fed cobra à la Milanese.
Whatever the case, eating at Gino's
Is always a treat to the taste buds
As well as the imagination.

With its wall decorations, which have lasted, intact,
Since the '50s, this restaurant
Might be an Attic vase,
Modern-day Grecian urn à la Keats,
No matter that all the waiters speak thick Italian.
And if not, perhaps it's a brothel
In ancient Memphis, Thebes, Caesaria,
Or Rhodes, not a neighborhood trattoria
In Gotham. Whatever the case,
It's *On Beyond Zebra*, whenever we're here.

9/23/90 — [3] (03450)

[Sounds of garbage trucks,][†]

Sounds of garbage trucks,
diesel engines,
pneumatic hoses screeching
and blowing off steam

Smells of horses by the Plaza,
garbage trucks

Homeless,
Those rifling through black plastic bags
huddled on street curbs,
for cans, uneaten bread heels,
potato, orange, banana peels,
the unused butt-ends of moldy lettuce heads

9/24/90 (00694)

The Moment Before ^Δ

Lady, as I sit here,
In this plush room of the Park Lane Hotel,
Facing Central Park South,
Gazing at its slightly pretentious decorations
(Side tables, Chinese scenes on linen,
Oversize mirrors with rococo moldings,
Kingsize bed with brocade-tufted, hand-carved headboard),
I focus on you, my sweet mistress —
The process by which you prepare yourself
To seize the day, twenty-three floors below,
The way you apply facial creams,
Layer your makeup, design eyeliner,
Spread out, on the bed, faded black jeans,
White cable-knit sweater, select shoes,
As though the imminent occasion
Were a celebratory coronation of our souls
And we regal queen and king
About to publicly accept our divine duties,
Instead of just two anonymous bodies
About to enter the oceanic crowd
Gathered to witness its own continuous ebb and flow,
Moment to moment to hour, day to decade,
For a thousand tomorrows, forever.

9/25/90 — [1] (02435)

Ca' Nova ^Δ

Sitting here, across from you,
In this outdoor restaurant on Madison Avenue,
Staring into your face, then past,
I see shapes passing us in the plate glass,
Disappearing into their own matrices.

Seated here, with you,
I realize, perhaps prematurely,
My day has been made,
Its celebration a *fait accompli*.
Now that it has come, it can go,
*

And I can die,
Knowing Jane is the name jubilation takes.

9/25 — [2] & 10/26/90 — [3] (02443)

All the Difference ^Δ

“And you and I
Took the one less traveled by, and . . .
And it has made all the difference,”
I whisper to you, across the small table,
Outdoors, buffering this restaurant
From Madison Avenue, between 62nd and 63rd.
We dine on sourdough shadows,
Salads laced with thyme and sweet balsamic vinegar.
Our silence is so reverberant with worshipfulness.
I say, “I am totally accommodating;
Whatever I might endow you with, I shall.”
Oh, the elusive fugitive sunrays
That somehow penetrate these colossal edifices,
Make their way to our shoulder blades,
Thighs, down into the quick blood!
How does one like me, a refugee
Whose empty pockets belie a cornucopious heart,
Proclaim the robust joy I feel,
Seated here, on this tiny island, with you,
Floating in an ocean, we two
The only known species to have survived lives
We left behind when we chose
To take the road less traveled by . . .
And that, my lady, and that
Has made, nay, will make, all the difference,
Especially since our destinations are already decided.

9/25/90 — [3] (02436)

[The sun is a swift, blue flume,] ^Δ

The sun is a swift, blue flume,
Whose warm cascade, this September ending,
Injects us with sensual jubilation.

*

Across from each other, at this outdoor *ristorante*,
We clink water glasses,
Toast our crystal good fortune,
Eat a delicious chicken dish seasoned with thyme
And balsamic vinegar, nibble at couscous.
The freedom of eating amidst nearby traffic
And pedestrians parading by us
Is such sweet exhilaration.

Suddenly, we grow alert to an intruder,
A kamikaze bee,
The only one along all Madison Avenue,
Off course, who strafes our shore
Bordering this oceanic corridor within New York.
This hyperbole-bee disturbs our equanimity.
We shake napkins, futilely, as if surrendering,
To no avail. Even the waiter apologizes:
“Sorry for the fly, but I can’t do anything.”
I hand him a fifty-dollar bill, for our meal,
Instruct he keep the change.

But before we can vacate this cramped real estate
We’ve rented for an hour,
An aged lady in tweed suit from the fifties
Collapses to the sidewalk. Two men try to grab her
As she crumples into a contorted mass.
“Oh, I just got out of the hospital,
From a hip operation,” she complains,
As they hail a taxi and place her in it,
For the solitudinous ride to her solitary abode.
Once again, we enter day, rejuvenated,
Ready for episodes about to enfold us, in their unfolding.

9/25/90 — [4] (02437)

Makeup Artists ^Δ

Amidst Madison Avenue’s fanciest real estate —
Banks, art galleries, couturiers —
Is this mecca of cosmetics: Boyd’s Chemists.
My lady invests a pedestrian hour, out of her day,
Sitting for a “makeup consultation.”

*

I scrutinize the stages of her transformation:
Cleansing, moisturizing, concealing,
Foundationing, contouring (choosing rouges).

She views herself, in a hand-held tortoiseshell mirror,
And approvingly poses,
While her technician blends in patchouli blush,
With brushes and sponges —
A female Toulouse and her flattered subject,
Collaborating in an act of creation.
Finally, applying eyeliner, shadow, and lipstick,
She completes her portrait of beauty's newest deity.

9/25/90 — [5] (02438)

Slumming ^Δ

Legs amputated at the kneecaps,
Paraplegics begging, for quarters, from wheelchairs;
Tatterdemalions rifling plastic garbage bags
Hurled into curbs and alleyways;
Bums, winos, and Vietnam-vet specters
Lurking at every other corner,
As if behind trees in a rain forest or rice paddy,
Waiting for the enemy to raise its head;

Just over there, by the Plaza fountain,
That sad, dilapidated shape of a man
Bending into a garbage container,
Extracting a half-eaten sandwich, a beer can . . .
Unself-consciously, in plain sight,
He satisfies his thirst and appetite,
Exercises first right of refusal,
By eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner in two bites,
Chugging his libation, with a single tilt of the elbow,
Then crumples under a bench and falls asleep.

Soon, you and I will reach the St. Moritz,
Where, seated outdoors,
We'll share a late-afternoon raspberry sorbet,
Sip decaffeinated coffee,
Before paying exorbitantly, for the privilege,
*

Tipping the waitress disproportionately to her carelessness,
Then disappear again, into our insularity,
On the twenty-third floor
Of New York's most extravagant flophouse.

9/25 — [6] & 10/26/90 — [4] (02439)

Snippets from the St. Moritz — Café de la Paix^Δ

Oh, the fear,
the pervasive fear of it!
Here in this city of cheerless faces,
everyone wears a troubled demeanor,
a visage of half-hidden,
anxiety-ridden fearfulness
that, in the near future,
they'll cease fearing
their nearest enemy
and friend,
commence trusting instincts of innocence and faith,
and end up surrendering to death,
without ever having had time
to obsess over their
disillusionment.

A movable Hooverville —

Berserko, on a bike with bells,
blowing bubbles

A bum rifling through garbage,
with the furiousness of a
cyclone,
with a skunk on his
shoulder,
all the
while

A scavenger, pushing a laundry cart
with brooms protruding,
stops at a trash basket at
59th & 6th Avenue,
locates a discarded tennis shoe,
inspects, pulls its lace out,
hunts for &
locates its mate,
deliberates, pulls *its* lace,
keeps both laces, not
shoes, and
sets sail again, for
newer
oceans.

From this canopied corner-
vantage,
at 59th Street and 6th Avenue,
facing the park,
we see teeming humanity
streaming by, in procession —
ah, over there,
Santa in September,
escorting two
black children
nowhere.

Horse-drawn carriages,
Hot-dog and pretzel stands on wheels,
buses, taxis, ambulances,
bums stumbling by, in their travels,
joggers wearing masks, to
avoid the pollution —
all on their ways home,
to a cubicle or
habitat
or rabbit warren
or witch's den
or Skinner box
complete with its own
*

idiosyncratic
 electrified sex-
 grid
 (this city of interlocking boxes),
 Park Ave. apartments,
 Riverside Drive condos, Bronx tenements,
 grocery and laundry carts,
 to sleep in

Ah, these urchins and beggars and waifs!
 Where do they go to replace a wheel
 When a bearing goes out
 Or the rubber tread breaks down to its steel rim?

What doctor or emergency room
 Do they seek when AIDS
 Invades them, appendixes get inflamed,
 Then suddenly rupture? And
 When death finally overtakes them,
 To whom do they bequeath their treasured possessions?

9/25 — [7] & 10/26/90 — [5] (02440)

Lovers and Sons ^Δ

Although I lingered late, before leaving,
 My love yet sleeps, in our dark room at the Park Lane.
 I debated waiting for her to awaken,
 Take a shower, compose her makeup,
 Arrange her clothes, on the bed, prior to dressing,
 Then decided to keep one hour, out of five days,
 For myself — such a short-lived compensation,
 I reasoned, for having dispensed, all week wide,
 My least private, as well as deepest, secrets.

Now, I sit at a table for two, in Rumpelmayer's,
 Surrounded by the factory-roar of foreign voices
 Competing against used and new silverware,
 Dirty and clean dishes being cleared away,
 Restacked, or set out again,

*

With indefatigable, slapdash automaticity.
I gaze, abstractedly, at my scattered breakfast —
Coffee, seven-grain whole-wheat toast,
And a bowl of rice pudding floated with raisins —

And I'm amazed by a fugitive illumination
Slowly evolving into a focused recognition of myself
As a baby in a highchair,
Trying to feed myself spoonfuls of viscid gruel,
Chewing my gums numb, on zwieback,
Slurping milk all over my bib.
Nibbling my toast and rice, sipping coffee,
I realize how incomplete this visceral ritual is
Without my love's companionship, to nourish me.

9/27/90 (03445)

A-mazing Dominoes

Oh, how the days elapse so exactly in line,
Like a collapsing layout of dominoes
God designed and tediously placed on His worktable,
In the most elaborate maze He could conceive
And single-handedly create at the onset of time,
Each black, rectangular block
Bearing the face of either my Trilogy or Troika,
On each, emblazoned, a human caricature of moon or sun,
Out of medieval and Renaissance atlases —
Bloated globes with porcine features
Mocking my existence as their progenitor.

No matter what hour or second I pause
And listen for whispers and reverberations
To suggest where the cascade may have arrived,
In its travels toward the abyss named Apocalypse,
At whose base I wait, to be smashed,
My inner ears and eyes
Can't triangulate my broken heart's epicenter,
From which the original quake emanated,
Or differentiate these passing days
From memories of our harmonious family, in Farmington,
Before the first shock waves shattered our dreams.

This hazy morning after Yom Kippur,
Sitting alone, in a foreign living room,
Sipping silence from my still-filled cup of atonement,
I lift my pen above an empty page
And, fidgeting as if trying to decide
On which line to begin, pray for mystical intervention,
To let my instrument commence free-associating
And form a wall of inky strokes
That will force these dominoes to stall, cease falling,
Maybe even reverse their momentum
And reset themselves, as God always intended.

9/29/90 — [1] (03639)

No More Curiouser a Pair Anywhere ^Δ

Janie, O Janie,
You and I share identical
Dissimilarities,
And though we both envision, differently,
Sunset and sunrise,
We always see, eye to eye,
Parallaxes that disillusion the imagination,
Fool the scientific mind.

We're two of an idiosyncratic kind,
Who, gifted with insight,
Find room, in the universe, to coexist
Independent of messiahs who would stifle differences,
For fear of being discovered
To possess no innovative ideas.
We're God's best bet to beat eternity's odds —
A pair of wild cards in His deck.

9/29/90 — [2] (03444)

[For years, he labored without realizing that desperation,] [†]

For years, he labored without realizing that desperation,
Not jubilation,
*

Was the driving wheels of the steam locomotive
His keen intellect, effusive energy, and enthusiasm
Fueled

9/30/90 — [1] (02449)

Last Rites

Ah, on this last Sunday in September,
Actually the month's last day —
Maybe the last time I'll be able to walk outside
In just my bathrobe, barefoot,
As though summer were in its heyday,
And witness medium-size butterflies
Still hovering over petite-plum clusters
Yet blossoming and argenteous spider-threads
Interconnecting sunrays,
Glistening in midair — I listen to my heart.
It sings a bittersweet threnody

I myself, in another kingdom, in other times,
Have harmonized, not so much a send-off
Or mournful plaint for a season's end
Or the onset of unpleasant prospects of health
But rather an elegy having to do with necessary losses
Of a permanent nature, not physical death
Or vegetative forgetting
So much as detention within a living memory
Of events so vivid with anguish,
Neither regret nor resentment requite them.
Today, I see the ghosts of my children and wife

Drifting with the clouds, themselves clouds
Billowy and whisperous, changing shapes continually,
As if eluding wisdom's capacity to fix them,
If evanescently, in a prism
And lift them out of their glowing opacity,
As they blow past me, and I'm hoping, perhaps,
Just to say, "Hello," or "I miss you so much."
But the grass, yet wet with night's sap,
Wrapping between my toes, distracts my senses,
*

Unfocuses me. Suddenly, the sky is emptied of them.
September and I remember only their last rites.

9/30/90 — [2] (03638)

[Although we boasted such sleek vessels,][†]

Although we boasted such sleek vessels,
On first meeting each other,
And practiced separately

10/5/90 — [1] (02450)

Never Depend on a Metaphor

In the eyes behind my mind's drowsy eyes,
I see packs of wild boars and Chilean tapirs
Attacking the sun and moon
As though the sky were an Andean forest
And I a not-quite-innocent bystander
Witnessing the Apocalypse, from a mystical distance
Imagination provides
Whenever the psyche requires a swift shift of venue,
A refuge from fact too predatory to evade
By employing normal measures
To keep reality at bay . . .

Like this autumn morning,
When, to suppress the pain of our divorce,
I've tried to marshal, to my defense,
The most irrelevant image conceivable,
To distract me from my past
And focus me on present paths.
But no matter what direction thought takes,
Even disguising itself as hope and dream,
It lands *in fate's medias res*,
Chased by marauding tapirs and boars
And eaten alive, under October's bleeding sun and moon.

10/5/90 — [2] (03635)

Staying Afloat

Oh, how quiet, docile, and perfectly private
This Sunday morning seems,
Into which he rises from dreams.
Through remote greenish volumes,
He surfaces like a breaching whale,
Trailing glory-spume from his colossal flukes,
A human disguised as a white leviathan
Forming its own horizon, toward which it slowly floats,
As though expanding the ocean's contours,
So that, without knowing,
It won't ever quite reach shore
But rather keep going out of sight
Of those rowing boats crowded with harpoon throwers
Trying to close the gap, from behind,
And both blind sides of his survivor's psyche.

How serenely amniotic these waters seem,
As wide as his vision projects.
The undulating waves nuzzle his underbelly,
Like minnows nibbling manna-flakes
Sprinkled by low-flying angels on their way home
From terrestrial visitations. Jaws wide,
He combs the pelagic eco-nets, for plankton and weeds,
To feed his peaceful imagination.
For the moment, his tiny, vital whale-brain
Conceives itself free,
Promulgates existence consisting of laughter and love
(Or its mammalian equivalents, anyway)
In such abundance, he may never submerge again,
Just swim, continuously, out of and into eternity,
For the rest of his cetological life.

10/7/90 (03637)

Moon's-Day Hallucinations

On this upper-fifty-degree October morning,
The first day of the workweek,
Just twenty-three from Halloween,
The misting rain spitting at my windshield
*

Lays claim to my melancholic imagination,
Makes me wish I were able to don my costume
Prematurely,
Disguise my disillusioned, somnolent heart
Inside a luminescently painted skeleton suit
Not necessarily redolent of death . . .
Not necessarily, I halfheartedly tell myself.

I could just as easily be the plastic bat
Stuck to our front door's rusty screen,
Or rubber spider hung, by an elastic string,
From the gaslight fixture beside the cement steps
Leading from the street to our porch,
Each level sentinelized with infernal pumpkins.
Perhaps I could rent a devil's flaming-red outfit,
Fancy myself Beelzebub,
Replete with pitchfork, pointed tail,
Gorgon's beak, demon's cloven-hoofed feet,
And a penis resembling Eve's secretly exciting viper.

Without notice, the wipers' erratic screeching
Yanks my fantasies back to the land of the living,
At least long enough to let me recognize
That what I thought to be rush-hour traffic,
Pacing, leaping, lunging at me,
Is really a pack of stray black cats
Scratching the glistening glass, with bared claws,
And the mist their hissing, spitting vindictiveness.
Suddenly, I realize I'm caught, caged inescapably,
Actively leading my ghostly soul's procession
Toward Monday's haunted mausoleum.

10/8/90 — [1] (03636)

Shaping Volcanoes, from Human Clay

We write because no other expression
Suffices to let us get said
Ideas so deeply suppressed in the brain,
Anything less would create such pain
That the head would implode
And nobody would ever guess
That where ash forms wind devils, daily,
*

A volcano God sculpted by hand
 Once exploded
 And expanded the range of our understanding.

10/8/90 — [2] (03640)

Missing Watches

He has days, these days,
 When his imagination strays from the straits
 Through which his transportation company
 Has operated its vessels, for decades.
 It seems to drift on hallucinatory oceans
 Or steam like a damaged *Bismarck*
 Trying to break free from Sisyphean circling,
 Readjust its course, in hope of reaching
 Recognizable shores,
 Or at least limp into dry dock, for repairs,
 Before daring out again, beyond the treacherous shoals.

He knows he no longer commands the controls
 That used to keep his *Titanic* afloat
 No matter how many ice floes
 Threatened to shred his compartmentalized psyche.
 In fact, he frequently relieves himself
 From second and third watches
 He insisted on keeping when his ship was commissioned.
 Now, as he stands alone, on the bridge,
 Winter gales stiffen his joints,
 Open-ocean breezes blister his skin,
 And premonitions of the Ancient Mariner dim his vision.

10/10/90 (03644)

The First Frost

On signing the divorce decree

For us, separated from each other irretrievably,
 This day marks the first frost of our middle ages
 And our gothic years.
 If it must be symbolic of all we've lost,
 *

At least let me see, in its mica-white glistening,
 Some sign of redemption,
 That our shattered heart-parts
 Might not be scattered with this day's dust,
 Dissipated mist lifting into twilight,
 To mix with ice crystals
 Drifting down, down into the abyss.

O God, let love sustain us, in days to come,
 Just as my tears, wetting this page,
 With this final benediction for you, my wife,
 Make me realize that even in my silences,
 I'll always be grieving for us.
 And if my tears turn to frost
 Spreading across the lawn of our remaining years,
 Let the heated love we shared
 Turn it into pacific water,
 On which we might walk, the rest of our lives,
 And thaw our frozen souls.

10/11/90 (03645)

Harmonies in Fall

This shadowy, sun-blasted Thursday afternoon,
 Trees' leaves, like cosmic tongues,
 Shape the breeze's voice into a sad, sweet plaint,
 God's oratorical prelude to winter.

I sit on this hand-carved limestone block
 Pried loose from Eads Bridge,
 By the tornado of 1896,
 Trying to chronicle this glorious mortality,
 By harmonizing with its intermittent silences.
 Listening is an art
 I've only partially perfected;
 It requires vision, to transfigure nature's tropes
 Into poetic notes. This crisp mid-October,
 I detect His inflection tingeing the leaves,
 With mystical music. My bones quaver.
 Suddenly, they're hymning His ancient refrain.

10/18–19/90 — [2] on 10/19 (03647)

The Merry Band of Sherwood Forest

*Bill Heyen visits Timeless Press,
10/13-18/90*

I

For six days straight,
L.D. and Bill raced from spectator events
To recording sessions in Clayton,
Ate breakfast, dinner, and lunch on the run.
They picnicked beside the Saarinen Arch.
Janie and Jerry were their steady sidekicks,
Accomplices in their various peripatetics
To Cherokee Street, to ferret out Roseville pottery;
Ted Drewes, for late-night ice cream;
And Union Station, with its gypsy caravan of shops,
For drinks beneath the green and gold-leaved dome
Of the Great Hall, where, during the '40s,
Thousands of passengers a day
Waited for their trains (one of myriad dozens)
To snake into the colossal Mill Creek yards,
Halting, screeching, lurching over warped switches,
Before backing down tracks paralleling covered platforms —
Observation car first — into waiting gates,
Under a massive shed astir with a blur of humans
In business suits, tailored skirts,
And drab khaki and dazzling white/black uniforms
Of fliers, infantrymen, and sailors
Scurrying to reach training camps and ports of debarkation,
That they might make the “ultimate sacrifice”
Against the Axis, those malevolent foes of democracy
And Rooseveltian New Deal politics.

II

Oh, what a fine, six-day whirl
The four of us shared, spiraling down, through time,
Toward this very morning,
When, scattered like fractured atoms in a cyclotron,
We skitter in our separate sunrays —
Dust particles separate yet equal,
For memory that hasn't abandoned or stranded us,
*

In nebulosity, but rather kept us together.
How will today's hours coalesce,
Manifest themselves in recognizable forms
That might serve as foundation blocks for dreams
We've not even begun to conceive?
And what will Bill say to Jerry and Janie,
As L.D. reinvents images they helped shape,
When he cadences these receding events, in his notebook?
Will our silences speak for the rest of our days
Or dissipate into the welter of accumulating matter,
Adding, second to second, to the crust of our orbiting brains?
Whatever may happen necessarily must.
But let us not forget the jubilation that possessed us
During those six days now slipping fast
Into history's mystical forest,
Where, at this very everlasting moment,
Robin Hood and his band of merry revelers
Are just getting ready to make their next expedition
Into the Realm of Possibility.

10/19/90 — [1] (03646)

Mr. Muffet Suffers a Start

This crisp October Saturday morning,
I sit on my mystical tuffet,
To satisfy my appetite for cadences and verse.
Diffidently, I challenge my pen
To measure each bite it takes from my notebook,
As though it might be a magical spoon
Dipping into a potion of thick witch's brew.

But in that space between the bowl and my face,
The pen suspends itself,
Refuses to change, at imagination's beck,
Chooses, instead, to assume the shape
Of a brown recluse spider
Dangling from a Piranesian chain in my brain.
Frightened, I retire into *carceri* silence.

10/20/90 (03652)

Coming Home

This dislocated Sunday a.m.,
He dreams of singing a song of a ring and a key —
A troubadour's choral refrain
The brain keeps repeating
As though it were a sweetly echoing leitmotif
From a Prokofiev piano concerto,
Not two musical notes
Forming a whole symphony, from a single chord . . .

A wedding ring he's bequeathed to history
And a key to a house
From which he was evicted six months ago,
Where yet reside two children
And a drug-addicted, alcohol-abusing wife.
He, divorce's orphan,
But certainly not her only child,
Takes up the rhythms his diaspora-feet beat,

Hoping to compose melodies, out of grief,
Harmonies, from loneliness and despair,
That, somehow, his own ears might again reverberate
With the spirit of belonging.
Slowly, his lips begin quivering,
His tongue undulating, as they shape, from silence,
Unrecognizable whispers and sighs
He transfigures into lyrical measures.

Ring within ring of holy light
And key to the universal kingdom's gate,
Through which he realizes he must pass,
On his homeward flight,
Shimmer and dance in morning's incandescence.
Suddenly, someone ushers him in,
To God's joyous house,
Where a choir of His family welcomes him home.

10/21 & 10/22?/90 (03668)

Comicking with Troika [△]

Five days away from his thirteenth birthday,
I and my son, Troika,
*

The little guy who still inhabits a warren
Just across the hall from the bedroom
Where my ghost no longer spends its nights,
Unite, to make a run on the Comic Convention,
Held, one Sunday, every odd month,
At the Kolping House, in South St. Louis.

I pick him up, this morning, at a friend's.
We eat lunch at a restaurant
And avoid conversational impasses,
By sidestepping fragile matters of the recent divorce
That officially concluded our family's dissolution,
Protracted two and a half years,
For reasons too blatant to him, me,
His sister, and my ex-wife not to engender relief.

Circuitously, we home in on the VORTAC
Toward which Troika's excitement soars.
After all, like his dad,
He's been an avid collector, most of his life;
In fact, he may just prove
His father didn't corner the market
On world-class maneuvers and enthusiasm.
Unintimidated, he eagerly engages dealers.

For two frenetic hours, I follow his weave
Through the press, from booth to booth,
As he reconnoiters, measures supply
Against prices in his most current *Overstreet*,
Trying, I speculate, to ascertain what equation
May be prevailing, today,
In the volatile comic-book stock exchange,
Dominated by villains and heroes with healing factors,

Bionic creatures, cyborgs, mutants,
Fearless Hamlets and Lear's of fantasyland
No Shakespeare could so poetically have rhapsodized.
Troika looks at thousands of books
Packaged in protective, inert Mylar
And poly-bags with acid-free backboards,
To extend the too-rapid end
Of their stapled, pulp-paper pages:

*G.I. Joe, Ghost Rider, The Incredible Hulk,
The Punisher, The Uncanny X-Men, The Avengers,*

*

And, for Troika, today's *pièce de résistance*,
The Amazing Spider-Man —
Ah, but not the common run of numbers,
Instead 298 through 325,
Those issues whose covers and content
Owe their desirability to the artist McFarlane.

I don't question my son's "insider trading"
But rather am amazed by his tenacity
In canvassing the stock of thirty-five dealers,
Finally gathering, a few from each,
The complete sequence. Following him,
I sense my necessariness, writing each check,
Feel proud, not dejected,
As the total diminishes me by a few hundred dollars.

In his excited eyes, I see the happiness
That derives from pride only a collector knows,
Filling gaps in overall vision,
Reaching goals not exactly arbitrary
But self-imposed, vital, while knowing
The universe doesn't rely on personal victories.
Today, I gloat over my boy's accomplishment —
Modest, maybe, yet divine in its design.

All the way to the house where, once, I resided,
He decorates, with inner pleasure,
The silence we maintain.

In my eyes' peripheries, I witness him fondling,
Mesmerized by, his newly acquired prizes,
As he dreams of giving each book
Its own nook in a cardboard box
He has neatly displayed in his room.

And I feel satisfied, pleased indeed,
That I've helped enlighten one young soul,
Just by allowing him to express his needs
And extend his own growing personality,
Not stifle its creativity.
Watching him take the steps,
Loaded with his timeless treasure,
I recognize how precious my collection is, also.

The Voodoo Down from Chicago

Yesterday was Miss Martha's last day at work.
"Martha, I think you should take a few weeks off."
"I feels fine as apple pandowdy,
Miz Jane. Can't complain 'bout nothin' much."
She'd almost intuited her fate, almost,
As she left Mrs. Goldberg's house, in Ladue,
Almost knew, when she mumbled, over her shoulder,
Just loud enough for her employer to hear,
"I hope this don't mean you gonna let me go."
Waiting to catch her bus, for the two-hour ride
To East St. Louis, she must have shuddered,

Wondering if she'd suffer another of her "strokes,"
Those lapses in which the voodoo,
Sent down from Chicago,
By the mother of her husband's lover,
Overwhelms her with fear, as it did, two nights ago.
"Martha, I just think you could do with some rest,
And let a doctor check you, too.
Here's an extra hundred dollars, to carry you through."
Oh, if only she hadn't told Miz Goldberg
About how she'd coughed up that black tadpole,
Almost choked to death, on it,

How, when she'd cut it open,
It was filled with the hair of her husband's lover.
"Martha, how did you swallow something like that?"
"Voodoo, I tells you. It's lucky I coughed it up.
I woulda had a whole frog in me."
This morning, when Mrs. Goldberg called Charlie,
Martha's brother, to inquire after her health,
He told her how Martha had said that, as her bus
Approached the old Park Plaza Hotel,
A voice ordered her to get off, climb the building,
Jump down all three tiers, to the ground,

And how all the folks on the bus heard her scream,
"I ain't gonna do dat! I ain't! I ain't!" —
This, and how she'd come home raving,
Ranting about tadpoles growing inside her stomach,
Causing pain in her belly all night,

*

Moaning about needing to get ready for work,
Wondering if she'd make it, for that frog.
"Charlie, tell Martha not to worry.
She just needs some good sleep."
"I knows what you mean, Miz Goldberg.
Voodoo down from Chicago done got Miz Martha good."

10/23/90 (03663)

Following His Call

Bound south, out of the City of Contagious Mores,
Hoping, for a few solitudinous hours,
To disappear into his own zone of privacy and quietude,
He indulges his eyes' appetite for spicy cuisine,
Lets them breakfast on a sunrise
Dripping Chinese violets and pinks.
He sips a delicious hot-coffee draught
Bought when he stopped at a quick shop
At the Festus/Crystal City exit,
Just prior to his vanishing into Missouri Territory
No Boone or Lewis ever mapped.

Soon, the sky brightens to a cerulean hue
So seamless, it might be a balloon
Lifting his smoothly floating car, its gondola,
Into a hospitable stratosphere
Where humans, those select few
Who happen upon it gratuitously,
Need not trouble with breathing,
A kingdom in which concert flutes,
French horns, tubas, and contrabassoons
Circulate music through the universal body
All assume, who chance into this blessed wilderness.

Up here, the air is preternaturally clear,
Unvitiated by clouds, birds gyring,
Jets spewing snail-trails.
The horizon is a stone's throw from his echo.
Oh, how curious it seems, this a.m.,
For him to be listening to his own voice, at this height,
As he soars, invisible to Earth,
*

Straining to hear his lyrics
Composing themselves, free-associationally,
From words he's never heard before —
God's love-whispers growing audible, on his lips,

Floating down like tiny Chinese kites
Inside violet and pink hand-painted balloons
Parachuting his marooned spirit homeward,
Toward the City of Contagious Mores.
But as his composition sifts into sunlight,
He sees spectators, on myriad continents,
Gazing skyward, in silent amazement,
As though his glowing halo were that of a comet
Come round after two thousand years
Or he were Moses, descending Mount Sinai,
Reciting verses from a Bible he's just composed.

10/24/90 — [1] (03661)

Fall Calls the Road-Poet Home

Passing through this vast pied cemetery
Alive with thriving trees,
Dying to complete their painless metamorphoses,
And Earth's brain-dead vegetation,
Acquiescing to the probated terms of this season's
Last will and testament,
Accepting their fate, with placid resignation,
As if they expect a far less sympathetic bequest,
I read the leaves' biodegradable obituaries,
Express my condolences to their effigies,
On view, for the last time, in nature's open casket.

But traveling further north,
It's as if I've turned my back on a grave,
Walked away without remembering
Whose burial I've just witnessed or, worse yet,
Not really caring whether death was there
Or was a mirage rising off my mind's highway,
Which I'd been driving too long, without rest.
Perhaps my forgetfulness

*

Has to do with the pressing recognition
That I'll be arriving home late,
Alive despite guiding my own procession, today.

10/24/90 — [2] (03662)

Checking the Mail

“Diaspora” Caspar “Milqueghost” Rosen
Passes, rapidly, through a former hometown,
Pauses just long enough to rifle his stuffed box
At the post office to which, for a matter of months,
He made his way, each day
(Except the Lord’s), in order to claim bills,
Assessments, obituary notices, chain letters,
Bulk-rate mail-order catalogs,
Samples of bath soap, cereal, toothpaste,
And facsimile checks for free speedboats,
Condos in Phoenix, Jackson Hole, and Eureka Springs,
All-expenses-paid vacations to Maui,
Acapulco, Cancún, Ocho Rios, and the Bahamas,
Just for the tiniest inconvenience —
Visiting, and submitting to a half-hour tour
Of, Alligator Alley, 152nd Street, in the Bronx,
Beijing, the Gaza Strip, or Laputa in the Gullivers.

What’s possessed his obsessive mind, today,
To drive fifty-five miles out of his way,
Heading home, to his most recent temporary residence
In the City of the Inane,
Remains, for him, to ascertain.
Just this minute, he’s at loose ends,
Sorting his enormous stack of dated missives
And epistles he might just as well not open,
For the irrelevant content of messages
He long ago memorized for their specious credos,
Preposterous promises, fictitious claims,
Their insidious intrusions on his private life
In this country town of 8200 souls,
Where he tried to hide without being labeled
“Christ-killer,” “enemy of the state.”
Sitting on the granite post-office steps,

*

Remembering why he registers no forwarding addresses,
 He tosses his mail in a can by the door
 And vanishes.

10/24/90 — [3] (03705)

Troika Turns Thirteen ^Δ

Dearest Troika,
 My man-child, no longer a boy,
 I awaken into this frosted Friday morning,
 Singing your nativity praises.
 You've reached that magical age of thirteen
 And placed, in God's oven,
 Your baker's dozen of years,
 Which we'll consume, celebrating this sacred occasion,
 Without even disturbing their icing —

Confectioner's glaze that puts my dreamy thoughts
 In mind of this dawn's frost,
 Over which I've walked, out of my separation, toward you,
 Whom I've helped rear,
 All your years less these past eight months.
 Now, I see these words becoming sugar-covered leaves
 In October's gift box. Eat up, my son!
 Birthdays have such a wondrous taste
 For one like you, with a sweet tooth for life.

10/26/90 — [1] (03654) ([2], on 10/26, is suite 03448)

Self-Respecting Others

Thank God I've finally deduced
 That it all has to do with human abuse, in the absolute,
 The way a being chooses to treat coevals,
 Friends, family members, associates,
 Sex mates, helpmate, and enemies —
 Those uncomplicated expressions that stroke the ego,
 Articulate a "Hello" and "How you doin', today?,"
 Communicate libidinal drives and emotional empathy,
 To anyone close enough

*

To translate compassion and reciprocate love.
It all turns not on welfare and/or philanthropy

But rather on devotion and awe
(In essence, respect for others)
And the notion that no matter how anomalous
Others' ways of working through solutions,
To intractable dilemmas, or processing
Endlessly accumulating daily information might seem,
One universal standard of ultimate judgment
Must remain constant:
*I accept you, on faith, unconditionally,
Assume your intentions are beneficent,
Your promises extensions of God's covenant;*

Otherwise, we're all permanently in trouble.
Peace between inhabitants of lands
Disconnected by language, religion, pigmentation,
And physiognomy will be out of the question.
This morning, sipping coffee, nibbling a bagel,
I ponder my thoughts and realize
That my lines of verse, corroborating their own existence,
Are ineluctably naive
And that, irremediably, I'm just a dreamer,
Impossibly inadequate at affecting
Anyone else's attitudes and actions except mine.

10/27 & 11/6?/90 (03667)

The Old Sayings

I

My generation spent its Tom Brown school days
Echoing proverbs, credos, and aphorisms
(Precursors to today's self-help books and videos)
Espoused by those, of the older persuasion,
Who'd achieved a modicum of success
In athletics, business, Victorian ethics,
Science, pedagogy, and the healing arts.

We definitely believed that God helps those
Who help themselves,

*

That a penny saved is a penny earned,
A stitch in time saves nine,
A feline has nine lives,
And that there's more than one way to skin a cat,
Even though opportunity never knocks twice.

We were all moralists of a sort, we kids,
Self-styled orators and rhetoricians,
Aestheticians with an eye toward ritual and myth,
Reverencers of history and tradition,
In touch with Franklin, Emerson, and Thoreau,
Adams, Dewey, Andrew Carnegie,
And Josiah Royce — authentic American voices

We trusted, for their good common sense,
Homespun innocence, logic,
Unobfuscated honesty about how to behave
And make progress the beneficiary of education and ambition.
Never were we wanting for mentors
Who could instruct us in the ways of “taking stock,”
Making the best of our “human lot.”

II

Ah, but today, upon whom can the children depend,
When their parents, relatives, leaders,
Helpmates, teachers, and closest friends
Have misread the fabled cat's capacity to survive,
Endowing it, instead, with nine *tails*,
And discovered saving in a time of spiraling inflation
Is like panning for pyrite in a dry stream?

Who can the kids emulate, when impatience is a virtue
(Why else the proliferation of computers and fast food?)
And “grass” lets them put off, forever,
What their elders could only postpone until tomorrow,
What *their* forebears accomplished in a stitch?
Why should those old Scripture-like verities
Sustain us? After all, God is deadly,

We've all read. He who created Auschwitz
And Hiroshima has lost credibility with kids.
They're “scared shitless” and don't know how to admit
*

They've reached the limits of narcissism
And materialistic self-indulgence
Inherited from parents gone soft, with success,
Afraid to the very depths of their conception of death.

So what's left to do,
For our best and brightest hopes for the future,
Who, thrust into a world bereft of traditional ethics,
Must seek help elsewhere?
And what of us chumps who believed proverbs,
Credos, and aphorisms were keys that fit spiritual gridlocks?
Someone please tell me . . . please.

10/29–30 & 11/6/90 (03664)

Trick or Treat

Who, at birth, can predict
Whether we're destined for fame or infamy,
Good health or valetudinarianism,
Wealth or penury, family or barrenness,
Whether life will treat us royally
Or toy with our spirits,
Trick us, with deceit, malice, and callous retribution,
For actions over which we have no control,
Whether we'll appear, on the eve of All Saints',
As rodents or *Homo sapiens*,
Specters or shades of the quick or the dead?

Today, I reflect on these antinomies
And accept my tenuous position amidst the living,
Grateful for God's small gifts
Yet wary of the alternatives.
Whenever I see ghouls, goblins, poltergeists,
And abysmal Miltonic apparitions on the loose,
I'm reminded of my own propensity to drift,
Lose my sense of place and time,
Court death-wish desires to let ambition die,
Dreams split, dissipate atomistically.
It's then I summon the courage to mount my broomstick and fly.

10/31/90 (03656)

Division of Property

These past three weeks,
While the rest of the world's turned east,
For signs of peace, if not spiritual guidance,
We've been trying to divide our earthly estate,
As per the "Divorce Decree" and "Agreement of Settlement" —
For you, wife, a brass National cash register
With ornate cast designs
And an "Amount Purchased" sign surmounting its display;
A five-foot-high, console model
Mills "Owl" slot machine,
In lustrous, quarter-sawed golden oak;

For me, three Tiffany-type art-glass fixtures;
A floor-model mahogany Reginaphone,
With hand-carved lions on its façade,
And a stack of 15½-inch discs;
For you, our living-room suite
Of matching silk love seats,
Glass-and-brass coffee table with griffin motif,
And a pair of tufted side chairs;
For me, a cache of Currier & Ives lithographs
Depicting Mississippi riverboats
And other sentimental renderings, from the 1860s.

We stay busy with this division of property,
As if its dismantling of history
Were profoundly significant to everyone else.
Back and forth, from rented storage bins
To the house we've listed with a reputable scavenger,
We dizzy ourselves, failing to notice
November eclipsing October,
Leaves metamorphosing, the trees emptying,
In the secluded neighborhood to which we moved
To increase our children's opportunities
Of meeting friends and improving their schooling.

Sporadically, during this protracted ordeal,
You and I back off long enough
To see through the artifacts, to truth,
Detach from our vast disillusionment,
And catch glimpses of dream sequences

*

In which the two of us,
In a wind devil of passion and cherishment,
Once cut a swath through God's universe.
Each interlude ends abruptly,
Reminding us of our responsibility
To abide by the terms of our settlement.

But we don't know where to go, what to do,
Or how to shepherd our two children,
Who still need their parents —
Once twin stars in the eastern sky,
To which they turned for enlightenment.
The only hope we yet possess
Is that Trilogy and Troika, as they grow,
Will exemplify the ethics and goals
We set for ourselves, in Sutro Park,
That misty morning when we took our vows,
Looking westerly, across the Pacific.

11/1/90 (03666)

The Man with the Crooked Smile

There was a crooked man
Who had a smile so crooked
That when he walked,
He logged a crooked mile.
In youth,
He tried to join the rank and file,
Pursue his father's occupation
Of manufacturing pants,
Working with him, side by side,
Out of duty and devotion.
But neither deference nor reverence
Gratified the appetites of his father,
For power, profit, and control,
Who spent his hours in his counting house,
Mounted on a bulldozer distributing his riches,
Like a storm-pitched ship shifting its ballast.

There was a crooked man
Who had a smile so fractured

*

That when he talked,
His syllables were shattered glass,
Cobra-spit
That never missed hitting his father
Right between the eyes.
It seemed the harder he tried
To negotiate a straight line,
The more he lost sight of his destination,
Until, one night,
He backed up a tractor, to that Solomon-house,
Then razed and reshaped it into an oval
To which, for the remainder of his crooked days,
He'd come, to walk his crooked mile
And, on his hatred, meditate.

11/2/90 — [1] (03659)

Making Rock Candy ^Δ

Driving away, this bright November morning,
My sleepy-headed Jane,
I arrest and focus on last night's holy acts
You, David, and I,
Your long-haired composer/lover,
Ritualized in the kitchen and basement of your temple —
We three novitiates,
Acolytes, come, in innocent wonderment,
To discover the profundity of doing nothing required,
Just having fun,
Unviolated by society's judgmental others,

Such as playing eightball,
With warped cue sticks and bridge,
On your unleveled A. E. Schmidt pool table;
Engaging in Ping-Pong, with a cracked ball
That might have been Wile E. Coyote
Chasing its own Road Runner shadow,
In and out of the dimly lit rafters,
Back and forth, between tattered paddles;
And, with a watched pot on the gas stove,
Making strawberry-flavored rock candy,
Consisting of a sticky mixture of sugar,

Light corn syrup, water, and red dye,
We three fascinated by the thermometer's silver clot,
Stalling at 220, interminably,
Before racing to its 310-degree apogee
And warning us to pour its witch's brew
Into a greased pan, where, in minutes,
It would solidify and we'd fracture the slab,
With the back of a knife,
Before prizing out, shard by shard,
The sweetest hard candy man has ever eaten.
Even now, Janie, I can taste our celebration,
And my mouth waters for another piece.

11/2/90 — [2] (03449)

A November Lament

Oh, do I remember how the sun
Shone, so brightly,
On my old Farmington, Missouri, home.
Even at this very second,
Recollection vividly arrests reflections
Of warm autumnal days, such as this one,
Which my eyes register, for their Seurat dots.
Each leaf's hue, impastoed by God,
Dazzles my cones and rods,
With stimuli so dizzyingly vibrant,
I could die right now, for their orgasmic high,
Were it not that I've been destined
To survive the Sisyphean ritual,
Of chronicling my gifted existence
Despite brief lapses of happiness
Between vast chasms of solitary wandering,
To which I've voluntarily committed my psyche —
That obsessive questing for the nexus
Upon whose portals are inscribed
Words I'll recognize, reading them, simultaneously,
For the first and last time:
“TAKE HEED, ALL YE WHO ENTER.
NONE EVER RETURNS
FROM THESE PRECINCTS OF OBLIVION, BY CHOICE.”

Driving southeasterly, I survey the trees,
For signs that my arrival might be nigh.
But no voices speak to my eyes,
And my ears fail to locate their own nearness
To the source of metaphor.
Once, this same sun shone, so brightly,
On my old Missouri home.
Today, Farmington, just to the west,
Is arrested in diaphanous forgetfulness.
Only these verses connect me to past presences,
Ghosts I can no longer evoke,
Whose images keep growing dimmer as I go south.

11/2/90 — [3] (03665)

Assessing His Uprootedness

Why is it he never seems to stay put
In any one place
Longer than it takes him just to get acclimated,
Almost feel assimilated into the milieu,
Before that predictable impulse to bolt takes hold,
Sends him fleeing, helter-skelter,
In quest of a new address,
Shelter from the welter of elements
That would sequester him, in total loneliness?
Why is it he can't break the cycle
Or at least make it slave to his vicissitudes?

Jesus! Take this breezy November afternoon.
He asks himself what he's doing,
Traveling to the state's southern tip and back,
To attend the luncheon and presidential inauguration
Of a lady he's never met,
Just because he was designated "Friend of the University."
He ponders, gropes for a candid answer.
Neither ego nor self-inflated esteem
Has distracted him from his occupation;
Rather, he's been driven by an intangible faith
That his patronage and support might serve a purpose,

Stimulate others to devote themselves, selflessly,
To things that bring the philosophic mind
Into full flowering. He can honestly say
He's dedicated a lifetime,
Lyricizing his experiences, that they might disclose
Clues to the universe within,
Imagination's fragile, unmapped cosmos,
Accessible to anyone willing to sacrifice
Security and rootedness for chaos and confusion.
Suddenly, he realizes why he's nomadic:
He's God's wandering poet, Moses.

11/2/90 — [4] (03660)

Stirrings

Oh, what astounding jubilation I sensed,
Sifting through beds of hued maple leaves
Strewn wherever I set foot on the university campus,
This soft, warm November morning,
Just eight hours ago, I see,
Now that, heading home,
I have time to focus on time.
Oh, how sensuous it was,
Almost like swimming naked in an ocean
Crowded with minnows nibbling my feet.
What a temptation, to take off my clothes
And throw myself into one of those mounds,
Pretend I was young again,
Ready to be seized by love
And surrender to her tender impulses.

But I know, now,
How the impetuous behavior of spontaneity, caprice,
Never was my real strength
But rather a shortcoming assuaged by metaphors
I taught myself to substitute for taking risks,
In those long-ago days of my emergence
Into the worlds of poetry
And its antagonistic polarity, life,
Where work isn't measured in syllables,
Accents, or beats per feet

*

But by hourly wages,
 After-tax, take-home checks,
 And grocery bags to be purchase,
 Every payday,
 Week after week after week.

And so it was
 That those boisterous, fluttering leaves
Almost transported my imagination,
 Provoked drives deep inside me,
 Maybe even penetrated my libido, briefly,
 To the core of sensual invention,
 Where wonderment is a component of divine love,
 Before frightening me back into the silence
 My psyche always calls on, for protection,
 In weak moments, when it senses
 It might submit to primal letting-go,
 Let itself become leaves or minnows
 Or, God only knows, an ocean,
 Whose depths my intellect might dive into
 And rise from, to its stifled heart's endless content.

11/2/90 — [5] (03658)

Taking November Communion

*For my Janie,
 with love*

These past three weeks, in mid-Missouri,
 We've reveled, witnessing a Chardonnay-ripening
 And fermentation, in nature's wooden casks,
 Not of grapes but leaves of oaks, elms, and sugar maples.

And oh, what inebriation we've been feeling,
 Savoring their fanciful tastes —
 Flaming crimson, russet, mustard, purple,
 Variously hued verdigris still resisting dissipation.

God's inexorable passage from supple to brittle
 Dizzies our senses, to ecstasy —
 A collective death, preceded by a Last Supper,
 To which we've been invited to toast, with our eyes.

We raise high our chalices containing sweet memories,
Say or whisper or sigh benedictional good-byes,
While the mystery unfolds,
And try to penetrate this mystical ritual,

With its rich mixture of crucifixion and resurrection
At season's end, as all His Jesus-leaves,
In paradoxical ascension, descend, en masse,
To grave-caves we'll tend, the rest of our lives.

11/4/90 (03657)

Leah ^Δ

Approaching seventy years,
He notices, with increasing predictability,
How his nightly routine
Seems to veer from watching, on TV,
Sitcoms and PG movies,
Heating meals, in a microwave,
To sitting, by himself,
In the kitchen, his *locus mundi*,
Until sleep inundates his vacant eyes.
He can't assess what's possessed him lately,
Yet for days, weeks, maybe decades,
He's been fantasizing about his wife, Leah,
As he did in the Warsaw ghetto, in '43,

During that hiatus between her deportation
And the perilous escape he made
From his adopted *Vaterland*,
When he couldn't suppress that grotesque afterimage
Those brownshirt-uniformed Gestapo crows
Etched on his retinas,
As they dragged her, by the hair,
Naked, fresh from their lovemaking,
Down two flights of stairs,
To a snorting transport train
At the *Umschlagplatz*, three blocks away.
Curiously, he's been seized, recently,
Not with memories but libidinal urges for her,

Real, erotic feelings — hot flashes,
 Erections without seeming provocation,
 And what, in youth, they called “wet dreams”
 And “lover’s nuts.” It’s so crazy,
 Especially for one as abstemious as he,
 Who, for almost half a century,
 Has ascetically repressed all sexual thoughts,
 Out of respect for her gone soul.
 And if, once again,
 He’s been experiencing sensual pleasure,
 Then he’ll continue masturbating
 Whenever she appears to him —
 Biblical sin or not.

11/5/90 (03704)

A Latter-Day Milton Contemplates Certain Irregularities in Nature

Mirabile dictu!

Behold this golden-November-halo of a day,
 Glowing so Canaletto-brightly,
 I might as easily mislocate myself in Venice
 As in St. Louis,
 Seated outdoors, in my bathrobe,
 In the very middle of this leaf-strewn yard,
 Relaxing, on this eighty-degree afternoon,
 Whose heat, on my neck, is God’s affectionate kiss.

Had I tried, I could not have asked Aladdin
 To grant three more glorious stay-at-home days,
 To accommodate my convalescence,
 Or desired to hide from workaday responsibilities,
 In a clime more conducive to my need
 For revising my work, in silence.
 Surrounded by these skitterish leaves,
 I revel in my brief freedom,
 Breathe deeply, and sigh,

Knowing, in the back of my mind,
 This crazy season must have a rhyme scheme

*

And that one fine, frozen day up the line,
I'll recite my *Greenhouse Book of Garden Verse*
And thus explain how fossil-fuel emissions
Reduced the planet's ozone, altered its climate,
Just so that, midway through November,
I could sit outside, in my bathrobe, barefoot,
Trying to justify the ways of men, to God.

11/15/90 (03671)

A Divorcé's First Winter at Plymouth

Drinking coffee, I think how, days from now,
The fourth Thursday in the penultimate month
Will overtake America, with symbols, myths,
And ahistorical rhetoric celebrating turkeys,
Plymouth Rock, the Mayflower Compact,
Pilgrim resolve, Protestantism,
And the perfectly Western concepts
Of liberty laced with Jeffersonian ethics,
Manifest Destiny, and self-reliance à la Emerson.

Oh, those sweet, reassuring certitudes
We learned, from kindergarten
Through American-studies classes in graduate school,
To accept at just less than face value,
That blessed metaphor for original Creation
Their unfolding story told, and yet tells,
To those of us who'll huddle before TV sets,
For the sacred Macy's Day Parade
And trunk-to-tail football games

Encapsulating this fabled, secular feast:
Dressing; biscuits; giblet gravy;
Sweet potatoes dripping with marshmallows;
Creamed spinach; cranberries;
Pies; cakes; assorted sugar-glazed pastries;
Sliced white and dark meat of the symbolic fowl,
Which, through plenitude and depression,
Has superseded the bald eagle,
In all categories except "endangered species" . . .

Even the day's colossal consumption
Won't dent the gobbler population — no massacre here,
By us God-fearing members
Of democracy's "mighty fortress," not us,
Who'll stuff our bellies to splitting,
As though packing sausage into casings
Or pressing processed ham into cans.
Oh, the relief of undoing pants and skirts,
Submitting to overeating's sleep-inducing philters.

Sitting in this neighborhood café,
Joyous voices crisscrossing beyond listening,
I'm reminded of Thanksgiving Days past,
With their peaceful suspensions of activity
And happy celebrations of familial gatherings
My wife, our children, and I shared.
Today, I know there won't be another one,
Not this year or the next, not ever,
For this bitter winter, which none of us has survived.

11/20/90 — [1] (03673)

The Uroborus ^Δ

For Donald Sloane

Neither Eve's consort in the primordial forest
Nor Hippocrates's caduceus
But rather the serpent with the insatiable appetite,
Whose suicidal tendencies to consume itself
And all its progeny, in its belly's juices,
Ultimately render it inessential —
Uroborus, by name
(The mythic snake that bites its own tail,
Despite intense desires to prevail
Against enemies and friends),
Chews itself until nothing's left
But its own impression, in the dust,
Itself dissipating
As afternoon shadows lengthen into night.

11/20/90 — [2] (03669)

A Pilgrim's First Thanksgiving ^Δ

For Jane and David Goldberg

Now, knowing that what remains of my failed harvest,
From seasons preceding this first winter
After my divorce was decreed,
Is isolated in forgetting's storage silos,
I settle into this tranquil November afternoon
And give thanks to my new family,
For accepting me not as a foreigner to their hospitable shores
But as a fellow pilgrim, come, in humbleness,
To kindle their lives, with my tiny spirit's divine fire.

Arranged with a bouquet of fresh flowers
And set with sterling, china, and crystal,
Your dinner table will provide a sacred place of worship,
From which, after serving the turkey and fixings,
We'll pray for personal forgiveness of our neglects,
Secular resurrection for those in distress
(The homeless, refugees, the dispossessed), and world peace.
Oh, there's no place so sweet as home,
Especially for those who've known aloneness, most of their days.

Although we may be a colony of only three,
Our resolve to survive against enemies,
Starvation, internal strife, and disease is transcendent.
Tonight, our quiet celebration
Will consist of all the traditional elements of festiveness:
Wholesome jokes, laughter, closeness,
Appropriate solemnity, on toasting God,
And appreciation of the vestigial good fortune
That has blessed us with this food and love for each other.

And tomorrow, we'll awaken, early,
Into a golden aura rising in the east,
Which will distinguish us, amidst Earth's darkness,
Mark us as being among those chosen
To receive His redemptive love.
For that providential stroke of grace
And for inviting this stranger to the New World,
To start his life over again,
I dedicate, to you, Jane, my "first" Thanksgiving.

November Planting ^Δ

For Janie Goldberg

Less than three weeks ago, sweet Jane,
You chose a spacious crystal bowl
In which to place your baker's dozen of narcissus bulbs
And set them free, to do their majestical growing.
Periodically, passing from bedroom to kitchen,
We've marked their progress:
Vermiculate white roots spreading like creepers,
Larger than life, for watery refraction,
Slender green stems thrusting upward,
Like beams in a climbing skyscraper —
The entire fibrous network God's architecture.

This Sunday morning, we lie in our bed,
Uneager to leave sleep Vaughan Williams seeded,
With his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*
As a prelude to our own musical blooming,
In which we sent down roots, blending, tendrils exploding.
Eventually, we awaken into November's silent greenhouse,
Brew coffee, then linger by the narcissus cluster,
Orgasmic with white-petaled nebulae,
Whose pungence is the same scent we remember
Inundating us, last night, as we entered the earth, together.

11/26/90 (01202)

Greenhouse Effects, or Tarzan's Day at the Zoo, with Jane ^Δ

Something there is, profoundly anomalous,
That confounds my senses,
Once the mind has decreed them winterbound,
Then finds them spending, outdoors,
The entire seventy-six-degree afternoon,
Strolling, hand in hand, with Miss Jane;
Lingering to watch the prodigiously social prairie dogs
Dig additional tunnels in the sun,
Interfacing nexuses between their perfectly public
Private underground "towns" and "coteries";
*

Vicariously applauding
With overeager seals and sea lions
Being fed fresh fish, in their nearby ocean,
By the trainer/keeper/maintenance man.
Oh, how we admire their smooth, sleek sensuality!
We postpone our tour just enough
To watch, from less than an arm's touch,
Two colossally vain, Seuss-like peacocks preen,
Oblivious to danger from humans like us.

Miss Jane squeezes my hand, confirms her juices
Are flowing, rushing, flooding freely,
As though she were finning through my bloodstream,
Toward the source of my pulsing libido.
It seems strange, if predictably so,
How, always, on a sunny spring or fall day at the zoo,
My hormones run crazy
And excite me to the wondrous plunder of pure animality,
Incite my fantasies to riot, exchange skin,
Climb inside cages or behind bouldered confines,
And reappear, in tiger or zebra stripes
Or the two-tone hide of a Malayan tapir,
Better yet, know the freedom of the polar bear
Diving, continually, into its pool,
To cool itself against November's inordinate heat,
Or cavorting with a plastic beachball
It can't quite position and balance
On the tip of its perfectly white delight —
As the two of us are doing, right this minute.

11/27/90 (01203)

Don Quijote de la ciudad

Periodically, he precipitously flees the city,
With a quixotic compulsiveness
No Quixote and his Sancho could have dreamed possible,
On their leaving Madrid or Valladolid,
In quest of guttersnipes and courtly whores
Beset by even sleazier picaresque rascallions
Or misguided knights errant like him,
*

Who, in a broom closet, spontaneously conceived himself
Alive and slightly healthy,
Despite an imagination swelling with ne'er-do-wells
And misanthropes, who, he came to realize,
Only after four colossal sallies out, into the world of action,
Were too numerous even for *him* to defeat.

And when he retreats quixotically,
Nobody, least of all he,
Seems to know where he's going or cares,
Let alone when he might return
Or for what conceivable reason or caprice
He just might decide, instead,
To remain in the hinterlands, hiding from demons,
Tucked in bed, for days at a stretch,
Convalescing in a no-name motel,
Before daring to return to the city,
To take up, again, society's wild-goose chase . . .
Like today, when one call from the country
Has him racing. It's his mistress, Dulcinea, in distress.

11/28/90 — [1] (03675)

No Ordinary Workday

Oh, how invigorating to his neck and left shoulder
The late-season mid-Missouri heat feels,
As he travels northeasterly, toward St. Louis.
Behind the wheel, he's free to explore
The leafless countryside and azure sky,
Just as Chouteau might have, from his canoe,
And the shiftless kids — Huck Finn and Sammy Clemens —
Did, aboard their Mississippi River skiff,
Whenever cast adrift, on daydreams.

Today, being able to take off, for its own sake,
And drive to the country and back
Is motive and justification enough
To reverse the severest judgment
His guilt-ridden psyche might levy against him,
For the crime of shirking responsibilities at work.
Having risked being fired, for absenteeism,

*

He's expressed a deeper, purgative urge
To get back to the business of serving himself first.

11/28/90 — [2] (03676)

Collection Agents

A dad by any name other than his
Surely would claim a rightful place in his family,
No matter that he no longer holds sway
Physically and emotionally. Only in matters of finance
Do his two children still prevail upon him
To make good on the old unspoken obligations
That, while he was married to their mother,
He vowed to honor and devotedly obey,
In sickness and in health, wealth,
And even during the poverty they came to know,
Once his wife assumed her true calling,
That age-old, if ignoble, distaff profession:

Adultery, sexual apostasy so flagrant,
Their neighbors packaged her activities as a board game
They successfully marketed, for three years,
Before its trendiness became yesterday's fresh fish
Wrapped in today's newspapers
Tomorrow's garbage collectors compacted in their trucks
And hauled to the dump. Now, living alone,
In a hotel located close to his office,
He can't even believe his kids still bother to call,
Nickel-diming him, as they do,
Like collection agents dunning him, daily,
For bills the divorce court ordered him to pay.

11/29/90 (03681)

Peretz's Postwar Poems ^Δ

For Jerry Call

He sits in the recording studio, with Christopher,
Listening to his own lips and tongue
Rip plosives and fricatives from phrases
*

His imagination articulated, years before,
Into poetic fortresses in which his spirit,
On its soaring flights into memory's wilderness,
Would spend extended hiatuses, translating God's silence.

Now, editing his taped verses,
He can't quite recognize his voice as his own,
As though the speaker, naming concentration camps
And tortures from A to Z — "Aktions" to Zyklon B —
Is reciting echoes of an even older specter
He himself couldn't possibly have projected,
Unless . . . unless, "just yesterday,"

The ghost with whom his Russian mother might have mated
Had traces of Teutonic Jew
Tattooed to its genetic code,
Or else he's just suppressed, maybe forgotten,
How he, Poland's best poet,
Escaped the ghetto, left for America,
And arrived deaf, for the first seven years of his life.

12/4/90 (03706)

The Captain of the *Rachel*

Where are my children when they need me?
This crisp, sunlit December morning,
I pry open the sky's tight lids
And peer inside.
But trying to isolate the source of an iritis
My vision has been suffering, for years,
Is like focusing on the cross-section of a slide
Placed under the outer lens-end
Of a space-probing telescope.

Nowhere in this azure stratosphere
Do I detect specks or traces
Left behind the flaming trajectories of their meteors
As they passed out of sight, before my eyes.
This day exemplifies emptiness,
Belies promise and jubilation brightness implies
In traditionally religious renditions
Of the suffering Christ Child. For me,
Resurrection and redemption are improbable options.

Anyway, I've always prided myself
On being the secular priest of my own congregation,
An ordained minister of Lord Metaphor,
Self-anointed rabbi of life's unrolling scroll of days,
God's divinely inspired scribe,
Translating His Scriptures into verse,
According to my own natural sense of piety,
A person who can do his own bidding
Despite the magnitude of any disillusionment.

And so too is it, this sunny December day,
As I gaze through the windshield,
Scanning the horizon, for glimpses of my children,
Who've disappeared from my paternal view,
That I have no choice but to accept this desolate condition
Yet look ahead, as though the highway
Knows what direction to take me,
I believing, as always, that destiny will shape me
To the contours of the faith I place in myself.

12/5/90 — [1] (03682)

Holding On

Fleeing his old hometown,
He passes the slack-factory outlet, at city's limit,
And, flowing progressively north,
Is afflicted by the tire dump, derelict autos,
Ramshackle churches, liquor stores,
And whorehouse-motels littering the empty stretch
Between Farmington and St. Louis,
A beggar's no-man's-land, where his attention span
Always used to lapse. This afternoon,
He ruminates on the visit he's just made to Jim Sanders,
His childless former next-door neighbor,

Who, once more, at eighty-three, has reminisced
About how he ran a GM parts depot
In Flint, Michigan, from '43 through '45,
Before moving to Decatur and Bloomington, Illinois,
Then University City, Missouri,
As a high-school principal, and, finally, Farmington,
*

Where his own two children came to know Jim well,
As he listened to their woes and fed their growing up,
With humorous anecdotes, daily.

Having just eaten lunch with Mr. Jim,
At the Capital Café, on the downtown Square,

Sharing events from the past decade,
During which they were witnesses
To each other's scripted one-act plays,
He ruminates, now, driving north,
On how all that's left
Aren't even the memories both bespoke,
Between bites of grilled-cheese sandwiches
And lemon meringue pie,
To remind him he once lived next door,
With his adoring wife and two gorgeous children,
But just the bitter taste of his divorce.

12/5/90 — [2] & 2/16/91 (03683)

Christmas Poinsettias

This a.m., as I sit at a table in Milwaukee,
So distant from you, Jan, while I drink coffee,
In a greenhouse-like dining room decorated for Christmas,
Vision arrests my listless initiative,
Compels me to focus on the slick, glistening icicles
Fixed to branches just beyond the glass,
Systematically slipping into disappearance.
Between sips, I listen intently,
As if I might hear drops they drip from tips,
Accept their bitter-cold dissolution, with resolve,
And take a lesson from their stoicism.

But my ears have never developed such acuity
As felines and canines possess.
By degrees, my fascination lapses.
Distraction sets in, destroys the sunlit prism,
Instead directs me to the red poinsettia plants
Decorating window ledges facing the street,
Their leaves *so* red, I begin to see past them,
To other winters, when your dad

*

Delivered, to the family flower shop on the Square,
Two thousand of them he'd grown, by hand,

In greenhouses he and his father had built
Long before we were new to each other
And Christmases glistened with icicle rituals
That excited us, invited us to bequeath them
To the children we hadn't yet dreamed into life.
I can see him transferring, from his van,
Five pots at a time, setting each on the marble floor,
Until they filled that converted Victorian bank,
From back to front door, he stooping, straightening,
Occasionally taking a between-trips breather,
To wipe his brow, with his ubiquitous kerchief,

And survey the celebration he'd nurtured, from seedlings,
To six- and eight-bloomed magnificence
That dazzled us, with its profusion — us two,
Whose tenderness was, itself, a blessing
No Christmas could bestow, its own flower
Both of us cherished and shared with the world.
But this is another dimension, here in Milwaukee,
Where, staring with growing suspiciousness,
I realize that the beribboned window pots and table vases,
Containing perfectly shaped poinsettia blooms,
Are artificial displays in satin, silk, and plastic.

12/8–9/90 (03684)

Just Being

Oh, here he goes again,
The man who turned from writing prose fiction,
In the mode of William Faulkner,
To composing his own homegrown brand
Of semiautobiographical poetry,
Whose influences, besides Moses and Christ,
Can be traced back to Calderón and Lope,
Milton, Wordsworth, Whitman,
Roethke, and Plath —
A black-magic amalgam of inspiration
That has aligned his verses with God's true east.

This foreign morning,
The second moon's day in December,
When he should be extolling snow,
Penetrating to the cosmological center of a flake's shape,
And focusing, with infinite wonderment,
On divine design in all earthly elements,
He contemplates, instead, what he's read in the paper —
Seventy degrees by midafternoon —
And realizes he'd rather suppress
Poetic expressions of amazed delight
Instead of letting himself be physically possessed,

Lose his senses to spherical music
Whose fluids lubricate the spinning planet,
And surrender, with no ulterior motives,
To pure jubilation.
Exuberantly, he sets aside his pen,
Shuts his notebook, finishes what's left in his cup,
And bolts, fancying himself one of the "roughs,"
Who, with apparent carelessness,
Could drop all duties
And devote themselves to the business of being,
Just being . . . oh, here he goes again!

12/10/90 (03677)

Christ-Crossed Lives

More than intimations issue early warnings,
And more than prophecies or death wishes
Obsess me, as I recognize, suddenly,
That this Christmas won't arrive on time,
Not this year, anyway, maybe never.
Sitting here, sipping coffee, I shiver,
Not fearing solitude, emptiness, or pariahdom
(Those obnoxious, though not opaque, words
Are grotesque as stag beetles flailing on their backs)
So much as being alone, Christmas morn,
Viewing televised High Mass, in my hotel room.

I, who've reveled, so many yuletide seasons,
With wife and children, decorating pine trees,
*

By draping their boughs with popcorn and cranberry swags,
Strands of staccato lights, fragile ornaments
Handed down from grandparents
As well as those our kids made in school,
And silver tinsel strips, and placing, at the conical tip,
Christianity's angelic epiphany,
Fear having to depend, this year, entirely on memory,
To share, with me, the holy renascence
Of my own crucified spirit.

12/11/90 (03685)

Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts

For Jerry Call

Strange, how so many of the poets I know
And read in leading literary magazines
Focus their free-verse digressions
On factories, blue whales, dodos, carrier pigeons,
Rain forests, toxic waste, the ozone layer,
And the Holocaust, devote their artistic energies
To dramatizing hopeless biomes, endangered species,
A planet crowding and starving itself,
Inexorably, into extinction.

Oh, those caring, well-intentioned, sensitive souls,
Those dyed-in-the-natural-wool do-gooders,
Human barometers of the spirit's deteriorating condition,
Leaders of the Global Village Congress of Concerned Poets,
Convened to keep watch for Loch Ness monsters,
Nizzards, goose-stepping Wehrmacht troops
In jackboots and atavistic gas masks,
Whitmanesque "camerados" loafing with their simulacra,
Harking back to a Natty Bumppo republic

That, from its unhumble inception, never existed, anyway,
Other than as a romantic eidolon
In the visionary hallucinations of Emerson and Thoreau . . .
Writers identical to me, in some ways —
Obsessive, compassionate, naive, and unjustifiably trusting —
Yet fundamentally unlike me.

*

I don't rely on what my eyes read in print
 And my mind shapes, from chaos, into paradigms,
 To identify the worm at the core as man, not metaphor.

12/13/90 (03670)

Peretz at Sixty-Six ^Δ

He's spoken with other survivors
 And read memoirs about the dread scourge
 Of the late '30s and early '40s,
 Which virtually extirpated Jewish Europe.
 His interviews disclose a verbatim litany
 Of ethno-idiosyncratic speeches
 Each preaches from his private pulpit,
 A collective manifesto-poetics-apologia
 Clattering with taciturnity,
 Espousing nonviolent resignation
 And faith in a seemingly gratuitous Elohim
 Making opaque promises of *l'chaim*
 To His "Chosen people."

Always, they say the same lame phrases:
 "Unspeakable!";
 "It's too shameful to recall";
 "I can't remember anything at all,
 Prior to arriving in the States";
 "I died then; only my life survived";
 "I don't recognize who I *am*
 Or when or why I *was*";
 "For years and minutes, I've just existed";
 "Oh, the horror —
 You can't hide inside it!";
 "Silence is the only Resistance group —
 I joined it decades ago."

During his informal explorations,
 He's recorded testimonies and confessions
 That suggest the herd, if diminished,
 Is still intact, in its vast, scattered corral,
 Still vulnerable to mass attacks
 From its Gentile shepherds,

*

Who, in times of plague, starvation, and war,
Slaughter sacrificial lambs,
For their skin, fleece, and meat.
This fourth day of Chanukah,
Sensing his poetry is a sheep's bleat,
He yet coaxes verse from muteness,
As though writing like crazy might keep him sane.

12/14/90 (03707)

Saying No, Over and Over and Over

Neither Christian nor Jew,
This slumberous Sunday afternoon,
But rather anonymous, atheistical entity is he,
Perhaps one of Whitman's sextillions of mystical atoms
Comprising his own free-floating soul,
Maybe a whole blade of grass,
Possibly just dust hovering above the earth's
Vast westernmost chasm
As its last sunset lapses into oracular parallax,
Then collapses into jet-black darkness
Reaching so far past night, only God can see into the abyss.

He senses himself at the mercy of absurdity,
Simultaneously occupying disparate antipodes —
Death and life — without the slightest clue
As to who he might be or become
Or whose electricity previously engendered his energy,
From primal to dinosaurian mists,
Through subsequent reincarnations, into his modern body,
Which, just this minute, sits at rest,
Contemplating the request silence has made of his intellect:
To come to grips with his necessariness
If, that is, it existed in the first place.

So many pseudoscientific and theo-philosophical treatises
Have fashioned rational explanations
Of eschatological and epistemological significance
Which he might easily have appropriated as his own, growing older,
Subsumed into his maturing poetry,
And so many homespun disquisitions and homilies
Has he read, from elementary through graduate school and beyond,
*

That have posited comforting rewards for moral acts,
In the form of immortality and eternal salvation,
He should consider himself fortunate
To be progressing toward divinity.

But somehow, he's never accepted these balms
As reconciliatory rewards for his having heeded reason
And whatever *the* conventional wisdom might be
During any prevailing incumbency
Promulgated by the best and brightest minds of their times.
No, he can't admit to ever feeling assimilated
Or having become one of the "roughs."
Contrarily, all he knows is this: he does exist,
A vocal, sensuous, at times licentious, and juvenile spirit,
Whose heretical intellect drives him to write verse,
To outshout silence that would deny him his cosmic say.

12/16/90 (03686)

Silent Night ^Δ

This Christmas,
It's not the gift-giving I'll miss,
Nor is it the irreversible fissure that exists
Between me and my two children,
Troika and Trilogy,
That will keep me from entering, gracefully,
And disappearing, for an extended weekend,
Into the gentle, tender cheerfulness of the season
But rather that elemental essence
That drives, deeper than redwood roots, into the psyche:
Loneliness.

Oh, how my silent grief moans so loudly,
As the days approaching next Tuesday
Diminish to seconds that corrode, beneath my focus,
Like nails rusting in the snow.
It must be the last three years' accumulation of tears
Overflowing emotion's spring-fed reservoirs,
Or else it's just seeing all those kids
Clinging to their parents' shoulders and warm hands,
When I've attempted to reenact the ritual
Of shopping in malls, with my nonexistent gift list,
That causes me such terrifying despair.

And yet not even loneliness and despair,
 Though they share recognizable tendencies with the enemy,
 Are the verifiable culprits,
 Just twin tips of the colossal glacier
 Drifting, like an iceberg, in this Christmas ocean,
 Converging on my unwitting *Titanic*,
 To capsize its already listing spirit,
 Scuttle its captain's hope of reaching safe port
 Before corruption transforms it, memorabilia and all,
 Into a barnacle-encrusted hulk
 Mired in sand, below the planet's Sea of Forgetfulness.

No, those threats are of inconsequential significance,
 Compared to the ultimate punishment:
 Cosmic silence,
 Going out of this life without friends, children, wife
 To guide me into the incomprehensible unknown,
 Where death commences its unending millennium.
 It's this pernicious stillness that most frightens me,
 As though even my as-yet-unrealized ghost
 Realizes the irrevocable permanence of our sentence —
 Condemned to listen, throughout eternity, to all my verses
 Being recited, to me, by Satan's crew of deaf-mute Kapos.

12/18/90 — [1] (04246)

O Come, All Ye Faithful and Apostate [△]

O come, all ye faithful
 And even you who've deviated from rectitude,
 Participated in licentious escapades
 And reprobate excesses of all persuasions,
 Especially family breakers —
 You're welcome, too,
 To our Congregation of Stray, Wayward Spirits,
 Whose house of worship is located, conveniently,
 Wherever there's a coterie of souls needing merciful care.

You needn't petition the absentee Landlord.
 Just come inside, enter by your heart,
 And share prayers of compassion, with us, tonight.
 After all, we've known each other

*

Too many years, to disguise our fears
Of dying alone and unknown,
Committing suicide, for lack of altruistic alternatives,
Or just disappearing in the dust others have left.
Haven't you guessed yet? We're your loving bones and flesh,
Beckoning you home, again, this Christmas.

12/18/90 — [2] (04247)

The Journey of a Magus

Some days, his words come rumbling,
Tumbling, fumbling, stumbling, from the Heidelberg tun
Located, invisibly, just under his tongue,
Come, in paroxysmal undulations, through the funnel
Connecting the outside air with the hoard
Where all his vocables and syllables,
Like electrons circling a highly charged nucleus,
Keep orbiting in imagination's perpetual force field,
Waiting for mystic release, to fly off
And start shaping a verse-chrysalis,
To protect their progenitor from potential incursions.

Some days, those words don't come at all,
Not even as stillborn babies
Of deportees, from metaphor-ghettos,
Being transported to Auschwitz compound sentences
Surrounded by adjectivally barbed adverbs and nouns,
Let alone as kaleidoscopic butterflies
Setting the universe astir, with their tuning-fork antennae,
Or entire choirs of onomatopoeic tropes
Singing Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*,
To a world perched on God's crucifix,
Thirsting to be absolved of the earth's curse: verbal expression.

This undisclosing morning, five days before Christmas,
He listens to strains sifting down
Through vents in a ceiling that might be heaven's subfloor
Or asbestos roof tiles glued to Hades' decking.
He can't distinguish specific words or phrases,
Just melodies he's hummed for nearly fifty years,

*

Magical music of this holy season,
Which his Jewish beliefs, curiously, have always found comforting.
Suddenly, his pen begins moving across the page,
Registering his soul's location and the direction he'll take, today,
On his re-verse journey toward ineffable expression.

12/20/90 (04248)

[This rainy morning, four days before Christmas,]

This rainy morning, four days before Christmas,
He repairs to the Kaffee Haus,
To contemplate the nature of great white whales
Breaching literature's surface, Darwinian primates
Swinging from limb to limb, in a rain forest
Shading Victorian England and expanding America
From ultraviolet exploding through slowly growing holes
In their smoky sky's ozone dike,
And McCormick's reaper and Corliss's steam engine.

Why he's fixated on nineteenth-century visions
Instead of issues more contemporary
Is easily explained by his own theory of continuity
And three new thermonuclear-dynamics laws
He presented, in a paper, to the Academy of Rhetoricians and
Projectors,
Earlier this year — "Diminishing Returns of the Day" —
Dealing with half-lives of carbon-tetrachloride trilobites
And retroactive pay for cave painters,
Pyramid-building slaves, and stone masons

Engaged in piecing together Chartres cathedrals
Eight generations in the making.
He's resorted, before, to this sort of intellectual deflection,
Especially when the prospect of addressing reality
Gets too close to home,
Approaches his threshold for emotional pain,
Such as has been happening for weeks, now,
As the season reaches critical Mass,
Threatens him with ground-zero extermination of his spirit.

In cases like the one he's facing, this Christmas,
Bereft of all family, extended and immediate
(Silent, his children and former wife, she given to fugues
And schizophrenic delusions of sexual ecstasies
À la Hadrian, Rabelais, de Sade, and Kafka;
Silent, too, in their denigratory vituperations,
His elderly parents, the father threatened by his own success,
His mate the sad clone of his egocentrism),
He tends to fantasize, tries to lose himself in earlier events,

That, possibly, he might invent ways of reversing history,
Redirecting fate, controlling all destinies
Leading toward and ultimately coalescing into his own.
In this way, he might save, from extinction,
Melvillean whales, sequoias, snow monkeys,
Rain forests, dodos, ozone layers, starving babies,
Save mankind, save the planet,
Most important, save himself,
From his grave sentence of spending this Christmas alone.

12/21/90 (04249)

Where Do the Homeless Go, for Christmas?

Three days remain. I count them assiduously,
As if they might forget my solitary existence,
The minute I quit. I sit in this empty restaurant,
This snow-stippled Saturday a.m.,
Sipping coffee, listening to synthesized melodies
Setting the Christmas week's mood:
“I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus,”
“Silent Night,” “O Come, All Ye Faithful,”
“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.”

And I question why I've lighted in this place
Rather than remaining in bed,
To catch up on rest, from my obsessive projects,
Recognized the necessity to express my ideas
By writing them in a notebook
(My steady companion);
Why I've never learned how to trust my senses,
Suspend intellect, and just let the days
Soothe me, with Mediterranean unguents.

Perhaps, during the first decade of our marriage,
When two children graced our lives,
With their endless sensuous inventiveness,
Requiring all our waking attention,
I found a place in the universe to claim in my name,
Where pride in having made something unique
Finally transfigured my anonymity,
Increased my standing as a responsible man,
In God's eyes and mine if not yours, wife.

But that blessed ten-year period
Passed so fast, neither of us saw it lapsing
Or realized our passions were evaporating,
Until all that was left to corroborate the dazzlement
Were photographs and, naturally,
Our adolescent children, who, by that time,
Had assumed emblematic beauty — our namesakes,
Charged with perpetuating the seminal promises we'd made
And would not, we knew, bring to fruition.

This morning, a trilogy of chilly days
Waves to me, from changing locations up the way.
Focusing from this desolation,
Imagination mistakes them for Magi bearing gifts,
Pulsing like stars in a Wisconsin sky,
Fluxing toward a manger behind my eyes,
In which two babies mildly cry — my precious babes.
Suddenly, I know why I've come here to write:
My poems are homes I repair to, in moments of loneliness
and despair.

12/22/90 — [1] (04250)

Narcissuses

*For my love,
in bed*

Candles' lights, like paper-whites
Flickering the fragrances of our lovemaking,
Illuminate the bedroom, with our blooms.

12/22/90 — [2] (10573)

Breathing Eye to Eye ^Δ

*This belated New Year's Eve gift,
for Janie*

After the newness has passed,
The mucilage that keeps passion intact,
Makes the initial sense of wonderment last,
Is our capacity for detaching from ageless habits
We might have initially disguised
Or deceived ourselves into believing we'd jettisoned
As sacrifices to an incipient relationship
And recommitting our heart's allegiance
To another human life,

Just as we have, mistress mine,
Witnessing candles you fastidiously lit,
Their tips flickering the fragrances of our lovemaking,
Change mystically into narcissuses
And illuminate the bedroom with our blooms.
Transfigurations such as this
Come once a lifetime, night after night,
To those who, breathing through their eyes,
See beyond their nose.

12/22/90 — [2] (from 10573) & 1/3/91 (01201)

Trying to Make Too Much of a Good Thing

*For Janie,
who bestowed, on me,
her snowy, peaceful quietude*

Now, with just two full days to go,
He sits in the living room, gazing at the snow
Cascading, in Currier & Ives slow motion,
Just beyond the massive glass windows,
The flakes partaking of a mixture of romance
And Cronus's retrospective distortions.
He witnesses their perpendicularly drifting descents
As if oblivious to mechanisms, on high,
Bent on filling the sky with such innocence.

And he admires the entire diorama, from here inside,
Where he's ensconced in a chair
Beside the fireplace, whose garrulous logs
Provide accompaniment to his mood of brooding quietude.
The blaze's tongues, speaking in orange whispers,
Sustain a dialogue with his silent eyes and ears,
Themselves busy trying to decipher white hieroglyphs
Aligning themselves on the sky's papyrus scroll,
Unwinding, minute by minute, outside.

But neither the crackling flames nor the crystallized ice
Communicates prophetic messages
Or transmits insights his synapses might translate
And incorporate into a conversation between Elohim and his spirit;
Indeed, the more deliberately he pressures himself
To impose meaning on the snow,
Assign symbolic importance to its presence, this morning,
Two days before Christmas,
The less itself it becomes. He threatens it with invisibility.

Slowly, he begins to assimilate its ubiquitous essence.
Its existence depends solely on his ability
To resist imagination's temptation
To transfigure and reconstitute, by transmuting, nature,
Into fable, myth, image, symbol, universal truth.
Even now, hypnotized by the snow's freedom of movement,
Its total appropriation of the landscape,
Without anyone's apparent consent,
He's in complete awe of its senseless independence.

12/23/90 (04251)

[This frigid a.m., December 24,]

This frigid a.m., December 24,
With just one day more until Christmas,
He sits dreaming of wrapping gifts
Fastidiously scratched off meticulously fashioned lists
The two of them once crafted like poems,
From hints and wishes their kids had expressed
As well as intuitions on which they'd speculated,
To gain the requisite effects: glee-filled ecstasy

*

And inner contentment that comes to most
As pride in ownership, material security
Dovetailed with the serenity beneficence bestows.

He remembers, so clearly, those complex preparations
And last-minute importunacies:
Running back, for the fourth time, to the store,
For more mincemeat or turkey dressing,
Batteries, ribbon, paper, and tape,
Additional cards to be dropped "post"-haste
And "post" factum, to reciprocate the gesture
Of somebody they'd neglected.
He recalls the lateness of each blessed Eve,
When both of them would be engaged in assembling toys
As difficult to complete as those of Los Alamos.

This cold morning, sipping coffee, by himself,
He contemplates his few necessary trips within the city
And knows the interstices between stops will be wide.
First, he'll pick up a bouquet of roses,
At the local florist, and deliver it to his mother's house,
Visit, for minutes, kiss her, then disappear,
For fear of encountering his father
And treating him with volitionless incivility —
The damage from a quake his dad,
By failing to consider him his manly equal and friend,
All his adult life, ultimately precipitated.

His only other destination of sufficient significance,
To compel him to venture out, onto the treacherous streets
Still drifted and icy, is the residence of his children,
That once splendidly furnished house
He provided for his family,
Three years after moving from the country,
With such excitement and trust in their "right choice,"
Before Jan's disenchantment and abject descent
Down the Corridors of Immoral Divorcées,
Toward damnation and eternal banishment,
To the flaming region assigned to adulterers.

He wishes he could resort to another form of delivery
But has no options. Soon, he'll make his rounds —
A Santa of sorts, out of sorts, remorseful,

*

Altogether disoriented,
Nonetheless a Santa with a mission to accomplish,
If for no other reason than to repudiate,
At least in his own mind,
The intrusive possibility of being able to accuse himself
Of selfish mean-spiritedness and misanthropy,
This Christmas season. Paying for coffee,
He leaves his waitress a five-dollar tip and flees.

12/24/90 (04252)

A White Christmas^Δ

Tentatively, I awaken into this silent morning.
I'm the only creature stirring.
My sweet lady and her boy resist resurrection,
Let sleep bathe them in preventive dreams.
I shower, then stroll from one end of the house
To the other remote end,
Before lingering behind an oversize window.

At this hour, I witness a very orange sun
Trying to pry apart glistening pine trees
Buffering the eastern extremities of this palatial property
And reach colossal icicles fastened to the eaves
Of the Chinese-pagoda-like pavilion
Sheltering me, this pristine Christmas morning,
From snowy, sub-zero reality.

I know it'll be days, maybe weeks,
Before vision, from this vantage,
Will relinquish its ripsaw configuration,
Months until the trees will resume their green blooming,
And years, if ever, before this particular morning,
Inflated with decades of jettisoned memories,
Will coalesce into forgetting and let me start fresh.

Nonetheless, I recognize the morning's necessity
To get as far away from depression
As circumstances will permit. I brew coffee,
Take a seat by the fireplace,
Focus on the three stockings, bulging with treats,
And repress every extraneous echo
That might reconnect me with my past.

After all, I'm the self-proclaimed "*l'homme nouveau*,"
He who's survived *Hölle*, marital Auschwitz,
And, at forty-nine, arrived here, emaciated of spirit,
To be taken in, as a refugee, and repatriated
By the lady of this magnificent St. Louis residence,
Lady Jane Goldberg, by birth a Jew
But who, like me, defies description,

Refuses to be categorized,
Prefers, instead, to live outside society,
Behind the privacy her inheritance provides.
Despite my empty pockets and blasted spirit,
Providence has borne me here.
With grateful appreciation, I pray, quietly, to Elohim,
Knowing He has mandated this fate for me,

And sigh a promise to reject complacence
Whenever it threatens my mission
To translate His faith in mankind, for the world,
Through my fragile yet durable verse.
Moreover, I proclaim my own faith in humanity,
By whispering forgiveness to my apostate wife
And love-wishes to my missing children, this Christmas.

As I sit sipping silence from this mystical cup,
My lips begin to quiver. Its draught
Must belong to a mythical rite
That somehow has discovered me just in time.
When I look up, Janie is kissing me.
Her fragrance is of white freesias, irises, and spider mums,
Which keeps filling my eyes, with her own Christmas snow.

12/25/90 — [1] (04253) ([2], on 12/25, is suite 03240)

A Retrospective Reconsideration of Christmas

Although he never fell asleep, last night,
He takes an unconscionably long time to awaken,
This first morning after Christmas.
Reports of family members missing in action,
Though most important,
Were not the only source of distraction,
Nor were specters of his divorced wife,
*

Threatening his life, with physical molestation
In the form of medieval tortures —

Stretching his flaccid penis, on a miniature rack,
Until it snapped from his groin;
Depilating his pubic region and armpits;
Ripping his finger- and toenails to the quick,
With a rusty needle-nose pliers;
Prying out his eyes, from their sockets;
Extracting his gold fillings;
Finally, chopping off his hands and feet,
At the wrists and ankles, with a blunt ax.

Even now, hours south of the spot
Where his dreams and rest were crucified
And died a grotesque death, by fire and ice,
He tries to explain, to his satisfaction,
Just how resurrection might have happened
With such unexpected ecstasy,
How, at this very second,
He could be driving I-55,
Toward whatever destination he has no idea,

Except that he knows he's following his instincts,
With total blind devotion,
As though cruise control were an autopilot
Whose mechanism has been preset
To deliver his spirit to a location free of stress,
Where all those upon whom he depended,
In his previous avatar,
Will be conspicuously absent from his newest incarnation,
He free to be his unbearably caring self,

Without exposing his gentle soul
To exploitation by those who misread honesty,
Assume truth is the opposite of disguise,
Not the essence of immutability in a changing universe.
Fleeing nightmares, he begins to realize
Just why he never reached sleep, last evening:
His entire lifetime had to be recapitulated,
Then dematerialize, overnight,
Before transmogrification could initiate this final flight.

12/26/90 — [1] (04245)

A Scents of Wonderment ^Δ

For Janie, in my awayness

The sky below which he drives home, tonight,
Is twilight's epiphany —
A crisscross of striated violet and orange hues
Suspending day's blue jardiniere,
In which night's flowers, even now, are blooming.
Soon, he'll inspire their fragranced perfume
And saturate his imagination,
With pungent scents reminiscent of narcissuses
His lady forced from tumescent bulbs
She half-submerged in crystal bowls, about their house,
To whet and coax his sex-buds into flowering.

Coursing north, he witnesses this metamorphosis:
Dusk's stratocumulus blooms close,
Leaving no traces of that imagined bouquet
Except those he knows never existed, anyway,
In their colossal sky-bowl.
And those, he *also* knows, will continue growing,
No matter where he goes,
Since (as it was in the beginning
And so shall be in the end) every invention,
Whether God's or man's, is of the same intention:
To perpetuate a scents of wonderment.

12/26/90 — [2] (01200)

Humble Scribe

Something magical, in the act of scripting texts
From seemingly nonexistent sources,
Reinforces his personal sense of necessariness.
It's as if a mystical grip drives his hand,
Guides his fragile instrument, through divine gyrations,
With such urgent determination,
He couldn't possibly abort its contortions,
Even if mandated by Satanic forces
Bent on stifling creation,
Or alter its course, by imposing his own tropes
On what he always knows is providentially sent.

This morning, four days before New Year's,
The bones in his fingers reverberate,
As procreation proceeds — strokes engendering letters
Themselves undergoing syllabic mitosis,
Until imagination's cells explode,
With the most musically fluid associations of sound,
Fuse, line by line, into a poem
That defines, without circumscribing, his own lifeline,
As it grows toward closure. Now, as always,
Its destination depends on faith alone,
To take it the rest of the way home.

12/28/90 (03672)

Considering New Year's Resolutions and Wishes

Few people have ventured out of their houses,
This last morning of the year,
When temperatures have dropped below freezing,
By fifty degrees. Fewer still
Will brave slick streets,
To reach work, this New Year's Eve day,
Despite company policy.
Most will use, as a collective excuse,
Their batteries' incapacity to start their cars,
In such frigid conditions. Some will simply refuse,
Just to assert their tenuous independence

Or defiantly arrogate, to themselves, the last word
In their ongoing say-so with anonymity,
To preserve a sense of moral integrity and pride
In a society they suspect has computerized their minds,
With endlessly crunching numbers, codes, and prompts —
Forearm tattoos of a more sophisticated kind.
These last hours of 1990,
He sits by himself, in a nearby café,
Sipping coffee, scribbling lists, on a napkin —
Wishes and resolutions for the new year,
In which his greatest fear is that of disappearing before he dies.

12/31/90 — [1] (00895)

Braving the Elements

I

He takes to the road, in conditions
So egregiously iffy,
According to incessantly repeating radio reports,

Even *he* can't guess what conceivable obsession
Could possibly compel him to risk limb,
Just getting from point A to place Z,

Or why he has taken to the icy highway,
Realizing hazardous storm warnings
Have been in effect since yesterday evening.

Whatever the reason for his recklessness,
He stutters from rut to rut,
Swerving as if canoeing a rocky stream

Or careening down Niagara's sawtooth falls,
On skis. Suddenly sideslipping,
He just misses hitting another traveler.

Correcting his direction,
He shudders, knowing he's out of control,
Going slowly nowhere,

Lurching past derelict autos,
Whose terrified owners most likely
Are detained in police stations and hospitals,

Waiting to be retrieved or pronounced DOA.
Undaunted, if overly cautious, he proceeds
As though something transcendent to life

Depends on his successful arrival —
The fate of nations, perhaps,
Or last-minute survival of a collapsing planet.

Urged on, from inner reserves of courage,
Despite worsening conditions,
He's determined to reach his destination.

II

Peering through a windshield
Whose minimal view continues to diminish
As cinders and chemical solutions accumulate,

He begins to hallucinate.
Polar shapes alternate with lunar shades,
In tantalizing persuasions

That relocate him in a landscape
Vaguely familiar, for its dazzling rainbow hues
Radiating from a colossal prism.

Suddenly, like a trained circus lion,
He hurtles through a blazing hoop,
Past the sun's outer halo, into its core,

And, in a flash surpassing earthly candescence,
Enters a spectral Poe-mass
Neither snow nor ice

Though partaking of both as well as flames
Crisping the edges of the universe,
With cosmic heat, and begins his transfiguration,

That passage which, this morning,
Compelled him to brave risky elements,
His now-disclosing mission of outdistancing death

And approximating the other side of existence,
Where he might content his heart,
In timeless wonderment,

Unafraid of dying before his time
Or too late. Oh, the ecstasy of his disappearance!
If only he'd known how to achieve this

While alive, he might never have left home.
Ah, but then, how, otherwise,
Would such splendor have dignified his demise?

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Louis Daniel Brodsky was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1941, where he attended St. Louis Country Day School. After earning a B.A., magna cum laude, at Yale University in 1963, he received an M.A. in English from Washington University in 1967 and an M.A. in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University the following year.

From 1968 to 1987, while continuing to write poetry, he assisted in managing a 350-person men's-clothing factory in Farmington, Missouri, and started one of the Midwest's first factory-outlet apparel chains. From 1980 to 1991, he taught English and creative writing, part-time, at Mineral Area College, in nearby Flat River. From 1987 onward, he lived in St. Louis, near his daughter and son, and devoted himself to composing poems and short fictions.

Brodsky authored eighty-six volumes of poetry (five of which have been published in French by Éditions Gallimard) and twenty-seven volumes of prose, including nine books of scholarship on William Faulkner and eleven books of short fictions. His poems and essays have appeared in *Harper's*, *Faulkner Journal*, *Southern Review*, *Texas Quarterly*, *National Forum*, *American Scholar*, *Studies in Bibliography*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Forum*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Literary Review*, as well as in *Ariel*, *Acumen*, *Orbis*, *New Welsh Review*, *Dalhousie Review*, and other journals. His work has also been printed in five editions of the *Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry*.

Brodsky's *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* won the Center for Great Lakes Culture's (Michigan State University) 2004 best book of poetry award.

His Website is <http://www.louisdanielbrodsky.com>.

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