

# Found Music

Poems by Jeffery Triggs

For Sara

Found Music

## I. The Long Way Home

Funeral for a Worm For Tati and

Grandpa

For Sara

Haiku For Sara

俳句

Washing Up

For Tati

I, Tati

Privet Blossoms

Heavenly blues

Berlioz on the Beachfor Sara

Rauschen For Sara

Lazarus of Bethany

The Tenth Leper

Liebestod

Crickets For my friend, Marcantonio

Crespi

Lohengrin For Marcantonio Crespi

For Marcantonio Crespi

Laundry For my mother, Helen Triggs

Merry Widow Waltz For my mother

Music in the Rain for my mother

The End of the World For David

Triggs

Magnolias 2000

Nature

The Wolf at the Door a Dream

Christmas Morning 1999

Marblehead — August 1984

Twenty Years to Life for Sara, May 17,

2000

Intermission

Central Park, Sunday

Vacation

Pelicans

Worker Bees

Einsamkeit

**Basketball**

**Snow**

**The Long Way Home**

**Layers**

**June 3, 2017, New Jersey**

## **II. Archeology of Feeling**

**L'envoi**

**Morning**

**On a Winter Morning, before Sunrise**

**by Eduard Mörike**

**Archeology of Feeling**

**Kinderszenen**

**Midlife Mirrors**

**Cleaning Up For Charlotte Elena**

**Sandbox, Soldiers**

**Eight For Jeffery David**

**Pinewood Derby for Jeffery David, and**

**Jeffery, and David**

**The Last Spring of the Millennium For**

**Jeffery David**

**Watching for Snow for Charlotte**

**Elena, Age 16, January 2, 1999**

Aspiring to the Condition of Espresso

Traveling from Virginia by Train

Kampf For Professor Edward Glas

### III. Detail of the Last Judgment

A Visit to the Museum

Edvard Munch—The Shriek 1910

Paul Delaroche—The Execution of

Lady Jane Grey for Charlotte Elena

Willem Kalf — Still—Life with the

Drinking Horn of the St. Sebastian

Archers' Guild

Whistler — The Little White Girl:

Symphony in White, #2 — 1864

Deathmask of a Girl Drowned in

Paris—1895

Attic Stele on a Child's Tomb

The Lacemaker Ca 1666

John Brett—The Stonebreaker—1857–

58

Hughes—April Love—1855–56

Rossetti — The Girlhood of Virgin

Mary — 1848

Gainsborough—Giovanna Baccelli—

1782

Gainsborough — The Housemaid

1782-86

Sargent — Lord Ribblesdale — 1902

Sargent – Ena and Betty, Daughters of

Asher and Mrs Wertheimer — 1901

Sargent—Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose—

1885-86

Too Many Turners

Constable — Admiral's House,

Hampstead — 1820-25

Death on the Battlefield: Photograph

from the Spanish Civil War

Horse Dying at his Cart—Andre

Kertesz

Paris Boulevard by Daguerre—1839

Young Lady Aged 21, Possibly Helena

Snakenborg—1569

Way Out

#### IV. Life Masks

Aubade

Hamlet knew it, when Shakespeare

Marvelous to drink the riddle of

October

First Cup of Coffee, a daydream for S

Antiques

A Small Secular Song

Lear's Wife

Young Woman Combing Her Hair

The cat in the window is very lazy of  
the sunlight

Like a fig, or maybe like the universe

For Sara

Apples—for Sara

Grunts

#### V. Commuting

Bird House at the Bronx Zoo — for  
the Zanders

Tigers of the Moscow Circus

The Peacock

Undertow — Bethany Beach, Delaware

Home Run

Verzweiflung

Inside my mind a mild-mannered

madman

Birdsong I

Nesting

It's April and

Great Grandfather

For My Grandmother

Youthful Portrait of my Father

At the Sea Shore—for my father

Portrait of the Author as a Child—for  
my father

Commuting to Montclair

## VI. Found Music

Dandelions

A Snail in Abersoch

Lines for Gregory

Three Old Women

Rose of Sharon

Winter Housecleaning

Peonies

Beeches

A Sonnet for Sara

For Charlotte Elena, Three Weeks and

One Day

First Steps

A Problem of Shadows for Charlotte

Elena

Scene from Swan Lake—for Charlotte

Elena

To Charlotte Elena, Dancing

Rilke's Carousel, Jardin du

Luxembourg

Children's Voices, Jardin du

Luxembourg

Cleanup

For Charlotte Elena

For Sara

Bellcore Geese for Sara

A Room for Charlotte Katcher

For Jeffery David

For Jeffery David, Age Three Weeks

and One Day

Learning About Gravity — for Jeffery

David



**Ungeheure for my father**

**December**

**For Charlotte Elena, Age 10, January**

**2, 1993**

**Found Music**

**Glory**

**A Letter to Michael (1954 – 1962)**

**“Real” Love — for Sara**

**Carpe Diem, or A Domestic Song**

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in Paris—1895,” “Hamlet knew it,” “Edvard Munch—Shriek 1910,” “Antiques”), *Gryphon* (“Paris Boulevard”), *Interim* (“Lear's Wife”), *Art Times* (“Scene from Swan Lake”), *International Poetry Review* (“Sargent—Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose,” “Rose of Sharon”).

## I. The Long Way Home

## Funeral for a Worm

For Tati and Grandpa

Why might a chicken have crossed the road?  
Duh. Because the sidewalk ahead was dug up. Q.E.D.  
And this only one of many things we ponder  
as the sun follows us slowly through the neighborhood.

If I remember correctly, Rilke was right:  
children see things low to the ground, the things  
we giants, lost in our abstractions, miss:  
seed-pods we crush routinely underfoot,  
stray feathers, a dimpled stone, mud-sleek twigs  
that emerge from the puddles after downpoured rain.

I can still picture a day like this with my grandfather.  
With his cardigan, perhaps with a cigar in hand,  
we slow march up and down the road together,  
though he avoids the puddles I delight to splash in,  
attentive as only someone with new, spare time can be.

Today the May sun dries the puddles after a rain,  
stranding earthworms that washed up in the road.  
They frighten me, though the live ones merely struggle  
to win back to the soft, safe, burrowy ground.  
With a twig we lift one crushed worm from the road  
and give it as best we can a *cortège* and decent burial.

I wonder sometimes if you quietly conjured the needed music,  
*Andante con moto*, still vivid memories  
of the great orchestra in which you'd recently played,  
and as yet meant nothing to me.

## For Sara

Even in the rain the early bird comes out.  
The one we've listened to these years  
Who woke us that first morning  
Now sings the song that's knitted us together.

**Haiku**

**For Sara**

Touch of fingered yarn,  
Click of the wooden needles.  
Sunset already.

俳句

Light, wet snow in March  
Paints evergreens with blossoms.  
We yearn for the spring.

## Washing Up

When I wash dishes, glasses, silverware, old pans,  
I feel in them the touch of the long dead.  
I hold what they held, my fingers trace the cracks  
that run through porcelain like lazy streams  
traveling from their sources in some forgotten time.  
I touch the smooth curves of the bowls, as with the potter's hands.  
I watch the kitchen light glister in facets of cut crystal  
or on the rims of glass still blushing from the evening's wine.  
My mother's silverware, my grandmother's iron pans,  
the bowls in which our bread has risen, over and over,  
I feel in them the touch of long lost selves.



## For Tati

Wide-eyed with wonder, we listen to your first spring  
Through open windows whispering with breeze,  
The same birdsong I've heard now how many years,  
Edenic noises to draw forth the earliest sun.  
Wide-eyed with wonder we see, as for the first time,  
The buds burst into bloom, the leaves unfurl,  
Thousands of them, millions perhaps, that seem to float  
Windily over the lulling, rocking carriage you are in.  
Low to the ground, we trace the wavy texture of the grass,  
Grown green now and lush in molting May.  
Each day the sun grows warmer, longer, strong  
Enough perhaps to lift you lightly from your knees,  
Wide-eyed toward the wondrous blue sky,  
Forever beckoning and forever young.

## I, Tati

On a cold, damp day, otherwise  
quite ordinary, dreary as all February,  
something utterly amazing happens. Pen in hand,  
you mark a paper with your name: T@tTI.

Or so it looks to me — *pure calligraphy*.  
From this oath, “I, Tati”, all the future must proceed,  
schoolworks, mortgage signings, pure poetry,  
everything you will mark one day as your own.

## Privet Blossoms

I keep forgetting to write this poem —  
its subject slight as the tiny hedge flowers  
that welcome summer, filling the walkways  
with a glorious scent that belies their humble presence.

Redolent of the idle summers of my youth,  
for weeks now they have blessed each morning walk,  
reminding me, before the business of the day takes hold,  
of the sheer beauty of being so easy to forget.

## Heavenly blues

They are quite difficult really. No volunteers  
Spring eagerly to life when summer beckons.  
They must be coaxed from seed, positioned  
Just so, and favored with the weather's luck.  
Even then, sometimes they stubbornly refuse  
To bloom — but when they do we have The Blue Flower  
Itself, Mary's hue, the keys to very heaven.

Suffused with the morning sun, they glow as with sources  
Of their own so brightly that as the day wears on  
They consume themselves. Daily generations  
Furl and unfurl thus, always different and the same,  
And comforting as the weeks pass by. Near the end,  
When daylight shortens and the nights grow cool,  
They bloom abundantly, as though desperate now  
For more living days before the frost that will lay them waste.

## Berlioz on the Beach

for Sara

It's just an earworm, really,  
a Faustian will o' the wisp  
from the moments before WQXR gave up the ghost  
somewhere on the Parkway and turned to dust.  
But enough. Now the crashing waves,  
the seagulls' cries are transfigured  
by whimsical, whirly music. Can it be  
that no one else here listens?  
They go about their beachy business  
as before, filling sand buckets,  
paddling in the waves, scarfing down  
sandwiches and cokes, turning pages,  
or simply soaking sun rays in the seaborne breeze.  
But for me all is changed, changed utterly  
perhaps. I can almost make out,  
silhouette along the shore, a figure walking  
in a frock coat, a peacock spread of hair,  
toward the blue point where the horizons merge.

## Rauschen

For Sara

Today we don't hear it the way Eichendorff did  
Shwooshing night and day through primordial forests  
Godhood made somehow audible in Nature. We hear it,  
When we do, against the background humming of the highway  
Or the noise of the landscapers' machines, insisting weed-whackers  
Leaf-blowers, airplanes, sport utilities,  
Perhaps a siren or two transporting the fallen of this world.

But when our world intermits, as it sometimes seems to do,  
When the leaves are full of summer still and the first  
Autumnal wind is up, our gaze is drawn  
To the rustling crowd above us, and the sound,  
With its deep, slow harmonies, is overwhelming.  
Ah, this is what they knew, the old poets!  
And for a time at least our ageless spirits mingle.

## Lazarus of Bethany

Young Rembrandt shows you best perhaps,  
your ashen features barely distinguishable  
from the molding graveclothes. You struggle  
visibly to lift yourself from the opened tomb.  
The onlookers, bathed in light, are by turns  
suspicious, tentative, astonished at the event,  
even the one whose raised hand seems to draw you up.

You have known death already: four days, an eternity  
outside time, your memories dispersed apart, your body  
given to inexorable dissolution. That much is the same.

As you blink now uncertainly in the light, how can it feel  
to be drawn back into a disintegrated body so changed  
you do not know it? to look upon smiling faces somehow  
infinitely strange? And in the end what was it for?  
The *others*, the women, of course are happy, relieved,  
but they cannot know the horrors you passed through  
and now must face again. For you rise now, not into  
a kingdom of heaven, but once again into the darkling world.

## The Tenth Leper

Until he was chosen by the disease, the tenth leper  
Was just like anybody else. You couldn't have picked him  
Out from a crowded street on any given day.  
And even when the bacteria had taken root and the sores  
Declared themselves, when the numbness set in so  
That he could not feel the rocks of the road  
Break off his toes; when he was shunned now  
By the good people, the normal, lucky ones,  
He seemed still like any ordinary leper, so far gone  
That he was past hoping for a miracle.  
When one came to pass, when the man on the road  
Waved his hand at a whole group of them at once,  
Did he summon from somewhere deep in him the feelings,  
The hopes, the common decencies of man alive?



## Liebestod

In the official police photos, Stefan Zweig and his girl,  
Young Lotte, can be seen lying side by side,  
Primly propped, he in his sweat-stained shirt and tie,  
She in her house dress. Their lips are pursed and chaste.  
Their fingers gently touch each other as though  
They were shy, young lovers on a first date.  
Only the empty bottles on the night stand speak  
Of something gone amiss. Things are not as they seem.

I have seen a different view. The same iron bed, same bottles  
And same clothes, only here disheveled. He holds her  
In his arms as only a practiced lover knows to do,  
His mouth is agape, as if he strained for one last kiss.  
Not knowing better, one might almost think  
They moved in death, death imitating art.

## Cricket

For my friend, Marcantonio Crespi

It's time now for the hard poems, the ones  
you never wanted to write at all, the ones  
pried out like aching teeth.

It's September now, and time you were back  
from wherever it was you spent your summer this year.  
The semester is soon to begin, full of business,  
new students, new beginnings.

We have a standing dinner date just about now.

A quick handshake of welcome, a glass of wine,  
a joke or two, and we pick up where we left off.

It's happened just this way for how many years now?

Likely as not the evening stretches on

after dinner: brandy and cigarettes on the porch  
in the cool of the late-summer evening, and talk,  
always good, witty talk to catch us up,

We round our lives with such words. In September,  
ever wistful, the dark comes earlier,

and the crickets fill our ears, reminding us  
of the chill night, surely soon to come,

when they'll fall silent. We're poets together,  
after all, and death surrounds poets, *mitten im Leben*  
as Rilke put it. Death is a thought we always  
entertain, at least abstractly, theoretically.

Whether your "*mort*", my "death", even Rilke's "*Tod*",  
the word itself is delicious. "Easeful death" —  
one might well be half in love with that.

On some level I still think it can't be true! at least not yet!

But right away I knew. You were in Switzerland  
like so many times, but different this time,  
after the hospital stays, the gruesome treatments,

the dread, mysterious bug striking and clinging  
to you, stealing all joy of life, making you,  
suddenly, unforgivingly a mid-life invalid.  
The heart that over the years watched and received  
finally gave out. So many memories  
roared now tsunami-like over my thoughts,  
which seemed to tear away from me out of control.  
I remembered our last phone call, our last meeting  
sporting now their terrible, unexpected adjectives.  
I thought of a dozen things I longed to talk with you about —  
movies, books, events, current now only for me.  
No literary savor in this ache.

*Dark house, by which once more I stand...*

I actually drove by your house once, almost by accident,  
pulled on by some half-conscious wish that made  
me take wrong turns until the road itself insisted.  
The shutters, the curtains still the same, the lights turned out.

Oh Marc, oh Marcantonio, Marcantoine.

(How shall I call you now?)

I write this for you with one of your own pens  
still full of ink, still bearing, as it were,  
its unborn lines of poetry, a final metaphor  
whose difficult birth I guess at from the chewed tip.  
So much of life passes away in mere habit,  
irksome tasks or duties that do the work  
of holding off dread certainty a while.  
We never know, really, when we do something  
for the last time. Oh Marcantoine,  
I can see you rising to greet me at the door,  
the table ready with cheese and biscuits and wine,  
a candle flickering in the evening light.  
This time it is I who have much to tell you  
as we pick up where we left off before.

## Lohengrin

For Marcantonio Crespi

When you first breezed into our lives, a young knight seemingly out of nowhere, we didn't know your allergy to Wagner and I'm afraid for every evening of wine and Puccini arias I inflicted hours of *Lieder* on you, while you submitted bravely in the spirit of young friendship. No surprise then that, as the chance arose, we took you to *Lohengrin*, that magnificent fairy tale even non-Wagnerians claim to like. You held out silently, not wishing to seem ungrateful. While we thrilled to the usual scenes: Else's *Traum*, the knight's arrival towed by a stage-prop swan, the boisterous, brassy, German sounds that filled the hall. Perhaps it was only the champagne in the final intermission that made you admit to us how much you loathed it all. And how I cringed then when the third act began fortissimo and wished the wedding and the love music away, the magic muted when the knight sang out his name and vanished in the misty lake. The curtain closed on Wagner, but our friendship started new that night, knowing ourselves different, and lasted through long years of business: marriages, children, funerals, jobs that kept us far apart, and through the anguished years of inexplicable decline, the secret illness that gripped you and would not let go. I listen now to the anxious chorus cry "*der Schwan, der Schwan*," and to the achingly beautiful notes of renunciation, of loss, and think of you now, my unlikely swan knight, as you depart one last time over the misty lake, mysteriously as you arrived, and we remain, non-operatic creatures that we are, to go on day by day among the living.

## For Marcantonio Crespi

In which heaven shall I find you then?  
I fear we failed to make arrangements for that  
when last we spoke, and now I am at a loss.  
Will it be Capri-blue, or like this mottled sky  
chill with New Jersey spring? How will I even know you  
there? Will you be young again, vacation tanned  
as when we met, or gray with too few years?  
Will we meet point to point, as if once more in time,  
or everywhere and every while at once?

## Laundry

For my mother, Helen Triggs

As I still see it, the house is flooded with light,  
morning light most likely, perhaps in February  
intensified by the snowy yard outside. I follow you  
from room to room, each with its gauzy shafts of light  
that flame the dust and gleam the waxed wood 1950s floors.  
Now we head down to the windowless dark of the laundry  
where I help clean the delicious lint from the dryer.  
It has an otherworldly softness, an inutility  
that begs for more of this lulling time, for play.  
I sense the rich brown cascade of your hair, so long  
to me then, though the evidence of pictures shows it  
merely shoulder-length. In the bedrooms once again  
you fling the white sheets aloft, aglow with morning light  
and snap them so that they settle gently, perfectly  
on the waiting mattresses. I want to reach out for them  
clean and laundry-warm. I want this moment to stay,  
and though I am only four, I know somehow that it will not.

## Merry Widow Waltz

For my mother

The old Oldsmobile seemed almost to float, slowly  
inexorably as it neared the schoolyard. Sometimes  
we'd beguile this anxious time with the car radio  
blaring, say, "Downtown" or "These Boots are Made for Walking".  
It was hard to imagine Petula Clarke in the hip and distant city  
I would one day visit, but the sounds mitigated, somehow,  
the day of fourth grade misery that grew more real as we passed  
each stop sign on the way, and then the crossing guards  
with their silver badges who waved us on the last leg.  
I still remember the ache of being there, the watched clocks  
teasing me with their stubborn stillness before, sprung,  
they'd softly thud each minute of the passing day.  
Sometimes instead of the radio you'd hum your own melodies,  
Lehár's "Merry Widow Waltz", lovely and lulling and lush.  
This is how I'd hear it, even now – not glamorous of Vienna  
sung by some elegant diva under the dimmed chandeliers  
of the Met, but softly hummed as we wended our way home.

## **Music in the Rain**

**for my mother**

In the morning, in a cool, mid May,  
rain glows all windows green and gray,  
sheets of it stipple the eastern panes  
as we attend to lovely strains,  
Beethoven, perhaps, or Richard Strauss,  
that fill the corners of our house.  
No need for words. The music binds  
the thoughts of unconnected minds,  
treasure we carry separate ways  
as these moments travel into days.  
Scenes like this now come to me  
from a dim recess of memory  
as fresh and vivid as the spring  
that gives the day such coloring.



## The End of the World For David Triggs

In those New Jersey summer days when a/c was scarce but gas quite plentiful, we would, likely as not, escape the heat by driving “to the country” — if only through New Vernon, near Madison, but rural enough. My father still drove in those days my mother next to him, and three of us tucked in the back seat. He liked to scare and amuse us, driving suddenly on the dirt path next to the Tuttle oak, a huge old tree allowed to remain in the middle of Prospect Street. George Washington, according to the legend, once tied his horse to it. Along one country road we always thrilled at “the end of the world”. Shuttered with overhanging trees, the road wound up a hill at whose crest, simply and suddenly, it vanished into the sky. We always waited for it eagerly with a kind of mock terror, only to be relieved when at the top we saw a pleasant meadow slope gently downward full of wild flowers and late summer light. The distant goal then, often as not, was Jockey Hollow Park, surrounded by sets of funny-looking, split-rail fences. Here was another old horse tale. The young girl, Tempe Wick, fearing it's confiscation by Washington's soldiers, had hidden her horse in the bedroom of her house. If we had time, we'd stop there to wander a bit. Leaning on a split-rail, we would scan for deer shyly entering the apple orchard. Deer were not suburb “pests” back then, as so often now, and rare sightings. We waited through the twilight eager for a glimpse — all one usually got, as they'd bound away at first sight of us, hurdling the spiky fences with surprising grace. As the lingering light paled finally into summer dusk, it was time to pile back in the Oldsmobile and head home. Perhaps an ice cream waited for us on the way. My father always delivered us safely home and tired enough for bed. I happened to be driving there today, and wondered as I went if my father, when he faced suddenly his own end of the world, passed through at wonted speed and found there a meadow as alluring.

## Magnolias 2000

Eager in the rich-proud service of the spring,  
they bloom early and without stint, holding back  
nothing, like some more cautious plants; indeed,  
they give so much of themselves that when April,  
as it sometimes does, plays a malicious trick  
(like this snow, no sooner here than gone),  
they cannot quite pull back and weather through.  
The opened buds fill up in cones of snow.  
Their delicate, pink skins, shocked by the cold,  
tremble with the unaccustomed, icy weight.  
And then they droop and wither, suddenly brown,  
eyesores quite out of place among the other  
flowers that hasten onward now the hourly,  
inexorable work the season had begun.

## Nature

The dog walking on his hind legs may seem,  
for a time, remarkable. It is not, after all,  
an everyday occurrence. It is full of amusement  
for the leisured classes. Often, they condescend  
to hail the dog with toasts to such abilities  
as even he grows shame-faced at the mention of.

But soon they all tire of the game. The great ones  
return to their affairs, while the poor beast,  
though he may venture a few more steps unattended,  
returns to a four-footedness somehow less natural  
than before, as though, from having striven  
beyond himself, he was now fallen more lowly.

Avoiding now even the casual looks of strangers,  
he cringes in a doggy way, and lets his tail  
drag downward and curl between his quivery legs.

But eventually his true nature reasserts itself:  
four good legs carry him swiftly and more surely  
than two, and blithely he courses where he wants to go.

## The Wolf at the Door

### a Dream

He is not at all like my dog Blizzard,  
the friendly Samoyed who watches out for my return,  
wagging his tail, ears back, glistening white  
in the welcoming, warm brightness of the kitchen.  
The wolf at the door is scruffy, dirty, dark.  
Only his teeth gleam white with a vicious grin  
as he eyes me and moves near, silent and menacing.  
He's met me now. There is no place now to run.  
Without thinking, I leap on him, wrestle him,  
pin him back with all my weight and strength,  
the strong jaws held firmly for the moment shut.  
But the malignant grin remains, mocking me.  
I cannot let go even for an instant now,  
though my arms ache and strength begins to wane.  
One slip, and the razory canines will surely slash  
my arms, my wrists, the face brought down so close.  
I wonder now if there is even time to wake.

## Christmas Morning

1999

I am sure that somewhere, even now,  
machines are whirring, jet planes landing or taking off,  
hard-drives spinning with their odd, muffled chortles.  
But here the morning passes from silence through silence,  
so that, going out into the rinsed December sunlight,  
the only sound is wind itself, sweeping  
the frigid air, spreading plumes of chimney smoke.  
Hard as you try to populate this silence,  
say, with a shivering tangle of bare branches,  
or the raucous descent of some few, spare crows,  
it insists upon itself. The sounds are strange —  
the flapping of wings, the odd “caw”, “caw” — eerily  
discrete, distinct, and quickly overwhelmed:  
like pauses in a kind of masterful, negative music  
where you may hear, if you can listen,  
modern echoes of the ancient miracle.

## Marblehead — August 1984

You'll remember how we wandered that day  
(having somehow escaped the dead museums of Salem)  
the narrow, winding streets, walled or picketed,  
how we spied the weathered, shuttered “sailors' cottages”  
with their tiny closed gardens, often with keyhole gates  
and bright with hydrangeas or rose of sharon.  
It was easy to lift Charlotte then, and one could walk  
for hours not heading anywhere in particular.

And then to happen on the bay, bobbing with sails  
in the glistening sunlight. The blues of water and sky,  
the whites of cloud and sail, the blazoned boats  
and craggy, background shore — all seemed somehow painted  
for us with youthful impressionism. Glorious  
to be far away from home that day, we three  
carelessly alive, thinking neither of the past  
nor the future that waited for us in its dim coils.

## Twenty Years to Life

for Sara, May 17, 2000

Rain-rinsed, sunlit, a-twitter with every birdcall possible in May, the morning waits for us; in sweeping, *sostenuto* passages of breeze, the wind-chimes, two of them now, ring out for us.

Twenty years have brought us to this day, to this garden greener than memory, to this huge oak tree, spreading, swaying in the breeze, in which, if I look deeply, I can still see the lovely, white-veiled face with tremulous eyes coming to meet me, I can still feel my own heart beat with anticipation, as if for a journey; and then, veil lifted, the softening smile, the calm determination for departure.

Twenty years have brought us to this day which passes slowly, solemnly almost, the light stepping carefully about the yard, drawing the seedling flowers of last weekend. Its ceremony refuses interruptions: the importuning cries of children, who burst awake now, ready to go like wind-up toys, the roaring of a vacuum cleaner, car doors clanging shut, the passing of some siren. The birds themselves are at work now, fetching twigs and straw for their nesting in our soffits. Shopping, laundry, mealtimes have their cycles too, and follow one another faster than the shadows that begin to lengthen and mottle the green lawn. But I can still make out the trusting green eyes, the gentle hand held steady to accept its ring.

Twenty years have brought us to this day  
which hums along now, like so many others.  
The sun, traveled round, shines now from somewhere  
behind us; we look out, spectators of the shade,  
upon the honeysuckled breezes of the afternoon,  
you with your knitting, I through puffs of pipe smoke.  
Dinner, sunset, upon us, gone. No need of words  
after all this time, when the well-honed gesture, glance,  
or private joke still carry years of meaning.  
And perhaps, late in the warm fragrant dark,  
wind-chimes will still sound out on the deserted porch,  
a look or a familiar shape, unseen but sensed  
and still loved and the old thrill will come upon us both.



## Intermission

Diffusely lit, the curved walls covered with red velvet spiral slowly down the stairs from the upper galleries. Turiddu, bumbling oaf, has had his Mafia-like demise. Soon Pagliaccio, make-up half on, will sing in anguish at the betrayal of his Nedda (namesake of my aunt's cat); the great, dramatic killings, and the final cry:  
*La commedia è finita.* But it is not over yet.

Crowds mingle as with one studied nonchalance. The usual cast of characters: two women, middle-aged, in necklaces, bracelets, their best dresses, chat about husbands, bosses, the dreariness of it all. Across the way a pair of sleek young men in dark shirts (they have known it all already) maneuver toward the door to the outside balcony, cigarettes ready in hand. A stately old woman orders champagne with an accent from somewhere or another. A young man in tweeds, no tie, a three-days' growth of beard (perhaps a music student), heads back in early. An older, Brooks Brothers white male, managing two cocktails, looks about as though he were enduring this for someone special.

Not much has changed in thirty years, except perhaps the cell phones that keep popping out unexpectedly and the earrings on a number of the younger men. I scan the room looking for someone who is not there, not queuing at the bar or water-fountain, not lingering under the two gaudy, great Chagalls, not sneaking a quick cigarette in the anonymous dark of the outside balcony. He would be sixteen or seventeen, a somewhat awkward boy masking his shyness in the seeming elegance of his blue, pin-striped suit (reserved for such occasions); dark-haired and with a stern, fixed look that might say: "I am the poet of this place if you only knew. Of course,

I would rather this were Wagner, as I yearn for serious things.  
My life has little else to occupy it at this moment  
than dreams of poetry and music and great, vindicating,  
laureled fame that the future, surely, will bring to me.”

But it is no use. If he *is* here, he has become someone else,  
perhaps quite harmlessly middle-aged, keeping his secrets now,  
melding seamlessly with the rest, who pass this brief time  
waiting for the next act to begin.

## Central Park, Sunday

for Sara

This day will bear remembering, for its fair weather soul  
that somehow led our strolling lakewards here. For now,  
we pause unharried: nothing matters but the sun-gilded sails  
mastered by unseen hands of children. The city  
stands back awhile, the summer crowds blend round us  
in one great smile. Across the lake, checking his bike  
(an upturned hat some feet behind), the itinerant tenor  
stands at the verge and breaks into wind-buffed song.  
At the Carroll monument a clown magnets small children  
to his busy trade. We sit and wait and wait  
as under some hypnosis of the wind-blown waves.  
The great tall buildings that look over us seem now  
somehow benign, emptied of all business, their fearsome  
energy coiled, poised. They wait and wait,  
as loath to monday as we are to pick up our lives again.  
For what? Surely, here, now, as each wave laps the shore  
as the singer washes down a song with Evian  
as the clown does up a balloon like a lion  
as we linger with another ice-cream cone  
surely for this one day there is no time.

## Vacation

The first day of a vacation is always cloudless, blue,  
wherever it may be, in the mountains or by the ocean,  
in some great modern or medieval city, as long  
as it is, as it must be, *elsewhere*: plan or not, rain or shine.  
The bad things that might happen are still unknown;  
the evils of the old life remain safely behind.

On the first day of a vacation the strange, morning birds  
charm as no other, the foreign pillows are ethereally soft,  
the hotel's coffee seems, somehow, richer than one's own,  
the daylight brighter and the night more fine.  
The bad things that will happen remain unknown.  
The evils of the old life are still safely behind.

## Pelicans

At the beaches of Costa Rica the pelicans  
fly by like fighter planes in strict formations,  
eight or ten, over the glistening water.  
Now and then one dives toward the surface,  
an old Stuka bomber ready to strafe,  
but the target is some fish unseen by us.  
If he is lucky, he struggles back to his altitude  
with the squirming capture in his long beak.  
Otherwise he'll fly low and solo over the breakers  
hungry for a kill before he might rejoin his fellows.

## **Worker Bees**

Disoriented by the sudden change of weather,  
on a September morning they cling to what's left of the hydrangeas  
and buddleia, attempting still what they know best,  
all they have known, which can no longer save them.

The air fills now with the steady dirge of the crickets.  
The light comes later now with its remembrance of summer warmth,  
and glances sooner away, leaving long, evening shadows  
cool and death-dealing to all without another season in their DNA.



## Einsamkeit

The cold morning air and winter light perhaps,  
the odd, deliciously transgressive feeling of the sick-day  
and in an instant I become again a troubled teen,  
playing hooky from the hated school. Left alone,  
I would spend long mornings listening to Schumann  
or improvising on the piano in my pathetic, untrained way.  
One year — I can't remember why — we failed to drain the pool  
so that the water froze with Winter and we had months of ice,  
a kind of private rink. At home alone, in the cold morning light,  
I would put on skates and spend hours gliding back and forth  
over the glassy surface, cutting figure eights (my math that year).  
Loneliness and pleasure, shining, seamed with guilt like a tiger-eye,  
attended these occasions, as they do today. Then I waited,  
coiling for a life I could not imagine. And now?  
Awaiting the unimaginable shuffle, I fold away from the world again  
into a self decades more crowded now, but still one and whole.



## Basketball

On a winter day, without snow or ice, the sound  
Of a basketball, repeatedly dribbled and thrown  
Beats out the slow time of Sunday morning.  
A solitary boy is practicing his hoops. Without  
Some seven-footer to block his shots, he is brilliant,  
Outwitting all imaginary opponents,  
Looping long, curving three-pointers into the net,  
Over and over, bouncing the ball with abandon  
On the empty street. In the distance church bells  
Ring out as if to celebrate each point.  
He doesn't see me watching. He will no doubt  
Grow out of the game some day; the backstop,  
Rusty and unused, will go to the compactor.  
But years from now, perhaps watching another  
Boy at play, he will recall the triumphs of this day.

## Snow

The night is lit with snow  
falling through the lamplights  
capping the dark hedges and the walls.  
In the distance a train passes. The snow  
glisters on the powerlines. The sky is sepiaed  
with reflected light. One can see in this dark.  
Why is it beautiful to me? Why not a horror,  
cold coating death? Yet the flakes caress  
all things, and transfigure with their caress.  
On a night like this, one might believe  
in the transmigration of souls. One might  
believe, even as a late car carves two tracks  
of darkness in the road, in a caressing God.

## The Long Way Home

Christmas week invites a kind of laziness,  
deliberate movement, contemplative of things past,  
and so, given the choice, on a cool, gray morning  
I take the long way home. The streets, familiar  
from bicycling or walking in my youth,  
seem hardly different now, winding as they would,  
but the neighborhoods are changed, strange, so foreign  
I hardly know them. The older shade trees, pen-knifed  
with youthful hope by a boy walking from school,  
have vanished with a future whose time has now passed.  
The young maples that neatly lined my old street, brightening  
the changing seasons with red leaves, are still there,  
but now misshapen, spreading haphazard branches  
awkwardly through the power lines. The houses  
are changed too, warted with ungainly additions  
or simply uprooted to make way for outsized McMansions  
that swallow whole the yards where we tossed our footballs.  
Now and then I recognize a house that's not been changed.  
I wonder if I might stop there, ring once more,  
and see the door open to a familiar face,  
perhaps my old friend eager to come out and play.  
But that cannot be. If he were there, he'd be  
no longer blond or young, and besides all that  
I have a living home I must get back to now.

## Layers

They're not all bad, the new things,  
much as one dislikes admitting it. Yet on the long road home  
I fancy much in truth no longer there:  
that rust-colored barn where we stopped once  
to peek at the goats with their “mystic”, slanted eyes,  
the empty field where, as a child, I had a tractor ride.  
[Today outsized McMansions own the view.]  
Beyond there, somewhere, is the duck pond with its falls.  
But even the grand houses, the ones we sought glimpses of,  
have changed: the white-wood, farmhouse sports a brickface  
and fake columns now, tripled in size. The town itself,  
which I thought would never change, is different now:  
most of the old shops gone, though a few names still  
cling in fading paint to the upper reaches of brick walls.  
New, fancy sidewalks, new storefronts, new people now.  
When I imagined living *here*, I did not realize  
here was *now*.

According to the real estate agents  
every “property” is a “home” to be bought as such.  
Thus you can buy “townhomes”, “executive homes”,  
but never now a “house” in which to make a home,  
as we did. In the houses I have known there were many homes,  
for each home is made by people, two or three gathering together  
in a space and for a time. A house's homes are born  
and live and eventually, like all living things, they die.  
They are made with passions, boredom, clutter, dinner smells,  
the dust of days laid on in generous layers.

Our first home (ah, yes, renters make them too)  
was the second floor of a Victorian house  
on a street with gray, slate sidewalks rising  
obligingly over the roots of the larger trees.

I can still see its elaborate, carved moldings  
its wide pine floors, the wavy, hundred year old glass  
of the windows; I hear the creak of the back staircase;  
I smell its ancient wood, like my grandfather's house.  
We moved there the first of June. I remember waking  
next morning to the sounds of the birds and sweet breezes  
wafting through the window screen.

Today

in another house more than a generation beyond  
we heard birds like that again, and felt again  
the soft, cool breeze: and that June morning,  
still there full of youth and hope, somehow eastered in me.  
Though not a molecule of our old selves remain,  
I am still I, you are you; we've shared this journey in place  
registering change and yet the same.  
A self persists, perhaps a soul expanding time,  
a tree of girth that still knows all its sapling rings within.

### **June 3, 2017, New Jersey**

At 4:30 in the morning you can hear, well, not a pin drop  
(I just tested that), but all the early birds at song,  
the soft padded steps of the house cat, the snoring dogs,  
the sound of a distant jet that pours through the birds.

And suddenly, at 4:45, it all goes silent for a while  
to give the sky, still quite dark, time to catch up.  
A dull gray now to the east, just bright enough  
to make the boughs appear again on the white oak.

At 5 new birds begin to sing in antiphonal choirs  
far and near to home; a train engine hustles by  
before the day's usual service can begin.  
And now the mourning dove enters with measured,  
soft intervals. Oh what a world to wake to:  
this contrapuntal and suburban dawn!

## **II. Archeology of Feeling**

## L'envoi

Hands connected at the tips, held out  
as if in beggarliness. What will come?  
An airplane soars above, destination Heathrow,  
perhaps. On the ground it does not matter.

What will come? Eyes lift planeward and beyond.  
Orion beckons; the Pleiades draw one  
into their ever-complicating mystery.  
Around one, the cold universe draws its breath.



## Morning

*O pflaumenleichte Zeit der dunkeln Fruhe!  
Welch' neue Welt erwickelst Du in mir?*

Mörike

The horizon forms itself first, a silhouette  
fringed with light. Then all the shapes  
hidden in darkness, as in gray mist, emerge,  
lighten almost imperceptibly, compelled  
with each passing moment. The birds know this.  
They break into songs, first one, then others.

I keep to bed, though the pillows have taken shapes  
wrought by the nightlong twisting of my dreams  
that wither quickly now. Their terrors gone?  
What new world indeed brightens behind the shades?

## On a Winter Morning, before Sunrise

by Eduard Mörike

O feathery light time of the early dawn!  
what new world would you awake in me?  
What is it that suddenly, now in you  
I glow with soft voluptuousness of my being?

My soul is like a crystal now,  
untouched yet by a false ray of light;  
my spirit seems to flow, it seems to rest,  
open to powers, miraculous and near by,  
that from the clear belt of blue air  
call out a magic word before my senses.

With bright eyes I almost seem to sway;  
I close them so the dream cannot escape.  
Am I gazing into the bright fairies' realm?  
Who laid that vivid swarm of images and thoughts  
at the very gateway of my heart,  
that, shining, bathe themselves in this bosom  
like goldfish in a garden pond?

And soon I hear the sound of shepherds' flutes,  
as round the crib upon that wondrous night,  
soon wine-crowned, happy songs of youth;  
who has brought that peace-blessed crowd  
outside my sorry walls?

And what a feeling of enraptured strength,  
in which my mind guides itself freshly afar!  
Drenched by the first mark of today  
I am heartened to each good work.  
The soul flies as far as the reach of heaven,  
the genius in me rejoices! Yet say,

why does my gaze grow damp with melancholy?  
Is it a lost happiness that softens me?  
Or something growing that I carry in my heart?  
Spirit, go forth! Here there is no standing still:  
a moment's time bears everything away!

But look, on the horizon the drapes already rise!  
It dreams of the day, the night has fled;  
the purple lips, which lay closed before  
breathe, half opened now, sweet breaths:  
Suddenly the eye flashes, and like a god of day,  
with a spring the royal flight begins!

## Archeology of Feeling

*A thought once spoken is a lie.*

Tyutchev, *Silentium*

Language occults them so very thoroughly,  
(these secret thoughts that drive us day by day  
yet cannot confess themselves in grammar)  
that you must merely guess at them, infer  
like the astronomer who senses a new planet  
from its slight pull of orbit on a star.  
Music, perhaps, might get you closer to them,  
Schopenhauer's perfect intuition  
of will, a kind of innerliness exposed;  
but music, timeful and prearticulate,  
intermits in vast silences with each rest.  
Poems would entomb them. Yet even here  
only rarely, as through a fluke of nature,  
will you find quick-frozen, perfect sacrificed  
remains, ice-maidens of feeling on whose slender  
arms hairs still stand in the excitement of creation.  
More likely you will see here merely fossils  
hardened round the feelings they'd delineate,  
deathmasks whose chapfallen features you peruse  
searching for hints of the vanished life within,  
shards, fragments of a sensibility  
scattered in the ground. You must dig for all,  
brush, wash, assemble, re-imagine what was,  
in the instance, a twinge of envy, or groan of despair,  
delight, or gravitation of pure love,  
lazy satisfaction, horror of death.  
And feeling their deep silence give them breath.

## Kinderszenen

It never rains when I think about those years;  
always sun, though cold, a sort of February daylight.  
Usually I'll be reading, listening to Brahms or Schumann  
records. Always alone. But the picture window  
with its unchanging scene: blue sky, gray woods  
across the snowy road, is always bright.

As no one's there, often I'll settle at the piano,  
“dreaming with the pedal down.” Suites and serenades,  
whole symphonies pour out with no audience but me.  
Of course my play is clumsy and wrong-fingered,  
but the ear's a fine, self-serving editor, striking  
blundered notes, adding here a trill or there  
a thrilling run, muting the default *fortissimo*.

I took one lesson only. My aunt, the real pianist,  
sat with me as I tried the Minuet in G.  
Beginner stuff, but nice, needing a real left hand  
and proper fingers, the happy gift of scales.  
Softer there. Fourth finger for that. *Legato*.  
Keep your fingers bent, your wrists parallel.  
Practice one hand first and then the other.  
For three whole days I worked at left-hand scales.  
Perhaps with diligence, or Schumann's “seating pants”...  
I thought of Rubinstein beginning at nineteen —  
perhaps it was not too late to do things right,  
another lesson in a week — but the week became forever.

The musician fled me, though his clubfooted symphonies  
continued quite some while, (I can still hear one solo  
played on a horn above soft, *tremolo* strings —  
when I write today, it's right here *obbligato*

if you only heard...), but my best dream was already gone.  
As one knows, without having to look out a window,  
that the light has changed, a storm is coming on,  
I'd know to start dreaming something else, something  
for late starters, though it too require years  
of practice, years of dedication, something  
needing no teacher, though it aspire, silently,  
to the condition of music after all.

## Midlife Mirrors

*Drei-und-Zwanzig Jahre alt, und Nichts für Ewigkeit getan.*

Schiller

Perhaps it's just another bad hair day.  
As I try to hold that thought, the mirror winces.  
How did I ever get to be *you*? It can't be true.  
That weary shabbiness about the eyes that once  
looked piercingly at the great world, the gray hairs  
insinuating near the temples — flags of surrender —  
this is not *me*, surely; this is not me,  
hardly more than a boy yet, just getting a handle  
on things, still arming for the battles yet to come...

I'll try some irony, an arch look  
about the brows, a disapproving scowl, —  
the surly fellow refuses to depart  
but scowls back. The irony's on me.  
How did I ever get to be *you*? It's true.

I'll scabble up some precedents.  
Elizabeth used thicker makeup and no mirrors.  
The Marschallin stopped all her clocks. But it is vain.  
Still comes the day the inner I must eye itself,  
the withered frame curls fetal to the wall.  
No comfort there. Where are those snows of yesteryear?  
Where's Villon? Rossetti? Hell, that was just meant for school.  
But *Life*? An' I pluck this gray hair out, it hurts.

It hurts, and therefore I live. In the sobered eyes  
I find something familiar, something  
I might own to (though they wince to see themselves),  
and even the five-o'clock-shadow face

bears yet some semblance of the serious boy  
who still peers out at me from pictures. The lips  
of the young poet quivering to recite his love.  
The slightly frowning brow that knows all this already.  
Here is no surprise then.

Up and doing then.

Much is still unseen, undone. The windows need cleaning.  
Outside the February wind awaits, a free, new tousel,  
another look, another chance.



## Cleaning Up

For Charlotte Elena

Already putting childish things away —  
Too soon! my mind cries, though my eyes  
smile on you in their accustomed way.  
Those are my memories too that you  
so blithly pack in cardboard boxes  
marked for the attic or the dump —  
hideous, pink ponies we rode  
together once; garish beads  
I saved I know not how oft  
from the clutches of the vacuum;  
girlish, crayoned Picassos;  
dolls you dress up one last time  
fastidious as an undertaker.  
I have not changed so much  
(I cheer myself), but each year  
works sea-changes in you, bringing  
you taller, wiser, and more beautiful,  
and with that strange sensibleness  
of youth, you will not sadly look back  
but welcome the future where you want to be.

## **Sandbox, Soldiers**

All month now, as green has struggled toward the sky,  
they have stood guard, stern soldiers clad in a fading  
Union blue. In balmy sun, in day-long showers  
they wait, as they have always done, their faces  
grim with expectation, their hands clenched  
round their weapons. Now some are fallen in the driving wind  
and lie with rifles shouldered. A horse lies near them in the sand.  
All now incarnadined with blossoms from the redbud,  
they lie without a boy to general them around.  
Unfazed by time, they wait for small fingers' grip again,  
for careless frowns that send them where, though old now,  
though stiff and scarred with many weathers, they want to go:  
to the cannonaded fields, to death grips, to the fray.  
And all but unresentful that the boy in me has long deserted them.

## Eight

For Jeffery David

Hurry up, it's late! Hurry up! It's late!  
The morning sound repeats insistently amid  
the breakfast dishes' clatter, the revving of a car.  
Yet shoelaces double-knot themselves with the lazy tempo  
of last night's dreams, which seem to hang on you  
still while second grade awaits. Hurry up, it's late.  
*So much seems slow in being eight.*

Sometimes, through the glass doors of the porch,  
I notice three of you sitting together, gazing  
reverently up (as in a church, except you are three boys  
and you are eight) at something which I cannot quite see.  
The innocent, fresh faces of your “gang”, free now  
to play video games without homework, without girls,  
trading the latest secrets of your craft with no thoughts  
yet of personal glory, debating the arcane rules  
earnest as parliamentarians. Or else I watch you swarm,  
beelike, the length and breadth of the sideyard soccer field,  
your voices mingling in a high choir of delight,  
heedless of the chill autumn air or of the coloring sun.  
*So much seems fast in being eight.*

If I only blink, I see you three together still  
at sixteen perhaps, “almost grown”, lanky and angular  
and with shadow beards. And when I try to listen in  
I miss the sweet, soft voices (quite like girls'),  
the little hands just large enough to hold or shake;  
all the earnest talk of *Mario* and Lego's been replaced now  
by math homework or sportscars, or the school dance  
about to start. Hurry up, it's late! Hurry up! It's late!

Sometimes I grope back through the dusty stores

of my own memory, past twenty, past sixteen,  
even beyond being eight.

I am six

and quite uneager one night to fall asleep alone.  
My father comes to talk with me, sitting by the narrow bed.  
I am impatient being six. All good things in life begin at eight:  
Cub Scouts and Little League and writing cursive script.  
I want a uniform to wear to school and lead the pledge in;  
I want a real, felt baseball cap with eight rows  
of stitches in the visor. I even want real homework,  
to be seen walking from school with inch-thick books  
gripped casually at my side. To do these things requires  
being eight, and I am six, and much seems slow in being six.  
My father listens, smiles. He can remember being six,  
and eight. Six is a good age; eight is even better.  
It will come, surely. I will dream real dreams about it.

So much seems rushed now, faster than the video days and nights  
you summon with a song in *Zelda*. Generations blur.  
Last year you cried at the thought of leaving seven,  
but being eight is as good as ever it promised to be,  
and having once begun is half-way done now. You want to hurry,  
with nine (horseback riding and the “major leagues”) on the horizon,  
but even though it's late I'd have you linger  
just a little while. *So much seems too fast in being eight.*

## Pinewood Derby

for Jeffery David, and Jeffery, and David

You know, it's really for the fathers after all,  
a chance to show off one's tools, one's handiness  
at woodworking, one's skills in “shop”. This thought's  
no help to me — two left hands when it comes to tools.  
I measure twice, but need three cuts at least.  
But I have a boy all eager and innocent  
of these finer points of fatherly humiliation:  
in the end, procrastination will not do.

And so one night we mark our block of wood  
and try to cut it with a hacksaw (the only tool  
I have that's nearly suitable). The awkward bits  
I clean up with a wood file I picked up somewhere.  
It whirrs and sends the sawdust flying — *voilà*.

I try to babble on about the process,  
why *this* tool and not *that*, why not the one  
we have not got, or how, like Michelangelo's  
*David*, the simple block contains it's artifact  
already, which we only liberate.  
(More filing there might do it!) I think he could  
handle the wheels himself, but they must be straight.

He wants to see it *go* and cannot understand  
why I keep taking the wheels on and off again,  
and do not let it fly across the room  
(as Nature meant) to slam into a wall.  
I think he might try, himself, the first coat of paint  
(we've chosen royal blue), but it's oil based

**Cars should be  
built by the  
Cub Scouts  
with some  
adult guidance.**

**Any technical  
assistance  
should be fully  
explained to  
the Cub Scout  
so that he can  
use that  
knowledge on  
future projects.**

**A car with  
untrue axles  
tends to steer  
to one side or  
the other**

and even if I had some turpentine  
at hand, I do not relish rubbing his fingers clean.  
It's hard explaining that we have to wait now,  
that tomorrow *I'd* better do the finishing coat.  
Perhaps, when I find a proper weight, file it,  
and weight it out, he might glue it into place.

You see, I've been through this before. An old hand.  
My father — artist, woodworker, basement full of tools —  
took me in hand to build a thing of beauty,  
an old Indy-car, perfectly rounded, aero,  
a sleek “ghost gray” with racing stripes in red,  
wheels straight, weighted (I see him soldering the lead).  
My memory is that we won first prize that day,  
the “gray ghost” streaking effortlessly ahead  
of every other car, whizzing along the varnished floor  
of the school gym toward the finish. Cheers. A trophy.

This year we don't win, indeed don't even show.  
The early heats disclose our fatal flaw:  
my shiny weight (so cunningly disguised  
to seem a turbocharged exhaust) slows us  
the moment we're off the ramp on the finishing flat.  
Over and over it happens, and toward the end  
he doesn't even watch, but plays with friends.  
I sit, with a wait-till-next-year smile, front row.  
As we drive home, he tries to cheer me up:  
“It's still a good car, dad... And I can play with it now.”

**Because it is  
difficult to  
establish how  
much help was  
given in  
building the  
car, some  
Packs have a  
separate  
Pinewood  
Derby Race for  
adults.**

## The Last Spring of the Millennium For Jeffery David

It begins with snow: great, wet, transforming flakes,  
winter's heavy hand to press and snap  
old branches that will never turn to boughs.  
The hedges sag with a sudden bloom, the walls  
pile high, the early bulbs quite disappear from view.  
Even by night we see the tiniest details:  
the tracery of branches, pickets, pine needles.  
By day, it is blinding in March's shadeless sun,  
soft as the air of the blue day first hits 60.  
And as quickly gone. The spring has come.  
The last spring of the millennium. Will it be  
in any particular, in any way  
different from the storied springs all poets  
celebrate? from troubadours, or Shakespeare?  
Wordsworth's glad May or Eliot's cruel April?  
Much is the same. Armies prepare spring offensives,  
brokers in lightweight suits still watch the Dow,  
scientists in sunless labs prepare  
the future, lovers haunt shopping malls  
to set their wedding registries,  
the networks ready for the TV sweeps.  
This much is as it might be: life's rhythm  
continuing, preparing exams or vacations.  
Why should we pause for any spring? and *this* one?  
It's only millennial for us. Not Moslems, Jews.  
And what of that Roman who got his dates all wrong?  
For anyone who isn't dying now  
it hardly seems special, this millennial spring.  
Why not let it pass with the thousand others,  
its blossoms break unnoticed like mid-ocean waves?  
And yet to miss this is simply to miss all.

Not to sense the overwhelming green  
lightening wintered hearts, not to watch the spring,  
blossom by blossom, in millimeters creep  
will be a festering grief. And so with any season.  
We go out while the snow still clings  
under the northern walls and pine boughs and feel  
a fine benignity of the warming air,  
the invitation to new life, the primal  
energy that has not grown weary with years.  
You've known but eight springs of these thousand,  
yet you sense it. "Dad, I see an angel's blossom."  
I'm not sure what an angel's blossom is,  
but it must be good, all full of April  
and the spring, this feeling that propels us  
to outgrow ourselves as the blossom its bud and bole,  
to put on our best white, wingling as angels do,  
to live together the young season under the old sun.



## Watching for Snow

for Charlotte Elena, Age 16, January 2, 1999

Was it just steam filling the radiator?  
Or had the snow begun, millions of crystals  
pouring from heaven, dancing at the windowpanes?

No matter. We watched, for perhaps the dozenth time,  
our old tape of the Kirov *Swan Lake*, scratchily  
monaural, clumsily filmed with static camera shots,  
bewitching. And you were caught once more,  
your six years slave to Rothbart's trance, and I,  
a prince again, would rescue you, lifting you  
high in the air, turning you this way, then that,  
your arms aflutter as the desperate, last fight  
filled our small room. Over and over we played this.  
The music swelled at us in dangerous *appassionato*,  
yet in my arms you were but featherlight  
and the vague, painted evil haunting the little screen  
would stand no chance against us.

Now you've awakened, swanlike, to sixteen years  
that watch you wear out pointe shoes on real stages  
where Princes and young Rothbarts alternate their parts,  
where ills and evils haunt backstage and audience-dark.  
And you arch over them with practiced *relevés*,  
with arms extended, waving, and with determined gaze,  
and still I ache for you at every leap or turn.  
I watch though I no longer lift you above the fray.

Are the predictions right? will it snow now after all?  
or is it simply grim with wind and hail and rain?  
We wait, uncertain yet, searching together the dark  
windowpane for signs: a distant glimmer in some outside  
light, a telltale tapping of the crystal

dancing flakes, and as I watch you poise now,  
ready to leap into whatever scenes will come  
when the glass shall brighten with revealing day.

## Aspiring to the Condition of Espresso

Although it's technically French roast, we like  
our coffee finely ground and strong, aspiring  
as it were, always to the condition of espresso,  
so strong in fact it frightens our visitors.  
We'll make it at night and set the timer going,  
so that we wake to the sound of steaming water,  
the smell of coffee wafting through the house.  
You'll have your cups *con latte*, while mine are black,  
sweetened just so to drive the edge off bitterness.

It's always been this way, for me at least  
since I was a teen too young to know better.  
Alone much of the time, I got somehow  
the habit of visiting my grandmother each day.  
Mornings I'd set off as purposeful as if  
there really was someplace I had to be,  
walking the three blocks to her snug, brick house.  
I can still see the kitchen, thick plaster walls  
bright with old fashioned, painted cabinets.  
I can still smell Italian specialties  
already started cooking on the stove, steaming  
from odd-shaped, much-used pots or pans. Sometimes  
there would be peppers frying right on the fire,  
their bright colors blackening before my eyes.  
Even now I smell them, an indelible deliciousness  
filling my memory as it once filled that room.

Back then I worked at pronouncing the funny names:  
*osso buco*, *strufoli*, or something *cacciatore*.  
Our talks were laced with Italian I'd sense and feel  
if not always understand. It was always something different:  
the Italy of her youth, her wondrous sense

that the earth moved on her first train ride to Naples,  
her youthful sadness at the news of Rei Umberto's death,  
the woman from her village who pretended to read  
only to be caught holding her book upside-down:  
“*Stupido*, don't you know all the *best* people read this way?”  
I used to write translations of her proverbs:  
“The habit does not make the monk,” of course;  
yet in the next breath “Clothes do make the baron.”  
“The head that does not think becomes a squash.”  
“*Aspetti cavallo*, wait horse, the grass will grow.”  
Of course there were many stories of her father,  
the country doctor who fought with Garibaldi,  
sang in the church choir only to meet the woman  
he made his wife, who played the flute and wept  
when having lost a tooth to age he could no longer play;  
the story of her first trip far from home,  
a visit to America that somehow never ended.  
And there were her dreams, mystical premonishings  
of her father's death, of her children being born;  
one where she called out to my father who walked right past her.

All this with a candor innocent of my youth.  
We sat together at the old, formica table  
day after day, always sipping espresso.  
I was too young, of course, for coffee at home,  
but she never blinked at getting out the funny  
old pot that looked like two pots stuck together,  
the little spoons and cups almost like dolls' china,  
where even so the coffee was so dark we could not see  
the grains gathered at the bottom — like the future  
soon to happen and before which we quietly paused.

## Traveling from Virginia by Train

We all age together, this one day at least.  
The grandmother traveling for her birthday party  
in a place once home, the students heading back  
after a semester's "grown-up" freedom, the young woman  
whose children trail after her like ducklings  
on the way to the dining car. And I, the weary one  
longing as well for a bed at home, the watchful one  
feeling my beard grow in the silent pauses.  
The conductors, old hands at scenes like this,  
read us all and smile and offer practiced chat  
as they near the end of their "run". As always,  
there are glitches and delays, but only the young fellow  
with a plane to catch seems anxious to banish the hours.  
The rest let the day pass, moment by moment as we must,  
in a sort of quiet benignity, keeping our public poses  
and our private thoughts, keeping a stillness as if  
oblivious of the rattling, vast machine that rushes us  
each to his destination.

## Kampf

### For Professor Edward Glas

Oh, how you'd have gloried in this foolish war!  
There you'd be again, up at the blackboard tracing  
the Ottoman and Habsburg roots, explaining in precise  
detail just why and how they hate each other,  
have done from Time immemorial, will always do.  
You predicted it, of course, way back when:  
*As soon as Tito goes, just watch...* I know.  
I heard you. I still do. The voice returns now.

When we first learned you'd died (one dreary Sunday  
otherwise quite ordinary, drizzly, dull,  
spread with the New York Times) it seemed almost  
impossible. I could still picture you a hundred ways:  
the mock-fierce, Prussian eyes that would light up  
suddenly in ironic smiles, the “famous” stance  
at the lectern, a cigarette in one hand, coffee  
in the other. Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns  
crowding each other on the blackboard, more real  
than the fatuous importunings of provosts or deans.  
Dreikaiserbunds and Zollvereins, Moltke's  
“best poetry”, Graf von Schlieffen's sleeve,  
and Bismarck's “damn stupid” Balkan quarrel  
(*There are some problems that may be insoluble*),  
Metternich, Napoleon, Andrassy, Wilhelm — so much  
life in that modulating, flickering tongue.  
I'm always there as well, the eager, admiring  
student whom you'd coaxed from painful isolation,  
transformed to the dignity of *Einsamkeit*  
(*What the Germans mean when they talk of Einsamkeit  
is more than just our loneliness or solitude*),  
mentored out of loony adolescence,  
guided surely toward the grown-up life of the mind,

tough but sensible: *Ha! Mr. Triggs,*  
*do you know why I'm arguing this point with you?*  
*I want to teach you to be an intelligent conservative.*  
On learning that I'd switched from history to English:  
*So, you're going over now to the soft side.*  
*That's OK, as long as you don't go too far.*  
Now, barely *mezzo del cammin*, so much gone with you.

All through that Sunday I struggled to keep hold of the voice,  
but it seemed the first to go, crumbling away  
with each soft touch of the imagination.  
*Realpolitik*, that good psychologist,  
means putting such things safely out of mind.  
There were, after all, other things to do.  
I had my own life on the wing now as it were.  
I had that Ph.D. to finish, which you knew  
would be for me a *Kampf*, a desperate struggle.  
Over a shot of booze one night: *you know,*  
*this is one of those things you'll have to tough your way through.*  
*A long haul — and then you can write your poetry.*  
I toughed and hauled, and how easy it was to forget.  
Just as my life, with such guidance, took its flight,  
you crashed, lonely, graceless, untenured, appalling:  
court fights, asylum time, whiskey at eight in the morning  
to help tough through. Some problems are insoluble.  
And where I could not help, I mostly winced away  
like the others with life still to get about.  
terrified now to touch that glowing, searing,  
still-living thing, your solitary pain.  
There were, after all, so many things to do.  
Strange, I am older now than you ever were,  
venturing the uncharted future on my own,  
free to think thoughts of sober coloring,  
to make of the facts what I will, and at last,

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in the glow of civilizing sense, quietly,  
simply, gratefully to remember you.



### **III. Detail of the Last Judgment**

## A Visit to the Museum

Entering the gallery of the dead, you feel  
a hush of life, as in a church. Rising up flights  
of granite steps out of the traffic, out of affairs,  
you enter the quiet precincts of past centuries  
and their peoples. Fashions change. Scenes change.  
Time itself seems to wobble in these halls.  
No matter how quietly you try to go, on marble floors  
your shoes scuff or squeak and wake the thousand ghosts  
who peer at you from their places on the walls,  
each, like Francesca, with a story to be told.  
And sometimes, as in church, you may almost come  
out of yourself (that daily prison of the senses),  
out of the strict confinement of each moment  
hurtling you towards death. Here death's all around,  
like a great freedom, and natural as a different life.

## Edvard Munch—The Shriek 1910



Is there no one here to ask:  
who is this who has lost his way  
among unlistening stars?

All the body is pure sound  
bursting from its edges  
echoing back merely upon itself.

He has released the undulant world  
like a womb.

This is the only shape such terror knows,  
all contortion of flesh,

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all noise—  
helpless as a whisper against eternity.

## Paul Delaroche—The Execution of Lady Jane Grey for Charlotte Elena

All are in place: the weeping servant girls  
who cannot bear to look, the ministering priest,  
the patient executioner with polished blade  
ready in hand, the venerable oak block  
contrasting strangely with the one-day straw.  
And Lady Jane herself, blindfolded, terrified,  
her brief seeing in the complicated world  
already done, kneels with her best satin gown  
drawn to a murderous décolleté.

The artist has delighted in the clash of textures here:  
satin and steel, velvet and burnished wood,  
straw and the poor girl's length of red-gold hair  
so soon to be incarnadined. Another bride to death.  
Others pass blithely by this scene, but you, my little one,  
bring to it your four year old passionate stare,  
an innocence, like hers, confronting death  
(which even wise ones can't explain) as by necessity,  
and a regard of love to span the blank centuries  
hanging suspended where the servants dare not look.

## Willem Kalf — Still-Life with the Drinking Horn of the St. Sebastian Archers' Guild

Like most still-lives, it speaks to us of death.  
A banquet stays on to mock the departed guest,  
the diner called suddenly from his table.  
In his absence, we peruse the careful setting: silver plate,  
a crystal goblet and decanter filled with sherry,  
a tawny drinking horn with rims and stand  
carefully worked in silver, and hastily dishevelled,  
its patterns bunched and overlapping, a rich fabric  
of the orient. Uneaten delicacies — lobster and peeled lemon,  
cheese and wine — tease us, so that our living mouths water  
at what has turned long centuries ago to dust.  
Against such appetite, the sensible mind repeats  
*memento mori*, nothing persists; though in Holland  
it may be the emptied horn is still displayed.

## Whistler — The Little White Girl: Symphony in White, #2 — 1864

In the old religious allegories  
mortality is hidden away. The face of Mary smiles her  
eternal smile; Jesus continuously beams.

In portraits like this, though the artist emphasize  
the harmony of his paints, we see a human face  
meshed in its emotions and in time.

And so the white girl with her frills and wistful eyes  
is very much of her moment, like the flowers  
(put here for contrast) with their week-long bloom,  
and in the mirroring of her face a melancholy look  
speaks of its certain dissolution. This is still-life too.

The flowers, the fan, the dress, the girl:  
in a rushing multitude of minutes all are  
all were already sweeping to oblivion.

With our own century still warm about us,  
we peer at the cool, painted images of hers.

## **Deathmask of a Girl Drowned in Paris—1895**

About the forehead only a slight grimace  
speaks of something human, something flawed.  
The mouth large, open like a kiss.  
The eyes tightly closed, as if she were  
a saint seeing God in the darkness.  
The cheeks hard and smooth, like stone  
water has polished for an eternity.  
Did someone really live in this face?



## Attic Stele on a Child's Tomb

Now that earth has recovered  
from the wound inflicted by her grave,  
she will appease the day's blue yearnings  
with a journey, her casual eye  
pausing in the usual, the well-worn places,  
casting about for the flesh of memory.  
Out of Chthonic depths she brings a smile  
through centuries of youth, through all  
the deep imaginings of spring, into  
this warmth of stone. There she rests,  
waiting in her smile like a kiss.

## The Lacemaker Ca 1666



The light as usual enters from her left  
To fill the almost empty room;  
Her hands, practiced, meticulous, and deft,  
Attend the rich laces on her loom.

In detailed miniature she pours her fine  
Devotion, soul, and female heart.  
Her eyes, like Milton's, someday may go blind  
From the long peering of her art.

## **John Brett—The Stonebreaker—1857–58**

He is younger even than his morning  
spread with such soft, early light,  
purpled with miles of distance,  
wild-flowered and blue-skyed.

He wonders, bending with his mallet,  
are there times when there aren't any hours,  
times made of Sunday afternoons,  
times made of meadows and wild-flowers?

But today the great rocks have yet to grow little  
(as they must), and though the dog would play,  
he bends disconsolately to his task,  
the consummation of his day.

Behind him, a robin perches on a tree-stump;  
before him, like bones haruspically tossed,  
the broken knuckles of the stones:  
the future where his gaze is lost.

### **Hughes—April Love—1855-56**

She is not one to be taken, some midsummer's  
night, under a hedge, but still, in her ivied bower  
strewn with a first fall of lilac-colored blossoms,  
she requires discretion. While she looks outward to the light,  
her lover kneels behind in shadow, as natural  
as the green, blossomed background of his furtive kiss.  
A kiss of nature. And she yields to it  
uncertainly, her hand at first, and what sensations  
thrill her we may only guess, as whether she will flee  
next moment into the sunlight that strokes  
her cheek and hair and arm and the blue folds  
of her dress, or turn from us to his soft shadowy  
caress.

## **Rossetti — The Girlhood of Virgin Mary — 1848**

Of Rossetti's model here we know too much  
to let her pass in legend with its leavening  
of mortality; not so much Mary as Elizabeth,  
and we know the gruesome circumstance of her death.  
And so we view, in a kind of double vision,  
the real girl with her waist-length, golden hair,  
her hand-work, and her chaste Victorian dress,  
set among angels and symbols: the palm, the lily,  
the dove, the rose, and visible through the trellis  
holy land. Her face, haloed and intense,  
holds something back, as if she stored up strength  
for the great role before her now, and as we guess  
the lustrous, secular play of her few mortal years.

## **Gainsborough—Giovanna Baccelli—1782**

Gainsborough put her in that abstract land,  
Arcadia, and set her dancing to a shepherd's flute  
(his timbrel lies nearby), ribboned her dress  
with colors of the sky, and strew her path with roses.  
But something in her blushing cheeks, and the smile,  
delicate and Italianate, on her lips and eyes,  
tells that she won't stay framed in Arcady for long.  
She is no pale nymph, but a woman whose passion  
is for the world of days and weathers, of momentary  
musics, roses blowing and blown. For her  
mere mortal loves suffice, all preparations and regrets  
at which she smiles her sly, sweet, knowing smile.

## **Gainsborough — The Housemaid 1782–86**

Posed with her broom, all sepia and pink,  
she stands in a rustic doorway. On her face  
the familiar longing directs her glance outward  
to a vast, unpossessable world, or simply  
to this close room with its aristocracy of ghosts.  
Perhaps, she feels the urge to turn within,  
having seen enough, for surely she's uncomfortable  
with the likes of Giovanna Baccelli  
or the young, dead lord who poses on the opposite wall.  
Yet her beauty, simple and delicate and human,  
transcends the meanness of her class, and dominates  
the long years more surely than the satisfied smug looks  
of those who paid their "immortality" in full.

## **Sargent — Lord Ribblesdale — 1902**

As emblems of his class, he poses with  
polished boots, silk top-hat, a silver handled  
riding crop, and of course an arrogant gaze  
meant to suggest the generations of his breeding.  
The background, too, is elegant and old,  
a parquet floor and fluted molding in the “classic”  
style. This is the style of the world he lives and owns in,  
the belle epoch that was surely vanishing, even  
as he hung its image here, monument to posterity  
and self, this expensive portrait  
gawked at by commoners of the future.



**Sargent – Ena and Betty, Daughters of Asher and Mrs  
Wertheimer — 1901**

Ena and Betty, both statuesque and pretty,  
peer at us from their frame among their paintings  
and their objets d'art with such delight  
that it seems nothing but good fellowship.  
Seeing them thus, Ena in red velvet evening dress,  
Betty in white silk, both dressed to the nines,  
one hesitates to imagine what dark times  
the still fresh century brought them. No.  
Let's not detain them from the dinner that awaits  
to linger dryasdust with indigestible thoughts,  
but wave hello, goodbye, remembering their young smiles.

## **Sargent—Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose—1885–86**

The elements of this painting mesh so well  
that there seems little to say, but to remark  
Dorothy and Polly lighting lanterns in their garden  
in Broadway, in summer, in twilight, innocent.  
Surrounding them, to set off their innocence,  
lush grass and a full complement of flowers:  
“carnation, lily, lily, rose.”

Tall white rubrum lilies tower over the girls  
mid clusters of pink and deep red roses, and yellow  
carnations scatter palely at their feet. The lanterns  
even are like exotic flowers, gold and red, or unlit  
coolly blue. But pinning of color to thing  
is arbitrary and abstract. The momentary light  
is everything to our view. White is never white:  
the girls' dresses stream with ochre, green, pale blue,  
the light of the lanterns leaps to their hands and faces  
redish gold, an echo of the lilies' dangling stamens.  
Even the grass shows a range of hue that hardly  
can be named with green. The colors merge here  
in the harmony of one moment all their own, remaining  
when the flowers and girls have faded and are gone.

## Too Many Turners

In the Clore wing too many Turners blaze  
like the Houses of Parliament, and as well attended.  
Each canvas a cauldron in which colors seethe,  
each breathtaking alone, taken together  
they overwhelm and make a shipwreck of the senses.  
Though there are placid, waterlit scenes, spectral Venices,  
here's mainly a mind for man's destruction: in one room  
avalanches, snowstorms, tempests of rain and steam and speed,  
and sad, doomed, ghostly, watched over by a lurid sky,  
the Temeraire, which I so loved in youth,  
towed, and towing the fallacies of youthful hope.

## Constable — Admiral's House, Hampstead — 1820-25

This is a scene you might almost walk in,  
fording the stream and greeting the shadowy peasants  
who have come there watering their animals,  
making your way under sycamores and poplars  
to the great, white house where the admiral waits with tea.  
And if it does not rain (for the English sky  
is as ever changeable), you may be regaled in comfort  
with tales of Nelson and Napoleon and wild tempests  
such as Turner loved to paint, and if you linger  
long enough, dinner and brandy and talk of the day's events:  
the Petersborough business, the affairs in Greece  
(a young man's game), the comforts of retirement,  
and its boredom. And when you set out to return,  
whatever the hour, your way will still be light, the sky  
still changeable, the peasants eternal and in place,  
the bad century waiting with its familiar grip.

## Death on the Battlefield: Photograph from the Spanish Civil War

Beneath his feet, teeming  
the earth swoops; above him  
the sky is as blue, perhaps, as this one today  
powdered by a cloud or smoke. What matter?  
Our attention, of course, is riveted in black and white  
upon the pure agony held motionless:  
his body's helpless loss of grace,  
his contorted features, the bit of his head  
being blown off—constantly, for all these years.  
We wonder if for a brief moment before  
he saw the anonymous killer;  
or was he taken, suddenly, from humbler thoughts:  
the pleasantness of the morning, a glass of wine  
to be drunk that night, an evening with his wife?  
What matter? He relinquishes all that  
along with his last seeing, his last hearing,  
the taste in his mouth, the eternal heaviness of his weapon.  
His cause is now the earth.

## Horse Dying at his Cart—Andre Kertesz



In the distance, too far to be made out clearly  
the dome of a church in soft gray silhouette,  
to which, doubtless, this road eventually will lead.  
He will not know that time. Suddenly  
his work and aches and strength have flown from him.  
He lies too helplessly at rest—  
no words nor whip will shake him from it.  
Now the peasant and his wife must yank the bit  
from his teeth, and pull the harness off  
with a roughness that knows too well their common fate.  
If he is still breathing, they will break his head in

with a stone, and go on arm in arm  
bearing up the sky till bearing is no more.

## Paris Boulevard by Daguerre—1839



Branches or boughs? There is no telling here.  
A sudden wind, perhaps, kindling in the trees,  
consumed the season of this boulevard.  
The crowd, impatient, intent as always  
on the moment, vanished with it.

Only the dark souls of the carriages  
on cobblestones emptied of their clamor,  
smokeless chimneys, stolid buildings  
their windows thrown open to the sun,  
and one shadowy figure in profile remain,  
mementoes of the invisible alive.



## Young Lady Aged 21, Possibly Helena Snakenborg—1569

Over the dry centuries features reappear;  
we wonder and are terrified. Helena,  
aged twenty one when Shakespeare was but five,  
shows off her jeweled dress and ruff and feathered hat;  
her red hair, curly and close cropped like a boy's,  
exposes the attached lobe of her ringless ear.  
A narrow face, high cheekbones, tremulous lips  
and questioning, large, doe-like eyes give her  
a far away, almost a tentative look as she peers  
out of her childhood into the great world of marriage,  
courtliness, and death. Four centuries distant,  
tremulous too, her double in street clothes looks at her a moment,  
searching, like us all, the silenced secret of the past,  
and then shied by my presence, moves to another room.

## Way Out

Century by century, land by land, this orderly  
labyrinth of rooms is searched without string.  
And the way out is still the way you came, only  
you pass quickly now those shades who earned  
your leisured contemplation. Drawn back to life,  
you've barely time to glance in farewell at Giovanna  
and the Housemaid, Sargent's girls, Miss Siddall  
and Miss Snakenborg. The Stonebreaker  
maintains his penance, Lord Ribblesdale his pose.  
They are everything they can be, and persist  
which is their lot, but for you everything is not done,  
and you know, moment by moment, you must change.  
Leaving here, you leave the illusion of a comfortable frame.  
Outside is weather, outside the loud vulgarity of life and love,  
the might be and the still to be done, the vast  
invisible dimension in all things. It is still yours,  
and lest you perish, perishable you must change.

## IV. Life Masks

“Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt  
weiss' was ich leide” *Goethe*

My longing is a kind of Kantian splendor  
Mindly and shaping, but *in sich* abstract;  
It wants an object, flesh and blood and tender  
To imagined touch, and tingling of fact,  
Else all my courtesy is empty form.  
Until I hold you I am left in desperate harm.

## Aubade

First a shout, something like “Hey, Bill”,  
a title, an attention-getter that settles  
comfortably among my expectations.  
Then the words that cannot be made out,  
not whispers or even anything supposed to be  
secret, but plain, boldly spoken things,  
rough even (from the voice), only they don't  
quite find their way wakingly, sensibly  
through the bedroom window at 7:00 A.M.  
And now they are mysterious (they might  
as well be French, like that time in Paris),  
charged with all possible significance  
so that my ear strains after them, as after  
nuances in a line of Shakespeare, as after  
Revealed Truth (Who was it said truth is overheard?).  
But the speaking tongues flicker and disappear,  
leaving behind, eager and inexplicable too,  
the tweetings of the birds and rush of commuter cars  
and me, awakened to my usual dark.

## Hamlet knew it, when Shakespeare

Hamlet knew it, when Shakespeare  
sent him early to his death, for practice;  
and two millennia before them, Socrates  
as wise as anyone, I suppose, knew it  
maintaining philosophers should spend their lives  
rehearsing one breathless moment's movement  
toward the unknown; and you know it:  
sometime, anytime, toothbrush in hand, or fork,  
or at the office when the vault of some filecabinet  
yawns more ominously than usual, or later  
in bed with your lover, perhaps, practicing at life,  
you hear a click, or your ear buzzes you dizzy  
on a summer's day, or against the cool, fresh pillow  
you make out a muted thumping, and behind it,  
beyond it, around it, nothing, for the rest *is* silence.

## Marvelous to drink the riddle of October

Marvelous to drink the riddle of October  
the first spell of the cold, the first brightness  
under which death lurks;  
with the universe still packed full  
to venture upon the wind,  
to move easily among the small things:  
fears and blue skies and preparations;  
to breathe only the best dreams.  
As a bird his song  
I carry my love always at my lips.

## First Cup of Coffee, a daydream for S

If the morning coffee is black enough, so that  
the kitchen light swims on its surface, swaying  
gently, romantic as any moon on mysterious lake,  
then anything is possible. One stares  
into the cup, glazy eyed as a mystic or gypsy  
with a crystal ball, and the whole world is there.  
And one can dream others, counter-worlds  
beyond anything in Baudelaire, places where  
people age in reverse, where the laws of physics  
are completely haywire, places without work,  
so long as this one's safely floating there.  
And best of all if, draining toward the bottom  
it disclose its grains in dark haruspic shapes,  
a bell, perhaps, to twist one's ears, or lamb  
(or black sheep rather), or maybe just a letter,  
lazily serifed, completely familiar from being  
seen pretty much everywhere, yet changed completely  
now by membership in a dear one's name.

## Antiques

Careful not to spill,  
we perch in not quite comfort sipping tea  
(chairs, courtesy of one Louis or another)  
and I wonder, beneath the chat of you and me,

at the centuries old wood  
supporting us, its weathers other than our own,  
its blooms, and the lovers who embraced  
beneath it of a May, and are now gone.



## A Small Secular Song

From half-shut eyelids flows a sleepy light;  
the abstract, tousled hair (a stitch of troth)  
the bare arms trembling, bordering on delight:  
here is no inspiration in us both

that's unrehearsed, no sudden genius flashes  
unforeshadowed in an ancient grace—  
a moment's fluttering of primordial lashes  
reechoes time and time and place and place.

But somehow it's new-minted, and has shown  
our passion marvelously new, what's ours  
to here-and-now, our momentary own  
untold in the countless others' countless stars.

And so we lie back easy, kiss, accept  
the past we form, the future of us made;  
we are the world and what in it is kept—  
in being fated we're creating fate.

## Lear's Wife

It was good luck for you to die  
before our memory began, fortune  
that you should witness three young girls,  
sugar and spice, etc.  
and nothing more. You were spared  
all the bad sex and the gore, neglect of old age,  
the whole tragedy of wrinkles.  
*Gnothi sauton?* Perhaps, you knew  
yourself as slenderly as he,  
but what did it matter? You slipped  
namelessly away, you were not hurt by mirrors,  
and had no tragic part to play; except,  
perhaps, as he would remember you  
wild and slender in his arms, more fair  
than the fairest daughter, giving him love  
as due, your dark hair tousled,  
your sleepy smile floating up to him,  
the white map of your body a world kingdom.

## Young Woman Combing Her Hair

It is so long; trimmed with sunlight  
it covers and obscures  
the Botticelli face and velvet eyes.  
Long, sensual strokes she gives it  
so that the soft gleam trembles there,  
and then, with one sweep, she flings it back.  
Now all her body flames  
and a smile dances in her eyes.

In my distress  
in my days made of tears and winter  
in my raging solitudes which hurl me  
in despair on empty beds or evenings  
I will remember this blithe moment  
and scatter the flocks of clouds.

## **The cat in the window is very lazy of the sunlight**

The cat in the window is very lazy of the sunlight  
of the breeze in the tall, shaggy locust trees  
of the birdcalls too distant to be of use  
of the hour of noon which can bewitch us all.

The cat in the window  
green-eyed against the green of summer  
concerns himself only on occasion  
with an insect or a butterfly passing by.

The cat in the window, sure,  
will never notice us or mind or tell  
how we have spent our noontime well  
and happy and almost alone.

## Like a fig, or maybe like the universe

Like a fig, or maybe like the universe  
I open you, and this is the emblem of my love  
like a rose, or a ring. Older than youth  
your body beckons, and through a moment  
from eternity to eternity I pass.  
Your hair is a jungle hot with endless August,  
your breasts fresher and smoother than sand-dunes  
in the morning, teased by a Sophoclean sea;  
for there is something ageless to you, like the sea,  
some prism in you of this human life  
counting its minutes in ashes, and yielding  
its moments to eternity. Like a fig  
you define for me this moment, like that one  
when we watched a dove sing through the air  
on a day in spring too fragile to remember  
except in you, when we clung together  
under the universe in our passing.

## For Sara

With our house  
its soft lamplight and seventy or so degrees  
around you, a cloak  
banishing the chill of the March night,  
you are sleeping—as beautiful as I remember,  
the image of peace. And yet I know well  
the troubled places of your dreams  
where you must travel now without me  
where I cannot help, though I kiss your cheek  
or press your hand. Or if I am with you there  
I am without my will and strength  
to protect you from the chill, the darkness within.  
Sleep reminds us that there is no growing one.  
Yet for these years, like paired trees  
sharing the same weathers, the same shade and sun  
and breeze, we have grown at a like angle  
from the earth, rooted together when we least think it,  
bearing each other's shape  
greening and coloring the same. Though distinct  
though dying, my life is never without your touch,  
like that first kiss you made me wring from you  
longed for and sweet in the having.

## Apples—for Sara

In late May the season stretches to its solstice.  
We awake to open windows, curtains billowing,  
the morning madrigals of the birds. We awake  
in a fresh intensity of green: full leaves,  
the lush velvet of the grass. The blossoms  
of last month are blown and gone, and in their place  
the green beginnings of the season's fruit:  
apples, cherries, pears, all hued alike,  
all filled with the enormous energy  
of their different promises. In late May,  
in morning, one can almost see the colors  
of October, the reds of the apples, the yellows  
of the pears, one can almost hear the rustling  
resistance of the branches as the fruit is picked,  
ripe and chilled in the equinoctial breeze.

## Grunts

Thoughts were always easier, able to wear  
the words we gave them like models or tailor's dummies.  
Ideas, well dressed, are always quite presentable,  
whether in the black-tie of the conference paper,  
or in classroom tweeds, or even, dressed down  
and casual, for a bit of cocktail-in-hand smalltalk  
(with ice-cubes jiggling). Feelings are more difficult,  
though they like their liquor too. Sometimes it seems  
they don't want to be dressed at all, but to go  
quite nakedly silent, save for the jewels they always  
bear in `meaningful gazes'; sometimes they grunt  
or stutter, primitive, cro-magnon things, fur-draped  
and hairy, smelling of blood and grease and musk,  
insistently gesticular. Yet these bear fire,  
and if one could only see, in their cavernous dark,  
cave paintings, miracles of articulate shape and line,  
sacrifice and conquest and the holy life.



## V. Commuting

## **Bird House at the Bronx Zoo — for the Zanders**

Unlike the Snow Leopards, who must make do  
with outdoor weathers, New York extremities  
of heat and cold, our global greenhouse summers  
and this arctic February now, tropical birds live  
“completely as in the wild,” in tropic weather  
that, like paradise, will not change. In winter-  
coats, scarves, hoods, sweltering, we pause to watch them:  
quetzals, toucans, birds of paradise,  
ibises, cockatoos in their green freedom, perched  
on moss-hung boughs or in the swing of flight  
arced and circumscribed by an invisible bound.  
One might extend a gloved finger to them  
through what they think is glass, but it would seem  
the teasing sport of an Olympian,  
intrusive, otherworldly. Their territory  
is decided; they know from hard experience  
not to explore, to venture near the “air wall”  
and be stunned again. Therefore, they feed and rest,  
and we, who are without wings, pass by  
and through the great glass barriers between us and home.

## Tigers of the Moscow Circus

Worth \$700,000 each,  
they are put through their paces:  
first into the netted ring and onto  
platforms made of bicycle tubing,  
then standing on hind legs (something  
surely odd, even in dogs), now  
leap-frogging each other, lifting  
their winter bulk through hoops  
held in the bold trainer's hands aloft.  
Their faces scowl now and then  
but on the whole remain  
implacable, even when the little man  
tickles their hindquarters with his whip.  
Is it he who cows them? The audience,  
titillated in their gaudy chairs,  
all know that any one beast,  
suddenly grown cross, might swat  
and kill the man. Seventeen strong,  
they could devour him in their pride,  
and yet with circumjacent strength  
they cower and fawn for him and leap through fire.

## The Peacock

Viewed from the highway, always in passing,  
it retained a certain stateliness: a Gothic  
house with gingerbread, white-washed and gleaming  
in the summer sunlight. Of the grounds  
we saw little beyond a swish of verdure:  
that the plantings were various and mature,  
extending like a blanket up the hill.  
It was, quite simply put, like many others,  
Victorian survivors in a plywood age  
fixed there so long as to be unnoticeable.  
Only a chance business brought us closer  
one late June day, up the gravel drive  
and to the house. And what a shock was there:  
the bushes were grown monstrous, wild, the lawns  
quite over-grown to hay, the driveway rutted,  
and the building blistering in the sun.  
What had been gardens lay about, and yet  
so long unkept and wildernesses with weeds  
their forms were ghostly outlines only, a triage  
of flowers, a sinking geometry of ruins.  
Yet from a corner of the house, suddenly,  
silently, a peacock stepped into view,  
inexplicable creature, his tail full-spread  
in its proud tracery of hues. The ruined  
aristocrat of this place, stately in decline,  
he held his garden court, as though history  
were nothing and one might hear, momentarily,  
the jiggling of tea settings and look and see  
the servants hurrying with their glistening  
burdens and lighting candles in the day.

## Undertow — Bethany Beach, Delaware

To get beyond the rip-tiding breakers  
which scallop the length of beach with incessant clawings,  
one must negotiate the close-in waves  
with a certain care, sideways and in stages,  
eyes fixed on the sea, or at least reverting there  
lest one be caught mid-breaker, unawares,  
by any of the great waves, “honker” waves,  
and thrashed about by it like a rag toy  
worried by a dog. But once out, or rather  
neither out far nor in too deep, a calm  
possesses one. Even the big waves simply lift one  
gently, momentarily, and pass by spending their strength  
enormously in the foam. And here one may dream out  
sandwiched between the lucifacted blue of ocean  
and the still and limpid soul's blue of the sky.  
Wave after wave. Beachward, one's life is strewn  
haphazardly on the sand, one's wife and children  
wait at the foamy edge, sand-buckets in hand,  
the occasional seaward wave, the perfect picture.  
Seaward, one sees only the humanless horizon  
marked with an aetherial strip of light,  
as if nothing were there, or the nothing where one might find  
all lost things, whole Europes sunken in the past,  
one's dead waiting in the horizon's smile, one's youth.  
Who cannot feel the urge, now, to let go of all,  
to drift naked toward some new birth in the undertow?  
After all, it would be tricky to go back  
now, awkward fighting the tow and being caught  
and thrashed ashore, all sandy and pebbly, to pick  
oneself up from one's knees and begin it all  
again.

## Home Run

Inside the boarded, chain-link fence, cries,  
importuning and important, sound.

Bodies scatter randomly like dice,  
then reassemble on familiar ground;

at the signal of the bat, they fling  
themselves again, another play is played,  
one more legged-out home run triumphing  
in the invisible annals of sixth grade.

Pausing, peering for a moment out  
of his importance, his affairs (quite like  
a sick child watching others play and shout),  
a home-bound businessman follows a third strike.

Perhaps he longs to join them in their play,  
turn in his flowered silk noose by Dior  
for grass-stained pinstripes: “hero for a day,”  
youthful and vigorous just one time more.

Strange, in those early days when even he  
never thought of mortgage rates, high yield,  
high blood pressure, when he could barely see  
over just such a fence, from such a field

he'd look with envious longing if he spied  
some adult person speeding past, someone  
“responsible” in the “real world” outside,  
rid of the carelessness of being young.

“If only I had known,” he says, and sighs.  
Now they are signaled in: like a balloon

the game collapses, and regretful cries  
chase each other to the locker room.

He turns, topcoat in hand, to his pursuit  
of all those consolations age hath left:  
a Porsche, car-phone, and designer suit,  
Black Label Scotch, and, optimally, sudden death.

## Verzweiflung

It's quite the common thing, really, this business  
of being torn in two, unzipped from groin to neck,  
yet if one goes out in street clothes, suited up  
necktie and all, who would know? Who would suspect  
my two lungs, taking their orders from one nose,  
are not on speaking terms? That pancreas  
and liver, far from any intimacy  
the world perceives, take separate holidays?  
Or that I eat for two? Outside this strange  
biology of despair, life, which has known  
so much that's strange it will not countenance  
the bit of strangeness that I have on loan,  
busies itself with blossoms and warm days,  
the serious business of the spring, of growth,  
brokers new marriages, mortgages new nests,  
old Aristophanean fallacies of youth.  
It would not do to argue with all this,  
or go wild, say, walking around with my shirt  
open to the waist, hysterical of my old  
despair, trying to disturb the universe.  
Better to smile on all that with a reasonable  
smile, to go about, always, as though one  
were taking chocolate with Lancret, ever  
in a garden somewhere, in morning, under the old sun.



## **Inside my mind a mild-mannered madman**

Inside my mind a mild-mannered madman  
quietly raves. In the voices of my youth  
arguing, cajoling, terrifying, he reminds me  
that life is not, as it seems some August mornings  
(with accompaniment of birds), like a Jane Austen novel  
but horrible, with explosions and meaninglessness and sudden  
death; that my heart will attack me, that my blood cells  
will declare revolution, that my tongue will give up  
words altogether and come lolling out, black and drooling.  
And yet the sleek August mornings continue happening  
around me, with their songbirds and sunlight and  
cooling breezes right out of literature, and I walk  
daily, calmly in the quiet neighborhoods of this fiction  
and the madman must be mannerly as we salute the neighbors.

## Birdsong I

Surely, it's cacophony, not song.  
It accepts rules neither of harmony  
nor counterpoint; its melodies  
leap haphazardly, its rhythms  
are at once repetitive and weird.  
Only as fanciful metaphor, the product  
of some bored shepherd, some lonely Greek,  
can we call it music: no more music than the spheres.  
And scientists tell us, of course, that even  
its motives are not aesthetic: we tune our ears  
to hunger cries, war cries, mating cries;  
and Philomela is a boastful, lusting male.

But something deep in us still makes it pleasant  
to wake up in the earliest dawn  
and hear the first bird “cast his soul upon the gloom,”  
his fellows join with him in “madrigals”  
like clashing swords, “melodies” more  
primitive than Stravinsky, bird wars, sex,  
brute beauty to celebrate our fathering sun.

## Nesting

Each year our drain pipe with its comfortable crook  
provides a nesting place for various birds: robins,  
or cardinals; this year it's home to blue jays,  
“townies,” not transients; they've been here winter long  
raucous, colorful, mindful of their future.  
We watch them as they go about their careful  
surreptitious ways, flying a circular route  
with beakfuls of twigs and leaves and grass. We dare not  
stay too close, for they are wary of their neighbors,  
but from the decent distance of the porch  
we spy the miracle instinct of their goings on.  
This year, along with twigs and grass, they use  
a new material: the perforated edges  
of computer paper taken somehow from the trash,  
leftovers of our technology joined to their ancient art.  
Nature lets nothing go to waste; and thus  
the edges of my poem about last year's spring  
(already fledged) find use in this one  
warming and weathering an unknown summer's flight.

## It's April and

It's April and  
my grandmother's cherry blossoms easter again  
just as she saw them, the same snowy pink  
and in the gardens out behind the house  
hyacinths, daffodils, tulips, just as she plotted and planned  
are making their scheduled appearances;  
slowly, inevitably all around grandmother's house  
the shade is growing,  
slowly, like one of her careful picnics  
lush summer afternoons are being prepared.

## Great Grandfather

Since your daughter ended, forever, our morning talks,  
I am the only one left to help remember you.  
On air-conditioned summer afternoons,  
stretched on the couch, I sometimes shut off the television  
and let you re-live that whole string of adventures  
with Garibaldi; or tell how you would sing in a village church  
having gone (good anti-clerical) for the music only;  
how you played the flute, and wept  
when having lost a tooth you could no longer play  
(that was the first word of your death);  
how you were a fine country doctor, and undersung  
though when you died hundreds of peasants,  
unpaid, mourned at your funeral.  
Strange — you never even guessed my existence,  
I, the executor of your memory on earth,  
so far away and in such a different future.

## For My Grandmother

Yours were visionary, simple dreams  
as from an imagined, pre-Freudian past.  
When I was a boy in wide-eyed wonder,  
you told them to me — premonitions of your children,  
of your father's death, and at last  
foretaste of your own. Since then  
the seasons have blown over you  
as they will, and as they must, my thoughts  
have turned elsewhere with the turning years,  
save on some solitary nights when my hearing  
tunes to the stars and the voices and the dreams  
out of a deeper universe return.

## Youthful Portrait of my Father

With no thought of me  
you chased your pastel April day  
about those same green lawns  
where I would later play and gathered  
the prettiest blossoms for your mother  
(watching as always from the window)  
and then, because the sunlight was so warm,  
the grass in its first growth so welcoming,  
because all later life, surely, would keep awhile,  
you lay down and dreamed dreams like apple blossoms  
and wished for no better day.

## **At the Sea Shore—for my father**

Today the blinding blues of the sky and sea  
the insistent crashing of the waves  
the cries of delighted children  
are painful, overwhelming, as from another world  
sunken in the bright haze of the horizon  
where I once belonged to innocence.  
Now your arms will never hold me again,  
lift me from the threatening waves skyward  
toward a friendly and forgotten sun.  
Now your absence is everywhere  
filling the sea, filling the horizon  
where I cannot follow  
though my longings have the wings and grace of gulls,  
the chained ambition of the waves in swell.



## Portrait of the Author as a Child—for my father

Twenty one years ago  
your love, your innocent reverie  
your best hopes for me filled the canvas:  
the serious boy, his pages of imagined music  
the bust of the great composer presiding, deaf.  
Even now they are intent, they continue  
their fever of creation: soundless, motionless.  
They do not so much as glance at me  
sitting careworn beneath, my desk piled high  
with scattered possibilities. Somewhere in me still beats  
the heart of the boy with his ambition for the sky  
though I no longer feel it. You felt it  
and set it down for this uncertain, distant day:  
your gift, your Heiligedankgesang—music (I once told you)  
one could die happy with. You did not need it.

## Commuting to Montclair

To live without writing poetry is  
to have the disturbing sensation  
of water pouring through one's fingers  
in despite of one's thirst, to see  
the images of a spring day blurring along  
at the mercy of windshield wipers, when what  
one craves is even momentary  
stillness, kept firm and particular.  
To live without writing poetry does  
not confer a sense of freedom, as when  
one closes up a diary to begin living and  
not copying down one's life. No. For poetry  
does not copy anything (weeping cherry blossoms,  
for instance, shyly emerging in the rain),  
but offers for one's delight  
rival spontaneities of rain and blossom  
in the pastel of imagination, pure, enduring,  
blissful as a boy who passes on his way  
from school, and thoughtless of all the energy  
around him, moves through the lawn with meaningful steps  
home.

## VI. Found Music

I think that I will never see  
A baby beautiful as thee —  
My summer boy! my winter girl!  
My only art, my heart, my soul!

## Dandelions

The French eat them, while the English—  
so one gathers—weed them meticulously  
from their half-inch lawns. In Madison,  
where I live anyway, they flower forth:  
dandelions, golden lads and girls,  
great constellations of them in their narrow  
space of green. While cultivated blossoms,  
blue-blooded lilacs or proud peonies,  
make slow, diurnal progress toward their prime,  
these whizz unsponsored through whole generations,  
extended families, golden, gray, and blown,  
redoubling the vast energy of spring.  
Yet make May languid under dappled skies,  
seventy or so degrees, soft breezes,  
perfumed air, and make me satisfied  
simply to be here now, to drowse or watch  
the lazy snowfall of the toothless lion.

## A Snail in Abersoch

*for Charlotte Elena*

As if evolving, curling, unfurling  
through eons to its present shape,  
the snail's shell balances in perfection  
on a blade of grass. When we look closer,  
the snail itself emerges from the bell-end  
like the mute of a french horn, only living,  
a strange, wet muscle flexing itself along  
millimeters at a time, and  
oblivious in its primeval way  
to the vast, swift, momentary things  
(all wonder now) who pause to watch it move.

## Lines for Gregory

Boy and baseball, butterfly and blue sky  
contrive together to knit their summer day,  
laughter racing over the sloping lawn,  
baseball looping into the blue, row on row,  
hour upon hour. Somewhere in the distance  
a flute is being played. Its soft notes  
weave, ghostly, a melody among the trees.  
Overhead, planes are being tossed somewhere  
important—places like Chicago and L.A.  
again and again. No one watches; or perhaps  
only some adult waiting to tell us we can't play,  
curious, as when we watch the butterfly  
bright orange with purple specks, beautiful  
and helpless, buffeted by whatever wind is near.

## Three Old Women

In the happy middle of their day  
they smile at my passing car  
then waddle like ungainly short-winged birds  
about their way; undaunted  
mothers grown into grandmothers  
idling in the day like children.

## Rose of Sharon

Weedlike and hardy,  
you bloom in the long summer's heat  
when all the spring flowers have quite burned away.  
When everything else is busied with ripening,  
with roseate petals and luxurious yellow stamens  
you dare the role of the aesthete.

And yet how easily we disregard you.  
You made no one's heart flutter  
with the first breezes of spring, and you are not,  
hothouse and difficult, the pride of someone's labors.  
Rather, it is your easy way with nature  
that disarms us, and it is only when in last blooms  
your strength is spent that we see in you  
the full wistfulness of September and our season's passing.



## Winter Housecleaning

Mourning dove  
heard through an open window  
making April of the February air,  
beige and calm on your branch  
beside the rooftop — melting snow,  
water gleaming and trickling of spring.

## Peonies

A week long glory  
of pinks and rose, inexplicably  
multifoliate, so heavy a bloom  
that you bow to the earth  
which is in awe of you.

## Beeches

Beeches  
silvery, thin-  
skinned  
carved with  
lovers' initials  
dappled with  
spring light —  
to peer at the  
world through them  
is to become a  
pure blue thought,  
to sense an Eden  
teasing  
through our lives.

## A Sonnet for Sara

April's not April if it is not seen  
nor felt along the bone; spring is not spring  
without known blossoms crowding themselves between  
each day and day of almost everything;  
nor poets poets without practiced eyes  
to flesh the structures of their knowing hearts,  
eyes close upon each hour's pink surprise  
the blossom-promise of earth's subtle parts  
nor love quite proper love that cannot find  
in tiny leaves, like infant's hands unfurling,  
some correspondence of its deeper mind  
or purpose that has set the planet whirling.  
Therefore, from earth's long, deathly, winter sleep  
I watch our spring in centimeters creep.

## For Charlotte Elena, Three Weeks and One Day

Out of a restless dream I wake  
and Charlotte, with your three weeks worth of woe  
you lie there scratching against silence,  
writhing as in an agony of darkness.  
And yet what agony can you know?  
What dark experience can pierce your sleep?  
I sing: Charlotte the world is full of lights...  
Outside the night is quiet, save those sounds  
which tell me, in a speech beyond your years  
of the coming day: the first train in the morning  
and (muffled in snow) the sounds of commuters' cars.  
Sometimes their headlights climb up through our windows  
casting ominous shapes upon the walls.  
I sing: Charlotte the world is full of bells...  
In our close room there are no sounds  
but the occasional rattle of the radiators  
or relentless ticking from a mantel clock.  
Charlotte the world is full of hours. And yet  
you lie, it seems, in a primordial pain  
broken out of sleep, as to another birth.  
Can it be that waking, which so comforts us  
even in darkness, reminds you disturbingly  
of that painful hour? Or do you carry  
troubles from some Platonic "other life"  
about with you? As it were, trailing  
such clouds of glory, we walk about the room  
dancers to a lullaby,  
and while your cradle teeters on the brink,  
heedless, you sleep again, and I am left  
troubled and awake to that loud world  
so full lights and bells and hours.

## First Steps

On the cool September morning  
after rain  
in an old house  
shuttered against the unexpected weather  
the baby stands over and again  
and walks and falls.

Though it is much easier to crawl  
from one point to another, more efficient, safer,  
the baby stands over and again  
and walks and falls.

I see in her how many millions?  
Man must walk, man must raise  
the aristocracy of his hands  
reaches for far, high things,  
man must seize his Adam.

On the cool September morning  
with this one gesture the jungle is put by,  
the ritual of our deepest instinct  
repeats itself: the race rises from its knees  
to claim dominion: the baby walks.

**A Problem of Shadows** for Charlotte Elena

On our evening walk  
inexplicable shadows grow about us  
nets of branches and leaves, huge trunks  
thrown down in our path, strange, dark  
elongated likenesses of ourselves.  
You are frightened by your own shadow,  
sometimes behind, sometimes in front of you,  
now vanishing suddenly under a light.  
It is no use to offer the explanations  
of scientists; for you these phenomena  
are still magical, in your eyes, still  
the wild lights. Not wishing to hurt your shadow  
stepping on it, you stop, still. Now there are  
no practicalities of destination, only  
existential terror, existential pity.  
And am I now to help you over the magic of this  
vague, airy thing that clings to your body  
and will cling for as long as you are in the light?

## Scene from Swan Lake—for Charlotte Elena

Like a parade marshal, the prince waits at their head  
(two pliant, graceful rows of swans), and peers  
not at their number where his choice must fall,  
but at the watchful darkness where the audience sits  
and his fate, after the climactic scene,  
will be played out. Meanwhile the swans all poise  
bewitched in unison: their heads, arms, feet  
are matched; even their tutus make a white wild  
uniformity. Out of these, how shall he pick  
Odette, his destined one, to pirouette from her  
oblivion? And yet she'll move suddenly free,  
the chosen one, asserting her ineffable difference,  
a wistfulness, a longing, love, the fulfillment  
that for an act or two it brings. She and the prince (who  
stock character though he is is still too few)  
will dance the old dance all the others only hope for,  
keeping the white discipline of the background.



## To Charlotte Elena, Dancing

Out of its dim and recreated past,  
music swells from the stereo in the room  
(through which the sunlight streams in counterpoint),  
moving you to dance, stirring  
some ancient impulse in your young body,  
rhythms you remember, as if learned.  
In four year old toes the elevation of Odette,  
in four year old eyes the ritual sadness of play  
at love and loss and death, things you will need  
when the womb of this room opens to the weather  
and the world, the great stage where you must dance  
solo till the curtain time. And we applaud,  
who love you, this apprenticeship to tragedy,  
accompanied by Tchaikovsky's saddest mitigating strains,  
the difficult freedom you're so eager for.

## Rilke's Carousel, Jardin du Luxembourg

*for Charlotte Elena*

It circles still, and still without a goal  
here at the world's great center. Blind and breathless,  
deathless childhood keeps still its hour of bliss,  
only now you are here, and though the elephant  
is gray, your smile is dazzling with five freshly painted years.  
Bagette in hand, a sword, you lunge at the silver ring  
held almost out of reach—children toss Eden with both hands  
at glittering goals like these. Outside I watch  
(with Rilke at my back) the generations of innocence  
go round, for bliss at any time, in any language,  
sounds alike. And you will keep these moments stirring  
long after Rilke's faded from my brain, more purely  
remembering the poem we only try to write.

## Children's Voices, Jardin du Luxembourg

*for Charlotte Elena*

Children's voices, when they wear our words,  
haunt at us with a mystery, like birds',  
for though an adjective is not on straight  
and though some noun trails its preposterous weight  
along the ground, these have strange power to beguile,  
like Eve's first questionings, their little while.  
For Eden's laughter is still audible here;  
only one language is spoken. Thus, you share  
easily the French girl's dizzying play  
on swing-sets and sliding boards one summer day;  
in common wonder with a small German boy  
you needn't translate Spielzeug into toy.  
Between yourselves one language makes for ease.  
And only when it's time again to please  
parents or Eltern, the usual Babel tells  
how Eden sinks away in mystical low decibels.

## Cleanup

By nightfall the parlor floor appears  
a veritable triage of toys. Barbie lies  
twisted and naked by the couch, her  
perfect hair embarrassed in blonde tangles,  
while Ken, mangled, one leg completely  
torn away, looks on quite helpless.  
A war casualty? perhaps, or simply  
victim of a Tonka truck amok.  
The beach-hut too is shambled,  
as by a hurricane, beams busted,  
thatched roof blown and scattered;  
champagne glasses, tipped and over-  
turned, crunch relentlessly underfoot.  
Were one to squint and not think so adult,  
that mess of crayon rendering the rug  
incarnadine might even pass for blood.  
But we have seen it all before, and oh,  
sweet Reason bends our thoughts from horrors  
lurking at each turn to dustpans, washcloths,  
and 99 percent pure soap,  
the cleanliness—this children cannot know—  
that passes for understanding here below.

## For Charlotte Elena

How they puzzle us, the looks  
in children's eyes, the glances  
already formed for life, the sapience  
of fairy tales waiting for words.

You, little Snow White, how I  
imagine you in all the attitudes  
of the breeding years, the adult mask,  
the child's mind struggling to connect.

This is the look to fascinate  
(though you don't know it)  
some little boy still charmed  
with soldiers and electric trains.

This is the look to wonder with  
on nights miraculous with stars,  
on mornings rinsed with sunlight,  
the strange benignity of living.

These are the eyes to question death,  
to learn that all we love  
slips from us by and by, that the eyes  
give up their prisoners at last.

And these are eyes to puzzle on with  
(though they yearn toward sleep)  
to live another day mastering  
what bewilders you while the future waits.

## For Sara

The wind chime, our Æolian Lute,  
sounds out those breezes that reanimate  
at last the stagnant summer days.  
Now everything seems a bell. Mimosa  
leaves and rose of sharon sway, tolling themselves  
in the wistful beauty of an August afternoon,  
while white soft cumuli blow harmlessly  
away and lazily the blue air descends.  
We will remember well this lulling time  
when brisker winds of stern November blow  
the last remnants of the harvest high  
in whirlpools, and when lashing rains open  
our casements to the cold; and still the chime  
will sound in full tones of its first summer breeze.  
So even our love remembers now the fateful  
fluxing of a distant April day,  
the tone of two souls blown somehow together.  
And thus our primitive recollections stir  
through various seasons with a single,  
an obsessive purity, struck by invisible  
and animating force, and vibrating in our beings.

## Bellcore Geese for Sara

*Geduld ist alles.*

Rilke

Weather by weather in the early spring  
which changes constantly its rules, somehow  
they know it and obey one changeless rule.  
They seem absurd at times, sitting their nests  
beside the parking lot, ganders on guard,  
while we, the seasonless at work, trundle  
by them in our overcoats, or lolligag  
extra minutes of our lunch-hour in the sun.  
The gander grouches, beaks at us walking too near,  
irritable creature, comic, as his mate remains  
serene with preparation: patience is everything  
for her. She often sleeps, or seems to, as  
the biding utterly possesses her.  
Soon we forget to notice or expect.  
Our days repeat themselves and pass to weeks;  
like waves, our deadlines break, only to recede  
again as unimportant memories.  
And one day, perhaps by chance or out of habit,  
one glances over at the nest, mottled  
with woodchips and feathers, to find it expertly empty  
beside a violenced shell, half crushed, half  
delicately poised, a teacup filling with rain.

## A Room for Charlotte Katcher

Evenings it catches California light,  
last light, second-story light filtered  
with green-gold oak leaves—banners in the dusk—  
the stuff that dreams are made on.

Autumns it gives upon two carpets of  
red leaves, dogwood and maple, gathering down  
softly, slowly to the November ground  
that hardens with dreams of winter.

New Years it witnesses great drifts of snow  
that build the porch roof in mysterious shapes,  
*fais do-do*-ing flakes whipping to windy music  
against the frosted panes.

Always it imagines—perfect fiction yet—  
its wide-eyed boy eager with fresh dreams  
of sea-discovery or love that make  
this room an everywhere.

So we would have it be. Brushes in hand,  
we instruct the walls to fable sand and sky  
and sea all round, so that anywhere  
one may begin a voyage, target some new  
horizon (ever blue and bountiful);  
or simply rest at seaside while lapping waves  
deliver their calm tides, hour upon hour.

So it stands waiting for its boy, for Jeffery,  
for the waiting he will do here, sun upon sun,  
to blossom in slow ages of life's welcome.



## For Jeffery David

I imagine sometimes your waking, not so much into life itself, but into sense, the moments of dis-coalescence when the birth-world blurr separates into shapes to the eye's horizon, when the cacophany, with you from the womb, articulates suddenly into sounds. Thus is the world “born over and over”, the scenes unexpected, the moments sudden, unchosen, and waking terrifies with its brilliance.

## For Jeffery David, Age Three Weeks and One Day

An afternoon baby, your poem happens at noon  
and unexpectedly. Around us no premonishings  
of early dawn, but Saturday shoppers, milling,  
fingering the racks of a department store,  
plucking out credit cards. Around us  
the swishings of changing-room curtains, wrappings,  
cash-registerings—life's full midday throttle.

You sleep through it all. Hushed, cocooned,  
we wait together in a private twilight.  
And this too seems business as usual.  
Unnoviced father now, I see in you  
shadings of others, your sister mainly,  
but parents, grandparents, the whole damned lot  
of us timesharing, editing your fontanelle.  
Patiently you dream on all our masks,  
the torque of your heritage in seven ages.  
Poor, belated thing. I sense your lightness  
in my arms, and seven years are nothing—  
sweet and heedless, Charlotte sleeps again  
a primal infancy you only follow.

But you remain continually surprising:  
a look patterns you, inexplicably your own,  
a cry escapes that's somehow other  
than all others (though how I cannot tell),  
your robust Urvoice calling for a love  
strong as before and different as this day.

Your fingers, of an almost fetal delicacy,  
grasp one of mine, the awkward giant  
scarred and blunt with use. Yours are inutile,

fresh funny things that wear their baggy skin  
like ill-fitting trousers. Tipped with razory nails  
(thumb still unopposing), they barely reach.  
And still I feel their force, a born strength  
making but the first of many claims.  
The fingers already—so small one squints  
to see them—are whorled with personality;  
the palms, with heavy Shar-Pei creases,  
even now are rich with fate.

## Learning About Gravity — for Jeffery David

Flying to California is perhaps a funny way  
to learn about gravity, leaping the Grand Canyon  
as from sofa to chair, landing, not suddenly  
backwards or headfirst on the hard kitchen floor,  
but in the slow descent of outstretched wings.  
Yet even at flying speed, Icarian height,  
this clings to you, and will never let you go.  
So, as you have these ten months in earthly air,  
climbing a chair, standing, balancing, walking,  
at each of these you learn about earth's pull,  
that gravity is ever rude, emphatic,  
humiliating, strict in her arrest,  
that yours and all our efforts (high-flying  
though they be) only hold her at bay,  
that walking and flying defer our falls awhile,  
no more, as consciousness defers our sleep.  
And yet the world we dream is weightless, wingling,  
free, and we are masters in it, our steps  
light and portentous, our gestures time-slaying.  
So that even knowing better, we go on  
and dare the dangerous things, to wake and walk  
and want and love, and get up when we fall.

## *Ungeheure for my father*

The old slides, yellowing in their boxes  
still come to life under the projector's light:  
scenes of Madison forty years ago flash  
with a strange familiarity; scenes of ourselves,  
children again, splashing through summery hours  
in the pool; vacation scenes, beaches at Cape Cod  
or Maine, alike now, sepiated with age.  
These were the images your practiced eye  
thought worth preserving, the expected ones,  
the scenes of bourgeois blisses. But I'm drawn  
now to the peripherals in them, cloudy corners  
that have secrets still to keep, the background  
images of houses long since changed or gone,  
the missing things (and you are one) only  
to be guessed at now. And bleaker and more  
interesting yet, among these holiday shots,  
emptinesses, woods or wintry skies  
at which, who can say why, you aimed. These speak  
a darkness in you even then I never guessed;  
ragged, formless, their sure locus is  
what's gathered by the corner of your eye.  
But cameras are not made for emptiness,  
immensities we only sense around us,  
inchoate, terrifying with their vagueness.  
A kind of sublime, they always seem clichéd  
when in a frame, or helpless, hopelessly missed.  
You missed, of course, for what canned image  
this side of Giotto's innocence can hold soul's blue?  
Yet early as children we knew it, at play  
in our careless months, May mornings, August noons,  
even Octobers when the sting of a football tackle  
would tease us to look out, to where? anywhere,

or the horrifying nowhere that lurked behind  
everything familiar. Darkly look out, and  
then forget it all, join back the others. Smart  
silently. This is how I feel, turning now  
as the projector cools, perfectly imageless at last.

## December

One wonders, as the weak December sun  
flees westward early, if these bare trees,  
these sap-shrunk, ruined choirs, black  
and Piranesi-tangled against the slate of sky,  
remember their seed-bursting spring.

Sure, but the planet's tilt, a prying ray  
of sun, a breeze blowing warm again,  
and redbud and maple will resap, rebloom;  
even now the ancient code kernels in them,  
pure promise, full of a fruitful June.

But we are far from then, our season  
lived and harvested. If we still bear,  
somewhere deep in our sap, pure traces  
of April's pastel, May's overwhelming green,  
these will not clone themselves anew.

And so we quake in the December wind  
that withers in our sweaters and rattles  
in our panes, not knowing what spring  
will bring us to, but sensing change  
that roots us by the molecule.

**For Charlotte Elena, Age 10, January 2, 1993**

*Und zehn Jahre sind nichts...*

Rilke

Nothing? Perhaps, if the perspective's vast enough, and super-human. But in our lives ten years are years to be reckoned with — but five of these, and it's a different world; back up a dozen tens or so, and horse-drawn carriages rattle upon cobblestones, the ballet music that you love to dance to is vaporware in some composer's head, and even Rilke cannot count to ten; a mere one hundred and a “new” millenium: that armor we once saw gleams in the field and Carfax tower's down in stones.

So one more frost-cold morning has come round, bright like that other, and as blue as only January can make. You sleep in, rather like that other day, as I keep watch on dawn, marking it in the tracery of branches as one more thing that must be remembered. Ten years back (perhaps ten years are nothing after all) tiny fingers opened from nowhere to embrace the world; now they play Beethoven (ten by seventeen before). Ten years ago a voice cried out in dark to startle me awake; now it rehearses lines for Juliet (back ten times merely forty), dulcetly yearning.

And now you wake, and with a yawny smile begin ten more, happily, towards the



millenium we've dreaded and beyond.  
By tens you inch into the history of your kind.

## Found Music

Trying to hold on to joy, the ear scans  
eagerly for song, for birdish madrigals  
amidst the daily hummery of machines.

The day is white and wintry, and no calls  
answer my longing. No registry of song  
sweeps on the air in bursts and sudden falls,

trillings or swoops. But there's a jet plane long  
in the heavens that has some business there,  
and automobiles sweep by in constant throng.

Day's blankest winter business-as-usual stare,  
my sorry anguished *mezzo del cammin*,  
(Is this the nothing that is or is not there?)

meet and converse and seek the genuine  
not on some mountaintop or by the sea—  
for who, there, can take any music in—

but on some ordinary Monday of a day  
that's bleak, cold, March, and quite at home,  
a sick-day maybe, shaped round an empty tree.

Here I wait and let the music come  
out of the sky-glare, from the passing cars,  
not Brahms or birds or that celestial hum

that passed once for the music of the spheres.  
Just a suburban music, tuning, waiting  
ever to happen, imagining my ears.

## Glory

My uncle starred at baseball for Cornell,  
fielding, coursing the sunlit diamond,  
who bends now with infirmity and age.  
My father was no less an athlete, but one  
indifferent to baseball, sandlotting through  
his youth, who learned catching in utility  
and thus, backstopped games where no one would,  
ingloriously without uniform or cap or letter.  
Little for a boy to choose from there, his dreams  
all Ford and Mantle and the major leagues,  
who fain would pitch, but would not have his dad  
coach, or hang out at practices to butter  
positions on the starting team. Glory  
will out, brief though they promise it to be.  
And so in those days my uncle, who'd long since  
given up chasing flies for chasing bucks,  
commuted in his Jaguar to work or golf,  
greasing leads and contacts, making the pitch.  
My dad, for whom life must have been no less  
a struggle, took up his catcher's mitt again.  
I see him now, patient with my windup,  
kneel in the yard in the sweeping green of May  
making a pocket, offering up signs I'd shake off  
over and over, pulling in stray pitches  
so that they seemed sharp-breaking, wicked curves.  
And what did it matter if in Little League,  
fatherless, I did not pitch? There, in that  
afternoon whose warmth mingled the smells  
of blooming lilacs and leather with linseed oil,  
whose sky, pale powdered blue, deep, magisterially  
benign, promised us nothing of this might change,  
what glory grew there in the backyard grass.

## A Letter to Michael (1954 – 1962)

### I.

It is now the summer of 1992, more than thirty years since we last talked. In many ways things haven't changed. Kids still pedal their bicycles around town and take in the Fourth of July fireworks or the carnival or a movie. Kids are still eager to get out of school but bored stiff on the long summer days that deliver them oh so slowly to adulthood. Childhood still seems endless. But having made it through school, we are, many of us, into our late thirties, our second jobs, our second kids, our second wives. We drive around in small cars now, built usually in Japan or Germany, and even our kids do their work on computers. We no longer hide under our desks to practice for the atomic bomb to come. Yes, some things are different. The Yankees no longer win the pennant every year. An ice cream bar costs over a dollar. Elvis is dead. Nixon is still alive. Meanwhile, many of us are beginning to go gray, and to develop obscure pains, and to get tired of everything, even sex (which I'll explain another time), and often we try to forget about all this and seek a sort of oblivion, like that guy, that drunken cop who ran you down on an otherwise perfectly normal evening, a day you began like any other, long ago.

### II.

I don't remember all that much really. You'll have to forgive me for turning out forgetful like the rest. I remember when you first came to school, how I wrote an essay about the new boy who had made many new friends, "especially me". I still

remember struggling with the spelling of that “especially”. And how your mother let you ride all the way across town to play. I don't remember where I heard the news, or who told me. But I still see your empty desk at school and with a bit of effort feel my seven-year-old gloom, my shocked and battered incredulity (another difficult word). Nowadays, no doubt, a crew of “childhood trauma professionals” would descend on our class with briefcases full of therapies, but we made do with a few words from the teacher and a schoolyard of rumors and the overwhelming evidence of your unattended desk (hardly big enough for me to sit at now) that still held your “things” — rulers and pencils and erasers and brown-paper-covered books with words like “READING” in your childish hand. On the playground some days after, I made an ass of myself. I told another boy in halting, tremulous words, the sort that cast about hopelessly for confirmation, that if Jesus could return to life, perhaps you would as well, perhaps right after lunch or next day. I imagined you back at your desk again before it could be cleaned out and reassigned. When we got back, you were not there, and first thing he raised his hand to tell this to the teacher and the class. I remember I ran in horror from the room and not much else. Later the teacher put the nix on all such talk. I don't remember her words. Second grade finished up anyhow. Your picture was in the newspaper and I cut it out and, believe it or not, kept it for years till it yellowed on my bedroom door and the image grew more strange and strange, as such images do, faded and distant and oddly young. It got misplaced somewhere, sometime, in the place where lost

things go; I got distracted into the business of growing, of getting older, putting away childish things, acting like a man.

III.

As a man I try to talk with you now, but we have nothing any more in common. You are younger even than my daughter. If I were to see you now, come back pedaling your bike along the street, I would not know you, would not greet you or hang out with you. Probably I'd pass by like any strange adult, weighed down with my own affairs and other griefs. Yet at times to this day I make out something of you living over and over in the children I see wending through childhoods that I know can flash suddenly, as in the glare of headlights, into the vast uncertainty of all our lives.

## “Real” Love — for Sara

Just as we're about to give up on it — almost —  
something stops us. It might be something subtle,  
like a familiar glimmer in your eye,  
or the curve of your hip slimming down your leg,  
or maybe just something in a movement of your sleep,  
a habit that refuses to depart,  
and the desire, suddenly, to caress you  
overwhelms me once more. Surely, I admit,  
this is no longer spring-ferish, a La Bohème longing  
that drives one silly, Romeo delight  
that sends one leaping with sheer novelty:  
all expectation, all unknown, unrealized,  
the undebatable promise of a bud in May.  
Fourteen years forbid it. With us no more  
a time when months, weeks, days, hours  
pine with one object, the chance of company,  
burn all the world and worldly things away,  
consume them as a flame the air, intent  
on consummation only. Tired our days,  
fraught with insistent day-to-dayness;  
all jest aside, sublunary our nights,  
and love a blossom opened to all weathers,  
a working love, more fruit than blossom now.  
Was it a lie? a snare of long-lost spring?  
What were they for anyway, the concerts  
and late suppers, Schumann Sundays in our  
tree-hut rooms? We are now two births later,  
and sadnesses have grown round us, as they must,  
like weeds in the full leaf of a summer.  
Unlike the crew of easy Romeos and their girls,  
we survive into the world's vicissitudes.  
Can love survive such unpoeticness?

Better, it learns to outgrow poetry  
(which knows only its beginnings), to seek  
richer satisfactions of middle and of end.  
Day-to-day love makes room for squabbling children,  
angers, encroaching age, spring and spring-cleaning.  
But the rose, weathered this far along, does not  
grow sick; the summer's fruit, monotonously  
hued, colors ripe, for harvest and for tasting.



## Carpe Diem, or A Domestic Song

One might begin naming things:  
Automobile. Lawnmower. Boy on a bicycle.  
In the distance a train chugging for New York.  
Summer is full throated: I hear a bird calling,  
over and over its soft note laces the late morning;  
I know the effort of the boy pedaling uphill.  
The trick is to notice everything, to apprehend  
the light on the leaves, the fading rhododendrons,  
the fading t-shirt of the boy like a summer sky.  
Lawnmower. Automobile. Mother walking her baby.  
A bell ringing the hour. As if inevitably  
the rhythm continues. The same rhythm  
for how many summers, for how many lives?  
Beside a white, gleaming picket fence,  
beside pink and white roses, I walk  
in the heat of the day, my soul in my eyes,  
careful as if afraid it will spill.  
*Cueillez dès aujourd'hui les roses de la vie.*  
It's June and life is waiting with her rose  
(somewhere a woman waits for me with her smile).  
The trick is to notice everything, to see  
how many Junes have come to rest in this day  
in the roses, in the picket fence, in the baby crying  
my mother's Junes, my grandfather's, Ronsard's,  
the invisible dimension in everything. The rhythm begins  
again, the waiting, the train leaving for New York,  
the boy coasting through his youth. All beating time.  
The trick is to remember everything.