

# Commuting

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## **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**

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.

## 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 *Heilgedankgesang*—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.