

Archeology of Feeling

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FOR SARA

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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.

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.

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.

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 *Pokémon* 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

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

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.

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

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.

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

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
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.

*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.*

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.”

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.

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.

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.

Morning

I don't know what to think about, or do.
Not that the morning is not beautiful,
lush with the twitterings of birds, the hum
of small planes and cars. Other people know.
Other creatures. The birds and squirrels busy themselves.
They do not need to think when it's full summer
and full green, and such a day is calling.
To get up on a Saturday and fly a plane, one must be full
of hope.

The early sun has called me away from sleep,
yet even two cups of coffee cannot rouse me
to an un-nightmarish wakefulness, even on this morning
when the vast blue universe settles so lightly on my hour.

But there is no turning back. Though we hardly sense it,
time plunges forward. The quiet, postcard day
turns at breakneck speed, and trying to hold stillness
I whirl with it in a helpless, thoughtless round.

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

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.

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?

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 hydrangias 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.