

William Hedrington

Collected Poems

Revised and corrected edition • 13 Nov 2001

Edited by Michael Smith

Poems copyright 2002 by Darlene Knudtson

Editorial material copyright 1998 by Michael Smith

Foreword 5

On the Downhill Side 6

The Voices 6

Apple 6

Gone 7

Near-accident 7

Water 8

Glass 8

Lest You Believe Walt... 8

On Hearing Freshmen Argue About the Existence of God 9

On Deck 9

Like Quakers 10

The Others 10

The Boats 11

Shutdown 12

Knowing the Time 13

Old Women at the Check-out Counter 14

Locked In 14

Deliverance 15

Bicycling Away from the Library 16

Photographs 17

6 A.M. 18

Freefall 18

For My Grandfather 19

One Day at a Catholic University 20

December Aubade 21

Flare 22

The Change to Ariel: For Sylvia Plath 23

Sight 23

Acceleration 24

Student Accident 24

Bomb-shelter 25

Second 25

January 26

It 26

Illness 27

The Distant 28

Death of a Football Star 29

How Long 30

Child 31
Visiting Home: On My Father Awakening 32
Walking Fence 33
To One Skeleton in One Indian Mound 34
An Indigestible Dream 35
Secrets 36
The End 38

Poems from other sources 39

Dreams 39
Sailing 39
Collapse 40
Hill-climb 40
for my father 41
sun 41
Seven 42
Monody: One Madam to Another 42
The Script 43
The Harsh In Music 43
Song of the Wandering Jew 44
To Labour for the Wind 44
On My Father Awakening Shouting 45
Tablets 45
Earth 46
Wrist-watch 46
Speech 47
No More 47
Florida April 48
Learn 48
untitled (Now divide the unit world in two) 49
Letter to Ward A 50
The Reasoning Rock 51
Sub for Sail 52
For Grandfather, Dying Hard 53
The Ends of the Bed 53
Night-light 54
And I Fear 55
2-S 58
Boot-camp Suicide 59
Sunday 60

Shark 60
After Much Speech 61
untitled (I awake so easily today) 62
untitled (two riddles) 64
Downtown Dealer 65
Of Archibald MacLeish 66
Shrapnel 66
Mapping the Terrain 67
A Footnote to the Alexandrian Fire 70

Foreword

These are the poems of William Hedrington, as collected on the web site www.hedrington.org and published in book form, *On the Downhill Side*, by Shambling Gate Press. The book can be ordered through [Book Clearing House](#) or other online sources.

The poems are in two groups: *On the Downhill Side*, a collection made by Bill himself, and a collection of poems from other sources, assembled from Bill's papers after his death. The latter group is arranged, to the extent possible, in chronological order.

Bill was never satisfied with his work, and re-wrote it over and over. And he kept all his drafts, including tiny four-times-folded slips of paper that seem to have spent some time in a hip pocket, on a motorcycle, in the rain. All this material was made available for this edition through the great kindness of Darlene Knudtson, Bill's sister, and her husband Ed, with whom Bill had left a number of his files, and to whom his papers were sent after his death.

On the Downhill Side was put together by Bill in 1970. It's as good a text as we can have for the poems it contains, though there are some notes and drafts of further revisions to poems in this collection. These seem rather tentative and have not been used here.

The remaining poems, collected in "poems from other sources," include everything from juvenilia to works-in-progress; some student work, handed in and then apparently forgotten by Bill, has not been included.

The texts of the poems in this collection are more problematic, since many exist in multiple versions and these versions are often not datable. The versions presented here are what seem to be the latest complete texts. As with *Downhill Side*, no attempt has been made to incorporate scraps and fragments jotted down here and there, even though some of these may be later than the complete texts.

Readers who have in their possession versions of any of the poems in either of these collections are asked to contact Michael Smith (mjs@smithbowen.net), particularly if these versions are later than the spring of 1970.

The poems are copyright 2002 by Darlene Knudtson. All rights to reproduce them in any way are reserved, except that persons visiting this Web site are permitted to make copies, either on paper or in electronic form, for their own personal use only.

On the Downhill Side

The Voices

I was born on the downhill side,
late in the year, in early December,
in the light's heavy dip and hesitation,
when the old peoples prayed for beginning
in the snow-salted fields
and scattered bitterness of corn stalks;
but though I came fatly of that gaunt race,
though it was a different end and today that day,
the fields untracked by supplicants,
the corncribs many, and full,
still I carry their disappointed dead
buried in my body,
and am the outspoken child
of the silent generations of my cells—
for O, they call with the old voices,
in a millennium length of words,
in the thousand year cries of the dead,
that their lean voices, lost to these fields,
may be gathered up and justified in me.

Apple

The dead litter so,
leave clothes in drawers,
old photographs, everything,
and go.

They are as thoughtless as children,
who will get up with the sun,
take an apple,
and set out for the world's end.

Gone

Even after the goodbye kiss
there was the waiting
for the walk to the plane and waving,
there was the drawing up of steps
and doors closing,
the taking off,
and still the requisite tedium of disappearing:
always a raveling dress
caught on a cabinet knob,
always in her "coiffure" a hair
from the back of nowhere just hanging;
there is even her handbag after the plane's gone.

Near-accident

The wheels spun instants,
but the whole car was hours
in the arriving, arriving, arriving,
its massive, death-making power
awesome in its actual density,
the important, indifferent driver
fascinated out his left window by flowers,
but I jumped back, alive!
I've been lightweight in life ever since.

Water

Her rhythm is the measured walk
a half-step from a skip;
her time an hour distant,
until the smiling instant!

O would that she were what she seems,
or would seem whatever she is,
for I can forget the shape of ice,
but go mad remembering water.

Glass

The glass tension releasing he knelt down
on pain to free himself among the bits,
and crooning at the smoothness of the glass,
caressed his wrist to calm himself and rest.

But bandages and tape bound back the blood,
and the tile was cleansed, and nothing was left
to tell the sometime deep demand for glass
to break the frail containment of the skin.

Lest You Believe Walt...

In the gravid trees' hydraulic green,
Buds breeding-hard under the grown load,
When the earth's belly swells big to bleed,
And the mud labors, and the seeds groan,
Even Bambi has humped, even the white-tail deer
Have taken their tails down off the knoll,
The does staggering heavy and sweating to kneel
And fall thickly in the bracken at Spring's door.

On Hearing Freshmen Argue About the Existence of God

And thus it is the first year here; the one
Female, Catholic, certain—St. Thomas sent
To prove the fact of God by argument.
Her “infinite regression” is well done.
The other though, semantic, male, and done
With God, proves proof of the omnipotent
Is sermon, and that what she thought she meant
Is meaningless, and at best emotion.
God, Anne, come here, and we will argue too,
And set the Spirit at the null and void—
We’ve done it once and know more than they do
Of point and counterpoint—how to avoid
The question—how to attack—and when through,
Of what to do when both sides are destroyed.

On Deck

The fist that punched the pasteboard mask
Pulls back; and Ahab’s lost a leg.
And should he dare disturb the universe,
Or even care? The child who plays at mumbly-peg
Enjoys his two fat legs—no worse
For idleness or innocence.
Is Ahab’s madness loss of sense,
Or should he cock his fist a second time,
And ask whatever question there’s to ask,
Or should he hunt the narwhale and the right?
On deck! man Ahab harpoons Prime,
White water downs the Pequod, White
Heals the sea of pride; the child plays; the mask
That Ahab dies at watches both do each his task.

Like Quakers

Unless I take like Quakers thees and thous,
And break this bucking English into rhyme,
How will I tell you that which only vows
Exceed, because they recognize no time?
My good-enough, everyday, bronco tongue,
As everybody knows, will do for day;
High-talking's hard on a work-a-day lung,
That has to eat the dirt man eats for pay.
But after nightfall, when the day slows down,
I'll study Greek and Latin rhetorick,
While you take off your cotton dress, and gown
Yourself in bedsheets, and each night I'll pick
Some new old Roman speech to hobble me,
For else I'd naught but babble love to thee.

The Others

My others are the thousand shallow breaths
A man will take to give himself short sleep,
Safe by minor lives in minor deaths,
And warm where water will not tell the deep
Tall mountains of the central sea, or read
The hard high-pressure country of its floor,
But only wets the night it can't exceed,
And proves with less how much I need the more,
But my one with you is like the deep-drawn air
That pins the lungs, like the mile-under dark
Of the Atlantic, and the river there
That sweeps a quarter earth in one salt arc
And never tires; but I, tiring, again
Will rest myself with others, until when.

The Boats

The boats that bump so docile at the dock
Are moored there slackly; no rowboat captain
Even, but knows the moon-called sea takes line,
And will have it, or hang the boats to break.
I'm not a boat, my will is not a rope,
And you, for all your changes and your pull
tiding my heart's rerunning salty well,
Are not the pumicestone that queens the deep.
Yet, I might as well be boat, and you moon,
For though I fight, my blood bends with the sea,
My body aching at my twisted will.
How, unless a man tie back the ocean,
Can taut lines help but snap, and how, once free,
Can any man but be a tide-bound hull?

Shutdown

Death shut down the works, the factory's old.
The union of the dead has won, and quit.
Will his eyes be opened by the cold?

The economy is strong, the market bold,
The people as a whole are not hard hit.
Death shut down the works, the factory's old.

The management holds on, when it can hold—
Tonight the doctor packs his useless kit.
Will his eyes be opened by the cold?

What a question—it's common—factories fold;
Dark windows only show the soul is lit.
Death shut down the works. The factory's old.

Yet whatever reassuring story's told,
The after silence mocks the telling it:
Will his eyes be opened by the cold?

By his works, would that faith, like dreams, were sold—
A man must be a scab! Do not admit
Death, shutdown—the work's, the factory's old;
Will his eyes! Be opened by the cold!

Knowing the Time

When the last
local point of interest
has been marveled over,
and the folder
of "Things to See and Do"
is shut in a drawer,
and Mom and Dad are finally
settled for good
with their own kind,
they start to always
know what time it is,
without looking almost,
like children out of school
who play school
to shorten summer;
and tired of always knowing
almost without looking,
they retire to local bars,
crowding in the cocktail hours
to drink at special rates
the Senior Citizens' Special,
the newcomers chatting
of children and grandchildren,
regulars quiet mostly,
mostly watching themselves
in the mirror watching
behind the bottles
behind the bar,
until they drink up where
no one ever
knows the time.

Old Women at the Check-out Counter

They are afraid, of course: boots and helmet
mean motorcycle, mean young—and alien;
so they pick and pull at their worn sweaters,
and rustle among themselves of T.V. shows,
the high price of lunch meat on a pension,
the shuffleboard scores in their condominium.
But still they peep at me and what I've bought:
the razor blades, the metal polish, the beer.
I move to leave, having many things to do,
and now eager to do them now, but one
speaks up to me and stops me, wondering,
until she quavers out "You forgot your stamps."—
her arm jerking randomly—"They're good to save."
I leave them as some kind of gift and leave.

Locked In

The car splayed wide the gray stone wall
in abrupt stop;
as leisurely as July,
the door swung back and slammed;
dust went humming in the sun.
Blood soon stopped,
but other things went on—
the stones began to settle in the grass,
the left rear tire sighed flat;
a panting farmer jumped the wall and pulled,
and pulled at the bent door, and quit:
the angle of the head was plain,
the driver was locked in.
His day-long labor lost, with nothing to do,
he waited out his gasping,
until, as silent as the other one,
he moved his legs and left,
perhaps beginning to be afraid
there are not doors enough to get outside.

Deliverance

I have delivered her to madness
And am quiet now.
The chair remains a chair;
I must remember that
I am quiet now.
The coiling, flicking of its arms
Is not there.
What she saw
Is not there.
The breath may lie, and the mind believe;
I speak with an urgent breath
To myself.
I have delivered her
And will not talk with her.
Though she speaks in a voice beyond lies
And shrieks in the last vision;
I will remain quiet
About the chair
And ignore her.
I cannot help her.
I will remain quiet
And the chair will remain quiet.

Bicycling Away from the Library

Rosewater and dust the dawn;
whir and grit of tires,
grumble of gear and chain
and the fine rain
nerve-white along the skin
as the round webs turn
their long miles down the day...
push and push, right and left,
the pedals down and down
riverrun your revolution
downstream drift of wheel and dream
by book and magazine past paper drain
our unloosed lives in your dark run
that we may join our urgent night
allow the turning waterwheel
lost to the buzz of black and white,
that clash of opinions
a Tower of Babel and confusion of tongues.

Photographs

Click! my light caught in black and white.
Remember the Amusing Anecdote? how native blacks
broke the magic box to free their souls?
Remember how explorers laughed? If I could laugh...
for six hours I have hunted my soul,
scattered drawers and stripped walls,
decimated photograph albums,
keeping a small fire going,
freeing myself picture by picture:
myself at one year eating ice cream,
myself at five petting a spaniel,
at ten on a bike, fifteen a car,
brown, flare, and burn, every one, into air!
Unless I loose the light caught in these shots,
bound in a boy, I will die to my full flame
never to become my essential sun,
memory wholly burned in pure oxygen.

6 A.M.

Instantly awake and shocked tight,
in the light's smashed mountain,
broken granite and gray air,
my eyes gouged open,
my body a fear in flesh;
why snapped from sleep?
No noise did it, not the light,
not any dream in memory;
why awake?

The sudden day slips into normal calm,
the hours mass their usual ease,
and noon and afternoon are gone,
with all their small antitheses,
and the slight drag of doubt, the snag
that warps the river just a bit,
ignore it.
You may, perhaps, forget for good,
unless, of course, some morning stabs your eyes,
the gulfs and cliffs that drift by through our days.

Freefall

No one returns an All-American
from here; the first law you must learn is breathe,
the second, walk; if the language cools
enough to speak, then you swear allegiance,
as if you could care, as if a country
could naturalize such aliens.
Which of you knows this freefall of the mind,
the nausea of the weightless man, lost
out of eclipse, the burning of the Word
become its full and Pentecostal sun,
and worst, the realizing as you lose
profane faith in mere reality,
how many, and deep, are the levels of sleep.

For My Grandfather

When my grandfather went away,
October headed north into the winter,
and I was cold of the crying
in back bedrooms, restless at the whispers,
at the fussing of leaves in the mouths of the house.
Away myself from the cooling house,
from the dusting of my mother, away,
far as grandfather, who left me there,
who left with his German into the north,
away at the creek, rock-walking the granite,
I was quiet as Sunday in an autumn town,
my game strange with the haze of the burning leaves
as they lost their small summer to winter.
Even then, though my coat wore out that day,
thinner as the wind blew back from the winter,
though the water hurt as it wet the rocks,
even then I was childish and able to play,
only quiet in my stepping from rock to rock,
wishing the dusting would stop, and the whispers,
and that my grandfather were there.
Now, in the drought in the middle of winter,
one of my impermanent winters
only of weather and my gradual age,
as the sun swings down in a dead-end month,
with water dust in its dunes of snow,
twenty more years have lengthened the thought
of a playing child in smoky October.
My mother that day couldn't dust enough
to stop the burning up by breath
of all our combustible selves, but grandfather,
guttural tongue stiff with the winter,
left us seventy years when he left,
and proved by the sudden north of the house
that human fire is our first house,
and we are the waste which makes increase.

One Day at a Catholic University

The morning reconstruction done,
books fit to the category Books,
records fit to the class Records,
everything fit to Something,
and nothing slurring into anything else,
I begin by getting up.

I notice on my way to class
that I have shaved and showered
and apparently changed clothes.
I smile: habit is a priceless nurse.

Today the class is on Camus,
and while they settle Suicide,
I doodle my way through.
When it's over I leave.

Lunch is good. The afternoon
is like falling
until I stop it.
I regulate my breathing
and continue.

Back to the window for light,
I sit,
reading the Church on Camus—
in nineteen scintillant pages,
a Jesuit concludes that “really,
the Absurd is silly.”

Dinner. Tired today. The fork wouldn't work
and I had to give up.
It's early to sleep
I think I must
I undress
lie down
let it collapse

December Aubade

You, who will shortly land
smiling in a wailing plane,
gray eyes and gray wool dress,
from the land of the blank white field
and the black upright tree;
bring some order into Florida.
A proper winter will freeze
the intricate quick water,
and make even a walk downtown
a thought-out thing.
While here the sun still burns,
the water is continual;
no stillness and too much of change.
But you promised me snow,
somehow you'd bring snow,
and if I looked quickly,
I might find in crystal
a brief symmetry,
before the sun takes even that away.
But whatever coldness you can bring,
bring some, and quickly! come!
for the long light of the morning sun
allows only my continual walking.

Flare

The compressed breath
bound in a tank of oxygen
burst into his face God's word Flare!
then nothing seeing there.

But oh, how his face took it,
ingathering all that light,
his eyes used up at once,
his features chopped to scrap,
and all of it an instant Gloria.

Then under the knives and eyes he lay,
lost and found in the light in his face,
while they...
picked out many bits,
left many.
Few of the attendants
thought it was worth-while.
Even as, in joy, he tried to smile,
they knew what explosion meant,
what really happened that he might not see:
an abrupt, but small,
yet permanent,
increase in entropy.

The Change to Ariel: For Sylvia Plath

Sylvia, come, come, come;
you were the only, the very woman, the one
sick enough of sunlight to take the sun;
skinning your eyes of daily lids,
your mind of caution and the Golden Mean,
you scribbled all the way one droning note,
then shed your nothing song as Ariel,
deep-breathing death's strange oxygen,
and stared forever into noon.
Were you left-handed, did you cast a shadow,
what was the clue? Now you've tuned our Sirens
who goes next, forgetting human form,
hungry to learn that manic monotone?
Ariel, I sweat and want to burn.
Teach me, woman, how you made the change.
Nothing is enough. My summer's winter sun
itself is worthless till it's off or on.

Sight

You may look. Do not stare.
If you dare
fix eyes on desk or chair,
on anything for long,
if you dare,
your sight will disappear in its mere fire,
retina burned beyond all light
by something so much there.
Boys blind, lids down to cover stones,
sit in the chairs that took their eyes,
say nothing, hold in their black brains
the image of those chairs,
say nothing, days by hours gone,
nothing, hold that frame of fire, those cells
recycling everything they finally saw,
silence their last end,
our noise our ignorance, our sight, our sin.

Acceleration

Out of the fuzz of men and mouths,
riding the sun cracked from gasoline,
twin megaphones lay down
the original red roar,
and I have my fist around fire!
Ahead world blooming with rate,
behind world dead by my speed,
twist out the last nova of wrist,
star!
grow now and breathe, slow beyond speed,
with light as my limit, my loss, my release,
where time has no name but enough

Student Accident

A fifty-three Plymouth painted gray
and a green tree
wading into the metal
breaking around that tree,
while the driver lolled and flopped
his loose way back to babyhood,
an unstrung puppet of a child
who grew at last so young he died
into a heap of random limbs:
but it was sudden, done,
just stick-man, just new-made junk,
the official affairs of uniformed cars
and brushy voices out of radios;
so leaving it to those who clean it up,
I walked narrowly away,
stopping once to pick up someone's book
thrown open to the page with Melville's name
and academic poem of
matter and its ancient, brutal claim.

Bomb-shelter

When the clock broke, it was over.
Until its tinny cardiac, we'd managed,
one set against the other, to advance.
I threw it on the cans, north corner.
I stayed for what I think were three more days.
White noise on the radio. No change.
The bulb alone could not make day and night.
When walls became a problem, I got out.
I had to break the door. It is a day.
It still looks like it looked like when it hit.
The sea turned gray and silver as hacked lead.
The sky was sick with light.
The wind collapsed with sound and then was done.
My face was white and black, my brain a ball of glass.

Seconal

Twenty years, awake to every day;
the sun, its shock or sullenness of light,
darkness—pools and ditches of air;
so tired—twenty pills to sleep.
("Slap her! Make her walk! Talk to her!
She has to stay awake! Keep her awake!")
Their worry founders in her year-wide yawns,
her calm dilating in a snow of Seconal.
Myself as dumb and lost in drifts as she,
I wander to my room, stung
briefly by the siren as it comes,
but yawning then myself that I forget,
as she forgot herself, her in my smaller, shorter sleep.

January

Half in, half out of doorways,
always ghost and girl at once,
pale resonance with red hair,
she is gauche in anything not January,
puzzled at any kind of sun,
at any red-rimmed noon in day or man.
Afterwards asking "Did I do it right?,"
as if fire were a craft, as if I
could teach rhythms of woman and man;
how lost her twenty lovers must have been—
such sadness in red hair, white skin.

It

Top Forty yells it out, but not this one:
I blush to say it, even think it,
even in our doubled secret dark,
safe from any ears but yours, two
very fine ears.
In all clench-jawed America,
no one says it,
as if it were the secret code,
and we bit tongues against Gestapo questions,
polite all-day, all-night questions.
It's after the secret hair sprouts that we lease it,
for our entire ever, to the radio.
Before that teen-age sign-away
I love you love we love us love love
conjugates everywhere on our childish tongues,
but about age twelve we start to suit the action,
and forget the word.
So if I never say I love you, it's not true.
I do.

love

you

Illness

Oh I'm clever, clever. I
cannot die. What scintillance
of brain cells... Hell!—and fever, fever.
You shimmer quaintly, nurse. In or out
of phase, please. Really. You know,
I've half a mind... ho! Ice, I see.
By water burn my blaze away...

Most cold this morning, cold.
The sun is black, sucks
where it once spent its light,
August is reversed, and dust is snow.
I cannot quite remember, are you gone?
How far? From where do your letters come?
I do remember mornings when we two
rose with the sea breeze,
my shirt blown about on you,
time rewound with every wave.
That sun: will it never white again?
We wrote letters for a long time, long time, long time...
Distance shuts my mouth.

The mistral and sirocco yield:
I regain my weather and my weight.
I lie down late, rise early, often see
the round return of one more day.

The Distant

Those who are growing
easier as their hair goes gray,
those more distant everyday,
drinking shallowly and seldom,
eating nothing to speak of,
sleeping an hour before dawn,
and breathing a few times a day,
their eyes steadily empty with something
they learn as they forget the earth,
or rather, deal with it as it is;
how do we talk with such men?
How do we get them to tell
through their frail bodies and wrinkles
what they are the maze and puzzle and sign of?
Even with each other they won't tell,
but talk around the changes they've seen,
the celebrities they've seen
who are dead, the first Model A
and the bad roads, and the many friends
who are dead; so the younger
shake their heads and leave them to themselves;
for how can you deal with them,
be they ever so rich and strange,
if they do nothing but talk of change?

Death of a Football Star

Still arms will not hang straight;
they remember in cramps tonight how
with these limbs I lifted him,
huge, myself child to his man,
onto the cart, white sheets and wheels,
my ears jammed with ringing and silence,
the shouts of attendants unheard,
but then, ganged into a corner,
held hard from hurting the dead,
my ears returned with one sound:
the tick of bearings and clock
as they wheeled his huge stillness away.
Afterwards I was so clumsy,
all things were so slow afterwards.
In my hand the coffee cup rose,
weightless and drifting and white.
I drank once without any taste
and set the cup down for a year,
smashed it without any force,
and bled for forever until
a doctor prescribed pills to calm me,
who was calm as the form of my friend.

How Long

Some morning of knives and nausea,
at the cliff's edge in the kitchen,
scarring formica for a slice of bread
for my stomach to bite down on,
my time will be packed up,
free of forethought, and I
will put away the clock and eat,
in the yellow kitchen, my bread, and sleep.

You will be gone then, for good, good, good;
your porter, your redcap, old I
will have lugged the baggage out.
Will you tip me a kiss,
a quarter, will you smile,
wave and wave and wave a while?

When my red phone caught the rings,
I wouldn't treat it, I ignored it.
Better it sick than me sick.
But then "knock knock hello hello
I wouldn't come back but I love you so"
and you're in, unpacking you.
I wound the clock but didn't set it,
since all I care is how long.

At night you are always hot
to that side of me near you,
so I turn and turn, and I turn,
like a man on a spit, not to burn,
but be done, be done.

Child

At the top of the house tonight
in a room I once lived in,
the slant ceiling hunches over
and the square-shouldered doorway cants
his enormous empty body to my sight
and no angles are true: nothing obeys
the plumbline and tape; worn tile
warps in distress at hot and cold,
old windows of bad glass change the laws,
and there are strange animals, the alien toys
of a child, and there is the child smell:
have you ever heard them before they're human,
before we teach them everything?—have you ever
heard them?—they laugh like they're outside—
whole skull humming in their animal—
listen! we must make them human—
they could be these other things—I remember
through this bad glass when I wasn't human—
I remember when I was connected—
telephone and powerline, table and chair,
all, the chaos and the light, the whole,
hydrogen and helium,
the sun of total confusion

Visiting Home: On My Father Awakening

She clicked on the light and shook him from his dream.
He woke up small in the scarred oak bed,
Eyes red with fighting the insistent hunger
That was the only danger in 1933
In Chippewa County; he woke up curled up,
Dream-caught, confused, broke open his small knot,
Bunched like a shot squirrel, and stretched stiffly.
“I know he’s here, I know,” he said, coming slowly
From those old forests, “I’m awake.” But his eyes
Wouldn’t come to today. The wide silence
Of the hunt held him, and he looked past us,
Intent, still searching trees for nests,
To find in all the green one small furred meal,
Some dark meat for the many who must feed
On the illegal rabbit, the unlawful squirrel,
For it was summer, and all game was out of season,
As if hunger had a season but to eat.
But no. I could not blind his eye-dark dream
With the electric bulb of 1966.
I turned away and I turned out the light.
I, who have never been bound to single-shot
And lead-shock for the daily sake of family,
Who killed perhaps ten bottles, and once, one slow squirrel,
Could not forbid him gun, trees, squirrel, hunger again,
Could not deny him his man-making pain.

Walking Fence

Many there are
who don't love a fence,
the fence Robert Frost
once walked in his thought
when he couldn't decide
either/or about walls.
Now I had a fence,
a white wooden fence
that I walked once,
with grass on one side,
and grass on the other,
its paint scaling off,
its leg-posts wobbly
where water had bitten
with the teeth of Wisconsin.
When I dared its blunt balance
with my thin-worn soles,
I walked the white wobble
for a hundred yards,
but I fell on my belly
like a sack on the fence,
then slowly slid off
like a sack on one grass,
where, empty of air,
I cried for air,
but I could get breath
enough for living
and maybe more fencing
only on coming
dizzy near dying.
That day I'd a bruise
on my round of a belly
to help me remember
that walking fence
is a serious business
when you're human and heavy,
so let someone tell you
who knows about fences,
that if you don't pick
one grass over another,
you'd better be ready

for a bruise on the belly,
a problem with breath,
and some tears.

To One Skeleton in One Indian Mound

At noon the sun like one more engine
roared overhead,
and all we amateurs at spades
crossed our broad blades in the heat
in the hurry to dig up and hoard,
but now... all your awry bones
and a round skull full of cobweb thought
unlock my day,
and the dig's quarrel of shovels
disappears. Let the others save and save
their bones against the dozers
bulling their way here and there tomorrow
to the tick. My thin friend,
I could outsit America,
spinning a headful of those subtle threads,
and in a jumble in the next time's mound
crook my head-house a thousand years
around the nebulae of webs,
thinking on the spinner's work of stars.

An Indigestible Dream

The damp of three summers' rotting rain
ruined the emperor's day with a cold,
and left the wheat-fields like paddys.
When the taxman added his tax that year,
he went off his diet with worry,
for the imperial pocket was short of full
about one new palace worth of dollars,
but descending heavily from his office
on the towns, he adjusted the towns.
Sullen farmers clotted the corners,
leisurely as the rich but more hungry,
angering the air with belly-growls,
but the taxman slid like a stick of butter
easily unhearing along the streets:
he must have gone deaf at the edge of town.
Knowing the business of government heavy,
and knowing the taxman a busy man,
the farmers, to get his attention,
threw stones, but the mayor's high walls
were hard of hearing as the official ear,
though the taxman couldn't have heard anyway,
for that buttery ear was being busily licked
by the confidential tongue of the mayor.
The taxman, back in the capital,
figured out one day that each farmer
had been taxed the cost of one stone, well-cut,
for that pocket-filling palace of dollars.
An indigestible dream that night,
a dream of farmers square as cut stones,
silent farmers, a whole palace of farmers,
woke up the taxman till nearly morning.

Secrets

Daily I bought him candy,
riding the bike we'd built from junk,
the bike that had three tires,
one on the front and two on back,
the two back tires with one inside the other,
so we could stagger holes against a blowout.
Daily I rode it to the neighbor grocery,
that had an old-time wooden floor
worn into pathways by years of feet,
there to buy three Hershey bars,
with or without nuts, like old Norm said,
smiling slyly at the embarrassed boy,
who didn't want to show he knew the joke.
Sometimes I didn't buy the Hersheys,
I hated the joking part so much,
sometimes I'd buy licorice,
but then grampa'd be mad,
for Hersheys were what he really liked.
I'd lie and tell him Norm was out,
and he'd eat second best, unsatisfied.
Always, though, I'd buy red soda,
a big bottle, because we both liked that,
then ride back home one-handed,
paper bag in the other arm,
pretending to go up or down a mountain,
depending on which gear I was in,
high or low, for second gear was broken.
He'd sit on the porch, on the left side sagging,
stick arms and legs and a big body,
almost like I'd drawn him once,
circle for body and lines for limbs,
like a boy will sometimes do.
Careful of mother, I'd come the back way,
on the dining-room side of the house,
for Hersheys and soda were secret things,
the kind of secret the old and young
will make against the big ones of the house.
It was more than that though, more than a secret,
though I never did quite know what was wrong,
why candy was bad, and why soda,
except it was something called insulin,

that happened at night, that I wasn't let watch,
that had something to do with little bottles
kept cool in the icebox, that I couldn't touch.
So we kept the secret that mother knew,
knew but overlooked each afternoon,
the secret really secret from my father,
who would have stopped my daily rides,
but an old and dying man's got to have something,
like she told me ten years later.
My anger at what she'd done outgrown,
and even outgrown my own guilt,
I've become almost proud of what I did,
that I rode the bike and bought the candy
to battle the insulin, maybe killing a little,
maybe taking some weeks from his months
with eight-years-old near ignorance
of how good candy could somehow be bad,
and I remember with no accusations
the learning about secrets, years ago.

The End

The shadows of the earth grow short,
For everything that is upstanding
Must soon be level in the sun.

The dialectic of the day and night
Collapses to a synthesis
In the numb medium of red twilight,
for everything that is of two
Must be one.

The slow untroubled circling of the moon
Goes frantic as it spirals in,
Bulges, breaks, and smashes all,
For everything that is in balance
Must fall.

And now, low in the dim sky, the red sun,
That has consumed itself for time
And fed all the hungers of the earth,
Will settle the sum of no and yes,
And briefly incandesce.

Poems from other sources

Dreams

Her dream was gentle hands, a winning smile,
and eyes as blue as fair as skies,
not hard arms and taking hands
to make her suddenly wise.
But her daydream fled with her attacker,
who now feared screams that didn't come,
for she had opened to her deeper dream
when she began to move with him.

Sailing

I set the sea shell in a port tack,
but in primitive rage against my sailing,
the green infuriate hammers of the sea
beat the boat dazed as its white fragility
was bombarded repeatedly by the savage waves,
and the wind slammed deep in the thin sail,
its frail order weakening under the convulsed battering,
until the boat bent, bowed toward the water, hovering, until
the sail rived with a scream to upright me.

Collapse

The stage floor is worn thin,
the actors mince across the boards in dread,
and even the audience knows their parts too well,
but if the whole theater should collapse,
newspapers would merely flitter from the press
and experts merely analyze and guess,
concluding; "It was ill-designed, perhaps—
but I can't commit myself to why it fell.
The new one won't be better—like I've always said,
Those old building codes are a sin."

Hill-climb

Rutting the wheel-way up,
storm of sand and rock,
break this bike or make it, dammit,
drive, you headlamped devil,
burst earth at hilltop,
arc and bottom, dig, dig,
stand in second gear
and go devour wind with steel,
destroy the need for speed or die.

for my father

my father wrote in flesh,
on white, parting parchment,
on supple and yielding skin
tightened for him.

he knew nothing of what he did
in that dark-liquid bed;
erect in his man-power,
he wrote in mindless words.

he knew nothing of what he did,
but to him I have no need
to lie forgiveness—he needs none,
for his words have a ringing sound.

his chromosomes were keyed
into a sunly code,
his words aligned the atoms
of a galing, windy mind,

and he unlocked the door
that blocked the watery shaft
so I could break the surface
with bones curved of his pen.

he knew nothing of what he did,
but it was good,
and as I laugh in light
my flesh sings of his words.

sun

when understanding burns away the mist,
sunhigh revelation in the noon of joy,
pain-brilliance fevers think to feel,
flares an inside twisting out to everywhere
through miraculous topology;
openness and sun are now

Seven

In dawn's first-laugh fireburst,
When Logic slips in dewy grass
And stains his knees a skipping green,
My number is seven in a new breeze,
My mind is soda-pop bubbles,
My body a plastic delight.

A supercharged seven of hearts throatpurrs
My motorcycle along the walks,
Snarls it down the steepest hill,
And sun-shout days clatter by,
A picket run along a picket fence
That runs a million miles---

Until he stands erect, and stiffly
Brushes nonsense from his clothes.

Monody: One Madam to Another

Madam Earth, you're more a whore than I am.
I've stood on my head, turned somersaults,
anything for a customer with a big fat tip,
but you've turned more tricks than ever I did,
for you turn away no man.
In the end you box us all, even me,
man or woman's no difference to you,
you've got to take it and take it in,
but what makes you the final whore—
you won't take cash and let us go;
for we pay everything we've got.
So all I've got to say is there've been times,
times I spread for free,
and they liked it,
and were at peace, alive, in me.

The Script

The old man rehearsing my flesh
broke my legs to bring me down;
under the shower, in the pin-hot rain,
my knees thumped porcelain, twin thrown logs;
I slumped downhill to dream, undone,
darkly remembering the flesh I am,
from father and mother, by their first cell,
the human river knotted to a child,
untied a lifetime to that dying man
swelling the river's run as he forgets
back to the water the part he knows too well.
After child and before old man,
halfway from river to river,
I am my middleman and must learn
my script that's written in each cell,
draining myself through my design,
that, coming at end to my untie,
I have performed entirely.

The Harsh In Music

You have been true, and I promiscuous,
If those quaint words define the modern way,
When one or many's a matter of choice
And why not seems as reasonable as why;
So I've an intimate crowd who've never stayed
Except in certain ghostly whispered thoughts,
Until I found the snakey chorus loud,
And wished I'd stopped at ten or so one-nights;
While you, in your unmarried faithfulness,
Have found one instrument a monotone,
And thinking three years' love a two years' loss,
Now want instead a symphony of men.
But what is harsh in music is while I
Am your one more, you're not one less for me.

Song of the Wandering Jew

I am the Wandering Jew,
I struck at Christ with a closed fist
As I struck at Baal and Osiris,
And it makes no difference.

I have no memory of why
I am the keeper of balance,
Alternate Christ and Anti-Christ,
But it makes no difference.

You know as well as I
Of the worth of arguments,
But they must go on for some time,
Since it makes no difference.

But when it is all in balance,
A white noise of the mind,
I am mindless with that waterfall
Which makes no difference.

To Labour for the Wind

And what profit hath he
That hath laboured for the wind?
For who can search for it and find,
And what man hold its brief breath;
It is more transient than snow,
Which in one small hour is gone.
And a man who had the need,
Where would he search?
What is the source of it,
And what the end;
For even as it comes from nowhere,
It goes also to nowhere;
For it has no North or South,
No East or West,
But abides equally with all of these,
And is one with the child and the old man.

On My Father Awakening Shouting

But can I shoot away that doubt,
Demobilize the enemy, distending lead
To prove the punch behind my hollow point,
Confirming with the bang the wavering good?
But can I escape, can I escape
The very palpable recoil of such a hit,
The question magnified behind the scope
As I dismantle my own man? The hurt
That heals in daylight gapes in dreams.
No gun kills as surely as it seems.

Tablets

I would like to know why David Roberts
sold her the one bottle of white tablets
and wouldn't sell her two.
Was he afraid to do what she was not,
or did he want to keep a customer
for another try on some night later,
or—did he plan some leisurely delight?
Whatever: she's not through,
and must repeat her purchase, buy again—
I wish he'd sold her two and got it done.

Earth

Always the long push and pull of blood,
always the building up, and collapse of lungs,
always the mass of flesh to overcome,
obese inertia and base momentum,
but always too beyond all these there is
the continuing earth,
which outwears all its thousand forms to one
equally beyond the fatigue of fine steel
and the water-weariness of stone.
This night, whisper-spent and eye-bleared-out
in a clock-watched and hour-exhausting
hushed soliloquy in sibilance, ends but in earth,
which calms all that crackle of the nerves,
and submits us to the summer sun
'til we admit, brought to that calm,
the snow of flesh, the ice of bones.

Wrist-watch

Unwind your coiled cold,
your ice-tight sleety machine;
the clock-shock of its minute tick
but wakes me to the wrist-bound world,
but wakes me to my three-named enemy:
time, December, and the ticking wind.
And therefore thanks to you my trinity,
my three-personed implacable cold God:
with eyes as open as the handcuff's closed
I can now find that woman that
driven by the sprung whirlwind
we coil in our own Spring.

Speech

Let them come heavily, bull-boned men
who kill with many blows of a blunt stone
determinedly, because they do not understand:
these men can be yoked neck and neck,
their tongues are numb, they are not to be feared;
if ever they discover speech, their speech
will move with the tide by sun and moon.
No, fear, but fear the efficiently thin,
the light and bright as aluminum,
the neon-tongued, who have teeth of movable type
and squawk from a nylon voicebox
words that are to them as paper cups,
paper plates, plastic knives, plastic forks.

No More

That a woman should so live for today
that I am now to her like food long eaten,
used, built into the body, and forgotten,
though a month ago we together cried "today,"
and wound a double helix of the limbs:
at this I shout at those two in the park tonight,
startling them closer, crazy man out of the night:
"There is this much and there is no more:
There is tonight and there is tomorrow!"

Florida April

The summer's coal-long twilight glow
and the loafing floating ash of stars:
April, where April is the cruelest month—
here—just June, machine-green palms,
and heavy traffic on the highway north.
Today another died. As nurses aid
for the unimportant terminal ward,
I was the old man's friend for his last gasps.
With the final loss of breath through strength squandered,
he told me how it is at eighty-one.
"Always the long push and pull of blood,
always the building up, and collapse of lungs,
always the mass of flesh to overcome,
obese inertia and base momentum,
but always too beyond all these there is
the continuing earth,
which outwears all its thousand forms to one
equally beyond the fatigue of fine steel
and the water-weariness of stone."

Learn

Skin is forbidden again—
not to touch! not to touch!
forget each history of wet,
for we are what reverses lust,
and makes a ghost of red memory.
Again there is "I meant..." "I didn't mean..."
two talk at once or not at all,
and all tends to Philosophy.
But how long can we walk and talk,
and rarefy our night and day,
how long can we practice innocence
when hunger tells us to turn in,
lose everything but what we only are,
and learn what is forgotten once again.

untitled (Now divide the unit world in two)

...Now divide the unit world in two
and call these twins habitual day and night;
assign to one the dream that works our rest,
and to the other, memory—this done,
this is a man: born one, grown up two,
a double citizen of neighbor countries,
each foreign across the border to his other,
although each whole to his own eye.
What then when a man must meet his states,
and at the junction of his day and night combust
the singular fire of a sun and moon
when he makes these twin lights twilight?...

Letter to Ward A

That added-on, crazy-quilt clash of a house
might have been our stitched-together marriage:
split shakes and logs for the ground floor
and a second floor clapboard and plywood.
The nights when you left upstairs and me,
spiraling down two flights to the cellar,
I'd try, but I couldn't remember
if you were worse at the other house.
A wide hall pinched to a small door,
three kinds of windows in one long wall,
none of it foursquare or true,
it must have helped odd-angle you.
Worst of it was for me those nights
when you played the house from that cellar:
hot water, then cold, lights off and on,
the steam heat hissing and whistling,
and all of it in patterns and design,
until sometimes I had to crouch in bed,
half-afraid to half-understand.
The meters with their needles, ducts,
the pilot lights and the valves, all things
half-magical to a wife anyway,
even before the patterns began.
But then, an hour or hours later,
everything would go on at once,
and you'd dull-foot your way upstairs,
again a man of right-angle mind.
You had to go to that place, I guess,
especially after that last long night,
when the lights blew out and I found you,
mind-dark, with your hands in the fusebox,
but I miss the music now—so intricate!
and with such an unlikely instrument.

The Reasoning Rock

If a rock could think,
I mean a brain-round rock,
to make its thinking easier,
(and maybe ponder is better than think,
for a rock must think ten million years,
long pondering, about one thing,
but anyway, if a rock could think,
about the date of the dawn of Superman,
this reasoning rock would say, Q.E.D.,
“What top-speed Keystone Kops were men!”

Sub for Sail

If I didn't pay rent I'd be a ghost,
a bump in the night
for the other tenants to whisper about,
but once a week Landlady docks,
half steamed-up on Irish Mist,
hand out for me to unhand cash,
and I buy off the all-outdoors
for another seven days.
But every week, before her bon voyage,
she puts me on the stand,
crossly examining the cluttered room:
"Why were you on the night of the day
reading all night?" she says.
I fold my hands. I clear my throat. I say
(lying) "I am" "Perjury
is an ugly word," she says.
"writing a book on" I say.
"*Perjury*, Sir."
"di-proto-astro-negativity."
and she leaves.
I close the hatch and dive,
cruising my book-pile,
discoursing with dolphins and whales
about the Marianas Trench,
about our common full fathom five,
snoring an hour on Monday,
Tuesday half a day,
reading toward and sleeping away my time
in a deepsea June or July,
for it's hot down here, the pressure's on,
more and more I need some air.
Next time the S. S. Weekly nears the door,
I think I'll trade my sub for sail,
exit the harbor, come about,
and gathering a deep canvas of air,
I'll up on the water, and away from here,
to see how is the all-out-there.

For Grandfather, Dying Hard

Old man, coughing your way half here, back
far enough from death to see the surface,
thick with those who bother to breathe air,
die, float off in the dark and disappear
beyond all sonar but my memory.
What makes you think you can still live here,
your huge heart thin as a red balloon,
shaking your body like a distant bomb-blast?
But most of all I hate your eyes, their fear.

The Ends of the Bed

I took this ball of dirt the world
for heaven and hell;
the water of nerves a woman gives,
hunger, a bank account:
these things were solid as sunlight.
I went to and back, I worked,
slept deep, fulfilled my every day,
and I lived in the house of the whole big world.
Now the whole big world is starved of weight,
that house has fallen in a flat of cards.
We're like some storybook ragpaper keeps,
some Hansel and Gretel thing of scares
to nightmare children into sleep;
all this pother of day and night,
the white sheet red with the child,
wet with the middleman
as he reforms his flesh,
bloody again with the old man's lungs,
none of it seems more than breath.
Why, seventy years are crammed in an hour:
marriage and career, financial empire, death
and it's all a story to start the night,
between the first and last of breath,
between the ends of the bed.

Night-light

The night-light burns its angry, hungry red,
ravaging the night fast as my sleepless
saying; if it can eat at this red rate,
awakening is false and sleeping true,
time and its savage dream of light a lie,
and dream dark fact to its pale fantasy.
So dream: in the still pool beneath the mind,
lose all our wear of days, our loss of nights.
Forget deep as the ape—no! to the fish—
farther, to the cell, back until the clock
drowns in the sea by which we swarm and live,
our memory in genes, our reason that we breathe,
our understanding oxygen and light.
And the result? Drowned daily into calm,
we sink but to awake, shock of sun or night,
and there the ticking or the humming clock.

And I Fear

In silos and cradles, carefully cool,
air-conditioned, checked continually,
watched and tended by technicians,
our stockpiles wait the one-time call
that speeds them and converts them
from mere matter webbed with circuitry
to a local, uncontrollable sun.

The triggered clock cuts off the dark
and all the nightmares of the other side and
Pop! my mushroom of a brain blooms again,
dewy and ready to be sucked dry all day.
The sun, its hardly dangerous soft radiation on,
sweats me from my limbo and I see,
the unstable room still solid
in its unexploded light.
My day gapes before me like the door,
opening on all the world I have, still there,
reprieve granted from the final heat.

I am an outpatient, a man qualified
by certain drugs. It took shock
to fry me from my neutral stall,
but, all that Brownian motion stopped,
I'm turned loose on the world,
bracketed by a pair of pills
setting my upper, my lower bounds.

In my kitchen, the stove-snake cooks my food,
and at night its split electric tongue
dangles the apple by which I wait to sleep,
for I was born to the broadcast radiation,
and Big Boy's ghost fell out into my bones,
sighing in my marrow its long decay,
forshortening my half-life until I knew
this is the morning I will live or die.

It was in the army, in Japan,
at Hiroshima I lost my common sense,
and stopped for all my personal time
being numb with the millions of the expected dead.
The museum there has uncommon stones
stamped with the shadows of that summers leaves,
and still the people of the city say
how some are never either sick or well,
and others, cut, don't heal:
I puzzled doctors at the base
by waiting awake for several days;
when my white blood-count went low,
they flew me back,
amazed at what the mind can do:
DISCHARGED

My static still low enough to work,
I took a job in some big building,
filing away my forty hours and more,
in an alphabetical sub-basement room,
but through the walls of files
I felt the background radiation rise,
and when I filed schematics
for the sixteenth sub-assembly of a missile,
to get away from the geiger's roar,
I jammed my nerves to one
white noise of a neural snow
and nothing did me any good or any harm.

Burnt out of that and six feet tall again,
I rattle between the ups and downs,
bracketed by a pair of pills
setting my upper, my lower bounds.
Before the bar of that double governor,
my range and domain were all the short way
to the near end of human time,
and though the leveling drug
has landscaped me to relative calm,
nothing can trick the final eye,
the ear that's tuned to the coming sun,
the nerves set for the heat:
I see walls fail,
my skin reads radiation everywhere,
in the mushroom of my brain I hear
the hydrogen's confusion,
the helium's crisp answer
and I fear.

2-S

Day breaks in the afternoon,
the spine is gone, we're paralyzed.
The evasions approach zero
as a limit.
What to talk about today,
what to avoid?
Nothing, I'm afraid.
Remember the one of us
who didn't make it through boot camp
because he didn't want to,
but shut-the-fuck-up-soldier for good?
In a place like that
he couldn't sleep the twenty hours a day
that let him stay awake at all,
and had to get it some way.
The camp commandant,
one of those one-eyed men
who charges through the world
damn-well getting his duties done,
wrote us a brisk letter
about how anyone
who didn't want to bang a gun in 'Nam
wasn't a man anyway.
I wasn't convinced,
and the funeral wasn't fun.
I myself am tired of late,
and my 2-S runs out soon.
I hope at least I get a different camp
from his one.

Boot-camp Suicide

In the cinder-block shack
of my dormitory room,
I sleep to dream and wake up to remember
how one of us has failed boot camp,
standing like the man his sergeant made him,
upright on the obstacle course,
then machine-gunned down,
flunked out of breath and blood.
His death is foursquare fact,
cramped as a slot in a basement dorm,
but his memory exceeds him
as the world inflates their dime-store dolls
so the staff shrink on Uncle's team
can sign him off to hell, Case Closed
by a penetrating pen,
while the local pump of the underground press
types him into heaven.
Before he failed his mid-terms here on earth
and passed his physical,
I was his roommate once, and I know
nothing except that barracks and reveille
would break the twenty hours a day
he had to sleep to stay awake at all,
and I know from a photograph
how bad his khaki fit.

Sunday

The mower woke us, motor throbbing
through the room, then dying... sigh, turn over,
the blur of a close face, the touch—
blossoming into morning, light opens
to laughter as we wake to being human,
sculpt ourselves in sheet, and talk
of what to do on Sunday in such light;
then standing in a motion in her simple skin,
she walks to the kitchen, makes coffee, singing,
serves willingly where no one would command;
finished waking, we dress lightly, leave,
confirm through morning and the day
our ancient, nightly trust of two asleep.

Shark

Out of my room, cool with motor and coil
for my daily lifelong dream,
hammerhead shark bites down
white from his exploding brain!
Never a fish this fierce
from any seventh sea! Space
only has fathom enough for fire this free, we
only, and sometimes, eyes enough to see.

After Much Speech

Silence after much speech; it is right,
caught up here now out of common time,
in the crystalline once tense of poetry,
that we—he, you, and I, the three the one
that wrote and sings these constant, ancient lines,
shall shiver, the book close, and we two choose
to fall into the flesh and lose our voice.

untitled (I awake so easily today)

I awake so easily today
as if awakening were breathing out
the night's long breathing in...
and she—sleeps, still taking breath,
as easily as morning's light
grows in its ancient, patient way.

In this broken cabin,
equally of land and sea,
on sand between the collapsing and collapsed,
we live our lifelong doorway,
waiting out the tide when it takes hold,
worrying the pilings,
not eager to take hold, just there,
the random fact of eventual capture.

But no tide now, just wind
rustling the brown palmetto fronds
casting their moving maze on us,
a maze of shadows she accepts,
as calm as milk-glass under them.

On our first morning, how I worried:
would she be able to be with me,
at once forgetting and remembering
her other first mornings with others?
She undressed to the sadness of nakedness,
in the old confusion of twilight,
in the old understanding,
clothes falling softly as her breathing,
and then came,
forgetting and remembering.

If we had waited, been deliberate,
entering a maze of yes and no
to find some certain yes or no,
to find some law besides the Second Law...
O that wish!
to enter it, turn face up, and then
O to rise!
above the timebound maze
in the noon's discovering blaze
and see the pattern, the whole pattern!
O to rise
 if we could but rise,
leave these doors
and corridors—

But she stirs—"Good morning."
Good morrow to you now as now you come,
good morrow as we now say yes again
for yes we will go down,
caught in the center,
we will go down
to join the beginning and the end,
to obey the timebound order of the land,
to become the strict disorder of the sea.

untitled (two riddles)

Done

1. Its way with people is to break;
Its tool the sun, or anything;
Its patience is in brevity;
Its aim, to get things Done;
Its paradox—that I took some
To write this riddle, but used up none.

Marriage

2. The positive and negative
must mate their alternating charge
inside a bulb and not at large
for any lasting light to live.

Downtown Dealer

Resume

B.A.: 1959.
M.A.: 1961.
Married: 1960.
Taught three years: Philosophy
At a minor university.
1963: Wife died: suicide.
One day in 1964,
In a lecture on reality,
To everything I said
There echoed refutations in my head.

But this New Job is Really Me

it's really fine it's mine
the chrome's so bright it's like clear thought
the motors roar like chimera
it's just the thing
it's just the way it all should be
my salesman's tongue as slippery
as any salesman's tongue can be
from years of lectures on philosophy
and since it is so really good
I'm here to stay
I'm here to sell it everyday
I do it any way I can
you see those flashing reds and greens?
A SALE A DAY A SALE A DAY
the neons really pull them in
A SALE A DAY
everyday some guy comes in
machinists hands cut up like meat
I put him in the driver's seat
it costs him "seven dollars weekly"
it costs me what I have to pay
A SALE A DAY
a man who buys his time by sales
has to buy the only way
has to buy it everyday
or go under

So I will make a deal
 any kind of deal
 Hey mister see that two-tone Ford
 gray and pink as dawn?
 I will make a real deal
 You know that dream you have of dawn?
 I can make it real
 I can make it real real
 if I can make it

Of Archibald MacLeish

At last, growing brown into his end,
The straight man bends to the fire,
The good liar enters what he lies about,
And finally lives out his poems about age
As its impersonal rage burns him down.

Shrapnel

As I lie here lightly
crumbled in the moon,
I must laugh gently.
I used to be so stiff, thinking of tonight,
all mechanical arms and lead-lined containers.
I guess I thought I could dump it
in some out-of-the-way spot and forget it.
But now I find no need —
I hold my metal in me like a child
and know its warmth like a mother,
from the inside.

Mapping the Terrain

An acid-head friend of mine,
his eyes unfocused on infinity,
came by one day for a month or two,
talking of highways and freeways,
and how he's locked in America,
since our north and south neighbors' border guards
gate the tourists but fence the longhairs out.

Alterly he thumbs and sits,
ranging America in my little room,
but trying to cross at my kitchen door
into Canada, he's scissored off:
the Mounted Police, Stan Laurel style,
like body-political practical nurses,
jockey their jodhpurs, and judge him a germ,
so he hitches south to my easychair—
and a second cut-short border halt
for an Oliver Hardy Federale.

Yet as he tours the Fifty States,
the stops and goes of his travels
are all somehow the same,
as if his stasis were a kind of motion,
his motion some strange stand,
like water running the river still,
or the whirlpool turning in its rest;
but how can someone rest as he moves,
or be in action as he is still?

And his eyes! Though he sees,
he seems to look at nothing,
as though the world were so much windowglass,
and he more giving the light than taking in.
This Keystone Kops matter of keys
to lock him in and out and up
bars and borders him not at all:
plainly he could live in this one room,
less my vast frontier of kitchen,
and think himself unbounded Lord and King.
Such ease! Is it the etch of the acid
has razed the nerve-noise in the head
and incandesced his brain,
or was the easy, day-light man
scripted in his primitive cell,
never to suffer a tape-loop of the mind?

Melville, if Hawthorne saw it right,
had no rest from Mind:
on open beach, he so amazed beach sand
with his brooding toward and from,
you would have thought him cabined there,
yet his only bulkheads were the north and south.

Moses broke water out of a rock,
and Jacob fought the white shadow of God:
had Melville that staff or that angel,
he might have drunk and lost to faith,
rather than shift dry sand,
a thirty-years thirsting man along the salt.
Instead fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute
were like the Mojave sun: he,
in a heat-stroke of these themes,
cracked his brain like desert mud,
and to learn what? that desert thought
could only shine black the man's shadow
in which the Pequod and Moby Dick went down.

World-sailor Melville, landlocked in thought,
and my everywhere sunshine friend
between them have split the unit sun:
heat, salt heat, for the sailor,
for my friend all light, all delight,
but I both sweat and see,
and I both thirst and drink.

To hitchhike lightly through highway U.S.A.,
all-unthinking, and as birds of the air,
is not enough man; it brackets us:
it's too much God and too much animal;
but to pace in the sun and syllogize fixed fate
is to look for your own eyes:
fixed fate is a riverbed,
free will an abundant water,
foreknowledge absolute the river-land:
old Aristotle and his logic box,
unless you walk, swim, and wade this terrain,
are the organ-grinder and organ of the mind,
and a man, that metaphysical mud,
who maps, and thinks the map the terrain,
is terrain-mocked as he cranks the Ergo tune:
as the riverbed shapes the river,
the river recuts the bed;
what are our maps, if each alter the other?

A Footnote to the Alexandrian Fire

The high-heaped books of Alexandria,
reaching critical mass, fire up,
and the PhD's get third degree burns
so Minimus the Grammarian
can save his gloss on Minor.
Stoke the galleries, scholars,
shovel the stacks like coal,
and quit your hydrant of tears:
not even the downleveling ardor of Troy
freed so much hot air.
Plato, if he could have seen this fire,
though a hard-bound man himself,
would have danced like Dionysus,
drunk with disglossing the Ideal Text,
several removes more near to the Real.
And about the texts, old sirs—
Alexandrian epics on the crash of Troy,
do you think them worth the burns?
Helen will be stolen, Troy burn,
Achilles die through a million rhymes,
though Alexandria were not.
If you must have texts though, I've got a few,
and you can fill up the margins, if you like,
though I've not much more than a common Homer,
and a few short pieces by memory.
I cannot unremember the ones I love.
Tell me—do you really value
books there's only one copy of?