

Remnant
1965-95

Neil Myers

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No illumination can sweep all mystery out of the world. After the departed darkness, the shadows remain.

-Joseph Conrad

I

Country Journal

Beanstalk With Variations

1 *Jack at 60*

Just crazy, to think it again,
riding the old sprouts, those that took root
in the yard once, & still
lift fresh as clowns with tall faces, sighing
pull yourself up, quick as you wish,

& even the undergrowth,
stuffed with cans, shards, turds, brambles
clattering magically at every wind,
can help,
since whatever he climbs now is useful & dense,

& if he squints hard he can begin,
hunching & leaping,
until he lets stuff spill he's carried for years –
goose, harp, eggs in a basket,
his mother's check.

The choice is his.
He can be generous, & gigantic,
& end the tale any way, with a crash, renewal, more craving,
trying it out in all sizes, to see if it works
when diminished & raving.

2 *Rising*

To be aloft, & then look back,
imagining the crowns
of flower heads, braille of petals
snapping silently,

fruits growing in thick lanes,
dogs raising tunes from the river, & the moon's
huge face,
its no-need no-name,

clouds of fireflies,
clusters, dippers, arms full,
separate as stars,
swollen to immense points in disparate space,

rain, sweet green, the pig of a pulse
draining him upward in thin air,
kicking fresh leaves,
fierce-gilled edges, terse dependencies.

He swallows, leans his head.
Something will tell him where to step,
a snail bobbing
before resuming, unpredictably.

3 *Resting*

This can't be the first time he's paused,
pretending nothing's lost, or worth
the trouble, or that he can let it drop

a mile, as far as the horizon, lengthening
each second – tiles, swallows, fields
enough to hold late light. A flood of dark,

a way to grasp what still can yield
☞ carry him with it, through scenes
too dense to read, a void for every

stage, the hundred thousandth error in
a plot tuned to this balance
of waste ☞ gain. Each alike. All the same.

4 *Arriving*

Shrieks falling past his hat
like dandruff,
incessant names, *I'm Big, Fee*

Fi, I'm Jack, props stitched in
helpless loss

of accuracy & scale, a strobe

that flares him clambering
toward a target
& spilling soup, scripts, numb

repetitions, an old hen casting
shadowy clucks,
cloudscapes rolled up below

the vine in dawn-bright curlers,
tails, beaks,
long hours tonguing, pleading,

loathing, huge boot steps, then
a truth so odd
he squirms in shock: nothing's

left here but the air his lungs
keep bracketing,
a bag perpetually puffing itself

& him inside it, its urgencies
banal as coins
or squirrels that plunge from

stems & trunks (*fear not*)
into a gap (*at length at last*).

September, Late

When I wake, I hear them. Voices. Sentences.
The moon. The katydids. *Help help o help.*
Like horror flicks. I used to close my eyes
& wait for signals - *daylight, it's ok.*
Saturday matinees. *Zombies* sometimes, a
mirror for each skull —*no image if you're dead* —
I see my nose, feets do your stuff. & once
a furry claw, emerging from a panel just
above a sleeping woman's head, who woke up
slowly, inch by frozen inch, & finally
shrieked, *help eeyoo!* I mean, if I kept
lids tight, whatever showed would vanish, in
bursts of hammered pulse & dull expectancy,
& I'd be back among the things I knew,
hands in pockets, sockets wide, a smooth
walk to the house I left, & safe,
where face of loss was merely loss of face.

My Father's Tales

A plain unlearned man, your father
knew his place, a house on Gladstone
with a dull squat stoop. He
must have been a stone-sack for a
child. You went with him to pick
scrap, then dreamed the horse ran
wild, *I was killed*.

The year I was
born a trolley smashed him on a
curb. You watched all night, decid-
ed not to waste your life. At his
funeral strangers filled the street,
the poor, he'd brought them baskets
of food. Six months, your mother
died, *of grief*.

∞ your older brother,
piecing crepe flowers in a loft,
puffy blind with glare, who wouldn't
visit their graves. After, you never
talked.

I have his wedding gift to you,
Diana, cast in metal cloth, *antique*,
it cost.

I keep it in a closet, in a
box.

Six Early Pieces

Night Song

In the stiff night
hooves rouse the street
whether as beast or guest.

We can sleep
but left in the street
horses cry out for lust

☞ pound the snow into dust.
Here is the fold of night
dark as events always are.

I can turn to my mate
watching her swellings ☞ sleep,
but there in the bruit of the night
what fox screams as it leaps?

The Victim

Hung from a red bough
a deer swings its head
as if the wind could kill

☞ alone uncouple the hounds
☞ drive like a fall of flame
the stag from his brood,
from his hill.

Death in the knifelike wind
unsheathes his horns ☞ his skin,
unfolds his hooves ☞ his breadth,

while the hunter alone by the tree
stroking the wind-flattened heads

of the ecstatic dogs in their fame
thinks himself alone free.

Tristan

I am waiting for my death
to come riding up the stair
over the woof
of carpets, from the sea,
twisting like a gull,
like a greyhound.

I grab my spear
& look out on the ground
where holy men
died or were drowned
under the cliffs,
where Mark will come
with his stiff spear
& his men like hounds.

In the still
sky
the clouds stick
like harmless birds
& the empty bees
around the edge
of the tower's roof
hammer like birds.

My god o my dear,
if I will die
I will stand upon
my slippered feet,
waving my spear
at the first sail. for my love,
my murderer.

Song of the Mad Bomber of Hiroshima

Whores in my parlor,
bandits in my suits, needles
up the ash streets, I spit
out ancient suffering. Men
were always pigs, but this
strikes everything. My father
squats in his shame, my child
leaped into flames, my birth
vanished up, I never
died, never saw,
sever sang, never was tamed.

Notes for Charles Burchfield, Painter

The hours padding along the edge of night,
the darkness shattering in gusts of light
along the stormy path, the windows gold
in the broken up house, the patched stairs
smelling of wet wood & cinders, the tree
shaking in its yard as if the darkness would
swallow its health & its leaves.

I come across the prairie edge
to my home. I am going up to death,
on stairwells thin as ice, to the plains,
apples in the brown grass, among the skulls.

Tombs at Tsfad, Galilee

For centuries
Europe's ghettos
spat envoys here
to wait for a king
to build God's temple
scattering goyim
out like rain. Peter fished
in the Sea below;
the Arabs' mosque
is a sculptor's studio,
curly chassidim
dazzled by
escape from gas
sing from windows;
dry old men
in crazy angled schools
hug scrolls
like parchment babies,
the numbers blued
on their arms like Cain.

If I forget thee
Jerusalem
my right hand
will lose no grace
tho on a ledge
below the town
the Rabbi in
his famous tomb
lies in light
like an angel's eye
tasting the love
of death & truth,
his sockets blank
as messiah's face.

Homage, Basho

1

Swallows over a mud-flooded path,
bits of wings cut by water,
sky of brilliant granules, whirling, bolting,

a juncture of pulse & emptiness,
the border of suffering where nothing yet is missing,
a river of stars, a wall of glass.

2

If I sit in the center of a province, in the center of a desert,
I sit in the center of an absence, laying out its grid.

Doors slam.
A dog lies hump-backed, quiet as slate,
blood pounding its small sack,

while close in the west, the air flushing darker,
wind tips the horizon with a sweep of easy silver.

3

Rain again, stupefying, shaking blades, white roots,
summer grass/ the warriors/ dreaming,

the light peering in as if we frighten it,
we two, folded on each other, loving ourselves to death.

Sesshin, Hokyoji

At dawn I notice the steep hill behind the zendo
& near the top, framing the skinny pines,
the monstrous rim of a full moon setting, salty & vast.

How furious & simple, morning & its clumsiness.
For weeks I've stumbled, splayed
on the speechless knots of aging. Now

I pull my breathing inward, over diaphragm & chest
& the animal of my spirit
enters my spirit's form. Each pause is a pebble

dribbling on a roof, until the door
to the moment swings open. *Let go*, it says. *The rest*
is empty. Nothing is ignored.

Homage to the Tao Te Ching

“The five colors blind the eye.”

All week I hear birds burst among the
backyard leaves: stars, splits, pinwheels,
plugs, ratchets, rips, slides, specks.
It’s endless, quick. Ten thousand scales
wink wildly, asking that we all be
harmless from now on, tho if we never lived
the rest would be intact, sunk in the world’s
crotch like a knife in a pig’s neck.
Or maybe we’re not at war, with
everything that spills us, in crowds of
rainbows, clucks & flares. Maybe it’s
as it should be. Scarred. Flawed. Blurred.

“Those who do not know are near catastrophe.”

Their margins thick against the snow,
trees, waiting for their lives to start
over. Dusk, distant & heavy. They stretch
out slowly, across the foreign sky. How
did this happen? How did they arrive?
Here’s night, & lovely cold, the deep
lustres of its outlines, pores & nostrils,
hairs that reach up toward a house
where flames reflect our faces at them.
Breughel, someone says, high whites
with blackened slabs, like Breughel.
As if that could be an answer.
A reference point. An angle from a window.

“The sage never tries to store things up.”

The pleasure of throwing out opens me
to things without clear purpose again:
two cats a fence away, one craftily
shadowing the other; the nutty dog next
door, terrorizing fantastic interlopers,

doves huddled near a hedge, clouds
answering clouds. I mean, most stuff
lets up some time in its own way, & that's
the joy: the graver the cut the farther
it extends, until just sky is left,
& cans, skins, shards, shells, small flakes
of bones, a trash-lipped rim of grass.

"The still is the master of unrest."

Fog. Backyard sparrows. Suppose that nothing's
over, the whole scene floated up
from where it just peeled off, a million
lunky branches waving freely when
a squirrel slam-dunks the web. I take
a breath, & see, *I'm here, & in the clear,*
across one contour, a sort of edge whose
surface is exposed, & bare, & curved,
& things are different from what I think
I've said. A tune unexpected, & now
it steps out. A tall figure, a far-off
tower of clouds? I squint. A clump of woods?

"Better stop short than fill to the brim."

I'm staying quiet, fixed on the linchpin
of my life, & nothing's moving me except
the sudden realization, all there is.
Like a stone falling for years, & hitting
somewhere soft. The morning perfect,
cool, threaded across the thinning leaves,
abandoned intimacies of sleep, an urge
to let things mean, thru focus, time & sun.
Just weather, helping them along. Seeing
a shade, & hearing less & less: wind,
the pounding, swelling of my breath, & blood.

Vladimir Nabokov, Aging in Montreux

The things he may have thought, maybe,
he stops thinking, suddenly. Or differently,
trembling toward a checkpoint of waters,
a place where it's useless to talk
of what comes next. & that, since truth
is normal, all preparation must be loose.
& that he goes on walking while sensing
little but transit, the sharp
tides of faces breaking, reappearing
at his feet. An empty frame.
Emergence, one might say. Pupae, Repeating.

*

It must have been the summery landscape
that flickered, like a shine on powdery
metal, rivets flashing on a crude
weld when the seam is wild with heat.
Or a pond, & rustling saplings, where
skippers, swifts whose forms he knows,
their blurs & stains, are starting to
work clear. There. He's standing, quiet,
net in hand, & only has to take
the nearest path, & look. He sees the
circles & turns. The web's edge
shimmers. *Nowhere*. Trying to find them.

*

Eyes shut, he keeps recalling, in the firm
voice he keeps answering, again &
again: an empty lake line, miles of stony
shore, a clump of toothy fronds,
a streetlamp overhead. & the night whitening,
a bowl of blank clouds passing, cicadas,
thunder, shafts of rain. Later
he needs to plan, how the day will go,

light entering the vines, the feel
of grapes, a trail of drops across a hand
held out for more. Satisfied, it
shuts. ☞ asks for nothing more. ☞ asks.

You walk &
find a feather, & under the
boulder of a wall, a rusted
can, & holes,
& I imagine you
only in winter, & we hardly
talk,
of grief to come, a
month, a year,
& snow, a
pause of brilliance in a
window thin as smoke.

Phone Lines in Woods

If it opens on this side & ends on that,
& it does, as you have always shown —
then the world is malleable, is real.
If the wires rise taut along firs, &
clouds pour thru, above the moss —
then the world won't change, will be
as it has been. If I can hear you thru
everything between — huge burrowing
beetles, a fox, paw lifted, from
the dark edge of the trunks an owl
deep in the upper shadow — then things
have never shifted, have barely started,
& whatever we know is what we say,
here, across these lanes. Speak. Begin.

After Dreaming of Flight

Now, as we descend, the curve
of snow drifts, corners spiral,
the edge turns south, a breath
of semis mists the fields, the
interstate, the flat earth's
monstrous folds, until we touch
the thickening grid of street
& house, & exit easily or not
at all or late, to salvage
things or let them break. After,
I call it, dreaming of flight.

Country Journal

1

Early evening.

I'm straining hard to do what I cannot do well, read, think, print. Outside, just as the dark comes, I see an owl fleshed across the unmentionable.

In the back a porcupine bobs across the grass towards the shed, to chew man-handled wood all night, herding its two young. We light the jerky lamps. At first the kerosene flames up, prints the ceiling paw black.

After I turn them out, in the afterglow, I watch the blue filaments pinwheel & hiss. Total black.

2

I am still my own enemy, & feel it beat around the house all night like a vamp, sheltering me. It breaks into the covers, touches your familiar humps in sheets. I break out in a sudden twilight fear. Nothing is ordered.

Later an owl wakes me with a child's long cry that starts a dream like a tongue on my ear, & ends as I come alive in a start of breath.

Toward light I think there's nothing here but me & miracle. I come out of my socket, sleep again. The children begin to chatter, & we dress them, send them in the fleshed light out for blueberries, which lie in the cereal

pale blue pale.

3

Day after day here, I sit in the bedroom study, taut with boredom, "working on a book." When I think I finish it I feel released. Under the stairs a heart ties me with terror coming closer.

You fill
the downstairs room with flowers we find in the meadows & woods like flags: daisies, huge swollen pubises of eyes, orange darting tongues, spear swells, green thighs, stars that tip & split.

I
go with you in a canoe to a part of the pond we never saw, a spoon shaped end with enormous lily pads, a frog on one two hands long, marsh grass that holds the bottom & sucks the boat across. We talk lumpily & see everything detail itself against us.

A night later, sleeping downstairs, I hear the porcupine at its nightly work, gnawing the porch. The trees drip gum, tick tick,

sugar maples, hemlock, iron scrub, pine blind walls alive with damp, light, dry dirt, elephant hides.

I feel a groove
gum thick, & open my mouth to move it out.
It saws.

4

For two months time broils slowly, into a fist no one will touch until I take it off. Slowly I build my spirit like a lamp, with the porc-

upine, the garbage fixed raccoons,
the dog from the farm downhill,
nose high with quills, a fox, a
cat. Then trees whip huge balloons.

I keep stiff. I feel things change:
the girls move outside more freely
now, you are less restless than a
butterfly, I learn how to stand in
a space with trees drying & falling
around me; I watch the mice that
stay in the walls all winter. I am
in patience suddenly with death.

II

An Old Man in Oregon

Clara

No other way to see it,
the midland, the quotidian
she's had to pick thru

to live: under the surface
glistening tin, dank
bulbs, crumbs, &

overhead mullen & the
deadly nightshade, its yel-
low eyes & purple hems

that ride the porch &
tangle in her fence. *Clara*,
she calls herself, she's

91, & bends & trims &
cuts, & has her friends,
a dozen trees & shrubs,

& needs to get along, not
break a skull or hip. &
wants stuff out of the way

but not everything, not
yet. & pauses while she
rakes. *Got to*, she says.

Death Scenes

1 *Hermann Hesse*

He woke alongside the quiet squares
of daylight, that grew more quickly
than the dripping thrusts of birds,
the thousand twirls & curves & hails.
Alert, pulse pounding, he felt a noise
start in his throat, a word he'd just
said on a street to someone smiling
in a glare of easy vanishings. Things
seemed weighted, rinsed. He could
get by for a while breathing any way,
no longer fixed on whatever he cared
deeply about. Surprised he let it
fall. Something was receding, or
dwindling, immeasurably sober, & else.

2 *Ravel*

There was that speechless leveling he
felt, & his friends' preparation, their
flutterings of clumsy pain. & his
staggering, & sitting up again, his
head pushing weirdly, brain knocking
at its roof. & then the little cycles
his hands made, gathering notes all
day & letting them escape, as storms
reached thru his sight, voices passed
like psalms. & the ways he finally
thought to tell them what he'd do:
press the dark keys on the white,
sleep, be insane, or wait for some-
thing to arrive. When they'd know too.

3 *Robert Frost*

Clear, in the under-shadow, the place
he craved, of hopeless need, defiance,

folly. He meant where crows appeared,
below the branches in a darkness
that had bloomed there since he last
looked closely. He meant the fat
bellied sparrows, dull stripes &
one-track heads, that kept swiveling
on the same spot, stretching away,
& chirping toward whatever was near
enough to peck. & the edge, a flap
of shadow, triangular tented, more
than sexual, under the new leaves
that day. & farther back. & back.

4 *Virgil*

There were things he positioned him-
self for, that never appeared, they
came so quietly, or if at all, thru
his anger, in a haze of irritability
& after-sorrow. It happened seasonally,
at a dark time in the year, in rain
or when the leaves were heaviest, the
mists drenched deep so no one breathed.
Or passed so lightly he never said
anything, just followed: a sort of step,
a mild crunch, *the tree, unclench*
your fist, think hard — of all of them
not gone again, or just indifferent,
merely rooted, listening — & see.

5 *Thoreau*

Once it was nearly over, anything
could keep beginning again, an echo
of the tail end of the last thing
taking the same form: a spring
storm belching a few flakes, or
rain, wolf hairs flying under
low clouds, ground ripening for
prints & thickening stalks. Or

whatever he least expected, that
each time turned out changed: a game
or a way of recovery, when the
scattered pieces came together &
a seamless sky lay overhead,
its sharp blues uttering new cries.

6 *Wilfred Owen*

He's dealing out the cards, one
by one, slapping them on the crate.
Around him everyone's either asleep
or vaguely stunned, or leaning,
staring mildly. Slap slap. Outside
again the guns, & then the casual
flap of the rain. Nothing's up.
It's more or less routine. There's
no attack for days. The cards are
spattered, greasy, cracked, a few
are missing, enough to make the
game foolish. Slowly they let them
pile up & pick. Slowly they choose
what they have no business choosing.

7 *Rilke*

It could have been a moment for a
calm awakening, but it was really
nothing he remembered easily.
Moved beyond measure, he watched
the shadows pencil on the wall.
the leaf shapes on the floor. Last
days were here, stems water-filled,
worms on the cold paths beading clods,
repeated among mountains, clouds,
roof-clattering storks, That was
the long & short of it, quite like
fate: that if it took hours, &
gathered words by which he was the
lighter, he still could barely talk.

Apropos

Do you remember the dark shack we
rented, where it rained for weeks,
& nothing dried, & thumbing slugs
appeared one night — I crushed one
with a broom handle & swept the oth-
ers out. We hung a blanket & slept,
half in shock, the kids in back. &
what love. The rain, the sea had
made you lovely, fleshy, quick. I
rubbed & blundered thru you: day
felt like a joke.

Here be dragons
at the end of summer, I thought, &
could not get enough. Then the sun
came back, & trouble.

I remember. I
folded like the two halves of s
wound around a pearl. I don't ex-
aggregate. I kept it close, I keep
it now.

An Old Man in Oregon (for Shannon Applegate)

1

Springs hang down, a dozen angry moons, the long links of the chair under the porch.

Lackwit.

Hung
on a sweet perch, the dark moon
of leaves, wedges of lingering wood,
a huge shadow of a cycle, lattices
into a field, wet wires into
the road.

Aaah! I am linked to it
like honey, waving in hunger. My hands
no longer touch my knees, they go back.
I cannot hear or bear the anger; I can
break.

Here, on this stair, the humming birds
come to the feeder, six at once sometimes,
when the wasps don't drive them off. The
land backs me once, on this final toss.

2

Hung over like a heavy squash, a pear,
a thin gourd, sweet, clear, acidic,
like a porch a dark weight heavy in its
own thumbs, its hams stringing from
the rafters, all the borrowings brought
& piled on the rails, the cats under
& the old man.

In the backroom a girl without
a fir in the window, looking at a
tree, memory of a madman holding two
snakes, saying the name, over, under.
Whose spirit talks? The old man mentioned

all this, it seemed so common, so under
studied, so intent. Not without loss but
standard: ghosts. One who walked steadily
overhead, in the middle of a winter, one,
one.

The Revolution Is Accomplished

It's done being cold but a cold
wind leans thru the screens I
just put up, where the dog nos-
es to come in from the sun. Be-
yond, the usual sparrows, a car-
dinal, a grackle's itchy croak.

It's
common cold. In the yard things
stiffen for the jerk out of the
ground, the slabbed grass glows,
lanes are toenail blue with
scrub, & when the dog wants out a-
gain, I follow, into the wild
light, among clichés: I've piss-
ed away a month, need a poem,
endless life love luck,
points of
weather, flies to swallow, flat
mouth, dry tongue. When the
revolution is accomplished,
the old dog's done.

August, Late

There's a fly in here

Yesterday thru the basement window
I saw a daddy long legs against a screen,
its light compass legs folded,
& shafts of waxy leaves.

Now all that's secret is this fly.
I don't know where it is.
A minute back it was buzzing craftily.
Now it's just nowhere.

This morning
the fly just came.
The daddy longlegs must have left.

The Air is Doing Its Breathing

The trees hold their leaves
like old men.
They could be lame, blind,
or ashamed,
so that standing under them,
even before dark,
we can hardly see.

Hanging Around

Just at midday the birds go
wheeper wheeper wheeper.
The sky is dark,
thunder comes bombing flat & fast,

tho the rain doesn't come.
Everyone is waiting for everyone.

Hot

Out the window

1963: A Girl Abducted

She combed her hair, kissed, stared
in the mirror, left the door wide, &
was gone. A blind ride, a bum steer.
For half a year they looked for her,
in lakes parks drains motels & lots,
& found nothing. Either she'd been
neatly murdered or copped out, they
thought. But her mother said she was
the best girl in the world, a friend
that she went out with no one.

Plain

Jane, weird. They probed some more,
& for a while everyone did. I remem-
ber a late afternoon on the Berkeley
campus, a mute kid idly poking gul-
lies, storm ducts, under the big eu-
calyptus that we liked, scented with
rain & space & sea. It was a week
before the death of Kennedy.

All this

is in the papers, which still turn up
clichés for each calamity except our
walk. It seems now Kennedy had to die
& that girl be spirited — is that the
word — away, & we think, no reason, no-
thing at all, breathing eucalyptus in
the half dark, following her.

Memory of Italy

Nightingales: we must have heard one
one spring evening, in the Borghese,
hidden in the clusters of red trees
& stone, life laid out calm & lush,
the children home.

Vishinsky, at the
UN, once told a hostile to come to
Russia & hear them singing in the
south, in spring, by river & birch.
He would lose his politics, & be
won over. Or was it sickness to
be home?

I guessed that things seen
were beaten by things heard. I like
what you can grasp: bricks in the
field near Paestum, Salerno with its
tiled church, rowing at Positano,
walking the night stone around the
Campo, a picnic in the winter near
the empty walks of Veio.

Here
the fog lifts, & we see the crazy neon
of another Indiana summer. A bird comes
easily, a cardinal by its throat.

Michelangelo's Bust of Brutus in the Bargello

Like a bunched fist, the colorations
& the knead of marble,
a thing to stripe, attenuate
in the palm of a hand that could never
lift or balance it alone.

The face turns, the eye
has a cauliflower ear, the hair
hangs over like peach colored fringe,
the mouth is a lined branch, the brow
a blank, the neck a trunk of
twisted sputtering light.

Name it Brutus, something
that had forgotten to stand up for other truths,
or never sat, or looked sullenly out at anger
like an assassin, made out of fruit
so ripe it would touch the earth
like a grenade
a hand's span off,

the man who moves toward action from a thought.

For My Father in Florida

It was a fabulous scene for us, when you sailed out in the middle of a hurricane to tie up the tomato plants, like FDR, since everything you nourished had to grow. & there were other storms in early fall, rolling branches, flooding streets, & everyone going about their business just the same.

Now you live where hurricanes are born, & I'm inland, & have got to know tornados, how they threaten a field or bash a road, sullen, sporadic, magnificent yet nothing to crow:

& I can hear my own kids on hot September nights, daddy, what now, & want to say, despite despite, my father's work, & nothing to fear past love itself.

Vaucluse

Terrace

A surge of brilliant light & the sound of a fly.
You turn your back.

Mid-morning climbs the far wall,
heat rising over shoulder & leg.

The fly in its crafty stupidity
thinks it is trapped.

A few birds chatter, moving toward noon silence.
The familiar upwash of pain

lies in hand like a cluster of pebbles.
If your fingers opened everything would drop to the dirt,
even shape, name, scale.
All that.

Abandoned Chapel

Had God continued searching but found only us?
There's no recent news about this,
& maybe all the time we've only mistaken the unknowable
for the unknown,
a door, lined with fluted leaves, stems twined in stone,
garlands of entry, cool with vanished dirt,
almost uninhabitable,
to finger mindlessly, stepping across.

Mistral

Doors slam swallows climb
shutters rattle no way

past the ego's
ragged graceless stump
whatever it is

whatever it grows



Two blasts a third
an instant of steep rage
then simple magnitude
blue stones
on the floor of a well
thirsting waking

Cigales

Light like prayer or imprecation,
space taut in each direction,
a few flies hammering on glass.

Soon the cross-chant
the chorus to enter or oppose
the sermon under cloud —

but now gentians, canebrake,
yellow broom in margins of foam,
husks of grass.

Cairanne

This morning off the terrace
mountains have triple outlines,

cylinders & teeth
that mirror the grain of the table

where your gaze taps
tiny whorls & ridges.

Past the door in milky glass,
a flailing rope, a dented chair,

trivial yet final

☞ rooted in the frame

smoke of fields
old vine-stocks burning

☞ visible,
unspeakable,

figures with huge arms,
cloud shadows

III
Two for O'Keeffe

Berkshire Morning, for My Mother

Age is like sleep, but from another source.
Listen, it says, touching one lid, & the next,
there's just one choice, it must be

to draw only on reserves, to watch
cedar slab, window square, buds in innumerable gloves,
a butterfly on a stalk, blurring slightly,

to speak only to those who bend & put ears to your mouth,
& in the gaps among distinctions
to let shadows run, slow drafts past the screens,

a tapping,
a tearing of bark, & ferrying of small bits of tissue & chaff,
an immense stratum of debris

ready to claw up, unaware
of any pettiness, along the peripheries
of woods & fences, crowding the oncoming grass.

Apples

– For Lorna

i love you
what words
can say it
forget it soon

the body disposes
banalities
comfortless as angels
& violent

the reposed granite
swinging for ages
the tone
the river edge stunned

by curtains of blackbirds
my eye my tongue
stop confused
nursing these trees

from roads & cold forests
to call gently
from another winter
spring

out of the sand
a bodiless
perch for singing
in which no one will part us

one from the other
the storm from the shaking
thunder from children terrified
they will come to it too

their own answers

hidden under these bridges
we are our own gardens
& the ice floes that fall

*

love hate
begin from the same
dismay

a breath of solitude
the countries
that fall apart

in a wanton breaking
of pairs
we should fall

further
in the sweet act
of lesion

fingers loosening
legs awake
moving

eyes bigger
than nights
nipples chest

a last clearing
of tedious loss
love must carry

its own abuse

Beginning

must i
be starved into it
words fit nowhere
i take them
one by one
& plug my nose

they drop slowly out
rhythmic count them
their masses bring
no awakening
humming
 i take back
everything i have said
everything
 i take back
& plunge into the bright
sky where we
never were
never will be

it radiates
across my snout
i am no mole
to escape
but we are all diggers
& breathe
at the buggery overhead
letting no sound
 drop
 watchman

the night
the plane moves further
into the rim of light
the surrounding darkness
pursues
 scattered

sorrows
a pure bright ring
at last
i awake
the words strike
softly up
& breathe
leniently

Two for O'Keeffe

Pelvis With Moon

The abstractions often the most definite
form for the intangible thing in myself
that I can only clarify or paint.

It must be something she's noticed half
a valley away, for months — an intractable
clear lump, exposed beside some common
rise or track, an eye of blue within a pearl.
Tho when she reaches it, it's gone,
vanished under boulders, roots, dead stumps.
So she knows she has to continue, thrusting
into distance, straddling forms,
delivering them out. Probing. Homing.

*

All day, nothing. This must be accurate, she
thinks, this furious drifting, signs
that mark the site with absence. Slow.
Pass. It is no dream. Hills are whitening,
leaves thinning, vast shelves of sage,
puffs of nuthatch, waxwing. When crows
arrive they take her in their mouths, &
spit her miles off. The place is vacant,
like the end of anything. wind or
concentration. Strata. Apertures. Height. Touch.

*

Or like the sounds the most intimate shapes
make, taking cues from whatever's at hand:
the way nails scrape & fold up from
inside; or how, at the farthest rim,
stars break, lights dip, smoke stirs,
no need to realize anything but what
they said you couldn't bear. How many years

has she known that? She stares, startled, as if
the thing looked back, & uttered all
it saw: this scale & ground, bone-clean, *here*.

Ram's Skull

I am often amazed at the spoken & written
word telling me what I have painted...no
one else can know how my paintings happen.

She's spent the morning putting things
aside, & framing views, of doors,
arroyos, roads silvering toward gravel.
She studies distant textures, how wind
flays cliffs like templates, cuts
a mesa. In a tree, new shadows. Focus
in drifts & petals . It thunders at her.

She's bored. She checks a window. It's
bright, buds spill at crazy angles,
glass leaves, s bull snake looping up
the scrub to butt a house, warm rock,
blank shed. She lets a fist uncurl
48& flicks a horn, deep hull & whorl. Tap
Tap. Outside? It may be speaking in her.

Forgettings. Long delays. Dogs roaming
in them, somewhere past the socket,
toward the jaw. Late yellow in the
half light of a nostril. When she
reaches it it whisks off, chattering,
trembling to attention, depth & shape.
whatever she's figured on for months.

Horizons, stems, a way. The rest predictable.

IV

Gateless Gate

In the Bright Day

Two song sparrows, one within a greenhouse,
Shutting its throat while perched on a wind-vent,
And another, outside, in the bright day,
With the wind from the west and the trees all in motion.

— Theodore Roethke, *Meditations of an Old Woman*

1 *Watching*

The butterflies are mating,
two just now, ragged
cards, one folded deftly
on a window, the other
flicking in quick arcs.
The day is dry, chicken
yellow. Extinction, you'd
say, but it doesn't fit
the breath you draw,
the room where you sit.

*

Is it the edge of space,
the sky poled back, the
leaves looping from huge
heights: just seasonal,
& still growing, making
your skin itch & ripple,
tho all you can think
is "edge," knife-thin, &
"space," a cut incom-
prehensible tho possible?

*

Leaves turn in loose
packs, jumbled beaks
& tails, crazy as slick

chatter. Most things are
drunk with strength, &
pain is an abstraction,
waiting, holding a bag,
saying age is prepar-
ation for madness & death,
give me some bread.

*

The air is stretching
from a humid stench
that held it half a day.
A thin wind laps at
twigs, & your mind, free
of its furniture, slings
notes that empty every-
thing, & keep on after
the last tick, after
the defeat of dread.

2 *Dreaming*

You drop across the floor,
past bells, stairs, grates,
to where roots hang. Boats
approach. Someone steps
out, shoves a doorway back.
You lift.

In one you've
got to get home, halfway
across a line of quick
eclipse & loss of scale.
Your shadow curls up,
blind & hushed. You tip
the knob, the paving,
with a foot. The cusp.

You're in
a yard. The day burns
glove-tight. You sense

anise, kale, sweet
wood. Katydids clatter,
bark, rinds. skin. You
see how to peel, twist,
split, return.

3 *Waking*

When your body starts
to tremble, do you

give up consciousness
as a fine web gives

vibrations back? If
your torso fills with

haste, mouthing its
inner snow, is there

some dimension at the
core, that now is

nameless tho you had
words before?

4 *Walking*

Here prophecy is mere
revelation, a crazy rain
slapping twigs, while
seeds rush out in gar-
lands, tentacles, flares
of dominance. There's
no preparatory blessing.
You pray not to demons
but to the unfixd bodies
that pilot them, across
the stormy mornings,
endless & habitable, in
coils of clouds & sun.



Smell of heat in
the trees. Some-
one's playing Schu-
mann, a summer
noise to carry in
your head. The
dust falls across
the keys rag-
thick in damp-
ness. You want to
listen & survive,
whatever comes.



Then there are the beginnings
of facts, like these leaves,
lobes losing a fine edge, like
a mind that's given up the
personal to become what
it remarks, in a frenzy for
truth surpassing everything,
in order to learn how to
live forever or die. You pull

your hands down thru your
sleeves, dazed as the season
with its thinning blood.
Above, three starlings in the
yellowed hackberry, then the
smooth swipes of instant
rain, dark clotting that barely
speak of the few things you
need to take back into spotted
earth, across these leaves.

5 *Waiting*

What kind of ornament
are these birds
always braiding, unbraiding,
ripping up & knotting back,
tiny trails, rills against
your molded hands,
the thick donuts of your fingers,
the ring where your head shines
a tiny nut
in rounded space?

6 *Listening*

Nothing stays clear. Chewing your ash,
& more or less content. & little to do
but this. & no need to be disturbed.

The sealed air stirs. You check the
windows, pebbles & rain, diffuse
torsions, car tops, blind roofs, a

million dusty fronds. The same wind
moves thru all, dividing, correcting,
tonguing pathways, a surf where

nothing needs protection since it sails
toward the same ripe crash, like gourds
flicked meticulously, tap tap, like that.

1972

Summer, & I see news of kids
pressed in ghettos (the word
is love), & want to waste no-
thing, like the skinny cat I
feed who goes after birds no
matter, & now & then rips one
& drops it under the maples
out back (*what's the good?*)
What is the good? It's summer
on my swollen head, my thick
hands, the stiff lipped dumb
who stomp around my tongue or
starve or sit on washer tops
in seconds stores, dealing
frigidaires, the Wallace but-
tons sticking from their necks
(*you hippie jew, you nigga lov-
in' fag, I'll kiss you on my
mouth if you don't buy it*) &
we walk out. I work for power.
Yevtushenko said it on tv the
other night, before a ghetto
black, *my poem is a mailed
fist*, & made it sound decis-
ive for a minute, tho I know
better, both about poems & a-
bout Yevtushenko (*who buys?
who kills? who dies?*). The pow-
er I work for flickers in &
out, & will not be abused, excis-
ed, & goes its own way to its
own green hell, the hell I say.

Anything You Want

The eaters of men are coming, said the book I'd bought her, *the black eaters of men!* She read it over, chewing on her hair - a boy'd fled island savages, armed only with a dog, knife from a tomb, & chutzpah. *Call It Courage*, c. 1941: be calm, go conquer hell.

Archaic now, taboo, I wanted to say: some of my best friends are cannibals, & no one's escaped yet or chased us here, & someday you'll read *Jew Suss Meets Trader Vic*,

but that's fable too, like Alice on the dark side of the glass. We are all goys, in Pago Pago.

Ch'ad G'ad Yaw

Watch it, I tell the kids, meaning
stop look & listen, & hammer in the
storms, crushing dry spiders & burnt
moths (one fell on the floor last
night, & flipped under the couch, away
from the light).

Things pause, just
grackles checking trees, & we sleep
in a blind calm, until someone's at
the bed, *can I get in, bad dream*, &
breathes against an angel outside,
swatting leaves.

Take a load off
your cells, I think, & hear my
grandmother's, *the old get dark &*
go down, before. unhurried, we
stood & kissed & left.

P'town, Summer Tune

In the fishpond of
our landlady who
has emphysema, in-
cipient angina, a
dead husband who
ignored her, etc.,
frogs pulse & bong.
I stay upstairs,
slap flying ants,
& when the kids
fight bomb down &
calm them gently
as I can. The high
tide fills with
silver sprats, the
sun can blind, trees
pick at the wind &
hold it on its
nose. It's your
father's first
season alone. He
sleeps on the porch,
all screen & glass,
& tells us what
he hears in the
dark: wind, water,
dogs. We are, he
tells us, every-
thing he has.

O Jacob

The rest are in the blankets of
their deepest lives. Only he can't
break his consciousness, taut
tin. His fists go to the window,
beat his head, chest, neck,

his
tepid ghost, working the same
slopes,

nexus, nurture,

words
that drop their feathers on the
dead, angels at the rims of
chain-linked yards & roads.

Down
the hallway, the dog stirs.

*

The
figures of his village past, who
enter grudgingly,
lacking orna-
ment, in sacks, the shadows be-
hind his father,

their thick
hands, their curiosity.

What
is this world, they would have
asked, *how is it made?*

& would
have kept asking that, from
the beginning.

*

In a house where
no dream is possible,
the year

blur east & west across a
ground of sullen sky & edge
of sunlight beating brass.

*

The
quiet evening, with its skills,
is moving toward him like a
touch, on rocks or glass, of
blood.

Its trees, flags, windows
ripple in the wind's ripe
breath. Who, it asks, would
live here in this century,
its
vapors looming in a red white
sun. Who would, or has the
choice?

What angel comes?

For My Father

If the dead are usually vulnerable,
dependent on our love, then
to be empty of them is to be cramped
& panicked, perhaps unbearably,

perhaps not. From moment to moment
a flame swings in my throat,
huge attitudes open in my chest,
your face stands in quiet distance,

staring, tenuous. Often I guess
you're drifting toward me, carrying
your bag of thunderous ripples, &
my inability to comprehend you,

to profit by your restlessness.
For hours I've sat here, considering
your light, your ground under
my feet. All's real, & nothing lasts.

Photo of My Daughter

She must be wandering apart from us, who stand quietly before the the frame. The day is on her face, her skin luminous, her eyes tall with some surprise behind our backs. Beside her, one branch has lost its leaves. We who move in squares destined for families know the worst: each choice is like the next, there's also sunlight breaking ice & sky, despite all doubt & lack. It is that blatant, why say it any other way? She is not looking at us.

For Su Tung-P'o

A day breathes thru an end, another one,
all dark, which says, I am
one better, tho it coughs up clouds
like liquid, fat curled leaves, dead
pears, a redbud turned all skeleton, &
things less sentimental: a constant knock
of rakes & bells & talk that clamps
our sanity, our sleep.

I think, to clear
my head, of intelligent Chinese, & then
I see them, watching boats on huge rivers,
drawing from mountains, trees, feeling
tall altho they may be just two hands, a
head, some feet. One rubs a pool
of ink, smooths paper, prints characters,
links all to each, & drinks all night,
hilarious, without addiction. One
praises the moon, & speaks carelessly of exile.

Gateless Gate

Wind, & a scattering of splinters, blades
hitting the window, littering the grass.
Few things keep still at any moment. Most must be trapped,

but not even that's true: mountains, clouds hang on for a long
time in their places,
even great trees, rocks, coyotes under stress, a line of ants pulsing
in dusty earth,

& you can also stare from the quietest sites for hours
& eventually give up your terror, & emerge.

*

Nothing is lost.
To shield any flame in both hands like a cliché
is to keep coming on it again & again.

*

After years the voices you need appear beside you,
their wings wide targeted webs, their antennae furred.
You hear them rip & bow, their edges hingeing finely.

*

Closure is a shape.
You can watch your self recede.
What you expect has no figure
except as had been.

*

You want it gone.
When you find that impossible, you ask it to stop.

It does. It doesn't.
What the pulse rides

(left forefinger, bump near a vein, back of the neck)
the self just holds
& exposes.
There is only this work.

*

Mornings! they're the same! Most things
are final, light. air, guilt, fury. They don't
vanish when you sleep, don't wander away.

*

All day a cloud, a bird facing its shadow,
a moment, a vacant wall.

*

Enter quietly the plain of your being
with its mild noises, black seeds, cicadas, redwings.

Think of Van Gogh painting petals, exposing heat that erodes
fields daily,
surrendering in lethargy & terror (to be asleep in the web is
Think terror),
watching night fade like a father's skin, flushed with whorls
Think of rough red,
far from intelligibility
as at the heart of a pond lies a sun.

A tide is out.
No need for eloquence, nor to die of what has hold of you.

These lines reflect exactly the tattered pulse of morning
zazen.

Things come, go.
Gateless gate, & hinge.

V

Climbing Out of the Moon

Fall Journal, for Leonora

Three days before my father's Jahrzeit,
like an ache, waking, when I've slept the wrong way,
that stays for hours, moored to my gait & pace,
I'm trapped in the personal, paying out its threads,

a dog gnawing trash, a grackle pecking grass,
an old man's shrug as he sits luminous on a couch,
his throat softly pumping in the empire of less,

a fury always alongside, behind, within.

*

Walking to the mesa, Ojo Caliente, I hear a Hopi proverb,
"Face goes where spirit does,
but gets there earlier."
Sure. That's the role of faces.
They're open to whatever they encounter, snake-coil, nettles
of moist dark,
pools of pebbled water.
I bend & palm a cup. My hands dry red.
They're eager to gather anything,
a rim of Anasazi pot, a grid of tiny bones,
the heart in its wily chest.

*

What am I to do with the lies I've abandoned,
voiceless & in a hurry,
& from moment to moment still in sight of each other?

This morning each morning stirs calmly on its wire.
Trees assemble in pale swathes,
figures on the horizon who haven't spoken in months.

Late summer. Is my spirit dancing?
Can it stay balanced, like a bag an irritable clerk
slaps on a scale, tosses over his shoulder?

*

It's clear that what she needed to say
wasn't being said. That what she was
wrapped in was blind, blinder than anything
she carried inside,

with its familial smell
‡ ache, its arc of speech
gone too
in heat,
October afternoon, leaves piling toward
my shoes,

‡ on my desk a sky-blue crystal
dove, a tiny saucer with initial ‡ a fringe
of floral curves,

gifts from my kids, to
hold me here, beside an arrowhead, a fist-
sized grinding stone,

a photo with its
double phase (Here We Are, What Is Here),

‡
last week's news,
our trust the gentle can
survive –
suicide,
a phrase to break apart
for days, as if I could scratch through.

*

Daily I imagine it wandering, the soul,
perched on a rock, threading its hook, sorting barbs,
excesses of torn flesh,
then the drop into the lake of forgetting,
the string taut,
the calm face loading memory again

until it plunges to another border,
sky's deep heat,

mind's airy caul,

lightning that illumines the fraying mask,

"boundless openness"

Ha Shem

My God the soul that Thou has placed in me is pure

*

The way things refuse to vanish, breathing as long as
possible,

what to think of them? how deal with them?

Most hang on, fatigued, twisting veins, sticking to gutters,
sides of sheds.

Boom. Boom.

I want to make a sound like thunder, to gather something so
something different will emerge.

Boom.

I'm raking soberly, for hours, flogging ruined systems
toward the street, & past.

I'm in my yard, the only watcher.

Do I open my hands? Do I see how I love my life?

Postcards from the Musée Valère

– For Cony Nelson

1 *Cemetery by the Sea*

The cypresses that shudder
when we enter, flash us toward

whatever we encounter, angels
packed in arches, photos rimmed

by brass, names that at a distance
say the deep past lying here

has little baggage & less mass
than sun-fringed walls weeds shade

scattered between ice-dark
& dusty green, wind cracking

joint & skin, a thousand blades
pitched for rage & clarity.

2 *Portrait at Desk*

Does openness last if
syntax stops? Or is it

the player's hand that
tips the stress of

barely gaining, a tossed
pebble pausing so

the speed of descent &
arousal are the same?

Need is a form of spirit
just like these cigales

each hour dropping gritty
shells, gathering, & letting

the day disperse. How late
it must be, absent friend.

A Last Letter from Connecticut

There is no chance, I think, of any new poems. Most of the time, when I am at home, I drowse.

— Wallace Stevens

Imagine him near midday, feeling nothing
but stupor, ripe as oranges left out
in sun, advanced & purposeless, tender to

a touch, drawn down toward shallows past
anguish or shame, a Pennsylvania barn,
a space below the beams that held the huge

floor high, & let big horses trample easily
years back, when things were lighter,
steadier, more sensate – incessant ripples,

strawy droppings, cupfuls of dark clay, a
hundred flies gone calm, a butterfly
shaking its sails, a brief bird, & another,

followed by the same – before the scene
can empty, scattering under curtains, folds
where syntax fumbles, the way old pages

gather & spit flames (no chance), the city
booms (I drowse), the first boards catch.

For Franz Rosenzweig

We do not root in earth and so we are eternal wanderers,
but deeply rooted in our own body and blood.

— The Star of Redemption

How do I test
my pleasure in this full moon,
& the first cool after a week's feverish heat,
& these deep pitched katydids
so close I listen hours before deciding what to expect,

since there's always self, & history,
immense dreams, shadowing the surface of this world,
spitting out the stems.

*

Remembering is present tense.
No memory, no waste.
So these photos, synagogues in Poland, 1938,
tangled faces, shining in the diamonds of an
irreducible time,
personal as any psalm,
preserved in thin scrolls, scripts to chant for centuries,
insisting on each vowel, since if one fails to parse
God still will get it right,
so grief might vanish, worn to a last dimension.

*

The rest are in the blankets of their deepest lives,
but I can't break my wakefulness.
My fists go to the window, flail at chain-linked yards

where my fathers loom, & the shadows behind their
fathers,

their pounding curiosity,
their *what is this world, how is it kept?*

& in a house where no peace is possible

I stagger to the door, drop shaggy hoof & coat
& enter a century of desolate voice & air.

O Jacob, your dwelling places, here in the dawn's ripe
breath,
under crusted sun:
is this just dream? Who has a choice? What angel
comes?

*

Did each day fill slowly, for those Jews?
Did their pleadings to the Father
resign them to the air I breathe now?

Such questions fray in season,
attentive only to what must be guessed,
a flame, a presumption of rage.

When I open my palm a voice spills out,
another guest.

*

This light's abnormal, but chokingly beautiful.
Objects bank in it,
shaking off indifference that dusts all shoulders.

Thunder closes from the west, sky flushes darkly,
bowls of clouds trail the contours of each hand
pulsing in quiet tremors to the edge.

Photo, 1943

Lord, you arrive on a plain sea
in moments of sweet boredom
& roll the gravel in your chest
& walk off toward something else
before we plunge in any direction,
like these women who sat on a couch,
smoking, touching their hair, lipstick
gleaming, while their mother, my
grandmother, stared with one good eye,
the other marble, clouded quietly.
Clothed in black. Hands in her lap.

Hokyoji, *June, 1995*

Past noon my pulse breathes
in long slow closures into heat

underground
a finger of lava hour by hour

words fall away
splintering toward a core

I can touch but that's illusion
there is no center truth has a wide perimeter

so every form of extravagance
unknots & leaves

blinking furiously staring into
compassion peace

*

Standing outside my tent to pee
night edged with fireflies
cut field & high grass a bowl
of double shadows west
northwest clusters of stars
there's nowhere else
simply a record of space

*

Auroral an opening a sign a touch
before knowing starts a sort

of discovery one flares another tunes
the next extends a fourth responds but

the rhythm is stable a matter of unimpeded

rising after days

a gathering of others to one's chest
just before the horizon swells shoulders

shrinks to a hair an
opened panel jewel or rock

*

I can only go forward
gazing at ruin while sounds deepen
into brief cries
annunciations
fur drawn through a comb
sparrows shrilling from the eaves at dusk

*

Begin with burning need
(thunderous abandoned)
☞ then with burning plunge

Mountain Seat

Don't think

— Tozen Akiyama

O wild confusion, I need a different act,
a cadenza to be played without hurry
as when we climbed through clouds of butterflies

then lightning, long slants of solid rain
before sky cleared, boulders dried.
☞ a clutch of finches burst out, chittering, from a
fir.

*

At times I want to stride past waywardness,
as if I'd been dipped in a river of gold,
a dream of sumptuous scales,

where the squeal of a gas saw slicing branches next
door,
mites streaming over an air-conditioner's hum,
a small dog chained up in the heat, yelping for
company

are blossoms of some locus
that speech laps ☞ releases,
each pause a waterfall.

*

The burden isn't the absence of release
but that words aren't illusion so much as shadows,

☞ Tozen's "Don't think" is a kid's cheap whistle
while storms at night lift the late May
mini-drought,
☞ there's nothing to get, no other place of arrival.

Homage, Basho - 2

Swallows over a mud-flooded path,
bits of wings cut by water,
sky of brilliant granules, whirling, bolting,

a juncture of pulse & emptiness
a river of stars, a wall of glass.

*

If I sit in the center of a province, in the center of a
desert,
I sit in absence, laying out its grid.

Doors slam.
A dog lies hump-backed, quiet as slate,
blood pounding her small sack,

while close in the west
wind tips the horizon with a sweep of easy silver.

*

Rain again, stupefying, shaking blades, white roots,
summer grass/ the warriors/ dreaming,

the light peering in as if we frighten it,
we two, folded on each other, loving ourselves to
death.

*

The late afternoon hushed, impenetrable,
like a fresh start at something,
sunlight beating hard along the floor,
blind white,

phrases falling like shards, worms caked on rinds,
Great Anger

longing to thicken

What else?

What twist of heart?

A higher flame among the open trees?

*

Before I go in, I stand on the steps, studying the heavy
sky, the
clouds like scars.

Wind in the branches.

Wild boars & all/ swept/ in autumn storms.

A roof leak tapping quietly.

*

Rage,

old appetite, indifferent as illusion,

I drift in, out,

forsaking, returning.

Hours go by

until I lift my head.

Every pebble stays.

The rest dissolves.

Waste darkens in its hiding place.

*

I'm a creature in a house

where the backyard maple blows leaves all day in wild
clusters,

& the act of giving up

meets the decimal surrender,

& the mystery is in the ordinary,

the uninflected,

from which most scripts

have fled.

*

Several dreams:

A ship pounding forward, shaking.

A savage darkness after.

Then a wheel, incessantly brushing splotches of sun,
bone, stems,
paranoias, inaccuracies.

If all phenomena are themselves reality,

any condition is the condition of happiness.

Hui-neng, *"What need to keep the mirror bright?*

Where is there room for dust?"

*

Compassion

A small cheep in thick clouds,

bright beak at the core of hell:

Deep fall/ my neighbor/ what's he doing now?

Santoka

Once rid of gravity days bloom backward,
without scale or bud.
None appease the craving to be swallowed by the inner
world,
its little roots in snowy clusters,
gauze & pink, brief yellow, fireweed.

Do I stare at their brilliance
not to master
but to remember what failed earlier?
To what will I return, & when?

*

What could it be, this passion to follow a cul de sac,
a tight turn, an abyss,
repair grave peel flower torque,
such sunny fronds,
flesh-dry, irreducible,
simple sounds, as the cardinal
just preened & whistled across three
seasons to absorb a flame?

*

Back yard, warm afternoon,
croak gabble of sandhill cranes overhead,
shadows not yet emerged,
a tremulous anarchy,
that must be spun away,
like twenty
grackles suddenly risen
off the grass, across bare branches,
into a scree of rain,
pasted on the sky
like small marks
projected before sleep
to map
the unbridgeable.

For Dainin Katagiri

1

After I decide to give up, in an anguish
of forgetting, maybe some phrase remains
in my fist, like a pebble, a prayer, “Father
of Lights,” of shattering, our dead. Maybe

I walk for hours, wondering if I really
consider loss simple, to be filled in
like old road-cuts, fields in patches seen
from heights. Maybe the world will let me off,

or there’s little to say, someone’s already
said it, though I may need to notice it.
Then what is the way, how break
the glass, & talk of mindless things,

dust on cornflower petals, huge dock leaves
swaying above the sidewalk cracks?
How can I speak? What name for anything?

2

There is the pain. The pain of coming
to focus, of being less & less, of
seeing oneself change blindly, not
for the better, while understanding

with less pleasure. A resonance,
a way of slowly conjuring, groping
for years, then finally grasping
whatever I’m doing. Whatever it is,

it must be clear. Pain is part of the
clarity. If no one responds, that’s no reason.
In the deepest pain no one is there,
that’s what the word means. Pain in the

ass, hand, thumb, arthritis of the jaw,

mind, memory itself, of slaughtered
millions, of all grief, all turning
aside, becoming rocks. Understanding this.

3

Often it comes back, in the sharp cry
of a bird approaching a big window, & the
echoes of other voices farther off,
as if someone's watching, listening. But
past that the air keeps filling with

distorted leaves, & I go on circling
by stones tossed up in my path,
then suddenly there's more: glass
of Giotto green & blue, a frame the birds
keep nearing, lifting vertically across.

O how can anything fly through such squares
of liquid sky? That must be it, before
I strike, to know that instantly,
it makes the instant possible, brilliant
& intact, since air, light, absence can

enter it like knives, despite the shattering.
Also great joy, you said, & opening.

Feeding the Bear

For my father, *Berhesch*

Trees are crooked & bloated.

A neighbor & her dog walk awkwardly by a tiny cardinal
marking a ragged
shrub.

Grackles, purple tongues, spear through the disheveled yard.
A squirrel flings electric arcs.

To the north there's debris & pulse, to the south trash & pulse,
east & west are
cliché & pulse.

As for arrhythmias, they kill, like Mahler's, filling his chest in the
great

booming 9th,
or the smoked salmon I just chewed, dense oily layers, pink
chalice of bones,
& the dull blustery weather, snapping huge branches instantly.

*

That winter you sat in your closet, silver, porcelain, ivories
shining around
you,

that you'd wrestled from the world,
antiques whose photos you carried in your pockets for years,
to thrust them on strangers,
saying, though at times you knew better, *this stuff I love*.

Father, most of what I've done is a blur grounded in mist.
I open my fingers, it fades; I close, it gathers again.
Green covers the seams of shapes waiting cramped in long ranks
while my words crack,
their plots half broken,

& that, in dealing with The Great Fears
of "dying, losing sanity, losing livelihood, losing reputation,
speaking before

large crowds,”
not reaching out irritably is an act of skill,
‡ that from moment to moment one can salvage a few things,
breathing some intact ‡ giving others over, like wet leaves off
shoes

*

Codas of speech, relinquished names, pasts I barely regretted,
a perfect ribbon that I follow,
both hands passing a rope around my waist
in readiness.

Father, of the perceptions descending toward us,
for which do I plead?
Affection, grief,
the air you sucked back,
over the drop on your lip above your chin
the day I left for good?

Light each morning seems the same.
Trees hover like clouds at the back of a lake
or a child touching its mouth.

I can feed the bear my own way.
Toward the darkness of the world I turn my face.

Climbing Out of the Moon

Seeing it again
the long uncomfortable reaches
the bare spots chutes
where a finger tore a fist sized scarp

*

A weed-lined corridor
a dozen doors

someone slapping the static out of his head
belching scratching

cloudscapes pellets
of indelible snow

*

Pines on a ridge
white grass

A murmuring to one side
Such light

VI

The Blade of Manjusri

Love Poem

Sky one morning over a New Mexico gully.
Pinyon, mesquite, a distant river over rocks,
small birds settling once something large has passed,
your face so close it could be an element.
I can see all that clearly now, & past.
Sometimes I can't.

Summer, Late

& a cardinal begins in the far yard,
under the tiny stems, the cities of leaves,
a looping *wheeler whee why*
that pulls my body back
from its long contract with anguish & death.
I can see cardinals out here often,
on chairs, in snow, on scattered can, drab grass.
There's also deep jo, Katagiri said, when
I said I saw awakening as grief,
the soul going off like a match,
flash.

Soundings

A jay flings over the lawn three stories down.
I'm ready for anything.
When I look again light hangs metal on the trees.
motors whir, the house sinks in the haze
& sings of desolation, trough calls to trough,
sand fills my mouth, I clutch pebbles
& want to talk without resolving anything.

*

I take dirt & hold it to my face,
taste its moisture & let it go,
scattering stinky clods,
dust spurs, beetle shells

in the light dusk, again, again.

*

Small black fruit, tiny gonads show overnight,
in the yellowing hackberry.
Soon waxwings will arrive, unabashed,
testy, in steel gray bellies & dark hoods.
A few bees slice at the window, curve off in damaged
hooks.
I wave at dust rings, corpses at Pompeii,
fists tangled, knees to mouth.

*

Trees raise branches
to say something about exposure
in spaces where it's getting colder.
Why be thin as paper,
rocked over roofs,
under clouds like scrolls unrolling,
whose print we are?

Fall Piece

O the potato shell of this world,
arms out, high stalks, wings shining.
It may freeze tonight,

& my iron thumb
that's never made anything grow very well,
indoors or out,

tho it's made little difference.
O my iron thumb.

Remnant

An unexamined life is worth nothing,

except to the sleeper who pulls it thru an alley
where examined things lie rusting.

Little Soul

Does its last breath rest somewhere?
Will others inhale it too?

℘ is God that pumping in its chest
telling his angels not to respond, not yet?

Quick Fix

In the universe of spiders
a single web

in the single web of the universe
the spiders

One spider
in the single web own the universe

one spider
one web

Jahrseit for My Father

I swim in old words
like a cripple scrambling for a cane

bewildered between window ℘ wall
table glass, candle glass,

my voice angling
across clichés to mourn

the diamonds on my palm,
the rainbows in the grass.

Hakuin

One evening while Shoju was cooling himself on a veranda, Hakuin presented a verse. 'Delusions & fancies,' Shoju said. Hakuin shouted back, 'Delusions & fancies!' Shoju siezed him, rained twenty or thirty blows upon him, and pushed him off the veranda.

— Mike Sayama, Samadhi

O zazen. Wind blows
the steep afternoon thunder.

I reach for a slot to drop
pain & feel it bunch & disperse,

then knit together again.
I stop, knowing I can always

stop further. Yesterday a tornado 40 miles north
demolished a trailer,

knocked a dozen homes & several people about,
lifted a man out of his kitchen & threw him

against a shed, lifted a garage with
a car inside but left the car intact,

& the woman in it. Today in the half
dark of midday tree trunks look

blanker, plainer than ever.
I can see their detailed

cracks & layerings & borings & ridges.
Whatever is necessary is here, here,

where it's always been. Shoju to Hakuin
in his desperation, *Dead monk in a cave!*

shoving him into the mud, where he lay

face down. I have fallen between

labor & labor. I blink, shake, look up.
Rain is approaching, air like a vice.

Thru a patch of higher stems
the sky is turning. I can forget the rest.

I can forget the need for blessing.
What do you want, says a voice.

I can clap & exhale.
I can begin by laughing.

I Keep Hearing a Fan Swirl

& the flap of sparrows in the billion towers of leaves,
moltings, cascades, riddles I want to see again before I
fall,
gripping the rung under my claws,
hearing a darkness pack the shadows by my beak.

Casually

is how things start, & end, rarely
as expected, tho a brief junction
often joins them at the middle. Like
now. I'm upstairs. listening to my
wife & daughter talk about clothing
in quick snippets, & staring down-
yard at the brilliant chokeberries
in the deep green rags of bushes.
Oh let go, I think, the rest takes
care of itself, tho in detail it's un-
predictable: the slip-slap of a heli-
copter that just buzzed the house,
then our stunned alertness, then my
urge to be exact about the tinge of
red in veins, dots, flowers, slashes

sky, time, place where lives keep
racing at their own fierce pace.
ineptitude, or calm sufficiency.

Summer Group, Long Island, Painting by Alex Katz

They may be dreaming the whole thing,
the channel buoy swinging, the boat

bobbing & tipping, the sail ready to
descend, the bowsprit's whoof flap

slap. Heat, weeds, shells, scales
tonguing odd bits of skin. moths

furious on screens, unimpassioned
spiders, trees khaki-dry & mushroom

pale. That's how it happens: floods
of weather wrinkling the charts, the

way they lean toward each other under
pressure, pleasure, grief, lucky to

witness every instant, to survive
by whim, charm, all of the above.

Cicadas

As if a wire had snapped, & plunged thru clumsy dark,
shearing weeds, tiny umbrella stems,
wrapped in horny circuits, back & back,
near, within, around us,
in gutters, hinges, throats.

*

Be ready. The climate hasn't changed.
When I call a chipper voice tells me time, humidity,
high-low.

I tongue the sea ridge of my palate, teeth & warty
flesh.

Everything's in place, scored with growth.

*

Sometimes the horizon narrows to a closet
where an insect stirs memory of dusty coats,
their high domed collars, camphored folds
ready for seasons long worn through,
leaving spotted flesh,
while it continues,
the only creature in the universe without light, or rest.

Radii

I hold two candles, one in each hand.
Each day I blow one out, the other is renewed.
As for my mind, it has its potholes & dead ends.
Daily a postman seeks an address there,
& finds my mother's lovely face, my brother's height,
my children's outstretched palms.
We're diverse, but he can recognize us by our fates
& flaws,
& the radiance thrown by the candles, one glowing
incessantly,
out of the central void I'm walking from.

Summer Sesshin

Circles
hands, palms up
& arms

*

Staring
at the rough cedar
of the will

*

Nothing less
this
silent shore

*

Dimmed by
a bleak
morning ahead

*

On a single rim
failure
& breath

*

Always
put the stone down
let it fall

*

My father in his chair
legs swollen
“my mind never stops”

*

Circling the dead
one's
ceaseless breath

*

Suddenly a small leaf
yellower
then the rest

That Earth Can Burn with What is Real

First there was panic, then waking up.
West, north, I see what I love,
thunderheads, a gauze of fields,
dry sticks, a stitching of late light.