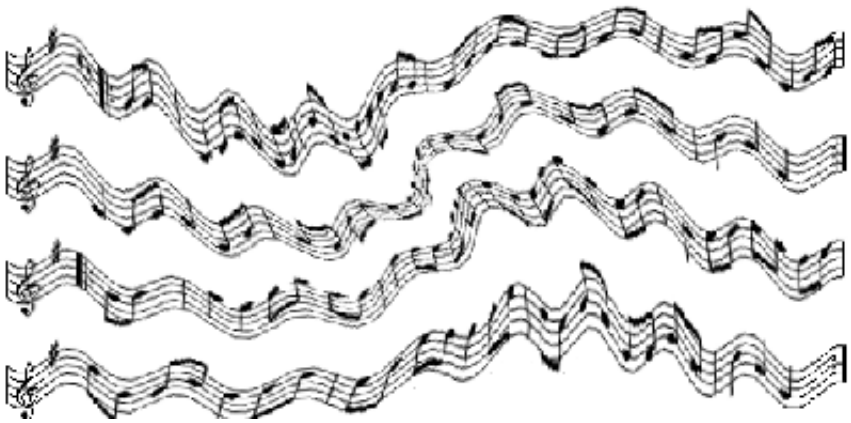
Found Music
Poems by Jeffery Triggs

For Sara

1992, 1996, 1999





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I. New Poems

Kinderszenen

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

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

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

The musician fled me, though his clubfooted symphonies
continued quite some while, (I can still hear one solo
played on a horn above soft, *tremolo* strings -
when I write today, it's right here *obbligato*
if you only heard...), but my best dream was already gone.
As one knows, without having to look out a window,
that the light has changed, a storm is coming on,
I'd know to start dreaming something else, something
for late starters, though it too require years
of practice, years of dedication, something

needing no teacher, though it aspire, silently,
to the condition of music after all.

Midlife Mirrors

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

Schiller

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

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

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

It hurts, and therefore I live. In the sobered eyes
I find something familiar, something
I might own to (though they wince to see themselves),
and even the five-o'clock-shadow face
bears yet some semblance of the serious boy
who still peers out at me from pictures. The lips
of the young poet quivering to recite his love.
The slightly frowning brow that knows all this already.
Here is no surprise then.

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

Cleaning Up
For Charlotte Elena

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

Sandbox, Soldiers

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

Eight
For Jeffery David

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

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

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

Sometimes I grope back through the dusty stores
of my own memory, past twenty, past sixteen,
even beyond being eight.
I am six
and quite uneager one night to fall asleep alone.
My father comes to talk with me, sitting by the narrow bed.

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

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

Pinewood Derby
for Jeffery David, and Jeffery, and David

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

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

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

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

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

handle the wheels himself, but they must be straight.

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

He wants to see it *go* and cannot understand
why I keep taking the wheels on and off again,
and do not let it fly across the room
(as Nature meant) to slam into a wall.
I think he might try, himself, the first coat of paint
(we've chosen royal blue), but it's oil based
and even if I had some turpentine
at hand, I do not relish rubbing his fingers clean.
It's hard explaining that we have to wait now,
that tomorrow *I'd* better do the finishing coat.
Perhaps, when I find a proper weight, file it,
and weight it out, he might glue it into place.

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

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

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

The Last Spring of the Millennium
For Jeffery David

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

under the northern walls and pine boughs and feel
a fine benignity of the warming air,
the invitation to new life, the primal
energy that has not grown weary with years.
You've known but eight springs of these thousand,
yet you sense it. ''Dad, I see an angel's blossom.''
I'm not sure what an angel's blossom is,
but it must be good, all full of April
and the spring, this feeling that propels us
to outgrow ourselves as the blossom its bud and bole,
to put on our best white, wingling as angels do,
to live together the young season under the old sun.

Watching for Snow
for Charlotte Elena, Age 16, January 2, 1999

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

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

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

Are the predictions right? will it snow now after all?
or is it simply grim with wind and hail and rain?
We wait, uncertain yet, searching together the dark
windowpane for signs: a distant glimmer in some outside
light, a telltale tapping of the crystal
dancing flakes, and as I watch you poise now,
ready to leap into whatever scenes will come
when the glass shall brighten with revealing day.

Aspiring to the Condition of Espresso

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

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

Back then I worked at pronouncing the funny names:
osso buco, *strufoli*, or something *cacciatore*.
Our talks were laced with Italian I'd sense and feel
if not always understand. It was always something different:
the Italy of her youth, her wondrous sense
that the earth moved on her first train ride to Naples,
her youthful sadness at the news of Rei Umberto's death,
the woman from her village who pretended to read
only to be caught holding her book upside-down:
''*Stupido*, don't you know all the *best* people read this way?''
I used to write translations of her proverbs:

‘‘The habit does not make the monk,’’ of course;
yet in the next breath ‘‘Clothes do make the baron.’’
‘‘The head that does not think becomes a squash.’’
‘‘*Aspetti cavallo*, wait horse, the grass will grow.’’
Of course there were many stories of her father,
the country doctor who fought with Garibaldi,
sang in the church choir only to meet the woman
he made his wife, who played the flute and wept
when having lost a tooth to age he could no longer play;
the story of her first trip far from home,
a visit to America that somehow never ended.
And there were her dreams, mystical premonishings
of her father’s death, of her children being born;
one where she called out to my father who walked right past her.

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

Central Park, Sunday
for Sara

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

Kampf
For Professor Edward Glas

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

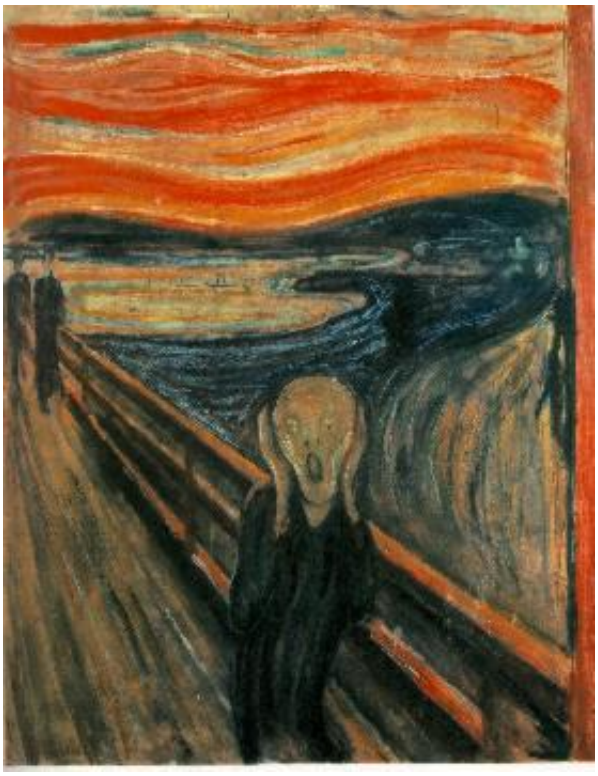
When we first learned you'd died (one dreary Sunday
otherwise quite ordinary, drizzly, dull,
spread with the New York Times) it seemed almost
impossible. I could still picture you a hundred ways:
the mock-fierce, Prussian eyes that would light up
suddenly in ironic smiles, the ''famous'' stance
at the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

So, you're going over now to the soft side.
That's OK, as long as you don't go too *far*.
Now, barely *mezzo del cammin*, so much gone with you.

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

II. Detail of the Last Judgment

Edvard Munch--The Shriek 1910



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

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

He has released the undulant world
like a womb.

This is the only shape such terror knows,
all contortion of flesh,
all noise--
helpless as a whisper against eternity.

Paul Delaroche--The Execution of Lady Jane Grey for Charlotte Elena

All are in place: the weeping servant girls
who cannot bear to look, the ministering priest,
the patient executioner with polished blade
ready in hand, the venerable oak block
contrasting strangely with the one-day straw.
And Lady Jane herself, blindfolded, terrified,
her brief seeing in the complicated world
already done, kneels with her best satin gown
drawn to a murderous décolleté.
The artist has delighted in the clash of textures here:
satin and steel, velvet and burnished wood,
straw and the poor girl’s length of red-gold hair
so soon to be incarnadined. Another bride to death.
Others pass blithely by this scene, but you, my little one,
bring to it your four year old passionate stare,
an innocence, like hers, confronting death
(which even wise ones can’t explain) as by necessity,
and a regard of love to span the blank centuries
hanging suspended where the servants dare not look.

Deathmask of a Girl Drowned in Paris--1895

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

Attic Stele on a Child's Tomb

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

The Lacemaker Ca 1666



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

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

John Brett--The Stonebreaker--1857-58

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

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

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

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

Hughes--April Love--1855-56

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

Gainsborough--Giovanna Baccelli--1782

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

Sargent--Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose--1885-86

The elements of this painting mesh so well
that there seems little to say, but to remark
Dorothy and Polly lighting lanterns in their garden
in Broadway, in summer, in twilight, innocent.
Surrounding them, to set off their innocence,
lush grass and a full complement of flowers:
‘‘carnation, lily, lily, rose.’’
Tall white rubrum lilies tower over the girls
mid clusters of pink and deep red roses, and yellow
carnations scatter palely at their feet. The lanterns
even are like exotic flowers, gold and red, or unlit
coolly blue. But pinning of color to thing
is arbitrary and abstract. The momentary light
is everything to our view. White is never white:
the girls’ dresses stream with ochre, green, pale blue,
the light of the lanterns leaps to their hands and faces
redish gold, an echo of the lilies’ dangling stamens.
Even the grass shows a range of hue that hardly
can be named with green. The colors merge here
in the harmony of one moment all their own, remaining
when the flowers and girls have faded and are gone.

Death on the Battlefield: Photograph from the Spanish Civil War

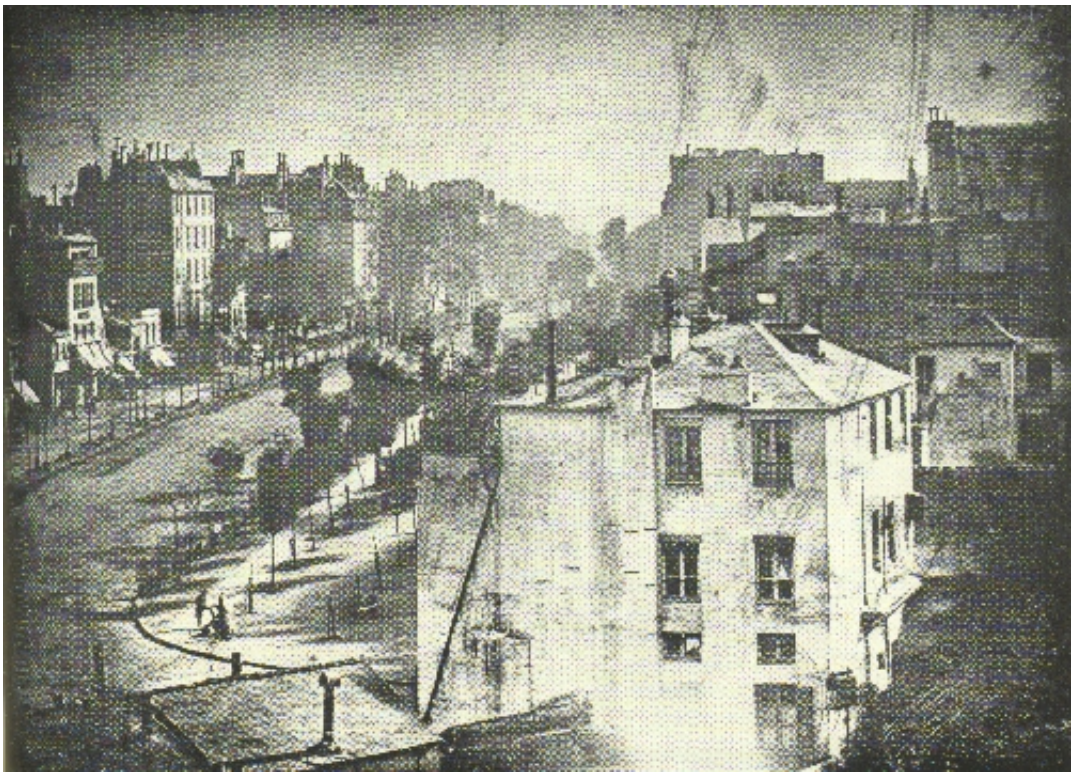
Beneath his feet, teeming
the earth swoops; above him
the sky is as blue, perhaps, as this one today
powdered by a cloud or smoke. What matter?
Our attention, of course, is riveted in black and white
upon the pure agony held motionless:
his body’s helpless loss of grace,
his contorted features, the bit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

Horse Dying at his Cart--Andre Kertesz



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

Paris Boulevard by Daguerre--1839



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

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

Young Lady Aged 21, Possibly Helena Snakenborg--1569

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

III. Life Masks

‘‘Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt
weiss’ was ich leide’’ *Goethe*

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

Aubade

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

Hamlet knew it, when Shakespeare

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

Marvelous to drink the riddle of October

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

First Cup of Coffee, a daydream for S

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

Antiques

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

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

A Small Secular Song

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

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

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

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

Lear's Wife

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

Young Woman Combing Her Hair

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

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

The cat in the window is very lazy of the sunlight

of the breeze in the tall, shaggy locust trees
of the birdcalls too distant to be of use
of the hour of noon which can bewitch us all.
The cat in the window
green-eyed against the green of summer
concerns himself only on occasion
with an insect or a butterfly passing by.
The cat in the window, sure,
will never notice us or mind or tell
how we have spent our noontime well
and happy and almost alone.

Like a fig, or maybe like the universe

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

For Sara

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

Apples--for Sara

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

Grunts

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

IV. Commuting

Bird House at the Bronx Zoo -- for the Zanders

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

Tigers of the Moscow Circus

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

The Peacock

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

Undertow -- Bethany Beach, Delaware

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

Home Run

Inside the boarded, chain-link fence, cries,
importuning and important, sound.
Bodies scatter randomly like dice,
then reassemble on familiar ground;

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

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

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

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

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

‘‘If only I had known,’’ he says, and sighs.
Now they are signaled in: like a balloon
the game collapses, and regretful cries
chase each other to the locker room.

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

Verzweiflung

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

Inside my mind a mild-mannered madman

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

Birdsong I

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

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

Nesting

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

At the Sea Shore--for my father

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

Portrait of the Author as a Child--for my father

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

Commuting to Montclair

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

V. Found Music

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

Dandelions

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

A Snail in Abersoch

for Charlotte Elena

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

Lines for Gregory

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

Three Old Women

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

Rose of Sharon

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

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

For Charlotte Elena, Three Weeks and One Day

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

Scene from Swan Lake--for Charlotte Elena

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

To Charlotte Elena, Dancing

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

Rilke's Carousel, Jardin du Luxembourg

for Charlotte Elena

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

Children’s Voices, Jardin du Luxembourg

for Charlotte Elena

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

Cleanup

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

For Charlotte Elena

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Sara

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

Bellcore Geese for Sara

Geduld ist alles. -Rilke

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

A Room for Charlotte Katcher

Evenings it catches California light,
last light, second-story light filtered
with green-gold oak leaves--banners in the dusk--
the stuff that dreams are made on.
Autumns it gives upon two carpets of
red leaves, dogwood and maple, gathering down
softly, slowly to the November ground
that hardens with dreams of winter.
New Years it witnesses great drifts of snow
that build the porch roof in mysterious shapes,
fais do-do-ing flakes whipping to windy music
against the frosted panes.
Always it imagines--perfect fiction yet--
its wide-eyed boy eager with fresh dreams
of sea-discovery or love that make
this room an everywhere.

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

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

For Jeffery David

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

For Jeffery David, Age Three Weeks and One Day

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

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

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

Your fingers, of an almost fetal delicacy,
grasp one of mine, the awkward giant
scarred and blunt with use. Yours are inutile,
fresh funny things that wear their baggy skin
like ill-fitting trousers. Tipped with razory nails
(thumb still unopposing), they barely reach.
And still I feel their force, a born strength
making but the first of many claims.
The fingers already--so small one squints

to see them--are whorled with personality;
the palms, with heavy Shar-Pei creases,
even now are rich with fate.

Learning About Gravity -- for Jeffery David

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

Ungeheuere for my father

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

December

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

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

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

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

And so we cling, two and three together,
piteously in our passing, scrabbling life
from the earth and the thin air, and in
the dark cold of the year leap at April
at all cost and through all fear.

For Charlotte Elena, Age 10, January 2, 1993

‘‘Und zehn Jahre sind nichts...’’
-- Rilke

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

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

And now you wake, and with a yawny smile
begin ten more, happily, towards the
millenium we’ve dreaded and beyond.
By tens you inch into the history of your kind.

Found Music

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glory

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

A Letter to Michael (1954 - 1962)

I.

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

II.

I don't remember all that much really. You'll have to forgive me for turning out forgetful like the rest. I remember when you first came to school, how I wrote an essay about the new boy who had made many new friends, ‘‘especially me’’. I still remember struggling with the spelling of that ‘‘especially’’. And how your mother let you ride all the way across town to play. I don't remember where I heard the news, or who told me. But I still see your empty desk at school and with a bit of effort feel my seven-year-old gloom, my shocked and battered incredulity (another difficult word). Nowadays, no doubt, a crew of ‘‘childhood trauma professionals’’ would descend on our class with briefcases full of therapies, but we made do with a few words from the teacher and a schoolyard of rumors and the overwhelming evidence of your unattended desk (hardly big enough for me to sit at now) that still held your ‘‘things’’ -- rulers and pencils and erasers and brown-paper-covered books with words like ‘‘READING’’ in your childish hand. On the playground some days after, I made an ass of myself. I told another boy in halting, tremulous words, the sort that cast about hopelessly for confirmation, that if Jesus could return to life, perhaps you would as well, perhaps right after lunch or next day. I imagined you back at your desk again before it could be cleaned out and reassigned. When we got back, you were not there, and first thing he raised his hand to tell this to the teacher and the class. I remember I ran in horror from the room and not much

else. Later the teacher put the nix on all such talk. I don't remember her words. Second grade finished up anyhow. Your picture was in the newspaper and I cut it out and, believe it or not, kept it for years till it yellowed on my bedroom door and the image grew more strange and strange, as such images do, faded and distant and oddly young. It got misplaced somewhere, sometime, in the place where lost things go; I got distracted into the business of growing, of getting older, putting away childish things, acting like a man.

III.

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

‘‘Real’’ Love -- for Sara

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

But the rose, weathered this far along, does not grow sick; the summer’s fruit, monotonously hued, colors ripe, for harvest and for tasting.

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Found Music by Jeffery Triggs

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