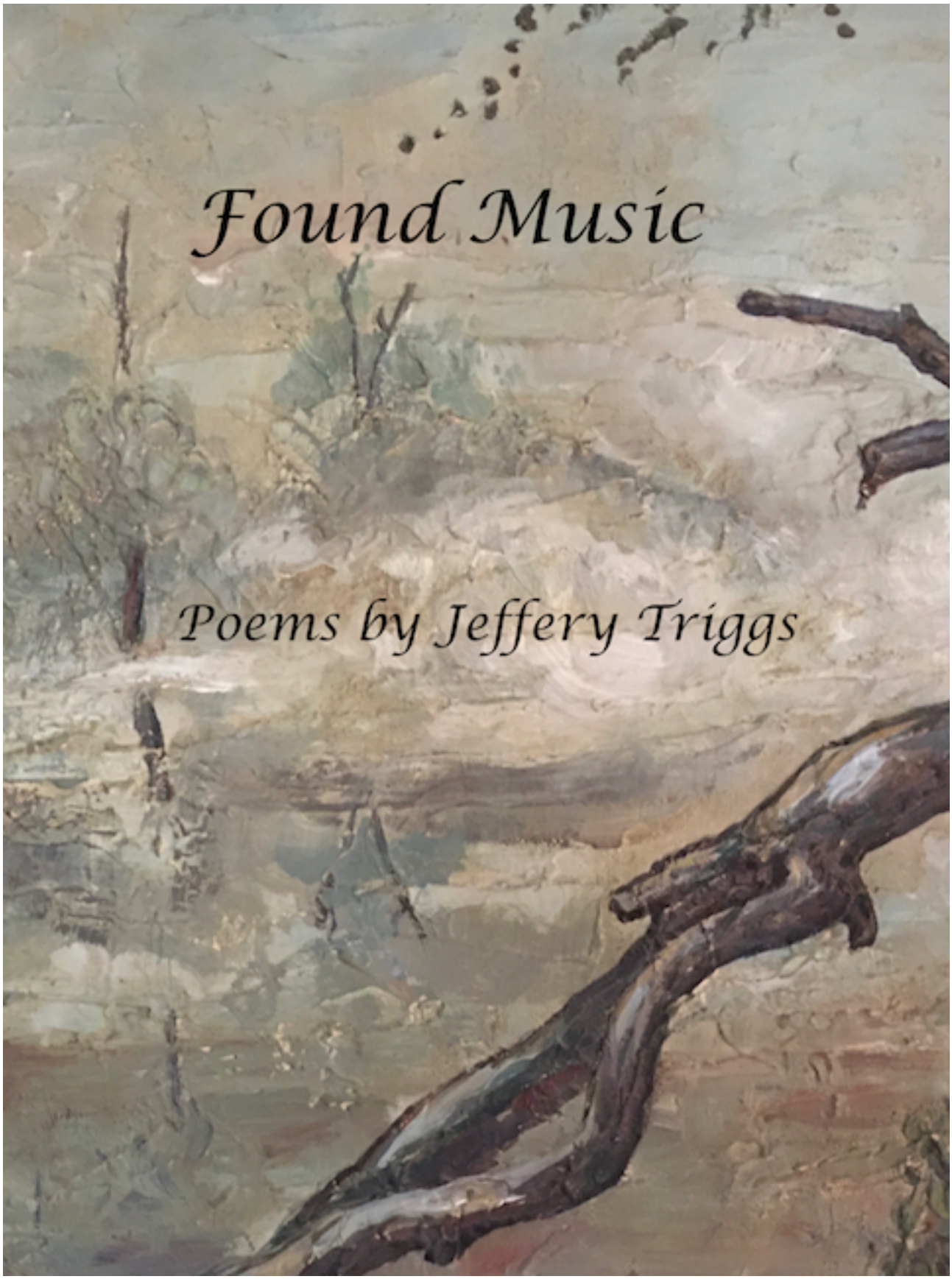

Found Music
Poems by Jeffery Triggs

Found Music

Jeffery A. Triggs

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For Sara

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A life-long resident of New Jersey, Jeffery Triggs received a Ph. D. from Rutgers in 1986, where he taught English from 1978 to 1987. From 1989 to 1999 he was the director of the *Oxford English Dictionary's* North American Reading Program. From 1999 through 2001, he worked at AT&T Labs. From 2002 till 2021 he worked for the Rutgers University Libraries on digital library projects. He resides presently in Madison, New Jersey, with his wife Sara. They have two children, Charlotte Elena and Jeffery David, and four grandchildren, Tatjana, Ofelia, Indira, and Arthur.

Poems in this collection have appeared first in *The Literary Review* ("Attic Stele on a Child's Tomb", "For Charlotte Elena, Age 10, January 2, 1993"), *The Journal of New Jersey Poets* ("Horse Dying at his Cart," "Death Mask of a Girl Drowned in Paris—1895," "Hamlet knew it," "Edvard Munch—Shriek 1910," "Antiques"), *Gryphon* ("Paris Boulevard"), *Interim* ("Lear's Wife"), *Art Times* ("Scene from Swan Lake"), *International Poetry Review* ("Sargent—Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose," "Rose of Sharon").

Part I

Missing Persons

Maine again

(2019)

On the last morning I listen through a shuttered window
to the birds and passing cars. I'm in Maine, again.
Maine was the first, the prototype of all my later holidays.
I was a young boy. I remember the cool mornings in the campsite.
I remember climbing a wall of rocks (they seemed so huge)
and the flowery path to the beach, the soft gray sand
studded with green jewels of seaweed, the gray-green waves
crashing over it all. My father was there painting.
I remember blueberries and my parents cooking lobsters
that we'd bought in a little weathered town near by.
Little did we think that we'd never go there again.
I grew up looking at those paintings of lighthouses
and the sea, but we never did go back to Maine,
and eventually the memories got put away
in some dark and crowded attic of my mind.
Other coastlines and beaches I visited would revive them
from time to time, but overpaint them with their own colors,
so that they grew lichen-coated, mingled and confused.
And then I came to Maine again, this time with a wife
and children and grandchildren. And one by one
the memories came back to me in their original forms.
We chat about coming back again, maybe for Thanksgiving
or next year, but then you never know. Look well!
You may be doing something for the last time.

The Moon in Morning

For Tati



(2019)

The moon in morning is always somewhat odd;
ghostly pale, it evokes a kind of quizzical
surprise — that's if we notice it at all —
quite unlike the prizing of the early sun.

The moon in morning follows your car to school;
you notice it through the car roof window
slipping effortlessly among the branches overhead
and remark it. Strange to see the moon in morning.

Already made uncircular with waning,
it fades before your eyes before it sets.
Nature's magic. You'll see such moons again.
You may well remember this one.

Funeral for a Worm

For Tati and Grandpa
(2018)

Why might a chicken have crossed the road?
Duh. Because the sidewalk ahead was dug up. Q.E.D.
And this only one of many things we ponder
as the sun follows us slowly through the neighborhood.

If I remember correctly, Rilke was right:
children see things low to the ground, the things
we giants, lost in our abstractions, miss:
seed-pods we crush routinely underfoot,
stray feathers, a dimpled stone, mud-sleek twigs
that emerge from the puddles after downpoured rain.

I can still picture a day like this with my grandfather.
With his cardigan, perhaps with a cigar in hand,
we slow march up and down the road together,
though he avoids the puddles I delight to splash in,
attentive as only someone with new, spare time can be.

Today the May sun dries the puddles after a rain,
stranding earthworms that washed up in the road.
They frighten me, though the live ones merely struggle
to win back to the soft, safe, burrowy ground.
With a twig we lift one crushed worm from the road
and give it as best we can a *cortège* and decent burial.

I wonder sometimes if you quietly conjured the needed music,
Andante con moto, still vivid memories
of the great orchestra in which you'd recently played,
and as yet meant nothing to me.

Crepe Myrtle in May

(2022)

The branches of crepe myrtle enter May with winter gloom
While other trees parade their finest pink and white.
If you wait long enough, everything that's alive will bloom.

Despite of nature's ever-building, leafy loom
that spreads green shade by day and darkens every night,
the branches of crepe myrtle enter May with winter gloom

All tangled so that it's quite natural to assume
That something is amiss with it and not alright.
If you wait long enough, everything that's alive *should* bloom.

Maybe our freezing, northern weather spelled its doom
Some months ago in fact, in a long and icy night,
So the branches of crepe myrtle entered May with winter gloom.

Or perhaps it's simply biding out till it resume
A summer life in an accustomed warmth and light.
If you wait long enough, everything that's alive will bloom.

And so I hold my judgment, giving it breathing room,
And thus today find tiny leaves instead of blight!
The branches of crepe myrtle entered May with winter gloom.
But you wait long enough, everything that's alive will bloom.

For Sara

(2018)

Even in the rain the early bird comes out.
The one we've listened to these years
Who woke us that first morning
Now sings the song that's knitted us together.

For Sara again



(2020)

The blossoms of high May are weathered down.
Sheer green abounds now, leafy, mossy,
awkward with adolescent beauty.
The tendrils of the grapevine
wind round each other in the night.

Haiku

For Sara
(2017)

> Touch of fingered yarn,
> Click of the wooden needles.
> Sunset already.

March



(2013)

Light, wet snow in March
Paints evergreens with blossoms.
We yearn for the spring.

October

(2018)

In the time of long shadows
In late morning light
Flowers struggle into bloom.

The Secret Calendar

(2022)

The secret calendar of the mind,
from the unchosen day you're born, fills up
ever more crowded with anniversaries.
These are all happy ones at first, familials:
birthdays, graduations, first kisses, weddings.

Then, relentlessly, the sad ones come too,
partings, anniversaries of death,
dark days that set you rummaging mournfully
through your memory — unlooked for holidays
that blacken even the best days around them.

But once known, you must wonder how,
year after year, you passed them by in innocence —
as you do, each year, your own still circling,
final day.

A Walk in Spring

(2022)

All those little memories
that a long life will accrue,
you cannot sensibly browse them,
decade by decade or year by year;
rather they rise up seemingly at random,
even ones you would happily erase,
along with memories as pleasant
as the first flowers on a walk in spring;
funny ones too can make you smile again,
so that a stranger, wondering, passing you by,
cannot guess that what possesses you
is a fifty year old sliver of your mind.

For Sara, of course

Seit ich [ihr] gesehen
Glaub' ich blind zu sein.
—Adapted from Adelbert von Chamisso (as set to music by Robert Schumann)

(2022)

I still remember the night I first noticed her blinding smile.
Across the table from me at the local diner,
her dark hair in a twist, her dress, her velvet green eyes.
Hopelessly not mine! How foolish we are when young.
Everything is but raw imagination of a "future"
nothing has prepared us for. Love? What could that even be?
But from that moment of enchantment, she became,
though she did not know it, though dimly imagined yet,
the chief hope of my life.
I'll skip the details,
and refer you, when you've time, to my early poems.
Fast forward forty some odd years to where
routinely we finish each other's thoughts.
Our lives seem so determined now that we forget
how easily things might have been different
these 15,000 days, how many people might not even be —
were I not blinded that one night by her smile.

The Lover's Pinch [Which hurts, and is desir'd]

(2021)

Don't try to fool me, just because I'm old.
You've all known something like this.
I have too, though I won't tell if you don't.
I'll stick to Shakespeare's script.

These are like cave paintings, or secret words
carved somewhere on an ancient wall.
Young, intimate love yearns, reaches out
across the centuries to other young love.
For something like this, so personal
it won't show itself uncovered to the day,
can only be known to lovers, to those
(though old now, wrinkled and gray)
who have been lovers, at least once.

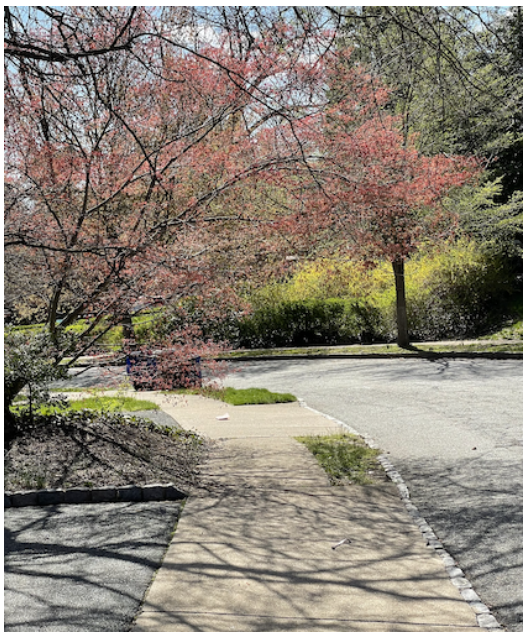
When they see the latest young ones
hitting upon Cleopatra, perhaps
for the first time, smiling with a secret
shock of recognition, they smile even more secretly.

Passport Pictures

(2021)

The young pictures are the best, of course,
but who even thinks of that when they're being taken?
The destinations, at first imagined ones, are all —
possibilities bounded only by the world,
flights of pure fancy, all those empty pages
just waiting to be stamped by random hands.
Over the years, the name remains; the pictures grow older.
What places were visited? What places could have been?
Whatever. Only the last, stubborn stamps remain
in place. The pictures themselves gaze out, always older,
diffident, each year more distant and more strange.

Tangles of Bloom



(2021)

It only happens for a brief time every spring.
The trees bloom at first as though transparently:
magnolias through maples, white oaks through redbuds,
appear like strange, double exposed images,
middle-distance tangles of bloom from trees
that won't be seen together when in full leaf.

Vistas unnoticed in the gray-branched winter
and hidden by summer foliage, open for you now
signposted in yellow, russet, white, or pink,
random forsythia, cherries, flowering plum,
all fluctuating their opacities
as the green begins its languid climb from grass to sky.

Missing Person

(For Sara 4/19/79)
(2021)

Missing: English grad student, surrealist poet,
last seen in April catching a New Brunswick train;
told friends then he was off to meet a girl in Maryland.
This photo (age enhanced) shows what he might look like now.

Don't expect him to have the same mustache and sideburns.
It would seem a perverse stubbornness to have kept these
through his prime. Employers would look askance at that.
And by now his black hair must be somewhat gray.

Known for his cocky attitude and sense of his own destiny,
he could be living anywhere, but even as a student
he had a marked preference for the northeast states.
He might be found in an ordinary business somewhere,

though more likely he clung somehow in academe,
no longer a professor (his longed for sinecure)
but in compromising work that manages to keep bills paid.
If he's still writing poems, don't look for them to be surreal.

We don't know if he married — the Maryland girl or someone else —
or had children. If so, be warned: he's likely happy
having cast his lot with love, and would refuse to return
any of these years, though it meant tenure or laureled fame.

Washing Up

(2013)

When I wash dishes, glasses, silverware, old pans,
I feel in them the touch of the long dead.
I hold what they held, my fingers trace the cracks
that run through porcelain like lazy streams
traveling from their sources in some forgotten time.
I touch the smooth curves of the bowls, as with the potter's hands.
I watch the kitchen light glister in facets of cut crystal
or on the rims of glass still blushing from the evening's wine.
My mother's silverware, my grandmother's iron pans,
the bowls in which our bread has risen, over and over,
I feel in them the touch of long lost selves.

For Tati

(2015)

Wide-eyed with wonder, we listen to your first spring
Through open windows whispering with breeze,
The same birdsong I've heard now how many years,
Edenic noises to draw forth the earliest sun.
Wide-eyed with wonder we see, as for the first time,
The buds burst into bloom, the leaves unfurl,
Thousands of them, millions perhaps, that seem to float
Windily over the lulling, rocking carriage you are in.
Low to the ground, we trace the wavy texture of the grass,
Grown green now and lush in molting May.
Each day the sun grows warmer, longer, strong
Enough perhaps to lift you lightly from your knees,
Wide-eyed toward the wondrous blue sky,
Forever beckoning and forever young.

I, Tati

(2018)

On a cold, damp day, otherwise
quite ordinary, dreary as all February,
something utterly amazing happens. Pen in hand,
you mark a paper with your name: T@tTI.

Or so it looks to me — *pure calligraphy*.
From this oath, "I, Tati", all the future must proceed,
schoolworks, mortgage signings, pure poetry,
everything you will mark one day as your own.

Privet Blossoms



(2006)

I keep forgetting to write this poem —
its subject slight as the tiny hedge flowers
that welcome summer, filling the walkways
with a glorious scent that belies their humble presence.

Redolent of the idle summers of my youth,
for weeks now they have blessed each morning walk,
reminding me, before the business of the day takes hold,
of the sheer beauty of being so easy to forget.

Heavenly blues



(2015)

They are quite difficult really. No volunteers
Spring eagerly to life when summer beckons.
They must be coaxed from seed, positioned
Just so, and favored with the weather's luck.
Even then, sometimes they stubbornly refuse
To bloom — but when they do we have The Blue Flower
Itself, Mary's hue, the keys to very heaven.

Suffused with the morning sun, they glow as with sources
Of their own so brightly that as the day wears on
They consume themselves. Daily generations
Furl and unfurl thus, always different and the same,
And comforting as the weeks pass by. Near the end,
When daylight shortens and the nights grow cool,
They bloom abundantly, as though desperate now

For more living days before the frost that will lay them waste.

Berlioz on the Beach

For Sara
(2014)

It's just an earworm, really,
a Faustian will o' the wisp
from the moments before WQXR gave up the ghost
somewhere on the Parkway and turned to dust.
But enough. Now the crashing waves,
the seagulls' cries are transfigured
by whimsical, whirly music. Can it be
that no one else here listens?
They go about their beachy business
as before, filling sand buckets,
paddling in the waves, scarfing down
sandwiches and cokes, turning pages,
or simply soaking sun rays in the seaborne breeze.
But for me all is changed, changed utterly
perhaps. I can almost make out,
silhouette along the shore, a figure walking
in a frock coat, a peacock spread of hair,
toward the blue point where the horizons merge.

Rauschen

For Sara
(2010)

Today we don't hear it the way Eichendorff did
Shwooshing night and day through primordial forests
Godhood made somehow audible in Nature. We hear it,
When we do, against the background humming of the highway
Or the noise of the landscapers' machines, insisting weed-whackers
Leaf-blowers, airplanes, sport utilities,
Perhaps a siren or two transporting the fallen of this world.

But when our world intermits, as it sometimes seems to do,
When the leaves are full of summer still and the first
Autumnal wind is up, our gaze is drawn
To the rustling crowd above us, and the sound,
With its deep, slow harmonies, is overwhelming.
Ah, this is what they knew, the old poets!
And for a time at least our ageless spirits mingle.

Lazarus of Bethany



(2011)

Young Rembrandt shows you best perhaps,
your ashen features barely distinguishable
from the molding graveclothes. You struggle
visibly to lift yourself from the opened tomb.
The onlookers, bathed in light, are by turns
suspicious, tentative, astonished at the event,
even the one whose raised hand seems to draw you up.

You have known death already: four days, an eternity
outside time, your memories dispersed apart, your body
given to inexorable dissolution. That much is the same.

As you blink now uncertainly in the light, how can it feel
to be drawn back into a disintegrated body so changed
you do not know it? to look upon smiling faces somehow
infinitely strange? And in the end what was it for?
The *others*, the women, of course are happy, relieved,

but they cannot know the horrors you passed through
and now must face again. For you rise now, not into
a kingdom of heaven, but once again into the darkling world.

The Tenth Leper

(2014)

Until he was chosen by the disease, the tenth leper
Was just like anybody else. You couldn't have picked him
Out from a crowded street on any given day.
And even when the bacteria had taken root and the sores
Declared themselves, when the numbness set in so
That he could not feel the rocks of the road
Break off his toes; when he was shunned now
By the good people, the normal, lucky ones,
He seemed still like any ordinary leper, so far gone
That he was past hoping for a miracle.
When one came to pass, when the man on the road
Waved his hand at a whole group of them at once,
Did he summon from somewhere deep in him the feelings,
The hopes, the common decencies of man alive?

Liebestod

(2014)

In the official police photos, Stefan Zweig and his girl,
Young Lotte, can be seen lying side by side,
Primly propped, he in his sweat-stained shirt and tie,
She in her house dress. Their lips are pursed and chaste.
Their fingers gently touch each other as though
They were shy, young lovers on a first date.
Only the empty bottles on the night stand speak
Of something gone amiss. Things are not as they seem.

I have seen a different view. The same iron bed, same bottles
And same clothes, only here disheveled. He holds her
In his arms as only a practiced lover knows to do,
His mouth is agape, as if he strained for one last kiss.
Not knowing better, one might almost think
They moved in death, death imitating art.

Crickets

For my friend, Marcantonio Crespi
(2005)

It's time now for the hard poems, the ones
you never wanted to write at all, the ones
pried out like aching teeth.

It's September now, and time you were back
from wherever it was you spent your summer this year.
The semester is soon to begin, full of business,
new students, new beginnings.
We have a standing dinner date just about now.
A quick handshake of welcome, a glass of wine,
a joke or two, and we pick up where we left off.
It's happened just this way for how many years now?
Likely as not the evening stretches on
after dinner: brandy and cigarettes on the porch
in the cool of the late-summer evening, and talk,
always good, witty talk to catch us up,
We round our lives with such words. In September,
ever wistful, the dark comes earlier,
and the crickets fill our ears, reminding us
of the chill night, surely soon to come,
when they'll fall silent. We're poets together,
after all, and death surrounds poets, *mitten im Leben*
as Rilke put it. Death is a thought we always
entertain, at least abstractly, theoretically.
Whether your "*mort*", my "death", even Rilke's "*Tod*",
the word itself is delicious. "Easeful death" —
one might well be half in love with that.

On some level I still think it can't be true! at least not yet!
But right away I knew. You were in Switzerland
like so many times, but different this time,
after the hospital stays, the gruesome treatments,

the dread, mysterious bug striking and clinging
to you, stealing all joy of life, making you,
suddenly, unforgivingly a mid-life invalid.
The heart that over the years watched and received
finally gave out. So many memories
roared now tsunami-like over my thoughts,
which seemed to tear away from me out of control.
I remembered our last phone call, our last meeting
sporting now their terrible, unexpected adjectives.
I thought of a dozen things I longed to talk with you about —
movies, books, events, current now only for me.
No literary savor in this ache.
Dark house, by which once more I stand...
I actually drove by your house once, almost by accident,
pulled on by some half-conscious wish that made
me take wrong turns until the road itself insisted.
The shutters, the curtains still the same, the lights turned out.

Oh Marc, oh Marcantonio, Marcantoine.
(How shall I call you now?)
I write this for you with one of your own pens
still full of ink, still bearing, as it were,
its unborn lines of poetry, a final metaphor
whose difficult birth I guess at from the chewed tip.
So much of life passes away in mere habit,
irksome tasks or duties that do the work
of holding off dread certainty a while.
We never know, really, when we do something
for the last time. Oh Marcantoine,
I can see you rising to greet me at the door,
the table ready with cheese and biscuits and wine,
a candle flickering in the evening light.
This time it is I who have much to tell you
as we pick up where we left off before.

Lohengrin

For Marcantonio Crespi
(2006)

When you first breezed into our lives, a young knight
seemingly out of nowhere, we didn't know your allergy to Wagner
and I'm afraid for every evening of wine and Puccini arias
I inflicted hours of *Lieder* on you, while you submitted bravely
in the spirit of young friendship. No surprise then that, as the chance arose,
we took you to *Lohengrin*, that magnificent fairy tale
even non-Wagnerians claim to like. You held out silently,
not wishing to seem ungrateful. while we thrilled to the usual scenes:
Else's *Traum*, the knight's arrival towed by a stage-prop swan,
the boisterous, brassy, German sounds that filled the hall.
Perhaps it was only the champagne in the final intermission
that made you admit to us how much you loathed it all.
And how I cringed then when the third act began fortissimo
and wished the wedding and the love music away, the magic muted
when the knight sang out his name and vanished in the misty lake.
The curtain closed on Wagner, but our friendship started new that night,
knowing ourselves different, and lasted through long years of business:
marriages, children, funerals, jobs that kept us far apart,
and through the anguished years of inexplicable decline,
the secret illness that gripped you and would not let go.
I listen now to the anxious chorus cry "*der Schwan, der Schwan*,"
and to the achingly beautiful notes of renunciation, of loss,
and think of you now, my unlikely swan knight, as you depart
one last time over the misty lake, mysteriously as you arrived,
and we remain, non-operatic creatures that we are,
to go on day by day among the living.

For Marcantonio Crespi

(2008)

In which heaven shall I find you then?
I fear we failed to make arrangements for that
when last we spoke, and now I am at a loss.
Will it be Capri-blue, or like this mottled sky
chill with New Jersey spring? How will I even know you
there? Will you be young again, vacation tanned
as when we met, or gray with too few years?
Will we meet point to point, as if once more in time,
or everywhere and every while at once?

Laundry

For my mother, Helen Triggs
(2005)

As I still see it, the house is flooded with light,
morning light most likely, perhaps in February
intensified by the snowy yard outside. I follow you
from room to room, each with its gauzy shafts of light
that flame the dust and gleam the waxed wood 1950s floors.
Now we head down to the windowless dark of the laundry
where I help clean the delicious lint from the dryer.
It has an otherworldly softness, an inutility
that begs for more of this lulling time, for play.
I sense the rich brown cascade of your hair, so long
to me then, though the evidence of pictures shows it
merely shoulder-length. In the bedrooms once again
you fling the white sheets aloft, aglow with morning light
and snap them so that they settle gently, perfectly
on the waiting matresses. I want to reach out for them
clean and laundry-warm. I want this moment to stay,
and though I am only four, I know somehow that it will not.

Merry Widow Waltz

For my mother
(2005)

The old Oldsmobile seemed almost to float, slowly
inexorably as it neared the schoolyard. Sometimes
we'd beguile this anxious time with the car radio
blaring, say, "Downtown" or "These Boots are Made for Walking".
It was hard to imagine Petula Clarke in the hip and distant city
I would one day visit, but the sounds mitigated, somehow,
the day of fourth grade misery that grew more real as we passed
each stop sign on the way, and then the crossing guards
with their silver badges who waved us on the last leg.
I still remember the ache of being there, the watched clocks
teasing me with their stubborn stillness before, sprung,
they'd softly thud each minute of the passing day.
Sometimes instead of the radio you'd hum your own melodies,
Lehár's "Merry Widow Waltz", lovely and lulling and lush.
This is how I'd hear it, even now — not glamorous of Vienna
sung by some elegant diva under the dimmed chandeliers
of the Met, but softly hummed as we wended our way home.

Music in the Rain

For my mother
(2017)

In the morning, in a cool, mid May,
rain glows all windows green and gray,
sheets of it stipple the eastern panes
as we attend to lovely strains,
Beethoven, perhaps, or Richard Strauss,
that fill the corners of our house.
No need for words. The music binds
the thoughts of unconnected minds,
treasure we carry separate ways
as these moments travel into days.
Scenes like this now come to me
from a dim recess of memory
as fresh and vivid as the spring
that gives the day such coloring.

The End of the World

For David Triggs



(2014)

In those New Jersey summer days when a/c was scarce
but gas quite plentiful, we would, likely as not, escape the heat
by driving “to the country” — if only through New Vernon,
near Madison, but rural enough. My father still drove in those days
my mother next to him, and three of us tucked in the back seat.
He liked to scare and amuse us, driving suddenly on the dirt path
next to the Tuttle oak, a huge old tree allowed to remain
in the middle of Prospect Street. George Washington,
according to the legend, once tied his horse to it.
Along one country road we always thrilled at “the end of the world”.
Shuttered with overhanging trees, the road wound up a hill
at whose crest, simply and suddenly, it vanished into the sky.

We always waited for it eagerly with a kind of mock terror,
only to be relieved when at the top we saw a pleasant meadow
slope gently downward full of wild flowers and late summer light.
The distant goal then, often as not, was Jockey Hollow Park,
surrounded by sets of funny-looking, split-rail fences.
Here was another old horse tale. The young girl, Tempe Wick,
fearing it's confiscation by Washington's soldiers, had hidden
her horse in the bedroom of her house. If we had time, we'd stop there
to wander a bit. Leaning on a split-rail, we would scan for deer
shyly entering the apple orchard. Deer were not suburb "pests" back
then,
as so often now, and rare sightings. We waited through the twilight
eager for a glimpse — all one usually got, as they'd bound away
at first sight of us, hurdling the spiky fences with surprising grace.
As the lingering light paled finally into summer dusk,
it was time to pile back in the Oldsmobile and head home.
Perhaps an ice cream waited for us on the way. My father
always delivered us safely home and tired enough for bed.
I happened to be driving there today, and wondered as I went
if my father, when he faced suddenly his own end of the world,
passed through at wonted speed and found there a meadow as alluring.

Magnolias 2000

(2000)

Eager in the rich-proud service of the spring,
they bloom early and without stint, holding back
nothing, like some more cautious plants; indeed,
they give so much of themselves that when April,
as it sometimes does, plays a malicious trick
(like this snow, no sooner here than gone),
they cannot quite pull back and weather through.
The opened buds fill up in cones of snow.
Their delicate, pink skins, shocked by the cold,
tremble with the unaccustomed, icy weight.
And then they droop and wither, suddenly brown,
eyesores quite out of place among the other
flowers that hasten onward now the hourly,
inexorable work the season had begun.

Nature

(2001)

The dog walking on his hind legs may seem,
for a time, remarkable. It is not, after all,
an everyday occurance. It is full of amusement
for the leisured classes. Often, they condescend
to hail the dog with toasts to such abilities
as even he grows shame-faced at the mention of.

But soon they all tire of the game. The great ones
return to their affairs, while the poor beast,
though he may venture a few more steps unattended,
returns to a four-footedness somehow less natural
than before, as though, from having striven
beyond himself, he was now fallen more lowly.

Avoiding now even the casual looks of strangers,
he cringes in a doggy way, and lets his tail
drag downward and curl between his quivery legs.

But eventually his true nature reasserts itself:
four good legs carry him swiftly and more surely
than two, and blithely he courses where he wants to go.

The Wolf at the Door — a Dream

(1999)

He is not at all like my dog Blizzard,
the friendly Samoyed who watches out for my return,
wagging his tail, ears back, glistening white
in the welcoming, warm brightness of the kitchen.
The wolf at the door is scruffy, dirty, dark.
Only his teeth gleam white with a vicious grin
as he eyes me and moves near, silent and menacing.
He's met me now. There is no place now to run.
Without thinking, I leap on him, wrestle him,
pin him back with all my weight and strength,
the strong jaws held firmly for the moment shut.
But the malignant grin remains, mocking me.
I cannot let go even for an instant now,
though my arms ache and strength begins to wane.
One slip, and the razory canines will surely slash
my arms, my wrists, the face brought down so close.
I wonder now if there is even time to wake.

Christmas Morning — 1999

(1999)

I am sure that somewhere, even now,
machines are whirring, jet planes landing or taking off,
hard-drives spinning with their odd, muffled chortles.
But here the morning passes from silence through silence,
so that, going out into the rinsed December sunlight,
the only sound is wind itself, sweeping
the frigid air, spreading plumes of chimney smoke.
Hard as you try to populate this silence,
say, with a shivering tangle of bare branches,
or the raucous descent of some few, spare crows,
it insists upon itself. The sounds are strange —
the flapping of wings, the odd “caw”, “caw” — eerily
discrete, distinct, and quickly overwhelmed:
like pauses in a kind of masterful, negative music
where you may hear, if you can listen,
modern echoes of the ancient miracle.

Marblehead — August 1984

(2001)

You'll remember how we wandered that day
(having somehow escaped the dead museums of Salem)
the narrow, winding streets, walled or picketed,
how we spied the weathered, shuttered "sailors' cottages"
with their tiny closed gardens, often with keyhole gates
and bright with hydrangeas or rose of sharon.
It was easy to lift Charlotte then, and one could walk
for hours not heading anywhere in particular.

And then to happen on the bay, bobbing with sails
in the glistening sunlight. The blues of water and sky,
the whites of cloud and sail, the blazoned boats
and craggy, background shore — all seemed somehow painted
for us with youthful impressionism. Glorious
to be far away from home that day, we three
carelessly alive, thinking neither of the past
nor the future that waited for us in its dim coils.

Twenty Years to Life

For Sara, May 17, 2000
(2000)

Rain-rinsed, sunlit, a-twitter with every birdcall
possible in May, the morning waits for us;
in sweeping, *sostenuto* passages of breeze,
the wind-chimes, two of them now, ring out for us.

Twenty years have brought us to this day,
to this garden greener than memory,
to this huge oak tree, spreading, swaying
in the breeze, in which, if I look deeply,
I can still see the lovely, white-veiled face
with tremulous eyes coming to meet me,
I can still feel my own heart beat with anticipation,
as if for a journey; and then, veil lifted,
the softening smile, the calm determination for departure.

Twenty years have brought us to this day
which passes slowly, solemnly almost,
the light stepping carefully about the yard,
drawing the seedling flowers of last weekend.
Its ceremony refuses interruptions:
the importuning cries of children, who burst
awake now, ready to go like wind-up toys,
the roaring of a vacuum cleaner, car doors
clanging shut, the passing of some siren.
The birds themselves are at work now, fetching
twigs and straw for their nesting in our soffits.
Shopping, laundry, mealtimes have their cycles too,
and follow one another faster than the shadows
that begin to lengthen and mottle the green lawn.
But I can still make out the trusting green eyes,
the gentle hand held steady to accept its ring.

Twenty years have brought us to this day
which hums along now, like so many others.
The sun, traveled round, shines now from somewhere
behind us; we look out, spectators of the shade,
upon the honeysuckled breezes of the afternoon,
you with your knitting, I through puffs of pipe smoke.
Dinner, sunset, upon us, gone. No need of words
after all this time, when the well-honed gesture, glance,
or private joke still carry years of meaning.
And perhaps, late in the warm fragrant dark,
wind-chimes will still sound out on the deserted porch,
a look or a familiar shape, unseen but sensed
and still loved and the old thrill will come upon us both.

Intermission

(2001)

Diffusely lit, the curved walls covered with red velvet
spiral slowly down the stairs from the upper galleries.
Turiddu, bumbling oaf, has had his Mafia-like demise.
Soon Pagliaccio, make-up half on, will sing in anguish
at the betrayal of his Nedda (namesake of my aunt's cat);
the great, dramatic killings, and the final cry:
La commedia è finita. But it is not over yet.

Crowds mingle as with one studied nonchalance.
The usual cast of characters: two women, middle-aged,
in necklaces, bracelets, their best dresses, chat about husbands,
bosses, the dreariness of it all. Across the way
a pair of sleek young men in dark shirts (they have known it all already)
maneuver toward the door to the outside balcony, cigarettes
ready in hand. A stately old woman orders champagne with an accent
from somewhere or another. A young man in tweeds, no tie, a three-days'
growth of beard (perhaps a music student), heads back in early.
An older, Brooks Brothers white male, managing two cocktails,
looks about as though he were enduring this for someone special.

Not much has changed in thirty years, except perhaps
the cell phones that keep popping out unexpectedly
and the earrings on a number of the younger men.
I scan the room looking for someone who is not there,
not queuing at the bar or water-fountain, not lingering
under the two gaudy, great Chagalls, not sneaking
a quick cigarette in the anonymous dark of the outside balcony.
He would be sixteen or seventeen, a somewhat awkward boy
masking his shyness in the seeming elegance
of his blue, pin-striped suit (reserved for such occasions);
dark-haired and with a stern, fixed look that might say:

"I am the poet of this place if you only knew. Of course,
I would rather this were Wagner, as I yearn for serious things.
My life has little else to occupy it at this moment
than dreams of poetry and music and great, vindicating,
laureled fame that the future, surely, will bring to me."

But it is no use. If he *is* here, he has become someone else,
perhaps quite harmlessly middle-aged, keeping his secrets now,
melding seamlessly with the rest, who pass this brief time
waiting for the next act to begin.

Central Park, Sunday

For Sara
(1996)

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.

Vacation

(2012)

The first day of a vacation is always cloudless, blue,
wherever it may be, in the mountains or by the ocean,
in some great modern or medieval city, as long
as it is, as it must be, *elsewhere*: plan or not, rain or shine.
The bad things that might happen are still unknown;
the evils of the old life remain safely behind.

On the first day of a vacation the strange, morning birds
charm as no other, the foreign pillows are ethereally soft,
the hotel's coffee seems, somehow, richer than one's own,
the daylight brighter and the night more fine.
The bad things that will happen remain unknown.
The evils of the old life are still safely behind.

Pelicans

(2012)

At the beaches of Costa Rica the pelicans
fly by like fighter planes in strict formations,
eight or ten, over the glistening water.
Now and then one dives toward the surface,
an old Stuka bomber ready to strafe,
but the target is some fish unseen by us.
If he is lucky, he struggles back to his altitude
with the squirming capture in his long beak.
Otherwise he'll fly low and solo over the breakers
hungry for a kill before he might rejoin his fellows.

Worker Bees



(2009)

Disoriented by the sudden change of weather,
on a September morning they cling to what's left of the hydrangeas
and buddleia, attempting still what they know best,
all they have known, which can no longer save them.

The air fills now with the steady dirge of the crickets.
The light comes later now with its remembrance of summer warmth,
and glances sooner away, leaving long, evening shadows
cool and death-dealing to all without another season in their DNA.

Einsamkeit

(2012)

The cold morning air and winter light perhaps,
the odd, deliciously transgressive feeling of the sick-day
and in an instant I become again a troubled teen,
playing hooky from the hated school. Left alone,
I would spend long mornings listening to Schumann
or improvising on the piano in my pathetic, untrained way.
One year — I can't remember why — we failed to drain the pool
so that the water froze with Winter and we had months of ice,
a kind of private rink. At home alone, in the cold morning light,
I would put on skates and spend hours gliding back and forth
over the glassy surface, cutting figure eights (my math that year).
Loneliness and pleasure, shining, seamed with gilt like a tiger-eye,
attended these occasions, as they do today. Then I waited,
coiling for a life I could not imagine. And now?
Awaiting the unimaginable shuffle, I fold away from the world again
into a self decades more crowded now, but still one and whole.

Basketball

(2013)

On a winter day, without snow or ice, the sound
Of a basketball, repeatedly dribbled and thrown
Beats out the slow time of Sunday morning.
A solitary boy is practicing his hoops. Without
Some seven-footer to block his shots, he is brilliant,
Outwitting all imaginary opponents,
Looping long, curving three-pointers into the net,
Over and over, bouncing the ball with abandon
On the empty street. In the distance church bells
Ring out as if to celebrate each point.
He doesn't see me watching. He will no doubt
Grow out of the game some day; the backstop,
Rusty and unused, will go to the compactor.
But years from now, perhaps watching another
Boy at play, he will recall the triumphs of this day.

Snow

(2007)

The night is lit with snow
falling through the lamplights
capping the dark hedges and the walls.
In the distance a train passes. The snow
glisters on the powerlines. The sky is sepiaed
with reflected light. One can *see* in this dark.
Why is it beautiful to me? Why not a horror,
cold coating death? Yet the flakes caress
all things, and transfigure with their caress.
On a night like this, one might believe
in the transmigration of souls. One might
believe, even as a late car carves two tracks
of darkness in the road, in a caressing God.

Little Yellow Book

(2021)

As a kid I loved getting the little yellow phone book
thrown casually on the driveway from a passing car.
It wasn't like those humongous phone books with too many people,
people from the whole county whom I couldn't possibly know.
It was just the folks from a couple of local towns, the ones
who "counted", with kids in school, and easy to find.

I'd turn right away to the T's to pick out our names in print:
my grandfather, my "bad" uncle, my grown up brother, my father,
our number, our address. Almost a kind of immortality —
indeed my father was still there for some years after his death.
I remember being puzzled one year when a Triggs appeared
who *wasn't* a relative. It seemed somehow a strange intrusion.

I skipped over the adverts that doubtless paid for it all,
but pored over the maps. The street map pages were the best.
I could place all the addresses on all the local streets.
I could follow them in imagination as if lazily walking home from school:
my own street boxed boringly in its planned development,
but also the long streets, the old roads that really went somewhere.

Long before Google street views, I would follow Central Avenue
as it began at Main Street and curved up gently toward our first house.
Greenwood echoed it an inch away, so that they seemed
two questioning streams — I always wished they had been longer —
that fed at last into old, colonial Ridgedale Avenue.
This one you could follow from Madison and all through Florham Park
until it quite disappeared away from the safety of the towns,
off the end of the map itself. What could be there? The ultima Thule?
Time would tell, of course, but it was not yet given to a boy to know.

The Long Way Home

For Billy
(2016)

Christmas week invites a kind of laziness,
deliberate movement, contemplative of things past,
and so, given the choice, on a cool, gray morning
I take the long way home. The streets, familiar
from bicycling or walking in my youth,
seem hardly different now, winding as they would,
but the neighborhoods are changed, strange, so foreign
I hardly know them. The older shade trees, pen-knifed
with youthful hope by a boy walking from school,
have vanished with a future whose time has now passed.
The young maples that neatly lined my old street, brightening
the changing seasons with red leaves, are still there,
but now misshapen, spreading haphazard branches
awkwardly through the power lines. The houses
are changed too, warted with ungainly additions
or simply uprooted to make way for outsized McMansions
that swallow whole the yards where we tossed our footballs.
Now and then I recognize a house that's not been changed.
I wonder if I might stop there, ring once more,
and see the door open to a familiar face,
perhaps my old friend eager to come out and play.
But that cannot be. If he were there, he'd be
no longer blond or young, and besides all that
I have a living home I must get back to now.

Layers

(2014)

They're not all bad, the new things,
much as one dislikes admitting it. Yet on the long road home
I fancy much in truth no longer there:
that rust-colored barn where we stopped once
to peek at the goats with their "mystic", slanted eyes,
the empty field where, as a child, I had a tractor ride.
[Today outsized McMansions own the view.]
Beyond there, somewhere, is the duck pond with its falls.
But even the grand houses, the ones we sought glimpses of,
have changed: the white-wood, farmhouse sports a brickface
and fake columns now, tripled in size. The town itself,
which I thought would never change, is different now:
most of the old shops gone, though a few names still
cling in fading paint to the upper reaches of brick walls.
New, fancy sidewalks, new storefronts, new people now.
When I imagined living *here*, I did not realize
here was *now*.
According to the real estate agents
every "property" is a "home" to be bought as such.
Thus you can buy "townhomes", "executive homes",
but never now a "house" in which to make a home,
as we did. In the houses I have known there were many homes,
for each home is made by people, two or three gathering together
in a space and for a time. A house's homes are born
and live and eventually, like all living things, they die.
They are made with passions, boredom, clutter, dinner smells,
the dust of days laid on in generous layers.

Our first home (ah, yes, renters make them too)
was the second floor of a Victorian house
on a street with gray, slate sidewalks rising
obligingly over the roots of the larger trees.
I can still see its elaborate, carved moldings

its wide pine floors, the wavy, hundred year old glass
of the windows; I hear the creak of the back staircase;
I smell its ancient wood, like my grandfather's house.
We moved there the first of June. I remember waking
next morning to the sounds of the birds and sweet breezes
wafting through the window screen.

Today
in another house more than a generation beyond
we heard birds like that again, and felt again
the soft, cool breeze: and that June morning,
still there full of youth and hope, somehow eastered in me.
Though not a molecule of our old selves remains,
I am still I, you are you; we've shared this journey in place
registering change and yet the same.
A self persists, perhaps a soul expanding time,
a tree of girth that still knows all its sapling rings within.

June 3, 2017, New Jersey

(2017)

At 4:30 in the morning you can hear, well, not a pin drop
(I just tested that), but all the early birds at song,
the soft padded steps of the house cat, the snoring dogs,
the sound of a distant jet that pours through the birds.

And suddenly, at 4:45, it all goes silent for a while
to give the sky, still quite dark, time to catch up.
A dull gray now to the east, just bright enough
to make the boughs appear again on the white oak.

At 5 new birds begin to sing in antiphonal choirs
far and near to home; a train engine hustles by
before the day's usual service can begin.
And now the mourning dove enters with measured,
soft intervals. Oh what a world to wake to:
this contrapuntal and suburban dawn!

Moving Day

For Charlotte Elena and two Blizzards
(2021)

As you wake this last, snowy morning in your old room,
the Samoyed dog is already nervous. He typically
gets upset at the sight of packed suitcases,
sensing a departure. But this morning
the house is full of boxes, emptied furniture,
an empty bookcase moved to the middle of its room.
When the truck arrives, he wanders fitfully
about the snow-packed drive while we work purposefully,
loading one piece after another, big items first,
then the carefully taped boxes, up and down
the silvery ramp. And when it's time at last
to go, the dog, as if he might postpone things,
lingers stubbornly, resisting to the end his farewell pat.
Fifteen years before, when we moved in here, it took longer
and was harder, but aside from the season was more or less the same.
All moves seem alike somehow; the dogs were different.

I remember it now through the blur of many years,
a May morning bright with early light and blossoms.
It was one of those days, nervously anticipated,
that you wake knowing you'll need all your energy to get through.
The movers were to arrive at eight, but surprised us
coming early with a bang on the door that jolted us to action.
First for me was to drive Jeffery and you and Blizzard, the first Samoyed,
away from the chaos of the day to my mother's house.
Then back for the loading of the truck, helping guide
some larger furniture through the old house's crooks
or porting the delicate things to our own car.
(As I remember, we broke only one mirror that day.)
The truck was packed by noon, but we drove first to the closing —
so many lawyers and signatures my hand hurts simply thinking of it,
but time was of the essence, as they like to say —

and only then to the new house, which took longer to fill than the old one
had to empty. This piece in here. This piece over there by the window.
The afternoon wore on slowly and by evening we were still not finished,
but with the bedrooms done, we fetched the kids who slept in right away.
In the end, I sat alone signing the last checks, settling up by kitchen light.

There was still one thing left — to bring Blizzard to his new home.
Alert and purposeful, as if driven by some instinct,
he went from one room to another, first the bedroom
where Jeffery slept, and finally upstairs to the closed door
of what would be your room. He refused to leave until I quietly
opened the door and he could see that you were sleeping there.
Only then did he relax and find a place himself.

I've thought of this many times over the gently drifting years,
but foremost on that other, moving day
we carried him one final time from home.

Part II

Archeology of Feeling

Prologue

(1999)

Hands connected at the tips, held out
as if in beggarliness. What will come?
An airplane soars above, destination Heathrow,
perhaps. On the ground it does not matter.

What will come? Eyes lift planeward and beyond.
Orion beckons; the Pleiades draw one
into their ever-complicating mystery.
Around one, the cold universe draws its breath.

Morning

O pflaumenleichte Zeit der dunkeln Fruhe!
Welch' neue Welt erwickelst Du in mir?

Mörike
(1999)

The horizon forms itself first, a silhouette
fringed with light. Then all the shapes
hidden in darkness, as in gray mist, emerge,
lighten almost imperceptibly, compelled
with each passing moment. The birds know this.
They break into songs, first one, then others.

I keep to bed, though the pillows have taken shapes
wrought by the nightlong twisting of my dreams
that wither quickly now. Their terrors gone?
What new world indeed brightens behind the shades?

Archeology of Feeling

A thought once spoken is a lie.

Tyutchev, *Silentium*
(1999)

Language occults them so very thoroughly,
(these secret thoughts that drive us day by day
yet cannot confess themselves in grammar)
that you must merely guess at them, infer
like the astronomer who senses a new planet
from its slight pull of orbit on a star.
Music, perhaps, might get you closer to them,
Schopenhauer's perfect intuition
of will, a kind of innerliness exposed;
but music, timeful and prearticulate,
intermits in vast silences with each rest.
Poems would entomb them. Yet even here
only rarely, as through a fluke of nature,
will you find quick-frozen, perfect sacrificed
remains, ice-maidens of feeling on whose slender
arms hairs still stand in the excitement of creation.
More likely you will see here merely fossils
hardened round the feelings they'd delineate,
deathmasks whose chapfallen features you peruse
searching for hints of the vanished life within,
shards, fragments of a sensibility
scattered in the ground. You must dig for all,
brush, wash, assemble, re-imagine what was,
in the instance, a twinge of envy, or groan of despair,
delight, or gravitation of pure love,
lazy satisfaction, horror of death.
And feeling their deep silence give them breath.

Kinderszenen

(1999)

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
(1999)

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 tousle,
another look, another chance.

Cleaning Up

For Charlotte Elena
(1993)

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 blithely 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

(1993)

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
(1999)

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



(1999)

Cars should be built by the Cub Scouts with some adult guidance.
You know, it's really for the fathers after all,
a chance to show off one's tools, one's handiness
at woodworking, one's skills in "shop". This thought's

no help to me — two left hands when it comes to tools.
I measure twice, but need three cuts at least.
But I have a boy all eager and innocent
of these finer points of fatherly humiliation:
in the end, procrastination will not do. ***Any technical assistance should be fully explained to the Cub Scout so that he can use that knowledge on future projects.***
And so one night we mark our block of wood
and try to cut it with a hacksaw (the only tool
I have that's nearly suitable). The awkward bits
I clean up with a wood file I picked up somewhere.
It whirrs and sends the sawdust flying — *voilà*.

I try to babble on about the process,
why *this* tool and not *that*, why not the one
we have not got, or how, like Michelangelo's
David, the simple block contains it's artifact
already, which we only liberate.
(More filing there might do it!) I think he could
handle the wheels himself, but they must be straight. ***A car with untrue axles tends to steer to one side or the other***
He wants to see it *go* and cannot understand
why I keep taking the wheels on and off again,
and do not let it fly across the room
(as Nature meant) to slam into a wall.
I think he might try, himself, the first coat of paint
(we've chosen royal blue), but it's oil based
and even if I had some turpentine
at hand, I do not relish rubbing his fingers clean.
It's hard explaining that we have to wait now,
that tomorrow *I'd* better do the finishing coat.
Perhaps, when I find a proper weight, file it,
and weight it out, he might glue it into place.

Because it is difficult to establish how much help was given in building the car, some Packs have a separate Pinewood Derby Race for adults.
You see, I've been through this before. An old hand.
My father — artist, woodworker, basement full of tools —

took me in hand to build a thing of beauty,
an old Indy-car, perfectly rounded, aero,
a sleek “ghost gray” with racing stripes in red,
wheels straight, weighted (I see him soldering the lead).
My memory is that we won first prize that day,
the “gray ghost” streaking effortlessly ahead
of every other car, whizzing along the varnished floor
of the school gym toward the finish. Cheers. A trophy.

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

The Last Spring of the Millennium

For Jeffery David
(1999)

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
(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

(1999)

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.

Traveling from Virginia by Train

(1999)

We all age together, this one day at least.
The grandmother traveling for her birthday party
in a place once home, the students heading back
after a semester's "grown-up" freedom, the young woman
whose children trail after her like ducklings
on the way to the dining car. And I, the weary one
longing as well for a bed at home, the watchful one
feeling my beard grow in the silent pauses.
The conductors, old hands at scenes like this,
read us all and smile and offer practiced chat
as they near the end of their "run". As always,
there are glitches and delays, but only the young fellow
with a plane to catch seems anxious to banish the hours.
The rest let the day pass, moment by moment as we must,
in a sort of quiet benignity, keeping our public poses
and our private thoughts, keeping a stillness as if
oblivious of the rattling, vast machine that rushes us
each to his destination.

Saturday Morning

(2001)

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

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

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

Kampf

For Professor Edward Glas
(1999)

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

When we first learned you'd died (one dreary Sunday
otherwise quite ordinary, drizzly, dull,
spread with the New York Times) it seemed almost
impossible. I could still picture you a hundred ways:
the mock-fierce, Prussian eyes that would light up
suddenly in ironic smiles, the "famous" stance
at the lectern, a cigarette in one hand, coffee
in the other. Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns
crowding each other on the blackboard, more real
than the fatuous importunings of provosts or deans.
Dreikaiserbunds and Zollvereins, Moltke's
"best poetry", Graf von Schlieffen's sleeve,
and Bismarck's "damn stupid" Balkan quarrel
(*There are some problems that may be insoluble*),
Metternich, Napoleon, 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 insoluble.
And where I could not help, I mostly winced away
like the others with life still to get about,
terrified now to touch that glowing, searing,
still-living thing, your solitary pain.
There were, after all, so many things to do.
Strange, I am older now than you ever were,
venturing the uncharted future on my own,
free to think thoughts of sober coloring,
to make of the facts what I will, and at last,
in the glow of civilizing sense, quietly,
simply, gratefully to remember you.

Part III

Detail of the Last Judgment

A Visit to the Museum

(1987)

Entering the gallery of the dead, you feel
a hush of life, as in a church. Rising up flights
of granite steps out of the traffic, out of affairs,
you enter the quiet precincts of past centuries
and their peoples. Fashions change. Scenes change.
Time itself seems to wobble in these halls.
No matter how quietly you try to go, on marble floors
your shoes scuff or squeak and wake the thousand ghosts
who peer at you from their places on the walls,
each, like Francesca, with a story to be told.
And sometimes, as in church, you may almost come
out of yourself (that daily prison of the senses),
out of the strict confinement of each moment
hurtling you towards death. Here death's all around,
like a great freedom, and natural as a different life.

Edvard Munch — The Shriek — 1910



(1976)

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



(1987)

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.

Willem Kalf — Still-Life with the Drinking Horn of the St. Sebastian Archers' Guild

(1987)

Like most still-lifes, it speaks to us of death.
A banquet stays on to mock the departed guest,
the diner called suddenly from his table.
In his absence, we peruse the careful setting: silver plate,
a crystal goblet and decanter filled with sherry,
a tawny drinking horn with rims and stand
carefully worked in silver, and hastily disheveled,
its patterns bunched and overlapping, a rich fabric
of the orient. Uneaten delicacies — lobster and peeled lemon,
cheese and wine — tease us, so that our living mouths water
at what has turned long centuries ago to dust.
Against such appetite, the sensible mind repeats
memento mori, nothing persists; though in Holland
it may be the emptied horn is still displayed.

Whistler — The Little White Girl: Symphony in White, #2 — 1864

(1987)

In the old religious allegories
mortality is hidden away. The face of Mary smiles her
eternal smile; Jesus continuously beams.
In portraits like this, though the artist emphasize
the harmony of his paints, we see a human face
meshed in its emotions and in time.
And so the white girl with her frills and wistful eyes
is very much of her moment, like the flowers
(put here for contrast) with their week-long bloom,
and in the mirroring of her face a melancholy look
speaks of its certain dissolution. This is still-life too.
The flowers, the fan, the dress, the girl:
in a rushing multitude of minutes all are
all were already sweeping to oblivion.
With our own century still warm about us,
we peer at the cool, painted images of hers.

Deathmask of a Girl Drowned in Paris — 1895

(1977)

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

(1977)

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
this warmth of stone. There she rests,
waiting in her smile like a kiss.

The Lacemaker Ca. 1666



(1976)

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



(1987)

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



(1987)

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.

Rossetti — The Girlhood of Virgin Mary — 1848



(1987)

Of Rossetti's model here we know too much
to let her pass in legend with its leavening
of mortality; not so much Mary as Elizabeth,
and we know the gruesome circumstance of her death.
And so we view, in a kind of double vision,
the real girl with her waist-length, golden hair,
her hand-work, and her chaste Victorian dress,
set among angels and symbols: the palm, the lily,
the dove, the rose, and visible through the trellis
holy land. Her face, haloed and intense,
holds something back, as if she stored up strength
for the great role before her now, and as we guess
the lustrous, secular play of her few mortal years.

Gainsborough — Giovanna Baccelli — 1782



(1987)

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.

Gainsborough — The Housemaid — 1782–86

(1987)

Posed with her broom, all sepia and pink,
she stands in a rustic doorway. On her face
the familiar longing directs her glance outward
to a vast, unpossessable world, or simply
to this close room with its aristocracy of ghosts.
Perhaps, she feels the urge to turn within,
having seen enough, for surely she's uncomfortable
with the likes of Giovanna Baccelli
or the young, dead lord who poses on the opposite wall.
Yet her beauty, simple and delicate and human,
transcends the meanness of her class, and dominates
the long years more surely than the satisfied smug looks
of those who paid their "immortality" in full.

Sargent — Lord Ribblesdale — 1902

(1987)

As emblems of his class, he poses with
polished boots, silk top-hat, a silver handled
riding crop, and of course an arrogant gaze
meant to suggest the generations of his breeding.
The background, too, is elegant and old,
a parquet floor and fluted molding in the “classic”
style. This is the style of the world he lives and owns in,
the belle epoch that was surely vanishing, even
as he hung its image here, monument to posterity
and self, this expensive portrait
gawked at by commoners of the future.

Sargent — Ena and Betty, Daughters of Asher and Mrs Wertheimer — 1901

(1987)

Ena and Betty, both statuesque and pretty,
peer at us from their frame among their paintings
and their objets d'art with such delight
that it seems nothing but good fellowship.
Seeing them thus, Ena in red velvet evening dress,
Betty in white silk, both dressed to the nines,
one hesitates to imagine what dark times
the still fresh century brought them. No.
Let's not detain them from the dinner that awaits
to linger dryasdust with indigestible thoughts,
but wave hello, goodbye, remembering their young smiles.

Sargent — Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose — 1885–86



(1987)

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.

Too Many Turners

(1987)

In the Clore wing too many Turners blaze
like the Houses of Parliament, and as well attended.
Each canvas a cauldron in which colors seethe,
each breathtaking alone, taken together
they overwhelm and make a shipwreck of the senses.
Though there are placid, waterlit scenes, spectral Venices,
here's mainly a mind for man's destruction: in one room
avalanches, snowstorms, tempests of rain and steam and speed,
and sad, doomed, ghostly, watched over by a lurid sky,
the Temeraire, which I so loved in youth,
towed, and towing the fallacies of youthful hope.

Constable — Admiral's House, Hampstead — 1820–25

(1987)

This is a scene you might almost walk in,
fording the stream and greeting the shadowy peasants
who have come there watering their animals,
making your way under sycamores and poplars
to the great, white house where the admiral waits with tea.
And if it does not rain (for the English sky
is as ever changeable), you may be regaled in comfort
with tales of Nelson and Napoleon and wild tempests
such as Turner loved to paint, and if you linger
long enough, dinner and brandy and talk of the day's events:
the Petersborough business, the affairs in Greece
(a young man's game), the comforts of retirement,
and its boredom. And when you set out to return,
whatever the hour, your way will still be light, the sky
still changeable, the peasants eternal and in place,
the bad century waiting with its familiar grip.

Death on the Battlefield: Photograph from the Spanish Civil War

(1980)

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 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.

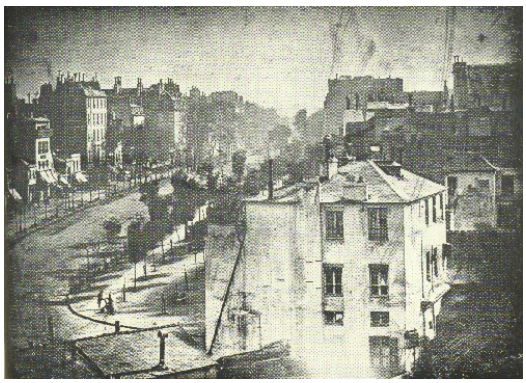
Horse Dying at his Cart — Andre Kertesz



(1980)

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



(1977)

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



(1987)

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.

Way Out

(1987)

Century by century, land by land, this orderly
labyrinth of rooms is searched without string.
And the way out is still the way you came, only
you pass quickly now those shades who earned
your leisured contemplation. Drawn back to life,
you've barely time to glance in farewell at Giovanna
and the Housemaid, Sargent's girls, Miss Siddall
and Miss Snakenborg. The Stonebreaker
maintains his penance, Lord Ribblesdale his pose.
They are everything they can be, and persist
which is their lot, but for you everything is not done,
and you know, moment by moment, you must change.
Leaving here, you leave the illusion of a comfortable frame.
Outside is weather, outside the loud vulgarity of life and love,
the might be and the still to be done, the vast
invisible dimension in all things. It is still yours,
and lest you perish, perishable you must change.

Part IV

Life Masks

Prologue

"Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt
weiss' was ich leide"
— Goethe
(1991)

> 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

(1988)

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 in the dark.

Hamlet knew it

(1980)

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

(1978)

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

(1991)

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.

Antiques

(1978)

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.

Between two girls of flesh, the woman of dreams

(1979)

Between two girls of flesh, the woman of dreams,
her beauty in crescendo, her body
duned and undulating like the earth.
Each bed flowers with her nakedness.
The birds on bright days
whisper the light syllables of her name.
She is in the golden singing of the daffodils,
the green choiring of spring grass.
But she has left unanswered, unregarded
my tenderness, gently questioning
like the white throat of a swan.
Shall I sing: as long as I live
I will love none other?
Shall I say: as long as I love
I will serve her alone, and passionately?
Yet as a blossom with its pure promise
is superseded by the green
unbrilliant fruit,
all abstract passion is in the fact detected.
Quietly, spring grows into its summer;
in heavy leaves the winds are cradled,
in the multitudinous fields
if we will only listen, life
keeps what promises it has to give.

A Small Secular Song

(1977)

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.

The eloquence of your body like a flame

(1978)

The eloquence of your body like a flame,
the rhythmic blooming of your smile,
your rivering hair — all entreat me, coax
as I would have them do.
Out of a few square feet of darkness
lovers create a world with brilliancies.
Out of sweat, endearments, violence,
tenderness glows. A sort of joy,
and then an end:
the imaginary nightingale falls silent,
the roses wilt and the stars,
morning, death.

Drawing on one final cigarette, I ponder
this poem of ours like the hundredth wave at sea,
this trifle of humanness we have created
against both angels and machines,
this eloquence of your body like a flame,
this blooming of your smile.

As I return home from you

(1978)

As I return home from you
the sky embraces me in your stead,
the landscape in reverse rises to greet me
with strange familiarity like an early hour.
Though I am still wearing the kisses
you clothed me with, I grow small and cold
under the breathing galaxies of night.

Everything tempts me from you:
the road, the voluptuous flowered air,
the full moon riding in my windshield,
the forest's lush and laboring undergrowth.
If I am to return to you some night
so full of ardor and high hope
I must scatter bits of my love along the way.

Caught by so many solitudes

(1979)

Caught by so many solitudes
I gather the melody of you
among the empty branches.
Here you stood once, and here,
here the sun painted you in shadows,
in this spot once your hair
became moonlight, your eyes
(already full of departure)
grew distant like the stars.
Here my dreams fall
without echo into the world.

On Hearing Vaughan-Williams' "The Lark Ascending"

(1979)

What is beautiful passing away
what is whole strung out in pieces
our youths our lives

Dining on emptiness
we scatter our love on the yellow fields of October
we survive into one more winter

You I remember from far away
who supported me with love
ashes

Your voice sweet
like all the Aprils of my early life
ashes

Our lives our youths
the pity to have known in a passing moment
surpassing beauty

Lear's Wife

(1979)

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

(1979)

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

(1978)

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

(1981)

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

(1988)

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
(1988)

In late May the season stretches toward 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

(1991)

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.

Part V

Commuting

Bird House at the Bronx Zoo

For the Zanders
(1989)

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

(1989)

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



(1988)

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

(1991)

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

(1979)

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

(1991)

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

(1988)

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

(1988)

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

(1988)

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.

It's April and

(1982)

It's April and
my grandmother's cherry blossoms easter again
just as she saw them, the same snowy pink
and in the gardens out behind the house
hyacinths, daffodils, tulips, just as she plotted and planned
are making their scheduled appearances;
slowly, inevitably all around grandmother's house
the shade is growing,
slowly, like one of her careful picnics
lush summer afternoons are being prepared.

Great Grandfather

(1982)

Since your daughter ended, forever, our morning talks,
I am the only one left to help remember you.
On air-conditioned summer afternoons,
stretched on the couch, I sometimes shut off the television
and let you re-live that whole string of adventures
with Garibaldi; or tell how you would sing in a village church
having gone (good anti-clerical) for the music only;
how you played the flute, and wept
when having lost a tooth you could no longer play
(that was the first word of your death);
how you were a fine country doctor, and undersung
though when you died hundreds of peasants,
unpaid, mourned at your funeral.
Strange — you never even guessed my existence,
I, the executor of your memory on earth,
so far away and in such a different future.

For My Grandmother

(1982)

Yours were visionary, simple dreams
as from an imagined, pre-Freudian past.
When I was a boy in wide-eyed wonder,
you told them to me — premonitions of your children,
of your father's death, and at last
foretaste of your own. Since then
the seasons have blown over you
as they will, and as they must, my thoughts
have turned elsewhere with the turning years,
save on some solitary nights when my hearing
tunes to the stars and the voices and the dreams
out of a deeper universe return.

Youthful Portrait of my Father

(1982)

With no thought of me
you chased your pastel April day
about those same green lawns
where I would later play and gathered
the prettiest blossoms for your mother
(watching as always from the window)
and then, because the sunlight was so warm,
the grass in its first growth so welcoming,
because all later life, surely, would keep awhile,
you lay down and dreamed dreams like apple blossoms
and wished for no better day.

At the Sea Shore

For my father
(1985)

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
(1985)

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 Heiligerdankgesang — music (I once told you)
one could die happy with. You did not need it.

Commuting to Montclair

(1988)

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.

Part VI

Found Music

Prologue

(1991)

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

Absence of Blue

(1980)

On an overcast
May afternoon shade upon shade
of green or gray with only some occasional bloom:
violet rhododendrons or the red beginnings of a rose;
azaleas have long since spilled their blossoms
in bright shadows on the ground, and sweet-smelling lilacs
burned to brown ashes of their April selves.
In spite of this we walk through spring
learning to see again:
beeches birches
ashes oaks
to sift among hues
and shapes: thick-
leaved and shadowy
clusters of maples
or airy, feathery
lacework of oaks
against the sky;
to name, like Adam
in radical innocence
things of our demesne,
to begin over again
in the absence of blue
with earthbound, green, or greening things.

Dandelions

(1988)

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
(1988)

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

(1985)

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

(1981)

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



(1988)

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.

Winter Housecleaning

(1982)

Mourning dove
heard through an open window
making April of the February air,
beige and calm on your branch
beside the rooftop — melting snow,
water gleaming and trickling of spring.

Peonies



(1982)

A week long glory
of pinks and rose, inexplicably
multifoliate, so heavy a bloom
that you bow to the earth
which is in awe of you.

Beeches

(1982)

Beeches
silvery, thin-
skinned
carved with
lovers' initials
dappled with
spring light —
to peer at the
world through them
is to become a
pure blue thought,
to sense an Eden
teasing
through our lives.

Church Bells

(1981)

Aspiring,
lifting through the air
the blue zenith of a winter morning,
the music drags its echo to my window
demands an opening.
I let it coldly in.

On Painting a House

For Andonis Decavalles
(1977)

In sun-stretched hours
the light has sought and learned
the boundaries of my forehead,
the bronzed extent of my arm's yearning.

In the convex day
between roofs of shingle and sky
my brush instructs the dull wood
to resemble sky until it soars
blue and cloudless beyond my touch.

A Sonnet for Sara

(1982)

April's not April if it is not seen
nor felt along the bone; spring is not spring
without known blossoms crowding themselves between
each day and day of almost everything;
nor poets poets without practiced eyes
to flesh the structures of their knowing hearts,
eyes close upon each hour's pink surprise
the blossom-promise of earth's subtle parts
nor love quite proper love that cannot find
in tiny leaves, like infant's hands unfurling,
some correspondence of its deeper mind
or purpose that has set the planet whirling.
Therefore, from earth's long, deathly, winter sleep
I watch our spring in centimeters creep.

Sospiri

For Sara
(1981)

We hardly notice them, the layers
of April and May passing us each year;
blossoms wither like the leaves in fall:
forsythia, magnolia, cherries, crab apples, plum
weeping to the ground, lilacs, wisteria,
deaths hidden everywhere in the early leaves.
Or when a storm jars the season forward
torn blossoms blow wanton through the streets
under the wheels of cars, dogwoods, azaleas.
Week by week, weather by weather
the season sighs away its flowers
to celebrate new fruit and summering leaves.

For Charlotte Elena, Three Weeks and One Day

(1983)

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.

First Steps

For Charlotte Elena
(1983)

On the cool September morning
after rain
in an old house
shuttered against the unexpected weather
the baby stands over and again
and walks and falls.
Though it is much easier to crawl
from one point to another, more efficient, safer,
the baby stands over and again
and walks and falls.
I see in her how many millions?
Man must walk, man must raise
the aristocracy of his hands
reachers for far, high things,
man must seize his Adam.
On the cool September morning
with this one gesture the jungle is put by,
the ritual of our deepest instinct
repeats itself: the race rises from its knees
to claim dominion: the baby walks.

A Problem of Shadows

For Charlotte Elena
(1988)

On our evening walk
inexplicable shadows grow about us
nets of branches and leaves, huge trunks
thrown down in our path, strange, dark
elongated likenesses of ourselves.
You are frightened by your own shadow,
sometimes behind, sometimes in front of you,
now vanishing suddenly under a light.
It is no use to offer the explanations
of scientists; for you these phenomena
are still magical, in your eyes, still
the wild lights. Not wishing to hurt your shadow
stepping on it, you stop, still. Now there are
no practicalities of destination, only
existential terror, existential pity.
And am I now to help you over the magic of this
vague, airy thing that clings to your body
and will cling for as long as you are in the light?

Scene from Swan Lake

For Charlotte Elena
(1988)

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

(1988)

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
(1988)

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
(1988)

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

(1991)

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

(1988)

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

(1990)

The wind chime, our Æolian 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

(1990)

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
(1990)

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

(1990)

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

(1990)

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
(1991)

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
(1991)

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.

The full leaves flutter restlessly on the bough

(1977)

The full leaves flutter restlessly on the bough,
each enchanted with its crystal share of morning,
eager for flight like a September bird.
The air, too, is restless, the sky
questioned and puzzled with first light:
primal and relentless, the fugue of birds.
Seas of grasses, waving, swell into hills.
I am overcome by their sleepy rhythm,
I feel strange urges now to be forgotten,
to be abandoned like a toy in the tall grass,
the grave of dreams. Discovered at last by light,
I reach for the smile waiting beyond my mouth.
Beside a maple my eyes begin hurriedly to bloom.

With its ear against the sky

(1980)

With its ear against the sky
a tree listens for autumn.
Birds gather the song they've kept
all summer at our window
and depart with it.

Chills now in the pulse of wind.
What we love is passing, surely, away.

Last night I felt the bone in your caress;
cello and viol, we played a sad duet
laboring toward silence.

December

(1991)

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.

Your head tangled in a blue silence

(1977)

Your head tangled in a blue silence
clutching the sunlight like a coin
you kindle for a bird as tall as dawn.

The sky is shaped with your eyes' longing.
Pure, like a bell you trace the air.
Nothing, no one touches your flight.

Now you are the wish of all things
dark with earth and aspiring,
brindled with the clamor
of city and field.

The wind sweeps you
through haloed weather. Morning throbs in you
and forgives the wilting of the stars.

Sweetness of pine

(1977)

Sweetness of pine, the scented moment
longing for an eternity,
or perhaps a cardinal wending scarlet
through winter and white air and morning bells:
wistful as the cutting edge of white
the habit of transience passes for beauty,
travels, travails; and I must always be turning
away from things (like a cave) returning
alone to myself. I stand behind the wind
to sow my sorrow in the breathless sky,
simple words to an ear endless as heaven.
I have the green sad immovable smile of pools in autumn.
I long to depart my body like starlight,
to scatter myself through an immortal universe,
to forget return. But my return is insistent
like the pulse,
sterile, dry like the air conjured by radios.
The guilty soul trembles back to body
where its confessions go unheard,
where it languishes like a shadow at the approach of noon,
where pine-scent mingles with the truth of brick.
The sky vanishes to its height, deserting my caress.
Or perhaps another cardinal
to fill the whiteness of my solitude with wings:

For Charlotte Elena, Age 10, January 2, 1993

Und zehn Jahre sind nichts...

Rilke
(1993)

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" millennium:
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
millennium we've dreaded and beyond.
By tens you inch into the history of your kind.

Found Music

(1990)

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

For my father, David W. Triggs
(1992)

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)

(1992)

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
(1992)

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.

Carpe Diem, or A Domestic Song

(1982)

One might begin naming things:
Automobile. Lawnmower. Boy on a bicycle.
In the distance a train chugging for New York.
Summer is full throated: I hear a bird calling,
over and over its soft note laces the late morning;
I know the effort of the boy pedaling uphill.
The trick is to notice everything, to apprehend
the light on the leaves, the fading rhododendrons,
the fading t-shirt of the boy like a summer sky.
Lawnmower. Automobile. Mother walking her baby.
A bell ringing the hour. As if inevitably
the rhythm continues. The same rhythm
for how many summers, for how many lives?
Beside a white, gleaming picket fence,
beside pink and white roses, I walk
in the heat of the day, my soul in my eyes,
careful as if afraid it will spill.
Cueillez dès aujourd'hui les roses de la vie.
It's June and life is waiting with her rose
(somewhere a woman waits for me with her smile).
The trick is to notice everything, to see
how many Junes have come to rest in this day
in the roses, in the picket fence, in the baby crying
my mother's Junes, my grandfather's, Ronsard's,
the invisible dimension in everything. The rhythm begins
again, the waiting, the train leaving for New York,
the boy coasting through his youth. All beating time.
The trick is to remember everything.

Part VII

Translations

On a Winter Morning, before Sunrise — by Eduard Mörike

(2014)

O feathery light time of the early dawn!
what new world would you awake in me?
What is it that suddenly, now in you
I glow with soft voluptuousness of my being?

My soul is like a crystal now,
untouched yet by a false ray of light;
my spirit seems to flow, it seems to rest,
open to powers, miraculous and near by,
that from the clear belt of blue air
call out a magic word before my senses.

With bright eyes I almost seem to sway;
I close them so the dream cannot escape.
Am I gazing into the bright fairies' realm?
Who laid that vivid swarm of images and thoughts
at the very gateway of my heart,
that, shining, bathe themselves in this bosom
like goldfish in a garden pond?

And soon I hear the sound of shepherds' flutes,
as round the crib upon that wondrous night,
soon wine-crowned, happy songs of youth;
who has brought that peace-blessed crowd
outside my sorry walls?

And what a feeling of enraptured strength,
in which my mind guides itself freshly afar!
Drenched by the first mark of today
I am heartened to each good work.
The soul flies as far as the reach of heaven,
the genius in me rejoices! Yet say,
why does my gaze grow damp with melancholy?
Is it a lost happiness that softens me?

Or something growing that I carry in my heart?
Spirit, go forth! Here there is no standing still:
a moment's time bears everything away!

But look, on the horizon the drapes already rise!
It dreams of the day, the night has fled;
the purple lips, which lay closed before
breathe, half opened now, sweet breaths:
Suddenly the eye flashes, and like a god of day,
with a spring the royal flight begins!

An einem Wintermorgen, vor Sonnenaufgang

O flaumenleichte Zeit der dunkeln Frühe!
Welch neue Welt bewegest du in mir?
Was ist's, dass ich auf einmal nun in dir
Von sanfter Wollust meines Daseins glühe?

Einem Kristall gleicht meine Seele nun,
Den noch kein falscher Strahl des Lichts getroffen;
Zu fluten scheint mein Geist, er scheint zu ruhn,
Dem Eindruck naher Wunderkräfte offen,
Die aus dem klaren Gürtel blauer Luft
Zuletzt ein Zauberwort vor meine Sinne ruft.

Bei hellen Augen glaub ich doch zu schwanken;
Ich schließe sie, dass nicht der Traum entweiche.
Seh ich hinab in lichte Feenreiche?
Wer hat den bunten Schwarm von Bildern und Gedanken
Zur Pforte meines Herzens hergeladen,
Die glänzend sich in diesem Busen baden,
Goldfarbgen Fischlein gleich im Gartenteiche?

Ich höre bald der Hirtenflöten Klänge,
Wie um die Krippe jener Wundernacht,
Bald weinbekränzter Jugend Lustgesänge;
Wer hat das friedenselige Gedränge
In meine traurigen Wände hergebracht?

Und welch Gefühl entzückter Stärke,
Indem mein Sinn sich frisch zur Ferne lenkt!

Vom ersten Mark des heutgen Tags getränkt,
Fühl ich mir Mut zu jedem frommen Werke.
Die Seele fliegt, so weit der Himmel reicht,
Der Genius jauchzt in mir! Doch sage,
Warum wird jetzt der Blick von Wehmut feucht?
Ist's ein verloren Glück, was mich erweicht?
Ist es ein werdendes, was ich im Herzen trage?
Hinweg, mein Geist! hier gilt kein Stillestehn:
Es ist ein Augenblick, und alles wird verwehn!

Dort, sieh, am Horizont lüpft sich der Vorhang schon!
Es träumt der Tag, nun sei die Nacht entflohn;
Die Purpurlippe, die geschlossen lag,
Haucht, halbgeöffnet, süße Atemzüge:
Auf einmal blitzt das Aug, und, wie ein Gott, der Tag
Beginnt im Sprung die königlichen Flüge!

The Pond — by Annette von Droste-Hülshoff

(1977)

It lies so still in the light of dawn
Clear as a conscience that's at peace.
And even when the West winds kiss
Its mirror-image, the flowers on
The rim stand still. Trembling, there's
A dragonfly, small blue-gold bars,
And crimson; the water-spider dances
On the sun's gleaming, reflecting glances;
Hearkening to the lullabies
Of rushes, a wreath of irises;
A gentle rustling quickens and dies
As though it whispered; peace! peace! peace! —

Der Weiher

Er liegt so still im Morgenlicht,
So friedlich, wie ein fromm Gewissen;
Wenn Weste seinen Spiegel küssen,
Des Ufers Blume fühlt es nicht;
Libellen zittern über ihn,
Blaugoldne Stäbchen und Karmin,
Und auf des Sonnenbildes Glanz,
Die Wasserspinne führt den Tanz;
Schwertlilienkranz am Ufer steht
Und horcht des Schilfes Schlummerliede;
Ein lindes Säuseln kommt und geht,
Als flüstre's es; Friede! Friede! Friede! —

Fall Day — by Rainer Maria Rilke

(2020)

Lord: it is time. The summer was prodigious.
Now lay your long shadows on the sundials
and let the winds blow freely in the fields.
Command the last fruits to be full now;
give them still two southerly days,
drive them to perfection, and hunt
a final sweetness into the heavy wine.
Whoever has no house now will build no more.
Whoever is alone now thus will long remain,
will wake, read, write long letters
and in the avenues, here and there,
restlessly wander when the dry leaves blow.

Herbsttag

Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß.
Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,
und auf den Fluren laßdie Winde los.
Befiehl den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;
gib ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,
dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage
die letzte Süße in den schweren Wein.
Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben,
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben
und wird in den Alleen hin und her
unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.

A Woman's Fate — by Rainer Maria Rilke

(2020)

Even as a king, out hunting one day
grabbed someone's glass to drink from, anyone's —
and afterwards the one whose glass it was
put it away and guarded it as if it were no one's:

so perhaps Fortune, thirsty too,
would lift One to his mouth and drink,
that then a small person, much too afraid
to damage her, kept her from use

tucked away in the anxious cabinet
in which he kept his precious things
(or the things that passed for precious).

There she stood, as strange as something loaned
and simply became old and became blind
and was not precious and was never rare.

Ein Frauen-Schicksal

So wie der König auf der Jagd ein Glas
ergreift, daraus zu trinken, irgendeines, —
und wie hernach der welcher es besaß
es fortstellt und verwahrt als wär es keines:

so hob vielleicht das Schicksal, durstig auch,
bisweilen Eine an den Mund und trank,
die dann ein kleines Leben, viel zu bang
sie zu zerbrechen, abseits vom Gebrauch

hinstellte in die ängstliche Vitrine,
in welcher seine Kostbarkeiten sind
(oder die Dinge, die für kostbar gelten).

Da stand sie fremd wie eine Fortgeliehne
und wurde einfach alt und wurde blind
und war nicht kostbar und war niemals selten.

From a Childhood — by Rainer Maria Rilke

(2021)

The darkness was like richness in the room
in which the boy sat, virtually concealed.
And as the mother entered, as in a dream,
a goblet in the quiet cupboard shivered.
She sensed the room betraying her now
and gave her boy a kiss: Are you here?
Then both gazed anxiously at the piano
because on many an evening she had a song
in which the child was strangely, deeply caught.

He sat quite still, his wide-eyed gaze hanging
on her hand, which, bowed down by the ring,
as if moving heavily through drifts of snow,
wandered over the white keys.

Aus einer Kindheit

Das Dunkeln war wie Reichtum in dem Raume,
darin der Knabe, sehr verheimlicht, saß.
Und als die Mutter eintrat wie im Traume,
erzitterte im stillen Schrank ein Glas.
Sie fühlte, wie das Zimmer sie verriet,
und küßte ihren Knaben: Bist du hier?...
Dann schauten beide bang nach dem Klavier,
denn manchen Abend hatte sie ein Lied,
darin das Kind sich seltsam tief verfing.

Es saßsehr still. Sein großes Schauen hing
an ihrer Hand, die ganz gebeugt vom Ringe,
als ob sie schwer in Schneewehn ginge,
über die weißen Tasten ging.

The Carousel (Jardin du Luxembourg) — By Rainer Maria Rilke

(2021)

With a roof and in its shadow they turn
for just a little while, the stable
of bright horses, all from the land,
that lingers long before going on.
Indeed many are hitched to carriages,
but all wear spirited expressions;
an angry, red lion goes with them
and now and then a white elephant.

Even a deer is there, just as in the forest,
except it wears a saddle, and on top
a little, blue girl sits buckled in.

And on the lion a boy rides all white
holding on with his small, hot hand
while the lion flashes teeth and tongue

And now and then a white elephant.

And passing by on the horses too,
bright girls who have quite outgrown
this ride already; in the middle of a swirl
they gaze out, anywhere, over here —.

And now and then a white elephant.

And thus it goes and hurries to the end,
circling and turning and without a goal.
A red, a green, a gray one all sent by,
a small profile only just begun —.
And sometimes a smile, turned round,
a blissful one that dazzles and spends itself
on this breathless and blind game.

Das Karussell

Mit einem Dach und seinem Schatten dreht
sich eine kleine Weile der Bestand
von bunten Pferden, alle aus dem Land,
das lange zögert, eh es untergeht.
Zwar manche sind an Wagen angespannt,
doch alle haben Mut in ihren Mienen;
ein böser roter Löwe geht mit ihnen
und dann und wann ein weißer Elefant.

Sogar ein Hirsch ist da, ganz wie im Wald,
nur dass er einen Sattel trägt und drüber
ein kleines blaues Mädchen aufgeschnallt.

Und auf dem Löwen reitet weißein Junge
und hält sich mit der kleinen heißen Hand
dieweil der Löwe Zähne zeigt und Zunge.

Und dann und wann ein weißer Elefant.

Und auf den Pferden kommen sie vorüber,
auch Mädchen, helle, diesem Pferdesprunge
fast schon entwachsen; mitten in dem Schwunge
schauen sie auf, irgendwohin, herüber —.

Und dann und wann ein weißer Elefant.

Und das geht hin und eilt sich, dass es endet,
und kreist und dreht sich nur und hat kein Ziel.
Ein Rot, ein Grün, ein Grau vorbeigesendet,
ein kleines kaum begonnenes Profil —.
Und manchesmal ein Lächeln, hergewendet,
ein seliges, das blendet und verschwendet
an dieses atemlose blinde Spiel.

Experience — by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

(2025)

The valley of the evening was suffused
With silver-gray perfume, as when the moonlight
Seeps through clouds. And yet it was not night.
With silver-gray perfume of the dark valley
My twilit thoughts grew blurry and perplexed
And quietly I sank into the weaving
Transparency of the sea, and let go my life.
What fabulous flowers could be seen there,
With chalices darkly glowing! Thickets of plants
Through which a reddish-yellow light, like topaz,
Streamed and glowed in the warm currents. The whole
Permeated with a most deep swelling
Of melancholy music. This I knew,
Without comprehending, yet I knew:
This is death. And death has become music,
Immensely longing, sweet, and darkly glowing,
Cousin of deepest melancholy.
But strange!
A nameless, homesick longing silently wept
Within my soul for Life, and kept weeping
As one weeps, when going, on a great sea-ship
With yellow giant-sails, towards evening
On the dark blue water, past his home city. He sees
The alleys, hears the fountains rushing, smells
The fragrance of the lilacs, sees himself.
A child, standing on shore, with childlike eyes
That are afraid and want to weep, he sees
Through the open window light in his old room —
But the great sea-ship carries him away,
Silently gliding over the dark blue water
With yellow, strangely shaped, and giant sails.

Erlebnis

Mit silbergrauem Dufte war das Tal
Der Dämmerung erfüllt, wie wenn der Mond
Durch Wolken sickert. Doch es war nicht Nacht.
Mit silbergrauem Duft des dunklen Tales
Verschwammen meine dämmernden Gedanken,
Und still versank ich in dem webenden,
Durchsichtgen Meere und verließdas Leben.
Wie wunderbare Blumen waren da,
Mit Kelchen dunkelglühend! Pflanzendickicht,
Durch das ein gelbrot Licht wie von Topasen
In warmen Strömen drang und glomm. Das Ganze
War angefüllt mit einem tiefen Schwellen
Schwermütiger Musik. Und dieses wußt ich,
Obgleich ichs nicht begreife, doch ich wußt es:
Das ist der Tod. Der ist Musik geworden,
Gewaltig sehnend, süßund dunkelglühend,
Verwandt der tiefsten Schwermut.
Aber seltsam!
Ein namenloses Heimweh weinte lautlos
In meiner Seele nach dem Leben, weinte,
Wie einer weint, wenn er auf großem Seeschiff
Mit gelben Riesensegeln gegen Abend
Auf dunkelblauem Wasser an der Stadt,
Der Vaterstadt, vorüberfährt. Da sieht er
Die Gassen, hört die Brunnen rauschen, riecht
Den Duft der Fliederbüsche, sieht sich selber.
Ein Kind, am Ufer stehn, mit Kindesaugen,
Die ängstlich sind und weinen wollen, sieht
Durchs offne Fenster Licht in seinem Zimmer —
Das große Seeschiff aber trägt ihn weiter,
Auf dunkelblauem Wasser lautlos gleitend
Mit gelben, fremdgeformten Riesensegeln.

Sonnets to Orpheus, II, 4 — by Rainer Maria Rilke

(2025)

Oh this is the creature that does not exist.
They didn't know that, and in any event —
its gait, its posture, its exquisite neck,
up to the light of its quiet gaze — they loved it.

True, it *was* not. But because they loved it,
a pure creature happened. They always left space.
And in the space, clear and uncluttered,
it raised its head lightly and scarcely needed

to be. They fed it no grain,
only the possibility it might be.
And that gave the creature such strength

that it grew a horn from itself. One horn.
To a virgin it came, all white —
and was in the silver mirror and in her.

Sonette an Orpheus, II, 4

O dieses ist das Tier, das es nicht giebt.
Sie wußtens nicht und habens jeden Falls
— sein Wandeln, seine Haltung, seinen Hals,
bis in des stillen Blickes Licht — geliebt.

Zwar war es nicht. Doch weil sie's liebten, ward
ein reines Tier. Sie ließen immer Raum.
Und in dem Raume, klar und ausgespart,
erhob es leicht sein Haupt und brauchte kaum

zu sein. Sie nährten es mit keinem Korn,
nur immer mit der Möglichkeit, es sei.
Und die gab solche Stärke an das Tier,

daßes aus sich ein Stirnhorn trieb. Ein Horn.
Zu einer Jungfrau kam es weißherbei —
und war im Silber-Spiegel und in ihr.

Part VIII

Addenda

Forest Murmurs

For Sara
(2024)

> "I *need* you! I *need* you! I *need* you!" says the bird,
> or seems to say. Another bird answers "*Subito!*
> *Subito!*" A third chatters with laughter at it all.
> Breezes rustle the full-leaved trees, an orchestral
> accompaniment of sorts.
>
> I have slain no dragons lately,
> but sometimes, on a morning rinsed with sunlight,
> when the wind chimes mingle their tones with the horns
> of passing trains, the neighborhood speaks to me,
> and with an eerie sentience I attend to this
> confabulation of the universe.

Afternoon Haiku

(2022)

In the afternoon
I was reading about death
when a flower fell.

Stump [waiting to be pulverized]

(2023)

Sidewalks are designed to stop things growing,
likewise paved or gravel drives. But given the slightest crack,
green shoots appear, forcing themselves into the open air,
weed-whack them as we will.

Take this tree stump that we pass by each day:
sawn two inches from the ground, its life in rings exposed,
it bursts now from its edges with tiny branches
and new leaves fed by the roots.

Life indeed has deep memories, and while it can will out.

In the Weeds

(2023)

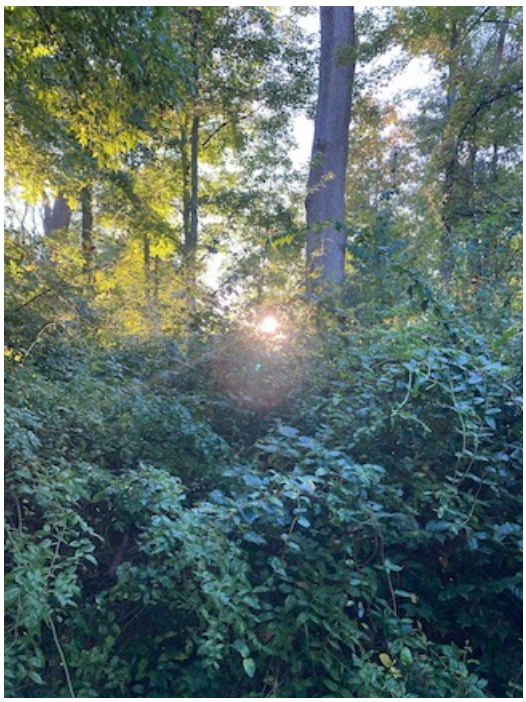
They actually have real names, even poetic ones,
in addition to the usual gibberish of Latin:
cockleburs, dallisgrass, fiddlenecks,
foxtails, goosefoot, redmaids, lovegrass,
shepherd's-purse, sprangletops, witchgrass,
yellow stringy stonecrop, loosestrife,
purple dame's rocket, deadnettle,
cape leadwort, and the butterfly weed.
Just naming them will twist the tongue.
Don't try remembering them all. It's easier
simply to pass by this volunteer army of the spring,
finish your walk, get on with the fleeting business of the day.

One More Spring

"Since to look at things in bloom..."
A.E. Housman
(2023)

> It's here again, the inexorable spring.
> If nothing else, you can tell it by the light
> that gently pries the early blossoms open.
> You can tell it by the fragrant tufts of grass,
> deeply green now, the yellow forsythia
> that seem to amplify the very light of day,
> the white clouds of the cherries now in bloom,
> the palely pink magnolias wavering with breeze.
>
> I have watched it now for how many years?
> I have felt its enormous energy quicken in me,
> like a tidal wave, only to subside with summer.
> I have seen the flowers blown into green fruit,
> and the fruit itself left to decay. One more
> spring has come. One more year has fallen away.

The Last Day of Summer



(2022)

It's still a green and short-sleeved summer day;
only the air conditioner can be turned off now,
the windows opened to a gentle breeze,
and birdsong listened to as in the spring.

The birds themselves, great murmurations of them
quilting the morning sky, surge back and forth,
anxiously questioning, waiting for a sign,
a shift in the light to set them journeying.

The evening shadows are growing longer now
cast by the sun's deep-golden, lingering light.
The summer flowers are growing sparser now,
brief flames of color on umbracious garden walks.

September winds are growing cooler now,
combing the yellow fields of goldenrod.
The equinox draws near with a sudden gust of rain
scattering petals and seeds. The great fall begins.

Keeping Watch

For Aunt Emma
(2022)

While we were on watch, waiting for my aunt to die,
they told us the last thing she might hear would be music,
so I pulled out my iPhone and set it playing near her —
all the things I thought would be peaceful at the end, Bach's
Goldberg Variations, the *Heiligerdankgesang*, Nocturnes,
the final Beethoven sonatas. In my mind were thoughts
of all the music she'd given *me* over the years,
my first Wagner, that first concert with Respighi's *Pines*,
the strange, eerie piece I heard once entering her snug house.
What *is* that music? Oh, Sibelius's second symphony. My first
(and only) piano lesson with her. Fingers bent. That's it!
I wondered at the pianist playing Op. 111, the trill dancing
above those deep, magisterial base notes. Going on and on.
And then, like that heart she'd kept for us all these years,
the battery wore down at last, and the music disappeared.

33/4

For Charlotte Elena
(2024)

Don't ever read poetry on a plane!
If you're anything like me at least. I did that once —
"I am sick, I must die..." — all the while
The plane rocking, shaking, a bit of metal
And 38,000 feet between you and the Atlantic.
Better take up the stained and wrinkled magazine
And read some piece explaining baseball
To the English. Pretend to sleep like the others.
And if you can live your life over — just once —
Don't wait to start flying till you're 33.

I was 33 and you were 4. My new suitcase,
Somewhere down below, was locked with the combo 334.
Who could guess? At takeoff, frightened by the sudden speed,
You cried for me to have the pilot turn around,
But it was too late. With everyone else,
We vaulted into the air toward heaven,
And then you fell sound asleep, real sleep,
Leaving me with my book of turbulent poems.

And then, wondrously, we were on new ground:
The train ride to London passing the quaint towns,
Victoria Station with its bustle and ice cream,
Our first pub with its friendly collie dog,
Museums, St. Paul's, Dr. Johnson's house along the way,
The Underground with its cushioned, fabric seats,
A far cry from the plastic seats we knew in NYC.
And then the old side-hall train to Oxford —
Compartments with sliding doors and blue cushions
Straight out of the movies.
On the way to The Randolph,
Dragging the heavy suitcase, we stopped at a pub

With “Platonic” roast chicken, a place we never found again.
I wandered lonely through the half deserted streets
That evening, humbled by the ever-presence of the past.
(We chose our pubs, of course, for their willingness
To allow children.) Turned away from the Lamb and Flag,
We settled, with the ghosts of Tolkien and Lewis
And live English robins, at the Eagle and Child.
You left your Mary Poppins book at the Turl.
It was sad to leave in the end.

But then driving the “little roads” to Devon.
Tess could see, riding high up on a wagon, but for us
In our small car, the hedgerows were like a weird maze.
You may remember that horse galloping alone in his field,
Or the rolling hills, green to the edges of red cliffs
Looking down on the pebble beaches of the sea.
We heard there, for the first time, Arnold’s grating roar.

At the Edge of the World — Furkablick

(1988)

By sunrise or sunset, or when we hear
some eternal wave crash like the history
of the world on local shores (such Matthew Arnold heard)
we are stirred deeply, strangely, for at such times,
sensing the edge of the world, the limit where what
is ordinary ceases, we have a glimpse
of that vast otherness of universe
in which our domesticity resides.
Call it, like Ruskin, "the sublime," or simply
sense in it community with our fellows,
those sentient beings who glimpsed eternity
and died, and all this so long ago.
So too
where the mountains stagger past the clouds,
where glaciers father, age-old and marble green,
the rivers that sustain our common lives,
we stand as on an axis of the earth and feel
the great plunge from sky to sea, the river's life
and memory, our memory for innocence.
Here we grow small (as what does not beside
the universe?), and humbly, like a child's
balloon drifting in aether to its vanishing
point, we let the bubble of our being fly.

The Spring Offensive

(2025)

Like a fading army in retreat, the tattered
Snowpatches hide from the prying rays of sun
Behind walls and trees, or under leafless, scattered
Hedges, whatever gives them cover on the run.
No use. Cold winds that blinded us in white
Have broken faith, and blow now for the Spring.
Pale grasses, newly uncovered to the light,
Lust for deep green just one more month will bring.
Rebellious bulbs, once prisoned under snow,
Rise up now everywhere with slender lances
Spiking toward heaven with a yellow glow,
Promising blossoms as the Spring advances.
Thus March, the month of yearly revolution,
Fires up the Spring with Winter's dissolution.

Graphs

For Charlotte and Jeffery
(1996)

Dates still mean something nice with them — they stand
beside each other making a sort of bar-graph,
and if one fancies, one can almost see
the dates as sub-headings: 1990, 1983.
Still happy dates that have about them
the promise of growth-spurts yet to come,
sea-shore castles, Little League home runs,
glorious mud-fights, first-day trips to school.

Our graph, though with smaller dates, was like that
once: you could tell at a glance the kid from 1954,
the "baby" '57, the big girl, '48.
In a photograph I see them still, the line
of smiles decending as the dates ascend.

Back then, the adults were 'teens; their graphs
(1912 or '17) were flattened out and dull,
so that for us there seemed no difference.
Nothing was changing; nothing could ever change.

The grandparents then had smaller numbers still:
1883, or '84, or '92, a wavy graph, though which
dates meant a dip or stoop you could not tell.
Already, with what grim, granite permanence,
hyphens were being chiseled after these.

While the Future Waits

(2025)

I've known too many people who have died,
And am weary now with lifting up the past.
Too much of my soul now lingers on that side —
Too many memories that cannot last.

I wait for the future that always waited for me —
As I try to touch it now it won't hold still,
But slips away like the horizon at sea.

The self becomes inscrutable, the kind
That only smiles, and gives away no secrets.
No one can hear the pulsing music of my mind.

Perhaps the dead alone might hear it, resident
Still in timeworn layers of my being —
That "I" who remains a lingering guest of the present,
And smiles at the deep mystery of seeing.

Branscombe Postcard

For Sara
(1988)

Checkered with hedges, insistent, green,
the meadows climb here to the sea
which hammers the narrow, pebbled strand;
pastorals of green and blue, flocks of sheep
and sailboats pass their accustomed days
together. In the morning, a brilliant sun
skims off the waves to bathe the eastern cliffs,
red with compacted layers of Devon soil.
Remote, as in a paradise, we walked here once
and heard "the grating roar of pebbles" and the gulls' cries
and almost forgot the other world. But one gull
signaled a wild distress, caught on a fish-hook
by a stranded boat, beating absurd and helpless wings.
The white feathers of his neck were flecked with blood,
his eyes in terror, as he played to his last strength.
Unwilling, this once, to witness nature run
her usual cruel course, tentative, I cut the line,
and he flew suddenly free, first arcing the bay,
then to a perch high on the red cliff — whether
to slow death or to life we shall never learn.

The Voice Inside

(1986)

will never be quiet, calculating
by day, raving when I lie
at night, a twisted insomniac
in the No-Man's-Land of bedsheets.
The voice inside is really many,
my friends who have known *me*
as no others, fearless
to point out my flaws, dreading
all sorts of harm, boldly conceited
inside their modest manner of man,
spinning and unspinning pipe-dreams
at which I wear myself.
The voice inside explores unspeakable
things, decides for me,
makes silent tracks in each morning
stealthily, as in new snow,
and I suppose will be the first to tell —
oh doubtless years from now —
when it is time to quiet and to go.

A Stick of Type

For my father, David W. Triggs, May 19, 1987
(1987)

We would spend mornings out of
the sunlight, spurning the invitations
of spring blooms, in the cluttered cellar
where your memories lay boxed. Here
were the remains of your darkroom
(still crated since the move from the old house),
boxes of old bookjackets (the art-form you
made your life's work), the evidence
of our childhoods meticulously saved
and catalogued, all sorts of gadgets
you thought might prove useful — someday,
perhaps today — paintings that somehow
hadn't found frames or places to be hanged,
all the furnishings of your life saved
against some possible use. And here
the old hand press you'd promised me,
a technology from grandpa's time in need
only of a knowing hand to work it.
I thought it would be glamorous to learn,
and asked you to teach me. Thus,
my first lesson in typesetting began.
For the first time, I imagined what
your work had been, day after day
in the real world of the big presses,
preparing all those out of print books
that seemed important. I hungered
for all the jargon expressions that had
flown over my head throughout childhood.
I yearned to think the thoughts you had thought
all those days of my "thoughtless youth."
We began with an old type cabinet

made of real, extravagant oak,
filled with inexplicably heavy lead pieces
marked with reverse letters, mysterious
like hieroglyphics, full of the promise
of wisdom. And there were strange metal pieces,
“sticks”, in which the random type fulfilled
its promise in sentences. We opened all
the narrow drawers until in one we found
a stick that Grandpa had made up years ago.
Read backwards it said simply: Frederick Triggs.
Thin, dark, fragile, like a bone finger
from the grave it pointed to us with the letters
that once were its name. I, Frederick Triggs,
have lived and made this, and this
narrow legacy is now all of me. You didn’t
rearrange the letters, but put the stick
back in its drawer, and closed it,
and without a word the lesson ended,
my one lesson in type.

Spring Lake, NJ — Aug. 22, 2025

For Sara



(2025)

This seagull likes me, I think.
Come close, he eyes me expectantly.
No food on this beach, I'm afraid.
With a sudden beat of wings, he flies off
And his shadow sweeps across the sand.
I'm left alone with the dull roars of the ocean
And the tidbits of human sound —
Children's cries, the scraping of sand from folding chairs,
The cloppings of sandals on the boardwalk.
Nothing to do but gaze at the horizon
That joins the still blue of the sky
With the churning sea-blue of the sea.

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