# Found Music

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# *L’envoi*

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

# Dandelions

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

# A Snail in Abersoch

*for Charlotte Elena*

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

# Lines for Gregory

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

# Three Old Women

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

# Rose of Sharon

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

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

# For Charlotte Elena, Three Weeks and One Day

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

## Scene from Swan Lake—for Charlotte Elena

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

# To Charlotte Elena, Dancing

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

## Rilke’s Carousel, Jardin du Luxembourg

*for Charlotte Elena*

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

# Children's Voices, Jardin du Luxembourg

*for Charlotte Elena*

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

# Cleanup

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

# For Charlotte Elena

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

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

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

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

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

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

# For Sara

The wind chime, our 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

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

# A Room for Charlotte Katcher

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

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

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

# For Jeffery David

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

## For Jeffery David, Age Three Weeks and One Day

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

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

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

Your fingers, of an almost fetal delicacy,
grasp one of mine, the awkward giant
scarred and blunt with use. Yours are inutile,
fresh funny things that wear their baggy skin
like ill-fitting trousers. Tipped with razory nails

(thumb still unopposing), they barely reach.
And still I feel their force, a born strength
making but the first of many claims.
The fingers already—so small one squints
to see them—are whorled with personality;
the palms, with heavy Shar-Pei creases,
even now are rich with fate.

## Learning About Gravity—for Jeffery David

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

# *Ungeheuere* for my father

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

everything familiar. Darkly look out, and
then forget it all, join back the others. Smart
silently. This is how I feel, turning now
as the projector cools, perfectly imageless at last.

# December

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

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

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

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

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

# For Charlotte Elena, Age 10, January 2, 1993

*Und zehn Jahre sind nichts...*

Rilke

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

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

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

# Found Music

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Glory

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

# A Letter to Michael (1954—1962)

## I.

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

## II.

I don't remember all that much really. You'll have to forgive me for turning out forgetful like the rest. I remember when you first came to school, how I wrote an essay about the new boy who had made many new friends, "especially me". I still remember struggling with the spelling of that "especially". And how your mother let you ride all the way across town to play. I don't remember where I heard the news, or who told me. But I still see your empty desk at school and with a bit of effort feel my seven-year-old gloom, my shocked and battered incredulity (another difficult word). Nowadays, no doubt, a crew of "childhood trauma professionals" would descend on our class with briefcases full of therapies,

but we made do with a few words from the teacher and a schoolyard of rumors and the overwhelming evidence of your unattended desk (hardly big enough for me to sit at now) that still held your "things"—rulers and pencils and erasers and brown-paper-covered books with words like "READING" in your childish hand. On the playground some days after, I made an ass of myself. I told another boy in halting, tremulous words, the sort that cast about hopelessly for confirmation, that if Jesus could return to life, perhaps you would as well, perhaps right after lunch or next day. I imagined you back at your desk again before it could be cleaned out and reassigned. When we got back, you were not there, and first thing he raised his hand to tell this to the teacher and the class. I remember I ran in horror from the room and not much else. Later the teacher put the nix on all such talk. I don't remember her words. Second grade finished up anyhow. Your picture was in the newspaper and I cut it out and, believe it or not, kept it for years till it yellowed on my bedroom door and the image grew more strange and strange, as such images do, faded and distant and oddly young. It got misplaced somewhere, sometime, in the place where lost things go; I got distracted into the business of growing, of getting older, putting away childish things, acting like a man.

## III.

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

# “Real” Love—for Sara

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

(which knows only its beginnings), to seek
richer satisfactions of middle and of end.
Day-to-day love makes room for squabbling children,
angers, encroaching age, spring and spring-cleaning.
But the rose, weathered this far along, does not
grow sick; the summer's fruit, monotonously
hued, colors ripe, for harvest and for tasting.