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AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE READER

Invisible Rivers is the third volume of a trilogy set mostly in and around Swan Lake in northwest Montana. The first two volumes: *Interiors* and *The Distances*, were also published by Alba Publishing.

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For Thomas Cobb  
old friend and co-inventor  
of new constellations

I

*Darkness falls  
from the air*



## IN LIEU OF A REQUIEM: DICK GARCIA 1938-2013

Tonight's sky is in a tizzy—meteor showers; fat stars flashing in a Van Gogh heavens; squandered moonlight.

I'm up at the crack of four a.m., thinking of someone I barely knew, who might've been my friend.

—Unless the heavenly hubbub keeps him awake, let's cut Dick G. out in little stars, shall we? He was a rarity in an age of upward immobility, wherein no one really arrives. By "rarity," I mean that Dick was an ordinary man content to be ordinary and to leave the pursuit of the American nightmare to others. To a fault he was kind, gentle, and tolerant of racial intolerance ("Go back to Mexico!" a drunken Swan Village cowboy once shouted to him from a passing pickup).

He grew up in San Diego. The air was clearer then, the town mellower. Born in Chula Vista, the 5th child of a dirt-poor family, more than anything else he remembered the green flash: an atmospheric phenomenon occurring—when it occurs—as the sun dips into the ocean. A devout Catholic even as a child, he thought of this wink of green as a covenant more soothing than the rainbow.

Really, he's the last guy you would think to write about: no drama, no bitter ironies—no bad moon rising. So I can hardly do Dick justice. But for now, while it's still dark on the lake and a south wind rises, I'd like the choir of constellations to pause for a moment and sing:



*Dick Garcia was a man.*

on Bond Creek  
anonymous  
blossoms

## PORTRAIT OF A LADY

Eighty-three years old, she lives alone in a fairy-tale house by the lake. With its unexpected nooks and crannies, a short flight of stairs that leads nowhere, and one of two tiny bedrooms she uses for painting the mountain apple trees of a Hawaiian childhood, the house isn't so much a reflection of her as it is her—or so a neighbor has observed.

She appreciates the solicitousness of friends, though she'd rather be alone, even in winter, when the lake freezes over and she can watch eagles, coyotes, and red foxes make a meal of the dead elk dragged onto the ice by a neighbor astride a small John Deere tractor. In early April when the lake begins to thaw, she stations herself on the tiny rickety deck with a pair of binoculars, waiting for Canadian geese migrating north.

Childless, widowed for nearly forty years, she knows she'll die alone in this house, almost welcoming the thought, though she's in good health. I know what they'll find, she thinks with a trace of amusement, a half-finished mountain apple tree on the easel and my head on the pillow.

More than twice she's told neighbors who pretend to admire her paintings: They tasted like a rose smells.

At night she dreams of the lake in summer; Hawaii's salmon-pink twilights; blank canvases—and the touch of her husband's hands on her back.

sun low in the sky  
never quite right—  
pinks of the apples

## OPUS SOMETHING OR OTHER

Again I fail the words. Seduced by twilight twelve hours ago, at dawn Swan embraces the same promiscuous colors—courtesans luring the farm boys.

So what does it mean to be a poet? It means that you have to learn to follow when the muse leads. Problem: You never get to lead.

Sometimes she pops up unexpectedly, catching the computer and me barking at each other.

She says,

*Bark all you want, Baby; THEN let's go to bed.*

green rain in deep woods

bird-song

where I don't want to go

## BENT MORNING

Fog on the lake: stirring memories. Of Marin County, yes; of San Francisco, yes of course: but the fog also reminds me—I've said this before—of white marble: the marble Michelangelo claimed imprisoned a sculpture asking for a Get out of Jail card.

*Well? Is that too much to ask?*

There's a tiny forest service-owned island across from us, very near the west shore; in the old days we'd boat up the lake and have picnics there. Now the only "inhabitants" are deer swimming from the shore to nibble leaves.

So what is the sculpture? Not a woman. M. wasn't interested in the girls. And surely not another David—

Hold the phone. The fog is lifting. . . Whoa! It turns out that the Artist has cleverly concealed—

A boat trawling for Northern pike! And, as the sun climbs, among the sounds my empty house makes I hear a giggle: the muse, naturally!

playing leapfrog  
the Mission Mountains  
—re-reading *Childhood's End*

## THE LOST ONES

Dawn comes up—not like thunder—more like the song of that bird in Birch Wood I can never identify.

That's not right either. Dawn goes on doing its thing, while the songbird has mysteriously disappeared. Is it my imagination, or has this entire forest become quieter the last few years? I know the Arizona desert, where we spend half the year, boasts far fewer sightings of fauna—bobcats, deer, scrawny coyotes, even rabbits—than before.

No need to remind Arizona's Anasazi and Hohokam, who saw the Earth Mother turn on them, watching in deliberate horror as summer rains absconded: thieves in the night robbing them of a livelihood.

—Meanwhile, brother puma no longer comes down to drink from the turquoise pools of Chaco Canyon.

moonlit shadows  
the delicate death  
of a tiger moth

## FLY ME TO THE—

Another morning, another hangover! Well, let's shrug it off, shall we? —And flip another page of our calendar of minor tragedies, pleasures, disappointments, not to mention the absences of surprise to life.

Don't forget those small ghosts which, as the Spanish say, are really unspoken thoughts, no more mysterious or scarifying than that—

And the lake—always the lake—

I've written elsewhere that to me Swan Lake = all the world's lakes rolled into one: Como, Geneva, Lomond, Ness (*sans* Nessie), and the humungous Baikal. —All except Tahoe with its goddamn casinos studding the shoreline: paste jewelry in a paper crown.

Distances are our friend but also our enemy. Think of the distance between you and the moon where, thanks to Neil Armstrong in 1969, the "man" has gone AWOL, along with his U-Haul trailer full of green cheese.

Still and all, the poet:

*The moon may not be made of green cheese but my heart is—*

too far—too far—

Sea

of Tranquility

## THE ROAD HOME

Death in summer—

Actually most of my loved ones have died in fall or winter—my father in January (or the last night of December; I found him on New Year's Day); my mother in November; my maternal grandmother in February; only my paternal grandmother died in spring.

Nonetheless, on this white-hot July afternoon mortality surrounds me, emerging from the shadows of pines and tamaracks like locusts, each one on a mission.

—The dead hummer on our deck this morning, having (along with dozens of his fellows) banged against the bay window; the dead mouse on our grass, open eyes bright with pearls of light (sun-reflections); the juniper tree that gave up the ghost last week and plunked in the lake—sighing as it went down!

(We always hit what we aim at, a U.S. army tank gunner tells a reporter on the news last night. *And we will mess up your world*).

—Twelve hours later, July's quarter moon seems... *ruptured* somehow, as if stricken by a psychosomatic condition brought on by witnessing events down here day in and day out.

gray dust of a dead world  
astronauts too busy  
to gaze on a blue earth



## NOT FOR US

Shades of deep, deeper, deepest blue—

Returning from the bar in Swan Village, looking out from the deck it occurs to me that cloud-reflections on Swan are—*privileged* is the only word that comes to mind. Why?

I mean, by whom, for whom, and of whom? Surely not for us—

In a former life (these days I count my life in months, not years) I wrote a prose poem which, at first blush, seems to have little to do with the above. On second thought I think it does:

### *John Constable's Hampstead Heath*

*—No one saw the English sky until Constable painted it.*

*There's an internecine war going on here: clouds vs. clouds. On the one hand, Constable's busy sky leans toward an abstract expressionism this painter would never know; on the other, it "embodies a full apprehension of natural effect"—Constable's own words.*

*The heath exhales darkness; and the clouds (the clouds, up there, the wonderful clouds! Baudelaire sang) seem in a hurry to cross the heavens to somewhere, anywhere away from the human universe.*

*What's going on in the village down below? Who knows? Who cares? This is Mother Nature's cosmos where no humans need apply—unlike Monet's world of trees in rivers, Constable's immortal clouds won't even pause for reflection.*

a child writes,

*Where do they go?*

*Only the clouds know*

7/2/13

East shore—

So many faces gazing up at me from these colorless  
waves—

Now, thanks to a sullen evening sun, Crane  
Mountain and the moonrise negotiate an uneasy  
truce.

Hah! Next thing you'll say—*the North Star is a  
tuning fork; all is well!*

—Except for one thing, damn it. Walking  
northward up and down golden hills and valleys of  
dream, I never reach my childhood home, 3216  
Emerson Street in Palo Alto.

Know thyself—

trembling for both of us  
my reflection  
—cold ripples

## DARKNESS FALLS FROM THE AIR

Thanks to a fast-moving line squall, the lake—a sheep in wolf's clothing—huffs and puffs and returns (sheepishly!) to quietude.

—There's a light across the lake, dark gold, disappearing in rain and fog. Now it's back, and, as usual, I'm compelled to think of the Mystery which encases this light like a cocoon. Thinking this way I feel like a fool, but—

What will be born from the cocoon? Answers to my questions, to the Question (*There are no answers to the real questions*, an Irish poet remarks)? Or, when I dream—this has happened before—will I be whisked off to a kingdom where there're no questions at all, only answers?

So is *that* the answer?

Believe it or not I've never heard anyone put it this way, but what haunts me isn't the thought of an afterlife yea or nay, happy, sad, or miserable, etc., etc.

What haunts me is that, whatever does or doesn't happen, when we croak *we'll no longer be human*. Yes, I know there may be a Reality out there which makes our day-world dream-like; and—and—

And? What does Baudelaire say? *Let questioning rest.*

Fat chance!

. . . Meanwhile, the light is on day and night. As for the line squall—like a petulant child it sulks up on the Mission ridge. As if its questions, too, have gone

unanswered!

This just in: a rainbow is forming in the sky,  
curving slowly earthward, awaiting the pot of fool's  
gold.

tamaracks—

whispering to shadows,  
shadows

## CRANE MOUNTAIN IN SILHOUETTE

How many moons? Lake-ripples make of each moon a ladder leading upward—homeward—to its source 235,000 miles away.

Or, if not a ladder, then a pillar of fire—

Either way, it's too tempting to get off my duff, walk down to the beach and take a stroll on the lake, as if—now—the moons are stepping-stones. *Enough, or too much, metaphor*, as Blake might say.

The lake and I (and all those feral moons) go back forty years. Even when I'm living far to the south for half the year, it has midwived my sorrows, pleasures, disappointments—even my memories—

—As if Swan were the Chosen Daughter of the earth-goddess of Salish shaman-songs. . .

inventing new constellations  
dreams  
of deeper sleep

## WIND IN TAMARACKS

I've written of a summer day in 1981 when a violent squall tumbled down the Mission foothills and, as I sat drinking a Corona on the dock, headed toward me like a freight train.

Sometimes, though, listening to distant thunder, it's impossible to tell whether it's coming or going.

Character in a Hemingway short story: *Where are you going?* Reply: *The other way from you.*

Now that I think of it, the thunder always seems to be coming. If you hear it, no matter how far away, it will knock on your door.

from  
*distant*  
to  
*thunder*  
from  
*getting*  
to  
*nearer*  
TO

The enemy is dry lightning. Every year forest fires pop up in the Swan and Mission ranges, often in inaccessible country. The closest one to us was started by a careless camper last summer, when flames came within thirty miles of the lake-house. Not super-close, but—

*The soul of fire.* . . What would the Salish—and the Flathead, and the Blackfeet—think of that phrase which just crossed my mind? Yes, the earth once was a living thing, friend and enemy, midwife of sorrows—

O and Sister Water! Not that far from Montana Indians in temperament and sensibility, St. Francis sang of it in the *Canticle of the Sun*.

And Brother Air—



## ENDINGS

Like a lecturer an attentive audience, cold orange sunlight addresses the whitecaps on Swan. An hour or two later winds die down, the light taking on a life of its own: a voice content to have no one to talk to.

— No longer interested in illuminating things (somehow it seems too proud, even haughty for that!), the sun delights in “its own self,” as I overheard a local farmer say.

And it seems—scary is the best word I can come up with—to think of old Sol this way.

—And God said: *Let there be*—not worlds, not stars, not you and me and the family dog—no: simply  
—Light.

flooding the garden

noon sun

—one rose still unfolded

## SUNDAY ALL DAY

Me being me, when a speedboat with twin Mercury engines slits the smooth waters of Swan, I'm reminded of—

In a French surrealist film of the thirties, thin clouds bisect a full moon at midnight. The scene then morphs into a razor blade slitting a human eye. This did happen to one of my students, a double murderer, at Arizona State Prison. He'd been a snitch—very bad move, dude.

In a heartbeat the lake heals over and the world prepares its next razor blade—the latest incarnation of its choosing—

*You have chosen poorly—*

That, too, from a film, a mediocre one: *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Oh, well. My moods are so cinematic these days that I wonder if my dreams are films with a beginning, middle, and—

—In 1966, a reporter from the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* asked film director Jean Luc-Godard, “Surely, M. Godard, you believe that films should have a beginning, middle, and an end!”

“Of course,” Godard replied. “But not necessarily in that order.”

In the jargon of sports announcers: *Just as I say that, what happens?*

—Nothing.

sucking his thumb  
the toddler looks past me  
into his future

## GREEN STONE

She had dark hair, deep blue eyes, a sweet, killer smile—and, in the end, no time for me.

—Well, not quite. When I visited her up at UC Davis that fall (we'd met at Yosemite National Park in July), she let me pick her up and carry her around a park in the middle of campus; and I spent the night with her.

Trouble was, she'd already met a guy from Washington State, and was more or less "spoken for," as she put it—regretfully? Was I dreaming?

The last time I saw her we went to a party at my Berkeley apartment, chauffeured (I had no car then) by Rick, a friend of mine whose girlfriend happened to be her roommate at Davis.

She didn't say much, so like a fool I asked what the matter was, knowing full well—

"I'm sad and confused," she studied the backs of her hands. For the zillionth time since I'd known her, something dropped inside of me.

Then she said,

"May I borrow this?" picking up my roommate's green stone paperweight. I simply shrugged. A vague rancor darkened the room, even though there was laughter and bright conversation swirling around us. The rancor gathered its forces against me, acquiring mass, shape, almost a face.

On the way back to El Cerrito, Rick driving his yellow VW, sitting with me in the back seat she

pressed the stone tight against her stomach, still saying very little. Through a miasma of grief I was reminded somehow of nature programs I'd seen of animals mourning lost infants, holding and rocking them, knowing they were dead.

When I looked out the window, lights of the Berkeley hills seemed—*poignant* is the only word that came to mind. A sleuth of bears, a murder of crows—a poignancy of lights! Why the hell not?

She clutched the stone until we walked up the entranceway to her parents' home. Then she turned, gazed up at me, and placed the stone in my hand. Incongruously, or maybe simply to escape the situation, I thought of the secret Greek rituals of Eleusis, in which a sprig of wheat was placed on the initiate's palm.

She turned again—and turned back. *Please don't say we can always be friends! Don't say it—*

"I'm so sorry," she murmured as I ran my fingers over the stone, still warm from her body.

In the car Rick flipped on the radio as we headed back to Berkeley. Very first song: The Beatles' *I'm a loser*.

That was nearly fifty years ago. Over the decades a sentimental mythology surrounding the stone bubbled up in me like magma, until the stone became—I'm embarrassed to confess this—a sacred object.

The other night I told my wife the story, including, of course, the mystery of the green stone and how the girl had clutched it against her stomach

all the way home.

My wife was silent for a moment. Then she said,  
“Menstrual cramps.”

winter moonset  
night-birds’  
wonderment

~~~~~

POSTSCRIPT

Two years later her ex-roommate, now the fiancée
of my friend Rick, pulls me aside at a party.

“You should know this. . .” she pauses. “Or maybe
not! Anyway, Mary and I talk on the phone every two
or three weeks. A few days ago she told me,

“Cheryl, I think I’ve seen the light’—those were
her words—‘. . . I should’ve chosen Steve.”

“But she’ll stick with the marriage.”

“Yes.”

dark cosmos
fear of the unknown =
fear of light

HONEY OF GENERATION

Teen—looking up from a movie stars magazine—
“There’s nothing to do here, Grandpa.”

Grandfather: “Wait till the sun goes down; then
try naming new constellations!”

“What’s a constellation?”

dark on dark—

a child asks,

Are the stars on fire?

WATERTOWN

He was fairly typical of the genre, a demanding, leather-lunged martinet who bullied his charges and produced several excellent, punishing high school football teams during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. He groomed his only son from early childhood to be a star player. The boy did have considerable talent, becoming a starter his junior year, but from the beginning he'd never enjoyed competitive sports. "There's too much of your mother in you," the coach liked to say.

If the boy mustered the courage to express his feelings to the father—which he did on occasion—father and son always argued, the arguments escalating into shouting matches. Then, when the boy begged for permission to quit the team mid-way through his senior year, the coach refused, saying that it was better not to have a son at all than one lacking intestinal fortitude.

On a bright, cold early December morning one day before the game to decide Connecticut's state championship, the boy's body was found hanging from the football field's east goal post. In the end, both father and son got what they wished for.

game day—
coach
pacing the sidelines

FOG ON THE LAKE

Following a night of rain, lines of fog move slowly up the lake from south to north, obscuring half the Mission foothills, making the other half seem closer to the east shore and to me.

Physicists tell us that what I'm seeing are mere representations of a subatomic world composed of quarks, hadrons, leptons, and the newly discovered Higgs boson. So be it. If the world is Plato's cave, and shadows cast by atoms are all we have. . . I find this notion strangely attractive.

. . . Hot off the wire:

It's something we can't embrace, rather than the other's embrace, which tightens our embrace.

leap
of an eagle
the branch still rocking

HEART CONDITION

Turns out I never really knew my maternal grandmother at all.

I did spend a lot of time with her growing up, and then in college when I attended Cal. Most summers I'd take the bus up to Berkeley from Palo Alto and visit, and in 1966, shortly after our mother died, my teen-aged brother and I moved in with her and our step-grandfather.

According to my mother, grandma was a silly-headed floozy—those were her exact words—at Berkeley High back before World War I: a real party girl. My uncle told me a story about bringing his friends home after school, his mom greeting them in the foyer of their “Berkeley box” home on Grant Street—and bursting spontaneously into a song and tap dance! This, of course, resulted in my uncle's humiliation and an on-again, off-again rift between him and his mother.

pale purple twilight—

rare

onshore flow

When I was nine or ten, on a Monday afternoon when grandma was playing the ponies (I learned later), my step-grandfather admitted to me that he'd barely broken even selling nuts and bolts and door hinges at the junk store he ran in Albany, just north of

Berkeley.

“So why do you go there, grandpa?” I asked.

“Why do you think?” he looked at me. “To get away from *her*—”

She dyed her hair so often that by the time age seventy rolled around she was nearly bald; what hair remained was pink (behind her back my brother and I called her Grandma Henna.) And she was full of boring inspirational sayings such as, “Don’t ever use the word ‘damn’; if you do, God will dam off all the good things in life from you.”

Just a week before my mother died, she told me this story:

My great-grandfather, of whom it was said that he ate himself into the grave, developed chest pains while still in his fifties. The only treatment in those days (the year was 1913, when my grandmother was twenty-one), was nitroglycerin tablets to relieve the angina. One evening they were sitting reading in the parlor, some distance from each other, when my great-grandfather shouted, “MY PILLS!” Springing to her feet his daughter ran to the mantle and tossed them across the room. While they were in the air he fell forward, dead.

gravestone—

withered,

even the plastic flowers

Then, finishing the story, my mother dropped what to me was, and still is, a bombshell. Soon after

she'd watched her father die, my grandmother became partly catatonic. She didn't utter a word for nearly a year.

fog off the Bay
downstairs
her voice calling

SEPARATE TABLES

At a legal banquet back in the seventies attended by my brother, then a deputy D.A. in California's Solano County, Kathy G.—one of the few females in the room—gets into a heated discussion with an inebriated male defense attorney at the next table. After the squabble goes on for a few minutes, the guy slams down his drink, stands up, and drops trou smack in front of Kathy.

“Looks like a penis,” she says after a moment. “Only smaller.”

dessert course
keeping it short
—the after dinner speaker

WARS

tranquil moon
since Fredrick the Great
not one winter offensive

According to a Spanish proverb, *every hidden thought becomes a small ghost*. Tumbling through the looking glass of language, I find . . . a haunting.

The mother of a close friend once told me the following story. During World War II, a few days before being shipped out for a European tour of Army duty, her younger brother—call him Robert—had gotten into a series of violent quarrels with his parents that lasted the course of a week. Terrible things were said on both sides, and the father told him he never wanted to see him again. The young man served in the 2nd Ranger Battalion and survived the horrific casualties at Pointe-du-Hoc and Omaha Beach on D-Day. Six months later he and his peripatetic battalion were assigned to the 28th Division in the Hürtgen Forest, where his luck ran out.

men crying from the cold—
between the stars
smell of cordite

On December 4, 1944, near the tiny village of Bergstein, on the eve of a battle for the infamous Hill 400, Robert stepped on a mine and was critically

wounded. This was far more serious than the so-called million-dollar wound that could get a soldier out of battle and on his way back home. The wound was life-threatening, and so a chaplain who, as it happened, was from the same western Pennsylvania town as Robert, and who was married to one of Robert's distant cousins, attempted to notify the family. Robert was too badly wounded for evacuation back to the states: in fact, he might not live out the week. The family made no reply. Robert confided in the chaplain the story of the family fight and his father's last words to him. Again the chaplain tried to contact the family, this time through private channels. To keep Robert's spirits up and because of the extremity of the situation, he assured Robert that the second message had gotten through, a decision he later bitterly regretted. Robert hung on for ten days after that, hoping—indeed expecting—to hear from his family any moment. For some unknown reason, the chaplain's first message, sent through official Army channels, arrived in America *after* the second, private message. When the second message arrived, Robert's distraught father frantically sent words of reconciliation through connections in Washington—too late however. Robert died of his wounds just two days shy of his twenty-fifth birthday, fully believing that his family, the father in particular, had forever turned their backs on him.

Thirty years later, Robert's sister told me that her father never ceased being tormented by those angry last words he'd spoken to Robert stateside, before the

young man went off to fight in Europe. But that was nothing, she added, to the daily agony he suffered because the son was destined to remain forever bereft of the father's last message. Having fought for the rest of his life with the might-have-beens of Robert's fate, the father died disconsolate, even as Robert had died disconsolate a decade or so before, thousands of miles from home. Thirty years after her father's death, Robert's sister's eyes filled with tears as she spoke of her younger brother and what his thoughts must've been as he lay dying in the snows of the Hürtgen Forest in late 1944.

When I asked her what the family quarrel had been about, she thought for a moment, gazing at the floor before admitting that she couldn't recall.

mopping up
the 442nd—
Japanese-Americans

MAY DAY

What just happened?

Leaf-shadows cross my writing pad, cloud-shadows crisscross the lake. I'm trapped in a net of memories: of a girl half a century ago, both hands gently stroking my face—before she lowers the boom; of a red balloon floating away from me across a furrowed field, a pretty teen-aged Japanese nurse holding my hand; of honeysuckle-colored light striping the wall of my father's bedroom the morning he doesn't wake up.

From the west shore, a gunshot echoes up and down the lake. Another—another—

I wonder if Dr. Depression is about to make a house call.

—Then I look up.

There, cool, gray, adrift in a soft web of lilac blossoms, floats the day moon.

our shadows

the road taken

BEFORE A COLD FIREPLACE

Night thoughts—

To me, what makes contemplating never seeing a beloved person again cruel and unbearable is that eons will pass; stars will blossom, wither, and die; comets will fizzle out and the earth be swallowed by the sun—all Creation fading into a thin, cold haze—and I'll still be bereft of that person.

When I talk like this to friends, they roll their eyes and accuse me of lack of acceptance. I accuse them of lack of imagination.

Then—inexplicably—I burst into laughter.

—the morning after
rubbing it in
song of a thrush

PRAGUE

I'm sitting by the deathbed of a fellow professor for whom, in truth, I have little or no professional respect (among other things, he'd been a bag man for the athletic department, bad-mouthing more rigorous colleagues so that athletes would avoid them). We talk for an hour of department matters until I mention an upcoming trip to Europe. Lying in a home-delivered hospital bed, his visage colored Van Gogh-yellow, he suddenly cheers up.

"Go to Prague when you're over there," he implores me, describing in loving detail the joys of drinking Czech white wine on mild summer days in Wenceslaus Square. Cirrhosis of the liver had ravaged his body, the sickness unto death—and yet he tells me that!

When I leave, his wife, also a department colleague, says, "Say a prayer for him."

Later that year, sitting alone at a table in Wenceslaus Square, I lift a glass of white wine in silent homage to my late colleague.

golden light of noon—
hugging Kafka's house
a cathedral

HOMELESS

He sedulously avoids the shelter—too many predators.

When cops don't roust him, he sleeps in the park. He carries a yellowed snapshot of him sitting on his father's lap, clad in shorts and suspenders, looking shyly past the camera; and for the thousandth time he wonders how, after all the countless twists and turns, he came to this.

He once told a friend without a hint of self-pity or even regret, *I'm just a dog-soldier; I don't have any rank in the world.*

Sundays are the worst. With the depressing downtown practically to himself, he performs a ritual. Pushing a shopping cart full of junk and his sleeping bag, he waits on corners for the light to change, even though there's zero traffic and no cops around to bust him for jaywalking. Sometimes it seems as though the green light will never come, but he won't cross the street until it does.

In this, and in other small ways, he keeps dark thoughts in their lair.

lucky day
on the sidewalk
a dollar bill

KNOTS

Faithless, she lies awake next to her sleeping husband, who knows.

Wonder at the riot of emotions within her; revulsion inspired by the mere sight of a bare shoulder as he sleeps on his side; guilt rekindling whatever feelings for him she has left; and the thought, *One always hates what one wrongs.*

But that's not it—not the heart of the mystery of what she's feeling. Then, after dozing, she wakes up with a start, finally grasping it: *I can't forgive him for forgiving me.*

sounds of breathing
—nearly a face
moon in the window

OLD KENTUCKY

Until recently I never knew his first name, and since he died a half century before I was born, not a lot about him has come down to me, including his origins. Sometimes genes skip generations—my brother is a semi-dead ringer for my other, maternal great-grandfather—so I wonder how much of this paternal ghost lives on in me. Could he be kind, gentle, and compassionate as my father was? Did he have a steel-trap memory like his son David, my father, and me?

Are dreams genetic? I do dream about him, his face always hidden in shadow (of course), his voice sounding like my father's as I remember it. In these dreams he too, resembles my father and my brother, who happens to look more like our dad than I.

I know only one hard fact about him. From 1892-1897 he murdered five people in a family feud before someone blew him away with a shotgun blast across the Indiana line.

river—

swamp moon

click of the hammer

VIEWS

Perched on my step-grandfather's shoulder, I'm mesmerized by the distant cool colors of the Santa Cruz Mountains twenty miles away. They fill me with an oddly pleasant sense of melancholy—so much so that I almost feel like crying.

Years later, when I actually hike these mountains, the sense of pleasantness returns—but not the melancholy. And I feel cheated—

distances
valley floor—
heat rising

in my mind's eye
a boy gazes upward
hidden moon—

VISITORS

You always knew who they were. Except for car salesmen and tourists, few wear aloha shirts in Hawaii. But these guys weren't exactly tourists. Two things gave them away as soldiers on R and R from Viet Nam: the haunted expression in their eyes and their government-issue pencil-thin mustaches.

jungle darkness
cry of pain—
or a bird

This is the Honolulu zoo in early 1969. Tet went down a year before, and Khe Sanh is still to come. What had these two—they look to be twenty or twenty-one—seen and done? Yes, the answer is in their eyes, but. . . . They say in prison to never make eye contact with anyone, even the guards; and now I understand why. They flick their eyes like bullwhips in a 180 degree arc, as if expecting Viet Cong behind every tree and bush. And they gaze at other zoo visitors and kids with a half-resentful, half-puzzled look, like astronauts finding themselves on an alien world.

cages
contentedly sleeping
two lions

Then, having sorted through all these impressions,
and walking to the exit, I overhear one of them say, “I
can’t wait for the evac,” slang for the plane back to
Nam.

too many horizons—
distant waves
unseen predators

II

Early morning wind

SWAN LAKE

This is the day that shouldn't have been.

In the morning I misplace my car keys and spend ninety minutes looking for them. Around noon I get a phone call from California informing me that an old friend has died of alcoholism—to my knowledge the first member of my high school class to pass away.

At three o'clock I hear the air horn of a big rig, then a loud thump. Running out to the state highway I see a dead deer; looking more closely I discover that she was pregnant.

Late that afternoon I develop sharp stomach pains that antacid won't cure.

as one—

taking to the sky
a line of eider ducks

Then, sitting outside in what we call the bower, staring glumly at the water, I hear a sound and look up, just in time to see a mother eagle swoop down and rudely knock her eaglet off a birch branch. *Cruel* pops into my mind—before I realize that she's teaching him how to fly.

TALE OF TWO SEASONS

On this particular occasion he managed to surpass his own reputation for irascibility. A well-paid academic poet specializing in long poems about his personal pain and suffering, his specialty within a specialty was earning extra money on “the circuit”—a network of visiting poet jobs embracing colleges and universities around the country.

One winter a Wisconsin university invited him to spend a week giving pep talks to MFA classes and a reading of his own poetry.

“What do you do to distract yourself in this God-forsaken country?” he asked the English prof who picked him up at the airport. “Besides ice-fish, I mean.” On the way to the university he made several demands, including a bottle of his favorite Irish whiskey.

“Where am I staying?” he asked as a ribbon of white landscape unrolled behind them. The prof informed the poet he would be staying with him on his small farm ten miles from school.

“You’re putting me up in a barn?” It was true; he was going to sleep in a spacious, refurbished barn whose loft had been made over into a guest bedroom and bathroom, with a sweeping view of the Wisconsin countryside.

. . . On retiring that night, the poet put his false teeth in a glass of water, set the alarm, and dozed off. Around three a.m., the heat failed. On awakening, he

discovered that his false teeth had frozen inside the water glass. Later that day, he furiously informed the department chairman that, on completing his teaching/reading gig, he had no intention of ever returning to the university, and would take great pleasure in bad-mouthing his hosts wherever he went.

After the poet left, the chair summoned the prof.

"We have to get him back," he said. "This could be a real black eye for our program."

Pretending to be sympathetic, the prof heard him out, finally agreeing to re-invite the poet, this time for summer session.

After much wheedling and cajoling, including the offer of a raise in pay, the prof succeeded in arranging for a second visit. Irascible as ever, the poet arrived on a balmy July day and was ferried in stony silence to the farm, where he would sleep in the same room.

That night, with a warm wind belying the curtains, the poet placed his false teeth in the water glass and fell into a deep sleep. At two a.m., the prof's snooze alarm went off; whereupon he went to the barn, tiptoed up to the loft and, deftly taking the poet's water glass, put it in a small downstairs freezer. Two hours later he returned, removed the glass with the false teeth frozen inside once again, and placed it back on the poet's bed stand.

Two hours later the prof was awakened by the sound of screaming. Hearing the crunch of tires on gravel, he looked out just in time to see the poet angrily throwing his luggage in the back seat of a taxi, which promptly drove off, heading to the airport.

ground blizzard—
 delicate on the ice
 a blue heron

LEGEND

No one is named Kelvin Israel, for God's sake.

Not until he'd left town under cover of darkness did it occur to any of his English Department colleagues to think the above, much less say it out loud. By then, the damage—or so the university chose to interpret it—was done.

His credentials were impressive—B.A., M.A., and PhD from Columbia, top-shelf letters of recommendation, etc. And from the moment he stepped into a classroom at Mankato State in Minnesota and gave his first lecture on *Moby-Dick*, the students loved him. Like all good teachers, he punctuated his delivery with personal anecdotes, some of which showed him in a less than flattering light: which inspired the kids to love him even more.

Word spread around campus. By the time the second academic year rolled around, there were students lined up to take his classes, including many non-English majors. Colleagues, anxious to discover what Kelvin Israel had that they didn't, asked to sit in; they, too, were wowed.

The third year he was unanimous choice for Mankato State's Teacher of the Year. In due time, having published the requisite number of articles, he was granted early tenure. The fact that the journals he chose to publish in were obscure and foreign didn't matter much; besides, unlike bigger, research-driven institutions like the University of Minnesota,

Mankato's emphasis was on teaching.

Out of the classroom Israel was shy, reticent, "mysterious," as one colleague put it. He rarely attended department functions. Only once did he volunteer anything resembling a philosophy of teaching: *You are what you teach*, he once cryptically remarked to the chairman.

His charisma was still the talk of the campus when a jealous colleague decided to look more deeply into his background. That's when it was discovered that Israel had forged his documents, including the letters of recommendation. Not only didn't he have a PhD, apparently he'd never graduated from college.

Almost at the same time, in the middle of the fall semester and of three lit courses, Israel disappeared without a trace. When the Dean called the boarding house where he lived, the landlady said she'd never heard of a Kelvin Israel, although a professor with another name had recently left town, stiffing her for a month's rent.

one last horizon—
vanishing from the narrative
Ishmael

The strange thing is this. The department, which heretofore had been fractured by infighting and petty jealousies, came together in the wake of Israel's departure as never before. "He was a double-edged sword," one professor said to a fellow he hadn't spoken

to for months. “We’re both happy to be rid of him.”

city limits—
waving at the cop
a stranger

As for the students, they remembered him years later, many for the rest of their lives, swearing up and down that they’d learned more from Kelvin Israel than the rest of the English Department—the university for that matter—put together.

It’s *Call me Ishmael*
not
My name is Ishmael

AUTUMN DREAM

Brother fire, sister wind—

Rowing on Swan Lake, for some reason I think of a story about St. Francis which—who knows?—might be true. A fierce wolf terrorized the small town of Gubbio, prompting the people to go up to Assisi and ask for help. St. Francis went looking for the wolf, and when he found it said, “If you will stop attacking Gubbio, the citizens promise to give you ample food for the rest of your life. If you agree, give me your paw.” And the wolf gave him its paw.

But what really makes us brothers and sisters? I wonder as white-topped Mt. Aeneas comes into view. Then I have it: what Emerson called the NOT ME, a terrible presence of absence, connects us all: dots in a faceless universe, including the stars. Of course, St. Francis would never think of it that way. . . .

Thirty miles away, across the Mission Mountains, is the ghost of Glacial Lake Missoula created by a gigantic ice dam ten thousand years ago. One day the dam burst, and at 70 mph a 300-foot wall of water began its long journey to the ocean, scouring out town-sized potholes in the desert landscape of what is now eastern Washington. On the coast, Indians woke up to a distant roar which grew louder all morning. Six hours later, casting his fishing net into a stream, one looked up and saw it coming, a crown peaking between two mountains, studded with trees and boulders like so many jewels. I like to think the fisherman opened his arms to this emissary of the

NOT ME—what else could he do?—as it swept him away.

Ospreys carrying fish cruise overhead as I row between two shores a mile apart: from the darkness of larch-branches east of me, to the darkness of pines westward.

one thin cloud
slitting the day moon—
cry of a loon

DESERT MUSIC

Returning from Swan Lake, I always forget that the genius of Sonora lies in making human beings feel tentative. I love it.

—And yet the *mystery* of the desert—the mystery’s heart of hearts—eludes me, who’ve lived here nearly a third of my life.

T.E. Lawrence had something like this in mind when he remarked, “The desert is an ocean in which no oar is dipped.” So, lying awake, imagining my childhood desire for the sound of distant waves, I try to decipher hieroglyphics of moon-shadows on the dunes.

—Unsuccessfully, of course.

horizons—
the first thing
coming

SEASONS OF THE DAY

Music of dry maple leaves sounding almost like tympanis when autumn winds pick up in the woods.

And the lake—no, that's wrong; there's no *lake*, just moods of light, clouds, wind. . . .Nor is it proper to say they're on the lake: they *are* the lake, even as Monet's haystack is the play of light and shadow six different times of day; so that, in truth, we have six haystacks.

Looking at Lake Superior, local Indians chanted the smile of the Great Spirit. Ah, but there are smiles and smiles—kind, tired, sardonic, ironic—even malevolent. What if lakes were sentient, sparing the lives of sailors and swimmers if they chose? Of course we'd shout Hallelujah! But the lakes, we know—or ought to know—would be less beautiful—less redolent of the NOT ME.

inlet pools
gazing at their reflections
two blue herons

bathing in its own
muddy light
summer moon

THE FIELD

mill pond—
 winter sky
 —cold colors

We made caves. Crawling around in them—dug out of soft earth—we challenged each other about how deep we'd go. One day the mothers came and collapsed them; naturally, we resented that. When they explained that we risked smothering to death, we resented that too.

sleeping out—
 a torch-lit cave
 California sky

LOST IN THE STARS

Parallel universes—

In one, the green-eyed, blonde-haired girl next door—my first lover—had blue eyes and brown hair; in another, a chance encounter with a classmate at UC Berkeley's Student Employment Center didn't happen, so I never accompanied her to Tucson where I met my wife; and my marriage, if it happened at all, followed a very different world-line, as physicists say.

—And if there's an afterlife (or –universe), how many plangent voices in the dark winds of Purgatory—*Too late, too late. . . .*

fresh dreams

other deaths

HAPPY HOUR

Five o'clock in the afternoon. How dare I judge the new barmaid at Swan Bar?

Cold, distant, she does her job competently, but never making eye contact; never—

Never *what*? What do I expect? Who knows her history? Does she? Or has she repressed it?

People are what they are for a reason, which enables them to do what they do for no apparent reason at all. A Devil's bargain: made, perhaps, by this girl with innocent hair toiling behind the bar.

Illogically, mysteriously—hey, I'm only on my second glass of chard—this notion swims into my ken, gasping for air:

Judgments—little murders: the sentence carried out on oneself.

V

of snow geese
the other way from me

EARLY MORNING WIND

Caw-caw-cawing of a raven—

Big guy, he cruises Highway 83 looking for road kill: then, successful or no, flies to his accustomed perch in a gnarled jack-pine, the one preening in the mirror of the lake.

I assume he has no feeling for beauty, but I see him now and then—where's his mate, by the way?—gazing out at Swan, as if it held a mystery only birds can decipher. Then he flies off, not toward the highway this time, but into the forest, where other mysteries lurk.

He fluttered into a dream I had last week. I knew his thoughts and feelings, which were a mirror of my own. Flying deeper into the darkness of tamaracks, pines, and larches, he said to himself—as I have many times—

No, I don't want to go there and yes, I do want to go there.

wings still folding
unfolding in the breeze—
dead butterfly

OH, STOP—

End of the affair—

I mean the one between Swan Lake and a line of fog drifting up from the south. *I'm just a gigolo—*

When it comes to inamoratas, Swan is nothing if not democratic. Grebes, osprey, red-tailed hawks—

And in winter, when ice covers the lake, red foxes and eagles, vying for the lake's favors, which occasionally include a dead deer dragged out on the ice by Don, my 82-year-old neighbor who owns a small John Deere tractor.

Love and death! Well, love is a stretch, but for me too Swan is a shameless flirt, luring me down to our pebbled beach with a symphony of colors, the sound of a Northern pike jumping, ripples from the splash coming right up to the shore.

And I think of Plato's metaphor for love as a beggar who knocks on your door, is turned away, knocks again, is turned away again— until he stops coming.

What does Baudelaire say? *Has my brain become a witch's mirror?*

shimmering mirror—

I think

of a drowned child

WIND: OPUS I

Love it or hate it—I happen to love it—the gale blows all night, making the sound of waves on- shore seem closer than they are. The wind is a living thing—

In the morning there'll be twigs, leaves, and branches scattered all over creation. No sense in cleaning them up, I say—of course my wife disagrees—since the next windstorm will simply scatter more.

So why do I love the wind? “Romantic” sounds of the lake, yes; sounds of the forest, yes; but—

Suddenly it dawns on me: I love the wind precisely because it can't love me back.

tap—

the branches want in

—tap

WIND: OPUS II

Three-thirty a.m. There's something rattling around in the basement.

Did I dream it? My dreams have taken a turn for the worse lately. Nightmares, no; bad, unpleasant dreams, yep. Always I'm walking overland, up and down California's lion-colored coastal hills, knowing that I must get to Palo Alto—where I grew up—or Berkeley.

I wake up before I get to either place.

Rheumatoid creaks and cracks of branches outside my window: maybe that's what I heard. Or are they, too, denizens of dream?

—Well, no way am I going to roast the old chestnuts about life is but a dream and that Chinese parable about the emperor and the butterfly, etc. etc. Morning seems real enough.

Now it's dawn, the lake slowly materializing. It too is shuffling off the mortal coil of dreams.

An hour after sunrise I go downstairs to check out the basement. The chair I usually sit in is in a different place.

fluttering around
unlit candles of dream—
lace-wings

SERVICE FOR ONE

An economy of sorrow—

That's what life has become since she lost him a year ago. Very few frills in her day now—she's even stopped doing crossword puzzles.

Simplify, simplify—

To her new way of thinking, that's one too many *simplify!*

I know—you'd think the opposite—that she would add to, not subtract from, her lifestyle. About the only luxury she allows herself is a long daily walk, but in a different direction from where they used to walk together, before cancer changed everything.

She also spends long hours gazing at the lake, counting ospreys flying overhead with salmon in their beaks.

—Herewith, a dialogue betwixt self and soul:

You should get out more. Meet people. Swan Lake is so insular.

And gossipy, she manages a smile.

So what? What do you care?

I always wonder what Paul would think.

That's dangerous thinking, Sweet.

—So it is. But then, suddenly, hidden in the tall weeds since the funeral, Deep Depression makes a courtesy call.

What does she do?—Simplifies her life even more, cutting down on those gazing-at-the-lake sessions.

—The lake: *Come on in, Sweet, the water's fine.*

—white sky

AVATAR

No, no, not transported to, damn it; transported
from—

Now I know why some believe in reincarnation.
What is life but a looking backward—back, back, to
beyond the Big Bang? I suppose that's writ on the
water of our spiritual DNA, if such a thing exists.

Before prehistoric Glacial Lake Missoula burst at
the seams—more dams, more breaks, more floods,
more—

—Packing up my tent, cook stove and sleeping
bag, I plunge into what Eliot called the unimaginable
zero summer.

line squall wrinkling the lake—
happy
unhappy birthday

SUMMER SOLSTICE

“This isn’t a dating service”—kindly, hunchbacked Mrs. Kenny, as she fired me from my shelving gig at the Berkeley Library. That was 1965.

Today on Highway 83—sky a perfect blue, reminding me of we used to call “Berkeley days”—I look in the rear-view mirror of my SUV, trying to spot years, not miles. —Amazing, how many places I was thrown out of back in the day—the “Org”, foster homes, apartments, bars, even junior high school briefly. That Steven Carter : yet another stranger disguised with my face.

Or is he? Later in the day, gin and tonic in hand I walk down to our landing to check out what Swan has to offer. Not necessarily in this order: silence, punctuated by wavelets coming ashore; a woman’s giggle from a sailboat in the middle, riding the current of Swan’s invisible river; perfect circles from a leaping fish; and—this is pretty rare—a fresh-water white pelican, very different from its dun-colored cousins on the coast—wow!

Zooming overhead, the pelican looks down at me—unsmiling, of course. And the old feeling creeps back, fogging up my inner rear view mirror. I don’t belong here, folks, this isn’t my home, this is just a stopping-off place—

Last night I saw an old movie where a cop whacks the soles of a bum asleep on a park bench. “Move along, buddy.”

Where?

tinkling
ice-cubes or—
laughter on the lake

[The “Org”: Christian Science Youth Organization in Berkeley]

JOURNEY

O master of the blue horizon! What bad poet said that? Was he or she really a poet?

For the umpteenth time: *Let questioning rest.*

The horizon is anything but blue. Last night Glacier Park received its first snow of the season, a sign that we need to head south pretty soon. Suddenly I remember another poet's lines—

*You are going south looking for a drinking fountain.
I am going north looking for the source of the chill in my bones.*

So which one am I?

I am going north—

kneeling on wet leaves
picking up that red one
—what disappears

INSOMNIAC MOON

In a former life I wrote and published aphorisms.
Here's a handful:

*Chance wields power over us in precise proportion
to how little we're willing to give chance a chance in
our lives. The opposite is also true.*

*No loneliness is less self-aware than the loneliness of
a poor listener.*

*Yes, to doubt nothing and everything is the surest
way of knowing nothing. The only equilibrium between
these poles of doubt is a) happiness or b) misery. So
many choose misery!*

*Not only can you argue with success, you should
argue with success—as with an adversary.*

*The rotten truth is that if truth were profitable,
we'd still lie out of sheer cussedness.*

*We're kept like courtesans by the secrets we keep from
ourselves.*

*More men dread the advent of dawn than dread
the kindness which is night.*

The saint weeps and is human. God is silent. That's

why we hate the saint and love God.

What you love you dare not become.

. . . Strange light on the lake tonight (two a.m.,
I'm awake, looking out the westward windows in the
living room. The light bobs, dances, then scoots along
the surface as if—)

As if what? *Dude, it's too late for this stuff. Can't
you turn the faucet off?*

The will-'o-the-wisp comes closer, then farther,
then closer again. Illogically as usual, I remember
lines from a poem I read in that former life:

The river wants to thirst us.

*No river wants to thirst us. There's no malice in it,
Billy. Try to understand—*

—For river, read the aforementioned invisible
current where, as we speak, the light seems to be
hovering, searching for something.

When the wind picks up, the light disappears.

assassin of sleep—
you, friendly star!

THE TOWER

It will come as no shock to you that Montaigne is one of my heroes. Check him out: sitting at his desk in the tower, or carving aphorisms on the library's wooden beams, indulging in self-examination with a surgeon's cold precision—

The lake-house is no tower and I'm no Montaigne. It's odd, then—ironic?—that I won the Montaigne Medal for Literature, awarded by the Eric Hoffer Foundation. Anyway, Michel, tell me what you think of these bad boys:

You can't lose your innocence. You can only be lost by it.

We're all actors, yes, but why? Like all actors we can't see the (darkened) audience.

Our desire to be loved gallops out of control insofar as others' love gives free rein to the worst in us.

Perfection—the dream of perfection—is the perfect crime.

Two kinds of people: those who grieve that their grief is lesser than, and those who grieve that their grief is greater than, the grief of others.

The chorus empties what the soloist has filled.

There's no misstep until you don't put your foot down.

Opportunity doesn't knock. It's slipped under the door surreptitiously, like a billing statement at a hotel.

"I've never loved anyone," claims a philosopher. No wonder people were drawn to him.

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#### POSTSCRIPT:

*The past is dead as a doornail*, someone remarks to me at the bar the other day. So why worry?

—This afternoon, wandering down to the beach, I notice something on a branch of our dead juniper. Kneeling down, I see it's a freshly sprouted, pale green leaf.

up in the Bob  
two firefighters dead  
. . . beautiful sunset

[The Bob = Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness]

## THE YEARS

When I was a senior in high school Mr. Tanner, my English teacher, brought in a guest lecturer—a writer. I don't remember his name, or what kind of writer he was, but he looked the part—corduroy coat, cold pipe in his pocket, baggy pants, the whole eight-and-a-half yards.

The missing half-yard: He didn't like his profession.

First thing he said to us, smiling—

“Don't be a writer.”

I was sitting in the first row, thinking defiantly, Oh, but I will be. I will be a writer—

Who was I defying—him or myself?

A few years later I understood what he meant. I wrote a book about my boarding house experiences during spring of freshman year at Cal. Needless to say it was beyond atrocious—I neglected to put in dialogue!

Then, still at Cal, I vowed to write 1000 words a night for a year in a journal/commonplace book. I nearly made it, finally getting bored with the project. I did keep all those long yellow legal pads for decades, finally tossing them in the trash in Bakersfield.

But get this: my stuff was so bad in the early going—which lasted decades—that I actually had hope, figuring that hey, if you're still at it after producing mountains of crap, you must be a writer!

Sitting in the bower, watching the lake do its

thing, I think of my years of blood, sweat—no tears;  
but still—

And, of course, a songbird of undetermined  
species, making up for this morning's haiku I  
struggled with and finally threw away in disgust—

—You, songbird; you, leaves of the juniper—  
doing what comes naturally!

behind a cloud  
haiku moon  
—still, the song



## SHORTEST DAY OF THE YEAR

How many Cassandras can dance on the head of a pin?

*How many doomsday scenarios are out there? Does that answer your question, Bub?*

The lake abides—for now. Put another way, like the rest of us it's waiting for the killer asteroid to crash into earth and screw up our best laid plans. Guess we'll have to put the real deal—Armageddon—on hold.

In 1949 Max Ehrlich published a sci-fi novel called *The Big Eye*. On the brink of World War III a rogue planet cruises into the solar system, making a beeline for earth. Astronomers hatch a plot—I said this was sci-fi, with an emphasis on the fi—to inform the public the earth is doomed, and everyone in Russia and the U.S. had better cool it and say their prayers. In fact they, the astronomers, know the intruder will miss us by a whisker (no doubt regretting a blown opportunity to make the *Cosmic Gazette* early edition). Reason: maybe humanity will wake up, smell the coffee, and in gratitude usher in a millennium of world peace.

Fat chance!

Eschatology—the church term for world-ending scenarios—is a hot topic these days. A bit of this, just a bit, is wishful thinking, especially among the Republicans in Washington.

—*So where do you want to be when Big Bang II*

*interrupts happy hour?*

—Right here, Bubba, nursing and being nursed by  
a Brownstone Chardonnay, gathering ye rosebuds, aka  
my sins, while I may. Why? To trump the Last  
Judgment, of course!

As the setting sun smooches Crane Mountain,  
Dutch courage impels me to amuse the Cosmic  
Muffin by saying, *All right all right—what else you got?*

keeping the world away—  
string fence around our sapling  
so many years ago

## A WHITER SHADE OF PALE

The woman in the moon won't take yes for an answer. Neither would G., fifty years back, whom I dreamt about for the zillionth time last night. Playing it cool after all these years! Not that it got me anywhere then, either.

*You are part of my heart—*

That was in a letter she wrote out of the blue, twenty years after the sorry fact of our dissolution (she dumped me). Why? She was always a mystery.

I remembered Plato's theory about love: how, in ancient times, lovers were of one body, which separated into two.

As for the lake—

Colors melt into each other, fading—fading—emerging paler or deeper, seemingly content to be so.

Here's a fable I wrote a while ago:

### *Miss Yellow and Mr. Red*

Miss Yellow said to Mr. Red,

"Do you realize that if we marry I'll no longer be me, and you'll no longer be you?"

Pause; then—

"So what are we waiting for?" Miss Yellow and Mr. Red said in unison.

fragrances of jasmine  
fragrances of moonlight  
—heart's alchemy

## LITTLE BIG SKY

Above, a patch of blue; at my feet, on the floor of Seeley Meadow, an ocean of wildflowers where, in pre-history, a real, un-metaphorical ocean rolled on—

They creep into my dreams—flowers, I mean, scattered off-shore during a memorial service, gentled by waves until they disappear.

—Mountain asters, daisies, service-berry blooms, wild roses, fireweed, harebells, bear grass, lupine—

No poppies—along with lupine my favorite flower of childhood. That was in California, light-years from here.

Today, upon seeing me, a doe runs for cover—back to her den, no doubt, where a fawn awaits. Unlike the leopard, the little one will change its spots.

*Home is where the hart is!*

The moon, too, is a pun, but for what? Thanks to W.B. Yeats, I have it—a pun for small, moon-shaped apples borrowed from Eden after the Fall of Man.

Shared, of course, with the sun—

*The golden apples of the sun; the silver apples of the moon—*

in love with the shapes  
of dragonflies—  
nothingness

## THE PROPERTY NEXT DOOR

I keep waiting for the owner to sell, and for some out-of-stater to build an obscenely large house with a full bar in the basement—

Till then, I do some of my exercise over there (the owner's in Denver). Most of the land—it's at least two acres—has been clear-cut, like the Mission foothills. The ground is uneven, so I have to guard against spraining an ankle which, when I played high school basketball before the Civil War, I did with alarming frequency.

She, the owner, has twice the beach we do, but it's semi-inaccessible; the drop down to the water is too steep and too high. That worries me too. I can see a new owner bulldozing the heck out of that part of the property, making one or two boat-ramps, a shed for umbrellas, lifejackets, etc.—

—an entire season of band-saws, grunts and growls of Caterpillar D-9's, hammers pounding—

How silly all this is—how fortunate I am simply to be here—and I turn back to the lake eternally unsympathetic to my minor tragedies: especially before they happen.

When a storm comes up and the waves build, whether I'm next door or not, and particularly if a boat happens to scurry for cover, I always think of Simone Weil: the French religious philosopher who starved herself to death, passing away the day I was born:

*The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty.*

## SHORTNESS OF BREATH

Silence is the best revenge—

That was my curmudgeonly neighbor George's philosophy. Victim of (mostly imaginary) affronts, he turned a chilly shoulder to almost everyone—except yours truly, for some reason. Maybe it's because I tolerated his obnoxious Jack Russell terrier, a yapper called Scooter.

Scooter came after one of Don's—George's other neighbor, to the north—granddaughters, whereupon Don punted the dog a full thirty feet into the lake. That was the end of George's and Don's relationship, such as it was.

George rented his place, or rather the land, from ritzy Six Mile Estate just up the road. Not long ago he got word that, during a Six Mile Association meeting, a complaint was filed that his place looks like a junkyard, which it does. George assumed—wrongly—that Don issued the complaint. So it went.

George was way up there—mid-eighties. He no longer went fishing in Alaska, chopped wood or drove his truck, save when absolutely necessary. He did nibble marijuana cookies—legally, because of arthritic leg pain. He told me that only half a cookie suffices—“Clears it right up, Steve,” he claimed. He filed for a permit to grow his own.

When my wife teased him that he should be wearing love beads and a tie-dye, George simply stared at her.

Don't ask me why, he wouldn't even talk to his only son who lives in North Dakota.

Last summer we learned that George passed away down in Missoula. Bearer of the bad news was Don—whose last remark concerning George was, “To hell with him.”

After a pause Don, himself on the wrong side of eighty, added,

“You know—I do miss the old so-and-so.”

A week or two later, apparently having forgotten these words, he told me,

“Not to speak ill of the dead, but this world is a better place without that son-of-a-gun.”

Whereupon this thought gate-crashed my reverie:  
*Why not speak ill of the dead? If they could, what do you think the dead would say about us?*

. . . For the first time, I noticed that George and Don share a certain resemblance.

river rocks

. . . placing bets

which seed-pod goes where



## ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT

At one time I didn't dwell much on my checkered past. Then, when I wrote *Letters To My Parents*, my first e-book, it all came rushing back in a Biblical flood of memories, impressions, words—especially words—even fragrances. Before that, when childhood came knocking, I expressed it only in parable form—as in:

*At three in the morning a young boy awoke to hear his widowed mother weeping in the next room. At first he thought he was listening to rain, but no, it was the sound of sobs.*

*When he couldn't bear to hear them any longer, he got out of bed to see what he could do; but a dark figure appeared in front of her door, holding up its hand, and the boy retreated to his room.*

*Many years later, he himself became acquainted with the night: but whether the apparition that appeared before him long ago was devil or angel, he could never be sure.*

My mother and I once planted a small garden in the back yard of our Palo Alto home. I forget what was in it—just flowers, I think. What I do remember is that, when I walked through it, careful to step between the rows, time seemed to slow down, even stop. It was as if I'd re-entered the Garden, swapping the mundane hours of childhood (yes, kids feel ennui too) for the Garden's eternal hours of childhood, defying a russet sun ticking down the sky.

On FOX News yesterday the gorgeous anchor-woman announced that doctors say that age 72 is the new 30. Holy guacamole! That means—*but not so fast, my friend. DNA will have a say in the matter, I'm sure, your dad having died at 38 and your mom at 53.*

On the other hand, much of my DNA reads like a mystery novel with, no doubt, a “twist” ending. Who knows what nasty hereditary surprises lurked in my parents’ DNA, waiting to show up in my brother and me.

Meanwhile, like Byron’s deep blue ocean, Swan rolls on, going nowhere or—in my overheated imagination—everywhere.

—Nightfall.

tragic wings of moonlight yes moonlight  
whispers outside my window no willow leaves

[This haiku originally appeared in different form in the volume *River Mist*, released by Alba Publishing]

## COUPLES

They're a happy, squared-away twosome married fifty years, still up to teasing each other, as when she threatens to have an affair if he doesn't clean out the attic. As a child she and her family were displaced when Hitler decided he wanted the Sudetenland (now part of the Czech Republic) as a birthday present. He, the husband, is American, an architect. They live three or four properties down the lake from us.

She wrote down her life history and showed it to me—quite moving, well-written. And, for the umpteenth time, I was struck by the different world-lines (an obsession of mine, as my readers will readily recognize) which pass like leaky rowboats in the night—

—Leaky because, guess what? Although time seems to stand still here, Time's Winged Chariot, that very real anti-Santa Claus, makes its house calls on Swan like everywhere else.

Anyway, I'm struck by the anomalous nature of this marriage between a refugee and an architect. Like Emma Bovary, so many of the women up and down this valley kick against the pricks of marriage, of disillusionment, of boredom and misery. —Feelings that can appear any hour of the day.

What triggers them? I remember a scene in *Madame Bovary* when Emma, in the throes of bitterness and soon to have her second fling, happens to be walking behind Charles, fixating on his back. All

her resentment, even hatred (Charles has done nothing to incur this, by the way), bubbles up like magma: until his innocent back becomes metonymic for *everything*, her humdrum mornings and afternoons, ennui on the farm *before* she met Charles, etc. etc.

passing sailboat—  
one smile  
makes all the difference

## POTPOURRI

Among the angelic orders, who will hear my cry?

Cry, indeed! Look, all I'm doing is sitting on our landing, sipping a beer, reading my aphorisms aloud to a passing line of eider ducks—which keep right on going.

*Were fish capable of desire the way humans are, they'd desire water.*

*The impulse to suicide is the doomsday weapon, not against despair, but hope.*

*We all crave praise, but it's so damned often forthcoming!*

*Talent: to fit your sail to every wind. Genius: to fit your wind to every sail.*

*When America is all tributaries and no mainstream, our goose is cooked.*

*The wise person is one for whom the horror of having never admitted an error outweighs the horror of having committed it.*

*The "nothing" in "nothing to lose" is an illusion. We can always lose an illusion.*

*The Creation wasn't a happening. The Creation is happening—every damn day.*

—Back down to earth (or water): —I can't abide jet skis!

Their drivers have IQs in negative numbers. The noise, the rooster-tails of water—Zeus knows what

the poor fish think, not to say eagles and ospreys circling overhead.

—Even the smug expressions on their faces, the kind you see on California surfer beaches.

Of course part of this—maybe the hyena's share—is me.

(Two weeks ago, five miles south of here a jet-ski jockey, drunk and showing off to his buddies on shore, was killed. Unfairly and shamefully, this ran through my mind: *Darwin taking out the trash.*)

However, this morning my thoughts are consumed by two other deaths: two beautiful girls, employees of the Kalispell newspaper, who died in a small plane crash at the south end of Flathead Lake. The fool at the controls forgot to allow for lift—lack of lift—, showing off by skimming the lake-surface, pulling up sharply as land approached and failing to get proper elevation because Flathead's surface is so cold. The rest is obituary.

—Time's Winged Chariot in the form of a four-seat Cessna.

purple rain-light  
this moment—  
this—

## PINKS OF DAWN

My students were amazed to learn that dead center  
of Dante's Inferno is cold as—you get the point.

*So where is that unimaginable zero summer?*

*Zero at the bone*—who wrote that? No matter.  
What matters this morning, in the wake of last night's  
light show, is the cold music of the Northern Lights, a  
symphony put on for the Aleut by their gods. Ticket  
of admission—

Praise! Praise, yes, even for last night's cold  
comforter of stars!

inability—

inability—

to say *love*

## BLIND EPIPHANY

*I wish that every kiss was everlasting.*

—The Beach Boys

Embarrassed—even though there's no one around—I look up an old flame of forty-seven years ago. There she is on Google, strikingly young-looking, still super-pretty: almost—almost—as she was.

Zeus help me, I'm strangely unmoved. The usual suspects come out of the woodwork—*Buddy, you didn't really love her; ever hear of rose-colored glasses; too much time under the bridge; you were only twenty-two; etc.*

No, no, none of these things! The reason is, rather, my depressing conviction that human love is an illusion: a substitute for something. And that we'll find that something the instant we leave our bodies behind.

To the objection, *Why do you say depressing? What does it matter, as long as we find that something?*—I repeat:

The instant we leave our bodies behind.

embers—



## SWAN RIVER

Keeping in mind that bread cast on the waters  
turns moldy quickest, let me float these aphorisms  
merrily down the stream—toward Swan’s north end,  
Flathead, and the western ocean:

*The writer who worries that something he’s said  
contradicts something he said in the past should’ve said  
neither.*

*“Nothing is as hideous as an obsolete fashion,”  
writes Stendhal. Exception: A fashion au courant.*

*Who will slay the dragon of metaphor?*

*God’s mercy: The illusion that it sucks when we die.*

*Dogs have fur to keep warm. Cats have fur so as  
not to look ridiculous.*

*If God had wanted me otherwise, I would’ve  
invented Him otherwise.*

*Christ the carpenter, Creation the habitation,  
humanity the nail.*

*No woman is a coward.*

—While we’re at it, I’ll reprise a poem from my  
chapbook on ekphrasis: the poetry of art. This one  
bounces off a Monet painting entitled *The River*:

*A house shimmers in the river; the structure itself is  
hidden behind the voluptuous leaves of a chestnut tree.  
As early as 1868 (the first Impressionist painting was  
done only two years earlier), Monet invites us to enter  
a world of reflections.*

*T.S. Eliot writes of flowers which have the look of flowers frequently looked at. This river has that look except, as I say, what we're seeing isn't the river but its nether world, the hell of a good universe next door E.E. Cummings wrote about the year before Monet died.*

*Bow cradled by a flower-strewn shore, the boat appears to be taking a nap. And the woman water-gazer: take her out of the picture, it's been suggested, and you could hang the painting upside-down without changing much.*

*I was reminded of The River last summer when, becalmed in a rowboat on Holland Lake, I watched a lemon-yellow slice of moon rise in a brandy-colored sky (a forest fire burned in the mountains). Then, as I turned my gaze to the water, the mountain-peaks became stalactites festooning Plato's cave.*

*These nether-mountains pointed to the Earth's center where, Native Americans believed, a goddess dwelled.*

*—Native Americans who, like the rest of us, lived in a world of reflections.*

settled in the beauty  
of not being me  
you, lace-wing butterfly!

## WORDS, LOVES ONE MORE TIME

Let the games begin.

I mean the spring mating rituals of squirrels, mice, crows, butterflies, ravens—you name it. What intrigues me is how assiduously the female always runs away, the male in hot pursuit. *Not too assiduously*, you say—but no: the girls look like they really mean business.

As for the guys—

*Darling, I love you now, behind this service-berry bush—*

And the bees: a drone of desire heard at a distance, beyond the garage where, three years ago, paper wasps built a hive, deserting it later that summer for some reason.

*Love is Blue*: Remember that song from the sixties? OK, along with food, sleep, and shelter, humans need the sentimental embellishments of song and poetry.

—I can guess what the birds and the bees would say about the two-ton Valentine I received from my San Diego inamorata in 1963, inscribed *I'll always love you*.

A week later she turned off the lights.

happy hour  
moon in a wine-glass—  
1+1=0

## ONE MORE TIME

Oops—I forgot the bowerbird. He lives a billion miles from Montana (in Australia), but still—

His romantic strategy is to build an elaborate bower—tons of work, a lot of time and dedication.

He decorates it with flowers, twigs, even—I saw this in a nature film—pieces of blue plastic scavenged from someone's garbage. Very pretty! —The poor guy goes nuts making the coolest bower on the planet, or at least in Queensland. Finally the chick shows up, takes a long look at his handiwork, bobs her head—and walks away.

That's that. The lonely bowerbird simply stares at the camera—thinking, no doubt,

*What the f—does a guy have to do?*

she finally says it—  
my lips part  
something else comes out

## SONG FOR A HEARTLESS SATURDAY

*Loneliness is a cloak you wear. . .*

Thus the Walker Brothers, in a popular song back in the day—

Most American teens grew up assigning memories to moments when they first heard a song—I know I did. And yet, in a book of aphorisms I wrote: *All forms of memory are masochistic.*

Loneliness sharpens the senses. Here's a recent haiku of mine: what disc jockeys call a Moldy Oldie:

fog  
the sounds  
an empty house makes

—"Empty house": 1420 Hearst Street where I spent too much time by myself, wondering what the world had in store for me. It never occurred to my fallow and callow sensibility to think vice-versa.

But now I recall a day, when I was in fifth or sixth grade, heading out alone on my bike with a brown bag lunch and my BB gun, for the Stanford hills. I rode up Page Mill Road, crossing beautiful country which the Foothill Expressway has long destroyed. . .

After shooting at and missing several birds, I sat down under an oak tree to eat my lunch. Then, turning on my transistor radio for company, I gazed eastward, to the town of Fremont on San Francisco Bay's south end. On the radio: *Shrimp Boats*.

Intoxicated with aloneness, I begun running up and down the hills, dodging poppies and lupine and gopher holes, filled with an oceanic feeling of—what? Even then, I failed the words. Anyway, the emotion, whatever it was, accompanied me, germ of an aphorism I was destined to write nearly fifty years later:

*Only God can create loneliness and be lonely at the same time.*

homeward—  
songs  
of the cicada

## SANGRIA IN THE DARK

How do I love thee? Let me count the sounds—  
Instruments in an orchestra: tamaracks, jack-pines, junipers and birches play a different tune when the wind—a living thing, remember—picks up the baton.

Don't forget crickets, which stop then resume their concert when a boat with green and red running lights chugs by, vanishing up the lake.

—And fog which whispers (this is an illusion of course), like the long-ago sound of a girlfriend's silk undergarment falling to her ankles.

—Sipping the sangria, I'm put in mind of a trip I once made with friends—a married couple with a three year old—to Gold Beach on the Oregon coast. Right before lunch, after father and son tossed a whiffle ball back and forth, the little guy picked up a conch shell, held it to his ear —and took off in a mad dash for the shore! Stopping at water's edge, he wound up like a pitcher and threw the shell to where the ocean—nothing if not a good outfielder—dutifully caught it.

Then he dashed back, clearly pleased with himself.

"Why'd you do that, honey?" his father asked, bringing out three beers.

"So othean hear roar too!" he lisped.

And—

Remember the screaming homunculus in Munch's *The Scream*? It has no ears.

secrets

keeping

me



## SWAN BAR I

This conversation isn't simply dangling; it's  
crashing to earth—

—*Flying machines in pieces on the ground*—

Still, she's quite pretty, this new bartender. And  
nothing if not efficient! Or is her lyrical efficiency—  
she whistles a merry tune while she works—a ploy to  
ignore me?

And exactly why am I entertaining myself with  
this egotistical romp?

It comes down to self-loathing in a minor key: no  
matter how chilly her silences, with every sip of chard,  
her tip will get bigger.

The tail wagging the dog of these musings—  
Nietzsche:

*The man who despises himself nonetheless esteems  
himself as a self-despiser.*

stranger in the mirror—  
lifting his glass  
to me

## SWAN BAR II

"I take a bath once a year on my birthday, whether I need one or not."

—Cowboys passing through from the small rodeo town of Helm, to the McPherson ranch outside Kalispell where they've been offered summer work.

In silence, one toasts the far side of despair with his Bud Light bottle: clink!

"I'm fifty-three years old—no health insurance (that's why I quit smoking, which nearly killed me); no savings, no. . . Don't know how in hell I can retire."

"Why not just ride into the sunset?" one suggests. "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"I can't believe you said that, Wes."

"So—anyone here play golf?" another changes the subject diplomatically. "They got a decent course, Eagle Bend, in Bigfork."

Sipping my Salmon Creek chard, I wonder which strands of our universal DNA connect them and me. Exile, I suppose—not just from people, places, and things, but from hopes, sweet dreams, and plans gone awry.

(Maybe I should've said *spiritual* DNA, since one immediately thinks of the Garden.)

In spite of the golf interregnum, a somber mood settles over the cowboys. Finally, go-cups of Jack and Coke in tow, they file out of the bar to head north on Highway 83.

I overhear the next to last one say over his

shoulder,

“Things never worked out for me.”

Tomorrow, hung over or not, they’ll pull on their pants, wriggle into their boots, and go to work.

reflected in the mirror

a clear-wing moth—

*Make it a double*

## DUEL IN THE SHADE

So who's the guy at the far end of the bar, nursing and being nursed by a vodka and Fresca?

Why it's Mr.—ah, Herr—Nietzsche, tangled up in a dialogue betwixt self and soul!

I leave my barstool and sit next to him. He moves aside, even though there's plenty of room.

Ordering another drink (I'll stick to my chard), he turns to me and says in perfect English,

*I challenge you to a duel! You may choose the weapons—*

I think for a moment. Then,

"Aphorisms—"

*Very well*, he nods. *You may begin.*

"Very little children love the company of very little children. Very old people love the company of very old people. In between we can't stand each other."

He responds:

*One must have a good memory to keep the promises one makes.*

My turn:

"Not belief, but love of beauty is the purest distillate of faith."

His turn:

*We often contradict an opinion for no other reason than we dislike the tone in which it is expressed.*

Mine:

"We speak of memory playing tricks on us, when of course it's the other way around."

His:

*Many a man fails to become a thinker only because  
his memory is too good.*

Mine:

“You can’t make lemonade back into lemons. For  
a staggering number of people, that’s the problem.”

His:

*A joke is the epitaph of a feeling.*

—I pour another chard from a bottle in the ice  
bucket provided for me when I get here. Nietzsche is  
silent, gazing at something I can’t see. His eyes—green  
as a cat’s. . .

I go to the men’s room. Washing my hands, I hear  
a racket from the bar.

When I return to my stool, there’s Nietzsche  
playing the honky-tonk piano in the corner with his  
elbows. Well, hell, I can’t even play it with my hands,  
much less—

“You win, buddy,” I say to him. Of course he  
doesn’t hear me.

*without judgment*

*no forgiveness*

—feet erase the sidewalk scrawl

## BEFORE THE DELUGE

Summer sky chock-a-block with stars—

So why does it seem utterly vacant to me? It's not really my mood (although I can't say my mood is top-shelf. Yesterday, out of morbid curiosity I tried the bar's well vodka and paid the price.)

Where was I? The balcony of night hung with icicles—

*This is the way the world ends; this is the way the world ends; this—*

What does Rimbaud say?

*—It ends with angels of flame and of ice.*

"It": the world? Not for me—

"It": This russet Montana autumn afternoon, and the next, and the next, until I board a plane and fly to far-off Point B, where I'll be no better off than I was at Point A.

35,000 feet—

the flight attendant  
too happy

## THE WEARINESS OF ROWING

Once—I forget why or when—I asked my students: Which would you rather experience, a broken heart or a broken bone?

Of course they said a broken bone.

I think I would too. Easy to say, because—knock on Formica—I’ve never broken a bone.

I’ve written elsewhere that suffering doesn’t evolve, meaning that when I did have my heart broken age twelve, the pain was as intense as it would be seven, eight, nine years later, when I wore the brown helmet (as we used to say in Berkeley) a number of times. (Btw, forget that stuff about puppy love. Its bark and bite are just as painful as any other kind.)

I remember F. Scott Fitzgerald’s remark about a love affair—Zelda had been in hospital for a long time—I *didn’t know I had another emotion in me*.

Neither did I.

—In Greek, *the weariness of rowing* translates as Tiresias: the blind seer who saw into the truth of everything.

broken hearts on Delos  
my dream girl—  
Rosy-Fingered Dawn

## INTERMISSION

*Here lies Lester Moore*  
*Four slugs from a .44*  
*No Les, no Moore*

There's supposed to be an Old West graveyard in them thar hills, I wish I knew where.

Odds are, however, it can't hold a votive candle to the cemeteries of Poland!

Once upon an autumn I walked the cemetery of a small town ten miles from the Ukrainian border—not far from Chernobyl. It was a cold windy October day, and I was wearing only a light jacket. But the experience was worth it. Each stone or monument was unique: some were works of art. Most leaned toward each other—exchanging confidences no doubt.

Back in my host city Lublin (I was a Fulbright scholar) the night of the Day of the Dead was stunning: mourners and/or relatives holding flower bouquets upside down, single-filing up and down narrow rows of graves, where shadows cast by a zillion candles performed a merry dance macabre.

I indulged in a few odious comparisons. This one, I think, is valid:

Gravestones in America are, for the most part, homogeneous, entropic, inspiring fear of life. Gravestones in Poland—and elsewhere in Central Europe—are heterogeneous, inspiring fear of death or, at least, gratitude for the gift of life.



One caveat: In Yiddish, which most of the 3000 surviving Jewish Poles (out of 300,000 before the War) still speak, *cemetery* means House of Life.

dust to dust—

motes

letting us see the light

## DIANA

She's a strange one. Quite intelligent, well-educated with an M.A. in Finance, she seems to be a mermaid out of water.

She does like the outdoors, hiking the Swan Mountains with her dogs. Armed with a silvery .44 Magnum auto-mag, she's also conscious of being a woman alone in the same wilderness where two bozos, father and son, kidnapped a jogger, accidentally shot and wounded her, killed a civilian posse-member, and were finally captured by Johnny France, a renowned local sheriff who knew the dad from high school.

"Don't make me shoot you, Dave," France said, catching them by surprise. Their hands were black from frostbite after spending all winter up in the Bob.

Anyway, this woman—

Semi-happily married, she told me up-front that her marriage works because hubby Dave (another Dave), travels much of the time. Different strokes—

She loves to read—I send her all of my books—and cook! One day, out of the blue (I forgot to mention she bartends at the Swan Bar once a week) she made me a German chocolate cake. "Tell me if the frosting collapses," she wagged her finger at me. It didn't.

She'll say the occasional odd thing, as if something or someone is dictating to her: an anti-muse singing off-key. I always think of a cat, staring down Nothingness then staring at me—as if Nothingness

might rub off and I too might learn to see what isn't there.

*Sing in me, muse—*

No: That prospect is alarming if not frightening.

One morning—again, out of the blue—she calls me at home. This being her day behind the bar, she says, “Remind me: I have something to tell you.”

“Why not tell me now?”

“Not over the phone.”

When I get there, she brings out the silvery bucket for my wine. Then she leans forward on the bar and, without being reminded, says,

“My sister’s dog died yesterday.”

where it flows underground

Bond Creek—

waterbed of Proserpina

III

*Transport to autumn*

## A SHORT DESULTORY PHILIPPIC

Tree-hugger. *n.* Pest impervious to bark.

Plenty of them around here, including a guy named Sam Montrose, who appears to want the Seeley-Swan Valley all to himself. I'll spare you the details about his organization's silly agendas, except one. They want to shut down the annual Swan Run through the wilderness, a for-charity enterprise, because it might "disturb the bears."

Disturb the bears? First off, even here, bear-sightings are rare, and if anyone's going to be disturbed it'll be the runner who surprises a mama grizzly enjoying Sunday brunch with her cubs.

I do wonder what the local fauna think of us. Probably as an inconvenience—but even then, as I say, close encounters are few and far between.

Lewis and Clark killed 43 grizzlies on their way to and from the western ocean (one ferocious bruin chased Lewis into the Missouri River). That was when the big guys roamed prairie and mountain alike. I'm all for environmental protections, but where *Ursus horribilis* is concerned, there're plenty in place, and the bear population of the Swan Range has doubled in recent years.

The wilderness abides. As for man—  
Earth elides.

Salish moonset

## THE TEMPEST

Round green pebbles on the bottom of Bond Creek: cats' eyes gazing up at me:

*To understand all is not to forgive a damn thing.*

*The reason why pride and humility are sometimes hard to tell apart is that they often speak the same language. I don't deserve this can be read in two ways.*

*There should always be an element of surprise in the knowledge of being loved. If that element is missing, there's a problem.*

*Like an animal, life senses fear in humans and attacks.*

*Is it just me, or does "fool" always connote the male of the species?*

*"How's it going?" the cripple asks the blind man. "As you see," the blind man replies.*

*We always forget to provide moat monsters for our castles in the air.*

*Someone said to me the other day, "I understood exactly what you were trying to say." Funny, I didn't.*

*We focus more attention in figuring out a proper tip than in prayer.*

*Doubt, not faith, is the voluntary incarceration of the mind.*

Ten years ago I gave a little book of my aphorisms to Sylvia, who operates the lodge/restaurant in Swan Village. She read it, made notes, and a week or two

came to me with questions, which, needless to say, pleased me no end.

But Sylvia had begun to run afoul of the locals. She was a snob—so it was said—“one of those California types.” It’s true she insulted the couple who own Swan Bar, telling them not to bring their children to the restaurant again. The kids had done nothing, I learned, but order the one breakfast Sylvia wasn’t prepared to cook that day.

Other villagers began an informal boycott. As if she cared! Business was super-good, word of her excellent cooking having spread around the valley. Folks from as far away as Whitefish embraced the place.

Sylvia began doing an odd thing—writing aphorisms of her own and placing them in locals’ mailboxes! I never learned what they were but most people weren’t pleased. “Were they malicious?” I asked. “No, but—”

Then Sylvia petitioned the Lake County Commission to make an easement through private property across Highway 83, so that her kayak-renters could have access to the lake. She cited a century-old document by Phyllis Bond, the woman who willed the land to two families whose descendants still owned it. Mrs. Bond had stated that a public easement was her wish.

The families had, of course, ignored this codicil.

With the fifth-generation property owners walking point against Sylvia, a battle was waged through two springs and summers. Finally she got her

way.

One morning in August of that year, I was strolling with a few of my neighbors along our frontage road when someone brought up the war six miles south.

“Tempest in a teapot,” Anna N. waved her hand.

Said 78-year-old Paul S.: “Everything’s a tempest in a teapot around here.”

I silently agreed—ah, but something, the still, small whisper of a memory—began to nag me.

It took an entire afternoon, sipping wine in the bower, to pin the memory down—a poem by Patrick Kavanagh, greatest Irish poet since Yeats:

*I have lived in important places, times  
When great events were settled, who owned  
That half a rood of rock, a no-man’s land  
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims—  
I heard old Duffy shout, ‘Damn your soul!’  
And McCabe stripped to the waist, seen  
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel—  
‘Here is the march along these iron stones’  
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which  
Was more important? I inclined  
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin  
Till Homer’s ghost came whispering to my mind  
He said: I made the Iliad from such  
A local row. . .*

mid-summer noon

still

the chill in my bones



## TRANSPORT TO AUTUMN

Thumping the invisible westward window, an unfortunate hummer interrupts my thoughts which, interestingly, are drifting toward glaucoma (I'm having extensive tests for the disease as we speak). Naturally I try to imagine what it's like to be blind, concluding that there's no "like." It is what it is.

So: Will the setting sun, a muted trumpet, sound taps for my world of form and color?

When a blind man approaches, what do we see? A white cane and dark glasses, that's all! He swims out of our ken and we sail on through the cloud of our unknowing—forever blind to the blind man.

windy moon in the window—  
pine branches—  
taps

[A different version of this poem originally appeared in *Interiors*, the first volume of this trilogy]

## RIPPLES

Sunday Sunday—the day the Deity went fishing.  
*A fisher of men—*

They love the rain—fishermen on Swan;  
something about the fish swimming up to check out  
the surface, confusing rain-drops with insects.

There he is, the complete angler, sitting in his  
aluminum boat a hundred yards from shore, raincoat  
shining in the drizzle. Don't know if he's caught  
anything, but he isn't giving up.

I despise fishing. To me it's beyond boring. Plus  
I'm so busy thinking and/or checking out the land-  
and cloudscares, that no self-respecting rainbow trout  
would favor my hook.

—On clear calm days when the lake is as smooth  
as green glass, you'll see them jump—see, rather, the  
ripples spread out toward the shore. You put down the  
haiku pad, fascinated by the rings of bright water  
approaching—approaching—stopping, of course, just  
shy of your toes.

Everybody's a critic!

rainbow—

no, no—

the one in the sky

## SWAN LAKE PASSACAGLIA

1. The lake, its catharsis of colors greeting mid-morning, the second season of the day: there'll be many others. 2. The brick that fell off our chimney: its pale grays, russets, and streaks of blackish-orange constituting an abstract painting. 3. Aphorisms:

*Next time you see a ghost, burst out laughing. See what happens. I mean, is there a single instance of a ghost ever harming anyone?*

*We savor our revenges all our lives. Our kindnesses are usually forgotten.*

*In the end, all mysteries are the same, renting time-shares on the moon's dark side. The mystery of life, of death—and of the inscription on my used copy of Dante's New Life: to Ralph from Michelle. Who was Ralph? Who was Michelle?*

*"Don't sweat the small stuff." Problem: It's all small stuff.*

*Contempt: the opposite of envy? No—envy's cushion.*

*To love oneself means getting the day's work done, period. Go beyond that and you're on thin ice.*

*So many love affairs lean on a straw: the degree to which the lovers love because the other loves.*

*"Free love": the supreme oxymoron.*

*Like a stage production, without an audience no marriage prospers.*

—In *King Lear*, poor Gloucester says, "I see it

feelingly”. What does he see? Fugitive colors in the sky  
admiring themselves in the lake? Quick! Quick! Now  
you see it, now—

What does love do to things? It’s true that the  
falling-elevator feeling in one’s stomach due to the  
flowering of a poem is indistinguishable from falling  
in love.

*Do not forsake me Oh my darling—*

gyring down to the lake  
eagles  
dreams of eagles—

## ONE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

I wake up sweating, having dreamt of white walls, towers, and a guard named Tracy armed with a .243 Remington—

In Arizona State Prison there's a saying—universal, I'm sure, among inmates everywhere: "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime."

Ah, but there's "time" and there's "time."

What about time served by us, out here on the bricks? —Time for what? I'll get to that in a minute.

—There's poetry in the Joint: "In for all day" (life imprisonment without parole); "The House of Many Doors" (the Central Unit); "Fucking the dog" (slouching through another day), etc. And always, always, the woeful rhyme of crime and time.

—Here's a thought: "Invisible" crimes—the ones against human dignity—won't be found in the Penal Code. Check out California's:

Homicide—PC 187

Mayhem—PC 203

Kidnapping—PC 207

Robbery—PC 211

Attempted murder—PC 217

Family disturbance—PC 415

Child abduction—PC 277

—No crimes against human dignity on this laundry list! I mean the kind Joseph K. in *The Trial* is guilty of, mainly insensitivity toward his fellows (especially women). The real crime: he doesn't think

he's guilty of anything.

Baudelaire (from *Paris Spleen*):

*Horrible life! Horrible city! Let us glance back over the events of the day:*

*. . . Refused a slight favor to a friend and gave a perfect rogue a written recommendation; boasted (why?) of several ugly things I never did and cravenly denied some other misdeeds that I had accomplished with the greatest delight—*

*—Offense of fanfaronade, crimes against human dignity.*

*—Dissatisfied with everything, dissatisfied with myself. . .*

These malfeasances don't crack the Penal Code because very few persons—save for Baudelaire's speaker!—perceive them as such.

Let's look at the issue from a different angle. Let's celebrate the criminal stupidity of American public school superintendents.

Why not? The only thing most of them are good for is to provide comic relief. Compare professional comedians and their dreary litanies—*Give yourselves a hand, no, no, really, you're beautiful.*

So: a last hurrah from Paddy—

*. . . And I also found some crucial Documents of sad evil that may yet For all their ugliness and vacuous leers Fuel the fires of comedy—*

caw-caw-caws  
    accusing me  
        or is it me

YES, YES—

*So few drink at my fountain—*

I never hankered—hunkered down?—for a wide audience.

On the other side of the mountains a neighbor once told my mother-in-law, “There’s not a lot of money in church work, Jean.”

No kidding. The same is true, of course, of haiku, etc. Ask Basho.

True believers will tell you that St. Anthony came down to the shore and preached a sermon; whereupon fish swam up and listened attentively. Dollars to doughnuts, like me they wanted to be reminded: *Was it fishes into loaves or loaves into fishes?*

Amazing, miraculous—but why *fish*? Still, Tony had an audience.

*So few drink at my fountain—*

thinking reeds—

glints

of hidden water



## OCTOBER 1

Nestled in anonymous humility, fallen leaves pile up on our stone walk down to the landing.

It's virtually all yellows—all Johnny one-notes. Swan has few maples to syncopate autumn's oratorio.

Two exceptions: twin bushes—*maple-brush* a visitor called them, but I'm not so sure—planted by the previous owner. In early September their small leaves acquire a pink blush, then deeper pink, then russet. Then the fat lady sings! —Deep reds and magentas, serenading the ravens, osprey, eagles, even the songbirds (more anonymous humility). Then cold weather kicks in and we have to go south.

I've never heard the tinkling cymbals of winter up here: an icicle shattering on the stones; cracklings as lake-ice forms and thickens—to be continued in spring when the thaw begins; sounds of snow tumbling off a branch when an eagle takes off, the branch rocking long after it's gone; and, of course, silences which, far from deafening, are whispery.

Or so I'm informed by year-round neighbors.

Somewhere along the line I developed SAD—Seasonal Affective Disorder—due to lack of light. On my Fulbright in Poland I found this out the hard way. My host city Lublin is on the same latitude as Montreal, Canada and, in late October, on my way home from lecturing at the Catholic University, I knew I was in trouble when the sun had plunged halfway down the sky by two p.m.

Here, on the Swan Range's western slope, storms bump up against the mountains and stay there, condemning the Seeley-Swan to a Purgatory of gloom for weeks at a time. No sun, no color—nary a yellow moon to break up the monotony.

So I'm better off in the desert, where even night-shadows are tintured with lavenders, purples, and violets. —And my lost yellow moon, waiting all these centuries to guide the souls of Anasazi to paradise.

night-stroll

—crickets

vary their rhythm

## BAROMETER FALLING

Defrocked by her starry fays, the moon blushes dark russet, turns her cheek and—taking the stars with her—disappears. A midnight storm is upon us.

Like waves booming thunder on the shore, “pulses” of storm-cells come and go: wind rising, falling, rising.

I always think of Stokowsky’s *Night on Bald Mountain* and the deep impression it left on me as a kid. Bam-Boom! Bam-Boom! —storm-gods were on the loose, hanging around after the Stokowski to wake up the monsters under my bed:

*Come on, you sleepyheads! He isn’t asleep yet. There’s still time—*

Waking or sleeping, what did it matter? The monsters were always there, hiding in the tall weeds of dream, licking their chops.

The storm is right overhead. The forest swings and sways, syncopated with the occasional crack of a branch. What do animals think of thunder and lightning? They’re probably frightened—but maybe not.

As for us—

I remember strolling past a campfire last summer, overhearing the chatting of a ring of locals I didn’t know. As I proceeded on, heading back to the public boat-launch, a snippet of conversation followed me:

*The gods are still around—*

*Father, Mother, God  
loving me  
guard me when I sleep—*

## IN SYNC

Roundelay! Never mind what it means: Listen to the music of the word! Roll it around on your tongue—

Poetry is everywhere. Like flowers to the sun, people naturally turn to it, even—maybe especially—if they haven't a clue as to what poetry "is".

The ear loves the heights of Parnassus: rhyme, assonance, alliteration which, since the days of Ivy Lee, has trickled down to the lowlands of advertising.

*Money is a form of poetry*, writes Wallace Stevens. So is advertising—even crudities like the hair-cream ad of yesteryear: *A little dab'll do ya!* And Alka-Seltzer's *Plop! Plop! Fizz! Fizz! Oh, what a relief it is!*

—And don't forget the worst poem in the English language: *I think that I shall never see/a poem as lovely as a tree.*

That's war-loving Joyce Kilmer, who got real by walking above the trenches in Flanders Fields, daring the Germans to shoot him. They were happy to oblige.

—So: welcome once again to the sad disarray of afternoon. I cool my heels in the windy bower, listening to a private onomatopoeia of pine-branches, fallen leaves whirling up in a vortex, lake-waves—even the hissing of a mountain lion from last night's dream.

old photos  
on the lake  
I hear the wind

## BAROMETER FALLING II

The wind returns. Here I sit. Meanwhile: a celebration of second Mass for the Flathead National Forest.

Complete with incense: fragrances of pine-boughs wafting up from the south. And—but let's not get carried away—in truth I'm no Catholic, not even religious; and yet—

I'm still spellbound by a scene in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Wandering through a wood, Henry Fleming happens upon a “chapel” of trees—so Crane describes it—which soothes his nerves, until he looks more closely and spots a headless corpse half-concealed by fern-fronds. So much for second Mass—

Come on, Steve! You know mistletoe dripping off tree-branches = the Golden Bough of Greek mythology. *The gods are still around—*

Can one truly invoke Apollo, long-retired from his day-job of archer? How about Cupid, whose arrows were tipped with poison (forget the innocuous rubber-tipped shafts of our Hallmark Valentine cards). Hah! The Greeks knew more about love than we do.

Modern prayers: soft as starlight on broken glass—

moon in my wine-glass  
cold fireplace  
—something stirs

## COLOR ME—

Apollo!

The poor guy must be lonely, still waiting for the second coming (or third: remember the copy-cat Romans) of Hellas.

—God of intellectual clarity, music, prophecy, medicine, and light.

Busy boy! Funny courting habits, though. He once tried to seduce a maiden by disguising himself as a tortoise. I mean, come on—

I do miss the Greeks, even though I'm incorrigibly postmodern. Teaching Sophocles and Homer, I offered my students Five Greek Moments:

—*Pythagoras of Samos, gazing out to sea, noticing that the wall of blue sky and the horizon-line made a right angle. Whoa! The essence of nature is Number. Thus: the invention of modern mathematics.*

—*Pre-Ionian Thales positing that water is the fundament of the universe. Wrong, but he set the stage for the notion of a Unifying Principle: 5th-century atomic theory, eventually to become quantum mechanics.*

—*The Republic, containing (in Chapter 11) Plato's Allegory of the Cave, another fundament of Western thought.*

—*Alexander the Great, whose theories of military strategy are still taught at West Point. How good a strategist was he? Ask King Darius—still high-tailing it, no doubt, back to Persia.*

—*And the converse: Homer's Iliad, Western culture's*

*first anti-war poem. You can't tell whose side the narrator is on. All that matters: battle transforms men into things—cf. the metaphor of bodies = stones on the Trojan plain.*

When I was a kid reading about how the Trojan War was kibitized by Apollo, Pallas Athena, etc., I visualized the back-and-forth of battle below a flickering of gods in the sky, half-visible, sticking their noses into the human business swirling around the walls of windy Troy.

—Even now, on our deck, my eyes stray to the Mission ridge horizon, then higher: half-expecting to see Apollo and cohorts dancing with the clouds.

orange sails  
searching for the old man—  
Telemachus and me



## BARDS

A physician suggests that Homer must've been an army surgeon—his depictions of wounds in the *Iliad* are so physiologically precise (and horrific). Homer was certainly an ersatz historian, since the *Iliad* was written centuries after the Trojan War.

Think of the grip this “local row” had on the Greek imagination. Composing the *Iliad* in the 8th century is like a contemporary British poet writing an epic about the Wars of the Roses. Who cares about that now? Why did the Greeks care?

—I said “written,” but that’s wrong. Thanks to scholars like Parry and Lord, we know that Homer’s epics were oral documents, sung by a Bard around a campfire up in the Thracian hills. How they eventually found their way into print is anyone’s guess.

This forest too is oral—not aural, since no one’s listening when I speak my haiku out loud. (Or spoke: hearing my own voice has gotten to be disconcerting.)

*It’s OK if you talk to yourself as long as you don’t interrupt—*

Still, there is writing to be found here: infinite calligraphies of dark earth when late spring snow begins to melt, forming abstract patterns of pine-needles and rotting leaves. *Calligraphy* is rooted in the Greek: “beauty” plus “writing.”

—And tree-bark which, when touched with eyes closed, reminds one of braille.

The Bards of Homer's time could keep a story going for hours, spilling over into the next night and the next. So does this forest, whose narratives of storm, leaves and twigs swirling in eddies of air, and the Who-Who's of Mr. Owl, never get old—even when they disturb my sleep.

shouted down Blue Canyon

*I love you*

—echo and abyss

## THE BOWER OF—WELL—

The *now—now—now*—of fireflies!

So many different kinds of time: Proust's,  
Bergson's, Joyce's, Einstein's—

And, of course, Swan Bar time.

I see them in my mind's bloodshot eye: winking  
and blinking, winking and blinking. (My eye, not the  
fireflies!). No, there they are, lighting up the void,  
newborn stars encapsulating the life and death of our  
cosmos in fast-time.

Imagination. . . *So few drink at my fountain—*

Now, suddenly—where did they come from?—  
black and orange Monarchs flutter around my half-  
filled notebook page, perusing the haiku I just crossed  
out. Thanks to them, I look at it again. Thanks to  
them, I cross it out again.

—A marginalia of butterflies.

There are no fireflies on Swan Lake.

Chilly wind of her wings  
(the muse)

—pen out of ink

## KYRIE—

—The gods? Children, really—

I mean, rolling the hoop of night? (I'm thinking of Flathead Indian mythology, rooted right here in the Seeley-Swan). The Flathead who, like their Hispanic brothers and sisters, worship the kiddies—

Of war the poet Robinson Jeffers wrote: *It is nothing. Let them play.* Well? We play at tragedy: even *Oedipus the King* and *King Lear*. (Ralph Richardson, maybe the best Lear to strut his two hours on the stage, said of acting: *Mere child's play.*)

Fade to my father-in-law's nursing home on the other side of the mountains, where I once overheard:

"I feel so sorry for them. They're like children, really."

"Why? Do you feel sorry for children?"

ABC blocks

—parallel universe—

CBA

## BIRDS

—So beloved of the medieval imagination!

You see them in museums, in tapestries and paintings, carved into brass gates guarding walled towns in Italy and Germany. Beyond the obvious symbolism of souls flying up to heaven, medieval depictions of birds charm because, thanks to them, we see our own ravens, blue jays, pileated woodpeckers—even swallows building mud huts under the eaves—in a different light.

Sky-brothers and sky-sisters, St. Francis of Assisi called them. Like me, did he think of swallow-dwellings in connection with the habitations of peasants of an earlier time: the Carolingian Dark Ages when barbarians swooped down from the north?

—Hunkered down and shivering in their mud huts, these secret sharers of our DNA with no books, no comfort for sorrow, no light after dark—

sleeplessness and the same  
little sound  
of rain

## ELLIE

She still lives in a small inherited house on Crystal Bay, just south of here. Pontoon boats cruise into the bay, check out her place and three or four others, and then head back up or down Swan to party.

...Re-doing the décor: changing drapes, carpeting, lamps, the color of walls and shutters: everything but the look of defeat on her face.

*Change of seasons—change of worlds—*

When quite young she was molested by a favorite uncle, who whispered that it was “our secret.” And so it remained.

by herself in  
the thick fern-grove—  
a feeling of being held

Now and then, however, the ghost of that episode does a walkabout in her dreams, casting a shadow, breathing Uncle Phil’s wine-breath on her.

She never married.

She can’t recall the last time she wept. Did she ever weep? In another life, perhaps—the one in which loneliness is an elixir, a balm—not of Gilead, but it’ll do!—a world where there’s an answer to the question which always perplexed her: *Why are we more disturbed by the tears of others than by our own?*

shadows and fog  
leaves in the window  
not quite a face

DICTATION AT 2:43 A.M.:

I

*Act and act: Only one definition need apply.  
 If dreams came true we wouldn't be living in truth  
 but in dream.*

*Sufficiently passionate attention makes the object  
 disappear.*

*We think of time as the essence of normalcy; and  
 yet if clocks could think they'd go insane.*

*You are what eats you.*

*We resent too happy more than too sad.*

*No baby came laughing out of the womb.*

*As an injustice, ingratitude for an altruistic act is  
 second only to gratitude.*

*Once abandoned, expect a bad habit to knock on  
 your door. A good habit, never.*

*A guy returns to his wife's bed after an affair, not  
 out of guilt, but to be unfaithful to his lover.*

—By noon Swan is a scroll: waves unrolling from  
 the south to the north, where Grand-Daddy Flathead  
 Lake waits with open arms. The wind blew all night:  
 a Montana wind, the kind that gets in your head and  
 won't leave. It drove my late mother-in-law half-  
 crazy...

The wind's purpose, and my poetry's, is to have no  
 purpose.



II

—And like sea-waves, the white-capped Mission Mountains roll in, folding thunder (a summer storm is upon us) on Swan's west shore.

This morning's lake was a palimpsest, each layer of light revealing interstices composed of yours truly and the spirit of Basho; yours truly and the spirit of Basho; yours truly and—

looking  
*dreaming*  
at  
*about*  
the  
*Basho's*  
mountain  
*floating*  
without  
*world*  
seeing  
*of*  
it—  
*snowy*  
seeing  
*mountains—*  
the  
*not*  
mountain  
*a*

without  
*thing*  
looking  
*to*  
at  
*cling*  
it  
*to*

## TONE-POEM

Afternoon river-wisdom, or: words of the Middle  
Flathead I couldn't quite make out the other day—

*Silence is a ladder. Only on the top rung should we  
be allowed to speak again. And the top rung is  
forbidden.*

*The good news: He keeps solitude at bay by talking  
to himself. The bad news: He keeps interrupting.*

*Pain fills the universe. Very scary that we say, "I'm  
in pain," rather than "Pain is in me."*

*The sky looks at itself. The sky is the mirror the sky  
looks into.*

*"You owe it to yourself." At what rate of interest?*

*Sentimentality always wears the sheep's clothing of  
sensitivity. True sensitivity is as rare as a wolf sparing  
the flock out of compassion.*

*I won't, therefore I am.*

*Damn you, you didn't fool me enough!*

*—I think the river is a strong brown god.*

T.S. Eliot was thinking of the Mississippi when he  
penned these words. To Huck Finn—maybe to Mark  
Twain himself—the river was sacred (not the word  
they would choose, but still—): a dispenser of wisdom  
around every bend. *Men have died here—and will die.  
Remember my flood of 1927.*

Meanwhile, back on the lake, I turn to the charms  
of a river I can't see, although it flows under my nose:

the Swan, making its way through the lake from south to north, wooing oblivion in the form of Flathead and then, much later, the western ocean—as Lewis and Clark called it.

(*O, the joy!* Clark wrote in his journal the day they arrived).

Hitching rides on the Swan: rainbow trout, northern pike, salmon. And, this morning, an empty canoe, its owner nowhere to be found.

And—mustn't leave this out!—cloud-reflections going nowhere.

And me, plopped down in a deck-chair, thinking of a purple-leaved tree of fifty years ago in San Diego, its branches rustling in the evening breeze. You guessed it, more words:

*Steve, I'll always love you.*

Dude, this is getting way too serious. So what happens? When I get up for another chard, snatches of river-words follow me to the kitchen:

*Nothingness sung and danced—*

heart

up her sleeve

—jacaranda moon

CELEBRATING ARTHUR RIMBAUD'S  
158TH BIRTHDAY

A mirror falls to the carpet twice in our living room. Hanging it back up on a stronger nail, my wife says, "Oh, there's a slight warp in the glass."

—Catechism for this cloudy Monday:

We are both mirror and observer. Glimmering within us, the pool of Narcissus: vagrant clouds vying for attention. Unsuccessfully, of course. . .

We forget that Narcissus thought he was looking at someone else gazing at him from the bottom of the pool! If he were self-aware, the myth would lose all meaning. As it is (and to change the figure), Narcissus' pool constitutes our life-blood, egoism being nature's odd way of insuring our survival and possible self-extinction.

A poet calls the world a wilderness of mirrors. . . Well, we're all criers in that wilderness, or so it seems to me as I sip French roast coffee and gaze at Swan Lake for the zillionth time.

An iridescent hummingbird appears—no, two—in our westward window. Indolently, I think of the lake within me, complete with its shadows of hawks, reflections of thunderheads, even a sea-plane looking for a place to splash down.

The lake's gaze penetrates deeper and deeper: as if, like me, it'll never be satisfied until it reaches the other side of the mirror.

preening  
in the mirror of sky,  
sky

age nineteen, hanging up  
writing poetry—  
*I would've gone mad*

## FOUND HAIBUN

*[Thanks to Stanley Pelter for giving me the idea for found haibun. Prose passages are from the novel Spring Snow, by Yukio Mishima, translated from the Japanese by Michael Gallagher]*

### I

His eye was caught by the iridescent back of a beetle that had been standing on the window-sill but was now advancing steadily into his room. Two reddish purple stripes ran the length of its brilliant oval shell of green and gold. Now it waved its antennae cautiously as it began to inch its way forward on its tiny hacksaw legs, which reminded Kiyooki of miniscule jeweler's blades. In the midst of time's dissolving whirlpool, how absurd that this tiny dot of richly concentrated brilliance should endure in a secure world of its own. As he watched, he gradually became fascinated. Little by little the beetle kept edging its glittering body closer to him as if this pointless progress were a lesson that when traversing a world of unceasing flux, the only thing of importance was to radiate beauty. . .

### II

Everything came back to him—the dark rooms of the Ayakura mansion, the court screens brought from Kyoto with their pattern of autumn flowers, the solemn stillness of the nights, Satoko's mouth opening

in a slight yawn half-hidden behind her sweep of black hair—everything came back just as he experienced it then, in all its lonely elegance. But he realized that he was now admitting one idea that he had never dared entertain before. . . Something sounded within Kiyoaki like a trumpet call:

*I love Satoko.*

### III

Suddenly she seemed consumed by a mysterious fire—much as the flame in a stove burns more fiercely when the door is open. Both her hands were now free, and she pressed them against Kiyoaki's cheeks, pushing hard against him, but her lips remained on his, even though she tried to thrust him away. As a result of her resistance, however, her lips, with an incredible liquid smoothness that intoxicated him, kept twisting one way, then the other, against his own. The firm edge of her resolve was melting away like a lump of sugar in hot tea, and now a wonderfully sweet dissolution had begun.

the weariness  
    of its beauty—  
        Fuji  
  
on a lacquered tray  
    muddy light. . .  
        whispers—cries—



