



# Poems Along the Path

Michael Thaler

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*For all those, both gone and still here, who  
inspired this work*



## ***Preface***

On January 15, 2008, Michael Thaler died of a rare cancer at the age of 45. Michael's creativity blossomed over the last two years of his life and stayed with him until his final days. His unique vision could turn a photograph of a washing machine into a work of art and a subject for poetry. Wherever he happened to be – in Japan, suburban New Jersey, or New York's East Village – he paid attention to things most people would pass by and showed they were worthy of notice. Above all, he was in search of the authentic – in the world and in himself. In photographing people, Michael captured their essence. He approached his subjects humbly, without artifice, and they responded by revealing their inner natures. In his blog, *One Foot in Front of the Other* (ohenrosan.blogspot.com), Michael revealed himself in the same way and touched readers all over the world. Michael had to stop taking pictures when his cameras became too heavy for him, but he continued writing until the night before he moved to a hospice. His last blog entry was the moving poem "Fatigue" in which he said "I see the steady progress of death. . . But, blessing of blessings I can still feel the life spark." This small book gathers together the poems that were scattered throughout Michael's blog. And we can still feel his life spark.

*Valerie Thaler*



## ***Contents***

Gleanings from Buddha Fields .....	1
On the Path .....	9
Remembering Japan .....	25
Gone But Still Here.....	41
Hermitage.....	55
Facing Death.....	67





# **Gleanings from Buddha Fields**



## In heaven



*Chaung-yen Monastery, Carmel, N.Y*

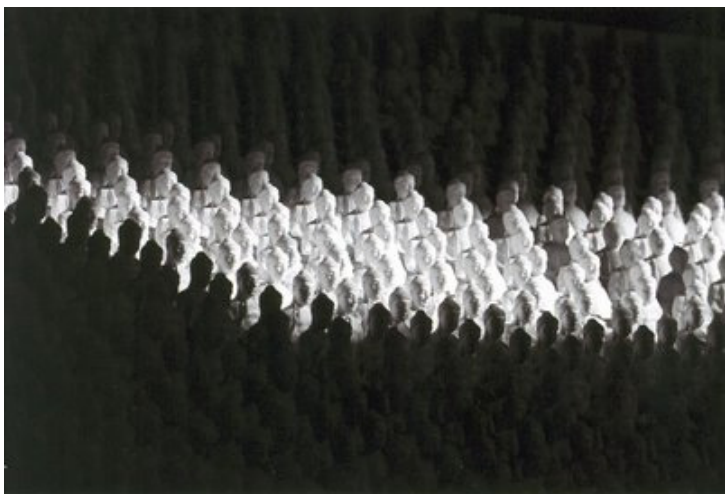
In heaven  
there's a lake  
where cares are washed away

## Getting clean



Washing machine  
baptizes my clothes  
in a fresh start

## Dreams of Buddha fields



*Great Buddha Hall, Chuang-yen Monastery, Carmel, N.Y*

And I awoke  
surrounded by ten thousand Buddha's  
and I was whole again

## **Four untitled poems**

Time to sit zazen:  
Fart around, now it's too late  
OK, tomorrow

The Buddhist precepts:  
Very easy to follow  
till I leave my house

A thought arises  
I try to chase it away  
but like it too much

Don't let anger rise:  
One more precept I can't keep  
the list grows longer

## Three untitled poems



Alone with my thoughts  
haunted by the bitter things  
I shouldn't have said

Gray hairs on my head  
each one a mocking witness  
to empty worries

And just who am I?  
Particles of shit and spit  
exactly like you



## Circles



It's funny how we're amazed  
by the simple victories  
of the very young  
and the very old:  
"The baby took his first steps today"  
"Grandma walked by herself today"  
Circles  
in constant motion  
opening, closing  
closing, opening

## **On the Path**



## The Brooklyn Bridge



The Brooklyn Bridge  
is a coy child  
peering from behind a wall wrought  
by immigrant hands

## Visiting an old friend



It was early May when I last walked across the George Washington Bridge, gateway to so many of my adventures on foot in Manhattan and beyond.

With cooler weather approaching, I want to dust off my walking shoes and get back on the path.

On the path, I lose myself and find myself at the same time.

On the path, necessities and luxuries rarely vie.

On the path, my senses sharpen.

On the path, I feel content as my life unfolds at three miles per hour.

I'm just about ready to heed the call once again.

## Walking, again



Today  
Manhattan was mine  
seven leagues  
20 miles  
a trail of footfalls  
from North Jersey  
nearly the length of the island

Crossing the George Washington Bridge  
haven't felt a hammering headwind like this  
in a long time  
it's a cunning sparring partner  
threatens to sweep my feet from under me

Walking down Hudson River path  
wind roaring in my ears  
my eyes water  
can't hear myself think  
gray clouds part  
like a fleece jacket unzipped  
on the gusts  
a hint of spring

I leave the riverside  
to escape the wind

walk east down 83rd Street  
to Central Park  
Choose a serpentine path  
blasted through bedrock  
deserted  
runoff from yesterday's rain  
drips from an overpass  
cars and taxis zip by

Cross Fifth Avenue  
Madison  
Park  
Lexington  
Third  
Second  
First  
Downtown-bound

Reach Gramercy Park  
memories of my grandmother  
summers spent as a kid  
not far from the little bar  
where O. Henry wrote  
"Gift of the Magi"  
and Babe Ruth bragged  
over beer and cigars

Cut back west to Third Avenue  
head down to Canal Street  
Chinatown  
hucksters hawking  
fake designer bags  
and wind-up toys  
and God knows what

Sun setting  
streets emptying  
People rushing home  
to see  
the Super Bowl kickoff

Streets turn quiet  
purposeful Chinese ladies  
head home from shopping  
men shut their stores  
and I head to the Manhattan Bridge

A dark, mysterious span  
over the East River  
not a soul on the footpath  
wind blows dust into my eyes  
subway trains clatter by  
deafening screech of metal on metal  
sparks cast a greenish light

To my right  
the Brooklyn Bridge  
twinkling like tinsel  
strands of angel hair

On a whim  
I don't double back  
across the Manhattan Bridge  
I'll head into Brooklyn  
city of churches  
instead  
and take the Brooklyn Bridge  
that lacework fortress  
back over the East River

Back in lower Manhattan  
the financial center  
Wall Street  
all dark and quiet  
no deals going down  
all the tourists gone  
a few drops of rain



(hungry ghosts weeping)  
I see the ghost  
of Bartleby the Scrivener  
(he still prefers not to)

Head up Allen Street  
which becomes First Avenue  
after Houston  
past crowded bars  
sports banter wafts outside  
men out front smoking  
excitedly talking  
the world's biggest football fans  
some just for this day

I stop at my friend's sushi bar  
the place is a crypt  
kid reading a book  
at a corner table  
leaves as I arrive  
just me  
and the waitress  
and the cook  
and the radio  
I quietly sip my beer

Return from the toilet  
to find someone sitting next to me  
some college girl  
young enough to be my daughter  
I try to make small talk  
amid cavernous silence  
rebuffed, ignored  
she turns away without a word  
“Don't flatter yourself  
you just happened to be there”  
(I feel like saying)  
but I finish my beer  
pay the tab  
tell her  
“Enjoy your dinner  
and keep in mind

life isn't nearly as serious  
as you make it out to be --  
but you'll find out"  
and back out into the night

9:30  
trudge uptown  
losing steam  
ankles sore  
carefree stride well behind me  
walk past the carriage horses  
along Central Park South  
no business at this hour  
drivers talk among themselves  
in conspiratorial whispers

I reach Columbus Circle  
nearly fall asleep on the A train back to the GWB  
I get off the train  
the station quiet as a catacomb  
up the stairs  
onto the street  
into the darkness

Half-moon perched  
atop one of the GWB towers  
wind still howling  
even stronger than this morning  
not another soul  
walking back to New Jersey

## Cotton Club



At the Cotton Club  
is that Duke Ellington's ghost  
in the pinstriped suit?

## Underneath the bridge



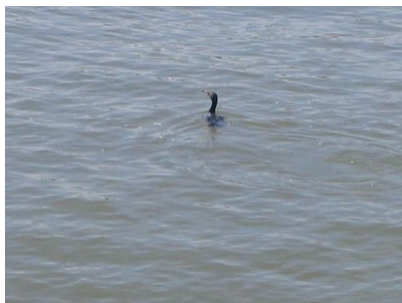
Underneath the bridge  
a world of broken spirits  
tucked away, unseen

## Just passing through



Walk walk walk  
Think think think  
Angels and demons vying for my thoughts  
I'm just passing through

## **A master at work**



Diving, surfacing, diving again  
A lone cormorant  
probing the Hudson's secrets

## A senryu\*



“How is your dessert?”  
“Fine,” she says, fully sated  
Now, awkward silence

*\*Haiku are poems about nature. Senryu are poems about human nature.  
In Japanese, they both follow the same 5-7-5 syllable pattern.*

## Light and shadow



New York shopkeeper  
smoothes his trousers, combs his hair  
poses for a shot





## Remembering Japan



## Doors



*House entrance, Sawara City, Chiba Prefecture*

I remember a time  
and a place  
of adventures  
around every corner  
behind every door

## Storm dream



*Bamboo grove, Sagano, western Kyoto*

Distant thunder in the dead of night  
stirs my sleep  
floats me to a level  
just below consciousness

Through half-shut eyes  
I can see  
a bamboo grove  
smell its musty dampness  
feel its moist soil underfoot  
then I awaken  
and realize  
I'm still in New Jersey

## Lately



*Abandoned truck swallowed by kudzu, Chiba Prefecture*

These days  
I feel so old  
weary  
stiff  
joints ache  
focus wavers  
past is more clear  
than the present  
climbing a mountain  
summit hidden by fog  
straining to move  
this bag of bones  
how nice it would be to sleep  
for 10,000 years

## If



*Matsuri (festival), Sawara City, Chiba Prefecture*

Coming back  
to beginner's mind,  
casting off  
these jaded views,  
seeing anew  
with the eyes of a child,  
All  
just a footstep away  
If  
I hop off this treadmill

## Hermit's lament

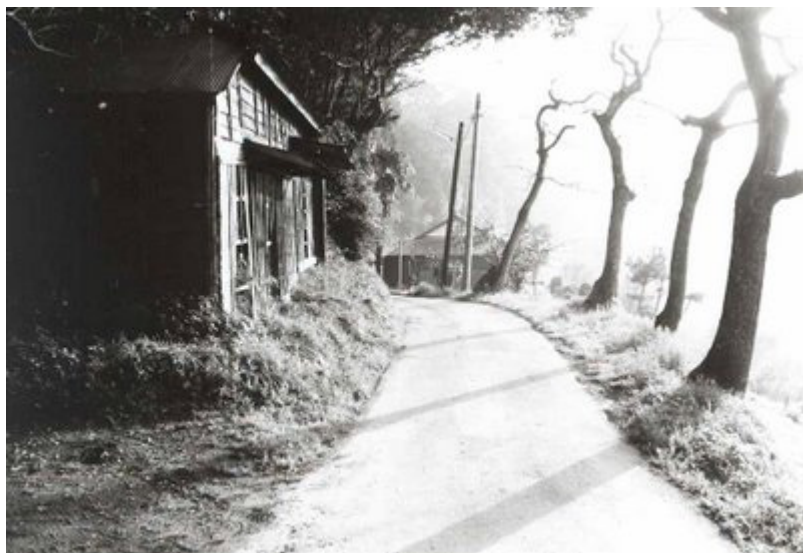


*Bored monkey, bored trainer, Miyajima island, Hiroshima Prefecture*

‘Tis a sad world indeed  
that would rob you even of the simple pleasure  
of bathing in your own blues



## The threat



*Country road at dawn, Chiba Prefecture*

Watch: One of these days  
I'm gonna leave this old house  
and just keep walking

## Death is but a dream



*Pilgrim (o-henro-san) on the Shikoku 88-temple path*

Death is but a dream  
a long walk through countryside  
strangely familiar

## Atomic Bomb Dome



*Genbaku domu (Atomic Bomb Dome), Hiroshima*

Atomic Bomb Dome  
twisted beams, cries of anguish  
searing heat, silence

## Crazy Zen abbot



*Adashino Nembutsu-ji temple, Kyoto*

Crazy Zen abbot  
serves tea, tries to out-bow me  
at Daisen temple

## Farm woman



*Yokaichiba City, Chiba Prefecture*

Farm woman blushes  
as I point my camera,  
adjusts her bonnet.

## Gentle Koyoshi



*Taoist priest on grounds of Fushimi Inari Taisha shrine, Kyoto*

Gentle Koyoshi,  
scorned, cast out by family,  
“You’re no husband, you’re no father,” they yell  
forcing upon him a life of solitude;  
days of wandering,  
finally takes refuge in a garden shack between two trees,  
too proud to accept charity,  
owner lets him stay in exchange for chores,  
breakfast is part of the deal;  
Koyoshi, ever in his own world,  
joins us at table,  
never talks much to his surrogate kin,  
quietly sips his tea,  
now and then lifts his head to smile, eyes twinkling,  
gets up from the table without a word,  
gently exhales  
shuffles back to his shack  
a man of quiet earth tones, a golden light within.

## Greetings from Kyoto



*Maiko-san (apprentice geisha), Gion district, Kyoto*

Painted smile conceals  
a heart brimming with sadness,  
beneath the veneer a spirit  
rarely allowed to shine through,  
sick of this life  
the rude customers  
gawking tourists  
staccato click of camera shutters  
a routine set in stone,  
had to leave school after ninth grade  
to learn arts that stink of the old  
here in the ancient capital,  
hates the goddamned shamisen  
makeup sometimes makes her break out  
dreams of reinventing herself in Tokyo  
time for her next appointment

## Farmer



*Farmer, Yokaichiba City*

A life spent stooped  
over a vegetable field  
pulling weeds  
planting  
harvesting  
forever bound to the land  
childless  
alone  
years since her husband died  
backbone twisted into a question mark  
cranes her neck just to look straight ahead  
54 but looks decades older  
farming can't pay the bills  
shack falling apart around her  
TV set, kotatsu\*, kerosene heater, toaster oven, ancient clock  
her only luxuries  
finds comfort in tea and cigarettes  
and the cats that prowl outside

*\* A kotatsu is a small, low table. Underneath the table are heat coils. In winter, you stick your legs under the kotatsu, and a blanket keeps the heat in.*



## Echoes



*Rice planting, Nosaka Town Chiba Prefecture*

Every day, I'm visited by voices and visions from my years in Japan.  
The memories remain alive and vibrant within me.  
The sense of aesthetics that took root in me colors the way I view life  
itself.

Hints of incense remind me of lazy summer afternoons with a dear friend  
in Kyoto,  
watching Arashiyama -- Storm Mountain -- turn blue then purple then  
green in the changing light.

The tinkle of wind chimes carries me back to my apartment balcony  
overlooking a sea of rice paddies shimmering emerald green in the  
brilliant sun.

Certain poetry rekindles the joyous solitude I felt inside bamboo groves.

A cicada's stridulations or a bird's call transport me back to forests of  
giant cryptomeria trees where the sunlight never fully pierces the canopy.

Physically, I'm half a world away now.  
Spiritually, I never left.

## **Gone But Still Here**



## Song of the Taconic Parkway



*Chatham, Columbia County, N.Y.*

Old two-lane Taghkanic highway of brittle macadam  
slices through the hunting grounds of the Algonquins  
    sunlight  
        filters through clouds  
    plays tricks on the mountains  
        gives them wrinkles  
        tints them purple  
tickles the heather on their slopes  
    and makes it shimmer  
tires thump on black rubber joints  
    between pale roadway slabs  
in perfect time to the Bukka White blues on the radio  
    the ghosts of the Dutch  
    still haunt the geography  
        of this place  
        where creeks  
        are called kills  
        and rolling thunder  
is but the mirth of giants playing tenpins

## Road to glory



*Civil War veterans monument, Hillsdale, Columbia County, N.Y.*

Damn kids went off too proudly and too eagerly  
to fight in a war they thought  
would be fought and done in a month  
Full of piss and vinegar  
itching to get in the fray  
poor bastards probably died  
of measles or dysentery  
long before they could fire a shot  
in anger or fear  
Sure, put up a monument  
write odes to their bravery and courage  
and the nobility of their cause  
but how do you capture in bronze and stone  
a dying boy scared shitless  
crying for his mother

## Dream house



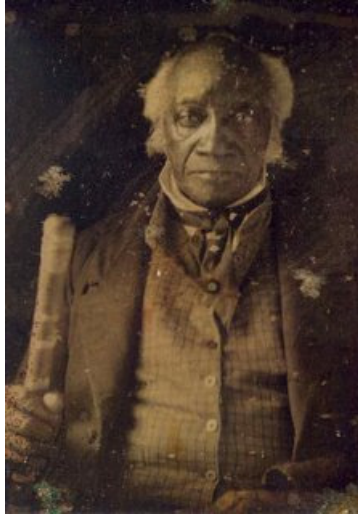
Stones shaped by sturdy Dutch hands  
before a free America was even an idea  
Its only neighbor a willow sapling  
grown staid and massive  
Its walls a witness to pioneers and scoundrels  
Redcoats and patriots  
dreams and realities  
Exuding an inner warmth  
that makes it a home

## Spots on a tin ceiling



Trendy SoHo art gallery  
entertains the well-heeled and the hip  
paintings hang like jewels on the wall  
magnets for comments  
small talk  
like the three kinds of wine that fuels it  
flows freely  
few look up to notice the ages-old pressed-tin ceiling  
with a diamond pattern in relief  
its fresh coat of white paint  
can't cover the vignettes  
of generations of tenants long gone  
immigrant families crammed ten to a room  
mothers nursing newborn babies  
elderly relatives breathing their last  
strong men with calloused hands  
speaking languages strange even in this Babel of Manhattan  
all their ghosts mingle  
unseen  
but felt  
in the art gallery

## Slavery in New York



*Caesar, a slave. Daguerreotype, ca. 1850  
from Collection of The New-York Historical Society, ID 46594*

Slave burial ground  
yields beads cowries bits of bone  
echoes of anguish



## For MST, 1907-1992



I could've eased my dad's final months  
could've soothed  
his fears  
arising from awareness  
of ebbing lucidity  
his mind the victim  
of a capricious child  
stealing a cookie here and there  
from the jar

I could've bridged decades of enmity  
that had settled  
into an uneasy truce  
could've answered  
that frantic long-distance call  
one afternoon  
a cry for help  
asking me  
where he was  
why he was alone  
why I wasn't there  
"Can you HELP me?"  
he pleads  
into the answering machine

through which I screened the call

In his last days  
his mind nearly gone  
wife unable to care  
for his needs  
or defend herself  
against his blind rages  
he is put in a nursing home  
the same one where his mother died  
I remember visiting her there  
as a boy of 4  
“Why is Grandma playing with a doll?”  
I ask my mother  
in a scene that haunts me  
to this day

And now my dad  
perched on the edge  
of that same fine and fragile line  
and at that same way station  
in a moment of clarity  
says  
“I’m going to die here, aren’t I?”

I want to visit him  
“He wouldn’t even recognize you”  
my mother says  
I take her word for it  
and stay away

The phone call came a week later  
he died just past midnight  
on his 48th wedding anniversary

I don’t recall shedding many tears  
at his funeral  
but afterward  
I pulled out the box of old home movies  
safely tucked away  
and forgotten  
in my mother’s basement

carefully threading the brittle film  
through the projector  
and there he is  
vibrant  
smiling  
in his element  
forever young  
in far happier days  
before realities put hopes to flight  
and opening this portal  
I let loose torrents of emotion  
such as I've never felt

It's been 14 springs  
since he's been gone  
but the talks we have now  
by his graveside  
are among the best  
we ever had

## Gone but still here



*My dad's childhood home, Sixth Street between First Avenue and Avenue A,  
East Village, Manhattan*

I sip  
rum and cokes  
and blur  
the here and now  
at an East Village bar  
steps from the tenement  
where a midwife delivered my father  
99 years ago

I rise  
on stuttering feet  
and walk  
around the corner  
past the old public baths  
on 11th Street  
between Avenues A and B  
an abode now for well-heeled tenants  
but through a rip in time  
I see the place where my father

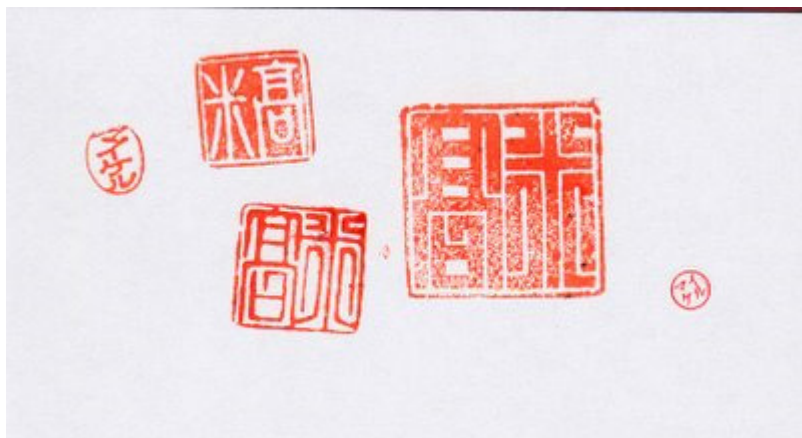
watched his father  
get clean  
after days of manual labor

I pass  
the public school  
where my father's mind was nurtured  
its classrooms now luxury apartments  
with big closets

I hear  
idle chatter  
about  
stock portfolios  
and  
reality TV  
and  
real estate prices  
but it can't drown out  
echoes  
of ancient immigrant sounds  
whose meanings can be inferred  
but not quite understood

I walk  
these streets  
arm-in-arm  
with ghosts

## My old man's ink



Another spring  
since he has been gone  
my old man's ink  
still not dry  
his stamp  
on my personality



# Hermitage





## Roots



*Well dug circa 1763 in yard of carriage house where I live. The main house, a Dutch colonial, was built in 1763 and was occupied by the British during Washington's retreat from Fort Lee. The well is no longer used, but the quality of the water is said to be nearly pristine.*

My roots  
on my father's side  
are in the polyglot streets  
of the East Village  
and on my mother's side  
in the wise-guy streets  
of the Bronx  
and Brooklyn  
and Harlem  
With such a noble pedigree  
how the hell  
did I wind up  
in Joisey?

## Celestial palace



I rail against the cramped confines  
of my timeworn garage apartment  
so hot in summer  
so cold in winter  
and then tonight  
I see the golden gibbous moon  
flickering through the pines  
that tower over the roof  
and I give silent thanks

## **This old house**



My drafty old house  
Frigid gusts find every crack  
in these thin, tired walls

## **Winter sky**

Outside my hermitage  
on a chill night  
I watch Orion  
prowl through the trees

## **Welcome to January**

A chilly morning  
Puddles show scudding gray clouds  
Bones creak as I walk

## **Storm**

Air still as a tomb  
Thunderclaps move like footfalls  
toward my shaking house

## **Whispers outside my window**

A mourning dove coos  
from a treetop perch unseen  
breeze rustles the pines

## Untitled



Two cats  
couch-mates for years  
yet in the morning  
strangers

## **Plotting mischief**

Plotting mischief  
two cats sit  
by the water bowl



## Untitled

I have a cat  
unlike all other types  
he's in love with the sound  
of the Scottish bagpipes

When the skirling begins  
his ears perk up straight  
“That's not music,” he thinks  
“That's a possible mate”

## **Untitled**

Cat sleeps in my lap  
too old to do much but purr  
just wants to stay warm

## **Do not go quietly ...**



In a patch of preserved marshland down the road from my house, these wildflowers are flaunting their colors for the last time before they wither and die, yielding to the coming autumn.

## Facing Death



## Jisei\*



Winter is here  
a trudging old man  
who finally has arrived

*\* Jisei is the Japanese word meaning “death poem.” The tradition of composing a poem as a farewell to life goes back hundreds of years in Japan and is rooted in the Buddhist view of life and death.*

## **Reminder to myself**

Living life to its fullest isn't about  
checking off thrills from a list;  
It's about being fearless in following my dreams,  
courageous in accepting  
that some will go unfulfilled  
(but the joy is in the pursuit)  
and taking the time to savor  
something as simple  
as a cup  
of tea

## **Dropping away of body**

In the early stages of my illness,  
when the cancer was just beginning to bloom inside me,  
my karate found full, if awkward, expression  
in the relatively pain-free movement of my ankles, knees, hips, wrists,  
elbows and shoulders.

As my ankles began to betray me  
and as my knees and my hips followed suit,  
I thought,  
“Well, I still have my arms.”

As my wrists begin to betray me  
and as my elbows and shoulders follow suit,  
I have come to realize  
that all I’ll soon have left  
is my spirit.

The cancer can’t have that.



## Thoughts on a Friday night in the ER

In a burst of fury  
hotter than the sun  
my right fist engages  
in a brief  
but vicious  
bout  
with the bathroom door  
and the door wins  
like Tyson  
over Spinks  
only much quicker

The exquisite pain  
flushes the anger  
from my mind  
like a burning  
bubbling  
stream  
of peroxide  
flushes out infection  
and I realize  
in a rush of clarity  
what a long  
long  
journey  
this  
is

## **Calcium Dreams**

Pick a dream  
from the catalog  
and wrap yourself  
in it  
then fade  
to black

## **Thoughts on a Wednesday afternoon**

Embers cool quickly  
as the last bundle of sticks  
is burned ...  
my thoughts are  
distant  
clouded  
wrapped in gauze  
my body weighs  
as much as the universe  
I just want to sleep  
and sleep

## **That's progress**

I was immortal  
when I was younger  
fooling time, fate  
and myself  
with a parlor trick  
long since forgotten

## **Lying on the exam table**

Lying on the exam table  
as the IV medication  
drips ...  
drips...  
drips ...  
I know how I got here  
but where am I going?

## **In the X-ray lab**

In the X-ray lab  
they peek  
at the inner man  
while my spirit finds  
a hiding place  
amid all those bones

## **Journey of a lifetime**

I've been expecting you  
but not eagerly  
Won't you have some tea?

## **Two thoughts from the zendo**

Sitting in the zendo  
I am just a shadow  
on the wall

\*\*\*

Going on a journey  
leaving behind everything  
even myself

## **Voices from the subconscious**

A poem?

A poem? At a time like this?

Are you crazy?



## **Untitled**

Frightened beyond words  
by that final anxious moment;  
Hoping beyond words  
for a journey to the stars

## **Kindness**

Worried friend stops by  
with a hearty meal  
“Enjoy these blessings while you can,”  
says I to me

## Untitled

I'm curled up on a bed in an ER exam room. An elderly woman lying on a gurney rolls by my door.

The gurney stops for a moment.

She turns to me and her tired, sad gray eyes meet my tired, sad blue ones. Whisper acknowledges whisper.

Then she slowly turns away as the gurney moves on.

## Untitled

Facing death  
recalling the “virtues” of my life  
(why am I keeping score?)  
letting the foibles haunt me  
Who am I trying to please?  
What am I measuring up to?

## Untitled

I've trapped myself  
into sniffing out death  
around every corner  
and when panic attacks  
reveal a minuscule glimpse  
of what I most fear  
I recoil in terror  
and scream "Oh Shit!"

Am I the pursued  
or the pursuer?

I'm learning  
that if you go fishing  
you catch fish.

## Untitled

In younger days  
I created  
a rite of passage --  
a silver-dollar-size tattoo  
on my left bicep  
of the Chinese ideogram  
for “double happiness”

Done in reds and greens  
it now looks like a rheumy eye

How silly it appears  
on my toothpick arm

**Fatigue**  
**Thursday, January 3, 2008**

Looking in my bathroom mirror  
I see the steady progress of death  
as he moves like an eclipse  
across my face

My skin grows more taut  
my beard is shot through with gray  
my eyes are increasingly bloodshot  
I can't recognize this person staring back at me --  
in fact  
this stranger is scaring me

My physical weakness astounds me  
my arms don't listen anymore  
my sense of balance has forsaken me

But, blessing of blessings  
I can still feel the life spark  
I can still feel the life spark

