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Interiors

haibun

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Alba Publishing

US\$16.00 / UK £12.00 / €15



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Published by Alba Publishing,
P O Box 266, Uxbridge
UB9 5NX, United Kingdom
www.albapublishing.com

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-9572592-5-6

Edited, designed and typeset by Kim Richardson

Cover photograph of Swan Lake by Janice Carter

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgements

The following haibun and haiku originally appeared, or will be appearing, in the following journals:

"Dominoes" and "Hymn" in *Haibun Today* and

"Claustrophobia" in *FreeXpresSion*

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Book I

Nettles

MAY 31

Late afternoon sunlight on Swan Lake: a vague rancor in the grays, pale yellows, and reticent violets—which oddly pleases me. I get a kick out of anthropomorphizing nature, which tries its level best to anthropomorphize us, but with little success.

Oh-oh—I feel an anti-war jeremiad coming on...And here we go, preaching to the bare ruined choirs of hidden constellations my car-pool mates and I once invented: the '54 Hudson; the Chromium Dinette Set; the Seven Quaaludes.

My message doesn't matter, of course, since no one's listening.

Numbness...From the TV upstairs, faint words of the President's Memorial Day address:

"...Sacrifice...Sacrifice..."

when shall we have
taps
for taps

SWAN BAR PASSACAGLIA I

Snippets of conversation:

“So—if you have your druthers, where do you see yourself ten years from now, when the kids have flown the coop?”

“... With someone who loves me.”

...Splayed on the window looking out on the deserted deck—it’s a chilly afternoon—a turquoise and black butterfly. It reminds me vaguely of the faint outline of a human hand in an Anasazi cliff dwelling near Arizona’s Chaco Canyon.

Anasazi: The Lost Ones. . . .

Cook to a barmaid]:

“What would you like for lunch?”

“Something that doesn’t suck.”

“What would that be?”

...The butterfly’s gone. Thirty yards east of the deck, murmurs of Bond Creek, tranquil before the spring runoff—veils of sound mingling with the muddy river-babblings of bar-talk on both sides of me, as if I were a smooth stone.

“Remember Vince Edwards, the sixties’ TV star? He died of cancer recently. Back then I once saw him placing bets at Del Mar racetrack—the guy’s face had pores the size of moon-craters! And he was a teen idol?”

This must be the afterlife pops into my mind as I sip my Salmon Creek white wine. Ghosts, playing country-western on the jukebox, elbow to elbow at

the wooden bar which seems to me more insubstantial with every sip.

“Do you ever laugh in your husband’s face after sex? I do.”

Tracy, the owner-bartender, has pretty hands—slender pale fingers, floating and fluttering around the cash register like tendrils of smoke in the half-light of a Coors sign.

...7,000 miles away, in a Parisian street, lovers embrace in a doorway, embraced in turn by obliging violet shadows...

“Another?” Tracy says, but not to me.

[Me, perversely]: *“Do you think the phrase ‘sweet melancholy’ is an oxymoron? I don’t.”*

“What?”

I’m afflicted—afflicted is the word—by a sudden, free-floating affection for my fellow patrons, most of them strangers. It’s the sort of feeling one might have in Purgatory, spotting a human face in the darkness, enkindling the need—a recalcitrant fire in rainy weather—to give him or her a big hug.

Unreal. . . .

biker girls
go-cups
runneth over

SWAN BAR PASSACAGLIA II

Tuesday: pale gray light over the south end of Swan Lake. Glints of hidden water: silver pepper shaken over the wildlife refuge.

Sipping a cold Corona I think of Tracy's husband Phil, who croaked twice last year, yanked from oblivion by doctors at Kalispell Regional Hospital. (He'd been operated on for serious back and shoulder problems when infection launched a sneak attack.)

"I don't know what the children [they have two] would've done without their dad," Tracy said to me then, a few days after Phil came home.

Putting myself in the kids' place, I felt a sudden, unexpected rush of emotion which made my eyes sting. The odd thing is, I'd never felt that deeply about my own father who did die of course, when I was younger than Tracy's kids.

It was as if I had to come to my feelings through the medium of Tracy, whose kids happily hadn't lost their dad.

...Well, there are mysteries and mysteries. Just today, this tanka came through me like a dose of salts, as if I too were a medium:

this beautiful morning's
mystery of the world—
blue blur:
bluebird or
sky tossed by branches

...My reverie broken, the Greek chorus of the bar resumes:

"Either you control it, or it controls you."

*"If I come back, I want to come back as a buzzard.
He don't need nobody, and nobody needs him."*

*"She fired into the ground, but you better believe he
got the message."*

"I used him the way a guy would use a girl."

[Two barmaids]:

"You smell so good today!"

"Why, thank you!"

"Did you shower?"

candle-stub

4:37 a.m.

lake-winds rising

ORBITS

From the surface of Pluto (God help the astronaut who gets that assignment) the sun is a grain of gold dust in a vein of stars—*our* stars, suburbs of the Milky Way galaxy.

Poor Pluto—demoted to sub-planet status by armchair astronomers with nothing better to do. But today, an overcast Friday, on my merry way to the bar I have a plan. I'll take up a collection for Pluto: money to pay for a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, imploring astronomers to reconsider their decision to kick Pluto downstairs and return it to planetary status.

Fellow patrons, of course—including the grizzled dude I never talk to—will stare at me while I, comfortable in a wizard's cloak adorned with stars and crescent moons, pass the hat.

...Now, in the heart of the heart of Montana's huckleberry country, I think of Thoreau. From his essay, "Huckleberries":

Be blown on by all the winds. Open your pores and breathe in all the tides of nature, in all her streams and oceans, her stars and planets, at all seasons...

Big Bang
Big Whimper
Well here we are

MISSION RIDGE—DUSTING OF SNOW

Ulysses S. Grant referred to himself as a verb. Well, here I am, content for the moment to be a noun—no, a pronoun—checking out the lake wrinkling in the wind like a victim of premature aging disease.

A dark gold security light across the lake gazes at my own security light—lovers separated by the Capulets and Montagues of mossy shores: plague-free houses of green pebbles, larches, pines, and birches.

My thoughts turn inward, never a good idea. The morning I found my father's body, 60 years ago, Swan Lake must've looked pretty much like this—minus the patchwork of clear-cuts on the Mission Mountain foothills.

Thinking for the zillionth time of my father's death at 38, an uninspired yet cheerful notion: *Yes, yes, you can't step twice in the same river; you can't drown twice in it either.*

floating
in my glass of Merlot
drunken day moon

NETTLES

What is it in me blotting out every memory of my mother's funeral—except the horror of being comforted?

My poetry—totally useless as an Ariadne's thread out of that labyrinth—into it, that's another thing. (By the way, don't let anyone tell you that writing exorcises the demons. Bullshit. The demons stay right where they are: they just get written about.)

Someone wrote, "I don't want to know my soul and I don't want to renounce it." Problem: for me, "soul" is such a big word, woefully out of vogue in this benighted age, that I always find it embarrassing—even though I shamelessly employ it when the spirit—another suspect word!—moves me.

. . . .And now—go figure!—compared to the subterranean truths of my mother's funeral and the feelings which still trouble me, today's fake laughs at the bar seem comfortably authentic.

3:14 a.m.: I sit up in bed, my right hand stilled by sleep, with a thought—persistent, like a mosquito's tiny violin:

You can't want what you want.

just ahead of me—
the need to touch
a pretty stranger's shoulder

CLOUDY THURSDAY

Kafka insisted that the point of no return is the point that must be reached. I'll go further: It's the point where we must pitch our being and live: where the weariness of being loved and of not being loved meet, smashing each other to smithereens.

"Good news!" an old man announces to the bar, sick and tired of listening to him. "My wife is coming to visit this summer!" His wife, everyone knows, has been dead for years, killed in a head-on crash down near Drummond.

I pat his shoulder on my way out.

clap of thunder—
on the jukebox
I'll hate myself in the morning

POWER OUTAGE

“In the still of the night. . . .”

Ah, no. Nothing about this night on the lake is still. Yellow and black shadows of cars and trucks whizzing by on Highway 83 spring to life, scrambling up and down the walls of my bedroom: a panicking of trapped animals.

Wind in the pines, birches, junipers and tamaracks: each tree a different instrument in an orchestra. And the lake! Even when the wind stops, you sense restlessness; like Michelangelo's sculpture within raw marble, something in the water wants to be freed and give its promiscuous colors to the moon.

At four a.m. I'm awakened by the sound of a big rig's air horn on the highway, then a thump, then silence.

By morning I know what I'll find: a young deer, possibly a yearling, lying in the road, one eye popped out of its head.

Dragging the beautiful animal to the roadside, I re-think the tone *of road kill*.

bowing respectfully
to its own reflection
a dying juniper

COLD FRONT

In the low clouds cruising up Swan Lake from south to north, where does gray become silver and silver become gray?

Checking out what morning has to offer, I suddenly feel like a supplicant, cup empty of everything except colors I can't differentiate.

Yesterday, at the bar:

It always rains on the weekend. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

They found the remains of that Oriental kid yesterday. A thousand feet off Swan Peak: Imagine his surprise when the snowmobile ran out of snow...

Swans are such beautiful birds—why are they so mean to us?

I was just trying to protect her from finding out.

I imagine polarized alien-cousins on a Goldilocks—earth-like—planet a thousand light-years away. They extend their own cups of longing, only to withdraw them in benign puzzlement—which seems to them (though certainly not to me!) a gift from the gods.

Well, forget it. In the end they and I neatly sidestep all cosmic differences, cups overflowing with this comforting notion:

Only the gods are capable of creating loneliness—and of being lonely.

beach—

slightly tilting

rowboat full of water

BIG SKY

[Mom to eight-year-old]:

What are you drawing?

God. . . .

Honey, no one knows what God looks like.

They will when they see my picture.

Today, at the bar:

*On CNN it said that somebody in Texas saw the face
of Jesus in the mold on their bathroom wall.*

...Clouds scud east to west, vaulting the “Chinese
Wall”—the Continental Divide: silver clouds with
dark linings reminding me to consider more closely
Swan Lake’s suburbs of brown reeds, timothy grass,
green pebbles, French moss—no, mistletoe—illicit
loves...

magic at the bar—

fake laughter

become real

REPRISE I

For the first time in many days the dawn sky is bereft of fog and clouds, even light mist. Bereft! Such a highfalutin word. . . . So terrible in connotation yet beautiful-sounding, why does it ring chimes in my sensibility?

If *bereft* were female it would be G., whose own words of 50 years ago I still remember—cracked bells tolling for another guy, more than one.

Yesterday, at the bar:

Man, it would've been so easy to pretend that I cared about her.

But isn't that the same thing?

What?

...Again the nagging feeling that Swan Lake is leaving me, even though I'm not going anywhere—just got up here three weeks ago.

This puts me in mind of the first poem I wrote about Swan and her necklace of mountains (now, just now as I say this at 6:42 a.m., the first band of chartreuse light appears on the Mission Mountain ridge):

They don't call it the big sky for nothing. Rowing on Swan Lake late one chilly afternoon I see diamond-white Mt. Aeneas, cut by frozen sunlight, dwarfed by thunderheads piling up over the "Chinese Wall" to the east; southward, mountain ranges leap-frog over each other below the setting sun until the vanishing point,

making my eyes ache.

*A quiver of cobras, a battery of barracuda, a sleuth
of bears: why not a mystery of mountains? Before and
since Lewis and Clark, humans have traveled these
mountains to find or to lose themselves. Is there a
difference?*

ripples fading
 how the dark
 knows the dark

a fish jumps—
 ripples
 not quite reaching me

AN HOUR BEFORE DUSK

Sunlight paints the honeybees in our “bower” a paler gold, revealing (I’m on my second vodka tonic) the nakedness linking us as living things.

I don’t know what they’re up to—they don’t seem particularly interested in my wife’s flowers. Three or four hang out around my notepad, one hovering over these words. *Everybody’s a critic.*

Virgil’s bees...And last season’s hornet hive under the garage eaves, humming like a distant power mower: an oddly comforting sound.

A little girl once asked: *Do bees have a soul?*

Why should they want one?

Of course I kept this to myself.

I stare at the lake, pale cerulean in late afternoon light. Skimming the ripples, my thoughts = leaky balloons that won’t make it to the west shore.

Among bees, flowers, colors on the lake, this sudden notion: *A god is in this place.*

pine-branches
puzzle-pieces
of sky

NURSING HOME

*If given a choice between feeling
pain and nothing at all, a man
will choose pain every time.*

Nietzsche

The character of light on Swan—bitter greens
mixed with silver-grays of clouds on cruise control—
gives me pleasure.

It won't last long. Neither did the wave of
melancholy breaking over me early this a.m.

But here's the strange thing: that too—the
tsunami of melancholy—gave me pleasure! I'd made it
through one more night.

The nursing home will be like this: the time when
I'll plop down in a wheelchair, tuning out the hymns
of the visiting Methodist Youth Choir, bless their
hearts. Rather—

*May the dirty snows of yesteryear—hurts of Dear
John letters, unanswered phone calls, "We can always be
friends," etc.—become something to cling to: the gift of
an anti-Santa Claus I want to believe in with the
innocence of a child.*

bellyache

plums

missing from the kitchen

HUNGER PANGS

Lupine.

The steep hillside down to the lake is crowded with them: pale purple blossoms taunting gravity as mini-waves nudge the pebbly beach below.

They are time machines, whisking me back to the early 50's, when I was a kid wandering the Marin hills, surrounded by fields of poppies, lupine, and yellow fennel smelling of licorice.

But this afternoon I look past the lupine to a small, Forest Service-owned island a mile across Swan, near the west shore. I glom onto the words of St. Martin: *Be satisfied with what you are given*—and promptly disavow them!

No, we needn't fall into the traps of greed and covetousness, but to me dissatisfaction should be the staff of life. Its amiable haunting moves me forward—even if the point that must be reached is dissatisfaction with the solemn foolery of seeking and striving!

(Someone asked me at the bar yesterday, *Are you into Zen?*)

...Thing is, something in me wants to devour the beauty of the lupine. When such moods overtake me like a faster runner (in my case the “faster runner” = memories of childhood), I think of Simone Weil's parable of a birthday party for seven or eight year olds.

Mom brings in the cake, a thing of beauty—until the kids have their way with it. Then, of course, it's a

total wreck, splendor in tatters—the price of
devouring beauty (i.e. of eating the apple in the
Garden), a bellyache.

just out of reach—
hugging the west shore
an orange sail

BEHOLDER

Enervated colors on the lake: perfectly matching my mood.

Even a dead hummingbird is beautiful. Until I picked one up on the deck (they bang into our lakeside windows with alarming frequency) I didn't realize they were iridescent—their iridescence cheating death, as they say—as if death deserved fair play!

The beauty of dead things enchants me—a juniper leaning for years over the lake: finally giving up the ghost and falling in the water.

Now, thanks to the tinselly light of ripples welcoming this stranger to the neighborhood, its black twigs and branches are given new life.

A dead mouse: fur still silky; feet perfectly shaped and delicate, reminding me of a calligrapher's brushes; black eyes open, reflecting tiny windows of light looking on to the beauty of nothingness.

mirroring each other—
blossoms on the tree
blossoms on the grass

HEART'S NEEDLE

Invisible rivers. . . The Swan: threading its hidden way through Swan Lake, courting the chilly oblivion of Flathead Lake fifteen miles westward.

Beneath my feet, or so I'm told, a tributary of the Little Blackfoot: to that sunlit river what poems are to the words of poems.

Yesterday, at the bar:

I never see him. . . . Oh, he's a good kid, a bit confused about the past. No, I don't know where he is at present. . . . Sent me a Christmas card three or four years ago. Guess what? I'm a grandpa!

swans—

swan-shaped

driftwood

CRANE MOUNTAIN SHADOWS

As I sip a cold Corona on our landing, I dwell on how the world is no longer alive to us. Only the primitives literally lived and breathed animism, whose echoes are found in our custom of knocking on wood.

Machines come alive for us when the sun rises and go to sleep when the sun sets. What am I saying? Machines guard us, their little brothers and sisters, when we sleep...

I really don't think it'd be that hard to slip, a thief in the night, right back into that mindset: voices of Naiads in the leaves, sylphs in the ripples, gods in thunder—the night sky a torch-lit cave.

Ah, again to bathe, like my supple brother Mr. river-otter, in that insanity, or what we perceive as insanity.

...When I was very young—when the world seemed very young—I prayed to the light on my bedroom ceiling, calling it Susan. Susan kept the monsters under the bed where they belonged.

father, mother, God,
loving me,
guard me when I sleep—

DIS

Memory is a form of weariness.

Last year Bond Creek was rushing—I mean rushing—with spring snow runoff, more frantic than the year before, than the year before, etc. Don't get too close, Phil the bartender warned me (the creek flows just behind the bar).

But I wanted to get close, damn it—something in me wanted to surf that bad boy all the way to the lake.

Fool! Bond Creek dips underground for a hundred yards before it pops up again on the lakeshore.

Yes! The waterbed of Proserpina. . . .

mirroring
nothing but dying trees—
torrents

BOTTOM RUNG

The earth is damp—it rained all night—but the lake seems dry: gray and obdurate, like shale. This morning's French roast coffee tastes bitter, even liberally laced with milk.

My ladder of faith starts here—I know the clear-cuts and pine-groves, hidden by clouds and fog, are still up there on the Mission ridge; I know the green light at the end of someone's dock, hidden by mist, is still there; I know...

Where does it stop? Not with hope, I hope (to faith what a spy is to enemy territory). I always think of faith the way I used to think of a prospective lover when, surfeited with other lovers, I'd say to myself—to paraphrase Molly Bloom—As well her as someone else...

darker gold
than the flame's dark gold
my candle in shadow

BERKELEY PLAIN SONG

“The kindness which is night. . . .”

How many empty Berkeley nights—voids filled by the voids of other nights—when I was 20–22...My mother told me more than once that it’s a shame to “waste your youth”—not by doing bad things but by doing nothing at all, the sands of life trickling through a cracked hourglass—

So what did I do? I blew off the summers of ’63 and ’64, staying in Berkeley when I should’ve been chasing girls at places like Yosemite National Park where, to be fair to myself, I did work and play in 1966.

Depression is a form of poetry. Sitting on our back porch on Hearst St., staring down the rickety back stairs, I tried to re-hash the previous night’s dreams of the girl next door: tall, willowy, a goddess who—like all goddesses—made her own importance.

It wasn’t a matter of taking life for granted. Quite the reverse: Life seemed to be taking me for granted.

Meanwhile—or so I felt—the fevered memory of future seascapes ebbed and flowed beneath an all-knowing, contemptuous moon.

gray day moon
thin cold shadows—
the Campanile

REPRISE II

The artist has cleverly concealed the face of one of your past lovers in the leaves and branches of this picture. Can you find it?

No.

Fog on the lake at six a.m.: not clouds, not mist—real pea-soup fog. I give my sensibility a few moments to rub sleep from its eyes.

Then:

Now's the time to haul out the rowboat, drag it down to the beach—what beach there is—and venture out into this heart of whiteness: the consoling invisibility of Crane Mountain, the “Chinese Wall,” Swan Peak, and Mt. Aeneas.

And now, just like that, I do see the face:

We're parked on a dirt road at the top of Grizzly Peak under a full moon. The light is so bright that at midnight we can clearly see the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz, Angel Island, Red Rock, and the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, then still under construction. To our left: lights of Oakland, Piedmont, and Alameda; the Estuary where UC Berkeley's crew team practices in the spring; the mudflats of Emeryville with their bizarre plywood sculptures; Elmwood; and the string of pearls that is the Bay Bridge.

Then, as we watch, a fog bank appears west of the Golden Gate and begins to move in. Soon the red lights of the Bridge are gone; then the Bridge itself; then Alcatraz and Angel Island blocking our view of the lights

of upscale Belvedere and Tiburon. Hesitating as if making up its mind what to do next, the fog moves south and begins to creep up and down the hills of San Francisco. One by one white and yellow windows of skyscrapers disappear; ditto the streetlights of Lombard, Marina, Geary, Clay, Pine, Market, Mission, and Montgomery streets; then the Financial District, the alleyways of North Beach (I imagine I can see the sign of Gino's and Carlo's, my favorite bar on Green Street), and the "Avenues," stitched together like whole cloth by the threads of Geary, California, and—diagonally—Holloway, where just last week I'd taken the M car out to visit a friend who attends San Francisco State.

After swallowing the city, the fog shyly embraces the Bay Bridge, tower by tower, light by light, until it reaches Treasure Island, pausing before the East Shore of Berkeley, unfurled like an apron beneath our feet. Then the thoroughfares: San Pablo, where my step-grandfather's junk store was located before he moved over to Gilman Ave. in the shadow of the Albany Hill; Sacramento Street (I imagine that I see the porch light of our house on Hearst wink out); Grove, Shattuck (where I'd lived until recently at the Berkeley Hotel: it burned to the ground two years after I left the Bay Area); then up Bancroft bordering the campus to the south.

When the lower campus is gone, the fog begins to nibble at the cold rocks and eucalyptus groves of the Berkeley hills (most of these are second-growth trees, their predecessors cut down and floated on rafts across the Bay to rebuild San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire).

*...The Campanile; Memorial Stadium and
Tightwad Hill; Strawberry Canyon; The Jordan Trail;
"Pan-O," the lower lookout on Panoramic Drive where
my friends and I drank beer on Friday nights, keeping a
watch out for the "Nabs"...*

*The fog laps up the spilt milk of moonlight until we
too are lost in it.*

Oakland sparkling at night
yes, yes, a there
there

SARATOGA

Dry-eyed—she's beyond tears by now—a woman
cradles like a newborn the urn with her baby's ashes;
of course I'm touched beyond words.

Sheltering the funeral procession, willow-branches
bow reverentially toward a pale sun low in the
heavens. I'm there, floating a few feet above their
heads, this out-of-body experience seeming perfectly
natural to me—well-suited to a pale gray sky and
glimmering clouds of dream.

The pastor takes the urn from the mother, says a
few words, raises it upward—and releases it to the sky!
Glinting in the gray light, it floats past me, so close I
can touch it. Faces of mourners below are lit up by
joy, but what I feel—typically!—is sadness: deeper
than if they'd lowered the urn into the grave, covering
it with cold earth.

I wake up, sweating.

wind shaping ravens' cries—
ravens
the wind

MONDAY MONDAY

—A voice from the whirlwind of last night's dream:
As you sow, so shall you weep.

I don't want to pick up the pieces of this broken coffee cup. Not that I'm lazy—I just want to gaze at the pieces, “getting off,” as we used to say in Berkeley, on the impossibility of making the cup good as new.

The secret life of cupboards. . . . Like Alice in Wonderland I wish I could eavesdrop on the conversation the remaining cups are having, now that their brother or sister is no more. But, like everyone else, I shamelessly swing the conversation back to my own mortality, imagining the bar-talk after my death:

I didn't know—; He was fairly young, wasn't he?—; I can see him sitting on that stool right there, just last Monday.”

Then, silence as the third leg of the Triple Crown begins on TV.

As you sow...

no change—
rushing of
Bond Creek

D. F. C.

Last night, lying awake as a full moon bathed in its own muddy light on the lake, I finally discovered—or thought I'd discovered—what love is a substitute for.

The wind was rising; in the trees, stirrings of invisible life ceased (it was less than an hour before dawn).

So far I've experienced the death of only one high school cohort—this one to alcoholism. I hadn't seen him in years, but wish I'd at least had the chance to ask him—because apparently he'd been teetering on the edge for some time—what *friendship* is a substitute for.

Then I realized that he must've known all along: each time he took a swig of Maker's Mark Kentucky bourbon, followed by an ice-cold beer chaser, he knew.

He was a good friend of mine.

pinwheel of stars
so many earthquakes
since

TRANSIT OF VENUS

I climbed out of bed this morning feeling like a spy in enemy territory—the territory being my own sensibility, of course. Dreams: weapons in a kind of cyber-war I wage against myself, my battle-strategy—worthy of Alexander the Great!—dissatisfaction.

I think I've said or intimated before that none of this, with the exception of a pocketful of dreams, is particularly unpleasant. And it's all suffused with an aura of amazement, not to say gratitude, that I still feel the way I do on the cusp of age 70.

I won't shed Alexander's bitter tears that there's not a second world to conquer. But, during the hour of the wolf when some dreams push bamboo shoots under my fingernails (as if I really were a spy fallen into enemy hands), I come pretty close.

scraping my window
the dead branch
wants in

COLORS

For me no color, not gray, not even the indigo of my father's lips the morning I found his body, is lifeless. This is odd, because I'm the last person you'd call visual: my wife sees more, notices much more—especially things that have gone awry—than I do.

The inner eye—that's something else. Now and then a sudden color—a tint of blackish-green on the lake—will stir a memory: but of what? I never pin it down, except that it must come from very early in life, when I saw that color for the first time.

Such memory-triggers remind me that our deepest feelings of exile are reserved for *unremembered* people, places, and things. These feelings run even deeper than Dante's or Ovid's, for at least these guys had the bitter luxury of fondly remembering the domes, towers, and cobblestones of Florence and Rome.

first light—
pinks, yellows, etc.—
the blackness remains

CUT-OFF LOW

High time I learned to accept darkness—the Darkness—as a privilege.

Nietzsche speaks of imaginary food. Beauty—yes, beauty—is such. Physicists cheerfully inform us that what we see isn't really there—a magician's cape concealing the darkness of quarks, leptons, and hadrons, which would drive us bonkers if we could only see it, experience it.

The dull green-blue banality of this summer sky—shouldn't I stop making it swim, a drunken day moon, in my second glass of chardonnay?

Should I—

50 years on—
flash of
a pretty girl's ankle

WINTER LIGHT

Seven years into retirement, I still loathe Sundays. For me the seventh day, far from being the Sabbath, carries an odor of mortality, even of the Apocalypse.

My father died on a Sunday—or rather the Saturday night before; I found him Sunday morning—and, even though my mother died on a Tuesday, Sunday November 14 1965 was the last day I saw her alive and seemingly well.

Still, when Sunday rolls around I rarely think of such things. Like a Chinese box, Sunday's void is filled with other voids: tedium, sloth, apathy—I was about to add depression, but depression is something, not a void.

Sunday exists only because the other six days exist; it's like Swan Lake, which takes its form from the invisible river flowing from south to north before surrendering itself to Flathead Lake.

But Sunday has no river running through it. After all, it's the day the Deity went on vacation, which means to me that all we have on Sunday morning is the presence of His absence.

third glass of chard—
toast to the empty
eagle's branch still rocking

TUESDAY ALL DAY

The lake seems groggy this morning, its invisible river wide-awake. *Nay, it is; I know not seems...*

The September sun is torpid behind a thin, cold haze of cirrus—indifferent, as I am definitely not, to light from a newborn star inching closer to the Milky Way, our solar system, earth, and Choteau cemetery where I'm on the waiting list for internment.

Choteau cemetery: destined itself to be interred under glaciers showing up and leaving, showing up and leaving, before the starlight gets here.

Who, among the angelic orders, will hear my cry?

...A sudden horrific notion: the only ticket of admission to Paradise = *embarrassment* that Christ died for our sins.

Once upon a time I wrote a parable about a guy who climbs and descends a mountain in the clouds:

A friend insists, "But you know as well as I that it's a mountain of air!"

The climber: "Mountain of air, mountain of stone: who cares—it's a mountain in the clouds!"

diving
into their own shadows—
osprey

THUNDER ON THE LAKE

The problem with *lapis lazuli* is that it means something. If it weren't a deep-blue stone flecked with minerals—if it were just a sound, a whisper...

We never communicate. We make sounds, we are made by the sounds we hear, spoken to us or not.

Elsewhere I've related an anecdote about a renowned American jurist of the 19th century:

...He didn't speak a word until he was almost five years old. Then, one evening at the dinner table, he chirped:

"The soup's cold."

His astonished parents looked at each other, then at him.

"Why didn't you say anything before?" his father asked.

"Nothing was wrong before."

only in last night's dream
awakened
by the cry of a loon

BORDERLANDS

In a former life I wrote, “If dreams came true we wouldn’t be living in truth but in dream.”

Someone else—I forget who—insisted, *Once we’re able to see this world as an illusion and a phantasm, then we can see everything that happens to us as a dream, as something that pretended to happen to us while we were sleeping.*

Might a time arrive in universal evolution when the line between dream and reality has ceased to exist; when, if you ask someone who’s said something really bizarre, “Did you dream that?” they’ll look at you blankly, the etymology of *dream* having joined passenger pigeons as alms for oblivion?

To sleep, perchance to dream—

Even Chaung Tzu, whose famous emperor didn’t know if he’d dreamed a butterfly or if he were a butterfly dreaming him, pitched the ambiguities of his parable on a reader’s distinctions between waking and dreaming. No, what I’m getting at is different.

Death’s dream kingdom—

Do animals dream? Think of dogs “running” in their sleep. But animals have no awareness of death, so how can they dream?

bending to tie my shoe
...a fawn watching me
then—nothing—

THE TERRITORY IS NOT THE MAP

Looking forward to a trip we've planned to Seattle in September. . . .But it's almost as if I've already made the journey: boarded the airplane, ordered a double gin and tonic, flown over the Space Needle, landed...

So why go?

Years ago I wrote a parable:

There was a well-known man in our town who spoke thrillingly of rare and exotic destinations he had visited. His descriptions of landscapes, beaches, rivers and forests were so vivid and exciting that many of the townspeople flocked to see them too.

Then it was discovered that the man was a hoaxer who had never visited these places at all, not a single one! The people in our town were so disappointed in the hoaxer, and so disappointed in themselves for being deceived, that they stopped visiting the exotic destinations that he'd spoken so eloquently about.

But the birds of the air, who hadn't heard the thrilling words of the hoaxer, flocked happily, as always, to the exotic destinations he'd described.

bird-watching

birds

watching

LITTLE MURDERS

This husband whose wife no longer loves him: in my eyes, now, a different person: but suddenly a much more intricate one!

Truth is, her confession has given me a privileged glimpse into an ordinary man's soul—even as she murmured to me, “He's soulless, you know, or nearly so.”

The cloud of unknowing he walks through—an LA smog of tainted innocence—fascinates me. And like a man in a cloud, he's surrounded by my free-floating compassion: what ought to be contempt, or so I feel.

According to the wife, this guy is not only clueless but contented: sleepwalking through a miasma of endearments which (no, he hasn't noticed) came to a screeching halt some time ago.

...But now, suddenly, I do despise him, though I have no right or reason to do so. I despise him, not because of his sins against the wife, but because he doesn't *know*—taking his daily stroll under the poison Tree of Knowledge, too preoccupied with this or that to bother reaching up for the low-hanging, pulpy fruit.

Enough, or too much! The last facet of this zircon of a soul (as the wife might say) is that, being a fellow male, he's incapable of confessing his feelings to anyone.

Even as I write this, compassion and empathy

begin to creep back—weasels from beneath the
cocktail cabinet—affronts to the darker angels of my
nature.

upside-down shot glass
Lauren the barkeep—
He bought your next drink

SUN

Ships that collide in the night...Walk-ons taking the stage of “stolen moments”...

Her name was Kathy Ireland or Holland—one oft-occupied country or the other—the season was late summer, 1961. Not a particularly gorgeous girl, but she had the kind of tender openness I’ve always loved in women, especially those who (speaking of stages) faked what they didn’t actually possess.

Our timing couldn’t have been worse. I was just weeks away from schlepping a gray and yellow suitcase from Palo Alto up to UC Berkeley for my freshman year. On the other hand, we didn’t have time to discover each other—always a plus. Even better, as long as we remembered, lousy timing had made of us artists: poets spared the inconvenience of words; painters happily bereft of palette and brush.

But the best analogy I can conjure for our non-affair is two mobiles made of the thinnest, flimsiest paper.

Another plus: In cheating us, Eros compensated by de-creating the present, letting us pitch our youthful existences in the winking and blinking of eternity—stars and planets lined up the wrong way, of course.

On this silver-gray morning fifty years later it seems to me that, like dark matter or energy, the human universe is cross-stitched with these instances of *Almost*, voices in the winds of Purgatory, too

stricken with grief even to lie: *See you at Christmas.*

killer quake
in Montana—
the Berlin Wall—

Book II

Invisible Rivers

OCTOBER 1

In Teton Nursing Home across the mountains, my wife asks her 93-year-old father, “I know this is awkward, Daddy, but we have to know. When the time comes, would you prefer cremation or burial?”

“Neither.”

...After a night of freezing rain, a pair of wild turkeys—where did these poor guys spend the night?—make their rounds, looking up and down our driveway for something that isn’t there. A week ago a neighbor found one of their brothers or sisters ripped apart, feathers all over creation; probably a bear.

The lives of bears: stitched together with little murders: mothers kicking kids out of the den, showing better timing than their human counterparts: especially in contemporary America where so many young adults move back in.

Garry Trudeau [in *Doonesbury*]:

“Hi ‘rents! The real world didn’t work out; but hey, it happens.”

Woody Allen:

“I don’t mind the thought of my own death; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

...Last night, getting up to pee for the zillionth time, a thought brushes my mental cobwebs aside: *The universe is a computer programmed to solve a problem. The problem: us.*

Forgetting my glasses, padding to the window, I check out my share of the local heavens—a field of

white blossoms whose fragility stirs free-floating
compassion in me.

Illusory, of course—

star-gazing

stars

gazing

THE OPENING OF THE FIELD

Staggering to the finish line of age 70, I'm haunted once again by the shyness I suffered as a young man. Certainly my circumstances are different: I'm a grandfather, married 44 years, but there's a ghost resurrected within me that still wants to head in the opposite direction when a pretty female walks in the room.

As we grow older we know ourselves less and less. Imagine my surprise when, at the bar the other day, a girl plopped down on the stool next to me and I averted my gaze to the window, Baudelaire's voice bending my ear:

The clouds, the clouds—up there—the wonderful clouds!

For sure there's a grain of self-punishment in all this, as if one's own emotions were thieves in the night, and death has become—an embarrassment.

in the tamaracks—
hiding themselves
a doe and a buck

THIRD CUP OF COFFEE

Morning light slides down the Mission ridge, cold rocks and pine-groves turning the color of fool's gold.

The river running through Swan Lake is hidden from me, its shyness a mirror of my own.

Like the moon's dark side, this lake is a repository of all lost things: sunglasses, flip-flops, lifejackets, rings, hairclips, broken boat-props, and the dreams of an eight-year-old child who, because of a nasty rip-current, never grew up.

Now the light hesitates as if making up its mind what to do next. This leaves room for my fourth cup of coffee and a final thought:

God must wonder why some people adore solitude. Then again this is the same Deity who, in last night's dream, wrote an entry in the *Divine Dictionary*:

Adore, v. Don't know what it means. Neither do you.

cutting
the big sky down to size—
two osprey

TWO DREAMS

I

Everything's yellow—the sky, the clouds, the water I'm standing in ankle deep, the skin of beautiful Chinese girls naked from the waist up, caught in a frozen moment, as if I were a camera.

The dream, which I remember from an early age, inexplicably pops up now and again, not when I dream, but at times like this when I'm sitting here looking at the lake as my morning coffee percolates.

Everyone my age (I'll be 69 in August) tells me that their dreams are getting stranger and more numerous. Why? Maybe it's because as death draws closer, dreams begin to compensate for these diminishing waking hours, sensed by the barometer of the unconscious.

The Chinese girls remain still as still, small breasts gleaming in a whitish-yellow rain (I forgot to mention the rain); and for the first time since having this dream eons ago I notice that none of them is smiling.

They gaze past the cold lens of my dreaming, as if I'm not there at all.

taro patch
glints
of hidden water

II

Giant insects crawling up the perpendicular faces of skyscrapers—many years after it first invades my sleep, this dream knocks on the door.

Even then I wasn't particularly terrified, probably because I didn't know where I was in relation to the insects: watching through a window, floating in space a few feet away, I don't know or don't remember.

But here's a first: just this morning, as I sip my second cup of coffee, a grown-up voice chirps:

Suppose we were able to remember every second of every dream, good and bad, then add up these memories as a miser counts coins, one by one.

In the end, would we be staggered—humbled—by the sum? Quite the opposite; most likely we'd say, "Is that all there is? Is that all I get?"

...According to this logic, however, were we offered a dream of eternity in the form of a blank check, we'd refuse to cash it, for eternity isn't an extension of time—it's time's opposite.

in the window
shadows of pine-branches
...the other side of the pillow

TIGER

Golf is a metaphor for golf. It doesn't compare to anything else—never mind “mental” this or “concentration” that. If golf builds character it builds character (I almost said “characters”) for golf, period—for the next round, the next bad lie, the next chip shot out of the cabbage.

When (not if) golfers disagree, let them answer this: If for most people golf is an escape, how can it character-build for the world it seeks to escape from?

...Today at the bar, with the U.S. Open on TV, I subject a pine-knot on the wall to withering scrutiny, discovering that the best way to make a person, place, or thing disappear is to *keep gazing at it* to the exclusion of everything else: especially one's frowning face in the mirror above a Coors beer tap.

Barkeep with the remote—

Golf

or soccer?

TRANSPORT TO WINTER

"I feel. I shiver with fever. I'm I." Better than Descartes.

Things keep happening. Last night more rain, reminding me and my buddy the insomniac moon that this soggy June, Montana's rainiest month, is only half over.

...Two ugly dreams after midnight, both starring me as a bad guy—a really bad guy—who commits anonymous wrongs: very Kafkaesque.

Toward dawn Kafka himself takes center stage—

...Somehow I'm in Paris, for me the city of shaded light, because I never travel here in my waking life without feeling a sense of loss. I'm plunked down on the chilly Boulevard Magenta, experiencing what Baudelaire called the mysterious drunkenness of crowds.

Baudelaire's words come to me in dreams as I brush elbows with Berbers in red- and white-striped robes, pasty-faced Germans, Greeks, Spaniards, Russians, and Parisians throwing me the obligatory hard looks.

Darkness falls from the air; just ahead a dustcoat-clad figure ascends the steps of a subway stop, coughing and slowly walking toward me. In the half-light I recognize Kafka, who died twenty years before I was born. He stops, adjusting his bowler hat, coughs again—he'll soon be dead of TB—and says,

"If you see her before I do please tell her. . . ."

Voice trailing off, he commences staring at something over my shoulder.

*I turn to see the thing that isn't there; then he
murmurs, "God."*

When I turn back, he's vanished.

veils of rain

a funeral cortege—

the Sacre Coeur

LAKE WIND ADVISORY

Sturgeon and trout hitch rides up the current of Swan Lake's invisible river which dumps tons of cold water into much-larger Flathead.

As Melville's ghost would be the first to tell you, fish are the masculine thoughts of the lake; osprey, eagles, herons, and Canadian geese the feminine thoughts of the air.

What gender is human solitude? Excuse me? Baudelaire had the answer to that one:

*Be still, my solitude,
You longed for evening; it comes; it's here.
A gloomy atmosphere envelops the city,
Bringing peace to some, to others care.
Now, as the wretched mortal multitude,
Under the lash of Pleasure, that pitiless tormentor,
Pursues Remorse in their servile entertainments—
Give me your hand, my solitude, come away
Far from them. See the dead years in white robes
Leaning from the balconies of the sky,
And Regret, rising from deep waters, grinning.
...Hear, darling, the soft footfalls of night
Trailing off to the east like a long winding-sheet.*

Baudelaire was the poet of the modern city—but here, now, on a rainy June afternoon, watching a gyre of ospreys twirl down to the lake, Baudelaire becomes for me what he always was—universal.

jammed
to the gunwales—
party pontoon boat

7:05 A.M.

Fog and the west shore: a love affair you know is going to end and end soon.

Obedient to gravity, the lake seems obedient to something else: yesterday's mood which made its way through my dreams as through a jungle of thickets and shadows, staggering into a clearing bloody but unbowed, as the poet says.

A tad hung over, holding up this leftover mood to the light like a kaleidoscope, I'm happy to feel utter contempt for socio-biologists who tell us that love is a bubble of gas in the stomach.

too beautiful to skip
across the lake—
a jade-green stone

FOR V.K.

A morning of defeats...Eight poems rejected by the top-shelf British journal *A Hundred Gourds*, plus zero recognition by the New Zealand international haiku competition—not even a commendation.

Fine; keeps me honest. Besides, rejection doesn't affect my present mood—fed like an invalid through the straws of a) three cups of coffee and b) thoughts of Mr. Death, slouching toward Swan Lake to be born.

I'm sitting on the deck looking south. The Mission Mountains leapfrog over each other until the vanishing point where, thanks to a line squall that just passed through here, a rainbow is forming.

But—not to get drippy about it—it's the *distances* that seem sacred to me: not the pale purples of rain, not the playful mountains, not the abounding westward isles—certainly not the pot of fool's gold awaiting the rainbow.

sun behind a cloud
...opening her cedar chest
all that vanishes

HAND-PRINTS ON A WALL

Back in the day a movie made of the children's classic *The Secret Garden* was filmed in black and white—until the moment when three kids entered the garden and Technicolor kicked in.

My dreams can be like that, except in reverse: On rare occasions they play out in color, or seem to, only to dissolve in the chiaroscuro universe of an hour before dawn. Surprisingly, this has little to do with my moods—except for the twilight-zone moments following a particularly good or bad dream.

New cave-art has recently been discovered in Spain: 40,000 years old or older—maybe, some archaeologists feel, harking back to the Neanderthals:

Glancing up at a full moon, ragged clouds, and the torch-lit cave of starry sky, they move on. Chilly pinks of an African dawn are still an hour away. They pass by, looking right at me but of course not seeing me. Happening upon the carcass of a saber-toothed tiger, the leader stoops, picks up a bone, hefts it like a club, and continues on. Several other males do the same. So now they have weapons.

Walking more slowly than the others, a mother nuzzles her shivering baby. I'm moved, almost to tears.

...Breathing thick, unfamiliar night air, I'm also amazed at the size of the males' hairy thighs: these guys could probably bench-press 1000 pounds. Then a thought: when did we become fully human? After Cro-Magnons appeared among the Neanderthals? Or

when they, the inheritors, exterminated them?

dawn of music
soft winds,
grasses

BEFORE THE MEMORIAL SERVICE

Surprisingly, so many post-retirement tableaux (I hung up my teaching spikes seven years ago) threaten to become part of my heart. I'd been prepared to write them off as second-class substitutes for the persons in my former life who meant the most to me. But no—

To a certain sensibility—to most—this would seem an attractive proposition. Not to mine! It means that no line whatsoever exists between childhood and old age; that life is a watercolor, blurred to begin with, then left out in the rain.

But now, even as we speak, and just to spite me, a rainstorm sweeping across the lake vanishes mysteriously, revealing the clear sharpness of the Mission ridge horizon.

in the lake
green reflections
pines—no—birches—no—

MORNING NOCTURNE I

In the same way that stars deepen the dark (fish in water, without starlight how would we know what darkness is?), these poems serve only to bring oblivion out of the shadows.

Alms for oblivion...*Oh, knock it off*, hisses the ladybug on a blade of grass left over from last night's strange dream. But it's pretty hard not to think like this when platoons of rain march down the Mission foothills, one after another, robbing the pines, birches, larches and tamaracks of form and color.

lone fishing-boat—
grateful for rain—
angler-neighbor

ASK AND—

OK, OK, the world is a fiction dedicated to God, or His zillion surrogates.

I think of Bob, my father-in-law who died peacefully in his sleep last year, age 95. A teacher/rancher with a top-shelf intelligence, he had (was blessed with?) no metaphorical imagination whatsoever; he saw the world literally, A-Z.

My favorite story about Bob concerns a guy he'd met on a Tucson golf course who announced that he recently moved to the desert from Montana. "It's because I got the calling," he explained.

"Who called you?"

19th hole
bottom of the glass
the eternal drop

1954

For me, Berkeley was one of the cities of the red night.

Back in the fifties, visiting my grandparents in their “Berkeley box” home at 2111 Grant, I’d wake up at two or three a.m., pad to the window of my upstairs bedroom, and check out the westward sky, tintured russet by the lights of radio towers, streetlamps, even the red lights atop the distant Golden Gate Bridge.

Relatively benign in those days, now and then my dreams could have a bite and a growl, waking me up, sending me to the bathroom for a drink of water, then back to the westward window.

My great-grandfather Frank Paul Medina died in this house of what used to be called a heart seizure. The nitroglycerin pills my grandmother grabbed off the mantle and tossed to him were still in the air when he keeled over.

After that she fell utterly silent: silent at the funeral and the graveside ceremony, silent for nearly a year.

This was decades before Russian bombers, red stars on their wings, appeared in my dreams over the Bay Area to lay their nuclear eggs; before the age of mega-death, when the number of corpses in Hiroshima and Nagasaki dragged Magnitude kicking and screaming into our consciousness, making us forget, at least for a moment, things like Frank Paul Medina’s cry, “My pills!” as they flew through the air.

in the window
a soft blonde radiance
...the smell of bacon

SCENT OF CHRYSANTHEMUMS

There's poetry in getting lost.

I've written before of the childhood day I climbed Mt. Tam in Marin County, losing my way until a friendly stream led me back to Mill Valley and safety.

What never happened, what never will happen, is also a kind of lost. I've never been to Japan—though I'm an avid student of Japanese short-form poetry and Zen philosophy—but one night, unable to sleep, I stumbled out of bed and wrote the following:

The Zen Master related this parable:

Not long ago I had a dream of my own disembodied shadow taking its morning exercise, huffing and puffing in solemn foolery up and down the hills west of Sendai, to be greeted as always by masters and students tending their gardens.

Where was I?

green melons—
behind a cloud
early morning sun

ECHO

There are no questions here, only answers.

Who in the world said that? Irritated and grumpy
I rub my eyes, trying to follow the Ariadne's thread of
my dreams backward, into the torch-lit cave I just
emerged from.

No dice—it won't work.

So here I am, here we are, stranded like whales on
the shores of questioning which, according to my
dream, look out on the indefatigable, imperturbable,
irascible, everyday *It*.

wet sand—

preening in the mirror
a one-legged seagull

ORANGE SAIL ON THE LAKE

Strange, this quickening of fall in the sky, since nothing has really changed from yesterday and the day before—summer brims with warmth, clear skies, and a carnival of colors on the lake.

But something's definitely different.

Let questioning rest, Baudelaire admonishes. But I can't stop interrogating the vague slumber of late afternoon, making me think of a mysterious church bell tolling from a point in the air—*There*, someone says, pointing southwest to where the Mission Mountains vanish; *There*, someone else nods toward the "Chinese Wall" twenty miles east of here; *There...*

...Flipping a calendar page, I do let questioning rest—because it's Sunday.

still on a blade of grass
one ladybug
...our departing shadows

MORNING NOCTURNE II

All the world-lines—destinies—spinning from
this moment's brief assignation: filaments of a
cobweb.

"This moment" = fifty years ago, when we each
took the road less travelled by only ourselves: you
willingly, I grudgingly.

Parallel universes, surely: but with a common
silken thread linking them:

"I call it death-in-life and life-in-death."

vanishing point—
rhyming sound
of a fountain

SARTOR RESARTUS

There's something chaste about today's mid-morning lake.

No boat traffic at present, but that's not it: I've had this impression on holidays, when Swan swarms with boat-craft doing their thing. No, Swan keeps its own counsel, confiding only in the hidden Swan River flowing through south to north.

There I go, anthropomorphizing again!

...As if to compensate, when boaters do show up late in the afternoon, they—even water-skiers—seem wooden, mannequin-like: too perfect to be human.

They put me in mind of their cousins placed strategically next to mirrors in clothing stores, so that shoppers will seem dowdy and imperfect.

Better buy some new clothes!

sun behind Crane Mountain

sun

behind my eyelids

NEW MOON

Where are the snows of yesteryear?

Melted, damn it.

For “snow” read snippets infinite:

The false laughter of barmaids at McGraw’s Cantina down in Tucson and the Swan Bar up here; my journal a fiancée sneaked into 50 years ago, bringing it to me in tears (I talked myself out of it, thus nominating myself for the Nobel Prize in Bullshitting, a distinction unrivalled until Barack Obama reeled in the Peace Prize 40 years later).

How’s this for a scenario:

When we die, we’re taken on a grand tour of three vacation spas:

1. The spa of All Lost Things.
2. The spa of All Forgotten Words, Caresses, etc.
3. The spa of an aphorist’s unforgettable words:

What I receive from you is not what you gave me.

1966

hanging up—discovering
I have a drink in my hand

AFTER DREAMING

Hail.

I never saw telltale white streaks in the dark clouds, but they must've been there—probably tucked behind Crane Mountain.

Everything up here turns its face from me, even the day moon, with no starry fays for company.

Everything's alone—the branch where an eagle perched a few moments ago, still rocking; ripples, never quite touching each other as they move shoreward— lemmings toward a cliff; iridescent hummingbirds ignoring each other as they buzz our empty sugar-water jars: pylons in an air race; a hornet's nest beneath the garage eaves, empty two seasons now; wind, God's hand for the Lakota Sioux, shaping mountains, waves on Swan, shadows of pines and tamaracks—everything but the wind itself; and the eternal triangle of my mother and father and her lover (killed ten years before my parents met—she confessed to me she loved him most of all.)

unchanged in a blue bowl
all winter—
plastic roses

MORNING NOCTURNE III

Bruised by cloud-shadows—it's the longest day of the year—today Swan flows from north to south thanks to a freakish breeze off big brother Flathead.

What of the river? Defying wind-currents and shadows, it persists on its northward trek, shouldering an empty canoe that somehow escaped its owner.

Cottonwood cotton floats on the lake, hoodwinking sturgeon and trout rising to it then, no doubt embarrassed, resuming their pilgrim's progress to Flathead. A couple of mountain ranges over, the ghost of glacial Lake Missoula forms ice dams which break, form again and break at 10,000-year intervals, sending 300-foot walls of water at a 70 mph clip across eastern Washington toward the Pacific.

I imagine an Athapascan Indian casting his fishing nets in what's now the Willamette, hearing a distant roar and looking up to see the fresh-water tsunami, crowning between two mountain peaks, studded with jewels of boulders and trees glittering in the sun, coming imperceptibly closer.

What could he do as its shadow pounced on him but face it, raise his arms and chant a shaman song he might've learned as a boy?

What would I have done?

ghosts—

the People's Republic of Purgatory—

...or current occupant

REQUIEM

Freezing fog this a.m.; the lake totally soaked in.

Like Michelangelo's sculpture in the stone, Swan is a block of marble—that's how solid and unyielding the fog seems—

It wants to thirst me, as Lewis and Clark might've written.

The view westward: so white it makes me squint.

Naturally and perversely I think of Melville's disquisition on whiteness in *Moby Dick*, calling it the all-consuming, colorless color of atheism.

Last night's lightning and thunder reminded me that the universe is alive, but I admit that this cottony void is preferable.

Not comforting, but...Hold the phone...A boat! The soft purr of a trawling motor...

I'm drawn to it too, as if the fog were a white-hot flame, as if even moths (as my mother would've said) are God's creations.

moonset

lupine by the lake—

swan song

UN-BROTHERLY

As I trudge up our puddled frontage road to the mailbox, my footprints of yesterday and the day before strangely depress me. All sorts of conventional reasons for this I suppose, but here's a new one:

They're *my* footprints; *I* left them behind—a Kilroy of the soul writ on water.

Fortunately, this egoistical romp is interrupted by a raven in the tamaracks cawing for its mate. . . .But who could love a raven?

E. A. Poe, yes: for whom the universe seemed so loveless (“*God, my God, have mercy on my poor soul!*”), as if he were dying in Philadelphia not Baltimore.

60's radio—

Jim Morrison—

This is the end

BEFORE THE DELUGE

Half an hour after dawn: two bands of light on the foothills: pale gold and the dark green of trees exhaling shadows.

I'm reminded of the European custom of painting interiors two colors, one of which, sometimes both, is usually hideous. Thousands of apartment-buildings, hotels, boarding houses and restaurants are painted this way.

Nothing hideous about today's light and shadow—ominous, that's another thing. A kind of Armageddon is going down, constituted entirely of photons, a dress rehearsal for the real thing.

...Now, on my third cup of coffee, it occurs to me that if the real thing truly were to occur, Good will win only by not showing up.

Forty minutes later: Light has squeezed shadow down onto the west shore, then into Swan, where it flows toward me, a *tsunami* in slow motion.

still
iridescent
a dead hummingbird

DAWN COMES UP LIKE—

Less than a week till the 4th of July: a loathsome holiday for me. Nothing to do with the occasion per se—it's the noise: fireworks, bottle rockets and M-90s triggering a severe startle response, one of the crueler jewels in the crown of PTSD.

I remember dreading having to walk past our local firehouse when I was a kid, petrified that the siren would go off just as I passed by.

I jump when the phone rings or a drawer slams shut, which doesn't make me the easiest guy to live with. On the other hand, this disorder within a disorder has made of me a sophisticated connoisseur of silences—the chilly lake-surface muffled by scarves of light just after sunrise; the forest as a wind-storm peters out and dies; the wake of a raven's cry, darker and certainly more palatable than the raven itself.

And (as I've written before) the cosmos packed with stars and galaxies blowing up in silence just to whisper something to us.

on a blade of grass—
a dragonfly
...footfalls of our shadows

LOG ON THE RIVER

I wake up thinking of the last moments of HAL, the rogue computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*— the scene when astronaut Dave Bowman disconnects one malfunctioning circuit at a time while HAL's voice becomes blurrier and blurrier—"I can feel it...I can feel it..."

The well of my affections is drying up. Part of that is egotism—the natural egotism of late middle age, so redolent of very young children. With every flip of a calendar page my cohorts and I wander deeper into a wilderness of mirrors.

Naturally the lake seems indifferent as we speak: indifferent to its own colors— dark greens and gray splotches made by fog-shadows; indifferent also to its own calmness, waiting patiently for something to happen.

It's this calmness, this imperturbable patience, that I find particularly maddening.

deep, deeper—
ravens in the woods
the other way from here

TRANSPORT TO AUTUMN

Thumping the invisible westward window, an unfortunate hummer interrupts my thoughts which, interestingly, were 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 is no "like": it is what it is.

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.

pine branches—
windy moon in the window—
tap

GRAY MOON

Birdsong (just a run-of-the-mill robin) floats like a balsa raft on a river of thunderclaps and howling wind.

Last night's thunderstorm fizzled; today's has loftier ambitions. The Weather Channel informs me that a Florida town called Panacea received more than twenty inches of rain in 24 hours...Panacea! *That's* where I want to move (crash of thunder; the birdsong ceases) when, after relocating in last night's dream to Hope, Arkansas, I abandoned all you-know-what.

shadows—
invisible
flowers

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

Ghosts of the living...

Back in the day—during the Punic Wars—I fell in love with a character of light appearing just before sunset.

Pale gray with pale greenish tints—so pale, I wondered if they were really there at all.

Done with dreaming, I sit up, rub my eyes, and peek through the blinds to see if Crane Mountain is still standing. Then I look for the color. Not there, of course. Oh, well, it's the wrong time of day, I'm a second or three too late, the weather's changing, etc.

Suddenly, the thunderclap of a notion—two notions—rattling, like a gourd, what's left of my poor brain:

In order to belong to the waking world you must be a stranger.

And:

Only poems which famish fill us up.

power outage
free to imagine
the glass cat yawning

STILL LIFE

The Artist has cleverly concealed a palpable prayer in this grove of trees. Can you find it?

So what constitutes a palpable prayer? A tamarack: genuflecting over the warm shallows of Swan's east shore? This birch-branch: still trembling from a) a gust of wind or b) a raven, AWOL, checking out the highway for road-kill? This stand of fireweed—or is it Indian paint brush?—appearing furtive, even contrite in the blue shadow of a jack-pine?

Out of sight, out of mind—these trees, flowers, and shadows. As Plato would be the first to tell you, we too are shadows...As for me, I'm flat-out embarrassed to pray for forgiveness, knowing that such embarrassment, too, is a sin.

Wind springs up in the forest, hurtling toward our "bower" and the larger grove of surrounding trees: some of them dead or dying.

gray on gray—
snow geese above the ridge
disintegrating V

A MEMORABLE FANCY

Dark yellows of the lake-ripples, tails of a Chinese kite...

Last night's power outage—a chance to indulge my imagination: that the green glass cat on the mantle is yawning; that a cruel moon will go down a few moments after rising, depriving me of light to think by—good!

More rain today—without thunder this time—an ambassador without portfolio from the “Chinese Wall” east of here.

Before starting my day I grab a moment to simply gaze at a bowl of peaches on the window-sill, each peach casting its own small shadow—a perfect emblem, as a medieval doctor would say, of the human condition.

Peaches and penumbras—

twins in the ripples
your tired smile
shadow of a cloud

SEA OF TRANQUILITY

Strange hazy light suffuses the middle distance between my coffee cup blotting out a day moon and the Mission ridge.

An hour later: a subtle transformation, stranger still: the light a greenish-blue, the day moon no longer around; as for the sky—it seems emptied of everything, even emptiness itself—the emptiness I feel when I glance enviously at the technology-addicted, soulless denizens of Generation Z... Suddenly discovering that I don't really envy them after all!

Or is my lack of envy one of Death's hungry emissaries, nibbling me like a snack?

Don't spoil your appetite.

60's radio—

*Welcome to the graveyard
of moldy oldies*

SURROGATE

Like HAL's in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, my memory-circuits are starting to fizzle, one by one.

This afternoon's lucid day-moon, step-sister of Mnemosyne: partly obscured by virga—rain that doesn't reach the ground.

Forget the rainbow. Virga—now *there's* a covenant!

It persists in the western sky even after I tire of gazing and go inside for a refill.

Typically, what I do remember is something that didn't happen to me. When my wife was in first grade, she showed up the first day of school, shy and terrified, standing alone and trembling on the playground until a boy named Ricky approached her.

One six-year-old to another:

"Don't be afraid, Neecee," Ricky said.

lost keys

same song

different meadowlark

INVENTORY

In this order:

Gray (the sky); chartreuse (a narrow band of morning light atop the Missions); dark green (trees up and down the foothills); white (puff-balls of fog floating between the lake and the Mission ridge); gray again—battleship gray—Swan Lake under a semi-overcast sky.

The world this Sunday a.m. is an appetite, I a morsel, destined to famish or be famished, as the ruddy sun staggers—Red Skelton playing a drunk—through the clouds toward noon.

Oops!—new colors—half a rainbow launching itself above the fog, not so much unfinished as abandoned: the work of a painter who wisely knows when to walk away from the palette.

song of a hummer
for us and
not for us

DOMINOES

We were blind dates. Instantly taking a liking to each other, we went to the beach, roasted hot dogs, popped a few beers, got half in the bag—and said nothing.

The stars came out and, masochistically, I paraphrased Juliet's, "I will put my lover in the sky, and cut him out in little stars..."

Staring miserably out to sea, our hands close but not touching, both of us had revealed that a week or so earlier, each had been unceremoniously dumped by a significant other. (By the way, never believe that stuff about misery loving company!).

Now, on this nearly deserted beach on Coronado Island—deserted except for another couple fifty or so yards from us—she suddenly points upward,

"Is that Cygnus?"

"...The '54 Hudson," I say.

"Is that Orion?"

"The chromium dinette set."

"Sagittarius?"

"Sonny and Cher."

She smiles for the first time.

"Is that—"

turning to the next dune—
he touches her hair
she turns to the wind

HYMN

Another season in the book; the lupine are long gone, the mountain daisies, asters, even dandelions which popped up overnight, disappearing just as quickly.

How many summers left? I'll turn 69 next week. In truth, never thought I'd make it this far, my parents having died young, ditto both grandfathers leaving their own illegible signatures in my DNA which reads like a mystery novel.

Last night I had a strange—even for me—dream of a light across the lake, orange, not dark gold like my neighbor's on the west shore. Actually the light seemed to be on the lake, moving toward me, then away, toward then away. Equally mysteriously, the waves' black music was stilled, to be replaced with the faint ringing of a bell—but from where?

Still dreaming, I went outside in a rising south wind (I saw pine-branches playing catch with Sirius, Altair, and Alpha Centauri), trying to find the bell's source; but that was impossible. This point in the air, that point—it seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere. This struck me as profoundly sorrowful, as if the ringing were a cross, and all the world's dreamers, except for me, were crucified on it.

extra blankets
four a.m.—
something thumps the house

Book III

Interiors

LUBLIN, POLAND

The night twists: among its braids of sound, tires on wet streets; dogs barking three blocks over; the phone ringing next door; bang-bangs of a rusty gate in the wind.

Yes, *in dreams begin responsibilities*: but—damn it—responsibilities beget troubled dreams, at least for me. Never mind. Once, when I was definitely alive, a beautiful dark-haired Eastern European girl asked me, “Why are you so rare?”

That, Dante’s Beatrice be praised, is enough.

behind my eyelids
dreams of sleeplessness
Balkan moon

WINTER DREAMS

In Montana the wind is a living thing, its hands shaping all—timothy grass, lupine, mountain-ash trees, even the Sweet Grass hills—all but the wind.

I'm a stranger, even as Lewis and Clark were strangers—yes, even Sacajawea: all living things, or so it seems this bent morning when mist *is* the mountain and colors *are* the lake

This lake with only one name—although, thanks to color and wind, there're many Swan Lakes, every hour of every day.

dragonflies in love
death-rattle
of a chain saw

BETROTHAL

This morning, on Swan Lake's west shore, an orange and black beach umbrella keeps vigil over the vigil of a green light on the end of somebody's dock. Ever since teaching *The Great Gatsby* a zillion times, I can't look at a green light at the end of a dock or anywhere else without thinking of betrayal.

My closer neighbors—pileated woodpeckers, ravens, eider ducks, hummingbirds—leave astonishment to the human universe, to me in particular. I sip coffee, munch a breakfast bar, and watch tinselly bands of light surf the ripples.

...Now, as a caravansary of colors packs up and leaves the lake, veils of rain float down the clear-cut Mission Mountain foothills, making the day moon seem shy: a bride, not of quietness, but contemplation.

pull
of a yellow sail—
season's end's beginning

CLAUSTROPHOBIA

A heart's spelunker, or cave explorer, I'm interested
in purple echoes of love poems bouncing off
stalagmites—you know: the ones that point upward,
to heaven.

Or is it the reverse? I forget, not being a stalagmite.

once upon an abyss
smiles
a portable typewriter

PARALLEL UNIVERSE

This just in: We're all born with Alzheimer's disease of the soul. Naturally we forget ante-natal picnics with or without ants; cirrus skies; seedpods, twigs, and dead leaves over the falls; grayish yellows of dawn and twilight (how interchangeable these times of day so often are!)

In a former life were there days when heart attacks brought someone's genes to a screeching halt? Were we becalmed on endless afternoons of torpor, or what I've called the horse latitudes of the soul?

Even human children know such moments; I know I did.

...I remember a character in a modern play—did her voice echo down the rugged canyons of a former life?

She said:

No, I don't wish to be happy, and yes, I do wish to be happy.

pick up a stone—
all
that disappears

SUBURB OF A SUBURB

The other day someone asked me if I had an imaginary friend as a child. Hardly! The truth, rotten or otherwise, is that *I* was an imaginary friend. My cloak of invisibility accompanied me wherever I went—up the street to Tony's house; to Alto School where I irritated my poor teachers by constantly waving my hand in the air; on solitary hikes in the Marin hills.

Amidst swatches of lupine, poppies, and yellow fennel, I watched my shadow drink from a canteen, bend over to tie its shoes, plop down in the grass and gaze northward at the orange towers of the Golden Gate Bridge.

My father's funeral in Mill Valley...The night 90-mile-an-hour winds closed the Bridge...The death of a neighbor child named Robin who contracted polio in summer 1952... I remember these things, but is it really I who remembers them?

One or two mornings after I found my father's body, my mother and grandmother entered the small room I slept in, my mother crying. The kids' program Big John and Sparky was on the radio, and I turned the volume down.

My mother said,

"Steven, you're the man of the family now."

If she'd said, "We're going to wallpaper your room," my disinterested reaction would've been the same. As usual, my feeling was that she was talking to

someone else.

Mt. Tam in the window

westward

a sound of invisible waves

EAGLE ON A BRANCH

“My habits are of solitude, not of men.”

I don't remember who said that—not that it matters.

Today my senses have gone awry, the sunrise consisting of a symphony of colors—percussive bright oranges; a cello section of blacks and grays; the chiming of a triangle, flooding the northeast sky with bluish-pinks.

I murmur a few words—then cool it, afraid that the Conductor will glance over his shoulder, place finger to lips, and hush me forever.

tumbling down
Mission ridge—
pale light and shadow

THEORY

Where is the shore? Better question: *What* is the shore?

Does it recede from you or you from it? Guess what? Einstein—who knew?—was a love-philosopher, not simply the physicist of relativity. Not that I'm clueless about where curved space begins: with the wonderful breasts of V.K., so many light-years ago, delicately carved out of space by the sun's corona.

Yes, a physics of passion—bereft of calculus, of course—possessing the strangeness, color, and charm of quarks which shared our kisses.

pagan loves
brimming night-sky
warmth of a cave

DISTANCES OF SLEEP

I dig the family photograph from a water-stained box crammed into a corner of the attic. Failing to recognize anyone, all I have to go on is my grandmother's signature on the back, the year (1925) and the place (Berkeley, California).

Who are these strangers, almost certainly sharing my DNA, no matter how tenuously (I almost said "trivially")? I feel the gravitational pull of one girl in particular—very pretty, her face half in shadow, a tennis racket perched jauntily on her shoulder.

7,000 miles from the scene in this yellowing, wrinkled photo, Hitler hatches his plots in the beer garden; Otto Frank, soon to be the father of two daughters, Margot and Anne, heads off to work in Frankfurt; Ernest Hemingway pens the last words—"Isn't it pretty to think so?"—of *The Sun Also Rises*.

And this girl continues to gaze past the camera's cold lens, not at the photographer and not at me.

And the curve of her cheek, the aureole of long-ago sun framing her hair, the mischievous gleam in her wide eyes—were they blue?

Isn't it pretty to think so.

wind-shadows on the Bay

rare

onshore flow

SPECTRUM

Forbidden colors. . . Eyes: gray-blue; hair: blonde; lips: pinkish-red with or without lipstick. And the little things: slits of her toes in flats, out of style for decades until now; her sidelong pickerel smile as she giggles at toddlers in the park imitating heads of pigeons bob-bobbing.

Memory: a Napoleonic army marshaling its forces against me: flag-bearers (staunch in the ranks of death) always the first to fall—shot from behind, naturally!

All colors fade save the colors of desire—at once the comforter I pull up to my shoulders and the Antarctic loneliness it protects me from, deepening as night deepens, syncopated to the black rhythms of waves on the lake.

disintegrating V—
Canadian geese
a feeling of not belonging

SWAN BAR

Ah! That shameful and shameless pleasure that I might constitute the low point of his day—the grizzled dude who shows up at 2:00 p.m. sharp every day. What is it about him—about me—that prompts a frenzied need to mentally sketch him in charcoal as a bad guy?

I heap upon his poor shoulders the hyena's share of my resentments, dead leaves of self-loathing, even pleasures: to my current sensibility what shortness of breath is to the invalid.

From the corner of my eye I watch him watch me pour a glass of Red Diamond chardonnay from the bottle snuggled in a stainless steel bucket. And his voice down the bar, scraping silence—sandpaper on sandpaper...

Let's face the absurdity: He and I are brothers, swaddled in lies: lies our mothers believed about us before we were born, lies the pastor will tell about us at our funerals.

beer and a shot
...Dante's
brotherhood of men

L-SHAPED ROOM

When I was a Fulbright scholar living in Poland in 1991, I routinely dreamt of the Greek islands. There they were, floating in the ice-blue Aegean (even my dreams were tintured illogically by the temperatures of an early Polish winter!), ruined temples whispering bittersweet nothings to the wind.

I knew I wouldn't travel to the blessed isles of my imagination anytime soon, but so what? Sleeping on a brown fold-out couch in my dingy studio apartment, I populated the tiny living space with beautiful Greek girls, the honey of generations long gone who—like girls of today, I suppose—mostly remember the words, not the caresses, of boyfriends.

Ah, but what if their lovers were girls, as on Lesbos and many other places? Well, we know from Sappho that there was an abundance of caresses too—in memory, I mean—haunting the aging poet, who may have sailed the seas to Syracuse in search of more poems and loves.

If there's an afterlife, will it too be haunted by memories of words, loves—gray dawns east of Delos? It's pretty clear that my brain, as Baudelaire would've said, has become, at least for now, a witch's mirror.

candles and shadows
ancient breezes
All Soul's Eve

SUNDAY MORNING

*When the first band of morning sun reaches the
geraniums, the world will end.*

This thought weighs on me like a cloud:
apparently insubstantial, but lugging tons of cold rain
from horizon to horizon. What is it in my mental
cloudscapes that point the compass of my being in
such directions? Of course the world won't end with a
kiss of sunlight; and yet, and yet. . . .

Beyond the deck where the potted flowers bide
their time, each lake-ripple is a reverie—quite
decipherable—a shimmering mirror of my own
sodden thoughts.

But hold on, that can't be right—the ripples are
beautiful, green from afar, colorless up close...

Suddenly and mysteriously tiresome, they whisper
a bland reminder: *Mirrors reflect and reverse.*

blur
of a bluebird or
sky tossed by branches

THREE A.M.

Every shot in the dark misses its mark, every will
'o the wisp pinned to the target slips through my
fingers: until, in an infinite process of elimination, I
empty my twin quivers of the Known and the
Unknown.

I know, therefore I am not.

absences—

the leaf-cutter ant's

perfect *O*

TRUE WEST

“Are you happy?”—the least meaningful of all questions: an insult, in fact, to those who aren’t happy. At best the questioner will get a kind of sullen satisfaction, no matter what the response—envy and resentment at “Yes,” superiority, even smugness, at “No.”

This morning, as I watch the lake turn gray in a light drizzle, comes the feeling—no, conviction—that happiness is simply the purest distillate of the presence of absence: a door to another dimension as physicists like to say.

Physicists: who refuse to admit, especially to themselves, that the door is eternally locked—and had better be.

westward
playing leapfrog
the Mission Mountains

RANDOM HOUSE

Bill Haley's spit curl...

But this foggy afternoon I don't feel like playing the game of summing up a decade, in this case the 50's, by a single object or image. Why? I'm starving—the lake starves me for more fog...Hours ago I listened to rain on the deck and the roof, its clack-clack-clack sounding like a distant train heading the other way from here.

A few nights back, feeling oddly bereft of most things, even memory, I walked outside, shivering, the house rising inscrutably behind me. Searching the sky for Altair and failing to pinpoint it, I suddenly felt there must be an error, a glitch in the grammar of the Milky Way galaxy.

On the other hand, our poor sun, a middling G-type star: always on time, always there, always grammatical!

Dull silver fog forms again at Swan Lake's north end, sullenly drifting southward, toward me.

For a moment, just a moment, I'll knock off all feeling and thinking.

snow on Mt. Aeneas
spring crocuses
hoodwinked again

POLYMATH

The zero sum of our existence shall be calculated thus: How many times Love—characterized in The Phaedrus as a beggar—makes cold calls at your door: and, busy texting, changing the cat litter, or paying the bills, you send him or her on their merry way.

...I wake up, my right hand trembling as usual. O Western Wind, when wilt thou blow, the small rain down can rain? In fact it is raining in the birch woods north of the house. Christ that my love be in my arms, and I in my bed again.

Dozing again, I think of my favorite pun—the heart and the hart: a deer leaping through green rain on the lakeshore: hunters, including me, hot on its trail.

Another day.

broken glass
gleams of
soft starlight

EQUINOX

I got out of bed this a.m. with the usual cheerful feeling of exile from a city—heavenly city, earthly city, who cares?—I don't remember. (At least Ovid, rubbing elbows with barbarians near the Black Sea, remembered the pines of Rome).

Why cheerful? I imagine it's because I'm free to invent streets, houses—tilting strangely like Chagall's—voices, the clang of streetcars, rasping cries of lottery hawkers, gypsies, cobblestones bruising my feet.

Byron called Venice a fairy city of the heart. I wonder if, dying and delirious with swamp fever in Greece, the stones of Venice seemed to him to melt so that it too became, not unreal like Eliot's London, but non-existent—no way the same thing.

...No Hollywood amethyst towers in my city, just a fine translucent mist falling everywhere; no sun, no moon, the sky punctuated by stars: a poem pleasantly indecipherable.

So: all praise to the gods, hand-me-downs or otherwise, architects of impossibility!

cathedrals
of no faith—
ripples of laughter

CUP HALF FULL

How's this for a conjugation?

I love; you love; we love; no one loves.

I'm in love with the name of a street in Lisbon—
Rua dos Douradores—the laughter and hubbub of its
crowds syncopated to the tinny music of a Portuguese
twilight. Lovers cling to each other in the alley-
shadows of an abandoned movie theater where
Charlie Chaplin once did his thing.

Escorted by my shadow down this bleeding aorta
of a city (very much like San Francisco), I indulge in
what the Greeks called agape, feeling deep compassion
for strangers walking ahead of me—too easy, I know:
a substitute, I'm forced to admit, for the real thing.

Perversely, tragically—if that's not too highfalutin
a word—it's the real thing which makes of my
conjugation, not a necessary evil as you might think,
but a necessary good: part of us yet not part of us.

Phantom limbs, phantom kisses.

unsure

which way to go

ships crowd the harbor

GOLDEN GATE GRAVEYARD OF MOLDY OLDIES

Scary—how the music of our youth dates itself. I was about to say “us,” but that’s untrue; what the music speaks to in us is always—eternally?—the same, even as we’ve outgrown everything else, including the books, movies, and paintings we enjoyed once upon a time.

If it is true that everything aspires to the condition of music, I wonder if music itself aspires to the condition of what *almost* comes through when, for example, listening to *The Art of the Fugue* we hear Bach’s fury that he can’t shatter the glass ceiling of his own music.

Fifty years ago I wrote an atrocious short story about an old man who spends his final moments on a hilltop listening to music. Actually, the music part wasn’t so terrible—wouldn’t it be cool if, especially with today’s technology, one might ride into the hereafter on the coattails of *Bolero* or *The Fountains of Rome*?

Cf. St. Peter to Americans born after 1980:

“Listen up: What kind of music do you want to hear on a celestial jukebox near you?”

“... ”

“Cue the trap door.”

Gene Price—forgotten
immortal
Bay Area DJ

COLD FRONT

Last night, as a Pacific storm ranted outside, two more or less uninspired notions: 1) Heaven = where, when we hear what we want to hear, we stop listening; 2) Heaven = where we could care less that people pretend to listen to us.

Sounds of rain: words murmured in the dark by lunatics talking to themselves in a Quiet Room, leaving me no choice but to lie there and listen. Even dreams of sleeplessness leave me no choice whatsoever.

As dawn fills the window, the madness dissolves into a kind of benign, loving melancholy.

3rd cup of coffee—
still dreaming
a golden eagle

SNOWMELT

Bread cast on the waters becomes moldy quickest; that's why—perversely, as usual—I wouldn't be heartbroken if all of my writings were lost. Bewildered, yes; unhappy, yes; angry, yes of course; but. . . .

There's an unreal quality in having found my voice, or voices, in life's seventh decade. Anyway, what would I be if I weren't a late-blooming poet? A water-gazer, a connoisseur of stars and christener of new constellations, a gigolo pretending to be in love with the promiscuity of clouds: in short, utterly worthless.

snowmelt
dark earth
darkness between stars

NEXT STOP

It's been so long since I've taken the train I forget the tedium and boredom accruing, a kind of anti-interest, with each passing town. As if it has a tapeworm, the train north from Bakersfield gobbles up the miles, producing more hunger with every bite.

I sit in the bar car, sipping vodka tonics, chewing one then two cheeseburgers, watching the San Joaquin Valley unspool out the window—the dreary Central Valley, breadbasket to a world starving for more than food.

For some reason the train comes to a stop for in the middle of a cotton field, power off to everything, so that the bar car becomes rapidly warmer. This puts me in a reverie, tinted yellow in memory like an old photograph. The “photo” is of Kay, long-ago girlfriend who lived in Hanford, one of the many stops on my present journey. Back in the day I'd visited her half a dozen times from Berkeley. Her mother, I recall, had little or no time for me, and I sensed even then that Kay would go on to channel the mom after marriage—not to me, thank Zeus.

Suspended, a dragonfly in amber, between the bittersweet worlds of then and now, naturally I wonder what's happened to Kay during the forty-plus years since I saw her last, frowning but waving to me from the platform.

...To everyone else in the bar car, of course, I'm merely a cipher mired in the terrible here and now,

while ice for our drinks slowly melts in the cooler.

lone contrail
steeply banking westward
a Continental 737

NECESSITY

Kids serious about play, adults playing at being serious: to my mind, one measure of the distance we've come since being kicked out of Paradise.

Simone Weil writes about the playful beauty of waves being dependent on the deaths of sailors who pray for the waves to smooth out and spare them.

But let's imagine sailors whose prayers are answered: back on dry land, grateful for being given power over the waves; and yet...

Like children contemptuous of parents who grant their every wish: sailors, too, contemptuous that the tumultuous seas let them play God.

pointing heavenward—
the legs of Brueghel's Icarus
the ships sail on

SAMOS

Pain is the basis of life.

—Sophocles

Know thyself. Yes, but which one?

...In a former life I'm sitting on the rocky shore of a Greek island as my girlfriend, Rosy-Fingered Dawn, pops grapes into my mouth. Far out to sea an orange sail—the ship of Telemachus, no doubt, setting out to look for his father.

A gray moon sails above the Western Approaches, where Odysseus and his crew disappeared years ago. Munching grapes, for my part I'm uncharacteristically content to put the search for my own father on hold for a while.

Who am I—the eternal question. Better question: Who am I not? Answer: Who or what I love, if I love.

On cue, Rosy-Fingered Dawn stops with the grapes and whispers a snippet of Greek wisdom in my ear:

The truth hurts, not because of any intrinsic power to do so, but because the illusions it replaces don't hurt enough.

high winds from Delos
girls' voices—

Too late, too late