

Mornings
. . . After

Selected Poems
1975-1995

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Preface

Between the mid-70s and the mid-90s I wrote a few hundred poems. About 25 of them were published in small magazines. I assembled and re-assembled all kinds of combinations of them into many different "books" and "chapbooks" over many years, none of which found a willing publisher. Then I stopped, not just the sending out but the writing, for a set of very good reasons I detail in my book *Re-reading Poets*. I compile here many of my personal favorites from that earlier era of my creative life.

Quite out of the blue, after a 20-year hiatus, I started writing poems again in the fall of 2016, all of those ebooks now on my amazon.com author's page. I am, in retrospect, delighted with all of it, the poems I wrote early, sampled here, the full stop for 20 years, and the sudden re-start. I hope you'll find something here to be delighted with as well.

Morning Song 1

This morning
many small angels gathered
on my window as if
they might stay
all day to pray or
picnic there, happily
for no reason in particular.

When they moved their luminous
heads, splinters of daylight streaked
all across my room.
After a while they filed
quietly upward and
out of my sight.

I leaned back more solidly
in my chair and smiled, thinking:
they have nothing
whatever to do with
the day I am
about to waste now.

On my way to work a passerby
glanced at me a second
time thinking: that man
must have seen angels on
his window this morning,
while I slept.

Morning Song 2

This morning
a herd of elephants
stampeded through the trees.
For no particular reason except
it is November now
and there is nothing
left to wait for.

I dressed hurriedly
and stepped out into
the thick, gray
flesh of Thursday, thinking:
sometimes it is hard
to know what
to love
and when.

Then I remembered
the elephants who love
everything even
Thursday and November
and I kicked my way to work
through the beautiful
wreckage of leaves.

Morning Song 3

This morning
I woke to
a roomful of azaleas,
thousands of them, clouds
of flowers blooming ferociously,
more gorgeous than I
could ever hope to afford,
enough lush color to crowd out
even my loudest dreams.

I lolled for a while
in a haze of fragrances too
hothouse sweet to breathe.
Then I hacked my way
to the stairs thinking:
sometimes you cannot trust
anything to be
only reasonably beautiful.

On my way to work I saw nothing
except the fog of my hot
breath catching itself like
cotton on the frost-
sharp air and I thought
of all I had meant
to say that day about
my being beautiful
and wouldn't now because of
those damn azaleas.

Morning Song 4

This morning
all the bluebirds I ever knew
(and that's a lot of them)
stopped by my place just
to sit around and sing.

I couldn't figure it.
I was no place they should be.
But they were there. Not just
like I remembered it.
Like for real.

Pretty soon it was "blue"
this and "blue" that and
"blue" them and "blue" me
until there were more
blues in that room than
all the music I knew.
Or than the sky.

I rocked back and forth
in my chair thinking:
they say the Eastern Bluebird
is nearly extinct, and most of
this month I believed it.
Now I have to wonder.

On my way to work
their cheerful, delicate voices
diminished as I walked
till all I heard was traffic
or the wind, which seemed
to want to wonder
how any day could start
so blue and come so soon
to this.

Morning Song 5

This morning
many made-up minds climbed
in over the windowsill
back from wherever
sane as the light of day
meaning what they meant.

I had to laugh.
They just sat there
in a small circle and talked
quietly
for a long time
mostly about "life:" how
this one for example happened
at the moment to be mine.

I did not "think"
anything all day.
I did not need to.
I did not go to work.
I just sat there
and listened
quietly
for a long time
to the sound of many minds
saying something
singly,
like mine.

Indian Summer

The sassafras I sit under is a tangle
of mango-colored hands. With each easy breeze
they wave bravely, cavalierly even,
as if there were no such thing as November.

Lots of other leaves flutter
down around me--beech, maple, oak--
one, a couple, a dozen at a time.
They are crisp and flat and make a pleasant clatter.

But the sassafras leaves stay where they are,
their August-sundown oranges
growing more and more gorgeous
in the warm, late-morning light.

I try to figure out what they are here to teach me.
I already know every shade of sundown they can think of.
I know the secret of holding on when others won't.
And I know all about November.

Still, I cannot turn away.
I decide to sit a little longer than I'd planned,
enjoy, while I can, this heat,
the breeze, these mango-colored hands.

*Autumn Walks to Work
Through Schenley Park*

I

Maples drench everything
in lovely shades of red.
Always above average,
never stunning, shunning
attention, they display
what is left them, yield
slowly and only to need.

Today, while I am taking
care of my affairs,
I will remind myself:
maples drench everything
in lovely shades of red.

II

The two elms on Flagstaff Hill,
so lush, so sexual, just yesterday,
went last night—that needling
rain—in privacy, to pieces.
Today: a shambles of yellow
dulling down the lawn.

I know just what it's like,
those all-at-once undressings
in the cold; and the mornings-
after. I shuffle down the leaf-
slick hill, hoping not to slip.

III

Like a team of breaching whales
locked in freeze-frame
at the top of a leap, three sycamores
lean over the street, waiting
for stop-action to start up again:
a splash of sun-bleached
umbers, a settled sea.

Such colors as these, they say, emerge
only as dominant green
recedes: spectacles of absence,
brief celebrations
before loss entire.

IV

Ghinkos—licks of flame
stilled, cool tongues—
line the sidewalk.
The rest of the trees
on the block—coal-black
and alien their remains—
gave up days ago.
Ghinkos still heave back
rain-soaked manes
and menace.

I walk by watching
only out of the corner
of my eye, wanting
not to intrude on
what soon they stand to lose.

Coda

I have lost
just about everything I can think of
at least once in this town:
one night, firestorms
afloat on a foam of smoke,
smelting; by morning
nothing but empty
shells of mills, tame as sheep
asleep on their feet.

Raucous autumn: I walk
across broad yellow pools
of dead leaves, my gait
steady, geared it seems
to a dream of my own making.

A shutter clicks, fixing
in black and white
the empty frames of trees,
the leaf-strewn hill,
and me—grateful
the fallings are all over,
this fierce season—
at the brink, glancing back,
almost halfway home.

Three Spring Songs

I

Mid-March—the Carolina wren sets up
in his old spot on the basketball backboard
and warbles. The notes that float from his throat
are so pure I am sure they will endure
whatever the day's weather.

Just a week ago I wondered
if anything at all would survive winter:
that long, gray ship gripping
row after row of gaping mouths, not allowed
to make even the slightest sound.

Today the sky is a bright, brittle blue.
It arches over the newly green treetops
like the shell of an egg, a sign
that soon it will be time again to sing.

II

A tiny iris spikes through last night's snow.
I have waited all winter by the window
for this moment. The blossom opens,
each petal a dark velvet pool,
perfectly still, over which a man rows boat
slowly, on his way back home.

I am suddenly beside myself, staring
at that strange, pale, gray-haired fellow
standing by the window waiting for something.
Before the morning is out, there will be
only one of us here, rowing
slowly on his way back home.

III

Like fireworks freeze-framed in free-fall
three switches of forsythia sweep
in elegant arcs over the lip of the hill
all the way down to the street.
Yesterday they were just a few thin sticks
whipping wildly in the wind.

Today, they trace an array of paths
between this dreary universe
and the one we want to get to.
Look: In just the last few hours
they have left thousands
of yellow prints for us to follow.

Breaking the Ice

I

Last night's freezing rain slid
like a tight glove—precisely,
down to the finest detail—
over leaf and twig and bud,
each one iridescent now
in the bright March sun.

I've been studying this scene
for the last half hour or so
trying to find a way of saying
how life is sometimes like that.
You know, the ironic play
of fire over ice:
thin, shimmering fingers
burrowing into the firm sky
against all odds, achieving something.
Or the other way around:
slivers of heat intruding
into the good wood
which shivers, gives way.
I can't make either one work.

II

In the ninth grade I prayed
day after day
that she'd stop and talk to me
on her way out of school.
I'd stand by the door hoping
to catch her eye as she hurried by,
try to come up with a clever line
to break the ice.
I couldn't make either one work.

So, every afternoon at three
for the last thirty years—
in my mind's eye, at least—
she breezes right by
without noticing I'm there,
hugs her smug boyfriend
climbs aboard the same clunky bus
and chugs away.

III

I walk down to the bus stop
to meet my son.
By the time we get home
the ice is crashing down
in big, wet slabs
all over the back yard.
We sit on the porch steps
and laugh like crazy amazed
at all that dazzle and disarray.

As his bus heads up the hill
I could swear I see her
looking out the window at us,
big eyes, like it just dawned on her,
that tomorrow,
when she's heading home,
I won't be there.

Just Before the Rain

Three amber beacons meander
around the night sky announcing
something and I follow
all the way across town until
out of nowhere: a life-size
plywood ark, blue, bobbing
on fake yellow waves
the heads of two giraffes
poking up through the top
and smiling like no animals
are supposed to smile except
maybe alone in the privacy
of their own wilderness
before they were ransacked
and led up the plank to a small
stall for a 40-day boat ride
to nowhere, too poor they both
knew for a real cruise so stuck
together for this. And a deck
below, the hippos, snouts
opening and closing as if
they can't stop laughing at
the thought of adding ballast
so the whole damn thing
doesn't just topple over and sink.
And for godssake of all things
two ostriches weaving back
and forth on deck like drunks
toward Noah, at the wheel,
looking a lot older and dumber
than I ever would have guessed
it would take to keep a boat
like this afloat, his furrowed
brow throbbing out in neon
an ad for car stereos and sunroofs.

I wait at the base of the stairs thinking:
it's only a matter of time now
before those three amber beacons
beckon my roommate and we board.

Crazy

as the wind he was and wanted,
for himself, nothing; but for her:
the most glorious chrysanthemums,
armloads of yellow held loose, huge
blooms oozing dollops of sunlight;
behind them, his smile, so wide
no one, not even her, could ever hope
to resist; then he'd run toward her
through the tall grass, in slo-mo
maybe, his dozens of chrysanthemums
bobbing every which way, crazy
as the wind he was, and wanted.

Or so he told his florist in the morning,
who recommended roses, or a nosegay-
anything but crazy, but chrysanthemums,
but what he wanted, was: the wind.

For Daphne: On the Mornings After

I

She told me how in her day
it happened matter-of-factly:
some girl on her way, say,
to the well, stopped in her tracks,
legs stiff as tree stumps,
feet rooted to the ground;
and from fingertips clutching
at a cloudless, blue sky,
thousands of leaves puffed
up from their buds at once.

The news spread fast:
proud parents announcing it,
a coming out of sorts;
brothers and sisters amazed
at the luck of such a great story
to tell to their friends at school;
her boyfriend, well, at a loss,
a little miffed, missing her.
Later, all the celebrating done,
everyone else home and asleep,
he'd hold her in his arms all night,
promise never to marry.

II

I couldn't have been more than
7 or 8 when I first heard you
murmuring from the old elm
I had to walk past on my way
to the creek to play.
For years I steered clear,
trying not to listen.

Then one morning, my mind
too much abuzz with wonder,
I clung to the trunk
hoping to seep like a dark stain
into the clean wood beneath.
That night your words
turned into flocks of birds
swarming wildly by moonlight
across savannas of empty sky.

III

Last week, on my way to work,
the hollow of my head filling up,
as usual, with a cloudless,
blue sky, two birds circling
without a place to settle,
my legs suddenly stiffened;
tendrils descended from
my feet, holding me hard;
arms, flung up to steady myself,
locked, hands cupped
open like empty nests.

Clouds of doubts massed up,
passing in fast-forward,
rationales I ransacked
in my panic for an answer:
the inevitable and graceless
changes of age? the grappling
fingers of someone else's past?
death's staccato laughter?
Then the birds settled
and I heard again your words.

IV

I notice it now mostly mornings:
a little stiffness in my hips,

that ringing in my ears.
All day the birds busy themselves
with nesting. By night
they settle down to rest.

I hear only the ceaseless music
of their voices, or mine, singing
of loves lost and then recovered,
ever the same song, growing
simpler and more clear,
nearer to the light into which
we are always rising up or settling,
beyond which there is nothing more now
either one of us needs to say.

The Night Before Roy Orbison Died

I

In Miss Merino's ninth grade art class, I'd just drift off, daydreaming myself into the back seat of her black Pontiac, the late September heat abating in a lake breeze, Roy Orbison crooning "In Dreams" over the car radio, both of us grappling with the only things left between me and the ecstasy of . . .

The 1:55 bell snapping me out of her lap, back into the last row where I go grudgingly limp all the way to Algebra, never to measure even one of the curvy wonders Miss Merino kept treasured under her regimen of lingerie.

II

In the summer of 1963, months before the Beatles were anything more than a few teenyboppers screaming in Liverpool, I must have pumped a hundred nickels into the jukebox in the back of the Sugar Bowl, just to hear that sleek tenor, wire-tight, "ooh, ooh, pretty woman," bought myself a slick, black, fake silk shirt, sat in the back booth, dark and mysterious, waiting for my own pretty woman to come walkin' back to me. Except in the second it took her to think about turning around, Lennon and McCartney started holding everybody's hand, Ringo pounding harder and harder on his drums, one at a time, then row after row after row down Pennsylvania Avenue, ratcheting our dreams all the way back to a tiny flame in Arlington, a day's worth of drumming to remember it by, to forget, Roy Orbison singing "Crying," all of us into the streets, to war.

Eight years later, the Sugar Bowl closed for good,
I pulled that shirt from the corner of the closet,
threw it in the Goodwill pile, the '60s suddenly
history, bombs exploding all over Cambodia,
collars buttoning down, belts tightening,
the long, slow leak of impeachment,
Roy Orbison singing "Only the Lonely"
on the double album I bought
as if he were already dead, or I was.
and then 15 years later, there he was,
on "Saturday Night Live:" that frying-pan flat face,
the slicked back, sculpted sideburns
still jet-black as the plastic glasses
hanging halfway down his nose
squeezing out the slight smile of a man too shy, or wise,
to ask for anything. Then that voice:
haunting, smooth, still chilling.

III

Last night, the night before Roy Orbison died,
his dark blue heart about to break
one last time into unearthly song,
I woke up in the back seat of Miss Merino's Pontiac,
the decades between us passing so fast
not my hair going gray, not the drag of gravity under flesh,
not even Roy Orbison about to encore with "It's Over"
could come between me and my sweet destiny.

IV

I almost don't know what to make of anything tonight.
I think my heart is breaking but I am not sure.
I think of all I have missed, am missing right now
to finish this, the way life keeps rushing off, up ahead,
before you have time to finish asking for
a second date, a better raise, a simple favor,
just a single straight answer.
Without even thinking about it, I find myself

saying a prayer for Roy Orbison.
I don't know why.
I am sure he is a happy man and probably always was.
I play his songs over and over on the stereo.
No one with a voice like that
could ever have had his heart broken
for good. If there is a heaven, he is singing there now.

Or, better, in the back of the Sugar Bowl,
leaning against the jukebox, listening
to his own sweet voice fill the room,
some pretty woman, Miss Merino for all I know,
halfway to the door, unable to decide
whether to turn around.
I see him there, frozen in that moment
A serene early-'60s smile still on his face,
nothing but a shy, kind man
without a worry in the world,
because the whole time—her heels
clicking against the tile floor on her way out,
another man immeasurably more handsome
waiting in the street to meet her,
my heart pounding faster and faster,
fearing for him, for myself, for everyone who waits
deep into the quiet night for someone else to decide
and then walks home alone—
because the whole time he knows just how the song goes
and how it's going to end.

I think of Roy Orbison, dead less than a day,
that voice rushing out through her car window
as she drove away from school to somewhere, someone,
a boy of 14 could never begin to imagine he could be
or be like, "ooh, ooh, pretty woman"
diminishing into the distance, as close
as I thought I'd ever get to Miss Merino's back seat
until the night before Roy Orbison died.

Morning Rush

The big storm is all but over.
A final few flakes float down
in super-slow motion, falter in front of my windshield,
and stall there, unwilling it seems to fall.
Traffic crawls and halts, crawls and halts,
hundreds of us hung up in long lines
slung from hilltop to hilltop all the way to town.
I will be lucky if I get to work by noon.
I stare down at the broken white line
inching past beside me. At this pace
it seems so precise, so individual, so breathtakingly
graceful.
My radio blares: "Wild thing, I think you move me.
But I want to know for sure."
I try for a while to think of one person
who might move me, for sure.
Instead I find the driver in the car stopped momentarily
alongside mine staring blankly over at me.
He looks as if he might be watching me on TV,
bored, blasé, the remote poised, ready to zap.
I rise up, wind into my wickedest air guitar,
and scream along with the Troggs,
the two panes of glass between us
not anywhere near thick enough
to keep him from hearing:
"Wild thing, you make my heart sing,
you make everything . . . groovy."
He jerks his head forward, pats down his hair, and scoots
a car-length ahead, looking for another channel.
I slide back down into the seat and think about maybe
heading home, having accomplished already
about as much as anyone has a right to expect,
at least for a day like this, at least for a guy like me.

Limbo Rock

The lines for the water slides seem to snake away for days.
Sleek, brown bodies steam dry between rides.
Their parents, pink lumps slumped into inner tubes,
bump lazily down a curvy turquoise culvert.

It must be a hundred degrees today, even under this tree.
I creep deeper into the mottled shade,
crocodile out of water.
I can hardly breathe.
"The Limbo Rock" rollicks down from the boardwalk:
"Every limbo boy and girl/ All around the limbo world."
Overhead the trees gyrate wildly
in the rising heat, trying, as I am, to reach
the cool languor of autumn, the freedom to let go.

I try to picture "a limbo moon above."
It comes out electric blue, a black plastic sky
oozing vaguely away from its wavy-hot edges.
I try to imagine what it is like to "fall in limbo love."
I think it is something I am too old for
but would like to try.

Through the hazy heat I see a thin, lithe boy,
tanned deep, leaning back, knees bent,
duckstepping up to the limbo stick.
"How low can you go?"
I wish suddenly I were 16 again.
Or at least had worn my bathing suit today.
This must be just what these leaves will be thinking about
in October, on their way down
to the cool, beautiful ground,
wishing it were August again, that they could gyrate
wildly one last time in the unbearable heat.

I head out into the sun.
Sweat pours down my chest.
My daughter has been splashing around
in the crowded pool.

Now she runs to me, shivering, her lips blue.
I swoop down and scoop her up,
my knees buckling under her weight.
Old, young, too hot, too cold,
parents, children, each inching along
in their own separate lines.
Even the leaves in such a big rush
to get where they won't want to be.
On a day like this, if you stop to think about it,
none of it really figures.

My daughter and I sway and laugh
to the last few bars of music:
"All around the limbo clock . . ."
Pretty soon she doesn't shiver
and I don't sweat.
". . . Hey, let's do the limbo rock."

Winter Solstice
(with some fragments from Empedocles)

a roomful of pure moonlight
oozes over every
pore of my body
bathes me as if I were a child
peals of his laughter leak
like helium I hear
a little-boy voice squeak
parts of his heart healing . . .

he says to me:
“shelter . . .
a silent
heart . . .”
he says to me:
“love . . .
tenacious
love . . .”
he says to me:
“there . . .
it is fixed
forever . . .”

night after night I sit here
silent in the dark thinking
I am closer than ever now
to the last great nothing
these dreams keep leaving
my children build heavens
I try . . .

tonight I will hold myself
in my own warm arms
then let them come apart
riffle through pages scattered
around me on the floor
lift them up in big bunches
how slowly they float

back down shining
with borrowed light

tonight I will write myself
a love poem
it will begin with the line
“a roomful of pure moonlight”
but it is not this poem

this poem is only
to help me
forget
what you thought
I was trying to say . . .

Appraising the Vase

It came here, she says, from Genoa,
late 18th century, the story goes, saved,
stolen, bought, no one now knows,
still flawless, without visible scars.

“My family owned it for generations.”
I asked to see it, hold it firmly
in my hands, move my thumbs
over its smooth face caressingly.

I care only for this: What was
its beauty, power, there, then;
what is its beauty, power, now, here;
what does it hope for, fear?

Only when I know all of this—there,
then, now, here—can I say for sure
if it still breathes or is gone, what someone
else will be willing to pay just to hold it.

Two Dreams

1.

The kiss is electric, lips
soft, slightly moist,
barely touching at first,
then exploring each other
carefully, until they know
mountains, valleys, streams,
each leaf, stem, flower.
We gasp, the exact
moment love arrives.

2.

She reaches into the dark
for a hand, finds mine,
waiting. Our warm fingers
entwine for a second.
Then hers slips quickly out,
move toward another,
the one they meant to find.
We gasp, the exact
moment love leaves.

Two Poems in the Manner of Emily Dickinson

1.

Settled in a second—
how her eyelid moved—
the words I had just heard—
disproved.

Truth by definition
finds respite in the small—
words are weak—
eyelid says it all.

2.

Arrayed around a table—statues—
a voice I cannot hear—
woman with a grimace—
man with unkempt beard

and twenty more of each
iterated chair by chair—
I walk by sidewise glancing
glad I'm here not there.

Missing Americans

Bearded, sweaty, he crouches in the shade
leafing through the August *Penthouse*.
I buy a dozen daisies from him, pretending
the day is lovely, there is romance
where I'm going, a woman in the flesh.
As I turn the corner a wall of heat
heaves up from the street. I stroll
slowly through it, pretending I am
Norman Vincent Peale afloat on an iceberg.
It doesn't work. I am too hot to think
straight, might as well be Buffalo Bob
layered in braided suede, or Howdy
Doody, wooden headed and sweatless.

They say the weather is going crazy.
El Niño swirls slowly off the coast of Peru.
Molten lava oozes down a swollen Hawaiian
hillside. A year's worth of rain falls
in a weekend on Galveston. The Sudan
turns Sahara. And I am only halfway
home. Norman Vincent Peale is lost at sea.
His ice cube clinks inside a glass.
Clarabell steals a Jeep in El Salvador.
Four nuns fall to their knees pleading,
el niño, el niño, just a kid, shoots them
to keep cool. I stroll slowly home alone,
a dozen daisies wilting in my fist.

Pike's Peak

I came for nothing but a pretty good tan

then the mountains massed, vexing
a sky, wide and unoccupied turbulent spaces
only a new eye
can size up
break down
over and over, spending attention
proportions of perception reordered

a whole season of sun in a week tanning into the
evening
heat, skin sweating
through the night

pigments gathering

in solitude abiding keen-eyed, silent
the dry heat of thinking leaner and leaner
toward nothing
but a reputation for distance a pretty good tan

the western sky
cowboy blue an hour after sundown thin air
the sting of stars
refusing to use even the fewest words

I lean back, listen
skin stung with sunburn turning one word conserved,
another red rock
sandstone
fool's gold

too deep even to feel
massive plates of hot rock drift casual under pressure

willing simply
to give
in the nature of things, resources in transit
the silent sky intruded upon

I do not know any longer what it is possible
to learn, teach, all afternoon

the grass lengthening perceptibly under me long
silences over dinner listening

lapses of attention
the privacy of sunburn turning

courage to preserve orders, order
let go

strangers in a strange place cannot remain strangers
long presenting oneself
in the proper light

anyone's skin
turns, the sun unconcerned with pleasantries
over breakfast
voices seeking
the heat of speech

lint of cottonwood blowing up the steep slope
to snow in the air
brutal reversal of seasons a geography of loss grasped in
the passing maps of the mind redrawn, the state

of things abiding sun, snow, stars struggle of feeling the
peak

peace
willing simply
to give
in my words forming too deep to feel

the burning
under my shirt
hot skin turning

words into

nothing
but a pretty good tan

Postcards from the Shore

Monday

A dank wind clambers in off the fog-blank Atlantic.
My daughter and I pick through
little heaps of shells,
the litter of last night's storm still stalled off shore.
"Show me how brave you are," she taunts,
daring me to chase the receding surf
then out-race its rush back up the beach.
I play that game over and over,
if only to avoid explaining to her
that what little I know about bravery lately
is how much it can take just to turn around.

Tuesday

The sea is gun-barrel blue and roiling.
Wind pushes back breath, deafens.
My wife and I stride diligently into it.
I try to think of what I used to say to her
on walks like these. Dark swirls
of seaweed keep churning up between
the words . . . I need . . . to speak.

Wednesday

Wind and water wake me wide at one.
I roll over, whispering "Oh, shit,"
expecting it to make a difference.
Wave after wave crashes
rhythmically in the background.
I repeat whatever I can think of to recover sleep:
"Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep
and can't know where to find them . . ."
I know just how she must have felt:

you wake up one night in a start
from what you thought was only a bad dream,
and there, the whole field in front of you is
. . . empty.

Thursday

It is nearly midnight.
The skies have finally cleared.
Each incoming wave, as it curls to break,
is momentarily molten with moonlight,
which scatters then in thousands of sparks
among wet shell-shards along the shore.
I wade out waist deep into the cold combers,
wanting to believe that the sea,
which cleanses everything, can cleanse me.

Friday

Six or seven seagulls fly single file
in close formation
inches over the ocean,
each one silhouetted for an instant
against the huge red sun hovering
just above the horizon.
I see it this morning as a hole
poked through the ceiling of a large, gray room
where I have been made to stay
for days and days, opening now into a place
alive with bright light that pleases
even the seagulls, which celebrate by squawking
raucously, just as we drive off.

Five Scenes from My Final Dream of You

I

I am standing behind you on a balcony.
Your white robe billows in the wind.
My fingers reach all the way down
to a child's memory, tinkering
until you think you are still alone.

II

When I raise my hands,
thousands of yellow finches
stop, wheel in a whirling mass,
wait their turns to pass.

Tonight I will teach you
how to reach for them,
keep each one in your hand
an instant only,
fingers parting as they close,
holding and letting go all one motion,
your only measure
the delicate pressure
of feather-edge against skin.

In precisely this way
your time and mine
will be saved.
Until morning.
Let us begin.

III

It is womb-warm and humid here.
I could not be more at ease,
with myself, with you.
As we walk, long, lush fronds of fern unfurl
eerily green before us.

Just beyond the steamy haze
that rises between us,
hundreds of white horses
are thundering over a tundra,
their eyes wild with desire.

Do you hear them coming?
Do you hear?

IV

I am standing alone
against a stone wall, eyes closed,
hands folded at my waist.
I am growing slowly smaller
and smaller. All around my head
green auroras flicker, flash and fade.
I fear that in the light of day
they will masquerade
as these mere words,
which neither of us will hear.

V

Even in the deep of sleep,
my heart aches
beyond reckoning
to see nothing more or less
than what I have done.

Forgive me.
It has taken me half a lifetime
to begin the waking.
Before I rise I must savor again
this terrible aching of my heart.

Snow Man

I

He did not go to the tundra
it came to him--
first a tickle in his teeth
then a frost on his tongue
then a slab of ice
inching up his throat.

When it finally broke,
everyone else was somewhere
else but him: had left
by night, had left
by plane, had left him
bundling into his future
all animal handsome
in a thickening coat,
elk-sleek, moose-stubborn,
hammering, hammering
hammering hooves to snow.

II

The world blubbered.
He trimmed and slimmed and leaned.
He hated blubber: the flaccid
feel of it against his teeth,
the fatty slick it left on his lips,
the slow, gelatinous curls it wound
down his throat, the way it lay there
like a wet log on the slow fire
souring in his gut.
There was nothing about it
he could love.

But when cold drilled
pinpoint holes in all his bones,
when wind thinned blood
to ether in his brain,
when his sorry heart wound
down to zero-dark,
he hacked off hunks of it,
ate it quick and raw and all
he could stomach,
until he was bloated, bilious,
all smiles to find
there was nothing
he could not love.

III

It went hard out there
for the flowers: flash-
card blurs of red dashing
past breathless upstarts
of yellow spattering
freak summer snow-thins;
pale pink, pale blue
pastel woozies bobbing
through thaw fogs
prickled by sunlight
still stiff from winter
and stiffening already
toward winter again.
A cold world for color
to go on coloring in.

Lucky.
He hadn't a mind now
for color.
He needed snow-sheets
billowing up like bear thighs,
horizonless white
steaming out of infinity.

He courted each flake that fell
kissing bittersweet
on his cheek, unballad
his tight little fists,
limbered his fingers into
each hexagonal hole
lifting back the delicate
tissue until his whole
head bobbed through
and he knew where
he was and what he had
found and a thrill
of guilt throbbed
in his throat

puffed up the muggy
steam-pots of his cheeks
tickled his quick
hot tongue until
the gentle rhythms
of snowflakes contracting
over and over slowly
into infinity pumped
voice-box wonders
out of his
mouth like words.

IV

"Ha," he said to the sun
when it failed to rise.
"Ha," he said to the snow
when it failed to fall.
"Ha," he said to the moon
when it failed to shine.
"Ha, Ha, Ha."

He stood and listened
a long time
to the flat black
echo of that laugh
wanting to be wrong.
But he was not.

His "Ha, Ha, Ha," re-
sounded nothing like
the laughter he had practiced
trying to be right.

But it was, mind you, a laugh.
The only laugh
he heard.

V

It was nice
those long nights to need
no words to have
no one to hear him
having no thoughts
to talk about
as if they mattered.

He sat in a sparkle
of stars and a low hum
rose through his throat
tickled his lips
pressed shut against
a silence that expanded
across the entire sky
without jostling
anything without even
nudging the tiniest
speck of light
out of
its perfect place.

VI

Time was tiny
scissors snipping
here and deft
there unfold-
ing origami
memories whole
sheets of
holes stiff
birds unable
to fly anywhere.

He tweaked
a beak that
would not
speak clipped
a claw that
could not
close poked
those tiny
scissors
down
every
hole
but his.

VII

He was the dead
of winter so cold
he coughed a solid
block of fog
all motion slowed
to a stop or almost
he breathed
once
 a day
heart
 beat
every
 hour.

Gelid love he called it
frozen slow in time
never complaining
only to himself
a month-long monologue
a monotone of snow
a slow roll all the way
to the pole
which was where he was
when he awoke
and saw her
sitting like the dead
of winter on his heart.

VIII

He rolled a smooth stone along
the fingers of his left hand
and hunkered motionless
over an ice-hole
seal-spear poised, ready over
his right shoulder stiffening
as the surface gurgled
slanting down fast then
between seal eyes through
seal bone into seal brain.

A day's wait done
he slung the carcass
over his shoulder plopped
the smooth stone down the hole
and plodded off: one step
always only one step
ahead of the blood-stained snow.

IX

He had always had at least
seven names for the snow
but tonight he had seven
million, one for each
flake that fell in its
uncanny uniqueness.

He called out one
after another until
one flake struck him
as so beautiful
he could spend
the night with it.

And while seven million
flakes fell somewhere
else besides here
this one zeroed in on
the tip of his tongue
and melted like none
of the names he knew.

X

He walked on water that
jackpot morning multitudes
thronged behind him waiting
to crow-laugh him under so
he jogs out all gingerly
and gentle each toe-drop
feathered under his weight
and it held the damn thing
it held so he strode step
after step goat-surer and
surer until the crowd's
sounds pounded down
around him on the ice
he hadn't told anyone about
which is what he was
walking over after all
and when it got just quiet enough
for the whole universe to hear
a dull thunder rumbled
under the ice divided
his mind and the next step
he took flushed him
all bug-eyed and bony
into the krill-ripe swill
of the beautiful sea.

XI

He dove down deep in the coastal
where bowheads sang
unearthly songs of hunger
and home and loved each other
with each rubber-hose bass-twang
note plucked
whole from
their hollow throats.

These were the voices
he dreamed of
having
and hearing.

He climbed on an ice-floe
and heard his words emerge
from pitching blacknesses
into the dim green light
of winter day
like the darkest shades of
emerald he remembered like
his hunger lunging
deeper like his
love-song headed
home.

The Poet Comes Out at Night

He waits in a thicket
like moonlight seeping
down along twig-tip,
leaf-vein and bark.

Suddenly the razor
edge of his voice leans
cold and gentle against
my throat, prodding.

I follow each flick
of the blade all adazzle
with moonlight and
do not know what to say.

I empty my wallet
in his hands, empty
my pockets in his hands,
empty my hands . . .

He leaves behind
nothing but moonlight
in a thicket, all that
he wanted to say.