

# A Mind of Winter

*“To whom then am I addressed ?  
To the Imagination.”*

W.C. Williams

Paul Kameen

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This is the “summer” panel from Bridget’s “I’m Still. Here.” seasonal series that also provided the cover image for my “winter” book, *A Mind of Winter*, from which these inter-chapters have been extracted and revised. The “spring” panel is the cover for the other half of that book, the personal essays now revised and gathered in *Spring Forward*. I’m saving the “fall” panel for something special I haven’t yet imagined

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## Preface

*I am the angel of reality,  
Seen for the moment standing in the door. . .*

*I am one of you and being one of you  
Is being and knowing what I am and know.*

*Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,  
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again . . .*

“Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” Wallace Stevens

I’ve written another sheaf of essays of the sort I’ve been writing these last few years—I go for a walk in the woods, see some things, remember some things, think about some things, then come home and write as much of it as I can remember—enough of them now for another short book. I read them through enough times, along the way, to think they were okay, nicely composed, not (I’m pretty sure, though no writer ever knows this for sure off the bat) a “piece of crap.” If they were my first book of this sort, I’d have been satisfied. But they’re not. They’re my fourth. I feared it would sound to someone who had read more than one of them—a small band of dedicated followers of my work, but generous readers all, I know, because they have spoken back to me about them—like I might just be mailing it in. I know I’m not. But I can’t risk leaving it at that. So I’ve been thinking more about why I write these books and about how I share them, both so eccentric.

When I publish my work via online platforms, there is always the box that asks what “category” it should be placed in. As has often been the case in my life and career, no matter how many boxes they offer, none seems quite right. There are aspects of

my work that could be described as “poetry,” or “autobiography” or “inspiration/self-help.” And then the one I am always tempted to pick, but don’t: “nature writing.”

I like nature writing. It’s what I do foundationally in these books, describe what I see on my walks in the woods, that is. But it’s not all I do when I walk in the woods, nor is it all I want to convey when I write about what happens there. If it were, I would be writing these essays after every walk, an ongoing journal of sorts. But I don’t do that. I write in waves, something of consequence on my mind that I can’t quite fathom, something that makes the natural world somehow more luminous to me, urging me to write about it, not simply for that reason but also as a scrim for figuring out what is currently vexing me. One of these waves will last a month or so, run its course, and then feels done. Whatever needed to get sorted, either did or won’t, and I’m never entirely sure what it is. Just how it feels. Then I don’t write for many months.

My head, like most heads, is chock full of other stuff that gets triggered by what I see and hear, opening portals toward other kinds of writing, my poems, the works of great poets and thinkers I know, concepts, ideas, obsessions that have befriended me all my life, questions I keep trying to fathom to deeper and deeper levels, hoping never to reach bottom. Those things end up in my essays and they help me, too. So when I’m in a writing wave, right from the outset I’m kind of angling around to find what all this action is “about,” for me first, and then, I hope, for you. Each of my other books turned out to be about something that arose during the composition process and both sustained and hovered above all of the details of my walks, made those details come to life at a level beyond immediate perceptions. As I wrote into this one, I kept looking for that aboutness, but it was elusive.

*First, Summer*, the book I wrote during my early months in Olympia, was about the problem of seeing what’s right before our eyes, how hard that can be when you’ve taken those eyes far



enough away from their native haunts that nothing looks familiar any longer. Yes, we do see, but it just doesn't get processed very well, certainly not well enough to find words to record or report it. That was my conundrum last summer: how to write a book when I had no words to put it in, or into it. My sense this winter has been that that is still an issue for me, but one with larger implications, not any longer the problem of tongue-tiedness, an inability to make my available "vocabulary" match the immediate landscape, but the larger question: Having now made my adjustment, what made it possible to do that, especially at my age, more a "mind of winter," (another Wallace Stevens reference I'll explain in my first essay) frozen in place than a child learning for the first time.

In mid-February, I just happened to pick up William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All*, a book I've read many times and taught several times, so I know it well. It is I am firmly convinced his retort, full force, to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which had been published the previous year, the "appearance" of which Williams later called, in his *Autobiography*, "the great catastrophe to our [American] letters" (146). The extremity of *Spring and All* derives in large part from that. For Williams, this was not a mere "poetic" difference. It was political, cultural, philosophical. It was, really, all of life on the line. Eliot had, from his point of view, put a full stop on an emergent Modernism that was in "the American grain" (Williams's term and preference), now free from "the mind of Europe" (Eliot's term and preference.) Its lineage went back to Whitman not to the French pre-surrealists. He compared Eliot's poem to a nuclear bomb exploding his hope and vision. He was both heartbroken and furious. So he wrote this dazzling, chaotic book. I love that kind of rage, in him and in me.

Given how I moved, I was only able to bring about ten books with me. That was one of them. That's how much I like it. I thought I was being drawn to it because I was craving spring and it wasn't anywhere in the neighborhood yet, all that "historically deep" snow we had around then, one thing I was familiar with

and had hoped never to see again when I moved here. But something he says early on struck me in a new way this time. Here it is:

*The reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a vision of what he would be, some day. Oh, some day! But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested. Ergo, who cares for anything I do? And what do I care. (2-3)*

That is exactly how I feel, catching up with myself, now that my “some day,” this retirement that I always envisioned spending with my wife Carol is something else entirely. Her passing so suddenly 4 years ago jolted me into a “now” that stayed stuck in place for a long time, never moving off that spot, like a scratched record, not the sort of “now” Williams is trying to inhabit. Then the record played again, one new now after another, the way music flows. You hear only the note that’s playing, inflected perhaps by the one that just vacated the air, yes, and, yes, preparing the air for the one that will follow, but still only that note sounds, making it a once in a lifetime moment, right now. All there is now for me is that right now, so, like Williams, I say, what do I care? It is an exciting and an unnerving existential condition, both to live in and to write from.

It’s what he says next, though, that gave me my “about” for this book: He says, “To whom then am I addressed ? To the Imagination” (3). I’ve read that sentence numerous times before. But its radicality never really sank it. Williams is not writing from the imagination, the traditional way of thinking about creative composition. He is writing to the imagination, implying that while one’s imagination may be an internal engine, it is also in a way extrinsic, with a life of its own, maybe not a “muse” in the traditional sense of that word, but serving exactly the same purpose. Wallace Stevens, thoroughly agnostic, uses the term “necessary angel” in my epigraph above—the figment of some

spiritual creative helpmate that remains even when you don't believe in spirits any longer—to name this function. It has a mind of its own, even if it's in our own minds, one smart enough to give us what we are not smart enough to get on our own, our everyday regular own.

And it's also dangerous, as Williams goes on to say:

*The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have, are and will be dedicated. (5)*

He says this in the context of a bizarre, hyperbolic, clearly satiric paean to “the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth” (5). But the sentences above suggest something similar: The imagination is a force of its own, one we cannot and should not seek to control with “prohibitions.” It needs to be free to do its essential work. And one of the things it does is destroy. There is no way to remake without destroying. I knew that when I got here and couldn't “see” any longer. I had destroyed my world. I needed to remake it, to learn how to see again. And it is the imagination that makes that possible.

I immediately recalled the term that Coleridge invented to characterize the imagination: “esemplastic” (the “esem” derived from a Greek phrase, es hen, meaning “into one.”) What a perfect word. It doesn't matter how far afield you go or how old you are, the imagination is still willing and able to adapt transformatively, if you let it. I understand that all of the things I'm talking about under the aegis of that term, including the out-of-bodiness I will come to later, could well be attributed to neurochemical activities in my brain. In fact, neuroscientists use a similar term these days, plasticity, to describe the eternal adaptability of the brain. I have no problem with that. Imagination simply gives me a way of naming whatever force supervises and synthesizes all of this creative activity. It may or

may not be spiritual in the conventional sense of that word, but what it does is akin to what a muse, or an angel, or a soul does to humanize us and to help us on our way here.

Here's Walt Whitman writing about something like this, as he experiences it:

*Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is  
not my soul.*

*Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,  
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn. . .*

*I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not  
abase itself to you  
And you must not be abased to the other.*

*Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,  
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or  
lecture, not even the best,  
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice. (30-32)*

Yes, my soul and the other I am, both so clear and sweet. Yes, the unseen proved by the seen until that becomes unseen, a full circle. Yes, loafe, loose, the lull, the hum. Exactly. That is the imagination at work. Before anything unseen gets seen or anything unsaid gets said.

So, now, I had my “about.” And it is a good one for me to have now. I always think the book I’m writing will be my last, even if I stay on here longer enough to make another. I’ve been writing about the power of the imagination from the outset of my career. My first academic publication, back in 1980, a wild manifesto that lost me the job I had and found me my next one, had the cosmic title of “Reworking the Rhetoric of Composition,” which I felt, at age 30, I was clearly qualified to do; and I was, in addition, mad enough to try. The last section of that essay is called “Renaming the Imagination,” another

hubristic gesture from a very passionate young man. Here are the first and then final sentences of that section of the article:

*In order to restore language as a functionally creative element in acts of composition, it is necessary to begin to specify those mental processes through which language enacts expression. These processes are best organized under the aegis of a concept that has long been a commonplace in the lexicon of rhetoric: imagination. . . My motive is not that of an antiquarian seeking to preserve an historical monument for aesthetic reasons. I believe that we need the term, for it allows us to say some things about thinking, knowing and writing that are otherwise unsayable. . . (85)*

*[I]t is through the mediate power of what I have named imagination, and through its principal instrument, language-as-metaphor, that this transformation has been accomplished. To abide by any rhetoric, then, that dismisses that creative potential, either by trivializing it or by ignoring it, is not only to misconstrue what language is for, but also to fail to appreciate what we as human beings really are. (90)*

Even now, reading them, I am thrilled. What an ambition for a young man to have. And I still agree with myself 40 years hence. That is cool. I have in the meantime written about the imagination and imaginative processes in many of my works, both critical and creative. I always wanted to write a book “about” imagination. I could just never figure out how. Now I have. This is it. Or, depending on how it goes (I’m writing this in advance of much of the “scholarly” work it will involve) it’s as close as I’ll ever get to one. I may be too old to be as blasphemous (in a good way) as Williams was when he was in his thirties, or as I was at that age. But I’m not dead, either. So, Paul, let’s get to it.

\* \* \*

The form of this book is more like a brunch buffet than a sit-down meal. There are my usual woods-walk essays, written from late-winter into early spring this year (2019) in Olympia, Washington. They are ordered in real-time narrative fashion, by date. I decided to open each one with a poem that seemed to be pertinent to that day's observations, one of my own, or another poet, or a song, just to get more creative material in, more like *This Fall* than *First, Summer*. After each essay there is a brief inter-chapter in which I discuss a specific poet or philosopher theorizing on the imagination, very broadly construed, in that some of them don't even use that specific term. I followed historical sequence with these, from the pre-Socratics to the Projectivists. I skipped the postmodernist moment (1960-2000) entirely. If, as I say in one of these pieces, the Modernists were anti-Romantically Romantic, the postmodernist agenda, critical, philosophical, cultural, all of it, was anti-Romantically anti-Romantic. I am a Romanticist at heart, always was, always will be. I like all those cool terms they take as everyday matters: the ineffable, presence, being, muses, angels, all of it. And, of course, imagination. These concepts were anathema to most died-in-the-wool postmodernists, hopelessly "nostalgic," like religion seemed to Marx: "the opiate of the masses." People like me.

One of the unfortunate consequences of this is I don't get to write about all of the amazing poets of that era, one in which women and writers of color not only entered the scene but, finally, took it over. Many of them use the word imagination, but not as a keystone concept. Why would they? They have ambitions on the political side that make a term like that seem too private, ineffectual, even effete. I applaud all of that. As a result, though, of this historical caesura I end up, with only a couple of exceptions, writing about all DWMs. Maybe that's for the best in a way. I am one of them. Except for the D part, I'm pretty sure, at least most days. I'm properly disenfranchised from staking a claim too far outside my assigned and very

privileged territory. They don't need me to speak for them, and I shouldn't presume I can.

I close each of these analytic essays with another poem, of my own, or another poet, briefly introduced, one that seems pertinent; again, mostly to get more poems in, always a good thing, to me at least. You can pick what you want among all of this in whatever combination you fancy. Make it breakfast or lunch. Or both. Skip around. Leave the parts you can't eat, all that gluten, fat or sugar for some, all those fruits and vegetables for others, pick the things you like. Go back for more if you want. The heated pans will always be full. Or try something new, just to see if you like it. In any case, I hope, when you're done, you'll feel sated, whatever your appetite or tastes happen to be.

All of those poems I included, especially so many of my own, may seem self-indulgent to you. Some readers felt the poems I appended to my book *Re-reading Poets* were exactly that. And they were, no question. Back then I cared about what people thought in regard to my excesses. Now I don't. So I am self-indulgent. And, well, the book you're reading is either free or so cheap (by contrast with that other book of mine, published by a traditional press) that you can leave that part of it on your plate if you want, scrape it off into the waste bin on the way out (it's a buffet, remember, no table service or bussing) and still feel you got your money's worth on the meal.

*Bon appetit.*





February 22, 2019: Too Much of Nothin'

*One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;*

*And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter*

*Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,*

*Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place*

*For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

“The Snow Man,” Wallace Stevens

I was born with a mind of winter, I'm certain of it. It's probably why I cried continuously, according to family lore for a year after I was born. I came out in the middle of February, for godssake, so cold, the mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania, 1949, heading into the heyday of waist high snow, deep lasting freezes, the 1950s winters in a nutshell. I was a scrawny kid growing up, cold to the core all the time. The inside of my head was just as cold. I rarely spoke, again according to family lore. But I did “regard” things, “behold” things, “not to think” but to “listen,” that absence of self-generated noise in the head that allows words and others and things to find a resting place there, take on meaning. A “nothing himself,” I lived at a position from which one can behold “nothing that is not there,” all the extra layers one might make up and

extrude, supplanting what is there, and “the nothing that is,” a richness of being so elusive it is more like music than words. That, I would say now, is what my “imagination” was back then and is now, which gets me on my path here.

I just got back from a walk down to the point at Woodard Bay, a gorgeous nature preserve between two of the lower fingers of Puget Sound, maybe my favorite spot here, the first time in about two weeks I’ve been able to get there, primarily because of the weather. If you have read any of my work, you know how attached I become, and what an affection I feel, for the places I walk regularly. They become like good friends to me, always there, always welcoming, along with all the other smaller “good friends” I have made with the various flora and fauna those places host. And when I come back to them after an extended absence, it is quite moving to me, as it was today, standing at the point taking in that magnificent view. I stood there for quite a while just “beholding” it. No words. Nice.

My head made up for that quietude on my walk back to the lot, overwhelmed by way too many thoughts, recollections, reflections, speculations. I’m not sure why. Maybe my having been unable to get out for a woods-walk for several days had backed-up the reservoir. And today the dam burst. The process started innocently enough, just remembering the snow that had kept me home in this meantime. Before I got back to the car, I was riffing on God. As Bob Dylan says, “too much of nothin’ can make a man feel ill at ease.”

About two weeks ago, on a Friday afternoon, it started to snow here. I had read the weather report, which predicted one to three inches of snow. Not bad. Within an hour or so, there were already three inches on the ground and it was still snowing furiously. In *First, Summer* I describe the unique (to me) kind of rain that falls in the Northwest. The drops, I said, are large, splotchy, a little more viscous than Eastern rain. And they hit with a very distinctive “splash,” on a windshield say, one that kind of stops for a second or two before it slides off. It is quite

mesmerizing. Well, the snow we had that day was that rain frozen into very large crystalline flakes, each maybe an inch across, and it came down copiously, not quite a whiteout, but hard to see through. And it piled up fast. The closest analogy for me was the “lake effect” snow we’d get in Pittsburgh when the winds carried moisture down from Lake Erie. Depending on where you were when that snow came down, you could get anywhere from a few flurries to a few inches in an hour, more than enough fluffy white stuff to shovel in what seemed like a flash.

The snow here was denser than that, heavier, but fell at that sort of fierce pace. We got about five or six inches in a couple of hours, a shocking amount by local standards. The next day, same pattern, same forecast. This time maybe eight inches. The next day, same thing, except this time almost a foot. So, two feet of snow in about two days in a place that might not get that much in a decade. I read that it was the most snow to fall in one event here since 1949, the year I was born. The day after the snow stopped I turned 70. I had by then shoveled out my 75 foot-long driveway with the help of Lisa and Sterling, who co-own the house I rent. They arrived just in time: I had quit after finishing half of it, my breath getting shorter and my back starting to twinge in a way the said “stop or you’ll regret it.”

Only one factor I had failed to calculate, operating still on my Eastern sense of what happens after it snows: The town here is utterly unprepared for snow of this magnitude. So there was way too much snow in the road to go anywhere. A couple of days later, in the evening, one of the two plows the town operates made it to my neighborhood. I watched it move snow around for a while, very grateful, of course. But it was also quite comical. The operator clearly had no experience plowing snow of this sort, he’d move some, back up, move some more, twist and turn this way and that. It took about a half hour to open the intersection I live at. In Pittsburgh, plows flew around like big birds, clearing streets so fast all you heard was the hard scrape while it tore by. They could do many blocks in a half hour.

One of the other oddities of the event was how it was forecast. No matter what was happening, the weather report said it would be 1-3 inches of light snow turning to rain, which it never did. Even after much more than that had already fallen, the report was the same. You could look out the window and see it was snowing, yet the report never updated. It was like the plows: the weather forecasters and their equipment seemed to have no capacity to imagine, or even recognize, actual snow.

There was so much snow pushed and piled around that it lasted for a long time, even as it got above freezing for days. I tried once to get to Woodard Bay, all the roads open by then, but the path in was covered with a layer of icy, packed-down snow, about 3 inches thick, very slippery, not much fun walking. I made it about a quarter of a mile before I decided to turn around. One of the obstacles I had to navigate to get that far was a red cedar that had fallen across the path. It was huge, maybe six feet in diameter at the base, and fallen in such a way, down a hill onto the path, that the only way to get past it was to walk under it down near the roots, which were perched about six feet above the ground, a huge crack in the trunk about eight feet further up, or now down, the trunk. It was a little unnerving. I thought at the time it will be weeks before they get this chain-sawed out of the way, and it will take a heckuva chain-saw to accomplish it. Today, it was all cut up, the path clear. There must be way more and better chain saws here than there are plows.

This morning, it snowed that way again, dense heavy flakes coming down in blinding sheets, all the while the weather channel on the internet claiming it was merely raining. Even the radar map showed rain-green instead of snow-blue. They must not have any of their instruments calibrated to measure snow. If it's falling from the sky, it must be rain. I actually became quite panicked, assuming the storm of the century would be reprised in the same month. But it stopped after a while. It was raining when I got out of my car to walk. By the time I got to the point, the sun was out. The scene was breathtaking. There was a father-son team taking photos of it with good cameras. I took a few with my phone. I

must have fifty photos taken from that very spot by now, the water, the forested horizon, the clouds, so captivating. Every time I get there I think, okay, you have enough pictures, Paul. And after a few minutes, out comes my phone for another. The scene seems somehow uniquely beautiful that day, every day, one that merits recording. I rarely look at any of the pictures I take, but someday maybe I'll take out all the Woodard Bay pictures and look at them in series. I bet I will love every single one of them.

February tends to be a dramatic month for me, sometimes life-altering, much more so than any other month. There are four days in the month that function as personal landmarks for me. One is Groundhog Day, February 2. Pittsburgh is only a couple of hours from Punxsutawney, and my wife Carol and I, both lovers of the movie by that name, took a drive up there one sunny fall day. It is not anywhere near as vibrant or glamorous as the movie makes it seem. Many of the movie's scenes (the dance on the pavilion, the ice-sculpture scene, the snowball fight, etc.) were, I'm pretty sure, shot in another quite charming town in Westmoreland County, Ligonier, a couple hours south of Punxsutawney, one Carol and I often visited for a walk and a meal. Punxsutawney, at least in late fall, is kind of drab, one of those down-on-its-luck Western Pennsylvania towns about 40 years past its heyday. We found a nice place for lunch and asked on our way out how to get to Gobbler's Knob, assuming, as in the movie, it was somewhere nearby. They told us it was several miles outside of town (not right up the hill, past the foot-deep puddle Phil Connors keeps stepping into) and how to get there. We asked if it was possible to walk there. They said absolutely not, given the terrain, uphill most of the way, the roads, risky. So, given our temperaments, we, of course, walked. It was pretty hot that day, so the walk up was challenging. To finally reach the site of the event, at the top of a very long uphill climb into a big park, was exhilarating. Or at least a relief. We decided to come back a different way and got kind of lost, so that walk was just grueling, exhausting. But we saw Gobbler's Knob. And Punxsutawney. And Phil the groundhog in his little zoo/museum home. Then we drove home.

Carol died suddenly and unexpectedly a few years later, on February 17. That, of course, is one of the other February days that haunts me. I've written at length about that elsewhere, so I'll let it be. What I want to say here is how those two days, Groundhog Day and the day she died, got locked together in my head. In the aftermath of her passing, I felt as if I had become trapped in a timeless space, every day exactly the same, no advance. Like the rest of the world was enjoying its day over and over without being aware of it, and I was trapped outside it as a witness, the only one who knew it was happening repeatedly. Like Phil Connors, I'd wake up every day and it would still be Sonny and Cher and "it's co-o-o-l-d out there!"

I went through everything Phil Connors did over the course of his exile from temporal advancement. The anger, the selfishness, the despair, the desire to be gone from here for good, the various foolish attempts to start over. And over. And over. And every morning, Sonny and Cher. In many ways, four years later now, I still feel that way, though I am, I hope, in one of the latter phases of his journey, those attempts to become a better person, more human, do a little good in the world while I'm still stuck here. The main difference between us is how old I am. I'm pretty sure I won't wake up on February 3 beside someone like Rita Hanson, his producer, with her arm draped over me. In fact, just the other day, I was thinking I may now be too far gone to be of much interest to any loving partner, had reached some sort of "expiration date" on that. I won't go into the details. If you've lived alone for a long time, you know what I mean, that point of no return. If you haven't, you wouldn't get it.

And, of course, there is Valentine's Day, a holiday of great magnitude when you're with someone, the romance of it of course, but also the stress, for a man, of coming up with a gift that will not seem clichéd or overly calculated, something I was not expert at, for sure. The process was sweat-inducing during the early years of our marriage. Over time it became less so, in part because our "wants" diminished in favor of our kids'. A simple, sweet gift would satisfy. And I'm sure in part because Carol

became more and more accustomed to what an oaf I was in that regard, her expectations adjusting accordingly. Now, of course, with no one intimate in my life, Valentine's Day is an odd sort of emotional *mélange*, no stress, a little sadness, good memories, that sort of thing. I'd give anything to have a little of that sweet sweat back.

The other major day on my annual February calendar I implied above: my birthday, February 13. My mother used to joke that if I had been born a day earlier, I'd be Abraham, a day later, Valentine. But I'm Paul. And I have a mind of winter. I was, as I said, for all of my childhood and well into my adulthood, very thin, a "skinny marink," as they used to say. So I was always cold, even when it was warm. In the summer I hated to swim, those cold-water lakes, would end up shivering and blue-lipped within minutes. And winter, well, that was an ordeal. In all the pictures of me taken outdoors in winter, I'm kind of scrunched up, like I'm trying to remember what my extremities used to feel like. Everyone is ice-skating happily, rolling in the snow and I look like I'm trapped in giant industrial freezer, behind a locked door, and will die shortly if no one happens by to open it.

And my mind of winter tended to render me speechless when I was "beholding" something. That's what I did back then and did today standing in peaceful silence at that little tip of land looking out over Henderson Inlet, a kind of amazement, even dumb-foundedness, at the scene before me. Regard. Behold. Not to think. Listen. A way of being in the world. Carol's passing amplified that quite a bit. My mind of winter went into overdrive, a self-isolation that I could not override. I was "nothing" myself, witnessing "nothing that was not there" and "the nothing that is." Times ten. Here, now, four years later, I would say I'm back to times two of that. Maybe, if I keep working at it, I'll catch up to my infant self before my time runs out. I hope so.

I'm quite superstitious and avoid almost anything associated with the number 13. But for some reason, I think of my birthday as a lucky day. Maybe everyone feels that way, no matter what day

they're born. What choice do you have? Fear and hate the day of your birth? What fun is that? I enjoy a quiet birthday, with family if that's possible. If not, then alone. I have one little ritual I like to repeat on that day, akin to the snowball throwing I describe in *Last Spring*. For some reason, almost every year, there is a light snow on my birthday, just a ground covering, and I like to slide on it. Just take a little running start and slide on it. I don't know why. I think maybe it makes me feel young and free. In advance of my birthday this year I just assumed that would not be possible. And it wasn't, but for the exact opposite reason that I thought: Instead of too little snow, there was way too much. You could barely slog through it, let alone slide on it. But I was able to find a slippery patch on the driveway Lisa and Sterling and I had shoveled and took a few passes on it. It was fun.

And I always (until a few years ago, of course) had a magnificent cake that Carol baked. She was a professional pastry chef when I met her, so her desserts were amazing. This year, I hadn't been able to get to the grocery store for several days, nor could my daughter Bridget, who lives a couple of miles from me now, get here with the roads as they were. So I had to make do with what food I had in the house. I cooked some rice and vegetables and ate the two Pepperidge Farm chocolate chip cookies I had left in a bag on the counter. Sounds kind of pathetic, I guess, but it was the best I could do with what I had on hand. Which is, maybe, what I can say in general about most everything these days.

One of my great ambitions growing up was to reach the age of 50 and be economically self-sustaining. I was kind of frail and very impractical as a child, day-dreamy, socially remote, so the thought of actually growing up and having a decent job seemed like a stretch to me. This year, I turned 70. I have had a real career, a beautiful wife, two amazing kids, and now have enough money to do what I want when I want. In other words, I have vastly exceeded my own expectations. It was nice to celebrate that, quietly, by myself, with gratitude and some pride, too, maybe tinged with a little sadness, the way you feel after a big, hard job is done, accomplished, happy to have made it, a little sorry to see it



all looking back instead of ahead. And, especially, to have to “celebrate” this one snowbound, home alone.

Last year I was very ill for most of February, so the big days passed like a series of cryptic road signs on a tour of Nightmareville. In the aftermath, as I started to come to, I felt different, all that rage I carried having maybe been boiled out of me by a high fever. It did not, I now know, leave for good, though when it arises it is more appropriate to my age. 70 years old: a lot of bluster and noise, not a lot of muscle to back it up, pretty easy to fight off.

Yesterday, when I woke up, I felt again like something was different, not on that scale, but noticeable, more like a tweak than a major upheaval, a shift toward neutral in my inner realm, indexed by one of the things I say to myself repeatedly, multiple times daily, out loud quite often or silently even more often, like a mantra, when I have to confront the realities life now: “I don’t really care anymore.” There are other variations of it—“I don’t care about anything anymore,” “nothing really matters anymore,” etc.—but the underlying message is the same: What was there is gone and won’t be replaced; what you came here to do is done and can’t be redone. I call these phrases mantras because they arise in my mind so often, at least 25-30 times a day that I’m aware of and are designed to settle me down, help me come to terms with whatever is agitating me at the moment, allow me to see it as so small instead of all. Mantras are learned and repeated with intention. These function more like a fast-moving tickertape on the side of a building in Times Square, news being reported to my nervous system from some external source. They are an index to my mind of winter, nothing myself, beholding nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. So what do I care?

That phrase (and its alter-egos) became gradually, over the last couple of years, a sort of shorthand to help me cope with the various losses I’ve experienced in the aftermath of the big one, personal relationships, my job, my long-time home back East, and the million tiny other things in the same vein that accompany

those kinds of losses, including the unpleasant indignities associated with aging in general. So, over and over, I console, sometimes inspire, myself by insisting I don't care anymore. This kind of thinking is, I am certain, not depression. It is more a sign of mental health, the willingness to accustom oneself with what is there, to be satisfied, or least not pine away for what can't ever be, no wishing and hoping and praying for magical solutions to unsolvable problems. In its best version, it is akin the "learning to receive the gifts that are offered" (56) I wrote about in *Last Spring*; the ability to see what's still there, or newly there, what might under more favorable circumstances simply fall beneath the radar of perception, another form of invisible loss, or never have arisen at all. And my gifts are extraordinary. I can't imagine a more perfect place for me to have moved, exactly "my speed" as my daughter would say, such a lovely town, the bounty of natural beauty, all the places I get to walk through and see, the ones I wrote about in *First, Summer*. My daughter just up the road, my son in regular contact with me, both doing so well. And so much more. Those precious things now step forth and are found, blessedly.

Yesterday, when I woke up saying "I don't really care" in my head, that phrase took on a different valence, tweaked, as I said, to neutral, toward something more like detachment, a stepping away from caring about "anything," as a form of spiritual advance. I'm no expert on Buddhism, but I have read enough to know how to meditate and have meditated enough to know, fleetingly, what detachment from things feels like. What I felt this morning was like that, very pleasant, this not-caring for what's not there in any case, or bemoaning what might be but isn't, or hoping for what could be but won't be. Or even stressing inordinately over what's left. Everything like dust made visible by sunlight through a window on a bright day, all equal. Why get agitated over it?

It had that Zen aspect to it, my tickertape breathing me toward genuine detachment. Where I was this morning was not transcendence, the real guru-goal. It was just calm, like a visage with a wry smile. No halo. Rage has no foundation there, or a

weak one maybe, one that won't support it for long. Even if it arises, one can say: I don't care about that either. It, too, will soon pass. I liked that feeling, a strange form of inner "peace." I can't say I've earned it, because I never imagined it as a possible outcome to strive toward, and I certainly haven't done the hard work of meditating that the great mystics did to achieve transcendence. Maybe I evolved into it by looking up at the tickertape over and over.

More likely, it just happened on its own, like almost everything else in my life has just happened on its own lately. A good example of that is my moving cross-country when I retired, disposing of almost all my belongings and flying off that way. Some say they think that was courageous. Some find it inspiring. Some find it confusing. Some crazy. Some stupid. Whatever. For me, as I experienced it, it just happened. Any number of other things more or less dramatic could just as well have happened if circumstances or events had been tweaked ever so slightly, like with those barely off-kilter gravity waves right after the Big Bang, producing the highly particulated universe of light and dark and things and life that we have instead of a big pail full of dirty brown water spilling out amorphously into infinity. But they didn't. So this happened. Because it was the only thing left that could.

Most days are like that for me now. I have no idea whatsoever I will do on any given one. I showed my 2019 calendar to my daughter recently. I had one appointment marked in January, medical, and one in February, taxes. Other than that it's just a very nice series of pictures of birds of the Northwest, more art than business. But it is not a vacuum. It is like a series of empty "appointments" with temporal spaces that I will fill with whatever engagements happen to garner my attention day by day. That is what this kind of not-caring is like. It is not a nothingness, nor does it cause me to do nothing. It is, day after day, the absence of any obligatory something, inviting me fill it with anything. Anything at all will do, really, and every individual possible thing is equally consequential. So, every day some various things happen.

I may start firmly fixed on one goal or destination, change my mind twice on the way for no good reason I can fathom, and end up doing something entirely different, or just turning around and going back to start over. I may end up seeing an astounding natural spectacle, like the Olympic Mountains arrayed in their long line when I look down from the end of the boardwalk downtown, if the air is clear enough, as it was just yesterday, a woman I was standing beside, dressed to the nines, having just come out of a beauty parlor, on her way to something of consequence I assumed, as we waited for the light to change, commenting on it spontaneously, how it was her favorite spot, that intersection, waiting for the light to change, gazing at that spectacle, when the sun is out and the air is clear. Or I may just vacuum the rugs. All equal.

It's possible that one of these days I will leave the house on my way to the grocery store and end up in China. Both equally amazing and surprising "appointments" to keep, from this position of equipoise I hope to find myself in on my better days now. Because, well, as I said, "I don't really care anymore," and that's one of the many things it makes possible. In a good way. On a good day. Like today. Woodard Bay. All the way to the point. Which is what maybe I should have been writing about here. Instead, you get my screed on the mysteries of meteorology and the inside of my head. Sorry. But at least I decided to spare you the riff on God I actually wrote up, the one that left me so "ill at ease," because it was, like, yikes! So maybe we're even.



## Parmenides

*The horses that take me to the ends of my mind  
were taking me now: the drivers had put me  
on the road to the Goddess, the manifest Way  
that leads the enlightened through every delusion.*

*I was on that road. Wizard mares  
strained at the chariot and maidens drove it.*

. . .

*Where I begin is all one to me  
Wherever I begin I will return again . . .*

*Speaking and thinking are the same as WHAT IS.  
WHAT IS exists*

*Nothing does not  
Keep this before you*

*. . . for to think and to be are one  
and the same*

Parmenides (11, 14)

This is where I begin the series of mini-essays that I hope will amount to my “book” on the imagination, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE: “all one to me”—a distinctive power of imagination in Western history, its capacity to unify separate multiples, fuse contraries—with Parmenides, on the road to the Goddess, thinking and being one and the same, my definition of the imagination in its purest form—again, a distinctive power, its capacity to synthesize discrete perceptions into seamless “worlds” and then embody these evanescent inner experiences in vivid external forms. While, Parmenides says, “nothing” does

not exist, it remains, even here I'd say, a subtle presence in the equation, the "is not" that makes "what is" possible, a more cryptic version of the function "nothing" serves, 2500 years later, in Wallace Stevens' poem "The Snow Man,"

*For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

You will see these basic elements in the many theories I explore along the way, with Coleridge at the apical pivot point a couple of thousand years hence and a couple of hundred years ago.

The work of Parmenides, like all the pre-Socratic thinkers, survived primarily in fragments, via quotations in other texts for example, which scholars subsequently assembled in the ways that made the most sense. His work is, as you can see, stunningly intense. He has been appropriated into the ongoing narrative that is the "history of philosophy" as the original monist, everything singular and unchanging; the one who first separates appearances from reality, setting up Plato's later concept of transcendent "ideas" both distinct from and superior to their instantiations in our everyday world. I have no interest in that Parmenides, if he ever even existed in such a simplistic form. Read the opening six lines above, which introduce his long, ecstatic vision of a young man's journey to the heavens via a speed-of-light flaming chariot pulled by wizard mares to meet the Goddess who will teach him her wisdom. Wow, "monist" is quite a redaction of all those pyrotechnics.

Parmenides, among the many things he was—shaman, cosmologist, philosopher, teacher—was first and foremost a poet. Just read those opening lines again. What else could you call that but a poem? Yes, he did propose a "Being" that was changeless, eternal, even timeless, one that we humans can encounter face to face, as he does in the heavens via the young man in his space-age chariot. And yes, he offers the original ontological alternative to Heraclitus, for whom all was changeful,

who famously never stepped into the same river twice. I like Heraclitus too, quite a lot. Philosophers have explored this baffling conundrum, the seeming contrariness of multiplicity and unity, flux and stillness, from these two bad-boys through to Badiou. To pit one against another, though, especially as progenitors of two competing traditions seems stupid to me. A poet wouldn't do that.

Poets are not just capable of but defined by a capacity that Keats calls "negative capability," a chronic state of generative irresolution between competing mental states. Emerson similarly poo-pooes "a foolish consistency," that this-or-that-but-never-both mentality that afflicts Western thinking, the "hobgoblin of little minds" he calls it (138). Whitman ratchets that up several notches further: "So I contradict myself," he says, "I am large, I contain multitudes" (95). For him it's not even binary, an either/or. He can keep multitudes of competing, even contradictory thoughts and ideas quite comfortably of a piece, like what a quantum computer might be a generation from now, as you know if you have read any of his work. That's what a poet does. That's what all of us do, I believe, no matter what "philosophers" might say.

The primary term I'll be recurring to here to name the faculty of mind that makes that kind of magic possible is "imagination," a term that the British and American Romantics elevated to the pinnacle of human being-in-the-world, that many of the Modernists used to leverage out their various poetic systems, a term that has been mostly off the menu, or at its margins, for the last couple of generations. I'm not necessarily interested in revalorizing it, establishing a new Romanticism. For me it's more a placeholder for the human function that makes life alive, that makes poems poems, that makes me happy, here, now, possible even. And Parmenides is where I begin, those horses, the ends of my mind, the manifest Way. WHAT IS exists, all one to me.



## Poem

I wrote this poem in the early fall of 1971 after an evening walk in Frick Park in Pittsburgh, where I had moved shortly after graduating from college. I was unemployed and living under, well, dire economic distress (I'll spare you the details) waiting for an induction notice into the US Army. A few months earlier I had taken and passed my military physical and been "awarded" a 1-A designation, the only A I ever would have gladly traded for a (4)F. I went in that day with at least three exemptionable conditions, including being beneath the minimum weight for service, which I achieved naturally, just by being extremely skinny all my life. I had a note from a doctor for the other two. No matter. I passed. Where I came from, a rural county in the anthracite coal mining region of northeastern Pennsylvania, they passed everyone. I laugh when I hear that Donald Trump was exempted for "bone spurs." Where I came from—no one had money even remotely of that consequence—they would have said, "Oh, so you have bones, great, pass." Money can buy anything in this country, I knew even back then—including, I found out in more detail this week, admission to the college of your choice, with a scholarship in a sport you cannot play. And, of course, "exoneration." "Hey, the poor guy has bone spurs. How much should he have to suffer in this life?"

In the draft "lottery" I had the misfortune (my birthday on the 13<sup>th</sup> maybe) of drawing a low number, 121, almost a shoo-in for a call-up. The year before I graduated they had drafted much higher than that, in the 190s, as best I can remember. So I waited. Knowing I wasn't going to report, I mulled my range of horrible options, trying to decide which I'd pick. I had ruled out CO, knowing I was not beyond killing under the right circumstances. The day of my physical I felt I might want to kill any number of the horrible people I encountered in my many hours of walking around in my underwear.

After the physical was over, around 5, I was waiting for my brother to come and pick me up. We had been discharged into the street and it was pouring, I mean Biblical pouring. By the time my brother came, with my mother in the car, I was surprised to see, I was drenched to the skin. And cold. They both thought it was too dangerous to drive in that downpour, that we should wait it out. I said, "I'll drive" and I proceeded to do just that, about 60 miles an hour over narrow country roads, able to see maybe three feet in front of the car. I always trusted my senses and my instincts, especially under pressure, so I felt safe and in control the whole way. My mother vowed never to get in a car with me again. I mean once we got home, without my having killed her.

One of the blessings of my life has been the way that, from time to time, poetic possession, what I'll call, following Plato, a "divine madness" in the next inter-chapter, can take me out of myself, relieve me of my diurnal "me-ness" for a few minutes, allow me to be absorbed, in a good way, by what I see around me, illuminated from within by its "what-ness." That's what this poem is about, in the midst of my angst, just taking this magical walk in Frick Park. I can't remember if there was also external illumination that night. I say "like moonlight" in the poem, and I tend to say what I see, so I'm assuming there was. The transmogrification happens just like that, leaving behind "nothing but moonlight in a thicket." And "all that he wanted to say." That "he" is both "me," the one who actually says something even though "I do not know what to say," and some inner or outer "not-me" who comes like a thief in the night to take what he wants, leaving behind these traces of words. Yes, the imagination.

This poem never found a publisher in its day, or any day, though I always thought it should have. Until, that is, a few years ago, after a young friend of mine, exactly my age when I wrote the poem, the smartest person I met in my time at the University of Pittsburgh, found it on my website and wrote an extended

commentary that brought tears to my eyes. I documented all of this in *This Fall*, its debut. And now it gets to take its walk again.

### *The Poet Comes Out at Night*

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

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

*I follow each flick  
of the blade 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.*



February 25, 2019: So Much Depends Upon . . .

*This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,  
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,  
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,  
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.  
Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean  
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.*

from "Evangeline," H. W. Longfellow

Today was just a gorgeous day, high sky bright blue, puffy white clouds just sitting up there, a Simpson's-summer sky, the only index to winter the temperature, around 40, still cold. This morning I walked downtown on the boardwalk. It was breezy, water dark and choppy, a couple of baffleheads diving down for food, their delicate brown crests perfectly coifed the whole while. But the air so clear. I stopped at several vantage points to gaze off at the Olympic mountains, 60-some miles west of here as the crow flies, only visible when it's very clear, an impressive series of sharp, jagged, ice-draped peaks, maybe 6 or so, in a long line at the far horizon, shoals of soft clouds hovering above them today, having swum up from the windward side to settle there, creating their own weather. They range in elevation from 7000 to 8000 feet (I just learned from Wikipedia), but the clearer the air the bigger they look. Today, they looked huge.

Mount Rainier, off in the opposite direction, also about 60 miles, is the tallest peak around here, over 14,000 feet. There are only a few good vantage points in town where it comes into view, when the air is very clear, like today, and I do mean comes into view. For example, just above my local grocery store there is a spot where you see it, driving. Nothing, nothing, nothing, then this massive monolith, like a mega-pyramid, icy white this time of year. A few seconds, and it's gone. Same thing coming down the hill on the other side of Budd Bay, the road I take to the

mall. You're coming down Harrison Avenue and all of a sudden this super-massive overturned snow cone juts up on the horizon, much bigger-looking even than the grocery store spot, because of the angle of vantage, I'm assuming. And another spot when you're walking around Capital Lake downtown, a stretch of maybe 20 feet where you can see it peeking between buildings. These mountains are mesmerizing to me, never having lived among such giants before. But they are equally mesmerizing to the locals, maybe because most days you just can't see them. Then like hungry recluses, on a day like today, they come right downtown to shop with us. I took a number of pictures which I'm sure will be disappointing, given my camera, my skills, and most especially their meagerness in comparison to live vision, animated by my real-time stunnedness.

This afternoon I walked in Watershed Park, the first time in over two weeks I've been there. The great snow of 2019 closed the park and it remained closed until this week, so much snow and ice on the paths and boardwalk bridges over the streams, so many trees downed by the extra weight of white they had to bear. The trees here are, of course, huge, and they look muscled up. But they are not adapted to heavy snow on their limbs as Eastern trees are. So branches break under that added weight, especially those already covered in a dense fur of moss. The moss is sometimes an inch or more thick, very puffy and dangly, moisture laden, enough so to support little colonies of ferns right up there in the trees. Everything—trunks, branches, twigs, stumps, you name it—is just enveloped in this overcoat of flora, especially the hemlocks, their downflowing boughs like long dark gowns adorned with this silvery filigree. That's what made me think of Longfellow, remembering that passage from maybe middle school, my thinking back then he must be writing about someplace like the swamps in Louisiana, that other Acadia, instead of the original Acadia, in Canada of all places, which must have the same sort of temperate rain forests as we have here. Longfellow's description also made me think of these moss-draped trees as figures of wisdom, like Merlin, maybe, the tall hat, the long beard. I joked recently with a friend that I

expect to wake up some morning covered with moss and ferns. In any case, my guess would be that most branches are already carrying the weight of a very heavy falling of snow before any snow at all falls. So the extra weight can be unbearable, breaking limbs, sometimes dragging down even the tallest trees. And until all that fallen lumber is cleared, the park paths are either impassable at points, or the parks close completely.

I enjoyed my return to Watershed Park today as much as I enjoyed my return to Woodard Bay a few days ago. It was emotional, quite touching, like seeing a familiar face after long separation. There is in fact one huge Douglas fir about 100 yards down the path I start on that is now my actual friend. I feel its warmth and openness every time I pass it, usually reach out and touch it, like I'm shaking its hand. It is especially pleasing to me because I haven't walked in any of these parks enough yet to feel fully at home, let alone at one, with the trees. They remind me of the people here: Very polite, laid back, cheerful, charming, everyone saying hello, how are you; but also diffident, reserved, judicious, careful about taking that next step, the one that might come with some consequences. I have no problem with that, either among the trees or with the people. Sometimes you just have to show up over and over, enough times until you're an integral part of the landscape or the community. The intervening step of "hey, let's be friends" gets skipped over. At some point, you're just in, one of them, the whole concept of "friend" becoming redundant. Now that one tree reaches out to me, I'm sure there will be more. I am grateful for that, a promise that I'm on the right path here, at least with the trees.

One of the things I noticed today was how normal, routine, the landscape looked to me. Those things that just blew my mind when I first got here, the size of things, the drapes of moss, the wall-to-wall forest-floor shag of shoulder-tall of ferns, the full-size trees growing right on top of downed older-growth trees, almost incomprehensible back then, all looked today like Boyce Park used to look to me back in Pittsburgh. Just what woods are. I even tried at a couple of points to recover that sense of stunned

wonder gazing at things I know impacted me that way last summer. But they still looked normal. That made me happy, made me feel I live here now, I mean really live here, that this is my home, and I know how to live in it.

Moving so far under the circumstances I moved last summer is hard. It takes a considerable leap of faith, and maybe a sense of “well, I just don’t care anymore,” to take that leap. It could go catastrophically wrong. The new place could feel like a limbo forever, exile, never home, a disconnectedness aggravated by the fact that you know you can’t go back to your former home, which doesn’t exist any longer. I know I still have a way to go before more trees and people receive me into their company. But today I gave myself credit for making pretty good headway. I know one tree really well, a few well enough to have a conversation with, and I am in love with the places I now live and walk in, the things I see, those mountains, say, so far off, but right there, too. I have worked so hard to get here. You have no idea how hard unless you’ve done something like this. At least for someone like me, not a dazzling social butterfly to say the least. This is now my home, and I’m sticking to it. A little pat on the back for having accomplished that, at my age, in nine months, well, that seemed warranted.

While I was walking I found myself thinking about William Carlos Williams’ zany, hybridic, blast of book *Spring and All*, maybe because today was the first day this winter that the concept of a possible spring seemed at least tenable, a distant dream maybe, but at least tenable. Williams’ book contains those famous little poems that end up in school book anthologies, each propped up as an isolated, individual artifact. If you’ve read any of Williams’ poems, it is likely these. The “red wheelbarrow” poem (none of them have titles in the book, only Roman numerals) is the most famous, if the least radical among them:



*so much depends  
upon*

*a red wheel  
barrow*

*glazed with rain  
water*

*beside the white  
chickens.*

Twenty-seven of these are scattered throughout his book like little islands jutting up in the midst of the wide ocean of his prose argument on behalf of the “Imagination.” Parts of his argument are awesome, parts are unintelligible, parts are nonsensical, parts are hilarious in their extremity. It is a wild ride, this book that not many ever read. And the poems, seemingly so slight when wrenched out and read separately, exactly the kind of poems that make many students wonder what’s so great about poetry anyway, I could write that in my sleep, are luminous in their native habitat here, like deft sketches for what Modernist poems in a truly American tradition might look like or aspire toward. They are the parts of the book that help his overall argument make sense in a practical way. I think I’ll get that book out and reread it.

It is a great alternative to T.S Eliot’s “spring” poem, “The Waste Land:” “April is the cruelest month” is how he starts. No it is not, Tom. Not by a longshot. Take February, for example. From here April looks heroic, heralding “spring,” the thought of it, the concept of it, the fact of it. My own book *Last Spring*, which takes its title from the lunacy of the academic calendar, wherein January, February, March and April are the “spring term” instead of winter, which is what they are, even April quite often, in Pittsburgh at least. Well, that is actually a “winter book.” Which means I still have a spring book to write to

complete the cycle of seasons in this series. This book may turn out to be it, even if it must take a “winter” title given the timing and the fact it is the only “season” I haven’t already used. Only time will tell. In any case, I will take my inspiration from Williams not Eliot in that regard.



## Plato

*As to the soul's immortality then we have said enough, but as to its nature there is this that must be said. What manner of thing it is would be a long tale to tell, and most assuredly a god alone could tell it, but what it resembles, that a man might tell in briefer compass. Let this therefore be our manner of discourse. Let it be likened to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer.*

Plato, *Phaedrus* (246a)

Socrates, writing a generation after Protagoras, and by implication Plato, the “student” who documents his dialogues, say all kinds of disparaging things about the poet and poetry in general, most famously in the *Republic*, from which he deemed the poet’s banishment necessary. And, in the speech I quote above, his second speech on love directed to young Phaedrus, a soaring testimony on behalf of love’s beauty, goodness and power, shortly after the above passage, he relegates the poet to the 6<sup>th</sup> level down on the human totem pole, with the philosopher, of course, first and the tyrant last, 9<sup>th</sup>. So the poet is definitely on the lower half of the curve, a lightweight, a purveyor of semblances, those imaginative figments several steps removed from the higher Ideas. Yet here at the most crucial point in this speech, performing what is always the most crucial part of the Socratic argument, defining terms, he turns to poetry, metaphor, as his preferred “discourse,” one suited to “a man” not the gods.

Over and over in the dialogues Socrates quotes extensively and respectfully the poets of his age, always from memory, exact memory, most especially when he has a complex or subtle distinction to make, one that might take many pages to work out in its fullness, as in the *Protagoras* for example where he uses a poem/song of Simonides’ to tease out his ideas about being and

becoming, the absolute keystone in his critique of that great sophist Protagoras. Sophists, by the way, are 8<sup>th</sup> down on the pecking order of value in this world, below even the poets.

And he says this earlier in the *Phaedrus*:

*All the great arts require endless talk and ethereal speculation about nature. This seems to be what gives them their lofty point of view and universal applicability. (270a, p. 515)*

It is, to my way of reading, by this means, “ethereal speculation about nature,” what another translator calls “star-gazing,” and by extended, extemporaneous conversation with others, or even in our own heads, that truths become “written on the soul” (276a, 521), which is, given Socrates’ aversion to actually copying things down in a textual form, the only kind of “writing” he endorses.

Beyond that, I can’t imagine that anyone could read Plato without leaving with both an admiration for and a deep feeling from his poetic genius. Yes, I know, he is claimed by philosophy, at least in the archives of the contemporary academy, absorbing him into that discipline, now 2500 years in the making, so far removed from his local moment. Socrates is a very smart man. He must surely see the irony in moves of the sort I just described in his arguments, which happen over and over, whereby the very “logical” point he is making is undercut by the terms of its making. I could list example after example of this, but they have been quite well documented by his postmodern counterparts, most especially Jacques Derrida. But Plato, to me, is even smarter, or at least inevitably more self-aware of all of this, because he is actually writing it down. His is not the one-and-done kind of interlocution preferred by his mentor, who never wrote down one word of his thinking. Over and over, I can’t help but see Plato smiling the smile of a poet, knowing he is both saying and doing at least two things at the same time, sometimes more, mutually contradictory things, the kind of sleight of hand worthy of a poet, of the imagination.

My main point here is this: Both Socrates and Plato turn to poetic discourse, and often, to do the main work of their argument. So why? Well, Socrates says why above: Because when faced with the greatest mysteries and conundrums of being in this world, not only is resemblance, figurative language, the only “discourse” we have for examining and declaring it, it is actually, quite astonishingly, more efficient than the one the gods have! We can do quickly what would take them much longer. Okay, maybe in the end they would do it better, but Socrates says over and over here and elsewhere that, while we may become more asymptotically godly on this earthly plane, and need to if we ever hope to escape our painful cycle of earthly lives, we are not gods. We, therefore, can’t have their discourse even if we wanted it. And their discourse cannot in any case be constituted by words, language, or any other available mode of semblance and simulation, the only kinds we humans have and must rely on—all dissociative in some way—to convey what we see and know.

When we approach the godly state of mind, as, for example, the kind of love that this speech describes and endorses, it is beyond our human capacity to render directly. It is, to use a concept from Longinus, writing a few centuries down the line, sublime. And it can only be intimated figuratively, poetically, held in the spell of a very specific kind of “madness,” a madness that comes from the gods. This becomes a mode of “vision” that in rendering the truth, actually changes the way we see, look at, apprehend what is beautiful before us, whatever “beloved” that might be.

Yes, that is love. That is what vision informed by love does. And vision informed by love is poetry. QED. That is where my argument starts and ends. Were I arguing with Socrates, he probably would find some tricky way to escape this bind of both diminishing the value of poetry while he uses it to do his most important work. I’m probably not quick enough to “win” under those circumstance, though I don’t think I’d be as stupid as

either Phaedrus or Protagoras is. But he and I would know what the truth is.

As H. D. says 2500 years later:

*Socrates' whole doctrine of vision was a doctrine of love.*

*We must be "in love" before we can understand the mysteries of vision. (22)*

And, if we can love what we see well enough to be fully taken by the madness of the gods, it will find its way into a "reality" that is poetic, no matter what "appearance" it might take on. Absent the language of the gods, this is the most godly way we have to say what we are in love with here, to the imagination "addressed."

## Poem

I wrote this poem in the late 1980s, another very stressful time. I was coming up for tenure (the academic equivalent of the draft physical, in or out, today, no "deferments," and in this case a 1-A was clearly preferable to a 4-F) in a department that was in turmoil, some of which had to do with me. Again, I'll spare you the details. I had a brand-new daughter at home, Bridget, who is now my near-neighbor out here in the Northwest. I was worried. If I got turned down, it could have been 1971 all over again.

I was walking to work down the hill through Schenley Park in Pittsburgh, my usual route, a bright spring day, the trees in that early transitional phase, each twig-tip half bud half leaf, that half green half yellow shade of flora you only see for a few days at exactly that moment, thinking about my lifetime's-worth of moments when I felt at one with the trees, like they were my actual peers, wishful I could just turn into one and get it over with. The Greek myth of Daphne turning into a tree to escape from the love-mad Apollo, one Socrates would have known,

crossed my mind, and all those myths about a time when people believed that sort of transmogrification could actually happen to real people in real life. That's the first part of the poem.

All of this called to mind an incident I remember from early childhood where a very big tree felt to me like it wanted to absorb me directly into it. That's part II. Parts III and IV document more immediate moments in relation to this theme, those two birds in that blue sky, so vivid I can still see them circling. And again, what's left behind is just these words on the page, "their voices or mine, singing." I had an article to finish up for publication, one crucial to my survival in the academy. I did finish it. But I wrote this poem first. I hate that article. I love this poem.

*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  
into a cloudless, blue sky,  
thousands of leaves puffed  
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  
5 or 6 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  
to stay away, 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 just 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?<sup>?</sup> the grappling  
fingers of someone else's past?<sup>?</sup>  
death's staccato laughter?<sup>?</sup>  
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.*



February 26, 2019: The Half-life of My Love

*A Thought went up my mind today –  
That I have had before –  
But did not finish – some way back –  
I could not fix the Year –*

*Nor where it went – nor why it came  
The second time to me –  
Nor definitely, what it was –  
Have I the Art to say –*

*But somewhere – in my Soul – I know –  
I've met the Thing before –  
It just reminded me – 'twas all –  
And came my way no more –*

Emily Dickinson

Today, another bright, brilliant day, I drove around to the various spots where Mount Rainier becomes visible. The view from most of them lasts only seconds because they are driving vantage points, but it was spectacular. Mount Rainier is the tallest peak in the Cascade range and the only one visible from here as far as I know. When it arises into sight, it hardly seems real, a giant pyramid covered with thick frost, the kind you used to get in old refrigerators, before the “frost free” circulation systems came on, crusty-looking, dense. The clouds created by the Cascades today were lower than Mount Rainier. It towered out of them like it was just floating, might be mistaken for one, same color white, if it weren't so pointy. Then I walked for a while on the boardwalk, gazed again at the Olympics while they're still visible, looked just like yesterday, an armada arrayed on the western horizon, banks of clouds perched atop them like billowing smoke from steam engines. It is colder today, with a chilly breeze, and part of my normal walk was blocked off by construction vehicles, so I cut it short. I had in any case already

done what I wanted today: I took advantage of the clear skies to see many things amazing and far away.

Now that I say that, I'm thinking this day was right from the outset destined for the amazing and the far away, in this case my life now, not so much what I've made of it, but what it has become, seemingly on its own over the last few years, poised now toward something indistinct, far off but at least now visible, like those mountains on a clear day. I have no idea how I did it. I could understand someone else doing it, someone more adaptable or adventurous than I am. I am not either of those things temperamentally. I like being where I am, doing what I'm doing over and over, averse to drastic change down to my bones. But here I am. I'm not sure what's happening in me. I think it's good, but I don't know. Maybe in a few weeks or months it will be clearer. I just feel like a couple of days ago I passed what I called that "expiration date," having been alone so long, endured and risked so much along the way to get here, on my own, not because I wanted it that way, just the way things went. I could be wrong. I often am. But I don't mind this feeling. I'm proud of myself—for making it here, for loving myself well enough to fill all the empty space.

Just as I was waking up today, a thought, an extended stream of one thought more than a series of thoughts, was swirling around slowly, like bath water starting down the drain, slowly at first, then the cone grows deeper, the water passes faster, then it's gone. Maybe it was what was left over from a dream I can't remember. Maybe it just arose there in that liminal state I sometimes find my head in when I wake up happy and a little loopy all at once. I like those states of mind and the days they inaugurate. The last twirl of that thought took this form: "Something is afoot in my head; something is ahead in my foot." Kind of stupid-sounding, but worth tracing back to where it first started swirling.

That's where the Emily Dickinson poem comes in, the one above, that first line "A thought went up my mind today," a

haunting rendition of what it feels like to have a deep thought that you can't ever quite pin down, put into words, even understand, its meaning, its origin, its destination, yet you recognize its general shape, its import, and sense how it will go on to shape your thinking in profound ways going forward. My thought, I guess, went "down my mind" today, down the drain I mean, slowly, and here's what it looked like in the process.

It started where I left off a few days ago, that something in me was changing, deep down, something I had no way of naming, more a tweak than a transformation. Today that thought assumed, figuratively, the shape of me in a very small, tidy boat in the middle of a very large, horizonless, body of water, calm water, not scary or threatening in any way. And I was thinking that after many, many months of my paddling furiously in search of land, another boat, something, anything, it was time to give it up, that I was going to be adrift this way for the rest of my life. This thought was, surprisingly to me, neither scary nor depressing. It was almost a relief, made me feel peaceful. There was, I already knew, enough sustenance from this water to keep me nourished, and I was in a boat plenty strong enough to keep me afloat for as long as the rest of my life was likely to take. I could survive here, as I have for years. But I could also, I started to think, live here quite comfortably.

I was reading some of W.H. Auden's poems yesterday, ended up writing a couple of my own in his manner and style, a mode of simulation I just enjoy. Here's one I wrote that seems pertinent to what I'm trying to get at here:

*I tell myself each passing day  
today's the one: I'll find a way  
to make this love recede  
to memory, bleached of need.*

*And every day I fail.  
It billows up, a wind-blown sail,  
drives deeper down a chartless sea*

*that has no whit of care for me.*

*No matter, I strive to steer,  
it takes another path, will veer  
whichever way it pleases, goes  
fitfully, never slows.*

*I tell myself each passing night  
perhaps that bright star's light  
will guide me home once more,  
anchored near a sun-blached shore,*

*out of love at last,  
memories safely past,  
half a life made whole  
by reclaiming half its soul.*

*Then I fear: the half-life of my love  
may exceed the life of that star above.*

After Carol passed, I used the expression “off the rails” to describe my wandering lostness. And I knew I wasn’t likely to find them again. I didn’t even want to. I’ve led big parts of my life on the rails. It’s not that great, really, the answers laid out there for you, the future, the past, all visible and predictable, not much room for the big questions, just keep going, keep your promises, fulfill your duties, responsibilities, all good things, really, and essential if you choose to pursue a relatively normal life in human culture, get an education, a job, married, have children, all huge commitments that extend rails forward until they merge at the horizon, promising, it seems, a perpetuity of order. Were Carol still with me, I would be happily on at least that pair of rails. But I’m not. I do still have and feel deep connections to my grown kids. But they are grown. They love me, but need me less and less. The rails there are kind of amorphous.

The problem with this metaphor is that once a train goes off the rails it either tips over and stops (which mine didn’t) or it just

keeps barreling around through the woods and fields without any guidance or destination (which mine did), creating a lot of havoc. If you're engineering a train like that, you'd better keep it away from populated areas. And when you risk traveling into them, out of loneliness, or even just curiosity, those living there will quickly get out of the way, which they did in my case, understandably.

The boat in the big lake is not like that. It just bobs around, can be paddled here and there, does no damage at all to the water, which doesn't even remember its passing. So, adrift was how my thought started its swirl today. It meandered then through the "I don't care" business I wrote about yesterday. When you're adrift without, apparently, any prospect of rescue or landfall, you can panic, rage, scheme, hope, dream, fear. Or not care. Fashion a line and a hook to fish, figure a way to catch rainwater to drink. Keep sailing. The circumstances will not vary. It's just a matter of how hard you make it on yourself to endure them. And, at a certain point in an extended process of not-caring, endure turns into engage. And at some point, it will turn into enjoy. I'm not at that last point, but today I could imagine it.

In many ways, my thought-swirl suggested, it may now be too late for me to return to land. I've just drifted too far out to get back. It's not necessarily that I have to be always alone. It was more that if I were ever again to have someone intimately in my life in an ongoing way, they would have to be like me, like Emily Dickinson: already happily adrift, but open to mooring up with another boat. Those are rare people. I think, in retrospect, that's why I fell in love with Emily Dickinson, late last fall. She was like that, like me, even more so, in the most charming and alluring ways. I made an album of songs based on her poems. [See the March 4 essay for more details.] My favorite is this one:

*Wild nights - Wild nights!  
Were I with thee  
Wild nights should be  
Our luxury!*



*Futile - the winds -  
To a Heart in port -  
Done with the Compass -  
Done with the Chart!*

*Rowing in Eden -  
Ah - the Sea!  
Might I but moor - tonight -  
In thee!*

Yes, rowing in Eden, exactly. Ah, the sea! Might I but moor tonight in thee. I think most readers would hear those lines exactly like I do, including the passionate, sexual implications, and the word “tonight,” not tomorrow, or forever, just tonight, everything you want or hope for when you’re adrift. A wild night. I recorded that song in one take about 3 AM one morning last November. I was alight with energy. I felt both for and with Emily, her longing and mine, my voice full of both our passions. It was electric. As a friend said later: “I guess you could say you had a wild night with Emily Dickinson.” Yes, yes I did, exactly that. As wild a night as a man could imagine. Writing this makes me think again about *Groundhog Day*, the way Phil Connors, after eons of striving, just wants and is grateful for one good day. “I’m happy now,” he says, “because I love you.” That’s what I think Emily Dickinson is talking about.

That accounts for the “something is afoot in my head” part of what I heard from the drain today. As for “something is ahead for my foot,” well, who knows. I do walk a lot, which is my sustenance, the primary way I encounter living things and experience love. Maybe I’ll end up traveling far and wide. Maybe I’ll just bob like one of those poem-filled bottles I wrote about in *Last Spring*, all the way to China. Maybe I’ll just be tying a string to my big toe while I fish and nap simultaneously, like in those old movies. Who knows, who cares. Maybe I should just focus on, and be happy with, the fact that there might really still be an “ahead” for me, not just the chronic time-locks I

keep drifting inside of, or the endless swirl of time down the drain. A real ahead. Adrift in my little boat. So beautiful. That's what I was thinking as I woke up this morning. I hope it is and will stay true. First, I need to pick an "ahead" for "my foot" and get out walking.



## Aristotle

*Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else . . . (1457b)*

*The greatest thing by far, is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblance. (1459a)*

Aristotle, *Poetics*

I have very little to say back to or about Aristotle, Plato's student, in regard to any of this. I think the first famous sentence in my epigraph is just not true and the second famous sentence is trivial. The whole notion that a name "belongs to" what it names implies that the foundational state of language is representational, this is this and that is that, no blurs, no overlaps; that the vector connecting word and thing is unilinear and direct. And that figurative language is a rare exception—transgressive, essentially erroneous. He isolates it in a group of other opaque elements of speech that includes, for example, "strange" or "foreign" words, which, of course, absent expertise or fluency, are unintelligible. Aristotle's concept of "belonging" seems to me to imply that we can in fact speak in the discourse of the gods. It may take a long time, but it will be precise, clear and distinct. Just like his prose seems, those many, many books—fifty have survived, and he may have written three or four times that many—all lined up neatly with clear titles on the bookshelf of Western intellectual history.

I can't buy that. Even Socrates wouldn't buy that. And Plato, his mentor, I think would find it way too simplistic. As to teachable? The only reason it might not be "teachable" in conventional academic terms is there is no need to teach it. You just have to nurture and encourage it. Everyone already knows how to use

figures because that's what language is. Open your mouth and something poetic will come out. No word "belongs" to anything. You may or may not like that, but it is the way it is. At least to a vast array of great thinkers, including a few philosophers. And to me.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, from which those sentences are extracted, is, of course, a landmark of critical thinking on modes of creative discourse and their effects, and in tandem with his *Rhetoric*; his treatise on expository discourse, Aristotle basically erected both the paradigm for and named the two primary categories of discourse we use to convey knowledge. You can see remote artifacts of that paradigm in contemporary English departments, which differentiate categorically between composition/rhetoric and literature/critical theory. These two classes of intellectuals have a hard time even talking with one another. I won't blame Aristotle for all of that (academics like it that way) but, well, he started it by putting them in two separate books.

More specifically, he named and defined the many distinct types of metaphor down to their finest details, and we rely on those definitions still today in textbook approaches for naming the poetic figures we must come to terms with in the processes of writing and reading, things with names like synecdoche and paraphrasis, and, well, you have no idea what the difference is, do you, that's how esoteric it becomes. But, to me, he is just boring, tiresome, kind of mechanistic, a good taker-aparter but not a great put-back-togetherer. The imagination is a putter-togetherer. Likewise, Aristotle is not "mad" in the ways that interest me, as a poet, as a human presence in this world. Plato is mad in a beautiful, often wryly funny way. Socrates is mad in a wiry, weird way. Aristotle, totally sane. Every sentence is confidently declarative, never a question mark in sight. Were Aristotle to read most of what I've written, he'd be most likely appalled, think I'm mad, too. And he'd be right. I am mad. But in a good way. So, I have very little to say about Aristotle. Read him for yourself.

## Poem

This is a needlessly long poem (for here, I mean, not in itself), the final poem in a book called *Harvest Moon* that I wrote in a literal state of “lunacy” in September 2016, held fully under the sway of that year’s actual “harvest moon.” I picked it because, toward the end, I make a funny (to me) reference to Aristotle as the source of many of the problems that afflict both Western thinking and the organizational structure of the modern university.

*9/19/2016: And now, right now,  
I'm calling this one done*

*That moon tonight looks a lot like me,  
not quite altogether, beach ball  
the day after, half flat the left  
side of its head, migraine maybe,  
air gone missing. I have no idea  
why we both went from wide-awake  
light brimming over everywhere,  
puffy-cheeked kid with such a smile,  
to saggy, dimmed down, looking out  
through vague, smudgy haze  
that either seeped out or seeped in,  
about as much light as that night-  
light I use now, not because I'm  
afraid of the dark, because I'm  
afraid I'll get afraid of it if I don't.*

*Kind of a relief, really, so intense,  
too much pressure to keep  
the air in, pour the light out,  
teaching-head heavy instead of  
TV-head light. Hear that hissing?*

*the air still going out of that moon  
from last night, my head, this book,  
five days in and it's already half-  
flat, like I'm stuck in all of Zeno's  
paradoxes at once, the half-way one,  
faster and faster to go slower  
and slower, a book in 20 days,  
then a book in 10 days, now  
a book in 5 days, and I'm just  
saying, I can't write another book  
in 2.5 days, no way, I have chores  
to do today that I put off to finish  
this one, I teach tomorrow all day,  
so you tell me, where does a book  
get written there? and even if it did,  
you know as well as Zeno does  
that sooner or later I'll be writing  
like a million books every microsecond  
and I'll still never get to "done,"  
and the arrow one, zinging along  
so fast but each instant a standstill,  
so which is it, zip-zip or zap?  
time turning into space or  
vice-versa and that's summer  
in a nutshell, so stop-action  
day after day you can't remember  
anything that came before,  
so fast it's like it didn't even happen,  
and the race one, that tortoise  
slow as those stones sliding  
over mud in Death Valley  
when the wind blows and  
no matter how fast Achilles runs  
he's can't ever catch him  
with that too-big head start  
he gave him, so if I'm Achilles,  
and maybe I am for all I know,  
I'm thinking, I'm going to make*

*a cup of tea and let that tortoise  
sweat it out wondering whether  
I'm gonna catch him at the wire  
because he's too slow to know  
that can never happen, no way,  
and I'm not even running anyway.*

*And really, you could argue  
this is not even a book, just another  
half-book, like the last one,  
that long line of half-books,  
my history, and I was just trying  
to decide whether to put checkered  
or decorated in front of history  
but the only way it sounded  
like a poem was if I used both  
and you can't because you end up  
with two half-thoughts that can't  
ever add up to one thought  
each racing on a different track  
toward half-books, and I'm  
calling this one Paul's paradox  
and, ditto, a cup of tea, Achilles,  
let them run as long as they  
want, because so what if I get  
another half-book, it's a  
whole-book world I work in,  
and maybe that's why  
I never get anywhere  
in this poetry racket:  
the only box you get  
is just too damn big for what  
I have to mail in, and sure,  
I could unroll a half-book  
of bubble wrap, and I got  
a headful of it, believe me,  
thousands of little pressed-  
together polyvinyl pierogis,*



*keeping this bit of empty away  
from that one, and you need them,  
really do, because if all that empty  
got together at once in there,  
there would be trouble,  
no way to say where this empty  
ends and that one begins  
on that long shelf of books,  
the ones Aristotle named:  
"this is this and that is that  
and don't mix up them up,  
OK, because it took me a lot  
of work to get them apart like  
that," the superhighway right to  
wwwdotbubblewrapdotedu,  
and for some reason I can't  
seem to write one whole one.*

*But don't get me wrong,  
I have no bone to pick with wwwdot,  
not at all, because if it weren't  
for wwwdot I'd be, what,  
Emily Dickinson shoving stuff  
in a drawer, where it dies, or I do,  
and if I'm lucky, I mean like  
lottery-type lucky, some  
huge doofus like Higginson  
(give me a break, Tom, what's with  
the Wentworth?) swoops in, scoops it  
up, says: don't look at her, look at me,  
too big a prick to stick my neck out  
for her while she was here and  
would have loved it, maybe even me,  
and hey, all I'm saying is if  
she says to me "I love you,"  
I'm outa here, like lickety-split,  
not even giving her the fake statue act,  
just, well, you know, she's wacked-*

*out as all hell and those poems  
are like, WTF? but, hey, now she's  
gone, looky here, slicked up by me,  
they look like a good whole book.  
I'm so-o-o smart. Well, no, Tom,  
you're not, YOU are NOT!*

*And I know enough now to know  
it wasn't always this way, take  
Parmenides, he hardly wrote even  
a half-book, and he's on Amazon,  
OK, I know, someone has to write  
a long preface and add lots of notes  
and there's tons of white space so it  
doesn't just end up being 10 pages  
and when you pick it up you think  
it's just two covers bubblewrapped  
around empty, I got totally ripped off . . .*

*or I could just talk, not bother  
with all this typed-up hype, like  
Socrates, say, never wrote down  
one word, just yakked and yakked  
with anyone he could track down,  
and I would love, just love, to be  
yak-yakking like that with smarties  
about the soul, say, but the way  
things work where I work I could sit  
in my office with the door open  
now 'til the cows come home,  
feet on my desk, and not a soul  
would walk through that door  
to talk about the soul, all of them  
crouching over desks behind  
closed doors writing whole books so  
they get to stay in the whole book  
building here with all the other  
whole book people, the ones*

*I mean who might wave, weak,  
rushing by my office while I'm  
waiting, but if all Plato had was*

*Protagoras: wave*

*Socrates: wave*

*well, there you have it,  
nutshell around nothing, so . . .*

*I'm going to go for a walk. I'm back.  
And first thing I noticed was  
now all that air is out there was room  
in there for me, I know, because  
I was there, all of me, on the drive over,  
not me talking to me, or pretending  
I'm talking to you when, get real,  
you know and I know you're not there,  
no one is, not for a half-book  
at wwwdot, I mean me just happy  
being me, and the drive went so  
slow, maybe not slow as that time  
in the WABAC machine I smoked  
some laced weed and it took me  
a week to drive three miles home  
and I was almost hoping I'd get  
pulled over so I could ask the cop  
am I really only driving .01 miles/hr?*

*Then I got there, and  
the sunroots I walk through  
right when I start are all  
just slumped over now,  
like their air was out, too,  
a few flecks of yellow  
still stuck up on the stems,  
but summer on the run,*

*and that was the last thing  
I can remember seeing  
on that walk because  
it was just me seeing  
not me seeing so I could  
pretend to see you seeing  
me seeing. And now, right now,  
I'm calling this one done.  
and now, right now,  
I'm calling lots of things done.  
You might be one of them.  
All I know is I'm not.  
And this is not the end  
because like I said: now  
I'm on this side of  
that. And when I say  
now, I mean now.*



February 28, 2019: Too True to Be Tolerated

*Underwear, Hats, Clouds*

*Spring air strings its fingers  
through my green hair.  
Washed clouds hang like innocent underwear,  
white against blue, drying.*

*Windows behind hats behind windows:  
I have passed them before,  
quietly, not wanting to be seen  
without my head.*

*Now, resigned, I laugh and linger.  
I shall not wear a hat:  
My clouds must come and go  
as they will.*

Paul Kameen

Today I took a new walk, down to the beach behind Evergreen State College up on the other side of town about 5 or 6 miles from here, a walk my daughter and my friend Lisa, both of whom walk their dogs there, said was quite beautiful. And they were right. Evergreen is the school Bridget came out here to study at 12 years ago. She had seen an article in a teen magazine her junior year in high school about “cool” schools and this one landed with her. It was created in the heyday of academic innovation during the 1970s, and it is one of the few such enterprises that survived the conservative institutional backlash of the 80s. It is still a cool place, such a beautiful campus, still progressively activist in its mission and its programs, still innovative in its curricular and assessment practices. I am so happy she ended up here, for her BA and then a Master in Teaching degree. Bridget spent her first two college years nearer

home (long story), but as soon as she was able she enrolled at Evergreen, drove cross-country with a friend, and set up shop here. She's been here ever since. Now I'm here. All because of an article about cool colleges in teen magazine. And we all go around thinking our lives are under our control and make sense!

If you park in the farthest-back lot on campus, there's a trail that heads through the forest down to Eld Inlet. The walk down felt like about two miles, but the walk back was probably more like one. That's the psychological difference, to me at least, between walking (or driving) to a destination you don't know—like wondering all the way how far it is from where you are and when you're going to get there—and one you're familiar with: long to get there, short to get back. It is a beautiful walk, first through groves of mostly alder trees, on the smaller side by local standards, their flaky, moss-riddled trunks dividing up the space with many tight lines of off-white. Then through stands of cedars, again, mostly on the smaller side by comparison with Woodard Bay and Watershed Park, I mean, which are on the smaller side compared to real old-growth forests further afield here. Then into Douglas firs, same thing, smaller, maybe 4 feet at the base. There was a very nice sense of procession from smaller to larger species on this way.

About halfway down the hill I ran into a group of what looked like middle school students with their teachers, sampling water from a little creek, lots of animated chatter I could hear from far off, wondering what was up. It made me feel oddly hopeful for our future on this planet. The whole Northwest is more eco-conscious than the Eastern cities I was used to. But I was thinking today more in generational terms. I know my own kids and many of the other millennials I taught over the last decade or so are extraordinarily conscious of sustainability, not to mention extraordinarily knowledgeable about equity in matters pertaining to race, gender and sexual identity. What attitudes I had to learn along the way to buff up the not-half-bad ones I grew up with, they have built into them: multicultural, diversity, collaboration, community, and, especially, tolerance, those are

words that organize their ways of seeing and define their ethos. And there is another generation of kids now coming along, like those I saw today, who will carry on that mission. The world will be better for all of this, I'm sure of it. That army of old white men standing in the way right now? Well, they are old, and the linearity of time is relentless. They will pass.

I continued on for what seemed like a long time down a steep incline. Then I saw the water. They refer to this place as a "beach" and it is the first waterside spot I've seen here that reminded me of Atlantic beaches, on a micro-scale—maybe twenty feet of actual sand instead of gravel, little four inch waves lapping ashore with an ocean's hyper-rhythm. I just stood there for a while and watched those tiny waves rise and tumble, rise and tumble, as I used to do on our vacations to the shore back East.

I've had a lot on my mind lately, this last week or so, all the already tattered remnants of my past finally falling to pieces while I wait and watch. Today, I imagined what little was left as bits of confetti caught up like flotsam in the surf, rise and fall, rise and fall, disintegrating rapidly in the clear, cold water. I'm not sure how to feel about all of that. I guess it doesn't even matter how I feel. It has been and is just happening and there is nothing I can or, now, want to do to stop it. I knew when I retired and left Pittsburgh that my remaining connections there would gradually evaporate. Retirement alone is enough to do that. Leaving town just expedites it. I knew that, too. But it has happened so much more quickly than I expected. Email exchanges that flourished early on diminished rapidly until, one by one, my missives to friends received briefer or more belated or no replies. I went from a passel to a few in less than nine months. And that's with me trying!

I've also been in contact with a number of people I had been out of touch with since before Carol died. A few of those I initiated myself, to update my address, some came out of the blue. They, too, have tapered off, most ending after one or two



emails. I know why. One of the effects of my originary loss, as I have explained in several other places, is I “cannot tell a lie.” And I don’t want to. Everything that comes out of me, speaking, writing, on the phone, is exactly what I think and am thinking right then. That is not, I can assure you, a good recipe for a rich social life. I am never rude, never offensively honest (not saying what’s true is not a lie), quite the opposite I think, more ebullient than cranky, yet I always, sooner or later, say something that is disturbing, worrisome, or off-putting. I think about big things, strange things, often dark things. They seem routine to me. They are not for those still happily on the rails out there. Either they don’t reply, or ignore what I’ve written or said, which makes me not want to reply.

The big one lately has been my deep sense of uncertainty about almost everything in my life. Most people my age have settled more or less on some array of social networks, principles or systems that give them intellectual, emotional, and spiritual security. They have answers. When I behave in way that betrays the fact that I have only questions, some will offer me their answers, with confidence, as if that will “solve” my “problem,” whichever specific one happens to be the topic du jour. I understand that they are viable answers. They just don’t carry any weight with me. I may appear to be lost, but I’m not looking or waiting to be found, especially if it means adopting a framework I have already dismissed as inadequate. What I keep hoping for is a real conversation, exploratory, open, one that looks full in the face of what’s there and may be scary, like a bear staring at you: Don’t turn tail and run, not good, it will get you. Stand your ground, maybe back off slowly, but keep eyes forward, always, eyes forward. Don’t let the bear feel your fear.

I guess if I keep going this way there will be no one left for me to talk or write to. That’s not good. The few interlocutors I have left are really nice people. I’d better be careful. Oddly, to me, many of them are men. You would think men would have a harder time tolerating someone in my condition. Not so. They are quite kind to me, rarely get freaked out by my apparent

extremity. Maybe they live on some level with the same uncertainty I do, are compelled to hide it all the time, and are happy to get a bit of a respite from that charade. I wrote this poem the other day about this, after reading those Auden poems, a little stupid, but it does the job:

*I'm closer now to an age  
when all my friends will be men.  
I wonder when I reach that stage:  
what I'll do then?*

*Certainly the mild heart  
continues to beat, no matter.  
But what about the wild part?  
Does that beat go flatter?*

*Is love like a blank check  
with lines for mild, wild?  
or dealing a face-card deck:  
man, woman, child?*

*I wonder if my love will be  
what it has ever been  
when I'm alone with me  
and all my friends are men.*

Maybe that sounds, now that I'm hearing it in my head, more like Housman than Auden, the wry humor of it. Auden's wit is much dryer. So let's say Housman.

Anyway, after I got to the water today, I thought I'd take one picture, just to prove I'd made it. The more I gazed into and across the bay, the more stunned I became by the beauty of it. So I took a few. Then a few more. Then even more on my walk back up the hill, so happy. On one of the little boardwalks they make in the woods here to get you over little wetland areas without sinking ankle-deep into the muck, all I heard was the clunk, clunk, clunk of my hiking boots on the wood. I wore

them today instead of sneakers because I wasn't sure what kind of terrain I'd encounter, how wet it would be especially. Sneakers would have been fine, but I'm glad I wore boots. That sound, rhythmic, repeating, made me realize in a deep way that I was there, right there, step by step, and I was me, just me, step by step, neither of which I take for granted, especially these last few days, feeling barely here, hardly me, which gives you an idea of the level of uncertainty I live with. Honestly, I like it this way. No lies. Carol could live this way, too, did live in that sort of liminality even before I met her. She had no answers and never found any. She was a beautiful person. I miss her, even more so now as I come to realize how unlikely it is that I'll ever find a companionable soul to talk or write to for more than a few days or weeks, until I tell something too true to be tolerated.

On my way back down Harrison Avenue into town I got to see Mount Rainier again, just a few seconds, that improbable nearly-three-mile high pile of ice-caped rock looming up and over everything, plopped down there with one broad mushroom shaped cloud topping it today like a big, floppy hat, the kind Carol always wore when she walked, to keep out the sun or the rain or just the rest of the world. The mountain looked humorous and cool all at the same time, just enough of its top hidden to make it intriguing. Next spring I'll be driving out that way to meet Mount Rainier in person. Maybe it will be my friend. That's when I thought of the poem I use as the epigraph for this essay, the hat part. I wrote the poem about 50 years ago at a moment of letting go, the kind that happen often in any good life, like the moment I'm in now:

*Now, resigned, I laugh and linger.  
I shall not wear a hat:  
My clouds must come and go  
as they will.*

Yes they will, like those around Mount Rainier. And so will I.



## Longinus

*A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. . . [A] sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash, and exhibits the whole power of the orator in a moment of time. . .*

*For instance, Sappho, in dealing with the passionate manifestations attending on the frenzy of lovers, always chooses her strokes from the signs which she has observed to be actually exhibited in such cases. But her peculiar excellence lies in the felicity with which she chooses and unites together the most striking and powerful features.*

*“I deem that man divinely blest  
Who sits, and, gazing on thy face,  
Hears thee discourse with eloquent lips,  
And marks thy lovely smile.  
This, this it is that made my heart  
So wildly flutter in my breast;  
Whene’er I look on thee, my voice  
Falters, and faints, and fails;  
My tongue’s benumbed; a subtle fire  
Through all my body inly steals;  
Mine eyes in darkness reel and swim;  
Strange murmurs drown my ears;  
With dewy damps my limbs are chilled;  
An icy shiver shakes my frame;  
Paler than ashes grows my cheek;  
And Death seems nigh at hand.”*

*Is it not wonderful how at the same moment soul,  
body, ears, tongue, eyes, colour, all fail her, and are  
lost to her as completely as if they were not her own?  
Observe too how her sensations contradict one  
another—she freezes, she burns, she raves, she reasons,  
and all at the same instant. And this description is  
designed to show that she is assailed, not by any  
particular emotion, but by a tumult of different  
emotions. All these tokens belong to the passion of  
love; but it is in the choice, as I said, of the most  
striking features, and in the combination of them into  
one picture, that the perfection of this Ode of  
Sappho's lies.*

Longinus (20-23)

In the first passage above, Longinus, writing most likely in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, proffers his version of the effect “sublime” language has on “every reader:” “It takes him out of himself,” a “lightning-flash.” Once again, here is that structure of inside and outside being simultaneous. The term ecstasy, which is another way of naming this effect, means quite literally to stand outside oneself. This is not a simple out-of-body type thing, the actual body left behind. It is an embodied out-of-bodiness. That’s what imaginative experience is at its finest, all the senses heightened to their extreme. In the second passage (which I included in part to get that cool Sappho poem in), Longinus describes what this same thing might feel like in real time. Sappho describes vividly the fleeing of her senses, an all-at-onceness that is ecstatic, “not her own,” the contradictions among multiple senses, vividly co-present at-the-same-instant, the “tumult of different emotions,” the “passion of love” that Socrates talks about as a “madness” from the gods, that other form of ecstasy, of standing outside our moment of time and space, “one picture . . . the perfection.”

All of this might sound on the face of it unnerving, even scary, the apparent loss of control, I mean. But for Longinus, for me,

for everyone I'll be writing about here, it is not that at all. It is a very normal human condition that we can enter on our own, by exercising imaginative initiative, either in everyday perception or as we lend ourselves to the most sublime works of others. I wrote about Longinus a couple of books ago, in *Last Spring*, and what I said then is pertinent here:

*I was trying while I walked today to think of a poem to go along with what I was thinking, feeling, one of mine, someone else's, no matter. I couldn't think of one, not even a line, not even a word that seemed to fit. It was "sublime." Longinus, who wrote the book on sublimity a couple of millennia ago, the one that inspired the Romantic poets a couple of hundred years ago, basically, to my way of reading him at least, says that sublimity is not intrinsic to language or linguistic artifacts, no matter how powerful or beautiful they are. When I teach his book, I always use the analogy of a rocket ship. For Longinus, a "great" bit of writing is simply a vehicle that, if well-enough designed and crafted, can transport us right to the very edge of the medium it is made from, those words still held captive in their tiny province on the spectrum of human life in this world. Figurative language is the most powerful such booster, capable of thrusting us up to the very edges of our babbling biosphere. Once there, we just need to step outside, and we will go into orbit on our own, skimming off into the majesty of deep space, where we will float weightlessly, silently, the gravity of diurnal discourse too weak to pull us down, until we want or need to come home again. It takes a little courage to take that step, but the payoff is magnificent, an eternal here and now that is not parsed by grammar or syntax, those slaves of time we need for more mundane "communication" down here. There is no clear inside or outside. Just being.*

*As I have said, we have, historically, come up with a few vague words to describe that spacy state. I have never, of course, actually travelled into space. But I've seen the*

*pictures taken from there. The earth, this generous caretaker, which seems like all there is when we are fully in its embrace, looks suddenly so small, beautiful, blue, but fragile, so, so small. And the space it navigates its tiny little circuit within is as close to infinite as a human mind can apprehend. Here, we make things with words, very useful things, often beautiful things, sometimes so much so, so over-full of themselves, that they can convey us to the brink of this transcendent elsewhere. That is where I was today, right outside of words, and then everywhere outside of words, where crying, laughing, or just staring incredulously at what is right before our eyes, are the most appropriate media for expression. It was sublime. (51-52)*

What I want to add now, having thought about it for another year, or at least through another couple “waves” of walks, is that it is imagination that allows us to experience such sublimity, on our own, when we’re walking in the woods, when we seek to write something beautiful about what we find along the way. We are both in and outside of ourselves, in tune with what we know going in, what we come to know in the process, what we need to learn by reading and rereading what we write; or when we take the time to read something beautiful just because it is beautiful, gaining everything else it proffers in the process.

## Poem

I wrote this poem in the early 1980s. When I wake up in the morning I am often, as I’ve said, half in and half out of this world. I feel both silly and sublime. This particular morning the way the light played on the window appeared to me to be angelic. Literally. As I watched, not sure how long, the light migrated upward and that was that, an encounter with the heavens to start my day. The “halo” such an encounter leaves behind lasts for a while, but sooner or later the world takes over again, all that’s left of that halo’s light just a distant, perplexed



look on the face, one that others find strange, even uncomfortable. This poem is about that. Then over the coming days I wrote a series of five “Morning Songs” following the same general format. I’m not sure if Longinus would consider this a piece of “sublime” writing, maybe too playful for that. But it describes a sublime experience and invites readers to share it.

### *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.*



## March 1, 2019: Go Take a Leap Day

*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, droplets  
of molten blue glass drifting over the lawn.*

*Just a month ago, I wondered  
if anything at all would survive winter:  
that long, gray ship gripping  
row after row of open 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, reminding me  
that soon it will be my time to sing.*

#1 of “Three Spring Songs,” Paul Kameen

I just woke up. February is finally over. It descends on me now, these last few years, like a desert sandstorm, an ominous dark swoosh that hurtles up over the horizon, then churns in, clouds of blinding grit driven by fierce wind abrading down to the bone, piling up crushingly. For the first few days I face bravely into it, then, worn, I try to hide from it. No matter. The sand finds a way in through even the slightest cracks, and, in the end, leaves me buried. That’s where I am today, the storm over, but laid low, laden with its great weight. Oh, I know I’ll dig my way out, like last year, by May maybe. I’m starting today, an easy, pleasant walk, one that promises to help me heave out those first few shovelfuls of sand. . .

Okay, I’m back, mid-afternoon. Today turned out to be such a good day. Firstly, of course, because it’s March instead of

February. I headed off for a walk on the boardwalk downtown. It is clear and sunny today, bright blue sky, little floaty clouds, like it's been lately, but warmer, almost 50 degrees right now. I figured I'd gaze off at the Olympic Mountains, take a few pictures, meander around the bay, maybe head over to Capital Lake or into town. Just slow and easy. About halfway down San Francisco Avenue, a steep, winding decline with a gorgeous view of the boat-festooned bay, I changed my mind. I change my mind all the time here, for almost no reason, just feel a force and follow it. I never used to do that. Carol was a mind-changer, very spontaneous. I used to envy that. Now I seem to have inherited her trait. You can never predict exactly what I'm likely to do. Neither can I. Today it had mostly to do with my wanting to listen to one of my albums, one I hadn't heard for a while. When I cued it up in the car, I liked it, so I needed to drive farther to hear more of it. That meant out to Woodard Bay instead of downtown, a 10-15 minute drive each way, enough to hear the whole thing. I'm so glad I did that. Right from the outset, the walk was magical.

First it was birds, always uplifting to me, all those twitchy little buffleheads at the top of the inlet by the bridge where the tidal flow, coming or going, is strongest, more like a river than a bay. They dive down for their food, disappearing suddenly then bobbing back up 30 seconds later 50 feet from where they went down. There were maybe 10 of them, so perky and neat. The males are black with broad strips of white on their bellies and breasts and right behind the head. In the bright light today that white was super-luminous. The females have less white, some on the cheeks, some mottling on the breast, but are equally striking. I have no idea what they look for down under water or how they find it. But they are very persistent, almost frenetic in their pursuit of it. One type of merganser that shares the same spaces with the buffleheads, same size, similar coloration, has a sort of mohawk hairdo, a fine comb of spiky feathers, cinnamon brown, always perfectly coifed, the kind I saw downtown a few days ago. There were a few of those there today, too. I stood a while and watched them all. They are not necessarily comical, they just

make me smile. Right below where I was standing I saw my first shore bird here, a plover maybe. It was about a foot tall, long spindly legs, thin slightly curved beak, mostly light brown, kind of an ivory breast, wading in shallow water, poking up and down to take whatever was there for it to eat. It reminded me of those glass dippy birds, red and blue, we used to have as kids. You get it going and keeps on dipping. A little further down the path there is a small cove with a huge Douglas fir fallen into it. It's where the mallards hang out, having come here to winter over I assume, a few pairs of them, the flamboyant drakes, all those linear stripes of color, their mates more sedate, mottled brown, stately. Today they were all settled down in pairs, heads tucked in, just rounded mounds of feathers sleeping on top of that log. So sweet.

As I said in *First, Summer*, this place is preternaturally quiet for a spot that's really not that remote, as quiet as any place I can remember since I was a kid wandering around in the further reaches the woods around my uncle's farm. Here, you get 100 feet down the path and there's a clean silence, amplified today (as in made even more noticeable) by the fact that the air was so still, not even a breath of a breeze. It was like walking into a painting, nothing moving, nothing making any noise, all the quiet in the world. I headed up into the woods today, a path that had not been navigable lately because of the snow and downed trees. The snow is now mostly gone, just a few white patches in the leaf-litter, and the fallen trees have been chain-sawed out of the way, beginning with one huge one right at the opening of the path up into the woods, a hemlock, maybe five feet at the base. Whoever tends the parks here has, as I said a couple of days ago, great chain saws and they know how to use them. No path stays impassable for long.

As I headed in, all I could hear was the sound of my feet scratching on the gravel, and then, clunking on a wetland-crossing boardwalk, quieter today than yesterday because I was wearing sneakers. Then I started to hear myself breathing, which I never do, listened to it, in, out, a little Zen rhythm to pace my

walking to. About 100 yards in there was a very large alder down on the ground. I tend not to pay attention to the alders, they are so much less dramatic than the firs, cedars and hemlocks. But, as I said, yesterday their birchy white really stood out to me in the bright light and today it was even more so, especially this one, laid out for close inspection. It was maybe 70 feet long, perfectly straight, mostly “bald,” its mosses having fallen off, nice white trunk, no side branches anywhere all the way up, a symptom of what it takes to find the light in a forest with so many arboreal skyscrapers around. The leafy top of the tree must have broken off on the way down and fallen out of sight. So it was just a very long pole. To see it there laid out like that was stunning, enhanced my respect for these lesser trees.

Right across from that tree, three or four little birds that looked to me like juncos, a little smaller, very flitty, were bouncing around, maybe eating, maybe flirting. My friend Lisa has been helping me pin names on some of the local birds. That’s how I know what baffleheads are. I’ll have to ask her about these. A little way ahead I could hear all this high-pitched chirping down in the ferns, but try as I might I couldn’t flush out any of the birds making it. Then, all of a sudden, one of them flew in, a kind of bird I’ve seen in this area before, so tiny, wren-like, milk-chocolate brown, maybe as big as my thumb. It, too, disappeared into the ferns, becoming only its chirp. I was hoping to see the kinglets today, too, further up the path where I’ve seen them before, stunning little birds, not much bigger than the “wrens,” their v-shaped golden crowns precise, princely. They are very friendly birds, darting branch to branch higher up off the ground. But they were nowhere in sight today.

About half mile up the path, I ambled into and through a stand of alders even bigger than the one I saw at Eld Inlet yesterday. And one I barely noticed here before. But today, all those white trunks standing tall in the bright light seemed majestic. I have no idea why there are so many right there. Maybe the bigger trees were cleared at some point, making way for them, hundreds of them, a foot or two in diameter, closely packed, extending their

slender white necks up toward the light. And I could see behind them a similar stand of younger alders, a foot or less at the base, even more tightly packed, like giant toothpicks, hundreds of those, too, all their white trunks similarly striking in the sunlight. The alders turned out to be the stars of the show today. And the birds. Perfect.

Near the end of the path there are two huge trees, one on each side of the path, a Douglas fir and a red cedar side by side, maybe four feet apart, just enough room to walk through. Their roots intertwine on the path like a step, reminding me today of the two “married” trees I came to know so well in Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh, wrote about in *This Fall*. These two are like the mallards, permanently paired, very sweet. Then, about 100 yards further down there is another “couple” of trees, cedars, even closer together, with a smaller one in front of and between them. You have to thread through them like a pinball. Today they seemed to me like a little family, parents with a child. Even sweeter.

I passed a few other walkers on my way back up the road to the lot. Everyone nods and says hi, but very quiet, church voices, in keeping with the solemnity of this space, like they’re walking in the painting with you. I noticed the ferns on the side-banks up into the woods have begun to recover from their snow-stunning. The last time I was here, the snow having mostly melted, they were still pressed down to the ground, flattened, forlorn looking, like their February wasn’t so great either. Today they were perking up. I’m sure in a few weeks they will be fully upright, bushy again.

Winter is so different here. The leaves on the deciduous trees fall, of course, the big-leaf maples and the alders, so the woods-arena is more spacious, brighter, all that extra light streaming in. But the evergreens, at least half of the standing forest, stay, well, ever-green, adding density to the scene. And the understory flora don’t die down to the ground. The ferns stay green, the shorter grassy plants don’t freeze off. It doesn’t get as cold here as back

East, I know, but there are still lots of nights in the 20s. These plants must have some kind of anti-freeze to keep them from wilting down or going brown. I'm assuming that will make the spring here seem more sudden, all the plants not having to start over again from zero. In a month or so, I'll see.

On my way to the car I smiled, remembering I called Bridget this morning, around 10, as I do most Saturdays, left a message to ask her if she wanted me to pick up anything at the Farmers Market. She called me back a few minute later, from work, laughing, saying "You know it's only Friday today, don't you?" I laughed, too. I did the same thing about a month ago, skipped over a day, and we laughed about it then, too. I joked today that I must be getting a leap day, February 29<sup>th</sup> in the wrong year. I wrote in *This Fall* that even back then, a few years ago, when I was working full time, I seemed to have so much extra time on my hands. I'd do everything, work, chores, walks, meals, everything, and I'd still feel like I had all my time left. I said it felt not like I was using my time wisely but was actually creating new time virtually. Now I am creating new time literally, an extra day every month. This day, because of that, became special, like a gift, and I reveled in its extra-ness. It felt like a snow day used to when you were a kid, all the enjoyment of a vacation, nothing obligatory to do, just free time, new time. Maybe I'll get one of these bonus days every month now. That would be cool, especially in the better months coming up, spring, summer, fall, all of it, precious leap days.

I know a lot of people think I'm compulsive because I get my work done so quickly, almost instantly. My essays graded the day they came in, my email queue always empty. Send me a request for a letter, a review, it's done like right then. But it's not compulsion that leads me to behave that way. It is my deep love for, a coveting of, free time. Time during which I'm not obligated to do anything at all. Free time, new time, extra time. I feel liberated in those interims, like I'm flying, that good. But I can't get there if there is even one shred of work left on my agenda. I need it done. All done. So I do it. Then I am happy.



Now, of course, I have far fewer obligations. And I seem to be inventing all this new time to enjoy my nothingness in.

A few weeks ago, after Bridget had been sick for a while, I went with her to her school late in the afternoon the day before she was going back to work, still weak, to help her get her room straight, the chaos she always finds after a substitute has been there for a couple of days. It's an art room, thousands of little means-of-production that she manages assiduously and the substitutes don't. The second she walked into that room, she was like a machine, sorting this, cleaning up that, plugging things in, throwing things out. It was like watching a movie at double speed. That room was ship-shape in about 20 minutes. Ultra-fast. And she does all of her work this way for the exact same reason I do, she says, so she can maximize her time to do nothing. Full speed so you can get to a dead stop, just two gears, overdrive and park, nothing in between. That's the opposite of compulsion, I think, a form of controlled laziness, really. I can see why people might prefer to spread out their duties to take up every available second. When you have a lot of empty time, you inevitably have to encounter yourself, and you'd better be able to tolerate what you find. Or that time will feel expensive instead of free, much better spent doing something more obviously productive to others.

When I came out here a few years ago for Bridget and Mark's wedding, she gave me a little plate that says "I don't care if you like me. I like me." She is the embodiment of that mantra. I'm not as far along the path to true wisdom, but that plate inspires me to keep going in her direction. I do like me most of the time. But some of the time I still care if you like me, a hard habit to shake. I bought a bottle of hard cider on the way home and just drank a glass of it writing this. I hardly drink at all now, so it doesn't take much to get me smooth. I just forgot what I was going to say after "habit to shake," so I'd better stop. Go do nothing. This has been such a good day. A great day. And it's about to get better: nothing left to write. For you, too: nothing left to read. Go take a leap day.



## Philip Sidney

*For conclusion, I say the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him; that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught. But the poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs; the poet is, indeed, the right popular philosopher. . .*

*Thus doing [loving poets and poetry], your names shall flourish in the printers' shops: thus doing, you shall be of kin to many a poetical preface: thus doing, you shall be most fair, most rich, most wise, most all: you shall dwell upon superlatives . . .*

*But if (fie of such a but!) you be born so near the dull-making cataract of Nilus, that you cannot hear the planet-like music of poetry; if you have so earth-creeping a mind, that it cannot lift itself up to look to the sky of poetry, or rather, by a certain rustical disdain, will become such a Mome, as to be a Momus of poetry; then, though I will not wish unto you the ass's ears of Midas, nor to be driven by a poet's verses, as Bubonax was, to hang himself; nor to be rhymed to death, as is said to be done in Ireland; yet thus much curse I must send you in the behalf of all poets; that while you live, you live in love, and never get favour, for lacking skill of a sonnet; and when you die, your memory die from the earth for want of an epitaph.*

Philip Sidney

Okay, so I just skipped 1500 years to get to Sidney's famous "Defense of Poesy" (circa 1580.) It's not that nothing happened in the interim. There was lots of poetry and even more philosophy. But the concept of the imagination fell by the wayside, or, more accurately, was generally considered a

subordinate or middling mental faculty. Aquinas, for example, writing 350 years earlier, sees the imagination as a sort of storehouse for sensory impressions. Bacon, a near contemporary of Sidney, sees it as one of three fundamental, and relatively co-equal, “faculties” of mind, along with memory and reason, its status imbued more with Platonic ambivalence than Longinian flamboyance. It’s not until Kant, nearly a century hence, that this pattern begins to budge a bit. Which is right around the time Longinus is being translated into French by Boileau, launched on its way toward the English Romantics.

What I most like about Sidney is that he takes on the philosopher directly in this piece, as well as the historian, those other two archivists of human knowledge, arguing that poetry is the superior repository for what we know, at least in terms of conveying it to others, non-specialists. Beyond that, he suggests that unless philosophers and historians are also poets to some extent, that is, imaginative in their work, their work will be lifeless, even delusory, founded in fantasy rather than truth, or available only for a highly specialized few. More radically, he even implies, in relation to this matter of teachability, that everyone has a native capacity to understand poetic figures and discourses. Those are proto-Romantic ideas proffered well in advance of the great British poets of the late-18<sup>th</sup>/early-19<sup>th</sup> century, the ones who will serve as keystones in the middle portions of this book.

I quote his final paragraph because it is such a furious bit of rhetorical flourish, the ultimate in-your-face peroration, declaiming to all that if you want to win at love or be remembered after death, you need to love poetry and learn how to use it. And he does it all in one sentence. I write long, mazy sentences because that’s how my head works. I like to write them and like to read them. Sidney’s is way out of my league, a sentence only a great poet could write. Sublime. If you like sentences like that, read some Sidney.

## Poem

In the late 1970s I wrote a long mock-epic series of poems called *Beginning Was* that was my riff off a quote from Claude Levi-Strauss that just happened to catch in my brain like a cotton ball on a hook. He says in his *Introduction to the Works of Marcel Mauss*:

*Language can only have arisen all at once. . . In the wake of a transformation . . . a shift occurred, from a stage when nothing had meaning to another stage when everything had meaning. (59-60)*

What struck me, and stayed, was the imagined sense of what it would feel like if you had no language, none, and then in an instant had it all. It would be almost like a form of insanity. All that noise and those voices in the head. Cacophonous. Scary. And it would take a very long time to get it under enough control to do at least some of your bidding instead of your doing only its. Each poem in the series takes an historical epoch, places this insane head in it, and explores what it is then, progressively, trying to make of and do with words. It always comes to a bad result.

The poem I chose here is set in the Age of Enlightenment, roughly Sidney's time, that moment when it all seemed to make sense. And then, as is always the case with sense when it settles a bit, it didn't.

### *Locus*

*Like all dreams this could never last.  
He woke to a world rational as glass.  
Predictable as clockwork he punched in,  
settled to the task: He tracked down*

*planets in their paths, greased  
a brand-new axle for the stars,  
set right the flywheel of his mind,  
picked his brains, numbered all his  
bones. He made himself at home.*

*On his way to lunch he slipped on wet grass.  
The attractive earth beckoned and he sat.  
There ought to be a law, he muttered.  
And there was. He inclined himself  
to the plain truth and thought: I think  
I am. He marveled at the leverage  
this gave, geared down for the long  
haul downhill, positive his differential  
would keep him steady on the curves.*

*His lexicon was eloquent and trim,  
a perfect execution of sentences  
he pronounced. He catalogued a wilderness  
of names, climbed a ladder halfway  
to the moon, tamed a troop of angels  
to stage a sideshow on a pin.  
Weather was cool and sunny as a rose.  
Lovely dreams of dreams slid by  
his eye. Nothing left to know.*

*Then thick fogs rolled up the shore.  
Things began to rust. The grease  
so right for sunlight congealed at night.  
There was friction in the works.  
He felt the axle give. A time clock clanged.  
He punched out with his fist. His flywheel  
grew eccentric and he shook. Insomnia  
set in. His nerves were shot. This  
is a crying shame, he cried. And cried.*



March 2, 2019: The Tip of the Iceberg

*Somewhere beyond the sea,  
Somewhere waiting for me,  
My lover stands on golden sands  
And watches the ships that go sailing.*

*Somewhere beyond the sea,  
She's there watching for me.  
If I could fly like birds on high  
Then straight to her arms I'd go sailing.*

*It's far beyond the stars;  
It's near beyond the moon;  
I know beyond a doubt  
My heart will lead me there soon.*

*We'll meet beyond the shore;  
We'll kiss just as before;  
Happy we'll be beyond the sea,  
And never again I'll go sailing.*

*I know beyond a doubt, ah  
My heart will lead me there soon;  
We'll meet beyond the shore;  
We'll kiss just as before;  
Happy we'll be beyond the sea,  
And never again I'll go sailing.*

Jack Lawrence

Today I went to the Farmers Market first. Not much fresh local produce this time of year, of course: some root vegetables, some still-pretty-good apples, my favorite now, Smitten, which used to be in a huge wooden bin, now in a small cardboard box. But it's a fun place to walk around, always draws a crowd. Look at the



art and craft booths, pick out some handmade chocolates, flowers, fresh fish, listen to a local band. Then I headed up the boardwalk. The Olympics were shrouded under a canopy of over-topping clouds, a wide, gray swath of them. If I didn't know that far off scene well, I might think the mountains were clouds or vice-versa. They were barely distinguishable. The rest of the sky was clear and blue. I stopped to watch a few buffleheads just resting along one of the mooring docks. There are maybe three hundred boats moored downtown near the boardwalk, smaller craft, very nice sailboats, their tall masts making pleasant wind-chime clanks in the breeze, bigger cabin cruisers, small yachts, some work boats, tugs, etc., and another couple hundred moored further up the bay on the way out of town. I rarely see boats on the water, at least since winter set in, but today a small tug boat came chugging in over the dark, choppy water and snugged up the dock. It was a picture-perfect scene.

On weekends one of the historically significant local tugboats, the Sand Man, is open to visitors. A couple of weeks ago, a cold, icy Sunday, I ventured down the slippery gangway to see it. It's maybe 50-60 feet long, had been used in a variety of ways over the last 120 years or so to tug all kinds of cargo into and out of the lower reaches of Puget Sound. The man and woman on board, the owners I assumed, were both working on it. He was fixing the engine's magneto, she was doing some work on the decking. It is a cool boat, low slung and sturdy-looking, smaller actually than some of the pleasure boats now moored at the adjacent Yacht Club end of Budd Bay, but with a big diesel engine down below, which the man showed me, a real ship's wheel on the bow, out in the open, for steering. They're hoping to get a new heater up there one of these days. It must feel paralyzingly cold to pilot that boat into a biting wind mid-winter. I think I'd last about 15 minutes up there on day like that.

On my way home I drove up past the grocery store to see how Mount Rainier was faring today. I got stopped at the light that is the best vantage point, so I had an extended view. Unlike Mount Olympus, it was poking up through a much lower deck of clouds,

maybe half of it visible up there, like it was floating. I'm sure I'll get used to its imposing size the way I've gotten used to the huge trees and everything else here, especially if the weather stays clear and I can see it over and over. But I haven't yet, so I want to enjoy it with my innocent eyes as long as I can.

One of the odd things about aging to me, and I suspect this is almost universal, at least for people who are alone for some reason, is you go through so much of life entirely inside your own head. As I said earlier, I know I have both endured and risked huge things over these last four years to get where I am now and no one was there to share it with. Okay, I might have a conversation every rare now and then with someone about it, but only the slightest tip of the iceberg is made visible that way. The rest, 95% of it, that huge wedge of frozen water, is out of sight, underwater, like an upside down Mount Rainier, where only I know it, a single snorkel diver exploring its astonishing textures and nuances, coming up for a breath from time to time. Now, when the thought of intimacy arises, I wonder how can I possibly fill in all that history for someone else. Maybe I'll get to a point where I'll know I shouldn't try, won't even want to, will have filed it all away into folders marked "the past," like eighth grade "permanent records," their utility expired, so easy to forget they ever existed. But I'm not there yet, and my time is running out to get there. Well, whatever. I guess it's not of that much consequence anyway. I'll get there or I won't. Someone else will join me or they won't. When you're 30, as I was the last time I ended up suddenly alone, that's a scary thought. When you're 70, not so much so. I think you can see for yourself why that's true. Then again, there may still be somewhere beyond this sea where someone is waiting for me. Until then, I'll just keep sailing.



## William Blake

I was link-hopping online recently and got on a William Blake jag, ended up listening to Patti Smith sing William Blake's "The Tyger." She has a great voice of course, musical skill, but I thought the presentation was kind of dirge-like, processional, flattening out all the intense emotion Blake must have been feeling about that tiger, awe, fear, sadness, vexation. Here is his poem:

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies.  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand, dare seize the fire?*

*And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?*

*What the hammer? what the chain,  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp,  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!*

*When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears:  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

*Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
In the forests of the night:  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?* (24)

Last fall I got obsessed with Emily Dickinson, one of my longtime favorites, as you know if you read my work. I am in love with her. I was reading her poems every night before I went to bed. They are beautiful and perplexing enough to set the stage for vexing sleep. Just out of the blue, one night watching TV, I started up a conversation with her in my head, based on her “nobody” poem:

*Im Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you—Nobody—Too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!*

*How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
How public—like a Frog—  
To tell one's name—the livelong June—  
To an admiring Bog!* (47)

I ended up writing my reply to her, as a song, recorded it and then recorded seven more of her poems as songs, slightly to quite a bit modified to suit my purposes. Anyway, when I heard Patti Smith sing Blake’s “song” I thought, you know, I think I can do better than that, get the angst and emotion back in. So I sang it, recorded it, liked it, and picked seven other Blake “songs” to sing in my own voice. Or my own imagined version of his voice.

Because I am in love with Emily Dickinson, we have a kind of late-night-communion capacity, at least via her music and mine. I am not in love with William Blake. But I quite like him. When I think of historical “geniuses” he’s one of the first people that enters my head. And far as I am off the charts, he is further, which makes him a kind of hero to me. Well, I think, Blake made it through his trying life without caving. Maybe I can, too.

And at least now, I can add him to my late-night-communion partners, me, my guitar and Big Bad Bill. I almost named the album I made of his songs “Don’t Mess with Bill,” but that song is nearly as old as I am and I wasn’t sure anyone would get it.

Anyway (again), part of that link-hopping led me to a couple of letters Blake wrote in 1799 to a man of means, Dr. John Trusler, who had commissioned him to do some art work. Trusler had a very specific thing in mind that he wanted, and he was quite insistent on it. It was not what Blake envisioned as best for the project. If you know anything about Blake or others like him, including me, that did not bode well for their “partnership.” Blake needed to find a way to get this commission off his back. He did that via two letters, which I quote from here, because they have something to say about the imagination, as I’m trying to delineate it here. The first is the shorter, but quite forceful. Here are several key passages:

*I find more & more that my Style of Designing is a Species by itself & in this which I send you have been compelled by my Genius or Angel to follow where he led. If I were to act otherwise it would not fulfill the purpose for which alone I live . . .*

*I attempted every morning for a fortnight together to follow your Dictate, but when I found my attempts were in vain, resolved to shew an independence which I know will please an Author better than slavishly following the track of another however admirable that track may be. At any rate my Excuse must be: I could not do otherwise, it was out of my power!*

*I cannot previously describe in words what I mean to Design for fear I should Evaporate the Spirit of my Invention. But I hope that none of my Designs will be destitute of Infinite Particulars which will present themselves to the Contemplator. And tho I call them Mine I know that they are not Mine being of the same opinion with Milton when he says that the Muse visits his*

*slumbers & awakes & governs his Song when Morn  
purples the East, & being also in the predicament of that  
prophet who says I cannot go beyond the command of  
the Lord to speak good or bad. (701)*

Here are many of the elements of Blake's belief about the origin and agency of creative enterprise:

1. Imaginative work is individual and unique, "compelled" by a force ("Genius or Angel," inside/outside) that cannot be resisted.
2. It cannot be controlled in its details by an external sponsor (especially an obtuse one).
3. It cannot merely imitate another's work (no matter how great).
4. It cannot be predicted or prescribed, even by the artist himself. Poetic/artistic work belongs to a "muse" in much the same way that a prophet's words belong to God.

That would be yes, yes, yes and yes, to me. I have been asked a couple of times to produce poetic work on spec. It started out awful, it felt awful, and I quit, with predictably unsalutary effects. I'm no Blake, but I can understand his upset.

Apparently, it didn't work. Trusler was as stubborn as Blake, wanted what he was paying for, not what Blake wanted to make. So Blake wrote again, a much longer missive, from which I'll quote sparingly.

*I feel very sorry that your ideas and mine on moral  
painting differ so much as to have made you angry with  
me. If I am wrong, I am wrong in good company! . . .*

*You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas,  
but you ought to know that what is grand is necessarily  
obscure to weak men. That which can be made explicit  
to an idiot is not worth my care. . .*

*I perceive that your eye is perverted by caricature prints which ought not to abound as much as they do. Fun I love, but too much fun is of all things the most loathesome. Mirth is better than fun, and happiness is better than mirth. . . This world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. . . Some see Nature all ridicule and deformity, . . . and some scarce see Nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers. . .*

*To engrave after another painter is infinitely more laborious than to engrave one's own inventions. (702-3)*

Same general ideas, with these two additions:

1. He implies that his sponsor is weak, idiotic, perverted and loathesome, probably not the best approach to customer service.
2. He states over and over the relationship between imagination and vision. And he doesn't mean vision in the ordinary sense of the word (I see that table, say), but in its more ecstatic, prophetic sense. He says elsewhere, to explain this, that one should not see with the eyes but through them. Even blind eyes, in such a system, might provide a deeper "vision" than sighted eyes tuned to their lowest frequency.

Again, yes and yes.

A few days later Blake writes to George Cumberland, who apparently recommended him to Trusler. He says:



*I have made him a Drawing in my best manner [and]  
he has sent it back with a Letter full of Criticisms . . .  
How far he Expects to please I cannot tell. But as I  
cannot paint Dirty rags & old Shoes where I ought to  
place Naked Beauty and simple ornament. I despair of  
Ever pleasing one Class of Men—Unfortunately our  
authors of books are among this Class. How soon we  
Shall have a change for the better I cannot Prophecy.  
(703)*

As is so often the case with prophetic souls of Blake's sort, not soon enough.

## Poem

The poem I picked for this section is one I wrote maybe 30 years ago, at a fearsome moment in my own life. It has nothing to do with Blake. But it's kind of scary, like "The Tyger." And it has to do with the powers of imagination to create, not only figuratively but quite literally; to take over from the outside in, for better or worse. It's not only a poem I like, it's a perfect bridge to the "high" Romantics, especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom I'll be getting to soon, an extremist of the imagination. In a good way.

### *Sleight of Hand*

*Let me explain to you  
that this is not in any manner  
mysterious, what I am about to do, I mean,  
right before your eyes.  
But you must pay close attention:  
Here is a round bowl  
into which I pour one liter  
of distilled water.  
It is just enough for one of us*

*to survive for one night  
in the desert.  
In a few moments I will allow you to decide  
in which direction you wish me to turn.  
On the one hand  
I will simply climb the stairs,  
take off my clothes and go to sleep.  
You will find yourself alone here,  
staring contentedly at one goldfish in a round bowl  
as it puckers its mouth  
over and over breathing.  
On the other hand  
I will stride directly at you,  
passing right through  
everything that stands between us.  
You will hear nothing  
but the monotonous sound  
of my voice warning you  
over and over  
that you have gone too far now ever to get back,  
that to do so you would have to cross  
both your desert and mine  
with nothing but one liter of distilled water  
in a round bowl  
in which we are both now swimming  
unable even to breathe.*



March 3, 2019: Tip-toeing in Mid-air

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.*

William Wordsworth

Sunday, another warm sunny day, a walk on the boardwalk downtown, crowded today, all these people, mostly young, lovers walking hand in hand smiling, parents with young children running around, playing in the playground, the long row of outdoor stools facing the water at the Oly Taproom, empty all winter, full now of hands holding beer, bodies bundled to keep warm, getting a jump on spring. I am always surprised by what action such a small town can generate, in this case all these people, many hundreds I'd say out today for a stroll, a beer. Like me. A suddenly sunny Sunday, seaside. Maybe we won't see Proteus rising or hear old Triton blowing his horn, but there is no such thing as "late and soon," or "out of tune" on a day like this in a place like this.

I wandered over to Capital Lake, the pathway smattered with bench sitters, dog walkers, duck watchers, a few actually feeding the ducks. As a consequence, all the mallards had come out from their little hidden coves, where I've seen them before, a

pair or two, in various places around the lake, reclusive. Today they swam right up to the lake wall, 10 or more of them gathered variously in groups here and there, so close-up you could see every feather, waiting for someone to toss food their way. Then the turmoil to snatch it.

I have a carved wooden mallard drake that I got from my family at Christmas maybe 25 years ago, a sweet gift because I like ducks. It is painted authentically, made by Ethan Allen. The head is black. On the water today those heads ranged anywhere from black to cobalt blue to a stunning iridescent green, sometimes changing from one to another, depending on how the light hit. I got a very good look at the females, too, the ones I described yesterday as “mottled brown.” That is accurate, but the pattern of feathers, lighter brown, darker brown, off white, looks more like a tortoise shell up close, variegated, precise, quite beautiful. I looked at enough of them to begin to notice significant differences in color patterns, body types, size, generic mallards becoming individuals right before my eyes. I think if I did that a few more times, I would recognize them separately, the way we do people. One of the sweet memories I have related to my wooden mallard is driving back to Pittsburgh after Christmas, Bridget and Joe in the back seat with the duck singing a duet founded on the inscription on the bottom of the duck. Bridget: “Ethan Allen,” Joe: “mallard drake.” Over and over. They were so delighted by it. So was I.

I walked up into town to buy some chocolate, dark with toasted coconut today. I had some after dinner. Very nice. On my way back to the car I noticed again something I’ve been meaning to write about all week: A manhole cover, the first manhole cover I have fallen in love with since the one I saw in Scranton over 50 years ago and wrote about in *This Fall*, a passage I quote in my essay on H.D. later in this book. This one is mesmerizing: At the top are the lower legs and bare feet of a very young child, I mean a baby really, from the shape and proportion of them, one just old enough to walk, tip-toeing in mid-air, like maybe a parent is holding on to provide balance, then a few sleek little

fish that look like they're jumping up out of the water, which is more implied that inscribed, just some swirls and bubble-like circles. All of these raised details are painted baby blue, somewhat worn now from all the foot traffic. The surrounding design is bright yellow. Every time I pass it, I have to stop and look at it. It is art, great art in my book, the design, the colors, the texture, everything.

I got to see the Olympic Mountains again today, this rarity that has now happened for me almost every day this week. I heard an older man comment to someone he seemed to be showing around, pointing them out, "This is something you don't often get to see." Unless you're me, I guess, retired, can walk here every day, and the weather happens to be this once-in-a-blue-moon clear for multiple consecutive days. I tried again to count the number of peaks today. Depending on where you're standing and what you consider a separate peak, you can see maybe seven or eight of them from the boardwalk. Mount Olympus is the tallest, in the middle, appearing anywhere from slightly to much taller than the others depending on the vantage point.

I am trying mightily these days to keep my head on straight. It is so hard when you're alone to do that, no one there to nudge you back on track—"don't swear so much," "you need to trim your nose hair"—that sort of thing. Social normalcy is not easy to simulate in the absence of the social. Maybe that's one of the things I especially enjoyed today, strolling in the warm company of all those good people. Feeling confident, knowing I trimmed my nose hair this morning and had no reason in the world to start swearing.



## William Wordsworth

*It is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind. The evidence of this fact is to be sought, not in the writings of Critics, but in those of Poets themselves.*

*The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure. Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title. It is desirable that such readers, for their own sakes, should not suffer the solitary word Poetry, a word of very disputed meaning, to stand in the way of their gratification; but that, while they are perusing this book, they should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents; and if the answer be favorable to the author's wishes, that they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision.*

William Wordsworth (47-8)

William Wordsworth is the elder statesman of British Romanticism. In 1798 he teamed up with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, both quite young, essentially unknowns, to publish one of the most influential books of poetry in English literature, a little book called *Lyrical Ballads*, the poems of which



Wordsworth characterized in a very brief and tentative preface, which he called an “advertisement” (about half of which I quote above), as “experiments”. They are all of that and more. When most people think of a poem in its most stereotypical sense now, they have in mind something like what these poems are, no longer experiments, but nearly clichés. Wordsworth’s preface, brief as it is, lays out a profound critique of the mainstream poetry of his day, which he says is premised on an too-intimate relationship with “criticism,” often indistinguishable from it. He actually believes these poems may not be recognizable as poems by his most likely audience, indoctrinated as they are into that sensibility.

The book received a lukewarm reception, which is better, I think, than either author expected, and Wordsworth, emboldened by this, expanded his preface exponentially for the next edition (1800), I mean like maybe 20 times longer. By the next edition (1802), the preface was fully formed in all of its elements, no longer an advertisement but a manifesto that shaped what poetry was to become for the next two or three generations. Or more, depending on how you prefer to read the Modernists’ at least partial rebellion against it. There are so many famous sentences in this argument that I don’t have space here to document them, sentences that may still ring a bell of familiarity with even the most casual reader of poems. One of them is “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” (Wordsworth adds the extra “I,” maybe conventional back then.) This sounds pretty simple, and often gets translated into an invitation just to “spill your guts.” It is nothing of the sort.

He lays out in more detail the complex stages of his process later in the preface to the 1800 edition, this way:

*I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually*

*disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment. (180)*

So, first you need to go out and acquire an experience that is deeply emotional. Then you need to go away, maybe for years, as is the case with some of his most famous poems, like “Tintern Abbey;” and in solitary “tranquillity” you must “contemplate” it. Then, this emotion, already one stage removed from the original, disappears and a “kindred” one is produced, but gradually, taking some time to evolve. Then and only then do you get that “overflow of powerful feelings,” the ones you’re having now, not back then, that produces a poem, for which the term “spontaneous” is quite a stretch. I used to tell students all the time, just follow this recipe very carefully. You will get a Romantic-type poem every time.

Wordsworth is the first of his generation to proclaim that in some essential respects we are all poets, gifted with this ability to feel deeply and find language to communicate it. He says:

*Among the qualities which I have enumerated as principally conducing to form a Poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree . . . (178.)*

Then, of course, he goes on to list the qualities that real poets have to define that “degree” of difference, and there are lots of them. He may seem to want in his heart to believe everyone is by nature a poet, but he mostly ends up saying: Leave this to the professionals. Like him. I’m only saying this now because the

American Romantics, especially Whitman, are much more generous and democratic in this regard, as I'll show later.

I want primarily here to focus on two short poems from this seminal book, both written by Wordsworth (the authors' names were neither on the book cover nor attached to their respective individual compositions, which says something about what my word "tentative" means above, in relation to this first edition.) The first poem is called "Expostulation and Reply," a conversation between "William" and "Matthew," who have quite divergent view about how best to spend one's time "learning" in this world:

*"Why, William, on that old grey stone,  
Thus for the length of half a day,  
Why, William, sit you thus alone,  
And dream your time away?"*

*"Where are your books?—that light bequeathed  
To Beings else forlorn and blind!  
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed  
from dead men to their kind*

*"You look round on your Mother Earth,  
As if she for no purpose bore you;  
As if you were her first-born birth,  
And none had lived before you!"*

*One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,  
When life was sweet, I knew not why,  
To me my good friend Matthew spake,  
And thus I made reply:*

*"The eye—it cannot choose but see;  
We cannot bid the ear be still;  
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,  
Against or with our will.*

*"Nor less I deem that there are Powers  
Which of themselves our minds impress;  
That we can feed this mind of ours  
In a wise passiveness.*

*"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum  
Of things for ever speaking,  
That nothing of itself will come,  
But we must still be seeking?"*

*"--Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,  
Conversing as I may,  
I sit upon this old grey stone,  
And dream my time away," (133)*

It may be hard for us to understand this hardline distinction between “books” and “Mother Earth” as reservoirs of knowledge, but it’s a big deal to Wordsworth and subsequently becomes similarly so for all the British Romantic poets. To Matthew, William is just a dreamer wasting his time sitting on a stone alone. He should be studying the great books, indenturing himself to the light these “dead men” have “bequeathed” for our enrichment.

William’s answer is just as strong: The eye, the ear, our bodies, they are learning machines. Whether we give them full rein or not, they feed the mind in ways that books can’t. His “passiveness” he says is not laziness. It is “wise.” He will learn more dreaming alone on the rock for half a day, in other words, than any “dead men” could possibly teach him. That is an argument I generally endorse. Why else would I be writing all these books about nothing more than my walks in the woods? I have, of course, read a lot of books, including Wordsworth’s and I’ve required many students to read it. Clearly he is dead. I often ask students if they think he would disapprove of my forcing them to read his book.

Wordsworth, I know from some of that reading, was not a humble man. Thomas Carlisle, who interviewed him much later, when he was famously iconic, found him to be one of the most arrogant men he had ever encountered. And Thomas Carlisle was no slouch himself in that regard. So I'm guessing he'd make his book required reading for the course on life. And most likely argue for it on the basis of its closeness to nature. In other words, that it is not a "book" in the traditional sense, but more like the language of eyes, ears, and body, one that it is different from other books in "kind and not degree." Who knows, maybe he's right. But even if he's not, he had extraordinary powers of persuasion, so might just pull it off. That's the foundation I'm starting with for Wordsworth. Quiet, meditative time with Nature (capital N, to indicate how the Romantics valorized that term, as way more than just some pleasing trees and pretty scenes) is both how we learn and what produces good poetry, the ultimate discourse for teaching others. I like the cut of his jib on this one.

William reprises his argument with Matthew in another little poem called "The Tables Turned," which is literally that: his critique of Matthew, with an even stronger endorsement for his position:

*Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;  
Or surely you'll grow double:  
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;  
Why all this toil and trouble?*

*The sun above the mountain's head,  
A freshening lustre mellow  
Through all the long green fields has spread,  
His first sweet evening yellow.*

*Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:  
Come, hear the woodland linnet,  
How sweet his music! on my life,  
There's more of wisdom in it.*

*And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!  
He, too, is no mean preacher:  
Come forth into the light of things,  
Let Nature be your teacher.*

*She has a world of ready wealth,  
Our minds and hearts to bless—  
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,  
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.*

*One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.*

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—  
We murder to dissect.*

*Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives. (134)*

Yes, quit your books, that dull and endless strife. Listen to the music of the linnet (finch) and the throstle (thrush). Then that great line: “Let Nature be your teacher.” Wealth, health, cheerfulness, knowledge of good and evil, you get that by sitting alone on a stone, not in a library. Or a classroom, which is pretty much the only place Wordsworth gets to hang out these days. I don’t think the industrial combine that is the contemporary university would look kindly on awarding credits for this kind of learning. Unless maybe it could charge full fare for it without having to provide a classroom, a building, a teacher, just some stones, a pretty good business model. All those rich families now buying a way into elite schools for their privileged children could

save a lot of money. Send the kids out to sit on a stone, pay the school for the credits. Sweet deal all the way around.

And there's that other famous line here: "We murder to dissect," which captures succinctly that other pillar of Romanticism, the vital wholeness of all living things. Unless you apprehend the whole, as a whole, fully alive, on its terms, you won't get the wisdom Mother Earth has to offer. Taking it apart might be a useful strategy for something that is already dead. But not worth taking a life for. This whole idea was poo-pooed dismissively back in the 70s and 80s, as "vitalism," whose primary vehicle was rank sentimentality, the "just spill your guts" model. Lots of readers still think that Wordsworth is in fact a rank sentimentalist, all those tear-jerker poems about poor or infirm people—Goody Blake, Simon Lee, the Mad Mother, a haggard lot—being grievously abused by the Matthews of the world. I don't. I like those poems. I think they are deeply humane. And I like this young Wordsworth a lot better than the Wordsworth he turned into once he got famous. Maybe that says more about me than it does about him. If you want to find out for yourself, you can get this little book for free online and check out some of these early "experiments." It's an easy read.

## Poem

I take my poem for today from the second book I wrote after my wife passed, called *Harvest Moon*, written when I was, as I said earlier, under the sway, for five days, of the actual harvest moon in September 2016. It has to do with knowledge, a few learned trees, a little brook, and it ends with Marilyn Monroe. I think Wordsworth would approve of that.

*9/16, 2016: I just couldn't stop*

*So this morning I just couldn't stop  
laughing, I mean couldn't stop.  
I think it was knowing how now  
for some reason I happen to know  
way more than you're supposed  
to get to know while you're still here,  
and I'm not sure how it happened,  
maybe it was "just bad luck,"  
what that doctor told me  
when "a couple tough weeks"  
turned into months and months  
of misery and I still see his face  
that half-smile flash frozen  
into his cheeks hoping I'd  
laugh instead of lunging at him,  
throat-throttling, and I don't remember  
if I laughed, but I'm pretty sure  
I didn't strangle him or I'd be in more trouble  
now than I am knowing just this much,*

*and, sure, I could tell you some of it,  
if you pushed hard enough, thought  
you could take it, but then, like they say,  
I'd have to kill, well, at least one of us,  
and I'd prefer not to have it be you,*

*so I'm off now to the woods,  
my walk, all those trees,  
well, they already know  
all of this, I know, for sure,  
way more I think, too,  
so if I happen to start blabbing  
instead of laughing, at least  
they won't be like,  
yikes, Munch's "Scream,"*



*and I'm thinking ahead to the ones  
I want to walk by today, hoping  
they'll be where they normally are,  
which is no sure thing in my woods,  
that big black cherry, flaky-shingle  
bark up and down, so charming,  
like a fairy-tale dollhouse  
I could walk into for a little kiss  
and one of us would wake up  
and the other wouldn't still be a frog,  
but I can never find the door,  
and believe me I've walked around  
and around it lots of times looking  
and I never, ever find the door,*

*or that monstrous oak right out  
in the open six feet at the base at least,  
like a ten story leg, so long  
I can't see what it belongs to,  
so I just guess from that huge foot,  
two-foot toes grasping ground,  
one side a brontosaurus maybe,  
head way up there somewhere,  
munching on, what, who knows  
and the other side a couple elephants  
leaning into each other, still asleep  
leg-locked together, so sweet,  
and I always pay close attention  
passing, in case one of them decides  
to take a quick step and I have to jump  
out of the way, but not too far, hoping  
I can get a glimpse of what's been kept  
secret all these years under that big foot,  
or the heart-shaped poplar up the hill  
chain-saw toppled last year,  
too near the power lines,  
at least waist high just lying there*

*on its side, all that it knew  
slowly spewing back to the universe  
bit by byte by megabyte,  
terabytes of it still left there on the ground,  
and I think if I sat with it for the rest  
of my life and listened close enough  
I'd overhear a bit of what it now has to  
give back,*

*but today is my only whole day  
this week to do absolutely nothing  
and I'm in a hurry to get on with that  
so I keep walking toward a voice,  
a real one I promise, a woman  
on the phone maybe, just talk-talk-  
talking, and then the three of them  
walk up single file on the one-lane path,  
that fluffy poodle-doodle dog up front  
then her, then him, her husband, had to be,  
and I can't tell if she's talking to him  
or the dog and what does it matter  
anyway, either way it's all still love,  
and tomorrow maybe he'll be up front  
hearing what's rushing up toward  
the back of his head from her, and she says  
to me, don't worry he wouldn't hurt  
anyone, and I assume she's talking about  
the dog, though I can tell instantly  
(I am that good at this, really)  
that the guy wouldn't either, just happy  
to be out walking today with these two,*

*and then the little "bridge,"  
hardly a bridge, two steps long,  
the tiny "brook" running under it,  
hardly a brook, two steps wide,  
heady today with yesterday's rain  
going over the rocks with a hard*

*"glug, glug," like pouring a two-liter  
bottle of coke into the sink fast  
because it's too flat to drink*

*and I know right then that this poem  
is over, all I have to say today,  
down the drain or under the bridge,  
whatever, even though you waited  
all this way thinking you'd get to know  
something you don't already know,  
not just glug, glug, glug, glug, gone . . .*

*except on the drive home,  
a big truck I'm following, on the back door,  
a ten-foot, full color bottle of coke,  
not the two-liter job like your fat uncle  
in too-tight pants but the Marilyn Monroe  
one (yes, I am that old) with the waist  
you just want to put your arm around  
for a long, slow dance all the way home,  
all those dew-drops on the dark glass  
like maybe her voice would be,  
whispering into your ear, I mean my ear,  
something that means nothing  
and everything all at the same time,  
one breathful of it carrying more  
than I or all those trees  
could even hope to know, now or ever,  
and the slogan high up on the right side:*

*Love it!  
Again.  
And again.*

*OK. I will. I will. Soon as I get home.  
Can't wait. Thanks.*



March 4, 2019: Nurse Logs

*This Dark Is Mine*

*Every night in the woods  
these trees reach out,  
caress one another,  
leaf to leaf in summer,  
shadow into shadow  
twining on the ground  
all winter, multiplying  
moonlight, starlight,  
what care is, not giving,  
taking, just there, always  
in the air, a way of prayer.*

*The light we reach into  
day after day, not  
destination, wisdom,  
I hear them say, simply  
where we find what  
we need to survive.  
Down below, in that dark,  
we are rooted, share  
everything, care  
for each other, rear  
our young, prepare  
for storms, wind, cold;  
there, the trillion tiny  
highways from here  
to everywhere,  
how we live as one,  
out of your sight,  
not out of ours.  
Look now to what  
holds you deep down.  
There the dark is yours.*

*At the top of the hill  
where I always first feel  
what today I decided to call  
a holiness in this place,  
the tall, lean poplar  
on my right, speaking  
for all the trees,  
their collaborative voice,  
said: Take care now,  
Paul, this dark is yours.  
Show no fear.  
It was always there  
waiting for you, the way  
from where you are  
to where you go.*

*Take heart from us.  
We will meet you here  
every morning, cheer you,  
the September daylight  
so bright, so clear,  
this light we love and use.  
But we are specialists  
of the dark, know all  
its ways. Remember,  
so do you, so do you.*

Paul Kameen

I walked in Watershed Park today, and as has happened a number of times in these woods, the first one I walked in after I moved here, it was, in unexpected ways, a watershed walk for me. I hadn't been for a full walk there for weeks, the snow first, then the closing for cleanup. I actually tried to walk yesterday but couldn't find a parking spot. There is a side-of-the-road parking strip big enough to hold maybe ten cars. On a day like yesterday, a weekend, sunny, spring in the air, the chances of getting one are slim. I knew that but tried anyway, figuring I

might drive up just as someone was leaving. No such luck. Monday is the opposite of that, the workweek starting, many of the downtown stores closed. It is easy to park everywhere.

The walk started quite movingly for me, my encounter with that big Douglas fir standing half into the path about 100 yards in, the one I said had become friendly to me, open. I had almost forgotten about it, I'd been away so long. But as soon as I saw it, I felt welcomed. I reached out and touched it as I usually do now, just to say hello, and my eyes got a little moist, a cheerful tear, the kind that doesn't fall. I said in *This Fall* that for me, the way I am now, there are at least seven kinds of crying. This is one of them, that happens when an unexpected kindness comes your way, one that touches you, as this one did today. And it was an omen of things to come. A little further down the path two more trees received me warmly for the first time, like they may have missed me as much as I missed them. I knew right then that in this space I was becoming a real citizen, a welcome presence instead of a stranger. It was heartwarming, with my having such a hard time finding new friends here. Finally, I thought, it's working.

I know this may sound strange, equating trees with people, even replacing people, but I hope you won't find it sad. It is a salvation for someone like me, so solitary, so awkward in the human universe. I became concerned late last fall that I hadn't established a "social network" here. And that was with me trying! So I decided to try harder which was, as you might expect, counterproductive. A few weeks ago, I just stopped. If anything on the human side emerges for me, it will have to happen out of the blue, the way I have always met my favorite people. In any case, the fact that I have made several new friends in these woods, just by going back over and over with an open heart, was beautiful to me today. As "holy" to me as the tree that spoke to me so graciously back in Boyce Park while I was still fully in the dark.

I noticed that the ferns in Watershed Park have not fared as well as those at Woodard Bay under the weight of February, almost as bad as I did! They are still flattened to the ground, bedraggled, dilapidated, many stems bent or broken by the weight of all that heavy, wet snow. I know how heavy it was—not fluffy “powder,” more like almost-ice—because I shoveled it. Two feet of that is enough to crush even the sturdiest green things. And many of them are still buried under piles of branches, logs, sticks, the detritus left behind by the storm, some where it fell, some where it was stacked after being chain-sawed aside. I’m sure they’ll make a comeback. I actually saw a number of new shoots protruding from the mud here and there of things that looked like the skunk cabbage back East. Thick thumbs of green maybe six inches tall, two inches wide, jutting up, sure signs of spring. My guess is the ferns are eternal. A month or two from now, they will be resurrected from these crushed piles into fountains of green as tall as I am. I can’t wait to see that.

About a quarter mile into my walk I noticed one of those trees growing up from the stump of a dead tree that I have marveled at and wrote about in *First, Summer*. I never saw anything like this back East. In Watershed Park, you can see examples of it everywhere, especially with the cedars and hemlocks, which must provide the right kind of culture for this. In one case, the original stump, maybe five feet across at the base, is fully decomposed now. So the tree that took root on top of it is perched up about six feet off the ground supported only by the “cage” of spindly, long “legs” it grew originally to reach over the old trunk down to the ground. You can walk right through them! In another case, there is a trunk of a large downed hemlock that stretches out on the ground for maybe thirty feet. It has become what they call a “nurse log” here: Along the top of it is a line of smaller hemlocks, maybe ten or twelve, in a series, bigger to smaller then bigger again, their roots gripping down around the main trunk like long fingers. It is strange and charming. But the one I noticed today I had never seen before. It was maybe 10 feet up the bank on my right, a living tree perched on a dead



one that was pretty much the same diameter, maybe two feet. In other words, this new tree has been growing long enough to reach the size of the “parent” tree that supported it when it sprouted. And the parent was still there. That’s how good trees are at fostering their own. Just like those trees in the poem I use to open this piece.

About a year after Carol passed I was trying to explain to some friends what it felt like for me, why I was at such a loss to get going again. I used the analogy of a tree. I said I have had, like everyone, significant losses before, a painful divorce, my parents passing, things like that. In each case it felt like some big part of “my” tree had been excised. In some cases, it was like a few big branches had been lopped off. When that happens, it usually takes a year or two for the tree to fill out that empty space, either with new branches or just more leafing in from the surrounding area. If there is light, the tree will reach out to find it. If it’s a major loss, like a secondary trunk, well, that never grows back, might leave an ugly scar. But it heals over and the tree diverts its energy elsewhere. When Carol passed, I felt as if my tree had been cut down almost to the ground, like these stumps I see in Watershed Park. When that happens, there is no growing back. Yet I was still here. I said back then, before I saw any of these trees, that I felt like I was sitting on that fresh-cut wood waiting for a new seed to germinate, that I would have to wait as long as it took, more than likely past my time, given my age, before I was a tree again. That tree today reminded me of all that, and made me feel like I actually have at least germinated, have a few shoots going up. Honestly, it doesn’t even matter how big the new tree grows. I’m just happy it is alive.

And then I remembered another time of crisis in my life, almost 30 years ago, what I call my “nervous breakdown,” though no doctor ever used that phrase to my face. I had been under enormous pressure at work, just terrible stress, family matters, my parents declining needfully, Carol’s two nearly fatal medical events, two very young children. I was lying on the couch at home on the day before Thanksgiving, 1991, thinking I can’t

take it anymore. In my head I envisioned a branch with one leaf on it. I was that leaf. I thought I can hang on or let go, either way. I decided to let go. As that leaf fluttered to the ground in my head, I knew I was in a lot of trouble. A fallen leaf, I suddenly realized, can never climb back up into a tree. For it to flourish again, it needs to decay on the ground, be re-absorbed by the tree, find its way to a branch and bud out. I thought: That takes years not weeks or months. I am so screwed. And I was. It did take years. Fortunately, I was able to keep working, keep caring for what I needed to care for. Not great, maybe, but, blessedly, no one needed to take care of me, just tolerate me in my depleted, broken state. Now I know enough not to let go.

Both of these scenarios flashed through my mind in a matter of seconds when I saw that tree, the speed of life being so much faster than the speed of words describing life. If somehow you can imagine both of those images simultaneously and instantaneously, well, you have an idea of why I might have had some tears well up then, though they, too, were sweet. Because, whatever deficiencies I might have and display right now, I am not broken for good, a dead trunk. I am growing, leafing out on top of the one I was sitting on four years ago. Even if it's only a thin shoot, well, that's everything you need for a tree to grow, for a future to emerge.

Last fall, as I said, I translated a bunch of Emily Dickinson poems into songs for the Christmas album I send to family and a few friends every year. She of course is a recluse in a league of her own, at least according to the common stereotype of her. I was lying on the couch one night and her "Nobody" poem came into my head for some reason. Here is her poem:

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you—Nobody—Too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!*

*How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
How public—like a Frog—  
To tell one's name—the livelong June—  
To an admiring Bog!*

I thought yes, yes I am “Nobody—Too.” Thanks for asking! Right then, I felt a deep intimate connection with her. She was, I thought, just like me. And I started to fall in love with her. I ended up that night writing a song of my own in response her, a love letter of sorts, a way to say back, I’m here, let’s get together. Here’s what I wrote:

*I'm nobody. Who are you?  
Are you nobody, too?  
Then there's a pair of us.  
Now that we're aware of us  
Maybe I can be  
nobody for you  
and you nobody for me.*

*I won't tell if you won't  
then they'd advertise.  
How dreary to be one  
everyone else buys,*

*so public like a frog  
admired in the bog  
no way to hide  
from all those prying eyes.*

*I'm nobody. Who are you?  
Are you nobody, too?  
then there's a pair of us.  
Now that we're aware of us  
Maybe I can be  
nobody for you  
and you nobody for me.*

I got up from the couch and went to the sunroom to record the song, just like that. The tune came automatically, really, her work is so rhythmic, in the style of church hymns, the old “fourteener” structure. And we did get together that night. It was beautiful.

That’s when I decided to make a whole album of songs based on her poems. I riffled through a bunch of my favorite Emily Dickinson poems, tried a few with my guitar, settled on some that seemed to work well, then turned them into songs one by one: “Because he loves her,” “There’s a certain Slant of Light,” “I taste a liquor never brewed,” “Tell all the truth but tell it slant.” It was slow for the first day or two. Then one night, in a fever-pitch about all this, I woke up around three, restless, agitated, knew I’d never get back sleep. I opened the book to her “Wild Nights” poem, the one I mentioned earlier, turned on my equipment, and rasped out my version of it, no plan, just made up the tune as I went. It was electric, Emily Dickinson and I wild together. I sang the song exactly the way she wrote it, repeating parts of it to make it long enough for a song. Here is her poem once again:

*Wild nights - Wild nights!  
Were I with thee  
Wild nights should be  
Our luxury!*

*Futile - the winds -  
To a Heart in port -  
Done with the Compass -  
Done with the Chart!*

*Rowing in Eden -  
Ah - the Sea!  
Might I but moor - tonight -  
In thee!*

Wow! Just stop and take that in. It might be one of the sexiest poems I've ever read. No matter whether it is man or woman she wants to moor with, or both. There are arguments out there on all sides of that. Like Whitman, she is capable of enough passion, enough desire, enough sensuousity to love anyone and everyone, including me. And all this stuff about her being prissy, repressed, even a prude. Read the poem, for godssake. Emily Dickinson is as torrid as my emotions are in my song.

Then I did her "Hope is the thing with feathers" poem, again, no plan, just started singing and playing. It brought me to tears several times. If you listen to that song on the album, which is the take I used, even though I had much "better" ones, you'll know why. The emotion is raw and all there. You cannot understand how strong and durable hope can be, how it can persist for eons of human time without any sustenance, singing its wordless tune into the darkness, the wind, asking for nothing—unless you also know, can imagine, how it feels to be hopeless, utterly hopeless. Emily Dickinson knew that. Carol knew that. I do, too. Here is my song, which I turned into a conversation with her, her call, my response, the two of us communing with that hopeful thing with feathers. The parts I added to simulate a back and forth are bracketed:

*Hope [you told me] is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops -at all -*

*And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -*

*[Since then]*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -*

*Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.*

*[Hope is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never -in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.]*

It was an amazing night, as close as I've felt to a woman since Carol passed. All this wasn't in my head while I was walking today, at least not explicitly. But it must have been in the air, because I'm writing about it now, in the immediate aftermath of describing my two "deaths." Hope and wild are two of the things you need to grow back into life again.

About halfway through my walk I stopped to look at the remnants of what must have been a real old-growth cedar, eight feet wide at the base at least, nothing left now but a falling-apart stump about six feet high. I've stopped to look at it many times, and it must be a popular destination, like a shrine, because there is a little path worn right up to it. Now there's a sign asking walkers not to leave the path, to help preserve the flora. And maybe to help preserve what's left of this magnificent tree, the temptation to pluck a sliver from it probably irresistible if you get up that close. It was flooded with bright light today, the wood a beautiful reddish hue. The way it has decayed has left layers of tall spires of wood that in this light looked like dozens of packed together skyscrapers in a hillside megalopolis. It made me think not about the fragility of life but its tenacity, its durability. That tree probably lived for hundreds of years and that stump has probably lasted another hundred or more. The weathering of time strips away and strips away and strips away, and still, in the right light to the right eyes, what remains is a megalopolis on a

hill. The deep sense I've had these last few days that I am lost and will not be found began to dissipate while I stood there. If nothing else, I sensed that I have at least found myself.

Bridget made a series of four paintings on black cardboard when she was in college. They came home one summer in a box with dozens of other paintings. One day I was going through things in the basement and decided to inventory those boxes. After a while I pulled out a piece I really liked, a quickly painted winter scene, huge snowflakes lightly sprinkled with glitter, a simple tree, almost abstract, quite playful looking, with snow-covered branches, a layer of white snow on the bottom counter-balanced by a layer of white clouds at the top, and inscribed in a semi-circle, almost like a mound of snow the phrase: "I'm. Still. Here." Bridget had a habit back then of adding text to her paintings, big enough and obtrusive enough to be part of the painting rather than a title. I decided I'd build a frame for that one and hang it up somewhere in the house. So I'm leafing through the box some more and I find another one, colorful, floppy butterflies in pastel-Easter shades instead of snow flakes, a big purple flower instead of a tree, and "I'm. Still. Here" standing straight up, on end, like it was growing. Pulled that one, too. Then I found another and another, those two just as strikingly beautiful, the same general design of elements, same phrase situated differently. I pulled them, too. When I looked at them all together on the floor I realized they were representations of the four seasons, a whole year. And against all apparent odds, "I'm. Still. Here." those periods doubling the meaning; all the words together, survival, each separately like a meditation on patience and presence.

I built black frames with black mats for this group. They are so inspiring to me. I have them arranged now in a sort of circular format on the wall in my bedroom opposite the bed, where I see them every night and every morning. I'm looking at them right now, as I type on my laptop. The one straight across from me is winter. To the right and slightly higher is spring. Summer and fall complete the cycle and the circle. When the seasons change

I rotate them a quarter turn, like turning back the hands on a clock. I've been here now for all of summer and fall and almost all of winter. In a couple of weeks I will wake up looking at spring, its "I'm. Still. Here." standing up straight and tall. Amazingly, against all odds, I'm. Still. Here., too. Just like that great tree, what's left of it, next to nothing, a city on a hill. And the scene I'll be looking at in a few weeks is now the cover of this book, having found another home for itself, just like me.





## Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Coleridge, as anyone who knows me knows, is my favorite thinker on matters of this sort. His definition of the imagination is probably the most famous of any. It juts up like a little crystalline jewel in the middle of his long, mostly turgid book, the *Biographia Literaria*:

*The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. (Bio, Ch. 13)*

Here's what I said about this in *This Fall*:

This is the most exorbitant definition of the imagination I'm familiar with, and it comes out of nowhere in his argument. He's been trying to get to it for pages, chapters, the long Kant-like drudgery of his foundational thinking, striving, grappling its way toward where I'm sure he knew well in advance he wanted to get. Just before he announces the above proclamation, he clearly reached an impasse and knew it. Most theorists at that point would likely just cover over the huge chasm from one paragraph to the next with an authoritative "thus" or "therefore." I do it all the time. No one ever notices. Coleridge, to his everlasting credit, doesn't do that. I think it's actually because he believes that we, his readers, are smart enough to see all the steps that are missing, which we are not, or at least I'm not. I would have trusted him, or been enough carried away by the fervor of his argument to overlook this crucial apostrophic moment. Coleridge does here the most charming thing: He inserts a letter from a friend

that, basically, warns him not to publish that portion of the argument because it's both incomprehensible and inflammatory. His reputation will be marred. So, out of deference to his wise reader, he complies. The letter of course, we know now, was one Coleridge invented himself, and it's a wonderful bit of ironically deceptive rhetorical flourish. At least to me. Other readers might be less generous. I think it's a gas. (30)

What I like about his definition is its simultaneous extremity and simplicity: Our imagination is the repetition in our finite minds of the infinite power of creation we attribute to gods, in the Biblical mode here as the originary I AM. It is, in other words, a very normal kind of creative perception, the kind I've been talking about all along here: We look out and create a world. We do it all the time. It is whole, luminous, residential, real. Okay, so the gods have the power to make something from nothing, to look out imaginatively and actually bring a material world into being. But, on our much smaller scale, so do we. We make a world of those already created things, give them meaning, bring them into the human equivalent of being.

If we want to make art of that, then we use what he calls "the secondary Imagination,"

*the echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and unify. (Bio, ch. 13.)*

Simple as that. We make art out of our materials in the same way we make a world with our perceptions. No mumbo jumbo, no mind-bending circumlocutions (which Coleridge is capable of and does quite often in this book, especially in the long, tortuous build-up to this definition.) That process may be a "struggle," but

it does “recreate,” “idealise and unify,” just as our perceptual systems do with the world proffered to us by the gods.

There is no better depiction of this power than in the closing stanza of “Kubla Khan,” the would-be epic poem that never got written because Coleridge’s laudanum-induced vision was intruded upon by “the man from Porlock,” who knocked at his door, thereby distracting him. Or at least that’s what he says. He could have invented that guy, too, to justify his never getting far with this poem. Although by “not getting far,” I mean he ended up creating one of the greatest poems in the English language, which is a good index to how different Coleridge’s standards are from mine, say. If I got that poem, I wouldn’t be trying to explain why it wasn’t longer and better. In any case, this man from Porlock breaks Coleridge’s spell and, after he leaves I assume, Coleridge finished the poem this way:

*A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.  
Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight ’twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (Works, 547)*

Every time I taught Coleridge, I read this stanza aloud to give a sense of what Coleridge believes is possible with imaginative

engagement, and not just for him, for any of us, if we can initiate or recover the beautiful song that accompanies such “visions.” We, too, could “build that dome in air/ That sunny dome, those caves of ice,” and not just a figment for ourselves, but tangible enough for “all” to “see them there,” like for real, up there in empty air. Wow, that’s amazing to think about: Build them for real! Afraid as others might be of that sudden creation, thinking something otherworldly must be afoot, they would still know instinctively that it was good, godly, a work of inspiration, which is exactly what we have in common with the gods, maybe their way of breathing Being into being through us. Socrates might be a little put off by Coleridge’s outlandishness, but I think he would ultimately like this legendarily garrulous guy as much as I do.

One of the other terms that was a keystone of Romantic poetics is “association.” That may seem like a simplistic, even trivial mechanism in our day, but it was not so at that historical moment. It offered a new way of accounting for what poetry was and could do. Wordsworth uses the term multiple times in his famous “Preface,” having simply absorbed it from Coleridge, I’m sure. Coleridge, who actually read David Hartley’s seminal work on this mental tool, which is how it came into currency back then, relies on it heavily to jog his thinking toward his famous definition of imagination, though he has to abandon Hartley’s highly deterministic system very early in that process to get there.

One of my favorite Coleridge poems is “Frost at Midnight,” a poem he wrote in a dim room, late-winter/spring, right around the time of year I’m writing this, with his infant child sleeping beside him, whom he had named Hartley after his mentor. Here is a redacted version of what I wrote about that poem in *This Fall*.

It opens this way:

*The Frost performs its secret ministry,  
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry*

*Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.  
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,  
Have left me to that solitude, which suits  
Abstruser musings: save that at my side  
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.*

What follows is a series of “associations” initiated by this moment. Every time I read this poem I can’t help but see it as a literal enactment of David Hartley’s (or at least Coleridge’s Hartley’s) associative process, which proposes that there are actual “vibrations” in the brain that bring about these kinds of creative connections. The poem starts outside with the frost, then moves transmissively, via an owl’s cry, back inside the cottage, to little Hartley, to Coleridge, meditating there in the silence until all the outside world is absent, except for the little flame fluttering on his fireplace grate:

*. . . the thin blue flame  
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;  
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,  
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.*

That perception vibrates his mood and his memory, jogging him back to his lonely school days, watching that same “fluttering stranger” (a metaphor back then for the little flame.) An elaborate series of associated memories ensues, concluding with his poignant hope that some actual human “stranger” he knows (“townsman, aunt or sister more beloved”) might show up at the door to rescue him from his solitary work. This vibrates him instantly back to himself in that room with his son, for whom he has such loving and elaborate high hopes, thoughts that could never have issued forth had he not first been transported back to his own lonely childhood moment at school. This feeling clarifies and emerges into his poignant peroration, an address to his child, then returns to the outside world, and, finally, to the frost, this way:

*Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,  
Whether the summer clothe the general earth  
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing  
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch  
Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch  
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall  
Heard only in the trances of the blast,  
Or if the secret ministry of frost  
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon. (Works, 43)*

The lovely circuit of associations closes where it opened, but so much more enriched, as is always the case with Coleridge, by its path of transit, in this case the “secret ministry of the frost” having revealed at least a few of its beautiful secrets. (32-35)

There is no poet I know who is better at this kind of circularity: an opening perception, a long meditation with many unexpected connections, and a return to that initial image, deeply enriched, laden with new meaning, from having been followed through the full circuit of those “associations.” Coleridge calls these poems “conversation poems.” In part that suggests something about their “voice,” casual, open. But at a deeper level it suggests the sort of intimate connection he can establish and maintain with what’s out there, what’s in his mind, and with his reader. Every time I finish this poem I feel both that he has been conversing with me, and that he is listening all the while he speaks. That is what the imagination makes possible, all those things, including talking with someone hundreds of years hence as if she is right there in the room with you.

## Poem

I picked this poem, which I wrote in the mid-90s, because, like Coleridge’s, it is set at a seasonal transition and in the context of the nearbyness of my children. And it says something about

what one can build in the air out of nothing with just words, even if those words never become the poem you're actually writing:

*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 . . .*



March 5, 2019: Listening Without Words

*When the evening shadows fall,  
And you're wondering who to call  
For a little company,  
There's always me.*

*Or if your great romance should end,  
And you're lonesome for a friend  
Darling, you need never be;  
There's always me.*

*I don't seem to mind somehow  
Playing second fiddle now.  
Someday you'll want me, dear,  
And when that day is here,*

*Within my arms you'll come to know  
Other loves may come and go,  
But my love for you will be eternally;  
Look around and you will see,  
There's always me.*

Don Robertson  
(as sung by Elvis Presley)

I had some chores to do today, so I went for my walk downtown, on the boardwalk, Capital Lake, that one, the easiest of all, just down the hill, all level, very pleasant, a walk built for daydreaming. It is warm again today, just turned 50 degrees as I drove home, the air even clearer. I've been looking at the Olympic Mountains all week, but that view is still breathtaking to me. The sky was summertime blue, a few wispy cirrus clouds around town, almost no clouds at all around the mountains. So they seemed even taller today, partly I think because I could see them down almost to their

bases, the wide brown pedestals the ice-caps rest on. Maybe they were so visible because there was no low-lying haze in the air to mask them, maybe because the snow is now melting on the lower levels. No matter. They looked huge, making me think about the many kinds of optical illusions that determine what we see and how. Near or far, there is always enough in between, even if it's only on the inside of our head, to intervene, magnify, divert, enhance, obfuscate. I tried again to count the number of peaks visible from town today. It's at least eight, maybe more. For the last part of the range on the right the view is obstructed by a dense cluster of sailboat masts. No matter where you move, they still get in the way. Though I shouldn't say "in the way." They are beautiful, too, so tall, straight, shiny. I often take pictures of that scene, especially when the mountains are hidden in clouds.

I had a long conversation on the phone early this morning with a friend I haven't seen in many years. We've exchanged a few emails over the last month or so after a happenstance re-connection. She called to hear my voice, what it sounded like now, which I thought was sweet. I've been around long enough to remember when the phone eliminated the need for someone to actually come into your presence to converse, all that bodily energy and vitality removed from the scene. The answering machine aggravated that further by eliminating even the need to have a spontaneous exchange, in the moment, which, like the body, is where life actually resides. I mourned that loss and hated the phone for causing it, an aversion that lasted many years. Then email eliminated the need even to deliver a message via one's voice. It is possible of course to simulate "voice" in writing. That is a longstanding concept in the history of rhetoric. But you have to be a good writer to do it, and you have to write with great care to achieve it. Email never proved a medium that promoted good writing even from good writers. And care, well, there was little of that, too. Now it's texting, eliminating even the need for sentences, punctuation, just the straight dope—for me, the opposite I guess of "all thumbs" in

my clumsy index finger pokes at those tiny letters, inevitably dopy.

Our kids left home to go to college 14 and 11 years ago, respectively, so have since been largely absent to us, and then to me after Carol passed. They are extremely adept with electronic devices and social media, text primarily now. But rarely to us, or now to me. They always called and still do. I am so grateful for that. When the body is absent, when all you have is the voice, you need to pay close attention to it. When you do, you realize what a huge amount of information it conveys, health, mood, frame of mind, worries, affection, all of it. Sick, tired, happy, anxious, calm, aloof, they all come through. I got to a point where I could tell in a few seconds what the foundation was and what I might need to say back, and how, to help. My friend today had serious surgery recently, has been on pain meds, but there was no obvious strain in her voice (pain), no cloudiness (meds.) That seemed a good sign that things are progressing well, and I hope that will continue. Like Carol, I hate to talk in detail about medical things. Just the barest facts, please. But, if you listen to the voice, you don't need the details. You can learn what you need to know without them.

While I was walking today I was thinking about all of this in terms of listening. When someone is standing in front of you, how you react physically, move, your eyes, your face, all of that is right there. You can do most of your listening, and make it clear to the other that you're doing it, without words. Take that away, well, what, then is the evidence of listening? I was thinking today that the evidence of listening, under these constraints, must come not in what you say, but in what you say back. I know from long experience teaching that such speech acts, what you say back to what a student says, are a million times more important than the question you asked to elicit their initial response. Teachers struggle for hours to formulate questions, maybe not wasted time, I suppose. Unless you totally blow it by not listening well enough to the response to say something back that feels to the other like actual listening. It's hard to do, which

is why most people are not good at it. They have a train of thought going in their head, one that left the station either before you arrived or gets going on a sidetrack because something you said reminded them of it. A little of this is, of course, necessary and useful to have an equitable conversation. But when it's all that, well, I wish I could just turn on my answering machine to record it, leave the room (or put down the phone) and go for a walk by myself.

I want to say again, as I have so often through all of my books, that I have no extra-sensory gifts in this regard, just the standard sensory equipment. I try to see and hear what's there, not my head turning itself inside-out, but the world turning itself outside-in toward me. That may take a little practice, and I've gotten a lot of it on my many thousands of walks in the woods where just seeing what's there is what you go for, and the many thousands of classes I've taught, trying to say things back that don't sound canned or stupid. In both of those transactions, I still get to be fully me and present, interactively, even more so in fact via this "listening." It is the woods in some essential respect that wrote these essays for me and the classroom that taught me what I know. The human body is such an extraordinarily sensitive portal with so many antennae tuned finely to receive what is proffered. We just need to let it.

I joked talking with my friend that these days my voice is everywhere out there if you want to hear it, Bandcamp, Soundcloud, Audible.com, and especially my personal website where all of my stuff—songs and audiobooks, as well as texts—is ensconced for free. Enough of my voice—poems, essays, songs—to last you for many months. We ended up talking a bit about singing, which is my new passion, singing and songwriting. I said, which is true, that part of the reason I started to record myself after Carol passed was not so much to hear my own voice (that's rattling on in my head and, if I'm alone, running out of my mouth under my breath all the time); but to hear another voice in the room with me, which is what one's own voice sounds like when you listen to it playing back, from the outside-in rather

than the inside-out. It made me feel like I had company. Now I listen to myself singing every day. And I sing every day. I'll get a tune in my head, one I know or one I'm writing, and I sing it into my microphone until what I hear playing back sounds sweet to me. I've recorded hundreds of songs now, including about 35 of my own.

I told her that singing helped me come back to life after Carol left. It allowed me not just to feel deeply what music, when it's added to voice, can convey; it also allowed me to hear it outside my head, to listen as if I was someone else listening. It made it possible for me to learn some things I could not have otherwise come to know, if for example I had just put on a piece of music and listened to it rendered through someone else's voice. It was a way to convey all of the depth of information that voice can convey, from me to me, a way of both saying and saying back all at once.

So, if you want to hear my voice, I am all over the internet. Or you can call me, always a treat for me. Or, even better, stop by my place and I'll make you a cup of tea. I happen to be here right now, and that's exactly what I'm going to do for myself as soon as I finish this typing. And listen to myself sing the songs I recorded last night. Who says I don't have a best friend?





## Percy Bysshe Shelley

[I wrote quite extensively on Shelley's poetic theory in *This Fall* (pp. 26-30) so I'm just going to borrow from that material, making whatever changes seem necessary in this new context]

I was just looking again at a couple of Shelley poems I know well and I happened to focus on the birds that make those poems work. One is Shelley's "To a Skylark," published in 1820, an astonishing *tour de force* of Romantic figuration. Here is the first stanza:

*Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
Bird thou never wert,  
That from Heaven, or near it,  
Pourest thy full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.*

It struck me for the first time how odd this assertion is, telling this bird that it was never a bird! All of a sudden, the skylark is entirely disenfranchised from his own birddom, at the poet's behest, reduced only to its song wafting down from the clouds. I suspect there is a technical name for this specific kind of figuration, but I don't know exactly what it is, or care enough to look it up. It is the act of radical disembodiment that interests me here. And what Shelley does with it in the rest of the poem, the array of similes he uses to re-fill the empty space his absent skylark creates for him, transforming the spectral song into the apotheosis of poetic inspiration, slowly at first, in the opening stanzas: "Like an unbodied joy whose race has just begun . . ." or "Like a star of Heaven/In the broad day-light." Then cascadingly:

*Like a high-born maiden  
In a palace-tower,  
Soothing her love-laden*

*Soul in secret hour  
With music sweet as love, which overflow her bower:*

*Like a glow-worm golden  
In a dell of dew,  
Scattering unbeholden  
Its aerial hue  
Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the  
view:*

*Like a rose embower'd  
In its own green leaves  
By warm winds deflower'd,  
Till the scent it gives  
Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged  
thieves.*

*Like a Poet hidden  
In the light of thought,  
Singing hymns unbidden,  
Till the world is wrought  
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not.*

Note that in each case, there is a “thing” there, at the base of the comparison, but it’s never quite tangible, embodied; it’s always barely evanescent: the rainbow clouds, the hidden poet, the tower-ensconced maiden, the screened glow-work, the scented rose. Nothing solid anywhere, but still filled to the full. That’s impressive. The rest of the poem then uses this re-figured bird-base to amp up things like Wordsworth’s “Let nature be your teacher” and Coleridge’s “damsel with a dulcimer” to their maximum pedagogical volume, what the poet aspires to be but can never even approach becoming. That’s very cool, I think, at the material level of the poem, this bird that is not a bird, these things that are no longer things, enspiriting in the most majestic ways, haunting in the most alluring ways, the similarly disembodied figure of the poet who can only listen, listen:

*We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not:  
Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught;  
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.*

*Yet if we could scorn  
Hate, and pride, and fear;  
If we were things born  
Not to shed a tear,  
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.*

*Better than all measures  
Of delightful sound,  
Better than all treasures  
That in books are found,  
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!*

*Teach me half the gladness  
That thy brain must know,  
Such harmonious madness  
From my lips would flow  
The world should listen then, as I am listening now.*

(poetryfoundation.org)

Shelley wrote this poem right around the time he wrote his hyper-drive starship of “A Defence of Poetry,” the apogee, in my mind, of Romantic valorization of the power and force of both the poet, as a cultural figure, and poetry as a mode of discourse. Here are a few passages, just to give you a flavor of Shelley’s ecstatic paean. My favorite one comes about halfway in, the ultimate phallic analogy for verbal invention: “Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.” Yikes! But there are many others, more extended and wonderous:

*Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life.*

...

*Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes.*

...

*Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.*

(poetryfoundation.org)

Wow! Can't go much farther out there than that. Shelley doesn't seem to be very widely read or admired these days. I've come to enjoy and respect his work more over the years, but there is something oddly "cold" in the overwhelming "heat" of his images, a glassy, almost dispassionate, beauty to the poetic surface, hard to penetrate, reminding me of Walter Pater's

famous dictum: “To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” That is Shelley exactly, I think, burning, burning, yes, but with gemlike flames.

## Poem

I happened upon this poem in an old e-file while I was looking for another poem. It’s one of the very first poems I wrote with an eye toward publication, so that’s about 50 years ago. It never landed that way, but I still like it, maybe more now than I did then, to be honest. And, like Shelley’s, it’s about a bird, one I used to see often, always with delight and amazement out in the country when I was a kid.

### *Redwing Blackbird*

*The switchblade wind is  
quick enough to play  
tricks with me  
makes me think back  
faster than all these  
flakes flicking past me  
like blurs of summer  
sunlight on the lake  
until I am wading  
knee-deep in pickerel-  
weed snaking my way  
toward cattails where  
blackbirds sit with  
quarter-moon beaks  
tucked beneath wing-  
blades splashed red  
at the hinges--such  
a red that does not  
resemble the sun going  
up or the sun coming*

*down or the blood  
around any wound  
or gashes of peonies  
cut into thin air or  
anything birdlike and  
fragile as feather only  
a splash of red on  
all that astonishing  
black and I bask  
in that healing heat  
while the switchblade  
wind cuts deep to  
a dream of its own.*



March 6, 2019: A Once in a Lifetime Winter

*Because I do not hope to turn again  
Because I do not hope  
Because I do not hope to turn  
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope  
I no longer strive to strive towards such things  
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)  
Why should I mourn  
The vanished power of the usual reign?  
Because I do not hope to know again  
The infirm glory of the positive hour  
Because I do not think  
Because I know I shall not know  
The one veritable transitory power  
Because I cannot drink  
There, where trees flower, and springs flow,  
for there is nothing again. . . .*

*Because I know that time is always time  
And place is always and only place  
And what is actual is actual only for one time  
And only for one place  
I rejoice that things are as they are . . .*

*And pray that I may forget  
These matters that with myself I too much discuss  
Too much explain . . .*

*Because these wings are no longer wings to fly  
But merely vans to beat the air  
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry  
Smaller and dryer than the will  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still.*

from "Ash Wednesday," T.S. Eliot



In the dream I had just before I woke up today, this Ash Wednesday, so late this year, I was at a large round table eating a lavish meal, more like Shrove Tuesday I guess, a table of 10 of us maybe in a large room full of many similar tables, receding into the shade as far as I could see. Like a very large wedding, but I knew it wasn't one. There was no clear reason for us to be there together like that, we just were. And the food was delicious, not wedding food, not even high-end wedding food. It was home cooked, and no matter how much anyone ate, the quantity never seemed to diminish, both on the table and on the plate. I was sitting next to my father. We never got along very well, so we didn't talk, until the very end, everyone clearly full. He turned to me and told me he had just visited one of my uncles, Joe Carrigg, my mother's sister's husband, who was dying, the finest man I ever met until my son came along. My father said his final words were, "Just wonder." I was taken aback by this because, I told him, just that week a colleague sitting next to me at a departmental meeting said he had visited an older colleague, someone I quite admired, who was dying, and his last words were exactly that: "Just wonder."

I recalled after I woke up the line from Coleridge's "Essays on Method" that I built my final speech in the Pitt English department around. Coleridge says, quoting in sequence Plato and Aristotle (erroneously, as it turns out), "Philosophy begins in wonder and ends in astoundment," probably one of my favorite all time sentences. And the last words of the preface to my book *Last Spring*, where I'm imagining what a Chinese man might feel or do, finding a bottle on the beach with one of my cryptic poems rolled up inside it in some distant future, one of the many bottles I thought I might dump into Puget Sound once I got here, to find their way around the world. "Just wonder" is what I say.

The last two days have been cold, rainy, clammy. Some snow last night, too. I have become spoiled here in the sense that even the slightest snow seems impertinent to me, an affront. It was pretty far down the list, but one of the attractions of this place for

my retirement was that “it rarely snowed.” An email from my power company, explaining higher heating bills, said that February was the snowiest month here in 50 years and the snowiest February since 1916. I already knew that the event around my birthday, that two-foot job, was the most single-event snow here since 1949. A few people, jokingly (I think) said I must have brought the Pittsburgh weather with me. If you’ve read *First, Summer*, you know I brought almost nothing with me, wanting, as I said, to start over, clean. If the Pittsburgh weather sneaked somehow into my overnight bag or the storage container of my kids’ art, it couldn’t possibly have brought enough of itself to last more than a year. So I’m assuming this is a once in a lifetime winter. Not just my lifetime, a “day to day” business, but Bridget’s too.

I just got back from a walk at Woodard Bay. It was sunny when I left, started to rain on the way, and then even harder while I walked, a miserably cold rain, those big, splotchy Olympia drops that splatter when they hit, my water-resistant (but not -proof) red jacket, the first piece of clothing I bought here, sodden quickly. It was sunny again by the time I got home. All of my clothes got soaked, though, and are in the wash now. It was entirely unpleasant, the only such walk I’ve had since I got here. I can’t decide whether it was bad luck or stupidity that sent me out at exactly the worst part of the day.

I was trying this morning, in an email, to explain to a friend the nature of “the dark” that sometimes afflicts me now, as it did during February, as it does every February. I think the analogue most people have for that is “depression,” as it was for her, wondering whether she herself might end up deeply in the dark if she didn’t resist its predecessor. I told her not to worry. I honestly don’t believe you can end up in the dark by force of will, or lack of it. If it is waiting there on the path you happen to be on, as it was for me four years ago, you have no choice but to go through it. And it takes as long as it takes. It’s actually not that scary once you’re in it. Very solitary, very silent, very somber, like being in church on Ash Wednesday, waiting for that dusty

cross to get smashed onto your forehead. It does, of course, feel empty, the old “dark night of the soul” business, as if prayers won’t rise up, just hover there and clunk back down to the cold, hard ground, like Hamlet fears his will. But at least for me it has nothing whatsoever to do with depression, no cause-effect relationship between them in either direction. From the very first thing I wrote after Carol died, that long letter to my sister that turned into “Coming to Terms,” I wanted to make clear that I was not depressed. I have suffered from depression. I know what it is. It is fearsome. And it leads to no good. The dark is not fearsome and it leads to something new. You just have to go through it to get through it. I told my friend I hoped that her path was one that would always be in the light. But you get what you get in this life.

I see now that the sun is working. The snow on the garage roof right outside my window is already gone. I could swear it was still there when I sat down on the bed to finish this. That fast. I am and always have been addicted to fast, so this transition is especially pleasing to me. The forecast looking forward has days where the temperature begins with a 5, and about ten days down the line a 6. Spring is champing at the bit, I can feel it, the battle between light and dark turning again my way. Your way, I hope, too, always.

I’ll have to decide soon what to make of this book, at least in terms of a title. Right now, I have only “winter” left in the quiver for this series—*This Fall*, *Last Spring*; *First*, *Summer*, three seasons taken—and these are clearly winter-made essays. But they just don’t feel like winter to me. In any case, as I said, I feel as if my winter book is already done: It’s called *Last Spring*, written during my final term as a professor, “spring term:” January, February, March and April. How do you get spring from that set of months? In a place like Pittsburgh, for godssake. It says everything I have to say about that winter. My head was empty, deeply dark, I got the flu and it then invited in every other contagious malady my classrooms were fogged with. I shivered and sweated, feverish, and shoveled and shoveled,

breathless, unremittingly gray. I was lucky to survive it. Beyond that, I have been fretting that if I finish the cycle, the whole circle of the year completed, maybe my circle, my time, will be completed, too.

I'm not all that averse to death, it is my partner in life now in many ways, but I don't want to invite it in for the final big party by writing a book. That's just not smart. I'll figure out the title later. Now, I'll close with a beautiful "winter" poem I wrote not long after Carol and I were married, on, by the way, one of the coldest nights I can remember, late December, just the two of us with two friends as witnesses, at a minister's house because he had a bad back and couldn't come out. His two little kids watched it between the balusters of the stairs. It was perfect for me, but also for her. That should tell you a lot about how well-matched we were.

The night before I wrote this poem we had been out dancing on the riverboat, listening to Billy Price and his band, a local legend and one of her favorite singers. She was a great dancer. And Billy Price attracted a wild crowd. What a wonderful memory to come to me here, now, wow. That night I had a dream that turned into this. It's called "Second Wind," which I think is in keeping with my mood right now, not all that black ash mashed into my forehead, some vague cross, reminding me of my return to dust, but flocks of tanagers, my favorite bird, dreaming of spring, mine, yours, no matter, some dancing, the lovely passage of breath:

*Tonight I dreamed my own death,  
escaping it, as always, narrowly.  
Now the sound of you breathing  
beside me: flocks of tanagers  
dreaming of spring. I smoke  
one cigarette, then another.  
The darkness floods my lungs.  
Earlier, while we were dancing,*

*I caught my second wind and wished  
the lovely passage of breath  
through my chest would never cease.*

*It is just this kind of night  
I'd like to die on: full moon icy-white,  
calla lily lazing in a vase of light,  
snowbound ground aglimmer,  
no place for a back hoe,  
one man only, pick and spade,  
making room for me, stopping now  
and then to catch his breath,  
light a smoke, colds hands cupped  
to keep the match from blowing out.*

“Just wonder” might have been the final words of these wonderful men I mentioned here. I don’t want them to be mine, at least not yet. And, if you turn the page to continue past this sentence, you will find that they aren’t, so many others on all these pages waiting.



## Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson is America's Wordsworth, the progenitor of a poetic movement that spanned a couple of generations, flying most often under the flag of "transcendentalism," first coined by a critic in a pejorative sense, and the sponsor, maybe not entirely intentionally, of its greatest voice, Walt Whitman. Whenever I taught Emerson in relation to poetics, especially at the entry level, where students are likely to be unfamiliar with his actual work, maybe having heard of him in relation to transcendentalism, I prefer to use his essay "The American Scholar" rather than, say, a more obvious choice, "The Poet," an equally powerful argument on behalf of imaginative creation.

"The American Scholar" originated with a talk Emerson was invited to deliver before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College in 1837, his first "book," which we now read as an essay, *Nature*, having been published the previous year. So he's still relatively young and relatively unknown. Events of that sort, I know from my experience in the academy, tend to be ceremonial, celebratory, what Martin Heidegger calls, dismissively, a century later, "commemorative," rather than opportunities to provoke real thinking. I'm sure Emerson knew this. But he chose to do the second thing instead of what is expected, building "thinking" into the very fabric of his talk via the elaborate figure of what he calls "Man Thinking," his way of naming the genuine intellectual, in or out of the academy.

I always read aloud, before I even assigned the text, the first paragraph of this essay, just to give a sense of how brave and dynamic Emerson is in this endeavor. I asked everyone to imagine the audience, all men of stature and importance in their day, most older, maybe much older, all expecting to be honored and edified by their new recruit. Emerson starts off on the right tone in that regard:

*Mr. President and Gentlemen,*

*I greet you on the re-commencement of our literary year. Our anniversary is one of hope, and, perhaps, not enough of labor. We do not meet for games of strength or skill, for the recitation of histories, tragedies, and odes, like the ancient Greeks; for parliaments of love and poesy, like the Troubadours; nor for the advancement of science, like our contemporaries in the British and European capitals. (43)*

Then he takes a sharp turn:

*Thus far, our holiday has been simply a friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters any more. As such, it is precious as the sign of an indestructible instinct. Perhaps the time is already come, when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. (43)*

Okay, he's saying, via "simply," none of this "friendly sign" stuff to assuage us because others are "too busy" to listen to what we care about. That's precious but pointless. Then the artillery comes out, "the sluggard intellect of this continent," like, for example, you guys sitting here under your "iron lids" championing "mechanical skill." Yikes! I'm guessing he got their attention. Not in a good way. He goes on:

*Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. (43)*



Yes, their dependence, apprenticeship, discipleship to “the learning of other lands” (meaning European, primarily), recycling “the sere remains of foreign harvests,” instead of learning how to “sing themselves.” Yikes again! Then he lays out his ambition for this talk:

*Who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years?*

*In this hope, I accept the topic which not only usage, but the nature of our association, seem to prescribe to this day, — the AMERICAN SCHOLAR. Year by year, we come up hither to read one more chapter of his biography. Let us inquire what light new days and events have thrown on his character, and his hopes. (43)*

Okay, so poetry is the solution to this, not most likely what his eminent audience would be expecting to hear— poetry, nice for a quiet evening, not much good for the business of the world. And poetry is, in his view, not a pastime but a mode of scholarship, the most essential one. That’s pretty incredible right there. His audience may not have been sanguine, but I bet their ears perked up, if only to find all the ways they might want to dismantle his impudent argument.

Poetry as the apex discourse and imagination as the apex mental faculty are ideas founded in the British Romantic movement, championed by Wordsworth and Coleridge forty years before Emerson gave this talk. So what makes what he has to offer new, and not simply, along the lines of his complaint, derivative from “foreign harvests?” Well, quite a lot really, things that are distinctively American and find their originary spokesman, at least in relation to poetics and intellection, in Emerson.

I’ll start with the big one, “Nature,” the title of the very long essay that got him this speaking gig (181-225), and a term Emerson

uses repeatedly in his work. For Emerson, Nature has four pillars: Commodity, Beauty, Language and Discipline. I'll skip Beauty because that is basically Wordsworthian in its ambitions and proportions, though Emerson adds a provocative "intellectual" component to it (12.) But the other three supplement British Romanticism in interesting ways, making Emerson's concept considerably more comprehensive than Wordsworth's.

Firstly, when Wordsworth talks about nature, it's almost always in relation to landscapes that have not been commodified by human hands and our encounters with it are almost always solitary, even if we are with someone else. Emerson is more inclusive, incorporating those elements of nature that have "uses" for us. Two of his pillars, "Commodity" and "Language" seem to me to fall in this category.

"Commodity," he says, "although low," "is perfect in its kind and is the only use of nature which all men apprehend" (7). And "the useful arts are reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man, of the same natural benefactors" (8). Commodity is the relationship with nature that we share in common, adding a communal, social aspect to even the greatest artist's relationship with both nature and his audience. So Emerson is in that respect, I would argue, closer to Socrates the star-gazer than Wordsworth the stone-sitter. That's a big addition, in many respects distinctively American, in its relation to things "democratic" in particular. And it mitigates the harsh city/country binary that afflicts British Romanticism, making it sometimes seem haplessly anti-industrial and hopelessly nostalgic.

Emerson also has a considerably more sophisticated theory of language than Wordsworth does, one prefiguring the American "pragmatists," Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and William James, who came along and amplified some of his ideas a generation later. For Emerson, "words are signs of natural facts," (13) "that convey a spiritual import" (14). This brings immediate "experience" and the "universal soul" (14) much more intimately

into confluence in moments of creation. Art may benefit from meditation, but it doesn't necessarily require all of those steps back and away from the moment that Wordsworth scripts out so meticulously. And in terms of poetry, it prefers to render nature, in all of its aspects, including the social, through very specific details rather than relying on vaguer "emotions" for animation.

Emerson doesn't insist on the "recollection in tranquillity" part of Wordsworth's process. Encounters with nature, in all its myriad aspects, are direct, immediate. They can and should initiate arrays of extrinsic connections that lead, ideally, to an awareness of the whole of the universe, which is correspondent to the human soul. To see the difference in practice, read Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," or a few pages of Shelley's poems, where everything is absent in some way; then read Whitman, where everything is fully present. Whitman becomes, by this means, the foundation for a poetic tradition in what William Carlos Williams will later call "the American grain." And Whitman got his call from reading Emerson.

"Discipline" allows Emerson to bring "the understanding of intellectual truths" (19) into the field of play. For Wordsworth, trying his best to counter what he felt was the excessive intellection of the previous generation, truth is best encountered via emotion, a "wise passiveness." In his speech, Emerson's assigns the "scholar" as the "designated intellect" for the cultural system in which there are all kinds of other useful specialists. He calls on each man in this group before him not, though, to be a mere "thinker," self-contained, preoccupied with status and fame, or his own little bailiwick; but to be "Man Thinking," (44) a grander, more nobly generic profession, working always with some humility on behalf of the whole.

He names three "influences upon the mind" (44) that need to be properly coordinated to accomplish this. The most important is Nature, in the broader Emersonian sense I have outlined here. The second is "the mind of the Past," (46) whose primary vehicle is books. Again, Emerson has a considerably more complex

approach to the nature/books conundrum than the one Wordsworth details in the William/Matthew argument. For Emerson, “the theory of books is noble,” “transmuting life into truth.” So books are good. “Yet hence,” he says, “arises a grave mischief.” Too great a devotion to the “perfect” “hero” who wrote each book, and “the book becomes noxious: the guide a tyrant.” “Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm,” the sort of “book-learned class” that is likely well represented in his audience (46-47). Emerson goes on to detail “a right way of reading,” which he calls “creative reading,” (48) the first time to my knowledge reading has assumed the status of writing in that regard, as an active, imaginative enterprise, a way of making. So Emerson is not at all afflicted by Wordsworth’s contradiction about whether one should be reading his books. Emerson is clearly learned and promotes learnedness. And he would be happy to have you read his books. It’s what you do with them that makes the difference.

That gets him to the third “influence” on the mind of Man Thinking: Action. Basically, Emerson says the point of reading is not to acquire a mastery of things past, it is to inspire something new, something now, to render your book not regurgitate theirs. Make what you read your own and then go make your own books for others to read. That’s the charge Whitman took off and ran with, so I’ll save further discussion of that for the next inter-chapter. The point I want to make is that Man Thinking is not solely contemplative. He must act, too. And get out into the world to do it, once again, testimony to the importance of the social sphere in Emerson’s system:

*The world, this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I run eagerly into the resounding tumult. (49)*

Yes, the resounding tumult. Where he is not likely to run into Wordsworth! Thinking, for Emerson, is a mode of doing. It is not sitting on a stone. “Thinking is the function. Living is the

functionary” (51). And, right before this sentence, one of my favorite in all of Emerson’s work, though it is not necessarily pertinent here: “Character is higher than intellect” (51). This to an audience of intellectuals. Good for you, Ralph!

One further point, an arguable one. For the most part, Emerson seems to assign “thinking” to this scholarly class, like the men sitting there. But over and over in this piece, he implies that “thinking” is the one function we all share in common. To my way of reading, he says we are all “(wo)men thinking,” most especially important in a democracy, where we can’t afford to entirely trust specialists to do our thinking for us. Thinking is an innate and endemic human function. And to turn briefly to his essay “The Poet:” If you want to trust anyone for guidance along the way, trust the poet, who is fully “representative,” who “stands among partial men for the complete man” (288), is both capable of and properly inspired enough to tell us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

What a remarkable legacy to leave us, a truly American poetics. No wonder Whitman loved his work, brought that legacy fully into being about 20 years later. No wonder Emerson loved Whitman’s work, even if he couldn’t quite identify it as poetry, calling it “wit and wisdom” in the letter he wrote Whitman after the publication, in 1855, of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which was not otherwise well-received, the letter Whitman used to launch his second edition. Emerson knew this was a book from its own time and for the future, not from the past or for the past. He was a man thinking!

## Poem

I think I’ll end this with one of Emerson’s poems. Emerson’s own poems, and he wrote a lot of them, are not very interesting to me, strained and formal, by contrast with his prose, which is dense but rich, pellucid. If you want to read Emerson’s real poetry, I say read the essays. You can judge for yourself of

course. But don't finalize your judgment until you read some Whitman, who is, to me at least, the poet Emerson imagined when he wrote those great essays. Then write your own poems. Here for example is the poem he uses to preface "The Poet:"

*A moody child and wildly wise  
Pursued the game with joyful eyes,  
Which chose, like meteors, their way,  
And rived the dark with private ray:  
They overleapt the horizon's edge,  
Searched with Apollo's privilege;  
Through man, and woman, and sea, and star,  
Saw the dance of nature forward far;  
Through worlds, and races, and terms, and times,  
Saw musical order, and pairing rhymes.*

*Olympian bards who sung  
Divine ideas below,  
Which always find us young,  
And always keep us so. (287)*



March 9, 2019: Grayed-out Aliases

*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 a 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.*

#2 of "Three Spring Songs," Paul Kameen

I went to the Farmers Market today and walked the boardwalk, on the upper end, near the market, not my usual haunts. There is up there a wooden observation tower, three stories tall. I've been up there, but didn't go today. I just wandered around it. It is sunny and a bit warmer than yesterday. The few crocuses I saw a couple of days ago in a dockside planter box are now being supplemented by many more in other boxes, and a few daffodils. There is a daffodil festival in Puyallup, maybe 30 miles from here, in April. Apparently, from a postcard I bought, there are fields full of daffodils, a "carpet" in "the shadow of Mt. Rainier." I hope to go there. Nothing better in spring than daffodils.

While I was wandering I intersected paths three different times with a young man, early 20s maybe, always on the phone, clearly with a different person each time. In his first conversation I overheard in passing: "What I need to do now is change everything, how I look at things, everything. I need to focus on just me." From the second conversation, when we crossed paths



a few minutes later, I overheard: “Where did you eat lunch?” pause “Oh, they have great burgers. Did you have a burger?” From the third conversation I overheard, as we both were leaving that area: “Hi, Sweetie.” Pause. “Daddy loves you.” Pause. “You know you can call Daddy on the phone anytime, don’t you?” Pause. “Well, you can call me any time you want.” I made up a couple of different stories around these fragments, as you might be doing right now. One of the things I ended up thinking about is how simple my life is now. I live alone, so there are no daily entanglements of that sort. I come and go as I please. Eat and sleep when I want. I never explain myself to anyone, so I’m not invoking any rationale for my thinking or behavior. They just are. And since I don’t tell my daily “story” to anyone, it evaporates very quickly, never having found a narrative line to hold on to.

My kids are grown and on their own. They can of course “call me any time” they want, and they do, very sweet, and we all help one another in very material ways. I may be chronically in a state of mind that seems to be impelling me to “change everything, how I look at things, everything.” But nobody really cares about how and why I do that besides me, so the stakes are low. If I mess up, it’s not an issue. If I’m stupid, I’m usually the only one who really knows. I can’t help but focus on me. I specialize in that. I do like burgers, maybe once every couple of weeks, a special treat at any one of the several diners nearby my house. Too bad I didn’t hear the name of the place they were talking about. I might head there tonight. Alone is the price I pay for that, of course. But today was a chance for me to look at what I get for that price, which I too often forget or underappreciate: freedom. Radical freedom. Simple as that. I want to stop moaning about alone and start cherishing freedom. I’m already happier just thinking about that.

My relationships in Pittsburgh have gradually evaporated over the nine months I’ve been here. At the outset, maybe a dozen people communicated with me in some way, now it is down to a few. That, of course, is natural. As I’ve said, even if I retired and

lived up the street, that would have happened, I'm sure of it, because I've seen it happen with everyone else who has retired from our department. Flesh and blood people I used to see and spend time with became grayed out aliases on my desktop. I could click on them over and over and the application just wouldn't open. I don't know if the file had been corrupted or erased, but the result was the same. I'm not sad or happy about any of this. It just is what it is. Fewer attachments.

The tide in the bay was extremely low today, as low as I've seen it here so far, and not even all the way down because the water was coming back in. I stopped at several spots to see how far below the high water mark it was right now. I was quite surprised. It was down at least eight feet, maybe more in some spots. The bay is at least a quarter mile wide down here and at least a couple of miles long. I'm sure I could calculate how much water that is coming and going every six hours. So let's see:  $2(5280) \times 1320 \times 8 = 111,513,600$  cubic feet. I've always been puzzled by that "helpful" metric they use to give meaning to large amounts of water: the Olympic-sized swimming pool. Who has ever been in an Olympic-sized swimming pool? I'm sure I could find out how much water is in one and how many such pools come and go here all day long. But I'm not going to. Let's just say it's a lot.

On my drive home I passed a house that has devoted its front and side yards, both big, to crocuses and daffodils. It is spectacular, thousands of them, like a mini-Puyallup! And "I am suddenly beside myself," on my "way back home."



## Walt Whitman

*The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me—  
he complains of my gab and loitering.  
I too am not a bit tamed—I too am untranslatable;  
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*

Walt Whitman (96)

I'm not sure exactly what I want to do with Whitman here. Not because I don't have a lot to say, but because there is just so much to love about his inspiring approach to imaginative creation, more than one of these mini-essays can contain. I could just paste in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, which is breathtaking, I mean literally, you will lose your breath reading the voluminous, clipped, ecstatic sentences flowing like rushing waters over and into others, obviously composed in a state of "godly possession" that even Socrates would find staggering. But it is way too long. Or ask you to read his "barbaric yawp" of a poem, "Song of Myself," in its original 1855 version, all that "gab and loitering," so electric, before it got "tamed" "a bit" into numbered parts as he expanded and republished his evolving book under the same title for the rest of his life, leaving finally a volume thick as most Bibles. But that, too, like everything Whitman wrote, is very long and ultimately "untranslatable," at least into a container of this sort.

So I'm going to focus on just one thing, the relationship he creates with his reader, so personal, so intimate, on the basis of which he genuinely carries out his invocation to you to use his book not simply to grasp his vision but to inspire one of your own. All imaginative acts involve or imply a reader, of course, even if it is only oneself, and writers have approached this matter from all angles along the way. For example, as I've been saying, the Romantics, British and American, talked about their desire to establish a co-equal relationship with their readers,

professed their belief that all of us are, fundamentally, poets, because language itself is fundamentally poetic, figurative to its core, thus allowing for face to face encounters on that terrain. Then they start to place conditions or limits on that shared capacity, taking this piece back, or out, contracting the promise, until, well, only the “real” poet is left to write “real” poems. Wordsworth does it a lot, Shelley does it less, Emerson does it least. But they do it. Whitman does not. He makes that promise and then he keeps it. That is his greatest charm to me.

Basically, I’ll just quote some passages from “Song of Myself,” maybe my favorite all-time poem, to show how he does this and with what effect. The poem opens this way:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself  
And what I assume you shall assume  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (28)*

Wow! So there is an “I” and a “you” here, a poet and his reader, configured together right off the bat. This is a conversation in which he may not be able to hear your side specifically, but as he says later he wants you “to listen to all sides and filter them from your self.” This is an opening hint toward some of the “multitudes” Whitman aspires to “contain” in the poem. There is him, with his “me” and “myself” and you with your “you” and “your self,” all co-equal partners in the enterprise. Other poets do this, too, maybe not as assertively, but they invite “you” in. Not one of them though announces an atom-for-atom exchange between the two parties involved. That is so outlandish as a first move you almost want to stop reading, like this guy is nuts. Don’t. He fulfills this ambition in the most generous, gentle way you can imagine.

And he gives everything of himself to this interaction, body and soul, flesh and spirit, all of it, a sensual, even erotic energy that is intoxicating. Like here:

*Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are*

*crowded with perfumes,  
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,  
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.  
The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the  
distillation, it is odorless,  
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,  
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised  
and naked,  
I am mad for it to be in contact with me. (28)*

The atmosphere is in his mouth forever, he is in love it, mad to be in contact with it! Again, wow! I have fallen in love with almost anything you can think of at one time or another. But to fall in love with the odorless air, well that is something that remains an aspiration. I would never even have thought of it had it not been for these lines. Then he lays the groundwork for how things are going to go in the conversation he has started:

*Have you reckoned a thousand acres much:  
Have you reckoned the earth much?  
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?  
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?  
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin  
of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are  
millions of suns left,)  
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,  
nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed  
on the spectres in books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things  
from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (29)*

Okay, maybe the first part sounds like a crass power move, as in “you think you know stuff, but you don’t know crap. Listen to me!” But then he clears the field, or the air, or whatever. The one left doing all the listening and filtering is not him, it’s you, not through his eyes, but yours. That is an impressive sleight of

hand to be sure, to assert himself into the conversation in such a way without pre-occupying the readerly space of the “you” he is in communion with.

I think one of the ways he maintains such a decentered authority is, oddly, by overloading his poem with details, those “catalogues” he was renowned for, has no equal for, not even a close competitor, endless lists of things that both sound Biblical in style and are Biblical in proportions; and all those amazing stories, historical, mythical, imagined, fully peopled with every kind of person, place or thing you can imagine, the “I” of the poem right there in the midst of them, telling them as if they are happening now. These go on for pages and pages and reading them becomes addictive, at least for me, a desire to go faster and faster, to absorb, consume, huge gulps at once, then more, like trying to swallow the ocean, which creates a thirst while it slakes it. You just can’t stop. And neither can he. I love his swagger, his aplomb, his coyness, his bombast, all of it, incomparable. I can’t fully render that propulsive element of the poem here without adding more pages than I can possibly print. Just read, with speed, some of these catalogues and see for yourself whether he wins you over. At least give him a chance.

Then he goes on, telling you something about who he is (not by his actual name, which doesn’t come until later in the poem, the only place anywhere in this first edition, including the cover and title page, where Whitman’s name appears, and even then it’s kind of an afterthought.) This is my favorite section of the poem, so I’m going to quote it all, even though most of it doesn’t apply directly to my limited ambition here:

*Trippers and askers surround me,  
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward  
and city I live in, or the nation,  
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors  
old and new,  
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,*

*The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,  
 The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss  
 or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,  
 Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news,  
 the fitful events;  
 These come to me days and nights and go from me again  
 But they are not the Me myself.  
 Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,  
 Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary  
 Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable  
 certain rest,  
 Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next  
 Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.  
 Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog  
 with linguists and contenders,  
 I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait. (70)*

Who wouldn't want to listen to and talk with a man like that? He goes on to describe his relationship with his soul, with God, with the child who asks about the grass, with death, and then enters into a kind of trance where he identifies with every specific kind of person you can imagine: old, young, Black, White, Native, men, women, children, gay, straight, etc. And things: animals, plants, minerals, stones, everything. There are pages and pages of this, long catalogues, astonishingly moving and unique. He tells their stories, stands in their places, comes into a seemingly impossible intimacy with them. My favorite is this one:

*I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss  
 And fruits and grains and esculent roots,  
 And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,  
 And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,  
 And call any thing close again when I desire it. (62)*

I always imagine him here as a large, sticky ball of chewing gum rolling around glomming up anything it comes in contact with, like a cartoon, all these animals and birds poking out



everywhere, wondering what the hell is going on. And here is another I really like:

*I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals,  
they are so placid and self-contained,  
I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long.*

*They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
Not one is dissatisfied . . . not one is demented with the mania  
of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another nor to his kind that lived  
thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth. (63)*

There is a quiet and winning humility to this that I just can't resist. Whitman had a reputation for the mental instability that ran in his family and has been subjected to almost every form of indignity in that regard that critics can come up with, armed with the artillery of subsequent psychological theories and jargon. Right here, he sounds to me like the sanest head in the room. If I ever have to exchange atoms with someone, let it be him.

During all of this cataloguing, and there is lots and lots of it, page after page, he still stops from time to time to talk with "you," get the connection re-established, as here:

*Do you guess I have some intricate purpose  
Well I have . . . for the April rain has, and the mica  
on the side of a rock has.*

*Do you take it I would astonish?  
Does the daylight astonish? or the early redstart  
twittering through the woods?  
Do I astonish more than they?*

*This hour I tell things in confidence,  
I might not tell everybody but I will tell you. (48)*

Or here:

*Writing and talking do not prove me,  
I carry the plenum of proof and everything else in my face,  
With the hush of my lips I confound the topmost skeptic,*

*I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen,  
And accrue what I hear to myself . . . and let sounds  
contribute toward me. (58)*

He is present then, as if bodily, with people on their death beds, in their wedding chambers, on the underground railroad, in the fields, at sea, in battle, everywhere, the ultimate voyeur. And his presence is so vivid it seems unmediated. "I am the man," he says, "I suffered ... I was there." This, too, goes on for pages until his own identity starts to come unraveled, first in this scene, reminiscent of Parmenides' young man flying into the heavens on his flaming chariot to meet the Goddess:

*Speeding through space . . . . speeding through heaven  
and the stars,  
Speeding amid the seven satellites and the broad ring the  
diameter  
of eighty thousand miles,  
Speeding with tailed meteors . . . . throwing fire-balls  
like the rest,  
Carrying the crescent child that carries its own full mother  
in its belly,  
Storming enjoying planning loving cautioning  
Backing and filling, appearing and disappearing,  
I tread day and night such roads. (68)*

And finally here, in this out of body apostrophe of ecstatic empathy, "an acme of things accomplished . . . an encloser of things to be," he falls apart:

*O Christ! My fit is mastering me!*

...

*These become mine and me every one, and they are but little,  
I become as much more as I like.*

*I become any presence or truth of humanity here,  
And see myself in prison shaped like another man,  
And feel the dull unintermitted pain. (76)*

After he gathers himself, he returns to "you:"

*You are asking me questions, and I hear you;  
I answer that I cannot answer . . . you must find out  
for yourself.*

...

*Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,  
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,  
To jump off in the midst of the sea and rise again and nod to  
me and shout and laughingly dash with your hair. (90-91)*

Followed shortly by these famous lines:

*Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then . . . I contradict myself;  
I am large . . . I contain multitudes.*

*I concentrate toward them that are nigh . . . I wait  
on the door slab.*

*Who has done his day's work and will soonest be through  
with his supper?  
Who wishes to walk with me?*

*Will you speak before I am gone! Will you prove already too  
late? (95-96)*

He closes this way:

*I depart as air . . . I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.  
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles,*

*You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
and filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you. (96)*

So beautiful, generous, serene. I realize I've done little more here than let him speak. But that is the beauty of this poem. You want to let him speak. Not so you can learn what he has to say deferentially, but so you can gain the energy you need, the momentum, to go forth and make an amazing poem of your own, a life of your own, a mind of your own. Lots of poets seem to make that promise, to listen, to stay out of your way, to cheer you on. Whitman is the only one I know who keeps it, wants you to live up to your own promise, to "celebrate" yourself, as he does, for every atom that belongs to you as good belongs to him. And it's not just pertinent to writing. It is the best way to teach, too. And to love, yes, above all, to love. Write, teach, love. That is Whitman in a nutshell.

## Poem

I wrote this poem about 35 years ago in Colorado Springs, my first extended time in the high mountains, which baffled me then in much the same way as the big woods here baffled me last

summer. I just couldn't contain them with my available vocabulary. For some reason, this poem seems to me to have a Whitmanic aspect to it. I hadn't thought about it or read it for maybe 30 years. I thought it was lost for good on some discarded floppy disk. But I'm glad I remembered it and was able to recover it from an old computer file.

***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*





**March 10, 2019: Coming Home Empty-handed**

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.*

*Now, of my three score years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.*

*And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.*

A.E. Housman

Today was the first day that had the feel of spring for real. Still cool, in the 40s most of the day, hitting 51 at the peak. But there was something in the air that seemed inebriate. Part of that may be because it is Sunday, people out everywhere, ambling around in groups and pairs, moving at a stately pace, like a Seurat painting—without the long dresses and umbrellas, just relaxed and happy. Even the animals seemed to share that mood and pace. And so did the inside of my head. What a wonderful experience all around, which reminded me of that Housman poem, one of my favorite spring poems. Not many people read Housman these days, but I'm a big fan. This one struck me today because the "voice" of the poem is a young man, 20 years old, trying to cram in all the visual enjoyment he can before his allotted time—three score years and ten, he says—runs out. I am just past my three score years and ten birthday, trying to recover and look at the

world like I'm still 20. So it's a good match, bookends of a sort we are. The spring trees are just now coming into flower, little hints of it. Soon they will be hung with bloom along the bough.

I walked at Woodard Bay this afternoon. As was the case downtown the other day, the first thing I noticed was how low the tide was, as low as I've ever seen it in the bay, the smaller branch of this particular set of Puget Sound's fingers. On the other side of the road from the parking area there is a body of water the size of a lake that drains under the bridge into Woodard Bay when the tide ebbs. It was just pouring out in a torrent today. The bay is maybe 100 yards wide and a mile long. Today, the whole upper half of it was just a mudflat. I stopped in various spots along the way to try to calculate how much lower the water level from its normal peak. Again, as was the case downtown, it looked to be at least 8 feet. Maybe these are "spring" tides. Maybe not. I'm lucky I even know how they work here now let alone what their names are. At the lower end of Woodard Bay as it meets the wider inlet, the water had receded at least 50 or 60 feet along the shore on each side. From the top of the bank, you could see the bottom of the bay in its middle, maybe 3 feet down. It was, to me at least, an amazing spectacle.

There were more walkers there today than usual, families with children, couples, pairs of friends. I'm pretty sure I was the only solitary walker, but I was quite happy that way today, as I have been more and more lately, such a pleasant and welcome relief. I guess part of what I was feeling before here was a kind of embarrassment that I haven't been able to make new friends. Now I don't really care. That will happen or it won't. Either way I will be fine.

As I've said, Woodard Bay is very quiet, so on a day like today, air still, any conversation at all, even the quietest, carries a long way. I overheard a variety of snippets in passing. One in particular interested me. A young woman, in her 20s, was sitting on a bench talking with a female friend about the same age. She said: "I felt like I got along with him. We could talk. He shares a

lot of my views, like political, I mean,” then a long pause, “and he knows I’m married.” I couldn’t help but think of the young man I overheard a couple of days ago. I’m sure they have no connection with one another, but I guess, like most people, I have an innate desire to make up stories around the slightest twitches this world makes in my passing.

I saw a couple of birds as I walked, one of those tiny, chocolate colored “wrens” I mentioned earlier. And a kingfisher. I saw one once before here, last fall. I hadn’t seen a kingfisher since I was a kid, fishing at my uncle’s lake. They seem smaller here. I’ll Google it later to see if there is a difference east-to-west with these birds or if it’s a kid-to-adult thing.

On the Henderson Inlet side of the point, the mudflat was even more impressive, maybe 100 feet out, a few people, like me, wandering into it out of curiosity until the mud got too icky to walk through. There were maybe a dozen buffleheads bobbing for food, a large seal, head like a grapefruit, just floating slowly by, some gulls flying around. One of them was doing what I saw a gull do downtown recently. It had grabbed what I assume was a mussel from the mud, flew up about 30 feet, and dropped it on the rocks below, hoping it would crack. This one got lucky. First try, it went down and ate. The one downtown took multiple tries before the meal opened.

Among the many decaying remnants of the logging structures—rail tracks, rows of posts, etc.—that still stand in the bay there are a couple of large wooden platforms, maybe 10 by 30, about 100-150 yards out. I realized today that they must be floating decks, because they are always at water level. A couple of weeks ago I saw about 20 seals hauled out on one of them, filling it up. I’ve read on the signage that seals come to Woodard Bay in spring to deliver and rear their pups. I hope I will get to see some of that if/when it happens here. Today, that platform was empty, but the one farther out was covered with a crowd of large, dark birds, maybe two hundred of them crammed together there. It was too far away to see them clearly, but I know enough about the ducks

and gulls, their sizes and colors, to know they weren't either of those.

I wanted to think it was the cormorants coming back to their summer nesting grounds here, a spectacular sight I got to witness last summer, hundreds of them roosting in the trees across the bay, flying back and forth to forage for fish. But I thought that might be wishful thinking. Until I was walking back. A sleek, black cormorant, that arched neck, pointed wings, almost bat-like, so distinctive, smaller and darker than a heron so there is no mistaking it, flew over the path. I stopped and sat for a while on the same bench the two women had been conversing on earlier, right across the bay from the tall trees I know the cormorants roost in. From that distance, I know from last year, they look like large, dark leaves on the tips of branches. Until they rise up and fly off, of course. I saw a number of those dark splotches over there, but try as I might, I couldn't tell if they were these great birds. I sat for about 10 minutes and nothing moved. Part of me started to think maybe I just made the whole thing up because I wanted them back. But I'm pretty sure I didn't. I'm not that imaginative.

While I was walking in the muck at the inlet I found a large metal fastener, maybe two inches across encrusted with rust. It looked like it might have been a combination nut and washer used to hold the structure out there together. It was quite beautiful, a mixture of tan and reddish brown flowing together like liquid. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. I never take anything natural from the woods I walk in, no keepsakes or reminders or souvenirs. I explained why a couple of books ago, but I'm sure you can guess. I was vexed about whether to keep this item, clearly manmade. I took it out of my pocket multiple times on the walk back out, put it back in, trying to rationalize a good solution. Finally, I decided to leave it: on one of the metal girders of a large bike rack near the parking area. It seemed at home there, all that metal the same rusty brown. And I came home empty-handed, always my preferred outcome for a walk in the woods. As is also always the case, and quite often to my great

surprise, I was not empty-headed though. I went out today with nothing to write about. I came home with this. You may or may not like it, but it's more than enough for me. I was happy and grateful when I left the house. I'm even happier and more grateful now. I was going to say that that's a good day in the woods for me. But, really, that's every day in the woods for me.



## Emily Dickinson

*To be Susan  
is imagination.  
To have been  
Susan, a dream—  
What depths  
of Domingo  
in that torrid  
Spirit!*

A note to Susan from Emily, early 1880s

I met my wife Carol serendipitously, one of those miracles of intersection that are lottery-type improbable, but happen, in October of 1982, a gorgeous fall Saturday. I had been driving through central Pennsylvania literally “celebrating myself,” what I felt was my liberation from a series of unsuccessful relationships I had been running through in the aftermath of my first great loss. I wanted out and I worked at it. Took maybe six months. But that day, when I woke up, I knew I was free, just me, ready to move on.

I stopped for a while at Brady’s Bend, at the top of a steep hill overlooking that large crook in the Allegheny river and watched some hang gliders for a while, got a great slice of pie at the diner right there, and headed east, just by happenstance, toward State College. To explain all the convolutions that were involved in my ending up having dinner with Carol that night would be, as Socrates says, “a long tale to tell.” But we did. She walked up the steps into that second-floor restaurant, and it was over for me. Later she told me it was so for her, too, though, as she put it, “I knew I was in trouble.”

She was finishing a Master’s degree at Penn State, so for the next year we were intimate remotely, traveling back and forth

when we could, but mostly writing letters. Long letters. Amazing letters. Almost-every-day letters. The kind of letters that could end up in a book, like the one I'm reading now (*Open Me Carefully*, edited by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha) of Emily Dickinson's letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson, first her dear friend then her brother Austin's wife. Carol was like me, did some of her best thinking and loving on paper in the most elegant, electric, intense way. I miss letter-writing as a thing of that sort. A mode of intimacy, of love. I sometimes try to use email to simulate it, but it is not the same, and quite often "sounds," those little letters flickering up on a screen instead of hand drawn on paper, foolish instead of amazing. It is hard to fall in love with someone by email. It is easy to do so through the mail.

Anyway, those letters will not end up in a book. A few years before she died, Carol asked and I agreed to destroy them, to save the kids the heartache (or embarrassment) of finding them in the attic, going through them, all of that. Carol's first husband died very young, 29, out of the blue. She found him the way I found her, coming home, normal day, on the floor. Dead. I put that word in its own sentence. It is a brutal word, belongs alone, when it describes what she and I found 35 years apart. Dead. She had to go through his effects, their belongings. She was deeply and permanently traumatized by that. Never got over it. She wanted to do everything possible to make our passings as easy on the kids as possible. So, among many other things, those letters went. Not into the garbage, where one or two of them might fly out of the truck in the wind, picked up by some stranger. No. Burned. They were that torrid.

Emily Dickinson asked her sister to destroy her letters after she passed, which was customary at that time, the ones she hadn't already destroyed herself for her own good reasons. So the correspondence we have of hers is mostly her letters to the people she wrote to, though the book I'm reading includes a few of Susan's letters to her that somehow survived. It is an astonishing body of work. She wrote letters of consequence to at



least 100 people. *Open Me Carefully* contains what the editors call a “selection” from the Susan-letters archive: letters, letter-poems, and poems associated with her love for Susan. It is over 250 pages long, small font, the way books are not the way handwriting is, and all of Dickinson’s letters were, of course, handwritten. And they are astonishingly beautiful. There is no question why those she wrote to kept those missives, read them repeatedly most likely, so emotionally ethereal, seductively poetic, so full of life and love they are.

There is, to me, no hard line between Emily’s poems and these letters. Hardly a line at all. They are all poems. If all she had done in her life was write these letters, she would be worth reading for eternity. As a great poet! I’ve barely scraped the surface of the trove of her life’s letters. I have written before about her correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom she clearly wanted to sponsor her poetic career in some way, use his considerable leverage to do things she couldn’t. He knew she was worthy of that, more than worthy. Just look at the poems she sent him sometime. They are among the ones we are reading with awe to this day. He was too big of an oaf, just too arrogant, self-interested, to do anything but keep stringing her along. A fool. For twenty years. Then, after her death, he harvested her work and made his fame by publishing it, in concert with Mabel Loomis Todd, who was Emily’s brother’s mistress at the time, self-interested on the same scale as Higginson. Todd edited the first edition of Emily’s letters, which didn’t include her letters to Susan. The editors of this book have found, using current photographic techniques, that some of these letters were altered to make them appear less affectionate toward Susan. Most likely, it was Todd who did this. As I said, she was the “younger woman” having an affair with Emily’s brother while he was still married to Susan. What a pair to leave your legacy to. Emily did not ask her sister to destroy her poems. I’m so glad they weren’t. Except for the fact that Higginson and Todd got to use them to their benefit. It would almost be worth it to have lost them just to prevent that affront. We would still have the letters she sent to others, as poetic a

treasure as anyone could ever hope to find. But, fortunately, we have both, now fully restored to their original form, as Dickinson wrote them.

I have no idea how I can get across to you the range of emotions, the vitality, the humor, the pathos, the depth of human hopes and needs and desires and fears that these letters embody. And I mean embody, because, if you've read any of her poems, you know what poetic gifts Emily had for embodying the deepest reaches of human experience in this world, could say more in a few lines than most of us can say in a month of Sundays. So I'll probably do something like what I did with Whitman, let her speak for herself. Like him, she is more than capable of doing that better than I can.

I had actually decided at one point to write about both Whitman and Dickinson simultaneously, started, but it got too complicated. My reason for doing that is simple: Both are victims, and I mean that word in its express sense. Victims. Of our cultural obsession with sexuality in its most simplistic modes. O-oooh, Whitman must have been gay, Emily Dickinson must have been a lesbian, that kind of thing, as if it explains anything of consequence about either of them. It doesn't. It explains everything you need to know about our cultural attitude toward sexuality generally, and toward art and artists specifically, about what we value and why, and of course about the critic writing it. Blessedly, the editors of *Open Me Carefully* do none of this. Still, I want as best I can to urge all readers of those two poets to get past that kind of fetishism, to see them as full-fledged human beings. Who loved. Deeply, comprehensively, beautifully, sensually, sexually, all of it. Loved men, women, things of all sorts, everything they saw, thought, all of it. Not many kinds of love, one kind of love with many facets. Whether they had actual physical sex of one type or another is not the point. I hope they did. Lots of it. Because for either, sex would have been a most beautiful expression of true love, no matter who the partner nor how many.

About 10 years ago I was driving home from work listening to Terry Gross on NPR. She was in the midst of a multi-person “conversation,” mostly pre-taped from phone interviews, a remembrance for some writer or musician who had just committed suicide. I came into it too late to know exactly whom they were talking about, just that he was a “he.” Gross had interviewed him on her program about month prior to this and had found him excited, exciting, passionate, brimming with life. She basically asked the same question over and over, incredulous that he had taken his own life: “How could someone so full of life one minute, and with such talent, end up in such despair the next, enough to end it all this way?” Over and over, she got the same response: If you knew this man, you’d know that all of that was there all the time all at once. It was not a now/later or an either/or matter, had no binary aspect to it at all. It was multiples, layers, way more than two, equally present in every instant. No one said this exactly, but implied that he wanted to live forever and kill himself every second of his life. I don’t think she could process this. It had to be one or the other, something must have happened in the interim since her interview with him. It just didn’t make sense to her otherwise. Over and over she persisted, no matter how clearly the point was made.

Here’s what I want to say about that: Whitman and Dickinson are exactly the same as that man, in relation to their sexuality, in relation to everything. It was all there all the time all at once. It is very hard to use words, so linear and progressive in nature, to convey such a timeless unity of spirit. But these two writers do it as well as anyone, Whitman through the breathtaking, never-ending fluidity of his descriptions, those extravagantly long lines lapping over on themselves, light waves or huge breakers, over one another, layer after layer after layer. He is the poet of extension. Dickinson is the poet of compression. Her short poems have just as many layers, but built right on top of, even into, one another, three or four say in every image, sometimes in a single word, so vexing in its complexity you feel like you can

dwell on it for days and still not fully fathom its depths. That's what great artists do. It's why we read them.

But I also want to insist that, on an experiential level, it is not just great artists who are as complex and layered as the man Gross was honoring that day or as Whitman and Dickinson are. Everyone is, at least to some extent, or at least at some times. I surely am. I've written repeatedly about the fact that there are multiple emotions, feelings, thoughts, images happening simultaneously in there, some of them mutually contradictory on the face of it, but still companionable in real-life-time. Laugh and cry, joy and sorrow, life and death, right next to each other, or, more accurately, inhabiting the same space, inseparable from one another. Take away one, you lose them both, or lose them all. I bet that's true for you, too. And it is most especially so for what Whitman and Dickinson and I call "love." There is, of course, a difference for me between falling in love with a woman who might become my sexual partner and falling in love with a manhole cover. But it is difference of timbre not of tune. As is the case with Whitman and Dickinson, even the latter can have an erotic aspect to it, if it's real love, I mean, not a sham. Conversely, if what you want to know about my sexuality is whom I have had sex with, and you think by that means you'll get to know anything of interest or consequence about who I am or how I love, you are wasting your time. And mine.

The human mind is, as I've been saying all along here, capable of holding all kinds of apparent contraries, including eternal life and instant death, in its grasp simultaneously, almost has to at least from time to time, our lives here so fraught with joys and sorrows. Mine certainly does. And I'm surely way more like everyone else than I am like Whitman or Dickinson. In other words, what applies to them, this need to be generous, comprehensive, in our approach to the fulsome sexuality of these great artists, and all great artists, applies to me, to you, to everyone. To spend time ferreting out clues about who had sex with whom is crassly voyeuristic, and ultimately as pathetic and destructive as was Thomas Wentworth Higginson's intrusive

nosiness about Emily Dickinson's identity—who are you, where do you live, send me a picture, I need to come and meet you—when he could instead have heard what she was clearly asking of him, loved her poems, loved her in the way he was capable, in the way she was asking. And done it.

Emily's letters (she signs them some of them "Emilie") to Susan (whom she addresses variously as "Sue," or "Susie," or "Susan," sometimes "S," over the 35 years or so they corresponded) are of a different order, in a different key, from the Higginson letters, more forthright, more poignant, more exquisite. You can tell from the very first that she was in love with Susan. In what way? In the real way: true love. Every time I write about Emily Dickinson I get agitated, end up in a rant. I've already used up too much space here doing that when you could have been listening to her sweet voice. So here are some excerpts from the nearly constant stream of letters she had delivered to Susan by mail, or, later, delivered herself, little folded up squares of paper, complete with doodles and poems, on the walkway between her father's house, where she lived, and her brother's house next door. Most of these passages are, by necessity here, just a sentence or two from letters that go on for pages with comparably astonishing sentences. Like this one that she wrote when she was twenty-one, having recently met Susan:

*I wept a tear here Susie—on purpose for you—because this "sweet silver moon" smiles in on me and Vinnie [her sister], and then it goes so far before it gets to you—and then you never told me if there was a moon in Baltimore [where Susan had just moved to take a teaching job]—and how do I know Susie—that you see her sweet face at all? She looks like a fairy tonight, sailing around the sky in a little silver gondola with stars for gondoliers. I asked her to let me ride a little while ago—and told her I would get out when she got as far as Baltimore, but she only smiled to herself and went sailing on. (1851, p. 8)*

And this one,

*Susie, what shall I do—there isn't room enough; not half enough, to hold what I was going to say. Won't you tell the man who makes sheets of paper, that I hav'nt the slightest respect for him. (1852, p. 18)*

which was written upside down on the first page of an essay-length letter that opens this way, she excited about a “snow day:”

*Thank the dear little snow flakes, because they fall today rather than some vain weekday, when the world and the cares of the world would try so hard to keep me from my departed friend—and thank you, too, dear Susie, that you never weary of me, or never tell me so, and that when the world is cold, and the storm sighs e'er so piteously, I am sure of one sweet shelter, one covert from the storm! The bells are ringing, Susie, north and east and south, and your village bell, and the people who love God, are expecting to go to meeting; don't you go, Susie, not to their meeting, but come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love—shall intercede for us. (1852, pp. 14-15)*

And this one:

*I do think it's wonderful, Susie, that our hearts don't break every day, when I think of all the whiskers, and all the gallant men, but I guess I'm made with nothing but a hard heart of stone, for it dont break any, and dear Susie, if mine is stony, yours is stone, upon stone, for you never yield any, where I seem quite beflown. Are we going to ossify always, say, Susie, how will it be? (1852, p.21)*

Or this idyllic one:

*I have but one thought, Susie, this afternoon of June, and that of you, and I have one prayer, only; dear Susie, that is for you. That you and I in hand as we e'en do in heart, might ramble as children, among the woods and fields, and forget these many fears, and these sorrowing cares, and each become a child again—I would it were so, Susie, and when I look around me and find myself alone, I sigh for you again; little sigh, and vain sigh, which will not bring you home. (1852, p.33)*

Or this poignant one:

*Susie—it is a little thing to say how lone it is—anyone can do it, but to wear the liveness next to your heart for weeks, when you sleep, and when you wake, ever missing, this, all cannot say, and it baffles me.*

*I could paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be solitude, and the figures—solitude—and the lights and shades, each a solitude. . . .*

*In all I number you. I want to think of you each hour in the day. What you are saying—doing—I want to walk with you, as seeing the unseen. You say you walk and sew alone. I walk and sew alone. (1854, p. 51)*

I could go on and on all day and night typing passages like these, the long early letters, so luxurious and flamboyant, the briefer notes and poems she wrote after Susan married Austin and lived next door, tighter, more cryptic, hundreds of missives, full of dark and light, sweet and sorrow, as beautiful as these.

As I said in an earlier piece, I am in love with her. As much as I've ever been in love with anyone or anything. I think,

reading just these letters, you can see why. My love for her may seem on the face of it delusional. It is not. So I can never meet her nor she me. No matter. I have been in love, “from afar” with people who never got to know me, or maybe even noticed me. Even death’s farness does not deter love. So maybe she wouldn’t have any interest in me if she had known me. No matter. I know very well how hard it is to be in love with someone not in love with you. I would still be in love with her. I said in *This Fall* that falling in love is always a choice. But it is one based on what we see in the other, hope for, believe in, not on the guarantee of an equitable return. If I were lucky enough to have been with Emily, even sitting right next to her all those later years when she spent most of her time in her room, I would have written her a letter every day, handed it to her, and hoped I’d get one back from her. If she wrote me even one letter in return, I would have treasured it the way Susan seems to have treasured hers, reread it over and over, when life was grand or hopeless, to know deeply that there was beauty and poetry and above all love still afloat, would burn eternally on this churning, turbulent earth. It would have been as fulsome a life as I can imagine.

To love another with all your heart takes great courage under any circumstances, most especially so when the chance of reciprocation at that level is slight or nil. If you read Dickinson’s letters you will see a profile in such courage. But Susan did respond, often and warmly enough to sustain Emily’s passion for all of those years. The ultimate risk in an unrequited love is that the beloved will respond harshly, and you will be made to feel a fool. That is hard. But at least it’s “terminal.” You move on sooner or later. I don’t sense in these letters that Emily even fears that, let alone feels it. Susan never does this. There is, of course, a gray area between, where the response is minimal. As I put it to myself: “You don’t have to think someone a fool to make them feel like one.” Especially when they are in love with you. And there is no better way to do it than with silence. That love will perish



even if you don't want it to. Susan may have married Emily's brother, but she sustains and continues to foster an ample love for Emily. She is not silent. I am so happy to know that, that Emily lived in those good graces, even if her love may have been "unrequited" in some ways. That Mabel Loomis Todd then tries later to "silence" that part of Emily's life is, honestly, just despicable.

Dickinson's poems are, of course, both equally riveting and much better known. See the March 4 essay, above here, for what I want to say here about that. Again.

I have been writing about love, in one way or another, for four years now, multiple books, all arguing, in one way or another, that love, true love, is not an assortment of different emotions depending on the subject of one's attention, arranged in some hierarchy wherein some are higher or better and some are lower and less important. And most especially not one with sexual love at the top. It is one thing with many manifestations. Seeing can be an act of love, or not. Sex can be an act of love, or not. They are equal in that regard. This is how I get back to my main track here: the imagination, which animates and coordinates all of our manifold expressions of love as we engage with the world we have to live in here. It brings the other, whoever and whatever that might be, into being in our loving presence. Without it, well, you end up with lots of "or not."

One final thing. The editors of *Open Me Carefully* include as I said many other texts that are not stereotypical letters. During the latter years of her life, with Susan right next door, some of her "letters" were little notes squeezed onto squares of paper multi-folded, the space of the page forcing short lines, like the one I use as my epigraph. They look like poems. Like her poems. The authors call these "letter-poems," which is brilliant. As I say above, having now read them, all of these letters are letter-poems, or poem-letters. They are that astonishing. So

were her letters to Higginson, so daring, coy and evasive, letter-poems of another kind.

Percy Shelley argues in his “Defense of Poetry” that the category “poetry” is not limited to linguistic productions. For him (and for me, too) almost anything, when envisioned imaginatively, can become poetic. Likewise for “poems.” Anything made out of words can be a great poem. Even an email or a text, if it is made with care, imaginatively. Look at the poem at the top. It is as short as most texts, yet so deep and beautiful. I could argue, because I believe it, that one can make a great poem without any words at all. But that would be a “long tale to tell,” and I’m pretty sure by this point you can imagine everything I might want to say about that without my having to utter one word. If not, take a walk in the woods and think about Emily Dickinson, her great love, her great way of loving, as I did about a month ago when I decided to write this book. You will have a poem in your heart you will never forget.

## Poem

Right before I left Pittsburgh I wrote these two poems “in the manner of Emily Dickinson,” just because I felt like it:

### 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—  
an eyelid says it all.*

2

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

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



March 11, 2019: Thomas Hardy Gray

*We stood by a pond that winter day,  
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,  
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;  
- They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.*

*Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove  
Over tedious riddles of years ago;  
And some words played between us to and fro  
On which lost the more by our love.*

*The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing  
Alive enough to have strength to die;  
And a grin of bitterness swept thereby  
Like an ominous bird a-wing....*

*Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,  
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me  
Your face, and the God curst sun, and a tree,  
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.*

“Neutral Tones,” Thomas Hardy

I woke up on a major downer this morning, sad to the core, thinking no way am I going to write today, just let it be, let it pass, don't inflict it on someone else. But I just got back from my walk (more on that below) and here I am again. The first few of my dream cycles last night left me feeling bereft. I don't remember any content, just that they had to do with my many shortcomings out there in the human universe, trying my best and coming up empty when it seems so easy for others. My last few dreams had something to do with the “Chinese mafia” being out to get me for some reason. I don't remember the details of that either, just that it was exhausting and scary trying to keep alive.

The weather this afternoon matched my mood. Sullen. Gray sky from the bottom to as high as you could see, seamless. The kind of gray you might end up with if you water-colored a single shade of gray on a piece of linen paper, some variations in hue as the tint settled differently here and there, blurry boundaries, subtle tones. Thomas Hardy gray, that bleak. "Neutral Tones" is the opposite of Housman's "Loveliest of Trees." That third stanza will put the chill of winter back in you even if it's July.

It is as warm today as yesterday, but felt about 20 degrees cooler on my walk, the air so sodden with moisture, promising rain tonight. I went back to Woodard Bay, more to listen to a CD I'm finishing than for the prospect of walking. I even thought I might just drive out and back, not walk at all. When I got there, though, I was swept in, enthralled by what I saw. Woodard Bay was almost entirely empty. And the estuarial "lake" above it, just one little pool above the bridge pouring out what little water it had left as the tide went out. I thought yesterday was as low as it could go, but today was even more stunning. My mood and the mood of the weather led me to think about how powerful the forces of nature are, how they could wipe out me and everything else around me here with a little flick of the wrist. Just by moving water, an ocean mega-tsunami for example, one of which is overdue in the Northwest. Then it's 80 feet instead of 8 feet moving through in seconds instead of hours. Yesterday, the sun, all the people, the earth seemed such a friendly place, generous, warm, caring. Today, the gray, no one else in sight, it seemed like it could care less what might happen to me or any other living thing. Not sinister, just utterly aloof.

Since the bay was so empty, I wanted to get to the end of the peninsula to see how it looked down there. So I did walk. On the way, the crooked, gnarly branches of the alders and big leaf maples overhanging the path, bare of leaves, coated with thick layers of moss, a sickly green in the dim light, had a Halloweenish aspect to them. Like the fingers of witches and vampires reaching out to pluck me up. All along the way I could see that the bay was nearly empty, a huge mud flat, with only the

narrow “stream” of outpouring water, meandering around through the groove it had carved over the centuries in the silt on its way out to sea, less than a foot deep most places, still being fed by what was left in the little lake above. There were a couple of herons poking around in its shallows, spearing little fish, like a Japanese print, an elegant tableau.

And at the point, where I could see the bottom of the bay yesterday through a few feet of clear water, well, I could see the bottom today through no water at all. There was in fact a little raised gravelly “land bridge” that went all the way across to the other side, with the exception of that little outgoing stream, and looked high and dry enough for me to walk right over, just getting my shoes wet. I thought for a moment about Moses and the parting of the sea. If Pharaoh’s army were chasing me today, or the Chinese mafia, and they were more than a few hours back, I’d get off scot-free and they’d end up mired in the mud under eight feet of water. On the other side, Henderson Inlet, same thing, a little land bridge going out all the way to the remnants of the railroad trestle that used to serve as a dumping-out point for all the logs coming down from the surrounding mountains. I actually walked out to touch it! Most days, that seems so far away, like I might have trouble even swimming to it. I took a bunch of pictures of all of this, just in case I never get to see it again.

Maybe it’s an extension of my mood today, but I sometimes, like right now, feel embarrassed admitting to my wonderment over things that to others probably seem perfectly normal, routine. That I must sound inane, like a five-year-old after the first day of school. What’s the big deal? I don’t know. I’ve always been this way and given my advanced age I predict it will not change. And then I figure that maybe a few likeminded readers out there—my books always seem to find them—might appreciate me for being willing to express what they, too, know and feel about this wondrous world, whatever others might think. Like Walt Whitman maybe. He was even stranger and more intense about the minutiae of the world than I am, and he wasn’t afraid to show it. So why should I be, I guess, is what I think, having now

overridden my intention not to write today by several pages. That's Whitman, too, always a few more pages in him.

This morning, before any of this, I went to the mall to buy some pants. On my way back down Harrison Avenue, at least then, around 10, the skies were still pretty clear, so from quite far up that hill I saw the ridge of the Cascade Mountains 60 miles off. For some reason, I thought only Mount Rainier was visible from town. That's not true. There are at least three or four other peaks you can see from up there, all of which seem quite large, until, as you come toward the bottom of the hill, Mount Rainier comes suddenly into view, 1000s of feet taller and much wider than these others, all icy-white instead of a friendly brown, its topmost portion, maybe 2000 feet, stuck up into a low billow of clouds, lopping off its head.

I had the same feeling about that as I did this afternoon walking by all that missing water: An overwhelmingly massive force out there, so clearly today looking like a volcano, cone-shaped, steep smooth sides, caldera-topped, that could probably wipe me out, along with a lot of other stuff here, with a slight cough, let alone a full-blown eruption. It was awesome, both scary and breathtaking at the same time, almost beyond my comprehension, foreboding. I hope it will not blow for millennia, but know it could happen this afternoon. Which would make the tidal shift seem like chump change, I'm sure, in the general scheme of "the forces of nature" that might take a swipe this way, wiping us out. Hardy would have a field day with that, the hand of "Fate" finally swinging in his direction, "the deadest thing alive enough to have strength to die." I'll take "the cherry hung with snow," thank you very much. If you don't mind.





## T. S. Eliot

The American Modernists (I'll be writing about several of them here) fancied themselves as anti-Romantic, especially in relation to its Wordsworthian version. And they were, in many essential aspects. They felt Romantic poetry was too vague and indistinct in its mode of representation, wanted immediate perception and not "emotion recollected" later "in tranquillity," which made it too mushy, an afterthought instead of a thought. It was basically not "thing"-y enough, that word that became their mantra, from the outset in Pound's 1912 definition of "Imagism," the first tenet of which is "direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective," to Williams' later dictum: "no ideas but in things." But you can't be totally opposite something that remains in your argument as a vital contrary, one you depend on to make your engine run.

Eliot is good example of this. Take that famous poem he published first in 1915, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The opening lines are,

*Let us go then, you and I  
when the evening is spread out against the sky . . . (3)*

I can't help but think that his informed readers at the time would hear echoes here, as I do, of the opening line of Wordsworth's famous "evening" sonnet: "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free . . ." Eliot's whole method invited and relied on such echoes, which are called "allusions" in the lexicon of Modernist criticism and became a highly valued feature of worthy poems for a couple of generations. The next line in Wordsworth's poem is a figurative representation of a beauteous calm: "The holy time is quiet as a nun." So I'm reading along with Eliot and maybe expecting something along those lines. Instead, he delivers this jolt: "like a patient etherized upon a table." Yuck. It is so

extreme, so over the top, as if Eliot hoped he might be able to demolish Wordsworth in one figurative stroke.

In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), Eliot takes on Wordsworth's ideology directly, offering a critique of the famous sentence I quoted earlier, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." Eliot counters:

*The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that "emotion recollected in tranquillity" is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not "recollected," and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is "tranquil" only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him "personal." Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (107)*

He doesn't even bother to mention Wordsworth's name, he is that dismissive. And by "inexact" he means absolutely, entirely wrong in all of its elements and in its purpose. Okay, Wordsworth, done. I didn't need to quote the second half of that paragraph to make my point, but I did because it is so quintessentially Eliotic, especially the last sentence. Every time I read it I'm thinking first, gee, I wonder if I actually have personality and emotions worth escaping from? Yes, of course I do, Eliot would certainly approve of me. But do I want to "escape" from them? What does that even mean? What's left if I do? Then I think, well, maybe I don't and should be glad of it. This guy is just a snide, elitist prick. I'll hang on to my emotions and personality like the rest of us schmucks down here in the human universe. See how you feel when you read that, which side you want to come down on in terms of this problem of who has legitimate personality and emotions and who doesn't.

A little earlier in that same essay he compares the poet's mind to the platinum catalyst in that famous chemical experiment where a different compound is produced without assimilating anything new, essentially the way a catalytic converter works in contemporary cars:

*The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. (104)*

I think it's pretty clear what he means by poetic imagination, though that is a term he usually avoids, as if it, too, is hopelessly tainted by the Romantic system that valorized it. It is the catalyst that creates something without adding any taint of itself to the resultant compound, an "inside" element that is "outside" by its very nature, both generative and inert. Interestingly to me, the product of this chemical alchemy is about as noxious a substance as you could want: sulphurous acid. It makes me think of those smoking slag piles around Scranton, where I grew up, the "mine fires" that burned slowly and eternally, releasing gases into air that, when combined with water in the form of rain, turned into sulfuric acid strong enough to take the paint off your house. If you read further into "Prufrock" you'll find the poetic predecessor to it in all that swirling, stinky fog he wants us to walk with him through, as in this passage:

*The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep. (4)*

This is also, I think, Eliot's tacit critique of the more sentimentalized American poetry of his day, for example in poems like Carl Sandburg's "Fog," which came out, coincidentally, a year after Eliot's:

*The fog comes  
on little cat feet.*

*It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on.*

How about that for a couple of cool cats arguing it out about fog via their poems. Many people these days think of poets as remote from the life and death struggles of ideological strife in the world. They are not. Postmodernist poetry for example is deeply and directly political, especially in matters pertaining to race and gender. But you can look back at any of the guys I've written about (and they are all guys, except for Dickinson, up to this point.) They believed they were dealing with matters of considerable philosophical, political, and ultimately moral import in their work. The stakes were not just large, they were everything. Like politicians these days. Except the great poets are smart and know how to write.

The last element of Eliot's system as it pertains to imagination, which, as I said, he never names with that word, is this thing he called "the objective correlative:"

*The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.*  
(141)

For Wordsworth, emotion is not a matter of objects and external facts, though it may pertain to them. It is about feelings generated after the "fact" by recollection. Eliot wants to assemble a "formula" to evoke a "sensory experience" "immediately." The term "objective correlative" is just a little sidelight in his famous essay "Hamlet and His Problems," but critics first, then other poets, seized on it quickly, elevated it to law, and used it to define for a generation what "good" poetry would do and look like. Again, most readers of poems think poets are all unique and original. They are not. Some are, especially at those crucial junctions of ideological transition that happen cataclysmically every now and then in poetic theory. A few of them argue furiously until a precedent is established. Then for quite a while

thereafter that's just how poets write poems because that is just what poems are, definitively, in their cultural moment. Go too far off the rails here and you might become famous, even historically great. It just won't be in your own lifetime.

## Poem

I chose this poem, called "Missing Americans," which I wrote in 1981, because it has some of the darkness of the kind of walk Eliot invites us to share with him; it makes very specific references, allusions of sorts by how I frame them, to people that were in the news the week I wrote it: Buffalo Bob Smith of Howdy Doody fame, Norman Vincent Peale, and most horribly, the four nuns that were gunned down in El Salvador for no apparent reason except they were nuns. It was not "a beauteous evening calm and free."

*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.*





March 15, 2019: What a Nice Man

*two doves  
perch pure  
porcelain bowls  
on a branch  
feathered with  
thick white fluff  
just a few  
weeks ago  
hoping for  
snow to go  
for spring  
for love*

*how it was  
now then  
and is  
now now  
I cannot  
calculate*

Paul Kameen

It is sunny and warm today, almost 60 degrees. I woke up cold all winter. Today, even though it was still in the mid-30s, I woke up warm. I think my body knew what was coming today. I didn't even put on my long johns and don't regret it. Before I went out I was sitting in my living room with a cup of tea staring out the big picture window at a mid-sized tree beside the road. It must be in the maple family because it has those burgundy buds just now burgeoning out, pre-green. A beautiful ivory-colored bird a little larger than an Eastern mourning dove flew in and perched there, facing me. It was very calm, confident, like it owned the place. I studied it so I could ask Google what it was, porcelain-smooth surfaces, creamy white, a black "collar" around the back

of its neck. About a minute later, another flew in, nuzzled up right next to the first one, a breeding pair I assumed. Maybe they were here to stay (robins nested in that tree last year), maybe passing through. I thought of the snow that was piled 5 inches high on those branches just a few weeks ago, same white, spring just a dream, and wrote the poem above, one I'll add to my collection of Olympia tiny-poems I call *slights*. After about 10 minutes they flew off together. When I checked, I discovered they are called collared doves, native to Africa, often kept as pets given their calm demeanor, but also now colonizing America, including the Pacific Northwest, in the wild. I have no idea if I'll ever see them again, but it was quite a nice way to start the day.

I walked a lot today, most lately in Watershed Park. The trees looked and acted different, like a company of soldiers standing at attention all winter having just heard "at ease." They were relaxed, kind of chatty, mostly among themselves, so pleasant to see and hear. The ferns are perking up from their snow-induced "depression," the skunk-cabbage-equivalents I mentioned earlier are leafing out, the chocolate-wren-equivalents were chirpy in choruses in the underbrush, though I never saw one, robins were everywhere, sleek and alert-looking. I saw a chipmunk and a squirrel, both absent from sight all winter, moving around like they were on speed. Life is back and it is good.

In keeping with that mood, here is the third poem from the "Three Spring Songs" series, the first two of which I used to open the March 1 and March 9 essays:

*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.*

On my way home I stopped downtown to walk around, pick up a few things. I bought some tea at the tea store. The coffee here is so amazing and I drank so much of it last summer and fall, at least five times what I was used to in Pittsburgh, I ended up with constant jitters. So I had to stop, shifted to herbal teas for now, try to get my nerves unjittered. Today I bought “Mango and Friends.” Sounds phoofy for a guy, maybe. But, hey, as Popeye always said, “I am what am and that’s all what I am.” I ODED on coffee, so this is all what I am now. And I actually kind of like my new “friends.”

I wandered into Compass Rose, a cool store, Bridget’s favorite gift shop, thought I’d buy her a little something. I found a pair of sky-blue socks with Bob Ross’ face on them, the Happy Painter, a fluffy cloud, and the phrase “Happy Clouds.” Most “real” artists look with disdain on Bob Ross. Not Bridget. She loved him as a kid, still does. She likes to throw “theme” parties for her friends. One she does every now and then is a Bob Ross party. She has painting supplies for everyone and they make Happy Painter paintings. A few years ago, while I was still in Pittsburgh and had all my woodworking tools, she called to ask me if I could make croquet mallets that looked like flamingos for an Alice in Wonderland party she was planning. I thought, “that’s impossible,” but said I’d give it a shot. I found a combination of dowels, balusters, pieces of a post, plywood and plastic that looked great all put together, painted pink, little wings, flamingo faces on the mallet. Sweet!

Then I headed up to the little guitar store around the corner. A friend of mine who lives in Seattle, much younger than I am, also plays acoustic guitar. He’s been thinking about buying an

electric, a Fender Telecaster, so we exchanged emails about that. He suggested I look into it because it would be easier on my damaged left hand, the action lighter. I said no, I'm too old, don't play well, what's the point. Anyway I stopped in today just to look. The man who owns the shop repairs guitars, his primary business I think because I see young people going in and out with guitars in cases all the time. He was at the counter with a guitar opened up, all the wiring for the pickups in his hands, like a surgeon working on a heart. I told him what my situation was, didn't want to spend a ton of money to try it out. He showed me a beautiful red Stratocaster-type guitar, less than 300 dollars. I said I could spend more than that, and he said, "you don't have to, this is a great guitar." What a nice man. I felt the action, clearly easier than my acoustic, took it on the spot. He asked if I had an amp, which of course I don't, forgot even that you needed one, showed me a small one with plenty of oomph, took that too, a strap, some extra strings.

When I got home I set it all up. It is in fact a great guitar. I Googled it to learn how to use all the switches and knobs and this one got really good reviews. I still don't play well, but I can now do so at a much higher volume looking considerably cooler in the process. As I said in *First, Summer*, I've never sung live for anyone except Carol. Standing there today, that beautiful machine hanging on my hip, all that sound blaring out, I thought, hey, maybe if I got good with this I could. The amp, he told me, can even run on batteries if you want to take it out that way, like down on the boardwalk downtown, say, with the other 20-somethings who sing there from time to time. Might take years, but, hey, what else am I doing except writing this book, which feels like it's almost over, and walking in the woods, which takes no time at all. That's how it feels anyway, at least on a day like this, at least for a guy like me, as I once said in a poem where I was playing "air guitar." Might as well finish with that poem, now that I'm thinking about it:

### *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.*





## William Carlos Williams

I've already made reference to William Carlos Williams' weird and astonishing little book *Spring and All*. Here's what he says later in life about what was happening, had just happened in fact, at the moment he was composing it:

*Then out of the blue The Dial brought out "The Waste Land" and all our hilarity ended. It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust.*

*To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I'm sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself-rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated.*

*Eliot had turned his back on the possibility of reviving my world. And being an accomplished craftsman, better skilled in some ways than I could ever hope to be, I had to watch him carry my world off with him, the fool, to the enemy. (Auto, 174)*

If Eliot's poem was like an atom bomb, Williams' response to it is at least a stick of dynamite. And, in the long run, if you look at the history of American poetry over the intervening century, Williams' explosion won out. He did live long enough to see the Beat generation and the Black Mountain movement, both of which were inspired by his work. And within a decade after his death in 1963, the legacy of Eliot (to my way of reading, though others might argue it) had played out and the legacy of Williams was more fully to the fore.

As it pertains to the imagination, I have already noted the radical move he makes early in the book: “To whom then am I addressed ? To the Imagination” (3). It is such an oddly constructed pair of sentences. The anomaly of the extra space before the question mark is interesting only because there are many, many such “errata” in this book, misspellings, out of order chapters, upside-down printings, missing words, sentences that end in mid-air, strange punctuation. Most of them are intentional, a satiric attempt at the formal level to critique the sort of order that “traditional” writers (like Eliot, say, who uses that term centrally in his critical system) are fastidious about. The only thing in this book that Williams seems to be fastidious about is the poems, which are luminous, brightly lit islands poking up out to the turbulent sea of his prose.

There is also the odd “whom,” and the “to,” neither of which are conventional ways of orchestrating our relationship with what is “traditionally” considered a mental faculty, an interiority. Here, the imagination is a being in its own right, both inside and outside at the same time, rhetorically speaking. That’s just interesting, provocative of thought, a conundrum. I like that aspect of it. A couple of pages later, he adds time to the equation: “The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have been, are and will be dedicated.” I guess that about covers everything.

I mentioned earlier the Modernist obsession with “the thing” as a poetic cornerstone, a word that had no currency in relation to imaginative work, outside of its routine meaning, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Williams’ famous dictum, which I’ll repeat, is “No ideas but in things,” a single line in his magnum opus, *Paterson* (1927), a sentence he never explains, either then or later, after it had become, literally, the foundational mantra for several literary “schools.” I’m going to try to tease something out here about that, because I think it’s important to have at least a crude road map before you head off in search of something, or some “things.”

I see two elements of this thing he names “things” here. One pertains to the outside world, all the actual things we encounter out there, Nature again, though far less spiritualized than it was for the Romantics. Soul is gone. Just “things” now in the desperate, agnostic aftermath of WWI, “rooted in the[ir] locality,” still infused with light, not from a transcendent power, but by the imagination, via words. As Williams says, quite cryptically:

*So long as the sky is recognized as an association*

*is recognized in its function of accessory to vague  
words whose meaning it is impossible to rediscover  
its value can be nothing but mathematical certain  
limits of gravity and density of air*

*the farmer and the fisherman who read their own  
lives there have a practical corrective for—*

*they rediscover or replace demodé meanings to  
the religious terms*

*Among them, without expansion of imagination, there  
is the residual contact between life and the  
imagination, which is essential to freedom (19)*

This is more like a poem than a set of precepts. Clearly Williams is not suggesting that poetry must be merely descriptive of “reality” out there. He actually says the opposite. The poet needs to relate to the world intimately, directly, the way a farmer and fisherman do, as if their lives and livelihoods depended on it, which they do. The poet does it with fully imagined words. It is at that juncture between words and “reality,” in my view, where “things” reside. He says:

*When in the condition of imaginative suspense only will  
the writing [sic] have reality, . . . Not to attempt, at that  
time, to set values on the word being used, according to*

*presupposed measures, but to write down that which happens at that time— (48)*

Like right then, he means, in the moment, the force of imagination fusing world and word, creatively, into one “thing.” So the key to me in understanding Williams sense of this “thing” is not to focus solely on what’s out there, where actual things reside, but on the poem, which becomes a thing in its own right, capable of standing up in reality with the same vitality as the “objective” “things,” that enter into it via words redeemed from their “demoted” forms.

He says later:

*Nature is the hint to composition not because it is familiar to us . . . but because it possesses the quality of independent existance [sic], of reality which we feel in ourselves. It is not opposed to art but apposed to it...*

*[The poet] holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature’s composition with his own ... Poetry has to do with the crystallization of the imagination—the perfection of new forms as additions to nature... (50-51)*

*To understand the words as so liberated is to understand poetry. . .*

*Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore . . . it creates a new object. (91)*

This may all sound needlessly arcane. But I elaborate it for the same reason I elaborate Wordsworth’s actual method, which had nothing to do with just “spilling your guts,” though it gets misread that way. Note Williams’ little jab at Eliot here, those

“objects or situations,” the exact words Eliot uses in his definition of the “objective correlative.” Williams’ “things,” the repositories of ideas, are, to my way of reading, not merely described objects but the poems themselves, which, when animated by the force of imagination, can take their place with legitimacy among the world of other legitimate “things” out there, upon which they “depend:” like that famous “red wheel barrow.”

It won’t be until the object-oriented-ontologists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that a firm philosophical script emerges for this sort of a merger. But so much of the poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is saturated with Williams’ thingness. You don’t need a philosopher to tell you what it means. Just read the poems. Especially his.

## Poem

I’m going to close this piece with one of Williams’ poems because I like this one so much and it’s one that doesn’t get much attention, even though, among all the poems in his little book, I think it best illustrates the radical and intimate merger of these two distinct kinds of things, specifically here if you pay attention to the petal tip of the rose and think about how to define exactly where air stops and petal begins, or even which is which at any specific moment, a kind of poetic representation of the “uncertainty principle” in modern physics, two things both either and both at the same time, a principle Werner Heisenberg formulated, coincidentally, in 1927, the year Williams published his famous sentence about “things” in Paterson. It is the only poem in the book that, for some reason, is unnumbered, though it takes its place as VII in the sequence:

*The rose is obsolete  
but each petal ends in  
an edge, the double facet  
cementing the grooved*

*columns of air – The edge  
cuts without cutting  
meets – nothing– renews  
itself in metal or porcelain–*

*whither? It ends –*

*But if it ends  
the start is begun  
so that to engage roses  
becomes a geometry –*

*Sharper, neater, more cutting  
figured in majolica –  
the broken plate  
glazed with a rose*

*Somewhere the sense  
makes copper roses  
steel roses –  
The rose carried weight of love  
but love is at an end – of roses*

*It is at the edge of the  
petal that love waits*

*Crisp, worked to defeat  
laboredness – fragile  
plucked, moist, half-raised  
cold, precise, touching*

*What*

*The place between the petal's  
edge and the*

*From the petal's edge a line starts  
that being of steel*

*infinitely fine, infinitely  
rigid penetrates  
the Milky Way  
without contact – lifting  
from it – neither hanging  
nor pushing –*

*of the flower  
unbruised  
penetrates space (30-32)*





March 18, 2019: Nothing Fake

*Li Po:*

*"Autumn wind clear, autumn moon bright,  
Fallen leaves gather then scatter,  
Dark crows settle and startle."*

*Me:*

*Beech tree bark is parchment  
smooth, perfect for carving.*

*On one I walk by daily:  
a heart, arrow-stitched,  
meticulous script:*

*JC  
loves  
AW*

*Right beneath, huge letters  
gouged out helter-skelter:*

*IT'S  
ALL  
FAKE*

*I wonder day by day:  
one or the other betrayed,  
hateful? Someone else  
enraged, forewarning? Today  
I wondered: Which came first?*

*All I know is this: Nothing  
in this world is fake: love,  
hate, rage: just decide  
day by day which  
your knife will carve in bark.*

*Li:*

*"When will we end our longing and meet again?  
That thought, this moment, suddenly unbearable!"*

*Me:*

*Wind clear, moon bright.  
Leaves, in piles, scatter.  
Crows, cold, startle.*

*Nothing fake.  
That thought, this moment, suddenly  
unbearable.*

from *Li Po-Ems, #15*, Paul Kameen

I've been brooding for days now, moody, my thoughts flowing slowly like turgid water going nowhere. That's why the extended silence. I am not averse, as you know, to droning on about my inner angst, real or imagined. But to drone, you have to have some content to give it a buzz. What I've had in my head these few days could be rendered in one word, repeated ad infinitum: dark.

Today, I felt, well, not quite clarity but maybe translucency, a soft light shining on the portal to a way out. It started on my way to Home Depot to pick up a few spring things. Driving down Pacific Avenue, all of a sudden in a place I didn't expect it, there was Mount Rainier, no clouds, just there. It is very clear today, in the 60s, so calm. It stunned me, stopped me short. My immediate thought was, yes, that is what's ahead now, a great

mountain with all that fearsome glamor. Not behind me, as I have been thinking, all those high mountains everyone has to climb to make a living, a home, a family, even a friend. Not easy. But surely, that was done now, for me, no job, no home, just level ground, clear to the end. That, of course, is so stupid. There is always a mountain. I guess it didn't dawn on me until that second, Mount Rainier looming in all of its icy stillness, that I have one ahead, and it is a huge one. I won't know until I start up it how it compares to the others I've had to climb. It looks daunting. My will may still be strong (I'll find out soon), but time is short. I'd better get going.

Life, I guess, is always about what's next. For the last two years, what was next for me was this, moving to a new place, finding a spot to settle, starting over if I could. As it turned out, Olympia happened to be an ideal fit for all of that, for which I am grateful. I was prepared to keep moving but didn't have to. I've been here now for nine months, a normal gestation period. At the outset, Olympia embraced me like a warm womb, such a perfect summer, the weather, the landscape, the community, the water, so beautiful. I think you can feel all of my coffee-fueled at-first-sight high in *First, Summer*. And I was also, of course, running on the adrenalin that started coursing through me a year ago, what anyone needs to plan and execute a late-stage move of this magnitude.

If you happen to listen to my music, you know how dark a turn my head took last fall, all those harsh songs, the opposite of my summer album. Then, winter was long and gray, way too much snow. The adrenalin ran out, I quit coffee, the womb cramped. Now, spring, I've finally been released into the wide world here, alone, the way we are always born no matter how many times it happens in a life, not nurtured from the outside in, by lovers, friends, a workplace. Born and alone might as well be the same word. It is a bracing realization. Not a new one for me. But every alone always feels like the first one, hard. That's why babies cry. But, like them, I need now to move on, make a real life here, quit spinning wheels in the mire of retirement,

whining. There is no mother, no magic, no miracle. Alone is the only way forward. There is that mountain. I'd better get going.

I need to figure out who might benefit from what I am or know, be of some service to others, and then make it happen. I intend to be deliberate about it, take my time. When I commit to something, I do it, whether I want to or not. At least that's my work history. I've committed to some things I wish I hadn't. I did them, but I learned it's best to be judicious. I have many skills and a good heart, and I have some ideas about how I might yet use them to do some little bit of good in this world, which needs every little bit it can get, as I write this in the aura of the mass murders in Christchurch, which is in the aura of the mass murders in Pittsburgh, and on and on.

Hate seems the order of the day. There is no antidote to hate. Only a choice: hate or love. I want to love. And love is work. For others. It doesn't matter what, if anything, I end up getting back from this. Lately I've been wanting to be loved. That's just not how it works in this life. Wanting is a waste. You may or may not be loved. You still have to choose: hate or love. That's what made me think of the poem I start with, one from my series of "conversations" with Li Po, based on an actual description of a tree I used to walk past almost daily in Boyce Park, those messages carved into it.

I just got back from a walk downtown. So clear again, the Olympic Mountains seeming right next to me almost. I could see all the distinct peaks more clearly than ever, some large, some small, at least 10 I'd say now, I mean peaks you'd have to walk down from at least a bit in order to climb the next one. I'm sure I'll never reach any of those. And even more surely never get to the top of Mount Rainier. Those overwhelming physical challenges and risks are for the young. I've got another mountain to climb. Doesn't matter if I make it to the top. It's time. I'd better get going.

I'm just back from a second walk, in Watershed Park. It is late-spring warm now. My hoodie came off about half a mile in. My shirt sleeves went up after a mile. I would have taken my shirt off, as I did from time to time back in Pittsburgh, at Boyce Park. But there are too many other walkers here, and I'm still new in town. Most of the walkers today were quite young, in their twenties, in pairs, holding hands, so sweet, ambling along at a very leisurely pace, of course, because why hurry when you're young and holding hands. I passed them all in due time. With this walk and my earlier one, I'm now back to about how much I used to walk back in Pittsburgh, 3-4 miles a day. It surprised me to realize that. I didn't think for the longest time that I'd ever get back to that.

Those things I thought resembled skunk cabbage are now "flowering." They top off at about two feet tall, huge fleshy leaves, two of which form a sort of lobe that first yellows then opens revealing a long, thick stamen that looks like a small corn dog covered in little bumps. I saw plants today at all stages of this process. I'll have to wait and see if those bumps turn into flowers. But the seasonal lifecycle of these plants seems almost complete. Someday I'll find out what they are called here.

I'm always intrigued by that human desire to know names, as if it matters what they are called. In fact, as soon as I know the name, they will become generic, all of a piece, instead of many individuals, each at a different stage. I guess it would be hard to get to know every plant or animal we encounter as an individual, unique. But it would be good training to avoid the sort of mass groupings of people that lead to racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, which the current political climate keeps redlining. Which are hate, plain and simple. Which is not love, plain and simple. Everyone has a choice. Take your pick.

I was thinking while I was walking about a genre of old movies I like to watch, mostly from the 30s, hard times for everyone. A man who cannot find work to support a family in a culture that assigns him that role from birth gets "down

on his luck.” In these movies, all his highfalutin friends, including his fiancé who hooked up with him before the fall, take a hike, fast. At his nadir, some bright young woman takes a liking to him, sees what’s in there as potential, falls in love with him, really. And I don’t mean that conditional kind of falling in love that says “okay, I’ll take a chance on this guy, see if it works out,” or “I’m sure if I flog this guy forward enough he’ll turn into what I need him to be.” I mean real love, the you’re-enough-for-me-just-like-you-are and we’ll make our way forward from here together. The kind that fills a man (or woman) with confidence instead of fear.

On my walk today it dawned on me, watching those young people strolling hand in hand: I was thirty-something the time that actually happened for me, down on my luck but full of drive, determination, life. When you’re my age, that doesn’t happen. I could list all the reasons, but you know them as well as I do. When that thought crossed my mind today I laughed out loud. There is that mountain. I need to get going. I can’t wait to see how it turns out. If I’m still alone when I get there, so be it. Nothing fake, that thought, this moment, suddenly . . .



## H. D.

Hilda Doolittle is my favorite Modernist poet, having moved up the scale from less than zero when I was in college (her work wasn't even included in the massive Norton Anthology I used in my first survey course, if you can believe that!) to second behind William Carlos Williams during most of my adult life, as I got more and more familiar with her work, to first after I found her amazing book *Notes on Thought and Vision* maybe 20 years ago. She had the misfortune when she was young to fall under the sway of Ezra Pound, as did almost all of the other great Modernist writers, Eliot and Williams included. Pound groomed her, even renamed her, the vaguely ungendered H. D., and then promoted her, aggressively, as the prototypical "imagist," his obsession in the period just before and after WWI. That got her career off with a blast, but, unfortunately, left her captive to that "image" of herself as a poet, well, really forever, long after the movement died down and long after she had turned her imagistic skill to more and more complex and sustained poetic endeavors, *Trilogy*, for example, her brilliant WWII series written during the bombings in London, an astonishing *tour de force* that transfigures Western cultural history from a male- to a female-centered enterprise.

Modernism was particularly difficult on female poets—not necessarily overtly, though Pound was as misogynistic as he was mis- pretty much everything else, including the radio broadcasts he did for Mussolini during WWII, which nearly got him hanged for treason in the aftermath. The primary discourses that Modernism trafficked in are not aggressively anti-feminine. They simply take a patriarchal history for granted, as given, therefore hidden in plain sight. For a woman, the problem is then how to write from a gendered position when gender has been fully co-opted as male. H. D. struggled with this. But she overcame it, too. Brilliantly. I wrote quite extensively about H.D. in *This Fall* (by means of which she earns worthily one of the longest



“sketches” in this book) and there is no way I can say better what I have to say about her than I said there. So I’m just going to quote my slightly younger self from that essay, written in 2015. As I think I make clear here, her theory of imagination is vested in the female body and, specifically, in “vision,” broadly defined:

A few days ago, at work, I re-read H. D.’s *Notes on Thought and Vision*, such a unique, inspiring exploration of her notion of the creative process, orchestrated through an array of fully female, not feminine, not feminist, *female* figures. The first of its kind as far as I know, and still the best, concocted at an historical moment generally, and a life moment for her, that made the likelihood of producing such a treatise infinitesimally small. She actually grounds her metaphoric grid so interestingly, so surprisingly, in the female body, brain connected to womb, by establishing the figure of the “jellyfish” at the center of her system and then elaborating its implications. It would be 50 years before “vagina,” “uterus,” became commonplace terms in discussions of female creativity. They are not words H.D. uses, here in 1919, preferring the very tame (by our standards) “love regions,” but she might as well have. It’s that clear, to me at least, that they are included and implied in the way mind connects to body via the jellyfish.

She talks a lot about this jellyfish business early in the book, so provocatively, engagingly. But it’s halfway through the book before she fully shows her hand in her translation of male to female, and she does it in two succinct sentences:

*The world of vision has been symbolized in all ages  
by various priestly cults in all countries by the  
serpent.*

*In my personal language or vision, I call this serpent  
a jelly-fish. (40)*

I laughed out loud when I read this passage this time. It is brilliant: How do you get a jellyfish from a serpent? Who makes that move? Well, she did. And if you think about it figuratively rather than physically, it makes perfect sense. One is a penis, the other is a womb. All of a sudden, along the central figurative axis that organizes what poetry is, what creation is, what thinking and feeling are, a woman's body is at the core and a man's is not. H.D.'s whole career, a dramatic re-ordering of Western myth (*Helen In Egypt*), religion (*Trilogy*), poetics (*Hermetic Definition*) that installs female figures in the positions that have been held down by male figures for as long as anyone could remember, is just a footnote to this little slip of the tongue in *Notes*: You say serpent, I say jellyfish, let's call the whole thing off. And in my little thought experiment, the same one I used to "get" Emily Dickinson, I could see that if history had been gender-reversed and I was stuck on the Scilly Islands in 1919 trying to get my life together, wanting to be player in the world of poetry, I would have to do what she did: See a sea full of jellyfish contracting orgasmically around me and think: Well, how about a serpent instead. Brilliant.

This is a book almost no one reads. I don't think I've ever run across anyone who had read it before I taught it. As is the case with H.D.'s work generally, that staggering and magnificent oeuvre produced over her lifetime, clearly, to me, equal in innovation, scope and eloquence with anyone in the top-tier of male poets from her generation—Eliot, Williams, Pound, Stevens, any of them. As the magnitude of her accomplishments became more and more evident to me over the years, just through more and more exposure to the work, I started wondering why I hadn't been apprised of her status when I was in college, reading all of those Modernist

master-poets in my first survey course. So I went back to the *Norton Anthology* I used that term. I have no idea why I still have it, but I do. This iconic compilation, the gold standard for surveys back then, three inches thick, containing a little bit of everyone and a lot from all the big boys. I wanted to see what part of H.D.'s work was there. Well, it wasn't, none of it, nothing. I couldn't believe it. And now, further, why don't we read this little book I was reading. We read Eliot's *The Sacred Wood*, all those short, sharp blockbuster essays, and Williams' *Spring and All*, every bit as eccentric, serendipitous, outlandish as H.D.'s little book, tuned to the masculine register of tropes. But not *Notes on Thought and Vision*.

I was thinking on my walk today about how liberating it is, as a man, to have to think through the opposite set of figures, imagine how, if at all, my creative enterprise might or might not be channeled through a "womb," imagining that I am trying to write my way into a "tradition" that has been owned by women for millennia. What would I do? I might of course say, well, I don't have a womb so this doesn't apply to me. I guess I'll do something else. That is the exact conundrum out of which women creators have needed to emerge if they had any hope of being "writers" until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all of the defenses, approaches, systems, rendered unreflexively through a figurative web that was masculine, patriarchal, or just plain phallic, my synecdochic example being the one I used in an earlier essay: Shelley's "Sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it." Again, yikes! Women could easily have said, as I am supposing many did: "Well, this says I have to have a white-hot dick to do it, and I don't, so I can't." But many didn't say that. So what did they do that I now have to do as I sit and read this remarkable little book, me, Dr. Old White Male, the exact one who should be most readily precluded from this womb-based mode of creation?

That's what I was thinking about today, riffing out, as I often do on these walks, some of the things I might want to say about it in class, animated, hands flashing around dramatically, my manifesto-performative mode, most of which, I hope, will winnow itself down to something manageable by 2 PM tomorrow. I won't go into all of that here. Or in class tomorrow, most likely. But I had a lot of fun thinking about it.

I actually read the book kind of backwards this time, as I often do when I re-read, starting somewhere *in medias res* that attracts me, re-assembling things piecemeal, back and forth, in and out, until I'm done. The section I ended up centered on this time was her description of the Chinese poet Lo-Fu's intimate relationship with a tree branch, which he first notices, then approaches, then gets so engrossed in, detail after detail, deep and deeper, that it becomes his "mistress," accompanying him back to his room, where he meditates caressingly on the memory until it comes even more fully to life, present in its absence. It starts out this way:

*Lo-Fu sat in his orchard . . . and looked in a vague, casual way. Against the grey stones of the orchard wall he saw the low branch of an apple tree. He thought, that shoot should have been pruned, it hangs too low. Then as he looked at the straight tough young shoot, he thought, no, the apples are excellent, so round and firm. Then he went on looking. (43)*

You see Lo-Fu's shift here from a "vague" to a clear way of looking. Then "his conscious mind ceased wondering and, being an artist, his intensity and concentration were of a special order." (43) He uses these powers to study the branch in the most intense and exotic ways until the "leaves" were "continents" with "rivers" and "many, many little fields." (44) It is an astonishing process,

almost timeless, of falling in love, as a result of which “[h]e really did look at it. He really did see it.” (44) Then he goes to his room where “his love, his apple branch, his beautiful subtle mistress, was his. And having possessed her with his great soul, she was his forever.” (45)

Such a beautiful set of observations, both his and hers. But to me it ends puzzlingly, unsettlingly, disturbingly even, with the word “possessed.” That word just stuck in my craw, and it’s still stuck there. I have been re-reading *Notes* and especially this section over and over trying to find my way out my discomfort. All of this sensuous, gentle loving between Lo-Fu and his branch reduced, finally, to possession, ownership, why? At first, because Lo-Fu is figured male, I thought H.D. might simply be saying that that is the only possible outcome for a man, whether for cultural or biological reasons, no matter. It’s just what men always end up doing with what they love. This was heartbreakingly depressing to me. I could not accept that. Then I remembered the note at the end of the book, in which it is made clear that the real Lo-Fu was in fact a woman. I was relieved, seizing on this as a way out of my depressing “gender” trap. But that, of course, only generalizes the problem. It doesn’t solve it. So I kept re-reading and re-reading, trying to figure it, to re-figure it, literally.

Here’s what I came to. H. D. had been writing about a certain kind of “love” from early in the book, exactly the kind I have in mind these days when I think about my relationship with the trees, with the “things” that make up the world around us in general. Throughout, I hear H.D. arguing that poetry arises from and derives from our “falling in love” with things. I couldn’t agree more. I started thinking about this sort of experience in a conscious way almost 50 years ago, walking down an empty street in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a rainy-gray

afternoon, something of consequence on my mind, though I cannot recall what that might have been. I will say now I was “depressed,” though that might go without saying if you ever walked down an empty street in Scranton in the late 1960s. The Northeastern Pennsylvania I grew up in was always characterized back then as a “depressed” area. I was in college before I realized that the term was being used economically rather than psychologically. So I’m walking distractedly, head down, and I pass over a manhole cover. For some reason, I noticed some faded patches and flecks of red and green paint all over it. I calculated unconsciously that at some point, many decades previously, when it was new, it must have been painted flamboyantly in those colors, more a work of art than a sewer lid. And suddenly I was stunned out of my inattention. I gazed at the manhole cover. I could not take my eyes off it. I literally fell in love with it, what it had been, what it was now, both so beautiful. I was enthralled. I don’t know how long I stood there. I can see that manhole cover in my mind’s eye right now, stunning.

I don’t recall exactly, but I’m quite sure that whatever had been afflicting me right then was gone, that I was not depressed but ecstatic, how anyone feels when they fall in love. I didn’t think much more about this experience until maybe a decade later, when I was at a point where I knew I was going to need “credentials,” publications, to get and keep a job. I decided to write something about the value, the real value, of poetry, for me, how it was more an approach toward the world, things, objects, people, everything, than a body of texts or a series of words. I called the piece “Thinking Poetry.” Somewhere in it I made reference to this “falling in love” business and used my encounter with the manhole cover as an example. I got the piece published in a small journal that had “teaching” or “teachers” in its title. I don’t have the piece, so I can’t check. Well, you might ask, check your

CV. But here's what happened with that. I got my first full-time job at a relatively elite college in 1977. I knew I would have to publish, and present my publications for others to evaluate, if I intended to sustain my position there. I had this one, "Thinking Poetry," going in. But after a while I started to think what the reaction among my senior colleagues would be to this upstart who had a habit of falling in love with manhole covers. Not good. Not good at all. You might say, well, maybe not. No, I knew these people. Not good. So I removed the line from my CV entirely. No one but me would ever know what I really thought about "thinking" poetry. I laugh now remembering all that. I got "terminated" (what a great word, so antiseptic and incendiary all at the same time!) there anyhow, for being, well, that's beside the point. It is, though, looking back from here, the "moment" in my career for which I am now most proud. It was exciting, interesting, hard. I stood up for something. And at least no one involved in that process ever got to say it was because I fell in love with manhole covers.

In any case, I have fallen in love with things, almost any category of thing you can think of, thousands and thousands of times in the interim, as I have with all the trees I meet on my daily walks. I've never regretted one of them. This is what gets me back to "possession." The thing about things is you cannot both love and possess them. They are where they are. You can return to them. But they never belong to you. And here's the other thing, which I have realized in a deep way only on my walks this fall, all of these trees reaching out to me: Many of the things you fall in love with love you back. Really, truly, the best kind of love. Not all of them, of course. You can tell which way it is going if you pay attention. I believe, in retrospect, that the manhole cover I fell in love with also fell in love with me. I think it never forgot

the day that guy fell in love with it. It has a good story to tell, too.

This sort of experience, these kinds of intimate relationships, are hard to account for, almost impossible to explain, in the context of postmodernist critical and philosophical systems. If you know something about them, you'll know exactly what I mean. If you don't, don't bother checking. Believe me. That's part of why I took that article off my CV. But they are not as hard to account for in the context of the now-emergent object-oriented otology movement. At the extreme, maybe, but possible. Again, if you read that work, I think you'll see how and why it's true. If you don't, don't worry about it. If you really want to know what I mean, read poetry, good poetry. Read H.D. She fell in love with things all the time. If you read enough of that, you will find yourself doing it without having had to read philosophy to learn how or explain why.

Very early in *Notes* H.D. introduces the theme of love via a reference to Socrates' famous second speech in the *Phaedrus*, when she refers to his way of orchestrating "vision" and "love:"

*Socrates' whole doctrine of vision was a doctrine of love.*

*We must be "in love" before we can understand the mysteries of vision. (22)*

If you read his speech, true love actually changes how we see, or look at, the beloved, and our eyes are only opened this way if we are filled from without by a godly madness, are possessed in that way, outside-in. Everyone knows what such "loving eyes" look like in everyday terms. You don't have to read Plato or H.D. to know that. We have all witnessed them and displayed them at



some point. For example: When Bridget was in elementary school, either Carol or I would pick her up after school so she wouldn't have to sit on a bus. Whenever possible, even if Carol was going to do that, which was most days, I'd go, too. Seems like overkill, I know, two parents with two cars to drive one kid two miles. But here's the thing: I did it because I couldn't wait to set eyes on her, and I truly believed she couldn't wait to set eyes on me and Carol. Parents had to wait for these pickups about 100 feet in front of the school, beside a flagpole, a small and devoted band of us who got to know one another there over time. When school let out, hundreds of kids from all grades would flood out to find buses or meet parents. I would have my eyes trained on this sea of faces, and as soon as Bridget came out the door hers would be the only face I could see. It would fill up the universe with a bright light. Her eyes would be trained toward the flagpole, and as soon as she saw us, her eyes would light up like the sun. You might say, how could anyone see that from 100 feet away? Well, that is exactly what "loving eyes" can and will do.

H.D. talks about some of the things her eyes love:

*The Delphic charioteer has, I have said, an almost hypnotic effect upon me: The bend of his arm, the knife cut of his chin; his feet, rather flat, slightly separated, a firm pedestal for himself; the fall of his drapery in geometrical precision; and the angles of the ingatherings of the drapery at the waist. (24-26)*

Just a statue, but the most miniscule details of it so vividly observed, rendered, enlivened by her loving eyes.

Da Vinci, she goes on to say, "went mad if he saw a boy's face in Florence or a caged bird or a child with yellow hair that fell or stood up in tight whorls like the

goldsmith work he had learned with Verrochio.” (26)  
And Jesus, whom she calls “the Galilean” here and elsewhere, loves this way as well:

*The Galilean fell in love with things as well as people. He would fall in love with a sea-gull or some lake-heron that would dart up from the coarse lake grass, when Peter leapt out to drag his great boat on shore, or the plain little speckled backs of the birds bought in the market by the poor Jews. . . .*

*He looked at the blue grass-lily and the red-brown sand-lily that grew under the sheltered hot sand-banks in the southern winter for hours and hours. If he closed his eyes, he saw every vein and fleck of blue or vermillion. (28)*

If you want to know exactly what I mean by falling in love with things, well, here it is. I am not Jesus, to be sure. But this capacity of his is, I am sure, while it may begin with a “godly” possession, fully human. It is I would say what makes and keeps us human, ensconced intimately in a material world so vivid, so enchanting, why would we not take as much advantage of it as we can, before we are marched off to a heaven or a hell or a nowhere that is spectral, disembodied, dull, dull, dull by comparison.

For H. D. this kind of love is the only way we can save our life here:

*There are two ways of escaping the pain and despair of life, and of the rarest, most subtle dangerous and ensnaring gift that life can bring us, relationship with another person—love.*

*One way is to kill that love in one's heart. To kill  
love—to kill life.*

*The other way is to accept that love, to accept the  
snare, to accept the pricks, the thistle.*

*To accept life—but that is dangerous.  
It is also dangerous not to accept life. (39)*

So now I am back to Lo-Fu, and I have answered my question, relieved my troubledness with the concept of “possession.” The kind of love H.D., Lo-Fu and I are talking about is not ownership, domination, control. It is a being taken over, enthralled, from the outside in, by a godly madness that is only possible on a physical plane, this earth we need to stay at for whatever reason, for whatever time we’re told. I know: In the sentence where that word appears, this meaning of possession is syntactically impossible. But I also know that if I could have a conversation with H.D. about this, she would say, “Oh, yes, I see, that’s what I actually meant. Let me change that right now.” I may be re-writing history here, but isn’t that exactly what H.D. is doing when she calls a serpent a jellyfish? What she would want all of us to do when we find ourselves closed off for some reason from what’s truly good and true in the “reality” we have to live in? Re-write it. Right now. (76-86)

## Poem

I was just looking through my electronic files for the poem I wanted to use here and can’t find it anywhere. It is old, so may exist only on a piece of paper somewhere in my closet, which I don’t feel like digging through. What I found, though, was this poem, which has an imagistic aspect, though not with the layered tensions H. D. managed in her early work, in keeping with

Pound's early definition of an image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." My poem does not have an intellectual aspect. What was amazing to me though is I have no recollection whatsoever of having written it, and I like it. So, here it is, in lieu of the poem I cannot find:

*Night Life*

*a flare of street-  
light: air  
delirious with snow*

*each step a dent in  
wind blowing  
over what's left of*

*the night beside me  
tucked in  
luxuries of snowfall*

*two trees across  
the street  
lustrous to twig-tips*

*in tuxedos I pull tight  
the bow  
of my black tie*

*step out in fineries  
sheer syllables  
of silk ruffle through*

*a sheen of street-  
light still  
delirious with snow*



March 19, 2019: How Things Happen in the Woods

*Li Po:*

*"Sun rises over the eastern nook,  
as if coming from the underground. . . .*

*Grasses never refuse to flourish in spring wind;  
Trees never resent their leaf-fall under autumn sky. . . .*

*I will include myself in eternal heaven and earth,  
become part of the Mighty Power of the world."*

*Me:*

*Just yesterday it seems  
trillium carved starlight sparkle  
into last year's leaf-fall dark,  
up and down ravines too steep  
for ravenous deer to reach,  
the rare rosy-fingered ones  
gathered at the dogleg turn  
I take, the way down,  
each a little dawnlit day.  
Today sunroots, eight feet tall,  
hundreds and hundreds, lean  
into the portal of my path,  
a palisade I pass through,  
coming from underground  
out into Mighty Power:  
the light, right now and right now.  
Do not refuse, they say, season  
to season, resent. Myself: included.*

from *Li Po-ems*, #5, Paul Kameen

Today I finally saw one of the trout that the signage says inhabit Moxlie Creek in Watershed Park. I've been looking for one since my first walk there last summer. There are a couple of small decks along the stream that overlook deeper pools, a few bridges to look down from, and the path abuts the stream directly at a number of points. Those are the places I've been looking from. Today, I was approaching the second deck thinking, yes, today I will see one. As I got closer, I could hear two men talking down there, and could see from how they were leaning on the rails that they would likely be there for a while. So I decided not to interrupt them. Instead, I stopped by the stream about 50 feet ahead of that point, looked in, and there, right there, well-camouflaged but clearly visible, was a trout about 8 inches long, its tail whisking back and forth to keep it stationary in the current. After about a minute, I must have moved in some way that alerted it to my presence and it was gone in a flash, instant. Had those two men not been there, I would have been hurrying up to the deck where I would not have seen anything. So often, that's how things happen in the woods.

There is an equally elusive creature that inhabits Woodard Bay, one I learned about from the signage also: the rough-skinned newt. Every day there I'd scan the walkway and the woods and the water to try and see one, without success. One day, I had a similar feeling, that I would finally find one. I took the whole circuit of my walk through the forest, scanned assiduously, nothing. As I headed up the paved path back to my car, head down, having forgotten this pursuit, there, right there, at my feet, was the elusive newt. I watched it for quite a long time. I think it sensed I was there, so didn't move much. Then it started to walk again and so did I. About 20 feet down the road I realized that I had been so stunned that I forgot to take a picture of it. So I went back and did that, several pictures. In any case, same thing: I saw the newt after I had stopped looking for it in all the places I expected to find it. As I said, so often that's how things happen for me in the woods.

A little later on my walk today, about halfway around the circuit in Watershed Park, I caught a glimpse of something white up the hill on my right. It was a trillium! Then I noticed more around it, maybe forty or so scattered around a space about as big as my living room, just enough light making it in for them to feel at home I suppose. From then on I saw them all over the place, one or two or small groups but so many and so beautiful. And they were exactly like the trillium I used to so enjoy in Boyce Park back in Pittsburgh, mostly white, a few pink. That's what made me think of the poem I start with, another one from my series of "conversations" with Li Po. Again, so often, that's how things happen for me in the woods. One thing leads to another and another. But you have to notice the first one to see the rest.

I'll close with another poem from that series, now that I'm remembering it, one of my favorites (#10: 9/3/16), and pertinent to my mood and the season, having to do with such "small things," how much they can mean in this life:

*Li Po:*

*"Short and tall, spring grasses lavish  
our gate with green, as if passion driven,  
everything returned from death to life.  
My burr-weed heart--it alone is bitter.  
You'll know that in these things I see  
you here again, planting our gardens  
behind the house, and us lazily gathering  
what we've grown. It's no small thing."*

*Me:*

*All the small things, you always said,  
what you would miss most not being here,  
that first taste of coffee in the morning,  
the feel of a knee bending on its way  
down stairs, and me I'd say, laughing,  
Paul, from paucus, Latin for small!*



*You never said yes, but you never said  
no, just laughed, too, no small thing.*

*Some days I think only of small things  
so I won't recall all I now know,  
my burr-weed heart growing bitter.  
Some days I recall all the small things  
so I won't forget what I love,  
my burr-weed heart growing bitter.*

*Some nights, the perfect ones,  
grasses lavish, passion-driven,  
I sit in the back yard with my guitar,  
sing songs softly, your chair  
beside mine, empty,  
but no, not in my yard,  
only a chair I am "saving,"  
a sweater maybe flung on it,  
until the one I came with gets back.*

*From death to life? Crazy you say. Never.  
I know. I know. But still,  
It's no small thing.*



## Not Wallace Stevens: Modes of Surrealism

I have been writing these inter-chapters out of their final sequence, depending on what I was thinking about at the time, most interested in, the way any writer writes. Some I would start on, falter, slide down the list for later. That's what has happened with Wallace Stevens, the last figure I'm writing about, even though he's not last in my sequence. I started writing on him at least three times, never got past the first few sentences, turned to someone else. I really love his poetry, and also his ideas. But I can't stand reading his prose. I feel about five sentences in that I have fallen into a spider web. I struggle to get my bearings, but just get more and more exhausted by it. Everything goes gray, I get sleepy, turn on the TV and take a nap. I've now reread the book I'll be writing about here, his famous book of prose *The Necessary Angel* twice in the last few weeks. I still feel like I want to find a further bottom to my list. But there isn't one, so I'm just going to wing it, do my best. Don't get me wrong, this is an amazing book, stunningly astute and beautiful. And his concept of imagination, which he counter-poses with "reality" in provocative ways, is right at the core of my story here, couldn't be better for my purposes. I think my resistance is just a temperamental thing. Like I always feel as if he's a bit over my head, out of my reach, I'm just not getting it. But here's what I have to say about what he has to say anyway. . .

I just skimmed the book again found a few good quotes and then thought better. I'm not a professor any more writing to other academics. I want this book to be legible to non-specialist readers. And I don't want to just "mail it in," go through the motions, just because I said to myself I would fill this space with something in particular. So I'm not going to write about Stevens. Basically just because I don't want to, which is all the reason I need these days. Okay, so maybe he's the premier theorist of the imagination in the Modernist moment. I still don't want to. I'll provide one of his most famous poems at the end, which as I said I like a lot and are, to me, clearer statements about how the imagination interacts with

reality, how they create and re-create one another, than any of the essays in this book, with the exception maybe of the first of his “Three Academic Pieces” and “Imagination as Value,” which you can read if you want to.

So now I’ve decided instead to write about the rise of surrealism, which was happening at about the same time. I got that “link” in my head because I thought at one point in rereading Stevens’ work that it sounded like a highly stylized mode of surrealism. And really, ultimately, surrealism had a far greater impact on the poetry of the latter part of the century than Stevens did by himself. In addition, I’ve always been bugged by the fact that writers throw that term around monolithically, as if surrealism is one thing, or a variety of amenable things. It is not, to me at least. There are a number of distinct kinds that poetry between 1950 and 2000 took advantage of in quite different ways. I’m going to write about two of them. One has its roots in the French tradition, one in the Spanish. Both of them rely on the metaphor of the “dream” to enact their method. A “dream” in its simplest form is a way to use outside material to do some meaningful work “inside.” For the French, the vector is pointed in, for the Spanish it is pointed out. That’s a big difference with significant ontological implications.

There are surrealist elements in the French poetic tradition going back at least to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, some of which Pound and Eliot tapped into. But the term itself, at least in its French version, came into currency via the “Manifesto of Surrealism” written by Andre Breton in 1924. He says early in the essay:

*Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality.*

*There remains madness, "the madness that one locks up," as it has aptly been described. That madness or another... And, indeed, hallucinations, illusions, etc., are not a source of trifling pleasure. The best controlled sensuality partakes of it . . . (all quotes from:*

[http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/assets/manifesto\\_of\\_surrealism.pdf](http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/assets/manifesto_of_surrealism.pdf)

So, imagination, madness, hallucinations, illusions. That's a pretty good "final four." He then offers a fierce, cogent critique of "the realistic attitude" which he equates with positivism, and the opening move to his alternative to it.

*We are still living under the reign of logic: this, of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. . . Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices. It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer -- and, in my opinion by far the most important part -- has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. . . The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them . . .*

*Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear upon the dream. It is, in fact, inadmissible that this considerable portion of psychic activity . . . has still today been so grossly neglected.*

Again, superstition, fancy, the forbidden, the dream, all legitimate counters to the overbearing "reign of logic" he so laments. The invocation of Freud, and the potentially "victorious battle" against surface concerns is especially telling. For Freud, a dream does not find its origin and meaning in external objects or facts. It culls what it needs from "out there," strips them of their organic

connections to where they come from, and uses them to serve the purposes of what's inside, in his case the unconscious. In poetic terms, this is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's notion of the conscious kind of "dream work" he called the "objective correlative," (I provide his definition of this concept in my essay on his work) the object of which is pretty clear: I have something in there that I need to get out. It can't come out directly, so I have to build something to carry it out, in the hopes I can get it across to you. Let me assemble a "formula" for that. For Freud, this building goes on unconsciously instead of consciously, its vehicle the dream, which, with the help of an analyst, we can use to get something across to ourselves, something more than emotion in most cases. That's the advance along this Modernist line that Breton makes from Eliot. He calls it surrealism, which he defines this way:

*SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.*

You can see the same dynamic here. Thought (absent imposed controls) is first, the word depicts it, via symbols which are connected to actual "things" out there in only the most tenuous way, if at all.

In the next section of the essay, "The Secrets of the Magical Surrealist Art," he prescribes this method of composition:

*After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in a passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly,*

*without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard. It is somewhat of a problem to form an opinion about the next sentence; it doubtless partakes both of our conscious activity and of the other, if one agrees that the fact of having written the first entails a minimum of perception. This should be of no importance to you, however; to a large extent, this is what is most interesting and intriguing about the Surrealist game. The fact still remains that punctuation no doubt resists the absolute continuity of the flow with which we are concerned, although it may seem as necessary as the arrangement of knots in a vibrating cord. Go on as long as you like. Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur. If silence threatens to settle in if you should ever happen to make a mistake -- a mistake, perhaps due to carelessness -- break off without hesitation with an overly clear line. Following a word the origin of which seems suspicious to you, place any letter whatsoever, the letter "I" for example, always the letter "I," and bring the arbitrary back by making this letter the first of the following word.*

This is similar to the sort of “automatic writing” that was in vogue at the moment (Yeats practiced it) and influenced the Dada movement, also contemporaneous. You can see immediately how different this is from Wordsworth’s method, or any of the Romantic or Modernist systems I’ve described. The goal is to override not just intentionality but conscious intervention entirely, to dream awake. He goes on:

*Not only does this unrestricted language, which I am trying to render forever valid, which seems to me to adapt itself to all of life's circumstances, not only does this language not deprive me of any of my means, on the*

*contrary it lends me an extraordinary lucidity, and it does so in an area where I least expected it. I shall even go so far as to maintain that it instructs me and, indeed, I have had occasion to use surreally words whose meaning I have forgotten. I was subsequently able to verify that the way in which I had used them corresponded perfectly with their definition. This would leave one to believe that we do not "learn," that all we ever do is "relearn." There are felicitous turns of speech that I have thus familiarized myself with. And I am not talking about the poetic consciousness of objects which I have been able to acquire only after a spiritual contact with them repeated a thousand times over.*

His closing sentences seal the deal:

*This summer the roses are blue; the wood is of glass. The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a ghost. It is living and ceasing to live which are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.*

No, he is clearly not talking about poetic consciousness of objects. Everything is vested in words, which is characteristically French. Existence is elsewhere. This is a long and wild argument, worth looking at just for its rhetoric, its dynamism. But the point is clear. The poem starts inside, finds automatized ways, via words, to get out, and then awaits, untranslatable in ordinary terms for the analyst-writer-reader to interpret, or if not that, just experience and enjoy, its own brand of non-Platonic madness.

On our side of the water, and later, the "New York School" that emerged in the 1950s flies generally under the French flag. Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, all those ebullient, colorful flashbulb images of the New York vibe and street scene, pre-Andy Warhol, are my favorite poems in this genre. Like this section from one called "Music," the poem that opens his iconic book:



*I have in my hands only 35c, it's so meaningless to eat!  
 and gusts of water spray over the basins of leaves  
 like the hammers of a glass pianoforte. If I seem to you  
 to have lavender lips under the leaves of the world, I must  
 tighten my belt.  
 It's like a locomotive on the march, the season of distress and  
 clarity  
 and my door is open to the evenings of midwinter's  
 lightly falling snow over the newspapers.  
 Clasp me in your handkerchief like a tear, trumpet  
 of early afternoon! in the foggy autumn.  
 As they're putting up the Christmas trees on Park Avenue  
 I shall see my daydreams walking by with dogs in blankets,  
 put to some use before all those coloured lights come on!  
 But no more fountains and no more rain,  
 and the stores stay open terribly late. (1)*

This has what we now call a “stream of consciousness” feel to it, maybe not Breton’s surrealism in its purest state, but informed by it. John Ashberry, who comes along a little later, is probably the most famous of the New Yorkers, a sophisticated virtuoso in this vein, his career spanning 60 years. Here is a section of a poem called “Worsening Situation,” from his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), a title that says a lot about his method:

*Like a rainstorm, he said, the braided colors  
 Wash over me and are no help. Or like one  
 at a feast who eats not, for he cannot choose  
 From among the smoking dishes. This severed hand  
 Stands for life, and wander as it will,  
 East or west, north or south, it is ever  
 A stranger who walks beside me. O seasons,  
 Booths, chaleur, dark-hatted charlatans  
 On the outskirts of some rural fete,  
 The name you drop and never say is mine, mine!  
 Some day I'll claim to you how all used up  
 I am because of you but in the meantime the ride*

*Continues. Everyone is along for the ride,  
It seems. Besides, what else is there?*

I think you can see the ways the French model of surrealism informs this piece, as it does Ashberry's work generally.

The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets who emerged in the 1970s I would place in this tradition as well, at least in their early stages, though as the name suggests the focus is primarily on words as modes of estrangement, what Charles Bernstein later called in a long manifesto that rivals in strangeness Breton's "The Artifice of Absorption." The Freudian dream-stuff is gone. A poem becomes more like a work of abstract sculptural art. My favorite among these poets is Susan Howe, especially her early work. Here is a part of one of those poems, from *Cabbage Gardens* (1974):

*The past  
will overtake  
alien force  
our house  
formed  
of my mind  
to enter  
explorer  
in a forest  
of myself  
for all  
my learning  
Solitude  
quiet  
and quieter  
fringe  
of trees  
by a river  
bridges black  
on the deep  
the heaving sea  
a watcher stands*

*to see her ship  
winging away  
Thick noises  
merge in moonlight  
dark ripples  
dissolving  
and  
defining  
spheres  
and  
snares*

This is a rung up from Ashberry and O'Hara in terms of "dissolving and defining," but to my way of reading shares the same lineage and ambition.

"But there is another method," as John Berryman said, quoting Olive Schreiner. Something akin to surrealism had been afoot in Spanish poetry for some time in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the 1920s there were interactions with French Surrealism. But to me at least, the poetry coming out of Spain—Juan Ramon Jimenez, Federico Garcia Lorca, Antonia Machado during this era—looks and acts differently from the French, or from Pound's and Eliot's for that matter. The Spanish also use the figure of the "dream" to locate their approach, but for them the dream starts out there, in the world of things, then migrates inward, a kind of inhalation, where it is transmuted into images, not thoughts, and slowly finds its way back out in words. The world is in the poem from beginning to end. And it is not automatized in any way. It actually shares some of the meditative aspects of Wordsworth's method.

I'm going to start with a piece by Jose Ortega y Gasset, the great Spanish philosopher of this era, called "The Dehumanization of Art," not so much because it details this ontology of poetics—it is primarily a critique of Romanticism and, to some extent Modernist (over)reactions to it, which he is hopeful are on the

right track for what's next and new—but because it came out almost simultaneously (1925) with Breton's piece. There are moments in this long essay where what I'm trying to get at seems to rise up out of the mire of that critique. He says, for example:

*It is a perfectly simple matter of optics. In order to see an object we have to adjust our eyes in a certain way. If our visual accommodation is inadequate we do not see the object, or we see it imperfectly. Imagine we are looking at a garden through a window. Our eyes adjust themselves so that our glance penetrates the glass without lingering upon it, and seizes upon the flowers and foliage. As the goal of vision towards which we direct our glance is the garden, we do not see the pane of glass and our gaze passes through it. The clearer the glass, the less we see it. But later, by making an effort, we can ignore the garden, and, by retracting our focus, let it rest on the window-pane. Then the garden disappears from our eyes, and all we see of it are some confused masses of colour which seem to adhere to the glass. Thus to see the garden and to see the window-pane are two incompatible operations: the one excludes the other and they each require a different focus. (68)*

He wants the glass in, but he doesn't kick the garden out entirely to get it there, it remains, "confused masses of colour." He goes on:

*It will be said that it would be simpler to dispense altogether with those human forms – man, house, mountain – and construct utterly original figures. But this, in the first place, is impracticable. In the most abstract ornamental line a dormant recollection of certain 'natural' forms may linger tenaciously. In the second place – and this is more important – the art of which we are speaking is not only not human in that it does not comprise human things, but its active constituent is the very operation of dehumanizing. In his*

*flight from the human, what matters to the artist is not so much reaching the undefined goal, as getting away from the human aspect which it is destroying. It is not a case of painting something totally distinct from a man or a house or a mountain, but of painting a man with the least possible resemblance to man; a house which conserves only what is strictly necessary to reveal its metamorphosis; a cone which has miraculously emerged from what was formerly a mountain. The aesthetic pleasure for today's artist emanates from this triumph over the human; therefore it is necessary to make the victory concrete and in each case display the victim that has been overcome. (71)*

Here is the Spanish “victory,” the triumph over “the human” in its demodé Romantic forms, though, as I said, Ortega y Gasset seems to see this as an interim point on the way to something else. And his examples are, tellingly, visual—looking and painting—rather than verbal, differentiating his system fundamentally from the French, oriented outward rather than inward, toward things rather than words.

The main point is this: He doesn't want the things all the way out, he wants them to be seen, and that is only possible via modes of defamiliarization, sometimes extreme. That is the dreamwork of the artistic imagination. And then he says this, which takes, I think, an (un?)intentional poke at Breton's automatism:

*It is commonly believed that to run away from reality is easy, whereas it is the most difficult thing in the world. It is easy to say or paint a thing which is unintelligible, completely lacking in meaning; it is enough to string together words without connection, or draw lines at random. But to succeed in constructing something which is not a copy of the 'natural' and yet possesses some substantive quality implies a most sublime talent. (72)*

Further:

*'Reality' constantly lurks in ambush ready to impede the artist's evasion. (72) . . .*

*Seeing is action at a distance. A projector is operating within a work of art both moving things further away and transfiguring them. On its magic screen we contemplate them banished from the earth, absolutely remote. When this de-realization is lacking it produces in us a fatal vacillation: we do not know whether we are living the things or contemplating them. (74)*

Even the paintings of the Spanish artist Salvador Dali, roughly contemporary, all those melting clocks and transmogrified animals and shapes, about as extreme as you think it might get in pushing the Freudian buttons, well, if you look at the paintings they have distinctly recognizable natural settings—the bare trees, the brown earth, the blue sky with puffy clouds—that have a Catalonian vibe to them. The world is still there, it is just dramatically estranged in a way that forces us to pay attention not only to it, in its representational sense, as a scene, say, but to what it holds and withholds, its spirit, its imaginative grip on those who know it well and live in its grasp, what Lorca calls “duende,” an earthy irrationality inflected with vitality, darkness and death.

In 1929 Dali would collaborate with Luis Buñuel on that classic Spanish surrealist short film *An Andalusian Dog*. If you have seen it, you will never forget the brief scene which shows a full moon in the sky, a thin cloud moving toward and then across it, and then jump-cuts to a straight razor slicing into a pried open eyeball. It may be a clunky way of demonstrating what I'm getting at here, that movement outside-in. But it works. You remember the eyeball, but you remember just as vividly the cloud that invoked it. The scene starts out there and then gets estranged. Not to get you to see

the eyeball in a new way, but the moon. That kind of dreamwork is not Freudian nor is it Bretonian.

All of this got processed through Latin American literature, what became by the mid-50s something called “magical realism,” a term, I just found out preparing this, that was first used by a German art critic, Franz Roh, in, you guessed it, 1925! I won’t go into all of that because it pertains primarily to fiction. I want to talk instead about the subsequent transition into American poetics by one “school” of poets that was called variously the American surrealists, the “deep imagists,” or, to use Robert Bly’s term, the “leaping poets.”

The deep image movement (the name I prefer) originated in the 1960s, and ran parallel with, but became more mainstream than, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. James Wright was the foundational poet, Bly the “theoretician.” Bly’s book *Leaping Poetry* (1972) expressly established the link to the Spanish poets I named above, one that Wright had put into practice and then made famous with his remarkable book *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963). Wright’s early work was quite traditional looking and sounding, long lines, rhymes, formal, Frostian. After he read the Spanish and Eastern European poets that enact the sort of dream state I describe above, all that changed. Here is an excerpt from a poem called “A Blessing:”

*Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,  
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.  
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies  
Darken with kindness. . .*

*They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.  
There is no loneliness like theirs.  
At home once more, they begin munching the young tufts of  
spring in the darkness.  
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me*

*And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.*

There is now a lovely fluidity to the movement. The world is all there, but deep and mysterious, having been dreamed back into itself via the poet's presence.

By the mid-70s this way of sounding became the default standard for mainstream American poetry for at least another 25 years as the field expanded and diversified and became much more inclusive in terms of race and gender. It also lent itself to powerful political poetry, as it did for the Spanish poets during their civil war in the 30s. Carolyn Forché (*The Country Between Us*, 1981) writing subtly of the horrors in El Salvador in the 70s and Jusef Komunyakaa (*Dien Cai Dau*, 1988) writing lyrically about the horrors of the war in Vietnam, are two good examples of this method being used toward that end.

There was, as well, a mode of what I'd call surrealism (a stretch maybe, but there are similarities) that had its roots in Asian poetry, especially Chinese and Japanese traditions. Gary Snyder is the most prominent example of this, though those poetic sources were secondary influences for the deep imagists as well.

All of this is to say that surrealism, in its various modes, whether it used that name or not, was a defining force in most of the American poetry of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now that I've written this, a quick sketch at best, I can get back to Wallace Stevens, who was one of Ashberry's chief influences. Maybe Stevens would even approve of my approaching him along such an acute angle.



## Poem

I'll close with one of my favorite (and one of *the* most famous) of Stevens' poems, one that has a distinct surrealistic cast to it, at least in relation to that foundational conundrum of the role language has in negotiating meaningful interfaces between the inside and the outside, or to use his terms, imagination and reality:

### *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*

#### *I*

*Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.*

#### *II*

*I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.*

#### *III*

*The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime.*

#### *IV*

*A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.*

V

*I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.*

VI

*Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow  
An indecipherable cause.*

VII

*O thin men of Haddam,  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?*

VIII

*I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.*

*IX*

*When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.*

*X*

*At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in a green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony  
Would cry out sharply.*

*XI*

*He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.*

*XII*

*The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying.*

*XIII*

*It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.*



March 20, 2019: “You Saw Her Bathing on the Roof”

*I thought of her as a crystal vase  
and wanted cut flowers to fill it,  
but it was March and the garden  
was buried under snow.*

*So I carved her likeness out of ice,  
and when she walked past me in the night  
the sound of her long, white gown  
disturbed my sleep.*

*Somewhere in the wilderness a deer  
reaches for three green pears on the lowest  
branch. He remembers her suddenly  
and leaves the last to ripen.*

“Memorabilia,” Paul Kameen

Today is the first day of spring. I don't think I've ever been happier to see the first day of spring. Not because this winter was that brutal, pretty tame actually (with the exception of the February inundation of snow) by Pittsburgh standards. It's more that it feels like a watershed moment in what has been such a long and arduous process of my getting here. In fact, as I was walking back to my car after a trek in the woods at Woodard Bay, the phrase that just popped into my head and keep repeating itself was: “Here I am,” in a way that sounded like “Here. I. Am.” I could unpack that, maybe will later, but if you have read enough of my work, I think you understand both the humility and the grandeur of that sentence.

I started on my path to “here” about 18 months ago, formulated a specific plan late in the summer of 2017. It took me nine months to finish up my final year of work, take care of my local affairs in Pittsburgh, sell my house, shed my belongings, that sort of thing, and get on a plane to “here.” For a good portion of the

winter before I left, I was very ill, scarily so, fearing I'd never make the move, even if I lived, for lack of the energy or inner resources to do it. After I got here, I entered, understandably, a period of emotional excess, long ups, downs, shorter ups, downs, not pathological, but intense, on either end of the spectrum. I wrote *First, Summer* in the midst of my falling in love with my new home. Once we got married, well, then the work started. I'm still in love with Olympia, happy to be here, in for the long haul, "till death do us part." But the fall was hard and the winter harder, coming back to earth, reality, what it takes and will continue to take to make it here on my own. Those nine months passed grudgingly. Now it is spring. A new nine months maybe starting. Or maybe just a life, what's left of mine, to grow into and live.

This first day of spring is also special this year because here it is actually spring now, weather in the 60s and sometimes 70s lately, the early spring flowering trees burgeoning all at once. On my way to Woodard Bay I saw groups and rows of what I assume are the western equivalent of eastern crab trees, plum trees, pear trees, pink, white, flush with flowers that weren't there even a few days ago. All the flora here seem to be overfull of themselves all the time, and spring is no exception. These flowers cover every twig and branch to the limit of what it can bear. The first day of spring in Pittsburgh was usually just another step on the slog through the drudgery of winter, no matter what the groundhog said. Actual spring came three or four, or last year six or seven weeks later. The equinox was merely a passing formality of solar serendipity. Now, here, it is spring for real.

When I woke up this morning I felt serene. My guess is if you did a word search of all of my recent writing, maybe all of my writing, you won't find me even once using the word "serene" to describe the inside of my head. In there is such a volatile place, exciting, scary, worrisome, playful. Or, as was the case last winter, the absence of volatile, a sort of null space, empty of everything, pleasant for that, but not in any way serene. I have,

of course, felt serenity at times in my life, and I have poems that depict it. But they don't use the word either, more show than tell. So I know this will pass, maybe very quickly. Today is also the full moon day for March. I love the full moon, always feel better under its monocular gaze. Tomorrow, well, I may be back to some version of volatile. I don't care. This is a great day. I will love it as long as it lasts.

My walk today, at Woodard Bay, was kind of magical. I went up through the woods, a space that was just as serene as my head, preternaturally quiet and full of life all at the same time. One of the first things that struck me was the shape of the cedars. There are some humongous cedars at Woodard Bay, that tapering upward shape, the droopy, loop-leafed branches, reminded me today of wizards, tall hats, long beards, Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter type stuff. Except all friendly, wise, kind, gentle, smiling.

About a mile in I saw a deer nibbling alongside the path about 30 feet ahead of me. She looked at me, I looked at her, she kept nibbling, I stopped a while to watch. The first thing I thought of is how much I love the look of deer in the wild, so sleek, strong, alert, confident. This is the first deer I've seen here in the woods. There are a few that amble through my neighborhood, scavenging. But they are like the deer that used to graze off the flowers in my yard back in Pittsburgh: slovenly, dull-eyed, disheveled looking things, hardly wild animals any longer, more like lazy pets, pests, really. They seemed not even to be the same species as the ones I'd see on my walks in Boyce Park, so alert, so spry, so alive. This deer today ambled a few steps further in as I walked past. It had a black tail, so I assume that's the equivalent here of Pennsylvania whitetails. As I passed by, I saw another deer just ahead of this one, equally nonchalant. That's what made me think of the poem I open with, one I wrote back in the 1970s, had forgotten even existed until today. Nice poem I think now, all these years later. I went my way, they stayed and browsed. It was the kind of encounter I'm

accustomed to here now, open, tolerant, no fear, no hurry to either avoid or enhance the moment of mutual presence.

Near the end of the path there is a small pond, not a natural one, the sign says, but the result of a deep gouge left in the ground in the aftermath of the logging era. It appears to be about 4-5 feet deep in the middle and is covered, always, summer, winter, spring, and fall with a full coat of some sort of small-leaved water plant, looking like a soft green lid. I stopped there to look for a while, maybe see one of the newts, which use it, the sign says, to lay their eggs in the spring. Instead I heard first and then saw a magnificent Steller's jay, the western blue jay. This one's head was a deep charcoal, including the crest, which is much more cavalier looking, like a feathered military helmet, than the eastern blue jay. And the body color was the distinctive cobalt blue, iridescent in the light. Its call is harsh and raucous. This one kept squawking and squawking, like it was sending a warning, but to what? First I thought it was just trying to get me to keep moving. Then I heard some splashing in the little pond about 40 feet to my right, wondered what was up, way too much noise to be a newt. Through a thicket of fallen branches I saw a flash of beautiful cerulean blue. It was another jay, the partner, I'm sure, taking a morning bath. I could see the wings fluttering in and out of the water, hear all the delicate splashing. I thought of the Biblical story of Susanna bathing in the garden, the one I think Leonard Cohen is alluding to in "Hallelujah," feeling almost voyeuristic myself for a moment. Then, done, that bird clambered up through the branches of the overhead trees like a monkey, hopping, leaping, the strength and suddenness of the jumps, instant, just stunning. These two will make stellar new Steller's jays, for sure.

On my way back to the car, out of the general silence I could hear, but not see, a variety of birds: A woodpecker knocking methodically, maybe the red-headed one I saw here a couple of weeks ago, the tom-thumb wrens rustling and chirping in the ferns, always stopping when I would try to get a glimpse of one, robins, whose distinctive calls I recognize, a kingfisher, that



raspy grind of a voice, and some song birds, quite melodic, which I could not identify. It was a cheerful chorus to welcome spring.

I stopped at the grocery store on my way home to pick up some things for myself and my daughter. After the great snow, there was a huge pile of snow in the area I usually park, maybe six feet high. It reminded me of the plowed mound of snow at the intersection right across the street from the house I grew up in, the final resting place for tons of snow cleared from both directions. As kids, we would dig into it while it was fresh, a giant igloo to enjoy when the winds were harsh or to stage whatever games we were playing that day. After a while, it turned black on the outside, all the dirt and cinders from the road accumulating on its icy surface. It often lasted until late May, melting slower and slower as it turned into harder and darker ice. There were similar plowed piles of icy snow in my neighborhood in Pittsburgh, and in town, where plowing was more random. They might last until late April. The pile in the store parking lot here was like that, huge, gradually darkening with soot over the weeks, rock hard, melting so slowly. All the other snow was gone here, even in the woods, and this pile kept resisting the heat. Even seventy degrees didn't finish it off. Today, I noticed it was maybe a foot tall, taking up about as much space as a large chair, melt water drizzling off in all directions. I was finally able to park in the spot it had occupied for the last six weeks. In a day or two, it will be gone. That's what I mean about spring being spring. Winter came and went. The equinox is more than a mere bookmark. It is a boundary here. I am so happy to have spring be spring.



## Charles Olson

Charles Olson wrote an essay in 1950 that set the poetry world on its ear. Literally, as you'll see, or hear, below. Olson was the central ideologue in what was then the Black Mountain poetry school, which was the only one that was actually centered at a school. Literally: Black Mountain College in North Carolina, founded on the principles of John Dewey. This was the heyday of poetry "schools," aggregations of disparate, like-minded poets who flew under the same flag. You had the Beats, just a bit later in the 50s, congregating primarily in San Francisco; the New York school around the same time, which was, as advertised, based in New York; the Confessionals (that name wouldn't be assigned them until later; early on it was just, mostly, students of Robert Lowell), with a New England focal point; the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, a little later, which had hubs on both coasts; the deep imagists, a midwestern vibe. Those are the big ones. I came into the contemporary poetry scene in the heyday of all of this, the late 60s, reading these poets when many of them were quite well known. And by "well" I mean by young people who wrote poems and hoped to get known by joining one of those schools. Each school had an ideology, a method that you could endorse, practice, argue about, etc. Poets would "enroll" in one, "transfer" to a new one, just like real school. Even graduate, if you got big enough, and start one of your own. Amiri Baraka is a good example. He was by turns a Beat, a Black Mountainist, even to some, early on, still in his Leroi Jones days, in some respects a confessionalist. Then he became a force in his own right, too powerful a voice not to have a school of his own.

One of the things I distinctly remember was reading multiple poets in the same "school" and wondering what exactly it was that they had in common. They might all espouse the same creed, but they surely looked and sounded different on the page. The Black Mountain school is a good example. You'd be

hard-pressed to find two poets whose poems look and act more differently than those of Olson, long, aggressive epics with edges like broken glass and those of his co-theorist Robert Creeley, little, quiet poems, smooth, seemingly simple—until you heard him read, the best reader of his own work I ever heard, the voice, the persona, the performance, all of it, fantastic. I'm not even sure if "schools" are a thing anymore in the kingdom of poetry, I'm so far off the grid now. But it was an interesting dynamic back then.

Anyway, Olson published a very short essay, less than ten pages, in 1950 that transformed the Black Mountain poets into the Projectivists. It was titled "Projective Verse" and it's the piece that put that school in the poetry college on the larger map, and recruited countless new "students." The essay starts off mildly enough:

*I want to do two things: first to try to show what projective or OPEN verse is, what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished; and II, suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what the stance does, both to the poet and to the reader. (the stance involves, for example, a change beyond, and larger than, the technical, and may, the way things look, lead to a new poetics and to new technical concepts from which some sort of drama, say, or of epic, perhaps, may emerge.) (15)*

Olson was just then setting to work on his own epic, which turned into the multi-volume *Maximus Poems* series, setting the standard for the plethora of "long poems" that erupted in the 70s and remained an aspirational goal for many poets—"I'm writing my long poem now" was the mantra—for a couple of generations.

Olson does in fact get technical in this essay, one of the reasons it became so influential I think: You could actually try it out. He

says the poet who “works in the OPEN,” which he calls “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” (he liked to capitalize his main points), instead of the “old” form-bases systems, must “learn” a few things first:

1. *the kinetics of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. . .*
2. *is the principle, the law . . . : FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. . .*
3. *the process of the thing . . . : ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. . . speed, the nerves, their speed, perceptions . . . must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (16-17)*

There’s a lot of Williams here, you can see, the poetic calendar starting to shift in his favor, the OPEN, the “thing,” the PERCEPTION, all features of Williams’ figuration of the imagination, a term Olson doesn’t use much, though it’s what he’s talking about, at least under the broad umbrella I’ve poked in the sand here. Olson later in the essay talks specifically about the proper poetic stance toward “OBJECTS,” another keynote of Williams, who helped found the “objectivist” movement, though Olson preferred the term “objectism” to further highlight the object-orientation of his approach.

After a couple of pages of analysis of his system, with a few examples, Olson comes to what for me is his most radical core-set of propositions:

*Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:*

*the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE  
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (19)*

The second of these was the one that took off in relation to the mechanics of composition: line breaks determined by breath patterns, instead of the million other ways you can mark stops in an OPEN poem once rhyme and meter are no longer in control. To be honest, I thought even back then this was kind of a crock. Olson was maniacally careful in his work and may have been self-aware and self-disciplined enough to pay assiduous attention to his breathing while he wrote and read. And maybe some others, Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, the big names, though if you read them, they sure breathe differently, like hardly the same species. The poets I knew weren't. I'm not either. I'm lucky I can pay attention to my fingers typing. I think the breath-stop became a trope for most poets, more a way to justify a line-break after the fact than to regulate it *in situ*.

Nobody as best I could tell paid much attention to the first one, which is far more radical and innovative, hard even to think about let alone to do. It places the SEMANTIC (to borrow Olson's way of accentuating) center of a poem not at the level of sentence or phrase, the line or even word, all of the traditional ways of locating meaning or sense in linguistic constructs. But on the SYLLABLE, that single, distinct sound that has no intrinsic "meaning" in the conventional sense, on each little bit of noise as it gets extruded along the way. And the import of the syllable is not simply aural, physical, the vibrating wave part, as has always been the case for poetry, the interplay of sounds resonating in the EAR. It is intellectual: the HEAD!, he says. That is a completely unique way of thinking about the primary work of poetic composition and reception. And even though I don't have a clear way of explaining how a single sound can carry intellectual import, I believe it, the ear connected to the tongue, the tongue connected to the larynx, and so on, until somewhere down the line you get to the HEAD! Because that's

how I feel it when I write a poem (the head leads to the ear) and when I read one (the ear leads to the head.) ALWAYS.

I'm glad for that reason that I'm ending my "survey" with this piece. That line says the thing about poetry that, to me, makes it distinctive as a genre, whether your form is OPEN or CLOSED, and makes it most beautiful, enlivening, as an experience, its mode of embodiment, IMMEDIATE embodiment, INSTANTER, right now, whether you're making your own poem or receiving another's. Ending at 1950, the year after I was born, is probably wise for me. It is so hard to fathom things of this sort as they are originating in one's own time, the personal stakes so urgent. And, as I said, poetry is, historically, largely a young person's game. I am not young and try my best not to presume to speak for the young.

On the other hand, as I said in the preface, I have to deliver a book now with a passel of DWMs as the primary spokes-MEN. Just ten years after Olson's essay, the era of poetry inflected by gender and race took hold. Now the galaxy of primary talents, the "stars" in the American constellation of poetry, is not just dotted with, it is dominated by women and writers of color. I love so many of those poets and their poems, and as a not-D-yet WM, I am happy to step aside for them, let them speak for, and argue among themselves, write their own books on what poetry is, why people love it, and how to make it. I was never destined for greatness in any case, knew it right from the outset. I actually wanted to be and worked hard along my way through the professional world of the academy to stay "small," because I am by nature reclusive, do not like being looked at. And I've succeeded at it. Had I not, maybe I would have been harping about my "school" instead of enjoying and learning from all the myriad and various poets of all ages that I have. I have that raucous chorus of voices in my HEAD-EAR all the time and I like it that way. Or I might not have read all these competing theories about how to make stuff like that, not just to create my own little things, get into "the best school," but to study at all the schools, starting with a one-on-one with Parmenides and ending





2

*love is form, and cannot be without  
important substance (the weight  
say, 58 carats each one of us, perforce  
our goldsmith's scale*

*feather to feather added  
(and what is mineral, what  
is curling hair, the string  
you carry in your nervous beak, these  
make bulk, these, in the end, are  
the sum*



**March 22, 2019: My Lucky Day**

*He sat around clacking  
the joke plastic teeth  
on the kitchen counter  
all afternoon overheard  
the wide blue sweep of  
a broom across the sky  
full of tiny white birds  
flapping happily away  
from his brooding over  
this earth so green so  
good so much asizzle  
with apple blossoms  
cherry blossoms pear  
blossoms swept into  
deep drifts gleaming  
in seamless sun-  
light begetting one  
beautiful blue brood  
after another littering  
cracked shells across  
the green kitchen floor  
he just keeps sweeping  
a black mood clacking  
back at him from  
the kitchen counter  
that his life is not yet  
ready to start living  
sunny-side up again  
the morning paper open  
always to the comics  
which he reads and  
reads can never quite  
laugh at . . . or believe.*

“Moving Out Day,” Paul Kameen

I woke up this morning knowing “this book is over.” I will, I told myself, write a few tag lines to close it and that will be that. I wanted to walk at Woodard Bay but decided ahead of time not to write about it, this place you must be bored silly by already, unless I saw something I had never seen before. And I did.

On the path in a little bird I didn’t recognize—the size of a large sparrow, black head that came down into a V-neck, brown body—was picking away at whatever was there to its liking in the cinders. I stopped to watch it for a while. When I started walking again, it just kept moving along, always about 15 feet ahead of me. Then it took flight, another V of iridescent blue-white feathers shimmering from its wide tail. Then I saw a few more, same thing. I thought this day could not get more special than that.

As I came up toward the tip of the peninsula on the Henderson Inlet side I saw a Canada goose standing in the path, craning its neck up, looking around, like I do there. Just one. No flock in sight. It seemed quite odd to me. Maybe he was looking for his mate, or mates. I got within about 10 feet and then, like the little birds, it started walking ahead, slowly, right at my pace, maintaining that distance, those floppy webbed feet plopping awkwardly along. After we both stood at the bank for a while taking in the gorgeous scene over the bay, it took flight, came down with a splash on the water. There was a stiff breeze blowing in today, so the waves were working against it. Still, it glided along, out toward the pilings, as if there was no resistance at all. Further out, I could see maybe twenty of those dark shapes on the far dock that I assumed, or just hoped, were cormorants a week or so ago. But not having seen them in flight here since then, except for the one I mentioned, I was wondering whether it was all just wishful thinking on my part.

Then I turned to go to the Woodard Bay outlook. I could see a man, maybe 50, sitting on a log there, camera with a telephoto lens on a tripod, taking pictures. As I came up he started picking up his gear and I chatted with him briefly. He had been to the Nisqually Estuary this morning, now here, on the advice of a

phone app, his first time, to take pictures of birds. I asked if he had been to the other outlook, over the wider inlet. He said he had just taken some pictures there of 17 herons standing on the old rail line deck above those massive pilings. I was stunned, having just been there without even noticing. So after a few minutes I headed back that way. He was set up there again to take some more pictures and let me look through his telephoto lens and there they were, all those herons, standing stock still, their gray-blue close enough in color to the weathered wood to blend in. Once I knew they were there, I could see them without any artificial aid. He told me that the dark shapes out on the further platform, which I had seen indistinctly already, were, in fact, cormorants, which filled me with joy, to have them back and to know I was still connected to reality perceptually.

As we were talking a whole flock of big birds, maybe thirty or forty, flew up together from one side of the little harbor at the tip of the bay, most settling in trees on the opposite side, some on the pilings. They, too, were herons, an astonishing number of them, almost in one group as many herons as I had seen in my whole life before I got to Olympia, where they are more common. But on this scale, that many at once, no, never, a once in a lifetime event I'm sure. We speculated about what they might be coming here for in such numbers, a rookery, maybe, like the cormorants, or a stopover to refuel on the way to someplace else. Only time will tell whether they are here to breed and stay for a while or just passing through. Either way, I was there at that moment to see them. My lucky day, magnificent.

On my walk back to the car I saw more of those small black-capped birds. I just Googled the description and found it is the "Oregon" or western version of the eastern (slate gray) junco. Juncos back in Pittsburgh came in small groups like that at seasonal turning points, always passing through. Maybe that's true here, too. I'll know in a week or two, my first spring in Olympia, who is here to stay, these brown birds, those herons, or not. The cormorants I know are back to stay. A few weeks ago I walked on a trail on the other side of Woodard Bay, the side they roost on

in summer. I could see in the trees they haunt, empty of leaves now, dozens of large, twiggy-looking nests, which I wasn't aware of last year. The path on that side is closed all summer, I'm assuming to make life easier on all those big birds. Maybe some of those nests will foster herons.

On my drive back home from Woodard Bay there is a sign on East Bay Drive as you come down through that long colomnade of evergreens on the way to Priest Point Park that says: Tree City USA, sponsored by the Arbor Day Foundation. I recall now having seen a similar sign on one of the first days I was here, feeling grateful, like I had made good choice for a new home, a guaranteed cohort of good friends waiting here for me to get to know, for them to get to know me. Friends I see now, here and in all the places I walk, every single day. I may not have yet, in nine months, made human friends I might walk with or talk with in any regularity. I say that a bit embarrassedly, an index to my failure out there in the socially networked human universe. But I say it anyway, because it is true. Today, I don't care about that. I have all the friends in the world, countless friends that receive me, welcome me, day in and day out, vast networks of friends I get to walk and talk with any time I want.

I savored driving under all the slender outstretched arms of the spring trees blossoming, more and more of them every day, so fulsome with pink blossoms, white blossoms, and the tiny buds of leaves on the alders and maples, little red nubs. Soon they will puff out in that only-once-a-year-for-a-few-days shade of yellow-green that turns so swiftly into the deep green of summer leaves. As I headed up the steep incline of San Francisco Avenue, I caught a brief glimpse of the Olympic Mountains off to my left, across the bay, across all those miles between us, all the lives being lived under their purview, a few puffy clouds floating up over them from the windward side. All of it so soft.

This afternoon I took a second walk, at Watershed Park. Those skunk-cabbagey things are all over the place now, dozens and dozens of them, anywhere it's boggy or marshy, which is a lot of

places in Watershed Park, in keeping with its status as a temperate rain forest. The yellow lobes of leaves look like giant tulips. The little green bumps on the “fruits” are turning into miniscule yellow flowers. Wordsworth’s daffodils could not be more beautiful.

It is no longer winter. I am so happy to be here and to be me, with all my friends, today, tomorrow, as long as I want, this earth so green so good so much asizzle with apple blossoms cherry blossoms pear blossoms fluttering down around me now in great waves like the February snow, blowing across the ground, billowing up and gathering in drifts that gleam in the seamless sunlight. It is spring. This book is over. Finally. Imagine that!





## Postscript: June 17, 2019

As you know if you read my work, I inhabit time quite strangely, more like a sub-atomic particle sometimes, I think, than a human being. I have no idea why. In *This Fall* I describe an unusual encounter I had in Boyce Park in Pittsburgh, on a day I was deeply afflicted, ended up getting “lost” on paths I knew well. I wandered up into the woods to get back on track and saw three great trees, much larger than they should be in those woods, with strange shapes and features. I put my arms around one just to make sure it was real and I felt a great comfort come over me. I found my way that day. In *Last Spring* I describe my search to find them again, mid-winter, all the trees in plain sight for hundreds of yards around in every direction. I went to the spot I thought they should be and then gradually expanded my search in circles, maybe an hour or so, total, over two days. Those trees are not there, I am certain of that. I let it slide, attributing it to a very large-scale (impossibly large, I know enough about physics to know) “quantum anomaly.”

A few weeks ago on a walk at Priest Point, not one of my usual haunts, I realized (I had already seen this, but it hadn’t sunk in in this way) that some, not all but many, of the big leaf maples here have exactly the same “globules” on their trunks that I saw on those trees that day in Boyce Park. Maybe . . . but, I thought, they don’t have quite the same tapering-upward shape. Today, in Watershed Park, I looked at a cedar and saw that it did. Exactly. So it must have been some hybrid of those two trees that I saw in Boyce Park. I am certain of it. And I am certain, too, about why they came, at that moment, in my despair, locked in a time warp that never moved, to share with me their knowledge of a future, theirs and mine, here, if I could just “find my way.”

Oddly, on my walk today I had a similar sense of temporal discombobulation. I decided to take my walk in the reverse direction from normal, as I did in Boyce Park 4 years ago, to

save the most beautiful and enjoyable part for last. A few hundred yards in, a woman in her fifties, on the phone, passed me walking from the opposite direction, then a woman in her twenties, running, same thing. About 5 minutes later, by my time, they passed me again, same people, same direction. The circuit here is a mile and a half around. I walk slow, but no way they lapped me in five minutes. It was then that I started thinking about all of this, and before I knew it, I was back where I started, in minutes, it seemed. And I had no recollection of the part of the walk I had been most looking forward to. Most likely, I just got so distracted by my thoughts that I “missed” it all. But maybe, I prefer to think, like those trees, I had to go somewhere else for a while to comfort someone lost. I hope so. I am not lost now. I am here. My time may move strangely, but it moves. I’ve seen the trees that came to meet me. They are here, too. Someday, I hope, whomever I might have met today will be able to meet me again, when they’re here instead of there.

Just so you know: The skunk-cabbagey things are called skunk cabbage here, too. That was nice to find out. The Oregon juncos are still here. I see them every time I walk at Woodard Bay, such cheerful, charming birds. So are the herons, though they don’t seem to be nesting on the other side of the bay. Maybe they don’t like the kind of mass-collective rookery the cormorants clearly prefer. I’m still here, too.

I opened the book with the first poem in my *Snow Man* series, and I want to close with the series’ final poem. As I said, I wrote it 40 years ago. If there was ever a catalogue of poems for my mind of winter, these are it. I love those poems. This one takes him down deep with bowhead whales, which, coincidentally, migrate every year to their feeding grounds right past where I now live. I think it says everything I have left to say about winter, about hopefulness, about love, about the beautiful sounds that accompany us on our way here, some of which we can even make ourselves, those gifts from within and without that come

from the imagination, and about home, how it drives us forward,  
trying to reach it, no matter the season, no matter the weather:

*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 own  
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.*



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**Poetry:**

*light/waves* (2022)  
*first: my newer tiny poems from (t)here* (2022)  
*slights: my new tiny poems from here not there* (2021)  
*In the Dark* (2016)  
*Harvest Moon* (2016)  
*Li Po-ems* (2016)  
*Mornings After: Poems 1975-95*  
*Beginning Was* (1980)

**Personal Essays:**

*In Dreams . . .* (2022)  
*Living Hidden* (2021)  
*Harvest* (2020)  
*Spring Forward* (2019)  
*The Imagination* (2019)  
*A Mind of Winter* (2019)  
*First, Summer* (2018)  
*Last Spring* (2018)  
*This Fall* (2016)

**Scholarship:**

*Re-reading Poets: The Life of the Author* (2011)  
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