

PAT SONNETS



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The title sequence at the center of this volume is an abridged version of a longer cycle composed between 1978 and 1981. The collection in the form presented here was published in 2000 by Street Press. Dates of composition and other publication are given with individual poems.

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AT SIXES AND SEVENS

The Sniper

Dear Sir:

There are four obvious targets here:
the legs, the genitals, the already burst
heart, and the eye. Each would cost equally dear.
I write to ask: Where should I fire first?
Your last dispatch read "Cut off every route"--
which argues legs. But (I recall) at school
you always taught "Emasculate the brute!"--
which argues higher up. What's more, the fool
believes in love--his heart's his weakest point;
more, his reconnaissance seems a single eye
that sees to much not to be wished knocked out.
You see? Don't leave to my discretion why
one bull's eye must be first. This is our joint
responsibility, Sir.

Please reply.

--Written Winter 1981-82, published in *Shenandoah*
(XXXIII.2, Winter 1983)

Shibboleth

Let's say the overcast that has made gray
our air for years suddenly clears. The sun
comes out in a flash, triumphant. Let's say
for centuries no gentleness has won
more than a passing compliment, but now
all mankind opens yarely to the heart.
Say, though till now we've all been quick to allow
divorce, now in one glance none feels apart.

Let's say that's how it is. The sun shines and
our quarrels are the pastimes of our feeling
of solidarity. We understand
everyone with the need to be concealing
his need, though we can't force him to display it
in the one way we know, which is: "Let's say it."

--Written Winter 1981-82, published in *Shenandoah*
(XXXIII.2, Winter 1983); reprinted in Alan Pater, ed.,
1983 Anthology of Magazine and Yearbook of Poetry Verse
(Beverly Hills, CA: Monitor Books, 1984) and *Poems*
Since When (1988)

At the Bottom

1

Love wraps its wet, green kelp around our necks
and hauls us down together into time.
Lazily bubbling moments froth and climb
aloft along our skins, and minute specks
from pore to pore are spent till, far above,
they break a windswept surface beyond love.
We feel love's muscles at the bottom flex.

They shift the cloudy silt about them, shove
beginnings toward us through fine sand and move
us to strange ends. We settle upon wrecks
where love gropes for the salvage of its crime--
an unformed fetus blushing through the slime,
hairless and fat, and of uncertain sex.

2

Pleasure is surest in the lowest place.
Nothing to feel but unfamiliar flesh,
we are abandoned in it and we drown.
But an uncertain pleasure in the face
holds out for love and keeps our bodies fresh,
faithful on top, though faithless further down.
Love is a net that's gathered in the eyes,
the steadiest glances knit the finest mesh.

Betrayal or abandonment's the crown
of natural certitudes, and something dies
deep down whenever surest pleasure cries.
The surest pleasures always make us frown,
and our astonished faces find them strange,
because beneath our waists our natures change.

--written in November 1981

Parsifal

1

There was a pain I hadn't counted on.
It broke the skin in a peculiar place.
It took me in the midst of joy and won
my heart, while it inhabited your face.
And now it goes wherever you must go,
and stays wherever I stay--clears a mist
one day, and on the next day dims a glow.
I call it "love"; you call me "masochist".

But if the world's the larger for that pain,
and if it makes myself the less a jail,
"masochist" is an empty word--the gain
the more, the more mere pleasures fail.
A little skin breaks each time we draw breath.
The quest for pleasure is a quest for death.

2

Just call me, and I'll come despite my will.
I'll always fight for your unquestioning trust.
I'll do you good only because I must,
and I'll withhold my name from you until
I have to go. I swear that I'll keep still
about my origins forever. Just
love me until the both of us are dust.
Speak to me. Speak--be it in words that kill.

You speak of troubles: let me stay to hear you.
You speak of love: let me remain the same.
You speak of all the others that you know
who've meant our death, and will again--I fear you.
You ask my name and why or how I came--
Good-bye. My name is pain. Now let me go.

3

Pain daunts all those who dare believe in joy
as in a title to which they are born.

It weans the babe, it fascinates the boy,
and it seduces big men from their scorn.

It whispers: "There's no joy except where you
do not exist yet. Life's a mixed affair.

Let me teach you to suffer, not to do.

Your pleasure builds on ground plans of despair."

Pain makes them feel that they achieve their bliss,
not as a price, but as a hard-won right:

even the lovers feel it in each kiss

when something whispers: "Soon it will be night.

The pain, if you are female, makes you human.

If you are male, then pain must be a woman."

--written in December 1981, published in *Sewanee
Review* (XCII:4, Fall 1984) and in *Poems Since When*
(1988)

Narcissus

What fools me in all those I love is their
adorability. I take it for
their measure of my best lights, hope they share
whatever in me hasn't lost its core
of something godlike. One of them seems strong--
I must be Hercules at woman's labor.
Another seems the earth itself--I long
to dance upon it, striking up my tabor.

A third incarnates humor--and I yearn
to raise a laugh. Last, one appears above:
an equal other self who makes me learn
how I adore the self even when it hates.
All I love are incompetent to love,
but expert at uncanny surrogates.

--written ca. 1982

Obsessional Cycle (for Z.)

1

Obsession seeks to be still rhyming
love's yen for power with love's need
to leave the loved one free. Love's timing
in its last leap or its first seed
seems rarely good, but is always strong.
Black is the gulf and green the sprout
through which obsession's double song
drives into one what one rules out.

Obsession's jubilations bring
black ripples to desire's wave.
Green blossoms of obsession spring
to decorate desire's grave.
But once the hurly-burly's done,
obsession finds: obsession's fun.

2

Obsession's fun does not begin
till freedom and desire blend.
Love's failure is its origin,
and love's beginning is its end.
All that desire legislates
desire bans. Obsession's rhyme
is of one fate with all the fates.
Obsession's place is not in time.

Somewhere beneath desire's ocean
desire's tomb turns slowly green.
Somewhere above its sky's commotion
black garlands whirl the might-have-been.
The statue on desire's tomb
announces: "There is always room."

3

There's always room, there's luck, there's grace,
there's one more chance, there's always hap.

Obsession is the lure, the place,
the hunt, the hunger, and the trap.

But there's one prey: the face of love,
the only face of love that's known.

It sees the snare and floats above,
making a changing face its own.

The trap's a prop; the prey, a trope;
the hunt, a game; and the bait, loving.
Love's face becomes the face of hope;
obsession, a rhetorician proving:
Nothing escapes. Love, more or less,
depends on whom our thoughts possess.

4

Our thoughts possess a body that
wills what we will, takes what we take.

Obsession's an aristocrat
whom no desire can mistake.

The body that our thoughts can see
resists us strongly while we yield.

Love's motto is "Be!" Love's heraldry
is "Black waves rampant on a green shield"--

Black waves for sadness, green for power,
and a shield to show how love's defended,
and one free body far from our
body on which one thought depended:

What paradox could we not prove,
If I could love or you could love!

5

If you could love me, you could tell
why your obsession can't admit
you are not loved. Obsession's spell
is spun from what unravels it.
In time, desire on the brink
of its abyss takes one last leap,
unthinks the image it must think,
the vision of obsession's sleep--

its hard blue eyes, its graying hair,
its faint contempt for personal loss,
its sense of emptiness everywhere--
a stony statue gathering moss,
and an inscription high above:
"I might love you, if I could love."

6

If I could love you, I might know
why my obsession can't hold fast
in rhyme or time one who will grow
awake out of its dreaming past--
the bright, warm skin, the lively glance,
the anger and the hair of flame,
the slender figure in the dance
who makes love go the way love came.

Let us rule out our will to love.
Let us rule in our will to be
in time. Let all obsession move
from onset to extremity
and rhyme first love with last until
the rhyme obsession seeks is still.

--written November-December 1981

The Marrying Kind (for Bill and Jean Sylvester)

1

“To give one’s self is not enough,” you said,
And you were right. We gave ourselves in bed,
no strings attached. Now love hangs by a thread.
I’m not afraid of sacrifice; I dread
only my empty pockets. Let me spread
what more I have before you. Every red
penny is yours. Refuse, and love is dead.
You’ve led me this far. Will you now be led?

led to forget the monstrous gifts we read
about in love’s book, long ago granted?
take no more of my heart on a platter, no shred
more of myself, or my great soul. Instead,
take from me something tangible--my bread
on your table, my roof over your head.

2

They would have been married, except that they
were sane and know how, with the best
intention to love, honor, or obey,
people will twist a promise, fail the test.
They were in love. What need had they to say
they favored love? And honor seemed a jest,
enforced; they much preferred honor at play.
And obedience? Mere servitude when stressed.

They did without the form. And still today
they live in the same world: their interest
in love has not diminished, their dismay
at loss of honor not increased. Each guessed
what the other finally wanted. Both
have told no lies, nor ever sworn an oath.

3

Remember the stone jug we bought when we
were first in love and drunk on all that liquor?
After we drained it dry, you saved it. “We shall see,”
you hiccupped, “if love or time is quicker.
The very second that you hear me bicker
for more love than now, smash it. As for me--
I’ll do the same, vice versa.” I was sicker
than you were, but I drawled out: “I agree.”

Well, here’s the jug. Intact. We certainly
have bickered meanwhile. We have even tried
to drop it once or twice. And once, my plea
to save it made you save it, and I cried.
Now both of us are crying. We have carried
this on too long. Let’s smash the thing, get married!

4

I want you. You. The one I'm talking to.
You want me. Me. The one you want to talk.
I know what to say. Tell me what to do.
Well? I'm still talking. Listen to that clock
ticking. Why will a man and woman balk
at action while a word can give them pause?
What word? The word is: yes. Let's take a walk.
Time out. Time in. You and I make the laws.

You wanted my yes. But my yes had flaws.
Make my yes the more perfect by your smile.
I wanted yours, the more because it was
the yes that silenced me. I'm silent. I'll
want this until I die, for I am seeking
a final cure for this disease of speaking.

5

The fat woman I will marry will be
mercilessly indifferent to my
need to call her intelligent. If free
of the need to be skinny, she will die
before I can brag of it. And if not,
she'll rub it in. Each way, she'll hardly do so
on purpose. Nonetheless, she'll have a plot:
She'll be polite to me and bring a trousseau.

O these skinny women! As though our lives
were mere fruits of someone's letting us be free!
I'm done with them. How can they want to be wives?
They're on a diet of autonomy.
Give them what they ask--liberty, work, a chauffeur,
respectful treatment--and what do they offer?

6

Pass the salt, salt of my life. Thank you too.

Yes. The neighbors are moving. We had better
talk about that some time. What? No. The letter
didn't come. Is there something I didn't do?

Oh, 'morning! I love you too. Hand me the paper.

The world is changing. Good that we remain
like this. Your coffee's great. They forecast rain.
For such a day we've saved. Let's cut a caper

tonight as in the old days. Yes. They're dying,
our African violets. Let's buy the same
variety next time. And isn't it odd

how the rent seems lower than it was. Thank God!

Thank God I was out the day the landlord came.

We'd better get to work. The children are crying.

--written in December 1981

The Sea Beast

(on a theme by A.D. Hope)

At twenty-one, still wet behind the ears,
when I fell thundering on my shining bride,
something escaped me, something writhed inside
her body, never struck by me. The years
have made me shy. I now know: when a girl
shudders for something she can't understand,
she creeps into a hollow something and
her brow grows horned and wears a painted curl.

I used to wait to see her move. Her eyes
stared into nullity. Her rump seemed frozen.
I shudder now to think that I felt chosen
by that untwitching skin. In those days, I
shuddered because I never understood
why her whole outside felt like wood--all wood.

--written in 1982

PAT SONNETS

*Know that love is a careless child
And forgets promise past.
He is blind, he is deaf when he list
And in faith never fast.*

*But Love is a durable fire
In the Mind ever burning--
Never sick, never old, never dead,
From Itself never turning.*

--"Walsingham"

PART ONE

1

Shakespeare in vain strove to expunge his lust
and Drayton's innocence closed up love's eyes.
Poor Sidney's passion only reached to dust
and in the sands good Spenser's marriage dries:
They all preferred a struggle to be pure
over a present joy. And with what gain?
Their now and future readerships endure
futilities of metaphor and pain.

Yet Shakespeare's mistress trod upon the ground,
Drayton's was more than an idea and
Sidney was rich in hope, while Spenser found
his bride sounder than letters on a strand.
And I? Embrace me. The disease you cure
is: Turning hopeless love to literature.

--written in September 1978, published in *Poetry*
(LXXXVII:1, October 1980) and in *Poems Since When*
(1988)

2

The urgent Cleopatra was too old.
Tristram was sad-sack, Romeo inept.
Werther, the goose, just looked and wrote and wept.
Juliet and Eloise did what they were told.
The sun is down on all that old romance.
The jig is up on mooning, sultry eyes.
We are bemused when chaste Clarissa cries.
We smile to see Onegin join the dance.

I speak not for the age, but for ourselves
and say, in presence of this girl, that though
I love the old romances on my shelves,
I would not trade their brilliance and their glow
for her one, unromantic glance when she
smiles back at almost-unromantic me.

--written in Autumn 1978, published in *Poetry*
(LXXXVII:1, October 1980)

3

By love possessed? Ah no! by love admitted
for a mere pittance to fantastic thrills,
we pause among the mirrors. Jacks and Jills,
milling about us, shriek to see their pitted,
attenuated, gawky, bloated, rough
twin-simulacra in the twisted glass.
Beside themselves, appalled, distraught, they pass
from pane to pane and call their frenzy "love."

For us no dizzying mimicry will mar
the quiet image of our hearts, for we'll
turn face to face after each apparition
and see what we see always, on condition
that we are truly what we trust we are
and while we feel what we have come to feel.

--written in Autumn 1978, published in *Poetry*
(LXXXVII:1, October 1980) and in *Poems Since When*
(1988)

4

Oh, these experimental lovers who
seek love's uniqueness in the mad ambition
to love with matchless form--who think love's vision
is false when secret; when explicit, true!
As far as bodies go, they don't exist
for them--they're only signs of points of view.
The missionary's or the beast's position,
either is possible and both will do.

Let me not preach to them that we insist
on plainer style, nor even say we've got
a style at all. Leave form to chance decision!
We guard our bodies' secrets, and we seek
to be material to each other, not
to be enamored of a new technique.

--written in Autumn/Winter 1978, published in *Poetry*
(LXXXVII:1, October 1980) and in *Poems Since When*
(1988)

5

No one will hint that you are cheap, yet you
have made no secret of your ready favor.
Each time you lightly laugh at what you do
deflates your price but to enhance your flavor.
You've been around, and you are fresh as air.
I am your present partner in the dance.
You freely lead, I freely follow where
I pay no money while I take my chance.

I've tasted others, with a debtor's sense
of their proprietary interest,
have labored to be worth their dear expense
who spared no cost to be uniquely blessed.
You make their arduous virtue seem a vice,
whose truth craved tribute and whose love, a price.

--written in Autumn 1978, published in *Poetry*
(LXXXVII:1, October 1980)

6

Good-bye, you others. You have had your day.
Models and rivals, self-conceits, good-bye.
Good-bye, all lovers (all but two). . . You say:
“Love speaks too much, simply to prove how high
he sits, or that he’s rich enough to waste
some words on others. What is else to prove?
That love’s polemics are a lapse of taste?
or that a love song is a lapse of love?”

It may be so. Yet if I found (or you)
a something better, I (or you) would take it.
Life for our love alone is what we make it.
Vainly the others cry, “Love is not true!”
Love is the best condition. Best of all,
love, our condition, is conditional.

--written in Winter 1978

7

The hero heaves a happy sigh and wilts
to common size, no nobler than his horse.
He burns his mail shirt, megaphone and stilts.
The stars he sought to force resume their course.
No giant ogre calls him to a stand.
No hermit's cavern yawns for him to grieve.
His fate is jingling in his pocket, and
he wears his heart unarmored on his sleeve.

I take my stand, or ride the world, with him
and prick my steed toward your smile, where calls
an ordinary nature, rousing dim,
de-individuated animals--
more satisfied to moan with you than speak,
more glad than grand, more lucky than unique.

--written in December 1978, published in *Poetry*
(LXXXVII:1, October 1980) and in *Poems Since When*
(1988)

PART TWO

8

You're gone. Can I evoke your shape, display
your figure through my veils of notions in
the fashion of the past--a veil so thin
I feel your cold nose through it, hear you say,
me feeling glum, "Is baby glum again?"
nuzzling my neck; a veil so loose, your free,
gloved hand rests inside mine, and we
speed (homeward?) on the highway in the rain?
Fancy that! Now your elbow, now your shoulder blade
show, faintly hinted, underneath, and now
the gossamer fabric twists about your side,
pressing your girlish breasts, starts to allow
your form to rise, until my notions slide
about your ankles and you stand displayed.
Ugh! Now I am afraid
this fashion is too fancy to assign
you home yet. Yet your laughing glance will shine
through webs, however fine.
they may make shades of lips, but cannot shroud
those eyes of which I know yourself are proud.

--written in September 1980

9

You are the skinny waist whose twist enralls
my palm when itching for a phantom star.
You're the long lashes whose mere flutter calls
me more than single in the world. You are
The soft-downed round the nipple, who delight
at a soft touch; the smile, the knee who bend
to bid me speed; the chin who give me fight.
You are the navel, you my story's end.

I am your story's cause or I am not
the one who claims he knows you love me too.
And yet I'm not your story's end or you
are she who doubts your story has a plot.
A thousand ghostly stars rise every hour,
A thousand winds daily caress your breast,
your glance proclaims your power
To put a thousand restless tales to rest.

My story can no more than let you see
an absent lover's style:
One hand about your waist, one on your knee,
my lips with the impression of your smile.

--written in Autumn 1980

10

So there you are. So long as you're away,
I seem to have you pat, but must include
you in the vague, potential multitude
whom, or whose loves, I summon as I say
sometimes you're this and sometimes that. Oh, this
is rhetoric, of course. What more you are
you better know yourself, and know how far
my words can shape it, when I say I miss

That actual figure in the possible throng
who boards this bus, this railway car, this plane
even as I speak. Let it be you today,
and all the world, or none, tomorrow may
arrive, or not---ah, rhetoric again!
Because to me the journey seems so long,

I use these tricks of song
to deck you out in all I think you share
with all who hear this. This is my despair.
But hurry back. I swear,
this is my only grief. My joy is that
you'll come yourself, and then I'll have you pat.

--written in Autumn 1980

11

Because unquestionably something blank
comes to usurp possession of what was,
now you are gone, part of your shape, and draws
the wan conclusion that it was so--thank
my lucky stars!--so unconceited, frank,
while you were with me, should I clench my jaws
on this conclusion as upon a cause?
Is memory merely what oblivion drank,

Oblivion's memory what oblivion drinks?
Unquestionably, something was that is not. Yet
you were more than a something that I miss. . .
And while I think this, I almost forget
what is was like to talk, to toy, to kiss.
I chase a mere conceit, even as it shrinks

from is to was . . . Who thinks
"I worship you"? Who says he still believes
in you when all else has gone blank, nor grieves
as each conclusion leaves
me here to toast the lucky stars which drape
part of my memory, part of your shape?

--written in Autumn-Winter 1980

12

Our word is silence and the silence yours.
Our subject, violence and you, no victim
but an inspired mimic who abjures
the changing form of words and chooses me--
me who will rhyme the lucky chance that tricked him
to lucky passion with your will to be
the happy arbiter of your own peace.
Our only context is the world's caprice.

You do not ask me, yet I make this noise
to drown the voices that I think deny you.
Your peace and my desire in equipoise
take turns to give a measure to my time,
Move me to reach for words meant to supply you
with garlands of inevitable rhyme.

But I would rather mime
the world's caprice whereby desire sings
and happy peace determines how we spell
the violent word which brings
a love that we can tell,
scanning the very world and rhyming things.

--written in November 1980

13

The hero sighed once more and hurled his book
of omens in the trash. "Feeling alone,"
he mused, "is giving me a shifty look.
For even as I'm staring at the phone
from which your call may come, I check my Man-
of-Action's and my Poet's horoscope,
and now and then my Lover's fortune. Can
I do it, give it, speak it? May I hope?"

The book was burning with the garbage. News
was noised abroad. A thousand heroes stepped
in Poets', Doers', Listeners', Lovers' shoes
to twist the spell of happiness. And she
greeted them laughing. Only one hero kept
waiting for calls, despite the shifty stares

of thousands. "I will be
Myself!" he thought. . . The book was ashes. "There's
my fate," he sighed once more; "to dream of you
with nothing left to do,
to speak, to mean, to hope, but to be bound
to hear your laughter when I feel . . . profound."

--written in December 1980

PART THREE

14

Right now I miss you so, I can't recall
what you were like to cradle in my arms.
Your bed, your clothes, your photo on the wall
seem neutral, blank, props from a play. I try
To flesh them out with facts, calmly to haul
patches of you out of plausible charms.
Each 'tranquil recollection' seems a lie.
I think of nothing much. Nothing at all.

If all should come to this, were you to die
before your next return . . . to feel my gall
rising against a frantic self that warms
his hands on vague desires, yearnings that fall
to eat your memory, not to know if I
wish I could kiss you or wish I could cry . . .

--written in January 1981, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988)

15

The hair of death obscures my terror's face,
dead hair has veiled his gaze and coal-black hairs
pepper his wrists and swirl across his thighs,
tufts of dark hair circling his sex. His place
is in the loneliest of your worlds. His back
is turned against me. But I know he stares
with death's ruthless compassion in your eyes.

And he is young. I call him "Jim the Black."
This is my nightmare: Men are dead. Your fears
of hating men have vanished with the men.
But in the void, his hairy shape, above
your desolate body, darkly stands. And then,
his beard and mustache matted black with tears,
he crashes into you, as you cry "Love!"

--written in March 1981, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988)

16

My brighter dream belongs to Jim the White.
Long ago somewhere I shook hands with him,
while you stood near us, blushing like a bride.
Then as we walked away in wintry light
smiling, my arm about your shoulder, you
confessed: "He is the one. His name is Jim."
Somehow we kept on smiling, side by side.
The air was frosty and the sky was blue.

The rest is in a haze. I know I dreamed
in images of solace to the end.
Sometimes I seemed alone, sometimes you seemed
alone, consoled by him alone, your friend.
Love sweeps the threshold, till both he and I
wave you farewell and you wave us good-bye.

--written in March 1981, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988)

17

When in my kitchen mood I go to cook,
I brook no interference from your hands.
A word distracts, a mere inquiring look
can trip the steps each recipe demands.
You've learned to let me fuss alone. You set
the table, entertain the guests, because
you trust in me for banquets that will whet
all waiting tongues for pleasure and applause.

Not so our life: Four eyes read each direction,
four hands must stir the broth we drink tomorrow,
two hearts season for frying pan or fire
the meal of habit with the salt of sorrow,
the sweet of love, the bitter of desire--
potluck of joy or perilous confection.

--written in November 1980, published in *Poetry*
(CXL:1, April 1982) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

18

What's happening to me? You're still the same,
yet my heart trembles when I hear you speak.
You still show trust as simply as a game,
while my own uttermost trust whitens my cheek.
How I once smiled at all our luck and grace!
and now my smile seems your smile's injured note.
But then your smile enlarges to a space
where I shrink, singing, to a dancing mote.

My language foolish that seemed pat before,
My stance impossible, my features twisted
for all that woe of opening. . . A door
IS opening, feebly by me resisted,
on that old shattering smile by which you prove
I loved before, but now I know I love.

--written in March 1981

19

And in our bodies is our absolute trust--
those mortal vessels of our mortal feeling.
Fidelity is the landscape where we must
feel for the faithfulness of unconcealing:
our hands to mark the ends of our embraces,
our lips to speak the language of excess,
our sex for difference, our astonished faces
to shine with the right light of happiness.

And in your body is the only key
quite to unlock the room my body claims,
and in your eyes alone the light to see
the humors of my questionable games,
your skin to judge how, in all seriousness,
the soul of honesty is a caress.

--written in March 1981

20

The hero in the black hole of my chest
breaks loose again. He kicks my heart around,
jumps on my diaphragm and, at each bound,
yells: "See! I'm looking better. I'm the best!"
My finest feelings seem ulterior since
he's hatched his newest scheme to make them rise.
My mouth's a leer. I scarcely trust my eyes.
My "candor" in the mirror makes me wince.

What would you do with me, the man you love
possessed with such a passion to impress?
"Admire me!" the hero cries, his glove
hurled down in challenge of our happiness.
"Come back and marry me!" cry I. "Your face
can charm him from my head and know his place."

--written in March 1981

PART FOUR

21

I know that I manipulate. Well then,
let me manipulate. I know I love,
and know we will be happy, both. To prove
these truths are not preposterous is the plan.
If my proof uses your contempt for men,
I know I'll lose, because I'm on the make,
and I'm a man.
To kill the lie, you'd prove it doubly true.
And if I cry, "I'll always worship you!"
the always is a bore, the worship fake.

What then? To keep watching your face for signs?
But it will change, knowing it's being watched.
To play blind martyr? No, the fortunate lines
smiles made around my eyes
would show you how that enterprise was botched.

I am forced to be wise.
Some day we'll love more happily. Our fate
hangs on the manner we manipulate.

--written in March 1981

22

Manipulate me with our will-to-be.
Say "Love me now!" but look out for your life,
Your happiness, your readiness to see
disaster in each urge to call you wife.
And I'll manipulate my will-to-death,
that little death of how little I matter
if you are saddened when I waste my breath
saying "I love you now" merely to flatter.

Our truth is underneath us. I can't tell
(nor you) how deep our love may reach, unless
your strong allegiance to your happiness
and my allegiance to my yearning's hell
can both be true and circumstances prove
our last manipulation is our love.

--written in March 1981

23

(her lost child's voice)

Mother, look at you now! Your iron mask
drops from your face to show your mask of brass,
which melts more rapidly than I dare ask
“Do I exist?” Then, glimmering like the moon,
your silver mask appears and fades away.
Beneath, heavier than all, smoother than glass--
your mask of burnished gold. When now I say
“Do I exist?”, the golden smile says “Soon!”

While I not yet exist, you smile. But when
I do, your mask of gold will suddenly fall,
and then your masks of wood, of silk, and then
your mask of skin. I'll know your eyes and call:
“Look at you now! your glance's dazzling fire!
Your name is Beauty, and my name, Desire.”

--written in March 1981

24

There is a meaning clearer than the noses
on both our faces. We forget it when
we cry "I love you," since that sentence closes
on a "you" and an "I" must cry it again.
The meaning's in the middle, arrows sent
from I to you or back, the willed connection
between us which, ignoring all intent,
means what it means regardless of direction.

To cry "I love you" means to know there is
a questioning in the meaning that we know,
To be unfaithful to all that we miss
when our blind faith demands it must be so.
And so it is. The meaning you now prove
is crying "Love, I mean it when I love!"

--written in March 1981

25

There is a darkness darker than each night
in which our solace suffers an eclipse,
a silence far more silent than each slight
silence of love on our unkissing lips.
There is a word behind each word we say
that qualifies our love, a thunderous noise
quite overwhelming noises on our way
which mark the pathlessness our path destroys.

The greater darkness makes the less be seen.
The final silence lets our lips declare
what word behind our words it is we mean
in each endearment we obscurely dare.
There lies our path, which both our loves must mark,
toward the dark behind the darker dark.

--written in April 1981, published in *Poetry* (CXL:1,
April 1982) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

PART FIVE

26

Each time we meet, I find you a sensation.
I feel I sense your thought, can almost tell
the rightness of my memory's conflation
of recent pleasure with my ancient hell.
An ancient pain is buried in your sex,
a recent heaven in your eyes that flame
glances so lucid they almost perplex.
I call your nature when I call your name.
You come to me with unsuspected treasure.
Your life is courage, though your heart is weak.
I come to you with unforeseen designs,
An empty head, strong with the need to seek
faith in a look. I speak,
trust in the blankest signs.
The sense you give is not your final measure,
the name I call you always almost right,
but never quite.

--written in April 1981, published in *Poetry* (CXL:1,
April 1982)

27

You almost say to me: "This is the end.
I have no heart to give. Please don't exchange
your heart for something lost. Please don't pretend
I'm saying what I'm saying for effect.
Love is not love while I feel something strange
when I say 'Love.' I've used the word before.
I've lost my heart and now I suspect
that to say 'Love' means merely to say 'More!'

More what? More of the fateful first temptation
to tell the lie that everyone believes,
that every heart is lost?
This is the end, and what the end achieves
is what both of us know, at both our cost.
We are both tossed
between our guilt and our realization
that our paths have crossed."
I've lost my heart to you. I hear you and
I almost understand.

--written in April 1981, published in *Poetry* (CXL:1,
April 1982)

28

This is my rescue fantasy: You're not
an ordinary girl who loves me well
as only you can, but a whore, a pot
Of fool's gold, a disease, an evil spell.
And you, to all of this, confess. And I,
cock of compassion that I am, forgive--
and find forgiveness easy, though you lie
even in your confession. Grandly I say: "Live!"

You seem to die.

Is this an act? My fantasy continues:
your baby dies because of your neglect.
I rescue you from justice, take the blame.
your ordinary strength enters my sinews,
your hate my hate, your only shame my shame.
If you die, I reflect,
you'll never know I came
to give you love and was not even sure
whether love was a poison, or a cure.

--written in April 1981, published in *Poetry* (CXL:1,
April 1982) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

29

Not long ago I thought Desire
was Beauty's little boy and you
were Beauty's self. Little I knew
that thinking this made me the liar.
Love made me grope for the entire
secret of Beauty. Every clue,
so long as my Desire grew,
seemed usable. Love played with fire.

But now, though I am burning still,
Beauty is nowhere that I sought her.
You lied to hide her, but behind
your lies there burned your purer will.
You are Desire. Love is blind.
and Beauty is Desire's daughter.

--written in May 1981

30

I am asleep and dream about your smile.

“O baby, baby!” mumbles all the air
and strokes your baby lips and baby cheeks
because you seem the only baby there.

Delight--”O baby!”--strokes you everywhere
with trembling, wrinkled hands and, even while
each wrinkle finds your skin, it curves and seeks
the ripples--”Baby!”--of your watery style.

But the wizened sky, grandmother of your hap,
that old hag looming from another dream.

cradles an alien baby in her lap,

You scream,

seeing a rival at her shrunken pap.

Your lips part in that scream but then
the water of your smile returns. You seem
calmer. Then scream again.

Again. Then silence. While
the other baby smiles--”Baby!”--your smile
freezes in place as the old woman dies.

I cry to see

it shine on me

and wake to my own cries.

--written in May 1981

31

A common story: Once upon a time
the hero and the heroine awoke
in fading starlight to a distant chime.
“You are apart!” it sang, and with each stroke
the distance grew from him to her and from
the bell to both. He rose, and she, before
the sun rose, while the bell tolled “Find the door!”
Bravely they ran. Faintly the bell chimed “Come!”

And was the door where he heard her voice, or
was it where she heard his? Or was it more
a matter of the chime’s dark source? They ran
in zigzags as their afternoon began.
The bell tolled “Soon!” and yet more distance yawned.
Night fell. The bell tolled “Now!” The next day dawned.

Heroic woman and heroic man
were lost forever in a night beyond
all distance. You and I did not respond
when the next teasing bell began
its common story: “Once upon a time
there was no ever after and you two
were fated by my melancholy chime
to reach the door but not to make it through.”

--written in May 1981, published in *Poetry* (CXL:1,
April 1982) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

PART SIX

32

“Fool!” cried my pride to me. “Trust in your luck and sing!”

My tunes came pat, deriding the heroic lovers.

Was Juliet more than a brief joy under the covers

whose luck ran out while Romeo was posturing?

And Cleopatra, with her fallen soldier’s pole,

was she more woman than the milkmaid of her dream?

or Werther more the man because his Lotte might seem

the opening in his sky, no earthly, sexual hole?

“One vow at most,” I said, “at every second breath

suffices for us. Worlds are lost, but never well.

Faith needs no doom to toy with. What could be absurder?”

Fool that I was, I sang more truth than I could tell.

True love seeks joy even when it beckons out of death.

Mine hid from pain and tried to get away with murder.

--written in July 1981

33

Have all my sonnets then been double-dealing,
singing my luck while silent of her whim,
gay in denying pain, secretly grim
with gallows humor? As I set them reeling
publicly for her love, were they concealing
her private enmity, and did they hide
the writing on the wall even as they tried
to paint their splendid picture on the ceiling?

If this was so, so it is now, the sins
or virtues of all words I spoke before
still tantamount to masking or revealing
how rhymes are what they should be: either pins
stitching what truth endures together or
nails in the coffin of a stifled feeling.

--written in July 1981, published in *Poetry* (CXL:1,
April 1982) and in *Poems Since When* (1988) and in
Buffalo News (April 2, 2000)

34

A nightmare worse than most: The years roar past.
I stand, anaesthetized, against their flow,
seeking to salvage something of the woe
and the joy she was to me. But the glacial blast
numbs every fiber of memory until
it's a stick marking a road, with no
text to proclaim what's gone, or where to go.
In the end, the air grows perfectly still.

Then she appears, as once I dreamed she would,
crying: "I'm glad you're still here. I've gone off-track.
The path I picked was fated but no good.
I loved you best. Tell me which way is back."
And, rigid as ice, I hear myself say:
"There's none! Not that way! Not again! No way!"

--written in August 1981

35

She loves. Yes. No. She loves me not. She lies.
She does not lie with me. She lies with Jim.
No, I'm not jealous. Yes, I am. Her eyes,
Opaque to me, transparently fix him.
There is our future. There is none. There is
me on the make while he is on the scene.
The past was mine. What is to come is his.
Our wills are stuff. Her will is the machine.

Love is a science casually appointed
to passive finders by their active choosers.
It is a fiction for the disappointed,
a fabled flower only picked by losers.
I've plucked all petals from my only daisy.
Love is the science fiction of the lazy.

--written in August 1981

36

“Come live with me and be my love,” he said.
She bubbled with excitement as she came.
“I like it here,” she cried. But all the same,
a day dawned when he found an empty bed.
She pledged her nothing, he his anything.
Their vows were dress rehearsals for the hours.
Their world was a periphery of flowers.
They ended in a May dance in a ring.

When could she all the pleasures prove, who moved
her pillow to be always in the light?
She liked it here. She liked it there. He loved
a shadow in the forest in the night.
Love was a radiant darkness at the center
of a dark wood that both could never enter.

--written in June 1981, published in *The Lyric* (LXII:1,
Winter 1983) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

Epilogue

37

At first she brought an unimagined pleasure.
My words were easy gifts to make her share it.
But then she said, "This is my fullest measure.
I'll always be in love with you, I swear it."
At least I heard her say so, and I thought
she meant she'd share what pain might come. She meant it
no doubt sincerely but, no sooner caught
in unanticipated pain, repented.

That's when my words became truly excessive.
Whatso she did, I had to try to blab it.
For every less she gave, I piled on more.
Though she might not, someone perhaps would guess if
this showed the impotence of language or
the imprint of her nature on my habit.

--written in June 1981

38

I read what I have written now and groan.
My every line sounds like a vulgar crib.
Love made me facile, lost love made me glib.
Why even now I try to hard for tone!
Is she impressed? Hardly. Or does my drone
make her feel guilty for my lack of style?
Much less. I can't even imagine her smile
to hear me say, "A poor thing, but my own."

It's empty. Empty all. It seems I'd trade
the kiss I miss for an antithesis.
It seems my only consolation is
To feel I'd be profounder if she'd stayed.
What matter if the vanity I fear
Is of the lover or the sonneteer?

--written in June 1981, published in *Poems Since When*
(1988)

39

“Each love song is a lapse of love.” Yes, true.
Love’s lips are sealed. A blabber is no lover.
Yet I tell her: “These sonnets were like you.
I took them on, and then they took me over.
You took me on, and then you took me in.
I blabbed my faith. You turned it into doubt.
I can no longer trust the thing I’ve been.
You’re in my rhymes. I cannot take you out.”

“Love is not true.” True, too. She’s made it plain.
But something is, conditionally speaking.
I tell her: “Something of you will remain
To try the truth these lines are faintly seeking,
And it may live in them when you are gone,
Though now, without you, they cannot go on.”

--written in July 1981, published in *Poems Since When*
(1988)

PAT SONG

(her voice)

1

You're through. You're done with me. You hurt. You win.
You've had it up to here and down to there.
You're right. I'm wrong. It's true it isn't fair.
I wasn't fair. Have it your way: I've been
a coward, liar, heel to save my skin
before yours. What would you do? Say a prayer?
I cared as much as I could try to care.
Now that we're through, may be we can begin
to see the life that's really to be seen,
to read the texts of what we are, without
anticipating what they are about,
to foist no wishes on each other, and to bless
our choices. Count me out
and count yourself among the lucky-- yet
there's nothing I regret,
for I believe in happiness.

2

That we were happy once your songs proclaim.
that I am happy now is your complaint.
You would be happy if you were a saint.
Desire has no face, no proxy name.
And, grant desire wears a mask, I paint
my smile, you draw your grimace--it's the same
desire for a happiness that came
once and once only when there was no taint.
Don't taint me then for being happy now.
Enjoy your anger or your grief, but sing
that the one thing
I dangle on a string
to cause you such a passion of distress
is nothing but my vow
to keep my faith in happiness.

3

What's a belief that will not stand a test?

You see the light. Always the light falls on
one face you see. And now the light is gone.

One face is not the light, but it is blessed
while it is chosen by the light. You call
the chosen name by which you once addressed
one face into the darkness and your rest
seems to depend on one face seeing all.

This is unhappiness, and it will try
from time to time both you and me. How I
once gloried in your face! But then
I could not see it clear unless
it shone with memory of the moments when
we both believed in happiness.

4

Truthfulness, courage, loyalty will measure,
no doubt, the easiest of my certainties.
But can they measure what will do me ease?
What gauges worth can guarantee no pleasure.
Behind the light I bless crackles the fire
by which my earliest will-to-pleasure sees.
Desire is sickly when it fails to please,
and pleasure is the fuel of desire.
You pleased me and I pleased you and we burned,
a momentary blaze of truthfulness
Where you called me (and found yourself) a liar.
Are you surprised I turned
back to my faith in happiness?

5

Each new truth bares the old romantic lie.

Fresh braveries mark what's dared as cowardice.

All loyalties betray a past. So this

truth is the gift I give you: How could I

promise more than the promise that I meant--

a present pleasure, not a future fusion?

If you resist, my gift is an illusion.

If you accept, my gift is an event.

Our future knows: no future comes unless

desire is unmasked.

Let the mask fall, the mouth be stilled that asked

for a romantic happiness.

6

Romantic victim, unromantic priest:

which one is me and which one you? Agree

that I at times have suffered too--at least

grant that you have manipulated me,

If not to your own ends, yet with your will-to-be.

I'll grant I too manipulated you

until you seemed the happiness I see.

Even now you are a face my eyes look through

to something else, and even now your songs confess

through my own mouth: "All true

desire swears by happiness."

7

You gave your mask a tongue that like a bell
rang changes on one infinitely alterable word:
desire. My word is *face*. Only our faces tell
the way we triumph or the way we erred.
You praised my “otherness” once to my face.
The otherness of my desire stirred.
My cursing mask was somewhere else. This was a place
for blessing. What occurred, occurred.
The ever-alterable face I bless
is not desire, but happiness.

8

In the charade of virtues that we made
my part was to be heedless of your pain,
a role I ever-alterably played.
Your part now is to feel your pain again--
if you can call it pain--and I'll
smile at you if you can't and--yes,
smile even if you can. Oh, smile
yourself! The features of my mask express
nothing at all or happiness.

9

Nothing at all or happiness:
light of desire must in time display us,
both mindful of the order of our tasks,
both smiling at our bodies' randomness.
Else must our wills blindly obey us
till fires of desire betray us
to ultimate distress,
the burnt-out fixity of vacant masks,
external order but internal chaos.

10

Nothing at all or happiness succeeds,
though my heart wavers and though your heart bleeds.
No song you sing can be remembered when
a single fate is ordered into rhyme.
But when you rhyme our fixed fates with disorder,
I'll cry myself: "Go sing that song again!"
Nothing at all or happiness remains
of us unless we sing in time.
We are the center. Memory at the border
recalls our faces but forgets our pains.

11

Or happiness is pain called into place
among the brilliant chances of the light
that make desire pleasure. Happy the night
we snuff one light to let another flame.
Betrayal is the order of the day.
I called you as desire calls a rhyme.
Your flame of memory flickered, and you came.
You call me now as notions call for space.
New notions call me and I come in time.
Be loyal to me, bless me on my way!
Pain is the mask and pleasure is the face.

12

I'm done, I dance for happiness, I lose
you and the next one and myself. I lie
in each last glance of light and I deceive
only each only chance. I look and choose.
Call me, and I will answer as you know.
Know me, and you will see me as I leave.
Remember me but as you know me, I
will look at you just as I looked, although
I may not know you. Should we meet again,
you'll know how happiness forgets and why
the face you see is the face you believe.
If you can better this, I'll know you then.

13

Happiness takes me, though I can't tell how.

I wish you happy but I cannot make you.

Once all my darkest secrets cried aloud
to be extinguished in your light, but now
your darker knowledge cries: "I overtake you
in a confused extinction of desire!"

I feel no final truthfulness to save,
and every vow I make forestalls
its promised end. My courage is not proud.

Only the light is kind and true and brave.
Layer by layer it melts the masks and falls
on both our faces, swimming fire in fire,
water in water, two clouds in a cloud.

14

The memory of happiness is not
the name of happiness. Singing of pleasure,
all words seem pat, and pat each lucky measure,
although desire's voice be polyglot.
Each chance of light we draw holds this persuasion:
"Speak as you never spoke or else be dumb!
Call up what masks you will and they will come.
To name desire is the one evasion."

We draw the lots. Happiness holds the straws.
I call your name, I call your nature. See,
what you are not you never will become.
While in your presence, I may be a cause,
but absent, I must be a mere occasion.
And what we are is what we yet may be.

--written August-December 1981, published in in
Poems Since When (1988)

SOME FREEDOM!

The Convivium of Carnal Knowledge (in memory of Mac Hammond)

The taster of desserts plays the theorizer
of forgotten flavors in the appetizer.

Was it fish? In that case, the chocolate mousse
froths with a hint of *la mer*, however *douce*.

Or perhaps there lingers a sweetness in herring
itself, with which no curd bears comparing.

And the wine, and the Debussy, and the partner across
the table--conspiring in inventories of sweet loss:

so that, even after Rocquefort, or figs, or liqueur,
disappearing into the divan with him or her,
she or he becomes a convert to forgiving
all that still seems unforgivable, living
for the past with its interminable futures in keep,
or for whatever foretaste remains in sleep.

--written in 1984, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)
and in *Buffalo News* (April 2, 2000)

The Figures Beneath
(Jackson Pollock's "Convergence II")

Here is where we started out. Here is
where we return. You will not gauge our force
until you learn that we are not the source,
nor guess our number till you see that this
is not the background and is not the goal.
We're here to help you, but we come uncalled--
splayed, charred, uncertain, spurned, benighted, scrawled
myths of the body, axioms of the soul.

In our effects you know us. In the plane
where your own gesture makes its marks to chart
the lightnings of our absence, in the pain
you feel when you begin, we live. Our part
is merely to confirm the urge. The urge
is yours. Open your eyes, and we converge.

--written in January 1982, published in *Poems Inspired
by Art in the Albright-Knox* (Buffalo, NY: Orchard
Press, 1982) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

Four of a Type

1 Idea's Mirror

Anything I, while you are absent, brandish
plunges to nothing till yourself return.
Homeliest metaphors will wax outlandish--
torches unquenched, what can they do but burn?
Out of your earshot, I'm a winding stair
without a tower, a smoke without a duct,
all words empty percussions of hot air,
rockets in space, programmed to self-destruct.

But let me feel you coming back, and I
am suddenly completely stiff and still.
What picture is there for a starless sky?
What language musters the abandoned will?
Thought, only thought can touch you in the dark,
grist for your mill, torpedo to your mark.

2 *The Sham*

Confound me then, if you will have it so,
drown me in stuff too fine for me to feel,
tie me on airy spokes and spin the wheel,
sift me to sand, shred me to dust and blow
the dust among your stars, grind me up fine
over your oceanic voids of thinking,
leech out of me all knowledge I call mine:
but give me grace to face you without blinking.

Withhold it, and I'll brag that I am blest
when all that's uttered is an utter shame,
that in me only ponders one thing best,
though you alone can speak me as I am,
your spoor betraying everywhere I've trod
that you are language, not the language-god.

3 *To My Mummy*

I lived you while I did, and while I did,
our mystery seemed anybody's guess:
you were the mummy in my pyramid,
and I your guardian against nothingness.
But then you came to life, and when you came
to life, all the enigmas reappeared.
What was I then? Only your air, the same
oxygen that one lived in and one feared.

To claim to solve a riddle is to say
one hates the answers and the questions too.
What? Who are you? Merely my life's display?
or the love's body that I hide? Not you.
You bare your death in life and lend your heart
for keeps to my dissolving balm of art.

4 *An das Geliebte Unsterbliche*

Melodious but deaf, you twang the string
that thrills your uproar echo toward the space
here, where I live. You, mouth without a face,
there, where I die, make noises mimicking
me in a trance. But sound on, heedless thing:
emit your throbs-in-season while I brace
myself for the occasion or the place
where I have to pretend to see you sing--

sing that you're here and I am there, that you
draw me to you even where I did intend
never to linger: terror, judgment, rue,
passion, grace, pity, reason, cause and end
of every voice crooning to me that I'm
blind, blind but handsome: you in pantomime.

--written in Summer 1985, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988)

The Best of Us

“Nobody loves me!” cries the one who dies
by oversight, while nobody is minding
the light he finds particularly blinding,
and none to speak of hear him when he cries.
“Everyone loves me!” smiles the one who tries
to dim the lights, and everybody, finding
the dimness easier, does. Such love is binding,
though darkness is what everyone denies.

At what point in between pitiless light
and pleasantly adjusted darkness move
the best of us? who neither die of fright
nor live to gather courage from the dark,
to whom of none or everyone the love
remains alike indifferent, off the mark.

--written in March 1985, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988) and in *Buffalo News* (March 4, 2001)

Vita Nova, Ars Antiqua

Manifest will drifts in the common stream
which secret will resisted from the start.
Now love opens both eyes. It chills the heart
to see the secret seen, and in love's dream
magnified past all manifest esteem--
inhuman secret tearing all apart:
to will unlike all others--dreadful art:
self's hapless hiss augmented to love's scream.

“Trust only secret will. Without that trust,
the common lives you make are mere abortions,
which lust inflates and habit multiplies
toward the final critical mass. You must
enlarge each other to divine proportions
in order to attain to human size.”

--written in March 1985, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988)

Cupido

“Enlarge each other, not yourselves inflate”?
Harsh ultimatum from the arcane pit
of limitless desire. Self must split
itself to become whole again, must hate
lovely accord it might negotiate
to those unlovely ends which ever knit
Narcissus to Narcissa, it to it,
ego to ego, wished for fate to Fate.

Echo it is who must regain a voice
in the revision of other in other,
the hollow cry of everything too late
to force the one decision: either smother
your infant hope, or rear it to instate
love’s holocaust. There is no other choice.

--written in March 1985, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988)

The Ring

Infant hope must make all the world aware
of it, has read all guarantees, can't rest
voiceless, claims at worst everything, at best
enough to sink a tooth in, a fair share.
It hisses, "Don't tell me it isn't there!"
A world of infants is a serpent's nest,
where all know love must tear them from the breast.
For infant hope's misnamed. It is despair.

And old despair skulks in its hole, ashamed
to tell, afraid to show, secretly sure
its first wish came too late--end of its rope
a wound, stinking in silence, past all cure,
till love shrieks, pouring poison: "You're misnamed.
The think you shrink from is my only hope!"

--written in March 1985, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988)

Serving the Sentence (In Memoriam Albert Cook)

1

Dismissed, like women on their wedding nights
from any further augury of garters;
disgraced, like Herod by his infant martyrs
into a dotage under lurid lights;
distorted, like attorneys without cases
who niggle at each rubric in the fount;
disfigured, like the stars when priests lose count,
into a zodiac of monstrous faces;

defaced like love, disbarred like noise, dethroned
like angels on a pin, undone like acts
of fate by worlds of will, unfit like facts,
departed like one chance unsung, unmoaned,
disjoint from heads and disinterred from hearts
are words of wisdom when the sentence starts.

2

Sentences start when subjects, modified
by antecedent or anticipated
conditioning (or not), grasp indicated
articles under which they have been tried
(and clauses in each sentence may provide
additional strictures more or less severe)--
grasp at all rates a meaning neither here
nor there, unless some object is applied

verbatim, or attaches them verbatim
(times, cases, modes according to occasion
being served concurrently or seriatim),
and learn no sentence is considered closed
until the ultimate means of persuasion
they call the “copula” has been imposed.

3

Like ready-mades in galleries reclaimed,
likes swords for oaths converted, bombs
in fireworks redeemed, untouchable *grandes dames*
retouched by *nostalgie de boue*, like tamed
tigers released in Central Park, like bums
reregistered as sovereigns of the roads,
like gems returned into the heads of toads,
like rage recycled when the kingdom comes,

like diamonds repressed from coal and dust,
refined by all that limits the elect,
repealed in every roll call of the just,
redressed against the white-gowned circumspect
(whose folly cries “Don’t move! you’re among friends!”),
resonate meanings as the sentence ends.

4

Is that . . . ? How then, no other way? Oh no!
Too many others. Now if only . . . What?
Living and sleeping. Food for . . . I'd have thought . . .
Anything but. And yet, the way we go,
Nothing but luck. Always the same. Unless . . .
Just once. One here for always. Question mark.
Why not? And why not never? In the dark.
Wit's end. The copula. Period. Oh, yes:

“am are is is is are are are”. Right? Wrong.
Meaning (and how!) a pause. To dream, to die.
Some famous sentence and none other. Sky
and water, dirt and flame. And words (ding dong)
enduring long as they. Infinite room.
Yoo-hoo! O voice of wisdom, how? who? whom?

5

According to the text, you will arrive
in time to let me speak it once again,
(if you're in view and I am in the vein--
and though the one is rather likely, I've
long had presentiments that I may be not):
and so repeat these versions of the text,
each variation altering the next
from *dies irae* to *magnificat*--

hoping the novelties are accidents,
a necessary service for your time,
litany of a primal paradigm,
and that by practice of such rudiments
I'll know you what you are, if not what IT is,
my life and little wisdom. *Nunc dimittis*.

--written in Autumn 1987, published in *Poems Since
When* (1988)

Triptych (for Dan Murray)

1 *Although the Juice Runs Dry*

Although the juice runs dry, the life prevails.
Its meters keep insisting on the meaning
lost in the throb of them. True, nothing fails
so miserably as a fancy leaning
on memories of a music spent. And still,
life does prevail, the rhythms go on pounding
as if spent love were all their secret will,
always to be repeated. It's dumbfounding:

You love one person or another, and
you lose, you win, you exult or you despair,
understand nothing or do understand,
and now love stinks, and now it isn't there,
the juice runs dry. What did it represent?
The rhythms tell you: This is what it meant.

2 *The End of History*

We are the past and we are pretty gone--
and being gone is just what makes us pretty.
That you become so ugly is a pity;
pity it is that you are living on.
But though you're living, you would die for dawn
like ours to break, to dive into our city
of water, there to join us in the ditty,
"After many a summer dies the swan."

Granted, we lead you on, soon as death sucks
us down. If we don't do this, then who do?
But is there something else we're on to? No,
don't waddle in our wakes, you ugly ducks.
We do not know you. All you care to know
is how somehow we all lead up to you.

3 *A Shard*

Life's final click or boom or wheeze or clatter
makes music by comparison with the birth
of love, which makes you sure life doesn't matter
so much so long as love goes down to earth,
to earth where the whole dance commences, sure
as death and trivial as hate, the ground
enduring though you can't endure,
given there is no other death around.

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. My friend,
it is in love that we begin and end.

--written in December 1997

