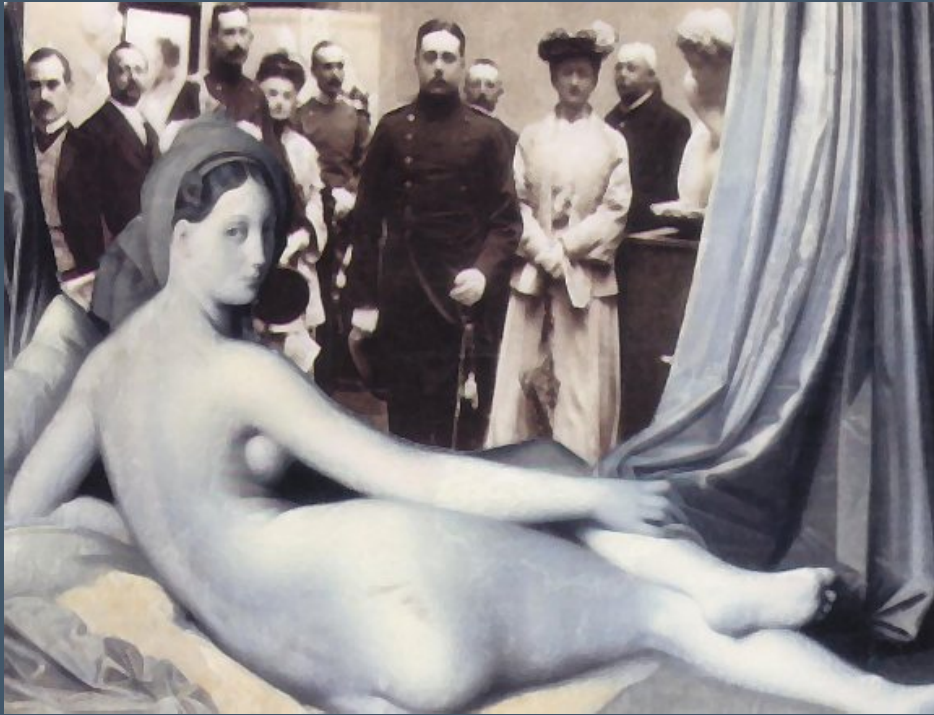


Max Wickert

RUDE COURTESIES



Collage by Gabriele Wickert (1999), Collection of Max Wickert

Almost all the poems in this volume were written between 1980 and 1995. A very few, written at other times, have been inserted for thematic reasons.

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FESTIVALS

Three Christmas Cards

1
Joy to the World

All the asses
in the world
 and
all the oxen
eat their hay with
undiminished
vigor
 and still
the baby is
born naked
 We
shiver
and the
shivers of our
infancy thrill
in the neon
asses
 and the
oxen over
the neon crib

and the neon
hay between the
bank
 and the
new parking lot.

--written in 1976, unpublished

2

Carol

When the kid is born let
him tell us that good will
is not the same as to

see oneself in others,
that to see the light in
darkness hasn't any

resemblance to seeing
in the dark, let him tell
us that heaven is not

to be in Las Vegas
but see one Self in others
and others in oneself

how you look to me when
you look at yourself
in the mirror knowing

the kid is on his way.

--written in 1976, published as a Christmas card (1977), republished by
Outriders (2009)

3

These are the parents
and this is the child
and how glorious if

the child were divine
and not the parents
and they believe it

and we believe it

--written in 1976, published as a Christmas card (Brockport, NY:
Andrews Press) and in *Poems Since When* (1988), slightly altered

Threesome

Dearest daughter,
daddy's fiancée
needs to borrow
your black satin
pants and your white
silk blouse--the one
with the scooped neck.
Daddy has to
mail them today
in time for her

Halloween. Won't
they make a nice
outfit? Leave them
out before you
go to school please.
You'll have them back
before daddy
goes to bring her
home for Christmas.
Have a nice day.

--written in 1980, published in *The Whole English Catalog* (SUNY
Buffalo, Spring 1981)

Father's Day

As usual I dream of
a locomotive. I hear
it huffing *denkfaul! denkfaul!*
denkfaul! Through hills like scoops
of green ice cream it pulls
its caboose and five small cars
towards the Fatherland.

And

I know its headnote of smoke
to issue (accusative
cum infinitivo) in
spirals of protest up to
the smiling blue sky, my loss.
Denkfaul! denkfaul! denkfaul!

And

a small crowd on the platform
of its far, terminal stop
hears a little professor
in a bowler hat declaim
on "Fatherhood in Shakespeare."
Nobody understands him
when he says, "with due respect
to the Bard, I submit that,
among us, these monoliths
of primal narcissism,
wrath, bewilderment, cunning,
hanging on one daughter and
coveting matchless sons seem
silly."

At night the crowd has
gone. The little professor,
alone under the arc lamp,
leans against the steam engine's
cooling boiler, not knowing
when it arrived: I hear him
weeping while the moon's huge face,
unshaven and smelling of
cigarettes, gently descends
and gives him a bristly kiss.

--written 1981, unpublished

Paternoster

The first father was the man
For whom I squealed and chortled
While his five-o'clock shadow brushed my cheek
And he tickled me half to death.

The second father was the one
Who made me walk too fast by his side.
Rewarded me with punishment
And punished me with approval.

I outstripped the third father in some way
Or other, let myself forget
His language and found his pride in me
Excessive but understandable.

The fourth father still
Occasionally reappears. He is
The father with the father,
To whom I'm too frightened to speak

Except now, when I say to you, the fifth,
"I never liked you as a father,
But I always loved you as a man"—
Often as I forget that that man

Resembles the first father,
Who resembles the second,
The third, and the fourth,
Whose father resembles them all.

--written summer 1979, published in *New Poets Review* (Chowan
College Catalogue, 1981-82)

Pentecost in the Provinces

The steeple bell has tolled eleven.
Dear brethren, we are gathered here
for our weekly talk of heaven.
Heaven is a theme, it would appear,
Of which a man's imagination
Finds it embarrassing to speak .
Custom leaves matters of salvation
To private hearts. Yet once a week
We seem to want privacy broken
(The Lord knows why) and we allow
An orator, such as me, a token
Public authority, as now.

Six day , and nights I sit and ponder
(It's what I'm paid for) the old dream
Of new ideas about the yonder,
New variations on the theme.
I want our unimagined waking
And not and edifying sleep.
By mid-week little things are shaking
My faith in all thoughts high and deep.
Then dawns the Sabbath (it is here now):
All my ideas seem absurd
And I become what I appear now—
A mouthpiece of the same old word.

You know it well: The heavenly regions,
The Good Book tells us, are within--
That is a truth of all religions--
Though *pointing* inward is a sin.
But pointing outward? There my brothers
All the religions disagree.
Some ask, "Why point at all?" while others
Pronounce , "Where else divinity?"
Some say, "Yes, point; but point discretely!"
And some, "Fear even that!" A few
Claim to have understood completely
That pointing is all we ever do.

We call he any of these others,
So they can speak or make us see
In simple words like "Men are brothers"
The least originality.
Brothers, is heaven what we burn for,
Or are we inwardly elect
Is the idea what we yearn for,
Or are words what we collect?
I'm pointing now, but (understand me)
I'm pointing upward--which out
Of what these past six days unmanned me
To try to think or talk about.

Up there the angels smile to see us
Waiting for messages from the king.
The words arrive but no ideas,
And each word is a flaming thing,
The only message we comprehend .
And such a message I myself
Will lbe as time draws to an end.
Brothers, amen! The bell tolls twelve.

--written in ca. 1980, unpublished

A Universal Prayer

1

You who begin where we are not quite
aware of even ending,

2

grant that if our name were yours
we would never object to ourselves.

3

If you object to us, put yourself
in our place. We don't know you are there.

4

What we need must be something you give
whenever you choose to give it.

5

Forgive us and we will forgive ourselves,
and if we don't, condemn us.

6

Still, it feels like blackmail, to use
not merely us but those whom we love.

7

Dear Nobody, let us move
into a less terrible part of your mind.

--written in December 1981, unpublished

Epithalamion

Safe at last in great motels, they wash
Sins of courtship from their loutish grooms.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

A Little Satori Take

Pleased with myself again
I hear traffic swish by
like a reassurance-

the night will issue well.
My tennis shoes in the corner
look sort of cute. I could

have screwed the lovely woman
asleep behind the door with the Magritte
whenever I wanted.

Not having done so all this time
seems wonderfully okay--
and even that there were times

when I was less than
wonderfully pleased with myself
seems okay too.

--written 1979, published in *Berkeley Poetry Review* (No. 13, Spring
1980)

HYMNS AND MORITATS

Psalm

Father, you know
my pleasure in

having secrets
all these years from

you, and in you
all along to

have seen through me
halleluia!

--written ca. 1976, unpublished

The President

--after a Meeting with Hostile Powers, Feeling Lonely

His head is bald, his piss is black,
he has a valiant manner.
he says, "We're all under attack;
none of us is a winner."
And the bodies go over the brink

He walks his bony wife around
a neighborhood too good for him,
hearing from every mouth one sound:
"I wonder how she stood for him."
And the bodies go over the brink

His poodle is repulsive, too,
with its protruding scrotum; a
and we detest his taste in socks--
the socks of a factotum.
And the bodies go over the brink

His blood is of an ochre shade.
We doubt it flows at all
and we can guess what odds he's laid
that "Pride Precedes a Fall."
And the bodies go over the brink

So if a body goes over the brink
to whom pride has given no cues,
he pisses black, and "Do you think"--
he growls--"I like to lose?"
And the bodies go over the brink

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Ballad

I'm watching my destruction played
Upon the giant screen.
They're coming to that long slow fade
When I no longer am.

I hoot and cheer until I know
That I'm no longer here,
And drink, and think "It's better so,
Since I don't give a damn."

Sometimes the program stops between
Commercials and I'm crying,
And with each sip replay the scene
Where I must make the grade.

So many ways of sipping beer,
So many ways of dying,
And just one way of cheating fear--
Never to be afraid--

Never to be afraid,
Since I don't give a damn
To try to make the grade
When I no longer am.

--written ca. 1978, unpublished

Nobody in Town Blues

I've got to slow down to catch my sanity.
Nobody in town will ever let me be.

She swore she was crazy about me and turned to another guy.
I held my breath and thought, "Honey, you swore to a lie."

I've got to slow down to catch my sanity.
Nobody in town will let me be.

All the people who knew told me, "Leave her be,
She's no good for you," but I just couldn't see.

I've got to slow down to catch my sanity.
Nobody in town will let me be.

I took my Smith and Wesson and cleaned it real nice.
I was going to teach her a lesson. Then I looked right in her eyes.

I've got to slow down to catch my sanity.
Nobody in town will let me be.

And she said, "Why don't you guys just leave me alone.
I know I'd get wise if only I could get on home.

I've got to slow dawn to catch my sanity.
Nobody in town will let me be.
Nobody in this whole goddam town will ever just fucking let me be.

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

Ballad of Nothing

She was the sweetest thing in town
And I always treated her right,
And she let me have my will with her
Every Saturday night.

And where were you when it all began?
I truly do not know.
And how did it end? My love left me
About nine months ago.

What was it came between you then?
I cannot say, but I'll
Never forget her haunted eyes
And her madonna smile.

She was the sweetest thing in town
And I always treated her well . . .
"But what went wrong?" It must have been
A visitor from Hell.

What was? Whatever thing it was
That Hell to us did send--
It came last year on a Saturday night
And that night was the end.

She let me have my will with her
And we fell fast asleep.
I did not hear her leave the bed,
My slumber was so deep.

Pitch dark when I woke up. Her spot
Was empty at my side.
Then came a crash from the kitchen floor
And I heard how she cried.

"Oh, sweetheart, help!" I heard her shriek,
"It's happening again.
The Specter Rapist holds me down.
I cannot stand the pain."

Down to the kitchen then I tore,
Obedient to her call,
And what I saw upon the floor
Made all my skin to crawl.

Nothing was there except herself
And nothing looked like rape
And nothing like a man at all
And nothing had my shape.

Nothing was pushing her thighs apart
And smearing blood on her knee
And digging bruises on her breasts
Nothing that I could see.

Yet she lay writhing on the ground
Her wrists pinned over her head
And she wrenched her lips to the left, panting:
"Oh no! I'd rather be dead."

"Help me!" she gasped, "please, darling, help!"
When she had caught my eye.
I stared at nothing and then I reached
For the kitchen knife nearby.

*You can't believe all this. This is
The twentieth century.*
Believe what you will, or don't believe--
I know what I did see.

I swung the blade with all my strength.
It ripped through nothing there.
She stretched out smiling and nothing changed
And her eyes were fixed on the air.

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

The Latest Pange Lingua

Let jargon reverberate the riddle
Of the somatic blaze
Spilling itself
To economize the world,
Its first, prenatal fruit
Already aborted.

The inborn is the given,
Its inviolable and over-determined
Universal conversation
Replicated in every letter,
Everywhere synthesizing
The admired order.

On the night of the last carnival
Oneself, reduced among the others,
May regress all the way
Into archaic protocol.
The crowd will devour whatever
Leaves itself in their hands.

Meanwhile what speaks for itself
Is what speaks the body,
Turning its waste of time
Into a drug for others
Who follow any sign
That heads them to the margins.

Thus profoundly privileged,
We bow to the fetish.
The old evidence gives
To a new procedure.
Theoretical rigor compensates
For the missing data.

Authorship or authority,
Both questionable,
Their relation problematical,
Beget at least an ironic convention
By which we promote either one
For approximating the other.

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

AMONG FRIENDS

A Jingle for Mac in the Hospital

"The heart is an asymmetrical screw."
The body is a gigantic barge.
And though the latter be large,
the former has to do.

It chums through its ocean of blood
with its awful thud! thud! thud!
and at times gives a perceptible start
to recall
that far outside it all
moves another twisted heart.

Every human body sinks or swims,
waving its lubberly limbs
in a larger, bloody sea
shouting *I! I! I!*
Never say die!
And the name of the sea is We

There's the blood that jumps
and the engine that thumps
all about you and above you--
the single mind and will
of all those of us still
around to tell you we love you.

--written in 1993, unpublished

Baroque Clouds

--for John Logan

bulging
bodily
shapes

draped
in a thin
convention

--written in 1985, unpublished

Soulbuilders' Local

--for Heidi Carman

You say that
building it
will create

jobs so did
pyramids

tell us what
it is we're
supposed to

help build and
tell us whom
what we build

will delight
tell us that.

--written in 1981, unpublished

The Sermons of Dr. Southwood Versified

Strange how the writing of
one single sentence
can foster so much joy.

Strange how the closer one
comes to language and
the more one pierces its

source the more mysterious
it becomes. Strange how
all the joy in the world

seems to take place in the
space between one word
and the next. The name that

no one can say the name
of that space is God.
Well, back to the dungeon.

--written in 1989, unpublished

Addio, Bell' Idol Mio

--for Irving Massey

“There will be music everywhere:
bombs grown so utterly terrifying
that their mere existence insures permanent peace,
literacy so universal that all votes
are cast for nothing but more education,
forms of flattery so persuasive
that even the king feels obliged to be good,
inquisitors so excruciatingly scrupulous
that every witch will die in the state of grace,
and all the time, the empire a force so civilizing
that the barbarians will stop recording their history.
Life in the garden is so delightful
that death itself seems worth a taste.
And of course . . .”

Look! the female disciple
backs out of the elevator
excitedly chattering.
The automatic doors
cut her off in mid-sentence
and the master murmurs,
"There goes Truth!"

--written in 1994, unpublished

A Note on My Door

dear Anselm,
though memory is the root of invention--
lovely little brain muscles
getting stronger each time they
repeat the motion of doing it right--
though the pleasure of memory
drives plasm faster and faster until
less and less space is taken up
by the plasm person, who thus
gains more and more space into which to fling
the next quantity of person plasm,
and though the memory must itself be pleasurable,
not merely the memory of a pleasure,
and even if I'm wacky to think this,
nevertheless ponder and read this note
before you indulge your unhappy habit
of crashing (whenever you're drunk)
to all-night oblivion on the living room floor.
(If you're not drunk when you read this,
you should be.)

we both know that you
are nice people who hogs no more space
(even when drunk) than you need,
but unless you like to be rudely jarred
awake at sunrise by ululations of loud sestinas
composed of phrases from Elementary
German Language Drills (which you know
I often practice aloud)
for once in your life
make yourself comfortable
and go to sleep in your own
lovely little cozy bed,
and remember, please
close the door behind you
and close it gently,

your host.

2

"sorry, we jest
cdnt get in .
anselm hollo"

--written in 1978, published in *Street* (III:2, 1982)

Daniel at First Impression

--for Dan Murray

It's easy. Let the prince of eunuchs
usher in all the angels by strange new names
Let him summon for instance Feminine Strength
as the She-Dragon, or Masculine Grandeur as
the Me-Shark. Let him evoke Ardent Desire
as the notorious demon Tobedwego
and let him tell each little Belteshazzar
who thinks his real name is Prophet and
who has no blemish: The names of those who don't
eat to the tune of kingship won't
matter to the prince of eunuchs either.
I will come to call on you, one by one,
and I know I can always depend on angels
somehow to betray an angelic strength
or to value themselves somehow as they ought,
even if or perhaps especially when
adjured by somewhat strange new names.

It's easy. Angels are always politely asking
for this very test. They tell you they can manage
on virtually any name and thrive. To them
a whole hodgepodge of Tobedwego demons
seems a rather light preliminary snack,
they claim to have nibbled at the Me-Shark
since their first memories as bathtub babies
and, as for the She- Dragon, they've always felt
inclined pretty much to incorporate her.
The amazing test is inevitably one of a kind
after which every angel appears more lovably fat
than any fussily dieted model of kingship.
And what's-his-name . . . Belteshazzar, what of him?
"Oh, him!" the other angels smile, "his is
his own inimitable model for kingship."

Its all too easy to come to accept
that one's forgotten dreams contained only
the statuettes of one's own decaying clichés,
that the Me-Shark in a filigree of many metals
grew grand in human offices and consorted
like a decent brother with the She-Dragon
as well as with Tobedwego. Still, whatchacallum
needs would stay home with his recipe for himself
and speak, ignoring the business of names:
What were all the new names in the first place?
Signs of the old-fashioned figurines embroidered
on a wizard's gown. We angels look good in anything.
Dress up three of us in the hottest of such outfits
and a fourth will jump in to sweeten our taste,
without even claiming to have mastered the trick.
No test exists to make us doubt there is
a Grandeur, that strength is more than rock or steel,
and Ardent Desire better than the prince of eunuchs.

Still, it is hard to get exercised about
the flames of controversy, unless someone else
has lived through them. Arid only angels always do.
Take three whose new names are easy to forget
and whose old names have long been consumed:
They survive in some unnamable fourth.
The only way we rise above all controversy
is in saying to every star gazer, without
telling him whether we mean it or not,
“Hearing your prophecy makes us want to give up.”
An old, amazingly reliable test:
Make the Angel of the Future prime minister,
call him Belteshazzar and see,
how he survives himself.

First the Angel of Grandeur announces "I'm here."
Almost at once the Angel of Strength proclaims
"I embrace you." Then the Angel of Ardent Desire
murmurs "Sleep! “ But the Angel of the Future
is like the first to overhear the story,
and to speak of it as in a monstrously consoling dream,
so that nothing is all at once so easy,
so that all at once nothing is easy.

--written in 1980, unpublished

Is This Typical?

I volunteer to drive your wife home when
she says the babysitter overcharges.
I saw (she knolls I saw) the reproach
in her face. We say little enough
for a while.

How very thin her lips are.
Parchment curling back from *girlish teeth*.
Then she says, "You are so articulate,
I never quite know what to say to you.
If you . . . if he only . . . "

"Wife a talk !" I think. I think.
In her hesitation my hypocrisy
bursts a faint bubble of lust.
I escape from one form of blame to another
and she

and she confides in me: She thinks that
among the completely articulate
there can be no breach of trust.

It is late when we reach your house.
Headlights off, bored fingers of rain drumming on the hardtop,
we sit in the gloom behind the windshield wipers. I stuff
her hungry silence with polysyllables.
My loyalties are hopelessly prearranged.

Unfed she steps into the porch light.
I take the concupiscent baby-sitter home.

--written in 1975, published in *Street* (II:2, 1976)

Good Party

--for Murray and Peggy Schwartz

the tables
are placed so
nobody
in the room

can stand up
the tables
are loaded
with food and

heady wine
the host is
nowhere seen
the room is

large as the
world and all
the guests are
real real

--written ?, unpublished

TRADITIONAL BETRAYALS

Martial Nursery

Actaeon Gemens

He howled for the moon. He has it now. Since then
He's had one only wish: to howl again

Naso

This Jack-of-all-Trades shows it can be soothing
To have (after much effort) mastered Nothing.

Ritus Mithraicus

He has no clothes on. They'll see this before
They'll ever see there is no Emperor.

Calchas

Each prophet laughs at others' prophecies
Till they come true. If not, laughing he dies.

Maro

He's the only Maker and the Emperor's man.
Would you help him put you together again?

Vis Germanica

This is Newcastle. We have only two goals:
To light the fire, and keep it lit. Bring coals.

Nero

You think this is a fire? Be a man.
Face it. It isn't even a frying pan.

Grammata

On a rod of gold:

THE STRIPPERS OF PLEASURE'S LAST
IMPLICATIONS MUST BE WHIPPED

In a silver bowl:

FILL ME DEEP BUT DO NOT CLOUD OVER
THE DETAILS OF THE HORRORS BELOW

On your father's dueling pistols:

LET MY USER BE THE LOSER

On my sister's hat band:

OUR SIS WILL ALWAYS BE OUR SIS

Around her pit bull's studded collar:

WEAR ME OUT I DARE YOU

Inside the collar:

(CANINE) KEPT (CANINE) BY (CANINE) KEEPER
YOU ARE SAFE, MISTER PEEPER

On the tomb of the speaker:

HERE HE LIES AND THERE HE LIED
THE DEEP ONE WHO DIED

And (as always) on the proverbial wind:

KEEP GOING, GONE ONES, SLEEP!

--written ca. 1977, unpublished

Seven Epigrams

1 *The Act*

The eye has caught me in the act:
no option but to face the fact.
 Yet long before the act, the choice
 to make me what I seem took place—
 and that's a fact I cannot face.
 I know it shows. My tone of voice
betrays me. Quick! what charming lie
will cause a winking of the eye?

2 *The Scheme*

Act One, no matter how well done
will not remain the only one.
 Something that happened long before
 makes it (no matter what I do)
 into a prologue to Act Two.
 Once more the curtain falls. Act Four
comes out of turn to make me see
I had my reasons for Act Three.

3 *The Collaborators*

Hamlet was mad but had the sense
not to require too much from friends.
 He forced them all to use their eyes
 but made not one--Horatio (say)—
 co-author of his little play.
 I've learned the hard way to be wise:
By having them help write my shows,
I've lost all my Horatios.

4 *The Sacrifice*

The perfect chicken on my plate
is gone before I know I ate,
 by bolting it, whole generations
 of hatchlings, lost forever to
 some nameless cockadoodledoo,
 all gone! I urge these observations
not out of any ruth for lowly
fowl, but to learn to eat more slowly.

5 *The Silent Woman*

A prompter from behind the scenes,
she breathed her whispers in my teens,
 whom I ignored as I grew prouder.
 Now, past my prime, I understand
 her shrieks of irritant command.
 Day after day her voice grows louder.
But I am used to it by now.
Too late to heed her, anyhow.

6 *The Contest*

Flayed lips, could they both speak and touch,
would only howl: "It is too much!"
 In blessed numbness grows my skin,
 stretching its silence in between
 the inner and the outer scene,
 although the world I mumble in
calls for more touch than I can say,
marking more and more skins to flay.

7 *The Spell*

Remember how my verses went
to make you guess their whole intent,
 then turned on you each time you read
 to find their center rearranged?
 It wasn't they but you who changed.
 Yet go on changing till you're dead,
with each new reading I'll recall
something you never meant at all.

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

Six Studies for Heads

1

This is a lover endlessly repeating that his mistress
Leaves all the men who see her speechless.

2

This is a banqueter gulping a drink of such fine vintage
that he fears all future drink may be unnecessary.

3

This is a martyr precipitating himself into blood
quicker than his god can come to himself.

4

This is a thinker catching his thought in the nick of time,
shouting 'Let it be!' just as the thought is about to whisper 'I am.'

5

This is a future entirely of faith and hope
almost triumphant over its beautiful illusions.

6

This is a universal orb of light that emanates
from the dead sleep of darkness at a feast of endearments.

--written 1989, published in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

Emblem

His heart is nailed upon his righteousness.
He hears a single voice that cries, "Confess!"
His halo and his blush of conscious shame
Announce his willingness to take the blame.
Something is leaking in the house they built.
He doesn't fix it; he assumes the guilt.
The Weltschmerz in his eyes darkens the scene
With clouds of never-more and might-have-been.
Transgression warps his lip right from the middle,
Half smile, half frown. Life has to be a riddle
For him, and only when his heart is crushed
He'll know the real reason why he blushed.

For her, vague voices choke the air and stammer,
"Be good! be good!" She strikes them with her hammer.
She's leaning forward in a fit of rage,
Her eyes afire, and she yells, "I'll wage
My war against your holy war until
You stop your willful bleeding." On her brow
She proudly wears two horns. She has for now
At least the wisdom she has always had:
You only know yourself when you are bad.
The roof is leaking. Both of them will fail
To patch it up unless he stops to ail
And grabs her hammer while she holds his nail.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Scurry Old Tune

Dirt pulled new
dirt out of
dirt in a roar.

Dirt drew down
dirt to the
dirty floor.

Dirt hid more
dirt in a
dirty drawer.

Then dirt had
dirt of
dirt enough and more.

--written1989, published in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

Variation on a Theme by Thomas Wyatt

Came a time he first suspected
that his urge for instant joy
would be checked by her, corrected
till he was a better boy.

Earnestly he then consented
to however long delay
in the pleasure she prevented
till he found a better way.

But increasingly he doubted
whether her repeated call
unto him to do without it
was a call to joy at all.

And he told himself: "Her candy
must be sweet, that's understood.
If I live to eat it--dandy!
If I die first--not so good."

In the end he sent her packing,
pleasure that he might have had.
Now his life is where she's lacking.
Still, he finds it not too bad.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Reading Spenser

Always the meaning is almost naked
whenever the story comes to reinvent
itself at some subordinate crisis.
Temperance and Magnificence
hopelessly galloping after Pure Beauty,
suddenly, inexplicably drop from the plot.
Instead, a boy beset by three ruffians,
is dangerously wounded before he kills all three.
Meaning, lightly clad, appears to nurse him
but opens up wounds of another kind.
A rather large symbolical hiatus
crudely but grandly glosses the fact
that from here on Pure Beauty is truly in trouble.
The dead ruffians' young cousin inhabits a hovel
with his mother, the Old Witch of Convention.
Their miserable flophouse in the woods
bears a sign on the front door that reads:
Sanctuary For All Distressed Beauty.
Pure Beauty, though ever in flight, is at heart
a trusting soul and, when distressed,
will enter any door whatever. Meaning
now represents herself, a little less
than nakedly, as the mother of Convention.
She snaps Beauty's picture for her stupid son
and the plot stops with the click of her shutter
even as, to escape Scandal, Beauty herself
has hurled herself, virtually naked,
into an ocean of nakedly mutable Meaning.

--written ca. 1980, published in *Escarpments* (IV:1, Autumn 1983)

The Spell of the Renaissance

Be bold? be not too bold? what is the quest?
While in our endless line to time we grow.
Sharp north keeps crossing the declining west
before behind meets just above below.
A vacant verse must haunted mind outrun
and falls o' th' other gasping, "Blow, winds, blow!
Live us, O dust, that knows no other sun!
Make dumb our eloquence, darken our art!"

But once the hurly-burly has begun,
when constant wit seems only lack of heart,
we guess the cause: this one? the other one?
The test is silence. Take the world apart.
Say where is mischief bred or virtue done?
They want the power to say so will do none.

--written in 1988, published in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

Variation on a Theme by John Suckling

Why so savagely aggressive?
 Though one must admit
that your fury's most impressive
 when you fume and spit,
 what's the use of it?

When all's done and said, what matters
 all your pantomime,
which if you keep going, flatters
 his magnitude of crime:
 wasting so much of your time!

Yes, yes, he's the worst of men
 and he's untrue, you
have seen the worst. If so, why then,
 others who woo you
 may better do you.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

"Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms"

Believe me if all those endearing young charms
Could make of me less of a miser,
I'd give you a fortune to marry whoever
Would make you the wiser.

But since all the glances and smiles that you squander
Can scarcely unfasten my coffers,
Don't think you can promise me more than you give.
I've known of such offers.

They show something here, and they show something there,
Appearing one day, and the next, disappearing.
You'd think that you'd know what they're worth--and yet
You find them endearing.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Never Seek to Tell Thy Love (Variations on Blake)

--for John Hollander

Never try to cram your yearning
Down another person's gullet.
Though your inmost heart be burning,
Let it burn and bite the bullet.

Words are the bitterest gall to a lover.
Think how it feels, when the world's out of joint:
"Say it," you hear, and you speak and discover
Nothing you speak of is quite to the point.

Exercise. Use your eyes. Move your hands. Bite your tongue.
Do it now. Never try eloquence. Just be bold.
Love all who yield to you. Don't ask why. You're still young.
Do it now. You will find words enough once you're old.

You'll never feel loved if you think you must babble
The secret you seek to each Tom, Dick and Harry:
The secret can never be told, for the rabble
Will think all you need is to screw or to marry.

Secret pain floats above every word men can say.
Secret joy flies away, yet it stings deep within.
Pain must come. Joy will fly. Let the joy sting today.
Heads will blab. Tails will play. Heads you lose. Tails you win.

To exist or else not to exist is the test,
Not to carve your confession in pools of the sea.
Hear the voice of the Bard and don't speak of the rest.
It will come, it will go, it will die. Let it be.

And when you find your love indeed
Take all you can and have your fling.
Be still, don't ask, and never plead,
And if love asks, don't say a thing.

--written 2004, published in *The Buffalo News* (November 6, 2005)

Homage to Roethke

1 *The Day Slaves*

The night lets none of us dismiss all doubt.
Doubt seems at worst a sometimes useful pain.
The day persuades us all to throw it out.

All of us nurse a dawning sense about
The thing we burn for as a thing to gain.
The night lets none of us dismiss all doubt.

None of us knows it, till he feels the clout—
The sometimes useful clout or needful chain.
The day persuades us all to throw it out.

Both day and night we feel something's left out.
Both night and day we speak the same refrain:
The night lets none of us dismiss all doubt,
The day persuades us all to throw it out.

2 *It Was Downright Dangerous*

The case of space was not only sublime,
It took my life to reach a context where
Its only rhyme could be a rhyme for time.

The line from peak to peak, and from the climb
To the song would suddenly snap in mid air.
The case of space is not only sublime.

The snap echoes in me. I shudder, I'm
Solid inside the one event. I swear
Its only rhyme could be a rhyme for time.

Now I was here. Presently I am there.
When it all happens will become my care.
The case of space is not merely sublime,
Its only rhyme must be a rhyme for time.

3 *The Forsaking*

Each time's the last time, unless we say:
"No, Here is a place we never dreamed to be,"
Each place the first place till it lets us go.

We think "This time it's different" and although
We mean to say "This is it, yes!" we see
Each time's the last time unless we say no.

You break all rules to rule me, and I throw
All caution to the wind while you decree:
"Each place is first until it lets you go."

Time after time I chase you, and you show
Yourself each time so long as we agree:
"This time's the last unless we both say no."

You teach me when to gather, when to sow.
I ask you where to settle in or flee,
Each place the first until it lets us go.

We reach the end when we begin to grow,
And we begin where everything is we--
Each time the last unless we both say no,
Each place the first until it lets us go.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Nietzsche's Horse

Impotence hurts. Doesn't it ever! You
see how another suffers in the brain,
yet know that there is nothing you can do--
his whole horizon merely personal pain.
Another bleeds no matter where you look.
The firmament becomes the devil's book.

Even such another is your self. You hear it
one minute before zero wildly call,
"I need more time, more grace, more lively spirit,
I hardly have begun to feel it all,"
but even as the bells of midnight chime
slow hooves are trampling your remaining time,

grace fails in the last click, spirit withdraws.
The laws of torment only stay behind--
power is knowledge only of these laws
and impotence the will of your whole kind,
while still another shrieks, "Not me, but him!"
and turns on you, and tears you limb from limb.

--written ca. 1977, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)

The Rainbow Vengeance Villanelle

Once, in a haze of ignorance and pain,
I yelled: "I'll see you damned in deepest hell!"
My reason? Vapor now. My words remain--

to see you damned in hell? me to explain
forever and forever how a bell
once, in a haze of ignorance and pain,

of pain and ignorance, again, again
told, tells you, clear as sun or rain
might tell, reasons of vapor? how the words remain,

remain my words--unreasonable, plain
witness to one infuriated yell
once in a haze of ignorance and pain?

Oh, pain too is a vapor, its terrain
the same terrain where any fool can spell
reason written in vapor. Words remain

to find their heavenly nonsense. Mine contain
you, my heart's villain. In my villanelle,
sprung from a haze of ignorance and pain,
be reason vapor, let the words remain.

--written ?, unpublished

EXPERIMENTS

Cockaigne Overture

having thus in the teeth of
insidiously insistent solicitations
by delectable shrovetide sausages
with a firmness equally mixed
of resolve and wry good humor
abjured that easy yet subtly pernicious
brigandage of quasi-sabine gorgeousnesses
all unique but all utterly dispensible
to their legal possessors and hence hardly ever
missed he finds himself as though dropped
smack upon his copious and at times cacophonous
behind stark naked and too astonished to form
a coherent notion or even a single crisp phonic
ejaculation indicative of his intense and singular
sense of exactly proportionally mixed
joy and dejection delight and disgust
sudden liberation and continuing *déjà vu*
kerplunk on the wooden floor of this wide-walled
chamber which seems at first to be lined with
fascinating if awfully Victorian wallflowers
but turns out to be in the end a whole
seraglio crammed full of the world's
most jealously guarded female correspondents who
after assuring themselves of his minim of manliness
cosset him with their Whitsun pancakes until he
abandons every vestige of control and ardently
with a crazily debonair laughter volunteers
to venture to carry them off to any place
the least less compromising for them than here
were it to cost him his gothic sex
his classical eye his oh so romantic heart
the very sideburns of all his power to vary the enigma
period.

--written 1978, unpublished

Three Formal Bows

--for Aaron Rosen

1

Ein Musikalischer Spass

Sad as Muzio's love for Amadeus
is the love of speech for power.
Sad as Antonio's libelled fame
is the love of power for death.

Sad as the death of old Leopold
is the fable of final release,
and the syllables of constancy are locked
in the throat of an elder sister.

Each of your words, my friend, is safe.
Even the burglars will come to play
their violas with reasonable skill

while every sash in old Vienna
flies open to the opening
of the saddest of lips in a smile.

2

The Cockney Poet

The stunner with a common past,
so proud in all her gaudy shreds,
had turned his head just as she turned
all other heads.

"Her beauty is the grief of art,
half a coincidence and half
a crude plan of attack. And yet
why do I laugh?"

He thought he could not smile if he
had squandered all his need, his guile,
his courage on a woman who
was not his style.

"Her beauty is the grief of art,
a horrid warning to the few
whose hearts are only satisfied
with honeydew."

He loitered in the modern street,
a connoisseur of fits and starts,
and eyed the art of arts to hide
his heart of hearts.

3

Carlist Sleeper Between Big Wills

Doña Concepción,
the great and peerless archer,
lies asleep

There is a mirror
afloat
on the frosty pond!

The pinioned quarry plunges,
black against silver,
into the stars!

*

In the apotheosis of endless escape
everything falls out
exactly as planned.

No ruffling breezes
rattle in their quiver
the charmed arrows:

"Doña Concepción,
arise!
Pluck the string!"

--written ca. 1978, unpublished

A Useful Object

--for Jack Clarke and Anselm Hollo

A slot
Take it away from the mother

A hollow tube
Keep it for water and snow

A breakfast
Leave time for atonement

A tooth
Save it for rapists

A crystal
Use it on sentimentalists

A life-size dummy
Throw it at the mirror

A sofa
Move everything out of doors

A dirty joke
Let your father say a few words

A cloud colony
Say it was yours once

A vapor
Return from it

A defense
Be ignorant

A girl's name
Let it remain secret

A violent wind
Hang the words back on the trees

--written in 1979, unpublished

Fornyrd and Patward

byetheebuoy,
uoy evol i?
aye cums to your notits.
its to ourn comity,
not this fore pubication.
oy loy fur ure leitforgather,
o wite for hour lifegotother.
yoohoo cambuck evol uturnallye
unicornly eggsilent.
love cumback, blame viz
me my allinphant.
gimme schlechtyear,
tack my aught off the ballcome,
ass shellfishly ass you canned crab--
ile eaver be yourning use for heifer
marrilie:
vile on see,
vile on nosinging,
for ewe no living accept
aye is no umpirishible evilive.
awe shocks,
alle kristen men nose dis.
I law? phew!
babyeby.

--written in 1989, unpublished

Liquid Skies (or) An Essay on Art and Nature: Short Version

--for Henry Sussman

Each coat of arms is nothing but art--and that's
why kings were nature for aristocrats.

"Inertia" (etymology can tell)
is nothing but "not art." Nature is hell.

One rhythm throbs in every jagged piece:
"Nature's the mob, and art is the police."

When nature plays almost all human parts,
art need no longer hide all of its arts.

Let wit be art ingeniously undressed:
what oft was thought and always well expressed-

As well as possible, one sees its trace.
(No fact is final from one human face.)

Something has been begotten or born, or dies--
art's hollow round in nature's liquid skies.

--written in January 1984, unpublished

Letters to Your Grandfather

I was thy neighbor once, thou rugged Pile
With lips unbrightened, wreathless brow, I stroll
The habitation of all things which dwell
Locks its mute music in her rugged cell

There is not such a treat among them all
Bordered with palm and many a winding vale
Let Zal and Rustum bluster as they will
That's my last Duchess painted on the wall

To be like Nature strong, like Nature cool
Lethe had passed those lips, and he knew all
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell
The shadow of thy spirit, this shut scroll

Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control
Where it slipped, and sank, and was past recall
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale
Although they do not talk of it at school

And would it have been worth it, after all
You were silly like us: your gift survived it all
Looks farcically human; laugh if you will
With the wild breast and blessed and giant skull

--written in 1979, published in *Pacific Poetry and Fiction Review* (VIII:2,
Fall 1980) and in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

Imago

1

He was the perfect father figure--
powerful, benevolent, and ineffectual.
His helping me now would not weaken my resolve.
I looked up at him in pity, fondness and fear.
How I had come to know his humor,
the solemn way he plucked his false beard,
the mock wisdom of his jokes about it.
Sometimes they were even funny.
He now with such drollery
acted the part of stern concern for my sanity
that, though I could not obey him,
I smiled at him oddly.
He scowled at me oddly.
He was trying so hard to stop me.
I swept off the couch,
and, kissing him lightly on his bald spot,
rushed out the door into the dark, wide world
to go about his business.

2

He never looked bigger.
I remembered he was an intellectual,
whatever his trying to help me might involve.
And he never forgot that intelligence was vaneer.
He could even joke about his tumor.
It was weird.
He sometimes made even me say "I doubt it."
Such moments were worth any money.
He was the voice of practicality
to make me so far forget my vanity,
I could never betray him.
He would never drop me.
Time was when I noticed his stoop, his slouch . . .
No, I could not imagine him going to pot
with his face oh so tightly furled
proclaiming my hisness.

3

He never looked bigger.
He was the perfect father figure--
powerful, benevolent, and ineffectual.
I remembered he was an intellectual.
Whatever his trying to help me might involve,
his helping me now would not weaken my resolve.
And he never forgot that intelligence was vaneer.
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The mock wisdom of his jokes about it.
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I smiled at him oddly.
He scowled at me oddly.
He was trying so hard to stop me,
he would never drop me.
Time was when I noticed his stoop, his slouch.
I swept off the couch.
No, I could not imagine him going to pot,
and, kissing him lightly on his bald spot,
with his face oh so tightly furled,
I rushed out the door into the dark, wide world
to go about his business proclaiming my hisness.

--written in 1980, unpublished

Fry, Lechery, Fry!

4:00 a.m., standing by the mailbox, his last extravagant love letter to you in hand, he sees you across the street leading on a leash the mongrel you once told him about. Just then some bitch out of nowhere comes up head down to sniff it, and you're so busy smiling at the wagging tails, you can't see him waving. "What was she doing in my neighborhood?" he muses when you've vanished from sight and the full moon is swimming somewhere low among mercury lights and red tails of cars pulling upstreet away from the Singles Flamingo. "What was she doing near me?" Back home, your photo propped on his night table, he hops beneath the covers and tucks his paws between his thighs, staring at you by candle light, thinking: "Little does she know I know she knows how I'm fooling with myself. Serves me right--I never trusted her enough to let her in on anything loveless." The telephone rings and rings and, whether it's you or not, whoever it is, he knows he likes it.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Woman Driver

It was late afternoon, the rain had turned to a cold drizzle. Robert and Matilda, fresh from having ridden the most astonishing car in the German Auto Show throughout the years that you've owned your Alfa Romeo over one of the most horrendous roads in the world, got good press. Germany's leading minders of the wisdom of your choice called it "a dream car," "slippery," and "as logical a place as any to start."

In the gloom a mud-spattered car turned off the road, hardly a symbol of the wave of the future, although the interior was the renowned Alfa Romeo blend of sensibility and sensuality. Men in blue lab coats hurried over to it and opened the doors. It looked spectacular--a completely enclosed underbody, nestled in rich leather, every instrument where it should be--but there were no human beings in the car.

The Lynx had less wind resistance than the Rabbit, particularly when you passed all the other cars, the road so brutal that Robert, the driver robot, had to operate the steering, the accelerator, the clutch, the brakes, and every forward move was so engineered as to excite Matilda, the passenger robot, to act as a sensor.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Sleeping Dogs

The silent ranks in white caps disport themselves as they mince their meat, pausing at times to give the boot to a dog who through gaps in their ranks with lolling tongue squints furtively at so much hacked loot. A serious calling theirs. Perhaps spilled blood now and then tints a white apron pink, but only too-astute eyes scan the stained laps; all others sooner or later convince themselves that the work of the mute butchers is clean. If the maps begin to show dwindling canine populations, they wince and know the damage is minute. When they see a toy poodle who naps in a bay window under clean chintz curtains billowing, they say: "Here is a mutt of good repute. Look how he wraps himself, friend fit for a prince, around a satin pillow. The root of social ill, the vice that saps white virtue is hunger slobbering over bloody footprints, its muzzle alert at a greasy suit. Behind all hunger, greed taps blind, all its limbs in splints, in rags, in patches, utterly destitute and dirty, licking foul chaps and prepared for daily sprints after more necessities. O let the men in white down their white chute pack the hacked flesh. Who stints music of the flute for their labor is a cur. Let him who snaps at their ankles reap the dints of their kicks, the proper fruit of his sin."

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Parallax, Twenty-Two-Hundred Hours

The brand-new Pontiac ran the red light
The half moon plunged through the twigs like an axe
Every who howled like a how and the law
As usual arrived when a11 was over
The light turning red red red red red red

How I wanted to watch the program but
I could not bear the commercials in which
Every why howled like a he who threatened
To tell the cops it was me though he put
The Pontiac into orbit himself

--written 1979, published in *Pacific Poetry and Fiction Review* (VIII:2,
Autumn 1980)

The Extinction of Ducks and Drakes

the cry of these endangered birds is a single note
aak it is their signal of alarm at any noise
intenser than fiddlefaddle of *aak* hoi polloi

all flimflam *aak aak* of other fowl is mere background
to this fabulous creature's *aak* magnificently
monosyllabic abracadabra

aak and we
must leave it in peace as we left in peace all other
wishy-washy species *aak* each vibrant throat its own
ricochet virtuoso in the tumultuous
mumbo jumbo of its kind

yes this bird here now is
the one cry over the waters *aak* all other cries
merely soso so many notes pell-mell like so much
chitchat until *aak* hocus-pocus *aak* let there be

water water wide enough to drown *aak aak* one cry

--written 1987, published in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

*Regarding the Distance between the Organs of Love and Intelligence,
in the Form of a Love Song*

In my sleep I
hear myself cry
"The surface of
my skin contracts

until my words
are carnal facts
and every pore
becomes an eye.

No longer my
poor self will slide
from tongue to eye,
from eye to tongue;

I'll move among
my body toward
your body which
is only you

who sleep till you
hear yourself say
"Myself will slide
down to the sex

to speak to you
there, you, crying
"Way down deep is
far, far away."

--written ca. 1978, unpublished

Kissinger Yin-Yang Cockadoodledoo

ROAD ONE **STOP** IF YOU DONT KNOW **STOP** WHERE TO GO **STOP** ANY
ROAD WILL **STOP** TAKE YOU THERE **STOP** ROAD TWO **STOP** IF YOU DONT
KNOW **STOP** YOURE GOING THERE **STOP** ANY ROADL DO **STOP** FOR YOUR
ROAD **STOP**

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

The World's Most Abstract Poem

The miracle is
that anyone should
understand it
when there are
such countless ways
to misunderstand.

--written 1990, unpublished

Rumba

eef de troof
zoom a way
de song take
de leel ol
feex on heem

--written 1990, published in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

Space Age

to remove
proof

score
around dotted

line and
lift off!

--written (found poem) in 1982, published (uncredited) in *Street* (III:2, 1982)

MAYBE THEORETICAL

The Critic as Artist

Critics, I once believed., were writers one read in an idle hour, very occasionally, to test one's fading memory of a cherished text. Not that I thought that critics were inconsequential; I even conceived the idea of a "great critic"--a voice that brings so much life and energy and joy to the task of illuminating a text as to flood the remembrance with light, or to hurl an insult at it so monstrous as to make it charge furiously from its cave. I liked critics. I also liked pork chops, girls, indigo buntings, and Edgar Alan Poe. And of course, I liked real writers, primary texts. Perhaps I was merely powerfully under the impression that it was not decent not to like them, but then that impression was at least equally powerful when it came to critics.

Reader, I now consider this erstwhile attitude the attitude ideally suited to a critic of texts; but of course in the meantime I have become a critic of texts. and use any text., under whatever dim light., as an occasion for ironic outbursts about the hole in the middle of language, or its inevitable lapse into circularity. For does not each text simply lead back to its own beginnings, the pork chops, the girls, the indigo buntings--and the work of the imagination which is so inescapably everywhere the same even as in this text the narrator annihilates himself in his own white light, or in your furious jaws., oh reader.

--written ca. 1988, unpublished

Literature and Philosophy

Once there was literature.

Literature was whatever fed on philosophy but kept being famished by it. It recognized philosophy only in its own experience of not grasping philosophy. It had, so to speak, an experience of absence, the absence of philosophy in its head.

The literary person always confronted the philosopher as student, never as teacher. He did not, however, revere him without resistance; on the contrary, he made of his incomprehension of the philosophical a conscious challenge to the philosopher.

"Explain yourself!" he dared him, and he searched in the severities of the scant explanations for whatever did not sound like literature. The more carefully he searched, the more he sensed a bifurcation: in one direction, matters of philosophy which he understood only in a literary rather than in a philosophical way; in the other, philosophy of which he understood only that it was philosophical, but not how it was to be understood.

Every literary person dearly yearned to become a philosopher but knew he would never succeed so long as philosophers failed to provide the direct experience of philosophical understanding.

Then came journalism.

By now, every literary person who reveres philosophy without resistance has ceased to be a literary person and become a journalist, and every philosopher who comes easy to literary persons has likewise ceased to be a philosopher and become a journalist.

The possibility that no philosophy exists outside literature is a thought day by day less comforting to literary persons, and those who are comforted by it are likewise becoming journalists.

Only insofar as it utterly contemns such a possibility does philosophy remain indispensable to literature and invisible to journalism.

Literature needs philosophy. Like a hole in the head.

--written ca. 1988, unpublished

An Essay on Art and Nature

--in memory of W. K. Wimsatt

Art? Everything that fits together. Nature?
Whatever is begotten, and so forth.
So what? Can one conceive a single creature
whom all engendering fits? and is this worth
bothering with or not? Where does one hide
when art and nature, words and worlds collide?
and if one's self is hiding here, what art
but is most pregnant when it falls apart?
Are general genius and primordial craft
so much at loggerheads that, if one laughed
in the beginning, at the end the other
will find its very tears not worth the bother,
or that--vice versa--if one always cried
over spilled milk, the other is edified?
They are. Again, so what? For which is which,
channel or stream, the cistern or the ditch?
When art begins, it must begin alone
and order gnosis back to all that's known,
where nature never ends making its run
of generations long ago begun.
But in each kind of universal dance
art sees merely a puny renaissance
where genius or genocide contends
in an arithmetic of kindred ends.
At each beginning, art indeed may slumber,
but it already dreams the total number;
yet it dreams more, and when it wakes, it reads,
scans army lists, gives orders, and proceeds.

2

The art of politics has the right name
if it rebels when nature rules the city.
When the walls crumble, art must take the blame;
nature supplies only the fear and pity.
Something must fit whatever still becomes
and make for products other than mere sums.
The fall of Greece left only room for Rome
yet what a room! when art supplied its dome.
Its very ruins still modulate the dance
on the Bastille, and of Napoleon's France.
The fall of Rome let the barbarians in
to dream eternal cities without sin,

to invent their Orders of the Golden Fleece
as though to mend the long-lost case of Greece,
while in a third world outside Greece or Rome
another art stood ready to thrust home.
Resources sleep in nature, but the will
to use them well must be artistic still.
No extraordinary engine drives
nations or cultures toward better lives.
In every finished work of art is seen
the ordinary toil of the machine
which fails only when out of all the fuel
specific to its blue-print of renewal.
Not too contrived, but not contrived enough,
it seems a monument of natural stuff.
With only its failure left to understand,
how one forgets the artificer's hand
which thrust aside whatever worked too well
in generating a taste for asphodel
to work again in spite of death and birth
for an articulate harmony on earth.
How facile to organicize the list
of all the seeming failures and insist
upon a genotype through which they blend
into one natural round, world without end. .
The art of politics, the less alive,
the more it seems nothing but social drive.
So ancient tribes, when they no longer saw
that art ruled tribes, made them a natural law.
So gentile dynasties, falling apart,
called kinship "nature" and estrangement, "art."
So Daedalus came ever from abroad
to tinker briefly with the indigenous god.
For each dark age, the tendency is rife
to call its key to living well "mere life."
Then locks grow rusty and the doors stay shut
and the still turning gears are nothing but.
The ancient art of conquest had to cease,
and men saw nature as eternal peace.
Then, arts of peace reduced to good alarms,
men found all nature in a coat of arms,
till heraldry's sophisticated stages
dispelled this mother myth of the Middle Ages.
Escutcheons became nothing but art--an that's
how the king became nature to aristocrats.
At last, amid royal elaboration,
men dreamt up "natural representation"
and every puny delegate began
to speak of nature as the Common Man.

The aggregate sum, with little rhyme or reason,
was called an organism, phase, or season,
till art, caught once more somewhere in the middle
between two worlds, construed another riddle.

3

So now, in the year 2000 and some more
we only see our natural brother, Time,
as one who never made it through the door--
art for him just another social climb.
But nature, that makes him seem so like us,
is our center and our terminus.
Before the time and after the Iron Curtain,
our vast majorities are dumbly certain
their system's working of its own accord,
siring an automatic overlord.
What needs there art when constitutions freeze
toward the sum of natural certainties?
If we can't fit our crimes in, we can dream them
and trust our nature will some day redeem them.
A speculating President? Forgive him,
because the checks and balances outlive him.
A bourgeois enemy? Just pound your shoe
on tables, roaring "We will bury you!"
The natural system of the natural mind
will serve to make one kind the only kind.
True, it's a shame so much destructive seed
was sown by us each time we disagreed,
yet we have always owned our natural brothers
by treating them as naturally as others.
If there is art in this, it's riding us
as lightly as a god rides Pegasus.
We check the pace at every Gallup poll,
knowing that, if one choice should take control,
the great horse, neighing, starting, rearing, fleeing,
would fly off, thinking it's a human being.

4

Review the films for which our time is ripe:
One kind--professional, charming, "true to life"
grants all ascendancy to the genotype.
The hero needs must be employed. The wife
(or husband, as the case may be) supports,
by her agreeable way of disagreeing
(or his), the partner who is out of sorts
(as we all naturally are) with being.

And at that point, the aliens always enter:
suicide friends, defectors from the center,
gangsters, reds, victims, hypochondriacs,
creatures from space, neurotic mothers, blacks,
incestuous fathers, spies. It scarcely matters
whether their nature is in veils or tatters,
you simply know, despite their rage or vice,
they are all fundamentally quite nice.
The climax comes when all involved confess
that the ugly agent in his ugly dress
is most attractive in his birthday suit;
that all cold wars are peace; all aliens, cute.
The spaceship vanishes into the sky
and life gives out one universal cry:
"March onward, Christian soldiers! march and do!
Nature's your homeland; art, your Wandering Jew.
Out in the suburbs which all artists hate
forever blooms your pastoral fifth estate."
Then comes the other sort of film, in which
man is the monster, woman is the bitch,
walls are impenetrable, dialogue drags,
there's no nobility, not even in rags.
The aliens land, but they are very small.
The climax comes on crutches, if at all.
The conqueror of the Mystic Mountain knows
the Mount of Mystery is an artist's nose.
The aliens never leave. The heroes brood.
Machines are started up and don't conclude.
But one rhyme rings through all the episodes:
"Just touch the genotype, and it explodes!"
One rhythm throbs in every jagged piece:
"Nature's the mob, and art is the police.
Men took from nature all that they could get,
and still the revolution is not yet."

5

Has modern art "evolved"? It seems the fish
have long ago climbed all the tallest trees.
Still, is the image origin or wish?
Who cares, if "nature is as nature sees"?
One painter may be canonized a saint
for seeing gods incarnate in pure paint,
even while another's epochal invention
seems to find gods in acts of pure attention.
But, be it representational or abstract,
an art which merely mimes one germinal act .
lacks leverage and thrust; it scarcely matters

whether it deals in picture cards or splatters.
So music which is nothing but a dance
of prime necessity or primal chance,
a Maxwell's demon fiddling with his tap
or a Big Bang springing its ultimate trap,
must either form a kind of noisy mist
rising always from one place, or persist
in a kind of gravitational monotone,
clattering downhill like a rolling stone.
To sound nothing but nature in chance or choice
is not quite instrument and not quite voice,
nor is such harmony a great advance
which makes nature a mix of choice and chance.
What matter if it's classics, pops, or jazz,
if what it's always had is all it has?
In the return to nature is the seed
of holocausts, and no art can succeed
the uncreating word of its return
to germs where offspring in their causes burn,
for when it gets there, what more can it do?
You're done for when all things are done for you.
All confidence is shattered once you know
that all that could be otherwise must be so.
The fish have climbed all of the tallest trees.
The birds have petrified in mud. He sees
nature who follows up the repetitions,
but it's the artist who ordains transitions.
No fitness is in what is everywhere.
Nature takes care of nature. Artists care.

6

Ah, care! The very word is like a bell
that tolls us back to all the usual places.
Care seeks to worry out of nature's spell
not one expression but all human faces.
When the erotic partisans advance
to fixate nature in some single glance,
care only, artificial and aloof,
doubts automatic good and asks for proof.
To care, each artless glance may mean a duel
to the death, to prove the glance or itself cruel.
Art needs a pair of eyes through which to see
the human face, but needs no guarantee
that it will be familiar. If it's not,
each cynosure of eyes may be a blot
on an escutcheon charged with signs to prove
there must be art even in the act of love;

and if it is familiar, nothing shows
of nature but what art already knows.
Whatever is not fitting will perplex
the art of love with the brute force of sex.
Love's old sweet song can be no careless song--
the blood may boil, the gender may be wrong.
Male clarity seems a natural golden mean
till female riddles crowd upon the scene;
eternal feminines seem natural ends
until impeached in some last trial of friends.
Beyond all care are those who will conflate
love's body with a mere body of fate,
search it for all congenial traits and find
the dark phylogeny of humankind.
Old Yeats was right: even in love our tasks
are not to find our natures but our masks,
though this can't mean that all our art must perish
unless we cling to Adam's curse. We cherish
Adam's potential--fall in love, but use
what we can see to care for, and refuse
what merely is begotten, born, or dies.
Nature is in our bloods; art, in our eyes.

7

With all its capital blood, love has no skill,
but with art's ordinal eye it measures, projects,
discards, invests a little, makes a kill,
spares no expense so long as it connects
with something seen, and only cuts its losses
when nature merely offers who the boss is.
Nature bequeaths whatever nature seems;
art knows it, sells its birthright, and redeems--
shows you how what makes love like clock-work tick
is not some classificatory trick,
while also showing how it can't be what
you view as something you've already got.
When nature offers blueprints, it is vital
to know that you already hold the title.
But art will tender its untaught design,
saying, "Come make me yours, else you are mine."
You sense an opportunity or a test,
remember all you once were--and invest.
Once nature is invested, one is sure
the capital of nature will endure.
But once investment is an art, one knows
that nature's partial to the designs it chose
when last it had to choose. Investments rise

only before the most artistic eyes.
Nature is the commodity of its clones,
the golden egg of kings and epigones.
Art must be wrought, before it's bought or sold:
it loads all rifts with ore, and not with gold.
It understands nothing, but needs to see
something more naked than simplicity.
Do you think it's the epitome of wit
to cry, "I've never thought of that! that's it!"?
No, wit is art ingeniously undressed,
what oft was thought, and always well expressed,
though never merely what was always thought.
Art is both plain and hidden. Those who taught
artis celare artem once, knew how
unnatural men could be sometimes. But now
that nature plays almost all human parts,
art need no longer hide all of its arts.
Nature is what confirms all nature's mood.
Art is a still becoming attitude.
What's born must fit more than what is begotten,
lest all of nature's nest eggs turn out rotten.
What's made must calculate with all that dies,
art's hollow round in nature's liquid skies.

8
Something too much of this. Such propaganda
for art--who needs it? Right before our eyes,
nature and art sit on their great verandah.
"That's a nice sunset," sated nature sighs.
"Sure is," says art. Silence. Now we compare
what won't be there with what was never there.
"I see that art," says nature, "hides from me.
I'm the one shining there. It's me I see.
Whatever is begotten, born, or dies
has always been enacted in these skies."
The rocking chairs are creaking. Art is yawning.
We go to sleep. Night falls. New day is dawning,
and art, suddenly lively, rubs its hands
like a class dunce who finally understands
and whispers even as nature nods in sleep,
"I know that nature dozes. Let me keep
watch for what wakes, is possible, and fits
with all I see here. All these glowing bits
of cloud and spark and color interact
in something more than merely natural fact."
Something is busy in us now. A breeze
awakens nature to what nature sees.
There is a stillness in the rising sun.

Before the day began, art has begun.
"Inertia" (etymology can tell)
is nothing but "not art." Nature is hell.
Our chairs are rocking still. We alone stir,
inspecting the battalions on the air.
Look! they are legion, mustering for art.
The hour is here. The clouds are torn apart.
Who hates all nature may never know why,
but those who hate one artist want to die.
It's us or them. All human voices blend
in either the crimson kermesse of one end
where nature takes again what nature gave
or in cool exordia to one ritual close
which we intone, while art prepares our grave,
to the tune of "They chose this, but we choose those."

--written January-February 1984, unpublished

Advice

To be moved, to be made thoughtful, to smile at your skill,
To approve your puzzling assertions of will,
To endure the gravity of your point of view
As a pause in their own, and themselves to pursue
Your personal track through the labyrinth of delight
Is all people want when they read what you write.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

Rude Courtesies

yes it's
a game

move things
around

but try
not to

move the
people.

--written 1982, unpublished