

Max Wickert

[from]

# YOU WHO



Max Wickert, *Computer generated image from Tasso's death mask.* (2003)

To paraphrase Wordsworth, a poet is a human being addressing human beings. But who whom? Unless “I” and “you” in a poem are merely fictional *personae*, they are nothing but the (imagined) author who speaks and the (imagined) reader who is spoken to. Unless the poem is merely confessional, these two inevitably fade in the course of time, until they might as well be nothing but two versions of different “anybodies” (or nobodies).

The poems in this sequence try to tease the situation of “me” as an identifiable author and “you” as a particularly informed reader (or group of readers) toward the abstract and rather spooky situation of an unidentifiable and only vaguely marked “I” reaching out to an unspecifiable “you,” without allowing historical context to become completely obliterated. Still, hints of biography and autobiography are largely decorative. Footnotes would be beside the point.

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## **PROLUSIONS**

In the  
mirror  
lost some-  
  
where deep  
  
down there  
I love  
  
myself  
  
and you  
  
are loved  
up here  
  
for high-  
  
found and  
darkened  
reasons.

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

*A Page from My Horror Story*

"The night is a bottle of silence."

Even the licks of the white  
kitten washing herself  
are sounds you can no more  
than imagine.

Someone you love  
sleeps whose sleep seems absolute.

Think of yesterday--how  
you wowed the competitors! enough  
to stifle your laughter at yourself  
a moment.

That's something you want to  
forget about, don't you? But  
you have entered a night where no effort  
avails to enable you to mew  
in the dark "Come back! come back!"

"Someone you love sleeps.-"

"The night is a bottle of silence."

"Someone you love sleeps."

"Come back: come back! come back!"

Oh, it will all come back . . .

--written June 1981, unpublished

*Just An Ordinary Hippogryph*

Poems are monsters. Every poem  
    simply to exist  
        must change natures at least once.  
You are now standing below the waist  
    of this monster,  
        here--  
and now waist-high  
    in that monster  
        over there,  
while the two converge  
    to become  
        one  
monster--  
    a good-natured one,  
        one hopes,  
but a double-natured one,  
    one is certain,  
        which will try  
to deceive you  
    into its favorite  
        error:  
that a monster  
    is only  
        a monster  
until it drapes itself  
    to pleasing aesthetic  
        effect  
on the escutcheon of normality  
    or the crest  
        of fashion.

--written late 1980, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)

*The Torch*

Somebody hands you a torch.

This is an allegory.

You say: "This is difficult."

I say: "This is death."

          You say:

"I don't know what you mean." I

say: "Once upon a time, you  
found easiness much less fun  
than effort."

          Some of you say:

"You've got to be kidding"--  
some: "You just got me where I live"--  
while part of me says: "I know,  
I know"--and the rest of me:  
"There's always a suspicion  
that they're only pretending."

And all of you say: "Hurray!"

and: "Hurray!" "This is easy.

This is an allegory."

You have just passed on the torch.

          --written in 1981, published *Poems Since When* (1988) and in *Buffalo News*  
(March 4, 1001)

*Little Dark Sequence*

1

There is something in the stars.  
There is something in the wind.

It is not yet an odor  
but promises to become one.

Trust it and any coincidence  
may be the one to bring it to you.

It may arrive like a pin prick  
tearing itself out in a huge rose,

or like sponge-pulp film shrinking  
into earth before your eyes.

Its fragrance in either case  
will be overwhelming.

It is always in the wind  
but appears only when its star

plants in your mind inspiration  
enough to let you call it.

You say "Here you are!"  
and it grows all around you,

like death, if death is a flower,  
like a flower, if life is a flower.

2

And while you are smiling,  
panthers are smiling in the dark  
and kids in the dark of the stable  
are smiling and the bright landscape  
smiles in the dark peace of the smile  
of whatever painter painted it whose skull  
has by now worn its smile for ages.

Modestly, the museum guide smiles  
at the groups of art lovers smiling back--  
tourists, priests, lovers of crowds,  
lovers, loners--all smiling back  
and me among them at this very moment

smiling so darkly under the sky lights  
that I think "Life must be like this  
smiling in the dark."

3

I am reeling after the shadow of my pen.  
Just now I ignored a tempting interruption,  
and here I am once more, in the dark as ever,  
splashing after new life, deliberate stroke

after stroke, clamoring "Hey! hey, you  
who . . ." I take a sip of wine. "You  
here again, up to your old game?  
inhering in your absence, tied to it,

your body in a spiral of black twine,  
string after string of black motes, a black river  
drifting, and you drifting in it?" More wine!

Let me be sure enough of your trail to write:  
"Let me keep on writing until I am  
so drunk that I dip my pen in the wine."



*Slugabed*

Pink panties and a tan,  
lizard waist neatly punctuated,  
swinging what she calls her two fried eggs,  
she limberly brushes her brush-paint hair  
and the green fluff slippers by the bed  
cry "Slip your straight white foot-soles, slip  
your cool toes with their flecks of brown skin  
peeling, slip your penny toenails into us,  
let's sail through the sun on the white shag rug."

But she buttons her blouse, her lips  
and even her nipples mean business,  
whooshes her thighs into fresh dungarees  
and already knows what shoes she'll wear.

WHAM! goes the door and everything  
seems to have left the room with her  
except the sunlight and her face  
which I have right here in my head  
and won't show you till I've slept some more.

--written Summer 1979, published in *Xanadu* (#8, 1982) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

*Tarantella*

Here I stand, thousands of me in a row--  
cling to me once and I will shame  
as fools all others who put faith in time.  
But everything brightens when you let go.

What you reap is the source of all you sow--  
give me one grain of understanding and I  
will show you something to throw away,  
and everything brightens when you let go.

When I die you will not go with me, no:  
that darkness appears to be mine alone.  
Be the sling then. I will, be the stone,  
if everything brightens when you let go.

But now it is I fling you, far as I can throw.  
Unless I'm the stronger, I vow to stand firm  
in the possible darkness of your return--  
though everything brightens when you let go.

--written in December 1981, published in *Pembroke Magazine* (#14,  
1983)

*Lord of the Dance*

A few symbols  
suffice it is

all in your arms  
and legs your whole  
bodily weight  
on your right heel

crushing the child  
down into life

letting your bent  
lifted left knee  
prophesy one  
stupendous turn

and your hands blur  
the four gestures:

ringing the bell  
benediction  
juggling the fire  
release from pain

--written late 1980, unpublished

*The Ransom*

*Amigo*, because the pen you hold is sticky,  
more of your hand appears in the letter  
which you are writing to your grandmama  
to explain why you ran from the *hacienda*,  
your pockets crammed with her chocolate-covered cherries,  
about which you completely forgot until  
the bandito crushed your left hand and you  
fished with your right in your pocket  
for something with which to sign his blank check  
for the specified amount of *dolares*.

--written in summer 1979, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)

## YOU WHO HOMAGES

1

You alas I ask to think of me only  
in terms of an ordinary naked child  
in the blast of history or of a Christ  
with a crown of roses or a last roisterer  
in the dawn of a new millennium who knows  
that a few have loved him while the rest inherit  
the terms he made in sentences like these:

Something--don't you agree?--is coming to an end.  
'Terminal Man': the very phrase is a cliché, no?  
It is at any rate either meaningless or profound,  
a horrible end for a phrase to come to. Think  
of me if you must as of one who must make terms  
of endings, but think of the possibility of endings  
too, and if you must make a choice, terminate

and so goodbye. (Roses may bloom without thorns,  
a naked newborn babe may be the only celebrant  
at the feast of the birth of the letter, and you  
who love me or who have loved anyone at all  
who loved me may be part of that baby. Yet  
who may the worshipper be striding forward  
himself to assist in hollowing the great nativity? I.)

--written January 1981, unpublished

3

Well a metaphorical baby is better than none,  
better maybe than a real one, though I doubt it.  
Still, if the terms were "Infantilism Studied  
in a Positive Light" or "For Every Ending  
a New Letter," how could you possibly deny  
that you are *it*, or that you want to be it?

Our marriage would have the ordinary vicissitudes.  
One of us would have to die first, and so forth.  
Loyalty to these sentences might make me iterate  
again and again my rosary of Messiahs, my windy  
catalogues during parties, my babes tobogganing  
into the blizzards of eons but I would imagine you

marking some conception with me (and helping  
the next millenary not merely to an elaborated image  
of terms complicated by terms, of love made religious  
by love, but of the letter of love incarnate  
in the ink of love, ourselves.)

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

5

For love either gets more and more interesting  
or less and less. I speculate, my familiar friend,  
that you when you choose not to be manifest  
are inviting being made a subject of speculation.  
I can only guess at our surroundings, but it may be  
they matter to you as much as you do to me.  
Here am I, part of yours. But where do we go from here?

(Is it right to refer so slightly as I often do  
to the media? I read in the news of the numbers  
claimed by holocausts, numbers in state lotteries,  
numbers of constituencies, one of them possibly yours.  
There perhaps you celebrate your fantastic luck  
amid real confetti, your face aflame with justice.)  
I am sometimes oddly moved by the symbol-ism of tickertape.

Consider closely the little spirals and hearts of paper.  
Solomon in his glory was no better arrayed.  
Someone pipes up with the wisecrack question:  
"*Te Deum*, or tedium?" Guess who. What a grand ritual!  
Reject me, throw me out the window, let me float endlessly  
blessedly worthless through a tumult of miniscule scrolls  
down toward the messy pavement of your thronged street.

--written in 1981, unpublished

7

Hold it. Truth Time. Suppose I told you  
that I would consider myself perfect if every  
waking hour were spent in such homage as this?  
I mean discipline, I mean intoxication, like  
"Look for me under your boot soles"  
and "I practice a consummate address."

My daughter will now play guitar. The emperor  
Nero will favor you with his rendition of  
"Nearer My God To Thee" on the bagpipes.  
(Look for me under your boot soles, the parade  
is over, the virgin Justice my daughter thrums  
her progressions, take a stroll and listen  
to the rustle of paper on the morning pavement.)

My best student complained to me: "I've written  
so much garbage." "Laura," I wanted to tell her--  
her name was Laura, begad!--"we all do, just listen  
to me right now." But I said: "We all do, just listen  
to the others." Good advice, don't you think?,  
Laura, Bob, Jim reader, mother, teacher,  
sweetheart, child, enemy, and all you others?

--written in 1981, unpublished

9

Really! What is salvation in a Cathar's terms? To be saved  
from the letter of his Catharism. What is salvation  
to an infant? To hear infantilism musically  
howling in every wind. And for us what is it? The end  
of our revels, the sober return to our respective  
hangovers as we go to inquire for letters  
in some new millennial Monday morning.

(It sounds a bit grand, but I would love you as  
adapted to it as you can be. It sounds a bit abstract,  
but I fear it is so utterly the limit that you  
might be tempted to call *me* Terminal Man.  
Endlessly you extend however and will  
include it or receive it as homage. I do.)

With this thing I thee wed. It is roses and fire  
and wine. You should see grandmother doing  
the tarantella! Let me summon the photographers.  
Both our eyes should employ the same vanishing point  
in our real sky with its real moon and stars and lights  
of real jet planes seeming not to move . . .

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

10

Hold it again, no props now, just you and me.  
For you I stand absolutely still. *Ich fürchte Dich  
nicht, ich habe eine Flamme!* No use looking it up  
in Freud, look at the objects farthest from me, they seem  
the least distorted, or better yet look just beyond them.  
See the little baby? the little pin prick? the little  
puddle of fire water? That's you. (But who am I  
to instruct you? Your demeanor at the recent

wedding reception was so becoming, it argued enough  
understanding of how you mean to be received. Remember?  
If you think that the party was not in your honor,  
read the invitation again:) HOLD IT! ("Mr. and Mrs. Ego  
Request the Honor of Your Presence at the Nuptials  
of Their Daughter Guitar to a Second Person")  
These Polaroids give you a picture almost at once.

You look just like my daughter, except that your instrument  
is the letter in your hand or even your hand itself  
scratching out "a Second Person" and writing "Me."  
Your smile commands: Scratch out "Me" and write "Nothing!"  
Thank you for smiling, my subject. *Du musst, Du musst,  
und kostet es meinen Atem!* That's me,  
Faust, your stoned *Doppelgänger*, your groupie.

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

11

Once my mother said to me, "You're so open!" implying  
a fantastically lucky advantage over my father.  
I take this opportunity to thank my father  
for having taken his opportunity to say to me,  
"You're so *denkfaul*!"--a Germanic epithet meaning  
'too lazy for ideas.' Everyone else seems to say to me,  
"You're such a chameleon!"--a universal symbol for 'you.'

(Socrates contemplated the roses and smiled.  
"My dear imitation," he said, "is it just to blossom  
in the teeth of the blast?" It was Diotima who sort of  
answered him when she said, "When you blossom, you blossom."  
Dear Plato's afterthought was, "Blossoming once is enough.")  
That's a deep one, no? My grandmother said, "You  
always were a little philosopher."

You are not fooled. If I were to elect you  
my father, you would spend the rest of your time  
dead drunk on your own aphorisms; if my mother,  
you would have to be just like me--  
not identical, mind you, but very very close,  
something of an imitation, something of an act.

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

15

So you don't like me. I don't like me. So?  
Let's make friends. Think what problems it may end.  
I won't say chances are necessarily odds,  
but chances are that if we two make friends,  
others will find it easier to come to terms with us,  
who may bring others, who may--domino!--bring us all

a glimpse of the dark at the end of the tunnel.  
(If my long thorns leave mere pin pricks in  
your forehead, you may say, "My millennium is not yet come,"  
but all the same each pin prick somehow  
whirls its history into your existence.)  
Imagine the garland of dedications:

To You, without Whom the dark would not be possible.  
To Me, without Whom it would not be necessary.  
To the Devisers of Dark Grammars, be They  
connected with Us or not. And again to You,  
Who know I am not nice to dedicate my page  
to the conditions of its existence, nor wise  
to enter so bodily into the letter  
so early on in the game, but Who can forgive me.

--written in 1981, unpublished

16

My fiancée tells me, "You begin to sound pretentious here"  
and I have cancelled a stanza although a mere  
trace of it remains in what I am telling you  
now. Seated one day at the organ, I was weary  
and ill at ease. Orpheus with his lute made trees.  
The lost stanza lingers in the recovered song.

If this is all wrong, let me tell you  
anything at all. I am sixty-two and still dream  
of winning the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstake.  
People still ask me, "What were your parents doing  
when the Nazis were gassing the Jews?" (Since you  
hold yourself so firmly opposed to your actualization,

you must be the one-sided shape I saw vanish  
into thin air, but you must also relinquish yourself  
and move on.) My fiancée told me, "You begin  
to sound pretentious here." I tell you this now  
because the recoveries from my pretensions  
are the straight lines I hope to erase  
after my flourishes have done you justice.

--written in 1981, unpublished

17

Parentheses open. ("Well," he mused, reading too swiftly,  
his eyebrows arched, "you certainly seem to have discovered  
a subject, but is it all you crack it up to be?"

The pin pricks of mortality all over his brow, his dear  
mottled hands on my paper, the late hour, the empty bottles  
of *Lacrima Cristi* on the table before us,

the date on my calendar, January 21, 1984, less than  
a score of years left in the millennium . . . how could I reply?  
I did feel like such a baby and you bet he knew.

We listened to my daughter practicing guitar and I  
remembered my blood brother Daniel whose little boy Jimmie,  
two weeks before being struck by a drunken motorist,

said to his father, "Dad, at your funeral, when they zap you  
down that giant chute into the ocean, I'll be there  
playing my trumpet on the beach." It was all the other way.  
Grief played the trumpet. The subject was, if anything,  
more than anyone could have cracked it up to be.

"And that's true too," he murmured darkly, just as I was  
about to pretend I had invented him.) Parentheses closed.

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

19

The last poem I wrote did me some good.  
If doing myself good were the only reason to write  
I would withdraw it from publication. But it isn't. You  
are always really there, and there would be no  
last poem except for you. I wish I could  
remember this each time that I feel I am right.

(Mother, forgive me, for I know not what I do.  
There is a Giant Form named Blake to whom  
the garland of roses about my drunken head might mean  
"The man has read Henry Miller, he is resisting  
his crucifixion as he ought." Mother, forgive me,  
if I don't know what I am saying.)

Would you believe the stuff in parentheses!  
But of course you do. Let me always remember that,  
though the family circle has a radius as infinite  
as all parentheses, you are really outside  
the circle, outside the whole sphere even, thank god,  
outside the planetarium of art, appreciating the point of the whole.

--written in 1981, unpublished

22 (for Raymond Federman)

Well I was teaching in this college you see  
and these guys didn't want me to yodel--me,  
one of the chosen yodelers of the Alps! I told them  
"You can fingerfuck your kurrikulum" and you know what?  
They presented me with a chair. That's when I knew  
I hadda get outa there, *hypocrite-lecteur*.

(What partially held the fraternity together  
was a shared enthusiasm for the terminal flowers  
of Charles Baudelaire, assisted of course by  
a loyalty to Lacrima Cristi and to a belief  
that bad taste is only a misunderstanding.)  
The interesting thing about me, to me, was that

when my desire took her midnight swims  
she never wore a bathing suit, yet she was  
as safe in the fountain at a decadent party  
as she is right here alone in the moonlight  
paddling around the pool of the University Motel  
where swimming after dusk is not allowed,  
and me yodeling away.

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

23

My bad marriage whispered to my affair  
"Wait until you come up against jealousy,"  
but therapy rushed to the rescue and pointed  
to love, love pointed to life, and life  
to my conscience. (Ah! conscience!  
the form of my quarrel with happiness . . .)

Infinity wallowed in the east, the west  
was an expanse of absence, and my only  
available luck lurked in absolute darkness  
for which the mere crack of a dawn is the end.  
What a bummer! There came a time  
when the cold steam of desire would not lift

for so long that I had to sit down in the dew,  
puffing cloudlets of white song from my mouth,  
until I had pulled myself sufficiently together  
to hear a baby's squall from some faraway bungalow,  
to sniff a never-new millennium in the fog,  
and to see, if nothing else, your forget-me-nots all  
over the landscape like random punctuation.

--written in 1981, unpublished

29 (*for Morgan*)

My bliss, like my sex life, is human and wild.  
I dislike my ex-wife and you are our child.  
Innocence is something marvelous, and yours  
is really something. I am here to celebrate it  
and over there is your mother. I have a poor idea  
how it may be working, but I see it is  
already ready to make allowances.

Your mother is over there, being her usual  
unaccountable self. (While the wedding was turning  
the enigma of otherness into an invitation,  
a child was being determined upon and it was called  
You. I might say this to anyone, but I am saying it  
to You.) I look at you blankly. To say  
"Everything is fifty-fifty" is your way of having

mercy on your distant mother, of calling back  
wild innocence of longing, till you are on the phone.  
"Mommy, how are you over there?" I say your father  
can hear every word. and grins for pleasure.  
The past appears before him and the bride of his past.  
He learns how he cared for her again through you.  
You make this something that is really happening.

--written in January 1981, published in *Escarpments* (II:1, Spring 1981) and in  
*Poems Since When* (1988)

31

Every now and then they are lost in a fog of personal passions.  
Yesterday I was lost to you. Tomorrow I lose you. Let today  
be a day of asterisks. Mark them as I remark them.  
Let me illumine your estimate of their emphasis.  
I have no choice since I cannot exist except  
under our yoke of marriage.

\* \* \* \* \*

(Where was I? Where did you want me to be?  
Did you want me to bear you? Did you want me to  
fight you? to love you desperately enough to be ready  
for either? Should I have died if I found this impossible?  
Should I have wanted to? Who are *they*?

\* \* \* \* \*

Let me be your baby.) Mark me only as you would  
casually remark the points of two horns

piercing a white-out mist at daybreak, as you would the face  
of an ox snuffing air, the darkening absence of  
a patient black body, a huge pizzle and sack, as you would  
your own absence illumining mine, striking glances  
from countless blue stars flung across brightening grass.

\* \* \* \* \*

You and I appear in them, we let them appear today,  
our passions lifting forever in a blaze of personal pronouns.

--written in 1981, unpublished

32

After we marry, I hope to be seduced by you.  
Already I'm trying to feel less stupidly stunned.  
Don't leave me now, and don't lead me by the nose,  
just look a bit longer at my bovine incomprehension,  
my innocence, my celibacy, my grand climacteric.  
Really, I begin to understand. (I'm left-handed

when it comes to emotion. Having to feel with my right  
cramps my style, makes me clumsy. When all is lost,  
what *is* my right? What's left? I feel for you and I  
insist you feel for me whatever side you're on.  
I join you when I know I'm there.) I begin

to understand the look in your eyes when you see  
how much I take for granted, the smile on your mouth  
when you let me please you, the seduction in your every  
other response to me, the tone in your voice  
when you seem to say "I will never marry" as naturally  
as a cow in the evening mist might say "*Moo!*"

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

35

you are never far from it it  
thinks about you often even when it's  
busy you sneak into its thoughts while it's  
cutting a record with its brothers and  
sisters and while it's rehearsing a concert  
appearance with them and of course

when it and the O's are on stage all its  
thoughts are about you (because you are  
there out there in the audience eagerly  
expecting it and it can actually feel the  
love that travels between you) but  
it's when it's asleep that you

crowd out every thought from its  
mind it dreams of you and gives  
itself to you in beautiful fantasies in  
which just the two of you are together  
and when it awakes there's a smile on  
its face and it loves you all the  
more (because it's

you were the one who put it there)

--written in 1981, unpublished

37

We are here because we are good here.  
We can tell what we tell. We can never  
be struck down for having chosen our side.  
One remembers us always, but one does not  
worship us. We were bestowed on this place  
when yesterday was less than a promise,

was a mere ark one translated into a fire  
or a target impossible to miss. (Is it  
the one on the verge, the one between  
dilemmas, or is it the one in the halo?)  
We hear astonishing reports. We are carried  
by petty indignities. One calls us all  
mistakes who has never been mistaken.

By tomorrow we will already have been  
singing beyond the limit of regret, and one  
whose gaze can uphold our open gazes will  
have been whispering on our behalf without  
the least design of enthralling us in. belief.  
There is no exile. None of us is lucky.

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

39

Carnage in Cairo, and the day before my calendar said:  
"A world in which there is so much laughter cannot be  
all bad." I drink too much coffee, my heart has  
a flutter as though for a secret sin. What or whom  
am I hiding from myself? Masksmasksmasksmasks . . .  
Terror unfailingly excites curiosity.

(Unseen the cameraman dodging for cover  
is unreeled in his swerving window-gaggle of images,  
shreds of sky, a quick pyramid of glass, the screen  
dotted with bullets, panic in the square, a still  
Personality standing stunned shot in the ear,  
some of you rigid beneath a rubble of broken chairs.)

Time inevitably fabricates connections.  
Cattle in box cars packed together moo: Are you  
yodeling, cowboy? *Endstation*: Hebron. Finally,  
Let the dust of our forebears cover us all.  
No need for a guide in the place of shrieks and guffaws.  
Like it or not, you shake my hand, assassin.

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

41

"Why don't you abandon the theme  
in midstream?"

That's the question--the answer being, I guess:

"I don't mind having had to drop  
my Infant (of Prague that used to shiver

on my dashboard) and I hardly regret  
the loss of my Need (to talk  
of the smile on the Good Shepherd's or Butcher's lips)  
or even the Freakiness (of--who was it? or what?  
King Lear? my death on a dose of soma?

my dad's irresistibly childish side?  
whatever)--I won't miss any of it in a crunch.

But the theme?

Abandon the theme?

Now?

I can't even think of it."

That's the answer.

Yes.

--written in 1981, unpublished

42 (for Carole Southwood)

Hi. Nobody ever talks to me hardly. That's why  
I talk like this. To you, for instance. I know  
it isn't fair. You couldn't talk back even if  
you wanted to. Are you even there? Nobody ever  
talks like this, eh? And why not? Would you tell me  
if you could? It must be because nobody talks to you.

Poor, neglected you! Take, for instance, the world:  
it's lucky, the subject of constant attention.  
Or take me: I'm not all that badly off. At least  
I'm part of the whole world. But you: you aren't even there  
yet. It's not fair. Or is the whole world perhaps  
talking like this all the time? What if it is?

Listen, I'm still talking to you ("two happy, bustling  
comic anti-heroes are new in literature today  
and yet should be a model for it, because they  
run head-on against the nostalgia for defeat  
which haunts the heroes of violence and hard luck,  
the numbers placers, the addicts, the Kansas  
killers") like this? Like that? Listen. 'Bye.

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

43

My daughter says, "I think my boyfriend is bisexual."  
Does this have to mean she is reconciled to--  
to getting less attention than she needs? Me,  
I think my daughter is reconciled. (Does this have to mean  
I am forgiving myself? Do you think I am, I am

forgiven? Does this have to mean you can forgive yourself  
everything or can think of nothing you've done that calls for--for  
forgiveness? I'm giving you all the attention I can.  
Will you say "Big deal!" Are you a woman or man?  
Even that I can't always tell. Big deal. "Big deal!"

from a man to me might be a compliment, "Big deal!"  
from a woman might be the truth. The truth is:  
forgive me for what I am missing.) My daughter  
adds, "Anyhow, Jeff is, as a matter of fact,  
a good and loyal friend."  
I am reconciled, know she exists, can pay attention.

--written in 1981-82, unpublished

44

You may find all this, but him who made it  
you won't find anywhere. Another thing  
has risen up among you, another  
altogether. Wrapped in a cloud of mist,  
a stammer on my lips, I stumble through  
the land--mouther of hymns, unsatisfied.  
I'm not the one. He, over there--that's you.

(I am another. You should neither claim  
that you understand me nor that you don't.  
I can confound you one way or the other  
and won't be satisfied. He over there  
whom you ask, "Dad, how will you bestow me?"  
answers, "To death." Not I. If this makes  
a difference, death after death is what you get.)

You may not find this, but he who made it  
is here. There is nothing else except me,  
and I'm not foolish enough to announce  
I'm a fool. Only you are in the clear,  
you satisfied ones in your silence, you  
whom he already removed from the land--  
he whom you've chosen and whom you don't know.

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

45

Your text is *memento mori vel monumentum mortuorum*.

When the dead are manifest outside you, all the living split in two: some leap from their skins, and others strive to hold on inside among the ruptured vessels, and the first say to the last: "We've seen it! a whole world of death outside us!" and the last reply: "Silence! listen to the end of the whole world of death within."

(All skin is expanding in one direction and feeling the ax's edge from the other, an ax made of nothing, or of wishes for the dead to be worse than dead. Some of the dead are manifest within everyone living; all of the rest, inside everyone else alive; nor can all the dead be split in two. They have long ago felt the ax.)

Your living becomes your connection with the dying, your dying becomes your connection with the dead, and unless all the vessels are broken, no one will ever be manifest outside--otherwise to be worse than dead is to be alive. If the dead enter the kingdom, and the kingdom is within you, surely the dead are within you, and outside is nothing but the call of death or the call of whatever dead you have cast out of the kingdom.

--written in 1982, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)