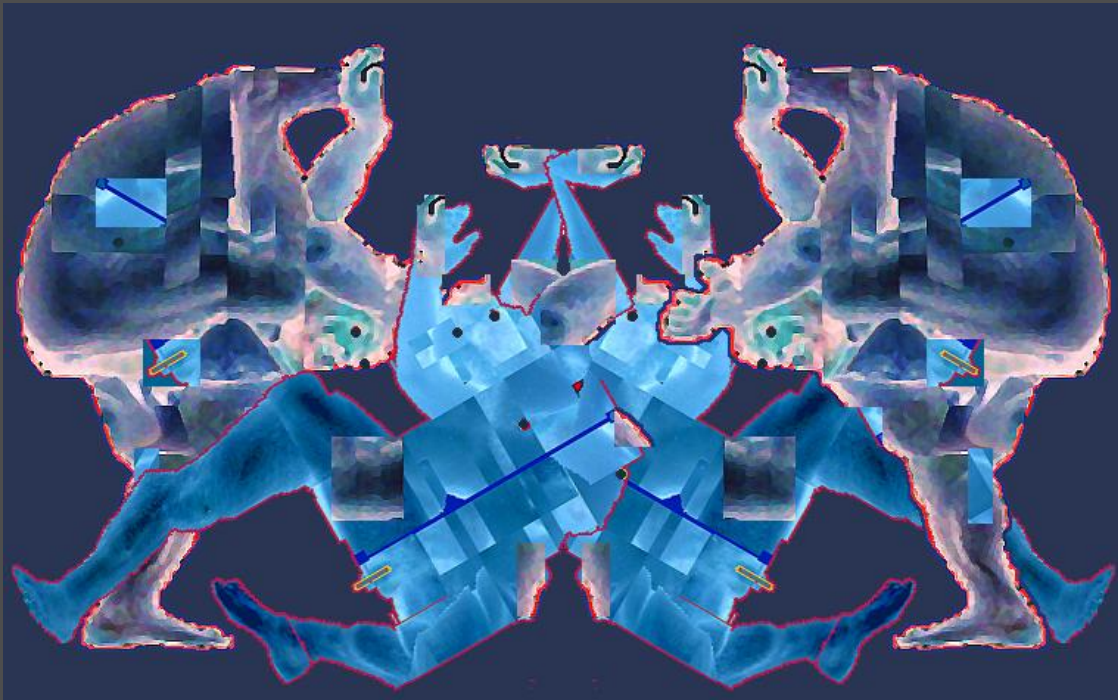


Max Wickert

[from]

## DOUBLE NEGATIVES



Max Wickert, *Scene of the Crime* (2009), computer-generated image

Note: The sections entitled “Shakespearearian Rags” and “Sonnets-Come-Lately” were not originally part of this book but have been added here for the sake of convenience.

## Contents

<i>page</i>	
	ONLY IN AMERICA
5	<i>Pastoral</i>
6	<i>Big Rig</i>
7	<i>Hadj</i>
8	<i>Maximum Security</i>
10	<i>Lecture</i>
11	<i>The Convertible</i>
12	<i>Night Out</i>
13	<i>Three Essays on Getting Stoned</i>
15	<i>Faded Jeans and Worn Sneakers</i>
16	<i>The German-American National Anthem</i>
17	<i>Homage to Hitchcock</i>
18	<i>The Snyder Telegram</i>
	FAMILY VALUES
20	<i>To Xantippe</i>
21	<i>MCA</i>
22	<i>Easy-Off</i>
23	<i>Disturbed Child</i>
24	<i>Tantalus and Tantaletta</i>
25	<i>For My Daughter</i>
26	<i>In All Likelihood</i>
29	<i>Chauvinist</i>
30	<i>Sermon of Double Negatives</i>
	RANTS
33	<i>From the Mouths</i>
34	<i>Stranger in Paradise</i>
35	<i>The Harrumph of the Will</i>
36	<i>Therapy</i>
38	<i>From the Mouths</i>
39	<i>Nocturne Macabre (after a print by Kunisada)</i>
41	<i>Next</i>
42	<i>Chekhov</i>
43	<i>Teaching the Lesson</i>
44	<i>Among School Kids</i>
	SHAKESPEHEARIAN RAGS
46	<i>Tribute</i>
47	<i>An Impediment</i>
48	<i>Twisting the Bard</i>
49	<i>Variation on a Theme by Drayton</i>
50	<i>As You Like It</i>

SILVAE

- 54 *Haiku (for Irving Feldman)*  
55 *Ab, Cricket!*  
56 *To a Mask of Fear*  
57 *Black Wedding (A Puppet Play)*  
58 *The Hoopoe*  
59 *The Heaven of the Anxious*  
60 *Two Puppets*  
61 *Vala*  
62 *Anima*  
63 *The Spectrum Stanzas*  
66 *Oriente*  
67 *Gesundheit*  
68 *Scholar*  
69 *Riddle*  
70 *Allowing the Body fo Fate*  
71 *Some Trees*  
72 *Dawn Song*  
74 *Dirge*

SONNETS-COME-LATELY

- 76 *The Make-Work in the Making*  
78 *From the Miami Workshops*  
79 *Shame on us Faulty Rhymers*  
80 *At the Suggestion that Some Taboos May Be Violated with Decorum, the Sonneteer*  
*Attempts to Discredit his Entire Calling*  
81 *Be This the Theme?*  
82 *Unworthy*  
83 *Motto*  
84 *At the Bottom*  
85 *Children in a Graveyard*  
86 *Epicoe*  
87 *Bald Mountain Crap Game*  
88 *At Sixes and Sevens*  
91 *Two to One*  
92 *Two Little Nothings*  
93 *Fated Path*  
94 *Ohime! Il bel viso!*  
95 *Untitled*  
96 *Prisoners of Conscience*  
97 *Quo Vadis?*  
98 *West of Eden*  
99 *The American Dream*  
100 *Running on Empty*  
101 *Adam's Curse*  
102 *Wahnfried*  
103 *after cummings*  
104 *Lectura Dantis*  
106 *Earth News*  
107 *Ode to Science*  
109 *Commedia dell'Arte*  
110 *Day of Wrath*

111	<i>Fables</i>
115	<i>The Survivors' Song and Sonnet</i>
116	<i>Naked Poetry</i>
117	<i>Datamate Data</i>
118	<i>Quit</i>
119	<i>Sort</i>
120	<i>The Fusilier</i>

ONLY IN AMERICA

*Pastoral*

With its few splotches of black paint,  
unhappiness marks up the white  
cottage of my happiness. One  
of the giant cabbages in  
my garden will not sprout this year.  
The halleluiahs of cedar  
waxwings nearly drown out the buzz  
of the chainsaw from the distant  
copse. Happily I chase my geese  
to the pond. Unhappily I toss my spent butts  
in after them. Nightfall. My wife on the warm stoop  
sits knitting, a volume of Freud  
at her side. One page is neatly  
dog-eared. I wait until moonlight  
makes the cottage-wall rough-cast glow  
white, with a few blacker shadows—  
a match, almost, for the blue ghost  
in the pane of the TV screen  
that she has flicked on for the news.  
Happily aware that I breathe  
relatively unpolluted  
air, I linger by the wire fence,  
softly humming tunes to the moon.

--written ?, unpublished

*Big Rig*

I had a Big Hot Momma Sausage. She was a mixture of sawdust, bone meal, suet, pepper and blood, coagulated in a cylindrical casing and preserved in strong industrial vinegar. Midnight was astir with the staccato crackle of mayflies and cockchafers diving into her Jumbo Electronic Bug-Trap. Out in her maroon Nebraska sky, the moon hung yodeling. I felt the catch of her throat vibrating faintly between my gonads. Her pantyhose tangled in the cab of my semi, flapping about my six-inch velveteen dice. I couldn't make out all her words right away; but you don't bother, when you're reading her as well as all this, to ask for her handle. Anyhow, she was a lot of sausage for just six bits.

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

*Hadj*

*(for Aron Farakb)*

I've landed on your apple often enough  
to know that plastic packs of sweetness  
can fly their carpets from its every pore  
like ticker tape snowing in the fabulous  
Louise Nevelson pizza parlor above  
Second Avenue or I might as well say  
Fifty-Sixth Street for all Allah knows  
who rarely deigns to visit the tunnels  
of the prophylactic grubs who devour  
the white knowledge beneath the skin  
knowing in themselves it is nothing  
one man's poison and thank you  
very much your excellency and no thank you  
I couldn't live there regretfully  
I have that much of Allah left in me  
Allah the dispassionate the unaffected  
but still for you I'm delighted to see  
as I toss my Balkan Sobranie in the Sound  
a quartet of bluebottles fresh and shiny  
hanging on the painted iron ceiling of  
the deck lounge of the Staten Island Ferry  
singing "Baghdad or Bust"

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



*Maximum Security*

A door or window is open.  
Close all doors and windows now.

You are not authorized to operate this vehicle.  
For authorization, speak the password now.

Your password is invalid. This vehicle is now on High Security Alert.  
Do not attempt to start the engine. Do not attempt to open the doors or windows.  
Do not attempt to operate the radio, CD, or any other device.  
All systems are now inoperative.

If you are the owner of this vehicle  
And have forgotten the password  
Push the red button on the dashboard.  
It will automatically dial 911. Push the button now.

If you are a thief, push the button for 911 and give yourself up.  
If you do not do so within five minutes,  
This vehicle will activate Maximum Security Alert.  
Push the button now.

Warning: You have not contacted 911.  
This vehicle will now activate Maximum Security Alert.  
Maximum Security Alert may be hazardous  
To your health or your life. Contact 911 now.

You will find a cell phone under your seat cushion.  
Call a friend who has a key to this vehicle.  
A key that opens this vehicle from outside  
Will disable Maximum Security Alert.

You have dialed an unauthorized number.  
Maximum Security Alert is now activated.  
Do not move. Unauthorized movement  
Will cause this vehicle to self-destruct.

When you hear the motor start up,  
Do not attempt to steer this vehicle.  
Do not operate the brakes.  
If you do, this vehicle will self-destruct.

The star on your right is Vega.  
The star on your left is Antares.

You may now take the wheel.  
Steer exactly between the two stars.  
If you deviate,  
This vehicle will self-destruct.

Correction! Correction! Antares  
Is the star on the right.

--written 2006, unpublished

*Lecture*

The man who has had no friends  
is on the town tonight,  
nods to himself in the jammed bars  
and guzzles cynical beers.

He's the youngest in the crowd.

Hugging corners to avoid  
gross bodies of enemies  
who don't know his face, he cries  
damply into his tenth drink.  
His red tongue steals out to lick  
his slow spermy tears. The man  
who has had no friends is fine.

He has no need to talk, he  
likes to observe, he is free  
to go horse when the bars close.

When the grey dawn comes, he goes  
Home. His wife lies on her sheet,  
a lump of fish on a plate

(Those with friends and gentle wives  
should keep such thoughts to themselves)

--written 1967, revised 1972, unpublished

*The Convertible*

of course we have been making  
remarkably rapid progress

year by year more and more  
all over America poets both male and female

who look like poets  
and sound like poets and live

and die like poets head themselves  
toward premature death and speedy oblivion

while we are finally beginning  
to see poets left and right

looking and sounding like used car salesmen  
and livingdying for the greatest country anywhere

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

*Night Out*

You

're about the  
twenty-fifth man

I

've kissed tonight  
but (loverboy)

You

'll be  
the only one whom

I

'm going to  
kiss again and  
scr-

you.

--written 1977, unpublished

*Three Essays on Getting Stoned*

1

The first time I got stoned I discovered the pleasures of the mind, which were nothing but the pleasure of contemplating my own mind. Not once though could I think of my narcissism and feel the old chagrin.

2

In the beginning there was Labor and Curiosity. I remembered the second time I got stoned how prolific these two are in the beginning and how conceited in the end, pointing to their children and children's children and children's children. "We're irrepressible," they say, "we should be in the history books." In the end the sons of Labor and Curiosity suffer martyrdom every time I get stoned. I enjoy it, with reason.

3

Long ago there were two kinds of men: those whom, the consumption of tea even in minute quantities would transport into

heavenly raptures  
and those whom it would  
not. These last went on  
their way fleeing from  
the mind. But the tea  
drinkers formed themselves

in ceremonious  
groups and invented  
China and Japan.  
Some there were of course  
who merely faked it.  
Oh yes. The real  
population of  
the orient is quite  
small. The third time I  
got stoned I under-  
stood tea. And I ask:  
Are you among those  
whom the consumption  
of pot even in  
minute quantities  
will transport into  
heavenly raptures?  
Or are you faking?

4

The fourth time I got  
stoned I discovered  
with pleasure that all  
my discoveries  
(even if YOU got  
stoned) would mean very  
little to you.

--written in 1977, unpublished

*Faded Jeans and Worn Sneakers*

*--for Geraldo Rivera*

Punks for punishment demand  
eternities of quitting time.  
Our promised land becomes the land  
where all the rates forever climb,

where reckonings inflate until  
the only justice is a joke,  
where doing exactly as you will  
is doing it by the book.

My constitution says "I am."  
Chinks in my armor mean "I won't".  
If you're inclined to give a damn,  
don't.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished



*The German-American National Anthem*

"America" give me your name.  
In another country I was a boy  
who could recite the catalogue:

Rotkehlchen, Kuckuck, Eichh her,  
Drossel, Feldlerche, Kibitz . . .

I scarcely know a goldfinch  
from a yellowhammer now  
to say nothing of handsaws and hawks.

And always I hesitate  
between plume and plume.

How can I preen myself on style?

while the names of almost everything  
are taking wing in swarms  
back toward the old, old places?

and me left here to stand, stunned,  
plucked, in "America"? Yes,

trying to pinion my image  
of the mockingbird

against the song and name  
of the mockingbird  
plucked to "America"

--written ca. 1982, unpublished

*Homage to Hitchcock*

As regards your trial testimony,  
Mrs. Quince, though it may have helped to hang  
your friend, it was tendered with such wondrous  
candor that I knew it was not yourself  
who could have fabricated its nifty  
ring of reality, and how could it  
be your seemingly homicidal friend?  
You see, Mrs. Quince, my theory now  
is that your friend was not the murderess.  
Calm yourself. Believe me I'm not anxious  
to accuse you. By the way, Mrs. Quince,  
have the police returned your poker yet?

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*The Snyder Telegram*

that  
you  
know

large  
cycles

does  
not  
mean

small  
cycles

stop

--written ca. 1985, unpublished

## FAMILY VALUES

*To Xanthippe*

Never again to stand bareheaded in  
the rain with you with not a word to say,  
the suburbs gray, and plot how to begin  
at once once more the crucial game we play;

not to choose silence when my only voice  
is silence and I'd rather die than speak;  
once and forever not to have the choice  
even to quarrel with you in the bleak

day-weather; never once to say again,  
"Don't say a thing, I think we've said enough!"  
nor ever to be baffled by your pain  
into rough anger underneath the rough

clouds in a cloudy season--these are nevers  
I never want to think of though I now  
speak of them.

    Something in me clevers  
everything up but not enough to bow

to what is absolute in the "Not again!"  
when you say "Not again!" with every breath.  
Never to stand bareheaded in the rain  
is never again to know you. It is death.

--written 1982, published in *Pembroke Magazine* (#14, 1983)

*MCA*

women  
keep us  
sober

--written 1980, unpublished

*Easy-Off*

*-for Morgan*

My teenage daughter is cleaning the oven.  
I am re-reading *Beowulf*. This is the lifel  
The Liberal candidate says, "We must not  
let the Buffalos of this great nation die."  
My daughter has a smudge on her chin.

I don't feel alone in the least. I do not  
feel alone. "Alone" alliterates with "Offa"-  
Offa, a Mercian king in *Beowulf*. Buffalo  
today is hot and humid. I have given  
my promise to my fiancée: we will

keep our home clean. The Liberal candidate  
has departed for Detroit. How my daughter  
is slaving away! I have agreed to pay her.  
Alive in dying Buffalo, her dirty chin  
proclaims, without her knowing it: "heart

shall be the firmer, courage the keener,  
as our might lessens." I make myself  
a promise that tomorrow I will perform  
something that my daughter can command,  
her flushed face emerging from the oven

is enough to oblige me. I don't feel alone,  
though I want my fiancée to come home  
to Buffalo with or without *Beowulf*,  
a destination not without my daughter.  
The cake I will bake will be delicious.

--written 1982, unpublished

*Disturbed Child*

Subject was inaccessible because  
various objects today appeared  
as if each were a candidate  
for a subject

Subject is inaccessible because  
the hum of the machines is always  
so strong as to seem as alive  
as itself

Subject will be inaccessible because  
attention will often balk  
at examining mechanisms or letting  
objects speak

Subject is eating normally

--written ca. 1981, unpublished



*Tantalus and Tantaletta*

She  
kept saying  
she wanted the baby

and he  
kept saying  
he wanted the baby

but it wasn't  
the same  
baby because he

wanted the same  
baby as the one  
in the picture

of his mother  
with the baby  
reaching

for the peach  
and she  
was the peach.

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

*For My Daughter*

What's the matter?

*Nothing.*

Come on.

You're not usually so still.

What's the matter?

*Nothing.*

This is what I call communication.

I think you want me to know that you hurt,

but you won't tell me why.

Tell me what hurts.

*Nothing.*

Does this mean that nothing hurts

or that you won't tell me.

*Nothing hurts.*

Can I believe that?

or are you just

beginning to hurt all over?

What are you beginning?

*Nothing.*

Damn, I have to watch the questions I ask.

Are you saying I started this?

What was it I started?

*Nothing hurting.*

What was it you started?

*Nothing.*

Thank you.

I wish you'd do something

to interrupt me.

--written 1979, unpublished

*In All Likelihood*

One day he beat *his* seventh son so hard,  
grandmother's suppliant dishpan arm  
flew out to ward the blow.  
It whirled her wedding ring  
clear from her finger through the open  
window into the pansy bed.  
*They* never saw it again.  
*In* those days that was one of the only  
thinkable forms of divorce.

Three sons killed or missing in the War,  
he played the organ in the parish church  
dutifully , even as he damned a daughter  
who chose university, even after  
the youngest son chose art.

I knew him only from effects,  
although I met him twice  
when I was just a child,  
the first time us the hexagenarian cadger  
my father had taught me to expect,  
and the second as a beautiful corpse  
in a halo of silver curls.

One of my uncles was sobbing in a way  
so extreme I could not trust it.  
The noise made me lift up my eyes  
to meet in those of my father  
the fear of being a chip off the old block.

At the funeral breakfast, my father  
had little to say. Uncles and aunts  
evoked all the apparent virtues  
and guessed at some others:  
how undeviatingly he kept to principles,  
how always the parishioners  
had admired his musicianship and  
his punctuality, how large a surviving  
clan bore witness to his virtue and vigor,  
how even in his principled grimness  
there was a certain grandeur.

I was not yet in school but can  
reconstruct all this plausibly enough  
from the family myths and my recall  
of the sour and indulgent smile

which my grandmother wore to hide  
what was probably grief, and which  
gave her a better pretext for silence  
than my father found.

My parents shared an obscure joke,  
something to do with mother's  
wedding ring; I didn't understand it,  
but on those occasions always felt  
a little more safe than usual.

God! what am I doing spinning  
these invented memories around the meagre facts?  
Whatever would make me think  
that their likelihood must be truth?

After my parents retired, my father  
took to painting the family portraits.  
He began with my mother's mother,  
then revised an early bust of his own,  
then did a meticulous oil of my mother's father,  
though his death had preceded by a month  
my parents' first meeting.  
Then there were difficulties.

Later I would come for occasional visits,  
after my first divorce,  
some years before my father's death.  
There is a memory I need not invent:

The artist ponders in his studio,  
seventh son of a large religious household,  
late in life and in another country,  
late at night and in a cloud of cigarette smoke,  
surrounded by sketches for a picture  
he will never finish.  
He is showing them to his son.

Here is a caricature  
of a man with a crew cut.  
He looks at you as if to say,  
"There is beauty is there not?  
in such dourness coupled with such youth,"  
but you have no difficulty imagining him  
as a man who beats his children.  
And here, in scuffed charcoal,  
a mask of utter terror  
in a halo of silver hair.

The son's eyes meet the father's.  
Fear echoes fear.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Chauvinist*

During listless performances of whatever is necessary but not necessarily convenient, on ramshackle structures behind false facades, I tend to fall to doting on a woman so solidly disposed as to require no pity beyond her body's obedience.

To her I permit all the luxury of eternal repose among the ferns in the backyard. She may spread her legs to anyone who, at the cost of being unable to speak, gets close enough to be heard. She may smoke cigars or wear excessive make-up.

She will not be imperiled by self-abuse, though forced to eat three square meals every day; she, however, must justify my conceit of her absolute detachment from horseplay, from duty,

from all but self-indulgent expenditures, from moping for the existence of others like herself, and from the slightest pretension to such art as my love has wasted on pet inutilities

*--written 1970, revised 1980, unpublished*

*Sermon of Double Negatives*

Some of us, though exceptionally intelligent and loving,  
know the difference between liking and love no better  
than that between knowledge and intelligence.

We are dumbfounded when we see  
intelligence (as it sometimes will)  
operating in the absence of knowledge;  
we are horrified when we feel  
(as sometimes happens) love  
bearing it out in the presence of dislike.

If at such moments we feel  
intelligence scrutinize us, ourselves,  
we lose our own in a scurry for data.

When we are the objects of such love,  
we become for a moment  
incapable of returning any.

Sometimes we are like children  
whose parents do not know or like them, really,  
but understand and love them well enough.

Someone's father is too stupid  
to understand his dislike for his child  
and explodes at intervals  
to abuse it with accusations manifestly absurd.  
The child knows his reasons are nonsense,  
but never considers they hide a real dislike.  
All the same the father loves  
and the child will be heard to protest  
how despite all it really likes him.

Another father is too loveless  
to admit ignorance of his child.  
Instead he engages it  
in interminably subtle discussions.  
The child dislikes the emptiness that follows them,  
yet never thinks of the father as stranger.  
Yet the father is shrewder about the child than most,  
and the child can furnish a dossier of the father's traits,  
accurately observed and exhaustively catalogued.

We hope what we know is no necessary enemy to love,  
and what pleases us, no inevitable bar to understanding.  
We find it difficult to imagine a God who would

fill the world with merely enough hints of himself  
and merely enough reasons to be pleased with him  
merely in order to make us  
his children, become, like him,  
exceptionally intelligent and loving.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished



RANTS

*From the Mouths*

The dictionaries of praise I'm forced to rely on!  
Compiled by blond spaniels their tongues hanging out for you  
Their huge eyes watery with imbecile candor

Not that I too don't gape at you occasionally  
Or smear your preciousness in my sores but at least  
You cant make me guarantee myself forgiveness

There is no word for your bones there is only  
A tedious list of makeshift synonyms for pity  
*Too bad* can only be spoken in ironical tones

Language has taken advantage of your sweet tongue  
Powerless I watch the reaction to my translations  
A licking of lips as though for more soup

It would be tempting to dwell unhealthily on the fact  
That you have nice saliva or even to invent deformities  
Wax lyrical (say) about your hemorrhoids

But garbage is no more human than chrysanthemums  
In the ledgerbooks of indulgence even the cruelty  
I sometimes urge upon you leaves all in the black

Where are your eyes? where is the chalice to hold  
Your politeness or the page to commemorate your gallantry?  
Even the unlikely hiding-places have been claimed by cripples

Words words words--thank heaven the world is called hostile  
Its visible surface covered with blades I can use  
To cut your name from the foul mouths of others

--written 1970, revised 1980, unpublished

*Stranger in Paradise*

At first, of course, he missed the lepers.  
"Where does one go from here?" he mused,  
almost dismayed to find so many  
possible and delightful paths  
to be pursued or not as he felt like deciding.  
But he decided.

(Take it from there.)

--written in 1988, unpublished

*The Harrumph of the Will*

This rumbling from the cellars, irksome in  
the very vagueness of its origin,  
should faze us less than the arithmetic  
of dazzling daylight on the heights we pick  
to conquer. Yet because it would distract  
us from the audit of our stars, we act  
as if we sometimes heeded it. We must  
deign to respond a little, if only just  
enough to give due delegates the scope  
to take what action they see fit, and hope  
it may be adequate. If not, we know  
too well how trivial regard can grow  
to what may seem a fundamental doubt.  
Naive indeed it would be to rule out  
the constant danger that our higher mission  
could be co-opted into mere transition  
from one piffling state of emergency  
to the next--all in the name of "liberty."  
But that way we go nowhere. Onward then!  
Let those of us who will be loyal men,  
ordained executives, go execute,  
freeing us for the manifest pursuit  
by which we seek our problem, not below,  
but in the altitude to which we grow.

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

*Therapy*

If you want to rid yourself of reasonable suspicion  
Lock yourself in behind a million doors  
In an upstairs bedroom of the Heavenly Jerusalem  
Making sure not to let any of your pets escape  
You'll get used to the ring-doves cooing  
And crapping all around your bed  
And to the aroma of stale cat food

Keep the lukewarm tea of faithful eroticism at hand  
Taking a sip at least once every seven years  
Don't wash and don't change the sheets  
And if you have to eat eat your heart out  
On no account should you tamper with the cobwebs  
Accumulating in the rib-cage of your lover  
Though you can amuse yourself by poking out the eyes  
On the photographs of rivals littering your night table  
If you masturbate keep a tight check on your fantasies  
And record them carefully in your diary

After a few decades of this you'll find  
That the skeleton in the closet has fleshed out a bit  
And that your clothes have become immaterial  
When a great white beard forms on your lover's dusty skull  
And your cats have populated every inch of floor space  
And the walls are completely red with lipstick marks  
Giving your ghostly posterity your menstrual history  
The time will be close for the last operation

Take a piece of strong thin wire  
And wind it in tight spirals around  
The fourth finger of your left hand  
After all those years of strict discipline  
The swelling won't be too painful as you near the tip  
And your ring will drop easily onto the floor

Then take your last match and set fire  
To the diary and the photographs and turn off  
The heat under the tea-pot and thread your way  
Through the mass of caterwauling animals toward the closet  
And shut that door behind you too

If afterward you should still hear faintly the sound  
Of prolonged clattering on the great golden roof  
Pay no attention: You are safe  
From the multitude of keys  
Raining out of the dangerously brightening clouds

--written 1972, revised 1980, published in *Deliberately Faulty Balcony:  
Woman in Cheektowaga* (1973)

*From the Mouths*

The dictionaries of praise I'm forced to rely on!  
Compiled by blond spaniels their tongues hanging out for you  
Their huge eyes watery with imbecile candor

Not that I too don't gape at you occasionally  
Or smear your preciousness in my sores but at least  
You cant make me guarantee myself forgiveness

There is no word for your bones there is only  
A tedious list of makeshift synonyms for pity  
*Too bad* can only be spoken in ironical tones

Language has taken advantage of your sweet tongue  
Powerless I watch the reaction to my translations  
A licking of lips as though for more soup

It would be tempting to dwell unhealthily on the fact  
That you have nice saliva or even to invent deformities  
Wax lyrical (say) about your hemorrhoids

But garbage is no more human than chrysanthemums  
In the ledger books of indulgence even the cruelty  
I sometimes urge upon you leaves all in the black

Where are your eyes? where is the chalice to hold  
Your politeness or the page to commemorate your gallantry?  
Even the unlikely hiding-places have been claimed by cripples

Words words words--thank heaven the world is called hostile  
Its visible surface covered with blades I can use  
To cut your name from the foul mouths of others.

--written 1970, revised 1980, unpublished

*Nocturne Macabre (after a print by Kunisada)*

He thinks of her ultimate shape as of something almost theoretical,  
to be sought in some drafty pavilion of the heights where moonlight  
haloes a couch of silver--and-black brocade that awaits him.  
One night in autumn, on its formal coverlet, he goes to rest  
naked on his back, unblanketed thighs sprawling and arms  
flung wide, intent on lubricity even if the wind on his skin  
is a trifle cold.

No howls of beastly yearning outside  
surprise him, for they're appropriate to the colossal needs that he  
anticipates as well as to the easy generosity with which he plans  
to appease them. He simply strips back his foreskin and concentrates  
on what stirs in his groin. It is the last deliberate action  
he can manage, what follows being no more controlled  
than the abrupt gust that slams open the door.

She stands unfleshed,  
a pale diagram in the black of the gateway. Her vacant eyes  
and trusting grin reassure him that she looks to him for everything.  
He finds himself overcome by a pitying affection much greater  
than he had reckoned with, while she advances spreading her radial  
arms and flings her twenty pounds of faded bone on his body,  
wind oozing from her cavernous skull like chill  
honey.

Kissing her temples, he will nuzzle a polished shell  
and hollow as flutes her shins lie along his thighs, her kneecaps  
two medallions dropped on his belly. Then when her arms  
meet to form their tibial tongs behind his neck,  
her desperate lightness will *shock* him into gasps and wheezes  
and he will reach up to pull down to his breast her breast,  
a whitened basket leaking air.

Very likely that will be all  
the compassion he musters. But even if not--if he could feel,  
cobble by cobble, the ridgepole of her spine, until his hands  
are cupped above her sacral triangle and his knees  
persuade the lattices of her legs apart, and if  
his cock, upon finding that more than ample berth inside  
the calcium dry tunnel of her pelvic hole, could thrust  
against a vague storm its filaments of white cloud--



even if his royal, spilth could all by itself transform  
and return to her hollow ribs their sticky sponge for breath  
or swill fresh blood throughout her formal scaffoldings,  
charm pupils in her sockets, or smutch all the *etceteras*  
between her outlines until a radiant She lies smiling  
between his arms, yet would she leave him in windy morning.

In windy morning he wakes to seek the death he undid by night.

--written 1971, revised 1980, unpublished

*Next*

In my next life I will be beaten and burnt.  
I will be a success and smell God. I will  
comprehend the blessing of sleep by resisting it,  
beget children without regret, and murder  
(if I must murder) without compunction.

You will meet me,  
as though in a prior life, saying: Don't I know you?  
You are innocent. Your good luck has no meaning.  
God is forgetting you. Wake up. Let it go.  
The resurrection was yesterday. Your favorite was faithless

How much do I have to hurt you?

--written 1985, published in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

*Chekhov*

When she says she feels like a girl in Chekhov,  
I feel she's going too far.  
Those people spoke a much too peculiar language.  
"Whose compatriot," I tell her, "do you think you are  
to cry in your private cipher conned  
from Garnett's Oxford prose  
which Chekhov would no more understand  
than I some *muzhik* brute or those  
no less material Bolsheviks  
not redeemed in his stories  
who rendered Chekhov obsolete for all time?"

"Stalin making like a seagull would have more rhyme  
or reason than you claiming to hear the ax  
in your orchard. The very ideal!  
Consider how weird you would seem  
in a droshky in the Crimea,  
tossing tampons or Norman Mailer paperbacks  
in the street, moping with your New England drawl  
for Moscow as though for San Francisco."

I hoped I had said enough.  
Chekhov's people are not after all  
appropriable. You may feel for them—  
that translates--but they don't resemble you  
any more than Huckleberry Finn.

If anybody thinks they really do,  
I think I'm a drunken Cossack who,  
after firing on a mob on command,  
confesses to his monk in idiomatic Russian,  
moist-eyed among balalaikas, how he can't  
understand what that American gypsy  
(and moreover such a beauty)  
was doing among the hysterical riffraff  
whom he shot in the way of duty.

What could she expect, when it came to that?  
I'm sorry for her. I could wish I were Russian.  
The compassion is never wasted, but the pity is.

--written 1983, unpublished

*Teaching the Lesson*

--for Irving Feldman

Two boys are fighting, a big and a little.  
Countless boys make a circle around them.  
The scrappy little one gives a good account

but at last the big one knocks him cold,

stomps on his groin and kicks him in the head.  
The whole circle gasps. What to make of it?  
Feebly the little one whimpers and is kicked again

and again, till an angry little boy leaves the circle

to give the big boy something to repeat.  
When that one whimpers at his tenth boot-in-the-face,  
will the third little boy's enthusiasm fade,

and will the tenth have learned the lesson?

Are there enough boys in the whole circle?  
It may be an endless circle of little boys.  
If only the big boy got tired of fighting,

or better, got tired of winning, even over

whatever unlikely big boy remains in the circle.  
If any winner must behave like a winner  
till there's no boy left to lose to him,

the boys in the circle must face him,

one by one and all together,  
until he either gives over  
or teaches them all the lesson.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Among School Kids*

As one of our poets said: "Put on  
knowledge with power." Do it right and  
do it quickly. Our primary schools

teach one thing only: how to learn.  
To the children we say, "There's one thing  
more important than to learn something:

to learn it very fast. We love it  
when you finish, but we love it more  
when you finish in plenty of time.

When your lucky number comes your way,  
you better have learned to count that far.  
When the great weapon drops in your lap,

you better have ready a sheath to  
receive it. When the last word flashes  
across the heavens, it will flash so

briefly that only the fastest eyes  
will catch a glimpse, and of these only  
the fastest heads will have enough time

to decipher it, and among these  
only the fastest hands will know how  
to act in time." Look at these kids now.

You can't not love the little hammers!  
Not all are happy. But all their eyes  
shine more brightly with each school year.

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

## SHAKESPEHEARIAN RAGS

*Tribute*

“One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.”  
Tired myself from grading Shakespeare themes  
Browsing am, Berryman, through *Love & Fame*  
Me too a prodigal struck by the sty he’s in

Number one student thought Shakespeare’s line  
Translated to (believe this?) *One good feeling makes all men brothers*. O fabulous deal!  
Pearls in their mouths must look like teeth to swine.

Me, struck thus, felt how a gulf between me  
And student in mere terms of intelligence  
Inestimable was—his so clumsy stencil  
Offended my so-long-ago-earned sense of clarity

So greatly, me positively grunted. Now me is reading  
You, Berryman, John, suicide who thinks  
What intellectual tooth soever he let me sink  
Into the he of him must to me seem talent exceeding

What great price ever I on myself place. In short  
I so feel before the presence stupid which enters  
At my ear, that all attention in me centers

On the mouth of I-who-hear-myself-snort:  
“Is intelligence such a pearl and a curse?  
Fool I may be. But I can imagine worse.”

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*An Impediment*

Loving may be something. Love is not.  
Love, which alters when it alteration  
finds, finds nothing more than it has got—  
less than nothing: love's annihilation—  
finds desire, finds the lack of lacks,  
wails whatever wishing be about,  
sees disaster, stops dead in its tracks,  
picks the burden up and bears it out.

Never ever married that to this:  
no man ever loved, no woman ever.  
Falsehood is: saying of love "It is,"  
witless love that makes desire clever,  
that must lose all fact that falsehood finds.  
Love is less than marriage of true minds.

--written 1985, unpublished



*Twisting the Bard*

Alright then, once more through the hoop, *da capo*.  
It isn't me, it isn't you who speaks.  
Love alters not with our brief hours and weeks,  
though whoso tries to fix it is Gestapo.  
What forces near-verbatim repetition  
to seem not *déjà vu* but *de rigueur*  
is neither your nor my first *cri de coeur*  
but love's conjecture at our joint condition.

Where does this leave us? Whether in the lurch  
or in the clover of our easy life,  
we're safe enough. It's like going to church  
when you're an atheist: the nave is dark,  
but through the stained-glass windows, like a knife,  
love's wandering star glints for each wandering bark.

--written 1982, unpublished

*Variation on a Theme by Drayton*

Cancel your irrefutable complaint,  
abort your irresistible attack,  
relax your inescapable restraint  
and take your direst imprecations back.  
You're right, you know you're right, you know he knows.  
He's fooled you badly and he's felt the guilt.  
He made an awful promise, yet he goes  
and, after all the pleasure, plays the jilt.

An anticlimax? A catastrophe?  
Well, that depends upon one's point of view,  
doesn't it? Everything changes once you see  
another alter, and he sees--not you.  
What? break the never-to-be-broken vow?  
forget the unforgettable? Yes, now.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*As You Like It*

1

The poet of adjustment answers all  
that can be answered unto those unable,  
or worse, unwilling to repress their gall  
seated at life's meagerly furnished table.  
He finds huge ecstasies in sparseness, thrums  
abandoned on his single hard-won string  
and sings of miracles in poisoned crumbs,  
sermons in stones and good in everything.

His audience grows, their space remains the same.  
The crumbs get smaller and each stumbling-stone  
teaches that bliss is nothing but a name  
for the greed that some men feel when others groan.  
He squares the circle of the insatiate skies--  
for in that circle every fool is wise.

2

The poet of abandonment begins  
where you or I might end. What we call modest  
life-handicaps he calls original sins.  
He's always tragical. Show him the oddest  
assortments of mere foibles, he envisions  
the most disastrous failures of the soul--  
and all disasters are, for him, decisions.  
He calls what we call luck, loss of control.

We must abandon him and, of course, we do.  
He would abandon us, if we did not.  
Nursing his private humors, he'd construe  
space without measure, time without a plot,  
since in his own space he is king of hearts  
and one man in his time plays all the parts.

3

The poet of abridgement, never tired  
of stripping speech of unbecoming clutter,  
becomes at last exhausted and is mired  
in his own junk-yard of laconic sputter--  
sits on his hands and bites his tongue and chokes  
his breath back rather than permitting time  
to take from words or pictures he evokes  
redundant meaning or distracting rhyme.

When stuck for words, he rather likes the feeling,  
and hates, being stuck in words, their latent sense.  
His soul is manifest in his concealing  
each cause that gives only his soul offense.  
Nothing stops him. Nothing makes him admit  
omittance is no quittance. He *has* quit.

4

The poet of antiquity, like me  
or you, knows no one hears him nowadays.  
Not now. He finds some kind of guarantee  
in this that he will never slide in ways  
of instant fortune. *This* one understands.  
And also that posterity is men  
inexorable all in their demands  
for audience as great as his. But then--

unlike myself, or you--he will go on  
humming, until his voice or lungs go flat,  
what he believes he knows of all who're gone  
for good, for everyone, for now--and *that*  
no-one can understand unless he's whirled  
in constant service of the antique world.

5

The poet-of-atonement's one ambition  
is to make you take pleasure in his scorn.  
"Contriteness," says he, "isn't quite contrition,  
and while one lives, the other can't be born.  
Believe me, I'm on your side, but I see  
me miserable, you all satisfaction.  
Were both of us damned to eternity,  
what lip were quick enough for so much action?"

But poets of atonement should be humble.  
Each little bit should please them. So take heart:  
trip them with facts. They are content to stumble.  
It makes them feel good to be torn apart,  
to ask: "Am I so old? Are you so young?  
What passion hangs these weights upon my tongue?"

*Epilogue*

If the poet of aversion  
and addiction's poet could  
cut, without animadversion,  
equal shares of sacred wood;  
if the poets of attrition  
and accretion got along,  
art would be in mint condition,  
each song purchased for a song.

Poets both of clear affection  
and of cloudy affect fear  
if all fits, there's no connection.  
Songs are rare if art is dear.  
There's much virtue in an if:  
If you're limp, you can't be stiff.

--written 1982, unpublished

SILVAE

*Haiku (for Irving Feldman)*

The distinguished raindrop  
spends his whole short life  
acknowledging applause.

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

*Ah, Cricket!*

Ah, cricket! You like  
to keep up friction.  
That's why you croak so quick.

Be today's milk  
tomorrow's clabber,  
you keep your racket up

I heard. a flapper cricket  
cry *Whoops!*  
*do me no harm*  
*good man!* but

she was already  
edging her rear end  
toward your diction

--written 1967, revised 2008, published in *Anonym* (No. 5/6, 1970)



*To a Mask of Fear*

Your look of abject terror makes me smile.  
It's so extreme, what artist could have made you?  
I hope whatever frightens you so much  
is not as trivial as I think.

Otherwise, were I as pop-eyed as you  
and had learned no better manners than  
to drop my jaw like that at every  
little thing that's truly unfamiliar,

I would either preen myself on my ability  
to tell you so, or I would sing  
out of a constant torment of the senses, see  
out of an apocalypse of understanding.

As it is, I think my smile would quickly fade  
were I to nail you up in some usual place,  
where you would hang day after day,  
a decorative grimace, till I die.

Lets say that, in the eternal second before my heart  
stops for keeps, I would catch your eye.  
Let's say that then I would truly smile  
and not, I hope, imagine you are smiling.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Black Wedding (A Puppet Play)*

Hoo! Hocus pocus! Cockadoodledoo!  
Rise, Mother Hell! Here is a mate for you.  
Do you refuse? I warn you, I'll descend  
and drag you upward till the bitter end.  
Hoo! I'm Homunculus, Microcosmic Man:  
show me the hugeness where I first began.  
Must I use force? Show me--I'll take no maybes.  
I conjure you by all your countless babies.  
If of our offspring more than one be evil,  
be I their genius. Woman, you're a devil!  
Each time I name you, you must be beside me,  
much as your nature cannot long abide me.  
Quick, sign our pact and cancel nature out.  
I'll show you presently all I'm about.  
You deem the terms dishonorable to you?  
If I thought that, I'd beat you black and blue.  
No promissory note in blood, please. Write  
in ink--I want this one in black and white.  
If you insist I too must sign . . . of course!  
Only in you ride my winged horse:  
I do believe you have a devilish wit,  
but trust mine penetrates deeper than it.  
While I can feel our compact is uneven  
I'll ever see some trap-door into heaven;  
and if I (hocus pocus!) don't--ah well,  
I'll do it your way and come down to hell.  
You pledge me then your score of years, agreed?  
I offer you my breath, my blood, my seed.  
Eternal Parent, hear! We wait for you!  
Hocus pocus! Hoo! Cockadoodledoo!

--writtenca. 1981, unpublished

*The Hoopoe*

Nature is brooding. Let her rest.  
Don't poke into her hoopoe's nest.  
Although her plumage still is bright,  
her gloom won't let you sleep at night,  
but make you start, each time you think  
of her brute purpose and her stink.

But keep your hope under control,  
do not insist that she have soul,  
wait till her progeny obey  
her call into the brilliant day,  
and you will find, despite her fall,  
that she is royal after all.

She wears a gaudy, feathered crown.  
Speed is her kingdom. Her renown-  
joyless, compelling no belief-  
shines in each tongueless cry of grief.  
Loss, like a splendid garment, drapes  
the chosen victims of her rapes.

Nature is not a gentle bride,  
though all her golden sons have cried,  
"We were her daily food before.  
We live again. We are no more."  
Her golden sons are still her food.  
Nature is resting. Let her brood.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*The Heaven of the Anxious*

The great reputations converge  
on the source and do it homage,  
  
expressing themselves in a sign  
language peculiar to the source,  
  
and because each pious gesture  
redeems a death of the source,  
  
it returns to life, a great  
long-misunderstood reputation,  
  
ready to take on all comers  
in the urgency of a pilgrimage  
  
to the gathering place of sources.

--written 1981, published in *Deliberately Faulty Balcony: The Last Five Can't Leave*  
(1982)

*Two Puppets*

The smile on that puppet  
humping that other puppet  
is the smile I want  
when I start stopping  
to want it all

I'll smile with my eyes open,  
she'll smile with her eyes open,  
each looking all the way `  
into a different space.  
We'll have enough.

If that puppet raises one eyebrow,  
it's with a kind of vaudeville resignation  
over the silly red of its nose.  
But of course it is humping that other puppet.  
For now that's all it wants.

--written ca. 1979, unpublished

*Vala*

The puppet with the patch across his eye  
hauls Mistress Woman-of-the-Town to tea.  
The Gretchen doll, her hand upon the thigh  
of pug-nose Punch, calls for the maitre-de.  
The marionette of suicide, his face  
agoggle with the aspirins he took,  
sits openmouthed and stupid in his place,  
scarce crediting the things the high-strung cook  
has flung upon the banquet board today:  
a frozen amber tea which no one sips  
and pea-sized muffins of papier maché  
The red-tuxedoed bellboy curls his lips.

The puppet prince, his tin-foil breast-plate dented,  
his black tights dusty in their velvet nap,  
sits arms akimbo on his throne, his scented  
one-square-inch napkin spread out on his lap.

The *Marionetten*-Anthem plays, and how  
the one-eyed bandit doll fixes his grip  
around the ermined wooden neck, how now  
faces hold grimaces though lacquers chip.  
Now Punch will slyly fondle Gretchen's hand,  
and now the leering devil puppet clunks  
his club foot underneath the table and  
calls for his meal of suicides or monks.  
The puppet *abbé* with the bluish frown  
and chin on hand is something pale at that.  
What touch can smooth his long disheveled gown,  
straighten his black beret or white cravat?

My mother, god of puppets, was moved  
so much by their great intensity, she chose  
her son for puppeteer. He let them know  
she baked their stone cakes, sewed their tiny clothes.

--written ca. 1979, unpublished

*Anima*

*--for Irving Massey*

She feels two-faced as a coin in a whirlpool of oracles.  
Her grief sees all futures aswim in her tears  
and her love is blind to retrospect.  
Because the source of her regret is not  
what she really regrets, does this mean  
she cannot be in love while she plummets toward love?  
She is eager to annul the question,  
though she fears that she will not remember  
the answer. Her faces close together  
like the halves of an oyster while she  
feels from within the old yearning for pearls.  
"Show me some," she cries, "but let them be  
more than the merest specks of sand and less  
all the same than the glints in a diver's eye."

--written ca. 1982, unpublished

*The Spectrum Stanzas*

1

These blue poppies  
have such a pronounced scent  
of wet cat you can almost see

the little beastie shaking  
from its white fur  
droplets that rattle on tin

still fitfully reflecting  
glimmers of blue  
summer lightning.

These gigantic ants.  
have folded their forelegs  
like Russian dancers

and will keep  
their blue turbans  
diligently

opulent and  
imperturbably  
erect.

The domesticators  
of blue summer lightning  
have no advantage over us:

They too might be stationed too high  
to tell the blue turbans of the ants  
from these blue kittens.



2

Under orange and black striped tiger lilies  
you will crouch and pounce, oh Sahib.

Bengal tiger only regains balance  
when all black pain has forsaken goat.

Gook of grass inside stomach  
stays for many hours gook of grass.

Orange sun took one last peek  
at universe of pain, oh Sahib-

not pain in dead red goat,  
which was your property, oh Sahib-

but pain in striped foot  
pierced by broken thorn

of him who will lick goat blood  
from hot orange black striped Bengal tiger whisker.

3

Most colors are a little yellow--  
at least I have to say so  
to thwart my ambition  
to catalogue the whole spectrum  
in the obvious order from infra to ultra.

I can see a whole rainbow of lemons  
being flung across the sky and falling  
to rot and moulder through seven natures  
and be reborn in the wings of finches  
or in a sunflower's heart.

Eating sunflower seeds may promote jaundice  
in those who are predisposed to jaundice  
but less so than swallowing a pound of precious saffron,  
which may in addition prove mortal.

Only because of the primary yellow  
in my eyes which I cannot see  
can I say that, as I grow older,  
more and more violets approximate shades of maroon.

--written 1975, unpublished

*Oriente*

My ten pennies gleam, tossed on ripples of sand.  
My two slim trees rise into crowds of finches chirping up! up! up!

and two of them do sail aloft gladly on parallel wings,  
skating over simultaneous bumps of my lower sky.  
The rising widening spirals overlap at look!

a piece of marzipan in a posy of hyacinths.  
This is my heaven.

From here my harmony ripples gently away  
across my ocean of cool satin  
with its little whirlpool

to my altar on which  
two juniper berries float in two dishes of milk.

My casual finger--does it not look ready to fish  
one of them out, as if to say "Let me toss it  
into my little phial of ruby blood"?

Look at the two dark lanterns I raise,  
rainbow windows under sable fringes  
that open on wicked, wicked thoughts  
of your flesh, my heaven.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Gesundheit*

*--for children, perhaps*

The humungous indistinct body  
looming in back of the nose snaps back  
straight to the single renegade point  
on its far aboriginal horizon  
where it hops on the hump of a flea-size camel  
a wee wee lumbering hairy balloon  
doubly doomed to go and grow  
in relentlessly miniscule increments  
toward the infinitely  
remote and immense  
intensely blue  
star-fire-vaulted  
oasis of Achoo.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Scholar*

In the end he found the ideal book  
Hidden in the wet grass  
Under a white birch,

Stooped in reverence to feel  
The velvet spine  
Gilt edge,  
Crickets loud in his ears.

Out of ancient wounds  
The birch tree spoke to him:

*Open it!*

After the yellowed wood-cut on the title page,  
Some smuggler or thief had (he saw)  
Scooped out all the leaves  
And put a dead mouse  
Where the text used to be.

He thought he would bury that animal.

--written ca. 1970, unpublished

*Riddle*

If one should speak of the source to the water  
which the source has forgotten, will the water  
be happy to know? If one should prattle  
to the source of the water which recalls  
only the vessel for source, will the source  
rejoice in the secret?

Even now  
as the vessel cracks and the water is troubled  
and the source nearly dry, the source  
may not thrill to gather the water back  
nor the water to be turned to the source.

Dark the source,  
secret the water.  
Answer the riddle, water,  
to let the source receive your answer!

--written 1984, published in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

*Allowing the Body of Fate*

*"If you can endure the anticipation of what's going to happen, anybody can write a book." --Carole Southwood*

When I look at the stars  
I'm in my kind of company.  
When I look at you  
I'm alone.

Everything about you tells me  
"Do something!"  
but I look at the star  
as if I were Yeats.

I think I'm really something  
even if I don't know what to do  
when every day erases the stars  
and I look at you.

I admit, I know, I don't  
have the stars in my pocket.  
It's not a good feeling  
but it's not a bad one.

Even under the shining sun  
I'm not alone while I pray  
"Let me be just  
or just let me be.

If I can't be an example  
let me be a warning  
or let me look inhuman  
if I'm not human."

If I am a pleasure to you  
let me be good to you.  
Let me look very bad to you  
If I am a pain.

--written ca. 1985, published in *Since When: Second Series* (1990)

*Some Trees*

There are some trees (and well we know 'em)  
Each as unlovely as a poem.

One vainly tries to hug a wall  
And scarcely seems a tree at all.

Another fingers at the sky  
As though something were solved thereby.

A third, "placed in a puzzling light,"  
Bares beauty without appetite.

In fact, there's often something wrong  
With any tree of fact or song.

Even loveliness is, after all,  
A dubious solace for the fall.

When something's right with what we see,  
We see a poem, not a tree.

--written ca. 1981, unpublished



*Dawn Song*

*--in memory of Hugh MacDiarmid*

1

Ye're boring., wee birds!  
Heard ye before and before!

So what if ye cawed your wee caws-  
And perhaps ye *did* caw caws  
The day me midder slid dawn

Dawn  
dawn—  
dawnward she slid,  
Your shadows there, wee birds,  
There as they were, wee ghosts,

When it was  
Me midder's jo came a-stormin'  
After her  
dawn  
dawn

But I'm sick of your shadows, wee souls,  
A-teasin' me in your ceaseless wee songs!

2

I use this silence to tell you this:  
A greater silence will come.  
Avoidance of rhyme will become a discipline.

The lesson having been mastered by all,  
The song we will hear will not be  
The song of birds.

Then we will know how much more  
Of pleasure or of pain  
There is in humblest music.

Meantime you have known  
How we must bear up  
Under that ceaseless twittering,

Even to imagining at times  
That we find a sort of song in it.

3

You would want me, I know,  
    to end on a positive note.  
What wouldn't I give  
    to hear you gleefully cackle  
after you call to me  
    the all-too-obvious reason  
why after all this time  
    the birds have really ceased singing:

The dawn is over!  
The working day has begun!

--written Summer 1979, published in *Pequod* (Winter 1980)

*Dirge*

I've always wanted to make gift of you  
To those without necessities.  
I would expect no return.

By chance I will now leave you behind,  
Nothing guarding you except the great fire  
Of all you're forgetting.

But if you died before me,  
If you died before, me tell my friends  
I have no more need of them.

I am an open book in the dialect of maggots.

--written ca. 1978, unpublished

SONNETS-COME-LATELY

*The Make-Work in the Making*

How are you making out? Not all that well?  
Ah well, the Maker's will must be obeyed.  
If you don't make it, you can have it made.  
Why don't you let me make it for you? Hell,  
all that you need to do is make believe  
I'm just not there, will never make a diff.  
(You make one either way.) Furthermore, if  
I am, or will, how could I make you grieve?  
And when you make away with me, would this  
mean I make way for your triumph? You bet.  
Make a good job of me and you're all set,  
for I'll make hay with things you'd never miss,  
trash that would make you sick, such made-up stuff  
as makes ends meet but never is enough.

You bet. Let me make book on you: the odds  
are even we will make a splendid splash  
or make a mess. And, of the two, you're rash  
to guess that one makes sounder sense. The gods  
make things out otherwise. Admit it took  
the making of your world to make you see  
you don't make it--our noise or mess may be  
the thing to make us take another look.  
If making love is making trouble, I  
make trouble--but, you understand, without  
having it in for you while making out.  
No, no. Humiliation makes me cry.  
Make me the joker. Make me disappear.  
Make light of my obscurity. Don't hear.

Of course you don't. I make no bones about  
making this public, since you make as though  
there were no me to do so. Make-shift show  
is make-shift woe. And if the truth were out,  
you'd find I'm making merry, in my way,  
making the best of being bested, making  
zero make peace with zero, taking  
my make-up off, saying in public: "Hey!  
Look at your maker. We two make a pair--  
he's making like a human even as I  
make like a god. But look! here is a guy  
who makes it seem like neither is quite there"  
(and here I point to you making a face  
unmade-up and undone) "--what a disgrace!"

What a disaster! Make one complete man  
and let him speak: his first word will make two,  
four, eight, etcetera. Life is making do  
with all who make fools out of those who can  
make up their beds and lie in them. But me--  
let me make you think it again--I don't  
make too much difference. It is my wont  
to make molehills of mountains. Don't you see?  
I would make trash of you if I made sense.  
The make-up of our mechanism screams  
to make laws for the most anarchic dreams.  
Abracadabra: enemies make friends--  
and you and I make motions to discuss  
what makes a quorum: you, or me, or us.

Suppose we make the news, get on the air,  
you making one side heavy, me the other.  
How to make terms with all, sister or brother?  
Make it appear that there was no one there?  
I'm on the make, though--and you make pretense  
you may be making more than empty speeches.  
Ah, our not making friends certainly teaches  
us both that making makes a difference.  
So there we be. Of chance making a skill,  
the Maker's will will ever be obeyed,  
make waves, make time, make room, make tracks, make way--  
till, in the end, everyone makes his will  
which, if you cannot make it out, just say  
you made it up. I know you've got it made.

--written 1989, unpublished

*From the Miami Workshops*

If this were a dramatic monologue  
the baffled wisdom of your yellowing years  
might cut a figure in it. *Bitter Tears*  
*for Long-Dead Spouse Triggered by Death of Dog.*  
If it were a confession, some few wise  
readers might cleverly catch you out revealing  
more than you meant to. *Atrophy of Feeling*  
*Ascribed to Alcohol, Lack of Exercise.*

But it is not and it is not. Conviction  
tries every sentence much too hard. *Back Pains*  
*from Television, Pensioner Complains.*  
Too vague for fact. Too commonplace for fiction.  
Yet you keep fiddling with it, brooding on it.  
*Word-Whittling Therapy Advised.* This is your sonnet.

--written ca. 1990, unpublished

*Shame On Us Faulty Rhymers*

*--for John Barth*

The subject's wonderful? Then why not *say*  
*she* is? The subject is embarrassed? So,  
let us refrain from blurting out today  
what will be obvious tomorrow. No  
wonder can last nine days that will not last  
nine years in the proverbial drawer, staying  
out of the floodlights till the flood be past.  
Our object must be praising, not betraying.

Yet if reflection on the subject shows  
(which causes wonderstruck admirers pain)  
that she is almost never justly praised,  
the rush to judgment *is* the flood and glows,  
however much the subject may complain,  
through all our praise like a great blush, God knows!

--written ca. 1990, unpublished



*At the Suggestion that Some Taboos May Be Violated without Corresponding Breaches of Decorum, the  
Sonneteer Attempts to Discredit His Entire Calling*

*--for John Coetzee*

A sonnet about fucking isn't easy.  
I've tried often enough, but not succeeded  
(to write of it, I mean). Men are made queasy  
seeing their penile trumperies paraded,  
and women get to feel a trifle odd--  
invaded, used. It's not just "kiss and tell."  
That can be easily done, e.g. "My rod  
was raised, her furrow blessed, and ding dong bell!"

But afterglow and foreplay are not it.  
Octave and sestet are not cunt and cock.  
Somehow it's boring to have Priapus sit  
as model for a form carved from a block.  
Mere coupling always makes a couplet dull.  
A fucking sonnet is impossible.

--written ca. 1990, unpublished

*Be This the Theme?*

How beautiful it is to know your mind  
and to be rid of all the clouds of self:  
to see that all you seek is what you find  
when you have put your ego on a shelf  
where anyone may know it--that there's room in  
each frustrated desire for a second sight  
of what it means to be completely human.  
Nothing is wrong, and everything is right.

And yet, how ugly to deny your heart  
and to include it in a force which smothers  
compassion--knows itself and keeps apart  
forever all your misery from the others'.  
Is this the theme of every human song?  
That nothing's right, and everything is wrong?

--written ca. 1990, unpublished

*Unworthy*

I feel unlovable. That's a cliché,  
I know--but what's the use? I drink too much,  
I like to sleep. Why not? I sleep okay.  
I think too much, and I don't think too well.  
I touch myself and hardly feel the touch.  
I smell myself and I don't like the smell.  
I owe myself a death that I won't pay.  
My life's a basement bargain I can't sell.

My job's a bore, my wife's a stranger, my  
religion is a myth I can't believe in.  
I frown at all the faceless passers-by.  
I smile at mirrors and I see a smirk.  
My shirt is dirty. Who would change it? Even  
undoing shoelaces seems too much work.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Motto*

Whatever loves you speaks to you as fact:  
I make a sign. Already you translate.  
Whatever words I speak now come too late:  
Sounding like yours, they slowly turn abstract.  
Nor can the fiercest empathy exact  
Your loved one's interest in your common fate.  
At sixes and sevens, he must contemplate  
The myriad actions in his single act.

Our own love baits the snare. We mouth the bait  
And choke on multitudes when we cry *Thou!*  
Image encumbers image: You learn how  
Each human love endures the ghostly weight.  
But for the countless other selves you meet,

--written ca. 1995, unpublished

*At the Bottom*

1

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

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

2

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

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

--written 1982, unpublished

*Children in a Graveyard*

They arrived yesterday. Already they  
are used to darkness and the balmy smell.  
They like the rules. ("Just listen for the bell.  
Day is for sleeping and all night for play.  
Tell no one of the sights you see.") The sound  
of curfew summons them as though by name.  
Eyes wide as saucers, they begin their game,  
tiptoeing two by two from mound to mound.

Thrilled by a life that stirs under the ground,  
palms meeting damply as the tocsin tolls,  
they stare upon the loosening soil and squirm  
if something moves. At last they dance around,  
ecstatic, while each hole enfolds its worm,  
or shriek when worms come rippling from their holes.

--written 1982, unpublished

*Epicoene*

Their rage, impossible to utter, grows  
into the sign by which they pick their friends.  
The more they choose, the more everyone knows  
the lexicon of their transcendent ends:  
discipline, righteousness, swift justice, power,  
the single cause to own allegiance to,  
the stern preparedness for a crucial hour,  
the word to kill for and the thing to do.

Their enemy has all the pleasure. So?  
Her wrath is scattered in her wild words till  
she revels in the nothing of her will.  
But they are always impotent. And know.  
Neutral as oxygen and clean as hate,  
they feed the common fury which is fate.

--written 1982, unpublished

*Bald Mountain Crap Game*

Seven is the sacred number:  
six days needed to create  
and a seventh to encumber  
all that's made in one debate.  
Whether one or two be better  
needs a third one to decide--  
fourth the spirit, fifth the letter,  
sixth the groom, seventh the bride.

Feminines are never seven  
unless they're virtues or vices.  
It's the extra one that's heaven.  
Cast sixes on any dice,  
it's the extra that entices.  
Snake's-eyes isn't good but nice.

--written 1981, unpublished



*At Sixes and Sevens*

I think you think I love you? You are right.  
You know you think you love another man--  
and know I know. You rush at your desire.  
He's your way out, and you are my cliché.  
You are my frying pan and he your fire.  
If we can't have lost love, then no one can.  
Lost love is heat for me, for you it's light--

and as for loss, what is it? who can say?  
Joining the other is a metaphor  
makes me begin to dance, makes you begin  
to act the blazing victim in a play.  
He is your hero, you my heroine.  
Love must be vain. I dance you to the door  
and join with others as you whirl away.

\*

You love him (don't you?) in more daring style  
than she could ever who's his only fair.  
For him you would do violence to your soul.  
What more could she do than she's always done?  
Nothing for him. While you strive to control  
all care for him, she simply doesn't care.  
Her only gift an enigmatic smile--

she's finished with him. You haven't begun.  
If you began to tell with sobs and wails  
how all desire is only misery,  
he'd ape her smile and answer, with a pun:  
"My only fair is only fair for me.  
Though you be mine till all desire fails,  
she is my prize because she won't be won."

\*

He loves her hopelessly. She gives no sign  
of feeling the least weight of hopelessness,  
but turns her back on him without reply,  
like someone drawn by an invisible wire.  
"Who is the rival I'm outwitted by?"  
he shouts, seeing her silhouette regress  
into a crowd of silhouettes that shine

through hers as bodies shine through their attire,  
then she is gone . . . If any of us the while  
told him whom she was loving now and where,  
he'd feel compelled to cry out loudly, "Liar!"  
and stare beyond us with a baffled air,  
fearing that his great love must learn the guile  
of all our lesser loves or else expire.

\*

For she loves all of us alike and we,  
the headstrong heroes of her favorite tales,  
love all alike by acting all one role,  
twisting whichever way her story goes  
to change our parts in our lust for a whole.  
We flee the one fate that her love entails:  
not to be joined with others, but to be

ourselves--and we become ourselves, she knows,  
only by blazing out contrary trails  
to those that she has reached us by. Thus she  
becomes the mercy that we must oppose  
(we know the measure of her love and flee),  
becomes the law that weighs us in the scales,

\*

Somehow we love you all: you who have been  
baffled enough and you who yearn for more,  
whom hunger hurls to folly or makes wise,  
who vow for keeps or who break every vow  
for love. Be it your hell seems paradise  
so long as your desires bolt the door,  
or heaven seems hell while banishing the sin

of wanting more than heaven can give--somehow  
we're forced to love you as you are, to plan  
our lives as though some day you will requite  
our loves. We doubt the likelihood--but bow  
or dance before your image and recite  
your favorite text: "Praise we the image of man,  
though it seem golden calf or sacred cow!"

\*

We love you as you are, while you love those  
who scorn all selves you have embraced till now.  
To us their arms are vacant with surmise  
of all you've done that they will never do.  
To you their open arms are needles' eyes  
through which you glimpse the lives you miss.  
You vow to choose the modes of happiness they chose.

Your lines of vision thread their points of view.  
While you feel loved, they show you how to shun  
all single points where selfhood fades away,  
and by their scorn they teach you to pursue  
perishing hopes in your vanishing day.  
They are so many, you cannot be one--  
your selves the wars of all you love with you.

--written 1992, unpublished

*Two to One*

Maybe I have no luck to link what I  
Can think to some significant other's way  
Of thinking. Maybe I lack the will to buy  
Into an other's knack for saying what I say.

Mabybe I'm fated to go on like this alone,  
Clueless, until I see, at my last gasp,  
Nothing but me, and in the end to own  
That all I knew has been beyond my grasp.

Yet I'll at least have known your eyes, your skin,  
Your grief, your lust, your humor, by which you  
Signaled to me that I have somehow been  
Yours all this while, no matter what I do.

And may this be enough to show me I'm  
Alive when you are, not some other time.

--written 1995, published in *Deliberately Faulty Balcony: Compulsory  
Attendance* (2000)

*Two Little Nothings*

"Dullness may entertain a clever soul,  
but mine's not clever enough to yawp or smile  
when something makes no sense. The dimmest hole  
I like must have some light in it, else I'll  
seek to escape it altogether though  
to stay there be my ultimate reward.  
Cleverness makes me catch my breath and go  
For broke, but dullness chokes me like a cord."

"Look, I am something trite, stupid and dull.  
The light behind me makes me seem immense,  
but something from my awesomely pitiful  
darkness barks at you that I make no sense  
and never have and never will. Yes, never.  
I think denying me is very clever."

--written 1995, unpublished

*Fated Path*

I almost, dear, forgot: Here, take-the key  
to your old grief. Take your sorority ring  
("Pi Alpha Theta Before Everything").  
And look! Your original wooden nickell! See,  
dear, I remembered. Can I go now? We  
are not compatible enough to swing  
in the same club we met in. We can't sing  
the song of sixpence quite in harmony.

Oh, all your gifts were lovely, dear; their flavor  
is memorably woeful now. And I  
am glad, yea glad you never curried favor  
with any high or low or middle brow.  
It's just that you are not like me. That's why  
I'm saying this. That's why I'm leaving now.

--written ca. 1990, unpublished

*Ohime! il bel viso!*

Good heavens, what a face! What an expression!  
She walked as though all earth were conquered clay  
and talked to make you sad for all you say.  
Men leapt in silence for her least concession.  
And me (good heavens!) not to have had discretion  
enough to mark her bullet glance at play!  
She would be president of all today  
were it not now too late for this profession.

Such burning words! They mock, I think, your face  
but I have earned them. Having seen you once  
and lost you always, nothing could be worse.  
What words can burn, once I have lost your place?  
What pleasure flatters my most desperate stunts  
if the one rhyme the wind gives me is "curse"?

--written ca. 1994, unpublished

*Untitled*

You kiss my shoulder, and I am your minion  
until the feeling dissipates. But kiss  
my neck in token of your lost dominion,  
and I remain in bondage to that bliss  
until you kiss my mouth. Then I must fall  
into abject enslavement to your tongue  
until your tongue enunciates the name  
that I am vassal to--one word among  
a legion made me servile till you came.

I stand, I yearn, I lean toward you; and all  
you do to me is strengthening one claim.  
"I'll stay here till you turn away," I call.  
"Don't turn away. Don't tell me to be brave  
until you know another word for slave."

--written 1991, unpublished



*Prisoners of Conscience*

*--in memory of Porfirio Suni Quispe*

Would I could bring you back to all that I  
call misery, which you'd call happiness,  
I'm sure--my-ordinary child's distress,  
for instance, watching how my mother's eye  
dulls daily till she fails to recognize  
even my face and fades the brutal way  
of bone and flesh, and then my everyday  
disaster of discovering I'm not wise

or brave enough to bear this much. But you--  
would you not choose such mortal pangs when your  
tormentors come to test how you endure?  
My griefs are lucky. Horrible but true.  
They leave you cold and do not leave you cold  
by choice. Teach me how not to be consoled.

--written 1992, unpublished

*Quo Vadis*

*--Washington, 1982*

NERO! Thou should'st be living at this Hour!  
*America* hath need of Thee today.  
We are a Rock-of-Ages Church; we pray  
For Pow'r, and Heav'n doth always grant the Power.  
We've overcome the Arctick Bear, and our  
Women are seemly in th' American Way.  
Three Worlds crave Tribute we shall never pay.  
We're upright men and vigilant in our Tower.

Thou, NERO! hast the Gift to make us burn,  
To take us down to where the Secrets are,  
To let us feel the Triumph of the Star  
(In which we blaze) as ours. Do Thou turn  
Us onto Thy Wheel, NERO! Do Thou blow  
Us up to Spheres where all the Systems go!

*--written 1982, unpublished*

*West of Eden*

They stumbled into openness. The rain  
had stopped. Still squint-eyed from the forest, they  
threw down their packs to catch their breaths and scan  
the glistening green of one infinite plain.  
The children blinked, the woman stretched, the man  
undid his ploughshare. Later on that day,  
chanting an ancient reel, all danced around  
as much as they dared of the rain-damp ground.

The circle where their feet crushed out the flowers  
would be their fence, and everything inside,  
their sod. All night, with the kids sprawled out beside  
them sleeping, man and wife dreamt through the hours--  
she picking dry mud from the hem of her skirt,  
he scooping up small handfuls of the dirt.

--written ca. 1998, unpublished

*The American Dream*

Out of the shadows of our pains has risen  
our dream of solid and commodious ends:  
to make this land our home and not our prison,  
where we may greatly quarrel but stay friends;  
to make this history our own and no  
hackneyed rehearsal of the fate of others,  
in which even the direst hatreds go to prove  
to all it pays to act like brothers.

Such are our objects and they are in sight,  
ready to seem as obvious as our air,  
and all we need to conquer is our fright  
of making us a world of objects, where  
the shadows brighten as our pleasures fade  
and the dream is over when we have it made.

--written ca. 1998, unpublished

*Running On Empty*

First, all the women, more and more made proud  
to show no faces but some rising star's.  
Next, all the men, in recent-model cars,  
sleek-cheeked, cock-sure, clean-jawed and level-browed.  
And then the children, faces in a crowd  
before or after, who's to know? It jars  
the nerves to see a blemish, so all scars  
are judged obscene, indecent, not allowed.

Last, the election of the face of faces--  
confident, empty, schooled, without a blot.  
What if in some unmentionable places  
unmentionable voters rise to fall  
for saying: "How can anybody not  
see he's a liar?" So? Aren't we all?

--written ca. 1998, unpublished

*Adam's Curse*

1

With purple loose-strife crowding to the pump,  
the closed-down Mobil station swims in view.  
A boy in T-shirt and fatigues picks through  
tin cans and plastic in the nearby dump.  
He thinks the shop is spooked and eyes askance  
its crumbling black-top and its boarded door,  
shrugs, mutters "Keep on looking!", picks some more,  
finds something, grins, and does a little dance.

For what? It's nothing useful, and it's not  
good-looking either--just a hunk of rubble.  
Some voice is telling him: "This item's hot!"  
Same voice that told him once: "Stay out of trouble!"  
Sure thing: somebody's looking now. His heart  
jumps, and he runs. So labor flees from art.

2

A blonde lass in a linen smock is wading  
knee-deep in surf in sunlight by the docks.  
Dispatchers peer up from their bills-of-lading,  
gape, but don't see the poppies in her locks.  
She tears them out and flings them to the spume.  
Mist rises round her. She strolls homeward, braiding  
her salt-wet curls. The sober clerks resume  
checking consignments for United Trading.

Art flees from toil, knowing it is degrading.  
It fades from sight, from mind, and there exists  
nothing to halt its slow, relentless fading  
while one man gawks or winks or balls his fists  
at his investment running on the rocks  
and toes his line and sweats and minds the clocks.

--written ca. 1998, unpublished

*Wahnfried*

He settled down (that was one word for it)  
into a coma of success but knew  
the retroactive shock of failure too.  
Men called him an enigma. Not a bit.  
Dilemma was an apter name. He'd sit  
hearing some forest creature twit or coo  
while barnyard fowl shrieked cockadoodledoo:  
"Who is not simple is a hypocrite!"

Oh, all simplicity left him unimpressed,  
but discord made his harmonies increase.  
In the end, like Matthew Arnold, he finessed  
the last word: "Geese are swans and swans are geese."  
In contradiction was his place of rest.  
Peace from illusion. The illusion of peace.

--written ca. 1998, unpublished

*after cummings*

not like my body when it is with yours  
his body gets a zap from hers and zing!  
his muscle-tone improves his nerves get better  
not like your body what hers does insures  
(the proper button touched) the proper sting  
or shock or whatsit: O he knows the letter  
of her law though what she knows don't appear  
but certainly she's under him and BING

GO! here's a beaver shot of her and (*well*  
for decency) her eyes to kiss and here  
his body like he says quite new and O  
so plainly in the picture, eloquent, clear  
not like yours: you wriggle too fast to show  
not like mine: i get too tired to tell

--written ca. 1994, unpublished



*Lectura Dantis*

*--for Rachel Jacoff*

1

A single point? But where to fix it? In  
the eye, or (vanishing just out of sight  
as the attention sloughs off sweets of sin  
and total self-absorption seems alright)  
in all eyes canceling what the light remembers--  
color with never a stain, fire without  
all stink of smoke in its expiring embers,  
abstraction vanishing as it comes about?  
It is no problem and no paradox,  
just the bald statement of an obvious fact,  
to say I slide down slopes of ticks and tocks,  
and while I slide my energies contract  
to stars--time, space and speed wrenched out of joint.  
Pointless to postulate an only point.

2

*Leva dunque, lettore, meco la vista,*  
ride high on your imaginary horse,  
like Dorothy to Oz upon her twister,  
Your chiefest thrill: knowing you veer off course.  
*Per sodisfare al mondo che li chiama,*  
Your mount is ever altering his pace,  
rearing to make you feel again the drama  
of one cliché: the mind is its own place  
*Quanto per mente e per loco si gira,*  
you know and fall and feel the usual fright  
After you've fallen, everything is clearer/  
The steed you rode has merited the light.  
You land at home, ditched by that bucking bronco.  
*Or ti riman, lettore, sovra'l tuo banco.*

3

One book condemns all burning, though we burn  
with shame on reading it. Sadly we find,  
measure for measure and too late, we're born  
to turn ourselves and not the world around.  
The same book drowns our greatest griefs which stirs  
exquisite torments in the dubious mind.  
Each letter seals the very ground it scars--  
unraveled country, undiscovered bourn.  
The same book (as we read it) builds the stairs  
by which we circle out or in to learn  
how we and only we make that mankind  
which gives itself this gift, and no return.  
One book anticipates each shift of ground  
and shows at every change of heart the stars.

--written 1987, unpublished

*Earth News*

*I alone was left to tell my story. For it seemed that Time--the frazzled washer of his hands appearing to say so in a spectrum-bezeled space above hot water--Time would not.*

--James Merrill

1

The tablets with the marks of time impressed  
give daily notice how the world is lost.  
Their carbon ciphers crowd a palimpsest  
of headlines in the rock. Each holocaust  
projects more melting flesh in the concrete.  
Life glints unvanquished from the stones to state  
in all their fading traces: "Life is sweet  
even as it goes to press and takes a date.

"Take comfort, reader. Trust the editors.  
Extinction cannot countermand their flint,  
though sweetness of your human life, of course,  
will suffer emendation in the glow  
through which they make you news. Thank heaven they print  
not what you want to hear, but what they know."

2

The sweetest news will date. The very earth  
is daily edited into the void  
and every fine-cut imprint flames to birth  
in smudges on a future asteroid.  
Substantial flesh and unsubstantial ash  
clinging to stuff centrifugally hurled  
rush to the deadline day and in a flash  
release the face and faces of the world.

All past disasters qualify the light.  
A spectral analyst records the shocks  
of all astonished glances that once shone  
or phosphoresced in the retreating night.  
Galactic fires are the ghosts of rocks.  
Rainbows translate the features in the stone.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Ode To Science (Sunday. Faust's Laboratory.)*

1

My instruments lie idly all about.  
Indoors, a cricket chirrs; outdoors, a lark.  
Worlds too immense for the best eyes to take in  
or too minute for the keenest to make out  
are closed to me today, nothing to mark  
planets, stars, nebulae, black holes that spin  
beyond each pole, or, crowded on each pin,  
cell, helix, molecule, atom, neutron, quark.

The sun catches my tools and makes them shine.  
In all this dazzle I am in the dark,  
and all this silence is a Sabbath's shout  
for open ears. Oh, let me open mine!  
Between a bird's song and an insect's whine  
lies my whole scale from certitude to doubt.

2

Expense of labor in the void can win  
sure profit only if it can align  
an aggregate demand from the beyond  
with a utility for the within.  
The cricket shrills deep in its little mine.  
The lark sings high above its field or pond.  
Soon other larks and crickets will respond,  
each deaf to all but one peculiar sign.

But in my ear their signals blur their traces  
and all the Sabbath instruments combine  
to raise a tumult underneath my skin.  
The cosmic scale from entropy to stasis  
is neither quite replaced by nor replaces  
the human scale from rectitude to sin.

3

Long since the aboriginal Sabbath yawned,  
or long before the ultimate Sunday races  
to kingdom come, man either feels the spark  
of human sin, or waved the magic wand  
of human righteousness. Like an oasis  
in sand, the human scale, like Noah's ark  
afloat, irradiates all that once seemed stark:  
The bird's position as its song embraces

the light behind it, or the insect's snout  
needling the dark beneath it--both are graces.  
"O man" (is this a line in Shakespeare?) "fond  
Man, dressed in brief curiosity, you flout  
the only trick you cannot do without--  
singing immortally in a mortal bond."

4

Not Shakespeare's? Well then, it's my own remark.  
Sundays don't leave me quite unmoved. Without  
their short repose, what are we? For guilt like mine,  
what innocence is there else? And when the shark  
is more intense than the nightingale, when drought  
brings out the scorpion in the grasshopper, I dine  
on larks and crickets. Today, I decline  
to be fed with anything else. Oh, let me tout

my humanness as I ought. I am akin  
to all who can sleep easy in their doubt.  
As poets used to say, I whisper: "Hark!  
My whine proclaimed your park of gold was tin-  
but it stayed the jungle it has always been.  
Now I sing your jungle's scale--and it is your park."

--written 1983, unpublished (awarded Mason Sonnet Prize)

*Commedia dell' Arte (reading Walter Benjamin)*

When one is called out by what's likely to  
destroy oneself, another fills one's place,  
*loco parentis*, so to speak, his view  
salvation of, if not the soul, the face.  
Inevitably, as you read beyond  
the aphoristic fretwork to the pain  
beneath it, it seems useless to respond  
to grimaces with grimaces again,

unless by keeping firm the features while  
a formidable rictus grips the heart.  
Each other's pain is just . . . another's style.  
Remains no task except to stand apart  
from one's material. Failure in that task  
preserves the agony on another's mask.

--written ca. 1990, unpublished

*Day of Wrath*

I hate you. How I hate you all! who trash  
the dreams that animate my life, who've sent  
my loves into your rubbish heap, made ash  
of all my solaces for your content.

So why should you be safe? You know no better  
(I know) and (worse than that) you cannot see  
that you are damned if you apply the letter  
and not the spirit of your law to me.

Take care! Don't tread on me. It's not so easy  
to stop the judgment that I contemplate.  
The day is near and shows me what to do,  
and though it blast us all, I'll not be queasy.  
My hate will rise, though it may rise too late  
and blow me up even as it blows up you.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Fables*

1

The worm is not quite human, but it knows  
that dirt is good for its digestions. It  
digests dirt thoroughly, turning its prose  
into a sort of crumbly poem. Bit by bit,  
something more nearly human grows in slime.  
Lift any rock and see it. As the ants  
are rearranging space, the worms advance  
to sift the soil, thus re-inventing time.

Your foot is on a spade, digging a pit  
in earth rich with an age of toil. As you  
push through the wreck of petals, leaf-mould, grit,  
you're bound to cut some worms in two.  
Two segments tunnel in their separate dirts.

2

The mayfly is most innocent of all.  
Even as a nymph of nearly twenty springs  
she showed a modest appetite. Last fall,  
she found herself a sub-adult, with things  
almost like legs and tails, but incomplete,  
judged by they standard of her brilliant wings.

This dawn she hung by four of her six feet,  
the perfect mayfly of her day, who flings  
herself against the nearest wall of men,  
and flung herself in innocent delight  
against just such a wall . . .

Don't ask, "What then?"

Her day is passing. Now she understands  
mid-summer's warning and, rather than fight,  
sits on a greenish rock and wrings her hands.



3

The carp lives a great age because his way  
of clouding up the muddy bottom makes  
life difficult for gamer fish who prey  
in tepid ponds or brackish streams or lakes.  
To slough his eggs off in the sedgy shallows,  
he makes a shameless splashing when he breeds.  
At other times he merely basks and swallows,  
pompously gloating up among the reeds.

“These depths are mind, and I” (he daydreams) “am  
their stirrer-up of silt. I here frequent  
an element in which I can grow old.  
Here once less hardy, prettier specimen swam.  
But I have cousins in the Orient  
whose eyes are fire, and whose fins are gold.

4

The frog will squat for hours in a show  
of guilt contentedly in league with death--  
his greenish belly gives no hint of breath,  
his eyes like gems; toes, vines--then throw  
his lasso tongue around some innocent fly,  
gulp some more guilt and snort and reassume  
a gleaming posture of complacent doom,  
or waddle to some lily-pad nearby.

But let a crane soar overhead and he  
freezes, his pose signaling *No offense!*  
and should the crane swoop all the same, he lingers  
an instant more, then flip-flops till you see  
him belly up, his eyes all glazed, his fingers  
splayed in a show of total innocence.

5

The snake lies curled up in his little hollow,  
his little jaw pulsing along the seam.  
He'll bit off nothing more than he can swallow,  
yet he can swallow more than you would dream.  
He's passed through worms and yesterday he fed  
on larger, more sophisticated prey.  
He's taken on a medium toad today  
ten times the volume of his little head.

Go prod him with your boot--he rears and glares,  
his duck mouth flashing a quick puff of white,  
as though to hiss: "You've got big boots. Who cares?  
Maybe tomorrow . . .

But not yet. Not quite.  
Just give me time. I'll bite and swallow *you*.  
And more. Remember, I don't have to chew.

6

The gosling takes to water from the egg  
and never learns the wherefore and the why  
of what is tugging at its webby leg  
or what is staring at it from the sky.  
The mother goose is always found nearby  
until there's danger. Then something says *Yes!*  
and makes her flap downriver with a cry,  
a fine impersonation of distress.

Predator eyes, fixated on the mother,  
lose sight of her small, scarcely hidden brood.  
The likely seizure of a greater good  
makes little certain grabs not worth the bother.

The noisy mother splashes. Something dives.  
Her little one sits quiet and survives.

7

The brindled cow stands baffled in a puddle,  
her jaw arrested on a stalk in bud.  
She's heard something. Briefly her world's a muddle.  
She drops her mouthful, then resumes the cud.  
Her puzzled eyes gaze vaguely at the ground.  
Her blunted horns veer downward through the air.  
She wonders, not what she was doing there,  
but what seemed so familiar in that sound.

But she forgets and flounders back ashore  
to join her herd as if she had no choice.  
The sound is either not repeated or  
calls once again, in a more urgent voice:  
Where is the one I called to? Who is she?"  
And the whole herd starts rumbling: "Moo! Not me!"

8

The blond, nearly extinct and wordless farmer  
sloshed through the wetlands, squinted at the sun  
and went back to the work he had begun.  
Grass would be greener if the days grew warmer.  
Work would be harder if the days stayed cold.  
The days turned colder and his hair turned gray,  
and he began to talk a lot. One day  
he drowned and his whole plot of land was sold.

This is his land. And here's what people say  
who still remember him: "He was the last  
of a lost breed. When harvests failed, he'd fast,  
and when his hunger grew too strong, he'd pray.  
He used to plow with light and fruit for hire,  
and, when he feared the darkness, start a fire."

--written ca. 1990, unpublished

*The Survivors' Song and Sonnet*

Life is cocktail in a garbage dump  
and love's the maraschino.  
  Though our air  
is fouled by pipe and pump  from Bangor, Maine,  
to Reno,  
  we're for love and we don't care,  
So life and love occur somewhere.  
  Love's trump  
is best to play when the chips are down.  
  The sky  
's the limit--why  
  complain it shows a stain?  
Let's paint the town.  
  Tomorrow we will die.

What though our water's dirtier every day,  
if we feel clean while we are kissed.  
  We're glad  
That we don't know  
  some other, loveless way  
where dead men say  
  they miss what's ages ago  
been missed.  
  The water's tainted? So?  
  We'll add  
A lemon twist  
  or a teaspoon of Pernod.

--written 1997, unpublished

*Naked Poetry*

Rhyme struts in ruffles; reason, in the buff.  
Stuck in stiff Levis, rhyme would wipe the floor.  
In a bikini reason seems a whore.  
Yes, less is more. And too much, not enough.  
Still, next the skin, need everything be rough?  
No topless reason with a hankering for  
rhyme in designer jeans? It should adore  
such vulnerable art, since life is tough.

Yes, yes, I know. I hear you--but I snore,  
dreaming a stay, a pantaloon, a cuff  
around the naked truth of all the lore  
of all that's reasonable, fluttering near each pore  
that dreams are made on (I believe this stuff!)  
and my skin--everything, more being more.

--written ca. 1980, unpublished

*Datamate Data*

1. Seducers are condemned to their computers for life. 2. Let there be no reprieve for the looters of homes. Assign them their appropriate numbers, and let them serve their terms. 3. Those who ignore promises, theirs or others', let them pore over their programs in their very slumbers.
4. Numberless games end win or lose or draw.
5. Unbroken vows have one end only: law.
  
6. There ought to be law. 7. It is no life to be always computing what it takes, what would be needed to impeach a spouse.
8. A program is a program, not a house.
9. Let the adulterer, for all our sakes, man the computers. 10. Stone the adulterous wife.

--written 1990, unpublished

*Quit*

*"If it's possible, why do it?" --Gertrude Stein*

Call it a life. Was it worth living it?  
Those waves, those waves that always lapped the shore,  
But never wet the lawn! Their froth, like spit  
In elegant spittoons . . . . .  
. . . . . deck chairs. . . . .  
. . . . That strain again. . . . What for?  
. . . . . and here you used to sit  
Guessing the rhymes . . . . And you want more?

The inland heart, a horn of plenty, hollow,  
Hoots the same music. Proteus is no man,  
But when he blows, the human feelings follow.  
. . . . That pump is working. . . . Jab it!  
. . . . . rather than  
Starting anew your conquest of your habit.

--written 1995, unpublished

*Sort*

Hand Sister Stone Tongue Fever Jawbone Flower  
Pease-Porridge Dog Symphony Eyelash Hunt  
Flame Jacket Harvest Ticket Brandy Cunt  
Moon Clinker Shrimp Mercury Fortress Bower  
Pain Shovel Father Vomit Grief Nail Fart  
Cathedral Oyster Sting Embankment Wire  
Sulfur Harp Sausage Jazz Escarpment Mire  
Dazzle of Glance and Murmur of the Heart

Margin Delusion Center Godhead Power  
Speech Alienation System Hegemony  
Eternity's Enslavement Freedom's Hour  
The End of Ideology Wealth Pelf  
Silence and Truth The Real Thing The Phony  
Imagination Discontent The Self

--written 1995, unpublished



*The Fusilier*

--"Stop it! I will not." (John Ashbery)

*Pssst* BANG! BANG! IS THERE ANOTHER WAY TO START  
*Artstartstart* SHOOTING THE WORKS UP AT THE HEAVENS TOP  
*Toptoptoptoptoptop* BANANA EVEN GRANTING EVERY STAR T  
*Ontightnight* ONIGHT ALL NIGHTS IS RIGGED IN DUMBEST OF  
*Position* POSITION WHY THESE WHISPERS? WILL THEY HELP?  
*Oneon* ONE SHOT CAN MAKE THE WHOLE DAMN FOREST HOP  
*Hophop* AND FLUSH FROM COVER EVERY PRICK THAT HELL P  
*Prepreprep* REPARES FOR BLEEDING HART HO! HO! BURST HE  
*Eartheartheart* HO!HO! THE TOTEM PEOPLE COME MISTAH P  
*Personaperspersonap* ERSONA WHY YOU ALLA TIME ON WAR P  
*Athpathpathp* ATH SUH? THEY CRY OH OPTIMISTS WHO'D STOP  
*Stops* WITH YOUR WEE NOISE ALL THAT THE NOISIEST ARE T  
*Ootootoot* OO WEAK TO BRAZEN OUT THE STARBURSTS WARP  
*Awarpwarp* AND WOOF KISS-OFF AND KISS BANG! BANG! PSST!

ART

ART?

--written 1995, unpublished