

# A Beach as Long as Life



**Gus Speth**

**Complete Poems and Such**



WATER SHED  
PUBLICATIONS

A Beach as Long as Life  
Complete Poems and Such  
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PDF book designed and produced by  
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## Introduction

**A good idea**, I thought, to bring all my poems together in one place, including the twenty-five or so written since the publication of my most recent book of poems, *The Blessings*. I wanted to make them easily available online. This compilation does that. I hope you enjoy them!

Each poem is hyperlinked from the Table of Contents. If you want to find a poem and you recall at least the name, you can click on it in the Table of Contents. You will note that the poems are organized by several headings, vaguely thematic, not by the four books where most originally appeared. All the poems have been color coded as to their original books. The new, unpublished poems are also color coded.

Except for the poems written since *The Blessings*, all of them are in print and available in the four short books highlighted at [www.watershedpublications.org](http://www.watershedpublications.org). You will observe the .org — there is nothing commercial about my efforts in this sphere.



To the certain embarrassment of some of them, I have named and thanked those who have helped me in my poetic efforts. I want to thank them again here, profusely, and praise their patience and good spirits: Cece Speth, Baron Wormser, EB Moore, Sam Love, Jennifer Brown, Karim Ahmed, David Grant, Sydney Lea, Ina Anderson, Catherine McCullough, Ethan Goffman, Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Richard Garcia, Jim Antal, Cindy Shannon, Jonathan Stableford, Byron Breese, Megan Mayhew Bergman, Pamela Harrison, Jim Speth, Charles Speth, Jenny Hane, Debbi Wraga, Chin Woon Ping, Tom Kinder, Carol Potter, John Keefe, and Clare Brant. Once again, as she did with my four poetry books, Anne Pace has done a marvelous job designing this presentation.

Every so often someone asks, “is this really a poem?” It is a good question. Mostly, I have tried to write genuine poems. I love poems, at least the ones I can understand. But every once in a while I give up and just say it the way that comes easily. Thus the subtitle—Poems and Such. Efforts like mine in these cases have been called ventilated prose. They incorporate certain poetic features but in the end fall short of the real thing. An example is “State of the Union,” one I like very much.

The photographs in this compilation were taken by me and my wife Cameron Speth.



*Gus Speth*  
*Spring 2023*

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# SPETH'S POETRY COLLECTIONS



[www.watershedpublications.org](http://www.watershedpublications.org)

Poems in this compilation are color keyed in reference to their published source. Click on a title to learn more about or purchase a book. Or visit Watershed Publications to see all four books.

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## ■ What We Have Instead

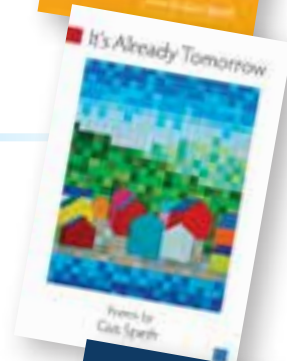
*2019 Shires Press*



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## ■ It's Already Tomorrow

*2020 Shires Press*



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## ■ What Will Last

*2021 Shires Press*



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## ■ The Blessings

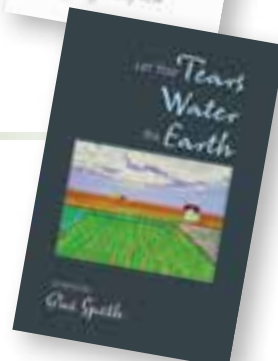
*2022 Watershed Publications*



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## ■ Let Your Tears Water the Earth

*2023 Watershed Publications*



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I

Moving Through Our Lives

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## A Place of Little Pretense

This small beach house was built in 1951,  
just across the dunes from the big breakers.  
Facing the full Atlantic through a few palmettos,  
it has survived the ferocity of many encounters,  
including the direct hit of the big storm Hugo.  
It has survived thousands of children  
tracking in tons of sand in wet bathing suits.  
It has been the enduring strong cauldron  
for explosions of laughter and love and anger.  
Its tiny kitchen has seen the endless shucking  
of local oysters and the frying of many flounder.

How many books have been read here?  
How much coffee spilled into the rugs?  
How many exhibitions of grandkids' art?  
How many hugs?  
How many castles washed away by the waves?  
How many games of Monopoly and cards?  
How many kids bodysurfed to dad's legs?  
How many carbs?  
How many shark teeth found near the surf?  
How many dogs slept in the chairs?  
How many bare feet warmed by the sand?  
How many beers?



---

The signs of age are all around:  
tiny worn sinks in upstairs bedrooms,  
a bottom floor flat on the ground,  
a very small toilet in the bathroom,  
the walls and ceiling a simple bare pine,  
the medicine cabinet with its slit in the back,  
the razor blades there to oblivion assigned.  
There is mold around the edges and corners,  
lots of rust from sitting in the salty air,  
and boards worn out around the dormers.

This house is a modest place on the beach,  
yet pilgrims trek here each summer.  
It's a state of mind they hope to reach,  
to see again their families and each other,  
to watch birds and catch some fish,  
to worship the tanning sun,  
and the boys look at girls, and wish.



---

## Out of Place

Seen from the deck of this  
place of little pretense,  
the Atlantic today lies flat and leaden,  
shrouded in low, lifeless clouds.  
I look out from a beachfront bungalow  
built in 1951 when I was nine.  
It is out of place now,  
and we are its final renters.  
It cannot match its neighbors,  
the cementitious mega-mansions  
that up the strand and down  
bestride the narrow dunes  
crushing the sand crabs  
and the small pleasures of everyday life  
at a beach once arrogantly shabby.  
There are now swimming pools  
to my left and also to my right.  
Is it just my age pining for the times  
we brought our children to this place  
and ran along the warm sand path  
through the dunes to the beach?  
Folly our dog is scared. And why not?  
She sees the empty rooms,  
furniture gone to Goodwill,  
everything we own boxed and bagged  
and ready to move on  
before the wrecking ball.  
It is coming tomorrow.  
I am going peacefully,  
but I am scared too.



## Voices

While the peepers perfume the twilight air  
and the barred owl sings her simple song,  
we rock gently, slowly on the old porch and  
in the gathering darkness listen for voices.

*Who, who speaks for you? Who speaks for you?*

For the longest forever it was mother.  
I hear her now at dawn, helping with  
homework I was too tired for last night.  
Where would I be if she were not there,  
and now here on this sofa beside me?

*Who, who speaks for you? Who speaks for you?*

Dad is a ragamuffin, a mop of happy gray hair,  
a jokester who keeps running the soft  
soothing patter of simple laughter.  
He tells the Principal he will keep me straight  
and military school will not be needed.

*Who, who speaks for you? Who speaks for you?*

Time evaporates into the peepers and slow rocking.  
I am back at the beginning, and I hear another voice.  
Don't worry, Miss Amelia, you got a fine boy.  
He'll be something one day, I know it.

*Who, who speaks for you? Who speaks for you?*

There have been so many who spoke for me,  
voices heard now over the dark transom of evening.  
All along the long river of my life, there have  
been angels who spoke kind words on my behalf.

*Who, who speaks for you? Who speaks for you?*



---

## An Error in Time and Space

You are gone tonight, and the vacant space  
beside me is a vastness into which I reach.

I feel only absence and longing,  
cold sheets in a wintry November.

There is a not rightness about it,  
an error in time and space.

I remember two weeks ago dining  
out across the river with easy friends.

While waiting for the food to arrive,  
we went around the table answering—

what is the secret of a long marriage,  
since we had all been long married.

Spurred by the moment, I answered  
devotion, loyalty, forgiveness.

I should have remembered the words  
stitched on the pillow in your chair:

Happiness is being married to your best friend.  
I long for my friend this night.



---

## A Dog's Life

What do the dogs most enjoy,  
other than eating of course?  
What do they demand with  
wet noses and come-on nudges?

Bright in the mornings,  
they chase the ball with  
abandon and aplomb.  
Proudly, they catch it in the air  
and find it lost in the grasses.

It is not the exercise,  
nor the praise, but  
the sheer joy of accomplishment—  
doing what they do well  
when they are up for magic.

Later in the day as  
boredom creeps in on napping,  
they want to explore  
the world more slowly.

A walk down the road  
and into the woods,  
to see where the grouse hide,  
to find some blackberries,  
to smell every possible thing,  
tails going like metronomes.

Pride in their competence,  
joy from their curiosity,  
oh, these are just simple animals,  
lacking the higher powers.



---

## A Long Journey

The last time he put on shoes  
he wore a hospital gown.  
He took the hall elevator down  
and walked out to the street  
into a bright early fall sun.  
He got some stale cashews  
at the Dollar Tree, and  
he ate them as he went  
across a bridge of sighs.  
On the other side, he found  
a familiar mossy street  
with its canopy of big live oaks  
more ancient even than he.  
Shuffling along the shade  
he passed the skating rink,  
the town baseball field,  
his dad's old repair shop.  
It was a journey, but then  
at the county fairgrounds he  
saw the Ferris wheel turning.  
He went right to the booth  
where his high school class was  
selling Earl Dukes barbeque  
to fairgoers enjoying themselves.  
She was working at the booth  
and she smiled, and he sat there  
at the counter a very long time.





---

## We Awoke Together

She dreamed she wore a dress.

I asked if she were sure.

“Yes,” she said, “a dress no less,  
the picture of demure.”

“Were you a young girl,  
or dreaming what’s to be?”

“I wore earrings of pearl.  
The 50s I’d say,” said she.

The past unfurls,  
good memories rush in:  
Such a beautiful girl,  
now and way back then.

It was in 1958  
when we first fell in love.  
Behind the high school gate,  
first kisses from above.

And kisses ever since,  
in love through many times.  
I was not so very dense  
I missed the many rhymes.



---

Her life has been a wonder,  
a joy that spread to me.  
Decades now to ponder  
how blessed my life can be.

“Come beside me, dear one,”  
I ask of her just then.  
“Kiss me in this morning sun.  
Let’s once again begin.”



---

## Peaches and Cream

One of his earliest memories  
the taste of sugar cane.  
His dad stripped it with his knife  
handed him bite-size pieces.  
He chewed the sweet white stalks.  
It was 1946.  
He remembers his father  
with admiration, a gentle man,  
always telling funny stories.  
He is named after his dad.

He sold elberta peaches to yankees  
headed south to Florida on US 301.  
The smell of peaches in Carolina heat  
and their gentle sweet—irresistible.  
He remembers being fired,  
but not because he ate too many.  
He threw the soft peach at the car  
full of unpleasant New Yorkers.  
He has no memory of what they had said.  
It hit the car's back window right  
above that orange Empire State plate.  
Mr. Brickle ran out of the filling station,  
shouting to head off another Civil War.



---

He remembers his neighbor,  
a rotund Mr. Mutch he called Very,  
who had a bakery in town  
making delicious French apple pies,  
the ones with icing and raisins.  
His mother saw how seriously  
he devoured them,  
bought him a regular supply.  
He would eat a whole pie  
after football practice.  
A skinny sophomore, he  
aimed for big and strong.  
The first-string line he confronted  
scrimmaging averaged over 210.  
Mr. Mutch's pies could do it,  
he was sure.

In New York with his girl Miss C,  
they stayed with family friends, Gin and A,  
and twice went out to the World's Fair.  
A corndog there smothered with  
the Chinese mustard sitting innocently nearby  
blew a hole through the top of his head  
and led to a lifelong addiction  
now slaked with excesses of wasabi.  
Gin made dinner for them that night  
and served his first and best crème brûlée.  
He tastes it still, now his favorite dessert,  
the hot, crusty top  
the cool, smooth bottom.



---

After college, he and Miss C married.  
Then off to England for an extra degree.  
In the Scottish Highlands,  
his thesis finished, he stumbled  
on human remains  
atop a heather-covered hill.  
Leading the constable back up,  
an officer mumbled,  
“It takes one damn fool to find another.”  
Reckoning the innkeeper did it,  
promptly descending the Highlands  
down to the pleasant banks of the River Tweed,  
they bought a well-deserved  
Selkirk Bannock and relaxed,  
nibbling its deliciousness and inhaling  
the cool, clean breeze from the river.

A new Little Miss C was born in 1969,  
her first home a cabin on the  
shore of lovely Lake Quonnipaug.  
It was one of Sarah Jennings’ cabins with  
her rule of no children. But  
holding Little Miss C that first time  
strict Sarah melted like an ice cream cone.  
A new dad learned that spring  
one of life’s great thrills,  
a sleeping baby on your chest  
with the sweet smell of the baby’s head  
filling you up.



---

## Speaking of Home

My wife shouts to upstairs,  
“I am putting on coffee.”  
I roll in the bed and reply,  
“I am putting on airs!”  
And think to myself  
when was the last time  
I heard a person say that?  
You don’t hear it here  
because hardly anyone  
puts on airs in Vermont.  
Better to put on warm clothes.

Highfalutin is not the local way,  
I think, drinking the coffee.  
Politicians are plain-spoken.  
The clothes aren’t fancy,  
nor are the cars and homes.  
Well, anyhow, that’s it mostly.  
Folks are caring with the land,  
the farms and forests, and the bogs,  
and artists and craftsmen are  
everywhere making beautiful things.  
Proud people, but not prideful.



---

Now don't go having a hissy fit  
because I'm idealizing Vermonters.  
I got to get along with these people.  
It isn't that hard since they are  
not really the remote and taciturn  
folks they are made out to be.  
Some on a good day could even  
talk the breath right out of you.

We have moved four times,  
headed north from the South,  
dragging along word baggage  
and accents that don't fit.  
Not since we left in 1964  
have we found a place  
that feels so much like home.



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# Spring Suspended

Hovering, waiting,  
she has held back

Spring suspended

No viridescent  
displays cover  
the still gray woods

The snow has gone  
but crocuses  
are all there is  
to signal change

Perhaps she cannot  
bear the thought of  
arriving to know  
that Ned has gone





---

## Celebration

Of some it has been said,  
“We’ll not see his likes again.”  
With Ned we knew that  
long before the end.

Raconteur! Provocateur!  
He entranced, amused, cajoled,  
entertained by tales both new and old.  
The man could tease and charm,  
hardly anyone he could not disarm.

An entrepreneur as well!  
Selling Jeeps in Asia,  
farming chickens in Nigeria,  
trying with wind machines  
long before wind’s day had come.

He was the real deal:  
curious, engaged, present.  
“I’ve been thinking,” Ned said  
one day, nearly ninety-four,  
“about a new approach  
to climate change.”

He loved his family, his town,  
loved life, loved women,  
loved all of us,  
really cared about us,  
asked often after us.



---

A dear, witty, and very wise man  
who gained age with grace  
and grace with age.  
He had the world's best smile.  
No pomp or pretention  
but nothing average either.  
None of him average.  
Not the smallest smidgen.



## The Prince of Tides

Wishing to pay our respects  
to a writer not long departed,  
we stood on a Carolina sea island  
not far from where he began,  
his friend Reverend Mike and I,  
there on an early spring day.  
Mike had been there before,  
but to me a joyous surprise.

*I was born and raised on a Carolina sea island and  
I carried the sunshine of the low country, inked in  
dark gold, on my back and shoulders....My sister and  
I... were born to a house of complication, drama, and  
pain. We were typical southerners. In every southerner,  
beneath the veneer of cliché lies a much deeper  
motherload of cliché.*

I shuffled my feet and sand  
drifted across his simple grave.  
We were in the middle of an acre  
cleared from maritime forest—  
an isolated black cemetery,  
burial mounds scattered around.  
How had the entertainer of millions  
come to this unknown spot to rest?

*I... take you to the marsh on a spring day, flush the great  
blue heron from its silent occupation. Scatter marsh hens  
as we sink to our knees in mud, open you an oyster with  
a pocketknife and feed it to you from the shell and say,  
“There. That taste. That’s the taste of my childhood.” I  
would say, “Breathe deeply,” and you would breathe and  
remember that smell for the rest of your life.*



The wind rustled the magnolia leaves.  
 It had crossed the incoming tide,  
 alive with spot tail bass and shrimp,  
 drifted over sun-filled marshes of spartina,  
 picked up the dank smell of pluff mud  
 and the chatter of cedar waxwings.  
 In such a familiar and peaceful place,  
 he must have felt his demons released.

*Anytime I would come into the house with a string of fish...  
 my mother could not have been more upset if I had  
 brought roadkill newly scraped off the highway...  
 Each fresh tide brought shoals of white shrimp boiling  
 into the creeks a hundred yards from the house where  
 my mother heated up their frozen cousins.*

I too was smitten by that quiet place—  
 Mike said there was much more to say.  
 We were surrounded there by landmarks  
 in the history of people once shackled,  
 including the site of the famous Penn School  
 for those newly freed from enslavement.  
 His books tell stories of whites;  
 his death celebrates the stories of blacks.

*Teaching remains a heroic act to me, and teachers live a  
 necessary and all-important life. ...Long ago I was one of  
 them. I still regret I was forced to leave them. My entire  
 body of work is because of men and women like them... .  
 Though I've never met a teacher who was not happy in  
 retirement, I rarely meet one who thinks that their  
 teaching was not a grand way to spend a human life.*



I see that I am not the first to visit  
this remote and secluded gravesite.  
The once bare mound of sandy loam  
that defines his last place  
is covered now with mementoes,  
gifts from guests like me—  
an oyster shell, a fishhook, a shrimp boat,  
a little b-ball, other notes of grace.

*On the top shelf, I spotted Savannah's second book  
of poetry, The Prince of Tides. I opened it to the  
dedication page and almost cried when I read the words:*

*Man wonders but God decides  
When to kill The Prince of Tides*

*(the excerpts in italics here are from Pat Conroy's writings)*



## Dove Hunting

1.

Two hunters walking  
into the cornfield  
on a fine fall day,  
an old farmer and me  
when I was thirteen.  
Do you want a chew?  
offering me tobacco.  
The man I surely was  
took a generous bite.  
We walked our ways,  
built our cornstalk blinds.  
Only soon I realized  
my mouth was full of juice,  
my cheeks a chipmunk's.  
What was I supposed to do?  
Of course swallow the juice.  
My world went dizzy,  
I was nauseated,  
and then, BLAM!  
my gun went off.  
As I sat there in the dirt,  
earth and sky spinning,  
shotgun several feet away,  
I looked up at the farmer  
standing over me,  
staring with concern.  
"Are you all right?" he asked.  
I wanted to explain.  
And he said, "You shot me.  
But I'm okay. Stings a bit."



2.

Another time, the hunt over,  
Dad and I walking out of the field  
as dusk approached,  
birds in our jackets or the trees.  
Then one last dove enters the field  
flying high, and someone yells,  
“Mark!” Everyone drops to one knee.  
When the bird is overhead  
almost too far to shoot,  
Dad says, “Take it, Gus.”  
I am flummoxed at first.  
But I stand and fire my 20-gauge,  
and the poor bird falls to our feet.  
I was very proud that day.  
And Dad was proud too.

I see it differently now.  
The graceful mourning doves  
enjoy the sunflower seeds  
under our bird feeders  
here on our Vermont hill.  
They gather, rest on ledges,  
make their cooing sounds,  
not all mournful.  
They sit on our windowsill  
looking in at me with their big black eyes,  
and I hope they are saying  
they hold no grudges.



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## Old Man Walk

He was bored with the walk to the mailbox.  
It was a half mile down the old dirt road  
across the field, over the hills and through the woods  
to where the town road ended at the neighbor's farm.  
Trudge, trudge, once again now almost every day for 15 years.  
But it had to be done. Otherwise, the box would fill up,  
mostly with catalogues. They were the sheerest junk,  
except for the keeper from Victoria's Secret.

High summer and he noticed that the goldenrod was out.  
The rain had been incessant; the field had never been so lush.  
Queen Anne's Lace floated like little clouds above the grasses.  
He could not get the silly dogs to stop eating half-ripe berries.  
He shouted obscenities at them, to no avail, and plodded on.  
It made him mad that he had seen no Monarchs this year,  
maybe one, despite the most luxuriant milkweed.  
He read about a tribe of Monarchs in South Carolina.  
They stayed put, refusing to migrate,  
like those Canada Geese in New Jersey.  
Given what was going on, not a bad idea. Stay put.

In the woods, the maple and ash and moosewood  
dripped the easy morning rain on him.  
In his memory, they had never stayed so green so late.  
The ash leaves come late and go early.  
He wondered what the ash borers would do to his trees.  
He saw a row of tiny red mushrooms  
marching across a water-soaked log, and over in the woods  
he could see a patch of yellow chanterelles.  
He should gather them—  
if his legs worked still or they were closer to the road.





---

He finally reached the mailbox, looked around at the farm.  
It always seemed the same.  
The three miniature cows looked just like cows, only pint sized.  
They were damn pretty. Dusty the donkey was there as usual.  
Try as folks might there was simply no way  
to reduce the cry of a donkey to letters. A “bray”? Ha!  
Dusty’s was remarkable, a thing of beauty heard for a mile.  
The chickens came out of the barn. The flock seemed bigger.  
He’d soon get a dozen of their fine products from the farmer.  
He wondered if he should buy some pullets.  
Maybe it was time to have laying hens again.  
Weirdly, one sounded like a rooster.  
Maybe it was. Not a bad life, roostering.  
He noticed that the spring lambs, a white and two blacks,  
had grown to look like their moms, about the same size.  
The dogs taunted them, as they always did, but  
they just kept nibbling the abundant greens, oblivious.  
He wondered what the farmer had planned for them.



---

There wasn't much to the mail.  
He recalled the cartoon of a Vermont geezer  
who'd run a shunt from the mail slot in his door  
straight to his pot-bellied stove.  
He thought, I am the mailman, slow but sure,  
and if I take enough steps, I will be home eventually.  
Moseying on, he would see the same things, mostly.  
He tried to reassure himself that the little eejits  
that had found him were gnats, not blackflies.  
The burdock now looked like little purple thistle flowers.  
He knew that one day in the fall they would  
cover the dogs with abundant sticker seeds.  
He spotted a pile of black bear poop  
still shiny and as big as a cow paddy.  
He wondered how he had missed it earlier  
and whether it was the same bear as before.  
In the field again, he paused to look south,  
over the nearby hills to the magnificent Ascutney  
outlined faintly there, a darker shade of blue.  
He thought that if he had to walk up and down hills  
for a mile every day, it might as well be here.  
Not a bad spot.

He turned back to the road  
and was surprised he was almost home.



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## Falling Apart

It was a fall to remember  
It left a big hole in my heart  
Foliage was never prettier  
In the fall of falling apart

He left a big hole in my heart  
A dog that was easy to love  
In the fall of falling apart  
We went together hand in glove

A dog that was easy to love  
Smart and he could be ornery  
We went together hand in glove  
He had many ways to tease me

Smart and he could be ornery  
He knew his words and tried to talk  
He had many ways to tease me  
Gave me a grin when he balked

He knew his words and tried to talk  
He leaves a big hole in my heart  
Stayed close when we went for a walk  
In the fall of falling apart

Dogs find us to teach us about love  
And leave us to teach about loss  
It is a love we hope to be worthy of  
But one that comes with a cost



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## What Do You Want to Be?

This tale of a young man's fancy  
begins in a small Southern town.  
It ends in south Chicago,  
an early aspiration in tatters.

He wanted to go into politics  
thought it would be interesting  
and keep his growing ego happy.  
He thought he might go far.

His first job, in high school,  
tacking posters on poles.  
He can't remember for whom.  
His work lined the highways.

Then, in college, a summer job  
working for his DC congressman.  
Assigned to write right-wing speeches,  
it should have cured him.

In 1968 he became Gene McCarthy's  
campaign coordinator for his state.  
At the infamous 1968 Chicago convention,  
he secured but one vote for Clean Gene.

It's been said Chicago was a gas.  
He was tear gassed there, protesting.  
With no pass, Mayor Daley's thugs  
hustled him off the convention floor.



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He realized he wasn't in touch—  
he and his base drifting apart.  
The thought of chasing that base  
cured him of politics for good.

Signs can appear telling us which  
dreams to hold to and which to let go.  
He is glad he saw that sign back then.  
But he still wants to be President.



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## Thin Doors

Thin doors in our lives,  
mere gossamer things  
between present and past,  
remembering and forgetting,  
loving and despising,  
living and dying.  
We walk or stumble  
willy-nilly through them.



The Edisto River rises in the sand hills of central South Carolina. Like a glistening black snake it glides through the Carolina Lowcountry. Its dark tannin-stained waters spread out over the banks forming swamps of tall cypress, tupelo, and sweet gum draped with Spanish moss, an environment welcoming to its sunfish, heron, and occasional alligators. On its way through the hardwood bottomlands and on down to the tidal marshes, the Edisto passes through the small agricultural community of Orangeburg. I grew up there in the 1940s and 1950s, our house about a mile from a swimming area the town had established down from a high bluff. On the several terraces from the bluff's top down to the river, the girls spread blankets on the grass and worked on their (one-piece) tans. Near the riverbank, benches ran between large cypress trees where mothers sat watching their children play in the shallow water. A pavilion on the top of the bluff served RC Colas and hot dogs. There were pinball machines there. The juke box played "Sixty Minute Man," a song to fuel a boy's fantasy if there ever was one.

When I was a preschooler, my buddies and I would jump off a platform that stuck out over the river and doggy paddle back to the platform ladder. One day I got a good running start and jumped out too far, into the strength of the river's current. It carried me away fast, and soon I was underwater staring wide-eyed at the rays of sun coming through the tea-colored water and completely unable to surface or gain control. I remember thinking that I was going to



drown. Back on the benches, my mother scanned the platform area, and, not finding me, she and her friend panicked and sprang for the river, Mom to the platform, her friend to the deep water where the children's swimming area ended. I remember being wrapped up into the arms of two strong women and carried out of the water and laid on my stomach on the bank, my cheek on the warm sand.



As the Edisto becomes tidal and enters the Atlantic, it flows by Seabrook Island. This coastal barrier island near Charleston, once full with the delight of maritime forests, Seabrook had been given to the sturdy Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina with the requirement that its rare natural beauty remain unspoiled. A small Episcopal summer camp for young people was the only thing on it. I went there as a camper for many summers, and I loved the place. I got to know a group of young ministers, and discussing theology with them was the most intellectually exciting thing I did as a boy. Then I went off to college. I stopped going to church, lost interest in organized religion, and realized one day I had become something akin to an atheist. The sunsets at the camp looking back up the Edisto, the loggerheads coming ashore to lay their eggs, the pluff mud up to your knees in the saltmarsh, the fiddler crabs scurrying about—all will be always with me. If I had been raised a pantheist, I might still be one. Years later, the Diocese would sell Seabrook to developers. As Faulkner wrote, the very act of selling the land should have forfeited the seller's claim to it.

My final stay at the camp was shortly after graduating from Orangeburg High in 1960. We were excited to have our bishop, Thomas Carruthers, join us in camp for a short spell. The bishop seemed a giant in every way—size, presence, booming voice—and was enjoying himself being with young people. On a hot Sunday afternoon we walked with him down to the mouth of the Edisto and around the point onto Seabrook's pristine front beach and had a cookout there. Afterwards, staff in hand, he led us back to the camp's cabins. The bishop said he was tired and went to his room in the counselors' cabin, and I joined a small group of young ministers



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on the cabin's porch. They were talking and I was listening. Then we heard a loud thud from inside the cabin. We all rushed to the bishop's room. Through the thin door we could hear the bishop snoring. When we tried to open the door, something held it shut. One minister said the bishop had not liked his door banging in the wind, so he must have blocked it shut with a suitcase. Another added that he had been complaining about being tired and must have gone quickly to sleep. We moved quietly back to the porch and resumed conversation. Later that night, back in my cabin, I would learn that the bishop, age 60, had died that evening of a cerebral hemorrhage. He had fallen against his door.



Immediately before reaching Seabrook Island, the Edisto passes by the settlement known as Rockville, a small gathering of very old homes and large live oak trees. It is a beautiful spot from a long-lost era and is best known still for its sailing. I have a friend who sailed his Moth in all the coastal regattas, and one summer during my high school years, he signed me on as his crew. Moths have no crew, tiny one-person boats that they are, but it got me into all the parties, including the famous dance at Rockville held after the race every August since 1890.

The Rockville clubhouse is a one-story clapboard structure in the Lowcountry style, with a large open floor for dancing. Its huge windows and porch on multiple sides make the whole thing veranda-like when opened up. As it was the evening of the dance. The band was pumping away that late 1950s night; the dance floor was crowded, mostly with young people; it was hot; and the alcohol was freely flowing. As I walked outside to cool off, I noticed couples headed for the grass and backseats of the parked cars. Feeling especially lonely after missing out on what was very close to a drunken orgy, I sat on a porch bench, next to two perspiring but well-dressed matrons. Despite the loud music, I could not help but overhear their conversation. The lady next to me said in a charming Charleston accent, "This event has gone terribly downhill." "Yes," the other agreed, "What a shame that the young men are dancing without their jackets."





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## Memory's Gate

My dear,

I am trying hard to recall  
where my memory went AWOL.  
What is it that I forgot?  
Does it still matter a lot?

It seems we'll just have to wait  
'til time unlocks memory's gate.



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## Things Are Closer Than They Appear

She said one day she was ready to go.  
Go to where, I try not to think I know.  
She had bought us a cemetery plot  
on a hillside spot that she liked a lot.  
It is lovely there, covered now in snow.

I have to think further on this matter.  
At first my thoughts made me sadder.  
Are things really coming to an end  
for me and for my sweet best friend?  
Are we soon to climb Jacob's Ladder?

Of course, she meant she was prepared  
for the ending that no one's spared.  
Her words had shattered my easy day,  
raising new things for me to weigh.  
She had told me because she cared.

So, problems wait around the door,  
ones we can no longer ignore.  
But we will go on undeterred  
by a future inevitably blurred.  
There is so much left to explore.



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# The Prediction

## 1.

### Early Pandemic, March 2020

A happening across America.  
Maybe it sounds early,  
just March after all, but  
Christmas presents are  
being prepared in millions of  
homes and apartments,  
trailer parks, co-ops and condos.  
The project is taken up  
watching boring TV shows  
or in any vacant room  
where the kids won't see.  
Some are preparing them  
after long delays and neglect.  
Others just fell into it naturally  
without much thought.  
Like a big beautiful quilt,  
these presents can't be rushed.  
When delivered for Christmas,  
there will be joy in the house.



## 2.

**As Things Worked Out, March 2021**

So much for prediction!  
Pandemic baby boom—a bust.  
2020 not generally inviting  
to lighthearted pleasures  
or dreams, or plans for the future  
or lovemaking actually.  
A death-filled, pain-filled year  
full of stress and fear  
anger and frustration—  
life as broken fragments  
and recycling worries.

A year of loss when  
women suffered most deeply:  
as the months crept by  
jobs lost in record numbers  
lost income and security  
lost family support and daycare  
lost schools, churches, parks  
lost freedom, hugging, laughing  
lost each other,  
and by the end of the day  
bone tired, exhausted.



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## Reverie

Dangling emotions, residue of dreams,  
orphaned feeling now attached to nothing.  
They linger longer as the years pile up,  
while memories rush about, fresh as life.  
He studies grains of sugar sparkling in the spoon,  
all destined to dissolve in coffee he drinks too often.  
He recalls the many friends he has had and lost  
through decades of changing jobs and distant locations.  
They were almost all good people, honorable and  
doing hard work to make the world a bit better.  
A wave of gratitude and affection warms him.  
He thinks of the blessing and joy they were to him—  
how they were the clear water in which he swam.  
It has been so terribly long.  
Faces he once knew now drift in front of him.  
He would like to know what became of them  
and hopes they moved happily into their futures.  
He hopes too that they remembered him fondly,  
and he knows that is all he can ever ask.



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## It's Complicated

draining family cookouts  
a new chill in the breeze  
awkward zoom conversations  
the softest Vermont cheese  
very late squash in the garden  
impossibly golden trees  
vacationing from the news  
snowless for the skis  
a long sad book to read  
the kids' spot-on tease  
playful ducks to be slaughtered  
some memories bring unease  
it's sunny and no rain  
poison keeps away dog fleas  
a limb blocks the plowed road  
church service on Christmas Eve  
dog-gnawed oriental rug  
bracing cold then a sneeze  
taking a fall in the forest  
so many to try to please  
a hard winter kills the ticks  
not everyone here agrees



---

## You Remind Me

After fifty plus years of marriage,  
you are reminding me...of me.  
It is not a case of old people  
getting more alike, like babies.  
It's that we are now each  
half of the same person  
so that together we know  
who owns the big orchard  
and how to cook together  
in this very small kitchen.  
But as very nice as that is,  
it's not all I am getting at.  
It's also that now you can fly like me,  
and I can fly like you, and there  
are very special moments  
when we are flying together  
in a wonderful new way.



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## Coronavirus, Near Charleston, March 2020

Big beachfront houses, solid,  
cementitious, dug into the earth,  
await the next big wind and water.

But now empty. Even the rich  
cannot get onto this sea island.  
Beachgoers turned quickly away.

Two old renters of an old house  
shuffle down the vacant strand  
alone with the surf and their dogs.

Black Skimmers, Sanderlings, Laughing Gulls—  
they're still here and tempt the mind to  
imagine a natural world safe from people.

But I am thinking now mainly of people,  
and I am beginning to cry,  
struggling with what is going on.

The great world wails,  
the suffering is just starting.  
What must we learn? What must we do?

Houses thought to be impregnable against climate,  
a country too great to be brought low by a virus—  
two artifacts of arrogance.

So many vacant spaces. Still,  
our worlds are full with memories.  
We will remember each other.





---

## The Man in the Prius

Typical small village  
in rural Vermont:  
a town one road thick,  
church of many denominations  
among two dozen simple homes  
holding hands along the road,  
an elementary school on the hill,  
and a town store  
where I stop for milk.  
Decent looking Prius  
pulls up beside me  
at the old gas pumps.  
He goes inside to prepay.

Fifteen years here,  
I've settled in.  
So it took me a minute  
to really see what  
I had just taken for granted.

Man about 60, stocky, strong,  
workman clothes, sawdust  
on scuffed up boots,  
a face behind a mask that said Vote.  
Red Sox cap.



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So, here was this Vermonter,  
a working man, a long timer  
not a retired import like me,  
driving a fuel efficient vehicle  
wearing a proper covid mask  
beseeching the world to vote—  
a scene simply taken in stride,  
unremarkable here.

In the 2016 presidential election,  
if only gun owners had voted,  
Trump would have carried every state,  
but one.



---

## The Smile

An artist sketched her, using freestyle.  
He got it right— she was all smile.

She has that smile, reaches my heart.  
She is at peace. It makes me part.

Pulled over once, she melted the cop.  
He said to her, I regret the stop.

Maybe eyes too, but I am sure,  
the soul's window: her smile's allure.

It is my cure when I am down.  
I look round 'til that smile is found.



---

## First Friend

My best friend growing up died yesterday.  
He'd just emailed me, now gone in the wind.  
When he will seem dead, I cannot say.  
He is still here, as real today as then.

Son of my minister, a preacher's boy,  
suitor of my sister, a summer spree.  
She was his youthful infatuation's joy.  
For losing her, he blamed himself, not me.

He was thoughtful, reserved, truly brilliant.  
His off-beat humor was a swift curve ball.  
Much about him just a little different.  
I loved the guy, the quirkiness and all.

I was the student body president  
but he was the president of our class,  
his four years as prez without precedent,  
respected in ways I could not surpass.

He was a teacher, a Chaucer scholar,  
a writer and a poet, prone to deep dives,  
one who cared not a whit for the dollar,  
father of four who didn't well fit his wives.

There may be a memorial service.  
I am asking myself, why should I go.  
It makes good sense to outwait the virus.  
The family will not care if I show.



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It won't be a gathering of old friends,  
unlikely more than a simple good-bye,  
some of them likely there to make amends,  
then the proverbial blink of the eye.

Yet I am sure beyond doubt I'll attend.  
I'll go if I am the only one there,  
I want to say good-bye to my first friend,  
respect his goodness, say my off-beat prayer.



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## Moving Through Our Lives

Here's what has kept me going,  
and going and going  
through these many years.  
Maybe you too.

Have you, like me, loved  
to learn new things?  
The endless search to understand!  
Bruner was 95 when asked  
why he read long biographies.  
"To improve my mind," he said.

What about making things?  
People love to build, to create.  
The Navajo sand painting blows away.  
It is a beautiful thing.  
My poems will blow away too.

"Variety is the spice of life"—  
one of the smartest things ever said.  
People will do anything to  
avoid boredom and find excitement.  
Trust me on that.

How about comradeship?  
We are often casual with friendships,  
but a comrade is something special.  
Bonding for a good cause!  
Comrades inspire us  
and keep us going.



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Speaking of good causes,  
they keep us going too.  
Mostly they will fail, but remember  
what Camus said of Sisyphus:  
“The struggle itself towards the heights  
is enough to fill a man’s heart.  
One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

What’s the most important thing of all?  
That’s a big question. We may differ.  
I think it’s companionship. What’s better!  
On the pillow in my wife’s chair, it says  
“Happiness is being married to your best friend.”

I’m carrying on here  
too long without getting  
down to the serious stuff.  
Give us this day our daily sustenance:  
the kids and the family,  
the dogs and cats and random pets,  
the joking and the poking,  
the laughing and the hoping,  
the cooking and the eating,  
all the sublime messes we create!



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Then finally, are we the same  
in knowing, deep down inside,  
that we are close kin to wild things,  
and loving that knowing?  
I am refreshed when I am  
moving in life's intricate web,  
pausing in the forest with the dogs,  
standing with awe and reverence  
in that cathedral of viridescence.





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## Love Song

I want to be a singer songwriter  
Make a great song for you  
Can't think of anything better  
Than making a song for you

I listened to music last night  
Brought back the old dreams  
Me being a singer songwriter  
But damn, it's harder than it seems

You're in my head now  
But the words don't come soon  
Gotta get it right, try as I might  
I'm still looking for the tune

It's been a long, long time  
Since I sat down with my guitar  
What I learned back then  
It was a bridge too far

Singer songwriter is harder  
When you can't sing a note  
That's another of my problems  
Even when its words I wrote

*I want to be a singer songwriter  
Make a great song for you  
Can't think of anything better  
Than making a song for you*

I'll never be a singer songwriter  
Can't write, can't play, can't sing  
But I know how much you love me  
So it doesn't mean a thing



---

# In My Mountain Town

I come from a very small town,  
where folks rarely pulled a frown.

A good place with many farmers,  
with me one of the rare departures.

Now I'm in these big hills,  
a town once again with no frills.

I've spent my life in leveland.  
Am I here by mistake, or plan?

Well, I'm here for the community—  
for neighbors without ambiguity.

Folks here remind me of my home,  
like it's the very same genome.

Real people with people strengths,  
knitted together with loving links.

We must hold tight to what we've got!  
It is not perfect but it is a lot.

Mainly, we have got each other  
(and then sometimes great snow cover).

Whether born here or from afar,  
everybody is a rock star.



---

## We Have Rules!

Have our dogs forgiven us for  
the rule about the brand new couch,  
their older brother being gone,  
the scary noises from the storms,  
the treats we do not give,  
the cold cold water from the hose  
splashing on their face and nose,  
the sometime sharp scolding  
for chewing on the molding?

Who am I to know the dogs' minds!

But this I know: despite it all,  
they love to walk with us, and if  
walking we trip and fall,  
they are quick to our side  
licking us as we sprawl.  
They greet us each morning  
with happy tails and grins  
that say we want to play.  
They love to snuggle in our bed;  
we let them lie there on our legs,  
when there should be a rule instead.



---

## So It Goes

We proceed each morning  
with our everyday lives,  
trailed by shadows  
of what we once contrived.

Big plans, plans not so big,  
brains working all the time.  
They make us who we are.  
Will plans and history rhyme?

Some plans made to please,  
others we'd not advise.  
Yet some turned out to bring  
true blessings in disguise.

Your boy was rejected  
at the college of your choice.  
It was at the other place  
that your son found his voice.

The job you badly wanted  
did not materialize.  
That loss was a gift  
you came soon to realize.



---

There's the girl long forgot.  
Your head was over heels.  
Married now for fifty years,  
that bell of true love peals!

Happiness comes in packages,  
you did not place the order.  
It just arrives unbeckoned  
like the kiss from your daughter.



---

## Old Legs

These old legs don't like stairs anymore  
or steep slopes or rocks or roots.  
But I will accept this and be thankful.  
Once they could jump to touch the rim  
and pull out down the line to trap block  
and kneel at the altar near forever  
assisting the Reverend with Communion  
and carry three children up Jack Mountain  
and kick the mile-long swim needed to be lifeguard.  
Now their gift is the stiff walk of an old man  
and a shuffling and out-of-balance gait.  
But how can I blame them?  
They screed straight-down slopes in the Rockies.  
They suffered sprains and scrapes and dog bites  
and being ripped wide open by a cleat.  
They stood there for countless hours  
at soccer games, receptions, and speeches  
and had no real complaint to offer.  
On a special day in 1965 they did their job:  
despite a case of nerves and trembling,  
they faked a steady walk down the aisle.  
The doctor said bodies are made to move.  
Me and my old legs will keep on walking.



---

## A Gentleman I Knew

A cozy room in a large white house.  
Mr. Jim in his always chair by the fire.  
A chilly Sunday afternoon.  
His poker shifts glowing embers of coal.

He is quizzing me in a teasing way.  
I struggle to answer why Truman fired MacArthur  
while also thinking about “High Noon.”  
Mr. Jim looks like an older Gary Cooper.

I was told I’d be good company for him.  
I make an effort to visit most Sundays.  
In his mid 70s, his beloved Claire ill.  
It is the year 1958, and I am in high school.

In truth I’m there for his kindness, his interest in me,  
his great knowledge. I am lapping it up.  
He made up for college reading the Harvard Classics,  
fine pencil notes on every page. I looked.

We talk politics. He had despised Joe McCarthy.  
He likes Ike, though a life-long Democrat.  
He grew up in the mean years after Reconstruction,  
but racial hatred is totally alien to him.

As gentle with himself as with others,  
he takes out four cigarettes late each day.  
Sano brand, they of the powerful filters.  
He smokes them over the next hour, and that’s it.



---

Once I used the cigarette lighter in his nice car  
to burn little circles in the leather seats.  
Now we are close, enjoying each other.  
I can tell he is growing me. I like it.



Mr. Jim is a proper dresser—very proper.  
Most often he can be found in a three-piece suit,  
a dark worsted, wing tip shoes, a starched shirt,  
a watch chain across his vest, brown fedora.

An unusual sight, then, thus attired,  
walking the golf course as the doctor ordered.  
Graciousness and self-deprecating humor  
make him welcome to the foursomes he joins.

In a land where cotton is king  
he was for decades a cotton broker.  
The town playground bears his name.  
He says he and Claire made it possible.

A woman friend of my mother's told me  
Mr. Jim made and lost several fortunes.  
I try to understand what that means.  
He does not act as a rich man might.





---

I try to think about his life, his work.  
I read he once had bank credit to cover 300 bales.  
I imagine him giving the farmers a fair price.  
Harder to imagine a younger Miss Claire.



Married to Miss Claire over fifty years.  
She can be a challenge like the Scots Irish she is.  
They dote like attentive sweethearts,  
he even more so near the end, in her senility.

Once I saw her growing frustrated, fidgety.  
She turns angrily on him, accusing him  
of far-fetched things, blame flung wildly about.  
I had been prepared that this was happening.

He absorbs it stoically but looks deflated.  
What can he be thinking as she fumes?  
Surely he knows it's not the real she but  
some lost fury breaking through tangled circuits.

She was a few years older than Mr. Jim,  
and he lived a few years after she died.  
I went off to college, having learned from him.  
He was curious about my progress to the end.



A Remembrance of Mr. Jim says he was  
“a man of deep integrity ... always truthful and honest.”  
Earlier, I had seen that with my own eyes.  
*Mercy*, the young me wondered, *can I be that man?*



---

## airborne

first bounce dogs  
they are jumping  
levitating defying  
all constraints  
they own the ball

a great catch  
they know it  
and hustle back  
with a little swagger

scientists test to see  
if dogs do have  
human emotions  
good lord  
they would do better  
to test humans



---

## A Meal to Remember

Little place cards in pastel shades  
each with a first name of a dear friend  
at our dinner table over this past decade.  
Quite a large collection now. I look  
at them one by one, remembering it was when,  
and whether there was a why or any reason—  
these meals, before the isolating, sacramental.

I turn the cards face down, I shuffle them and  
place four on the table. I turn them over again  
and the party begins.  
Ed is dead but he is here. He was our first friend in town.  
Dear Cindy moved away to be near her children  
but she is here too. Also Julian and Jim, a couple,  
a graphic artist and a writer of funny novels.

I try to imagine what the group would like for dinner.  
Vegetarian Cindy is easy.  
It's Julian who can't eat onions who's hard.  
Ottolenghi's maqluba is perfect I decide,  
one version without chicken, another without onions.  
I can smell the kitchen perfumed with baharat.

I remember the stories Jim told, his life-size rolling laugh.  
The one about his failings at farming could be a novel itself.  
And the time Ed said with a twinkle that  
nothing in life had prepared him for his parents.  
I heard Jim's laugh again just yesterday on zoom,  
but it was no substitute for the real thing.



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## Something Happened, She Said

I can't remember tomorrow.

It was just yesterday that

I could remember it well.

But today happened.

First there was a message

and then we got the news,

and the future went away.



## What Did They Know?

Those who knew are mostly gone.  
But what was it that they knew?  
How to jigger fish along the riverbank.  
How to diagram a sentence.  
When fields were full of Bobolinks.

The small flat-bottom boat glided slowly along the bank of the easygoing black water. Gene, the paddler, lived a modest life in the down and out town. He drank too much and smoked too much and ate too little, but nobody paddled with his grace and skill. Moving the wooden boat quietly under the overhang, he positioned it perfectly for the old fisherman in the front to jigger his cane pole gently so that the three tiny hooks tied close to the pole and their crickets excited the redbreasts and bream into striking, an offer they could not and did not refuse. The men were thankful for a good catch and for a good river and thankful too for the black snake staying quietly in the overhang. They joked about the fisherman who panicked when one dropped into the bottom of his boat and he shot it.

Miss Higgins taught high school English, or so it was called, but it was grammar, and a rigorous, demanding version of grammar it was. Over a career of several decades she began each class by striding to the blackboard and revealing the proper diagramming of the sentence she had assigned to her students as homework. She offered a prize to students who could properly diagram the first sentence of *Silas Marner*. During the year her students learned about adjectives attributive, predicate, and appositive, and more on appositives and predicate nominatives, gerunds and noun infinitives, voice and mood. Spelling, punctuation, and proper forms of polite address and usage were not overlooked.



There were hundreds of rules to be learned, and they were. Her students would never be thought to be the hicks they seemed to many. They would understand that there is a right way and a wrong way and that in life as in grammar some things are improper. To Miss Higgins good grammar showed self-respect and, even more important, respect for others.

*The Way to know the Bobolink  
From every other Bird  
Precisely as the Joy of him —  
Obligated to be inferred.*

Emily Dickinson's fields and meadows must have been full of Bobolinks. Indeed, they make appearances in over twenty of her poems — her irreverent, rowdy sorcerers of the meadow with their napes of cream and bubbling song. She wrote of her sadness when these dear little blackbirds were gone, but back then she was noticing their departure — down through Florida, across the Gulf, and on to where winter is summer. Today, Bobolinks are departing, but departing very differently. Populations are down sixty percent since 1970. Destroy the habitat and you destroy the birds, and Bobolinks, Larks and other meadow birds are in steep decline. So, will our children one day ask what we did, or didn't do, to save the fields of Bobolinks?



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## Giving Out

It is strange what is happening to me.  
As I am finishing up here on Earth,  
I find that I want to share pieces  
of me, until there is nothing left.  
I won't be happy until I am all gone.

Here, take my library, good books  
collected over a lifetime of trying.  
And these paintings, I will write your  
name on the back of the ones you want.  
This house is willed to you, if you  
promise to care for the dogs.  
Do you need someone to review your draft?  
Or some advice or a contact or reference?  
Or someone to show up at your event? Gladly,  
I give you a piece of my time remaining.

Most important of what I have to give,  
I think, are the things I have written, and  
the ideas that reappear there stubbornly.  
Giving them up is too easy since  
they were always made to share  
and they are never gone away.  
Some gift! Given but not.  
It is embarrassing to share them  
with friends who have not asked.  
An old man clinging to relevance,  
or a kid who has seen a bit of light?  
I am hardly the best to judge.

The last thing I will give will be  
some nourishment back to Earth.  
Every extra little bit will be needed.



---

# Unsung Heroes

scarves

grammarians

pallets

Neosporin

accountants

extension cords

Mexican workers

baking soda

technical colleges

handrails

conjunctions

lacrosse

nurses

U.S. Army-Navy Hymnal

glass panes

acrylic paint

spiders

United Nations

repair shops

sociologists

water hoses

Medicaid

soy sauce

credit unions

librarians





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## Me and 80 and You

I am entering old age today.  
I know you think it was earlier,  
back when you gave away my golf clubs  
and borrowed a walker for me.  
Well, in any case I am 80 today.  
It is surely a milestone, but  
marking what I am not certain.  
Do I now become a Wise Old Man?  
or a wizened old curmudgeon?  
At least: a smoke signal announcing to all that  
the Dark Knight has arrived on a nearby hill.

I have lived through a third of America.  
A mere three spans of 80  
takes us back to the Founding.  
I remember from Truman forward,  
or has it been backwards?  
A kaleidoscope of joy and tragedy,  
and far too much of it tragedy.  
The climate destruction,  
the desperate poverty and discrimination,  
it is sometimes too much to bear.



---

After a long lifetime of  
working hard for good causes,  
I wonder with what result.  
I think the reality is that  
I've mostly been along for the ride,  
a pimple on the butt of Progress.  
But have I succeeded at trying?  
That's not enough, but it is something.  
Now it's time for me to move on,  
and I am finding it hard to let go.

When asked the source of happiness  
and urged to state the matter simply,  
the psychologist replied, "Other people."  
I can vouch for that. I celebrate  
my many friends and comrades. Still,  
one other person has been central to me  
over this long journey of a happy life.  
From high school to this memorable day,  
despite the golf clubs, the missing chain saw,  
that person is the wonderful you.



---

## Passing Days

A hundred Black Skimmers swirl above the inlet.  
First signs of a lovely day.

We walked holding hands on the beach this morning.  
She gave me a surprise kiss.

If only dogs knew their birthdays,  
there would be so many more parties.

The Year of the Rabbit begins today.  
I will hop to, for there is much still to do.

That day I turned 81 I applied for the sales job  
at Bits of Lace.

Remote from remotes, no devices except my own.  
A lovely day in the past.

I said, please bare with me,  
and she did that evening.

We say today is the day,  
but there is always mañana.



---

## Someplace Safe

The dirt road to the farm in West Virginia  
leaves the main road that runs beside  
the South Branch of the Potomac  
then heads up along a bare hill that  
slopes off to the right into a mist-filled valley.  
On the way there, station wagon filled,  
three children restless, squabbling and teasing,  
tired after the four hour drive from DC,  
we pass by two old sheep farms on the left.  
They mark the spot where we sing “almost heaven,”  
and I think for a moment that I am John Denver.

After going there again last evening,  
I awoke, startled—  
this place is real only in my dreams.  
I’ve been going there for decades  
with my un-aging family in our 1970s car.  
The dream never changes, and we never quite arrive.

We had an actual place on Jack Mountain in West Virginia,  
a place my wife and kids loved with a view down the hollow  
to the North Fork of the South Branch below.  
The house had no plumbing, and the privy was a two-seater.  
Mainly it was a weekend place for us but  
once we stayed the summer fixing things, painting,  
bringing back an old orchard and planting 500 tiny trees.  
My hands developed calluses thicker than beech bark.  
The place of my secret dream was not this place, but nearby.



---

So I dream,  
opposing what was and is  
with what could be, might be—  
a place of happiness  
apart from time and change and loss  
somewhere and no where.



---

## Song of the South

I thank my Momma  
and my Daddy too.  
Thanks to them,  
I got this song for you.

Birthday is tomorrow.  
I'm an old man now.  
I tried so hard but  
it doesn't matter anyhow.

I grew up with racists.  
There's so much to blame.  
It's what history did,  
to our ever-lasting shame.

I see a person,  
there's a battle I can't win.  
A thing I still notice is  
the color of their skin.

It is a curse I think,  
a present from the South.  
Some things I used to say  
banished from my mouth.

Momma had a kind heart,  
but Daddy had it bad.  
The 1950's hit him hard.  
At first it made him mad.



---

He began to teach  
in a school for only whites.  
Math for little white kids—  
so much for civil rights.

There came a point  
something happened to my Dad.  
He liked so many Blacks the  
teaching began to make him sad.

He joined the War on Poverty,  
worked with Blacks every day.  
He knew from his own life  
they were people in every way.

Daddy was a smart man.  
It couldn't be shut out:  
his Black friends were equals,  
not something he could doubt.

He didn't tell me what to think.  
I could think for myself.  
But he helped my life along  
to become something else.

The curse I carry forward.  
Soon I'll find my grave.  
But I hope I have respected  
the gift my Daddy gave.



---

## Adagio

The sun that day burst bright  
orange through the trees  
and settled on Lee's sleepy face.

Emily was gone already,  
away to fix breakfast for Maud,  
95 and bright as that sun.

The dogs waited, restless for him.  
They loved and teased in equal dose.  
His pup took off with his old socks.

Lee had some coffee and corn flakes  
with blueberries from lord knows where.  
They ate the ones he somehow dropped.

The yard, now green, was full of Robins.  
Bluebirds had claimed their little homes.  
Maybe they were born there last year.

He sat on the front porch and read  
the Times online, and did Wordle.  
He realized he still liked Ike.

There were a ton of new emails.  
He did his day's inbox triage,  
checked on the war in brave Ukraine.





---

A doe with fawns suddenly appeared.  
Just as quickly, nothing was there.  
So quietly the dogs missed them.

He saw the swing in the basswood.  
The grandkids loved that swing.  
They no longer needed pushes.

He filled the bird feeders full up.  
They're back—red, blue, yellow, and black!  
He'd learned so much watching them.

Lee was content, but then was stirred.  
He had a thought he'd had before—  
about magic in what is commonplace,  
about the ordinary grace of everyday.



---

## Friendship

She was an old dog,  
hard of seeing, hearing,  
and an awful winter:  
snow rain melt freeze,  
snow rain melt freeze—  
everything slick with ice.

The old man let her out  
to do her business.

He saw her standing  
at the edge of the yard,  
the big hill dropping  
fast down to the woods,  
a steep sledding slope  
for the grandkids.

A glance later she was gone.  
One step too far, with  
ancient limbs and no traction,  
she had slid away.

He dressed hurriedly  
and spotted her trapped  
in a jumble of bramble  
down at the bottom,  
occasionally struggling  
but with no effect.  
The old man's back was afflicted,  
painful and giving out.  
Still he headed down,  
stumbling to the bottom.



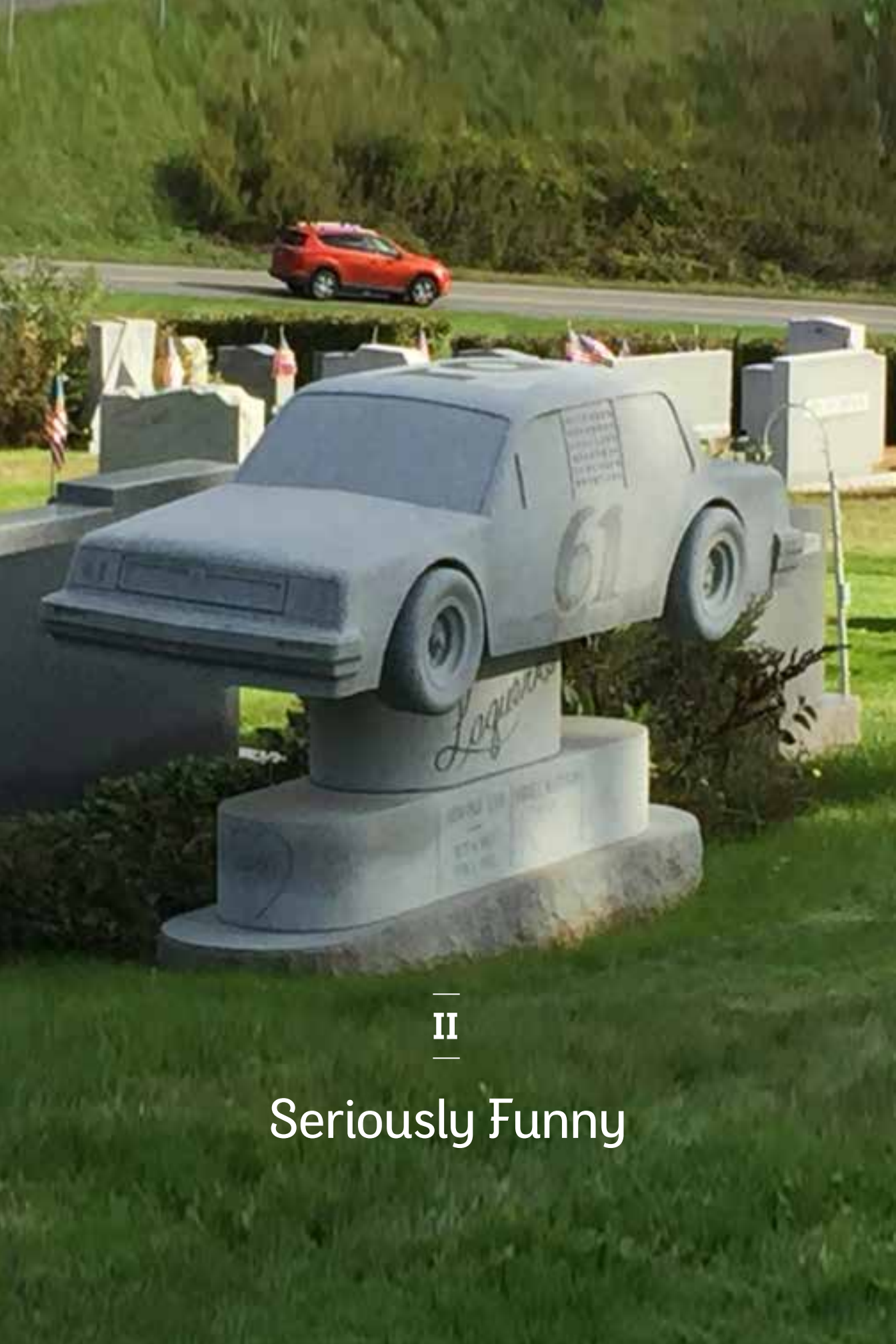
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The dog seemed glad  
to have him by her side.  
He was glad to be there too.  
He lifted her big Lab body  
and started up the hill.  
When the pain was too great,  
he paused, let it subside,  
remembered she had been  
an acrobat at Frisbee, had  
loved to play with the ducks.

He thought: two elder residents  
of town in trouble and now  
struggling together to get  
up a hill covered with ice.  
What could be better?

He lifted her one last time  
as they approached the stone steps  
to the house, and it was too much.  
His feet slipped out from under him,  
the dog let loose as he reached for the ice.  
His head landed inches from the steps.  
He rolled over, looked up, and grinned  
as she stood licking his face.





—  
II  
—

Seriously Funny

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## A Balanced Life

The soul is more important than the back

A child rushes towards you  
Little arms outstretched  
Pick up the child

The sun graces the morning beach  
It goes for miles  
Walk the beach

The dogs insist on Frisbee  
The motion's like a hula hoop  
Throw it hard

The exercises prescribed  
Awake real pain  
Do them...sometimes

Your partner's car arrives  
With bags of groceries  
Head for the bathroom



---

## God's Own Black Flies

God walked into the garden.  
He saw that it was good.  
Mostly.

He noticed that horned tomato worms  
were decimating the plants and  
beetles were ruining his potatoes.

Leaning down, He asked them loudly,  
“Who the hell made you?”

And in that moment they found Him.  
A natural poet, He cried out:

“Black flies, black flies, you’re here again!  
You found my forehead and my chin.  
Black flies, black flies, oh, what a pest.  
It’s time you guys *also* took a rest.”

And then the devil tempted Him—

“Black flies, I want you to go for hair  
that’s orange in the atmosphere.  
Not a little girl’s, for sure,  
but a man far more immature!”

His good nature soon returning,  
God remembered his Creation.  
He paused, thought, and said wistfully,

“Black flies, if only I could clearly see  
you as part of biodiversity!”



## The Devil's Assistant's Dictionary

Ambrose Bierce was a very clever guy  
with the mind of a troublesome fairy.  
For years he scribbled little notes  
that became *The Devil's Dictionary*.

His definitions always cut somewhere.  
Once he set out to define harangue.  
He said it was “a speech by an opponent,  
who is known as an harangue-outang.”

Most often his quips were more adult,  
but I am setting the bar low for myself.  
I too have been at work on a dictionary.  
I may one day join Bierce, as his elf.

Our language has many big gaps,  
holes that need lexical cementing.  
So I am creating some brave new words.  
I'll start now with their inventing.

**Pandammit** – a situation of everything going awry with no good options, as in “His life in a pandammit, he lived in his sweatpants.”

**Exasperational** – a condition of having high goals you know are hopeless, as in “She lived an exasperational life, with her soufflés always collapsing.”

**Slah** – an adult child. Said to be derived from “still living at home.”

**Complinots** – praise or compliments that are known by giver to be undeserved, as in “She layered on the complinots so that he would continue the cooking, sketchy as it was.”



**Complifish** – compliments given in hopes of compliments in return, as in “He complifished his neighbor about her garden but got nothing but a ‘thank you’ in return.”

**Ambadassador** – someone commissioned to spread disruption, as in “They sent an ambadassador to the anti-vax rally.”

**Mellowdrama** – life when high, as in “In another mellowdramatic incident, the police stopped him as he was walking down the center line half naked.”

**Disastrophy** – a really bad, cataclysmic event, as in “Given climate change, Prometheus stealing fire from the gods was, longterm, a disastrophy.”

**Awsomistic** – to have a dream or vision that is awe-inspiring and that one believes is going to be realized, as in “Awsomistically, his fans believe that Tom Brady will win Super Bowls forever.”

**Flushtrate** – repeated failure to get the toilet to work, as in, “I’m totally flushtrated with that damn thing!”

**Fontrum** – embarrassment for someone who isn’t embarrassed but clearly should be, as in “Hear that silence from his audience? Lots of fontrum in here.”

**Enterfailement** – a box office bomb, a TV series canceled mid-season, the comic who dies onstage, as in “The commercial gods declared the Shakespeare film enterfailement.”\*

*\*For a few, I offer thanks.*





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# Hopium

It takes a lot of hopium  
to get me through the day.  
There is always more hopium,  
and I will take it any way.

I can grow my own hopium.  
My mind's a fertile field.  
The less I know, the more I grow.  
You cannot beat that deal.

I got a bumper crop last year  
when I turned off the news.  
Being hopeful was easy when  
I took a long news snooze.

There are far worse addictions;  
hopium just affects the mind.  
Yet in terms of climate worries,  
it leaves them far behind.

Dreamy hope, comforting hope,  
whenever needed it's there.  
There's always more hopium  
when I'm in my easy chair.

Hope without costs,  
hope without consequence,  
this hope's a dope's dope  
in a cauldron of innocence.



---

## The Difference

Hope is putting seeds into the ground.

Hopium is expecting the garden to be fine without you.

Hope is trying to sing in tune.

Hopium is believing it happened.

Hope is a kick in the butt.

Hopium is an easy chair.

Hope is “in the shadows,  
in the people who are inventing the world  
while no one looks.” (Solnit)

Hopium is just looking.

Hope says “cannabis is safe.”

Hopium says “tobacco too!”

Hope is wanting tomorrow to be better than today.

Hopium is counting on it.

Hope is shouting at the TV.

Hopium is thinking somebody hears you.

Hope is writing a poem.

Hopium is believing it will be published.

Hope is making cornbread stuffing.

Hopium is thinking it won't taste like cornbread.

Hope is taking supplements.

Hopium is taking supplements.



## Our Jack

Through Jack's old brain  
the ideas fly,  
hardly stopping  
to say goodbye.

He has to talk  
to a big group.  
He wrote his text.  
It follows soup.

He wonders did  
he brush his teeth.  
His teeth feel Yes,  
to his relief.

He did his tie.  
His shirt was white.  
Ready to go!  
All seemed alright.

But things came loose.  
Jack was midway,  
his pages were  
in disarray.

He had no choice.  
Keep on reading!  
No one noticed.  
Fears receding.



---

It was over  
in the middle,  
and no one cared,  
not one piddle.

The crowd it cheered.  
They loved old Jack.  
He was their man  
with no going back.



---

## Learning About Deaning

I was proud to become a dean.  
The provost then had a joke for me.  
A rich man came to Yale to see  
and for his visit he had a screen.

“I’ll meet the president,” said he,  
“but no one lower than a dean.”  
“No problem,” he was told, “We agree.  
There is no one lower than a dean.”

You may recall Handsome Dan,  
Yale’s famous bulldog mascot,  
a dog I wish I’d soon forgot.  
For Dan, I did what a new dean can.

Dan attended a big reception,  
one I had for all our donors.  
Dan had fun eating cheese sliders  
but upchucked all without exception.

Being dean, I looked around for staff  
as the crowd stepped carefully  
around what was in Dan’s belly  
and some guests suppressed a laugh.



---

Soon I was on my hands and knees  
armed with some paper towel  
and with a ruler for a trowel,  
wondering if it was blue cheese.

So I was off to a very good start!  
Being dean requires an attitude  
of living through all vicissitudes.  
I was learning to play the part.



---

## The Human Condition – Part I

On hot days an old man named Joe  
would head to the beach for the show.  
The bikinis were getting quite meager  
and he would dream of being still eager.  
On his trip home he was simply aglow.



George was on the cusp of success.  
He gave his big job no rest.  
But he lost his family and friends,  
and he came soon to doubt his ends.  
So he asked Siri what she'd suggest.



There was once a guy named Rice  
who wrote poems near the end of his life.  
A few said they were good,  
but no one really understood:  
writing them was his Dune spice.



---

There was a young chap named Nate  
who always noted the food on your plate.  
His wife warned, “On pain of our sever,  
Nate, you must not ever, ever  
comment on what a woman ate!”



There was a Black man named Strong  
who knew he was done wrong.  
He was told “just get along”  
but he refused that old song  
and instead he sued Officer Braun.





---

## In Bed

My dog has positional anxiety.  
He awakes and moves quite quietly  
around and around and around  
making small circles on his bed,  
searching for just the right place  
to put first his rear then his head,  
one that feels satisfactory.

Complicating the situation  
is his friend on the cushion.  
Once a pup barely tolerated,  
she's now too big a friend  
to be pushed and relegated  
to a small corner at the end.

If a dog can worry so  
about taking the right position  
and how to relate to another,  
imagine then the human condition  
when it comes to sharing the cover.



---

## Fishing with the Family

There once was a boat that the salesman said  
was solely owned by the preacher.

“He used it on Sundays after church  
to take out his wife, the teacher.”

Out on charming Chincoteague Bay

I remember it all with a sense of dread.

Every last word that salesman said  
went straight into my gullible head.

Embarrassment can still turn me red.

Out on charming Chincoteague Bay

Never buy a new boat or an old motor,  
that’s the sage advice from my father.

I could have listened a great deal better  
and thus greatly reduced my bother.

Out on charming Chincoteague Bay

The motor died early one Sunday  
fishing with my family that day  
far into Chincoteague Bay.

The good news is, I’m pained to say,  
the Coast Guard was not too far away.

Out on charming Chincoteague Bay



---

## Reboot

I wish I could plug me in  
and get me fully charged.  
There is memory I need to keep,  
and messages I need to send.

Old models need special care.  
The interface still works,  
but user-friendly means  
something rather different—

a slower response time  
and more time sleeping  
are not the all of it.  
Getting logged in  
is a special problem.

The faces our cameras see  
and zoom around the world  
are not the old familiar ones,  
but new ones weak-eyed and worn  
from searching, staring, scrolling.

I fear the dreaded crash,  
a loss of precious information,  
perhaps unrecoverable for all time.  
One crash too many and  
there is nothing left to upload.



---

## Freedom Isn't Free

A prominent man named Panetta  
was smitten by the bordello's Loretta.  
He loved her dark almond eyes  
and adored her marmalade thighs.  
But soon he came to regret her.

The police raided the bordello  
just as the weed was getting him mellow.  
He was completely surprised;  
he was found compromised.  
His solid respectability could become jello.

He claimed he was inspecting the place,  
said his business needed the space.  
Loretta he said was his partner,  
that she was the one who was smarter.  
He thought that would buy him some grace.

The friendly police let Panetta go free.  
But that did not let the matter be.  
Loretta was a good business lady  
and just a little bit shady.  
Each year he pays her a big fee.



---

## Chinese New Year's Resolutions

It is the Year of the Rat.

Be the unbelled cat.

It is the Year of the Ox.

Be strong, a Fort Knox.

It is the Year of the Tiger.

Be fierce, but quieter.

It is the Year of the Rabbit.

Be still, a new habit.

It is the Year of the Dragon.

Be the circle of the wagons.

It is the Year of the Snake.

Be alert and awake.

It is the Year of the Horse.

Be a gentle great force.

It is the Year of the Goat.

Be the butt of a good joke.

It is the Year of the Monkey.

Be clever and spunky.

It is the Year of the Rooster.

Be a morale booster.

It is the Year of the Dog.

Be a friend for the long slog.

It is the Year of the Pig.

Be steady, no zag-zig.



---

## Zombies Walking

Your slip's showing.  
Math's beyond her knowing.  
Make a carbon copy.  
His handwriting's sloppy.  
The check is in the mail.  
That's beyond the pale.  
He's seated below the salt.  
The misbehavior's his own fault.  
Sunday is a day of rest.  
You must wear your Sunday best.  
The iceman comes.  
The Colorado runs.  
The free market.  
You can bank on it.  
It's a shotgun wedding.  
It's good sledding.  
Let's go out to the movie.  
His flattop's groovy.  
Justice is blind.  
Make payment in kind.  
The woods go on forever.  
Humans are very clever.  
Ease off the gas pedal.  
The loser also gets a medal.



---

# Climate Negotiations

Brazil's new plans for Amazon destruction are what prompted its abrupt decision not to host world climate negotiations.

Now the small island nation of Jose Cuervo has become an international hero for bravely stepping into the breach.

Its main proffers are, first, its beach with cabanas to watch the erosion. Then, diving on reefs newly bleached,

the few fish now caught by explosions. But most important for negotiators *arriva*: unlimited quantities of blue agave tequila!



---

## Hey, You Males!

Hey, you males,  
do you ever feel like  
a praying mantis,  
the weaker sex  
here for procreation  
then dispensable,  
even devourable,  
by the new woman?  
She is tough, resilient,  
smart, and she persists.  
Some reward, I say,  
for the great state of  
the world we made  
in countless generations  
of our manly leadership!  
I worry about rising up, or  
maybe just speaking out,  
but I am too tired  
and my back hurts, and  
privately, I think women  
are right about us.





---

## Embrace of the Virus

Bring your own wine to communion!  
That's the day's COVID commandment.  
Someone said don't breathe on the cheese.  
This thing has made fools of us.  
Haven't we had enough already?

So, after my fourth injection,  
I put up my masks,  
ventured out into the big world,  
and gave some hugs.  
Next thing I knew I was wrapped in the  
feverish embrace of a new Omicron, and  
wondering who breathed on the cheese.



---

## Johnny's Confession

Before the wrong me emerges,  
know I resisted half my urges!

The other half? My life's story.  
It's a story shorn of glory.

I thought at first my BB sights  
could not shoot out the town street lights.<sup>1</sup>

I made the fake IDs, a little gold.  
Some friend, the one who told.<sup>2</sup>

Shoplifting then seemed smartest.  
Hiding Pringles was the hardest.<sup>3</sup>

I stole some bikes, a mere trifle.  
So then I stole a motorcycle.<sup>4</sup>

I took it round the Cabot Trail.  
How easily I ended up in jail!<sup>5</sup>

The judge said, "Son, you must reform.  
You must obey the common norm."<sup>6</sup>

In back my mom then shouted,  
"Make the jail one more crowded!"<sup>7</sup>



My mom had long been worn with me.  
Now that was there for all to see.<sup>8</sup>

The judge then said, “He’s just like boys.  
It is your mind with which he toys.”<sup>9</sup>

So, I own up to all the things I’ve done.  
I was, all said, just having fun.<sup>10</sup>

.....

<sup>1</sup> The police took my BB gun and never returned it!

<sup>2</sup> Pretending to be from Hospital 1, I got blank birth certificates from Hospital 2.

<sup>3</sup> Sardines were the easiest.

<sup>4</sup> A giant Harley! My dream is still to run off with a ’52 Vincent Black Lightning.

<sup>5</sup> Several nights in the central cellblock of the Halifax jail!

<sup>6</sup> Thank the Lord I was still a juvenile.

<sup>7</sup> This is the problem with my mom.

<sup>8</sup> Can you imagine having such a mom?

<sup>9</sup> The judge saw through to mom and me. Amazing woman, the judge that is.

<sup>10</sup> Life doesn’t last long. You better have fun with it!



---

## There Once Was a...

There once was a woman named Jane.  
She spoke out, so some men thought her a pain.  
On Choice, she ramped up the decibels to double,  
and she gave six Justices big trouble.  
She won when Roe was law once again.



There was once a character named Corning  
who worked on his poems each morning.  
He always found things to adjust.  
Over words he would endlessly fuss.  
He said his poems were all still aborning.



There was a young woman from Perth  
who had been waltzing almost since birth.  
One exciting night found Matilda  
dancing arm in arm with a lovely Sarah.  
Together they floated far above earth.



There once was a judge named Beau.  
He'd fix tickets and more just so.  
The cops laid a trap  
but he was gone in a snap.  
Beau was last seen in Acapulco.



---

I am thinking it's past time for bed,  
but bed is what I now dread.  
It's something I wish I'd forgot:  
that I have so many trips to the pot.  
But I can find nothing in its stead.



Jan was striving for poetry,  
and she worked quite hard for drollery.  
But her phrases fell flat some times,  
and she had trouble with her rhymes.  
Her big soul saved her from obscurity.



Lucas sat down to write a lim'rick.  
He deployed a many a gimmick.  
Luke thought he was quite clever,  
but his wife murmured "never."  
So he closed his tablet, heartsick.



## The Gazette

We old people think we have  
earned the right to be heard!  
To have a respectful audience!  
The young editors think  
we had our chance, and muffed it.

My friend, also eighty, well, he  
thinks that that is ageism.  
He has written some letters  
to the names on the masthead,  
thus showing his age for sure.

So the battle is joined between  
the forces of old age wisdom  
and youth's fresh perspective.  
The scene's set for compromise,  
but no one's in a mood for that!

It's not really a fair fight.  
Those whippersnappers  
have seized the high ground—  
the jobs once ours now held  
by ever younger kids.

My friend and I decided to  
have some drinks instead.  
And at some point that evening  
We rambled onto the idea of  
*The Geezer Gazette.*



---

We'd gather in the has beens—  
old guys and gals still with fire.  
We played with some slogans:  
“The Wisdom of the Aged”  
“ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS BIG PRINT.”  
“Wisdom! Experience! ...Wisdom!”  
(or did I say that?)

We dreamed of working again  
with writers who'd earned their spurs,  
who'd started out covering sports  
and recalled Scotty Reston's quip:  
“I don't know what I think  
until I read what I've written.”

The *Gazette* would have a special  
Department of Endless Edits,  
staffed by the most crotchety  
for submissions from those under 50.  
Youngsters would start as cub reporters  
assigned to cover peach pageants and parades.

The evening ended, a short drive home  
lost in my memories of waiting for  
the morning papers, sure to find there  
my latest Op Ed filled with optimism  
and the rambunctiousness of youth.



---

## Happy Ending. Not!

The beach was fabulous.  
It could have been salubrious  
for all us youngcoulous.  
But we drank superfluous.  
Grip on reality got tenuous,  
self-control became laborious,  
hand driving car was tremulous,  
skidding was furious,  
so that was the end of us,  
far beyond neosporious.  
Remorseful now, all of us—  
heaven not so bounteous,  
food not really scrumptious,  
the lectures very ponderous.  
God makes fun of us.  
He makes us abstemious!  
We are just incredulous.  
An ending ignominious.





---

## From a Child's Garden of Sensible Verse

My Mom and Dad keep telling me  
the person I must grow up to be.  
They made a list of things to do.  
One is to double knot my shoe.  
Another is to learn to hear  
which words are good  
and which are swear.  
My parents seem to use them all.  
Damn, I swear that takes some gall!



They say the laws of nature don't allow  
a bug to become a cow.  
Then, they must explain to me why  
I see this yellow butterfly.  
They say the sky is ablaze,  
but I believe it's cold up there.  
They say the human mind is beautiful.  
Not with all the things I hear!  
Perhaps I'm young to be so jaded,  
but truth and error seem so conflated.



I was wandering carefree and happy,  
but now I realize that I am lost.  
I hope they find me pretty snappy  
or there will be big costs.  
The goldfish will not be fed,  
and I won't have a proper bed.  
But the biggest cost will surely be  
the fun they'll make of little me.  
I might be alive or maybe dead.  
Either, I'll have lost my local cred.



---

## Thanks to Weezie

My son's dog once got in stickers;  
he quickly lay down in a heap.  
Weezie went there to comfort him,  
and she pulled them out with her teeth.

When Weezie was young and alone  
and she could not hold it any more,  
she went upstairs to the bathroom—  
did her puddle on the hard tile floor.

Weezie slid down a big ice hill.  
She got caught in a bramble pile.  
I went down the hill to free her,  
and she gave me a big dog smile.

She would always ask permission,  
and had a most beautiful way.  
School kids loved to take her to play.  
At the end I tried to say, "Stay."

Scientists do major testing  
to see if dogs have human feelings.  
Lordy, one then must ask aloud:  
What's it that needs more revealing?

I'll leave you with a conviction,  
one I first found in my old heart.  
These dogs, there is nothing better  
in which we humans had a part.



## Ice Would Be Nice

*Expect the end of the world!*

What, then, a flood?

Or will it be fire?

As you might inspire,

Frost said ice,

ice would suffice.

But expect the end of ice.

Without a market price

there is no future for ice.

And even with a price,

Warming has shaved the dice.

Now, I wouldn't swear an oath,

but on fire or flood, I'd say both.



---

## The Human Condition – Part II

Two wives whose lives were on repeat  
decided that life without men would be sweet.  
They bought themselves a used car  
but the car didn't go very far.  
So they called a mechanic named Pete.



Teachers of a new poet named Vince  
said he should use “the personal intense.”  
Poems should not be a talk at TED, they said,  
or sound like the lectures he once read.  
Still, he wrote on matters of social consequence.



What a beautiful bird, the Macaw!  
More colorful than what we before saw.  
Yet Nature was troubled by such beauty  
and saw balancing that beauty her duty.  
Macaws now croak the most awful **Craw! Craw!**



There was a young dog named Sally  
who on walks would famously dally.  
One day she met Billy the beagle  
and off they flew like an eagle.  
Now she knows all about phalli.



Some said Darius was stropky.  
They said he was always grumpy.  
But what's a person to do?  
All his gripes were perfectly true!  
His bad attitude just came naturally.



## Thought Police

Are the thought police around?  
Yes, well please bring them in.  
Have a seat, anywhere. Some tea?  
Once I thought my thoughts were good,  
but now they cry out for policing.  
My anger needs modulating.  
My hopes need lifting.  
My vision of societal decline  
definitely needs a bottoming.  
Do you have experience  
with others in this situation?  
Have you prescribed TV?  
Perhaps House of Cards?  
Or The Handmaid's Tale?  
Or The Night Of?  
The Wire and Breaking Bad  
were more upbeat. Maybe them?  
Buying things, you say. Shopping.  
You know I've thought of that!  
Do you provide money?  
Okay. I understand. Let's move on.  
You say hard work then. Hmm.  
You mean like in the yard?  
Or for pay, like a barista?  
I've got my doubts about that.  
I already work two barista jobs.  
Can we settle on a puppy?



## Half Naked and Other Moments

Early in Michaelmas term  
 the Dean said with a touch of wit,  
 “I do not care if you walk on the grass,  
 but you may not walk across it.”  
 Well, that was a rule of great clarity.  
 So we bought some Scotch eggs and  
 warm bitter from the buttery,  
 found a nice open spot on the grass,  
 lay down on our backs, and tried not  
 to think about the afternoon class.



Part way through my lecture,  
 I was confronted by a heckler,  
 “I don’t believe in global warming!”  
 At such points I reply about science  
 and trot out my most charming.  
 But this once I paused hardly a bit,  
 “Global warming doesn’t care at all  
 whether or not you believe in it.”  
 That felt good, and is the nicest way  
 I’ve called someone a first class twit.



I try to do what my doctor says,  
 and I keep good dogs at my feet.  
 I try too to be one who cares  
 and pays attention to what he eats.  
 But a person’s got to take some chances  
 and dance now and then to the devil’s beat.  
 While I’ve cut out the cannabis trances,  
 I once was stopped half naked on Main Street.





## Where the World Is Local (Rural Edition)

Mailboxes are used for many things, plus mail.  
The postman just smiles.

The town store will take a message.  
“Please remind her to bring some mortadella home.”

Cars stop in the road to chat.  
The other cars wait and don't blow.

Folks ask about our dogs by name.  
Just like they were our children.

There are no secrets.  
Except where to find morels.

Big box stores are kept out of our area!  
Shoppers head to the strip mall across the state line.

Our dear Mamie, living at home, is 98.  
There's a sign-up sheet for visits with her.

It is a mistake to close the blinds.  
It just makes folks suspicious.

The neighbors' garden is an embarrassment.  
It embarrasses me every time I see mine.



---

## Callie, the Prodigal Dog

The prodigal dog is the one full of DEET,  
not the calm one sitting here at my feet.  
I wish there were something I could do.  
Instead I'll just wait here, and I'll stew.

Wherever there's DEET she will lick it.  
It's a habit now; she can't kick it.  
It's only one of her profligate ways.  
Mostly she just teases and plays.

Her big sister listens so well.  
She's slower but does what you tell.  
The prodigal dog is much brighter,  
but there's nothing on earth I can teach her.

Problem is, she's cute as can be.  
She does tricks you definitely should see.  
She amuses her parents so greatly.  
Have you seen what she's done just lately?

So we shower her with oohs and aahs,  
while big sis sits watching for cars.  
Sometimes big sis gets quite jealous,  
which she clearly knows how to tell us.

Time and talent are going to waste  
as Callie grows up at her playful pace.  
She's not a puppy any more.  
Did you see her levitate off the floor?



---

With apologies to my friend Folly, the best,  
a finer dog than this poem suggests.  
She's the de facto mom of our little pest.  
With her, we are just doubly blessed.

What Callie knows was taught by Folly.  
Lab things, not those of the border collie.  
Big sis Folly is patient endlessly  
as Callie tugs her jowls relentlessly.

This verse must have a happy ending.  
But life with Callie is just beginning.  
Do I hope that she'll get serious?  
Giving bugs leeway for biting us?  
I am sure Callie will grow up fine.  
It's all just a matter of time.



---

## Smokey

She sat there on the toasted bagel  
wild and smoky and sassy as you like,  
and looked me in the eye and said,  
Could you give me some good EVOO  
rather than that cream cheese?  
And I said sure, whatever you want.  
You must not be from the city?  
No, she said, but nearby.  
And then she asked, do you have  
some fine chopped red onion?  
Sure, I said, that's a good choice.  
And while I was getting the onion,  
she said, since you are up,  
please get some capers too.  
And rinse them if you don't mind.  
I don't mind at all, not a bit.  
You must be going out today, I said.  
Yes, she replied. My friend is giving a party  
and I want to look nice—my best.  
I hope you have a good time, I said.  
Yes, she said, with a sly little smile.  
We have been friends a long time  
and I try not to ever let him down.  
Would you like pepper? I asked.  
Honey, she said, pepper I do not need.



---

## As Soon as I Get Well

When I get well,  
I'm going to be insufferable!  
When my legs work again,  
"let's scramble up that hill"  
will be heard once more,  
as my kids roll their eyes.  
When my endurance returns,  
I will challenge Cas to a fast 10K.  
When I have found my balance,  
I will take on Jim down the  
Youghiogheny in rubber duckies,  
and dare Char to join me  
skreeing in the Rockies.  
When my libido returns,  
well, that will be interesting.  
When I am at full strength again,  
I'm pushing this walker to Goodwill  
and organizing some touch football.  
I don't think I was made to sit here  
in the recliner in front of the TV  
looking at Wheel of Fortune and  
dying with each awful bit of news.  
So get ready world!  
I expect to be back any day now.



## Consider the Leaders

BBC said world leaders are havoring.  
Over here, that word is, well, napoo.  
Yet, truly, havoring may be  
better than being decisive.  
Consider who are the leaders!  
Some leaders we prefer vacillating,  
procrastinating, murmuring.  
We will celebrate their prudence,  
circumspection, and their caution,  
sometimes even declaring it wisdom  
and meriting a nice vacation.



---

## When We Were Just Four

We were just four,  
playing on the floor  
of Billy's big side porch,  
when along came a spider  
and sat close beside us.

There is a lot still to go  
if you're a boy of four,  
so much you need to know.  
We found a toy by the door,  
gave that poor spider a blow.

When what should appear  
from under that toy but  
a hundred tiny spiders  
spreading out around us,  
many headed straight  
for our little bare legs,  
tiny spiders coming  
faster and faster.

Needless to say  
we hurried away  
ran quick from that place,  
and hid somewhere safe—  
in Billy's mom's skirt  
in the kitchen.



On that summer day  
in a time far away,  
I learned a lesson for sure.  
It's now a cliché but  
its warning rings true:  
'Tis best not to mess  
with Mother Nature.





---

## The Human Condition – Part III

I once knew an old couple  
whose relationship was not very supple.  
She was dreaming of new days  
but he was set in old ways.  
Just imagine the constant kerfuffle!



Fay was a person with miles to say.  
Confidentiality was not in her DNA.  
She was the local purveyor of gossip,  
just like turning on the faucet,  
until the day the hose aimed her way.



There once was an old man named Merv  
whose ideas had been a bit ahead of the curve.  
That gave him great hope.  
Maybe he wasn't a dope.  
His new views would soon hit a nerve.



---

There once was a man called Ray  
who asked God what bills he should pay.  
He found it was a great relief  
to have such deep belief.  
He was happy to his very last day.



Erin was a woman of some daring.  
At school she was already preparing.  
She had something important in mind:  
empowering those who were kind  
and committed to neighborhood caring.



---

## Please Don't Have My Funeral

Please don't have my funeral.  
But if you must, leave me out of it.  
I cannot bear even the thought.  
Pew on pew only sparsely filled.  
The minister at a loss officiating  
for one so fallen from the faith.  
My poor acquaintances  
dragooned to speak,  
struggling for a few nice words.  
My last request songs totally  
mismatched to the occasion.  
People mulling about discussing  
almost anything but me and  
ready to get home for the ballgame.

I would have stayed alive  
had I thought of all this!  
Perhaps in lieu of flowers  
and in lieu of anything else,  
my friends, those remaining,  
could gather and share thoughts  
of the dumbest things I'd said.  
That would be fitting  
as well as revealing and fun and  
there is no shortage of material.



# Radiculus

“Radiculopathy”

is the perfect name for it!

Pinched nerves commandeering muscles  
making them mere receptacles  
for a big pain in the buttacle.

“Laminectomy”

is quite apt also!

If it sounds just like  
the neck is coming off,  
well, that’s quite close to  
the truth of the matter.  
The pain is ‘cruciating.  
I must be mad as a hatter.

I long for simple days of  
appendectomy  
and tonsillectomy!  
That was at the beginning of life,  
not now near the end of me.  
And if they offer again the knife?  
Maybe I will just wait and see.

I may not have to wait too long.  
I can clearly hear old Charon’s song.  
I’m sure the emperor of malady  
is waiting there for aging me.  
Problems now lurk around my door.  
I thought I had a long time more!



---

## The Evening News

These days the evening news fills  
my brain and other vacant spaces  
with disgust and deep loathing.  
Sometimes there is real fury.  
All the decades of good work:  
how did it come to this?

The evening news, of course, begins  
at 8 a.m. with Amy Goodman. Already  
she has worked up a simmering scorn.

Then it picks up again at noon, when  
Andrea Mitchell is on and has  
steeled herself with incredulity.  
She is followed closely by  
the irreverently bemused Jake Tapper.  
Jake is great at spotting hypocrites,  
of which he finds no shortage.

Then, there are the weather and other  
catastrophes brought to us on the  
actual evening news by Lester Holt.  
He tries desperately to show us  
the world is not really falling apart,  
even though it certainly seems that way.

All this negativity  
rattles my positivity,  
sapping my old age strength.

Perhaps I should just relax  
and turn on the late news.  
It may be time for Rachel.



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## Post-Op 2018

Suddenly awake!  
Hospital's a blur.  
Pain cautions: don't stir.

So I lie here medicated,  
still not concentrated,  
much less authenticated.

TV's turned to something dinky.  
Then, two strange men in Helsinki.  
The bald one says "not me."  
The orange one says, "You see!"  
I cry, "please, no more TV!"

Recalling now a dream of mine:  
as the surgeon was removing  
generous portions of my spine,  
a powerful Vermont woodsman  
in a wool and worn plaid shirt  
and holding a sharp chainsaw,  
someone I knew rather well  
but could not exactly tell,  
mounted my back gracefully,  
knees on my shoulder blades,  
and started sawing at my spine,  
removing triangles perfectly  
holding a smile the whole time.

The surgeon says it was a big success.  
Has one ever said anything much less?



## Going Crazy

For years I tried to be  
calm, sane, and reasonable.  
I thought that was the path  
to being highly credible.

“We’ll save the world, if our  
approach is non-threatening.  
Persuasion is the key,” I said  
to co-workers who were listening.

“Businessmen will hear us,  
and politicians too.  
They will take our advice,  
and then will follow through.”

But it didn’t work out that way.  
We find ourselves today  
in a sad, troubled place  
with the world in disarray.

Events, we see, are shaped  
by those unhinged from reality,  
moved by mindless angsts,  
who shout to force us to agree.

So I have been at work lately  
to become a lot like crazy.  
I work at it every day;  
it’s not a task for the lazy.

The aim of my new project is  
changing my whole modality.  
When I’m carrying on plum crazy,  
perhaps I too can shape reality!



## This Is for the Birds

I have a word feeder,  
 one heaven fills each day  
 chock full up with good words  
 just there for me to say.

I take a word like “hedge.”  
 It makes me think of “row,”  
 a place the winds are slowed  
 and where the Brown-head Cowbirds go.

Color words are special.  
 It is a thrill to get a “red.”  
 I’ll use it in Redstart,  
 but the Redpoll would do instead.

Some words are palindromes —  
 such as the good old “bob.”  
 It finds a place in Bobolink.  
 The Bobs are my heartthrob.

Most lovely one of all?  
 I need to get a “beak.”  
 The Evening Grosbeak was just here  
 and flew when I let out a shriek.

Getting towards the bottom,  
 the word I get is “mouse.”  
 (A family of mice once lived  
 here in my Bluebird house.)  
 I’m not sure how to best use it,  
 but then, of course, Titmouse.

Some words are hard to rhyme.  
 But don’t think one is “Wren.”  
 If you get in trouble rhyming,  
 don’t put it at the end!





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## All You Need To Know About Information Technology

As it constantly grew ahead of me,  
I have climbed the mountain of IT.  
But from the small peak I have reached,  
I see that climb going to infinity.  
So I give up here on learning more.  
I'm as techy as I will ever be.

My new iPhone can do so many things  
way beyond my comprehension.  
I am happy to know that that is so,  
but I can't give it more attention.

Facebook is enwrapped in scandal,  
but it's such a money maker!  
It takes your personal information  
and quickly sells to any taker.

I have never written a Tweet.  
Twitter will stay beyond the pale.  
I have already seen too many Tweets  
from senders who should be in jail.

So I step off the uphill train  
and walk onto the platform.  
From that point on I'll just admire  
the techy things my son Jim performs.



## Golden Okra

Ocracoke is lovely the way  
little beach villages once were  
and still should be today—  
an island worth remembering,  
a restful, pleasant place to stay.

It was on lovely Ocracoke  
in our cute little space  
when she said, “it’s stuffy,”  
and set my mind to race.  
She likes piles of covers and  
banishes breezes to the beach,  
so I worry what she meant  
in her short two-word speech.  
Can it be the company’s stuffy,  
when it’s just me here with her?  
I know that I can be fussy,  
but am I also getting stuffy?

Home now from Ocracoke,  
I hang golden okra in the window,  
sold there as Christmas ornaments,  
hung here with adoration and thanks.  
I dutifully recall my first taste of okra:  
too slimy to be high in any ranks.  
But okra worship begins in earnest  
with first frying in the old oil tank,  
golden crisp and simply heavenly.  
I don’t listen now to okra cranks.



I stare at the golden okra  
and still wonder what she meant.  
I know that I am changing,  
but in directions to lament?  
I'm flinging the windows open,  
letting the breeze blow through.  
I'll continue just as I am, and  
see if this room's stuffy too!



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## Can the Poet Let the Poem Write Itself?

Hi, Poem. I'm trying  
not to think of you, but  
I hope you are thinking  
of me. Together, you and I  
are supposed to capture  
a pause-worthy reality.

The best way forward,  
I have heard, is for me  
to be almost in a trance,  
see you with a side-ways glance,  
not straight on eye-to-eye,  
while you, Poem, write yourself,  
and I step back and let you try.

Poem, you could be a poem  
about a poet and a poem who  
can't quite rise to the moment.  
Here's one route.  
(Far from letting you go with the flow,  
I seem to be showing you a place to go.)

"The poem could not get through the door.  
It complained bitterly to the landlord.  
She replied, 'you've got to do more!  
Or instead, you could just puddle on the floor  
or slide away like the watch of Salvador.'"



## The Rhymer

There're many things that are a curse.  
 One of them, I found, is writing verse.  
 When painting, I saw shapes everywhere--  
 forms of bear and chair and curly hair.  
 With verse, a tumble of words float down.  
 One digs through them 'til the right one's found.  
 Then, it must stay still, well situated,  
 to see if a good rhyme germinated.  
 Some like me still believe in rhymes.  
 Some find rhymes old as chimes.

Rhymes ... chimes, that works well.  
 Why not start with a good rhyme  
 and see what poem that foretells?

These random rhymes are from a book.  
 Can I use them without gobbledygook?  
 Prayer – Despair  
 Surprise – Prize  
 Detest – Blessed  
 Resign – Design  
 OK, it's time now to have a look.

“The poet was near despair.  
 He felt he had not a prayer.  
 To losing, he was now resigned -  
 not the fate he once designed.  
 The judges he surely would detest.  
 But our poet was among the blessed.  
 The announcement was a big surprise.  
 His sassy poem had won first prize.”



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## Leftovers

Truthiness: I will see it when I believe it.

Where does time go to die? To the Cuckoo's nest.

It's just a matter of time  
a splatter of wine  
a shatter of spine  
a clutter of crime  
a platter of lime  
a spatter of grime  
a blabber of mine

Maybe he will be younger by Election Day.

Rain, rein, reign,  
please go away.  
Maybe yet a poem,  
but on another day.

The small strings vibrate.  
It's subatomic music.  
The quarks are singing.

I will rest my case  
with the scarlet tanager.  
There, in the plum tree.



The great Percy Bysshe Shelley said,  
“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”  
Today those words seem rather dead.  
Still, they blaze across the banner here unfurled.  
May these words be heard and not just read!



III

# Going Out





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## A Morning Around New Year's Day

Real Vermonters love  
a morning like this,  
a land of ice and snow,  
clear, crisp, and 5 below.  
The purple shadows  
from big bare maples  
reach out across  
the slopes and rolls.  
The big balsam bows  
with her new white coat  
while the birdhouses  
wear their snowcaps  
and the swings try out  
their new white loads as  
the wind gives easy pushes.  
Once-green everything  
now everywhere white  
except the red of sumac.  
The deer will browse at dusk  
but now what moves are  
chickadees flitting and flying  
with their friends the juncos.  
There are a few goldfinch  
at the feeders, but they left  
their gold somewhere safe.  
The dogs bark when the  
long-hanging roof ice  
drops in a noisy plump.



---

It is a beautiful day  
for a walk on the road  
or to head out with  
skis or snowshoes,  
and also very nice to return  
to a warm sweet-smelling house.

Still, my wife and I were raised in warmer climes.  
In a month or so we will be chilled enough to  
take out of the refrigerator and be enjoyed  
by friends and family on the beach in Carolina.



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## Lift Up These Eyes

We chased away the mist,  
opened up the day,  
blew holes in the clouds,  
and called down the sun.  
It lit the wet rocks where  
we dropped to our knees,  
leaned over the edge, followed  
the red talus slope down and down  
as it fell to green embroidery  
framing the dark river below.

The breeze began to stir.  
We heard the tent door flap.  
Little Cas is crawling out  
into the morning light. She lifts  
her head, sees us, and sends  
an ear-to-ear crescent-eyed grin—  
a moment of shared delight  
as bright as the new-found sun.  
Good morning, Cas, we say  
in all the languages we know.



## Small Waves Putter About

The tide is out and the small waves putter about.  
The beach stretches away as long as life.  
Fragments of great shells gather in random piles.  
Gray ocean, gray sky, shades of gray today.

The beach stretches away as long as life.  
A dot of red in the sand, a child's lost shoe.  
Gray ocean, gray sky, shades of gray today.  
Is this the way, in all these shades of gray?

A dot of red in the sand, a child's lost shoe.  
There was a child once with a bright blue bucket.  
Is this the way, in all these shades of gray?  
Was he the child and the sand flakes of gold?

There was a child once with a bright blue bucket.  
A shimmering beach the day he fell for her forever.  
Was he the child and the sand flakes of gold?  
Her amber skin glowed in the noon high sun.

A shimmering beach the day he fell for her forever.  
The tide was out and the small waves pattered about.  
Fragments of great shells were glistening in the sand.  
The beach stretches away as long as life.



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## Getting Close

A half century ago my wife and I walked up  
Jack Mountain into an unexplored meadow.  
I held my little girl's hand in mine,  
we carried our young sons on our backs.  
It was summer, our sweatbands were  
drenched, and we were exhausted. Still,

the scene ahead as we entered the meadow  
startled us: everywhere white daisies  
and Queen Anne's Lace, black-eyed Susans,  
yellow yarrow, pink aster, purple thistle,  
orange hawkweed and early goldenrod.  
Our young daughter looked up at us and asked—

“Are we in Heaven?”

Just yesterday I was walking an old  
logging road that runs uphill through  
some green shade-dappled saplings  
and opens out to a big meadow on top.  
As I approached the meadow on the ridge,  
all I could see ahead was the late day sun

sitting, pausing on the crest of the hill  
and pouring a blinding gold over the horizon.  
I just stood there in the saffron glow.  
Two dark silhouettes were on the ridge top.  
It took a second but then I recognized  
my dogs standing there and waiting for me.



## What the Preacher Saw

Looking up, he saw the bluebird sky  
and the Ben & Jerry's clouds,  
the hills moving gently to the woods  
sparkling now with last night's snow.

Two tall pines rising above  
the stick bare branches  
of maple, ash, and beech  
atop Morrill Mountain's ridge.

Silhouetted phthalo green  
against that crisp blue sky,  
the pines seemed a pair, together.  
The preacher paused.

The pine on the left rounded,  
perhaps shaped by lightning.  
The other a rising spire  
leaning leftward, leftward

as if reaching over  
to whisper or be near.  
A steady wind can do that, but  
he thought something more.



---

## Like Snow

The snow's so slow,  
it's barely falling.  
The field is frozen solid,  
the wind gone elsewhere.  
Still, the fat fluffy flakes  
dance and twirl and jump  
trying to stay suspended.

It's time to take a walk  
before the blizzard comes.  
My legs are failing but  
for now I am still able  
to dance and twirl a bit.  
I'll leave the jumping to Folly,  
a dog who can suspend herself  
like snow.



---

## New Farm

So, this is  
what we have:  
a young couple  
who can feel  
the green grass  
in their toes  
know the proper  
order of things  
of hills to home  
and barn shaped  
to fields and woods  
and the beauty  
of enough space  
to see the full scene  
so that they now can  
envision a time  
when sheep played  
white and brown  
dots into the distance  
of a past  
not very far away.  
Not far at all.





---

## Stick Season 2020

Stick season is here!  
The world is deciduous.  
Fall foliage fallen.

Now I see their barn,  
a red-green dot on the hill.  
Far away, but not.

The way the land lies,  
less color but more contour.  
Just like our faces.

The last hay is in,  
fields left to murders of crows.  
Brown stubble looks gray.

Honkers overhead!  
Chickadees flit and stay close.  
We go south like geese.

Turkeys stride in lines.  
Stick forest hides them quickly.  
It hides great moose too.

Ash trees wait in fear.  
Slender limbs reach to heaven,  
offer anxious prayer.



---

Good friend passed away.  
Buried before the ground froze.  
No answer for loss.

Nature's shutting down.  
She is going now to sleep.  
White blanket needed.

Tall pine sentinels.  
The evergreens do not sleep,  
keep the woods secure.

Dusky dark at 4.  
Soon the sun will be reborn.  
Longer days ahead.

This year's almost done.  
Anxiety was its name.  
Tree limbs wave with joy!

Calm now in the woods.  
A quiet settles in and spreads.  
For the moment, peace.

Put out the brain fire!  
Settle your mind in the heart.  
Let your new eye see.



---

## American Acropolis

Atop the steep green hill  
massive sides of ancient board  
gleam in the bright sun.  
She is huge, she captures  
the landscape, holds the eye.  
Her shadows define  
shapes pleasing enough  
to rival the fairest mean.  
The great barn seems a temple  
for the goddesses Gaea and Demeter,  
the place where nature's full  
fecundity finds a grateful host.



---

## Generations

I plodded downstairs early this morning  
and was sipping a much-needed coffee  
when I noticed the yard had more than its  
normal complement of robins to see.  
These early birds are getting worms, I thought,  
worms the heavy rain last night has brought.

I saw something very strange in the yard,  
and at that moment our son phoned us.  
Char's a busy guy, driving then to work.  
There's always family news to discuss.  
It's a short drive and is his main time free.  
Still, he shares this time with his mom and me.

I listened, but the robins were distracting.  
Three were close together, each bird dancing  
a quick two-step, moving across the yard.  
The largest robin led this prancing  
followed closely by two smaller ones—  
their triangle hopped around in the sun.

Their movement seemed quite random, but then  
the lead bird spotted something by the tree.  
She paused while the two trailing birds jumped  
quickly to the front, and then there were three  
beaks all pecking at the unlucky worm.  
My guess this is bird parenting confirmed.



Our son said his daughters have a busy day,  
both a soccer game and a hip-hop class.  
He'll cover one and his wife the other.  
The bird triangle hopped on to new grass.  
I thought then how these events well captured  
the artistry of lives being nurtured.



---

# High Summer

High summer made it here again,  
season of yellow all around.

The sunflowers begin to bend,  
the goldenrods abound.

Season of yellow all around,  
day lilies bright yellow and gold,  
the goldenrods abound.

The monarchs' stories to be told.

Day lilies bright yellow and gold,  
swallowtail and buttercup.

The monarchs' stories to be told.  
Susan's black eyes looking up.

Swallowtail and buttercup,  
I marvel at what my eye now sees.  
Susan's black eyes looking up,  
soon yellow in the trees.

I marvel at what my eye now sees.  
The sunflowers begin to bend,  
soon yellow in the trees.  
High summer made it here again.



---

## Springtime

Winter has had a very long run.  
Welcoming this bright spring sun,  
I'll go looking for early green.  
First, I'll check for rhubarb's sheen,  
then for tiny grass where it's clear,  
the smell of detritus in the air,  
the early buds of daffodils  
poking here and there on our hills.

I've done this now for many years.  
It lubricates my rusty gears.  
I wonder what manner of mind  
could live in April and yet find  
her to be the month most cruel.  
Is it but the poet saying April Fool?  
It seems it's something far more deep:  
depression prefers the winter's sleep.



---

## The Last Monarch

The season of beautiful endings,  
life giving up another round.  
At first it seemed heart rending.  
The fields turned a rusty brown.

Life giving up another round,  
the monarch drifted to the grass.  
The fields turned a rusty brown.  
Fall has now yes come to pass.

The monarch drifted to the grass,  
the maples glowed bright red.  
Fall has now yes come to pass,  
nature putting herself to bed.

The maples glowed bright red.  
Dying away precedes new birth,  
nature putting herself to bed.  
My footprint too upon this earth.

Dying away precedes new birth,  
at first it seemed heart rending.  
My footprint too upon this earth.  
This season of beautiful endings.





---

## From NYC to Vermont

I saw him sliding seamlessly  
through the Broadway crowd.  
What to make of him?  
He seemed more proud than bowed.  
Worlds are made of words,  
and he's been a great maker.  
But he's led a life of bad mistakes.  
Do we stick to what he put on paper?

I imagine him in Vermont  
without the screaming people  
and their jangling jarring stories  
without the neurotic density  
to fuel his words' intensity.  
Could he write among the trees?

Summer brings blue-winged teal  
to the pond down by our house.  
The small ducks drift behind ash branches  
dabbling around, in and out.  
In winter, the ravens will be croaking  
among themselves near my window  
fastened tightly against the cold.  
Life here he could not really know.



---

## For a Moment

A porcelain white and windy day  
a day to watch the chickadees

A foot or more of light new snow  
building drifts along the road

The scattered birdfeeders  
pecked down now and empty

She makes her way across the yard  
her white cap glowing in the sun  
a dusty yellow encircles her neck  
a scarf the Magnolia Warblers wear  
and on her slender back a royal blue  
the color of the Indigo Buntings

She lifts herself arms reaching up  
up to dislodge a pair of frozen feeders  
For a moment I can imagine  
her taking off in graceful flight



---

## The Six Seasons of New England

### *Greening*

Beginning of everything,  
the eternal return.  
Explosions of chartreuse  
a dozen shades,  
viridescence  
but ephemeral.  
Crocuses poke up,  
daffodils show their faces,  
nature waking up.  
Sap made it to your waffles.  
A season of reassurance.

### *Garden*

Means work, so much to do.  
Days long and warm,  
growing season short.  
Everyone busy—  
bringing in the hay,  
setting out the garden,  
putting up the dilly beans,  
hoping for the rains.  
Bluebirds reclaim their houses.  
Baseball and no school.  
A season of sustenance.



*Foliage*

is a harlequin duck,  
impossible not to watch.  
Colors joyous, playful.  
Nature's grace,  
free, bountiful, undeserved.  
Ample old barns, orchards,  
fat sheep, dwarf Nigerian goats,  
county fairs with  
draft horse pulls and pig races  
blues and bluegrass.  
A season of worship.

*Stick*

peaks in November.  
Everything visible, exposed.  
the land lies open.  
It lacks color  
but adds contour.  
Stubble fields where  
once grew hay and corn.  
A thousand snow geese  
feed in the Addison marshes.  
There is a nip in the wind,  
and snow on Camel's Hump.  
A season of seeing.



---

*Snow*

seems forever.  
Pumping the brakes won't  
stop the slide into the ditch.  
Before covid, cabin fever.  
Yet for many snow makes  
this place the joy that it is:  
maple limbs dappled white,  
snowmobile trails snake  
through woods, crossing Nordic ones,  
black diamond slopes awaiting.  
Time for reading.  
A season of contemplation.

*Mud*

is the dreaded one,  
the curse on all  
who use dirt roads,  
and that is everyone.  
Let's hear no more  
of mud, glorious mud:  
the mud is where cars sink to the axles.  
Mud is a rite of passage,  
mercifully short,  
something that must be crossed  
to find the Greening.  
A season of anticipation.



## Delmarva

a truly great spot that  
America most forgot  
you have won our hearts again  
thank you for the oysters  
and the crabs and the clams and the ponies  
thank you a lot  
lord how the kids loved the ponies  
the foal by the road has our hearts

after being away a long time  
we are again the two of us  
walking on Assateague  
a beach so long it's the  
whole of Maryland's shore  
and so pristine its  
sands sparkle and squeak  
laughing gulls laughing with us  
breakers breaking fast  
into the sand's steep slope  
a beautiful blue and pale green  
and a boy asleep in warm dunes

behind the beach are the marshes  
the marshes are owned by the birds  
birds are the best of what's left  
across the marsh on the island  
is quaint Chincoteague town  
oh god there are pieces still here  
of what the watermen had once



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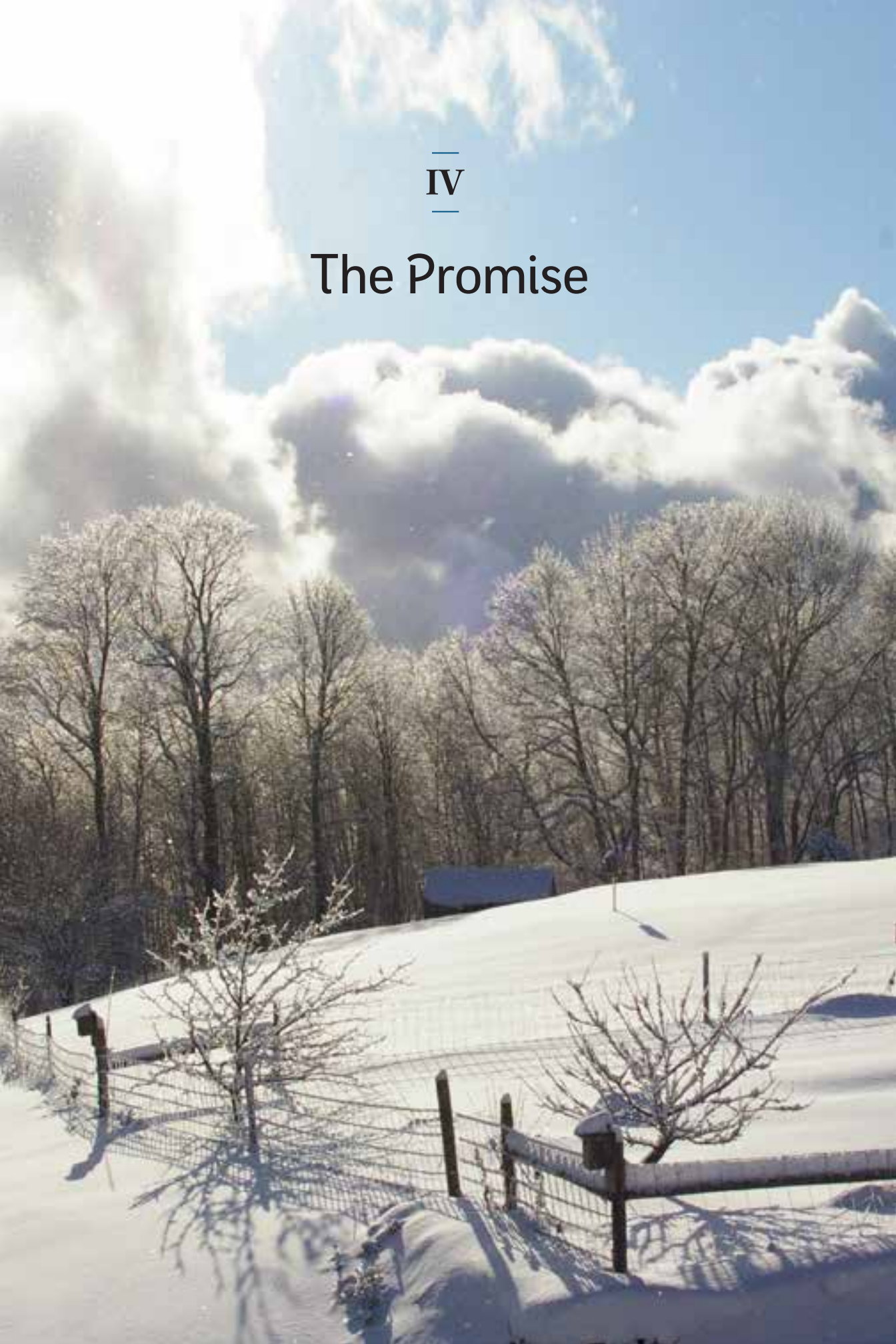
the small lovely houses  
and the big boats and the little boats  
and the nets and the pots  
big men in wet trousers  
and the smell of old fish  
ripe on the docks

but big houses are moving in now  
Marriott and lots more are  
commandeering the island's shore  
the great American machine  
is colonizing little Chincoteague  
an eager participant we surmise  
in her own oncoming demise



—  
IV  
—

# The Promise





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## Bread and Roses

When the big sea has stopped rising  
and the maps we're through revising  
and I can think of storms as friends,  
I'll go down to the beach again.

I'll stand still there in that bright surf  
and sing a song to this dear Earth.  
I'll sing climate change to its end.  
I'll sing tears for where we have been.

I'll sing to things that we have learned—  
the fossils we should not have burned  
releasing the power of former suns,  
bringing losses that cannot be undone.

Sad losses the children will inherit.  
Species gone without much credit,  
thanks to the piles of money earned  
and all the corners left unturned.

I'll sing to anger rising still.  
Our leaders let firms do their will.  
The people did assert control  
but not before the barons stole.

Our job is now to make the best,  
finding purpose in what is left.  
It is a joy to live to fight  
and on that beach to fly two kites.



---

## It's Time for America Again

I think I see America again.  
Every time she seems so lost,  
America finds a touch of sane.

Social injustice is a dark stain.  
But in countless civil protests,  
I think I see America again.

Democracy's hard to sustain.  
Before democracy is lost,  
America finds a bit of sane.

Polluters have had free rein.  
Now there may be climate action.  
I think I see America again.

Migrant treatment's not humane.  
Decency demands a better tack.  
Will America find a touch of sane?

Time now for a bold campaign:  
a struggle for all the children.  
It's time for America again.



---

# Forgiveness

I have some vivid memories  
I wish were not there

We heard it all the time  
in the South in the '50s  
That's mighty white of you!  
racist words spoken then  
as just a casual thank you

I went recently to the  
Blacksonian on the Mall  
and I left there uplifted  
but with moist eyes and cheeks  
When I got home I listened  
to King speak in Memphis  
"I've been to the mountaintop"

Gnawing away inside me are  
the shootings at Mother Emanuel  
the many times Black lives haven't mattered  
the mass incarceration  
the famine of equal opportunity  
the ongoing everyday prejudice

I want to go in supplication  
to the Calhoun Street sidewalk  
to the Edmund Pettus bridge  
to Montgomery's memorial  
to four thousand lynchings  
and ask there for a forgiveness  
that in acts of amazing grace has  
already been given so many times



## Banners Yet To Be Unfurled (Song)

The snow lies lightly on the lilacs  
round by the kitchen door.

The juncos peck in stone cracks  
endless in their search for more.

I think that is my way too,  
to keep the search going on.  
What else really could I do  
but find new ways to scorn?

As Camus said of Sisyphus  
who toiled with his stone,  
there is no fate for us  
that can't be beat by scorn.

And so I scorn what passes here today  
for equality and justice before the law,  
for helping the poor to find a way,  
for promises the troops will soon withdraw.

The politicians are pathetic souls;  
almost every sentence is a lie.  
Recognition is their main goal.  
To integrity they've said good-bye.

Oh purple mountain majesty!  
Oh fruited plains of amber grain!  
The machine crushes endlessly  
everything for investment's gain.



---

And so we search for ways to fight.  
We see the beauty of the snow,  
but we know to make it right  
may require our blood to flow.

We've seen the heads bandaged round,  
the men and women teared by gas.  
Each has earned a special crown.  
They know the system will not last.

Scorn, rage, and many actions:  
protests coming round the world.  
Today we see but a fraction  
of banners yet to be unfurled!



---

## It's Already Tomorrow

it's already tomorrow  
but you know that  
we failed the moment  
way back yesterday  
we were young brash smart  
we thought we knew  
so was the fatal flaw  
hubris or over-confidence  
some say yes but I think  
the fatal flaw was faith  
that our system of political economy  
had a brain big enough and feral enough  
to seek its own preservation  
so the system would work  
at least to hold off the worst  
but no nowhere near so  
tomorrow is now deciding  
the system is yesterday  
in its pain and grief and suffering  
it will banish the system  
to some unheralded past  
the ash heap of history



---

## The Promise

the snow's just gone, the moment feels unreal  
the earth is pat down gray and brown  
a porcupine moves slowly through our field  
headed somewhere between lost and found

nothing too dramatic going on  
so much of life seeming gone  
spring held in check again  
spates of warming asking when  
left bears and sap turning round  
wondering do I now head up or down

I saw a sugar house last night  
late but all cranked up despite  
bright and busy with the boiling  
beer and banter slake the toiling  
these times worth remembering

climate change is messing with the season  
messing too with plain reason  
the climate models are predicting  
that maples will be disappearing  
what's left, what's green we must hold tight  
no, not going gently without a fight



# Independence Day

If I could be what I'm clearly not,  
I would lay my hands upon the world,  
call down a blessing of peace and freedom  
from hunger, pain, illiteracy and oppression.  
I would appoint an ambassador  
to every living species and grant them  
plenipotentiary powers of protection,  
just as I would grant such powers to all  
mothers for their children and charges.  
I would bring hosannas to Pope Francis,  
Thomas Berry and Reverend Barber,  
and to 21 kids who sued for climate  
against government by failure.  
I would call upon the Devil,  
for who would know better,  
to disclose every rancid scheme  
and deplorable machination  
of the rich and powerful, including  
those hiding under corporate shells.  
I would pardon all those unjustly  
imprisoned or prosecuted. And  
I would forgive all those gullible  
and duped or simply uninformed,  
not requiring their repentance but  
merely a promise to use good sense—  
while we all remember the truth  
self-evident at the Founding  
that we are all created equal.





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## Louisiana Climate Change Blues

My house's right here on the marsh,  
the water's coming up to me.  
Only just a matter of time  
'til I hear the slapping of the sea.

Oh Momma, oh Momma—  
Momma's got to move away.  
It's got way too hot in here,  
she needs a cooler place to stay.

I know that I been screwed again.

I got the Louisiana climate change blues.  
It's taking away my world,  
it's taking my world away,  
it's taking my world away.

I got to find fish for a living,  
I try to find crab too.  
But now they're not swimming,  
not bringing fish to you.

The hurricane was such a big one,  
my boat's a total wreck.  
I know no one is watching out for me,  
but I never did suspect.

I know that I been screwed again.  
I got the Louisiana climate change blues.



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## Random Sample

I am not a robot  
lots of online chatter  
everybody knows  
into a ton of trouble  
try this new paella  
running out of time  
who was in charge  
pre-K subcommittee deadlocked  
something never seen before  
a disastrophy, the young girl said  
what will happen next  
anti-semitic material found  
moose population down, ticks blamed  
I'm tired, so very tired  
second Capitol attack  
sign my name and say good-bye  
your Dropbox is full  
where can I sit down  
FBI says tips are up  
herbal immune support is here  
your cup needs some sweet  
pain always leaves a gift  
honey, we're the big door prize  
squeeze me, I squeak



---

## The Strategy: A Conversation

The situation is hopeless...  
and therein lies the hope.

*You are writing again!  
But in riddles now.*

Yes.  
America is in steep decline.  
Failure is all around.  
But that opens many doors,  
something new can be born.

*That would surely be nice.  
But is it “can” or “will”?*

Only “can.”

*What will make the difference?*

You know as well as I,  
vision, preparation,  
struggle, sacrifice.

*Sacrifice?*

Yes. The civil rights struggle,  
the fight against apartheid,  
they put it all on the line.

*So, it's into the streets?*

Yes, there, everywhere  
civic unreasonableness,  
fearless and far-reaching.



---

## Killing Time

Where is today today?

It is so easy to miss.

It comes on quiet puppy feet  
bringing juicy burgers and  
good ideas for killing time.

Then it stealthily slips away,  
and we sink into the morrow.



---

## The Man with a Farm

An old man lives up a hillside  
on a rundown farmstead  
not close to the center of town.  
His unpainted house needs repair;  
rusting machinery is scattered about.  
He stays in one small room downstairs.  
Folks bring to him baskets of food  
at Christmas and at Thanksgiving,  
but he is easy to forget—  
alone, a distance from neighbors.  
He has no kin; he has no dog.  
He can move only with difficulty.  
Trash piles up in the room.  
The end of his belt hangs over  
a foot below his now-thin waist.

Do we know what keeps him going?  
Does he think about his mother?  
Does he carry memories of the farm  
as it once was with milking cows  
and his wife and son helping him  
and he is there on the tractor  
tedding the hay loudly singing church songs.  
Does he love the lilacs now flourishing  
in the rich soil around the falling barn?

As he struggles to make another day,  
does he think this is just the way?  
Some say that may be best for him.  
Yet he may wish a better end.  
He may like to see his land alive again,  
long for someone to help him in his tub.  
He may think there should be friends.



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## Tale of a Small Planet

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Somehow,  
in the staggering vastness of the universe  
a small but glorious ball of life was born.  
As its eons passed,  
a myriad of extraordinary life forms evolved there.  
Among them was the species homo sapiens,  
a small bipedal mammal distinguished initially  
for its very big brain, which helped it to flourish.  
Those with big brains, the human beings,  
grew in time to love music and art and  
found special pleasure in story-telling and gift-giving.  
Partly because they evolved as integral to it,  
partly because it sustained them in many ways,  
the life-giving world around them was revered.  
They found it beautiful and were inspired.



---

But,  
as those big brains grew stronger,  
an extraordinary, world-shattering thing had happened.  
Humans began to reflect on their own existence,  
to be aware of themselves as alive individuals,  
to know their own reflections in a pool,  
and so also to contemplate their own deaths.  
Animals all fight or flee when threatened, but  
the powerful human desire and consuming drive  
to deny and transcend their own oncoming deaths  
was something altogether different,  
something utterly new to the world.  
Quickly, the remarkable power of the big brain  
was harnessed to this uniquely human struggle  
and things began to happen.

As millennia came and went,  
humans pursued several ways to cope  
with the devastating realization,  
the reality of their own mortality.  
Most common has been belief in an Afterlife.  
Another has been belief in Reincarnation.  
An extraordinary approach has been to create  
something that continues to exist after death,  
perhaps a giant stone memorial or a small poem.  
Perhaps a family, or even a family name, or a farm.  
Or something for the history books. Perhaps an empire.  
Something that says, very quietly or quite loudly:  
“I was here. Don’t forget me.”



Meanwhile,  
a development more indirect and more devastating  
was occurring in many ways and places.  
Faced with their vulnerability and ephemerality,  
humans have also compensated for their fatal weakness  
with striving to become grand and invulnerable.  
They have done this by gathering and by growing  
wealth and status and power.  
To aid this approach to coping with existential angst,  
certain economic arrangements have been preferred.  
These arrangements have, by design,  
provided full opportunity for:  
ownership and control,  
growth and expansion,  
dominion and extraction,  
public recognition and preeminence.  
Allowing and sometimes favoring  
competition  
in these evolving economic systems  
has unleashed a more powerful dynamics  
involving insatiable accumulation and growth,  
ruthless exploitation of people and natural resources,  
and vast inequalities of wealth and power.

So. Here we are.

It has been asked, only somewhat in jest,  
whether the big brain was actually a good idea.  
It has also been asked what is to be done now?  
The answer, it would seem, is to be found  
in this little tale of a lovely planet and its inhabitants.





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## We, The People

If we could restart the US of A,  
where then would we begin  
to give the clock new spin  
and take the role creators play?

We will mainly focus on the Founders  
and their badly flawed creation,  
the much-revered Constitution.  
On it the country nearly founders.

To start, there will be no first sin.  
Humans will not be slaves.  
Our story better then behaves,  
so much evil gone with the wind.

Our democracy very nearly dies  
when states not people vote.  
It's time for us to now demote  
the not-so-great Great Compromise.

The Electoral College must also go.  
The popular vote is ignored.  
The People once again get gored.  
To that, our new democracy says no.

All this is made worse when corporations  
are “people” and their money “speech.”  
They now have extraordinary reach,  
matching the power of ordinary nations.

The Commerce Clause must be rethought.  
It can block community action  
and easily undermine local traction.  
Our priority cannot be to have things bought.



---

It is odd that states control elections.  
The foundation of national government  
easily shaken by corrupt state ferment.  
We'll make a new deal for voters' selections.

We will enshrine the right to privacy,  
making it explicit in our new document.  
There, it would be the Choice complement  
to all the other rights we see.

The right of individuals to carry a gun  
wasn't there, until in 2008 the Court said yes.  
We will reclaim gun control from this mess  
and return our streets to having fun.

We humans invented having rights,  
but gave them all to ourselves.  
Omitting "rights of nature" compels  
action to correct the oversight.

We know we can't start America again.  
It is a day dream that comes to this end.  
But there is much that we can mend  
if together we make history bend.

For our democracy's shortfalls  
there are now work arounds.  
We can get to better ground,  
bursting new and ancient walls.

Government of, by, and for the people,  
that is the essence of democracy,  
the meaning of popular sovereignty,  
the bright light in the steeple.



---

## State of the Union

We so want America to succeed!  
But the struggle is uphill, steeply.  
The economic system is hard wired  
for production and profit and power,  
not for people and place and planet.  
A fabled Constitution is outmoded,  
its many checks and balances instead  
saddling us with clogs and barriers,  
while repeatedly providing against  
government of, by, and for the people.

And if that were not enough,  
now, just when a new sense  
of national purpose is imperative,  
when concerted action is most demanded,  
the people themselves are cleaved,  
in trenches facing each other in mutual rejection,  
with massive efforts expended  
for small gains, often rolled back.  
We now know much about the divide  
and the major role of racism fueling it.

It is hard to see where to turn!  
The books are full of good proposals,  
both reformist and radical,  
for near-term and long.  
We know what must be done.  
But how? That is the question.



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This we can do.

We can search for small openings  
seizing opportunities wherever.

We can be crisis ready, anticipating  
moments of punctuated equilibrium  
when impossible becomes inevitable.

We can back leaders with vision and skill  
in the mold of FDR and LBJ and MLK.

We can meld now-siloed progressive energies  
into an unprecedented fusion of forces.

We can sustain journalism and scholarship  
to keep truth alive and core values burnished.

We can embrace our preachers and prophets,  
those who elevate new values and battered spirits.

We can hold each other tightly.

There are some encouragements and,  
even more, avenues for engagement.

Among the building blocks now evident,  
labor activism is increasing,  
as is activism among the young,  
the marginalized, and the victims.

Doubts about current order are surfacing,  
and calls for transformative change  
grow louder in the country.

Aversion to socialist ideas is fading,  
at least for young people.



---

Recent affirmations of government action  
challenge the hold of market fundamentalism.

The rising menace of climate change  
is bringing home the imperative of  
a strong, effective government  
of, by, and for the people.

Federal paralysis is countered partially  
by impressive initiatives by states and localities.

The threat to democracy is recognized,  
and the fight for a democratic future is joined.

All is not lost, but it is already a close call.



## Fast Breeder

The student takes me head on  
as I'm talking my Luddite talk.  
"Really," he says, "what new tech  
has ever been beaten?!"

I reel as I feel time unfold,  
travelling back fifty years  
to the day the White House said,  
"Our best hope lies with the  
Fast Breeder Reactor."

"The what?" the students say.  
Half-century earlier  
we greens said, "No way!"

The breeder, you see, produces  
more fuel than it uses.  
That sounds like a premium,  
but that fuel is plutonium.  
It's bomb material, to be shipped  
all across an energy-guzzling land,  
hundreds of breeders coming by 2000.  
To friends and foes alike  
it's named the "plutonium economy."

It took ten hard years to beat the beast.  
If you've never heard of it, that's why.



## World Changing, Northern Perspective

Black flies now have competition  
in creating a foretaste of perdition.  
I refer of course to the disgusting tick,  
the bug that made a good friend sick.  
They've now spread northward day by day  
as global warming has paved the way.  
Before their presence becomes a flood  
and they abscond with all our blood,  
we must act with strong convictions  
to prevent even worse afflictions.  
Climate change is messing with the season,  
ringing ever more degrees in.  
It's not just ticks it's bringing you.  
Soon it will also bring kudzu.  
With kudzu comes the mite-y diggers:  
the tender curse of summer chiggers.  
The human body is just delightful  
to all the bugs that get a bite full.  
Nor are our poor bodies immune  
from the torrid heat waves coming soon.  
Even rattlesnakes may be in store,  
if you want to worry even more.  
But please don't blame me for warning.  
It's time for truth about global warming.



---

## The Fall

The summer had been powerful.  
It did not yield easily to the fall.  
The trees turned slowly,  
each at its own pace.

The fall came around politely.  
The woods near the house moved  
from green to gold with grace,  
giving respect to that lush summer.

Such glory could not last long.  
Soon gold leaf was floating down.  
Vermont's Great Season would come.  
Forests of stick would signal its coming.

Suddenly the woods went quiet.  
A hawk was near, on the low branch.  
The mighty and the meek,  
then sensing each other.

What will become of them—  
the seasons, the trees, the birds?  
Let your heart beat defiance.  
Let your tears water the earth.





## The News Knows Its Audience

The big-time reporters have gone home.  
The foreign pols have visited,  
walked around the crumbled cities.  
They too are safely home now.  
Months into Russia's invasion,  
it's time for the news to move on!

There's another shooting in Texas!  
Or is it Illinois? Or Florida?  
Time to shift the cameras there.  
Top pols are there now.  
Wall to wall coverage, please.  
Interview the grieving parents.  
Do a little dance around gun control.  
The viewers will then feel better.

Need some less depressing news?  
Switch to a courtroom drama, somewhere!  
Maybe even Russia.  
Or to a British scandal. There's always one.  
If all else fails, bring on the glurge.

Hey, news guys, sorry for that sarcasm.  
But is social media ruining our kids?  
Are we living in a plutocracy,  
crippling poverty and social insecurity  
surrounding a bunch of billionaires  
buying up everything? Even space.  
Is there still an opioids crisis?  
A famine in the Horn of Africa?  
And, oh,  
do we really need your sponsors' stuff?



I know, that's too much negative.  
But you report our pols telling us  
America is the shining city on the hill.  
We can do anything we put our minds to.  
We are the land of opportunity.  
We are the last best hope.  
I am still moved by the rhetoric—  
but chilled now by the reality.



---

## Heretical, Cynical, or True?

That government which governs least governs ... poorly.

Government interference in the economy is ... necessary.

Economic freedom is the path to riches ... for the few.

America is the land of equal opportunity ... for fast food wages.

People get what they deserve ... in the afterlife.

Democracy is the best form of government ... if only we had it.

Corporate responsibility is ... an oxymoron.

The important things in life ... aren't things.

The more you buy, the happier you ... are not.

Green consumerism is ... still consumerism.

The future is unknowable ... if you don't think.

Things are getting better ... after they finish getting worse.



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# Scary

I'll tote it in my garden  
or at the soccer game.  
I'll take it to church.  
Everywhere's the same.

Guns, guns, guns!  
It is my right to carry!  
Guns, guns, guns!  
I like they make me scary.

I will shoot any moving critter.  
Nature is my rifle range.  
It is a thrill to see them drop.  
No reason for that to change.

My friends ask me why I carry.  
I once knew the answer.  
Now I say it's for protection.  
Damn sight better than a taser.

Sure, there will be mistakes,  
like the time I shot the preacher.  
Freedom will always have a price.  
And I've never shot a teacher.

Guns, guns, guns!  
It is my right to carry!  
Guns, guns, guns!  
I like they make me scary.



## In a Dry Land

My TV tuned to the January 6 Hearings,  
I hear reports tearing my heart apart.  
But through the window above the TV  
the hummingbirds dart about their feeders.  
Tiny things, they seem ferocious today.  
A ruby-red throat glistens in the PM sun.  
In the distance giant maples and ash bow  
to a new wind promising rain in a dry land.  
As it begins with a low growl of thunder,  
I go to the porch for a better view.  
A dark and dense purple gray moves in,  
occupying every foot of available sky.  
It's going to be a powerful storm,  
cleansing, the one we have been awaiting.



## Threads in the Tapestry

He saw it coming,  
saw the wreckage coming,  
wreckage driven ever on  
and on by the warming,  
the rising, and the changing.  
Saw it early, decades ago,  
and he cried out,  
thinking they would listen.  
He saw then that it was  
the heart that would decide.  
He cried to a big world  
from a small pulpit.

Young then and hopeful,  
hopeful that words would matter,  
words could reach the heart.  
And so he wrote, invoking  
the whole life community  
that evolved here with us—  
life we did not create and  
over which we are not lord.

Years later, as an old man,  
he challenged his few readers  
to imagine Earth without us.  
When asked why he would  
even think such a thing, he said,  
consider the wreckage  
gathering at your feet.  
Does it not break your heart?



---

Now pause, he said, be still,  
and contemplate such a world:  
living canopies so vast  
a small squirrel can move in trees  
from the Delaware to the Mississippi,  
oceans so fish-filled there appear  
to be paths across the water,  
flocks of passenger pigeons that  
cast large shadows on the landscape,  
great herds of ungulates  
grazing across cool savannahs,  
an Earth thriving with diversity.

But without us.  
It's a test, he said, of our  
environmental imagination.  
If we can imagine such a world  
with feelings of awe and reverence,  
taking joy in its existence  
even though we are no part of it,  
nature for nature's sake,  
then we are ready  
to answer a question.

What is a species worth?  
Perhaps just a small part  
of nature's tapestry?  
It depends on what is  
vital and alive to you,  
what your imagination sees.



Place yourself, the old man urged,  
not as superior to nature  
but as evolution's child,  
close kin to wild things,  
part of nature's flourishing,  
threads in the tapestry.  
Then you will know the answer.  
The heart will decide.





## High Tide

It did not used to be this way.  
 High tide is now at our front door.  
 It seems to get worse every day.  
 God must not like us anymore.

High tide is now at our front door.  
 The rains have drowned the roads in mud.  
 God must not like us anymore.  
 Climate change is God's new Flood.

The rains have drowned the roads in mud.  
 The oceans are too hot for fish.  
 Climate change is God's new Flood.  
 It will not do to sit and wish.

The oceans are too hot for fish.  
 Our kids' lives are what is at stake.  
 It will not do to sit and wish.  
 What strong action must we now take?

Our kids' lives are what is at stake.  
 It's time to close the fossil beast.  
 That strong action we must now take.  
 It's time to stop their deadly feast.

It is time to close the fossil beast.  
 Our Ark must be disruptive action.  
 It's time to stop their deadly feast.  
 Making them pay is just exaction.

Our Ark must be disruptive action.  
 It seems to get worse every day.  
 Making them pay is just exaction.  
 It did not used to be this way.



## The Counsel of Despair

As I navigate among the various faces I have in this world — the Happy Everyday Me, the Policy Wonk Me, the New Radical Me — I sometimes stumble to the bottom and into the Despairing Me. I try not to go there, but I stumble. In this windowless cellar of my mind, I have devastating thoughts, not phantasmagoric apparitions easily dismissed, but thoughts resulting from a calculus carefully tuned to empirical observation of the world spanning many years. There, I encounter the thought that the human enterprise on the planet — ambitious, arrogant, heedless, at times inspiring — has inadvertently created an insatiable contraption that is now devouring the planet at a phenomenal rate and that can no longer be controlled by human societies. If this contraption were bringing genuine human satisfaction and wellbeing while ruining the planet, well, that would be something. We would at least be going down happy. But as an apt description of the human condition, I cannot but think instead of the Tom Lehrer lyric, “The whole world is festering with unhappy souls.” Generally, people are unhappy for good reason. Some are unhappy because they are spoiled or misapprehending their circumstances, but for most there are genuine causes of human misery. Hard data support deprivations born in economic disparities, social inequities, environmental decay, political oppression, invidious discriminations, the failure of systems of education and health, the loss of community solidarity and human companionship, and, perhaps most important, the widespread sense of powerlessness and hopelessness in the face of these challenges. In this bottom chamber of Despair, that is the ultimate problem: honesty cannot assign a decent probability or even a fighting chance of finding a solution.



Faced with this looming dilemma, human creativity can reach in several directions. First there is Acceptance. One can accept this fate with bitter nihilism or with calm stoicism or, most likely, with hedonistic abandonment. Many will opt, as Thoreau noted, to live lives of quiet desperation and make the best of a bad situation. Second, there is Denial. Denial too can take many directions. One can stick to living in the truthiness world free of fact and science and full of fake reality and mythic beliefs. Or one might believe — and hope! — these problems, like so often in the past, will be solved — somehow, someday, by someone. This is the hopium solution. A third tack, The World Beyond, can be taken by some religious followers who put their faith in the afterlife, not this one. They might welcome climate and other catastrophes as signs of the End Times.

Then, there is the response I will call Rebel and Resist. Here, people fiercely oppose and fight back against their fate, knowing full well it is hopeless but nevertheless rebelling beyond hope because the human spirit tells them with insistence that what is unacceptable — all the suffering, all the loss, all the tears — must not be accepted.



## In the Neighborhood

My neighbor is dying of cancer at an early age;  
I am healthy as I tumble and stagger past eighty.

My neighbor's only child was killed in Iraq;  
my children are fine, the parents of six.

My neighbor's husband lost most memories;  
my wife provides companionship every day.

I have benefitted from white privilege;  
my neighbor has long suffered discrimination.

My neighbor cannot make ends meet;  
I have a comfortable retirement nest egg.

My neighbor is depressed by disappointments;  
mine are real too but don't lay me low.

Neither I nor my neighbors did anything much  
to deserve or merit our divergent situations.  
Life's blessings fall unfairly, rather randomly.  
Here's nonsense: people get what they deserve.

Our job, then, in every way we can, is  
to work to bring fairness forward,  
to defy fate with neighborliness.

The hopes we can make happen  
in lives connected close by caring  
are all the light we ever need.



---

## It's Just Another Day in America

No more insurance along the Gulf Coast,  
over in Carolina or out West.

The floods and fires are too severe.  
It's only the money that makes them care.

There's been a new mass shooting in Florida,  
but there is no movement on gun control.  
Shootings now one a day it does appear,  
taking away good folks that were held dear.

One in ten of us awoke destitute,  
facing a day short of money and food.  
They say the economy is in high gear;  
the money just reaches a thin veneer.

Many states are working to take the vote  
from folks who are not old and white like me.  
All this I fear could be our New Frontier—  
echoes of JFK too far, too faint to hear.

There can be a reckoning at the polls  
only if our democracy still holds.  
Bad things closer than they appear—  
It's our job now to make that clear.

It's just another day in America.



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## Holding It All Together

I can't imagine  
the world working  
when I'm gone  
or if I just quit.

The guidance I give  
shouting at the TV,  
cursing in the yard,  
advising friends what to think,  
giving assignments to reporters,  
holds the world together,  
such as it is.

Coping is what it's all about.  
Pissing in the wind,  
whistling past the graveyard,  
these are life skills  
learned in lesser times  
and now invoked.

As the proper order of the world  
seems rather threatened,  
and the supplies of comity,  
discretion, and common decency run short,  
still, we will confound the world  
with civility and thoughtful observation  
while going berserk at home  
where oaths echo  
from wall to wall.



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## Unnatural Order

An ugly sense of superiority  
has long infected humanity.  
It conveys special status,  
grounds claims of privilege,  
and justifies exploitation.  
When it's threatened,  
the fear prompts repression.

Superiority demands the inferior:  
nature inferior to humans,  
women inferior to men,  
people of color inferior to whites.  
That is the proper order of things,  
or so the last of them still believe.

Now we see the old, decrepit order  
crumbling everywhere we look:  
rights too long denied reclaimed.  
Rising protests express new joy,  
anger formed of new empowerment.

Repression again seeks a foothold.  
It cannot match this pregnant moment.



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## A Place Beyond

Beyond all our fears, it is.  
Beyond grieving and crying, it is.  
Beyond even hope, it is.  
What then is left beyond?

A collapse of sentiment?  
What do they feel:  
the black man in solitary,  
the young girl buried  
in the rubble of Aleppo,  
the Amazon biologist  
watching the forest die?

What do we feel, you and I?  
Can the mere knowledge  
of the world's desperation  
while still in a sheltered space  
take us to a place beyond?

I can only speak for myself.  
I hunger to strike a blow  
so shattering that enthrallment  
breaks into a million shards  
and falls to the feet of the world,  
illusions gone, apathy impossible.





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## Greetings

What do we say on the Holiday card?

That we are well and filled with life's joys,

That we are truly, truly worried,

That we are blessed with close friends and real food,

That we are trying to cope with a ravaged democracy,

That we love to travel where nature is still strong,

That we are having trouble finding unbleached coral,

That we are thankful for good schools and medical care,

That we see such deprivation amidst extravagance,

That our expectations are defiantly high,

That we must make this year a year to realize them,

That we are young at heart and full of fight,

Yes! all That plus our great fondness and best hopes for our friends.

What a lovely bunch you are!



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## Crepuscular Thoughts

I was thinking of a happy ending,  
but took a break and went to watch  
the giant project of “beach renourishing,”  
a project I would have loved to scotch.

Slurried ashore in three giant pipes,  
the sand intended to shore up the beach.  
That of course was all just tripe:  
the new sand soon in sea level’s reach.

Where the waves now lap at condo doors,  
the poem somehow slipped from my hand  
and disappeared there along the shore  
swept away under tons of dirt brown sand.



## What He Could Have Done

He could have pitched a tent in Lafayette Square  
and fasted until action was taken on climate change.  
He thought about it many times, imagined reporters  
seeking his views as he sat outside his little tent.

Yet even his fantasy moved to the  
possibility of fasting away instead in a  
Hay-Adams room overlooking the park.  
No reason not to be comfortable, and besides  
he would get more reporters that way.  
Along with water, he thought:  
should I take a vitamin pill every day?

Amid the great suffering of the world,  
he had lived a life of worldly comfort.  
He did a bit of time in jail for protesting  
the end of the world as we know it.

Not risking everything is a strategy  
that ends with grandkids deprived.  
He knows that now, deeply knows  
this is no time for self-deception.  
But will he act on his conviction?



## Isle of Hope

An Irish village, it's been said,  
can be but a pub and a post.  
Staying once in such a place  
near the Connemara dreamscape,  
we found two pubs side-by-side,  
one serving mainly Guinness,  
one serving mainly food,  
no one complaining.

The bright music in the pubs there  
and in other west coast towns  
can move away the gloomy weather  
and clear away your troubles too.  
Until they sing about Annie Moore.

Annie was an Irish girl of 17  
who was the first ever to walk  
through to America at Ellis Island.  
And so she enters our fractured hearts.  
“Isle of hope, isle of tears,  
isle of freedom, isle of fears.”

Many thought the Irish an inferior race  
when Annie disembarked in 1892.  
Are we walking with her today?  
Will we take her hand  
and lift a light beside the Golden Door?



## Shootings

To avoid repeated interruptions,  
the networks have decided  
to announce the week's shootings  
on Thursdays at 1 p.m.

We sprang from a wild  
and reptilian thing with  
long teeth and no pity.  
We must deal with it.

Somewhere along the way  
up our longest family tree,  
an ancestor found the path  
of nurture and affection.

Mother strokes the child's cheek,  
the first smile appears.  
A boy practices his swimming strokes,  
Father holds him in the water.

The world bends with the weight  
of massive contradiction.  
It rights itself again—then sings,  
held in the joy of music.

*Hey! Nelly Ho! Nelly*  
*Listen love to me*  
*I'll sing for you, play for you*  
*A dulcet melody*  
*Nelly Bly has a heart*  
*Warm as a cup of tea*  
*Bigger than a sweet potato*  
*Down in Tennessee*



## Tomorrow Is a Yesterday Place

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time.*

Time paused, took in the current scene,  
and went away.

The last syllable happened yesterday.  
Lord knows exactly what time saw,  
but enough to make time withdraw.

So tomorrow is a yesterday place,  
a land of many dreams and hope  
where today had little space,  
a land where even I could cope.

Without tomorrow we must face  
the brutal truth of everyday—  
the desperations we can't erase,  
a place well in old history's sway.

I will cling then to tomorrow!  
I will hope it will come back.  
With it, there's relief to sorrow,  
and a way to get life on track.



## I Know You Want To Cry

There is failure around me,  
a glass of cheap wine  
spilled onto the crisp resume.  
“Accomplishments” blurring into the paper,  
fading, disappearing.

Fifty years now of hard-striving  
and the class moron is  
erasing the blackboard.

Our common home  
and fellow Americans  
are under assault. Yet  
the loss is applauded  
by many of our people,  
people with whom I would  
gladly share a drink,  
go to the movies, laugh.  
People I know because  
I have lived with them.  
And, even worse, I did not  
see it coming. Not like this.



What is to be done?  
Cry? Done that.  
Tune it out? Tried that.  
Smash the TV with a big vase?  
Maybe next.  
But, really, really,  
the only meaningful answer  
is to pull oneself out of grief,  
regret, anger, resignation, whatever,  
and in every way we know  
fight to take back our country  
while her lingering light still shines.





## A Movement of Movements

In my imagination, the activist communities to which many of us feel close affection are each in separate little boats paddling ourselves through swirling waters. Whether flagged environmental integrity, social and economic justice, community solidarity, or people's democracy, sometimes our boats go forward, then backwards, sometimes sideways. But one cannot help but notice that the boats tend strongly to move together, carried along by currents more powerful than our efforts.

Far too often, progressives neglect the underlying currents that are powerfully affecting all our boats. These currents heavily determine whether we make progress in our journeys or move backwards or go nowhere at all.

To succeed in the major ways we dream about requires understanding those underlying forces that shape our prospects. Once we know what we are dealing with, the good news is that progressives can join together in facing a shared situation. The inconvenient news is that when we look at the common, underlying causes of the problems, we find forces that are often deeply burrowed in the mainstream, often so widely and conventionally accepted that to challenge them appears radical to many.

Any search for the sources of the currents holding back real progress must start with the political and economic system. Its prominent features include ramping up GDP, growing corporate profits, focusing on high financial returns to guide investments, increasing the incomes of the already well-to-do, neglecting those marginalized and desperate, promoting runaway consumerism,



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facilitating great bastions of corporate political and economic power, and pursuing a host of self-serving and harmful policies internationally—all the while demonizing governmental efforts to correct its side-effects and shortcomings.

There are more sources of unwelcomed currents, of course. Dominant cultural values tend decidedly materialistic and anthropocentric. Democracy is impaired in many countries. And there is an ever-active military-industrial complex working away.

It is hard to see where to turn! We know what must be done. But how? That is the question.

This we can do. We can search for small openings seizing opportunities wherever. We can be crisis ready, anticipating moments of punctuated equilibrium when impossible becomes inevitable. We can back leaders with vision and skill. We can meld now-siloed progressive energies into an unprecedented fusion of forces. We can sustain journalism and scholarship to keep truth alive and core values burnished. We can embrace our preachers and prophets, those who elevate new values and battered spirits. We can hold each other tightly.

There are some encouragements and, even more, avenues for engagement. Among the building blocks now evident, activism is increasing, especially among the young, the marginalized, the victims as well as organized labor. Doubts about current order are surfacing, and calls for transformative change grow louder. Aversion to socialist ideas is fading where they were once off-limits, especially for young people. The rising menace of climate



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change is bringing home the imperative of a strong, effective government of, by, and for the people. The threat to democracy is recognized, and the fight for a democratic future is joined.

There are some positive currents driving toward transformative change, and they will likely strengthen in the future. The possibility progressives must face, however, is that this strengthening will be too modest and too slow to head off a series of genuine catastrophes. This possibility underscores the imperative of progressives leaving their own little boats—their issue silos—and together forging a mighty political force for deep, transformative change. This fusion of forces, a movement of movements, would be new and could make all the difference.



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## New Consciousness

Decades of discourse  
led by people like me  
lawyers, scientists, economists  
and we are stuck.

They can't do what must be done:  
reach the human heart.  
The deep problems are  
avarice, arrogance and apathy,  
dominant values badly astray.

What we need is not more analysis  
but a spiritual awakening to a new consciousness.  
So let's bring on the preachers and prophets!  
the poets and philosophers!  
the psychologists and psychiatrists!  
Let's bring on the writers, musicians, actors, artists!

Call them to strike the chords of our shared humanity,  
of our close kin to wild things!



## Next

a new day underway  
building in the shadows  
just over the horizon  
piece by piece  
place by place  
stunning in what it asks of us  
in cities not well known  
in churches with half members  
in councils long forgotten  
in families once apart  
in unions nearly crushed  
in co-ops gone to seed  
we see new life  
rising up  
up rising  
many local initiatives now  
coming together as new systems  
systems of ownership by workers  
of health care and education without division  
of needs met without consumerism  
of economy without growthmania  
of energy without pollution  
of reverence for nature's miracle  
of commitment to climate's protection  
of coping together with pandemics  
systems of popular sovereignty  
yes democracy of by and for all the people



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all the people  
sharing supporting caring giving loving working creating  
participating debating voting demanding protesting provoking  
listening learning playing worshiping trying crying trying again  
tolerating respecting empathizing honoring being people  
people of all races and genders and religions  
bound together by good laws and good fellowship  
laughter and song



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## The Faithful

They carry on.  
They do not care  
about the odds.  
Perhaps their fight  
is now hopeless.  
Hope is not part  
of their thinking.  
They are instead  
motivated  
by a vision—  
something better  
now awaiting,  
a place of peace,  
people laughing,  
Earth flourishing.  
Their cause is right.  
They are faithful  
to the struggle.  
I will embrace  
these my brothers  
and my sisters.  
They are warriors.



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# Soul Searching





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## What We Have Instead

In this our world

if there is meaning  
we create it.

If there is community  
we build it.

If there is justice  
we forge it.

If there is providence  
we provide it.

If there is love  
we extend it.

Nothing is given  
save life itself.

We have only  
this speck of earth  
and each other.

It is enough.

So let us pray  
to fields and friends  
and to the spacious sky.



## Sunday Morning Coming Down

I cannot hear “Sunday Mornin’ Comin’ Down”  
without recalling how one Sunday morning  
I was studying for the bar exam in DC and  
not wanting to tackle negotiable instruments  
I took a walk down the sleeping city sidewalk  
that ran through my diverse neighborhood  
black and white poor and not poor cheek to jowl  
and how at that point I wanted to work eventually  
for the Children’s Defense Fund and represent  
those on the losing side of that unequal equation  
and I walked past where a black woman was  
sitting on her front steps as her two kids  
played on the curb and sidewalk  
and I smiled at her and she said  
“What you laughing at, white boy?  
Something funny to you? You ain’t here.”  
I kept walking lest there was more coming  
but shaken I kept saying to myself  
blunder blunder blunder blunder boy  
did you not see that she was real and  
you were just a character in your dream?



# The Reckoning

The shadow moves across  
the void of moral reckoning.

It blocks light,  
light vanishes.  
It shreds truth,  
truth vanishes.  
It crushes hope,  
hope vanishes.

Darkness gathers  
in hate, ignorance,  
violence.  
It knows  
no delight or joy.  
It sees no beauty.

Will there be a reckoning?  
A confrontation with evil?  
There is a pause, then  
one community says yes  
and soon many others,  
for there are still  
domains of truth  
shafts of bright light  
people of great hope,  
weary but brave  
and alive in the world.



## Vision on the Beach

We were walking on the chilly beach this morning.  
The sea calm, the small waves moseyed onto the shore.  
Then, with a strange confluence of small breakers,  
the surf shot skyward, and in the spreading spray  
I saw the shape of Jesus walking on the water.  
I let that sink in, and then I told my wife.  
“What did He say?” she asked, seeming serious.  
“Nothing,” I replied. “He was walking away.”



## All the Color

Don't think that the colors you see  
streaking across the high ceiling  
spread wide by a glass award  
now sitting in the window sill  
are all the colors.

There are other colors and other awards.

There's an award of pure white  
for the endless gifts you bestowed  
on family, friends, even strangers.  
What is love if not  
caring unreservedly  
and giving regardless?

There's a flat black award  
for sitting quietly and absorbing  
all that is going on in the world  
and then standing up straight  
and acting with strong purpose.  
The actual size of the purpose  
does not matter all that much.  
It is the transcendence that does.

Then the rust-colored award  
for gracefully aging-in-place  
without too much complaint.



And the phthalo-green award  
for repeated acts of eco-tage,  
large and small, legal and illegal.

We do not see, much less live,  
the true spectrum of all the colors  
until life explodes like a collapsing star  
and the higher elements with  
all their density are born.



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## A Prayer

Can I banish despair with hope,  
    if hope is paired with action?  
Can I find a heaven for dogs,  
    just for them and those who love them?  
Can I understand quantum mechanics,  
    at least a smidgen please?  
Can I write enough to clear my name,  
    purging my mistakes and errors?  
Can I stay both alert and anguished  
    until I have done all I can?  
Can I finally admit there are angels,  
    since I have now seen some at work?  
Can I cry in front of other people,  
    and not just when alone?  
Can I have some hugs again,  
    free of the damn virus?  
Can I find some untapped strength,  
    and lighten burdens with it?



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## Those of a Certain Age

Will you please run ahead and see  
what's around the corner for me?  
I think I know what's in my book,  
but I need you to take a look.

There is an end for me out there.  
A peaceful one you see, my dear?  
Or will there be a drug-soaked pain,  
and you wishing me gone in vain?

I hope it's sudden, in my sleep,  
with no more promises for me to keep.  
I don't know how brave I would be  
facing out to that endless sea.

I'll remember what our child said  
about the truth of being dead.  
She said it is okay to mourn  
but death is like before you're born.





## New Morning

Now with the shove of pill bottles  
into the drawer for another stay,  
I will appear to all who care  
an average guy greeting another day.

Do all of us have our  
drug store displays?  
Who knows what's  
truly average?

Whatever!  
Here today I'm ready  
for anything it brings,  
pills in the drawer and the cabinet,  
ready to dethrone the king.

Feet unsteady, I stumble around.  
Poet Thomas says I must rage.  
No one notices how I'm  
entering my anecdotage.

Is the long travail nearly over,  
the seamless hours of striving?  
I doubt it, but an easy thought  
for a new day in the morning.



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## The Real Problem

Imagine

every morning when you wake up,  
beyond your nice view  
and over the horizon,  
there are 8 billion people out there.

Imagine

8 billion people  
searching every day  
food and water  
shelter and safety  
affection and sex  
and, much more complicated,  
identity and self-esteem  
status and recognition  
and, oh yes, meaning.

Our world was once empty -  
few people and little human activity.  
Now we live in a full world,  
brimming over with more activity  
than it can handle comfortably.

But consider

even if math is not your thing  
fifteen percent of the world's 8 billion  
are blessed to live in the rich countries.  
Yet each of us has ten times  
the environmental footprint of  
a person living in poor countries.  
Taken together, the rich fifteen percent  
do twice the environmental damage  
of the vastly larger poor majority.  
No one is innocent.  
But some are more guilty than others.



## Thinking Like a Mountain

Aldo Leopold knew nature  
like few before or after.  
He urged those who listened  
“to think like a mountain.”

Well, hell, I say, I am a mountain!  
I am Storm King, here beside the Hudson,  
a sentinel with which to reckon.

From my shining east flank I  
often heard Pete Seeger singing,  
notes forming tunes and rising  
from the bow of the sloop Clearwater  
as it tacked the Highland’s wind gate.  
From far on my top I’ve seen  
many times, way past when,  
Clearwater and Pete were strongest  
sailing upstream against the wind.

Pete sang to all the parts of me,  
not just my verdant slopes rising steep  
from the fast-flowing river, but the parts that  
move around, rub brown fur against  
the parts that sink deep in me and share  
my waters and my nourishment.  
I give it freely, as do critters too small to see.  
They too are part of me.



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My leaves shimmer in chartreuse,  
for spring I am bringing back.  
I want to hear the ovenbird again,  
to help the goldfinch find its gold,  
to see soon the evening grosbeak  
dancing among my limbs and leaves.

If you want to think like a mountain,  
you must come to see me whole.  
Energy flows coursing through me;  
life each day from entropy stole.

Can you come to see me sacred,  
all the beauty consecrated?  
I am alive and fertile and fecund,  
providing sustenance and refuge.

I know then what I am,  
what I do in this world,  
how to weather many threats,  
how yet to sing back to the river,  
how I am old, yes also that.  
But even now I, Storm King,  
am not clear on all that we  
mountains are supposed to think.  
I have told what Aldo meant.  
Perhaps that is enough.  
But there may be other thoughts,  
thoughts waiting to be remembered.



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## A Billboard Along US 301

The old professor thought it was  
time to take the question seriously  
as he passed the Border motel  
and headed into South Carolina.  
“Do you love Jesus?”  
asked the big billboard on the right.  
He’d seen the sign many times.

He had once been religious.  
But he’d failed at churchgoing  
for many decades now,  
except for the frequent funerals.  
Still, the billboard prodded him.  
He thought the real question  
the billboard was asking him was  
about his relationship with Jesus.

Well, if he had one at all,  
he doubted it was the Jesus  
of divinity and messiah.  
Or the Jesus of sins, salvation,  
resurrection and everlasting life.  
Nor could he imagine Jesus  
as a buddy walking with him,  
as wonderful as that would be.  
And he couldn’t warm to the Jesus  
of the prayer book creeds  
read so often and saying zero  
about living, caring, and loving.



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But there was more to consider—  
things that had mattered to him.  
He wondered if he would have  
the courage of Jesus' Samaritan.  
Would he rush to a burning car?  
What about the Jesus who gave  
us the Sermon on the Mount?  
His favorite lapel button said,  
"The meek are getting ready."  
But had he lived the Beatitudes?  
This Jesus had challenged him.

He also recalled well the Jesus who  
kicked the bankers from the temple,  
befriended Mary of Magdala,  
died painfully for what he believed,  
and whose closest followers,  
seeking to carry on his example,  
gave all their possessions to the needy.  
He was surprised by his answer to  
the question the billboard asked.



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## Bach Hears Music

What does Bach think when he hears Klemperer  
conducting his great Mass in B Minor?

Well, he shouts to a bright heaven, Hallelujah!

And when he hears Aretha Franklin and Paul Simon,

Harry Nilsson, Miles Davis, The Beatles,

Loretta Lynn, Stevie Wonder, and Dave Brubeck

with their innovative melodies and harmonies

yet with echoes unmistakable

coming down through the ages?

I see him now, his big arms folded,

his face bathed in a glorious sunlight,

and he sways his large tummy back and forth,

back and forth to the music.

And to his genius self he softly says,

Three centuries and here we are today.

What a joy! Toss the bouquet!



## In the Maritimes

Road sign warns  
“Blind Crest” ahead.

Over the hill,  
well, anything.

Life unfolds  
like hills, blind  
to what’s ahead.

Then, the crest,  
the new horizon.

Perhaps a nice view  
Fundy and beyond.

Perhaps sideswiped,  
someone texting  
his mistress  
at the motel.

Life’s hills, the daily struggle:  
work, meals, schools, doctors,  
there is so very much to juggle.

We hope for appreciation,  
helps make it worth the trouble.  
But we act from our affection—  
let some worry with that puzzle.

When life seems one hill on another,  
know that your caring is worthy bother.  
You have no idea who will come to stand your side.  
But when it’s done, your peace is that you tried.





## Really Human

Are you really a human?  
How do you know you're not a robot?  
By spotting stoplights in an online matrix?  
Better, hum a little Chopin,  
wade barefoot in the ice cold surf,  
pick up a shell (a Lettered Olive!),  
imagine the old rocks are a chorten  
and circle it slowly clockwise,  
laugh back at the Laughing Gulls,  
hold a hand, smell her hair,  
remember her at childbirth.



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## If I Were a Praying Person

If I were a praying person,  
as many praying people do,  
I would make a list  
of those for whom I pray.

I would pray first for the children  
for they are inheriting a most difficult world.

I would pray for the poor and destitute  
for despite having little, they persevere.

I would pray for the oppressed minorities  
for despite their suffering, they show the way.

I would pray for the living things, small and large,  
for their homes are being destroyed.

I would pray for the rich and powerful  
for they are the most in need of forgiveness.

I would pray for the teachers  
and the preachers  
and the journalists  
and the scholars  
and the artists  
and the parents  
for they must keep both truth and hope alive.

I would pray for the generations ahead  
for they must remake the world.

And I would pray for the mothers  
for the world is lost without moms.



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## In the End We Make Our Peace

In 1948 the big planes roared  
day and night into Berlin's Tegel,  
making noises common to large airports.  
Yet even those right under the flight path  
did not hear noise. Instead they heard:  
We are free. We are still free.  
The Berlin airlift saved most of the city.

Sometimes I cry for my country.  
Whence all the violence and destruction?  
We are missing, losing, hurting so.  
At times I've almost given up on her.  
But I have cried for decades and  
I am still flying Old Glory after all.  
Much here makes me damn proud.

My wife and I were buddies in pre-school  
and married now for fifty-six years.  
Too often I know I disappointed her.  
Hell, I often disappointed myself.  
Stubborn, self-absorbed, inattentive.  
It is the great compliment of my life:  
despite it all, she keeps me around.

So, we know the bitter and the sweet,  
and, in the end, we make our peace.  
We hope sweet will outweigh,  
and take us to another day.



## The Way

The way is a path  
that leads along the river  
under the tall cypress  
to a spot where  
you can hold hands  
and wade into the current  
as the dark water flows by  
and then heads uphill to  
the white pavilion  
on the bluff above the river  
where the door opens  
to a place of memory  
and old friends await and smile  
on the other side.



## What We Know, and Don't

If God is out there, here are some things we know:

1. **God is full of energy.** Everyone knows about the Big Bang of energy that kicked things off, but even the tiny subatomic particles like quarks and electrons are points of energy. Almost everything is energy. God can even make energy happen in a perfect vacuum.
2. **God thinks big.** The universe is at least 93 billion light years across. It contains about 400 billion galaxies and maybe 200 billion trillion stars. (Only about 3000 stars are visible on a good night.) Here we are, inconspicuously circulating around one of them, but what has God cooked up on the other hundreds of billions of trillions? It is hard to feel very special.
3. **God doesn't rush things** and, indeed, doesn't care much about time. The universe is almost 14 billion years old. And the time we experience can speed up or slow down depending on velocity and gravity and other things.
4. **God actually likes math.** The creation can be described mathematically. You might even say that math existed before anything else did. Modern physicists find solutions in mathematicians' century-old work.
5. **God believes in evolution.** God's a change agent. The universe is not a product but an ongoing process. New stars and black holes are being created. Here on Earth, evolution gave rise to life about 3.5 billion years ago, and now, here we humans are, one of evolution's more recent products, busily destroying the place.



**6. As for salvation, God wants us to save ourselves.**

God is the very opposite of a helicopter creator, and we are adrift with our own devices. All of science confirms God is not interfering in human affairs. We long for angels and miracles, but they are not to be found in this universe. If there is providence, we provide it. If there is salvation, we forge it. If love, we give it.

**7. God likes puzzles,** and so left us with some dillies, like merging quantum theory with relativity, the early “inflation” of the universe, the possibility of the multiverse and other worlds, and human nature.

**8. God loves beauty and nature.** Just look around, or listen to God’s friend J.S. Bach, or swim among the corals and blue tang.

**9. God believes in term limits.** For starters, we all die; everything alive dies, even Joshua Trees. Earth dies, eventually if not before. Our sun has a term limit; it is slated to die about 4.5 billion years from now. Most fundamentally, entropy — the inexorable and vaguely disturbing second law of thermodynamics — will in due course take care of the whole shebang.

**10. God may not be out there at all.** We are left with the biggest question. It is the last question:

Why is there something and not nothing?

The scientist winks and says, “Why not?”



## Sunday Morning

The old man kept his balance  
moving across the smooth rocks  
on the far bank of the Margaree  
along a wide bend in the river.

Since first light he had been  
fishing the magnificent river.  
The cloak of morning mist,  
the feel of his favorite fly rod,  
his procession down the swirling water,  
the birdsong from the banks,  
the salmon pools he knew so well,  
it left him feeling renewed, himself.

Over the years he had come  
to see the river as close to magic.  
His concerns seemed to vanish  
when he waded into the water.

Now he was headed for a wooden bench  
someone had built long ago  
where the river started to curve.  
He knew that his dog Jez was lying  
by the bench on the warming rocks,  
as were the butter tart and hot tea.  
Jez's golden color blended with the rocks,  
like she was meant to be there.



---

He felt good about the decades he'd spent  
in masonry and construction locally.  
He was justified, he reckoned,  
by his useful, thoughtful work,  
and there had been a lot of that.  
But he had made time for fishing,  
and he was very glad he had.

It was Sunday and his wife, half jokingly,  
had said he should be going to church.  
He thought of that as he sat on the bench.  
He could still make church if he left now.  
But he felt he needed more time with the river.  
“You don't have much conflict about it, Jez.  
I can see that,” he murmured.

He looked up through the tree canopy  
to the sky brightening up,  
and he thought, not for the first time,  
that he was in church already.  
He gave a small piece of the tart to Jez,  
took a sip of the steaming tea, and  
focused down the river where the  
sunlight now danced on the water.





## The Longest History

We do not exist  
because we think.  
We exist  
and then we think.  
Our minds are  
but our bodies  
doing special work  
and our bodies are  
but stardust  
now folded together  
by eons of evolution.  
The universe has a story  
and we are part of it.  
That story is now  
telling us that  
we are the universe  
looking back on itself,  
contemplating its reality.  
The universe has  
become aware.



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# Mother Emanuel

No first stone is cast,  
and if no first, none.

So many wrongs.  
Our world we'll fill  
with forgiveness.

(but)  
Remember, forgiveness  
does not imply blameless.  
It's just the opposite.

(and)  
Understanding does not  
imply acceptance.  
It implies awareness.

(for)  
We are all fallen.  
Omissions, commissions,  
can we forgive ourselves?

(and yet)  
Can we also be accountable  
for our acts and expect  
accountability for others?



Forgiveness can be real,  
accountability too.  
But forgiveness sometimes exists  
on a different plane altogether.

On the 17th of June 2015 Dylann Roof entered Emanuel AME church in Charleston and shot to death nine Black church members there for Bible study. A short while later the families of the victims faced Roof. “One by one, those who chose to speak at a bond hearing did not turn to anger. Instead ... they offered him forgiveness and said they were praying for his soul, even as they described the pain of their losses.” Later, they would oppose putting him to death, though not putting him in prison.

Visiting Emanuel AME the year after Roof an elderly Black woman there spoke kindly with me at length, like I was the one needing comfort.



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# Listening

It's a stirring sound.  
Not Bach in B-minor but  
hot coffee nearby.

Listen carefully—  
the new puppy is afoot.  
Hear today's mischief.

DeMent is singing.  
Much-loved songs for the Delta.  
It's not far away.

I hear wind outside—  
opera of the forest.  
That is music too.

Selectively deaf:  
tuning out the needless noise.  
But I do hear you.

She's giving advice.  
I am working on listening.  
Unhappy with me.

Let's go to the game!  
Gallaudet's winning season.  
They're a spunky team.



---

Clap the big bass drum:  
signal to snap the football  
where there is no sound.

Hands and fingers shake—  
the applause for the touchdown.  
Silent. Beautiful.

Which sense to give up?  
Some say it should be hearing.  
What would students say?

Each sense is precious.  
Sight, hearing, smell, taste, feeling.  
I must have music.



---

## The Islanders

They settled on an island  
far off the coast of Maine.  
They came for the clean air  
and for the bracing cold,  
the breakers on the rocks,  
the innocence of birds.

They often came in pairs,  
their children gone away.  
Some settled by themselves,  
their partners then gone too.  
They reached out to each other.  
And it was enough.

They shared one great thing:  
In a hundred different ways  
they had fought a good fight.  
They had seen the world's beauty  
but struggled with its horrors.  
And they were chastened.

They celebrated the animals and the plants  
and so also St. Francis and Pope Francis,  
and were found often in quiet reflection.  
They lived there with laughter and song.  
They flew flags of rainbow and black  
and, yes, of red, white, and blue.



—  
VI  
—

# Telling Stories



## Sarah's Farewell

Now comes new winter's day  
the shortest of the year  
Not much time to say  
goodbye to those held dear

The path to Sarah's house  
is filled now with snow  
A good one to bitch and grouse  
she said it's time for me to go

And so she just stopped eating  
and convened a celebration  
She stood at the door a-greeting  
the whole damn congregation

All her friends came that day  
Their feelings were complex  
Some felt nothing but dismay  
Some danced the ice-cold deck

Calmly and peacefully one day  
with people who loved her dearly  
she silently slipped away her way  
Sarah knew her mind so clearly

It is easy to miss someone  
who loved my cooking so  
On this day of little sun  
I feel an afterglow

We thought she was full gone  
but I found a message in her desk  
"Miss me but do not mourn  
I lived well and better than the rest"





## The Novelist at Bay Blues

I didn't read the paper  
Didn't watch the news  
Didn't wash the dog  
Didn't put on shoes  
Didn't call my kids  
Didn't pay the dues  
Didn't do my workout  
Because I read my damn reviews  
I read the damn reviews  
Lord, I know I had to do it  
But I'm sinking in the blues  
Sinking in these blues

Maybe there's a better way  
Not wallowing in despair  
I know I'm such a slovenly cuss  
The writing's where I care  
Writing's where I care  
The critics, they have sold me short  
And for sure I need the bread  
So let's pull me back together  
And let's get me out of bed  
More there must surely be  
A new story to be shared  
New stories to be shared



## Ruth's Gentle Plea

Here we are  
on the cool grass of the common.  
It's good to have you back.  
A blues group has been playing,  
and the harmonica is great.  
Our little Johnny has been  
kicking the ball with the other kids,  
and dear Frank Jr., now a first grader,  
was studying the sound equipment  
with an intensity beyond his years.  
Come lie with us.

Yesterday, before you arrived,  
the boys and I were at the house  
sitting near the swing in the maple tree.  
They remember when they were little  
and you gave them easy pushes.  
They said you had made them daring  
young men on the flying trapeze.

We want you to come home,  
and be with us all the time.  
I know you blame yourself every day.  
But we could learn to deal with it,  
not forgotten, of course, but past.  
You are the part of us lost now.  
You could be alone when you needed.  
Here, come lie with us.



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## Making Music

He had no music left in him.  
It was there once, upon a time.  
He was young then and strong,  
a bubbling cauldron of words  
and tunes to go along.

But the blows came quickly.  
Deep drink, it helped to dampen  
what the Stan war did to his boy.  
Then his lady gone with cancer.  
Nothing of joy left to destroy.

He was unmoored, adrift.  
He knew he had to move on.  
Travel America with his dog?  
Head for an island somewhere?  
Just make that past to fade to fog.

He wanted mainly to escape.  
A friend said “find a moose.”  
He looked at wildlife maps,  
and headed for northeast Vermont,  
a hotspot for moose mishaps.

He found an old ramshackle farm  
perched up the flank of Burke Mountain.  
Worked a bit at the ski resort.  
Did odd jobs for newcomers.  
Walked with his bloodhound Snort.



Peace came to visit one spring  
as he looked out from his porch  
over bogs and fens to the far blue hills.  
He put on the first of his old cds,  
felt a rush of forgotten thrills.

Townes van Zandt suited his mood;  
John Prine was just too damn happy.  
But that was changing, he could tell.  
He stared at the black guitar case,  
still scared to come out of the shell.

But then one day it opened up.  
He hit a few chords on the porch.  
In Guy Clark's past great song,  
it's the guitar that plays the man.  
For him, well, that was just plain wrong.

Composing was painfully hard,  
so slow he'd forget where he was.  
He had no idea what to say.  
Passing songbirds distracted him.  
Had talent also flown away?

A new girlfriend pointed the way.  
"You need to write from life  
and not just from memory.  
Get rolling man!" she shouted,  
"Other people hold the key."



He took a job performing each  
evening at a spot down in the town.  
He didn't want to be discovered;  
that had happened long ago.  
But pieces of him had now recovered.

He was never to regain his fame.  
A few new songs were recorded.  
But he became beloved in town.  
He and Jill were soon married,  
happy with the life they'd found.

Rodney Crowell's song "It Ain't Over Yet"  
became his personal anthem.  
And what would bring his friends new highs?  
He and Jill singing Prine and Iris DeMent's  
"Honey, we're the big door prize."



---

## A Nearby Place

George remembered what old Doc,  
summoning his most ferocious,  
had commanded him never to forget:  
We are all Christ, Doc insisted,  
and we are all crucified.

He remembered it when  
he learned that Johanna and Karl  
had to sell their beloved farm,  
the one up on Orion Brook,  
to cover the damn taxes.

It came to him when Jennifer,  
who composed exquisite music  
mostly for string quartets,  
found years of work in ashes  
but, mercy, her baby unharmed.

He recalled what Doc said when  
a college prof, his dear friend,  
was quietly bypassed for tenure,  
his politics too radical and  
his religion too atheistic.

But most clearly he remembered it when  
he was at the prof's home the night  
a local quartet played a piece by Jennifer  
composed to honor all the many contributions  
Johanna and Karl had made to their town.



## Aunt Ginny's Story

The old maple we planted by the house  
a long, long time ago  
took a heavy beating last summer.  
The children who climbed it  
and played in its limbs each summer  
did not make it here.

Not then. Not again.

Could it feel the aching sadness  
that spread every day from the house into the yard?  
Did it miss the grab of little hands,  
the press of sneakers, the scraped knees,  
the rocking of the swing?  
Who can say? I can only report that

its leaves did not turn red last fall.

They simply went to brown, crumpled, and fell.  
We talked about how it might not recover.  
We talked about cutting it for firewood,  
something useful, a good ending.  
We talked about a lot of things.

I doubt that I'd be telling this story  
if the maple hadn't leafed out in the spring.  
Not gloriously, but there it was:  
life returning, awaiting.  
Its leaves were smaller,  
more delicate, but it was back.  
We could see that.



---

## Ode to the Tar Snakes Painter

The truck slows down.  
He hops off the back,  
magic wand in his hand,  
the road begs for black.

They try to define who  
is an essential worker.  
So easily they might miss  
the tar snakes painter.

He first must play a bit.  
He squirts a Jackson Pollock  
and signs in secret script.  
Draws rapids he has shot.

Dissolving into fragments,  
the road can't bear the freight.  
Cracks here and fissures,  
he hopes it's not too late.

He paints in vacant spaces,  
hot tar seeps and seeks to hold.  
It fills and does the binding.  
The painter heals the road.

(Who among us knows  
what this artist knows  
of what the day requires,  
where the real work goes?  
Work that has benefit,  
work that lasts a while,  
work that can be fun,  
and brings a little smile.  
I look at all I've done  
and wonder what will last.  
Long as a mended road,  
or lost back in the past?)





## Jake and the Flood

We gathered early on that night  
toward the end of a sad year  
in Jake's old house, not feeling right.

For all, Jake was a man held dear.  
A few guests did not want to stay.  
The fall's events were still too near.

What was it we could say  
in such a place so full of pain?  
So there we stood just in the way.

It had all started with the rain.  
Then came that knock down wind.  
Then came the freaky rains again.

He had long been our friend,  
and old enough to be our dad.  
For some of them he was their kin.

That dog was mainly what he had.  
So when the stream became a torrent,  
he ran outside toward her pad.

Tragedy he sought to prevent!  
We must celebrate his deep love  
and to that love give our assent.

Dear Jake. Found in a downstream cove —  
his left arm still holding her tight —  
close to the ancient ash tree grove.



## Leroy's Lament

I sit here working crosswords  
dripping black coffee on my dog,  
trying not to think of you,  
watching this morning's fog.

We had such a time together,  
but now you're really gone.  
I need four letters down  
and I can't but think of "torn."

I thought if I were drunk again  
it would be easier for me to tell.  
So I chugged a pint of Jim Beam.  
That made you mad as hell.

I was trying to explain  
my running around didn't matter.  
I said she was just off and on,  
but that just made you madder.

You left two months ago  
right after that big fight.  
If I hadn't hit so hard,  
would we still be alright?

I'm glad you didn't call the cops.  
You could have put me deep in it.  
I guess I should be thanking you —  
one more, I wouldn't be acquitted.



I got my smokes, JB, and dog.  
And I'm getting use to feeling sorry.  
I think about having you back.  
Perhaps one day that still will be.

*Dream on, lover boy,  
you worthless pile of it.  
After too long a spell with you,  
it's way past time I split.*



# The Billy Ballou Story

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BILLY BALLOU

A LETTER FROM THE NATION'S CAPITAL

WITH A NAME LIKE THAT

THE MISTAKE: MERV'S STORY

OLD SAM'S STORY

SOMEWHERE LOVELY

## BILLY BALLOU

On a gorgeous spring day in '58  
during the term of Ike Eisenhower,  
Billy Ballou was born in east Mobile.  
It was never clear why it happened.

Billy was raised by his mother Mabel  
in a small rundown house near the shipyards.  
She loved him without measure or reserve.  
To him she was his angel from heaven.

She would gather him up in her big arms,  
press him to her warm body and twirl round  
and round and the house would shake on its blocks.  
He held the joy of those moments with him.

With his curly black hair and soulful eyes  
and his smile to light up the rainy sky,  
he won the hearts of her small group of friends.  
He tried to follow their tease and chatter.

Billy needed all the love he could get.  
He was born deaf and said to be simple.  
Deaf and dumb. He was called deaf and dumb.  
He would see those words form and be angry.

His mother found a church school for the deaf  
where the main goal was to teach them to speak.  
Imagine speaking words you've never heard.  
He tried but knew he was no good at it.

Billy was a happy kid all the same.  
He found a dinghy washed up on the shore.  
He taught himself to sail and would go out  
for hours on the bay and the great Tensaw.



---

And he loved sitting in the small kitchen  
while his mother was busy with cooking.  
His mother told her friends that what Billy  
lacked in hearing he made up in smelling.

When his mother would stir the red onions  
with fresh ginger and garlic she could see  
his face glow and that big bright smile come out.  
“Boy’s got a stubborn streak, too,” May said once.

Soon after Billy turned 14 he found  
his mother dead in her bed one morning.  
May had died overnight of a bad heart.  
Billy fell across her bed and he wept.

No real relatives could be found for Billy.  
He was soon put into a foster home  
that was far away from his neighborhood,  
far away from all that he knew and loved.

Then, a few months later, hardly noticed,  
young Billy simply disappeared from sight.

The authorities felt obligated  
to search land and water for our Billy.  
They did a reasonable job of it.  
A home neighbor said he stayed in mostly.

They said: “if you hear a sweet but odd laugh,  
you will have found him.” “He could hardly talk.”  
“Something was wrong. Don’t know how he got by.”  
“I sure do hope you find him soon. Nice kid.”



A dinghy was found washed up down the bay  
 in the stretch between Daphne and Fairhope.  
 Some of Billy's things were tied tight in it;  
 it was clearly identified as his.

The story took hold that Billy Ballou  
 had sailed way out into the bay and drowned.  
 Some said it was probably for the best,  
 with his simplicity and no mother.

His mother's friends thought rather different.  
 He was a swimmer and smart as a whip.  
 They dreamed the boy would show up before long.  
 One of them would sing quietly to herself:

Oh Billy Ballou Billy Ballou  
 Where are you Billy Ballou  
 We miss you so where did you go  
 We pray for you Billy Ballou

*The Sewee Indians of coastal South Carolina,  
 having had enough of merchant middlemen,  
 loaded their canoes with their wares  
 and set out paddling to markets in England.  
 No one knows what became of them, but  
 they were searchers for something better.*



## A Letter from the Nation's Capital

Ethel was excited to receive Billy's letter;  
that's been many a year.  
And now she has another, with a clipping.  
A heartbeat she can hear.

She was closest of all his mother's friends  
and remembers Billy well.  
The clip's photo shows Billy with a group  
of protesters raising hell.

He was passing out food to them,  
several smiling in return.  
They gathered there to teach a lesson,  
one way past time to learn.

The news clip is dated March 9 '88:  
Students Demand Deaf President Now!  
Gallaudet students are revolting;  
they make a solemn vow.

They have shut the campus down  
and made their four demands.  
They see change coming for the deaf,  
signing it with their hands.

With the clip is a note from Billy:  
I am part of all this  
and proud to be a student here at Gallaudet.  
I seal this with a kiss.





## With a Name Like That

Many long years ago  
my wife Cameron and I  
went to a spot in New Orleans  
in the Marigny district  
along Frenchmen Street.  
Summer Reyes was there  
singing beautifully with her band,  
and I said to myself,  
“Cameron is as good as Summer  
and if I were her manager  
and she had a name like Summer Reyes,  
wow, we could really go places,  
touring around and having fun.”

Named Gus as I am, I’m  
sensitive to these matters.  
A friend in the UN once said  
“You become your name.”  
Movies love Gus—for animals.  
Soon I will be a mule or mouse.  
It has occurred to me  
that if I were instead named  
Jonathan Countryman,  
I might have made a  
good life in politics.



## The Mistake: Merv's Story

There was an accident on the highway  
early on Sunday morning, just yesterday,  
not an interstate but a poor state road.  
We had talked about it being a bad stretch.

I can hardly bring myself to tell this.  
She was pregnant and so they're both gone now.  
My house creaks and bangs from the cold and wind.  
It was frozen hard like this yesterday.

My Sis was driving fast and hit black ice  
on the curve near the Ace Hardware and slid  
flat sideways into an oncoming truck.  
He was carrying a load of white pine.

On Saturday night late she had over  
a new guy she met in the bar in town,  
a mistake way past a few too many.  
He went about it in a rough mean way.

"I want the cute young one too," he said.  
"That's my daughter," Sis yelled. "Forget it, jerk!"  
But he forced Sally into the bathroom,  
locked the door tight, and took his pleasure.

Come morning, Sis knew what she had to do.  
With her dead husband's pistol beside her  
on the old pickup seat, she headed out  
to the place he was staying for the night.



---

When she hit the ice she was likely thinking  
about where she should put the first bullet.  
Perhaps she was thinking between his legs.  
That is what I likely would be thinking.

Sally said my Sis held her tight all night,  
told how she fought and got hit many times.  
She cried, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."  
Her mom finally found the gun and left.

I have my gun but I have told the police.  
For now, I'll give the cops a chance to act.  
I'll take care of Sally as best I can.  
But I have so little to offer her.

Sis should have gone to school but went to drugs.  
She straightened out became a good mother.  
She loved, protected and worked hard at it.  
But she had a weak spot for drink and men.

I will miss her to the end of my days.  
But Sally, my God, how can I help her?  
How can we get beyond this awfulness  
and claim a small place of peace in this world?



## Old Sam's Story

Did you know Molly?  
It was new summer's day,  
bright and fresh that morning,  
and she was in the garden  
with her favorite flowers budding.  
How she loved her roses,  
almost as much as I loved her.  
Now this longest day returns,  
and she is gone.  
The sunset brings shadows  
to untended blooms.  
Bluebirds pause and float  
from post to ground.

Everybody knew Molly!  
And they loved her too.  
She was a woman in full,  
if I may say that.  
She would look you in the eye  
and you were in that moment  
everything to her.  
Her daddy once said of her,  
"Lord, Molly, you can charm  
the lard out of a biscuit."  
She charmed me every day.  
And on this endless day,  
she is gone.



Itching is between  
the hurt and its healing,  
and I am itching all over.  
The loss of her surrounds me.  
I am covered by memories  
of her silver hair on my shoulder.  
On this day she would have loved,  
she is gone.



## Somewhere Lovely

What Heaven was ever made  
but as beauty wrought in sun and shade?

Jonathan Countryman sat on his porch  
in Litchfield Beach in the late afternoon.  
He had just finished his fifth and his last  
term as state senator and was thinking.  
Half into his Bloody Mary, he knew  
he had accomplished some important things,  
but not as much as he had hoped at the start.  
He became a leader of the progressives,  
but this was South Carolina after all.  
That damn flag yet flies around the state.  
But I am still vertical, he thought,  
still vertical despite it all.

On that warm March day, Jennifer joined him.  
Married for fifty-one years come July,  
she knew what he was thinking, and she said,  
“It was worth it. We made a difference.  
Even if we didn’t, it was still worth it.  
All the effort, all the trying...beautiful!  
We should go out and celebrate. Tonight.  
Somewhere lovely.”

Jonathan had heard about a new place,  
a casual restaurant that seemed perfect.  
Most nights they had a band playing.  
It was near Murrells Inlet up the beach,  
so they made reservations and took off.



When they got there, the thing they noticed  
were the grounds — the beautiful landscaping.  
The camellias were blooming pink and red.  
An old man was bent over the roses,  
clipping them expertly to get the best.  
Jennifer was a good gardener herself,  
and he started talking roses with her.  
“My apartment is down the road from here.  
I volunteered to care for this garden.  
My name is Sam. My wife Molly loved roses  
and when I work here, I remember all  
the good things with her. It is a blessing.”

The restaurant was indeed lovely.  
She’s an attractive woman, Jonathan thought,  
as they were warmly greeted at the door.  
“Hello,” she said, “and welcome to our place.  
I’m Sally. I know about your service,  
and I have admired it from afar.  
Thank you for all you have done!  
This restaurant is something my husband  
and I have long wanted, and here we are.  
That’s him over there where they are cooking  
the best food on the coast, or so we claim!”



Jonathan could see an animated man  
with curly gray hair busy in the kitchen.  
To his surprise he was communicating  
with the kitchen crew using sign language.  
Jonathan knew the new restaurant's name  
and asked if that would be Billy himself.  
"Yes," Sally said, "that's my Billy of Billy's Balloons.  
He's overcome everything life offered.  
This is our daughter, Fairhope.  
She will show you to your table."

As for Cameron and Gus, well, they were  
at a corner table eating crab cakes,  
taking in the whole scene with pleasure.  
To their delight, they had noticed that  
Summer Reyes would be coming soon.  
They would be back.





Afterword...

