

William Hedrington

*Collected Poems*

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Edited by Michael Smith

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## Foreword

These are the poems of William Hedrington, as collected on the web site [www.hedrington.org](http://www.hedrington.org) and published in book form, *On the Downhill Side*, by Shambling Gate Press. The book can be ordered through [Book Clearing House](#) or other online sources.

The poems are in two groups: *On the Downhill Side*, a collection made by Bill himself, and a collection of *Poems from Other Sources*, assembled from Bill's papers after his death. The latter group is arranged, to the extent possible, in chronological order.

Bill was never satisfied with his work, and re-wrote it over and over. And he kept all his drafts, including tiny four-times-folded slips of paper that seem to have spent some time in a hip pocket, on a motorcycle, under a drenching rain. All this material was made available for this edition through the great kindness of Darlene Knudtson, Bill's sister, and her husband Ed, with whom Bill had left a number of his files, and to whom his papers were sent after his death.

*Downhill Side* was put together by Bill in 1970. It's as good a text as we can have for the poems it contains, though there are some notes and drafts of further revisions to poems in this collection. These seem rather tentative and have not been used here.

The remaining poems, collected in "poems from other sources," include everything from juvenilia to works-in-progress; some student work, handed in and then apparently forgotten by Bill, has not been included.

The texts of the poems in this collection are more difficult to establish, since many exist in multiple versions and these versions are often not datable. The versions presented here are what seem to be the latest complete texts. As with *Downhill Side*, no attempt has been made to incorporate scraps and fragments jotted down here and there, even though some of these may be later than the complete texts.

Recently (January 2026), through the kindness of Ana McGrath, Archives and Special Collections Librarian at New College, Bill's undergraduate thesis, titled "The Voices (49 poems with prefatory essays)" became available to us. Most of the poems in the thesis were already included here and in the printed book, either in *Downhill Side* or *Other Sources*, but this additional manuscript source enabled us to add three poems to *Other Sources*.

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## On the Downhill Side

### The Voices

I was born on the downhill side,  
late in the year, in early December,  
in the light's heavy dip and hesitation,  
when the old peoples prayed for beginning  
in the snow-salted fields  
and scattered bitterness of corn stalks;  
but though I came fatly of that gaunt race,  
though it was a different end and today that day,  
the fields untracked by supplicants,  
the corncribs many, and full,  
still I carry their disappointed dead  
buried in my body,  
and am the outspoken child  
of the silent generations of my cells—  
for O, they call with the old voices,  
in a millennium length of words,  
in the thousand year cries of the dead,  
that their lean voices, lost to these fields,  
may be gathered up and justified in me.

### Apple

The dead litter so,  
leave clothes in drawers,  
old photographs, everything,  
and go.

They are as thoughtless as children,  
who will get up with the sun,  
take an apple,  
and set out for the world's end.

## Disappearing

Even after the goodbye kiss  
there was the waiting  
for the walk to the plane and waving,  
there was the drawing up of steps  
and doors closing,  
the taking off,  
and still the requisite tedium of disappearing:  
always somehow something trailing;  
malways a raveling shirt  
caught on a cabinet knob,  
always in her "coiffure" a hair  
from the back of nowhere just hanging;  
there is even her handbag after the plane's gone.

## Near-accident

The wheels spun instants,  
but the whole car was hours  
in the arriving, arriving, arriving,  
its massive, death-making power  
awesome in its actual density,  
the important, indifferent driver  
fascinated out his left window by flowers,  
but I jumped back, alive!  
I've been lightweight in life ever since.

## Water

Her rhythm is the measured walk  
a half-step from a skip;  
her time an hour distant,  
until the smiling instant!

O would that she were what she seems,  
or would seem whatever she is,  
for I can forget the shape of ice,  
but go mad remembering water.

## Glass

The glass tension releasing he knelt down  
on pain to free himself among the bits,  
and crooning at the smoothness of the glass,  
caressed his wrist to calm himself and rest.

But bandages and tape bound back the blood,  
and the tile was cleansed, and nothing was left  
to tell the sometime deep demand for glass  
to break the frail containment of the skin.

## Lest You Believe Walt...

In the gravid trees' hydraulic green,  
Buds breeding-hard under the grown load,  
When the earth's belly swells big to bleed,  
And the mud labors, and the seeds groan,  
Even Bambi has humped, even the white-tail deer  
Have taken their tails down off the knoll,  
The does staggering heavy and sweating to kneel  
And fall thickly in the bracken at Spring's door.

## On Hearing Freshmen Argue About the Existence of God

And thus it is the first year here; the one  
Female, Catholic, certain—St. Thomas sent  
To prove the fact of God by argument.  
Her “infinite regression” is well done.  
The other though, semantic, male, and done  
With God, proves proof of the omnipotent  
Is sermon, and that what she thought she meant  
Is meaningless, and at best emotion.  
God, Anne, come here, and we will argue too,  
And set the Spirit at the null and void—  
We’ve done it once and know more than they do  
Of point and counterpoint—how to avoid  
The question—how to attack—and when through,  
Of what to do when both sides are destroyed.

## On Deck

The fist that punched the pasteboard mask  
Pulls back; and Ahab’s lost a leg.  
And should he dare disturb the universe,  
Or even care? The child who plays at mumbly-peg  
Enjoys his two fat legs—no worse  
For idleness or innocence.  
Is Ahab’s madness loss of sense,  
Or should he cock his fist a second time,  
And ask whatever question there’s to ask,  
Or should he hunt the narwhale and the right?  
On deck! man Ahab harpoons Prime,  
White water downs the Pequod, White  
Heals the sea of pride; the child plays; the mask  
That Ahab dies at watches both do each his task.

## Like Quakers

Unless I take like Quakers thees and thous,  
And break this bucking English into rhyme,  
How will I tell you that which only vows  
Exceed, because they recognize no time?  
My good-enough, everyday, bronco tongue,  
As everybody knows, will do for day;  
High-talking's hard on a work-a-day lung,  
That has to eat the dirt man eats for pay.  
But after nightfall, when the day slows down,  
I'll study Greek and Latin rhetorick,  
While you take off your cotton dress, and gown  
Yourself in bedsheets, and each night I'll pick  
Some new old Roman speech to hobble me,  
For else I'd naught but babble love to thee.

## The Others

My others are the thousand shallow breaths  
A man will take to give himself short sleep,  
Safe by minor lives in minor deaths,  
And warm where water will not tell the deep  
Tall mountains of the central sea, or read  
The hard high-pressure country of its floor,  
But only wets the night it can't exceed,  
And proves with less how much I need the more,  
But my one with you is like the deep-drawn air  
That pins the lungs, like the mile-under dark  
Of the Atlantic, and the river there  
That sweeps a quarter earth in one salt arc  
And never tires; but I, tiring, again  
Will rest myself with others, until when.

## The Boats

The boats that bump so docile at the dock  
Are moored there slackly; no rowboat captain  
Even, but knows the moon-called sea takes line,  
And will have it, or hang the boats to break.  
I'm not a boat, my will is not a rope,  
And you, for all your changes and your pull  
tiding my heart's rerunning salty well,  
Are not the pumicestone that queens the deep.  
Yet, I might as well be boat, and you moon,  
For though I fight, my blood bends with the sea,  
My body aching at my twisted will.  
How, unless a man tie back the ocean,  
Can taut lines help but snap, and how, once free,  
Can any man but be a tide-bound hull?

## Shutdown

Death shut down the works, the factory's old.  
The union of the dead has won, and quit.  
Will his eyes be opened by the cold?

The economy is strong, the market bold,  
The people as a whole are not hard hit.  
Death shut down the works, the factory's old.

The management holds on, when it can hold—  
Tonight the doctor packs his useless kit.  
Will his eyes be opened by the cold?

What a question—it's common—factories fold;  
Dark windows only show the soul is lit.  
Death shut down the works. The factory's old.

Yet whatever reassuring story's told,  
The after silence mocks the telling it:  
Will his eyes be opened by the cold?

By his works, would that faith, like dreams, were sold—  
A man must be a scab! Do not admit  
Death, shutdown—the work's, the factory's old;  
Will his eyes! Be opened by the cold!

## Knowing the Time

When the last  
local point of interest  
has been marveled over,  
and the folder  
of "Things to See and Do"  
is shut in a drawer,  
and Mom and Dad are finally  
settled for good  
with their own kind,  
they start to always  
know what time it is,  
without looking almost,  
like children out of school  
who play school  
to shorten summer;  
and tired of always knowing  
almost without looking,  
they retire to local bars,  
crowding in the cocktail hours  
to drink at special rates  
the Senior Citizens' Special,  
the newcomers chatting  
of children and grandchildren,  
regulars quiet mostly,  
mostly watching themselves  
in the mirror watching  
behind the bottles  
behind the bar,  
until they drink up where  
no one ever  
knows the time.

## Old Women at the Check-out Counter

They are afraid, of course: boots and helmet  
mean motorcycle, mean young—and alien;  
so they pick and pull at their worn sweaters,  
and rustle among themselves of T.V. shows,  
the high price of lunch meat on a pension,  
the shuffleboard scores in their condominium.  
But still they peep at me and what I've bought:  
the razor blades, the metal polish, the beer.  
I move to leave, having many things to do,  
and eager now to do them now, but one  
speaks up to me and stops me, wondering,  
until she quavers out "You forgot your stamps."—  
her arm jerking randomly—"They're good to save."  
I leave them as some kind of gift and leave.

## Locked In

The car splayed wide the gray stone wall  
in abrupt stop;  
as leisurely as July,  
the door swung back and slammed;  
dust went humming in the sun.  
Blood soon stopped,  
but other things went on—  
the stones began to settle in the grass,  
the left rear tire sighed flat;  
a panting farmer jumped the wall and pulled,  
and pulled at the bent door, and quit:  
the angle of the head was plain,  
the driver was locked in.  
His day-long labor lost, with nothing to do,  
he waited out his gasping,  
until, as silent as the other one,  
he moved his legs and left,  
perhaps beginning to be afraid  
there are not doors enough to get outside.

## Deliverance

I have delivered her to madness  
And am quiet now.  
The chair remains a chair;  
I must remember that  
I am quiet now.  
The coiling, flicking of its arms  
Is not there.  
What she saw  
Is not there.  
The breath may lie, and the mind believe;  
I speak with an urgent breath  
To myself.  
I have delivered her  
And will not talk with her.  
Though she speaks in a voice beyond lies  
And shrieks in the last vision;  
I will remain quiet  
About the chair  
And ignore her.  
I cannot help her.  
I will remain quiet  
And the chair will remain quiet.

## Bicycling Away from the Library

Rosewater and dust the dawn;  
whir and grit of tires,  
grumble of gear and chain  
and the fine rain  
nerve-white along the skin  
as the round webs turn  
their long miles down the day...  
push and push, right and left,  
the pedals down and down  
riverrun your revolution  
downstream drift of wheel and dream  
by book and magazine past paper drain  
our unloosed lives in your dark run  
that we may join our urgent night  
allow the turning waterwheel  
lost to the buzz of black and white,  
that clash of opinions  
a Tower of Babel and confusion of tongues.

## Photographs

Click! my light caught in black and white.  
Remember the Amusing Anecdote? how native blacks  
broke the magic box to free their souls?  
Remember how explorers laughed? If I could laugh...  
for six hours I have hunted my soul,  
scattered drawers and stripped walls,  
decimated photograph albums,  
keeping a small fire going,  
freeing myself picture by picture:  
myself at one year eating ice cream,  
myself at five petting a spaniel,  
at ten on a bike, fifteen a car,  
brown, flare, and burn, every one, into air!  
Unless I loose the light caught in these shots,  
bound in a boy, I will die to my full flame  
never to become my essential sun,  
memory wholly burned in pure oxygen.

## 6 A.M.

Instantly awake and shocked tight,  
in the light's smashed mountain,  
broken granite and gray air,  
my eyes gouged open,  
my body a fear in flesh;  
why snapped from sleep?  
No noise did it, not the light,  
not any dream in memory;  
why awake?

The sudden day slips into normal calm,  
the hours mass their usual ease,  
and noon and afternoon are gone,  
with all their small antitheses,  
and the slight drag of doubt, the snag  
that warps the river just a bit,  
ignore it.  
You may, perhaps, forget for good,  
unless, of course, some morning stabs your eyes,  
the gulfs and cliffs that drift by through our days.

## Freefall

No one returns an All-American  
from here; the first law you must learn is breathe,  
the second, walk; if the language cools  
enough to speak, then you swear allegiance,  
as if you could care, as if a country  
could naturalize such aliens.  
Which of you knows this freefall of the mind,  
the nausea of the weightless man, lost  
out of eclipse, the burning of the Word  
become its full and Pentecostal sun,  
and worst, the realizing as you lose  
profane faith in mere reality,  
how many, and deep, are the levels of sleep.

## For My Grandfather

When my grandfather went away,  
October headed north into the winter,  
and I was cold of the crying  
in back bedrooms, restless at the whispers,  
at the fussing of leaves in the mouths of the house.  
Away myself from the cooling house,  
from the dusting of my mother, away,  
far as grandfather, who left me there,  
who left with his German into the north,  
away at the creek, rock-walking the granite,  
I was quiet as Sunday in an autumn town,  
my game strange with the haze of the burning leaves  
as they lost their small summer to winter.  
Even then, though my coat wore out that day,  
thinner as the wind blew back from the winter,  
though the water hurt as it wet the rocks,  
even then I was childish and able to play,  
only quiet in my stepping from rock to rock,  
wishing the dusting would stop, and the whispers,  
and that my grandfather were there.  
Now, in the drought in the middle of winter,  
one of my impermanent winters  
only of weather and my gradual age,  
as the sun swings down in a dead-end month,  
with water dust in its dunes of snow,  
twenty more years have lengthened the thought  
of a playing child in smoky October.  
My mother that day couldn't dust enough  
to stop the burning up by breath  
of all our combustible selves, but grandfather,  
guttural tongue stiff with the winter,  
left us seventy years when he left,  
and proved by the sudden north of the house  
that human fire is our first house,  
and we are the waste which makes increase.

## One Day at a Catholic University

The morning reconstruction done,  
books fit to the category Books,  
records fit to the class Records,  
everything fit to Something,  
and nothing slurring into anything else,  
I begin by getting up.

I notice on my way to class  
that I have shaved and showered  
and apparently changed clothes.  
I smile: habit is a priceless nurse.

Today the class is on Camus,  
and while they settle Suicide,  
I doodle my way through.  
When it's over I leave.

Lunch is good. The afternoon  
is like falling  
until I stop it.  
I regulate my breathing  
and continue.

Back to the window for light,  
I sit,  
reading the Church on Camus—  
in nineteen scintillant pages,  
a Jesuit concludes that “really,  
the Absurd is silly.”

Dinner. Tired today. The fork wouldn't work  
and I had to give up.  
It's early to sleep  
I think I must  
I undress  
lie down  
let it collapse

## December Aubade

You, who will shortly land  
smiling in a wailing plane,  
gray eyes and gray wool dress,  
from the land of the blank white field  
and the black upright tree;  
bring some order into Florida.  
A proper winter will freeze  
the intricate quick water,  
and make even a walk downtown  
a thought-out thing.  
While here the sun still burns,  
the water is continual;  
no stillness and too much of change.  
But you promised me snow,  
somehow you'd bring snow,  
and if I looked quickly,  
I might find in crystal  
a brief symmetry,  
before the sun takes even that away.  
But whatever coldness you can bring,  
bring some, and quickly! come!  
for the long light of the morning sun  
allows only my continual walking.

## Flare

The compressed breath  
bound in a tank of oxygen  
burst into his face God's word Flare!  
then nothing seeing there.

But oh, how his face took it,  
ingathering all that light,  
his eyes used up at once,  
his features chopped to scrap,  
and all of it an instant Gloria.

Then under the knives and eyes he lay,  
lost and found in the light in his face,  
while they...  
picked out many bits,  
left many.  
Few of the attendants  
thought it was worth-while.  
Even as, in joy, he tried to smile,  
they knew what explosion meant,  
what really happened that he might not see:  
an abrupt, but small,  
yet permanent,  
increase in entropy.

## The Change to Ariel: For Sylvia Plath

Sylvia, come, come, come;  
you were the only, the very woman, the one  
sick enough of sunlight to take the sun;  
skinning your eyes of daily lids,  
your mind of caution and the Golden Mean,  
you scribbled all the way one droning note,  
then shed your nothing song as Ariel,  
deep-breathing death's strange oxygen,  
and stared forever into noon.  
Were you left-handed, did you cast a shadow,  
what was the clue? Now you've tuned our Sirens  
who goes next, forgetting human form,  
hungry to learn that manic monotone?  
Ariel, I sweat and want to burn.  
Teach me, woman, how you made the change.  
Nothing is enough. My summer's winter sun  
itself is worthless till it's off or on.

## Sight

You may look. Do not stare.  
If you dare  
fix eyes on desk or chair,  
on anything for long,  
if you dare,  
your sight will disappear in its mere fire,  
retina burned beyond all light  
by something so much there.  
Boys blind, lids down to cover stones,  
sit in the chairs that took their eyes,  
say nothing, hold in their black brains  
the image of those chairs,  
say nothing, days by hours gone,  
nothing, hold that frame of fire, those cells  
recycling everything they finally saw,  
silence their last end,  
our noise our ignorance, our sight, our sin.

## Acceleration

Out of the fuzz of men and mouths,  
riding the sun cracked from gasoline,  
twin megaphones lay down  
the original red roar,  
and I have my fist around fire!  
Ahead world blooming with rate,  
behind world dead by my speed,  
twist out the last nova of wrist,  
star!  
grow now and breathe, slow beyond speed,  
with light as my limit, my loss, my release,  
where time has no name but enough

## Student Accident

A fifty-three Plymouth painted gray  
and a green tree  
wading into the metal  
breaking around that tree,  
while the driver lolled and flopped  
his loose way back to babyhood,  
an unstrung puppet of a child  
who grew at last so young he died  
into a heap of random limbs:  
but it was sudden, done,  
just stick-man, just new-made junk,  
the official affairs of uniformed cars  
and brushy voices out of radios;  
so leaving it to those who clean it up,  
I walked narrowly away,  
stopping once to pick up someone's book  
thrown open to the page with Melville's name  
and academic poem of  
matter and its ancient, brutal claim.

## Bomb-shelter

When the clock broke, it was over.  
Until its tinny cardiac, we'd managed,  
one set against the other, to advance.  
I threw it on the cans, north corner.  
I stayed for what I think were three more days.  
White noise on the radio. No change.  
The bulb alone could not make day and night.  
When walls became a problem, I got out.  
I had to break the door. It is a day.  
It still looks like it looked like when it hit.  
The sea turned gray and silver as hacked lead.  
The sky was sick with light.  
The wind collapsed with sound and then was done.  
My face was white and black, my brain a ball of glass.

## Seconal

Twenty years, awake to every day;  
the sun, its shock or sullenness of light,  
darkness—pools and ditches of air;  
so tired—twenty pills to sleep.  
("Slap her! Make her walk! Talk to her!  
She has to stay awake! Keep her awake!")  
Their worry founders in her year-wide yawns,  
her calm dilating in a snow of Seconal.  
Myself as dumb and lost in drifts as she,  
I wander to my room, stung  
briefly by the siren as it comes,  
but yawning then myself that I forget,  
as she forgot herself, her in my smaller, shorter sleep.

## January

Half in, half out of doorways,  
always ghost and girl at once,  
pale resonance with red hair,  
she is gauche in anything not January,  
puzzled at any kind of sun,  
at any red-rimmed noon in day or man.  
Afterwards asking "Did I do it right?,"  
as if fire were a craft, as if I  
could teach rhythms of woman and man;  
how lost her twenty lovers must have been—  
such sadness in red hair, white skin.

## It

Top Forty yells it out, but not this one:  
I blush to say it, even think it,  
even in our doubled secret dark,  
safe from any ears but yours, two  
very fine ears.  
In all clench-jawed America,  
no one says it,  
as if it were the secret code,  
and we bit tongues against Gestapo questions,  
polite all-day, all-night questions.  
It's after the secret hair sprouts that we lease it,  
for our entire ever, to the radio.  
Before that teen-age sign-away  
I love you love we love us love love  
conjugates everywhere on our childish tongues,  
but about age twelve we start to suit the action,  
and forget the word.  
So if I never say I love you, it's not true.  
I do.

love

you

## Illness

Oh I'm clever, clever. I  
cannot die. What scintillance  
of brain cells... Hell!—and fever, fever.  
You shimmer quaintly, nurse. In or out  
of phase, please. Really. You know,  
I've half a mind... ho! Ice, I see.  
By water burn my blaze away...

Most cold this morning, cold.  
The sun is black, sucks  
where it once spent its light,  
August is reversed, and dust is snow.  
I cannot quite remember, are you gone?  
How far? From where do your letters come?  
I do remember mornings when we two  
rose with the sea breeze,  
my shirt blown about on you,  
time rewound with every wave.  
That sun: will it never white again?  
We wrote letters for a long time, long time, long time...  
Distance shuts my mouth.

The mistral and sirocco yield:  
I regain my weather and my weight.  
I lie down late, rise early, often see  
the round return of one more day.

## The Distant

Those who are growing  
easier as their hair goes gray,  
those more distant everyday,  
drinking shallowly and seldom,  
eating nothing to speak of,  
sleeping an hour before dawn,  
and breathing a few times a day,  
their eyes steadily empty with something  
they learn as they forget the earth,  
or rather, deal with it as it is;  
how do we talk with such men?  
How do we get them to tell  
through their frail bodies and wrinkles  
what they are the maze and puzzle and sign of?  
Even with each other they won't tell,  
but talk around the changes they've seen,  
the celebrities they've seen  
who are dead, the first Model A  
and the bad roads, and the many friends  
who are dead; so the younger  
shake their heads and leave them to themselves;  
for how can you deal with them,  
be they ever so rich and strange,  
if they do nothing but talk of change?

## Death of a Football Star

Still arms will not hang straight;  
they remember in cramps tonight how  
with these limbs I lifted him,  
huge, myself child to his man,  
onto the cart, white sheets and wheels,  
my ears jammed with ringing and silence,  
the shouts of attendants unheard,  
but then, ganged into a corner,  
held hard from hurting the dead,  
my ears returned with one sound:  
the tick of bearings and clock  
as they wheeled his huge stillness away.  
Afterwards I was so clumsy,  
all things were so slow afterwards.  
In my hand the coffee cup rose,  
weightless and drifting and white.  
I drank once without any taste  
and set the cup down for a year,  
smashed it without any force,  
and bled for forever until  
a doctor prescribed pills to calm me,  
who was calm as the form of my friend.

## How Long

Some morning of knives and nausea,  
at the cliff's edge in the kitchen,  
scarring formica for a slice of bread  
for my stomach to bite down on,  
my time will be packed up,  
free of forethought, and I  
will put away the clock and eat,  
in the yellow kitchen, my bread, and sleep.

You will be gone then, for good, good, good;  
your porter, your redcap, old I  
will have lugged the baggage out.  
Will you tip me a kiss,  
a quarter, will you smile,  
wave and wave and wave a while?

When my red phone caught the rings,  
I wouldn't treat it, I ignored it.  
Better it sick than me sick.  
But then "knock knock hello hello  
I wouldn't come back but I love you so"  
and you're in, unpacking you.  
I wound the clock but didn't set it,  
since all I care is how long.

At night you are always hot  
to that side of me near you,  
so I turn and turn, and I turn,  
like a man on a spit, not to burn,  
but be done, be done.

## Child

At the top of the house tonight  
in a room I once lived in,  
the slant ceiling hunches over  
and the square-shouldered doorway cants  
his enormous empty body to my sight  
and no angles are true: nothing obeys  
the plumbline and tape; worn tile  
warps in distress at hot and cold,  
old windows of bad glass change the laws,  
and there are strange animals, the alien toys  
of a child, and there is the child smell:  
have you ever heard them before they're human,  
before we teach them everything?—have you ever  
heard them?—they laugh like they're outside—  
whole skull humming in their animal—  
listen! we must make them human—  
they could be these other things—I remember  
through this bad glass when I wasn't human—  
I remember when I was connected—  
telephone and powerline, table and chair,  
all, the chaos and the light, the whole,  
hydrogen and helium,  
the sun of total confusion

## Visiting Home: On My Father Awakening

She clicked on the light and shook him from his dream.  
He woke up small in the scarred oak bed,  
Eyes red with fighting the insistent hunger  
That was the only danger in 1933  
In Chippewa County; he woke up curled up,  
Dream-caught, confused, broke open his small knot,  
Bunched like a shot squirrel, and stretched stiffly.  
"I know he's here, I know," he said, coming slowly  
From those old forests, "I'm awake." But his eyes  
Wouldn't come to today. The wide silence  
Of the hunt held him, and he looked past us,  
Intent, still searching trees for nests,  
To find in all the green one small furred meal,  
Some dark meat for the many who must feed  
On the illegal rabbit, the unlawful squirrel,  
For it was summer, and all game was out of season,  
As if hunger had a season but to eat.  
But no. I could not blind his eye-dark dream  
With the electric bulb of 1966.  
I turned away and I turned out the light.  
I, who have never been bound to single-shot  
And lead-shock for the daily sake of family,  
Who killed perhaps ten bottles, and once, one slow squirrel,  
Could not forbid him gun, trees, squirrel, hunger again,  
Could not deny him his man-making pain.

## Walking Fence

Many there are  
who don't love a fence,  
the fence Robert Frost  
once walked in his thought  
when he couldn't decide  
either/or about walls.  
Now I had a fence,  
a white wooden fence  
that I walked once,  
with grass on one side,  
and grass on the other,  
its paint scaling off,  
its leg-posts wobbly  
where water had bitten  
with the teeth of Wisconsin.  
When I dared its blunt balance  
with my thin-worn soles,  
I walked the white wobble  
for a hundred yards,  
but I fell on my belly  
like a sack on the fence,  
then slowly slid off  
like a sack on one grass,  
where, empty of air,  
I cried for air,  
but I could get breath  
enough for living  
and maybe more fencing  
only on coming  
dizzy near dying.  
That day I'd a bruise  
on my round of a belly  
to help me remember  
that walking fence  
is a serious business  
when you're human and heavy,  
so let someone tell you  
who knows about fences,  
that if you don't pick  
one grass over another,  
you'd better be ready

for a bruise on the belly,  
a problem with breath,  
and some tears.

### To One Skeleton in One Indian Mound

At noon the sun like one more engine  
roared overhead,  
and all we amateurs at spades  
crossed our broad blades in the heat  
in the hurry to dig up and hoard,  
but now... all your awry bones  
and a round skull full of cobweb thought  
unlock my day,  
and the dig's quarrel of shovels  
disappears. Let the others save and save  
their bones against the dozers  
bulling their way here and there tomorrow  
to the tick. My thin friend,  
I could outsit America,  
spinning a headful of those subtle threads,  
and in a jumble in the next time's mound  
crook my head-house a thousand years  
around the nebulae of webs,  
thinking on the spinner's work of stars.

## An Indigestible Dream

The damp of three summers' rotting rain  
ruined the emperor's day with a cold,  
and left the wheat-fields like paddys.  
When the taxman added his tax that year,  
he went off his diet with worry,  
for the imperial pocket was short of full  
about one new palace worth of dollars,  
but descending heavily from his office  
on the towns, he adjusted the towns.  
Sullen farmers clotted the corners,  
leisurely as the rich but more hungry,  
angering the air with belly-growls,  
but the taxman slid like a stick of butter  
easily unhearing along the streets:  
he must have gone deaf at the edge of town.  
Knowing the business of government heavy,  
and knowing the taxman a busy man,  
the farmers, to get his attention,  
threw stones, but the mayor's high walls  
were hard of hearing as the official ear,  
though the taxman couldn't have heard anyway,  
for that buttery ear was being busily licked  
by the confidential tongue of the mayor.  
The taxman, back in the capital,  
figured out one day that each farmer  
had been taxed the cost of one stone, well-cut,  
for that pocket-filling palace of dollars.  
An indigestible dream that night,  
a dream of farmers square as cut stones,  
silent farmers, a whole palace of farmers,  
woke up the taxman till nearly morning.

## Secrets

Daily I bought him candy,  
riding the bike we'd built from junk,  
the bike that had three tires,  
one on the front and two on back,  
the two back tires with one inside the other,  
so we could stagger holes against a blowout.  
Daily I rode it to the neighbor grocery,  
that had an old-time wooden floor  
worn into pathways by years of feet,  
there to buy three Hershey bars,  
with or without nuts, like old Norm said,  
smiling slyly at the embarrassed boy,  
who didn't want to show he knew the joke.  
Sometimes I didn't buy the Hersheys,  
I hated the joking part so much,  
sometimes I'd buy licorice,  
but then grampa'd be mad,  
for Hersheys were what he really liked.  
I'd lie and tell him Norm was out,  
and he'd eat second best, unsatisfied.  
Always, though, I'd buy red soda,  
a big bottle, because we both liked that,  
then ride back home one-handed,  
paper bag in the other arm,  
pretending to go up or down a mountain,  
depending on which gear I was in,  
high or low, for second gear was broken.  
He'd sit on the porch, on the left side sagging,  
stick arms and legs and a big body,  
almost like I'd drawn him once,  
circle for body and lines for limbs,  
like a boy will sometimes do.  
Careful of mother, I'd come the back way,  
on the dining-room side of the house,  
for Hersheys and soda were secret things,  
the kind of secret the old and young  
will make against the big ones of the house.  
It was more than that though, more than a secret,  
though I never did quite know what was wrong,  
why candy was bad, and why soda,  
except it was something called insulin,

that happened at night, that I wasn't let watch,  
that had something to do with little bottles  
kept cool in the icebox, that I couldn't touch.  
So we kept the secret that mother knew,  
knew but overlooked each afternoon,  
the secret really secret from my father,  
who would have stopped my daily rides,  
but an old and dying man's got to have something,  
like she told me ten years later.  
My anger at what she'd done outgrown,  
and even outgrown my own guilt,  
I've become almost proud of what I did,  
that I rode the bike and bought the candy  
to battle the insulin, maybe killing a little,  
maybe taking some weeks from his months  
with eight-years-old near ignorance  
of how good candy could somehow be bad,  
and I remember with no accusations  
the learning about secrets, years ago.

## The End

The shadows of the earth grow short,  
For everything that is upstanding  
Must soon be level in the sun.

The dialectic of the day and night  
Collapses to a synthesis  
In the numb medium of red twilight,  
for everything that is of two  
Must be one.

The slow untroubled circling of the moon  
Goes frantic as it spirals in,  
Bulges, breaks, and smashes all,  
For everything that is in balance  
Must fall.

And now, low in the dim sky, the red sun,  
That has consumed itself for time  
And fed all the hungers of the earth,  
Will settle the sum of no and yes,  
And briefly incandesce.

## Poems from other sources

### Dreams

Her dream was gentle hands, a winning smile,  
and eyes as blue as fair as skies,  
not hard arms and taking hands  
to make her suddenly wise.  
But her daydream fled with her attacker,  
who now feared screams that didn't come,  
for she had opened to her deeper dream  
when she began to move with him.

### Sailing

I set the sea shell in a port tack,  
but in primitive rage against my sailing,  
the green infuriate hammers of the sea  
beat the boat dazed as its white fragility  
was bombarded repeatedly by the savage waves,  
and the wind slammed deep in the thin sail,  
its frail order weakening under the convulsed battering,  
until the boat bent, bowed toward the water, hovering, until  
the sail rived with a scream to upright me.

## Collapse

The stage floor is worn thin,  
the actors mince across the boards in dread,  
and even the audience knows their parts too well,  
but if the whole theater should collapse,  
newspapers would merely flitter from the press  
and experts merely analyze and guess,  
concluding; "It was ill-designed, perhaps—  
but I can't commit myself to why it fell.  
The new one won't be better—like I've always said,  
Those old building codes are a sin."

## Hill-climb

Rutting the wheel-way up,  
storm of sand and rock,  
break this bike or make it, dammit,  
drive, you headlamped devil,  
burst earth at hilltop,  
arc and bottom, dig, dig,  
stand in second gear  
and go devour wind with steel,  
destroy the need for speed or die.

## for my father

my father wrote in flesh,  
on white, parting parchment,  
on supple and yielding skin  
tightened for him.

he knew nothing of what he did  
in that dark-liquid bed;  
erect in his man-power,  
he wrote in mindless words.

he knew nothing of what he did,  
but to him I have no need  
to lie forgiveness—he needs none,  
for his words have a ringing sound.

his chromosomes were keyed  
into a sunly code,  
his words aligned the atoms  
of a galing, windy mind,

and he unlocked the door  
that blocked the watery shaft  
so I could break the surface  
with bones curved of his pen.

he knew nothing of what he did,  
but it was good,  
and as I laugh in light  
my flesh sings of his words.

## sun

when understanding burns away the mist,  
sunhigh revelation in the noon of joy,  
pain-brilliance fevers think to feel,  
flares an inside twisting out to everywhere  
through miraculous topology;  
openness and sun are now

## Seven

In dawn's first-laugh fireburst,  
When Logic slips in dewy grass  
And stains his knees a skipping green,  
My number is seven in a new breeze,  
My mind is soda-pop bubbles,  
My body a plastic delight.

A supercharged seven of hearts throatpurrs  
My motorcycle along the walks,  
Snarls it down the steepest hill,  
And sun-shout days clatter by,  
A picket run along a picket fence  
That runs a million miles---

Until he stands erect, and stiffly  
Brushes nonsense from his clothes.

## Monody: One Madam to Another

Madam Earth, you're more a whore than I am.  
I've stood on my head, turned somersaults,  
anything for a customer with a big fat tip,  
but you've turned more tricks than ever I did,  
for you turn away no man.  
In the end you box us all, even me,  
man or woman's no difference to you,  
you've got to take it and take it in,  
but what makes you the final whore—  
you won't take cash and let us go;  
for we pay everything we've got.  
So all I've got to say is there've been times,  
times I spread for free,  
and they liked it,  
and were at peace, alive, in me.

## The Script

The old man rehearsing my flesh  
broke my legs to bring me down;  
under the shower, in the pin-hot rain,  
my knees thumped porcelain, twin thrown logs;  
I slumped downhill to dream, undone,  
darkly remembering the flesh I am,  
from father and mother, by their first cell,  
the human river knotted to a child,  
untied a lifetime to that dying man  
swelling the river's run as he forgets  
back to the water the part he knows too well.  
After child and before old man,  
halfway from river to river,  
I am my middleman and must learn  
my script that's written in each cell,  
draining myself through my design,  
that, coming at end to my untie,  
I have performed entirely.

## The Harsh In Music

You have been true, and I promiscuous,  
If those quaint words define the modern way,  
When one or many's a matter of choice  
And why not seems as reasonable as why;  
So I've an intimate crowd who've never stayed  
Except in certain ghostly whispered thoughts,  
Until I found the snakey chorus loud,  
And wished I'd stopped at ten or so one-nights;  
While you, in your unmarried faithfulness,  
Have found one instrument a monotone,  
And thinking three years' love a two years' loss,  
Now want instead a symphony of men.  
But what is harsh in music is while I  
Am your one more, you're not one less for me.

## Song of the Wandering Jew

I am the Wandering Jew,  
I struck at Christ with a closed fist  
As I struck at Baal and Osiris,  
And it makes no difference.

I have no memory of why  
I am the keeper of balance,  
Alternate Christ and Anti-Christ,  
But it makes no difference.

You know as well as I  
Of the worth of arguments,  
But they must go on for some time,  
Since it makes no difference.

But when it is all in balance,  
A white noise of the mind,  
I am mindless with that waterfall  
Which makes no difference.

## To Labour for the Wind

And what profit hath he  
That hath laboured for the wind?  
For who can search for it and find,  
And what man hold its brief breath;  
It is more transient than snow,  
Which in one small hour is gone.  
And a man who had the need,  
Where would he search?  
What is the source of it,  
And what the end;  
For even as it comes from nowhere,  
It goes also to nowhere;  
For it has no North or South,  
No East or West,  
But abides equally with all of these,  
And is one with the child and the old man.

## On My Father Awakening Shouting

But can I shoot away that doubt,  
Demobilize the enemy, distending lead  
To prove the punch behind my hollow point,  
Confirming with the bang the wavering good?  
But can I escape, can I escape  
The very palpable recoil of such a hit,  
The question magnified behind the scope  
As I dismantle my own man? The hurt  
That heals in daylight gapes in dreams.  
No gun kills as surely as it seems.

## Tablets

I would like to know why David Roberts  
sold her the one bottle of white tablets  
and wouldn't sell her two.  
Was he afraid to do what she was not,  
or did he want to keep a customer  
for another try on some night later,  
or—did he plan some leisurely delight?  
Whatever: she's not through,  
and must repeat her purchase, buy again—  
I wish he'd sold her two and got it done.

## Earth

Always the long push and pull of blood,  
always the building up, and collapse of lungs,  
always the mass of flesh to overcome,  
obese inertia and base momentum,  
but always too beyond all these there is  
the continuing earth,  
which outwears all its thousand forms to one  
equally beyond the fatigue of fine steel  
and the water-weariness of stone.  
This night, whisper-spent and eye-bleared-out  
in a clock-watched and hour-exhausting  
hushed soliloquy in sibilance, ends but in earth,  
which calms all that crackle of the nerves,  
and submits us to the summer sun  
'til we admit, brought to that calm,  
the snow of flesh, the ice of bones.

## Wrist-watch

Unwind your coiled cold,  
your ice-tight sleety machine;  
the clock-shock of its minute tick  
but wakes me to the wrist-bound world,  
but wakes me to my three-named enemy:  
time, December, and the ticking wind.  
And therefore thanks to you my trinity,  
my three-personed implacable cold God:  
with eyes as open as the handcuff's closed  
I can now find that woman that  
driven by the sprung whirlwind  
we coil in our own Spring.

## Speech

Let them come heavily, bull-boned men  
who kill with many blows of a blunt stone  
determinedly, because they do not understand:  
these men can be yoked neck and neck,  
their tongues are numb, they are not to be feared;  
if ever they discover speech, their speech  
will move with the tide by sun and moon.  
No, fear, but fear the efficiently thin,  
the light and bright as aluminum,  
the neon-tongued, who have teeth of movable type  
and squawk from a nylon voicebox  
words that are to them as paper cups,  
paper plates, plastic knives, plastic forks.

## No More

That a woman should so live for today  
that I am now to her like food long eaten,  
used, built into the body, and forgotten,  
though a month ago we together cried "today,"  
and wound a double helix of the limbs:  
at this I shout at those two in the park tonight,  
startling them closer, crazy man out of the night:  
"There is this much and there is no more:  
There is tonight and there is tomorrow!"

## Florida April

The summer's coal-long twilight glow  
and the loafing floating ash of stars:  
April, where April is the cruelest month—  
here—just June, machine-green palms,  
and heavy traffic on the highway north.  
Today another died. As nurses aid  
for the unimportant terminal ward,  
I was the old man's friend for his last gasps.  
With the final loss of breath through strength squandered,  
he told me how it is at eighty-one.  
"Always the long push and pull of blood,  
always the building up, and collapse of lungs,  
always the mass of flesh to overcome,  
obese inertia and base momentum,  
but always too beyond all these there is  
the continuing earth,  
which outwears all its thousand forms to one  
equally beyond the fatigue of fine steel  
and the water-weariness of stone."

## Learn

Skin is forbidden again—  
not to touch! not to touch!  
forget each history of wet,  
for we are what reverses lust,  
and makes a ghost of red memory.  
Again there is "I meant..." "I didn't mean..."  
two talk at once or not at all,  
and all tends to Philosophy.  
But how long can we walk and talk,  
and rarefy our night and day,  
how long can we practice innocence  
when hunger tells us to turn in,  
lose everything but what we only are,  
and learn what is forgotten once again.

untitled (Now divide the unit world in two)

...Now divide the unit world in two  
and call these twins habitual day and night;  
assign to one the dream that works our rest,  
and to the other, memory—this done,  
this is a man: born one, grown up two,  
a double citizen of neighbor countries,  
each foreign across the border to his other,  
although each whole to his own eye.  
What then when a man must meet his states,  
and at the junction of his day and night combust  
the singular fire of a sun and moon  
when he makes these twin lights twilight?...

## Letter to Ward A

That added-on, crazy-quilt clash of a house  
might have been our stitched-together marriage:  
split shakes and logs for the ground floor  
and a second floor clapboard and plywood.  
The nights when you left upstairs and me,  
spiraling down two flights to the cellar,  
I'd try, but I couldn't remember  
if you were worse at the other house.  
A wide hall pinched to a small door,  
three kinds of windows in one long wall,  
none of it foursquare or true,  
it must have helped odd-angle you.  
Worst of it was for me those nights  
when you played the house from that cellar:  
hot water, then cold, lights off and on,  
the steam heat hissing and whistling,  
and all of it in patterns and design,  
until sometimes I had to crouch in bed,  
half-afraid to half-understand.  
The meters with their needles, ducts,  
the pilot lights and the valves, all things  
half-magical to a wife anyway,  
even before the patterns began.  
But then, an hour or hours later,  
everything would go on at once,  
and you'd dull-foot your way upstairs,  
again a man of right-angle mind.  
You had to go to that place, I guess,  
especially after that last long night,  
when the lights blew out and I found you,  
mind-dark, with your hands in the fusebox,  
but I miss the music now—so intricate!  
and with such an unlikely instrument.

## The Reasoning Rock

If a rock could think,  
I mean a brain-round rock,  
to make its thinking easier,  
(and maybe ponder is better than think,  
for a rock must think ten million years,  
long pondering, about one thing,  
but anyway, if a rock could think,  
about the date of the dawn of Superman,  
this reasoning rock would say, Q.E.D.,  
“What top-speed Keystone Kops were men!”

## Sub for Sail

If I didn't pay rent I'd be a ghost,  
a bump in the night  
for the other tenants to whisper about,  
but once a week Landlady docks,  
half steamed-up on Irish Mist,  
hand out for me to unhand cash,  
and I buy off the all-outdoors  
for another seven days.  
But every week, before her bon voyage,  
she puts me on the stand,  
crossly examining the cluttered room:  
"Why were you on the night of the day  
reading all night?" she says.  
I fold my hands. I clear my throat. I say  
(lying) "I am" "Perjury  
is an ugly word," she says.  
"writing a book on" I say.  
"Perjury, Sir."  
"di-proto-astro-negativity."  
and she leaves.  
I close the hatch and dive,  
cruising my book-pile,  
discoursing with dolphins and whales  
about the Marianas Trench,  
about our common full fathom five,  
snoring an hour on Monday,  
Tuesday half a day,  
reading toward and sleeping away my time  
in a deepsea June or July,  
for it's hot down here, the pressure's on,  
more and more I need some air.  
Next time the S. S. Weekly nears the door,  
I think I'll trade my sub for sail,  
exit the harbor, come about,  
and gathering a deep canvas of air,  
I'll up on the water, and away from here,  
to see how is the all-out-there.

## For Grandfather, Dying Hard

Old man, coughing your way half here, back  
far enough from death to see the surface,  
thick with those who bother to breathe air,  
die, float off in the dark and disappear  
beyond all sonar but my memory.  
What makes you think you can still live here,  
your huge heart thin as a red balloon,  
shaking your body like a distant bomb-blast?  
But most of all I hate your eyes, their fear.

## The Ends of the Bed

I took this ball of dirt the world  
for heaven and hell;  
the water of nerves a woman gives,  
hunger, a bank account:  
these things were solid as sunlight.  
I went to and back, I worked,  
slept deep, fulfilled my every day,  
and I lived in the house of the whole big world.  
Now the whole big world is starved of weight,  
that house has fallen in a flat of cards.  
We're like some storybook ragpaper keeps,  
some Hansel and Gretel thing of scares  
to nightmare children into sleep;  
all this pother of day and night,  
the white sheet red with the child,  
wet with the middleman  
as he reforms his flesh,  
bloody again with the old man's lungs,  
none of it seems more than breath.  
Why, seventy years are crammed in an hour:  
marriage and career, financial empire, death  
and it's all a story to start the night,  
between the first and last of breath,  
between the ends of the bed.

## Night-light

The night-light burns its angry, hungry red,  
ravaging the night fast as my sleepless  
savings; if it can eat at this red rate,  
awakening is false and sleeping true,  
time and its savage dream of light a lie,  
and dream dark fact to its pale fantasy.  
So dream: in the still pool beneath the mind,  
lose all our wear of days, our loss of nights.  
Forget deep as the ape—no! to the fish—  
farther, to the cell, back until the clock  
drowns in the sea by which we swarm and live,  
our memory in genes, our reason that we breathe,  
our understanding oxygen and light.  
And the result? Drowned daily into calm,  
we sink but to awake, shock of sun or night,  
and there the ticking or the humming clock.

## And I Fear

In silos and cradles, carefully cool,  
air-conditioned, checked continually,  
watched and tended by technicians,  
our stockpiles wait the one-time call  
that speeds them and converts them  
from mere matter webbed with circuitry  
to a local, uncontrollable sun.

The triggered clock cuts off the dark  
and all the nightmares of the other side and  
Pop! my mushroom of a brain blooms again,  
dewy and ready to be sucked dry all day.  
The sun, its hardly dangerous soft radiation on,  
sweats me from my limbo and I see,  
the unstable room still solid  
in its unexploded light.  
My day gapes before me like the door,  
opening on all the world I have, still there,  
reprieve granted from the final heat.

I am an outpatient, a man qualified  
by certain drugs. It took shock  
to fry me from my neutral stall,  
but, all that Brownian motion stopped,  
I'm turned loose on the world,  
bracketed by a pair of pills  
setting my upper, my lower bounds.

In my kitchen, the stove-snake cooks my food,  
and at night its split electric tongue  
dangles the apple by which I wait to sleep,  
for I was born to the broadcast radiation,  
and Big Boy's ghost fell out into my bones,  
sighing in my marrow its long decay,  
forshortening my half-life until I knew  
this is the morning I will live or die.

It was in the army, in Japan,  
at Hiroshima I lost my common sense,  
and stopped for all my personal time  
being numb with the millions of the expected dead.  
The museum there has uncommon stones  
stamped with the shadows of that summers leaves,  
and still the people of the city say  
how some are never either sick or well,  
and others, cut, don't heal:  
I puzzled doctors at the base  
by waiting awake for several days;  
when my white blood-count went low,  
they flew me back,  
amazed at what the mind can do:  
DISCHARGED

My static still low enough to work,  
I took a job in some big building,  
filing away my forty hours and more,  
in an alphabetical sub-basement room,  
but through the walls of files  
I felt the background radiation rise,  
and when I filed schematics  
for the sixteenth sub-assembly of a missile,  
to get away from the geiger's roar,  
I jammed my nerves to one  
white noise of a neural snow  
and nothing did me any good or any harm.

Burnt out of that and six feet tall again,  
I rattle between the ups and downs,  
a blue pill and a white  
my ceiling, my floor.  
Before the bar of that double governor,  
my range and domain were all the short way  
to the near end of human time,  
and though the leveling drug  
has landscaped me to relative calm,  
nothing can trick the final eye,  
the ear that's tuned to the coming sun,  
the nerves set for the heat:  
I see walls fail,  
my skin reads radiation everywhere,  
in the mushroom of my brain I hear  
the hydrogen's confusion,  
the helium's crisp answer  
and I fear.

## 2-S

Day breaks in the afternoon,  
the spine is gone, we're paralyzed.  
The evasions approach zero  
as a limit.  
What to talk about today,  
what to avoid?  
Nothing, I'm afraid.  
Remember the one of us  
who didn't make it through boot camp  
because he didn't want to,  
but shut-the-fuck-up-soldier for good?  
In a place like that  
he couldn't sleep the twenty hours a day  
that let him stay awake at all,  
and had to get it some way.  
The camp commandant,  
one of those one-eyed men  
who charges through the world  
damn-well getting his duties done,  
wrote us a brisk letter  
about how anyone  
who didn't want to bang a gun in 'Nam  
wasn't a man anyway.  
I wasn't convinced,  
and the funeral wasn't fun.  
I myself am tired of late,  
and my 2-S runs out soon.  
I hope at least I get a different camp  
from his one.

## Boot-camp Suicide

In the cinder-block shack  
of my dormitory room,  
I sleep to dream and wake up to remember  
how one of us has failed boot camp,  
standing like the man his sergeant made him,  
upright on the obstacle course,  
then machine-gunned down,  
flunked out of breath and blood.  
His death is foursquare fact,  
cramped as a slot in a basement dorm,  
but his memory exceeds him  
as the world inflates their dime-store dolls  
so the staff shrink on Uncle's team  
can sign him off to hell, Case Closed  
by a penetrating pen,  
while the local pump of the underground press  
types him into heaven.  
Before he failed his mid-terms here on earth  
and passed his physical,  
I was his roommate once, and I know  
nothing except that barracks and reveille  
would break the twenty hours a day  
he had to sleep to stay awake at all,  
and I know from a photograph  
how bad his khaki fit.

## Sunday

The mower woke us, motor throbbing  
through the room, then dying... sigh, turn over,  
the blur of a close face, the touch—  
blossoming into morning, light learns  
our laughter as we wake to being human,  
sculpt ourselves in sheet, and talk  
of what to do on Sunday in such light;  
then standing in a motion in her simple skin,  
she walks to the kitchen, makes coffee, singing,  
serves willingly where there is no command;  
finished waking, we dress lightly, leave,  
confirm through morning and the day  
our ancient, nightly trust of two asleep.

## Shark

Out of my room, cool with motor and coil  
for my daily lifelong dream,  
hammerhead shark bites down  
white from his exploding brain!  
Never a fish this fierce  
from any seventh sea! Space  
only has fathom enough for fire this free, we  
only, and sometimes, eyes enough to see.

## After Much Speech

Silence after much speech; it is right,  
caught up here now out of common time,  
in the crystalline once tense of poetry,  
that we—he, you, and I, the three the one  
that wrote and sings these constant, ancient lines,  
shall shiver, the book close, and we two choose  
to fall into the flesh and lose our voice.

## untitled (I awake so easily today)

I awake so easily today,  
as if awakening were breathing out  
the night's long breathing in...  
and she—sleeps, still taking breath,  
as easily as morning's light  
grows in its ancient, patient way.

In this broken cabin,  
equally of land and sea,  
on sand between the collapsing and collapsed,  
we live our lifelong doorway,  
waiting out the tide when it takes hold,  
worrying the pilings,  
not eager to take hold, just there,  
the random fact of eventual capture.

But no tide now, just wind  
rustling the brown palmetto fronds  
casting their moving maze on us,  
a maze of shadows she accepts,  
as calm as milk-glass under them.

On our first morning, how I worried:  
would she be able to be with me,  
at once forgetting and remembering  
her other first mornings with others?  
She undressed to the sadness of nakedness,  
in the old confusion of twilight,  
in the old understanding,  
clothes falling softly as her breathing,  
and then came,  
forgetting and remembering.

If we had waited, been deliberate,  
entering a maze of yes and no  
to find some certain yes or no,  
to find some law besides the Second Law...  
O that wish!  
to enter it, turn face up, and then  
O to rise!  
above the timebound maze  
in the noon's discovering blaze  
and see the pattern, the whole pattern!  
O to rise  
    if we could but rise,  
leave these doors  
and corridors—

But she stirs—"Good morning."  
Good morrow to you now as now you come,  
good morrow as we now say yes again  
for yes we will go down,  
caught in the center,  
we will go down  
to join the beginning and the end,  
to obey the timebound order of the land,  
to become the strict disorder of the sea.

untitled (two riddles)

**Done**

1. Its way with people is to break;  
Its tool the sun, or anything;  
Its patience is in brevity;  
Its aim, to get things Done;  
Its paradox—that I took some  
To write this riddle, but used up none.

**Marriage**

2. The positive and negative  
must mate their alternating charge  
inside a bulb and not at large  
for any lasting light to live.

## Downtown Dealer

### Resumé

B.A.: 1959.  
M.A.: 1961.  
Married: 1960.  
Taught three years: Philosophy  
At a minor university.  
1963: Wife died: suicide.  
One day in 1964,  
In a lecture on reality,  
To everything I said  
There echoed refutations in my head.

### But this New Job is Really Me

it's really fine it's mine  
the chrome's so bright it's like clear thought  
the motors roar like chimera  
it's just the thing  
it's just the way it all should be  
my salesman's tongue as slippery  
as any salesman's tongue can be  
from years of lectures on philosophy  
and since it is so really good  
I'm here to stay  
I'm here to sell it everyday  
I do it any way I can  
you see those flashing reds and greens?  
A SALE A DAY A SALE A DAY  
the neons really pull them in  
A SALE A DAY  
everyday some guy comes in  
machinist's hands cut up like meat  
I put him in the driver's seat  
it costs him "seven dollars weekly"  
it costs me what I have to pay  
A SALE A DAY  
a man who buys his time by sales  
has to buy the only way  
has to buy it everyday  
or go under

So I will make a deal  
any kind of deal  
Hey mister see that two-tone Ford  
gray and pink as dawn?  
I will make a real deal  
You know that dream you have of dawn?  
I can make it real  
I can make it real real  
if I can make it

### Of Archibald MacLeish

At last, growing brown into his end,  
The straight man bends to the fire,  
The good liar enters what he lies about,  
And finally lives out his poems about age  
As its impersonal rage burns him down.

### Shrapnel

As I lie here lightly  
crumbled in the moon,  
I must laugh gently.  
I used to be so stiff, thinking of tonight,  
all mechanical arms and lead-lined containers.  
I guess I thought I could dump it  
in some out-of-the-way spot and forget it.  
But now I find no need —  
I hold my metal in me like a child  
and know its warmth like a mother,  
from the inside.

## Mapping the Terrain

An acid-head friend of mine,  
his eyes unfocused on infinity,  
came by one day for a month or two,  
talking of highways and freeways,  
and how he's locked in America,  
since our north and south neighbors' border guards  
gate the tourists but fence the longhairs out.

Alterly he thumbs and sits,  
ranging America in my little room,  
but trying to cross at my kitchen door  
into Canada, he's scissored off:  
the Mounted Police, Stan Laurel style,  
like body-political practical nurses,  
jockey their jodhpurs, and judge him a germ,  
so he hitches south to my easychair—  
and a second cut-short border halt  
for an Oliver Hardy Federale.

Yet as he tours the Fifty States,  
the stops and goes of his travels  
are all somehow the same,  
as if his stasis were a kind of motion,  
his motion some strange stand,  
like water running the river still,  
or the whirlpool turning in its rest;  
but how can someone rest as he moves,  
or be in action as he is still?

And his eyes! Though he sees,  
he seems to look at nothing,  
as though the world were so much windowglass,  
and he more giving the light than taking in.  
This Keystone Kops matter of keys  
to lock him in and out and up  
bars and borders him not at all:  
plainly he could live in this one room,  
less my vast frontier of kitchen,  
and think himself unbounded Lord and King.  
Such ease! Is it the etch of the acid  
has razed the nerve-noise in the head  
and incandesced his brain,  
or was the easy, day-light man  
scripted in his primitive cell,  
never to suffer a tape-loop of the mind?

Melville, if Hawthorne saw it right,  
had no rest from Mind:  
on open beach, he so amazed beach sand  
with his brooding toward and from,  
you would have thought him cabined there,  
yet his only bulkheads were the north and south.

Moses broke water out of a rock,  
and Jacob fought the white shadow of God:  
had Melville that staff or that angel,  
he might have drunk and lost to faith,  
rather than shift dry sand,  
a thirty-years thirsting man along the salt.  
Instead fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute  
were like the Mojave sun: he,  
in a heat-stroke of these themes,  
cracked his brain like desert mud,  
and to learn what? that desert thought  
could only shine black the man's shadow  
in which the Pequod and Moby Dick went down.

World-sailor Melville, landlocked in thought,  
and my everywhere sunshine friend  
between them have split the unit sun:  
heat, salt heat, for the sailor,  
for my friend all light, all delight,  
but I both sweat and see,  
and I both thirst and drink.

To hitchhike lightly through highway U.S.A.,  
all-unthinking, and as birds of the air,  
is not enough man; it brackets us:  
it's too much God and too much animal;  
but to pace in the sun and syllogize fixed fate  
is to look for your own eyes:  
fixed fate is a riverbed,  
free will an abundant water,  
foreknowledge absolute the river-land:  
old Aristotle and his logic box,  
unless you walk, swim, and wade this terrain,  
are the organ-grinder and organ of the mind,  
and a man, that metaphysical mud,  
who maps, and thinks the map the terrain,  
is terrain-mocked as he cranks the Ergo tune:  
as the riverbed shapes the river,  
the river recuts the bed;  
what are our maps, if each alter the other?

## touch

when the whole surface  
of my body becomes acutely  
aware of yours,  
my skin has the surface  
tension of a raindrop,  
and I move tautly, lightly,  
so as not to split  
and spill the water of myself,  
until we touch, tremble, and re-  
lease into each other

## 2-S

In the cinder-block shack  
of my dormitory room,  
I sleep to dream and wake up to remember  
how one of us has failed boot camp,  
standing like the man his sergeant made him  
upright on the obstacle course,  
then machine-gunned down,  
flunked out of breath and blood.  
His death is foursquare fact,  
cramped as my slot in a basement dorm,  
but the rumoring tongues wear out  
to explain him around the world,  
the army issuing a report  
that he was bad material for them,  
while the local blur of the underground press  
types him into heaven.  
Before he failed, and passed his physical,  
I was his roommate once, and I know  
nothing except that barracks and reveille  
would keep him from the twenty hours a day  
he had to sleep to stay awake at all,  
and I know from a photograph  
how bad his khaki fit.

## To a Girl of the North Country, From the South

As I have been once a citizen there,  
And learned December's laws, a shivering boy,  
And know how thick and thin the winter's wear  
Must make us to survive its frigid joy,  
And since the south has put me in a state  
So different I must master by new study  
The dulling sun, pricking me on to mate  
My other life with lounging ecstasy,  
I would we were together in-between,  
That north and south, being met, might teach the laws  
To storm this distant, temperate mean,  
Before all summer cools, or all winter thaws,  
Yet I know you could be here, or I there,  
Or both in the middle place, and neither care.

## A Footnote to the Alexandrian Fire

The high-heaped books of Alexandria,  
reaching critical mass, fire up,  
and the PhD's get third degree burns  
so Minimus the Grammarian  
can save his gloss on Minor.  
Stoke the galleries, scholars,  
shovel the stacks like coal,  
and quit your hydrant of tears:  
not even the downleveling ardor of Troy  
freed so much hot air.  
Plato, if he could have seen this fire,  
though a hard-bound man himself,  
would have danced like Dionysus,  
drunk with disglossing the Ideal Text,  
several removes more near to the Real.  
And about the texts, old sirs—  
Alexandrian epics on the crash of Troy,  
do you think them worth the burns?  
Helen will be stolen, Troy burn,  
Achilles die through a million rhymes,  
though Alexandria were not.  
If you must have texts though, I've got a few,  
and you can fill up the margins, if you like,  
though I've not much more than a common Homer,  
and a few short pieces by memory.  
I cannot unremember the ones I love.  
Tell me—do you really value  
books there's only one copy of?