

Only  
What's  
Imagined

## Also by Geof Hewitt

### POETRY

I Think They'll Lay My Egg Tomorrow

Just Worlds

Living in Whales: Vermont Public School Stories & Poems (ed.)

Poem & Other Poems

Quickly Aging Here: Some Poets of the 1970's (ed.)

Selected Poems of Alfred Starr Hamilton (ed.)

Stone Soup

Today You Are My Favorite Poet: Writing Poems with Teenagers

Writing Without Walls: Boise Writing in the Schools  
(ed. with James Hepworth)

### POEMS IN PERFORMANCE

The Maple Corner Tape: Poems from Vermont  
(with Chuck Meese)

### NONFICTION

A Portfolio Primer

Today You Are My Favorite Poet: Writing Poems with Teenagers

Working for Yourself

Only  
What's  
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Geof Hewitt

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## INTRODUCTION

Poems, poems, poems – it seemed as if they were sprouting from the trees, even in dead of winter, and I do mean dead. Sometimes in January it was so cold and quiet you could hear Wallace Stevens thinking up a new poem down there in Connetchicutty. Well, we had a lovely forest. Kinnell in Sheffield, Engels in Williston, Voigt and Gluck in Plainfield, Budbill in Wolcott, Broughton and Huddle in Burlington, Rich in West Barnet, myself in Johnson, and – happily – Hewitt in Enosburg and Calais. A peculiar forest, no doubt; every tree was different, a species unto its own. No conformity. Maybe that’s why we had such good times together and never suffered any territorial competition.

Truly, it was the finest literary society I’ve ever lived in, and I miss it terribly in my enforced exile in upstate New York. Circumstances, since 1980, have kept me from living in Vermont, which I still think of as home.

Geof Hewitt was our cut-up, the one who made us laugh the most, and we laughed a lot. His mind was like a squirrel scolding us from every branch. I’ve never known anyone so inventive, so full of good-natured rage, so antic in his refractoriness, and yet so gentle.

He could puncture our sentimentality and leave our sentiment intact.

It’s delicate when we touch  
each other, a careful mistake  
will do but nothing more.

His wit, inexhaustible, was always acute but forbearing. Clement is not a word we use much now, but it’s the word for Hewitt. He was and is the good friend of us all, and his poems were and are our delight.

But let me say a few sober and earnest words about our origin.

Like other rural areas, northern Vermont has generated a strange cultural mix in recent decades. When Geof Hewitt arrived in the late 1960s, coming from New Jersey by way of Cornell and Johns Hopkins, he found a poor agricultural society fundamentally unchanged since the eighteenth century. But Hewitt was part of a large immigration of outsiders, many of them young and idealistic, who sought escape from the crassness of mainstream America, and who admired the local inhabitants and became friends with them and absorbed much of their lore and manners. Life based on an alliance with nature amidst the hardships of the north appealed to them. At the same time, however, these newcomers retained their idealism, their devotion to rock music and social protest, their independence from convention. The result was that the newcomers changed Vermont as much as Vermont changed them.

No better poetic record of this cross-cultural amalgamation could be found than in the writing of Geof Hewitt. He bought a dilapidated farm in Enosburg, the region known as Cold Hollow, and soon afterward he and Janet Lind, who was from Iowa and had lived in Colorado, were married. They came to call on me one summer day and brought me a jug of somewhat-hard cider. We sat under my maple by the woodshed and drank it and talked. Geof was a young poet who had printed a poem of mine in his little magazine, *Kumquat*. He had founded the Kumquat Press in 1966 to publish *Poem & Other Poems*, a pamphlet of his own work, and had then expanded the enterprise to include his magazine and occasional pamphlets by other poets. Janet, born and raised on a farm in south-eastern Iowa, was essentially a farmer, i.e., a farmer-without-a-farm, since the place in Enosburg would have needed an enormous investment of funds to make it workable. Our friendship was immediate.

Before long Janet took a job milking cows on a neighboring farm in Enosburg. Geof worked as a free-lance writer, did odd jobs, wrote poetry, and was a poet-in-the-schools with the state arts council. After a while they moved from the farmhouse into a cabin they built with the help of friends, at the edge of the woods overlooking Cold Hollow. It was a sturdy, two-story cabin, but “unimproved,” as they say – no electricity, no plumbing. It was one of the coziest, most enjoyable abodes I’ve ever known.

Some years later Janet and Geof moved to Calais, to the section called Maple Corner. Janet became a librarian and teacher in the public schools. Geof worked in Montpelier, first with the Vermont Arts Council and then with the state education department, where he still is. In other words the reality of financial need overtook them. Geof continued to write, he published several books, he gave readings. He continued his association with the other poets of Vermont, most of whom had come at about the same time he did and for the same reasons. He became something of an impresario, arranging public readings and concerts throughout the state. He lectured in libraries and galleries. He directed workshops. He traveled widely to give readings and participate in literary conferences.

But make no mistake. Hewitt is a fully assimilated Vermonter, engaged unreservedly in the native life of the state, social, political, academic, and artistic, just as he is a fully committed poet who has been writing consistently, devotedly for more than thirty years. The history and heritage of Vermont are as important to him as to anyone. Likewise the history and heritage of poetry.

Probably no environment could have been better chosen for fostering Hewitt’s special talents. He is a man of wit, even a jokester, in the best tradition of New England slyness and sardonicism. He

loves the outré and unlikely. Elsewhere he might be called an absurdist. He's an avid gardener, for instance, who grows California artichokes – with difficulty – as well as corn and potatoes, and pumpkins of exaggerated size. He is close to nature but delights in nature's improbabilities. At the same time he is an intelligent guy, obviously, a student of the social and political scene, a concerned husband and father. Above all he is a man fascinated by language.

His influences? Well, surely Frost. We all must admit to that. But also David Ray, Edward Field, A. R. Ammons, David Budbill, Donald Hall and, he says, myself. (When a poet has read enough of a friend's work, probably that voice kicks in from time to time, whether wanted or not.) His poems are tough, very original, occasionally sentimental, usually keen and caustic. His language is knotty, sometimes abrupt and anti-syntactical, but never cryptic. His topics are unconfined, anything that happens. His poems, properly read, are a better reflection of his time and place than any sociological dissertation could ever be.

I'm tempted to call this poetry, retrospectively, Neo-Classical or even Late Metaphysical, not a fashionable kind of poetry in our time. Yet for my part I can draw a straight line from Andrew Marvel to Geof Hewitt, and the line is perfectly secure at both ends in spite of the distance between them. This is a mode, a sensibility, in which I have always taken delight – the fusion of natural observation and metaphysical awareness in vivacious, trenchant, witty poems. No whispering or mumbling, as we find in so much poetry nowadays. Hewitt is far too confident of his own imagination to suppress it, and justly so. In short these are very fine poems. I recommend them heartily to everyone.

Hayden Carruth

one



## MISSING THE PROOF

In my own little world  
I rush against the passing season  
and try to get a start on the season coming:  
winter cut wood for next winter;  
springtime get the tiller going  
haul manure and fence the garden right this time;  
summer pull weeds and build a chicken coop;  
fall stack wood and cut wood that didn't get cut last winter.

The sun inches lower in the sky each day,  
and starts back up before winter is even half-started,  
season after season, eventually so far behind  
winter finds me cutting wood one day to burn the next until  
I build a fire to warm me in the woods  
and burn what I cut so there's nothing to haul home  
and in panic my family searches my flushed face  
demanding me to prove I worked all day.

My young daughter sniffs where her nose reaches my belly  
and remarks I smell like cutting wood  
while my older son and wife look me in the eye  
for a trace of lost confidence.  
They have huddled at the stove all day waiting.  
Perhaps tomorrow they will be cold enough to help,  
but for the night we sleep in the same bed  
under heaps of blankets pooled from our rooms.

I dream of my own importance in life  
until by some breach of common sense  
I feel that I have been the constant  
and the sun an incidental body on the run.

# THE DAMP OCTOBER

leaves fell in clumps  
and browned before their brighter colors

could hold

I remember well the mud tracks  
dragged across the floor,  
dried to heavy dust by noon & swept out the door  
puffing I shall return

bum's rush  
we always think we got our dirt by the scruff

how we treat the heart  
how we use soil as a verb

## UPSIDE DOWN

Upside down, my pants hang from the line  
Depending from a pair of wooden clothespins  
One to each leg. The waist is three inches too high  
To scuff the leaves, though six weeks from now  
We'll have to raise the line or double  
The trousers over at the thighs to keep the waist  
From dragging snow. Come a good January thaw  
We could hang a pair by the cuffs and let the waist freeze  
Into the puddle where melted snow froze fast  
At the snap end to the thaw, then  
Unpin the cuffs and remove the line so a flat pair of pants  
Is stiff and vertical upside down executive  
Who plunged head first into the earth, up to his waist!

## SPECTRUM

Excited by the clearness of the night,  
the quarter moon's smile  
in a sky full of stars,

we remarked, almost colorful,  
our three shadows on the snow.  
It's the moon, she said,

that makes those images  
but without the stars you'd never get the blues.

A giant timber in the forest cracked.  
No matter.  
The child was talking.

Where was I going?  
Was I going home forever  
or would I return to the walk?

I'm going back to write a poem,  
I replied, I'll never return.  
That was good enough for them.

They headed down the path  
with their black and blue shadows.

## THIS IS GROSS

but I cough up a good one  
and whistle-thrust it through my lips  
into the blazing furnace fire  
where it catches halfway up a maple chunk  
and sleazes into a giant teardrop  
before starting to sizzle.

This is gross but it begins to puff up,  
having sealed and trapped sufficient air  
to expand it to the size and shape  
of a giant cocoon: it seems to pop  
but returns from half-inflated to its greatest girth  
repeatedly, breathing like a heart confused.

At last I understand how fire might make the parts of life  
and from the popping seed they issue, rudiments of speech.

## IN LIKE A LION

The white howl of March  
Sweeps down from Canada.  
A glove is frozen to the spade.  
The rope holds a defiant curve,

It smiles at gravity.  
I stamp out your name in the snow  
So big great altitude is needed to read.  
And, "I am a lonely secret

Like pajamas stuffed with pillowcases."  
How yesterday's sunshine made me feel  
I'd got to spring scot-free,  
How lovely to hear it come through branches

Through open window like a voice  
You love says let's dance.

## SYLLABLES

Though every generation claims its share of Frosts,  
the only real or self-appointed Frost was Robert Frost himself.  
Anyway, you need a name for an accolade? Mantel of syllables  
or letters embossed on special license plates,  
Look out! That big white Lincoln whooshed  
past your wagon on the interstate.  
If you could have kept up you'd have tailgated,  
trusting inside the reflective glass rode a radar detector,  
you could speed with impunity. Or perhaps it was a sting:  
ambitious cop from Washington  
ready to arrest you or a state trooper  
off duty, driving home at dusk in an official car,  
accepts bribe in the twilight  
and winds up in the slammer for a year.

Vermont's got its prisons but when a man from Florida,  
visiting his second summer in a row,  
learned we have six "correctional" facilities  
for adult law-breakers, his mouth dropped.  
He'd been upset the week before to hear  
Frost wasn't born in Vermont, but this time  
he nearly cried. I could have mentioned other institutions.  
He wasn't so interested that inmates need contact  
with the world's ideas and people as by the fact  
that in St. Albans and St. Johnsbury, in Burlington  
and Windsor, Rutland and Woodstock  
are jails. I changed the subject and he relaxed  
enough I got my point across  
about the book we were discussing.

The prison with the nicest coordinator  
had the loudest iron doors,  
visitors constantly reminded  
what inmates take for granted  
as a fetus adjusts to its mother's breathing  
or miners adapt to conditions that kill them.  
David Budbill's poems were the subject.  
The cultural coordinator said she often found  
his book's Vermonters "stick figures — personality types."  
A young inmate from Tennessee:  
"If so it's because Vermonters  
didn't let the author close enough to them."  
These syllables from one with three more years  
in a place some people don't know exists.

Another participant expressed contempt:  
"That writer's got it made. Play was produced here in town."  
But when the poems passed his expectations,  
they touched him with familiar syllables,  
arranged in another version of the truth: he liked the book.  
The people of Vermont are not just the Yankee farmers,  
whose "industry" crumbled in twenty years,  
with 2,739 of 5,264 dairy farms gone since 1969.  
The growth in tourism eased the sting  
and like as not farmers  
from the 70's tend ski lifts and bars  
on gorgeous mountain tops or drive trucks  
or work at the university or in state government  
or sell hardware, teach school, edit, chair committees  
while 2,500 still hay the fields and milk cows

for which Vermont is famous. As malls and shopping centers  
replace the dairy herds and crops, what's a man to do?  
Frost would have captured it with irony  
and maybe played a hand in helping to reverse  
a stone's fate in quicksand, nearly my fate once  
when marching through a neighbor's barnyard to collect  
on a debt, I got two feet  
into the manure pit and sinking fast  
finally figured to reverse direction.  
My neighbor never said, when I asked for the check,  
"We'd never have missed you," though he could tell  
from the level of things in the air,  
and on my trousers, where I'd been.

The people of Vermont? You'll know them  
one or two at a time, not through annual Town Meetings  
or around a single ritual like sugaring or potluck dinners,  
and they'll fool you. You've got to be persistent,  
a journalist, unless you've got a lifetime.  
So when I asked Hugh Gross "How was sugaring this year?"  
he said "Not bad." I rephrased the question, knowing it  
had been a banner year. "Best season ever?"  
"Yup."

You'll know them one or two at a time,  
and they'll fool you. When I arrived in '68,  
I admired a house painter whose Yankee savvy  
and accent obscured that he had lived  
all but the past six years in New Jersey,  
my home too. The cusseddest Yankees  
are the ones who got here late and have  
to make up time like the Happy Trails Lady  
never smiling except in the woods

or the woman from Scotland who won't look humans in the eye  
unless she's about to let them take a pet  
from her pound. She hates people for the abuse  
she sees animals suffer. The next cussedest Yankees  
are the Yankees themselves: take Harold, the farmer  
whose old house and fields I bought when he quit farming  
at sixty-five to drive the town tractor, maintain town roads, grading  
and cutting brush. One summer day I was barefoot,  
shirtless in shorts when he stopped to visit, yelling down  
over the hot diesel engine, his blade  
in thick roadside grass inches short

of a large rock. When we'd done talking  
I sweated that rock, as he watched, from his path: I squatted  
and worked it up, over bare toes, behind the cutter bar.  
He smiled, touched his cap, lurched into gear and drove  
up the road.

The backstrap of his cap  
winked in the bright afternoon as I saw the cutter bar raise  
from its grass-height position  
over some new roadside obstacle.

I built a chimney for the oil furnace I'd installed to replace Harold's kerosene  
space heater. I never was told to mix sand with the mortar,  
so the chimney blocks, hefted up a ladder leaned to the side of the  
third story and braced by an ancient house, were never really leveled.  
The final result had shape in common with a tall letter "S." Wendell Savage,  
who grew up in the house before Harold bought it, saw the chimney, smiled  
and scratched his chin, "I never saw smoke that  
wouldn't bend." This phrase ever since has lessened my shame at  
not reading details in the how-to books.  
This morning I woke to thoughts of Patricia

and what's happened to her mother?  
who used to walk her forty-year-old Patricia  
through Montpelier and take her to the fairs  
and big art openings, always in a matching yellow outfit,  
Patricia equally bright in red or shocking pink.  
When I was really awake I tended my face and dressed,  
then saw Patricia on my way to work!  
Her mother has probably died. "Dead as a flapped jack"  
Patricia uttered in my morning dream,  
the nearly waked state where a distant figure  
becomes friend for life, someone you see  
and care about, on the street in color if I dream in color,  
the syllable or building block of lasting vision.

No death will keep Patricia at her mother's heel.  
She walks Elm Street and goes in muted colors  
to the fairs with a bigger smile  
than ever. We're both out on the streets  
and glad to live where we're needed.  
Where notice of the mountains seems important,  
where, after frost, leaves brown and scramble from the trees —  
each a syllable in a long, hard sentence:  
Winter — things become clear.

On a good November day I can see  
six miles when even yesterday the view for the leaves was just ten feet.  
The seasons keep me going, keep me hoping I can count  
or somehow keep up with my debt,  
my interest on my debt,  
to Patricia and all others with whom on this planet I move.

## THE COUNTRY POET

I want a new image, something with dash  
To grind my tongue in.  
Something our kids will have to learn in school.  
But what? I try how dry I feel some nights  
After the wood stove's used up all the air, dry as  
Doggie do, but that's no good, dry as dust,  
Dry like powder in a box, dry as ash.  
My lines are these big clunks like hard cement.  
And the sun goes down on another day of literary jerking off.

I envy Stanley his hourly wage and the end of his day  
Of working for other men. He comes home  
& tells the family, "Soon we're going to buy a farm."  
I think I'll hire out as the trusty hand!  
What Heaven it'll be to have to get up & warm my hands  
On steaming udders thirteen out of every fourteen days!  
I know how fortunate I am. My brain  
Is like a baked potato waiting to be peeled.  
The white meat is useful & something damp.

Stanley, oh Stanley. How easily the snow  
Drops through the winter & lowers the hemlock's boughs.

## THE SANDMAN

So I was coming around the corner and the car ahead of me has stopped and I'm on sheer ice and my car starts to skid and there's this guy on the sidewalk with a shovel and just before my car crunches into the car ahead of me he throws a shovelful of sand under my rear tires and my car comes to a stop ten feet from disaster.

Half an hour later I'm at the Xerox machine with a job I've gotta have copied in time for the mail, which leaves in ten minutes, and the machine jams and I'm trying to get the paper out and something throws a spark and ignites the paper so smoke is starting to curl from the ink drum and I'm trying to figure whether I should run to the men's room for a handful of water when this guy appears with a shovel and throws a shovelful of sand into the machine's underbelly and the smoking stops.

## WHY I HATE OVERCOATS

When Swifty,  
That sad, old prick,  
Made me go back  
Because the coat rule was still in effect,  
Even though it was sunny & warm,

I knew future freedom  
Lay in my ability to take the cold.

# STONE GATHERING

-for John Cote

These marks in stone, these pocks  
were forced into its surface when some ancient rain  
lost its juice to stopped momentum

and saved its shape, splatting by pure luck  
into rock that hadn't hardened yet. Then the river played  
its part to roll the stone, to smooth

and to protect the finished rock.  
You say pick flat ones only  
and the big are best, it means

less work. A snail falls off  
the one I'm working from the streambed  
given up its home, losing suction

gone back to the brook, perhaps to find  
another stone. I heave the snail's ex-home  
up onto the bank and sit on it

and there decide this rock of every century  
in the house you built  
will brace someone whose hand,

feeling the work, stopped where the notion struck:  
it's shaped as much by heaven's gentle water  
as by men who build it into walls.

# THE MOTHER PHOEBE

-for Heather

She has her second brood ready to fly  
if only they would — four of them  
elbow to elbow, cheek by jowl,  
in the tiny nest under an eave of our porch.  
Last summer, home at dusk  
I stood on a chair for a peek  
and four or five baby phoebes took just that moment  
to burst forever from the nest: they startled me!

She chirps from the porch roof  
then visits a bean pole from which she flies  
to take a bug on the wing back to the nest  
and leaves immediately with the peeping  
of three disappointed, unfed big babies behind  
as the one that was most aggressive  
tries to swallow the oversized chunk of bug whole,  
bug-eyed himself, blinking unbelievably into the  
six inches of red yarn she worked into the nest  
three or four springs ago.

Every place she lands she glances back  
hoping, I guess, one of her unfed chicks  
has got the message and will follow.  
She moves from the pine to the clothesline  
whereupon she poops on my son's  
favorite tee shirt, a punk tee shirt  
upon which the wearing of birdshit might well, by his peers,  
be considered the ultimate statement of punkdom to date.

She's pissed at me for trying to observe  
their privacy. I'd hoped she might recognize  
my growth from last summer's chair-peering behavior,  
my lawn stool arranged  
in shadow for glare-free vision,  
at least twenty feet from the nest.  
A beak full of bugs and she can still scold  
from the bean pole, her tail flicking up and down,  
trademark of the perching phoebe.

Now he shows up, just after I discover  
it's the cat was scaring her and put it in  
then take my shady place again with beer and notebook,  
pen in hand: a tourist in the land of birds,  
they should open a hamburger stand.

They relay meals to the nest  
and in their absence I hear the whirring wings  
of overcrowded baby phoebes like the revved propellers  
of commuter planes at the start of the runway.  
Later one of them throws the clutch to exit the nest,  
hangs mid-air like a hummingbird near a screened window,  
then follows the mother to a nearby maple where  
it chirps and peeps after her  
as she calls from a more-distant perch.

Returning to the nest I count the fuzzy heads:  
four still remain!  
The one that just flew must have been sitting on a sibling.  
In two more hours I check again; the nest is empty.

## FOR HAYDEN

The tourist, happy to be alive in a place like Vermont,  
turns to the local stuck here twelve months a year  
and says, "Where do you go to get away?"

Then corrects himself with a quick addition:  
"Of course anyone lucky enough to live here  
doesn't need to get away!"

And that's the end of friendship there,  
the loss of universal feeling  
to a lie, in this case a patronizing one  
because the local knows  
that s.o.b. can choose  
and he's here only three days a year!

The tourist moves closer to the barbwire fence  
for a better view of the farmer  
astride his tractor with the side-bar cutter  
and the grass is falling in waves parallel  
to the last row that was felled  
while the squared-off stand remaining  
gets surrounded smaller and smaller.  
The cutter doesn't jam and the tourist  
thinks that's the farmer's life and I shared it  
for ten minutes while he squared  
his field and made hay.

Meanwhile, farmer thinking:  
that poor bastard got some time off from the city  
and best he can do is watch me drive.  
Thank God nothing's going wrong.

And fingers a dincher from the floor of his pack  
as the tourist turns  
back to the waiting family and automobile,  
a family that never chose to cease  
bickering and exit the car, but instead to sweat  
and call periodically for him to drive them on.  
The farmer on his tractor cannot watch them at all times  
cornering the field, he cannot look back  
    as they disappear, his vision  
is the stop-frame picture of their positions  
every time his tractor is headed straight down the row  
toward their parking spot,  
each time the father, now grown familiar with his foot on a strand,  
gazes at him in the foreground, the careful of family  
parked in the shade, exasperated,  
behind. He makes another square,  
a little farther from them as he hays  
toward dead center of the field.  
When the tractor straightens to the row  
that lets him see the tourists  
they are gone.

They were too far off to see the field sparrow's well-hidden eggs  
crumble under the cutter-bar, and they would never recognize  
the all-day, redundant, useless scold  
of the field sparrow and her mate whose nesting grounds  
and potential family have been unbelievably erased  
    lined up in horizontal rows  
    like grease stains on an earthen plate.

They left too soon to hear the cutter-bar clank  
against another grass-hidden object  
    this time not eggs, but stone,  
and the ripping free of iron and the  
    engine's overheated coughing to a stop  
in gritty, diesel-wafting heat.  
The scold is darting at the farmer as he tries to  
coax the wounded cutter back on the bar.  
Only a square of grass remains to be mowed  
and the tractor's engine is rough to restart in this heat.  
He gooses and coughs it back into action,  
jumps free and checks the motion of the bar.  
It works and back he climbs, too high  
to see the minute dangers of his work,  
too far from the retreating tourist  
rehearsing for Monday's coffee break  
as he describes to wife and children  
what they sat through and never saw  
anything there to start with.

## CHICKENS

And aren't those baby chicks  
creatures of my acquiescence  
letting a particularly broody banty hen  
have some eggs to set?

Now she acts as if they're completely her  
creation, even the rooster has to sneak  
blessings to his heirs, and I  
get pecked for coming near.

Those chicks get down under her belly  
and stay warm in that darkness,  
sputtling over each other in morning  
when I remove the raincoat

from their cage, the limits of their world  
so far. I make their day begin  
by letting sunlight in, and feed & water them.  
They peek out from underneath

their banty's feathered underside and peep:  
"Hey that's Him! I saw God's hand unveiling day!"  
And I sit here, twelve hours later, August 26  
8:30 p.m. Already the sun is down.

Yeah, winter's coming.  
Darkness — God! — I hate to see it come.

## LEAF PEEPERS

New Mercedes van  
with Jersey plates,  
stuffed with tourists  
scowling at a conifer:

“Damn.  
We got here too early!”

## FALL

The color drains from the daisy  
as when, turned upside down, the dress on the lady in the liquid  
barrel of my father's trick pen  
lost its color & she was naked in there,

tiny & unreachable, nothing to do but  
turn the pen back rightside up  
& write a word or two as she got dressed  
or smash the pen carefully.

Come to think of it, I didn't see a bee all summer,  
& maybe that's why the plants hardly fruited,  
why I didn't get stung even once this summer,  
& hardly saw the male at my hummingbird feeder —

no competition with those flying thumbtacks  
for all the good that drips inside the beebalm.  
Lawn chairs left out in the hope of one more day of sun  
are holding an important conference, their arms flat out

& serious, & when I walk the garden deep in weeds,  
tomato plants long ago choked out by jewelweed,  
I see within all that green & orange a tiny red globe,  
almost unreachable,

& return by stepping carefully in the swath  
I made coming in & see,  
smashed against the green mat of footprints,  
the colors of a crop that failed.

## THE WATER

The water was doing what water does best,  
which is soak things.

Which is finding its own level.

Which is leading to growth — plant growth  
and then rot, which is back to the thirsty soil.

The water was doing what water does best,  
it was dripping from every surface,  
it was dripping from my hair and from my nose,  
fingertips and elbows and from the cuffs of soaked pants  
through sox into shoes.

And the nasty November wind was doing what it does best,  
which is to take thin blood and flesh  
to the just short of numb stage, Christ the water,  
without that wind, would have seemed almost warm.  
I was cursing my luck, out of gas, two miles from home

on a deserted country road, I was walking!  
At 6 p.m. I was leaning into the driven rain,  
not seeing any humor through wet lashes,  
but already savoring the telling later,  
around the fire, attentive audience, cocoa steaming in clay mugs:

the wind was whipping bullets of water  
against my helpless face, while river currents  
forced me backwards nearly half the time.  
But I sang in the gathering darkness,  
sang and brought my soggy groceries home,

doing what I do best.

Two



## BLOCKS

These painted, hardwood blocks for children  
were my father's first children's blocks:  
passed down through his two families they stopped with me,  
his final child, conceived when he was 55.

They stayed in my room until my brother's wife  
had a nephew. I was in college and couldn't  
care less. They all fit nicely  
in a wagon with wheels that squeak.

These blocks are back now my nephew's 15,  
Ben helps Anna stack them, they topple  
heavy, hard, hurtful. Too often I stub  
my bare, cold toes on innocent playthings

and every night on my knees, as a child  
because of mother, as father by necessity  
one by one I search them out  
and fit them nicely the first time.

## PIGSKIN

Spiro with a long i  
is our word for spiral,  
something I could never throw  
except by luck  
until this year.

With small hands  
as a boy I couldn't hold  
the fat pigskin  
and carried into adulthood  
the habit of clutching fingers

that finally found a hold  
with the introduction of the pennyweight  
rubbery foam Nerf ball  
to a game that had formerly  
left me frustrated.

Proud that my fingers could grasp  
defiance of gravity,  
I held the Nerf for every throw  
so hard that my son Ben, on catching it,  
would claim I'd left imprints

in the foam. "Cratered like the moon"  
he'd crow, returning my heave  
with an effortless spiro, the ball  
all smoothed by the time  
it spun into my arms.

By some mistake I got smart  
a couple weeks ago and threw  
before my fingers clamped  
and the ball went out  
to everyone's amazement like a bullet.

Within a day or two  
I'd discovered and practiced my mistake  
and now my son and I toss perfect spiros  
back and forth until my arm gives out  
and the ball is bored without bruising

and wobbling through the sky, bouncing wide,  
bobbling off the edge of the hill,  
chased by Ben who screamed:  
"Stop! Come back! Bad throw!"

## ORSON

The neighborhood beagle, ignored by family,  
hated by the neighbors, is a car runner,  
garbage eater, chicken killer who is,  
nevertheless, kind with children  
and has always treated me with decency  
even if he does chase my car.

Shot and wounded, rumor had him dead  
but we saw him the next day,  
about the time Reagan was shot.

The owners kept him on a chain for a while,  
but by the time Reagan was back in the Oval Office,  
Orson was back on the loose, raising hell  
and none the wiser for his brush with death.

Today, a first real spring-like Sunday,  
he sauntered down our lane. I called him  
to make friends, then as he came and got petted  
I wondered would he misunderstand my attentions  
and return for other goodies, my chickens,  
my car, my trash?

## MOONLIGHT

The boss thinks

I'm devoted to my family.

At home they say

I'm married to my work.

## PATH POEM

They say the daughter at birth has all the eggs  
she'll ever produce: the path is set at your mother's birth  
as other paths unfold like a lifeline  
in the gradual, almost imperceptible unclenching fist of time.

Some of these paths will come to coincidence:  
it might be the accident  
of a flat tire that delays you just enough  
to miss the train that would have run you over,

and driving home with your suitcase stop at a bar  
to inspect the tire then decide to have one  
and meet a brilliant executive  
who takes you into her confidence and within the year

you're flying in a private jet, riding limousines  
with faultless tires and tuxedoed drivers  
who know the quickest route and where to drop you  
to celebrate time saved by such smart travel.

At times you think *you're* controlling the path,  
how else would anyone be so lucky  
if they weren't just plain smart:  
maybe a brilliant executive?

But you crave time so *you* can climb into the tuxedo  
and take *yourself* for a spin in the limousine,  
enduring the snooty stares at stoplights from people in normal cars  
who think you're a lowly chauffeur sporting about in the boss's rig.

Or maybe coming home that night  
your headlights catch the eyes of a cat working the roadside:  
it panics, running a path  
diagonal across the road, under your front tire.

At midnight there's no finding an owner,  
no one to comfort and thus make yourself feel better,  
the teary master in a nightshirt telling you between sobs,  
"It was only a cat."

Arriving home you slump from the vehicle  
and feel your way in the dark.  
You know the path can swing in front of fortune or misery  
or zag between the two a whole life.

That's why I keep my fingers crossed, it's a form of prayer.

## THE KIND OF POETRY I WRITE

I told him I think poetry is the language  
that shares experience, not what is beautiful,  
and I don't think I can use "moon" in my poems.  
Of course, explaining it in a poem is kind of creepy.

I'm delighted someone would read this far,  
and I never believed he'd listen:  
each word a new chance  
not to abuse an old cliché,

not to construct self-conscious language,  
not to be beautiful, not to confound,  
not to take a risk, not to discover, share,  
not to be mystical,

that was what I was not writing for these days!  
And I was sure depressed about it all.  
I told him I'd published in a magazine.  
"Resting on your laurels, eh?" he said.

Yeah, resting on my laurels  
and driving home what I took to be the moon  
— a smudge of light above Montpelier —  
glowed like the top of a smokestack

and I kept driving along and my poem said  
I never saw it I never said it

## THE SAILOR

In my movie the boat goes under  
And he alone survives the night in the cold ocean,  
Swimming he hopes in a shoreward direction.  
Daylight and he's still afloat, pawing the water  
And doesn't yet know he's only fifty feet from shore.  
He goes under for what will be the last time  
But only a few feet down scrapes bottom.  
He's suddenly a changed man and half hops, half swims  
The remaining distance, hauls himself waterlogged  
Partway up the beach before collapsing into sleep.  
As he dreams the tide comes in  
And rolls him back to sea.

## THE GOLDFISH

If, as the famous composer suggested,  
A fish tank's glass were painted  
With the G-clef and horizontal lines  
Of a musical staff,

Goldfish would compose the song  
With quarter and half notes,  
Rests and hours of silence  
Determined by their fits and starts.

The music would have a random quality  
Perhaps, to human ears.  
But how the fish would dance  
And how the water sing!

## MOTH

After you cut the lights tonight  
all the moths will burst into tears  
that haven't already singed their wings  
on what they think is the marvelous sun,

those unconsolable little light worshippers  
will beat their wings to powder night after night  
until all that's left are miniscule coat hangers  
like skeletons poking from their puffy moth bodies.

How does a moth know to love the light  
or is it hatred, this unflagging devotion, an ill-concealed fury  
that makes it dive toward the brightest  
or the only lit bulb in the house?

So how does an all-white, all-male jury react  
when you fall in love with a moth? This pet  
you've cultivated, trained and seek to wed?  
Will they show compassion and sanction the union

or separate you forever by pulling the plug on your freedom,  
committing you for decades to a darkened, padded cell?  
Or do you play it cool and encourage the moth to keep quiet,  
be discrete, don't brag about your human lover?

Hide the candles! Whisk away all matches.  
Fall in love with a moth and you got another moth to feed.

## THE WIFE AGREES

The wife agrees to cut my hair.  
She's the cheapest game in town  
And it doesn't hurt too much  
Except when she clips my ears.  
I guess she doesn't like being called the wife.

The little woman says I'm getting cocky  
And tells me from now on I need an appointment.  
None of this springing it on her at the last moment  
Before a poetry reading  
Or the gathering of important committees,

Tugs at the forelock and shoves my head to the side,  
Maintains that the shears are too dull,  
And leaves a moth hole on the left side  
About which I generously complain.  
I guess she doesn't like being called the little woman.

But I'm not gonna stop my bitching  
About looking like a half-peeled onion.  
So she takes the scissors and chops a grocery bag in half.  
"Put this on the left side of your head," she says.  
"Then people can only see your better half."

## LIQUIDS

Coffee wakes you from that sleep-bruised face,  
fraggles your nerves  
till they push you out into the day, into the twitch.

Rain and dandruff slush creep through your boots,  
feet seep. By noon you're ready  
to swallow a Pepsi, it sparkles your throat

and in the new sun your sweat bakes as mud turns to dust  
on your face. By 5 the excuse to stop: the whistle  
runs through your ears, cuts a string in your head.

You become friends with the guy next to you  
and agree to stop for a drink. The beer drags the day's crust down,  
coats a glistening path and

in the corner of your eye, like the last thought before sleep,  
something glints.

It reminds you something you can't remember.

A woman with pale powdered breasts and spots on her neck  
nurses a brandy alexander and you buy her one.  
Your friend from work has excused himself

till morning. He's got family, kids,  
and each of you would trade places.  
He could love the pale powdered darkness

and the chance to get lushed now and then  
and you'd drink all those quarts of nonfat milk  
just to get close to his wife

# THE RIGHT WORDS

-for Jim

When I was a kid  
and something bad happened to a neighbor  
I tried to stay away until things had blown over:  
I didn't know what to say.

My grandfather cut his left thumb clean off  
with a table saw. He was a carpenter  
making someone a table. He drove himself  
to the hospital twelve miles

holding his red hand out the window at red lights  
so traffic would know to let him through.  
I didn't want to see him, no matter  
that I loved him, hell, that made it harder,

but he was in our driveway before I knew  
he was even out of the hospital  
and before I could hug him or hide  
he told me his thumb-stump had grown a new nail.

"Wanna see?" Tongue frozen  
I nodded and saw  
he held to his turbaned thumb  
a six-penny nail from his shop.

A friend at a fancy dinner  
asked her three-year-old son  
who had just, by accident, farted loudly,  
"Johnny, what do you say?"

The guests had paused in their talk  
to study their reflections in the consomme.  
The astonished child replied:  
“Thank you.”

What does one say, what are the right words?  
My friend just lost half his house to a fire.  
I said: “You’re so calm.  
I’d be throwing a fit.”

He replied in a way that comforted me:  
“I’ve thrown it already.”

## R.I.P RAP

Having someone to love isn't all it's cracked up to be.  
It's 51% inspiration and 49% worry.  
The inspiration makes the worry worse  
Because if you didn't have the former the latter  
Would dry up and scab off  
Leaving you raw for something new.

But fact or fate is I'm gifted  
With these loves, these inspirational worries  
And I fear with horror what I'd be without them.  
Carving here my epitaph, Goodbye My Loves  
And Gone To A Better World and

Ha Ha  
You Sorry Bastards  
Look Who Got Here First

# POTTER

Your hands at the wheel  
pull a fat lump of clay,  
almost will it,  
up to a vase.

You make the hole with your thumb  
and guide the flaring rim  
so it stays round  
but gets thinner and thinner

against firm fingers  
now within the hole,  
now a cavity,  
your thumb started.

Your gray hand dips new water  
to keep it pliable  
and the rim takes an even finer tune  
but you spot an imperfection,

with wire cut the spinning vase  
down to a mixing bowl.

Another perfection check  
reveals a new flaw  
and the wire  
reduces the clay to a cereal bowl.

Even that won't work  
and the whole remaining lump bites the dust  
in the recycling bin I'm astonished  
how quickly destroyed, something so fine.

## BLACK HOLE

Every now & then someone gets out of line  
Here on Earth, and Mankind trembles:  
Hitler treated Jews like ants  
And some of us have relatives who died

In Vietnam, or Auschwitz, or just as needlessly  
In some less public way.  
How strange the names of places suggest ways to die!  
It's like the flu, how that's never yet come from America!

Here on Earth we send out messages of love:  
Space garbage, golf balls on the moon,  
We say we hope the Martians land.  
It'll help bring us more together.

Three



## ONLY WHAT'S IMAGINED

Only what's imagined will not happen,  
so I let myself worry about theft and  
run-ins with the law. I can't elaborate,  
it's too scary, but there's comfort having  
thought it when you believe that very thought  
wards off possibility. Extend the theory to  
happy fantasies, the effect is devastating.  
This can never happen to me now that I've thought it  
pervades the moment from mounting the camel  
with Gina Lollobridgida on the other side of the hump  
to loping in tandem across the Sahara with cool  
moments of lush and total isolation  
at oases on the way. This can never happen  
to me now as Gina drops from the camel  
and loosens the halter. Her open mouth covers mine  
as I try to chant "This can never happen,"  
and she forces me backward into sand at the base  
of lush grasses in soothing winds. The camel  
looks the other way, politely fascinated  
by the acres of sand he must cover beneath  
the weight of our three months' provisions,  
champagne and caviar for each oasis and a  
few crab sandwiches for elevensies on the sand  
to say nothing of a dozen sacks of dry camel feed.  
Gina pants in my ear as I surrender  
disbelief and feel her hand encircling, taking charge  
and then she covers me with kisses  
as, slowly, she peels back my robe.  
I close my eyes then blink them rapidly,  
up through the palms to a baked blue sky,  
green slur in foreground, burning blue much higher,  
farther from me than eyes in the air  
blinking back their disappointment, disbelief.

## THE TERRORISTS

We seized the President's family  
and demanded this year's defense budget  
be used to replace the ozone layers.

We used photographs of Margaret Thatcher with the Prince  
to convince the British we meant business.

We circled the Kremlin with flagons of laughing gas  
and got Gorbachev's detractors so silly  
they realigned priorities and declared  
complete cooperation with their friends  
across the tiny sea and the continents  
that had shrunk faster than the human brain  
could grow.

Until now. We saw the chance to reverse the earth's destruction  
and we leapt for it, billions of people saw through government  
control or the control of other mortals.

None of us was pure. Even the Americans  
had suffered intimidation at Kent State  
and through their agencies and presidents.

We swore together, a billion voices,  
we'd never lift arms when it wasn't  
in our hearts to kill. That, alone,  
ended most wars. Generals barked at empty barracks.

The President's wife became a regular Tanya Hearst,  
screaming at the press that weapons never settled anything.  
She really wowed them with that necklace of carbine shells  
strung across her chest and the M-16 raised over her head.  
It got so changed around from what you'd have expected  
that I began to hope the pollution problem  
would persist, bringing us to our senses  
in this horrible way.

And I saw who were the terrorists.

Who'd manufactured the weapons we now carried,  
who tried so hard to be big adults and grim,  
at least in public, who made the styrofoam  
and sold the refrigerators, the terrorists  
in the supermarket spending their grocery money  
for meats raised on carcinogens and wrapped  
in tomorrow's solid waste problem.

I turned the bathroom mirror to the wall.  
But like all the others I knew my silence would be the death  
of any hope to have an earth to haunt,  
at least an earth worth haunting  
with people on it, say 100 years from now.  
That's when I spoke. That's when we broke the ice.

Then all the world leaders, their international stress  
so magically lifted, pardoned every one of us.  
And we pardoned them.  
It was a real love-in.  
A bake-off of all that  
crazy international tension. We sorted our trash.

And we shot canisters of ozone hundreds of miles up.  
It was just like the 4th of July but much quieter.  
No one needed to whoop it up in that sort of way.  
And we all awoke with a warmth in our hearts  
and we all started over. And the terror of peace  
was known in many lands.

## THEY'RE TELLING ME NOW

They're telling me now  
a fine mist of gasoline, dispersed above the target  
will cost no lives, create an electromagnetic pulse  
that paralyzes the city below,  
but there's no concussion, no fallout.

They're telling me now  
a fine mist of gasoline, dispersed above the target  
and then ignited by conventional flares, might create a pulse  
that paralyzes the city below,  
without concussion, no fallout.

And they're telling me now the enemy  
will happily ignite the spigots of oil,  
earth's blood we learned to pump —  
the closest we could come to being hearts —  
without concussion, no fallout

And that the smoke from their destruction  
will block the earth's access to sunlight  
long enough to threaten a nuclear winter:  
there may be regions of the world  
too dark and cold to sprout a small garden,  
let alone survival crops.

They're telling me now  
the world can't go on this way, we have to prevail  
over human skullduggery no matter the price.  
So we swim in our own blood  
in battle for the earth's blood  
and our thrashing makes us hearts.

We pump to keep it on the move,  
to keep the helpless humans at our bidding  
who will go to war when we want  
to spoil the air they'll have to share  
as we go down in history.

## DABBLING IN OILS

words failing

I paint you a face like a kneecap  
a scoop of heaven soft & firm support  
it turns desire to energy  
then back again.

To know you once more in that impossible house  
only by painting I can ever see:  
such patience it takes, such a drive's required  
greater than dredging up words  
to know foreground vs. background,  
what should be the big thing in front  
to give the rest perspective,  
and where's the vanishing point Miss Cheek  
tried to teach me about when I was in school,  
too young to care?

Mixing colors slows me down  
I back off & raise a thumb.  
& not because I know what to do  
I sight along the thumb, exhale  
& move back in, it's time to sign

ink spilling from your doorway,  
the shadow of an emptied house.

## STEREOGRAM

I keep trying to lock you in  
get my eyes to cross just so  
the right image  
merges with the left image  
and the brain picks up a 3-D message.

To escape in lost focus!  
As if looking at a picture long enough  
will allow me to wander in,  
look around, see the back side of things,  
an ordinary schmuck made important with a stage pass  
intent on befriending the star

and kind of hoping the world will notice.

It's like the many small hexagonal tiles  
on bathroom floors in old hotels,  
I love to watch my bare feet disappear  
into the ages as, The Thinker, fist bracing chin,  
elbow on knee, I study the universe  
into which my toes can wiggle, pad around.

But — no! — you have to bend  
or otherwise distort my vision,  
close me out when I think I've locked you in,  
an amateur with love songs to an image on the page,  
who would have you know him, not just vice versa,  
a picture responding to its viewer.  
An art we haven't yet explored.

## CHOCOLATAHOLIC, CHOCOHOLIC, CHOCO

Chocolate body paint! It makes me pant  
to think of fingering up a glob to spread  
across the landscape of your flesh,  
the fragile part of you that shows  
and tender parts that rarely see the light.

And if I buy a gallon of this stuff,  
enough to cover you from head to toe,  
you can be my Milky Way, my Mars Bar,  
my M & M that melts in my hand and in my mouth.  
You can be the sweet package of my youth,

a Necco Wafer held so long without a bite  
saliva broke it down to sweet syrup  
coating teeth and tongue and throat,  
the dust I inhale, just molecules  
broken from the basal cells and walking the air  
until drawn in by a grabby nose.

So in your very presence I can take you in,  
little bits of spirit and molecule  
as well as all I've painted you to be,  
my fingers are spoons and you can be  
the plate from which my tongue lifts morsels.

# PRECISION AIRLINES

From the little commuter plane,  
Precision Airlines from  
Montpelier to Boston,  
I saw a whole nother side of things.

But first, how I feel about flying  
with a line called “Precision.”  
It’s the same way I felt about a company  
that once tried to sell me a furnace,

“Reliable Heating” —  
as if the name would compensate  
for some grandiose flaw.  
From Precision’s plane I saw

how the roadways thread the forests and hills,  
join up at the center of towns  
and from there each sneaks  
to a number of houses and farms,

past schoolyards with buses  
lined up like pencils  
and graveyards behind two identical  
churches and behind the graveyards

a single junkyard, hidden on the ground, I’m sure  
the juxtaposition confused by a comma  
in the landscape, a strip of brush and scrub trees  
but from the air, just a fencerow away.

## MOMENTS ALONE

I emerge from a singing shower  
naked as the piranha in my fish bowl  
but for its scales  
naked but for water as the water.

That fish bowl (really a tank)  
sits in my bathroom  
on a small table, by the toilet.  
Why it's a piranha I'd as soon not go into.

Suffice to say it's a guard piranha,  
not a pet. I tease him  
at times while I'm taking a crap.  
Cruelty to one's guards is how to keep 'em mean.

It's like the President, how he makes his look-alike,  
the guy lucky enough to serve as a decoy  
by coincidence of birth and the electorate's whim,  
he's the only Secret Service agent doesn't have to stay in shape

unless the President is on a fitness kick  
and decides to drop a hundred pounds,  
makes his look-alike, in case of snipers,  
emerge from the airplane first. "Go ahead,"

he says, giving his man a little, obnoxious push.  
"They're cheering for you. Smile. Look happy.  
Don't forget to wave."  
Fresh from the shower

I wave into the mist on the mirror  
as the piranha waves its tail, snarling at the glass.  
The towel clears a path for my face  
and if I stand on my toes, the entire body

gleams back, backwards:  
my left foot is my right,  
the knee I twitch comes back reversed.  
I wonder who sees me and how.

2.

The eye has interest only  
in what's not in the dark.  
The finger touches only what has body  
but being blind is startled when touched back.

It's a whole bowl full of surprises  
for each of our senses! The ear  
seeks color in sound but can't see it coming,  
and so on for the whole five of them.

They pool their resources where the brain on its stem,  
like a prodigy lollipop, runs the show  
without any of the senses' skills,  
depending on its runners, teenaged ganglia on their way up,

embittered veins and hardening arteries:  
they were just born in the wrong place  
hell, they could make a better decision  
who gets off the plane,

when to exit the shower,  
that piranha might be on the loose,  
what songs to sing,  
whether to shower or not.

## DINOSAURS

A boy outgrows dinosaurs  
and maybe always did feel, though awe, superior  
if only because his family came later  
“evolved higher,” if you’re willing to believe that stuff.  
Although he does not yet know the word,  
he treasures the irony that with humongous bodies  
still in their skulls their brains were tiny  
like the cockpits and their pilots up front and on top  
of their giant 747’s directing the future for 100,000 times  
their weight, 230 lives and luggage other than their own.  
And somewhere in the mansion developing in his brain,  
his body grows to heroic proportions  
with his capacity, self-doubt, to govern, at war in a land  
he’s learned to call feeling. By the time he’s fifty  
he’ll be realizing he has a future and better start running  
in spite of the collapse of his mansion, hell,  
the entire estate, though body continues to grow.  
Has there been a quarrel in the convent  
or is he finally tuning in on compassion,  
not just tolerance of his self,  
bossy dreamer, but acceptance, love?  
The corny stuff he’s always known was there  
but too big to control except by luck and faith.

## MY WIFE WONDERS

how terrible it must have been  
those 22 seconds when the commuter airplane  
rolled out of control and flew full throttle  
into earth. They must have known, she says,  
they were going to die. Twenty-two seconds to ask  
their final questions, say their final prayers.

Those are a long 22 seconds, she says,  
that is not a quick death.  
It must have been an eternity,  
she muses, I don't like it.  
And neither do I but you want it instant?  
No time, no "eternity," no chance to reflect,  
maybe even work up a laugh?

And remembers *her* airline "experience"  
when on take-off a deer punctured a wheel  
then got sucked into one of two jet engines  
and the pilot came on the intercom  
only after the plane was in the air and the cabin filling  
with smoke, the smell of venison and electricity on fire:

"Aw folks, unfortunately, we've just struck a deer.  
We're going to circle the airport, it won't hurt to burn up fuel,  
and wait for ground to tell us if we have what it takes  
to land this thing, I'll be back ... ."  
And remembers the questions she heard as the ordeal extended:  
"I wonder if anyone will know which kennel I left my dog at."

I could comment on the trivia  
insisting itself forward at critical moments,  
once you know you've bought the biscuit

as they say, seen the tomorrow cookies,  
how my question might be  
did anyone know I loved them?

Too general, too smooshy,  
but the first that comes to mind.  
Then, maybe, what should I wonder next?  
I wonder if I'm wondering right,  
savoring this final moment as I may  
have savored birth, thinking if I thought at all,

through it all, I'm sure:  
"Am I going to survive this?"

2.

I'm boarding a tiny commuter double prop  
under someone else's name  
and I'm scared: the digits in the flight number  
add up to thirteen and I've always said  
I'd never use someone else's ticket,  
wouldn't change flight plans after the itinerary

was in from a travel agent,  
I might volunteer to be bumped  
off the one plane that did land safely.  
And safe in my hotel room  
it's too early to chortle,  
I've got the return flight to encounter,

still using the round-trip tickets issued  
to the guy who canceled his trip  
at the last moment, in response to his wife's nightmare?  
And all the thrill seekers can have their  
midnight drives on western roads by moonlight  
at ninety miles per hour with the headlights off.

I'll take 60 in full daylight on dry roads, no other  
car in sight, four lanes, and *flat*,  
let alone the roller coaster, it makes me puke  
and I ain't into that, but I guess they all pale,  
this virtual reality, this *eau d' eau*  
or essence of essence compared to the whole, elongated trip.

No words can assess, no numbers quantify,  
call it 22 seconds or 22 years,  
it was there I almost remember spinning  
out of control and flying full throttle  
and didn't know I'd be glad  
when it stopped.

## DELICATE

It's delicate when we touch  
each other, a careful mistake  
will do but nothing more.

It's delicate the love  
we carry and know  
that only what waits  
is separation  
and let the new people  
into your lives  
or is this just a bunch  
of hopeful crap?

It's delicate too this learning.  
How even with degrees no one said  
there'd be a job, but there is work  
o there is work. How many  
times I vacuum each week  
is a measure of unemployment  
though vacuuming is nothing I do for enjoyment.

I want me one of them riding vacuums,  
metallic green with special bumpers  
so I don't mar the furniture as I'm whizzing the room,  
caroming off the pillars of our old upright piano  
and making the long run down the hall,  
wearing the safety helmet that came with the unit,  
wielding the magic wand  
attachment at cobwebs as I glide by.

Cobwebs! Don't make me think of them.  
Let me picture a spider's more symmetrical effort,  
not the chaotic gathering of dust  
in strands that hang from ceilings.  
Let me think of spider webs,  
the organization of desire,  
a spider's fractal-like construction to ward off starvation,  
a sticky, silver trampoline with "plenty of space to fly through,  
just avoid the center!" claims the stupid moth  
that fouls the whole web and isn't  
anything the spider wants,  
just a dusty pair of wings, fluttered to a mealy core,  
the cobweb of the animal world.

Not to speak of the damaged web to rebuild  
for, though resilient, a spider web is delicate  
and delicate is like touch, like love, like learning,  
like the finest, most expensive, tiniest chocolate  
you're only supposed to have one of.

## THE ULTIMATE COMMUTE

Every day, same time, he sees her car  
on the two lane highway, approaching his car  
as they drive to their jobs in opposite directions.  
He memorizes her license plate,  
he falls in love  
with that sensuous face in the windshield  
and those two, tenuous hands on the wheel,  
always in the proper ten-til-two-o'clock position,  
glimpsed each day  
as they whistle past each other  
to their work in opposite directions.

How can he meet her?  
He lacks the courage to call her license number in  
to Motor Vehicles and ask for her name,  
address, home phone and marital status  
or some details on the color of her eyes,  
at forty miles per hour plus forty miles per hour  
in the opposite direction, that's eighty miles per hour  
at ten feet the closest they've ever been,  
it's a miracle he even knows she's pretty,  
or is he imagining that, too?  
And willing?

So the complications are daunting.  
The only reason he doesn't leave his job  
is he'd miss this Mondays through Friday most weeks,  
daily, instantaneous rendezvous,  
no more than five seconds  
from spotting her grill to seeing the tail lights  
in the rearview mirror,

he's started to dread the weekends  
because he knows she loves these meetings too.  
Wasn't that a weak smile she managed  
and a tentative wave of the fingertips,

a moment of danger when one hand  
nearly left the wheel in a hot flash,  
tempestuous, impetuous, and  
for that moment vulnerable I'm sure?  
The whole expression was Be My Friend  
but in her embarrassment she missed  
his reciprocation the next day and the next:  
he carried a yellow rose by the stem  
between his teeth, thorns sometimes spiking  
the roof of his mouth and one day at work  
he nursed a pierced lip.

He knows that on the hottest days of all,  
when his trousers are thin and the top is down,  
she's probably wearing a short skirt  
and rubs herself as he does, suggestively,  
each out of sight of the other, maybe  
just a sentimental and funny reminder,  
maybe in lust lost on the highway  
each day where it begins,  
that little pep talk you can give yourself  
and with all your aging confidence you know  
she's giving herself too.

## JUST KIDDING, HONEST

Your young son's young friend,  
the one whose successful brain surgery  
removed not all speech but, strangely,  
his nouns: it turns out they'd also been stored  
on the other side of his brain,  
he just had to find them  
and the access key was music,  
all the TV and radio jingles starting with  
Chicquita Banana and I'm Here to Say:  
makes me more aware than ever  
it's a fucking computer we carry  
between our ears, these audio terminals,  
and when I saw the special  
on brain surgery I learned they pin little numbers  
to the lobes where certain impulses register. Honest.

I guess everyone's wired a little different  
so a naked nurse passes through intensive care  
your hard-on tells 'em you noticed  
and a 26 is pinned to the point in your brain  
where the pulsing soon makes wisps of smoke  
that sting the surgeons' eyes behind their masks  
and the one with the good bedside manner makes a crack  
how he now knows where to cut  
if you ever wave that big dong at his wife. Just kidding.

It's a crude part of mine they'd want to pin down  
and eliminate, cynical distrust and a laugh  
that echoes from hemisphere to hemisphere,  
here I am! here I am!

as, desperate for a target, in a pulse,  
just kidding, honest, for a laugh,  
the red-eyed, red-faced surgeons swipe their scalpels  
or probe nouns and music with a swab  
to rescue language, hoping for the truth.

*-for Ellen*

## THE LAST WORDS

Oh Heavens! Such a  
tiny airplane & the pilot's  
a whacky straight who got his training free  
during Vietnam.

Something unfortunate occurs with an aileron  
I don't understand but it means curtains  
and all we can do is fly around as low as possible  
until the gas runs out.

The winds toss us considerably and the radio says  
we're too far off course, of course, to pinpoint, we'll have  
to chance it, crash land in the darkness on the mountainside  
when the final spiral

down begins.

There. It is fairly clear we are going to die.

I turn to the pilot

and tell him how wonderful he's been

how he's been the most important bullshit  
in my life I am not thinking to speak of you

oh God