

# **A Life Drifts Out on Puget Sound**

## So Late/Too Soon

So late, so late, so late, so late  
So late for the end of summer  
So late for the honeyed fall  
Set on the bite of winter  
Like the wedge for the bitter maul

Too soon, too soon, too soon, too soon  
Too soon for the funeral dirge  
Too soon for the siren call  
Soon caught in the freshet surge  
Soon doffing the rinsed-off caul

## Come My Little Chicken

*November 3-7, 2014*

Come my little chicken, my little domino  
let's see what the thundering roar  
has thrown upon the churned-up shore  
where that inland lake sits so far within,  
so cold so deathly so silent so still.

We've taken a cowbird into the nest  
and our own have flown before they're fledged  
or else wither at home.

This frame of mind's like a fine tawny port  
that rings like polished brass on the tongue.  
Like all drugs it tires as it ages  
as if the head poking up out of these shoulders  
decomposed like a senescent mushroom  
aging to tatters in a cow-pied, rain-spilled field.

What remains, always there? It comes to no  
good end in this field where Spirit is constantly  
mucking about. We don't  
often know why we do the right thing.

## Three Aging Powers

These three aging powers of the soul –  
memory, understanding, will –  
do not fail in equal proportion.  
While memory fails understanding expands  
like the sun that will take in  
the orbit of the earth  
and all the planets; but will reduces  
both to the extent that we no longer care  
and to the extent that care no longer  
grapples us.

We limp toward the end  
bearing our basket  
of faults –

work our way down  
the old fault lines,  
handling those webs of rope  
unsure where  
this maze lets out .

or faultless  
lose the way  
and fail in the bushes  
a long way from  
care and the road.

We follow the breath, but breath is body  
and body exfoliates all the senses  
and senses bring in the world  
and world turns to soul  
while senses are body  
as they are mind  
so mind is body  
and body  
breath

## Now Time Stops Counting

spring rain no longer splatters the windshield  
as the drowsy rider nods  
tires spray, moments seep away.  
too young then to care,  
but now –  
the high sky how bright blue  
the young green leaves all struggled out  
wrinkled at birth  
the young fir shot straight to forest heights  
branches all fallen from its lower sixty feet  
a single long line drawn white-gray  
against the graceful limbs enveloping from  
    plumes boughs  
the cedar behind –  
now time stops counting.

## The Slow Fade into Translucence

the time comes  
    sudden  
    when,  
the time of activity and creativity  
    over,  
the time of preservation and legacy –  
  
if nothing else takes you –  
the slow fade into translucence

## I Walk, A Mass of Burning Light

I walk, a mass of burning light  
toward relief  
on hallowed ground.

when stones are lifted off the ground  
like old belief  
the grass regrows.

the curlew's soft clues  
when not refused  
are morning mist  
that damps the ground  
and throws

light in winding lists  
of gray  
relief

that despite the night-long flight  
in which life too much confused  
gave way  
to winding woe

and woe to nothing  
slow unwound.

## Why I Don't Send Out My Poetry

the wandering albatross flies to the moon  
crossing seas of moonlit dark  
it makes twelve trips,  
once every four years  
until it tires, then bears its young  
and sails alone a year at sea  
to recover from the great loss  
of raising a child who,  
like a wandering albatross,  
flies toward the moon

## For Christopher Smart

For life is sweet, whatever may attend  
For it is of God and God is good  
For I have heard the chatter of birds  
For the peach leaf stirs  
For gnats jig in the slant of day  
For it matters not whether I come a minute late or stay a minute long  
For the many voices are each a human being  
Let life rejoice in the golden chain tree  
Let God rejoice in His huge purple hands of clematis  
Let morning birds rejoice in the rhododendron  
Let the peach tree rejoice in its own pink blossom  
Let gnats rejoice above the wisteria  
and time sing in the lilac, which is of God  
and all voices harmonize in the hydrangea



## Hazy August

Hazy August lazes into suspended September  
and nothing happens

nothing

but it feels like rain

and we stand already in the slight shiver

of the first breeze,

stirring like old leaves worn nearly translucent

scattered on the levee

above

the dry channel of the rejuvenating

flood.

## Puget Sound in 1000 Reflections

glistening  
Sound –  
light rushing  
over its waters

footprints  
sparkling

untold thousands

cedar bark  
shred in strips

woodsmoke  
on a wet beach  
haze drifts

woven in hanging mist  
my life

– how quickly

run away.

## Puget Sound Ichthyology

Mud Bay, covered by 2' of warm water;  
soundings 546' off McNeil Island,  
930' of cold depth at Point Jefferson –  
two thousand miles of shoreline,  
bays inlets promontories mud flats  
gravel cobble and sandy beach  
tide pools estuaries kelp beds  
eelgrass meadows  
sculpins rockfish and perch-infested  
kelp-forested rocky shelves  
and declivities  
through which swim cow sharks gobies  
sand lances toadfish stickleback  
greenling skate snipe eels  
drums sauries gravel-diggers  
butterfish gunnel and those variously  
appellated cling- dog- rag- wolf-  
lantern- pipe- ribbon- and lumpfishes.  
of sculpin alone three dozen:  
scaley- and smooth-headed, rosy lip  
silver-spot, roughback, sharpnose  
mosshead, buffalo, soft, the red  
and brown Irish lords, dusky, threadfin  
spotfin sailfin, fluffy, darter, saddleback  
manacled, ribbed, grunt and the giant  
cabezón, flashing reds, greens, browns  
like shifting light seen on sand bottoms  
plus 15 species of flounders sand dabs sole  
marvels of geometry, Euclid adapted  
to the bottom-feeding habit, eyes that  
migrate, bodied forth like wings  
that flap sand to lie flattened  
in quiescent concealment

## How the Sound Breathes

The Sound breathes in overlapping flows  
of rhythm and depth – two breaths  
at once. One long, indwelling  
upwells in the deep Pacific,  
dense mass of cold oceanic water  
indrawn through the Strait  
pouring over submarine sills;  
the other, continuously,  
a great outbreath above the fresh inflows,  
exhales a lighter surface layer  
moving seaward in exact balance  
with the influx at depth, twice a year  
circulating its volume entire.  
Superimposed, slow-motion breathing  
moon-pulled, twice daily – in and out,  
Vishnu's breath that deeply dreams  
beneath Brahma's wakeful susurrus  
inhalation now deeper here  
exhalation more shallow there; longest  
on South Sound mudflats,  
least in the Straits; the winter pulls furthest  
in the dark hours; by June most  
at soft midday under light clouds  
sifted by pale yellow sunlight.  
At the equinoxes expect a lighter breath  
such as in a sleeping child  
might barely be seen.

## The Passing-By of Chance

on a warm day    nearly November we sit  
    side by side on a bench  
sides touching and remember another November  
standing side by side  
    overlooking Shinglemill Creek  
where   yellowed leaves falling one by one now one  
now another  
    and two small children at home –

    closing my eyes  
    the slow bowing  
    of the cello  
    water over its stony bed  
    mothers passing   their  
    two-year-olds  
    fledglings fluttering  
    at the edge of the nest  
    bills flutter into the cello case  
    like autumnal leaves  
    long-drawn chords  
    belie the harsh rasp  
        the uncivilized  
    and civilization  
    that can be like  
    the red-hot iron ball in the throat  
    that can be neither swallowed  
    nor spit out  
    footfalls   leaf-fall  
        the passing-by of chance  
    that stops nowhere  
    bidden

the park's many benches seat each   a musician  
people passing in fews and we's  
    liking falling leaves  
on a plane turned horizontal  
and nowhere chance fails to fall  
    heavy-handed  
                                on the shoulder.

## Emigrating from the Old Country

Old, but, ironically, where youth's mis-  
spent  
before this voyage embarked –  
familiar as old wine  
all drunk up  
before this broken boat  
made landfall  
on this New World,  
Old Age, whose  
shoreline thickets bristle  
daunt footfall –  
ill-prepared, the Old World  
uneasy explorer can't walk  
with soft native tread

but  
contesting  
every step like a conquistador  
has to slash through mesquite  
penetrating hinterland  
the vast interior  
unknown  
unimagined (grasping

Old Country dear life) all I know –  
the ship that sailed me here,  
small breaks and tears  
accumulating over the passage  
seaworthy no longer – there'll be  
no sailing back, no returning –  
and no  
knowing this country  
Old Age,  
stretching inland unexplored  
no learning (for learning  
requires memory, and there's no memory  
here  
but that fading Old Country)

## Everywhere Passes and Passes

everywhere rain passes and passes  
like time unremarkable, continuous  
and distance an intimate blur  
soft-wraps a day, day draws on  
and light begins to glow, windows  
pattering, pattering the time  
that makes up life, remembered  
time, blurred rain, softening lines  
trees wrapping the day, the house  
the windows glow, the rain, passing time.



## My Brother's Birthday

The sun came bursting in  
like troops of small boys with puppies.  
It is the same reality it always was  
but so warmly colored –  
swirls of pinks and yellows  
on the wood walls.

What was it I was reflecting on?  
what old sorrows or failures –  
    routed, quite  
ah!     forgotten.



## Throughout the Length of the Wintry Afternoon

throughout the length of the wintry afternoon  
sun streaked the wet-faced yard  
teared drops  
rolled off the black cab  
    of the parked truck  
the wet golden retriever rolled on its back  
kicking tufts of grass as though it were still summer  
until clouds poured sideways overhead  
mist blew the skirts of down-dropping dusk  
back up the slim waists of young fir,  
and, hid by turns in dour downfalls  
    of laced rain  
the dull clank of lowered skies,  
the sun stopped vaulting to blue  
and the blackly withheld  
hail loosed to hose  
white torrents of melting ice  
that did not escape in sharp stabs  
like spring breaking up  
but blanked sun sky yard dog cab all



## Surprise Sails *Surprise!*

(for Robert Bly)

His little boat *Surprise!* bobs at dock  
and his true name too is Surprise. No surprise –  
he does not limit his points of contact  
to the prescribed few. No,  
when this boat drifts and rocks  
out on that night-still lake, still the waves lap  
and the entire lake is alive with little  
jostlings and myriad webs through which  
he is in contact with you at every point.  
You are embraced by the arms of all,  
and only with great surprise (and very late)  
discover it is not one man alone who gently  
herds you into the dancing moon-slung dazzle.  
With what loving thrill the eyes  
invite the beloved to the ceremony  
of surprises found at every hand,  
on an impulse sailing the warm night  
in a small boat of a million late stars.

## Three Streaks Tear Memory

three streaks tear memory  
but no one recalls –  
    no longer calls like the sweet steps of music  
to mind –  
what weight they bore  
nor even whether tears  
    brimming joy  
or tears –  
    rents that open what they tore –  
or even tares like golden pollen  
freighting late afternoon on a sunlit spring breeze –  
no, no one now recalls,  
now that we've all so quickly ascended like smoke  
    – like a blown dandelion  
belonging to no one –  
ah we streak the pane  
of summer  
and are gone

## Old Age Balances on a Page Edge

Old age balances on a page edge.  
On one side of the page is written  
    “life”  
on the other side “death”.

Do not think the page can be turned,  
to fall cleanly into place  
on the half of the book that has been read  
    or that once turned  
there will be nothingness  
    or blackness or silence –  
because if so  
there would be something rather than nothing  
    and there is not even so much  
as nothing.

    Think rather, that  
life has closed one of its many eyes  
and though for that eye there is no more  
to be seen  
        of all that sight has been,  
        the vivid blues and vibrant reds,  
the multi-eyed light,  
the kaleidoscopic colors  
on an ever-mixing palate run  
    continually into new forms  
that are lost in one another  
as winging birds in the wheeling flock.

## Vashon Yardscape

Stepping out the cabin door, the land  
spread like paint on a canvas  
the rising green of yard warmed by yellows –  
though the grayed spring sky still hangs  
receding in washes of blues  
where distance winds into white openings,  
and closings shift into dark greens  
of fir and cedar, heavy with blacks  
lifted with great effort against the  
lowering far-flung purple-gray sky  
that too closes on itself – except  
where clouds open to pits of pure azure  
around which a brilliant porcelain  
and a little luminous yellow light  
the Allegro from Beethoven's Ninth  
that plays in small washes of colors that become  
floods, where a hand waves slightly,  
telling a story that, though told  
past the corners of notice, momentarily  
becomes insistent truth, overwhelming  
surprised thought as the yellowish greens  
drift to give the dramatically dark olive firs  
their loved offer of order,  
their chorus overtaking and doubling  
the rich warmth of sunny baritone  
until their brilliance flies into the higher  
treetops, a sheer cerulean joy  
thrusting into the hand of God the bluegray mountains, the life without which  
God could not Be, until sudden intensifying  
sunlight straying through doors and windows  
pours a sweetness of honeyed wine  
the orchestra of color the swirled paints  
of a landscape of voice breaking apart  
the solidity of Cezanne throws  
splatters of flung paint across  
an entire canvas that banishing nothing  
banishes all crescendos  
of daily well-loved routine.

## The Mountainous Fir and Cedar

the mountainous fir and cedar  
that last night thrashed their limbs  
like outraged giants  
today stand motionless  
as if draped by the somber gray sky itself,  
overlooking all without comment