

THE TEN SHORT POEMS OF SPRING AND A SONG OF LONGING

Ten Short Poems of Spring

Spring is a revolution mysteriously borne through death.

What is a revolution? It is a turning around a center. It is return. It is sweeping change. It is a new Word.

What passes away returns – with the sense that death is something necessary. Each spring, life is something radically new.

Fragile and beautiful, blossoms cover the fruit trees like convocations of white moths. Lasting so short a time, they capture the essence of this passing away and returning again, somehow made more joyful by life's transience and death's importance to the cycle's work.

How is it that the spring's timeless recurrence can be breath-takingly new? How can spring's return year after year seem so unexpected, so fresh, so that each spring is like no other?

These poems bring images of life, change, flow, revolution, death, seed, blossom, fruit, plant, earth, rain, water, river, breath, consciousness, longing, bride, wedding, marriage, fecundity, love, love-making, word, language, participation, eggshell, bird, flower and tree – not to answer such questions but, as Rilke asked, to live them.

Revolution is the startling renewal that produces genuine change, where only superficial alterations occurred before. Its vitality energizes, it is the new Word,¹ the breath that enters clay, animating it to life. It is the shift that sweeps away old perceptions so that new possibilities are revealed. This revolution is a revelation.

¹The philosopher Beryl Crowe held that the difference between a rebellion – which shed blood, perhaps, but changed nothing fundamental – and a revolution, was that a genuine revolution possessed a "new word." And so I'm led to think that it is only by standing shoulder-deep in the flow of spring's eternal turning and returning that we find the voice, the language, and the new word that carries the revolution for which we long.

Revolution is also the turning of the spheres, the waterwheel that ever fills and turns and spills, only to come up again. It is the endless cycle of the seasons, of life, in which the turning of the year marks the soul-sailing body on time's sea.

In the course of these seasons or cycles who can say which is inner and which outer? The turning year brings round again what we had so hopelessly hoped for and expected all along. It seemed so long in coming; no matter, the immensity of time over which spring has faultlessly kept faith with mortal creatures leaves not the slightest doubt among we who wait that its grace will be repeated and the earth will turn another revolution to the time when days grow longer.

Or has something returned within – a springtime both forever new and so old that its origin is past knowing? What could never be expected has been expected for all time; it is the loss of time and eternity (time continuing and eternity in each moment). It is the revolutionary return of what had been promised – the return of something never kept but only lent.

We wait. Yet what returns, over and over, time immemorial, arrives all unexpected. Perhaps its coming must always burst bonds of doubt and fear. And yet its arrival fulfills deep longings.

Poem I. Spring is a longing that breaks forth in all the branches, filling them with blossoms. We feel purity in these white blossoms and in the longing we bear within; in that longing, we blossom too. It is arduous, but ardor awakes when grace comes this close, covering the arbor with a white promise. In spring's profligate outburst, the tree is covered.

The *Ten Poems* open and close with white blossoms covering *the one tree of the orchard* – then they fall. How can an *orchard* be *one tree*? One spring I had only one tree, but it was clothed in white, and it was enough – it was an orchard for me.

The mystery of the one and the many – that the entire orchard may be gathered into one tree – lies open here, but it cannot be named. No more can the object of longing be named, but it is *one* – and also many. This cannot be prised apart. The first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* states:

*the nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth
naming is the mother of the ten thousand things*

We may name the many (as Eve did) and perhaps become caught up in illusion through their differences, but when we return to the center, we find

*as these two come forth, they differ in name,
yet at their source they are the same;
this source is called a mystery
darkness within darkness
the gateway to all mystery.*

Only Easter or perhaps spring can lend sense to this. We might think of an archetype or a Platonic ideal to make sense of the *one tree*, but that would only be naming again. Casting aside the problem of whether to differentiate the one tree into many or somehow reduce the orchard "in reality" to one, we may take deep joy in the fact that white blossoms will cover the one tree/orchard every spring. This is a truth we may *live* with; the rest only naming or not-naming. And yet it is important to hold both before us. As the Buddhists say, "not this, not that" – but definitely not "neither."

Opening with this image, the entire work of the *Ten Poems of Spring* is informed by the insight that we must reconcile our particular life with that larger truth that confronts us at that moment of meeting Martin Buber has called the *Thou*. We dare not be untrue to either. Opting only for the particularity of life we suffer the absurdity of diminished being, meaningless existence, a deafness (in Latin, *ab surd*, "to be deaf") to the "still, small voice." Losing ourselves in some oceanic version of God, we negate being, which has no other way than through the details of our world, our life.

White blossoms cover the tree, *then fall/shake branches suspended in whiteness –/death by death/a thousand drop*. We, the "ten thousand things," share in common that we pass – thus we participate in the *one*. Without our death, spring could not come, the *one* could not be.

So we find in their falling, our death; and in this death (with surprise), our *wedding*. After the wedding, *marriage – the bride takes off her dress*. She takes off her wedding dress on her wedding night: *piece by piece/a thousandfold/ descending her limbs*. She prepares, gracefully, for the beauty of the consummation of her marriage.

And from this consummation comes – new life. Blossoms. Another spring. The graceful fall of blossoms – death – has become, imperceptibly, the very heart of the wedding night, the bride baring her body, an entry into the most intimate moment of love. The repetition of

thousandfold in the first and second verses bears witness that this is something through which all particular being – the ten thousand things – must pass.

It is clear that we each are included: *each by each/sail/to earth. each one is me, is you – boat of tiny revolutions/maiden/master of ceremonies*. It is we, each of us, who are bride, maiden, and falling blossom – and master of ceremonies, all at once! Each blossom sails to earth, a boat with white sail crossing to death. Each one bears a tiny revolution, a tiny part of spring's gigantic revolution and so – *how important you are!* How important each of us is, each of our lives – only through this and nowhere else is God made, known, lived.

Each life carries the revolution of spring implicit in itself, each living element participates in the revolution – and the revolution is nothing if not the participation of all creatures in its creation. The participation which gives expression to creation by taking part in creating it is central to these poems.

Spring's deaths – blossoms pile upon the ground – prepare the way for the fruit and the harvest that follow, the marriage, all that follows the night on which the bride takes off her dress. This somehow echoes the crucifixion that prepares the way for the resurrection. Indeed a trinity of longing, revolution, and arriving grace are in both. It would not be too much to say that the one tree of the orchard is the cross, and Jesus himself, God-in-flesh, the one who bears the white blossoms. He is the Bridegroom for whom the bride (each of us) undresses on her wedding night – and the Bridegroom for whom the "thousandfold" (all of us) undress in our falling thickly from the one tree that bore us. Again, the many and the one cannot be separated, nor may either subsume the other.

Our each small participating life imitates Christ, creates anew in miniature what spring creates on grand scale. The paradoxical nature of the one and the many, found through all life, is expressed in the Spirit which enters equally yet uniquely all life – the orchard.

The revolution given in the New Testament is the triumph over death. And so death plays an ineradicable role; the meaningfulness and necessity of death to the coming and being of spring, Death is, as the theologian-scholar Gil Bailie once said, "the master stroke."

How is it that grace can be in death, that death can prepare the way for life as no other thing can? This is truly revolutionary – it is the revolutionary Word of spring that has been said to us for so many years that we no longer recognize how radical it is, no longer long for its meaning. And yet a part of us has not forgotten. I think it must be that the mere

appearance of white blossoms on a branch can be enough to bring the deepest longing to our souls.

Poem II. When the blossoms fall they *have their place upon the ground* – this death has meaning; the "ten thousand things" pass, but here their color is pink – the color of health. There are so many that they *swirl...to the tree's waist*. The blossoms, though "broken," are expressly not a contemplation of despair. In taking their place, they become a *revolution/with a simple covering/laid down*.

Here the bride of Poem I has become a more particular presence, a *girl/just missed/and remembered*. She whom this plunder of pink blossoms reminds us of is the Beatrician, god-bearing image who brings revelation; she is, in a sense, spring – as love itself is a revolution. She is the vessel of love who can carry the fecundity and loveliness we each experience in those we love.

It is that very human experience of human love to which these poems are addressed and of which they seek expression. It is through our participation in these simple things – blossoms that come and fall from the tree, the couple holding one another side by side through the night all their life long, the missing and remembering of one we love who is not here – through these unremarkable, astounding things that creation is fitted together, we all become what we become – what spring reveals.

So, the sprinkling of pink blossoms on the ground reminds us of the one loved but not here, missed and remembered, who in this way figures the entire spiritual voyage as her presence nears and finally arrives. The very human lover who draws near in these poems is also grace descending, the arrival of spring.

Poem III. This poem begins with images of love-making – *reluctantly, the spring rain/beads your thighs/with the laces of short love/a vulnerable, wet smile/spreads/making your legs ache*. It is the spring rain, the male, fertilizing rain, that is acting here. (And it is a *short love*. The image of a small rain during a dry time has stood for "grace" for me for a long time.)

The lacework of rain on green leaves beads my lover's thighs; it is her wet, vulnerable opening to love that gives to all creation a path to birth. Going into her is not so different from planting myself as a seed in the earth: *exposed to rain and bare air/i turn over/pulling the earth/around my shoulders//and return my body to the soil/without a box*.

There is an element of sacrifice here, of exposure and of vulnerability myself, which is not to be missed. There is also a sense of great aloneness – one goes into the earth, a seed

with unknown potential, completely alone. A sadness goes along with this and yet is tempered – even resolved – by *returning* myself to the soil.

The first word of this poem is the adverb *reluctantly* – why reluctantly? I have tried to change this word, but the poem will not allow it. There must be some resistance to this giving – but perhaps it is only that the transformation from winter takes so long, that spring takes forever to arrive, which leads to a sense of reluctance as if it were deliberately holding back.

Poem IV. Now the lover *just missed and remembered* (Poem II) is one scarcely known, yet... *thin eggshells roll together in my fist*. There is something thinly veiled from us. Like eggshells in our fist, we may break through at any moment.

What makes spring revolutionary is that we rediscover what we've known all along, yet as something totally new, surprising us from the unconscious earth (which, as seed, we entered in Poem III). We are now no longer in seed stage – *out of the window/i look at daffodils, crocus,/and snow-on-the-mountain*. In these flowers of early spring we already see blooming some hint of that knowledge still held in its thin shell.

The egg, its golden yoke just within, may be crushed if I grab too hard at what is just at the edge of my grasp. I must open my hand. I do it *in the pit of my stomach*.

When something, some recognition is about to break in, I have butterflies. My stomach jumps. Especially if it is something I have known all along, but hidden from myself. There is a sense of unexpected familiarity, a sense that, just beneath the threshold of consciousness, we do know this one: *where have we been meeting/that you haven't been telling me about?* (How else could the meeting be so...familiar, except that we've met somewhere before?)

Poem V. Now we *know*, without question, that something's coming, something's happening. The clues contemplated in the tension of Poem IV give way to a paean of praise to the joyful anticipation felt when the knowledge breaks through and we know what we're looking forward to – it's a celebration of anticipation, this longing, this revolution about to break over us. Ordinary words are no longer enough to express the exquisite anticipation – we want new adjectives, old words in new uses to express the delight of that moment.

Poem VI. Breaking through, life emerges (the seedpod now broken open, left empty behind – life escaped, gone on): *a slight wind stirs an empty seedpod/on the ground below bare*

branches. The branches are not yet in full leaf of summer, but the buds are out – you crawl out the ends of branches/in sticky yellow buds.

I speak again to spring and to my human love in one breath. She joins me in the figure of another spring flower, blue-eyed Mary; we *ben(d) crying/poking our heads out of the earth –/young, sun-diving/seedlings sent weakly/throughout the spring/into the high/ laugh-a-daisy sky.*

Perhaps there cannot help but be some sadness in this (as was hinted in Poem III), but the tears may be more of relief and release. Somehow these tears do not seem out of place, no more than those a young child may cry who may turn to run after others in play the next moment. The weakness of young children (to whom we say "up's-a-daisy" as we swing them up, just as the sky may be felt to bring the young plants up from the earth) is evident in this poem; these seedlings need strength gained over a summer's growth.

Perhaps we suffer in plunging out of the ground with those weak flowers of early spring, diving into miles of sky. We may feel sad, too, when we see the empty seedpod that once enclosed us, now abandoned. It is a loss to tear away the casing and we would not be human if we did not love the one we once were as much as we love the one we go toward. But now birth is accomplished; we cannot go back – the young plants sway in light wind.

Poem VII. These experiences, turning to look back at the moment a revolution is happening to us, are like asking unanswerable questions. And yet the moment itself pauses when we ask such a question. It answers, but by the time we hear the answer, translated within us into so many words, it can never have the poignancy that the moment alone can bring to the answer.

So we ask – how can you be so unpredictable? And the unpredictable moment of life answers with itself.

Spring's greatest surprise – that it does exactly what it "said" it would do (renew life, sweep through us with its revolution, reveal the resurrection) – lies in its simplest acts.

In the same way, Christ became unpredictable to the Roman mind: "this thing is simply ridiculous! simple-minded wish-fulfillment!" The traders on Wall Street laugh derisively. Corporate executives snort. Sad-faced therapists, apologists for the conventional order, seek an adjustment of attitude. But in the incredible moment itself, *a blackbird flies the*

uncounted pages/of the sky – /in a curved sky, it/cries out loud/cutting the throat of an immense day.

This poem also asks how we may become unpredictable. Perhaps this should be taken in the same vein as Don Juan's advice to Carlos Castenada, that one must not become predictable or one courts death (but not the death we are speaking of, which leads on to new life; rather, that of the "living dead"). And the answer is given: *by doing exactly what you said*. You are unpredictable when you do what you said you would do. This paradox needs silence, not explanation.

Poem VIII. The crow of Poem VII having slit the day with its cry (this emergence does not happen without some cutting, some breaking open [the seed], some pain), we now glimpse *the continuity beneath*. The white clouds part, *the sliver of empty sky/(open)/thin as paper/interrupts white clouds*, and eventually (*the wind pulls the sky apart*) the bits of blue agglomerate, form patterns; they are *like a woman with a long, blue-flowered skirt*.

The continuity is "betrayed" beneath (why betrayal? ask Judas – he "betrayed" Christ by showing who He really was). What is so "betrayed" is in one sense the fullness of life – the beauty of a woman's body glimpsed beneath her clothes either directly – *like a girl/her dress undone* – or indirectly, in her breathing – *her dress/rises and falls/her nature/is to breathe*. The girl with dress undone is the bride of Poem I, taking off her dress – and the loved one addressed throughout the poems.

There is also an emptiness beneath, but it is the emptiness of Buddhist meditation or of the Tao – the emptiness of a thing being completely itself.

*The Tao is like an empty bowl
yet it may be used without ever needing to be filled
...
the space between heaven and earth is like a bellows
it is empty, yet never exhausted
...
20 spokes connect to the wheel's hub
yet it is the central hole that makes it useful;
clay is shaped into a vessel
yet it is the emptiness within that makes it useful*

Meditation begins as an exercise of the breath, breath is life, the spirit is *inspiration*, from the breath of God the lump of clay is animated. Breath, being aware of the breath, is also a path to consciousness. In this poem, connections between spring and breath (consciousness) begin to be explored. It is the wind (breath) that pulls the sky apart, undoing the dress (even preparing the bride for her wedding night), and the poem ends with a simple contemplation of her breath – not in abstract, but in the living fullness of her breasts rising and falling beneath her dress.

Poem IX. The flow of the Tao, which is *also* the fall of dying blossoms, a continuing revolution, a living river, can be found in the breath. The rising and falling of this breath can be seen anywhere – a windblown sky, or *the lungs of spring (that) open all along the curve of branch above the sculptor's door.*

In this poem, breath fills the lungs, opens them to new life as does a baby's first breath. And what are the lungs of spring? The blossoms.

A branch bursting into blossom is like a mouth taking a deep breath. This happens overnight (after so long a wait, the revolution takes no more than an instant). The words in this poem cascade quickly (like a stream), like the many blossoms opening suddenly – reading it aloud, you scarcely pause; hardly time for a breath. (A meeting with the Thou – may it not leave us breathless?)

The breath *leaps from slender twigs, shoots into thin sapling limbs* – breath builds the body of life, it becomes branches of plants and limbs of creatures. This *deep breath blossoms...into one thousand breaths* – here again, the *one* and the ten thousand things are brought together, the mystery and the manifestation one – *all filling my chest at once.*

Why "above the sculptor's door?" I had a writing studio once, next door to the studio of Joseph Query, a gentle, powerful man who sculpted in marble and clay. He taught, in his art, his person, and directly, an obedience to the work itself. I remember him describing with surprisingly fierce passion that he had to "get Joe out of the way" to work. It was the branch above his door that blossomed, giving me this poem.

But we may ask the poem for a less private meaning, and in the sculptor the image of God or Tao (the "uncarved block" – perhaps *this* sculptor works by "not-sculpting").

*Who else can be still
and let the water slowly clear?*

Poem X. In this poem we both return to the imagery that opened the series and, as well, the imagery of the *Song of Longing*, which stands over against the *Ten Poems of Spring*. This poem is thus a bridge between the *Ten Poems* and the *Song*.

White blossoms again cover the one tree of the orchard, and again fall (and in this movement from Poem I to X, we may see spring returning, the timeless movement of the seasons, the wheel of life revolving. The branches are *overladen with whiteness*; in Poem I they were *suspended* – the insight that was suspended (as a young fruit) when we began the series is now ripened and ready to fall (branches laden, overladen, bend their heavy burden toward the ground that longs to receive their soft curves on its face).

This time the white blossoms are compared to a *dialectic of moths* – white moths fluttering groundward. A dialectic is a process that goes on with no end in time, as the cycles of ecology do, and the returning seasons. Hegelian dialectics perhaps overwhelm the image with a sense of abstraction, but actually the dialectic intended is very concrete; it is expressed in the *Tao Te Ching*:

*all under heaven see beauty as beauty
only because they also see ugliness*

In the Tao, the way (which is a *flow*), particular things and their opposites arise together. Dialectical logic teaches us that as they are reconciled a new "thesis" is created, attracting some new opposite ("antithesis"), and the reconciliation to follow ("synthesis") will recreate the process again and again, "world without end." This rhythm is very natural, even calming to observe – it is the ongoing flow of life in which what arises falls back again into the ongoing flow (but never without the arising of something new, to fall back in its *turn*).

Here we confront again the mystery of the one and the many. What arises – particular being, the ten thousand things – is not of less value than the *one*, the ongoing flow of life and being. Indeed, without the continual arising of particular being, the flow of being could not exist. It is an interdependent, co-creative relationship, one that cannot be reduced to one term or the other.

I ask, in this ongoing flow of being, *let my words be the words of stones/rushing in the river's mouth*. What are the words of stones? Stones are the hard objects over which the water falls, making noise. Without them, the river would have no voice. Let the flow of being pour over me and let me give it voice. (Here again, see how particular being, and that greater being for which we continually propose inadequate names, need one another; the

words, the expression that is life itself, needs both the flowing water *and* the stones over which it falls.)

This flow is of course life, death and life, inseparable. We return to the necessity of death – accepted, understood as Whitman did:

*Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.*

*Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
for life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love – but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*

*Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come
unflinchingly*

*Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing
the dead
Lost in loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.*

Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

At the moment of death the breath becomes labored, but more than that, labor itself (our "work" in daily life – what we insist on reducing to "our jobs") is both a kind of breathing (for humankind) and yet, too often, a *labored breathing*, an act by which we slowly collect death, our body and soul collecting more stress, tension, and eventually dying in some sort of tetanus. I ask (we may only ask for these things; if we "do" them we undertake an ego project and lose the whole) to relax more fluidly into the river's flow, *let my muscles collect death the way the water falls: carriage of opened stones*. The water carries in its music what the hard stones gave it – we, stones, opening ourselves to the passing flow find our

meaning not in what we may keep, but in what we allow this water to carry away from us, the voice (our voice) that it would not otherwise have.

What does it mean that I am one of these stones over which this water pours? It means, for one thing, that I am worn away, that time is given in its passage (as well as voice – my own! and also its voice to too). And the passage of time, flowing on, carries me away a grain at a time. And that this is very meaningful; no less than the "meaning of life" is given, standing in this flow and being "carried away."

River, breath, or blossoms falling, this is a true dialectic that fluidly finds and joins with its opposites. There is a danger of saying too much about the imagery; God and creatures are joined in this stream, *God dies in little fish/frailing upstream*. And we men? *We crouch naked in (our) wishes/as an eggshell in the mist*.

Now the thin eggshell rolled in the fist in Poem IV has grown to our entire being. (Ah! This seems the proper dimension.) *We live* this "something thinly veiled from us." And if we break through, it will be *into ourselves*. We, ourselves, are the mystery that we turned over in our hands, wondering, pondering, afraid to break the fragile shell. And yet, how little is truly concealed! We are as transparent, as *naked in (our) wishes/as an eggshell in the mist*. What could be more bare, more naked than an eggshell, outdoors, in the misting rain? (But a mist remains around us, we still see through trailing fog which now discloses, now covers.)

Nevertheless, it is we, us, ourselves, whose particular stony being gives voice in the river's mouth. We return again to Poem I – *how important you are* – and gather into the compass of the definition of who we are some of the particular beings who entered in the intervening poems: *blackbird, blossom, /snow-on-the-mountain*. This is an inclusive club; we find we are members of the set of all being.

Next, the poem pays attention to the difference between the *words of stones, rushing in the river's mouth* and what is so often passed from mouth to mouth among us. Human language stands interposed between our souls and what we address; it conceals as much as it reveals. Philosophers such as Wittgenstein tell us how important it is not to assume that we know what we mean (or what another means) just because we know the words, the language. However, *this river's language undoes the gate of words*.

Revolution is a *new Word*. The new Word is most profoundly experienced in the West as the Word of Christ. Jesus came with a New Word, a New Testament, a New Covenant. The

new Word was of course *love*, which is the Word brought by spring and the one explored by these poems. Spring opens that Word – one that's too familiar to be as new as it really is. Spring incarnates something that cannot help but make us think that, hope against all hope, something is blossoming on that cross of dead grey wood.

But now we take one of the most extraordinary leaps in these poems – this river, the flow of being over our stony shoulders which give it voice, undoes these problems of language as *love the single gate of death*. Love opens death in the same manner that this river opens language. The water opened voices out of stones and gave meaning a way into the world – a meaning we participate in by giving ourselves to the flow, to open its mouth (and in so doing, to be carried a grain at a time away). So love opens that dreaded gate, death. We deeply fear death, seeing it as *the* ("single") gate, a gate beyond which we may not see, and which could open onto something unspeakably awful. (And no doubt it does lead to the unspeakably awe-full.)

Love undoes the one gate in the same way by which spring leaps toward life: death. (Love undoes death's gate through death?? Another paradox that needs a great deal of silence.) What is revolutionary is that the new word, this "love" undoes the gate of death surprisingly easy – by accepting it.

Love opens that gate, Christ opened it, spring's revolution is nothing less than a continually repeated demonstration that it hangs open to a meaning that lies in the flow of which we are already, inescapably, a part. Love opens the single gate of death in a way that is beyond words, so I cannot say more about it here. We have, in our Western tradition, said such things before as "now, oh death, where is your sting?" but rarely are we able to feel the truth of it.

However, when we do feel it, it is as if we received some unexpected pardon, a forgiveness for some wrong that feels indefinably deep (perhaps this is original sin? after all, "sin" is very common Teutonic, from the present participle of the root *es*, *to be*.) And so to spring I say, *i love you/and your gentle way of forgiving*. And I say this to my human love as well, because this same act stands between we humans every day.

Spring, both timeless, so ancient in its return that it is beyond age, and at the same time a new event, unprecedented on the face of the earth, astounds and brings tears for its daring and gentle attainment of a forgiveness and a renewal that lies beyond conception. Spring is a mercy no one dare hope for.

A Song of Longing

Over against the *Ten Short Poems of Spring* stands *A Song of Longing* – why longing? Is there perhaps something in the coming of spring that reminds us – "springs to life" within us – of what we may never possess, but may forever participate in, something for which we long?

Are longing and revolution somehow connected? "Revolution" derives from the latin *volvere*, to roll.² The word originates in the shape of early books, which were of parchment rolled on two sticks. The word "volume" derives from the same root, and contains an echo of the physical act of unrolling from which it sprang.

A revolution is, then, the turning of a volume on its scroll. This is an act intimately connected with revelation – at each turn, the scroll reveals what had been concealed before. And of course what is revealed is the New Word.

"Longing," as Gil Bailie pointed out, is different from desire. Desire reaches for what is proximate and seeks to possess it. Desire is the ego's ever-unsated attempt to incorporate the world (the *It* world) into itself. Longing speaks the eternal *Thou*, it shoots beyond itself, leaping for what it could never consume, but may join (though not losing itself in the process). Longing knows the deepest meaning of life in the living of it.

Deep longing confronts us in the rhythms of spring. The word's root connects with the sense of "long" given in the word "slow." Desire demands instant gratification, but one *longs* for what seems *long* in coming. Spring brings what we longed for as winter dragged its feet.

The root of "longing" also connects with the verb form "length" and via Old High German and Old English to *lenten*, the season when the days grow longer. And of course the growing longer is the rhythm of return, one of the two primary meanings embedded in the revolution of spring. Accordingly to Shipley, *lenten* was originally an English noun, meaning spring.

²This and other word derivations given in this essay are taken from Joseph Shipley, *Dictionary of Word Origins*.

Lent, as we know, is the period of austerity before Easter during which we give up (much as the winter earth gives up) our trappings and ornamentation, a period of penance and purification, a time when what is *soiled* in us may be cleansed and what is decayed may transform, hidden away under the fallow, bare ground, to burst forth in renewed life. (These processes are very natural, very "eco-logical.") Lent is life's meditation on simplicity and indulgence, stripping away the unnecessary, going back to the soil, leading through death, unearthing redemption and resurrection, and happening³ thereby upon something truly revolutionary.

From the same root, Shipley leads us to "lenient" and notes that people are *lenient* who take *long* to collect what they have *lent*. *Longing* thus connects something lent with the leniency of One who waits for us to return what He has lent, at the time of year when days grow longer and we prepare (during Lent) for the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Something else important comes home when we remember that the first parchment was made of the membrane of the uterus. This meaning too lies hidden in the word; Shipley traces it from "scroll" through Old English and Old French to a Latin root *scrobis*, trench, "thence membrane of the uterus, used in making parchment."

The revolution, the volume which turns, is in turn the womb itself! Here we have the Word written on that which held us before anything else did on earth – the womb – which is also that without which spring simply could not exist, the *sine qua non* for life's renewal. Such a Word cannot be a word that *possesses* meaning, but a Word which can only point beyond itself to a meaning we can only go out to in the moment of meeting (the meeting Martin Buber pointed to in *I and Thou*). There is something very pregnant in the Word written on the matrix of life itself.

Spring is fertility, pregnancy, life come forth from the womb, springing from the life-giver (and what about this word "springing?" It means to leap, but when we use it of plants we think of shoots coming up from an underground root stock, returning from what was ever there, waiting in the dark, warm, wet earth.)

And does not our longing leap thus as well – toward that which, ever new but always there, lies beyond our power to "take hold of?" And so is "revolutionary" whenever we meet it? Is it not this power it has of being revolutionary (revelatory, as we see from the root of the word) that draws our longing?

³"Happiness," Baillie has pointed out, is "what happens" and "success" merely "the next thing the happens."

As Buber says, we gather ourselves, we go out to the meeting, but what happens there is neither an experience we may possess nor form nor content nor any other thing, but an the inexpressible confirmation of *meaning*. It can never be less than totally new and yet we recognize it – we have known it before, we will *turn* to it again.

This leaping longing with which we may not "do" anything is the motion of the Tao; the Tao is the way that cannot be "done:"

The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao.

The name that cannot be named is not the eternal name.

The sixth verse of the *Tao Te Ching* speaks of the Valley Spirit, which is of course the valley of the Mother, the lovely valley of the legs that lead to the lap from which you "may take all you wish; it will never run dry" – the membrane of uterus from which life, the Tao, the way, all spring: revolution that "turns over" the established order each spring.

With this introductory discussion, we are nearly ready to look at the *Song* itself, but first a note on structure is needed. This poem is actually three poems, interlaced, which may be read as presented (integrated, the three poems cascading together as a river does, comingling all its waters), or the three may be separated and read independently (three-in-one, a trinity – small poetic homage given in structure to the *one* which is many).

The structure indicates which poem is which. The "first poem" is the series of long, three-line stanzas furthest to the left-hand margin. The "second poem" is indented once from the left and has short lines, usually in three or four-line stanzas. The "third poem" is indented once more and is printed in italics with short, six-line stanzas (except the last, which is four lines). In the discussion which follows, I may seem to skip ahead sometimes, but actually am just following the development in one or another of these component poems.

The *Song* is prefaced by a stanza from the culminating Canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where he is brought into the presence of God, Eternal Love and confesses what he sees. Here again are the one and the many –

*In that abyss I saw how love held bound
into one volume all the leaves whose flight
is scattered through the universe around.*

Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto 33:85-87

[check actual Italian for volume]

The Italian actually uses the word ---, meaning "volume!" The revolving scroll was not the latest thing in books in Dante's day (the image would not make sense were "scroll" intended), but I think he would be comfortable with the deeper meaning of revolution we are exploring here shining through that image in his poem.

The *Song* opens by gathering in one verse the three primary images developed to express the revolution of spring: the *water scrolling over stones*; the *volume of branches bound in white*; and the longing expressed as *an arrow springing toward your wordless bones* – wordless, because beyond the power of speech. (Note, the water "scrolls," and, echoing Dante, the branches are a "volume" "bound.")

Spring is a branch broken from the flowering tree and strung to be the very bow of longing. And if we participate, drawn and waiting, all taut and intent on naught but the longing, the face to face confrontation we've sought will come springing *from* us at the moment the bullseye releases the arrow.

*I am a bow in your hands, Lord
draw me lest I rot.
Do not overdraw me, Lord. I shall
break.
Overdraw me, Lord, and who cares
if I break!*

We, bow, release the arrow of longing – and it is not in the arrow striking its target, but in the act of releasing it that the longed-for fulfillment comes. We must now explore this final primary image – the bow. The *Song* says, *this love leaps/with the flex/of a longbow/strung to knowing*. That it is a "longbow" emphasizes its function in the service of longing. That it is *strung to knowing* is a way of saying that our longing seeks to know that One for whom it aims – although this longing leaps toward a "cloud of unknowing."

But what of the bow itself? Shipley finds the Old English roots of this word in "bough," taken from the physical metaphor of the human shoulder, the curve from neck to elbow. It was the image of this curve that was borrowed when a word was wanted for that stringed weapon made of bent wood (it is delightful that it is this selfsame curve we stretch when we bend a bow).

Here the words and their origins conjoin in a conjunction of meaning for this poem that is truly amazing. The bough is the one laden with white blossoms. Whether taken from the model our own bodies provide or in a metaphorical sense, the bow bent is none other than ourselves – both in origin and in present meaning: *the bow is a curve bent upon longing/the bough taken from the human shoulder/ the curve from neck to elbow.*

Pause to consider that there is a second Old English root of "bow" – it meant anything bent (think of the curve by which the revolution comes around). In physics, one can plot the moment a curve turns by accounting for "vectors" of force. This poem tells us that *the curve turns at the lenient season/Lenten, when the days grow longer.* The discussion above should by now have made clear the meaning. This is spring, the season when *the bow (bough) bends, the limbs bear their white blossoms.* We find ourselves blossoming. And we bend *ourselves* as bow to send our longing springing toward *the goal shot beyond desire/who takes long to come for what's lent* (again, the exegesis for these images is given in the introductory discussion to the *Song* given above).

Now let us go back and pick up the second verse of the "second poem" (indented once) – the poem tells us that the bow and the "water over stones" of Poem X are one and the same: *it is the living river/that spills/in laughter/from your mouth.* How can we not think that we're meant to enter this flow when we find the very bow itself was taken from our bodies? The "third poem" picks up the echo, the living river *freeing* the voices of we stones in *falling* over us: *(stone year calling)/living river/now whenever/budding branches/shed to bear.*

There may be a few puzzles in that last verse. First, why "stone year?" (Later, in the next verse of the "third poem," this same image is repeated as *stone year wearing.*) Why? Because time itself is in this river – indeed this river *is* time, in its passing flow. (Time is nothing but sequence and requires motion for its measurement – basic physics. Without this living river's flow we would lack any benchmark to know time or *be* in time.)

A second note: "shed to bear." This image only points again to the need for the blossoms to pass away ("shed") in order for the tree to bear fruit – the need for death so that deeper life may come.

We now must go back, again, and collect the first verse of the "third poem." This one stands as a little counterpart to the two verses that introduce the *Song*, a little "snapshot" of what's going on. And what is going on? The dance of being. The "Wu Li" master is *dancing, rising* (toward God?).

Wu Li is a Taoist concept, meaning the way of "nonaction" that is a stepping into the Tao; this is action that follows the grain of wood or flows with the current (and we're back to the "living river").

Non-action does not mean doing nothing and keeping silent. Let everything be allowed to do what it naturally does, so that its nature will be satisfied.

Chuang-tzu

Let each thing be itself (step into the river); life with Life at one. This cry of longing is not one of loss or alienation, but of *belonging*. It *springs from/the bent bow* (ourselves, when we consciously enter this river, take our place on the blossoming branch, bend our longing toward the One). And with it, the Wu Li master *leap(s) higher/now than ever/lifting, scenting/ Gethsemane*. With this leap we lift up what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane and bear it toward God, and we are at the same moment fragrant blossoms "scenting" that Garden.

The middle verses of the *Song* return to image of the "living river" and stay with it until we have *overthrow(n) Leviathan*. Leviathan, among other connotations, was the title of Hobbes' famous work in which he contended that life is "nasty, brutish, and short." Here we have an answer for Hobbes. Leviathan is also the Great Whale, the creature of the deep (the ocean of the unconscious), and one way to speak of the opponent of God. The "watercourse way" (Wu Li, spring, the revolution) is what overthrows this beast.

[check Leviathan]

The fourth and fifth verses of the "second poem," the fifth verse of the "first poem" and the third verse of the "third poem" are all concerned with exploring just how the flow of being (the water) makes a music, finds a language in we stones, and how the years themselves open out of this flow (the years themselves are *like boulders*, they play the same function as we stones, they too provide a structure through which the flow of being may vibrate vocal chords and tell its story into creation).

the river drops its
round vowels
over stone shoulders

its consonants click with tongue and teeth it lacks
without rocks that clack and shatter water into sounds
that bound down lap to lap of years like boulders

wearing voices into them
like curves in stones –
the bones
that make a music
of the passing flow

*pouring, paring
stone year wearing
water carving
petals parting
the grain that's in
the year to be*

spinning down the manifold world's man-old sins
bent with joyful intent on prolonging
the headlong descent that is *to be*

the years put on the water's clothing
rocky throats betrothing
its bare breath expressed
when

in its waterway
(it goes)

overthrowing Leviathan

*pooling, clearing
sons and daughters
drops of water
collecting there
at the bottom
unread volume*

This continuing revolution flows on, pours over years like boulders. The boulders, you'd think are only obstacles that the river must negotiate. But they are what give the river its voice, its music, its tongue, and its language. For only in falling over them can the water

shout aloud the sound of its passing. So it is with us – we stand in the midst of a fast-flowing stream and find not so much that we *have* a language as that we *become a language* in its pouring over us. It crashes over our stony shoulders and over the bones of our years and we find that we, after all, have been making music.

Following the Wu Li, we see that this water "carves" us, and in so doing it *part(s)/the grain that's in/the year to be*. And of course, "to be" is what the *Song* is all about (and these grains are those parts of ourselves, carried one at a time away, as we give ourselves to the flow, until at last we've given so much – willingly or not, it doesn't matter – that we...simply "are not" any more, the blossoms lie on the ground, death, the grains of sand flow to ocean beach and ocean bottom, in the great cycles of tectonic plates to be subsumed, made into rock, pushed up again – eventually to be broken off, finding their way into new rivers...).

If we truly give ourselves to this flow, we find, *spinning down the manifold world's man-old⁴ sins*, that we have no other purpose than to prolong the joyful, *headlong descent that is to be* (remember what sin is – to be).

And now, at the end of fourth verse of the "third poem," the hint enters that something is collecting, pooling, the bucket next up on the waterwheel is filling – *at the bottom/unread volume*. That volume soon will be read, its *leaves...scattered through the universe around*. The bucket filling, downward pushing, turns the wheel; its water splashing back into the river down which it flows, again the resting moment of death giving way to new life running ever onward.

Only a summing up remains. The final four verses of the *Song* can be read within the context of all we have said. *Arrow, laugh, and river leaping only turn/(with the season) the revolution of your dying/like a volume on a scroll* – the scroll turns, the revolution that is spring comes round again. The back arches in the climax of love-making, new life enters the womb, *the arching first parchment*. Spring's "revolution of...dying," is written on parchment made of the womb itself, that which holds new life until it's ready to be born, whose membrane is *the membrane of the universe*. The entire universe is gathered in this volume, the birth-giving revolution; nothing here but what has been held in that womb, written on that volume.

⁴ShIPLEY tells us that "the world seems very old"; for human concerns it is at least man-old; from Old High German, *wer*, man and Anglo Saxon *ald*, *eald*, old.

Whether we understand it through the arrow of longing, or laughing river, the bucket on the waterwheel fills, *spring turns over/the unmoved mover/in one motion, revolution.*