

Book of Dreams

Soul House

(1964-2000)

I

it began at 10, finding rooms
to which no doorway led
from that house of decay and disintegration
to that parlor furnished with two flowered,
over-stuffed armchairs effusing warmth and comfort,
that garden in an unmown backyard
its stagnant pool now refreshed;
no one in evidence, but those two chairs
like overweight aunts, waiting.
down the gully, filled with gigantic tropical plants
overleafing a blackberry jungle,
the thoughts of God,
we trekked to that pastel house of light and air,
me, my brother, and my sister.

II

it was in fifth grade, we lived
in that filthy, rat-infested rental,
wallpaper peeling in layers,
holes in the floor beside my bed,
frightening disintegration
that returned in its bones, in dreams
where rooms, corridors, entire floors
long unvisited, forgotten, dank
where in the dirt-floored understairs
a mummy drag-legged toward me.

III

in that ivy-overgrown gully
around another stagnant lake
my brother and I found
a fleet of handmade wooden hydroplanes;
bellied down on a rotten dock,
fishing them out.

IV

in many years after that, I found
my way into rooms hidden behind the walls
where bare mattresses were stripped of sheets,
long unused rooms floored in bare wood –
dark halls and windowless rooms, unoccupied,
fallen into disrepair, left, deserted,
packed up and abandoned.
later, unused spaces, corridors, attics, wings
forgotten, began to be filled
with rich furniture and art,
unimaginably beautiful
but always space beyond space,
room at last and more.
they were sometimes unexpectedly
being remodeled, walls separating small rooms
torn out, new windows facing on sunlit patios
wood paneling, sometimes
a presence there which though I am afraid
to encounter, I never do.

V

With each visit, a memory trace builds.
Accessible only in dream, so that, redreaming,
even years later, I remember having been here before,
what these rooms once looked like
and where the secret life of the soul is lived
visible to no one else, a history known by no one else;
while as the condition of the soul recovers
so the condition of these rooms and buildings improves.

During one difficult time, the soul house twisted
in complex ways; floors warped up
from the story below like an Escher print
so that walking on the ground floor
suddenly translocated onto the second floor.
Non-logical connections – things relied on
that are not timeless and unchanging.
Things change as we use them.

VI

then one year, a round house set exactly on my childhood
home, the old family home,
a homecoming bringing me back

to air, light, warmth, and space.
a young man, newly married, beginning his career,
has his dream house under construction,
places it square on the center of his personal history,
the home where he grew up –
centered in the safest, strongest place;
huge, open, made of natural wood, a place to breathe –
a round home that brings nature within,
giant rocks, a stream flows through.
the place where my grandfather grew up
where his parents made their life,
the place to which we always promised ourselves
we would come home;

the construction is well along but not finished.
my mother and sister move back in while we finish it
and Gramp drops by to see how the remodeling
is going, hearty, taking his old interest
looking critically like a crow cocking his head on one side,
his bright eye examining, advising –
what could be done better, for example,
for example, protect the furniture we have left sitting out
on the porch, exposed to rain (a fine green velvet couch).

Grandma's Warning

Two Dreams, 1965-1989

don't put out the light!
Grandma formidable,
every fiber
moral, tense, imperative –
me reaching for the bedside lamp.
5th Grade, petrified,
 she saw mortal peril.

And so, at a time when I might have
put out my light,
she stopped me. And 25 years later,
deep in shame,
feeling no right to life,

I dreamt of a ferry crossing,
the return trip
absolutely black
city lights left behind
 I look below,
the bottom close enough to see
suddenly drops to unfathomable
depths.

We move out over the deeps.
I cling to the canvas side
of the boat.
It tips under my weight.
I start to go under water.
Over the loudspeaker, the Captain's
voice instructs us
to put out our lights.

I have a dim yellow light.
I do not put it out.

A Kindly Old Woman Like A Mouse

1974

I dreamed of an old lady like a mouse,
a kindly, warm old woman
under her city-roughened exterior.
She went to the front of the bus
and stood, putting on a small act
of tired, helpless, sick old age
to show me how uncaring
city people could be,
pushing past her.
After she was shoved aside a few times
she came back and sat with me
and I put my arm around her tight.

We arrived in the city over a bridge –
the entire lake frozen over
with people in red and gold
skating on it, and Christmas music.
The bus was nearly empty, and stopped
while snow fell
and two lieutenants argued politics.
The ruby trays I had not delivered
could wait for another day –
by the time I'd packed in the tea sets
and other paraphernalia,
there was no room for the message.

Desiderata

1974

I entered my friend's strange, hidden apartment in the dead city through my grandparents' garden; it was blooming in rapturous gladiolas, the eternal delight of peonies.

We were then in our second year of college; young men unfamiliar with the dyspeptic history of old drunks who had expired in these rooms, their years passing heedless as the sweatshirts we dropped on their decrepit floors.

Letting myself in to wait for him, the light was thick and pale yellow, fading to streaks of cello black that overcame the edge of sunset flattening the windowpanes. His farrago apartment high in the tenement overlooks square miles of the disabled city machine ground to a halt in its old grease.

The hovering sun seemed about to set for the last time, throwing its flat light over an apartment furnished in emptiness: 1950's refrigerator and stove in their white pallor, dinette set rejected and worn out, ready for the final ride to the dump where, *no one watching*, their slowly slumping frames fall piece by piece apart, disintegrating over long intervals in small thumps.

My old friend came home and began fixing dinner – boxed Kraft Macaroni and Cheese – banging his sad collection of Goodwill dishes and utensils. Talking as he cooks, he points to a decal pasted on his refrigerator by officials to mark some initiation, some hellish ritual that now marks him and his place.

Though he's scraped most of the decal off and I hadn't noticed it before, I find I can still read much more of it than actually remains – words that cannot be effaced from the refrigerator door.

His superior officer shows up, a lieutenant whose bulbous features distort a waxen, calculating face – a face capable of twinkling while manipulating the intricate agonies of torture. He stands around saying little, pallid, all-too-human, his pocked face slowly coloring to match his magenta uniform.

I return my attention to the decal. The more I try to read it, the more I find I can read. It is a Desiderata, a creed or code, a mummy-script through which flicker the hideous members of this sect, morphing from animistic toad to supernatural witch to human criminal – perversions that run through us like wild packs of dogs, distilled from the sordid common life.

Things Change as We Use Them

1974

the floors warp up, suddenly
we're walking along on the second story
– M.C. Escher understood this,
but how confusing in daily life
to find ourselves having moved
from level to level
through transformations
emerging out of repeated ordinary acts
that make what is
of what was not.

Wednesday Night Dream

April 21, 1977

where does that ladder lead
once solid, now rickety
that I have hidden
in a pile of scrap wood
so that no one will find it
and take it
while I sit in the inn
eating lunch with my brother and sister,
and which is now catching fire
from the trash burning nearby?
what is it that I am no longer using
but still protect?
where have I stopped ascending
that hibernates in those rungs?
what precision of mind and foot
burns now on the trash pile?

Something's Stopped

June 15, 1979

Something is stopped. Frozen. Timeless.
There the same background music plays forever.
There I am forever holding out my hand
to her, holding out my life.
There she is hurting, and comfort is arrested.
Last night I saw her there and so today is frozen,
suspended, timeless. Today
overwhelmed by waste, is transplanted
to the inside of a crystal ball, where it will
remain unchanged for all time.

A music runs through my head,
the final notes of which I can't recall.
Things are unfinished. Last night
I saw her kneeling, worn out from pain,
forced to run and rerun a cruel obstacle course.
We talked quietly of her childhood,
how she was once so badly injured
that she was forced to wear a body cast –
head, neck, arms, legs and trunk immobilized.
She told me what she did to cope.

I ran her torturers through her obstacle course of pain
until they died – then thousands more.
Why did I feel no remorse?

Now the stillness of that broken relationship
outshouts every sound the day can produce.
Cut off, brought up abruptly, stopped short,
it stops all motion in the world.
Why does this motionlessness possess me so?
Incomplete, unsatisfied, partial – a loss.

If I could break that crystal open
the mists within would dissipate; they seem
to form solids, bodies; they seem substantial.
If the crystal protection were removed,
they would dissolve in the world.
We would all shake our heads.

The crystal enlarges; I see her sitting there.
She is listening for me. She expects me

to say something. I shout.
She is waiting for me to make the motion
that begins the world again,
starts the film rolling, ends the flashback
and returns us to the present.

Are you in the movie house with me? Did you
think she was waiting too? She is not waiting.
She is living another life; she is in Minnesota.
What is it that stopped there then?
She never lived there.

House Afire

August 7, 1981

Snow covers the ground on a bright, clear day.
Friends drive out, but they do not stay –
couples who have each other, better things to do.
Around me, all is white, sterile, unmarried.

Two women accompany me to a house
where many people are gathered.
The small guest house nearby is on fire.
We bring out a hose. A room or two
in the larger house are to be on fire too.
There is no point to trying to save the smaller house,
it is engulfed in flame from within.

The women go upstairs to the rooms on fire
in the big house. A ladder leads up to their windows.
The fire in the smaller house persists in springing up.
I keep spraying it down, though I'm told
this is a waste of effort. I fight it alone.
The fire's consuming potency scares me.
I pour on water, it dies down, then comes back.
The women who went upstairs want me
to pass them the hose up the ladder
and through the window. Angry at being left alone,
I go into the smaller house. This is stupid, dangerous.
I can see the fire through cracks in the floorboards
burning the rooms below. Fire permeates the house.
Spraying the floor, it dies down temporarily.

Looking around at the damage, I am amazed:
the fire has danced over these floors and walls
without charring them.
Coming out of the small house, I coil up the hose.
All the people in the big house have made friends
and are leaving together. Someone has dented
my truck. It is hopeless to try to keep anything nice.
I put the nozzle of the hose in my pocket to take home.

Book of Dreams

September 6, 1981

opening the oversized old blackbound journal –
a dream, 17 years ago
I read with growing desperation –
going down into the earth, searching,
something missing, lost or taken, running
through subterranean rooms, corridors – escaping –
on all sides refugees with their baggage,
human refuse, directionless, castaways seeking nothing.
and again last night, the same dream
but this time I recognize them, parts of myself
fallen into deep hibernation, needing to be brought to life,
sitting, vacant, in bus or train terminals,
waiting through the night, in abject poverty,
open-mouthed, defeated, numb,
unable to rouse themselves – awaiting just such energy
as that with which I now flee through headlong

Gramp Talking to Gram

February 14, 1982

He carries on both halves
of the conversation.

He misses her.

He needs to talk.

In the kitchen at breakfast, he kneels
to take pots out of the cupboard.

Ferry Crossings

February 17, 1982

Ferries cross and recross
the Sound. Where they dock,
a gap
must be
leapt or swum
between boat and shore –
it's walk on water
or wait for help.
Nodal patterns cancel
at wave fronts.
The gangway slides,
perilous
back and forth. A deft leap,
I'm off.

My Anima is a Young Girl

February 28, 1982

Perhaps 14; we meet at the public pool.
She wears no top, small breasts
barely beginning to fill out.
Dark hair and eyes – enchanting.
She rolls down her panties
to show me the feather of hair
beginning to cover her small sex.
We pick up towels she stashed behind a rock –
though she's run away from home,
she has enormous wealth at her disposal.
I chase away several men who are following her
round bottom into the field.
There is no thought of sex, although
she remains naked. The field is rocky
with hummocks of bunch grass,
a trail winds through to the wood beyond.
We enter the forest as if along
a long green ramp.
There is a house to the right
with a light and someone's mother.

She is running away and I am helping her
to hide. We go through the lobby
of the large hotel, her father
sitting on a couch. He doesn't understand,
calls her, but returns to reading his newspaper.
Move quickly through legislative offices,
we find the hidden row of back rooms
behind the chambers, where the staff hide.
I show her how false walls
in what appears to be a closet
conceal the entrance. But this is no place for her,
and we move on out into woods
dark and damp. In the middle there is
an experimental school,
large and old but still innovative.
It's late and classes are out
but other activities go on.
She is put to bed. The trail becomes hazy
and is lost the way conscious is lost,
falling asleep. I wander about,
satisfied and relaxed,
looking at the creative work and grade school
notices posted on the walls.

Basketball Ballet

March 3, 1982

Basketball ballet, glorious freedom, effortless
running with the ball, making shot after shot,
half flying, the championship game,
high school friends and athletes,
newer college friends, anticipation high,
the score tied, now playing two on two,
and then just me against two others,
no sidelines, no crowd, no team bench –
not even any baskets or ball:

It all dissolves. We're playing in the living room,
using crumpled-up paper for the ball. To score
on one end, the paper is stuffed
down behind a sofa cushion; on the other,
behind a picture frame.

The court lengthens out again,
this is the championship,
the team plane
waits for me on the runway.

Tidal Wave

March 1982

The tide draws far out – acres of wet mud
exposed, waves lap
a breakwater
that extends far out to sea,
dividing tide flats from open water.

Three girls, one carrying a guitar, walk
out to where the waves break. I see them
getting smaller in the distance, picking their way
across the exposed seafloor toward the far sea.
Someone takes a coracle out to paddle.
People form a line along the mudflats.

Sudden realization floods me – tidal wave!
The first wave huge – 30 feet. Thrilled,
knowing it will not sweep me away –
but there's no hope for the three girls
or the person paddling the coracle. The sea draws
back and a second wave lunges in, as big
as the first. Awestruck in the reverent silence,
the small bits of life side-stepping under the sky.

Now the sea draws back a third time, and ranged
along the line of the undersea valley it exposes
a line of Canadian body surfers
waits. They travel the world looking
for this chance. They're brave, but this is bigger
than anything they've trained for. Still,
they survived the first two. No time
for deliberation. They turn, crouching
like fighters or ballplayers, knees and elbows
bent, hands and faces forward, balanced,
intent, ready to face the next one.

The third wave rides in, dwarfing
the first two. Deafening,
it destroys a blue lighthouse on the far ridge
as if it were a child's model made of
toy building bricks. It is as large as God,
the sky dark and stormy, the wave sweeps
all the way up, filling the valley
in the mudflats to run out at last
in small wavelets at my feet.
There is no sign of the brave Canadians.

After So Many Years, We Talk

April 29, 1982

We talk for hours, there is so much to share.
The disappointments of love.
Your eyes, brown yes but bright and deep as earth;
your red-gold hair over the curve of your shoulders;
your lips as they move – my heart keeps making little starts.
The deep soul-sharing conversation of old friends.
Our marriages have hurt us each.
You are Catholic now, and married to a carpenter.
You have children.
And I, divorcing and childless, say very little
about where I'm going.

I confess my love for you to the dark woman
sitting near me
who immediately turns to you and repeats
everything I said.
The dark woman laughs at me: "you do this
every year or so."

Your translucence, as baffling
and intimate as it was
when I fell in love with you at 15,
sharply contrasts to the obscure woman
I have married, who occludes her depths from me.
Opaque and stone, what she now conceals
will be shortly revealed.
You continue to return to me over decades,
while she will be so utterly forgotten
within 3 years that she will have to remind me
who she is when she calls to apologize too late.

Oh Linda, I want more conversations with you.
Tell me again what it was you said.
Wake me when we're done so that I can remember.

Driving Out a Dark Power

May 2, 1982

A dark shadow-man leaps
 into the Temenos
brandishing a pistol
that is only a child's caps gun.
I knock him to the floor,
subduing him until the police come.
An old black guard
(who should have a real gun)
lends me his, but it's only
a play cowboy gun though
the dark man on the floor
can't see that.

I come home to find a roommate has broken
a cupboard door. He took it down to the basement
to fix, but then couldn't find it – as if he'd gone blind.
In the basement I find tools lying about,
paint, and in a dark corner, the cupboard door.

There's also a table stacked with china dishes,
beautiful, sexy as an Asian woman
who is with me naked. Now is the time
to exhibit extraordinary powers.
Going down on all fours like a dog, eyes flashing,
the growl low in my throat builds to a roar
as I concentrate on lifting and hurling the table
of dishes as far from me as I can.

As the roar cascades to explosion, a large group
of young people partying in a hot tub
at the other end of the basement become frightened and flee.
The Asian woman flees too, though she loves me.
Her younger sister had climbed into the hot tub
with the others; now she too has fled.
Finding her and a few others I reassure them,
bringing them back to see that the basement
is now full of light, with many windows.
Thus, by acting the devil,
evil incarnate, I have driven out a dark power.

Now I befriend the dark shadow-man,
before the police take him off to jail.
He tries to give his calculator, but I don't need it.

Staying Up All Night Turning Out Lights

May 9, 1982

My wife has gone up to bed, making plans to sleep with another man.

Sick of it, I stay downstairs to turn off the lights.

It takes forever to turn them all off; someone has turned on every one. So much energy wasted.

Light is growing outside and I've stayed up all night turning out lights. This is a great loneliness.

Unable to get one light to turn off, I pull its plug, then rush back and forth flipping switches.

The house sinks into darkness with a sigh like the breath of my wife, softly in the face of her new lover.

Irrational Man* Walks Away from the Basketball Court

May 13, 1982

Irrational Man walks away from the basketball court.
We depended on him, but he's drained now
and has nothing left to give.
He crosses his arms above his waist,
covering the hole that has riven his entire midsection.
His shoulders are tied together, entwined
in a macramé knot. His tall sticklike form is bent.
He is exhausted; we have asked too much of him.
As soon as he goes, our star player stumbles
and pitches forward onto his face,
paralysis growing quickly from his gut.

**As pictured on the cover of William Barrett's book*

The All-Night Restaurant and the Drunk Who Died in the Above-Ground Cellar

August 3, 1982

We go out very late at night to eat at a special little restaurant in an old house, known for its good homemade food – Becky, John, Kate and I. When we arrive it is very late – 3:30 a.m. – and the restaurant is closed. It will open in two hours, so we wait. By 4 a.m. Becky is very hungry and John is looking for some way to break in. He is pragmatic, matter-of-fact, and undeterable. I am very disturbed by this – it is wrong, unnecessary, and he surely will be arrested – and all of us too, perhaps. I suggest we go to an all-night Denny's and play cards while we wait. We can have a little food there to tide us over. But by this time John has already forced a cellar door and emerges with a huge turkey leg and a neck for Kate (that smell overripe). They eat, and I leave in disgust, walking off to find an all-night café or tavern. When I return, I see that John has turned on the lights in the restaurant. The owners will arrive soon and find us; John has already been arrested.

Becky and I walk away, crossing the hills and fields above the restaurant. Several times we cross the path of her uncle, an alcoholic, considered a failure by her family. He is terribly troubled but I understand him. Eventually we find him dead in a large, rough structure built of cement blocks over raw, ungraded dirt. It is an above-ground cellar, its blank walls and roof built right up into the side of the hill, so that the floor within slopes up steeply to join the ceiling at its back wall. Her uncle has died at the very top right-hand corner, having crawled up as high as he could toward the back. I perceive that this reflects his life struggle. He has entered a place where he is confronted on three sides by blank, unyielding walls, and he is in the dark. He has climbed as high as he can to die, a suicide, at the highest point he can reach still living, lying on the dirt in the dark surrounded by impenetrable walls. It is this that gave him such great inner trouble, driving him to drink – his spirit surrounded by walls he cannot surmount, living in inner darkness. For him, there is no “without.”

Anne

April 1, 1983

I chopped and split the knotty wood
until I could no more.
Anne cooked, I fed the hearth.

*One night you came to me;
you were called Anne.
I asked you for a chore,
you had me cut firewood.*

Anne, Hannah, Grace of God,
we worked hard to support the group
(some gathering, on retreat) –
those on whom others depend
and don't think much about.

My task was to cut up the pile of bad wood.
Hard, knotty
odd-sized, lumpy –
ugly stuff to cut with an axe.
An endless chore.
I chopped and chopped,
working fast to keep the fire fed.

Anne encouraged and exclaimed.
My axe bit huge chips
through logs that would otherwise
have taken afternoons.

One piece, spongy,
like an old foam mattress,
was sawed into squares
and carried to the hearth in plastic bags.

The woodyard was our bedroom.
*Late that night you came to me –
we both felt a calm joy.*

*Anne, you held me –
no one dreamed that
in assigning beds
we two would meet like this.*

Holding the whole we both arose
healed in the other's strength.

The Stairs of the Castle

May 5, 1983

The stairs of the castle,
if they could be ascended at all,
could be ascended only at night.
We set out, four of us, two couples,
to climb the night mountain.
The path begins in stone stairs
cut into living rock,
passing by many turns
through flights and corridors,
a huge castle,
a city of people.

The first door opens into a stairwell,
giving at the top into an atrium
of many doors, all closed.
Some lead into private quarters;
only one to the next flight up.
We must choose the right one, but
they all look very much alike.

It is late, all but us abed,
the chambers full of sleeping beings
and we the only ones about.

We negotiate many flights without incident
breathless and scared –
often it is too dark to tell the way.
Once the only difference among the doors
is that one is set slightly deeper into its jamb.
I say, I think we should take the one
that's a little different from the others.
We opened it together –
through the crack a flash of brilliant light
shone for the briefest instant –
it was the stairs!

Arriving at a large central atrium, the couples separate.
Crossing the main floor with my partner,
we stumble over the sleepers there,
moving cautiously among white-sheeted sleeping shapes –
a healthy young man with his dog
sits up speaking suddenly, startling me –

a transient, sleeping in a darkened corner,
a young man still free to collect experience.

We've lost the stairs. The sleepers stir; if they wake
they will think us thieves stealing in.
I turn in frantic haste and urgently signal
my companion
to open
a door
but though our purpose is
hasty retreat
to avoid
disturbing the sleepers,
I slam the door
behind us. Across the hall,
our friends beckon through another door –
racing through, I slam that one too.

Confident now of which doors to take
we find
a corridor that leads out onto a balcony;
a great hall opens out beneath,
the heart
of the castle. Below
a dwarf with thick curly black hair
stands in the vast
moonlight, playing the fiddle.
He has been playing to himself
and dancing all night long –
the castle's essence.

Then, as mountain trails sometimes dip down
a steep ridge,
after a steady climb, the next
set of stairs doubles back down two long flights –
I remember this.

At the stair's bend stands a couple
who have been courting all night,
the gentle coquetry, the dance of love:
teasing and inviting pursuit – but
“not too far, yet!”
We smile; our hearts are gladdened.

At the bottom wait four women, friends
of the women with us.
Dressed in Renaissance costume they play
beautiful woodwinds
and stringed instruments.

They lead us into a smaller hall
behind the vast courtyard we glimpsed
 from the balcony,
where the ecstatic dwarf still fiddles
and dances, courting the moonlight.

Leaning against the wall, sighing, we slip
 to rest, while
the four women group themselves opposite
 to play music delicious
as the river
 from which Dante drank.

One of our women joins them, the other
 sits next to me,
 but she
has become
 self-centered, vain,
unconscious. I squeeze her shoulder,
but she sees only her own beauty
and makes no response but to primp –
 I wake wounded through the thigh.

Tiny Things Left in the Old Bureau

May 27, 1983

It's an old bureau that Carl and I shared
as brothers growing up –
 half each, moved now
into the tiny trailer bedroom
I had in graduate school.

 My young wife
and I go through its dilapidated
old drawers that still hold things
I'd left behind.

 Nothing important –
old clothes, miscellanea,
memorabilia I could do without.

 But I keep exclaiming,
 “oh, that's where that is!”
 “I'd forgotten I had this!”
 “how could I have done without these?”
as I go through it.

Miniatures in a top drawer:
a tiny microscope,
a set of tiny carved ivory bears.
I pack all the tiny things to take with me.

Kerry Comes to Me

May 31, 1983

She's no longer with Bruce. She tells me
things only the deep soul hears.
Her gaze shimmers
like intense heat. Why
haven't I been searching
for this every waking moment?
It's been ten years and it's as if
she's me, turned female side out.
Suddenly naked along the length
of each other, gasping
holding on
delicious as a long plunge
into cold clear water
merging, emerging from one
another as from a pond.
There are no words
for this lovemaking, for beauty,
fulfillment, delight, for purging,
for healing. We stop:
she is fertile and it's not the time
to have a baby.
But holding each to each, a dance –
one body, leaping
twirling, lighter than the motes
that only hang in the air
leaping so high, so free
so graceful
so curved in our flight.

Grizzled Frontier Scout

June 24, 1983

the grizzled frontier scout
and the old general
ride out onto the quicksand
where in deliberate dignity they staunchly sink
seated facing me on their horses
followed by a parade of wagons,
horses and all their troops.
the ground heaves and thrashes
where they have all sunk into it.
I wonder if the quicksand is bottomless,
watching it bubble and toss.
from far away, I hear a horse neigh.

Presentiment

(At My Grandparent's)

October 8, 1983

Lights on low, no one home,
lights left on in the yard,
no one turned them off.
light dim, hard to see.
someone in bed in the parlor
who cannot get up.
a desk, some boxes
someone has been sorting through
in the front room.
the old fireplace broken open
where it had been sealed
up in the wall.
then later, the house emptied,
floor bare, the rooms look
so big. remodeling is planned
but Gramp is still asleep
in his back room,
confined to bed.

Alligators Keep Recurring in My Dreams

1983

voracious, appetite-driven
incapable of exercising control
over the choice to bite
cruelly unthinking
they take huge bites, leave irreparable damage.
driven by instinct – no appeal possible;
they must be stopped by other means.
language, mercy, reason –
all are unavailing.
they *will* eat you if given the chance
last night, trying to bring one into the lab
it chased down and ate Cindy's little dog –
an oblivious animal.
don't be a stupid, naïve little animal
taken unawares from behind by
this armored cruel carnage machine.

She Carves Amazing Pumpkins and Has Hung Bozo the Clown on the Wall

January 1984

Home on Bainbridge during those lonely, bored years
I set out on my bike down Wyatt Way.
Turning on Madison, I cut in front of a family on motorcycles.
I'm afraid I've upset them at first, but as they pass me
the father – a man about my own age with a thick reddish beard –
recognizes me from First Grade.
At the bottom of Madison, a clique of young girls
stand around in front of the Congregational Church.
At first I think they might be what I'm looking for,
but they're only waiting for their boyfriends.
In a field that slopes uphill behind the church, a fire smolders
by the side of the path. Pedaling hard
to top the hill, I turn and coast into a private drive
through a fenced garden overhung with vines and surrounded by a hedge.
Captivating! – lining the porch (unimaginable!)
a collection of Jack-O-Lanterns, 6 or 8 of them, stunningly carved.
One has a full flowing beard – “old man pumpkin.”
Wanting an excuse to see them closer, I loudly announce
that there's a fire in the field as I come up to the porch.
The man who comes to the door has a thick reddish-brown beard.
He is friendly, about my age. Two children peep from behind him,
and – dark-eyed beauty! his brown-haired wife:
the family that passed me on motorcycles! They invite me in
while she phones the fire department. Embodiment of magic,
creative feminine spirit, she shows me her artwork.
All, children and parents, are spirits of kindred invention.
Playing with loose change in my pocket, I think I'll give it
to the lovely children, but first I want to arrange
the pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters into a pattern in my hand,
together with the two diamond earrings that belonged
to my Grandmother and were given to my first wife, Kate.
I can't quite get it right and am becoming a little embarrassed
when she gently takes them and arranges them for me.
In their living room hangs a half-finished piece done in yarn –
the very Bozo the Clown that hung in my bedroom when I was 3 or 4!
Mine was pieced from small fragments of colored plastic;
Grandma gave it to me. Red tufts of hair stick out each side of Bozo's head.
Staring at it, I fall into that deep reverie mingled with alert well-being
that I remember feeling as a small boy, lying in bed looking at it on the wall.

Old Boat Rocking

February 1, 1984

Far out on salt water, old boat rocking
old man watching –
seas surging, tide driving
waves rolling
immense freedom breathing.

Near shore, university research vessel floating,
scientists measuring – exclaiming –
the undertow flowing –
its strength! even fighting
such waves.

And I'm here standing by an old wharf piling –
suddenly looking!
 water towering –
enormously overtopping
tall buildings –
immensity dwarfing immensity –

Only God –

 and we but
the tiny diminishment of sparks.

Beauty imminent – awing
soon breaking –
 (no abstracting –
no fearing –) ineffable
but not terrorizing –

huge drapes of foam falling
down its front
 – no denying,
no stopping – well knowing
how little availing –
iron ring grasping in the piling
futility welcoming
 – overwhelming soaking
sweeping
out of mere control –

 far out into a sea
so vast that this huge wave
is nearly indiscernible
lapping at its edge.

The Apocalypse Around the Corner from the Dilettante

February 1, 1984

Misbehaving badly and well aware of it,
I bounce my bottle out the open back
of my cousin's country station wagon
breaking it on the road in front of the car behind.
We arrive at the amateur musical stage play
just around the corner from the Dilettante
just as it begins. Though I hardly know
the people I'm sitting with, I deliberately sing along
with the nostalgic old songs
to irritate and embarrass them,
sometimes even in anticipation of the actors –
 something about "akin to sin".
Defiant, knowing they plan to ditch me,
half mortified, I say to myself
I'm not here to please them –
I'll do what I like.

The play ends ominously. Suddenly, from high
on the cathedral roof overlooking the open air stage,
 statues – the gods
come crashing down. They fly out
in long, three-pronged series with hideous roars
like the growl of an avalanche or the gargoyles
that come howling out of the cathedral walls at Notre Dame.
Crashing to earth, a beautifully sculptured body
has its head knocked off. Snowballs of all sizes,
some huge, fall thickly all around.
The audience screams, running for the exits. But
amid the darkly immensely exciting apocalypse
I stand surrounded by falling gods and snowballs
and throw taunts and snowballs
at the fleeing guests, goading them
to chase me back to the Dilettante.

Kissing the Woman Who Fixes Her Gaze on the Setting Sun as She Dies

February 2, 1984

Two women engaged, enraged, incarcerated,
encircled
by other women
 who egg us on
circling the sore edges of an old fight
they knew we could not avoid,
so that one must kill the other
 on this veranda
in this women's prison
surrounded by prisoners.

She is so eager to fight, I resign myself.
Grappling, I see her face to face –
my own anima. I push her
down the porch stairs – unplanned,
I've gained the high ground.
Others explaining my advantage
restrain me from rushing after her.

So I retreat, beating off her attempts
to regain the veranda, kicking her
in the face and stomach
as she assaults the porch. She tires quickly;
soon I have her on her knees over the railing.

 It was then I saw that she no longer
 paid attention to my blows
 but turning her face to the left, fixed her
 gaze on the setting sun.

I knew then that she was dying
and ceased hitting her,
 taking her at once into my arms
gathering her into one long sweet kiss
in which I felt her life flee
going out in that sweetness of love
that two who have fought intimately have.

She did not leave in pain. When her life fled
I let her fall back into the mud below the porch.

Grandma Drives a Light Blue Sedan

August 20, 1984

Grandma, driving a light blue sedan,
picks me up walking home alone
down the road that always leads,
no matter how many times I walk it,
from her house to ours,
at the bottom of the hill.

She picks me up wordlessly, returning
from a family gathering held years ago at her home.
She's four years gone, but younger now.
She has deep, deep eyes.

She says nothing, but I look deeply
into her eyes a long, long time.
She drops me at my car without a word,
drives over the hill, and is gone.
When I reach my car, it is locked –
she has the keys, both sets.

Late August Storm

August 21, 1984

An apple-green summer waned,
the storm blew up, terrible and beautiful,
like the face of God.
Huge clouds of dust and sand, colored
like the rocks at Zabreski Point,
towered, dwarfing the tallest buildings.
Thousands of feet high, roiling
the way mud does in puddles
when it billows brainlike into creased
and pillowed clouds.

I was in love.

Wind so hard, storm upon us,
men and buildings shaking, sand-lashed
we, all enraptured, so taken
by its mightiness and our reverence
did not run to hide
but facing the horizon shielded our eyes, trying
to look into the storm. Something was happening;
the earth shook in earnest. The earth quaked
something pushed up, a volcano
domed into the distance, a small mountain –
ah my love.

The Anima Moves Out

September 9, 1984

She has left her husband and children
and moved out to live alone in a little cottage,
to be her own person, afloat
on the inner night sea journey. It is the essential thing, it is thrilling,
the air around her is vibrant.

I come to her cottage late at night, wanting
to stay over, on a journey that has no name.
She has brought with her only the things
that mean most to her, left the rest
to her husband. Every item
meaningful, her furniture and art
and books the essence of her.

Though she's in the city, out back there are no houses but a hillside still wild.
I go out in the moonlit frost in my stocking feet,
she comes trailing after.
There's good habitat for little wild animals,
and the hill keeps drawing me into it
and she keeps trailing after –
it's all so much bigger than I expected,
and around the side of the hill are vineyards.

Collecting Newts, Grandma Talks with Me of Old Age & Death

September 12, 1984

Gram and I – just we two – sit together
on a fall hillside near her house.
Though cancer has taken her, we collect newts
as we talk. I ask
about old age and death
and as she answers I understand
fear is no longer with her,
and more, that this question
has become unimportant.

The newts pile up against a long concrete wall.
Though only six inches high,
it presents a barrier to the newts migrating
down to the water to breed; they gather
under the wind-drift of leaves and debris
blown against the low wall, where,
hidden beneath layers of duff, moving
downslope, there are so many
that the forest litter shakes
and even rumbles from their passage.
Turning over a long windrow of leaves and twigs,
I see flashes of fire burning that quickly snuff
out when exposed. Picking out the ones
with fire-red bellies and the brown eastern newts,
I want three – two for me and one for Marian.
I nab a big, fat eastern newt right away,
and then a bright red-bellied newt which, however,
gets away. The many with unusual color patterns –
I don't take them.

Too Many Bulbs

September 28, 1984

There are too many bulbs, John – hundreds of banked bulbs, but enough current to make only one bright. The energy here is dissipated among so many bulbs that even taken all together they give dim light.

And why did my first Principal in consulting move into this place, that once belonged to my Master's Committee Chair?

People keep walking in off the street, uninvited. It would be impossible to keep them out – entrances everywhere; public by common use.

Before more come, I've been helping search for more light. That was when I looked up and, noticing no lack of fixtures or bulbs, realized that if one alone were lit, it would outshine all the dim lights put together.

It's an oddly familiar feeling, feeling my way around in dim light and wanting more. I think whoever had this place before must've liked it that way – never wanted to see more; indeed, wanted not to see more.

Rancho Bonito Burns After Yet Another Conversation with Marian about Moving in

October 25, 1984

Carl Jung disapproves.
Tall, spare, aged – he’s disgusted because
when he last left me here
the fire (though raging)
was confined to my room,
and now I’ve needlessly allowed it to spread
throughout the house. My sky-stretching
white-ceilinged home at Rancho Bonito burns
to the ground – a total loss.
I spread the fire by standing outside
throwing rocks at my burning room
to try to put it out. The loss of my poetry
seems irreplaceable. Too miserable
to work, after the house burns
I dig a shallow hole in the ashes
and spend the first night there with the dog.
Next morning, waking in my dark, ashy burrow,
I scoot up the tunnel to the surface
only to hear an angry roommate exclaim,
“aren’t there even any dishes left??”

We Have One Second to Look in Each Other's Eyes

November 12, 1984

We have one second to look in each other's eyes.
Bicycling through Golden Gate Park
Marian & Jenny, Teri & Chris and their kids,
we stopped at the bakery/ice creamery
where I loaded up with so many goodies
that they tired of waiting for me and left.
Clutching my purchase I pedal after them.
Guessing they've gone to picnic on the beach,
I turn and pedal up a hill so steep
I can't see the other side. Hills like this
always feel like topping them
would be to fling oneself over the edge –
and suddenly there I am, plunging
down a sheer cliff, 1000 feet toward the beach
where they all sit picnicking.
Marian sees me go over and runs to me
even as I'm still in the air. Helpless,
we have a split second
to look in one another's eyes as I fall past,
one moment while I'm still alive and whole.

I watch a golden retriever swimming in the surf,
retrieving sticks. So many people are throwing them
and the dog is so crazy about getting them all
that it swims from one to the next,
exhausting itself, in danger of drowning.

Walking Home Alone, Shedding Friends

Prague, April 11, 1986

Last night, back on Bainbridge, going home –
My friends came and got me two nights ago.
Now, coming home early in the morning, dog-tired,
one wants to take the road at Finch Place,
where I lived my Senior year in high school
but I know the roads didn't connect down there –
no way through.

We go down anyway and sit in the bar at Mac's Tavern.
I don't want a drink but they pour me one anyway
and I'm sitting there, dead tired, not wanting this drink,
when suddenly it occurs to me – I'm already home!
This is my own neighborhood – I can get up
and walk home; I don't have to wait it out.

Walking home shedding friends as I go
until I walk up the hill alone.
First one friend didn't want to leave the bar.
When I got up, almost everyone else got up too
but he wanted to stay.
“Stay here if you want, with the bar rats
and the alcoholics” we said – “we're leaving”
and we left him there,
dancing and partying in the early morning –
as though dancing with a skeleton,
dancing the dance of death.
Another one again wants to go down
the dead end streets that have no connections.
I leave him behind too, like the stamp collection
I put together during those awkward middle school years
with money earned from scoring bowling tournaments
seated amid the thick cigar smoke of fattening middle aged men
hopping their bulk absurdly on one small foot
as they slap down both hands on their knees
to coax a strike. Going on alone,
coming home wondering why I left,
why I sold that dear stamp collection for only \$15,
feeling relief mingled with sorrow
at having left at all and at coming home alone.

My Father Wants to See My Dreams

June 9, 1986

I sit with my father at a family gathering,
at my mother's father's place.
He wants to know about my dreams –
he keeps asking about them.
He has one he wants to show me.
The rest of the family is next door,
copying out recent dreams to show him.

The dream I have for him is about violence –
what he's done. I dream it for him within the bigger dream.
At the end, I'm a poor beggar sitting at the king's
table and the king gives me the turkey neck to eat,
fixed so that I cannot accidentally eat the poisonous parts –
he hands it to me with a great flourish.
But though I do not show proper respect for
his magnanimity, the king likes my spunk.

While I write out this dream for my father,
my father's mother comes in. She is also keeping
track of her dreams, and encourages me
to write down mine – even to the point
that she doesn't want to interrupt me while I write
as she changes to go to the family gathering.
So while I write and my father is anxiously asking
about my dreams, his mother is undressing
in front of us (though she shyly draws off
to one side). She has a beautiful hand-lettered,
hand-drawn book that my mother's mother made
when she was dying of cancer. In it
she has drawn herself with the ugly lines of age
and wasting – brutal yet frank. She writes about
what the doctors do, what it all means,
and illustrates it with stories about a little red-furred
dog she loves, who remained her constant
companion throughout the ordeal.

Plunging into the Night-Sea

April 27, 1987

Plunging into the night sea
 from a secluded cove
a hidden little shore
the gathering dusk
like something alive.

I've come here before
 going into the water
as if it were an interval
in love-making.

I plunge into the night sea
with all my clothes on
 but coming out
knowing I'll be just as cold
either way, I take off everything
but my shirt and sweater and
thrilled, energized, feeling very daring
plunge back in.

A huge net hangs
 suspended from a cable inches below the surface.
Running straight out from shore, out into the forever ocean
into fathomless deep, too big to conceive,
 as deep as the ocean and so far from shore
 it cannot be imagined to end
 like a sudden revelation
that breaks in
 bringing a myth or legend that truly exists.
Following the cable-line, keeping
safely afloat by lightly pushing off from it
I swim out from shore
 the night humming
with something alive.

A captain attended me on shore: how long
should he let me go
 before
he should begin to worry,
 he wants to know.
An hour, I said
and went into the night-sea, very alone

following the cable into the swimming dusk
(lit as if just before dawn with a white pale light)
to an island where, in a cave,
a collection of literature
 from all the countries
 in the world has been stored
gathered by a young girl
kindly encouraged by her mother, Helen.

We must have been introduced before;
I sent things for her search.
I saw her before I came to the night-sea; I will see her again.
Here on the island, in boxes, still in their original packages,
 are things concerning youth
life, the peoples and cultures of all the earth.
Piles of fascinating pictures cut from magazines
looking through them is so engrossing
that it is bright day before I look up, intense blue day,
 sun-blazing-sky day.

I remember then
 the captain waiting for me
on shore
suddenly realize
well more than an hour has passed.

After Five Days at Mar Vista

September 1988

casting off
the little white
lake-rocked boat
from the wave-
lapped shore
loaded with
the three of us
and our things
low in the water
making a night
crossing, adrift
to the other shore.

And What Then?

1988

awoke, self-disgusted –
but of what?
there is not so much
as a lonely soul wandering
into oblivion,
not even a fragment
whose name is unknown.
there are fragments – they hang,
turning suspended
transforming slowly
in a space neither inner
nor Cartesian;
fragments that exist in moments
fragmentary
as the juxtaposition of these two spaces.

we are all,
inescapably,
each other.

The Birdmen Dance My Loss

January 21, 1990

On a mounded hill off to the right
long shapes rise up in silhouette, birdlike men
 growing elongated necks and long feathery arms,
 their heads long pointed cockades,
the birdmen dance my loss,
a strange flapping dance ungainly as mating cranes,
they dance giant birdlike sorrows uncanny.

When the crying comes in long breaths that turn
 to howling in the throat,
they dance to the spot where we last sat together,
when, full of myself, I never considered
the possibility that I could lose you.

Their dance sags like a three-strikes-failed felon
as I slouch in my orange jail jumpsuit
 into the slumped couch.
Your friends try to protect you, try to keep me away,
but you lean over from behind
with a kiss to ask in my ear, "Is something wrong?"
Sick and ashamed – their cries rise up, terrible and sad
 THE BIRDMEN FLAP

and an irresistible wall of water floods the house
indiscriminately sweeping away
the things of a life.

Their high anguished wail
 rises like floodwaters to where,
trapped on the top floor
of a many-storied building, I'm

 thrown suddenly through the bottoms of many years
 like wet sacks

to drop squelched in a rain-sodden couch collapsing atop
The Evergreen State College library,

I stumble up

 blinded by grief and try to run
 down the Clock Tower stairs,
 half running, half groping –

just wanting to get out of the building,
but the stairwell is closed
so that, 50 or 60 feet in the air,

there is nothing for it but to work down
the construction scaffolding
that sheathes the unconstructed

future, feeling perilously with my feet
to reach the step below,
dropping down a story at a time

(only giant birdmen can reach their toes
to stretch down
ten feet at a time)

(She finds me once I reach the ground and wants again
to know, am I okay? No, I am not okay
and our way around the building is blocked
by construction fencing and a laydown yard.)

If I go around the other way I'll come back
to where I started, where the breakup began –
but there is no other way to go,
and heading back
that way, the ragged air exiles
a torn throat
that peaks in howling again –

their shrieks get louder;
strange birdmen
that dance my sorrows,
flapping and bobbing
as their shapes elongate,
taller and taller.

These Ridiculous Little Pieces of Wood Won't Cover the Cracks in the Foundation

January 28, 1990

Odds and ends of wood
pieced together
on the perimeter foundation
won't cover it up –
 ridiculous
trying make it look nicer
faking the work
the cracks are still there
dubious integrity–
Gramp won't be fooled.

This house was supposed to be just for me,
outside Marian's studio on Cherry Avenue.
I have the framing up and not much more.
Two lazy Indians work for me
 but they're slackers.
Gramp comes and looks it over dubiously –
doesn't think much of the job.

Even the few bits that are done well
I stole from some other building site –
 a window framed in above a door;
 a corner where two windows converge.
I ask Gramp, “What do you think of these?”
intimating I'd done it, taking credit
for others' work, waiting for him to say
I couldn't have done that. But he doesn't
say much and I don't admit it.
Let him believe I did it. All he says is
“at least that part is done well.”
But it isn't my work.

I inspect the corner held together with clamps
while the glue dries – it looks very complicated
and I hope he doesn't ask how it was done
because I don't know.

It's no good, and the glue won't hold.
I made my own glue, a big bucket of the stuff
but even the good-for-nothing Indians
are convinced it's no good.

I take some between my fingers:
“See? It’s good. It will dry.”
But oil has risen to the top of the bucket
and needs to be skimmed off.
No need to worry about gluing my fingers together
with this stuff.

Give it up – just let the bare ugly concrete
be uncovered, don’t try to make it nice.

There’s a dog caged under the framed-in steps,
a big German Shepherd that keeps
barking and trying to attack
 but I pay no attention,
I have enough on my mind and anyway
it’s too big to get through the step risers at me.
But to my surprise it pokes its head through
enough to bite at my knee.
I whack it with my key case but that doesn’t deter it
 – it only gets madder
and attacks all the more.
 Thoughts that won’t be beaten down
 keep shouting through the piecework
 I’ve thrown over the cracks.

Making the Rounds in Tiburon, Collecting Pledges for the Human Race

March 11, 1990

The broker says he's given all he can afford,
I say this deserves everything he's got
and more, so he asks his secretary,
old-woman bookkeeper
how much he has left
and then writes out a check for all of it –
\$733 or maybe \$761 (the double-entry
accounts don't seem to agree). My next
mark is a New Age guy who's just finishing
teaching a seminar – talking him
into it over the distraction of people
leaving to go running. He ponies up
\$800 without really getting what it's
for, and neither does the woman
who matches his \$800 but asks
that half of it go for planting trees.
Who cares? – all this for the Human Race!

Not Exasperated, the Anima Feeds Me in the Moonlight

March 13, 1990

She and I are two log fires banked against one another,
smoldering down to embers in the ash, a warmth
that permeates while consuming very little.
It's getting deliriously late, crowds thin
at the New Relationship theme park
of vaporously silly Disney productions – time to come home
together. All my ex-wives roll into one
and there's that lovely vertigo of not yet knowing
one another very well, lingering on the outside stairs
before we go up. But I never seem to get inside –
she's learning about the exasperating side of me
that dallies. I get distracted by such stupid things;
I might as well be standing out here
trying to shoot holes in a roll of toilet paper
with a BB gun. She tires of it
and goes on inside. I should be going with her,
keeping her company, finishing this close-sharing
evening together, but instead I miss the toilet paper
and put a hole in the glass door of my stereo stand;
the next shot rips the veneer on top. She comes back
out with plates of sliced tomato and cucumber,
and we lean romantically against the wall,
eating outdoors in the moonlight.

Anne Treanor's Shoebox of Color Crayons

July 21, 1990

iii.

Tonight unappointed Anne comes again
to arrange for Jennifer to meet
me at the basketball game –
but we'd already planned to go together.

First grade long, long behind,
high school too – and the ones who once passed
as ourselves.

By the time I get to the grave, winter has set in.
The grave is unmarked and I don't know whose it is.
It's late and I had to park far away and trek in,
icy snow on a thin path threading a field –
I don't know this grave, unless it's mine.
This isn't just a long walk in from some parking lot.

By the time I get to the game, it's in its final minutes,
our team losing, down 5 or 6 points,
missing all our shots. I check into the game with
Vince Taylor, artist in etched glass,
in whose small house of recovery I'm renting.

Jennifer catches up to me
after we lose and we all head out together
but Anne intervenes – she's promised
that Jennifer would go home with another man.
Hurt shoots from the fingertips.

I tell Jennifer

come with me if you want to
then set out, plowing across the icy snowed-covered
meadow, but this time take the wrong path,
a little too close
to the woods. When we're alone
it's easy to feel abandoned – and then
worse follows too easily.

Halfway across, Jennifer comes up from behind,
surprising me. The path curves,
we're back on the right way
just at that dangerous spot where you have to
leap a little.

Making Change for a Little Boy

November 12, 1991

At an amusement park, minding a boy
like I was then.
He's thirsty and wants to buy a drink
but he needs to change a dime
to two nickels. Searching my pockets,
I find a buffalo head nickel I bought
once on a trip – can't spend that.
I find other foreign coins left
in these pants from other trips.
I take the dime to the change window,
where rummies lean on the counter
lewdly commenting as I try to negotiate
with the Vietnamese lady wants to give us
two commemorative war nickels.
Minted in copper, they look like pennies.
We need regular nickels I say and point out
two she has already on the counter.
She refuses and I give up, only to discover
the pay phone will make change.
I put my coin in the old, broken
vandalized phone,
even the receiver and keypad ripped
out. I'm sure I've lost the dime,
but here are two nickels
in the change slot, though
it's hard to get my fingers in
to get at them.

My Insurance Won't Cover This

November 12, 1991

Moving into a large home alone,
rain and wind outside,
putting away small things,
I go back to the car, parked in the garage
and notice that several objects I'd placed
on the trunk have fallen over –
a troll doll and a child's rug.
As I reach for them I notice broken glass
strewn around to the left rear.
A pair of my round spectacles lie
in the midst of it, unbroken.
Then I notice the entire rear windshield
has been kicked out. With a sick feeling,
I realize that my insurance won't cover this.
Then I see that the top of the entire back left side
of the car is crumpled. Looking closer,
I see that the whole left side
of the car is smashed in. Strips of metal
are torn like paper. I can't imagine
what has done this. A tire is broken off
and leans against the slumping body
of the car at an angle that's wrong.
My life – I left it parked somewhere
and now in shock return to find it
terribly damaged, undrivable,
not covered, no visible cause.

The Appropriate Way to View a Goddess

November 12, 1991

Naked, she glows with golden light.
I peer closely, trying to make out her breasts.
Gently, she tells me not to do that.
One does not ogle a goddess.
My inner man responds at once, a figure of light
leaps up, awake and cooperative.

Confronting Dick

February 18, 1992

Teri and I,
at the round dinner table
being very blunt –
the first time
since childhood
though he tries to laugh it off,
push it all into some other terms,
the father omniscient,
he's not pulling it off –
confused, like a ferry backing up
to try the dock
a second time.

A Huge Black Man Came to My Dreams

March 1994

a huge black man came to my dreams
well-dressed, dignified, a leader –
a man I trusted enough to call father,
who mediated for me.
I read with the doors wide open
on both sides of my study,
saw how this life was more athletic,
challenging than that of the young men
I saw go by, heading into the forest ravine
with their hunting dogs on leashes.

The Candlelight is Going Out Around My Poetry

October 16, 1996

I try to light the candles placed on shelves of poetry
in my study.
I need to do this before we go out to dinner (a friend
with me).
The candles are hard to light, keep going out.
I am down to stubs of matches, which I try to relight
in the flames of still-lit candles
and carry to those gone out or not yet lit.
Running out of matches, I try to use the stubs without
burning my fingers.
When I come back around
I find many once lit are now extinguished.
There was plenty of time when I began;
now dinnertime is already past, I rush –
the lateness of the hour.
The candlelight is going out around my poetry
and I haven't enough matches.
At last I find one unused "self-strike" white match
that will work.
As I finish lighting them, I remember a promise
made to myself, forgotten ten years ago.

Descending, Singing to the Earth

November 10, 1998

falling, I catch a high branch
which breaks beneath me.
twisting like a gymnast
I catch the last large low bough
dangling
hundreds of feet above ground
the tall straight evergreen
I welcome
the aluminum extension ladder
raised to reach me
safety beneath me once more,
I descend singing

because I love you
because I love life
I return to embrace you

singing to the ladder
singing to the earth

Appointment at First Light

January 7, 2004

Carl has told me – my brother
told me my father is dying. He seems to have joined
my Grandfather.

Carl was there
with them both
when they passed. (I've seen
Gramp many times since
he died, in his old home,
always at night,
the lights low – now Dick
there with him
and Carl the one who attended.)

Gramp and I watch some movie about a submarine (this was earlier tonight).
Only the Captain and First Mate are aboard. Losing pressure and oxygen, the
submarine sinks to the bottom of the sea. The two men know what to do. They
must abandon the best living spaces and go into the smaller rooms, where they
must stay, keeping just to those few smaller rooms that they can keep supplied
with the vital necessities. Although many times their adventures have taken them
to far galaxies, this episode must be on earth, for since they are under the sea,
they can only be found and helped if they are on earth.

Under the sea or not, they go out
to look at the stars
before retreating to emergency quarters.
When they come back inside, it is awash –
at least a couple of feet of water
has entered with them at the hatch,
and even their retreat
can no longer be dry.

And here we awaken from within this story to Gramp's living room, where I sit
with him, watching it on TV. Gramp sits next to me on the couch. He is very tired
and tries to lie down to nap while I watch the movie.

He tosses and turns,
his heavy body stretched next to me,
along me, over my legs –
but I am taking up the room he needs
to get comfortable
so he gets up to go to his room, telling me he will nap there, and to wake him
at 5 a.m. (it is the middle of the night –

about 2 or 3) –
there is somewhere we must go.

At first it seems we have only a little time. Later, after my father joins, there seems to be a little more time for them both to sleep

(we all three will go
to death together, I suppose,
at 5 a.m.).

My father interacts with no one when he comes – all of a sudden
there he is
asleep in Gram's room. I am going
to go home
while they sleep.

But I have only one slipper and one tennis shoe
to wear –
their mates lost. I may have
a pair of rubber boots
somewhere. When I attend
to the mismatched pair, I am able to find
their proper mates
after all.

Messing around on Gramp's dining room table, picking things up, I feel something
under a piece of paper. It is my house key; I wasn't aware I'd dropped it. I'll need
that

to go home.

I turn off the lights
so Gramp and my father can sleep, leaving only one
on low
so they can find the bathroom
if they need to get up in the middle of the night.

I have trouble finding the light switch at the entry to my father's room, and end
up having to disturb his room to look. But when I find it at last, I manage to wake
neither him nor Gramp.

I'm ready to go back to my home
in the land of life
and leave them both sleeping with the dead.
I have my shoes, I have my key
and also I have an appointment to come back
and join them, and go somewhere
at 5 a.m., at first light.

That Leaky Pipe of Misery

March 2004

I should not have shoved that pipe of misery
leaking drip drip drip
so many years
under the upstairs floorboards.
She sees where all that water came from,
how the sagging soggy ceiling
with a single jerk exposes the whole sorry mess.
I look dumbly up, don't get it, ask
"but where is that leaky pipe I shoved out of sight
under the upstairs floorboards so long ago?"
Ah. Now I see it, far back, back
at the back wall. What a mess, a jumble
of wet black rotting rubber hose.
Amazingly I don't lose my temper
but seeing that it will have to be pulled outside
through the wall, with Cindy's help
and the fresh breath of air
coming in through the ceiling and walls
she's simply lifted away, just say
"I'll get dressed."

With Cindy's Help

March 2004

I should not have shoved that pipe of misery
leaking drip drip drip
so many years
under the upstairs floorboards.
she sees where all that water came from,
how the sagging soggy ceiling –
and with a single jerk exposes the whole sorry mess.
I look dumbly up, don't get it, ask
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Amazingly I don't lose my temper
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through the wall, with Cindy's help
and the fresh breath of air
coming in through the ceiling and walls
she's simply lifted away, just say
“I'll get dressed.”

Probably

May 2006

probably I position this slab of rock, this memory of loving, on the bedside table beside me every night before dropping off to sleep, where I hand-polish it every night;

probably I am ever pulling you off down the path to the beach of our first meeting;

probably I danced the Tai Chi there, at first alone and then with you, when you showed me the form for two I'd never seen before;

probably I am even now driving the short distance home from your party, the young man I met there falling asleep on my shoulder as he drives so that I take over the wheel;

probably he has been my friend from the beginning, there is something I so like about him, so bright, so open in his delight;

probably though I am accompanying my friends home to their beds, well after 2 in the morning, I am planning to get away as soon as I can and take my own car or perhaps my blue bike and ride the short trip back to you that takes forever;

probably this dirt road through which we steer hosts an all-night street party, the young toughs making threats as we thread through them, weaving around giant paleolithic possums and under the bellies of dinosaurs that nearly step on the car;

probably the words of everyone I've ever loved are carved on that curved slab of old school desk that I picked up off your beach there;

probably they include the lament of my high school best friend's father for his wife, dead of cancer, only now becoming legible though he wrote them to her when he was a young man;

probably he typed them directly on the wood, removing each typebar from the typewriter and striking its impression into the wood with a rock;

probably there was even carved there the name of the younger sister of another best friend with whom I was in love;

probably this beach party has been going on at your house (your parents keeping out of the way and both of us looking at each other not yet having spoken our souls) at least since we were 17, which is now 35 years ago;

probably your name is Helen and your teach poetry at Northwestern and I've mixed you up with someone else and we've never met;

probably you aren't classically beautiful except in those eyes and the maturity of your face and that haunting grace that could be and was and is any age;

probably the hungriest sufferer reached through the crack to the hungry suffering as soon as she opened the door with a whispered warning finger to her lips, don't wake my parents;

probably the woman who is sleeping now, late at night, in our bed, my wife, waiting for me to return from the party to which she sent me while pretending she did not know I'd gone, and past whom I tiptoe to slip out again, already knows and is waiting there, her arms your arms, waiting to close around me when I return;

probably time is an invention and doesn't matter at all, probably that's why these memories too fluffy to smooth into a simple sequence rumple the bed, as if one long slept in, a good sleep, the blankets all confused by morning.

Taking the Bus to the Ferry with Joseph

July 6, 2008

Riding the bus, sitting in the row behind the driver
I hold Joseph, smoothing the wrinkles
from his shirt while he leans his head on my shoulder
and through my memory pass all the men who nurtured me.
The person seated next to us is a woman,
the bus driver is a woman,
those in seats behind us and across the aisle
are all women, chatting, sharing their world
while we two travel, carried through silent space
by the bus. We are on our way to the ferry
where Joseph will make his first crossing on his own
going to meet his grandmother on the other side.
But wait, I say, he is not yet old enough
and anyway she will not be there, she is away.

After a Dream of One I Loved at 16

April 2012

I want to sit and somehow write
to you, somehow comprehend
that tight swell of ache and hope
that was loving you

*you offered me your breast
with the care of a mother
and yet are the lover deepest set*

how shall I let that bright pain –
how respect its right
to come alive again?

*and be again that grace I knew
that bursting joy in me undo
and be again in you renewed*

Do You Have Significance?

August 5, 2014

delightfully shriveled as a dried flower
the tiny wise
old woman –
epitome of Hannah Arendt
held center stage

answering questions

for the college graduate seminar.
at last I get my question through:

“if you had significance –
do you have significance? – ”

(slipping in the significant question
as Beryl Crowe used to call it)

and she knew it.

“If I did,
I wouldn’t use it to let five thugs
into the upper story.”

(the five senses, she meant,
and the avarice, lust and gluttony
they bring)

she went on expostulating
and I kept objecting
I hadn’t asked my real question,
cut off each time by the monitor
repeatedly and firmly
(a headstrong young woman whom
I’d mentored myself)

when I finally cleared some space
I realized it was empty of questions

she’d answered, yes
she and we
and all we do
have significance,

because in this world
we are that self
and no self
is vulnerable to that invasion

(the abstruse koan carried on
by gurus and Zen masters)

beyond no-self, a self is indeed needed
and once that question is answered
it leaves all other questions empty

no-self is not the answer –
an answer given only indirectly
as if it were not the main question
because the self is neither main thing
nor yet the answer

I sat next to the monitor
propped up by her friendly giant of a lover
joking and giggling while the lecture went on

jiggling laughter –
one cannot live in a helpless,
groundless
wide open way,
open to
whatever influence or compulsion
comes along

thus not “no-self”

nor live tight balled-up in the
self-serving ego

hence No Self

not no-self
not small self
and the collective self is an oxymoron

so we live somewhere
dancing and juggling
on the point of an invisible pyramid
projected by those three

the great blank space I’ve passed through
the cloud of unknowing
its passage the dark night of the soul –

climbing around the whole time
in the mist all over the face of the One

no-self merely degenerates
into aging, forgetfulness
and the mindless passing on
of a mere lump of flesh,
as pain does into stupidity

while self
lost the thread some
time ago.

My God What A Weight She Has Become

July 3, 2016

coming in to my own mother darkness shrieks
what am I doing kneeling over her
she is passive her breasts awe
confused I keep returning
to temptation molesting her sleep

the next day, through my sister
she delivers a message: for my bad behavior
there will be no Christmas.
I see the presents she would otherwise
wrap for me,
and in a pique inform her I will go one better
and never see her again.

When one eats too many chocolates
spends any time at all with porn
becomes jaded in any way
so that colorful life, sweet-scented life
vibrant life dies in the hand
like a wilted bouquet,
perversity seems rewarding.

God what a weight she has become.
I will do all I am responsible for, I said
but one must swing off the shoulder
the wire sack full of rocks,
and make a garden with the rocks.

Where the Full Force Hits

Dream May 15, 2020

little garden chairs and tables
are set out, as if this were
some lookout point

where the leisured class
might sip wine with a glacéd sweet –
but in truth

it's the wind end of a chasm
through which the storm drives
its giant seawave,

bearing down on us while we grip
the iron railing, one arm
on either side of you –

a closeness you've never
had before
– we brace

within the whelming wave,
the hurtling force
smashing

us up against each other
but like seaweed waving,
kelp handed over

to the surge surrendered
we embrace pressed
full-length

into one another, closing
our eyes as our faces
touch,

driven
beyond all praying.