
THE

LUCID

HALLUCINATORIUM

ROOM OF LIGHT

Jeremy Robertson Pratt

Soul House

*for my grandparents
Carl and Rhoda,
Orville and Ruth*

*for my mother and father
Drusilla and Richard*

*for my sister and brother
Teresa and Carl*

*for my wife and children
Jennifer, Joseph, and Laurel –
and the generations*

Mercy came to the Golden City. Manly held the Rose. From them, Bold Fighter found Eyes of Dew. From them, Harvest Bearer and Uplifted by the Lord and, again, Manly. And He Who was Uplifted found the White Wave. And from them, He Who Shall Increase and She Who Triumphs. Their names tell the story.

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Children's Story

It begins with a children's story – it always begins with a child's story. It begins with my sister ("Terry", when we were little), the way Dorothy goes to the very beginning of the yellow brick road, to follow it uncurling like a new leaf or fern frond from its center – so my life embryonic began to unfold within the unfolding she had already begun.

My sister was there before all beginning, before childhood stories began; so much with me as to be unable to distinguish her's from my own soul's twinning. Childhood home, children's story, Sound's shore foam reverberatory. Island-born in warm spring, coming loved into the world, small waves laughing over cobbles.

We talked, we confided. We incessantly made the world; we talked it into being, frame and foundation, the world since ever inhabited. Even after being put to bed, child-voices floated back and forth across the hall, small ghosts that visited quiet wonder upon a world itself only just then taken out of its box and unwrapped. We storied it. We filled it with small attachments and coda. We wrote ourselves into it in ten thousand tales, which we alone fully understood, and drew uncanny figures on the wall at the bottom of the stairs in crayon mother had to later scrub away. We named them to each other. We surrounded thousand-year sleeps with thorn bushes and then beat them down. When we were little, the walls were huge and the windows threw light into the outside dark, spendthrifts of a wilderness where it was delicious to play at being lost. Rattling the upstairs hall, delighting in lights out, down we went, miner and princess, into subterranean thousand-goblined halls and were never truly threatened throughout the entire rescue operation.

We said goodnight with a ritual prayer, a plainsong sung every night that I first lifted whole-cloth from goodnights once said by my Grandmother and several aunts when, a small boy, I was taken up to bed while the adults sat around the big black box of the living room oil stove. They intoned in turn:

Children's Story

(for Teri, my sister)

I

coarse, like home-spun,
and linen-plain,
but warm as spoonbread
baked

dancing on tile-cold
kitchen floors
just before bed;

and warm as lampshades
that people
all the corners with heavy-bodied dancers;

and oh –

warm as the wicker hamper
plumped full with
half-fusty soiled clothes
just visible in the hall
from my pillow.

II

past the ramshackle
old barn

half overgrown
wild blackberry;
streaked gray boards; unripe green apple;
old cobwebs; grimy boxes;

we made paths
that brought us close as Mother,
cheek by breath
and bone to bone.

through shiny, viperous green
dull-berried ivy
that wrapped two three spiraling
evergreens
and a corner of the yard,

slithering among smooth-bending
jointed
bamboo
to a quiet grasslesscenter.

*good night, sleep tight
pleasant dreams
see you in the morning*

repeated then and ever after to Mother, adding the coda, "I like you and I love you", as she, bending over my pillow like the moon of childbirth, full as Cytherea, white as Diana, echoed word for word the chant that we each all three took up, each saying the charm in unison that let us sail "out upon that sea" and brought us without fail "back again to me" – whisper binding childhood earnest to resonate moorings.

*sail baby sail, out upon that sea
only don't forget to sail back again to me*

She bent over us at night like a moon on a flower stalk in a bedtime picturebook. One cannot look directly at a young mother's loveliness – like a glamour it can be glimpsed but sidelong – like the mistiness surrounding the Good Witch Glinda or that kept me from envisioning clearly the face of Maid Marian. My father saw it like any young fool in love (which is to say, enraptured obscurely). Odd she is absent from my best memory of the two of them: It dawned on me post-liminally that we had been playing downstairs a long time alone when he came down, boyish, almost eagerly thanking us – as if he weren't talking to children – saying how important it was to them to have time together: something that puzzled me then, but that I remember with gratitude now, that they had that time. Perhaps it was the only time I ever saw him heart-glad.

Leaving Home to Find Home

1965

By fifth grade, we realized that we would need to find the path home on our own – Teri, Carl and I. We moved the summer before from the old family home where we grew up, home belonging to our generations, great grand-parent's home, leaving the home *that was our children's story* to move into the house we forever after called "Hansen's", for the large, eponymous, and blithely oblivious family that had gregariously trashed it. Thrown from our generations' heart, we *came to* in a rat-infested rental, rootless and squalid, from which our parents, absent in all but body, went in daily search of desperate lives. At Hansen's the wallpaper hung in a tattered archeology, its peeling strips excavated five or six layers deep into the lives of those gone before.

III

the stolid maple forked
thickly as the stump-legged ditch-digger
we called Yogi, who leaned on his shovel,
contemplating every spring
over the perennial roadwork in front of our home –
the "bumpity road"
that we crossed
to trail and hide in scotch broom and tall grass
where every secret place had a name.

IV

back inside
we made eggnog, thick and yellow
from a hand beater,

or graham crackers soaked in milk
till soggy, folded
for lunch on windy days.

on Columbus Day 1962
the wind passed gale.

two spare kerosene lanterns
were hurried in from the Tower House
(place of musty books
tintypes: 1910
long afternoons)

the lights went out –
darkness is a quality
that gets inside like a padding cat;
tangible even grayed
in the flickering shadows
it is grainy.

and the little giggle forms in the back of your throat:
inside – safe night-time

all the woods –
rusky-dusky wilderness
prickled with vivid flowers
(like the lamps beneath
your eyelids)

outside.

or that little tickling giggle
of the first snow:
wake up early under an extra spread
knowing it's there.

Frightening disintegration portended when my bed felt softly bounced at night by what seemed rats jumping from the huge hole in the floor between it and the wall, waking me into a world of lost breath, unrecognizable. Under the stairs, dank earth unlit formed itself into a mummy dragging slowly toward me. My sister thought the entire street was cursed.

Somebody came and shut us up in the wall and we cried because we couldn't get out. It didn't do us any good though; it just used up all the air and we died anyway.

Teri, a dream

Dreams find rooms and even floors and entire houses not in the floor plan – a room to which no door led, though I knew right where to find it. Two large flowered armchairs waited in a parlor more welcoming than any place in that house. A presence just departed, breathing warmth. No one in evidence, the room friendly, available, secure, comforting. The backyard pond embedded in flowers red, white, alive.

Down the ravine behind the house that we called “the Gully”, secret as childhood, never visited by adults, brambled and ivy-wrapped, in a small stagnant lake hidden at the bottom, my brother and I fished out a fleet of handmade wooden hydroplanes left bumping against the mossed waterworks, looking for a vanished dock. Bellied down on wood too rotten to trust, we fished them out one by one – one of those gleams in which young lives wake from that forgetful fall that troubles away their childhood. (Otherwise waking only years later, children no longer, sans the young selves that had been not so much unthinking as before all thinking.)

That year I dreamt I led a trek through the Gully, an amazing jungle of huge-leafed tropical plants (identified years later by Jung as the thoughts of God), brother and sister passing lightly through its luxuriant leafing and up its far side to the veranda of a large white house of light and air, doors open to the breezy sunshine and fresh air. *Expectancy*, breathing came easier – even waking back into that grimy fifth grade year, dimly realizing the lifetime’s trudge ahead, I held to that journey’s end.

*we glimpse only in fragments,
in shards and splinters
reflected from one to the next*

V

the moon fell into my bathtub last night,
out of a children's story –
it dragged, dripping, around my chamber
before i could catch and towel it;
i remembered i was sleepy

– to the tune of Old McDonald
Teri on one side, Carl on the other
waiting in the big bed on the porch
for Daddy's old maroon Ford
to bumple up in the spring evening
and die in the dusk like an overheated
dragonfly.

ENTERING THE LUCID HALLUCINATORIUM

Perhaps we too once were dipped in hot tea. But the teacup, don't you know, that lovely fragile thing painted pale rose that once belonged to the grandmothers, lies shivered to splinters on a flagstone floor. Picked up and kept in their thousands in a small box, the shards live under the lovely evasion that they will someday be pieced together.

What do we know of lucidity? Moments. Movements. Fragments. They lie collected in that box, lovely glimpses through thin cracks, splits in morning mist that murmur closed.

One writes down dreams, keeps a journal, writes poetry. Over decades, a lifetime seeps – stalagmites form. Stepping in any stream, all streams effulge, their waters invading words written years before. Eddies flood back to saturate one's work late in life. The way knows no linearity. Post-Proust, memory is no constructed thing but only reflected in the thousand shards of meaning's mirror.

Words flee the melodrama, scurry like small creatures, hide themselves under sheltering rocks where they compact themselves, dense and cryptic, pulling in all the rays of light from their surfaces, that only redound the more.

Dreams rerun; revisiting stories known only there, pick up the thread again. It all recurs, not in time's cycle but at once, enveloping eternity. What then of memory?

Later and for years since, I've visited soul houses, dreaming my way into spaces long closed off and unoccupied, corridors, wings and attics forgotten, floorboards bare, bare striped pillows and mattresses stripped and left on bare bedsteads. And rooms unimaginably rich in furniture and art, space beyond space, room opening upon room – room to *be*. What have I done with *that*? At times they were being remodeled, walls separating small rooms torn out, new windows put in facing sunlit patios, wood paneling. Sometimes a presence I almost encounter, but never do.

One year, a round house, set precisely on my childhood home, the old family home, the one we left that summer after 4th grade, now a welcoming homecoming to light, air, warmth, space. Someone living there has taken up the flowing life that purls on. Gramp drops by to see how the remodeling is going, in good health, full of his old interest and advice. The round house encircles and brings within it the natural earth – half-buried boulders; a stream flows through. My sister and brother are there, no matter what the adults are doing or not doing – the three of us growing up together.

All this unfolds from the moment that came when she and I decided to survive childhood, and bring everyone along if we could. We met somewhere beyond naming and only our souls knew the whole story and watched every step of the way.

We set out, taking the laughter of childhood as far as we can into the days to come.

Galway Kinnell

Small ghosts, half-returned, can be heard more than half a century on. Braving my venture into the world (as soon we found out we must) on your unconditional sisterhood, searching out each our own soul house, we went together and led together, and Carl came too.

Father's Daughter

(for Laurel and Teri)

I
my father reached for my sister
(little more we're told)
many lies were sold
forcing her orbit far
face pressed toward interstellar space
until she rounded the ecliptic,
made the hard turn
and was waiting to board
in a small eastern Washington airport
to see him for the first time in 32 years
when word came of his death.

the spin jumps instantly in two
linked quanta, be they never so far apart.

II
"small daughter" he'd say –
but ours, not quite six, tiptoes
early mornings careful
not to wake us
into bed
and wriggles into place.

I place a hand a moment on her side,
she covers it with her own
small hand patting mine as she sighs back to sleep.
and there we have it –
what neither my sister nor I
had, spreading whole
across our hearts –
 and I knowing he is gone,
 and she knowing he is gone –
the comet so long
retracing its long sweep
that she who settles now
thinks naught of it.

Carl

My brother Carl inched into my life like igneous rock intruding its continental edge little by little into the lapping ocean. Over a lifetime he lifted his head to look in my eyes, making his time-consuming headway into my heart, arche-typal in my dreams. We all shared a room at first; we heard Carl rock his head left right, back forth, over over in his crib, banging his head against the crib's headboard as he slowly impelled it down the floor to slam into the impedimentary wall, practicing even then his geologic thrusts.

Growing up we fought, resisting the lava love already flowing from spreading heart centers into the rifting sea, unknowingly bent our backs to push against the continent on which we stood. At last recognizing his startling profile, ancient in mind as dreams, I gave in and turned to that long mountain climb that has been the love of my brother, that gives at last onto the belvedere from whose vantage the entire vista is his life and mine, gathered into the eye of a raven that soars away. Since then, his smile has been with me night and day. Since then, he brays his impolitic opinions in my kitchen. Since then, he has had my back and I have a larger home.

He woke once late into a long night, as the quiet snow first fell. After midnight he went out alone barefoot, age 4 or 5 or 6, told no one, to track bare footprints in the new snow. The youngest, he was left out often. He sniffed out where Christmas presents and mother's chocolate were hidden. He had the upper bunk until he converted the attic crawl space into a dark bedroom, carrying all my sister's stored boxes out into the scotch broom to be ruined by the rain, to her great ire. He left with Mother when the Army transferred Bob to Minnesota, the year Teri and I refused to go.

Like my sister, *he knew*. Only a brother or a sister can carry that knowledge, what it was like to grow up in *that* home, in *that* family – no other can share it. We needn't carry it alone. We do it with each other.

Our voices fade far from hearing, no longer held in living memory. The brook of my sister's amusement; my brother's brass banter. Oh my brother, oh my sister, I had rather vanish like clouded moonlight than be lost in a world without you.

Tricycle

(for Carl, 1976)

Carl and I leand on the oil stove all night
and talkt the way oil pours –
takes a long time to drain the can.

Blue plotchd the window's dark robe –
we opened the curtains, stoppt talking,
pulled on our boots.

He took me up in the pine lot
above our old house and showed me it:

rust – made of rust; all three
wheels busted off, lay on its side.
We crackd through dry pine branches to find it –
just after 5:00 a.m.
and bleary light.

I shivred, heard more birds sing
than I knew were left in Winslow.

So tiny that when I lifted it
between my legs and straddled,
the handlebars touched my belt buckle
but the scooter bar didn't reach my knees.
I set it upright and wiped its brown spore
on my pants.

He told me he'd broken a wheel on it,
hid it up here in the woods so Mommy wouldn't
find out. It was mine 14 years ago –
he knew it to the year.
I said let's take it home; my brother
said no, it's the only thing been
constant all these years.

Oh Loved One

why is it that the parent,
calling children,
will go through the entire list,
sometimes adding their own parents,
grandparents, siblings
even the cat and dog?
because the voice inside
is simply calling
"oh loved one."

*now look back on so many things forgotten
and realize how little needed changing*

Native Tongue

Dandelion days of early June, Northwest sun still spring-cool. Winter-colored solitude disappeared into itself, a quiet Sound fading without distinction into its own skies. Who am I if not my own country?

Born on a June morning pale as the skin of a golden apple in a sun-showery spring, raised on a rock in Puget Sound, where gray stones merge, submerge, emerge from a gray sea that dies sighing into its own gathering return; memory gray-green already as the man-old *wolde*, *ealdor* even before my own world was old. Faint wash of weak waves like shallow breaths of memory; days that fall like Big Leaf Maple, yellow thousands littering the drive; the slap where the tide laps littorally and young bare feet ouch trepidatorily over barnacle-capped beach cobbles.

Bainbridge Island sheltered in slanting trunks, green over green water reaching. Madrone and fir leant out over a ribbed and rippling Sound. Crustaceans barnacled unbuilt shores, small crabs hid beneath green-slimed stones turned over. A small barnacle myself, set on a small stone, whelk clamped securely to home built by great-grandparents. Memories feathery fingers rake food from the surrounding seas amidst which I, loved and belonging, lived on a green, rainy island with as little question as any small creature.

Born in 1954, middle of three, older sister, younger brother – all that whispers is another. The middle child, said to be gifted negotiator – that may be so, but that gift, if it is a gift, can become confused in the inner sensing of boundaries, its dark bright sight wrapped in edges of opacity, insight colliding with density.

The three of us rocked to sleep on island shores. Mother bore the three of us in 32 months and was fulfilled. My father was already thinking about paring back, or at least packing.

Native Tongue

(for Robert Sund)

the coast suffused with a native tongue –
Elwah, Calawah, Makah, Shi Shi.

Elwah,

Calawah,

Makah,

Shi Shi. the names like restless breakers
roll in from a gray sea –
cobbles **awash** with the waves that

slip back,

never-ending.

the breath on which the names go out
pausing on the ahhh –

names fading away into fog
like the ghosts of those
who spoke them.

*under cold rain
the grebe bends his neck
and leaps a little,
diving with no cry
into gray water.
cormorants hang their wings
out to dry in the blowing rain.*

SOUL HOUSE

1964

At 10 – that room to which no doorway led from that house of decay and disintegration; that parlor furnished with those two flowered, over-stuffed armchairs effusing warmth and comfort. I knew I'd come to this forgotten refuge before. They've always been here, those two chairs like overweight aunts, waiting. Glass doors that led to a garden, an unmown backyard, its stagnant pool now refreshed, the Gully filled with gigantic tropical plants overleafing a blackberry jungle, the trail to that pastel house of light and air where I trekked with my brother and sister.

When neglected, all this appeared only in its bones – rooms, corridors, and entire floors unvisited buried forgotten dank. In fifth grade, the dirt-floored understairs mummy drag-legged toward me.

For many years, I found my way into rooms behind the walls. Bare mattresses, stripped of sheets, long unused. Bare unfinished wood in dark halls and windowless rooms, unoccupied, fallen into disrepair, left behind, deserted, packed up and abandoned.

The imperative to move back in, reoccupy, make a life in spaces beyond survival, make them rich again, full of sounds, colors, the things of life.

Sometimes they are being remodeled, walls torn down, rooms opening out, large, airy rooms, sunlit, freshly painted, glass-doored, wood paneled, bathrooms incorrupt.

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 what I've done here, where the secret life of the soul is lived in dimensions of life visible to no one else, history known by no one else; the soul revealed in the condition, atmosphere and landscape of these rooms and buildings.

During one difficult time, the dreamhouse twisted in complex ways; floors warped up from the story below like an Escher print, so that walking along on the ground floor was to enter effortlessly onto the second floor. Non-logical connections; things relied on are not timeless and unchanging. Things change as we use them; *because* we live them. Living is that change that passes unnoticed until one finds

the floor below become the one above.

A young man, newly married, his first nice home, beginning his career, his dreamhouse under construction, places it square on the center of his personal history, the home where he grew up

*I knew this place, I knew it well
every sound and every smell
my brother's laugh, the sighing wind
this is where my life begins*
sung by Anne Mayo Muir

centered in the safest, strongest place; huge, open, made of natural wood, a place to take deep breaths – breathing itself; a round home that brings nature within.

This is not a place from which one can “move out”. (Even after we moved out, it was still and always “our house”.) The place where my grandfather grew up and his parents made their life, the place to which we always promised ourselves we would come home; deeply emplaced fulfillment. Things long ago seem possible again. New construction is well along but far from finished. Moving back in, my mother and sister both there, living in it while we finish it.

Gramp comes by to view the progress, hearty, looking critically like the crow that cocks his bright eye, advising – what could be done better, for example, protect the furniture we have left sitting out on the porch, exposed to rain (some fine pieces, a green velvet couch of beautiful quality). Exhilaration tempered by so much to do.

*Come in then, if you will
I am neither begging nor proud
I am just me, and I am here.
Touch me, if you are there.*

*Yes, and if I allow your musical waters
to flow through my soul,
will they carry me far –
to where the music comes from?*

Father and Line of Fathers

Richard was 24 when I was born; Drusilla not yet 22. Marvelous that two such children should raise three of their own. But they didn't so much raise us as set us afloat in a Northwest green light filtered through the leaning foliage, each on our own night sea journey, pushed off from that twilit island shore – perhaps not tucked in reed baskets, but cockled in giant clamshells, the top half his escape and the bottom her fairytale – his escape from her fairytale, set adrift by parents, one who couldn't find his own way home, the other who never left it.

Who can remember his own father fairly? (Freud knew.) My father honed skills in psycho-drama long before it became a therapy. He played a mean boogie woogie piano by ear – nightly at home, sometimes in local bars or on Puget Sound cruises – as well as the banjo (which he taught me), harmonica, and later even the bagpipes. I can still hear the first few notes of *Sentimental Journey*, elided by his long fingers laconically slipping off the piano keys. He said so few words to us. What was he husbanding?

He was tending the dusk-colored poppies of Dis, to whose horticulture he early introduced us. With them he was tender. Gaping through holes in the attention with which children should be clothed, we watched as he sped away, tending toward the asymptote of escape. The vibrant orange poppies that our great-grandparents planted in the dooryard of our childhood home were, for him, discolored in failing light, nearly colorless, only a faint rim of orange remaining, an extinguishing sunset.

Still our hearts called to him, Richard, the littlest boy, hurt no one knew quite how, whose troubles so overwhelmed his tears that they unshed troubled not his lifetime only, but all we who came after. At death he forced himself to keep his eyes open even to the brink of death, terrified of closing them on that dusk-poppied dark.

Seen through shards of darkening orange, the fragments of the Lucid Hallucinatorium refract and repeat like a kaleidoscope that forms a labyrinth through which he ran and I run.

Fatherhood

Is that you I hear at the back of my mind,
two years gone, how long you lied –
what does that make, before you died?
I look at my hands on the steering wheel
and feel in me what you used to be –
or was I always you and you always me?
Or are you only memory? A boy wants to copy
his dad – holding the wheel the way you did,
the way you always spoke to us kids;
but they're my children now, they never knew you
except in the ways I've made myself you –
or are you trying to make yourself me?
Is it my eyes or yours that never did see?
Well if it's you then do what you wish you'd done
(you told no one) – I hold my kids;
you never did. If it's you then tell me
the things you learned too late,
redo your fate, do what you waited too long
to try, let yourself cry (your life went by).
I want to hear you speak today
the once-wise words you never did say
the ones I believed that once you could –
the ones you had but never could find
till the day you died, and they came in a tide
in a rush in a hand that smothered
your throat, trying your tongue, too late to be born –
yet still we mourned. I'm doing with mine
what you wish you'd done – with us, with yours,
it's not too late, tell me the price of what you ignored,
quick now give what you never yet gave
don't be grave. Fatherhood rolls to us
and through us a continuing wave.

*the mind like a wounded animal
moves through the bush.*

*the silent earth receives back again
what it had only lent.*

The funeral home afforded me a private viewing alone. I touched his face for the first time in my life. Cold. His eyes had been closed. Teri, Carl and I went to view him there, not with our mother but

with his second wife, Elaine Moline, the woman for whom he deserted his family, having first appropriated to himself the family home that my grand-parents had given their daughter, my mother, when she married – home that my great-grandfather bought when he moved to Bainbridge from Kansas, sold when he pulled out to the Okanogan to pack the Skookum label as an apple orchardist, then bought back again when they returned to the Island. One of the original residences built on Bainbridge, its deed, signed duly in the name of President Chester A. Arthur, oiled like the skin of Echidna, lay rolled up and tied in a heavy cover in the bottom right drawer of my rolltop desk until I donated it to the Bainbridge Historical Society.

Gramp was seven when his parents reached Bainbridge in 1907. John Robinson and Ella Mae (Bobby) Pratt lived out their lives in that house at the corner of Madison and Wyatt. They built another just up the hill on Wyatt Way for their parents. Gramp took the Wyatt Way house when he married and in turn gave their house to my mother when she married, the warm and welcoming grandparents' home to which downhill she'd skipped all her childhood; a living dream for a young bride.

Dick treated it like a rag, something on which to wipe his ass and cast off. He sold it for less than my great-grandparents had paid 60 years before – a few hundred dollars – and then proceeded to play a shell game with the proceeds. He spent the money, he said, on a VW van that was totaled, he said, a week or two later. Or so he told her. At least this is the story she tells. He certainly sold the house, that much is certain – Gramp's boyhood home; their wedding dowry; our childhood home. All knew him by then as an inveterate liar, so who knew what to believe? He lied to distill the last bit of color out of Dis, to keep the ashes of his life from going aggregate gray. Mother saw neither the van nor the proceeds, but she knew about the mistress and we all knew about the drinking, so there was little mystery where the money went. He paid the exorbitant cost of the tenebrous cocktails at the Erebus bar where with Elaine he drank crepuscular toasts, where they mixed the gloaming with the glamour and came off ash-daubed and ditch-marred.

As for us, at a stroke and in very short order we found ourselves bereft of our home, so that playing outside long after bedtime, we eyed in the

terrifying dark skies of Dis a louring sun that shone beneath black sullen clouds its glare on lives staggered, family heritage lost, the legacy of generations wiped out, security nullified – until, woken stunned into a confused dream, we understood nothing. Dick unearthed the only quarter-block of slum then extant on Bainbridge, moved us into one of its two-house ghetto, and took up with the Moline woman. His family lost in those years, he earned then the Dis-approbation that from then on leant over his life like a black poppy.

Repressed Household

The quiet mice scurry
 from stove-corner to stove-corner
 making the rafters tremble
 as if silence were too still.
 The chairs crawl in and out the woodwork
 when they're not watched.
 Momma steps over rugs that slip licentious hands
 over her ankles, fishing in her pan with a stainless
 steel spoon, while Pappy
 rumbles like a furnace under heavy dampers,
 carried around the living room
 by a restless chair.
 Pencils left from children's games
 litter the front hall
 by the stairs, as if the bannister
 were seeking a way
 into the French parlor.
 Children, put to bed under a patchwork
 quilt, ask
 what is real.

There began a rootless life in the twisted style of the Lucid Hallucinatorium – vagrant, fleeting, capricious, notional; always starting, always moving on; leaving early, leaving studies, homes, families, friends. There was with no surcease until, moving to another island in 1997, having lived at 37 addresses in 33 years, I had shattered Odysseus' record (20 years to sail home) by a lucky 13 twelvemonth.

What was it like to grow up in that slum house? Hours mesmerized, gazing out the window at rain dappling puddles in a muddy driveway. Hours of surging boogie woogie piano pounded into the

exhausted evening. A Christmas I wrapped an empty bottle as a gift for my mother because it had an interesting shape and there was no money to buy presents.

Should we credit that he never brought home the vulgar beer on which my stepfather got drunk? Dick preferred the romance of cheap red wine, lionized by 50's Beats and the unionizing thirties. He played his scratchy 78's downstairs after bedtime, the same he'd played in high school: Speckled Red, Cow Cow Davenport, Pete Johnson and Meade Lux Lewis; the Bearcat Crawl, Blues on the Down Beat, Barrel House Boogie, 8 to the Bar.

There were practical demonstrations of the sardonic voice. Training in the use of hard-boiled mockery: *"I'll break your arm off and beat you over the head with the bloody end"* – beneath which huddled a child we never saw.

The Hansen slum its own nightmare, a half-dozen layers of wallpaper peeling from crazy quilt walls; the hole in the floor by my bed as big as I was, from which I was sure something jumped at night, making my mattress lap with small waves. Entry to Dis, down-and-out rathole welfare house where we landed as I began fifth grade, washed up on the shore of my father's flailing squall that boiled up far past any visible horizon, where I first read *Animal Farm* and Ed McBain's 87th Precinct detective novels, sharing the salacious parts with my cousin Sue. Where I was a child and she was a child, and he was a child too, but it was no kingdom by the sea, where rather a hurdling dash of waves somehow leapt the seawall that no longer sheltered inside from outside, confusedly slamming from wall to wall, knocking us and him about until he no more knew north than we did, a child as young or younger than we, squalling alone and abandoned in a gale that out-howled him with his own voice.

The photograph I have of Dick's father, Orville, taken at 22, talks youth and an ambition to validate Horatio Alger. His marriage to the daughter of an Illinois millionaire was a carefully considered step in that program. None of the money passed on. Dick, youngest of the four "Young Robertsons" profiled in the 1942 *Bainbridge Review*, ran that family's vibrating web of secret judgment, tiptoeing the sticky strands that may have caught fat society flies in the King millions back in Illinois, but out West were little more than a decayed cobweb missed in a ceiling corner.

In his home, parents chose up sides and drew their children into alliances. Family-riven, playing the satyr and satirist, he was sent to a Santa Rosa school for troubled boys after he tumbled a tin can filled with firecrackers down the Lincoln School stairs (up which he also once led a cow – much easier up than leading one down). Later he, with help from his brother Walt, disassembled a Model T, to reassemble it on the school roof. From this he learned to dissemble. He also claimed that they once overestimated the quantity of dynamite necessary to blow an outhouse, perhaps the same outhouse under which he boasted they once ran a garden hose, through which they spoke to women who went in (allowing a decent interval for them to sit down) – "hey lady! we're working down here!", years later still laugh-convulsed at their hurried exit.

Returning to Bainbridge High, he handsomely affected a sardonic Bogart worldly toughness, already by then the brilliant psycho-dramatist, and sheared her heart, Dru, just as alone in her imaginary world as he was. Cast as victim in the elaborate stories he twisted compulsively round the theme of his pain, the liar whose concern for others was directly proportionate to their parts in his stories (through which we kids saw more clearly than did the adults).

Family stories are legion, but legends no more make up for what he failed to bequeath us than did Walt's folk-singing genius assuage his own footloose-forsaken and heart-scalded children. Yet he was not violent and Mother loved the humor in his sarcasm. *"I'll cloud up and rain all over you"* he'd say (small boy: imagery of cloud-bruised black sky, Zeus's fertilizing rain about to fall). Or, *"I feel for you but I can't quite reach you"* (so feeling became a groping about). Or *"Do you want a medal or a kick in the pants?"* (admiration for the self-styled smartass cynic who appropriated any likely line or story that came his way). But he had no violence in him – only a flair for drama.

Although it had started long before, it was in my fourth grade year that it all came apart. On his way to work, turning left on the Poulso bypass, he was hit from behind – some Mac Truck hauling a dozer rolled his little VW Beetle down a grass-and-bramble hill, from which wreckage he crawled to fall unconscious, concussed on a slope from which he could just glimpse the dark lanterns of Dis.

Our telephone sat beneath a lovely globed lamp painted with roses on a narrow stand in the living room, just beyond the entry hall. I'd just learned to answer it. The blunt nurse told me "your father won't be coming home tonight" (Mother furious at her callousness). He did come home eventually, to lie on the couch, allowing then our first TV to invade our house to entertain him (always anathema before – if it was beneath him it was beneath me) – but parentally limiting us to 3 shows a week, for which we always chanted "Flintstones, Donna Reed and My Three Sons", our incantatory petition).

He lived on the moon after that, looking down, face three-quarter darkened and seen in its parts by turns. Even when he shed a pale light it was always crossed by windblown clouds. After that he drank, acted in local plays, had an affair with an older woman whom he met on the set of either *The Madwoman of Chailot* or *Charlie's Aunt*, made theatrical threats during long-playing late-night dramas (overheard upstairs through the floor, heart-in-throat, hoping Carl was not awake), and generally inoculated us with a life insecure to the core.

Tracing back, as the twig breaks so grows the tree. Fourth grade, viewed from high in the ceiling corner of the old Commodore Bainbridge Elementary School Office, quietly humming in 1950's efficiency, seated on a pew-like brown bench before the big counter too tall to be seen over, next to a small classmate, Susan Mason. We'd been pulled from class on our first day of 4th grade and sent to the Office to hear adult-talk about balancing classes. It amounted to this: bussed from the neighborhood school to which I'd walked since kindergarten, we would cross the island to a school I'd never heard of, Captain Wilkes. I didn't know other schools existed, much less that we could be sent there. Susan Mason, kind and motherly, her small face comforting me as we sat, small and scared, on the school office bench.

In 3rd grade I'd been a leader; now simply a terrified small boy. First day at Wilkes: a bald boy much bigger than me, one Jan Staub (who, years later, stabbed by sudden empathy, I realized must have lost his hair in radiation treatments for cancer) loomed suddenly over me. He surely knew the effect he had. Memory tangles into briars of fear and confusion. I had crossed into a mysteriously changed world knowing none of the rules.

Already notably smaller than the other boys, I acquired my own following of bullies who found me absolutely magnetic. The first time I was shoved to the ground by Robbie Bellinger (a boy I liked), I didn't think twice but just got up. He pushed me down again; I got up. He pushed me down, I got up. And not until after six or seven or eight times, when he'd run away bored with the game and I wandered home in a stupor, did I comprehend that cruelty now fit into my world. (Teri telling Mother in a small voice; I speechless.) I made academic achievement my stronghold. Good grades became my centering angular velocity.

By fifth grade we were at Hansen's. I made friends with the next-door street tough, Vic Keys, whose cool father Gary tended bar at Mac's Tavern on the Island's truncated waterfront. Vic told far-fetched tales of falling down the steep beach bluff at the Bainbridge ferry dock; he slung low, hard street punches at Patty Alpaugh; but cried when hit himself because, he said, there were bubbles in his brain from his sudden skid down that bluff that would (he said) pop, and he would die.

The Keys lived between us and the patrician white Alpaugh house, home of the chain-smoking Island attorney, Bob Alpaugh, who handled Mother's divorce the year before he died of lung cancer – 40 years before that same chain-smoking habit killed the father whom he had caused to be divorced. What a word it was in our childhood, *divorce*, some French thing, out of place in the American West – "to turn away, turn aside, a dissolution, a deprivation".

Though Patty was in my class she dwelt at the acme of the *In Crowd* and I was never invited into her home – though I walked into Vic's at any hour I fancied (and once threw a rock through their long doorside window, chasing Vic home from some long-forgotten grievance) – a crash which mellow Gary passed off when Mother went to pay, allowing as how he'd done the same thing himself when a boy.

On the other side lived Randy Buesser, "the retard" and his little brother Jeffy, cobwebbed in fascinating scars from the time Randy pushed him into a fire, whose big-boned horsey sisters, Mary and Diane, were reputed to drop their clothes anytime (in Vic's salacious stories he threw their rags into the blackberry brambles to see them scramble after them through the thorns); whose drunk and vicious mother chased *me* home once

flailing and missing with her belt – all by themselves, they sufficed to make an entire ghetto.

From Hansen's it was a short walk downtown, where I stole ice cream bars from the Winslow Thriftway. But for that one 5th-grade summer we had our own ice cream parlor, just around the corner past the Martinique (the fashionable Bainbridge restaurant), below a huge parking lot that lay just below the Buesser house – a lot down the long slope of which I once swooped, an avenging angel, outracing my own legs, because I saw Randy and my own brother swinging between them the terrified tiny Alpaugh boy – leaving my own body in the headlong stoop, jerking Carl by the arm and furiously chasing Randy all the way up the front steps to his home; afterwards walking the still trembling and sobbing little Alpaugh boy home.

Before we knew her as our father's adulteree, I remember Elaine, gracious and rather large behind the counter of Van Deckers' ice cream parlor, that one summer it was in business. How gently martyred she seemed, asking what we would have, as her grossly obese husband (the very Van Decker himself) creasing his enormous gut as he leaned over to peer at us, like Cerberus gone to seed (though three guts was not as impressive as three heads would have been).

We moved the summer before sixth grade from the Hansen Tarturus to Brockmeier's, where startled awake by my father's loud ruckus bulling up the stairs, I sat upright frozen in bed, as he threatened to take down from his gun rack the rifle with which he swore to shoot us all – hoping my brother next to me was and would stay asleep. It went on for an hour, self-pity, calculating terror – things at which he was good. He would say: *your mother brought you into this world and I'll take you out* – but it didn't faze Mother; she had long known that, threats deflated, he would turn into a crybaby. Once when he threatened to break the neck of his banjo and she didn't rush to stop him, he became indignant that she left him no choice but to make good. She was far the tougher and more resilient, raised in a down-to-earth family where people stood up for themselves and stood for what they said – something I too learned from my Pratt grandparents.

In later years I began to feel sorry for him – even after I learned how he'd lied to his parents that Mother had didn't want them to see us, cutting off

access to our beloved Robertson grandparents for years to come. When we got old enough to drive, we visited them in their old age, but saw almost nothing of the Robertson aunts, uncles and cousins until I reconnected with cousin Paula after 30 years.

He divorced and left when I was in 6th grade and, having had no interest in having children in the first place, seemed finally freed of any real responsibility for us. Yet when in high school I rode my bike to his home, he rather welcomed the visits and took up some new role, not quite parental, with light duties and no responsibilities.

For her part, Elaine felt it quite enough to buy me a new shirt once in a while – and I was ninny enough to be grateful. After all, they had a boat to keep up, a yacht club membership, office parties. They didn't need college tuition on top of all that, and I, having watched the vapor trails of my father's escape since I was young, gave it no thought and paid my own way from the day I walked out the door at 18. Elaine certainly wasn't about to shell out for cowbirds in the nest. None of that mattered, except her priggishly smug superiority toward Mother. As for Dick, he sank in the heliacal russet of vanishing Dis, a varnish Elaine never understood nor could reach.

Only much later did I realize that none of my friends had childhoods like this.

Dedication (to my Cousin Paula)

1992

Our encounter, the first in more than 30 years – (the original and only had endeared you to me, a family 4th-of-July picnic on Grandma Bobby's lawn when you were a young woman and I a small boy – now we, witnesses, seers passionately exhuming the family story that wants nothing so much as the relief of being told, so self-hidden at times and so flimsy until, spoken, we take from their hands that damage they did as much to themselves as anyone, and give those whose hurt escaped to hurt some small redemption. The departed stand troubled and wordless, some few feet off, holding it out to us. So few are left, how did we reconnect? Second children, son of the second son and second daughter of the second daughter, each taking up for our survival that brilliance that flared

through our family – seared
 but not consumed. Two halves held dear beyond
 all remembrance – will salvation be any different?
 Dipping your head a little as you speak,
 your eyes narrow slightly as if to see
 into a rain-laced wind of years –
 the look of one who looks through what is
 forbidden, though prohibitions fall like blows.
 We take from their hands carefully
 the soul that tore through them and seemed
 so private, trying to recollect the scattered parts
 to see them whole in lives we never lived.

*each of us burst like fireworks
 upon a scene now faded,
 leaving ghostly afterimages
 illuminated in a smoke
 that hangs a moment
 against the black night sky*

for Paula, Teri, Carl

*Opening my own chest for heart surgery I find vital
 organs grown into a forest of sharp knives, scissors and
 razors. They snap and click like a mouthful of
 switchblades. They lean toward me, a ditch staked with
 sharpened bamboo. Some of these I know to have been
 implanted in that 4th grade year. I see I have spent most
 of my life in denial. There rose from that garden stillborn
 the silent, snipped by those clippers of denial, garden
 shears grown there. It's no good, no good – there's too
 much for an aging man to remember. My father sat
 motionless on the small deck of his small apartment
 through his last small years and months, his personal
 collection of teddy bears all he had for company, pinned
 in the small space of his soul by this same bristling
 arsenal of knives and long-blades. Shall I avoid the same?
 Or shatter life's mirror into the million shards of the Lucid
 Hallucinatorium?*

*Here too are simples gathered to self-heal. For example,
 the Great Compensation: the successful child. Giving
 myself the balm of fierce success, the winning sure self-
 loved comfort, words of praise.*

*There is no choice but to sew this chest back up and carry
 cupped here what for one wild moment I thought to
 thrust clattering to the floor, treading on abated blades,
 walking into the blessed land.*

Here began the mess, the tohubuhu that bent and
 channeled his life. Its body-literal, self-inward-
 turning grief switched off hormones, dwarfing and
 deforming its material, figuring me forth in the
 image it would live out. After that, insidious
 judgments whispered behind cupped hands hiding
 sweet mouths he would long to kiss but never
 would. Dwarf desperate to couple with the only
 women who would have him, soul-dwarfed and
 deformed, twice married beneath the sordid
 wedding bells of soul-hells, laboriously
 hallucinating lubricious bowers. Habits of
 compulsion, leveraged on arrogance and puerile
 pride, like gravitational fields used to slingshot a
 briefly orbiting craft into deep space, thrown again
 and again into unlit black heavens void of moral
 and spiritual air. Compulsively leaping into sudden
 marriage-bed – a woman hiding behind her, her
 lesbian döppel, coming out and hiding from him her
 phantasmagorical poet-lover posturing as her
 therapist.

After dragging that story through every muddy yard
 of misery, through those paper-walled boundaries
 that separate compulsion from compulsion on
 nights calling like nightbirds for respect and true
 human care, night after night his steering wheel
 turned of itself to pull up at another eventual
 partner's 8th Street rental; a madwoman who
 intensely held his eyes – escaping after midnight,
 on the short driveway he saw the stars like Dali
 clocks melted over the firmament so that time was
 destroyed nor never came he earlyhome to do his
 writing that could have been his salvation. From
 there, broken lifesprings horrify to silence.
 Wreckage, a ruin, no backlooking now.

What did it feel like, as a boy? Sent from the
 ancestral home parlor lit red-green-blue by the
 glow of old-fashioned Christmas bulbs; books
 opened and read aloud at Christmas; the three of
 us lined up on the couch on both sides of Mommy;
 Daddy through the parlor door, shaking out his
 paper where he sat in his chair to the left of the
 big black oil stove; from Halloween costumes,
 lights-out in the upstairs hall, in the magic-playing
 dark where the Princess always eluded the goblins;
 from upstairs bathroom bedtime evenings, all three
 of us brushing our teeth while Daddy lounged on
 the edge of the big white claw foot tub; from
 Mommy tucking us into bed, each with our own
 Ludens cough drop, sacredly intoning our soft
 bedtime prayer to her, and she the same never-
 varying response back to us; from cherished never-
 questioned life in which we were cherished and

deserved to be. *From there* dropped into the ratty slumhouse, peeling tatters of wallpaper, abandoned to it by parents gone from their bodies and our lives as sure as if they'd become zombies, bumping lost lonely around anguished dark, lost ourselves from what had place and sense and value, left lonely standing staring, staring out the window at rain falling, falling into puddles, waiting, waiting for the pain to subside, and each drop – dozens of drops circling the surface of each puddle – repeating, repeating “meaningless, meaningless, meaningless” at each plop. Waiting for them to say something else.

Life falls to us in fragments, in Old Hebrew a *tohu-bohu* of shattered mirror, an inchoate domain written down originally in Genesis 1:2. What did it feel like? Emptiness, confusion, despair, chaos. Tesseracting out of that termagant universe, each fragment reflects each, non-linear, out of sequence, a twisting style repetitious in the manner of a holograph – but we do not reconstruct the wavefront entire, the original globular singularity whose horizon, at once within, without and neither within nor without, we cross everywhere and nowhere, in each instant and never. Rather each shard resurrected in fresh context splints the broken thaumaturgical bones of meaningful tessellation. And that and there is all we know or need to know to resurrect meaning from the plopping stared-at raindrops that still fall and fall outside the window of that fifth-grade terebinthine resin, the congealed memory.

And so I already knew, before I ever left for college, the parable of the semblance, the gesture or trope of living a performance, constructed to stand for, but not enact, being.

Dick all unbeknownst doubtless figured in more than one of the uncanny amoeboids my sister and I crayoned on childhood walls. He likely spoke his inner words to himself as he did to us, never straight but always too dramatic too cynical too snide too condescending too unctuous to be believed.

Richard's father, *Orville* would have been 36 when he was born. He tells it that he was born a twin in Clinton, Missouri on a frosty October morning in 1894, the country doctor driving out in his carriage to the small white cottage to see to the birth.

Father's Father

(for Joseph)

outside, if you look tonight you will see a ladder fixed upright against the night sky.
it cannot be leaning against the stars
yet there is no visible support for its upper end,
its feet planted firmly in the earth.

if you look, it's there every night.

my father's father, so estranged from his father that he took his mother's father's name, would understand why I have done the same, returning the name used only two generations. my father may have his own reasons: he knew his father (whom we knew only as the kindest of grandfathers) in ways we cannot know. nor was his father able to reach or rescue his son. radical amputation has removed our knowledge of that history. but we know that each of us has been in our turn, a ladder set up against nothing, reaching, it appears,

for the far lone bright points of light that thicken impossibly distant night's black blanket above the still earth. silence surrounds their aloneness.

this will stop here.

you may lean your ladder on mine and your son, if you have one, will lean secure on you and on two generations of interlocking love. may it build from us, Joseph. may true family begin with us. this is how tradition begins, a ladder set up alone against nothing, the night foundation for what is to come. may our son's sons look back on an unbroken line of father's fathers starting here.

Meditation with Joseph

“What are you doing?” he asks.
“Sitting quietly without thinking” I answer.
He crawls up onto my lap.

“What is this music?” he asks.
 “Meditation music” I answer.

Rocking slowly, holding him,
 no longer the little body
 balanced easily on my shoulder,
 now he has to fold himself
 onto my lap.

Rocking slowly, holding him,
 nothing could bring me sooner
 to my own heart.
 I am not him
 he is not me
 but we are both waves
 upon this sea.

“Why do people meditate” he asks
 “Because there is Spirit” I answer,
 knowing this makes no sense.
 He nods.

He wants to talk about bugs and dinosaurs
 and which came first,
 and also when will the sun explode
 and will we be extinct by then?
 “This meditation music is making me sleepy” he says,
 “Let’s go get some cereal.”

We called him *Grandpoo* (*Gran Pere* being unpronounceable), a kind man indentured as a boy because, though his young mother found the fortitude to leave her much older abusive husband and begin anew in Kansas City (when he was barely 9), yet her children still fell victim in the end to his cruel distemper. Orville himself was never intemperate (worked manfully all his life to contain it in a large soul), but his father, whose name was Cook, tracked them down in Kansas City, persuaded his young ex-wife to let him take Orville and Olive off for a family Christmas, and then, for a gift, indentured his own children to rough farm families whose scriptures were strictures, little more than child slaves. He was made to write to his mother that he was happy. At 13, he slipped her a note that he planned to run away and, seeing no reason her son should have to lie or sneak away, she came at once and freed them both, again by sheer strength of will.

As a young man Orville turned naturally to help the destitute – street children like miniature wild roses

once called fairy flowers, Baby Darlings, sent out to earn a meager supplement selling rosebud corsages. Like the burnet rose matured to breed the huge double golden-yellow *Frühlingsgold*, Orville matured his life’s work to transform these children, this rapidly spreading ground cover (best cut early or at dusk, who unpruned grow to a mass of tangled brambles, who love full sun [but not too intense], ramblers that bloom only once). He was Clothonic to spin again their rosewreath, Lachestic to lengthen the thread measured out, Atroposatic to unsever ruth. He carefully autobiographized so that we should *know*.

Disdaining his father’s name when he came of age, Orville had it legally changed to his mother’s maiden name, Robertson. Almost 70 years later, I did the same (an irony escaping my hyper-ironic father), leaving behind the name that had been ours only two generations, to honor my great-hearted mother’s father. Years later, established in his career, Grandpoo received a letter from his father, threatening to “expose” him for presenting himself under an assumed name. Grandpoo held him beneath contempt. And his son, my own father, wrote bitterly to me late in life, appalled that I had taken my mother’s father’s name, implying that there were things that he could say, if he chose. Neither of us had more to do with our fathers; I saw Dick once in his last 26 years until the week he died.

*the darkest forests are young,
 dense with thin trees packed close.
 the oldest forests
 are cathedrals of filtered light.*

*only the self
 finds the path
 to no self.*

Introduced to Walter Whitson, an executive of a Kansas City family service agency who became his mentor, Orville began to attend Quaker meetings with a deep-eyed and deeply quiet young woman, Ruth King, then living in the Whitson home. He began to work with immigrant families, Italian and Mexican, the bewildered, with limited language skills, whom he found “warm, friendly and outgoing.”

Neither Orville nor Ruth cared for unearned success. Once married they threw off the black shroud of society and wealth to begin a shared a career in social work that led from Columbus to Kansas City, Duluth, Omaha, and finally to Seattle, where Orville joined the exclusive downtown Rainer Club, open to only 100 men – vacancies filled only upon the death of a member, perhaps laid to rest under bushels of Secret Beauty and Black Jade.

Orville stood and spoke as a principled man. He denounced Japanese internment and racism in WWII, in a strongly-worded letter to the *Bainbridge Review* in 1944, at the height of the war. He became the first social agency executive in the northwest to employ African-American and Japanese caseworkers, and the first to have them carry integrated caseloads. As a young man, invited to interview with a prestigious national family service organization, he refused the job when he witnessed first-hand their Southern courtesy to the colored staff:

...as we passed the desk where sat a neatly dressed, well groomed Negro woman of superior appearance, he [the manager] just waved his thumb in her direction as though pointing out an animal and said “That is Susie, our colored worker.” One would have thought she did not have a surname. This was obviously not the place for me.

Orville Robertson

I never knew that man until I read his autobiography long after he passed. The man I knew only as the kindest of grandfathers had white wisps of hair, hands that shook from arteriosclerosis (a malady we dubbed arterio-Cherrios-sis), and (so we were told) a weak heart. Ever ready to read *Pogo* to us on his lap or push us by the toes on the swing he hung out back, he could be as stern on duty and touchy on dignity as an Old Garden rose, but heart-fragrant as the Damask and compassionate as the winter rose that cures madness.

Grandpoo

Orville of old, City of Gold,
Attar of Rose in a Persian sleeve-fold
City of Mercy long foretold
Scatter of children noisy and bold
Shattering Orville, their tales retold
Tatter of crows that ladder the skies
Children who labor, hand-to-mouth cries
Corvid or kinder, black rags that fly
Shoot down the alley, down poverty row
Screaming neglect, the battering scolds
City of Beauty, gown of its souls
Blindfold to woes, the world goes by
Shivering clothes, blighted petals of rose

Orville aureate
pioneer laureate
of social work
old ills lurk
by old town walls
the starving fall
words sink
impoverished calls
crows caw
children crow
water boils
hearts scald
thin fingers indicate
what lies abdicate
and why’s supplicate
burghers fatter
than larders
dare none to pry
high on their toes
clothes-pinned nose
sniff “die unabate!”

Orville, a rose, early arose
street peddlers, each a tiny rose
sent out to sell their miniature rose
bouquet and nosegay rose
of no wars, rose of spun gold
 ruler of none
keeping *sub rosa*
nor silence nor secret
drew them all near
those who were sold
whom none hold dear
beaten metal, pressed petals
Orville disposed
clothed, shoved in their hands
a few coins of gold
a few less waited, a few less cold

My mother's father, *Carl* came west with his people from Vermont by way of Kansas, arriving on Bainbridge in 1907 at the age of 7. He lived there to the age of 99, oak heart, oaken beam, enduring, durable, holding up the space of protection, moving into the dark time of year and into the light time, drawing away the lightning and holding bedrock.

He grew up a Bainbridge country boy, bare feet slapping the dust of roads before there were automobiles or pavement. Line of fathers, trustworthy, solid, reliable, who held patriotic those old-oak values that by the sixties had become the conventionality against which we thought we were rebelling. Even-tempered like the tight-grained, honey-colored oak made into barrels for aging wine and whiskey, old barns, railroad ties, house posts, hardwood floors, timbers for boats and buildings, the cross.

We cast up the old dark tangled knot and are relieved by light streaming under the door, breaking on the horizon. Under oak, dreams are prophecy, its astringency heals wounds, the last leaves fall scarlet yellow brown; deep-rooted oak bears strength from the heart of the earth, brings steadiness and deep joy, is hospitable and open-hearted. Mixed oak forest is hickory white ash tulip poplar beech sugar maple black cherry, its understory serviceberry spicebush witch hazel, or it stands massive and alone in rolling oak foothills; interior live oak, a gladdening that outlives survival.

Outgoing, friendly to all, good-humored, patient, honest, good-hearted, he smiled often but was serious when values were at stake; loved to argue and tease, amiable afterward and no hard feelings; "one of the roughs" he went straight to the heart of the community, spoke the heart of the matter, never took the heart out of laughter.

Hearty, blue-eyed, unfazed, he looked directly in the eye of whomever he spoke to and never seemed short at all. Throughout a boyhood spent unconsciously fashioning my own self's self I grew like Aerial within that oak. A man who treated others and himself with respect, the man I loved and looked up to as a boy, the man whose name I took, the man with whose values I left home.

He lived out the full 20th century, born in November just before the century turned,

Gramp

What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

Crowfoot, a Blackfoot Chief at his death, April 1890.

I. Firefly

a small boy, no more than four stood near your knee (in the yard where you yourself played in days all the same to those stars at which we stared) and held two of your fingers in a tight fist. whatever you told me then of astronomy has been lost, but never since has the star-struck sky been so full or far. I remember falling, head back, mouth open, into that blueblack silence, mystery black-brimmed and bottomless, holding your hand, while the window threw its warm rectangle of lamplight on the yard around us. beyond that, all eternity falling, thousands of fireflies the scattered shower of stars that pulsed when we sighed – and we standing rejoicing on its edge in the cheek-stinging cold.

II. Breath in Winter

the St. Nick painted by your Dad on a big cardboard cutout is still ruddy, broken out in a belly-laugh, bulbous nose rubbed red by a Midwestern winter more than 80 years ago (the bloom spread to his cheeks as if he'd stopped by a small Kansas bar to whoop it up with the boys before arriving here, half-way down the chimney of your snowbound home under a crystal-cold midwinter Plains sky spread with fine-pointed stars that tingle and clink an icy Silent Night, Holy Night, his breath hanging in the air and holding in his gruff Christmas hands packages

passing in March of the year before it turned again. He lived March to November more than November to March. He was spring, summer and fall, ruddy as ripening apples, sound as a fresh-planed board, a man who looked for the best in others, his voice confident, warm and deep. He was more a member than rebel; his predilection was belonging, not rebelling.

Uninhibited, prone to repeating appalling prejudices, he meant no offense, and treated all he met with the same human dignity. To do otherwise went against his grain. He brought stray young servicemen home to dinner throughout the War. Gram and Gramp shared what they had, warmth of home and family, that was who they were. Her scrupulous care to make even each grandchild's Christmas gift made him impatient – to him the giving said all that needed saying. He spoke clear and plain. Thus his imagery is unelaborate.

He loved to watch television cartoons with us when we were little, sitting behind us in his big chair as we sprawled on the floor in front of their black and white (later color) TV. I followed him around, watched him use tools; listened to him talk to older men. Carl and I went to the Fire Hall with him when he was Commissioner, where we tried to figure out how to use the pool table while he chatted with his old chum, Chief Earl Callahan. I grew up arguing with him – the safety of an older man of integrity against whom I could rebel. He gave me wood to cut into scraps, then helped me reassemble them into some project. We watched 1960's football on TV and then went out in the yard at halftime to throw the ball; my first baseball glove was his 1920's antiquity. Coming home always meant him.

His people traced back through the Mayflower and Plymouth Bay Colony; their 13th century trace disappears into the Scots Campbell clan. They settled for eight generations in Swanton, Vermont, naming successions of first-born sons alternately Carlton John and John Carlton. That tradition ended when Gramp had no sons, and was restored when I changed my last name to his and we named our son Joseph Carlton.

He knew what it was to *inhabit* a place, to know the land and the currents of air, water, earth and life as he knew those of his own blood. He was a grandfather oak, there a

addressed to "Carl Pratt, Wabash Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri" and dated 1903).

III. Little Shadow

The razor's edge against the wrist of time
cuts down
against the grain of our lives;
the homes of moments, cast off,
bauble away.

It slices in one long downward stroke
unceasing
to reach that moment when –

like a sudden flock of sparrows
departing the wind-line of poplars –

all at once a soul is released,
as if a whirlwind of leaves
decided to quit the tree
and took wing all in one motion,
setting the wild wheatfield beyond
afire as they go.

century before those who come to gaze on it, there
a century after.

It came down, after a hundred years, to the swirls
of light wind and the weak sun of a March day, a
handful of us gathered at the little Port Madison
cemetery, the families of his three daughters.
Others spoke at his service; none of our family did.
Our hearts spoke for us. Carl and I reset the slab
over his ashes placed beside Grandma's in the
grave; we lifted the heavy stone back on top.

*the grampus
snores all night*

They Paunch Along Our Beach

Cannon Beach 1973

i
 they paunch along our beach,
 that pasty-headed heavy man in the bowler
 and his wife, heavier than the day
 he first spirited her away from
 that lily-frosted alter.
 in the twenties, probably,
 it was *their* twenties,
 and the mood was gay –
 all turned out to see
 a regular fellow and his gal –
 and her eyes probably laughed more than too –
 and he not so dumpy.
 she coyed winking dimples,
 and he maybe even gangly
 at the door, or with a quick jest,
 and chummy with all the best fellows;
 oh, they knew life was good
 for rattle-laugh carloads
 on an outing or a spin;
 yes, life was good, and the values
 set and sure as the oaken church door
 through which they hailed with the rice.
 for the terms were set and fair,
 and the paymaster sure and fair,
 and she fair as he good:
 it was a swell day and the
 alter hung out with lilies.

and now, threaded on the habit of loyalty,
 they paunch along our beach.
 the thread strains purple between them,
 but what better reason?
 love may be fair-weather
 but you can lay your chips
 right on habit every time, bub.
 he will not wait for her
 but trudges a little ahead
 and swings the lunch sack,
 for the sands grasp, whispering,
 at both their feet.
 the needle may hurt
 when first it goes through,
 and the thread is a constant line of tension,
 but still they smile, and simply smile,
 and blandly nod their simple heads
 like a child who knows nothing;
 nothing is safe –
 enough to know?
 and, uncomplaining, they leave
 pigeon tracks in the sand.

she knew how to feed him
 hearty; keep him on the job;
 oh he could bang with authority
 on any nail, and saw –
 but what did they say?
 in thirty-seven years of nights pale
 and house hushed – which is proper –
 what did they say? or
 well-collected bits of knowledge
 until the house fairly hums
 with efficiency, and hums
 with a warm mutter at night too;
 but how many words gone by
 and how many left to go?

what do you say your first night
 in twin beds?
 or when you meet in the bathroom
 at 3 a.m.
 one with a sick headache,
 the other after a gargle;
 watch that strange tango
 of these gawky birds
 in the stilled early morning
 each trying to reach their shelf,
 and what *do* they say?
 37 years has 3 a.m. gone by
 but what has been said?
 in the jingle-jointed dance,
 watch the shadows on the door,
 the clacking of water being run;
 in the strange hours
 when slumber murks deep
 in the hours when the prowls
 of starlight and moonshine can be felt,
 gentle brushing on hair-lifted skin –
 what do they say?

so they paunch on, childish, bland,
 with simple smiles and nods of head
 that are uncomprehending but happy
 to see you, and what
 do *you* say?

what did they expect, and what did they get?
 – he was quick with the clever jest, she
 had the laughing eyes.
 he chummed with all the best fellows
 and the town was proud of their
 hunk of Americana – she
 coyed best of all the gals and could
 cook besides;
 oh speak now
 or forever hold your peace.

ii

he is paunchy and she is heavier
 than when he first dragged her
 from that lily-bedecked alter
 straggling veil and bits of bouquet.
 and what did they not expect
 and what did they get?
 solace, solace at 3 a.m.
 when there is nothing to say
 because all is dried, withered as dried fruit,
 or beef jerky –
 so chew the fat and spit it out,
 it's good to punctuate a sharp jest;
 and eye slyly out of one corner –
 is she shyly, coyly, merrily –
 is she smiling or
 is she saying something to some
 other fellow?
 oh is she thinking of
 little yellow-candy flowers that
 go on the tops of wedding cakes: sugar-
 candy – was she sweet?

but what can you say to her, what can
 you say, but another jest,
 and another?
 and he bats peevishly at her reaching hand,
 like a little boy about to be put
 to the soap; he bats not meaning
 to touch, but such is a way of speaking,
 a telling, a warning.

and now they plod on –
 not so uncommon, not so innocent:
 he lumbers into hardware stores
 on sultry afternoons
 more concerned with the air-conditioning
 than with the grotesquely outsize hand-baggaged
 woman whom he is conditioned to have
 trailing behind like a wake;
 whose red-rouged cheeks
 look now more like a slap
 than a blush –
 and they do plod along,
 vacantly smilingly nodding
 into the distance and into the day,
 happy as a child with a chess set
 whose imagined wars with those pieces
 may be more dramatic than those
 of the masters who understand them –
 they do understand.
 but chess is a silent game,

because what do you say when
 it's his move all the time
 and your queen has been pawned
 on those vacant squares
 which wait only to be set upon
 and give up quite as easily
 and both his knights chew their cuds,
 and the bishop is rooking the king?

Cherries

(for Marian)

These are like the cherries I picked as a boy from the
 backyard tree Gramp planted when he began his family,
 sixty years ago – their skins dark purpleblack and their
 juice a deeper black. I never saw such cherries again until
 I found them in your kitchen.

Gramp hung a swing from the thick cherry limb that
 Mother and her sisters used and we children after them
 – jumping from it to run pick more joyously ripe cherries.

But they don't want memory, the family, so much as they
 want us to repeat the human acts – they continue
 through us not so much by being remembered as by
 being repeated. The celebration of tradition is ritual, and
 ritual rhythm, and rhythm repetition.

Our family continues in our planting and in the thick dark
 fruit that falls through small fingers that will themselves
 grasp more decisively someday (as we ourselves
 eventually will fall heavy with dark fruit through sun-
 patterned green cherry leaves to the soil beneath) –
 something I'd forgotten until I saw that bowl of ripe
 cherries in your kitchen.

*not yet, not yet –
 there will come a time when
 like the peach blossom,
 the cherry blossom
 that float on a bit of breeze
 it will all be found to have been
 much too short a time,
 but not yet*

Sister, Daughter, Mother, Friend

Mother and Mother of Mothers; sister, daughter, lover, friend – you, origin and uroboros; you who gather all, issue all, Mother to your father and daughter to your son. Loon that cries, lake of dark water, night's starred skirt, black earth fecundating, changing moon, salmon struggling up a darksome stream to spawn – you, pomegranate underworld rich in wisdom rubies, putrefaction, burial ground, life mourning life, rare minds and radiant souls; you, shoreless primordial ocean on whose swells bobs the cooking pot in which the glimmering soul rows hard alone to no known shore, beaching on the whale island that rises abruptly from the sea, undiscovered, unknown – fate, conscious or unconscious. Begetter of life into whose arms death falls. Green tips that spring forth glad; sky's bright morning breath a wisp; riotous garden colors, fields gathered to table and kitchen cutting board; pieta of grief holding the dying that rise again from mothering arms; you, withering wise crone: woman.

Every man has a sister he must approach during the time he is given to walk a night-bound shore, before the sea leaps up and engulfs him. Sister, mother, lover, friend – of you, to you we speak sing tell; internal eternal; nocturnal become diurnal, supernal confusion resolved in external fusion. Touch of dark butterfly wings spreading through the open chest, fluttering this skirt of Dis with dim light, like poppies edged in sunset. Sweet breath of woman growing within, with which each true man must grow.

Male is told as lineage; female as the great round.

The early phase of man's existence, the matriarchal world of the beginning, could not be reflected in a discursive consciousness, for this was the time before human consciousness. ... [It] is to be found in the symbols, myths, and figures [that are] image and metaphor, never knowledge or direct, reasoned statement. ...The [male] strives to deny its dark and lowly lineage, its origin in this primordial world; it does everything in its power to conceal its own descent from the Dark Mother.

Erich Newmann

Woman

I

the three stars of Orion's Belt
and a crescent moon in a blueblack sky –
why do i think of you?

II

where you walk, struck through
with stars
far above my bed –
a wheeling constellation marked out
in mythic joints –

sister, mother
lover daughter
friend

there
the seasons turn, night tilts.

III

strewn points sewn on a white quilt –

your slip slides over your hips
your heel the North Star
morning star at your throat –

i have known you since i began naming
the night sky.

IV

long-legged night flies in the window
folding its lanky wings with
awkward grace. it clings to a thin
sill above a whimling water
that slides under the bed.

dropping into your wake,
planet or bird that swims,
i feel your slow-motion
whirl in my bone marrow,
uncurl and crane my neck
waking in the odd hours.

V

diving, cormorant
that seeks the fish that seeks the depths,
plunging into you
watery ledges waver and descend.

My mother, *Drusilla* was simply the fairytale maiden “waiting for the one I love.” Watch Snow White to see her, true in minutest detail. Middle daughter of three, raised in the bosom of a family happier and more stable than any her husband knew, she wanted children dearly. We were anointed roles in her children’s story, at liberty to wander, picking luminous blooms. Our first years – longer for my sister, less for my brother – were lived within that children’s story, mother-love, unquestioned security. A small boy plays on the floor, his stars the vivid points of color in her rustling skirts that pass.

She did not talk until 4 or 5 (we are told), and spent her childhood immersed in imagination, playing with make-believe friends. Perhaps there was a certain self-absorption, but more deeply love like a summer meadow over which my sister and brother and I made-believed our way to safety holding one another’s hands.

At home, privileges of beauty were granted, but liminal Beauty was never taken over the threshold into the world of men. Child of the limen, the border lands, always preliminary, never crossing. The liminal world dusky, each splash of color a delight; the orange poppies of Dis irresistible. She secreted a naughty little pleasure in selecting a husband of whom she knew her mother (silent lips pursed) disapproved. She knighted him and followed into his night.

And yet strength lay in her vocation for loving. In her 30’s she came deeply into that inheritance, exemplar of reliance on Love, teaching Love in the face of brutality, quietly trusting in Love. She, like her father, thought directly into the heart of the matter. If she didn’t believe in her Lutheran mother’s church, she did believe in what God made good and manifest, and did without the name. She went straight to the heart of what theology or philosophy labored to artifice. It remains her voice quietly reminding me when I am stubborn or impulsive.

When the men she chose proved charlatans or brutes, duty proved more compelling than childish things; they were put away, and she went out to make the living at which her men failed, to support her children. Beauty cared less for itself and was given less thought; timidity shrank away, life taken up in resolve.

Woman (continued)

what moves? immensity –
the pool
ink-black on the sea floor
blackness from black detaches.

VI

the black-and-blue night shudders.
you come rising like a whale
 night wallows, sky full
of your movement, mouth
swallowing all words away.

leviathan, sea-murmuring mammal,
unfathomable beauteous beast
lifting your purple back
and the sea’s in turmoil;
you come whistling to the surface
trailing echoes into ocean
chambers 10,000 miles
traces honking into polar seas;
mysterious wideness, your emergence
thunderous in its grace.

VII

i see you step
on white feet
a star pins your heel
to the sky

your gestures
breathe
from arms and fingers.

VIII

every man has a sister he must approach
during the time
he is given to walk a night-bound shore
before the sea leaps up and engulfs him.

on a shadowy, seductive beach
lovers seeking shapes
stretch out their arms to him,
beguiling reincarnations
of shadows shifting when pursued; through
this webby silence
he must not strut or stagger
but walk on at a steady pace
full of light
and avoid chasing them into the shallows.
no man can do this, yet none
can refuse the call.

The catachresis of her childhood story was that of ours, and we all began together to write our way back, badly and amateurishly, into the scarcely adumbrated adult stories we had never studied and did not know how to tell.

My grandmothers, *Rhoda and Ruth*, differed more than did their husbands and yet were more the same. Grandma Rhoda was taller, tomboyish, awkward at womanly graces (married to a man who chose for soul, not display).

Grandma had the rougher life. Youngest of five Young's, only sister of four older brothers, her mother (whom we called Moppie, the child's version of the Swedish Mer-Mer) was widowed shortly after she was born. Moppie took in laundry and boarders and scrubbed floors until a scandalized visitor, seeing her on her knees, asked her what on earth she was doing down there when she could teach voice and piano.

Her people were German and Swedish immigrants, strong Protestants. Her father, a German Lutheran minister, died when she was a girl. Brought over on an immigrant boat as a baby, his father caught the smallpox and was ordered thrown overboard by the Captain. His mother hid him in a lifeboat for the passage. During World War I, they changed the German "Jung" to Young.

Competent, already used to taking care of four fatherless brothers, Rhoda was sure of her moral compass, as sure of herself in the kitchen as, a Lutheran Pastor's daughter, she was sure of herself in directing the church choir. She managed the household, organized family gatherings, and raised three daughters. Amoris of classical music and voice, as formidable and strict as music at times, but scrupulously fair; her duty to love and serve family, church, truth and community unquestioned.

Her close circle of girlfriends became "aunts" to her girls and stayed in her field of gravity all her life. Eleanor, a nurse, was with her in her last struggles with leukemia. Auntie "Boots" had the most memorable nickname. Connie Steel came to practice choir solos in the parlor (Grandma on piano), her pasty face beaming mild good will to children who nevertheless were excluded by a parlor door never otherwise closed. Zoe Beal, stern schoolmarm, proved no pedant in her small scrimped home to which Grandma once brought us

Woman (continued)

it infiltrates his daily hours
until they become thick, grainy
as old photos,
until he wakes, hears the ocean thrash
like a whale that may at any moment
plunge again
swallowing into his breast
the whole sea –
a fatal stroke.

then he looks for his light and answers
and sets out,
or else turns on himself,
brutally amputating his own limbs.

IX

California nights, warm and distanceless
echo like a hand waving down a dusky beach,
waving good-bye down years
from a night of love bitten like a warm peach
in half-lit sand lapped by the sea.

what slips, leaving, down that uncertain shore?
beach visited once, no more
(empty now save for that whispering
meant for closer ears
tangling mute sounds in the mouth of night
and lost to hearing).

who turns, entwined,
and sinks again in the breathing sigh,
too dim to make out?
there, in the night-wrung hollow where
I thought was only one –
there are two.

X: Betrayal

the bed spread like a sea
below a white window,
turn and sail toward me
opening your eyes
cutting the billowed sheets.

blackberry eyes in the ripening dusk
amber eyes that gather down –
grey-eyed,
her pearl dress
gathered in pink nipples
swimming out of a soft sleep.

to eat cold sandwiches and play outside on rocky cold Puget Sound saltwater shores. None of them warm, all of them love put into action. She had the gift for love – not a warm smothering Grandmotherly love but a practical, active love that gave us our touchstone of a stable home and a compulsion never to do the job half-way.

For all her practicality, Grandma loved and wrote her own poetry. I look in vain through the 14 poems that she left for a striking image or unexpected insight. Simple as windswept rain, tall straight Northwest firs, the smell of salt on the air, the gull's cry, the love of husband, daughters and grandchildren, sun-worn splashes of garden color, birdsong in a quiet yard, prayer and love of God – she wrote just this.

Grandma taught me to fold tight the corners of Christmas wrappings, gave me the compulsion to finish whatever I began and be a life learner, and let me fall asleep in dire times confident in the protection of reliable care. We have, framed and calligraphied, the music that once hung on her parlor wall, her favorite Christmas carol: *in the bleak midwinter/earth stood hard as iron/water like a stone*. She also hung a hand-embroidered sampler at the entrance to her bedroom, *No Cross No Crown*.

GRANDMA'S WARNING

(Two Dreams, 1965 and 1989)

Don't put out the light! Grandma formidable, every fiber moral, tense, imperative – me reaching for the bedside lamp, 6th Grade, petrified. She saw mortal peril there.

At a time when I might have put out my light, Grandma stopped me. And when, 24 years later, in deep shame, I felt no right to life, her warning stood by me: *a ferry crossing, the ferry long departed, the return trip utter black, city lights left behind. Looking into the water, the seafloor suddenly drops to unfathomable depths. We move out over the deeps. I cling to the canvas side of the boat that tips under my weight. I start to go under. 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.*

Woman (continued)

blue your eyes, betraying
when, clothed in his ghost
of letters
you galloped down his other side,

indistinct when, a shadow by his bed,
you paused in the naked dark
before plunging into the waiting,
many-eyed
sea.

XI: Half Smile

there, in the bending of eternity's disced hand

a monkey's-paw moon
touches a curious sky. . .

go and do it

there, in the bending.

trees with no waists bend to their knees –

where in the folds
are we to be found?

would you forget

the most important question of all?

XII: Where She Is

there, in the bending
of her waist –
there again
is the movement of her hand –

she sways her hair in the long pine tops,
a thousand of her
on the hills surround this little lake of mine.
in the dark she merges in and out of trees.

i fell over the edge of the boat where
gently rocking, i paddled
alone on a dusk-ridden lake.
i laughed
and she swayed-smiled down through me.

XII: Caress

brush, whisper, die away
return, sound, retreat again.

Rhoda's mother, **Anna Nyquist**, was born in Chicago in 1870, the year after *her* mother, **Emelie Amalia Åhlberg** came to America, where she soon met and married Jonas Petrus Nyquist. We have the silver service the young parson gave his wife that Christmas, engraved with her initials and the year, 1873. They settled first in Indiana, moving soon to Chicago where they survived the Great Fire. Jonas was Pastor of the South Side Swedish Salem church. Emelie's brother Pher was a Revivalist; as a small boy he would tie *his grandmother's* black apron around his neck to look like a minister's gown and stand on a kitchen stool to preach for her. "Mermer" he said, "when I get big I am going to preach so that the sins roll down the backs of the people." With cousins and aunts, Anna and her mother kept a dressmaking shop. She married **Herman Young**, and after the births of Anna's sister **Adele** and brother **Ernest**, the Young's migrated West, living some years in Nebraska before coming to the Northwest.

And now it is May 29, 1949. Tomorrow is Decoration Day and I would like to put some flowers on the graves, but as I cannot I will in my memory pay tribute to my dear ones who have gone on and write here that the memory of them is very sweet.

Anna Nyquist Young, Journal

Around that time Grandmother **Ruth's** father was a young cowboy on the Kansas plains. Thirty years later Gramp's people moved through a little further south, passing by way of Kansas to Washington.

Ruth looked softer then, a lovely young woman holding her first baby in the old photo we have of her – her large expressive eyes, in which Orville swam so long that (he writes) he chronically stayed overlate and walked home in moonlight after missing the late night Owl Car. And these are almost the last words of love he writes of her in the 194 pages of his autobiography. How much more he has to say of salary, advancement, professional commitment and social standing, of a long steady well-planned career! How much evident respect is given and reliance placed on the men who mentored his career in the pioneering days of social work; he much has to say even of fishing tackle, catches and cherished fishing trips; he takes the time to express disdain for the slackers who revolted against the high expectations to which he held himself. He tells

Woman (continued)

like shallow waves that run up to my feet at low tide,
walking Cannon Beach late at night
your breath swells and ebbs

somewhere.

listening for it to lengthen
out of the other side of the bed, my skin poises
for you to reach an arm over my shoulder
in the early morning,
put a hand on my face in the tired night.

if i could sketch but a moment's time
with my fingers down your back
i would trace your face again.

if i could feel your fingertips
that run down the long back of night
gentle as the strokes of waves on a sand-ribbed shore
run over me
i'd laugh in a thousand tongues
just to see your ribs
like waves rolling full with their water
ripple over mine.

XIV

far back
in the dark death i occupy inside of you,
in the warm watery depth i penetrate
while making love
i hear – and don't know which of us
is whispering –
i will become closer than your bones

before i was born
speaking to each other
over and over *closer than your bones.*

XV

Mother and line of mothers
pushing hard against the human form –
i heard your sing-song
in hips, in blood that slides
in mine; your body singing itself
around mine; felt it flow,
its upheavals and the soft thrashing
when you made love, when you, patiently,
made the ears that closed like tiny fists
around the sounds you spoke only to me,
words of flesh, promising bone.

how touched and galvanized he was by the appalling social conditions of the poor and by racism and bigotry; how tough his opposition to their neglect (as to his own childhood abandonment); how willing to stand up against social convention and risk censure to protest the mistreatment of the Japanese during WWII. How bright a picture he paints of properties they owned, cars they bought, cities they lived in, friends they had; how tender his care for his mother and sister; how much he clearly relied upon Ruth, his partner and support. And yet in all these pages filled with his story, how few soft words for her or for any of his children.

And for all her soft loveliness in the photo we have of her, she too shined like polished metal, cool, intellectual, penetrating. Sharp and clear as her mind was, she was also more frail than Rhoda. She had to lie down to digest after eating. Allergic to more and more foods as she aged, she was a hasty but peremptory cook who put up with little backtalk from the sauce, much less from the palates of those she fed. Perhaps she gave less natural mothering to her children, but she joined Orville in his social work as soon as they married, helping him manage a home for poor children in the Italian and black neighborhoods of Columbus, Ohio, running a small employment bureau, doing home visits, ladling out free skim milk and coaching girls' sports. Ahead of all convention, she wanted him with her at her first childbirth, in 1924, pulling on his hands instead of the metal handles of the delivery table.

Orville does note her keen mind and, in truth she was brilliant. Home from college at 19, I found her reading Barrett's *Irrational Man*, a seminal work on existentialism, and took her recommendation to add it to my reading list.

Ruth and Rhoda both loved to garden, but Ruth also loved to botanize, teaching her grand-children to identify plants. She was the one who read me *Treasure Island*. I never saw or heard of a single personal friend, but I still hear that oddly pitched birdlike old-woman voice crying us welcome – "come in, come in, come in, come in!"

Woman (continued)

XVI

the faint wind of your womb
breathes down

centuries
to children
not yet born,

warm and
immemorial
tugging back

on the cord.

you lay in the bed, laboring, and asked
how am i to open their breaths
with such bare hands?
with such bone hands?

Mother upon Mother gasping
as the question unfolds,
blossoming in your lap – all your labor
bursting forth.

XVII

your son plays on the floor where,
walking quickly back and forth,
your skirt brushes his face
blurring the words you speak –
it phosphoresces; it seems
the starred sky;
it is a darkness aglow
with luminous flowers –
red, green, gold, blue –
that burst, expand, and fade
on a field of black.

XVIII

Mother, your love
is an etched face
worn
by the gravels of time and care.

XIX

curtains of wind
run through me –

endless mouths
opening
over my skin –

The Seed (A Parable)

A woman cooking dinner for her family stood at the kitchen counter, the cutting board piled with cucumber, tomato, celery, green pepper, red onion, a clove of garlic. As she sliced and minced, she noticed an irritation in the fold of her thumb, pressing against the knife handle. She ignored it for several strokes, then almost without thinking, paused, opened her thumb, and noticed a small seed embedded in the soft flesh of her hand.

She brushed the seed from her hand into the loud heap of colorful fresh vegetables and served it to her family later that evening in a gazpacho. The seed worked deeply into them, as if it had found a damp place, away in the dark earth. No one noticed.

It was like her – quiet, like a bulb. Warm with an inner life. Something indomitable beating at the heart of her work, pulling in life from the air around her to build stems and flowers.

At last, it burst out – a garden rising from its winter bed, scarlet, dark maroon, columbine and larkspur, yellows, reds, multitudes of colors. The family began wearing brighter clothes and stopped watching television. They began to talk.

Sometime later – a day when the drops of water from the lawn sprinkler evaporated in mid-air and the deer were eating their way slowly through the yard, heads down, working through the raspberries and the young nasturtiums – her husband looked at her, a woman unpremeditated as a thundershower in May, and wondered, what new wine is this that, brought to lips, bites fresh as the first plum of spring pulled from a high bough?

He thought, "I can't believe the frail rosebud has sprayed the sideyard with such a scent." The tallest tree in the orchard, a plum, leaning for more sun, partially fell and still reached for more.

Summer ended, the yellowed age of a late afternoon was caught nodding with the goldenrod that invaded the garden. Autumn paused brief October prelude, pondering back on a late summer suspended in motes of dust. The light was fading, hovering with the last pale warmth.

How often she had penetrated the night with a shaft of work. From the back door, a yellow line

Woman (continued)

your memory
fades like hands
over my face.

XX

you stand in the wind in an old photo
a young woman,
hair pulled back by the long comb of the wind.

that image of you
remains
as year by year we love you out of your body.

XXI

Mother weeping Mother to her grave, we all wept;
we heard you go
as evening approached the day, face down
in one of the far fields.

XXII

from grisette to grimalkin
she pinned year to year together
at the hem and through them all
she went firm-ankled

and then straight on, following
that same straight seam
into the pregnant night.

XXIII

Great-grandmother, Mother of Mothers
who knows our children before they
come on to meet us –
not yet cloaked by our faint mortal fire,
too wise for the disguises
they will inherit from us
to wear out their lives in: i know

when a child comes, making his way to us,
on his way he's met by one unknown to him
(as if his train paused in an outland station –
on the platform, an old woman watches.
from his windowseat he stares at strangers –
the sole traveler she waits for – and sings himself
his traveling song, "carry me on
you train" he sings and then

from the welter of color surging out of the station
she catches our boy's unborn eye –
her bright glance like a familiar hand
clasps him in that old warmth; he sits up straight –
her face sharpening like an unforgettable

cracked like an egg yolk upon the night as she stepped into the dark yard. Like a seed she lay out under the night sky, again born and giving birth, fields and fields intimated above, bare as a wet stone in a streambed. Warm, oh warm the water that washes away, prayer, silence, a listening within – and then a seed that fell from her.

Mother and Line of Mothers

We come headlong up out of you, from the Dark Womb, from Dark Ages, benighted from the dead of night, pitch dark, from Stygian gloom to dim dusk, crepuscular and shadowed, cloaked, enshrouded, mantled by you as you first are, as fire, round and orange in the dark. We go on falling into you like ripe fruit from trees, sinking into the ground, falling away from our skins into the great relief of rest and the great joy of continuation.

A Morning too Beautiful to be Born

this morning's beauty unbearable,
as unbearable as life –
 childhood over,
 grandparents gone, home sold,
family broken up. when we
who have grown up in others' heartbreak
see the sun warming the cool morning
as it did long ago –
the long shadows of brilliant early sun,
the kind of morning my grandmother loved
to sit out early on the lawn swing
and we, early risers too, climbed up
next to her and she told us how beautiful
the morning was –
 it fills me with its indescribable loss
so that I rise and pace or do small chores
and settle none too quickly
into that quietness in which all souls,
together with the loss of what they loved
before, are called too yearningly
by a morning so beautiful it will break your heart.

Woman (continued)

painting – the great-grandmother who welcomes him on.

XXIV

knower of plants, ancient one,
story-teller, weaver,
healer of wounds,
dancer and singer and sew-er of skins,

your forehead,
your
withered breasts

unmistakable
even in winter morning
even under snow,
under age,

even discernable
by bright
points
in the night sky –
the blind cave of night
eternity
lit by the scattered drops
of your pearl-luminous
blood
falling through space
without finite number
or a finite depth
to plunge.

vastness, vastness and their light
come all that way.

Teri and I went outside when we were 4 and 5,
picked the tiny white-lashed yellow-centered
ground-daisies (a few of them pink) and sprinkled
them over mud pies.

Waiting to be old enough to go to school, I watched
out the window for Spring to come down the road
(Mother *said* spring was coming) – and spotted him,
dressed in brown overhauls, coming to fix the
pipes.

Puget Sound Country

June spring, the rain wrings out the sky. Clouds undone, we have sun for one or two days. Light is a walking man who takes all day to cross the horizon (like those my great-grandparents told of watching walk toward them on Kansas plains, remembrance passed down from those to whom I never spoke). Intermittent spatter of lightly falling water. Weak morning rain sun-washed like a reminiscence.

Walking down the dock for the 7 a.m. ferry, the sky lowers a gray gauze over the Olympics. A watercolor wash blurs the brown wood house at Bay's point; Blake Island firs fade off to the northeast; a large white ferry slides across the blurred canvas into indistinction, freshens memory's watch.

In the evening a rising breeze knocks the wind chimes into the pale yellowing of late sun that pervades the fading blue and dies again. Even the yellowing of old photos has passed on.

Sweeping out dead ants from the writing cabin this morning. Curled and shriveled ant bodies litter the sills and the bare board floor. Yesterday two tribes of ants were at war; today their field lies silent and their black corpses mass in a pile like the *Iliad's* dead waiting to be burnt. In one sudden thrust, swept out the door.

The small fire ants of insight, the little red ants of denial are locked mortally with the large black carpenter ants of memory. Each thought that returns is bitten by one of these two. Each memory lugged lugubriously in by the laborious big blacks.

Blake Island humps out of Puget Sound – whale of recollection rising long out of the hazy illittoral. Seawater ruffles into thousands of fine criss-crossing ribs, clouds the unfathomed seafloor, as do the small events of a life recalled. Constantly shushing inconstancy brings the gaze continually back to the water surface. No mirror, all below obscurity.

A son returning home for the summer visits his mother in showery moments between sailing boughs of fir. Only the half-roads lead through. The rest redirect back a half-century to

0.9 Inches of Rain by 6 a.m.

(for Robert Sund)

Budd Inlet, Eld Inlet,
the old Nisqually Delta.

I drag the mattress nearer the open window,
raise the sash 3 inches towards the rain.

In Olympia, the road is jumping
with little frogs
that hop out when the rains come.

Hemlock,
a soopollalie bush by Puget Sound.
Mallards, buffle-heads, lesser scaups,
ruddy ducks, shovelers,
canvas-backs, and hundreds

of American widgeon migrate
north. A mist draws back off the Olympics –
piles of old tree roots and squaw wood
left by a bulldozer near the Dosiewallups trail.

Hunters are out, breaking
marsh grass and bracken
on their way
to the green-banded neck.
Pines and ferns are dripping drizzle
off their fronds
and a fine fog is blowing.

Puget Sound Country

the rain on the roof
sounds like an old woman
shuffling pans
in her kitchen. the rain-
blurred pane
looks out on a gusty
Sound carrying into
gray-blue infinitude.

seminar halls smelling of old wood, the master's telling remark, and the pages of books closed these 50 years. Sitting on spongy rotwood of a cedar stump dripped on by salal and sword ferns, alive half there, half here.

No breeze no light rain no early light no dripping leaf no birdsong unseen no late sun no roll of small waves on pebbled shore – none that is not sensory strung along the neuronal cables which I am. Are we not our country and people? Begun among community, living as much in green leaf as leafed book? Die never but into these.

“Hey-yah! Haw, haw!” The shouts of men's voices raised to be heard above the clatter of horses and wagons in the piss-mired pot-holed streets of Old Seattle. Born the year of the City's Centennial; more than half as old now as it was then. If every year of living extends back as well as forward the range of change comprehended, I am now well out into the territory, making my way into the nineteenth century. Just this morning, walking under a three-storied scaffolding on my way to work, I hear the workmen's echoed voice: “By God! Sometimes I wish I could understand what the hell you're saying!”

In thick downpour, in wet mud, I pull together again the molecules of life, and what bodies forth is all of evolution, biochemistry beginning from geochemistry. At pale sunrise in the cool of the morning, it is again the Greek dawn. In my own country, among my people I do not fail and extinguish. Renewal ever renewed.

Island whaleback lifts lasting out of Puget Sound, time-thick, furred with fir, cedar and western hemlock. Native island off which glance (seen-not-seen) in their thousands the commuter's and tourist's blank looks from the decks of decades of ferries gliding by, leaving it reflected again in green waters now silver, now blue. Only the patter of rain on split cedar shakes exists, and that comes and goes. The island is an incomprehension that, once grasped, becomes at once what it is and always was.

Leaf shadows in the long rectangle of sunlight on a brown wood floor; tiny needles of fine drizzle that silver a descending silence; great breathing air that gestures the limbs of the elderberry and the cedar – we, alive in all these things.

Puget Sound Mornings

I
in sun-shafted fog
a white tug
baubles – the knot
on the drawstring
of her robe

swinging loose
against her milky legs
that stir the fog
and make the water
ripple.

the tug far off
the port bow;
the bright fog
ready to break.

II
flat –
but motion
lifts
in steel waves.

fog
lugs cold
curtains
around the boat.

III
emergences –

the silk sheet ruffles
that last night was taut;
a grebe's head pops
out of the flat table of water
spread across Eagle Harbor.

IV
excited, silver Seattle
lies stunned in Puget Sound,
the skyline in the water –
black skyscrapers of big pay

where once the coast was bear grass
where men with flintlock eyes
built on hills of blue spruce,
hemlock, western red cedar

At earliest summer dawn I get up and sit and try again to know what it is to let dim light grow. Myriad birdcalls flower the tree's hidden recesses. What hope! – if these miniaturized hollow-boned flutelike saurian heirs flashing their colors quick on the wing can be made from Behemoth! And the mock orange, that flowers not just once at the stem's end but crams as many as will fit fragrant along the graceful length of each branch bending like a girl's arm to catch a boy's neck.

Ferry Commute Seattle to Bainbridge

Spring 1976

Catching the 5:50 p.m. ferry to Winslow. Cold rain, wind gusting to 20 knots, temperature in the low 40's. Stand out on the edge of the dock watching the big waves come careening in, plunging silver over one another, over the hands of the wind.

the gulls, their porous bird-bones
flexing in the gusts: no control,
like debris that can sail.

The pilings lean on one another, rub up against each other playing tubas and big horns with each blast. The ferry approaches from the Bremerton side so that the wind will blow it *into* the dock. A grebe doesn't even get off the water, he dives; wind *hard*. Shuffle on board, warm with the sheltering herd, watching the waves bounce in the yard formed between the Bremerton and Winslow ferries – slanting, they rush from side to side. Out on the water, the ferry catches the wind like a steel kite, snapping taut as soon as it leaves the dock.

Ellen, whipped bright and clean by wind, wearing her giraffe shirt, catches up to me: "look at the size of those babies!" White wakes trail from each wave the way wind-blown sand streams over wet sand. The sun pierces massed clouds, making the rain shiny. The Olympics move down closer, kneel in the icy water. On the other side of the boat, gray rain falls. A dour sky over Alkai Point, the sun angles under the gray cloud pack making it look blue. A white cumulus, trapped under the gray mass outlined by the sun against the false blue sky, sings.

At Night, From the Ferry

Seattle –
like a bracelet,
like a party
reflected in Puget Sound.

Seattle at night –
the waterfront lights on the water,
the thorns, red, green, indelible
on which we rolled and giggled.

The ferry at night –
pulling out on the black table of water.

The city –
rolling down from its hills,
tumbling in lights,
splashing

out towards us
like party laughter,
like a woman in an evening gown.
Unclasp

her things.
Pull her lighted bracelet,
pull her necklace
from her throat. See them

sink and glow
in the wake.

Wasting My Time

remembering Karen –
gray Puget Sound rainday,
coffee, wooden booths,
Athenian Cafe
in Pike Place Market
overlooking Elliot Bay –
where we were when we were,
yesterday gone away.

See It

on Puget Sound
 the late, flat
 afternoon fades
 in long tresses
 of failing light.
 in their rooms
 ladies dress
 for the evening
 in thin shreds
 of twilight
 picked up off
 Seattle hills
 like gowns lifted
 from chairs
 in dying light.
 they fasten
 bright necklaces
 to their throats
 and thighs:
 city lights –
 streetlights, homes
 lit by lamplight,
 store signs in neon light
 prick out a musical
 scale of colors
 that runs along headlands
 and highways,
 lifting stories, private
 dramas to a stage lit
 by their vivid flecks:
 an impressionist painting
 of blurs and blotches
 (no one watches
 the whole play
 except the Sound
 that rolls in
 numb and cold, waking
 on the shore
 from its dumb
 falling over itself,
 to see it see it
 see it.)

At the Winslow Ferry Slip

dark night pierced by far lights –
 pricks and blotches of color
 on the horizon pinpoint Seattle,
 outlining harbor and inland hills
 across a black water
 flat as a table.

the silent boat
 glides from her folds;
 her jewels – red, gold –
 lighting her, the city shimmers
 (laughter in a dark lounge)
 her lights plunge laughing
 into the night water, they glimmer
 on legs that leave –
 like a woman's – her dim skirt,
 parting it. kicking towards us, splashing,
 she stops, laughs, throws
 her lighted necklace
 after the departing boat.

bare bulbs burn in a long string
 down the gangway;
 lights cast the terminal's interior
 out in squares upon the pavement.
 amid quiet talk in the chalky
 dark the gathered people wait.

the ferry rounds the corner
 enters the harbor, huge
 self-contained
 silent. slipping into the dock
 it moves over the water
 like a Taoist warrior or
 a benediction passing
 over a quiet face.

Driving the Olympic Peninsula

climbing NW into Sequim,
the mean wind flings drizzle
like darts down off the Olympics;

yellow shafts of skunk cabbage
and big grasses play wind-whistled
trombones in a bog by Lucas Road.

driving to Kalaloch, where black-haired
Mary works at the lodge.

weathered gray Clallam Co-op silo,
west end of Sequim; then
Port Angeles and Lake Sutherland ringed
with fishermen and summer cabins.

fast-flung boughs of wild ocean air
volley blue spruce;
western red cedar shakes wet fingers
in the drooped top sprays
of western hemlock.

the coast suffused with a native tongue –
Elwah, Calawah, Makah, Shi Shi.

Elwah,

Calawah,

Makah,

Shi Shi. the names like restless breakers
roll in from a gray sea –
cobble awash with waves that
slip back,

never-ending.

the breath on which the names go out
pausing on the ahhh –

names fading away into fog
like the ghosts of those
who spoke them.

and then Mt. Storm King
hulks hundreds of feet
out of the mist that grips his shoulders,
giant thighs plunged
into the earth, logging slash
stubbling his unshaven chin.

below lies Crescent Lake, she, the frigid
unfathomed goddess who marks
with snags and spars where dead men
(who sought to plumb her legendary ice-blue
depths, clear for hundreds of feet), now

know her well.

driving with the window down,
the cold surging in,
warming one hand under my leg.

gray ribbed turtleneck
red down coat
old Levis and boots.

a street cleaner like an orange sloth
lolls its bristle tongue
on Sappho Bridge, over the Soleduck.

then only the wet deer in the fields
and the rainforest.
salal chokes both sides of the road;
water sprays from under the tires.

I'm in your country now, Mary;
stepping hard on the accelerator
whenever i remember your gray eyes.

The Man Who Loved The Cold

What was written down undigested at 15 and 16 is mostly indigestible now – high-flown, idealistic, romantic, judgmental, unreadable. Little of it truly my own, little lived. Through pontifical unthought-through swallowed-down dogmatism, slowly we grow from ourselves into ourselves. Here and there glimpses emerge through massed clouds. For example, I wrote:

A long journey separated me by many miles from those I loved.

Many nights walking the black velvet that Velcro's day to day.

Immensely tired I came to a strangely silent room filled with gray-sheeted lumps – each lives I might live, persons I might be.

Stretching out of sight on all sides
gray lumps, cocoons

sprinkled like daisies in a field.

Some never chosen by anyone,
lie far back in the room, awkwardly positioned,
their slumberers partly emerged,

disintegrating, moldering

back to earth. Some lie aging

on three-foot pillows of their own hair.

Someone was trying to sing me to sleep.

Time. Our lives unwittingly lived amidst great conflagration. A raging fire rusts iron, rots strong wood, splinters and scatters memory into pieces picked over by heirs, descendants and later civilizations. Time's fire consumes us all and all with which meaning was made, in our time.

*proudest pride as ever was
lived to die
as the world does*

The Man Who Loved Cold

Once there was a man so who loved the cold, cloudy days, the shiver, that staying out in chilly weather and constant rain he caught tuberculosis, and was sent away to live in the desert where the heat was miserable. He soon escaped and fled home to his green, wet country where one day he turned off the heat, threw off his coat, and went out bare-headed into the rain. That night he slept in a cold bed. He died then; but he died happy.

What Unfolds in Moonlight

Late at night, watch from a dark window the ghostly surf of moonlight on bushes and trees, the scene that quietly sets. Gnarled tree roots tell stories older than the lunar marks engraved on Paleolithic bone. A young man wanders the middle of the night; no other is abroad at this hour. The earth gives him a cool power, the wind a cool promise. His window condenses cold night. He sinks to rest, leaning into the swirling roots. Moon-silhouetted trees stark over winter soil. He is learning the language of the wind and clouds. He incises the moon's footsteps. He never gets up; he never moves. The roots twist into another shape.

Poverty

...so poor that when their son died, they put him out in a box with the garbage to be collected.

*driving east from Pendleton, Oregon:
Poverty Flat Road
Old Immigrant Hill Road
Two Miles*

Great-Uncle Carl's Funeral

Silence of an embittered heart. Why should he be brought to so rich a room after his life was over, who never gave himself to such luxury while he lived? I stayed a week in his dark, scrimped apartment. The silent earth receives back what it had only lent.

Coward*(for Dick)*

"I come from a long line of coat-hangers" you said.
I know you expected me to accept that
for myself – your son.

In a darkened room you approach your life
as if it were a Van de Graf generator
positioned on a chair in the middle
of the room. Spitting and
cracking electric sparks (all your
vitality in it) this classroom
model can do no real harm. Dancing
around it, you must grasp it;
but, like Skinner's rat,
each time it spits, you jump back.

What if one of the experimental rats
slipped from its cage one night
and made its way through the laboratory
to B.F. Skinner's bedroom?
Paused on the threshold, watching
the head, heavy with mazes, snore. . .

but the machine cracks off another load of electrons,
lurching and jerking you back.

*squawk wrung chicken
postured like pomp's ass
on a whoopee cushion*

Dick fled to the asymptote of escape, abandoning
his family after we moved in my sixth grade year to
the house we always called 'Brockmeier's'. By
seventh grade I didn't know who I was, stuffed by
the school horde into the sack of an insubstantial
ghost, a boy who felt he lived the reflected
contempt of others.

His violence is your violence, Kate said. But no,
Dick's turned all his violence in on himself. He ran
others through with swords thrust through himself.
I learnt his violence in a child's quiet unquestioning
way, but I have done with him. Let what he
brought on himself belong to him. I no longer have
a father in time.

By eighth grade, I was unpopular and isolated. That
was the year Bob came, our stepfather, if he was

that, the polar opposite to Dick: macho, career
Army, Vietnam veteran, animal to his core. A
brutal man, brutalized himself as a boy, a Golden
Gloves boxer who problem-solved with his fists,
lashing through alcoholic-hazed post-traumatic
shock at adult demands whose very excess to his
coping skills confused him with fury. I hated him
heartily, challenged him thoughtlessly, baffled him
intellectually, and scared him emotionally as he
scarred me. His blind bellowing bulled emotional
uproar and dramatic upheaval through my high
school years. His Eulogy I write later, and leave him
too a poem, memorializing his most memorable
feature – violence.

Ninth grade, the move up to high school, a quiet
year. Claire Peters, an English teacher in her last
year, immersed me in Dickens as if an herbal wrap
at some healing spa. By 10th grade a cohort of new
young teachers arrived at Bainbridge High. Early
fall 1969 came alive with protests against the
Vietnam war, whirling in gusts of autumn civil
rights, leaves windblown on the coming gales of the
counterculture – environmentalism, feminism;
fierce on the barricades of the generation gap.

Bob McAllister came (who too will have his Eulogy
later), taught literature, drama and poetry, and
others came to teach music, art, literature – I
name Steve Olmstead, Everett Thompson, Ralph
Cheadle, Cindy Brookens. They listened and cared,
formed deep bonds with socially conscious young
people who, grouping around them, formed
Thespians and tried out for plays, put out *The
Rock*, wrote poetry, sang choir, created art. Most
came from good homes and stable families. They
hosted parties at which we sang, played guitar and
piano, talked intensely and endlessly, stayed up till
all hours and never drove home drunk. Lacking
much self-reflection then, I saw little difference
between my home life and theirs – and am
eternally grateful that none of them made me
aware of it.

And, though greatly self-embarrassed, I began to
change, became more myself – changes made
necessary by a Beatrician soul-afire passion for a
small red-haired girl who sat at the opposite side of
the Geometry classroom – I stared amazed through
entire class periods over the heads of others; only
her graciousness spared me mortification. That love
threw me self-conscious into a world where, hiding
in plain sight, I already crouched, forcing me to
make actual those things I lacked, to replace my
more grandiose fantasies and self-inflation.

When I left high school I was, for all the troubles and unassimilated turmoil of my first 18 years, an optimist and an idealist, actually a nice young man who believed deeply in the power of love. When I look at the boy of about four who, seated between his sister and brother in the 1959 picture I keep close, I love so much, who is so wholly himself and so full of potential, it seems he was alive yet in the senior who graduated Bainbridge High in 1972.

Turning on a Dirt Path Minnesota Cornfield

Summer 1971

A damp dirt half-road drew me on into that vague half-time when day becomes night. A girl's face sharpened in the blurry dusk that faded in the trees. Crickets kept up their interminable, half-familiar, half-forgotten chorus, swelling and losing itself as twilight came on. In a clearing of black earth, a farm field interrupted the way – the track led on from its far side where, irresistibly, two small pines, close as brothers, limned a waypoint beyond which, losing the half-path to dimming light, a tall fir stood sentinel on a small hill. Against a softly glowing dusk sky, the path ran on ahead. Perhaps beyond lay changes to my life. A hopeless love, caught in the branches, needing only to be disentangled.

At dark, I turned back, choosing the sharpness of the hard, real world where I might be a success. Streetlights and windows blazed harshly as I returned. Soft dirt became crunchy gravel underfoot. I remembered a book left out on the back steps. Even as I wrote it all down, it became doubtful.

Nightmares are only dreams of which children are afraid. So reality becomes nightmare, and the true meaning of life only dreams and fairytales. One beckoned and I did not go. That One never stops beckoning. And an entire life to be lived after I turned back.

I was young for my age, immature and very idealistic. Those qualities stayed with me many years – the drive to speak and do what I thought right, even against my own interests. There also stayed with me a certain toughness and self-reliance that Teri and I both learned very early, so often independent, no one there to watch over us and guide us.

The Wind

the wind is rising again,
knocking on my bedroom window,
asking “will you come?”

it sweeps through bedclothes
as wallboards
knock their still-swaying branches together.

the soul tugs at anchor –
released, it joins the great marrow of the wind,
surprised to find there
so many traveling companions.

the wind carries words from the ends of sentences
broken off, sighs breathed out
all the love sighed out –
the people parted from these.

when blue dawns shatters the morning
I'll find myself rustling corn in Minnesota,
lose a bit of myself in a Midwest thunderstorm,
and blow out in a mid-afternoon squall
over the Atlantic.

*I rise, startled by the geese in the skies'
suddenly find myself flapping 1000 miles south*

December 21, 2015

Years ago I stopped writing down every dream. Last night there I was, back at the BHS Reunion I missed several years ago – but we were all high school age. I walked through a display presenting all the scholarships my classmates won, reading their awards, the memorials extolling them and presenting their grand hopes and plans, marveling at their talents and accomplishments when I came across a meager piece written in my own name, nothing but a copy of a mundane scrap of my own writing that was not even an actual application for any award, but merely a functional description of how to apply. Of course this poor rag missed the fine points of self-presentation entirely and stood no chance of receiving an award from anyone. Someone had nonetheless put it on display, perhaps wanting to give me at least some small nod rather than overlooking me altogether. And then Shelley Froehning, whose parents really did give me a small

¹ Isho Tokugan (Zen Poems of the Five Mountains, p. 114)

scholarship when I graduated in the name of their business, Winslow Rexall Drug, rushed up to me demanding to know why I hadn't followed through with the required post-award thank you letter. I answered "I didn't apply, I don't know. Someone else submitted this for me – see, it's not even my own handwriting."

As we filed out to the buses, I saw Mary Cross in front of me, slim but not shaped to be attractive. I overheard her say "I hope no one forgets about me", so I took her hand as we walked by the line of buses and read aloud for her the posted codes so we'd know which route to board.

In Love with Old Sorrow

The Life without Sorrow

1969

Mother came to my room, her feet lapping little waves around her ankles as she waded toward me, bog-deep in the delicate damp of black Dantean despair, the despondent impossibility of life-changing love swamping my floor, to give me this, since everkept:

The life without sorrow is like a picture painted all in white. Sorrow forms the little black lines which give it depth and meaning.

Drusilla Pratt

The Mind's Bright Pool

Retrospective Long After

Silence of the heart, heart of memory as we become each our own traveling toward – not common possession, but what we are. The pleasure of returning again and again to old sorrow as an animal licks its wounds – because a thorn embedded within called memory calls *this* memory and *this* one, calling and calling, like loon like wild like music, like loon heard wild with music once long ago (like longing that arises from smells that whirl infant memories, voices that return on tides of old seashores and with bedroom and kitchen smells long before there were words for them).

What Roads Are These?

(for Linda)

What roads are these I know so well?
You were a beauty and I was a fool
Dying each day in your lovely spell.
Come to me now in my mind's bright pool,
Tell me again what I know too well.

Bare me your hair, bare me your face,
Spare me the chance to die in your grace.
Brush me your hand, brush me your eyes,
Hush me the moment, the nevering why –
Hush me the touch, your memory's trace.

Return me the moment, each memory's death,
Return me the answer, the question, the breath.
Return me my boyhood, its bright bursting power;
Return me the girl, her bright blooming flower.
Return me the grave and leave me the hour.

Some minor scholar may find ruined fragments and piece Sapphics from my life, lending some illusion of skill I lack to breathe to life her lithe frame. Then I wouldn't have to try to write, nor acknowledge that I cannot. *Supple fire* I wrote once, and *rose-spun*, and *melting*. What young fool has failed to write *your smile, your eyes*? Flailing words then, I fail of them now. She disappears, hardly to surface at all, except when she speaks (less and less frequently) in dreams, where what speaks needs no permission. And on a morning fresh, early in spring when forever and never have lost their meanings.

I strained honey through a rose and was left with a mouthful of fibers.

After a Dream of One I Loved at 16

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 explain that bright pain –
how respect its right
to live again?

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

I sat in the queue of desks along the window side of Geometry class; you sat opposite, on the door side. All the way across the room, I stared transfixed throughout the entire class, through weeks, the entire fall trimester, dumbstruck, ignoring three rows – an entire swath of class disconcerted between us, over whom my staring had to pass. You rarely glanced my way, only met my gaze once or twice as if by chance. The insupportable glimpse of your conscious regard sent me flustered fleeing. How graciously you disregarded my gawky

amazement, kindly leaving the ravished boy to incinerate into the cinders of his awestruck stare. Even 50 years later, I am grateful for your forbearance.

Everything about you was unbearably exquisite, beauty or pain; full with the pregnancy of your soon assumption into whatever straitened heaven I could never conceive bearable. Neither insufficiency of hope nor surfeit of joy, but the thought memory imagined drove mind-spinning absorption which, unlike a drug, the more assiduously sought, the more sweet the intoxication. Your eyes fulfilled impossible degrees of life with an intensity that no boy who met them could possibly survive.

Walt, and Others Crowding Round

February 2012

Walt – driving south toward the Columbia, hearing your gone voice on the car stereo, *I Ride An Old Paint* (learned from your record long after you were gone, to sing my own children asleep when they were just small, that too already long ago) what does, oh what *can* this mean?

Northwest forest, opened by fields of wild prairie wet and black on both sides of the car that sprays water out from under its tires, speeding the interstate past. *What does it mean*, the heart calling out to one no longer here? What does it mean that we speak this dreadful longing to the long dead? If there is no self that survives and goes on, *to whom* do we speak? Terrible wind that blows itself away, dematerializing even as it rises, blows me down a long crevasse, dwindling into the dark vast between two glass-smooth sheets of sheer ice walls, which themselves disappear beyond vision, placing long-distance telephone calls to nowhere as I fall. A translation answers the call, from the Swedish of Hjalmar Gullberg:

Tag Bort Fotografierna

Tag bort fotografierna! Vi döda
är känsliga för dylikt första tiden.
Anpassningen sker inte utan möda
till friden över allt förstånd, till friden

som ni har unnat oss i dödsannonsen.
Släpp oss! Er sog förlänger vår begravning.
Namn och profil i marmorn och i bronsen
när vi ska byta form och ändra stavning,

är hinder som vi hellre vore utan.
I natt är vi den snö som faller flinga
vid flinga ljudlöst. Ansikte mot rutan,
vems namn är det du ropar? Vi har inga.

Take Down the Photographs

Take down the photographs! We dead
are sensitive to such things at first.
Not without effort we adjust
to the peace that passes all understanding,

the peace you left us in our obituaries.
Let go! Your sorrow prolongs our burial.
Names and profiles, in marble or in bronze
(when we must change form and alter spelling)

are hindrances we would rather do without.
Tonight we are the snow flung flake
on noiseless flake. Face pressed to the glass,
whose name are you calling? We are no one.

Of what use an answer? This poem first heard from Ingrid Wikner, Grandma's cousin, two generations older, second cousin twice removed, sitting at her dinky dining table just within the entry to her Stockholm apartment on Brahegatan that she shared in retirement with Sven, both too now long departed, their apartment long packed up, their things dissembled. My first trip to Sweden, 1983, we translated it together. Corresponding for a number of years thereafter, sharing that delight. She gave me a volume of Ferlin and I bought her volumes of Gullberg. And then the voice on that line fell silent. *And now the heart places another call.*

Walt, Dick, Gram, Gramp, Sven, Ingrid – so many calls misplaced unanswered (as will go calls placed to me soon enough). Nowhere a message left, and yet still the heart calls and calls. Why oh why heart do you go on calling up dead numbers? There must be some meaning to this that you alone know, blindly calling and calling, senseless and instructive, instinctively persevering.

Walt, so utterly gone, how can I hear *your* voice yet, singing tinny over the car stereo, remnants of your very person that live and act in the world? What has gone? The timbre of your voice – more than 50 years on, a little boy again, I hear that

unmistakable timbre of your voice calling us *my little termites*. And behind your voice, the distinctive high-pitched birdlike intonation of Grandmother crying *come in! come in!* as we tumbled from car door to doorstep. Grandpoo and the entire family now crowd in behind her in that doorway, like that tunnel said to lead toward the white light. Hearing yours, Walt, where are all the other's voices? – voices I knew by sound well enough to recall in a moment after decades have gone by. Where is your brother, Walt – what happened to your brother? What have you done to see after your brother? How can they be heard now no more forever? And mine soon to follow on a feather breeze.

Beyond Capture

Thich Naht Hanh has written of the necessity of swimming upstream from his first love. She is there, he says, in the headstream of life (and mine these four or five decades since first dumbstuck by beauty in Sophomore Geometry? – as also Walt's and Gramp's and Mother's and Dick's and Teri's and Carl's and all those of whom I write?) In that stream are ancestors, first spring, fresh evergreen boughs, the revolution of the volume of Love that Dante saw in Paradise. All of you dear to me; *this is, because that is*; "that without which not", Ever Present Origin, *That which Thou Art*.

*So she is gone and remains,
particular, lovely,
and utterly beyond capture.*

Am I?

Dream, November 10, 2012

"Are you *still* in love with me?" she asks, almost shaking her head.

A part of my soul got caught up in you that Sophomore year, I fumble to explain – Cassiopeia or the Pleiades caught with a sliver of moon silver in winter branches whenever I've looked up all these years walking thick woods, no open sky visible, the night pitch and my remnant soul sold to it.

She'd come up to me at our reunion – the 40th, the one I could not attend when, near death, I checked into the Emergency Room at the Cleveland Clinic. Several of us stood in a circle, my laughter resonating like a cello, and then she drew me aside to speak privately about how she, pregnant, lost in a cavernous hospital, gave birth in a darkened wing

alone, suddenly blood everywhere. (Someone later came up to me and intimated how she had become given to wild stories in later years, but I heard – I heard and I knew.)

Ancestors Who Think Back On Us

The land like a lover takes off her white dress. Everywhere she shows through the snow that withdraws inch by inch from her lovely limbs. Brown now but soon the sun will green; now mud but everywhere a little water runs. Laughing pulling me relaxing down into her brown arms brown eyes a water that sparkles as it runs undressing herself of snow ancestral land unclothed.

Did ancestors I never knew think of me? My hand lingers on the head of the little boy I love, caressing the fine hairs as I think how long this small head will outlive me and wondering what hand will caress its few wisps of fine hair when it is very old.

Linda came again last night; I watched her lips move as we talked for the first time in years. Who is she? I wish I knew. The love of her a natural flow refreshing and refreshing earthen hearts; hearts longing to be buried turn to earth.

After So Many Years, We Talk

Dream, 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. You're Catholic now, 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 nearby 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
 contrasts sharply 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 years
 while she will be so utterly forgotten
 that within 3 years she will have to remind me
 who she is when she calls to apologize.

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



The life gone wrong is wrong in all its particulars –
 how the children are raised, the roots that connect
 the soul to its home, the satisfaction of work, the
 love at its center.

But where there is such love as I bring to mind with
 the memory of those departed or family now or old
 loves once loved, the woodstove of the heart so
 heats the whole cabin that it glows red, so red a
 warmth as if we lived in embers within the stove
 itself, a stove as if the heart of home's life. *And
 when the phone rings again there is a voice on the
 line.*

Solstice Rereading

December 21, 2015

I sit awhile longer in the peace of the rain, the
 well-lit cabin, the small heater blowing warm air,
 the rain on the roof and on the pond outside.

rain, rain, come what may
 fall again all through the day

dance, drop on all the pools
 leave my loves all holy fools