BERT MEYERS

Early Rain and Other Poems

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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Early Rain and Other Poems

BERT MEYERS

A Critical Reading Edition

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Archival Images

A short selection from the source record

Bert Meyers, portrait from the family archive.

Meyers carrying picture frames, the trade that shaped both his working life and his poetics.

Bert and Odette Meyers.

The Meyers family in Los Angeles.

Editorial Note

This edition is not extracted from, reordered from, or silently collated against the 2007 *In a Dybbuk's Raincoat: Collected Poems*. Every poem printed here was transcribed from an original book or periodical issue in the local archive. Online sources were used only to verify publication history and biographical facts. When a poem appeared both in a periodical and in *Early Rain*, the book text is printed once and the periodical witness is recorded in the source files. Substantially reconceived poems are retained in both forms. The archive presently lacks a scan of *The Dark Birds* (1968); poems from that book enter this edition only where Meyers republished them in the lifetime selection *Sunlight on the Wall*. The local copy of *The Wild Olive Tree* lacks printed pages 19–20, including "Pebble"; no later text has been substituted. Authorial stanza divisions, meaningful line indents, internal section headings, and epigraphs are retained, while page-width wraps and scan-induced hanging indents are removed.

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Introduction

Bert Meyers made poems with the hands of a craftsman and the nerves of someone who knew how quickly a life can fracture. A high-school dropout who became a master picture framer, graduate student, and unforgettable Pitzer College teacher, he wrote brief, exact poems in which tools, alleys, animals, family gestures, and Los Angeles light suddenly open onto class, illness, Jewish memory, love, and death. *Early Rain and Other Poems* returns to his original books and little-magazine appearances rather than reprinting the later collected edition. The result restores the sequence in which readers first encountered him: the sharpened social and erotic poems of *California Quarterly* and *Coastlines*, the hard clarity of *Early Rain*, the mature compression of *Sunlight on the Wall*, and the luminous late sequences of 1979.

Biography

Bert Meyers was born in Los Angeles on March 20, 1928, to Romanian Jewish immigrant parents and grew up in East Hollywood. He attended John Marshall High School, where he was a gymnast, but left before graduating. The physical poise visible in family photographs—handstands, balancing acts, the alert body in space—has a counterpart in the compact structures and quick turns of his poems.

Before entering academic life, Meyers worked as a farm laborer, janitor, house painter, printer's apprentice, picture framer, and gilder. Framing became both his livelihood and one of his governing metaphors for writing: preparation, exact pressure, proportion, surface, and the removal of excess. Long exposure to industrial fumes, compounded by smoking, contributed to the respiratory illness that shadowed his later years.

Meyers married the writer and translator Odette Miller; their children were Anat Silvera and Daniel Meyers. Family life enters the poems not as conventional memoir but in compressed scenes of rooms, meals, work, grief, and remembered speech. He also participated in the Los Angeles poetry culture around Thomas McGrath and writers including Henri Coulette, Stanley Kiesel, Gene Frumkin, Mel Weisburd, and Naomi Replansky. His poems appeared in *California Quarterly*, *Coastlines*, *kayak*, and other little magazines.

Alan Swallow published *Early Rain* in Denver in 1960. On the strength of his writing, Claremont Graduate School admitted Meyers in 1964 despite his lack of conventional undergraduate credentials. *The Dark Birds* followed from Doubleday in 1968. The original book has not yet been located in the present archive, but Meyers republished a substantial selection from it, along with poems from *Early Rain* and newer work, in *Sunlight on the Wall* (kayak, 1976).

After graduate study, Meyers joined the faculty of Pitzer College. Students and younger poets remembered the intensity, humor, rigor, and generosity of his teaching; among those influenced by him were Amy Gerstler, Garrett Hongo, Dennis Cooper, and Maurya Simon. Illness forced his retirement in 1978, yet his final years produced the expansive sequences and exact object poems collected in *The Wild Olive Tree* and *Windowsills*, both published in 1979.

Meyers died in Los Angeles on April 22, 1979, at fifty-one. His manuscripts, journals, photographs, and letters were preserved by his family, especially Daniel Meyers. Posthumous publications, including *The Wild Olive Tree & The Blue Café* and *In a Dybbuk's Raincoat*, broadened his readership, while the family archive and the poet's original editions remain essential for recovering the chronology, variants, and material contexts of the poems.

The Posthumous Collected Edition

Morton Marcus and Denise Levertov on Bert Meyers

Morton Marcus's foreword to *In a Dybbuk's Raincoat* (2007) records the twenty-eight-year effort to bring Meyers's posthumous collected poems into print. Meyers had chosen a selected-poems manuscript shortly before his death. Odette Meyers carried that manuscript forward, sought publishers, and continued the work even after learning that she had cancer. After her death, Daniel Meyers recovered notebooks, journals, letters, drafts, photographs, and other family papers; Marcus and Daniel then shaped a larger volume from the poems and supporting documents. The project survived promises that went unfulfilled, a manuscript held for seventeen years, lost submissions, and the bankruptcy of a press before the University of New Mexico Press finally published it.

Marcus describes Meyers's poems as brief, delicate, socially engaged structures built from exact images and subtle rhythms. He credits Odette and Daniel Meyers, Maximillian and Estelle Novak, Gene Frumkin, and publisher Luther Wilson with keeping the work from disappearing. His account is not only publication history: it explains why the surviving family archive is central to any responsible edition of Meyers and why chronology and copy-text must be checked against original books and manuscripts rather than assumed from the later collection.

Denise Levertov's introduction—first published in *Light Up the Cave* (1981) and reprinted in the 2007 volume—argues that Meyers can be called a great lyric poet because of the intensity, consistency, and formal completion of his work. She places the image at the center of his practice: a precise observed object can stand alone, but it can also become the strong building block of a longer poem. For Levertov, Meyers's images are not decorative comparisons. They are earned by sustained attention to labor, streets, tools, bodies, landscape, political violence, family life, and the physical world.

Levertov also corrects the idea that Meyers's compression made him merely private or apolitical. She reads poems on Paris, Saigon, American power, money, and social brutality beside poems of domestic love and natural beauty, emphasizing the disciplined anger and humor within his ostensibly gentle lyric mode. Her essay remains the most consequential early critical account of

Meyers's poetics. This summary is included here in place of reprinting the copyrighted essays; their complete texts remain in the archived 2007 source volume.

Source: Morton Marcus, foreword, and Denise Levertov, introduction, *In a Dybbuk's Raincoat: Collected Poems* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007), pp. xiii–xxxi.

Magazine Verse

Periodicals | 1954–1962

Seven independently published poems recovered from original issues of *California Quarterly* and *Coastlines*. Periodical versions of poems later collected in *Early Rain* are not duplicated here.

Roughing It

Mountains: their hidden movements, ambush;
noon, sullen, hot, crouched on a ledge.
But we too have sudden lightning
in the iron bough we grip…
yet rocks the air snaps in its midnight jaws—
could be the sly circling of our death.

Screen, screen then, the hillside!
Make each bush reveal a secret!
Who knows? a stick may suddenly uncoil,
ants, beetles, lizards, carry poison.
Let paths wag their tails around our feet.
The deer, plump flesh of the mountains,
will be ours; and, at night,
with coffee pioneering through our veins,
a little music from the radio,
we'll stretch outside our tent
(no risk, but robust in our daring)
inhaling oak tang, dirt and London Dock.

Publication. First published in *California Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1954), p. 14.

The Love Romantics Have

that makes them shake and sweat
beside a golden head,
is wonderful and sad
and aches between the legs.
Such lovers cannot wait
to set their marriage date.

But those sweethearts who
have explored instead,
inside and out of bed,
the sense of I and thou,
go slowly to the judge.
They wear each other's breath
and only fear love's death.

Publication. First published in *California Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1954), p. 19.

Ritual

Parents surround a child
until their image is
absorbed. That giving in
becomes a mighty sin,
and the child who wishes
for love at any cost
feels all its beauty's lost.

I think of children who
must play an instrument
and make an artful noise:
the trite, embarrassed voice
of their disfigurement.
Convinced the song's their own
they hide and live alone.

We take into the world
a blessing or a curse:
the love we learn at home.
Always, we feel unknown;
always, we must rehearse;
and keep in dreams the art
of the hot, natural heart.

Publication. First published in *Coastlines*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1955), p. 16.

Sonnet to R

We smile, and sit down far apart;
we, who once had a single heart.
And you, married now, look at me
as if looking were adultery—
fearing this new love's only true
if all that other love is through.
Memory might dull the polished plans
of matrimony's pots and pans.
But dear, what could one give, or be;
except a piece of property
with such a love? Now, if instead,
you can bring to your board and bed
all of the love that's filled your life,
couldn't you love me, and be his wife?

Publication. First published in *Coastlines*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1955), p. 23.

Mary, Mary

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
how does your loving grow?
I spread my legs, they come.
When I show my heart they go.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
what have you done?
Cut my hair and swaggered round
to be my father's son.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
why do you go to school?
There's a worm inside my blood
that hates a pretty fool.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
when will you wed?
When a cold wind blows between my thighs
and the earth takes me to bed.

Publication. First published in *Coastlines*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1955), p. 23.

She Spoke of Love

So, she spoke of love
as if no man gave
more than a senseless shove.
And, although it's true
men often turn aside
when their urgent, stiff
desire's been satisfied—
leaving the woman then

they also feel unfed
on that desolate
and unfriendly bed,
who secretly despise
what teaches them to swagger
and strive upon the thighs.

And yet, the world has men
as rare and passionate
as all their blinding words—
who, after that wild ride
inside the sensual cloud,
will sing like sombre birds.

Publication. First published in *Coastlines*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1955), p. 24.

I Dreamed

I dreamed of a light that kills;
there wasn't a sound from man.
A clinic of clouds appeared
and the moon dressed as a nurse.

Then, khaki colored leaves
fell from the public trees.
I saw that we'd all come
to the corner to say: Peace.

At last the generals
were beaten with ploughshares
and you and I became
two hammers with one blow that builds.

Publication. First published in *Coastlines*, no. 19 (1962), p. 12.

Early Rain

First book | 1960

The complete original poetry section of Meyers's first book, reset from the Alan Swallow edition. Its two translations from Louis Aragon are placed in the appendix.

Because There's So Much Speed

without any place to go,
and naked, blind as light,
we rush from stone to stone
and bump against the world,

I like the silly snail:
wrapped in its wooden fog
it crawls across my yard;
and where it goes, it paints
the ground with useless roads.

Day and night, in its world,
leaves fall without a sound;
and flowers become suns
that bugs like little planets
in a green astronomy
go round and round and round,

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 7.

On the Hill

Wind—and a mild army
of mustard runs uphill;
this town shakes in a shrub

and children, now and then,
abandoned in their kites,
leave home on a long string
and climb into the sky.

I walk at the wild edge:
behold! a buzzard drills
for the dry oil of death;
the air snaps like a log,
shrill birds like sparks fly out.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 8.

The Cougar Has Been Shot

Something of the mountains,
something that wrinkled,
muscle of sunlight in the trees,
crept like a slope at evening
to a stream, washed its paws,
sticky with sunset, death...
    something of the mountains:
    the cougar has been shot,
    Good! the weekend hunters say.

When night hunched anonymous,
snarling in the leaves,
who could divide those eyes
from stars that trailed us
branch to branch overhead?
And once, I heard the gullies
raging, underbrush grow furious,
roots, rock, the air, rise up
to join a giant mating...
    Brought to life by their guns,
    the weekend hunters worry:
    such mountain breaking, making passion,
    in a living thing is dangerous.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 9.

And, Sometimes It Seems

that: because a man,
being born in a tear
when his mother wept,
never takes off his sweat
or really finds a friend,
already in the cradle
makes his little fist.

But what a brave thing
he is, who has a fountain
at his hips, a brain:
that blossom on the spine!

And, when I look at the earth
and the earth is someone
I love, then it seems:
what a pity man
becomes a melancholy
beast that likes to think.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 10.

Porcupine

A little Saint
Sebastian
(body of barbs
that hardly hurt)
and like a Saint
misunderstood,
when he appears
he scares the wood.

We love to catch
an animal;
then, petting it,
insist the beast
should lick our hand.
But porcupines:
they're very mean
to have such spines.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 11.

In Those Hills

In those hills, where I grew,
time passed like the plants:
acorn and castor-bean.

By a tree, I found the deer
that hunters left: a flower
of ants in the bullet hole
and a root held its leap.

There sunlight came down
a road, and green nature
reddened at the tip.
Yucca struck at the wind,
turned dull and rusted in
the fall; lizards rose
like steam upon the rocks
and snakes took off their clothes.

Nothing's happened. The years
go on under the grass...

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 12.

Origin

Daily the sea sprayed my town
with gulls...it could have murdered me.
I took a shell whose mask of tides
was a refinement of the sea.

The brawny boats went where they pleased;
I traveled in a twisted bone.
That's how I discovered islands
where hungry shadows quarry stone.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 13.

Once, in Autumn

Once, in autumn, I saw the sun
pause in the wrinkles of a tree
like passion on an old man's face.
My father, armed with shears, came out
and trimmed the little shrubs to death.

And always, in a wild backyard
my father stepped upon his flesh
(those blind galoshes struck the earth)
and tough as trucks, his hands ran loose
killing the plants they couldn't name.

A lawn—or passion—if ignored
may rise around a house like fire.
Son, my father said, Fight back
the garden with its big green hips.
I fought a beast of leaves instead.

But, with a scowl, my iron dad
cut down the grass to a proper flame.
He said: Too many flowers. And then
(though with a hose I'd been their stem)
my scowling conscience cut them off.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 14.

Pity the Child

Pity the child who felt
green gates of childhood close:
the enchanted eye must learn
what everybody knows
and a grey haired hunter stalk
the forest of his blood.

This child saw the firm
parental towers fall
at the quiet stroke;
the mighty adult crawl
to what it hates; and heard
a long, collapsing sky.

Such enemies that rise
upon the heart's wild shore
will invade the mind.
His own voice at the door,
the haunted man lies down.
He fades in a white room.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 15.

My Parents

When my mother puts her flowers
in a bowl—amaryllis, rose—
light from another afternoon
still makes the lonely body glow.

And still my father comes, poor man!—
a hard day on his knees, from money.
My mother turns to an old piano,
her hands snowbound among the keys.

I know they sleep in the same dream,
while the fat moth spreads its dust.
My parents wear each other's breath;
their clock's forgotten how to tell the time.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 16.

The Garlic

I still cry at the table
when I smell the garlic,
that breath of an old verb.

I know the good health that dies,
the green candle flames
underground, the sad wax
of life, those cruel kitchens...

It's true: wherever I am,
when I see the garlic
with its beard full of grief,
my grandmother sits down,
my parents pray, my uncles
fill my mouth with ashes,

By the fires of men,
my family sang alone;
they were heard, entering
the synagogues of garlic.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 17.

Rainy Day

Outside, nothing moves: only the rain
nailing the house up like a coffin.

Remember, in childhood, when it rained?
Then, the whole world sailed down the alley:
leaves, paper, old shoes, the buildings,
everything like a circus going to sea,

Now, the rain, the iron rain, with its little keys
is closing all the doors...

and I think we're all dead. See how the sky
sits like a tombstone on the roofs.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 18.

At My Window

Across the street
nine boys in the weeds scream,
hurling rocks. Blackbirds
are headlines overhead.

One boy looks at the sun.
And I look back at how
I stood, under a tree,
my hands hot with stones.
A squirrel, tail up
and balanced on a bough,
faced me like a question
I couldn't answer.

Here, on this jewel of earth,
time tears at the green edge.
This pane, thin water,
makes two small islands
of my eyes;
and the sky
always seems to be
the sail of a great ship
that never reaches land.

Below, on the sidewalk,
a neighbor's little girl,
tall as a yardstick,
her eyes in glasses,
on her bike rides by
singing, Oh lady of Spain,
I adore you...

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 19.

October Poem

October smokes a strong cigar
and spreads its leather in the sun.
Metal on metal when the mind
feels the limber oil grow thin.

As I came home, after work,
I saw an old man mow his lawn.
Sweet rain fell from those blades and death
smelled like a baby in its bed.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 20.

The Death of a Lucky Man

They were seen,
now and then
(by all the cameras)
very happy
under the sun
in Hollywood.

The brute stem
flowered in her soil,
He starred on the wide
screen of her eyes
and found the goddess
without her make-up.

One afternoon
(they'd said: That boy's
a lucky man!)
he awoke.
His great blood
was wetting the bed.

And, beautiful,
she came to court
dressed in a little grief,
hot from the flame
upon the altar
between her thighs.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 21.

We Thank the Heart

It came from nowhere,
the impossible car.
Some of his thin hair
is stuck in the glass,

There's so much blood:
the warm sun walks
like Christ upon it.
A needle's eye
in his tattered head
is losing his life's
essential thread;
the crowd kneels down,

A siren blows.
The man tries
to straighten out
his body, like
a suit of clothes.

We see the tailor
in his chest
work overtime.

And we thank the heart,
and nothing else,
that patched his head,
that he smiles at us
and isn't dead.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 22.

Before I Sleep

I go to the window
to breathe before I sleep.
I hear a driveway growl,
the valves of darkness leak.

Hills roll in their blankets,
the crickets turn to rain;
and as I close my eyes
I feel the stars take aim.

I'm still a child at night,
who knows the world is round.
Soon, sunrise with its paint
will brighten up this town.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 23.

On a Summer Night

On a golden boulevard I watch
the women: so many flow past me.
And their hips rock like little ships
that need a mast to go to sea.

Now at the walls the men appear.
Mounted upon a myth, they hunt—
their eyes deep in the high-heeled waves—
that fallen cup of sacrament.

I thought I saw in a passing face
how love to lovers will be good.
Gayly they'll fish all night to find
that jovial serpent in the blood.

But I go to a familiar door.
And wait until she asks who's there.
And always, in the dark, she opens
without pleasure—and without despair.

I see myself in a bulging sheet,
no-body to her, although, so near.
I think: You're a ghost; and flee
before she asks what I'm doing here.

A white cat climbs over that wall
and all the stars are out of place.
Buildings grow in their tall grey robes;
coldly the headlights peel my face.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 24.

In the Alley

At noon an airplane,
a hard drop of sweat,
rolls down the sky's
big forehead.

The dry alley
dreams of water—
trampled root.
Fenced-off the housewife trees
multiply their fruit.

Later, a man,
grey as gravel,
comes up the alley.
At a garbage can
an alarm of flies
goes off in his face.

Scared by a wind
that walks through gates,
among the leaves
the fallen man
curls around a wall
like smoke, and disappears...

In the yards, the trees
drop loquats, and yellow
ripe round pears.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 25.

At Night

At night, when the mouse
is murdered by cheese,
when the tired walls turn away,
when the body can't stand anymore,
then death parts my hair
and I don't want to die.
I don't want to die!

The asthma weeps.
The asthma burns in its leaves.
The medicines consult,
aware of their labels,
by the bed.

But death comes:
out of the faucets, the floors,
from the big clock that bleeds
weakening in its springs,
it comes shoveling out my chest,

And I don't know why
but I know the heart beats
and beats a man to death,

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 26.

Legend

Lucky Aladdin had
a lamp that he would rub.
Metal, it showed its love
in sensible delight:
gave him a golden life.
But now, the gods are gone,
and we are on our own.

Bold Rustem beat the deevs;
with heavenly assistance
shook all the gaudy tents
of Asia like a tree
against his majesty.
But now, the gods are gone,
and we are on our own.

The lonely, young or old,
who tossed all night in bed,
were heard and comforted.
Not fantasy, but flesh
lay down to share their wish.
But now, the gods are gone,
and we are on our own.

Then, green as money were
the distant fields. And all
who stood upon a hill
and swore they would fulfill
their dreams before they died,
had lightning at their side.
But now, the gods are gone,
and we are on our own.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 27.

I Took the Wild

An old man
is a bundle of leaves;
I saw one scattered
in the street,

The police came.
They put his pieces,
like stolen jewels,
in a little can,
People felt themselves.

Slowly, someone
nobody saw
slipped a white glove
over his hand.

Before I went,
I closed my eyes
and took the wild
poinsettia that grew
where his mouth had been.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 28.

This Morning

We were the rain last night;
this morning there's a smell
of us in flower beds.

A light of insects moves
upon an old lawn's face.
The street is nearly dry

and the sidewalk's become
a mockingbird: its long
grey throat full of children.

We go to see ourselves
in puddles, you and I,
clear fragments of the flood.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 29.

Evening on the Farm

Time for a jacket now,
and to put my hands away.

I must learn from the stars
how a field should look.

But one by one, bright children,
the stars rush downstairs

to meet my horses and hay
with an astonished eye.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 30.

Now It's Friday

I came for coffee
to water my deep heart

Now it's Friday
and my hands still hurt
from Monday Tuesday

But a cup of coffee
is a big brown eye
that looks at anyone

Where is the door
that opens like a hug

When you're always alone
at night there are the stars
The sky's a plate of salt

And you wait growing hard
like a loaf of bread

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 31.

Picture Framing

My fingers feed in the fields of wood.

I sand pine, walnut, bass,
and sweat to raise their grain.

Paints, powder and brush
are the seasons of my trade.

At the end of the day
I drive home
the proud cattle of my hands.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 32.

At Work

He said: The sky's so blue there,
you could bathe your feet in it.

And his emotion rose like dust
behind a passing truck.
He always coughs on his lunch.
His eyes are faded, like his shirt.

He smiles: I was strong then,
as big as a young barn.

What can you do for a man?
Time is an old boss we hate
together. I look at his hands.

Those bent flowers by the wall,
they still live! Even if the wind
should never have put them here.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 33.

A Short Speech to the Hungry

Because so many children dream
the full moon is a bowl of milk,
if you forget your hands—
those wonderful roots—
you feel your right mind fail:
unlike the bee stuck to its hod
you see creation in a cloud
and fear the wind that tears
orchard, field and mankind down.

While the celery's green fountains rust,
you, for whom the earth
has no concern, must think:
we live in our belts
and we have been
like the blind ant who pulls
his daily ton in company;

The smile that ripens for a friend,
the word that strengthens us like bread,
rot in the mouths of hungry men.

When the satisfied say: The Wind! The Wind!
you will understand who tears
orchard, field and mankind down.

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), p. 34.

Sunlight on the Wall

Midcareer selection | 1976

Poems not represented in *Early Rain*, together with two substantially reconceived poems, reset from the kayak edition. This lifetime selection also preserves much of the recoverable record of *The Dark Birds* (1968), for which no original scan is presently in the archive.

In Those Mountains

In those mountains, where I grew
time passed like the plants:
acorn and castor-bean.

By a tree, I found the deer
that hunters left: a flower
of ants in the bullet hole
and a root held its leap.

There sunlight came down
a road and green nature
reddened at the tip.
Yucca struck at the wind,
turned dull and rusted in
the fall; lizards rose
like steam upon the rocks
and snakes took off their clothes.

Nothing's happened. The years
go on under the grass...

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 9. A substantially reconceived version of "In Those Hills" in *Early Rain*.

Foothills

Every morning here,
black-plumed the knightly quail
go riding through the grass.

In the wind, a mild army
of mustard runs uphill.
The yucca toss their spears.

Now and then, a child,
abandoned in its kite,
drifts out into the sky.

At twilight, the foothills
are a pile of rose petals
the color of grapes...

There went the sun
in a crumpled hat,
to see the rest of the world.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 10.

The Dark Birds

The dark birds came,
I didn't know their name.

They walked in Hebrew on the sand
so I'd understand.

They sang, the sea flowed,
though no one made a road.

I shivered on the shore
when the water closed its door.

Then as I felt the birds return
to me like ashes to an urn,

and sunlight warmed the stones,
fire undressed my bones.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 31.

Pigeons

Wherever I go to find
peace or an island
under palms in the afternoon
at midnight to pity my neighborhood
at dawn in the shrubs
to look for a child

I hear them
they fly by
applauding themselves
I see them
they pray as they walk
their eyes are halos
around a pit
they look amazed

Who are these that come
as a cloud to our windows
who rush up like smoke
before the town burns

You will find one
on a mountain
in a carpenter's shop
at home on the lawn
of an old estate
at the library
in the forehead of paradise

Whoever is mad
can accuse them
thousands were killed in a day

What happens to them
happens to me
when I can't sleep
they moan and I'm there
and it's still like that

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 32.

The Garlic

Rabbi of condiments,
whose breath is a verb,
wearing a thin beard
and a white robe;
you who are pale and small
and shaped like a fist,
a synagogue,
bless our bitterness,
transcend the kitchen
to sweeten death—
our wax in the flame
and our seed in the bread.

Now, my parents pray,
my grandfather sits,
my uncles fill
my mouth with ashes.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 35. A substantially reconceived version of the poem in *Early Rain*.

Madman Songs

1

People go home
to rest in vaults
curtains soothe their faults
bright windows show their money
I hated home
it caused me pain
cloudy days
and evenings came
I leaned against
the iron rain

2

Someone held me there was harm
now each word's an alarm
the man who looks so calm
will turn into a bomb
Woman daughter son
I wake up and put them on
they hide me from the law
My desire's a blade of grass
I trample as I pass
Fear me what I hate will fall

3

In summer small cones
of dirt beside a fence
erupt with the weddings
of the ants
a moth staggers from a shrub
People turn their sprinklers on
to watch the water girls
dance on their lawn
I don't go out
until they've all gone in
They might come near

with large damp wings
love and other things

4

When I don't sleep
the crickets weep

When I say
My life will pass
they scrape the dark glass

When the wall
begins to fall
where I strain
they file the chain

When I rise I wear
an orange shirt
A green woman
is rinsing her skirt
She imagines me

5

David's gone Goliath's strong
flocks of pebbles bleat
their brittle cries of light
fade where the leaves lie
dry harps near a stream

Jacob warmed a rock
the rock and Jacob dreamed
I'm burning I'm alone
everyone's a stone
I break my feelings on

6

I sat on the sidewalk
with my own box of chalk
and all day long I made
the whole world by myself
That's not the world they said

Then I rose at dawn
I put a label on
it wore me out by noon
All day I swung a brush
to see the buildings bloom

Just painting on a wall
won't change a man at all
or make the stone turn blue
So I sat down once more
What else could I do

7

People go home
Twilight's a glass
through which they pass
The carver calms
his arm and leaves
his passion in the grain
The one who ran
runs back again
We live in pain
The moon's an aspirin

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), pp. 36–38.

The Drive

Because their bed was calm
and they'd never done
what they read about,
they drove to the hills,
left the car, and climbed
high over the shale
and spread her dress in the dirt.

Soft ceramic quail,
the natives there,
stared from the chaparral
while they groaned
and hurt themselves.
The heat made ants
bubble out of the ground.

The hill was a flower
that evening closed.
They were naked
and very small,
and they put on their clothes.
The car would give them back
their power.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 39.

A Child's an Apple

Those who are tall look down.
They show their keys,
the dead bird in their hands.
They open and close
volumes of doors.
They smile.
Their teeth are the stones
in the graveyard at noon.
They're always hungry
and when they love they bite.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 40.

Funeral

Surely a dead moth's
the skull of a tiny horse,
and the moon's a saint
who pities the sea.

Peace, peace to this child
of rain and light,
and the people who stay
holding candles and lilies,

tasting their tears,
naked in a dream,
over the long drawer
they've closed in the earth.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 43.

One Morning

I told myself,
A single man's
like water where
nobody swims.
And I went out.

In gardens, doves
were broken jars
a wind blew through.
Beds of ivy
were spread with webs,

old underwear;
forgotten wives,
moths, or the wrong
figures of men,
lay at the roots.

While sparrows strained
their tiny springs
to live, I heard
how people damned
another day.

Later, I found
some blackberries
under a porch
and leaves as rough
as a cat's tongue.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 44.

The Poet

1

They said, Go, rise each day
with her, become
the reliable dough a family needs.
I wouldn't. I walked away
from the kitchen, the store
she was building in her breast...
And everything grows dim
like the little stone
brought home from the shore.

2

What will I bring
if I come to your house?
A cold wind at the door,
bad dreams to your spouse.

There isn't a tree
in your backyard;
the lawns are plastic,
the chairs are too hard.

No, I wouldn't talk.
I'd be full of spite
and I'd strike my head
like a match that won't light.

3

Woman, mirror of all my sides,
I pass through you to the window.

When I lay my hand on the grass
forgive me if I call the earth my child.

4

Always poor, he knows
the crickets will leave him

small jars of money.

He waits, he admires a weed.
His dreams are addressed.

At night by his desk
he becomes a flower;
children are bees in his arms,
a little pain making honey.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), pp. 45–46.

Apprentice

Because
I love you
I've learned to be
this hammer that runs
all day like a horse
with its hoof in its head.

In the afternoon
my hands
lie down together
for a minute.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 49.

A Year in a Small Town

1

Surrounded by flowers,
bees are drowning
in the housepainter's pot.

2

Today, I know
I haven't done as much
for this world as a tree.

3

Children bring home
stones instead of friends;
the blackbird has a golden eye.

4

Spring, that young man
is wearing the shirt
I was wounded in.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 50.

Lullaby

Go to sleep my daughter
go to sleep my son
once this world was water
without anyone

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 51.

A Tree Stump at Noon

The light drips like oil
from an old machine.

A crow, an angry boot,
flies over the roofs
and begins to scream
at the men who build.

The huge root lies, severed head,
on a still vacant field.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 52.

Now I Sleep in the Afternoon

We gaze at the beautiful forms,
at the dark hair of delicate dials—
we want to hold and move the world.

Often, as we extend our hands,
nothing happens: loose wires hang
from the plaster of our sleeves.

I have dreams in the afternoon
of khaki-colored leaves, and men
who fall, of cities like rain coming down.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 55.

Stars Climb Girders of Light

They arrange themselves
in the usual place,
they quit before dawn,
and nothing's been done.

Then men come out.
Their helmets fill the sky;
their cities rise and fall
and the men descend,
proud carpenters of dew.

Man brief as the storm,
more than five feet of lightning,
twisted and beautiful.
Man made like his roads,
with somewhere to go.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 56.

By the Sea

Across that loud scroll of water
fishermen still sail out
to earn a living,
a boat leaves for Peru...

And always, a multitude
unpacks a paradise
of Sundays on the sand
to celebrate the passage of its blood.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 59.

L. A.

The world's largest ash-tray,
the latest in concrete,
capital of the absurd;
one huge studio
where people drive
from set to set and everyone's
from a different planet.

For miles, the palm trees,
exotic janitors,
sweep out the sky at dusk.
The grey air molds.
Geraniums heat the alleys.
Jasmine and gasoline
undress the night.

This is the desert
that lost its mind,
the place that boredom built.
Freeways, condominiums, malls,
where cartons of trash and diamonds
and ideologies
are opened, used, dumped near the sea.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 60.

G. F.

He's a law about to be broken
a man rippling at the edge

He edits news of a material world
while under his tongue intelligent nouns
are preparing their adjectives
for a view of the city without crime

This man encircles himself
his waist is his own embrace
his smile is a private door

I admire him for his agile fat
a mind like an animal's jaw
his poems that escape from their chains

He awakens to books like birthdays
He tries to grow where he stands
He's a warm wall his daughter climbs

This man has put his ear
to his heart and kept the secret

At the head of his round table
far from the ancient onion of mother
he settles between his shoulders
to be a calm king of argument
though his castle burns
and his people are alone.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 63.

A. C.

He smiles he wants to be wise
He comes on a shrewd donkey of wit
He peddles his innocence
His fist opens when asked
the ambivalent cow of his hand
gives a little

But Christ he gets mad
I want to report
his teeth his cloud his envelope

And there he goes
always an exile
never undressed
with a flute full of leaves
beads growing in his beard
still ready to climb
the soft Himalaya
of hope in his eyes

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 64.

José

Through with work
his hands waxed and polished
where the big rings shine
a chocolate jacket
apricot shoes
and the dark glasses
to hide the scar
that withered rose stem
love had stitched near his eye
he entered the cheap café
and whistled whistled
the neighborhood's old king
of fists of mockingbirds
gigolos and finishers

Everyone looked
even the dishwater glowed
Then coffee refilled our cups
darkness the windows

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 65.

O'Keeffe

One morning, Georgia O'Keeffe
cobblestoned the infinite with clouds.
She stared at space. It blushed.
She smiled. Fire and sword,
mountain range and stream—
the vulva's green silk rippled—
everything burned to its bone
and a black cross grew
from the radiant grave of forms.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 66.

Twilight at the Shop

A whole day at the saw—
when they come for the rubbish,
I throw myself
out with the dust.

We smile and smoke and praise
what's left of the sun.
Dark trees have bottled its light.
They glow like many beers.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 69.

Next Door

The Black man's horn,
sweet summer,
played;
night blooming jasmine
floated in.
They danced and danced
like a diesel's
windshield wiper blade,
on a hard floor,
in the saffron rain
that falls from a light,
while their music
slowly seeped
each bitter night
under the skin
of a clean
and quiet town's
disdain.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 70.

I Can't Sleep

I wish we were young,
in another house,
in a different town.
I can hear the dog
run away in her dream;
outside, raindrops—
their tender hoofbeats
trapped in the courtyard
of a leaf.

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 71.

Watercolor Days

Pull up the shade, look outside.
November sent a card to you—
an antique world upon a shelf.

These are the watercolor days,
there's never been anything else.
Trees that have lost most of their leaves
are sketched and delicate and look
like music written in the air.

A faint blue wash and that's the sky.
One hill, neither green, nor brown.
Sunlight warms a tired wall's face.
A few clouds, a few old ladies
with twilight tinted hair...

Publication. First published in *Sunlight on the Wall* (Santa Cruz: kayak, 1976), p. 72.

The Wild Olive Tree

Late collection | 1979

The complete recoverable text of the West Coast Poetry Review edition. The local scan lacks printed pages 19–20; “Pebble,” listed on page 20 in the contents, is therefore recorded as a missing source rather than reconstructed from the later collected edition.

Signature

I earn a living
and I have a family
but to tell the truth
I'm a wild olive tree

I like cognac
and a proud Jewish song
I live wherever
I don't belong

I watch the world decay
on every page on every face
it's a sick man's clouded eye
that rolls around in space

And my obsession's
a line I can't revise
to be a gardener
in paradise

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 9.

These Days

homage to Attila József

These days, everything's bad.
The future waits in a button.
No one plans, nobody says:
Three years from now...

Evening falls upon a porch;
bloody, black and white,
it opens like the paper.
—Someone bursts into flames.

Winter, a grim warehouse,
delivers the wind.
An angry truck rattles by—
the inconsolable self,
strumming its gas pedal,
tuning up for the storm.

Lies! so many lies!
Windows malignant with things.
When at last the nail
strangles the hammer
and even the ant howls.

Then rifles, rockets—
"O what a time, what a time!"

And, like an old ideal,
the moon's been reached.
A few astonished flies
wrinkle the dust on its face.

Be like the rain
that wears a ragged coat

and finds a lamp
in the smallest stone
and sings for nothing
from street to street.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 13–14.

Some Definitions at Work

The hammer lowered its horns
and the rusty nail shrieked
pulled from the place where it lived

The table-saw whined
like a virtuous bee
that knows it will die
in a meadow of dust

The sandpaper sighed
as it killed itself
caressing the sugar pine the ash

The housepainter's brush
hermaphrodite
with a long stem a vaginal voice
and a spring in its bristle
swayed satisfied with itself on the wall

Glue the woodworker's sperm
began to boil in the pot
The rags their breath
full of turpentine
demanded their rights
and threatened to burst like the sun

Then the woman
who turned into a mop
dishevelled grey
worn out by the floor

and the man
who'd become a broom
his broad shoulder
lost in the dirt

noticed how even a motor
bleeds when it breaks
drops of oil stare from its skin
like the eyes of frightened fish

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 15–16.

Landscapes

1

The City

The city grows
from a highway's stem:
it's a glittering circuit board,
a crystal that palpitates.

Night's swept away
like a broken glass.

The day begins.
It prints the parking lots;
doors work like switches;
people are impulses in a system.

But often, a siren occurs—
the awakened man's incredulous wail.

And the sky, that rotten lung,
bleeds, then blackens;
the windows on the walls
multiply their cells.

Still curious, the infected moon
regulates its lens.

2

On the Outskirts

On the outskirts, the factory—
somebody's chemistry set;
a junkyard, where the town
keeps throwing itself away;
rust clots on the mangled iron;
pain in the sun's aluminum glare...

There's a hubcap, going blind
in a ditch; the dust,
spreading its cataract;
and a few yellow machines

that die like sunflowers,
dropping their parts in a field.

The hills are a pile of rags
in a pail of dirty thinner;
scrap metal trees crinkle
in the wind's grey flame;
and the tumbleweeds roll
their barbed wire over the roads...

An airplane roars like a sperm
through a crack in the smog's deep stone.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 17–18.

Eviction

Where could he go
from a house hidden by trees,
whose days were pebbles
in a stream of birds,
with his wife, his children,
all the books like bottles of wine
- that glow on their shelves?

To a neighborhood
of crypts with windows,
high-rise transistors,
cars brighter than people;
where everyone stares
like a loaded gun
and the grass is sinister...

He stood in the yard.
A rose opened its wound,
a spider repaired its net,
an old leaf touched him
like his father's hand;
and the trucks delivered,
or took away.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 21.

Old

Their children are gone;
almost everyone
they loved and half
of what they understood,
has disappeared.

But the door's still open,
the porch light's on;
a little wind at night
and they hear footsteps
when a few leaves fall.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 22.

A Citizen

1

The spider I hit,
loose thread on the floor,
clenches its fist.
The cat lies down;
it looks at me
as if through a window.

2

I'm a coat hanger
twisted by rage.

3

Everything shrinks from my hands—
that landscape threatened by planes,
a woman's astonished face.

4

I served the giant
who ate the villages,
whose arms swept aside
the stars like raindrops
on a windshield;
who broke the sky,
man's sacred mirror,
and promised peace...

5

I did these things for freedom,
endless as a boulevard
where all the lights are green.

6

My car won't start.

Dead leaves follow me—
they're scribbling my name.

7

I'm a swastika, the headless man

whose iron limbs grind the world.

8

I want to change.
Even a wall gets painted again.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 23–24.

After the Meal

1

A suburb of coffee cups;
napkins, those crumpled hills;
silverware, freeways
spotted with grease, with flesh...

and the ash-tray,
a ghetto full of charred men
with grizzled heads
who wasted their flame;
where every breath
scatters its bones
and small grey mounds
accumulate, then crumble,
like nations
or the knees of elephants.

2

Like a cleaning plant, steam
comes through a hole in your face.
Your exhaust is the last
wild horse that gallops away.

3

Smoke waters the flowers
that grow in the lungs.
The cigarette, like your life,
is a piece of chalk
that shrinks as it tries to explain.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 25–26.

To My Enemies

I'm still here, in a skin
thinner than a dybbuk's raincoat:
strange as the birds who scrounge,
those stubborn pumps
that bring up nothing...

Maddened by you
for whom the cash register,
with its clerical bells,
is a national church;
you, whose instant smile
cracks the earth at my feet...

May your wife go to paradise
with the garbage man,
your prick hang like a shoelace,
your balls become raisins,
hair grow on the whites of your eyes
and your eyelashes turn
into lawn mowers
that cut from nine to five...

Man is a skin disease
that covers the earth.
The stars are antibodies
approaching, your president
is a tsetse-fly...

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 27.

All Around Me

All around me, butterflies,
ecstatic hinges,
hunt for the ideal door.
A cicada's ratchet
tightens a place in the yard.
Everything's warmed
by a wave from the tree.

A bird trickles like the tap.

And the dog just stands there,
looking down.
Run, sleep, she can't remember.
It's hard to be conscious.

From here, I can watch the freeway—
ants on a windowsill.
The skyline doodles, an airplane
seems to float like a fish.

Nearby, a factory smokes.
I'm one of its little ash-trays.

Suddenly, a dinosaur,
or Rome, will rise,
then crumble,
in the cracks
on a ragged wall.

We do marvelous things
without knowing how,
like the chicken whose bronze shit
builds a shrine under its coop.

But, even so,
one gets depressed.
This morning, a field,
a flock of stones
asleep in its mist...
This world's painted
on a glass that has

to break.

I can still
pay the rent
and the roads aren't lined
with corpses yet.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 28–29.

Pencil Sharpener

It has no arms or legs, this tiny nude; yet grip it by the waist, then stir its hips: a dry leaf multiplies, a cold motor starts in the wood.

Revived, still shivering, the pencil sheds itself—and there's a butterfly, teeth, the fragments of a crown.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 33.

Pliers

Contour of fish, or a donkey's intractable head...

Open, the pliers are an eagle over its prey; closed, any woman you reach for to tighten loose nuts.

The color of all common tools and, like mankind, made of steel, yet easy to use.

Though, basically, it's only a jaw, or a thumb and forefinger joined by a pin.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 34.

The Old Engraver

An old engraver was out of work. He lived alone with his tools. It was summer. The sky wore jeans and every day the backyard opened its familiar shop: a worm scrolling along, the trees elaborating themselves.

But in the street children were grinding each other between the gears of their parents' wrath. Should he just walk around without a point?

So, each morning he printed lots of money; and all the children went to the candy store and became sweet.

Then, the police appeared. The old engraver was out in the yard, hanging dollars up to dry with his underwear.

He had to go to jail. And all the children turned into broken glass until even the mountains, those solitary herds, bled to death.

The moon, a giant freezer, hummed. It was going to be used.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 35.

The Gilder

The Shop, weakened by dust, was closing its eyes. The saw stopped like an ambulance. A breeze made of turpentine still hung around his hands.

Outside, the walls in the alley were gold leaf fluttering on their frames; clouds, retired housepainters, relaxed in the sky.

A little cello began to throb in his throat.

Suddenly, he saw the sun overturn like a truckload of oranges at the end of a street—its light scatter and roll through the windows on a hill.

What's that got to do with Wittgenstein, or how we live? voices shouted in his head.

Nothing...nothing at all.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 36.

Suburban Dusk

One girl in a red dress leaves the shopping center with empty hands: and you believe in the future—you've seen a drop of blood flee from the luminous cells of a corpse.

But the sky slips a coin in the slot between two buildings. Lights go on. Distorted creatures appear. A car, like an angry heart, explodes.

And a vast erysipelas spreads over the hills. What can you do? Each night, the city becomes a butterfly, trembling in its oil.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 37.

Postcards

For Odette

Ocean

There it is: an immense, grey, agitated circle...

and all day long the boat goes on
like a cartridge across a turntable,
an old shoe in a storm,
dipping itself in the spume.

* * *

If the sun shines, the water grinds its glass.

* * *

When calm, the sea's so blue
you could paint the sky with it.
Sometimes, it's a green tablecloth
laid on the wind.
Fog—
sailing for hours
in the same spot;

and the joyful sound
of the invisible sea.

* * *

On the horizon, late at night,
a ship glows like the last café
still open
at the end of a boulevard
after the rain.

Island

Dwarfs and hunchbacks
are loading wagons.
Gardens drip in the heat.
Flowers burst from the walls.
An ox appears
like a hillside in an alley.

* * *

At the grocery store,

chamber pots display their bottoms
from the rafters,
chicks lament among the onions...
So poor, a box
of baking soda's
smaller than a cigarette pack.

* * *

A group of boys, in double file,
marches down a street.
A young, skinny priest, a scorched twig,
walks behind them, reading Scripture.
Pale girls lean on their windowsills,
framed like the earliest photographs.

* * *

Passengers board the ship at twilight.
The people who wave from the pier
light matches—they become
a crowd of candles on the shore.
The boat, a huge altar, dissolves in the fog.

Arrival

Two sailboats cross the bay,
as if the wind wore tennis shoes.

* * *

Villages, like broken pots,
or baskets of apples,
scattered on a mountainside.

* * *

And the light, so much light!
a harp burning in a glass.

Village

A farmer swings a scythe,
tilting the blade's sharp edge.
The weeds are waves that fall
on a glistening coastline.
When he stands it up,
the scythe's a tall, one-legged bird,
whose long bill the farmer cleans.

* * *

The cemetery's such a pretty town—
old, quiet, full of mansions.
People, flowers, crows, everyone comes.

* * *

A market in the street.
Herbs, those quiet housewives,
wearing their modest prints,
were found in the fields at dawn.
Clods of garlic, the kitchen's diamond,
hang from every stall.
Cheese, like the walls of France;
red peppers with a plastic glow...
The cook speaks softly, gesturing,
as if she were washing her hands in French.
She loves to look at the sea
when the water ripples
and a gaggle of rowboats
wobbles near the shore.
She talks to the chickens in the garden.
They're very intelligent, she says...
They'd tell us beautiful stories
if they weren't so busy eating.

* * *

Frogs croak twenty-one in French all night.

* * *

In the morning, calves
stare at the world
with their mothers' eyes.
The rabbits quiver—
they know so much
about freedom, death.

* * *

Inside the moldy church
you're wrapped in a damp rag.
A Christ, as smooth as soap,
hangs from a cross
near the entrance.

A bland virgin
in a faded blue robe
gestures from a niche.

* * *

Outdoors, a breeze
makes all the shrubs
look sociable.
White butterflies in a field
are the frayed handkerchiefs of those
who didn't finish saying goodbye.

Train

Sunlight plays its flute in the treetops.

* * *

A village where a church,
with one arm raised to the sky,
sinks in a cauldron of tiles...

and a castle whose towers rise
like a charred town
from the murky water of its walls.

* * *

Train station.
Empty platform,
not even a cat.
A flock of bells
crosses the tracks.

* * *

Green keeps changing itself from green to green.

Paris

City, where every wall's a canvas
(a torn poster's an allegorical town)
and time goes around painting the past...
Night lifts the moon like a coffee cup
from the skyline's cluttered shelf.
Each day, spring comes in the middle of fall.
Neighborhoods are history books,
leatherbound and stacked in their centuries.

* * *

In a little square, a man
fills a bottle at a fountain.
The sound of water stops, continues.
A woman leans from a window
to see how the sky feels.
Clouds rub their silver polish over the sun.

* * *

And here are also filthy streets,
leprous walls that sunlight
never touched, smeared with crud,
battered like garbage cans...
the cracks in a stone
are a landscape of nerves;
the air's a perpetual fart
and even the shadows wear rags.

An old dog, a four-legged
bundle of straw,
leaves the café and goes
to the gutter for a drink.
When he returns, his footprints
are a crooked row
of tiny vases, each one
with four flowers, on the sidewalk.

* * *

A child carries a long,
thin loaf of bread.
Its sides are chipped
like the molding of a gilded frame.
The crust looks warm, dented,
as if the baker were a blacksmith
who hammered and sold the sun's rays.

* * *

Jardin du Luxembourg

Birds, in their brown suits,
hurry home from business.
Clouds lie rumpled in the sky
like napkins after dinner.
A chandelier of rain hangs over the lake.

The queens of France are always here.
Their poignant pride endures
the casual gaze of foreigners,
the pigeons and the years.

Arc de Triomphe

Nothing but grey seen through the arch—
as if triumph were an abyss
into which a nation marches.

14th of July

Fireworks—an empire's crown
that lasts for a moment.

A tough guy shows a timid girl
how to dance in the street.

Buttes-Chaumont

From this melancholy cliff
the park unrolls,
a thick green mist below...

And Paris, like a sea
without its water—
the world's most delicate
accumulation of debris.

* * *

Some days are harpsichords
under the chestnut trees.
Nothing lasts, their strings break,
the gold turns grey, a drizzle falls...
And then the gold's restored.
People leave their tables,
birds their narrow benches in the walls.
An old woman sits and bathes
her tired feet that look like marble
in a puddle near the market stalls.

* * *

Among the antique dealers,
a pigeon on the sidewalk's
a little baron who struts

through a village of bric-a-brac.

* * *

It rained and rained in the courtyard
and an old man in a grey coat
sang to empty windows.
The laundry wept for hours.

The round slate roofs of grand hotels,
mythical in their scales,
float through the radiant water of the air.
But the buildings of the poor
divide their bread with everyone.
At night, each window's a glass of wine
the darkness drinks as it passes.

Sometimes, a blind violinist
helps us through the street.
You shed a few coins in his cup—
a shop front glitters
like an accordion in the rain.
Cars whirl around a monument.
People smile, horns blare,
headlights shine like brass.
The whole square's a carousel.
Suddenly, you're a child
who's had his turn, a stranger;
the others stay, but you go home.

* * *

Now, from the dawn's grey chemical,

a café's a postcard in the distance...

a barge strolls through Paris on the Seine...

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 41–55.

The Return

I thought our house was on a hill
that wore its tenants like a crown.
The sidewalk sparkled in the sun
and all the doorways knew my name.

Broken windows, the grass is brown...
only a little grey hunchback
wears the neighborhood like a shawl.
Now, everything's so old and small.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 59.

Homecoming

1

My father was a tender man
whose blue eyes would overcast
by noon. Every dusk
he floated home
in the soiled wind of his clothes.

I flew to the ceiling in his arms.
The silverware sang
as he came to the table
and the bright room rolled
like a train that climbs
its ladder through the dark.

2

His hands are cobwebs full of flies,
trembling in his lap.
They've locked him up with strangers,
because he drools too much;
and I imagine freeing him.
We'd go to a town that isn't there,
where everyone he cries for now
(wrapped in the bed's thick bandage)
would come to shake his hand.
He laughs. He lifts a child and grows.
He drinks and drinks the meadowlark,
he smoothes a stone's grey hair...

But he stinks, he's a huge bib;
a loose scab, a rotten cornflake,
clings to his lip.

3

There are mouths so cold
the salmon-colored tongue
leaps without a sound;
lonely ditches where a broken dove
mourns in the rubble of a face.

Men, at the mercy of their parts:
grime in the skull, despair
corroding the rainbows in their wires.

4

My home was a watercolor
I left in the rain...

Tonight, the crickets ring and ring,
nobody answers;
the shadows of men are looking for blood.

Someone has stepped
on the classical face of the moon.

Dawn comes, a gradual
mountain range of ashes.

5

The mockingbirds, those joyful books
that opened in the sky,
then closed their pages on a branch,
awake and go mad,
chewing the bones of their old songs;
and the flies, such tiny fenders,
batter themselves in the air.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 60–62.

Lament

1

I looked for you at the cemetery.
You have two addresses
on a metal door in the grass;
but you don't live at either one.

2

When I was a child
and sick at night,
you were the moon
above my bed.

Father, father,
I saw you smile
at a sparrow
the way you smiled at me.

3

What else awakes and knows
it was born, it will die.
The same clouds come and go;
the same bird sings or flies.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 63.

Driving Home at Night with My Children After Their Grandfather's Funeral

See how the moon follows us?
That's Grandpa's face in the sky.
It smiles; so, he's still the same.
Sleep. The way home's always
shorter than the way you came.

Shhh... The car's a steel measure
that swallows the road like a tape;
and all live twice as long
as it takes the snail to go
around the world on its crumpled skate.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 64.

The Widow

Leaves gnaw at the porch.
The century, like her family, disappears.
Life is a movie she's already seen.
Her cheeks are rose petals
in the book of better days.

Wrinkled and powdered and rouged,
bewildered by others,
alone wherever she is,
she opens her purse, she opens a drawer:
it's twilight—she enters a photograph.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 65.

Tree

Thirty years in that yard—
and what a wild,
melancholy mind,
I know you were.

Autumn, the gifts come down.
I still see yours
multiplying, bruised,
there on the ground.

My dear, ironic tree,
what did we do?
Your neglected fruit
has poisoned me.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 66.

For W. R. Rodgers

(1909–1969)

I knew a candle of a man
whose voice, meandering in a flame,
could make the shadows on the wall
listen to what he said.
Time flowed from a vein that ran
its blue crack through his pale forehead.

He's done. You'd need a broom
to arouse him now.
All things burn before they're dead.
Some men are words that warmed a room.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 67.

Spleen

Sometimes, I just hang around
like a dead man's coat,
or a vacant lot that trembles
when construction crews pass.

I go to a coffee shop
and sit for hours to watch
a window's silent film—
people, scrawled and erased
on a long, grey page.

Later, when clouds blaze,
then suddenly grow old
and sad, I take a walk.

Evening begins with headlights
and a sound track of birds
that fades from tree to tree.
Behind a garage, a few
strange weeds, taller than men...

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 68.

With Animals

1

I feel like the elephant
enlightened boulder
held back by a chain

2

I act like the camel
with its melancholy
sensual eyes
and fastidious lips

3

I see the dung-colored
crumbling bison
an entire town evicted
even its sofas
falling apart

The young look over the fence
their eyes are maple leaves
after the rain
American lakes
a hundred years ago
Their mothers stare at the ground
their fathers shrink
like the countryside
The moon the oldest streetlight
touches them
with its intangible snow

4

I envy the tortoise
primordial hand
whose neck is a thumb
measuring time and the grass

5

I understand the stork
the way it paces
scholar or wandering Jew
whoever waits
for the real world to be born

6

I want to comfort the ostrich
that mad woman
wearing her grandmother's clothes
and be like the mountain goats
who lick each other's forehead

7

But look at the huge green toad
sanctimonious phlegm
the crocodile hell's pavement
bats those weird umbrellas
that open only at night

8

The baboon sulks on a shelf
prehistoric priest
whose rump is a festival
its face a sportscar
his eyes glum headlights that glare

9

There's that insect
winding itself again
another ant

berserk on its boulevard

10

And somewhere a field mouse
sits by the sea

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 69–72.

And Still

Nobody's honest
nothing matters

That's why I'm always
adjusting myself
my chemicals
my complaints

And every day
I fly around
in my insect-colored car
The city's a carcass
streets quiver like meat

In my own voice
I hear a broom
that sighs while it waves
farewell to the past

And still it happens
a few leaves
come around a corner
demonstrate
then disappear
Mozart arrives
in an ice-cream truck
a long war ends
I feel like a streetlight
tall and radiant
my face was made
to shine among the others

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 73.

Gently, Gently

We, too, began with joy.
Then, sickness came;
then, poverty.
We were poor, so poor,
our children were our only friends.

Gently, gently,
through anger and pain,
love justified itself,
like the nails in the house
during a storm.

Somehow, we created hope,
reliable drum
in the shadow's wrist;
a tuning fork
on the sidewalk of dreams.

At night, I was the one
who became a cello,
strung with all our roads,
where memory hums
to itself like a tire.

And you, mad as a clarinet
where the street divides;
a city of raindrops in a bush;
the slow honey that drips
from the sky's old ladle...

the reason I'm frightened of death.
I swear by the wings
love spreads at my waist,
that I'll carry your tune
until my tired strings break.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), pp. 74–75.

Daybreak

Birds drip from the trees.
The moon's a little goat
over there on the hill;
dawn, as blue as her milk,
fills the sky's tin pail.

The air's so cold a gas station
glitters in an ice-cube.
The freeway hums like a pipe
when the water's on.
Streetlights turn off their dew.

The sun climbs down from a roof,
stops by a house and strikes
its long match on a wall,
takes out a ring of brass keys
and opens every door.

Publication. First published in *The Wild Olive Tree* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1979), p. 76.

Windowsills

Late sequence | 1979

The sequence “Images,” reset from the original Common Table edition. The book’s second sequence, “Postcards,” is not repeated because the same text appears in *The Wild Olive Tree*.

Images

...best of all, merely to look. —Goethe

I

Bales of hay—cartons
of sunlight fading in a field.

II

Shadows rise like water;
white fences comb their hair.

III

Leaves everywhere—
shreds of a giant eraser;
an oak leaf,
becoming an antique.

IV

Outside, a snowfall's passed
and painted all the windowsills,
even the curb's grey putty.

V

Sunlight in a window—
a flower in a glass.

VI

The highway's an old
surrealist's granite hair;
and the sea's become
a sky full of clouds.
A wind records the waves,
then plays them in the trees.

VII

A flock of crows
dissolves in the mist—
a cigarette's ash
in a glass of water;

and sunlight
twitching in a puddle.

VIII

Now the night drives up.
Distant buildings
are golden radiators,
the sky's a black cloud
full of sparks... Sirens, dogs;
and he just stood there,
by the police car,
with those handcuffs on,
staring at the moon.

IX

After the rain
a streetlight hangs
the shadows of trees
like laundry
on a wall.

X

Hands, twin sisters
to whom everyone's
a wrinkle
that needs to be smoothed,
a stranger who should be fed.

Hands, those humble wings
that make each day
fly toward its goal;
at rest, still holding
the shape of a tool.

XI

Proletarian aristocrat
whose forehead glows
like imagination's egg;
when you're asleep
you look like

the death mask of Keats,
alone with yourself
again—absolute, relieved.

XII

I wish we were two birds
living in a courtyard
near St. Germain des Prés.
Leaves spread their tablecloths,
trees open their cafés;
all day the sun's a barrel of beer,
at night the earth's a woman,
the full moon's her mirror.

Publication. First published in *Windowsills* (Stony Creek, Connecticut: The Common Table, 1979), pp. 7–19.

Translations

Appendix | 1960

Two untitled poems by Louis Aragon in Bert Meyers's translations, printed at the close of *Early Rain*.

Untitled Translation from Louis Aragon I

Translated from the French of Louis Aragon.

I'm the chief iconoclast among the churches
I'd rather have you than anything
men live or die for
I come to you with the perfume of shrines
with a public song
See how I bleed as I pray to you
Oh how blind I am when I don't see you
Who cries that isn't you
How can I understand millions who die
unless you also moan
It's when I'm at your feet that every road
strikes me with its gravel
when I'm in your arms that every hedge
hits me with its bramble
Your shoulders bear every burden that's born
All this round world's trouble is the salt
that strengthens one of your tears
I'd never been hurt before knowing you
Suffer Did this beast suffer
displaying its wound
How can I compare a little pain
to this pane of patterned glass
where a nailing to the cross of a day is done
You've taught me the grammar of grief
Now I can read sobs their letters spell your name
Your name only Your name shattered
Your name the rose unpetaled
Your name the fertile land of love
Your name for which I'd enter hell
to carve before the face of the world
like the supernatural script
carved over the head of Christ
Your name the sound of my flesh
the tearing of my soul
Your name a fire among the ashes of books
Your name knowledge in our desert

Your name is all I need of history
the Hymn of hymns
the glass of water for the convicts
And all the patron saints
are only a field of broken bottles
at the door of a damned city
when your name resounds on my dry lips
Your name only and let them take my tongue
Your name
all music at the moment of death

—Louis Aragon

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), pp. 35–36.

Untitled Translation from Louis Aragon II

Translated from the French of Louis Aragon.

I'll tell you a great secret
Time is female she needs to be courted
to have us sit at her feet
Time is a dress to undo Time
that head of endless hair being combed
that mirror where a breath
hangs its curtain up to dry
Time is you still asleep at dawn where I awake
Time it is you Time like a knife
going through my throat
If I could show only the pain
of time that never ends
the pain of time that's moored
like the blood in its blue vessel
It's worse than desire left outdoors
than my eye's thirst when you flow through
the room
(one must never break such spells)
and it's worse than if you were to be a stranger
who runs away without reason
and the heart already in another country
How heavy God words are
And it's a question of this my love
further than pleasure my love still safe
you who pound in my head my clock
And if you didn't breathe I'd choke
And on my flesh your step hesitates and descends

I'll tell you a great secret
My words are poverty they beg
an anguish in your hand
things that blacken when you look
That's why I say all the time I love you
lacking the perfect crystal of a phrase
for you to wear around your neck

Don't disdain my common speech

It's the simple water that stutters in the flame

I'll tell you a great secret
I don't know how to talk about time
time that resembles you
I don't know how to talk about you
I pretend as they who stay on the platform
waving their hands to the trains that already went
their fists extinguished by a new weight of tears

I'll tell you a great secret
I'm afraid of you
afraid of what follows you at twilight
to the window
of certain words we never say
I'm afraid of time that's slow
and of time that speeds

I'll tell you a great secret
I'm afraid of you
(close the door)
It's easier to die than love
And this is why I take the trouble
to live my love

—Louis Aragon

Publication. First published in *Early Rain* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), pp. 37–38.

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Colophon

Publication and production notes

This critical reading edition was edited by Brian Kim Stefans for The Text-Tech Papers, Los Angeles, in 2026, as part of *Extremes and Moderations: Early Southern California Poetry*. The poems were reset from the source pages identified in the publication notes and datasheet. The book was composed in EB Garamond on a cream field at 6 × 9 inches. The cover uses original abstract artwork prepared for this edition.