



HAROLD WITT

Collected 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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Collected Poems

Harold Witt

A Critical Reading Edition

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

The Text-Tech Papers

Extremes and Moderations: Early Southern California Poetry

Archival Images

A short selection from the source record



Anniversary cover of Blue Unicorn, featuring the magazine's editors and its visual identity.

Editorial Note

This reading edition is reset from the original book scans and the audited structured corpus in the poet's production folder, not from the earlier *Witt – Poems* reader PDF. Each poem begins on a new page. Stanza divisions, meaningful indents, internal subsection labels, and subtitle material are retained; source-page wraps are rejoined, while any unavoidable display wrap uses a visible hanging indent. The black page-edge remnants and isolated scan characters in the split-page source files have been removed. Book and periodical titles are italicized in all editorial matter.

Contents

Archival Images	I
Editorial Note	2
Introduction	26
<i>Superman Unbound</i>	28
<i>Superman Unbound</i>	29
<i>In an Eighteenth-Century Picture Gallery</i>	30
<i>Record Concert</i>	31
<i>Gospel for Brother Bernard</i>	32
<i>Ode on an American Painting</i>	33
<i>Metaphors for Christ's Birthday</i>	34
<i>Sunset Psychoanalyzed</i>	35
<i>Cinema Matinee</i>	36
<i>Miss Salamander</i>	37
<i>Girl with Crowbar in a Delicate Seascape</i>	38
<i>Hymenoptera</i>	39
<i>Horror Story</i>	40
<i>Ode in Late Winter</i>	41
<i>A Mathematician's Answer</i>	43
<i>Dirges for the World's End</i>	45
<i>Likelier</i>	47
<i>Photograph of Ghosts</i>	48
<i>A Brevity of Grass</i>	49
<i>Flamingos, Swans and Cranes</i>	50
<i>Aunt</i>	51
<i>Laramie</i>	52
<i>The Stream Keeps Tolling</i>	53
<i>Explanation for Eric</i>	54
<i>Juvenilia</i>	55
<i>Echo and Narcissus</i>	56
<i>Nightcoach from Salzburg</i>	59
<i>Tapestry</i>	60

<i>Dans L'Atelier du Peintre</i>	62
<i>The Death of Venus</i>	64
<i>Veil of Perfume</i>	65
<i>Briefly of Love</i>	67
<i>The Strayed Opossum</i>	68
<i>To a Friend in Worse Weather</i>	69
<i>O Rhododendron</i>	70
<i>Drug Store Opening</i>	71
<i>The Death of Venus, and Others</i>	72
<i>Brown Towhee</i>	73
<i>One More Time</i>	74
<i>Fun Zone</i>	75
<i>Actaeon</i>	76
<i>The Lover</i>	77
<i>Memoirs</i>	78
<i>Vale</i>	83
<i>Water Music</i>	84
<i>Vivaldi in Nevada</i>	85
<i>Tea Time in Troy</i>	86
<i>Fully Clothed Figures at Highball</i>	88
<i>Winter Once More</i>	89
<i>Dirge for Dylan Thomas</i>	90
<i>True Story of Venus and Adonis</i>	91
<i>These Senuous Cats</i>	92
<i>Yes, it was the Era of New Erewhon</i>	93
<i>Errored by Love</i>	94
<i>Silenus in the Morning Light</i>	95
<i>The Foetus</i>	96
<i>First Buds</i>	97
<i>The Noble Savage</i>	98
<i>A Bee</i>	99
<i>Newport Suite</i>	100
<i>The Lately Mockingbird</i>	102
<i>Arcs</i>	103
<i>Arachne</i>	104

<i>An Emerald Error</i>	107
<i>Circus</i>	108
<i>The Cocoon</i>	109
<i>The Exile</i>	110
<i>Once a Shy Knight</i>	111
<i>Beasts</i>	112
<i>Why Should I Lyricize the Icy Sun</i>	113
<i>Age of Fable</i>	114
<i>Public Library</i>	115
<i>The World Is White</i>	116
<i>Eliot Among the Vinylite</i>	117
<i>December Ends</i>	118

Beasts in Clothes

119

<i>Notre Dame Perfected by Reflection</i>	120
<i>Au Chien Qui Fume</i>	121
<i>San Marco</i>	122
<i>Campidoglio: Dusk</i>	123
<i>Goddess</i>	124
<i>Piazza Di Spagna, 26</i>	125
<i>Flight, by Turtle, from the Pitti Palace</i>	126
<i>More Nudes for Florence</i>	127
<i>Allegory of Spring</i>	128
<i>Mad About Bodies</i>	129
<i>Back</i>	130
<i>The News Is Robins</i>	131
<i>This March Eighth Air</i>	132
<i>Lawn</i>	133
<i>Boy</i>	134
<i>Bird World</i>	135
<i>Botanical Garden</i>	136
<i>The Berry Bush</i>	137
<i>Nude</i>	138
<i>A Spider</i>	139
<i>Powermower with a Man</i>	140
<i>In Redwoods</i>	141

<i>The Rose God</i>	142
<i>Now, in Feather and Wheat Weather</i>	143
<i>Jet</i>	145
<i>Girl</i>	146
<i>Dog Alive</i>	147
<i>The Raying Fog</i>	148
<i>Three</i>	149
<i>Girl with a Hoop</i>	150
<i>Summer Elegy</i>	151
<i>Brother</i>	153
<i>Pyramid</i>	154
<i>Sea Cliff: End of Summer</i>	155
<i>Winter Intervals</i>	156
<i>Letter to ———</i>	157
<i>Antique Snow</i>	158
<i>Research of the Wrist</i>	159
<i>Elegy for O. S. W.</i>	160
<i>Preferring Nakedness</i>	161
<i>The Ego I</i>	162
<i>In Myths of Music</i>	163
<i>Eyes</i>	164
<i>Ears</i>	165
<i>This Arm</i>	166
<i>The Tape Recorder</i>	167
<i>Wild Horses</i>	168
<i>The Dream Dissected</i>	169
<i>The Word</i>	170
<i>Snake</i>	171
<i>Supermarket</i>	172
<i>When Men</i>	173
<i>TV</i>	174
<i>Of Various Errors</i>	175
<i>Swimmer</i>	176
<i>Here</i>	177
<i>A Rat of Habit</i>	178
<i>The Cock of Confidence</i>	179

<i>Spontaneous Bottle</i>	180
<i>Back View of a Nude</i>	181
<i>Spastic in Glass</i>	182
<i>Reminiscent Beast</i>	183
<i>A Circumstance of Stone</i>	184
<i>This Clock</i>	185
<i>Christmas Poem</i>	186
<i>Butterflies and Elephants</i>	187
<i>Witches</i>	188
<i>Daphnis</i>	189
<i>Theseus</i>	190
<i>Peacock</i>	191
<i>Sitting for Leonardo</i>	192
<i>Siren Sung</i>	194

Pop. by 1940: 40,000 198

<i>Pop. by 1940: 40,000</i>	199
<i>Ben Harding's Flying Machine</i>	200
<i>I Touched the Hand That Shook the Hand of Lincoln</i>	201
<i>Mr. Small</i>	203
<i>Eddie Weismann</i>	204
<i>Dr. Earl Blood, the Painless Dentist</i>	205
<i>Dolores Knight</i>	206
<i>Mr. Byron Jarvis</i>	207
<i>Miss Dark</i>	209
<i>From Aardvark to Zymurgy</i>	210
<i>Lura O'Leary</i>	211
<i>Nancy Van Deusen</i>	212
<i>My Sudden Cousin</i>	213

Now, Swim 214

<i>Night Letter</i>	215
<i>The Oldest House in Silver City, Nevada</i>	216
<i>Trying to Decide at Kayenta Trading Post</i>	217
<i>"The Shadow of the Cross"</i>	218
<i>Rushmore</i>	219

<i>Inside Iowa</i>	220
<i>Walking Milwaukee</i>	221
<i>You Must Say Goodbye</i>	223
<i>Knight of the Road</i>	224
<i>Web World</i>	226
<i>The Cheetab</i>	227
<i>Yellow Jackets</i>	228
<i>Water</i>	229
<i>This Morning Isn't Enough</i>	230
<i>House</i>	231
<i>Jellyfish</i>	232
<i>Picasso and Freud</i>	233
<i>Blurred Leaves in the Foreground</i>	234
<i>The Sad Psychiatrist</i>	235
<i>Babies,</i>	236
<i>The Mermaid</i>	237
<i>Reluctances</i>	238
<i>The Hungerers</i>	239
<i>If Black</i>	240
<i>On the White Seat</i>	241
<i>Ballet Fantastique</i>	242
<i>Ready for Rembrandt</i>	243
<i>The Father Image</i>	244
<i>Barbie</i>	245
<i>Baby Jesus</i>	246
<i>The Day They Walked on the Moon</i>	247
<i>Hippo</i>	249
<i>Opus 132</i>	250
<i>A Wild Delight</i>	251
<i>Believing in Balances</i>	252
<i>The Jerusalem Cricket</i>	253
<i>Orion at Three A.M.</i>	255
<i>Opal</i>	256
<i>The Light in Michigan</i>	257
<i>Crater</i>	258
<i>Lines from Inner Space</i>	259

<i>Ecology</i>	264
<i>On First Having Seen the Emily Dickinson 8¢ U.S. Postage Stamp</i>	265
<i>Three Readings: Reading in Reno</i>	266
<i>Reading to Twenty Pregnant Black High School Girls</i>	267
<i>Lyn Lifshin</i> ,	269
<i>So</i>	271
<i>We Thought</i>	272
<i>Yet</i>	273

Winesburg by the Sea

274

<i>Now in November</i>	275
<i>Winesburg by the Sea</i>	284
<i>Cock-a-Doodle-Do</i>	285
<i>Martin's Texas Tamales</i>	287
<i>Photograph of Ghosts</i>	288
<i>Catalina</i>	289
<i>The Cruel Sea</i>	290
<i>Again, Again</i>	291
<i>Fessendens'</i>	292
<i>Confetti</i>	293
<i>A Voice in the Rapids</i>	294
<i>Ben Harding's Flying Machine</i>	295
<i>The Depression</i>	296
<i>Ear</i>	297
<i>Marjorie</i>	298
<i>Alice White</i>	299
<i>Hired Girls</i>	300
<i>I Don't Remember</i>	301
<i>Saturday Nights and Sunday Mornings</i>	302
<i>Miss Herring</i>	303
<i>Jealousy</i>	304
<i>Brother</i>	305
<i>Hand on the Gun</i>	306
<i>Orange</i>	307
<i>Veil of Perfume</i>	308
<i>Aunt Nettie</i>	309

<i>Uncles in the Orchard</i>	310
<i>Aunts and Uncles</i>	311
<i>Sundays at Uncle Earl's</i>	313
<i>Rich Man, Poor Man</i>	314
<i>The Science They Breathed</i>	315
<i>Gettysburg</i>	316
<i>I Touched the Hand That Shook the Hand of Lincoln</i>	317
<i>Under the Roses</i>	319
<i>Veterans</i>	320
<i>Everett</i>	321
<i>What She Said</i>	322
<i>The Johnson-Smith & Company</i>	323
<i>Miss Hale's</i>	324
<i>Like Any Boy</i>	325
<i>Rumble Seat</i>	326
<i>Jump Rope</i>	327
<i>Tearful Occasions: Peroxide</i>	329
<i>Perspective</i>	330
<i>Desperate Desmond</i>	331
<i>Marilyn's Father</i>	332
<i>Joseph Horwitz</i>	333
<i>Elementary Education</i>	334
<i>Larry Worth</i>	335
<i>Heck Quinn</i>	336
<i>Bones</i>	337
<i>Life in the Tomb</i>	338
<i>O Pioneers!</i>	339
<i>Two Grandmothers: Hannah</i>	340
<i>Sarah</i>	341
<i>a Topless</i>	342
<i>Miss Platt</i>	343
<i>Birch Street</i>	345
<i>The Bank of Italy</i>	346
<i>Green Orchard</i>	347
<i>II: WEST EIGHTEENTH West Eighteenth</i>	348
<i>Black Anecdote</i>	349

<i>The Vegetable Man</i>	350
<i>Neighbors</i>	351
<i>Mrs. Marsden</i>	352
<i>They</i>	353
<i>Mrs. Small</i>	354
<i>Mr. Small</i>	355
<i>S. (our) M. (ilk) Lovett</i>	356
<i>Ebersoles' Potato Chips</i>	357
<i>Elaine Farquhar</i>	359
<i>Warm Days</i>	360
<i>The Day the Governor Played Ball</i>	361
<i>Under the Eucalyptus</i>	362
<i>Hiroshima</i>	363
<i>Dr. Earl Blood, The Painless Dentist</i>	364
<i>Felicia Best</i>	365
<i>Dr. Farsdale</i>	366
<i>Harry Chin, Chinese Herbalist</i>	367
<i>The Seth Thomas</i>	368
<i>German</i>	369
<i>Zelda Keith</i>	370
<i>This Is K.F.I. Los Angeles</i>	371
<i>Junior</i>	373
<i>Time in the Evening</i>	375
<i>Nervous Breakdown</i>	376
<i>Little Bobby</i>	377
<i>Maud Winters' Swedish Massage Salon</i>	378
<i>Mr. Mueller</i>	379
<i>Eddie Weismann</i>	380
<i>Mr. Virgo</i>	381
<i>Those Veaches</i>	382
<i>Screaming on Seventeenth</i>	383
<i>Next Door</i>	384
<i>The Symbol</i>	385
<i>The Times</i>	386
<i>Aunt Lucy</i>	387
<i>Past Ten O'Clock</i>	388

<i>Rewrite</i>	389
<i>The Jazz Singer</i>	390
<i>Tom Mix</i>	391
<i>Those Times When Richard Barthelmess Went Up</i>	392
<i>Our Gang</i>	393
<i>Those Busby Berkeley Musicals</i>	394
<i>Mae West</i>	395
<i>Tarzan</i>	396
<i>Godiva Ridden</i>	397
<i>And Greened My Twelfth, Most Verdant Summer</i>	398
<i>The Annunciation</i>	399
<i>The First Time</i>	400
<i>At the Broadway</i>	401
<i>High Places: Lost Horizon</i>	402
<i>Mutiny on the Bounty</i>	403
<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	404
<i>Homework</i>	405
<i>The Clever Studio</i>	406
<i>Sugar and Spice</i>	407
<i>Complaint</i>	408
<i>Lady Chatterley's Lover</i>	409
<i>Robert Taylor</i>	410
<i>The Marx Brothers</i>	411
<i>Beyond the Rainbow</i>	412
<i>Love Affair</i>	413
<i>The Hurricane</i>	414
<i>Dark Victory</i>	415
<i>Coming Home from the Movies</i>	417
<i>Solo</i>	418
<i>Starting at Thirteen</i>	419
<i>Past Bean Fields</i>	421
<i>In Those Days</i>	422
<i>Ars Gratia Artis</i>	423
<i>It Took a Long Time</i>	424
<i>Gone with the Wind</i>	425
<i>When I Finally Went to MGM</i>	427

<i>Pop. by 1940: 40,000</i>	428
<i>Passing Through</i>	429
<i>Vivian</i>	431
<i>Belle Small</i>	432
<i>Doc Clark</i>	433
<i>Oswald Sbrader</i>	434
<i>Mrs. Nice at the Talkies</i>	435
<i>Grandma Folkston</i>	436
<i>Etta Johnson</i>	437
<i>Elmer Slater</i>	438
<i>Marianne Cox</i>	439
<i>Deacon Ennart</i>	440
<i>Mary Mitchum</i>	441
<i>Widow Willis, the Cat Lady</i>	442
<i>Bubbles</i>	443
<i>Johnny Walsh, Checkered Cab Co</i>	444
<i>A Man from the Freight</i>	445
<i>Slim the Janitor</i>	446
<i>The Santa Ana Wind</i>	447
<i>Mr. Foote, Postman</i>	448
<i>Joseph and Mary Pilford</i>	449
<i>Robert Furness, Doctor of Divinity</i>	450
<i>Edith Furness, Minister's Wife</i>	451
<i>Touchdown Brown, Dept. of Sanitation</i>	452
<i>Ramona Lopez</i>	453
<i>Clarence Holmes, Attorney at Law</i>	454
<i>Carlotta Seyrig, Palm Readings</i>	455
<i>A Faithful Husband</i>	456
<i>Abby Arthenot, Waitress</i>	457
<i>The Golfer</i>	458
<i>Daisy Hemingway, Dressmaking & Alterations</i>	459
<i>Angel Rodriguez</i>	460
<i>Mile High Miles</i>	461
<i>K-O-R-E, The Voice of the Citrus Empire</i>	462
<i>Golden Gloves</i>	463
<i>Ernest J. Licht, Physician & Surgeon</i>	464

<i>Tobacco, Candy, Magazines</i>	465
<i>Arthur Couchay's Ladies' Apparel</i>	466
<i>Bessie's Beautie Shoppe</i>	467
<i>Millie's Millinery</i>	468
<i>Zeta Goff, Chiropodist</i>	469
<i>The Arkansas Travelers</i>	470
<i>Mike Allman</i>	471
<i>Bert Perkins, Station Master</i>	472
<i>Number Please e</i>	473
<i>Karl Bower, Nurseryman</i>	474
<i>Mrs. Wright</i>	475
<i>Stationery. Cards. Notions. Books</i>	476
<i>Helen Payne, Spotter</i>	477
<i>Fay Purvis</i>	478
<i>L. I. Augen, Optometrist</i>	479
<i>The Projectionist</i>	480
<i>Otto Uhr, Watch Repair</i>	481
<i>"Dummy" Randall</i>	482
<i>Margo Martine, Studio of the Dance</i>	483
<i>Georgina Gorman, R.N.</i>	484
<i>Chest 46", Waist 32", Biceps 18%"</i>	485
<i>Lura O'Leary</i>	486
<i>Tan di Lanzo</i>	487
<i>Nancy Van Deusen</i>	488
<i>Henna Vinal, Birdwatcher</i>	489
<i>Adam Crabtree, Beekeeper</i>	490
<i>"Rubens" Jones</i>	491
<i>Al Booster, Chamber of Commerce</i>	492
<i>Mad Mady</i>	493
<i>Rev. X. Burns McDermott</i>	494
<i>Hattie King</i>	495
<i>Flower World, L.P. Bloom, Prop</i>	496
<i>Percy Tilg, Mortician</i>	497
<i>Asked Back</i>	499
<i>Miss Dancey</i>	501
<i>Leslie Aumaire</i>	502

<i>Jesus Lopez</i>	503
<i>Ben-Hur</i>	504
<i>Mrs. Grook</i>	505
<i>Norma</i>	506
<i>Miss Dark</i>	507
<i>Dolores Knight</i>	508
<i>World History</i>	509
<i>Mr. Byron Jarvis</i>	510
<i>Uber Alles</i>	512
<i>Rex Wishneuski</i>	513
<i>Physics</i>	514
<i>Mr. Music</i>	515
<i>Rita Rubio</i>	516
<i>Jack Henry</i>	517
<i>José Ramirez</i>	518
<i>Tom White</i>	519
<i>That Kid</i>	520
<i>Leon Hendrixon</i>	521
<i>Dan Anderson</i>	522
<i>Lee Zorn</i>	523
<i>C. B. "Mathew" Brady</i>	524
<i>Janet and Howard Darling</i>	525
<i>All Star</i>	526
<i>My Brother Made Model Airplanes but Never Sniffed Glue</i>	527
<i>Oasis</i>	528
<i>Gap</i>	529
<i>Citrus Heights</i>	530
<i>Edward Morgan Barry</i>	531
<i>Our Town</i>	532
<i>Double Date</i>	533
<i>In the Basement of the Carnegie Library</i>	534
<i>Mrs. Northcross</i>	535
<i>Mile. Smith</i>	536
<i>Miss Bagley</i>	537
<i>Judith Lovelace, M.A</i>	538
<i>Dr. Tyger</i>	539

<i>Field Trips: Geology 1 & 2</i>	540
<i>Mrs. Oates</i>	541
<i>Social Conscience</i>	542
<i>Rosemary or Jasmine</i>	543
<i>Richard McGregor</i>	544
<i>Maryjo Malone</i>	545
<i>The Famous Poet</i>	546
<i>Chalice</i>	547
<i>The Stream</i>	548
<i>When No One Else Had Ever Been Eighteen</i>	549
<i>Feeling Surreal</i>	550
<i>From Aardvark to Zymurgy</i>	551
<i>Heigho Silver</i>	552
<i>Places, Everyone</i>	554
<i>The Only Trouble</i>	556
<i>Communion</i>	557
<i>Our World</i>	558
<i>Norwalk</i>	559
<i>Remember Pearl Harbor</i>	560
<i>Steve Yamamoto</i>	561
<i>Edgar Nelson</i>	562
<i>My Sudden Cousin, My Sanguine Minister, and The Cruelty of Conviction</i>	563
<i>Conscientious Objector</i>	565
<i>Fires</i>	566
<i>Dressed for an Occasion</i>	567
<i>Eyes</i>	568
<i>Brothers</i>	569
<i>Now They Work In Banks</i>	570
<i>Oobing the Umlaut</i>	572
.	573
<i>I Find Time</i>	575
<i>Aunt Anna Marie Hayes</i>	576
<i>Golden Wedding</i>	577
<i>Later</i>	578
<i>Home Movies at Newport</i>	579

Flashbacks and Reruns

580

<i>Homecoming</i>	581
.	582
<i>Smudging</i>	583
<i>Diary</i>	584
<i>Hmmph</i>	585
<i>Aloha</i>	586
<i>Conversions</i>	587
<i>Melvin</i>	588
<i>Elegy for Aunt Nettie</i>	589
<i>Mrs. Mitchum, Neighborhood Witch</i>	590
<i>Coke Fiends</i>	591
<i>The Voice Magicians</i>	592
<i>Singalong</i>	593
<i>The Real Story</i>	594
<i>Billy Durant</i>	595
<i>Now, Voyager</i>	596
<i>George Morton, Manager Citrus Empire Hotel</i>	599
<i>Bebe Dixon</i>	601
<i>"Scoop" Shoop, Mercury Columnist</i>	602
<i>Hershey, the Cop</i>	603
<i>Elmer Johnson</i>	604
<i>Ed Williams, Philosopher</i>	605
<i>Joe Louis</i>	606
<i>Looking for the Stars: 1940</i>	607
<i>Lemons</i>	608
<i>Artichokes</i>	609
<i>My Brother Still Goes to the Barber</i>	610
<i>Dream</i>	612

American Lit

613

<i>Nancy Drew</i>	614
<i>A Child's Version of Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	615
<i>Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address"</i>	616
<i>Poetry Reading</i>	617
<i>The Emperor Jones</i>	618

<i>"The Gift of the Magi"</i>	619
<i>"The Cask of Amontillado"</i>	620
<i>Authors</i>	621
<i>Evangeline</i>	622
<i>"Thanatopsis"</i>	623
<i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i>	624
<i>Mark Twain</i>	625
<i>Keeping a Diary</i>	626
<i>"Miniver Cheevy"</i>	627
<i>Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia</i>	628
<i>Onomatopoeia</i>	629
<i>Nevermore</i>	630
<i>Ben-Hur</i>	631
<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>	632
<i>"The Chambered Nautilus"</i>	633
<i>Dactyls</i>	634
<i>The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin</i>	635
<i>Great Audiences</i>	636
<i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	637
<i>The Last of the Mohicans</i>	638
<i>You Can't Take It with You</i>	639
<i>"The Man with the Hoe"</i>	640
<i>Roethke</i>	641
<i>The Good Earth</i>	642
<i>The Call of the Wild</i>	643
<i>Walter Winchell</i>	644
<i>O World, O Life, O Time!</i>	645
<i>Story</i>	646
<i>Revisions</i>	647
<i>Studs Lonigan</i>	648
<i>"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"</i>	649
<i>Portnoy's Complaint</i>	650
<i>Waiting for Lefty</i>	651
<i>The Postman Always Rings Twice</i>	652
<i>The Last Tycoon</i>	653
<i>"To Build a Fire"</i>	654

<i>Rip</i>	655
<i>Seventeen</i>	656
<i>The Happy Journey</i>	657
<i>Our Town on the Barge</i>	658
<i>Is There Any Culture or Love of Beauty in Grover's Corners?</i>	659
<i>Zane Grey</i>	660
<i>Trash</i>	661
<i>"Trees"</i>	662
<i>Sandburg</i>	663
<i>Clement Wood's Complete Rhyming Dictionary and Poet's Craft Book</i>	664
<i>Millayish</i>	665
<i>Whitmanesque</i>	666
<i>For Whom the Bell Tolls</i>	667
<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	668
<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	669
<i>"Ars Poetica"</i>	670
<i>O William Carlos</i>	671
<i>Marianne Moore</i>	672
<i>The Art of Poetry</i>	673
<i>Ogden Nash</i>	674
<i>Vachel</i>	675
<i>Hart Crane</i>	676
<i>Dreiser</i>	677
<i>An American Tragedy</i>	678
<i>"Paul's Case"</i>	679
<i>Willa Cather</i>	680
<i>Winesburg, Ohio</i>	681
<i>Spoon River Anthology</i>	682
<i>Main Street</i>	683
<i>Main-Travelled Roads</i>	684
<i>The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter</i>	685
<i>Winesburg by the Sea</i>	686
<i>Frost</i>	687
<i>E. D.</i>	688
<i>The Portrait of a Lady</i>	689
<i>Ethan Frome</i>	690

<i>The Octopus</i>	691
<i>Walden</i>	692
<i>Billy Budd</i>	693
<i>Moby</i>	694
<i>Sanctuary</i>	695
<i>The Long Hot Summer</i>	696
<i>Jeffers</i>	697
<i>The Day of the Locust</i>	698
<i>Miss Lonelyhearts</i>	699
<i>U.S.A.</i>	700
<i>Native Son</i>	701
<i>Martin Eden</i>	702
<i>Long Day's Journey into Night</i>	703
<i>Robert Nathan</i>	704
<i>Daisy Miller</i>	705
<i>"Annabel Lee"</i>	706
<i>Two Years Before the Mast</i>	707
<i>"A Psalm of Life"</i>	708
<i>Harmonium</i>	709
<i>Under the Ginkgo</i>	710
<i>Tortilla Flat</i>	711
<i>McTeague</i>	712
<i>Elmer Gantry</i>	713
<i>Fables for Our Time</i>	714
<i>O e.e.</i>	715
<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	716
<i>Saroyan</i>	717
<i>Wolfeian</i>	718
<i>Prufrock</i>	719
<i>Auden</i>	720
<i>Stephen Crane</i>	721
<i>Josephine Miles</i>	722
<i>Sara Teasdale</i>	723
<i>Gertrude Stein</i>	724
<i>The Ox-Bow Incident</i>	725
<i>The Red Badge of Courage</i>	726

<i>The Sun Also Rises</i>	727
"Patterns"	728
<i>Talent</i>	729
<i>Sonnets</i>	730
"The Lady or the Tiger"	731
"Rappaccini's Daughter"	732
"Self-Reliance"	733
<i>Modern American Poetry</i>	734
<i>Storm</i>	735
<i>After Macbeth</i>	736
<i>Past Mono Lake</i>	737
<i>Wake Up and Live!</i>	738
<i>At Washoe County Library</i>	739
<i>Ted Malone</i>	740
<i>Waldo</i>	741
<i>She'd Rather Read the Funnies</i>	742
<i>The Turn of the Screw</i>	743
<i>The Education of Henry Adams</i>	744
<i>Microbe Hunters</i>	745
<i>Varieties of Religious Experience</i>	746
<i>Little Magazines</i>	747
<i>Language in Action</i>	748
<i>Someone Though</i>	749
<i>Joanne de Longchamps</i>	750
<i>The City of Trembling Leaves</i>	751
<i>Interim</i>	752
"The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"	753
<i>Arrowsmith</i>	754
<i>An Early Sequence</i>	755
<i>The Waldport Poems</i>	756
<i>William Stafford</i>	757
<i>Emily Dickinson at Coleville</i>	758
<i>Susan Glaspell's The Verge at Coleville</i>	759
"Grass"	760
<i>Island Attitude</i>	761
<i>Aria da Capo</i>	762

<i>Henry Miller</i>	763
<i>Rexroth</i>	764
<i>Muriel Rukeyser</i>	765
<i>Lines</i>	766
<i>It Can't Happen Here</i>	767
<i>Shapiro</i>	768
<i>The Memoirs of a Shy Pornographer</i>	769
<i>Dorothy Parker</i>	770
<i>Anais Nin</i>	771
<i>The New Yorker</i>	772
<i>Babbitt</i>	773
<i>The White Tower</i>	774
<i>Mildred Pierce</i>	775
<i>Jessamyn West in Yellowstone</i>	776
<i>To a God Unknown</i>	777
<i>Kerouac</i>	778
<i>Robert Lowell</i>	779
<i>Lazarus</i>	780
<i>Amherst</i>	781
<i>The Glass Menagerie</i>	782
<i>Underground</i>	783
<i>Test</i>	784
<i>No, She Said</i>	785
<i>Cowden</i>	786
<i>Mrs. Black</i>	787
<i>Bane</i>	788
<i>Robert Penn Warren</i>	789
<i>"Danse Russe"</i>	790
<i>Elinor Wylie</i>	791
<i>Another Moore</i>	792
<i>The Moores, Marianne, Rosalie, Merrill</i>	793
<i>All My Sons</i>	794
<i>Lunch at the Princeton Club</i>	795
<i>Browning It</i>	796
<i>You Can't Go Home Again</i>	797
<i>The University of Kansas City Review</i>	798

<i>Prairie Schooner</i>	799
<i>Punching a Time Clock</i>	800
<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>	801
<i>The Waste Land</i>	802
<i>Ezra Pound</i>	803
<i>To Edwin Honig</i>	804
<i>Howard Nemerov: "The Amateurs"</i>	805
<i>Other Voices, Other Rooms</i>	806
<i>The Natural</i>	807
<i>Dylan</i>	808
<i>Weldon Kees</i>	809
<i>Spingarn</i>	810
<i>Schevill</i>	811
<i>Eras</i>	812
<i>Experiment</i>	813
<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>	814
<i>The Naked and the Dead</i>	815
<i>Joyce Carol, et al</i>	816
<i>Witter Bynner</i>	817
<i>Surprises</i>	818
<i>Richard Ashman</i>	819
<i>Henry Evans</i>	820
<i>Discovery</i>	821
<i>Writing, Writing</i>	822
<i>Nights in San Jose</i>	823
<i>Seize the Day</i>	824
<i>Nobody Knows My Name</i>	825
<i>My Eden</i>	826
<i>Writing America</i>	827
<i>Drink</i>	828
<i>Ho Hum</i>	829
<i>Richard Wilbur</i>	830
<i>Ciardi</i>	831
<i>Lolita</i>	832
<i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i>	833
<i>Leonard Said</i>	834

<i>The Best American Short Stories of 1964</i>	835
<i>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</i>	836
<i>Jean Stafford</i>	837
<i>Playboy</i>	838
<i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i>	839
<i>Suicidal</i>	840
<i>Sylvia Plath</i>	841
<i>Delmore Schwartz</i>	842
<i>Humboldt's Gift</i>	843
<i>Richard Eberhart</i>	844
<i>X. J.</i>	845
<i>An Editor?</i>	846
<i>The Blind Lemon</i>	847
<i>Influenced</i>	848
<i>A Steady Light</i>	849
<i>A Voice from Miami</i>	850
<i>Mail</i>	851
<i>A Texas Twang</i>	852
<i>Typos</i>	853
<i>The Color Purple</i>	854
<i>A Tree Grows in Brooklyn</i>	855
<i>Stegner</i>	856
<i>Eudora</i>	857
<i>William Meredith</i>	858
<i>Conrad Aiken</i>	859
<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	860
<i>Modernism</i>	861
<i>Carlos Cortes</i>	862
<i>A Wealthy Ghost</i>	863
<i>Ina Coolbrith</i>	864
<i>Peg</i>	865
<i>Simbolica</i>	866
<i>How Often</i>	867
<i>Flannery O'Connor</i>	868
<i>Letters from the Earth</i>	869
<i>"Babylon Revisited"</i>	870

<i>Shootemup</i>	871
<i>Kunitz</i>	872
<i>Styron</i>	873
<i>Snoopy in the Louvre?</i>	874
<i>Gail White</i>	875
<i>“Göta”</i>	876
<i>Richard Aldridge</i>	877
<i>Nelson Bentley</i>	878
<i>Mark Strand Complains</i>	879
<i>William Burns</i>	880
<i>Galway</i>	881
<i>I Studied Shelley</i>	882
<i>Elizabeth Bishop?</i>	883
<i>So Many Poets</i>	884
<i>City Lights</i>	885
<i>Yes, Bill</i>	886
<i>Lewis Turco</i>	887
<i>The Rage</i>	888
<i>Fiction</i>	889
<i>Behind It All</i>	890
<i>Where’s Danny?</i>	891
<i>Workshop</i>	892
<i>American Lit</i>	893

Bibliography	894
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Colophon	896
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Introduction

Harold Witt was a California formalist with an appetite for everything formal poetry was supposed to exclude: consumer absurdity, librarians, local eccentrics, pulp movies, family embarrassment, political dread, psychoanalysis, and jokes that suddenly become elegies. Born in Orange County and raised in Santa Ana, he published thirteen books across five decades while working as a reference librarian in California and Nevada. His work moved from the tight surreal satire of *Superman Unbound*, *The Death of Venus*, and *Beasts in Clothes* to documentary sequences, autobiographical portraits, collage, and the paired literary miniatures of *American Lit*. This edition gathers the eight complete books currently represented by source scans in the project archive and documents the five additional collections that remain to be recovered.

Biography

Harold Vernon Witt was born on February 6, 1923, in Orange County, California, and grew up in Santa Ana. His poems repeatedly returned to the social geography of inland Southern California: citrus towns, small newspapers, shopkeepers, movie houses, family stories, and the transformations of the Depression and war years. He attended the University of California, Berkeley, where he completed his degree, and developed the double professional life that sustained him for decades—poet and reference librarian.

Witt's first books appeared in rapid succession in the 1950s. *Family in the Forest* and *Superman Unbound* were published in 1956; *The Death of Venus* followed in 1958, selected by the Book Club for Poetry; and Macmillan issued *Beasts in Clothes* in 1961. These volumes established the combination that remained characteristic of him: formal verse and sonnet craft joined to satire, psychoanalytic language, art history, political unease, and the surreal comedy of consumer life. His poems appeared regularly in *The New Yorker*, *Saturday Review*, *Poetry*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and other national magazines.

By 1960 Witt was living in Orinda in the San Francisco Bay Area. Contributor notes from the period describe him not only as a poet but as the author of a completed novel and the maker of an experimental film. He worked as a reference librarian at San Jose State University and later at the

Washoe County Library in Reno. The daily traffic of libraries, reading rooms, schools, local characters, and literary reference entered the poems themselves, especially the book-length social portraits of *Winesburg by the Sea* and the paired miniature literary histories of *American Lit*.

Witt continued to publish steadily: *Poems and Pop. by 1940: 40,000* appeared in 1971, *Now, Swim* in 1974, *Surprised by Others at Fort Cronkhite* in 1975, *Winesburg by the Sea* in 1979, *The Snow Prince Poems and Collages* in 1982, *Flashbacks and Reruns* in 1985, *The Light at Newport* in 1992, and *American Lit* in 1994. He won the James D. Phelan Award and the Poetry Society of America's Emily Dickinson Award. Contemporary and later descriptions repeatedly singled out his sonnets and his command of formal structure, although his books also range through dramatic monologue, collage, documentary portrait, and comic sequence.

Witt married Beth in 1949, and they had three children: Emily, Eric, and Jessamyn. He remained in Orinda late in life and died of leukemia at Kaiser Hospital in Walnut Creek on April 14, 1995. His career lasted roughly fifty years and, according to his obituary, produced thousands of poems and thirteen books. Correspondence survives in the records of *Poetry* magazine at the University of Chicago, the *Antioch Review* archives at Indiana University, and the Edmund Skellings Papers at Florida Institute of Technology. Those dispersed archival traces match the range of his publication history: a California formalist with national magazine reach, rooted in libraries and local memory but continually testing the forms available to postwar American poetry.

Superman Unbound

Stage I | Surreal satire and the postwar self, 1956

The complete recoverable text of the 1956 collection.

Superman Unbound

Shut in his room he had an airless answer,
objected even to spring when hormones warred
and obscene roses exposed on every bush.
He knew as his heart unlearned the mountain effort
and his mind shrank like a killed clam
in his skull's shell, why the dinosaur died
too large for his function. Instead of sap
up to the brain's blossom, the silex bloomed.
Then he arose from his burning bedroom
mating mid-air with the actual
like a trite phoenix in a twisted metaphor,
soaring where even rockets in the fabulous funny paper
of our red and yellow time cannot ascend:
beyond the starry bend of space
where no phosphorous-numbered dial divides
life into logic.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. II.

In an Eighteenth-Century Picture Gallery

A certain static yet ecstatic grace
flows through silken hand and satin face
of palest ladies who though stayed in bone
wear such knowledge as they bear the sun-
under beribboned hats and parasols.
They lean on parapets where no sun falls
near urns without dimension like their lives,
shimmering from shadow where the beetle hides
useless as they, with similar silken hooves.
In solemn umber what more Tragic Muse
than Mrs. Siddons might have masqueraded
when Pope played Homer and when Reynolds painted?
And who among such symmetry as this
could dare distort proportion with a question?—
where Pinkie poises, more wish than girl,
her spiccurl dimmed by a dreamworld
of wicker sunlight in watery countryside
and flickering wheels along the Roman road.
How can these curled and perfumed people know
that lurking behind their landscape with steel maw
and aluminum wing and belly full of hate
immense and various monsters crouch, and wait?

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 12.

Record Concert

Red-sealed and perfect the mystic orchestra
makes no mistake; the electric plant
blossoming lightbulbs among wiry tendrils
sends the sun's impulse from the city's frozen edge
where rats scuttle in rubbish, rattling tin cans.
The machine thinks Brahms as if hooked to his heart:
fill old man in an antique park
listening to skylarks
while the world spins in its groove
and men grow dark inside like the sun's core
from too long burning.
We, in our easy chairs,
turning the warm cocktail in the cold hand,
ask for more ice.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 13.

Gospel for Brother Bernard

Moon-eyed Ophelia, neurotic of Elsinore,
 holding discourse only with Hamlet the introvert and platitudinous
 Polonius, might, if the thing the play was had been Heartbreak
 House, hearing your wit, have laughed at her despair, left for a
 co-op, learned how to cook, made speeches at meetings, and
 shingled her long hair, Bernard Shaw, nonagenarian, untragic
 elderly gentleman, half Puck, half prophet, up the steep asphalt
 slope of evolution bicycling cloudward, there to keep utopian
 appointment with Henri Bergson
I in some comfortless vortex, who have been among our tired words, the
 active verb.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 14.

Ode on an American Painting

Thou still unravished bride of Connecticut,
Mom of the matronly bosom and virginal mind,
dreaming behind those stony eyes you still enfold
in ample arms and stroke the baby dimples
of grown sons gone blind
to your stolid charms, now you're unwise and old,
In' far city hazard hugging dollish girls
their thoughts do not return to this tired, scene
of muscular Dad after a hard day's work
on the stem doorstep in his undershirt
and the stark white house and the collie dog
up to his slender ankles in the grass.
The silence does not speak. The murky dusk
stammers these figures like half-heard words
of stilted lovers. Only the dog is eloquent,
gracefully Greek, who has no memory
beyond yesterday's chase in the dark woods
or dream beyond his place beside the stove.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 15.

Metaphors for Christ's Birthday

Apropos, a misfit dragonfly
late hatched, diaphanous freak
from mossy festering sink
under the torn pondlily,
home of lewd toads, arose—
gauze-winged eccentric
on December air almost
flawed it was so cold.
Irees turned sapphire, and birds
froze, booming like stones.
This one, however, daring hoar,
adventured everywhere
flimsily soaring
through solid atmosphere
until crucified on web
like any fly
and never heard the news
of abnormality.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 16.

Sunset Psychoanalyzed

We come to these hills to see the obvious city
subtilized by sunset, made original by distance
as a plain man may be a poet in his sleep—
from the mainland of his life
to the lower almost-islanded peninsula
spin a spidery bridge.
The miracle progresses like analysis
from the average to the unique;
where the daily blue bay curved into watery cove shorelines are winedark,
and even as we watch red transfigures into rose. Meanings are not
monstrous: into womanly hills a phallic zeppelin rides.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 17.

Cinema Matinee

Sprockets turning in the projection booth
wind and unwind a gray grotesquerie
of the bad and the beautiful: the blameless wife,
the lover's giveaway mouth, his chin
called weak in every popular fiction.
Though the figures in the tapestry can move
by optical illusion, the brain's trick
stays static, flicks like the machine
and men are merely calamitous or cute.
If Mrs. Donahue hurrying home to potroast,
to the low blue flame under aluminum,
opened a different door and found instead
Apollo the grocery boy naked on her bed
like an obvious meaning in a foreign release
would she run redfaced indignant down the hall,
clutching her corset and phoning the police—
or would she see him lying there at all?

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 18.

Miss Salamander

Miss Salamander lives with her lapdog
comfortably camphorous among blown glass boats
that take her nowhere, and intricate ivory
letter openers (each day pursing his large lips
the postman passes, but once a month
plants like a sterile seed, the gasbill in her box—
her only billet doux). Miss Salamander
taught school in Sioux City, read Whitman
and Whittier with the same bell-like voice
sonorously sounding, oh she shook seeds everywhere
from the plump packet of her mind, and one fell
who knows on what fertile ground amid pimply faces
arid the noise of notes being passed.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 19.

Girl with Crowbar in a Delicate Seascape

On this Self seacoast are some pools
in which pale-green ideas bloom,
anemone-nebulous, that seem
fastened to brain like rock; my daring
darling detaches, grim with her crowbar,
probing among these starfish, coming
to my coves at unlikely times, banging shins
on barnacles, but hears shut
like a spinster's pocketbook, imagining thieves,
softly in the dark boudoir of the sea
some ancient oyster spinning a new pearl,
an abalone locking its box again.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 20.

Hymenoptera

Think drones swarming after the quaint queenbee;
twisting tails up and with furry paws
treading her terrible beauty;
after their fatal function, starved
while workers pollinate flowers
like hypnotized cottonpickers.
In her dark cave servants attend the unborn queen,
the one chosen by chance to be fed differently
from the like eggs. She rises to reign
over the murdered carcass of the empress
like an instinctive Borgia.
Though their business is sweet:
humid syrup oozing from cells
as from autumn barndoops amber hay,
no sentiment prevents
the precise success of this society.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 21.

Horror Story

As in a house of mirrors I've appeared.
variously distorted and disproportionate,
a sideshow to the sight, wistfully weird
and sad as a handleless hermaphrodite
on nights of lights and hula girls in tents.
Freakish, a false voyeur, I've paid to see
myself sawed in half, exposed in underpants,
tonguetied like Shakespeare's muse or Miss McGee
who dreamed of obelisks. But now that canvas
carnival moves on to Nightmare Chasm,
the chaos and the Id where no. men pass
except Johannes Milton who came back
to rationalize a paradise regained,
finding himself the Satan that he sang.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 22.

Ode in Late Winter

Clouds are breaking. Boys on bikes
wheel toward treasure where the rainbow ends
at the rifle range. Hearts like targets flap
in this greening weather; any stray stimulus
might quiver them like quail. It is a time
of vulnerability, the buttercup field wounded
where hunters walked, who flung sensitive rabbits. into quicklime.
Poets who suffer singly lie vis-a-vis
like slim corpses in little magazines.
The Decline of the West, a new sonata,
will not be heard next Sunday. We'll lurch
over illiterate hills among stitching
music of streams sewn into small ravines
where awkward scrub oaks look like trees
in an old sampler.
Listen, you can hear at houses' corners
and cornices the whirl of come back birds—
winter-stilted branches nude as we were
(though snug in warm bed beyond the blast) fur
with buds, and sap runs like warm blood.
Somewhere a meadowlark sings, drowned under
lakes of sunset, turquoise and lavender.
It is a time
of bay as if breathed onto, smeared, done
without mirrors, nature's stage effects—
gray tintyped hills and etchings of sun
gave way to later periods, violent wrecks
on rocks of color, heartburst of red in clouds.
Boys come back for jt is storm again
and birds ruffling to keep warm chirrup
under the eaves
in this not yet spring, this still January—
season like a corpuscular war of toxin
and antitoxin under skin through looped tubes
and vessels—veined earth's fever—and in ourselves

the same, creatures who out of slime came
to this contrast place, fire and ice,
too near and not near enough the sun
and will return.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 23.

A Mathematician's Answer

Matter being divided into infinite atoms
 we've isolated one and worked our wonder—
 damn, in my youth I played with poetry—
 Keats was my favorite and my tongue gets twisted into alliterative
 nonsense sometimes when I'm not thinking as I wasn't then.
 You asked an explanation of the bomb, a moral question. Who
 is to blame? My job was purely mathematical but I'm a thinking
 man. You understand that honors mean nothing to me. I was
 brought up in a house of culture—fin de siecle, loaded with
 Victorian bricabrac. My mother squeezed herself to death with
 corsets, or rather, fashion killed her. But I digress. There is no
 formula for morals yet, and my department, though I'm a
 thinking man, does not specialize in implication. We have a
 problem set and by fixed laws come to our inevitable
 conclusion, in this case Hiroshima, in another new worlds. The
 logic of murder is not one-sided, neither can the impulse be
 held responsible. The boy beating a dog, the cool-brained
 bomber pilot, who, with sure grasp, his marvelous hand evolved
 from the handleless slime, unclutching death, makes earth our
 laboratory, are different in kind as in degree. Human life you
 say? There's more of that in lad's loins, joined in mindless
 ecstasy with the corresponding pelvic angle. My wife who goes
 in for oriental art sentimentalizes what she calls this catastrophe,
 but the serious tears of many humanitarians won't change
 nature, not that I say the Japanese or for that matter any race, is
 more barbaric (one of my finest co-workers was named
 Yamamoto). The sensitive lines of Hokusai's series representing
 Fuji as unifying principle are proof enough. You've seen them,
 have you? Rainy fields of rice,
 a few swift strokes that speak symmetry to the ages,
 simple, eggshell delicate, yet soundly
 traditional as teacups. But I digress.
 Philosophically speaking, to blame anyone
 is to blame all. The nuclear physicist,
 the men who poured concrete for the cyclotron's floor
 by this conception share equally. But say
 it was the atom for being extant, the first
 amoeba that dared divide, the primate

who, during the dawn of intellect, picked up
a stone and threw it. The sperm that was Einstein,
wasn't it one of innumerable polywogs
up an endless river, out of which wetness
came Mrs. O'Flaherty who didn't dust this desk?
Conscience, a charwoman who'd rather leave
the immediate mess half-done than be late for mass,
has turned the corner of this time to find
the stones that were absolute made relative.
Take cancer, a disease once limited to aristocrats,
now sprouting death in anybody's guts,
and even democrats can have these days
those fine intangible mental sicknesses
like a nest of white slug's eggs in the brain.
So war, the former game of knights in armor,
now the unborn child's business. Well,
who made it so? Myself, once follower of Euclidian
geometry, which by the fourth dimension concept
suffered atomic changes, can't conceal
some anxiety—to see circles so uncircular,
parallel lines meeting, material more mental
it would seem than any Aristotle dreamed,
and no katharsis for this tragedy—
Damn, the sound destroys the sense again;
perhaps I talk in circles, and my wife's
influence shows. I don't know. There may be
no answer, only generations of ridiculous genes
making a slow curve backward to the earth.
Then, after the lights go out, along some shore
on Venus, another moist amoeba will divide,
the impractical joke man repeat his slow telling.
It's safer among figures, though they lie;
and after nightly bromide I sleep well.
But I have bad dreams.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 24.

Dirges for the World's End

Knicknacks on trivial shelves will melt,
the dripping dresden shepherdess mar
an immaculate floorlessness
(we'll have no feet
when our bones drift and meteor dust
down voids with porcelain swans).
Sleepers in separate beds will meet
at that sweet aspirin time,
clockless and unclothed to keep
tryst in the atom deep
where lovers and enemies are locked
by an abstract embrace.
Nerve ends won't hear
the screaming stimuli
or eye drink at refreshing
fountains of light
The source in the stone mountain
stops, springs snap like clocks.
We wonder briefly
was there choice?. remembering
a sun like some aunt's silk cushion
now seen abruptly to erupt—
Murderous as bombs
were innocent objects—
the sweet soap slipped on
or homicidal linoleum;
A picked pimple spreading
ominous venom
was deadly as politics.

When clouds unclothe like curtains
and epilogue begins, actorless;
except for one
ironic dove down the broken winds
narrow trees may blossom like mosaic,
tile and bits of bottle shine among
parthenonic ruins strewn
with stony fingers in the radio dung.
Old Noah need not exit

from his ark to populate.
His squirming sperm was twisted
eras before Ararat.
The long oppressive acts are etched
on earth by clues of claw.
Sabre teeth attest
the amoeba's tragic flaw.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 26.

Likelier

Perhaps when sinews thin
wristbone slack to skin,
and I gawk nude rooster necked
gloss-feathered who will be plucked,
abundant hair like desire
desire like locks of fire-
gold hair will fall, and I
admire philosophy.
Or phoenix likelier—
Yeats when he grew grayer
rehatched in flame
flew and rehatched again
and my great Uncle Tom
ran naked from room to. room
while Aunt Susan smiled downstairs
among relics and rumors of wars.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 28.

Photograph of Ghosts

Smiling with kept coiffures and enormous
silken hats, my several aunts,
and mother posed, graceful as sylphs
for this seabeach photograph
on fleshcolored sand whose bits of sticks and tar
are long since tideward drawri, and by the waves
engulfed, quite gone, like their long skirts
that flourish no more under the different sun.
Cruel photograph, to have caught them
exuberant and young, the one's hand at that
clear cameo, and the starched lacy stuff
at this one's throat, for an instant only.
Among them, resurrected, the dead sister shares
their two-dimensional moment, ephemerid
frailer than they who circle
but a little longer the bright helium sphere.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 29.

A Brevity of Grass

A brevity of grass, a grace of daisies,
so summer passed—fugitive faces,
smiles, tears, grimaces, the newsprint
of places, the pictured shore passed
under eyelids of waves death's tides
pounded down and nailed with daisies.
Swift as summer days, as a butterfly lasts
that quickness passed like fugitive faces.
As from the sure shore of places the swift
plane glides to the uncertain inland
hurling hot passengers onto high ice
so summer wrecked, so hectic autumn
grayed, whitened, Hke an old man shrieked,
in his plain black rocker poking white
twig fingers at the black and white paper,
though spring sped, “ more light, more heat! ”

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 30.

Flamingos, Swans and Cranes

I swore at swans, what right had whiteness there,
suave freakish birds aglide less true than planes
buzzing the gray city over a mud-edged bay-
but swans, necks arched in waterlily air. swam nevertheless, flamingos and
 cranes
stood on one leg whatever I could say.
Whether I stayed or swore and went away
swans paddled and preened, flamingos and cranes
stood on their stick legs, were pink or white.
And if I went back through lewd alleyways
where hags clucked thin tongues and sickly babies cried
and there would sound loud arguments all night
it hardly mattered. Flamingos, swans and cranes
stayed white—or swam—whether I lived or died.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 31.

Aunt

Terribly, time is an aunt whose liver leaks,
arthritis also, wrinkling in a chair.
Against the insisted queer crochet
she sits and does not speak, her dyed black hair curled tight against her
scalp unspeakably white.
But tries at times, her mangled words are only
small talk of television and the sun
“It cracks the varnish so, slanting that way—”
Though June, the Chrisnnas candy, the cut glass cologne stale and still
stoppered stand on the table there; packs of flyspecked cards called “
Bicycle ” and Peter’s rack of pipes, also displayed.
And painted plates—bluebirds pecking apricots cups and curled dishes
behind the bulging glass. This was a life, this and the owned lots, the
stocks, the bank account, the permanent pass “ Air conditioning
chills me so we never go.”
Remote red cliffs are hers, the very polkadots
on Mexicans’ bandanas who wipe sweat and swear
between her round well-kept rows of orange trees. “When Papa was
alive—” The freckled claw tugs at the cameo; a girl carved in pale
chalcedony smiles, as if at her.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal,
1956, p. 32.

Laramie

We arrived in Laramie under an array of rainbows,
Shakespearian the air where brown cows dozed
in lighted pastorals or grazed on gray
monotonies of mountain and slow plateaus
In town, cowboys leaned, The Paris Bar
pale neon arched on noonday windows, Indians
more a rumor in a waitress' face
than hieroglyphs or histories of war.
Yet sped through, and last frantic signs
at cities' edges urging us to stay
there seemed to be a souvenir of sky,
a beaded brightness past the sly designs
of sunburnt proprietors with silver belts and rings—
receding rainbows after the wigwam rain
we came out from, as into intensest blue
the prairie lark ascending as he sings.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 33.

The Stream Keeps Tolling

The stream keeps tolling with a brazen sound
around a-bend near pines where picnickers
celebrate day's end in twittering twilight,
the world blurred by childhood or by beer
as, above purpling peaks, a sudden star
flares in the deepening vast, darkening like fear
a clear mind to cold distances.

The children's faceless figures silhouette
indistinguishable downstream; tangled in stars
and branches, forest lost, as if we watched
Hansel and Gretel, helpless behind glass
and could not warn them though we knew the witch
waited with wily candy in wry metaphors.
They come back crying but unharmed,
escaped from snakes or drowning and soon laugh,
ignorant of hazards in a world that has
ouzels and bells of water, far baaing lambs,
a red moon rising, doomed as innocence.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 34.

Explanation for Eric

Your forehead from a frown will lengthen and line
with time, all your smoothnesses—time will roughen
them. New bud on the thorn stick, life, bald bird
downy and wobbly winged, cousin of moon and sun,
involved in all that moves; no spotted spider climbs
pendant from branch or eave except her web of thread
tugs at the curve of things; rivers and their rhymes
reflect our steeped towns, and so in this one head
a universe revolves. Wherever sparrows bleed—
Reno or Capri—or criminal or Christ, they die
for us and you. Unbearded in their graves, naked of grief
and joy, the great composers lie, yet our spinning grooves
whisper their slightest sigh, as you repeat ourselves
with hardly hands, with eyes, with pink and perfect feet.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 35.

Juvenilia

She has ascended the plush pleasure stair
to balconies of dream, seen love and war
fade at the moment of most potency,
gone out at intermissions of conjecture
on inadequate arms in a popcorn snow,
and tried the trembling reefer, hotrodded home
through juvenile statued streets where with long hair
and throbbing cigarettes they stand in jeans
attempting to look like men in comic books;
hair blown, with twinpipes popping sixty per
past the white maltshops of her infancy
past parks vacant of maids and babies where
boys with knives encircle the snoring bum
and furtive matches flare and someone screams,
(found facedown in lilies later on).

And there is nowhere she had not been kissed,
silvery underwater of a summer plunge,
by braided pilot in the winter air.

Escapes through backdoors when cops intrude,
out alleys like her conscience crying with cats;
caught, in cold courtroom, can only blink and stare,
eyeing the bald blackrobed Father who presumes,
guilty with age to judge, sobs through truthful hands:
“That wasn’t me, I was never there.”

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 36.

Echo and Narcissus

Echo, reckless, chattered on and on
to the heavenly housewife, about anything—
myrrh and myrtle, latest things with wings,
“A nymph hardly knows from dawn to dripping dawn
what bird or flower she might be turned into,
what spider or dim ornament of dew,
stars instead of hair, twigs for fingers,
silly satyrs if you stay a nymph
prancing everywhere, gods that glimpse
entranced, and fatten us with gods. It angers
me somewhat.” Juno heard the scurrying
noise among leaves: her husband hurrying
guiltily homeward from the love-warm grass
and grieved, “Why can’t I keep him comfortable
in sky? Am I so haggish, so saggly horrible,
so sluggish and so ugly and so crass,
my furniture of rainbows and my house of clouds
too damp and cramped, am I a cow or dowl
that I must vie with virgins for his love?
And you—” she shouted, “blithely babbling bawd,
if I had caught them coupling I’d have clawed
white red. Since you tricked me with your tongue,
daringly detaining me by longwindedness,
from now on you shall be short of breath,
an imitative answerer, a laconic voice.”
“voice,” Echo said, fled, and silently cried.
Narcissus, hunting deer or boars nearby
his speartip sparkling, a truly beautiful boy,
paused wearily, leaned the weapon to a lotus
and though the tree sighed, he didn’t notice,
unclasped his cloak lined with gold designs,
stretched out on it as on a pool of blue
lilies grow in. Echo, when she viewed him,
wondered what sculptor had hid among these vines
this dazzling handiwork. Narcissus moved—
and Echo, throbbing, mutely knew she loved.
She spoke with stepped-on sticks and uttered butterflies
by fluttering bushes to attract him. He cried,

“Who’s here?” and “here, here,” she delightedly replied.
He thought it was another hunter’s voice
as they shouted, almost simultaneously, “Come!”
And then the twittering woods were once more dumb.
“Why do you avoid me?” he wanted to know,
“Why?” she inquired, “do you avoid me, avoid me?”
gladly agreeing when he said, “Let us meet,”
she came out wordless, bird loud boughs
singing the silence that she couldn’t speak.
She tried to embrace his body, kiss his neck—
He sprang back as if a cobra hissed
or a blinded lioness mistaking for her mate
stickily licked him with clinging amorous hate.
Shrieking, “I would die rather than be kissed—”
(“be kissed, be kissed”) Narcissus ran away.
Echo, ashamed, hid in leaves and caves.
At first her face began to disappear,
her body withered until only bones—
then her silvered voice alone remained
and still reflects each foolishness she hears,
a pool for boys and bells, birds and yodelers,
resounding pictures to indiscriminate ears.
Narcissus went on spurning everyone,
always followed by Echo, answering
whatever he swore or scorned, or scorning, sang.
One day, however, a naiad about to drown
bubbled a prayer: “O let this cruel boy
love and not be loved, desire and not enjoy.”
Nemesis listened and arranged a place
for tired Narcissus attired for the chase
to stray upon as if by accident,
intended victim of seeming circumstance—
could he have chosen somewhere waterless
or did every action blunder toward this choice?—
a pool no sheep had wrinkled, dipping tongues
and dripped to circling ripples, stirring sand,
that hadn’t mirrored antlers or cupped hands
lifting cold clearness fish had never swum.
The green boy leaned toward this proscenium
and saw a watery actor lean toward him

repeating perfection in a water theatre.
He called, "Come out," (Echo called, "Come out"),
"youth of my yearning, not too thin or stout.
Mouth be music to my drowsing ear."
"Mouth be music to my drowsing ear"
she mimicked air as he appeared on water.
He bent to kiss, the bending figure moved
as eager armed and eyeing what he eyed,
questioned when he questioned, replied when he replied
(with Echo's voice), said it also loved.
He cried. The crying phantom disappeared
and when he dryly looked again, was there.
Then, insight. "I love myself," he thought,
"that faultless face, that wrist and waist are mine,
my bloodless own the branching patterned veins,
neck curve not to be bitten, curled hair not
delicately to be raked by aching fingertips,
rainbow lips receding from these lips,
ignis fatuus eyes, my own mirage
wavers in this wet desert of my mind.
I see myself, but seeing, I am blind,
spinning inward with a blind man's rage
to watch what he can touch as I can't touch
this shimmering sham of seem, but only watch."
"Alas," he said, and Echo said, "Alas,"
crying if he cried, and if he sighed, sighing
until he shrank and shriveled and was dying.
The almost skeleton in the grassy glass
still looked lovely to his fading I.
He breathed "Goodbye," (and Echo breathed "Goodbye,")
then dropped his hideous head toward the pond.
A starry lily sprouted on the spot
reminding (Echo chiming) life is not
substantial but diaphanous, flower or sound
reflecting or reflected, changing us
who glisten and who gaze, to something less.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 37.

Nightcoach from Salzburg

Lurching in a stagecoach through the countryside
there goes Mozart with disheveled wig,
Don Juan descends through smoking violins;
the Bürger wobbles, oinking like a pig,
sleeping fingers sausage on silk thighs.
The lady smiles at the aging prodigy,
eyes him with serenades—Constance, he thinks,
humming at home, baroque in blue
princess imprisoned in a twice told town
fluting with fountains—Eine kleine Nacht-
musik might nightingale her now.
The clumsy carriage rudely over rock
wakes the Bürger who believes he has been robbed,
clutching fat buttons, descends to dream again—
disturbs the birds in Herr Mozart's mind
to soft throated clarities of song.
When will it end? The stagecoach glides...
moonlit Viennaward through lost child woods.
He thinks of Paris pianoing with lights
over his bone mother on whom he broods—
Yes, there is more than this Gemutlichkeit,
the lace cuff Zifted precise to string
something needing voices, choirs in white,
a crucifying cruelty requiring requiem.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 41.

Tapestry

She moved in crosstitch shadows under trees,
a lively princess trapped in tapestry;
each day, like an arras, seemed the same—
against an embroidered castle of ennui
the threadlike king, the queen in jewelry
played croquet but mallets never moved.
To her it seemed that nothing ever moved,
no wind whizzed apples from the woven trees,
apples that glowed like garnet jewelry
set in silver leaves, a hopeless tapestry
where butterflies spread forever like ennui
above thread roses always silken and the same.
And the same far, hardly figure on the same
foreshortened horse though no hooves moved
apparently approached, and might have changed ennui—
a pulsing prince beneath the threadbare trees.
to save the gay girl from boring tapestry.
Instead, the man and horse remained a distant jewelry,
the high-wigged queen amber and blue with jewelry,
the fading king, inclining slightly, played the same
dim game along a grass of tapestry.
In that stopped opera only the princess moved,
her slow skirt tolling under trees,
moved and moved back, weary with ennui.
Perhaps she was meant to be a figure of ennui
although she raged beneath her quiet jewelry,
an ornament in shadows as the trees
decorated slenderly what would not have been the same
boredom of wall without them. If one twig moved
turrets might have toppled in that tapestry,
where butterflies suspend depending in a tapestry
not only on red roses repeated like ennui.
Or, if shrieking from shadows, the pinned-down princess moved
incongruous into sun that blazed her haze of jewelry,
hooves might rise and drop, nothing stay the same,

apples of gravity plop from sappy trees.
But deciduous trees can't happen in II tnpCNlry:
it would not be the same dim pattern of ennui
if a princess in dull jewelry more than slightly moved.

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal, 1956, p. 42.

Dans L'Atelier du Peintre

The chimney pots, lamposts, gold VINS on green
courtyards of cats and cages, the blue street,
this gothic grillwork tritest ivy twines
further framed by views and then by sky—
did you expect my Paris window to reflect
the artist's woman and anemones?

No, your friend in the States was mistaken, quite,
to send you here thinking I don't know what—
pink cathedrals perhaps, turnips of Sacre Coeur
from Utrillo's corner with Boulangerie.

You may have misunderstood, his words been blurred
by nightclub noise or seawaves while you gilded.

Who now would try a tower however leaved,
stipple La Grande Jatte again in blues and greens?

It has all been done before, Tahiti, too,
possibilities of yellow exhausted by Van Gogh—
guitars, armchairs, Greeks and Gertrude Stein,
amorous birds drawn twice to mean they move,
Picasso performed them-champagne is all I have,
which I was saving for some dim departure;
however, if you don't mind it warm—the way
smiling at that tumbler in a light like this
you look almost madonna I might be moved
to noon interiors with accurate flies,
reweave the goldwork of your stole in oil.

Vermeer or Van Eyck—that green again—Jan
Arnolfini and His Wife, you may have seen it—
marvelous, marvelous. Why should I try for fact
when those old masters mentioned with a brush
more than cameras can, even more than eyes.

No, it's too late for magis, much too late
for realistic red down blue Sebastian's side.

Any good artist must now be more abstract
than every predecessor—otherwise—
but you're far too beautiful and the day too bright
for boring tirades on the state of art.

You came to buy a picture. I fear my blobs
and blurs aren't quite the bedroom piece you're
looking for—still lives and chrysanthemums—
I haven't done them since my student days,

Publication. First published in *Superman Unbound*. New Orleans: New Orleans Poetry Journal,
1956, p. 44.

The Death of Venus

Stage II | Myth, memory, and modernity, 1958

The complete recoverable text of the 1958 collection.

Veil of Perfume

His black dog asleep by the emery wheel,
my ninety-year-old grandfather sits
sectioning an orange, juice trickling
into his stubborn goatee as he eats,
saying “Schmeckt’s gut,” his straw-hatted
sons at lunch (like a Bruegel) before
the broad red door slid back that reveals
chicken feed spilled on a dirt floor.
Out of the barn’s blue depths a Leghorn
crosses the dazzling gravel, idiotically,
red comb awobble pecking at rocks;
the sons doze under the umbrella tree.
My grandfather gets off the old Buick’s fender;
The dog shakes himself licking my grandfather’s
affectionately freckled hand. They go to look—
walking the elliptic ditches of the orchard—
at God’s work, specking the leaves here with aphids,

stripping this branch bare, and there
hanging a whole tree with a veil of perfume
and bees and oranges, in the certain air.

II

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 1.

Briefly of Love

Briefly of love, the marble goddess' thigh
amazes us by such fluidity; the way
her falling chi ton carved to a curve
falls no farther, o maddening statuary,
stops at the hip like iron drapery.
The marvelous eyes seem staring but are stone
at dead Adonis turned to an anemone
blood red then gone into the windy noon;
for which she became this ideal lady
of rocky breast, no arms, stone belly,
her swans still gliding in a game of grace
on mirror ponds and the grass as dove's down
in Groves of the Academy where Socrates
and homosexuals wear her myrtle crown.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 2.

The Strayed Opossum

There strayed a naked tailed opossum down
from the water company's land, a wild thought
prowling the civil hedges of the mind.
He climbed against a sheet of water sky
and hung hideous (we thought), arboreal.
A blot in our suburb loud and lizardless
where shrieking jetplanes daily practice death;
accustomed to that and the trained vine
we wondered, as in a mansion's modernness
mistaken for cool caverns, a bat might hang.
He did not stay long, sensed we disapproved
like a turbaned visitor, his erroneous fur,
and disappeared by night, inverted foreigner
with arabian jeweled eyes and slender paws,
back to his dark demesne, disturbing as stars.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 3.

To a Friend in Worse Weather

Amazing April evoked you like a grass
hanging with dragonfly transparencies,
and cool with clouds, expectedly-
since it was that blurred season of the year-
next sky might be bluer than jewelry.
You were at best when webs and ditches wove
a summer lace across our crying eyes,
then seemed among such summer wizardry
one with the goats and roses of surprise,
the lizard iridescence of our hot July.
We knew the fur-pawed plundering would cease
when colors, slack on stems, can't stay
and memories of buzz, the in absentia bees
sting and carouse dim continents away—
had only hoped a more predictive green.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 4.

O Rhododendron

o rhododendron bush ablast like doomsday
rose-purple trumpeting, not only gardeners hear you
but uninvited snails tour in whorled cars,
extending ethereal feelers, your breathing branches.
I do not like your loud blossoms shrilling
in the muted air, your cacophonies on curbs
where ornamental trees spray like lyric passages
sudden petal wheels through a noise by Stravinsky.
Clownish summer trampling the narcissi
will break your blatancies like recordings
of military speeches. You are too brassbandish,
blaring from stiff stems, rude parader.
Already death is busy at your roots,
a bug-rite to ungloss you of green glamor—
daisies and you are doomed, lamb and tiger
alike lie down for that rough destroyer.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 5.

Drug Store Opening

Insight arced me like the x of lights
on the night of a drug store opening—
then moths, insane, veined and white,
ruby-eyed rattled on x:-raywings—
the delicate, the weird bent of me was streaming
like Dore's falling angels out of grace
down clouds through that electric beaming
attracting crowds to the cross of commerce;
orchids at the glass door of that hell of glass,
unguents and gloss to cure despair—
no turning sword Eve could not pass
to tint innocent once more her hair,
and the lying labels seemed to be trying
with tigers and riboflavin promises
to smile while my moths were dying,
sizzled outside hope's premises.
I wished the bright crisscross would stop,
the dazzling druggist count up his coin-
for it was over, that successful shop
had sold me death's dark magazine.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 6.

The Death of Venus, and Others

He on his terraces of terror, his patios;
surrounded by calendulae in pots and chorus
girls in tights, pretends, lifting among
the ruined radios, red wine, and reciting
an ode of Horace, he is having a good time,
the television king, cultured of course.
His wife in seals waits like a necessary evil,
a cold draft under his brocaded doors
and when she speaks speaks in Brooklynese.
They are like lookers at The Dying Faun
except, old Italys ago, with wild goat's feet
he might not have lived to die so long
though such nymphs danced round his defeat:
art gushing from its marble breast and eyes
stone blood, stone tears; the end of Rome.
Suddenly she shrieks—imaginary Niobe—
it queerly seemed (a quirk of the issueless)
something she said made them statuesque;
she gazes at their mass morbidity,
at him whom she might still have lively loved.
He too is stone; the giggling daughters only
remain but are rapidly departing
into an unfortunate rigidity—
at Cyprus, Venus sighs among her dying swans.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 7.

Brown Towhee

Hope was a brown towhee that lit and looked at me,
warily flicking wings, a bundle of feathered breath
flown down from twigged simplicities;
flitted, nervous of cats, a small truth
at grey porch edge in platitudinous rain
dripping undiamonded from waning vine and hedge;
he viewed with. timid eyes the human thing,
life brief as his beak, older than bird adage.
I was about to think Wordsworthian words
but the moment, anthropomorphic; minimized.
Turning with feet like spiders on porch boards
he tipped his tawny head, as if surprised,
and ruffling, defecated, then quickly went
back to survival's nest, chirping like sentiment.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 8.

One More Time

Farewell, philosophical affair, life's
meaning eked from a whiskey stare—
the apartment of sterility and strife—
“And Nietzsche?”—combing your complex hair—
“What would he think if I were wife?”

And always, Aristotle there, turning
the oblong light into a treatise,
tying one testicle for the sake of learning,
no kiss but suggested Greece,
a love allusive, a learned burning,
the major premise of despair—
“If I had been beautiful, a real beauty—
Helen or a movie star—

Yes, all would have gone differently,
no fatal scholar stooping on the stair
have stopped you, but some stupid fellow
shouldered like Hercules, or a fat
millionaire drooling on your pillow,
rubied as Solomon. Instead of that
a man who marks aging yellow
pages with a great lover's care,
at love's syntaxes bungles like a boy.
“Shall we have more whiskey or a beer?”

It will not bring back adolescent joy,
it cannot paint our figures in the air,
ruddy as Rubens peasants, ready
as Decameron men and women for sweet
pornography. Satyr in the shady
glades of Arcady, stroking the teat
of a caught nymph—! grow unsteady-
Perhaps then it is not goodbye.

One more time. It can go
on and on this way like history
but turn the light off-so-
this is more medieval than it is Greek.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 9.

Fun Zone

Nevertheless, though Venus has fallen into the cement
 mixer
and the nymphs of the summer night turned at first
 taste
of candied apples not into purple lotuses but girls,
even though this Greek is selling freaks tickets to see
 freaks
and the smell stifles, of hot dogs and salt scented sea,
I am thinking of something ancient, something absolute,
abstract, and somewhat absurd among the whirlings of
 these wheels.
Here where ice cream napkins drip onto the spittled street
and shrimp-red people come out of the plunge I am
 thinking
(though the great green turtle bubbles and eels sleep) of
 love
while the planted winner daims with a painted smile
 the ham.
At the very door of five comedians for a quarter I re-
 member—
amusements even when Sappho loved and Pindar wrote
 his strophes
were not remarkably dissimilar on a summer night from
 these.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 11.

Actaeon

She is sitting on the zebra couch inclining
an ear that cries a diamond to hedover,
the strict voyeur whom later hounds will tear
for watching her thin nakedness of mind.
bathing in the private alcohol.
The Bach she does not listen to is fluting
a nocturne of silver nightingales.
Now his antlers branch, he zigzags through
a forest of fluorescent streets pursued
by ribbed thoughts barking at his hooves,
cornered in dark bars where mirrors frame
a stag of terror, the beast he has become,
and, as his human heart is torn, is thinking
—ridiculous desirer of the moon.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 12.

The Lover

Twenty years later he is seen to sympathize
with spinsters and all the sparsely loved,
to rainwet kittens, of milk the hot purveyor,
and dreams inrtocently of descending doves
nesting in his armpits, roosting on neck and crotch,
the Prince Mishkin, the Christ of cruel modernity.
Goes, after work, out of his weary way
with well meant marigolds for the tumored woman;
children with slingshots stone him nevertheless.
It is too late for kindness, the autopsy will show
like Whitman's, big as an egg, sonie cancerous gland
that hurt him into gentleness. It is too late
for saints after such explanations. (We understand
you, pear-smeared Augustine, insane St. Francis,
lesbian Joan). The arrangement of these atoms
is green mirage over tarantula traps. And yet,
O before we are unsocketed and charred,
forgive his love, however he deceived.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 13.

Memoirs

Remembered awkwardly at first, an early island. (in later dreams telescoped
toward shore,
kelp-swinging waves in which I gasping swam)
approached on a gum manufacturer's white boat—
arrived at, an island only, with fringed palms,
chimes I couldn't climb to, and as at home,
sobbed until sleep montaged releasing dreams.
In spite of next day's popcorn, doll's parasol,
never again the boy before that time;
not swearing parrots, orange and bright green
or palepink topknot spreading cockatoos
at the zoo they took me to untragicked me.
I had been islanded, and the unclimbed-to chimes
remotely rang over the toothed, the shark-dark sea.

Sea swung a rhythm I hardly listened to;
Catalina on the horizon on clear days
was blue, the water, bottle-glassy; crabs bubbled
among ocean-broken shells in damp sand.
Later waves, as they had before, uncurled
snowflake lace alongshore; but at night I heard
a thing like a chained monster bellowing,
gulls crying beyond the decaying door.
Now the manypainted porch, the splintered chair,
Aunt Olive's wallpaper and my grandfather
are gone as if dissolved in that salt air.
Sliverless feet walk quiet along concrete,
the new house looks solid in uncertain weather,
yet every summer several swimmers drown.

III

Still mid-May the Cecil Brunners bloom
reminding me of childhood without charm
in a fenced backyard young years ago, and gloom
like a tent of guano sacks aspread the warm
blue irrevocable day, a grass blaze time
of sprinklers ticking, testides descent-
shuts out the linnet song and sun,
the street a heat above which walnuts bend.

Coiled in the blood, the sleeping cobra, sex,
fluted-to arouses, the garden's innocence
is ominous with apples and the sense
of heavy presences alighting on the rocks
around the fish pond and on stepping stones—
aged angels smiting the new blooms.

IV

Striped cat returns me to a temps perdu,
a waterlily time; his tail atwitch,
a gold-eyed cat entranced by dragonfly-
blue twig with wings that might be god or witch
(as I was sometimes Crusoe cast away)
above a pool in whose blue mirrored sky
among the marble clouds of summer day
goldfish swam in slow tranquility.
I learned the pool teemed invisibly,
monsters inhabited the hair-soft moss,
worlds within worlds, more than a milky way
of microbes warring in that pleasant place—
but hurting insights later. Then it seemed
the perfect pond toward which Narcissus lqned.
Backflipping in like a circus team,
my brother does not bother with amenities;
wearing his muscles and a bulging jockstrap,
he belches like a bottle while I butterfly
in the Mozartian gardens of the mind
and statue him among the phlox and stocks,
a marble admirable discobolus.
As art he cannot hurt but only poise
forever frozen like a photograph-
an egregious god of bodily grace,
a symmetry of sinew, but whose face,
blank as a snowbank or an executioner's,
stares neither cruel nor kind, indifferent
to when cannas bled, where swallows went.

VI

I learned the bookless lesson, loneliness,
from frosty formats, a text of ice,
and therefore lack a later tenderness—

slow sentences of family with nice
aunts in whose immaculate embrace
also cold cousins were quietly conceived;
strangely strangled by that gracious lace
of lies and intricate formalities,
stifled in tombs of rooms were radios
droned boredom to the clocks and flowers of wax;
my mother's sweatless father, ancient author
of that precisest prose kept killing flies
buzzing obscenely on the Bible's cover—
his house a tome that never mentioned sex.

VII

I try to testify it was not ornate
but the love seat no one loved on at my grandfather's
prints like a William Morris book mahogany curlicues
on the present's page—or simply state
I was never out in those medieval weathers,
skating home with Poe's appropriate news
of bugs and killed cats and hearts that would not stop—
to say though the ceiling reddened there was no drop
small as a bead of blood I watched while it spread,
no rat, lively with maggots, in the triangular
attic of webs and memories like a mind,
only a house around which pink and red
round leaved gerani urns grew and when clouds cleared,
deeper blue on blue, the hills, the endless wind.

VIII

Now for a small forever we are framed
twenty one years ago, mother and sons
under grey apricots and leaves of grey,
the tortoise poisoning at the cantaloupe
at feet beyond some blurred calendulae
and Mom is mentioning, mouth open, what?
We are not ready yet for immortality?
or telling Dad to stop the sprinkler? Click
reckless photographer we are preserved,
wings of waterdrops, turtle, just as we were,
gophers below our grass, inadvertent birds
dipping above the leaves of this naivete.

Aslant, Dad's shadow, like a crucifix,
darkens a corner of our glossy day.

IX

My father, five feet six, was kind as Christ,
children and kittens slept in his thick lap,
a gentle elder, eyes. as blue as frost,
if I have maligned it is my own relapse
co present bitterness from the better past,
a wrong perspective on his humanness.
He is the kind of man the seas outlast
but stays like pelicans in remembered skies.
Along the beaches of my late despair
I did not wait, a tall Telemachus,
hear her incessant weaving in my ear.
He burned no Troys. Hamlet or Oedipus,
I only briefly wished his classic death,
learned sadists later few such fathers breathe.
When tortoises turned, Junes ago this grass,
across a yard, mowing with pink tongues,
inexorable across flagstones over less
likely, pink instinctive angleworms,
when, in their queer armor, ringed like redwoods,
they turned and passed me, chopping their blunt feet
into the green blaze, swaying their snakelike heads,
mouths leaking apricot, I was too young as yet
to more than merely think: pet tortoises
as if, viewing tiger, I had thought pet cat.
Often, mangling dandelions, such small dinosaurs
hissing their heads in like a frightful thought
still move across a garden of regret,
fossils like furthermores that I can't forget.

XI

What was wrong with the depressing doilies
on the bloated couch, color of toad's throat,
or that there should be a mirror whispering
pimples of puberty like Narcissus' pool?
Windows, suddenly sensuous, replied
with velvet apricots on a hurting sky;
Keats said, "Beauty that must die—"

and then the house was ugly as an ulcer.
The waterfall's picture would never spray me,
alas, lovesick, with mother-of-pearl mist.
Dull as history, relatives arrived
 and sat like albums of the seldom kissed.
Nevertheless I sensed a tragedy—. heard groan the ironic ghost of Oedipus.

XII

When I was short those winters of surmise,
a chided child whom no mirrors loved,
of hairless hands and half grown ecstasies,
I thought of women but all theorems proved
my awkward angles a geometry
adjusted to square rooms in which to cry
on square chairs where clocks ticked to the eye
dripping small tears a large eternity.
Then leaflight tented that euclidian lie,
my atoms shifted out of parallels
and streets escaped from strict infinity.
Tall, I walked to the sound of oval bells,
my orbit bonging to a different time
of Einstein sky, birds my singing axiom.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 14.

Vale

to San Francisco

O drowsy cocktail hour kiss, the spilling fur—
blurred cars like bugs along the distant bridge,
priceless pictures of fair flesh made a fetish of,
horn rimmed music listeners, all else ennui,
city denoted by these bulging glass gingerbread
fairytale houses as a place of pioneers, farewell
false fronts, bright lighted liquor stores, pigeon-
gobbed green domed city hall neo-renaissahce.
A final wreath of roses flung in your stinking bay,
all Alcatraz clutching at its bars (but I shall miss
your foghorn weathers when possibility
shimmers and shifts like colonnades through mist).
A last look at your repeated doors and people,
skilled skaters on fake ice, your peeling theatre
like an old unhealing man; one night more
among the condescending waiters, black satin watc
silvered like dagger light (if clear) by moon.
O but it is always and everywhere not Chinatown
pretending pagodas, a hoax of joss; the sad
striptease of wigged impersonators, hot these
or gastrucks past midnight rumbling over bricks;
rising like sap in the blossoming streetlights,
changing to grass carpets cacophonous concrete,
the murky morning is suddenly chrysanthemumed
by love, leveler of cities, life's only anodyne.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 26.

Water Music

We went into the simple water, the suri
warmed us, there was purple lupine-
met midstream laughing, inan and woman,
naked, ankle deep, kissed in the icy water,
lay afterward in lupine, loving slowly,
the day a dazzle of our nudity.
A curve of June, the bluejay colored sky
pulsed with tenuous transparencies,
insect slender, like breathing dragonflies
beat the pulses of our nudity.
Pines swayed to our swaying nudity; the stream
a watery harmonium, played as when
Handel idled in a sensuous dream,
 pressing the ivory keys like breasts and thighs.
 The afterimage of our ecstasy
 flickers like water music heard imperfectly-
 two naked figures rise while crowds of oriole
 fly south over a desert stream

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 28.

Vivaldi in Nevada

Hear, while around the rodeo grounds below
a girl gallops her pale palomino
and like a cowboy film a man in Stetson
follows, incongruous, Vivaldi's Concerto Grosso.
The local colors flapped Reno Rodeo,
the parade, with clowns, passed serious and slow;
some succumbed to heat, some heaped the queen
with roses; sales went up on beer and beaded coke.
They roped, and broke steers, and one was thrown
to twitch on crutches inglorious afternoons
n, but listen—listen to Vivaldi,
the dateless, deathless drama of his tones.
The West passed like a brief excitement,
like bands in red boomed its burnt down towns;
Vivaldi, while those who pranced in the purple
mountains
s lie under summer still as stones, plays on.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 29.

Tea Time in Troy

A clock with cupids bonged the quiet time
for thin tea in the thin house of Aunt Elaine.
Like deacons sat her stitched-with-sampler chairs,
the plates, handpainted, passed from hand to hand—
scenes from the classic myths—Troy burned
under stale cookies daily, a punctual doom.
And there was always talk of death and doom
in the room while ribbons rustled and slow time
hurried the guests homeward (one was burned
in a condemned hotel owned by Aunt Elaine).
The plates, handpainted, passed from hand to hand—
there seemed a click of bones about the chairs,
asthmatic cushions gasping in the chairs.
The cupid clock bonged again like doom,
the stale cookies passed to the thinning hand
and someone coughing questioned, “Is it time
for the evening paper yet, Elaine?”
Through windows, like a city, sunset burned;
eyes in the smoky glow watered and burned,
bones creaked on the creaking chairs.
An album of the past, sat Aunt Elaine
explaining, while cups clicked, an ancient doom—
“Remember, Margaret, just about that time
the good looking O’Brien boy lost his hand—”
“It was his left—no right—foot not his hand.
You seem to forget, Elaine. Our house burned,
don’t you remember? at the same time—”
But she insisted to the thinning chairs
it was the hand and not the foot of doom.
Sometimes she seemed not one Elaine
she said, but many woman named Elaine.
This was not hers, this twisted twiglike hand,
excellent Elaine did not deserve that doom—
to be embroidered with these pains that burned
and stitched her like the samplers to the chairs.

“Have you forgotten, Margaret, the time—
he said I was outside time?” cried Aunt Elaine
to the empty chairs, the cold cup in her hand
while maples burned, and Troy in porcelain doom.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 30.

Fully Clothed Figures at Highball

When the World Ends

We sit at surrealist cocktails among
ants and dripping watches; the tree
is shedding faces of the past
into our beverage.

Beside us broken arches lead
to steps ascending and descending
nowhere; but the beautiful blue
reflects an obvious master's hand.

Leaves like last year's magazines
whisper (yellowing) passé, passé—
And that decanter adds a touch,
matches the also dying lawn
as if God might suddenly grasp
Dürer stars in His frame again
or Blake be etching glades away
angelic certainties

to illustrate in acid
Divine Lost Comedy.

A distant mushroom, multicolored,
umbrellas cleverly. We think—
how spectacularly phallic,
sipping our delicate drink
until finger by dropping finger
we quaintly disappear, only
the radiant wind our tombstone
on a dissolving brink.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 32.

Winter Once More

As in a movie the attractive trees
blossom, leaf, dangle with fruit, have bees—
one dark and cloudbright day leaves blow
dramatically toward my window; now edged with
bare, crooked branches indicate that time's
cold clocks are turned to zero; skiers climb
white peaks between triangular green pines.
Winter once more, and though speedy reels spin
on toward summer's swans and bare-armed heroine
canoeed through lilies to a denouement
outdazzling Paradise, a bell clangs "Gone—"
across the freeze and white-fenced cows that breathe
mistily in Christmas pastures needing a wreath
and Season's Greetings spelled in red beneath.
Skiers from skyward schussing the fresh snow
dissolve to a different scenario
of startling star and infant in warm hay,
a graceful group of wise men like ballet
(this too, like movie time, imaginary)
coiffured immaculately, an amazing Mary,
and Joseph out of focus among the blurry
sheep and burro. Bright spotlight on the child
wrinkled, red and crying. Madonna-mild,
Mary does not dream his martyrdom,
thinks, like a housewife, of the journey home
and if their cow was cared for, the well froze.
The movie, time, has more tricks to disclose,
ticks off quick centuries of heat and cold—
Cruel crusades kill millions, paunchy Popes
parade in tasseled gold; and down these slopes
sunburned skiers glide as if this wintertime
were not flat pictures but a curved continuum
in which they easily might change to swans
sliding all summer on roundpadded ponds.
(That bell across green pastures clanging "Gone—")

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 34.

Dirge for Dylan Thomas

Not that his poems mattered more than the snow
that did not fall; unlistening lovers heard,
if they heard at all, the paper at the door
(THE BEST MURDER WAR) but it didn't matter
more than if there had been herons there,
or snow, printing cold news of mist in hexagons,
whitening the grey city to a countryside
where, beyond squares of yellow cottage light
falling in soft diagonals on snow,
any English poet might have died—
Milton, old as Homer, and as blind,
Burns, burning as briefly and as bright—
but most were sick and exiled, suicides
on the treacherous Mediterranean of their times,
went out with small boats despite the warned-of storm—
had hearts that (romantically) would not burn.
And some swam Hellesponts, Leander-like,
took drugs, or, dull as Tennyson,
wrote endless elegies in perfect rhyme.
This man was liveliest of them all,
green-thumbed among them; curlews cried
rising from his smeared-with-sunset lines;
bells bonged as the waves he raged of broke
and dragged him screaming down the tangled tide
(few dared, sneered by critics, to so lyricize,
face after face in their forbidding rows).
But some—between skyscrapers icicle tall,
think azure herons hanging in spring skies
stiling to pools mirrored as clear English is,
and will remember this November when he died
as one of searchlights arcing the dread dark,
Orion and the Swan jewelings west and east,
the smaller sapphires of the Pleiades—
know there walked once, spritely and small,
a man of feeling, starred as vast as these.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 36.

True Story of Venus and Adonis

I never thought you handsome until a look of larks
differed your face like dawns of April after April darks,
then sang in first bud eloquence among your snowfire flakes,
thrill-throated birds by wintry, ice-splintering lakes—
And oh, how Dian-green you went all light-arrowy May
saying, “Hard Adonis, I shall be your soft lady.”
Poets lied of course, preferred the gory boar,
my white thigh leaking rose red on the classic forest
floor,
changed me to fit their meters into a convenient flower,
and charioted you to Cyprus by the improbable power
of doves out of their toybox of such silvery devices—
said you died from love. It was not one of your vices.
Opined I pictured hairy deer or spiky porcupine
while the silkbags of your breasts dangled and your fine-
as-spider-spittle hair mingled with the coarser curls of mine—
What could be more freakish when a goddess lay on a man?
They erred, idealistic. You remember after that time
leaves covered my quiver—that may be out of rhyme.
Already by autumn you were tinged deceiving red
like passion-seeming trees really frostbit, dead.
It was a hot-chill, long and slow and lovely dying—
cold won out, of course, and I admit I was tiring
too, trying the tightness of my slackened bow again
before you took the boat to Cyprus and I joined my
hunting men.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 38.

These Senuous Cats

These senuous cats remind us—licking their paws
in the winterchill, the twigged gold dust as they pause,
(it blows from the icy meadows, the glacial peak)—
of summer, equatorial, creaking with heat.

And, as they walk between the melting snow,
like queens, practiced with baskets, poised and slow
they seem, this miniature moment, animals remote
as conjectured Incas hot histories ago.

They seem alive in a world we cannot know,
lush to their furred feet and to their eyes that glow
like phosphorous in shades, this disagreeable ground
enormous with insects, stones, loud with sound
of beetle drums, sowbug armies, a belated drone
buzzing his deathsong all one cold winter noon.

And watching this grey etching, etched in grey
they seem a simple comment on intricate history.

Man, before his instruments, mute as these
cats crouched under crisscrossing twigs of wild rose,
sat by his frozen stream, his backyard universe
a winter garden swung farther from the sun's source
than numerous summer, watching the death of things,
ignorant as cats of atoms and their solar rings
but diametric in his difference, even then
musicked by mathematics, knew blue from green.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 40.

Yes, it was the Era of New Erewhon

Several saviors later, improving pumpkins,
orange and plump, pleased our botanists—
approving scientists disguised as aunts exclaimed,
meanwhile administering a clinic kiss:
“One would never know he was once maimed,
that stainless hand had ever been plain bone.”
There were saving substitutes for everything,
those fashionable fake fabrics often better,
unnoticeably rained-on, as pressed if slept in,
new breeds replacing the red and simple setter,
machines to mimic the secrets of the sun,
almost emotion almost spun from water.
Soon, that poets’ plaything, the romantic moon,
its silver deserts and sable ranges named,
would be an airbase in infinity
and otherworlds revealed, as Lucretius claimed,
a plethora of men, and sparse divinity,
hazards more drastic than our experts dreamed.
Yes, it was the era of New Erewhon,
of Brave New World, nearly nineteen-eighty-four—
we sat air-cooled at bluish television,
pretending laughter though clowns only bored
and censored drama lacked a certain vision.
We whored and warred and hated as before.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 41.

Errored by Love

Errored by love, I staggered into the air—
false spring, fat-birded in twigs of buds,
transforming bald hills with gold wigs
of light, fooling, like me, by warmth,
thin-winged and dotted bugs. It gilded
to modern art even garbage cans: red
tissue paper, celery, a humorous shoe
seeming deliberately, inevitably right
bulging, against brick, in that soft light;
and I was heroed, white as Galahad.
It seemed I might have errands of delight
and perilous import, Greek-pectoraed might
dive in the lake and rescue to the light
the inverted beauty from her turtle sleep.
But all the houses either flat or peaked
were grim with grillwork, blinded to the light.
People I passed had wheels to lift dirt
or sped on wheels from numeral to clock.
No one needed saving even if I could have
reached them timely on my twisted foot.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 43.

Silenus in the Morning Light

They sleep in the world end weather canopied,
Mylady Menopause and not Shaw's Don Juan,
she sheer in negligee, his negligent arm
across the crisscrossed gold that ribbons her.
Across the headboard quilted Cupids play.
A xylophonic greyhound breathes, it seems,
in fitful effort, curled on dim irises
of the carpet weave. The scene is sinister,
done in grey, but could be moved easily—
this censored from the script, and technicolor.
Then the dieted lady, dyed to red
prances coltish pursued by Juan on green
greener than summer graves by grievous seen,
lie by the bookish brook and speak their lies
to soundtracks sighing after they are dead.
He wakes, Silenus in the morning light;
naked with goatfeet, pouched and pendulous,
and thinks "how haglike my lady looks,"
corseted; escapes to the dew dripping nymphs
who fast outrun him now it is too late.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 44.

The Foetus

Kicks in the warm curve as even Christ,
webby knuckled now, result of love,
on blood-system like a fuchsia bud—
will burst in the world with eyes and suck the air.
The tickling drop of love, jolt and sighs
translated children's chalked obscenities
from sidewalk blaze to the secret bed
beyond dark x-ra ys and infrared.
In the inverted mountains of the microscope
cells knit like Norns to girl or boy,
blonding this hair, bluing this shut eye
whether we admire plum buds on sky.
Apart, pearl bones spin to their size,
the ancestral hand is nailed in miniature,
oxygen and protein weave a thigh
predictless and despite our fear.
When Christ dropped in hay who was amazed?
One sparrowy spring this bagged girl
or curled boy will be crucified,
tacked on an Easter tree by newborn eyes.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 45.

First Buds

First buds, pink-wheeled, enhance the sticks,
are Japanesey (as Mrs. Crosley said,
inviting to poetry a ten-year-old
that memorable spring, as to lavender tea).
Red headed linnets do our carpeting
and blindless windows frame frail scenes.
Simplicities of orient—that tree crotch,
those roofs inverted v’s—oh William
Carlos Williams, so much does depend;
a life hangs by a flower hinge,
and Mrs. Crosley turning the geranium.
Of course if it hadn’t been for Marjorie Quinn
with bangs and dimpled knees on the porchswing
denying her adjective like an English grammar
who knows what fireworks trees I might have missed?
But that mistaken lady had guts at least,
to use such language faced by proper nos;
said water sprinkler wings still iridesced.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 46.

The Noble Savage

I met an Indian in a latrine—
that flush reminded of high waterfalls,
Hiawatha by a spotted fawn—
fat, watery eyes tattooed with red.
He wore a cowboy hat and jeans,
reeking of cheapest wine.
I thought papooses and beaded
braids and pots and dyed designs,
a chief in feathers, leather legs
of braves in leather moccasins—
and then, museums of the dead,
a Salt Lake bowl with mummy grain.
He asked me only, “Got a dime?”
stumbling by the scrawled-on wall
in stolen boots, Ramona’s man
fattened, had he lived, by time.
And gave the money as they gave
trinkets for an island once.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 47.

A Bee

A bee, immediate, buzzed on feet of fuzz
tipping, brief as bliss, a tigerlily leaf,
merely there like air, without because—
gold bands and black, and wings of onyx gauze
and facet eyes, concernless of as if.

And whizzed despite our whys from cup to cup
down hairy stamens and stiff pistils, up
petals aesthete to us, yellow and gold and rose-
her business honey, ours vaguer than hers.
Ours, like crooked spies, subversive, sinister,
disguised by guilt and dimly sensuous
to chart her like a star, speculate
her hows, call simple cloud, complexly, cumulus.
Now she is gone to zones, amber and intense;
the lily straightens up; the human poems this;
nothing is changed—except a universe.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 48.

Newport Suite

The waves again. They green wall like a summer day
and topple into foam. Something about this is Aegean,-
Egyptian—With stiff slanted stance.—It cannot be,
those honking gulls wheeling in modern sky, that I
am thirty-one, and this my daughter is as blond and big
as I was days of sand and ocean green as bottles.
She sees the wet sand bubble when the lace of foam pulls
back

like an aunts curtain, digs like a confined aunt's eyes for
the excited orange swarm of sandcrab's legs, delighted
by small wonders while we demand El Greco, Bach,
Alhambra's butterfly lace of stone, the real Kremlin
domed like onions, and to go in gondolas.

This is enough now to venice her, a European tour—
those stores with miniature pink parasols
and jeweled junk, the cement sun as gold edged glow
as in the patios of Barcelona, to us a dull
seaside southern California town who wish Algerian
nights and Shelleyan days on the shores of Sicily.
The traveler will not find himself however. Rome
stones,

columned ruins, disciples disappearing in the wall 49.
are not the lost boy he is looking for, who triked
boardwalk and all the similar houses were not his,
lost in his sailor hat a block from home. Be stares
into a Turner haze, sighs on the Bridge of Sighs.

At America's extremest edge
surreal forest of parking meters
barnacle tufts on the pier piles
a slow yacht points orient.

Scene of my early summers, chirped
by these birds, at slim sixteen
an awful adolescent thinking East—
spotted leopards and lepers rotting,
I, safe, in this beer-canned sand—
now more muscled, hairier than then
safe here again, to remember and imagine
dangers and deaths, the familiar and the strange.

Silk handkerchief of jellyfish,
dark ray lurking to hurt like
man's intentions, innocent pearl-
iridescent air better remembered
than to be in. Ideal recedes
like a yacht east, a jet tears
the sky apart reminding of headlines'
hideous now and here
above weird aerals and telephone poles.
Look backward to despair, there
I stood like a dying tubercular
saying bright star and when I fear
or forward to each receding year—
the lace waves drop like lead,
hourglass granules drop in my head—
only marriage saves the aging man.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 49.

The Lately Mockingbird

The lately mockingbird white-streaking struck
cadenzas beyond counterfeit; a bow brought down
by virtuoso could not more amaze
than his diminished sevenths, subtle clown.
Adjacent jays spread jealous parasols
spectacular in blue; small sparrows wheezed.
A voice like vision in the walnut leaves
announced messiah to a wilderness of ears.
His lilt the tilt of boat disciples rode,
ballooning sails and robes when oboes blow—
religious or aesthetic ecstasy—
and mere chirp chirps to prove his repertoire,
simple as limericks, included comedy,
or seemed so, seemed sincerity
as mindless mirrors show backward, beauty's shell,
report distortion with as good a grace.
This Janus of the branch, oblivious, sang both ways,
Stravinsky's shriek and Schubert melodies;
occasionally, against a memorable sky,
fanned pearl-grey tail and seemed to crucify.
Tragic lyricist, for whom did he perform
his brief perfection in this theatre of green,
compelled by what dim impulse to bright song?

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 53.

Arcs

Round with expectancy on slowing feet
you carry carrots through the cooling heat
accompanied by husband and by daughter
to feed the horse whose forehead is a star.
In time of poplar and purple spotting water,
in time of color—killdeer sip and totter-
cows with long and lovely lashes gaze
either-eyed at our figures of surprise
along the road we walk through pastoral,
a distant bucket clinking like a bell.
Poems ago I lied in my despair;
I walk beside you with as fiery hair
and you are still as startling dark and rare.
And still, blue dragonflies suspend in air
like held breath in this lavender
of sky-reflecting ditch and horse's star,
neck arched to the child's hand, the unborn
curled in dim bones in arching dark,
and we wait here briefly, form by form
for the next sad cycle through this starry arc.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 54.

Arachne

Arachne laughed. "You wartier than a toad
old crone, what do you know of artwork, ragged
hag, calling me too beautiful and bold
when I with thread can make a mountain cragged
better than Jupiter with his thunderbolts
if there is a Jupiter. See my dove's down colts
browsing a meadow of amazing green,
that grove in which each separate olive seems
ready to pick, that sleeping boy to dream.
The gilded goddess in the woven sun
is I. You needn't cackle, next thing to a hen.
Minerva herself can't do what I have done."
The witch's tatters like a grey cocoon
from which some spectacular moth emerges
fell empty, and staring jeweled father on
Minerva stood, tall, intense and gorgeous.
The nymphs who had been watching, murmuring,
 bowed.

One satyr said, "Her goose is cooked," aloud.
"I should merely turn you into an ass,"
Minerva said, "egregious girl, and let
you bray, but at the moment it wouldn't please
one known to be magnanimous. I prefer to forget
your jealous jeering and challenge you instead
t? a contest of beauty with shuttle and thread."
An immediate loom appeared next to Arachne's own.
The nymphs came closer, and the laughing satyrs.
Minerva tied her wool onto the beam.
Arachne's wrist as a swift swallow flutters
flew up and down the garden of her colors;
each looked at the other's work like Egypt sculptum
out of the stiff corners of their eyes.
The goddess chose a suitable scene of triumph:
twelve gods watching while she won the prize,
Athens from Neptune who had only thumped
a horse out of earth with his sea-wet trident.
Herself she pictured in a heavy helmet
holding her invented olive branch—

and in a rainbow mist around this central piece
pictures of mortals who at their lives' expense
compared themselves with gods. One of these
had a woman's head, but her throat of scales
coiled and and coiled into hideous green tails.
Arachne's tapestry-she should have seen the hint
and torn apart perfection. Her snow white bull
carrying Europa with sinister intent
in oceanic indigo, his tasseled tail
afloat, seemed to swim the embroidered deep,
a real girl to clutch his horn and weep
looking backward toward the shore where trees
receded as he swam, and dripping from her hand
like blood, slim petals of anemones.
Nymph whispered to nymph Arachne planned
impiously, but as good as Minerva's masterpiece,
to show that gods were human, if not beasts.
The shaggy satyrs regarded their goatlike feet.
Minerva marveled at that boastful blue,
the crying crimson, and inexcusably white
the bull so vivid that the tale seemed true.
She took her shuttle and stabbed the handiwork,
expecting it to bleed. She stood there stark,
starred with her jewels, eyed like jewelry,
poised to strike, but touched the girl's head.
Shaking with shame, flaming with modesty
Arachne grabbed some strands of the offending thread
and hanged herself, though was not quite dead
when Minerva saw her dangling and felt sad.
"Live and weave," Minerva, pitying, said.
The dying girl shrank to a small ball,
her eyes that saw too much contracted in her head,
the legs she sprouted, hairy, black and tall
were talented at running up a wall.
A clever artist in a bag of gall,
she swings on iridescence, and spins octagons.
Sometimes her radiant prey are butterflies

that breathe with color like the ones she once
worked on her web, more often merely flies.
Whoever met Minerva, except in a poem?
She stitches still, though Athens fell, and Rome.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 55.

An Emerald Error

Trees trilled, sparrows at our toes'
approach fled up in terror;
under symmetries of rose
grass was an emerald error
our idling ankles ambled, and butterflies
above paradoxed our summer.
Their shimmering snowflake flutter
through antonyms of air implied
a death of daisies, your look said later,
later, and time tore at my eyes.
Christ's crown nests in poplar pushed
songs around my brow, and what
was wine turned vinegar, and what was rushed
went slow: centuries of heat,
eternities of snow. I stood
beside you painted with obvious blood
and arrows, then as dying does,
this suggested resurrection in
every grass still green.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 59.

Circus

My life is swinging aerialists in tights
of insect wing green, a letting go mid-air
three at a time over the oval blur
and caught by feet among ladder lights—
or stepping high wire in the steepest nights,
a pause of poise, balance to band's blare
of my precise thigh and my exact shoulder,
alone, half naked, at those netless heights.
And then, with lions, no pistol but a stare—
and tense tailed tigers and hissing cougar—
this, and a way of moving without fear
between death's leopards, my back to jaguar,
I play the daily circus of despair—
then all my clowns cry in their false hair.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 60.

The Cocoon

A caterpillar dim bed the white wall of our hope
slowly, a comic eyebrow that had crossed who knew
 what roads
for this arrival, or why when he had climbed
with pyramidal patience, it was that spot he chose
and gluing himself on, turned to a grey ghost.
We hated and loved; for philosophical solace
hunted the real tiger in poetry's symbolic Bengal
to tear at us with meaning, drip metaphorical blood,
remembering at such times the sleeper on our ceiling.
Luna or swallowtail? We guessed his chemical.
A jeweled beauty out of our blank might move
drying his sapphires, or crimson as our blood
castle and prince us, enchanted by his change.
Until one day we watched his wings unwind
expecting spectacle—and ugliness emerged

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 61.

The Exile

In the very din of business, the purr
of planes, where cash clangs, type-
writers tintinabulate, wheels whir;
to the sound of shoes, elbowed
by buyers and while sellers smile
the exile merely smells a rose,;
wearing his dacron in an island way.
He meditates the quiet statuary
in parthenons of pause, that pale perfection
of curve and thigh as real to his eyes
as these shrill housewives, this sign
shrieking to BUY, these mild old men
and employees, the lurid headline's lie.
He seems to dream along a far piazza
by a bright sea that dazes with its dazzle
and palms explode to feathers, sunset
streaking with gold, greening his other sky.
And yet, although in this commercial light
by the drugstore door he looks remote,
byronic, he's local as a sparrow,
unlikely to leave whatever winters blow.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 62.

Once a Shy Knight

Once a shy knight in greenest allegory,
he defended Faerie Queenes and Guineveres
with hair like glories. On fields of fleurs de lys
deflated the dated dragon with slim spears.
Ice-boned belle dame, she would appear
briefly in high towers cheering him on,
to her no more than a glittering blur
pricking the pallid pastures of the dawn.
To him she waved her onyx handkerchief,
descended stone into her lover's bed—
Essex or Lancelot—and took relief.
unladylike, considering men had died
about her white-as-palfrey purity,
her laughter dulled by proper tapestries.
It was the vivid autumn of the year
when birds like blood pulsed on all the trees.
Ill-disguised at an insidious inn,
green toothed, she lifted tankards with a steward,
glanced uncaring when two serving men
carried his arrowed body off a sword.
He recovered, blue with welts and winter-slow,
wondering about blind loyalty;
healed of more than wounds, thereafter rode
the erroneous forests mailed in irony.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 63.

Beasts

She moves among the shadows every day
of men she does not know, bemused
by marriage, thinking they also change
in other rooms to beasts who lay their manes
on breasts of long white ladies, cured of rage.
All men can be enchanted by a touch
to someone tall and different in the dark.
A tiger as if prin red stops his srri pes
listening to Mozart in a pleasant park—
he hears such music when she subd y strips
—a naked nymph the graceful fountains spray,
rainbowed around her like his vanity—
her mind to cooling curves of nudity.
Or she will hold him by his golden horn,
a wild woman and her tame unicorn.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 65.

Why Should I Lyricize the Icy Sun

dying behind black factory stacks, amuse
with music like a v of geese bassoon—
ing long-necked south from sudden freeze,
jewel October with my diamond praise?
I could not mention witcheries of leaves
without remembering sinister descents
of hourglass spiders from frosty eaves,
the death of deer among spiced autumn scents,
partridges martyred, and such sentiments.
Too much depends on murdered innocence
to muse on oozing cider in an ode,
forget disaster in a country trance
of trees turned scarlet, sepia and gold.
Twitching on canes, the crippled and the old
feel cold birds beat south from trees of bone,
hung with vacancies like windy nests.
Tomorrow, snow will blow on steel and stone.
Why should I praise it with a white pretense
when at my lush equator islands green.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 66.

Age of Fable

Di screed y f iglea ved, gods and goddesses
display initialed toes as two go up,
pause at balustrade, put out a butt
(laughing among plush) in Hebe's comic cup.
Through velvet draperies, eyes adjust
surrounded by red EXITS, blue with haze,
to the mad minotaur at this end of maze.
It changes faces easily enough,
deceives by distance, places, and can smile
with even, ivory piano teeth,
soothing by celeste and silver guile,
sometimes an emperor treacherously wreathed,
more often women for the naked eyes
of balding bachelors and bearded boys.
Theseus is absent. These who tried,
when centaurs rode above such chandeliers,
believed the dazzling shadows on the beads
shed human blood and more-than-onion tears,
will dawdle homeward from this dark defeat
convinced of justice in a cave so curved
ideals were distorted (as Plato once observed).

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 67.

Public Library

His hatbrim slants across a crawling eye
as he caresses Ingres odalisques,
removes *The Seated Woman* from the book
to grace his gruesome room with nudity.
Mrs. Philpotts would like something on
how to make money without doing anything,
requests it of the learned looking man
who finds all books entitled MIND are gone.
The foreign woman with the mutt of jet
curled on parquet beneath her cheerless chair
discovers her exclusion from the ads—
no one needs an aging chambermaid
accustomed to perfume a countess' hair.
And who is this scholar hunched behind
(glasses glittering) columns of the mind:
intent on truth, a crossword puzzle fan.
Shine, innumerable wattled, correctly metered
lights, your messianic radiance like
the spotlights of expectancy. There might
emerge among the magazines sometime
a poet no one will read—that coughing boy
limping like a hurt stag toward history
where, behind a pillar, lovers grope
and foolish schoolgirls shriek our final hope.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 68.

The World Is White

The world is white, twig-tracked by wrens,
supposed color of innocence,
swanned with snow on hedge and fence:
Chesslike figures, black nuns go
to feed the blackbirds in the snow;
on crystal hranches an ebony crow
watches as in the poem by Poe.
Ivory piano keys of snow
pound on the mind, adagio:
a second movement slow and sad,
D minor speared and leaking blood
along an alabaster side—
it seems to nuns. When they turn,
tollled through snow toward orison,
that subtle fastbeaked bird flies down.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 69.

Eliot Among the Vinylite

On Last Listening to His Library of Congress Recording
 Only his language saves him, grandmother voice
 drones doom, auld Englishman from St. Louis,
 muttering prayers. We come to his teashop
 to hear the lemon porcelain and silver clink,
 blue curtains against the London dirt and noise.
 If a woman had smiled once, if a woman settled
 her hair of quelques fleurs and smiling said
 “I don’t believe it, Tom, old stony phiz,
 the only real desert’s in your head.
 In the Mojave, in spring, you hear yucca bells
 ring and ring, flowers carpeting
 palaces of Persia in the dry outdoors—
 but even. your rain is an unreal desert rain.”
 I don’t know. Perhaps he only would have
 fingered his artichoke like a surpliced priest
 or one who had suffered at birth a delicate wound,
 seemed to agree while beads burned on his chest
 and between limp pectorals like an old tattoo
 the cross of his boyhood twitched. Occasional zest-
 the twisted wit of a monk who suddenly looks up
 from brushing gold in a dark scriptorium—
 saves him, April framed by a window niche
 warm with orioles evokes abstract delight
 but the snake of denied desire will coil somewhere
 whispering of apples to innocent Eve.
 Not Christ but Mary, not kindness but a cross
 is his well-phrased lesson, jeweled with unicorns
 and repetitious as a liturgy
 mesmeric in intent, not to adorn
 his meanings, to obscure from scrutiny
 the nightingales he never listened to,
 Sweeney, who excelled in games at school.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 70.

December Ends

The clock that breathed when roman gardens fell
slants more slowly on numerals of ice;
though headless Venus with her marble swell
shadowed by twigs, voluptuous, excites
love's leafy vision, I look Adonis-eyed
at where her nipples chip, hearing the boar
snorting to gore me and can think no more
of one summer's ruin who am soon to die—
only great glaciers and blue interiors
of snowy pines, white peak on sky of white
and an albino bird if there were ears,
heard but not seen. That ermine everywhere.
absent of antlers, cold as hate,
not even face interpreting with tears.

Publication. First published in *The Death of Venus*. Francistown, New Hampshire: Golden Quill Press, 1958, p. 72.

Beasts in Clothes

Stage III | Social animals and formal argument, 1961

The complete recoverable text of the 1961 collection.

Nuns and Winos

Notre Dame Perfected by Reflection

Beside the very view of Notre Dame's
rippling rose window upside down in water,
a reek of winos curls asleep on stone;
a woman dips dim clothes in nuns and spire.
Displeased at easels, artists squint through thumbs,
pondering why bridges continually recede
past a Louvre hung with painted problems,
baigneuse and saint that, bluely solved, succeed
while timid brushes blunder into green.
The fisher's wish is for a simpler fame—
to hook among the gargoyles of inversion
something sizably silver with a fin.
A tarry tug comes breaking buttresses,
shattering to abstracts the merely mirroring mind—
nuns and winos plunge through oily rainbows,
a five-eyed limpid poet splits and drowns,
the ripping lips of fish are anglers' own,
the woman washes gowns in artists' blood.
It is a matter of reflection, not perfection,
whether views are evil, true or good.
Perspective straightens in the crooked Seine
as tugs chug, dripping drapeaus, farther on,
and then the mind perfects this ecstasy,
a wavering vision entranced to glass and stone.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 3.

Au Chien Qui Fume

Dogs smoke everywhere and Cezanne players
flip constant cards down, the evil queen
grimly framed again and again on green-
a place of melon rinds and soiled excelsior,
the belly of Paris, Zola called Les Hailes,
but beer only bubbles, saucisses merely steam
on trays the decorative waiter brings.
A cart of bleeding lambs transformed to art
passes the window of this cubist world
where continual rectangles turn on a square of green.
And painted players might be so arranged-
no card or face without a bottle balancing
in carefully triangulated space.
At first it seems a picture, but the players
anger to purple, dimension throbs with veins,
flat hearts are muscles hung in suddenness.
The dogs don't really smoke, they only seem
smoking, as dogs do in a dream.
The waiter is a waiter after all
and not a measured spot of black and white.
There are occasional clubs for variant,
diamonds and joker; a beggar in the street
lapping up soup like a beast of circumstance.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 4.

San Marco

Pausing in bronze, four horses seem to glide
below those gold mosaics statue laced,
and mosque-like domes on blue look blown from glass
for this, my basilica of gossamer.
It arches there in air like happiness
and more interior where Tintoretto tried
with bits of stone and tile, blue paradise,
it arches, censer-smoked, apostle carved,
is sinking seaward, Atlantis-like.
A handless virgin on the palace side
might tell of time, my timely fantasies
such slender corridors where Doges bled—
rank ankled first then up to mossy eyes
of saints and Christs, my fading FIAT LUX
—until winged lions drown like butterflies—
an orient by spider, splendor brief.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 5.

Campidoglio: Dusk

We climb a slow slope, oleander laced,
up stairs past dioscuro hugely nude;
Aurelius prances a pedestal beyond,
benevolent in bronze; those twins squirm up
toward heavy dug against a sky with domes
and crosses flaming lavender on rose.
Everywhere's loveliest hour, redder in Rome,
the purple forum flickering below
like broken candles at the feet of saints;
incongruous beauty, music or a poem,
this statue-graced piazza on a hill
where gods bled redly and stone bleeds still.
But now tranquillity. Fountain and tower
sound our time to muse behind
Castor and Pollux strangely caped and capped
leading light-edged horses into radiance—
a place beyond this place we briefly stand,
turning in eternity, entranced.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 6.

Goddess

(The Ludovici Throne)

The sea this Venus rises from is stone-
her headless helpers lift or seem to lift
the goddess out of granite and she smiles,
looking sunward in a water gown.

They stoop to bring her up, to cover her
breasts of effort above believable ribs
as if this were not art, as if she were
someone bathing instead of something carved.
She has archaic hair, a queer coiffure
flowing below a stone band onto her stone shoulder,
with waves too even, the face, however,
suggests she breathed beyond this skill of sculpture.
Certainly when such attendants had their heads
a real Greek girl from a B.C. sea
dripped blindly smiling into light like this,
whatever gods have lived or seemed to live.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 7.

Piazza Di Spagna, 26

Squirrelfaced Shelley is suddenly lit up
supposedly composing Prometheus, pen poised
in broken Baths. "Mostly imaginary-"
the librarian slightly laughs. "Although we know
he wrote it here in Rome." We warily
look around the Keats-Shelley memorial rooms.
The scene with Severn she vivaciously describes-
Keats dying in his arms-seems dimly far
from this bright, fountain-sounding Roman afternoon.
He heard the grotesque faces in the square
spout similar music before he heard no more,
lively lovers descending Spanish Stairs
and thought of Fanny Brawne, a romantic mist
in which, to nightingales, they had hotly kissed.
The furniture, like Shelley's corpse, does not exist-
destroyed by fire, but Leigh Hunt snatched a bone
(that neo-Grecian group on a nineteenth century beach,
Byron in profile, Trelawny's blowing robes
against a pyre that glowed) enclosed here in an urn.
So splendor ended fittingly in Italy
where splendor often ends. Although she claims,
among photostats of odes and curls clipped from Keats,
"The fireplace and ceiling are the same,"
when senses burn like cities nothing stays.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 8.

Flight, by Turtle, from the Pitti Palace

Obscene with breasts, a bulbous Bacchus rides
astride a turtle in the garden light,
testicles like tumors, rolls of stony fat
and somewhat mossy, an ugly excellence,
the turtle spurting water to imply
consequence of protuberant revelry.
He rides a desert at the palace door
toward death by thirst; madonnas drown inside
holding their gold-edged saviors satisfied,
slenderly slumberous, and saints adore
(while adolescent angels almost wink)
triumphant motherhood smiling beyond desire.
Blubbery unbeliever, he urges on forever
his terrible turtle in a slow pursuit
of nymphs who change to echoes, bitter fruit
(purple fountains dry before he drinks),
besotted reveler who will not arrive
where slimmer lovers thrive on subtlety.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 9.

More Nudes for Florence

Between Cellini's Perseus and the Sabine Rape
(evening in Florence, the fountain darkly drips)
we sit inhibited among nakedness,
the man's stone hands on the marble woman's hips
carrying her confusion to our consciousness—
gracefully struggling against, while wanting this
terrible taking more than tenderness.

You say, "A lively group at least," and Perseus
holds up the dripping, blood-arrested head.

Cellini wrote he threw his pewter in
(the same Palazzo tolling overhead)
when Medicis refused the proper tin
and costly copper for this green completion,
difficult love, or art, no easier then.

"The statues, not we, seem to breathe," I mention.

Purring pigeons, softly, like a thought
whir toward Neptune, nude, and the stiff equestrian
silhouettes, dark against less dark.

You question, "Shall we go?" and we go toward
our room above the Arno, where all night
we ring, like bells of Florence, renaissance.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 10.

Allegory of Spring

after Botticelli

A grace of graces in a place of green
toeing, arms arched, toward archwayed trees
and touching hands, they seem transparencies,
flute music more imagined than as is
lilting them lightly-or the mind that planned
playing this dance of face and drapery
with flutist hands to please a Medici-
for Hower floors never were so paused upon.
A needless Cupid flies above the scene
aimed at the white-thighed Florentine
reaching, one hand on hip, the other lifted up
for art or apples or philosophy.
Simonetta presides, a perfect centerpiece-
who can resist the pleasures of the dance?
A Horal flowing lady spritely steps,
Sandro's mistress, or Spring herseH perhaps
into the orchard with a sideways glance
at the couple, slightly sinister, beside-
someone clothed in mist, a sprig between her lips,
pursued by a bluecheeked creature panting fast.
This is epitome, a wind from Greece
ringing the bells of clover in the grass,
cooling hot thoughts to nakedness,
a green invention that will briefly pass.
It might have been Lorenzo's mind he meant
the poisoning moment of such airiness
before design desisted, fluting stopped
and dancers were madonnas once again.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 11.

Mad About Bodies

Mad about bodies, if massive enough-God's
pectorals, biceps, forearm, fingertip
pointed toward Adam, an excuse to muse
on muscles in repose, masculine Eve.
Athletic sibyls sit with books or scrolls,
like anatomy charts of how arms look
variously lifted, prophets pose
with wrists of wrestlers bent over knees-
he peopled the Pope's chapel with huge nudes.
Another wall? Ungentle Christ will judge,
exposing an armpit like a discobolus,
the swarming forms of flesh. A tomb?
Then chip a rippling Medici from stone,
nipped and naked kneed, let Lorenzo brood
armored above Dawn and Twilight who recline
beardedly virile and almost feminine
(women are men unsexed with breasts tacked on
or mild madonnas blurred by drapery)
let inward Night, the unfinished face of Day
be marble statements about men and time.
Make a giant, Angelo, out of that rock.
He tugged it home and tapped a David out.
That one Pieta best, a Christ
so shouldered he could hold the world's weight,
dwindling to thin legs, a face beside,
if it had been finished, would have cried-
Magdalene perhaps, doomed like him to live
desiring love no touch of body gives.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 12.

Back

Back from culture, I have brought besides these views—
a click like Proust's cake then the movie, memory,
unwinds Elysées—taxis and ornate arc—
places and faces beyond this shadow show,
the light too dim, the angles all askew
where meaning burns cathedrals in the bone.
Angels at Reims outflew my telephoto,
the Perugian bathroom with fountaining bidet
outfountained Trevi's Triton and his sprites
for all their straining toward magnificence.
Bacchus rides forever into view
his spurting turtle of inconsequence.
I tried to set my lenses for those heights;
Alps outloomed the widest one I knew—
the bird on cue that flew from waterflame
that Montreux sunset framed in leaves of willow
is not the same experience of wings
flapping feathers through my unfilmed idyl.
Failures of flickering fields and misty castle,
perfect exposure on erroneous Rome—
it wasn't the column caught as it cracked I felt,
this dying Gaul, these dolphins, even the light
but something more dimensional than that:
noise, salt, rose, those fused intangibles,
Pisa leaning where it could crack my skull,
not Galileo up there in a book
proving unequal weights equally fall.
Now I am back from culture I have brought
an instep ache, a sense of foreignness,
of distant danger in the familiar sun.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 13.

Backyard Universe

The News Is Robins

The news is robins and an end of snow,
is buds with waterdrops, wrens in dew—
we think a thaw although we know, we know

glaciers never melt, icebergs whitely grow
jagged as ever at poles of frozen blue.
The news is robins and an end of snow

but penguins oddly waddle in a row,
black and white, on blankness just as true.
We think a thaw although we know, we know

african absolutes where winter cannot slow
the lissom lioness who pursues the gnu,
where news was robins and an end of snow

innumerable aborigines ago.
When green begins and rabbits change their hue,
we think a thaw although we know, we know

eternal coolness on Everests of no—
death's vacancy—from a sleeper's clue.
The news is robins and an end of snow.
We think a thaw although we know, we know.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 17.

This March Eighth Air

Thin March eighth air, this feather-scented cool
when thin white jet-marks numeral the blue,
these plum blooms canceling, as they slowly snow,
that hint of deficit, the killers in the sky—
Time of unbalance, small outweighing birds
by songs and numbers heavier than death.

Among the ledger's lines, ambivalent worms
assist through minerals, wordless and maligned,
like snakes and spiders figurative of evil.
Simply, it is spring, a winged and waspish symbol.
The pilots, who are men, with a grace like feathers,
tracing glad plumes, zoom homeward in their weapons.

And Bible-wronged, the not yet budding apple,
primer of sap, when summer bends its branches
brittle with abundance, how those red rounds
will bounce like knowledge in the grass of genesis—
This March eighth air, these less than later meanings
begin the book whose end is revelation.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 18.

Lawn

Spendthrift mornings, jeweled by a dew,
emerald, -sapphire, ruby all at once,
diamond webs, and amber-beaded glance
of birds so black they, flashing, sheen to blue,
an ordinariness of lawn enchants-
then what was opulent evaporates;
by ten o'clock a greenness squares the view
between cement monotonies of grey,
but, leisure elbow in the busy blades,
lean and learn there more than meets the eye.
A universe by spider laces space
in dandelion, dichondra and clover;
dramatic underneath, lady and lover
meet for their fatal sixteen-legged embrace
while armies of ants advance against each other
and deeper under, in translucent bags
(tomorrow's hope), neat blind choirs sleep.
A rooted carpet, populous. and steep,
a roof for gophers, a sweetness for the bees,
this green and trimmed tradition that we keep
cut at rims, clipped against the critics,
where robins hop, where butterflies careen,
looks, by our dainty doors, serene-
but O the raging change and energies within
green infinities where Whitman leaned.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 19.

Boy

Comedian of love, my wind-willed boy has entered
the bees' abode, the danger yard of roses,
his second spring to toedance with the wasps.
Now apple boughs explode their buds of odor;
like emerald toys the leafy guns go off.
A hush of thrushes cautious in acacias
eyes him sidewise, turns on instinct strings,
twitching censure, arrives at some decision-
outmoded parents imprisoned in their wings.
But, small individual, he will seize the sun
from puddles and ring the calla bells although
their only music is a thud of moisture,
taste oozing snail and raw butterfly
until in liberal morning, a stern conservative,
the tamest cats are tigers to his touch.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 20.

Bird World

Some thrushes wove their basket to a branch
in which, her mate on twig, the female sat
until she hatched her wispy brood of beaks
craning the warm world with necks of awkwardness.
Nervous from nest to earth, concerned for worms,
they flashed on errands of continuing
and hopping seedward sideways, seldom sang.
Bending, a feast of beetle in her beak,
bald heads bobbing upward, and warily nearby,
the male bird perched for the approach of peril,
this feathered family in survival's tree
lived a civil idyl day by day-
but worlds are worlds. A harming boy arrived
to poke his stick and cause catastrophe.
The brittle cradle tipped to tragedy
out of the high air onto the hard ground,
while parents wheeled their useless arcs and screamed,
helpless for all their finery of wings
to mend disaster, and, without memory
-though human viewers were compelled to cry-
flew soon away into the cold and endless sky.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 21.

Botanical Garden

Eight iced and windy winters intervene
since, hills as hot, up a steep radiance
hip to hip we hiked this height of oak.
Lovers hand in hand and Sunday slow,
we wandered to a pond of. lily spikes,
whispering, when not kissing, hates and likes
beside the linnet on her nest of nerves,
among the honeybees who humming home
thought of their tiger queen and did not swerve.
And now return, this sensuous again
alyssum-scented once more buzzing summer.
Cedars from Lebanon, elmtrees from Japan-
our children pluck exotic leaves and run
laughing ahead through. Hora of the world.
We can't remember what we whispered here
that then of love, blundering among flowers,
kissing hip deep in birds of paradise.
We see the four o'clock about to strike,
the green agave blooming as it dies.
Transparencies of insects fleck the air,
a cactus grove puts out its needles where
two lovers stroll as if they did not know
the pollen purpose they are moving through.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 22.

The Berry Bush

Her elbow at my side after I hacked and hacked
a berry bush all day that stays behind my lids,
thick thorned, alive, the hedge of Briar Rose,
fades from my ribs like ever afterwards.
I change to childhood in that lifetime trice
between true sleep and only closing eyes.
It is the smell of cutting green of course,
transports me backward with exactitude.
I hack and hack that the evil bush may fall—
its sinuous green and prickly tan are sick,
spare berried, small rounds of blood and green—
something in myself I'm hacking down.
The cast of characters, faces kind or mean
or both at once, senselessly transform
like witches in a fairytale, and I hate
their anger and their ignorance now as then,
a boy, like everyone, misunderstood,
stealer of berries, as good as I was evil.
My days since then, increasingly complex,
include no berries quite as red as those
I think of now, or do not think, I see,
against an innocence of budding blue,
even the ladybugs touring in their spots
on leaves that loom alive and doom my nights.
And still I hack and will be hacking still
that bush of childhood in my final bed,
wrinkling to ticking until a thoughtless sleep.
But she is stirring and I'm through the hedge;
her lips a weight of butterflies on mine,
I kiss the haunted princess from her dream.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 23.

Nude

She suns on grass, my dark, my gifted mistress,
turning her pink hips in the summer green,
and she is reddening even to nipple tips,
a nude that pulses, better than by Gauguin-
by the blue shadow of an orange tree,
rounder than Eve in leafy paradise,
woman warm. she's hotly hinged at knees,
a sweaty sweet attraction for the flies.
When she turns over, intaglios of clover
wrinkle her back and sides like fossil ferns-
O she is bones then in that langorous cover,
and as she'll peel with burn, will peel to bones,
but see how she's gauguined, a doomed nude redly caught in the
changeless Polynesia of my poem.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 24.

A Spider

A spider spun the dark from leaf to fence
arc by arc with clever latticework
whose silk intention was a wheel of death,
then, like a god, she gamboled out of space,
connected to creation by a thread.

Dozing in her parlor, venom plump,
she waited for the tug of victim wings
and pounced on struggling dinners in her sleep,
sucking until husks from bloody tables dropped.
Though there are other points of view to things-
a wind blew just enough, a quince unstemmed,
bombing her flimsy habit to a rag:-
eight-footed acrobat, she hung midair again
and cunning as a mind began to mend
catastrophe with gossamer, wrecked egomaniac.
i/

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 25.

Powermower with a Man

As much as he drives; he's dragged by the machine that purrs like a heart with a handle; whirlingly mows,

"I blading the clover like a blood of green

and makes a neater chaos where it goes.

Metal and mind, the engine and the man

slash civil aisles, a music out of noise

and, tame as emeralds, a floor for boys,

i the amiable grass, trimmed of mysteries, stays in the rageless cages of its park.

So hopes my tidy neighbor out of gas,

filling the darkness from a glistening jar-

a willing victim of the mastered wheel

mangling bees and daisies with that power.

They roar across the morning, man and mower,

god in a grass mist with his beast of steel

or fool of science whom the tool controls,

raging to change himself and green with zeal,

he clips wild continents to squares and laws.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 26.

In Redwoods

Leaves hang down jade patterns to our eyes
from trunks like braid that soar to blue and cloud;
a blue electric easiness of jays
flashes in the redwoods of our mood,
moving shadow leaves on leaf translucencies,
fluttering luminous oak-leaves through our dark
as we walk between old logs of burning green
where delicate, ruffled funguses repeat
diminished fans along a fallen bark.
My twigged stick touches moss that falls apart
and sinuous bands of coral slip away-
a kingsnake sliding startled as we are
that there are people in his privacy.
Through his familiar forest, foreign forms,
we ponder those interiors of truth
(a deeper antlered darkness closing in),
warned back by wild eyes that disapprove
intruders to their emerald point of view.
Then back through leafiness as if pursued
-Apollo touching Daphne in our thoughts
and clutching nothing but a branching wood-
we hear the dryads crying, forest-caught,
or think we do, prefer the fable to
cones that dropped when parthenons were new;
saplings dappling light the day Christ died,
the year Columbus rode, another ring
in redwoods of inexorable time.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 27.

The Rose God

Careless of consequence, along a backyard fence,
a thoughtless thug, I bludgeoned as I dug,
beetle, sowbug, earwig, eggs of slug;
ants swarmed screaming from their panicked nests,
or what ants do, when frantic, like a scream.
Pink to my waist in sun for bloodred buds,
a fence of roses was my red intent,
and why I grappled clods, and, burning, bent-
thorn-ripped animist-dropping sweat and blood:
to make of barrenness, a plentitude.
Sadist with sprays, I, altruistic, planned
eventual paradise for general view,
and watched green imperceptibles ensue-
but when that radiant rosiness began,
creation disappointed like an Adam.
My roses only roses, after all,
were fated, as in Edens, not to last-
shapes of grace individually lost
and doomed like every vine to finally fall,
but far as revelation from that thought,
a crimson buzzing clammers where I dream
some figure from whose avid thumbs of green
teem fabulous blooms too abstract for a frost-
a farflung force that vastly digs and plants,
burning against immensity's back fence;

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 28.

Now, in Feather and Wheat Weather

What, by that witchery of weather,
was stopped, cold clouds ago, in snow,
flickers, flutters, turned to summer
high with wheat and deeply hot.
Whistling boys with fishpoles go
through blue shade beside a river.
Unbewitched from ice, the river,
bolted white in snowy weather,
wetly bubbles; farmers go
far in fields of former snow,
small and slow and hatted hot
through the moving wheat of summer,
in the hip-high shimmering summer.
Midges move above the river
and the pink-tongued dog is hot
who was furred for other weather,
but, if boys choose heat or snow,
follows spotted where they go
and they glitter as they go
flashing fishpoles down the summer
through an opposite of snow
by the leaf-reflecting river,
now, in feather and wheat weather,
now the world is Congo hot.
Are there arctics never hot,
white forevers where bears go,
pale and cool in iceblue weather
pole-remote from suns of summer,
colder than a solid river
disappearing under snow?
And do farmers think of snow,
deep in wheat and armpit hot,
feel a frost invade the river
(while slender boys still go
bending poles along the summer),

do they dread a pallid weather,
in fair weather fear a snow
when boys of summer, burning hot,
will coldly go by winter's river?

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 29.

Jet

I dream it's diving and I walk through walls,
greeting its pilot whose guts loop from a slit,
step over jaggedness into shattered plaster, ask him
into an interior he's blasted with his jet.
Now you are dying and I am and it's black
except where, flaring, your plane lights dahlias up
and sets the fence afire-was it worth it-
to batter down air Jerichos then drop
splattering lawns with children, staggering out
to wade in brains and livers through my sleep,
the fool of time, believing you'll arrive
-clipping our nerves pianos with your speed-
alive in death's red west before you leave.
Better to sit on some slow mountainpeak
hiked by the eightfold path and contemplate,
while curled horned cloudwhite goats improbably leap,
how burning suns. and whirling worlds will stop-
I say this in my dream but hardly speak.
before a sky of planes comes shrieking down,
from which bright progress there is no turning back.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 31.

Girl

Girl in a world that now begins to spin,
twirling on toes, in tights, your first ballet,
girl in a whirl of equilibrium,
revolving stormy planet blue with moon
that, copernican, turns around the sun;
sauntering daughter who can also run
meadows of morning or by the evening sea
leave in fading sand your shadow feet,
who fall and try again in a small room
lessons of limitation, danilova discipline
of rigid digits, an alphabet that tends,
curved like a clock or turning world, toward Z,
moving through Junes of sun to winter moons
and then curves back to April A again,
girl in a world that is not flat but bends-
the dancer, not the dance, begins and ends.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 32.

Dog Alive

“A living dog is better than a dead lion.”—ECCLESIASTES

The gladdest spaniel who prancing brings the ball.
and wags a tail stump as if it were a tail
doesn't know his black long ears are beautiful,
his eyes are elegies that mourn the fall of princes.
To please, he retrieves the small ball as it bounces
from step or fence, and then delightedly dances-
enchanted worshiper or commanded slave?-
for “Good dog” or a touch. The beast appears to love
this condescending deity above.
In woods of drowse he'll chase on twitching paws
ancestral enemies, and sniff the pleasure trees,
not entirely tame, as no one is.
Smallfanged cousin of the angry wolf-
he snarled at a cat hissing puffed and stiff
and bit a rival vying for a bitch-
coward now, at his hero's word lies down
and doesn't touch the bright desired bone.
Drooling like Tantalus at this Pavlov lesson,
he hates, perhaps, the master he adores,
but after such flattery-a roof and food and fires,
while nine lions topple for every lion that roars.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 33.

The Raying Fog

The raying fog we walked through wasn't thought,
gathered water and not diamonds dropped
from palms and lemons, the joyful boy in boots
awkwardly whichwayed as a small boy hops,
the haunted wife, the daughter with a scarf,
raying, receding, and my darker self
seemed like figures in a fog of life,
dim human symbols but were only us.
The naked greek arrangements on a vase,
black on red, toward which dead artists bent,
may move us with a curved significance
though only meant to please and decorate.
An exercise in air was our intent-
we strolled through light and moisture, silhouettes;
appearances where whether jewels dripped
metaphored the weather of our lives.
Beneath a lace of palm and pepper leaves,
more than one family walked that spectral fog-
numberless wet husbands with their wives,
lively sons and daughters and the dog
went through mist as we did and came back
to rooms of objects similarly stopped
in surer shapes than that pearl grey and black
of lost identity, as in the fog of sleep.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 34.

Three

My son is three today, in walnut shade
ten children blow harmonicas, balloons
roll like airy fruit from a tree of air,
September's pastel petals falling down
drift on the lawn and gleaming jetplanes scream.
Time that turned him three has turned the leaves,
has turned me thirty-four who yesterday
toddled with toys among such boys as these
and girls in bows, the mothers of such boys
playing London Bridge while butterflies
escape their hands to taste brief dahlia joys.
The caterpillar eating on the rose
will strangely change but not as strange as he,
seeing his son or daughter turning three
while what inventions split his skies with noise.
Delightful child, stay forever three,
forever bend to blow these leaning flames,
beguile with smiles, and when you skin your knees,
cry the soon dry tears of honesty
in a safe world of answerable whys.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 35.

Girl with a Hoop

A twirling circle perfect for her verve,
she lets it slowly undulate at first
around her moving wrists like a huge bracelet,
her hands prayer-pointed, though the hoop slips
more circus than religious, a luminous snake
whirling along her arms down to her neck;
the big ring swinging as she sings to Euclid,
her slightest movement keeps it coming back—
and she is solar to its fast ellipse—
she lightens weighty rounds like Stonehenge
to turning slim geometries of joy—
we see how magic circles can impinge
their airy, almost nothings on a waist—
her slender impetus becomes a hinge
to keep a looping jugglery in play—
she hulas it back upward with a lunge,
her dipping hips suggestive of burlesque,
and languid, lets it float about her knees
a little while before she lets it drop—
girl with a hoop, sublime, ridiculous.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 36.

Summer Elegy

Leaved evening, and through the arching dark
 speeding fruit trucks roar to higher gear
 hauling the heavy harvest of the year.
 Summer, purple with plums and apple thick
 fallen and picked, ladder and basket
 back in the black, the shard of beetle dark
 where worms spin silken wombs around a spark.
 There wasp-deserted mud nests hang in clumps
 at A's of rafters, there small spiders wait
 to split their sacs and wobble wet as lambs,
 falling on feasts of weevils mothers dragged
 to horror's nursery before they died
 grey with weaving, shriveled thin as hags,
 that pillowed, satin hatchery their pride.
 Now Ovid's fabled nature always changing
 changes again, as if from the waning lawn
 some-daughter like Proserpina were gone
 to light up hellish winter with her hair,
 who only sleeps and changes in her sleep,
 but she will wake, a woman, from that deep,
 Pluto's bloody bride, my daughter this haH-year.
 And I have seen her under the longlived pear
 playing at maturity and death
 when the rainrinsed air was bee and blossom breath,
 when twigs oozed beady sap, and spigot water,
 spectrum after spectrum, splashed on sprigs,
 have seen my son becoming what I am
 while melons swelled and sweetened, sun by sun.
 Cornucopia plenteous, familiar multiform
 grape and apple shape, cherry, and pear
 rose speckled yellow, plums' oblongs of color,
 and where it cracked with ripeness, watermelon
 showing a red interior flecked with black;
 sucked, when they dropped, by bumblebees and wasps,
 the splattered orbs of golden apricots;
 vines like lives that tendriled as they crept,
 circled a wire, climbed a convenient fence,
 glittered abundant berries then died back

to ghosts of lives, limp pricklered impotence-
Pickers came and plucked like instruments
the lutes of harvest, music of ancient loss
in an ending wind where webs and ladders tossed.
And though I rage and shudder, rage and curse,
no truck reverses, or in tricks of trees
peaches and plums unpick from opening gloves,
no bird flies backward to unpeck the pits.
Summer is over, summer gone from the groves-
from bud to fruit and hauled through cooling nights,
and then there comes the lessening of leaves.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 37.

Brother

Tandemed by him down Memory Lane, the gun
slung across his broad back, his blond
head bobbing, his hard calves pumping us beyond
the city limits to the country sun,
I was his brother, bothersome and young,
behind him on the bike's rack, holding on,
hearing the fence posts whiz and asking all
eager tediums a small brother can.
From manzanita in the river bed,
feathers white edged, eyed like frightened jewels,
topknots quavering, quail flew
and some dropped back into the bushes, dead-
brother, hero, blond god, why do I see
murdered birds still bleeding in your eyes?

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 39.

Pyramid

The desert cries with gulls, the dry is wet-
in violence like this, disciples might
toss and toss until toward their boat
a raying savior walked through wests of light.
Then radiance of aftermath might lap
shores like these, pelicans resurrect
and, where swans slide too, farfetchedly flap
beaks; wings, webs, applauding their own eclat.
Beside weird shapes of tufa where they slept,
snakes might unwind and faintly castanet,
cui-uis leap through lavenders of quiet,
the purple pyramid tuffl to burning red-
Marvelous loaves, and water into wine,
infinities of Sn where none had swum-
miracles as likely as this shine
and shadow-shattered coming of the night
to such a lake, a place where nature seems
-raying with changing ranges, windrow-lined-
symbolic splendor; suspending disbelief,
we walk the Christ-calmed mirrors of that deep.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 40.

Sea Cliff: End of Summer

Against the beach an end-of-idyl tide
flashes rims of seafoam where we sun;
our busy boy drags different driftwoods back,
swirlshapes worn to artwork, and he drips
huge doomed castles from small sandy hands.
The cliff shows layered evidence of time,
green at the top with cypresses and pines
where miniature picnickers look down
at tiny semi-nudes beside the blue,
calm at our arrival but chopped now
as if, since then, an equinox were passed.
And now, along the foot-indented sand,
instead of only evening's deepening,
our cooler shadows lengthen into autumn.
We walk along an aging edge of things,
thinking of time while the oblivious boy
drapes slick leaves around his neck and sings.
The waves wash bubbling wreckage to his feet,
coils of kelp in which some lettuce-bright
weed is tangled, lank grass darker green-
he hears a cheerful music in the din,
an innocent in implicating light,
and fears no evil, the deceiving sheen
shimmers its shifting sameness and has boats
with far men turning nets of flashing fins.
But we have felt a lateness in our bones-
summer's sailors tossed in winter winds
and laved by cold finales of the sea
Homer-sung and harped by Debussy.
We race through rising wet and let him win.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 41.

Winter Intervals

After such orchards, branches in a fog,
the next trees misty ghosts of trees before,
after that blur we're in with distance gone
when in the muddy road runs the sudden dog,
there come those winter intervals of sun-
a sapphfre drip from twigs, and telescoped,
purple hills so close the tiny pines
I, waft hints of scent like summer to our minds,
the houses have the colors we had hoped,
the dead dog in the road is brilliant red.
And when, accompanied by a boy who cries,
small fist to eye, the man in blue arrives,
his shouldered shovel has a blade that shines,
we see his kindness as he grips big hands
to scoop up what was friendly but won't wag.
Diminished in an orchard, shadow twigged,
their figures go so clear we hear their feet
walk on wetness, smell the petal-sweet
air that's mustard and oxalis sprigged;
hear one digging, one sobbing, like a fugue.
And then again, the cloudy curtains close
on blossoms and on burials; and birds
wait in their winter skins for further worlds
of blue midsummer clarities like those,
as we are waiting, in our inner cold.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 42.

Letter to ———

Ma chere, to share a ghostly causerie
we meet in a snow of pages tracked with words
among the staying small grey winter birds
in winter-scented air under a bare tree
one leaf is falling from, and far deer
appear against blue sky then disappear.
We meet in images white times of year
when quills lie quiet in a cave of snow-
the perilous porcupine who summer slow
bristled a blazing road, and the red bear
who pawed for honey slumber now like fear
and we can walk this crystal out of danger-
ice-sheathed needles, sierra paragraphs-
high in abstract peaks breathe the rare air
of promises and poetry, the clear
unquestioned landscape of our lives as if
genius brushed us small and japanese
balanced here among such symmetries.
We talk our tinkling symbols otherwise,
inconsequential, in conversation's heat,
more like enemies than friends we meet
and speak our different languages of lies,
yet in these letters, like lovers through an ice,
say more with silence than with rhetoric.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 43.

Antique Snow

Catastrophes from now, when we are history,
when pale pagodas bong bluntly on a cup
some muffled hint in a scene oblique with snow-
the faint far figures from a dynasty,
when we are painted in that antique snow
insect miniature under the iced bamboo
and lips and noses of the future loom
enormous, warm, and obvious as now;
the armpit drips, flyspecks soil the sill,
the hot room yammers with a singsong sound,
they will be quoting proverbs proving how
our squares were squares, our circles always round
and how remotely to an inner music
we moved confucian and continually kowtowed.
I was a yessing fen you tottered to
inside a paper house with banging gongs-
a ruse of ritual they will take for truth,
that there were artwork eras in the past-
Tang or Sung-and there may have been
a teacup time or two that didn't last.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 44.

Research of the Wrist

Research of the wrist reveals a humanist,
how the held ball was arced into that country;
a vein ticked in the udder that my father milked-
tame warm liquid scooped when berries burst.
Studying this hand that since has stroked,
silks electric, her neck to music,
jangled with keys for rooms where clocks intoned,
I hear again those broods across a pond,
walk through the droppings of such cocks and hens
whose combs scream scarlet in a child's wrist,
and find white ovals warm on sunflower seed.
The clucking bushes cluck to my later mind,
the peaches curve their fuzz because he willed,
my father God who caused the barnyard sun.
I snuggle in a hay and toss the ball
while some quick spider knits another world.
Reading this text of veins beneath the skin-
the orchard reeks with wings, and amorous buzzards
fly to their loves with flesh in flashing beaks-
entranced by my book of blood I think the morning,
pages of light, pages of red and green
began when I did though it did begin
the year the round fruit flt the desirous hand
hooked by tendons to a tenderness of mind.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 45.

Elegy for O. S. W.

His ranch of riches had a scent of worms;
he went among the orange-heavy trees
and picked a seeded sweetness for my ease
while windmill against nimbus, warning storms,
wheeled like his eyes' ice-blue irises.
I followed, son of his, from grove to barn
Leghorn lit, hay smelling, udder warm,
his answers soft as kittens to my whys.
He magicked corn and melons from a frost;
where nothing was, in baskets, redness bulged;
because of him, the minerals divulged
teeming secrets in a seeming waste.
So seasons hummed or whitened, bloom or blight,
loyal as light, he lived what he believed;
down rows of roundness where the rock doves grieved
he walked in faiths of air through rain and bright.
Gone from my agains, he will reflect
in ditches on the ranches of my grief;
by busy blossom and by bird-twitched leaf,
his gentle kindness, christlike, resurrect,
and he will go through orchards of my mind,
an abstract presence in an actual grove,
bringing, kind as Christ and brave with love,
small lambs homeward under psalm-blue skies.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 46.

Preferring Nakedness

Preferring nakedness but in my belted blood,
pocketed and shod, my breath against a knot,
I went downtown, a nudist underneath
to buy the attire required for my death.
I said my size to an inquiring clerk
who whistled “Forty?” and hips tapered to irk
-he admired in three mirrors my six shoulders-
ballooning with trousers, the minds of clothiers.
Color? It didn’t matter-something funereal,
tomb-interior dark and apropos a burial.
He proffered fabrics, ominous and strict,
striking their twill like clocks. I heard them tick
buttons at my waist and at my wrist,
and when he tightened looseness with a twist
I felt the pins of fashion going in
big as spikes-then bled in that iron maiden.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 49.

The Ego I

As if he wore among such ugliness
a single horn of beauty on his head,
long maned, long tailed, the ego I
pierced by the worst, still will prance his pride,
surprising women with an ivory nudge
—discovered gored on divans in the night—
and pause at every glass and glance his love,
trotting toward extinction, thought by thought
or so he thinks. As final dodos drop
and mastodons turn up their drastic hooves,
innumerable grazing, pastured in the mind,
this ubiquitous unicorn survives.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 50.

In Myths of Music

“In sleep a king, but waking, no such matter.”
—Shakespeare

In myths of music, from a beast by love
changed to the handsome prince, unhamleted,
he rode through misty meanings on that steed—
at his approach enchanted gates unlocked,
castles of sound admitted to their spell
the man who had this valid talisman;
outwitted witches pricked their thumbs and fell,
the princess, kissed, revived while violins
and flutes played suites of trees and nightingales.
He dared worse witches with his magic pearl
through forests of woodwinds in further fairytales,
and climbed the haunted hair of Rapunzel.
Blinded by evil briefly, found the girl
whose pure tears cured him, and the key was his,
the marvelous horse, the goose, the golden bird
because he shared his beer or spared the fox.
Though viols and cellos moaned a counterpoint
the ridiculous conditions were fulfilled.
He ended befriended, lively wived and crowned
and all the warty ogres ended killed
or toads that croaked like oboes where he walked
in the last movement, furiously jeweled,
before finales sounded and he woke
on the first morning of the cruel world.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 51.

Eyes

The street states JEWELRY, ICE, and tries,
beguiling us with eyes, to say that there are souls—
these moving irises, veinlaced lidded whites
under the lying signs, pierce like poetry
letting in the light. We look and some are gone,
attached to jowls and moles, blinking farther down.

Then blue and green in girls, lyric, mid-cement,
more mysteries for praise, shocking as apple trees
where glass Saharas blaze. Eyes that smile askance,
eyes both bold and shy, eyes as high as thighs
or not yet up to knees, giving us God's glance—
ellipses lashed, with tearducts—in a trance

pausing at black prose for newest news of blood—
eyes, on thinking twice, like apes' or octopi's
(a likely lineage) neither good nor bad.

Merchants, cats and flies gaze out through the heat
at the street of ICE and EATS—with jewel-beautiful eyes—
immortal emerald, or depthlessness that dies?

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 52.

Ears

Like horns on rams, ears because they're there,
shellcurved delicate, when noise or music loops
around those spiral flaps and flies through tubes
no one questions or considers them queer.
Splendid appendages, flaring among hair,
when nocturnes flutter in like whispered moths,
are we the listeners or the mouthed flutes?
Apart from purpose, they encumber smoothnesses
like nature's joke giraffes and laughable asses-
our heads, except for noses, eggshaped otherwise,
are slit for eyes and mouths to see and name
what, unless ears whorled, would be a tree
that could not whiz, as in philosophy.
The third eye withered, the tail fell away,
most vestiges receded, but the brain,
connecting sense with senses, still retained
a heard range between a snowflake's boom
and the loud silence of exploding atoms.
Laudable labyrinths, whose drums in bony chambers
only reflect, echo the outer inner-
we change to noise or music what we hear.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 53.

This Arm

bulges to lift and the whole body changes,
statue tense from toe to shoulderblade,
tendons strain in face, neck, thigh that tightens,
a plumb bob balance depending from the brain-
consider how this arm concludes with fingers,
most apropos of ends to hold an apple;
claws and paws lack fists of whitening effort,
monkeys' wrists are furrier, less supple.
Arms of athletes swell up as they balance,
visible with veins that, formerly flat,
hinted under hair a branching blueness-
they stand on hands or landing on their feet
hoist swan easy the difficult danseuse up.
And swimming arms drip different out of water,
cutting the splash with finnier hands that slip,
buttocks and bubbling ankles following later
in a wet advancement from the burning beach.
Yet for these uses this arm must have a shoulder,
a back of muscles rippling to a spine;
Orpheus, hacked, can strum when not together,
armless contortionists embroider with their toes,
but most of us need wholeness, or we move
clumsily encumbered by our clothes,
our left arm ignorant of what our right arm knows.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 54.

The Tape Recorder

Entranced Narcissi, we lean and listen to
glistening syllables turning on a spool;
the tape played back, reflecting like a pool,
wheels inaudibility to view.
Hissing highpitched or booming, loud and slow,
captured in the water of our words,
speaking spooks a twisted knob returns,
our faces vowels, this disembodied show
remembers timbre but forgets the rest-
eyes, smiles, gestures; instead, a tinny laugh
mentions the intention of our grief
as if our prisoner voices had confessed
self-love, self-hate, now they reel released
in second chance on the miraculous machine.
And like the amorous boy, we call again
expecting, in this clamor; someone else.
No one but Echo answers from the cave;
ourselves intone our own brief touchlessness
that only loving others can caress
although we wheedle and we rage to have.
The tape spins on, to final consonants,
and distant diphthongs twang today's Ai Ai-
awkward talkers, we erase and try
vibrant possibles in a zone of silence.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 55.

Wild Horses

Witness, I saw four horses maned with radiance
walking through purple lupine dripping dew
in pines half brilliance, half in shadow-blue,
wild, shining horses, yet obedient
as buds to something April that I knew.
Hoof after lifting hoof, a beast ballet,
they conjured music in the quiet wood,
their rope-pale tails swaying when they stood,
bright necks bent, to drink a wrinkling pool.
Then clip-clopped on. The mirror of the morning,
slimly minnowed, mended back to blue
and jays unpaused to swoop their usual hue.
With farther flanks, that vision vanishing,
the lambent animals ambled out of view-
and something centaur passed from happening,
a sheen in which I felt apocalypse
had moved through raying April where I knew
half man, half beast, believable, if spring is.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 56.

The Dream Dissected

The dream dissected, the corpse of afterward
 cut up on a table in that glamorous gleam
 of lights, tools, doctors' eyes, is not the dream,
 but something abstract, cadaverous, absurd,
 a body not what it was, the blood gone
 from eeriness experienced; Orpheus looking back;
 a brightness, as of butterflies on black
 pinned down and labeled when that dim again
 is consciously collected and can't act-
 But moves in sleep, the Chaplin of the scene,
 the timeless mime, the dream's comedian
 stumbles into fantasy from fact,
 miraculously actual, skates on nothing's edge,
 falls forty stories onto feather pillows;
 pathetic Quixote, when everyone goes
 toward frantic opposites, he doesn't go
 but gazes unconcerned on loveliness-
 the blind girl feeding doves in softest snow.
 His dance through dreams, enraptured fabulist,
 'so serious we laugh, and so ridiculous
 he teases tears of joy from tragic masks,
 escapes, like every art, analysis.
 The rooftops steam with morning, thought-police
 leap dissolving ledges after him,
 this small, elusive figure in a dream
 who, when pursued, is always somewhere else—
 past borders of the comic, captureless.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 57.

The Word

burst overripe, an apricot to ears
summer accustomed; wasps of meaning hung
humming above it as in Saxon suns,
its simple sound suggestive of its sense,
but its effect repeated started fears.
He heard that only syllable when said
oftenest by joyless boys annoyed,
and then began a difference in the word—
confused amusement and, erect, absurd,
the graphic groom's explosion in the bride.
Every synonym lacked that luscious thrust
of lunging vowel and plunging consonants—
satyrs in a sublimated dance,
and hidden by a strategy of hands,
exciteless nymphs implied, derived from lust,
thoughtful therapy, not thoughtless love.
Some four-lettered ladies would have blushed
really to feel their euphemisms pushed.
Lexicons, ridiculously hushed,
kept hairy-handed silence in a glove,
though he had read of nakedness on walls
and kisses clarified what dreams inferred.
A nervous novice throbbing as he lurched,
relaxed by the actual act, he at last learned
words for wordless nature were all false.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 58.

Snake

Goya-grotesque, she changes to a snake
in deeds as sinuous as her cunning is,
coiling to wait, or stumbled on in grass,
hisses her fanged interior and flits,
thin as a black thread, her tongue exuding venom.

You may have seen a strange stick in a brake
that oozed its spots, then seen its slitted eyes—
she hides like that, watching with yellow beads
to sicken victims at a break of leaf,
inclusive nature her huge camouflage.

She slides as easily as oil on glass,
elusive lamia less observed than sensed,
and darkly writhes, the snake of ignorance
twining truth's tree, unlike that shimmering pimp
of abstract apples who inspired Adam.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 59.

Supermarket

I wander aircooled aisles, to Villa-Lobos,
in the marvelous market of our age;
lights are colored and a fountain sprays—
beans, lettuces and carrots iridesce,
the cauliflowers gleam like rows of brains.

Remote, improved, removed from brilliancies,
from farms, from moon and sun and summer rains,
harvest has been captured in these cans—
island spice, Hawaiian essences;
simple bread revised by vitamins.

I walk fluorescent aisles as if entranced,
expecting, from poetic texts on packages,
contents of ambrosial potencies,
and eerie cereal, as in a fairytale
to be the very porridge that enchants.

The frozen dinners of dishonesty
will thin my inner man with cakemix ease,
detergents virgin me, and soaps purify,
though toiletpaper, tinted like romance,
suggests inevitable outcomes nevertheless.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 60.

When Men

When men work summers shirtless in the sun,
their honest muscles moving seem to swim
lake-pure morning, though they dig in grime,
the lines are Greek that narrow to their jeans—
a Parthenon is what the street becomes.
However ugly, cupolas beyond,
flaked paint, turd-colored fence, fake stone,
a grace invades the Coca-Cola signs;
that luminous nudity makes all viewers nude—
they watch the pickax arc with quicker blood.
And, at the jackhammer, like a handsome dancer
holding his jarred stance in a dust that dims,
from his waist up, one man gleams and glints
as if, since Phidias, there had been no time
despite this steel, cacophonous invention.
The same male frame and pectoral perfection
—fat man's despair and envy of the thin—
persist against the dullness with a shine,
and women warmly watching in a din
feel antique meanings touching them like hands.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 61.

TV

Cyclopean eye, seen but unseeing,
through whose blue bubble pictures pass,-
dream shadows, a patina of people
framed minutely luminous
in the large dark-electronic genie,
at a button's touch you hum us
far from our anchored scenery
on a carpet of hypnosis.
Travelers, cheered by choices-
your selection of reflections
and your inviting voices-. we squint our clear corrections,
contorter of proportion,
lost in your snowing cowtowns
on horses of distortion,
bored by your grey clowns.
Seeming tamed, child-eating monster,
you squat square, electric chained,
but turned on, breathe fire,
a dragon chewing children until maimed,
charmed to your harm from the. spring air,
they sit unmoving in a cave of winter
clawed by your bright lies and dripping
real blood from minds your paws are gripping.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 62.

Of Various Errors

Of various errors, my gamut agony
omitted from the series only one,
as in a. scale of cacophony
I played all Bartók negatives of tone,
banged bow on string, clanged a xylophone,
castaneted, and called the clatter art;
prizing what I should despise, my reasons wrong,
I rang with love like a discordant harp.
Percussions thumped in that distressing symphony,
piano and drum pumped like pulse and heart,
but one note missed among the dinning tympani
too low except for experts to detect,
and strict on staves, a music sharp and flat
was cleffed with comprehension, lacking that.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 63.

Swimmer

Swimmer, she rides the shattering curves of water,
a nymph of summer from the neptune air;
where sails lean billowed pillows into silver
and lit gulls dip, she glides with foaming shoulder
this green and ceaseless sequence of the sea;
luminous human, she is mostly moisture,
a moving woman mirrored in my eye,
but more than mirrored, by her dripping gesture
her shoreward swim is toward eternity.
This vaulting salt that makes a grit of granite
is grinding like a gift to terrible time
the jewel of her life; like chips of light
broken prisms spray from her feet and arms-
sylph of surf, tide rider being rainbowed
by fragile froth, with skilled agility
she strokes the green commotion of the cold,
arriver on the breaking mists of mystery,
dazzler in foam, dreamed oceans afterward.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 64.

Here

Here, where we pick up wind in shells,
are lapping laces, waterswells,
moss, foam, hermits' houses
in which they masquerade as snails.
Tentacled anemones
pretending to be flowers in pools,
touched, clutch inward into balls
digesting enemies.
Gulls are gone to gleaming meals-
underneath these indigos
jellyfish with stinging veils
glitter among grotesqueries
of weeds and things that look like weeds;
something quick eats something else,
something fortified under coral,
hungering, has eyes.
Here are cormorants' sticklike tracks
and shapes of rancor on the rocks,
a reek, as much of death as salt,
ghost wood and wood that rots;
here, through bone and claw, we stroll
where horror crawls in pearl
and flaming rainbows beautify
a cold and wordless world.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 65.

A Rat of Habit

He blunders through frustration's passageways,
dejected by the expected rearranged,
his fur a fear from which eyes redly gaze,
a rat of habit in a maze of change.
The nightmare floors, the doors of horror lead,
seemingly scentward, only to where he was,
and no exposure of his twitching teeth,
no tail or whisker tic evokes the cheese.
Standing on two pink feet and sleek to sniff,
or done with cunning, running in a rage,
the useless mirror of his yesterdays
splintering inward, it is as if
a god of anger whimmed those walled-in ways,
some human hunger maddened in that maze.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 66.

The Cock of Confidence

Bedraggled swaggerer, limp at last in mud
and leaking scarlet from a blinded beak,
glossy tosser slumped to this small clump
of settled feathers, wet and death weak,
quite killed who crowed from fence or stump, the sun,
and roused a harem from the clucking barn,
still blue with morning, for your early fun-
The world was egg warm and all yours, Don Juan,
when flattered hens would flutter at your strut
and mastered by the masculine, lie down
to thrash beneath your passion one by one,
but now around the body of desire,
pitiless idiots, they wobble, pecking out
your eyes' cold fire, my failure chanticler.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 67.

Spontaneous Bottle

Spontaneous bottle, out of which, Aladdins,
the genie grants us handsomeness and wit,
enchancing everyday to a tranced Atlantis
rising from forgetting as we sip-
or do we dive down, slipping as through sleep,
swimmers bubbling in our backward hair,
and shimmer toward some Bagdad of the deep,
the fat one slim, the weak one muscular,
corrected to perfection by much wet.
As lenses, eyes, these glassfuls focus us
in stunning countries more in than outer lit;
we waltz through moonscapes weighing less and less
and veer in verge dance near a vast abyss.
Here come crowned satyrs, fluting, nymphs with flutes
whose tilted breasts, pink tipped, the gods have kissed
and Bacchus' leopards changing silent spots
pad to the timbrels of our joyousness.
Then that procession passes into myth,
the slender temples topple; dreading death
we retch alone in beds of over with.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 68.

Back View of a Nude

"Everything #,ows: you cannot step twice into the same stream,
for it changes every instant."-HERACLITUS
It haunts me still, by twoness, youthful picture,
back view of a nude, myself, in a cold pool
and going deeper in, deeper than I dare now,
at the top of Illilouette, a. Yosemite fall,
buttock deep, and because it was black and white
I ripple in that film, white moving statue,
while the water around me ripples circles of. light.
Not that I was ever so young, so smooth and grecian,
or water darted. such stars from its widening rims,
but the lying camera implies that I might have been
almost as tapered once in one of my skins,
have dared undress on those rocks and go right in,
whether or not, thought cautious, now I would,
or spin through such sprockets to be projected nude.
Since less inhibited then, gone from those mountains,
I've sat through my blood's thinning movie in suitable suits,
dying slightly at desks, bending to fountains,
remembered the silvery image of that nude youth,
peaks, domes and pinnacles rising around him,
and often, hopelessly changing, would like to have been
up to his graceful waist in that hastening bath,
half in the sun and half in glacial water,
would like to have felt what, flickering, he can't feel—
the shock of ice, hot sun on face, back, shoulder,
doubly alive, knowing what I know now,
but shining and rinsed as he is in that reel,
at the same time warm with burning as cool with chill,
farther than Heraclitus, in a returning flow.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 69.

Spastic in Glass

!; She entered wending in a kind of dance
I with hips that lurched and one hand extending! stiff with fingertips, to the
agile glance
of athletes and their kinesthetic friends,
then dipped and bent, macabre, minuetting,
almost falling, wheeling up to balance,
a spastic girl where everything was glass.
Where all was straight she came in crookedly reeling,
and then we saw what glass was, not revealing
but
by its very clarity concealing-
faces that mumbo jumboed through their masks,
beasts in clothes, a wonderland of malice
when truth was all she simply came to ask-
we twisted trustless to her honest Alice
and tallest athletes crippled as she passed
inwardly erect but outwardly collapsed,
shattering all our certainties, like glass.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 70.

Reminiscent Beast

Reminiscent beast, padding fast and sleek,
golden with grace and power, pacing pouncer-
you leap with visible ribs on the slow and weak,
in pastorals of antelope, poising, you are there,
a tailed noiselessness among the leaves,
a sense, in every green, of orange danger.
Lips wrinkled, hissing, whiskers lifting,
your terrible teeth revealed, your topaz eyes,
with slits as black as death, reflecting life,
your round ears back in anger and your paws
clawing, you, the mirror of the enemy,
only rip yourself in any striped strife,
electric tiger. But how can we believe
the sinister symbol of your burning fur
when telephotos show you kitten-clear
rolling, as in catnip, feet in air,
exposing, as you roll, your snow-pure belly,
both frolicsome and fierce with grace and grandeur.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 71.

A Circumstance of Stone

A circumstance of stone, the mind cathedraling
i aspires with spires above a lace façade
/ or looks like lace, but is buttressed tons
 with changeless angels' faces smiling down.
 Though you might think at sunset mauve robes blow,
 those kinks are only carved-in flutterings.
 Though in this violet evening the petlt point
 at slender edges glows like burning thread,
 it's stitched with schist and rocky as a moon-
 this willed fragility is a snow of stone.
 The calculated window catches light,
 a round euclidian jewel, as it was set to do,
 and rays a pool of moth blue and brazil
 on the still inside where aisles are logic cool.
 There in Italian marble, chiseled Christ
 exudes the wounds of art, there Mary cries
 tears as hard as crystal which can't fall
 hot on his locked lids that have no eyes-
 the mind is artifice, an edifice
 displacing spacious chaos with stone lies.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 72.

This Clock

An o forever figured with these twelve
stiff disciples of some rigid christ
whose metal bones of boredom never move,
and circles into latenesses the soon
dying minutes of the living past,
it turns us back to a medievalness,
this clock that has a judas numeral
betraying into midnight every noon.
Time is entombed here, one who calmed the lake
from storm to startlfug quietness here lies
locked in the round dark, powerless and pale,
a martyr dead to our impatiences-
and heavy hours rolling back like stone
reveal the angel of our emptiness.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 73.

Christmas Poem

The sky curves Mary's color, blue as faith,
the icy morning drips from raying roofs
and twigs of darkness tip with waterdrops.
A Christ warmth, manger-luminous, intrudes
its crèche of kindness on our night-cold thoughts
and there they are, the shepherds with their crooks,
the birth-splotched baby like a crying bandage,
accompanied by Handel and by Bach.
Almost, a gentle Joseph tenderly bends
like love above the mother and the son,
out of blue purities, white doves descend,
the robes of wise men drag through hay and mud.
And there is nearly, in the meaningful scene,
a mingling scent of winter and of myrrh,
even though shepherds, as in Bruegel's picture,
whisper behind their hands something obscene.
But doubtful knowledge lights time-misted Christmas—
we see how limp with labor Mary is,
and Joseph, shocked by birth and sleeplessness,
leans on the bloody straw, his head in his hands.
The air is thick, but not with frankincense,
the buzzing stable reeks of excrement,
no one adoring, or come to sympathize
where small and human, hate-doomed Jesus lies.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 74.

Butterflies and Elephants

Like nerves with wings
two butterflies midchase
stopped above a bush to copulate-
lace treading lace in delicate delight,
whose flapping seemed erratic before that
as, in white flight,
they limberly dipped
across a grass and paused their filaments
to guzzle nectar from the clover cups.
Then there in air
the quicker flickering flake
gaining his gauzy lady took her to bed.
Erotic acrobat, this insect slipped,
almost invisible, a thrill of thread,
his penis in a daintiness that gripped.
Miniature rapture,
splitsecond ravishment,
it was for that the ugly larvae hatched
and worms of fur tugged their segments up,
encased, until camouflages split, in grey,
then lifting luminous
that scaled array
fluttered our thoughts with life's fragilities-
whatever nature meant by butterflies.
Improbable amorist, he mounts enormity,
a massive mate to sate her largest lust,
two awkward bulgers at conformity
hugely fooled by passion, hooving dust.
They squeal, flashing tusks; from tail to trunk
feel, as he thrusts into her throbbing tons,
a coming oneness in that double bounce-
thoughtless of gawky daughters and fat sons.
And she will sway immense through jungle months,
lifting her trunk to leafage as she bloats,
forgetting which male pumped that weighty once
the momentary pleasure that makes elephants.

Witches

Those ugly lady sadists, Beauty's sisters,
Psyche's and Cinderella's, glass slipperless,
whose feet were hacked, or off a precipice
stubbed and tumbled, in real life grow old-
gloating, toad graceless, as if on lilypads,
buzzing nerves like flies that light on lace
or speck black feces on a sleeping face-
that twisted sisterhood, deserving nemesis,
thrives on bile while smiling ladies fade.
Good girls may win blond princes in a tale,
Snow White be saved by dwarfs, but actual witches
hex with craftier apples and make pale
even the bravest who, to no avail,
sickened by wickedness, in the bone castle
open distorted doors and find them spinning
at an unreal wheel, webs of endless hate.
Those lady thugs who cast a thorny spell
on Briar Rose and lock up Rapunzel,
however legends end, outlast them all-
the kiss is useless, and the laddered hair
tatters at the touch of Romeo.
They victimize like spiders that enthrall
and tie up butterflies, then in the air
sway lethal at the center of their ego.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 77.

Daphnis

Gasping for pastorals like a displaced Daphnis,
walking exhaust, lost in a waste of windows,
hunting the hazed cafes, the stores for happiness,
transporting drink or supernatural clothes
that will return him to the imaginary
gold coast with Chloe where he never was,
he's grinned by salesmen toward the guaranteed,
the tested best, but bowed back to the street
he finds his perfect purchase turned to dust.
And, almost gassed, through the cement dark
of leafed with neon night he wades a soot
past splattered statutes in a larkless park
roomward to nowhere, to a bed of dreams
where in the sea clean air he pipes to lambs.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 78.

Theseus

Led like Theseus by a thread of thought
through a latter-day macadam labyrinth,
trapped by traffic in a maze of noise,
he went to hunt the Minotaur, the beast
crouched behind the corridors of cars,
an evil reason somewhere in cement,
huddling where the thread would surely lead.
The streets were shining with their recent rinse,
the rowdy robins, plump as wax, were out.
One drying Monarch. flapped on a gassed bush.
He thought he glimpsed a hoof among TV's
that hummed behind the windows of the rush,
he seemed to hear it trampling with its tongue
boys among the drugs and magazines.
He saw it in the movie of his dream,
crunching women with its casual teeth,
but just behind the billboard where he looked
pollution stretched its sooty vacancies.
He took the fast way back along the thread
and fled with Ariadne, who believes,
deserted on Naxos, the Minotaur is dead.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 79.

Peacock

Slow-feathered fowl, a peacock dragged his tail
of abstract discs and stars through actual dust,
prinked-up parade, false with fabled quills,
a frilly ruse, he glistened as he tossed
blue breast and neck that tapered to his head
trembling a crest of the same dissembling hue,
a head so small, considering the rest,
you had to laugh, as when a tale is true
but decorated and proportionless
to the slight meat of the essential pun—
the peacock's too much tail went on and on
senselessly drifting like a universe.

And then unfolded; the meaning of the farce
lifted, and disc by disc, slid open
to show the trailing tail's erect élan,
a gifted angle, different with stars
as if stars quivered green and silver blue
on rattling quills to a scream of god
because dull peahens happened into view.
He didn't spread that spectacle from pride
but, ignorant bird, whose tail turned in our eyes,
unclosed repose, symmetric, iridesced
as some fly south and others stay on ice,
a riddle of vitality exploding into space.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 80.

Sitting for Leonardo

Sitting for Leonardo, La Gioconda smiled
at the thin-nosed painter and the puffing boy
(who blew odd music) neither man. nor child.
She thought the eggshape lovely Leda. laid
and Helen hatching; in a maculate mood,
doubted the dewy angel had announced,
descending dovelike to the Madonna, God.
Lovers were heavier. You felt their mouths,
their hands that held you like an ornate cup-
and this da Vinci painting women while
she knew the magistrates had had him up
for fines and reprimands-he never loved.
Hadn't she tried her wiles, casually brushed
her hot hand on his cold one corpses touched?
She smiled at Leonardo, not the mime
(tragically amusing as he was,
dancing, to the boy's flute, out of time),
at him and men, particularly Francesco,
old goat of a dotard, slobbering,
pretending, if he knew about it, not to-
how lively lovers made up for his doddering.
Well, she was his third. What had he expected?
There weren't any miracles, except nature-
virgins conceiving, dead men resurrected-
like a painter changing truth to make a picture.
Whose brush could catch the chaos of a smile,
the outcast angels and the banned Eden of it?
Leonardo's maybe. He had the devilish style.
St. Anne, for instance, grinning like a tigress
in a scene supposedly holy, knowing how
even Holy Ghosts must madly kiss
to cuckold Josephs, and the baby grow-
Christ or her own, curled in watery bliss-
Francesco preferring to believe it his
than sparked by a young man's plunging nakedness.
Now what was that surly servant bringing in?-
another image for her contemplation,
a statue of the sphinx, half cat, half woman,

whose riddle's answer of course is man,
ridiculous monkey on a stick and string,
a hairy imp that, slipping up and down,
revolves like a toy around the central thing.
Leonardo smiled-at her or at the boy?-
that bearded mask of sternness burned away,
and someone slim and porcelain at play-
almost girlish-with a coltish joy
darted in a garden, a ghost of ecstasy
through leaflight cavern-cool as undersea
in the Val d'Arno village known as Vinci.
Opaqueness opened to translucency,
the flowerpetal flesh, dropping one by one,
left on a stem the seeds of mystery-
something untellable and never known
seemed to have a purposed symmetry,
spectrums of passion like a prised sun
from purple gamuts paled to sisterly-
science and art, love hate, woman man,
the shading aspects of a singleness.
A long time ago the world began-
she felt the silent centuries web her face,
forever smiling, young and Florentine,
painted changeless against nothingness.
Was it benevolent, or a demon's plan?

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 81.

Siren Sung

I

Thin as April then and leafed to please,
slow budding platonist, desirer of realms
bluer and less shadowy than these,
I met a memoir girl by music streams
fluting their phantom water at our feet.
We waded in, like plumage, to our knees,
sat on a rock as if we sat on eggs
when I became a rising realist.
Crooked lightning through a cloud of blood
lit up the faded garden I believed.
A moccasin was hissing as it slid,
a cougar burned behind the crochet leaves—
and green excuses for my purity
dangled, snake-entangled, from a tree.

II

My coastal love when phosphorous bugs lit up
waves curving to break, my shoreline girl and I
counted those curves that, breaking, brimmed our cup,
waves in the dark, curves in a countless sea.
We kissed while crabs went bubbling underneath,
water like lime ate our slim peninsula,
sharks and swordfish between our breath and breath
leaped illumined through that mounting sea.
Through pools of starfish and anemones
we waded salt back to the higher dry
and unaccountably, to the gulls' high cry
she sobbed a salty lie, accusing me
as if my feet were tail, my torso human,
swum from the sea to taunt a tailless woman.

III

A kiss of fire—I burned upon her body
like a dazed martyr blazing to my bones,
hair flaring, heart oozing out, but oddly
she got up and left me in her flames,

straightened the sunflowers bursting from their frames,
though I kept sparkling like a firework;
she brought hot cocoa in and turned on Brahms,
my bright frustration lighting up the dark.
Summer and snow did not extinguish me,
words from wellwishers only fanned my heat
and I was clearly visible at night,
a man on fire from flickering head to feet.
Inquisitions later, embers late,
a wet acquaintance finally put me out.

IV

I met a doctor who diagnosed my dire
fever as desire, and prescribed her cure—
livelier work, less Elizabethan leisure
as if I spelled out in a tight attire,
collar and codpiece, some imagined mood
with a quill of quaintness, foxhounds at my feet,
an earringed dandy inventing neat conceits.
Instead I signed hot sonnets with my blood.
Diseased by love—her Latin was too late—
I sickened, beyond physicks, for her sake
and would have died except, as leeches suck,
her slow indifference drained me dry as hate,
and rose from her cold couch unhale but cured
not of desire though nearly healed of her.

V

Invading, a hoofed satyr, her chaste chamber,
a nude beast fluting terror in her prayer,
hairy and horned, her demon, her *bête noire*,
thinly innocent, she dreaded my desire,
a running nun chased by a cunning satyr
under the high, the spired architecture
where deums bonged beneath her steeped hair.
But she revealed my error in a letter—
pursued through woods of words, herself the nymph,
a hot robed monk, slim, with a timid tonsure,
who strayed to glades from nave and corridor;
through leafy paragraphs I had my glimpse

of monk and nun meeting behind the rocks
as nymph and satyr in a paradox.

VI

Then in the hot stoned forest of her eyes,
the hunter hunted by a lying goddess,
among the lions of her last Julys
I played to her aging Venus, my Adonis.
Quivering slimly like kissed innocence,
in lists of ecstasy, her final boy,
each time I left she paled with pretense
some tusk might pierce me passionless that day.
But I was armed, a sharp-as-arrow wit—
saved me daily from her wished-for boar,
and daggering every danger with my humor
I dragged back bloody trophies to her feet
until she wearied of sly poetry
where Venus wrinkled and Adonis didn't die.

VII

Harped and siren sung by her suggestion,
Odysseus, I was tonguetied to a mast,
sailing a sea of misty flabbergast,
the Grecian hero of her invitation.
Was I one she sang to from the rocks,
wishing my shipwreck on her shell-sharp shore?
Against that bondage my ribs, my nipples tore,
I gasped to answer as a madman gawks.
Lashed and listening, passionate and dazed,
the vessel staying straight in which I veered,
I heard her farflung music finally fade
and steered across the winedark afterward
regretting distance but convinced she sang
that sea-entangling tune for any man.

VIII

West, in the windy Indies of her mind,
of continents beyond, the first discoverer,
flamingos dropping, egrets trapped in that wind,
tossed in her hurricanes, I became her lover.

And there were desert days, nights by rivers,
nights on the icy ledges of her heights,
days I thirsted in her prairie summers,
lay by great lakes her luminous long nights.
A gradual charting like a map of Mars
each new lens changes, I revised her coasts,
keeping the liquid names though they had lost—
Florida or Iroquois-like names of stars
most of their bright significance when to her dark
I crossed that first Atlantic sharp with sharks.

Publication. First published in *Beasts in Clothes*. New York: Macmillan, 1961, pp. 85–92.

Pop. by 1940: 40,000

Stage IV | Inland California portraits, 1971

The complete recoverable text of the 1971 collection.

Pop. by 1940: 40,000

It wasn't as if there wasn't any culture-
in the S. Hurok series, Nelson Eddy sang,
and even Marian Anderson, which proved
we weren't white sheep hiding a bigot's fang,
and the Public Library carried a good selection-
everything from Beowulf to Lin Yutang.
Maybe a Louvre didn't reflect in our dryness,
but there were excellent prints that we could hang-
Bonheurs, Van Goghs, and Raphael madonnas,
some real originals in homes on Lemon Heights:
Sacre Coeurs with the paint still almost wet;
and some of us had been on tours and flights
to Rome, Shanghai, and even to Tibet-
it wasn't as if we'd never been around-
only that we knew there was no place quite like
our BEST IN THE WEST!
SEE BOWER'S MUSEUM!
WATCH US GROW!
99 and 44/100ths percent
pure American town.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 10.

Ben Harding's Flying Machine

As the thing with crisscrossed wirres between its wings
went up like a halfbaked bird and then crashed down,
the men yelled "Get a horse" and the ladies tittered
but Ben Harding got out and bowed in his goggles and cap
and clasped his hands above his head in a sign of winning
and wasn't embittered.

Greeted with jokes on the street,
he went right on thinking and tinkered around
and once, on a porchswing, my mother (with eyes averted)
told (and she might have if his nails hadn't oozed grease)
asked her to marry him, and blurted
when she laughed no, "All right, you'll see, you'll see!"
Ben went home whistling and patiently twisted his wrenches
until even the stupidest cows had to agree
as a sound like a giant lawnmower ratcheted over
and their milk curdled, and dogs, terrified, peed,
that someone besides birds could fly and angels hover
and shine in the sky and suddenly pick up speed.
And Ben became famous and rich and was good to his mother,
giving her houses and servants and cars and gown after gown
from Paris (and never married) my mother said (with a sigh)
almost as if she wished instead of doubting she'd believed
he'd get off the ground, and high above town,
like Zeus with Leda, her sons had been conceived.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p.
11.

I Touched the Hand That Shook the Hand of Lincoln

I touched the hand that shook
the hand of Lincoln-
blackveined
by then,
a liverspotted claw-
“wen t, what they called later,
A.W.O.L.”—Grandpa said,
riding his highback rocker
“to see old honest Abe-
the wind blew raw-
and he stood on the back
of a train, talking of union-
we all reached up
to greet him when he was through-
Yessir, a good man,
straight and tall-
he looked just like he looks
on stamps and pennies-
except he wore
a stovepipe hat and shawl-
but sad, boy, sad,
and tired of war.”
And Grandpa sat there
rocking back to Shiloh
and other gruesome
battles oozing gore-
and he was sad and tired,
almost a hundred
(in spite of one lung
missing since the war)
wondering, maybe as I do,
who touched the hand

that once shook hands
with Lincoln
(who surely wondered, too)
what it was for.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p.
12.

Mr. Small

When Mr. Small, in spite of medicinal whiskey,
had another attack and suddenly died,
I couldn't feel sad, but just as frisky,
whizzing my Yo-Yo, listened to Chandu-
talking to God that night, I tried and tried
to pray the way good neighbors supposedly do
that he'd be handed a harp and robe of white,
but I was only eight and he was cruel-
especially to boys who were always coming over
and laughing with his daughters on the porch,
or clicking pingpong, trampled down his clover,
and though he'd been a pillar of the church,
I hoped if heaven had a pearly gate
he'd ring and ring the bell and have to wait.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 13.

Eddie Weismann

He smiled among the EX-LAX,
swim caps, candy bars,
still sold dollar watches,
peppermint in jars-
and mixed a deft prescription-
“Hope this makes her well.
And how’s your father? Better?–”
stood there in the smell
of lipstick, cough drops, drugs,
freshly printed magazines,
arsenic for slugs,
forever friendly, helpful-
someone who in Rome
would have known which herb to use
on wounds of martyrdom-
and smiled and patted shoulders,
handed back the film,
praising when it turned out clear,
with sympathy when blurred-
and when he thinned and dwindled,
though slower at his work,
about the vulturous cancer
never moaned a word.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 14.

Dr. Earl Blood, the Painless Dentist

When Dr. Earl Blood died,
up and down our street
through low fog we heard a sound of sobbing-
he who had filled and pulled so many teeth
no longer there
to stop our red gums' throbbing.
His daughter and his wife
went walking with their grief
arm in arm along the foggy street
under the crying twigs and dripping leaves,
scarves tied on heads
and high heels on their feet
that hammered vaguely on the grey concrete
like tiny tools tap-tapping deadened teeth
around the block
and back along the street-
coats and scarves,
through mist, of two in shock.
Unfeeling of their grief, still we listened
and watched as the sun came out
and fog jewels glistened,
until they'd gone back in
to where he lay
painless in bed and quiet as after the din
of a turned off drill in an air of pure relief,
the jarring whirring over,
the numb face undercover
that had twice yearly breathed
close to ours
and far away as death.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 15.

Dolores Knight

The only thing she had, she gave quite freely-
at first in vacant houses and weed high lots,
and then on Lemon Heights when boys drove cars-
giggled at school, passed notes that were full of plots.
Her skinny lovers didn't really like her-
that sausage hair, those round, eye-doubling glasses,
but horny, they were eager enough to hike her
skirt up in the dark or after classes-
secretly smoking, laughed about their luck
and told the others-"Hey, if you're hard up,
ask Dolores-boy does she like to fuck-"
licked sweetness from her overrunning cup,
and felt grown up, guffawing in lower octaves.
Dolores, however, wasn't entirely stupid,
and when she finally swelled, chose from her loves
the one who came closest to being wounded by Cupid-
Frank Beach, kinder than some, and more easily frightened;
they both dropped out, and after they were married,
the others felt a heavy burden lightened-
Adams no longer of the guilt she carried.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 16.

Mr. Byron Jarvis

dapper, avant garde,
reading e. e. cummings'
humanistic word-
delivering the news of truth,
calling war a crime
when hero patriots could look,
in the light of peace, absurd.
Then papers boomed on porches
headlines like a storm-

NAZIS, BLACKSHIRTS, LIDICE-

and in that dark, no ray-
Mr. Jarvis signed up soon
to die in a dim campaign,
a brave fair weather pacifist
like many who were slain.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 17.

Miss Dark

She sometimes cried in class-
Miss Melissa Dark-
leaving some girl in charge
ran crying from the room.
We read what Shakespeare said-
“O swear not by the moon!”
And one was Romeo
and one the bawdy Nurse,
passages too purple
bowdlerized, of course.
We did our sophomore best
to understand the verse,
whispered now and then-
“She and Mr. Lutz
drove off after the game
with a basket and a blanket-
isn’t that chain she wears
his name on an anklet?”
The circled orb changed monthly-
by summer we forgot,
though some of us were lovers
and some too timid yet-
September Miss Dark went on leave
and Mr. Lutz had left.
Later as a Mrs.
Someone she came back,
married and miscarried-
so rumor had the myth-
“Nervous breakdown.” “Tragic love.”
And then we read Macbeth.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 18.

From Aardvark to Zymurgy

My Uncle Peter was determined
in those less wordy days
to make himself more learned-
so started out with aardvark
and worked right through the A's.
"All the books there are to read
I've read," I heard him say-
"with beer and sandwiches in bed-
histories, mysteries, modern fiction
while your Aunt Lillie lay
snoring in her coldcream."
"I don't!" her wrinkles claimed.
"Of Mice and Men?" I asked him-
but that was a mistake.
His eyes in their red rims
and wart began to blink-
"He's one of those pink socialists
who writes about life's stink."
And even Shakespeare wasn't
what the critics think,
Lamb's Tales an improvement,
livelier, more succinct.
The centuries of art dismissed,
I almost dropped my drink
of ginger ale Aunt Lillie brought
in on a tray of birds.
"Uncle Peter, have you thought-?
Couldn't you have missed-?"
but after he'd reached zymurgy
there were no other words.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 19.

Lura O'Leary

To the Chaparral Circle ladies-
in her reds of unconviction
with brilliant checkered sashes
and sometimes orange tams,
she might have come from Greenwich Village
or the Left Bank of elan.
They ohed her telegraphic poems-
messages tapped out
from a secret deep interior
of rapture and of doubt-
inquired about her father,
a corpse that still lived on.
And she was gay and glib
and often cryptic—"... a shame,"
they said, "she never found a man."
"Oh, she's a nun-art's martyr-
she doesn't need one—who does,
who writes like that?"
And some contended,
when she drank the Lysol,
stumbling, sick at midnight, out of bed,
she only had intended, in the darkness,
to take a harmless
medicine instead.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 20.

Nancy Van Deusen

They gave her everything-
horse, clothes, private school,
ballet until she quit,
then lessons on the flute
(she said it marred her lip,
and locked the music up).
She sulked through half the Louvre
and couldn't be enticed
up the Acropolis-
the only thing she liked
on that expensive trip
was shuffleboard on ship.
She yawned whole operas through,
wouldn't pour the tea
as grateful daughters do-
though married the nice young man
they chose to run the store,
a joyless squarejawed bore
(she loved his red MG)-
in labor with the twins
screamed as if only she
had ever felt such pains-
watching her parents die
didn't move an eye-
inherited it all-
the house on Lemon Heights,
the tennis courts, the pool,
the store, the stocks, the rights
to lands of ore and oil-
and drank away the nights.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 21.

My Sudden Cousin

My sudden cousin, short on the glorious Fourth,
held a bomb too long and exploded his hand-
blood all over, several stitches worth,
a bandaged hero, but to his Dad and aunts
more fool than valiant, little boy than man-
time, and World War II took care of that.
He shot up fast and filled a uniform
in a plane with a gun that went ratatatat
to zoom on German housewives, neat and fat,
hanging up windy wash on Monday lines.
“I saw bright blood on the white sheets,” he wrote,
“making little splattering designs-”
and aunts, Dad, Congress, smiled with pride
to have my sudden cousin on their side.

Publication. First published in *Pop. by 1940: 40,000*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Best Cellar Press, 1971, p. 22.

Now, Swim

Stage V | Travel, ecology, and inner space, 1974

The complete recoverable text of the 1974 collection.

Night Letter

In a strange town in the middle of the country,
cockroaches hopping the sidewalk—somewhat south—
I've stopped midsummer under the bluish streetlights.
In a second story brick arched window a light is on
and a TV flickers—there's laughter from a bar—
I've come a long way and I'm going farther,
but now for a while I'm sitting in my car,
the windshield streaked with moth blood, and I'm writing
a short night letter to no one in particular.
Good news from Peoria—everyone looks alive—
in St. Jo. Mo. the dark sky gathers thunder,
over Wyoming the moon is twice its size.
Exotic merchandise gleams in the corner drug store,
at an Athens, o. A.&P. you can buy James Bond and Tolstoi.
In a minute I'll go in and send this over the wire.
I've got to drive on, past billboard art and detour,
a place past I it facades I've got to find.
Are you my reader? Come along for the ride.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 7.

The Oldest House in Silver City, Nevada

Stone by stone, Irene's remade the mountain
to keep its natural erosions out of the house,
toting buckets of water to every sprig;
she's eked an Eden from the desert dryness—
a tree of heaven fans us with green shade.
Harry, dapperly capped, also looks proud
of what she's done, and tells about the lizard
coming to drink—laughs about the time
she guided a tarantula across the road,
talking to it as if it were a child.
“They're useful animals,” Irene laughs at herself
“and we need all the helpers we can get.”
With its new roof and newly gleaming sides,
you wouldn't guess the little house had stood
over a century among abandoned mines.
She picks a yellow brilliance from the hill
and tells the children it's a “Miner's Lantern.”
Inside, we're shown a picture of the house,
shining as now, a stagecoach down below.
“People are always coming to take pictures.”
And we take ours—Harry and Irene
smiling out from their front porch frontier—
from farther on we'd let the camera zoom
back through the miles of sage where year by year
houses and supermarkets spread like a poison mushroom.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 8.

Trying to Decide at Kayenta Trading Post

The man in Kayenta lamenting
the death of Navajo weaving
was turning over the rugs—
“ Few of the young ones
have patience to learn
an art that doesn’t pay much.”
He flipped through the pile
of dancers and arrows,
eagles and lightning designs—
and we noticed an Indian
not far away
in Levis, his hair bound up,
who, while we talked
to the man showing rugs,
stood belted in silver,
believably beaded,
and whenever we looked we saw him
silently looking at us.
Slowly the rug man
warmed to our interest—
mentioned the weaves and the dyes,
that the best black came
from black sheep,
the best white, from pure white.
He brought out rug after rug,
carried away by the theme—
Wide Ruins—Two Gray Hills—
swastikas on some—
“They make them and don’t even know
the meaning they have for us.”
But we wondered—maybe they do—
deciding the eagles would go
with patterns we already had—
“That’s a good choice,” said the man
as we watched the Indian still watching
us from under his hat.

“The Shadow of the Cross”

We had been through the dust and the red canyoned country—
places of mesas carved on the air—
when we came to the mission at Ranches de Taos,
a duncolored structure of buttressed adobe
reflecting, white crossed, in the mudpuddled square.
An Indian boy sold us a folder that told us
how long it had lasted, and, needing repair,
that antiquity leaked—please contribute to help
keep rain off the pictures, ruin from the altar,
and be sure not to miss the miracle there—
Christ in the daylight on Galilee’s shore
(the artist himself could never explain)
who, every evening, when darkness turns deeper,
carries the shadowy cross of his pain.
We looked but not long—rushed on through the range
of Sangre de Cristo, toward Lawrence’s shrine—
rayings from darkness, light in the pines,
and over bright rock, that shadow of change.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 11.

Rushmore

Rushing to Rushmore, speeding as we read
sphinx comparisons (in the free brochure)
to monumental features of the dead,
we doubted art in such a spacious sculpture
especially done by dynamite and drill,
smirked that workmen with electric hammers
had hacked a factual grandeur from that hill.
We sneered like critics. What did those amateurs,
exploding crude colossi out of stone
know of Cellini and his detailed golds,
David expressive to the very tendon
or marble Grecians rippling in their robes?
And we were anxious on a trip to elsewhere,
winding narrowness, just to glimpse and go.
Then through a tunnel we saw history centered,
staring four faced, bluish in the glow.
Dazzled travelers, skeptic to the end,
we drove up closer, looked in Lincoln's eye
in which a six foot man could easily stand
and, *vita brevis*, made a longer stay.
We gazed along the precipice of faces,
silenced by a pyramidal shock—
temples, obelisks, the statued ages
were equaled in that democratic rock.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 12.

Inside Iowa

Thundering Iowa hissed a hostile rain
as if at us, the dark dragon of weather
forking tongues of lightning over corn,
and we slowed down, sliding through the splatter,
feeling our wheels go slick as rolling pigs.
We blinked for signs of coffee, lit cafes
to warm us from a leaking harm like dikes
but towns and farms slipped deeper in that haze.
The cornbins glistened and the silos flashed
pictures in a tungsten suddenness;
the tails of the stormy monster lashed
flickering scales across the muddiness.
Then at a deluged corner, warehouse-square,
a coalsmoke restaurant, brick and hardly lettered,
next to a factory for fertilizer
spelled oasis, stark, old, dark and battered.
We ran around the building in the rain
like figures in a nightmare, trying doors,
and all were locked except the magic one
that opened on a sesame of mirrors,
pink lights, rich carpets, politesse,
a maitre d'hotel bowing from the gilt—
laconic Iowa or ironic Paris?
We rested among graciousness, and felt
a friendliness replenishing our cups,
the difference of interiors, a dream
of shelter from the mire of the maps
that only showed us where we hadn't been.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 13.

Walking Milwaukee

At the end of everything, I walk Milwaukee
 between the elms cathedraling the blocks
 and hotbox houses in the muggy weather—
 over to Sherman, or drive to Brown Deer Park.
 No one is there to glide the moss but ducks
 and under birch and willow only us
 to walk in clover, sweating as we walk
 with Grandma and the babies by the pond—
 who would have thought, in summer hot Milwaukee,
 we'd find green vacancies at six o'clock?—
 but yesterday I saw a rabbit hop,
 as if through grass, across a concrete street
 as I was walking, thinking as I walked,
 and saw a squirrel flitting up a trunk
 while fattened housewives talked among their lawns—
 this One Way flatness wildly overflowing
 its sober German rules and regulations—
 madness of beer, preponderance of paunch.
 I walk the miles of square and ugly blocks
 scanning the bricks for out of place clematis—
 a purple tropic climbing up a string—
 drive miles to look at Wright's Greek Orthodox
 crown round church, beneath whose darkblue dome,
 above eye windows, thorns are waterspouts—
 a far out marvel; no one would have thought
 concrete could flow so rightly in a ring
 except a mind in bitter anguish caught
 seeing such blocks of boxed-in suffering—
 SCH LITZ signs sizzle, DON'T WALK goes on and off
 at this hot endless end of everything.
 Past Silver Spring—the names sound meadow cool—
 we walk and talk on Grandpa's clovered grave—
 death of a salesman—Grandpa sold the lots—
 the carving on the stone is "beautiful"—
 we talk above him on Valhalla's plots,
 smelling the smoke from backyard barbecues—
 who will lie where when similarly boxed;
 a later generation climbs the stones

over the rigid burghers locked below.
Grandma says the trees, because the roots
would crack the coffins, can't be planted close.
Whom are the plastic flowers meant to fool?
I have to walk—through smogs of Fond du Lac—
the name is lovely but the street goes on
past smoke black bricks, past churches pointing up
to nothing but a boiling murkiness—
thundering dark about to split and drop
gutterflooding water that won't help—
the lightning seemsto dramatize a god
whose wise displeasure makes the hailstones bounce,
but soon it's over and I walk again
through heated green beside Menomonee River—
(along the banks, because of antique drains
polluting purity, dead fish glitter)—
and on and on, beside the dying elms
(a blight is killing them the city over)
arching a Paradise, to hear Grandma tell,
under the willows, in the parks of clover
I walk Milwaukee in the still hot weather
and think of Dante sweating through his hell.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 14.

You Must Say Goodbye

*"You must say goodbye, it would be madness
not to say goodbye, when the time comes."*

Samuel Beckett, Molloy.

Now we are going mad not saying goodbye
in elmed Milwaukee evening, everyone here—
Aunt May and Margaret, and Tom John's limpid eye
twisting, and dripping on Willa's long blond hair
as she kisses the kitten and tosses it up in the air.
It is sticky and hot, a thundery midwest evening
Indians don't dance in now that Indians are rare.
Everyone said already they must be leaving
but still they stand or sit, aunt, cousin, sister
as if they waited for something that's not quite clear—
the sky to suddenly split, the lightning to print them
forever from negatives exactly as they are.
How can we say goodbye, how can we quit them
for days and weeks, for months, for more than a year
when even Aunt May avoids the choice of the door
moths want to flit through, the light is so inviting
and better than being out in the Indian dark?
The time has come, but the time is too exciting.
"Tom John, stop dying"—does Margaret seem to remark?—
as bloods of madness thud through the staying heart.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 16.

Knight of the Road

on the straight strip
through the Bonneville Salt Flats,
a high up driver
with a wide load,
saw damsels in his mirrors,
their small car veering
and the hard wind whipping
and splitting to ribbons
the tarp at their top.
Lit by the lightning,
one of them gripping
the wheel while they both
looked paler and paler,
their lives and their luggage
seemed to be slipping
where shoulders were soft,
too narrow to stop,
and nothing beside
but the rain on the salt.
The man in the van,
who might not have heard
that knighthood was dead,
slowed down his charger—
and ignoring perhaps
that life is absurd,
sheltered them on
by the width of his back
to keep them from swerving
over the margin.
Knights never were
as alleged in their legends
perfectly virgin,
but who's so enlightened
to find a dark flaw
in the motive of one

who led ladies to safety
then kicking the flanks
of his horsepower onward,
sped beyond thanks.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 17.

Web World

In early light, in silhouette and silver
trees and mist and rayings from the sun,
from leaf tip, fence and branch,
from twig and corner,
thousands of pearly loops of dew webs swung.
They changed an aerial to strands of Christmas,
linked everything together in the gleam—
space had no meaning,
time had stopped its wheeling,
the very roofs had vanished from the scene.
Familiarities
became the lightness
of all those vibrant ladders on the air,
slightly swaying in the backyard brightness
and strung across the canyon through the blur.
It isn't often that we see it that way,
web after web and line by spectral time,
what's near so tied up with the far away
we feel the oneness,
as a clear design.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 19.

The Cheetah

As far from Africa as home
I met a cheetah on a chain
of little links extending back
until they reached a human hand—
the fastest animal on land
padding in a slow advance—
a narrow head, a long wide tail,
a fawny tawniness on which
its spots looked inked and fixed as print,
and though it's said the leopard's can't,
they seemed to change—those ornate dots
danced and rippled when he walked.
And as they neared—the man and beast—
one of them touched his civil brim,
the other hissed a whiskered hint,
claw-pawed, rhythmical and slim,
of held back power meant to hunt
and eat the heart of what it must.
They paused there straining on the leash—
“The beast is tame,” the man when asked,
said—“just a great big pussy cat”—
both of them showed a line of teeth
within a grin that hid the truth—
then loped off lightly through the heat.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 20.

Yellow Jackets

We camped in high country again and this time
thousands of yellow jackets buzzed smelling around
even at the lake edge where the sleek people
skied winging water behind a motor sound.
The ranger said brush lightly, and we did
as the striped insects flew, and crawled over stones
and sometimes, as we shuddered, cruised our skin—
the boats went roaring out, with their gleaming blonds
whirled in a gas wake of white and swirling back in,
piling the waves up, crowding the shore with their shine—
and of course they had every right to a mountain din,
to buzz through blue silence, then turn the ballgame on
between their walks over water—we were used to that
noise taking over the air, and commerce, the mind.
Mt. Tallac rose pristine, peaked at our right,
an incense of pine blew warm on the gentle wind
as we sat among things that could sting and wished them away,
not having thought, at least at that distance and height,
we'd find so much to brush off and try to take lightly,
so many encroachments on a pure delight.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 21.

Water

Earliest slept in liquid laving the shut eye
 and late wave breaking at maturity,
 this lucid fluid drenching what is dry—
 rain pure, salt tear—obsesses me.
 I sail for Europe with a watery wake
 churning my mornings to gull followed foam
 or bathe confined in rising steam at home
 remembering snow mists on a mountain lake.
 The fact refreshes, splashes faucet close
 the telling element of all that's flesh,
 the swimmer's slippery kinship with the fish,
 the opulent drop that feeds the thirsty rose—
 and oh, how after droughts, wet gentleness
 slants out of ominous clouds that rumble and scud
 settling the dust, stirring the seeds to bud,
 the worm beneath the greening farm to bless
 mineral earth, sensing the season's reason.
 Rome from its nipples and Neptunes, dolphins and horns
 bubbles and spurts the moisture that adorns,
 falling from scallop to scallop, glistening stone.
 I've waded naked up a summer creek,
 lain in bent grass beside its slide and its murmur
 and heard in its voiceless hum the voice of summer,
 silvery syllables sung by tonguing rock.
 At spas, at Lourdes, cripples unlimp at its touch
 such a soothable power it has to baptise and heal,
 and stepping into its cool how much better we feel
 as we drip knee high, hip deep, in its undulant rush
 and veils of violence at an edge of ocean
 that the rolling moon pulls back, revealing pools
 of starfish, crabs, the sensitive jewels
 of tentacled sea-anemones, commotion
 stilled to a glitter, a pause in the tide of emotion.
 Vapor with rainbow; fogpocket; waterfall flash—
 let me live in its shine and its splatter, current and crash,
 feel at the center of life that unceasing motion.

This Morning Isn't Enough

newleaved and smokeblue—
though I'm seedwarm in egg weather,
toward the high sun hearing my blood,
the oak still as bare as it was
and the appletree, too,
and a spring hoe clinking below,
and eagerness, rising up,
of the small girl wanting to know—
this morning isn't enough—
it takes contrariness, too, to make
a garden grow—
winds that I wondered why then
whistled at corners and blew
leaves creaking down—
and ruinous rains waded through—
this morning isn't enough,
and only half true.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 24.

House

They're hammering up a house across the canyon,
men who work shirtless balancing on beams
and fitting windows, like ballet dancers,
limber among lumber in their jeans,
nailing a geometry, on green,
of planes and squares, roofs' isosceles—
already the yellow of the skeletal timber
is almost sealed by their zeal at sliding
the wooden siding over the wood that's inner—
their precise agility is hiding
the shimmer of the yet unfinished rooms,
and as they work, from here their voices sound
against the buzzsaw and the pounding booms
almost as if they sang a joyous round,
tenor and baritone in alternating tunes,
but though they toe it with a dancer's zest,
I know with what ambivalence they work—
the house is being built by angry sweat,
step by difficult step and curse by curse,
and only distance makes it Whitmanesque.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 25.

Jellyfish

Transparent purple
leopard spotted mushroom
swimming freely
in a sea of green—
jello parachute
dangling slender tentacles
to stun a prey
that tangles with your string—
not fish if fish are finned,
too faceless for a flesh—
synonymous sometimes
with lack of spine—
yet what are you but gut,
an undulous hunger loosed
in this surprising form
from some sly design?—
part spider and part web,
a kind of naked brain
glittering, marine—
drifting with the tide.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 26.

Picasso and Freud

"Love is the most important thing in life."

—Picasso at eighty

"The obsessive thought, 'I should like to murder you,' means . . .

'I should like to enjoy love of you.'"

—Freud, A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis

Young as he felt, and feeling what was young,
Picasso butted bullish with his brush—
like Zeus of the curling forelock, wasn't above
god disguised exposures of his lust—
as late as eighty, still believed in love.
Whereas, past forty, Freud had given it up—
those children, all those patients, lectures, books—
the bearded old Jehovah knew too much
at latent murder in flirtatious looks
and double edges of the human touch.
If only we could fuse them into one
as the excessive artist liked to do,
and paint two moving points of view at once—
put more lightness in the morbid Jew,
and, in the Spaniard's glance, dark consequence.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 27.

Blurred Leaves in the Foreground

The first time it looked different—
blurred leaves in the foreground
while sharpfocused lovers strolled hand in hand
or ran through the garden behind—
the green frame or screen relating,
especially as color got better
and truer to nuance and shading,
an Eden to the mind.
Nude without being naked,
and new as the leaves implied,
the lovers could go in the garden
where angles were green and wide,
swinging along to the music
of Mozart or some other tune
and God wasn't needed or lions with lambs
to show how they felt inside.
Then like most innovations
repeated time after time—
if there ever had been a meaning,
it changed as if for a rhyme—
the lovers were always in focus
and the foreground blurred as they came
fresh from fruit tasting, into God's eye,
covered with leaves, like shame.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 28.

The Sad Psychiatrist

The psychiatrist is serious and sad
listening to the lady on the couch.
Spreading middle aged but wild inside,
princess in skins and slim as ocelots,
she runs through jungles of association
and meets, beneath bananas, Jungle Jim.
Waiter, elevator boy, handsome him,
whoever, however, he has heard before
this serial stereotyped as television,
the hohum housewife and her humdrum husband,
failures of fantasy and gin,
her plump insistence: nerves and nothing more.
Dazzling on his pad, it all adds up—
the wrinkling doctor needs a rest from this;
impatient with patients, he thinks too much,
and analyzes every touch and kiss.
He'll break his neck on the next freudian slip.
Voices at windows soon will whisper Jump.
Garrulous lady, you're only growing old.
Try travel or a face lift or divorce.
The tale of your vanity is told
and even Jungle Jim, in the hot outdoors,
doesn't take his shirt off anymore.
The psychiatrist listens sadly, doesn't laugh.
Supposedly imperturbable, he feels pity.
The jest is joyless and the guilt is God's.
Face after face from the evil, speeding city
replaces the lady patient's and he nods
Yes, yes, go on, and then—
Moses, he's writing laws on stony pads.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 29.

Babies,

to begin with, a natural result,
bird-bald, shell flake fingered, aren't what you think—
monkey pink and wrinkled at the start,
soon they're crawling, kitten interesting,
and a harassed messed madonna, far from art,
fondles, and swears the kid was a bad mistake.
They smear the walls of miracles, and walk
out in the world where livid drivers brake.
Lisping at first, they usually learn to talk
fluently cute, and then talk back.
Hiding and seeking, skating into pain,
the distant corner closer than it was,
they won't wear coats or rainboots in the rain
(their terrible trouble is they're growing up)
limp sneezing home with knees without a skin.
Folks are fogies in a four-wall prison,
old worried wardens from whom they plan escape
(Jesus said you are my mother and brethren
to strangers, putting Mary in her place).
Goodbye, they cry, and fly off unconcerned.
The sighing father pays, the wakeful mother
hears the midnight faucet dripping blood—
even the blond banged toothless little brother
is six feet tall and in a mating mood;
the tired, hated parents grope for each other—
but here they come, married, harried, home,
in the large arms of ambivalence carrying what?
“Why,” says Grandma, taking the dimpled gnome.
Grandpa grins and gives grim Dad a pat.
The clock of hope is back where it began.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 30.

The Mermaid

swims innerness,
arms parting a deep of dreams,
her fan tail following,
and her slowmotion hair
streams from her head like a radiant weed.
Alone in the sea of herself,
dives deeper,
half flesh, half fish,
she coruscates through
forests of coral,
breath pearls bubbling
upward to burst at the surface of sleep.
Her shape shuttles shadows on sandy ripples,
and masculine, muscular,
into this crystal
a human lover plunges to kiss her,
warmly touching her numbness of nipples.
Slim in his grip,
she glistens against him,
her virginal fingers raking his back,
her silvery scales are changing, eclipsing;
lips, teeth on her neck,
she feels the fan of her fin turn to feet,
deep in her fishiness, avidness beat
as he slides the widening tip of his heat
where her hips begin to have legs in that wet.
Then up to the morning,
tossed on the waves
gasping awake on the rock of her bed,
she turns,
but her lover is gone, and instead,
from her waist down, the cold tail still curves.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 31.

Reluctances

It never occurred to the turtle that it should hurry,
the spiral weighted snail could hardly go,
and, among the species that were furry,
the sloth was also known for moving slow.
Mules could run if they wished but they liked to linger
and clop along with knobbed, unwilling knees.
Reluctances of man to lift a finger
in fellow help suggested that one of the least
of his best qualities was samaritan quickness,
and not because of a shape that dragged a shell
or traveled the slippery trees with three toed thickness.
A nimble ambler, alert enough to tell
right from wrong all right if he had a mind to,
he could easily turn, as swiftly as a pack,
on ones he thought none needed to be kind to.
Lack of pity undoubtedly kept him back,
and modicum of mercy, with the beasts.
It took him ages just to face the fact
the maze was fixed, he'd never reach the cheese
unless he learned a better way to act.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 33.

The Hungerers

I dreamed I was hungrily moving
in a cafeteria line,
taking hors d'oeuvres, a tossed salad
and eager to shovel it in,
heaping my tray, from a rich array,
with red steak and pickled peach—
my American mouth pursed poisoning
to open and receive.
It was India, or somewhere starving—
people with rickety bones
shoved at my back of muscles,
stepped on my wellfed toes.
And those eyes—huge in their sari
because the face was so thin—
that little Greek boy, a shadow
shrunk to his skeleton—
I piled up the pies and the jellies,
laded the gravies and soups—
while the others, like flies about me,
buzzed in crumb-hoping groups.
Vin rose, or white? asked the pourer—
I tasted and took time to choose—
someone fainted for water,
someone kept humming the blues.
But as soon as I reached for my money
the register rang like surprise—
saved by the bell of distance
from eating before such eyes.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 34.

If Black

I have a cat, and if black is apropos,
an eternal no—
except for his round gold eyes that greenishly glow
and the fleet way he plays,
leaping to toss whatever it is with his paws
while those needles of white flick at the ends of his toes.
He's a quickness that flows
more than it runs, a dainty panther of poise
as he noiselessly goes
night black from the tip of his tail to his nose.
In some ways a simile cat, but unlike those
snarling obscene
black cats arched for evil's Halloween
or told of by Poe
he's not so much metaphor dark as a lightfooted show,
a living example of just how wrong we can be
when we think we see
bad luck when we don't, and that we lack
perception, in fact,
when we call a cat something else because it is black.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 35.

On the White Seat

On the white seat like an enameled doughnut,
his belted trousers lowered to his feet
in the classic position, elbow on his knee
and fist to his chin, as if in bronze by Rodin,
here sits, as he always has, democratic man.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 36.

Ballet Fantastique

From a huddled up bunch, the octopus sends
long tapered white cupped tentacles, then
oddly enough, this bag of biology
swims out and away in a web of analogy
spreading red membranous translucent fans,
an eightlegged ballet without feet or hands,
coiling, uncoiling, now starshaped, now tendriled—
is it reeling beguiling or only unbending,
a fish in a tank not thinking of us
but making us think what else cunning does?
Whatever intending, this monstrous reality
goes on pathetically wending its fallacy—
the spidery, human-eyed, horrible hood,
so delicate, scarflike, scarlet, controlled. it's hard to believe that there lurks at its
heart
a purpose less dainty than being an art.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 37.

Ready for Rembrandt

Ready for Rembrandt, through a chiaroscuro,
having parked far down the Indian summer day,
we hike uphill by the blue scoop of the bay—
cypress on seaciffs, a sweeping higher view
of ruddy Bridge and white sails on the blue.
But at the top, stretched from the colonnades,
past Rodin's Thinker and queued on into the street,
a crowd of others hardly moves in the heat,
and still arrives, by car and bike and bus
to see the pictures of his loneliness,
to push and shove for a glance at his antique golds
shimmering bright edged from the dark of things
and shadowed faces of imaginings
no one liked at the time, fat flesh in its folds
in the right light, uncomfortably close.
What are we doing then, in line with the rest—
we know all that and knew it from the first,
the public eye mistaking best for worst,
and, until much later, blind to the best—
it isn't worth our time to be so pressed
for a *deja vu* of Rembrandt—so we step
back to the bayview, along the summer's edge
where on the frameless air the famous Bridge
from which so many leap to darker death
swoops lumil')ous arcs of afterimage red.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 38.

The Father Image

Father of us all, he walks on knuckles
and edges of his feet, with spreading ears,
squint eyes glittering, to his island limit,
and coarsely hirsute as our early fears,
sits there glaring out as Grandpa did,
a patriarch less fierce than he appears.
The grand old apeman loyal to his own,
he lets wild children climb him like a tree,
Darwin's proof, and bogymen of Freud,
who, as in a mirror, seemed to see
an easy freedom not to be enjoyed
by ones who know their ape identity.
What boy could ever grow as huge as he
and sit exposing those unconscious teats,
then turn in simple hunger back to where
the unsymbolic fruit he peels and eats
is shared by Eve, his hairy lady fair,
and join his joy with her compliant heats?
On this side of the moat, young fathers stare
and slenderly lift their offspring to the sight
of bored authority coming out again.
Why should he think of what is wrong or right?
Unlike our sinning sires, he isn't human,
or, as they looked to us, at least not quite.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 39.

Barbie

You pull a string from her neck
and it slides back in as she says
“Would you like to go shopping?”
in a doll’s hollow voice
as if from her rubbery head.
She hasn’t any sex
except for her nippleless breasts—
and is, in fact, all of a piece,
her vacuous face
after face after face
stamped by the money machine—
and her wardrobe’s never complete—
each cute
fragile costume
costs what wou Id feed
some rickety kid
for a week.
Over and over she asks,
thoughtless of hunger or bomb—
as her makers make toys,
too, for doomed boys:
hand grenades, almost real guns—
barbarous Barbie,
death’s shallow mate—
“What shall I wear to the prom?”

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 40.

Baby Jesus

What she liked better than the real stove,
dishes, and the doll that really cried,
was a 29¢ plastic nativity scene
from Safeway—God, she said,
lying in a manger where two lambs looked on
and Mary in blue and Joseph in royal red
knelt in the deep blue night on a white ground.
Whenever you turned the bubble or shook it around
a snow of silent silver glittered and whirled
and settled on the figures—she said they must be cold—
and she looked in at something we hadn't found:
a meaning of peace in there in the watery world
where the baby Jesus, about whom she'd hardly been told,
asleep in his fable still had power to astound.
Then she dropped it—liquid began to leak out—
I turned it upside down and tried some glue,
which, leaking in, enveloped the scene in a cloud—
“Goddamn the dishonest economy—with this in view—”
but she didn't care why, she only sobbed,
as if we dimmed in such a fallout, too—
“I can't see the baby Jesus! I can't see God!”

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 41.

The Day They Walked on the Moon

our younger daughter's temperature soared
to one hundred and four
while they were in the module
looking out at the black and silver landscape
we sat in EMERGENCY
waiting three hours to find out
nothing
we hadn't known before
We went home and gave her another aspirin
and more fluids
while they drank Tang on the moon—
and it was announced in our heatwave
they would be walking there soon
But just as the first man was about to get out
our older daughter
called from EMERGENCY—
she'd had an accident on a bike hike
not far from Santa Cruz
I had to go over to the hospital
and kept the radio on
to keep in touch with what
went on on the moon
Though missed the historic moment
waiting in EMERGENCY
for the result of the x-ray—
her toe had been broken
and had to be taped up
and after that we went home
hearing the President on the phone
to the men on the moon
telling them blah what a blah etc.
we could see it up there silver
talked to from Washington
And at home turned the TV on
among the temperatures and toes
the picture wasn't very clear
but they were walking on the moon—

our son came home a little later
and he'd missed most of it, too,
having gone to an operetta
by Gilbert and Sullivan.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 42.

Hippo

Wiggling small ears, with bubbling holes
in what's too much to call a nose,
here comes the hippopotamus
submerged but looking out at us.
He slips along upon his lip
and hoping peanuts, opens up
a wrinkled cavern, pink, with teeth,
hinting more and more beneath.
His humped eyes blink, his chins arise
and as he climbs, surprised by size
we watch a world of otherwise,
a hipless blimp on stumps with toes—
stepping out—the wonder is
why nature made such tons of him;
clumping off, eliminates—
his mossy sideways tail shakes—
then glumly finished, goes back in,
troubling the water once again,
and since we've seen all sides of him
the weighty question starts to thin—
what came up is underneath
widening ripples, and at least
seems less monstrous, now we know
how much hippo swims below.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 44.

Opus 132

When the quartet came to the third movement,
the cellist, who looked like Roethke, stopped showing off,
we forgot the eye tic of the second violin;
all four leaned together and back at their bowing—soft
at first, then more fortissimo until
they seemed four dancers holding a great ball
of sound aloft, spinning on fingertips,
all of them, poised in a seascape, equally deft,
as the round tone, turning, curved with shimmering colors.
In the scene of the music they danced there naked, adept,
with Grecian proportions as clear as the sphere they were keeping
up off the earth for the little time they had left
before it would float away flawless, escaped on the air,
and blow out of shape down the shore in a wobbling stretch,
as they got up to bow on the stage—four middleaged men,
halt, faultily built, and short of breath.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 45.

A Wild Delight

A wild delight in shapes has tidepool proof,
conegleam, and beaded weedwork edging blues—
here comes a snailswarm dancing in its whorls,
and things with claws move snail-housed, to confuse;
a strand of little spheres as pure as pearls.
What's imagined but the way it is?—
a face of lace not stitched, but etched in ooze—
I have to gasp at diligence of what?—
thought is it, patient art, or something else
that outdoes Dürer's ink in stinking kelp.
There was a man who tried to grasp, but failed,
essence of wonder with a pen and brush;
trembling with resemblance to what's veiled,
the pool is lucid, but its vital hush
shrinks inward into darkness at a touch.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 46.

Believing in Balances

Nothing about those mice was cartoon cute—
a sudden light revealed them at their crime,
rodents with bead bugged eyes and naked tails,
leaving their pestilence to dot my food
and nibbling in the dark like secret snails.
They'd sneaked through spaces ants and earwigs use,
small invaders of my peace of mind—
I couldn't go on thinking life was good;
there comes a time when any man must choose
such pawed encroachment or to spill a blood.
And reverence aside, I set the traps,
believing in balances, but fearing plagues.
They bit all right, resistless to a mouse,
but in the place of their dead, dainty shapes
a rat of thought keeps gnawing at my house.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 47.

The Jerusalem Cricket

“Actually the Jerusalem cricket is harmless and may be handled
with perfect impunity by anyone, although it may inflict a
painful nip.” -Poisonous Dwellers of the Desert by Natt N. Dodge

Whatever I felt it was—
that Martian looking bug,
a thug with a bee-striped back,
clicking out of a crack
to rattle across the rug—
and even worse close up—
slender antennae that waved
above its eye-dotted face
with a death grin chin, and legs
or things that looked like legs
right at the sides of its face—
ugly isn’t enough,
nightmare doesn’t describe—
again the question arose
of if, and the following whys—
whatever its difference was
from bugs I’ve come to expect—
spiders festooning gauze,
armies of ants that invade,
I couldn’t wait for the truth
or stop in my thoughtless haste,
but ran for a hammer to pound and pound
the ominous thing to a paste—
then later, looking it up,
found out, as I have more than once
making the same mistake
about a spine-crawling shape
that it wasn’t as bad as I’d thought
when I smashed it or bottled it up—
what bugs us with horror’s head

(and only equipped with a nip)
still isn't dead when it's dead—
what has to be killed
is the dread.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 48.

Orion at Three A.M.

Yipping at three A.M. coyotes woke me—
sudden as fear somewhere in the sage-
and I went to the window of that cabin
glancing out at the sky and gasped amazed.
“Oh my God—come and look at Orion!”

For years I’d only seen it through a haze,
having forgotten how when viewed from mountains
every star becomes a jeweled blaze.

Below the veiled arch of the Milky Way
it angled in a foursquare magnitude—
shoulders, knees, bright blue belt and scabbard—
silvers that sometimes winked the color of blood,
at that pine height seeming twice as huge
as when immenseness has to blink through smog—
and there we stood, looking through the window,
husband, wife, young daughter and the dog,
at three A.M. coyotes farther off—
admiring Rigel, awed by Betelgeuse,
in the pure air of beginnings spiced with autumn,
as at a cave’s mouth, some older family group.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 50.

Opal

Look into my depths
I am a jewel
water and silica
caught in a crack
and slowly compressed
smoke yellow, black
I was a sand
where dinosaurs walked
but flesh doesn't last
they were the thirsters
that drank my mirage—
I was the fact
Then hands took me out
minds said a gem—
ground, polished me round
I turned and returned,
indifferent to them
that nothing could hurt
Now I am set
a drop of the light
cried by the dark
a spectruming thing—
I flash in your eyes
filament, flame
the mazes of space
curving inside
the stone that you face—
I am time.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 51.

The Light in Michigan

There was a heron I remember,
a great blue glider over an Ann Arbor river
in an air tinged with October,
crumpling down and settling
stick legs on a bank—
though seen then, more like a forgetting
of a light out of the past
than that haphazard bird collapsing
after its light edged flight
in a mist as bright as that.
Now there are roseate trees and the bridge we stood on,
the soft touch of a gone hand—
the outdoor sound and very smell of water
and the glinting sight of those wild wings
folding to land.
A train hoots elsewhere at the edge of autumn,
the bird scatters up in the light
exactly as it did that day
she held the place where all the trains
were going in her hand.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 52.

Crater

The launch we ride in carves white winged foam
in the blue brilliance of the watercircle
as we speed lightly toward a cinder cone
called Wizard Island, inside the crater
with edges like a crater on the moon.

The foam wings rise and fall back into blue
so blue in places that it's almost purple,
like sky for Pegasus, with such a hue
it doesn't seem we're on the earth at all I—
but moving toward a visionary view.

Our guide tells how it happened, fire within,
the molten cone collapsing, then the snows
and rains of ancient eons pouring in—
the little island was a last eruption.

The boat docks, rocking in a lava cove
and we take pictures that can never show
how far we are in blueness from the rim,
how steep and quick the color goes below
the surface of the atom that we skim—
infinite planet we still hardly know.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 53.

Lines from Inner Space

Should I consult my horoscope today
and find my waiting fate in constellations—
inquire what cozy zodiacs will say
of love and hate and power among the nations?
Bright Venus rising on a sparkling chart
confounds my plans for birded quietude—
the quarreling blood is up in fiery Mars.
The thing to do is not to go outside.
All that has changed. Copernicus saw through it.
Man's egomania thought himself the center,
haloed by perfect circles, and God knew it—
but after that—the telescope inventor,
the eye of Galileo, and the I
rocketed released into infinity.
What loomed so hugely shrinks to a small ball,
even the peaks are toy peaks, and the lands
diminished outlines shored against a puddle;
a clocking shadow sweeps its spectrum bands,
light into dark, across it for a while—
then we are gliding starward beyond that—
nine gold dots around a burning circle
like motes inside the iris of a cat.
What are we cruising toward across the vast,
past nova views and through such emptiness,
intruders in a universal dust,
speeding from loneliness to loneliness,
when insight could have guessed it all the time?—
this distance only brings us closer home.
Such intricate and lavish multiplicities,
infinities of leaves, the endless sand,
rose shape, daisy, fleur-de-lis,
the stitch across the calcium fan of clam,
such care for form in petal and swirled pearl
of conch or abalone, none too small
to have its sheened design, its stripe or whorl,
each dark or brilliant feather—something final—
and even those invisibles, made large,
gazed at through a glass reveal a world

so patterned that there seems enormous purpose
as if galactic balances could whirl
in points too tiny to conceive unless
zero dwindled into spaciousness.

A certain tilt is what achieved the seasons,
a slant of sun and tipping at the pole—
different planets have their different reasons,
some always burning, others keeping cool
because of distance or the way they face,
the clouds around them, the orbits we observe,
none like the earth, a green and perfect place,
warmer or colder depending on the curve.
At least our latitudes seem loveliest
from springtime points of view, in summer thoughts;
if autumn witherings should trouble us
or whitened steepness deepen winter doubts,
we know we're only traveling through the freeze. and coming back to Eden by
degrees.

Now I am here in feet, in face, in hands,
a garden man less ignorant than Adam,
clothed in the thought of what no snake intends,
eating the fruit on which I only fatten,
fed with death's knowledge, shamed from superstition,
unflashed by sword from local paradise,
one at my side, but not my side's creation—
the God robbed rib that fable's woman was.
How many books have proved me not so special,
and billion births exploded myths of Eden,
that fertile plot a speck wrecked in the spatial
speed of immensities that keep receding—
yet it is warm today; among the leaves
a naked nearness moves that could be Eve's.
Those gods were lovely but they never lived,
jealous in robes or stripped in nipples Greece,
tablets of myths, the laws that lightning chipped;
who posed for stone were only whores and boys—
nothing beyond except a hope's projection,
nothing inside but what the mind desired,
no virgin birth, no raying resurrection,
the god was finished when the man expired.

Preponderance of ugliness and cruelty
preferring to be beautiful and kind
implies, perhaps, in opposites, a unity,
but mysteries that none can comprehend
subsume an idol even in the word—
if flies had gods, their gods would swarm the turd.
There always seemed some sense in sensuous sequence—
taste tested best along the hungry tongue,
the knowing nose chose sweet, not ranker reekings;
if freewill ears had preference of tone,
not noise but harmony would charm their chambers.
No telling where the parching eyes might wander
to drink oasis; though there were disclaimers,
when lovers most desired, their touch felt fonder.
Then like a keen machine to shatter matter
or stars that burst to sudden puffs of smoke,
certain thinkers paused to reconsider
and theory caught complacency at a stroke—
our fishy senses gasping through the rim
of water into air were told: Now, swim.
The air has tricky Echoes, and the ear
blithely believes, as eyes, in images—
gullible Narcissus, trapped in lying water,
the seeming surface is the dream that damages.
Neither the smooth youth nor the horrible Dorian
can be completely pictured as the truth.
Some say they've seen the Snowman, some the Saurian
rising midocean, hissing through a froth—
and who can say they didn't, or that some,
rused by a pool or portrait never drowned?
They surely died, and what they then became,
ghosted out of sight and out of sound,
was strange enough, essences of matter
beyond distortion's art or power to flatter.
Dreaming destruction, every line gone down
and no way out, apartness in the air,
the streets awry, the natural and known
a frantic phantasm, an abstract blur,
and walking in it, talking in a whisper
as rubbles smoke and distant noises veer,

not quite screaming, even when they're closer,
not believing it is now and here—
up what were stairs, past blasted balustrade,
past burning dirt on once immaculate waters,
still thinking This is fear, a dream's charade—
only a nightmare shudders so, so shatters,
then waking up, to feel, in the familiar,
clear vibrations fabulous before.
Choice? Oh yes—ostensibly existential
since Nothing cares and Man is all there Is;
ill Reason dies and lusty Will's potential
becomes the Emperor of Emptiness.
No matter what a mess the old man left
the wise young boy still might set it straight;
he is too cynical to feel bereft;
he knows his Love is Hate in masquerade.
He has an answer to the Nothingness
though it may echo hollow and absurd:
the touch of nakedness on nakedness
conceals its context in a chosen Word—
not cogito ergo sum but what I am
selected thought to be the Moon and Sun.
Nothing can stop this hot pursuit of shadows,
if not glad satyrs chasing after nymphs,
astronauts across the starry meadows,
their sex zipped up, fly for a grimmer glimpse
of something that can never satisfy.
Their yearning changes atoms at a touch,
it isn't naked to the naked eye—
the laurel branch that fooled Apollo's clutch.
When they come back with stuff of satellites
and proof of creatures circling distant suns,
our days will still be days, our nights, starred nights,
and plunging lovers still will kiss and plunge,
whose sandy pastures, in the human sense,
seem green as any astrals past the fence.
Here are two forms long famed in song and story,
hard muscled man, and softer at the hip,
the one he wears against him like a glory.
They glide to pleasure in a sliding grip,

thigh trying thigh, they ride, they ride, they ride—
O what delight at nipple, side and lip,
what a throbbled rapture seminal inside
when true components meet and fleetingly fit.
But that's not all; it's only half the tale;
his hands subside along her silken back,
and as she sighs, he wonders Did I fail?
the pulse already slowing in his neck,
and soon they sleep, a silence at each side,
and each one turns and dreams a different world.
What is this urgency that swims upflesh,
this microscopic polywog of life
fighting eyeless toward the waiting egg,
a particle of husband in the wife—
why does it want to get there, why does it try
against the odds of time and darker odds
to find a mother for its destiny,
a faith that's nourished in a curve of bloods?
Why should it hang, evolving from a fish,
repeating cycles that the eons took,
two parts united to a single wish
when what began it might have been a look
casual as creation, dust and thirst—
till whirled involvement was a universe.
In chills of space and temperatures of stars,
shadows and brilliances, I felt at home;
west through the deserts in the wastes of Mars
I only paused to recognize the dream;
outward past blizzard moons and whirling rings
and farther still through zones of other suns
whose wheeling systems seemed remembered things,
I traveled light, and darker implications—
all this had happened time and time again,
the heats of love, the zeroing of hate,
division slicing at a sudden line,
the atmospheric tricks of light and weight,
so that, returning, what I meant to say
was—circling is another way to stay.

Ecology

I'm writing this poem with a pencil found in the weeds
down where the worms left a slime, and I had to brush
a spider aside, and avoid things stickered with seeds—
oak galls, work of some wasp, had dropped all around—
by winter it would have been sodden under the leaves
and begun, by a natural change, to merge with the ground—
by next spring part of the wet earth circling the sun.
But I like things properly used for what they were made—
pencils, memory tipped, for poems or for lists,
with an opposite end to wipe out crazy mistakes—
hands fingered for touch, lips that can spit, speak or kiss—
so I picked up this stick and washed it and sure enough—
still good for I don't know how many words it will take
until what I've saved has been scribbled down to a stub.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 61.

On First Having Seen the Emily Dickinson 8¢ U.S. Postage Stamp

The world that never wrote her
is sending letters now
with her touched up daguerreotype—
a postmark through her brow—
the introvert of Amherst
who stayed at home to brood,
bringing us the gasbill
and other billets doux.
She sits there in a corner
feyly gazing out,
a neckband to adorn her,
her name a tasteful shout,
a presidential eminence
public as a frog—
the nun of disappointment
everywhere abroad.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 62.

Three Readings: Reading in Reno

for Joanne

We walk up Center, talking about the reading,
both of us strangely nervous with elation—
though I've arrived, I still seem climbing, speeding
through snow Sierras of an old sensation—
bumping on a wartime truck from camp,
a skinny boy who'd met you only once
and holding in a cold hand that was damp
"Nearest at Noon" and "Lovesong from the Mountains."
Among your crystal eggs and rubbing cats
we read our poems, make fun of ourselves,
touch on this's, deftly leave out that's,
laugh, drink, chat, finger books from shelves
much as we did when through this mountain land
I came to you with sonnets in my hand.
In the City of Trembling Leaves we go beneath
black leaves of evening to the student union,
twenty seven years since, timeless youth,
a different era's children of illusion,
thirsting for certainty, we first read each other—
now side by side, who have been mostly distant,
though closer than a sister and a brother,
we face young faces that have come to listen.
And we read lines we couldn't have written then—
time that's escaped the clock is in our pulses
ticking like iambs, as we read on—
later we unwind with Scotch and waltzes,
and though the deathless music doesn't end,
at 3 A.M. we stumble to a stop.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 63.

Reading to Twenty Pregnant Black High School Girls

poems about the sea, about a snake,
trying to say
anything that might touch them as they slump
looking at me or not looking at me, some
in Afros, some in red wigs,
all with bellies,
I'm not Yeats among schoolchildren
but only one more person
they have to listen to
as foetuses feed on their blood,
after the hygiene lecture,
after all they've been through.
Poetry is here and now, I try not to shout,
a "familiar species
that perished by the door"—
I mention Emily Dickinson
and they write down her name
("a famous poet")—
"suites by Bach", I cry to them
who have never heard that music
and as a few whisper (what?)
among themselves
I end with the hawk—
"tenderness hadn't been caught.
It blended in."
They stare at me blankly, frankly
glad as they may be later
after the teacher's "that's all for today"
after the doctor's "push, push"
to be delivered
of an inconvenience
taking their young time

when they could be heroines in True Romances
making love—
“Any questions?” I ask—
but they have none.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 64.

Lyn Lifshin,

if I'd been half as old—
twenty-five—
and still older than you
I might have gone for those
Theda Bara eyes
and blue jeaned thighs
as you pushed long hair
from your thin face
at the lecturn—
as was
I sat beside my son
enjoying your
breathless delivery
of poems about
loneliness and screwing
and you were so
funny sometimes
though with those pale lips
more like a heroine
from Edgar Allan Poe
scary with talent and style—
I heard my
son listening too
as you
again and again read
to those climaxes
so frequent in youth
but what I wanted
wasn't you
which might have been fun
briefly
but your easy world
of writing and flight
everything instantaneous—
love, poems, fame—
not this

endless
(though maybe
you have that too)
Keatsian commitment.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 66.

So

So you want that blond, smoothbrowed, unbearded
lyricist back,
that everything will turn out all right
birdwatcher,
the man you could depend on
to take the garbage out
and find diamonds in it—
well I've lifted the lid from the can
and there was a rat
showing his teeth
and I've observed the baby cowbird
pretending to be a sparrow
and wearing out the sparrow mother
feeding that brat
and those are only two backyard examples
of the kind of thing that's making my forehead wrinkle
and my eyes narrow—
a road or two away
some man came whistling home last Wednesday
and instead of a martini
got a handful of his own guts
and there are dismembered bodies
in the Santa Cruz Mountains
of young girls not even missed yet
and all the while I've been sitting here
gazing on greenery
someone was plotting
to hack out a freeway
If I turn my back for a minute
in the warm sun humming an OM
a truck will come
spraying DDT
and even while I'm writing this
instead of my congressman
plutonium leakages from sinister blueprints
seep underneath.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 68.

We Thought

We thought that we were walking over water
but the truth is we were crawling on a scum—
imagined we were upright, even godlike
though we had only weakly gone along;
not far from our bacterial beginnings,
sloshed out by some freak motion from the swamp,
we felt that we were doing all the moving—
instead, we'd been propelled as down a ramp.
There was an underneath we couldn't see;
we hopped like bugs of chance along the top
and bit and maimed, and screaming "mine!" and "me!"
we saw at last there was no way to stop
the forward motion that was plunging us,
helpless, toward the edge of the abyss.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 70.

Yet

at my direst,
stalled on Fish Ranch Road—
and it wasn't the first time
kindness came out of the dark—
as I chugged and chugged
the car to get it to start
(the fifth time that month,
though doctored, it stopped
like a heart),
my wife in the mad ward again,
my nerves on the verge,
the Zodiac killer killing people dead,
victims, on dark lanes like this,
shot in the head,
a voice said, nevertheless,
“Are you in trouble?”—
and I glanced at a beat-up Chevy,
wary at first;
what else to expect, nearly at nadir,
but more of the worst?
“Can I help? Do you want help?”
a woman in curlers
leaned in the light of the dials
from her wheel toward my need,
and I said, as I tried and cursed,
“Yes—it's dead.”
Tried again, then got out and left it—
she'd pulled up ahead—
and I told, as she drove us on over,
the least of my troubles.

Publication. First published in *Now, Swim*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1974, p. 71.

Winesburg by the Sea

Stage VI | The documentary town, 1979

The complete recoverable text of the 1979 collection.

Now in November

Now in November, ten years after then,
 fragility grown to bigness, Emily runs
 homeward from fractions with her violin,
 her hair as brilliant as the turning oaks,
 followed by Eric vivid in his shirt.
 Flitting behind them, sparrows tip with sun
 and peck the pyracanthas' berried arcs.
 I didn't guess this autumn lesson when
 I heard them, dimly, cry in early darks—
 meanings of time we learn only from children,
 how they come in from the arrowy sun,
 leaves falling behind them, as I ran once,
 and the glad dog does a delicate dance,
 their "Oh OK," when asked how school was,
 then off to try their balance on a fence.
 I hear, as evening deepens, acorns thud
 from the darkening tree they're climbing in
 against a glow that slowly streaks with blood,
 and on that golden bough I am the one
 who hears my vanished father call me home.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Now in November 5

I: ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Winesburg by the Sea 11

Cock-a-Doodle-Do 12

Martin's Texas Tamales 13

Photograph of Ghosts 13

Catalina 14

The Cruel Sea 15

Again, Again 15

Fessendens' 16

Confetti 17

A Voice in the Rapids 17

Bed Harding's Flying Machine 18

The Depression 19

Ear 19

Marjorie 20

Alice White 20
Hired Girls 21
I Don't Remember 21
Saturday Nights and Sunday Mornings 22
Miss Herring 23
Jealousy 23
Brother 24
Hand on the Gun 24
Orange 25
Veil of Perfume 25
Aunt Nettie 26
Uncles in the Orchard 27
Aunts and Uncles 27
Sundays at Uncle Earl's 28
Rich Man, Poor Man 29
The Science They Breathed 30
Gettysburg 30
I Touched the Hand That Shook the Hand of Lincoln 31
Under the Roses 32
Veterans 32
Everett 33
What She Said 34
The Johnson Smith & Company 34
Miss Hale's 35
Like Any Boy 36
Rumble Seat 36
Jump Rope 37
Tearful Occasions:
 Peroxide 38
 Perspective 38
 Desperate Desmond 39
Marilyn's Father 39
Joseph Horwitz 40
Elementary Education 40
Larry Worth 41
Heck Quinn 42
Bones 43
Life in the Tomb 43
O Pioneers! 44
Two Grandmothers:

Hannah 44
Sarah 45
Topless 46
Miss Platt 47
Birch Street 48
The Bank of Italy 49
Green Orchard 50

II: WEST EIGHTEENTH

West Eighteenth 51
Black Anecdote 52
The Vegetable Man 53
Neighbors 53
Mrs. Marsden 54
They 54
Mrs. Small 55
Mr. Small 55
S.(our) M.(ilk) Lovett 56
Ebersoles' Potato Chips 56
Elaine Farquhar 57
Warm Days 58
The Day the Governor Played Ball 58
Under the Eucalyptus 59
Hiroshima 60
Dr. Earl Blood, The Painless Dentist 60
Felicia Best 61
Dr. Farsdale 61
Harry Chin, Chinese Herbalist 62
The Seth Thomas 63
German, 63
Zelda Keith 64
This Is K.F.I. Los Angeles 65
Junior 66
Time in the Evening 67
Nervous Breakdown 68
Little Bobby 68
Maud Winters' Swedish Massage Salon 69
Mr. Mueller 70
Eddie Weismann 70
Mr. Virgo 71

Those Veaches 72
Screaming on Seventeenth 72
Next Door 73
The Symbol 74
The Times 75
Aunt Lucy 76
Past Ten O'Clock 77

III: COMING HOME FROM THE MOVIES

Rewrite 78
The Jazz Singer 79
Tom Mix 80
Those Times When Richard Barthelmess Went Up 80
Our Gang 81
Those Busby Berkeley Musicals 82
Mae West 82
Tarzan 83
Godiva Ridden 83
And Greened My Twelfth, Most Verdant Summer 84
The Annunciation 84
The First Time 84
At the Broadway 85
High Places:
 Lost Horizon 86
 Mutiny on the Bounty 86
 Wuthering Heights 86
Homework 87
The Clever Studio 88
Sugar and Spice 88
Complaint 89
Lady Chatterley's Lover 90
Robert Taylor 90
The Marx Brothers 91
Beyond the Rainbow 91
Love Affair 92
The Hurricane 92
Dark Victory 93
Coming Home from the Movies 94
Solo 94
Starting at Thirteen 95

Past Bean Fields 96
In Those Days 96
Ars Gratia Artis 97
It Took a Long Time 98
Gone with the Wind 99
When I Finally Went to MGM 100
IV: HOLD IT

Pop. by 1970: 40,000 101
Passing Through 102
Vivian 103
Belle Small 104
Doc Clark 105
Oswald Shrader 106
Mrs. Nice at the Talkies 107
Grandma Folkston 107
Etta Johnson 108
Elmer Slater 109
Marianne Cox 110
Deacon Ennart 110
Mary Meechum 111
Widow Willis, the Cat Lady 112
Bubbles 112
Johnny Walsh, Checkered Cab Co. 113
A Man from the Freight 114
Slim the Janitor 114
The Santa Ana Wind 115
Mr. Foote, Postman 116
Joseph and Mary Pilford 117
Robert Furness, Doctor of Divinity 118
Edith Furness, Minister's Wife 119
Touchdown Brown, Dept. of Sanitation 119
Ramona Lopez 120
Clarence Holmes, Attorney at Law 121
Carlotta Seyrig, Palm Readings 122
A Faithful Husband 122
Abby Arthenot, Waitress 123
The Golfer 124
Daisy Hemingway, Dressmaking & Alterations 125
Angel Rodriguez 125

Mile High Miles 126
K-O-R-E, The Voice of the Citrus Empire 127
Golden Gloves 127
Ernest J. Licht, Physician & Surgeon 128
Tobacco. Candy. Magazines 128
Arthur Couchay's Ladies' Apparel 129
Bessie's Beautie Shoppe 130
Millie's Millinery 130
Zeta Goff, Chiropodist 131
The Arkansas Travelers 132
Mike Allman 133
Bert Perkins, Station Master 133
Number Please 134
Karl Bower, Nurseryman 134
Mrs. Wright 134
Stationery. Cards. Notions. Books. 135
Helen Payne, Spotter 136
Fay Purvis 136
I.I. Augen, Optometrist 137
The Projectionist 138
Otto Uhr, Watch Repair 138
"Dummy" Randall 139
Margo Martine, Studio of the Dance 140
Georgina Gorman, R.N. 140
Chest 46", Waist 32", Biceps 18½" 141
Lura O'Leary 142
Ian di Lanzo 142
Nancy Van Deusen 143
Henna Vinal, Birdwatcher 144
Adam Crabtree, Beekeeper 145
"Rubens" Jones 146
Al Booster, Chamber of Commerce 146
Mad Mady 147
Rev. X. Burns McDermott 147
Hattie King 148
Flower World, L.P. Bloom, Prop. 149
Percy Tilg, Mortician 149

V: CLASS PICTURES

Asked Back 151
Miss Dancey 152
Leslie Aumaire 152
Jesus Lopez 153
Ben-Hur 154
Mrs. Grook 154
Norma 155
Miss Dark 155
Dolores Knight 156
World History 157
Mr. Byron Jarvis 158
Ober Alles 158
Rex Wishnevski 159
Physics 160
Mr. Music 160
Rita Rubio 161
Jack Henry 162
Jose Ramirez 162
Tom White 163
That Kid 163
Leon Hendrixon 164
Dan Anderson 165
Lee Zorn 165
C. B. "Mathew" Brady 166
Janet and Howard Darling 167
All Star 168

VI: GAP

My Brother Made Model Airplanes 169
Oasis 170
Gap 170
Citrus Heights 171
Edward Morgan Barry 172
Our Town 172
Double Date 173
In the Basement of the Carnegie Library 174
Mrs. Northcross 174
Mlle. Smith 175
Miss Bagley 176

Judith Lovelace, M.A. 176
Dr. Tyger 177
Field Trips: Geology 1 & 2 178
Mrs. Oates 178
Social Conscience 179
Rosemary or Jasmine 179
Richard McGregor 180
Maryjo Malone 181
The Famous Poet 181
Chalice 182
The Stream 183
When No One Else Had Ever Been Eighteen 183
Feeling Surreal 184
From Aardvark to Zymurgy 184
Heigho Silver 185

VII: REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR

Places, Everyone 187
The Only Trouble 188
Communion 189
Our World 189
Norwalk 190
Remember Pearl Harbor 190
Steve Yamamoto 191
Edgar Nielson 192
My Sudden Cousin, My Sanguine Minister, and The Cruelty
of Conviction 193
Conscientious Objector 194
Fires 194
Dressed for an Occasion 195
Eyes 196
Brothers 196
Now They Work In Banks 197
Oohing the Umlaut 198
I Find Time 200
Aunt Anna Marie Hayes 201

Golden Wedding 202

Later 203

Home Movies at Newport 204

Section One: ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 5.

I: ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Winesburg by the Sea

I thought Winesburg somewhere else but I lived in it,
my own Spoon River on the California coast,
no Virgil to show me around and to point out
in that bright darkness, the lesson of the lost.
I read of Main Street as a midwest place—
An American Tragedy happened far to the east,
figures of old art on Keats's vase
no less remote than those tales or more antique.
Didn't I walk under palms in an air that blossomed
huge pink hibiscuses and poppies for the bees,
how could minds be anything but open
so close to sunset and the rich realm of the seas?
I had to go away and to look back like Orpheus
or Lot's wife turned to salt before I could see
how it really was, from one point of view glorious,
from another, hell itself, and damned past pity.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
11.

Cock-a-Doodle-Doo

The rooster in this suburb crows me back
 —no blue was ever cobalt as those skies,
 cannas couldn't have burst as bright as those—
 to waking in a boy's world of surmise,
 a block of lawns, trees, cats, dogs, bungalows—
 even the word's gone now for wooden homes
 with porchswing afternoons of lemonade;
 we hadn't heard of suburbs, lived near town
 where gingham witches clucked, whose gnarled hands sprayed
 grain to the cock and hens, and the iceman came,
 liquid diamonds leaking from his truck,
 and tonged a cube of winter on his back.
 Someone might have moved from a Main Street mansion—
 come on, Jim, Bill, Arthur, come on, Dick,
 let's see if a skeleton key'll fit the lock—
 it does, and sneakered boys intrude
 on parquet floors, a stairway curving up
 to bedrooms, and real tile around the tubs,
 a shower—hey, someone left some soap—
 then know, by veils of blue cigarry smoke
 hanging in the hall we aren't alone;
 with hearts in bellies, stirred-by-terror hair
 we're down the dusty bannister and gone...
 to dig a clubhouse in the vacant lot
 or build a tent for secrets on the lawn:
 Touch a toad, you'll break out into warts
 In Africa they don't wear any clothes
 I've seen your sister and she's getting tits
 If you do catch warts you can cure them with potatoes
 Why don't we try to swipe some cigarettes?
 We're up in prickly cedars looking down,
 skating the edge of everything there is
 until our handlebars have learned the town,
 until there's nothing left of innocence
 but lower marks of height we've soon outgrown.
 And brightness fades like smoke words from the air

with the Green Hornet and Tom Sawyer's fence,
multiplicities of what was rare
obscure us from our early vividness—
12 unless some bird of dawning crows it clear.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
12.

Martin's Texas Tamales

My mother drives us as I lean from mohair
in the square Buick to the other side of town—
we turn a corner at a grocery store,
I look the fanpalmed street both up and down
though I have been here many times before.
I've passed this gingerbread, these stormwarped porches,
the paintpeeled, useless shutters hung askew,
the little dogs exploding on the lawns
into big barks as we go driving through
poor people's twilight where there are no dawns—
it's always six o'clock and time for supper,
with broken trikes and wagons left along
the root cracked sidewalk; there is a small
sign on a palmtree before the house we stop at,
a onetime mansion, yellow as Chagall.
The handled lettered sign spells MARTIN'S TEXAS TAMALES—
my welldressed mother goes up to the bulging door
and a dark lady in a night black shawl
flashes whitetoothed smiles I can see from the car,
takes the pan she's handed and after a while
brings it back, makes change, and that is all—
except the still there smell through yesterday's paper
of warm tamales near me on the seat—
life, that mysterious Mexican memory shaper
has wrapped in husks some mix that's cornmeal sweet.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 13.

Photograph of Ghosts

Smiling with high coiffures and enormous
silken hats, my several aunts
and mother posed, graceful as sylphs
for this seabeach photograph
on fleshcolored sand whose bits of sticks and tar
are long since tideward drawn, and by the waves
engulfed, quite gone, like their long skirts
that flourish no more under the different sun.
Cruel photograph, to have caught them
exuberant and young, the one's hand at that
clear cameo, and the starched lacy stuff
at this one's throat, for an instant only.
Among them, resurrected, the dead sister shares
their two-dimensional moment, ephemerid
frailer than they who circle
but a little longer the bright helium sphere.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 13.

Catalina

The island came close again,
somehow floated in
and lost the blur of distance
as if such mists could thin—
its hills showed chapparal,
its harbor with a pier
had masted ships and bathers
in quaint suits splashing near.
Ladies in hats, with parasols
strolled boardwalk Avalon
accompanied by sailors
and dandy Sunday men—
my mother and my father
rocked in a picnic boat;
I heard their drifting laughter,
I saw the starring light—
while I walked the far mainland
too hazed for them to see,
my watch ticking tomorrow,
they lived bright yesterday—
some dream lens over the water
had zoomed them out of time—
Sunday on La Grande Jatte
focused beyond an eye—
they so young, on honeymoon
and I older than they
trying to call them home
to my side of the sea—
Mom, don't you remember,
and Dad—I'm getting grey—
as they spooned on Catalina
blue decades away.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
14.

The Cruel Sea

She sat me by the waves
and said now you stay there—
and one broke over my head,
tugging me into the glare—
I gasped and coughed out salt,
my sandpail swirled away
and I felt or thought I felt
sea things munch at my legs.
I had been left to die,
a lunch for the sharks and snails,
lipped by the cruel sea
of love's betrayal.
She ran to lift me out
laughing (who wanted a daughter)
I wanted to get you over
fear of the water.
And for years I dreamed I was dragged
into that ocean,
struggling to shore from the mouths
of her cold emotion.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 15.

Again, Again

Again, again I swim
in images of foam
down to the seadrowned town,
under the rim of brine.
I walk the sandribbed times
of saltscent, pelican
(his slack beak skims sardines)
the sea is green as limes.
I hold my breath between
the fishers on the pier
and find my father there,
a pole curved from his hand.
He smiles, he's winding in
a hooked lip dripping gems,
o-eyes, black, immense—
the rest of it is fin. 15

It struggles among buckets,
it tugs at my childish eye
until I don't quite cry.
My father, blood on his knuckles,
slaps it into a creel.
The glittering agates rise,
sinker, hook and line
fly whizzing from the wheel.
I run the other way,
I never hear since then
Christ, fisher of men
except the cruel bait
arcs from my father's hand,
the fooled tail flaps
in a metaphor that gasps
in air where I first drowned.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 15.

Fessendens'

Once I went in, the eyeglassed geezer
smiled and winked and said, "Well what'll it be?
Soda pop or ice cream out of the freezer—
or tell you what—we're getting in next week
an Aunt Jemima doll, wound with a key.
She opens up her mouth and sings 'Susannah'
and does a dance and only costs a dime,"
The old store smelled like overripe banana,
and spotting the counter on which Fessenden leaned
was fish blood being drunk by a big green fly.
"Oh please," I said, "will you save a doll for me?"
"Sure will. Now what do you want today?"
And I chose ropes of licorice, five for a penny,
and skipped out happy into the glare from the sea.
I asked him every time if he'd got that Mammy
and every time he said "What do you mean?"
and denied, with a face as sour as a pickle,
he'd ever mentioned a doll that sang a tune—
and even when he gave me a cherry Popsicle
it dripped in the different sun
like blood from a wound.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 16.

Confetti

She said “There’s Someone up in the sky
who’s going to punish you for what you’ve done”
which was: stealing a box of confetti
from an open garage, abetted by Donald McMillan.
We’d tossed it up in the air and it fluttered along
the walks, the afternoon lawns, like snow on the bushes.
“You know your taking it was very wrong
and you’re going to have to tell Mrs. Smith you took it.”
We did. Mrs. Smith eight feet high
glowering out of her door, in glittering glasses,
said, however—“Oh, that’s all right
except you’d better clean up after your messes.”
But though we quickly swept away our sin
it took years to stop expecting God to swoop down.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 17.

A Voice in the Rapids

Tragedy wasn't Hamlet or Medea—
of whom it would be a while before I heard—
but my Aunt Clara, away in a horseless carriage
with her young husband—just wed in the Methodist Church.
The way my mother told it, I could see them—
she in a hat tied down with a blowing veil,
and he in a cap, bug goggles—both of them laughing,
the road in those days hardly more than a trail.
They stopped at sunset somewhere up in the mountains—
the odor of pine, and jays that probably squawked,
the green and white river swirling, gushing with fountains—
bees must have buzzed in buttercups where they walked.
“And while Aunt Clara was cooking their wedding supper
over a fire her groom had happily made,
he decided to go for a little swim in the river,
stripped to his drawers—into the cold cascade.

She heard him yell “Help! Help!” and heard him screaming—
though thought it was only one of the jokes he played—
but when he didn't come back she went down to the river,
stood on the bank and called, then crazily prayed.
Later they found his body, facedown and bloated—
it took Aunt Clara five years -to get over the shock—
a tragedy—“ my mother said, and in that word
a voice in the rapids cries back from pitiless rock.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 17.

Ben Harding's Flying Machine

As the thing with crisscrossed wires between its wings
went up like a halfbaked bird and then crashed down,
the men yelled "Get a horse" and the ladies tittered
but Ben Harding got out and bowed in his goggles and cap
and clasped his hands above his head in a sign of winning
and wasn't embittered.

Greeted with jokes on the street,
he went right on thinking and tinkered around
and once, on a porchswing, my mother (with eyes averted)
told (and she might have if his nails hadn't oozed grease)
that he'd asked her to marry him, and blurted
when she laughed no, "All right, you'll see, you'll see!"
Ben went home whistling and patiently twisted his wrenches
until even the stupidest cows had to agree
as a sound like a giant lawnmower ratcheted over
and their milk curdled, and dogs, terrified, peed,
that someone besides birds could fly and angels hover
and shine in the sky and suddenly pick up speed.
And Ben became famous and rich and was good to his mother,
giving her houses and servants and cars and gown after gown
from Paris (and never married) my mother said (with a sigh)
almost as if she wished instead of doubting she'd believed
he'd get off the ground, and high above town,
like Zeus with Leda, her sons had been conceived.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 18.

The Depression

My father sometimes said we were going to the poor house
and nothing got my mother madder than that—
I saw us leaving, with a few rags in the Buick—
would they let me take along my cat?
My mother, furious, splotches on her neck,
shouted “Just because I bought a new spring hat!”
“Money don’t grow on trees” was his next comment
and I saw orange trees, green with dollar bills,
neat and round in long rows at the ranch—
then in my mother’s voice the tone that chills
“Miser! Tightwad! Skinflint!”
and from her pretty face, a knifing glance.
He must have got rich quick. Morning glowed better.
We didn’t pack up and move to the County Farm.
She kept the hat, and that night above the platter
of juicy beef generous Dad was carving
he said, as if nothing had been the matter,
“Eat every scrap.
Someplace kids are starving.”

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 19.

Ear

"Lowell inherited wit and a love of poetry
from his mother." -The World Book

"Whether we look or whether we listen,
We hear life murmur, or see it glisten"—
my mother used to quote
on a what-is-so rare day
not much different
from this one.

She with her henna hair
and grey bearded James Russell Lowell
are both long gone and few remember
such old anthropomorphic poems—
"Then Heaven tries the earth if it be in tune
And over it softly her warm ear lays."

Still though when this blue warmth happens
I once more am that small boy
running out from where my mother's finger
hisses testing the iron,
and looking up to where I'm sure there'll be
a giant ear descending from the sky.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 19.

Marjorie

I was going to marry my cousin Marjorie—
as pretty as any star in the rotogravure,
and I thought she loved me, the way she gave me candy
and those times she cuddled and kissed me I was sure—
but she had a tall thin man she called a beau
who sometimes towseled my hair or playfully poked me.
“Clifford, you be nice,” she smiled as she said
whenever he got too rough and might have provoked me.
Then one day my mother said, “Marjorie’s eloped”
and I asked her what that meant and she only sighed
“Ran away and got married—to Clifford, you know—”
Then I knew she’d never be my bride
even if I should hurry up and grow,
but she was so beautiful, I could have cried.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 20.

Alice White

Blandly radiant, lighting the grey walk,
perfect as her name, came Alice White.
She stopped to skip the squares of hopscotch chalk
while I, my tongue too tied in knots to speak,
watched until she dazzled out of sight,
her pink bows bobbing as she danced along.
And I began to wobble, warm and weak,
as I sighed home, not knowing what was wrong.
Bigger kids in knickers might have whizzed
and squealed their wheels so she would have to stare,
or shaken up a Nehi till it fizzed
and popped the top to show what they could dare—
but how could any little shrimp of five
let a goddess know he was alive.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 20.

Hired Girls

Louella's h"air, so black I had to pull it,
sitting on her tasselled flapper's lap—
Naomi's sky blue eyes I liked to wink at,
Viola's legs that made a silken zip
crossing and uncrossing as we sat
at Grandpa's when I wasn't half a man—
hired girls, who cleaned and did the dishes
but in the evenings joined the family group—
a beautiful succession of pert swishes,
soft hair and eyes and lips, and beaded loop—
the early stirrers of my manly wishes—
how nice they smelled, and swelled like ripened fruit.
Sister big and virtuous as nuns,
they'd lift me up and say that I was cute—
Naomi holding me, her honeybunch—
she ran off later with some gangling lout—
but I liked blonde Viola just as much
whose teeth winked brighter, in a redder mouth.

//.

Blase roue, by then an old Don Juan—
no sooner had Viola left for good
than I went into sleek Ramona's room,
who let me play at typing on her bed,
and leaned beside me with such wild perfume
I felt a blood she never knew I had.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 21.

I Don't Remember

I don't remember why—or what we did there—
it may be my mother needed to get away—
at the Barbara Worth Hotel in Santa Barbara
beside the mission sea for a weekend stay.
There might have been palmtrees, sunsets on the waves,
purple lantana hillsides, long colonnades—
all I recall is the dark panelled lobby,
and a fluttering headline in a chill that still pervades.
Cold looks of crisis, silences of hurt,
some turmoil underneath that hardly rippled the nice—
there might have been these, I feel as I think back
to a bed with a sheet turned down as neat as ice,
but the rest of that winter weekend when I was five
at the Barbara Worth with its darkness and lighted name
is a why and what of ones who no longer can drive
in the old car home to warmth from a lonely time.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
21.

Saturday Nights and Sunday Mornings

Saturday nights, dressed in our innocence,
my mother curled, my father's Homburg neat,
my brother and I both slicked with Vaseline
to keep our hair as polished as our feet,
we parked downtown, got out and shopped around
as regular as rituals repeat.

Salvation ladies shook their tambourines
and men in buttons tromboned for our sins—
the windows showed us toys and dummy scenes—
skirts that were up to knees or down to shins,
radios and all the latest things
for Easters, Christmases and Halloweens.

We never bought much, met at nine o'clock
in Uncle Peter's shoe store—Fourth and Main—
my father smoked his White Owl at the back
and let me have the rich band for a ring—
and after anecdotes among the smoke
we went on home the s-ame way we had come.
That was our life.

I added up and learned to read between.
Then Sunday's funnies and the dressed up ride
to Sunday School to hear about a man
they said was crowned with thorns and crucified.
Once every week we nailed him up again.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 22.

Miss Herring

Remembering Miss Herring, redhead who taught me to read,
her faintly freckled arm flashing like ivory,
eyes flashing; holding up card after card,
oh she was slender, beautiful and lively—
peppery tempered, sending to the principal
bad boys who whispered, giddy girls with gum;
learning personified, intelligence invincible—
old to me then, I see her now as young.
Mistress of alphabets, flashing DOG and CAT,
tall twenty-five, sylph in filmy green,
she flashes cards of knowledge back and back
and I can read her spelled out suffering—
love's rage fading in a slow small town,
hating every child not her own.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 23.

Jealousy

The way I pictured jealousy was this:
an old vignette my mother often told—
she and Aunt Lillie, the young and older sister,
strolling one Sunday
in some Dakota field
with Uncle Peter, a handsome bridegroom then,
when a monstrous bull loomed toward them hooving and snorting—
careless of cowpies,
Uncle Peter escorting
both to the safety of an empty wagon
and helped my mother up and then his bride,
a flurry of flounces and her wide sash dragging—
which may have been the worst mistake
of his life—
in that mad second giving a hand to my mother
before he'd saved his palpitating wife—
she never forgot, or forgave one or the other,
and always felt that horn
twist in her side—
 ghostly as the one that tore my brother
 and gored and gored him since the age of five
 when I was born, he imagined his darling mother
 forsaking him
 to bring me home alive.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 23.

Brother

Tandemed by him down Memory Lane, the gun
slung across his broad back, his blond
head bobbing, his hard calves pumping us beyond
the city limits to the country sun,
I was his brother, bothersome and young,
behind him on the bike's rack, holding on,
hearing the fence posts whiz and asking all
eager tediums a small brother can.
From manzanita in the river bed,
feathers white edged, eyed like frightened jewels,
topknots quavering, quail flew
and some dropped back into the bushes, dead—
brother, hero, blond god, why do I see
murdered birds still bleeding in your eyes?

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
24.

Hand on the Gun

Hand on the gun the day the cat died—
my father's manly one,
veined and sinewed, touched the trigger,
eternity between
then and the first shot, the first sick kitten
blasted beyond.
Truth in the orchard, death by the mustard
yellow with bees and sun,
virile the jaw at every cocking;
straight from the eye that sighted
bullets tore five furs of pathos—
life could never be righted.
Meowing at last, the pink-tongued mother
whose comfort I had known
twitched to a stillness tears and shaking
wouldn't wake her from.
"The cats were sick. We couldn't keep them,"
he said. "It had to be done,"
and I fell down forever, cold in that clover,
but took his assassin's hand.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 24.

Orange

A symmetry of segment takes me back—
the seeded juicy acid smell of fruit
when the rind's knifed off, a thicker outer fact
revealing all the softness of the truth—
Dad's there in the orchard, and the skin
spins an organge ribbon from his blade—
how lucky can you get to be the son
of someone hard as he and so arrayed
his capable copper buttons catch the sun
raying through the blossoms and the leaves—
he stands in shade where water ditches run
blue as his smiling eyes, with glints of doves,
above the thirsting roots that spread beneath,
and hands the globe of sweetness down to me.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 25.

Veil of Perfume

His black dog asleep by the emery wheel,
my ninety-year-old grandfather sits
sectioning an orange, juice trickling
into his stubborn goatee as he eats,
saying “Schmeckt ‘s gut,” his straw-hatted
sons at lunch (like a Brueghel) before
the broad red door slid back that reveals
chicken feed spilled on a dirt floor.
Out of the barn’s blue depths a Leghorn
crosses the dazzling gravel, idiotically,
red comb wobbling, pecking at rocks;
the sons doze under the umbrella tree.

My grandfather gets off the old Buick’s fender;
the dog shakes himself licking my grandfather’s
affectionately freckled hand. They go to look—
walking the elliptic ditches of the orchard—
at God’s work, specking the leaves here with aphids,
stripping this branch bare, and there
hanging a whole tree with a veil of perfume
and bees and oranges, in the certain air.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 25.

Aunt Nettie

A heart of gold was what I heard
about Aunt Nettie, big-boned, loud,
who pranced down ranch steps toward the car,
gossiping of sex and God.
Eyeglassed, in her apron, howled
that she'd been—Halleluja!—saved
(again) down at the river bed
where saints and sinners rolled and raved,
or inquired if we knew who
was doing what with who these days.
“Ain't we got fun?”—she slapped a thigh—
the sun through palmleaves flashed like blades,
the chickens pumped like golden hearts
on naked feet across the yard,
the windrill wheeled, the windcock turned,
new yolks bubbled in her barn.
She'd hand us tracts with Bible quotes
and redness warning to REPENT,
or tell us it was avocados
as healthful manna God had meant.
I thought she must have known His number
and between times of listening in
on neighbor ranches, through the static
chatted afternoons with Him,
she was so certain how we slipped,
and had His recipe for good—
He must have told her who deserved
the bright sword of her righteous mood.
She cooked kind stews to serve the sick,
she could forgive, if He required,
but looking back I have to think
hearts of gold are sometimes hard.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 26.

Uncles in the Orchard

You wouldn't have known they were the same men in the orchard—
farting clowns under a tent of trees,
wearing Lee overalls that xed their backs—
using censored words and taking pees,
they were like polite Huck Finns released
into a pristine auntless wilderness,
proud to be masculine beneath the leaves,
who had to hide it in a living room,
and sat so sanctimonious and meek
in pious pews hearing of sinners' doom—
cracking jokes as they cracked walnut shells
and popped into shaven mouths the tender meats.
No, Uncle Joe, you weren't meant to be tamed
and led home by a lady, on a leash;
I saw you at your best, not very tall
but capable of anger as a beast—
you must have seemed, before life made you small,
David with his sling, in dreams at least.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 27.

Aunts and Uncles

Where is Aunt Alice, Paderewski's pupil,
 who smelled of mint, who winked across the keys
 rings of seedpearl, turquoise, rings of opal,
 whose smiles were music to my childish eyes,
 who loosed, through the stuffiness were I was young,
 sirens in Debussy's tonal seas,
 who bent to better me with Bach among
 surroundings inharmonious otherwise?
 Deaf in a narrow parlor under grass,
 silence at her marrow, beetles for a brain,
 dead Aunt Alice lies pianoless,
 safe from Mozart's joy or Chopin's pain,
 and yet her smiles reverberate again,
 her flesh-warm rings flash in my listening. 27

Summer and winter my Aunt Lillie sat
 chilled in her sunroom reading books of love,
 her flesh bright clothed, her bones too deep for heat,
 her odd, small body too entranced to move.
 Vicarious heroine dancing tall and tense
 through ballrooms of intrigue, the nymph of many beds,
 she fled across romantic continents
 while Uncle Peter multiplied like seeds
 her planted cash, the money money breeds;
 and she was richer than some princesses
 but begged from fiction all her warmer needs
 for real desire, for daring instances—
 lips at her icy ear, and hands to speed
 her heart, not paper, while it still could beat.
 Now I am uncle, like homunculi
 puny nephews, dwarfish nieces sport
 comic around me, now instead of me
 a later generation just as short
 notes my mustachioed eccentricity
 as once I stared at Uncle Peter's wart,
 as, from the vantage of a lower eye,
 normal faces frequently distort.
 I view them not as children but as some
 funny show of quick and charming freaks,

knowing my own enlargement looks to them
one of those natural, disturbing quirks
—humorous animal or man from space—
and neither dreams the other in his place.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
27.

Sundays at Uncle Earl's

who lived on a date-palmed road—
Aunt Laura mixing the batter
in their little brown house in the grove—
Gwendolyn—a beauty—
Jim—who drew cartoons—
and their dog, Woo, a wagging friend
old sun red afternoons—
above the sofa, an Indian
on a horse at “The End of the Trail”,
glinting even redder
as the light continued to fail.
All of us laughed in the kitchen
while the ticking waffles grew,
and that was the sweetest butter
and syrup we ever knew.
We talked—Gwendolyn kissed me—
Aunt Laura smiled and smiled
and Uncle Earl joked on and on
and Jim sat there and drew.
The stars came up to the windows—
gems on velvet black—
and we had to go home from the tasseled lamps—
that long and dark way back.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 28.

Rich Man, Poor Man

Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief—
twiddling aunts went down our coats
counting out what we would be—
Doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief—
what little tickled men we were
perching on their silken knees
and in a perfumed cloud allowed
to dream of possibilities—
weren't we pampered then and proud?
And some became what sweet aunts told
and some died early in a war
before our doting aunts were old
and some got rich and some stayed poor
while plump aunts shrank and shook and bent,
and some, who'd seemed so bright and sure
to go as far as buttons said
when bouncing aunts had counted there,
went mad, or broke, or drank instead.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 29.

The Science They Breathed

Sealed in that sweetness, nothing could touch them—
nodding yes yes it's so true, so true
in the Health of the heat in the room like a tomb
and the Science they breathed saved them from seeing
pictures of danger where rugpatterns seethed—
the mad eyed magician, the witch, and the tiger's
teethbaring smile not far beneath.

But Grandpa awoke and cried "Where's your head?"
on a battlefield screaming with cannons, he said,
the soldier beside him blown past believing
no one had died.

Then Aunt Alice spoke to him awfully softly
while Will's gold edged teeth completely agreed,
"You imagined it, Papa, death's not harmonious,
it's clearly erroneous,
and only exists as an unChristian creed."

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 30.

Gettysburg

Smiling whitehaired, "My boy," he slapped a knee,
pulled out a worn thin watch and looked at me
while I got up from roses in the rug
and sat like expectation on his leg.
"Grandpa, tell me a story." "Well, my boy,
which would you like, the Civil War or Troy?"
'The Civil War,' I said, "—about the day
you died." "Not quite died but there I lay,
one lung shot out, voices overhead—
'Leave him, he's dead,' 'Take him,' the other said—
debating against a distant fusillade.
I saw their two blue figures blurred through blood,
oh my Lord, and couldn't wheeze a word.
Next I heard a wheel of water whirl,
soldiers cursing cards and I was on
a riverboat, maggots in my wound.
A man held up a cup I couldn't drink.
Where would you be, Harold, do you think,
if they had left me in that bloody mud?"
"Where would I be?" I questioned, "Where would
I be, Grandpa?"—a small boy balanced on
his brittle knee. "Tell me, please," and then
he pondered those slim numerals again.
"That's a story for another time."
But the shot kept numbing; shattered by that thought
my own red life was leaking, drop by drop.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 30.

I Touched the Hand That Shook the Hand of Lincoln

I touched the hand that shook
the hand of Lincoln—
blackveined by then,
a liverspotted claw—
“went, what they called later,
A.W.O.L.”—Grandpa said,
riding his highback rocker
“to see old honest Abe—
the wind blew raw—
and he stood on the back
of a train, talking of union—
we all reached up
to greet him when he was through—
Yessir, a good man,
straight and tall—
he looked just like he looks
on stamps and pennies—
except he wore
a stovepipe hat and shawl—
but sad, boy, sad
and tired of war.”
And Grandpa sat there
rocking back to Shiloh
and other gruesome
battles oozing gore—
and he was sad and tired,
almost a hundred
(in spite of one lung
missing since the war)
wondering, maybe as I do,
who touched the hand

that once shook hands
with Lincoln
(who surely wondered, too)
what it was for.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 31.

Under the Roses

She lay there in the casket under sprays
of roses, stocks and gladioluses,
seeming to breathe although her eyes were closed
and her live lips had never glowed so pink.
Later I'd hear "When Allie passed away—;
but that late date was still too soon to think.
Grandpa shuffled in while Rock of Ages
mourning from the organ shook the petals
and touched her hand and whispered "Daughter, daughter..."
dark spots on the ribbons of his medals.
Two aunts rushed up and all that they could say
was "Papa, don't—" "You know there is no death—"—
and it took all their Scientific strength
to hold him back before he kissed her face.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 32.

Veterans

We had to take him out
in all his faded ribbons
to sit among the veterans
whose faces looked like webs.
The green lawn never ended
with flowers near the crosses—
the Mayor spoke, and soldiers
fired saluting guns—
flags waved as the band
thrilled us with its drums—
high school majorettes
twirled and twirled batons
that glittered in the sun—
and every year one less
folding chair was there
with hat and uniform—
until above the bunting
Grandpa sat alone—
but still the band's brass circles
blew Stars and Stripes Forever
for Shiloh and Bull Run—
and still the lawn stretched on
with crosses crosses crosses
farther than Verdun.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 32.

Everett

Softly and often I heard tell of Everett,
my flawless cousin in the photograph,
almost haloed over his virgin curls,
with an eyelit mouthcurve tickling toward a laugh—
so wellbred, so gentle, such a little man,
buttoned in velvet, tapered of hand.
His death was stark torture—cancer that crawled
right through his mouth and all the way down
as he turned pale and bore it
with hardly a frown.
You saw he was going, my soft mother sighed—
he tried not to show it. He smiled as he died.
Why was I mean then, toad-wordy and desperate,
finding things out and sneaking through weeds
behind backlot fences when a cousin like Everett
spoke phrases of pearl and did such good deeds?
And sometimes I thought I heard Everett say
“Perfection is easier once you’re a memory.”

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 33.

What She Said

When a girl at the Farm Bureau dinner
dropping mayonnaise on her dress
jumped up and said oh Fuck,
not knowing what it meant
I liked its ripe fruit sound
and so repeated it—
then felt a shouldertap
and when I turned around
a lady who'd gone red
said, "I don't know what that means
but know it isn't nice—"
which hardly made good sense—
a luscious word like that—
the more I thought of it
the less it seemed to detach
from a tall branch and—splat—
make a gold sound on the ground—
I didn't say it again
and it began to rot
like anything kept in.
Next time I heard it spat
out of some bully's mouth
it lay there grey as death,
and secret worms writhed out.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 34.

The Johnson-Smith & Company

Grown ups, no matter what we sent for
out of those pages promising so much—
the sneezing powder and the squirting flower,
the gadget that could make a handshake buzz,
seldom were impressed, and if so, slightly,
reacted with indifference or disgust,
smiled for a minute, but not very brightly
at bloody thumbs and real looking guns—
didn't believe it when we threw our voice,
though sometimes they were horribly convinced
that the turd wasn't rubber or the farting noise
came from Aunt Glennie instead of Johnson Smith
whose cruel catalog of tricks and toys
knew that boys always would be boys.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 34.

Miss Hale's

Hoping improvement, my brother and I were enrolled
for lessons at Miss Hale's where in front of a mirror,
a full length oval showing us short with faults,
we practiced elocution for an hour—
rewarded afterward with chocolate malts.
He went in first while I, in her horsehair parlor,
itchily fidgeted, as someone waiting for torture
hears in the next room a victim groan—
wouldn't this kneepants childhood ever be over,
how many inches did it take to make a man?
In wrinkled rouge, she cherrily said, "You 're next—"
my finished brother sat where I had sat
and I went in beyond the door of beads
to give my reading to the ghastly class
as Miss Hale hovered backward ghosting my words.
Her little birdmouth seemed to be picking at seeds
or wide as a tiger's, spurted the blood from T's.
She ooded like eating lemons, clicked falseteeth.
I sighed out my singsong, waving my several hands,
wishing, I thought, if this was life, for death.
Action to words, she did a laughable dance
or sawed up the air with skinny braceleted gestures.
How many lightyears can an hour last?
How long until later in blunders' Wonderland?
Childhood was the time that never passed
in Miss Hale's inner chamber saying the speeches
and watching antiquity creak in a rigorous prance—
and after that prisoner's hour being released
to knickers first and then to manly pants
and hearing of Miss Hale's death—almost with grief.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 35.

Like Any Boy

Like any boy, I needed something more
than self, and family of ambivalence,
an absolute, a god, I could adore—
and lavished love on cats that through the fence
returned from fanged excursions missing fur
but purring as they were they weren't enough,
not worth obeisances with far-brought myrrh;
they lacked a certain magic star of proof.
Then one day playing, there in a dim lit manger,
I saw a new perfection at a teat,
and later lugged it home through streets of danger,
the very tenderness to ease my need—
god spelled backwards, licking at me with pleasure,
a pup my father said I couldn't keep.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 36.

Rumble Seat

We'd heard of what was done
by big kids in their teens—
but under the moon what fun,
us in a rumble seat,
only eight or nine
and bumped through wind and light—
whee!—past WEISMANN'S DRUGS
and out toward the sea air night.
Melvin up in front
and Norval who got to drive,
laughing like silent films
while we shouted, bundled in back
and then through fields of beets
where the sugar factory chugged
Norval gave it the gun,
and holding on to our lives
we flew down the dip and up,
our stomachs gone like balloons
that drifted slowly down
and it almost seemed we would fly
over the curve where we stopped,
over the moon bright sea
as we tittered at what went on
36 in life's next rumble seat.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 36.

Jump Rope

Charlie Chaplin sat on a pin,
how many inches did it go in?—
Kathy Cox chanted
and Lois Grant sneered,
turning the rope
in a viny backyard.
They were the curled first
girls I adored—
willowy Kathy
and Lois's nose
reckless with freckles,
dresses with bows—
giggling and jiggling
pink against leaves.
“Red hot peppers!”
and both of my loves
made me skip faster,
cracked at my feet
the arc of the clothesline,
widening grins—
nastily Kathy
counted my leaps
and Lois, a Maenad
licking her lips,
flicking her hair back,
baring her teeth,
kept flashing her wrist
as the rope flew beneath—
oh how I panted
and wanted to win
for if by a hundred
I hadn't missed

(they'd said looking wise
and I couldn't guess what)
they'd give me a prize
in the spidered garage.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 37.

Tearful Occasions: Peroxide

They told me when I knocked that Kathy was taking a nap,
but liking them all, I ran in anyway
and right at the kitchen table there Kathy sat
among the Coxes next to pimpled Grace,
a slice of bread halfway to her mouth,
one of the cute striped kittens in her lap,
and under a pitcher poured by Marianne
Mrs. Cox above a sink of truth,
dripping peroxide from hair the color of butter—
facing their surprise what could I do
except apologize, and big-eyed, stutter
I thought I'd j-just come in to say hello—
then turned and ran, away from that sudden light
and sat on the curb of childhood and cried.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 38.

Perspective

When my fifth grade art teacher, Mrs. Temper, asked
“Whose is this?” holding my drawing up,
I raised my hand, small art enthusiast,
and told her it was the one that I had done.
“How could you have drawn it? Your name isn’t on it!”
she said going red and her bangles crashing.
“And you can’t handle perspective as well as that!”
I sat there watching her teeth that were large and flashing.
The chart of colors seemed to spin around.
But no one claimed my picture so I took it
off her desk, conscious of some great wrong,
seeing my name on the back where she’d overlooked it,
hearing the bell that ended the period sound
as the whole fifth grade blurred and flattened out.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 38.

Desperate Desmond

Desmond Petcalf, for no reason I could think of,
except that he was tougher and bigger than I was,
sprang out, at a party given by Marilyn Brinkerhoff,
from behind an oak tree and started to beat me up—
quietly—while I tried bravely not to cry
even when down on my back in the gravelly dust
far from the others, feeling his fist on my eye—
he hit and hit me, mad with some kind of lust.
In the picture he's absent—got up and sprinted away
when the kids squealed near with gay balloons on strings
and found me pale and bleeding where I lay
gulping the air and wondering about such things—
I'm the short one next to Gloria Simms,
sobbing among the universal grins.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 39.

Marilyn's Father

I remember him joking, the night that he did it,
at a church basement party, in an Uncle Sam suit—
Mr. Samuel Delvin, Rotarian, elder,
well-liked, respectable—Marilyn's father—
grammar school princess, our cardboard show's star.
They found him next morning, headlessly slumping,
the rifle aslant in his brainsplattered car;
no note told the motive—a half empty bottle;
we whispered at school—"Marilyn's father—"
and then we forgot, being lively and little,
until she came back, her hair curled as ever,
sadsmling, pretty, but marred in some way
in our minds by the bloodblast that ended her father—
innocent Marilyn, victim of tragedy,
the mystery suicide's deathspattered daughter.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 39.

Joseph Horwitz

None of us thought of Joseph as a Jew—
if he felt chosen, he never let us know—
instead he was admired by a few
for the dark hint of being more mature.
In our spare sixth grade armpits nothing grew.
We'd heard before of Joseph and all those
others in a testament of gore—
when Joseph's father, among cut-rate clothes,
was murdered in his Fourth Street dry goods store
all of us signed the sympathetic rose
printed on the card Miss Hurley brought.
We thought we saw the Mexican appear,
flashing a knife, and shuddered at the thought,
at every nightmare corner of our fear—
death's elusive angel, still uncaught.
And Joseph did seem different from us
when he came back with black around his sleeve,
a sadder pupil adding up the sum,
though after he no longer had to grieve,
as good at soccer as he ever was
but even older, while we felt more bare
and higher pitched than ever, and who knew
if he had known some wife of Potiphar
stroking like Miss Hurley's glances through
the rich symbol of his lustrous hair.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 40.

Elementary Education

“Don’t touch him—stay away,” the teacher warned us.

Our minute-before friend lay foaming on the ground,
his eyes rolled upward,

but why he should twitch like that no one informed us.

A line of blood came trickling out of his mouth.

We went away and whispered by the fence

“Larry’s gone crazy.” “I think he’s going to die.”

“How could it happen?”

“Joe, do you know why?”

40 Then the bell rang and all of us got into line,
craning to look back at Larry, the teacher kneeling
and signalling someone who’d driven up in a car—
a woman whose bright beads swung as she ran—his mother.
The bell rang again and all of marched on in,
straight and polite, though usually we pushed one another,
and told by rote the lessons we had learned—
whether it snows in Timbuctoo
and when Rome burned.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 40.

Larry Worth

I found out he was all right
in every other way—
sandy haired, blue eyed,
funny at times,
and he knew some words I didn't—
he asked me over once
to whisper the words
and look at his pigeons
but he climbed up a tree
and started to shake
and when he fell
almost fell on me.
He was alive, though,
jerking and foaming
the way I'd seen him
that time at school
except this time
there was a lot more blood.
I screamed, "Mrs. Worth, Mrs. Worth!"
and she came out
and squatted beside him and said
"Oh my baby, my baby,
he's cracked open his head."
My mother wouldn't let me visit him
at St. Joseph's Hospital
or after he was better
go over there anymore
to play with the pigeons—
she thought what he had
might be catching.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 41.

Heck Quinn

She didn't want me to play
with Heck Quinn, either—
freckled, humorous,
my own Huck Finn—
lizards in his pockets,
he knew where babies came from;
kitchen matches
flared from his thick thumb.
He might whistle for me
and I'd be out the window
off to some mischief,
sucking cigarettes—
she didn't like it,
questioned like a policeman,
with all the right on her side,
"Where on earth have you been?"
But she couldn't stop me
slipping off like that,
flipping out my manhood,
pissing beside him—
when he winked I winked back,
when he called I sneaked away
to desperate adventures
like those of Huck and Tom.
He stood there behind her,
grinning through the glass,
doing funny antics,
saying without saying
"Aw stick it up yer ass"
and how she would have screamed
and had Dad tan my hide
if she had ever dreamed
that boy I imagined.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 42.

Bones

None of them ever seemed to be in pain—
Grandpa slipped and snapped his toothpick hip
but he was old and almost gone by then—
a smile of Christian Science curved the lip
of nice Aunt Glennie, though she may have tossed
moaning the night before on beds of nails.
I never heard how Uncle Sol was lost—
why bother youth with death's unpleasant tales?
To me their bright cheeks didn't look too pink—
they were so careful not to cry or shake,
and to poke fun with one foot on the brink,
so sly with medicines and cleverly stoic,
I grew up thinking hearts and bones don't ache—
much later felt they must have been heroic.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 43.

Life in the Tomb

In that grey tomb of a house
where everyone nibbled his words
so crumbs wouldn't drop, and an aunt's
hands clawed as thin as a bird's,
where even the dewiest flowers
shriveled and seemed to gasp,
a table of General Grant's,
beads in the doorway, the clock
forever a quarter past,
a love seat where love never sat
under the case of swords,
but only a huge fixed cat—
the noise overhead—so I heard—
of footsteps and shuddering doors,
while Aunt Susan kept buttoned downstairs
among relics and rumors of wars,
was my great uncle John,
naked, chasing his nurse.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 43.

O Pioneers!

I remember pretensions of an aunt and uncle,
lounge lizards in silk pajamas,
they tossed raw meat to their German shepherd
on a Newport floor,
lived in Chevy Chase and drove a Cord—
the latest thing in sporty squareness then;
their house seemed like a white castle with archways and tile.
Thumbing through *The New Yorker*, I sat there
hearing tales of the Spanish American war,
in their beamed pale living room, bored—
there was no one to play with, nothing to do;
they served Coca-Cola—my mother said “They would, of course”—
and it was right up to date and very daring and new
when they got divorced.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 44.

Two Grandmothers: Hannah

Contained in her frame like the oval cameo
pinned to her bosom pleated stiff and white
she didn't turn a hair to hear the radio
gloomily announce what Hitler did that time,
but kept on smiling, mother of my mother,
mother of hennaed aunts and my favorite uncle.
She smiled forever above the rosy heater,
under "The End of the Trail"—a face I liked—
deaf to Uncle Porter and Uncle Peter—
china elephants in a tiny line
flanked her on one side and on the other
a gleaming abalone with CATALINA inscribed.
The plaster cracked, the flame-bulbed chandelier
swayed in the earthquake of nineteen-thirty-three—
"Oh my goodness!"—she tumbled to the floor—
I thought she would have shivered to smithereens,
but when I picked her image from the dust
her kind grey eyes seemed smiling: Never fear.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 44.

Sarah

Her house of sliding doors smelled
the next day of last night's supper,
she shuffled in darkness under
a kitchen light at noon
wearing high button boots,
her hair in a bun,
gave springerles to grandsons,
ticking her tongue.
Swiss, Wisconsin farm born,
shapeless mother of ten,
Sarah, hard to remember
except as a smile that bent
eyeglassed, sitting on horsehair,
mending things that were thin
and nodding her grey agreement
in a shadow world of men.
The day they sealed her in
out at the edge of town
I saw my father crying,
I heard my grandfather moan
and wondered why they should miss her,
Grandma, who'd only gone
back to a dimmer kitchen
to leave the men alone.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 45.

a Topless

When men started wearing topless shorts at Newport,
my mother sniffed on the porch and cleared her throat
at naked navels and nipples and said they look better
in shirts—here comes one now the old hairy goat.
Yet as the bellies paraded and pectorals passed—
thank goodness at least some part of them was clothed!—
and broad bare backs diminished down the walk,
redly rippling or jiggling tan as toast
she didn't go on into the house or home in a huff,
but sat there glued to the view with her silk legs crossed
and skirt at fashion's length below her knees
and watched—you might almost have said with lust
if she hadn't snickered and sneered at what was disclosed
and smoothed down her skirt even farther and
 straightened her hat—
not that she couldn't have ogled manhood at home
but she was too much of a right minded lady for that—
though when as the waves of seasons went out and in
what seemed obscene no longer even looked stripped,
she sat quite calmly sunning out on the sand
half nude herself in the air where sweet sweat dripped.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 46.

Miss Platt

I wonder if anyone missed Miss Platt,
 Milady's Vanity Barber,
who combed and snipped behind plate glass
 in the clean, slow years ago
in my treelined town now under the vast
 concrete and traffic flow,
if some, once clipped by her loving hand,
 neat sculptress of living hair
that fell like chips scattered around
 her pure white barber's chair,
noticed when beauty began to abound
 in parlors of noise and glare
that Miss Platt quietly wasn't there,
 and wondered where she had gone
with her little neck tissues and shining gear,
 and pinstripe aprons thrown
with such immaculate flourish for fear
 of soiling milady's gown.
Yes, I knew one once who followed her out
to the country of bees and sun
where she practiced her art on any lout
too lazy to ride into town—
my mother, tardy at fashion, and late
at forsaking a grace outgrown
loyally drove to sit at Miss Platt's
 whose scissors sang and sang on
as the meadowlark did in the rustling grass,
 and when her precisions were done
handed my mother a looking glass
 as if to a queen on a throne.
The town spread out, and Miss Platt again
 escaped into flower and arbor

far from the shoppes where new lotions shone
and hair needed more than a barber,
and crowned by a glory Miss Platt couldn't trim,
my mother followed still farther.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 47.

Birch Street

I wish now I had listened
those Birch Street summer nights
to Uncle Peter's tales
of blizzards on frontiers,
his boyhood in St. Paul—
but history was words
only heard at school.
“Now, listen, when you're old enough
you can write it all—”
anecdotes of Indians,
Sioux and Chippewas,
when as a rising shoe man
at some dim trading post
he'd swapped them out of moccasins
with pints of alcohol—
a riverboat he'd worked on
sculpturing the foam—
how young I was and bored,
trying to look interested,
staring at his wart.
But now that even that
modern time is gone—
the watch chain on his vest
from which an Elk's tooth hung,
the fake gas-burning log,
the tasseled lamps, the footstools,
the white, glass-eyed bear rug—
I wish I'd listened better
to the lesson of the past
as we sat there like a cover
by Rockwell on The Post,
while Uncle Peter tamped his briar
not so far away
from footpaths blazed by Daniel Boone
past Birch Street into space.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 48.

The Bank of Italy

I used to go among the marble columns
that exploded acanthus when I was counter tall,
and wait there for my mother to deposit
checks through the bars, smiling, being small,
at the guard who winked at me from mustached-heights.
It was like visiting a museum or a foreign country—
the floor had wiggles of black in pinks and whites;
I stood there peering in wastebaskets richly green,
I craned my neck to admire the golden lights,
and went out as from a temple into the street.
But when Benito Mussolini began to be seen
in newsreels with Hitler, scaffolds xed out the shrine—
we had to duck in under buckets and white capped workmen,
agile as monkeys, doing things to the sign,
and when they were finished, it didn't seem quite the same—
the floor glowed marble as ever, pillars still held up the sky,
the braided guard stood winking by the door,
but over the front and on the slips I swiped
it said BANK OF AMERICA where before
IT AL Y'd been lettered, and A. Giannini
didn't glare down like the Mafia anymore.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 49.

Green Orchard

It was the ranch again, eleven cousins,
 uncles in suits for once, aproned aunts—
 perspective a green orchard that stretched out
 bobbing with fruit, buzzing with orange blossoms—
 at the top of the pumphouse, a metal windmill turned—
 but as in a dream, it wasn't like that—
 instead of teasing, Bud, the biggest bully,
 smiled as when we sat
 smiling in the picture on the lawn
 and little Billy didn't tie cans to the cat—
 we all were caught at our best as the powder went off
 under the tall palms in front of the scroll work porch—
 you couldn't hear Aunt Edie's jealous sneering
 "I saw a dress like that on the cheap side of New York."
 My earthy uncles didn't hawk and snort
 arguing money out by the emery wheel—
 it was, in fact, a selective work of art,
 a cautious flashback of the raucous real
 where the cock of lechery rutted far in the barn
 and there was less to say than there was to feel.
 As in Willa Cather's rural past
 the steaming turkey had a clearer taste
 everything looked better, a gleam was on the dirt,
 Aunt Nettie never slapped her thigh to smirk
 at pregnant meanings in a bulging waist—
 lean in our shirtsleeves, we all took turns
 turning the sweetness of the salt packed churn,
 and, while ideal uncles scooped it out,
 altruistic aunts passed heaped-up bowls
 to cousins scrubbed until nostalgia shone.

Section Two: WEST EIGHTEENTH

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 50.

Il: WEST EIGHTEENTH West Eighteenth

I go down Main again—
now children you will see
the street where I grew up,
a corner cedar tree,
a hedge, a slope of lawn,
the deodar next door
lightgreen in the sun—
an apricot in back
I climbed blue summer days—
against the grey garage
a canna lily blaze,
and all along the street
white trunked walnut trees
with silhouetted leaves.
I turn down West Eighteenth,
wider than it was—
where are the trees, the lawns,
where have the porches gone,
of ferns and lemonades?—
what cleats of progress came
to bulldoze lights and shades
and make my climbing days
a concrete parking lot?—
but as we pass the place,
I feel what I forgot—
those early loves and griefs—
maybe it's just as well
time changes lives and streets.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 51.

Black Anecdote

Charlie's a nice nigger, isn't he, mama,
 I asked my mother, at the age of three—
 and—he won't hurt you, will he, mama?—
 the anecdote echoes—will he, will he?
 Polishing grins in the Baumgartner's Cadillac,
 his overall stripes must have stopped at that—
 the episode echoes back and back—
 but he tipped, nevertheless, politeness' hat.
 Later, my brother told—"Charlie said
 to call him a colored gentleman—"—
 and uncles and aunts, when the bon mots were quoted,
 tittered white pride at his black chagrin.
 He was ebon all right, almost as black
 as the Baumgartner's car, a part of the shine—
 clad from his cap to his boot tips in black—
 that drove furs and derbies clubward to dine.
 Gardener, too, he knelt to the tulips,
 digging pink palmed with his affable spade,
 against his black forearm, bloodcups of tulips
 in the ink green flutter of ginkgo tree shade,
 and gleamed his hellos at us. "He knows his place—"—
 gossiped my mother by bright blowing clothes
 to pie-nice, flour-white Mrs. Lovett
 and echoed again my "isn't" and "won't",
 turning my friendliness into her doubt,
 telling her bogeyman fear as my own—
 Charlie will get you if you don't watch out—
 as though he had sprung from my towhead fullgrown.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
 52.

The Vegetable Man

Diffuse it through lenses of time,
the treed and bungalowd street,
a sprinkler on a lawn,
grass smells rising sweet—
and slowly jingling along,
a truck with liftable sides—
the roving vegetable man
followed by noisy kids.
Show him parked at the curb,
our mothers down the steps
from all the morning doors—
some with their hair in nets—
to test the melons and fruit,
to ask how much for the beans
while we in our bare feet
wait for what he will do—
with an earring in one ear
and an impossible black mustache
that hat with its band of sweat—
toss us a cherry or two,
like jewels in that light,
and wink one eye as black
as a ringleted Corsair's boot—
as memory flickers him back.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 53.

Neighbors

I dreamed of neighbors, housewives when a child
who smiled, who smelled of cookie dough and dimes.
They asked me in where words and sinks were piled
with warm things, chocolate up to the brims
of cups, of crusts, crisp in floured light.
They listened, amiable; they shrugged, they hugged
the boy I was, their cute especial pride,
and gave me tidbits, sweets and tarts of love.
But when I aging dreamed them, dreamed them late,
their doors were locked, the face they showed
peering through windows was a face of hate.
They kept me bolted in a winter cold,
a man dissenting they wouldn't let come in
the kitchens of their kindness ever again.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 53.

Mrs. Marsden

Braided Mrs. Marsden, two doors down,
out of the bosom of her amplitude,
used to loose like great balloons of sound
arias over our neighborhood.

She sang so loud, at four I gave up naps,
but there were times when over the green lawns
her voice chased through the scales like butterflies
waltzing along.

A vaguely foreign lady faintly mustached,
she also had a husband and a dog
that yapped and snarled and clicked against the glass
windows of her song.

Once I saw her singing like a frog
puffed and wobbling big enough to burst
and wondered if a pin would hiss her thin;

I did my worst
to hate her like the gossips on the block
whispering guesses after she was gone—
but in the trash behind the empty house
of what she'd done

I found a gift of postcards in a box—
castles and flowers, statues of naked ladies,
and heard her voice, wherever beauty was,
cascading praise.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 54.

They

They came on canes under the feathery shadows
of red berried peppers in a blossomed tropic
on palmlined streets with sidewalk cracks where I
hopped and hoped and rolled on lawns of clover—
when I was young the old went creaking by.
Sploshed and crotchety and slow with troubled backs,
they shook their bird boned fists at any boy
who whistled past on skates and whee turned whirling
around the corner in pure boy joy—
where I was young, old people came to die.
Beyond begonias, they dozed on rest home porches
in a blue shade, and only woke to cry
from wrinkled mouths, untwinkling, as I flew,
threats and curses at the noise of life—
not being young was all they had to do.
I'm not there yet but find myself complaining,
like them sometimes, irked on this porch, too,
at loudnesses—and almost want to shout
shut up, slow down, as laughter goes careening—
like those old fogeys yelling at my youth.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 54.

Mrs. Small

I don't know why I needed another mother
but ran with my hopes and hurts to Mrs. Small—
an ample bosom toward which she would gather
my tears and smiles with a wide arm, pillow gentle—
she had no son and I was the one instead
she liked as well as any boy not hers—
in her house of comfort and of bulging bread,
a towhead brother to her auburn daughters
with whom I joked and talked as we played Hearts
out on their porch of fuchsias hour by hour
while Mrs. Small sat hemming pleated skirts
and brought cold lemonade, as sweet as sour,
but when dour Mr. Small scowled back from work,
I hightailed home, to wait for my only father.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 55.

Mr. Small

When Mr. Small, in spite of medicinal whiskey,
had another attack and suddenly died,
I couldn't feel sad, but just as frisky,
whizzing my Yo-Yo, listened to Chandu—
talking to God that night, I tried and tried
to pray the way good neighbors supposedly do
that he'd be handed a harp and robe of white,
but I was only eight and he was cruel—
especially to boys who were always coming over
and laughing with his daughters on the porch,
or clicking pingpong, trampled down his clover,
and though he'd been a pillar of the church,
I hoped if heaven had a pearly gate
he'd ring and ring the bell and have to wait.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 55.

S. (our) M. (ilk) Lovett

Tapping S. M. Lovett, Doc Clark said “Sun and rest—”
When his heart didn’t skip, his ulcers bled and bubbled,
and so, in a sheet like a toga, he shuffled out
to a little vined arbor he had, to be untroubled
which didn’t escape our boy-bright backyard eyes—
that thin pinched pale haired geezer who’d often yelled
“Get your damn dog off my lawn,” or “Don’t play here!”
white as a ghost, hoping to bask back health.
One at a time we climbed up the steep garage roof
to secretly peek in his leafy medical bower—
and it might have gone on for weeks if Jim hadn’t tittered
and almost slid off at the sight of such penile power.
Sour Milk seemed asleep, but there rose from the thick black bush
where his corpselike torso joined his matchstick legs
an enormous member, pointing up like a tower,
veiny and pink, with balls as big as eggs.
He heard us and jumped as if shot at, winding the shee’t,
and yelled and shook his fist and the sheet fell down—
“Get out of here, you Hoodlums! I’ll call the Police!”
by when, with too much to ponder, we were gone.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 56.

Ebersoles' Potato Chips

In a huge vat of grease
at the back of their house
they made potato chips—
only a block away—
white flakes in a writhe
flashed down and came up done
out of the tank of time—
we watched and licked our lips,
a sample salted our day
and seasoned our talk with a tang
far in a balmy dream
of kind-faced enterprise.

And from that fragrant place
we ran out into the sun—
Saddleback blue in a haze
rose at the end of our street.
Crack went the ball on the bat,
someone ran to base
under the walnut trees
where sun fell through the leaves
onto the dark green grass
like gold potato chips.
Crack and someone slid home
scraped by a manhole lid—
what was a little blood
when the best team always won?
But the dank day finally came
when we limped out of the dream—
Ebersoles' closed down,
sold to the faceless name
of a placeless corporation.
We stared down into the vat

empty of free creation—
Ebersole told us to scat,
and out in the eerie street
no one went up to bat.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 56.

Elaine Farquhar

The first few times we saw Elaine Farquhar
after they'd moved in, there she marched
with an armful of groceries, pushing a carriage
and still another baby on the way—

“That must be—tee hee hee—some marriage”
was what we heard the hatted aunties say.

Pale Elaine plodding toward the store
seemed heavy evidence against the stork—
not many months and there she went again
one of the kids pushing the other's cart,
the aunties tittering as we ran in,
“Isn't she expecting? Shame on him.”

Next summer, two were tugging at her skirt,
one squalled in the buggy, and “My stars!”
wasn't she already getting fat?

“Not even Catholic, either,” tutted the lips
as ice tea tinkled, and hat to hat
confessed that everyone had made some slips
but this was too much (we big eared pitchers heard)
especially on the wages that man earned.

And when she dragged past flat, with just four brats,
we couldn't figure it out—although we tried—
from the wistful riddle whispered by the aunts:
“They say the poor girl had to have them tied.”

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
57.

Warm Days

Warm days we saw her often on Eighteenth,
a platinum blonde who might have been an actress,
in filmy skirts, her face a mask—
no one else's mother looked like that.
"Where's she going, Jim?" big Bill Blood asked,
but there were places only in the movies
where anybody went in picture hats.
"You shut up—" little Jim would whine
as Bill Blood whistled, whanging the air with the bat
And whether or not she heard, she clicked along
breathtakingly swaying what she had behind.
"Ever seen her naked?" Bill Blood teased,
and Jim's pained face exploded into tears
and he ran after her and she stooped down
pushing the heated hair back from his ears.
And then swayed on, and we went on with our game,
forgetting about her, until, in an hour or so,
clicking, bouncing and jiggling, there she came—
a woman we'd meet in a bar, some warm tomorrow.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 58.

The Day the Governor Played Ball

WITH THE EIGHTEENTH STREET DODGERS

That time when the Governor came
chauffeured in a Cadillac,
grey vested, pot bellied, bald,
to visit his stately sister
who lived on our walnut treed street,
we stopped our game and gaped
and the Governor smiled and waved
and said, “Boys, toss me the ball—”
and one of us really did.
He went right out in the street,
and one of us flung him a mitt.
He even took off his coat
and rolled up his French cuffed sleeves,
then wound up like Dizzy Dean.
A feather could knock us over—
we talked for weeks and weeks
at school and on lawns of clover
about how the Governor played
ball that afternoon—
and it took us years and years
but it did gradually dawn
we too still stayed just kids
sliding into home.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 58.

Under the Eucalyptus

Under the eucalyptus, I tell my children
when the Santa Ana wind blew on West Eighteenth
Baumgartner's writhing branches broke and fell—
you couldn't plant much on that side of the house—
his hungry trees sucked up our mineral.
He had a milkwhite maid and black chauffeur—
lived in ease behind the medicine smell
of the torn pink bark and long pale flickering leaves—
and one of his meanfaced grandsons shot my cat.
A boy within me kneels to the box and grieves
the friend found dead when I came home from school—
Lhe shadowing eucalyptus still sways overhead
raining its pods and odor of the past—
my children drink and eat of what is spread
at a picnic miles and years from West Eighteenth
and listen to the scene that's vivid yet—
Lhe oblivious banker driven toward more wealth,
a small boy bending to a murdered cat
us the tall row of blowing eucalyptus
sends secret roots corrupting underneath.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 59.

Hiroshima

Smirking at ten, and thoughtless of the slaughter,
against bright cannas, I'm pictured with the dead
where diaphanous dragonflies curled to the fishpond water,
laying their random eggs as ripples spread,
a goldfish flashed to gulp, a moment after,
most of those unseen hopes as we went our ways,
Dad to his Sunday snooze, my lightedged mother
out of the burning sun to a twilit place.
Deep in dark, my brother developed the pictures,
I rode my bike or didn't go far to play
pingpong caught in the blaze with some dying neighbors
until it was time to come home to the grey array
of pictures that didn't show until much later
the Hiroshima of a summer day.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 60.

Dr. Earl Blood, The Painless Dentist

When Dr. Earl Blood died,
up and down our street
through low fog we heard a sound of sobbing—
he who had filled and pulled so many teeth
no longer there
to stop our red gums' throbbing.
His daughter and his wife
went walking with their grief
arm. in arm along the foggy street
under the crying twigs and dripping leaves,
scarves tied on heads
and high heels on their feet
that hammered vaguely on the grey concrete
like tiny tools tap-tapping deadened teeth
around the block
and back along the street—
coats and scarves,
through mist, of two in shock.
Unfeeling of their grief, still we listened
and watched as the sun came out
and fog jewels glistened,
until they'd gone back in
to where he lay
painless in bed and quiet as after the din
of a turned off drill in an air of pure relief,
the jarring whirring over,
the numb face undercover
that had twice yearly breathed
close to ours
and far away as death.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 60.

Felicia Best

he gave scraps to stray cats, and fed the birds—
that lady who'd moved in behind the Cox's—
and told us wild kids with kindest words
not to throw rocks or put little toads in boxes.
She was a Quaker, which was some kind of religion
that didn't believe in make-up or colorful clothes—
at least, pale in grey or brown, she didn't.
“How would thee feel if thee were one of those toads?”
We gobbled her cookies and thanked her and acted polite,
ma'amed her to her face, but behind her back
made fun of her ways, and if we had to fight
smashed one another with clods out of sight of her shack,
which one night, with her in it, went up in a blaze,
and none of us pulled wings off of flies—for almost two days.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 61.

Dr. Farsdale

After the divorce, when Dr. Farsdale moved
into the colonial mansion on the corner,
he went right on healing ills and wounds
and kept the hedges and the lawns in order,
repainted everything until it shone
green shuttered and whitely antiseptic—
one day we say him carry in his arms
out of the street, a bleeding epileptic—
and he was always friendly and polite,
Samaritan to any neighborhood,
respectful and respected, but one night
showed a different side of doing good.
“His house,” I overheard my mother phone
“was all lit up like Christmas in mid-June—”
I’d noticed her at windows, looking out.
“—that Filipino houseboy—” she went on—
“a wild party—drunk, naked men—
at least they could have pulled the drapes shut tight,”
behind the horror in her moral tone,
hennaed envy peeking through the blind.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 61.

Harry Chin, Chinese Herbalist

A joke, a front or what?—
no body ever went in
that house behind a palm
with a neat sign: HARRY CHIN,
CHINESE HERBALIST

two blocks down on Main.
Did he sell—opium?
and, if so, to whom?
and was there really any
such inscrutable man?—
padding down an alley
to sneak the groceries home.
A Chinese spy, a scholar—
innocent refugee?
wearing a silken collar,
grinning “no speak-ee”?—
a doughnut to a dollar
he wasn’t like you and me.
Then lumber in a truck,
a mixer chugging cement—
newness going up
(how did he pay for that?)—
and on the bright addition,
in neon: THE GOLDEN FAN—
and in tux and tie at the opening
under a searchlit sky
Harry Chin himself
and his Dragon Lady wife
greeting us all with menus
of lesser mystery.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 62.

The Seth Thomas

“Beneath the satin finished mahogany, behind the genteel
dial of the modern Seth Thomas lives that ideal of service—
the thing that never dies.”

-Century Magazine

It tapered, graceful, from its genteel dial
out to each side, that era’s classic shape,
when no one hurried much, and all the while
it told gold hours that never were too late—
flanked by a changelessness of dimpled smiles
of us and cousin graduates in frames—
the redwood vase brought back down winding miles—
the incense Buddha, the porcelain figurines.
Summer leaves moved mirrored in its face,
cold nights Dad lit real logs underneath
as it ticked on, neither slow nor fast,
a neat ideal on the mantelpiece,
which living in the satin finished past
looked at the time like something that would last.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 63.

German

we moved to time's repeated chime,
our ordered house a school of schedule,
and we grew up according to the rule,
three square meals—at seven, twelve, and five—
We scooped and scraped and didn't waste a scrap;
our soon done dishes always sterilely steamed;
the centerpiece was wax—fruit that gleamed
almost as if it once had stemmed from sap.
We clipped the hedge and edged the creeping grass,
drove on errands, mirrored neat and straight,
starting early, we were never late,
and we obeyed the laws, and knew our place—
so strict at goodness, that it made us sad
when history later proved us to be mad.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 63.

Zelda Keith

After three attempts—
gas—aspirin—and razor,
we knew where she went—
saw the ambulance
to which they led her out
struggling, loud, unkempt—
there wasn't any doubt.
Before that on our block
over the treeswayed lawns
we heard the curdling shout
“Bastard! Goddamn louse!”
and tried to guess the rest—
“Oh it makes me sick!”
my peeking mother said.
We'd see them going places
sleek in tux and furs
with happy social faces—
and next night even worse
words through curtain laces—
a siren down the street,
policemen running in—
then silence for a week
and then again her shriek—
We turned, so we could hear,
“One Man's Family” down—
and after that last time
in her half torn off gown,
wrapped and strapped in white
while he wept on the porch
holding both the kids—
my perfect mother said
“Well it serves her right”.
shutting up the blind
on every world but hers
the way you close a mind.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 64.

This Is K.F.I. Los Angeles

Through a golden cloth,
chosen by a knob,
vibrant on the air,
voices from a box!
We sat so carefully there
when listening was rare.
Amos 'n' Andy joked,
right there in the room
later the frost report
predicted whitest doom.
Fibber McGee and Molly
opened their closet door—
Witch's Tales sent shivers
upward into our hair.
And then when I was ten
and tall as the radio then
Charlie McCarthy talked
sexily to some—
we turned the dial and laughed
at Benny's violin.
With curlicues removed,
the box and our ears improved—
green roundness like an eye
for better tuning in—
the Metropolitan loosed
bubbles of shining sound.
Welles and Helen Hayes
like neighbors in those days
came and put on plays
at the end of the kitchen sink—
the ear could almost see
a toothbrush turning pink

or FDR with Fala
chatting on a brink—
and sometimes words escaped
that almost made us think.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 65.

Junior

Every night his voice broadcasts the news,
 coming into our kitchen like Gabriel Heatter
 from the green tuning eye and the green cloth circle
 on the old Zenith, and I tell the children
 stories of Junior who was the kid nextdoor.
 Capering on the sidewalk for attention,
 he moved in when I was nine and he eleven.
 I watched him from a tree as he turned a cartwheel,
 and not to be outdone, hung down by my knees
 to become his immediate rival, his magic
 lantern show vying with my broomstick puppets,
 his coal engine Lionel racing my streamliner.
 Under the still leaves of summer we traded stamps—
 a whole set of U.S.'s for one of his Mozambiques.
 Everything I had, his was better,
 even his father's car, his mother's mixer—
 his red sore throat worse than my headcold pain.
 No matter what cake or steak I ever ate
 his richer dinner tasted twice as sweet.
 If I started a newspaper, he too began one,
 headlining slurs about the rag I ran.
 As soon as he saw me busily clicking pictures
 he'd come around with cameras in his hand.
 For weeks we'd be friendly, for weeks we wouldn't speak—
 he'd glide by on his new English racer,
 leaning into the wind and twirling in circles,
 then I'd put on skates and spark around the block
 and it wouldn't be long before he and his fabulous friends
 were passing me up with wheels on their feet.
 "Fred Allen's funnier." "No, Jack Benny is."
 We'd argue hours, and it could end in blood,
 wrestling on cement, locked breathless face to face.
 Our mothers through the fence compared our grades.
 But though his Samoyed snarled at my common terrier,
 various forces worked to make us warier.
 He trained off to college in the East
 to become this newsvoice—on another Zenith—
 warning of later weathers and worse dooms.

Hearing his poise, I often wonder whether
he ever thinks how foolish we once were,
one boy the other's envious competitor
when to be friends was what we wanted more.
Junior, if I could, I'd whistle our secret whistle
over Tom Sawyer's fence—long torn down—
and shake your hand and ask if you remember
those bright tin cans we tied across the air
trying to talk between our rival rooms—
or that warm night we lay out on the lawn
blinking flashlight signals to the moon.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 66.

Time in the Evening

Time in the evening was a summer grass
we lay on after tag and hide-and-seek,
the darkness starring to a universe
over the chimneyed roofs along the street.
Junior said “That’s Venus”—where the leaves,
lightly lifting, let bright silver through—
a pallid twinkling, like a light through sieves
spilled all the sky with widenings of view,
so even Norval, at the sudden arc
of phosphorescence sparking down the dome,
cried “Falling star!”, and in that dark
we felt a closeness in the far-from-home.
The dippers tipped faint radiance above
the tops of cedar and the Main Street palms—
we were too young to wonder whether love
or an indifferent force had fired those realms
and fit the earth in such a firmament,
but on the prickling lawn it seemed to us,
among the jasmine and the clover scent,
a curve of warmth that heard the cricket voice
and heard the train hoot elsewhere at the edge
of summer in our town of growing up
where for a time some evenings, brothers, friends,
lay under lightyears near enough to touch.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 67.

Nervous Breakdown

Harriette Small came home with a nervous breakdown
crying he wants to do it all the time,
and I thought I was learning a lot by hanging around
pretending to be more interested in my Yo-yo—
later with a washcloth on her head she lay in bed
and ate bright honey that gleamed in the shaded room
while I told her my plans for running away
and building a dog kennel—
whether or not she was, she acted amused.
At last she got well enough to sit on the lawns wing
and we looked through hundreds of magazines
as the butterflies danced in the snapdragons
and the lawnsprinkler waved white wings.
She never told me anything about him
though I had the impression he was some kind of brute—
so when he ducked in under the roses
and she ran to him crying, and kissed and kissed him
I couldn't have been more confused.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 68.

Little Bobby

There was a distant cousin I couldn't play with—
handsome, beginning to sprout a dashing rustache—
“We wouldn't dream of putting him in a home,”
I heard his mother I wasn't supposed to hear.
“He's all we've got, he's our little precious.”
Whenever they visited, he'd stay out in the car.
I saw him glaring through the windowsmears,
holding up a one-armed teddy bear,
and making faces, though so tall and dark,
if older, he'd almost look like Robert Taylor.
“Such a little darling when he's good.”
“No, we were afraid to have another.”
“Whatever happened to that kid?” I asked later
when several times the parents came alone,
never smiling and seeming older and greyer.
“They had to have him locked up somewhere or other,”
my father said in a voice that cut to the bone.
“He took a knife and tried to kill his mother.”

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 68.

Maud Winters' Swedish Massage Salon

When Maud Winters' Swedish Massage Salon
moved in, the neighborhood slipped down a notch—
that elongated son on a motorcycle,
the Wolfhound instead of a pooch.

In a gangster movie aura
everything looked black and white—
men at the door, dark hats pulled down
and shirtfronts doubly bright.
Gin bottles gleamed in the ashcan,
the son roared home late at night,
a police car throbbed through the alley—
something wasn't quite right.

We heard a slap as on rubber—
Maud Winters plying her trade,
buttocks and belly of blubber
with an Edward G. Robinson face
steamed in imagination
and the son gunned off leaving tracks
of surmise toward some assignation
down at the Mexican shacks,
but he sped to his own beheading,
his life sliced by a truck.

And everyone saw two days later
when the funeral car drove up
Maud Winters and her daughter
on the steps of our wildest dreams,
dainty in black, and veiled
as beekeepers or mourning queens,
while the light seemed to pale around them
and the Wolfhound whined at the screen,
dabbing with delicate hands
at the face of anyone's grief.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 69.

Mr. Mueller

Dapperly mustached,
comparatively young,
he sold us Milky Ways,
slipped us bubble gum—
among the Campbell's Soup
and rounds of Quaker Oats,
aproned, clipped with pencils,
joshed us with his jokes.
And he took pride in keeping
his store well stocked and neat,
cranked the awning down at eight
and creaked it up at six—
delivered to our larger palms
legal cigarettes—
not a name he didn't know
among the corn flakes stacks.
For years a tiny island
encroached by widened streets
and Safeways, Alpha Betas—
he held out for the past,
greying in our service,
suffering heart attacks,
until he had to sell
graciousness at last.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 70.

Eddie Weismann

He smiled among the EX-LAX,
swimcaps, candy bars,
still sold dollar watches,
peppermint in jars—
and mixed a deft prescription—
“Hope this makes her well.
And how’s your father? Better?—”
stood there in the smell
of lipstick, cough drops, drugs,
freshly printed magazines,
arsenic for slugs,
forever friendly, helpful—
someone who in Rome
would have known which herb to use
on wounds of martyrdom—
and smiled and patted shoulders,
handed back the film,
praising when it turned out clear,
with sympathy when blurred—
and when he thinned and dwindled,
though slower at his work,
about the vulturous cancer
never moaned a word.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 70.

Mr. Virgo

He wobbled up and down
Main Street, underhat,
his bulldog on a chain—
almost an albino,
enormously polite,
he smade small kewpie lips
at every passing lady—
fearful of the sun,
only touched his brim—
had an eye for beauty
that no eye had for him.
Where did he get those clothes?—
circus tents for shirts,
belts for so much girth
through loops of hippo pants?—
and did he have a giant's chair,
someone to spoon his wants,
poor huge too white man?
No one ever knew—
or none we knew, at least—
we never went inside the door
he palely panted through—
there must have been a funeral—
did anybody grieve
to see such burden lowered
where pity cannot reach?

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 71.

Those Veaches

Something was wrong with every one of those Veaches—
the mother stuttered, the father lost his jobs,
Dorette swiped things from the five and ten,
no one at Jefferson got grades
as bad as Bob's—
Rosalie had a baby but wasn't married,
Paul was in reform school. Jake in jail
or serving out a sentence more likely than not;
none of them bothered much
about little Dale
dragging his germy blanket, the snotnosed brat,
and sucking his thumb, his diaper halfway off,
while Grandma smoked a corncob on the porch
and who knew what young silken leg
mad Grandpa watched.
They were a genetic disaster like the Jukes
we later read about in Psych 1A—
hare-lipped, knock-kneed, pigeon-toed, given to fits,
but a rich lady on Citrus Heights
adopted Dale,
had his lip fixed, sent him to private school—
and at age twelve he preached a sermon in church,
choosing as his text "The Golden Rule",
with an angel tongue that made
stone pillars weep.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 72.

Screaming on Seventeenth

a street away from home
toward which I pumped my pedals—
cop cars, ambulance
hurried to the scene—
spiderwebs of glass,
a dented smoking hood—
a bulge beneath a blanket,
a head in a pool of blood,
red beads that still rolled—

I clutched my grocery bag
of cans and wrapped up meat,
among the crowd of watchers
leaned
from. my seat—
hoping it couldn't happen
to anyone but them—
men in white with stretchers
lifting the victims in,
their wide eyes going dim—
and turned away alive,
aware of a spreading spot
soaking through to my hand—
feeling, as I balanced home,
the blood,
the blood of the Lamb.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
72.

Next Door

I was tossing a stick to my dog
and looking up, mid-laugh,
saw, glaring down from the leaves,
horror right next door—
a man without a mouth
sawing branches off—
I shuddered and turned away—
what did he mean with his teeth?
was it a leer or a grin?
I tossed the stick again,
and looked back up at the man—
easy in his jeans,
he stopped the saw mid-limb
to light a cigarette—
chinless and lacking lips,
held it between his teeth
and started to saw again—
I must have stared and stared,
forgetting the stick and the dog,
at so much innemess bared
and he must have been aware
of what I was gawking at—73
 after the whoosh of the branch,
 he flipped the cigarette
 and gave me a friendly wave,
 his strong arm glinting haired,
 perfectly muscled and veined;
 less hideous after that,
 he let the smoke stream out
 from the face. he might have had.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 73.

The Symbol

“sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal”
It didn’t tinkle—with a brassy clang
sounding through the house announced
the Fuller Brush man or whoever rang—
the doorchime I had made in shop at school,
polished and finished good enough to hang—
two brass cylinders of different lengths,
and at the top, hiding the coiled works,
a kind of shield with an Indian symbol
I’d outlined, pounding, so it looked embossed—
my one success at art that had a use.
Even my brother couldn’t find a fault;
aunts and uncles nodded at my talent—
it rang and rang, heralding the halt
who came to beg, the man who brought
the dog back that dark evening he was lost.
It would have blended in as time chimed too,
my brass accomplishment have been forgot
except the innocent symbol seemed to move
outward as if detached from bells of light
and billow blackly in our living room;
stamped on a flag that slanted somewhere foreign
and followed by a stomping swarm of troops,
the swastika of those who were finally dupes
could never again be seen to mean good luck—
at doors not ours the hour of doom had struck.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 74.

The Times

Crimson evenings, thudding at our door,
as a whistling boy on a bike whizzed it there,
The Times brought late news of death and horror—
Dillinger finally killed, the rise of Hitler—
misjudged, it sometimes broke a prized hydrangea
or decayed for weeks in a tree
in the too high air.

But almost always, spread before a chair,
the front page screaming RUMANIA; FDR,
someone behind it reading each new scare
or maybe only the sports or business part,
The Times, among our bric-a-brac,
hung like a huge fake moth
on a waxen flower.

It clung there monstrous in the turned on light,
politically conservative, lying about war,
the humorless funnies on a page inside,
even the simplest facts not printed right,
less truth than travesty, most of it a bore,
a grave mistake,
like much of our decor.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 75.

Aunt Lucy

“By 1941 we’ll be at war... ”
so my Aunt Lucy, who believed in tea leaves
and weighty messages from scales at Kresses,
told us one evening on West Eighteenth—
she’d given up phrenology and joined
a secret group divining from the stars
and dates of birth the truth about tomorrow.
“But you won’t go, oh no, you won’t, my dear—”
and would have fanned with wrinkles when she smiled
except a frequent mud mask kept her clear.
“You are a genius, you are artistic,
you will rid men of many misconceptions—
pictures in the paper, and finally—fame.”
Once she would have read it in a name
or analyzed a palm to find which year—
gone to a gypsy, laid out Tarot cards,
wary of the Hanged Man, hoping for The Lover,
or in a mystic mansions, clutching hands,
have waited for uncle Fred to eerily hover—
now she only looked at astral charts
for whatever it was she needed to discover.
And it was fun, though some of the relatives thought
this necromancy Communist-inspired—
“Lucy, if you don’t watch out, you’ll be shot.”
But she went right on, seeming to be wired,
when dire predictions happened, directly to God.
By then, however, she’d seen surer signs—
her neck began to wreck, a jowl or two had veered—
she went away somewhere and then sent out
Christmas cards from Lyle and Lucy Scott—
a new man on her arm, her chinline sharply sutured,
far from the future, when she next appeared.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 76.

Past Ten O'Clock

"People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles"

-Wallace Stevens

I walk along West Eighteenth
as clear as it was then,
the lawns stretch square and green,
the periwinkles glow.
Junior's oiling his bike,
turning and turning the chain—
he tells me Amelia Earhart
went down with her plane.
I whistle up my walk,
open the mailbox—
a letter from Edwin Roth!—
Mom bakes apple pie.
Dad comes home from the ranch.
Norval's lathing a table leg
in a whirling mist of sawdust.
"God thank Thee for this food.
Amen."

We listen to Major Bowes.
I conjugate my French,
thumb through the latest Life,
and when the clock chimes ten,
take off my baggy clothes
and neatly hang them up,
get into yellow pajamas
that do have blue rings—
and after I go to sleep
dream of a mad baboon
flying out of the night
and scream and scream and scream.

Section Three: COMINGHOMEFROMTHE MOVIES

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 77.

III: COMING HOME FROM THE MOVIES

Rewrite

I have been busy rewriting the scenario—
my life wasn't terrible enough—
born in the twenties, I never heard them roar,
and though I lived during the depression, the hungry wolf slunk off
somewhere else whenever I opened our door.
My mother and father were nice repressed people—
he wouldn't speak to her for a week when she came home with bobbed hair,
but mostly they smiled united, as in a family feature—
hardly the right characters for a picture of despair,
and visibly, at least, not very sexy either.
But emphasis is easy—I can make out of my brother
a teenage Cain banging me black and blue—
that time dividing the money when it didn't come out even
and instead of flipping the penny he chopped it in two,
I can turn into some Bergmanesque sequence in which he's dramatically driven
the girl next door can be made up more than she was,
they won't sing "On the Isle of Capri" at the piano or play parcheesi,
but later lights will flicker on backs and shoulders of lust—
locations can be selected to look more sleazy,
and whenever necessary, fake fronts nailed up.
I'll add, as though I didn't know any, drug addicts and drunks,
a stone age sheriff, a crooked lawyer, a high-minded judge,
put on the ill-lit corners of night pimply young punks—
no one will show delight in popcorn and fudge
whether or not they did, or thought, that palmy once,
believing the worst was only being foolish—
nothing happened at home or possibly could
to change the script from the way it never was
when the world beyond us still looked brilliant and good,
and ended, like the movies, with ever afters of love.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 78.

The Jazz Singer

You ain't heard nothin yet
said from the silent screen—
an era ended then—
Al Jolson on his knees,
in blackface, with white gloves,
biglipped “Mammy Mammy”
and we at the Orpheum
who'd bumped up to the city
over the rural roads
to hear the miracle
never could go home.
I sat O-eyed, all ears
on plush beside Aunt Lillie
listening to Vitaphone—
no one would have to read
the words to me again—
the pies would not be thrown
except with an audible whoosh—
even that tramp I'd seen
finally would have to talk
as he comically twirled his cane
and did his funny walk.
Everything was sounding
louder when we went out—
instead of squat brick arches
tall buildings loomed about—
the little lanes had widened
into cloverleaves
and all our hearts were pounding
on microphonic sleeves
as Uncle Peter's Keystone Kop car
seemed to be roaring low
and streaking smog behind us
toward the speechless groves.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 79.

Tom Mix

A Stetsoned knight the screen made look much larger,
every Saturday he killed the badmen—
arriving just in time on his dark charger
to save the girl and win the west again.
The bright dust billowed behind his quick clipclop,
the clapboard towns said BLACKSMITH and SALOON—
when villains reached he always got the drop—
he could have galloped straight up to the moon.
Which of us afterward wanted to be Indians?—
only we knee-high halfpint little squirts
with one pathetic feather in our headbands
had to go barefoot and shiver without our shirts
while all the big boys of the neighborhood,
twice our size, found where we hid out,
and sure as Tom Mix of who was good or bad,
rode in with rubberguns and shot their brothers down.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 80.

Those Times When Richard Barthelmess Went Up

with a roaring squadron in a war I'd heard
one of my uncles would have had to be in
(if Grandpa hadn't lied before the Board)—
and the dogfighting biplanes with cockpits looped and veered
I sat and watched the Jerrys leer through their goggles and cleancut
Richard going into a cloud out of which he soon triumphantly
soared only to face, as the ratatats grew loud, a German plane from
which hot bullets poured—
and meanwhile in the barracks someone scarved
who should have gone up but didn't was counting the whine
and increasing sound of the planes that were coming back,
and all of them sputtered and gunned and suspensefully landed
except for the flaming flimsiness Richard was in.
It was then, in those celluloid skies, as I went down
on the edge of my seat while black smoke spiraled up
and Richard's warm blood leaked like truth from my lip
before I scorched into glory, I was convinced
nothing nations could fight for was worth that trip.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 80.

Our Gang

They talked fast out of the comers of their mouths,
showing in every film what tough guys are—
those actors who played gangsters for my youth—
Cagney strutting like a bantam cock,
Edward G. Robinson spitting his cigars—
their tommyguns jumping, made getaways in cars
from where the guard slumped bleeding by the bank
or the old storekeeper with steel rimmed glasses askew
trickled blackly into his candybars—
and they had blondes slinking in apartments,
with dresses like mercury, and blinking jewels.
How sweet the champagne glittered at its brims,
how crisp with power the stacks of money looked!—
and when on two wheels in black sedans
they took the corners, pursued by shooting cops—
though we'd been schooled to know how they would end—
which of us kids, careening in our seats
away from goodness, wasn't with the crooks?

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 81.

Those Busby Berkeley Musicals

were swell—
neon pianos with dancers on their lids,
stairways and sequins—who could tell
from movie lavishments that weren't rich?—
some Americans went into a dance
on giant turning stages all the time
and wore such shimmering skirts and fancy pants,
though Main St. citizens couldn't spare a dime.
And that was what we really liked to see—
glittering fabulous sets and glamorous dames—
in "The Gold Diggers of 1933"
no one going hungry or in pain—
slick blondes houfing it to beat the band
and everybody looking like a million.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 82.

Mae West

A velvet hourglass
with diamonds at her wrist
and ostrich feather hat—
too little yet for lust
(or so my mother thought
who let me go along)
I innocently sat
and watched her do him wrong—
her bow mouth like a kiss,
her body undulous—
young, I didn't miss
her pornographic bust
or hinged hip as she said
“Why don't you come up?”—
a mirrored bedroom flashed
though I was only ten
and not as yet abashed
by what she meant by love
and how much fun it was.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 82.

Tarzan

How often we wished that we were as wide as he—
the backyard jungles echoed with our calls—
and we'd have jumped and swung from tree to tree
and swum with Jane in pools below the falls
if only all the blocks weren't so concrete,
if grinning Cheetah could have been a dog—
weren't those lions prowling along the street,
those gastrucks elephants that rumbled along?
With each new picture we were more convinced
our feet ran shoeless, we felt our biceps swell,
at our lithe loins we wore a scanty skin—
screaming from the treehouse—who could tell?—
Jane might be in danger of her life,
and naked as we climbed, we'd have his knife.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 83.

Godiva Ridden

We knew that Sally Rand took off her clothes—
no one ever did it in our town—
a few girls in bathing suits went by on floats
but that was art, a bareness rarely shown—
nudes at the library stayed behind a lock
and who would ask Miss Frost to let them out,
buttoned up to her throat against the shock
of having breasts, though there was some doubt.
Amazingly enough, however hidden,
the naked secret couldn't be well kept;
night after night, the town, Godiva ridden,
bobbed with thighs and bellies while we slept,
and every boy, starting at nine or ten,
dreaming the slippery truth, became a man.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 83.

And Greened My Twelfth, Most Verdant Summer

joy without juice—some girls began to be
visibly curved in places I stayed slimmer.
The written princess, to my shy inquiry,
deigned, from her horsy heights, no answer.
Through rainbow sprinklers, mailmen still might bring
the President's autograph, the sample cleanser,
the badge, the whistle and the magic ring.
Plump plums, pale apricots, hung hard and green,
the gentle tom came home with a bleeding ear,
Webster had never heard what some words mean,
my bothered father let me start the car.
A little later, through the rising heat,
plums and apricots dropped ripe and sweet.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 84.

The Annunciation

If only it weren't there and life weren't either—
she knelt and prayed with her fanatic rag
against her father and against my father
who kept their slimy secrets in a bag—
and now I too began to have the sag
and darkly sprouted to her white disgust—
O wasn't there anyone in whom to trust?—
the meaning was enough to make her gag.
She dropped the Ivory soap into the tub
and turned away as wordless toward the door
as if a shining shell had shown a slug,
and never came to wash me anymore—
she'd heard the angel tell her of a son
and knew his hated coming would be soon.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 84.

The First Time

The truth came out one afternoon in fall—
in sudden spurts, among the toothy pictures
of filmstars on the burlap clubhouse wall—
with painful joy, a juice past all conjectures
ejected out of that pink throbbing knob—
Garbo smiled blindly at my plight,
and Gable grinned cleft chinned above my shock—
how much more before I'd Iese my life?
A good thing, though, I thought, it wasn't blood
and yet I wasn't sure just what it was.
I saw it soak into the old rag rug.
If I'd been dying, how could I stand up?
The stars gazed down, remote, immobile, grand.
Next time maybe I would try my hand.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 84.

At the Broadway

Savoring grape flavored Life Savers
while Greta Garbo suffered,
I sat in my seat at the Broadway
no longer short and fat,
but suddenly her Vronsky
or her dark Armand.
Next week Bette Davis,
Joan Crawford after that—
those were the tragic ladies
on whom my boyhood planned.
I would grow great for Greta,
give Joan and Bette a hand
once I was bigger than they were,
with a face sharpened and thinned
until it would fit in the picture,
and knowledge to help them out
if they should need some kind of saving
as more often than not they did
when I sat there sucking a sweetness,
a star eyed overweight kid.
How Greta cried at the Broadway,
and Bette raved or went blind
and Joan Cinderellaed sad and unwise
I don't know how many times—
And O I am changed but they haven't,
they suffer on channels tonight
while I watch their young faces patient with pain
and know I will never grow up
before Bette's beaten and poor Joan is tried
and Greta leaps under the train.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 85.

High Places: Lost Horizon

The plane that crashed in Himalayan snows
took us to the heights of Hollywood
far from our burning slopes and freezing groves,
transported us to somewhere in the mind,
a Shangri-La where everyone felt good,
a place forever calm among the peaks,
potent as Geritol for aging blood—
no bone however old that ached and creaked.
Jane Wyatt ran there briefly in the nude
as, from a distance, Ronald Colman looked—
which was the scene we thought of when in bed
after the show we listened to the clock
ticking toward when we'd lose eternal youth
and, like Margo, shrivel with the truth.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 86.

Mutiny on the Bounty

That matinee the silver sea hissed high
and we were bound for elsewhere on the Bounty
under the ugly squint of Captain Bligh—
though it was filmed not far from Orange County
(in Catalina waters, we had heard)
we seemed to sail with Gable near Tahiti,
a desperate whiskery sweating crew on board—
the white sails bulged like pillows, blood believably
leaked from lashes on a naked back—
“Mistah Christian!” Charles Laughton sneered—
fed up at last, we made our sneak attack
and tossed the breadfruit and the captain out—
the overbearing father whom we feared—
and veered toward Paradise with a wild shout.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 86.

Wuthering Heights

Above the seats the heights were wuthering—
 Heathcliff and Cathy in a tragic tale
 showed us there were times and places other than
 today in a sleepy palmtreed town like ours—
 the phony cliffs and painted heath looked real,
 a soapflake blizzard blew around the stars—
Lawrence Olivier with a deep appeal
and Merle Oberon whose glycerin tears
glittering down her cheeks could make us feel
we all had such a strangeness at the heart,
and instead of streets there might be moors
of high romance glimmering in the dark—
our low world, after the final reel,
transformed forever by a touch of art.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 86.

Homework

“Grand Central Station”
announced my radio,
and hissed arriving steam—
“Gigantic stage
on which are played
a thousand dramas daily—”
I did geometry
and between the angles
listened down the tracks—
the farthest I had been
was Santa Fe and back.
The disembodied voices
made love in my room,
I measured my circumferences,
wanting to be grown...
Not long after that
“First Nighter” came on,
magicked from the air
by Campana’s Italian Balm—
I opened up my Latin
to an accusative case,
squeezed, as romance began,
a pimple on my face.
Would anything ever happen,
my adam’s apple jut,
a mustache sprout on my voice?—! faced the apricot
glimmering glorious
under a small town moon,
behind me—AMO AMAS—
the open Latin book, 87
and whispering from a box
rich voices of the dream

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 87.

The Clever Studio

The men were always taking off their shirts
to show that they had muscles sprouting hair,
sometimes sweating, bloody, streaked with dirt
the clever studio had painted there;
you didn't have to guess what they were like—
skinny boys who'd got a little older
and finally put away their childish bikes
and grown a thicker neck and wider shoulder.
The women, though, had never been mere girls
with runny noses and as flat as us
or worn those bangs, and bows in grade school curls—
a thrilling thing had happened to their chests
and MGM kept the secret well
that such silk legs were ever good at baseball.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 88.

Sugar and Spice

Sugar and spice, they said, but unconvinced,
and hot as Galileo for the truth,
I couldn't be content until I'd glimpsed,
like guessed at worlds seen close-up through a tube,
the thing itself, the curve of nakedness.
I had no sisters, and my only mother,
fearing my theory, locked her door to dress,
and so I gave a nickel to a brother—
not my own, but one with views to sell,
in secret, where a leaflight filtered through.
I swore that I would neither touch nor tell,
and saw his sister lifting as I grew
certain I was right, her skirt to show
the apple proof—what every boy should know.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 88.

Complaint

They came home early once and I didn't have time,
caught red handed, to pull my pants back on—
I had to tell them, wet and mussed with crime,
I'd taken them off because the day was warm;
not sure they believed my feeble alibi,
at least I'd fumbled, shrinking, into my shorts—
and felt a desperado forced to lie
to save my life, up before the courts.
If only Portnoy had been published then,
with news of liver, sox, and fucked brassieres,
how sadly innocent I would have seemed,
absolved from guilt and aches and needless fears
that I was going mad by being unique,
that soon I'd hear a ringing in my ears.

HEDY LAMARR

Some of the older boys had gone to L.A.
to see her in "Ecstasy", but they came home
saying it was a waste of half a buck—
"Shit, close-ups of her face was all they showed."
Then Hollywood brought her over and parted her hair
straight down the middle and made her mouth a bow
and when we went to view her in "Algiers"
with Charles Boyer, she kept on her clothes.
Her legs weren't bad, though there were skirts at school
with just as much to whistle at below—
not that we'd hoped for more from Hollywood movies—
but still no girl missed the innuendo
when we would leer, pimply and blase,
"Hey, Hedy, come wiz me to za Casbah."

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 89.

Lady Chatterley's Lover

John said "Lookit this" and took from a bag
only a book -with a pale blue battered cover
and I said, "So what? Is this some kind of gag?"
Then he showed me the title: Lady Chatterley's Lover,
and opened it up and pointed his finger at words
which I'd never seen in print except on walls
and some not even there—with a leer and a smirk
John said, "Wow, this book's really got balls!"
He let me read it, and parts I read more than once,
sometimes pressing it down to repress the result—
those two in the nude doing what I'd never done,
always feeling a penis some kind of fault—
and after I'd slipped the secret back to John
it was harder than ever not to be an adult.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 90.

Robert Taylor

Why wasn't I, I wondered, Robert Taylor,
wavy and dark with a cleft beard shadowed chin
instead of blond and bland, a teenage failure
shooting up so fast I became too thin,
a graceless no one in the mirror's frame—
Wheaties and Ovaltine couldn't help me out,
or shaving twice a month or thinking right;
I'd always lean there in the bedroom light
on West Eighteenth never to reach six feet
and it would always be the full moon night
of the high school dance when I didn't have a date—
sleeking my hair with reeking Vaseline
I whistled downtown to the Broadway where I kissed
Barbara and Joan with Robert Taylor's lips.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 90.

The Marx Brothers

I never thought they were very funny—
Harpo with blond curls cavorting after girls,
Chico in that hat, Groucho's obscene cigar,
and those big bosomed women always indignant—
feathers flying everywhere, drinks spilled
down dresses—they weren't the grand adventure
I was looking for—
the shimmering sets and bright sophistication
when Cary Grant, highball in hand, smoothtalked Jean Arthur—
and I preferred to Groucho's eyebrowed leer
the other feature, with songs by Deanna Durbin—
what boy would rather watch those foolish comics,
often losing their pants or falling in pools,
instead of a starlet
with bow lips, rippling hair and a nipped uplift—! hadn't paid my quarter for
Marxian antics;
when I went into the dark I wanted to see
Dorothy Lamour filling her sarong
or Carole Lombard's quivering chin at least—
a dream girl mad with love, with eyes of wonder
for the man I'd be.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 91.

Beyond the Rainbow

Those kids we went to see—Mickey and Judy—
she a braided innocent in Oz
and he the lovable undersized Andy Hardy
troubled with girls in a town of never was—
suffered in those films but not a lot—
there was a rainbow somewhere over which
she found a land as flimsy as the plot
where she could sing, and trick the wicked witch—
if he should slip, his wise old dad the judge,
man-to-man, would cure his different thought—
and then they'd co-star, smiling and sawed off,
a little older and bolder but not very much—
on those bright screens they never could grow up
to be innumerably wed, or dead of drugs.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 91.

Love Affair

It never was clear in that one with Irene Dunne
and Charles Boyer what the title meant—
they seemed to be only having innocent fun
and yet she was a woman and Boyer, French.
He took her to see his grandmother, Maria Ouspenskaya,
high up on the Riviera, wizened and wise
in her bougainvillea villa where violins kept playing
while she lacily smiled and gave them tea and advice.
Though often after the fade-outs you had the impression,
whenever the themesong “Wishing” began to get loud,
other things might happen, they acted like freshmen
on a first date who hadn’t yet been around,
and nothing you saw on the screen could possibly prove
they ever really got down to making love.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 92.

The Hurricane

You never saw more unconvincing natives
than Jon Hall and Dorothy Lamour in flowered sarongs
and when they clinched on the grass in their wedding leis
the modest camera panned up to the palms.
On the plastic island against background shots
emotions and barometers kept rising,
but as usual in those tropic plots
nothing much looked real or surprising—
until the hurricane, and even though you knew
it all was done by wave machines and cuts
you couldn't help believing water blew
and crashed like that and drownings weren't just stunts—
you forgot it was only acting when Jon lashed
Dot to a tree, the storm-battered church was a set,
and the struggling people as the breakers smashed
had been paid to lean and twist and get so wet—
but when the wind calmed down and every star
(except C. Aubrey Smith, who often died)
had somehow escaped the water's roar and pour,
you were again in good old Hollywood—
where Raymond Massey could miraculously change
and let the lovers paddle away toward the sun,
he bare to the waist, she with no hair out of place,
as the studio orchestra triumphantly played their song.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 92.

Dark Victory

Bette was really great in that one—
 even though George Brent looked like
 a clothing store dummy, she batted
 her eyes, sashayed around and lit one—
 not much impressed when George tried
 to get chummy, except underneath,
 and I knew she was falling
 for George with his fortyish bags
 and pencil mustache—I could tell
 by the music—but what made me feel
 almost like crying
 was, that though she had everything to live for—
 a Park Ave. apartment
 and plenty of clothes and cash, he found out,
 being a doctor (which showed off
 his sinewy arms in a flattering medical costume)
 Bette was dying.
 He had to saw open her skull
 (offscreen of course)
 and with Max Steiner's violins sighing, said
 (while she wore over the shaved spot
 a shining sequined cap
 designed by Edith Head)
 that though he'd cut out the tumor
 he couldn't prevent a relapse.
 Bette had changed, however—no more
 bitchy tantrums.

They got married,
 knowing it couldn't last,
 and moved to one of those immaculate
 New England sets, snatching,
 among foreboding oboes and cellos,
 every happiness
 it was possible to snatch—
 I felt sure that Warner Bros.
 would find some way to cure her.
 But then when she went blind
 and bravely kissed George goodbye, and climbed,

alone, with the whole orchestra lamenting,
up to her bedroom,
I gave up hope that Dr. Kildare would ever get there,
and I was so shocked that they had let
Bette Davis die
I went out and bought more Life Savers
and stayed to see it twice.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 93.

Coming Home from the Movies

I walked home warily daring, my warm smoke guiltily blowing,
grown up almost that spring I turned fifteen—
coming home from the movies with the package in my pocket
and keeping forbiddenness cupped where it couldn't be seen,
thinking of stogies bobbing in the movies
as Bogie and Bette Davis did a scene,
their little coals glowing after the matchlight showing
his hand blackhaired and hers as bright as cream
In lilac scented evening, knowing where I was going,
I felt an oddness growing as I walked
out of the Broadway theatre where seeing was believing
and back to my nice home on a square lawned block—
what was my body doing, starting that funny feeling
down by the Lucky Strikes as I walked along—
could anyone tell my reeling head that in such a setting
this throbbing oblong problem didn't belong?
Who needed blatant bedrooms, nudes on a wide screen screwing,
or for a loosening view, the aid of pot?
when a puff was enough suggestion, in the old old world renewing
of naked truth, whether youth was ready or not.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 94.

Solo

Wasn't I big, backing out Dad's '38 Buick,
getting its feel, shifting it into high,
flipping the knob to dial in low sweet music
as the beach road poles began to go whipping by—
hadn't I grown since I first sat on a pillow
to see past the hood, and hardly could reach the gas—
that little guy—and now this dangerous fellow
urging the horsepower on, lifting a match
to light up a Lucky, without Mom's shriek at my side:
"Oh my goodness, Harold, you're going too fast!"
They'd never catch me again now I could drive,
if they tried to follow I'd swerve down different roads.
I was the man at the wheel and they'd seen the last
of that mild boy above his bicycle spokes.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 94.

Starting at Thirteen

I kept a diary—
all my secret plans—friends who weren't friends—
a brother who beat me up until he got married—
that code of dots at many entries' ends...
and reading back I am that boy again
seeing too many movies, weeding the yard,
letting out into the dark the hidden man...
as it was poor Mom had enough men on her hands,
and I tried hard to be good, not let her know—
at least until later—but while I wrote it down
and dutifully weeded and listened to the radio
(Mary Marlin, Oxydol's Own Ma Perkins, Dr. Kate)
seeds she didn't suspect were coming up from below...
a rain of words watered me
from the stormy books I was reading
and while I went soberly down the aisle
taking up the collection
what I was wondering was
if Christ ever had an erection...
"Sometimes I think I'm a misfit," I noted sadly,
November 10, 1939,
looking out over the dark roofs at bright Orion—
and would have lain down with any girl gladly...
my handwriting became more erratic,
my pages spotted with dots...

Margie Stoller got engaged to a mustached man with an Olds—
and then in late spring of nineteen forty
I finally found the poets.

JESUS

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 95.

Past Bean Fields

neon-crossed with S
past streets that thickened toward a towered center,
there was another world beyond our rim
which I was finally old enough to enter—
Olvera Street where brilliant chilies hung
and pale tortillas grew from darker hands,
Spring St. with its stores, Main St. with its bums—
a farther feeling as in foreign lands—
bean sprout banquets in old Chinatown,
or bloated groanings after smorgasbord—
museums, and the Planetarium—
the palmed metropolis had golden doored
palaces whose naked statues stood,
plaster-breasted, on initialed feet,
and carpets rich as Persia led you on
to latest lucid screenings of the dream—
maybe it wasn't Paris or New York,
but to a Winesburg boy almost as rare—
where Rachmaninoff played at the Hollywood Bowl
and Blue Boy burned among the urns of grandeur.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 96.

In Those Days

In those days I was famous,
a real movie star
of my own home productions,
pictures in the paper—
many in my town said
that boy will go far.
The films were shot on week-ends,
winning praise and prizes,
acted out by friends,
shown at teas and meetings—
ambitious, I spent hours
gluing ends to ends.

Writer and director,
actor, crunerrunan,
the names I saw in theatres
blurred and turned to mine—
then dazzling spotlights faded—
I began to sense
poems and to write them—
movies seemed absurd
flimsy fantasies compared
with pulsings through a word—
I went from shadow brilliances
backward to a dim
archaic inner studio
to star there in my own
poems of identity
too secret for a screen—
and that was how I came to be
nobody again.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 96.

Ars Gratia Artis

Why I should dream years later of Margie Stoller
I don't know—but in my dreruns,
though I was forty-six and she sixteen,
an old time co-ed, she kissed my middle age
and I wiped her lipstick off like thick red crerun,
confessing as I did, I'd always loved her—
those movies I made were only so we could kiss—
Margie, I was your Taylor, you my Garbo,
and even when I dreamed of you like this
saying you didn't mean to be so grown,
your breasts in bud when I was narrow chested—
behind this beard, I'm still that filmy boy
in a looped memory, forever there arrested,
repeating scene after scene's young pain and joy,
caught in an adolescence I detested,
I'd rather have been a Gable to your Loy—
but even if I should wake to find you by me
you'd sag there creruned and curled at my side—
Margie, it's far far better you didn't try me—
in a drerun by MGM, my perfect bride.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 97.

It Took a Long Time

to put away childish things,
there were so many and I kept a scrapbook—
then all the movies I shot
beginning at thirteen—! found out I could do without the magic rings
and the map of Wheateenaville—the Orphan Annie mug broke.
As soon as I started driving I thought I was grown up.
Home seemed to be smaller, farther from the center,
Venus hung like a silver tear in crimson evening—
everything looked different when you were almost six feet—
my big brother became my little brother—! wondered where such perspectives
would finally lead.

I didn't whizz my Yo-yo any longer
or send to Quaker Oats for cosmos seed,
wasn't even interested in getting the autograph
of Carole Lombard at the Broadway preview,
though still attended movies twice a week
and church on Sunday, closer than ever to Christ—
on the subject of loving your neighbor we really agreed—
philosophically, I pondered deeper on life,
unable to get excited as once about the Orange Parade.
And I was ready as any boy ever was,
sudsing my face on Saturday nights for a shave,
in spite of my father who said I only had fuzz,
to be a lover, but I missed the chance—
nothing but holding hands on date after date,
and never nearing, as I didn't dance,
in an okayed social embrace, the region of love.
That girl I finally went with had breasts all right
and at last exposed them saying I hope
you can take the artistic point of view—
trying to be Gauguin, I groped lower
until she began fading out like a 1940 movie
and with eyes as round as Little Orphan Annie's
said there are some things a gentleman doesn't do.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 98.

Gone with the Wind

When *Gone With the Wind* came out
Dan Anderson told me
it was a sexy book,
recounted at noon hours
Scarlett O'Hara's doings
as we ate our bananas
under high school arches.
I was too busy to read it
but waited for the movie
and though some racy loves scenes
might have been cut out—
what a shock it was
when Rhett said right on the screen
"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."
It must have cost
more than it really cost
to burn Atlanta
on David o. Selznick's lot—
and all those bandaged extras
and hundreds of guns and cannons—! was glad
for every award it got—
"The best movie I've ever seen,"
I wrote in my diary, then dot dot dot
But when I took my children to see it
on one of its re-releases—
when movies were better than ever
and sex was less hush hush—
sitting there eating their popcorn
through childbirth and bleedings
in a fairytale plot,
they weren't so easily fooled
though brother still killed brother
and fire looked just as hot—
having been better schooled
by TV and Vietnam,
they just didn't believe it

(knew Tara was only a front)
and all they said as the screen flamed red,
drinking their Cokes, was
“so what?”

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 99.

When I Finally Went to MGM

it was a lot like home—
not a lion on the lawn
and emptiness behind
the streets that only had facades,
with people on mere feet passing
where I'd had stars in mind.

A showboat on a river
ending at a bend,
a grass that could be lifted
on stages wired for sound—
the minarets of Oz
near Tarzan's rubber jungle
next to a cowboy town.
And some of it was painted
and some projected on—
it looked as if you touched it
the thinness would be gone
and nothing there but desert
as later screenings show—
illusion howling through a skull,
a film of how things seemed
before they carted orchards off
and battered down the scenes—
and less like fun and games,
vivid faces held too long
against the heat of time,
burning in their frames.

Section Four: HOLD IT

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 100.

IV: HOLD IT

Pop. by 1940: 40,000

It wasn't as if there wasn't any culture—
in the S. Hurok series, Nelson Eddy sang,
and even Marian Anderson, which proved
we weren't white sheep hiding a bigot's fang,
and the Public Library carried a good selection—
everything from Beowulf to Lin Yutang.
Maybe a Louvre didn't reflect in our dryness,
but there were excellent prints that we could hang—
Bonheurs, Van Goghs, and Raphael Madonnas,
some real originals in homes on Citrus Heights:
Sacré Coeurs with the paint still almost wet;
and some of us had been on tours and flights
to Rome, Shanghai, and even to Tibet—
it wasn't as if we'd never been around—
only that we knew there was no place quite like
our BEST IN THE WEST!
SEE BOWER'S MUSEUM!
WATCH US GROW!
99 & 44/100ths percent
pure American town.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
101.

Passing Through

How beautiful the morning looked—
steam rising up from roofs,
green fields between the towns,
orchards of perfume—
He was Sam Compton's only son—
then came twenty-nine;
his father turned on the oven
and he had hopped a freight
meeting among hobos
ex-millionaires and poets
or ones who might have been
if only they wrote it down—
this width from sea to sea—
the swarm of stars—that sun
on tracks toward infinity
clicking him back home.
He wondered about Zelda—
probably married by now—
and Harriette Small, and Bev
and Athena Applewaite's cow...
How beautiful the town looked—
even its shanties did,
where he had had a darkskinned girl
when no more than a kid.
Should he jump off and walk
back into that life?—
put on a suit and get a job
and settle down with a wife?—
He leaned from the door toward Fourth Street
as the red lights flashed and clanged—
still there—the four faced clock
on top of his father's bank
silvered by the morning—
the straight street rayed with dawn—
and then sat back and lit a butt
through orchards stretching on,

remembering how it really was—
cruel, small, ingrown—
some day he would stop—
but not now—not in this town.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 102.

Vivian

Balling the clay, she said, "Take off your clothes,"
 but my cousin, Vivian, in spite of his name, all boy
 (and eight years old)
 stiffened his lip, made fists and said, "I won't!"
 "Your mother," Miss Applewaite said, "promised you'd pose—
 that's the way they did it in Greece and Rome—
 and you're just right for Cupid—
 that cute little nose."
 He left her there in the light with her egg of clay
 and ran home, starting to cry, through the fruit-heavy groves—
 "Mama, Mama, that old Athena May
 told me, Mama, (gasping) to take off my clothes!"
 O Vivian, Vivian, some day you'll understand
 when you've been to New York as I have, when you're a man
 sensitive as he was, maybe you'll be
 an artist or poet and bring your works to me—
 strong armed, loving as he,
 dark-eyed and clever—
 O God why did I ever
 come back to this clodhopping town
 of my martyred father?
 It wasn't until Viv was over thirty—
 his shirtbuttons stretched at his pot,
 and a mind man-dirty,
 that he added the tale to his stock of cocktail jokes,
 whooping, there she was panting to pants me—
 making a gesture of zipping down his fly—
 "Miss Applewaite,
 may I pose for you
 Loday?"

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
 103.

Belle Small

She drew good trees at school—
“An artist—” her teacher said,
and so her father bought her
nothing but the best
paper, arrays of brushes—
a spectrum in which to dab,
hired a man from the college
who showed her how to rub
charcoal for a shadow,
effects from melted crayons—
she won a ribbon at a fair—
she made such bright designs
her father called her Rosa Bonheur—
who ‘d done the horses’ heads
straining manes and eyeballs
in a black frame in his den.
A life class in the city
finished art for her—
a man took off a bathrobe
and stood there perfectly bare
in African example
of the human form divine—
at which her fingers trembled
and couldn’t draw a line.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 104.

Doc Clark

Dr. Clark, paying faithful visits
to croup and flu and measles brought his bag
of medicines and stethoscope and jokes—
“R ub with Vicks, put on Musterole”—
poking ribs as he leaned down to listen,
looking deep inside as we ached our throats
Or in his office, in a whiter coat,
while the big clock ticked, he heard vague symptoms—
“N othing as good as air and exercise”—
and we went out, knowing we wouldn’t die,
past plaster feet and bandages in rows
and finished ladies waiting for his lie.
How many times he had to get up at night,
how many babies squalled in his hands first,
whom he would save from sickness as they grew,
and if they suffered, help them not to cry—
how often was it his sad turn to soothe
the grieving who could only sob out: “Why?”
And he wasn’t more than fifty four or five
when he came in clowning past the usual group
of ailing townsmen, calling them by name—
and leaning to wash his hands felt somewhat faint
and then while all the dying stayed alive,
dropped downward into the dark,
without complaint.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 105.

Oswald Shrader

What miles of excitement then—
thetrolley showering sparks
all the way up Main
down Fourth—lovers on larks,
ladies out to shop,
and I in my buttons and cap.
Now I sit on a porch
and watch the buses go,
an ancient dog at my feet,
the shining tracks below
covered by concrete,
the lines overhead gone, too,
and the bright red gold lettered car
on 101 saying EATS—
I remember reading in school
something by someone called Keats:
“A thing of beauty
is a joy forever—”
They say that he died young—
he didn’t know how life tears
everything beautiful down.
My Martha these score years
rotting underground
drowned in a mother’s tears
for our bright boy who was drowned,
pulled, one Fourth of July,
by a riptide out and out—
and clanged to the end of the line,
nothing but memory now,
my joy tugged under by time.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 106.

Mrs. Nice at the Talkies

Nothing was as good as it used to be
in the old days when she went to matinees
and Rudolph Valentino glowed on the screen—
now they had to have these newfangled talkies,
you had to hear what Janet Gaynor said
in a squeaky voice and even Laurel and Hardy
made noises when they got bumped on the head.
She didn't need to listen to Gloria Swanson
or Warner Baxter—the world made sounds enough—
and she almost agreed with Mrs. Johnson
over the fence that all this modern stuff—
cars that whizzed so fast they made you dizzy—
was devil's work—nothing the way it was
when she'd bumped over unpaved roads in the old tin lizzy
with Mr. Nice—and oh!—
how dark and handsome he was then,
his hair as shining black as Valentino's
but parted in the middle and his hands
moving alive below the glimmering cuffs—
Buddy Rogers, pretty as you are
and holding Mary Brian or Billie Dove,
why do you blurt out everything and mar
the speechlessly flickering film
of remembered love?

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
107.

Grandma Folkston

It was beyond her
 what got into girls today—
 they didn't like to cook
 and not one of John's three
 would even dam a sock.

Alice with her book,
Mabel moping around—
she needed a good dose
of sulphur and molasses—
she and Clarissa May
looked like cheap floozies
the way they painted their faces.
Sally had spoiled them rotten.
You'd think to put up jam
meant you weren't quite right—
"Oh Grandma, why do that
when it's easier to buy?"
And off they went to the movies
with boys who were just as bad.
They all had things too soft,
not like the olden time—
that cabin in the woods
in northern Wisconsin—
oh she could close her eyes
and there they sat beside
the fire on winter nights,
birch logs crackling and snapping—
Father's beard red in the light,
Mother with needle and thread,
singing the good old songs,
in homespun they had made,
too tired
to dream they weren't happy.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 107.

Etta Johnson

She'd stopped the clocks, they said,
the hour her husband died—
no one remembered when—
and said she still burned lamps
using kerosene
in that dark house with towers
behind an iron fence.

Huge guava trees produced
fruit in the wilderness
her garden had become
and squashed along the walk
under our speeding feet
until the city came
to buzz the branches off
while she stood shaking her fist
there on the scrollwork porch,
a bonnet from the past
in faded bombazine,
quoting her bearded God
and calling down His wrath
on a world that had gone mad.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 108.

Elmer Slater

Injured in the First War,
a gold plate in his head,
he lived on a government pension
instead of being dead—
and drove around the ranches
with books, and charts he'd made.
“Look, I’ve traced your family back
as far as Catherine the Great”—
and tried to sell us lineage
to buy his wife a coat—
my uncles and my father
took it as a joke.
He’d stayed at the library late
inking the lines of blood—
“We’re all children of Adam—”
they laughed him to his Ford.
He took up Watkins’ Products,
sold soap with more success,
and later Mutual Funds—
“A smart way to invest.”
We didn’t care where we came from,
as Elmer Slater learned—
it was toward bright tomorrow
our ignorant faces turned.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 109.

Marianne Cox

The Coxes chose Marianne to be a star—
her Lux complexion and her long black hair
made her stand out, and she had talent, too—
the way she twirled batons was something rare—
while prancing she'd be wheeling two at once
then toss them up and snatch them out of the air.
With a dancing pencil, she could copy faces
from Silver Screen, of Harlow, Cooper, Gable—
so clever her praising teacher gave her A's.
“That girl,” beamed Mrs. Cox, “has got a soul”
and the whole Cox tribe saved dimes in those hard times
for a year so Marianne could reach her goal—
a trolley trip for a try at Hollywood.
She went with her grip, red lips, and new checked dress
and for two sad weeks sat around and stood
and breathed in that star dust air and smiled and wept,
but no one noticed, among the swarm that buzzed there,
how beautiful she was and how adept.
“They only hire relations and second-raters,”
Mrs. Cox cried, consoling when she came home—
“they're a no good bunch of liars, Jews and cheaters.
Never you mind, Marianne, your time will come”—
and she didn't mind too much, within six years,
wife, and mother of five, had grown past stardom.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
110.

Deacon Ennart

Deacon Ennart called movies “The Devil’s Church,”
so pious that when he caught his daughter dancing
he locked her in a dark room for a week—
he built a pool where everyone swam in the nude,
but segregated, at specified times of day
(at certain hours of the naked truth
branches creaked as someone high up viewed).
The deacon rolled, at revivals down by the river,
jerked (almost off) and talked in tongues and prayed,
which was when one of his daughters, in a flivver
with a nextdoor reckless ranchboy, first got laid.
His only son also began as a bully,
but turned out kinder, finally, having married
no a good woman who, too, hadn’t been saved.
You might expect, with such a twisted sire,
children of violence or hopeless addicts at least,
but though there were few things about him to admire,
his eager progeny lived their lives in peace,
dropped church gradually, went to movies once a week,
and the old sinner, calling them Clark and Gary,
dandled satanic grandsons on his knee.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
110.

Mary Mitchum

Her broad face freckle sprinkled,
big breasts that went
flop flop under a loose dress—
gone bad—everyone said—a beach rat—
she stayed down at that old house
alone all winter.

Her wrists were bandaged once
and both eyes black and blue
but even before she healed
she was lifting a glass again
in a dark beach bar on a stool—
she had a baby, born blind
and the pale, frail thing soon died—
not there after that

when families came down—
“Living with some bum—”
and finally “Mary Meechum?—
oh that one—
she swallowed a bottle of aspirin—
they didn’t find her in time.”

But I remembered her young,
not fat then, almost pretty,
sitting with me for hours
under a torn umbrella
as ripples lipped at the shore
and we leafed through sandy catalogs
from Sears and Monkey Ward.
Whenever we came to the bride’s gowns
she looked out at the sea,
and her bitten nail on the fanciest veil, said
“Next June that will be me.”

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
iii.

Widow Willis, the Cat Lady

I'd rather know cats than people—
they don't make you so sad—
not one of mine isn't grateful
for being rescued and fed
fish heads by the plateful—
not like Amy and Fred.
How I slaved for those children,
gave them all that I had—
when diphtheria almost killed them,
sat night after night by their bed—
scrimped for enough food to fill them,
and as soon as they could they said
"So long, Ma," never thinking
what it does to a stepmother's heart—
Fred—he started drinking—
Amy—she's not too smart—
making up, sashaying and winking—
twice married, the hard little tart—
but cats—there's loyalty for you—
up in your lap for a pet—
pamper them, they adore you—
they don't run off and forget.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 112.

Bubbles

That stately lady, Banker Burton's wife,
 officiated as she was called to do
 at proper parties, christenings of yachts,
 appeared in print, low gowned and latest hatted,
 below her patrician nose, a bow of dots.
And sometimes she'd be seen in city papers—
 when still almost young among the rotogravure
 visiting duchesses—and one time in the box
 of a turbaned Maharaja watching the races
 at Santa Anita, dripping gems and fox.
But a good friend told me that once when she'd been drinking
with him and her teen-age son alone at home—
stemmed champagne while they drank bottled Cokes—
she'd got up on a table and started dancing
and then she'd started taking off her clothes,
though stopped when she was down to bra and panties,
and led them to the attic where she showed
a secret trunk of antique joys and troubles—
sequined G-strings, gloves and ostrich fans
and a lifesize poster billing her as "Bubbles."

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 112.

Johnny Walsh, Checkered Cab Co

Not too much going on
in this two-taxi town—
I never delivered a baby
and nobody like in the movies
ever yelled “Follow that cab!”
But it isn’t all nice old ladies
either, I’ll tell you that—
one time Zelda Keith
gave me a twenty to take her
up to Citrus Heights.
Before I could open the door
there she was on the seat
putting a hand on my thigh
and saying she thought I was cute
and what a husband she had.
Jesus, what could I do
with two kids needing to eat—
and how do you say no,
for haif what you make all week.
to anything easy as that?

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 113.

A Man from the Freight

A man who'd jumped off the freight,
after his canned bean dinner
walked through winter wet
to the Library next to the Elks Club
and leaned in the light and read—
the local and L.A. papers,
Karl Marx and The Post,
Democracy in America—
anything and everything
to stay in out of the cold.
But Miss Frost's eye was on
those who didn't belong—
noted the hunch of his shoulders,
the week's growth, the Goodwill coat.
She saw him crouching down
far back in the stacks
peering up—or so it seemed—
a girl's legs on a ladder—
and swooping like a Harpie
said she'd call the police.
For tramps like him there were jails
and the gutter was good enough
for bums with grimy nails
and one brown and one argyle sock—
we had laws for outsiders,
on every door, a lock.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 114.

Slim the Janitor

He came at closing time
to empty, sweep and mop
the messes they had left,
to polish and to swab
their desks, their floors, their halls
and shine their fingered knobs.
In men's rooms, scrubbed their words of wish,
in women's, blood smears off,
and sometimes in the office hush
prayed wrathfully to God—
Deliver me from evil.
Give me another job.
Into oil drum alley cans
he dropped their filthy scraps
and rats that writhed with maggots,
left too long in traps,
and coughed back up their hollow stairs
hallowed with his steps.
They found him hanging naked
one morning near the brooms,
eyes popped, long neck bent,
and written on the walls
of all their soon doomed rooms
his warning word: Repent.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 114.

The Santa Ana Wind

We all were someone else
struggling against that wind—
our hair stood up tingling,
sparks leaped from our hands—
the tiled stucco dazzled
as in sirocco lands.

Our underclothes those days
snapped against our skin—
tan leaves whirled and scraped
with a dry and papery din—
the eucalyptus air
burned like medicine.

Usually so discreet,
fiendish ladies ran
after their crazy hats
scampering down the street—
the preacher in his study
whispered blasphemies.

Loving mothers shrieked
I'll kill you you damn brats
and meekest children tied
cans to electric cats—

 a demon had invaded us
 to make us mean like that
 or lie in silent lassitude
 going dark with thoughts
 of death and what's the use—
 until the weird blast stopped
 as if it had never blown—and then
 we seemed ourselves again.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 115.

Mr. Foote, Postman

A mad dog bit him once—
he'd had to have those shots—
relentless lugger otherwise
of gasbills to the box,
of invitations, ads,
and few importances—
letters with foreign stamps—
to Mrs. Liederkrantz
the White King Soap third prize—
his post bag on a strap,
in uniform and cap,
sweating around the blocks
in summer, and in winter
with heavy coat and gloves—
and after tons of cards
scrawled with unmeant loves,
his hurting bunions done,
his calves untied of knots,
a man who might have walked
several times around the world
finally pensioned off—
to dream he flies on winged feet
with messages for gods.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 116.

Joseph and Mary Pilford

After her miscarriage
and the lamentable operation
they discovered the secret of marriage
others were slow to learn—
released from fears of pregnancy,
they could both be warm—
she sometimes his mother
stroking a crying son,
or a lover in a lather
riding his underman—
then, if he would rather,
she'd let him be the one
chasing her like a satyr,
pushing her back on the bed—
to them it didn't matter
which one took the lead—
before they were man and woman
they were friends in need;
adepts of the bedroom
doing whatever they could
to ease and please each other
and keep an even mood—
more like sister and brother,
irreproachably good,
going to church on Sunday
and singing the hymns to Him
who wasn't a god of thunder
but far from vengefully grim
when with so many ways for pleasure
created He them.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 117.

Robert Furness, Doctor of Divinity

One time he climbed to the attic
with his Bible and his clipboard
to write his Sunday sermon
away from the screaming kids—
and saw in the nextdoor bedroom
Joseph and Mary Pilford
writhing in nakedness.
At four in the afternoon
practicing perversions
he never would have guessed—
figures out of Sodom
on a licentious bed—
Joe's head straying downward
to where her thighs were spread
and she—he couldn't believe it—
one of the Ladies' Aid
doing that to her husband
and letting him do that
while sprinklers ticked along the lawns
and not far down the street
the ball clicked on the bat.
Such sinful and revolting
positions of the flesh—
Mary with nothing on
bending over for Joseph
right next to the manse—
What is this that thou hast done?
Clasping prayerful hands
he asked God to forgive—
and every Saturday after,
excusing himself from noise,
under the wasp nest rafter,
nailed to his personal cross,
listened for their laughter
and jealously watched their joys.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 118.

Edith Furness, Minister's Wife

Spring exultances—
not like back East
where after months of white
green peeked subtly sweet—
but oh—these salmon pink
sudden hibiscus bells, those
African purple jacarandas
transforming a street,
masses of mustard
jungling the lots—
and the smell of new mown lawns
mingled with stocks—
the fur armed garbage man
humming “Carmen”
as he lifted the can
and his sweatshirt went up
over his navel—
it was too much
for her Methodist blood.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 119.

Touchdown Brown, Dept. of Sanitation

Muscle wasn't enough—
though he could have done much worse—
flunkie, boozier, factory hand,
driver of a hearse—
he liked to be out in the open—
soon got used to smells—
his good ear close to secrets
whispering garbage tells—
love notes, dried up condoms
behind a widow's house—
and once, a bloody foetus
wrapped in last week's news—
 he didn't let the police know,
 clanged the can by the gate—
 God, he'd been in trouble
 with girls in his own day—
 a bristling football hero
 they let have his way—
 he whistled along the alley,
 jumped down and shouldered away
 a food smeared Motorola
 that only needed a tube,
 The Rover Boys Over the Ocean,
 a hacksaw he could use.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 119.

Ramona Lopez

Her dustcloth rolled in The Times,
she got off at her stop
and went to clean the houses—
sometimes out to shop
for busy leisure ladies
behind the lawns and blinds.
Neatness in an apron,
black hair tightly drawn,
pierced ears glinting crosses,
a smile for everyone—
so careful with their Haviland,
so spiteless—not like some.
No husband and four children
(two with lighter skin)
racial tragedies unguessed
behind her even mood—
a brother in San Quentin,
a sister who'd gone bad.
And she was conscientious—
trinkets and extra dimes
she knew no one would miss
were the only spoils she slipped
with the cloth with which she'd polished,
cheerfully into The Times.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 120.

Clarence Holmes, Attorney at Law

Not many murders here—
civil cases, mostly,
more rapes than appear
ever on the books—
but I had a diller once—
nine teenthirty-three
soon after the earthquake
had shaken everyone up—
Mrs. Edwin Mandrake
raped and cut in chunks.
The guy the state indicted
was one Ricardo Lopez,
a kid of twenty-one—
when they can't find anyone else
they nab some Mexican.
But I hired a detective
and got the evidence
of things that screwball'd done—
doctors, the whole history
proving Mandrake nuts.
As cool as Jack the Ripper
he himself had hacked her
then raced out to the Club
and drank from some blonde's slipper
while his wife's parts bled on the rug.
You think they went out and grabbed him?
That the case was open and shut?
That Ricardo wasn't gassed?
That the defense can ever rest
until justice is just?

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 121.

Carlotta Seyrig, Palm Readings

THE FUTURE PREDICTED.

They want me to conjure the future

so I've got a crystal ball

and I do some reading of hands,

having been taught by a gypsy—

my grandmother, Barbara Delance.

But the incense, the Woolworth earrings,

the dim lights—all of that

is only the show they expect

when they drop in with their problems

mostly of money and sex

or what they should wear to the dance.

It's the mind I really believe in—

and I was born with the gift

though there are whole weeks

I have to admit

when all I draw is a blank—

but sometimes I feel those vibrations—

or call it whatever you please—! pretend to see it in palms or the cards

or in the ball or the leaves—

but it's the gift I was born with

that showed me as plain as could be

the earthquake before it happened,

the tumbling chimneys and cracks—

and as if on the silver screen

Amanda Mandrake, who called me a fake

and prettily laughed when I warned her,

attacked by her husband, Edwin,

and cut into chunks

with an ax.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 122.

A Faithful Husband

Soon after their marriage
 Jane Marx began to act odd—
 heard God's voice over the radio
though no one had turned it on—
showed Jack her demon lover's
red bites on her neck—
milkstop of a husband,
what did he expect?
And motherhood didn't help—
that bastard of a baby—
dirty diapers, bottles,
and the crying drove her crazy.
Jack came home one night
to find the baby strangled
but whether by her hand
or accidentally entangled
never could be proved.
At Norwalk after that
she wouldn't learn to weave,
never spoke, grew fat—
for years he brought her flowers
in the women's violent ward
until she rammed herself with glass
and they couldn't stop the blood—
but Jack never remarried,
thin and bent and grey,
he drives out to the cemetery
every Memorial Day.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 122.

Abby Arthenot, Waitress

Who says divorcees are gay?

After that it was over—

she had to go to work—

no husband, no lover.

She moved down from the city,

put the kids in school

and eight hours every day

grinning like a fool

praised the chicken salad

to Mrs. Bertha Gray,

told deaf old Mr. Potts

“Yes, it’s fresh turkey.”

In that white apron and cap

looked more like a lady’s maid

than a doomed Karenina

whose tragic heart would break—

brushed the tips in her palm,

greeted new patrons, polite,

with screaming corns walked home,

tucked in the kids for the night—

where was it she’d heard

that saying that like a refrain

kept singing through her head

as she balanced plate after plate:

“They also serve

who only stand and wait”?

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 123.

The Golfer

Quietly desperate, he kept coming home
to inlaws from the East in his favorite chair—
Grace's cousin or her Aunt Therese,
one or the other knitting an afghan there
and how they packed away the spuds and beef!
Or else they went out with Grace to some affair
or met the Old Dame coming in on the train
and he was left with a cold cut icebox supper—
and the ads to read—in the middle of round three
they'd troop in gabbing and Grace would say "Kiss Mother."
He had to drive them down to look at the beach
or else to the Hollywood hills for a glimpse of the stars
as they yakked and yakked with Grace across the seat
shrilling into his ears their Oh my dears!
and at every jerk of the brake giving a leap.
And he couldn't have stood it—Grace always so tired
and having those headaches, too, if while they snored
on Sunday mornings he hadn't got out his irons
and pretending to whistle off for some strokes at the course
parked the Ford near the house of a widow he knew
124 and they rolled and roared on her floor like coupling lions.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
124.

Daisy Hemingway, Dressmaking & Alterations

A whirr and purr of her Singer—
a few pins whipped from her mouth
when the bride came for the fitting
and there was the luminous gown—
not easy to compete
with cheaper ready-mades
but with weddings and formals and hems
she almost eked enough
not to go on relief.
Chuckling at Charlie McCarthy,
Jack Benny and Fibber McGee,
watching Garbo and Davis
half price at the West End—
if not exactly happy
she didn't despair at least
until she met Jim Garvey
and he started coming around
early on Sunday mornings.
She'd had enough of men
but there he was calling her honey
and there she was letting him in,
taking his gifts and his money,
doing it on the floor,
in the tub and so many ways
she never dreamed it was done—
and at first only thinking him funny
when he tried the dresses on.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 125.

Angel Rodriguez

A droll grotesquerie,
he had grown up emotions
in a 3'4" body—
waddling forward oddly,
treated as a toy—
the mascot of the team
though nothing like a boy.
“Hey, water here, Rodriguez—”
the numbered giants called
and rumpled like a kid’s
his hair while he went cold—125
and on the daily street—
“Mama, look at that—”
“Shh, it’s just a dwarf—”
he went wet with sweat,
hating to be a freak
but did a little dance
and cartwheeled down the walk
to show that he was lovable
even if sawed off
and usually he was gentle—
but mad, when teased too much,
screamed in both his languages
“Fuck you! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”
and thrust a hard arm upward
to prove him man enough.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 125.

Mile High Miles

A big man in our town—
almost seven feet—
he would have been more pleased
with less to move around—
special shoes and shirts,
a giant bed for sleep—
oh you little squirts,
try not to grow up!
smoke to stunt your growth—
drink coffee by the quart—
in spite of so much size,
he was a gentle sort
and married in his time
a girl not quite five feet—
some tittering went on—
they walked along to winks,
seeming so mismatched,
the grand and the petite—
but when the genes were mixed
by chemistry of sex—
two daughters and two sons,
nature knowing best,
not a single one
higher than his chest.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 126.

K-O-R-E, The Voice of the Citrus Empire

Out of his adam's apple
a resonance evoked
someone broad and tall
and not the way he looked—
not many would have bothered, though,
listening at all
to such a slight unmanly man
unless beyond the dial
whenever they turned on
his Poets' Golden Hour
it wasn't Herbie Bond they saw
but Gable, Cooper, Power—
at first only a fill-in
between important shows,
then after stacks of mail,
while strong men cleared their throats
and housewives leaked desire,
he became the one
announcing at all times
the failures of the crops,
the latest on the films,
with that voice of ice and fire.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 127.

Golden Gloves

He ate right, slept right, lived right,
training for Golden Gloves,
worked out every day
the way ballet improves
step by step by step—
cut bad once in L.A.
still he kept it up.
And how his mother worried
about his ears and nose—
his father crowed with pride
wild in the smoky rows—
those shoulders under the lights,
what a left, what footwork—
the new world champ—who knows?
 But he got knocked for a loop
 on his big night in Chicago—
 never the same again—
 paunchier and slow,
 he sells sporting goods,
 showing, in better moods,
 punk kids the old one two.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 127.

Ernest J. Licht, Physician & Surgeon

Gas-looped with indigestion,
he took another Tum,
stumbled down to breakfast—
coffee laced with gin—
and he was ready for the day:
removing someone's rectum,
making hospital rounds,
then in his Broadway office
tapping chests for sounds.
“Eat right or you'll die.
Cut down on cigarettes.
Walk instead of drive.
Take it easy—rest—”
with a light in his cast eye
“Get a girl in your bed
if you want to stay alive.”
But home beyond his lawns
behind Venetian blinds,
gobbled ice box scraps,
stale chocolates, gulped wines,
chainsmoked Lucky Strikes,
then rode the elevator
one floor to his crippled wife,
pecked her phthisic cheek
and lay awake till dawn.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 128.

Tobacco, Candy. Magazines

Here by the old West End—
not much of a theatre now—
I sell magazines,
tobacco, even rubbers
to regular customers,
and I've seen things in my time
128 you only see in the movies—
old Zachariah Friend
shot down in front of my eyes
by a hoodlum in '29—
those were desperate days—
and I took over the stand.
I keep a gun in the drawer
but it never happened again.
Mostly I sell kids candy
before the matinees,
but I keep some hot stuff handy—
Zip, Nude Views, and Breeze.
Wouldn't you be surprised
if I told you who comes by
like clockwork every month
without his backward collar
to buy the latest smut?

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 128.

Arthur Couchay's Ladies' Apparel

I have to go to New York
to pick out the latest fashions
copied from Hollywood—
if it isn't sleeves it's decoletage—
whatever Crawford wore
when she'd risen from rags to riches.
The local ladies adore
knee lengths if they're the rage
and when Hepburn put on britches
I had to take the plane
to keep the ladies in stitches
that would make them look like men—
usually I take the train—
which is why I stay in this business,
those trips to mad Manhattan.
I suffer sometimes from dizziness
shut in this stuffy shop
but a good stiff breeze from the Hudson
invariably fixes me up—
sometimes champagne with a model
or a not too bad lady buyer—
and my wife's no worse off for that—
she's always the first one in town
who isn't old hat.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 129.

Bessie's Beautie Shoppe

They came. in—looking a fright—
grey again at the roots
and wanted the works—the cut,
the rinse, the permanent wave
and she did what she could
to make their husbands believe
those bags were Claudette Colbert—
and also had to be
Bessie the listening ear,
their doctor and their priest.
She wasn't a gossip or pryer
but what she had to hear
before and after the dryer—
it was enough to curl your hair.
They were having hot flashes,
getting irregular
(well, and wasn't she?).
But what they were really afraid of
wasn't losing love
but losing their meal tickets—
they'd never worked a day
whereas she'd gone to school
and learned a useful profession
so she could keep a man
depression or no depression—
there were plenty of fish in the sea
hungry for sex and money
if Eddie should up and leave.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 130.

Millie's Millinery

Some of the younger girls
 don't care too much for hats—
 I say going bare
 on top is just a fad—
 a hat sets off the face.

Where would my business be
if all the hennaed matrons
decided not to wear
hats to the Ebell Tea?
In spring you should see the store—
every lady in town
buying an Easter bonnet
with buckles, feathers, bows
or maybe sequins on it.
They almost come to blows
vying for the right one—
they'd go without a girdle,
they'd rather not wear clothes
than bow before their Christ without
the latest in chapeaus.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 130.

Zeta Goff, Chiropodist

I tell them it's their shoes
that makes them Chinese wives—
vanity, thy name is woman!—
staggering on spikes,
squeezing in their toes—
as long as it's in fashion
any torture goes.
I cure them of their corns
pare their bunions off—
but they'll be back with more.
You won't catch Zeta Goff
playing their silly roles
or in anything but arch supports
and sensible rubber soles.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 131.

The Arkansas Travelers

Two sisters and two brothers
with bright eyes on the bigtime—
Jean with a nasal twang
sang “You Are My Sunshine”
while the chorus of the others
swayed and hummed along.
B.J.’s supple arm
pumped an accordion,
Esther plunked a banjo,
Billy strummed guitar.
They sang for us at Grandpa’s,
they played at most church socials
sweetly harmonizing
tearful “Oh My Darling...”
and everyone applauded
and said how good they were
but Hollywood wouldn’t listen
and Major Bowes said no.
And though they sounded fine
to us who liked that music
they weren’t the Andrews Sisters—
too out of date and corny
for 1939—
so finally they disbanded—
Jean and Esther married,
B.J. got a job
trucking to San Francisco
and Billy for a while
(before he took to drink)
changed his hayseed style,
trying to groan like Bing.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 132.

Mike Allman

Rushing up, tugging his hat,
wet suggestive lips
parting on gleaming teeth
under a brush mustache—
everything he said
hinting glands beneath—
he talked to fluttered ladies
boldly in the street,
and masculinely ready
for poker and for beer,
his were just such stories
the boys liked best to hear,
of brothels in Granada
and knifings in Tangier.
He had a wife, four children—
a terror to them all—
so when he clutched his chest
on Main St. one hot noon—
sired to St. Joseph's
in a dying swoon—
the nuns there had to stare
and so did Doc Magrew
to see beneath rough tweed
instead of a bulging jock
or boxer shorts at least—
pink silk underwear.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 133.

Bert Perkins, Station Master

Old puffers first—then streamliners—
not all of them made the stop—
sometimes above the clicking,
faces going places
flickering like a movie
and rosebud vases shaking—
but sitting on his stool
patient at the station
in glasses that were ovals
he read adventure tales
and hardly ever traveled
the disappointing rails.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 133.

Number Please e

You still can listen in
but it's not like the old times—
I've grown grey in this service,
plugging in the lines—
snatches of desperation,
lovie doves breathing their sighs,
sometimes one of those voices—
“Quick, get me the police—”
what face has she seen at the window,
what man's about to advance?
That I'll never know—
someone wants Paris, Kansas.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 134.

Karl Bower, Nurseryman

Maybe you've seen on Citrus Heights
or the new fancy streets
some of the plants I've furnished—
birds of paradise,
oleanders, begonias,
every kind of rose—
strawhatted gardeners tending them,
mostly Japanese—
they have a way with flowers—
but in this tropic place
you don't need many tricks—
a little water and presto!—
geraniums from sticks—
maybe you've seen the trackside shacks
massed with bougainvilleas
no one takes much care of
and yet they bloom like weeds—
it only democracy flourished
as equally as these!

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 134.

Mrs. Wright

I saw one of those schoolbooks—
it's a scandal that's what it is—
teaching we come from monkeys
when God created man
in the very image of Him.

I'm going to bring it up
next month before the Board—
think how those children's minds
will be forever scarred
by believing that atheist Darwin.
The Reverend Oral Dixon's
behind me a hundred percent—
those books have got to be changed
and the Genesis story put in—
what would the world be like
if we wasn't conceived in sin?
Call those Red lies science
and nothing'll be too lewd—
next they'll be teaching incest
by that Jew Sigmund Freud.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 134.

Stationery. Cards. Notions. Books

They sank what they'd saved up
and a small inheritance—
nailed shelves for a month,
at the opening, served coffee
among the attractive displays.
His wife in her handwoven skirt
and he convivial
with his pipe and English tweeds
tried to create an aura
of culture and good taste—
but except for a student or two
no one wanted Auden,
Toynbee or either James—
and the dusting they had to do!
Then after a half price sale
they did get rid of some books
and just in time not to fail
moved the rest to the back—
the greeting cards sold well
and so did the comic ceramics—
the cat with a cactus tail,
the miniature toilet ashtrays.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 135.

Helen Payne, Spotter

What could you tell from spots?—
mud, blood, bits of food—
designs of oil dots,
tobacco geezers chewed—
dip cloth and get it off,
don't think, don't brood.
What leg in the cut of that?
or heart pumped in this shirt?—
this one had a cat—
that one worked in dirt—
when the lover's knifeblade stabbed
how much did it hurt?
Don't dream, don't make it worse—
only a ketchup wound,
not like a matinee
where Tyrone Power swooned—
dab the thought away,
brush it as good as new,
give it to Tom for the mangle—
he'll smooth it out with steam
and go off in his Ford still single
with some other girl still green—
while tears drip like wax from a candle
and no one can rub you clean.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 136.

Fay Purvis

Brightlipped under neon
for twenty a week and tips—
a car hop at Shorty's Malt Shop,
she watched the kids whirl in—
a shiny blouse, red slacks,
a pert little pillbox cap—
who would have thought her thirty
or that she'd served time?—

Somewhere in Oklahoma
she had a teen age son,
somewhere in Arizona,
the grave of another one.
This time she'd be smarter—
if the medicine didn't work,
a certain Dr. Farsdale
she'd heard would do the trick—
and after that, she'd move on
maybe up to Seattle—
God, these smartass kids—
listen to their prattle.
Tittering on heels
she wowed them with her hips—
"Hi guys, what'll it be?"—
anything for tips.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 136.

L. I. Augen, Optometrist

The vain ones are the worst
who never wore a lens—
not only handsome ladies,
men too resent my rims—
some of them up in their eighties
who should have better sense.
They all can see the E
even with half an eye—
it's the finer print
escapes the retina—
however much they squint
most of them can't decide
what's in front of their faces—
it's not their eyes that are bad,
some blindness of the mind
keeps them from seeing right
and I can't give them that
whatever glass I grind.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 137.

The Projectionist

That little room got hot
but cool on the beaded screen
Astaire and Ginger Rogers
in sets like whipped cream
flew on down to Rio,
danced on a shining wing—
the ice pale face of Garbo
kept whispering “Armand—”
When the circle flicked in the corner
he clicked off the second machine—
and Cooper in “The Plainsman”
or Grant in “Gunga Din”
grinned their perfect teeth
without a missing frame—
the tears continued to drip
down Shirley Temple’s cheeks.
Over and over and over
seven nights in a row—
Mae West teased W.C. Fields,
Grace Moore hit the note,
and at matinees the same
reel after unreal reel—
while he flipped magazines
shirtless in the heat.
But sometimes the big boss winked
“I’ll need you after the show”—
slipped him some different cans
and bills in an envelope,
and for the boss’s friends
with erections in the loge
he projected what our town and MGM
never brought to focus.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 138.

Otto Uhr, Watch Repair

I look into the watch—
 delicate balances—
 this for a lady's wrist
 and that strapped on a man—
 a time for being kissed,
 a time for lowering down.

I squint deep in the works—
the thin oil lasts and lasts,
the jewels let it turn
not too slow or fast,
if frost or fire should burn
it only tells how long.

The mainspring drives it on,
the handspring's tiny spiral
keeps it going right—
a wheel is in the wheel—
night day night day night—
it doesn't have to feel
the breaking of a heart,
the wrecking of a face.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 138.

“Dummy” Randall

Only his mother felt
(who'd read Helen Keller)
what he might become—
she somehow eked the money
to send him north to school—
after education
he could clearly hear
the ignorant jeering “Dwnmy”
from lips that smiled before—
now snarled back screw you
with alphabetic hands—
one girl ventured close
not thinking him a man
and wrote “I like you John”
but when she heard the moan
his unused larynx made
ran away confused—
He soon left our town
to live again in Berkeley,
married one like him,
and after further courses
taught strangely quiet children
the language of the voiceless,
 and, as he finally did,
 to make the harder choices—
 take silence as a gift
 and those who are deaf and dumb
 in subtler ways, forgive.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 139.

Margo Martine, Studio of the Dance

Ignore at your peril bodily rhythm.
the rhythm of body is all there is.
I studied for years in New York and Paris
and now I waste it on these bratty kids.
Smiles, all smiles, for their fat fannied mothers
dragging their endless Shirley Temples in—
still there have been one or two others
none of them Pavlova, not a Nijinski—
a girl once, though, who might have gone on,
a nymph in her leotards—leopard and butterfly—
and I thought her serious—then at sixteen
she eloped to Nevada with some pimpled boy
and wrote on a postcard “I see what you mean
by bodily rhythm. I’m dancing for joy!”
But the one I regret most is Leslie Aumaire—
so proper and stiff at first—what could I do
to loosen him up except here by the mirror
strip for him, strip him, let it all flow—
after which he got queerer and queerer.
You need checks and balances—one mustn’t go
too far too fast or you do lose control.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
140.

Georgina Gorman, R.N

Take a tip from that dancer
Isadora Duncan—
to express yourself is the answer
before you turn into nothing.
After all day at St. Joseph's
I need a change of scene—
that's why I'm studying dancing
with Margo Martine.
Those bodies, bleeding and sweating—
one patient—my God—
exploded all over the ceiling—
one bed—completely red.
I like to bend and bend
and whirl and almost fly—
not to think of the end,
only to move, to be.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 140.

Chest 46", Waist 32", Biceps 18%"

He pasted pictures up
of nearly naked men
with giant chests and narrow waists
and bulges at the loin—
taped himself each day,
drank milk by the quart,
working out with barbells
all the way from York—
felt the inches swell,
his pectorals define,
straining in the sun
won the competition
at Long Beach more than once—
an Atlas of the shoulder,
a back like Hercules'—
but he was getting older,
got looked at more by men
than curving girls he dreamed of—
modeled now and then,
got paid for making love,
though no one ever touched,
kissing that rippling skin
in beach hotel or studio,
the skinny kid within.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 141.

Lura O'Leary

To the Chaparral Circle ladies—
in her reds of unconviction
with brilliant checkered sashes
and sometimes orange tams,
she might have come from Greenwich Village
or the left bank of elan.
They ohed her telegraphic poems—
messages tapped out
from a secret deep interior
of rapture and of doubt—
inquired about her father,
a corpse that still lived on.
And she was gay and glib
and often cryptic—“... a shame,”
they said, “she never found a man.”
“Oh, she’s a nun—art’s martyr—
she doesn’t need one—who does,
who writes like that?”
And some contended,
when she drank the Lysol,
stumbling, sick at midnight, out of bed,
she only had intended, in the darkness,
to take a harmless
medicine instead.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
142.

Tan di Lanzo

Whistling deliverer of the evening paper
and happy little hummer in a tub—
at first a boy soprano—not much later
whenever something needed to be sung—
The Vagabond King or Handel’s “Messiah”—
one voice they’d ask would usually be Ian’s.
The local teacher he did scales for
sent him on to lessons in the city—
“Don Giovanni” in the new tiled shower—
lucid notes that hovered high and pretty,
and then he developed darker, lower power,
could range from serious bass to falsetto ditty.

He might have been a Melchior or Pinza
but the lead’s laryngitis in an L.A. show
gave him the applause that after which
he couldn’t go back to waiting for tomorrow—
popular musicals made him comparatively rich—
what he’d really wanted,
no one had to know.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
142.

Nancy Van Deusen

They gave her everything—
horse, clothes, private school,
ballet until she quit,
then lessons on the flute
(she said it marred her lip,
and locked the music up).
She sulked through half the Louvre
and couldn't be enticed
up the Acropolis—
the only thing she liked
on that expensive trip
was shuffleboard on ship.
She yawned whole operas through,
wouldn't pour the tea
as grateful daughters do—
though marriage the nice young man
they chose to run the store,
a joyless squarejawed bore
(she loved his red MG)—
in labor with the twins
screamed as if only she
had ever felt such pains—
watching her parents die
didn't move an eye—
inherited it all—
the house on Citrus Heights,
the tennis courts, the pool,
the store, the stocks, the rights
to lands of ore and oil—
and drank away the nights.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 143.

Henna Vinal, Birdwatcher

An enormous storm shadow
from dinosaur time,
a marvelous large grace
like a Shakespeare line,
the high point of her life was seeing—
(or thinking she did) and she'd been
on Audubon tours around the world—
the nearly extinct California condor
gliding it seemed from Saddleback
with giant wings unfurled
to light on her star pine.
Elusive bird of happiness
right in her back yard—
it sat there looking down
like death or Satan himself.
Was it wish fulfillment
or had her eyes played tricks?
She was getting old, old
and almost extinct.
And though she wrote in excitedly
describing its size,
the underwing white and bright orange head—
most likely an inordinately large
turkey vulture
the Audubon Society said.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 144.

Adam Crabtree, Beekeeper

Hundreds stung me once—
and did I howl and swell—
but anything you love
is sure to hurt like hell
once in a while at least—
with people it's most of the time.
It's not so often with bees.
Some men have their wives,
with others it might be money.
I just keep my hives.
Thousands of little lives,
gallons of golden honey—
and are they ever bright,
even sometimes funny—
off on a blossom flight,
back to their house of wax—
so smart you wouldn't believe
unless you knew the facts—
dances, that's what they do,
and point, with their feet, wings and backs,
which way the nectar is—
if the old queen swarms or dies
they up and make a new one—
and after a couple of drones
flying after her screw one,
it's curtains for all those buggers.
Maybe you like it better
with regular fathers and mothers,
grandpas, uncles, aunts,
cousins, sisters, brothers—
well, good luck with your choice.
I've had enough of that.
I'd rather live in peace
with my pipe and my old fixed cat
and my perfect bees.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 145.

“Rubens” Jones

At Laguna or Corona del Mar
he anchors down his easel
above the breezy sea,
strives there stroke by stroke
to better what he’s done before
but always the canvas shows
the same green wave about to break
on beiges of the beach.
Rembrandt, Michelangelo—
Renoir—he’s seen their prints—
studied once in Mexico,
at Carmel, got some hints—
and he has visions—
not these seascapes
similar as gulls
but figures of Blakean prophecy
demoning whole walls—
the same wave arcing up,
the same brown rock midpoint,
and footprints on the sands of time
the sea is painting out.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 146.

Al Booster, Chamber of Commerce

Best damn town in the world!—
bigger every day!—
you must of seen our sign
out on 101—
and we'll make it, by gum!
New drives being put in
lined with fullgrown palms—
it costs a mint to transplant em
but class is what we want
and now the depression's eased up
you just watch our dust!
Have you been to the new museum?
Genuwine Spanish stuff.
 Even an Indian mummy.
 Mark my words—you'll see—
 five, ten years we'll be
 an A-1 metropolis!

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 146.

Mad Mady

Mad Mady went out at night to war on the suburbs,
armed with a bag of rocks and an irate crowbar—
broke windows in better homes, banged at cars
and stealthily slipped on back through her falling down fence.
Week after week, a secret one woman protest,
hidden by hedges until the police cruised past,
she struck again and again, chuckling when sirens
screamed toward the shattered mystery she'd left fast—
but one night Mady was caught in flagrante delicto—
someone had waited up behind plate glass—
and she stood there shocked with her rock in the sudden searchlights,
a frail old whitehaired sweet Ma Perkins type—
“That odd little lady who lives back there in the orchard,
in that old house that's held together by vines—”
A deputy led her away, while she shouted handcuffed
“Git off my property, goldang it! This land's mine!”

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 147.

Rev. X. Burns McDermott

He was a not-bad well-met fellow—
in learned sermons, more human than divine—
there was a beaten road that we should follow,
no fiery pit for keeping us in line;
his hometown Christ—nothing like Apollo—
would never have turned God's water into wine.
He told the old they'd rise in brighter raiment,
the young to go and work for better times
(the house on which he faithfully made payment
shone white and new on one of the latest Drives)—
he joined the Rotary, fished, like Christ, with laymen;
if we should ask, advised our troubled lives—
baptized wailing babies, tied the knot,
saw the rose-cheeked dead down to their graves—
as he'd peen paid to, shepherded his flock,
though it was seldom any of us strayed
from the straight and narrow path of least resistance,
going the way his good intentions paved.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 147.

Hattie King

Most people couldn't stand
the ugly end of things—
a bowel case—drooling mother?—
they called in Hattie King,
went out to a movie
while she wiped bedsores clean—
with a bag of tidy ointments,
a smile in a nurse's cap,
came and mopped the vomit,
slipped the needed pan
under the wrinkled buttock
of what had been a man—
sat up with the dying,
never took a drink,
crooned tunes to stop their crying,
tried hard not to think,
fed spoons of warm pap, lying
they'd soon be in the pink.
But when she finally sickened
none came to minister—
her wrists and ankles thickened,
she lay there old and poor
gazing enraptured at the face
of Christ on a calendar.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 148.

Flower World, L.P. Bloom, Prop

"Say It With Flowers"

For every occasion—flowers—

yet none exactly local;

from a hothouse up in the city,

posies for the yokel—

brought daily in my truck

down to this blossomed Eden.

Cyclamens, gloxinia

in foiled pots for the sick—

for some old ended veteran

this wreath will do the trick—

i only change BON VOYAGE

to SYMPATHY quick as a wink.

Some dad you wouldn't suspect

comes in clearing his throat,

buzzes around the daisies,

asks how much per rose

and has a dozen sent—

velvet brilliances—

not to his wife, you bet—

well, that's the way it goes—

i furnish nice bouquets

for stiffs and Romeos,

sweets to those sweet yet,

thorns for the old crows.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 149.

Percy Tilg, Mortician

Some are easier than others—
you take those accidents—
all my art's required
to give them back a face.
I had a war case once—
they shipped him home on ice—
what stitchery it took
to make him look half nice.
I wish the world could pass
sweetly in its sleep.

And you'd be surprised how death
erases lines so deep
they seem to have been carved there—
a touch of rouge, some lipstick
is all such clients need.

This one, for instance—beautiful—
she's almost sixty-six.

When those tight strings of pain
untie they all relax,
in spite of rigor mortis.

Yes, we drain them first
and pump a liquid in—
composed of several chemicals,
not pure formaldehyde.

You do get used, in time,
to almost anything.

I had to go to school
to learn how it was done—

I think of it as sculpture,
and yes, I do take pride
in turning out a client
better than in life—

I hope when you've written your paper
on my art you'll think it over—
it doesn't appeal to many—
but you sometimes feel so good
having made a blessing

out of their having died—
and pardon my confessing,
but we could use young blood.
Section Five: CLASS PICTURES

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
149.

V: CLASS PICTURES

Asked Back

Thirty years since we were gowned and capped
and then let loose into the unschooled world—
a card comes for reunion—will I join
the class still grinning in its photographs
for cups of kindness and a few good laughs?
I certainly would like to, Harvey Potts—
to see your shock of redness streaking grey,
and more made up than in their rosy day
those high school nymphs now matronly and fat,
showing off they're not as old as that—
to view what wives and husbands which ones got,
to hear about the times and kids they've had
and prove that I have grown beyond their thought—
that skinny, inward boy too shy to date,
long-married, bearded, fatherly and broad.
Not being there, though, I can imagine it—
the waistlines, jowls and middleaging look,
the great success, the failed teacher's pet,
the one who caught the pass while pompoms shook,
remembering what he drinks not to forget—
those days when on the shoulders of the crowd
his grass-stained face rayed like a blessing saint's—
and hears the whiskey cheer, each year less loud.
The small town Whitmans wordless ever since.
The artists who have put away their paints.
That Spanish girl's voice so clear and proud
singing The Vagabond King as we sat enthralled—
what quiet cowlike madre is she now?—
the thoughtless meat who when their country called
went to be maimed and killed without a doubt,
in a free nation, that their lives were owed—

some who will be missing, some not missed—
and I among the absent as I was
when to be asked you had to join the dance—
that age when difference never had a chance.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 151.

Miss Dancey

Not one boy ever told—
maybe it wasn't true—
“Y ou know those arty women—
not much they won't do—
she probably draws them nude.”
Though no one knew for sure
someone thought he saw
Miss Dancey's handmade earrings
glancing as her door
opened for Leslie Aumaire—
and then the way she bent
over Rick Wayne at school—
whom was the lipstick for,
the dark wild piled up hair,
unless for Ernie Rohr?
Unless the following year—
mansized at fifteen—
for Tony Myerbeer?—
nothing could be proved
except the School Board's fear—
they had to let her go—
she packed her artist's gear,
moved to Laguna Beach
and walked in the sea one night—
with so much left to teach.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 152.

Leslie Aumaire

Few in my school understood Leslie Aumaire,
 who plucked and penciled his eyebrows and dyed his hair
 and dared the difference it takes to be a dancer—
 in that night dark of my school not many cared
 for any attempt at art if we didn't have to
 and wouldn't go near the edge where his feet veered.

We booed him offstage that time he came dancing on
with a painted face, in a tight ridiculous costume,
after which I don't think he ever came back—
for us Swan Lake was someplace on the moon
and Leslie, if not a fairy, at least a freak—
who else would whirl with girls all afternoon
when bullshouldered helmeted heroes cleated the field?
I never found out what happened to Leslie Aumaire—
snickered from school, he may have left for the city
and danced into crime or into the limelight there
but few of us stopped to remember, and less to pity
a boy who practiced what we could only desire.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 152.

Jesus Lopez

He wanted to study Latin, himself a Latin
who couldn't recognize an English noun.
Everyone was kind—we tried to help him—
even when he was funny, Miss Arnoldy didn't frown.
Most of our mothers, if they had seen him
with his long hair and crossed eye, besides being brown
and almost a moron, wouldn't have asked him in,
but we were democrats, who knew his heritage
and felt his right to grow up in our town.
We kept on being patient and whispered the answers—
he could have passed if he had only known
how to take advantage like some of his classmates
whose C's and B's and A's were not their own.
But finally he dropped out, and we might have wondered
at odd times, alone, what he was doing now,
but none of us ever crossed the fine line that divided
his night world from our dark daylight to find out.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 153.

Ben-Hur

On tests, we wrote amo amas amat
and then went home to find what Ben would do
to best Messala and to end the plot—
and sure enough, this persecuted Jew,
sold for a galley slave, and his kind mother
and innocent sister vengefully locked away,
proved himself better than any other,
made a comeback and won the thrilling race.
We learned the Latin endings of the case,
declined and conjugated, but in between,
read about this Palestinian boy
(as if Jack Armstrong triumphed in his place)
saved by Jesus so that he could be
Judah Ben-Hur, the All American goy.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 154.

Mrs. Grook

Whoever could compute
from tons of paperclips,
from red marks: "Please see me!"
from skylarks struggling through
the parenthetic lips
of Mrs. Gretchen Grook,
from rulers in her tone
measuring—ta tum—
sublime soliloquies
and Wordsworth's daffodils
like astericks on stems—
program an IBM
with how much sinking dread
of boredom in the tome
opened with that hand
she wore the topaz on—
who in a sterile room
where bare statistics hum,
feeding the machine,
could fill out shrunk Keats
she bled to skin and bone
and unearth what was done
when dumpy in that dress
ruthless Mrs. Grook
shot nightingales down
with bullets in her look—
to come up with the sum
of those she turned away
from love of poetry
those chalkdust afternoons.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 154.

Norma

Norma was a girl who had to shave,
only a final n from being a man—
what was she feeling as she stood so brave
beside her desk conjugating French,
her hair up over her ears and combed behind
as if a brother stood there in her place?—
did she also have a mannish mind
behind the tell-tale stubble of her face?
She had to walk alone, smoked cigarettes,
wore a shirt and tie and pants sometimes,
but didn't belong in male or female sets,
friendless as if appearances were crimes
instead of hormones—o Megan Regan
sitting in the next row, curved, with curls,
you never knew how much you were mistaken
vivaing the difference between boys and girls.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 155.

Miss Dark

She sometimes cried in class—
Miss Melissa Dark—
leaving some girl in charge,
ran crying from the room.
We read what Shakespeare said—
“O swear not by the moon!”
And one was Romeo
and one the bawdy Nurse,
 passages too purple
 bowdlerized, of course.
We did our sophomore best
to understand the verse,
whispered now and then—
“She and Mr. Lutz
drove off after the game
with a basket and a blanket—
isn’t that chain she wears
his name on an anklet?”
The circled orb changed monthly—
by summer we forgot,
though some of us were lovers
and some too timid yet—
September Miss Dark went on leave
and Mr. Lutz had left.
Later as a Mrs.
Someone she came back,
married and miscarried—
so rumor had the myth—
“Nervous breakdown.” “Tragic love.”
And then we read Macbeth.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 155.

Dolores Knight

The only thing she had, she gave quite freely—
at first in vacant houses and weed high lots,
and then on Citrus Heights when boys drove cars—
giggled at school, passed notes that were full of plots.
Her skinny lovers didn't really like her—
that sausage hair, those round, eye-doubling glasses,
but horny, they were eager enough to hike her
skirt up in the dark or after classes—
secretly smoking, laughed about their luck
and told the others—"Hey, if you're hard up
ask Dolores—boy does she like to fuck—"
licked sweetness from her overrunning cup,
and felt grown up, guffawing in lower octaves.
156 Dolores, however, wasn't entirely stupid,
and when she finally swelled, chose from her loves
the one who came closest to being wounded by Cupid—
Frank Beach, kinder than some, and more easily frightened;
they both dropped out, and after they were married,
the others felt a heavy burden lightened—
Adams no longer of the guilt she carried.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 156.

World History

Listing boring wars,
pointing to the Rhine
(while we wrote notes and folded
paper aeroplanes)
Mr. Carver tried and tried
but never touched the mind—
Magna Charta, Ghent and Trent,
fourteen-ninety-two—
we studied heads ahead of us,
watched the clock of now—
Ferdinand in plumes
shot riding in his car
like some old flickering movie—
“Lafayette, we are here!”
Mr. Carver quoted dates
(none good as Saturday—
wow! what legs, what lips, what boobs!—
would June come, after May?)
He never reached the present—
endless time ran short—
we got our papers back,
droned our last report,
and thought that it was over,
irrelevant—not new—
but Mr. Carver’s deadly course
kept on coming true.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 157.

Mr. Byron Jarvis

He read us an ti-war
plays in a various voice—
“B ury the Dead” by Irwin Shaw,
“da Capo” by Millay
until there seemed no choice—
when, if there came a day
of armaments and uniforms—
of what we’d have to say.
Mr. Byron Jarvis—
dapper, avant garde,
reading e. e. cummings’
humanistic word—
delivering the news of truth,
calling war a crime
when hero patriots could look,
in the light of peace, absurd.
Then papers boomed on porches
headlines like a storm—

NAZIS, BLACKSHIRTS, LIDICE—

and in that dark, no ray—
Mr. Jarvis signed up soon
to die in a dim campaign,
a brave fair weather pacifist
like many who were slain.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 158.

Uber Alles

Onstage a Swastika
and good Old Glory, too—
a girl from Nazi Germany
explaining what was new,
plain, with braids,
in uniform,
an Aryan through and through—
(although she didn't mention
hatred of the Jew).
We listened to her spiel,
open minded—older boys
with eyes that peeled
her nipples blouse
thought they saw her nude.
 Wasn't she friendly,
 healthy, blonde?—
 a home room teacher praised
 dedicated strength of youth,
 accusing, as she did,
 us of gum and crudity—
 and no one dreamed that day
 the girl who'd stood before us
 proudly pure and straight
 was a whore that some might screw
 (when Nazism proved
 as base as any bannered cause)
 for a Hershey bar or two.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 158.

Rex Wishnevski

Oddball, screwball—hey, Rex, where’s his mama?—
always that briefcase with his lunch and music—
he played on stages of an inner drama
and didn’t care which side was winning or losing.
Out of his window, Etudes, Polonaise,
as the bat whacked or the football whished its leather—
cocoons of sound shut in, rainy days,
unwound and flew through blue in brighter weather.
And he endured the scales of ridicule,
the noisy sameness of the practiced ways
boys have always had of baiting the fool—
“What does he do, jerk off while he plays?”
“Hey, Ludwig, are you in love with your piano?”
left for Juilliard later, dreaming still—
married, it was said, a black soprano—
conscripted into the army, wouldn’t kill—
and some boys died, or went where life was leading
toward drink or small success or desperation—
but none, except Rex Wishnevski, that weird kid of their teasing,
became a name that’s known throughout the nation.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 159.

Physics

Supposedly doing experiments
that went over our heads
John kept making eyes
at Margie Stoller instead—
equations on the blackboard,
equipment looking like
coils in the castle
of Dr. Frankenstein.
Lilac outside the windows—
pines, the smell of grass—
and Margie Stoller's sweater
and Margie Stoller's face—
ions and electrodes
couldn't compete with those—
who wouldn't rather be
with her by a sea edge lace?
Somehow we got the workbook done
and barely made our C's—
but even when John asked her
she already had a date—
somewhere it was never spring,
somewhere even then
pondering $E=mc^2$
bent dedicated men.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 160.

Mr. Music

Flute, oboe, clarinet,
harp, bass, glockenspiel—
hardly an instrument
he hadn't taught those kids
(or tried his patient best)
when all he wanted to do
was play the violin—
wept when Heifetz pulled
Beethoven, Mendelssohn,
like rainbow silk from the strings,
thinking, clutching his seat,
it could have been me—
tapping his baton
shouted "Sharp, not flat!"
(A spitball from the drum).
Squeaked scales when only seven—
never had much fun—
four years in Chicago,
two and a half in London—
gulped aspirin for what?—
a high school production
of "The Vagabond King."

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 160.

Rita Rubio

A voice of soaring wing
edged as if with light—
she sang in “The Vagabond King,”
warbler of delight,
pitched perfect—the painted stones
looked rounder when her voice
warmed them with those tones
fluttered from sunniness
and dazzled in duets
with tenor, baritone—
it was her night of nights,
sheened where the spotlight shone,
a girl who rose in sounds
above our commonness,
over our school’s grey grounds
lilting and luminous—
wasn’t she someone since
bowing in Milan,
awing the audience
at the Metropolitan?
The questionnaire goes out—
no one knows where she went—
so many singings shot
down to such silences.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 161.

Jack Henry

Better in some ways, in other only equal,
he was one of the best players on the team,
with a Greek physique, and fast as panthers go,
a quiet smiler, someone in a dream.
Come on Jack, sleek co-eds proudly squealed
and pompoms shook and longlegged majorettes
tossed flickering sticks and caught them as they wheeled.
Jack made a touchdown and the band boomed for the Saints.
But glory's short and high school soon was done;
we all went elsewhere and Jack, too, couldn't stay
in spite of all the trophies he had won;
hanging around the Y, he'd had his day.
Then whether because he was black or maybe because
he lacked the luck on which so much depends,
Jack got a job as porter at the Elks Club,
keeping things neat for the fathers of his friends.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 162.

José Ramirez

It was a comedown, after he had starred,
his calves in knots, cleating yard by yard,
not to hear the cheering of the crowd—
his heart still pumped, ready to explode,
waiting around for offers, going to L.A.
to the big games, smoking and drinking Cokes
now he needn't keep in shape to play.
He worked on a garbage truck, quit then hit the road, but he came home
to dance with his mother one bright day—a lady noted for her light
tortillas, she would be his cook, Rose and Juanita wait on tables,
serapes on the walls—he saw himself being chauffeured in a Rolls.
And they did prosper, opened up more rooms,
hired an earringed cook whom Jose married—
their place is famous for its chili rellenos,
succulent tacos and hot enchiladas—
Jose hasn't forgotten the hopeful ball he carried,
he stands there friendly, ringing up the cash,
grown stout with time, but to remind him
how once in his golden youth he made a dash
toward high school glory over the winning line—
faded photos of the team behind him.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 162.

Tom White

He had to wear that shoe
and steel around his leg
withered from its size—
handsome otherwise,
his walk a clogging dance,
and smouldering deep down,
ashes of bitterness
because he'd been a boy
who couldn't play the game,
his clodhop never chosen,
and had to bear hot pity—
“Too bad Tom is lame”
whispered down a corridor
by some bright lip of flame—
but tall as anyone,
normal except for that,
sang well, learned to swim—
married at twenty-one
a girl from Fullerton—
and when the war began,
requiring every limb
perfect for the march to death,
how many envied him!

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 163.

That Kid

That kid played soldiers still at seventeen,
lined up little lead men down in the dirt
(so emotionally arrested he later became
an Air Force Major—death his lifelong work).
Always the hero or villain in school plays,
what he wanted to be was only an actor,
but some eternally adolescent factor
kept him from ever going beyond that phase.

If there hadn't been a war who knows who he might have been?—
a Burton, Brando or Olivier—
convincing in his parts, with a flowing face
he only had to command and it would harden
to a naïve teenager or a man of grace;
there was a war, however, and for him
dramatic uniforms and guns and planes
to make of blood and murder, child's play.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 163.

Leon Hendrixon

He didn't want to go
but wasn't it his duty?—
broad—blond—six feet two
(to giddy girls a cutie)
how could he nonconform?—
ticketed to camp
he got a uniform
and warned against the clap.
Learned to shoot a gun,
bayonnetted dummies,
heard unpresbyterian
words like shit and cunt—
lined up more than once
drunk on a week end pass,
liras in his pants,
to rent a piece of ass.
And for a purple heart
exchanged an eye and leg—
he'd played his hero's part,
lucky to escape
with any of him left—
he doesn't even lurch,
science is so adept
at surrogates that work—
you can't tell which eye's which—
his wife is svelte and pretty
and maybe less a bitch
than if she felt no pity—
he's glad to be alive
but wonders now and then
how little can survive
164 and still be called a man.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 164.

Dan Anderson

A lunchtime pal of mine,
big-eared, blond, blue-eyed,
except for friendliness
an undistinguished guy,
not much one for sports
or showing off onstage,
he was the audience,
though good at repartee—
happy with Bs and Cs
(Ds in Spanish 4),
Don Juan of Saturday,
he had a tomcat ease—
I heard him purr away
toward love, and then to war
and met him later, manager
of PAY LESS CUT RATE STORE
where once we used to eat,
bright noons of hope and peace—
older, darker, heavier,
friendly, though, as ever—
but different beneath
his open casual verve
(the cigarette he smoked
seemed a burning nerve)
as if he'd expected more
from life he loved so well
until at ripe nineteen
qualified to kill.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 165.

Lee Zorn

Four eyes, he was called, in Coke bottle bottom glasses
looking out like madness at us all—
and after stabbing several of us with pencils,
got tutored at home, forgotten until that fall
we started high school, when he too enrolled
and rolled his magnified eyes and lunged among us,
somewhat subdued, though just as odd a child.
He spent all period in a corner of the pool,
and disappeared beneath for a minute or so,
holding his breath, and gulping up through bubbles,
having viewed who knew what world below.

A genius at math, whatever his other troubles—
governments scholarships sent him on through school.
Then World War II. He didn't have to go,
but stayed on campus; I saw him once on furlough
from the pacifist camp in which I'd been shut up—
shambling along, antisocial as ever,
armed in every pocket with pencils in rows;
years later noticed his picture in the paper,
banqueted and honored among those
who'd hatched the A-bomb by their mad endeavor.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 165.

C. B. “Mathew” Brady

Pictures were his life—
a bee’s-eye meter hung
(as some boys wore a tie)
waiting to see the light—
in streets where victims moaned
he whipped his Leica out—
caught it, at The Fiesta,
the sad face of the crowd,
dipped, where all glowed red,
contrast in the scene—
was it an Orange Queen?—
he analyzed the shine.
At war, snapped target towns
to show where death should dive,
and once at Buchenwald
shot bug-eyed corpses live.
But finally settled down
behind a Fourth Street lens—
passport photos, high school classes,
pictures of the bride.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 166.

Janet and Howard Darling

Both had dramatic flair
though cast in minor parts—
later, masked in mascara
who was that movie star
she looked like?—Claudette Colbert?—
and he, usually a professor—
a bit in “Smilin’ Through”—
sometimes a stuffy butler
with one good line or two.
And after they were married
and he’d come back from war
they organized a play group—
evenings of Williams and Shaw—
everyone thought her a wonderfully
convincing Blanche du Bois.
They didn’t have any children—
both successfully taught,
but lived for their footlit weekends,
a Lunt and Lynn Fontanne
smiling down the rows,
at Playhouse and at Ebell
bowing to applause.
And when he had a heart attack
and couldn’t do his roles
she donned her wigs and makeup
and braved the boards alone,
playing for him on the aisle,
cheering him up at home,
assuring him with that trick smile
the show, the show must go on.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 167.

All Star

Rick Wayne,
swam, boxed, faded back
and spun the ball toward touchdown,
broke records, out for track.
He was a modest good guy,
maturer than his peers
and got our vote—his genial teeth
flashed on down the years—
always with a “hi, there”—
he worked to earn those Bs—
in time of peace, won letters,
in wartime, stripes on sleeves.
Engineer or buyer,
his life turned out just fine—
a perfect son and daughter,
a house on Orange Lane.
And when his wife grew haggard
and then cut open, died—
he slowed enough to take
agony in stride,
a little sadder, maybe—
a truth for which he pined—
but to question Winesburg virtues
never crossed his mind.

Section Six: GAP

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 168.

VI: GAP

*My Brother Made Model Airplanes but
Never Sniffed Glue*

the only painkiller in our house was aspirin,
Uncle Peter drank, but only a beer or two—
when we wanted to escape, we went to a movie,
breakdowns were rare, addicts far and few.
Mrs. Johnson wouldn't come home by sidewalk,
strolled on parkway grass to save her shoes—
Aunt Glennie refused ever to see a doctor
no matter what the backache or the bruise
(and lived to be ninety one or two).
As for Aunt Nettie, any swearword shocked her
in spite of what the Bible might include—
you could have said, and truly, we were modest,
eccentric sometimes, seldom very lewd—
and mostly tried, in our way to be honest—
however, that was only half the truth—
books brought light to some, if slow and dimly,
and if the radio, beaming news of doom,
mostly made us laugh or buy Ipana,
it wouldn't be long before we walked the moon.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 169.

Oasis

Right in that desert burning
and barrenness we'd known
there was a pool of learning,
shaded, on a lawn—
thought—art—poetry—
that somehow bubbled in.
Not much of an oasis—
a college—it was called—
but in such thirsting acres
we were waterfalled
and forested with furthermores
where aridness appalled—
every drop more precious
for being scarce outside—
Shelley—cool—delicious—
deeper hints of Freud—
almost surreptitious
but tasted and enjoyed.
Remembering as a gone mirage
that small green spot of mind,
some went on from there
and found a lush land—
others, lost in blazing air,
adjusted to the sand.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 170.

Gap

At first a hairline but I felt it widen,
coming back from class I jumped the gap—
that world beyond me and the warm inside one
of knickknacks, Mom's applesauce, sweet orange pop—
the campus, under its slim trees, brick and green,
seemed to drift off farther every day,
harder to reach across a rift between
the block I lived on and uncertainty.
On one side, Plato, Darwin, Degas, Keats,
an updated cave waiting on the other,
cozy with everything a cave boy needs
according to his jungle dad and mother—
finally, to get back home across the chasm
I had to hang on tight and swing like Tarzan.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 170.

Citrus Heights

Friends on Citrus Heights
(famed as a lovers' lane—
more than one young couple
descended into pain,
cheer leader, football hero
wished they hadn't lain
high on that hill of trouble)
we had only come
assigned to map the stars,
a few lightheaded students
getting out of cars.
Cepheus, Cassiopeia—
we scanned the twinkling dark—
put down the wheeling Dippers,
joking, on a chart—
the darting dogstar, Sirius
(Browning's "All that I know—?")
blue green red and silver
behind Orion's glow
of jeweled belt and scabbard,
and there blinked Betelgeuse,
the streetlight town below.
We laughed among the magnitudes
and showed them as a mark,
ignorant Ptolemaists
out on a freshman lark—
we searched and filled the circle
with Cygnus and the Crab;
and only much much later
would we feel the nights
slip from our selfish center
and know the sweetly bitter
distance of those lights.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 171.

Edward Morgan Barry

He once had played a gorgeous Romeo
to Madam Modjeska's delicate Juliet,
but now that he was sixty two or so
his nose had purpled and his face gone fat
and matinees had dwindled to a class.
How he sometimes strutted for us, though,
with his best side profiled, and as if
he still had something left that tights should show,
read a line like tossing us a gift,
deserved or not, of pure Shakespearean pearl.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 172.

Our Town

The Windsor tie, the knickers that I wore
were a costume in a play that couldn't happen—
in the third act, I was a time warp corpse;
the rain that sounded real didn't dampen;
the girl playing Emily went through an invisible door.
I'd never lived in a town like Grover's Corners
and I felt much to modern to believe
the umbrellaed feelings of the simple mourners
really had anything to do with me—
those quaint New Englanders were more like foreigners
in a tintype time before anyone wanted to be
a tall and slangy movie hero kissing
lipsticked sophisticates on a solid screen—
Emily came back to the grave from her ghostly visiting
and said the living moved too fast to see
anything around them, and I agreed
watching in a theatre in a city
twenty seven years later, when instead
of whizzing through the present I was sitting
in our town, as it was then, among the dead.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 172.

Double Date

We walked the Long Beach Pike,
four on a double date—
whirled and rollercoasted,
reflected back in black.
The others kissed and touched—! only took her hand—
we watched the onearmed artist
sculpturing the sand—
I asked her if she liked
the bronzes of Rodin—
and then we went to look,
strolling on the strand,
at a fat belly dancer—
“And do you like ballet?”
We saw the dogfaced boy
and, twined behind a glass,
joined just at their waist,
pathetic siamese twins
forever face to face—
nature made me wince.
We walked the Rainbow Pier—
the others stopped to neck,
she shivered warm beside me—
I wondered what she’d think
if I clutched her like that,
but pointed out, instead,
the faint enormous swan cross
blinking overhead.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 173.

In the Basement of the Carnegie Library

where
poetry was kept
down in the dust, in the dark,
in the webbed and terrible air
someone—was it I?—sat writing a sonnet
right in the diin light of a librarian's stare.
Among the Readers' Guides and the yellowing pages
this brighteyed boy I wouldn't recognize
if we should meet on some more modern street
was putting down in rhyme iambic rages—
in a stretched syntax, with "thees" like Shelley and Keats,
penning lines for the ages.
The grey linoleum cracked, the table creaked,
the antique librarian seemed to be having a vision—
though it might have been only something she'd had to eat—
while I—or this boy—was coming to some decision—
whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer or try to write
one poem at least.
And I wasn't even aware as I paused my pen
where mummified golden glory mouldered beneath,
and the sphinxlike librarian glared as I sighed in my passion,
that it wasn't a sonnet I wrote in that old room
but was signing my life away, entombed from the eyes of men
like a Theban fashion

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 174.

Mrs. Northcross

She was a gentle, Chaucer loving lady
who made the paper Prioress alive—
small at the lecturn, but remembered lately
evoking in that room giants of delight—
Shakespeare with his black wired reeking mistress, sensuous Keats
coughing out his lungs, Shelley flying in the mystic distance, Byron
nobly dying for Greek wrongs.
The grass itself began to show a difference,
the local trees became Wordsworthian—
no rose without Burns' red red inference
grew in the yards we'd called American;
we saw ourselves aslant through English eyes
and missed our edges that were Mexican
where darkness glinted with guitars and knives.
What did Blanche Trayo care about old odes,
dusting Spade in our white dining room
at a greenlawned bus stop far from her rutted roads?
But still in class the English lanes led on
past gothic tales, castles of indolence;
Mrs. Northcross skipped most of the modern—
it was too late for Eliot or those.
And scholarship is easy to condemn,
hanging us up like old hats on its traumas—
often on my couch I've looked back when
I sighed my sonnets, blind to social dramas,
about to curse those early verses, then
heard Mrs. Northcross warmly telling us
some of the best that has been known and said.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
174.

Mile. Smith

Her accent had the “n’s” and liquid lips,
a gourmet seasoning suggesting streets
of plein air restaurants, tiny coffee cups,
the fountained Tuileries where lovers meet
near statues without clothes, and pigeons puff.
She rolled those “r’s” out of a fleshy throat,
burbled and chirped and hacked as sensuous
as if in tme-a-tete Aux Deux Magots
she lifted absinthes with impetuous
Baudelaire or burning eyed Van Gogh.
And stood before all Paris with her stick
tapping at the bridges and the banks—
Les Halles with soupe a l’oignon hot and thick
(but didn’t mention how the pissoirs stank)—
a woman middle-aged, whose tongue could lick
the sauce from any labial there was,
in a big hat, and dressed like yesterday
and never having been except that once
at the Sorbonne, more than a day away
from her mother’s imperious mid-Victorian glance.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 175.

Miss Bagley

Slide after slide after slide
Miss Bagley pointed out—
proportion by the Greeks,
the balance on each side
of marble David pausing
forever there, surprised.
Van Gogh's gobs of field and sky,
Renoir's way with light,
Rembrandt, Rubens, Titian,
each one stroking clear,
with curve and cross and swirl,
aesthetic signature.
Art—where line by line
the natural jut or mound,
the often graceless figure
becomes almost divine—
click—and then Picasso
distorted what we'd learned.
But still Miss Bagley stood there
with a pointer on the slide,
her ruined face a lecture
as mirrored girls find,
that time is in the picture
and beauty in the mind.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 176.

Judith Lovelace, M.A

There was a teacher, proper and precise,
her lovers, in that sometimes loveless place,
neurotic Hawthorne or elate Mark Twain—
men of letters hers to entertain.
Was she ever lonely? Which of us knew?—
her wardrobe always coolly crisp and new
seemed put on to greet a James or Norris
whose ardent messages she quoted for us.
And where she went in that flat, flowered town,
she was accompanied by invisible men,
some who were elegant, some like rough Jack London
dashing forward brash and wildly sudden,
with whom she had incessant dialog,
smiling brightly as she walked along
176 at dark obscurities of meaning in
a word they'd chosen or a comma's hint.
What else was there?—love's disappointment,
family madness behind her eyes' sad glint?—
if so, she never said—glasses on a ribbon,
she read a poem of Frost's, warm with wisdom,
asking us the reason in the rhyme,
class after class, hair whitening with time,
reverer of values, cherishing the word,
learning's mistress, not there understood.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 176.

Dr. Tyger

Our only PhD,
he had a missing thumb—
too far and fierce of thought
for college in our town—
he taught philosophy
in the face of our ho hum.
Assigned: “What I Believe,”
my essay prayed to God
for which I got a C
that first warm autumn term—
Plato and then Nietzsche—
the worm began to turn
minerals in the mind—
and all that rainy winter,
worked on underground—
Spinoza, James, Descartes—
seeds were churned around;
our hungry looks grew thinner
as he held, with his absent thumb,
logic before our class—
atheist or cynic—
whatever that Dr. was,
like Socrates he had to leave,
accused of corrupting us;
assigned again before he did
(Scotch, not hemlock drunk)
a later springtime Credo
for which my A summed up,
ending in doubt, leafy wonder’s
blossoming begun.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 177.

Field Trips: Geology 1 & 2

We read the book of earth,
how heavy paged it was,
the document of rocks,
the record in the cave—
crystal sentences,
paragraphs of stone—
stra ta that contained
words of fem and bone—
drove out to pen a note
on chapters of the past—
a mountain starting molten,
now a snowtipped cone—
the writing of the rivers,
erasures done by sand—
scanned the glacial eons
it took to make a grain—
and singing “Clementine”
on highways leading home,
we felt how far we’d come
from what we hadn’t known
and how the story took us
on field trips into time
instead of back to dreaming,
farther from the slime.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 178.

Mrs. Oates

A smooth poetic pearl
in every phrase she said,
who would have thought she'd ever
mistakenly go to bed
with such a rawfaced roughneck,
the man who growled "he don't,"
we saw waiting for her
sometimes after class,
his lineman's gloves in his pocket,
whiskers on his throat—
"Oh, Mrs. Oates, Mrs. Oates,
how could you have done it—
 versed in Blake and Browning,
 have married a brute like that,
 who climbs prosaic poles
 only to fix the wires
 connecting telephones?"
But we were green aesthetes then,
idealistic youths—
so many precisions we didn't guess
in non-intellectual pursuits.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 178.

Social Conscience

The novel I was writing for creative writing
concerned the gap between the rich and poor—
since I was neither, it required some research—
trips to L.A. in Dan Anderson's rickety car.
The daughter of a Pasadena millionaire
(we wound past Spanish mansions fanned with fronds)
would fall in love with her hard up chauffeur
(we gawked through treeless streets of stunted homes)—! bought Das Kap ital,
The Grapes of Wrath
sang "The Internationale" through orchards back toward town—
then wrote a searing social paragraph—
but next we asked some laughing girls along,
and the middle-class turned out to be such fun
I never did get far past chapter one.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 179.

Rosemary or Jasmine

There was an acned girl from the south—! can't recall her highly scented
name—

Jasmine or Rosemary—with a painted mouth
that smiled and smiled
though she was slightly lame.

Toward groups on lawns or laughing after class
she'd lurch with books and looks of friendliness,

I]

under the ginkgo, come and sit with us
and show her knees
below her checkered dress.

No one liked her—even with those breasts.

When she intruded, the bright sun seemed to spot—
you felt her fingers would have smeared the tests;
once she appeared

for reasons we'd forgot

we'd have to leave, and left her on the grass
or in the room, sucking at her beads
and thinking who knew what?—that we were crass?
as if to see her

were to feel diseased.

One day in the library she screamed upset—
what was the matter, either with her or us?

What did she have to do, or be, to get
better grades and friends
and elected to clubs?

The librarian, like a tigress, growled and hissed
and pawed her overdues and snarled and paced
to see among the lucky and the kissed
the lonely mirror
she too had faced.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
179.

Richard McGregor

Exciting, urbane, he came to our backward acre,
breathing of books, with whiskey on his breath,
as much only young as he was a conscious faker,
and less a fellow of flesh than man from a myth,
he didn't belong, that glamorous Richard McGregor,
sad as an exiled prince
in our insular midst.
Ulysses, perhaps, anchored at some little island,
the light of horizons glinting in his gaze,
suggesting a Siren hurt by the smile of his silence,
taking whatever we gave but not meaning to stay,
he played at our picnics, bored but pretending compliance,
dallying there
until he could get away—
and what he became, after he left us forever,
none of us heard—though I too moved from that pla,
and once, at a distance, thought I saw Richard McGreg r
prosperous bellied, older, balding and grey,
the undistinguished uncle or businessman father
of any he scorned as a friend
in his interesting day.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 180.

Maryjo Malone

Some of her lines and some of her sonnets
might vie with Shelley's she had such a sense
of meter and of which words went together—
like Browning, she had found an eagle's feather
somewhere past the pasture's barbed wire fence,
but she was modern, too, wrote free verse
and had a summer affair with Richard McGregor,
who gave her sex, but not his next address—
she followed him into Berkeley's mist jeweled weather,
worked in stores for a while, and went to night school,
learning how to shape and fire a pot,
then moved back down to where she'd been a fool,
and though she no longer thought of herself as a poet,
her successful ceramics had a lyric anguish
and women came from miles to browse in her shop.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 181.

The Famous Poet

She came on drunk in red velvet—
it was the end of her tour—
a marriage breaking up,
new certainties of war—
her poems suddenly didn't seem
important as before—
she hammed them, played the great
Bohemian from New York,
threw the lines away,
thirty years of work
and what did it add up to?—
a college whistle stop.
Nothing she wrote or thought
prevented history—
those listeners in their rows
guiltier than she
of ignorance and hate,
pettiness, bigotry.
She thought of lips she'd kissed—
no one had loved so well—
and all it had done was lead her
deeper down this hell—
she laughed, wildly, mid-poem—
hiccoughed, almost fell,
but in her bourgeois audience
past mists of alcohol,
some girl—or boy perhaps,
waiting—watching her veer—
to take the torch from her tired grasp
in Iowa or here.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 181.

Chalice

Memory, that old magician's mixture,
has me down in the grass and throbbing in clover—
as green as I was—I'm watching myself in a picture
of candlewarm buds, the gone world's would-be lover.
Merlin—God himself—or whoever it is—
spring's morning sorcerer and good at grails,
has led me shining on and led me back
through sunfloating sycamore groves to the hillside trails
beside a snow cold stream in the land of the lost.
Dropped from a hidden cup of pain and joy
there is a meadowlark song like a gem in the grass—
and I bleed as I break through the steel webs of the past,
nude to the waist, Lancelot's pure boy
seeking illusion's chalice to the last.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 182.

The Stream

Somewhere out of time
I'm sitting with her now
on the same stream rock we sat on
leaves and lives ago.
Right where we waded out
and sat with a dazzling book
in the Heraclitan flow—
she looks at me and I look
away at the swooping line
of the hillslope and the blue
curve we're moving in,
at the sycamores that blow
faintly in the wind,
and down where our bubbling feet
look sculptured in the foam—
then at her side's light touch
a hardness rises up—
we're turning into stone.
We're marbled there midstream—
carved in a changing flow;
I feel her lean and lean,
I sense the mosses grow.
I'm sitting with her now
holding the mottled book,
our stone feet in the gleam,
our look a lichen look
lit by the speeding stream.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 183.

When No One Else Had Ever Been Eighteen

I tried describing in the later air
the way it never was but might have been
when no one else had ever been eighteen,
lovers, who didn't even know we were
lovers, laughing underneath the leaves
along the road from somewhere into summer,
walking among sweet whiffs from orchard trees—
she pushed the bike beside my swimming knees,
 Steinbeck in the basket whom we'd read
 loafing in an oleander shade
 and blow a storm of dandelion seed
 and feel each point of greenness blade by blade—
 that was the way it was I tried to see
 but there were bugs like motives underneath
 whenever, sighs from then, I tried to say
 it really was so bright and grass so green—
 the seeds of freeways blossomed eaten grey,
 Steinbeck showed sold colors on a screen.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 183.

Feeling Surreal

Feeling surreal, I lifted a phone of ants—
my old hat wore a rusted Willkie button
and at my wrist a timeless wristwatch dripped.
Outside, the apricot had blossom faces;
I sat passe and listened to her voice,
witty and glib, although the record scratched—
illumination like a light through grass
moved on the walls where winking eyeballs watched.
The phone kept burning in my moaning hand—
I wavered in the warp from now to then,
a Blake-faced father to tell me I'd discover
not much later she was not the one
I thought I spoke to in my fool's confusion—
but just before the melting phone went dead
I kissed the nipple of a cruel illusion,
and armies of ants marched off with my lost head.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 184.

From Aardvark to Zymurgy

My Uncle Peter was determined
in those less wordy days
to make himself more learned—
so started out with aardvark
and worked right through the A's.
“All the books there are to read
I've read,” I heard him say—
“with beer and sandwiches in bed—
histories, mysteries, modern fiction
while your Aunt Lillie lay
snoring in her coldcream.”
“I don't!” her wrinkles claimed.
“Of Mice and Men?” I asked him—
but that was a mistake.
His eyes in their red rims
and wart began to blink—
“He's one of those pink socialists
who writes about life's stink.”
And even Shakespeare wasn't
what the critics think,
Lamb's Tales an improvement,
livelier, more succinct.
The centuries of art dismissed,
I almost dropped my drink
of ginger ale Aunt Lillie brought
in on a tray of birds.
“Uncle Peter, have you thought—?
Couldn't you have missed—?”
but after he'd reached zymurgy
there were no other words.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 184.

Heigho Silver

"I think it's just wonderful—you keep at it—
my favorite poets are Shakespeare and Edgar Guest—"
I was urged on by my literary aunt
in whose house, though she had confessed
to poetry, I noticed books
were scant,
whereas my father, who had once read Zane Grey,
told me, as "The Lone Ranger" heighoed Silver again,
that there wasn't any money in poetry
and advised, as the masked man galloped through radioland,
"Why don't you try writing
something like that?"
One cousin who had graduated from high school
and been forced to memorize "Thanatopsis"
but who wasn't completely opposed to poetry nevertheless,
reading one of my early efforts said
it must be good because it made her
think of death.
While the word-clever girl I went steady with—
and I wasn't ever sure exactly what she meant—
grinned cryptic critiques which I could interpret
(she felt she knew how touchy even would-be poets get)
either as a budding Shakespeare
or an overblown Edgar Guest.
And a young teacher at college listened politely then mentioned
she too had gone through a phase—
every English student has—
or thinking herself a Shelley or an Edna St. Vincent Millay,
but—like acne or indigestion—
assured me it would pass.
And soon I was able to, I moved away from that place
and the longer I didn't live there, the listier it got
with little schools and steeples and orchards stretching out—
its emphasis on money gradually forgot,
until its far illiterate face
seemed more kind than not,
and I went on writing poems, right through war and TV
even when I found anti-art and bad taste

weren't limited to towns of ignorance dreaming half asleep,
and even after I saw, looking back with a pang,
those dead wouldn't rise up into the light
whatever poets sang.

As soon as I was able to, I moved away from that place

Section Seven: REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 185.

VII: REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR

Places, Everyone

yesterday's set is now ready,
there's a chair called Director but no one knows where he is,
someone in charge is scowling over the book—
the microphones hum, cleverly planted as flowers,
streets, buildings, houses, hills are painted to look
red gold at sunrise and change with the changing hours.
The actors go through their parts, they are rapidly aging—
a parade flickers by of later and later cars—
a sensitive boy from a novel walks hand in hand
with a girl by the groves as the colors and angles improve—
they go not far from the sea in a palmed promised land;
the leaf trembling town is viewed through the lenses of love.
In these scenes you see them laugh as they listen to music,
the banktower's clocks and churchspires pointing above—
a scent wafts, of lemon and salt, through incredible blue
almost too pure—it really needs some adjustment—
the trees and longstretching lawns are too green to be true—
those virginal urges they feel should have an encrustment
of freudian lust not to appear unreal—
but much that's been hid by these fronts is already shifting,
a harmless era comes to the end of a reel—
the town is a screen in a wind that pulls and is lifting
until where it flaps as it blows you can see underneath
these pictures that glimmer and charm, a whole world drifting,
political figures with bombers and troops behind—
clearer and clearer the town begins to be seen
not as it ever was but a town in the mind—
the lumber where dreams were tacked on is starting to lean,
the faces themselves, under masks, are harder to find
and some, without make-up, look more and more twisted and mean;
 flags flap from all the front porches, at blacked out windows
 dagger sharp stars of gold slice from their frames—
 men crutch back legless, stare eyeless, tear swollen widows
 forget like the rest and dance out in dresses like flames—
 gone, too, in that wind, the earlier innuendoes,
 those who died for nothing are nothing but names

on which obscurity thickens; the native returns
no longer out of a novel or young at his lines—
he's poking for hints that elude in the paved over ferns,
trying to find the gone town where freeways wind,
and finally drives off forever, that lover, that son
toward a skyline of shadows cast on another time.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 187.

The Only Trouble

“Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait”
Someone said in my dream you don’t look forty
and I smiled like my tinted high school annual picture,
my blond hair bleached on a beach,
flattered to blandness where nothing ever happened—
a town around me, stucco to my touch,
the safe streets arched by blossom purple trees.
The only trouble was, I was asleep.
Pater familias among the breathing bedrooms,
and teen prince strolling in a town of dreams,
both at once, I passed the ghostly peacocks
of sprinklers on the lawns and whistled along
now past the courthouse with its flag and cannon,
now past the churches whose crosses seemed to mean,
shining from steeples, Christ hung in the scene.
Someone came up to me and said you don’t look forty
and I smiled my tinted smile of seventeen.
My thought caught throat couldn’t scream a warning—
“None of it’s true, this pre-war town’s a dream.”
I ran through the town to find my sleeping children.
I wanted to shake them awake to what they must learn.
The only trouble was, they hadn’t been born.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 188.

Communion

Welch's Grape Juice—and I'm prousted there—
to Christ blood Sundays tinkling in the trays,
a hymnbook incense hovers on the air
where flesh was spongy Wonder Bread we ate,
symbolic cannibals, I in my teens,
pimpled and slicked, and talcumed not to reek.
The ritual is sterile, quick and neat.
We take the cruel communion's crustless pill
good Presbyterians cut behind the scenes
and now His body's eaten, wait until
the minister says "Drink ye all of it"
and wash His murder down with something sweet.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 189.

Our World

Aunt Nettie said No rval would roast in hell
for calling Richard a fool, my father
switched me, a crimewave at nine, for shouting goddamn—
some words weren't in print although I heard them,
none of us there ever pissed or shat.
Movie husbands and wives slept in twin beds—
in real life, if it existed, guiltily screwed—
as for anatomy, we were pallid dolls
with clothes contrived to hide whatever looked lewd—
everyone passed away but no one died.
Nothing but shameful statues in Greece and Rome,
naked baths and geishas in Japan—
disbelievers of truth, we liked our world
and really thought our duty was to save it—
no one as sure as aunts who stayed at home.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 189.

Norwalk

Whenever we went past Norwalk it was a joke—
“I guess I’ll have to stop and let you all off here,”
Dad said, or, at any odd opinion:
“Norwalk’s where you belong—”
We never knew exactly what they did there,
the crackpots, the loonies, the mad wife from next door,
but on our side of the fence, we laughed secure,
sane in our fears and foibles while they were crazy—
we seldom screamed at midnight or tore off our clothes—
there was a wall past which we didn’t dare,
and if we wandered regions sometimes hazy,
we soon came back into the normal air.
When everyone went berserk—that was called war—
and F.D.R. told God He was on our side;
we fought for peace, and killing wasn’t murder,
the only thing we had to fear was fear
but it seemed to me—though of course I was much younger
and didn’t know how right a wrong can be,
that lies are sometimes the truth, and the line is a fine one
dividing the irrational you from the lucid me—
that someone like Dad had let us all off at Norwalk
and the wide open gate no longer had a key.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 190.

Remember Pearl Harbor

When America entered the war, my mother blamed
everything on my father—screaming in the kitchen
he was a Hun, a Nazi, a Dutchman, and furthermore
responsible for every new invasion—

Austria, Poland, France, England and now—
hadn't he hired that Jap once as a gardener?—
Pearl Harbor.

She shrieked Murderer murderer murderer
at my meek father transfixed at the sink,
accused, too, his head of being square.

It was the worst Christmas Eve that I remember
and when I couldn't help crying, they both turned
and said, "What does it have to do with you?"

"What are you crying for?"

But I seemed to go on and on crying forever
though they went on just as they had before...e—
he passed communion in church, Christian as ever
and after she'd stopped being bitter
she cooked sauerkraut and wieners again
and other dinners of forgiveness she thought
fit for her Hitler.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 190.

Steve Yamamoto

Because our names were always at the end,
 as boys sometimes become in nearby seats,
 I was his and he my schooltime friend—
 we pledged allegiance to the starry states
 with liberty and justice (not yet under God)
 and sang sweet land, and learned important dates—
 and then, as time and school went on and on,
 his delicate face shone out in every class—
 an intellectual, though a witty one;
 in some trim garden at the edge of town
 his toylike parents bent to vegetables,
 prideful of their slangy, nisei son.
 “Why do you have to drag God into every poem?”
 he asked me once, one eyebrow cynical—
 a twinkling critic, and though I was hurt,
 who thought my verses brought down from a pinnacle
 where they’d been writ by lightning, word by word,
 compared to his bright haikus, they were absurd...
 we argued, still good friends; and then went on
 to Berkeley’s broad green campus and white spire
 booming jucundum as red suns slid down
 behind jeweled bridges and the bay on fire—
 the wide wide world and most of it to learn,
 infinities of knowledge toward which we could aspire.
 But one dark day the bombs of madness dropped—
 oh my God—it can’t be—they can’t have done that!—
 freedom, equality, America suddenly stopped—
 democracy was cancelled from the map,
 and my friend Steve, a slanteyed bucktoothed Jap,
 got locked up in a concentration camp.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p.
 191.

Edgar Nelson

Waving the latest little scrap of hope,
his father rushing from his Fourth Street store
showed some passerby his son still lived,
pointing out his stance, or the ring he wore.
See, he'd say, he has a nose like that—
he made it to Bataan—Edgar's alive—
and raised the glass above the hazy picture,
a bigger blur when dots were magnified.
And I could see him, too, but in the Mojave,
panting up a dark red lava slope
to the top of Pisgah, where our class had climbed
to study soda caves in the burnt out cone,
or laughing in my room as we boned for tests,
and suddenly serious thinking of Europe's war—
he told his plans and hopes for love and work
and all the joys and times life had in store.
We talked the pros and cons of peace and war,
and he as much a pacifist as I
dreamed the day when violence would cease
and men be friends instead of cruel and sly,
and he came by one last bright Easter Sunday
in brilliant buttons, tall and bravely creased,
and glad he needn't worry about the Nazis,
sailed with the peacetime army toward the East.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 192.

My Sudden Cousin, My Sanguine Minister, and The Cruelty of Conviction

My sudden cousin, short on the glorious Fourth,
held a bomb too long and exploded his hand—
blood all over, several stitches worth,
a bandaged hero, but to his Dad and aunts
more fool than valiant, little boy than man—
time, and World War II took care of that.
He shot up fast and filled a uniform
in a plane with a gun that went ratatatat
to zoom on German housewives, neat and fat,
hanging up windy wash on Monday lines.
“I saw bright blood on the white sheets,” he wrote,
“making little splattering designs—”
and aunts, Dad, Congress, smiled with pride
to have my sudden cousin on their side.
My sanguine minister kept us up to date
with hopeful views in pacifistic sermons—
lions and lambs, and how the swords of hate
might forge to pruninghooks in spite of Germans
gassing more Jews, and, tuned to Uber Alles,
goosestep troops down Paris avenues;
Christ died upon the cross of human malice,
loving the world, a glory we should choose.
But when JAP SNEAK ATTACK was all the news
hot, bloody voices leaked through radios,
my sanguine minister harangued the pews
with also apropos though different quotes—
Onward, Christian Soldiers—the thing to sing—
a sword, not peace, was what Christ came to bring.
She felt conviction was a cruel thing
—what would we do if everyone refused?—
a hawk flew by on slow and slanting wing,
I walked beside her frown like one accused.
Flayed eucalyptus hung in wounded autumn;
we strolled by ditch ice on the country road.
The world of sunset had no top or bottom.
Her given hand was cold and mine was cold.

I said she might be right, but what we'd do
was live in peace, no matter what the reason.
War couldn't be if every man said no.
We saw the rabbit's guts, the hawk's hooked feeding—
softness torn by bloody beak and claw.
Beak in my heart, I felt her hand withdraw.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 193.

Conscientious Objector

When I told her I was a conscientious objector
she said how could you do this to me?
interpreted my idealistic defiance
as a no to her personal war.
She'd like to have waved me away into battle
and while I was wading in gore
she'd be sitting under the apple tree
knitting sox for the Red Cross
with some nearsighted 4-F. Nevertheless,
an Emersonian believer in self-reliance,
I chose life not death—
though if it should have come to dying
I'd rather have died for the truth—
not that I thought I had such guts,
but refusing to kill anyone, even for her,
seemed next best to being nailed up.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 194.

Fires

So inexpressive that they might have been
New England Puritans standing stiff as starch
for formal portraits glaring out at sin,
my family seldom kissed, and held back touch—
their fires of feeling had to burn within,
their hidden lives sometimes turned to ash
though to the world they still looked much the same,
plainfaced with platitudes, and never rash.
But I remember once Aunt Emma came
crying brightly at me, “Wie geht’s, Liebchen?”
and kissed me less as nephew than as man—
and still am scarred by that encounter when
my mother clutched me—with a mouth like flame—
and begged me not to go away again.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 194.

Dressed for an Occasion

Coiffured, she looks alive,
hymned asleep on satin,
yet wouldn't nap so dressed—
she would have had a hat on
for church, frilled in her best.
Where is her dimesized watch
with its darkblue jeweled winder
and digits I used to read,
her onetime time reminder—
and why is her finger freed
of its diamond engagement
to him, who creaks in a seat
with tearspots on the suit
she always kept so neat?
Glad for such pink glads
at any other time
and wreathes and banks of roses
instead, deaf to the tune,
hands crossed, she reposes
waxenly indifferent
to whatever Dad forgot—
whether the blinds are down
and the cat has been put out—
nearer to God or not.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 195.

Eyes

When I went home to watch my father die,
he'd shrunk to almost no one, cut and tubed,
but in the lasting blueness of his eye
I saw a man still young and strong with youth.
He took my hand, as he had seldom done
upright in his pride of time and place—
but now that he was dying he held on
crying as he smiled to see my face—
anxious even then for my well being,
though he lay almost gone, and doped from pain—
reflecting back the son that he was seeing,
as in an equal inner eye of mine
I saw my son, but in his shining eyes
nothing yet of those eternities.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 196.

Brothers

If one of us had come from another planet,
maybe we'd have been still less alike—
tiger and housecat, taloned hawk and linnet,
“as different,” they said, “as day and night”—
how he would hum, and buzz an inlaid table
and scoff because I couldn't saw a line—
if he had been a sibling in a fable,
I'd have been his Abel, brained in time—
but actual brothers aren't so Karamazov—
fiction likes to touch up blood and tears—
and show how God brands Cain and warns him off,
but east of Eden, kinder with the years,
he fixes houses for his son and daughter,
and for my children, I make poems here.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 196.

Now They Work In Banks

Mrs. Northcross said—
One I thought as talented
as Carl Sandburg's dead
of alcohol in an accident—
and that's the only thanks
an English teacher gets.
I taught them Browning, Keats—
I tried to do my best.
Oh but I'm proud, so pleased
you weren't like the rest—
and there's another, too—
I praise God for that—
who's publishing like you.
I should get up and dance
for two who've stayed in flower,
yet what about the ones
I had in every class—
those three or four with power
to turn the common greyness
into a gorgeous phrase—
withered in an hour?
Where's Maryjo Malone
whose "wings of a white bird flying"
were light as any flown
on winds of Shelley's sighing?
What's Alan Eastman done
who once without half trying
tossed off a villanelle
and fleshed a sonnet's bone?
Maybe it doesn't matter—
perhaps it's just as well—
I'm not really bitter—
I hope they still read poems
and when your volumes sell

theirs will be the homes
that have them on a shelf—
those small town mute inglorious
Miltons, like myself.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 197.

Oohing the Umlaut

Oohing the umlaut, I was reading Dog Years aloud
to Mrs. Northcross's nineteen-forty-one class
and all the dead and greying were a crowd
of sophomore faces in the rose-cheeked past—
but I kept losing the place, flipping through
the Nazi parable by GUnter Grass.

I wasn't prepared to get up there like that
several wars later, a reader of the future
and find the passages to tell us what
was going on in Deutschland at the time
when there were football battles to be fought
and college bells had such a pretty chime.

Really surreal—in fact, it was a dream—
but which one was, I wondered, losing the place—
my middle age paging for the line
or the waiting audience with its unlined face,
and Mrs. Northcross smiling sweet as cream
in the back row, ready with her A's.

I doubt if she'd have given Grass that grade
if he had come before us as I did
to read to the class that hadn't died or greyed
our certain fate from a dream book that said
wake up, say no—it isn't yet too late—
before this sleep becomes a nightmare state.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 198.

The breakfast room table was set—
familiar underfoot,
a dog I reached to pet—
I turned the radio on—
Charlie McCarthy joked—
a twist, and deep blue flames
petaled on the stove
to warm the cocoa up.
It was as if I'd come home
and everyone else gone out
somewhere for a minute—
time passed—where could they be?
the cocoa was getting a mold,
a fine dust settling down,
F.D.R. came on
to say Pearl Harbor'd been bombed
I waited—I fooled around—
handled things on the mantle,
the shepherdess' web-cracked gown,
chipped candlestick, pink candle—
the radio went mad,
mentioned an atom bomb—
the cocoa had eaten the spoon
and still they didn't come home
the dog I reached to pet
felt like wagless bone
the mirrors had sprouted a beard
my diaries turned yellow
out in the bulldozed yard
a skyscraper started to grow
I heard them ringing the chime
I wanted to let them in—
"Harold, it's us, we're home!"—
everything inside
broke and began to festoon—
the way in or out was blocked—
"Harold, why is it locked?"—
the paranoid radio told
men were off to the moon—

“Harold, open the door”—
then with a deafening roar
as if it had never been
the walls of the dream caved in.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 198.

I Find Time

Getting rid of things, I find time
deep in my desk, the very Elgin watch
my father gave me—nineteen-thirty-nine—
as I took off my graduation cap—
it told me when Jack Benny would come on
and then how long until my Shelley class.
There was a girl sitting on my lap—
it ticked against her nipple in the dark—
it clocked the mountain endlessness of camp—
against Ann Arbor snows, glowed like a spark;
I wore it to an Oakland wedding once—
on summer's wrist it left a winter mark.
It had an hour for fatherhood, a hand
that never moved while I did boring chores—
but went right on, band by changing band
into the fifties, circling in its course
until I slipped the dim past off at last
and tried to put its fastness in a drawer—
but now I've wound it up again I've found
its jewels still work, its springs still coil and run
the wheels that fit the wheels that turn around
pointing out that nothing has been done
either to speed it up or slow it down
since smiling at time, I youngly strapped it on.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 200.

Aunt Anna Marie Hayes

was no Lily Pons—
her upper registers quavered
but she sang on, sang on
for family, friends and neighbors—
sometimes high Ced in solo
in the choir at the Methodist Church—
intoned “He was despised”
under their gothic arch,
warbled “O promise me—”
at nieces’ and nephews’ weddings
and cleft The Rock of Ages
in sadder settings—
struck dumb when Uncle Harry
was sealed where he couldn’t clap,
she found her voice again
and practiced while she gasped
between the doctorings
for what had long been wrong—
then even with much cut out,
rose on wings of song.
When Melvin went, and Elva,
she stood against stained glass
evoking with wrinkled lips
the Rugged Cross—
and daily in her nineties
alone in that little house
last roses bloomed behind,
facing a captive audience
deaf in their frames all around,
birdlike, almost blind,
still made a singing sound.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 201.

Golden Wedding

This couple in the picture—
what they could have told
of vanished pioneer times,
the wagons toward the sun—
births without a doctor,
fragile sapling groves—
of tragedies and faiths—
the nine who long survived,
the laughing girl they lost—
of heatwaves and of frost—
goateed, cameoed,
two from a righteous past
who here look joyless, quaint,
their era over with
of grim squarejawed endurance,
sobriety and grit—
Michael and Sarah Witt
whose ghosts are in my bones.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 202.

Later

There we were lives later—
it hadn't changed so much;
we biked down dream back roads
then passed the well kept fronts—
Bush St. Broadway, Sycamore
flickering with lawns
under the St. John's bread trees—
all the mothers' sons
wheeling through the shadows,
headed into town—
the clear air sweet with lilac
brushed by wings just flown—
we passed the sandstone courthouse,
a cannon on its grounds—
we pedaled past the Elks Club
to noontime churchbell sounds,
but when we got to the center
—hey, Ma, look, no hands!
the signs said DO NOT ENTER—
all it was was sands
between the windowed canyons,
hovered by a hawk;
we got off, grown men,
and walked our bikes along
among the playing tumbleweeds
and plate glass raying webs—
desolation whining
like wind through whitened ribs—
feeling terror crawl our spines,
our bone hands clutching rust
as slowed spokes crumbled, and our names
blew away like dust.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 203.

Home Movies at Newport

She says if they could rise up from their graves
and see your handsome family here at Newport
growing and grown—
her eyes show childish movies of the years,
quick generations dragging sandpails out—
The young one looks like you did then not now—
the waves break background green and do not change.
She sits there in her seventies at least,
lively survivor of so many dead—
uncles rocking on the album porch,
the watermelon brightness of the Fourths
when winking seeds flecked Grandpa's silver beard,
the little house spilled cousins out the doors
before the rumors of the wars were heard.
Fat rich Frank a penury of bones
and laughing Jack a black and soundless grin,
Elva, too, and Oscar, Melvin, Joe,
a list of ghosts comes back to sun and swim.
She doesn't like my beard. It makes her old,
and glasses, too—has youth gone dim so soon?
How many times since then this sea's unrolled
rolled back and stayed the same, cruel changeless coast.
She almost slaps a thigh but doesn't quite;
enthusiasm wrinkles, not yet lost—
she had to see the children in this light
against the curving summer sound of foams
before the coming winter—and that night.
Goodbye, goodbye, Aunt Nettie. Yes, I'll write.

Publication. First published in *Winesburg by the Sea*. Austin, Texas: Thorp Springs Press, 1979, p. 204.

Flashbacks and Reruns

Stage VII | Movies, memory, and rerun lives, 1985

The complete recoverable text of the 1985 collection.

Homecoming

I was the father in the later nightmare,
also the son, the young one, coming home—
today's husband she said was like my father—
we had inherited the small grey house of then
so vivid in detail I could have drawn it
exactly as it isn't
but once had been.

And she who wasn't my mother but my wife
followed behind along the stepping stones
withour children—my brother and myself—
the crooked apricot blazed springtime blossoms,
the rag hung on the railing, the key went in,
the backdoor swung open
over linoleum.

I could have counted the rose-grey

Armstrong pattern,

I could have turned the knobs of the Magic Chef,
the old G.E. hummed its round white motor—
all lights were on—someone had been and left—
I run from room to room frantically shouting
Who's here? Who's in this house?
But no one is.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 5.

Variation on a Theme by William Stafford

If I dialed would I connect
and answer myself—"Hello—?"
in that house as I see it still
years ago—
the boy I'm not but was
startled to unhook
this voice from the ringing phone—
"Who did you say this is—?"
treble to baritone—
nape hair erect as I hear
"It's you, fullgrown."
Those old lines blew down
in a Santa Ana wind one year
and now they're underground,
the parched house, too,
not there—
but far at one end of the poles
I'm waiting in that small town,
young, incredulous, blond,
receiver to ear.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 6.

Smudging

You couldn't stop that soot
from drifting through the town—
Aunt Glennie complained of her lampshades
and kept the cellophane on.
Evenings no matter where
when winter iced the air
we'd listen to the frost report—
Etawanda 23, Altaloma 24—
a basso voice of warning—
Cucamonga 29—
the ranchers' faces lengthened,
the cold stars had a shine.
At one, the tingling phone—
those voices in the hall
and Dad and my big brother
were off to light the oil.
Bundled silhouettes
dipped torches all along—
orange Halloween flames
made ink clouds until dawn,
and when the blackened men
wearily came home
the fish pond had a lid
and everything a film.
My mother mourned her curtains
greyed to warm the trees;
we blew that dark from our noses;
I wore two BVDs.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 7.

Diary

I tell my daughter she should keep a diary—
I read my own again and there I am
at far fifteen as in a family movie,
a nice blond boy bending to write it down,
day after day, there in the tiny bedroom
on West Eighteenth in that green prewar town.
The picture's clear, as one by MGM,
the thin penned words reflect as false a light;
they're only fronts, the hairy later man
came out to froth like Hyde in dreams at night.
Write it, my darling daughter—"I got up
at seven, drank a glass of orange juice—"
In forty years you'll make the movie stop
and find the too fast frame that shows the truth—
playing the games, keeping track of your weight,
noting each quarter inch toward being tall,
those joys you exclamation pointed "great!"—
previews which weren't really joys at all.
Unfaded ink that brings it back so close!
O little town still leafy in these words,
I not as I was but as I thought I was—
listen, my rebel child, and you shall hear
the doorchime ringing in that torn down house,
the lively dead arriving with tears and laughter.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 8.

Hmmpb

When Uncle Peter got his airflow Chrysler,
we went for a far out ride in the avant garde,
freewheeling over the roadbumps—
so much nicer
than going up and coming down too hard.
Wasn't he pleased?—
a bignosed tickled Punch
beside Aunt Lillie's brightcheeked, dressy glide,
while in the backseat how my mother humphed
with envy, though she tried to be polite.
It was so smooth, so dialed,
so far beyond;
but needed later decades for its shape
<a ludicrous humpbacked beetle low to the ground>
to hatch VWs from the egg it laid.
We rode, as the air of the thirties flowed around,
hitched weightless in a wagon to a star;
but Uncle Peter, laughed at, soon went out
to trade the future in
on what looked newer.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 9.

Aloha

We saw them to the ship
on which they'd sail blue deeps—
Uncle Peter's parting grip,
Aunt Lillie in her beads—
and they were off to ukeleles,
coconuts, romance—
while we went home and didn't see
the hula girls dance.
A postcard came of someone graceful
balanced brown and brave—
my mother read, and then she grumbled
"All I do is slave."
But when we met them, back from Eden,
loaded down with leis,
Uncle Peter white as ever,
Aunt Lillie pale as paste,
riding home they anecdoted
how they'd spent their days
sitting in the Royal Hawaiian
shaded snug and safe.
"Why, we met an L.A. couple.
Peter got some tips
on how the market's going—
cabled and made a mint—
and Mrs. Smythe was very nice.
<You can always tell good breeding.>
We dined on flown-in steaks
and did a lot of reading.
What's that? No never stirred
once from that air-cooled place.
You can walk the beach at Newport—
all it is is waves."

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 10.

Conversions

When Aimee came down in an airplane made of roses,
dressed as a pilot, virginal in white,
<the radio said>, carrying white roses,
saved Aunt Nettie couldn't sleep that night.
She sent ten bucks, she went up to the Temple.
She hallelujaed for a month of Sundays.
Telling us, Aunt Nettie's voice would tremble.
What an angel Aimee Semple was.
But angels fall, and so do plaster saints.
Rumors wafted of a warm affair
Aimee had with some slick reprobate.
Waves swept her away, then five weeks later
she reappeared, in new shoes, on the desert.
"She hid in a love nest,
 that's what that fake did—"
And soon Aunt Nettie, secular as ever,
was slapping her thigh and winking Oh you kid.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 11.

Melvin

My wavy cousin 'Melvin,
slight, not quite five six,
with a virile face of stubble
and rifle in his hand
tramping fields, up mountains,
stalked the wild land.
The doe as she leapt from the brook
guessed his testicle,
the bullet toward the branching buck
sang him powerful—
his slim hand notched the handle
to prove how male he was.
And when his son turned ten,
he took him too to teach
how any real man
camps past a woman's reach—
scoffed at the blizzard wind
as May's freak flakes increased—
but worse kept swirling down,
green had paled to white,
the thickening snow swirled blown
in an eerie world end light—
and then his startled heart
raced and missed a beat—
he didn't know what hit—
his slender hands and feet
numbed with cold and fright,
blood froze on his lip.
"Dad, Dad, are you all right?"
but even tears were ice.
The boy ran nowhere lost
then felt the killing frost
and when they brought them back,
quarry man and son
what hand had scored more notches
in Its Remington?

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 12.

Elegy for Aunt Nettie

And she like all the rest
discovered in the dust
the atoms gossiping
but hot of God or lust—
after her hey kid years
went down with her face of grooves—
her husband and one son
already in their graves—
mellowed before that,
sat by Newport waves
and streamed to salt remembering
oldtime griefs and loves—
wife, mother—aunt to some—
sister of the flock,
she's rinsed of Lamb's blood now
deep down past joy and shock—
no longer bounding out
to wink "Ain't we got fun?",
her laughter and her Jesus
rolling days are done—
gone with the bee bright groves
into the psalmless dark,
gone with the palmy light
and warbling meadowlark.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 13.

Mrs. Mitchum, Neighborhood Witch

“Don’t step on my herbgarden. Go away, boys—”

Always on Halloween, her house got it
with rotten tomatoes—the next thing to a witch,
poling her head out at the smallest noise,
grey scraggly hair and a chin that would twitch.

The old battleaxe, the old sourpuss—
out in the alley, we chalked things on her fence;
her scowling husband had to scrub them off
but when we peeked, he sneaked a grin at us
as if he had a heart and it was soft.

“You go play your football somewhere else—”
she’d scream at us, “or I’ll call the police—
trampled my bloodwort.

Just look at what you’ve done.”

We’d stuff a fat frog in her mailbox
and then we’d ring her bell and then we’d run,
but when Jim Walker sickened and got worse
so even Dr. Clark had given him up,
black caped Mrs. Mitchum, racing with the hearse,
flew back and forth, a basket over her arm,
until she’d cured him with her magic herbs.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 14.

Coke Fiends

There'd be a sinister couple
right at the drug store fountain
sucking red through straws
and puffing cigarettes—
she a Harlow blonde,
he with shadowed jaws.
The icy glasses tinkled.
She laughed. He growled “—adore”
“I don't think it's smart at all”
my huffing mother told
“you start and there you are
having to have your dope
and coming back for more.
It's got cocaine in it—”
But if that elixir
was what made them bold,
I thirsted to be a coke fiend,
kissing, handsome, old.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 15.

The Voice Magicians

Something used to be left to the imagination,
but still we wanted to see how it was done
and so we wrote to Hollywood for tickets
and drove up there where night was a neon noon
to watch, in flesh itself, the voice magicians.
They stood on stages by the microphones,
holding their scripts—toupeeless Charles Boyer
and Gail Patrick looking like anyone,
or boring as aunts and uncles, George and Gracie,
who sounded so uproarious at home.
Someone in a corner, wearing earphones,
made noises of doors, or storms, or barking dogs
and signs lit up commanding either: LAUGHTER,
or whether we thought they
 deserved it or not: APPLAUSE.
In fervid love scenes, Boyer never clasped her,
kisses were made with a couple of wet rags—
they scowled and slouched there,
 often in hornrimmed glasses,
nothing but actors waiting for their cues,
and who could quite convince us after that,
whatever we thought we heard, it wasn't a ruse.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 16.

Singalong

When the little ball bounced on the screen
over the line of words—
nobody ever sang.
Up there their big mouths moved,
their capped teeth twinkled along
but we sat mute in our seats,
popping Lifesavers in.
What did they think we were,
some kind of backwoods hicks?—
the only time we would sing
was in church or sometimes on trips—
you wouldn't catch us between
"Maytime" and Charlie Chan
being naive.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 17.

The Real Story

The paper didn't print it
but all of us at school
knew the real story—
as if we'd been the two,
Jack Jones, our hero fullback,
high girlfriend, Sadie Uhl.
Only a couple of months ago I
soaping in the showers
with Jim and Bud Carothers
he'd made a potent joke
out of the broken rubber,
and they'd told several others—
and Sadie told some friends of hers,
next Saturday more cold
when going all the way
on Citrus Heights, in cars—
and everyone guessed the reason
that day of urgent notes.
“They went up there and killed themselves.
They took off all their clothes.
Died in each other's arms—
sealed windows—taped a hose—”
“Johnny, I don't care.
Never again. I won't!”
Every boy's eyes narrowed,
silence filled the field,
the clocks seemed painted on the walls,
some girls ran sobbing home,
and teachers whispered somberly
of chemistry and Rome.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 18.

Billy Durant

Bob was out so often
long summer afternoons—
luncheons, meetings, sick calls—
she knew the Durant boy watched.
No sooner had the Plymouth gone
than—sure enough—he'd knock.
“Hello there, Billy, come on in—”
She smiled with a colorless mouth,
and shyly, clutching his notebook,
the rotot quite handsome youth
would give her such a look
an arrow went to her heart.
Then in the darkpanneled parlor
he'd read her what he had written—
vers libre, or a sonnet—
and through thin lips that were bitten,
she'd say, “Billy, that's good—”
or nicely explain why not.
The Seth Thomas ticked on the mantel,
the hot sun through stained glass
streamed barbarous light on the rug,
and O when it reached his hair
what radiant demon or angel
made fierce love to her there!
She never reached out to touch him
though his poems sobbed with desire—
the sun moved away from the window,
and Bob in his backward collar
hunched in with news from the sickroom—
which was also hopeless and dire.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 19.

Now, Voyager

She surprised us that time by playing
a dumpy old maid
with caterpillar eyebrows, rimless glasses
and her hair in a bun—
but that didn't last long after she'd met
friendly psychiatrist Claude Rains,
who took her away from her rich, domineering
Boston mother
to a sanitarium and changed her
into the real Bette Davis.
Slim, in a big white picture hat,
with large Bette Davis eyes and painted on
Bette Davis mouth,
her eyebrows and hairdo
had also improved
and she met Paul Henreid <who had a
sicK wife and two daughters at home>
on a Rio cruise.
He lit two cigarettes and handed her one,
which started the music,
and they must have made love
after the fadeout
because in the next scene
she acted even more
like Bette Davis.
They had to part, though, because
they both were noble
and she went home and confronted her mother
who said take off that <lowcut> dress
and threatened to disown her.
Now she was Bette Davis nothing could stop her
from being herself.
The stuffy relatives sputtered amazed
at her transformation.
She was going to marry
 some nice dull Boston bigwig
as she couldn't ever marry Paul Henreid
<because he was noble>

but then she met Paul again at a party
and he lit two cigarettes and handed her one
which started the music.
She broke off the engagement
and snapped mean Bette Davis words at her mother
who instantly died <and left Bette all her money>
and Bette blamed herself
and went back to the sanitarium
to have another nervous breakdown
where she met Paul Henreid's
 twelve-year-old daughter
who wore glasses,
an ugly duckling rejected by her mother
as Bette had been.
So Bette decided to help her
instead of having a nervous breakdown
and bought her ice cream and stroked her hair
when she cried
and took her on a camping montage
with the approval of Claude Rains
if she didn't get too friendly with Paul Henreid,
which wouldn't be noble.
She was making the daughter
into another Bette Davis
and brought her to Boston to live with her
and give her a mother's love.
When Paul came to her Back Bay house
he wasn't sure it would work out—
she was being too noble—
he tried to kiss her in the library
but she said no
explaining how they'd have something finer.
So they went to the window
and he lit two cigarettes and handed her one
which started the music

and she said—
Oh don't let's ask for the moon.
We have
the Stars.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 20.

George Morton, Manager Citrus Empire Hotel

I could tell you about hotels—
managed the Palace once
in Frisco—now that's some city.
But I got down on my luck.
There used to be spittoons—
I did get rid of those—
but you can't make silk purses
out of these saw's ear holes.
First Fresno, then Visalia—
each worse than the last—
a rubber plant in the lobby
nobody bothers to dust.
Permanent residents mostly—
old guys pensioned off,
year in year out on their butts
droning about the past.
When that movie company came
to make a picture in town
that was something more like it—
they had us all spinning around.
Yessir. Right away sir.
Those old coots in their chairs
faded into the wallpaper.
And that kid, you wouldn't believe it,
a creampuff on the screen,
cussing like a truckdriver.
Looks twelve but he must be
sixteen or seventeen—
a naked gal in his bed,
and a smell of Mary Jane
when I wheeled in the bucket
of ice and French champagne.

Hands me a couple of sawbucks—
now that's what I call class.
Most of the time this place is so dull
you can hear the flies pass gas.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 23.

Bebe Dixon

If they wanted to give her things,
clothes, and a little money—
well, what was so wrong about that?
It was easy to say honey
to someone you really liked
and she really liked so many—
such nice sugar daddies.
She wouldn't have taken a penny
from any she detested,
and regularly every week
she went to the priest and confessed it—
he was so understanding—
and he should be—wasn't Jesus?
Most had awful wives
anyway—didn't those guys
deserve to have in their lives
a little fun and excitement?
She was doing them a favor.
And didn't the Bible say
love thy neighbor?

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 25.

“Scoop” Shoop, *Mercury* Columnist

The Mercury didn't last long—
I never thought it would,
but we gave them a run for their money—
shook up old Harwell good—
the journalistic phoney—
most of that stuff he prints,
nothing but baloney
and slanted so Republican
it shits elephant turds—
we scared him for a while—
he thought intelligent words
might be back in style.
People read my column;
it really stirred them up—
The Times had to use headlines
twice as big as ours,
but most people read the funnies
and who Joe Louis kayoed—
reality gets on their nerves.
This town can wipe its ass again
on the paper it deserves.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*, 1985, p. 26.

Hershey, the Cop

Poised on his Harley Davidson,
mustached, gold badged, big,
he sat waiting for bad guys—
nobody called him pig.
We'd wave "Hi there, Hershey—"
he'd wave back with a grin,
a toothflash like a movie star
in a suntanned skin—
darkglasses, too, sometimes—
a nightstick on his hip,
a glint of holster and leggings,
sinewy hands to grip
handlebars as his foot
whooshed the gas pedal down
and he'd gun off after hoodlums
halfway across town.
Hero of law and order
always getting his man—
before distinctions blurred,
before we had to learn
Hershey or someone like him
would whang the heads of the young
in Berkeley or Chicago
even when laws were wrong.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 27.

Elmer Johnson

Since everyone said I was funny,
when the circus came to town
I signed on as a worker—
thought I'd work up to a clown.
But traveling around the country
what do you think I did?—
sewed canvas, curried the horses
and shoveled elephant shit.
Made friends with the fat lady—
she really wasn't half bad.
She weighed three hundred and eighty
but what delicate feelings she had!
Told me she'd once been slender—
the impotent strong man's bride—
then took to eating and eating;
her laugh and her touch stayed light.
I tell you you can't ever tell
from their looks what anyone's like;
those daring young men on the flying trapeze
were dwarfs of twisted pride,
and that sweet young miss who threw kisses
as she danced on the dappled mare
did things with the bearded lady
it would curl your ears to hear.
The clowns acted surly and jealous
and never gave me a chance—
the next time the big top stopped here
I said farewell to all that.
Hell, though, that's life, just a circus—
you look underneath what it seems—
excitement and laughs on the surface—
and there's nothing but shit and dream s.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 28.

Ed Williams, Philosopher

Summers I sit out front
and look up at the stars—
all along Main and Broadway
you can hear the cars—
people going nowhere
or visiting Aunt Mildred.
What is it all about?
The kids playing hide and seek
or fumbling in the dark,
people pulling thir blinds,
and all the useless dead
and all the unused minds?
I'll tell you what I think—
we're only the blink of an eye
in some kind of big face,
maybe the face of time—
Cygnus drifts up there,
the planets wheel around.
You can't tell me this ball
of water, dirt and rock
is anything so special,
that all those specks of fire
were put up there by God
just for us to admire.
Millions and billions of others,
some like earth, some not,
whirl around those suns—
and some have people on them
listening to Fibber McGee—
and on one there might be a man
with my face and my name
sitting out on his lawn
with the summer sprinklers whirring,
and a kid yelling "All in free—"
and the cars on Main St. purring,
thinking about me.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 30.

Joe Louis

You could hardly go to the movies
without seeing Joe Louis
bobbing and weaving and punching
sometimes for fifteen rounds—
how bored I got with that ringside—
as bad a when FDR
grinned elected again
in newsreel after newsreel.
I went to the studio preview
and had to sit though the bout
as the Brown Bomber jabbed at those faces,
the crowd, the crowd going wild
in Chicago, Detroit or such places—
SOCK—and blood leaking out
as Galento staggered and dropped
or Pastor went down for the count—
or hohum while Franklin Delano
outdid Hoover and Landon
then said there was nothing to fear—
it was hard to ignore that fireside
or Joe's blows at Madison Square
though I'd paid to see Barbara Stanwyck
in Joel McCrea's tent
on some far fake frontier.
Gody lasted and lasted,
Paychek only two rounds
and the heavyweight Wendell Willkie
got kayoed like those before—
still it was better than later,
Joe in a uniform,
FDR gravely paler
and no film worth waiting for.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 32.

Looking for the Stars: 1940

We went to Hollywood
and looked and looked for Stars—
at Grauman's Chinese Theatre
my feet fit Tyrone Power's—
couldn't get in at Paramount—
elsewhere in the hills
Veronica Lake and Alan Ladd
sunned themselves by pools—
she with her half a face,
he with his gun for hire,
so intimate on film,
so distant from us there,
and nowhere glimpsed the curve
of Lana Turner's sweater—
up and down the town
ogled but never met her—
we almost limped from searching—
no ray from MGM
or Twentieth-Century Fox
dartled Arcturian.
Gable shone on location,
Garbo glimmered alone—
but I found in a store on the boulevard
the light from Dickinson.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 33.

Lemons

It wasn't I who picked those brilliant lemons
with that young fairhaired girl
 who laughed with me—
someone else under the cobalt heavens
had gone through summer with her to that tree—
as far along the road as Uncle Theo's
to pull bright yellow ovals out of green—
but flashing still, a metal windmill wheels
and there's a certain earth shine to the scene
that doesn't fade, that's like a Van Gogh painting
in which the light was memorably caught—
though I'm not he, but changed
 with grief and aging
and she may be some wife of bitter thought
illumined among leaves and lucid fruit
that Eden boy and girl stay absolute.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 34.

Artichokes

I'd never eaten artichokes before
but at her house I'd try anything.
Peach leaves brushed against the darkened window—
dusk in the orchard, yellow light inside.
Her mother, in a turban, looked amused.
I peeled away a lightgreen meaty petal
and dabbed it in the gob of mayonnaise.
Her father's jaws were working on the steak.
Her young blond six foot brother also smiled.
I tasted newness, fatally amazed—
Adam again—and under bouncing curls,
in that tight blouse that I could see right through,
she grinned like someone who'd been whispered to
among the thistles by a recent snake.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 35.

My Brother Still Goes to the Barber

who's cut him for forty years—
before and after Pearl Harbor
lowering his ears—
snipping, buzzing, combing,
whatever the tragedy—
close death, distant bombing,
the same one keeps him neat.
In mirror after mirror
my silver brother sits
under the blades of that shearer—
errors, runs and hits
over the radio—
as when he sat there blond,
never letting it grow
even an inch beyond
Saturdays when Ike Aiken
whipped the apron off
and then my turn was taken
to be clipped just enough.
After Hiroshima,
after his heart attack,
no heavier or slimmer,
he came back and back—
the barber stooped and whiter,
my brother staying straight
whether sooner or later—
to that fluorescent light.
While I've moved here and there
sideburned, with a beard,
he hasn't changed a hair,
his stubborn knees are spread
under the dazzling pinstripes,
lotions on a ledge—
he's telling joys and gripes
to that same ear that lends
unvarying sympathy—
and if his Figaro
outlives him he will be

by his hand scissored true
before he has to go
farther than barbers shave,
for that occasion, too,
exact in every wave.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*. 1985, p. 36.

Dream

Jackie Kennedy Onassis, working at Woolworth's
in my home town in 1939
sold me some of those orange candy corn kernels
and black jellybeans for Halloween
and leaned over the glass counter
 above cheap chocolates
with cherry centers—friendly as could be—
beautiful almost as one of my female cousins,
her fair face mirrored in the weight machine.
On Fourth Street Packards went by, and Ford V8s
and girls in wool skirts well below the knee
and men who are dead now, wearing homburg hats,
and Jackie leaned there whispering to me
Oh my God you don't know how unlucky
you are and I am standing here in Woolworth's
among the cardboard skeletons and Maybelline
between assassinations and more wars,
the stars in frames—Shirley with her dimples—
all of us dreaming the American dream,
your mother at home baking cinnamon apples,
Jack making a touchdown for the winning team.

Publication. First published in *Flashbacks and Reruns*, 1985, p. 38.

American Lit

Stage VIII | A double sequence of literary miniatures, 1994

The complete recoverable text of the 1994 collection.

Nancy Drew

Kathy Cox, out in her vined backyard,
read me a pretty book called Nancy Drew,
her voice as thrilling as the mockingbird.
O how I wished that I could read it, too!
A blonde girl with a flashlight on the cover
went through blue darkness looking for a clue—
I sat entranced—O when would I discover
those ways with words amazing Kathy knew?
What pictures she could conjure from the page,
what music in her every syllable!
I could hardly wait to be her age,
ten years old—the whole world readable.
Or even older, Nancy's age or more—
in and between the lines, finding the answer.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 1.

A Child's Version of Uncle Tom's Cabin

Trying to get us into a reading habit,
after she had read us “Goldilocks,”
“Little Red Riding Hood” and Peter Rabbit,
and finally finished, too, The Wizard of Oz,
Mrs. Smith said “Bring a book of your own
and I will read it at our story time,”
so I brought one I’d listened to at home—
a child’s version of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
She wouldn’t read it, called it much too sad
and too grownup with far too many chapters—
sat there in that Kindergarten mad,
hearing about more happily ever afters
instead of flights on ice and Simon Legrees,
and black as I felt inside, yassuming Topsy.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 1.

Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address"

"Two bits for you if you memorize
'The Gettysburg Address,'" said Uncle Peter—
which wasn't fair, as I was only five
and not yet, like my brother Norv, a reader.
I listened while he read it in our bedroom,
words like Fourscore and seven years ago
and dedicated to the proposttion.
Oh how I yearned to hurry up and grow,
to learn that speech the way my brother did—
this government of and by and for the people.
Instead of being a know-nothing kid
I'd get a quarter and Aunt Lillie's kiss.
Standing in Keds and pants as long as his
when I could read I'd be created equal.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 2.

Poetry Reading

The first poetry reading I heard was Grandpa's—
“Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!
He sat there in his chair, the beaded lamp on,
a painted vase gracing the radio,
and in a voice that still had notes of bass
boomed out Lord Byron or James Russell Lowell;
more than once he told of rare June days—
the poets he recited had a soul.
I felt iambics on his creaking knee
where I would ride while Stonewall Jackson warned
not to touch a hair of Barbara Frietchie—
bowtied, and on Memorial Day adorned
with medals—though he said no one had won—
his love of vivid verse inspired my own.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 2.

The Emperor Jones

“How many of you went to The Emperor Jones
instead of studying?” Miss Plumb wanted to know
in seventh grade—and though expecting frowns
or, as when spitballs flew, a ruler’s blow,
some of us slowly raised our honest hands.
My parents must have thought it Amos’n’ Andy
to take me on a school night. I had sat
watching Paul Robeson die and munching candy.
“In such a town we seldom get a chance
to see great drama by an American playwright
right on the screen—it’s mostly song and dance—”
Miss Plumb told us in the chalkdust light
and I and those kids looked with wild surmise—
after that, A pupils in her eyes.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 3.

“The Gift of the Magi”

To stop our whispering Miss Whitaker
said “No more fractions. I will read to you
‘The Gift of the Magi,’ which is literature.
If you insist on numbers you can go.”
Everyone stayed and listened to the tale
of a young couple, who at Christmas time
sold the only things they had to sell
so he could give to her and she to him
what they most wanted—gold combs for her hair
and for his watch a beautiful gold chain—
the only trouble was she sold her hair
and he his watch—now wasn’t that a pain?
“The story of my life,” cried Miss Whitaker
and fled the room—and never did explain.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 3.

“*The Cask of Amontillado*”

Junior didn't have a cellar, though
he boasted everything he had was best—
I'd be his friend a while and then uh oh
when better friends appeared I was a pest.
We'd go downstairs and do a puppet show—
Shirley Dimple, Greta Garbage and Mae Chest,
among the webs, as in a tale by Poe
and who knew, maybe even a mouse's nest.
There weren't any casks of Amontillado,
nothing but some root beer bottles there,
but when he smirked and irked with his bravado—
well, of course, I wouldn't ever dare,
though what a thought—to tic him up and then
brick him where he'd never sneer again.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 4.

Authors

Junior and I played Authors by the hour—
better than Monopoly, I thought,
though he still bluffed his huffy way to power
even if such writers can't be bought.
Warm on the porch of summer there we sat,
fans in our hands with faces of famous men
and also less hirsute Louisa May Alcott.
The Blithedale Romance? The Marble Faun?
Evangeline? "The Courtship of Miles Standish"?
Our competitive books of cards would pile and pile
while Mom brought us ice cream in an equal dish.
"The Raven"? Junior asked with a knowing smile,
giving me that one-up Junior look.
But I'd show him. I'd put him in a book.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 4.

Evangeline

Wasn't it Evangeline we read?
It could be. Open-eyed I nearly napped.
"Hexameters," Miss Mingy must have said
and when Grand Pré was mentioned, some kid laughed.
I'd never get the story in my head.
I wondered if the blacksmith was the one
from that dumb poem where the chestnut spread.
A test on this sure wouldn't be much fun.
That's poetry, I guessed. Ho hum, ho hum.
Always somewhere far Acadian,
Miss Mingy glaring there, "Spit out that gum!"
and Latin next. Yes, it must have been.
then when so many of my peers began,
at anything with lines that scanned, to yawn.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 5.

“Thanatopsis”

Some big kid snickered when Miss Mingy read
“And the sweet babe, and the gray-haired man”
in “Thanatopsis.” She just glared.
“All right, class, memorize the last nine lines.”
Thoughts on death was what the title meant.
“So live that when thy summons comes—”
“He was sixteen,” she said, “when he wrote that.”
Kids must have been much smarter in those times.
Lucille Bradford raised a frantic hand
but only asked if she could leave the room.
A paper airplane zigzagged through the gloom.
“Her summons came.” Miss Mingy almost screamed.
But when I asked, after the rest were gone,
“What’s a quarry slave?” Miss Mingy beamed.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 5.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

My fence was hardly like Tom Sawyer's fence
and Junior not a Huckleberry Finn—
those Hannibal events weren't our events,
no river with a steamboat wheeling in
and yet, and yet—except for time and place
being kids is often much the same;
imagination has a boyish face
and makes up wondrous stories like Mark Twain.
We knew someday a man would walk the moon,
could see from where we lay on prickling grass
summer evenings hearing cricket tunes,
the starry universes streaming past—
and rockets weren't more visionary than
tall tales two moonstruck youths could plot and plan.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 6.

Mark Twain

Suffering the little children, suffering me
to ride the wild river on a raft of reason—
white-maned Mark Twain, behind his screen
of camouflaging smoke, believed in Jesus—
if America had prophets, he was one,
lighting up the gloom with his humorous twinklings,
telling a tale in the words of a backwoods bumpkin
who had a mind as clear and just as Lincoln's.
Though cracking me up, as when Grandpa joked,
and though I might have chuckled at his frog,
I knew it wasn't only fun he poked—
we both were Huck as we escaped along
the shores of parable and hid with Jim
where laughter makes the terrible less grim.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 6.

Keeping a Diary

Norval said I'd never keep a diary,
and he quit his after a month or two—
mine wasn't very wonderful or fiery:
Got up and drank a glass of orange juice...
but every night, slanting my fountain pen
I sat intent and wrote exactitudes—
Had a fight with Junior, studied with John,
not once failing to do it, whatever my moods.
Two years, five years—then I called it a "journal;
how overly poetic I became!—
my words, I thought, the next thing to eternal,
deserved a place of everlasting fame.
At over sixty, I'm still keeping at it—
another acceptance of an American Lit.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 7.

“Miniver Cheevy”

Uncle Peter drank but not a lot
and only beer, and mostly with the Elks.
He'd show us, just in case we had forgot,
the tooth that dangled almost to his belt—
B.P.O.E.—Best People On the Earth—
of whom, no doubt about it, he was one,
and told us, too, of those without much worth—
“Frogs,” “Chinks,” “Greasers”—even Irishmen.
Though not a man who cared for Medicis
or scorning money as he scanned the Dow,
he would have been a drinking pal of Cheevy's
if there were such a person in our town—
both at the Elks Club crying in their beer
about the good old days that never were.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 7.

Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia

The salesman smiled and showed those pretty books—
Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia.
I wasn't sure I liked his oily looks.
"Sign today—we'll ship it free to you."
"Well, I don't know," my mother hemmed, then hawed.
"Think of what this little boy will learn."
Little! Why that bowtied, hairypawed—
I flipped the pages and he glowered down.
"Look, Mom—" I'd stopped midway through P
where, in a drawing, sat a darkeyed man
with a quill pen, writing poetry.
He had a mustache, too: POE, EDGAR ALLAN,
and watching, as he mused, there sat a cat.
Mom signed, and I thought—*I'll do that*.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 8.

Onomatopoeia

Mrs. Thatcher said the silken sad
uncertain rustling was alliteration
and I thought poetry was not too bad
if it could lilt like that; with some elation
I tried those quoths and bells bells bells but oh!
the rhyming and the chiming of that raven!
My hair sleeked back I went out to a show:
slangy Barbara Stanwyck being brazen,
and made some lively movies of my own,
but mad for more than what is seen on reels,
I opened up my diary and wrote
about how being adolescent feels,
somerly singing my sadness, wailing my woe—
trying to tintinabulate—like Poe.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 8.

Nevermore

There was no way to get rid of that Raven
after it fluttered first in grammar school
when Miss Street read it (while we were misbehaving—
back row giggles, spitballs at Shirley Uhl).
Blackfeathered on the pallid bust of Pallas
it also croaked and croaked in junior high—
when by then, eyeing Lucille or Alice,
some heard its dark pronouncement with a sigh.
Plump Mrs. Thatcher loosed it in her room
where silken rustling girls had lips of flame—
older, we almost groaned at its word of doom
who'd known that ancient bird since we were ten,
and we weren't thrilled again in jaycee air
to find Poe's parrot perched and waiting there.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 9.

Ben-Hur

On tests, we wrote *amo amas amat*—
and then went home to find what Ben would do
to best Messala and to end the plot—
and sure enough, this persecuted Jew,
sold for a galley slave, and his kind mother
and innocent sister vengefully locked away
proved himself better than any other,
made a comeback and won the thrilling race.
We learned the Latin endings of the case,
declined and conjugated, and in between,
read about this Palestinian boy
as if Jack Armstrong triumphed in his place
saved by Jesus so that he could be
Judah Ben-Hur, the All-American goy.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 9.

All Quiet on the Western Front

I, m'h w? We'd never heard of him
but Mr. Jarvis read a play to us
which let us know that every war was grim
and not a show of uniforms and drums.
A few girls winced. "Christ!" he said, "God damn!"
and there were rats—and corpses in the scene
shot dead and yet refusing to lie down—
not much like movies—more like a bad dream.
As Mr. Jarvis read I sat convinced
and afterwards, toward algebra with John,
the air of early April brightly rinsed,
I told him I could never kill a man.
He, though, ratatatted like a gun,
practicing for Normandy and Guam.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 10.

“The Chambered Nautilus”

Mrs. Thatcher said a metaphor
was something like “The Chambered Nautilus”—
an inner spiraled seashell on a shore
not really being what we thought it was—
“its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt
unsealed”—poets liked to write like that—
“thou breath of autumn” or “in heaven yclept.”
Had Oliver Wendell ever swung a bat?
Next summer when I searched at Newport Beach
I found some scallops and a few white clams.
Well maybe Mrs. Thatcher had to teach
what meter was and those old highflown poems—
later I’d discover plainer speech
line after line, could build as stately mansions.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 10.

Dactyls

Mrs. Thatcher didn't have us read her
but chalked her name with stresses on the board
as an example of dactylic meter—
in those days fundamentals weren't ignored—
Edna St. Vincént, after that, Millay—
a poem in itself—it sang and sang.
I wished my own name lilted in that way—
then anapestic, and the noon bell rang.
Later in the street when up to bat
I still heard dactyls, heard them in my sleep,
but after being tested I forgot
until, a pinkcheeked freshman at jaycee,
I read a heady sonnet she had written
and checked her every book out, smitten, smitten.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 11.

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

For someone who had signed the Constitution
wasn't Benjamin Franklin pretty risque?—
old and bald but sexy—what confusion—
none of my bifocaled uncles were that way.
He said early to bed and early to rise
and didn't he invent the electric light?—
well maybe Edison did, but nevertheless
if Benjamin Franklin hadn't flown that kite
we'd still be in the dark—and what about
The Saturday Evening Post—he started that—
quite a guy—he made you have to doubt
our country's fathers were as out of date
as droning Mr. Carver made them seem,
in some old eyes, as in our own, a beam.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 11.

Great Audiences

“O Captain, My Captain!” was all we’d heard he wrote
and by the ship he meant the Ship of State—
but a big kid said he was a dirty poet,
some things he wrote could make you get all hot,
and “You should see the book my stepdad brought
back from Paris—cripes and oo la la—
Leaves of Grass with pictures who’d have thought
could go with poems.” “Let us see it.” “Nah.”
The Book-of-the-Month Club—after I had grown—
offered as a bonus if you’d bought
Saroyan and Marquand and A. J. Cronin,
an illustrated Whitman—which I got,
and some sung words electrified—but no
nudes not drawn so whole truths wouldn’t show.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 12.

The Scarlet Letter

Things were worse in Puritan times, of course—
Hester had to wear a scarlet A
for one little slip-up and live a life of remorse—
Mrs. Marsden packed and moved away;
lucky for her there wasn't any baby—
She just left for someplace like L.A.
in her fox fur, an unrepentant lady—
but sex had changed a lot since Hester's day
especially in the wilds of Hollywood
where movie stars kept hopping from bed to bed;
though spotless Boston still did what it could
to keep such smut from being seen or read,
that way madness lies, wise Hawthorne knew—
it all depended on the point of view.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 12.

The Last of the Mohicans

I liked the illustrations by N. C. Wyeth—
almost naked Indians brightly painted—
and Hawkeye—what a guy—not pale or pious,
he could be real, but what about those sainted
speak-no-evil sisters, Cora and Alice?
They never seemed to have to go to the bathroom,
always smiling sweetly, without malice,
not like some of the girls in my classroom.
You could almost hear the waters roar
in pristine forests, and see Uncas there
but there were truths of life James Fenimore
Cooper must have known but didn't dare
ever to mention—it would be ill-bred—
however redly—even girls—bled.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 13.

You Can't Take It with You

Ha ha ha hee hee—that's what you needed in a Depression,
a play like that—I laughed and laughed and laughed
and afterwards it left a deep impression.
Why couldn't my dull family be as daft
instead of pinching pennies like my Dad?
Nobody painted or twirled in a tutu—
most of the time, however, we weren't sad—
of course that zany humor wasn't true to
real life—no fireworks in the cellar
and no nice iceman who just decided to stay.
My brother, though, had hung an old propeller
overhead in our bedroom—well OK—
maybe we weren't such screwballs but so what?
We too had values that couldn't be bought.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 13.

“The Man with the Hoe”

That must be Europe or someplace like that.
My father farmed, but did it with a tractor
and wasn't dead to rapture and despair.
Once when my mother bought a new spring hat
you'd have thought he almost would have whacked her—
“We'll be in the poor house!” “No, you go there!”
she sneered and shrieked and life seemed pretty grim.
What gulfs between him and the seraphim!
But mostly he was meek and she was mild,
no one I knew really a monstrous thing;
even though the stock market had failed
some years ago—a wheel slave couldn't bring,
making us smile, a chrome trimmed V-8 home,
and take us out for malts at Shorty's Drive-In.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 14.

Roethke

My Dad grew things, too, and I could have been
that boy in billowing clothes on top of a greenhouse,
people pointing up at me while the wind's din
blew around me, my head not far from the clouds—
but not the son who had the waltzing father,
my own no dancer, and he didn't drink—
a little sober German rancher rather
putting his black lunchpail on the sink.
I wasn't Roethke—and not Rilke, either,
though I did have a feminizing mother;
and even if made fun of by a brother,
as Roethke wasn't, I can be the reader
as much alike as different from him,
meeting my shadow, too, in a dark time.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 14.

The Good Earth

I didn't read the book until much later 5
but saw the movie at a local preview—
Muni and Ranier—were they in the theatre?
I craned to see, then watched the phony show:
Hollywood made up to look Chinese—
and probably they'd gone to San Joaquin
Valley for the rolling fields of wheat.
They'd painted a plague of locusts in the scene.
Decades from then when someone sneered "Pearl Buck?
How come they gave the Nobel Prize to her?"
"Wall," I said—by then I'd read the book"—
"have you ever really studied *The Good Earth*?
OK—don't shucks and nope like Disney's Goofy:
'I never read it but I saw the movie.'"

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 15.

The Call of the Wild

If dogs got Oscars the St. Bernard should have had one
for snarling and wagging so well in the studio snow—
sometimes friendly, sometimes toothed like a mad one,
under hot lights supposed to be 20 below.

He was a better actor than Clark Gable
playing his grinning master—if only the film
had faithfully followed Jack London's canine fable
instead of dragging in Loretta Young
furred on a sled to look like a model from Vogue,
changing the wild's call into a mild romance—
it might have been the story of the rogue
dog we expected, not that song and dance
we usually got from oldtime Hollywood—
its every just-brushed wolf defanged, declawed.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 15.

Walter Winchell

Until I read that article I didn't realize
Walter Winchell thought up the three little dots...
Herb Caen thanked him. Many gals and guys
lived in terror of his mean pot shots.
How I despised his snide voice even then
in the black and white thirties on West Eighteenth
"... let's go to press..." he'd say when what he meant
was anything except unbiased truth.
Cruel J. Edgar Hoover thanked him, too—
in their felt hats they were two of a kind—
what power for a gossip writer who
had, like Junior, a clever 9th grade mind.
"Good evening..." he accused, including me
"... America and all the ships at sea..."

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 16.

O World, O Life, O Time!

Oh yes, yes, how LIFE used to stir me—
the magazine, that is—when just beginning;
every Friday—nothing could deter me—
I'd buy it at the drug store—as if sinning—
and eye its vivid pictures in my room,
Bourke-White's visages of sufferers
and flesh like silk, both of men and women—
I'd have to think of touching girls—or worse.
Oh, what was wrong with me? Those images
did tingling zinging things I couldn't explain—
even burly men at scrimmages—
every lipsticked lip—was I insane?
Later I read, by when LIFE was old stuff:
O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 16.

Story

There was a news stand by the old West End
that even then sold nudie magazines—
a depth toward which I couldn't quite descend,
though lingered pecking among libertines—
and what was that I spied near Life and Time?
STORY? Which I thumbed and bought instead
of starting a career of secret crime—
edited by Whit and Hallie Burnett.
I took it home. I read its every word.
I hadn't known there were such tales as those—
William Saroyan—something in me stirred
but not like seeing girls without their clothes.
I almost cried. At least my bright eyes blurred.
Yes, Yes, YES! I would try such prose.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 17.

Revisions

I ran to Harriette with each rejection
and she said “Well let’s see what we can do—
what’s this right here?” She made a red correction,
out on the lawns wing, and I felt less blue.
At home I twirled a sheet in my Corona.
Whit and Hallie’d like it better now.
“Why not call her something else than Mona?”
said Harriette when Collier’s said no.
And by the time the dahlias were in bloom
and my fifth version came back from the Post—
the backyard sprinklers went ta-soom, ta-soom—
I wondered what it was I wanted most:
to be a writer—or one of the guys—
but Harriette just said, “Revise, revise!”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 17.

Studs Lonigan

He did some things that I would never do—
but of course I didn't live in Chicago—
no young guys died—at least none that I knew—
what was a broad, what was a Bohunk, what was a dose?
I wasn't Irish, Catholic—or poor,
although my father often said we were—
beer, gin and whiskey had no grand allure;
I'd rather write a poem than play poker.
But I liked girls, at least I liked their looks—
hadn't yet had one the way Studs had,
though when I kept on checking out those books
it wasn't as if I couldn't have gone bad
if I'd known how to—maybe I would yet—
homeward, I sucked a secret cigarette.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 18.

“*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*”

My life was not as secret as Walter Mitty's
although I kept a private diary—
I didn't often envision emerald cities,
if not exactly a realist, either, entirely—
a girl I liked but too mature for me?
I asked her to star in one of my amateur films—
my hopes and dreams, still at over sixty,
on seeable reels and in those early poems.
Sometimes, however, under Broadway palms,
I did walk home, except it wasn't I
but someone older; not a boy like Mom's—
and I had Robert Taylor's face and body.
Garbo's Camille had just died in my arms
or Lana Turner recognized my charms.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 18.

Portnoy's Complaint

I never had a Newark Jewish mother—@
no chicken soup, oy wehs or rolling eyes—
or such a souleyed kosher father, either;
my family all were California goys—
no mazos, no bar mitzvah, no menorah—
I went to Sunday School and learned of Christ
and nothing much of Sodom and Gommorah.
I wasn't one of those outspoken guys,
but I was just as livid underneath
whatever words I might lack to express it.
I would have spit such anger through my teeth
as Portnoy did, but I had to repress it—.
and most thought no one needed to complain
in naive WASPville, 1939.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 19.

Waiting for Lefty

Hell, bastard, fat little ass, God-damn—
not words Odets would later write for movies—
and no such play was put on in our town;
Mrs. Baumgartner, wearing silk and rubies,
got driven clubward by her dark chauffeur.
We had no strikes. The Union was a rumor;
only the trackside Mexicans stayed poor;
what we preferred was funny paper humor
and screwball comedies with Cary Grant.
If there were reds, they must be in L.A.
and maybe my uncles, farting out at the ranch,
called F.D.R. a pinko, and so OK
without dinero nobody had a chance—
but it was still the good old U.S. of A.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 19.

The Postman Always Rings Twice

The postman never rang our bell at all,
but maybe it was different other places—
people in novels, too, had much more gall
than people I knew, though I knew what hate is—
raw lust and greed—well, no, I wasn't sure
I'd ever felt them like those characters;
even if I wasn't Ivory pure
I tried to think right and I might be worse.
You read about such murder in the Times
and in Macbeth as those two lovers did;
in Our nice town we had few deadly crimes
and hardly any really seamy side—
somewhere elsewhere—Shakespeare or L.A.—
Cainlike evil slinked its killing way.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 20.

The Last Tycoon

While I was making “Skeezix” in Santa Ana,
John as Brick, Kathryn as Nina Clock,
shooting a lovescene, maybe, among lantana,
not far away in Hollywood F. Scott
Fitzgerald leaned intent to *The Last Tycoon*—
the big time writer I, too, wanted to be;
I smoked a secret Lucky in my room;
he gulped more Jack Daniels as if it were tea.
And then when I bent gluing my film together
poor F. Scott gasped and clutched his chest—
later readers never will know whether
that book, if finished, would have been his best.
I only recently read it, gladder than ever,
beloved or not, I wasn’t quite so lost.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 20.

“To Build a Fire”

I'd felt like that—off in the ice and snow
without too many matches in my pocket,
wolves circling, and the temperature below
and if I'd had a gun I couldn't cock it.
At first it really seemed that I'd succeed;
a very little trick to build a fire;
but one thing happened then another did
and then it looked as if I might expire.
If only, and if only—gobs of wet
whooshed from the branch and there I was again,
a man whom fate had caught up in a net—
my freezing feet! my purple hands of pain!
I lay back reading snugly on my bed.
The Indian summer light was streaming in.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 21.

Rip

Only a story but I kept on thinking
what if I woke up in twenty years—
standing on West Eighteenth, my dim eyes blinking,
and wouldn't I have white hair and a beard?
Well maybe not at thirty-six, but then
I felt how Rip must feel or thought I did
even if as yet I had no children,
still, though I wouldn't admit it, just a kid.
It would be forty years until, returning—
the house that I had read that story in
as if destroyed by war or quake or burning
gone, as someone else wrote, with the wind—
I stood there weirdly in my fifties mourning
my parents and the beardless child P'd been.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 21.

Seventeen

Booth Tarkington's wife wrote you will have to write
his agent, and his agent wrote me soon,
all business and not overly polite—
Paramount owned the rights to *Seventeen*.
It couldn't, therefore, be a Century Film.
I thought a while, then tapped out in my room
a new scenario though much the same—
“Heart Trouble,” to be done in Kodachrome.
Only 8 millimeter, but the rushes proved
Marge prettier than Betty Field,
and I could pout as well as Jackie Cooper—:
and when that youthful vision is unreeled
it may not look as suave as Hollywood
but more than fifty years later still catches the mood.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 22.

The Happy Journey

In “The Happy Journey To Trenton and Camden”
I was the little brother. Edward Morgan Barry,
profiling his nose, said I looked too young
among the older boys whose chests were hairy
to play the boomvoiced parts I wanted to;
in our *Our Town* I’d also been a kid—
and once again he said I wouldn’t do
as anyone’s lover or Dad, and wasn’t I mad!—
wrote in my diary He’s a has-been ham,
decided to give up acting altogether—
but there I squirmed and cried, as Wilder’s brat,
on the long ride through pretended weather,
my last appearance in the footlights’ glow—
even though I almost stole the show.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 22.

Our Town on the Barge

I never was a boy who much liked fishing
but went along to the barge for Nancy's birthday—
blood and guts on the planks, the high sea swishing,
Mrs. Van Deusen, to while the boredom away,
reading *Our Town* aloud, my favorite play—
which helped my stomach some but not enough—
George and Emily among the spray
doing a scene of adolescent love
in Mrs. Van Deusen's voice while Nancy whished
and whished her pole again and I threw up.
O Nancy, Nancy, you weren't the girl I wished—
tender as Emily instead of one,
while I turned greener on the sickening sway,
baiting and baiting your hook, insisting we stay.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 23.

Is There Any Culture or Love of Beauty in Grover's Corners?

No culture in Grover's Corners or Santa Ana?
I went to pick up Nancy for a date
and there was Mr. Van Deusen drinking brandy
in a swell chair by his fireplace
among more glinting books than you could count—
on shelves and shelves—and he was reading one.
“Well, son, hello—come in and sit right down.”
Above the flames: a redskinned Remington.
“Are you a reader? I thought I'd just catch up—
Gone With The Wind. Its made quite a stir.”
I said “Oh yes, P'm joining the Book-of-the-Month.”
“That Scarlett O'Hara's quite a character—”
Then here comes Nancy and we're off to see
the Wizard or Ronald Reagan in Knute Rockne.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 23.

Zane Grey

"Zane Grey," my father said, "now there's a writer.
You write like him you'll be on easy street."
"Oh Dad," I said, thinking myself much brighter
and more elite than anyone like that,
"all he writes about is cows and stuff.
His characters are either black or white.
The good guys and the bad guys and their guns.
He's simpleminded, sentimental, trite."
"You write like him you might have a house
on Catalina, and a million bucks."
"Td rather write like Browning—or like Frost."
"Poetry won't buy you blue chip stocks."
And that night in my diary I wrote
No one understands me—dot dot dot.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 24.

Trash

My father said, “Those magazines are trash—”
Ranch Romances—about lurid love,
but I thought maybe I could earn some cash,
however young and ignorant I was,
writing tales of girls and virile men—
so rolled the paper in, and tapped away
and showed a few of them to Winnie Witton
who sat next to me in Psych 1A.
One heroine had honey-colored hair
dripping on her shoulders—Winnie laughed
and said “Why waste your talent trying there?
All you need to do is learn your craft
and you might write as well as—D. H. Lawrence.”
“And have to have my stories printed in Florence?”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 24.

“Trees”

Even though the Mayor on Arbor Day
pushed his foot down on a shining spade
and the whole jaycee band was there to play
and Miss Frost (who kept Freud in a locked case
read Kilmer’s “Trees” I wasn’t much impressed—
a tree with leafy arms lifted to pray,
its mouth against the earth’s sweet flowing breast?—
and besides which, it looked at God all day?
That tree must be some kind of contortionist.
The Mayor planted the elm and tamped the ground—
Miss Frost had finished Kilmer’s twisted list.
The band began to make a truer sound...
A fool all right—could Sigmund Freud explain
a tree with a bosom? On which snow has lain?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 25.

Sandburg

Maybe I'd never seen a painted woman
and gaslamps were passé and our farms ranches,
but L.A. too, was stormy, husky, brawling—
Sandburg gave us some poetic chances
to look at cities in a different way—
his, butchering hogs, mine, where Hollywood
could conjure up an Oz or make night day—
it sprawled with slums and lighted boulevard.
The difference was when visiting its neon
I didn't feel at home, burlesque and bums
hardly excited me to write a paean—
my pulse kept beating to iambic drums—
half naked at the beach I wasn't one
then, as yet, to put sweat in a poem.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 25.

Clement Wood's Complete Rhyming Dictionary and Poet's Craft Book

Wow! Every word I ever wanted to rhyme
except perhaps one or two like orange—
and I would learn from Emily in time
you could even slant that one with porridge—
not only rhymes, but metrical techniques
some of which I'd heard from old Miss Mingy—
“than in the breath that from my mistress recks”
pounded out as iambs sounding swingy.
And forms—those ancient French ones—sacre bleu!—
Petit the Poet's rattling dry pod seeds?
or sown and raked and watered to make new?
I try one, and my villanelle succeeds!
behung, betongue, bung, dung, Ung, wither-wrung—
si, Carlos, some rhyme's un-Amurrican.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 26.

Millayish

I almost felt I'd made love with Millay—
a fatal interview—and had to write
a yearning poem of my own to say
right there in the webbed Carnegie light
I knew the sensuous score, virgin or not.
Somewhere I would find someone like her—
my pencil almost steamed it got so hot—
if only my desire weren't words on paper!
What lips her lips had kissed and where and why
she had forgotten. I wrote hips and lips
under the librarian's rheumy eye
who stamped date due among the paperclips—
then went out throbbing into the evening town,
feeling another sonnet coming on.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 26.

Whitmanesque

When I read Whitman out on the backyard grass,
loafing, with an elbow staining green,
I felt a jolt—electric nakedness
of love and masculine power flashed through the scene—
a mockingbird kept trilling, thrilling me,
the alleyway led out to the open road,
sudden tightnesses were killing me—
I had to tear the button from my throat.
Beardless at school P'd sung freedom's song
but now like lanky Lincoln there I stretched,
a truthful youth first wondering at wrong—
brightness of Eden in the leaves I read.
while every house around was dark with fault.
If he still waited, I would go with Walt.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 27.

For Whom the Bell Tolls

The Book-of-the-Month Club sent me Hemingway's
For Whom the Bell Tolls—November 1940—
but I was in my Presbyterian phase
and didn't like the sordid gory story.
After reading it I washed my hands
with sweet Palmolive—sex might be OK
but not on wartorn grounds in foreign lands;
when it came to the truth, he wasn't Tolstoy.
And still he reeks of blood and a soapy scent
and still I don't admire his macho stance
blowing his own head off at the end
though on the jacket there he handsomely sat
typing in the light, mustached, intent,
a successful writer. I did admire that.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 27.

The Grapes of Wrath

When some paunch at a junior college banquet,
after the apple pie, got up and said
The Grapes of Wrath was nothing but a pamphlet
of Communist propaganda, I saw red—
I'd ridden that jalopy with the Joads
out of the dust bowl to the promised land,
been down those hopeless highways and those roads
to Okie camps if only in my mind—
and maybe I was young and middle-class
and hadn't suffered much injustice yet
but there were wrongs that I could recognize—
hearing that jowl of smugness I went hot
with wrath at all such art and people-haters,
pushed back my chair, ran out past the yawning waiters.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 28.

Of Mice and Men

Intending to enlarge my book collection
I bought a copy of *Of Mice and Men*,
and Uncle Peter, seeing my selection,
said that I would end up in the pen
reading such dirt. John Steinbeck was a red
or pink, at least, and also wrote of sex—
“Is that what college teaches you?” he said.
“The next thing you’ll be marrying a Mex.”
The afternoon I read it, nevertheless,
bees were busy in the apricot,
Curley’s wife, who’d lived right in Salinas,
talked in the barn with Lennie, and I thought
this is greatness. You can breathe the air.
And I’ll marry whomever I damn please, Uncle Peter.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 28.

“*Ars Poetica*”

It didn't have to mean but only be—
and dumb as old medallions to the thumb—
O Keats, O Edna, come and music me
now moonlight's in the apricot and plum.
The risen she goat, showing blue and red,
over the Main St. palms has climbed clear dusk.
It was all as Archibald had said.
It was as though of hemlock I had drunk—
and not a nightingale, a mockingbird
sang on and on and on as if in pain;
some poems didn't even need a word,
a poet hardly had to have a brain—
whatever nightmare prose The Times might scream,
I'd lean against the evening sill and dream.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 29.

O William Carlos

Anyone could have written it it seemed,
a few short lines and nothing like a sonnet—
somehow, though, that wheelbarrow gleamed
brilliant red with rainwater on it,
Aunt Nettie's mindless Leghorns white as snow
out at the ranch wobbling right beside it.
Was it a poem? We thought maybe so,
if not as William Wordsworth might define it.
Miss Judith Lovelace didn't feel too sure—
typically American—we heard—
afraid to sing but in its way quite pure,
laconically Yankee—not one soaring word.
How could we foresee the later trend?
O William Carlos, so much does depend.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 29.

Marianne Moore

Far in Brooklyn where I hadn't been
a poet wrote of poetry "I too
dislike it"—no one not American—
as Ezra Pound indited "make it new"
and William Carlos Williams "much depends"—
ever would have said a thing like that
instead of "the floating clouds their grace shall lend"
or tis not through envy of thy happy lot."
Who was this bold no-nonsense Marianne
who wrote of toads but not of nightingales?:
a Dodger's fan whose poems didn't scan.
Next thing you knew she wrote an ode to snails
or "elephants with their fog-colored skin"
or quote by quote evoked a pangolin.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 30.

The Art of Poetry

Like playing tennis without a net—well,
I thought maybe Robert Frost was right:
the art of poetry requires skill,
the thought might whiz across at any height
and—if words lack meter—who can tell
whether they are only prose or not?
I, too, liked sounds to be symmetrical
and even rhyme, like Mozart and like Bach,
but Whitman and the Bible? Marianne Moore?
What were they? Lawless? Or more free?
So much depended on the inner ear,
as in *The Rite of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky—
free verse or not, at least one thing seemed clear,
the game was won with lasting imagery.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 30.

Ogden Nash

I didn't think he was a real poet
but whenever I saw The New Yorker sneaked a peck.
His feet weren't Longfellows and didn't he know it?
Whatever. No one else was as unique.
Not to mention if nothing rhymed with rhinoceros
he made a word up. That sly Ogden Nash!
What a guy! Really quite prepocerus.
Shakespeares might beg but he raked in the cash.
One could do worse than be a singer of verses
funny as he. Jack Benny wasn't as comic.
One could stand on a streetcorner and watch the hearses
going by and still not cry though one was
doomed to die because one was anatomic.
And it isn't a pippin or a Delicious a day

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 31.

Vachel

He used to vagabond around the nation
and read his poems, Mrs. Northcross said;
trying for a widespread reputation
he traded bright and lively verse for bread.
At first, that is, and then his show caught on
and made him rich as his alliteration—
Booth led boldly with his big bass drum
and boomlay BOOM—created a sensation.
He'd throw his handsome head back and intone,
his dark eyes closed, while holding up one hand,
and there were even filmstars he outshone,
preaching The Gospel of Beauty to the land—
a story very much American.
At 52, he died by drinking poison.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 31.

Hart Crane

What a reverberant world of shimmering sounds,
musically marvelous lines, wonderful phrases—
between the pick-ups and the drinking rounds
and sinking, beaten, into sexual dazes,
Hart Crane heard, like Whitman, America singing
“My Old Kentucky Home” and “Casey Jones,”
“Some Sunny Day”—a roadgang, shoulders swinging,
pounding sledgehammers onto ringing stones.
He fled from Cleveland and the hated father
who cursed his fate—a poet for a son—
to New York City’s cold and heated bother
where Brooklyn Bridge’s lacy steel hummed—
had suffered enough at almost 33
and leaped from a boat into the wordless sea.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 32.

Dreiser

Bouncing beauties on his bony knee
what was it he had that drew those women to him?—
they gladly typed and edited—and whee!—
poor as he was, and ugly, theyd pursuc him,
help him with Jennie, clean up his horrible grammar
and, between paragraphs, let him cuddle and kiss;
he might have been sterile but he was a virile rammer
they liked to mother after he brought them to bliss.
Censored for being a sexual realist
he kept at it, both in his books and in bed,
and who says it doesn't pay to persist and persist?
Many considered him great before he was dead,
and litterateurs read whatever he wrote
however dirty they thought him in Terre Haute.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 32.

An American Tragedy

Maybe I wasn't much like Dreiser's Clyde
except as most young men desire women,
but as I read his lust my eyes went wide;
I sat on the Newport porch helplessly human—
girls with jiggling breasts went giggling past;
mightn't I make love to one of them
and when she swelled wouldn't I be aghast
and sink her like Ophelia in the slime.
No, never, even heated as I was
and still too shy to buy what they called rubbers).
I watched him murder her in vivid prose,
knowing that some I knew were backseat lovers—
not quite as tragic, trapped in my own woes—
O what a sea of troubles!—closed the covers.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 33.

“Paul’s Case”

I also wasn’t Paul in Cather’s “Paul’s Case”—
a youth perhaps with such artistic notions
and trying for development of taste
like others in the towns between the oceans.
Not quite so pale or quite so desperate
I wouldn’t ever, like that misfit kid,
steal someone’s cash and go off on a toot
to operas in New York the way he did.
Music—yes—it surged me on its sea
away from my Mojave day to day—
I put on Beethoven or Debussy,
wrote another poem, read a story—
about a grotesque quest for truth and beauty—
by Willa from the lone Nebraska prairie.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 33.

Willa Cather

Willa Cather might have had some flaws—
Mrs. Northcross said her plots broke down—
and you could bet, though mistress of each clause
and grammar's grande dame, she had never known
a man's hot body driving her to tears;
still, there was poetry in what she wrote—
white aprons of her vivid pioncers
glimmered in a dusk she could evoke.
Her characters, at best, were not fulfilled,
unless by their religion or by art—
that diva she imagined, how she trilled
believable arias in 'The Song of the Lark—
a missing blissfulness she had to create.
Isn't it usually that way with the great?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 34.

Winesburg, Ohio

Twisted were they, lonely and grotesque—
those people in a small American town?
I read about them at my boyish desk,
lit a Lucky up, my parents gone
to supper at the Presbyterian Church.
I turned the light out so the moon streamed in
and in the darkness felt my young heart lurch—
the smell of summer and the cricket din!
It wasn't Winesburg, not midwest or then,
but I was sighing for the way things were—
the book of strangenesses lay glimmering open.
A far off whistling train rushed others elsewhere—
toward brilliant cities, love and hope and learning,
while I sat groping there and yearning, yearning.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 34.

Spoon River Anthology

We were much more up to date than that—
Mixmasters, planes roaring over, Ford V8s—
not as quaint and twisted and old hat
as those dead people speaking from their graves—
Zenas Witt, Petit the Poet, Eugenia Todd—
our palmed Main St. wasn't their backwoods;
in every house around the wellkept block
an even pulsing of contented bloods—
or so I thought, but there would be a hint—
a screaming in the middle of the night,
in eyes of neighbors, a suggestive glint—
that deep beneath, some things were far from right,
that we too suffered from a darker taint
though all our modern surfaces shone bright.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 35.

Main Street

What a jerkwater place, no wonder Carol,
the dull doc's lively wife, felt terribly trapped—
our local Main Street wasn't quite so narrow
and ended at Newport where the wide sea slapped—
beanfields and orange groves instead of prairie;
if you got bored you only had to drive
to movicland not very far away
and look for stars at Hollywood and Vine.
Poor highbrow Carol yearned and yearned and yearned
for poetry among those earthsalt people
who thought the starry universes turned
around and around the cross on the Methodist steeple—
and how she would despair and sit and sigh
and curse the way things were. And didn't I?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 35.

Main-Travelled Roads

I have read much mid-American lit—
Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Carl Sandburg,
heard, out in the vastness, a single frog,
been down those lonely country roads at night
and stood like Ruth deep in fields of wheat—
I've listened to the long trains whistle and chug
but never did I know just how it was
till I heard Hamlin Garland, pure and sweet—
then I felt like a son of the Middle Border;
his homey, rich details took me there,
so vivid it was almost déjà vu—
his ear for speech true as a tape recorder—
I stared with the book in my hands, newly aware
of marvels such a realist can do.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 36.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

That girl, still in her twenties, wrote a book
of strange aloneness in a little town
more southern than mine; she had what it took
to get in Time, precociously well-known.
Wow! That was what I too wanted to do,
only eighteen and tapping chapter one,
but never met a Marxist or a mute.
Maybe she only made that oddness up.
My town seemed rather dull, to tell the truth;
everything happened elsewhere far away—
the relatives and neighbors of my youth,
the secret sufferers of everyday—
to see them as a universal myth
as sad as hers, would take maturity.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 36.

Winesburg by the Sea

How could I have realized it then?—
the semirural setting of my teens—
the gorgeous orange groves, the drowsing town,
and only miles away those green sea scenes
I still return to—was forever's place
like London's wild and Lewis's midwest—
you write about it vividly it stays—
the past, as Faulkner said's not even past.
Oh I like up-to-dateness well enough:
Nabokov's *Lolita*, Roth's *Complaint*,
and Oates' and Updike's cruel offcolor stuff—
I've read it all, and I am no pale saint
but there's a point of view—a different way
of seeing and of saying—not passé.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 37.

Frost

Once by the Pacific, dreaming his Atlantic—
his icy name seemed clear and winterfresh,
and though he wasn't overly romantic
he was the very poet of my wish.
A sycamore and not a maple leaf
zigzagged as I read "West Running Brook"—
miles from those lonely stonewalled farms of grief
there was a road like his I never took.
A Californian, Mrs. Northcross said,
born in San Francisco—could it be?—
maybe I would live where woods burn red
and learn to see and write New Englandly—
but never did—or had to go so far
for hate's great ice, for fires of desire.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 37.

E. D.

I heard a phrase or two Miss Lovelace quoted—
“the puppet bowing” “talked between the rooms”—
and “Amherst—19th century”—I noted,
but too intent on other American volumes
that spring semester didn’t check her out—
The Scarlet Letter, “I Hear America Singing”—
while she stayed shut away and patiently mute.
After “I could not stop—” the bell was ringing.
And so I kept rejoicing in my youth
and suffering because of it, and left
that sleepy, steepled town in the western south—
and then at I. House, desperate and depressed,
I found her book—in poem after poem
of urgent locked-in loneliness read my own.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 38.

The Portrait of a Lady

Well, I'd be literate no matter what,
and liked the naked runner with his torch
on The Modern Library edition, but
I read about some stuffy English Lord
and Isabel and Osmond and the rest
and picked my nose and tried not to be bored
and only to my diary confessed
where my true feelings frequently were poured
James might be good but he goes on and on.
Maybe he should have stayed In the U.S.
Not until much later did it dawn—
somewhere beneath that continental fuss
of words and manners there were bloods that beat.
Think twice and you could almost touch the heat.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 38.

Ethan Frome

At Chandler's Furniture waiting for the clerk—
Everything to Beautify the Home—
sofas and chairs and some with needlework—
I sat, however, deep in Ethan Frome.
My mother tried the cushions, spied beneath
at what the tags revealed, and undercloth
to see if davenports were of a piece.
“That one or this?” “Why not buy them both?”
Among new ottomans and woven smells
I flipped the gripping pages of the tale,
the human truth a master craftsman tells,
and Chandler's vivid furniture turned pale
in the bright light that irony had shed.
“This one,” I said, as if mere beauty mattered.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 39.

The Octopus

I took a train once—with my aunt and Mom,
to Pasadena to the Rose Parade—
but it was tame, not monstrous like the one
Frank Norris wrote of, hooting through the state.
We brought a lunch along—hard boiled eggs—
and I remember girls in bathing suits
waving from flowered floats and showing legs—
still I was blind and deaf to social truths
until I read *The Octopus* and then
I never heard a mournful faroff train
wailing at the steel-railed edge of town
without remembering that tale of grain
and, moving through it at an awful speed,
the sparking-wheeled juggernaut of greed.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 39.

Walden

Most of us weren't too desperate as yet
or doodling in our notebooks yet quite men—
or women—as we sat in American Lit
and listened to Miss Lovelace reading Walden—
quiet, though, as by a rippled pond,
we heard of how a nonconformist lived
while gazing at that transferred Fresno blonde
and wondering what test Miss L. would give).
It wasn't purity we dreamed we needed
but more bright lights and cars and bustle and hum—
no Thoreaus, in our green town we dreaded
any marching to a different drum,
but sated, sadder, seeing what has come of it,
pollutions later, some do dare clear thought.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 40.

Billy Budd

I didn't know anyone like Billy Budd,
"The Handsome Sailor," though my brawny brother
could probably climb masts as Billy could—
he was as mean as sin sometimes, however,
more like Claggart, used to sneer at me.
But Billy wasn't foreign altogether;
I had felt the hurt of jealousy
if not in an antique ship in windy weather—
and I expected people to be good
and went to church and would have brought back lambs
if any strayed, the way a Christian should—
and if at sea, among far storms and calms,
ignorant of evils I've learned since,
I'd have been martyred for my innocence.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 40.

Moby

Symbolic, I wrote, and read about the whale
and more than I wanted to know of whales' habits—
Ahab pegged the deck in a garrulous gale—
Lennie saying "Tell me about the rabbits"
in Steinbeck's sparer novel pleased me more.
I read and read the long Shakespearean tale.
Miss Lovelace said that this was literature—
not a character who wasn't male,
no Curley's wife seductive in a barn—
"I'm from Salinas—" nothing but that fish
and Ishmael's droning of the seasick yarn,
the captain mad, revenge his only wish.
Why all those words and none that mentioned love?
What was that spermy Dick symbolic of?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 41.

Sanctuary

Sanctuary never was assigned
or ever even mentioned in the course
and so it was a thing I had to find
the way I'd had to find what girls were for
quietly, on the sly—"a dirty book—
he does it with a corncob" John had said;
therefore I checked it out and took a look—
perversions unlike anything I'd read
but not quite mentioned—Faulkner made you guess—
his Popeye not the one in funnypapers
and Temple Drake among the grucsomeness
disintegrating—both of them social lepers—
so that's the kind of whoring that went on
far from the dreamstreets of our steepled town.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 41.

The Long Hot Summer

Faulkner had been hired by Hollywood
but few of us as yet knew who he was—
still no Nobel to tell us he was good;
years later they would fix *The Hamlet* up
and make a movie, though without a Snopes,
and, of course, no love affairs with cows.
Degrees might rise; we might have secret hopes
and some of us unbutton some girl's blouse
on Citrus Heights those nights of summer heat,
but that was life and when it came to art,
whatever we might dare parked in the dark,
for family viewing we would stay discreet,
suggest obscenity yet keep it clean
like Faulkner when adapted for the screen.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 42.

Jeffers

We skipped him, too, like most who still were living
and he on our own coast right at Carmel,
his rocks and hawks within a few hours' driving,
the tower he'd built beside the ebb and swell
of roaring surf too natural a design—
but some words drifted from anthologies;
we saw our perishing republic shine
in neon light when we went out to movies.
It wasn't his stark wilderness we wanted,
the round tan hills beyond the round tan hills
where there were foaming stallions to be mounted—
no, we were looking for more civil thrills,
sleeking our hair down, putting on our ties
and with curled girls speeding toward the cities.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 42.

The Day of the Locust

I never saw a Hollywood like that
with sleazy people under parching palms—
when I went up there no one sad was out;
I tried my feet in Gable's feet at Grauman's.
I might have thought I'd like to write a script
and maybe have it filmed by MGM
but couldn't write it with a pen I'd dipped
like sly Nathanael West's in burning venom.
Eastern authors must imagine things—
they hadn't been brought up in orange groves;
what was it they expected—angels' wings?—
so Lana Turner's sweater might show curves
but I knew if I met her there she'd be
like any nextdoor girl, smiling sweetly.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 43.

Miss Lonelyhearts

Obsessed with Christ—well maybe I was, too—
but who were they who wrote to Lonelyhearts?
not anyone I'd heard about or knew—
he seemed to be nailed up or struck with darts
grieving for cripples and for beaten ones—
he should have come to our church—well-dressed rows
to whom I passed the plate for green collections;
when moths corrupted we would give our clothes
to losers on the other side of town
and who knew if their peeling bungalows
where weedy gardens poked from harder ground
housed such despairs as in West's painful prose?—
the Christ our pastor preached of went around
laying his healing hands on none of those.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 43.

U.S.A.

What a panorama—all those headlines,
biographies and hardboiled narratives—
the wellheeled rich, the shoeless poor in breadlines—
I marveled as I read—it lives, it lives!
And some words in it you wouldn't believe,
as far as I knew printed only in Florence
and said by the lover of Lady Chatterley—
some kid had penciled in the blanks, of course—
c—r, c—t and s—t and p—s and f—k,
men who had b—Is knocking girls up—
so this was what the country really was
and what went on when Hector'd been a pup—
the war that saved us for democracy
a bloodbath, a political hypocrisy.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 44.

Native Son

Aunt Laura, who read books, too, wanted to know
some good novel I would recommend,
something really deep that she could borrow,
and being in my social phase by then
and dubious of liberty and justice
I said “Have you ever read *Native Son*?”
“Is it anything at all like Lloyd C. Douglas?”
“Well, Wright writes of wrongs that have been done.”
Poor Aunt Laura—watching while Bigger Thomas
axed off that girl’s head and madly shoved it
into a furnace—who had wanted dramas
of driven lovers slightly tinged with sin—
giving it back, however, minded her manners,
nicely smiled and loaned me her *White Banners*.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 44.

Martin Eden

Another Californian—one from Oakland—
and in Martin Eden telling how
some rough and tumble sailor could become
a famous writer with a higher brow.
His bourgeois girl reminded me of Jo
who when my deathless poems all came back
said “You could be a college prof, you know,
and write on the side”—as that girl said to Jack
before his book got published and acclaimed.
I, too, wouldn’t give up and wrote and wrote
and hoped I’d be as tousle-haired and famed—
Td never jump, like Martin, from a boat,
even if despairing as Hart Crane,
but more like Frost or Whitman bear the pain.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 45.

Long Day's Journey into Night

O'Neill kept writing that tragedy in Danville
while I was in jaycee green groves away—
his wife Carlotta said he descended to hell
and then came back for cocktails every day.
I had begun to read more deeply than once
and though my father was no has-been actor
and Mom not hooked on anything but sweets,
a kind of longing discontentment racked her;
she wished he'd finished senior high at least.
The anguished playwright kept remembering
while I discovered McTeague, *Our Town* and Keats;
by the time he finished the play it must have been spring
and Jo and I were out there by that stream
bedazzled in an equinoctial gleam.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 45.

Robert Nathan

Wasn't it Portrait of Jennie we were reading
that April day beside that gushing stream,
the water, as it rushed on, rainbow-beaded,
a scent of manzanita in the gleam—
didn't she read a while and then give me
the book and didn't I then read awhile?
and weren't we in a mood for fantasy,
or was there more of slyness in her smile?
What if we'd been reading something real?—
Sons and Lovers, Ulysses, The Tropic of Cancer,
some book that had a sensuous appeal,
and I had asked and yes had been her answer?
No, though, it was April forty-one
when we could still believe in Robert Nathan.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 46.

Daisy Miller

Daisy Miller, though—there was a girl.
She seemed almost to breathe, as real as Jo
who didn't wear a bustle or unfurl
a parasol as Daisy did in Rome.
Sometimes you wouldn't know just what she meant,
she said those things but acted otherwise—
a sly seductress or was her intent
only to be a friend? Evil or nice?
Among such naked statues as Bernini's
I also might have ogled, less naive,
though even down at Newport, roasting wienies,
hidden depths weren't too hard to believe,
especially before girls wore bikinis
and there could still be secrets up a sleeve.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 46.

“Annabel Lee”

We may have been two children by the sea
but in our teens we thought ourselves grown up.
What angels? None went envying her and me,
and though by night a wind might sometimes puff
out of the cloud, she only caught a cold
and I did, too, unbuttoned for some necking—
that kingdom wasn’t half as bad as Poe’s,
no more-than-loves, no lives completely wrecking.
She hasn’t any tomb or sepulchre,
at least I don’t believe she has as yet;
it’s several decades since I heard from her;
her hair is mostly grey by now I bet——
but even so, the memory can surprise—
reading Poe’s poem I still feel Jo’s bright cyes.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 47.

Two Years Before the Mast

Once there must have been a vacant coast
and someone not much older than I was
in whipping dungarces before the mast
doing what a tattooed seaman does—
the boat I went in with my gleaming friends
didn't creak and billow through the light
or dip down green and foam among the winds
though its one sail, triangular and bright,
did take the breeze that blueskyed afternoon
as we leaned young and laughing on the bay—
no Siren on the near shore wailed a tune,
there wasn't any danger in the day,
but still I tasted, swaying from that trip,
Odyssean salt, as if on Dana's lip.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 47.

“A Psalm of Life”

At Newport Beach when we knew everything
we walked along the shore reciting “Lives
of great men—” Flocks of gulls took wing—
a pelican was doing goofy dives;
white breakers broke and made a scalloped lace,
we left our footprints there but not for long—
ours were the indentations tides erase;
Longfellow’s sandy metaphor was wrong.
It sounded good, but like so many others
it never really was a treasure chart
of bright sublimity for shipwrecked brothers—
not even—we felt sure—the best of art.
But one good thing about “A Psalm of Life”—
you could sing its words to Beethoven’s Ninth.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 48.

Harmonium

After that raying day when we sat reading
within a budding orchard on the grass—
peignoir, mon oncle—tiger butterflies gliding—
nothing again was ever as it was.

She leaned toward me not toward the poetry
on that bright lawn before the little house,
lightly laughed and took the book from me.

“Oh come on, H, don’t be so serious!”

But I had heard, while trucks rumbled down Grand,
strange music from an old harmonium,
something that I had to understand—
saw Iceland poppy, pelargonium
differently blazing right in her front yard
and ways not hers of looking at a bird.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 48.

Under the Ginkgo

Under the ginkgo's shadowing and gleam
she told me she was choking with delight.
I'd given her a thing I called a poem,
cadenced alliterations with some rhyme.
"Oh, H, for me?"—that girl wasn't dumb—
she didn't fault my meter or my words
but took my hand right there among the hum
of noontime students and the trills of birds.
Cryptic critiques—P'd write about it later
recollecting in tranquility
how she only seemed to brightly flatter
my young and dubious ability,
then measuring my grasp against my reach
said, "Poetry's OK, but hadn't you better teach?"

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 49.

Tortilla Flat

Another book we read was Tortilla Flat—
she'd read a chapter and then I'd read one,
laughing in that oleander light
among the butterflies on her front lawn—
those funny characters—we thought we'd die—
that Steinbeck, what a writer—wasn't it greatness
making us guffaw then making us cry,
as we read on into the shadowy lateness.
Then went to see what Hollywood had done.
My God—how could they?—how could MGM?
Hedy Lamarr a sexy Mexican!
And Spencer Tracy wigged and painted tan!
“Well, that's the star system,” she said to me
sadly under the overbright marquee.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 49.

McTeague

"The intuitive feminine fear of the male," I said
quoting Frank Norris and she said that she
didn't want to hear such things. Instead,
took sugar down, got out a recipe
and started whipping up some chocolate fudge.
"The book's a masterpiece." "Well maybe so.
- I might be stupid and no one to judge
but there are things it's better not to know."
I clowned. I put my hands around her throat.
"You stop it, H." "Then say you'll read *McTeague*."
"Not if you keep bullying I won't."
And there we sat. The dark fudge tasted sweet.
"His liking Zola's why his vision's grim."
At least she knew Paul Muni had played him.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 50.

Elmer Gantry

Jo wasn't religious and so Elmer Gantry
made her giggle in our Bible Belt—
Aunt Nettie, flour-handed from the pantry,
bounding out to tease young love and yet—
“Hot dog! No chaperone!”—saved many times,
seemed the picture of such hypocrites
every day but Sunday still in slimes;
in fact, Jo rather sneered at all the Witts.
I too saw parallels, but didn't quite
believe that there was nothing to believe;
in spite of Elmer Gantry, I thought Christ
someone with a way of life to teach—
and lifted eyes to hills, and there above:
“the morning and the evening star of love.”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 50.

Fables for Our Time

I laughed and laughed at Fables for Our Time
and others laughed and so I thought they, too,
believed as I did: man was on a limb
and much ridiculous and all askew
with social values and the way things were.
I chortled at those wild cartoons: How true!
and so did Jo, until, our eyes ablur,
the mild librarian shrieked “Shhh, you two!”
But that was humor and it didn’t matter—
Thurber’s funny women, dogs and men
or Lewis Carroll’s Dormouse and his Hatter
however deeply clever didn’t mean
most people could see farther than their nose.
A rose was still a rose was still a rose.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 51.

O e.e.

O e.e. I only glimpsed you then
in Poetry: A Magazine of Verse
and didn't think a poem should be fun,
all cut up with parentheses and worse—
I wanted nightingales, though none sang there
in any orange tree or apricot.
Silly stuff, I said. I'll take Shakespeare
and shut away your wit and then forgot.
But when I heard you sing of that C.O.
one then myself, desperate in a camp,
I knew that there was more I had to know;
a lyric didn't have to be a trap
of graceful laciness from distant days—
i too tried poems of Now in lower case.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 51.

The Great Gatsby

I hadn't read it but saw Alan Ladd
play the Great Gatsby on the Broadway screen—
and Betty Field's Daisy sweet and sad,
the jazz age only history by then—
too bad F. Scott needed to drink a lot,
too bad about those crooks and bootleg gin;
few in my decent town were ever shot;
it was a different era we were in—
my mother once may have dressed like a flapper,
also my aunts; now, though, everyone knew,
from what we saw in the movies or read in the paper,
or twirling the dial, heard on the radio,
no one anymore shook a cocktail shaker
or said such things as twenty-three skidoo.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 52.

Saroyan

If someone born in Fresno wrote like that
so could anyone no matter where—
I twirled in another dazzling sheet
but nothing happened on it half as clever
as funny uncles in My Name Is Aram,
even though no funnier than mine—
maybe I should have been Armenian
and never even finished junior high.
Instead I wrote a poem and read and read
Keats and Wordsworth, Mark Twain—Ethan Frome—
the best of what was written by the dead—
but also now and then, William Saroyan,
to try to learn to write with vivid ease
like that “Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze.”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 52.

Wolfeian

Few read him now but many young men then
and I among them lugged his tomes around—
open the book, you heard a town-edge train,
the promised elsewhere of its mournful sound.
He rambled on, a lost American,
in chapters where one word would do as well—
from Greenwich Village lofts of love and pain
a homeward looking adolescent angel.
At slim eighteen I lolled in local sand
while waves slapslapped, and with him all the way,
behind me, as I read, the teeming land,
before me, swimmers in Japanward sea—
not long until, if not so Wolfeian,
I also never could go home again.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 53.

Prufrock

Evening had never been spread out before,
etherized or not, upon a table,
nor had the green sea in its curling roar
sung with those mermaids Eliot was able
to make us hear; few things ever again—
arms in lamplight, peaches at the beach—
could be as trivial as they had been;
he did such rarities with common speech
that Poe's pretentious raven flapped away
and Shelley's lark, the nightingale of Keats
forever after seemed somewhat passé—
irregular but still with iambic beats,
with rolled up trousers, hair parted behind,
his twentieth century Prufrock changed our mind.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 53.

Auden

What a picture—I could see it all—
Brueghel's Icarus—with Auden's eye:
true art, but more relaxed and casual
than Shelley's bleeding heart or Keats's sigh—
dogs that led doggy lives, a torturer's horse
scratching on a tree his innocent behind,
people going on with their boring chores
no matter what winged boy fell out of the sky—
and what a poct—most weren't so ironic—:
just when I had thought you had to write
poems with downdrawn mouths and no word comic
Auden put things in a different light—
the white legs of Icarus sliding into the sea
and nothing else suggesting tragedy.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 54.

Stephen Crane

“Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind—”
Mrs. Northcross called that irony,
something that could really bend your mind
around the way things were and make you see
they weren’t at all the way they seemed to be—
the man who kept pursuing the horizon,
the one who had no shoes and thought that he
suffered, until he met a footless man—
you could have your Browning and your Byron,
your Tennyson and Wordsworth but give me
someone who was more American,
eating his bitter heart out in a Mojave
and liking it because it was his heart.
I liked that better than less acid art.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 54.

Josephine Miles

What was this? Cornflakes in a poem?
And “neo-Spanish neatness of design”?
Not far from my surroundings there lived someone
who sometimes said my very turn of mind.
Later up at Berkeley I would see her
still young, already crippled, but with smiles
shuffling through the hallway light of Wheeler,
a poet after my heart, Josephine Miles.
Then, though, I had only checked her out
and read her early wryness with delight—
not a close and old acquaintance yet,
only a starry shining in my night,
who, if she had known me, would have said
“Change that last line,” or “Harold, it’s all right.”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 55.

Sara Teasdale

Let it be forgotten, Sara said—
and Mrs. Northcross gave us mimeos
in jaycee May where jacarandas spread
light outside—forgotten as the snows.
Forgotten as the poetess who'd died
and few had ever bothered to admire—
forgotten as a flower, Sara sighed,
forgotten, she lamented, as a fire.
And Mrs. Northcross never mentioned how
forgettable Sara turned tub water on
and slipped down in and drowsed until she drowned—
so many write and write and die forgotten—
and she died old and blind—but I have yet
that memorable poem she gave, and don't forget.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 55.

Gertrude Stein

Someone from Oakland where there was no there
who had moved to Paris where it was?
and knew Picasso when he had more hair
and Ernest Hemingway and all of those?—
also, Gertrude Stein looked rather fat,
more like a prison matron than a poet.
I guessed if she could write, and look like that
a beautiful mind didn't have to show it
in physical proportion or in face—
you needn't stand as grand as Hercules
and you could come from any Podunk place
and still make sonnets that were good as Keats'
or dream up lines that had an odd pizazz
like "Pigeons in the grass, alas, alas."

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 56.

The Ox-Bow Incident

“In God We Trust” it said on every coin,
which I believed, and sang hymn after hymn;
there wasn’t any mob that I would join
though cheered a little for the jaycee team
so if it came to choosing what to do,
kill or be killed, or if outnumbered, hang,
you’d see me either beaten black and blue
or strung up on a branch by some mad gang—
the West, by my time wasn’t quite so wild
or so I thought, but why then was I nervous?
To every male who’d lately been a child
there came that notice from Selective Service—
the nation still a land without a law
except the early one, of tooth and claw.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 56.

The Red Badge of Courage

Grandpa told me of the Civil War—
those gruesome maggots writhing in his wound—
and so I felt I'd seen it all before:
shot comrades screaming on the bloody ground.
But there I was, a boy about my age
addled in battle, not knowing what to do—
could that red badge really be one of courage?
Grandpa said it made no man of you,
that all war was was horror, pain and waste
and he advised me: "Don't you ever go.
I lost a lung and that can't be replaced."
And Stephen Crane, Miss Lovelace let us know,
never saw Cold Harbor or Bull Run—
which was when I chose imagination.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 57.

The Sun Also Rises

He never said exactly what was hurt
but I got the impression that he couldn't do it—
injured somehow, otherwise alert,
a eunuch maybe, or the next thing to it—
which is what war did—and Lady Brett
loving him like that, in Paris, too—
city of light I hadn't seen as yet.
There were so many places I must go.
They went to Spain. I thought between the lines
while bulls were fought—no no No No NO!
warm teenage blood kept moving through my veins—
no tossed grenade would cut me off below—
but in the lit-up Capitol old men
were plotting toward my maiming even then.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 57.

“Patterns”

Mrs. Northcross said “She smoked cigars—”
Poets of course had to be eccentric
young Shelley setting demon fires in graveyards
and Amy Lowell wasn’t even metric—
also obese—some kind of gland disease
Keats with TB, Pope almost a dwarf
they all seemed either overwrought or freaks.
Christ O Christ—what were patterns for?
And that one poem all we ever read
by eyeglassed Amy puffing at her chore,
who conjured up a lady in brocade
grieving for a loved one killed in war—
fat or thin, cheerleader or sonneteer,
a pattern with which we soon would be familiar.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 58.

Talent

Where's Robert Campbell and where's Samae McCorkell
who both could write a poem better than I?—
suave suburbanites who sometimes snorkel,
older but handsomely tan in blue Hawaii?
Whatever or wherever, neither's biting
an anguished pencil, bending to a page—
at least, it isn't stanzas they are writing,
who used to weigh their words and rhyme their rage.
Desert Miltons, were they, wasting sweetness?
I still remember lively lines of theirs.
Didn't they belong to that eliteness
with Hart Crane, Sara Teasdale, Poe and others?
Well maybe no—talent isn't enough.
Also you might have to give your life.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 58.

Sonnets

"I love your sonnets," Mrs. Northcross said.
"Keep writing and who knows how far you'll go.
Of all the bright young students I have had
there's only one who's writing poems now."
Blake's Canterbury pilgrims hanging above her,
Keats's deathmask in a silver frame,
she sat there sad, a kindly wonderful mother
whose children should have thrilled her with their fame.
"I also gave it up," she softly mentioned—
the sun streamed in and lit the tiers of books.
"There are so many who are good intentioned
and quit like me or die like Rupert Brooke."
"I won't do either one," I stubbornly told her
and turned blindly into the light, clutching my folder.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 59.

“The Lady or the Tiger”

That’s the way my life, too, had become—
a vast arena and it had two doors—
I heard the watching world intently hum;
behind one door a dazzling girl, of course,
a hungry tiger snarling behind the other
and there I was, having to make a choice.
She’d told me, as she’d been told by her mother,
which one to open not to feel the jaws—
become a G.I. and she’d marry me
some day, anyway—if I wouldn’t fight,
for all she cared the beast could carry me
off to a corner and chew out my gut—
but I knew better—she and the tiger both
were crouched behind the door I never chose.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 59.

“*Rappaccini’s Daughter*”

Not Rappaccini’s, but a rancher’s daughter—
if her outlook had been slowly poisoned
it was more from what her mother taught her,
where orange trees, not belladonna blossomed,
than from any taint her father planted—
what he thought of me he never said—
but little by little she took it for granted
a pacifist was someone not to wed.
She wasn’t above, however, wild desire,
more than once exposed those lethal breasts
and made me feel my blood was catching fire
but wouldn’t do a thing to quench my zests—
though oh, if such wrongs had an antidote
we might be kissing paradisal yet.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 60.

“Self-Reliance”

Wasn't I being foolishly consistent,
hating violence the way I did
and when they poked and probed me still insistent—
nothing but a skinny naked kid—
I wouldn't go no matter what they said.
“Coward” “unAmerican” “you're wrong”
“cough” “spread out”—an angry finger lingered—
“Prison's where you damn C.O.'s belong.”
Maybe so. But who would be a man
must be a nonconformist, I had read,
and I believed in Christ and Emerson.
If I should die I'd rather not have died
defending little minds with a patriot gun—
which is what they were relying on.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 60.

Modern American Poetry

Mostly I'd become too grandiose
majoring in English at U.C.
for anything but urns and westwind odes,
but bought a book of modern poetry,
and one night read it in my I. House room
when amber bridgelights arced across the dark—
H. D. and Ezra Pound and John Crowe Ransom—
something deep inside me started to spark.
That night in a dream I saw a tree
bright pink blossomed but on further view
the brilliant blooms were birds that flew away
filling the sky with music—then I knew
poetry hadn't ended with Keats and Shelley
though the English Dept. did think that was true.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 61.

Storm

A U.C. professor who'd written a notable novel?
Imagine that. Who'd have thought one could?
when what they taught there was what's new is drivel—
nothing by anyone living could be any good.
George R. Stewart, though, came to talk at I. House
and I descended from my ivory tower
to hear him tell us how, in spite of that bias,
someone not yet dead could write with power.
His central character a driving storm,
he'd had to study meteorology,
chart winds and rains to give the book its form,
not too much different from Greek tragedy—
as, on the hill behind us, the Cyclotron—
destroyer and preserver—split the atom.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 61.

After Macbeth

Still, though, after studying Macbeth
up in my room at I. House I would write
a sighing sonnet about Life and Death
or wake up in the middle of the night,
and look out into the twinkling bridge-arc'd dark
and think and think—No, I won't go to war—
and try to turn my longing into art,
or, between German verbs, my mind would soar.
Don Gard liked my poems—and one time
after I'd been conscripted, came to my room
and read me Whitman in a voice of pain—
sonorous cadenced language without rhyme;
our eyes went wet above the Berkeley hum—
One's-self I sing, a simple, separate person...

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 62.

Past Mono Lake

Had my life ended? No, not quite—
I was bussed up into the high Sierra
past Mono Lake in early morning light,
and I'd brought books to mitigate the terror
Whitman—Dostoievski—Shelley—James,
William and Henry, also brought a journal
in which I'd write about those C.O. times—
heavenly some of them and some of them infernal—
at Coleville, Reno and Galena Creek.
O aisles of pine, O stream of my delight
where I roamed naked under the mountainpeak
and went out lonesome into the windy night
almost worshipping on that abyss:
Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is...

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 62.

Wake Up and Live!

The title itself jolted through my daze
week after week half-doing in those woods,
slants of light in which I'd drowse and laze
and droop and mope in discontented moods—
then saw the paperback one day on leave!
in Reno—when a quarter was the price—
Why not buy it? Maybe I'd achieve
even in camp the outlook of the wise.
And read and read—instead of books more grand—
Emerson or Freud or William James—
this vividness by Dorothea Brande
and tried her self-help analytic games—
and whether it was that or just maturing,
swooning to death seemed less and less alluring.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 63.

At Washoe County Library

And there I was at Washoe County Library
taking a one day liberty from camp,
reading this and that and writing away—
snowflakes twirling out in the treelaced damp.
The aisles of pinewood open now I penned.
Something had happened. I'd become a poet,
which wasn't anything I'd really planned—
in gothic arches to the moon I wrote.
Oh—oh—and I would wander there with you
while quivering splinters white with frost hang down—
I couldn't stop that imagery of snow.
I finished it and wandered through the town
of neon coming on that cold midwar.
A few more lines like those—and I would soar.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 63.

Ted Malone

Sometimes those Galena afternoons
before Jack Armstrong, there'd be Ted Malone
reading three-named ladies' Junes and moons,
but he'd slip in some poems of flesh and bone—
a "Tiger, Tiger" or a Dickinson
and I would lean there after my kitchen duty,
the carrots shredded and the dishes done,
a young C.O. with an ear attuned to beauty.
O Ted Malone, out of that radio
your various and vibrant voice would float
evoking images that transformed sorrow—
in winter I would bundle into my coat
after your program and go prance in snow,
in summer frisk through lupine like a colt.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 64.

Waldo

I see that in my Emerson I've starred
To be great is to be misunderstood—
well, there I was, a man of disregard
who had a kind of island attitude.
I thought I knew whose woods I wandered through
when I went out to ponder and to brood,
a scorned C.O. a would-be poet who
took the road that led to solitude—
much the same in old New England when
few but Emerson read Whitman's book
and even among pacifists were men
who wouldn't give a poem a second look—
nevertheless, I sat up reading late:
Insist on yourself; never imitate.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 64.

She'd Rather Read the Funnies

When I was reading *The Brothers Karamazov*
in those dark woods, Jo hadn't given me up.
OK, so it was kind of heavy stuff
and what wild Russian names!—but all for love
she kept at it, wrote me that she did,
however much she'd rather read the funnies
or some American writer not so dead—
simplicity, she said, could be more stunning.
And by the time she visited the camp
she had decided against Dostoevski
and me—a dreamy pacifistic chump
as ineffectual as Alyosha, maybe.
So she read *Time* on how the world went
and I went on to *Crime and Punishment*.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 65.

The Turn of the Screw

I'd decided I had to read everything—
there wasn't any other escape from camp;
so after Raskolnikov got what was coming
I sat up late beneath the tincan lamp
reading Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*.
I had dipped deep by then in Sigmund Freud
and saw the sexual aspects of those two,
Flora and Miles, whom the ghosts annoyed.
Wasn't the governess rather overwarm
with thwarted passion, which might be why she
could see an evil thought in human form?
And that's the way it sometimes seemed to me—
a few more screwings, real or imagined,
and I might end up like that haunted kid.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 65.

The Education of Henry Adams

was one book I took out into the woods
and lolled and read in mountain light and shadows,
pondering on evils and on goods—
Why was I there? Why was there a war?
I couldn't concentrate, my hormones screamed—
twenty-one and no girl to adore;
a chipmunk streaked, the quick creek water gleamed.
Quaint as Henry Adams might have been—
and hotly nude and modern as I was,
believer in Freud and skeptical of sin—
he, too, had felt this crazy edginess,
the revelation of a real test
his Harvard or my U.C. hadn't guessed.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 66.

Microbe Hunters

Among the stirring paperbacks I bought
one was called Microbe Hunters—Paul de Kruif—
reading it by the rushing creek I thought
I might enjoy the scientific life,
improve a microscope like Leewenhock,
discover harming germs as Lister did—
I lay there naked poring through the book.
Oh there were many bugs I had to rid
the ailing world of; fearless as Pasteur
I'd boil the milk; chewed boys would not get rabies,
and also somehow I'd find such a cure
as Ehrlich had—no more disabled babies—
but “When in disgrace—” singing in my head,
I wrote another fourteen lines instead.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 66.

Varieties of Religious Experience

I took my book and wandered in the woods
and sunned on lichen rock below Mt. Rose.]
I read and wrote, and in those heightened moods
God—or whatever it might have been—seemed close.
Lupine bloomed, and Indian paintbrush, too—¥
was I a mystic?—or from Santa Ana?—
James's book I never did get through hi
and only many years later, Santayana.
Beauty—wasn't it?—I most believed in?—
those granite boulders in transcendent light—Hi,
it certainly wasn't sin P'd been conceived in;
round-stoned Galena Creek kept bubbling bright—ai,
there still was music, too; I had my player
and put on Brahms and Beethoven, like prayer.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 67.

Little Magazines

ie Bh

Dark clouds of wartime couldn't stop that light—
a sad objector at Galena Creek
who had said no I won't, and didn't fight, Ti
among the dreamers and the not so meck,
I chanced to learn of little magazines—
Accent, Kaleidograph, one called Approach—
even in backwoods there might be beams
from distant writers' minds, and rays of hope.
I had a list of them and sent in poems
and what was this?—an editor in Reno
answered that she liked the way I wrote—
there, too, amid the neon and the Keno i y
where you would think no inkling could shine through—

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 67.

Language in Action

Somewhere out there kamikazes dove,
but I was reading S. I. Hayakawa
was he in Manzanar just down the road?
and shouldn't I try satyagraha,
not pour more coal in a C.O. stove?
I stood and waited underneath the pines
and wanted most of all a woman's love
and read and read and wrote a few good lines.
He said—a failure to communicate—
something was rotten, not in Denmark only;
the world seemed nothing but a place of hate.
I sat up late, uncomforted and lonely,
and tried and tried—while irate nations warred—
stirred by the tears of things, to find the word.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 68.

Someone Though

Someone though, Blue Moon or Kapustkan—
then Irene Bruce at Destinies in Reno,
believed my poems—as the war bombed on
and I cooked for the C.O.'s at Galena—
worth printing in their tiny magazines.
I kept on writing by the bubbling creek,
a poet budding in Sierra scenes
of windy pine and hawk and snowtipped peak.
There always were—and will be—some dissenters,
lone ones who say yes, yes, beauty matters—
Dickinson and Keats and Frost their mentors
the so-called world leaders mad as Hatters)—
as Karl Shapiro says: “Their conscience is
what we come back to in the armistice.”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 68.

Joanne de Longchamps

Also, I met in Reno, Joanne de Longchamps—
“to one my breasts were lilies of delight”
she’d written in a sonnet and I thought
how beautiful she is and she can write.
O leave your husband, be my vineleafed love,
but no, she’d never do a thing like that—
both of us were only twenty-one;
when I came into town we’d smoke and chat,
and we wrote letters, sent new poems, too,
and she would flatter me with perfumed praise—
“Kenneth Patchen’s not as good as you,”
a friend who lasted long past camptime days—
and there we are, whatever time can do,
together in a few anthologies.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 69.

The City of Trembling Leaves

Clark's *City of Trembling Leaves* was my town, too—
I also strolled beneath those foliages
toward a rose and violet mountain view
and later toward a clandestine caress,
picnicked at Pyramid Lake and swam its blue
and what else done there I will not confess
(that night my backside had a redder hue)—
the need to write it wasn't only his.
That marvelous artist whom he wrote about,
his childhood and his almost lifetime friend—
I met once—in a Virginia City house
where paintings glowed—and shook his suntanned hand,
and through high windows saw a light like that
in *The Ox-Bow Incident* and *The Track of the Cat*.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 69.

Interim

Someone at the Reno Workshop read—
probably Joanne—a marvelous poem,
in a low, vibrant voice, tilting her head,
from a magazine called *Interim*:
“The Foetus,” I recall—Wendell B. Anderson.

It was like an x-ray, glowing bones,
and veins that flowed with blood under the skin—
I’d never heard such vivid verbs and nouns,
only lately realized I’d floated
nine slow months in amniotic dark,
a person growing while my mother bloated,
before that, if it wasn’t quite the stork
that brought me, I felt more like Shelley—
diaphanous-winged and never in a belly.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 70.

“*The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner*”

That one small poem certainly made it big.
You couldn't quite forget the imagery—
the guy hunched up inside the womblike thing
zooming among the winging enemy
and black flak flying, zinging streaks of light—
something they didn't show on the wartime screen
when only Japs and Nazis ever died
and all of them were snarlingly obscene.
Randall Jarrell had seen it as it was:
the short kid in the turret wet with fear,
a foetus upside down in Plexiglas,
the fatal nightmare aircraft screaming near—
and wrote the punch line, in the gunner's voice:
“they washed me out of the turret with a hose.”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 70.

Arrowsmith

Passé they say about so many things—
novels by Lewis, movies in black and white, i,
simplistic love against the bombs of might,
God in his heaven among angel wings
and other wide-eyed childish visionings;
sometimes, entranced in camp, in candlelight,
I stayed up reading Arrowsmith at night
and wouldn't have changed my slavish state with kings;
how stirred I felt by such unselfishness—
more than when Ronald Colman played the part
and Helen Hayes so tragically died—
brash young pacifist, could I do less
than dedicate my life to an ailing art
like Arrowsmith to science? So I did.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 71.

An Early Sequence

An early sequence was to dear Dolores—
I made her up from all too human stuff—
my Dante-esque Beatrice, my far Laura
who, when near, had prosy faults enough.
But sung in sonnets from my wartime forest It
she seemed the very light of poetry,
a warming brightness when pine scenes were hoarest—
I even thought that she might marry me.
You have, she wrote, too much imagination,
and that was true—I fashioned a de Milo
out of my yearning and my young elation,
but was I being realistic?—no—
which is one wonder poetry can do:
if things don't look so good, improve the view.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 71.

The Waldport Poems

“The man struck from the woman—/That is the crime.”
I couldn’t have agreed more with Everson.
There I was in camp far miles from home,
with mountain boots, thick shirt and Levis on,
and there Jo was writing me the news
of deprivation in our wartime town
and almost blaming me for Hitler’s troops—
shooting soldier classmates we had known.
On one address my middle name was V
“Not for Victory”—I lay there prone
reading her patriot contempt for me—
“more and more I’m turning into stone”—
while Everson at Waldport felt it all:
the felony of war, the heartleap at mail call.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 72.

William Stafford

Desperate, I heard a later name—
William Stafford—elsewhere in the pines.
A whitehaired old professor, visiting,
handed out a carbon of some lines
that haunt me still—“My brother and I...
In this glittering chromium time/ In the saddest war.”
I walked outside under a star-close sky
where new snow bent the boughs in mountain air
and thought of him and wanted to know more.
I couldn’t write like that, only admire.
Then went back through the narrow barracks door
after lights out, sat tense near candlefire—
“Oh God, my God—what is it all for?”
and wrote another poem of desire.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 72.

Emily Dickinson at Coleville

We never know how high we are, I said
in Coleville's night—till we are called to rise.
I couldn't sleep. I'd left my barrack bed
and gone out under star-pulsating skies.
My stature tried to touch them as I sat;
the bluish snowy mountains glimmered and gleamed.
I didn't even light a cigarette.
I could be true to plan, it almost seemed.
I sighed. I hardly feared to be a king—
not much chance of that, but in that air
heroism was a daily thing,
or would be, Emily said—and did I dare?
I sat there quoting her on a rocky slope,
hoping my heightened cubits wouldn't warp.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 73.

Susan Glaspell's The Verge at Coleville

When Morgan read *The Verge* in C.O. camp
I leaned entranced, his voice each character,
his faces changing under the tincan lamp.
What was her name? I can't even remember—
the one who was urging "Try it without salt!";
the play's no longer played but as he read it
lighting up our every grievous fault—!
a line became a ray, the way he said it, Wi
searching inside, the mountains all around us
heights of excellence we had to reach—ti
he would make us laugh and then astound us
with how much we must learn and he could teach, HK
and I see yet the face of what might be—i]
"Do they still sing 'Nearer my God to Thee'?"

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 73.

“Grass”

Pile the bodies high, Carl Sandburg wrote—
and they were piling even as I read,
not at Austerlitz or Waterloo,
at Stalingrad and Normandy instead.
The grass had covered them at Gettysburg
and they’d been shoveled under at Verdun.
What could I do? Didn’t I have my nerve?
Bodies were being flyblown in the sun
and there I sat, the evening coming on
at Coleville in a camp of pacifists,
instead of being killed, reading that poem.
I must have been on Edgar Hoover’s lists—
and maybe Carl Sandburg also was,
writing like that about what warfare docs.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 74.

Island Attitude

There was a man who asked me for some poems
to learn to print with, he, too, a C.O.—
released from camp, as some were who'd had breakdowns.
“...a little book, of ten pages or so...”

I sent him ones I'd written in the snow
and summer heat, glad at Galena Creek
and others in the Coleville dark and glow
among green piñons near a mountainpeak
under a pseudonym, why I still don't know
(in those days I appeared as Christopher Bloom).
“Blue for the cover?” “Oh yes—blue as Tahoe”
and there the chapbook came like joy, like doom—
whether in tears or broken up with laughter,
nothing but a poet ever after.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 74.

Aria da Capo

Make Bright the Arrows—wasn't that the title?—
and didn't Millay, like many, once for peace,
urge the U.S.A. to gory battle?—
save Lidice, save Paris, Oh save Greece!
What was this, though? Aria da Capo?—
a play as anti-war as you could get.
Morgan had us do it in the chapel
in C.O. camp, and I can hear us yet
and see us—John and Bea and Paul and me—
“I cannot live without a macaroon!”
Bea mentioned with a superficial sigh—
and those two shepherds, I as Corydon,—
on either side of an imagined line,
fooled to death, as many men were then.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 75.

Henry Miller

His name meant sex and therefore too tabu
except for *Circle*, though much tamer there
than in the books where all he did was screw—
published abroad and not for sale here
except under the counter and I never
knew where such illicit counters were—
he might have been quite brilliant and quite clever
and didn't he live on a cliff at the Big Sur?
I'd like to, too, and be as free as he
if not as bald; what titles he thought up—
The Tropic of Cancer, *The Colossus of Maroussi*—
I dared some scenes and was apprised of what?
by a correspondence course in writing fiction?:
the U.S. frowns on sexual depiction.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 75.

Rexroth

A poet and a pacifist—like me?—
why not where I was then, fighting fires
or planting in the wild, a further tree?
or stringing, up at Heenan Lake, barbed wires?
I didn't know, but I did like his book,
not too outré, the poems musical,
then after that first early camptime look
almost forgot his poetry until
imagine—there I was, in San Francisco
a few years later on a stage with him—
by when we both were other people, though—
he in a redlined cape at that museum,
and top hat, too—his European phase—
and I not quite so easy to amaze.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 76.

Muriel Rukeyser

Her “Effort at Speech Between Two People”
moved me much—I’d bought Theory of Flight:
“I am unhappy. I am lonely. Speak to me...”
Yes, I thought, I knew what she meant.
Though Muriel Rukeyser seemed right up to date—
airplanes, subways, red, successful neon—
I felt a wonder she kept leaving out—
her way of saying wasn’t my way of seeing.
War and Kodak, mons veneris, brain—
not very much omitted from her lines
except my kind of sad romantic pain,
the stained glass hues in butterfly designs.
And when I met her briefly later, yes
between us in person there was that abyss.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 76.

Lines

There are some lines imprinted in my brain
from an old wartime book by e. e. cummings—
I read it naked in the sun and when
the flickering barracks stove made windy hummings—
land above all of just add hot water and serve,
and—hips pumping pleasure into hips—
those and others had such comic verve
that as I read them they upturned my lips.
Sad as I felt sometimes, or desperate—
when e. e. sang of Olaf glad and big
I stopped beweeeping my own outcast state,
lifted awful coffee, lit a cig,
or loafing on my belly in the sage,
turned to the next inimitable page.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 77.

It Can't Happen Here

I wasn't sure it hadn't already happened—
reading Lewis on a cot in camp—
day after day, night after night that maddened—
and F.D.R. coming on to rant—
every movie only propaganda,
every paper with a bloodlust slant.
I lay back thinking Oh no! I can't stand it!,
received a pamphlet from my Christian aunt
which proved that Jesus came to bring a sword.
I pasted on another 3¢ stamp,
sending Jo my pacifistic word;
from where she sat, safe on an orange ranch,
she wrote back her red and white and blue
bandwagon letters—while the death toll grew.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 77.

Shapiro

The first time I saw “penis” in a poem
and the word “nigger” too—who was this Jew?—
was on an Inland Stages Bus toward home,
the sky above the mountains cobalt blue,
V-Letter in my lap, by Karl Shapiro,
a man who knew the wrongs a war can do,
that all the killing only adds to zero,
that love is best: deep truths I also knew.
How long could chaos last, I a C.O.
and he unwillingly in uniform?—
I thought as I descended from the snow
there are more ways than one to nonconform—
O Random House, I wonder if you know
the antithetic passion in the form.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 78.

The Memoirs of a Shy Pornographer

got passed around in camp, and Patchen's poems—
a pacifist, all right, why wasn't he there
not marching, as we weren't, to any drums?—
4-F probably, whom New Directions
published in spite of paper scarcities.
We bitched, fought lightning fires and had erections
dreaming of women—who were rarities.
In that milieu, I too seemed surreal
and sometimes tried to write in his wild style
but even so I seldom failed to feel
iambic while I went the second mile—
some of his lines, though, still can make me smile—
like “Can't you keep your big wings out of the aisle?”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 78.

Dorothy Parker

After they'd cut and sewn me and I lay
propped on pillows, sipping 7-Up,
Jo came to visit, less from love than duty;
by then she knew what pacifism was
and how I wouldn't die, except for beauty.
She almost sneered; she handed me a book,
crinkling her freckled nose and saying cutely
"This should make you better. Lots of luck."
And left me there among the hopeless cases
with Dorothy Parker's Viking Portable—
"Men seldom make passes/ At girls who wear glasses—"
She must have known that that would make me chortle—
which pulled my side; my stitches gave a shriek.
Some gifts of humor have a cruel streak.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 79.

Anais Nin

Anais Nin hadn't yet published her Diary.
I read of her in Circle magazine
and stories that I didn't like entirely.!
I liked real people saying what they mean.
Though when an older camper, Frank Triest,
knowing I wrote and wanting to help me out,
lent me *Under a Glass Bell* I was impressed—
I tried my best to be surreal as that. MH
No, however—her way wasn't my way
and neither was an artificial prose
with tinkling symbols really her metier—
twenty or so years later she would disclose
pictures so face to face and done with love
you knew what even the flies were thinking of.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 79.

The New Yorker

Evenings when it seemed the world's end—
a curve of starjewels blinking over camp—
depressed and darkly thinking, I would wend
up to the library, turn on a lamp
and take an old New Yorker from the pile.;
I'd sit there exiled from the way things went,
looking at cartoons that made me smile;
and sometimes lean beguiled and intent
reading an early poem by Howard Moss,
“Talk of the Town,” or an O'Hara story—
and then I'd feel the everlasting force
of le mot juste, the power and the glory
I knew I too might finally attain—7
went out not quite so handled with a chain.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 80.

Babbitt

At one of my life's nadirs, in Lapine—
peacetime then, and I not yet released—
out in the forest with disgruntled men,
I read *Babbitt*—and the satire pleased.
Chopping wood to keep warm to chop wood,
I laughed with Lewis at the philistines;
I, too, would not accept the bad as good,
a C.O. victim of the war machines.
That new bomb hadn't ended anything;
more Babbitts fattened as more walls went up;
jolting campward in the truck we sang
We won't be safe till everybody's dead—
but I kept reading and I had to smile,
sad as I was, going the second mile.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 80.

The White Tower

My mother thought—my last days at Lapine
under ponderosas in the cold—
I needed something to divert my mind,
and sent a book, knowing I liked to read—
The White Tower by James Ramsay Ullman.
So when I'd finished Babbitt, still confined,
after writing a letter to President Truman,
I read those pages and it seemed I climbed
up rocks in snowy weathers, higher and higher.
I still believed just what I had believed
when first I'd been shut in behind barbed wire—
while there were many wrongs that I perceived,
I seemed to see expanses few saw then,
silent on a peak—was it in Darien?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 81.

Mildred Pierce

A movie in Bend! Joan Crawford as Mildred Pierce.
I'd only vaguely heard of James M. Cain,
but there I sat, bearded and looking fierce,
watching rags to riches on the screen.
Years later I would read the lucid book
thinking of that postwar afternoon—
C.O.'s with a seedy, punished look
at that grim matinee in Oregon,
and what the movies meant—not just escape
but sometimes glimpses of a tragedy,
wild mother love right down from the ape,
an Oedipal to be or not to be;
back toward camp, thinking of those dire scenes
I saw one fellow man telling his beads.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 81.

Jessamyn West in Yellowstone

The “good” war over, with a C.O. friend
I toured the U.S. in a thirties Chevy,
swam roadside rivers, camped out on the land;
we traveled light, though some of our thoughts were heavy
and I took every book I owned along.
We read aloud, and read a story once
in Coleman lantern light in Yellowstone—
the first I’d ever seen of Jessamyn’s;
besides the way she wrote, I liked her name
as well as what she wrote about the Quakers;
I told Don I’d never be the same.
Perhaps she wasn’t one of the big world shakers
but at her best no one could write better.
I named a daughter Jessamyn years later.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 82.

To a God Unknown

Things weren't so explicit in those days
but didn't the guy in 'To a God Unknown,
if you could see him through the turns of phrase,
thinking about Nature, get a hard on?
I too had had my mountain mystic phase,
and wasn't over it yet at Yellowstone
traveling with Don. How scenery could amaze!
We read aloud those nights and weren't alone.
O Steinbeck—you gazed deep into my feelings—
in that high air I merged with rocks and trees—
Virgin and Child and Wise Men at their kneelings
weren't more religious than those ecstasies—
ideas of Oneness stirring my ardent blood,
there I was, far out on the open road.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 82.

Kerouac

I'd been on the road but not like him—
toured America the beautiful—
I never even popped an aspirin;
swam in the nude in Zion's Emerald Pool
with Don—and what elation when we hiked
Bright Angel Trail to the rivered bottom—
there were so many places that I liked
and none were dens of drugs and none were Sodom.
My generation's best minds Ginsberg saw
destroyed by madness, looking for a fix,
seemed secondrate compared to some I knew—
the answer wasn't getting substance kicks
or highs from kinky sex or Zen—ah no—
but mens sana in corpore sano.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 83.

Robert Lowell

He wasn't the only one who was manic depressive—
a C.O. too, and I was one of those,
and about poetry somewhat obsessive,
new weeping my outcast state and older woes.
The spoon that I'd been born with wasn't worth much.
It helped, all right, if you were one of the Lowells
or went to Harvard or joined the Catholic Church
when poetry scored low on all the polls.
There I was, however, driving with Don,
one day morbid and the next day high,
traveling in South Dakota dawn
past mooing pastures, then I'd have to cry,
a man of ups and then a man of downs,
as dire as "Cal" through all the ugly towns.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 83.

Lazarus

I read the sonnet on the pedestal
and even if the language seemed passé
I couldn't help a kind of tingling thrill—
the beacon hand uplifted, greenish grey,
there by the harbor, New York far across.
I may have been a captive of the State
more than three years, but there at least I was
freely reading by the sea-washed gate—
“Mother of Exiles”!—well, then, she was mine—
“A mighty woman with a torch whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning”—every line
exulting and exalted like her name:
“The New Colossus.” “Let's go, Don. Come on—”
and we raced up to gape out from her crown. a

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 84.

Amherst

She hadn't yet become a national treasure—
still the shy eccentric “minor poet,”
though long ago I'd taken her true measure
and there were lines of hers I'd often quote.
Not far from Amherst, traveling with Don,
I said why don't we visit her old house.
I knocked. The door of American Lit swung open.
A woman smiled and said “Come in” to us.
“Not many visitors—” and barely furnished—
“but look around. Go upstairs if you want”—
“The Northwest Passage” stairway newly burnished—
and we were in the room where she sat bent,
light slanting bright from what seemed numerous windows,
composing in a fairer house than prose.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 84.

The Glass Menagerie

Then in Ann Arbor in a different era,
America beginning once again,
I saw a play, and how could it be clearer
that out of someone's memory and pain
greatness would always happen, words renew.
There weren't too many men named Tennessee
and only he who gave us such a view;
the Gentleman Caller called and I could see
the girl of pathos with a hopeful voice
was doomed to stay and live a shadow life;
none but the braver brother had a choice
to leave the mother and to write and write—
a play like that, for which I pounded my hands
and out in the star-arched darkness almost danced.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 85.

Underground

Jamcloset, was what we called the room
downdeep in Mrs. Hall's Ann Arbor basement—
out of my Underwood, poem after poem,
and still I felt a person of displacement;
typed and typed that C.O. novel, too;
a reader for Contemporary Drama,
I read Don Pirandello, Strindberg, Shaw—
corrected students' papers, every comma.
We did go out—Pygmatism in Detroit—
toured, that fall, the blazing countryside,
and dated girls, but I was never quite
adjusted to the academic life—
back in that underground, tore off my tie,
tearful, fearful, older, sighed: Oh why?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 85.

Test

She failed that test, in the—was it Tri Delt?
parlor in October Michigan.
She never did intuit how I felt—
not to mention Emily Dickinson.
“,pianos in the woods”? Her eyes went wide.
Who’d ever heard of anything like that?
Red leaves detached and twirled and scraped outside,
but “power to mangle”? There she blankly sat.
The hills undressing, too—how silly that was.
She much preferred the shores of Gitche Gumee.
“Of all the souls—” “When...Subterfuge—is done—”
She yawned. Poetry was patois—
at least, the kind I liked. And I felt gloomy.
No, No, NO! She couldn’t be The One.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 86.

No, She Said

No, she said, she had to change her life—
I'd read my poems to her, and my novel,
envisioned her a marvel of a wife,
walked through dreamstreets in Ann Arbor snow
past the glowing window where she lived,
and wrote her O dear darling don't you know
you are the only one I ever loved?
She was a mystery without a clue.
Why had she smiled so much and leaned so close
and breathed Oh yes, Dickinson's my mentor,
then sent me that brief cruel final note
that went like an arrow to my being's center?
Something I have to do—What could it be?
Suicide? Sex change? Get to a nunnery?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 86.

Cowden

He sat there largely, looking like a farmer,
and placed a wide thumb halfway down the poem,
not saying much; my face kept flaming warmer.
That had been, I thought, my greatest line.
A midwest Socrates, he made me see
what didn't fit into the metaphor—
weeks later, even months, I might agree,
or—if a novel—slash the weaker chapter.
And when I got the prize in Rackham Aud
he bent to whisper never to give up—
his glasses glittered and his smile was broad—
a man who taught, or helped to whelp a pup
with equal ease, patiently showing us
exactly where we'd been extraneous.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 87.

Mrs. Black

“My God,” I shrieked, “who do you think you are?”
at Mrs. Black, of the secretarial school.
Her students typed for Cowden’s seminar,
made mimeos of novel parts—and you’ll
have to laugh—“I couldn’t let my girls
read any writing as obscene as that!”
What a swine, to criticize my pearls.
“It’s art” I screamed. “It’s dirt,” I heard her snort,
and slammed her glasspaned door with all my might.
At Cowden’s desk I still was breathing hard.
“That old biddy hasn’t any right—
as if those girls were lilywhite—My God!”
Of course today her attitude’s absurd,
but there I was, alone in the avant garde.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 87.

Bane

My life's bane was that novel I kept writing—
in camp, at home, and then at Michigan,
the C.O. story in that mountain lighting,
all those Levied, peace-believing men
sometimes in barracks, sometimes stringing fences,
and some of them who went stark raving mad—
I tried to show the humor and the tenseness,
the positive pattern that dark chaos had.
“You’ve made me see,” Roy Cowden finally said,
and reading scenes, the seminar lit up;
Don thought it great, and so did friendly Ned
whose sister Beth, over a coffee cup,
said she never knew there were C.O.’s—
and still it’s a story hardly anyone knows.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 88.

Robert Penn Warren

All I remember about Robert Penn Warren
speaking at the Hopwood ceremony
is sitting there wondering if Cid Corman
or I had won any poetry money—
and if my C.O. novel might have won
and if the play which I had also entered
had got a prize—Warren went on and on—
and there I sat, eager, young, self-centered.
I do remember that he wasn't small,
All the King's Men was one book he had written.
He spoke with a kind of mellifluous southern drawl.
My heart kept thumping and my nails were bitten.
If he'd said "Fourscore and seven—" I wouldn't recall.
There are some times when you can't really listen.!

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 88.

“Danse Russe”

It went to show what you could do in poems—
strip all your clothes off if you wanted to
and wave your shirt like William Carlos Williams
around your head—put everything on view—
except I noticed that he didn’t say
when listing what he looked like dancing nude
anything about the swing and sway
of one part—did he think a penis lewd?
He made that wheelbarrow seem so clear
but there might be, outside the picture frame,
steamier scenes, and in the mirror, fear
to give the thing that all men have, a name
or maybe it was only that he knew
if you showed all, they wouldn’t publish you.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 89.

Elinor Wylie

No one could write a poem softer than that—
everything in it hushed, everything white;
Elinor Wylie, no matter what you thought
about her life—one man a suicide,
maybe the one she walked with in the snow
like lacy veils and stepping on white down—
if her cool imagery could so evoke
such “windless peace” who cared what else she’d done?
And you could not be very much surprised
at the intensity of her brief life
when she could just as vividly create
from a noiseless Negro striding down the street,
his barrow heaped with “daisies somber-eyed,”
the perfect picture of an August heat.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 89.

Another Moore

and the only poems he ever wrote were sonnets?
Maybe that was better than writing prosily.
I only glanced—not bad—his language honest.
But I felt more diverse that midwest summer;
trying it all, I even wrote free verse,
As I kept stepping to a different drummer—
a virtue that could save me or a curse?
Whatever—there I was in Michigan
taking a Modern American Poetry course
and driving out in the countryside with Don
and sometimes Beth, and not one of the Moores
or I then, either, could have written what
painful joy I felt, in sonnets or not.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 90.

The Moores, Marianne, Rosalie, Merrill

“Do you write any poems of social conscience?”
We sat above Ann Arbor on a hill—
serious students—no adolescent nonsense—
and I can hear her quoting Sandburg still:
“Hog butcher—” “I have seen your painted women—”
the words went through me with a sudden chill
though it was summer. Faint starlight illuminated
the Arboretum. “No, but maybe I will—”
which was when I knew she’d be my bride
and I would have to get to know her better.
We parted, but the country wasn’t wide
when flown across in letter after letter—
and there Beth is—remembered by my side,
intoning the poem that first brought us together.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 90.

All My Sons

He'd won the Hopwood which I, too, had won,
so, visiting New York we saw his play—
“But was it great?” I said to Beth and Don,
all smoking as we drank off Broadway coffee.
It might not be, but Beth gave me a look
that told me plainly what she thought of me—
tomorrow's William Shakespeare in her book,
and it was I, not Don, she wanted to marry.
Out in the midnight streets we laughed along.
What had I written that was half as good?
But someday, maybe. “Hey look, where's King Kong?”
Miller'd never say such if he could—
so much, though, for odious comparison.
Even then he was brooding on *Death of a Salesman*.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 91.

Lunch at the Princeton Club

Lunch at the Princeton Club? I was really in
or thought I was. Editor Hugh Corbett
had asked me though my novel'd been declined
at Henry Holt. Over a Welsh rarebit—
or was it lamb chops?—he said I could write
and that the C.O. story should be told.
The war theme though by then was getting trite—
no more of that right now at least at Holt.
He knew, he knew—mine was pacifistic
and by the way the way that I'd portrayed
sex in all its aspects was terrific—
of course tabu; it wouldn't be okayed
by those who had the sayso on such matters—
no Howl case yet, no later Norman Mailers.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 91.

Browning It

I was somewhat roughing it myself
like Mark Twain in Virigina City;
a yellowed Storey County paper tells
I read my poems at a “hilltop party”—
a long time since the ended Enterprise
which, however, soon would be renewed
by Beebe and Clegg, those two eccentric guys;
eras after the played-out Comstock Lode
there I was above the crooked streets,
glimmering church and redone Bucket o’ Blood
sharing, even then, quatrains and sonnets
with others in a luminescent mood,
Mark Twain’s vast Nevada going rose,
purple and mauve at dusk, as it still does.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 92.

You Can't Go Home Again

I knew I couldn't but I did go home,
hardly an outsized, yawping Thomas Wolfe,
writing daily in the Flower Street den
though time and widening tide had fixed a gulf.
As yet the gorgeous orchards still were there,
the cloverleaves had only started whizzing,
and Jo was not the Jo I'd known before—
much innocence and ambience was missing.;
I lay back sunning on the blue chaise longue
among hibiscus reading the weighty tome
I'd read prewar before the world went wrong—
and then went in and worked on a new poem
and wrote to Beth, and sometimes to Joanne,
long, longing letters, rather Wolfeian.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 92.

The University of Kansas City Review

One magazine that helped me toward esteem
was The University of Kansas City Review.
I anguished in the Santa Ana den
and then and then—acceptance—and I knew...
Ciardi, Spingarn, Charles Edward Eaton—
confrères who would last and last and last
were right there suffering with me vis-a-vis
as more and more, formal iconoclast,
my poetry in Prairie Schooner, too,
I became someone whose name was seen.
Dearest Beth, I wrote—our letters flew
from Flower Street and snowy Michigan—
not very long until we'd say I do.
Something once dreamed seemed to be coming true.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 93.

Prairie Schooner

At Prairie Schooner, Lowrey C. Wimberly
liked an early poem or two I sent.
I sat and typed, my fingers limberly
kept tapping words of lyrical dissent—
winter sunsets made the walnut trees
seem shapes of seaweed pasted onto red,
a cat leapt up on my lap and curled asleep—
I went to Jo's and came back and wrote Beth.
No one in that town to share it with—
Sunday, alone, I drove down to the sea
wondering what was real and what was myth
and when spring burst I thought—I'll go to Berkeley
and packed the Chevy. So I fled again—
unbound Superman? Or still not free?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 93.

Punching a Time Clock

Punching a time clock in the U.C. Library
I thought I couldn't stand it anymore—
typing orders eight hours every day—/
was this what I'd been educated for?
I ordered Karl Shapiro, John Ciardi,
and then went home and tried to write a line.
How could I ever be a Thomas Hardy?
The green and spinning world had no design.
And then one bright May noon I walked away.
Dearest Beth, I'm sure it's for the best.
Come to me, O my darling, hurry, hurry.
I'll write half time and somehow we'll exist.
She did—we did—a new world spun around.
T. Weiss scrawled yes to "Superman Unbound."

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 94.

A Streetcar Named Desire

That matinee when high up in the Geary
in the most expensive seats we could afford,
the actors not too close but speaking clearly
the music of the playwright's every word,
I knew we watched a new American classic,
Anthony Quinn as Stan, without a shirt
lifting a gleaming beer and sneering crassly
at Blanche du Bois who cringed away from the brute.
When she put on those airs how could you doubt
she lived as Camille and Anna Christie did—
a real character you wouldn't forget—
and when at last hard life had driven her mad,
a splendid invalid, she faced the dangers:
"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 94.

The Waste Land

Al Louch came up to read *The Waste Land* to us—
I'd read it once unmoved in C.O. camp
but wasn't ready for its pastiche newness—
so many references to this and that.
Al, though, had an analytic mind
while mine was often softened by my senses;
“mon frere,” “twit twit” seemed clear when he explained
and we began to listen with attention.
Yes yes—the Thames did flow—with condoms in it;
my neck hair stirred—“Hurry up...” “it's time...”
Beth argued and Don said, “Hey, wait a minute”
when sordid sex was mixed with the sublime
but—Virgiled through that hell of a modern Dante
we ohed when Al breathed *Shantih shantih shantih*

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 95.

Ezra Pound

He'd never been a favorite of mine
and even less so with *The Pisan Cantos*—
I did like, though, "*The River Merchant's Wife*,"
"Damn you, sing: Goddamn" and some of those.
Yes, yes, his brilliance could astound—
but what had later happened to the mind
that had helped Eliot to save *The Waste Land*?
There Pound was in Washington, confined.
When I considered he'd thought Mussolini
a Thomas Jefferson of modern times
I felt how wrong he'd gone and felt it keenly—
still, though, there kept shining from his lines
in an Imagistic station of the Metro
petal faces on a wet black bough.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 95.

To Edwin Honig

Young, I used to write to Edwin Honig
telling him what's what about my poems—
not explaining would have been too lonely;
I didn't have—then—any poet chums
except Joanne. When a rejection came
postmarked New Mexico I sat right down
and typed responses to his praise and blame.
I guess I knew an adverb from a noun.
And he stayed patient—took a poem or two, /
after I tried and tried—and there it was, 'my moon lath in his Quarterly
Review—
and when I sent my "flutepoints," "spitted," "blue,"
he wrote me "Your 'Sibelius' 4
is almost better than Sibelius." p

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 96.

Howard Nemerov: “*The Amateurs*”

His story about superficial people
in Furioso—how it haunted and haunted—
none of them good, none of them, either, evil—
and none of them really knowing what they wanted;
I wasn’t such an intellectual
but bright enough, and writing, writing, writing 4
and even if too ineffectual,
there I was, and wasn’t it exciting
being in that magazine with him
and Howard Moss and Kees and Philip Booth?
I read each word, I didn’t ever skim—
among the jokes and fun, rich depths of truth—7
the nails going in, and Nemerov t
driving them with irony and nerve.:

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 96.

Other Voices, Other Rooms

I read “The Headless Hawk” in *Best American Stories*
and thought that guy’s really some kind of weirdo—
on the back of his book he looked almost glorious,
a man my age, who could hardly grow a beard, though,
somewhere southern, lolling in a hammock.
And there were other stories, other books,
a movie made from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*—dammit!—
with Audrey Hepburn, by when he was losing his looks
and getting plump while I kept working out.
Oh, Martha Foley listed my stories, too,
but, didn’t reprint one, and I had to doubt
he got where he got, and all that hullabaloo
only because his prose style was so great.
You had to do more than only write and wait.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 97.

The Natural

Of course there'd have to be a novel about baseball—
but one by Malamud?—oh well, why not?
You could almost write it—in those days tasteful
before obscenities became what's what.
A Robert Redford kind of grown up kid
headed for the bigtime in the Leagues,
he'd chew, and twist the ball into the mitt:
a sports myth suitable for widest screens.
There would also be some moral issues—
trust Malamud never to leave those out.
Later he would write about the Jews,
but now the stands are filled, the wild fans shout,
he bats the ball far up into the blue—
as anyone with U.S. blood would do.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 97.

Dylan

He wasn't American but the Americans loved him
and twice we heard his readings at U.C.
The first time there seemed almost a halo above him—
what an amazing voice of vibrancy!.
Poets went spellbound home and tried to write
If I were tickled by the rub of love
or When I was a windy boy and a bit—
he'd touched a numbly sleeping lyric nerve;
we hadn't known we hungered so for light.
The second time he read for us, however—
Oh what had happened to that Raphael face?—
redly puffed; he stumbled onto the stage—
the voice, though, thrilled us still with chills and fever—
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 98.

Weldon Kees

We saw him in Berkeley, “handsome as a villain,”
at Lucky, I think it was, among the Wheaties—
not as much of a poetry star as Dylan,
who outshone everyone—as a reader at least.
And we had seen Kees, too, at some events,
when Everson read, and once at Rexroth’s house—
his magic poems had a tragic sense,
and didn’t we hear about a dire divorce?
When I appeared with him in Furioso,
and vis-a-vis with Nemerov and Miles,
I thrillingly thought—now [m with the pros—oh!—
“The Beach in August,” those villanelles of his!
And did he leap? Or thumb to another fate?
His car was found abandoned near Golden Gate.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 98.

Spingarn

Some were simpatico. There Spingarn came
once on Haste Street in a nicer time.
He hadn't, either, yet made a big name:
a not bad looking large impressive man.
And he and Beth and I ate enchiladas
and chicken tacos from a nearby place;
symmetry in those days was what god was,
no protests yet on Telegraph, no mace.
And no one yet had heard of Ginsberg's Howl,
most drugs were bought for ailments—at a store—
there was no Antoninus in a cowl;
the light streamed through the open springtime door—
and Spingarn made a toast to poetry—
still one of the arts in 1953.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 99.

Schevill

What would he be like? A well-known poet
and editor who'd accepted something of mine.
Nervous was how I felt and would I show it?
The lights below had such a jeweled shine!
and linked by bridge to spired San Francisco.
Tamalpais—I turned up his street
and parked and rang the bell and felt a glow—
did anyone have a better right to greet
another smiling sufferer than I?
We elatedly talked; he too had written a novel
too anti-war for such a timorous time.
We agreed: Some crap we wouldn't shovel
and laughed as our sense of brotherhood increased,
while out in the Berkeley night there slouched a beast.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 99.

Eras

Eras always were ending. That one did
when at a San Francisco poetry reading
James Broughton quipped as cutely as a kid—
though even then his hair somewhat receding—
My God! Was she still alive?
after I had said Millay had died.
Rexroth wore a cape lined silken red
and all the men (and even I) a tie—
closets as yet were only slightly open;
Duncan still could pass for almost normal;
and no one blatantly was using dope then
and many poems rhymed and still were formal—
however, in the air—strange offbeat knells—
Ginsberg starting his howling somewhere else.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 100.

Experiment

And I was asked to join Experiment—
a group of poets with a magazine—
to which for several years I'd sent and sent
and where my poems frequently were seen.
James Boyer May was one who saw me there
and wrote me as a mentor and a friend
and asked me for a group of poems later
for Eight American Poets, printed in England.
How much being an Experimenter meant!
or seemed to—though when I look down the list
of those who published there I feel so vacant.
Where's John Gross now or Roland Ryder-Smith?—
though Eaton still writes just as good great verse
and Snodgrass still walks through the universe.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 100.

The Catcher in the Rye

Maybe not Mom's classic apple pie—
if she had read it what would she have said?
but there it was: *The Catcher in the Rye*—
since girls grew into women as they bled
and boys got bigger and began to sprout,
truths like those were new as they were old—
it was what *Huck Finn* was all about
it there'd been analysts he could have told.
“Lovely my ass” and “My sex life is lousy”—
said by a kid—not much like A. J. Cronin—
buzz buzz buzz—the Bible Belt got busy
acting as if no one had heard of Onan
or even Adam and Eve and trying to ban
such books the way the Nazis liked to burn.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 101.

The Naked and the Dead

“A great war novel”—yes, I thought so, too,
when I finally read it decades later
after P’d read the worst that he could do
which turned me into a Norman Mailer hater—
but this book written at age twenty-five—
my peer exactly)—how could he have been
so excellently clear and so objective
when my young feelings were in such confusion?
Oh, though, he never wrote another novel
to equal what had happened to that platoon;
everything else is on a lower level,
Tough Guys Don’t Dance and The American Dream
not the tragedies of good and evil
readers like me were ready to esteem.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
101.

Joyce Carol, et al

Joyce Carol Oates must have been in high school
when I was working at Washoe County Library—
no one like her had ever gone to my school,
or hurried here, seeing her destiny clearly,
to check out Dickens and James as she must have done,
undoubtedly scribbling, even at fifteen,
stories from her weird imagination.
Outrageous Roth wasn't yet on the scene,
and Updike still probably picked his acne,
Erica Jong had never boarded a plane,
none of them in the sagebrush west like me,
a family man and a librarian—
not the famed novelist I wished to be—
stubbornly rhyming my life, under Orion.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 102.

Witter Bynner

“Your skill moves through the stanzas like a breeze”—
Witter Bynner wrote from Mexico
when—in Reno—I was needing praise,
writing at night and crunching through the snow
to answer where the johns were and check out
romance to ladies coming in in furs;
after a while of which you start to doubt
if even teaching freshmen could be worse—
but I’d said no to that, and there I was,
now and then appearing here and there
in Journals and in Quarterly Reviews
and out of the mailbox in that bright air
plucking approval from a famous name:
“how very much I like your ‘Veil of Perfume.’”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
102.

Surprises

Sometimes there would come such grand surprises
even to a loath librarian
who wrote at night or in the Saturday sun—
no One not a writer realizes,
reading a finished poem, how it is done;
between this line and that line there arises
who knows what intricate complication
or agonizing tragedy to try us—
and then among the diapers and the gloom
Delmore Schwartz accepts “The Stream Keeps Tolling”
for New Republic: snow Sierras loom—
I’m feeling lucky where the Truckee’s flowing:
from Poetry (Chicago) Pve had word
Shapiro likes my “Lately Mockingbird.”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
103.

Richard Ashman

Then when I'd been in many magazines
a man named Richard Ashman wrote to me
among the neon and Sierra scenes
he'd like me to submit my poetry
to The New Orleans Poetry Journal;
in his old age he had begun to write
that hope to star in verse can spring eternal
and thought a quarterly might shed some light
and so I sent and so was published there
with Stefanile, Stafford and James Wright
and others—therefore how could I despair
or see my dark career except as bright?
I seemed to leap and fly up off the ground
when he brought out my Superman Unbound.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 103.

Henry Evans

And after I'm turned down by Yale Series,
Harcourt and Viking, even Golden Goose—
what do they know, anyway?—why here is
a letter to end my literary blues.

Henry Evans, a printer in San Francisco,
bookstore entrepreneur, and poet, too,
asks me for some poems that might go
in an artistic book he wants to do.

He'd published me in his small magazine,
Poems and Pictures, and he likes my work.
[I'm 32, and Keats was dead by then).

Oh how those snotty snide rejections irk
and worm the firmest ego with self doubt!
But there I'll be, beautifully brought out.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
104.

Discovery

Walked to the corner and what do you know—
my poem was on a drugstore whirligig!—
in colorful discovery—oh, Oh!—
inwardly, at least, I danced a jig,
almost showed the druggist, then thought—no—
bought a copy and did I feel successful
smiling out into the mountain glow
and neon hum of Reno, lit a Pall Mall.
Who, I wondered, was this Leonard Nathan?
I liked his poem—it reminded me
of someone else—who?—Patchen? W.H. Auden?
We all had miles to go, though, didn't we?
Louis still rhyming, Winfield saying when—
most of us married—even Adrienne.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 104.

Writing, Writing

Even in Europe I was writing, writing—
noting it down, writing a poem or two—
domed and gold San Marco so exciting
above the blue canal I had to brood
and stop its sinking in some luminous lines—
at that hotel in Rome, too, tried to capture
the spurting fountains and the soaring pines,
in Florence, all the nz ed, marble rapture.
If not quite tranquil, after I was home,
when memory itself did not evoke,
I turned the movie on of Notre Dame
rippling in the Seine and then I wrote—
perfecting its reflection in slant rhyme—
the stone emotion of that Paris time.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 105.

Nights in San Jose

Nights in San Jose when no one asked
for any information, I would sit
looking as if I did a bookworm task
but really polishing a poem which
later would appear in *Prairie Schooner*—
“and though I rage and shudder, rage and curse...”
Wartime, or in time of warring rumor
busy at the work of making verse.
That’s how it is, at least that’s how with me—
bombs in Vietnam or in the Gulf
and I am changing it to poetry—
as then when I’d go home to a sad wife
saved by a word I had to get just right.
Ars longa est—however brief the life.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
105.

Seize the Day

There were many days I felt like that—
an unsuccessful Bellow character
not too bad looking but without éclat;
fool that I was, I wanted to be a writer.
And why those cruel encouragements if not?
M. L. Rosenthal opining from *The Nation*:
The last few lines I think require more thought.
Maybe all I needed was to be patient?
So between the library hours I wrote
and there beneath a nevermoving clock
sometimes took the time to be a poet—
when M. L. accepted the poem—what a shock!—
then later—so illusion sometimes goes—
Capouya at Macmillan accepted *Beasts in Clothes*.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 106.

Nobody Knows My Name

I know, I know, few wanted to be black,
however beautiful, but there were those
from Harlem tenement or backroad shack
transcendent-voiced or masterful with prose
who didn't have to get a wise degree
or go to Juilliard—only sing or write—
the deaf would hear, even the blind would see
that one talent which is death to hide.
And so James Baldwin had it in his genes
and Richard Wright and Maya Angelou—
Paul Robeson toting bales on stage set scenes—
Gwendolyn Brooks, Ray Charles, Langston Hughes.
Nobodies?—ever invisible, nameless?
Not quite. Most palefaces are less famous.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 106.

My Eden

There were some who envied me my Eden—
time to write—or so it seemed to them—
38—and shouldn't I be succeeding?—
but it was almost overlate by then.
There I sat, though, home most of the day,
Leo at my feet in a booklined den,
and busy Beth most of the time away
studying psych at U.C. manic again.
I wrote all right, but had to babysit
and what was that? My Beasts in Clothes accepted!—
my name among the stars of American Lit!—
but, subtle serpent—how he was adept at
whispering self doubt, and tainting with
a sense of sin, my literary myth.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 107.

Writing America

I kept coming home and trying to write America—
not only the Beautiful but We Reserve the Right—
drove it unfearfully—not white-knuckled like Erica
Jong who looked down at it from a cloud-sculptured height.
Took Route 66 and stopped at Tucumcari,
camped in Yellowstone, once went Glacier Way,
sometimes in thunder, sometimes under the starry
silver pulsating sky of Santa Fe.
And at the end of it I walked Milwaukee—
saw more of this country than old Walt ever did,
hiked the Sierra, stood there on a Rocky—
skunk statuettes in Utah—prairies soaked with blood—
spacious, rapacious, sweet land, my U.S.A.
whether it knows it or not, in need of poetry.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
107.

Drink

In those days I thought poets had to drink—
Carolyn K. Bob Peterson and I
were at that party making ice cubes clink
in Palo Alto, reading poetry—
sprawled on a bed—that's how the memory goes,
and thinking we were acting very witty;
we seem so comic when the bourbon flows—
Gable-handsome, too, and oh so pretty.
In older, staidier days it couldn't be—
I bright as that and she in that tight dress
and—jargons later—coming on to me;
how rising my career if I'd said yes!
and maybe I exaggerate but then
some poets never do learn to say when.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 108.

Ho Hum

Ho hum, though, when it comes to madnesses
that stir up some attention from the mob,
those derring-dos and alcoholic gladnesses
don't make any poet less a slob,
Roethke more aware or Berryman brighter,
manic Lowell really closer to God;
some suffering is useful for a writer
but none are great because of acting odd.
Plath at the happy farm or on those couches,
Sexton downing moonshine with her pills
doesn't mean they weren't like any slouches
and might have been better poets except for their ills;
the longer I live the clearer it seems to me
the less controlled, the less it's poetry.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 108.

Richard Wilbur

Of course I might have been a little jealous
but why was it Richard Wilbur instead of me
who got sweet treatment from the Eastern fellows
and none but rave reviews in Poetry?
Couldn't I sing a rhyme as well as he?
But oh oh, how could I compete
with "sparrowy air" and "a clearing by Bazille"?
Though wasn't he too precise and overneat?
too elegant—while I wore open shirts—
and sometimes on his tweedy sleeve a heart?—
so perfect—while I showed my bleeding hurts
and more than once a freckle or a wart?—
but after the lawless yawping of the Beats
Richard Wilbur sounded as good as Keats.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 109.

Ciardi

A recognition shock—my heart sped up—
“Here lie Ciardi’s pearly bones,” I read
and I knew then he had the classic touch,
in our age, though, no laurels on his head.
And he kept speaking to me, book by book,
an urgent imagery in what he said,
his other road another poet took
the skyward one where Dante, too, had led—
not only that, an editor more friend
than many in their puffed-up power of place—
shouldn’t shining angel bands descend
and sing his acts of kindness and of grace?—
but there are none of those this era’s end.
I write these praises for him just in case.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
109.

Lolita

What wordplay and what lilting lucid sounds
more poetic than some poetry—
the trip across America astounds—
that little titillating nymphet, she,
Humbert's beloved, before the teen breast rounds
alive as Ma Joad or Madame Bovary—. &
written in English by a onetime Russian—
Vladimir Nabokov—his cute Lolita
once would have had the Gothic stiffnecks huffing
and “dirty book” from bigot Uncle Peter,
but it's a post-Ulysses masterpicce,
a delectation for the freer reader,
a tale that takes a poet's style to spin it,
and not a slimy streetword anywhere in it.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
110.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

By that time we were ready for the real.
In 1962 we weren't so dumb—
and maybe as yet, too, we still could feel;
things were only beginning in Vietnam.
McMurphy still could be some kind of hero,
purse-mouthed Big Nurse Ratched might be Mom.
The world was mad and any leader, Nero
ominously fiddling while the Bomb
hovered above. It looked as if Ken Kesey
would be another Hemingway at least,
his crystalline prose style seemed so easy—
and then, and then—free speech and LSD—
and everyone got more used to the sleazy
and nothing else he wrote had such appeal.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
110.

Leonard Said

Leonard said he liked my family poems
but others, too—"Rushmore," "The Double Boy,"—
the early sixties—not yet wild times,
still a dreamlike feeling about Berkeley.
He said You sometimes are a Baudelaire,
that sense of evil in the vivid sun,
and didn't think he had a voice as rare.
[thought his poems, though, somewhat like mine.
But then what happened? Bly's lies? Vietnam?
We never got together anymore,
he, a professor, I just keeping on
stubborn at my desk, whatever war,
and there's a friendly sound [ve listened for
and still I try to hear him, but he's gone.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. III.

The Best American Short Stories of 1964

Rereading, I have to wonder if they were—
oh sure, oh sure—some are not so bad
but that one, isn't it somewhat de rigueur:
Henry Jamesian when everyone was mad
for Henry James—and circumlocutory?—
few of the effing words that you hear now
in almost every movie, novel, story;
there's been a certain lowering of brow.
Memorable?—well a few—Jean Stafford, Swados,
and J. C. Oates already being prolific
with all the greatest writers for her models—
lively at times, at others, soporific,
and showing how the language doesn't stay:
the unadulterated use of "gay."

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. III.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

"These plainest and most casual actions are. . . more beautiful and more valuable, I feel, than, say, the sonnet form." —James Agee (1909–1955)

"These plainest and most casual actions are... more beautiful and more valuable, I feel, than, say, the sonnet form." —James Agee (1909–1955)
Well, right, James Agee— The Yale Series
wasn't your kiss of death, though it killed many,
and yes, it's true, the sonnet often wearies
and seldom brings the poet one red penny.
Pictures are the thing—those casual actions—
you saw that and went to Alabama
not for any rhymed and metric fictions
but to be an eye much like a camera.
You were one of those who swam right in
on future's wave, criticizing film
and writing the screenplay for *The African Queen*.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 112.

Jean Stafford

I didn't guess, until I read her bio,
the horrible tragedy behind the stories—
then had to think again, oh why oh why
so many darkneses behind such glories—
Chekhov and D. H. Lawrence spitting blood,
Roethke and Lowell at the happy farm,
and bright Jean Stafford, who posed once in the nude,
changing from a girl of spunk and charm
into a raging, aging alcoholic.
And all for ee rhe retty car wrecked face
enough to make Potlvaruta melancholic
and treated finally for syphilis—
Isak Dinesen—Beethoven—de Maupassant—
the list is brilliant as it's overlong.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 112.

Playboy

Finally when free speech was OK
Playboy appeared, with words and naked women
and nude cartoons—no one now could say,
as far as truth went, there was any limit.
Henry James might rotate in his grave,
even Dreiser's veiny eyes would pop
if they had seen how sex need not deprave—
skirts could be pushed up and pants could drop
right in a paragraph of high class prose;
it was getting difficult to tell
pornography from something without clothes—
and was it prurient if written well?
Ginsberg and the Howl case judge to thank,
Hefner—laughing—limoed to the bank.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 113.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Wasn't it intended as a metaphor?
George and Martha. Or was Albee pulling our leg?
Whichever, when they came through that stage door
and she sneered "What a dump!" like one in drag,
we knew that we were in for something wild.
Drinking forever, never getting drunk,
bringing up their nonexistent child,
she seemed the ultimate bitch and he reeked spunk.
Nick and Honey (young), who played along
through that Walpurgis Night of fun and gin
were too naive and too straight to belong
in games too doubly meaningful to win.
Homeward we argued—Just a mod charade?
Or Aristotle's terror up-to-date?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 113.

Suicidal

(*Randall Jarrell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton,
John Berryman, etc.*)

Randall Jarrell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton,
John Berryman, etc.

I think of some who walked out on the freeway
or turned on oven gas, or the car's ignition
in a shut garage, and gave themselves no leeway
to come back safely from death's recognition—
that old bloodsucker whispered in their car
it won't hurt, soon it will be over,
then gave the bite that ended love and fear—
and he became their master ghoul forever.
For now the living dead is what they are,
zombies of poetry, writers we revere—
I can't go along with thinking they are better
because they wouldn't stay and face the horror

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 114.

Sylvia Plath

Who was Sylvia? What was she? That all
the high-class magazines would print her?
Just what was it she had on the ball?
In every issue—summer, fall and winter
and spring especially they'd show poems of hers—:
a buzzing bee box or a Hitler Daddy
and she and Ted Hughes went from bed to verse,
but what began with joy was ending sadly.
Though, O how readers like to read of horrors,
ovens at Auschwitz or in London suburbs—
mad, suicidal Sylvia's adorers
increased in certainty as did her blurbs,
and poetry skyrocketed on the chart.
Her morbid words revived a dying art.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 114.

Delmore Schwartz

Psychotic Delmore with his ups and downs,
paranoic arrogance and doubt,
marriages, divorces, on-the-towns,
fierce friendship then the wounded turnabout—
when young and handsome as a movie star
seemed to have it all—talent, acclaim—
poet, critic, teacher, editor;
and then what was it happened to his fame?
America—that shifts as fast as packs?—
a lousy childhood or his fated genes?
emotional too muchnesses or lacks?
Those snarling arguments! Those Bellevue scenes!—
the marvelous ardencies that end with screams.
Responsibilities begin in dreams.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 115.

Humboldt's Gift

What saves Saul Bellow is his comic sense—
in Humboldt's Gift, the character he plays
stays in control through all the wild events
which would have Humboldt in a crazy daze.
Saul—or Charlie—as he calls himself
feels more amused than that he's persecuted
as Humboldt did (really Delmore Schwartz
whom sanity and comedy eluded).
The new Mercedes that got baseball-batted,
the greedily litigious ex-wife—
time, you thief, he seems to say, put that in,
on the other hand, about the joys of life.
And that's how I, too, see the tragic pattern.
Looked at another way, it makes you laugh.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 115.

Richard Eberhart

Richard Eberhart, heard when he was younger,
seemed rather formal and without a grin—
not my kind of sometimes humorous singer:
Roethke dancing his lines, tongue-in-cheek Dylan.
His “Groundhog” sounded gloomily Baudelaire,
and why so many souls and many Gods?—
younger than I am now, he stood up there
and in the audience—some yawning nods.
What happened in the next ten years I wonder?—
a change of life, an ebullient renaissance?
His later words had notes of jovian thunder,
everything he did, a kind of bounce—
even that old chestnut about chasing the boys
away from the tree, twinkled with new joys.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 116.

X. J.

When X. J. read at U.C. I was there—
and what a delightful difference from Denise:
she went on and on without a care
the audience was wishing she would cease.
But Kennedy recited, even sang—
no nose down to the paper or the book,
and we all stayed alert and got a bang
from his clan and his enjoying look—
not a criterion of what is best;
Eliot read as some old grandma might,
and, at least on records, Yeats lacked zest,
and Williams' voice went high, and Miles' was slight,
but there stood X. intoning every word,
a mesmerizing troubadour—a bard.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 116.

An Editor?

A magazine? And I an editor?
I never thought that shoe would fit my foot.
When Ruth first called to ask I'd said to her
I really don't know if I've time to do it.
Well, B. Jo says she will. So there we were
in sunny Kensington on Avon Road
going over poems by the score
and drinking wine, and served lunch on Ruth's Spode.
Our issue one was a succès d'estime
with Robert Bradley's art and our strict choices.
It's not so bad to do a magazine—
time after time you'd hear our laughing voices
and once in a while a passionate altercation.
And often I play the part with some elation.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 117.

The Blind Lemon

Some of us used to meet at The Blind Lemon—
Stan Noyes, Schevill, Mal Wood, Anthony Ostroff,
Ferol Egan, Don Geiger, Richard Hagopian—
preserve the names—Le Winter, Robert Beloof—
writers in turtlenecks crying in our beer;
years later Ostroff died of a hurt heart
after hang gliding, also Oswald Le Winter
somehow was a martyr to his art—
a plague erased us or we just gave up.
Schevill, though, had a Collected Poems lately
and Stan and I make up a dwindled group
twice yearly on Telegraph, lamenting greatly
and Egan up on Grizzly keeps on at it
as if bitter integrity still mattered.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 117.

Influenced

Jo Miles said, "What poet has influenced you?
Those poems I've read don't sound like anyone—"
"Except like me? At least I want them to."
I mentioned Keats and Frost and Dickinson.
"And I remember when I read your—what?—
Local Measures? Lines at Intersection?
Even the titles did things to my thought.
That 'plucking of hope from the hand, honor from the
complexion'!"
She told me Berkeley is a free verse place
but still a few do use some form and rhyme.
It isn't easy, after tear gas and mace
not to think of strictures as a crime—
shouldn't we eschew the metaphysical?
"And 'Gary Cooper's horse'? And 'God, a man at Yale'?"

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 118.

A Steady Light

I went believing you might still be there,
witty as always even if in pain,
a smiling friendly brilliance in a chair,
a steady light to which so many came—
your last words on the phone had been so clear:
“Be sure to let me know the meeting date”—
I thought your dear intelligence and cheer
a bravery that never would abate—
but you lay mumbling on a narrowness,
blind to any irises I brought—
“Demerol” explained the caring nurse.
“She was tossing awake most of the night.”
Oh, Jo—you’re leaving us no choice.
We’ll have to go to your poems for that light.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 118.

A Voice from Miami

A voice from Miami I haven't heard before,
or if I heard, only a voice in poems,
says hello this morning to my ear—
Ma Bell, I marvel at your magic phones.
Frost's flat voice in verse comes through clear,
and Thomas lilts in warm recorded tones,
but maybe even more extraordinaire
than such unlive one-sided conversations
is chatting with Edmund Skellings like a neighbor.
He dials, and here we are across the nation
as across a hedge in backyard air,
poet talking to poet, station to station—
vivid summery words shining so near
the birds of winter sing to overhear.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 119.

Mail

Here in my trap of dreams, I wait for the mail—
will today's postman bring the words I need,
the fabulous sweepstakes so that I can sail
off to Gauguin's Tahiti or the Isles of Greece?—
my collected poems bought for a film, perhaps?
Maybe my worth is finally recognized.
Yes, I'll be glad to come and accept the prize.
Should I start packing? Where did I put the maps?
How light my heart is as I fly up the steps
and with Christmas-child hands open up the box
at the edge of the road, a silver treasure chest—
and how many times must I endure these shocks?—
the ads and bills deepening emptiness
and the chill clipped to my blood: this isn't for us.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 119.

A Texas Twang

A Texas twang when I lift up the phone—
it really is becoming one small world—
someone dials me and [m not alone
where Emily's mighty merchant's button twirled.
Yes, this is he. The other's glad to hear it—
and such a young and friendly voice he has,
and such a deferent good humored spirit—
a Stetson on his tan brow as in "Dallas"?
I can't tell that without a picture, too—
he mentions, though, a poem of mine he's read,
says, No one can be funnier than you.
Im glad to hear it as Pve been depressed
and never thought there'd come what most sustains
from way out on those wide and windy plains.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 120.

Typos

If I ever have a stone instead
of being scattered on the peaks or waves,
it's sure to be misprinted and misread.
I'll lic beneath among the greener graves
as Howard Witt or else as Harold Witty,
who when I lived was sometimes so put down—
the lettered granite probably pigeon-shitty,
the weedy, seeded grass infrequently mown.
Maybe you think my tears are cinematic
or that'm exaggerating some,
and yes, I do desire to be emphatic
and not just sour grapey, dour and glum—
dear reader, though, if there are any of those,
try checking my real life against the typos.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 120.

The Color Purple

The Color Purple made into a movie
almost before it came out as a book?
Oprah Winfrey, someone else named Whoopi
playing the parts. I take a second look.
These days American Lit seems on the screen
as soon as it appears between soft covers—
though those conditions which most deeply mean:
the mystic grappling of the urgent lovers,
the slant of mind, the tearing of the rape
if not the sleazy language (that's OK
you have to read, or listen to on tape—
the eye can't see what connotations say.
Movies are movies. Words do more than state.
Something in a book will not translate.

Publication. First published in *American Lit*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 121.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

She says, “They don’t make them like that anymore—”
I say, “No—our Sunday inspirational—”
We’ve watched *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, about the poor
when living in slums could be educational.
The family mattered, and that failure father
singing “Annie Laurie” with tears in his eyes
made up for a lot of heat and bother
in streets of terror and in schools of lies.
“There was more reality in the book”
I say—“an indecent exposure—”
The movie gives a more ideal look
at growing up than Betty Smith’s disclosure.”
“Still, though, who writes now with such belief?”
“Yes, when will old beauty put out a new leaf?”

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 121.

Stegner

Oh yes, Stegner—who taught prose at Stanford—
a name of fame, but not on everyone’s tongue
like Updike, Roth, or such a household word
as some with “class and sass” like Erica Jong.
Far from the madding hoopla, quietly writing
scenes so real you could walk into them;
less whoop-de-do than innerly exciting—
if you like second rateness, don’t read him.
Northern California’s sounds and scents—
and Utah, too—he writes what he knows,
as good at nature as at home events.
Evenings, at an angle of repose,
I lean back, a cat curled on my knee,
deep in *The Spectator Bird* or *Crossing to Safety*.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 122.

Eudora

Some of us have to jet to the Antilles,
some of us see a world in a grain of sand—
no need for Troy, Odysseus and Achilles,
we sense the world in the close at hand.
Eudora stayed in Mississippi mostly
and mostly in the town where she was born—
not straying far from Jackson, traveled vastly;
her humor has a fairy tale charm—
The Robber Bridegroom and The Ponder Heart
lit with a wry delight—that's like her name—
and she lived on while practicing her art
on that same street in that same family home—
a dutiful and always thoughtful daughter
whose father's voice still rumbled up the stair.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 122.

William Meredith

A poet wins a Pulitzer—and oh—
I've hardly read a word he ever wrote.
His picture's in the morning paper, though;
I even like the lines of his they quote.
My inner twin but on another planet?
He never was in rivalry with Rocky.
Like me he's not exactly the kind of man that
preens on any screen, half nude and cocky.
No, while all that hoopla and whoop-de-do
has gone on in the world, he and I
have tried to see the beautiful and true—
too bad more people write it than read poetry,
and mostly it's under bushels where we shine.
He's probably hardly read a word of mine.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 123.

Conrad Aiken

“Music I heard with you was more than music.”
Who reads and who remembers lines like that?
The world’s too noisy, frenzied, too confusing,
too loud with threat. It even scares the cat.
We’ve sat here through the years and through the rhymes
which I have read, and this is one I read
those old and sometimes cozy family times
“and bread I broke with you was more than bread.”
So much has changed. It whirls. It keeps on changing.
We’re at the mercy of an urgent force—
familiar atoms keep on rearranging,
the children grow and marry and divorce.
Conrad who? And what was it he said?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 123.

Fahrenheit 451

Huge TV screens and no one reading books
except for Steel's or King's)? It sounds familiar;
houses with those same and sterile looks
and no till death do us part anymore—
there'd have to be some gentle hurting man
who'd glance into a volume sooner or later
and start to read—the best and worst of times—
and meet some woman not a knowledge hater.
Just as Soviet Russia went to pieces
and Hitler's Reich, no country can exist
on bread alone—wherever inquiry ceases
and government is by the iron fist,
out there in the woods, saving lost art,
rebels recite their favorite books by heart.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 124.

Modernism

Poets started talking to themselves
or to each other—which was modernism—
Ezra Pound, with bats among his bells,
and others suffering a kind of schism
or just pretending—it was hard to tell—
the more you read T. S. though, he got clearer
and as for William Carlos Williams, well—
his plain words were practically a mirror—
nothing that couldn't be said by guru Ginsberg,
and meanwhile there were hungerers for Beauty
who always could peruse Anne Morrow Lindbergh
about whom many critics were so snooty.
Where was that audience Walt Whitman wrote of?
What had happened to Truth? To words like Love?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
124.

Carlos Cortes

Whom does that Costa Rican want to meet
when he comes visiting the U.S.A.?
Allen Ginsberg, of course, and another Beat:
San Francisco's Lawrence Ferlinghetti.
Carlos Cortés, you are behind the times;
Roethke dove in that pool and Sylvia Plath
gassed herself from any further rhymes.
That garrulous generation's out of breath.
Dan Langton and Ruth Iodice and I
are sitting in this room and telling you
about today's American poetry:
how good it is, but no new Frost in view,
and you tell us the Costa Ricans, too,
can't boast a young Neruda or Voznesenski.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 125.

A Wealthy Ghost

Among the 40 top celebrities—
id est ones who yearly earn the most
whether deceased or not, Forbes lists T.S.
Eliot—and what a wealthy ghost
who once wore greenish make-up to look dead.
Also he's on a stamp—so all's not lost—
a poet needn't even be much read
or any more in town to be the toast,
but to have written funny rhymes on cats,
Old Possum's book of them, which can be made
into a lively Broadway song and dance;
he will be applauded and hurrayed,
his art no longer looked on so askance
who called our neon time a Waste Land once.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 125.

Ina Coolbrith

You'd hardly say she was inglorious
or even mute—though no Milton herself—
librarian and poet laureate,
she did help better writers fill a shelf:
Bret Harte for one, Jack London for another,
and still her Circle meets and reads its verse—
who said where two or three are gathered together?—
in her name writing poetry's a church.
And there she was—bones in an unmarked grave
in Oakland—where so many started out—
even Gertrude Stein—to be creative.
“Her poetry is pleasant...not important”
some critics say, but now a carven stone
remembers the angel voice of inspiration.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 126.

Peg

I used to have an audience of one,
sent almost every poem I wrote to her
and she would write me from the Reno sun
or clear aired Santa Fe when she lived there
and later from her little place in Carson
appreciation of what I had done—
symbolic hawk or humor about Tarzan—
perceptive reader to be counted on,
dear ear, intelligent commiserator,
not over-critical mother, sisterly friend,
herself an artist, and no imitator,
a caring sharer almost till the end—
O Peg, come back—the world's askew, amiss,
with no return address to send you this.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 126.

Simbolica

The cats clawed down, in one of their nighttime prowls,
a copy of a little magazine;
they do get bored—shut up in the house—
and there it was torn on the floor this morning:
Simbolica: A Poetry Review
edited by Ignace Ingianni,
the cover not as purple and as blue
as when old Harry grinned years before Ronnie;
and few whose poems grace its faded pages
heard of anymore—well, Judson Crews—
but most of those, paid neither praise nor wages,
not then or now making the big time news—
and I, among the abstract and surreal,
going that other way that's still my style.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 127.

How Often

How often [ve been out here in the sun
wearing, in the June warmth, not too much,
and writing, writing, trying to get it done—
a sonnet or a lyric before lunch.

A spotted towhee flashes to a branch,
the luminous petunias bloom and bloom,
a hammer sounds as on a distant ranch
in early eras when there was no zoom
of trucks on freeways or the grinding noise
of airplanes in the azure overhead.

I'm looking back to much more simple joys—
to unpolluted times when books were read
and everyone knew who the great ones were—
Mark Twain, Jack London—Joaquin Miller (?)...

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
127.

Flannery O'Connor

Some titles can be poems in themselves—
like Everything That Rises Must Converge—
with rocks and shells they beautify my shelves;
only thinking of them can enlarge,
like trailing peacock tails spreading wide,
the wondering mind—thus Wise Blood, too,
also *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*
and The Violent Bear It Away shimmer such hues.
Like many writers Flannery O'Connor died
young—it was lupus struck her down—
but still her Georgia stories shine and shine!
sheened with bluegreen quills quivering-cyed.
Who equals her strange luminosities?
Thomas Merton said—a Sophocles.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 128.

Letters from the Earth

That side of Mark Twain surfaced only later—
his wife and Queen Victoria kept it suppressed—
but past Tom Sawyer's fence, Huck's great creator
sucked his big cigars and wrote in bed
words that at that time couldn't be printed,
views about the goddamned human race,
a bitterness his humor slyly hinted,
a ribald heat beyond his time and place—
Marquis de Sade, H. Miller, Rabelais?
Not quite, but there he is when speech sounds freer—
with all the thoughts elided in his day
back where they should be—an American scer
in palm beach suit, mustache, and Einstein hair,
restaged by the Bill of Rights, having his say.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 128.

“Babylon Revisited”

Rereading “Babylon,” I’m there again—
in flapper time when money was the thing—
bobbed hair, snazzy knickers, bathtub gin,
a postwar mood we’ll never be forgetting
as long as Scott Fitzgerald is reprinted
and all those fizzy, dizzy movies shown
in which, however, sex was only hinted
and nothing heard like a climactic moan.
Crazy Zelda’s somewhere off the page,
the golden boys from Princeton drink and drink,
leggy choruses cavort onstage—
not many read a book or ever think—
and, if you think of it, don’t be too sure
that time’s as different as we’d prefer.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 129.

Shootemup

“ . . . before reading went out of style. . . ”
—*Today's Paper*

“...before reading went out of style...”
—Today's Paper
I wonder, though, if it was ever in,
here in the shootemup U.S. of A.
where there was that far West frontier to win,
Whitman known as the name of a drug store candy.
Maybe girls and sissies lounged around
daintily turning pages but real men
roped steers out on the range. Mad Ezra Pound
went cantoing away from all that din.
And who but other poets have heard today
of—say—Leonard Nathan or of me?—
though nobody hasn't heard of Ophrah Winfrey
and everyone's aware of Robert Bly

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
129.

Kunitz

Talking to Bill Moyers on TV
Kunitz says poetry's a language of the body—
it's from inside and viscerally deep;
before our ancestors could talk they oddly
felt these gestures that are poetry.
He reads a poem of a dream he had:
it's a country road we clearly see,
on which he meets his parents who are dead.
He makes a deaf and dumb sign to his father
and when he dreamed it didn't know it meant
reverence and respect—a dream's that weather
we have to walk in to find God's intent.
Moyers gapes astounded. But—in the U.S.
poetry's peripheral, as Kunitz says.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 130.

Styron

Out of his nightmare terrors, violent visions,
Styron wrote a history of our madness,
his prose a poetry of dark precisions:
Nat Turner's hatred, Sophie's horrible sadness.
That long march he took as a young marine,
that drunkenness that set a house on fire,
instances of what, on the U.S. scene,
keeps us sliding backward into the mire.
Idolized in France—when Mitterand
explains to George Bush who this Styron is:
one of the greatest writers of our land,
our President looks not too bright, alas!
His eyes go blank, "Oh yeah? Oh yeah?" he says,
which is why we still lie down in darkness.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 130.

Snoopy in the Louvre?

Snoopy in the Louvre? Well, maybe so—
American Lit, or art's not just the province
of critics with an elevated brow—
those in the know over in La Belle France
opine the cartoon dog is mythical—
and Im not really sure what I would do
on any dawning day that's typical
without my coffee and my Peanuts, too.
He sits there on his little house and types
another masterpiece, then gets rejections,
reminding me of some of my own gripes;
he's not a hound, though, of intense dejections—
imagines more than can be said in words,
and, like a fun St. Francis, talks to birds.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 131.

Gail White

Gail White wishes she were famous
so I would put her in American Lit—
as is, she's not exactly nameless;
even John Keats believed his name was writ
in water. When at Emily Dickinson's door
Death kindly stopped, how manyd heard of her?
And who reads "Hiawatha" anymore?
More often than they're right the critics err.
There you are down in Louisiana
keeping at it. Gail, don't despair.
You might, like me, be No One from Santa Ana
where, as in Oakland, there is no there there.
Today's famed names are Cher, Sting, Joe Montana.
American poets only dimly star.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 131.

“Göta”

You never know what poets will do next—
a postcard comes from Joan Swift in Nepal
doing what no stay-at-home expects,
chasing, by elephant, tigers of Bengal.
Old William Blake only imagined his
patterned orange and black and burning bright—
but not these days of flights to Indias
of taste and touch and smell and sound and sight.
So maybe she'll return with a sestina
like that from Sweden several years ago—
and win more prizes in the poem arena;
she does deserve to and I do hope so.
And am I envious? I might be—some—
but look at that swallowtail! Tigerish—hmmm?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 132.

Richard Aldridge

Richard Aldridge writes again from Maine—
he sent two books of his and I had written
I liked them, as I do like speaking plain—
the kind of voice for which my pencil's bitten,
the stone, the leaf, the grief, the daily thing,
the Yankeeess like Frost and Dickinson,
the marveling that makes a poet sing
in lines that rhyme as right as nature can.
He's a Someone I was not aware of
all those years, even when vis-a-vis
as I wrote once) in little magazines,
and that's the being heard that I despair of.
Thanks, though, Dick, for choosing to write me—
brothers, from now on, in poetry...

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 132.

Nelson Bentley

Nelson Bentley, I wish I had known you better—
poet, teacher, man of humongous humor;
now it's too late even to write you a letter.
Moose, didn't they call you?—transcendental loomer
in Northern forests in a lovely shimmer
from Sound and lake—Ted Roethke's country, too—
however much the world kept seeming pues
you knew (like me) that's not completely true.
Classmates? Nearly so at Michigan—
Cowden's thought rubbed off on both of us—
look at the line then look at it again,
and does the metaphor really get it across?
I see bright circles rippling on and on—
your students praising you as we praised him.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 133.

Mark Strand Complains

"The current laureate—Mark Strand—complained at his outgoing press conference. . . that brainy people such as poets never get invited to state functions. . . he read thousands of poems submitted to him and most were no good." —News Item

"The current laureate—Mark Strand—complained at his outgoing press conference...that brainy people such as poets never get invited to state functions...he read thousands of poems submitted to him and most were no good."—News Item
Mark Strand complains we never get invited
to White House inser Laureate,
the poor guy isn't very much elated
at having to stay home and stand and wait
or sit there reading poems many send
which he says aren't too good, while Queens and Stars
dine with George and Barbara, who lend
no ear to brainy verses such as ours
not ones written by the second raters

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 133.

William Burns

Here's a story for American Lit—
“enormous skill,” “genius,” and “energy”—
this William Burns got a lifetime in
a single poem, and didn't write too many,
revising and excising those he did;
some of them almost seem to burst for breath—
the miler, the bench presser, the jogging kid,
and Sisyphus rolling that stone in an aching myth.
Oh, oh—what tautness, what word power—
“cocked as Cagney, dirty-rattin' the world”—
envious others might read that and glower,
and then, at 64, everything whirled
and stopped—he was dead—his landlady threw
those goddamn papers out and rented his room.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 134.

Galway

Much can be done with a voice; take Galway Kinnell,
a presence on a stage, a man of height
reading his sensual poems better than well—
when he says light you seem to see the light,
or blackberries, they burst sweet upon the tongue.
Not one poem is a Shelleyan ode—
more of the earth, more full of blood, more strong
and more down Whitman's than down Frost's old road.
Oh, he's impressive—could be a movie star
and knows just when to pause and when to twinkle,
symbolic, too—in that odd poem “The Bear”—
again and again comes up with a new wrinkle.
Yes, yes—and after the voice is gone
maybe to touch the poems will touch the man.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
134.

I Studied Shelley

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain?"
—Robert Browning, "Memorabilia"

"Ah, did you once see Shelley plain?"
—Robert Browning, "Memorabilia"
I used to be a literary snob—
you wouldn't see me reading Mickey Spillane;
even the second rate could make me throb
and lift my Anglo nose almost with pain.
I studied Shelley, Austen, Lawrence Sterne,
I wasn't even sure about Henry James—
a hundred years and still I'd never learn
the best that had been said by the Great Names!
These later evenings—after I peruse
Conrad, perhaps, or maybe Wallace Stegner—
Pil turn the TV on, not to the news
and not to PBS and a cycle of Wagner—

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 135.

Elizabeth Bishop?

Elizabeth Bishop? Maybe I should give
her shy poetry another chance
even if it lacks a kind of drive—
something's to be said for reticence.
James Merrill, Howard Moss and all those guys
in *Voices @ Visions* on PBS
might have felt depths I didn't realize—
underneath the nice, a seething chaos.
Again she throws the old symbolic fish back,
makes out of a newspaper typo a man with wings,
has miracles for breakfast, boats off to Brazil
and writes precisely about many intricate things.
I Uke her quiet voice, her way with rhyme.
Getting to know some poets can take time.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 135.

So Many Poets

So many poets and so few readers—
even I may rather read a coal miner
those I sayers, word players, suicidal bleeders,
not very many of them really on the level.
To get to the bigtime how they have to kiss ass;
after these years and years it's made me bitter—
and none of them anymore singing the word En-Masse.
The fittest surviving? No, not even the fitter.
I won't name names but I know what I know
and count me out of that no-holds-barred game,
that free-for-all without a line to toe—
et—oh!—my aging eyes still have the gleam
they had on West Hishteenth—the lone coming
and my old heart starting that quicker drumming.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 136.

City Lights

*"Thirty-nine years after the first starving North Beach
(X>Ciwandered in seeking intellectual nourishment, City
Lights Books became a National Landmark yesterday."
—Maitland Zane, San Fransisco Chronicle*

"Thirty-nine years after the first starving North Beach
poet wandered in seeking intellectual nourishment, City
Lights Books became a National Landmark yesterday."
—Maitland Zane, San Fransisco Chronicle
Right up there with Poe's house in the Pantheon,
Ferlinghetti's North Beach City Lights
becomes a Landmark, but do you—what?—
not a book of mine has reached those heights.
Winesburg isn't in that hallowed place,
The Snow Prince wasn't stocked, or Beasts in Clothes—
in this confusing game, this paper chase,
what's the criterion, do you suppose?
If I were paranoid I'd feel left out
because aie and sneering persecution

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
136.

Yes, Bill

“The sonnet, I see now, is not a form at all but a state of mind. . . I never had the intelligence to realize that it wasn’t the sonnet that was at fault but the bad artists who wrote in the form were the calamity.”

—W. C. Williams to James Laughlin, Selected Letters

“The sonnet, I see now, is not a form at all but a state of mind...I never had the intelligence to realize that it wasn’t the sonnet that was at fault but the bad artists who wrote in the form were the calamity.”

—W. C. Williams to James Laughlin, Selected Letters

Yes, Bill, right, I saw that years ago—
whether Petrarchan or Shakespearean
so much depends on how the phrases flow—
you put your feelings in a sonnet’s scheme,
the teeming octave’s like a state of mind
that takes a turn as drastic as a dream
into the sestet, variously rhymed—
bad artists are the ones who make it seem
an antiquated verse form with inversions;

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 137.

Lewis Turco

Lewis Turco writes we'd better write
each other before it gets too late for that;
he's read my poems Fr years with some delight
and I his, too, and always with the thought
here's another with a sense of form.

He wrote a book that tells of villanelles,
ballades, blank verse, syllabics and much else,
and many other books and sends me some—
inscribed—I send him some of mine—
one more man who writes me as a friend
in my late age, and here it is again—
that hint of living in a vast design,
that raving light that shines through you and me,
that fellow feeling which is poetry.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p.
137.

The Rage

Serial killers are the rage these days—
Random, Viking (who have published greatness
consulted polls, and consensus says
no more Okies, no more southern quaintness;
it's Charles Manson, and goodlooking Bundy
people want to pay to read about.
The Presence of Grace? Children Are Bored on Sunday?
Not on your tintype. Give them hearts reamed out
and smashed mouths streaming, skulls in lonely places
dug up years later and identified
by tooth charts, give them the lurking faces
in murky shadows and young girls at night
strangled in the dark parks of the nation.
What else is worth big bucks except sensation?

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 138.

Fiction

"Fiction is not a competitive sport."

—John Cheever

"Fiction is not a competitive sport."

—John Cheever

Well maybe not, but Oates is up to bat

and Who's on First?—Isn't it Philip Roth?

Updike's fielding and at times falls flat—

waiting on the benches, tragic youth.

Ray Carver hits a homer but oh oh—

smoked and drank too much—he's out of the game.

Anne Rice is coming up, Anne Tyler, too

and there are many more from whence they came.

Marge Piercy, Alice Walker, Alice Adams—

the hot dog-eating crowd keeps going wild;

always there are those base-stealing bad ones.

Kill the ump—Jane Smiley's safe by a mile!

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 138.

Behind It All

Behind it all there still have to be writers—
maybe not “what lips my lips have kissed”
but dialogists, TV movie plotters,
ghosts who think up gems like “read my lips”—
not Chekhovs and not even Hemingways
but ones who’ve learned at least their ABCs,
and maybe they don’t know their lies from lays
but they have heard about the birds and bees.
Whenever mouths say something on the screen,
whenever presidents make a bon mot
someone at a computer must have been
up late flicking, in a fluorescent glow,
fingers over the keys to set the scene,
busy writing the scenario.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 139.

Where's Danny?

Dan says Where's Danny? when I show the cover.
There's Hawthorne, Whitman and there's Sylvia Plath
Jo Miles, Jack London, Kees and many another
but where's the author of Querencia?
I say these aren't just those I like the best.
Why Norman Mailer, then, or Howard Moss?
And this collage is not some kind of test
although I hope the message comes across.
American Lit's a glorious potpourri,
Frost and Shapiro, Carlos looking out—
you see the gorgeous torch of Liberty
lighting Stegner's smile and Poe's mad pout—
watch for the sequel, Son of American Lit.
Danny Boy's glad face will shine from it.

Publication. First published in *American Lit*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 139.

Workshop

Lost art, I thought—but maybe I was wrong—
the poetry group—some rhyme, some do not rhyme—
to which greybearded bards like me belong
and ladies to whom sonnets are no crime,
meets again, in CapFed's Redwood Room—
there must be such throughout the U.S.A.:
little lights dotting the map's vast gloom,
the glimmering last outposts of poetry.
This time, however, someone not so old
sits with us, and we read around the table—
the dyed, the greying and the growing bald—
and though I thought the young no longer able,
he moves us with such vivid metaphor
a horse with wings couldn't surprise me more.

Publication. First published in *American Lit.* Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 140.

American Lit

And then my daughter was taking *American Lit*.
She wanted help with Ahab and Hester Prynne.
Was he crazy? And also how are Pip
and Pearl alike and how aren't they the same?
I told her "Oh it's been years and years since then.
I've never even read 'Benito Cereno.'"
"Well, you should." And there I was again
green as the backyard grass I used to lean on.
How young I'd been. How much I knew in those days,
inviting my soul with Walt as I turned the pages
out there in the canna lily blaze,
the less others had read, the more outrageous—
"And listen, you've got books and tomes to go.
The more and more you learn the less you know."

Publication. First published in *American Lit*. Ashland, Oregon: Ashland Poetry Press, 1994, p. 140.

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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.