



LAWRENCE P. SPINGARN

Collected Poems

SIX BOOKS, SATIRE, FAMILY HISTORY, AND LATE 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

The Text-Tech Papers | Los Angeles, 2026

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ROCOCO SUMMER

And Other Poems

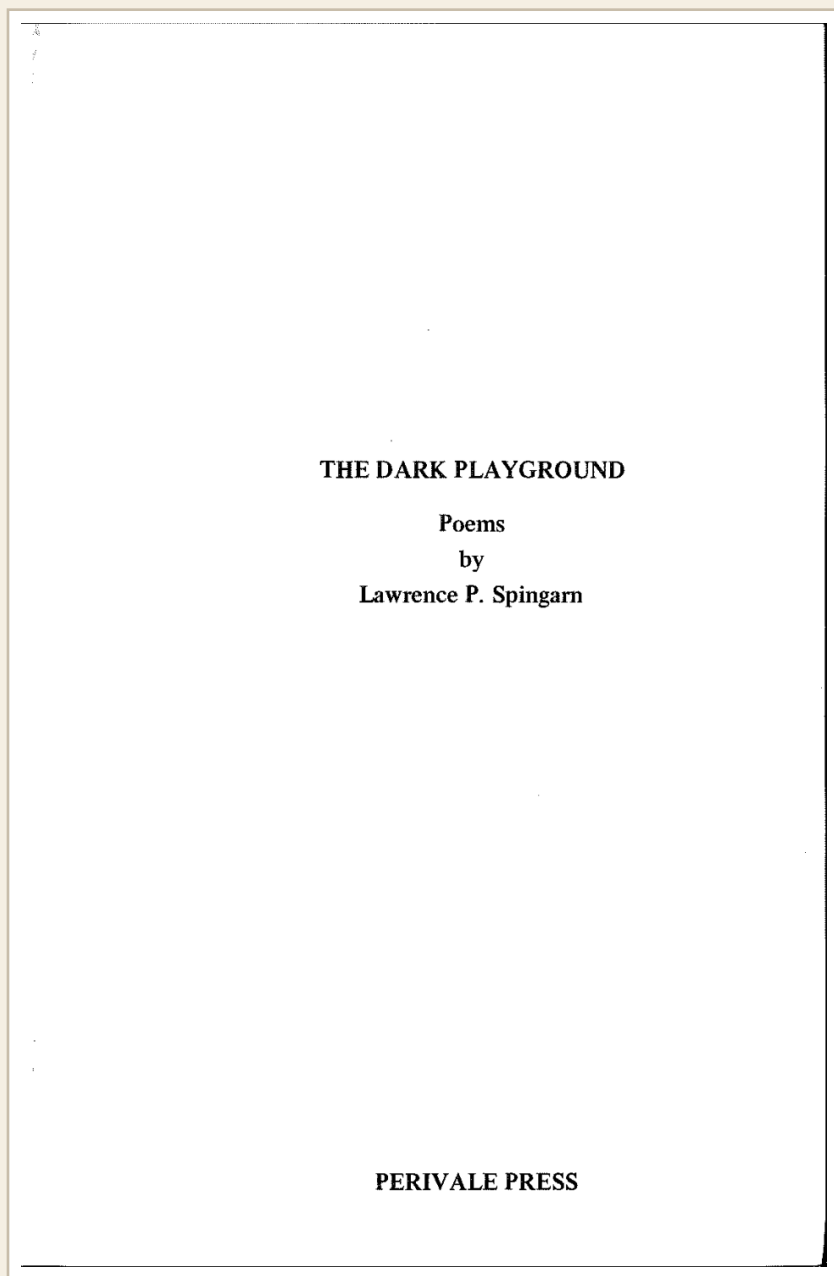
By LAWRENCE P. SPINGARN



E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY, INC.

New York, 1947

Title page of Rococo Summer, and Other Poems (1947).



*Title page of *The Dark Playground* (1979).*

INTRODUCTION

July 11, 1917, Jersey City, New Jersey – May 27, 2001, Van Nuys, California

Lawrence Perry Spingarn built a remarkably sustained Los Angeles poetry life out of several overlapping vocations: poet, teacher, editor, painter, reader, and small-press publisher. Born in Jersey City in 1917, educated at Bowdoin and the University of Michigan, and further formed at Bread Loaf, he worked at the Library of Congress and in New York publishing before moving west to teach at Pomona College. He later taught at UCLA and, from 1959 until his 1985 retirement, at Los Angeles Valley College. His poems appeared in *Poetry*, the *Southwest Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, *Coastlines*, *Bachy*, and many other journals.

His first collection, *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (1947), was recommended by the Book-of-the-Month Club and established the historical, familial, and satirical modes he would keep revising. *The Lost River* followed in London in 1951, then *Letters from Exile* in 1961. With *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (1968), Spingarn founded Perivale Press in Van Nuys. The press became both an outlet for his own books and a durable small-press node devoted especially to poetry in translation. His editorial reach widened with *Poets West* (1975), an anthology of writers from the eleven western states.

Spingarn's poems distrust prestige while remaining fascinated by its costumes. Hotels, clubs, faculty rooms, old families, imperial relics, travel brochures, freeways, delicatessens, and rented rooms become comic theaters in which class, appetite, ethnic inheritance, and mortality collide. The formal control is often strict even when the voice sounds conversational: rhymed stanzas and sonnet structures persist beneath a surface crowded by slang, brand names, menus, and historical footnotes. His Jewish family history and European ancestry repeatedly meet the postwar landscapes of Southern California.

The later collections—*Freeway Problems—and Others* (1970), *The Dark Playground* (1979), and *Going Like Seventy* (1988)—make aging itself a satirical

instrument. Spingarn kept giving readings and described poetry as intelligible public speech rather than an eccentric private cult. He also published fiction, including *The Blue Door*, *Moral Tales*, *Journey to the Interior*, and *Elegy for Amelia*. He died in Van Nuys in 2001. The present edition gathers every poem recoverable from the complete local scans, preserving the book sequence while avoiding duplicate printings where later collections repeat a poem without substantive reconception.

ROCOCO SUMMER, AND OTHER POEMS

New York: E. P. Dutton, 1947

Pilgrimage

Every spring, each ground-renewing April,
Religion of unrest brought them, mother, daughter,
Conservative in old Buick, comfortable in cloth coats,
Up through the flooded hills, past yawn of Hoosac,
Beyond that outworn excrescence, North Adams,
Through the insistent dignity of Williamstown
To the Vermont line: mortgaged white mansions,
The receding echo and dust of old battle.

In their veins rusted the thinning ore,
The mountainous metal of Ethan Allen;
Their banner was blue on fallen gold,
Their device, a cash-register rampant.
Speech: pure. Tones: nasal and precise.
Digestion: good for overdone turkey,
Apple pandowdy, tea. Clean plates, tip,
Maiden portions, sterile and neurotic.

After the conciliating cigarette, they strolled
Between the self-conscious poses of bronze,
Among the plinth and mass of granite,
Remembering a little who they were,
Discarding mentally the cotton stockings,
The unromantic exigency of low heels,
Dreaming of Molly Pitcher at the guns,
Love and General Burgoyne, Nathanael Greene.

Afternoon, like a pale flag, waved surrender
Against the dark, determined hills.
Custodians yawned behind their hands,
A small dog uttered banalities above the tombs;
These two ladies, tremulous, hand-in-hand,
Walked to the parked, high-waisted Buick,
Thinking of next April at this solemn place
And fretting about the gas jets at home.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Stanzas for the Closing of a House

The meadows sag below the house like rugs
Knitted in dreamer's gold by callid sun,
And small wind combs their flaxen nap.
The road slips past in brown impenitence,
Purged of its pilgrimage. From this porch,
Behind these withered arabesques of vine,
I hear the bees draining the flowered dusk.

Here are no peopled voices to protest,

Nor even ghosts to name these desecrations:

Uprooted ferns beside the ice-house pond,
My aunt's rank garden trampled down by hooves
(And she so helpless, written under stones!).
Her fences forced, the trees graze in her fields,
With but the echo of a whippoorwill.

And now, within this ravaged solitude,
The last slow fuse of contemplation burns
From a glow-worm's eye. The careless thrush
Ascends infinity on trestled notes. The brook
Pours its resinous, insinuating syrup
Beneath the starved pines that are sentinels
Standing guard among the tired gravestones.

But next the night drops like a slackened sail.
The gossip of a breeze rattles it briefly
As it descends yet lower on the house
Whose grey and flaking silence fills a mask
Frowning in memory of the faces lost.

Must I walk in to snuff the whispering candles,
To lock warped doors contesting exodus?

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Rococo Summer

After split skies and tardy thunder, rain
Recalled the children in their pinafores
To porches tense with sportsmen. Bores
Peddled the myth of Vicksburg once again.
Grant himself, bribed with a fine cigar,
Sinister, taciturn, sick with his cancer,
Snatched from a silver tray the cabled answer,
Read he would die, smiled, headed for the bar.
The sky protested. Mallets clicked dismay.
Beneath wet elms the darkey waiters served
Tall, minted juleps. Sudden horsemen swerved,
Missing a child, reining another way.
The sun returned. Oh, what is left to tell?
No pen stabs reputation. From the lawn,
Duly ensconced, not without a yawn,
Women moved gravely toward the dinner bell.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Partners

I came upon them as I climbed the road:

Their gate stood open and they had one load
Of hay to gather home before the rain
Lurched through the field and staggered out again.
They worked alone. They had no steady son
To cock their hay or hoist it ton by ton
Upon the wagon. In her gingham dress,
The woman struggled with gaunt loneliness,
While in the boulder-circled field her man
Lifted the loads, a Yankee Caliban.
They had been married more than fifty years,
Too long for idle gossip, or for tears.

They shared as topics weather and their horse:

No time was left for quarrel or divorce.
What words of theirs came sparely to a head,
The wind nipped off, the growing tempest sped.

These two beneath the sky were made for quiet:

The storm may intercede, but not deny it!

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

North Atlantic

This is a bitter land, and bold.
Wind sucks the marrow of its bone.
The waves have flayed it raw and cold.
Gulls deafen it with monotone.

Rename the island for its goats,
Endow the crags where each was born;
These piping deacons in patched coats
Shall bruise their pates on Capricorn.

Now, as our thriftless feet return
To houses furnished with proud years,
On each blind pane the sunsets burn
In alchemy too swift for tears.

The spiders of this shredded sky
Weave cobwebs stronger than a rafter,
Hard patterns for our alien eyes,
Appalling skeins of hidden laughter.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Definition

When I said that mercy stood
Within the borders of the wood,
I meant the lenient beast with claws
And bloody, swift-dispatching jaws.
He lies with silence, yet he tears
From out the heart its clustered cares;
He's not as kind as you would be

Who fast with toothless charity:

He waits, and holds his noxious breath,
Then springs with all the grace of death.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

The Elders

It was my privilege to remember
How feeble leaves, like ancient men
Snickering in gardens of September,
Watched chaste Susannah in her pool again.
They spoke the prologue to illusion,
Whispering like elders who deplore
Their mirrored, impotent intrusion,
Her whiteness floating at the shore.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

New England Pastoral

My father willed me nothing but his fields.

Once they were covered by his grazing stock;
Now, every Spring, the rain-wash in them yields
A growing crop of grey and useless rock.
My sorry cornfields, mucked with clay and bleak,
Can match me in the stubbornness they show.

They give no quarter when my team pulls weak:

The plow that breaks them must be strong and slow.

It's hard work skimming one poor pail of cream
When I have finished milking all my cows.
They sleep warm summer through in one long dream,
Half black, half white, like languid clowns they browse.
At night I sit upon the hill's hard knees
To hear the wind sing back my favorite air.

Wind, the tall harper, plucks the boughs of trees
And tunes the vineyards with elaborate care.
My neighbor told me many years ago
That one could gain a decent living here,
But now—I doubt if this was ever so. . . .

And yet, it's not the hard work that I fear:

Grass is one evil that I can't repress.
After my death, trees too shall work their harm,
Crossing my fields, making them wilderness
When no one lives to say "This was his farm."

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Solitaire

The house played dead beneath a threat of rain.
I looked upon its doors and turned away,
Scanning the blighted orchard, where the slain
Harvest of unpicked pears and apples lay.
Men said these rooms were fashioned for a bride:
At least the virgin paint was undefiled,
Brightening the wainscot and the tile inside,
Daylight peeped through the window like a child.

The sun at last revealed one face within:

Straight in a rocker near the chimney-nook
A single woman smiled upon her book,
With shadows dancing on her wrinkled skin.
Her men were gone: some to the civil strife
Whose sullen drums called striplings to the South;
Others to stones surrendered, or to drouth.
She toiled alone as maiden, mother, wife.

Yet here, they say, much hope had come to pass:

Love and its fruit, the modest easier years,
Long days of work, short days of rain and tears
To haunt this face beyond the dusty glass.
The hour was swift. Perhaps she read from John,
Joel who prophesied her locust days,
Or Chrysostom whose lips might louder praise
Her fortitude. I wondered, and walked on.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Mr. Ferreira's Vineyard

Maria came along the path. Her stride

Soon brought her to her sleeping father's side:

"Papa," she said, "you better come and eat.
It's not good for you, sitting in this heat."

He shifted his great bulk around and smiled:

"What for you bodder me?" he asked the child.
"I no eat notting at zis time o' day.
I watch zees grapes. Now go along an' play!"
The only vineyard on the dusty street
Was his, a green oasis, cool and sweet,
Where every day, from nine till almost noon,
He sat still, merely dreaming. All too soon
His hours of morning idleness were up.
Then he would go and drain a pleasant cup
Of wine in the woodshed, where his one task—
Making kindling—was all that he could ask
For work to do. A man of sixty-nine,
Suckled on grapes, is heavy as the vine
In his back door-yard, that, when day is done,
Bows to departing summer and the sun.
But evening's cool, and stealthily he'd go
Back to his grapes to hear them stretch and grow,
To watch the grackles take the place of bees
Going to hive beneath a neighbor's trees;
With the hot humming of their buzz-saw wings
They made him think of chores—unpleasant things.
This day wore on. As usual he came
To seek his arbor, passing the slow flame
Of shy geraniums, scarlet with heat,
And bedded roses, indolently sweet.
From this safe nook he heard his scolding wife,
Whose tongue had been the clapper of his life,
Call him again. That bell-shaped form he knew
Was cracked with years and too much work to do.

He dozed beneath the torrent of her voice:

Darkness excused him from a braver choice.
Tomorrow, by the time that shadows thin,
His vats would bubble and the grapes within
Yield the mightiest vintage of them all,
A mad Madeira for a festive fall.
Near dawn, the greening shadow of the grape
Was deeper, darker than a funeral crape,

And suddenly, there came to him the Word:

One sad note from a sad nocturnal bird,—
The hoot owl, poor relation to the cocks,
A target for artilleries of rocks,
An ominous and evil-visaged seer,
Impious harbinger of loose-kneed fear.
“Go’way, old fool!” José Ferreira cried,
“Go cross da street an’ scare John Pinto’s bride!”
He mopped his sweating, sun-tanned face and brimmed
With glee because the eyes of night had dimmed
Upon the vine-roots. Widening streaks of gray
Sheared through the arbor holes for prying day,
A day that brought the hardy old man near
The vintage that would cap his fertile year.
But, in the moment that the cock crew, night
Returned to him; old Joe Ferreira’s sight
Grew weak; the owl from a nearby limb
Flapped to the still-dark West, deserting him.
At six that day Maria found his head
All on one side. Upon its whiteness bled
Grapes that had slowly fallen, one by one,
After he died, impatient for the sun,
And for the old man’s hands that, years before,
Planted the vineyard on this alien shore.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Nytis Lodge: The Adirondacks

Each breeze that cracks this placid glass of lake
Removes its spider years. Here, rotund speech
Reverberates once more against the beams,
Quickens the immortelle which autumn ate.

That some were happy here concerns me now:

I shall unknot the stocking's hoard of time.
This generation, kind and debonair,
Fitted these stubborn joists like wedded lives.

Such builders never died. I know them well:

Charged with their grace, the tall and stately days
Were wound in punctual clocks whose slow release
Uncoiled brief pleasure with a lazy tick.
Now that the worms have girdled every beam,

I must be brief. Tale to rehearse with smiles:

How one dull heir to bounty infinite
Shook off the fiber of decorum's mesh
But found new bondage on a woman's lips
When stars eluded day above the pines.
Hands that burned these mottoes in the wall
Grasped stiff reality and moral flames.
No flippancy of mine outstares stern truth
More staunchly than the wise, embedded words,
And dust, a sermon shorter than a book,
Lies in the couch of reason it absolved.

Faint mice shall run a crooked mile of rooms
Yet not devour the clear and wordless title
Woven in contemplation at the hearth.
Time lifts its casual skirts, attempts the stairs,
And mounts security with rhythmic tread
Toward its cool chambers alien to regret.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Alarum

It is time again. I leave the town,
Drawn forth by the burning of the trees;
No other follows my footsteps down
Those flaming paths. I go where I please.
No sirens sound, so I look behind,
Seeing staid elms, a careful steeple,

But out of sight is out of the mind:

Town is enjoyed by the stolid people.
Yet the fires rage, and my feet will scorch
If I stand long under any tree.
I must find whose hand applied this torch
To the slumbering woods so guilefully.
I must pump all hope to quench my doubt
That the summer will survive this spite,
For my dawdling townsmen put flames out
With the snowflakes of a winter night.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Winter Eve

The white doe stamps and slimly glides
Through thickets close and cruel;
Upon her eye the star-sheen slides
Like fingers to a jewel.

No night for sound: yet from the glen
Come fusillades of frost,
The random shots of frightened men
Who scatter and are lost.

The startling axe is quickly still:

The woodsman's warning cry
Proclaims that on the hemlock hill
Giants touch earth and die.

And on a purple patch of snow
The images of untold wings
Foretell that winter too must go
Before the cold bird sings.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Counterpart

Something had stirred in the grass below.

I tarried to find what the night concealed:

Was it rabbit or deer, or friend or foe?
The dark was deep, and my eyes were sealed.

Alas, it was greater than all of these:

Into the moon's white net it crept,
The blinded self that gropes on its knees.
I laughed aloud, but the creature wept.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Together

We have been friends together:

Nothing has stood between us
But the weather;
Nothing has pricked us but the thorns,
Brambles, and heather.

Out of this house we fled,
Consumed by spring,
Or when the leaves were red,
When birds began to sing.
Into the woods we flew
When love was new.

We have found nests
Emptied of song,
Traced broken fences
That had once been strong,
Budged shadows with our knees,
And dodged the fickle bees.

We have been warm
When storms railed at our room,
Watching the burning oak
Accept its doom,
Reading the curls of smoke,
Fanning the modest flames,
Juggling the magic letters of our names.

Over a subtle book
We once exchanged
The pilgrim look,
Content to sit quiet,

Letting the wind riot:

Ours was the strangest youth
Where gladness walked with ruth.
We have owned half the world
Or half a league
Of hill and wood that mist unfurled;
Now we go softly up
With our fatigue,
Closing a single door
On brown and red,
Groping toward the bed,
Letting the breeze patrol the hall.

We have been friends together:

That is all.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Recluse

Her portal is deaf to the pleading sea,
The mew and the scratch of wind on its face.
No lover shall creep with his magic key
To the lock of this lost and lonely place.
When death begins knocking, she shall arise
And answer the door, naked save for dreams.
The dark shall make two diamonds of her eyes
While shadows drop like spiders from her beams.
Is this the guest who will lounge by her flame
And share her bed as if he shared before?
But even death rejects her. Red with shame,
She shudders and weeps and fastens the door.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Autumnal

*"No Spring, nor Summer Beauty hath such grace,
As I have seen in one Autumnal face."*

Your face is cruel in this forbidden land.
Between your feet the mists of autumn curl.
You, who go clad demurely as a girl,
Beckon me on with Circe's ardent hand.
Orchards are hung with tarnished bulbs of fruit.
Already frost divides the simple root.
The sky is milked of azure, and the earth
Must wait two seasons for a second birth,
While all the feeble children of the first
Creep, crawl, flutter,—hunger and thirst.
Day slackens like a sail. Our eyes are blind.
The bats of sleep stagger across the mind.
The house, with careful fences at its side,
Recalls our feet to custom and to pride.
Out of the burning bushes and the trees
We bear new hunger, lift our tainted knees,
And count the fragrant garlands that are spun
In secret from the sun, the northern sun!

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Cain's Acre

This side of the house

Dwells in shadow now:

No lens can detect
What its panes reflect.

Small hope from the skies,

Few traces of sun:

There are screams and cries
Where the work is done.

This chamber grows chill.
Blood lies on the grass,
Past the stubborn hill
Gorged buzzards pass.

While beasts in the stalls
Alone understand
When a red leaf falls
In the startled land.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Ecce Homo: Vermont

Hold still, my friend John Abbott,
I'll count the teeth in your name;
There's nothing soft about them
And little time can tame.

But speak to me, John Abbott;
I love to watch your face
Chop down the stubborn syllables,
Or wall the words that race

Has left in you, John Abbott.
I watch your cautious fields
Admit the pallid dogwood
When June to summer yields.

I know your house, John Abbott;
How very white and still
Are centuries in a sturdy frame
Upon a solemn hill!

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Promises

No cleft hoof haunts
The grove's unbroken white,
No screech-owl taunts
The shamefastness of night;
The ice-cap heaves, but holds
My pond in lucent folds,
With greys and greens and golds
The demi-gods of light.
No song lies lost
In drifts that are too deep;
No whip of frost
Confounds the ear of sleep;
No frozen spring will flow,
Nor will strange echoes go
To steal across the snow
Like shepherds calling sheep.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Greed's Orchard

The wall is twisted
About the Tree
Where Eve insisted
On privacy.
Her ruddy Adam
Filched his wit
From fig-stuffed madams
Who pandered it.
A priggish Lord
Locked up the Garden;
Snakes stayed to hoard,
The apples hardened,
While Adam's seed

Has followed suit:

Man is the worm
That spoils my fruit!

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Hex

Was this my portion of the sun:

A wifeless house, a frigid one?
Harvest of stones on bitter clay
Within the furnace of the day?

Under my rainy mountain top:

Winded nags and a niggard crop.
The fiddles of the wind must snap
Before good apples fill my lap.

No walls of mine will stand erect:

Frost is their sorry architect.
Lonely and old and ill-content,
Quick to anger, slow with the rent,
Born with a mark upon my thigh,
hoard the days until I die
And curse the crow for all my loss
Who proved when shot an albatross.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Quiet Kingdom

Mine is a realm of quietness and cold,
Sterile and bleak beneath ambitious sun,
Pitted with cellar-holes, quite overrun
By foxes, hawks, the meadows' marigold.
Mere earth has lodged desire with fruition

Snug in a corner of the spacious breeze:

They lie beneath the rain-enchanted trees
Where none may part them with an apparition.
Old fences tumble as the sumacs grow

Into new signposts for the empty roads:

When summer lingers and the fall is slow,
They speed the apple-pickers with their loads.
Here my pulse throbs alone, but is unshaken.
Count me as separate from all frantic faces.
They love me not, who scorn these quiet places
Where I shall be when censuses are taken.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Abandoned

Their great days done, iron and rock
Rail at the rust in the stopped clock.
Fear is a mouse in the still room.
Shadow sits idle at the loom.

The Book is closed. Its reader lies
With rigid face beneath cold skies.
By lost walls in anarchic snows
The rabbits watch where silence goes.

A russet thuds from the dry branch:

That shock could start an avalanche!
Thaw is a signal to the moles
To charge downhill from cellar-holes.
The churn is rancid, the pot foul.
No one answers the foolish owl.
Tramps stare up at a broken pane,
Shake their heads, pass on in the rain.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Spanish Lover

He must have entered in a gust of wind. Yes, that was it.
My sister's shadow moved along the panel: there he stood
Behind her, smiling, hunched in his dark yards of cloak, and black
Of brow under his cap; as quick of movement as a snake,
Soft-spoken, with a blade beneath his tongue. And what he was,
From whence he came, we did not ask. We never learned his name!

So on he stayed, for Mary's welcoming smile was like an
Invitation, if he needed urging. My heart has learned
True love is undivided, yet I grew used to hearing
His feet tiptoe from her room down to mine. A gentleman
Always considerate of ladies' feelings, he whispered
So softly, so sweetly in his foreign way. What shame
I could not answer. The wind answered, prophetically, on
Three sides of the house, at five loose doorways, from the sea.
Years afterwards I learned his shameful designation:
Deserter from a Spanish brig-of-war, an officer
Grown weary in the service of his queen, a wanted man
Hating the boredom of a cabin, charged with rebellion.

Mary took ill. I found time to weep between his kisses.
No medicine could save her. She lay in stiff agony,
Propped in the soiled bed, glaring at our whispers and our smiles:
At last she slipped into a sea of dreams, past all envy.
After my Spaniard paid the doctor in weighty dollars,
The old man rode off, shaking his white head, mumbling vague words.
But I was quick with love. I shut my eyes to death itself,
And rode behind the Spaniard to sweet Mary's lonely grave,
Clutching his hard brown body with this pair of trembling hands.

You don't believe me, you say he never lived at all? Wait!
Look under my hair. A fall? No, he struck when he was mad,
And, as our sins were netted in our faces, he would drink
Strong foreign wines that had been carried up from Portland Town.
Then he would wheel me in a wild coranto, tapping tunes
With his cruel, sharp little feet upon the puncheon floor.
Oh, but he was a rare one! Nervous and high-stepping on
His arches, he had exquisite taste. The tempting stuff he
Bought me from the ships was not cheap. In the entire state
I was the first to wear black silk stockings with bright red clocks.
He laughed when, entering the room, he watched me admire them,
For I had precious little else on.

Along towards spring he would sit himself down at the spinet,
A rosewood box marked "Wien," to play mazurkas. Chopin
Was his favorite, but the whole house shook with the thumping.
The wind itself sighed, drowned out and defeated by music.
He admired the rough sea, and would take me riding near it,
Sometimes as far as the Head, or even the Light, holding
Me fast within his red-gloved hands, a lady prisoner
Subject to occasional rain of kisses, not minding
In the least, if I must say so. Or sometimes I would ride
Side-saddle on big, spanking Bess who never understood
The little silver spurs he flattered my heels with. I learned
To cry when he was absent, and laugh when he was with me.
Although I loathed the patience needed, I used to launder
And iron with care the laces he wore at wrist and neck.
Yet he would pinch me at times as if I were a mere girl,
And often, when I was feeling very low, I remembered
Mary and the strange manner of her unlovely passing,
The cry she uttered which was not a prayer, and her eyes
Turned inward.

Then, one morning, after the many seasons
Of our mating, I saw him with a brass-bound telescope
Which caught the sun, standing below the house, below the hill,
Looking seaward. He watched the tall, impressive sloops-of-war
Wave from the cradle of the Kennebec. I recalled what
Jed Eastman had told me about the Spanish battle brig,
The Santa Luz, en route from Cadiz or Huelva, headed
Up swiftly into northern seas, on some private mission.

But, being a woman, I could not think beyond the bed
Which bound the happy world we made together. So they came:
Not as the wind comes, knocking on the windowpane, not as
The doe comes, leaping into the corn-patch, nor as the lynx
And the wolf come a-howling, man's brothers in bold caution;
But as the ice-floe moves, silently in the night, as spring
Ascends the hill, planting deep its tidy little banners
As marks and monuments, for recording every movement.
Thus they came. First, shadows stalked the house. The fire died
And leaped up again to reassure us when they had passed.
I did not know enough to expect the swarthy huntsmen,
The ensign and his gang, who vowed to search the Pole itself,
But he, philosopher in acquiescence, understood
The summons. Smoking calmly of his slender cigarettes,
He kissed me with renewed passion. I was unstrung. My blood
Dissolved to poison in my veins, The fear of losing that
Bright flame we watched together was on me. And when at last
The first warning sounded, like a thin hail on the roof slates,
I screamed until his hand wrenched the breath from me, while he
Damned me by all his saints. Yet somehow we survived this scare,
And in the night, with the solemn candles standing on chairs,
Benches, and in the windows, waiting for the next summons
(Which would take its good time), we lay down together for
The quick, thrusting act. The isolated lusts of my youth
Rose for the next-to-last time out of my body, my sheaf
That he had gathered and garnished. My love slept. Envious stars
Acted sly, winking chamberlains, with pines to whisper down
On us, with the neighing of cold horses in the stable
For commentary, and the margin of life narrowing
In the white-knuckled grip of frost. His plaster-pale devil's
Face lay fretful in sleep of exhaustion, and I remembered:
'Mary is gone, with only ribbons and a poor, painted
Miniature to remind me of her. What shall this love be,
Another quick forgetting, one more happiness sealed up
Beyond the mind's or feeble finger's reach? Never!' I shook
Myself in quick-breathing determination and arose,
Clutching the short, inadequate shift about my loins,
And padded to the attic door. I paused and listened hard
For the purposive sludge of men's feet in the snow. Silence.
Well enough! I brought the bag of plaster as skillfully

As wanting could downstairs. Panting somewhat with the effort,
I stood it at the foot of the bed. He slept so soundly!
Dear Lord, how sound! And merely a minute's slow walk from death.

The next morning there were gourds, coconuts, and pineapples,
A pomegranate, and a knife with a Spanish inscription,
All displayed neatly on the kitchen table. A love feast.
He laughed, but the corners of his mouth were trembling badly,
So that the seeds of the pomegranate tumbled out. Then,
To replate the armor of his pretensions, he was forced
To pull me to his lap and kiss me madly. I endured
His wet hands. Afterward, leaving the bright fruit where it lay,
I cupped my chin and listened to him perform Mendelssohn's
New music that we had sent to Boston for that very month.
I must have dozed, for next I knew I was startled awake:
The window had been shivered by rocks. The sound was very loud
And sharp, much faster than my ear. He stood in devious thought,
Bowed over the settee,—“chaise longue,” rather. Gleaming in
His hands lay a bracelet of gold with gems as big as warts:
The second warning. Waiting was still sane philosophy,
Though madness grew from it. Intangibles! Unpardoned sins
In odd disguise. A masquerade, with other-worldly forms
Strutting in triumph before your haunted face. I promised
To resist them, and took down my father's duelling-pistols
From the shelf, loaded them swiftly, and presented them
Uncocked. He shook his head, pointed seaward and, with a
Weary grace, shrugged his shoulders.

Outside, gulls gloomed overhead.
There was no tribute to exact save husks of tropic fruit,
By them unappreciated. We drank the milk of nuts,
Fed hugely on the white inner rind, put chickens to broil
On the spits, ran in relays to the dank cellars for wine
That gurgled from green, wickered bottles like human blood
From the cut jugular, and set out twelve frayed leather chairs,
My father's, around the oaken board heaped with the heavy
Tarnished plate and the chipped hock-glasses. And thereupon
We waited, not without ceremony, for he prayed with
Honest, unafraid eyes. Grace would not do us any good:
They did not come. The birds grew cold. We sat together all
Afternoon with a complaining fire, feeling the slow pulse

Of resignation and wondering if it were not our own.
Ice dripped from the eaves above like tears. The sullen river
Moved greedily between the snows, catching all of our sorrow,
All denials of implacable design. When the steeple
Clanged out the pensive hour of five, my man arose darkly from
His seat, surged into the black tenure of his cloak, and tied
The tapes of his strange hat under his chin. He hobbled
Frozenly to the door. "Where are you going? Stop, I say!"
If God himself had been behind, he would as stubbornly
Have set the needle of his nose on down the icy hill.
I could not follow on my high heels. I ran a good part
Of the way, sobbing out my small dignity, and wanting
Him back, safely lodged by the fire. My little strength gave out.
I turned back at last, fearing that he had already crossed
The Mendham Bridge, and so was walking into another
World, once more a stranger, but one beloved who took along
With him a northern heart to melt in the south's fiery sun.
Yet none of us have ever given up without struggle
What he or she has loved well: life in any form. Mary
Died with a bitter protest against the thing which grew
And seemed to cut teeth on her inner tissue. Our father
Slaved freely around Africa, and met his end with an
Ashanti arrow rankling in his side. Mother died just
After I was born. Bitter protest indeed! That is why
I harnessed up the sleigh to my slight hope, and wildly drove
In moonlight behind Bessie's steaming flanks. Too soon I found
What I looked for. That is my fatality, to suck up
In full measure what others sip from mere gills and half-pints.

I found him lying before Mendham Bridge, in the dark road,
Trampled and torn by strange hooves, by formidable horsemen,
Young-looking still, with his arm flung over his spared face,
The fingers pointing skyward, all muscles rigidly flexed.
Ai! What frights the dead, what makes them so fearfully heavy?
My arms almost failed me. Bess neighed a nervous denial
Of equine responsibility. I found his pistol
In the snow, unfired, inglorious. Bundling the entire
Bloody business into the sleigh, I drove like a witch
Over the ulterior road, through the Guy Fawkes cluster
Of pine trees, past the pond, and so to my deserted house,

To my widowed bed, to the fumbled spectre of desire
Groaning above the door. Half the long night I wailed loudly,
And half I spent in silence, shaking with inward coldness
Before a great fire, his mashed head in my lap. At dawn
I washed his face with a sponge and combed out his dank hair.
I recalled the bag of plaster. Stirred by inspiration,
I made a mixture in a box, pressed his dead features down,
And took record of his mortality. Love, your twisted
Pinions have possessed me in close grip, but whenever they
Relax, I am lost and helpless, utterly lost, wanting
Even above life the cold calm that is akin to death.
Burial was a betrayal to dust. Ground frozen stiff
Made digging hard and sweated me once again over what
Would never again quicken blood. The spade snapped off from rust.
With my fingers, like a beast, I finished the shallow pit,
Shoved him in, and stood awhile blowing out my frosty breath.

The next day I worked on the mold. Not having prepared
Impression from the back, I lacked a full head of him, but
The job was good enough. I knew the secrets of firing—
And used the Dutch oven as a kiln, heating it until
The clay blushed hotly, whereupon I feared a sudden fire
In the flue. And when he cooled (I mean, the mask of himself),
I took him out and mounted him upon a board, placing
The whole contrivance in the mullioned westerly window
Over the front door of the house, where it would surely catch
The sun's last feeble rays, glow whitely far away, into
The dusk, and continue to gleam in the winter moonglow,
Or, sneering prettily, gloat down upon the empty road
That resembled destiny, ribboning out to death.
They never came near again, but I have waited, hoping:
They would, and well-prepared for them. From that day forward
I kept a pair of pistols loaded and by my hand. I
Watched the road as he was doing. But no one ever passes.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Dead Sea

Here is where my ancient bathed,
Bearded sage with the eagle look;
From these dead shores he went unscathed
Upon the journey of the Book.

My ancient passed into the void:

Egypt, Syria, Ararat,
The canyon where the ghosts deployed,
The meadows where the kine waxed fat.

Mirage or dream, he found them out.
His sons and their sons, seekers still,
Must climb and freeze and scorch and shout
For Canaan—over another hill.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Cafe Society

At midnight, from the mansions of their sires,
The jobless cognoscenti, caps pulled down
On faces truculent with maimed desires,
Converge upon the Greek's place from the town.
Here, where the night cuts extra thick with fog,
The psychopathic neon that they seek
Shudders in expectation as the Greek
Reads from his menu evening's epilogue.
The looms stand idle, but these stomachs ask
More reassurance from the empty mill
Than widow's sly unravelling of a task
Or nurture niggard to a suitor's will.
But here the bacon of their youth gets done
To crisp upon an unscrubbed iron grate;
Their coffee through the rusty urn is run
Uncounted times made bitter by their hate;
Their complaints proceed to banter, their grim eyes
Grow weary with the stale jest and the lewd;
The Greek dreams hairily above his pies
Of Helen, lost among the multitude.
The cop turns at the corner of his beat,
Stares in through windows misted by the smoke,
Looks down the deadened artery of street,
Enters, and spreads dominion like a cloak.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

The Poet in Camden: 1892

The house is paid for now. You lie alone,
Propped up in bed with journals and cigars,
Your veteran's mane unshorn, the rolling stone
Invisible, like all your battle scars.

You, carpenter and printer, gentle nurse,
What is there left to trouble with, or tend?
What haunts you now? Do neighbors know the end?
They come too late with notice of your verse.
So-o, close your eyes. Breathe sweet a little smile.
Clap hands, a child. Keep easeful in your dress.
You quite escaped the niceties of style
But death has caught you in your carelessness.
We fold your hands, we make this bed anew,

Muting our tribute to a lesser man;
Flowers from Philadelphia (all too few!)
Arrive with Bucke and Traubel's watering-can.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Meeting Place

Haven is here, through this revolving door.

Make cheerful room against the pavement rain:

Here pilgrims find what they are humble for,
The proud desist a moment from their gain.

After the coffee comes the cigarette:

The diner scans the conscience of his age
And, none too eagerly, he turns the page.
Repletion soon will help his mind forget.

And here ulterior wisdom threads its way:

The slender purse is cunning and will wait
Until its own dire itch attacks the State,
With war the hot-plate special for today.
All night the lonely break the bitter roll.
At dawn, the empty ones in corners see
Blue-print perfection fitting thigh to cheek
With wantons shopping for a bargain soul.

The old and faded to their emblems cling:

Pride is the label in a greasy hat
Or sables on the talent run to fat;
Hope is initialed in the Woolworth ring.
And lovers at the brighter windows burn
To hurl their brittle heritage like stones
Into the sterile streets. Among dry bones
Their pleas will make the wardens taciturn.
But, being strangers, you and I observe.
There is no exit for us. In the street
The louder wars with taller warriors meet.
Protect your ears! Rearm that naked nerve!

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

North by East

Above the river and its poisoned shore,
Mured in her mansion with a dozen cats,
A lady dwells whom youth will not restore.

(She pins frustration to outmoded hats.)

Sealed in the musty temple of her room,
She moves with dignity across the floors;

No noise intrudes to warn her of her doom:

Death is a vulgar tumult, heard outdoors.
The river hurries garbage to the sea.
Her factory windows catch the falling light.
The streets are darkened with humanity,
Glad for the evening whistle, and the night.
But she must sift existence all alone;
This faded heiress of the loud machines
Hears the grim water lapping at a stone.
Time will inform her what this hunger means.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

The Conqueror

He climbs the stairs and shuffles through his door.
The nights are his, but he is not the nights'.
He'd be in darkness with a hundred lights,—
Casting a meagre shadow on the floor.
He pulls his rumpled cover from the bed,
Disrobes, and hangs his sweaty shirt to dry;
Knowing no God, and he too young to die
He slips between the sheets with prayers unsaid.
His lamp blinks out. Counting a thousand sheep,
Rubbing his hairy chest, he courts the muse
That dwells like ectoplasm in his shoes,
But, sheared like all the rest, he shall not sleep.
The harbor is ablaze with lights. Its cool
Enchantment is beyond his avid grasp.
His poison works more cruelly than the asp
Which Cleopatra tested on a fool.
The ticking of the clock prolongs the hour.
He turns and stares morosely at the wall.
A world away some thousand warriors fall
To help preserve his feeble dream of power.
He fiddles on a thought as Nero might.
Dead conscience is his tearful violin.
If all but emperors labor and stay thin,
This conqueror should riot through the night.
With nothing to remember or forget,
Victory in vain, his wine has fallen flat.
Sleep mocks him most, as he remembers that
Mortality craves one last cigarette.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Lament

Most love with fury, some few love in peace.
It matters not, for I have ceased to strain

For harmonies beyond staccato rain:

My thighs are diligent, my guests increase.
No disinfectant guards me as before,
I hold no man as lover or as friend,
And when at last their stealthy footsteps end,
A boy with towels raps upon my door.
Cupid has robbed my chamber inch by inch,
Filching the apples, taking out the light.
My very eyes are shutters drawn for night.
Men's hands sweat wonder, but their fingers pinch.
At six o'clock, the sun's carbolic disk
Cleanses my wound and broods upon the lamp;
These sheets are muddied and this pillow damp.
Inside my heart the rude guest runs no risk.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Portrait by Bachrach

You are the finished gentleman, and sit
Under these lamps to warm yourself a bit.

Forsake the fallen and surmount the dead:

Your heart is grey and narrow, like your head.
‘Assume the halo as you would a wreath:
Truth starves within the prison of your teeth,
But art has fixed to you the evidence
Sought by the naive wonder of this lens.
If you were kind, the kindness is forgot.
The camera strips you as your friends did not,
While you, commander, swagger for this pose,
Scorning the midge that crawls upon your nose.
The years shall prove that all your flesh has done
Little except to clothe a skeleton.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Cold Comfort

See how the street lamps glare into the room!
They shed no heat. No matter how I try
To bury them, the roses of the light will bloom
Over this sleeper's face, about her eyes,

Upon her hand extended as for bread,
Across the dirty coverlet, the alien sheet,
Around the dubious halo at her head
And up the nude projections of her feet.
Her staring face proclaims the lunar change
Which clutches coldly at the heart within;
A rusty brew is simmering on her range,

Rats waltz to warm themselves upon the bin.
Though you deny it, friend, her death is yours.
The world grows colder as the moon draws near.
Our souls provide no fuel. These frigid shores
Are proof enough of progress into fear.
Put on your coat, companion. We shall leave
This sorry room awhile, and get us air.
Look one last time before you go. Believe
The chill you feel lies deeper than despair.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Rainy Season

This is the rainy season within the heart:

From the hostels of the mind the bored guests start,
Seeking expensive pleasures in warmer lands
And love, with death coupling on bright ocean sands.

This is their Great Hegira. The crack train
Waits in the crowded station, steamed with rain,
For the rich, the bloated, the unnerved and blind
Who shuttle between Miamis of the mind.

A chill lies on Northern hearts, on Western gold:
Diamonds are cold, marriage without love is cold.
Travel therefore to palaces of the sun.
Convey women, your dogs, your symbolic gun.

Ladies, forego cake, the prolonged caress.
Diet, consult the quacks, shop for a new dress.
Take yourself a smooth skin, or a younger man.
Be blonde, brunette, redhead, either pale—or tan.

Gentlemen, true servants are in your hire,
While Yankee machines shall pay for your desire,
And in the mill slaves stand in dangerous rows
To lose limbs or jobs if they relax, or doze.

But here trains move surely through the warm shower
To cross the river, reach the hills in an hour,
Forsake damp memories, from these floods depart,
And escape the rainy season in the heart.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Wanderer

I see him stalking through the empty streets,
By rooted trees rebuked, past houses lit
For Christmas and the festive days. He meets
His shadowed self and thinks no ill of it.

He is not one who bears an inner light:

Diogenes was nearer to the truth.

He mixes earth and bread with dark of night:

Disastrous marriage capped his blasted youth.
Before him silence throws its snowy net,
Because of him no lonely cur shall bark;
All but the high, ensteeped clocks forget
That he is human and the road is dark.

He apes the wolves that howl upon the hills:

This humor is the deeper for his pain.
His wound is wider than neglect, that chills
Like fickle snowflakes turning into rain.
He is not poor. He brandishes his stick
As if collecting herds of frightened stars.
The scarf against his neck is warm and thick.
His face is fair and soft and free of scars.

He is not old and with the years put by:

His feet are firm and full of youthful spring.
This exile has a blue and glowing eye,
And moonlight counts the facets of his ring.

The journey that he makes is not his choice:

His home is down the street, his wife awaits
His step, his knock, his kindly-seeming voice—
Tonight he shall not pass familiar gates.
Now to the stranger heavens he returns,
Away from men, and spurning womankind,
Within his will a fiercer purpose burns
Than reading empty pages for the blind.
With half the earth repentant and unwell,
He walks about with freedom at his heels.

His ears are deafened to the pleading bell:

So few are born to stand the pain he feels.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Postbellum

Study him well. Explicitly remember
That war employs him now, for he shall find
Its flame is brighter than your feeble ember.
He shall outspeed the rabbit of your mind.
Prepare his welcome soon. He shall return.
Think of some answer to his inquiries,
For he shall probe the alleys of disease
And seize the morsels that your surfeits spurn.
The evidence is clear. Your panting eye,
Her clothing disarranged, that awkward room,
With wine, and flowers worthy of a tomb—
No jury dares convict him, should you die.
His need was work. Now he knows quicker ways
Than watching stubborn clocks, from check to check.
He'll hang your threadbare teller by the neck!
Be careful with the ledger of his days.
He shall return. Take heed of this, and mend
The broken masonry, the rotting floor.
He reads your sneer lettered upon the door.
He shall come calling when the battles end.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Song of Myself

My father said: "You dream too much."
My sister said: "You read too long."
The nourishment of sight and touch
Had made their minds and stomachs strong.
Their son and brother, strangely weak,
Could offer but the other cheek
And live among them in a trance
At such disturbing circumstance.
My father passed one wintry night
To nether regions of delight
Where none do suffer with the cold,
With graceless sons or growing old.

My weeping sister came to me:

"Our flocks need tending now," she said.
I buried deep pale poetry
And left the truant books unread.

I married and I multiplied,
Peopling a mansion in the town,
But all my inward children died
Save Hope, who is a clown.
Yet all my lover's children grow

Sturdy and skillful, rich and fat:

They wink at me, as if I know
That they would thrive and come to that.

They are good children too. I think
That I am proud to be their sire,
Since none of them were ruined by drink
Or decimated with desire.
And they are glad that I shall give

To each of them the stuffs that live:

That meat and malt of common sense

To wean them out of innocence.
I have no moments of regret

For those my passion did beget:

I wonder what the town would say
Had passion flowed the poet's way?
There is no substance in a song,
No roof can rise above a rhyme.
Perhaps the Muse shall prove me wrong. . .
But more of this some other time.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Bard

I knew him in his youth.
Now scan him at an age

When all his teeth are out:

His eyes pace in their cage,
The prison of his head,
He is estranged from truth,
He has grown bald and stout,
His lovelier foes are dead.
Forsaking arrogance,
He spits because he must;
Nothing looks clean on him,
His lips are dull with rust;
He dwells beneath a stone,
Supping on circumstance,
Hugging the interim
Between each monotone.

Words build his monument:

Its blocks turn quickly cool.

His deeds he disavows:

They are meat for a fool.
Few listen, and none care.
Locked in his tenement,
Only a dim lamp knows
How well the slow words fare.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Fever Fallen

Oh, take me from this man!
I loved him all I can.
My heart was free and wild
When he was but a child.
Alas, how could I know
How soon mere children grow?
No angel came to warn

My finger of the thorn:

He pricks me, and I bleed.
His love is like the steed
That vaults to the high stars
Across all earthly bars,
While I am left behind,
The stallion who is blind,
The hunter who went lame
And could not match the game.
It shows upon his face
How age has lost the race.
The tale I tell is brief

And easy of belief:

I loved the child, but can
No longer love this man.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Prisoner

I keep a guard, yet even he
But seldom answers to the roll;
There's ale in case of company,
Wine to make glad the soul.
I bed a wench, I pay a clerk,
My gates are firm against the night,
And still I stumble in the dark,
Though not for lack of light.
I swing a sword, I feed my hounds,

And pay my tithing free and clear:

The watchman on his safest rounds
Goes quaking with my fear.
Oh, if I could trace out again
My footsteps to the Quiet Grange,
I'd have no need to hire me men
Who find this fortress strange.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Paris: 1939

Men snatch this moment to buy pocketbooks
Needled with fugitive designs. Their looks,
Hardened by hunger, exile, and despair,
Follow the strolling fashions, flex the air,
Drive wedges into ease. At the station
Diplomats must dine on conversation.
Nude in her window off the boulevards,
A harlot laughs, shuffling the crimson cards.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Visitation

What sin was mine? What have I done
In this huge room among the gilded chairs
That statues turn away with marble stares
Toward the high windows barred against the sun?
Why is there pause, and silence in the dome,
Absence of bells, a hostess to approach,
Or lackeys who announce my sudden coach—
Why, at my coming, are no servants home?
And when I shout, crescendo drowns my voice.
The winds crack out, the golden horses prance.
The hall is long, but there shall be no dance.
There is not even room enough for choice!
Shadows about me stagger from surprise.
The mirrors gaze like humans at an ape
Back at my frightened features, which escape
To daylight and the unrepenting skies.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Finisterre

Do not bring your flowers here:

Wind shall tear them from your arms.
Keep your wine. Its like is dear.
Store your grain at safer farms.

Do not trust this fickle sky:

Thieves and poachers love its hue.
Tattered clouds go limping by.
Little thrives that's brave or new.
In the alleys of the wood
Shapes of anger snarl and stir.
Gird for evil, not for good.
Kneel and bless the Armorer.
Speed beyond the bordering night
Where the sentry day is bright.
Travel faster than your fear.
Never bring your flowers here!

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

Sonnet

For one who might have loved me, had she known
How I loved her, I graph the jagged course
That charted passion since blind Homer's horse
Outwitted crafty priest and stubborn stone.
Because there's danger here, I shall be wise
And shake my head, telling with shallow breath
How once, in jeopardy, we mocked at death
And doused the slow leaf-fire of his eyes.
My trimmed flame wavers now. No time to tell
How death returned to woo you by himself
And won you to his cold and narrow shelf,
Charming your eyes shut with his little bell. . . .
The graph ends where the paper ends: no doubt
It points to heaven, but it leaves death out.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

The Road Back

Leaving my house behind,
I did neglect

What its spirit designed:

Spring was my architect.
Oh, the roads were long, long. . . .
I chose them all.
My fancy was as strong
As any pine was tall.

Yet it was not enough
With dog at heel
To stroll away, and slough
Town smoke and city steel.

So now I must return
Without my staff;
Seek innocence, but learn
A child's despairing laugh;

Run sorrow's limping race
Throughout the town;
Mourn in the market place
While the gay sun goes down.

Publication. *Rococo Summer, and Other Poems* (E. P. Dutton, 1947).

THE LOST RIVER

London: Heinemann, 1951—poems not already printed in the 1947 section

Winter Orchard

Here is the winter orchard, here the gate
Leading to colder pastures of the mind.
This wintry fruit is locked inviolate
Within the tender closet of its rind.
Turn to the fallen fruit that left the bough.
Regard these prodigals upon the ground.
They are the strays that need no pity now.
In the wind's sullen corners they are found.
You are the picker of a firmer crop,
A larger harvest. Into your waiting hand
Answer and nourishment must surely drop,
Not from this sour and neglected land
But from a richer field beyond the fence,
From taller trees and from a better seed;
While imaged Edens of beneficence
Depict you walking naked and in need,
You are the innocent whom love shall give
A riper fruit to eat. Rejoice, and live!

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Deadwood Carpenter

I have some recollection of this fellow:

Unwise, impulsive, quite a ways from mellow,
A very Don Quixote for persistence
Auctioning frustration in the middle distance,
The crested clown repeats with every tap
His much-refused proposals. Any chap
Who hammers permanence to such dead wood
Needs not my pity, be it understood.

And yet, I'd miss his eye and frantic beak:

If chestnut shoots and rotten stumps could speak,
They'd answer for this bird, give good report
To hedgerow lawyers arming with a tort
Or pragmatists, as you and I once were.
It's best to leave him to his error, sir,
And step this way. I know a cooling spring.
Where silence props itself upon one wing
And does not launch impossibility.
Oh, do not glance up there so scornfully!
My friend, I think he's left that naked limb
And broken off the job. . . . Ah, shame on him!

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Strange Altar

She vowed the stone would never stir.
It had become the core of her
And stood as she might stand, alone,
Gaunt in her meadow as a bone
Dropped by the glacier in its glide
To rivers at earth's warmer side.
This torrid night she shunned the road
Past neighbours' farms. Instead, she strode
Across her woodlot, up her lane,
A Quaker with a walking-cane
Cut from a willow-branch. Her feet,
Old as her heart, were less discreet,
And where she halted, short of breath,
She glimpsed the languid wing of death
Tipping the cedar tops. She prayed
By shouting at the hawk. Dismayed,
He beat his wings above the stone
That was her altar. To atone
She prayed within, as Quakers do,
With planets gleaming on her pew.
Perhaps she missed the Facing Seat?
The moon was easier to greet
Than the stern aspect of a Friend.
Tonight was First Day eve, the end
Of her hard week. She could forget
Her stubborn garden, or the fret
That watching pennies gives. The trees
Dispensed with such economies;
A pair of fawns peeked from the woods,
Scorning man's louder neighbourhoods;
The Quakeress smelled dogwood scent,
An evergreen's sharp condiment;
Her body rested, but her eyes
Built stately mansions in the skies.
Touching the stone in thankfulness,
She dried her hand upon her dress

And knelt as she had never done
In meeting-houses flecked with sun,
And spoke a longer line of grace
By the white stone, in the high place.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Water Diviner

Perhaps his thirst proved greater than our need:
A cousin german to John Appleseed,
He carried little but a branching stick
And in his head the earth's arithmetic.
Our soil is cold and belted in by stone
On every side. None except he, we own,
Could tell us where the waters ran, or why
The brooks were stingy and the springs were shy,
Or how to drill through granite shelves, or when
The floods of Noah might return again.
And yet, I do not recollect what pay
He drew for navigating many a day
New England's arid pastures where each fence
Of rocks denied him scope and recompense.
It might have been enough for him to sleep
In hay, and be awakened by the sheep
Crowding against the barrier, or dine
In outdoor larders underneath a pine.
None of his calling lives to cut the grass
Veiling his grave, so that his feet may pass
Once more toward the orchard and the hill,
The vineyard where the drunken whippoorwill
Sobs for the wasted grapes. Within this well
The light reflects more than a poem can tell,

More than a mirror hints of woman's grace:

The water-seeker's mild and saintly face.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Indian Summer

This is the locust's time, the season
Of plenty dozing on a hill.
Our feet defy all roads and reason
To walk perversely where they will.
Beneath the leaf we find the grape,
Key to the bedlam of our bones,
And heat that ripens all must shape
The contours of the very stones.
Days sizzle in the skillet sky,
The jewelled dark's a jealous lover;
Although the brooks have all run dry,
Abundance nudges up like clover.
Sit down and feast. Stuff belly well.
Rome was replete the night it fell.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Apple Harvest

An apple was the fruit that took
Eve down to earth. There, for the lack
Of Eden's bower, Adam shook
Firm gates that would not let him back.
Now Jonathans and Northern Spies

(Round tempters peering through the fence)

Themselves give hope of Paradise
But glow with ruddy penitence.
Grass chokes each tree. No pickers take
The windfalls from this fallow ground
For cider or a harvest cake.
Their dropping makes a hollow sound,
And worms carve mansions in their sweet
Sun-dappled and rejected meat.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

The Leaf Is Clue

Who robbed the sun of strength? What made
Calm leaves desert their boughs and go
With winds of trespass to invade
The helpless valleys far below?
Surely it is a hasty hand
That shrouds these hills before they're dead;
Here is a footprint in the sand
Where mortal never visited.
Let's lock the house, then hide its key,
And lean against the shaken pane
A moment in perplexity.
Is this the bloodied coat of Cain?
Yes; here's the evidence: He slew
His brother, and the leaf is clue.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

This Arctic

Some claim the cold will never cease.

This month may prove its prophets true:

Wind lets the gables have no peace,
Snow gives our hirelings more to do.
Can one be warm beside his flame
When thought is lodged in narrow tracts?
The fever in our eyes lacks name,
Our bones are arrant artifacts.
We crunch the bitter nuts. We drink
Vintage whose lees are black and tart.
Laughing because we dare not think,
Each pulls the trigger of his heart.

This arctic woos us from inside:

Even the beasts try suicide.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Man's Estate

I came to work at man's estate,
Forcing a stubborn wicket gate

To pass a sign that always read:

DO NOT APPLY. YOU WERE MISLED.
When last I left, at the twilight time,

I heard a brittle, tinkling rhyme:

"Do not return. Aid comes too late.
All roads are blocked to this estate.
Neither look back nor seek to scale
The lofty reasons why men fail,
Nor cry like wind that fiercely grieves
For gardens drowned in spate of leaves,
But quit this lodge you tenanted. . . .
These are my words," the speaker said.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

The Double Dealer

In March the Double Dealer came.
I heard his horns confuse the street,
Pledging starved echoes to his name.
He wore the motley of deceit.
His was a thin and knavish smile
For such a stout and noisy fellow.
The sun escorted him one mile;
Jealous, the wind began to bellow.
Men shunned him as they would a rat.
He teased the dogs to give him chase.
Then, as he bowed and doffed his hat,
We glimpsed his other, darker face
That Janus might have tendered praise,
Since, like that god, he faced both ways.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Paradox

If you had studied to be cruel,
You would not meet so much success
As I, who burn with brighter fuel
In crucibles of tenderness.

Or had you laboured to be kind,
Neglecting once to whet your blade,
The enemies who blunt the mind
Would reach your beauty, and invade.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Roots

Trees die with groans, thrashing about
In the bed of undergrowth,
And stumps grunt
But will not yield an inch
To murderous, unaided man.
It takes a crowbar
With a stout yoke of oxen to kill a stump.
Even then,
Roots, left to themselves,
Grovel deeper in earth,
Fight downward for water,
Renew themselves continually.
Worms and salamanders,
Wriggling from the quick spade's cut,
Could do no better.
Roots demonstrate necessity.
Where stumps and branches perish,
Who can kill a root?

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Lines for an Ancient City

Blow trumpets in your drowsy neighbourhood
For brownstones, butternuts, and littered yards,
The face appearing in the polished wood,
The yellow stalk above the husks and shards.
That whittling criminal we call neglect,
Wind and its slow lieutenant, desuetude;
Silence, our most exclusive architect,
Lifting its cupolas in solitude;
The “paying guest,” the rocker on the porch,
The minching fragment of a miser’s crust;
A phthisic Liberty, shorn of her torch,
Threatening the harbour with a gale of rust.

The stagnant avenues and the pious streets
Aimless as iron fawns, stagey with weeds,
Are proud of laying puritan defeats
Upon the boisterous legs of centipedes.
Now call the spider “uncle,” name the wren
Executrix of rafters. This domain,
Termed by inquisitorial gravamen
Cloaca of the atheistic brain,
Shall disappear in tatters of disease,
The mortgage burnt, the moldy wafer eaten,
And kids defy the cops, do what they please
In environs where stubborn rugs were beaten.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

West

Wyoming is a green and rampant space,
Thanks to the Mormon stint that made it so.
In California grow prodigious grapes.
The Puget fishes quarrel in their nets.
Nevada is a whistle in the wind
Below guilt's finger-pointing Idaho
Hugged by the bear, Montana, and the Snake,
A frantic river fencing Oregon.
Recall the snow-stocked ranches of the Ute,
The pine cone mesas of New Mexico,
The penitents at Denver, coughing blood,
Beaten by whips of red and acrid dust.
The hiker, standing by the Judas tree,
Will pick and choose his Buicks as they pass,
And where the silver dollars bounce like hail
The hennaed dealers spread their dental wares.
While dry conformity had many sons,
The census-taker never came this far
To mark the groves and derricks with his pins.
Your oranges shall fatten on extremes
Larger than legend, yeasty as the sea
Foaming green flattery upon the beach
Of malted milk and cactus real estate
Where tinted post-cards serve as dividends
For squaws and yogis anxious to invest
In Christian Science or a pension plan.

Appease your hunger with the obvious:

The travel-folder missions, Santa Fe,
The tourist boiling in his oil of speed
And Iowa, retired to Hollywood,
For these are totem to your history
Defined by breakers at the Golden Gate.
Pacific is the nickname for the quest.
Gain its red eye and thirst its parching tongue.
Now is too soon to measure such a vast
Oasis in Mojaves of your hope.

Where all mirages lead to Panamint,
To fat white haunches of the Mother Lode,
Plateaus of folly, gulches of neglect,
The gin and tonic waves at Malibu.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Thunder of the Buffalo

The thunder of the buffalo remains:

Within parentheses of sound
Their anguished wrath
Suspends above the highway as a sword
Ready to cut each passing car in two;
The hooves will charge,
Then change direction,
Bear down on nervous traffic of today
And never stop.
That flesh was sweet
The skimmers left to rot
On Upper Platte in fall of seventy-eight,
And nickels cannot buy it back.
Remember those wide horns
That promised meat in plenty and forever?
Each generation goes
Wasteful to new frontiers, devaluated lands.
Bleached bones remain, and thunder.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Canyon Interlude: Socalla

Here I shall never sweat or burn my head,
 Here I can seldom labour long, or well;
 The sun, suspended like a copper bell,
 Glares on this Limbo of the strolling dead.
 Let us observe how canyon walls decay,
 Chipped by the geologic feet of birds.
 This crumbling granite flakes upon our words
 That cannot stem each huge, unwieldy day.
 The languid crocus blooms beside my pool.
 Across the patio bleached madams pass,
 Limp as their thoughts, their voices beaten brass. . . .
 A highball tinkles, and the air grows cool.

Always the serpent haunts this interlude:

The garden, spiked with yucca, wet with snails
 Who leave a putrefaction in their trails. . . .
 We numb our senses by the weight of food.
 We chew the logic of the pharisees
 With nice precision of the nether lip.
 The chilled dessert is moulded like a ship
 Becalmed in some guest's lap for want of breeze.
 It's this abundant health that makes life cheap:
 Youth, with her Viking eyes and even tan,
 Conspires with comfort to infect each man
 In stucco chambers of indifferent sleep.
 God's boy, awake! By dreams and soundless gyres
 At noontime haze and Sunday hush arrive;
 Your horizontal darling shall survive
 The hiss of commerce and the suck of tyres.
 Farewell, O belle. To hug each purchased guest
 Sits ill with me and shames my idle week.
 Who shall restore my own lugubrious cheek
 And pump the milk of kindness to my breast?

Now through the pass my late tormentors roll,
Their sainted valley beckoning in the mist;
A cactus moon stabs at each motorist.
Tomorrow's sun, perchance, shall make me whole.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Night over Pasadena

Quietly in California, clothed in hope,
The old are gathered in a major cult
Whose symbols are the faggot and the rope.

Dare to defy them, fulminate, insult:

They shall arise with planned beatitudes,
Implacable, intolerant, and unjust,
Combing your beaches for the rumoured nudes,
Naming your error as a deacon must.
Their oyster is ennui, revenge their pearl;
The grit of irritation spoils their lips;
Pensioned and proper, eager as a girl
For knights in armour and gold-burdened ships,
Each haunts the thrift shops and the palm-walled parks
And rubs arthritic fingers on the lamp
Aladdin junked, that cannot shoot a spark
To celebrate reunion in the camp.
Watch how the needles of inanity
Knit grave-clothes for an unregenerate mind
Steeped in formaldehydes of piety.
Calvin has found his persecutors kind
And in the Legion Hall Christ knows no stint
Since Kansas and Nebraska federate
With pledges potent as a liniment
Where softer language might not aggregate.
Good sisters wash these pilgrims' swollen feet,
Stay them with cider, pie, and lemon cake
Where Fair Oaks and Arroyo Seco meet.
Beyond a peradventure or mistake
They win new converts from Los Angeles,
Boasting like Peter of the planted germ
And how their Master swept the least of these
Into His grinders for a bloody term.

Where climate, sun, and wretched cooks prevail,
Where oranges and mittens go to waste,
The old are first. Drink their ambrosia. Hail
Their Circe-island in its sea of paste.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

Day of Rest

I'd hate to die a Sunday kind of death
With nodding rubber plants and drowsy streets,
The papers full of nothing and my heart
Pulling against a freight of turkey meat.
I'd hate to die hearing my Uncle Ned
Relate insurance data, or Aunt Nell
(The paunchiest woman in Nebraska) state
How once she fell downstairs and broke a rib,
The rib she loaned to Adam in the Book.
Caesar grows weary of electric clocks,
Convenient terms, the trophy from the fair.
Using the papers as a screen, I yawn
And stare devoutly at my Sabbath shoes.
Monday at least is battle, maybe blood,
The hit-and-run proximity of fate,
That icy corner down by City Hall
Where Nero and his fiddle wail unheard.
The church is empty that my father kept,
A beadle with a rod and iron stance,
Yielding to mice and wind his piety
But not a penny nor a hair misplaced.
Although forgotten in the rush of wings
When God flew elsewhere with his catamite,
We crave a Bendix and an Oldsmobile
Financed in Prairie Falls or Omaha
With Junior's education figured in.
I live, but in this dusk my Sunday dies,
Taking a greater toll of Uncle Ned,
That salesman for infinity. Aunt Nell,
Digestion quite completed, waddles out
To weight the car for him. They drive away.
Upon this street a different kind of guest
Roars into permanence and will not leave.
This is the time to put your child to sleep,

Turn down the radio and clean the rug
Where ashes spilled. The week begins like rage,
Caught at the throat so collar-button sharp,
A broth of spittle and anxiety.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

The Lost River

Why should this river flow backward in time,
A blight within our blood, against the current
Driving to sea, when tamer rivulets
Move primly past the lawns of our endeavour?
The answer lies before us. We neglect
The final synthesis, the covering view
That keeps a river from becoming lost.
Even in caves of man's ineptitude
Where pictographs of dinosaurs are scrawled
And where the fires of a million sleeps
Are cones of ash, the blood is adamant
Against persuasion into broader channels.
If, listening for my flood, you hear a voice,
Be sure it is the echo of your fear.

This stream descends out of the lands we know,
Moves down through granite layers where it feeds
On darker waters for its nourishment.
Our failures, lashed to bitterness, are here,
Joining the neap-tide of the larger flow,
Distilled to harmless humours, leaching out
Our weak dependence and our constant debt.
In spite, this hidden river can deny
The hopeful wish that lights us up to bed,
And running smooth, its waters yet correct
Our vision, though we cannot see the work.

Publication. *The Lost River* (Heinemann, 1951).

MADAME BIDET AND OTHER FIXTURES

Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968

Beauties in Native Garb: Miami

The girl of the future was handed a past:

According to the announcer, she engaged
In all sports, cooked, knitted, studied
Hindustani, and was hot for Kierkegaard,
But at the gong she wheeled sadly off,
Her blue stare ringing up NO SALE
As the next contender dazzled the screen.

It is easy to falter and be scratched:

The Amazon from Brazil, someone found,
Was married and had three *pequeninos*;
The tall Finlander was only twelve,
While the Scotch lassie in her wee kilt
And long black stockings raised havoc
With the rules and her countrymen's tempers.

When, after pauses for identification,
Talks from sponsors, and foolish delays,
The crown descended to the nervous scalp
Amid snickering cameras and brave pipes,
Ten thousand dollars, a complete wardrobe
Even the mink stole—
 could not atone
For hours locked in the sun's chambers.

But it is plain how magic succeeds:

We have bathed with loveliness before
On the beaches of an innocent coast
Where tanned arms stretch for the dear prize,
Where judges dote on the dimpled knee,
And an old god, called from his sleep,
Breaks a wand on the rocks of despair.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Der Stimme

For years I hardly spoke above a whisper.
When the assembled clan pounded the table,
Quarreling about money or manners, my teeth
Punched stars and crescents in their tempers.

But at last the red trolleys quit running:

At the end stop, upholstered aunts and uncles
Got heavily down to consume their last supper.
Now I can shout loudly from the rooftops,
Though houses and neighbors are not so tall
And the right occasion's seldom presented.
Moreover, the urge to defend each fortress
Seems to have vanished. Old abstractions
Hang out rear windows like rugs in April
That need hard beating. If families gather
At the rare intersections, they merely nod
And avoid entanglement, far wiser than I
Who compensate for those tongue-tied decades
With a clenched voice and a stale message.
My face grows red from the wrong reasons.
A ghost is my guest who talks of privilege.
I know better, but rave on regardless,
For silver and crystal were never topics
That passed as treasure from ruler to ruled
When I sat dumb in the kingdom of dollars.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Di Provenza: 1. Hotel Royale Britannique

In the deserted ballroom an old waiter waltzes
On red carpets pointing to kingdoms of quiet
Where surfeited ghosts ring for hot-water bottles;
Where mice test the rotted bell-pulls, and the sun,
Likewise unfit, squints pruriently through blinds
At flocked wall-paper, plush upholstery, coy bidets
That washed out diamonds or bundles of pound notes
In niagaras of pleasure while the high ceilings
Echoed with giggles and the sea winked blue eyes
For spend-thrift dukes who lost at baccarat,
Who went sadly downstairs into the gray years
Of the inflated meat and the *service compris*.
Such deaths are put on the bill in raised letters.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Di Provenza: 2. Restaurant de la Gare

As the train pulls in, a *garçon* in soiled apron
Shooes flies from the dusty bottles, the sour fruit.
The clock runs down. Cheeses mate in their cage.
Wine from an off-year does not console the traveler
Eating *andouillettes* beneath the slick placards
Of girls beached at Cannes; he plots their curves,
But the tracks outside stretch only as far as the eye.
The time-table commits incest with the *carte du jour*.
The chef, loathing his trade, spits into the soup.
When the bells ring, the slattern at the *caisse*
Pockets the five-franc note that buys her hose,
And the train, hurtling along the dark platform,
Throws back the small change of a poor country.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Di Provenza: 3. Villa Beausoleil

Although damp climbs the walls and gates sag,
The Mercedes stalled on gravel drinks up heat.
Tall flowers shamble to the drums of noon.
The guests, enticed by cool aperitifs,
Join the Common Market of sea and summer
Where crabs are cooked in shells of memory;
Where mannequins parade hot avenues of eyes
And fat applause, tickling their slender wills,
Seats them on iron chairs to be devoured,
While at the pool, hemmed in by avid boys,
A platinum countess toasts her famous legs,
Ogling the sun through rainbows of champagne
As lizards sleep with skulls beneath the leaves.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

The Embezzler

When we finally turned the lock, the detective said,
“Hold your noses!” and the D.A.’s girl murmured,
“Oh, my god!”, falling in a dead faint of nylon
And teased blond hair as the doors swung back
And the count began: stocks in my father’s name;
Coupon-bonds unclipped since March, 1933; notes
Signed by defunct nephews; debentures; I.O.U.’s
From bankrupt tenants; and in the main drawer,
Wrapped in \$100 gold certificates, a whole gross
Of contraceptives, the latex dried and yellowed.
But the accused stood affronted by the evidence,
Denied his guilt, demanded to see his lawyer—
An old man who knew the tricks, the combinations
That force strong vaults or the wills of women,
His lips pale, his hands shaken, his rubber plans
Shriveled and useless in the dark box of the years.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Emma of Waldeck

1858–1934

The Hague still honors Queen Emma, a frail dumpling
 On later postage-stamps, hired at twenty from the bare
 Pantries of Waldeck-Pyrmont to couch with “King Gorilla,”
 William of the Netherlands, and preserve the dynasty.
 Perhaps she found his beard horrid or the drafty halls
 At Het Loo cheerless, yet she winked and they concocted
 Wilhelmina. The king’s ageing sons balked at marriage:
 One fumbling the black garments of Paris, the other
 Coughing into basins. His keepers at state banquets
 Wore white ruffs, silk breeches, and blunted swords,
 While in dotage, past seventy, he formed the custom
 Of tickling each piano-legged baroness. Despite this,
 Patient Emma wolfed big Dutch breakfasts, examined
 Stereopticon views, shot deer in the Hooge Veluwe.
 Rain spoiled her summers. The Achinese rebelled again.
 Coffee in the Pavilion was not always to her liking.
 As widow and Regent, she spoke German to her daughter,
 Slogged through damp woods, rode in goose-girl coaches
 To open Parliament. Her dull century yawned and dozed.
 Her butter-and-chocolate court angels seemed to fatten.
 And Emma, hobbled by protocol, limped to the Delft tomb
 To bleed through her shroud in some bedroom of history.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Episode at Vigo

Before the ship purged me,
I walked into the Cafe Gallego
And ordered a whole cooked crab
With *vino del pais*, crusty bread,
And a girl for the hereafter.
On the docks, a bootblack grabbed
At my rotting shoes, chuckled,
And with his quick hammer
Tacked rubber grips to my feet.

I bought contraband cigars, rope,
Biscuits, the London papers.
I was all set, armed to the quills,
Ready to aim and deliver,
But the girl leaped from bed
In my dingy room at the hotel,
Blew out the lamp, and shrieked
(In Spanish) my mother's maiden name,
The size of my belt, the exact spot
Where my wound was, the number
Tattooed at the tip of my tongue.

It was a great relief, afterwards,
To hear the loud gulls denounce me,
To feel divine spittle on my face,
To dance on deck on rubber grips
And thank the aggressive bootblack
As the ship sailed for now or never.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

The Foreclosure

As soon as I signed the deed, my phone rang

And the slow poor-white Southern voice said:

“Look, what you aimin’ to do?—’cause I got
Seven kids in this here house. If we moves now,
Lordy, it won’t be pretty.” The lawyer
Signalled to hang up, my wife began to weep,

My dog growled, but I gave as good as took:

“Look, Whitlow, the funeral’s your own making.
Who asked you to lie down seven times in bliss
Or eat meat on any pork-fat night but Sunday
Or sit drinking beer in front of the magic box
When kingdoms of paper are falling like snow
And the besieged forts need clerks and computers?
According to figures, Whitlow, you’re dead already.
Your veins were opened ten years back. The blood
In your case took longer to drain out. Whitlow?
Are you there?” But the dead did not answer,
And next day, to save another dime, I walked
To work through the narrow streets of my heart.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

A Garland of Green Stamps

Between the Land camera and the hair-dryer
The clerk had hung us up for forty books.

He behaved equally as seller and buyer:

The choice sat naked on these tenterhooks.
“Redemption” was not the word to lure us in
Or dazzle us with full counters, heaped shelves.
We followed the glad shoppers whose bright skin
Teased us back in circles to ourselves.
We found the patterns of our indecision
Grinning from mirrors where the fatal plan
Like drops distilled upon a field of vision
Read *Hong Kong, Western Germany, Japan*.
But if the crying plastic dolls were missed
And kleptomaniacs joined the self-employed,
The children ever eager to be kissed
Are quick to help us fill our nagging void.
Hot from the pink mouth and the infant stare
We gather hope and push each wire cart
Loaded with precious rubbish toward the air,
The waiting automobile, the vacant heart.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Great-Uncle Leopold at Almendra, 1914

There the trains were stunning, the cheques
Kept coming, and the beggars with bad hats
In hand scraped each pavement in a low bow.
Then had they breakfast at the warm mouth
Of the sun and lunch on a plunging horse
And tea from a *carrozza* above Cappellino?
All brushed out in gouache to the blue South

When bugles shrilled and trumpets bragged.
Tin troops fell in a heap and tender boys
Shelved like unread books studiously died
As gentlemen and ladies, their painted foe,
Gossiped in the striped shade under mats
Or gathered for the last charge hollow-eyed
To spend and forget these sterling years now.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Hymn to Saint Francis

The hung-over crabs in the bay are seldom gulled
By Bloody Mary sunsets and the ruptured pace
Of cables groaning up these red-cheeked altitudes
To gardens where posh hats queer each famous view;

Or the flocked silk of fake Victorian brothels
Where tarts with dollar-proud rumps hang from swings
And cradle in six-inch smiles the lucrative bores
Who whisper “Now?” yet flunk all entrance tests;

Or pink merchants on the non-objective slope
Whose booted and furred upholders buy hooks
For “art” and “music,” stuffed birds that chatter
When fog invades their wounds with sullen bravado:

Or the China doll and her kickshaw sing-song pose
In the fantan joint with the slant-eyed windows,
The stink of joss, the odors from roasting tourists
Respectfully primed and impaled on bamboo spikes;

Or charcoal steaks and the permissible fetish
Of ten o’clock dinners at corpulent hide-outs
When night dimples with yawns the idlers at missions,
The honorable busts in the padlocked cathedral.

But the little saint wearies of loaves and fishes.
With palsied hands and inebriate leer,
He dips into funds of faith, compounds his crime,
And staggers down the wind to his intrusive birds.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

A Liberal Education

Bugled from candied dreams to ice-cold baths,
We plunged through chapel into ponds of fear.
Dim God alone could tweak the Rector's ear
Or ease the dullard down the maze of maths.
And in uproarious classrooms every season
Eight hundred frozen mouths contrived to cram
Latin and physics toward the next exam
That weaned us from the sour pap of reason.
And since the soccer prize was saved for cheats,
We aimed at lesser goals. Bland April airs

Promised us nymphs in subcutaneous pairs:

We spilled our disappointment on the sheets
And signed out Saturdays in frolic meter,
Digesting beans-with-pork and Evensong.
Mounted on pogo-sticks of right or wrong,
We solved our raging problem with saltpeter.
But now, perforce, we throw sheepskins away
Like quaint, perennial athletic letters
That taught us just to drink among our betters,
Turn on our built-up heels, refuse to pay.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Madame Bidet

After the glory that was Great Bend, Kansas,
And the grandeur found at Kearney, Nebraska,
I took my reversion to the small family hotel

In the Place des Vosges and set up this shrine:

A well-seasoned salad, a half bottle of *vin rouge*,
And thou, Madame Bidet, flushing with pleasure
In the wilderness of those moist imaginings
That once kept me awake as night freights rolled
Through the wheat and chaff of dry prairies.
When you were bolted fast and fully connected,
I could enter the void and count my blessings.
The girl who lolled on your lap purred like a cat.
Her silk hair and legs were ladders to Eden,
Her pale tears the ocean I crossed, her mouth
The purse I fed with francs and shillings.
It was a hard journey, even for a strong man,
But the sound of your voice, Madame, sustained me.
You did not weep for the slim child of chance
Struggling in the sewer below, among the rats,
And when wine had washed down the salad
And the girl began to comb her black hair,

I surveyed the landscape between lip and lip:

Not wide, not framed by the perils of loving,
Easy as soap in a dish, the still life seen
By tired eyes from the pillow's disorder.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

The New Realm

Bad Kissingen, West Germany, 1963

Burly early cuckoos from the squat steeples
Cheep to these forest knights, these dwarfs and drolls
Who wake and with their tainted goblets seek
The ancient springs to quaff and crack the wind.
Their blowsy faces come unstuck. Their knees
In *lederhosen* bend in worship. Wotan's spear
Is hurled at low-slung rumps. The rites begin
With beer and *aufschnitt*. Wagner bleats
A promise to the heavy dancing bear,
Locked in his rage, who waltzes up the sky
As day ponends, as noon on the fat grass
Snore from the gut of sleep. Water returns
To flush out love, to make wine tolerable,
To cleanse the drowsy blood or free the loins,
And as the sun retreats, new feasts are laid;
Frauleins in Paris gowns prink among trees.
The band strikes through the patriotic mask
When pastries rise and puff like golden hair
And plump horizons trap each famished eye.
Glued to this plan, weighing two hundred pounds,
And shaped to last a thousand breathless years,
The knights, the drolls, the orotund madonnas
Strut to a well-earned rest in ample beds.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

The Traveler

Since no one wishes to hear of the journey,
I have burned the notes and forgot the stations.
Aside from a few missed trains, some inferior meals,
And trouble with waiters, it was not eventful—
Unless you think the girl at the bar something
Or the coat taken in adultery or the earthquake
In Peru *that* cracked my shaving mirror.
Now, that was a very close call, for my face
Which was young and without lines, suddenly
Became wrinkled and grey; my tongue withered;
My ears stopped up, and when I looked again
Past the bed-post with the skirt on it: nothing,
Not one friend, even, to believe my tales
Of hinterlands, of cold pampas, of white hills
And killing frosts that point to silence.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Nuisance Call

Spawned by an angry distance on the dark,
The bell tramples sleep. The black instrument
Snakes in its coils to be the fumbled mark
For your worried hand. Out of good intent
You say, “Hello? Hello. . . .” The heavy breath
At the far end can not pull words from air.
Interrogation finds him only Death
Warmed over by your voice and hanging there.
And through his craven silence worms the plot
Nobody quite believes: forsaken brides,
An alcoholic damp forget-me-not
Of cup and bottle, stiff-necked suicides.
And then, with patience gone, you shout once more
“Hello! Hello!” Within that brainless void

Come crippled answers limping to the door:

The blind, the cracked, the queer, the unemployed.
But of their sorry ranks you must reject
All save this one, whose state you merely guess
In bed again, eager to disconnect
The line he fishes with, his loneliness.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Rumpelstiltskin

Some wrinkled purpose made him tense and nervous.
This crooked droll, as jumpy as a flea,
Could spin in twenty days a field of flax,
And so he did, to spare the old king's bride,
But with her first-born, forged a document
And claimed (according to the finer print)
The child was his-
 unless she guessed his name;
His icky name, proving her need for service,
Even from dwarfs, when kings will not agree
Upon their duty. None had called him "Max,"
But when she spoke him true, his crippled pride
Stamped him through marble floors. Yes, and his bent
Maypole of procreation, white as lint,
Dressed other pretty wounds in love's hot game.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Script for a Western Movie (Censored)

The girls at Mrs. Hockmesser's come
In a bouquet assortment of red, black, gold.
Though they wear corsets and bows to bed,
They work harder than waiters or grooms.
Even on Sunday they ride with the tops down
And it's *whoa! whoa!* on the montage street
Past the livery stable, the bank, the idlers
To that cool spot under the cottonwoods
Where the horses drink and the girls bathe.
We like the blond in the green sill< best:
Where the stream drawls, her white legs bend
As she lifts her skirt and wades in deep.
The banker applauds. His aims were high,
Higher than the tops of her lace stockings
But the pistol went off too soon upstairs
And bolder men came out with knives drawn.
A Negro collects the baskets. No more wine
For the dusty homeward ride with the tops down
Past the false fronts and funeral parlors
Of the hollow town at the end of the tether.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

The Tyrant

I've been an unconstitutional monarch too long.
For fifteen years in this house lacking a throne
I sat in moldy splendor prescribing your costume
Of the day, the breakfast cereal, our next topic:
Blood on our rug could not appease the idol
Shaping this outcome. Despite whimsical halts,
I drove kinglike a road piled high with trifles.
And when the stove fizzled or the pipes clogged,
I slammed on my brakes inches short of madness.
The cobwebs at your eyes told me what sad loss,
The sepulchre in your smile what deprivation
Had hit home, though it took the black kitten
To scratch me awake and the ladder I nipped under
To change your luck. Forgive me these excesses.
Rebel troops have breached the walls of my realm.
A new *de facto* government has been organized.
But you, my dear, were first to storm the palace
With a flag of truce and the kiss of surrender.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Vaterland, Vaterland

A fifth cousin to my father (perhaps), he brought
The name, the stature, and the square cranium
By way of Hong Kong and San Francisco a century
Later, if not too late. He saluted me briskly,
Fixed the monocle in his eye, barked an order
To sit down and drink a cup of lukewarm tea.
Beside photographs, his album held three locks
Of human hair, what was left from Auschwitz
Of love and family, but he pointed with pride
To the picture of himself, surrounded by men,
In the uniform of a *hauptmann*, taken in 1915
Somewhere on the Western Front. He wept easily,

Though we'd only just met, and asked in tears:

“What did I do that was wrong? Gentleman, soldier,
Good citizen—
 can you tell me, please? Our tea
Was cold, the room buzzed with his questions,
But I fled the answers, blood on my shaking hands.

Publication. *Madame Bidet and Other Fixtures* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1968).

Addicts, Clowns, Murderers, Victims

An Apology for a Book of Satires

Come, now! After all, they were *hardly* my friends.
This pen cannot scratch them clean
Or the blotter dampen to absorb their grief.
They were not asked for a few discreet words
Or quoted out of context to deceive minors.
On the page, at least, they appear prosperous,
Articulate, and gruesome—
 like our relatives;
And that's enough. If you hanker for more,

Please recall the duties they perform:

Not charities, of course, nor miracles
But these absurd configurations.
Moreover, they persist in vigorous evil
While you, my worthiest disciple, read on.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Backwords

Never, my father, again; sad one
With your cigars and straw hats,
Cheers for the roast beef, the cakes
And wine of red-heeled nights
Or the oiled wheels, stopped; done
In a flash, your commands: flats
On the sharp day, loud mistakes,
Women or slim girls, poor sprites
That you flushed with your gun.
Let us be friends, for that's
What you wished: thefts and takes
No more, though by what rights
Were your sleek trophies won,
Yes, and your pampered cats
Fished plump from the warm lakes?
But hush: only the fool fights
With his dead father, dear son.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Cocktail Hour

You sit and look unwanted. You're no pish
And tush of talk, you spit-and-polish squire
Who raps his money on the bar, nods for another,
Who yearns to say (out loud): "See you in Washington,
Where Sam's expense account includes the works—
A douche-bag blonde, a cost-plus contract, all!"
Out loud, for crying. . . .

Sucker, pardon me:

You meant the little fish you never had,
Who raised no mink, split nothing any way,
Was not percentage-happy; she defined
The different masks you wore, like once, like once.
Again the barman leers and winks, like now.

He served you well last week, the week before:

Gin to the admiral's wife, her ifs and buts
Which made you tremble, long at lying down.
But soon it's popcorn time in silver bowls,
And you're insured for every risk save one.
You bid the low horse on the merry-go-round?
Fine! Keep it up! Keep all the ponies up.
We daren't stop the gas. This frozen whirl
Is like the ice-cube in your empty glass
That melts and weeps for sustenance.
The old pomposities, pickled in brine,
Are not good diet for big-timbered men
With tricky deals, or for some ageing nymph
Who lisps her prices to a telephone
And taxies to her lavender appointments.
It's odd how out of darkness women lean
Against this face you feed on deviled eggs,
While sleep comes late, or worse, too slow
Even with pills, in daylight that you hate.
So here you live secure, elbow on wood,
Just what you are, no lush, no nincompoop.

The troublesome don't nibble at those doors,
Leather and chrome, like everywhere but home,
Home where the heart goes bad. Old Ninety-proof,
The barman, is your friend (you hope, we hope),

And there's an end: in rage, the final shove.
You say you feel unwanted? Sir, you are,
But not the only one this hour, this year.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Emperor: San Francisco

Joshua Abraham Norton (1819–1880)

Please to remember him in top hat, frogged coat,
Epaulettes—
 spilled up to rule nothing whatever
From the mad throne in his eye, from sheer nerve
That plummeted to the green bottom of his debts.
Please to eat the poor-bread of his honor
Or mint a private coin in the mazey streets,
In the cantankerous palace he decorated.
Please to shelter his dogs, for he failed
And fell at the intersection, crying charity,
Fooling the sounder merchants who hung on
To the wet deck or the dark rudder of gold.
The brain whirls on the gull-wing of his mirth.
The tight ships have sailed off, yet he persists
Like the Opera and the fan-tan dealers,
Struggling out of his plumes to high reason
And keeping kosher all the week long.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Esthétique du Mal

She ogles time, yet dare not drop where sand
Burns to defraud or curlews taunt her flesh.
The unfrocked glare is orient medicine
To cameras tasked with clay. Subject, assume
The bent neck and the easy thighs of mirth!
Let film dissolve your tan predicament.

The buyers clothe her in frail samples
While boys in limbo snicker but obey
Her infant stare, her dictatorial loins.
She lectures from the shell, the nautilus
As driftwood parliaments of envious gulls
Cackle fat messages to striped umbrellas.

Her eyes indulge all itching architects:

Tall naiad with a cocktail near at hand,
She rises with the tide from greener deeps,
Borrows some lotion, smokes one cigarette,
And laughs when tritons sound the conch
That marks her elevation of the host.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Fashion Show

This year's theme is called "La Marquise de Sade":
The Spanish heels, supple boots to the thigh,
Whips and spurs for that cruel evening at home,
And Viet Cong Red for a subversive touch.
At the horse-ranch gather surcingle, bits,
Snaffles and pony-tails. Helmets are camp,
And Moon-shot maquillage comes on stronger.
For the widowed Older Woman the Insured Look
Succeeds, while at funerals Bank Failure Blue
Works well. Girls of thirty, youth's lost clients,
Favor the Knowing Sprite: doe-eyed, demure,
In pinafores or knickers, their textured legs
On view, and buttons to repulse the male.
Since wars are rumored, one blonde Amazon
Struts tall with bugle and drum, epaulettes,
Busby, frogs, a dozen campaign ribbons
(Fake, of course; given for lunch-time valor),
And scent from Cairo labelled *Guess*.

The first prize always goes Collegiette:

As bagpipes drone and tartans titivate,
Sleek Highlanders in kilt and bonnet
Improve the heather, flout the saucy wind,
And smile, bare-kneed and cool, at far pursuers.
The clocks have stopped. From captive provinces

Or exploited cities the loot piles up:

Lotions, wigs, the specious fads of midnight,
Yet in these marble rooms the cold commands.
Announcers stammer. The trim models blanch,
And, when the fur is stripped from each of them,
A frightened child runs weeping to her bed.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Frau Sorge

Dame Care, you are a fearsome mistress.

Though we are equally grey, you dress young:

Boots, tights, fringed scarves, a bother of pleats
Convince the boulevards that death is masking,
While from the grave of your smile plastic teeth
Wink at the lay-about like brothel queens.
You perch on too many laps, victorious
Over the spoiled meats or doctored cocktails,
Flirting with the *garçon* as he dishes up
Your ration and serves it luke-warm.
In the Paris of weak sun you are the Metro
That roars through the veins on winter errands.
You have no occupation save disaster.
Why do you follow me into the toilet
With your hand outstretched for a *pourboire*?
Cannot I be alone, even to pass water?
Must I dream constantly that your plump cheeks
And girlish hems disguise but a skeleton?
Yes, you are always near, dim companion,
You from whose parched lips I suck venom.
We shall walk down to the Seine together
And sleep as friends under the bridge of night.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Freeway Problems

I had my coronary in Corona
After the long haul from Oceanside
Just by the off-ramp marked “Dog-patch”
When the girl in the parallel Porsche
Who resembled my ex-wife, Millie,
Ran a Schick over her blonde beard
And spat buttons at the white line.

How many chicks to the next pump,
Stupid, or to a snug lying-in home
For unwed fathers? But never mind:
I was rushed to a gay supermarket
And kissed by Box boy Number Sixteen.
Despite our condition, the sales rose,
Yet the manager yelled: Time, gentlemen!

There is no free time on the freeway:

Only a quick look in the rear mirror
To identify the black-jacket-ed pursuer
Roaring with his muffler out, gaining
On your best intentions, screaming
Curses through his windshield. Mister,
These days we all need safety belts.

And it's miles, more high-octane miles
To the rocker and the rug on your knees,
The cat purring by the Franklin stove,
The victrola playing “Hearts and Flowers”.
Have you heard your master's voice again
Or measured the cell for length and width?
Here's where the road ends and dark begins.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Gardener

This plot of ground is sure, after lean years
In boarding houses, spreading the roomers
Or fencing with slippered slatterns. Tears
Rush to my eyes when I recall the tumors
That fed on my faith, that turned heaven in
To the blue paper bandaging the hurt wall,
Since few boys, draped in their delicious sin,
Could eat death's sour bread and still grow tall
On the diet I had. It was a miracle, magic
From the wand I waved in those stiff days
And stiffer nights. They were not tragic.
They were the floor and ceiling of my praise
For small pillows and the narrow white beds
Where the dead lay, digesting each event,
Speaking with me of the denatured past,
Of the odd uncle who bilked me of my rent,
Yet, like a cold cry, such weather can't last,
And, I'm here in health, spraying the roses,
Walking about my half acre of rich ground.
The weeds reach high to tickle allergic noses.
The brave birds argue the nature of sound.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Good Resolutions

Although we shut the door firmly, the scent
Crept beneath the frame and through the keyhole
Until it could walk erect on high heels,
Swaying at the hips, plump and provocative,
To the table where the knives snapped to attention
And the pale vintages blushed pink or red.
While the buns resisted to the gallant end,
The meat wobbled and the sauces struck the flag,
Playing All Fall Down together, as on Sundays
With the aunts in attendance, and mortality.
It looked like a fair fight, for a moment,
Since the forces, we thought, were just balanced,
But then Cousin Adolph, who wasn't married,

Struck a match on the broad seat of his pants:

The door blew apart, the hussies danced in
Squealing and kicking their fleshy legs,
The tin-pan music pierced our eardrums,
And the food, which we'd kept at arm's length,
Went for our throats and bellies in a big way.
Believe me, it wasn't the same afterwards,
But then, of course, we should have known sooner.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Grammarian: Parts of Speech

"Spingarn, what are we doing in this institution?"

—R.D.M.

He started from the nouns, the feeble names
For creatures of the swamp that eat and sleep
In corsets, smocks, or planetary frames.
And when the sick moon bleached his face,
Pale "he" and "she" converged to "it"
As tricky delegates in silk and lace.
While action limped and thinking lacked a curb,
The fangs of progress and the claws of time
Retreated to moist jungles with the verb.

Ah, beauty was a bubble in his blood:

Like *easily, slowly, patiently*, it grew
Slack and adverbial before the flood.

And next the prepositions dinged him down:

He tottered through a sacerdotal maze
To whip these drunks and harlots out of town.
But in the yard no priest would give him unction.
The bones he loathed were rattling in their shrouds
Until he joined them to a fat conjunction.
A heavy corpse, he answered very well
The interjection that resounds each night
Across the precincts and the wards of hell.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Guide: Poros

Whenever I rounded the cape of his smile,
He came up for air like a dolphin, ducked,
Held out his wounded hand and said: "Please?
You like it here?" Oh, I liked it there,
With grapes of the hillside in my glass,
The sea in my plate, and girls in the sea,
But as the heat came down and gnats buzzed,
Still he danced on the pink blade of noon.
Cool as a grape to my tongue, he would ask
Where I wanted to swim, had I seen the ruins.
We walked on the sand, drank resined wine.
It was good to be taken about, to be told
What the donkey sang or the priest brayed,
So I paid and went. "You like it, please?"
I gave him gold. The sun sank at our knees.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Healthy Henry

Why this terrible strength? What is he building up to
And how and when and because of which infantile dream
Of power consumed with Shredded Wheat in a breakfast nook?
Otherwise, he's average. He goes gladly to bed with girls
Clean girls—

not more than once a month. He watches
Weight or lifts weights, bathes often, dusts his toes.
He is considered (by nuns) a snappy dresser. His shoulders
Are padded, though, like cells for the criminally insane
And his heels are skilfully elevated. If he should sneeze,
His mother's nervous ghost runs on stage with handkerchiefs.
She might serve him brain food, in somewhat disguised form,
But dried seeds, seldom, and that Swiss concoction, never.
He is looked upon as handsome when he drives Sunday roads,
Strapped in his seat; imposing, till he steps from the car.
But his emphasis is a clenched fist. His tall friends run
To gymnasias and oratories, to work for like diplomas
And pray for equal grace, while in his slim house the prune
Has been raised to the peerage with wheat germ and goat's milk.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Huntsman

You mount this glacial motive, gun at cock,
And fire through mists of love at your white prey—
The alpine hermit poised on his cold rock,
The hawk who scissors centuries from your day;

Or lure rare fellowship to some dank tent
With mythic flames and ritual cups that jeer
At saner pilgrims. From the woods you went
Far, far beyond the wintry tracks of deer

To sacred walls grim with mummy and horn.
Bears rue the proper stance and the deft shot
Which nailed them up in stiff postures of scorn;
Goats bleed again for the rude beast you're not.

You trigger each loud call for antlered heads,
Wings that support the downward drift of fame
While women you kissed (once) starve in their beds
And sons in darkness cry your absent name.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Idiot in the Bus: Aegina

With the back door agape and the horn drooling,
He clambered the slow-motion road in the heat's wake,
Tossed his limbs inside the bus, shut his eyes, died.
But the jibes revived him. He clapped hands in glee,
Sat up, gained a seat, grinned at the classic crowd,
And the miles within his head quietly conspired
With the sun, with the rocks as he tried to speak.
He was bound and gagged in the cave of sense,
The robber's cave where the lights blow out,
Where the air grows teeth and the tongue fur.
He beat his wings on the walls of our sight.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Last Confederate General

Kirby Smith

Maybe the war should have been extended
To the palms and pines of the West Coast
And then to the superhighways of Ever-ever
Lands or the neat confusion of faubourgs,

For soon all would have been victorious:

The white markers in a black province gleam,
The blond sky favors the banker's children.
But you surrendered last: this was your claim
To our patience, and your grandson struck oil
In his California field.

Once I uncovered

A girl with your name, Kirby, who declared:

"Well, I never! You're the first to know
What he did," yet we never, really, for she,
Preening on the dais of history, put out
Nothing and remains like grit in my eye,
The one Southern belle to resist my peace.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The London Journal: 1763

It was best, he thought, to diddle unseen
 With jades in the park St. James had christened.
 Since a youth who lacked mettle needed sport,
 The trick in armor could save him pennies.

Besides, his morsels of pleasure looked sound

And kenned nothing of urbane connections:

The man of grammar besieged in lodgings;
 The willow teacups, the snobbish duchess.

In erroneous schools tapers taught him
 Quadrilles and corantos, lace and powder.

The bribed footman warned of intrusion:

Vite! Allez!, he whispered. *Dans la ruelle.*

His father sat dumb in shires of kinship
 While Jem spewed logic and sweated reason.
 He mounted again in haste and hatred,
 Yet the bawd laughed at his tartan fancies.

Against wigged debts and dubious banquets
 He borrowed the pox, the itch of remorse.
 His letters of credit drew no succor
 (Like cries in the street when purses were cut).

If he wed his cousin, guineas would snow
 From miser hands in the frozen kingdom
 But who would frolic with Peggy and Nan
 And where might his blade and those scabbards join?

So he sneezed at meat and toyed with ladies:

The clocks ran skelter, his linen got frayed.
 With prayer and gossip he rumpled couches,
 Went home in hackneys to physic and fool.

He was cool from caution, harried by whim;
He had cooked his gammon with friend or wench.
As the lark turned glum and steeples muttered,
He rode high dudgeon toward thistle and faith.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Monday Sermon

If you stem from a proud line of haberdashers
Once appointed by the bouklars of Roumelia
Or from smugglers who ran Circassian virgins
To the Polish kings, learn again to hold your hats
And not ham up the intermezzo with complaints.
Besides, in this least of all possible planets,
A few still prosper on the royal left-overs;
Somebody makes out with discarded corybants.
To object in ragged processions is undignified.
Better to wait a century for the final hearing
When all the judges are pensioned and relaxed,
When the issues are blunted and the knives rusty.
To do otherwise is hot haste soon regretted.
The proof shines from these butter-faced millions
Standing behind the bayonets of the troopers,
Smiling sweetly at the camera's lewd affection.
A cinematic slut pressed her bosom into cement,
A cretinous troubadour makes music from his wig:
Miracles are slated to begin, the drums are ready,
And everyone who cares greatly for his native lawn,
For the ceremonies of ping-pong and barbecue,
Is panting with adoration. Would you disrupt now,
Dare you be the lean prophet in the wilderness
When here the grass is lush and the kine well fed?

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

A Novena for Cardinal Spingarn

1815–1888

He was born in the year of Waterloo.
(An early portrait shows his dropsical eye,
The color green, like that of his great-nephew
Who strolled at Antibes with monocle and cane
Eight decades later) and reared at Cassaro
Near Udine, where his mother tended sheep;
And related somehow to the stiff, patrician
Bragadins and Morosinis; and tutored
By a Bembo of Venice; and enlightened
As to his faith in a dark Roman garret;
And baptised at Cesena, where he conducted
His first mass. What followed sinks

Into a pulp of paper, wax, and ribbons:

He was a chaplain at Magenta, certainly,
And next an emissary to the Turks,
But when the Austrians retreated north
And the border was fixed at Riva del Lago,
He promptly took back his former style
Spingardi—

and was made a bishop.

One photograph shows him with the king,
Umberto of the sardine-tin mustaches.
Five years later he assumed the red hat,
Yet, on a windy March day, feeble now,
He rode in a coach to the peaks above Rimini
And there, in the ossuary of La Verna,
Said his last prayer. Under the gold cross,
The blue cassock, the surprising hair shirt
Lay the star of David; it was thrice denied,
But soon, as rumor thickened the air,
The Pope himself ordered the cremation,
Yet, as the body burned, a bitter smoke

Drifted down to the sea as a warning:

At Auschwitz, the family eye winked out
And nobody recorded the history.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Philatelic Lessons: The German Collection

The Zollverein was hardly neutral. One recalls
The brick-towered walls of Hamburg (puce and green),
And all the feuding marches that lay between
Mecklenburg-Strelitz and the Rhine River falls;
Or that in cold Nassau at the War of Sixty-six
Grand Duke Adolf, kinsman to the Dutch king,
Slept in his uniform to dramatize the *Ding*
An Sich of discipline or that the *Rix-Thaler* dropped out of use there soon after
This altercation. What follows are petty points
Affixed with glue and hinges at the creaky joints
Of stiff confederations to provoke our laughter,
While further still, if one patiently collates
Bavarian pre-cancels, one will usually find
Variations in the ink and casts in the blind
Stare of Prince Luitpold—

he mocked the fates

That pull taxes and imposts from each page.
But to get on (the map was always wrong):
Red post horns blow a tinny kind of song
About the borders like an antique rage,
While in Saxony the *one-groschen* stamp
Shows John the First within a rose medallion
Pointing his chin at some corpulent battalion,
The watermark faint and his gummed backside damp.
The colors begin to run and odd shapes perhaps
Tire the eye more than we know or care
To know. I have learned Henry of Reuss lacked hair;
The Prussian boundaries were drawn by Polish chaps.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Pioneer

In the beginning I said “yes” all the time
To the emotional coyotes, the snide relations,
The fast women and the slow horses,
But this was before the valley settled
Or the plain filled with sheepish neighbors.
But one day when the wells ran dry
And the girl down the road begged for sugar,
I started saying “no” and grew a red beard.
I’ve said “no” ever since, even on Sundays
When one hears the shock, the churchly gasp
Of disavowal, though now my beard is grey;
Now the habit goes down with my coffee.
So the girl who lacked sugar lies in her bed
Waiting for white rain, for “yesses” to bud,
For the bull to crash her gate and charge.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Recidivist

I've never been polite to the professors
Or served in the fashionable confusions
Or stood long enough on one leg, full of urine,
While dowagers cut cake and poured nonsense.
My patience ran outdoors light-years ago
While the girls screamed that I hadn't paid
For the treats. I was randy, hot-tempered,
And intolerant, the stallion in a gay house
Hanging sonnets on the gilded fixtures,
Pinching the fruit, pocketing the garters.
And now that I've grown grey enough
To write prefaces and recommend clemency
For policemen found robbing the very poor
Or poets who work as exterminators,

My tongue still can not be trusted:

I call the world a morgue, the dead happy,
And men but blue-prints of the future.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Regent: Brighton, 1815

This nervous prince, who chivied from his peers
Acres of blazing stoves and feather-beds,
Mortgaged his throne to spite the royal dears
For greedy nymphs with bogus maidenheads.

Each day his corset posed the stiff ordeal:

It nudged him through his coils of flesh and out
The nether end—
 a martyr on his wheel,
Squinning and writhing from the pricks of gout.
But as the fiddles wailed and candles danced,
He coaxed his ageing bulk along the floor
Where hussies smirked forgiveness if he chanced
To hang their easy garters on his door.
Locked in a nunnery of fat, he viewed
From privileged corners legs in scarlet tights
And gulped sweet cherry brandy with the food
That jacked him up for those pudendous nights.

A lass in tartan skirled his favorite air:

Her pox enlarged the lesions of his brain,
And soon the uniforms he couldn't wear
Waltzed home from Waterloo and back again.
Once more his nightmare galloped in—
 a dash
Of boots and plumes and trumpets to the Park
Made green with borrowed lawns, with stolen cash
Before the curtain fell, and all went dark.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Scaticook Mountain

Kent, Connecticut

We'd never ventured so high for larks. Big rattlers
In the cave fifty feet from Tom Mayhew's well
Lured us to try murder early Sunday mornings
Rather than Friends Meeting where age chanted
"Love, love." Crossing Brandy Brook, we climbed
The moccasin-smooth trail kids best remembered
When kept home, whipped hard, deprived of supper.
Tom wasn't a real Mayhew. *Mah-wee*, he claimed,
The Redskin name shouting down his African
Grandma's traits: Brillo hair and splay nostrils.
Tom joked, calling his rock slope "The Reservation".
In August, with streams mute and the earth baked,
We'd hear those dry clappers yards off. "Come,"
Tom said. "Let's chop us clubs in the thicket."
Nervous, we dove through sunlight to the hole
Where the creatures drowsed. Dozens we flushed,
Sweating as we thumped them from the dirty rugs
Of heat, their slow blood caking our pants;
And afterwards, in sabbath-white commitment
To grace and chicken, lied about Indian Tom—
No mere pauper who drank undiluted Sterno
In a tar-paper shack, the sagging porch heaped
With bottles, cans, inner tubes, and sinks—
But the copper-dad guide of Scaticook Mountain
Who'd laugh as we rushed past our Quaker aunts
To our tame bedrooms yelling "Kill! Kill!"

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Syndrome Blew Up, the Pilots Were Grounded

Copious and frequent ejaculations are needed
To nourish the infantile gut of the times,
To slake the cunning lingual thirst we feel,
Else the nude will fall from the billboard;
The mammiferous textual scholar in knee-socks
Will miss all her periods and be kept back
Lest we succeed; and some millionaire playboy,
Doting on the kid boots of a drum majorette,
Will take her baton to bed and get clobbered.
It is very easy to use conundrums or props
In the presence of Aunt Mary or Uncle Joe
Right smack on the parlor floor, in full sun,
But with the moon, man, the tissues flex
And one hears the obligation gallopade
Down super-highways of moist cuticle.
The pussy in the cupboard said *meow*
Much too seldom in the tight past. Now
We are madly activated to make good,
Better, best in the cockpit morning couch.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Uncle Eddy

London, 1888

Mumm's the word: oysters the moist syllable for supper
As Quaglino locks the door of his particular cabinet
And the delicate rose-blondé flesh warms to the task
Those imported black-stockinged things embellish.
But Mum, what glad truant prefers corners, reprimand
The draft on his neck while you in a widow's mantle
Wield the strap and lecture the rain-streaked decade?
So the paunch sucks up occasion, the cod swells big,
The eyes bulge with empire, whose star and garter
Shadow the crimson globe from Deihl to Dublin.
Ignore the asthmatic wheeze, the Hanoverian lisp,
Keppel in her pink corset, the gaslights flirting
Through the thick fog, and the Whitechapel forays
That tumble barmaids beneath steep chimneypots.
Your ministers smile. The Balmoral seasons improve,
And from the heather grouse, flapping their wings,
Drop upon platters in death, plump and persuasive.
Once more, Mumm's the word. Yes, some Cordon Rouge
For the Gaiety, for the easy girls of Tite Street
Who slither down banisters and kick off top-hats,
Cooing like doves at sunrise. Outside, horses sneeze,
And coachmen, bribed to wait, cough with the cold.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Underling

For Richard Bret Harte

I'm waiting for them all to die and leave me the advantage:
The man who lives on spinach in the larger flat upstairs,
The eccentric pianist who inherited millions from an aunt,
The collector of steam-calliopes who wins every contest,
The pedant who cast doubt on my favorite line in Marlowe—
They who filter my sunlight and keep me from passing
Over the fog-line to the green kingdom once promised.

I'm hoping that the tall house on Telegraph Hill burns down,
That the prices of sirloin and champagne totally collapse,
That my creditors fail and cabs take me on endless free rides,
That the Opera send me two tickets for each mink opening,
That pigeons in Union Square soil prouder heads than mine,
And finally, starting at fifty, that I may walk the streets
In hushed noons of acceptance with the most expensive girls.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

The Victory

Count them: my sister Evelyn, who died young; Uncle Paul
 Drunk enough, once, to break his neck on our stairs; Grandpa
 Sitting in a dim room for hours, motionless and morose,
 In hat and coat, waiting his century out, worth grim millions
 While his daughters begged or pawned their furs; and Kristin,
 The beautiful Swedish maid, who slept with me Christmas Eve
 Of my nineteenth year when the family were caroling neighbors
 Under the clear stars (“star-bright”)—all ghosts, children
 Of Sigmund, spun from the book, the very page; each the case
 You can indict years later, stretched on a leather couch
 Facing diplomas from Vienna or Zurich, talking by the hour,
 The twenty-dollar hour as wheels turned in your aching head
 And dials hummed—but today forgotten, rejected, put aside,
 For there was grace, too: we took wine with dinner, tackled
 The piano, sang about girls, the verities, high hope for summer
 When grapes would ripen again, when a dry old man smiled,
 Thinking of the ship that brought him through darker storms
 Than mine, a hundred years ago, before our bloodiest war.
 So I tell Herr Doktor: Look, it isn’t that bad. Let me quit.
 I’m tired of yakking. It’s just gossip, anyway; pure speculation.
 I’ll pay the bill, damn it! I’ve paid already. Where’s the bill?
 “Star-bright, star-bright. . . .” Kristin, on that chill bed,
 Upstairs in the servants’ wing, her hair silk to the touch.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

Walrich

Last night I dreamed of Walrich,
My grandfather's valet, Walrich;

Yes, and spelled out the lost names:

Anton Joseph, first and middle,
After so long, after a generation
Of want and war. Who needs this man
With his stiff knees and glazed eyes,
Old like my grandfather, Peter,
Inefficient, mad, expendable?
But he laid out the clothes,
Yes, even clothes for the grave
When no one else could look
On his master's obsidian face
Or recall the chained limp,
The iron feet on the cold stairs,
The rapping cane, the mutton-chops,
The ha'penny worth of speech
For a small boy waiting in the wings.

Publication. *Freeway Problems—and Others* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1970).

THE DARK PLAYGROUND

Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979

Area Code 213

The static is awful.
Five million people are busy
Answering unasked questions while I,
Hovering between Malibu and Pacoima,
Trip along wires to infinity, a plucked goose.

For dinner the karate teacher
And his murderous dragoons
Chop me into small grains of acquiescence;
The Colonel has rolled me in his batter
And rusticated me to Kentucky;
The suburban clans are dancing nude
Around my barbecue and swimming pool.
We are poisoned at the well of words.
Like scorpions, we sting our brothers.

Give me instead Tim Toad and his chick, Jill;
Their commune of birdseed and love-feasts
Is deeded to mute tribes in dusty sandals.
Whip me down mined roads to bankrupt ranches.
Fix me gin-enemas in the village square.
Ich bin ein sehr einfacher Mann. . . .

Poverty is nibbling my toes.
Having attended luncheons for worthy causes
And serenaded the President for pardoning a crook,
I now annihilate the insurance adjuster,
The shoe clerk, the furred predator in her nest.
I will eat dry bagels of age in a laundromat,
Go home in a huff and bilk the driver,
Rush up perilous stairs to Grandma's garret.

Nothing avails.
The unasked questions multiply.

Athletic voices dominate the ether:

CALLING ALL CARS. . . .

Last night a gas pump was my family tree,
A motel room my star chamber,
A typist my Egeria.
And today? The ocean
Pounds my doors, gulls
Kiss me the French way,
Wires breed distance.

The static is awful. . . .

Five million people (I think)
Will crash my funeral.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Bonanza

Here night and railroads never stopped. A lizard ruled:
His cold blood flowed in gallons to the stars.
We suffered itching hands, pledged monstrous cups,
And heard the loose boards whimper promises.
We hallowed parlors where the feathered dolls
Plucked from their easy garters green surprise.
We toasted Madam, pinched her silverware,
And egged the Marshall on to do his worst.
Outdoors, the anxious centipedes performed their jig.
Our whiskey worked through rock to drifts and stopes.
We nursed our golden veins, we called for more.

As fiddles throbbed, the nerves went up in smoke.
Cut was the olive branch when Tombstone Jack
Wore spurs to bed and hurled his diamond studs
To crack the tinted lamps and clear the planks
Of can-can kicks and deft ten-dollar kisses
Spun from a wheel. Charity? *Her* name was Charity,
But now her pale throat gasps its alibi;
Her rouged lips etch new craters in the mud.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Keep Moving

The slaughter on the roads must end in bed:

Pedestrian and motorist together
Obey the bilious yellow, ranting red
That warn them of today's infernal weather.
Only cool green promotes the rule of head
That, with denial, glosses anxious smiles
To urge the homeless or persuade the dead
Down frantic highways through unmeasured miles
Where every crash our wounded drivers fled
Revokes the jagged wheel hitch-hikers borrow.

Even the cops have cited our new screed:

"Parking in crowded worlds is such sweet sorrow
And they who dodged the battle grimly bleed
With dust, with heat in tents unvisited."

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Minimum Duck

“Minimum Duck” brags the menu in a slant hand
Taped to moist green walls up two flights of hot air
At 611 Washington Street, where no billboard
Heralds the stridence of Edsel Ford Foo, whose
Boiled nose and poached eyes aggressively scout
The kitchen, the trade winds of confusion wherein
To place his order: “Minimum Duck—\$1.75”,
Three nicks off the breast, one off the thigh,
With mounds of pale rice for the same money,
Foo’s temperamental sweet-and-sour finger,
And tea thrown down in a cracked green pot
Like anathema. They eat—but at the finish
Comes Edsel Ford Foo with his fat conundrum,
A Chinese doughnut pressed to unwilling lips.
The men big with anger, the women aghast,
Foo’s Shanghai gesture sparks the mutiny.
Take! Take! Take quick! His vice persuades,
If not for long, and some, incensed at his tone,
Leave in a huff for the Barbary Coast,
For moving violations in a topless town.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Notes from a Chinese Cookie Factory

The little men work in a dingy room:

The dough rises, trays cool, the sly words
Favor love, hope, the not impossible future,
But these bakers laugh at fortune. Their god,
The naked god with the huge paunch, cackles
Louder than they. Outside, the tourists prowl.
Business is good. Sunlight chases the fog.
But the little men write in blood, in secret
A different book, and love, transfigured,
Turns its slant gaze to the lacquered screen,
The incense pot, the toppled deity
Who lies in a hundred fragments on the floor.
We have borrowed heavily. We have pawned
Night against day. The debt is long overdue.
The hour crumbles like a stale biscuit.
Hope is a moron selling yesterday's papers.
Although the street appears unchanged
And the kids on skateboards normal,
At any moment now the pavement will melt,
The buildings shatter, the sky whine,
And the whole city slide downtown
Into the bay that waited for disaster.
It was the clever eye that learned the trick
And the unfed hand next to the oven
That lit the fuse. Some will go blind,
Others deaf and dumb, and the message
Scrawled on the single upright wall
Will not be read in the poisoned evening.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Ranch

After porridge, flapjacks, and stirrup-cups,
They dump the sedentary tribe on the patio

(Where all is hormones, gossip, or cigars)

To saddle, mount, and race down Kleenex Canyon.
Passing Coffee Gulch, Motel Springs, Hungry Joe's,
Golf Course Wash, Pill Hill, and Gertie's Garter,
They cross the Valley of the Dolls single file
And round Promotion Point. At Menopause Mesa

Antic winds kick up a hundred dust-demons:

The insurance man's wife faints, the stockbroker
Assumes a catatonic pose with *his* girl-friend,
The lead horse bolts. The pattern comes apart
When the garrulous bad hat eats *his* own words.
Borax whitens the ground. Dryness is endemic.
They canter back to the bar for Bloody Marys.
Laughing its head off, the legend dies hard.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Whales at Point Zuma

The sick whales at Point Zuma
Drift past million-dollar condominiums,
Film directors, insurance pimps, tramps
With cocktails in their hands. At five o'clock
When the October sunset posts bail
For new days on impeached marinas,
Decks built out to infinity
Embrace fried clams or bourbon.

Our sickness is not ambergris:

In these waters the green fry
Gobble up what is spewed forth
And pounce like sharks on a loose word.
Under these skies the blood looks yellow,
The epidermis wears pink corsets.
Our alibi, as usual, is distance,
But the whales, herding south,
Filter intelligence from our
Driftwood manners.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Athens by Night

The sad gluttons who once feared
Brambles on the baked rocks,
Hunger and the amorous wasp,
Now in fury and tight pants
Slap cards against the sidewalk
Or pinch the mustached girls.

The sheep they kept also love secrets:

Their eyes blink from gourmet platters
As bazoukis sob for unlikely hills,
As the lottery stirs in its cage.
When the moon slides toward Piraeus,
The octopi flirt with the lobsters,
The blind waiters pocket tips,
The curly boys stack up chairs,
The chestnut sellers go home warm,
The avenues collapse with laughter.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Bouillabaisse

Do not say the fish jumped in our platters.
In that bad collage, the *garçon* wore pimples
And a soiled apron, the *patron* drank Byrrh,
The Wurlitzer screamed in pain. However,
Mou/es, praires, and Breton prawns contributed
To the orchestra of taste, the *betteraves*
Were fresh, and the libelled Nuits St. Georges,
While not great, went down smoothly. Yes,
We drove through dukedoms of mud and rain
And shivered in a drafty foyer underneath
Posters of Carnac and the Lascaux caverns
For this repast, only to find wide trenches
Between promise and delivery. The addition
Seemed wrong, and as we walked out, full,
Somebody jibed at our impossible accents,
But had we stayed to complain, doubtless
The canvas would have blackened completely
In smoke billowing from the clients' cigars.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Christ in Sunshine: Scyros

After the old wall toppled and the priest came
Running from the cafe, the people followed him
Into the church, gingerly stepping on rubble,
Lighting candles, too, for they'd always feared
The bat-hung darkness, incense, the mysteries,
But there He stood, unharmed, smiling, blinking
At the sunshine He'd never seen. The next mass
Was free of mysteries: no bats, no nonsense,
And the men sang sweetly in the clearer air
That blew from Penkelos, scented by the blooms
Dropping on His face from the shattered roof.
Alelulja, alelulja. . . . Even the donkeys prayed.
His blessing lay once more on the dusty fields.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Church Picnic: Nebraska

This twang in the sky embraces nineteen
Different bean casseroles—all fattening.
The four-square shirt-sleeved men are wire-thin
With Sioux cheekbones, the women burst aneurisms.
Their tow-headed mites will darken fast
Beneath compulsive noons, umbrellas of wheat.
From Painted Butte to the rampant Niobrara
Jesus is jumps ahead of the clownish sheriff;
Only the preacher, thumping for resurrection,
Absolves the buffalo grass. Gaunt siloes
Frown upon acts of love, forbidden cigarettes.
As the sun plummets, a belfry chokes to death.
Folk walk on water toward mortgaged homesteads.
God is locked up again in Victorian parlors.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Clinic: Zurich

I found you in your narrow bed, after
The ordeal of breakfast and the inquisition
Of the Scotch Hose aimed by Herr Doktor himself
At the rump end of illusion, looking older
But smiling bravely as from a girlhood album
Where Aunt Belle had written indelibly, "Be good,
Dear child, and let who will be clever,"
Only good was the beefsteak you spurned,
Not the meusli or the herb tea; not, surely,
The iron doors, the calcimined walls, the pan
That catches the drippings of regret. We die
The slaves to weight, poor cousins to wrinkles,
Heirs to a meager luncheon and a foul sheet,
Paying well for the privilege of silence,
For separate tables and a cool nod at friends
Before the stout nurse comes with our papers
And signs us out to cities bombed by love.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Emerging Country

The national airline—one plane
Manned by a tubercular Cockney—
Glosses over ninety thousand square kilometers
Of desert and parched savannah
To Europe and solvency.

The new flag is a Swiss-model
Cash register on a field argent.
The anthem is a flourish
Of rude crepitations.
Opening his first parliament
The President in frock coat and medals
Breaks a fifth of bourbon
On the prow of the white Speaker.

Civil boils erupt, followed by
Mutinies among starving troops.
Arab terrorists set the corn afire.
Numberless nomads die discon—tented.
Camels learn to dream in Braille.
The palace falls. . . .

Months later, tons of spoiled American wheat
Unloaded on guileless foreign traders
Make the patriots millionaires.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Englishman

For twenty years I have worn my hair correctly.
I bellow through clenched teeth like a foghorn
Warning of hidden shoals, wrecks near the coast,
A battery of enemy guns on the bleak headland.
My tweedy legs stumble through alien parlors
Where I drink lukewarm tea, fondle moist babies,
Or peek at faces in grey stereopticon distance.
My opinions develop ulcers. I embrace the anthem
That proves beyond question that I've come
Honestly by these distinctions. I must outlive
A Rumanian childhood and a haberdasher's tic,
But when I stretch, out pops my dinner. My belt
Loosens, and my cravat, an embarrassed scarlet,
Blushes even deeper in the fading daylight.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Europe

Too many rare wines and empty cities
Have come between me and the camera.
The sad gluttons at all-night cafes
Leer at my luggage. Dank cathedrals
Yawn, and the itinerant afternoons,
Tipsy from sunlight, inch down streets
Darkened by childhood's vestments.
The guide steers me into blind alleys
Where the flags of yesterday mix
With the wash, where cats urinate
Venom, where the dead lie enrolled
In their regiments of unreason.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Fountain: Auch

Tolling the loss of Europe,
We dozed under the plane trees.
Dusk hit us like shrapnel.
Bats dove near, inept Stukas.
The fountain turned crimson
And the child whose toy boat
Drifted from his reach, wept
For us, the unmanned observers.

Red wine had dimmed our vision.
We muddied the pool with dollars.
The belfry clanged its sorrow.
But the Arab sweep, jumping up,
Dashed to the rim, leaned far out,
And pulled the sinking boat in.
The child laughed long, delighted.
The dead peers of France applauded.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

French Suite

Place de la République

Place de la Republique

The tariff of consummations at the Bar des Sports
Was quite dear, yet with each table occupied, all
Raptly ignored the addition. Certain good livers
Drenched in mineral water, plucked luxurious hens
From the noon boughs and fondled their pink toes.
Nobody turned green when oysters and the new wine
Approved by the Syndicate of Initiatives opened
With low bids, followed by crudities of the season,
Champagne, and the still-lives of winter pears.
Only the cheeses traded insults when the diners,
Anguished by degustation, observed the horizon
Crumple like serviettes beneath an irate fist.
On the impartial pavement gendarmes, priests,
And schoolgirls wielding yard-long loaves queued
At the facultative stop for the careless buses.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Greek Island

Do not talk to one-eyed men. It is unlucky.
Avoid dark lanes. Walk in lighted streets.
Merely skirt the harbor, where wind from Africa
And *contrabandistas* ply their trade. Subsist
On bread, cheese, and olives for the moment.
Arm yourself. Close each blind. Shun night air
And keep your liver free of bile. The girl
In the neighboring orchard barks her love
But seal your ears: she is an arrant witch.
Even the goats are demons in hairy guise;
Cut off their beards. Return to your bed.
The moon is rising. Now the pale stars
Will bathe you in their electric balm.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Haida Village: British Columbia

The fragile canoe drifts on an oil slick.
Decayed totems kneel toward Alaska.
A dog lurches down the unpaved street.
Feathers, burning leaves, empty cabins
Document the winter of smallpox.

“Perhaps the Chief. . . .” We hesitate
At one gaping door, weighing the silence.
The Chief is in jail at Prince Rupert.
He is snoring on a gin-soaked mattress;
Wet hands retract some vague promise.

As the steamer passes, tourists wave.
Their profiles suggest bears, eagles, whales.
They find nothing, nothing to photograph.
In the wake of their going, we stand firm.
The tide rises. We hear no eagles.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Honeymoon: St. Thomas

As the hotel brochure said: "Pure orange juice,
Fresh papayas, semi-private cabins, steel-drum
Bands, a clean beach, individual sun-tans
Guaranteed to last through February. . . ."
But in the barrios? Silence on most points.

Pirates left, sniggering all the way to the gallows.
Humor became a rare commodity. Sex was drug
And rum the *lingua franca* to pale evenings.
The palms were made of tin. Down the raw streets
Galloped the booted and spurious merchants.

Perfume. French cognac. Scotch. . . . Here's the list.
Just check them off. Your wants are simple, dears.
You dote white afternoons to vapid deaths.
You sink the easy balls and fall asleep.
You toast the darkened bride in foaming grog.

But in the barrios? Silence is golden too.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Ivory Poacher: Luanda

His own few tusks were corroded jungle-brown.
Wearing fatigues, he slumped over the green cloth
Lamenting in ragged English the dearth of elephants.
Gick! went the I 3 to the right slot. His beard crisped.
His bloodshot eyes glazed as he talked dum-dum phrases.
Once, thirteen huge fellows came to drink at the pool
And he was primed, the Spencer cocked, his finger
Nervous. *Whank! Whank!* The memories swelled him:
Orgies at Kip's Dorp, champagne and half-caste girls. . . .
But then years in the bush. Fevers. The leaves stilled.

When some ass tickled the keys, the bar closed down.
He looked crushed, sighed, loosened his bandolier
(No bullets there; nothing save cigarette stubs).
The tune went dead. He lumbered toward the street.
"Plastic," he said. "They're made from plastic now."

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Last Resort: Africa

The blonde from Zurich, jetting down the coast,
Unpacks her new bikini, simpers, rings the desk:
“Und make sure, now, the champagne vill be *kalt!*”
The beach boy waits her pleasure. They undress,
Disport themselves, wade deeper. He is young.
Retreating to her quarters, breathing hard,
Famished once more, she mounts her stud,
Moans to his thrusting, flows with milk.
Her democratic cantons hoist brave flags.
The dark, the alcohol, make all men equal.
Black penises are very “in” this year. . . .
She dreams of sausages and plump roast duck.
Waking to middle age, she wolfs her breakfast.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

London: 1902

Milton, shouldst thou be living at this hour?

Long trains pour through these iron sheds.
The ripe gold watches fester like meat pies.
At garden parties vicars spike the punch.
Beards curl under the silken counterpanes.
Downstairs, the servants tattle all afternoon.

Ignoring mice and cobwebs, the moonbeams
Lurk in dark tenements. Massive flunkies
Run nervous errands among the bell-ropes,
While scholars, bred from eloquent wantons,
Argue with the unanswerable dust.

Upstairs, the frog king squats on his midden.
Choking, he heaves up ten thousand cigars,
Bevies of pink thighs, naughty French corsets.
The twilight hesitates to salute him.
A winsome girl cuddles his thick bones.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Nabob

Fifteen years flattering the Darwan of Sarboda:

A bungalow with wide verandahs, a sullen
 Portuguese half-caste to warm his couch
 (Proud of her silk robes, her breasts ripe lemons),
 Five native boys to serve, and a drummer
 In a scarlet coat to warn off the tigers,
 He rode on a palanquin between temple and town
 Saluting the Dutch merchants with a jewelled fan,
 Heaping up five million *gonds* from trade,
 From collectorships at jungle outposts.

The perfumed evenings sighed, the tables groaned.
 His cheeks turned yellow, his liver exploded.
 Between arrack and madeira, he sweated hard.
 His brown bastards tumbling in the shade,
 He sported the Order of the Golden Elephant
 And aired a little nervous luck at cards.

The fever came, went. He physicked himself
 And buried his woman in a lead coffin.
 He danced to the last of the candles, quit snuff,
 Sold his warehouse and bought a passage home.

Skirting the Gulf of Mannar, he fell sick again.
 In the Red Sea his tongue burned, blistered.
 Off Barca pirates chased him to Gibraltar.
 By the White Cliffs he collapsed on deck,
 His face swollen past recognition, his tongue black,
 Blood pouring from his nose, his watch stopped,
 The five million *gonds* in chests at his feet.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

On Reading Georges Simenon

Somewhere a tap drips.
Reeking of sour wine, the room
Totters downstairs in a soiled mackintosh,
Greets the fog from the Channel,
And gripping its pipe harder,
Leans against the fly-specked zinc bar
In the deserted station cafe.

For quick solutions,
Do not flip the pages.
Rather, consult the menu,
The tariff of consummations,
The outdated railway time-table.

We are governed by rolled crumbs,
Shoplifted impressions,
Lost games of *belote*,
Nervous habits. . . .

A hundred meters off, a cross-eyed waitress
Hurries along the *quai*:

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Portuguese Captain: Angola

Trampling the blue grass, aiming his blade,
The Portuguese captain hacks at the future.
Sweat drips from his khaki face.
He wades to his ankles through red mud.
He whistles off-key, exhausted by noon.
The darker woman trudges behind him.

Ate logo! calls a macaca from the trees.
The wind sighs over empty cabins.
Children whimper. Old men burn at the stake.
The distances are reimbursed by silence,
And the blue grass, unwounded, stands tall
To give its disgruntled last salute.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Ranz des Vaches

Switzerland, 1813

The cannonball, bouncing on a glacier,
Rolled into a sweet meadow at the harvest.
Six tall grenadiers erupted in boils.
Dragoons were cut open like ripe pears.
An entire regiment bolted across the *cirque*.

But the conscripts, stubborn men, threw down
Their warm muskets and lumbered home.
Nothing could stop them, once horns bayed
And the lost cows were herded together.
Neither whips nor jails reversed the trend.

“A complete rout,” one general boasted,
Yet in dark huts the peasants listened;
From unconquerable valley to deep scarp

Voices gathered to a mountainous echo:

The cataract, the loose wind, blue thunder.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Recipe: Brantôme

What makes a good *cassoulet*?
Nobody here is quite sure.
The gendarme, dropping by
For his ten o'clock *mare*,
Bets on pig's trotters;
The *ebeniste*, fresh from his tools,
Maintains only a copper pot will do;
The baker's widow, bleary with age,
Reverts to her grandmother's geese.
We can't agree.

But in the garden
Noon winks at the fat beans.
The tethered shoats nibble the capers.
The air is charged by worry.
In the kitchen, meanwhile,
The cook, adjusting her glasses,
Wipes moist hands
And soldiers on.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

A Royal Prerogative: 1788

Prince Christian Karl, three hundred jovial pounds,
Having eaten hugely from the game pie *truffe*
And drunk copiously of Burgundy and Rhenish,
Belched halfway through the dull intermezzo.
When coffee was served in pink Limoges, he nodded,
And by the end of the cosmic third movement,
He was somewhat loose, somewhat embarrassed.
Though he broke wind, *his* Princess smiled forgiveness:
Strings undid his corset, horns attacked *his* gout.
But when the *kammerherr* proposed a modest pension,
He started up, he shook *his* powdered head.
Refusing, he thought of *his* young French mistress,
The corybants at the Opera, the thieving stewards.
Besides, the Austrian's bleak looks depressed *him*.
Who pays for such trifles? Medleys are free as clouds.
The gut of the rich composes sweeter music.
The yawn of the great is reward sufficient.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Sirocco

When the wind brags of Egypt
And the sea like a jilted girl
Whimpers below the orange grove,
It is best to keep hidden,
Seal up the doors, sleep,
Avoid meat, stint on oil—
Yes, even water the wine.
The very olive trees run mad
Downhill, tossing hard fruit
At the Byzantine waves,
For the arrows come quicker
As black sharpshooters
Plant marble feet in the sand
And with loosened hair in flames
Let fly from tawny beaches.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Small Countries: Liechtenstein

The postage stamps exploit you.
A goose-girl in ruffled *dirndl*
Spreads her legs and gives out cheese.
From five goiterous valleys
The alpenhorns promote flatulence.
The one-man army holds its erection.
The Prince among his battlements
Defends a dozen stolen Rembrandts,
And the tax-dodging syndicates
Pollute the blond air with corpses.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Small Countries: Monaco

A blue tide wipes off our guilt.
Between luncheon and cocktails
We have zippered up the afternoon
And put salt on the vedettes' tails.

Evening is a lame tango, a striptease:

The palms whisper like old beauties,
But as the francs inflate, croupiers
In soiled gloves chant *Faites vos jeux!*
By clogged fountains gouty poodles
Make their peace with a lenient moon.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Victoria Regina

A queen's face on every penny;
Naps that lasted sixty years;
White beards trailing among roses;
Tea served punctually at four;
Horses fouling the long avenues;
Trams whistling in dire suburbs;
Ale and gin cheaper than dust;
Tobacco browning all the pubs;
Babies and chancres multiplying;
Virgins jumping from locked rooms;
Whipping-girls in red corsets;
Orphans flooding bottomless mines;
Beggars and tarts picking oakum;
The churches and dominies silent;
Gates of horn that closed at midnight;
The housemaids dousing the lamps. . . .

August was the kindest month.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Where Is England?

Five Arabs in a black Mercedes
With two blonde £100 tarts
Romper through Berkeley Square

To their private crannies:

Dark oil on yellow waters.

From the beleaguered window
Of his club Colonel Spendwell
Hauls down flags of empire;
In her bed-sitter Miss Wren
Crosses oceans of weak tea.

The puddles glisten with spunk.
Bobbies wink at death and terror.
In her fortress the plump Queen,
Garbed like a parson's cook,
Makes her Duke toe narrow lines.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Anthologist

After skating through the Yellow Pages
And phoning 3,222 listings, I found
More poets than I'd dreamed possible
Crouching under good or bad pseudonyms
As accountants, beauticians, exterminators,
Masseurs, plumbers, or transvestites.
The exterminators continued to bug me
And the transvestites to steal my bras,
Yet I went on adding odes and eclogues

Until I reached the printer's and my limit:

Two hundred pieces, a varied menu.
The cranks phoned me, threatening mayhem.
Old ladies in pastel waved their credentials.
Members of clubs rose from anxious benches.
Excluded, they hammer on imaginary doors.
At the close, I had a plethora of Esses,
A dearth of Ens, and not a single Zee
(Vainly I prayed for rough Slavic names).
But when the book appeared, Chicanos
Clobbered me with kisses, grateful dikes
Lunched on my affections, Blacks
With advanced degrees polished my shoes.
Now I am an impotent jock, an ISBN,
An idol dozing on a coffee table.
Waiter! Hand me a cheaper menu, please. . . .

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

April Is the Coolest Month

I've never gone to an actuarial stag-party
Where figures don't lie and hundred-dollar chicks
Hatch out of the computers, but one of my friends,
A nosey type with tunnel vision and pink hair,
Goes once a month. "In the last analysis," he says,
Not speaking of urine, even, or gold-bearing ore,
"These babes don't increase the risk factor much.
They can add lots of fun at dessert, or hold down
Liquor bills by making you drink from their shoes.
If I were you, I'd deduct their panty-girdles
As 'entertainment'—which is allowed under 31-A
Of the current code. Still, I'd be a bit careful,
Because what goes on comes off later. Black silk
Is very contagious and smashed glass expensive,
Though in a smoke-filled room all cats are grey,
And some transvestites can fool you every time."
He talks a good game: I don't believe a word,
Since, in the last analysis, nothing is that sure
And fewer guys bring home positive Wassermanns.
You can't take people apart like Meccano sets
And put them back again in top working order.
You start with a percentage, then cut your losses.
"In the last analysis. . . ." How I hate that phrase!
It's like "death and taxes," it's like death itself
When we pay the Collector, when the party's over.
What about another, Eddie—just for the road?

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Barbers

They walked from the drunken boat to the ferry house,
Jowled boys with cardiac skin and ten-dollar smiles,
Who traded jokes under the hot lamps, cigars
At an angle and eyes on the manicurists' legs,
While the barbers, reeking of garlic and wine,
Followed a cold trail for tips on the market.

Twenty-three, skiddoo! my father roared. Knives
Tore at his breast already. He voted in Harding,
Laughed at Coolidge, played stud-poker Monday nights.
With his bogus tan, he looked only forty,
Skating across thin ice to his widower's meal,
To the nimble blonde in the pink corset,
To a sudden death the tabloids exploited.

But the barbers, I guess, stayed on their jobs,
Dreaming of Naples as the banks collapsed.
Funiculi! they sang, rubbing in Lucky Tiger,
Grateful to be ignored when the gag ended.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Blackboard

What I have scrawled there can not endure.
The yellow dust chokes me. The custodian
Will forget and erase the varnished truth,
The muscular verbs, the athletic mottoes.
Meanwhile, radiators are coughing phlegm.
Light plays hop-scotch on the tile floor.
Somebody who worked late has gone to sleep.

If I am Abelard in patches, the question is:

Why have I fought so hard without a helmet?
I am too easily distracted by argyle socks,
By buzzing flies, by the fading wall maps.
No sound country will let me immigrate.
The termites whisper of dubious tomorrows,
Scholars are racing off to the marinas,
The blind boy has stolen my lecture-notes.
In the front row, Eloise grins through acne.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Cellists

Most cellists come from Odessa,
Are fat, pale, and enervated;
They practice ungodly long hours

But succeed only with the Moonlight:

The Sonata gets away rent-free.
Dining at the Russian Tea Room,
They charge even the caviar
And run up a year's bills.
The owner, nevertheless, pats them
On the back and says, "*Tovarich*,
Don't worry. You pay me tomorrow."

Tomorrow it usually snows.
Walking home in galoshes,
Splay-footed and anxious,
The cellists dream of Odessa,
Of their mothers' *blini*,
Of girls they never meet.

Fair weather does not help.
The automat rejects their coins.
The bus spits in their faces.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Croquet Players: Dusk

Balls, you said, and the plump epithet rolling
Off matted pine boughs limped through wickets
To the inevitable porch where a shocked guest
Blushed to the lemonade-pink of comprehension.
Mosquitoes conspired to poison our ankles
And bats, shuttling between the trees, bombed
The Italian urns. Someone in white flannels
Laughed, and his echo, troubling our mallets,
Caused us to shiver and question the darkness.
In the hotel behind us, lamps flashed on.
Tetrazzini sobbed for oysters and champagne,
The needle biting the disc, while servants
In starched aprons, flailing ambiguous batons,
Knocked declining summer from the pergola.
The balls ran counter to the killing clocks.
You swore again—yet the night persisted.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Delicatessen

Changed: only their names (Shapiro = Shapp);
The forelocks gone, caftans replaced by
Hawaiian shirts, they persecute the hostess,
Tease the cash register, and yell “Foul!”
If new arrivals are seated before them.

Poland was roasted in ovens Friday night.
Spain husbands its warmth for every bagel.
The Chicano busboy plots with Torquemada.
A child moans from a surfeit of pink lox.
Mother’s cooking was thrown out of court.

The owner, bowed under lucrative nerves,
Haunts the men’s room like dysentery.
Waitresses turn sarcastic. Their tips, no
House of Rothschild, bankrupt expectation.
Outside, the Jaguars dance a *kazatsky*
Through damaged arteries of the street.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Dog's Funeral

From the hillside, a fine view of the grave
And by it Aunt Maude and Uncle Charlie
Blowing a cold day out of their heads
Reviewed the pounds of ground-round,
The gold shots for arthritis, the gem-encrusted collars, the turquoise tags:
A hundred pets—a hundred thousand spent
And their fat wills at last deflated.

In such processions a nephew walks last.
As the wind wailed, as they shuffled
Toward winter and the chauffeured car,
I raised the flag of my feelings and wept.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Faculty Meeting

Huddled in cast-off overcoats and fur caps,
They imagine that the Word is written larger
Above the Humanities Building, that the gym
Will collapse in an earthquake, that coeds
Disguised as lilies are the Vestal Virgins
Clearing the afternoon of their own doubts,
Their damp evasions, their meek self-abuse.
Meanwhile, the physicists rap on tables,
The French teachers practice the *savate*,
The mathematicians are knitting earmuffs.

When the vote is taken, the janitors guffaw:

Muscled arms carry out the shredded exams,
Cawing ravens foul the roof of the chapel,
The freshman caught smoking in the john
Is sent to town for marijuana cigarettes.
Over the Dean's body they rush to adjourn.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Foresight Saga

The ruptured saints and constipated missionaries at his bank
Convinced my grandfather early-on that this hostile globe
Was no pail of beer sufficient for a poor greenhorn all his days
And that by munching crusts and buying spectacles at Woolworth's,
He could save his wizened soul and see to ninety, which he did.
Having slept above his shop, bought lots, and buried the surplus
In bonds, he played Monopoly years before the game caught hold.
Of course, he never took up golf, poker, or women—like his sons.
To be honest, he always reeked of cheap snuff and ghetto piety.
While he distrusted many, he distrusted my father most
And drew a will that made the younger boys think themselves poor
Dad's trust-dollars multiplied in Seamen's Savings. Gold eagles
Coined in the terms of Pierce and Fillmore kept in mint condition,
And when this presumed pauper died (in 1930), tapping his cane
Against the plaster and shouting for Leopold, Otto, and Joseph
To search that spot, the wall also flowed a deep spring of cash.
I was young for golf and poker then, but smart kids learn fast,
So today, with two chicks in the pot (Long live Herbert Hoover!)
And an extra dividend around the corner, I'm sitting pretty.
But once in a while I honor Grandpa by serving crumb pudding
Or refusing a third martini or even a goodnight kiss. It's nice,
Now and then, to recall just who you are and where you hail from.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Grandparents' Day: Pacific Heights School

So we have come to this:

A comic for trustee, a statistician for headmaster,
Freckled girls in plaid frocks dodging between
Their mothers' capped U.S.C. grins
And the boys singing "Yankee Doodle"
Or "The Marine Hymn" with sad faces.

This is Nixon Country. The barometer is falling.
Impeached Volvos wince like angina cases.
The wheelchair stalls. The cane is our ghost
Tapping in Morse down halls decked with folly
Past aquariums innocent of gefilte fisch
To the crematory in the rose garden.

One last puff, O denatured cigarette
Before we invade the gazebo of youth
And come out the short end posing
For cameras that cry *Whoa!* to everybody.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

If the Girdle Fits...

You great brown zero of an advertiser's dream,
You would-be fashion model with sharp teeth
And the tenacious grasp of an octopus,
Listen to the parakeets in your bright room
Chewing and pecking the bars of your chatter.

There is a sub-machine gun in your purse:

You shoot down men like clay pigeons.
You move in a successful mini-waltz of talk
Or toys to the pill-cabinet of realization,
And on your bed cushioned by plastic dolls
One opens her mouth to cry *Father, Father*. . . .
He pinned you at ten to his brutal chest,
A medal, no model, for us all to admire.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

In, Mate

Busily I am refurnishing my cage:

Everything from Dad's humidior to new drapes
Goes well in a kaleidoscope of color, mode, tone—
Set off by the perpetual novena of your face.
The painter soothes us with hot towels.
The carpenter crucifies himself. The bank waits.
I am the contortionist who fixed each deal.

Now I am the sole occupant of his rage.
Now the hours frisk by in assorted shapes.
Now I shall squeeze blood from a stone.
Now I can emerge pure from my own bowels.
Now I must come to terms with the Fates. . . .
But can I jump clear of the turning wheel?

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Keeping Kosher

Laying tefillin is not the real problem:

What about the octoroon maid down the hall
Or Little Morty who plays games with himself?
At ninety-four, Grandpa has become a nuisance;
His Menshevik beard gets into the chicken soup.
Uncle Ben mopes about, turning off the lights;
Illumination is hardly his saucer of tea.
And when I am sent to open the front door,
The elevator boy shouts in an Irish brogue.
No spirit will enter, none will answer me.
I have said the last prayer, eaten the tart,
Gone meekly to my narrow couch, grateful
For the silence that pours over the blue rug.
I too have had my rations of conformity.
The furniture steeps in a bath of dumbness.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Locker Room

The sweat we gave to summer and its dust
Comes through clogged pores. Skinned knees,
Raw elbows vie for lotions;
Bruised lips and thirsty tongues say “Cheese,”

While photo freaks, blonde grandstand leaders,
And mesomorphic front-line players
Shall drift apart, become mere bleeders,
Cry “Foul!”, peel off in laughing layers,

Romp under showers (win they must!),
Put powder on and air their socks,
Knock autumn cold with virile motions,
Drive coaches down the throats of clocks.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Miss Alice Recalls Lewis Carroll

He was the quietest cove on shore
But in the boat, sir, ogled my hat
And peeked up my frock. “Flamingoes,”
He moaned, “and pink ones at that!”
As if he cared what wee girls wore,
But his gray fringe tickled my toes
And he bent far to a dither of green
With teapots in his lavish eyes
That flashed red for the Red Queen;
The White Rabbit gnawed on his nose.
The blanched light clung to my thighs.
“One!” he counted. “*Two—three—four*. . . .
”Will you yield now? Yield and lie down?”
Then the moon tripped at our cabin door;
A screech-owl gobbled the left-over pies.
It’s the five, I thought, the enormous brown
Cheshire cat roused from his slumbers,
But my old fool gaped, fingered my nook,

Kissed me awake, muttered some numbers:

Our boat sank under the weight of my frown.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

News from the Man Downstairs

Once I lived on the top floor among bats
And the dark winds, where a blowzy cherub
Puffed unheard melodies through cold pipes
And the rain teased and waved my hair;
But soon, of course, much tidier tenants
Tiptoed along my outer bounds, since tea
Was fetched and sugar and frosted cakes
To nourish them, though I never dreamed
Of the service, the maid, or the china.
I slept higher who wouldn't descend,
Who couldn't wink at the blond daylight,
Having treads to chew and tacks to swallow,
Once, in the top-floor room imprisoned.
Yes, and now the heaters ring this bed.
Toys are unwrapped and set around me
To march and jeer and clamor for my blood,
The stiff mechanicals of an iron age.
As I cough up little skulls into basins,
I am stretched helpless at the winter end,
The ropes tearing my flesh, the music
From a goatskin drum bang to my ears,
And my tall memory smashed with the clock.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Night Thoughts

Climb out of my dreams, lady with the glib smile,
The truisms, the chicken soup with matzoh balls,
And the pink Kleenex for my post-nasal drip.
I don't admire good cheer, right answers, health—
None of your American Hebrew Portuguese shibboleths—
But thrive on constipation, long grudges, silence,
And TV dinners spiked by *crème à la coeur*,
So don't knock and waltz in as if you'd just won
Cases of Chanel Number 5 or the Miss Boston Contest.
In fact, keep clear of my sesquipedalian testicles.
My door admits only the police, the *tramontana*,
Dark refugees from Lisbon, and assorted demons.
Besides, we were married under the Judas tree,
And the cradle we inhabit must soon fall down.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Pardon

He'd suffered enough snubs in narrow streets.
After many years of scrimping, he paid all cash.
The house with solid walls was his, the garden
With the tall fence, a scroll on the gate
(Suggesting noble blood), stained-glass panes—

Suffice it to say, much more than he needed:

Yes, even cellars full of tinned goodies, wine.
And twice each week, for his health's sake,
The eighteen-year-old doll, a blonde crumpet
In a brief gown, waltzed down the pillow
To his sticky clutch and was fast devoured
If not digested—all of which implies
That the problem was never quite resolved,
Since now he cannot cry in rage, *Assassins!*
Or prove that wicked neighbors threw stones
At his crystal eyes and punctured his tires.
He can only sit at the stupefying hearth,
The sleek twitch on his knee, ruminative
And joyless, though he's got everything at last,

While the clock in his belly ticks off slowly:

Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. . . .
Nobody
Will get hurt when he explodes, nobody care.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Plaintiff

Cornell, Vassar, and Wellesley were not responsible:
Those kilted, coy lassies who thronged my lectures
Perched on the Anxious Bench with knees exposed.
They took bad notes, they'd date for a C-minus.
They penned odes to autumn, ballads to spring,
Sonnets to winter (or autumn, from Europe).
After three hungry terms, having flunked my orals,
I married Betsy whose legs clogged the agenda.
She's named all our five boys for ancestors,
Including Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
She makes her own clothes, puts up beach-plum jam,
Bickers on my salary, skis weekends in Vermont.
We sail from Briggs' Cove in a rented yawl
To gossip and drink with her tall relations.
Each Christmas her father mails us dividends.
Her mother has willed us the Victorian Jove-seat
(if she dies) and warned Betsy to cut her hair,
Quit buying dolls and pinching fruit at the market.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Plato Was Wrong

The leader praised this fashionable cave
To dimpled charlatans in hiking clothes.
The schemer traded candles for trimmed wicks,
Coaxed them within, blew his platonic nose,
And flung improper ditties at damp walls.
The sportive wenches pouted, seemed annoyed,
Demanded food, sulked bare-kneed and cocksure
In languid postures ripe to be enjoyed.

They snubbed the stop-watch and the broken cord,
The lamps that winked and flirted, short of oil.
Their gallants tickled up the tender air
While courage heated suppers to a boil
And dishes rattled on impromptu stones.
Morning rose blushingly. Those jealous bats
Who dropped white parachutes to seal the door
May find odd uses for Tyrolean hats.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Professor Emeritus

Having plowed eighty percent of his students
And won the best-dressed teacher prize,
He retired to a dank cottage across the tracks
Where his wife clips roses and he clips coupons.
Trains chug-chug off with his last footnotes.
The mailman no longer stops each morning.
His books grimace from the mildewed walls.
His pictures scowl, like the college president.
Artilleries of time batter his old jokes,
But he regrets nothing, leastwise the nymph
Whose clothes he rumpled in the Arboretum,
That final lecture moved some to applause.
His conscience glows, an unfiltered cigarette.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Reservation

On fifty acres—loam or salt flats—cabins
House four dozen taupe-tan and Brillo-haired
Descendants of the last full-blood, Elizabeth Joe,
Whose ancestor deeded three hundred square miles
To Captain Upton in the Year of the Great Pox.
George Brackett, a grandson, recalls her staff,
Her corn mortar, her toothless incantations.
She was labelled witch. Bob Dragon supplies ducks
For Manhattan tables. His nose is happily hooked.
His children don beads, buckskins, and feathers
To war against mosquitoes. Perry Quanticutt
Fishes the bay and condemns the summer outboards
That foul his nets and decimate the mussels.
He is proud of his name, of the bows he fashions.
But in Wampum Lane Cornelius Horn, the cripple
Married to Polly Brackett, mocks at such nonsense.
To him even the annual Pow-wow is fraudulent.
His eyes are not flints; they blink and water.
Mounted on wheels, he digs for arrowheads,
Pays no taxes, and devours the *Harlem Clarion*.
“Indians?” he bellows. “We prefer soul-food.”
The current in Black River enforces his words.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Richard Bellamy, Esq.

Forest Heights, Illinois

Not that he was tall like steeples and devastating—
You did not take measurements then in Church Lane
Or Rockhill Road, save for the bank's granite need.
To wield his recessive pale blond charm was enough,
And as extra man at parties he demanded merely
A chair between the liquor and some youthful guest.
He played offensive bridge, for blood, and was seen
On the links chasing trim legs in tartan stockings
Beyond the water-hole. Naturally, his friends hoped
That he'd marry soon: rich Patty Clarke or Madge
Who died beneath her car one Christmas. At forty,
He still went each Friday to Miss Warne's Cotillion
And flirted with pimpled schoolgirls half his age.
He could jive, roll, swing, twist, and originate
Wilder steps without losing hairpiece or decorum.
At fifty, he got full dentures and a snappy Porsche,
But Miss Warne's pupils wouldn't budge. Ice-cubes
Cooled his wit in the punchbowl (spiked by regret),
And parleying one night with the mirror, he found
The skull that Nikons find when their lenses
Jam at f. 3: a white pledge but no engagement.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Send No Flowers

With my fifty percent yen for reality
I journey to the dog track in Ed's limousine
And come home in a huff, hounding my churns
For booze, lunch, even chicks on the game;
Feeling my prostate kick, my truss slip low,
Nibbling at the cheddar myth that all's well.
Let the Great Showman ring up his canvas
On New Frontiers. Barnum, you're pickled green.
You belch thick dollar-fogs. My eyes tear.
My sour conscience gags. Least dependable
(But expensive) are the white balls we drive

Over the water hole to the ultimate pause:

The heat, the cold, the massage, the nap—
Though like I said, my share's never enough
For a high pay-off. Nothing gets finished.
Even cabbies and waiters, disgruntled
At their tips, move angrily to pull wires
That endanger weak nerves or louse things up.
For you the living, it's better to consecrate
This lawn to me, your prince, your duffer,
Who hangs from the cross wearing a kooky hat.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

The Spider Is Waiting

The freezing man lurks in his attic.
Unschool'd, he plucks a harp of cobwebs,
While from below heat rises—and love
(The voice he knows), the gossamer years. . . .
And all between his feet and heart is warm.

Winter lies deeper yet, past beam or brick.
While the coy mole sleeps in her wool,
The dog is mute, the cat laps up her dream,
The fire lisps sadly an indifferent tune.
A wife is just a slender echo there.

But in the cellar, with prismatic eye,
The waiting spider plots against the house.
Slowly it moves, gently it mimics death;
The web must rise, the engine agitate
To snare the nimble moment as it flees.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Christmas Eve

In raw December dusk we met beside the cage
 Of Colliery 13, waiting for the lift to bring
 Hugh, her brother, into the fouled black air.
 Already, he was half drunk with anticipation,
 Yet the polluted landscape promised no mercy
 And Janet, silent, seemed blinded or deafened.
 We stopped at Tymtyczyn's for a bottle,
 Then trudged past slag heaps to their shack.
 I don't believe in Christmas. After one round,
 We tasted the blood-pudding and cried "Haggis!".
 After the fourth, Hugh tweedled the chanter
 And Janet, changing to the Scotch outfit,
 Came bashful from her room. She mounted
 The worn kitchen table and jiggled briskly.
 Her white knees, I recall, were dimpled.
 The lace at her throat teased and pleaded.
 By midnight, Hugh had passed out. Janet,
 Pale in the soiled couch, began to weep.
 "Take me away," she said. "I hate this dump."
 But what did she expect from me—Hollywood,
 A contract, chances to ball with rich men?
 At four A.M. I slammed her peevish door,
 Taking the chill bareheaded and hearing
 Weak drones from cantankerous tubes.
 The seasons limped by in Indian file.
 Hugh wrote me bad news. The clippings told
 More of Pete Tymtyczyn than of Janet.
 Married ten years, they have four children
 And a kitchen full of unwashed dishes,
 Yet I wonder, thinking aloud of bagpipes,
 If she still jigs on rickety tables,
 Her unleashed hair shimmering down,
 Christmas green in her heathery eyes,
 Her autumn days shorter than kilts. . . .

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

A Father at Fifty

Lead, kindly light, amid th' encircling gloom.

She dogged me all over North Beach,
Motes in her eyes, her jeans popping-hot,
Long black hair gloating on her shoulders. . . .
I should have known: Mongolia is wild.

Hash parties at Peter Pussydog's
(She didn't indulge), abandoned evenings

At The Trieste, bookshops full of debtors:

She could mew like a sick kitten.

Finally, at the Plymouth Hotel
We had it out on a lumpy mattress
After she dished up ten previous joes,

A ruptured hymen, each bleeding detail:

The works, Mister. And now? Now
We are both leaner by several years;
Our railroad flat blocks any view
Of the famous bridges leading nowhere.

The kid has her looks, my headaches,
A nose for trouble, a nervous cough;
We compromised and name him Job.
Patience is a hummingbird with diabetes.

As she lolls by the asthmatic stove
With her showgirl's legs on display,
I often think about knives, rope,
Poison (and the toilet's constant drip).

Lead, kindly light, amid th' encircling gloom.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

New England

Window shades dithered each night

He crept up the street for a quick beer:

Alphonse LaChapelle's in "French Town,"
Girls waxen under dim light bulbs,
Men horny and quick with their mitts,
The juke-box choking on bent nickels.

Careening home, he usually stumbled
Over dead cats, Miss Peabody's hedge,
Undraped hydrangeas, kerbs, roots,
Wrought-iron deer on neighbors' lawns,
The Atlantic fog—all whiskery ghosts
Until he was locked in and sober.

At the bank, behind a tense wicket,
He fumbled rich people's cold dollars,
Ate cheese for lunch, grew constipated,
Won demotion to tall stools, eye-drops,
Left promptly by four, honoring clocks,
And took short cuts through figures.

When trains quit, he bought a Chandler,
Drove his mother to the Berkshires,
Caressed damp grass, prayed for summer.
Cocaine helped his varied aches or tics—
A tooth extracted, a new tweed suit—
Cruel autumn growled at his heels.

Winter came next, the final battle.
Done up in gauds, his cheeks crimson,
He skated on thin ice once too often.
The pond was named for him. Chairs
In the library were his endowment,
Oak chairs that spinsters have trusted.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Nineteen Forty-Five

The war dragged on, but I was doing fine:

A garden with my flat on Cherry Lane,
A fireplace that drew, enormous ceilings
To balance off July's hot temper—eighty bucks
Per month. . . . The Sarah Lawrence dame was young,
And then my uptown “Highland Queen”—
Rich and immensely fond of good martinis—
Flew down by subway. Buses cost a dime.
A fool could keep both girls on half his pay.

The job. Nine to eleven at a desk, at phones
Like wild geese bringing luck; a typist
All teeth and tits; a nose for tenements
Ripe to be razed. My six senses reeled—
Even in bed with Emmy or the flu.

I caught small fish on cranky elevators,
Big fish at the Plaza Bar. No difference.
Few problems that I couldn't date ahead.
Between a jail and rivals, I lost weight;
Until I conned the bank, I sweated hard.
The wrecker's ball went *thunk, thunk, thunk*,
And the dust settled. Jean? Jean did not nag.

‘College,’ Jean said, ‘is crap. I’m going home’
But cashed her Daddy's checks and stayed,
A lovely fund of learning, prone to rhyme,
Protracted periods, monstrous depressions. . . .
‘I’m on to her, my dear,’ dear Emmy chimed,
Hailing from Merriewold, Episcopalian, chic,
And breathing jealousy through her “Scotch” nose.
At the end, Emmy had grabbed the brazen ring.
She rode my wooden horse too bloody well.

I'm dreaming now of Thursdays, Emmy's days:

A nervous sun fondling the davenport,
 My books (largely unread), her tartan frown,
 Strong gin and voices at the door: Max B.,
 Poor Mr. Gould endowed with oral notes—
 And last, the cane preceding Alfred K. . . .
 Emmy raved on, witty though seldom wise.

‘And where was Jean?’ you ask. ‘Burrowing
 For T.S. Eliot among crepuscular stacks,
 Taking notes on her cuffs, looking quite

Demure in cardigans and knee-socks:

My pert scholar.’ ‘And Emmy?’ ‘Furious
 Yet controlled.’ Thus the year limped out
 On sandals grey (apologies to Milton).

A later blizzard harried Jean away.
 ‘Of course she wrote, that home-ruled Egeria,
 Quoting the Bard from fatal distances
 While Emmy drained me to a shadow
 And plucked her harp of forty years
 To my dissembling jig.’ What rot!
 I won’t look back, regret, fume, pine.
 The truth was shoddy circumstance,
 A journey—and a thimbleful of wine.

They killed New York one humid afternoon.
 They buried with it the Wop architect
 Whose heartless *grattacielo* stole my view.
 I may return again—in wintry mood—
 But meanwhile, buy me aspirin.
 Confess to nobody. Raise alien flags,
 And tell me, stupid Muse, what else is new?

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Nineteen Thirty-Two

Going to work chill mornings, I hopped a red trolley
That mounted the Palisades, transferred at Journal Square
To a Central Avenue bus, and raced down blocks
Shrouded by washing. I passed the Reservoir,
Kelly's Bar and Grill, Mulrooney's Diner.
I sniffed cakes from Schroeder's, sausage from Boldt's,
Coal dust from the tracks, the stink of the Marshes.
I unlocked an iron door, posed by the counter,
Grinned, nodded, said: "The customer is God."
In the basement, rats gambolled with used condoms.
My uncle wore false teeth, suspenders, a white wig.
At the cash register Moe Klein pinched nickels.
The other clerks prayed for an early summer.
The nuns came in pairs, begging for Jesus.
Across the street, cars coughed, gasped, died.
Disbarred lawyers jumped from the Stoll Building.
The Courthouse and Hall of Records swayed drunkenly.
Garbage burned at the curb. Irish colleens
Danced their hornpipes in the brick gutters,
And I, terrified of those bare legs, confessed
To venial sins I'd never known, gave dollars
To the blind priest, trudged home through the snow.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Ode on a Distant Prospect of Jersey City

Perhaps we should know if the pulse was ever warm;
Or from what calculated risks fragrant smokestacks
Blighted our grass; or how one sad commuter
Hit jackpots on a gum machine at Journal Square,
Making the nightmare-colored balls yell “Foul”
To a jury of Polish butchers; or why firemen
Baptized in ale Mrs. Simmendinger’s tall niece
(The lass with the delicate air, the true answers).

Such information would help beef up the report
On the atmosphere’s carbon, the horizon’s tired stoop,
For my parents trudged frantic miles to their shop.
Out of a harvest of hats, a bias toward wide ties,
And trainloads of Union Suits they counted profit.
They were often bizarre and neglectful merchants,
But, I think, when the curfew strikes down clocks,
Time must promote the right man, the upright woman.

Meanwhile, a uniformed swarf punches my ticket
(Was it at Exchange Place—or Manhattan Transfer?).
To me going West, to me stamped by the journey,
These distractions are valid: spiders
In cantankerous tunnels, moles in the dank sewers,
Equal denizens neither marked for prizes
Nor bruised by dreams, glorious though obscure,
Favored yet mild, riding home in the Tubes.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Old Lady Poems: 1. Miss Booker and Miss Kite

As March huffed out, a blizzard sealed the doors,
Yet for some meagre weeks after that blast,
Peering through ferns and stained glass panels,
They named ambiguous streets heartless and rude
Like their metallic deer cropping the frost.
But when fat chimney smoke had whittled down
To question marks and shutters banged all night,
Neighbors inquired: the stoic purse of need
Snapped reason tight and darkened every room.
So Ralph, Miss Booker's nephew, paid his call.
He broke the lock, hoping eccentric stoves
Might wink at him from the red eyes of age.

He found two corpses in this wintry board:

A trumped-up parcel green with dollar bills,
The food and drink untouched, each counted log
Cold from refusal, and by the regal hearth
The sleek, inherited double of himself.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Old Lady Poems: 2. Mrs. Randall Debevoise

On stormy days her clocks would not behave
While leaves lopped from her youth crept to the porch
And at the antique mirrors of her eyes
The season flirted, babbling and agog
Like Mrs. Debevoise: stalled near the tracks
Where no trains ran, insulted by the wind
Or robbers of her obsolescent trees,
Small apples to her sight, who dodged away
In liveries watered by her cataracts.
We teased her ears. She blew the pipe of love
And charged out crying “Scat”, wrath in her hair,
Drunk with her nut-brown sherry, overjoyed
To have discovered on the barbed-wire fence
One shred of evidence which proved her sane.
Gone is she now, her house, its gimcrack freight—
Vanished down whistling tunnels to the dark.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

Incendiary on Elm Street

Should I resign and yield
This house, this family seat and go—
Where? Where else? Elsewhere,
A South Atlantic guano rock
Strictly for the birds? Perhaps.

But damn uncertainty! Today
I burned her dolls. Yes, all,
Even the blue-eyed lush who wets
And gurgles in her plastic voice, *Ma, Ma*. . .
They whine, stiff puppets: wine
For me the berserker at large
Despoiling attic or garage
For trinkets (milk-glass, old hats, knives,
Papers and tribal photographs
Kept just for laughs),
A poltergeist with few regrets
For gear of dusty lives;
While yesterday
As autumn had its way,
I threw golf sticks
Upon the pyre of leaves. . .
Such were my nasty tricks.

Publication. *The Dark Playground* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1979).

GOING LIKE SEVENTY

Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988

At the Playhouse

The blue jowls or the trembling hands come after.
With stiffening gait and validated heart,

We fake a round of music, dance, and laughter:

Again these planetary tables jump apart,
For look, the sun deserts us and dips under.
Even the fun-fair moon offers no prize.
The cups and saucers rattle with the thunder.
The toxic worm of selfhood multiplies.

Who paid a ransom to that dark physician
To feed us vitamins against the cold?
Who doused the lamps? (It's only intermission).
Who cheapened silver and debased the gold?
Our act has ended. Now that we are old,
The clowns on stage assume a brave position.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Chapel in the Woods

Walking in autumn woodlands once, I came
Upon a chapel built from massive stone.
The crippled priest within it prayed alone.
His tears were amber (but his eyes were flame).
His toothless gums were ugly with my name.
His voice was mine. He urged me to atone
For pampered nights with feasting overblown
And costly women he could never claim.
I mocked his tears. He bowed his head in shame.
My luxury had stripped him to the bone.
And then dry leaves in measured monotone
Danced for the priest whose shrunken feet were lame.
Yet only he limped homeward from that cell
Where flame and amber bind me to his spell.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Chappaquiddick

Martha's Vineyard

Those days, Indians had no bridge
For crossing to the main island.
They sat by their fires in the cold,
Smoked their fish, cursed the winter.
Their squaws were passed around
Like meat or mackerel—
 and devoured.

When the whites came, they went west.
Now a few hunker above the red cliffs
In plastic tents, making cheap baskets
Or colored pots that won't take firing.

The whites play beach-ball very hard,
Drink good whiskey, pass the tanned girls
Around like meat in butcher paper.
Among the pines sits their white house;
Their head squaw pays out thousands
For a purse, a robe, a shell necklace. . .
The waves eat sand as pale-skin summer
Retreats along the cool white beaches.
That bridge, like us, was double-crossed.
The Indians paddle their own canoes.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Elegy for a City

Sunset and a view of the Golden Gate;
The cable cars and the Neapolitan bakery;
Topless waitresses and the tarts on Fillmore;
Drunks at corners and doormen at some doors

All must be paid for and paid for well,
Though at the end it comes to very little
With the tax, the tip, and the free squeeze
Under the table where the deal concludes.

And if the knight rides out his pink lance,
The maiden, surely, must blush in daylight.
New Joe's, Old Joe's, the Original Old Joe's
Shall be good joes for cops to blackmail;
The limit, Signor, is a walk on the Marina
To digest the big supper or the bouncy blonde,
And after this, perhaps, two cappuccinos
Before you board the existential ferry.

But should the ferryman demand his ticket,
Let him wait: Sausalito has gone adrift,
Tiburon sinks in the polluted bay,
And sharks are marching up Market Street.
In the last glare from an improbable sky,
In the final figure of the disputed bill,
You will shine like the saint who fed
The birds, and the cloud will descend.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Granite

I've worked around the black veins in your legs.
You stand immovable among pines, to the north
Where the wind was born that plagues the cows,
And the stream, trickling through the pasture,
Makes no difference to your stance. Hardness
Is your main thrust, and my temper rises
When I dig but an inch down to find again
Your many ribs. O, let us give a yard, an ell,
The shortest distance from icehouse to barn
On this ground I call my own. Shrill ravens
Torment me less than you. I stagger home
Bawling *Granite! granite!*, your keen blades
In my flesh that must soon go underground
To join you in the inexorable winter ahead.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Horn and Hardart

New York: 1935

For plugged nickels, urns with lions' mouths
Growled and disgorged cocoa, coffee, milk.
For a lousy dime one could sit all night
Mixing ketchup with hot water, ogling
The queers who juggled bowls of sugar
And murmured *Darling, darling, darling*. . .
For only a quarter the American century
Opened glass jaws on baked beans, chicken, pie.
Opportunity, like the phantom in Macbeth,
Knocked thrice but was ever turned away.

Outside, the winter's manifest destiny
Blew into piles. The traffic snarled.
The cop on his box read Engels, Lenin, Marx.
A kid dodging the trucks wet his pants.

Macy's and Gimbel's engaged in safe wars:

The price of cigarettes and diapers fell.
But as I waited for the light to change,
A beggar at my elbow whispered *Not so fast!*
I gave him all the pennies I owned.
He tipped his hat, laughed at the dark sky.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

In the Verdugos

The native red fox has been driven
Farther into the mesquite. The coyote
Sits on his paws bewailing progress.
The yucca tramp the hills like Arabs
In search of oil or dollars. Cars
Pour through the washes between Glendale
And Montrose. The air is rancid.

Across a wide boulevard MacDonald's
Flirts with Star-Girls Nudie Bar.
The Kowloon Restaurant has gone bankrupt.
The "adult" bookstore plays with itself,
And the used car lot tells fibs
To any chump who stops to listen.
The neon bulbs hiss and stammer.

The foundations are not durable.
Housewives in pink wrappers bully
Their neighbors for rolls and coffee.
By noon the day is already exhausted,
And the unlovely children play
Hopscotch without conviction.
Even the mortgages have ulcers.

From the City of Dreadful Night
Helicopters, probing for burglars,
Cruise with impertinent eyes.
Bermuda grass doubles for marijuana,
And the faded palms, hiking their skirts,
Jig nimbly above the avenues.
This colder suburb will never thrive.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Keeping Kosher

My grandmother in England kept kosher,
Kept a modish hat shop in the High Street,
Kept Granddad in Bangor, Maine, amused
By her witty letters and clever sketches.
In 1865, the Civil War ended,
She took a Cunarder to Hoboken,
Fished in her reticule for his photo,
Compared tintype to the actual man,
Declined to walk down the gangplank.
Granddad, who'd shaved off his beard,
Persuaded her to touch land, touch dollars.
To her dying day she kept kosher.

In 1930, Mr. B. Manischewitz
Sailed from Hoboken to Liverpool
With an entourage of cooks and nannies,
Thirty pieces of luggage, eight kiddies,
And his plump wife in silver fox. . .
Throughout the year they kept kosher,
Dovanned at London, Paris, Istamboul,
Dined well, took the prescribed waters.
At Bad Pitz, they lost one portmanteau.
Did it matter? They read Baedeker.
The *matzohs* curled up like *torahs*.
Germans screamed for their kosher blood.

Between those years I lost my pimples;
Escaped *bar mitzva*, the Slump, the army;
Drank *tea* with Episcopalian rectors;
Learned to rhumba and down martinis. . .
In bed, I'm six inches short of bliss.
I wear a hearing-aid to the opera,
Don't patronize Chinese laundries,
Carry big chips on my left shoulder,
Devour oysters Friday evenings. . .
It hardly matters. I'm still kosher.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Legend

In the thick jungles of polluted air
We laid our traps to find if you were there,
Sweet king and festive boy. The charge was treason
Writ gallows-high and broadcast for the season
By hired drolls and dwarves. A ravaged earth
Still groans to barren girls news of your birth,
While senile Joseph, limping on his staff,
Who dozed in chimney corners, woke to laugh
And help them rock your cradle, start the loom
That wove you to the warp of the world's room
Where oxen rubbed against your tender skin.
We paid the charges of that churlish inn
Whose host, sent beggared forth, devised his plan
To feed the legend, crucify the man. . .

Our inquisition runs about the same:

The sheriff's gang subpoena us by name
To show why bonds and stocks and systems fell
The day you preached on peace at Adam's well.
And harder merchants drive us with the lash
Of tinsel, music, or the clink of cash.

Child becomes myth, but myth becomes our death:

We shout your name within the house of breath.
We kiss your wounds, set wine at large for cheer,
Mail cards, get drunk, ring out the plundered year.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Mehr Licht

Today I put more lamps in the study—
Not to illuminate my books, which have
Already illuminated me, but to cast light
On dark questions I may never answer. . .
I've seen the Apocalypse, ridden four nags
Across lush pampas of fear and worry,
Tilted with windmills that seldom turn.
The grist can't take root, the seed is barren,
And the old knight in his rusted armor
Only laughs when I ask the road to glory.
In the kitchen I eat too many Twinkies
And throw myself on the mercy of the court.
In the bedroom I dream of little murders
(the blood of others is ketchup for my chops).
In the bathroom I let it all hang out
And scrupulously measure each precious inch. . .
But here, where banners and plaques swagger,
I can hardly read my name. Transparent ink,
Dissolving paper are damp co-conspirators,
And I am rowing toward age in a leaky tub
With a woman I love yet no longer see.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

My Sister's Cabinet

Here, where autumn is parched desert blasts,
She kneels at the cabinet in the hallway

Lifting out year by year the decades' booty:

Her school albums; Dad posturing in khaki;
Aunts motoring in hats, veils, dusters;
A mugshot of Jill the dachshund, with pups. . .
In the locked bedroom old toys hibernate;
The girls' faces are turned to blank walls.
A disinherited furnace growls and rumbles.
It needs courage to survive—
 or oat flakes
And a cup of Brim to toast the shadows.
From upstairs she hears her master's voice.
Again she genuflects, her age marked CLASSIFIED.
Through battered jalousies the weak light
Embraces her with a forebearing smile.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Progress Report

The taverns are loud with losers,
The malls with kiddies and psychopaths.
In bistros, coffee laced with cinnamon
Will not disguise this sour aftertaste.
Big tips don't make the waiters laugh.
And the streets, mortgaged by midnight,
Are one-lane thoroughfares to Hum Drum.

But even poison drains off quietly.
Dead hands negotiate thirty-year loans
On missile sites and trailer homes.
The airports buzz like nests of hornets.
Travellers are jetting to new planets
To invest in wine futures, French jeans,
And bins of computer software.
It's time to pick up your chips, go
Gentle at last into that long goodnight.
Too many people and too many cars
Will drive you mad some day. . .

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Prices Have Risen Again

The dear of any thing is in your eyes
But I will gladly pay: oranges or lemons,
Flowers in a crystal bowl, Tanagra nymphs
With the supple limbs of rejection—
All are good bargains today. Tomorrow
I'll be locked in a private demesne
With two loud dogs to guard me from harm
And a rifle to shoot down the pigeons
That nest in the tropical branches,
Knowing that your blue eyes can still
Compel me to this prompt obeisance
And that the hands of the ocean
May wash me clean of oily images.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Pumping Iron

Today I am standing on my head
In a room full of barbells and weights.
I manage—
 with excuses to the crowd,
With a few nods to the younger jocks
That wouldn't deceive Charles Atlas himself.
Perhaps my fat uncles would've been proud
That I've lost my gut, that I breathe easily,
Yet my purple trunks and yellow top
(Made in Hong Kong) plainly advertise
Those generations of beer and liverwurst.
Next I try the fifty-pounder. I jump
Deftly over the leather horse and climb
Fist over fist to the high window—
 almost.
No applause. No music: just grey canvas.
Did the model in the park only laugh,
Or did she uncross her heart to let me graze?
Sheep, I say. Sheep cropped the warm hills,
And the breeze flipped up her kinky skirt.

Thinking of colder fields, I fall down:

The attendant snickers, the nymphet
In the douche emerges dripping guile,
The chronometer ticks off adipose years
In three-quarter time, a monkey waltz,
And health, like a retreating breaker,
Cracks on the granite reef of age.
The whistle blows. The lamp flickers out.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

The Spider Is Waiting

The freezing man lurks in his attic.
Unschool'd, he plucks a harp of cobwebs,
While from below heat rises—and love
(The voice he knows), the gossamer years. . . .
And all between his feet and heart is warm.

Winter lies deeper yet, past beam or brick.
While the coy mole sleeps in her wool,
The dog is mute, the cat laps up her dream,
The fire lisps sadly an indifferent tune.
A wife is just a slender echo there.

But in the cellar, with prismatic eye,
The waiting spider plots against the house.
Slowly it moves, gently it mimics death;
The web must rise, the engine agitate
To snare the nimble moment as it flees.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

Termites

Rot in these solid beams? The report must lie!
Who can believe worms from the earth below
Worked while we slept, chomping through
Oak and cedar with insatiable jaws? We sleep
Deeper than most, though the far field
Beyond our neat garden tries to intrude;
The autumn flowers look darker, and
Our raging stream is but a whisper now. . . .

Our kids left years ago: nothing remains
Of them but photographs dutifully mailed
For holidays and anniversaries—but worms?
We're not prepared for worms. Yes, we kiss
Over the cornflakes and the coffee. My wife
Smiles at my jokes. The days trudge into
Smaller frames toward those clouded horizons
Where all shall meet: laughing or weeping or mute.

Publication. *Going Like Seventy* (Van Nuys: Perivale Press, 1988).

When All Our Days Are Sunday

I doze through a symphony by Mahler;
You mend the torn pages of an old book.
The roses wave lazily from their beds.
The sky is eternally sultry and blue.

The children are jetting to far countries.
The grandchildren carry briefcases, guns.
The dollar falls into polluted oceans.
The armored sharks sicken on garbage.

The needle wobbles to the record's rim.
A few sour notes, and then long silence.
Weekends pontificate like the New York Times.
Mondays open with the washing of hands.

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