



THOMAS MCGRATH

Figures from a Double World

AND OTHER LOS ANGELES POEMS

A CRITICAL READING EDITION OF THE 1951–1958 PUBLICATIONS

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

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

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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Poems*

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas McGrath in Los Angeles, 1950–1960

Thomas McGrath arrived in Los Angeles as an internationally published radical poet and left a decade later after helping create one of the city's most consequential, if long-obscured, literary communities. At Los Angeles State College he taught poets including Henri Coulette, Gene Frumkin, and Mel Weisburd; at his Marsh Street house he gathered the circle later called the Marsh Street Irregulars; and through *California Quarterly*, *Coastlines*, public readings, and the Sequoia School he helped give the city's anti-McCarthy left an exacting poetic voice. His refusal to cooperate with HUAC in 1953 cost him his teaching position but sharpened the collision of lyric form and political history that defines his Los Angeles work. The complete *Figures from a Double World* (1955) moves from savage domestic and civic comedy through war memory into compressed songs of art, love, necessity, and revolt. The separately published poems extend that record, while the 1957 and 1958 installments of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* show his long autobiographical masterpiece taking shape at 2714 Marsh Street.

North Dakota, Education, and the Radical Thirties

Thomas Matthew McGrath was born on November 20, 1916, on his family's farm near Sheldon in Ransom County, North Dakota, the eldest child of James and Catherine Shea McGrath. Four brothers—Jim, Joe, Martin, and Jack—and a sister, Kathleen, followed. The family's Irish Catholic and agrarian inheritance supplied the two poles that would recur throughout his work: his mother's devotional culture and the cooperative, insurgent politics of the northern plains. His father's association with the Industrial Workers of the World and the lingering memory of Nonpartisan League radicalism taught McGrath to understand political struggle not as an imported doctrine but as part of ordinary farm life.

After an intermittent beginning at Moorhead State, McGrath earned a B.A. from the University of North Dakota in 1939. A Rhodes Scholarship was delayed by the outbreak of war, so he entered graduate study at Louisiana State University. There he studied closely with Cleanth Brooks and encountered the formal discipline of the New Criticism while remaining committed to Marxist politics. He also met Alan Swallow, then learning printing on a garage press. Swallow issued McGrath's *First Manifesto* in 1940, beginning a publishing relationship that would last for decades. McGrath taught at Colby College in Maine during 1940–41, then went to New York, where he organized workers, performed legal research in political cases, and worked at the Kearney shipyards.

War, Oxford, and the Road West

McGrath entered the armed forces in 1942 and served mainly on Amchitka in the Aleutian Islands, leaving the Army Air Forces as a sergeant in 1945. The isolation, cold, mechanical violence, and deadening routine of that service became a permanent imaginative resource. After the war he studied at New College, Oxford, in 1947–48 under the long-delayed Rhodes Scholarship. His proposed attention to the Marxist critic Christopher Caudwell did not please his advisers, and he left after a year. Before settling in California he had already published *To Walk a Crooked Mile* (1947) and *Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie* (1949), while placing poems and criticism in left and literary magazines in the United States and abroad.

McGrath moved to Los Angeles around 1950 and joined the English faculty of Los Angeles State College in 1951. He became faculty adviser to *Statement* and an influential teacher whose former students included Coulette, Frumkin, and Weisburd. He also served on the editorial board of *California Quarterly*, the independent journal founded in 1951 by Philip Stevenson and others. In a decentralized literary city, the college, the magazine, and McGrath's home created overlapping places where writers could meet, argue, and circulate work.

HUAC and the Marsh Street Circle

In April 1953 the House Committee on Un-American Activities called McGrath during its Los Angeles hearings. He refused cooperation as a teacher, citizen, and poet, declaring that he could not participate on “esthetic grounds” without destroying the pattern and integrity of his life. Los Angeles State declined to retain him after the 1953–54 academic year. The dismissal, FBI surveillance, and blacklisting closed off much academic and commercial media work. From 1954 through 1960 he supported himself through documentary-film writing, private-school teaching, factory and craft work, and other temporary employment.

McGrath and his second wife, the activist Alice Greenfield McGrath, made their house at 2714 Marsh Street a meeting place for former students, writers, artists, and political comrades. The “Marsh Street Irregulars” formed a disciplined alternative to both official literary culture and the publicity surrounding the Venice West Beats. McGrath also taught with Edwin Rolfe and Don Gordon in the short-lived Sequoia School. He encouraged the founding of *Coastlines* in 1955, and his poems, reviews, readings, workshops, and forceful conversation shaped the journal’s early years. The same network included Naomi Replansky, William Pillin, Bert Meyers, Josephine Ain, Lawrence Spingarn, James Boyer May, and Peter Yates.

The Los Angeles Books and the Making of *Letter*

The private student-made pamphlet *A Witness to the Times* (1954) and the Swallow Poetry Award led to *Figures from a Double World* in 1955. Dedicated to Alice and to the memory of Edwin Rolfe, the book gathered poems previously seen in *Accent*, *California Quarterly*, *Coastlines*, *Masses & Mainstream*, *Poetry*, *Statement*, and other magazines. Its three-part architecture moves from the grotesque citizens of “Monsters of the Happy Land,” through the combat and bereavement of “In a Season of War,” to the brief formal and political lyrics of “The Abstract Song.” McGrath also published the dystopian novel *The Gates of Ivory*, *The Gates of Horn* in 1957.

At Marsh Street McGrath began the work that became *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. *Coastlines* printed an early sequence in 1957, opening with the exact address and the declaration, “I am in Los Angeles.” *Poetry Los Angeles I*, edited by McGrath, May, and Yates and copyrighted in 1958,

published the erotic and elegiac section numbered IV. The poem would continue to expand in books issued in 1962, 1970, and 1985 before appearing as a complete four-part work in 1997. Its mingling of personal history, American violence, love, labor, political hope, and comic excess grew directly from the decade in which McGrath's public and private worlds were subjected to exceptional pressure.

Departure, Later Career, and Legacy

The Los Angeles decade ended with the collapse of McGrath's marriage to Alice and his return east at the close of the 1950s. He resumed college teaching at C. W. Post on Long Island in 1960. With his third wife, Eugenia, he founded *Crazy Horse*, and in 1962 he returned to North Dakota to teach at North Dakota State University. He joined Moorhead State University in 1969, retired in 1983, and later lived in Minneapolis. His son Tomasito became the addressee and subject of much later poetry. McGrath received an Amy Lowell Traveling Poetry Scholarship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, two Bush fellowships, and the University of North Dakota's honorary Doctor of Letters. *Selected Poems, 1938–1988* won the Lenore Marshall/Nation Poetry Prize and the first Minnesota Book Award for poetry.

McGrath died in Minneapolis on September 19, 1990. His papers are held chiefly by the University of North Dakota and Minnesota State University Moorhead. Frederick C. Stern's *The Revolutionary Poet in the United States* and Reginald Gibbons and Terrence Des Pres's *Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poem* established the foundation of later scholarship. In Los Angeles, Andrew Lyndon Knighton's 2016 exhibition and essay "Holy City Adrift" and the anthology *Poets of the Non-Existent City* restored McGrath to the history of the city's McCarthy-era writing. His achievement joins the satirist's appetite for the grotesque, the veteran's knowledge of state violence, the formalist's care for structure, and the revolutionary's faith that common labor can disclose what he called the holy city.

ARCHIVAL IMAGES

The poet, the blacklist, and the 1955 book



Thomas McGrath in New York, circa 1948. Photograph by Rena Wallant; reproduced in Dale Jacobson's biographical sketch, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée.

Poet Gives Relief From Unfriendly Ones

According to a wire service report, Thomas McGrath, a Los Angeles teacher and poet, has refused to tell the House Un-American Activities Committee whether he is or isn't a Communist because of "poetic license."

If there are demands that teacher McGrath be removed from his job because of his refusal to testify, doubtless it will be only poetic justice. But poet McGrath surely is due a vote of thanks for providing relief from the monotonous replies of other unfriendly witnesses before the Committee by coming up with a new and really imaginative reason for ducking the \$64 question.

Grath 1953

By:

stefans

Thu, Jul 26, 2018

"Poet Gives Relief from Unfriendly Ones," The Monitor (McAllen, Texas), April 28, 1953. The clipping reports McGrath's refusal to cooperate with HUAC.

10/26/2018

Thomas McGrath's Statement to HUAC

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

McGrath's Statement to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)

After a dead serious consideration of the effects of this committee's work and of my relation to it, I find that for the following reasons I must refuse to cooperate with this body.

In the first place, as a teacher, my first responsibility is to my students. To cooperate with this committee would be to set for them an example of accommodation to forces which can only have, as their end effect, the destruction of education itself. Such accommodation on my part would ruin my value as a teacher, and I am proud to say that a great majority of my students--and I believe this is true of students generally--do not want me to accommodate myself to this committee. In a certain sense, I have no choice in the matter--the students would not want me back in the classroom if I were to take any course of action other than the one I am pursuing.

Secondly, as a teacher, I have a responsibility to the profession itself. We teachers have no professional oath of the sort that doctors take, but there is a kind of unwritten oath which we follow to teach as honestly, fairly and fully as we can. The effect of the committee is destructive of such an ideal, destructive of academic freedom. As Mr. Justice Douglas has said: "This system of spying and surveillance with its accompanying reports and trials cannot go hand in hand with academic freedom. It produces standardized thought, not the pursuit of truth." A teacher who will tack and turn with every shift of the political wind cannot be a good teacher. I have never done this myself, nor will I ever. In regard to my teaching I have tried to hold to two guidelines, the first from Chaucer that "gladly will I learn and gladly teach"; the second a paraphrase of the motto of the late General Stilwell: "Illiterati on carborundum."

Thirdly, as a poet I must refuse to cooperate with the committee on what I can only call esthetic grounds. The view of life which we receive through the great works of art is a privileged one--it is a view of life according to probability or necessity, not subject to the chance and accident of our real world and therefore in a sense truer than the life we see lived all around us. I believe that one of the things required of us is to try to give life an esthetic ground, to give it some of the pattern and beauty of art. I have tried as best I can to do this with my own life, and while I do not claim any very great success, it would be anti-climactic, destructive of the pattern of my life, if I were to cooperate with the committee. Then too, poets have been notorious non-cooperators where committees of this sort are concerned. As a traditionalist, I would prefer to take my stand with Marvell, Blake, Shelley and Garcia Lorca rather than with innovators like Mr. Jackson. I do not wish to bring dishonor upon my tribe.

These, then are reasons for refusing to cooperate, but I am aware that none of them is acceptable to the committee. When I was notified to appear here, my first instinct was simply to refuse to answer committee questions out of personal principle and on the grounds of the rights of man and let it go at that. On further consideration, however, I have come to feel that such a stand would be mere self-indulgence and that it would weaken the fight which other witnesses have made to protect the rights guaranteed under our Constitution. Therefore I further refuse to answer the committee on the grounds of the fourth amendment. I regard this

First page of McGrath's statement to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, April 1953.

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Some of these poems were printed or reprinted in the following publications: AGENT, CALIFORNIA QUARTERLY, CONTEMPORARY READER, COASTLINE'S, CROSS SECTION, DISCOVERY (No. 2), INFERNO, INTERIM, MASSES & MAIN-STREAM, MEANJIN (Australia), POETRY, POETRY BROADSHEET (England), OUR TIME (England), LES LETTRES FRANCAISES, STATEMENT, VOICES, VOICE OF SCOTLAND, WESTERN REVIEW. Two poems are reprinted from A GARLAND OF PRACTICAL POESY and a number from A WITNESS TO THE TIMES, a group of poems put together by my students and more or less privately circulated.

Contents spread of Figures from a Double World (1955), the central book of McGrath's Los Angeles decade.

EDITORIAL NOTE AND SOURCES

Los Angeles-period scope and source control

This edition is deliberately restricted to poems published while McGrath lived in Los Angeles, approximately 1950–1960. It resets the complete *Figures from a Double World* (1955), the separately published Los Angeles periodical poems recovered in the project files, and the 1957 and 1958 installments of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. Later revisions and later poems are not silently imported.

The poems are transcribed from the original book, periodical, and anthology scans, not from an earlier reader's edition. Every poem begins on a new page. True stanza divisions, internal section labels, subtitles, epigraphs, and meaningful relative line indents are retained; source-page hanging wraps are rejoined where the wider reading page permits. Book and journal titles are italicized in editorial matter.

Obvious OCR corruption, page furniture, scan artifacts, and broken words are corrected against the page images. Punctuation and capitalization follow the source witnesses except where damaged type or OCR noise requires a documented reading. The local scan formerly labeled *Pictures of a Gone World* is correctly identified as McGrath's *Figures from a Double World*; *Pictures of the Gone World* is Lawrence Ferlinghetti's book.

EARLY LOS ANGELES PERIODICAL VERSE

1952

In a Season of War

Blood on the maps, on the flags, in a moon of blood,
In a winter when profit statistics fell like confetti
Or a snow of broken statues—Lincoln, Paine
Turned to headlines in a capital joke.
Then screwed to the grand piano of the past
(An ape, immortal, shall in time play Bach)
A president improvised a waltz of death
For the armed cotillions. For all of us. Ah, dark:
Winter of the heart. Winter of hate and war;
Winter of death of anonymous lovers
And of the clumsy and still virginal son
And of honor: when the bankers' phoenix from the fire
Of burnt-out cities, like interest in a vault,
Was reborn. Winter of the killers' moon.

Can spring be different? Its mothering lonesome rain
Falls like the tears that are about to be shed
For the nameless soldiers who died before being born—
Killed by their neighbors' ignorance or greed.
Or can the summer thrive, or autumn bear its fruit,
Or the new winter's magnetic North delude
With dreams of snow and silence? Another spring
May open all the wounds of hope and growth
Like early flowers; or bud another war.
Nothing is changed by time alone. Ourselves
Must drain that soldier color from the moon
To no corpse color, but to white of peace.
Now kill the cold king of our calendar.
Rain of our blood, let end his killing reign.

The colorless penumbra of a bloodless wish
Ensanguines crisis: the orbit of the year
Spins like a wheel and either Red or Black:
Arrives. Yet never chance, but power, born
From the human imperfection of our sphere,
Kills and controls. And not the Pope of Death,
Whose journeying false Christ he sends, black magical,
To touch the secret number of the year
Need win. A deeper magic stops the game,

Transforms the players into Right and Left,
Extends its system beyond chance to time,
Ordering humanity from wish to act.
Nothing is changed by time. When time has changed,
Nothing is changed by chance. Only ourselves
Are changed and have thrust on us all the power
Of change, as heavy as the ass's head
On Bottom. In a deadly comedy
We hunt for runes or the transforming rod
While the black alchemy of armorers
Turns all our calendars to bandit lead.
Where are our dreamed and charming Magi then
To point the star of peace across the world?
Where our saviours to redeem the time
Beyond frontiers of the atomic Rose?

Only ourselves. (Upon the midnight street
We meet the future but it wears no face.)
Only ourselves. (Or at the factory gates
The woman with the leaflet crying: Peace!)
Only the soldier with a broken gun
Can stop a war. Only the children know
The face of a day of peace, a plaything clock
Without the menace of the rifle hands.
Give us that day. The quiet of a street
No one had bombed shall be our guilt and wish
And all our hopes be carried in our hands.
They must be strong that will create a world,
And must be hands that have the greenest thumbs
Of ungilt gardeners of our circumstance.
Our human rites reclaim a waste of war
To plant the orchards where the field guns are.

Publication. *The California Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1952), pp. 36–37.

FIGURES FROM A DOUBLE WORLD

The complete 1955 collection

MONSTERS OF THE HAPPY LAND

A section of Figures from a Double World (1955)

Monsters of the Happy Land

From skies jaundiced with winter, neutral
As the spittle of nuns or children, rain
Falls on the suburbs. Over Skidrow
Night arrives, desperate for wine,
And summons the drifters and the paddy-wagons
And the weedhead whores who all night long
Argue the darkness on the price of love.

Then memory comes back, like the drowned men
Beached on the bar-stools of a savage shore.
Blood has frozen in the veins of neon,
There is ice on Main Street and the echoing ring
Of skates on the pond of my inner ear:
And it is Maine: and the war is coming:
A blonde girl's laughter shakes the placid moon.

Or, later, summer, and the war has turned
Sixes to sevens, slain the laughing man
And summoned the sensual to the farthest coast.
Over the headlands the seals lie, waiting
The admiring terror of the summer children.
A dark woman turns a grave face to the sun.
The sea contains an echo of all things.

All things are echoed in the wine's dark sea:
All hope the past conceived, and what was then
Implicit—though we could not image it—
The actual horror of the present hour
And all the monsters that the future holds.
It is not whores nor hopheads nor ourselves
Make the night ugly: but what is still to come—
Some final transformation. Alcohol preserves
The foetus of our hope, sea-changed, and that freak still
To be born between the gin-mill and the morgue.
So, night wears like memory. Skidrow dawn

Withdraws a slack tide to the outer dark
And all sea-monsters hustle from the light.
Real as tourists, but diseased with time,
These Presences still haunt the daylit world.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 11–12.

The Several Fortunes of Jonah Hope

Here Mister Hope (or the lines in his hand)
Exhibits a love for music. Three
Several dangers have passed him unnoticed. He
Is waiting for a dark woman. Mrs. Bland
Promises a voyage on a raft of money. Love
Like Divine Grace everywhere over him hovers.

Here Mister Hope (or the leaves in his tea)
Is drenched in Destiny. A promise of power
Haunts him like Caesar, but the epiphany hour
Is not on the clock. For an extra fee
He may speak with the world of the dead: but Mister Hope
Is too much with the one world in which he is groping.

Here Mister Hope thinks: What's in a name?
The mystic number of his own has struck
Amazement to the heavens. Would "John Luck"
Assure him his heritage of love and fame?
Failure is not in ourselves but in our stars,
Says Mrs. Bland. The stars do not argue.

Nevertheless the fortunes of Mister Hope
Seem never to change. Locked in the pack
Forever lie the Queen and the daring Jack
Of the happy years. Oh, dearer than any dope
To an addict is that image of the past
Where all his splendid future is everlasting:

Incorruptible, there. But year after weary year
(Though he is industrious, sensitive, lucky on each
Monday with full moon) his wish just out of reach
Hangs, like a golden apple, or a tear—
Or his life, long wished away. He cannot command
That fortune whose power was always in his hand.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 13.

Mr. and Mrs. Foxbright X. Muddlehead, at Home

Comes the murderer's evening, ami du criminel
And Foxbright, Mr. Muddlehead: putting his X
On the dogchewed-livingroom-carpet, perplexed
By the activities of the love bird and the fish in the deep well.
Television turns wild horses loose in the hall,
And the radio laughs while Rome and the supper burn
And a three ring circus, with lepers, jumps out of the wall.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Muddlehead, erotic in blue jeans
To Foxbright X, is answering three phones—
The Book Club, Christ Inc., Rebels Ltd. call while the bones
Of the wild goose flap in the pot and sail off the scene.
So, supper over, the Comanches enter, alas
As children, with axes, and proceed to chop down the lamps.
Mrs. M, lovely, smiles at the phones. All things will pass,

All things pass Foxbright. Comes another day
And the smile on the phones is the same. The children burn
His Sunday paintings while Mrs. M in turn
Queries one phone, then another. Hurried away
By destiny, and the need for the rent, Muddlehead keeps
The smile of his wife like an old man's memory of
When he was young, or love. And at last time creeps
Past smoky, incestuous noon with its straddling hands,
While the world and Foxbright wrestle. But on the clock
Of Mrs. M the whirling pointers mock.
The busy degrees of her circle. Who understands—
The world's needs but herself? And who will give
The Word? To her Club? Or to God? The fish and the bird
Is each in his element happy. To serve is to live.

The children blast out a wall. Like a wolf from the hill,
The wind comes in with a rush. It is bad for the bird.
And the fish. And for Mrs. M, who does not know a word
Of the language the children have recently learned, and is ill
With the air, and anguish of offspring asking for love,
And evening, and X coming home, and the three phones ringing,

And the rich demands of the world, which are never enough.

So, Mrs. M takes her leave, as her surrogate spouse,
With his ex-life in his heart like a fossil bone,
Returns from his dubious battle, mistaking as home
The place where he lives. O, ever the fish will browse,
Loved, in his glass room, and ever the love bird cry
Secure on his perch. But will Foxbright X return
Always? The years pass. They go by
Foxbright like falling stars or Mrs. M, drawn
To PTA or a Black Mass: perilous, hurled
Like no known comet at the unwitting world
Elliptic. Cutting his orbit. Gone
To Duty. The goldfish swims. The moon
Provokes the bird. O lovers, pity, pity,
Pity them, who, in some lost summer, loved, were young.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 14–16.

Fantastic Gentry Wakes Up Dead

Waking without a personal sense of disorder
But aware he was dead, he saw the sun on high,
Light of the world, a natural. Time made hay
Of the clipped hours. A perfect day for the murder

Of Mr. Gentry, who, poised, holding his shoes,
Remembers he cannot put both on together,
That the process of setting one foot ahead of the other
Is life. But there is nothing in life that shows

Which one to put first, nothing to point direction
For Mr. Gentry, whose feet unspool the roads
Of routine destiny. Over his shoulder rides
His loosed and hawk-like soul—it screams distraction

(For it wishes to strike at the world) but is not heard
In the buzz buzz of conventional conversation,
And the day goes by. Secured beyond decision
Is the secret death of Gentry. And not so hard

As life, he reflects, while neither hope nor despair
Troubles his average day. Nothing again
Will move Gentry, whose heart in the long gone
Seasons of wish was haunted by fear and desire.

And who would have guessed that one day his loved world
Would have run down, whether from failure of loving,
(His own or someone's) fatigue, or because the living
Desire to enflesh the wish burns out in the cold?

Observe him now, whom only life has destroyed:
Day after day driven past hope of solution
At last at peace. Or nearly. The heart will question,
Disturbing him often at night, asking: who is betrayed?

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 17–18.

Poor John Luck and the Middle Class Struggle

Or: The Corpse in the Bookkeeper's Body

The clock uncoils the working day
And he wakes up feeling that his youth has gone away.
Over the Eucharist of toast and coffee
He dreams of a Jerusalem where he was happy,
But the cops came and got him while he was still young
And they gave him ambition and a clock to punch.
O poor John! Poor
 John!

Then he claps him into clothes and he falls downstairs
And the street absorbs him as if he weren't there.
Reassembled in the subway as in the womb
He relaxes on tenterhooks to wait his time,
Reads of Armageddon on the sporting page
And appraises breast and buttock without getting an edge.
O poor John! Poor
 John!

The street rolls up till his office reaches him
And the door puts out its knob and drags him in.
His desk-trap is baited with the kill of the day.
He sets it off by touching it and can't get away.
So with profit and loss and commerce and knavery
The day is passed in business and thievery.
O poor John! Poor
 John!

And just when the mind might snap and go sane
The five o'clock whistle brings life back again.
(Usury and simony have buried the day,
The closing stock quotations bear the sun away.)
Into the five o'clock shadow of the bars
Goes good John Luck and his crying nerves.
O poor John! Poor
 John!

At three past Scotch it is time to go home
To the little woman and the sharp smell of doom
From the over-ripe radio. Free John Luck
Drops a penny from his eye into the magic juke
Box but can't get the number, as he never can now,
Because a witch stole his spell in the long long ago.
O poor John! Poor
 John!

Then home to his castle and the sacramental beef
And after the dishes to the movies for them both.
Embalmed in the darkness of their deadly wish
The warped years fall at their feet like a dress
While snowed to the bricks, hopped up and heeled,
They throw an endless gun on their Monday selves.
O poor John! Poor
 John!

But their Tuesday souls will be waiting in the street
When the lights go on and everyone starts
At his naked neighbor. And the lights go on.
The clock starts ticking. And the heart of man
Closes its shutters on its dreaming hurt
As another day falls into the files of the past.
O poor John! Poor
 John! Poor
 John!

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 19–20.

Just above the Battle, Mother—

(The Death Song of Professor Francis Doubt)

Once the powers of darkness stood
At the borders of the wood;
Now, for the devil and all his works
We have Lenin, Stalin and Karl Marx.

Galileo's dead and gone,
Erasmus sleeps in a long tomb,
And the neo-Humanists have no
Names for Voltaire or Diderot.

Where the Russians once had put their hex,
Sharing the wealth of land and sex,
Now the Red poll of the Pole appals,
And the falling rate of profit falls,

Debs and Paine are underground,
And Freedom has a double wound
But Franklin's mistresses retain
The Revolution's astral name.

The interest on St. Knox's gold
Assails for Honor we have sold:
The liberties a poet sings
Are shadows, not substantial things.

Jefferson is dead and gone,
And Monticello's but a tomb;
High in History's azure steep
The fathers of our country sleep.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 21.

Same Old Jazz

On the first day of Spring I am wakened by Blackbirds
Snapping their axles of sound on the garden wall.
Mr. Anthony M'Canicus arrives to assure me
That in the new season Wednesday will follow Thursday.
Mackerel sky at sundown; lagniappe of cloud to southward.
The equinoctial tides drag at my gumbo blood.

On the first day of Summer the Jays arouse me—
Their concept of blue grows on the wind like a flag
That has never fought a war. And Mr. M'Canicus
Has fixed it, he says, so that June follows August.
Morning moon, bone fragment; sky of machined monel.
Noon, pure sulphur, clouds into form like a tree.

And Autumn coppers, like a Potlatch feast,
And Winter with its diamond anguish like a snow,
The birds go kittywampus through the sky—
Let Mr. M'Canicus unchain his sundial.
Stuffed, a pheasant will sustain a mantel,
Though the sparrow punctuates an old disorder.

Order/disorder. Noon or Spring
The birds are ticking to a different time.
The formal bull lost in the baroque
Meadows of green time finds that all flowers break.
M'Canicus is not my gardener. His order
Is worse than the disorder of those goddamned birds.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 22.

The Seven Stations of Mrs. D

Waiting for the morning sickness of existence to pass
Mrs. D. put her head into the radio oven and turned on the laughing gas,
And after a briefing by Dr. Malcolm Quandary
(The noted reporter who surveys each morning's boundary
For Lady Macbeth Soaps) she was hopped up enough to face
Her great American future, and unable any longer to stay in the place

Anyway, Mrs. D. charged her moral battery and went out to see
What Mr. Luce and free enterprise might have hung on her 9 o'clock Christmas tree.
But though the headlines proclaimed that she was ready for war
(And there were assurances by three cardinals and one whore)
Though the street was tree-proof and bird-proof, clean, shiny and nice
Where civilization and sanitation had killed all but men and flies—

Still, something was terribly wrong. It seemed to Mrs. D.
That everything was properly accounted for. Then what could it be?
Was it love? A husband and a banking account were as good;
You had the Pope and the churches in exchange for God's body and blood;
In place of hope, insurance; of knowledge, radio quizzes;
Of culture, a genteel sexy bestseller. Nevertheless it seemed to Mrs. D. there had passed
away a glory from the earth.

That it was involved with the packed subway and the three dollars worth
Of sirloin steak in her shopping bag (whose meaty penumbra
She inhaled while behind her a man in experimental rumba
Engaged herself and the century) Mrs. D. vaguely knew.
But the earth continually opened at her feet; there was nothing she could do—

Poor Mrs. D—who lived on the high cold watershed
Between the few who are already living and the many who are still dead;
And it was dangerous to think, to waken out of the dreams
Of steaks and assurances into a world where the screams
Might be one's own. Mrs. D. put away the intimations of
Responsibility and went home to hear Mr. Tedious talk about Love

On television. But meanwhile the carnival in her head
Went on. The madman in her mind's house, manic with dread,
Turned loose his fantasies, like live snakes in the hall,
While the years of her youth like ghosts, her suppressed instincts, all
Like drunken spastics and cripples, joined in the riot upstairs.

Adrift and doomed on a vast and mapless Sargasso of despair

Like a liner afire below decks, Mrs. D. sailed through the day
With her hatches battened. Oh ye who follow the historical way
To the freedom of necessity, who match idea and act,
Pity Mrs. D., who—in the fiction and fact:
Of her incomplete consciousness, of too many things to unlearn,
Between the burning below and the riot above, knowledge and instinct—finds nowhere to turn.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 23–25.

The Guardian Angel Won't Be Back

Wing-clipped and crackling with light, the blind
Angel roars in at deck level, past
The machine guns of grace, all banging away
As the bishops let go a canonical blast—

And falling like Lucifer, shot down in flames,
The heavenly guest lies dead on his back.
The Unheavenly Activities Committee
Investigates and laments the lack

Of Faith (an article scarcer than those
Blest relics that shot the angel down)
Which sends God's proletariat
Spying and eyeing and snooping around—

For God knows nothing on earth is amiss—
Isn't the Savior nailed to the Cross?
The poor are easy laid in their graves,
And what's never been had can never be lost.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 26.

The Compleynte of Dreamy Dan Dollar

Sleep, like a cop, can clap me into court
Where the famous lawyers of the ego turn
To crazy prophets or to commissars
Or one's mother. All the ragged prisoners lean

Their faces to the wall. I face alone
The empty corridor where one will come
To judge me. Masked, a cameraman records
The profile of my politics. *Assume*

An innocence that you have never felt—
But still my guilt, expanding like the fiery fronts of meteors, rushing down the tubes
Of sleepy telescopes, gilds the dark hour:

*As queen of politics, I bought the vote;
As king of love, I split you like a hake;
As ace of any suit, I gave false hope;
As knave of chance, put all poor men in hock.*

Words of magic. The cop, like any jack-in-box bows low, and on the bench his Grace
Hee haws a judgment at the ragged men.
I walk from court. Each pinched and hungry face

Is turned away. In the expensive streets
An alarum of Cadillacs proclaims a self
Whose rent I pay. Awake, the daylight world
Is green as money.

Yet never to feel safe

*With the dark coming ... empty corridors
With turns where anything may come in sight ...
The hungry faces of the ragged men—
Wakeful as interest I spend the mortgaged night.*

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 27.

Mr. Carson Death on His Night Out

Evenings in gin mills when the band played blues
Led him to visions of an ordered life in a new city. Night, upon the streets,
Was love and murder in unequal parts,
But trumpets aimed toward the target Choice.

Nights of terror, and a whisky tent
To shield his machinery from memory's rain and rust.
Like the lonely cinemas of drowning men,
His past flashed pictures, and he prayed to luck
That all the ships and loves come home at last.

These dreams were shipwrecked on the lunar rocks
Of midnight barstools. Sweating on those tight
Islands of pain, a Crusoe of remorse,
He remembered warnings of that treacherous coast.
And dreamed of crossing mountains homeward, north.

Yet didn't. Still, the instrument, perhaps,
Of luck or grace may wake the hero, now
Chained to a Caucasus of alcohol.
Does something human echo in the wind?
An icy jazz stiffens the world of wish.

It is the world he wants. It is the world
He hates. Is it too early to depart
In the dark prime of hope and of despair?
The contradiction chills the morning air
As again the ritual of a dionysian art
Starts clocks in all his condominiums.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 28.

Thinking of the Olympic Rifle Matches

Sitting Bull's ghost-laughter shakes
The hand of the marksman on the grass
Who hears the tick-tocking firearms tell
Another time has come to pass
As Ivan's rifle zeros in
And carries off the loving cup—
Hard times when the Pioneer
Is being out-shot by the Bear.

And Davy Crockett's dead and gone
Whose knife-flash lit the Alamo,
And Daniel Boone and his coonskin cap
Have entered the continent. Texas Joe,
Wild Bill, and homiletic Deerslayer whose rifle never missed—
All sure shots are underground.
A greater marksman cut them down.

Another time must come to pass,
And soon the hero's heel must itch
For the poisoned arrow already nocked
By lover, mother, time's queenly bitch
Who slays all heroes in their time.
And now with impossible middle names
The roughneck of the future comes
As if all heroes' time's weren't done.

The blindness of the hero's pride
Has driven him eyeless from the stage,
Turned all his glory into myth,
His power into senseless rage.
Thersites, practical man, destroys
The City with a formula,
While Achilles' famous sword
Could only turn Scamander red.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 29.

The Little Odyssey of Jason Quint, of Science, Doctor

I

Betrayed by his five mechanic agents, falling
Captive to consciousness, he summons light
To all its duties, and assumes the world
Like a common penance. Rust on the green tongue burns
Like history's corrosive on his living tree.
But all the monsters of his sleep's dark sea
Are tame familiars in the morning sun.

II

He sees the nation browse across burnt miles
Of toast, toward the time-clock. Deafened, hears
A Gettysburg of breakfast food explode
Against the surd tympanum of the air.
The roads outside to No and Anywhere
Trigger all space-time to a zero Now.
The punctual goddess blossoms on his brow—
Pragmatic emblem of the daylit need.

III

Now with his thought the rank and maundy world
(That lost between quanta and mechanic wave
All pulp and passion sprawls around the globe)
He stiffens, as a hand informs a glove,
And drags each lank potential into form.
Thus the hieratic arrow of his glance
Creates St. Sebastian Avenue Street Place—
All of sublunary circumstance
Crowds on the casual platform of his gaze.

IV

Like money sealed in a pneumatic tube
He whirls beneath the city's stony floor
To where the cold coordinates of work
Advance their cross-hairs on the target hour.

There surplus value's mathematic flower
(All X squared Y squared like a tesseract
Or ghostly dirigible) grows unseen
Across the lean dimension of in fact.

V

Grows all unseen as Jason Quint pursues
The windy hazard of the Absolute
Through icy tundras, farther than the Horn,
Vaster than Asia in their wuthering snows.
The sweat of progress and humanity
Colors no litmus in those latitudes;
In a rustle of banknotes and casualty lists
The Bomb is shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

VI

The quitting whistle lofts a flag of truce,
And all hope's flutes and harpsichords compound
The lonely leisure. The Great Nocturnal Drift
Sets to its Deep. He walks the park. Profound
Unease returns to Quint. The sleepy lathes
Of hummingbirds machine the emerald
Of garden silence which his feet confuse.
The statues hoist, on labyrinthine paths,
The mineral grandeur of a public smile.

VII

And the world goes blank, and heavy as a stone
Rolls into night. It is the human hour.
Imperfect. Lovers, food and politics
Command the air, and Jason Quint alone,
Clothed in abstraction, like a bush that burns
In the blind frequencies where none may pass,
Stalks through that only country of the poor—
The lamplit hour the quitting whistle mourns.

VIII

Imperfect. The stability of dextrous stars
Offers him comfort, but their light is cold.

A storm of sentiment, sudden as a cloud
Of migrant birds, sings in his head. Now stirs
The terrible friend, companion of his dreams,
With his emotional algebra of need and loss—
The hateful witness to his mortal part
And confirmation of his loneliness.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 30–34.

IN A SEASON OF WAR

A section of Figures from a Double World (1955)

The Roads into the Country

Ran only in one direction, in childhood's years—
Into mysterious counties, beyond the farm or the town,
Toward the parish of desire the roads led up or down
Past a thicket of charms, a river of wishing hours,

Till, wrapt in a plenum of undying sun
We heard the tick of air-guns on the hills.
The pheasant stalked by on his gilded heels,
The soft-eyed foxes from the woods looked on,

While hung upon the blue wall of the air
The hawk stared down into a sea of fire,
Where, salamanders in our element,
We ate the summer like a sacrament.

That was another country, and is lost.
The roads lead nowhere. Aloof in his field of fire
The hawk wheels pitiless. Alone, afar,
The skirmishers of childhood hurry past,

Hunting a future that they cannot will.
Children of light, travelling our darkened years
We cannot warn them. Distant, they have no ears
For those they will become. Across a wall

Of terror and innocence we hear the voice,
The air-gun in the land of all mock-choice.
Around us not the game of fox and pheasant,
But the gunfire of the real and terrible present.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 35.

The Odor of Blood

Odor of blood excites
The violent, powerless dead—
Compelled again and again
To the place of their suicide,

Or haunted by the house
Where forgotten murder was done,
They grow drunk on the smell of the past
As if on the fumes of wine.

So, summoned in sleep
From his civilian dream,
The buried soldier returns
To the scene of an old crime

Where innocence and blood
Were spilled in the ditch of war—
Compelled again and again
By fury of desire

Or memory, to return:
Ghosts weak, bloodthirsty, mad:
As ghost planes tirelessly orbit
The closed fields of the dead.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 36.

Remembering That Island

Remembering that island lying in the rain
(Lost in the North Pacific, lost in time and the war)
With a terrible fatigue as of repeated dreams
Of running, climbing, fighting in the dark,
I feel the wind rising and the pitiless cold surf.
Shaking the headlands of the black north.

And the ships come in again out of the fog—
As real as nightmare I hear the rattle of blocks
When the first boat comes down, the ghostly whisper of feet
At the barge pier—and wild with strain I wait
For the flags of my first war, the remembered faces,
And mine not among them to make the nightmare safe.

Then without words, with a heavy shuffling of gear,
The figures plod in the rain, in the shoreside mud,
Speechless and tired; their faces, lined and hard,
I search for my comrades, and suddenly—there—there—
Harry, Charlie, and Bob, but their faces are worn, old,
And mine is among them. In a dream as real as war

I see the vast stinking Pacific suddenly awash
Once more with bodies, landings on all beaches,
The bodies of dead and living go back to appointed places,
A ten year old resurrection,
And myself once more in the scourging wind, waiting, waiting
While the rich oratory and the lying famous corrupt
Senators mine our lives for another war.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 37.

Memorial

Jimmy McGrath

Nothing prolongs. Neither the bronze plaque
Of graveyard splendor, nor public memorial. Even
The watery eye of memory, weeping its darlings back
Fails them. Flung like leaves on the cold heaven
In Time's own season, that Always when totals are taken,
 And the mortal tree is shaken,
 So, from its riven,
 Blood-branched and bony haven,
The soul is blown toward that South where only the dead awaken.

Nothing arouses. Shrouded in marble snow
He enters the house of his fatal opposite, under
His careless star, and the statues. The bedded seeds outgrow
Their sleepy winter, but now there is no Spring thunder
Can shock him awake, who, lying companioned and lonely
 In his small house, can only—
 Against Time's yonder—
 Live nigh, a bloodless wonder
In the chinese box of the mind, a mummied guest in that haunted and homely
Dark where nothing endures. Though the heart entomb
And hold that weakling ghost for a season, the altering
Cold years like snow blindfold our love, as time
Darks a stone angel. So does memory, faltering,
Kill you again—your stillness is whirled and hurried
 To nature's wilder order.
 It is the faulting
 Heart in that bloody welter
Fails you and fails. Forgive this second murder.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 38–39.

Ode for the American Dead in Korea

I.

God love you now, if no one else will ever,
Corpse in the paddy, or dead on a high hill
In the fine and ruinous summer of a war
You never wanted. All your false flags were
Of bravery and ignorance, like grade school maps:
Colors of countries you would never see—
Until that weekend in eternity
When, laughing, well armed, perfectly ready to kill
The world and your brother, the safe commanders sent
You into your future. Oh, dead on a hill,
Dead in a paddy, leached and tumbled to
A tomb of footnotes. We mourn a changeling: you:
Handselled to poverty and drummed to war
By distinguished masters whom you never knew.

2.

The bee that spins his metal from the sun,
The shy mole drifting like a miner ghost
Through midnight earth—all happy creatures run
As strict as trains on rails the circuits of
Blind instinct. Happy in your summer follies,
You mined a culture that was mined for war:
The state to mold you, church to bless, and always
The elders to confirm you in your ignorance.
No scholar put your thinking cap on nor
Warned that in dead seas fishes died in schools
Before inventing legs to walk the land.
The rulers stuck a tennis racket in your hand,
An Ark against the flood. In time of change
Courage is not enough: the blind mole dies,
And you on your hill, who did not know the rules.

3.

Wet in the windy counties of the dawn
The lone crow skirls his draggled passage home:
And God (whose sparrows fall aslant his gaze,

Like grace or confetti) blinks and he is gone,
And you are gone. Your scarecrow valor grows
And rusts like early lilac while the rose
Blooms in Dakota and the stock exchange
Flowers. Roses, rents, all things conspire
To crown your death with wreaths of living fire.
And the public mourners come: the politic tear
Is cast in the Forum. But, in another year,
We will mourn you, whose fossil courage fills
The limestone histories: brave: ignorant: amazed:
Dead in the rice paddies, dead on the nameless hills.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 40–41.

The Repeated Journey

for Marian

Again and again I make the intolerable journey:
First three days in the locked train, passing my home
On the stormy midnight when no light burns and all the houses
Are shut; then pinesmell, rain, confusion, a cold camp;
Again and again

I make the winter voyage: first the narrow
Sea-passage between the mountains where like frozen
Smoke the waterfalls hang and the scenery becomes portentous,
Dream-like and sullen, charged with a higher reality
Than our own; then, shadowy

As clouds in the roaring night-black ocean, islands
Plunge, fog-bound, nameless; finally, driving
Seaward, the headlands, and the crooked harbor:
wreckage,
Spume like spiders crawling, gun-metal water:
Again and again

I climb the hill: past the cemetery, the dead
Fighter aircraft, past the shops where the great
Machines rust in their beds and know it is
Useless, useless, the night-journey inbound and cannot, Can not turn back—

What am I hunting? I cannot remember. Rain
Slats like shot on the empty tents. The flaps
Are all closed tight on nothing. On ghosts. The night
Comes screaming down on the wind. Boredom. Loneliness.
Again and again

I return to the hunt for something long buried
In Time, like the dead in the cliff-face cemetery.
Loneliness, terror of death, splendor of living—
I rescued these wounded; but cannot reclaim my youth
Nor those lost violent years whose casual ignorant lovers We were for a season.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 42–43.

The World of the Perfect Tear

for Jimmy McGrath, killed 1945

Fire from a fixed star
Locates no place you are.
No warmth left in the air
Reminds that you were there.
Everything you were
Is canceled in the earth
And memory's single tear
Drowns all your footprints here.

Yet in that crystal sphere
All is reflected: clear—
Though no one can stand tall
Where earth itself is small
And fire is cool and air
Thinner than breath. Still, there,
The elements prevail
Reduced in memory's scale.

Sad joke: to entomb you here
In the damp world of a tear—
Though we navigate that globe
With a Magellan love.
Still, more like the Flood, this drop—
Or dead man's Ark!—will whirl
And whelm the dying world:
To raise the living up.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 44.

Counter-Image for the World of Death

The land-locked lovers, lying in the park
On a corpse-colored hill, alight with their desire
Like midnight suns in this arctic summer of war,
Blind the imagination. Dream-resonance—or life—
Rings from that image. Yet how, within a world
Where every night we must bring home our dead
Can it have meaning?

For that life is meaningful is seldom said.
It is denied in court and by nightsticks of cops;
Denied in a joke, denied in dead ‘earnest,
Though some will say ‘love’ and hide the brass knuckles,
Say ‘justice’ and condemn before the deed.
The hill of the lovers is islanded in slain, in the blood of unfortunates.

But the lovers feel only their own dear pain.
With fumbling assurance their amazed hands
Presume to invent each other’s bodies.
Their histories, dark, (but eyes see in that dark
What light they need) flame; and they are burning.
They lie in the front-line trench of the world,
Each kiss seems desertion.

But life will not let them desert. Hurled
Over the hill the voice of their violent day
Calls its commands, and the lovers go.
And perhaps they have nowhere to go? Perhaps
They are poor lovers, star-crossed lovers?
The world, which makes an outlaw of the heart,
Sets on its hounds.

Their image from my mind will not depart:
All mortal brilliance in a blood-dark time.
How commoner than salt is the element of love

And how uncommon in this cold season
Of war! And yet the flag of all our hope
Is love, as that true country of the heart
Is anywhere we walk, if not apart.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 45–46.

THE ABSTRACT SONG

A section of Figures from a Double World (1955)

I see the starres att bloudie warres

In the wounded welkin weeping

In Praise of a Dead Body

For the savior sinew, the muscular reflex
That carried me out of harm's way and away
From the daylight accident, or darkness' dangers,
For legs. that have never lagged on the years;

For the heart that leaped like a randy horse
Wild with desire in its bone corral,
And the hope that hid there; for the eyes
That have never refused to look at the world;

And for those other parts that kept
The habit of love whenever they could;
For the lights in the head's dark house, the hands,
And the bright continuum of the blood

I give my praise; and praise for that
Seven-year-old-buried face
That once held happiness—for all
My wasted body, here and there

Seeded across the enduring earth,
No longer mindful where I am.
I praise that dead man while I can,
Who am whatever he was worth.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 49.

The Trouble with the Times

for Naomi Replansky

In this town the shops are all the same;
Bread, bullets, the usual flowers
Are sold but no one—no one, no one
Has a shop for angels,
No one sells orchid bread, no one
A silver bullet to kill a king.

No one in this town has heard
Of fox-fire rosaries—instead
They have catechisms of filthy shirts,
And their god goes by on crutches
In the stench of exhaust fumes and dirty stories.

No one is opening—even on credit—
A shop for the replacement of lost years.
No one sells treasure maps. No one
Retails a poem at so much per love.

No. It is necessary
To go down to the river where the bums at evening
Assemble their histories like cancelled stamps.
There you may find, perhaps, the purple
Weather, for nothing; the blue
Apples, free; the reddest
Antelope, coming down to drink at the river,
Given away.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 50.

The Activities of Art and Science

The two-faced world that tears at my eyes—
Imperial eagle, cawing its command—
Let enter piecemeal only. Jigsawed birds,
Though beaked with fury in each singular part,
Subdued by a knowing and a practiced art
Are puzzled into doves at my demand.

Two-faced, then, I enter the wild world's hell
And am torn to a scarecrow by its mixed demands.
Until my wish can stiffen into law
My orphic head is eaten by the crows.
Man's several parts may generate a rose,
But it's the head he loses gives commands. —

Poet and scientist, the two-faced man
Must eye the double world like Argos. Changed
The world will enter with its rose, and caged
Like a wish in the heart be the hawk. Yet, wild,
Tomorrow he strikes with the fury of the world
When wiser we enter where his wide wing ranged.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 51.

Pueblo! Pueblo!

I.

Its special whiteness soiled the desert,
Trapping the sun. The mountains leaned over
Like clouds where nailed on the continental shelf
The city lay rapt in a trance of brightness.

And the narrow streets defy direction,
Carry you along past doorway and patio,
Mysterious with living, in the Mexican quarter;
Past hidden voices, laughter and birdsong,
Carry you along to the last turn where
The small trapped fountain dozing in the square,
Hypnotic sunlight, the healing sound of water,
Caress the morning like a benediction.

Memories of a town I have never known, seen briefly,
A hitch-hiker's view, clouded by years of war.
Framed between a time on the run and the coming crash
I sometimes question that brightness. Has such experience value?
Only to that hitch-hiker, lost in the years and the war?
But then I remember
How positive the vast and emblematic night;
The sad and hopeful steelworkers' voices;
The furnaces' brazen pillars of light thrust at the mountains;
And overhead for once (or so it seemed) hot and impatient stars.

II.

Of Pueblo, wrapped in its eternal summer—
Though it seemed coined into the golden years—
The cat of experience, dissolving with the light,
Leaves only the compromised grin of memory.

And memory, hunting in the fabulous dark
In search of the poem, the pebble colored with magic,
Can never recreate us, can point to the tree at the ford
Showing where earlier we passed along the road,

But cannot ransom the years or create Pueblo
Which I saw shining between earth and heaven,
Beyond imagination and experience in
A past beyond compromise, beyond redemption.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 52–53.

Icon

I see the autumn sheen on the far hills and the clover,
On the dapple of poplar leaves that gather their moony simples
Out of the bland heaven whose showering bronze is ample
To stipple the hunting fox and the pheasant crouched in his cover.

Transfigured images—a union of joy and terror—
In the ripple of light on the hills, a shimmer of cold fire
From the dancing poplar tree, they move in a wind that does not stir
The fur or the feather, equal, dedicated and careless.

They pass as a dream passes, like a killer fish through night water.
In the chill of celestial light I am made alone and old
By that passionless, icy perfection. Balanced against the dark and the cold
In completion, trembling at full, are the full moon and the autumn.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 54.

De Poetica

for Edwin Rolfe

A looney clock can make a fool of time
As clouds turn ghosts, or homing geese, or gay
Boats in a lake of sun, shape-shifted by
A witless wind. That Time can be controlled
Is known to poets and to sorcerers.

They know that history, a lackwit king,
Blows books past buoys and scatters all the boats,
While drowned in bays of law and literature
A sea-change sinks a sonnet like a stone—
It is that windy beast we must enchain,

Or summoned by the blood of the implacable past
Like ghosts we slake our memory on its fumes.
Then time, which pulses golden on the wrist,
Haggard shall hunt no Greenwich of our own
Nor make our hope's meridian its prime;

But time turned ego through the iambs beat
May set clocks straight and change the current wind
That else sinks drunken boats. A ritual
Can calm the crazy king—our measure start
The possible future for the hunting heart.

That ticking engine, ceremonious art,
Machines potential to the shape of choice,
Numbers the sundial, forgives the past, and sets
The vain-weather geese toward their proper North.
Accident, defeat, within our stormy time
Are changed through form to freedom in your rhyme.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 55.

Think at This Hour

In the blue snow,
How the heart was cold
In the frozen year:

How we would gather,
If we could,
In the stone wood
Of the soul's weather—

Something stronger
Than known words,
Than blind desire,
And to burn longer:

And found two things
In a dark hour:
Man's mortal love,
And a closed door.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 56.

The Progress of the Soul

Where once I loved my flesh,
That social fellow,
Now I want security of bone
And cherish the silence of my skeleton.

Where once I walked the world
Hunting the devil,
Now I find the darkness and the void
Within my side.

First to be good, then to be happy I
Worked and prayed.
Before the midnight, like the foul fiend,
I killed my dear friend.

Hope unto hope, dream beyond monstrous dream
I sought the world.
Now, at the black pitch and midnight of despair,
I find it was always here.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 57.

The Uneven Development of the Heart

Hardest to leave is that ruined life
We die each day. Hardest to kill
Is the sick man under our flesh who mourns
The years that are gone. His shaman's art,
Corrupting the play of the living will,

Fashions death in the changing heart
To a holy picture; each promising day
Is freighted like the Old Man of the Sea
With worn shape-shifting years. To live,
And keep the murderous past at bay,

Only the killer can survive.
Thus does a civil war divide
The heart's home country. Frightened of
New seasons of necessity
The man inside is sick with love
For all the summers when he died.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 58.

Ritual Song

The primary engine of the central heaven.
Solves all problems in its blue fission,
Sows trees of metal in the sacred wood.
In cold camps on the Acropolis of reason
The nomad literalists hang their worn equation—
All is transfigured in the warring blood.

The central engine of the second heaven
Cuts the blue seasons even,
Machines the seconds to a tick of stars.
The astral bodies of the beggars shine
Above the wild Missouri's oil and slime—
All is transfigured in celestial wars.

Hell under hell, heaven above mad heaven,
Level to level the Dream achieves its reason,
The Dialectic kills the static Good.
The gaudy peacocks of the commonplace
Die in a pride of momentary grace—
All, all transfigured in the warring blood.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 59.

Rites of Spring for Mason Roberson

In almost April when the charmed Spring comes
To Mason Roberson, a wishful green
Stylized acanthus on his capitol
Column appears. It is the living sign

Of the reborn heart. The window boxes of
North Beach (where all the bilious winter long
The lank geranium unfurled a flag)
Present their poor man's colors to the town.

But Spring is owned by others. Which disturbs.
Mason, who longs to make a present of
Sweet bastard April, half winter and half spring,
And shameless May to the city of his love,

The City of the World—and so to all
Those desperate lives who feel the season stir
Each worn and laboring heart with the green wish
To live as if it owned the April world.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 60.

Tourists at Ensenada

for Carol Zimmerman

The sunlight, like Rouault, draws a line
At everything, but shadow seems as real
As its object—stricter, even, to its form
Than the wasted color of the worn stone.

The sea fringes a desert. Travellers come
Where the wave repeats itself in endless promise.
On the uplands are the shabby goats, lean pigs,
And the poor in their doorways, watching the roads

Where the tourists flash past. The peasant is eclipsed
By the solar procession of the rich and bored
Who find the poor fearsome, but the blackening jail
And American motels enclosed in white walls

Romantic. Disturbing, though, that black-and-white
Life. The cripple, who rasps along the street
Like nails on a slate, lines all the tourist ear
With cries as real and shadowy as foreign fear.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 61.

The Troubled Midnight

Moonlight is casual on the midnight towns.
Under the starborne bridges flow
Old newspapers and ruined albums.
On the sundials midnight never comes,—

But definite as casualty lists the clocks
Record appointments which we could not keep,
Seeding the timeless light with hopes
Embalmed like Pharaohs on the shadowing stroke.

The sundial has no traffic with the moon.
Nature is indifferent to the time of man.
The clocks fling down their dark commandments on
The troubled midnight, light of the careless moon.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 62.

A Woman Praying through the St. Louis Blues

Surrounded by the casual music of circumstance
She kneels on the sore bones of poverty and ignorance.
Her goodness is common as her pulled back hair.
Her kindness makes her certain God will hear.
She thinks of Him as a vase or letter in the far attic,
Forgetting that shelf was long ago cleaned out.
She dreams she locates Him on her personal radar.

It ain't for diamonds or for store-bought hair
The man I love, he wouldn't go nowhere
Nor for luck nor pride nor fear nor happiness
(Happiness was killed in a crack-up in the war)
But for the general welfare of this world and the next.

The radio makes its generalized statement of loss—
Which she can believe having buried her son.
She wants so bad, I wish there could be God.
But the blues get lost in the heavens and she goes away
Rapt in her love and a twelve bar music no angel
Nor statistic nor theory can ever equal.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 63.

Poem in Autumn

Time, the copper money of the sun,
That grows, pure wampun, on another's wrist,
Keeps happy even in Antarctica
Love's misers and their girls. But that fool's gold,

The pollen of the hours, is lost upon
My ignorant heart. What other lovers make
Their study—how to turn time's seasonal flower
To the alchemic rose Eternity

Is not my magic now, black miles in time
From her. It is my industry to spend
Hours others hoard and all my summer wealth
To bring our traveling hearts safe home again.

Now, autumn. Pages from the calendar,
Like snow, will hide both summer and its pain.
I wait the winter bear of our desire
To cross the last mountain to our honey tree.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 64.

Love Song

Look at our summer sky, my love:
Birds and bombers fly above;
Some to the coasts of Anywhere,
Some ferry generals toward a war.

Listen to the speeches, dear:
Diplomat and murderer—
One to kill and plead good faith
And one to gild the face of death.

And the prophecies begin:
The poet and the crazy man.
One is shocked by common sense,
One hunts for God by reading French,

While a million souls upon a pin
Dance when a general moves his arm.
Many who rise shall not lie down—
Some short day shine immortal on.

Oh some curse God and die, my sweet;
And some will kiss the general's boot.
But few enough have strength to live
And keep an indifferent hope alive.

But now is the time of truth, my heart.
Let easy answerers all depart:
All special pleaders, all who lied,
The slick and the glib on every side;

Since, that all may not be lost,
All virtue is that we resist,
And to a world gone sick and mad
Our best devotions must be made

To save such goodness as we can
For the gay and thoughtless millennial man
Who will laugh as he strikes the dragon down—
Laughing stand on our laughing bones.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 65–66.

The Rioting Grave

A calm like glass across November fields
Reflects the frozen movement of dead flowers.
A dying sun thickens the stubble. Hours
Stiffen to clock-work in the ticking folds
Of Autumn afternoons. Now all things old,
All things completed, drowsing in shadow, fall
Like mummies into time. But you, poor fool,
Confound the calendar and enter now

Your furious cold summer. So, though winter house
The wind-lost seed immortal you arouse
Terribly awake into a nameless new
Season—but that trick any fool may know
In time: to make a fool of time who are Time's fool.
It is cold comfort to the quick, who feel
How the grave will riot under covering snow,
Though calm as glass the winter field may lie.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 67.

Rebellion

It was that time when the bullfighter flowers
Shake out their capes before the bulls of summer,
And down the domed face of midnight ran
Like rain the random comment of the clocks.

Then, in a religion of indifference,
Were but the smallest, firmest heresy.
We nailed our summer theses on the wall of war:—
On the altar of ourselves we praised the expendable.

The Pope of Death, with his winter Bible,
Came, casting out the flowers. Like a dream of swords
We were sheathed in the broken bed of innocence while
He clamored at our chantry, a shivering skeleton—

But under our blankets all wars ended:
Which public kissing has never halted.
Small victory. Still... we left Old Bones to wither
In the killing cold—love's absolute zero.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 68.

Sonnet

And when the sun, that files the points of leaves,
Unchains the summer, summons into light
Erotic innocence, proclaiming love's
Anonymous proposals; or, when late

The frost of autumn leaps the garden wall
And leaves all summer splendor in its ruin;
When, contracted in the cold, the wild
Heart wilts like a flower, farther than Orion
Or yesterday from its right cause and ground—

O love, no change or season brings us near
In the birth and death of the encircling year
Though Winter, like an annual failure, break
The yearly promise, or perennial green
Inform all April with the Spring's baroque.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 69.

Poem

The shadow of midnight lengthens across the world.
In the darkness only the lucky really are sure
That the sun comes up at the dawn and the birds sing
And the ones they love come back from the islands of sleep.

Voices of night, the metal voice on the wire,
The cry of a child, the voices hosting the air
That cry or laugh in the radio's neutral ear—
All these are unreal: they cannot make me believe:

They are only echoes thronging an empty room
Where we talked with others. Now they have all gone
And nothing exists beyond the circle of light
But remembered landscapes full of my own ghosts

And full of sorrow—full of myself. How far
Now to the farm, or to Nice, or the Ozark hills
Where first I was happy? How far to the promised place
Where every image creates an indifferent joy?
All that is unknown land. It is far, far
And lost in the dark, and I carry all my dead.
My murders upon me, I seek that improbable peace
After some other midnight, darker, harder to bear.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 70.

Perpetual Motion

One, one
Lives all alone,
Shape of the body's
Tree of bone.

Two, two
Can make the world do;
In youth, in youth,
But not in truth.

Three, three
And the body tree
Fades in the forest
Of company.

Three, three,
Society,
Will do, will do,
But not for two.

Since two, two
In love, withdraw;
Wish to be one,
To live alone,

But all must come
To the skeleton,
And one and one
Live all alone.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 71.

The Mobile

for Ben Maddow

Caged in the known sea of the room
Like a fish in the tide or a bird of dream,
The mobile animates a space
With gesture, saving the commonplace.
Always unlike a photograph
Which stills all vital joy or grief
In albums, art's abstraction lives
Beyond our necrologic loves.

Then consecrate that motion which
Obliges like a sign of life:
The free bird or the sacred fish
In the dream space of our daily wish.
We dare not tame them: eagle, whale
Will eat our guts or swallow whole
The unceremonious: only art
Subdues the furies at the heart.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 72.

Legend

Words I have said in anger or in passion
Flicker in memory's darkness like tired birds,
Toward midnight identity, recognitions.
I would be masked though I be masked in blood.

As if a dog were called and did not come...
Words evoke a love I had thought forgotten.
Who can forgive the thoughtless animal?
But something—scent perhaps—he can recall,

Packed in his head like letters in a trunk...
The bird flies flash the gun explodes, a tomb
Of feathers breaks above his pointing head:
A deck awash with other seasons' storms

When feathers tickled, only thunder could
Explode—the seasons when there was no blood.
God curse that Judas animal, forgive
What out of ignorance is always done.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 73.

Christmas Music

Winter proclaims its chilly benedictions,
And silence is polarized in the boreal night.
The moon licks at the earth with a tongue of light.
Solstice has spoken of peace to men and nations.

Planted by dark of the moon, unseasonal notions
Have ripened to hope of a god, but nothing stirs.
Where Jupiter wanders with his strumpet stars,
Sailing the dark on their cosmic inhuman missions.

(Yet once the starlight to the warring East
Proclaimed the birth of one poor carpenter—
The Price of Peace who could not stop a war
Nor stay the sleepy hangman from his task.)

Our peace this day is seasonal and cold
As light of distant stars when sun goes south.
And we are like freezing soldiers lying out
Upon a field of history, yet bold

To ask from each his gift, to each his need—
Now, in the season when all gifts are given—
To build on earth, not in the far heaven,
The human city of our daily bread.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 74.

Legendary Progress

When, in the darkness of his dream,
He felt the beast scream in his side
Shuddering to be born again
He crouched in the haunted, shadowy cave.

When twin colossi gripped the East
And rived the mystical world apart,
The rage and fire of a cold star
Kindled the darkness at his heart.

When darkness settled on the West
He heard the beast laugh in his home.
The flesh sickened on the bone.
He sought the cold, monastic heaven.

When the beast was partly freed
Hunger of voyage shook the world.
Toward Magellanic darkness driven
He gyved the mystical world in one.

When to perfection of the One
He drove his cold and careless thought
The beast screamed in his terror of
The frozen heaven of the absolute.

When Progress in its cold machine
Drove all the terror from the wood
The fury chained in the drowsy blood
Convulsed at the metal smell of sin.

When in terror of the beast
He prayed protection for his dream
A cold chaotic darkness came;
He crouched in the shadowy, haunted cave.

Now twin colossi rive the world.
The starship drops its furious rime.
The terror out of the darkness comes.
The beast is raging in its time.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 75–76.

In Praise of Necessity

Nostalgia of old men,
That spends itself in the sun
Hunting the vanished Sioux
Or shooting the buffalo down,
Is ground-rent to the Past,
Shafts of whose vanquished years
Pierce all decadent men
To envenom new-born desires.
Thus the blind demands of the heart
Are thwarted by out-lived lives—
The Wise Man's experience is
The wisdom killing the tribes.

How could it be otherwise?
All that's alive in the Past
Fastens itself on death,
Since to live is to change. Turned ghost
It is clothed in the future and us—
Not bound, traditional men
Remembering ritual words
Learned when their meaning was gone.
Shamen around a fire:
Where tired Ghost Dancers sway
Pray back the lost buffalo herds—
Words for a vanished age.

Then praise the hunters, who
Through yesterday's cold camps
(Where banked-up spirit-fires,
Ice-flamed, will warm no hand)
Advance to break new trail
Impatient of the meaningless dreams of legend herds,
Words of the old men;

And praise necessity
That frees the past of its snares,
Praising the killer heart
That makes dead meat of the years.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 77–78.

Against the False Magicians

for Don Gordon

The poem must not charm us like a play:
See, in the war-torn city, that reckless, gallant
Handsome lieutenant turn to the wet-lipped blonde
(Our childhood fixation) for one sweet desperate kiss
In the broken room, in blue cinematic moonlight—
Bombers across that moon, and the bombs falling,
The last train leaving, the regiment departing—
And their lips lock, saluting themselves and death:
And then the screen goes dead and all go home...
Ritual of the false imagination.

The poem must not charm us like the fact:
A warship can sink a circus at forty miles,
And art, love's lonely counterfeit, has small dominion
Over those nightmares that move in the actual sunlight.
The blonde will not be faithful, nor her lover ever return,
Nor the note be found in the hollow tree of childhood—
This dazzle of the facts would have us weeping
The orphaned fantasies of easier days.

It is the charm which the potential has
That is the proper aura for the poem.
Though ceremony fail, though each of your grey hairs
Help string a harp in the landlord's heaven,
And every battle, every augury,
Argue defeat, and it defeat itself
Bring all the darkness level with our eyes—
It is the poem provides the proper charm,
Spelling resistance and the living will,
To bring to dance a stony field of fact
And set against terror exile or despair—
The rituals of our humanity.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, pp. 79–80.

Political Song for a New Year

Gifted with prophecy and power,
All those the solstice marks with fire;
They harry out of the dung and mire
That crowd the circuit of the hour
The slumbrous, staggering, drunken boar
That on the starry, emblematic floor
Shall, tusk and tooth, their entrails tear
To wake with blood the flowers of the year.

Crowned in the surplus of zodiacal light,
The magical infant must accept his fate.
All keepers, mother, lover, layer out,
Are powerless with the child, who calls the swart
And southern-dropping sun against the night.
And then the blind and vegetative dead
Climb to the hysteria and ecstasy of birth;
The child is lifted from the blazing hearth
And the year sings prosperous toward his autumn death.

And now at the peak and pivot of a year
That saw each season signed with fire
(The mechanical throne, the burning chair
Circling the compass of the electric air)
I watch the Magi with their terrible gift
Climbing the haunted levels of the night,
Where the heroes and the victims burn and toss,
To where the Potential and the Actual cross
And the great year begins.

O all are whirled
Into the ruck and ritual of a world
We die to make, to sing out of the flame
Where joy is torment, fatal every game,
The only gods ourselves, and every good
Ripped from our sides in agony and blood.
Children of light, who give the future voice,
Calendar kings, be serious and rejoice!

Epitaph

Again, traveller, you have come a long way led by that star.
But the kingdom of the wish is at the other end of the night.
May you fare well, compañero; let us journey together joyfully,
Living on catastrophe, eating the pure light.

Publication. *Figures from a Double World*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955, p. 83.

LATER LOS ANGELES PERIODICAL VERSE

1955–1958

Passion of the Heavenly Detective

On the film set's formal garden the curse of all curses
Falls on the famous actors: the awful deed has been done.
(Our hero, in silk pyjamas, is at home cleaning his gun.)
Off stage, like a fallen soul or a trio of horses

A scream still sounds. Our hero does not stir.
Shaving, holding a mirror to Nature, he, pondering, points
To the Human Condition. Then, with nard and with oil anoints
The galvanized decorum of his hair,

Then among the stars the heavenly detective wanders,
Suspect to suspect, resolving to solve—be it ill, be it well—
What he considers the perfect crime. Who the hell
Is guilty? a literary policeman wonders.

Is it the star, sweet Evelyn Laye from Eden
Nebraska who sprang fully formed from the richly umbraed side
Of McAdam, the Pythagorean producer, under whose hide
(Surprise!) the golden and dancing rib was hidden?

The world (that groans in its bed when her fabulous name
Troubles its pragmatic sleep) thinks: Is Beauty aught but devilment?
For does it not lead to her ivory gates of evil
From whence proceedeth the sorrows of sin and dream?

Or is the crime perhaps some secret canker
Of the script itself—put in by the crotchety alcoholic
Writer? Is the villain the villain, so blond and brachycephalic?
And is the satanic stranger a New York banker?

All are suspect to our hero the Private eye:
Producer, director, star. A cop with a flashing stick
Patrols the garden. Above, the constellations tick,
The wagon is waiting to take them all away.

If he could only think like Mickey Spillane!
Our hero thinks; what a simple matter to fill with hot lead
The sinful sinner (though it be in the belly or in the head)
And then with Miss Laye to fall in a sexual swoond!

But, dreaming, he is aware of the sudden burning

Look on the face of the clock (it is Human Saving Time)
Great God! is he the guilt fall guy, scapegoat for the crime?
He thought it was only a play! And, warily turning,

He turns his weathercock head and alas and alack!
The mortal drama now can have no happy ending.
He was not born to suffer though he suffer to be borne past mending
As he rides through Gethsemane Fair in his Cadillac.

Envoi

Oh hopeful burgess in the darkened theatre
Waiting for the Salvation Follies to go on—
It is enough that you know that the hero is gone,
That neither today nor tomorrow will you see your main feature.

Too bad that today there is little or the wrong kind of love
And that neither yourself nor your friends will suffer the pain
Of man's passion. It is called off on account of rain.
Above the garden the stars, or the signs, wink on, wink off.

Publication. *Coastlines* 1 (1955), pp. 30–32.

Escape

Hunting in the dark my father found me,
My mother claimed me, and led me into light
From my nine-month winter. In the herds of Right,
Branded and bawling, the christeners bound me.
God given, church shriven, hell washed away,
Adam purged, heaven urged, the dog would have his day.
Hell all about me with its infantry
Storming the fortress of my crying years
Could not get my notice. They had stopped my ears
With chrism of love in my infancy.
World poor, world pure, I kept my head level,
Unproud, but uncowed, shaming the devil.
And thus betrayed I fell into a world
Where love lives only in another name.
At eleven or twelve, when the kidnappers came,
I took the poisoned candy and off we whirled.
Innocence, nonsense, the seven priestly lies
Surrounded me, when, hands bound, I opened my eyes
Onto the bloody barnyard of my youth
Where the stuck pig wetly squealed against the wall,
And fell on the stone crop. False, rich, tall,
The elders judged me. The stone edge of truth,
Flint-sharp, heartless, stabbed my begging knee—
Harmed me but armed me: I cut my hands free.

Publication. *Coastlines* 3 (December 1955), p. 20.

All the Dead Poets

How vainly men themselves bestir
For Bollingen or Pulitzer,
To raise, through ritual and rhyme
Some Lazarus of an earlier time:
The thought that died upon the page;
The attitude stiffened with its age;
The feeling, once appropriate,
Now, like honesty, out of date;
The elegant tone elegiac
That embalms the venom of a hack—
All the outmoded consciousness
A timid reason can assess:
His sin that in the soul's dark night
Like an ancient God's head gives off light—
All of this some will sing or say
(As if God's death were but a play)—
All the dead poets of the day.

I—Random Roderick

Here's one who sings (as he were wood)
The angst he has best understood:
What the Ash and Hickory
Feel toward Life and Poetry.
Of what the Willow should or shouldn't
He warbles his native wood-note prudent,

Proclaiming so everyone may know it
He's every ring the old oaken poet.
"Poems are made by fools like me
But only God can make a tree,"
Said Kilmer. Roderick proves the rule:
Too many trees may make a fool.
For there's a kind of Sallie law:
Such willowy whimsy is a bore.
Still, better his light than heavy work—
His agenbite's worse than his bark.

Earnest at his vatic trade,
He studies to be nobly mad;

Courts furor poeticus
(So long as it is decorous)
Thinking, when he has beguiled
The critic-beasts, to mount the wild
Pegasus of mantic verse—
If only someone holds the horse.
Yet to be “lyrically wild”
(And simple as a little child)
Is not enough. The art of sinking
Is not enough: he must be thinking—
Thinking, thinking all the while
(As a history doctor will)
Thinking, thinking all the day,
While the cute ideas play,
And when the hunting thoughts come home—
Lo! they’ve bagged another poem!
This philosophic poet’s bold—
Proudly demands his right to hold
Such attitudes to church and state
As died in 1848.
Built from ruin and decay
His dome of many-colored clay
Arises—O Philosophy,
Can this jakes thy mansion be?
Wilt thou number in thy van
This shambling nineteenth century man?

Meanwhile our poet is romancing
And sets the small ideas dancing:
His poems would rather mean than be—
O Woodsman, Woodsman, spare that tree!

Publication. *The California Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1955), pp. 52–53.

The Hunted Revolutionaries

I

*He hears the sound of hunting,
San Pedro, beside the last ocean*

Evening, with gull-cry, and a wind out of the bay
Where mournful a ship's horn sounds and the bell of a drowned buoy
Flinging a warning call from the cold sea.
Quiet, the wave, oiled where a freighter curves
Toward the dream countries.

Schooled like fish on a shoal or a flight of meteors
The bicycle lights of the workers shawl the hills
Of foreign cities, fall toward the factory quarters
And the new day. Manhattan holds on its chilly spires
Three stars, and darkness,

But westward the light still lasts, and a gull cries, and the wind
Complains. The false-lights of the sun,
Smoky and tranquil, lie on the wave tops.
I sit at the beach, in the light of a gone day.
And I wait for the hunters.

II

*He imagines the great demons of
the four corners of his country*

The violent darkness claims us all:
The indifferent demon of the North
Sends his abstract anguish forth,
Tall as you are and more tall.
The violent darkness claims us all.

Tall as you are and more tall,
The impotent demon of the South
Tears the tongue from the honest mouth.
The violent darkness claims us all,
Tall as you are and more tall.

The violent darkness claims us all:
The mechanical demon of the East,

The inflated demon of the West—
Tall as you are and more tall,
The violent darkness claims us all.

The violent darkness claims us all:
Now all your angels summon forth,
From East and West and South and North,
Tall as you are, and more tall.

III

He calls upon the powers of earth

The dark is in love with forms of light.
Angel of conscience of the North,
Assure all mortals mortal worth!
Stars shine clearest in darkest night:
I summon the angel of the North.

Stars shine clearest in darkest night.
O randy angel of the South,
Be lust of joy in the fields of sloth!
An indifferent joy is man's secret fate:
I summon the angel of the South.

An indifferent joy is our secret fate.
Anarchic angel of the West,
In solidarity bind what's loosed!
All bitterness in time grows sweet:
I summon the angel of the West.

All bitterness in time grows sweet.
Shepherding angel of the East,
Organize concord in the breast!
The dark is in love with forms of light:
I summon the angel of the East.

The dark is in love with forms of light,
Tall as you are and more tall.
Though the violent darkness claim us all
An indifferent joy is our secret fate.
The stars shine clearest in darkest night.
All bitterness in time grows sweet.

IV

*He remembers the tradition of
pursuit and struggle*

And, now, evening; and gull-cry. For the just and the unjust
Impartial evening. Zodiacal light. Star light. Light
Of search warrants. (The last wagon train
Is burning in ambush.) Dark, now, all the States,
And night on the west coast.

Darkness, and exile. And now the kind man,
Who only pitied exiles, will blindly look at the map
Where his perhaps home, graced with a foreign name,
Waits for the great ship. Somewhere under the Line
He will cheer for the fighters.

For they will hunt you, O revolutionaries!
Hunt you in darkness—the slogan chalked on the wall
Is your magical sign, icon of terrible love,
The dark of the calendar. They hunt you, listening
For a sound of gunfire.

But, now, the silence, and the neutral stars on the sea.
Sirens. Waiting. The waves' long lamentation.
Endured by millions—this darkness and the hunting:
Capture Death Victory: Like the struggle, the changeless sea,
Like the constant stars: Endure Resist Endure

Publication. *The California Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1956), pp. 10–12.

Letter to an Imaginary Friend

Part I

I.

“From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east.”

I am in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh St.,

Writing, rolling east with the earth, drifting toward Scorpio,
thinking,

Hoping toward laughter and indifference.

“They came through the passes, they crossed the dark mountains in a month of snow...

Finding the plain, the bitter water, the iron rivers of the black North.

Horsemen,

Hunters of the hornless deer in the high plateaus of that country,

They travelled the cold year, died in the stone desert.”

Aye, long ago. A long journey ago,

Most of it lost in the dark, in a ruck of tourists,

In the night of the compass, companioned by tame wolves, plagued

By theories, flies, visions, by the anthropophagi...

I do not know what end that journey was toward.

But I am its end. I am where I have been and where

I am going. The journeying destination—at least that...

But far from the laughter.

So, writing:

“The melt of the pig pointed to early spring.

The tossed bones augured an easy crossing.

North, said the mossy fur of the high pines.

West, said the colored stone at the sulphur pool.”

2.

And at the age of five ran away from home.

(I have never been back. Never left.) I was going perhaps...

Toward the woods, toward a sound of water—called by what bird?—

Leaving the ark-tight farm in its blue and mortgaged weather

To sail the want-all seas of my five dead summers

Past the barn’s ammonia-and-horse-piss-smelling dark

And the barnyard dust, adrift in the turkey wind

Or pocked with the guinea-print and staggering script
Of the drunken-sailor ducks, a secret language; leaving
Also my skippering Irish father, land-locked Sinbad,

With his singing head in a private cloud and his feet stuck solid
On the quack-grass-roofed and rusting poop-deck of the north forty
In the alien corn: the feathery, bearded, and all-fathering wheat.

Leaving my mother too, with her kindness and cookies,
The whispering, ginghamy, prayers—impossible pigeons—
Whickering into the camphor-and-cookie-crumb dark toward God.
In the clothes closet.
Damp comforts. Tears harder than nails.
Summery. Loving. Laughter.

How could I leave them?
I took them with me, though I went alone
Into the christmas dark of the woods and down
The whistling slope of the coulee, past the Indian graves
Alive and flickering with the gopher light...

3.

Dry runs and practice journeys through the earthquake weather
Of the interior summer... the singing services
And ceremony cheerful as a harness bell...
Bright flags and fictions of those hyacinthine hours
Stain and sustain me past the hell of this mumming time
Toward the high wake I would hold!

 No ghost, but O ill and older
Than other autumns when I ran the calico lanes
Past sleepy summer, gone, and the late west light
Downfallen. Lost. Autumn of distant voices, half heard,
Calling.
Rain. Gunfire. Crows. Mist, far woods.

Farther than winter birds in the most gaunt tree
Snapped in the frost, I was; or went. Was free, and haunted
By the reeling plunge of the high hawk down—down! O down
Where the curving rabbit lunged and was slapped with a sharp and killing
Heel.
There—in the still post-solstice dark, among

Rococo snow, the harp-shaped drifts and the ghost-marked trees of the season
I went all ways...
Spring came; the first cold rainstorms, dropping
Their electric hardware in the bright-work of the snow.
Then, the leather seasons by, and my bundling times,
My eye sustained the cow-bird and the crow
Their feather terms...

Then horny Summer come...
—and Autumn growing
In the west steep wrestling light and the rain-wrung rheumy wind in the rag-headed woods...

□

Way stations on the underground journey; the boy running, running...
Search for Lough Derg, or the holy waters of the Cheyenne,
Or the calf-deep Maple. Running away
I had the pleasure of their company...

4.

Took them? They came—
Past the Horn, Cape Wrath, Oxford and Fifth and Main
Laughing and mourning, snug in the two seater buggy,
Jouncing and bouncing on the gumbo roads
Or slogging loblolly in the bottom lands—
My seven-tongued family.
How could I escape? Strapped on the truckle bars
Of the bucking red-hall freight, or riding the blinds cold,
Or sick and sea-sawed on the seven seas,
Or in metal and altitude, drilling the high blue
I fled.
I heard them laughing at the oarsmen's bench.
Conched in cowcatchers, they rambled at my side.
The seat of the buggy was wider than Texas
And slung to the axles were my rowdy cousins;
Riding the whippetrees: aunts, uncles, brothers,
Second-cousins, great-aunts, friends and neighbors,
All bolus-bolus, piss-proud, all sugar-and-shit
A goddamned gallimaufry of ancestors.
The high passes?
Hunters of the hornless deer?

5.

A flickering of gopher light...
The Indian graves...
And then the river.
Companioned, and alone,
Five, ten, or twenty, I followed the coulee hills
Into the dreaming green of the river shade,
The fish-stinking cow-dunged dark of the cattle-crossing,
The fox-harking, timber-wolf country, where...
The cicada was sawing down the afternoon/
Upstream a beaver was spanking Nature/

The cows were wilder/
Horses carnivorous...

The kittycorner river cut through the buggy,
Through Dachau and Thaelmann
Rolfe in Spain
Through the placid, woodchuck-coughing afternoon
Drifting...
Past Grand Forks, Baton Rouge, Sheldon, Rome,
And past Red Hook and Mobile where the rivers mourn
Old Thames, Missouri, Rio Hondo.
Now
In far Los Angeles I hear
The Flying Dutchman in the dry river
Mourning. Mourning...
Ancestral night...

Passages of the dark; streets with no known turning
Beyond the sleepy midnight and the metaphysical summer
Leading here. Here. Here, queerly here
To the east slant light of the underground moon, and the rusty garden
Empty.

Bounded by ghosts.
Empty except for footnotes
Of journeying far friends near.

Enter now,
O bird on the green branch of the dying tree, singing
Sing me toward home/

Toward the deep past and inalienable loss/
Toward the gone stranger carrying my name
In the possible future
—enter now:
Purlieus and stamping grounds of the hungering people
O enter

“They died in the stone desert
They crossed the dark mountains in the month of snow...
Finding the plain, the bitter water, the iron rivers of the black North.”
Horns on the freeway. Footsteps of strangers,
Angelenos: visitations in the metropolitan night.
“Hunters of the hornless deer.”
Ancestral baggage...

Publication. *Coastlines* 7 (1957), pp. 3–6.

Ah ... to the Villages

Leaving the splendid plaza and the esplanade—
The majestic facades of metropolitan unease—
Let us to the vast savannahs of despair
Repair; and let us seek
The panoramas of malaise, the continental anguish,
The hysteria and the nausea of the villages;

Somewhere—perhaps where Omaha, like a disease,
And the magnificent, brumal names of Fargo, of Kalamazoo,
Infect the spirit with magnificent ennui—
A baroque splendor attends our small distress:
We dress in the grand extravaganza of cafard.

Still, there will come evenings without true discontent—
The sparrows loud in the dust and the crows gone cawing home
To the little wood; the lights ending at the prairie end—
As the divine and healing dark comes down—
The town reeling with unreasonable content.

In the one-horse town they have eaten the house—allons:
But soft! here are not only the megrims of small forms
And the subliminal melancholy of the central square.
Take care; for here you find
An intermontano anguish in the wind that sings you home:
Here is a false front distinguished as your own.—

And contentment is momentary in the villages.

Publication. *Coastlines* 10 (1958), p. 34.

Letter to an Imaginary Friend

(for Alice)

IV

I.

The immortal girls, the summer manifestoes
Startle the buzzard in the corpse-bearing tree.

Explosion of daisies in the stricken field.
The lilac is lifting its lavender toward Arcturus...

Noon's incandescence, autonomy of night
Cracked open throttles on my resurrection bone
My moon-steered master, midnight fisherman
Bound for the Indies...

Coiffeur of dream, oh bright improbable gold!
The blonde-haired women, crowned as with surplus light,
Curls crisp as lettuce on their bellies porch
And slick and secret when the armpit yawns,
Hair! dimension of heat!

 Lit by subliminal suns
That shrink their dresses half way up their thighs
It ripens outward.

 Furry as a peach
It licks the hand that hungers at the knee;
And where the back and buttocks sweetly mate
Like queenly empires joined in natural peace
(Equation of the palm! O sweet division!)
Glints like shot silk. And where the pubis thrusts
Into my world to light me into dark
Is stiff and secret as a buried fence
Or bristles friendly as a welcome mat.

Yes: and those soft brunettes, their eyes like caves
Their third eye winking in the knowing dark!
O ox-eyed honeys with the wine dark hair,
Branches of midnight where all moon long and climbed
Punching our tickets on the train toward dawn—
How black your hair!

Belly of smoky wheat,
Buttocks of solid water, legs like a slow dream—

O, as to a citizen of Jupiter's moons
Your soft enormous breasts, over the bare horizon,
Loom, golden and dusky rose, tremendous planets
Pendulous...

Iris toward the nipple and the nipples pink, veiny
Shot with faint blue...

And your eyes, O magnificent black-haired women!
Invincibly glazed or wet as a pool-side stone,
Heavy with sleep; and your mouths wide and elastic
And your lips, thickened with heat, which your tongue keeps wetting!
Ah, woman with your ass as thick as a pillow,
With your thighs like deadfalls and the black nest of your sex
Like a midnight hungry quicksand where I drown!
Drown and am born. Upborne! Resurrected!
Startling the buzzard on my shoulder tree.
—I've come through your black pass many's the sunny night!

And the brown-haired women, slim, with their lenten graces,
Or short and thickset and busy as a bear,
Their knees dimpled and their hips slung like a hammock,
Their bellies snug to my gut as a flesh muff;
And the red-heads, electric, with their buttermilk skin,
And the tickle inside the knee, and their burning bush,
With its wise unsleeping bird, more dark than their eyebrows—
Bucking like goats, quicker than minks, randy
As the wild strawberry roan: Sunfishing by moonlight
They have ridden me into a stall where I sleep standing up.

2.

Sweet Jesus at morning! the queenly women of our youth!
The monumental creatures of our summer lust!
Sweet fantastic creatures, as full of juice as plums,
Pneumatic and backless as a functional dream—
Where are ye now?
Where were ye then, indeed?

Walking three-legged in the sexual haze,
Drifting toward the Lion on the bosomy hills of summer

In the hunting light, the marmareal bulge of the moon
I wooed them barebacked in the saddling heat.
First was Inez, her face a looney fiction,
Her bottom like concrete and her wrestling arms;

Fay with her breasts as hard as hand-grenades
(Whose father's shot gun dozed behind the door);
Barefooted Rose, found in the bottom lands
(We layed the flax as flat as forty horses,
The blue bells showering); Amy with her long hair
Drawn in mock modesty between long legs;
And Sandy with her car, who would be driving and do it;
And June who would roll you as in a barrel down hill
(The Gaelic torture); Gin with her snapping trap,
The heliotropic quim: locked in till daybreak;
Literary Esther, who could fox your copy,
And the double Gladys, one blonde, one black.

O great Kingdom of Fuck! And myself: plenipotentiary!
Under the dog star's blaze, in the high rooms of the moonlight,
In the doze and balance of the wide noon,
I hung my pennant from the top of the windy mast
Blue peter, sailing the want-not seas of the summers.
And under the coupling of the wheeling night
Muffled in flesh and clamped to the sweaty pelt
Of Blanche or Betty, threshing the green baroque
Stacks of the long hay—the burrs stuck in our crotch,
The dust thick in our throats so we sneezed in spasm—
Or flat on the floor, on the back seat of a car,
On a groaning trestle table in the Methodist Church basement,
And far in the fields, and high in the hills, and hot
And quick in the roaring cars: by the bridge, by the river,
In Troop Nine's dank log cabin where the Cheyenne flows:
By light, by dark, up on the roof, in the cellar,
In the rattling belfry where the bats complained,
Or backed against trees, or against the squealing fences,
Or belly to belly with no place to lie down
In the light of the dreaming moon.

3.

Dog watch and silence.

In the high school yard, the dust
Settles; of vanished cars, the vast nocturnal migrations.
Under the moon
Paler than flowers the condoms gleam on the lawn.
Delicate, blue
Fragrance of lilac drifts in the night air, purer,
Sweeter than moonlight.

The lilac points to Arcturus.
Points down the street to my Grandfather's clapboard house
To the gimcrack mouldering porch where a beehive sleeps in the wall,
Toward his Irish keening.
"Ay-you, Tom. Avoid the occasion of sin.
You're a quick hand with a book. Pick up an education
And don't run about be the night!

Boy, its a wide
Road runs down to hell and its clear coasting
And the skids are greased for the poor. Boy, be learning!"
And up to bed, past the squeaking third step, bearing
Through the whispering grandfather dust, in the bellowing night of my sex
My little learning (Gladys and Daisy) bearing
The golden apple of my discontent.

4.

The dust settles. Settles like time. The years
Swing round my head like birds.

It is fall, now, evening,
The long and lonesome season.
The car bumps on the wagon road. In the lights
The dust is thick. The cattle hump and shuffle.
The smell of the autumn river in the cold night air
Is wild and alien.

Out of the river pasture,
Out of the gone summer we drive the cattle.
They plod the road, blind in the carlights' dazzle,
Docile enough. The car bumps and complains.
Wally is driving. The car crawls in low gear
And the dash-light gleams in the hair of my littlest brother.
"Where will you go?" he says. "Is it far to the town
Where they keep the college?"

He is five years old, maybe seven.
“What will you learn to know?”

I know it is warm in the car. The night stiffens
With black frost but the car is warm.

What shall we learn
In the cold? In the cold country where the books are burning?
Across the classroom of the north forty
My father professes his love and labor.

In the black field, burnt now, where the flax
Small breakers ran, the Wobblies’ footprint is buried.
A cold moon hangs in the trees.
“I hate September,” says Wally. “The damn blank lonesome fields—
What will you learn anyway?”
And Jack says, sleepy, leaning his furry head
Into my side:
“Is it far? Is it long?”

5.

And returned then, up the coulee hills from the river
Later than gopher light, with the colder and older moon
Riding my back like a buzzard.

Past the squeaking third
Step on the grandfather stair, past the dusty
Belfry and Daisy caught in the lilac,
Past barns where the country wenches were singing like cardinal sins—
And do they sing in the dust still?

Do their bones
Sing in the golden dust in the stallion summers?

O small girls with your wide knowledge, you lead me
Into the continent of guilt and forgiving, where love is.
Thru the small gate of your sex I go into my kingdom.
Teachers of men! O hot, great-hearted women
The world turns still on the axis of your thighs!

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COLOPHON

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