

## North American Sequence

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## THE LONGING

### I

On things asleep, no balm:  
A kingdom of stinks and sighs,  
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,  
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasels,  
Saliva dripping from warm microphones,  
Agony of crucifixion on barstools.

Less and less the illuminated lips,  
Hands active, eyes cherished;  
Happiness left to dogs and children—  
(Matters only a saint mentions!)

Lust fatigues the soul.  
How to transcend this sensual emptiness?  
(Dreams drain the spirit if we dream too long.)  
In a bleak time, when a week of rain is a year,  
The slag-heaps fume at the edge of the raw cities:  
The gulls wheel over their singular garbage;  
The great trees no longer shimmer;  
Not even the soot dances.

And the spirit fails to move forward,  
But shrinks into a half-life, less than itself,  
Falls back, a slug, a loose worm  
Ready for any crevice,  
An eyeless starrer.

### II

A wretch needs his wretchedness. Yes.  
O pride, thou art a plume upon whose head?

How comprehensive that felicity! . . .  
A body with the motion of a soul.  
What dream's enough to breathe in? A dark dream.  
The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all.  
Who'd think the moon could pare itself so thin?  
A great flame rises from the sunless sea;  
The light cries out, and I am there to hear—  
I'd be beyond; I'd be beyond the moon,  
Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm.

To this extent I'm a stalk.  
—How free; how all alone.  
Out of these nothings  
—All beginnings come.

### III

I would with the fish, the blackening salmon, and the mad lemmings,  
The children dancing, the flowers widening,  
Who sighs from far away?  
I would unlearn the lingo of exasperation, all the distortions of malice  
and hatred;  
I would believe my pain: and the eye quiet on the growing rose;  
I would delight in my hands, the branch singing, altering the  
excessive bird;  
I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form;  
I would be a stream, winding between great striated rocks in late  
summer;  
A leaf, I would love the leaves, delighting in the redolent disorder of  
this mortal life,  
This ambush, this silence,  
Where shadow can change into flame,  
And the dark be forgotten.  
I have left the body of the whale, but the mouth of the night is still  
wide;  
On the Bullhead, in the Dakotas, where the eagles eat well,  
In the country of few lakes, in the tall buffalo grass at the base of the  
clay buttes,

In the summer heat, I can smell the dead buffalo,  
The stench of their damp fur drying in the sun,  
The buffalo chips drying.

Old men should be explorers?  
I'll be an Indian.  
Iroquois.

## MEDITATION AT OYSTER RIVER

### I

Over the low, barnacled, elephant-colored rocks,  
Come the first tide-ripples, moving, almost without sound, toward me,  
Running along the narrow furrows of the shore, the rows of dead  
clam shells;  
Then a runnel behind me, creeping closer,  
Alive with tiny striped fish, and young crabs climbing in and out of  
the water.

No sound from the bay. No violence.  
Even the gulls quiet on the far rocks,  
Silent, in the deepening light,  
Their cat-mewing over,  
Their child-whimpering.

At last one long undulant ripple,  
Blue-black from where I am sitting,  
Makes almost a wave over a barrier of small stones,  
Slapping lightly against a sunken log.  
I dabble my toes in the brackish foam sliding forward,  
Then retire to a rock higher up on the cliff-side.  
The wind slackens, light as a moth fanning a stone:  
A twilight wind, light as a child's breath  
Turning not a leaf, not a ripple.  
The dew revives on the beach-grass;  
The salt-soaked wood of a fire crackles;  
A fish raven turns on its perch (a dead tree in the rivermouth),  
Its wings catching a last glint of the reflected sunlight.

### II

The self persists like a dying star,  
In sleep, afraid. Death's face rises afresh,  
Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick,  
The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across the highway,  
The young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting for its fly,  
The hummingbird, whirring from quince-blossom to morning-glory—  
With these I would be.

And with water: the waves coming forward, without cessation,  
The waves, altered by sand-bars, beds of kelp, miscellaneous  
driftwood,  
Topped by cross-winds, tugged at by sinuous undercurrents  
The tide rustling in, sliding between the ridges of stone,  
The tongues of water, creeping in, quietly.

### III

In this hour,  
In this first heaven of knowing,  
The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit,  
Acquires, for a time, the sandpiper's insouciance,  
The hummingbird's surety, the kingfisher's cunning—  
I shift on my rock, and I think:  
Of the first trembling of a Michigan brook in April,  
Over a lip of stone, the tiny rivulet;  
And that wrist-thick cascade tumbling from a cleft rock,  
Its spray holding a double rain-bow in early morning,  
Small enough to be taken in, embraced, by two arms,—  
Or the Titebawasee, in the time between winter and spring,  
When the ice melts along the edges in early afternoon.  
And the midchannel begins cracking and heaving from the pressure  
beneath,  
The ice piling high against the iron-bound spiles,  
Gleaming, freezing hard again, creaking at midnight—  
And I long for the blast of dynamite,

The sudden sucking roar as the culvert loosens its debris of branches  
and sticks,  
Welter of tin cans, pails, old bird nests, a child's shoe riding a log,  
As the piled ice breaks away from the battered spiles,  
And the whole river begins to move forward, its bridges shaking.

IV

Now, in this waning of light,  
I rock with the motion of morning;  
In the cradle of all that is,  
I'm lulled into half-sleep  
By the lapping of water,  
Cries of the sandpiper.  
Water's my will, and my way,  
And the spirit runs, intermittently,  
In and out of the small waves,  
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds—  
How graceful the small before danger!

In the first of the moon,  
All's a scattering,  
A shining.

JOURNEY TO THE INTERIOR

I

In the long journey out of the self,  
There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places  
Where the shale slides dangerously  
And the back wheels hang almost over the edge  
At the sudden veering, the moment of turning.  
Better to hug close, wary of rubble and falling stones.  
The arroyo cracking the road, the wind-bitten buttes, the canyons,  
Creeks swollen in midsummer from the flash-flood roaring into the  
narrow valley.

Reeds beaten flat by wind and rain,  
Gray from the long winter, burnt at the base in late summer.  
—Or the path narrowing,  
Winding upward toward the stream with its sharp stones,  
The upland of alder and birchtrees,  
Through the swamp alive with quicksand,  
The way blocked at last by a fallen fir-tree,  
The thickets darkening,  
The ravines ugly.

II

I remember how it was to drive in gravel,  
Watching for dangerous down-hill places, where the wheels whined  
beyond eighty—  
When you hit the deep pit at the bottom of the swale,  
The trick was to throw the car sideways and charge over the hill, full  
of the throttle.  
Grinding up and over the narrow road, spitting and roaring.  
A chance? Perhaps. But the road was part of me, and its ditches,

And the dust lay thick on my eyelids,—Who ever wore goggles?—  
Always a sharp turn to the left past a barn close to the roadside,  
To a scurry of small dogs and a shriek of children,  
The highway ribboning out in a straight thrust to the North,  
To the sand dunes and fish flies, hanging, thicker than moths,  
Dying brightly under the street lights sunk in coarse concrete,  
The towns with their high pitted road-crowns and deep gutters,  
Their wooden stores of silvery pine and weather-beaten red

courthouses,  
An old bridge below with a buckled iron railing, broken by some  
idiot plunger;  
Underneath, the sluggish water running between weeds, broken  
wheels, tires, stones.

And all flows past—  
The cemetery with two scrubby trees in the middle of the prairie,  
The dead snakes and muskrats, the turtles gasping in the rubble,  
The spikey purple bushes in the winding dry creek bed—  
The floating hawks, the jackrabbits, the grazing cattle—  
I am not moving but they are,  
And the sun comes out of a blue cloud over the Tetons,  
While, farther away, the heat-lightning flashes.  
I rise and fall in the slow sea of a grassy plain,  
The wind veering the car slightly to the right,  
Whipping the line of white laundry, bending the cottonwoods apart,  
The scraggly wind-break of a dusty ranch-house.  
I rise and fall, and time folds  
Into a long moment;  
And I hear the lichen speak,  
And the ivy advance with its white lizard feet—  
On the shimmering road,  
On the dusty detour.

### III

I see the flower of all water, above and below me, the never receding,  
Moving, unmoving in a parched land, white in the moonlight:  
The soul at a still-stand,

At ease after rocking the flesh to sleep,  
Petals and reflections of petals mixed on the surface of a glassy pool,  
And the waves flattening out when the fishermen drag their nets over  
the stones.

In the moment of time when the small drop forms, but does not fall,  
I have known the heart of the sun,—  
In the dark and light of a dry place,  
In a flicker of fire brisked by a dusty wind.  
I have heard, in a drip of leaves,  
A slight song,  
After the midnight cries.  
I rehearse myself for this:  
The stand at the stretch in the face of death,  
Delighting in surface change, the glitter of light on waves,  
And I roam elsewhere, my body thinking,  
Turning toward the other side of light,  
In a tower of wind, a tree idling in air,  
Beyond my own echo,  
Neither forward nor backward,  
Unperplexed, in a place leading nowhere.

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning,  
I know this change:  
On one side of silence there is no smile;  
But when I breathe with the birds,  
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,  
And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep.

## THE LONG WATERS

### I

Whether the bees have thoughts, we cannot say,  
But the hind part of the worm wiggles the most,  
Minnows can hear, and butterflies, yellow and blue,  
Rejoice in the language of smells and dancing.  
Therefore I reject the world of the dog  
Though he hear a note higher than C  
And the thrush stopped in the middle of his song.

And I acknowledge my foolishness with God,  
My desire for the peaks, the black ravines, the rolling mists  
Changing with every twist of wind,  
The unsinging fields where no lungs breathe,  
Where light is stone.  
I return where fire has been,  
To the charred edge of the sea  
Where the yellowish prongs of grass poke through the blackened ash,  
And the bunched logs peel in the afternoon sunlight,  
Where the fresh and salt waters meet,  
And the sea-winds move through the pine trees,  
A country of bays and inlets, and small streams flowing seaward.

### II

Mnetha, Mother of Har, protect me  
From the worm's advance and retreat, from the butterfly's havoc,  
From the slow sinking of the island peninsula, the coral efflorescence,  
The dubious sea-change, the heaving sands, and my tentacled  
sea-cousins.

But what of her?—  
Who magnifies the morning with her eyes,

That star winking beyond itself,  
The cricket-voice deep in the midnight field,  
The blue jay rasping from the stunted pine.

How slowly pleasure dies!—  
The dry bloom splitting in the wrinkled vale,  
The first snow of the year in the dark fir.  
Feeling, I still delight in my last fall.

### III

In time when the trout and young salmon leap for the low-flying  
insects,  
And the ivy-branch, cast to the ground, puts down roots into the  
sawdust,

And the pine, whole with its roots, sinks into the estuary,  
Where it leans, tilted east, a perch for the osprey,  
And a fisherman dawdles over a wooden bridge,  
These waves, in the sun, remind me of flowers:  
The lily's piercing white,  
The mottled tiger, best in the corner of a damp place,  
The heliotrope, veined like a fish, the persistent morning-glory,  
And the bronze of a dead burdock at the edge of a prairie lake,  
Down by the muck shrinking to the alkaline center.

I have come here without courting silence,  
Blessed by the lips of a low wind,  
To a rich desolation of wind and water,  
To a landlocked bay, where the salt water is freshened  
By small streams running down under fallen fir trees.

### IV

In the vaporous gray of early morning,  
Over the thin, feathery ripples breaking lightly against the irregular  
shoreline—

Feathers of the long swell, burnished, almost oily—  
A single wave comes in like the neck of a great swan

Swimming slowly, its back ruffled by the light cross-winds,  
To a tree lying flat, its crown half broken.

I remember a stone breaking the eddying current,  
Neither white nor red, in the dead middle way,  
Where impulse no longer dictates, nor the darkening shadow,  
A vulnerable place,  
Surrounded by sand, broken shells, the wreckage of water.

V

As light reflects from a lake, in late evening,  
When bats fly, close to slightly tilting brownish water,  
And the low ripples run over a pebbly shoreline,  
As a fire, seemingly long dead, flares up from a downdraft of air in a  
chimney,

Or a breeze moves over the knees from a low hill,  
So the sea wind wakes desire.  
My body shimmers with a light flame.

I see in the advancing and retreating waters  
The shape that came from my sleep, weeping:  
The eternal one, the child, the swaying vine branch,  
The numinous ring around the opening flower,  
The friend that runs before me on the windy headlands,  
Neither voice nor vision.

I, who came back from the depths laughing too loudly,  
Become another thing;  
My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves;  
I lose and find myself in the long water;  
I am gathered together once more;  
I embrace the world.

THE FAR FIELD

I

I dream of journeys repeatedly:  
Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,  
Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,  
The road lined with snow-laden second growth,  
A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,  
Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic,  
And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror,  
The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone,  
Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut,  
Where the car stalls,  
Churning in a snowdrift  
Until the headlights darken.

II

At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower,  
Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert,  
Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting-place of the field-mouse,  
Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,  
Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,—  
One learned of the eternal;  
And in the shrunken face of a dead rat, eaten by rain and  
ground-beetles  
(I found it lying among the rubble of an old coal bin)  
And the tom-cat, caught near the pheasant-run,  
Its entrails strewn over the half-grown flowers,  
Blasted to death by the night watchman.

I suffered for birds, for young rabbits caught in the mower,  
My grief was not excessive.  
For to come upon warblers in early May  
Was to forget time and death:  
How they filled the oriole's elm, a twittering restless cloud, all one  
morning,  
And I watched and watched till my eyes blurred from the bird  
shapes,—  
Cape May, Blackburnian, Cerulean,—  
Moving, elusive as fish, fearless,  
Hanging, bunched like young fruit, bending the end branches,  
Still for a moment,  
Then pitching away in half-flight,  
Lighter than finches,  
While the wrens bickered and sang in the half-green hedgerows,  
And the flicker drummed from his dead tree in the chicken-yard.

—Or to lie naked in sand,  
In the silted shallows of a slow river,  
Fingering a shell,  
Thinking:  
Once I was something like this, mindless,  
Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar;  
Or to sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire;  
Or, with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,  
Believing:  
I'll return again,  
As a snake or a raucous bird,  
Or, with luck, as a lion.

I learned not to fear infinity,  
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,  
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,  
The wheel turning away from itself,  
The sprawl of the wave,  
The on-coming water.

III

The river turns on itself,  
The tree retreats into its own shadow.  
I feel a weightless change, a moving forward  
As of water quickening before a narrowing channel  
When banks converge, and the wide river whitens;  
Or when two rivers combine, the blue glacial torrent  
And the yellowish-green from the mountainy upland,—  
At first a swift rippling between rocks,  
Then a long running over flat stones  
Before descending to the alluvial plain,  
To the clay banks, and the wild grapes hanging from the elmtrees,  
The slightly trembling water  
Dropping a fine yellow silt where the sun stays;  
And the crabs bask near the edge,  
The weedy edge, alive with small snakes and bloodsuckers,—

I have come to a still, but not a deep center,  
A point outside the glittering current;  
My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,  
At the irregular stones, iridescent sandgrains,  
My mind moves in more than one place,  
In a country half-land, half-water.

I am renewed by death, thought of my death,  
The dry scent of a dying garden in September,  
The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.  
What I love is near at hand,  
Always, in earth and air.

IV

The lost self changes,  
Turning toward the sea,  
A sea-shape turning around,—

An old man with his feet before the fire,  
In robes of green, in garments of adieu.

A man faced with his own immensity  
Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.  
The murmur of the absolute, the why  
Of being born fails on his naked ears.  
His spirit moves like monumental wind  
That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.  
He is the end of things, the final man.

All finite things reveal infinitude:  
The mountain with its singular bright shade  
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,  
The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;  
Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,  
A scent beloved of bees;  
Silence of water above a sunken tree:  
The pure serene of memory in one man,—  
A ripple widening from a single stone  
Winding around the waters of the world.

## THE ROSE

### I

There are those to whom place is unimportant,  
But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,  
Is important—  
Where the hawks sway out into the wind,  
Without a single wingbeat,  
And the eagles sail low over the fir trees,  
And the gulls cry against the crows  
In the curved harbors,  
And the tide rises up against the grass  
Nibbled by sheep and rabbits.

A time for watching the tide,  
For the heron's hieratic fishing,  
For the sleepy cries of the towhee,  
The morning birds gone, the twittering finches,  
But still the flash of the kingfisher, the wingbeat of the scoter,  
The sun a ball of fire coming down over the water,  
The last geese crossing against the reflected afterlight,  
The moon retreating into a vague cloud-shape  
To the cries of the owl, the eerie whooper.  
The old log subsides with the lessening waves,  
And there is silence.

I sway outside myself  
Into the darkening currents,  
Into the small spillage of driftwood,  
The waters swirling past the tiny headlands.  
Was it here I wore a crown of birds for a moment  
While on a far point of the rocks  
The light heightened,



#### IV

I live with the rocks, their weeds,  
Their filmy fringes of green, their harsh  
Edges, their holes  
Cut by the sea-slime, far from the crash  
Of the long swell,  
The oily, tar-laden walls  
Of the toppling waves,  
Where the salmon ease their way into the kelp beds,  
And the sea rearranges itself among the small islands.

Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas,  
Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true ease of myself,  
As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,  
And I stood outside myself,  
Beyond becoming and perishing,  
A something wholly other,  
As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,  
And yet was still.  
And I rejoiced in being what I was:  
In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm,  
In the bird beyond the bough, the single one  
With all the air to greet him as he flies,  
The dolphin rising from the darkening waves;

And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,  
Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,  
Gathering to itself sound and silence—  
Mine and the sea-wind's.

## Love Poems

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