

HABITATION:
COLLECTED POEMS

SAM HAMILL

A Letter to Han Shan-tzu

*I think of you often these days,
old master, when some people say
my poems aren't poems at all,
but merely occasions
of political provocation,*

*and of course they may be right.
Like you, late at night,
I scratch my songs on a wall
by firelight, and drink, and bow,
only to begin again, somehow.*

Letter To Logan From La Push

These heaped-up, half-paved streets
are no man's heaven, least of all
a drunk's. Stoked on wine and brimming with regret,
the landlocked sailors swill their brew
below their rotting decks.
They dream tuna, money, and wild-haired girls
and fish from wreck to wreck.

You saw "holy fog" along this narrow beach
where, despite a sunless sky,
the cedar timbers bleach.
You're more optimist, John, than I.

A drunk staggers sideways in the swell,
spitting blood, muscatel, and crabbing,
cursing his sunken hull. His arctic breath
falls icy on my cheek, and in those native eyes
an ancient pain like fog
curls long and wide and dull.

Letter To Ransom in Utah

with snapshots from Black Rock Beach

Was here, sweating on that filthy beach
with a girl whose name and face escape me,
I first saw that dead lake, ironic,
Antelope Island bare in the saltwater wave.
Here, a crusty old Black Rock with rusty iron pipe
to grip as you climb it.
The view from there was never very much.
Even late at night the sand was always warm
and cracked like frozen snow beneath our feet.
Down that road, the City of Salt, like Sodom,
stood stripped in neon and defeat.
Searchlights illuminate Moroni's golden horn.

And here, as if to scorn, they pour magma
molten down the hill. Its incandescent glow
throws fire on the water and fear
like a giant lizard dozes in the chill.
Down this road a neighbor boy hatcheted
two girls who refused to change his tire.
We shot-gunned rabbits from the back
of his hot-wired pickup truck. Turds
and tourists bathed in Jordan River.
Was it here the saintly gulls
spewed locusts and returned? Listen,
the ore-car's on the track again.
That hole called Bingham
was once a mountain, friend.

Letter to Ransom in Raymond

Jesus, Bill, what keeps them here,
these obdurate shacks and worn-out barns
bleeding through their stains?
This evening, coming home,
there were cows on the road again.
Where fields are tilled lies a stain
colored tobacco-riddled lung
in which lie pools like spat-out phlegm.
Where there is grass, even grass
is gray. At the threshold of despair
they sleep, dreaming immaculate defeat.

I sit at my table and smoke.
How are things in Raymond? Tell me
a joke. There are more birds returning
every day, so it must be spring.
Soon, the bright light low
burning the fields quartz, thin shoots
blushing green from pale. Must be
hard work getting old. Sometimes I think
we've sold ourselves in hell.

A dog yowls from the mill. Not a star.
The sky's a ceiling even a midget
could stuff a fist through.
Whatever it's like where you are,
the homestead's just the same,
sea and sky beleaguered gray,
no blue. But we stay in the tatters
of our labor, bearing our shards of hope.
Seems there's always a friend coming home
from somewhere down the road.

Letter to Robert Hedin

My grampa was short and thick and German.
His pock-scarred bulbous nose
usually filled with RoiTan smoke.
What fingers he had were mostly stub
and souvenirs of mines. I remember
how rarely he spoke, how strong
he was, broad shoulders and a monk's
straight-as-an-arrow back. He inhabited
an old man's hotel with a lobby
solemn as a mortuary. I rarely went there
and never to his room. I remember him
among the flags and snap-dragons in Ma's old garden.

I write you this not because
you'd have liked him (you would), but
because we are poets—it is for us
to remember and define. You
who are lean and tall
are like him: quiet, observant,
and intense. All the works and days
of hands with ten full fingers
are at your command. We who have
everything have less: we cuss the silence
and the silence blesses us.

What odd hotels will hold us
when we are old and bones?
In what second-rate retreat
will we learn to lick our wounds
when the roses of desire wither in our skins
and that old friend, agility,
is evicted from our feet. Can we,
you and I, endure those small, untimely
every-day defeats that old age visits
with earnest, absolute regularity?

Writing this to you,
I'm feeling old already, old enough
for foreign towns and hand-me-down hotels,
thankful for a home-cooked meal,
a letter now and then. True

to the craft to the end, nothing
counterfeit or cruel, thankful
to be living and for a few
wily and durable friends.

Letter to O'Daly

We thought the day would never end.
As we stood at the dusty summit
overlooking the tide, the green sea
far beneath our feet, we thought
the dark would never come, that scrub pine
and sunshine was all there was to see.

One afternoon on the boulder
with the highway curving off below
was an eternity back then.
Diesel smoke and weed
was a maniac perfume. San Marcos Pass.
I disremember years. Slow,
winding the old truck up
where foxtail browned beside the road,
a hundred years ago.

And Denver. Where'd it go?
You'd think we'd tire, or that
we'd've found what we were looking for.
Christ, I talk like I'm getting old.
Daylight and darkness keep moving,
moving on. If we burn with the fire
that consumes, it's a pleasure.
Cheers. What-the-hell.

Dead Letter (I)

Past midnight, rain
driven hard through trees
outside my cabin, I rise
from bed having slept
the sleep without rest,
the strange word still clumsy
on my tongue—*Father*,
I cried from nightmare,
Father, knowing no one
was there, knowing
no one would ever be there,
my own hair graying, and I
alone in another country.

Outside in the wind
black fists of rain
pummel the night until
the stars go out
one after another,
and I light the kerosene lamp
and huddle against the dark.
Father, I say out loud,
awake. And the wood
my own hands fit and nailed
whispers it back again.

Twenty years since I left
your house, and thirty
since your large hands held me up
and slipped me into the saddle.
Your hands were dry and red
as Escalante clay,
and the sweat of a hundred years
ran crazy down
the chiseled ravines
of your face. You told me then
you had more gold in your teeth
than in your bank account,
and you laughed
your great bearish laugh
to prove that simple truth.

How many years
since I stooped
in the icy mud of winter
above your unmarked grave,
not knowing how to weep,
unable to move, to speak,
to sigh. A mile north
where you farmed your life away,
the claws of the angry city
curled into soil,
and the soot of all the living
fell from a poison sky.

Tonight, in the light
of kerosene, it all comes back—
after dinner, after evening chores
when the stoker brims with coal
and with the blood of stewing hens
rinsed from your callused hands,
you lean back slow,
eyes closed, and sing
the song of Longfellow's Smithy or
the Ballad of Sam McGee,
your voice as long and dark
as Timpanogos Cave.

But the stove that warms
these walls burns wood,
and the blood on my hands
is my own, and cannot
be washed away. I want you
to dry the sweat
of long bad dreams, to show me
how to say the things
I could not say
when I watched your beard
grow white and long
from a thousand miles away.

I blow out the lamp
and listen hard:
only the black rain falling forever,

only winds aching in the trees,
only the shadows anointing me
with shadows from the past.
Nothing lasts. And only hope
is free. Far off,
from the haunted cathedral
of the narrow human chest, I hear
that old familiar drum
beat out its elegy.

Dead Letter (II)

To love the dead is easy.

—William Matthews

Father, it is May again,
and I enter the thirty-seventh year
of my search. I have walked again
the long path through the woods
when ocean spray and ferns,
blackberry shoots and
the blossoming apple
wear the jewels of fine mist
into the afternoon. The juncos
this morning burst into song
shortly after four. I lay in bed
and listened. I remembered
the heavy silence of the Salt Flats
as we crossed them in the heat
of 1948, the sulfurous white teeth
of Kalí grinning all the way
to Reno. If there are gods
of the desert lands, they are women
and angry and just. I have seen
in the heart of the Escalante
just enough life for hope:
hope for respite, for a better
life to come, or hope
to end a life of pain.

I watch the starlings chase
ravens down endless ravines
of sky. Far below them,
the logged-off stubble and slash
of minds gone wild and narrow,
and I remember my grandfather,
Otto Empey, and I think
of what he never said, and of
the Taylors down in Moab, Lester's
great hands on the pommel
of his saddle astride
his buckskin mare. It is good work
that leaves us in the weather,

in the rains that fall
on all of us, living and dead
alike, in the blank snows
of memory that cool our dreams
and fill our lives with stillness.

And I can hear, coming
over hills of woods, the soft breath
of the sea. Here, in the country
of Chemekum and Makah,
where rich robes warmed them
in winter, robes of cedar bark
and otter, where they brought down
their animals with stones
for maybe fifteen thousand years—
I am home. In the gray light
of early afternoon,
I can smell thistle and salmon
and the smoke of an alder fire
drifting over the dreamscape
of women and men and babies—
all who went before. I can hear
their chanting from far off,
from across the edge of the sea,
and see, perhaps, their longboats
slide across a bay. It is easy
to love the dead for what
they did or what they didn't say.

When I gaze out far enough,
I can see where the sea meets
the sky—the dark approaches
that promise to return.
And as I turn toward my life
once more, it is the daily
I adore: the little pleasure,
the food and drink of necessity.
Down on Water Street, among
the fruit flies and oranges
and lemons, apples, and tangerines,
I'll pick among the artichokes
for one ripe and green, just right,
and boil it in water, and eat

the fleshy pulp of its leaves
scraped from around the thorns,
eat down into the soft green heart,
and remember you then who taught
me how, and then slightly bow
with neither praise nor blame,
and from my knees in the dusk
I'll pray once more for nothing,
for the dead,
and for the gifts they bring.

To Kenneth Rexroth

Solstice. Once again
the foreshortened days
and cold clear nights
of winter.

 Last night
in freezing moonlight
I paused at the woodpile
where it lay under frost,
I paused to look up
at the Dipper.

 It hung
so close I could almost
taste its froth, and
suddenly, for no reason
I can name, suddenly
I remembered what you said
to Williams

 years and years ago
about a poet being one
who creates sacramental
relationships that last
always.

 The bare alders
glistened in the dark
and the whole world creaked
beneath my step. My own breath
wafted before me, and I
thought of how certainly
the diurnal becomes
the annual,

 of how
the wood shatters
into flame as I stoke
the December fire.

Far to the south,
the moon pruned the tips
of Olympic cedars, then
slipped into snowy hills.
In this land you roamed
so many years ago,

on this coast
where you loved your grief
away huddled near a fire
on the cold beach at Kalaloch
under the floating shadows
of wooden sculptures carved
by the broad hands
of the sea,

we are at peace
in the world where
the dirty hands of Industry
find us too poor
to exploit.

Again and again
in this season's bitter
cold, I savor the sacrament
of your poems—always
the warm shadows of campfires
linger on,

odors of shepherder
coffee, or moonlight
sifting through the trees. The music
of silence drifts up
from the vast, soundless
sea.

And in the flux and flow
of soundless change
unchanging, Adi-buddha
dances,

and I am happily lost
in the dance of the Gopis
where poetry is revealed.

LOYALTY: a letter

Concerning daily manual labor: Idleness is the enemy of the soul; hence brethren ought at certain seasons to occupy themselves with manual labor, and again at certain hours in holy reading.

—Cassiodorus

It is autumn equinox again and the rain,
the rain is falling, as it did yesterday,
as it will tomorrow. I take up the pen
you found and wiped the mud from, and words
drip from my fingers
glistening on the page, this palimpsest
of my heart where I write out
the loyalties of a lifetime complete
with erasures and re-visions, misspelled
devotions across the sinuous
syntax of the years.

Pavese says

that if all men accepted work
there wouldn't be injustice in the world.
You who have gone down the road
in falling rain to dig a hole by hand
on your little plot of land—you know
and understand the simplicity of virtue,
the dignity of digging a shit-house hole
through how-many-feet of hardpan clay
and stone in steady September rain. These ancient
convictions we hold in kind.

We are men

who love labor and women with whom
we can be friends. Our loyalties are few,
but thoroughly defined. I want to be
an old, beat-up guitar that sings
the blues—a siguriya—a canticle
for the damned. I want to be a comrade
to the soil. And when the days darken,
I will remember this pen you found,
remember the slate skies and the loyalty
of this land where words come as easily
as the rain,

where daily sweat and ordinary
tenderness accrue each day and are

the measure of the man. May we forget
the times we failed—but never
the reasons why. We revise our lives
to meet whatever consequence circumstance
demands. Low overhead, Ezra Pound reminds,
leaves room for a fuller life. Hip deep
in labor, give thanks to aching
arms and legs,

coarse tongues to sing
of where you're from, where you're going,
to the stiff back that bends from time to time
in the basic gesture of religion: faith
in the common good. I want to be there
with you, to shape the lay of the land
into something fit for human habitation
where your neighbors can be coons, cranky
old coyotes, or common deer. These
are our teachers, the makers of devotion.

*

Although I come from the sudden
white-hot days of the desert, the sea
sings clearly in my ears, it is the sea
that rises through my blood: its tides
flood my eyes to shape and reshape
a continent of dreams. Exiled,
I no longer remember the yellow faces
of summer, rough-hewn hands smelling
of the stable. I stand alone awash with
nightfall, listening to the sea.

The wind-
stricken eaves groan against
the dark, and the sea is a grave
for friends who didn't make it, who died
of avarice, of greed. We owe them nothing
but the breathing of alders when no one
listens, when no one gambles it all
on the card of a single ambition. Like
a stone skipped into the waves. The wings
of night life us up for our countrymen
to wound us, and

our little temporal

plot of ground we've heaped against the sea
can't hold us very much longer. Even soil
bleeds on the quick blades of lies. But
once when I touched someone—
a man, a woman, but someone I touched
with the thought of you—there came a
sudden touch in return that made me bend
to the earth again to lift a handful
to my lips:

it forgave us
everything. And so we must forgive
ourselves and our friends and the cock
that crows an hour before dawn, dis-
rupting our fragile dreams. This land
we bruise with malignant ambition
can never be our land. But we
belong to it. The sea may call us
into dream, the starlings set our fancy
into flight, the rains rinse us clean of
all our wounds and knives—

we remain
huddled against the earth while clouds
like waves wash up against the sky.
My friend, I offer this hand, knotted
in its pain, to hold your pick and shovel, to
dig a welcome burrow for your human
and therefore holy excrement. Though a man
is no better than a mole, he is nothing
without loyalty, without faith in labors,
without neighborly devotion.

Lives of a Poet:

A Letter to Gary Snyder

Nearly forty years
have passed since Kenneth Rexroth
introduced me to
the mountains and rivers of
your poems, the campfire light

flickering softly
across a page of Milton,
animal shadows
and wide, wise innocent eyes
observing from the darkness.

I was just a kid
with a heroin habit
and a talent for
self-destruction. Your poems
returned me to sanity—

as much as could be
at the time. Now poor Kenneth
has been fifteen years
in his grave, whose epitaph
I set and printed in his

The Silver Swan some
twenty years ago, not long
before your *Gaia*.
“Above Pate Valley,” yellowed
with age and writ in a hand

imitating yours,
still remains in my office,
along with snapshots
of Kenneth in the Cascades
circa nineteen twenty-eight.

I no longer go
deep into the mountains, but
remember printing
your “Axe Handles” every time

I buck wood. Which is to say

nine bows to a friend
and teacher who encouraged
a lifetime's study.

The mountains are in my heart,
and all the rivers that flow

flow from headwaters
“going back roughly forty
thousand years, dating
from the early cave paintings,”
you remarked in Alaska

twenty years ago;
and, “About five thousand years
is all one human
mind can comfortably hold.”
You've managed to redefine

civilization.

You have given us Stone Age
economics and
the idea of *practice*—
Buddhist and/or poetic—

you have given me
a model for my practice,
not something merely
to imitate, but a wise
counsel culled from the ages.

Now I'm no longer
young, though plentifully foolish—
my Japanese friends
have dubbed me *Obaka-san*—
and you're almost old enough

to be the tribal
elder you have always been.
“Mountains and rivers
without end.” From an old scroll,
a single kernel of thought

blossoms forty years
from its inception, like that
hundred-and-twenty-
year cycle of some bamboo.
The poem becomes the life

in some respects, it
deepens our engagement with
all that is human,
with all this temporal world,
plagued by all-too-human greed.

Who will join Shiva
and Tara, Kokopeli
and Dōgen Zenji in
“the dance of the intellect
among the ten thousand things?”

What I want to say,
what I have struggled to say
in this poem, is
that you have been a master
and model, a friend and sage

for those who follow.
And if I may paraphrase:
That’s what a poet
is—one who recognizes
sacramental relationships.

That is the real work—
reading books or bucking wood
or washing babies—
attentive lives all our days:
the real joy is gratitude.

Lives of a Poet:

Two Letters to Denise Levertov

1.

“I wanted to learn you by heart,”

I wanted the music of
 “your intense unmusical voice”
to carry the weight of the poem
 that carries us
toward the warm
 wet light of the hopeful:
poems
to remind us forever
 of Allende,
the way
 and reason he died;
 or the pathetic beauty
and sadness of
 “those groans men make”
when a lovely woman passes—

as though they could sniff out
 the grace of her compassion.

*

And so I sit
 beside the wood stove, reading:
how easily I am pleased
 and how rarely!—the outer
warmth of the fire, the inner
 heat of the line.
Hungry
 for food as for justice,
I take the round vowels
 deep into my mouth,
my tongue
 and lips careful to arouse
each consonant between:
 that taste
 of the luminous dust.

*

And you give me and give me that
which I didn't know I had—

the bread of the knowledge
of "suffering humanity"
we share as we carry,
eating as we go. If
I may retrieve
from these graces
some aspiration
to inner joy and goodness,
shall I praise you
more highly than the Goddess?

*

My strong and willing elder sister,
it's you and I must stand
against the murderous technicians:
traffickers in arms
and lives
and wisdom; marketeers;
all forms of theorists; careerists;
and loathsome politicians.

In such moments of in-
tense confrontation,
an absolute sureness
comes over me
when the poem
rides

the *anemos*
(breath or wind
of in-
spiration)

on which we glide and sing.

2.
Thinking, reading late

your “Modulations for Solo Voice”
at the dead end of night,
remembering Robert Duncan’s great poem,
“My Mother Would Be a Falconress,”
hunting back over
that same fertile ground—
“groundwork” as in
Duncan’s own grand testimonial—

seeking the various threads
of a fabric the way a painter might study
the fragile elegance of
Asian handmade paper,
eye alert to subtle
inconstancies, studying the material
to become the material:
the lonely soul the only empty canvas
the human heart must fill.

It is like loving an Anton Chekhov,
an Akhmatova, a Su Tung-p’o—
the love is there and real,
a tangible in this brief
intangible world. Thus the voice,
enthralled, has
no choice but to speak.
Lu Chi dips his brush because he must.
May a poet write *amor*?
Was there ever
a mother who did not hum?
Art is not
for. Art is mother of the soul,
but no romantic vision
can dissuade the heart’s own
existential leanings.
The heart rises like a bird of prey
and then returns,
humbled, to its hood.

Rice paper. Mulberry paper.
A voice like gouache.
Moonset. It is all
one thing.

I have stayed up so late,
 I may as well stay up.
The voice, like the heart,
 modulates.
It grows light.

Corinthian Suns:

A Letter to Olga Broumas

Above me, the sun.
And the sea's sound floods my veins
when winds lift their wings
high over tall evergreens
along the Pacific Rim.

Midwinter, I long
for the Corinthian sun,
to hear the Greek tongue,
the Mediterranean
light transparent blue and white.

But the clouds that come
inevitably sweep down
from the frozen north,
blanketing the sun in shades
of ominous gray and blue,

the day darkened by
midafternoon. So I stoke
the wood stove, Olga,
and curl up on my futon
with Elytis, Seferis,

Sikelianos,
Yanni Ritsos, Cavafy,
their voices merging
into a new Greek chorus
drinking Corinthian suns.

Where would I be now
without those Greeks in English,
without your labors
and passions, and Keeley's too,
and the late Philip Sherrard's.

I journeyed to Greece
more to visit the moderns
than the ancient ones
I came to translate later.

How can I come to thank you

enough for bringing
the brilliance of that Greek sun
into my winter?

Can you ever understand
what I felt so long ago

walking down Syngrou
Avenue with Seferis
ringing in my ears?
Even now, after fifteen
years, it brings me a shiver.

Like ancient Taoist
sages, these poets bring me
stoical solace,
light in the heart of darkness,
a Way in which to follow.

And you who have been
equally ever-present
cannot know—because
you are Greek you cannot know—
how this orphan's heart was shaped

not by the Greek tongue,
but by something still deeper,
the soul's own whisper,
perhaps, or simply the light,
the eternally Greek light

shining from within.
Heavy winds and rains batter
the house. But I'm gone.
I'm strolling down Pandrosou,
drinking Corinthian suns.

The Lotus Sutra Revisited:

Two Letters to Keida Yusuke

1.

The great dharma wheel
turns inevitably on—
cherry blossoms fall,
covering Honjoji's pond,
dancing in the air like snow.

It has been just so
for a thousand years or more.
Now I come alone
in the pre-dawn glow to bow
in memory of one who's gone

down that ancient road
each of us travels alone.
Young monks are chanting
the *Hokkekyo* in voices
beyond the measure of time.

Whatever I know
or think or feel is no use
to Yoichi now.
Long-life sutra or short-life
sutra—all the same somehow.

Out behind the hall,
Kannon stands alone among
cemetery stones,
in her hand a lotus bud
and upon her lips that smile.

She knows it is we
who most need compassion now.
Kannon Bosatsu,
tucked behind these Shingon grounds,
give me sweet solace and more:

at dawn in Sanjo,
blossoms bloom and fall;
I bow as I pass,

a pilgrim alone, going
I-don't-know-where-at-all.

2.

All evening long
I drink sake with Yusuke—
“Ten Thousand Mirrors
of Happiness,” cold and sweet,
made by his new family—

talking poetry
late into the night. We miss
our brother's laughter,
his deep, authentic delight
in simply being alive.

This is our sutra,
our homage: *Man'yō* poets
sang the same praises
for all those who passed before.
It has been so a thousand

years and more. We raise
a cup to toast *tsubaki*
flowers as they fall. The moon
that rises is the same moon

Hitomaro praised
shining over Yoshino,
the same pale half-moon
that shone on Bashō's journey
through the wilds of Tohoku.

It is good to grieve.
But now our grieving is done.
The Lotus Sutra
brings it all back home: this world
is a world of suffering

and transcendence. Be
still. Breathe deeply. Pilgrimage
has no beginning

and no end. Only this song,
only this gratitude endures.

Lives of a Poet:

Four Letters to Hayden Carruth

1.

A friend has sent me
a copy of your *Dark World*,
a mysterious
slender little Kayak book
from the indefatigable

George Hitchcock down in
Santa Cruz and printed by
Panjandrum Press in
that pale, inimitable,
almost ugly Hitchcock style.

That was twenty-two
years ago. You don't even
list *Dark World* on your
curriculum vitae now.
Even then you were not young.

I guess you never
could be, so full of advice
culled from the classics,
so full of good sound common
and uncommon sense, furies

inspired by a love
that simply would not be dammed.
Bless you, dear Hayden.
I'm glad you followed your own
advice: "Reticence be damned."

2.

Pilate asks, "What is
love?" For which I substitute
friendship, which is love
unburdened by erotic
passion, but informed by love's

kindliness, if not
by the inevitable

necessities of
dialectic argument.
And so I begin again—

“My dear friend,” I say,
meaning I have stood breathless
before the severe
beauty and anguish and love
and delight in your poems,

stood breathlessly still
as I listened to the turn
of a line or phrase
or flinched in recognition
of a painful truth revealed.

I do not know why
we must do it, why the line
begins somewhere in-
side the mind, its insistent
music delivering us

into another
world where the poem unfolds
from within, telling
us what’s really on our minds.
I swear it is so. I’ve sworn

allegiance before—
not to some bloody old flag
snapping in the wind,
and certainly not to that
junkyard dog, the Patriot—

but to what can be
found in poetry: friendship
and small dignities,
evidence of a long life
lived with an ear to the wind

and a heart exposed.
I swear it’s always been so.
A heart or poem

cannot be closed completely.
The heart of Heraclitus

or Euripides,
like the rhythms of Sappho,
resounds in your lines
as surely as the weather
of an age. And so I go

there in search of the
old familiar, the trusted
thing, the poem as
continuing thread binding
friend to friend across centuries.

Friendship is solace,
the root of a good marriage.
I extend my hand,
unwashed, still bloody with all
the excesses of our age.

I stand before your
poems as before a great
hearth in deep winter,
comforted by your labors.
I find sanctuary here.

We have our Pilates'
clean hands in public office.
We have messiahs
aplenty. I'm sick to death
of all those who want glory.

This is *poetry*.
It may change a life or burn
white hot with passion;
it may bring a smile
or be a coat for Jacob
wandering the wilderness,

but you and I know
that lust for fame is folly.
You ought to have a

Nobel Prize, a Pulitzer,
all the honors in the world.

But that is not why
you write. For which act my heart
goes out to you who
helped me learn to open it.
For which act you are my friend

forever, doing
the real work of poetry.
Fuck money. Fuck fame.
There are three worlds. In this one,
gratitude flows like honey.

The suffering world
brings about its own demise.
This world is neither
fair nor wise, but paradise
reveals itself in every line.

What, finally, *is* love?
Willingness to face the end
without blinking? The
gift made—and given freely.
I bow to the poem, my friend.

3.
Wily Su Tung-p'o
observed of Wang Wei's landscapes,
"All of his paintings
contain poems; all of his
poems contain the essence

of paintings." Thus said,
he pointed toward balance
to find harmony.
In one inch of snow, tulip
bulbs at Kage-an frozen,

the woodpile a block
of ice to be chipped with my
splitting maul, little

raccoon tracks around the back
door and down the frozen steps

and off into woods
that creak with the shift of winds,
I attend my chores,
muttering against the cold
furies of northern winter.

You who love the snow
can have it. And you can have
the chainsaw poems
and marvelous descriptions
of Nor'east country townsfolk

in all their glory.
Just send me the warmth of rain.
“Sin is not so much
knowing (if it were, every-
body would be innocent)

as wanting to know.”
Thus you quote Camus on sin.
I suppose my sin
has been relentless wanting
to know, whereas what I want

most to know right now
is comfort in married life,
the garden in spring,
the work at hand. This bloody,
bitter weather gets me down.

In my sins are all
my virtues, in my virtues
all my sins, for which
I can make no excuses:
I balance above the abyss.

This landscape is etched
in my blood—wouldn't have it
any other way.
This snow won't last, and neither,

happily, will you or I.

So I turn to your
cold weather poems, your thoughts
on sin and virtue
or on temporality.
Not for comfort exactly,

but because the truth
of the matter is, like that
other Williams—Hank—
I get so doggone lonesome—
and there you are, with woodsmoke,

almost three-quarters
of a century, and yet
the poems go on,
footsteps leading through the snow
until they become the snow.

You, like Su Tung-p'o,
are a master, a wily
old fox in the storm,
footsteps leading through the snow
until they become the snow.

4.

Reading your *Scrambled
Eggs & Whiskey*, I took note:
“The great poems of
our elders in many tongues
we struggled to comprehend

who now are content
with mystery simple and
profound . . .” and isn't
that the greatest mystery
of all? That we can at last

find within ourselves
a mundane ecstasy, or
simple contentments
known only in poverty

and at the price of patience—

which isn't my strong
suit, or so I always thought
until I awoke one day
and—sure enough—white whiskers
on a wizened, tired face.

Only then did I
begin to realize what I'd believed
all along: that joy
is not the orgasmic cry
in the night, nor lovely sighs

following after—
which are a mystery them-
selves, albeit thin
and fragile as a moth's wing
in flickering candlelight—

I wrote of Tu Fu
years ago, "His joys were neither
large nor many, but
they were precise." A moment
of prescience perhaps? Or
just the inevitable

result of struggling
to comprehend the tongue of
such a great master?
Probably both. In such great
and noble struggle I come

face-to-face with my
own small, quiet ecstasies
over a poem
that says for me what I could
not otherwise find true words

to say. Carruth or
Tu Fu, Sappho, Seferis—
it doesn't matter:
the poem somehow reveals

its particularities

and I am brought down
to my knees in gratitude
for the gift received.
If I am content at all,
it is because I struggled

all those many years,
because I was so foolish
then as to believe
that poetry was enough
to teach me to live, to love.

On the Third Anniversary of the Ongoing War in Iraq *a letter to Hayden Carruth*

It's been nearly forty years
since you wrote that poem
about writing poems against
all those wars, Harlan County
to Italy and Spain. When your
Selected Poems arrived today,
it was one of the poems that
gave me pause reading it again.

We've been at war ever since.
I too, born in World War,
have lived and written against
that particular stupidity
and pointless, hopeless pain
all my agonizing days.
Has even a single life thereby
been saved? Who can say?
Except that doing so saved mine.

Oh, I could tell you about
saved lives. There was that
beautiful young woman in Sitka
whose husband, jealous
of her poetry, tied
her feet together with a rope
and threw her from his boat.
You have about 12 minutes of life
in those southeast Alaskan waters.

Or the grandmother in Utah
who wrote rhymed, romantic sonnets
and called me late one night
in my motel because her jaw
was broken, and her nose, and because
he was still drinking. Or
I could tell you about Alex,
doing life for murder over drugs,
and how his eyes lit up
when he discovered the classics.

Yes, poetry saves lives.
All wars begin at home
within the warring self.

No, our poems cannot stop
a war, not this nor any war,
but the one that rages
within. Which is the first
and only step. It is
a sacred trust, a duty,
the poet's avocation.
We write the poetry we must.

Poem on His Sixty-third Birthday

It is heartbreaking to see
the cherry trees so laden with blossoms,
huge rhododendrons burdened
with swollen pink and red buds,
and lilies climbing hopefully toward the sky.

I did not choose to be born
in springtime, the briefest season.
But I may choose the day I die
if reason dictates such a choice be made.
Any day like this one would suffice.

See the bend in the cherry bough,
how pristinely white each blossom
hangs, holding tight, before the final fall.
The white stars of the new magnolia
have disappeared. The sun is burning

away the last faint trace of cloud.
I am certainly no Caesar, but have met
my Brutus and my Cassius in my day—
a knife in the groin, a knife in the face—
and delivered my poor man's empire

into the hands of fools and thieves
that only time will wash away. And I
have seen with weary eyes the resurrection
of the light, snows that always melt
into a dingy brown before the spring

returns to freshen a life again. Another
life. Again. Like Icarus, the lily
longs to meet the sky. And Icarus
himself must have blossomed in that moment
when his wings turned to honey.

We have flown and flowered, my love and I,
and have fallen too. But we are not,
as Borges thought, that river
of Heraclitus, time. Time is what
we so vainly try to cross, only to find

it and ourselves all changed, changed
utterly, although we are the same.

I step back into this one life, mere flesh and bone,
with eyes refreshed by a perishing world,
grateful only for this one moment, time

measured not by the flower but by stone.

Homeland Security

after Borges

No one is the homeland. The myths of history cannot clothe the Emperor's nakedness, no speech empower a vote not counted, nor honor the living who are impoverished by our anthems for the dead. No one is the homeland. Not the heroes of our old genocides, the Indian Wars, nor those who sailed west with cargoes of human flesh in chains, nor those in chains who came against their will to work and breed and die in the service of their masters, masters whose sons would be masters of us all today.

There are no heroes except the ones who rise to greet the dawn with empty hands and heavy hearts in a brutal time. No oath or pledge reveals what's in the heart or mind. No one is the homeland. Or everyone. For who lives without a country of the heart? And yet we cry, "We!" We cry, "Them!" I pledge allegiance to the kind. Among the exiled, I make my stand. No true democracy can be won at the point of a loaded gun, nor honor found in anthems or cheap paradigms based on the social lie. No one is the homeland.

It can't be found in the grandiloquence of pompous village idiots who run for office because they want the power. Nor in the brilliance of the medals on a uniform worn by a man whose thinking is uniform and obedient as he swears his pledge of allegiance. The homeland is a state of grace, of peace, a whole new world that patiently awaits. The homeland is a state of mind, a light flooding the garden, a transcendent moment of compassionate awareness, one extraordinary line in some old poem that reveals or exemplifies a possibility... *in time... in time...*

Cairo Qasidah

A slow gray-yellow dawn
beyond the slow brown Nile,
a heavy haze over Cairo

as I stood in my window
remembering how we paused
on a bridge, Amal and I,
in fading evening light
last night
to watch a lean fisherman
and his beautiful wife
cast their net along
the stony shallows just
as they have done
for five thousand years,
their small son happy
astern, fingers trailing
in the water while Momma
pulled the long slow oars
and Pappa drew up
emptiness again.

“Just wait!” they called to us.
And began again.

I rose in the hour before first light
having dreamt of them all
in troubled sleep all night—
a world caught
between antiquity
and modern life.
What kindness shone
in Amal’s brown eyes
when she spoke of
her son, of her husband.
A little archeology
of the heart may be
sublime—or raise
a veil of tears.

Her smart young son is teased
when she declines
to wear the hijab. The rules
set against the erotic

create the erotic—the rules
of war are found
in a woman's hair.

The five o'clock call to prayer.
An infidel in every tongue,
I closed my window, turning
back to solitude again,
to sit alone and breathe.

Soon enough the streets
will snarl to life and the world
go about its brutal business.
What business have I
whose commerce is the gift
of words, mere poetry?
War and peace, love
and exile— a mother's love
or a poet's dreaming—

what words do we dare stand by?
For what good word
does the good soldier die?
What can any weary
traveler do but live
in wonderment and gratitude
amidst such poverty and splendor—

And I walked out into the dust
that veils the city,
enlivens the sunrise,
and will, soon enough, veil us.

To William Slater

I lie sweating happily
under the late October sun
beside the jacuzzi on the rooftop patio
of a rented flat in Palermo,
listening to the lovely Buenos Aires birds
that sing *Wa-weee, Wa-weee*,
from high in the branches
of stately old chestnut trees
providing shade for Oro Street
when November begins the months
of grueling summer heat.

Yesterday was *Día de Madre*,
and my wife, whom we both love,
each in his own way,
turned sixty. We strolled the afternoon
in the Japanese Garden
feeding over-fed koi
that rose from the deep,
then dinner with dear friends:
fruta del mar, good wine
and late talk in the cool evening breeze
of a favorite sidewalk café.
So exactly why was I so
utterly surprised
to find that I am still alive?

Wa-weee, Wa-weee, reminding me
of the Hanamaki “Buddha-bird”
in the mountains in north Japan
all those years ago, singing softly,
Bu-po-so, Bu-po-so.
Well, let them sing—those odd birds
and these— let all the birds
of all this suffering world
sing, and sing, and sing.
And find whatever song redeems.
They do not sing for you or me.

Today I read: six hundred thousand dead
in a dirty little President’s
dirty little war
on the innocents of Iraq.
The sands shift, and we learn—

too often too late—that the heart
is the only gift we can make.

May this summer sun burn off
the sweat and tears I shed
when another, even smaller,
dirty little man
took what I'd made of years
with heart, tears and callused hands.
I lay aside my book and wipe my brow.

We've grown too old for lamentations now.
I listen to the birds and rise
on wings of gratitude. I no longer read
the daily body count. The latitudes
of man's indecencies toward men
have long since fallen off the map.
The blues and oranges of your art
provide a welcome breath of air,
colors of the Buenos Aires countryside,
a freshening breeze.
Wa-weee, old friend, *Wa-weee*...

I have run out of elegies—
elegies for lost friends; elegies for
the unnamed, unnameable dead of war;
elegies for the animals, for whole
civilizations and so much more—
for the days, the centuries
that pass without regret.
What the heart plants, the heart begets.
Cruelty is good business, so it seems.

And yet a man alone can rise
to find transcendent joy,
as your art amply demonstrates.
What you have made and freely given,
Bill, cannot be destroyed
by little men who speak of love
and practice hate.
I could write a ream
on how you've shown me not to weep.

I rise and fold these old, arthritic legs
and gently close my eyes
and breathe.

And wait
for what each breath alone redeems.

To My Muse

I admit it. I've grown
less fond of poetry
as I've grown old.
What once seemed bold
is commonplace, a howl,
a whisper, a groan.

I'm no longer dazzled
by philologists
arguing the subtleties
of antiquities. I'm baffled
by poets who succeed.

What's more, I never
really trusted
the trusty metaphor,
the smiling simile
grinning back at me
from the work-shopped page
of tomorrow's star.

I like my language
to be clear
as any summer day,
no effects to get in the way
when you, My Dear,
come calling.
Meanwhile,

I am here, waiting
in the twilit regions
of the lizard brain, listening
like a bride for that
first breathy whisper,
uncertain of whether you
are an angel or a demon.

What's Mine

I've a fat-happy Buddha belly
not to be confused
with Buddha mind,

which is arrow-slim and quick
as the knife of Ting the Cook
slicing fresh ham.

I do not claim to know the joys
and sorrows of the koi in the pond.
But I know the pleasures of feeding them.

The fruit on the tree of love
is an apple
I have sampled. And will again.

“Golden apples,”
sweet oranges in the sun.

Everything I own is in
my heart and head and amounts
to almost nothing, a dream—

and yet a long moment of silence
to greet the day
is a glimpse of heaven.

There are dreams to be realized
before dreams and dreamers die.
We're borne on the wings of butterflies.

Salutation

To Burton Watson

So very much learned
from the feet of a master—
the fall of the Ch'in,
the rise of the T'ang and Sung,
tales from Masters Chuang and K'ung—

the long dusty roads
of the various poets
and monks, and sutras
chanted, the sake cups filled
with kinship and harmonies,

hardships remembered.
It is December, the moon
full, snow turned to ice
on the frozen ground. I raise
a cup of good *Nihonshu*

to a master, a
lifetime's companionship in
wandering borders.
Through hard times and good, decade
by decade, when my heart yearned

for good company,
I always knew where to turn.
Tonight, just a cup
below Li Po's cold clear moon—
because it is impossible

to drink alone.

Another Love Song

A full moon emerges, pale,
almost transparent above the Rio de la Plata,
rising slowly toward the Southern Cross.
Like millions of Porteños, my wife and I
take refuge in a sidewalk café,
eating slowly, sipping wine, talking late,
waiting for the heat to subside
before we can mosey off to bed
a little high, tired, to dream
whatever dreams we might.

Gray is bald, still a little weak
from months of chemotherapy,
and wearing a white knit hat
because her wig is hot. We move
slowly along the still-thronged streets
of the Palermo neighborhood
at 2 a.m., greeted by a blizzard
of falling tiny yellow acacia flowers
with each small breeze.

It is almost solstice. In *El Norte*,
winter storms howl in the trees.
Friends have drained the pipes in our
Port Townsend house and prepared it
for a lengthy freeze. Here,
my wife and I return to find relief,
to heal a little from the assaults of age
that in the end no one can escape.

So this is the autumn of my life,
this exile or retreat into the heart
of Buenos Aires' summertime.
I think of others—Galeano, Gelman,
Borges, Cortázar, Che—so many who knew
these lovely streets as home
or exile in a mean time that now seems
so very long ago despite
the daily news of the *Madres
de la Plaza de Mayo* who still meet
to demand that we remember

the victims of the Dirty War,
and its criminals who are still on trial.

But here I find no winter in the blood,
no ice storm in the heart. I look into
the eyes of one I have loved so long
and find myself at peace. Esteban,
my brother, kisses both our cheeks
and I kiss his, grateful for whatever days
remain in a heart grown weak with age
and heartbreak over all
that those I loved betrayed.

The American capitalist enterprise
is on its knees. Nothing can rinse
the blood from hands that clung
so tenaciously to greed. Nothing
can resurrect the American dream.
In the country of the heart,
every border is a bridge, a door
that opens wide, a window
on the world from which we see
ourselves as one, one in gratitude,
one in solidarity.

Soon, it will be dawn. The moon
is slowly going down. My wife
sleeps peacefully,
and every now and then
a sigh escapes her lips. She is so beautiful
it makes me weep.

Southern Stars

It is solstice, the beginning
of summer, and almost New Year.
I'm watching Esteban measure out
each small shovelful of coals on his parrilla
where a rump roast slowly simmers.
From this third floor terrace,
we watch Venus, the first
and brightest evening star, emerge
above the Belgrano skyline.

We have been discussing
Galeano and "historical amnesia"—
that of Esteban's Argentina
and that of my homeland.
A quarter century after the Dirty War,
many of the dictator's hatchet-men
are still awaiting trial.

What became of Julio Simón—
the infamous Julián the Turk—
torturer and killer who threw
his screaming victims
out of airplanes high above
the Atlantic, bragging,
"I did it for *mi patria*, for
my faith, and for my religion.
Of *course* I would do it all again."

Whatever became of Adolfo
Francisco Scilingo and his boss,
Vice Admiral Mendía, who told him
their victims "would fly," and
assured him, "ecclesiastical authorities
proclaimed it a Christian,
nonviolent death" for those
accused of crimes against the State.
Scilingo confessed,
"Two thousand political prisoners learned to fly"
into the arms of God's embrace.

No one knows the names of all the lost,

children stripped from mothers' arms
in prison camps and sent away.
Today marks sixteen hundred
consecutive weeks the Mothers
of the Plaza have met and marched
from the Plaza de Mayo
to the Obelisk. Where are their children
today? Their sons, husbands, grandchildren,
the children of their friends...
Who knows? No one will say.

In El Norte, our victims are always
the other, the ones we know
the very least—Vietnamese farmers or
Cambodian peasants sprayed
with Agent Orange; the innocent
booksellers lining Al-Mutanabbi Street
in Baghdad for a thousand years or more,
bombed into oblivion; the nameless,
numberless, faceless dead of war
lying in Latin American fields and streets
from a hundred American invasions
in a century of unmitigated greed.

No one reveals the whereabouts
of the Black Sites, Bush's secret prisons.
And official smirking faces—Bush, Cheney,
Rumsfeld, Ashcroft and the rest
likewise have no apologies to make.
They are the policy experts who enjoy
fame, infamy and fabulous wealth.
Criminals are the authors of our history.
The worst of evils lies in their impunity.

Esteban jokes about the time
he was stopped on the street by police
and told to cut his hair and shave
or face stiff penalties. We fill our glasses
with a dry Chablis from the vineyards
of Mendoza and prepare to eat
as our wives come laughing
from the kitchen down below,
relieved to find a cooling breeze.

We put aside all talk of war.
Nations, borders, eternal crimes
against poor, suffering humanity
all evaporate in summer heat
as our communal laughter
rises like an evening star.

Children of the Marketplace

They come out of nowhere, the sad-eyed
pleading children of the streets, they come
bearing shoplifted socks, small notebooks,
pens, anything, even just a card that pleads
for change, a peso so they can eat.

From our lunch spot under the grand
acacia trees, we say, “No, gracias,” wondering
if a coin encourages thievery or whether
any of them will ever learn to read.
Or we make a gift of some small change
when one rushes to open the door
of a cab we’ve flagged. “No, gracias,”
to the old woman selling wilting roses
on the street, wondering what life
has she whose children learned to pick
a pocket, to moan for some relief
in a world without regrets, a world of need.

We watch a pregnant girl drag her heavy cart
through busy traffic on the street,
sorting through the trash—salvaging
old cardboard, plastic bottles, a board,
a brick, old newsprint, almost anything
that ordinary trash provides. Her work
is hard, her face a mask of grief
the marketplace can’t hide.

In Seattle’s Pioneer Square, it’s a wrinkled face
asking for a dollar for the newspaper
of the homeless, news of that other marketplace
where human life, degraded or self-abused,
comes cheap.

It’s the same in Caracas, Mumbai,
New York City or Saigon. The world is one.
Who knows what’s wrong or right,
whose coin will go for suicidal wine
and whose for mercy in a shelter for the night?
The young, the old, for them there is
no sense of time, no past remembered,

no thought of what tomorrow brings.
The marketplace is full of things.

Body Count

“Extreme rendition,” the Bush administration calls it—
no body count in
the shipping of warm live bodies
to icy foreign prisons in who-knows where
for who-knows-what kinds of torture.

Rendition? That’s a word I learned
as a boy when my mother asked me to play
my rendition of Chopin on our baby grand,
my botched rendition of Raphael Méndez’
Flight of the Bumblebee as I struggled to master
triple-tongue technique on my trumpet.

Is extreme rendition what
they’re doing these days in Darfur
where there is no body count,
where doctors are gang-raped, nails ripped out,
bodies cast into burning huts—
like that of the six-year-old boy
burned beyond recognition?

The body begs, the body embodies
the long gray cries of grief, the little white cries
of love and ecstasy, the pleas and groans
of ensuing death that lie at the extreme end
of extreme rendition.

Body count, Iraq:
certified civilian deaths by violence, Sept 1, 2008:
ninety-four thousand, six hundred twenty-two;
most recently identified:
Mohammad Khalil Hansch, male,
tribal leader, Sunni;
and the body count of those who remain unidentifiable:
unknown, even gender sometimes unknown, bodies
burnt to cinders or blown apart,
family unknown, religion unknown,
children and parents unknown.

Tomorrow: another count, another body carted off.
Saturday, August 30, 2008:

the latest “incident” records
“Five dead; two bodies found in Baghdad;
gunman kills policeman; one body found;
Ninewa Mosul, bodyguard’s body found
following abduction...”

In America, there are no body bags, no dead bodies
but those mourned and buried in secret, those buried
in moldy V.A. hospitals reeking of death.

This is the business of death, the unseen tides of death
that wash across our shores,
the homeless veterans whose bodies house
lice and strange bacteria, paranoia, post-traumatic stress,
the savagery of business.

And in Colombia, the “drug war” capital of death,
six decades of slaughter.
More bodies found, more bodies
disappeared,
more hostages, more torture.
More American business in arms and death.

All body counts are false.

In Vietnam today, millions are dying
of cancers from a war that ended
three decades back,
watershed poisoned, gene pool poisoned
as we poison the very earth that is
one body
too large to comprehend.

We are Darfur. We are Medellín.
We are Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad,
once a bookselling heaven, cradle
of our civilization where bodies
have been splattered across crumbling buildings...

We are the Palestinian child
who packs his body with explosives
and walks into a marketplace.
We are his teacher, his elder brother, his mother

blown to bits by Israeli bombs.

There is no “other.”
One breath, one body
is all that we can know.

We can't escape our bodies and the knowledge
of our bodies' suffering and glory
even as the heart's mind revolts, shuts down
in tears or tries to hide. We are the body
of our ally and our enemy, we
are the body politic and this unholy hymn
our universal anthem.

Praise the body in all its glory,
this body some say is made
in God's own image.
This is the body of knowledge
we must carry into life, into Heaven or Nirvana,
through Samsara,
and into the marked or unmarked grave,
into ashes in the wind.

To Salah Al Hamdani, November, 2008

How many nights have I awakened, shocked,
my friend, at having dreamt of you again
as a young man learning to write poetry
in Abu Ghraib?

How many times have I invoked your name,
spoken of your exile, since that bright afternoon
five years ago when we met and embraced
on a stage in Piacenza, Italy?

I did not know your tongue, nor you mine,
but in our poetry we claimed fraternity,
solidarity in this alien world. Time
has not been kind to your beloved Baghdad.

Mutanabbi Street where you drank coffee
and searched the bookstalls long ago
has been bombed and bombed again.
The national library is gone.

You can bomb a bookstore or ban
a book, but it will not die. You cannot kill
a poem like you can a man.
Mutanabbi Street will rise again.

America will soon be led by a saner man.
The war in Iraq, for Americans, will end.
But for you and I and millions more,
exile doesn't end with the end of a war.

Five years ago we vowed to meet
one day on Mutanabbi Street,
and I hope that day will come.
But now it must be growing cold

and gray in Paris. In Buenos Aires,
summer is coming on, the great
acacias a canopy
over Palermo's narrow streets.

Sometimes I hear in the night

the clatter of hooves— horses
hitched to wagons, everything recycled—
and I am reminded: we too recycled,

we, too, are “known to horses,
to the wilderness and the night...”
But by no sword
will our brief song or enduring love survive.

Mythologos

Perhaps it was the angry Mother Ishtar,
Asherah-Inanna, who wades an ocean of blood,
furious, vengeful Demeter,
who set our course on Ea, this earth.

Or perhaps the sons of Cain,
the first murderer, who by inventing
the arts of this civilized world—
Jubal, father of flute and lyre,
Tubal-cain, who brought us bronze and iron—
planted the sacred seeds
of all our toil and suffering,
the seeds of our destruction.

And all our hymns and odes and elaborate rituals
amount to nothing
except they prepare us for extinction.

Gaia, daughter of Chaos,
be benevolent
if you can; forgive us
our accomplished foolishness and hollow furies.
We cling to our delusions because we know
no other way. Guests in your house,
we ransacked
everything.

And now must beg for mercy.
We, who so often sang of love
and of love lost, worshipped
at the altar of unholy Ares. We were pillagers,
plunderers in the temple.

Reason perishes with the habitat of its days.
We bowed to the general, not to the impotent sage,
to the expediency of our insatiable needs.
We were the dinosaurs of our age.

Sweet Samsara

In the vocabulary of the damned,
the rich have their own special Hell:
it's lined with silk and ringed with gold.
And none of it can be owned.

The Descent

The old burro ascends the steep
narrow cobblestone street
with his load of firewood,
his feet in their own way
as sure as Fred Astaire's.
His master whistles softly
and strokes his rump
as they turn and disappear.

I brought to San Miguel
a load of grief I thought
no human heart could bear.
Walking down to el jardin,
I counted thirty-four chimes
of the church-bell as the sun
began to set below the clouds.
They say each tolling is a prayer.

If there is a heaven for burros somewhere,
I pray the gods will send me there,
for who could bear an eternity
of angels, saints and bells?
Give me good tequila with a friend
in a fine hotel that was
a nunnery in its day. I step unsurely,
one foot in Heaven, one in Hell.

A Visitation

I wake suddenly, in the middle of the night,
and realize I'm stroking the pillow beside me,
dreaming of my wife who is six months dead.

I rise and brush my teeth and pour a stiff drink
and go out into the garden to sit
on the old iron bench and think.

It's after midnight and the moon is almost full.
And after a long silence, I hear, faintly,
a woman's heels' *chink, chink, chink,*

against the ancient cobblestone
beyond the garden wall
as she makes her way down the street.

Elegy in San Miguel

Under a grand old jacaranda,
I sit in an iron chair, feet
propped up on the balcony rail,
watching the winter sun sink slowly below
the mountains far across the desert floor
as the lights of San Miguel come on
and a church bell slowly tolls.
By dark, the December moon is high and full.

Somewhere half the world away,
a small boy is weeping for his mother,
and watching with his father as first light
breaks over mountains across another desert floor.
Their eyes and ears are fixed on their horizon
for the first signs of the oncoming drone
that will blow their lives to dust.
They have escaped it several times before.

And I, having attended my dying wife
just months ago, share in their tears
if not in their fear. Grief makes one family
of us all. Slowly, I rise and go inside
and dry my eyes again. "Being," the Buddha said,
"is agonizing for us all." And I know
this world of endless war is mother
of all our stillborn dreams and hopes,

but also of our will to live and dream again,
although we are strangers on every shore,
to live, despite enormous odds, to love again,
even as deeply as before.

Border Song

For Esteban Moore

Sometimes I like to read
the poets of the borderlands,
some in English, some to wrestle
slowly from their native tongue,
my scant Spanish failing at each turn,
the gists and piths of poetry.

There are images, there are tones,
that cross the rivers
of time and space and cultural bounds
to touch the heart of one
who struggles in the journey.
Poetry is made from flesh and bone.

What is a nation, what is our song,
and what is a man, a woman, but
a tear and a smile, un abrazo fuerte
por favor, tender and temporal,
wine in the cup, a song in the ear,
when the struggle itself is everything.

It is what we know and what
we have to work with—bare hands,
dreams that restore
big hungry hearts and minds
made whole by what we share:
mi pan, mi agua, mi canto amor.

The Road to Rama

Where is the road to Rama
and how far can I go alone?

Here is the road to Rama, friend,
here in the dust of our bones.

And here is the house of an Arab
with its sleepy summer garden,
its olive tree and its shade.

You count the bullet holes, my friend,
and fill its empty craters,
but you cannot number the dead.

And here is the house of a Jew—
and the strangest thing—
it looks exactly the same:

the same garden, same olive tree,
same craters in the garden,
same bloodstains in the sand.

Here on the road to Rama
I hope to find my brother,
the poet Samih Al-Qasim,

before it is too late.
I have wandered far in the desert,
thirsting for his words.

Have you heard my brother, the poet?
He will break your heart and mend it
with the sadness of his song.

Have you seen my brother, the poet?
I am weary of smoke and dust,
and the road is long, and I am growing old.

I will die on the road to Rama,
my heart cradled by his song.

Ritsos Among the Asphodels

If Homer's word is true, Ritsos
wanders the fields of asphodels
in the Homelands of the Dead.
Perhaps he is urging the flowers to touch hands,
thanking the bees for the opera of honey.

And Ritsos smiles, "Kali mera, Miss Butterfly,
in your morning dress of linen; Kali spera,
Mr. Ant in your stiff tuxedo; Good morning,
Miss Dove in your robe of song—

here are our crumbs to be shared
because we are in this world together,
and here, our tears and our laughter,
one inside the other."

And if his shoulders bend
under the weight of island prison camps,
his heart leaps because he placed those stars
in the heavens and wrote poems
on stones he gathered along his way.

"Good morning, brother! Good morning, Sister!
Whatever place we are, we are in it together."
And he hears the chorus of stones and stars,
the bees' psalm and the cricket's gladness
and the murmurs of the ancients who visit him

inside a line of a poem—because he knows
no poem is self-generating, nor any man,
nor any country of the heart. He has come
from very far, planting words as he walked
from one world to the next inside the heart.

But his journey is not over. Because
his poems have legs, they walk;
they walk in their pools of light
and in their shadows, sometimes dancing,
softly singing.

On Being Invited to Submit Poems “Written
In the Manner of the Ancient Chinese
Mountain Recluse Poets”

From my windows on this hill,
Fidalgo Bay, green islands, pale blue sky
and, far off, Koma Kulshan, crowned
with icy snow—first and only words
I know in the Lummi tongue.

Thirty-five years in the woods,
watching the tree trunks thicken.
And now this view, this vision.

To Elisa Ortega

1.

I speak to you not in your tongue,
but in mine. Because I am impoverished
by all I cannot say in the language
of the heart, that cracked pot
that holds the stews and steams
of all our dreams. Brown skin,
brown eyes, black hair glistening
like a raven's wing. Was there a moon
in the Mexican night? Did I find
delight in the taste of a steak,
a margarita and our laughter
that is the mother of every tongue?
Delight then. Delight in the taste
of the night, in all we would like
to say, if only we knew how. Delight
even in the struggle. Hair glistening
like a raven's wing, brown eyes smiling.
If we walked through the square
under a brilliant moon and
ten thousand stars, the young
would laugh at us and whisper,
"How ridiculous they are!"

2.

I am an old man in mourning rags,
older than stone, and still unwise.
The sun comes up and goes down
and I'm grateful again to be alive.
Delight in the first flower on the cactus,
awed by the men on their knees
replacing a city street stone by stone,
amused by my own foolishness and follies
as though I stood outside myself sometimes.
And how could you have ever
imagined me, of all people, an old fool
on a pilgrim's winding road that leads
not to Paradise, but to bones.
And yet we are here—your brown eyes
laughing, both of us laughing again
against the night, laughter holding up

the stars and moon with a half-song
oddly sung in whispers and gestures,
and, for no accountable reason,
our own good nature.

3.

Sometimes I think of Don Pablo,
his love songs for his dear Mathilde.
Sometimes he was a big soft-hearted cow,
chewing again and again the stuff
that kept him going. *Cada día, Mathilde,*
who, he said, gave him life.
I listen to the tolling of the bells,
hearing aids in place, of course,
and make my way down narrow streets
cautious with each step. A fall
means broken bones, and I'm a man
alone, just learning the meaning
of that word. Nevertheless, I find
myself singing inside, a gentle sun
casting my shadow on a wall.
Don Pablo sings of the sea and the bells
and even of his socks, but also tells
of our need for solidarity. I plea
for peace, for camaraderie. And
I dream—for I am a soft-hearted cow—
of raven hair, brown eyes, and laughter
holding high the ancient stars.

Bittersweet

We talked so easily of suicide,
two of us growing older, soon to grow
infirm, sipping our sake and talking
of eventualities—cancer, Alzheimer’s,
heart disease—as though we were discussing
the weather or a recent book we’d read.

She is still beautiful and looks like she
could live forever, although we both know
that by now, every day is precious.
I told her I’d never prepared to live
this long at all, seeing myself living
hard and fast, dying young, a pathetic

re-enactment of the old Romantic dream.
At least we’ve learned to laugh at the fools
we’ve been along the way to geezerdom.
She who knows my grief can understand
when gallows humor shows its darkest hand.
And she mentioned the old *cante jondo*—

our souls’ deepest song, the singing *singing*
“to keep the bitterness from the sorrow.”

Not Going to Hanoi

Stuck in Narita Airport, I have hours
to reflect on the poet in Vietnam
who “defends the sadness” of his village,
for whom pain returns like a knife
in poem after poem.

The white-gloved bureaucrat
at Narita is coldly polite. “You
not go without visa. Sorry, rules—
you must have visa.”
There is no light in his eyes.

When Garcia Lorca returned to Spain,
he did so, he said,
to defend his smile. Thieu’s smile,
reflecting great sadness and beauty,
is a smile worth defending.

I take my passport back
from white-gloved hands
and say nothing. What could be said
to the immutable bureaucrat who smiles
like a frog that swallowed a fly.

I will not be going to Hanoi.
I will not see the smile I long to see,
the deep soft light of eyes
that have seen so little joy
and yet possess it in abundance.

I hear the noise of busy streets,
smell the smoky scent of frying meats
in stalls along the way. But I will not
have to endure the stifling humid heat.
I have hours to wait

before a flight back to the States.
I awaken from a dream to find
myself in a plastic airport seat,
aching back, dead feet, longing
for a city I’ve barely seen.

Weary, feeling old as dust,
I board the plane I must, and greet
the dawn at forty thousand feet,
reading from Nguyen Quang Thieu of the dawn
that breathes with two red lungs,

one west, one east.

True Peace

Half broken on that smoky night,
hunched over sake in a serviceman's dive
somewhere in Naha, Okinawa,
nearly fifty years ago,

I read of the Saigon Buddhist monks
who stopped the traffic on a downtown thoroughfare
so their master, Thich Quang Đức, could take up
the lotus posture in the middle of the street.
And they baptized him there with gas
and kerosene, and he struck a match
and burst into flame.

That was June, nineteen-sixty-three,
and I was twenty, a U.S. Marine.

The master did not move, did not squirm,
he did not scream
in pain as his body was consumed.

Neither child nor yet a man,
I wondered to my Okinawan friend,
what can it possibly mean
to make such a sacrifice, to give one's life
with such horror, but with dignity and conviction.
How can any man endure such pain
and never cry and never blink.

And my friend said simply, "Thich Quang Đức
had achieved true peace."

And I knew that night true peace
for me would never come.
Not for me, Nirvana. This suffering world
is mine, mine to suffer in its grief.

Half a century later, I think
of Bô Tát Thich Quang Đức,
revered as a bodhisattva now— his lifetime
building temples, teaching peace,
and of his death and the statement that it made.

Like Shelley's, his heart refused to burn,
even when they burned his ashes once again
in the crematorium— his generous heart
turned magically to stone.

What is true peace, I cannot know.
A hundred wars have come and gone
as I've grown old. I bear their burdens in my bones.
Mine's the heart that burns
today, mine the thirst, the hunger in the soul.

Old master, old teacher,
what is it that I've learned?

The Girl in Mandalay

Nine, ten,
eleven hours a day,
she bows over
her mallet and chisel
and chips away at faux marble,
sweat running down her cheeks
into white dust that becomes
a pale gray river
down her brown body.

Her lungs are stained
with the dust of her labors,
her stubborn heart's demands.
Her fingers are thick
like the paws of hungry dogs
that haunt the city's dumps.

Day after day, she carves
the image of the Bodhisattva
of Compassion, a fat happy Hotei,
a sitting Buddha, a Buddha
holding one cut lotus bloom.

She never thinks
of the finished stone, never dreams
of where in the world
it may one day be found,
or of who may stand before it
thoughtfully, and then bow down.

On the Anniversary of Her Death

Awakened from a restless, wine-inspired sleep,
I rose in the night to find Yuan Chen's elegy
and read, "Even if I had wings,
this net of grief would snare me."

Pouring a good Malbec, I smelled it,
just as I had that night ten years ago
in Buenos Aires, Gray laughing with delight
at first taste, and I took a sip.

"We should go to Mendoza," she grinned,
"since we're both in love with her grapes."
And now her ever-present absence,
my only true companion. Her beautiful dog

and the faint echo of her laughter.
Yuan Chen met his wife in dreams each night.
I meet mine in a glass of wine,
in a dog that barks for attention

when I'm too lonely to play; I meet mine
in a menu, in the taste of a simple empanada,
in a steak from the parrilla—"rosada,
sin sangre"—This net of grief

is empty. All things pass through.
Even as I sit, weeping with my wine,
here is Yuan Chen, my friend, and here
my late wife, and the stars above her

and a full moon on the rise.

Edible Earth

a trilogy for Ian Boyden

Habitations

1.

Earth. Orange alpine lichen
slowly digesting stone.
Black earth.
Red earth, brown earth,
icy dust.

Canyons carved
through centuries
by water and ice.
Stone canyons,
mountains thrust up
by shifting continents.

Across the river,
the great trees
bend in the wind.
The living are the habitations
of the dead.
How small is a man.

2.

How small is the man
who reads the stones
and listens to the whispers
of the poplars?

How large is the heart
that measures the heart
of a man
with a handful of earth?

How much hope and sadness
is a man with a handful of earth
and a heart that unfolds
in the moonlight.

Listen closely
to the stars, to the flutter
of nighthawk wings,
to the silence.

In the moonlight,
the susurrus river
tells its secrets,
and the great trees shiver.

3.
The great trees shiver
and the river is laughter
and stones are polished
by rolling
when the river rises.

The patience of stone,
a congress of trees,
the witness of the moon—

If only human emotion
could be found
in the things of this world...

Even the river runs
out of time and drowns
in a desert or empties
into an ocean.

4.
An ocean
of time, vast seas of memory:
detritus
contains the seeds
of beauty.

He dragged from the river
an ancient cedar log,
half-petrified,
and used it to bind
a book. From shark-tooth, cuttlefish
and fossilized ear-bone of whale,

pigments for ink;
from stone, the soul
of stone, earth from earth,
transformed, transfixed—
from thistle and feather,
a made thing,
and yet it is an organism,
it has a life.

I say, the trees listen,
and even soil has mind.

5.
Soil has a mind
that legislates the trees,
each grape on the vine,
and the trees and wine define
the changing light
that burns inside the mind.

Roots of tribal memory
burn in solitude,
in the vast unknowing
of this known world.

Gneiss. Shale. Sheared marble. Schist.
Granite. Black coal
compressed into diamond clarity.

The whale's ear-bone,
the great tree blown down,
each turning to stone,
ground into powder for ink.

One hundred thousand years
in one small stone.
A feather is a magical thing.
And what does it mean?

6.
What does it mean
when one says, "The
stately poplar," or

“The noble pine”?
Scrub oak and loblolly,
cedar, aspen and elm—
each has its poet
with adjective and rhyme.

Because the river,
we like to believe, flows
through us, and
the more noble the tree,
the straighter our spines.

Down through hardpan,
two hundred feet,
through layers of basalt below the sea,
I drilled to tap a river in the earth,
a vein,
water for a home
of cedar and spruce.

Holy, the water; holy, the wood.

7.
Holy, these woods
reclaiming the earth,
rich in detritus
becoming soil.

Holy, the garden, its river
of stones, its moss,
lilies, and lace-leaf maples.

Should trees have standing?
Is the katsura aroused
by the arousal of its new leaves?
Its blood
surges.

Let the stones tell it.
Let the river sing it again.
Listen closely to the silence.
Listen to a language
not our own.

8.

Not our own, this earth.
For us, only the sacrament
of its fruitfulness,
and the great mystery,
and the mystery of our passing.

The tallest trees bend,
feathers in the wind,
and we marvel
at the sound of water in the moonlight.

Not ours, this mystery we enter,
this strange habitation.
The tide rises.
The river and the trees,
the stones and the man abide.

Tasting the wine, *terroir*,
is tasting the earth and sun.
Tasting the fish
is breathing the sea.

My brother, the blind poet,
uses his ears to see.
High overhead, the Southern Cross,
the River of Heaven, Ursa the Bear.

9.

We drift in the river of heaven
under the great bear
or beneath the cross
in a boat of dreams.

We drift in our boat of dreams
above the earth
and rarely touch it
unless it comes tumbling down.

And yet the trees
bear us up into the world,
the rains cleanse us,

and we eat from clay
all sacrament and abundance

before we return to clay,
to earth and stone,
gone like the cry of the thrush,
everything devoured and reborn.

10.
Devoured, devouring, and reborn,
the earth endures.

Here, where vast shadows
of bending trees
ripple on moonlit water,
there is a world at ease,

indifferent toward our boat of dreams,
our palette of temporal desires—

This time is measured only
by centuries of ice and fire
and by what the winds might bring.

Gazing up at these same stars
that inspired the artists of Lascaux:
the great void,
the mystery that is a hunger in the soul.

The bison gone, and the mastodon,
the butterfly that rode the wind
to Mexico and back,
the little bird that sang the dawn—
all devoured and reborn.

11.
Devoured and needing to be reborn,
the hungry seek a master.

Making the paper, grinding ink,
dipping the brush, the master says,
“Draw the sound of the breeze in the pines.”
And, smiling, says, “Don’t

be foolish enough to draw trees.”

In the mind of a Buddha,
not even a flower.
Shiva the maker, Shiva the destroyer.

At the summit of a pass through the Alps,
high above timberline,
I knelt at the foot of a glacier
and peered down a thousand feet

at granite boulders in a creek,
and for a moment, knew
this ancient earth, orange alpine lichen
slowly devouring stone.

Terroir

1.
Third planet from the sun,
western hemisphere,
slightly northwest coast
of the northern continent,
terra firma,
place where the names begin to sing:

Duwamish, Skykomish, Swinomish,
Humptulips, Hamma Hamma,
Walla Walla, Hoh—

oerthe in Old English,
this planet, this sod, this dirt,
this rich soil.

Tasting the wine is imbibing *terroir*,
a taste
of the earth, a touch of time
measured not by centuries,
but by eons:

fallen star that we are,
endangered earth, remnants of

the great glacial ice age
carving these plains and valleys,

mountains and rivers
all present in the tang of the grape.

And after continents of ice,
the break-up,
torrential rivers
carrying everything in their path:

boulders the size of houses
tumbling down
until the waters calm—

rivers freezing, thawing, freezing—
rivers still rolling in the grape's bouquet.

A thousand thousand years
are a barely a moment
in the life of the grape that becomes our wine.

This “sphere of mortal life
as distinguished from heaven and hell,”
this very earth— *sod* or *soil*—
this “land neither water nor air”
that thrives on this water, this air.

And from this air, this water,
this ancient new-born land,
terroir;
this simple soil
in which the character
of the grape takes shape.

2.
The character of the grape
shaped
by three acids
for body and bouquet—

tartaric for crispness of flavor
and for aging;

malic for a slightly fruitful flavor;
citric for body—
the body of a taste—
body taken into our bodies
from the body of the grape—

nutrients, quality of sunlight,
qualities of warmth and cold:
weather adds character all its own.

From snow-capped Cascades
to the foothills of the peerless Andes
in Argentine Mendoza,
from Australian extremes
to French and Italian traditions,

it is the vintner, viticulture,
the vinicology,

that introduces magic.
From the ancient *vinifer* grape,
born long before Europe was Europe
or France France,
a hundred languages emerge.

3.
A hundred languages,
a thousand myths and rituals emerge
in a single sip—

The Greeks added water to their wine.
The mystics turned water into wine.
It is the blood of the Christian lord;
the sacrament of marriage that follows
wine-soaked rituals of seduction;
the unholy toast and roast of friends;
fuel for the song the heart holds dear;

salutation
of introduction or seal
on a contract drawn;
instrument of debauchery,
a poet's inspiration,

the Bacchanal or the connoisseur's
education of the nose and tongue.

Ian held up the tooth of a mastodon,
white molar half turned to stone,
all that remained of the great beast
that roamed this wilderness,

and in the cups on the table,
cups his father shaped
from earth's soft clay,

the smooth dry taste
of mastodon flesh made soil,
taste of unknown grasses
that bent in breezes blowing in from glaciers
that promised another world,
taste of fallen forests and native cultures
and native tongues—

viticulture—
what passes
enters us in a hundred ways;
there is no ablution.

How deep are the roots of the simplest things.
This is not a question.

4.
I do not question
the devotion of the ever-persistent mole,
nor the prayer of the owl,
nor the sanctity of Coyote's famous hunger
nor of his celebrated tricks.

They are all one thing together,
and we add another
and are another.

We are Odysseus on his wine-dark sea
if that is what we want to be.

The eloquent T'ao Ch'ien

sits here among us now,
wine cup high,
promising tomorrow another ode
on giving up the wine.

Foolish men drink foolishly.
The wise know when and why.

How could anyone resist
Su Tung-p'o's irony, the winy tongue
of Catullus's inspired invective,

and even old Omeros himself,
singing long,
no doubt kept his throat from growing dry.

In the ritual sacrament of the wine
we are one with the mastodon and the mole,
the glacier, the root and the stone;
one with Omeros and T'ao Ch'ien,
Coyote's trickster friends,
one with the fool and the seer;

one with the soil and the sun,
one with the root and the leaf.

Savor the source, the mystery itself:
the good *oerthe* here in the grape,
generosity in each kernel of rice
or corn or wheat,
generation, birth and death in every
rapture of the tongue
in all we drink or eat.

Edible Earth

1.
We eat the earth
before the earth eats us.

I mean the very soil, the root,
the stalk and the seed

we eat,
and the ancient animals even
that we arrived too late to see.

Do I not contain
at least a remnant of the elegant sea mink,
the lumbering, munching
Oregon bison, the proud and mighty
Badlands Bighorn sheep?

In my song or cry
is the remnant of the piercing wail
of the Cascade Mountain Wolf,
and in my belly the blood
of the Eskimo Curlew, the Bering Goose,
and Columbia Pygmy Rabbit;

in my meat
the meat of the hunter of the cumbersome
Columbian Mammoth
and the mammoth's meat,
the thick brown hide
of the Western Camel
that roamed the Holocene.

I have not seen the sudden flight
of the Laysan Crane,
the Dusky Seaside sparrow
or the Passenger Pigeon
that was still here
when I was born with a scream.
I did not know the Carolina parakeet.

And yet what I am
is what is left of them.
They are gone and what remains
is what I am and will be,
a mystery
in the belly of the Mother Earth,
Gaia, whom we devour and contain,
whom we so thoughtlessly consume,
at whose breast we feast.

2.

At the breast of the Great Mother,
we drink deep and dream.

Guided by the distant stars,
we dream and depart,
gauging our way by the North Star,
the Dipper, the Great Bear
and the Minor.

Under Orion's belt
we dream and love.

Under the Southern Star
and the Three Marias,
we pass. Under the waxing,
waning moon
we measure our days, our weeks,
and gazing up, we swoon.

Beneath our sails, fish too
are passing from our world—
The Longjaw and Blackfin Ciscos
we never caught and ate,
the Yellowfin Cutthroat Trout,
Silver Trout and Thicketail Chub,
Blue Walleye
and Maryland darter—
gone into eternity.

We drink the water they drank.
We swim in their history.
They swim through our blood in
the deepest pools of all our genes,
in the bloodlines of Mother Gaia's breast
at which we feast.

3.

At Mother Gaia's breast we feed
and sing, dancing
to the rhythms of her blood.

We scrape and bruise her flesh

and open a vein in search of
what is not ours to have.
Our poisons sicken her and thereby
sicken us.

Our death-tolls are her death-knell.
Our elegies are her death song.
Our only real enemy is us.

Walking the great *oerthe*,
we feast at her abundant table,
eating earth and myth and history,
bathed in the waters
of her dance, weeping
the salts of her compassionate tears.

No one owns a mountain or a lake.
No one buys the air we breathe.

The seas and the soils
are only ours to share
a little while,
before we become the sea, the soil
and the air.

If a single spot of this vast *oerthe*
is holy, then every spot and every
clod of earth and blade of grass
is equally holy, too.

Equally holy the lamb and the hawk
and the wind and blue of the sky;
equally holy
the singer and the song, the dreamer
and the one who longs
for a science of the soul,
the prayer of gratitude and farewell
that is whispered
by the leaves that fall.

4.
Equally holy, your country and mine,
your song and mine, your bread and wine

and mine,
your belief and my disbelief,
your child and mine.

Your country and my country
cannot be two things,
but are simply sides of one,
an angle of perception, a turn
of a mother tongue.

It is the flesh and blood of our Mother.
It is not separate from ourselves.

One man's life and work is
such a tiny thing.
And yet it is everything we have.

I saw on the California coast
a tree that stood for a thousand years.
I saw a petrified bone from the Pleistocene.
I heard the cicada sing
that lives
but a single day.

One young woman's menstrual blood
is the blood of all the world,
the sacred thirst, the great compassion
of the feminine, the fecundity
informing all our lives.

Your work is mine and mine is yours.
Breaking the bread, pouring the wine
in the sacred habitat of the home,
our work and our song
make one:
laborare est orare—
our labor is our prayer.

Our prayers will not be answered
by some future heaven,
but by what's planted
in our hearts already,
by what we've given, what we've taken

that was not ours to seize.

Our acts embody our only true beliefs.
Our labors in the home or in the vineyard,
in the office or on the farm,
are mere expressions of devotion,
gratitude for the Great Mother's
beneficence, her generosity
we must find within ourselves.

Humility before the task;
humility before the suffering of all
our brothers and our sisters
and all the animals that are passing from our lives.

We embody the noble gratitude that enriches us.
Humility informs the heart that burns,
that mourns, praises and desires.

Gratefully, we eat the earth
before we give ourselves
to nourish the earth in turn.

Of Cascadia

I came here nearly forty years ago,
broke and half broken, having chosen
the mud, the dirt road, alder pollen and
a hundred avenues of gray across the sky
to be my teachers and my muses.
I chose a temple made of words and made a vow.

I scratched a life in hardpan. If I cried
for mercy or cried out in delight,
it was because I was a man choosing
carefully his way and his words, growing
as slowly as the trunks of cedars
in the sunlit garden.

Let the ferns and the moss remember
all that I have lost or loved, for I carry
no regrets, no ambition to live it
all again. I can't make it better
than it's been or will be again
as the seasons turn and an old man's heart

turns nostalgic as he sips his wine alone.
I have lived in Cascadia, no paradise
nor any hell, but both at once and made,
as Elytis said, of the same material.
A poor poet, I studied war and love.
But Cascadia is what I'm *of*.