

FIREWEED POEMS

51 mostly longer narrative poems

CLIFF CREGO

*There is a flower
that does not fade,
it's not in heaven,
not made of jade;*

*It's a flower
which roots in love,
with rainbow petals
in the sky above.*

Part I

strophe: an order of movement which articulates itself into stanzas—or groupings or clusters—of an irregular number of lines of irregular length; alternatively, in the original Greek meaning, a complementary back and forth between the two sides of an orchestra.

katastrophe: the conflicting orders of movement of degenerative chaos and disaster; alternatively, in the original Greek meaning, “the return to a point of rest and axial equilibrium of a lyre string after it has ceased to vibrate,” and is, therefore, once again in a state of neutrality.

White Oak

The sound of a farmer knocking
on the wood of his kitchen table . . .
you can hear the fact that the truth
of love is never lost.

Physical things,
some precious,
some more like habit,
come and go,

but the sound of knuckles on worn wood
somehow remains the same. His grandfather
made it, his father made it, and knowing
full well his wife no longer hears it,
and that neighbors in houses
standing in fields they once farmed
together do not care to hear it,
he makes it now alone. Then he stops, listening,
looking down into his morning coffee.

His father used to tell him the story
of how, when the settlers first
came here to clear and plough the land,
what enchanted the natives most
was the taste of their sugar.

As a boy, he always
wondered by what sound,

by what word, they would
have called it?

The sound of voices . . .
Thank god for radio. The price
of soybeans and corn.

White oak. The straight, tight
grain of long, dry summers. Black
worm holes that a man of words might
ponder. All the polish of work
that breathes, folding into the rich fields
of the present moment.

He touches the wood,
still hearing his grandfather's voice
preaching to his father,

"Even God's gotta have a stick with two sides."

They were talking about the government,
then. War. Freedom. Money.

Some things are always the same.

Taking the metal cup off
the cooking stove, spirits
rising with the smell of boiling
black coffee, he shakes his head
and asks out loud of himself,

*“When the cup is broke
and no more use, where
does the circle go?”*

He can still hear them laugh . . .

That’s how they talked.

*“Sweets are always the first thing missed
and the last to be forgotten.”*

Love Grass

A spray of amethyst,
more texture than flower.

When one finally sees it, one
asks,

“Why hadn’t he seen this before?”

An unvoiced purple whisper trailing along
the deep greens of a well-kept path, looking
for signs,

“Which way could she have gone?”

Is it possible that even this tracery of joy must
wither and let go, finding no solace
in the irregular breath and tumble
of the coming winds?

A Mallow of Wet Places

Sharp-toothed calyx,
the sheath which protects
the ripening petal's rosy pink.

Which flower might
open today?

To what heavenly bodies
might it align itself?

The cattails do not seem
to ask, but stand their ground,
tall, straight, erect blades.

Sandbur

Continuous blessing,
feet moving lightly, swiftly,
over soft, yielding earth,

skin of soles reading
texture like eyes touching

the storylines seen in the bark
of many trees.

The simple thought of something sharp,
painful, these possible futures hidden
in the hard brown of dried grass.

Oh so careful child...
Don't let it take away this joy.

Crabgrass

4 or 5 digits—the splayed fingers
of an outstretched hand,

driven to the peripherique of tightly
cropped, well-fed urban meadows . . .

How the violets, moss and yellow flowers
of spring wish to return, showing us

that someone has given up all the fighting
and let their hair go wild again, gestures

shaped, even if ever so slightly,
by much sun, sparse rain, and the curious,
fickle ways of a prairie wind.

Omphalos

*They released two golden eagles
from the far corners of the Earth
and knew that, where they would
come together and touch wings,
there, they would find the center
of their world.*

Sometime, after the performance is
over, lean your ear carefully against
the wall of the concert hall and let it
speak to you. It is possible that
the wood holds within itself

the countless subtle movements of all past
performances, all sounding together at
once, as silent echoes within echoes
within echoes;

Perhaps it is this resonance of the past
that reaches out to touch
and inform the present moment.

Space . . .

The silence of the
blank page from which
the sound of words
emerges,

Space . . .

The violin on the table,
not yet tuned,
but we already sense
the almost manifest
shape of all past and
future concerti.

A child might touch it
and hear the wind moving
through the crowns
of trees in a distant forest.

Forest. Wood.
Space.

The master carpenter travels
with his two young apprentices
from village to village; they
go on foot and are welcomed
everywhere; with luck, they
will help you build your home;
it will last a thousand years.
Wood. Forest.

Space.

But where shall we place it?

The mark of the omphalos.

We see it even at a great distance.
Erect, standing straight up into the air,
artifact of a proud geometry.

What was here before this city was built?
Does it always begin with the placement
of but a single stone?

*...terra,omnes terra,
in exultatione.....
...terra.....*

Surely, the river remembers,
and perhaps the older, solitary trees,
placed and planted by others long ago,
ask the same question. You see it in

the way their powerful branches
weave themselves into the surrounding
air and protect it,

and offer us sanctuary.

Let us go then together,
slowly, hesitantly,
from tree to tree,
you and I,
from tree to tree,
crossing swiftly fences and wires,
and wide, noisy, dangerous
roads...

Surreal city,
we pause, and listen
to the sound...

From a distance,

The mark of the omphalos.

Artifacts of ruler, triangle
and square,

nets, grids thrust out upon the world,
bold gestures cut in stone.

in exultatione.....
....omnes terra,

Unreal city. Unreal.

Space.

The orchestra of strings stops,
to tune and tune again,
sensing the hushed sway
of trunks in a distant...

Space.

Where we shall place our man
of stones to mark where others
have gone before us,

and who have disappeared,
in this city.

Mark of the omphalos.

Not a monument, no supernaturally
proportioned horse
or poet or military man,

but a dream...

Surreal city.

Of many who rose to speak
as one of freedom and great urgency,
and at that moment the sound
of all creation passed
through their voice.

....Unreal city...

Long before, the ancients
knew that the images
of gods could never be
brought down to earth.
...omnes terra.....
exulted.

We stand,
on a bridge,
above a highway,

all highways,

together,

listening

to that sound,

One breath of the bow,
and the symphony sounds out
in voices of pure silver and glass,

...et in secula saeculorum.....

but a dream,

— city...

.....but a dream.....

Part II

Mountain Path

As two learn to walk
together as one,

one of their most primal of fears
is that they might somehow,

by some accident, be separated—
perhaps irreversibly.

That is why Love seeks to protect
every step Freedom makes.

Little Stone Man

a poem in rounds

Slowly, rock by rock, feet searching for a route through
the fractured byways of a vast boulder field.

The feeling of being lost mixes with mist, the body
shot full of holes, energy pouring out every which
way, any direction as good as the next.

But one moves on, all the same...

In the distance, a little stone man,
just a pile of rocks five feet tall.

But he's waving! He's smiling!

Silent gestures which give one courage,
the whisper of a smooth, comforting voice,

*"You're not lost, keep going!
This is the right way."*

Keep going!

* * * * *

*A blaze, a cairn, a metal board,
signs of those who have gone before me,
sounds of front doors firmly snapped shut,
echoing in the forest at night.*

In the forest,
the mark of an axe, the wood,
the wound, the trust of trees,
of threads tied, trunks, wombs,
of rocks, of constancy,

...the quiet centers
around which turn
the gift of our returning...

Returning.....

Day-old bootprints in a single row,
a track, a trail, a muddy road,

So much of my now walks on their past,
but how quickly my feet beat their work dumb,
the dulling drone of mechanical drums.

My free, easy rambling
is their hard labor;
my sure step, their fatigue,
their turning back...

But one moves on, all the same...

And everywhere these deafening sounds,
of d r u m s, heavy d r u m s, beating the bounds.

So tell me please,
pathmaker past,
“*Where is the unknown
now?*”

* * * * *

G*laciers, ridges and rivers without end,*
these differences, black on white.

A line, a color, a printed page.
A map’s measure of the Earth’s music
or a madman’s dictation?

The sure and certain knowledge that
others have been there before me.
Oh yes, the world is round!
(What a marvelous returning!)

A child draws the hands of a clock
such seriousness,
five, eight minutes pass.

But her face,

so full of frustration, surprise,
seeing what’s written
belongs to the past.

Belongs to the past,
But one keeps going, all the same...

And everywhere, echoing,
these deafening sounds, beating the bounds,
of d r u m s, heavy d r u m s, beating the bounds.

So tell me please,
mapmaker past,
*“Where is the unknown
now?”*

* * * * *

*A letter, a word,
a sound, a phrase.*

Meter, matrix, mother of all,
tell me, tell me please.

Where to with this need to be lost?
Where can this little girl build her

man of stones?

To mark that place where
maps have dragons and
trails have tails wrapping
round themselves,

where all is fire,
motionless,
ablaze,
no sound,
no sign,
steady light.

Part III

Without

A world without light or
sound is thinkable,

but not a world

without

movement.

Four Romances

(1)

Tuning:—it
was as if a light

were carried slowly,
in a measured way,
from player to player
to player,

a light passed on from the very first,
the original, of all earth-bound fires.

Bright star burning,
not without passion,
not without ash.

(2)

It was the beauty
of the writing,—the
proportioning on the page,
that intrigued the scholars most.

They had only fragments, but
they had to be poems, dozens
of them, that much they knew,
they had to be.

They would count the letters, and
what appeared to be the breaks between
the words on a page. Patterns emerged.
And theories concerning meaning
were proposed and circulated.

And yet, it was the rhythm—the sound
of the words—we mustn't forget:
they had to be poems, that much
they knew—that remained a mystery.

As time passed on, the character of this
absent sound, of its spirit it could be said,
became a source not of clarity but rather
of great confusion to them, finding no
proper place in their lexicon of ancient
knowledge, in their hypothesised *ars poetica*.

And so at once they did, and yet did not,
notice that something was missing in their

rooms filled with learned yet
strangely mute—one could
almost say—disembodied,

conjectures.

(3)

On the podium, a man
professed that a pipe of crude
concrete made the same sound
as a flute made of gold; that, indeed,
*“Sirs—a vibrating column of air
is a vibrating column of air.”*

Listening, the young woman felt
such a rage well up within her that
she wanted to run up and gouge
out his eyes.

But then she thought,

“No— “

She would have her chance
to demonstrate the truth
of her sound,

although she knew that few
among them would care to listen.

(4)

No one had taught her
how to tune the strings.
She simply knew. Without
knowing why, she sensed that,

beneath each sounding string
there lay a band of silent
sound as big as the world itself.

She would turn the pegs
until the precise moment a
string touched this source
and was illumined by it.

And this she thought was love, as
big as the world itself, and yet,
so intimate and small she could
hold it in her hands.

And still she knew that, if
she were to hold it too tightly,
as hers and hers alone—

that this sound, no matter
how hard she might try, would lose
all its beauty, and that she would have
to stop and learn to tune again.

Mystery Flower

It was simply there,
waiting almost,
in an abandoned field.

There were roads nearby.
And a noise that made them
uneasy about lingering too long.

They had all come to study it. And
debate its form, origin,
next of kin.

There was the problem of a name.
And proper epithets. And, of course,
there was the issue of a specimen.

Should they risk transplanting it?
Or would a leaf be enough? No, they
all knew, although not one of them

dared say it out loud:—They must have
a flower. Yes: a single, whole, flower.

That is how they found them. All standing
stones frozen in a circle about a mysterious,
empty center. Outstretched hands gesturing
to the heavens,

—eyes closed,
mouths,
still fully opened.

Two Little Poems about Nothing

(1) Zero

Zero,
such a shy performer,
at first hiding behind the no's "n",
you step out onto the clear, open page;

0,

inside your tight boundaries lies amazing space,
the mouth of a bottomless well dropping down into
the dark waters of unknown significance,
where absence is not naught and a mere
nothing adds more to the already full.

Cipher of silence, swollen round with fresh beginnings,
of curtains about to open, the choir's first breath... . . .

Origin of origins which comes forever before
the sound which can never be played.

(2) No Reply

.....This waiting for that which does not come,
perhaps, *will* not come.....rings left in-
complete.....

The paper which remains blank after so
many years, turned yellow and dry,
still thirsty for rain;

The book left half-read, whole shelves
full of dust and desire;

The ardent letter which finds no reply,
a hole burnt open in nothing;

.....The song spreads its wings and waits for warm air,
and wait it must, for in a room without echoes
we quickly stop our play.....

Part IV

Mirrors

A Die Falls . . .

A die falls.
The sharp sound of plastic and wood
meeting the
table's hard
surface.
Unpredictable,
each event isolated by
a lack

of relationship,
not tied to a past. The die has
no purpose, no direction,
just steps in a disconnected chain,
each moment unaware of the
next.

Though thought cannot for-
see which number will face up as
the die comes to rest,
it does see pattern,
a shape to the movement.

The dance as
a whole has order,
perhaps not
the design of a governing mind,
but predictable all the
same.

Isn't it strange?
Randomness repeated does
not look like
accident.
Rather,
it gives one a sense
of an intelligence near by.
Is that

what they had in mind
in laying the two sides of a
split marble slab, one next to the
other, the intricate weave of
the dragon veins, left the reverse of
right?

These patterns in two's
bring us somehow closer to home.
The die comes to rest
on a '3'
but we need a '2' since one of

any thing
makes no difference,

makes no place
for our butterfly, waiting so
patiently till now, to spread its
wings.

Procrastination . . .

How strange, this agonistic split
between two conflicting voices;
one, a relentless conductor,
the other,
a dreamer and somewhat lazy.

One will have me write
that letter
(so long overdue),
not allowing any holding
back.

The soft one, however, likes to
wait, preferring to
defer—
“Tomorrow will do just as well...”
Sometimes I wonder
which one is really
me, or is
‘me’

something more
like friction, an endless loop of
“yes” and *“no’s”*
grinding
round and around in runaway?

Day is the realm of the easy-
going-put-off, while conductors
come out at night to rehearse their
“should-have-dones.”
“*You didn’t write today,*” he shouts,

as I pretend to
sleep, he keeps
rolling me over and over,
prodding me with his
stick.

Surely, time is in the turning,
a loop tied into
a knot
which grows heavy with tomorrows...
Sometimes I wonder
if I could break the
circle, or
is

that just more
delaying, more contradictions
between two

voices,
strict by night and put off by day?

Pianoforte . . . *for Edgar Varèse*

Pythagoras's harp
now lies mute
on its
side,
covered with the wood
of a black forest.

Three teutonic legs stand firmly.
What a difference! This step by
step movement from soft
to loud and
back a-
gain,
abrupt shifts now accompanied
by the subtle fruits

of mechanical
invention.

Recalcitrant leaps of five scaled
down by
the overwhelming
power of ten, hands walking the
threads of an ancient
loom strung tightly with the rough cords
of a black and white
weave. Whether strings or

snare, an astounding
tool, pure space!
For time sits lightly on a four-
legged stool
of inter-
national design.

Striking, these orders
of the mind,
of thought
made
manifest, a danc-
ing chorus held in

the hand or a hand holding us?
What's the difference? A neutral,
eternal instru-
ment? Quite doubt-
ful. More
like
a light in the dark having for-
gotten that it's just

a light and
not the sun.

Of course, what could we display at
all with-
out measure, without
a bed to hold the stream, a smooth
surface for the cream-
like shades of the moon is the key,
the key to these dark
spaces behind the

brilliance of Mozart's
smile, an un-
known place where the birds go in winter,
flying through
endless skies,
sure wings, silent breath.

Mirrors . . .

Some days, I
look in the mirror
seeing more gray hairs than brown, yet

today,

the color of youth
seems to speak to me more clearly.

How thought plays
tricks, pushing me back
and forth like a bike in the wind;

one day,

it gives me wings, then,
friend turned to foe, my wheels are stones.

Part V

Roads Without End
A North American
Triptych

Roads Without End

for Jackie and her owls

From the
brush of a clear cut,

two bright
eyes leap out at you
and disappear into the night
like images of
some treeless future
flaring up out of the tangled
undergrowth
of destructions past.

In such
darkness,

the rattling
of the empty truck
seems almost hushed, somehow muted,

headlights cutting a
straight line path
down logging roads that know no end.
An echo in the
forest at night, like no other

sound.

The air of the empty spaces
between the trunks of
giant trees
resonates
in stillness
like the deep darkness
between distant stars. But this is
no echo.

A woman calls out
and calls out
again, three sounds each followed
by a slide into silence.

And a
bird replies.

This has happened before, but each
time she stands breathless,
this most primal of dialogues,
two beings no longer alone
in the world.

The flashlight's beam, the
illumination
of which it has no need, the head
slowly turning to
the left.

But the
eyes—so dark, so utterly motionless.

The woman suddenly senses
how strange this is...
She has come to help but is not
at home here, her movements somehow
out of tune
with the presence that looks
down on her
from the snag above.

She so wants to help,
to carry this bird in her arms
to some safe place, far
away from the smell of diesel
and the ripping, greedy sounds of

saws.

But the
bird says no,

as if it somehow understood
and sensed what was to come.
The woman checks her watch and marks
a map, turns
and walks steeply down

into a thousand
years of patient growth,
and into
the persistent, echoing howl
of a

bird and
the sadness of its

un-

neces-
sary,

ir-

rever-
sible

loss.

*(Flat Bottom Valley,
Mount Adams Wilderness,
Washington, USA,
summer of 1989)*

Hamadryad

It begins.
A map, a line, a
road is built.

One tree falls,
a cascade follows,
slopes left naked in the wind.

Look alike seedlings
in row after row, a handful
of pennies
for fifty
tons lost.

...This necessary a-
symmetry...

A saw's steady journey into
the tree's
distant past,
a year of growth cut
away in a second or two.
A man looks—
that moment of hesitation
as the great

fall begins . . .
First silent, a holding of the

breath, then

the air splitting on
either
side, two huge waves, the
swell, the crash.
Even the hand holding the saw

is brought down
to
earth.

Such a
dilemma,

this need of
wood, this need
of trees.

But need we be
the one who cuts the
weave?

Single trees
are not the forest
as separate sounds
make no great passion.
Where does the music
go?

Have you not heard the
tree-spirit sing
through the wood of the
oboe, the
violin?

These gifts of
the forest
which are made to last.

But I play my song
on a broken
violin,
the crass and scratchy sound which
suffering

makes.

I *am* the naked slope, cut clear
of trees,
torn open
with a muddy road.
But how can I resist the saw

when the saw
is
me?

Concord, MA

(Walden Pond)

for Henry David Thoreau

In America stands a house,
simple, rough hewn, like
a song which speaks eloquently
of important
things
with
words
from everyday life.
Just one room, it is made of wood,

with high glass windows on either
side, a place where the movement of
light could be studied
and known well.

*“A melody, as it were,
imported into the wilderness.”*

A door,
a bed,
a table,
a cooking stove of

black cast iron, a hearth made of stones.
And there's a wooden traverso

lying on the bed. Did he play?
What kind of sound would
a flute make in such a house?
Would he play
with the door open?

Clearly, this is a house in which
one must play
alone, sit and watch
the winter fire and the spring
ice crack, break up and begin to
flow. This is a house
where the necessary has been

patiently
mined from
the superfluous
like a rock that comes out of the
earth whole, not in need of any polish.

His life was this work.
The rock, the word, the life were all
one,
indivisible,
and that is so rare.

“A vibration of the universal lyre,”

This is what you've lost,
America...

The rocket's red glare
has entered your heart's
house and burst
it apart.

What remains
is a
shoddy shack.

Torn away from the
shores
which gave
so much life,
a derelict now on display.

You have gouged holes
in the Earth at the edge of his song.
Do you still remember the words?
Something
about....?

Yes...

In Concord is no
harmony, America, don't
you hear? No future.
Grave proof through this night
that our heart is not there?

Part VI

On the Wayside

Wanderer

Moving,
always moving, and

living inside movement. Not the
artful, cyclic, back
and forth
of the migratory birds, but
more the
discrete
stammer
of a tongue finding its way down

the tangled
streets of peregrine
words;

Not

the fountain's smooth, continuous,
laminar flow, nor
the fractal exuberance of
white water,
but a broken movement of stops and starts,
our passageway to the wayside,
to the
travail of

these necessary crossings
of arbitrary borders...

Light. Easy.
Taking refuge among the trees.

The rhythm, of cautious walking,
a weaving
together
of the unfamiliar and half-
forgotten,
picking up songs as we go like
so many seeds
moving from home to

home on
the fur of our pants.

The Color Black

for raven

The raucous sounds of birds burned
black with rage,
banished forever
to a cage
with fear for bars, victims of
their own inauspicious presence
on battlefields past.

Waiting.
Sensing what

was to come.
The smell of rotting

flesh. (Did they know who was to die?)
Ah, but this unbearable silence
filled with
thought's ravenous flies
biting at the brain's tender meat.

Such a bird
is no friend.

But who is lacking in light? Is no
rapprochement possible? Do we
not feel for
this creature

whose wings
must fly through
skies
clouded with
death's image?

See the clarity of their calm
indifference.

Soaring quietly now from
their high place of safety, a day-
time

witness

to our ancient dread of night.

Street Dogs

Two small dogs without
a domain, the open street a
home. No hard walls, no
master,
nothing to protect.

A duo barking
on dog star days, the music last-
ing till deep into the summer night.
Our w a s t e is their joy, their freedom,
our neglect.

African Drummer

A face full of sun,
a wall made of bricks,
a black man,
eyes dancing
with fingers on bubbles of air;

The bucket's plastic
is the skin of his drum,
while an empty cup gathers coins
of recognition, of rhythms,
not made of the counted bits of city glass

but felt, grown,
from water and earth.
Travelers walk by,

their steps beating a different kind
of time, the
push and pull of distant places . . .
but here, now, some stop, listening,
this attraction of centers, points
where
energies converge.
the strangely familiar flowers

from some far
away land, a land
once ours, but which we left behind.

No one knows the language he sings,
yet the body knows,
sensing some other order of movement,
a movement which turns
around the source of his smile,
which is not of this
place, not,
of this clime.

*(for an anonymous street musician,
Central Station,
Amsterdam, Holland
Winter of 1988)*

Guru

As the door closes, a jingle
of bells—raining, cold,
the shop is warm but not crowded.
She looks out the display window
onto the narrow,
busy street—small cars,
pedestrians, a woman with
a child on the

back of her
bike navigates the
flow...

She sees this,
amazed, the so determined look
of the young mother,
an envelope of
protection from somewhere. Thoughts cross
her mind this way—*cars, traffic, noise*—
which she can't quite get
hold of . . .

* * *

The berries of the mountain ash
are almost too big
for the tiny winter wrens. He
stops, amazed, counts seven or more

all on the same tree;
they show no fear;
ecstatic with fall, they are gone.
The limbs of the bare

tree shiver,
his camera, covered
with wet snow...

* * *

She sees this
as the book slowly opens upon
a face, an image

of a man,
seated, eyes closed, with

a triangulated silence,
a projected calm,
the sound of words she repeats by
heart—*mantra*, *yantra*, *tantra*, like
fingers ticking off
overtones on a taut
little drum. The face frightens her,
yet fills the shop with

an intense
aura of longing.
“*Go away!*” she closes the book,

(*“Go away “...”*)

Sitting, hands folded,
they have been there all morning long,
s i t t i n g, snap goes the stick, s i t t i n g.
a faint temple bell
rings; it is over...

“Thought,” she
thinks. (*“Thought “....”*)

* * *

The blackbird begins his practice
once day equals night,
snow mixed with mist, just barely light,
he tests the silence with a few
notes, listening, then
glides swiftly down the
mountain, low, wings closed, just above
the surface of the

ice—
wings opening on

his look-
out rock, a fluent flourish of
chirping metallic figures and

he is
motionless.

(She thought,
perhaps she should get... a

cushion;
she does have a tendency to

fall

asleep.)

But the rose quartz—little candies

from the tummy of
the Earth, she thinks, looking down at
the face again— “*Meditation,*
that is what they say,
in meditation.”

“Yes...”

(“*thought “ ...)*

* * *

He stops, abruptly, ramming in-
to a patch of hard,
crusted snow, then sits back and lets
go, traversing swiftly, resting
his uphill ski, “*There,*
perfect”...leaps out on his right foot,
then left, finding the rhythm, breath,
down the mountain, fast.....

*“Sandal-
wood is best,”* she thinks and closes

the book—
outside, rain, *“Freedom, from the...known?”*

...very fast,
“Too fast,” he thinks, as the snow turns
to slush.....She opens her eyes—turns, and

clicks the door
shut on the image.
With a muted tinkling, she thinks,

“thought...” “Freedom, from...”

a faint
jingling of

bells . . .

*(Amsterdam, on de Singel,
Winter of 1990)*

Spina Christi

As the earth leans back into
the sun,
little christ-bodies
are aban-
doned, left
out to die in the acid mists of
northern nights. green trees, dirty streets,
no hope.

Roots

cut short in brown burlap bags, a
cover for an ancient trust now
broken. New friendship found in the
ornaments
of alleyways, black bag mountains,
old TVs. Before
sunsight, the sound of strange tongues, but
who could understand

these men in their trucks who come to
remove
the thorns of a city's
eyes? Yes, a true gathering
together of
divine
errors
all. And in our sleep, tug boats going

out

to sea.

*(Amsterdam, de Pijp
Christmas, 1990)*

A Gathering Place

In a far
corner, glass
opaque and crusty with old manure,

the messy backyard
of the barn's windowsill. Dark. Still,
a gathering place
of the preterite,
for those

used-up
empty, broken accessories,
containers
of a farmer's life;
During

cleaning time, a place
passed over,
a bit out of reach,
but too close, to put out of
mind.

The Dance of Chance

A toss
of the dice...

The machine has no problem with
randomness,
abstracting order from chaos,
whole songs computed at will. But
the beauty of the butterfly's wings?
Just blind permutations, the in-
determinate
survival, selection, of small

dotted poems

in a
sequenced array, or
the sure sign

of the
open road, the future's pathless

land

unprecedented
possibilities

a l l ?

Tramontane

Bits of
labor, left

behind, tasks now foreign to straight
speaking tongues.

Closed doors reluctantly open
as that which is unfamiliar
is brought
into the outside within....

The necessary work
of inessential people, guests

held

hostage,
a ransom
s e l f - paid, the

outlandish
price of membership to these strange

worlds

of
aliens

a l l.

A Woman Alone

Late.

After a concert,
walking home.
An evening shared with
music and
friends.

The city's
night sky, dimly gray, the moon and
stars, muted, hiding behind

tall brick buildings, bright lights.
Time in the city
flows differently at night; not the
measured beat of the day's lock-step,
but an

unpredictable, many-voiced
movement
like the water of a narrow
ocean pass, cliffs on either side
hyaline sheets, dark, motionless, one
upon the
other, suddenly swallowed whole
by

eddies
so vicious they ravage themselves.

She senses
this, in
the body, that tender place, just

below the navel
which itself turns and
sometimes reverses directions,
as the heart beats the
changes of an unsure safe passage...

No task for
the timid, to call this place home,
to live with

this necessary
ambiguity
of movement at night—
the shadow can go both ways,
slipping back into its silent

light post,
or lashing out at you, with a . . .

The Literal Man

Stretched between the most distant of
stars and the
sparks which fly from the
candle's match
is the silver string of
young intelligence,
a vibrant face among the flowers,
resonant with the music of all

springs.

Still close
to the ground
where perception begins, before
thought's cells grow thick and woody walls,
and where meanings still
flow and freely merge,
where triangles and squares become
rounded in rhyme, and where the moon
is an apple on the
tree which has its roots in the sky.

Break the string
and the apple falls
into the lap of an unhappy

grown-up, eyes dull with
years of TV,

the life of one channel only
which does not change, which does not change;
where sense stays at home, alone, a-
fraid to venture out,
and becomes
precisely, neatly, bounded in

time.

Break the string
and the stars
at night will fail to cohere and

start to fall,
no longer turning
around their centers,

no longer,
threaded together,
in song.

On the Wayside

for Owenuma Blue Sky

What's a weed but the unwanted noise
of another man's music.

But beyond the margin,
that little strip of uncultivated life
to the side of a well-traveled road,
rank growth is my splendor.

Everything needs a place to be,
and here, even the weeds feel at home,
a free space where the troublesome
have gathered together, un-

folding their own songs,
f l o w e r i n g
in peace.

*(the Alps,
Winter of 1987)*

Part VII

Leaves

*Sometimes,
even trees notice*

*there's a fence
between them.*

First / Last

(1)

Each day the first, new
shapes grow out of the disappearing
darkness, the color of damp leaves

and pine. Trees

standing firm, giving
back our movement, your voice, first light.

(2)

This patience of trees,
an unmoveable trust of the earth
upon which they stand, nets weav-

ing themselves

into the light, the
dark, growing in a l l directions.

(3)

Walking out into
the growing darkness, events of
the day dropping like leaves after

the first freeze

of fall. Windless days
not returning, each night the last.

(0)

Leaves

(1)

Oak leaves: white, black,
red to scarlet and bur—

smooth lobes
to prickly bristles
and back, bringing out
the myriad accents
and turns of a phrase.

(2)

Small, quiet pond with
round water drop of leaf,
no need of stem.

See it rise...
into lance, feather,
perfect heart-shaped form.

(3)

The summer fades behind you,
as late one morning you
look up from your work,

and the sound of the leaves
is suddenly drier, higher
in pitch, and your thoughts

naturally turn from arcane theory
to the facts and practice of shelter
and the coming cold.

Far away in the mountains
it is already snowing, and
a deep and uneasy quiet descends
upon all the passes heading South.

Did they cross safely
to the other side?

The crows know that this is when
the pulse and flow of rivers ease, and
the orchestra of strings stops,

now listening, to tune and tune
again, sensing the hushed sway
of trunks in the spruce forests
of the far North.

How broad and slowly the
waves of wind pass through
the crowns of tall trees.

A hocketus of shrill cries marks
the crows' departure, as an empty
branch bobs nervously about;

arched back, a quick trill
of the paws, and
the gray squirrel has
stashed another piece of gold.

(4)

Perhaps leaves fall simply
to carry away all that we
thought we needed to say.

And perhaps trees in this
way purify themselves each
year knowing that there is

no thought so large that it
cannot be written on
the smooth, plain surface
of but a single—

leaf.

Two Little Poems about Everything

(1) One Morning

One morning, the mountain farmer goes out
to milk his goats and never comes back;

A quiet stream leaps from the edge of a high
granite cliff and disappears into the late
summer air;

Sitting in an alpine meadow, more flowers
than grass, the sound of delicate bells
rings out,

 wave after wave,

from the metal which sleeps in rocks.

(2) Stone Mountains

If one carries the mountain in one's heart, to
pick up the stone is to pick up the mountain,
the world.

But for us, a stone is just a stone and nothing
more, just so much dead weight,
like a pack which grows heavier
with each passing step.

Half way up, half broken, turning back...
and the sound of stone mountains
just *is*—in the wind.

Part VII

Seasons

The Fall Moor

Constantly running about from high to low and here to there, this freedom of movement, one of our most precious of evolutionary gifts, does have its dark side.

Will we ever know...

the rounded repose of water at rest, of
a small pond in a highland moor;

first but a shadow on the winter snows,
the melting then its rising, gladly receiving
each drop of the spring rains,

so freely offering a protected space for the
throaty love songs of creatures of a two-fold
nature.

Or the motionless resilience of ancient trees,
inhabitants of a lowland forest;

Each day, the beech renews its romance
with the space into which it has grown so
slowly and knows so well,

it has long ago made room for the nails of the
farmer's fence, having eased around these
wires with prickly barbs, a skin which grows
smooth with age.

November Snow

To the side of a cascade of little waterfalls,
the yellow-golden leaves of a mountain ash
drop one by one into the clear pool where the
water gathers itself together and rests a while.

A hermit might build a hut here simply
to count the numbers of their passage.
Sitting, watching, working out the intricacies
of a lute's tablature, pondering how the

turning, tuning downwards of but a single string
shifts our gaze from the steady rise of soaring
birds and blue skies to the sound of a minor
key's slow, continuous descent into earth.

Falling, everything falling. After a sharp
freeze, the avalanche alders of the north-facing
slopes give up their dry, dark brown leaves in
but a single day. Branches growing along

the ground, then steeply rising like a strung bow,
they're ready to disappear under six feet of winter snow.
Along the path where no one has been for weeks,
the sweet, rusty fragrance of the alpine rose brings

a muted echo of solstice pink. Without a trace of wind
or even a nutcracker about, the needles of the larch
forest tumble round and around themselves in slow

motion, falling to the mossy floor below.

November, that time of year when the lost, longed for strophes of verses naturally rise within us on the sound of low plucked strings. What chord might give back the movement of the black lichen's meticulous growth on its granite rock?

The farmer leaves the kids home with the pumpkins and goes with his wife on weekend trips to Paris and New York to buy chestnuts and find out, while the professor takes over the hogs in the barn, chews on lean bacon and asks the same question.

Two old crows, always the same couple, one with a few feathers missing from its left wing, fly the same trajectory every day, slightly right of center valley, West then East;

They gave up trying to figure out the fingering to the song long ago. The furry marmot watches and blinks his eyes for the last time from his lookout rock before retreating into his winter hole, as an eagle,

wings tightly closed, rests, far above on its cliff. A single car, lost perhaps, shifts gears along the one lane road that feels its way up the misty mountain, all listening, listening for the sound of that chord which forever falls.

Winter Solstice

That quiet time of year when thoughts
of the past naturally turn to face the
stars of the North, and we sit in front
of the winter fire, alone,

gently burning away the burden of what
has been. Old books go, manuscripts go,
bills, letters never sent, even things we
wish we would have said. We watch

them burn, the crackling sound of the dry
pine bringing the hard, heavy oak into flame,
irregular reminders of the unexpected
which broods and ripens

within the silent, glowing coals. That dark
time of year of many candles and delicate strings
of white lights that help us remember
the slower, more subtle rhythms

of the Earth itself, now not confused
by too much of the sun's glare. Some spaces
are meant to be empty; they're precious,
vulnerable, but oh-so-easy prey for

the religious contractors pounding at the door or trying to get down the chimney at night. But the fire is hot enough, and there's the simple promise of handmade gifts which do not arrive

until spring. For weeks now, the sound of carols, old and new, has been heard during the evening hours, a sound passed on from village to village, like a fire which must not be allowed to die out.

The Winter Moor

Deep, fluffy, snowshoe snow, falling
day after day. No wind, the ground
slowly rising, covering color,
rocks, small trees;

smoothing out the many variegated
accents and differences of the summer
moor into long, white, sweeping,
elegant, legato lines suspended
in time like clouds to be
walked upon.

If you could see it, the moon would seem
so close that you could poke a pole at it.

No path, even the grouse don't seem to be about, and
the pool has vanished without a trace.

They say there are places so powerfully peaceful and
quiet, that, if one were to play a properly tuned, long
wooden alpine horn in the right direction,
at the right moment,

that the sound of the higher partials would carry
over every visible peak
and beyond,

and in some deeply forested,

remote valleys,

not be heard for more
than a million years.

Ringling the Changes at Candlemas

Drifting, cold, deep snow everywhere,
filling all the unseen cracks in the houses.
The furry snow bunnies are meeting up on
winter mountain, and the priests have run
out of money and have all gone home.

The children light candles for each
star in the night sky while the
grownups drink hot coffee, sit at
the round table, and speak in earnest
of getting rid of all the tanks.

Heavy metal, slow metal, cold metal,
the sound of bells, thousands
of bells, swaying back and forth,
a wave of joyful sound,

passing on from city to city
to city, some say,
as swiftly as
the turning of the Earth itself.

Part IX

For a Friend and a Crow

for Paolo

Mid-morning, sitting in new
snow with an old friend;

an eagle flies by with a crow
on its tail.

Above, below—always with two begins
the movement of our world.

Oracle—
a reader of signs

*The blackbird runs nervously in
quick staccato steps, yellow beak
thrust forward, then stops,
cocks its ear to the ground, then runs
hurriedly again.*

Old, old:—, she
sits next to the spring.
The water appears suddenly
at the surface of the earth like
a music which steps
into the world
but reluctantly, beginning
over and over

again, rehearsing
in a whisper the faint sounding
sibilants of an almost vanished
tongue. She listens, but
knows not from where the water comes.

Cool, clear, constant
in its flow, the water is un-
touched by rain, snow or summer sun.

Watching, swaying back and forth, she
places her open hand above

a stream of minute
whirlpools, then looks down into the
swirling throat of the
largest, turning her
arm swiftly in a counter gyre,
murmuring something.

all but inaudible.
She leans forward and pinches off
a sprig of watercress, tasting
the stem's peppery
brassica, then swallowing the white

flowers
whole.

* * *

The men gather around in a
tight circle watching
the one, who, seated on the ground,
tosses the yarrow sticks. They all breathe in
with a gasp, their hands
raised into the air,
then pointing down, quickly, lifting
patterns up into

terse talk of
meaning. The man in their middle
slowly traces a form in the sand.

Out of the river,
a turtle rises and crawls to
land, head, neck fully extended
as if it had been from
shore since before the beginning of time.

* * *

The colorful display flashes
as the three men watch the
numbers turn all but instantly
into black figures. The clever talk
and laughter stop as
the message in bold
script steps down from top to bottom,
predicting opportunity, but

great risk...
they must move quickly.

Crack goes the shell, the
heat of the fire fracturing its
underside into myriad
storylines, waiting,
like a hand, to be deciphered and read.

Crash goes the code, the
cold of the night bifurcating
into myriad losses,
everywhere, losses,
like a terrible wind, taking all in its stead.

“All roads lead to the hidden center,”
begins the prophecy. “Very
auspicious. From there, proceed with
the greatest caution,
Follow in steps of 2s and 3s.”

...swallowing the white
flowers whole...

“The yarrow stems should be gathered
in late summer; it
grows frequently to the side of
roads, on poor soils, in large
patches, much space between
completely erect single
stems which are woody and almost square.
The white, sometimes pink,

flowers arrange themselves in tight
umbels in patterns measured in fours,
while the delicate leaves
of many tiny feathers
climb up around the
central axis as a crow calls,
in neat couplets of five
against of two. A powerful plant;

it should
be used with care—.”

The blackbird runs nervously in
quick staccato steps, yellow beak
thrust forward, then stops,
cocks its ear to the ground, then runs
hurriedly again,
a different direction;
it too is confused about the
days, singing now

with hard frozen snow
on the ground.

A fish, (was it a
small trout?) nibbles at the surface
of the quiet pool and is gone,
ripples ringing in the
clear spring water...How did it happen?

Crack goes the shell;
Crash goes the code;
the cold of the night,
a myriad storylines, waiting,
like a wind, taking all in its stead.

How did it happen?
She looks and sees...
She looks and sees...
Before, after,
now.

It took the
whole world
by surprise.

Ironweed

Some colors are known
to attract not only

the wingèd creatures of delight
that fly the skies of the warmer seasons,

but also the young heart which is
sometimes seen to flower even
in the very old.

Stepping out of the universal gray
of newspaper life,

closing her guide, thinking to herself,
living in a world where even
the goodness of mother's milk
must sometimes be questioned,

she needs not a soul to tell her
that, this color, this peaceful being
of high summer,

is good, is beautiful—
some might say,

the very essence of what is real.

Far Away from Home

A radio plays in the empty kitchen.

Wind-eyes, opening to the West.

A gaze, motionless, longing for distance;

In the background, a keyboard's thin,
electric sound, its bass firmly
rooted in the past, but higher, five fingers
feeling nervously about, far away from home.

A gold ring, stuck on water-soaked hands,
rolls out that evening through a crack in the door.

At night, in thought's house, a question
walks from street to street, alone.

It asks,

*“Which way,
to the river,
to the other side?”*

But no one seems to know.

There isn't a bridge.

There isn't even any water about.

And so, even the richest of sounds
is so easily lost, finding no echo, no
willing ears, no smooth surface upon
which to spread its waves.

A Witcher of Wells

Before she can say “*Don’t!*”, with one quick slice of his knife he cut another branch from the tree.

*“Hold it like this.
Both hands.”*

He walked slowly but rhythmically, she, at an uneasy distance, following.

“There,” he says.
“They cross here,” making a slow gesture with one of his hands, pointing down.

It was not her disbelief, at least not at first, but when another is sure of a thing you can neither sense nor see,

how are you to know?

He handed her his stick and with a few strokes drove a stake into the ground.

“Could he be right?” she thought.

That first winter, the new well
didn't freeze. He had said it wouldn't.

Years later, always come fall, she
took a simple pleasure in showing
her children, and then her children's
children,

the striking yellow-orange petals
of flowers which seem neither too late
nor too early,

but always just in time to remind her
of the mysterious secret life of twigs
which point both North and South, and
the gift of pure, deep,

sweet water.

Under the Tulip Tree

She thought quietly to herself:

*“Why is it that some people
look as if they’re wearing
uniforms even when they’re not?
Do I look like that?”*

Sitting under the tulip tree
she knows so well, full crown of leaves,
summer sun warming her face, thinking,

was it Sunday, or was it
still Saturday? She was trying
hard to remember...

The night before had
been hard, intense. They
had lost two, or was it three?

The gray weather-beaten spruce
planks of a bench made for two,
asking for company,

an unbroken view of a lake
reflecting clearly the suchness

of a welcome morning
free of work,

already filling with the collective
thought of

*“too little of this,
and too much of that.”*

pondering, as her cigarette begins
to burn slightly too hot,

how these large birds of endless skies
and open waters

move so gracefully together,
so peacefully feet-flat-on-earth
and neck-held-high-in-morning-air,
among and within themselves, were
it not for the slight trace of fear

she sensed they still felt for her.

American Linden

*“Sopra e basso—sempre due cose, inizia
così il movimento del nostro mondo.”*

It was a blessing to be out in the open,
out of her studio.

She watched the leaves of the Linden,
how they were beginning to lose
their shine and give themselves
to the duller surfaces and more serious
work of making summer wood.

May was her month, she felt—
the month which did not so much end
as dovetail with a long whispering
diminuendo far into the breadth of June.

That is how she felt:
Full crown of heart-shaped leaves,
alternating gracefully on the twigs as
a counterpoint of voices in a choir.

Moving, all leaves together, this was
texture, pure space. Time,
she knew, could be such a bore,
having to sit patiently at the keyboard,
or worse, listening to others play,
until she had all five or six voices flowing

in her hands. But the Linden, with its
bands of shimmering leaves,
was simply there, all at once. She
could so easily move from whole
to single trembling leaf and back again.

“Was this a woman’s space?” she asked herself.
Men, she knew, were wont to compare leaves
on a tree to pages in a book, pages
upon which something must be composed.

But to hear the sound the Linden makes in May
was for her to feel the same afternoon wind
move across her smooth skin, tapping toes barefoot
in cool grass, listening to the slow rhythmic
waves of sound.

She looked down into the score
she had brought with her. She found her
fingers rehearsing the movements, going
over them, again and again.

“That’s it!” she thought, erasing a
figure that had never felt quite right.
From her Grandmother, she had learned
to speak to her thumbs like a pair of stout
twins, anchoring the rest of a large family,
but just as easily stumbling a bit
behind the others.

“There!” she said aloud, her right hand

running off the page like a hungry robin,
then stopping just as abruptly.

Would she dare? she thought anxiously.
“*Tonight?*” Suddenly she was full of fear.

Tonight was going to be her night, her concert. Hers.
She repeated the fingering, right hand, then
left, again and again, then singing
the melody as she moved. “*Yes, yes!*” she conducted
herself, letting the score fall to the ground.

Like someone suddenly aware of time as
measured by the clock, she stopped, looked up
and leapt to her feet, running under the Linden
tree like a frightened little girl hiding herself
from intruders. “*Was that why he never left the studio
towards the end? No more concerts. Just recordings.
Was it going to rain?*”

She took hold of a leaf as the wind shook
the tree, never before seeing the pale green
of the fingerlike bracts just below the unopened
blossoms. She could sense a much older
woman than herself collecting
them for fall teas. She opened
her eyes.

“*Have to go now. Practice. Prepare.*”
Even as a small child, this had been
all she had ever known.

Tonight was going to be her night. Hers. Running back to the house, almost forgetting her other papers, all the letters that needed attending to, she could hear the music now within her as if completely surrounded by it and yet somehow above it, as if she were listening from both in- and outside the sound, hearing it as a clear crystal taken in on all its sides in but a single breath.

“Would he be there tonight?” she asked herself. *“Would he...?”*

She had sometimes noticed how, in a full hall with the lights dimmed, she would unexpectedly look up from the keyboard and see—her lips began to move with the sound of his slight accent—a face that seemed to emit a presence entirely its own.

“Would he, be...?”

She looked back and saw that the leaves of the tree were quiet now. Faces in a crowd, so close, so intimate, yet anonymous and so far away. She pressed the score to herself as never before, composed herself carefully, and was ready for whatever the night would bring.

North Face

*“Sein Wachstum ist: Der Tiefbesiegte
von immer Größerem zu seim.”*

*“His growing is: being defeated, profoundly,
by ever greater things.”*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Relief. Relief, the
deafening roar of the helicopter.
Relief. Relief.

She sat between the men,
shivering uncontrollably, the world
empty of sound, understanding nothing
of what they said. She saw only
the lips move, horrifyingly slow, time
and space ripped apart. *“Where
is he?”* she asked.

Their first night out
she had slept so deeply,
awakening with the coming
light, feeling the warmth on
her whole body, watching
the earth discovering
all the many colors, one by one,
as if for the first time.

She had heard the rocks fall,
but couldn't see them,
a high pitched buzz dropping off rapidly.
None had touched her.

She had had a premonition
the day before. He had dropped
one of the water bottles as
they both watched, together,
paralyzed in fear, how quickly it
accelerated beyond their grasp
and had slipped
from the ledge and out of

sight only to reappear ramming
against needles of granite and ice,
falling so far and fast that it separated
from the body of its sound.

He had broke her fear with
a gentle laugh, saying that if it
snowed again that day, they
would have water enough.

A photograph: Deeply tanned skin.
Serious face. Hair which had known
much sun and weather. The smile which
he carried with him always.

They gave her something warm to drink.
She pushed it away, then reluctantly,
shaking, took it to her lips. "*Where
is he?*"

After the shower of rocks,
there was only wind, and space,
a terrible empty space.

There was no weight
at the other end. She
hadn't pulled.

They were descending fast. "*Where is
he?*" None of the three men spoke.

A photograph: She loved the ropes.
Everything about them, the feel,
the craft, the color, the ritual of
care, packing them out, of putting
them away.

They were descending fast. She noticed
the leather boots of one of the men, how
they seemed to fit so perfectly.
"*Where is he?*" she asked.

...p e r f e c t l y.

None of the three men spoke.
Even with the noise of the landing,
the world was still,
terrifyingly still—wholly,

still.

(Coda) Of Birds and Trees

Strong chinook winds have driven me
inside. From my window, I see
a young male blackbird, its eye rings
still dark, perched on a mountain ash.
The tree, also young, is leafless,
but bright red clusters of berries
grace its bare limbs like ripe ornaments
for a festival of fall.

The tree, the bird, swing back and forth
to the wind's irregular rhythm.
The bird's neck extends and shortens,
easily keeping his balance.
Eyes so alert, the head bends down,
first slowly, then quickly snatching
a little fruit, swallowing it
whole. Then he's off, another tree.

Birds don't stay long in one place. Or
is this just the way of birds and
trees? One must do the work of
staying put, roots firmly grounded
in rocky soil, new fruit each year;
while the other, flying freely
to unknown places, carries with
him the seeds of falls yet to come.

Cover images: *Fireweed & November Snow*
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