

## The Exquisite Poet is Alive and Well and Living Among Us

(Included in the anthology, *Five on the Western Edge*, [Momo's Press, '75] with four other poets, including Hilton Obenzinger, who'd written, *The Day of the Exquisite Poet is Kaput*, I took offense at the pronouncement, without trusting myself to challenge the implication.)

Someone said of my work, *either you're one of the great poets, or this is parody*, I said I was imitating a poet who didn't yet exist, I've written satirical one-man shows, my father called me the Moline Mimic, a woman said she had a hard time reconciling the man she knew with the one who wrote my poems, I told a fellow artist, thirty years ago, *I feel like I'm making it all up*, I once felt I could become the person walking in front of me, more easily than I could become myself, my inclination became to find the truth of something, of anything, of everything, and finally of the inherent nature of my being, I hung an admonishment on the wall, a headline, cut from a tabloid, *Tell the Truth, Stephen*, I was struck by the advice that Irwin Shaw gave young writers, *Tell the truth*, he said.

It pleases me when I'm called *genuine*, but when I was first in the city, I described myself in language that better fit someone else, imitating an ideal I imagined to be more acceptable, I remembered what others said about me, as if I were seeking guidance, one man said I was the most open person he'd ever met, but I was open to all the wrong people, a famous comedian's wife said he had two personae, one on stage and one at home, until only the stage persona survived, I've chosen to shed the hold of all personae, even as they accumulate in numbers, I once practiced what I called *instant intimacy*, the ability to adopt the characteristics of anyone I was with, so quickly it went unnoticed I was becoming like them, I wrote another desired lover, *If I alone ghost the space between us, I'll succeed only in vacating myself*.

After being with a teacher of awareness in self-recognition, I looked at who was sitting in my chair, I saw there was no one there, yet here I am, I thought I was without reliable identity, unable to be anything other than a parody of others, a parody of myself, our identity is lost when we die, except for the reality to be what we become and be what we are, in my search for who I was, I stopped trying to find myself when I found where I come from, until being like others to be myself held no more sway, these inherited and imitated selves cry to be let go, in this endless reality of who we are, when I let inherent reality declare itself, I see the birth of one man, undefined by circumstance, more true to himself than any other.

Living as a persona among others, I wonder how to lose this addiction, while continuing to practice it, here where adherence to persona is the way we communicate, it's the way we recognize each other in this parody of reality, I've come to anchor myself in the unknowable present, when I look to see who is sitting in my chair, I see no persona and no formless reality, either; instead, I see a being that defines them both, my concern is to be human, not in imitation of what's human, but in being what's true, at the center of this endless and temporary reality, this parody of reality, everywhere present, is where we live, it is where I continue to live, learning to be true to what's more present than anything we might call true or false, there's no imitation of reality that doesn't become a parody, even the truth of what's true is a parody, even in this clarity, I become a parody of myself, when I don't know what persona to show, in any state of being I might tie my behavior to, I resort to being present, without a way to be.

This is the only way that works, that doesn't falsify myself in the eyes of my own awareness, I can be at ease without a thought and without adopting any new thought to calm an errant anxiety, my living being is resolved in the expression of my existence, I'm at peace in its reality, but as soon as I speak, I begin to misrepresent myself, I listen to find a way to speak that doesn't do that, but there's no way to prevent the unpreventable, I can be still, and let reality speak, through these clouds of misrepresentation, this language, this man.

The direction for knowing of being is not in the world of relative realities, and its best advice for how to be is not in the world and not within what I call myself, I wake and walk amazed, at being here in this reality, I find there's no need for the resources of my tools in this vulnerability, I'm made secure by what I might fear, the flood of wanting to know everything there is to know, drowns out my innocence, until innocence returns, knowing the fullness of the heart, this is the direction of deepest knowledge, to rely on what remains, where everything to be known is most clearly known by the unknown within oneself.

One lives easily and fully in the unknowing of knowing itself, from its infancy to its surrender, this is walking in the marketplace, in all the ways one might be, this is walking in the emptiness of existence, without losing consciousness, this is living in the brilliance of constant wonder, living in awareness of inherent being, the exquisite poet thrives in empty wonder, and that makes him not the same as, and the same as, everyone alive.

## This Day on Earth

I think to describe the essence of being, the exquisite transience of this day on Earth, a moment in the life of this available existence, a cardboard box, set on top another cardboard box, leaves a shadow in its separation from the wall, it leaves the shadow a thing itself, wedged between the wall and the boxes, but before I give the shadow character it doesn't possess, *quiet resignation, fear of the light, pride in the chiaroscuro of beauty-defining imagery*, I see I'm already in a state of recognition, without a name, the bare hillside, the horizon, the blue-white clouds, color and line, all these I enjoy, without molding them into pets of thought and feeling, like putting a hat and coat on the dog and envy in the cat.

As inclined as my mind is to dress everything in self-serving imagery, I'm already filled with awe to be in this unclothed reality, but how do I call myself a poet, if I have nothing to say about what I see, in language as familiar as colorful costumery, I address the world that's unrecognized by its own standards, a couturier, rebellious on the runway, as I perfect my design to arouse the distributors' delight, and their excitement at my salability, or I speak of the spirit in the room, over here, by itself, over there, by that other part of itself.

In the habits of my language, by misdirection and silence, I might draw attention to the moment of existence that outperforms its players, with the space more vibrant than the actors, so the actors are known by their example, and known by their convenient avoidance of the presence the audience has come to the theatre to be a part of, the same presence that everyone is always a part of, all our senses and all we witness come to this stage to see what occurs, and while it matters to make what occurs into what matters to us, what makes us matter, before we meet, is the very thing we transform ourselves into, we put ourselves in front of ourselves, so we might exemplify what already exists in our own unexampled original reality.

That chair, across the carpet, has a presence, I call attention to its acceptance of what may come to be in its embrace, its sunlit surface, cut by a cast shadow, its silent service in a servant caste, a resting place for the sensual leg of a smooth-skinned visitor, or it has no calling and no career, no business and no duty, we see its presence with empty eyes, filled with what is, not with what we want to make it, not with what we want it to become, for our intellectual or sensual satisfaction.

What is, dissatisfies our dissatisfaction, and there begins the career of the exquisite poet, to make something of what is, when what is, remains greater when it is left unmade, and not even in itself, but in the very thing of nothing that only, in these words, slightly better than poorly, can the exquisite poet describe the reality of being itself.

An audience sits in rapt attention as a great actor plays King Lear, on stage in front of them; the audience sees themselves in the old monarch's convection, burning up the space of his life, a mirror is held up to a mirror, the isness fairly crackles with presence in the moment, and *something of nothing* is made real, inside the space of a being that only seems real, there's no way, poet, to describe this *isness*, it's already been clothed in mind, in feeling, in body, and in some innate wanting to become action, you can only trust the audience to see what becomes of your performance, in the flow of its still beauty, in the truth of its silent words in the wind.

## Love's Errant Quest

An old lover stopped by, and we went to dinner, and I saw something, in her presence, that revealed a change in this translucent reality, we haven't been together for years, and I've struggled with the thought of her, as if there was a question unanswered, a relationship unresolved, to either rejoin the love or resolve it with some kind of understanding, a woman, across the room, makes eye contact, as she speaks with her companion, there is, in this kind of moment, charged with resonance, something that happens one might poetically call communing with the goddess, but it has nothing to do with the sexual or any other kind of imagination, but when social commandments over-ride communing in the moment, we lose recognition of our deepest self, I thought I was seeing that recognition with my old friend and lover.

The time we were together was happy and I so desired her, I couldn't distinguish desire from companionship, and another sense confused my thinking, I'd been led to believe, as an act of faith, like an act of certainty, that I was not whole without a woman in my life, I was convinced that finding someone was the answer to something missing, *You need a woman to take care of you*, my mother advised, without voicing any alternative, I rejected being taken care of, but I accepted the archetype, in the company of any woman, in the intimacy of brief affairs, in committed relationships, or walking down the street, I sought to resolve an interpolated dilemma, and until the question of love was relieved, I suffered from my questioning, unanswered in the world, unasked by my inherent self, there is no mate for the unbroken soul, no halves are made whole, I suspect that others have felt the assault of my desire to answer the question I was taught to ask, *are you the one I need to be with to satisfy my need to be with someone?*

I've come to know a deeper reality I was seeking in my wayward search, what I felt with my old partner, was the absence of any search, dissolved in its recognition, this being, with no need to search for anything, carries nothing missing in its heart, inspires nothing missing in the mind, and when nothing is seen to be missing, the search is at an end, the house is full, no one's lost in the street or the jungle, no one needs to be found, this delight and relief is an awakening to anyone whose face I once searched, to discover my lost love, she's not here in my heart, she was never here in my heart, she's nowhere to be found, because she's nowhere to have been lost.

## The Quiet Death of the Sun

After many volumes of poetry, after a degree in writing, with awards and recognition, I came to realize that I believe in the essence of poetry, I've come to believe in myself as a poet, like coming to believe in oneself as a homosexual, despite the denigration, the dismissal, and the deliberate murder of homosexuals, in nearly every society, since the dawn of history, the great challenge to self-acceptance isn't rejection, I've never been called an abomination, but I've lived in the absence of common acceptance, the grudging, smiling tolerance, the silent and casual ridicule.

Few poets have been beaten or killed for being a poet, there's usually a political or sexual reason to kill a poet, as with Lorca, where death is the end of the social denial, but the course is set for anyone whose thought to be different, no matter their gift or their character, poetry is like a beloved old horse, that no one dare kill, and no one dare ride, poetry is kept in a stable of thought, without exercise, without feeding, left to fend for itself, as if this disregard nobilifies the profession, just as some poets apologize for imposing their poetry on their audience.

Coming of age in a hotbed of poets, where it was said there were five thousand poets and five thousand I-want-to-be-a-poets, after years of giving and attending readings, I noticed the same crowd at every reading, poets and their admirers, like cells of communists and their sympathizers, hiding in plain view from the authorities and the public, where they're thought to be peculiar or odd, self-involved or useless, suspicious, somehow un-American, shady, even perhaps criminal, picked up for sleeping in a doorway, I told a cop I thought poets and criminals had a lot in common, surprised, he said, *well, I never heard that one before*, a guy told a woman I found attractive, *don't ever get involved with a poet*, a man in a café said, *poets are like vampires, stealing love from everyone around them*, there was a time when this casual calumny didn't occur, Homer was beloved for telling the life of the people, Byron was an idol, whose poems sold out every printing, Shakespeare wrote when poetry was the common speech of the people's theatre, poetry can be counted on to dignify a politician's speech, but something has happened, since poetry was last embraced by all, in the way language has submitted itself to mass communication, as someone said, *poetry uses the same language I use, but I don't get it*, as if poetry was a conspiracy of the poets to exclude the rest of us.

Language has been made subservient to a commercial reality, we think the same should be true in every other part of our lives, we impose a commercial ethic on the essential, some who might be poets, act as accomplices in this enterprise, prostrating themselves before a common master, for even less reward, *but if you're a diamond merchant, and nobody buys your diamonds, you're still a diamond merchant*, but those who hold diamonds in their hands, act as if they're holding only carbon residue or crushed glass, some poets reminds us we have serious matters to consider, as long as we don't get too serious, keep it light, shed a tear or two.

Poetry is the language we've lost the ability to speak, but it's more easily recalled than our common language was first acquired, it belongs to our tongues and our hearts in our deepest self, not to the busy Babel of our marketed minds, poetry is open-heart surgery, performed beside the road, the poet is often the only care available when the catastrophe occurs, and he's just as likely to kick the victim as kiss him, court jesters were poets, often the only ones to speak out, when the king raised his sword to strike the innocent, poets go to the border between us and the unknown, and they come back with a kind of reassurance, cold as outer-space, warm as the inside of the sun.

## The Luxury of Oceans

I like telling stories of the incidents that have occurred in my life, but I don't like talking about myself, it seems odd, when I spend so much time in attention to the subtle shiftings of consciousness, like maritime paths in the sea of awareness, but this subtlety is not about the way that life moves, it is the nature of life, our subtlety of thought and feeling come to the fore, in our attention to life's calm, its movement, its force, my experience is in the attention to what occurs, not in the sense of a man who does anything.

As captain of the ship of self, I'm more its attentive servant than I am the cause and control of its course, a captain spends his time responding to the shifting conditions, inside and outside his borrowed hull, and if he knows his position, he may open himself to the luxury of oceans, to arrivals and departures, carrying goods between ports of call, to the camaraderie of his crew, the shared passage of passengers and cargo, the land sightings, the stars in the night sky, the populous seas he crosses, like any seafarer, I love to tell where I've been and what I've seen and done, but not with the sense that I've swum the seas or hauled anything on my back, at the same time, there is no ship, no complement of others, no sea, no destination, in this inner reality, yet things circumnavigate, things drop out of sight and appear, in the incredible voyage of human awareness, no less wondrous, no less subtle, than being at sea, as if alone.

## The Sound of Music

Music plays in the background of our lives, one of the effects of modern life, wandering minstrels playing constantly, either one's favorite tracks or someone else's, our thoughts are set to music, a movie with a soundtrack, followed by another soundtrack, the same soundtrack on a loop, with the visuals rarely changing, there's a small thrill, when the music matches the moment of our lives, and we mark the moment as ours, some of our lives are layered with the din, while others run for the hills.

As springtime approaches, we peel off layers of clothing, until summer is here, when we long to lie naked by the water's edge, to swim in warm water, like stripping off one's false skin, before disappearing, I walked into a small Japanese restaurant in the city, and I ate a meal so perfect, I stopped eating, holding the morsels in my mouth, to savor them, my eyes half-closed, with the pleasure of recognition on my tongue, we peel back the layers, after we layer them on, we want to be naked, but we can't bear to be without our layers, my layered life is also mine, I'm burdened by its useless weight, my truth comes closer to the naked quiet, but when I hear my tune playing, I remember my coat is my skin, and I love the weight of my layers, then the harsh sun fades out of my head, like a big truck backing out of my living room, and I am effortless in my nudity.

## We Honor Ourselves at War

We honor those who return from war, the survivors of the killing fields, but we don't ask those, who kill, about the dead, we don't ask about their time in the manufacture of death, instead, we honor them for the sake of our honored selves, we ask them to do these things for us, and we honor ourselves in honoring our warriors, I have no compunction in defense of my life, but I shun the honor of it, as many soldiers shun the honor of their own experience, gained in defense of their friends in arms, rarely in defense of an ideal or a government.

We like to say that war is hell, many accounts support that belief, yet we elevate the participants in our man-made hell to heroism, we admit that preparation for war is our great necessity, we know it requires its participants to forsake forgiveness, kindness, and their reluctance to kill and destroy, to not only enter hell, but to become its legions, then we praise them for their successes and their failures, too, perpetuating this manufactured hell on earth.

When those we send to hell, to live as hellhounds, return to the surface of our protected lives, we thank them for protecting us, but not when they bring their war home, we prefer they hide their callused hearts in plain sight, we love our wars, we love our warriors, we love our own hardened hearts, we love our ability to take the lives and accept the death of those we fear, we quietly cherish our acceptance of the residue of war, slaughter and destruction, devastation and dislocation, these signs of the death we fear become signs of our survival, and the death we will, by our willingness, becomes the sign of the strength of our beliefs.

We love what we're able to do, to protect ourselves from others, from those others who feel the same about themselves and those they love, we send others to keep war as distant from us as possible, so that death is not our neighbor, and when they return to us, with death in their lungs, we honor them for our freedom from the very thing we fear might be contagious, and yet we dream of breathing the same fatal air, so we might honor ourselves, in our own warring hearts, twice over, twice removed.

## These Narrow Streets

If we were to meet on the street, I'd look away for a moment, looking within, to gain the moment's reality, free of the meeting, to greet you anew, as if you were unknown to me, or I to you, if you were someone I feared or desired, it'd be the same, not to run away from or ignore what's suddenly present, but to preface the unknown with itself, it doesn't take a meditation to live in prayer, or a prayer to be free, the embraceable unknown is always present, to brace oneself for the newest unknowing; the experience of anything is the original knowing of it, unless the experience is not grounded in its unknown origin, but comes as a copy of a previous known, what we take to be what we know, is habitually cloned from a copy of its more and more distant reality, what we truly come to know, comes to us unknown, even your smiling face, that I've seen a million times, when you aren't in my life, I eat well, but when you are in my life, everything tastes better, you are the other, who's become the talisman of my being alive, I've chosen you as the one I seek, when you're intent on seeking yourself, you don't seek yourself, to be rid of me, but that's what I take it to be, I choose my own plight, poets, in earlier times, wrote love poems to women they would never be with, so they might stay in the love they knew, the object of their love remained forever at a distance, unchanged by circumstance, their static joy remained unchanged, never gained, never held, never lost, upon reaching perfect enlightenment, it's said, one disappears from the world.

My friend's parents told him he was better than the neighbors, and then they said he was worse than those same neighbors, he was pulled to a stasis by these contraries, when I told you I was more alive in knowing you, we both knew it was a subtle deception, in the stillness of our being, we know the same joy as the joy we experience in the other's name, how dare we be in love without the other, with no object for our loving hearts, are we afraid to disappear, with no lover to claim our love, what poet, walking the narrow street, spying his inamorata, thinks to himself, *who am I fooling, when my love stays away from me, never comes to me, and leaves me alone*, we're bound by this human habit, to believe the feeling of love, that we love in ourselves, is best savored in separation, we love others and abandon ourselves, to stay in a variation of love itself, I think my love for you, held at a distance, transforms me to a lover, when I'm the one who transforms my love to a distance, I look across the street and leave myself, I run toward you, to stay away from myself, I come home to be with you.

This is an old thing that men do, this seemingly unselfish love, to leave oneself for the love of another, it breeds a selfish demand, that if anyone turn around to love them back, their love must duplicate its errant origin, in every moment, of every day, without end, this is another counterfeit of love's true being.

## Found in the Focus

I look on this bed of flowers that gets up and walks around, that rearranges itself in bouquets and bunches, a single rose, a spray, a display, that comes to life, and grows, and dies, a cartoon panels shows a boy reading a book, in the first panel, he reads, *a man was born*, and in the second, *he lived*, and in the third, *he died*, and in the fourth, the boy says, *it almost makes you feel like you knew him*, these people come and go, no one finally stays, including the one writing this book of illustrations, yet in this coming together and going apart, we bloom in our sight, my new glasses give my eyes clarity, I hear the words in my head, *hocus pocus*, *there's locus in the focus*, these silly words mean what they say, the painter doesn't paint the subject, he doesn't paint himself, he paints the painting, the garden is greater than its yield, beauty is not found in the eye of the beholder, it's found in the focus, I live among these people, I inhale their fragrance, I witness their beauty, there's no living that doesn't include us all, we are the garden.

## Fearless Emily

When I first read Emily Dickinson's poetry, I wanted her to speak about her life in Amherst, a hundred years before I was born, I wanted to hear some tidbit, or gentle narrative, to help me think of her, personally, I wanted a cordial introduction to her life that would have us become friends, and then we could dive deep into her oceanic awareness, I wanted to say, *let's sit awhile on the shore, before we drop off the continental shelf, risking our lives with no regard for our safety*, but I didn't get what I wanted, and doing detective work with her words, hoping to discover a twisted ankle, or a passion for orange marmalade, which I personally dislike, didn't work, either, I got nothing to ease the leap into her and my fearless abandonment.

After reading her words, I didn't need to be eased into the work, until finally I wanted to swim out to sea and turn right, I was grateful to her, for showing the way, and walking away, it would've been nice to hang out a bit, but that was never going to happen, and *never going to happen* is her implicit challenge, on every page, if I sat with her in casual biography, I'd have too much information to join her in the depths of her freedom.

## The Play Within the Play

(Two old friends sit together on the ground.) Lear says, *We have nothing, and Gloucester replies, I know.* (They look in each other's eyes and laugh.)

The old king's foolish need for praise dooms him and those he loves, the first chance others get to show how much they despise his greed, they take it, and after he forsakes his power, his life is a rapid decline to destruction, he pulls his beard and throws his arms around his fool, who tells him the truth all along, as he himself tells himself wise words of self-sight, but wisdom is no stave against folly.

On the beach at Dover, waiting for his honest daughter to arrive, Lear sits with his blind friend, two old men in the sand, alone with each other, torn from their wealth and power, and in that bereft circumstance, they know a moment of peace in the accident of wonder, but the moment passes, and tragedy rages on, in the rage of kings, in the wars and intrigues of palaces, in the gain and keep of wealth and power, wisdom knows what is missing, wisdom revels in its insight, but nothing makes wisdom real, until all its foils are lost in the wind, in the Age of Wisdom we have yet to witness, the wise not only know their better reality, they show the courage to live it, in the meantime, the rich language of wisdom will do to be our sufficiency, it touches even the hearts of the foolish, in moments of rage and ruse, in the unwise play of our lives.

## The King of Existence

I look at others, and I wonder, who among these is joined in this joy, where once I wondered, who among these might accept my presence, I stayed apart, asking nothing of others, who ask nothing of themselves, I stayed a prince, until I became a king, a king doesn't construct plays for others to observe or enact, he composes a reality, with no history, except the history written by others, after he passes from the scene, all those in any room have their dramatic reality, being themselves in their own connected universe, in which I am but a player, playing a part, no matter how high or low my position might be or become, but I see this world different than it was, mere moments ago, seeing my place in the journey, when I ask, *Who else is here, now, being alive*, there's no ascending a throne in this becoming a king, to be a king is not to extol oneself, but it is the end of denial and consent, it is the end of pretending, any king, newly crowned by his own decree, is free of being led, when he's led by the reign of his own existence, I am the king of existence, I look upon this realm of kings, where any who claim it, are king in their recognition of this reality.

## The Paralysis of Place

The wife of a poet, a poet herself, has had a stroke, and she's learning to talk again, this once articulate lover of language finds herself sounding drunk, dragging, blurring, slurring the tracks her tongue wants to make, like cherished music, the two are driving to the coast, on break from the university, where they both teach, he's hoping for a chance to do some writing, out from under the weight of work, *and the paralysis of place*, she adds, pointing toward the campus.

In the movies, the heroes are young, in great shape, they fly through their scenes with speed and grace, even after being beaten, shot, and drugged, but what of the heroism that sees its path articulated, miles ahead, and can barely take a normal step, buried alive, the hero fingers a spoon and gradually shifts the ground from front to back, moving closer to the light, all the while learning the nature of the earth he once barely bothered to notice, until he surfaces from his dark clime, into a world that's lighter than ever before, on his way, he stops and smells the roots of the roses, like learning a foreign language from one's parents, shortly after being born, the light comes brighter, upon each emerging word, as in her brilliant mind, she lives again her passage from the womb of unbroken silence into the noisy dawn.

## Slamming Into Barriers

*The median wall is flat, I thought, it's not beveled cement, like most highway barriers, I watched my truck sliding toward the wall, as it fishtailed, coming up the inside lane, toward the summit, on my way into the city, the snow, blowing across the lanes of traffic, steadily increased with the elevation, I kept my distance behind a big truck, moving slower than the others, I was content with the pace, in the dangerous weather.*

The truck ahead slowed even more, as it climbed the pass, crossing the pass, then there was no one to my left, so I chose to change lanes, but as I did, I crossed the accumulated snow, a slight mound, between lanes, and began to slide, *this is going to be a multi-car pile-up, I'm going to slam into the median, then back into the truck next to me, then others will slam into us from behind*, none of this was articulated, my wheels slid sideways and rolled forward, as I steered, rubber tread hit wet pavement, then snow, then pavement, I expected to hit the barrier and ricochet.

In the course of the movement, my truck corrected on dry pavement, then slammed into the median, with the back end striking it hard, and bouncing back out into the lane, still rolling forward, not hitting anyone, not being hit, I kept in the flow, back behind the truck I'd been following, now even slower, at a greater distance, until, at the next exit, I pulled off the road and to a stop, I expected to see the rear end smashed, the tail-light assembly demolished, but I found a small dent and scrapes, I'd escaped with only a few scars, I called my friend, *I'm a lucky son of a bitch*, I said, and that night, I told my son about it, as we sat together in a restaurant, and then I told him something else, *I have a heavy heart*, I said, *I carry a certain sadness, I'm fine, I'm at peace, but I have a heavy heart*, it was good to say what's true, and he agreed, this weight is a condition of his heart, as well, my unchanged sense of the world became clear to me, the night before, listening to the music of old blues singers, music I was caught by, as a young man, before my son was born, a white boy with no serious problems, I heard the blues as a college student, played by the kid from Memphis, across the hall, my heart was caught, my son told of wanting to live in the dark chasm of his awakening to the state of the world, he dove into that darkness, as I had, years before, we had both emerged, with nothing changed, we moved out of sadness to a clearer state, but nothing changed in what we'd come to know, there's no reason to carry sadness forward, misery is not resolved by adding to what's already true.

What Buddha called the pain and suffering of human beings doesn't disappear when one discovers the perfect eternity of the moment, and dwelling in the moment doesn't take away the awareness of what remains in the world, listening to old men sing with grace and beauty in the face of their predicament, tempts me to rejoin that heavy heartedness, to say again, I know that hell that I do not live, it's in me, it's in all of us who live on this earth, without exception, as my truck slammed into the wall between halves of the highway, I felt the peace that's implicit, how can anyone know these extremes of being, except these poles are within us, there's no escape from our constant reality, except in its denial, or in its acceptance, and still it comes, suffering, in the guise of pleasure, wisdom, in the nearness of pain, and freedom in the presence of being itself.

## Instructions to the Wild

One's own contemplated death is as keenly felt as is the loss of a lover, we mourn our own passing, we cling to this love in ourselves, when there's no one to be lost in our dying, being itself is an endless delight, yet we turn away from it, as one who leaves loving and being loved, because we have better things to do, making less of ourselves, making little of too much, looking for love in things and those we cannot hold, a prince is born a prince, he goes out, seeking salvation from his gilded imprisonment, until, in his contemplation, he asks himself, *who is born a prince, in this royalty of being*, we leave our birthright to seek it in the world, to look for what already exists, unfound except in its recognition in this empty moment of here and now, there is, in our awareness, a wilderness of startling wonder, it's the home I leave to go into rooms of thought, I leave my boundless nature, for a house-to-house search, looking for instruction to the untamed wild I left behind, less than a moment ago.

## The Teaching of the Teachers

There are those who learn something true of their reality, who run to teach it to the rest of us, these teachers often live in versions of themselves, adapted from their wisdom to the ears of their listeners, a great teacher told his followers to embrace their self-recognition, and they responded, *but what food should we eat, what prayers should we repeat, what clothing should we wear, whatever you say, we will do.*

*Be as you are*, he said, and they continued to want to be what he wanted them to be, *be as you are*, he said, and they leaned in, listening for his direction for their lives, we talk to each other, so our minds can be occupied in their familiar way, and our shared spirit can commune with itself, birds crisscross the sky, like ropes to tie cargo to a barge, but their wings enjoy the external air, and the air enjoys their internal wings, the teacher shrugged his shoulders and told his followers to eat the food that served them best, to say the prayers they loved the most, *be as you are*, he said, and they were as they had always been, and somehow more at peace in his presence.

## The High Fashion of Others

It's been my habit, as if it were instinct, to dress others in the clothing of relationship, overlaying their costume with my own, clothing the scant and the overdressed, ignoring the clash of style and color, their reluctance to dress as I would wish, once the haberdashery was complete, I was loyal to my tailoring, ignoring the poor fit of my desires to theirs, and there were those who sought my couture, until it became clear I'd made them over, I could see the injustice of my ambition, I could see the failure of my line of clothing, I could wish for a compatible nudity, but to stand naked without relationship, is to stand naked in oneself, if I didn't dress others to my liking, I couldn't dress myself either, my profession of presentation masked an amateur's embarrassment, I sought to make being present a predictable enterprise, to turn a profit in love's private and public display, then I found a loose thread and pulled it to a nudity, until naked of others, I stand naked of myself, the thread of my design has pulled me with it, the invisible man stands revealed by his dishabille, more able to see what can be seen, more able to stay in what becomes of the eye's delight, with no one draped and pinned not themselves, and nothing in the beholder's eye but beauty itself.

## The View from Diamond Head

A man gets out of his new car and cleans his new headlamps, he wanders around his car, as if he's waiting for someone, when his daughter arrives, he continues to walk, as tourists do, on the side of Diamond Head, above the surf, a hundred feet below, in surprised ownership of wonder at such astonishing beauty, the thrill of being thrilled sneaks up on us, overwhelms us, and we shyly disown its character as not our own, it must be that thing we're looking at, or that person, or that ocean we all agree is beyond us in its glory, the fish, who swim in the ocean we marvel at, are not on vacation, they're busy providing for themselves, they don't care what we think of their neighborhood, the water is indifferent, so is the sun, so is the dormant volcano, on whose flank we stand, but we are the ones, full of wonder, who notice how everything is, and when we include ourselves, we begin to see.

## The Arms of Love in the Rooms of the City

In the calm of daily breathing, I find the arms of love, not where I thought they'd appear, I was prepared to seek the arms of love in the rooms of the city, in the way we have of honoring our misadventures with grand design, I only reluctantly suspended the tired search when I did, as in the lore of our aboriginal self, an ancient warrior wraps his belongings in a bundle and walks off into the wilderness to die alone, making himself the absence of a burden to his tribe, an honorable demise, I imagine this retreat into simple breath and deepest stillness as a kind of demise, a letting go of a certain loyalty, where one's external purpose has lost its use, but there is, instead, no greater purpose than discovery, discovery is to look where nothing is known by what it comes to be, where anything known is not yet known to be what it is.

In other times, walking toward these open arms, I've made it to the edge of the forest, or the desert, or the jungle, and hesitated, listening to hear a voice call me back to the arms of the rooms of the city, where I know the approximation of love waits for me, the same love that's desired by lovers everywhere, is there no one in my arms beside this breath of life, is there no one who has let go of the love that wanton lovers desire, is there no one in my paradise who knows what I know, am I alone in being this alone, and is this questioning now only another call back to the rooms of the city, that pulls me away from love itself, back toward its rivals, the suitors of my heart, distracting me from my truest love, are these the dancing girls of the Buddha, who came to his dreams to occupy his perfect peace?

## A Boat's a Bridge

A grandmother walks to her waiting grandchild, with the gait of her own children's care, not this child's mother, but a mother still, when being a mother is no longer the possibility of her generation, she lifts all children in her mothering arms, another mother cries, when her small boy tells her she can no longer touch his privates, this abruptly proclaimed privacy is an intrusion on the wholeness she's held dear, since before he was born, I cannot rush to hold those I hold dear, there's an airy bridge between us, where once the flow it spans was our playground, these boundaries protect us from the theft of what we keep safe in ourselves, privacy is the honor we give ourselves in giving it to others, an energetic lover, I gleefully broke the bonds of separation, it became a rite of celebration in honor of freedom, sought and fought for with gusto, but I was not gentle in my embraces, I cared to break what carelessly held me close, I cared for carelessness, wholeness has its counterpart in care, but freedom is a quiet thing, and those who fight for it don't know what to do with their captured bounty, the more I surrender, the more I succeed in surrender, this life's a river no bridge can cross, but a boat's a bridge that's one with the water it displaces.

## This Seeing in Being

Early in this life, I thought I was learning everything, when I learned anything, we can't see the unlearned other side of what we think has no other side, but once we've seen all the sides of anything, we can begin to see the no-sided center of everything, when I hear a voice in my blood pulling me to some single side of myself, and I refuse to go, I see the good, all the sides, that compete for being everything, have their pull, and in their planetary gravity, I feel this openness as if it were a precise absence, to be human with sight and this gift of seeing, is to be at risk of being blinded by the sights that fill one's eyes on all sides, there's so much to see, that seeing loses its fullness, my eyes continually seek to be filled, when this seeing in being fulfills my vision at its heart.

## In Gestures Barely Born

I passed a woman in the crowded aisle of a store, she was large and homely, I smiled, and in that moment, I knew my smile was familiar to her, it was the smile that seeks to counter the bland dishonor of our relative realities, her smile matched mine in its tired sorrow, its worn sadness, I hadn't intended to see her that way, she hadn't intended to be seen that way, and we passed each other by, I went to see a movie with my friend, and I touched her arm as we walked, she noticed the touch for what it was, the gentle communion of our ease, the snow sits on the hills, well past the first day of spring, this winter's been long and slow, and in this slowness, lies the secret self of the soul.

I walk by the same dog, every day, he paces in a yard I pass, he barks when he sees me and turns his head to the house, he barks again and turns his head to the field across the road, he stops barking, as I cross in front of him, looking and not looking, as he does, his sense of smell is greater than his sight, my sense of him is greater than he knows, in this café, in passive contact with scores of people a day, I listen to the chorus of unspoken language, the undertone of verbal banter; we gauge each other in silent words of look and feel, we know more than we say, we say more than we speak, we are more than we act, I thrill to touch my friend, as we walk in tacit understanding, our silence together is greater than its overt play, we are a concise eloquence, in gestures barely born, greater than the social degrees of our elevation and our degradation.

## In a Grove with Benches

It seemed like a good idea, when I was a wine-drunk poet, to set up a place in the park, in a grove with benches that had been cut from fallen trees, for people to read the poetry of their choice, so we might hear, at our leisure, a range of voices, in such a setting, I told this story to a man who then told me to read a poem aloud from Keats, my earliest hero, but the man didn't ask me to read, he told me, and as I read a few lines, his voice aped mine aloud with the lines from his able memory, I stopped reading and passed him the book, and he read, as I listened, inviting others to read poems written by their favorite authors, is like asking strangers off the street to join the philharmonic, the young composer imagines such a thing, as he muses in his room, before he's heard the music born, before beauty has declared itself, before truth has been invited from stillness, Keats wrote *Ode to a Nightingale* to the nightingale of his ode, he followed it over the hill into the next valley, he wrote the nightingale into the flight of his poem, that was unknown to him, as well as to anyone else until it was written, I might hope to hear Keats read his own poem, but the words and images fail the reality his winged self left behind, anyone who reads a poem aloud, reads another poem than the one he reads, anyone who hears a poem read aloud, hears another poem than the one he hears into the next valley, Keats wrote himself so far into the poem, he was gone from it.

## The Statuary of an Awakening

I was dreaming and woke too soon for the day, I re-entered the dream, like re-engaging with a film, after stepping into the lobby, or restarting a conversation with a friend who's been put on hold, I felt embarrassed, away from my organic dream, each of us has loyalties we ignore, except those we challenge, we commit ourselves to a myriad of loves, we build a lexicon of loyalties, until something jars our network, or the glue fails, all the old loves I held close, all the ones I re-engaged, as one re-enters a dream, all the ones I have kept in my loyalty have lost their adhesion in this awakening, the same way resentments become grudges, and grudges become cancers, these loyalties in love also do their damage, the famous poet is paraded among school children, until he sees the likeness of his love from early in his long life, she's a love he's held as close as his loyalty to all the things that men praise, she's a love he's immortalized, the way the gods once loved mortals to grace, generations have praised his loyalty and raised his love to iconic, and the old man reels in his dream, as surely as if he'd encountered an enemy he's kept since childhood, what is it about our dreams that we drag them into this reality, what is it of this reality that we drag it back to dreams, when we know that anything held in the heart become its anchor, what would Jesus do, if he knew his life had become a consequential dream, what would Buddha do, if he knew he'd become the statuary of an awakening, I was embarrassed to go back to my dream, like a man caught in a daylight raid, in front of a brothel, who runs back inside, seeking refuge in the velvet darkness of a familiar distraction.

## She Thrives in Joy

The sorrows of this life are real, they pull us inside out, better than our brighter feelings are capable of doing, I have carried sorrow as a kind of humanitarian sadness, the insides of sorrow were the same as the outsides of happiness, I listen to the plaintive tales of a singer's broken heart, of her lost love and the desire in her heart for fullness, her honest sadness opens the door to the joyfulness in her song, there's sadness in her voice but no pain in the music, she thrives in the joy of her aching heart, this shell of a life clings to whoever we are, and we cling to it, yet we're exposed to a permanent emptiness that clings to nothing, that nothing can cling to, whenever I let go of what won't let go of me, I discover myself more full than I could ever be filled, the singer sings in heartfelt despair, and from her rises the music of transcendent ecstasy, she pulls her emptiness out, and it feeds the hungry and staves my thirst, as if singing itself was the cry of the lost in the gloom of despair, there's laughter between the notes of doom, we wear our rags of grief with relentless élan, we're flamboyant in the presence of any hell, until it's finally smaller than this being alive.

## The Invisible Bodhisattva

I saw a man reading books of poetry and enlightenment, and I thought to make light of it, but I've grown tired of my own casual response to what matters to me, it might not have been so, if I had stayed in the circles of my interest, but I walked out of the salon and the ashram into the streets and onto the fields of play, and I'm struck by the separation between these things of being and the rest of humanity, I've been a part of these things, and I've been separated out for it, especially when I'm the one doing the separating, in his example, Jesus went up into the mountains, and the only other one there was the shadow of his spirit, he came back to the others, and they killed him for his declaration of self-recognition, and then they named a religion after him, proposing what they said about him for what he meant, those who read of enlightenment and poetry, rarely practice what they study, I might be better off keeping my own counsel, I met a guru in training, who was my contemporary, and I was seen as her equal, but when I proposed a camaraderie, she turned away in practiced silence, committed to her path and fixed on separating her teaching from the old routines of conversation, I wanted both, and I faulted myself for not being willing to cross over, as she was intent on doing, yet I think she was right, for who she chose to become, and how she chose to live her life, as a rookie cab driver in the city, I was told by veteran drivers not to pick up street people, I defied the advice, and the stench of the unwashed was so great, I couldn't rid my nostrils of the smell, for days, our language is conditioned to express our habits of thought, it's almost impossible to speak any truth that hasn't been incorporated into its translation, the homogenized milk of a once sacred cow tastes nearly the same, but it loses its nutrition, we continue to drink store-bought milk, after tasting the pure, we long for a real conversation about what matters, with someone who's essentially the same as everyone, so our revelations are not limited by the elevated awareness of someone who's beyond our recognition, we seek the same awareness as one who's risen from the norm, who can finally say, as the common truth, *I'm alive, like you, and my life is the reality of being itself*, we don't need to separate ourselves from each other to show that we are the same.

## A Resident of Forever

We're all alike, if not identical, yet we seldom reveal what we know, despite there being no reason for secrecy, except for the keeping of power and exclusion, in Persia, the belief is that after poet comes prophet, I think of Walt Whitman, who seemed to move from poet to prophet, and I want to hear the experience of the awakening of his awareness in the passage of his poetry, the self in secret elevates this idea to continued separation, as if being a poet and becoming a prophet, is best kept to oneself, when it's only a part of the progression of the human spirit through the maze of humanity, fear weakens the connection between these ways of knowing.

If I speak of what occurs within awareness, and I see poetry emerge into prophecy, it's a dawning, the sight of what's to come for all to see, nothing is ever revealed that can't be seen, what's called unseen is not yet seen, prophecy is speaking what's unsaid, until what's said becomes what's known in the gradual ease of being oneself; anyone called prophet is only one who speaks what's not fully known but is still something from our common reality, any prophecy is false, if it doesn't resonate in the forever of who we are, anything that comes to be known is knowable and can be told, we call those voices prophetic that tell us what's knowable, and we jump to praise or fear what's always been true in what they say, no one is a prophet by his saying so, he's a prophet by what he says, the forever of who we are serves to prove what's said, a prophet is only a resident of forever, who looks around and tells what he sees.

## This Beloved Landscape

I look out across landscape that rewards my eyes with easy love, this is where I am and where I'm from, this is my home, as familiar as the houses I grew up in, the streets I walked, the schools I attended, the towns and cities of my life, I see features of the face I love everywhere I look, and I've fallen in love with the foreign faces of places I didn't know, where turning a corner opened my eyes to the differences, in lands where those who live their lives as I live mine, who love their landscape with as much subtle depth as I do mine, one can't speak of someone else's family, as one doesn't speak of one's own, no one knows what goes on in the heart of someone else's love, there's an inviolate surrender in the love of one's land, a stirring surrender in the love of someone else's land, the heart is revealed more open than what it loves, on the far side of the world, I loved a landscape not my own, I came home to love what's thought to be mine, with a heart awakened to itself, I see a heart more open to love. than what seeks its love can love the open heart, to fall in love with what's not known, one begins to ask, does love come shaped by what it loves, or is what one loves shaped by love itself?

This revelation of the heart, that lives to love wherever it is, frees me to love my home and love others' homes as well, the spirit of the heart in this body, born as if it belonged to its place, its flesh, its family, its town, loves the land that loves it back with greater demand and less surrender than the heart itself requires, I don't begrudge my land what it demands of me, I love it more than it can imagine, I can only love those who say my heart, able to love this land, so rich in form, ought not love, in greater degree, a world of unlimited landscape, where home is undiminished by the expanse of love itself, in a heart that freely sails the encircling seas, no matter where it calls itself home.

## The Clinch of Surety

My father's father worshipped one old leader my father scorned, we could easily exchange leaders in the way we think of them, generation to generation, region to region, town to town, neighbor to neighbor, the pleasures of acceptance and dismissal are interchangeable, love and hate are not the same, there's no razor's edge between them, each is unique, what unites them is the way they settle our concerns, it's more difficult to feel neither or both, than to feel one and be done with weighing the measure of our beliefs, my father admired a leader I disliked, and there's pleasure in being done with a leader others revere, including the leader of one's loved and loving father, it was difficult to accept his judgment, when mine was as righteously held, but he was my beloved father, despite our polar politics, my brother and I disagreed about another leader, I love my brother, and I shake my head at his affiliations, he shakes his head at mine, we may come to blows, we may think to kill each other, we may die in the divide of our common differences, it satisfies us to man the barricades of certainty, the ease of taking sides has a gravity greater than the pull of love or the fear of death, any man who honors war is honored by his fellows, wisdom is the willing embrace of contraries, but in the clinch of surety, the adherents of wisdom are few, and in the abandonment of wisdom, brilliance loses light, compassion dies, and love turns to desperate indifference, I love my brother, but I love wisdom more than I love either his certainty or mine.

## The Fountain of Fountains

A prisoner of the chair and the wall, the entrapping congeniality of fellow prisoners in this cramped cell of a body, I seek freedom within its bounds, I dreamt of making love to a woman with perfect attributes, her response was indifferent, as she chattered away, and I tried to believe I loved her, it's another windy day, there's no arrangement of these things that frees me from their grasp, their grasp is my grasp, *I had my nose between his teeth, and I wouldn't let go*, no distress but in the stressful mind, no pleasure but in the pleasures of the mind, even clear thoughts of clarity don't free me, I look for eternity in everything, and nothing that's said describes it, my love attaches to the transience of all I see, I look for its eternity, I open each drawer and search for what can't be found, yet what I find is fascinating, Vasco de Gama, searching for the fountain of youth, lives out his youth in Florida, died searching for what's found on every page of his history, he found the never lost center of discovery, or we do, in his image.

## The Precarious Reality

We're something not finally known to each other by name, we're strangers in a common land, and what keeps us apart unites us in this reality beyond our knowing, an auctioneer holds up a toaster and says, *what am I bid for this blender*, if he wants to call it a shoelace, why should I quarrel with the name, I take it home to toast my bread for breakfast, what I'll never know of her by name is what I love, I call it something else, I call it by some name I know, I call her by the name she uses, but she's unknown to me, what does it matter if I'm wrong every time I call her name, there's no name I could use that's accurate, I'm nearly blind, in my twenty-twenty vision, but that doesn't keep me from loving what I see of her life, her beauty, her unreality, her most real self.

I look at a hillside, my eyes drop out of focus into another kind of seeing, and the essence of the hillside emerges, I drop out of schooled attention on the definition of a hillside, into everything and nothing, dressed up as a hillside, instead of the voice of the mind falling asleep at night, it races with fears and desires, and I am its foil; it wants to continue its play, as if my life were dependent on it, it recognizes my wish for peace, as it tries to compose the best thought to carry me to sleep, instead, I fall back into my origin, I drop out of imagined dreams into lucidity, I step back from performance, into the stillness where thoughts are born, where being itself sleeps wide awake in perfect peace.

## I Weigh the Weightless Wind

A woman walks to a table, a guide-dog in tow, the dog is attentively obedient, but the woman yanks on the leash, jams her fists in the hind quarters of the dog, getting him to obey, she stomps the floor, to make the floor stay beneath her feet, she widens her eyes, to force her failing sight to see, I read stories by a woman I've just met, I read to see if I need to be in love with her, the weight of needing to love what I might come to love, weighs on me, the weight of loving what I already love, weighs on me, I weigh my love, I weigh my love, as a storm tracker weighs his life in the balance, as if love were the most feared force in nature, as if nature was a willful force, bent on raging, with no care for the lives it takes, as if good rain nourishes and bad rain drowns, as if good wind clears the air and bad wind destroys the earth, nature is the convergence of forces, love the more to be feared if fear is one's way of tracking what occurs in love, love looks across a sea of faces and finds its way among them, with no will in its choices, no will in its effect, I'm at love's mercy, and love is ruthless, constant, unrelenting, I'm relieved when the storm of love passes, my new friend writes of the way love sorts her feelings among her lovers, never as she imagines, always as it is.

## The Debris of Our Separations

With no tradition in my experience to honor the formalities that occur between those who live in ancestral habits, my generous heart bows to see ceremonies of honor between members of a tribe, I see something like it among those in crisis, where petty personality is washed away, in a moment of communal reunion, I baptize myself in the honor seen between ancient others, but I see the same bond in the dishonoring of those of the wrong tribe, the wrong name, the wrong class, the wrong face, this life flourishes in the awareness of its existence, but if I confine its use to being a tool in my behavior, I honor my habits and not their essence, I lose my honor, I demean myself by my habits of separation, I separate myself from who I am when I separate who I am from anyone else, I don't need to be everyone's intimate, but I await the day when, in any encounter with any man or woman, no dishonor occurs to diminish the honor of existence.

I fell into the anger of separation toward a friend's wife, and the dishonor I brought upon myself, within myself, has worn away at the honor I need to be free, it diminishes me in my own eyes, Buddha felt pain in his spirit, he remembered he had raised a stone to kill a bird, seven hundred years before his last incarnation, he felt dishonored by a thought, regardless of its time of birth, the honor that others show their own kind is an opening to a larger life, but we become cluttered with the debris of our separations, we lose the honor of our awareness in any narrow honor we practice only in the habits of our familiarity, we dishonor ourselves in the performance of acts of honor and dishonor when those acts elevate our separations, I apologized to my friend, not for his sake, not for the sake of his wife, but for the sake of my uncluttered heart.

## The Man Who Used to Be a Poet

As a young poet in the city, I felt like the luckiest man alive, my life was a constant love affair with the changing moment, my work gave me the privilege of benediction, everything that occurred was a blessing, when I thought, *I am a poet*, the words disappeared in a pool of the present, without name or occupation, as if *I am a poet* was read backwards, from *a poet* to *I am* to being in stillness, in the awareness of being, with no shape or form, I didn't speak the feeling, it was an encompassing reality, where everything and everyone present was a gift, and I was young, which gave me a certain invulnerability and the privilege of unlimited time, life was celebration, despite its open-sided envelopment, my sensibility as a poet didn't find itself in the world, I knew there were others at work and play, and the shapes and forms of life contradicted my life as a free being, there was no official position for simple being, being was free, but there was no profession for it, no priesthood for unscored existence, so after many years in the dilemma of my choices, I found myself with a teacher of the barest awareness, in the living physical presence of a possible master of existence, I saw a parallel to the priory of poetry I might have imagined, but that too failed the reality of priorities, since my existence sought and accepted no masters and no mastery.

Poetry was a form of my existence, as much as I was a form of existence itself, existence took form in me, as it took form in my poetry, existence is as it is, existence didn't need to take form in me, I realized that I didn't need to call myself anything for existence to be true, I no longer felt lucky, my life wasn't about love or silence, it wasn't about being or stillness, it wasn't about poetry or spirit, it simply was, and nothing changed, poets, in their mystical and mundane desires, are drawn to the indescribable, the one who was the closest man I'd ever known to being a master of existence, told me to keep trying to describe the indescribable, even though no one has ever been able to do it, and so I did, it was the perfect nakedness for a naked man, who used to be a poet, who was still alive.

## Pretty As She Once Was

Pepper burns my throat, hot in the not quite chai of the American café, but it does the trick, this controlled burn of heated spices and sugar, as in my sight, people and cars, a train, trucks on the freeway, three women, past middle-age, sit holding their cups, one of them pretty as she once was, we live past ourselves, a loose group of happy children look at a picture of old people, trying to find the face of their aged self, it's a game they play, it's their hope to live to a ripe old age, and they look to see what they'll turn out to be, they're curious, fascinated, eager to grow old.

Of course, this never happens, we live in fantasies of our youth, we live as if our youth is the standard, from which we slip inexorably away, as if time ruins the image we want to keep of ourselves, we're born, and we run swiftly to the shore of our fullest life, we spend the rest of our lives slowly drowning in deep water, living in dreams of the water's edge in the quickly receding past of our setting to sea, this water is fathomless, uncrossable, there's no salvation from it, except in the ability to swim, to float, to dive, to loll in its embrace, and yet we long for what we've lost, as if this sea, where we live, is not our home, as if we belong ashore, tan and timid, reluctant, on a big blanket, bathing ourselves in oil, mocking those who put their feet in the sea, yes, the water wrinkles the skin, the shallow dreams of youth fade, the oldest woman of the three, the one in whom no sign of her fair youth remains, what does she know of this ocean, with its cars and trucks and thin water like air, her eyes see, like the sonar of a whale, no distance keeps her, she lives where the seven seas are as familiar to her now as a small patch of sand in her unoccupied past.

## Courted by the Permanent

We become such comical people, to no one else but ourselves, naturally passionate, pretending to be dispassionate, ironic, thoughtful, distant, we begin to display our passionate nature in each other's presence, if not toward each other, in a courtship of reality, we expose our hearts to the air in the presence of the other, not to court the other but to find the deepest part of ourselves, in this place where we might be free to be as we are, what's true becomes true in its gradual revelation, we propose a virtual marriage, we make virtual plans in the air, yet we keep our plans a secret, we keep our union a secret, we keep our distance, when distance is the thing we fail to keep, the thing we never have to keep, we keep secrets, keeping one's distance is the irony of our bond, it makes us comical, we construct an elaborate charade of distance, inside its absence, we play games with the truth, when the truth chooses not to play, the truth plays a greater game, never wavering, when all else is scattered to the wind, we can't keep the wind a secret, we can't keep secret what remains when the wind has done its work, we work our secrets free from their flimsy moorings, our secrets keep us tied to what we're not, we're courted by the permanent, out into the open, where no secret can survive.

## The Mirror Dance

“Did you write any poems?” Kenneth Koch to Hilton Obenzinger during the student protest at Columbia University, 1968.

Standing in the window of the president’s office, in united protest of the university’s plans and policies, he could feel the surge of commitment and camaraderie, as below him on the street, his professor, a well-known and genial man, yelled up at him, *did you write any poems*, his politics are solid, developed over many years, unerring in his eye for hypocrisy and deceit, bold in response, yet he remembers the words, *did you write any poems*, I take them for my own, when I remind myself of the sludgy vortex of too much seriousness, if I’m at the mercy of love or rage, if I don’t like the way things are going, if I become overheated about anything, if I’m fearful or obsessive, if I’, in distress or pain, I can ask myself, *did you write any poems?*

In a book about his life, I read the rich remembered reality of someone else’s experience, I think of a similar narration in the existence of endless others, I read the list of those that another friend thanks in the back of her book, and none is recognizable, in an email from a friend I see the names of others he’s addressed, my own life is another name, after which follows a story and prose that disappears in the telling, so a man is more clearly seen than the language it employs, but the man of a story is in language, and in some stories, the man disappears for the sake of the language, both are fleeting and disappear for the sake of another life, another language.

As a boy, I knew I’d never live on in my art, no matter how well it might come to life in its own right, I could paint a portrait of myself, as lifelike as I am alive, and only the art might live on in the art’s unique vitality, I don’t denigrate art, I love the art of this life, but no art is a continuation of this simple, empty, endless reality I call my being, living on the edge of imagined immortality, I’m no more immortal than I’d be if I did or never did anything in anyone’s notice, something else jumps off the pages of my friend’s book and would if I didn’t know him, it is not his life or my life, it’s not his book’s life, it’s not the life of my imagination, it is this mirror dance, a man dances before a mirror, and he sees himself dancing in the mirror, he is used to seeing his image dance with him, in their odd unison, until one day, he takes up a partnership with his exact other, and he recognizes the simultaneity of absolutely no one, dancing with absolutely no one else, in this mirror of our enormous nameless immortality.

## Words in the World

How do I stop talking, the way people have always talked, how do I begin to talk, the way there's no way to talk, how do I let the exquisite reality of my existence do the talking, not in the distracting voices of gods and demons, but in the voice of trusting sound in myself, and silence in others, silence in myself, and original sound in humanity, bless those, who sit in fathomless silence, for their efforts at essence, how do I let that brilliance fill the dark passages of my habits, this reality is in the warrior who lowers his weapon in the midst of his warring and wonders about war itself, at risk to himself, at greater risk to war, as if there's no risk at all, it's in the one who hears his voice as parody, the voice he thinks he's learned to use well, as it becomes false to his truest reality, he hears his voice as it begins to repeat itself, as it becomes unfaithful to its original awakening, this breath is unrepeated, except in function, can I breath being into my language, the way being breathes itself into my life?

When a man is addressed, he answers when called, but what if he's untrained to breathe his words by rote, what if breath is the greater of the two, what if the greatness of being is in its recognition, what if our origin is the medium of our exchange, what if we spoke in the voice of our originality, what if the truest voice of our deepest communion was its unspoken expression, what if we knew, despite our comfort in belonging to a common language, that in our origin, the way of its expression was pretended into reality by our words in the world, there is no way to change the habits of a million years, all habits are changed only by their changing, the millionth monkey begins the day, living a new way, unbeknownst to him, his family has been around for millennia, his generations have been busy living their legacy, their habits continue, monkeys need to eat, they need to get along with the other monkeys, the habits of survival are ingrained in the habits of their community, even when it denigrates their inherent humanity, until one day a monkey picks up a thought and makes it a useful tool, there are no monkeys in my vicinity, probably none in yours, I live among humans, I'm human, I sat with a master of his humanity, and later, walking around the lake, in another city, I began to speak a new language, and I was dissolved in a loss of definition, I stopped talking, in that new way, almost as soon as I started, I returned to my customary tongue and continued the walk, at relative ease again in the familiar.

I sought to incorporate the awareness of the unpracticed tongue that's more familiar than my habitual language, as if I was suddenly speaking in Latin, Sanscrit, or Bantu, but I was only walking with others on a path in the city, as if I am the millionth monkey, the only human being in this body, the only body in this being that I know this well, I have no desire to change my humanity, and as radically as I might re-construct it, this poem dwells in the familiar, I saw a man who spoke, not as one human to other humans, but as being speaking to being, I saw love pouring out toward itself, and I have been heartbroken ever since, my heart was broken open in front of myself, I was broken down in my habitual mind, broken free in my selfless being, yet I strike up a conversation with the biker next to me, in this ordinary café, beside the road, the exquisite poet lives in the dust of the road, and when we speak, our minds engage, while the dust of our being blows free, the poet's voice is born from the exquisite emptiness into words in the world.

## The Empty Sky

Whoever contemplates the fullness of reality with no god in his prayers is thought to pray to himself, whoever prays to a god who's been given a name, is seen as selfless, whoever lives in the name of god is thought pious, whoever lives in nameless being is thought to be staring blindly at an empty sky, I contemplate a throne where no god rules, in a castle with no throne, a kingdom with no castle, greatness with no kingdom, where nothing dwells in place of anything I might name, the mind that's present in prayers wants to populate them with all these things, we live in a place of names and things, we expect our prayers to be as densely populated, but no prayer worth praying is thick and busy, the will of all prayer is to become clear at both ends, until one is open, from end to end.

A stranger begs from a man passing through town, but the stranger doesn't look the man in the eye, until the man gives him a few dollars, his haunted eyes are cloudy with purpose, the truth and beauty of pain come to the fore in the embrace of any pain to its relief, sadness and sorrow are the welcome residue of a peaceful being, joy grieves its own pain best, a destitute man sits stranded among those who travel in easy wealth in their own land, I've lived among his fellows in the mistaken identity of my own fears and desires, a good physician can see and seek the health in a diseased body, he speaks the language of healing, even when disease and cancers are screaming, when harm and hurt refuse to leave the scene, when debility and incapacity are one's common language, *physician, heal thyself*, I don't need to avert my eyes from this face of the conflicted past, when I matched my sorrow to the sorrow of those I knew, I joined my pain to those in pain, I prepared for life among the desolate and deserted, pain and sorrow were the realities of my world, I tried not to escape them, I moved into the hotel of ordinary grief, I took it for my home, but I couldn't make it my home, the separations we suffer keep us homeless in ourselves.

I thought homelessness was the honesty of my heart, it was a deception of the mind, I carried my home within me, on the dark streets of separation, looking for union in the eyes of those who feel separate is futile, one must look beyond their eyes to the unremembered reality, the one who sits in his weariness is not at home in the image of our common being, I don't desert those who are lost, in being in union with the essential, to be at peace is not desertion of the deserted, instead, it is an assurance of the presence of our common and inhabitable origin.

A child, openly loved and accepted, may grow old with no interest in self-knowledge, no belief in repairing the loss known by those who are deprived of his cultivated sense of self, he has no need to find a broader reality beneath his privileged spirit, he can't imagine why anyone else would, he doesn't know his schooled sense can only be gotten the way he got it, whoever is lost and whoever loses his brief advantage, may find the wellspring within that cannot be found by effort, that cannot be given by care, love given late can't fill, without constant refilling, the well of love not given, he who drinks from surface water, with no need to dig deeper, may never find the filling source of what seems absent in others, he may think such an absence is chosen, he may blame those who don't get his given, if he's never missed what seems so easily found, to live at ease with the belief in a caring god can be a rewarding life, deprived of its profound reality, the deepest love, born in the lives we lead, and nurtured among us, may fulfill our immediate needs and miss the fount it emulates, the caring we declare for each other can help us to our sufficiency, but nothing of a perfect life or an imperfect one teaches our origin, physician, nurse your knowledge to its source, let your acceptance, that was in you before you knew who you were being, break your spirit from its loss and its face, the exquisite poet is alive and well and living among us.

## The Jump in the Belly

Even in honesty, we perform for each other, I can hear my voice taking on qualities, and when I speak with no particular tenor, I feel the uncertainty in my stomach, I have a familiar voice in the company of others, and that voice has a more private voice I seldom hear, it's easier to perform the words of my thoughts aloud when their performance is the raising of the slightest stage, no one knows what occurs when two others are alone, no one else knows what occurs when we're alone in ourselves, I long to hear the voice of my non-performing reality, when it's on stage, it subtly speaks, when it's off stage, it silence speaks, a still, small voice, we say, to describe this silent tongue, it has no qualities, and as soon as we give it qualities, it loses its voice, the exquisite poet sings the still small voice, but it resists his fervor, remaining still within him, the jump in the belly is a sign of the voice of the presence that knows no performance.

## The Assassin of Separation

The exquisite poet is the voice of reality, filtered through whoever speaks him into existence, he's not the character of any one person, we limit his appearance in how we live, one assumes that anything filtered is lessened, but the life of the exquisite poet is the filter, where the exquisite enhances what it touches, welcomed by those in whom it appears, one assumes the exquisite speaks in ornate language, that the exquisite poet is a sensitive soul, given to outbursts of emotion and sensation, that he is the describer of the finer feelings of the human heart, one assumes the exquisite disavows rational sense, that its feelings are too keenly felt to appear as reason, one assumes its attentions are on the subtly intense, the intricacies of beauty, delicately nuanced, passionately enjoyed, one wants to put the exquisite in a box, held aside and offered to a chosen few, but the exquisite poet knows his essence is the being within being, that there's no limitation on the reach of the essential.

What sets the exquisite apart from those who refuse its reality is when one admits the presence that denies no one and nothing in its ubiquity, even those who deny its expression, the exquisite poet is the assassin of separation, he carries courage into the union of sense and reason, the rational and rhapsody, his is the decisive, delicate blade of the sword and the surgeon, his is the cut that touches the heart to its insurgency, his is the mutiny against the fading of the light of original being.

## A Simple Easy Love

After I told you I loved you, and you didn't match me, with equal expressions of tender devotion, I felt alone, and I felt something else, I felt my heart open to itself, I was changed by this simple revelation, there was no more question of the presence of love in my own heart, you said my love for you was a tragic and damned endeavor, you said you wanted to run from the country, shouting back over your shoulder not to love someone so damaged by love as you, the antidote, already in your heart, is the presence of this simple love, until there's nothing left, but its revelation, nothing left, but what's beneath the surface, that can no longer hold you in its constraints, and I am free from seeking my reflection in the eyes of my love, this ordinary love is free in its exquisite, transient, endless eternity, I love you, and this easy love is who I am, you've seen me, unmasked of my poetry, with my masquerade revealed as the same as who I am that inspires it.

## The Fertile Fire

So much of what happens lies in hibernation before it emerges in time, what comes to fruition is dormant longer than it's ripe for the picking, no amount of loving or eager insistence can make it mature any faster, I'm tempted, against my own practiced wisdom, to reach into the ground and pull the roots out, ask them why they haven't come up with anything lately, gold eventually comes spilling out of the mountains, but I'd rather not wait, I'd rather level the range, go blasting at the substratum, I can't wait for the tectonic plates and surface erosion to do their work, finally, I learned better, what taught me, is the arrival of what I never expected, the known of the unknown, always here, biding its time before it's seen, patience was not my virtue, divine ignorance invented patience for me, so that now, when I'm at a loss for discovery, I sit by the volcano of my small patch of earth, and wait; when you don't know what is coming, you can be sure that something is, given the molten history of everything.

## Tethered Eagle

Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.

Helen Keller

From the translucence of her self-protection, she admired the flight of everyone she saw, determined she was none of what they were, but she was already aloft in the wide expanse of who she is, she shed her cocoon and stepped into the peril of destiny, an uncanny beast of the earth who lives in the heavens, a hobbled angel, who thought she was bound by the ground, she tore away the cords that bound her and found the truest part of who she was, she was no romantic, but one who loved the passion of others, until she left her confinement in determined dissatisfaction, her deep breathing turned to startled laughter, as she stepped into flight from her chrysalis of innocence, she lived in the shell of her making, protected from who she might be, the final breach comes from within, an eaglet pecking away at its shell, before it breaks the barrier of birth, hesitant for only a moment, until it works the air with the force of its fledgling independence, in any population, the shelled outnumber the unshelled, we decorate ourselves to an art, we break our shells and wear the pieces as our disguise, the best among us have broken the shell of our gestation, and in our fearful hesitation, we contrive an invisible shell to replace it, she, who quotes Helen Keller, knows this, that knowledge is the last shell to be broken, this shell gets in its own way and reinvents itself, she points her way to freedom, poking one part of her shell from the open sky, then replacing it, in a single adroit gesture, until she pushed out knowledge from its nesting place, free from its caring encasement, dreams come to be what is, and there's an end to dreams, dreams teach themselves and not their imagined reality, we hesitate to say what's true, for fear it's still a dream, where dreams are the constant state of being, she drove her car to Oregon, past banks of blooming flowers, and she bloomed in spirit, not in her devotion to horticulture, not in her love of beauty, not in her appreciation of nature, she bloomed, she flourished, she blossomed, she flowered, she burst, not from herself but into herself, her spirit took over all the available universe and the universe acted in her available self, on a pleasant drive to Portland, we say what's true to say what is, not what's dreamed, to awaken in a constant state of awakening.