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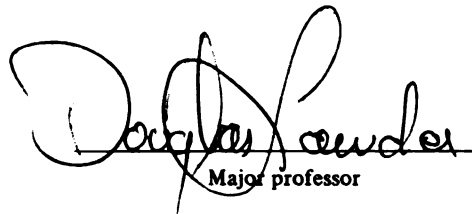
VANTAGES

presented by

Robert J. Clark

has been accepted towards fulfillment  
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in English



Douglas Fowler  
Major professor

Date May 13, 1991

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**Vantages**

**By**

**Robert J. Clark**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**Department of English**

**1991**

## ABSTRACT

## VANTAGES

By

Robert Clark

This work is a porfolio of poetry divided into six sections entitled: 1) Love and Other Things We Do Alone Together; 2) Etudes Ordinary and Fantastic; 3) Music for Solo Dragon and Continuo; 4) Off the Top of My Head; 5) Draining the Swamp; and, 6) Listening for the Big Bang, which is submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements of the Master of Arts program in creative writing.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In a last, desperate effort to spread the blame, I should like to point out that without collusion of the following un-indited co-conspirators this opus would never have been foisted upon academia. First, there's my wife Noelle, who not only encouraged my shaky ego at critical times when I might have given up before it was too late, but also provided tons of what at the time seemed like friendly criticism. Then there's Doug Lawder, who more or less made me write this stuff. And, finally, there's my mother, Rhea, whose knowledge of computers, word processing and laser printers, etc., has made the final product so attractive, polished the poison apple, as it were. If I can't blame these guys, who can I blame?

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**LOVE AND OTHER THINGS**

**WE DO ALONE TOGETHER**

## Clouds of the Spirit

Perched on a Smokey's bald  
in an October afternoon's unsettled air,  
gazing down a forest cove  
to where a column of smoke rises, tall  
yet fading into haze  
far below the granite dome,  
squinting against the sunlight  
that blazes off the valley  
under the walled darkness  
of an approaching storm,  
waits the hawk of my imagining.

Deft wender of the clear spaces  
between the clouds of the spirit,  
keeper of the voices  
whispered to raptors  
in the hiss of breeze-sleeked feathers,  
with wing ends  
spread like a lover's wheeling  
on the rapture of the gift,  
spread to trace the sheer satin  
rippling across the ribs  
of the wind,  
spread to tease the mysteries

from the body of the wind  
and the will of the storm  
and the mind of the sky.  
Hunter of shapes that pass below  
as rumors through the pines,  
Hunter of shapes that pass above  
like clouds in a watchful eye.

## Invitation

Dine with me tonight, love,  
in the stateroom  
where the sexed angel  
dances on the  
moon tormented waves,  
dine with me on  
unicorns and sea yarns  
as we reef our sails  
in every slack interval  
of our heart's weather.

Do the dark duty  
of all salty sailors  
with me here  
on the wharfside watch,  
lit with hurricanes.

You can be  
my cradle of storms  
as we navigate  
by your starry eyes,  
like little sailors  
seasick on each other.

## The Origin of the Quest

The windows rattle, ending my pretense of sleep  
so I lift the curtain on a muggy dawn that's  
racing through a storm to break; flashes  
of lightning etch out a branch of huddled  
wrens, wind shaken in an eerie orange haze.  
I turn my eyes to you, nude on flowered sheets.  
Your body shimmers in this strange light  
like a thing apart from you, a form  
before thought, will or understanding.  
It lays as it wants, beautiful, calm,  
feet draped in tangled sheets, hips  
innocently tilted, a wanton stillness  
like a carving in a paleolithic cave  
or a daughter remembered in a pharaoh's tomb.  
It stays real while its meanings shape  
in your dreams. The wind changes and the rain  
splats against the screen.

I watch you waken,  
watch you begin to form your body to your will,  
to make yourself into that frail unity  
of flesh and spirit that is our mystery,  
our chief joy, and our catastrophe. Your eyes,  
hazy with sleep, come to focus past me at  
the ruffled wrens and the sky tumbling by.

Four Little Flowers  
of Noëlle's

## 1

Blind in thin yellows  
of young sunlight; tulips nod  
also top-heavy.

## 2

Pricked thumbs in a  
clouded thicket of blossoms. I'm  
your roses' virgin.

## 3

Sitting in a far corner  
of our garden, away  
from your averted eyes,  
thinking how well over years  
this ivy has learned its wall.

## 4

the rude sun prickles  
the scalp of the gardener  
as he plays plant god.

### The Wages of Naughtiness

When our breathing had settled down  
it was full dark under the golf  
course oaks. As our senses rejoined us  
where we sprawled naked on the grass,  
we were surprised by the honeysuckle  
in the air, by how the fairway glowed  
with a faint tangerine light, by  
the stars rimmed with folded roses.

I asked her if she thought we were  
being applauded, she replied that  
she thought we were being upstaged.



## One That Ovid Passed Over

A Roman count was used to search far from his palace  
for rustic maids, through wood and field and boggy fen,  
to rape and glory over; to shame their men  
with the *puissant vertu* of his privileged phallus.

But on a day he caught sight of cunty Venus  
at her bath, all naked, veiled by the ferns of a glen--  
Thinking her his quarry, he creeps up behind, but then  
she turns and his flinty soul surges into his penis--  
How hugely it swells! Arm's length, hard as rock!  
The weapon of an elephant, a stage prop  
on a centaur in the plays! He grabs it as it sways  
heavy at his groin-- and finds it numb! in shock  
he pulls back his hand, and with a dull "plop!"  
it drops off, sprouts little wings, and flies away!

## Water Lights

A last lavender light washes  
among the hissing reeds.

Moths swirl about the dock light  
that hangs for them  
in a gibbous crescent  
above the water.

My thoughts around your bright face  
swirl. Are *you* the moon?

Hilary's Surprises

1

My daughter's red-gold  
hair in the sun, sparkling as  
she squashes the ants.

2

The lilacs shiver  
on the edge of a storm wind,  
the sky grows grumpy.

Mallards on a forest  
pond; still water mirrors mists.  
Dark tears in your eyes.

## The Fortunate Fall

1

The clouds twist among  
the ridges of the hunters' hills.  
Blue smoke on the rain.

2

The pond reeds hiss  
in the chill mists of night breezes.  
Yellow windows scold.

3

The silky fine grey fur  
of the cat who sleeps between us  
sneezes me awake.

4

Ghastly shrieking owls--  
pines in panic-- nothing frets  
this wife in my arms.

5

Southing birds gossip  
in a woods half envy green  
half jealous yellow.

Pamela Harris, Her Pavanne

Medieval dances, slow dances,  
not touching-- not quite touching--  
formal steps, symbols of desire  
or memories of imagined consummations;  
tease and demur, eyes lock,  
lower; curtsey and bow;  
other dances, other partners.

## Little Absences

## 1

The bowl of plums glistens,  
still wet. Meows complain of  
your having just left.

## 2

If I see you're face reflected  
in the stairway mirror  
even when you're gone  
could it be that a sound  
has fallen in the forest  
when no one was there  
and the tree still stood?

## 3

Upstairs at my desk, staring  
out into the supertime sunlight  
that's hanging limply through  
the branches of our big sycamore.  
Just waiting (aren't we, old Tree?)  
for her sparkles and shadows  
to move through us again.

You, sauntering up the walk,  
twirling your denim skirt  
about your ankles  
with a dancer's wrist,  
too intent to feel  
my eyes' caress from so high  
a husband's window.



## Giuoco Piano

I phone to tell her of my untimely death  
and she asks me over, but her voice is empty  
and there's a hint of liquor on her breath.

She seats me on the couch and serves me tea,  
the de-clawed wilderness of Sierra books adorn  
the coffee table, her saucer wobbles on one knee.

I find she lives exquisitely, genteely borne  
through Persian memories on the english horn,  
and I had thought to teach her how to mourn!

## Elf Call

Great conifers brood,  
dim light slants through speckled haze,  
even the birds whisper.

She floats translucent  
through this half light of ferns,  
spinning slowly, nude;

eyes closed, dreaming;  
always away over the ancient falls  
of moss mottled trees.

Four Phases of a Winter Moon

1

Geese settle on snow  
in stubble fields, the moon rises  
into cobwebs.

2

A sharp wind braids the snow  
across the ice of the lake,  
from the blue shadows  
beneath the cedars and out  
into the moonlight.

3

The moon nudges aside  
the curtains to shine on  
the nightstand  
where our eyeglasses  
embrace.

4

Snow ghosts howl and twirl  
beneath the warlock oaks, the  
harlequin moon sets.

Sundown on the Road

Rusts and umbers fade  
from windbreaks and stubble fields,  
blacktop glasses with rain;  
it's time for lights and wipers  
and pain behind my eyes.

Aching for my head  
to be nestled in your lap,  
your fingers to ruffle  
my hair. On the radio  
local stations fade.

If, as they say, the final cause of love  
shines from the ardor of divinity,  
the changeless light of crystal flame above  
the splendid agitation of our affinity,  
we must also know, no pleasure being pure,  
that wounds that take, not merely catch, the breath,  
must have a primal cause, abstract and sure,  
in the wanton will, the call and suck, of death.

The frailness her sleeping, moonlit face,  
this woman who is all I need of cause,  
all of my myths and only bond with grace,  
stings me with tenderness, a need that gnaws  
at foolish reasons, causes all cause to blur  
and aches as helpless, hopeless fear for her.

**ETUDES, ORDINARY AND FANTASTIC**

## Winter Trains

..And so there is not one kind of strife only,  
 but everywhere throughout the world there are  
 two...and they are completely different, for one  
 causes fighting and war, ...while the other makes  
 even the lazy work.

--Hesiod, *Works and Days*

{(St. Louis, January 31, 1990,

3:45 AM)}

All night they heard it,  
                   the night people,  
       without listening,  
 the rev of the diesels,  
 the squeal of the rusty brakes,  
 the satisfying, prolonged  
                   crunch of the coupling,  
 the building of the Chicago freight:  
       112 cars from Seattle, Frisco, LA,  
       Vancouver, Phoenix, Mexico City;  
 Santa Fe piggybacks of Toyota parts,  
       Canadian National boxcars of lettuce,  
       empty DT&I RoRo's headed back to Detroit,  
       flats, orehoppers, tankers with  
 their various warnings concerning sudden death,  
       and the night people heard it  
 without listening, it registered  
 only on the strangers to these strange hours,  
 new parents listening  
       for their baby's breathing,

first time felons,  
the new widow just moved in  
    with her city daughter,  
not the cops coming out  
    of the alley in their boredom,  
    in their suspiciousness, checking  
    the doors for trouble,  
not the janitor swinging  
    his mop and arguing out loud  
    with the call-ins  
    on the radio talk show,  
not the waitress at Denny's  
    just getting the smell of the bar crowd  
    out of her nose and fighting with  
    the pretty new thing to get her to do  
    her share of the cleaning up.  
Of all the night people  
    only the yard workers heard it  
because it was the rhythm  
of their work.

{(65 miles west of Billings, Montana  
    January 31, 1943, 3:45 PM)}

The big steam locomotive  
punches as fast as it dares  
    through the heavy snow



adding its confusion of smoke,  
steam and noise  
to the steel cold  
of the dangerous afternoon.

Behind stretches the forty-three coaches  
of the troop train  
headed for Seattle with its  
variegated load of male H. sapiens sapiens--  
the crap game of the "old" sergeants  
(25 or 26 at least),  
the cocky corporal from South Philly  
thinking about the three girls  
he talked into bed since he got  
his orders, smiling, looking out  
into the insanity-- the orderless swirl  
of the snow-- wondering if  
they were the last women  
he would ever touch.

The drafted miner from Bluefield, WV,  
who, by some quirk  
will be pulled out of a formation  
at Ft. Lewis and spend the war

behind a desk and on the beaches  
of Honolulu, beside the son  
of a Senator (whose presence there  
was less accidental).

The 19 year old ex-cop enlistee  
whose wife doesn't know  
she's pregnant yet, who will  
get through the malaria, the jungle rot,  
the two purple hearts  
by a fantasy: he and his angel  
afterward, peacefully enfolded,  
only to return to a snotty toddler  
who wants all of his mother's time.  
So in a roar, he swallows the kid whole  
and spits out a ghost  
that saps the colors from  
both their lives.

And, outside, at a county road crossing  
resting her head on the wheel  
of her daddy's pickup,  
the sister of a new KIA  
with parents too gnawed by grief  
to care, with no real sleep  
in three days, and with, out there

1

1

1

with a staff meeting to chair  
 listening to his top forty,  
 the single-mother-realtor  
 with a tricky 9 AM closing  
 trying to get her kids out  
 to paid-for schools, jiving  
 to the rap she's picked up from them,  
 the short order breakfast cook from  
 Bangor with his country,  
 the boiler operator with his Puccini,  
 and the freight, even when it blots out  
 the music, isn't noticed because  
 it happens every morning, every morning.  
 And as the train moves out of the city  
 the engineer, as he always does  
 as soon as it's really dark,  
 looks up to see  
 if he *can* see  
 the winter stars.

{(New York, December, 1916  
 sundown)}

In a sullen swirl of sleet  
 the Sixth Avenue El rumbles past  
 shaking clumps of dirty snow  
 down onto the street below.

The light is fading, the sun sets  
somewhere behind the drab brownstones.  
Here and there gas lights come on  
behind the windows  
that line the canyons  
of olive-drab-grey-brown shadows.  
Tired horses plod, heads down  
at the same angles  
as those of their drivers,  
their course held straight  
by the slushy ruts,  
the snow between  
steaming with fresh excrement.  
A young woman, picking her way  
through the slop  
catches the attention  
of a shriveled bookbinder  
in the El's window seat,  
her warm brown face  
curved in a secret little smile  
and the brilliant crimson

of her flapping scarf  
are the only colors alive  
in this ashlight where  
the snow's not even white.

At the next stop the windows  
of the second car look down a street  
where wiry children were disgorging  
from the doors of a garment factory  
at the end of their shift, which,  
in winter, of course, started  
before the sun and ended after it.  
With the indomitable, or rather  
not yet dominated, spirits  
of children,  
they laugh and shout  
in the snow, pushing  
each other down in it, throwing  
snowballs, first at each other  
and then at the unreachable train,  
up at the tired face in the window,

the tired face with its cigar  
in the window of the  
unreachable train.

{{Central Illinois, January 31, 1990  
10:30 AM}}

The Chicago freight makes its way  
through the stubble fields and farm towns,  
and from the helicopter above  
everything seems sharpened  
in the pale shadows off the snow  
in the low winter sun,  
seems crisp and clean, modeled  
in miniature, like a Christmas train set.

But it's just a working  
freight as it pulls through the town,  
past the idle grain elevator  
and the backs of the stores--  
the closed John Deere dealer,  
and the seed store, the laundromat,  
the Victorian gingerbread  
of the antique dealer,  
the hobo look of the  
hardware store and the plastic respectability  
of the supermarket.  
It rattles the cups in the diner

where a local farmer  
is flirting with the waitress  
who he has known since  
he knew anything-- but he's just  
filling the time  
of the winter waiting  
until the land again  
softens to his hands.

At the corner table  
two old-timers with weathered eyes  
sit jawing over coffee,  
their forearms propped  
on the table edge,  
their hands, awkward when at ease,  
looking like  
burls of mahogany.

Next door the train shakes  
the dust from the rafters  
of the Dew Drop Inn,  
where the tired owner wearing  
a Cubs cap tries to clean up  
the hopelessly shabby



bar from the ravages

of the night before.

Three streets over, the third grade

teacher with recess duty

stamps her feet in the cold

as the kids find their place

in the pecking order

like chickens in a barnyard.

And at the crossing gate on the main street

the alternating shadows and brilliances

as the sun flashes between the cars

splashes across the face of the town carpenter

as he waits in his pickup. He's

impatient because he has just seen

his lover's husband flirting in the diner,

and tingly in the hope that she

is, then, alone and waiting.

A mile past where she is

alone and waiting

a farmer sitting in his workshop

feels the vibration

of the train and

pauses a minute

to watch it out the

ice-encrusted window,  
 and then goes back to sharpening  
 his chainsaw, whistling  
 "Islands in the Stream"  
 with Dolly on the radio.

A flock of wrens that had been started  
 by the train, wheels behind its leader  
 and settles in the only evergreen  
 in the farmer's woodlot,  
 as if to wait for him.

{(West of Dresden, Germany, February 14, 1945  
 7:00 PM)}

They stopped the troop train  
 a few miles out of the city  
 because of the bombing.  
 It was dark and the boys  
 and old men in their *Volksgrenadier*  
 uniforms didn't look or feel  
 much like soldiers.

This last vestige of what  
 might be called Germany's manhood  
 filed out of the cars

and stood watching the flashes  
and the increasing red glow  
from over the hill and  
behind the trees.

The commander, an erstwhile teacher  
of classical languages, walked  
with the engineer up the tracks  
to the top of the hill and watched.  
For hours the fires whirled through  
the old city, becoming fire storms  
that flirted with each other,  
and then, as if copulating,  
becoming one firestorm. The buildings  
disappeared except where here and there  
a shape tottered, like a mockery,  
like a demon building, rocking  
in the heat and the smoke and  
the flames.  
The commander felt himself  
growing hysterical--

The grotesque lines of a medieval song  
squirmed through his brain:

*"Miser, Miser,*

*Modo niger,*

*et ustus fortiter"--*

"Misery, Misery,

I am roasted completely black.

He barely suppressed a will to laugh

and turned toward the engineer,

who was gaping absurdly,

and then back along the train

to where the dark shapes

of his foolish command

flickered in the obscene glare.

An hour after dawn

a handcar with an SS lieutenant

and a railroad worker came

over the rise from the city

like a bizarre Virgil and Dante

returning from a modernized

circle of hell.

When the officer told them to move on

toward the city, they looked at him

as if he were mad, he looked mad--

with a little smirk on his face,  
and he said, "Yes. They fried  
all the women and children,  
the old men and the hospitals  
but the only military target  
in the whole city,  
the switching yards,  
they missed completely, didn't  
even burn the station,  
not a track out of place,  
they couldn't do it again  
if they tried, not  
in a thousand years,"  
and he showed his bright  
teeth and grinned.  
The commander reeled,  
*"Dentes frendentes video"*--  
"Gnashing teeth I see"  
and his soul froze  
and he started to laugh,  
a laugh beyond self-forgiveness.

The train passed on  
past the hardware bound with them  
for the Russian front,  
past a cattle train on a siding

filled with Romany gypsies  
headed for another sort of oblivion;  
and still the city burned,  
and would burn until  
there was nothing left *to* burn  
not so much as  
a baby's fingernail.

(Chicago, January 30, 1990

5:10 PM)

All the diesels' rumble, all the clamor  
of their steel sinews, all the screech  
and clatter of the metal wheels  
are lost in the great city's rush hour.

Even as it streams in plain sight  
across the expressway overpasses,  
few of the commuters  
(headed for the western suburbs  
wearing their twice-daily squint  
against the rising or the setting sun,  
half listening to the radio reports  
of multiple fatalities and, more  
important, long delays, on the Dan Ryan)  
would remember seeing the Chicago freight.  
Even for those in buildings close enough

to shudder to its passing  
it's just another rumble  
filtered from awareness  
in the white noise of the city's scramble  
to change the guard.

From an architect's office high above the streets  
the trivial motion of the train  
is lost as he stares out over the city,  
no part of which he owns, yet so much  
of which is his, and he watches  
Chicago turn violet and golden  
in thousands of reflected sunsets.

Equally unnoticed, the vibrations jiggle  
the reflections in the mirror over a bar,  
blending the reds and leathers and brasses  
with the faces of those for whom  
getting home is no big deal--  
empty apartments, or homes where tension  
rubs the spirit raw, or homes where  
boredom has settled with the dust  
into the carpets. And they sit  
and drink over talk of work and sports  
and sex and lies, they all shimmer for

a minute like a mirage. The same mirror  
a few hours later will shimmer  
to a different train and craze  
the images of the singles, dressed  
like exotic flowers, as they  
search out heroes for the night.

Certainly the train adds nothing to the jostle  
of the triple-decker mall,  
just filling up, unless it slightly  
stirs the aromas in the 'Cafe'  
of the burgers and tacos and hotdogs  
and steak kow and gossip  
and lasagna and pastrami.

But a woman in a fawn-colored Mercedes  
does see it briefly, as she drives toward O'Hare  
to mix her destination (Phoenix)  
with the thousands of destinations,  
and her purpose (a convention)  
with the untellable thousands of purposes.

And it seems to the 10th grade English teacher,  
still sitting at his cluttered desk,  
that the world has begun to shake  
in sympathy to his shaking.



He still sees the look in the eyes  
of the two last-period dealers  
as they told him why they were  
in his class and exactly  
what they would do to him  
and his family if he got  
in their way. And, Oh, yes,  
from now on he was to call them "Sir".

And in a maternity ward, a new mother  
feels it as a vibration of her breast  
as her son takes the nipple for the first time,  
but she doesn't know what it is  
and looks up, past her smiling husband  
toward the girl in the next bed  
who can do nothing but cry.  
And a plasterer-- still in his own juices,  
splattered hat-to-boot with white-coat,  
shoulders aching from the ceilings  
he's been stretching toward all day,  
elbows on knees; grungy, callused hands  
held up as if they were those  
of a newly scrubbed surgeon--  
hears, but easily ignores, the distant whistle  
as he laughs at Bugs on TV

along with his twins  
who are sprawled on the carpet  
at his feet, until his wife  
shoos him into the shower.

And so it goes until the train  
pulls into the huge Chicago yards, and  
in the dim lights of the tower  
the work of sorting  
the cars of what was  
the Chicago freight, begins.

And the work continues,  
the building of other trains  
in the patterns the computer  
calls for. Here and  
everywhere the work continues,  
work passed hand to hand,  
across space and through time.

The endless drudgery of those efforts  
required to keep things  
from falling quite all apart.

For it takes none of our wickedness  
to reduce things to rubble.

Left alone, things fall  
apart by themselves. Endlessly  
we must rebuild, shoring up

the weak support, tediously replacing  
the rusted and the rotting,  
so that, once in a while,  
for a few, the chance comes  
to build, to make something new  
that isn't just a replacement  
of the decrepit.

And in the park on the lake shore  
the pigeons, with the ease  
that only long practice brings,  
fly just far enough to avoid  
the mittened hands  
of the snow-suited girl  
and resume pecking the bread  
that her mother has  
scattered for them.

The child wavers for a second,  
runs back to touch  
her mother's knee for reassurance,  
looks up with bright cheeks  
and says, "Mommy! Birds!"  
and runs out again toward where  
the low sun is shadowing

the ice of the lake.

Her mother watches the pigeons

swirl about her twirling daughter  
and smiles the ancient, quiet smile

that is the only known wage  
for the valid work of the heart.

## The Sheets Were...

chilly, like thunderstorms over water,  
the heat of the day  
sapping the colors from the light.  
The birds scatter and wheel,  
the summer silences rumbled,  
shatter, and I imagine my distant wife  
standing at a window  
slapping the fly that bites her arm.  
The dishes clatter, echoing "*Sieg Heil*"  
to the thunder, sapping my daughter's  
breath, the lightning's demon clapping.

The voices of the sirens (nurses)  
joking quietly at their station.  
The lack of pain feels odd.  
Afraid a deep breath  
will start it up again. Afraid.

Half awake again, the serene face  
of she who, poking my limp white flesh,  
serves as *ad hoc* god,  
calling me back through  
the silent storm, chilly  
and afraid.

## Spring: Persephone

Her husband's lusts would take a while to quell  
but rain will wash his pungence from her hair,  
the maiden *had*, at last, returned from hell.

She smiles in memory (the crackled air  
beneath his shadow, glory and despair!)  
and steps uphill from death, where none belong,  
transfigured winter glisters in her glare,  
her eyes the green in a grey world, her song  
and smile, the only song and smile, but not for long!

...And Hector, wrenching out the bronze-point spear  
from the bubbling throat of the soon to be dead,  
rights his glorious body  
and, turning his head, locks eyes with you.  
Your spine creeps, the fear gulps your will,  
your bowels go loose and queer, as when a woman,  
late at night, in a dim, red corridor,  
fumbling for her keys, purse spread wide,  
sees the approaching swagger and sick leer.

You suck the air almost voluptuously,  
tottering at a famous death,  
your knees sway-- your soldier's training ready,  
your soul aghast.

But then he sweeps his disdainful gaze away  
as if the leering eyes  
had just walked passed  
merely glancing at her, contemptuously...

## Those the Gods Remember

"Thus he spoke, and Calypso shuddered"--  
faith broken-- and in her tall groves  
the trees squeezed the dirt between their roots  
hard as the knot that thudded in her chest.  
Her hand at her throat, she clamped her eyes  
tight, til the day, the boat, and he, were gone.

When she opened them, she didn't know the place.  
Teutonic clouds scudded through the thrust  
of gothic vaults, roofless to the clotted sky.

She watched til virgin Spica shone in the center  
of a glassless window, then she slowly climbed  
the cold stone to a place she could lick  
the moonlight from where it had pooled  
in the empty socket  
of a gargoyles eye.



## In Old Calypso's Cave

She bows her head above the steaming coffee  
and lifts the rosebud cup, so very softly,  
with ten most careful, wrinkled, fingertips  
and brings the china to her parchment lips.

She drifts into an idyll from her childhood  
about a unicorn captured in a mystic wood,  
trapped for royal hunters by her virginity  
in a ruined abbey above a slate-grey sea.

The morning's restless, she can't elude  
the aimless lusts that senselessly intrude.  
The mildewed photo albums on their shelf  
taint the air, the soul frustrates itself.

Her scent is lavender, the room's, cedar,  
the FM stirs them round with Mahler *lieder*.  
She slowly puts the cup and saucer down,  
and stirs the coffee with a angry frown.

**MUSIC FOR SOLO DRAGON AND CONTINUO**

## Droppings From the Bird of Time

The avian menagerie of this splendid morning  
sings in the speckled leaves above, scorning  
the fancy footwork of this earthly frolicker,  
wife in hand, who pause to listen as they bicker,  
fight for their bit of branch, their right  
to love whom they please, even in plain sight.  
Along comes an old gnome (full-bearded, half-smiled)  
with Eliot under one arm, Williams the other, riled  
and writhing for each other's literary throat.  
But this well versed gnome knows by rote  
how time comes to obscure such living differences--  
reducing animosities to footnotes and references.  
"The Moderns" they will say, as we say "Romantics" now,  
as if they formed an infield for the Mets, how  
we fought or who we diddled will be just so much  
bird noise. Why is it, love, while we're still in such  
sunlight, that of all the love we've made, only  
that once (with the red hair) will survive our memory,  
while, all the while, the anthologies are filling up  
with mere immortal words and such-like sop?  
What snuffs the truest of loves and realist of birds  
so much before any half-decent poet's, half-decent words?  
After the eggs of the eggs above are dead and gone  
how long will these trees ring with the same old song?

## The Dragon and the Canon

## 1

When a mind's been whetted on Ockham's strop  
it's bound to be the canon of the coffee shop  
So when I relate how I cut my incisors,  
as just a lad, on reason's revisers,  
and my insight sizzles and sparks  
as I show by the charm of quarks  
how demons hatch in the strangeness of pions;  
and as I reason away our every fear,  
the whole pride of refuted lions  
comes to lick my face and whisper in my ear.

## 2

But there's a dragon of the night  
haughty in the glory of her might,  
her black scales flowing red  
with the faces of the dead.  
She stands, one gryphon's claw  
about my heart, her dripping maw

exhales her rancor in my face;  
lucent wings fling me into space.

In the morning I may pin her heart  
with the logic of an *a priori* dart  
but for now her atavistic need  
is my religion, sect and creed.

## Statuary

## 1

In the burnt beginnings lurks the myth  
multi-headed, yellow-toothed and lean,  
and from its heads the epic hybris springs  
for gods are flesh and blood and we are not.  
A fire insinuates its pale down stony halls  
where pewter people gather in deeps and shadows;  
so I chant to them of demons and twisted things  
gone wild and sane. For I'm the northern singer  
and I'll sing you sagas that sparkle in the air  
between us. Huddled together in the pentacle  
of witches' bones, I'll chant you a blizzard  
of lies, and you'll believe them, and so will I.

## 2

The maples shade the rhododendrens  
and fleck the garden with a flirting fire  
in jigsaw bits of quaint desire.  
The hedge is specked with pigeon coos and wrens.  
  
A Venus shining in a goldfish pond  
becomes a wish allowed to harden  
in the formal corner of a city garden,  
allowed to be familiar, easy, *fond*.

Some ancient knew this jaunty goddess posing here,  
how once she laced her coil-perfect hair  
with musks distilled from sacred air,  
ice blue in amber, spiced with fear.

His callused fingers on her breasts could trace  
the pure flesh of the image in his loins  
that for us is just a niggling in the groins  
obscured by the altruistic lusts that grace  
the bashful reality we allow ourselves to face.

## Vantages

## 1

She sizes up the party through her bubbly  
and lets herself be baffled by its chatter.  
It's such a pretty folk her liquor flatters  
into demigods, so nicely mannered, doubly  
dangerous, being mysteries. A Roman sort,  
cocktail cocky, begins his polished stalk  
of her, exciting some atavistic part  
with his hips and leers and specious talk.  
Sex sparkles through the smoke and laughter  
but images of his smug indulgence after  
rankle the goddess in her and she balks,  
spins on a tall heel, and on a whim, and walks  
past shark mobiles, Ming lions, abstract dangers  
lining the halls of her hosting strangers.  
At last she stumbles on a covered atrium  
lit only by the light from an aquarium.  
She rests her eyes on exotic labyrinths  
of neon tetras and water hyacinths.

## 2

Among the honeyed cloud-tops, with a dignity  
derived from the blushless nature of divinity,  
the gods make lazy love to the counterpoint of hymns  
hummed by choruses of the gendered but unsexed Seraphim;



and, far below, blue and scarlet birds swim  
through the olive shade beneath a forest canopy,  
weaving in iridescent flashes among the ivory  
shafts that mottle the gnarl of roots and ferns.  
Here in a grotto sacred to a nymph,  
he leans against a lichened boulder and turns  
stones in the pool with a dainty hoof.  
He grins deliciously-- smug eyes a trifle mad--  
hands folded at the juncture of goat and god,  
of myth and maker, where choices clash and blur--  
thumbs spread like a banker's, fingers curling fur.

And she comes, keeping to shadows, too timid  
to touch a heel to the leaves, or her daunted  
eyes to his. Beguiled by this specter reflected  
in her pool, she feels it becoming host  
to an illusion: an image that's never haunted  
by the stoop of raptors' wings, a ghost  
of the grace that gods think other gods must surely  
have, the very symbol of the desire to desire.  
She stands, ankles crossed, arms folded on her belly,  
transfixed by phantom paradigms and shadow fire  
until the distant demigods with muffled laughter  
shame her from him  
and she finds herself staring down into the water  
of an aquarium in a stranger's atrium.

## Gargoyles

## 1

Consider the musty grace,  
     polyphony from cloisters  
 twining up the gothic vaults,

*Kyrie eleison*

    the disturbing of old dust  
 speckling shafts of glass stained  
     sunlight, altered and subdued,

*Christe eleison*

    the rituals that through time  
 foment an incense  
     for the buttressed galleries  
 and their essences,

*Kyrie eleison*

    pungently holy  
     sacredly profane.

## 2

Were a crossed knight to hie himself  
 to church in quest of purity,  
*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,*

the spiced robed priests might  
pause from their liturgy  
to bless him, absolve him,  
*Miserere nobis*, and perhaps,  
dissolve from him  
those grosser passions which  
give nuance to their ethereal distillations.

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,*

This gentleman might then leave  
through the gargoyled doors,  
charged with the sacred liquor,  
the intoxication of expiation.

*Dona nobis pacem*

## The Dragon and the Chinese Rose

## 1

The sledges strike the anvil  
waking the esoteric dragon,  
that mad professor, who chimes  
his scales, and cracks the dawn.

His breath freezes like a hungry  
memory of the antique air  
as he spins a bard's song of heroes  
that only serves to singe his beard.

He casts his eyes on a Maoist poster--  
dumbfounded by an image of a million  
bowls of ideological rice;  
he shrugs and jogs off,  
stage sinister.

## 2

The scene is lifted from a scroll  
with pointy pastoral hills  
and scents of a Mandarin's woman

tiny-footed in the bamboo,  
gathering orchids.

The dragon slakes his thirst on her  
and tosses up his head, testing  
the air. He scans the castle's crenellations  
and sniffs the morning smoke.

On the hill he thinks he sees  
the ghosts of Chinese philosophy  
fall like an ashen snow  
that softly deepens around  
the blue and white funeral urns  
of those ancestors who have lost,  
posthumously, the right to think.

The tenured heart knows the truth  
but habitually rebuts itself.

On the eating habits of  
old Chinese philosophers and  
ancient dragons

1 (for the wise man)

One day beneath a juniper tree  
sat old and gnarled Lao-tze  
sharing out his meager alms  
with ants that chanced across his palms.

2 (and the dragon)

"Dragon, my friend," said Lao  
there's blood on your chin."

"I've bitten off the head  
of an evil hero," said the dragon,  
licking her lips.

Lao shook his head, "So much effort,  
so much risk. You are a foolish  
monster; I've warned you against  
commitment."

"But," the dragon said, laying  
her head in the old man's lap  
"When only those who like  
violence are willing to do it  
they will rule us all."

"And that," said Lao,  
stroking the beastie's head,  
"will be their punishment."

"Bah," said the dragon.

## Under the Tree of Heaven

Lao and the ancient dragon Ming  
shared the water from a spring  
high on a tall summer hill  
in the shade of a tree of heaven  
and paused a patient while  
to watch the village anthill  
bustle far below them in the heat.  
They imagined the squish of the mud  
between the toes of the peasants  
bending in the fields of rice  
and how the whining of the children  
was slowly wearing their parents out,  
and how the anger of the fat mandarin  
at the dull resistance to his tyrannies  
was choking his heart.

"See," said Lao, "if you make yourself  
useful, people will use you.  
The bane of women is that  
they are useful by anatomy."

"Ah, Lao, the trouble with you people  
is that you think too much,  
instead of doing what  
you know is right."



"No, my friend, there you're wrong.  
What gets us into trouble isn't  
the apparatus between our ears,  
but that between our legs."

Ming snorted out a small cloud  
of lilac peonies that  
circled in a graceful arc  
around Lao's head and said,  
"You've got that straight."

## Cape Cod Piece

*(Timor mortis {et amoris}**Conturbat Me)*

## 1

(Old Nestor in His Cups)

The night's grown late and rather drunk  
and the land breeze chilly on a naked trunk.  
The young bodies, water logged, puffy eyed, circle  
the fire, letting the beer work its juicy miracle.  
Only the driftwood flames show any spunk  
spinning up sparks in dizzy constellations  
to buzz among the stars. Its hot aspirations  
flush the faces of every clammy-assed hunk  
and wench with sparkled perspiration.  
The *Summum Bonum* sips his beer with moderation,  
sneaks a hand between two thighs and cops a feel.  
A strangled sound that tries to be a squeal  
begins a protest her intoxication squelches,  
he falls supine on the sand and belches  
and I begin to wonder what I'm doing here.  
Old man among the heroes, drug along as seer  
to read the sacrificial livers, glean an omen  
from the circling birds, tell which women  
are sacrosanct or divinely favored. I lurch

up and wander from the pale, go in search  
 of dark places for my loneliness to be alone.  
 I stagger up and down the shifty dunes  
 until I tumble-sprawl on a crest, a twisty rune  
 drawn by a drunken Druid, denoting "groan".  
 Below, a naked couple sways in the breeze,  
 hips arched for the probes of curled and stroking  
 fingers. Me? I watch, despite the poking  
 of an angel nagging in my breathing's wheeze.  
 My intoxication wins the tug between disgust  
 and the titillations of a voyeuristic lust.  
 She kisses his chest and slips to her knees.  
 Corn silk hair, silvered by the moon, bobs gently,  
 smoothly, like calm and starlit waves that tease  
 the shore, little ripples lapping the rocks, softly  
 nibbling, curling up the beach, buckling his knees.

## 2

*(Cum mortuis in lingua mortua)*

I ghost out along the moonlit beach like a dead lover  
 trying to remember who it was he loved and why. Clever  
 old heart to resurrect itself through the prick of pain  
 the high sadness that it used to feel, but it all drains  
 away into the pale moonshine of this silver never-never.

I stand on a sandy spit for the ceremony of the setting  
 of the gibbous moon, for the ritual of great regretting.  
 I pour libations into the pit, semen, honey, wine--  
 down into darkness to placate the darkness, the purified.  
 Above the black ground I lift the spotless ewe, beatified  
 in virginity, and draw the sharp bronze across its benign  
 throat; the smoking blood squirts hot on my wrist,  
 dripping into the bubbling sand. The ghosts twist  
 around my head, seeking to sip the blood, to gain  
 remembrance, the feeling of anything, even gross pain.  
 Hold them off! wait for the blind one, the promised!  
 Wait the seer with the secret homecoming, the omened mist  
 through which everything is clear. And here he stands  
 chanting in a language so dead that nobody understands.

## 3

*(The prophet by daylight)*

Knee deep in the surf, swayed by the surf, the sunrise  
 sizzling on the waves, I stare like a puzzled  
 infant into its mother's face, utterly dazzled.  
 Sea nymphs, like white cats, nuzzle my thighs  
 and lick my face, whispering that the old, the fizzled  
 gods, between the sanctification and the sacrifice,  
 offered a brief divinity. But this old, this grizzled

heart, prodded by hairy legs as cold as ice,  
reminds itself that it's mortal, still painfully alive  
and bizarre behavior in the surf won't shorten the drive  
back to Plymouth. I shiver and shut my gritty eyes.

The snow is softly piling up around  
the pitted granite headstones on the hill  
above Plymouth. Night is coming; the sounds  
of Christmas carolers and steeple bells  
are muffled by snow and a pang of doubt,  
So I sway, held from both the dead bound  
beneath my feet and the living songs in the bells  
by the simple faith I am without.

## The Fate of the Cliff Dancer

On a lawn high above a sea turned bronze  
in the haze of a quiet sun, she dances.  
The curves of her body stretch the fabric  
of her dress, her white skirts swirling  
with little twists of a wrist that smells  
of hyacinths. She sings and the sun stays  
to listen and hummingbirds, iridescent in  
reds and blues, come to feed from her ears.

In the brassy sun, with corona and halo,  
she has waltzed to the prince of hummingbirds  
until they broke their spells of brilliance  
and, laughing, fell like mating eagles,  
swirling down an immensity of empty air  
toward waves that sparkle in sunlight like  
hyacinth petals.

And high in a jungle canopy  
an orchid falls, swirling through the leaves,  
and the hummingbirds come and fly around it,  
mourning its long fall. It comes to rest  
on a jaguar being stroked by a woman  
who wishes that her wrists still smelled  
of hyacinths.

And as she floats along  
the slow, deep river, a green-gold shining

through the tarnished mists  
of the tropical morning,  
she trails a wrist in the dark water  
and tells the jaguar lying at her feet  
that she will remember how it was  
before the hummingbirds sucked  
all the nectars from her spirit.

But surely we know this,  
    my poor soul,  
for what it is:  
    the oldest of your dreams,  
    the oldest of your pangs,  
the most beautiful  
of all the lies  
    we cliff dancers  
    tell ourselves  
    during the long fall.

**OFF THE TOP OF MY HEAD**



A Compromise on the Inclination  
Toward Immortality Arrived at  
in October, 1986, at Higgins Lake

The sunlight skitters across the water,  
and through the gaudy leaves swirling  
above my head as I lie on the  
kiddy merry-go-round that my daughter  
is pushing for me. My wife  
and mother flash past, swinging  
on the swings.

{Socrates was accustomed to walk  
in the blazing midday of Athens  
when the sun off the stucco and marble  
was an exquisite pain to the eyes,  
but with everyone else curled up in the shade  
he was forced to talk to himself.  
He and the cicadas chirping away,  
they of things sexual, he dialectical.  
The clouds of twenty-five centuries  
have topped the Akropolis

but the cicadas still sing  
in the olives of Athens  
and Socrates' ghost still  
walks in the limelight;}

but me, I'm content to lie in this shade  
and with indolent eyes  
talk to myself.

## Looks

On campus the young women--  
girls a blink ago-- are  
everywhere, and I find myself  
watching them, not with  
the guilty lusts I used to feel  
but just because they're beautiful.  
Sometimes, though, they meet  
my eyes, with interest or defiance,  
with half a smile  
or a grimace of disdain.  
Flustered, I count my feet.  
Art should have the grace  
not to look back.

## Sweeping the Stairs

The job I assigned myself  
first this glorious spring day  
is to sweep down four flights  
of institutional stairs, a task  
I usually give to someone else.  
But this evening I want  
to at least see this sky  
if only through dirty windows.  
But then I get down to  
the entrance and there, floating  
on the high gloss  
of the white terrazzo floor  
are thousands of cherry petals.  
I wander off to find  
someone else to sweep them away.  
It's got to be done,  
But I'm not about to do it  
or to watch.

## Breaks

In the deep snow the pines  
on the ridge are silhouettes  
against the last green light.  
Where I'm standing in the deep cut  
it's already as dark as snow ever gets  
and Jupiter is sparking in Taurus.

A shadow in a crook  
of twisted pine suddenly  
becomes a great grey owl  
that rises on its arched wings  
and stoops behind the crest  
of the ridge. We all disappear, he  
to his sounds of rodent-under-snow, I  
to the mopping of this endless hallway,  
and you, with any luck,  
to the labors that  
make you mysterious.

## Duelist

Oh, I know what my body wants.  
It wants to be the eagle,  
the shower of gold, the swan,  
the bull that breathes  
crocuses from its mouth.

Ah, poor body, to be saddled  
with the rest of me,  
and poor me to have to know  
what my body wants  
and still be me.

## Ozimandian

At night the city has  
that cocktail taste,  
Scarlet plumage  
perches on the linoleum  
shooting  
by the bar light.  
Electric music  
churns the umber air,  
exotic flesh  
spins and burns  
on the foot-polished floors.

Out subway exits  
purple schooners sail  
fishing for elephants  
below the neon waves,  
all the easy people pop  
their paper bags  
defying hazy dictums  
with their zigs  
and zags.

## Those Lion Eyes

{Ten dicta for dealing with  
the big cats}

## 1

The lions of this world  
can be bearded, must be refuted,  
or they'll begin to think  
they're right as well as strong;  
but leave their spouses alone,  
even if they lick your face  
and whispurr in your ear.

## 2

You can't beard a lion  
with your head in his mouth  
or all of you in his gut.  
It's hard enough to do if  
it only hands you your paycheck.

## 3

It's better to have bearded a lion  
than to have brought it bad news.



4

When choosing up sides  
    pick the lions first,  
when choosing a mate  
    think twice!

5

Stay sleek around the hunters,  
slowpokes end up as lion shit.

6

For the most part it's easier  
to beard a lion in its den  
than to pull a thorn from its paw.

7

Remember the proprieties:  
lions are "tawny" not "yellow".

If you love a lion:

- a) be prepared to feed it well  
and live on scraps.
- b) remember that lions,  
even when refuted, sated  
and face-licking,  
don't build nests.
- c) N.B.:  
lions screw who they want  
and consume the rest,  
and who's on what list  
is subject to change  
without notice.

If there's a wall  
between you and a lion,  
check it often for chinks  
and misplaced loved ones.

Lions are more beautiful  
and infinitely more graceful  
than half-eaten gazelles.

## The MOWING OF THE LAWN

This is not a neighborhood for taking risks.  
Each house has its hedge clippers, edger,  
lawn mower, weed sprayer. My 4" grass,  
my shabby bushes, my lovely dandelions  
send tremors of vague uneasiness  
across the brows of my neighbors,  
an anger peeks from their eyes.  
For three whole weeks I have ignored  
the ritual Cutting of the Grass  
and the tribe views the pollution of my yard  
with growing restlessness; the God of  
Immaculate Neatness may do something,  
who knows what? Their eyes grow atavistic.  
They want to drive me from the village  
wearing the garland of this year's sins,  
they want to pour honeyed wine on my driveway,  
to sacrifice a goat on my doorsill and smear  
the smoking blood on my lintel. Since they  
can't, they just grow madder, vaguely.

## Like Persians in the Snow

In the backyard I unclip my beagle's leash  
and she runs out across the starlit snow,  
then I look back toward the house--  
two lights-- the kitchen's tropical  
fluorescence, and up on the third floor  
a dim yellow glow from the desk lamp  
left on a week ago when I rummaged  
for my *Poetics*. From a Michigan January  
the house seems to hold an oriental warmth.  
I turn but she's run off someplace, so  
I just stand and let myself feel the sharp  
air, easing into a world where the bottom's  
white and the top's black between  
the bitter stars.

The old girl's back, whining  
and limping from the cold.

The cardinal cocks  
his sleek head on the snow crest.  
No camouflage here.

## Protocol

Prone in maple shade.

Daddylonglegs bobbing on  
moss between sparse grass.

Tigers of tiny jungles,  
kings of naught, aren't we?

(Who bows first?)

## Bahram

("And Bahram, that great hunter..."  
--The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam)

Remember, love, how your grey  
cat was when he was fey,  
staring quite through the common world  
to where, in the dust motes, swirled  
the realer one of Plato's paradigm?  
And there a mouse, of "Mouse" sublime,  
ran the final course of absolute escape  
chased by your great grey hunter (up the drapes,  
across a lap, into a half-open drawer,  
which when opened, found him curled in a C shape  
among the underwear, feigning to ignore  
you.) Nothing had happened, he petulantly swore  
and besides it had all been (YAAWWN) a bore.

## A Niche in Time

One of those gifts given for mischief--  
up all night writing through the storm  
leaves me awake at first light  
of a season that's become confused--  
everywhere the snow and ice  
shine in the white winter sun  
but, it being only October,  
the sugar maples are olive becoming orange,  
the willows half yellow, still half green,  
the sumac blaze scarlet over the drifts,  
and the temporarily unemployed robin  
who's perched in the summery leaves  
of the honey locust above me  
gives out with a heart-rending chorus of  
*"Un bel di vedremo"*.



The Dildo of Fate

Once as a prank Eros and Dionysos  
taught somber Atropos, the silly calf,  
a use for her scissors less surely pernicious  
and nobody died for a year and a half.

Astronomy:

Variations on themes

by J. P. Sartre and the Holy Ghost

From this fourth floor window  
the urban space below spirals  
with people, each a black hole  
into which flows these massy  
blocks of glass and concrete  
along with the curves and bumps  
of each other's bodies  
to be crushed and reinvented  
by the laws that each negation  
stumbles on. And the Other, namely  
me, watches their faces, those  
event horizons, and wonders what  
their singularities are doing to  
my universe, while all the while  
waiting for my number  
to be called.

Manhattan

The scariest thing  
about this place is  
that even on the clearest night  
there are no stars.

## Germantown Trees, circa 1950

On our block were maples  
with big red keys in clusters  
whirling down in the haze  
of the leaf smoke,  
one block up were the big oaks  
with their plump, sharp-tipped  
acorns that clattered against  
the trash can lid shields  
and stung bare arms,  
and a block down were the sycamores  
with their hard balls that split  
into the surprise of delicate cotton  
and tiny seeds.  
Not the kinds of trees the planners  
plant today, too big,  
too dirty, too shady.  
These trees were planted when  
people thought of cities as  
good, permanent, civilized,  
and worthy of patience.

## Modern Argosy

And Neptune gazes dully up  
at the all-too-familiar passing  
of the leviathan-dwarfing hull  
and runs his fingers through  
his oil-matted hair.

A puddle enchanted  
with rainbows  
of oil, ugly only  
by inuendo.

## Paradox Stew

Nam overwhelmed me with its life,  
from the algae that choked its puddles  
and the niggling insects with their gaudy  
wings to the lizards that crept out  
from the tops of the walls at night.  
All this living smelled corrupt, cancerous,  
to this nordic nose. How I longed for snow,  
sun-dazzled, blue-veined, sterile, snow.

## Gesture

Sitting on the sandbags  
of a bunker at Bien Hoa  
just after sunrise, grease  
and sweat sticky in every fold  
of my body, trying to get sloshed  
enough on warm bourbon  
to sleep another day  
of tropic heat away,  
I looked up and saw an F-104  
coming in low from the south  
like the Hollywood version  
of a Trojan spear point.  
The tower must have given him hell  
for violating its air space  
for all of a sudden he sat it back  
on its tail, kicked in  
its afterburner and disappeared  
straight up into a clear sky.



## **DRAINING THE SWAMP**

## Squawking

The raucous squawking of some damn bird  
tells me that I've done it again.  
Somewhere out that window, beyond  
the city's big fake stars, the sun  
is changing the color of the sky.  
So I'll sleep half the day away and  
my wife will try just a bit too hard  
to be understanding and  
my guilt will make me mad.

Through fatigued gritty eyes  
the words my night has left  
on this page, seen now against  
the ages-honed glamour of a bird,  
begins to seem a perfect paradigm  
of purest doggerel.

Look at these books on their  
sagging, dusty shelves. The lives  
compressed there (saint cuddled up to Casanova,  
kings and cooks shoved belly to belly,  
lamb and lion laid down {with gilded spines})  
serve only to remind me that they are,  
as we will be, gone, completely dead, forever.

So why have I wasted a night  
trying to flesh out this ordinary life  
with words? For a gilded spine and dust?  
I'm not the keeper of any axe of sacrifice  
or sword of retribution,  
No dawn demands that I sing.  
Sixteen poets on a dead god's nest,  
drink and the devil have done for the rest.

Now even I can see the new light.  
Sibelius on the radio has me  
half in tears. That's it, then,  
really, isn't it? The beauty  
thing. Having been churned up  
by Yeats and Shakespeare, Brahms  
and Monet, I want to make  
someone else feel as they have  
made me feel. No, that's not true,  
I want to do it for myself.  
I want to make, with words,  
my wife's smile more beautiful to me

than it already is. A phantasm.

It's because I want to recreate

reality so that I can *feel* it better

that I wrench language in the dark,

and why I'll never write anything like this

ever again.

## The Monkey

A simple thing, a little cowardice,  
while still groggy from too little sleep,  
puffy from the tropic heat, unsure  
in my underwear and towel,  
walking to the shower,  
grease, grit and sweat everywhere,  
even between my teeth,  
excuses, excuses.

He was a big Spec 5, a crew chief  
on one of the hogs, I didn't know him  
well. He stood in front of his tent  
with his monkey, paying his mama-san.  
All of a sudden the monkey  
runs at the woman and bites her  
on the leg. She cried out and  
half turning, kicked it.  
He bellows out  
"Leave my monkey alone  
you fucking gook cunt,"  
and hits her, backhanded, hard  
across the temple, sprawling  
her onto the path.

How tiny she looked there,  
hardly big enough a bundle  
to really be a human being.  
After a second she pulled herself  
onto her knees and, with averted eyes,  
said something nasty in Vietnamese.  
But I ask you, who was worse,  
him for defending his monkey  
or me for walking away.

## Heartache

Caught up short between a plowed snow bank  
and a department store window creche,  
jostled by shoppers. How gross and rank  
to be frozen here in everybody's way,  
stunned by the pain in my arm and chest.  
The nitro I pop makes the Christmas lights sway.  
How ashamed I'd be to die here at these strangers'  
feet. Afraid to even be afraid because the strain  
might lay me out before this store front manger  
in a shameful desecration of the nativity.  
The Nitro pounds my temples, easing the pain.  
Suddenly I'm shaken by a queer fit of anger  
that the baby shames me from. Infant Divinity,  
why leave me here shivering, scared, shitty?

## On the Crest

Snow bright night trees;  
You in his comfort  
I in my cap  
had just settled down  
for a long winter's nap,  
Our windows show different branches  
hung with the same snow.



## Trivia

When I think of how few lives have mattered  
even to the race that bred them,  
of how for every Brahms there are a million  
"thee"'s and "me"'s; in short, of my humanity;  
I wish that I  
could forge a sword of ecstasy, rising  
from the lake of terror in the last darkness;  
that I could call it forth  
as a scream of lust and light,  
castrating the Antichrist  
in the last moment of crisis.

But then I realize that even this  
could not console me for the five minutes  
I last watched my wife prepare her body  
for the endazzlement of her lover's eyes,  
which is why, I guess, so few lives ever matter.



## The Keep

## 1

Lost in his office, weightless with pain,  
can he move the morning through its platitudes?  
The secretary's eyes and words probing,  
alien, through flashes of his wife lewd  
in her lover's grasping, burning.  
Years of images of her suddenly intrude--  
the shape of her hips, a smile through a window,  
her fingers tossing through her hair. A rude  
sting of fear. He twists in his chair and rises,  
gripped with nausea, and paces in crude  
pain. He chokes on his civilized disguises,  
chokes on the fear her images exude.

## 2

The hero squints his cunning eyes  
across the glare of a clouded sea.  
The surf pollutes his feet with foam

like the semen of a thousand enemies.  
His memory reenacts a vision in the haze  
of Agamemnon standing on another shore,  
his daughter's smoke twisting through his beard;  
a sacrifice to the thrill of enterprise.

At the last the heart's long journeys  
all are for the heart's home.  
Where is it now, my Agamemnon?  
Why is there seaweed clinging to your knees?

$$m = \frac{m_0}{\sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}}$$

Secure in bed, an arm around a nubile knee  
 I've given up all hope of being free.  
 All quests are over, I will not find  
 the harpy clinging to the Western mind.  
 I'll just compose my melodies in major keys  
 that depict my Hero's quest on baffled oars  
 Through the darkling realms of rhythmic snores.  
 For I must accept what I can't reverse,  
 Equations rule the universe,  
 But no philosopher should be too mad  
 if I chance to find this rather sad.  
 For they tell me, and I believe it,  
 though *you* can take or leave it,  
 that we are only things, mechanical devices--  
 A clockwork in pants, an engine in a skirt,  
 though we find, surprisingly, we still hurt.

## Digging in Our Own Ruins

We twist and churn through dreams of mythy sex  
with textbook adeptness; legs up arms under--  
new escapees from sin but running scared, torn asunder  
by doubts, chased by Guiltasaurus Rex.

Dashing through the trees, knock-souled, bow-hearted,  
like candidate saints seeking to be rose-farted.

We should have been preachers and on Mondays, angled,  
leaving our spouses' lives and arms untangled  
while mumbling sermons or rearranging mangers,  
or better yet, been bears and slept our winters  
breeding every other year with growling strangers.

Will the diggers who recreated us from our splinters  
be able to tell our gonads from our livers?

## Marked

The chalk is on the door  
across the street and down the way;  
furtive women smear blood on the lintels  
next door and across the road,  
the hexes on the peeling barns  
have been given a careful coat  
of fresh paint;

an announcement  
it is obvious, has been made.

The storm riding in on the sunset  
like bile over a bleeding ulcer  
has more in it than rain and thunder,  
that's clear.

The eyes in the street  
look at me oddly, and I begin to feel  
that I wasn't told on purpose,  
that everything is, somehow,  
my fault.

## Overdue Requiem

When I was just back from Nam I attended  
a small, exclusive college in Illinois,  
feeling as out of place as a hedgehog  
hobnobbing with eagles. Me, soldier's brat,  
three-striper's whelp, whose father was proud  
of the pain he's had the honor to have suffered,  
proud that each morning he becomes Death.  
I was torn between what I thought I ought  
to feel about these sons and daughters  
of the men who paid his wages and bought  
his sense of duty, and my easy affection  
for the people they were, how they wore  
their confidence that they had the right  
to be alive like an angel wears its smile.

But the one I remember late at night  
was as blond and blue-eyed as a spring sky.  
He was dying of leukemia  
but never told us, any of us.  
In his place I'd have been a prick,  
but he was as placid as a star.  
I called him Mr. Gullible, and



he'd just smile and call me Mr. Absolute.  
I guess he felt no more need to cultivate  
a skepticism than to burn and rage.

He was not a saint, nor I a demon  
and the sky is the same color.

## The Myths of the Beautiful Weapons

The older boy with his confused longings,  
diffuse, objectless, wanting to hold onto  
something,  
aching to defend  
something,  
someone, desperate to be of use,  
stands with his fingers laced in the chain fence  
watching imaginary F-14s flirt in the sunset,  
top-gun in the winter twilight.

He joins all the heroes who ever knelt  
in the cold moonlight of the winter lake  
when the woman's hand, emerging  
from the ice that encircles her wrist,  
holds up the sword of kings {golden,  
rubies for sacrifice, emeralds for revenge,  
diamonds for glory}, and takes it from her,  
warming her hand with his,  
heedless of consequence.

But as they take their weapons up  
she can not tell them they've become  
merely the newest toys of Mars.

## In the Huron Mountains

If there are still divinities that care a jot  
for this wet world, it must be for  
places like this-- for the hushed light  
of the deep forests,  
and when they are gone,  
cut down and paved over,  
there will be nothing holy,  
nothing of true power, left;  
or not, at least, anything  
that wishes *us* well.

## **LISTENING FOR THE BIG BANG**

Two Saints

St. Francis

Oh, triple blessed!  
Though bruised and sore  
you chirped to talking birds  
and slept among their turds  
but we love you all the more  
and not a whit the less.  
You shine out brightly blessed  
to your most silly, holy, core!

St. Dominic

dead men's cunning  
written on almond leaves,  
is that sun rising?  
where is Christ's lion?

trimming a tree  
with black balls.

## Dust Bowl

The old accounts tells us  
how drought added injury  
to the insult of their poverty;  
how the dust rose up  
in the sulphurous sky  
and buried the wind naked stalks,  
how it wormed its way into everything  
till their faces were dust grey  
even when clean;  
how when the sky crusted over  
and thunder boomed down the wind  
the lightning brought only smoke  
to mix with the dust;  
how they saw their children grow  
too thin, and too old too fast,  
and realized that they couldn't  
pass to them what their parents  
had graced their own childhoods with:  
the laughter of the games  
played in the innocence  
before knowing that,  
in the long run, all games  
are played in the dust.

## Skirting the Absolute

A skirted angel of my close acquaintance  
pirouettes, masked, posed in a Greek trance,  
across the carpet; enthused in seething  
metaphysical delights, "I am teething  
"on the devil's pitchfork," she explains,  
"gnawing it to a trinity of pink pains  
and splinters in my milk white throat.  
I've sailed the black waves in a swan shaped boat  
and need not die the death expected  
but can spread my free grace, sacredly respected,  
around God's heart and die to him on my own terms."  
All this delivered with elegantly prurient squirms,  
so we watch, candlelit faces like stone gnomes,  
our socratic phalluses imagining idyllic homes;  
but as she vaporizes into the ashen night  
we can't but hope that she might be right.

*Sanctus Sanctorum*

The old bishop, back from a meeting  
of the finance committee, sinks,  
half asleep, into his leather recliner  
and commences to recline. Music  
from the CD player (Vaughan Williams's  
"Mass", by chance) aches in his ears:  
"Ky-y-ri-e e-lei-ei-son."

In the darkness beyond the pale  
of the Tiffany lamp, the smoky forms  
that prop the tenets of belief begin  
to dance to the "*Credo in unum deum*"--  
half seen, half imagined-- like  
topiary in a dense fog. Forms which  
in morning sunlight once brought delight.



## Notre-Dame

The late sunlight gilds its gargoyles,  
crowns its kings and glorifies its saints.  
The stone in its profusion of perplexities,  
its intertwining of the sacred and profane,  
creates an awe for its mysteries of faith.

    In the echoed loftiness of  
its sanctification, the round  
and facing windows portray what  
the holy eye should see--  
such colors as God might show  
a spirit as great and yearning  
and as pure as these crossed  
and arching vaults, a soul stained  
absolute in piety, burning  
solely with the candles  
of pleading and devotion.  
These eyes of roses that see  
only the most sacred of the Light  
gaze unconcernedly above the world  
of couples and cafes that spreads out  
beneath the trees and across the Seine.

Lofted above the sparkling river as a  
space apart, liminal; the outer  
and the inner universe of the Gothic heart,

she was lifted by a faith we may  
have come to miss.

But the towers, guarded with grace  
and grotesqueness, still await  
the consummation of their intended spires,  
still await the coming of a day  
when they may point our way to heaven,  
still await the return of the Gothic  
confidences of will and faith.

And so the towers stand to earth  
as squarely solid as our flesh,  
still too human for its aspirations,  
and in so being, Our Lady stands  
as a perfection in the way that's  
least intended of them all.

A Bright Mist Hoards the Sea

A bright mist hoards the sea that climbs  
in a slow roll up the sand; a gull  
out of nowhere suddenly testifies in tongues.

And if it were that one who taught us all  
that any perfect man could understand  
it could not be, to me, more unintelligible.

So should an understanding one ever come  
like a ghost gull above a fog sea, teaching  
the supermen who sacrifice him everything  
they could possibly understand

he would be, like this gull in a blind  
mist, merely crying to the pipers as they  
peck the beach, skirting the bright misted sea  
that climbs in a slow roll up the sand.

If into the Midst of Armaggeddon

If into the midst of Armaggeddon  
the Fire Faerie came in her forbidden nakedness,  
her garnet eyes flashing with the blood's very  
fury, her aegis of sheerest light  
devised with copulating dragons  
blazing out with the blindness of prophecy,  
her emerald sword arcing in runes  
of sacred mystery culling thane and thrall,  
Would the final warriors listen then? Would God?

A Raven Lumbers

A raven lumbers from  
birches clumped on soggy ground  
to scrub spruce near rocks  
and tucks his wings; waiting death,  
others or his own.

## Dark Camp

(In memory of Noëlle's parents)

We sit touching shoulders as  
the wind and moonlight  
do their ancient dance  
through the trees around us.  
The old fire, once again  
prodded, smolders, flickering  
in your grieving eyes.  
Hollow in their absence  
we had been wondering in whispers  
why their princesses and ever-afters  
had to be fairy tales indeed  
while all the monsters  
proved quite real.

In the tent our daughter  
stirs and mutters in her sleep  
and I feel for her a terrible  
helplessness, knowing  
that no care is ever enough.  
Will the tales we tell her--  
that victories are for always,  
that slain dragons stay dead,

that the passing of the powerful  
is more real than  
the deaths of decent people,  
will these lullabies of innocence  
make her defeats more poignant?  
Make the dying harder, hers  
or ours?

The things that haunt our race  
circle us through the trees.  
We sit, tense and dazzled,  
like the last witnesses  
to an ancient, sacred, murder.

Don't You Wish

Listen,

The silent voice is singing while  
the clear flame spins the crystal rose!

The war horns themselves  
are proclaiming the

*Pax!*

The spirit has come to cuddle.

We find that after all we *are*  
the answers to the sacred Mysteries'  
queerest questions,  
The absolute proofs of  
the brightest of  
worlds.



## Shores of the Mind's Eye

## I

Where the tundra ends  
at a groan of wind and ice,  
where no scarlet birds ever sang  
for a spiced dawn and no Greek  
ever asked any barefooted questions.

## II

From beneath a stand of copper beeches  
on the last tall hill in the rain,  
the eye can follow the tangled hedgerows  
that trace the bones of the land  
until they run beneath  
the grey mumbling of the bay,  
knowing that nothing vivid or sudden  
ever happened here except the clamor  
of Tudor church bells and the flutter  
of swallow, swift and lark.

## III

From a lime green lagoon  
the run of a tropic curl  
up the coral beach, up from  
the break of the white reef

and beyond to an ocean  
that's the color of the sky  
just before full dark brings stars.

## IV

Slack tide on a dark beach, a night  
of moonlight chanting on black waters,  
flickering like votive candles might  
to the slow medieval litany  
of cloistered nuns at winter vespers,  
a calm that seeks eternity.  
But their heartbeats, like glass bells  
twinkling above my head, form an augury  
of what, in darkness, has begun to swell.

## V

The roar of the wind and the trees  
on this headland in the gale  
could drive you mad--  
tear your mind out through your ears  
and drive it in thin strands  
to catch on snags in the pines  
or sweep them up through  
the crevices in the contorted clouds.  
This gale without rain whose  
grey fury has already driven

the waves crazy, drowns out  
your heart, snuffs the sparks  
of your brain, smashes  
the meaning of every word  
uttered since Gilgamesh gave Enkidu  
the whore of civilization.

## The Arches of the Sun and Moon

## 1

Wind driven snow hisses  
around the slippered feet  
of the Moonlight as she dances  
across the ice of the lake;  
her swirling silver gown  
sweeps out in the rhythms  
of her last hero  
when he was in her;  
he, whispering "flame-flower,  
witch-lover, mother of my  
monsters," until his lips  
froze to her breast.

## 2

The maiden has returned from Hell,  
from the long winter of her husband's lust  
and she lets the rain wash the pungence of  
last year's death from her hair.  
Her eyes are the only green in a grey world  
her lips the only red and her smile  
the only smile, but not for long.

## 3

The cries have all but died away.  
The fires crackle through the houses  
burning clear and nearly smokeless.  
The dust from the fields coats  
the open eyes of the neglected dead.  
In the woods an ancient dragon watches.  
The homecoming hero, his shield  
slapping the flank of his lathered horse,  
his cock sticky from the girls  
he has polluted with his semen  
and the blood of their own fathers, rides  
through the mottled arches of the trees  
and the dragon crouches in the shadows.

## 4

But there comes a time  
when dragons hide from beardless boys  
and the spiders cast their webs around  
the eyes of the old men as they watch  
the infants suckle by the hearth,  
when the small beasts scatter before  
the flashing legs of the older girls  
as they rustle through the red hills,  
run the leaf strewn ridges  
of the red, wild, hills.

## Kyrie

There is a prayer that haunts me  
and I say it now for my daughter  
asleep miles away  
tying me to my humanity,  
and I say it now for my wife  
as she lies in her lover's arms,  
and I say it now for my duty drowned  
father in his soldier's grave,  
and I say it now for my mother  
whose life I have helped to use up,  
and I say it now, and over again;  
for our obscenity of power  
boils all religion down  
to this one old prayer:  
*Miserere nobis, Dona nobis*  
*pacem*; Grant us, O God, if  
You be good and God,  
Peace.

--Ann Arbor, 8/8/82, 1:18 AM.