

Expressions of Sea Level By A. R. Ammons



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By A. R. Ammons

Born in North Carolina in 1926, A. R. Ammons was graduated from Wake Forest College in 1949 with a Bachelor of Science degree in general science. Afterward he studied English for three semesters at the University of California. For the last ten years, he has been employed in business.

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Designed by P. David Horton

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to Phyllis

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Expressions of Sea Level

Raft

I called the wind and it
went over with me
to the bluff
that keeps the sea-bay
and we stayed around for a while
trying to think
what to do:

I took some time to watch
the tall reeds
and bend their tassels
over to my touch
and
as the lowering bay-tide left
salt-grass
combed flat toward the land
tried to remember
what I came to do:

in the seizures,

I could not think but
 vanished into the beauty
 of any thing I saw
and loved,
pod-stem, cone branch, rocking
 bay grass:

it was almost dark when the wind
breathless from playing
with water
 came over and stopped
resting in the bare trees and dry grass
 and weeds:

I built a fire in a hollow stump
and sitting by
wove a disc of reeds,
 a round raft, and

sometime during the night
 the moon shone but
it must have been the early night
for when I set out
 standing on my disc
and poling with a birch
 it was black dark
of a full tide:
the wind slept through my leaving:

I did not wake it to say goodbye:

the raft swirled before day
and the choppy, tugging bay

let me know

I had caught the tide
and was rushing through

the outer sea-banks
into the open sea:

when dawn came
I looked
and saw no land:

tide free and
without direction I
gave up the pole,
my round raft
having no bow,
nowhere to point:

I knelt in the center
to look for where the
sun would break
and when it started to come
I knew the slow whirl
of my ship
which turned my back to the east
and

brought me slowly round again:

at each revolution

I had
new glory in my eyes
and thought with chuckles
where would I be at noon
and what of the night
when the black ocean
might seem not there

though of course stars
and planets rise and
east can be known
on a fair night
but I was not
certain

I wanted to go east:
it seemed wise
to let
the currents be
whatever they would be,
allowing possibility
to chance
where choice
could not impose itself:

I knelt turning that way
a long time,
glad I had brought my great
round hat

for the sun got hot:

at noon

I could not tell

I turned

for overhead the sun,

 motionless in its dome,

spun still

and did not wobble

the dome

or turn a falling shadow

 on my raft's periphery:

soon though that symmetry

eased

 and the sun

was falling

and the wind came

 in an afternoon way

rushing before dark to catch me.

Hymn

I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth
and go on out

over the sea marshes and the brant in bays
and over the hills of tall hickory
and over the crater lakes and canyons
and on up through the spheres of diminishing air
past the blackset noctilucent clouds

where one wants to stop and look
way past all the light diffusions and bombardments
up farther than the loss of sight
into the unseasonal undifferentiated empty stark

And I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth
inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes
trusting the microvilli sporangia and simplest
coelenterates

and praying for a nerve cell
with all the soul of my chemical reactions
and going right on down where the eye sees only traces

You are everywhere partial and entire
You are on the inside of everything and on the outside

I walk down the path down the hill where the sweetgum
has begun to ooze spring sap at the cut
and I see how the bark cracks and winds like no other bark
chasmal to my ant-soul running up and down
and if I find you I must go out deep into your
far resolutions
and if I find you I must stay here with the separate leaves

Risks and Possibilities

Here are some pretty things picked for you:

- 1) dry thunder
 rustling like water
 down the sky's eaves

 is summer locust
 in dogfennel weed

- 2) the fieldwild
 yellow daisy
 focusing dawn

 inaugurates
 the cosmos

- 3) the universe comes
 to bear
 on a willow-slip and
 you cannot unwind
 a pebble
 from its constellations

4) chill frog-gibber
from grass
or loose stone
is

crucial as fieldwild
yellow daisy:

such propositions:
each thing boundless in its effect,
eternal in the working out
of its effect: each brush
of beetle-bristle against a twig
and the whole
shifts, compensates, realigns:
the crawl of a slug
on the sea's floor
quivers the moon to a new dimension:
bright philosophy,
shake us all! here on the
bottom of an ocean of space
we babble words recorded
in waves
of sound that
cannot fully disappear,
washing up
like fossils on the shores of unknown worlds:

nevertheless, taking our identities,
we accept destruction:

a tree, committed as a tree,

cannot in a flood
turn fish,
sprout gills (leaves are
a tree's gills) and fins:
the molluscs
dug out of mountain peaks
are all dead:

oh I will be addled and easy and move
over this prairie in the wind's keep,
long-lying sierras blue-low in the distance:
I will glide and say little
(what would you have me say? I know nothing;
still, I cannot help singing)
and after much grace
I will pause
and break cactus water to your lips:

identity's strict confinement! a risk
and possibility,
granted by mercy:
in your death is the mercy of your granted life:
do not quibble:

dry thunder in the locust weed!
the supple willow-slip leafless in winter!
the chill gibber of the frog
stilled in nightsnake's foraging thrust!
how ridiculous!
grim:
enchanted:

repeating mid night these songs for these divisions

Terrain

The soul is a region without definite boundaries .
it is not certain a prairie
can exhaust it
or a range enclose it :
it floats (self-adjusting) like the continental mass.
where it towers most
extending its deepest mantling base
(exactly proportional) :
does not flow all one way : there is a divide :
river systems thrown like winter tree-shadows
against the hills : branches, runs, high lakes :
stagnant lily-marshes :
is variable, has weather : floods unbalancing

gut it, silt altering the
distribution of weight, the nature of content:
 whirlwinds move through it
or stand spinning like separate orders: the moon comes:
 there are barren spots: bogs, rising
by self-accretion from themselves, a growth into
 destruction of growth,
change of character,
 invasion of peat by poplar and oak: semi-precious
stones and precious metals drop from muddy water into mud:

it is an area of poise, really, held from tipping,
 dark wild water, fierce eels, countercurrents:
a habitat, precise ecology of forms
 mutually to some extent
tolerable, not entirely self-destroying: a crust afloat:
 a scum, foam to the deep and other-natured:
but deeper than depth, too: a vacancy and swirl:

it may be spherical, light and knowledge merely
 the iris and opening
to the dark methods of its sight: how it comes and
 goes, ruptures and heals,
whirls and stands still: the moon comes: terrain

Nelly Myers

I think of her
 while having a bowl of wheatflakes
(why? we never had wheatflakes
or any cereal then
except breakfast grits)
 and tears come to my eyes
and I think that I will die
because

 the bright, clear days when she was with me
and when we were together
(without caring that we were together)

can never be restored:

 my love wide-ranging
I mused with clucking hens
and brought in from summer storms
at midnight the thrilled cold chicks
 and dried them out
 at the fireplace
and got up before morning
unbundled them from the piles of rags and
turned them into the sun:

I cannot go back
I cannot be with her again

 and my love included the bronze
sheaves of broomstraw
she would be coming across the fields with
before the household was more than stirring out to pee
and there she would be coming

as mysteriously from a new world
and she was already old when I was born but I love
the thought of her hand
wringing the tall tuft of dried grass

and I cannot see her beat out the fuzzy bloom
again
readying the straw for our brooms at home,
I can never see again the calm sentence of her mind
as she
measured out brooms for the neighbors and charged
a nickel a broom:

I think of her

but cannot remember how I thought of her
as I grew up: she was not a member of the family:
I knew she was not my mother,

not an aunt, there was nothing
visiting about her: she had her room,

she kept her bag of money
(on lonely Saturday afternoons
you could sometimes hear the coins
spilling and spilling into her apron):

she never went away, she was Nelly Myers, we
called her Nel,
small, thin, her legs wrapped from knees to ankles
in homespun bandages: she always had the soreleg
and sometimes
red would show at the knee, or the ankle would swell
and look hot

(and sometimes the cloths would
dwindle,

the bandages grow thin, the bowed legs look
pale and dry—I would feel good then,

maybe for weeks
there would seem reason of promise,
though she rarely mentioned her legs
and was rarely asked about them) : she always went,
legs red or white, went, went
through the mornings before sunrise
covering the fields and
woods
looking for huckleberries
or quieting some wild call to move and go
roaming the woods and acres of daybreak
and there was always a fire in the stove
when my mother rose (which was not late) :

my grandmother, they say, took her in
when she was a stripling run away from home
(her mind was not perfect
which is no bar to this love song
for her smile was sweet,
her outrage honest and violent)
and they say that after she worked all day her relatives
would throw a handful of dried peas into her lap
for her supper
and she came to live in the house I was born in the
northwest room of :

oh I will not end my grief
that she is gone, I will not end my singing ;
my songs like blueberries
felt-out and black to her searching fingers before light
welcome her
wherever her thoughts ride with mine, now or in any time
that may come
when I am gone ; I will not end visions of her naked feet
in the sandpaths : I will hear her words
“Applecandy” which meant Christmas,

“Lambesdamn” which meant Goddamn (she was forthright
and didn’t go to church
and nobody wondered if she should

and I agree with her the Holcomb pinegrove bordering our
field was

more hushed and lovelier than cathedrals

not to mention country churches with unpainted boards
and so much innocence as she carried in her face
has entered few churches in one person)

and her exclamation “Founshy-day!” I know no meaning for
but knew she was using it right :

and I will not forget how though nearly deaf
she heard the tender blood in lips of children
and knew the hurt

and knew what to do :

and I will not forget how I saw her last, tied in a chair
lest she rise to go
and fall

for how innocently indomitable
was her lust

and how her legs were turgid with still blood as she sat
and how real her tears were as I left

to go back to college (damn all colleges) :

oh where her partial soul, as others thought,
roams roams my love,
mother, not my mother, grandmother, not my grandmother,
slave to our farm’s work, no slave I would not stoop to :
I will not end my grief, earth will not end my grief,
I move on, we move on, some scraps of us together,
my broken soul leaning toward her to be touched,
listening to be healed.

Bridge

A tea garden shows you how :

 you sit in rhododendron shade
at table
on a pavilion-like lawn

 the sun midafternoon through the blooms
and you

watch lovers and single people
go over the steep moonbridge at the pond's narrows
where flies nip circles

 in the glass
and vanish in the widening sight except for an uncertain

 gauze memory of wings

and as you sip from the small thick cup
 held bird-warm
 in the hands

 you watch

the people
rising on the bridge

descend into the pond,
 where bridge and mirrorbridge merge

 at the bank
returning their images to themselves:
 a grove
of pepper trees (sgraffito)
 screens them into isolations of love or loneliness:

it is enough from this to think in the green tea scent
and turn to farther things:

when the spirit comes to the bridge of consciousness
and climbs higher and higher
 toward the peak no one reaches live
but where ascension
 and descension meet
completing the idea of a bridge

think where the body is,

that going too deep
it may lose touch,
 wander a ghost in hell
 sing irretrievably in gloom,
and think
how the spirit silvery with vision may
break loose in high wind

 and go off weightless
body never to rise or spirit fall again to unity,
to lovers strolling through pepper-tree shade:

 paradise was when
Dante
regathered from height and depth
 came out onto the soft, green, level earth
into the natural light, come, sweat, bloodblessings,
 and thinning sheaf of days.

Requiem

1. Mind

The strawberries along the roadbank in the hills bloomed,
the starwhite petals brilliant and melty in the sun as frost:
a glimmer of angels through the pines
rained fine needles, blanketing the rich fruit.

On Rome's hills stand Respighi's musical pines,
aural columns of light, beingless but with minds.
Rising from banana trees in Mexico one, beyond
the clouds, comes into skies of pines on rocky tops.

Thus when I saw the strawberries, I rose into the singing trees
and the angels, white
sharks in a glittering sea,
massacred me.

My blood drops still to the red pulp of wild strawberries
whose white shark flowers
will call any man into the waters of the boughs.

Oh my mind runs down the moon's glass tears
and plucks them up (tektites) frozen from the land.

No creation equals a moment's consciousness.
No cymbal cones and crashes peaks so.
No white shark stabs so.

Along the blade the dune thistle blows,
opening thorny hemispheres
of yellow florets half-deep in purple stain,
and spears of onion grass rise sleek and clean
from the gray and gritty sand.
To stand with landward hair enduring these
requires sharks in the eyes, the backing of seas.

The coffin-carrier cries and the crow "cars" over the salt creeks.

2. Event

The day after,
after the golden culminations and unfuneraled dead,
after the nuclear trees drifting
 on cloudy stems,
and the fruits of knowledge
and the knowledge of those golden high-capped trees,
 flaking, settling out,
after the transfigurations
and dark visitations,
 groans and twitching resentments,
after the golden culminations
and the trunks of violent trees stalking the vacant land,
 there rose an irrelevant dawn:

the white shell lay spiraled on the beach as it had lain
and the surf, again unheard,
 eased to primal rhythms
of jellyfishing heart, breaking into mind;
ants came out and withered in the sun;
 the white shark
sucked at the edge of the sea on the silent, reddened morning;

and all the white souls sailing
sailed, funneling out into eternity;
 by the wharf, dolphin bobbed
belly-up with his poet, all his nudging sea-cleaning done;
briery the earth, iced
 with bones, rolled into time.

3. Contraction

Repenting creation, God said,
 As you know, I Am,
God,
because I do not have to be consistent:
what was lawful to my general plan
 does not jibe
with my new specific will;
what the old law healed
is reopened
 in the new.
I have drawn up many covenants to eternity.

Returning silence unto silence,
the Sumerian between the rivers lies.
His skull crushed and moded into rock
 does not leak or peel.
The gold earring lies in the powder
of his silken, perished lobe.
The incantations, sheep trades, and night-gatherings
 with central leaping fires,
roar and glare still in the crow's-foot
walking of his stylus on clay.
Under surgery the sick man rolls and
 vomits on the temple floor,
the anesthetic words of reciting priests
licking grooves through his frantic mind.
The dust has dried up all his tears.
 He sleeps out the old unending drug of time.

The rose dies, man dies, the world dies, the god
grows and fails, the born universe dies
 into renewal,
and all endures the change,
totally lost and totally retained.

Guide

You cannot come to unity and remain material:
in that perception is no perceiver:
 when you arrive
you have gone too far:
 at the Source you are in the mouth of Death:

you cannot
 turn around in
the Absolute: there are no entrances or exits
 no precipitations of forms
to use like tongs against the formless:
 no freedom to choose:

to be
 you have to stop not-being and break
off from *is* to *flowing* and
 this is the sin you weep and praise:
origin is your original sin:
 the return you long for will ease your guilt

and you will have your longing :

the wind that is my guide said this: it
should know having
given up everything to eternal being but
direction :

how I said can I be glad and sad: but a man goes
from one foot to the other ;
wisdom wisdom :

to be glad and sad at once is also unity
and death :

wisdom wisdom: a peachblossom blooms on a particular
tree on a particular day :

unity cannot do anything in particular :

are these the thoughts you want me to think I said but
the wind was gone and there was no more knowledge then.

Expressions of Sea Level

Peripherally the ocean
marks itself
 against the gauging land
it erodes and
builds:

it is hard to name
the changeless:
speech without words,
 silence renders it:
and mid-ocean,

sky sealed unbroken to sea,
 there is no way to know
the ocean's speech,
involved and markless,
breaking against

 no boulder-held fingerland:
broken, surf things are expressions:
the sea speaks far from its core,
far from its center relinquishes the
long-held roar:

of any mid-sea
speech, the yielding resistances
of wind and water, spray,
swells, whitecaps, moans,
 it is a dream the sea makes,

an inner problem, a self-deep
dark and private anguish
 revealed in small,
by hints, to
keen watchers on the shore:

only with the staid land
is the level conversation really held:
only in the meeting of rock and
 sea is
hard relevance shattered into light:

upbeach the clam shell
 holds smooth dry sand,
remembrance of tide:
water can go at
least that high: in

 the night, if you stay
to watch, or
if you come tomorrow at the right time,
you can see the shell caught
again in wash, the

sand turbulence changed,
new sand left smooth: if
the shell washes loose,
flops over,
 buries its rim in flux,

it will not be silence for
a shell that spoke: the
 half-buried back will
tell how the ocean dreamed
breakers against the land:

into the salt marshes the water comes fast with rising tide:
an inch of rise spreads by yards
 through tidal creeks, round fingerways of land:
the marsh grasses stem-logged
combine wind and water motions,
 slow from dry trembling
to heavier motions of wind translated through
cushioned stems; tide-held slant of grasses
 bent into the wind:

is there a point of rest where
the tide turns: is there one
 infinitely tiny higher touch
on the legs of egrets, the
skin of back, bay-eddy reeds:

is there an instant when fullness is,
without loss, complete: is there a
statement perfect in its speech:

how do you know the moon
is moving: see the dry
casting of the beach worm
dissolve at the
delicate rising touch:

that is the
expression of sea level.
the talk of giants,
of ocean, moon, sun, of everything,
spoken in a dampened grain of sand.

Unsaid

Have you listened for the things I have left out?
I am nowhere near the end yet and already

 hear
 the hum of omissions,
the chant of vacancies, din of

silences:

there is the other side of matter, antimatter,
 the antiproton:

 we
have measured the proton: it has mass: we
have measured the antiproton: it has negative mass:

you will not

hear me completely even at this early point
unless you hear my emptiness:

 go back:
 how can I
tell you what I have not said: you must look for it
yourself: that

side has weight, too, though words cannot bear it
out: listen for the things I have left out:

I am
aware
of them, as you must be, or you will miss

the non-song

in my singing: it is not that words *cannot* say
what is missing: it is only that what is missing
cannot

be missed if
spoken: read the parables of my unmaking:

feel the ris-

ing bubble's trembling walls: rush into the domes
these wordy arches shape: hear

me
when I am
silent: gather the boundaried vacancies.

Mechanism

Honor a going thing, goldfinch, corporation, tree,
 morality: any working order,
animate or inanimate: it

has managed directed balance,
 the incoming and outgoing energies are working right,
some energy left to the mechanism,

some ash, enough energy held
 to maintain the order in repair,
assure further consumption of entropy,

expending energy to strengthen order:
 honor the persisting reactor,
the container of change, the moderator: the yellow

bird flashes black wing-bars
 in the new-leaving wild cherry bushes by the bay,
startles the hawk with beauty,

flitting to a branch where
 flash vanishes into stillness,
hawk addled by the sudden loss of sight:

honor the chemistries, platelets, hemoglobin kinetics,
 the light-sensitive iris, the enzymic intricacies
of control,

the gastric transformations, seed
 dissolved to acrid liquors, synthesized into
 chirp, vitreous humor, knowledge,
blood compulsion, instinct: honor the
 unique genes,
 molecules that reproduce themselves, divide into
sets, the nucleic grain transmitted
 in slow change through ages of rising and falling form,
 some cells set aside for the special work, mind
or perception rising into orders of courtship,
 territorial rights, mind rising
 from the physical chemistries
to guarantee that genes will be exchanged, male
 and female met, the satisfactions cloaking a deeper
 racial satisfaction:
heat kept by a feathered skin:
 the living alembic, body heat maintained (bunsen
 burner under the flask)
so the chemistries can proceed, reaction rates
 interdependent, self-adjusting, with optimum
 efficiency—the vessel firm, the flame
staying: isolated, contained reactions! the precise and
 necessary worked out of random, reproducible,
 the handiwork redeemed from chance, while the
goldfinch, unconscious of the billion operations
 that stay its form, flashes, chirping (not a
 great songster) in the bay cherry bushes wild of leaf.

Ghost Town, N. J.: Batsto

After two gray sunless days of warm
noreaster windy rains the sun breaking
clear this morning, over the bayside
field the sparrowhawk foraging in the
oval air, we took Route 9 north through
Pleasantville, past the pleasant
inviting cemetery crisp with light,
over the railroad, crosstown to the
Absecon meadows and into the sycamore
leaf-letting hills beyond and through
the housing development with groves
of old leaf-keeping darker oaks and
northward past Seaview Country Club

with the high round dining room and
young rich men in casuals crossing the
street to the golf-links and on past
fields and hedges, the scarlotry of
maple leaves, sassafras and skinny
birch resplendent in the clean sun,
the winding flat highway, empty
but for slight local traffic, and onto
Garden State Parkway to bridge the
wide-mouthed Mullica River that spreads
out in brown still meadows to the sea,
an occasional gull, the skeletal
cedar upriver against the land, off
to secondary roads not too well marked
and along the north bank of the
Mullica westward into the Wharton
Tract, now a state park, with ghost
towns and endless acres in neglect,

stopping at a pinerise to see the
cemetery of the French family, death
after more than a century light as
the morning sun, where Thomas French,
a year older than his wife, lies since
1844, his wife three years later
giving up her heavy grief, lying
down beside him, their secret union
invisible in the green needles of
the great pine that branches now
into their rest, looking where Levi
Scott, four years old in 1800, went
down beneath his thin tall slab, may
the child keep innocent of treason, and

on to Crowley Landing on the left

between river and road, now a campsite
and picnic ground, where we took
pictures, wild mullein starring the
grounds, a yucca group with dead
flower-spears off in a clearing, in
the center a mound of old chimney
bricks with wasp dust and gold grasses
and a yard tree, broken off, with
slender sprouts nude, swamp cedar
standing around in clumps like persons
edging the openings, by the river now
narrower twists of white birch
thin-twigged and leafless, and

around two curves to Batsto, the
tower of the mansion house first seen,
like the towers of shore women gazing
the sea's return, a confluence of
roads and streams, the bog-iron works
and Revolutionary cannon balls, iron
hearths and iron oxen-shoes, seeing
a nail made and headed from nail rod,
the company store, and men from
Trenton writing the place up for the
Sunday paper, wasps drunk with fall
warmth, a beautiful November noon by
the grist mill and the meal-honed
wood, the carriage house and small
seats, the sty with the iron-bowled
furnace for scalding, on the third
floor of the mansion a strict stairway
to the slaves' underground railroad,

and

weakening to the presence of a foreign
past and to the keeping of old things,
back home by Route 30 and the White
Horse Pike, by the farmers' stands,
Naval Air Base and to the sea's edge.

Mansion

So it came time
 for me to cede myself
and I chose
the wind
 to be delivered to

The wind was glad
 and said it needed all
the body
it could get
 to show its motions with

and wanted to know
 willingly as I hoped it would
if it could do
something in return
 to show its gratitude

When the tree of my bones
 rises from the skin I said
come and whirlwinding
stroll my dust
 around the plain

so I can see
 how the ocotillo does
and how saguaro-wren is
and when you fall
 with evening

fall with me here
 where we can watch
the closing up of day
and think how morning breaks

Close-Up

Are all these stones
 yours

I said
and the mountain
pleased

but reluctant to
admit my praise could move it much

shook a little
and rained a windrow ring of stones
to show
that it was so

Stonefelled I got
up addled with dust

and shook
 myself
without much consequence

Obviously I said it doesn't pay
to get too
close up to
 greatness

and the mountain friendless wept
 and said
it couldn't help
itself

Mountain Liar

The mountains said they were
tired of lying down
and wanted to know what
I could do about
getting them off the ground

Well close your eyes I said
and I'll see if I can
by seeing into your nature
tell where you've been wronged
What do you think you want to do
They said Oh fly

My hands are old
and crippled keep no lyre
but if that is your true desire
and conforms roughly
with your nature I said
I don't see why
we shouldn't try
to see something along that line

Hurry they said and snapped shut
with rocky sounds their eyes
I closed mine and sure enough
the whole range flew
gliding on interstellar ice

They shrieked with joy and peeked
as if to see below
but saw me as before there
foolish without my lyre
We haven't budged they said
You wood

Prospecting

Coming to cottonwoods, an
orange rockshelf,
and in the gully
an edging of stream willows,

I made camp
and turned my mule loose
to graze in the dark
evening of the mountain.

Drowzed over the coals
and my loneliness
like an inner image went
out and shook
hands with the willows,

and running up the black scarp
tugged the heavy moon
up and over into light,

and on a hill-thorn of sage
called with the coyotes
and told ghost stories to
a night circle of lizards.
Tipping on its handle
the Dipper unobtrusively
poured out the night.

At dawn returning, wet
to the hips with meetings,
my loneliness woke me up
and we merged refreshed into
the breaking of camp and day.

Jersey Cedars

The wind inclines the cedars and lets
snow riding in
bow them

swaying weepers
on the hedgerows of
open fields

black-green branches stubby fans under snow
bent spires dipping at the ground

Oh said the cedars will spring let us rise
and I said rain
will thawing

unburden you
and will
they said

we stand again green-cone arrows at the sun
The forces I said are already set up

but they splintering in that deep soft day
could not herd
their moans

into my quiet speech
and I bent
over arms

dangling loose to wind and snow to be
with them assailing the earth with moans

Hardweed Path Going

Every evening, down into the hardweed
going,
the slop bucket heavy, held-out, wire handle
freezing in the hand, put it down a minute, the jerky
smooth unspilling levelness of the knees,
meditation of a bucket rim,
lest the wheat meal,
floating on clear greasewater, spill,
down the grown-up path :

don't forget to slop the hogs,
feed the chickens,
water the mule,
cut the kindling,
build the fire,
call up the cow :

supper is over, it's starting to get
dark early,
better get the scraps together, mix a little meal in,
nothing but swill.

The dead-purple woods hover on the west.

I know those woods.

Under the tall, ceiling-solid pines, beyond the edge of
field and brush, where the wild myrtle grows,

I let my jo-reet loose.

A jo-reet is a bird. Nine weeks of summer he
sat on the well bench in a screened box,
a stick inside to walk on,

“jo-reet,” he said, “jo-reet.”

and I

would come up to the well and draw the bucket down
deep into the cold place where red and white marbled
clay oozed the purest water, water celebrated
throughout the county:

“Grits all gone?”

“jo-reet.”

Throw a dipper of cold water on him. Reddish-black
flutter.

“reet, reet, reet!”

Better turn him loose before
cold weather comes on.

Doom caving in
inside

any pleasure, pure
attachment

of love.

Beyond the wild myrtle away from cats I turned him loose
and his eye asked me what to do, where to go ;
he hopped around, scratched a little, but looked up at me.
Don't look at me. Winter is coming.
Disappear in the bushes. I'm tired of you and will
be alone hereafter. I will go dry in my well.

I will turn still.

Go south. Grits is not available in any natural form.
Look under leaves, try mushy logs, the floors of pinywoods.
South into the dominion of bugs.

They're good woods.

But lay me out if a mourning dove far off in the dusky pines
starts.

Down the hardweed path going,
leaning, balancing, away from the bucket, to
Sparkle, my favorite hog, sparse, fine black hair,
grunted while feeding if rubbed,
scratched against the hair, or if talked to gently :
got the bottom of the slop bucket :

"Sparkle..."

"grunt, grunt..."

"You hungry?"

"grunt grunt..."

"Hungry, girly?"

"grunt, grunt, grunt..."

blowing, bubbling in the trough.

Waiting for the first freeze:
“Think it’s going to freeze tonight?” say the neighbors,
the neighbors, going by.

Hog-killing.

Oh, Sparkle, when the axe tomorrow morning falls
and the rush is made to open your throat,
I will sing, watching dry-eyed as a man, sing my
love for you in the tender feedings.

She’s nothing but a hog, boy.

Bleed out, Sparkle, the moon-chilled bleaches
of your body hanging upside-down
hardening through the mind and night of the first freeze.

Bourn

When I got past relevance
the singing shores
told me to turn back

but I took the outward gray
to be
some meaning of foreign light

trying to get through and
when I looked back I saw
the shores were dancing

willows of grief and
from willows it was not far to
look back on waves

So I came to
the decimal of being,
entered and was gone

What light there
no tongue turns to tell
to willow and calling shore

though willows weep and shores sing always

Grassy Sound

It occurred to me there are no
sharp corners
in the wind
and I was very glad to think
I had so close
a neighbor
to my thoughts but decided to
sleep before
inquiring

The next morning I got up early
and after yesterday had come
clear again went
down to the salt marshes
to talk with
the straight wind there
I have observed I said
your formlessness
and am

enchanted to know how
you manage loose to be
so influential

The wind came as grassy sound
and between its
grassy teeth
spoke words said with grass
and read itself
on tidal creeks as on
the screens of oscilloscopes
A heron opposing
it rose wing to wind

turned and glided to another creek
so I named a body of water
Grassy Sound
and came home dissatisfied there
had been no
direct reply
but rubbed with my soul an
apple to eat
till it shone

Silver

I thought Silver must have snaked logs
when young :
she couldn't stand to have the line brush her lower hind leg :
in blinded halter she couldn't tell what had loosened behind her
and was coming
as downhill
to rush into her crippling her to the ground :

and when she almost went to sleep, me dreaming at the slow plow,
I would
at dream's end turning over the mind to a new chapter
let the line drop and touch her leg
and she would
bring the plow out of the ground with speed but wisely
fall soon again into the slow requirements of our dreams :
how we turned at the ends of rows without sense to new furrows
and went back
flicked by
cornblades and hearing the circling in
the cornblades of horseflies in pursuit :

I hitch up early, the raw spot on Silver's shoulder

sore to the collar,
get a wrench and change the plow's bull-tongue for a sweep,
and go out, wrench in my hip pocket for later adjustments,
 down the ditch-path
by the white-bloomed briars, wet crabgrass, cattails,
 and rusting ferns,
riding the plow handles down,
 keeping the sweep's point from the ground,
the smooth bar under the plow gliding,
the traces loose, the raw spot wearing its soreness out
in the gentle movement to the fields :

 when snake-bitten in the spring pasture grass
Silver came up to the gate and stood head-down enchanted
 in her fate

I found her sorrowful eyes by accident and knew :
nevertheless the doctor could not keep her from all
the consequences, rolls in the sand, the blank extension
 of limbs,
 head thrown back in the dust,
useless unfocusing eyes, belly swollen
wide as I was tall
and I went out in the night and saw her in the solitude
 of her wildness :

but she lived and one day half got up
and looking round at the sober world took me back
 into her eyes
and then got up and walked and plowed again ;
mornings her swollen snake-bitten leg wept bright as dew
and dried to streaks of salt leaked white from the hair.

Concentrations

i.

By the ocean
dawn is
 more itself,

nets hung like
mist on
 pole-racks or

spread out for mending, weed-picking, corking—

landreefs of gray
waves
 between the poles:

and the gray
boats, turtle-nosed,
 beached, out

of element, waiting,
salt-bleached,
 keels, hauled

across the sand,
ground to
 wood-ghosts,

sand-ghost gray:
and if there
 is fog,

dawn, becoming itself as reeds, dunes, sheds,

transfuses it,
opening
dune-rose-wise

petal by petal—wave, net, boat, oar, thole:

ii.

under the reedthatched or pineboughed sheds
dawn men,
opening gray eyes to gray light,

yawn out of the silver nets of dreams
and harden as entities,
their minds hardening the entities they seek:

iii.

how you catch a fish, slime-quick
with dart and turn,
loose in the medium:

remove the water,
letting down dams: in pike pools,
maybe looking for bait, dip

the water out,
concentrate the residue, increase
the incidence (you can

catch fry
with your hands then, clutching
the silver lights against the mud:)

if you can't remove
the water, change it, as
by muddying: swamp

ponds yield their fruit to this:
churn up the bottom,
suffocate the brim,

bluegills, "flowers," so they
rise to breathe:
seining

then is good: it
ridding lets the water through,
thickens the impermeables:

(you round-up a tiger,
isolate a compound, the same way:
surrounding, eliminating the habitat and

closing in
on a center or pass
or tiger-run along a river:)

iv.

the men rise from sand and sleep,
 wheel the boat,
strung like a turtle
 under a giant cart,
to the sea's edge:

dropped free,
 the oared boat
leaps, nosing into the surf,
 and spilling
the net astern,
 semicircles back
to land:

hauled in, the net is
 a windrow of fish,
gathered into thin, starving air,
 the ocean, sucking, returned whole
to itself, separation complete,

fish from sea, tiger
 from jungle, vision from experience.

River

I shall
 go down
 to the deep river, to the moonwaters,
where the silver
willows are and the bay blossoms,

to the songs
 of dark birds,
 to the great wooded silence
of flowing
forever down the dark river

silvered at the moon-singing of hidden birds:

27 March

the forsythia is out,
 sprawling like
yellow amoebae, the long
 uneven branches—pseudo-
podia—
 angling on the bottom
of air's spring-clear pool:

shall I
 go down
 to the deep river, to the moonwaters,
where the silver
willows are and the bay blossoms,

to the songs
 of dark birds,
 to the great wooded silence
of flowing
forever down the dark river

silvered at the moon-singing of hidden birds.

Motion for Motion

Watched on the sandy, stony bottom of the stream
the oval black shadow of the waterbeetle, shadow

larger than beetle, though no blacker, mirroring
at a down and off angle motion for motion, whirl, run :

(if you knew the diameters
of oval and beetle, the
depth of the stream, several
indices of refraction
and so forth

you might say why
the shadow outsizes the
beetle—

I admit to mystery

in the obvious—

but now that I remember some
I think the shadow
included the bent water where
the beetle rode, surface

tension, not breaking, bending
under to hold him up,

the deformation recorded in shade:
for light, arising from so far away,

is parallel
through a foot of water
(though edge-light
would

make a difference—a beetle can
exist among such differences
and do well) :

someone has a clear vision of it all,
exact to complete existence;
loves me when I swear and praise
and smiles, probably, to see me
wrestle with sight

and gain no reason from it, or money,

but a blurred mind overexposed) :

caught the sudden gust of a catbird, selfshot
under the bridge and out into my sight: he splashed
into the air near a briervine, lit :

I don't know by what will: it was clear sailing
on down the stream
and prettier—a moss-bright island made two streams
and then made one and, farther, two fine birches
and a lot of things to see: but he stopped

back to me,
didn't see me, hopped on through the vines, by some
will not including me...

and then there were two beetles, and later three at
once swimming in the sun, and three shadows,
all reproduced, multiplied without effort
or sound, the unique beetle—and I—lost to an

automatic machinery in things, duplicating, without
useful difference, some changeless order extending
backward beyond the origin of earth,

changeless and true, even before the water fell, or
the sun broke, or the beetle turned, or the still
human head bent from a bridge-rail above to have a look.

Identity

- 1) An individual spider web
identifies a species:

an order of instinct prevails
through all accidents of circumstance,
though possibility is
high along the peripheries of
spider

webs:
you can go all
around the fringing attachments

and find
disorder ripe,
entropy rich, high levels of random,
numerous occasions of accident:

- 2) the possible settings
of a web are infinite:

how does
the spider keep
identity
while creating the web
in a particular place?

how and to what extent
and by what modes of chemistry
and control?

it is

wonderful

how things work: I will tell you
about it
because

it is interesting
and because whatever is
moves in weeds
and stars and spider webs
and known

is loved:
in that love,
each of us knowing it,
I love you,

for it moves within and beyond us,
sizzles in
winter grasses, darts and hangs with bumblebees
by summer windowsills:

I will show you
the underlying that takes no image to itself,
cannot be shown or said,
but weaves in and out of moons and bladderweeds,
is all and
beyond destruction
because created fully in no
particular form:

if the web were perfectly pre-set,
the spider could
never find

a perfect place to set it in: and

if the web were
perfectly adaptable,
if freedom and possibility were without limit,
the web would
lose its special identity :

the row-strung garden web
keeps order at the center
where space is freest (interesting that the freest
“medium” should
accept the firmest order)

and that
order

diminishes toward the
periphery
allowing at the points of contact
entropy equal to entropy.

What This Mode of Motion Said

You will someday
try to prove me wrong
(I am the wings when you me fly)
to replace me with some mode
 you made
and think is right:

I am the way by
which you prove me
 wrong,
the reason you
reason against me:

I change shape,
turn easily into the shapes you make
 and even you
 in moving
I leave, betray:

what has not yet been imagined has been
imagined by me
 whom you honor, reach for—
change unending though
slowed into nearly limited modes:

question me and I

will give you an answer
narrow and definite
as the question
 that devours you (the exact
is a conquest of time that time vanquishes)
 or vague as wonder
by which I elude you:

 pressed
 for certainty
I harden to a stone,
lie unimaginable in meaning
 at your feet,

 leave you less
certainty than you brought, leave
 you to create the stone
as any image of yourself,
shape of your dreams:

 pressed too far
I wound, returning endless
inquiry

for the pride of inquiry :

shapeless, unspendable,
powerless in the actual
which I rule, I

will not
make deposits in your bank account
or free you from bosses
in little factories,
will not spare you insult, will not
protect you from
men who

have never heard of modes, who
do not respect me
or your knowledge of me in you ;
men I let win,
their thin tight lips
humiliating my worshippers :

I betray
him who gets me in his eyes and sees
beyond the fact
to the motions of my permanence.

Still

I said I will find what is lowly
and put the roots of my identity
down there:

each day I'll wake up
and find the lowly nearby,
a handy focus and reminder,
a ready measure of my significance,
the voice by which I would be heard,
the wills, the kinds of selfishness

I could
freely adopt as my own:

but though I have looked everywhere,
I can find nothing
to give myself to:
everything is

magnificent with existence, is in
surfeit of glory:
nothing is diminished,

nothing has been diminished for me:

I said what is more lowly than the grass:

ah, underneath,

a ground-crust of dry-burnt moss:

I looked at it closely

and said this can be my habitat: but

nestling in I

found

below the brown exterior

green mechanisms beyond intellect

awaiting resurrection in rain: so I got up

and ran saying there is nothing lowly in the universe:

I found a beggar:

he had stumps for legs: nobody was paying

him any attention: everybody went on by:

I nestled in and found his life:

there, love shook his body like a devastation:

I said

though I have looked everywhere

I can find nothing lowly

in the universe:

I whirled through transfigurations up and down,

transfigurations of size and shape and place:

at one sudden point came still,

stood in wonder:

moss, beggar, weed, tick, pine, self, magnificent

with being!

The Golden Mean

What does
wisdom say:
 wisdom says
 do not put too much stress
on doing; sit some and wait,
 if you can get
 that self-contained:
but do not sit too much;
 being can wear thin
 without experience:
not too much stress on thrift
 at the expense of living;
 immaterial things like
life must be conserved against
 materiality: however,
 spending every dime you make
can exhaust all boundaries,
 destroy resources and
 recovery's means:

not too much stress on knowledge;
 understanding, too, is a
 high faculty
that should bear pleasurably on facts;
 ordering, aligning,
 comparing,
as processes, become diffuse in too
 much massiveness:
 but the acquisition
of thinking stuff is crucial
 to knowledge
 and to understanding:
wisdom says
 do not love exceedingly:
 you must withhold
enough to weather loss;
 however, love thoroughly
 and with the body
so women will respect and fear the little
 man: though dainty
 they will scoff
when not profoundly had: not too much
 mind over body or
 body over mind;
they are united in this life and should
 blend to dual good or ill:

and do not stress
wisdom too much: if you lean neither
way, the golden
mean narrows
and rather than a way becomes a wire,
or altogether
vanishes, a
hypothetical line from which extremes
perpendicularly begin:
and if you do not
violate wisdom to some extent,
committing yourself fully,
without reserve,
and foolishly, you will not become *one*,
capable of direction,
selected to a single aim,
and you will be notable for nothing:
nothing in excess is
excessive nothingness:
go: but wisdom says do not go too far.

Nucleus

How you buy a factory:
got wind of one for sale in

Montreal,
Hochelaga
where Cartier, amicably received,
gave the squaws and children

tin bells and tin paternosters
and the men knives
and went up to the nearby
height and
called it Mt. Royal
from which the view was
panoramic,
an island 17×40
miles,
good trees (good as France)
and, below, thick maize:

Montreal,

got "The Laurentian" out of New York
first morning after the strike ended
and rode up parlor-car (expense account)
 along the solid-white Hudson
 and on up into hilled
graybirch country, through the Adirondacks
and along the high west bank of Lake Champlain
 (on heavy ice
men in windhuts fishing)

met the vice president
in the lobby at 8 next morning, ascended
(étage de confrères, troisième étage, s'il vous plait,
third floor, please)
to the 22nd floor
 to "The Panorama"
for breakfast: sight to see: St. Lawrence over there,
Windsor Hotel remodeling, where the Queen stayed,
cathedral, replica (but smaller)
 of St. Peter's:

Montreal,
and left center city by cab,
 through the French Quarter, out near Westmont,
long stairs from street to second floor,
 said it was typical,
with metal viny rails,

and on through streets, bilingual

traffic signs, turn left, left again: there:
Linden Sreet: 807, a local habitation and a name,

four walls, a limited, defined, exact place,
a nucleus,
solidification from possibility:

how you buy a factory:
determine the lines of
force
leading in and out, origins, destinations of lines;
determine how
from the nexus of crossed and bundled lines
the profit is
obtained, the
forces realized, the cheap made dear,
and whether the incoming or outgoing forces are stronger
and exactly why,
and what is to be done:

raw material inventory is
in winter
high: river frozen, must make half-year provisions,
squirrel-like, last till thaw, is
a warehousing problem: comes from England,
Germany (West):
important to keep a ready
stock of finished goods—customers won't wait, will
order from parent companies in England, Germany:

property taxes: things are
changing, you may get a rail siding here soon:
profit and loss sheet, cash flow, receivables:
large lot, vacancy providing for the future:
good machinshop and
here are the production lines:
how many heads on those machines: pcs per hr:
wages, skilled
unskilled: cut-off machines, annealing ovens, formers:
"I'll say! 15 below this morning."

order backlog: "I would say we have
an edge,
growth possibility: 50 good customers, pharm-
aceutical houses: you have to understand the background."
Perspective.

"Eight years ago...finally, I had to go to
Ottawa...left good man here, Oh, yes, he's done
fine...Swiss, later in Johannesburg;
you understand, management
wouldn't consider
selling him out, too much of himself:" un-

favorable points: competition, international market,
low tariffs,
unprotected, only advantage personalized service
to local
accounts, could

buy elsewhere,
large firms in States have bigger machines, faster,
more production per hour

(more overhead, too)

“being small’s our advantage...can adapt, work with
short runs of specialties—customers want
their own designs, premium,
made-to-order prices...”

Montreal,

“sure to see McGill U., ice sculpture front of
each dorm, emblem”
cornless lawns,

Cartier going through the motions of worship,
Indians looking up at sky, too,
can’t see what:

“We’ll get that information to you”

further study
and in the deep cold night boarding train, bedroom
Yassuh,
and heat connections broken, cold, next morning
going uptrain for toast and coffee,
that’s where East River turns—Manhattan:
lines of force, winding, unwinding,
nexus coiling in the mind:
balance, judge: act.

Other books of poetry from Ohio State:

Interpreter's House, by William Dickey / \$4.00
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