

ON THE POET AND HIS CRAFT

Words for the Wind opens with some very plain little bits of verse and descriptive pieces about a greenhouse I grew up in and around.

But it is the longish pieces that really break the ground—if any ground is broken. And it is these that I hope the younger readers, in particular, will come to cherish.

I think of myself as a poet of love, a poet of praise. And I wish to be read aloud.

Theodore Roethke



HOW TO WRITE LIKE
SOMEBODY ELSE

A GOOD DEAL OF NONSENSE HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT “INFLUENCE” in modern poetry, particularly the influence of one contemporary by another—by writers not very secure in their own practice who would have us believe that even their laundry notes are the result of divine visitation; by reviewers of limited taste and sensibility; by anthologists; and by the glib and middle-aging young who sometimes debase the role of *enfant terrible* by applying to the practice of criticism the methods—and often the taste—of the radio gagman.

For them it's all quite simple: any alliteration, any com-

pounding, any enthusiasm before nature equals Hopkins; any concern with man in society or the use of two "definite" articles in a row is "Audenesque"; any associational shifting or developing a theme alternately, as in music, is Eliot; sexual imagery or a dense language structure, Thomas; and so on.

A little humility may be in order. Let us say that some people—often inarticulate simple types—can hear a poem, can recognize the real thing; far fewer know what a line is; and fewer yet, I suspect, are equipped to determine finally whether a writer has achieved his own tone, or whether he has been unduly influenced by another; for such a judgment involves a truly intimate knowledge not only of the particular writers concerned, but also the whole tradition of the language; a very exact medium sense; and a delicate and perceptive ear. I suggest that the central critical problem remains: whether a real poem has been created. If it has, the matter of influence becomes irrelevant. Think of the sons of Ben; think of Herbert. Is he any less a poet because he took over some of Donne's effects? Is Auden a charlatan because he read and profited by reading Owen, Laura Riding, Robert Graves?

In a shrewd justification of the referential poem, or less charitably, the poem which is an anthology of other men's effects, Eliot said, "Bad poets imitate; good poets steal." In other words, take what you will with authority and see that you give it another, or even better life, in the new context.

All true, but in some ways a terrifying remark for the beginning writer, who is often neither bad nor good, but simply, as yet, unformed. He isn't sure whether he is a thief or a fake. He may, critically, be far ahead of himself

emotionally. He may be able to discuss, with real intelligence, Marvell or Pound or Stevens, but when he takes pen in hand the great models of the past may seem far away and even absurd, and the big names of his own time awesome, overwhelming. Particularly if he is a provincial far from a good library, or from any practicing poet, the immediately preceding literary generation, or the more precocious around his own age—and not always the best of these—may exercise a powerful attraction. The sensitive young are always acutely conscious of "fashion," highly aware of the topical, the surfaces of life; there is a peculiar sheen of contemporaneity—the phrase may be Huxley's—which seems to exist to speak to them alone. They may be attracted by those writers who reflect their own confusions: the roaring-ass "primitive" produced on both sides of the Atlantic; or they can turn to the overneat technicians who simplify experience by forcing it into an arbitrary order.

To such a young man in such a state I introduce the following examples, my own transgressions, in the hope he will take heart and do otherwise:

THIS LIGHT

*This light is the very flush of spring; it is innocent and warm;
It is gentle as celestial rain; it is mellow as gold;
Its pure effulgence may unbind the form
Of a blossoming tree; it may quicken fallow mould.*

*This light is various and strange; its luminous hue
May transmute the bleakest dust to silver snow;
Its radiance may be caught within a pool, a bead of dew;
It may contract to the sheerest point; it may arch to a bow.*

*This light is heaven's transcendent boon, a beam
Of infinite calm; it will never cease;
It will illuminate forever the aether-stream;
This light will lead me to eventual peace.*

This example illustrates, certainly, at least two things: a wrong choice of diction; an unfortunate use of a model. The model is Elinor Wylie; the moral is: don't imitate an imitator; pastiche begets pastiche.

One of the great and early temptations is Beautiful Words. How they shimmer, those mellifluous counters that others have used so often. It's the stage Yeats was at when he murmured, "Words alone are certain good," against which can be set Hopkins' "Words alone are only words." But even Hopkins cared for "lovely" for instance.

Now I didn't clutch a copy of Wylie in one hand, and write the piece with the other. Actually, I had been reading a lot of Vaughan, and a friend of mine suggested I do a poem on "Light." I took—I suppose from Wylie—the devices of metaphor on a string—as in her piece

*This sorrow was small and vulnerable and shortlived;
It was neither earth nor stone . . .*

which itself derives, I believe, from Shelley.

To adopt the technical device was legitimate: my real blunder was not to make the poem better: it's static; it doesn't develop; the epithets have too much to do; the last line is a banality.

My next spiritual romance was with Léonie Adams—something else again: her rhythms far subtler and more varied, a much richer aura of suggestiveness.

Listen to this:

THE BUDS NOW STRETCH

*The buds now stretch into the light,
The warm air stirs the fertile bough,
The sap runs free, and in the night
The young emergent leaf is cast;
The leaf is cast, and garish now,
And drunk with mellow gold, the green
Shapes to the accurate wind, though fast
Upon the branch are laggard leaves,
Their shade not finger-dies, but soon
Their patterns swing into the light
And broaden in the blaze of noon.
The substance of the tree is hung,
And all its loveliness unbound,
Its emerald leaves to sky are flung;
But that sweet vertical, the sun,
Repeats those leaves upon the ground
To deepen half a summer field.
And still as dreams that lovely yield
Of shadows bound like garnered sheaves,
A harvest of immobile shade:
But when those shadows move, a sound,
The full and level noise of leaves.*

It's the Adams cadence, the hurrying of syllables into speech, as in:

*It was my life, or so I said,
And I did well, forsaking it,
To go as quickly as the dead.*

The technical trick is in the manipulation of the pause, the caesura, on the fourth and sixth syllables. But, alas, there are verbal, as well as rhythmical echoes: in "Kennst du das Land," this Adams has a line

Knew the leaves deepening the green ground.

While I say

To deepen half a summer field.

Maybe that's not so reprehensible; but she also says, elsewhere,

As sweet as bones which stretch from sleep,

and in "Country Summer":

And full and golden is the yield

and I say

As still as dreams that lovely yield

Of shadows bound like garnered sheaves.

I hate to abandon that poem: I feel it's something Miss Adams and I have created: a literary lovechild. Put it this way: I loved her so much, her poetry, that I just *had* to become, for a brief moment, a part of her world. For it is her world, and I had filled myself with it, and I *had* to create something that would honor her in her own terms. That, I think, expresses as best I can what really goes on with the hero- or heroine-worshiping young. I didn't cabbage those effects in cold blood; that poem is a true release in its way. I was too clumsy and stupid to articulate my own emotions: she helped me to say something about the external world, helped me convince myself that maybe, if I kept at it, eventually I might write a poem of my own, with the accent on my own speech.

Thus, one can stake out an area of subject matter, hoard up a body of words, even embody fresh observation in a sustained rhythm, in a poem all of a piece, and *still* be too close to somebody else. I limit myself to passages:

*Diffuse the outpourings of the spiritual coward,
The rambling lies invented for the sick.
O see the fate of him whose guard was lowered!—
A single misstep and we leave the quick.*

or

*The winds of hatred blow
Cold, cold across the flesh
And chill the anxious heart,
Intricate phobias grow
From each malignant wish
To spoil collective life.
Now each man stands apart.*

That, of course, is Wystan Hugh Auden, himself a *real* magpie, with a cormorant's rapacity and the long memory of the elephant. He pillages the past, as in

"O where are you going?" said reader to rider,

from "The Cutty Wren":

"Oh where are you going?" says Milder to Malder

Or the present; here is Graves' "Full Moon":

*As I walked out that sultry night,
I heard the stroke of One.
The moon, attained to her full height,
Stood beaming like the sun:
She exorcized the ghostly wheat
To mute assent in love's defeat,
Whose tryst had now begun.
The fields lay sick beneath my tread.*

And Auden himself opens up a ballad:

*As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.*

And writes an entirely different poem. Now whether his conscious or unconscious mind seized on these elements: the "As I walked out," the street, the wheat, the fields, makes no difference. And it's perfectly possible that he might never have seen Graves' poem, or even written his earlier. But Auden, when he does take over a technical device or even another attitude, for the moment, does so with assurance and style. Invariably the poem moves into its own life.

Is this ever the case in my own practice? Well, I offer this as, possibly, an influence survived:

THE DANCE

*Is that dance slowing in the mind of man
That made him think the universe could hum?
The great wheel turns its axle when it can;
I need a place to sing, and dancing-room,
And I have made a promise to my ears
I'll sing and whistle romping with the bears.*

*For they are all my friends: I saw one slide
Down a steep hillside on a cake of ice,—
Or was that in a book? I think with pride:
A caged bear rarely does the same thing twice
In the same way: O watch his body sway!—
This animal remembering to be gay.*

*I tried to fling my shadow at the moon,
The while my blood leaped with a wordless song.
Though dancing needs a master, I had none*

*To teach my toes to listen to my tongue.
But what I learned there, dancing all alone,
Was not the joyless motion of a stone.*

*I take this cadence from a man named Yeats;
I take it, and I give it back again:
For other tunes and other wanton beats
Have tossed my heart and fiddled through my brain.
Yes, I was dancing-mad, and how
That came to be the bears and Yeats would know.*

Oddly enough, the line "I take this cadence, etc." is, in a sense, a fib. I had been reading deeply in Raleigh, and in Sir John Davies; and they rather than Willie are the true ghosts in that piece.

Is it an effrontery to summarize? Imitation, conscious imitation, is one of the great methods, perhaps the method of learning to write. The ancients, the Elizabethans, knew this, profited by it, and were not disturbed. As a son of Ben, Herrick more than once rewrote Jonson, who, in turn, drew heavily on the classics. And so on. The poems are not less good for this: the final triumph is what the language does, not what the poet can do, or display. The poet's ultimate loyalty—the phrase belongs to Stanley Kunitz—is to the poem. The language itself is a compound, or, to change the figure, a bitch. The paradoxical thing, as R. P. Blackmur said of some of the young in the 'thirties, is that the most original poets are the most imitative. The remark is profound: if a writer has something to say, it will come through. The very fact he has the support of a tradition, or an older writer, will enable him to be more himself—or more than himself.

In a time when the romantic notion of the inspired

poet still has considerable credence, true "imitation" takes a certain courage. One dares to stand up to a great style, to compete with papa. In my own case, I should like to think I have over-acknowledged, in one way and another, my debt to Yeats. One simple device provides, I believe, an important technical difference: in the pentameter, I end-stop almost every line—a thing more usual when the resources of the language were more limited. This is not necessarily a virtue—indeed, from many points of view, a limitation. But it is part of an effort, however clumsy, to bring the language back to bare, hard, even terrible statement. All this Yeats himself, a bowerbird if there ever was one, would have understood, and, possibly, approved.



SOME REMARKS ON RHYTHM

What do I like? Listen:

*Hinx, minx, the old witch winks!
The fat begins to fry!
There's nobody home but Jumping Joan,
And father, and mother, and I.*

Now what makes that "catchy," to use Mr. Frost's word? For one thing: the rhythm. Five stresses out of a possible six in the first line, though maybe "old" doesn't take quite as strong a stress as the others. And three—keep noticing that magic number—internal rhymes, *hinx, minx, winks*. And notice too the apparent mysteriousness of the action: something happens right away—the old witch winks and she sets events into motion. The fat begins to fry, liter-

(1)

A FIELD OF LIGHT

1

Came to lakes; came to dead water,
Ponds with moss and leaves floating,
Planks sunk in the sand.

A log turned at the touch of a foot;
A long weed floated upward;
An eye tilted.

Small winds made
A chilly noise;
The softest cove
Cried for sound.

Reached for a grape
And the leaves changed;
A stone's shape
Became a clam.

A fine rain fell
On fat leaves;
I was there alone
In a watery drowse.

2

Angel within me, I asked,
Did I ever curse the sun?
Speak and abide.

Under, under the sheaves,
Under the blackened leaves,
Behind the green viscid trellis,
In the deep grass at the edge of field,
Along the low ground dry only in August,—

Was it dust I was kissing?
A sigh came far.
Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone;
Marrow-soft, danced in the sand.

3

The dirt left my hand, visitor.
I could feel the mare's nose.
A path went walking.
The sun glittered on a small rapids.
Some morning thing came, beating its wings.
The great elm filled with birds.

Listen, love,
The fat lark sang in the field;
I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the killdeer,
The salt laughed and the stones;
The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,
And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,
The lovely diminutives.
I could watch! I could watch!
I saw the separateness of all things!
My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.
There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing a windbreak of
cedars,
And a bee shaking drops from a rain-soaked honeysuckle.
The worms were delighted as wrens.
And I walked, I walked through the light air;
I moved with the morning.

IV

Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical

IN A DARK TIME

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
I hear my echo in the echoing wood—
A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
I live between the heron and the wren,
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
That place among the rocks—is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!
A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
And in broad day the midnight come again!
A man goes far to find out what he is—
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

THE SEQUEL

Was I too glib about eternal things,
An intimate of air and all its songs?
Pure aimlessness pursued and yet pursued
And all wild longings of the insatiate blood
Brought me down to my knees. O who can be
Both moth and flame? The weak moth blundering by.
Whom do we love? I thought I knew the truth;
Of grief I died, but no one knew my death.

2

I saw a body dancing in the wind,
A shape called up out of my natural mind;
I heard a bird stir in its true confine;
A nestling sighed—I called that nestling mine;
A partridge drummed; a minnow nudged its stone;
We danced, we danced, under a dancing moon;
And on the coming of the outrageous dawn,
We danced together, we danced on and on.

3

Morning's a motion in a happy mind:
She stayed in light, as leaves live in the wind,
Swaying in air, like some long water weed.
She left my body, lighter than a seed;
I gave her body full and grave farewell.
A wind came close, like a shy animal.
A light leaf on a tree, she swayed away
To the dark beginnings of another day.

Was nature kind? The heart's core tractable?
 All waters waver, and all fires fail.
 Leaves, leaves, lean forth and tell me what I am;
 This single tree turns into purest flame.
 I am a man, a man at intervals
 Pacing a room, a room with dead-white walls;
 I feel the autumn fail—all that slow fire
 Denied in me, who has denied desire.

THE PIKE

The river turns,
 Leaving a place for the eye to rest,
 A furred, a rocky pool,
 A bottom of water.

The crabs tilt and eat, leisurely,
 And the small fish lie, without shadow, motionless,
 Or drift lazily in and out of the weeds.
 The bottom-stones shimmer back their irregular striations,
 And the half-sunken branch bends away from the gazer's eye.

A scene for the self to abjure!—
 And I lean, almost into the water,
 My eye always beyond the surface reflection;
 I lean, and love these manifold shapes,
 Until, out from a dark cove,
 From beyond the end of a mossy log,
 With one sinuous ripple, then a rush,
 A thrashing-up of the whole pool,
 The pike strikes.

And the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves,
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds—
How graceful the small before danger!

In the first of the moon,
All's a scattering,
A shining.

JOURNEY TO THE INTERIOR

1

In the long journey out of the self,
There are many detours, washed-out interrupted raw places
Where the shale slides dangerously
And the back wheels hang almost over the edge
At the sudden veering, the moment of turning.
Better to hug close, wary of rubble and falling stones.
The arroyo cracking the road, the wind-bitten buttes, the canyons,
Creeks swollen in midsummer from the flash-flood roaring into the
narrow valley.
Reeds beaten flat by wind and rain,
Grey from the long winter, burnt at the base in late summer.
—Or the path narrowing,
Winding upward toward the stream with its sharp stones,
The upland of alder and birchtrees,
Through the swamp alive with quicksand,
The way blocked at last by a fallen fir-tree,
The thickets darkening,
The ravines ugly.

2

I remember how it was to drive in gravel,
Watching for dangerous down-hill places, where the wheels whined
beyond eighty—
When you hit the deep pit at the bottom of the swale,
The trick was to throw the car sideways and charge over the hill, full of
the throttle.
Grinding up and over the narrow road, spitting and roaring.
A chance? Perhaps. But the road was part of me, and its ditches,
And the dust lay thick on my eyelids,—Who ever wore goggles?—
Always a sharp turn to the left past a barn close to the roadside,
To a scurry of small dogs and a shriek of children,
The highway ribboning out in a straight thrust to the North,
To the sand dunes and fish flies, hanging, thicker than moths,
Dying brightly under the street lights sunk in coarse concrete,
The towns with their high pitted road-crowns and deep gutters,
Their wooden stores of silvery pine and weather-beaten red courthouses,

5

An old bridge below with a buckled iron railing, broken by some idiot
plunger;
Underneath, the sluggish water running between weeds, broken wheels,
tires, stones.
And all flows past—
The cemetery with two scrubby trees in the middle of the prairie,
The dead snakes and muskrats, the turtles gasping in the rubble,
The spikey purple bushes in the winding dry creek bed—
The floating hawks, the jackrabbits, the grazing cattle—
I am not moving but they are,
And the sun comes out of a blue cloud over the Tetons,
While, farther away, the heat-lightning flashes.
I rise and fall in the slow sea of a grassy plain,
The wind veering the car slightly to the right,
Whipping the line of white laundry, bending the cottonwoods apart,
The scraggly wind-break of a dusty ranch-house.
I rise and fall, and time folds
Into a long moment;
And I hear the lichen speak,
And the ivy advance with its white lizard feet—
On the shimmering road,
On the dusty detour.

3

I see the flower of all water, above and below me, the never receding,
Moving, unmoving in a parched land, white in the moonlight:
The soul at a still-stand,
At ease after rocking the flesh to sleep,
Petals and reflections of petals mixed on the surface of a glassy pool,
And the waves flattening out when the fishermen drag their nets over
the stones.

In the moment of time when the small drop forms, but does not fall,
I have known the heart of the sun,—
In the dark and light of a dry place,
In a flicker of fire brisked by a dusty wind.
I have heard, in a drip of leaves,
A slight song,
After the midnight cries.
I rehearse myself for this:
The stand at the stretch in the face of death,

Delighting in surface change, the glitter of light on waves,
And I roam elsewhere, my body thinking,
Turning toward the other side of light,
In a tower of wind, a tree idling in air,
Beyond my own echo,
Neither forward nor backward,
Unperplexed, in a place leading nowhere.

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning,
I know this change:
On one side of silence there is no smile;
But when I breathe with the birds,
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,
And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep.

THE WAKING

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

THE VOICE

One feather is a bird,
I claim; one tree, a wood;
In her low voice I heard
More than a mortal should;
And so I stood apart,
Hidden in my own heart.

And yet I roamed out where
Those notes went, like the bird,
Whose thin song hung in air,
Diminished, yet still heard:
I lived with open sound,
Aloft, and on the ground.

That ghost was my own choice,
The shy cerulean bird;
It sang with her true voice,
And it was I who heard
A slight voice reply;
I heard; and only I.

Desire exults the ear:
Bird, girl, and ghostly tree,
The earth, the solid air—
Their slow song sang in me;
The long noon pulsed away,
Like any summer day.

THE SLOTH

In moving-slow he has no Peer.
You ask him something in his Ear,
He thinks about it for a Year;

And, then, before he says a Word
There, upside down (unlike a Bird),
He will assume that you have Heard—

A most Ex-as-per-at-ing Lug.
But should you call his manner Smug,
He'll sigh and give his Branch a Hug;

Then off again to Sleep he goes,
Still swaying gently by his Toes,
And you just *know* he knows he knows.

FOUR FOR SIR JOHN DAVIES

1. *The Dance*

Is that dance slowing in the mind of man
That made him think the universe could hum?
The great wheel turns its axle when it can;
I need a place to sing, and dancing-room,
And I have made a promise to my ears
I'll sing and whistle romping with the bears.

For they are all my friends: I saw one slide
Down a steep hillside on a cake of ice,—
Or was that in a book? I think with pride:
A caged bear rarely does the same thing twice
In the same way: O watch his body sway!—
This animal remembering to be gay.

I tried to fling my shadow at the moon,
The while my blood leaped with a wordless song.
Though dancing needs a master, I had none
To teach my toes to listen to my tongue.
But what I learned there, dancing all alone,
Was not the joyless motion of a stone.

I take this cadence from a man named Yeats;
I take it, and I give it back again:
For other tunes and other wanton beats
Have tossed my heart and fiddled through my brain.
Yes, I was dancing-mad, and how
That came to be the bears and Yeats would know.

2. *The Partner*

Between such animal and human heat
I find myself perplexed. What is desire?—
The impulse to make someone else complete?
That woman would set sodden straw on fire.
Was I the servant of a sovereign wish,
Or ladle rattling in an empty dish?

We played a measure with commingled feet:
The lively dead had taught us to be fond.
Who can embrace the body of his fate?
Light altered light along the living ground.
She kissed me close, and then did something else.
My marrow beat as wildly as my pulse.

I'd say it to my horse: we live beyond
Our outer skin. Who's whistling up my sleeve?
I see a heron prancing in his pond;
I know a dance the elephants believe.
The living all assemble! What's the cue?—
Do what the clumsy partner wants to do!

Things loll and loiter. Who condones the lost?
This joy outleaps the dog. Who cares? Who cares?
I gave her kisses back, and woke a ghost.
O what lewd music crept into our ears!
The body and the soul know how to play
In that dark world where gods have lost their way.

3. *The Wraith*

Incomprehensible gaiety and dread
Attended what we did. Behind, before,
Lay all the lonely pastures of the dead;
The spirit and the flesh cried out for more.
We two, together, on a darkening day
Took arms against our own obscurity.

Did each become the other in that play?
She laughed me out, and then she laughed me in;
In the deep middle of ourselves we lay;
When glory failed, we danced upon a pin.
The valley rocked beneath the granite hill;
Our souls looked forth, and the great day stood still.

There was a body, and it cast a spell,—
God pity those but wanton to the knees,—
The flesh can make the spirit visible;
We woke to find the moonlight on our toes.

In the rich weather of a dappled wood
We played with dark and light as children should.

What shape leaped forward at the sensual cry?—
Sea-beast or bird flung toward the ravaged shore?
Did space shake off an angel with a sigh?
We rose to meet the moon, and saw no more.
It was and was not she, a shape alone,
Impaled on light, and whirling slowly down.

4. *The Vigil*

Dante attained the purgatorial hill,
Trembled at hidden virtue without flaw,
Shook with a mighty power beyond his will,—
Did Beatrice deny what Dante saw?
All lovers live by longing, and endure:
Summon a vision and declare it pure.

Though everything's astonishment at last,
Who leaps to heaven at a single bound?
The links were soft between us; still, we kissed;
We undid chaos to a curious sound:
The waves broke easy, cried to me in white;
Her look was morning in the dying light.

The visible obscures. But who knows when?
Things have their thought: they are the shards of me;
I thought that once, and thought comes round again;
Rapt, we leaned forth with what we could not see.
We danced to shining; mocked before the black
And shapeless night that made no answer back.

The world is for the living. Who are they?
We dared the dark to reach the white and warm.
She was the wind when wind was in my way;
Alive at noon, I perished in her form.
Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
The word outleaps the world, and light is all.

CHILD ON TOP OF A GREENHOUSE

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,
My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,
The half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers,
Up through the streaked glass, flashing with sunlight,
A few white clouds all rushing eastward,
A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,
And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!

FLOWER DUMP

Cannas shiny as slag,
Slug-soft stems,
Whole beds of bloom pitched on a pile,
Carnations, verbenas, cosmos,
Molds, weeds, dead leaves,
Turned-over roots
With bleached veins
Twined like fine hair,
Each clump in the shape of a pot;
Everything limp
But one tulip on top,
One swaggering head
Over the dying, the newly dead.

CARNATIONS

Pale blossoms, each balanced on a single jointed stem,
The leaves curled back in elaborate Corinthian scrolls;
And the air cool, as if drifting down from wet hemlocks,
Or rising out of ferns not far from water,
A crisp hyacinthine coolness,
Like that clear autumnal weather of eternity,
The windless perpetual morning above a September cloud.

9
All things are brought to barn and fold.
The oak leaves strain to be unbound,
The sky turns dark, the year grows old,
The buds draw in before the cold.

3

The small brook dies within its bed;
The stem that holds the bee is prone;
Old hedgerows keep the leaves; the phlox,
That late autumnal bloom, is dead.
All summer green is now undone:
The hills are grey, the trees are bare,
The mould upon the branch is dry,
The fields are harsh and bare, the rocks
Gleam sharply on the narrow sight.
The land is desolate, the sun
No longer gilds the scene at noon;
Winds gather in the north and blow
Bleak clouds across the heavy sky,
And frost is marrow-cold, and soon
Winds bring a fine and bitter snow.

THE HERON

The heron stands in water where the swamp
Has deepened to the blackness of a pool,
Or balances with one leg on a hump
Of marsh grass heaped above a musk-rat hole.

He walks the shallow with an antic grace.
The great feet break the ridges of the sand,
The long eye notes the minnow's hiding place.
His beak is quicker than a human hand.

He jerks a frog across his bony lip,
Then points his heavy bill above the wood.
The wide wings flap but once to lift him up.
A single ripple starts from where he stood.