

From The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley

"I'm given to write poems"

I'm *given* to write poems. I cannot anticipate their occasion. I have used all the intelligence that I can muster to follow the possibilities that the poem "under hand," as Olson would say, is declaring, but I cannot anticipate the necessary conclusions of the activity, nor can I judge in any sense, in moments of writing, the significance of that writing more than to recognize that it is being *permitted* to continue. I'm trying to say that, in writing, at least as I have experienced it, one is *in* the activity, and that fact itself is what I feel so deeply the significance of anything that we call poetry.

For some sense, then, of how it was I came to be involved with poetry, at the outset I was much more interested in *writing* apart from its designated modes, and perhaps I am characteristically American in that respect. To begin with, I was shy of the word "poet" and all its associations in a world I was then intimate with. It was not, in short, a fit attention for a young man raised in the New England manner, compact of puritanically deprived senses of speech and sensuality. Life was real and life was earnest, and one had best get on with it. The insistent preoccupation with words did begin for me early, just that I did want so much to know what people were saying, and what, more precisely, they meant by it.

I think the most significant encounter for me as a young man trying to write was that found in the work of William Carlos Williams.

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He engaged language at a level both familiar and active to my own senses, and made of his poems an intensively *emotional* perception, however evident his intelligence. Despite his insistence on his Mediterranean connections, so to speak, he was as Puritan as I—or Lawrence, or Thoreau or the Melville of *Pierre*.

Otherwise, the forties—the time in which I came of age—were complicated in many bitter ways indeed. Not the least of the problems then evident for someone trying to realize him or herself in the world was the confusion about the very nature of "literature" itself. Coming from New England, I felt awkwardness about books to begin with, because they were for me often instances of social mark or measure, even at times a privilege of intellectual order—just as Hardy speaks of them in *Jude the Obscure*. I was very shy about communicating my own commitments in reading, and yet I used books as a very real *place* to be. Not merely an escape from the world—the difficulty was how to get *into* it, not away—books proved a place very deeply open to me, at moments of reading, in a sense few others were ever to be.

Thinking of that, let me note kinship with another writer—Robert Duncan—who has played a very important role in my life, both as mentor, very often, and as one whom I feel to share with me this particular sense of world, and writing, and poetry, which I most deeply respect. In a collection of his called *The Opening of the Field*, significantly enough, the first poem begins:

OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO A MEADOW

Then continues:

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,
that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein
that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

This sense of a poem—that *place*, that *meadow*—has echoes of so many things that are intimate to my own sense of the reality experienced in writing. One would find that field or "meadow" in Whitman also, and it would be equally the sense of place I feel Allen Ginsberg many times to be entering, to be speaking of or longing for. Charles Olson too possesses its occasion in his sense of "open" verse or that *open field*, as he insists upon it, in composition.

I have found it deeply in H.D.'s writing: "I go where I love and am loved. . . ." And in Pound's "What thou lovest well remains,/ the rest is dross. . . ."

What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage

Whose world, or mine or theirs

or is it of none?

First came the seen, then thus the palpable

Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell,

What thou lovest well is thy true heritage. . . .

All of these are, to my own mind, not only tokens but evidences of a place, a very distinct and definite *place*, that poetry not only creates but itself issues from—and one in writing is, as Duncan says, "permitted to return," to go there, to be in that reality. There is a poem by Allen Ginsberg which has always moved me deeply. He calls it simply "Song" and it is included in the first collection of his poetry, *Howl*. The closing lines of this poem are:

yes, yes,

that's what

I wanted,

I always wanted,

I always wanted,

to return

to the body

where I was born.

That body is the "field" and is equally the experience of it. It is, then, to "return" not to oneself as some egocentric center, but to experience oneself as *in* the world, thus, through this agency or fact we call, variously, "poetry."

In the same passage quoted from Duncan, there is another sense of much interest to me in the emphasis he puts upon "made": "a scene," as he says, "made-up by the mind,/ that is not mine, but is a made place,/ that is mine. . . ." And again, two lines following: "there is a hall therein/ that is a made place. . . ." This emphasis takes its occasion from the sense of poet as maker, going back to the Greek root, *poiein*, "to make."

One of the few books I've ever had that was stolen—not by me, as it happened, but by a girl I persuaded to steal it for me—was William Carlos Williams' *The Wedge*. It proved *fire* of a very real order, and, for the record, was subsequently stolen from me in turn when I was teaching at Black Mountain in the mid-fifties. In

1944, when it was first published and shortly after which I got hold of it, its content was a revelation to me. In the preface Williams makes this statement:

When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn't what he *says* that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity.

I think this is very much the way Americans are given to speak—not in some dismay that they haven't another way to speak, but, rather, that they feel that they, perhaps more than any other group of people upon the earth at this moment, have had both to imagine and thereby to *make* that reality which they are then given to live in. It is as though they had to *realize* the world anew. They are, as Charles Olson says, "the last first people." Now, in contemporary fact, they are also the oldest issue of that imagination—even in some ways bitterly so, because they have thus inherited the world as not only a place to live in, but also as that reality for which they are responsible in every possible sense.

However, I would mistake my own experience of poetry if I were to propose it as something merely *intentional*, and what men may imagine, either as worlds or poems, is not simply a *purpose* either may satisfy. Williams also had no sense of patness in the making of a poem, or of a world—but felt, as he says in one of his own poems:

Be patient that I address you in a poem,
there is no other

fit medium.

The mind

lives there. It is uncertain,

can trick us and leave us

agonized. But for resources

what can equal it?

There is nothing. We

should be lost

without its wings to

fly off upon.

The mind is the cause of our distresses

but of it we can build anew.

Oh something more than

it flies off to:
 a woman's world,
 of crossed sticks, stopping
 thought. A new world
 is only a new mind.
 And the mind and the poem
 are all apiece.

To put it simply indeed, it is not the intention to write that matters, but that one *can*—that such a possibility *can* exist in which the mind may make evident its resources apart from the limits of intention and purpose.

In "The Desert Music"—for myself the loveliest form he left us—Williams makes further qualification of the poem in its peculiar and singular function of *making real*:

Only the poem
 only the made poem, to get said what must
 be said, not to copy nature, sticks
 in our throats
 The law? The law gives us nothing
 but a corpse, wrapped in a dirty mantle.
 The law is based on murder and confinement,
 long delayed,
 but this, following the insensate music,
 is based on the dance:
 an agony of self-realization
 bound into a whole
 by that which surrounds us
 I cannot escape
 I cannot vomit it up
 Only the poem!
 Only the made poem, the verb calls it
 into being.

Act becomes the primary issue of "verb," or *verbum*, a word. "In the beginning was the Word"—and the word was the *reality of the imagination*. The "music," which the poem's title emphasizes and which becomes so central a content in the poem's activity, is that which vivifies, the *anima mundi*, lifeless and/or life itself. Our response to it or what it creates, its effects in the reality we are given, is the "dance."

Now the music volleys through as in
 a lonely moment I hear it. Now it is all

about me. The dance! The verb detaches itself
 seeking to become articulate

Poems are very specific kinds of *dancing*, because language is that possibility most specific to our condition as human beings. But I do not speak easily of these things because I feel, always, a timidity and confusion trying to isolate a sense that can only be experienced in the literal fact of the poem itself. It is as though I were trying to make actual a sense of wetness apart from water itself.

It is possible, nonetheless, to continue now to use those men I have used so much, to make evident what senses of poetry have been for me insistent. In "Maximus, to Gloucester" Charles Olson gives measure of the occasion in a way that informs my own:

He left him naked,
 the man said, and
 nakedness
 is what one means
 that all start up
 to the eye and soul
 as though it had never
 happened before

My sense of his statement is this: in the fact of our lives we are brought to primary situations, primary terms of experience—what they might have meant by "first things first" but probably didn't. "Nakedness" is to stand manifestly in one's own condition, in that necessary *freshness*, however exposed, because all things are particular and reality itself is the specific content of an instant's possibility. In poems we realize, not in discursive or secondary manner, but with this implicit and absolutely consequential fact of *firstness*, terms of our own life, manifestations of that life which, otherwise, are most awkwardly acknowledged. It is, again, that "field" that Robert Duncan speaks of as being "permitted" to enter. First things. We arrive in poems at the condition of life most viable and most primal in our own lives.

I've said that I feel myself to be a poet who is *given* to write. And I'm even awkward about using that designation, that is, to call myself so, a poet—because I do not feel I have that decision in it. Yet the complexity of the dilemma seems to me a very real one. How shall we understand Williams' painfully marked insistence just before the close of "The Desert Music":

I am a poet! I
am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed

In America, we are certainly not poets simply, nor much of the time.

The saints of my own calendar are saints of this exposure, beginning with Columbus and like men whose imagination realized, *reified*, one might say, the world I live in. They are Poe—who, as Williams makes clear, forced the *local* to yield him a world apart from the habits of English manner; Whitman—for the *permission* of life he insisted upon; Melville—the primary *imagination* of the isolation of our condition; Pound—who, like any Yankee, makes *intelligence* an invention of necessity; Hart Crane—whose “failure” regained the *possibility* of our response to what we are given to feel. It may well be that in the absence of such allusive society as European literature, in its own condition, has necessarily developed, the American in contrast must so realize each specific thing of his own—“as though it had never/ happened before.” I think of Williams’ sharply contemptuous answer to the British English professor, met with in Seattle, Washington, of all places, who asked him after a reading, “where he got his language”—to which Williams replied, “Out of the mouths of Polish mothers”—meaning not Polish, but the harsh, crude, blocked “poor English” of those immigrant women he had as patients in his profession as a doctor. My “saints,” then, are those men who defined for me an explicit possibility in the speech that I was given to use, who made the condition of being American not something chauvinistically national but the intimate fact of one life in one place at one time.

To speak then of the writing itself, which I can do only tentatively—just that I am persuaded by Heisenberg that “observation impedes function”—I have again much depended upon senses of procedure and examples (which are, of course, the point) given me by such men. In the forties there was so much talk *about* the poem, about levels of meaning, ambiguities, symbols, allusions. It was even felt that criticism itself would prove the most significant literary activity of the time.

Pound, in contrast, spoke of the literal condition of the writing, and it was he I used as guide—and continue to now, twenty years later, because his advice proved facts of perception as active to my mind now as when I first came to them. For example, his quotation from Remy de Gourmont, “Freely to write what one chooses is the sole pleasure of a writer,” continues for me the only actual measure

of the occasion I am aware of. He gave me the experience of integrity as “Man standing by his word.” More, he spoke so clearly of the explicit situation of writing:

In making a line of verse (and thence building the lines into passages) you have certain primal elements:

That is to say, you have the various ‘articulate sounds’ of the language, of its alphabet, that is, and the various groups of letters in syllables.

These syllables have differing weights and durations

A. original weights and durations

B. weights and durations that seem naturally imposed on them by the other syllable groups around them.

Those are the medium wherewith the poet cuts his design in TIME.

Against the arguments of taste and opinion which criticism so largely depends upon, Pound called attention to the character of the activity:

Rhythm is a form cut into TIME, as a design is determined SPACE. . . .

LISTEN to the sound that it makes . . .

However, it is really Charles Olson I must thank for whatever *freedom* I have as a poet, and I would value him equally with Pound and Williams and those others I have mentioned. *Freedom* has always been for me a difficult experience in that, when younger, I felt it had to propose senses of experience and of the world I was necessarily *not* in possession of—something in that way one might escape to. I mistook, I think, the meaning of “freely to write what one chooses,” which both de Gourmont and Pound may well have had in mind, because I took “freely” to mean “without significant limit” and “chooses” to be an act of will. I therefore was slow in realizing the nature of Olson’s proposal, that “Limits/ are what any of us/ are inside of,” just that I had taken such “limits” to be a frustration of possibility rather than the literal possibility they in fact must provoke. Despite Pound—or rather, because I could not hope to gain such means as he had—I had to find my own way, and at first I was completely ignorant of what it might be.

In consequence, what Olson made clear to me during the late forties and early fifties was of very great use. I am speaking of the *kind* of thinking that is evident in his essay, “Projective Verse,” written during the same time. Let me quote an instance:

The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being.

Not long ago, in conversation, Robert Duncan qualified his sense of *choice* as being *recognition*, that is, choice is significantly the act of recognition, and I believe it. What one "chooses" in writing is importantly of this nature, for me, and composition is the fact and effect of such activity. One isn't putting things *into* poems, then, at least not as my own experience of writing informs me. There is never a "subject" *about* which one constructs an activity called "poetry." Nor can one, as Williams says, "copy nature," take from that which is otherwise informed some felicitous appearance, whether a rhyme or a so-called sentiment.

However best it might be put, what Olson made evident to me was that writing could be an intensely specific revelation of one's own content, and of the world the fact of any life must engage. It has nothing to do with "personalism"—which, like personality, is a mirror or reflective image sense, a cosmetic of intentions. To the contrary, what emerges in the writing I most value is a content which cannot be anticipated, which "tells you what you don't know," which you subvert, twist, or misrepresent only on peril of death.

What I have written I knew little of until I had written it. If at times I have said that I enjoy what I write, I mean that writing is for me the most viable and open condition of possibility in the world. Things have happened there, as they have happened nowhere else—and I am not speaking of "make-believe," which, be it said, is "as real as real can be." In poems I have both discovered and borne testament to my life in ways no other possibility has given me. Can I *like* all that I may prove to be, or does it matter? Am I merely living for my own approval? In writing it has seemed to me that such small senses of existence were altogether gone, and that, at last, the world "came true." Far from being its limit or director, the wonder is that I have found myself to be there also.

From Selected Poems, 1945-2005

The Surf: An Elegy

Relative to cost, the high figures
of production:

you, sweetness & light
are destructive only in your
inveterate tendencies.

The poor are poor. The statement
the little people would not

I think
accept, is

that there is any refuge
that there is anything to be gained
in too simple formulation.

Or what else to destroy them with?
To keep them you, lover
grant is impossible:

the blot
is nationwide, the indulgence
federal.

Dams, projects of even
immense size
take on but
a few.

(But you are restless, the tide
pulls out, leaving scum, the likewise restless
and improbable
stores of the sea.

A Variation

1

My son who is stranger
than he should be, outgrown
at five, the normal—

luck is against him!

Unfit for the upbringing he would otherwise
have got, I have no hopes for him.

I leave him alone.

I leave him to his own

devices, having pity not so much that he is
strange

but that I am him.

2

Myself, who am stranger
than I should be, outgrown
at two, the normal—

luck is against me. Unfit

for the upbringing I would otherwise
have got, I have no hopes.

I leave him alone.

I leave him to his own

devices, having pity not so much for
myself, for why should that happen

but that he is me, as much as I am him.

The little children
grow only to old men.
The grass dries,
the force goes.

But is met by another
returning, oh not mine,
not mine, and
in turn dies.

The rhythm which projects
from itself continuity
bending all to its force
from window to door,
from ceiling to floor,
light at the opening,
dark at the closing.

The Mountains in the Desert

The mountains blue now
at the back of my head,
such geography of self and soul
brought to such limit of sight,

I cannot relieve it
nor leave it, my mind locked
in seeing it
as the light fades.

Tonight let me go
at last out of whatever
mind I thought to have,
and all the habits of it.

For W. C. W.

The rhyme is after
all the repeated
insistence.

There, you say, and
there, and there,
and *and* becomes

just so. And
what one wants is
what one wants,

yet complexly
as you
say.

Let's
let it go.
I want—

Then there is—
and,
I want.

For No Clear Reason

I dreamt last night
the fright was over, that
the dust came, and then water,
and women and men, together
again, and all was quiet
in the dim moon's light.

Raining, trees blow,
limbs flutter, leaves
wet with the insistent
rain, all over, everywhere.

Harry will write
Mabel on Monday.
The communication
of human desires

flows in an apparently
clear pattern, hindsight,
now they know
for sure what it was.

If it rains, the woods
will not be so dry
and danger averted,
sleep invited.

Mouths Nuzz

Mouths nuzz-
ling, "seeking
in blind
love," mouths nuzz-
ling, "seek-
ing in
blind
love..."

Billfold

Piece of me, curiously
attached, you were in
a bar for two days un-
drinking and unthinking,
object of your own worth.

The Temper

The temper is fragile
as apparently it wants to be,
wind on the ocean, trees
moving in wind and rain.

Characteristically

Characteristically and other words,
places of fabulous intent,
mirrors of wisdom, quiet
mirrors of wisdom. Help
the one you think needs it.
Say a prayer to yourself.

Echoes preponderantly
backwards. Is alone.

I'll dash off
to it.

Xmas Poem: Bolinas

All around
the snow
don't fall.

Come Christmas
we'll get high
and go find it.

Place

Faded mind,
fading colors,
old, dear clothes.
Hear

the ocean under
the road's edge,
down the side
of the hill.

One Day

One day after another –
perfect.
They all fit.

Thinking

The top of the mountain
is a pinnacle,
the bottom of the lake
a bed. Sleep fades deep,
floats off as clouds
shift sight to distance, far away.

Backwards

Nowhere before you
any of this.

Here

No one
else in the room
except you.

Mind's a form
of taking
it all.

And the room
opens
and closes.

Love

There are words voluptuous
as the flesh
in its moisture,
its warmth.

Tangible, they tell
the reassurances,
the comforts,
of being human.

Not to speak them
makes abstract
all desire
and its death at last.

Erotica

On the path
down here, to the sea,
there are bits
of pages
from a magazine, scattered,
the *big tits*
of my adolescence
caught on bushes,
stepped on, faces
of the women, naked,
still smiling out at me
from the grass.

In the factory,
beside which
this path goes,
there is
no one. The windows
are broken out.
A dump
sits in front of it.
Two piles of dirt
beyond that.
Do these
look like tits
too, some primordial
woman sunk
underground
breaking out,
up,
to get me—
shall I throw
myself down
upon it,
this ground
rolls and twists,
these pictures
I want still
to see. Coming back
a day later,

warm enclosure,
feels place in the physical
with others,
lets mind wander
to wondering thought,
then lets go of itself,
finds a home
on earth.

The Place

... Swoop of hawk –
or mind's adjustment
to sight – *memory?*
Air unrelieved, *unlived?*

Begun again, begin
again the play

of cloud, the lift
of sudden cliff,

the place in place –
the way it was again.

Go back a day,
take everything, take time

and play it back
again, the staggering

path, ridiculous, uncertain
bird, blurred, fuzzy

fog – or rocks which
seem to hang in
imperceptible substance
there, or here,
in thought? This thinking
is a place itself
unthought, which comes
to be the world.

Desultory Days

FOR PETER WARSHALL

Desultory days,
time's wandering
impermanences –

like, *what's for lunch,*
Mabel? Hunks
of unwilling

meat got chopped
from recalcitrant
beasts? "No tears

for this vision" –

nor huge strawberries
zapped from forlorn Texas,

too soon, too soon...

We will meet again
one day, we will

Time

FOR WILLY

Out window roof's slope
of overlapped cedar shingles
drips at its edges, morning's still
overcast, grey, Sunday –
goddamn the god that will not
come to his people in their want,
serves as excuse for death –
these days, far away, blurred world
I had never believed enough.
For this wry, small, vulnerable
particular child, my son –
my dearest and only William –
I want a human world, a
chance. Is it my age
that fears, falters in some faith?
These ripples of sound, poor
useless prides of mind,
name the things, the feelings?
When I was young,
the freshness of a single
moment came to me
with all hope, all tangent wonder.
Now I am one, inexorably
in this body, in this time.
All generality? There is
no one here but words,
no thing but echoes.

Then by what imagined right
would one force another's life
to serve as one's own instance,
his significance be mine –
wanting to sing, come
only to this whining sickness . . .
*Up from oneself physical
actual limit to lift
thinking to its intent
if such in world there is
now all truth to tell
this child is all it is
or ever was. The place of
time oneself in the net
hanging by hands will
finally lose their hold,
fall. Die. Let this son
live, let him live.*

Self-Portrait

He wants to be
a brutal old man,
an aggressive old man,
as dull, as brutal
as the emptiness around him,

He doesn't want compromise,
nor to be ever nice
to anyone. Just mean,
and final in his brutal,
his total, rejection of it all.

He tried the sweet,
the gentle, the "oh,
let's hold hands together"
and it was awful,
dull, brutally inconsequential.

Now he'll stand on
his own dwindling legs.
His arms, his skin,
shrink daily. And
he loves, but hates equally.

Mother's Voice

In these few years
since her death I hear
mother's voice say
under my own, I won't
want any more of that.
My cheekbones resonate
with her emphasis. Nothing
of not wanting only

but the distance there from
common fact of others
frightens me. I look out
at all this demanding world

and try to put it quietly back,
from me, say, thank you,
I've already had some
though I haven't
and would like to
but I've said no, she has,
it's not my own voice anymore.
It's higher as hers was
and accommodates too simply
its frustrations when
I at least think I want more
and must have it.

Oh Love

My love is a boat
floating
on the weather, the water.

She is a stone
at the bottom of the ocean.
She is the wind in the trees.

I hold her
in my hand
and cannot lift her,
can do nothing
without her. Oh love,
like nothing else on earth!

at last the fact of a life lived,
objectively, divinely, as it were,
acknowledged in whatever faith.

So that looking now for where
"an ampler aether clothes the meads with roseate light,"
or simply the "pallid plains of asphodel,"

the vagueness, the question, goes in,
discovers only emptiness – as if
the place itself had been erased,

was only forever an idea and
could never be found nor had it been.
And there was nothing ever beyond.

Sad Advice

If it isn't fun, don't do it.
You'll have to do enough that isn't.

Such is life, like they say,
no one gets away without paying
and since you don't get to keep it
anyhow, who needs it.

If

If your hair was brown
and isn't now,
if your hands were strong
and now you falter,

if your eyes were sharp
and now they blur,
your step confident
and now it's careful –

you've had the world,
such as you got.
There's nothing more,
there never was.

Buffalo Evening

Steady, the evening fades
up the street into sunset
over the lake. Winter sits

quiet here, snow piled
by the road, the walks stamped
down or shoveled. The kids

in the time before dinner are
playing, sliding on the old ice.
The dogs are out, walking,

and it's soon inside again,
with the light gone. Time
to eat, to think of it all.

two teeth—but all,
her climbing, sacklike,
limp, her hands out-
stretched, or simply out
to it, her coming here,
her, all of her, her
words of her, *Hannah*,
Hannie. Good girl,
good. So we go
on with it. So is
Hannah
in this world.

Plague

When the world has become a pestilence,
a sullen, inexplicable contagion,
when men, women, children
die in no sense realized, in
no time for anything, a
painful rush inward, isolate—
as when in my childhood the
lonely leper pariahs so seemingly
distant were just down the street,
back of drawn shades, closed doors—

no one talked to them, no one
held them anymore, no one waited
for the next thing to happen—as
we think now the day begins
again, as we look for the faint sun,
as they are still there, we hope, and we are coming.

Age

Most explicit—
the sense of trap
as a narrowing
cone one's got
stuck into and
any movement
forward simply
wedges one more—
but where
or quite when,
even with whom,
since now there is no one
quite with you— Quite? Quiet?
English expression: *Quait?*
Language of singular
impedance? A dance? An

"Anubis" rhymes with Auckland, says the thoughtful humanist –
 at least an "a" begins each word, and from there on it's
 only a matter of miles. By now I have certainly noticed
 that the dogs aren't necessarily with the people at all, nor are the
 people
 with the dogs. It's the light,
 backlit buildings, the huge sense of floating,
 platforms of glass like the face
 of the one at the edge of Albert Park
 reflects (back) the trees, for that charmed
 moment all in air. That's where we are.
 So how did the dogs get up here, eh?
 I didn't even bring myself, much less them.
 In the South Island a bull terrier is minding sheep
 with characteristic pancake-flat smile.
 Meantime thanks, even if now much too late,
 to all who move about "down on all fours"
 in furry, various coats. Yours was the kind accommodation,
 the unobtrusive company, or else the simple valediction of a look.

The Way

Somewhere in all the time that's passed
 was a thing in mind became the evidence,
 the pleasure even in fact of being lost
 so quickly, simply that what it was could never last.
 Only knowing was measure of what one could
 make hold together for that moment's recognition,
 or else the world washed over like a flood
 of meager useless truths, of hostile incoherence.
 Too late to know that knowing was its own reward
 and that wisdom had at best a transient credit.
 Whatever one did or didn't do was what one could.
 Better at last believe than think to question?
 There wasn't choice if one had seen the light,
 not of belief but of that soft, blue-glowing fusion
 seemed to appear or disappear with thought,
 a minute magnesium flash, a firefly's illusion.
 Best wonder at mind and let that flickering ambience
 of wondering be the determining way you follow,
 which leads itself from day to day into tomorrow,
 finds all it ever finds is there by chance.

A blue grey edge.

Trees line it.

Green field finds it.

Eyes look.

Let the aching heart take over.

Cry till eyes blur.

Be as big as you were.

Stir the pot.

Whenever it's sense,
look for what else is meant
in the underthought of language.

Words are apparent.

Seen light turns off
to be ambient luminescence,
there and sufficient.
No electricians.

Same sight
shadows at edge of light,
green field again
where hedgerow finds it.

Read these words then
and see the far trees,
hear the chittering of the birds,
share my ease and dependence.

Emptiness

FOR HELEN

The emptiness up the field where
the barn sits still like an ark, an old
presence I look up there to see, sun
setting, sky gone a vivid streaking of
reds and oranges, a sunset off over the
skirt of woods where my sister's barn sits
up the field with all her determined stuff,
all she brought and put in it, all her
pictures, her pots, her particular books
and icons—so empty, it seems, quickly
emptied of everything there was in it, like
herself the last time in the hospital bed had
been put to face out the big window back of
tv, so one could look out, see down there,
over the field, trees of our place, the house,
woods beyond going off toward Warren, the sight,
she'd say with such emphasis, *I'm where I
want to be!*—could ever Maine be more loved,
more wanted, all our history trailing back
through its desperation, our small people, small
provision, where the poor folk come from like
us, to Massachusetts, to a world where poverty
was a class, like Mrs. Peavey told our mother
she'd never felt poor before, not till she was
given charity by the women of the Women's
Club, her family their annual recipient—empty,
empty, running on *empty*, on nothing, on heart,
on bits and pieces of elegance, on an exquisite frame
of words, on each and every memory she ever had,
on the same will as our mother's, the pinched privacy
of empty purse, the large show of pleasure, of out there

everything, come in, *come in*—she lay there so still, she had gone into herself, face gone then but for echo of way she had looked, no longer saw or heard, no more of any human want, no one wanted. *Go away*, she might have been saying, *I'm busy today*. Go away. Hence then to be cremated, to reach the end and be done.

When I think

When I think of where I've come from or even try to measure as any kind of distance those places, all the various people, and all the ways in which I remember them, so that even the skin I touched or was myself fact of, inside, could see through like a hole in the wall or listen to, it must have been, to what was going on in there, even if I was still too dumb to know anything—When I think of the miles and miles of roads, of meals, of telephone wires even, or even of water poured out in endless streams down streaks of black sky or the dirt roads washed clean, or myriad, salty tears and suddenly it's spring again, or it was—Even when I think again of all those I treated so poorly, names, places, their waiting uselessly for me in the rain and I never came, was never really there at all, was moving so confusedly, so fast, so driven like a car along some empty highway passing, passing other cars—When I try to think of things, of what's happened, of what a life is

and was, my life, when I wonder what it meant, the sad days passing, the continuing, echoing deaths, all the painful, belligerent news, and the dog still waiting to be fed, the closeness of you sleeping, voices, presences, of children, of our own grown children, the shining, bright sun, the smell of the air just now, each physical moment, passing, *passing*, it's what it always is or ever was, just then, just there.

"To think . . ."

To think oneself again into a tiny hole of self and pull the covers round and close the mouth—
shut down the eyes and hands, keep still the feet, and think of nothing if one can not think of it—
a space in whose embrace such substance is, a place of emptiness the heart's regret.
World's mind is after all an afterthought of what was there before and is there still.

No one simply turns on a light.
Oneself becomes image.
The echo's got in front,
begins again what's over
just at the moment it was done.
No one can catch up, find
some place he's never been to
with friends he never had.

This is where it connects,
not meaning anything one
can know. This is where
one goes in and that's to find
beyond any thought or habit,
an arched, dark space, the rock,
and what survives of what's left.

On Earth

One's here
and there is still elsewhere
along some road to hell
where all is well —
or heaven
even
where all the saints still wait
and guard the golden gate.

Old Story

FROM THE DIARY OF FRANCIS KILVERT

One bell wouldn't ring loud enough.
So they beat the bell to hell, Max,
with an axe, show it who's boss,
boss. Me, I dreamt I dwelt in
some place one could relax
but I was wrong, wrong, *wrong*.
You got a song, man, sing it.
You got a bell, man, ring it.