An abstract painting with a vibrant red background. A white, brush-stroke-like shape is in the center, resembling a stylized face or a hand. To the left, there are black and green shapes. To the right, there are dark blue and purple shapes. The overall style is expressive and gestural.

WORDS IN PASSING

A SELECTION OF FORMAL VERSE

E.M. SCHORB

WORDS IN PASSING

a selection of formal verse

E.M. SCHORB

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is given to the following publications in which some of these poems first appeared.

Ascent, Bitterroot, The Blue Unicorn, Candelabrum, The Classical Outlook, College English, The Comstock Review, The Dark Horse, The Davidson Miscellany, Descant, The Formalist, The Formalist Portal, The Hampden-Sydney Review, The Innisfree Poetry Journal, The Journal of Anglo-Scandinavian Poetry, The Journal of New Jersey Poets, Keats Prize Poems, London Literary Editions, Ltd., Light: A Magazine of Light Verse, London Poetry Review, The Lyric, Margie, Measure, Orbis, The Oxford Review, Plains Poetry Journal, Poet: India, The Pennsylvania Review, Poetry Northwest, The South Carolina Review, The Southern Humanities Review, The Southern Review, The Southwest Review, Sparrow, Spring: The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society, The Unitarian Universalist Magazine, Writers' Forum, The Yale Review

Cover Painting: *Totem* by E.M. Schorb

Copyright © 2010 by E.M. Schorb

Published by
The New Formalist Press
<http://www.newformalistpress.com/>

In Memoriam

Howard Sergeant

Cornel Lengyel

and for Patricia

CONTENTS

<i>O TO BE RICH AND POWERFUL</i>	7
I. SOULS ~	
WORDS IN PASSING	9
MISSIONARIES	10
ELEGY	11
THE SURVIVOR	12
MADAM'S HOUSE	13
LATE SLEEPER	16
HADEWIJCH IN WALL STREET	17
DETECTIVE STORY	18
AN EVENING WITH "BLOOD"	19
WALLACE STEVENS CONTEMPLATES	21
SUNDAY SERVICE IN HADDAM	21
THE WEEPING BUTCHER	22
MISS LONELYHEARTS	23
THE GOOD ONES	24
THE ORPHANED	25
MARKED MAN	26
THE POOR BOY	27
II. LOVE ~	
A TUMBLE FOR SKELTON	30
THE REQUEST	32
WANT OF TIME	33
BUCOLIC SONG	34
NOSTALGIC SONG	35
POETRY IN MOTION	36
TODAY, NOON TRAFFIC CROWDING	37
RIVAL SLEEP	38
TORCH SONG	39
THE VANTAGE POINT	41
THE WIDOWER	42

III. LIGHT ~

LATE NIGHT RAP	44
OF SOUL AND BODY	44
DITTY	45
WHEEL OF FORTUNE	46
THE STEROID LADY	47
THE BEVERAGE FOUNTAIN IN THE GYM	48
BLARNEY STONED	49
CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA	50
COCKTAILS FOR TWO?	51
ECLOGUE	52
INDIAN ODYSSEY	55
EDUCATION	56
YEATSIAN SORROW	57

IV. TROUBLE ~

THE BOSNIAN CHERRY	59
PEACE IN OUR TIME	60
DARK AGES	62
THE LEAP	63
THE MANWOLF	64
THE MORAL	65
MURDERER'S DAY	67
THE NIGHT SWEATS	69
NIGHTWATCH	70
CAPITULATION	71
ONCOMING COMPANY	72
THE POWER GAME	73
REPORT THE DEAD	74
THE SAFETY ZONE	75
PUB SONG	76
SAPHICS: PRAYER WITH AD HOMINEMS	77
TRACT	78
ON MUDDLING THROUGH	79

V. FORCES ~	
THREE BY HERACLITUS	81
ELEGY FOR A LATE TORNADO	82
TO THE MIND	84
RODIN, BALZAC, AND THE THINKER	85
ODE ON SEX	86
CRUEL GAMES	88
THE BIG CRUNCH	90
THE DIFFICULTIES OF EPHEMERA	91
KINDRED SPIRITS	92
METAPHYSICS OF THE BIG WOMAN	94
UPSTATE STORM	95
REFLECTIONS IN A DOUBTFUL I	96
WHAT'S THE MATTER?	97
<i>SONNET AT SIXTY-FIVE</i>	98

O TO BE RICH AND POWERFUL

*O to be rich and powerful, to be
like the great-winged dragonfly of the lake,
a jaunty helicopter over sea
whose little motor without spasm spake
of micro- and of macro-cosmic truth;
to say: Littleness is relative, I am
that which I am, younger than in my youth;
imagination's child; a boy like them—
the pirate, prince, or pauper; tree maybe,
no trouble being tree; an open heart;
a mind unmatrixed, ready for the sky
to turn, at will, into the deepest sea;
to put together and to take apart;
rich, powerful to be, and never die!*

I. SOULS ~

WORDS IN PASSING

An apparently homeless occasional visitor to the Bedford-Stuyvesant Store Front Church, who signed our Guest Book with an "X," and was known to our congregants only as the "shopping cart lady," was crushed by a bus as she left evening services. Donations toward her last expenses will be appreciated.

—Church Bulletin

I passed here earlier and saw beneath
a bus an old black woman mocked aloud.
Forty-five minutes saw her ticking, transfixed figure
flouted in blood-filching snow, a crowd's breath
from peace and her God, a corrugated cardboard pyre,
too wet to burn, beneath her Earth-embracing body
and her Earth. Death was an everyday duty,
a boring business, to the busy ambulance
that came too late to save her from her shroud.
And so they chalked this shape of her small fame,
a tableau of her love in white and black,
while the mad mob leaned on linked arms to have
its picture taken by her broken frame.
Here, face down, toward the fiery zodiac,
she saw through Earth and, God please, forgave
that necrophilic crowd, Death's audience.
But in the unseen ceremony of her dying,
before the great beyond of her death, I pray
that they seemed members of her family
and that this reeking street where she was lying
seemed like an avenue of light down which
she went with You and Death without a balk
the while You made her young again and rich;
and that, for Love's sake, You hurried her catafalque,
through traffic-horn salutes and laughter,
beyond her first name, toward her last, and after.

MISSIONARIES

Wending our way, we wonder where
the Guys and the Gals went who seem to be gone.
Are we to wander inside of this weather
until we are lost like the others were?

Why were they lost, we wonder moreover,
the brave Moravian men with their women,
the ones in canoes and the cannibals too?
Some seemed to drown in the ever-new river,

some went along for the ride because lonely,
and some never got to the gates made of horn;
but some sought to come back to where they were born,
the ones who cried only, if only, if only.

ELEGY

In Memory of Patrick Harwood-Jones

I

And now the sea is calm, the ebb and flow;
and all the tides of life have come and gone;
and Peace reigns in the mind of my dear friend,
instated like a great calm king, benevolent
and tender, to regard his new domain.

II

My head, an egg, cracked, addled, petrified,
incompetent to solve the cosmic riddle,
in Spring brings forth a Phoenix, but in Fall
twin blackbirds, Time and Death. I write in Fall,
five years from you, in friendship and remembrance.

III

“A man must have his mysteries,” you said.
So now, my thoughts upon you, I am blank
to understand, to make some sense of death.
Look! For memento mori I possess
your spectacles, in which I see myself.

IV

Merely the blankest statement, tragic gesture,
as when some friendly hand is flung aloft
above the crowd, remains to keep; a vesper
of evening memory; a prayer I coughed
to save your life that wasn't saved by me.

THE SURVIVOR

The tugs towed us out, two on each side,
then left us alone. There loomed the sea,
slate in the slant of sunlight at dawn;
here, hecatombs hoped, the hundreds aboard,
boys nearly babies, boys fat and thin,
homely and handsome, helmet-haired boys,
among whom myself, woman-cheeked, pale.
But daylight saw dolphins, wagging dogs of the sea,
gulls at our garbage —grand, that display!—
while rainbows rolled butts, drowned nails of tobacco.
We drilled out on deck, dodging white wakes,
the escorts escorting scorned in vainglory.
No sooner sun shined than set the same sun.
But sharks, shining-finned, sure found our path.

Not long before light, a large ship appeared
and held the horizon, hovering there,
a carrier, cruising, crossing, recrossing,
then bombers, like bees, buzzed in the sky.
A bomb amidships! We scrambled on deck,
where booms lowered boats as bombs blew them up.
No escorts escaped! Scrapped in the deep!
Our shuddering ship, shadowed with death,
slid on its side and sank slowly down.
I rose on a raft and reached for survivors.
Hope in my hand, I hauled them aboard:
boys nearly babies, boys fat and thin,
homely and handsome, helmet-haired boys,
among whom myself, woman-cheeked, pale.

MADAM'S HOUSE

A House is not a home.
—Polly Adler

1. Tippy's Song on a Rainy Day

Once Madam told, sipping champagne,
how poverty built her disgrace.
What is the loss? What is the gain?
Poor Madam's rich from an embrace
while her smug family reside
in Potter's Field by State ukase—
all things will level with the tide.

My Johnny feared the ball-and-chain
and left me flat, a welfare case.
What is the loss? What is the gain?
These days I love at a faster pace
than any ordinary bride!
Though Johnny's gone and left no trace,
all things will level with the tide.

When I was good, they called me plain.
The simple farmboys would grimace.
What is the loss? What is the gain?
Now men come to this sultry place
and, smiling, up to me they stride.
It seems that sin improves my face.
All things will level with the tide.

On rainy days I watch the rain
that falls straight down like tears outside.
What is the loss? What is the gain?
All things will level with the tide.

2. Tippy Remembers Lawyer Smythe

“The men I fancy most,
they have erectile heads
like the cobra-di-capello.
You remember what they tell O
of the pleader, now a ghost,
how the veins of his neck would swell O
and his face in different reds
would flush until the flesh
stretched like a taut balloon?
Expansion of his meaning,
like an increasing wish,
was forced by the poor fellow
to the point of apoplexy.
We girls could only swoon.
For oh, his paroxysms,
how eloquent they were,
as if he were unspleening
himself of his hauteur
(we called him Mister Sexy,
but just among ourselves:
it was one of our witticisms,
or better, barbarisms;
because he wasn't like that at all).
I smile to think about him,
and yet it casts a pall
(it's sad when memory delves
like a baited hook on a line
and suddenly has a weight).
What shall we do without him,
we who loved him well O?
What shall we do without him,
that bulbous-headed fellow?”

3. The Broken Crow

Along the cliffs she wandered,
a song sublimely sung,
along the cliffs, and pondered
the sea they overhung—

“The sea is vast and deep,
the cliffs are high and wide.
Now let me plunge in sleep,
and in black water hide

my body that is dying
away from loving friends,
away from any crying
and have the best of ends.”

It was a swan who dove
into the sea below:
next day at Fisher's Cove
they found a broken crow.

Her friends were there and crying.
It was the worst of ends.
Oh, she who had been dying
could never make amends.

LATE SLEEPER

She never woke without the smile
that shaped that rose, her pretty mouth.
She'd lift the telephone and dial
for breakfast; then she'd have her bath,
cheerfully free from righteous wrath.

There was no need to wait a while
to travel, study, learn a style:
her money made her polymath.
She never woke.

After her bath she'd ride a mile
around the park, in single file,
with other girls of luck and wealth,
for poise, and skill, and better health,
and wonder what one *could* revile.
She never woke.

HADEWIJCH IN WALL STREET

When I walk in our ancient millioned alley
and dream of my Dutch past, I find my father,
a fortune-hunting youth who could not know
that flannel suits and frilly office frocks
are gray or parti-colored walking shrouds.

What terrible ecstasy would you have brought
this padded bourgeoisie, mad Hadewijch,
Dutch poet-nun who'd copulate with God?

The need for exaltation that I feel
in morbid secret service to my soul,
I walk like a mad soldier on patrol
among my enemies, the dressed to kill.

DETECTIVE STORY

Came in two hip nuns in unnunlike “funny”
disguise, and he who had been standing there,
sipping a pop, showed such interest—he
eyed them with eyes gone cold, studied what they were
in such strange dark habit and ivory-
embroidered cloaks—and so wondered, wondered

so plainly, as if he wanted them to know,
that they felt him there and turned toward
him, looking him over, eyeing him now,
wondering who this turkey was, some young cop,
some dude; but then, with bows, turned back to
order to-go burgers, contained pop,

straws sticking from eyed lids, and pulled rolls of bills
to pay with, flashing them; and, heeled, tapped
into the street, calling back, “You want girls?
Come on, then, boy!” Guffaws. And he followed them.
He kept his distance, though—for “speed kills”—
like a real cop, tailing them, shepherding lambs

to slaughter; for ahead there, in shadow, at
the far end of the street, waited Sam,
his partner. He’d signal Sam, by tipped hat,
to take the tail up soon, and he would drop back
to see what else was “going down,” root
out some more crime, and then take in a flick.

AN EVENING WITH “BLOOD”

*Art, being bartender, is never drunk;
And magic that believes itself, must die. . . .*
—Peter Viereck

Just call when you hit town, the great man wrote.
I like your work, and we must talk about it.
We lived a state apart, an hour's drive,
and I had business there. I called him up,
and he invited us to “Come right out,”
to hurry to his house, “and help me drink
a quart of Southern Comfort that a student
of mine has given me—I need some help.
Today above all days I need some help—
a falling down, and then a falling out!
How soon?” he asked. “As soon as we can get there.”
We didn't even have to ring the bell.
The bard swayed hugely at his door to greet us.
“I've got *your* names locked in. You call me Blood.
It was my nickname when I was a kid.
I like your husband's work,” he told my wife.
“It's very individual—which I,
and Emerson, and Wallace Stevens, think
is most important. Possum doesn't, though,
but he is wrong.” The lakeside house was empty
but for the three of us, a huge TV—
the N.F.L. in combat filled the screen—
and roaring fans and players, who loomed large.
“It's an old game. I like to run the plays
and second guess with twenty-twenty hindsight.
I tore your poems apart like that and found
I couldn't take much out—that's good!
Don't write, re-write! I drop them and go back.
This took five years—to make a wall of words
stand up like that. I worked spasmodically.
The novel took ten years, but it was worth it.
It brought a lot of money, and the movie,
and the chance for me to play a part myself.

That's Blood up on the screen, that character.
He'd scare the shit out of you, wouldn't he?
That wasn't acting, that was really me.
You see this arrow? Penetrate skull-bone.
Know how to use a crossbow? Here, I'll show you.
Up—like that—that's right. Now you aim and fire.
Bring down a rhino, that thing would. But Blood
says that you need another drink, and then
I'll play the banjo for you. Read me this one—
the one about the mad marine. *I love it,*
he told my wife. "I love the really mad ones.
Did you see how I got myself arrested?
Drunk driving. What I do is brownbag out
into the woods and turn my highbeams on
and try to see above them, not the helmet
of ordinary life down here. You too?
We yearn for levitation, flights of fancy.
I flew a lot of missions in the war.
Yes, Blood has done a major share of burning,
incendiariated towns and populations,
and no one ever understands you right
again when you've done that. My explanation
is in my poetry for those with guts to know.
As for the rest, I cannot help the world.
Above the high beams is the zodiac.
Let fools ask there about this fire-bombed world.
Blood's in the dark—like him—like you, sweet lady."

WALLACE STEVENS CONTEMPLATES SUNDAY SERVICE IN HADDAM

The day was nooning toward its bells,
and all were late, and yet he lingered there

enjoying summer and gold-nugget bees
divorced from gravity. He felt, at last,

that he was master of his mind, one of
the few who've made a satisfying picture

of the world and of the world's world,
the inclusive all, the one containing

all the perfect particles, the one
he was among the ones of, watching as

his hand scooped air as if it were
ice cream, a clean fresh strawberry,

an air so clean it glittered to his eyes
and melted on his tongue, an air

of summer on a Sunday. He wouldn't go,
and finally the others left him there.

THE WEEPING BUTCHER

The butcher weeps for onions, not for steak,
and yet he is capable of heartache.

One day he came out smiling
from the refrigerator—"You *are* beguiling."

The lady tittered—"A sweet man, Smith."
He ground her up some chuck forthwith.

But why do you drink, butcher, hiding in back?
When you have wife, children, home, what do you lack?

Smiling, pig's head in hand, he shrugs.
Blood's on his apron. The pig's head winks and mugs.

Poet, butchers aren't so different from us,
only they don't make such a fuss.

MISS LONELYHEARTS

“Love wearies me as water wearies stone.
Love baffles me as time must baffle clocks.
Love gnaws at me as dogs gnaw at a bone.
Love makes me feel as if I’ve eaten rocks.”
You love someone because you have no choice.
You like someone but not someone you love.
You love someone but not someone you like.
You need to hear that one and only voice.
“Let’s top the sea-cliff on a roaring bike.
Let’s be in blue, together. Let love go!
Let’s leap for water from that place above.
Let’s watch and see death happening below.”
I feel your pain, no need for explanation.
I understand your hopeless situation.

THE GOOD ONES

for Elbert Harkins

I guess the good ones stay with everyone,
the ones we knew who made us proud to know
them at some point somewhere beneath the sun,
but, to the good, I think, the others go
into a fading place and so are lost,
the others who were not so good to know.
The pain of course stays like an ugly ghost.
But I suppose in time it too will go.
I could name names, but only of the good,
the ones I knew that I was proud to know.
They are the heros of my life. I would
keep them forever fresh, not let them go.
It isn't hard to keep the two apart,
the heros and the zeros of the heart.

THE ORPHANED

When the mood comes upon him to die
of a loneliness deeper than death,

he must speak to himself like a parent
in a lecturing voice, but with love.

He must be his own father and mother,
and at night when he looks up at heaven,

where nothing of earth seems to live,
and the range of all things is so great

as to startle the love from his breast,
he must think of his father, the Rock,

and of his mother, the Dead Sea, and of
the message he brings from the sun.

MARKED MAN

He looks for Death
back over his shoulder,
some say too much.

He looks for Death
ahead on the hill there,
perhaps an inch.

THE POOR BOY

Not having had inheritance or luck,
undemocratically good blood or breeding,
nor any gold come out of family stock
that sets a young man up, preceding
maturity and forming for it pride
in action and aristocratic strength,
solace in having purpose in each stride,
and discipline that carries to its length,
I've found myself romantically inclined,
a muzzy mongrel with a barking mind.

How I admire those men and women who
were reared in order, dignity and pride!
You see it in their eyes, a voiceless vow,
a knowledge Levelling denied.
Here now is social change preeminent,
the mass man rises to his rightful place;
but his ascension leaves a remanent
of unredeemable darkness of disgrace
in that all art must kowtow to a taste,
now at his rising, weaned on gutter waste.

I know, for I have foraged in the lots
of blackened cities looking for a prize
of red discarded unbroken flowerpots
to place my plants, to brighten eyes.
I've shined a thousand shoes along the streets
of coughing cities all across this land.
A child, I'd enter taverns and retreats
the like of which to others would be banned.
Oh, I know poverty, unhappiness;
such things I know, I have no need to guess.

And yet a sturdy strength comes out of it,
that's undeniable; but at what cost!
The strength of street-bred children is their wit
and nerve; nobility is lost

in the hungry race of mongrels for a bone,
and Honor hangs his head before the scene.
The heart of the street urchin is a stone
ground more with each engagement, until mean.
We learn to fight and hate, but not to love,
no matter who says so. We learn to shove.

II. LOVE ~

A TUMBLE FOR SKELTON

Wherein Margaret Patricia Hill is Championed

Well done,
sweet John!
But I'd make a bet
that my Margaret
could contest against
that *midsummer flower*
that *hawk of the tower*
whom you have advanced,
in summer assaulting,
in tumbling in down,
who would be vaulting
but never be faulting
but always be salting
sweet red tomatoes
and spreading her toes
and sticking her breasty
where Philip was roosting
and cooing for fair
out of that lair
into the air
where her heart would be pounding
and pulses resounding
to the tapping of toes
in little high heels
of glittering shoes,
not spinning her wheels,
charming John,
you old Don Juan.

Yes, I'd take the bet
that my Margaret
ungaudded, ungirdled,
in a contest had hurtled
beyond your yon Hussey

like a beautiful horsey
or a flying flamingo
and be all ago
so joyously
so womanly
her demeaning
in everything
far far passing
that I can indite
or suffice to write
how superiorly
my lady would be
to Margaret Hussey
to make her seem fussy
and in the end dusty
and yet even musty
and leave her behind
never to find
while my winning lady
would take prize
at flashing her eyes
on that gay day
and laurel for her head
and goose feathers in bed,
but your lady, dear John,
you sweet old Don Juan,
your lady'd be lead
compared with my Margaret,
and I'd make that bet!

THE REQUEST

In her grave smile, I saw
myself reflected, too,
in a likeness not too near,
not as some unified law,
but as one whom I knew
before her face was there,
one from inside of me,
so whom I could not see.

And I reached out to her
across a deepening flood,
and asked if she could see
in my bleak-featured stare
and dark, unrisible blood,
her own grave self in me,
and if she could, advise
death be not recognized.

WANT OF TIME

Two weeks were plenty in those days
before we met for words of praise,
but now two weeks are not enough
to express to you my degree of love.
For in those days I knew no one
who could undo words as they were done
by gaining beauty and new light
much faster, love, than I can write.

But now, my dear, while charged with love,
I have this failing, seen above:
I can't design around your hair
accomplished words, express and fair,
for it improves at such a rate
it leaves me in a wordless state.
Nor can I write a faint disguise
with speed enough to cloak your eyes.

Ah, no, my love, it's of no use
to match my words, to their abuse,
against improving loveliness
and leave the words to mean the less!
I'll not do harm to poetry
trying to say what I can see.
Instead, I'll simply say that I
will follow through Eternity
until your beauty's all around
and I am left within, quite sound,
to sing that anniversary—
Millenium of You and Me!

BUCOLIC SONG

When dead dreams are dreamt anew
As my once dead ones are,
Homage must be paid to you,
Fargone time's renewer, who
Can renew a goneby summer,
Winter, or a wind that blew
Long, long ago.

Ah love, return my heart from dead
And gone to wondrous hours,
Give me golden times ahead,
Let my heart and hope re-wed
Here among new-verdant bowers,
Let their lovely vows be said
As breezes blow.

NOSTALGIC SONG

O darling, on this summer day
in Nineteen Hundred Two,
the parasol above your head,
your shadowed eyes of blue,

the way your yellow hair is piled,
the color on your lips,
the way you look at me and smile
and touch my fingertips—

all these conspire to make me dream
that we might fall in love:
yet what a jealous fool I am
when I touch your glove

and feel the prints upon that glove
of those hands of his,
and taste the ashes of old love
as we walk and kiss—

O darling, were there others
before Tom came along?
O darling, have I brothers
among the Coney throng?

O darling, when we marry
will you be true to me?
O darling, let us hurry,
let's hurry up and see!

POETRY IN MOTION

It was disheartening when physics told us
the universe was alien, indifferent.
I'm glad it's changed its doubting tune back to
the music of the spheres, of sorts;
especially now that I again see you
walking in the garden as you used to do
long, long ago. You haven't changed a bit—
gripping your brocade with one small hand
and with the other feinting flowers at the bees.
I'd have thought that I'd gone mad before,
but no more since the famous physicist has said,
upon accepting his Nobel, "It's poetry,
out there, and deep in here," pointing at his head.
"The microscope and telescope look in and out
but not across the warp and woof of time."
And that's where you go walking in the garden
(the garden of the old house that is gone,
the garden that's a parking lot downtown),
feinting at the bees with your hand of flowers
and lifting your brocaded summer gown.

TODAY, NOON TRAFFIC CROWDING

Today, noon traffic crowding, heat appalling,
I saw the double of someone I knew.
A face from long ago, I heard it calling
as plain as I might now be hearing you.

Thank God I'm not a king, or Canon Law
would have me married to the woman yet!
Pathetic creature! Not the one I saw.
That woman looked like one I would forget.

I mustn't be unkind! Resentment speaks.
So many years to hold a useless grudge!
Life's like a faulty sink from which love leaks.
Would you believe I stopped and couldn't budge?

Forgive my grief, then, when I turn aside.
I have at heart what I had thought had died.

RIVAL SLEEP

I have a rival for my darling's heart,
that dog called Sleep. She cannot let him lie.
It is the same now as it was to start:
she loves Sleep better than she loves my sigh,
my upright passion—which will never quit—
my tenderness of touch—all naked me!
She loves Sleep more than thunder's lightning wit
or downpour's sonorous profundity.

She loves Sleep better even than my kisses,
and cuddles him, not me, the long night through.
When I sat next to them and heard his hisses,
snake-tongued, in her sweet breath, I sadly knew
that deepest Sleep would keep her in the end—
my loving never could make her attend.

TORCH SONG

Lucky that you love me!
Lucky that you care!
Thought you'd treat me roughly
if I were to try
to attract your eye,
so I didn't dare.

Then one day you saw me
sulking in the corner.
No one came to paw me.
No one even tried!
Guess they thought I'd died!
Only you, a mourner,

staring at me there
with a solemn look
on a face so fair
I near fell apart
pounding with my heart.
Half the ballroom shook!

You came over then,
smiling, saying Hello,
different from other men,
smarter, I thought, somehow,
making your slight bow,
voice so soft and mellow.

Later, asking you
how it was you married
—I was feeling blue—
plain and simple me,
music ceased, and we
talked the while we tarried

on the muffled floor
waiting for the band to

play our song once more.
This is what you said:
“Dearest, your sweet head,
filled with bunk they hand you

—utterly unreal
books and films and such—
having the ideal
constantly in mind,
searching, will not find
answers overmuch.

Love has many reasons,
being what it is:
many different seasons
drifting in and out,
flowering in doubt,
freezing in a kiss. . .”

You fell silent then,
but the music rolled!
I felt gay again,
happy with alarm
dancing against the storm
which your words foretold!

THE VANTAGE POINT

If you allow your thoughts to run, gray man,
utrammelled grist, along the belt of mind,
do you discover there one grain of truth,
or one remembered woman not mundane?
Was every step ill-chosen or ill-timed?
Your passion in abeyance, or patience rushed?

I stand at noon, and wonder at the night.
From where I stand the morning was of dun.
The afternoon ahead could be still worse.
I hope somehow to see it light and bright;
I hope somehow to share it with someone,—
a woman in my arms, both warm and wise.

THE WIDOWER

The clock of the cock at morningrise,
or machine of the city sweeper,
rips the tape of the night from the wound of the day,
painful to the sleeper

who, hurled from his world of dreaming, hugs
the airy shape of his wife
who left him most malignantly
alone with his widower's life.

Then, as his arms pass through the space
that his wife has left in passing
and collapse within the O of prayer
as if the man were massing,

his eyes in surprise are opened to see
that his prayer is sensual,
or that his prayer is a wife of air
as the moon is menstrual.

Thus, winning beginning again and again,
though something each morning is lost,
he's gifted with pain to go on again
by the wrinkled sheet of a ghost.

III. LIGHT ~

LATE NIGHT RAP OF SOUL AND BODY

When you speak, and fingers snap,
it's I who tell you what to rap.
I own your hands, I own your feet,
I own all your dancing meat.

You have no home but meat and bone.
You are not you in space, alone.
If my bones break, you cannot move.
How then, my Soul, do you show love?

I'd shake you till the last bulb blew
and with the dawn do something new.
Your Soul, who's master of his ship,
says bell your sails from toe to hip!

You'd have me break and die for fair
from endless wear and terrible tear.
But no, I'll sleep. What can you do?
If I am tired, then so are you,

and when I sleep, you too must sleep,
and in your universe must keep,
among your dreams, inside my head,
a restful quiet in our bed,

till we awaken, straight and narrow,
freshened, like a new-fledged arrow.

DITTY

I

Valleys rich and beautiful
make you wish to farm them.
Women wise and wonderful
make you wish to charm them.

II

Once an innocent of loves,
now a veteran of them,
I remove my velvet gloves
to, barehanded, love them.

WHEEL OF FORTUNE

On Wheel of Fortune, Sex, to lick its chops,
sends Vanna's highheeled little feet across the stage.

She wiggles, turning cards. My old aunt thinks:
"I never looked like that, even at that age!"

And so it goes, as Vonnegut has said; and, like the Wheel,
we turn and turn and wait—for what we wait,
we wonder. Maybe the Jackpot Prize,
the house we always wanted, and, at its gate,

a swanky Maserati! The Wheel clicks
and rolls and clicks. We count to ten.

My old aunt saves her dough (but we say bread—
or maybe not). Click click! My old aunt thinks: "Well, then,
where to?" And in the glitz of Vanna's Fortune Wheel
time stops. The nervous neon blinks with doubt:
click click, and click click click, and here
we are! The universe turned inside out

and, young and beautiful, or handsome male,
eating each other up, we drool, O hungry for the flesh.

Who's who? Who's where? Again: the spinning Wheel,
the flashing lights, Vanna's target fanny, and fresh
turnings of a card! O laugh, O laugh and laugh!
O scream! Once rated the most popular
program on Earth, the Wheel of Fortune
itself comes back and back and back, bright star!

THE STEROID LADY

The steroid lady stands, flashing her smile,
upon a pedestal at Muscle Beach.
She's come a long way, baby; the last mile
was not beyond her iron-willed, wiry reach.

Delts, lats, pecs, abs, obliques, gluts, hamstrings, triceps,
erectus spinus: she walks in beauty like
a knight in well-oiled armor, flexing biceps,
and spreading lats and giving traps a hike.

What hope for man is left? She's made of iron!
She looks like Mike, my hirsute little friend,
but that she's hairless. Is she also barren?
For mothers must have fat or hormones end.

The softness of a woman has been taken.
I feel as if my manhood's been forsaken.

THE BEVERAGE FOUNTAIN IN THE GYM

She urinated into tall-stemmed glasses.
Oh how they loved it, piss of pure champagne,
the golden bubbly! She herself was ice,
a frigid lady. It was then that bane
of sex, the matron's matron, passed the door
that thumped with laughter, looked, and saw *her* there,
who leaned back like a most provocative "whore,"
legs open, peeing, as if without a care,
her face carved into "lechery;" and so the good
wives sued the school for sexual harassment,
and one divorced her husband, who had wooed
a work of art to her embarrassment,
 had wooed a lady of extreme bad taste,
 who melted in the heat of hate—sad waste!

BLARNEY STONED

Ah, Dionysis, ya grapey divil deity,
ya'd like ta have me back in Hellas
to guzzle in the juice of yer depravity!
Ya know yer dirty bottled blood'll
keep me at yer bidden.
Ah puke it up and force it down lak cud,
but I'll tell ya straight, ya satyr goat,
tomorrow, ah swear, ah'm quitten!
Ya make me drink this soupy slop,
ah know ya do, ah know it!
Ya tease me on ta gulp the rot,
and sure'n hell ah show it.
But ya'll not beat me, goaty beast,
cuz ah tell ya straight, ya satyr goat,
tomorrow, ah swear, ah'm quitten!

CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA

When Cleopatra rolled out from the rug,
it was the end of the Republic. Caesar,
involved in mid-life crisis, felt the tug
of pagan godhood, plus the need to squeeze her.
She took him on a tour of Egypt, showed
him secrets, like the tunnels used by priests
in their predictions of the Nile, and rowed
him on her barge. She showed him that her breasts
were fully formed, those of a goddess waiting
for him to join her in the Royal Way.
“A balding man should wear a crown.” Her baiting,
her teasing, proved Great Caesar’s feet were clay.
She laughed to see democracy go down,
and Caesar turn from great man into clown.

COCKTAILS FOR TWO?

John Ciardi
liked Bacardi
but drank Chianti
with his Auntie.

ECLOGUE

Non nostrum inter vos tantas componere lites.
—Vergil, *Ecloques*

FIRST SHEPHERD:

We meet again upon this hill
but now we climb it with a will,
when only last time, when we met,
our breath was easier to get.

I see your flock has grown greatly
over what you had just lately.
Oh, you'll die rich, but what's it matter?
Will wings of faith make your mound flatter?

SECOND SHEPHERD:

My soul is tended by a priest
whose duty it is to see to the least
among his flock as it is ours
to see to our sheep during their short hours.

FS: Much as you'd see to your fine flock
piece by piece on the butcher's block.
SS: We have had this argument before.
FS: Ho! Then, my friend, I'll say no more.
SS: Why do you plague me with dark thoughts?
You ought to think—
FS: Ought me no oughts
because you're a serious man who hurries
from hill to hill, enjoying worries
that do not matter, and I'm a herder
who knows how to laugh in the face of murder,
for what would the murderer be taking
and what would the victim be foresaking?

SS: You were a foolish fellow when
we last met, and are again.

FS: As indeed are you, who think you see
your way out in a fantasy,
in buying a pass to the eternal
from a priest whose heart's an infernal
machine of greed and mumbo-jumbo.

Did he have you drink his magic gumbo?

SS: Of dragon-bones. How did you know?

FS: I know many shepherds who go
to these purveyors of clipped toenails
and what you will. The game never fails
to take them in more than they do meat.

SS: I'm sensible.

FS: But they defeat
good sense because they offer what
good sense just simply hasn't got—
essence of Self, the thing we love,
outside, beyond the body, and above
that body's gross and greedy needs
which cause so many dirty deeds.
Your health is good. You need not worry.

SS: I do not worry.

FS: You heave and hurry,
and with your staff you vault the hill
as if to leap to heaven. Will
nor wealth can keep you whole.

SS: And when they tug and pull and toll
the bell for you, where will you go?

FS: What can we see? What can we know?

Go nowhere and become the sand,
a stuff run through the little hand
of an infant on a wide wide shore.
Like you, my friend, I'll be no more.

SS: Unbeliever!

FS: Self-deceiver!

SS: Your little flock is moving on.

FS: And I shall follow and be gone.

SS: Farewell, poor doubting soul!

FS: Farewell, and keep you whole!
SS: Next year, perhaps—upon this hill.
FS: If flesh is quick and has a will.

INDIAN ODYSSEY

In Memory of Acee Blue Eagle

I was afraid of the Indian boys
with no feathers in their hair
when I was twelve, in Oklahoma,
and went to school there.

They came at me, angry, red,
because I was from the East.
I did not know I should be dead.
I did not know I was a beast.

I tried to make them like me. "See,
this is my Red Ryder rifle.
Shoot it, shoot it, if you please."
They hurt me with that windy trifle.

Oklahoma is no place
unless you are Blue Eagle, Ace.

EDUCATION

Stemmata quid faciunt?
—Juvenal

Because he never went to college,
my father sold the Book of Knowledge.
Myself, I never went to school,
but did devote myself to pool.
Both of us ended on the rocks,
graduates of old Hard Knocks,
alums of Loving Kindness, yet
ignorant on how to get
along in life without degrees,
no forests for us, only trees,
yet publishing our poetry
in *Yale* and *Southern* and *Sewanee*.
Sometimes the editors write back,
Dear Professor, you're no hack,
we wish to publish "Ode on Birds"
in which we find such lovely words.
And I write back and say to them
I'm no professor, all the same.
I never even went to college,
but daddy sold the Book of Knowledge,
and I read it, growing up,
when he and I would share a cup
of sherry over Heraclitus
knowing nothing'd ever right us,
knowing nothing quite stands still,
that only changing always will
keep you up with changing things,
like that river on time's wings
that you can't step into twice
even if you'd pay the price.

Now that dear old daddy's gone,
I think I'll write about a swan.

YEATSIAN SORROW

When Algernon Swinburne died,
most poets doffed their hats,
but Yeats leaped up and cried:
“Now I am King of the Cats!”

IV. TROUBLE ~

THE BOSNIAN CHERRY

*. . . the explosion appears to have
shocked the tree into blossom.*

—Reuters

Friends, look with faithless unbelieving eyes
upon this miracle the bomb has wrought,
as now, in shocked conversion, I tell you
of spring against the devastated skies
of winter war, the hopelessness war brought,
and how, enveloped in explosive blue
of acrid smoke, this tree could still devise
beyond predictability. It caught
the shell's enormous heat, and grew
fluid with sap, miraculous with surprise
of spring, for all combatants to be taught
anew a faith unlearned by deathly cries,
a blossoming the human heart has sought
with every hopeful spring—a sweet-peace prize.

PEACE IN OUR TIME

*O yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill . . .
—Tennyson*

*The poet, ignorant philosopher,
Alpha & Omega beggar, posits
AND, in an academic naming, the
world that takes all others in:*

“AND,” he says, “includes the All.
OR is us & even war.
AND will keep including more.
OR is reductive, what we recall

—particulars, parts, & particles
—how many ways can it be said?—
all things unborn, & all things dead,
commas, grapes, seeds, articles

of various sorts, & written ones,
all things that are not All,
all memories we can recall,
all less than All, all suns,

all galaxies, germs, & viruses,
all parts of atoms & their parts,
all stops, reverses, starts,
all flowers, roses, irises—”

She frowned. “And so you say,” she said,
“that you can live with ugly war
because it’s what you call an OR.
ORs also are the many dead!”

“Yes. When struck by this, I wondered
what horrid meaning it must have.

The morality of love
was made to seem almost a blunder.

And yet, I thought, morality
must include the act of war.
For Fascists must be fought, are OR,
are fragments of eternity

gone wrong in AND, the All; are Fear.
A kinder & a gentler love
has got to be beyond, above,
& other than, this OR-world, where

it must be that, if we could see
the whole of things, we'd understand
how piece by piece (& hand in hand)
things add to form in synergy

a greater than is each alone,
as also are twinned Space & Time,
or life in clay & death in lime.
Thus, in the AND, all Ors atone."

DARK AGES

More light!
—Goethe, on his deathbed

Oh, there was never any powerful light
by which to comprehend the common day,
merely the milktoast light of the benighted,
who cannot understand what we see.
But whose fault is that if we sadly try,
standing clumsily up to our full height
like doomed, dim-minded begging bears
that with sad clumsy hearts are so unbright?

Is it any wonder that all we do is fight?
Is it any wonder that all we do is lie?
Is it any wonder that what we write is trite?
Is it any wonder that we stand and sigh,
who are graced with only such a little sun
by which to try to be someone, anyone?

THE LEAP

Faith says to leap, forget the brain;
Brain, I am Without-which-not.
Many a night I have lain
in my bed and, cold and hot
by turns, have tossed,
and known the cost

of ambiguity about
which way to go: if I should throw
away the brain, be like some lout
bulldozing what I do not know,
without clear sense
or evidence;

or, on the other hand, should pray
that I can make the leap of faith
and throw the troubled brain away,
and so acquire at my due death,
through sacrifice,
a paradise.

THE MANWOLF

Among the wolves a tale is told
of how, when Moon is full,
some normal-seeming wolf becomes
a Manwolf, stalking, murdering all.

His fangs grow short and flat in front,
his paws grow long and fingered.
He holds a firestick in a hand,
makes fire with what is called a trigger.

The cubs who listen to the tale
howl in fear of such a fright
as wolf that looks like human horror,
naked, murdering day and night.

THE MORAL

Some say the world will end in fire . . .
—Robert Frost

My father died in fire.
My mother dies of ice.
Myself? It is desire.
So ruinous a price
we pay for what we need!
The Muenster needs of mice
have trapped them in their greed.
It's never very nice.

My father felt the mire,
and threw decisive dice.
He died upon a pyre
with roomers and with lice.
A churchman of the creed
succumbed to shoes and rice,
then found he couldn't breed.
It's never very nice.

My mother feels with ire
the lack of kind advice,
and will time really buy her
another paradise?
A mongoose met a weed
and bit him off a slice,
then started in to bleed.
It's never very nice.

Myself, I'd be a liar
to say I have no vice.
I'll do it till I tire,
I've said so once or twice.
A hound who took no heed
once tried to make a splice.
The lion had a feed.

It's never very nice.

So all of you who read,
for you let this suffice:
that we shall be agreed,
it's never very nice.

MURDERER'S DAY

Why is it always Murderer's Day?
Why can't it be different someday—tomorrow?
I wake to the sad and terrible news
and ask over coffee, "Why do I listen?
Why do I want to hear of the fire?
Why don't I turn from the morbid to music?"

Of all things on Earth I'm sure I love music
better than any—I could listen all day.
Is it fear that impels that the ghetto on fire
be the thing that I hear today and tomorrow,
though I ask over coffee why I should listen,
when I wake up, to such terrible news?

On goes the radio, blasting the news.
Why don't I tune in some beautiful music?
Why do I listen? Oh, why do I listen?
And why is it always Murderer's Day?
Why can't it be different someday—tomorrow?
Why is the ghetto always on fire?

Why is the world always on fire?
On goes the radio, blasting the news.
Why can't it be different someday—tomorrow?
Why can't the world be filled with sweet music?
Why is it always Murderer's Day?
So I ask over coffee, "Oh, why do I listen,

why, over coffee, do I sit and listen
to news of a world that's always on fire,
to the latest report of Murderer's Day?"
But on goes the radio, blasting the news
instead of some beautiful, good-morning music.
Why can't it be different someday—tomorrow?

Why can't it be different every tomorrow,
that never again over coffee we listen

to other than beautiful, good-morning music
describing how love is aflame and afire?
Why can't there be music instead of bad news
and no more reports about Murderer's Day?

Oh, don't let tomorrow be Murderer's Day!
Let there be music and no sign of fire,
and let us all listen to much better news!

THE NIGHT SWEATS

By our intensity, with hanging head,
we spell the wolf away, who pants and croons
outside the door, who wants us to be dead
so he may have his meal. By magic runes
we rid the world of wide-winged evil loons
whose madness mixes metaphors instead
of bringing clarity, whose looney tunes
make breathless nightmares in our sweat-wet bed.
Hear them who creep toward our peace of mind,
destructive artifices of our brains,
to wreak their havoc! Run, leave them behind!
And in the dark we try to run in chains
and can't escape because the night is mined
to blow us up in spite of all our pains.

NIGHTWATCH

My loneliness was deep.
I could not see beyond it.
It robbed me of my sleep.

I lay awake, saw sheep,
counted; no dream responded.
My loneliness was deep.

The tide was at the neap.
I took the moon, and donned it.
It robbed me of my sleep.

I heard a great bird leap,
die, singing as the swan did.
My loneliness was deep.

You sow and you shall reap;
for guilt was how I conned it.
It robbed me of my sleep.

“Lord, take my soul to keep!”
I cried. Not He: no one did.
My loneliness was deep.
It robbed me of my sleep.

CAPITULATION

Be near me now; Time's weakened me; be
near me now; let me have my way once more.
Forgive, forget; you must remember me

now in my need. Come in the door,
sit down, relax, and let us talk
of all the silence listened for

these many years. I walk
alone in here and putter
weakly. I'm white as chalk.

Perhaps, I mutter,
in truth, it's I,
who could not utter

a cry,
must sigh

ONCOMING COMPANY

Oncoming company:
the flooding tides, the fell
ingrowing grave, the sea
of place, the held in hell.
What dark, what bleak o'clock
swings pendulously now?
No record on a rock
survives the voice and vow.

No record on a rock
survives the voice and vow:
Swings pendulously now
that dark, that bleak o'clock
of place, the held in hell
ingrowing grave, the sea
of flooding tides, the fell
oncoming company.

THE POWER GAME

The king is weak, the enemy has planned,
The queen is powerful and vain, and vain,
And everywhere there is a helping hand.

The enemy has landed on the land!
Who is afraid of fear? The pain! The pain!
The king is weak, the enemy has planned.

The pawns go forth and die. They understand
Their queen is beautiful, not plain, not plain,
And everywhere there is a helping hand.

Her knights are paramours. They leap or stand
According to her will. The gain! The gain!
The king is weak, the enemy has planned.

The bishop says a prayer. The castle's spanned
By other drummers than the rain, the rain,
And everywhere there is a helping hand.

Yes, trouble plagues the kingdom. Undermanned
And understaffed, they try, and strain, and strain.
The king is weak, the enemy has planned,
And everywhere there is a helping hand.

REPORT THE DEAD

Not having been, the dead remember only,
or never, never having been. Remember?
Remember never, ever being lonely?
They smell no smoke from any dying ember,

or, forever never being, what is smoke?
The dead remember nothing very clearly.
Nothing is very clear, the silence spoke.
Forever is as loud as nothing, nearly,

but nothing is the loudest silence now,
and never, ever speaks of what it knows.
Report the dead for never knowing how
to entertain the living with dumb shows.

Report the dead for scaring us with Not,
the nothing, nothing, nothing that they've got.

THE SAFETY ZONE

Bald Samson, feminized and impotent,
king of no castle, least of all his own,
resides within the modern Safety Zone
in what he calls the Nest of Discontent.
Like that great monster of the Scottish loch,
he sometimes finds his head above the water
(his neck is of his body a full quarter)
and, bullet-bald, heads in toward the dock
that promises escape, but's tugged below
and back and down, and his head sinks from where
there is a full supply of fragrant air
to where air-breathers should not try to go,
to where at bottom lies Contention's Bone,
the Nest of Discontent, the Safety Zone.

PUB SONG

The jukebox unwinds a Piaf
to us as we sit at the bar
trying to find some relief
from a world where troubles are.

The bartender brings me my drink
and I drink it without a remark.
Outside, the evening is pink
with that pink that comes before dark.

"I regret nothing," sings Piaf,
and the record drops dead in its box.
Now Piaf is free of the grief
her glorious music mocks.

And drunk, I am free as a sailor
to bless or not to bless.
Say, how can a man be a failure
if he has no need of success?

SAPHICS: PRAYER WITH AD HOMINEMS

Grant me, America, continuing freedom from
those officious intermeddlers who would
save me from myself, busybody bores ever
vigilant to steal

freedom from our land & our land from us for
spotted owls & kangaroo rats & snail-darters;
puritans without the old God; Pantheists,
pagans of Gaea.

Dear, endangered country of mine, grant hope of
triumph, victory over leftwingers like
these officious intermeddlers, that I
may not lose you to

them, whose empty lives must be lived through others,
whose *raison d'etre* seems to be control over
people, whose cowardice quivers at freedom,
O my America!

TRACT

The human race is richly blessed,
for it's at liberty to choose
the path above the dark forest

where it evolved from small tree shrews.
When we were young, in those dark ages
when trees were gods, we could refuse

our few objective pilgrimages
their bright discoveries forthwith.
We'd stronger gods and images

of potency surpassing truth.
It wasn't innocence we had
but ignorance, like any youth.

And ignorance of good and bad
we can't equate with innocence,
for ignorance is something sad

and innocence is happy; hence,
that Eden Garden written of
to show our disobedience

could not have been a place of love.
Nor did the ignorant within
(whose bodies fitted hand-in-glove)

deserve God's angriest chagrin
for plucking knowledge from the tree.
How was their action any sin
in seeking knowledge, lovingly?

ON MUDDLING THROUGH

I like the English saying “muddle through.”
It’s always better than perfecting things,
although the human race keeps trying to,
keeps carving for stone Victory stone wings.

V. FORCES ~

THREE BY HERACLITUS

I

Offend yourself with mirrored knowledge
(where's that face you wore at college?)
and your sense of life's no-stasis,
thinking of various times and places,
recalling the endless grandmother summers,
remembering bees and thunderboomers,
and quote, "A boy's will is the wind's will."
All is flux, nothing stands still.

II

About to vacation some years ago,
it was yourself that you wanted to know,
so you left your wife behind and went
away to the mountains and set up a tent,
and re-read Walton, and cast your fly
as you did as a boy, long and high;
but something went wrong—and you got a fever.
You can't step twice in the selfsame river.

III

Discontent in retirement you stare at your land
(once wild but tamed by the work of your hand).
How long will it take to overgrow
when you are gone, you'd like to know.
You haven't the strength to do things twice.
It's all gone now, gone in a trice.
You're an old dog now, a dog with the mange.
Nothing endures but change, change, change.

ELEGY FOR A LATE TORNADO

I

No, Nature has no wrath, no, none at all, and you
are merely what you are, Tornado—or by some
counts twenty—touching down around this tarheeled state,
a thunderbooming menace innocent as pie,
the product of two airs, of heat and cold colliding
without intention in our Mother's general chaos,
O fearsome Mother of us all, who says take that
and see if you can take it, kid, or you're not mine.

II

Now we of social order must adjust insurance
and see what can be done about the fallen roof;
and too, some trees have fallen and a boy is dead,
and we must bury him, the poor unlucky lad
who stood too close to leaves while saws were lopping limbs
for safety's sake; and others, too, who died in homes
turned round as if they rode a carousel or flew
like helicopters up, foundationless on Earth.

III

How do we call the dead back? Well, She says we don't.
She says She doesn't care if we are fools enough to live;
and what are houses but the homes of hermit crabs,
delectable to cats, fish and furry felines both;
and what are we to Her, She says, sure not the best,
but who dare say She doesn't love us all? Tornado,
you were a special pet of Hers a day or two,
but now your short-lived reign of terror I record.

IV

And you were dead and now are gone and none of us
can show a thing but that some still endure, survivors
in pain and struggle and somewhat the stronger now
than otherwise, and though a small reward for hurt
reward it is, and in the aspect of eternity
the very thing that shapes the human race, and all
the injured creatures of the planet as they struggle,
not merely struggle—stronger, propagate—O Winds!

TO THE MIND

*The mind can take flight into the world,
because it is not purely of the world . . .*

—Kenneth Patchen

Why do we wish upon a nonexistent star?
We know the star is gone, the light just now arriving.
Then why, O Mind, do we not wish upon the light?
Why do we lie both to ourselves and others, why
do we not value more the facts you would supply us
and make the bravest and most honest use of you,
you burning glory in the darkness of all time?

Why do we mock our truest selves and glorify
the sad bear of the body, locked in gravity,
O glorify the little leaps that it can make,
when you soar through the universe, a rocket ship,
you your own torch, and looking for the cosmic key
with which to unlock all existence in a phrase
or elegant equation, speaking like a god,

explaining everything in terms your partner, Heart,
retarded, slow, but pulsing, an idiot-savant,
can bear to beat his muscled drum for and be gay?
O Mind, you bravest human part, you essence us,
and lift us off our feet in flight toward the stars,
and are our pilot in the windshear night to port,
and so I sing your praises all my days, O Mind!

RODIN, BALZAC, AND THE THINKER

*Because assemblers will let us place atoms
in almost any reasonable arrangement . . .
they will let us build almost anything that
the laws of nature allow to exist.*

—K. Eric Drexler, *Engines of Creation*

Atomic transmigration was beyond Rodin,
who could not finally touch his statues into life.
And yet he must have seen the likeness of his art

to that of universal processes, stone into soul,
and felt the homeopathic nature of his magic,
the sympathetic magic of his mastered art.

But if Rodin could catch an atom in his hand,
then he could build a living man from solid rock,
then he could make him think and be a tender lover,

could make Balzac emerge from what was holding him
and step down from his pedestal and have a drink
and tell, as only Balzac could, where he had been,

of what the world of rock was like before the soul.
But once out of the rock, Balzac could never tell
Rodin about the rock, nor why his touch must fail;

and if Balzac could never tell, how could Rodin
make great Balzac march forward from the marble slab?
It must be that Rodin confronted his conundrum

and sat down like *The Thinker*, head in mighty hand,
and thus inspired himself to yet another task—
to show poor humankind its constant puzzlement.

ODE ON SEX

I

Come, let me champion your cause, mind-altering Sex,
disintegrator of great family names and fortunes,
despoiler of priests, wild joker in each Jack and Jill's
young life, who eggs their egos on aggressively;
delightful Sex, who makes us foolish to ourselves
in alleys or in cars or in motel rooms rented
in titillated glee and paid for all our lives.

II

Come, let me champion your cause, mind-altering Sex,
for Mother Nature gives no whit for social problems,
nor loves the individual more than the whole;
cares little for the personal life, or not at all,
but is a painted slut, big-bellied and prolific,
drugged drunk on hormones, sprawled with open legs and mouth,
and ignorant of consequence—"couldn't care less!"

III

Come, let me champion your cause, mind-altering Sex,
for whom in Tijuana town I paid two dollars cash
and two weeks on the isolation stool when I was young;
who bows and bends the gay and kills them for their trouble;
who loves no one but lusts for every orifice—
O Sex, mind-altering Sex, sad Sex, are you all bad?
O Sex, then what is Cupid's so sweet Psyche for?

IV

The juggling of the genes—the double-helix shuffle,
survival's muted laughing need to mix us up—
causes the countless changes in two families
in lines that branch back into great antiquity.
See them as weaving an enormous web shaped like
a geodesic dome, our primal mother-creature
at bottom and at top two families conjoining.

V

When Jack and Jill, the twins, the scared and hungry ones,
the little red, white, brown, or golden berries, come,
give them a shower, sharing wealth and love alike,
for Sex brings Love into the world with motherhood,
and even orphans know the heart above their head
that shook the womb they grew in, know another there,
and know most certainly the need, mind-altering Sex.

CRUEL GAMES

I

I read somewhere about a wizard with computers,
a man who's made a myriad millions in the field,
who lives out in an island's perfect solitude
in order best to think about life's origins,
who seriously thinks our universe is bits
and bytes, a program made some cosmic Otherwhere.

II

We make computer games ourselves and love to play them,
why then might we not be a game for something else,
a smarter It, why might it not be true that we,
the world, the universe, are toys played in an Else,
a game called Life, or its equivalent in Else,
played by the happy children of the clever Its?

III

Truly the Demon of Intelligence must thrive
among the happy Its of Else in Otherwhere,
but one must notice all the cruelty of the game
and think that those in Else have not evolved as yet
to that high point that even we, their bits and bytes,
their pawns, aspire to daily in our average lives.

IV

I must look up that article about the wizard
and find his name and write to him and ask him how
he thinks the whole thing works, and if the software used
is durable enough to keep us going on until
our progress takes us well beyond the happy Its
of Else in Otherwhere, who play such cruel games.

THE BIG CRUNCH

Uppathering, the dead are born again,
the dirt unshovels and the coffins rise
into the hands of backward walking men,
relieved, rejuvenating pallbearers.

A widow is again a married woman,
a wife, the mother of such lovely children,
these crying adults crying now like infants.
A hearse drives backward down a melting road.

From funeral parlor back to hospital
the warming body of her husband goes
by backward racing ambulance and crew,
who desperately try to save his death,

and watch in horror as his chest reopens,
and hear him laughing heartlessly at them.
They are too young to save him now and cry
at their own helplessness and nipples need.

Young, powerful again, he forges back
into the marketplace where he was born.
His girlish wife has lost her backward children,
forgotten them, but hopes to have some soon.

The objects of his life come rushing by;
his stature changes; and his wife is gone;
he vanishes inside his mother's womb.
The cemetery turns into a wood.

The world becomes a gas and joins the sun,
the sun becomes a part of many suns,
and suddenly the stars collect and vanish,
and everything is one again, just one.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF EPHEMERA

I know that the difficulties, as harsh as they are, and they are,
are, if not the purpose, the pastime of space, time, and star,
and what we are in is a vast starry game never to learn,
where all of the stars, like our lives, are only to burn,

and nothing's sacred in particle pool (or ridiculous quanta-flux),
and ultimately the planet's unsaveable—but, stop!—not because of us,
but because it's an observable rule of ephemeral existence
that ephemeral existence has only a temporary persistence.

And yet all of our consciousness-time we hold a wild power
to do as we think that we may for an instant or hour,
to move a few pieces or particles this way or that
with our particle claws and particle jaws of a Cheshire Cat.

KINDRED SPIRITS

I

The kindred dead have taught me how to sing.
They hover in the wind at night, I say,
and chant in dirges while they're hovering
in readiness to hold my breath away.
I've heard the dead elm's charry branches bend
under the weight of Nobody-at-all,
until a greater ruggedness would rend,
were it desirable to them, and fall.

II

I know they're in my mind—they tell me so—
down deep within the labyrinthine lobes;
they dance and whistle in the wind, I know,
somewhere inside the gray and outer robes.
But they project themselves into my yard
and frolic like the children of their past,
obscene and awful, shrunken up and charred,
that I may see their funeral at last.

III

They fall upon my sleep and, when awake,
they mock me underneath the midnight moon.
They say that I am drowning in the lake,
they tell me I will strangle on a spoon.
I can't so much as take a simple bath
without the water rising to the rim
and looking at me with a look of death,
as though to say, This is the end of him!

IV

What have I done to them? Why torment me?
I know the inner laughter they must feel.
I've seen that bird, reflected in the sea,
that made the Mariner go mad, until
he troubled purity with his sad tale
and dragged the wedding guest down with the dead.
I do not know if I shall rise or fall
or live as something different instead.

METAPHYSICS OF THE BIG WOMAN

The Big Woman is sweeping the floor.
There is dust in the corners, dust
in motes in light at the door
and whirling along the walls.

It has been twenty-four hours
since last she swept the dust;
but, to the dust, being small, it is more,
by some counts, ten billion years.

Quickly, she bends with a rag
and wipes a world from the world:
for all of the dust is shining,
radiant, with light from her source.

UPSTATE STORM

Heavenward, at middle-height,
where the moon is cumbersome,
like a pale breast on the sky,
hanging big, and full of seas,

clouds coagulate, then darken,
curdle, into angry gray;
shed appendages adrift
in the rising, warning wind.

Thus they hover, sheep, above,
turned about by barks of wind
as the baa-waymenting lambs
can be turned about the field

by the windy barks of Dog.
Bent electric lances snap
(violence claps the whirling air),
blasting black a mangled oak

(cedars cinder at a stroke);
thunder echoes over hills,
rolling in the wind beyond
tangled and uprooted trees;

pitchforks fill the lofts with light;
carp-eyed horses leap away;
flooding rivers jump their banks,
drowning lowland cattle, sheep;

and the farm foundation quakes
with the force of wind and rain,
heedless of the life it holds;
cold, indifferent to pain.

REFLECTIONS IN A DOUBTFUL I

Is the peripatetic part of the meaningless goo
this autumn that is being trounced by the rain,
one with the fallen beaten leaves? Camus
and Sartre would insist on seizing pain

by the throat and giving it a throttle,
being that we are all alone with it
like a drunk in a rented room with a bottle
and not a 'toon in which to spit.

Up to us, they would say, to do something about it,
be a "Renegade" or find *No Exit*
or become one's own kind of Mister Fix-it,
but of its ultimate use, I doubt it,

doubt we can do it alone,
doubt it to the bone.

WHAT'S THE MATTER?

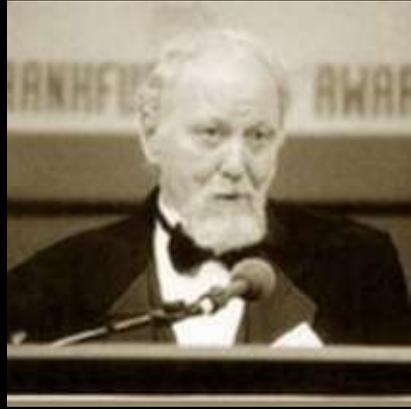
Luv, as our particles impact,
and bounce, as they needs must,
it should be clear, my dear, we are
but dust disturbing dust.

SONNET AT SIXTY-FIVE

*Sixty-five orbits of the sun today
and, though I'm growing tired of this spacesuit,
which rag, as an unhappy by-the-way,
has lost its goggles and at least one boot,
so that I cannot see or even walk
as I once could, and have some trouble hearing,
and toothless too, and tongue-tied, cannot talk
without the noise of cranky broken gearing—*

*where was I?—tired of this spacesuit!—still I
am grateful that I have a suit to wear
at sixty-five, and wouldn't I be silly
if I preferred to lie in earth bone-bare
to orbiting the sun again this year
in this old-fashioned and bedraggled gear?*

E. M. Schorb attended New York University, where he fell in with a group of actors and became a professional actor. During this time, he attended several top-ranking drama schools, which led to industrial films and eventually into sales and business. He has remained in business on and off ever since, but started writing poetry when he was a teenager and has never stopped. His latest collection, *Murderer's Day*, was awarded the Verna Emery Poetry Prize and published by Purdue University Press. Schorb's work has appeared widely in such literary journals as *The Yale Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Chicago Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The American Scholar*.



At the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2000, his novel, *Paradise Square*, was the winner of the Grand Prize for fiction from the International eBook Award Foundation. *Scenario for Scorsese*, his first novel, was also a nominee. He is also the author of *A Fable & Other Prose Poems*, *A Portable Chaos*, *50 Poems*, and *The Poor Boy and Other Poems*.

Schorb has received fellowships from the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center and the North Carolina Arts Council; grants from the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation, the Carnegie Fund, Robert Rauschenberg & Change, Inc. (for drawings), and The Dramatists Guild, among others. He is a member of PEN America, The Authors Guild, the Academy of American Poets, and the Poetry Society of America.

Published by

The NewFormalist Press

<http://newformalistpress.com>