

SELECTED
POEMS
2nd Edition

Nicholas Gordon

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you want a moment of reflection
Or a glimpse of someone's struggles with perfection.
Even greyhounds need a clear, still light
To bring them to the precipice of night.
Rest here, then, where joys and sorrows blend;
Yearning needs no goal and has no end.

Be like a bell, and let me be your tongue:
Your thoughts will toll when I've your passions rung.

Nor can I know what words will strike your ears:
In poems one's life transfigures what one hears.
Clear words contain a silence still as glass,
Horizons as remote as distant brass,
Old meanings darting luminous in pools
Like light caught in the blaze of well-cut jewels.
All this exists like sound without a bell;
So be its instrument, and listen well.

Give my poems the courtesy of space;
Often they need room to show their grace.
Reason works quite wonderfully by day;
Darkness must be grasped another way.
On you the moon, with muted, mirrored beams
Now casts its lace of memories and dreams.

A MOTHER CASTS HER DREAMS INTO THE SEA

A mother casts her dreams into the sea;
We, the words sent bobbing towards the sun,
The eggs of stone, the shards of prophesy.

Because she must conclude her melody
And fall back to the sweet dark hush of One,
A mother casts her dreams into the sea,

Hoping to cross that wild infinity
And on some infant shore again to run,
The eggs of stone, the shards of prophesy

Outside the fiery circle of memory,
The howling surf, the incessant years undone . . .
A mother casts her dreams into the sea

And then dissolves into a tapestry,
Her rolling, helpless drift again begun,
The eggs of stone, the shards of prophesy

Afloat once more upon eternity,
Once more the alien fury, never done . . .
Again, again, her dreams into the sea,
The eggs of stone, the shards of prophesy!

A MOTHER SERVES HER SUGAR

A mother serves her sugar with
A bit of peppermint
To clarify the passages
That carry what she meant

When she first set to bear a soul
Quite separate from her own,
Whom she would cherish, yet must teach
To live and die alone.

A VASE OF FLOWERS IN A WINDOW FRAME

A vase of flowers in a window frame.
A house of gentle light amid dark leaves.
An ecstasy so sharp it feels like anguish,
The pull that makes our beeline an ellipse.

No transcendental morning's inspiration
So ravishes the things we never see.
We hear for all our lives a silent music
To which we dance unknowing in our time.

And even when we die, there is a beauty
Older than the cold December stars,
A part of us that waits behind the darkness
To take us once again into its arms.

AND THOU SHALT LOVE

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All I ever looked for was happiness:
Not for myself, only; also for mine.
Dumbstruck, I learned the futility of being good.

Tell me, how does one get pleasure out of life?
How, when so much engenders pain?
Only maudlin moments of forgetfulness
Unloose the tears that turn the blood to wine.

Simple Simon went into a wood,
Hoping to return his damaged wife.
A drunken druid drove him forth again,
Laughing like a god at his distress:
Take her, fool! For you she'll do just fine!

Longing comes easy in darkness. I should
Open my eyes, turn on the light. A knife,
Viciously twisting, argues for pain.
Eagerly I press on, in fear of nothingness.

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There! Do you see the light
High on that mountain?
Even here there is

Light! Do you see it?
Only darkness. You see
Reflections of dreams. Here
Darkness covers even

Tomorrow. Who can
Hope any longer for light?
Yet there it is! We must

Go towards it, or else—
Or be of those who love
Darkness, luminous darkness . . .

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Wealth isolates, hardship unites.
In darkness people hold hands.
Those only who cry out are comforted.
However we live, death is the same.

And so we come to know Thy name:
Lounging easy in our rights,
Loving only as need demands,

The grace most sought uncelebrated,
Happiness inextricable from shame.
Yet we, too, have known lidless nights.

Hope is not for one who understands.
Even blameless, we are rejected.
All are lost who win the game.
Reason renders only lights.
Those who fear know Thy commands.

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

To appear wise, one must talk;
To be wise, one must listen.

To appear to do good, one must be busy;
To do good, one must know when to stand aside.

To appear to lead, one must put oneself first;
To lead, one must put oneself last.

To appear caring, one must give advice;
To be caring, one must give space.

To appear to love, one must know how to give;
To love, one must know also how to receive.

To appear happy, one must smile;
To be happy, one must be free with tears.

AT EVENING THE BOATS CROWD TOWARDS SHORE

At evening the boats crowd towards shore,
The yachtsmen eager for a night of talk
In bars and cafes, weary of the wind.
At dawn they drift back into the harbor
And sail loosely scattered into the bay.

From shore there is nothing more beautiful:
A schooner moves reluctant with the tide,
Sails taut, yet trailing the current,
Hung as if absorbed in meditation;
Or a sloop leaning into the water,
Ropes groaning, skin cracked in salt and sun—
Why does it do battle with the wind?

In winter, white with moonlight, the harbor
Holds nothing in the darkness of its arms.
The boats await the coming of the yachtsmen,
Who once again will fill the bay with grace.

AT ODDS OF THE NIGHT MY SISTER IRENE AND I

At odds of the night my sister Irene and I
Would count our coins that we might run away,
Stepping off the fated path of pain
That led me to the man whom I would love.

So little do we know of these, our lives,
That lead through dark and bitter labyrinths,
Sometimes to wind through sorrows unrelieved,
Sometimes to turn and climb through sunlit fields.

My mother was shot when I was three years old.
They brought us up to Anchorage to see her.
I don't remember hearing she was dying.
I cried for juice and then was led away.

They took us down to live in Lower Kalskag
With those who didn't care how we might wander
Through the chaos of their junk-strewn days,
Two melodies oft sung but rarely heard.

Often then we thought to run away
To live under the frozen moon and stars
Like faeries in a world of glittering ice,
Tinkling with each breath of polar wind;

Or walking with the freedom of the dead
By daylight in the shadows of the living,
Playing tricks on those whose anger lashed us
With all the passing fury of a storm.

Ah, bitter cold those days in Lower Kalskag!
Love was like an eagle high above us,
Soaring high above our frozen valley
Strewn with pleasure's gnawed and splintered bones.

And life for me exactly was my heart:
A stone grooved deeply by slow-moving ice,
Borne upon an unrelenting glacier
Sliding like a snake towards some vast hell.

Long were I then lost to angry lust
Like those around me, save for two bright angels,
Strangers moved to pity by my suffering,
Who sent me to the Wrangell Institute.

There was a serenity of order
Strict with the insistence of wise love,
And I could be a child once again,
Safe to dream within my castle walls.

And there I met my life's sweet love and light,
The boy who would become my man, my husband,
Whom I'd not have found another way.
And even as two children we knew love.

After Wrangell Institute I headed
Back to Lower Kalskag, for I knew
No other place to wait upon adulthood
When I and my sweet boy could make a home.

I never knew I had an older brother,
Now grown, who met me at the Wrangell airport,
Tore up my ticket, vowed that I would never
Go back to live in such a hell again;

And sent me to my sister in Bethel,
A sister also whom I never knew,
And there I stayed until I finished high school
And joined again the partner of my life.

We walked through rich and lovely fields together,
Filled with children, some who didn't live,
Nor would I choose now to have suffered less
Upon a different path from birth to death.

We cannot know where fate by chance may take us
Or where the road through suffering may lead,
Or whether when we're most submerged in darkness,
Our steps are headed straight into the light.

BARRELING ALONG, I STOPPED AWHILE

Barreling along, I stopped awhile
And made my peace with much I would have changed.
Suddenly I knew not who I was
With everything around me on its knees.

How beautiful! I thought. I think I'll stay.
But I went on, for there was much to do,
Until I crossed a range of inner mountains
And saw below the desert of my dreams.

BECAUSE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN GENERATIONS

Because one hundred and thirteen generations
Of Jews lit candles for eight days and prayed
(No doubt a miracle—flames in empty jars),
Nor could they, spangled abroad like lonely stars,
Inter their music, or cull their recitations,
Each cantillated word is death delayed.

Some memories are miracles: the jars
Empty yet dancing with light, the generations
Touched also by fire, burning like distant stars,
History twinkling in their recitations
Lest words be forgotten and the future die. They
 prayed
On their way naked to the ovens; they prayed
Resting by Babylon's stagnant waters; they delayed
Reeling into memory's end, the empty jars
Aflame with words, afire with recitations,
In words their mountains, their rivers, deserts, stars;
Nations flowing towards silence, the generations
Ebbing into darkness, with candles they delayed . . .

Granted they seem strange. Their recitations
Are as alien as Aztec chants. The empty jars
Burning in the temple, the scattered stars
Returning eagerly each night . . . Whose prayers
 delayed

Interment in darkness? Which sunless soul prayed
Earnestly enough to light the stars?
Long has this love been borne by their generations.

Memories need candles. The recitations
Of children are like black meadows of fragrant stars
Mirroring the eyes of generations.

Eventually memories end: the sightless stars
Like coal dust blown across the darkness, the jars
Like unattended stones . . . God once delayed
Eight days the death of light. The people prayed.
Now night awaits the last of their recitations.

BEFORE CHAOS, THERE WAS PERFECT LIGHT

Before chaos, there was perfect light;
Only light, there was no hint of darkness.
Nor was this moment ever in the past,
Nor can it ever be. Outside time
It simply is. Perfect. Eternal. Pure
Existence. What we, at every moment, are.

Still, we must move downriver. We are
Each, in the end, prepared to turn to pure
Terror at the raging lip of time.
How can we vanish, yet live on in the past?

Life only seems to flow towards darkness:
Open those seams, and you see only light.
Red in the west heralds motion's darkness,
Revealing glories millennia past.
As the Earth spins, so we spin through time;
In gravity's grip, no circle is pure,
No being is Being, yet by being we are
Eternal, forever an instant of light.

Given: that light can only be; that light,
As such, cannot not be; that in time lights are,
But then are not; that nonetheless they are pure
Rays racing far beyond the lips of time,
Infinite, irrevocable; that the past

Exists forever, as such; that darkness
Limits only one's perception of light.

Most experts claim the night is clothed in darkness;
Instinctively, they view the past as past.
Do not assume that what you see in time
Is what appears in visions cold and pure.

Eternal isn't only forever. We are
Living eternally now, fragments of pure
Light—the track, the train, the farmhouse time
Erased. No thing is ever nothing—not the past,
Not loved ones lost, not what we know as darkness.

BEYOND THE MANY MOUTHS

Beyond the many mouths
Of the imagination,
Or dreams,
Which give us words,
Is numbness
Like a wind
Through icy branches,
Or the dead center
Of what we know.
In a stillness
That whispers,
A silence
That rustles
Like dead leaves,
Clacking like branches
In the night,
In the darkness burning,
We cannot look
Upon others
Without compassion,
Or upon ourselves
Without fear.

BONES AND FIRE

Bones and fire,
Fire and bones:
We cannot look!
It will sear our eyes!
Even here is beauty,
The ashes of love.
To see you truly
I would have to die.

CHILDREN WHO DIE ARE NOT REALLY GONE

Children who die are not really gone,
But go to a place that is something like home,
Where they sleep the deep sleep, as quiet as stone,
Until we can join them when our lives are done.

Children who die are not really dead,
But just like good children tucked into bed,
Wait the long wait while we go ahead
Till our tales are all told and our tears are all shed.

Children who die feel no pleasure or pain
In the place where they wait till they see us again,
And all of us dance in a world washed with rain
Where the sun shines so brightly no sorrows remain.

EARLY ON, THERE'S A POINT TO REGRET

Early on, there's a point to regret:
In creative pain, one can make changes.
Grief is a wild, foolish, helpless rebellion,
Heart against stone, desire smashing against
The locked fact, the impenetrable event,
Yielding nothing but the wash back into life.

For one who grieves, there's no point to regret:
One lives through pain, it's not a time for changes,
Undoing in one's heart what one must accept in life,
Repositioning the precise stones one smashes and
smashes against.

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth spends summer afternoons
Leaning over roses and potatoes,
In radiant concentration as she prunes.
Zeno's thoughts are less with her than Plato's
As she snips and clips in steeply slanted light,
Blessed alike by tulips and tomatoes.
Each creature yearns to be, but never quite
Touches what it is, as dissonant tunes
Hover at the silent edge of night.

EVEN THOUGH PASSIONS
ARE COMMON AS RAIN

Even though passions are common as rain,
And we must pass by as God's children are slain,
Smiling while crossing their rivers of pain,
Telling the tale of Christ risen again:
Even as we do our best to stay sane,
Redemption comes only to those who remain.

FOR EVERY ROSE THERE
IS A SEPARATE SPRING

For every rose there is a separate spring.
Orange leaves drift down through separate falls.
Rivers dream their dreams while willows weep,
Though none can tell what beauty it recalls.
Years drain the memories to which we cling.

So do we dance within our separate bubbles
Even as we share a common breeze,
Viewing through a fragile film of troubles
Each miracle a frightened heart might sieze,
Nor dare we touch its stillness, vast and deep.

FOR YOU THE EARTH MUST BE A GREENER GREEN

For you the Earth must be a greener green;
Orange buds must burst with greater glory;
Rivers must be pure, light full of grace,
Time unfold a more enchanting story;
Years must shape a spirit more serene.

To you the birds must sing with more delight;
Hyacinths must pour forth sweeter scent;
Rain must wear more gently, storms retrace
Each devastated path, and harm repent,
Each turbulence turn calm, and sorrow right.

HERE ARE ALL YOUR CHILDREN IN ONE PLACE

Here are all your children in one place,
Enshrined behind some glass within a frame.
A picture's like a word, a sign, a name,
Symbolic of a much more complex grace.
Years of memories lie behind each face,
A wild sea no blessing can contain;
Years and years of love, of joy, of pain,
Of mysteries no heart can hope to trace.
Here are all the objects of your love,
A frozen section cut away from Time,
A summit between dreams and memories,
Which you need only look this way to climb;
An icon for domestic reveries
Through which a thousand answered prayers move.

HERE THERE ARE NO PLATITUDES TO SHARE

Here there are no platitudes to share;
After all these years, no words to measure.
Perhaps such love is more than one can bear;
Perhaps one's joy lies far beyond one's pleasure.
Yet words are merely sluices to the flood
That wells well inland from the graceful wall
Holding in its smile a truth that would
Inundate the bare brown fields of fall.
Remember, then, the beauty that will grow
Till time lets down the curtain of its longing;
Years are fast, but happiness is slow,
For there is no replacement for belonging.
In love there is an ease not easily won,
Freedom from a freedom too undone,
Tears no tears can drain nor words can tell,
Held in a heart that knows its passions well.

HOW DOES LOVE MATURE INTO A GARDEN

How does love mature into a garden?
A wild field, of course, need not be wed.
Pure pleasure tends the softest soil to harden;
Perhaps the heart requires that tears be shed.
Yearning blooms when it becomes a song,
A melody that savors its own beauty;
Nor will requited passion linger long
Not stroked from time to time by naked duty.
In gardens one defines where nature ends;
Vividly one wills the world to be.
Each swath of loveliness on love depends,
Restored each day to passion one can see.
Sing, then, of sweet desire turned to love,
And of the grace that does all lovers move,
Renewing in your song each day the vow
You never made more willingly than now.

HOW MUCH CAN ONE PERSON LOVE ANOTHER

How much can one person love another?
A universe exists in time and space,
Placed within the boundaries of one place,
Pressed into a point far from forever.
Yet love comes to us from some quite other,
Visiting our sorrow with its grace,
Answering our rage with its embrace,
Lending us the wisdom of its wonder.
Even as I say this, you are there,
Nestling in where need undoes the day,
Taking up your small infinity.
Inside my window, you are everywhere,
Nor could I tell how much such love might weigh,
Even were it salient as the sea.

HOW OFTEN DO WE LINGER

How often do we linger in
The vestibule of life,
Not ready to embrace the soul
We've taken for a wife?

Nor bear the dread oblivion
Of being who we are?
Nor render well our willing part
When we are not the star?

Ah, Valentine! This day of love
Behold what you have wrought!
And seek within the love you have
The love you long have sought.

For love loves not illusion,
Demanding what is true:
That underneath your greed and lust
You need her love for you.

HOWEVER SWEET THE AIR OR GREEN THE SEA

However sweet the air or green the sea,
At times I shut myself within my room:
Perhaps I've failed to pierce the dream of me;
Perhaps I've let my mind become my tomb.
Yet when Creation hangs upon my breath,
Apocalypse advances with my age:
No happiness can compensate for death
Nor pleasure overwhelm my bitter rage.
In my love for you there is a field of flowers
Vaster than all the galaxies of night;
Each moment holds a sea of restless hours,
Replacing time with hills of laughing light.
So may we long be given this sweet grace
And love the child within the aging face;
Render the world upon the scrim of mind,
Yet glimpse through love the mystery behind.

I HATE YOU, DAD, FOR WHAT YOU DID

I hate you, Dad, for what you did
To me when I was just a child,
A helpless thing whom you could beat
Until the excess bile was drained.

To me, when I was just a child,
You were God unmerciful
Until the excess bile was drained
And you were once again my friend.

You were God unmerciful,
And I was Satan, Lord of Hell,
Until you were again my friend
And curdled my last drops of love.

And I was Satan, Lord of Hell,
A helpless thing whom you could beat
Until you curdled all my love.
I hate you, Dad, for what you did.

I NEVER WANTED TO INVADE

I never wanted to invade
The forest of a friend.
I never meant to plant myself
Beyond where I might end.

But there it was—I wandered in—
And seized a wild field,
And turned its berries into corn,
And took what it would yield.

Years later, we would often walk
Out to the boundary line,
And picnic where the fence once stood
That marked off what was mine.

I WANTED NOTHING LESS THAN HOPE

I wanted nothing less than hope,
But, relishing despair,
I plunged into the nearest hell
And spent some weekends there.

I saw no answers on the walls,
No rebirth in the rain,
No saving grace in suffering,
No rapture born of pain.

What held me there? It must have been
The jackal, crazed and lean,
Who took my face between his paws
And, hungry, picked it clean.

IF ALL WERE NOW AS IT WAS WHEN

If all were now as it was when
Christ came to save us all,
And Christmas Day were Christmas Day,
Not some day we recall;

And in the East we saw a star
Exceptionally bright,
And wondered what was going on
That ordinary night;

If God were walking in our midst,
Saying what He said,
And we were not His followers,
But trod where He would tread;

And we were witness to His word
And looked Him in the eye,
And found His message interesting
But too bizarre to buy;

If we were in Jerusalem
And watched Him bear the cross,
And suffered with His suffering
But feared to share His loss;

And saw Him die in agony,
And wondered at it all,
And this were something we ourselves,
Not printed books, recall;

What would be the difference,
Had we known Him that way,
Between the faith we feared to feel
And what we fear today?

IN HEAVEN I MET KARL MARX

In Heaven I met Karl Marx.
Lenin was there, too, Stalin,
And Hitler along with Jesus Christ.
There was no Hell.
I asked Karl to explain the justice in this arrangement.
He said there was no way of measuring
The good in a person's life.
He admitted that he had been wrong
About history and some other things
And expressed regret about all
Who'd been slaughtered in his name.
Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin did, too,
Along with Jesus Christ,
Who was sad that more than any
Had been broken and burned for him.
All said it was a consequence
Of being so sure they were right.
None of them made excuses.
Ilyich did not blame Josef,
Adolph did not plead madness,
Neither Karl nor Jesus balanced
The bad with the good they had done.
Instead they seemed at peace
Completely with what had been,
In a clarity of repose
That seemed quite perfect for Heaven.

IN MEMORY OF THOSE WHO DIED

In memory of those who died
We weep and walk away.
Tears run into swollen streams.
No trace of us remains.

Even those who grieve are gone,
And those that grieve who grieve,
And those whose lives are ravaged by
A frantic urge to be,

And those who wander silently
Among the empty rooms:
Immortality is theirs,
Though they must vanish, too.

We bear astonished witness to
The passage of the soul.
No bridge exists that can connect
Our passion to the whole.

INTENT ON GIVING BIRTH

Intent on giving birth, I made
A sidetrip to L.A.
And could not make it back because
I'd never been away.

“I didn't want . . . I never meant . . .”
But what would I have gained?
I was where I had always been,
And, barren, I remained.

IT'S AS IF WE WERE RIDING IN A SEALED RAILROAD CAR

It's as if we were riding in a sealed railroad car.
Life passes by unseen.
Then someone throws open the door.
In the fierce sunlight we sense joy
But cannot clearly see.
How beautiful! we murmur, weeping,
Our tears like music.
Why haven't we known this all along?
In an open field we dance
Under sun and moon and stars all together.
You press my hand. You say:
I can't believe it!
I can't believe life has always been so lovely!
I tell you, my darling,
I tell you now, yes!
Yes, it is, my darling,
Yes. It is.

LAST JUNE MY PARENTS GOT DIVORCED

Last June my parents got divorced. So now
I see my dad on weekends. My best
Friend. My good angel. So anyhow,
He lives with his girlfriend, and I'm his weekend guest.
It works out 'cause I love her and her three
Boys. But my mom says I can't go there
Weekdays 'cause my grades will slip. Really.
But she's got rights, and I don't have a prayer.
Why is it parents have the right to split
When they have kids? Why don't they have to wait?
Why are they so free to choose, while it
Becomes our job to learn to bear our fate?
Right now right through my heart there runs a wall
That I did not erect, as I recall.

LAST NIGHT, TODAY, TONIGHT I'VE THOUGHT OF YOU

Last night, today, tonight I've thought of you,
Your fear of loving me, your fear of pain,
My own reluctance soon to love again,
And why we often flee what we pursue.
I've thought: if we could make time disappear,
Prune past and future, make the moment flower,
Lobotomize all save this single hour,
Then we could love with neither hope nor fear.
But when we pause to watch the moment flow,
Beneath we see eternity and space,
So thin a moving film is time and place,
Removing us, and all we love and know.
I cannot but anticipate the end:
Desire a lover, yet fear to lose a friend.

LATER ON, IN THE LANGUOR OF THE MARRIED

Later on, in the languor of the married,
Each comfortably alone because together,
Sleep lies just offshore, its blanket carried
Towards you like bliss in gentle weather.
Easy hours, moonlit, open pages
Read peacefully, their dissonance suspended,
As a child's cry moves silently through stages,
Now piercing, now remote, but never ended.
Do you, can you know how love has fashioned
Choice and chance as weather shapes the land?
Life reveals few secrets so impassioned
As those which long-term lovers understand.
Revel, then, serenely, as the night
Enfolds the meditative dust of light.

LET ME BE THE BANDAGE FOR YOUR BLEEDING

Let me be the bandage for your bleeding;
Let me be the ocean for your tears.
Let me be the secret of your healing;
Let me be the song to still your fears.

Love isn't love that cannot love in darkness,
Nor is it love that turns away from pain;
Nor would I love would I not hold your sadness
And with my love your love of life sustain.

So do not think your malady a burden,
And do not think my willingness deceit.
Just let your sorrow flow into my garden,
And I will share with you the harvest sweet.

LIFE IS CHANGING FOR US NOW

Life is changing for us now,
But never how I feel for you.
I can love a man and still
Not love you any less.

Love is not like bread or gold:
Just so much and then no more;
One gets this and one gets that,
And then there's nothing left.

Love is much more like the sun,
Which shines on one or more the same.
The light it gives to someone else
Takes none from you away.

I love you with a love just like
The light of which God made all things,
Made earth and heaven, tears and stars,
Of which my bones are made.

LITTLE DO YOU KNOW
HOW MUCH YOU LOVE ME

Little do you know how much you love me,
For there can be no faith without desire.
Little does your pleasure feel the fire
That burns beneath your cool avoidance of me.
You know no ease or ecstasy above me,
No balm so rich in all that you require,
No breast so full on which you may expire,
Satisfied that in your joy you've moved me.
My love for you is such that I will wait
Until in pain or passion you turn towards me,
Full of need that needs my knowing art.
My yearning for your love will not abate,
Though not one single word or thought rewards me,
And I must dwell unnoticed in your heart.

LOOSE CHANGE

Loose change (was that lose change?)
Spends easy. Like favors.
Like mornings or afternoons.
Time is easier than touch,
Being there easier than being.
How often, unthinking,
Do I spend a yes
To avoid breaking me?

LOVE IS NEVER VAGUE OR GENERAL

Love is never vague or general:
It's all about thin fingers and fat toes.
What makes someone attractive no one knows,
But all know that it isn't rational.

There is a chemistry, some catalyst:
A scent, a lilt of voice, a social grace,
Some subtle hint impossible to trace,
Fit fodder for a gentle satirist.

But passion is, of love, merely the seed:
It's love itself that most engenders love.
And here again, mysteries silent move,
Shifting darkly where there is most need.

Love is about a casual caress,
A patient silence in which souls can dance,
An obvious, clumsy gesture towards romance,
A comfort zone where long, hard days undress.

It's all about the richness of a night
In which two lovers work to keep the glow:
The feel of skin, the way a tongue moves slow,
The thousand tiny things that make things right.

LOVE MEANS MORE WHEN LIFE IS HARD

Love means more when life is hard
And choices lead to sacrifice,
And every passion has its price
In duties paid and windows barred.

Though I have loved for many years,
Love is still for me a spring
That will from stone sweet fragrance bring,
And make a garden of our tears.

The love of children, children's children,
Flowing to the distant verge,
Flowing from the ancient urge
To make a home of wilderness,

Has been my joy, my inner dance
Of ecstasy, as day by day
I move the mountains in my way
And claim through love the gifts of chance.

LOVE'S A STREAM THAT KNOWS NO BORDERS

Love's a stream that knows no borders,
Passports, visas, lengths of stay,
Laws and papers, rules and orders:
All these lies it sweeps away.

Love knows no color, race, or creed,
Spilling over states at will,
Submerging memory in need,
Drowning walls in waters still.

No bar can block it as it flows,
Tumbling towards eternity,
Gathering wisdom as it goes,
Yearning for our common sea.

MYTHS ARE HOPES REFRACTED THROUGH OUR PAIN

Myths are hopes refracted through our pain:
Each ray of justice bends into a bow
Resplendent, pure, symmetrical, and sane,
Resolving into grace the world we know.
Yes, God walked among us out of love;
Christ suffered terribly that we might live;
His holy spirit watches, as a dove
Remains aloft, to witness and forgive.
In love the earth returns a special fire:
Sapphires linger in disheveled grass;
The snow burns eagerly; the blood runs higher;
Mountains melt into astonished brass.
All who love revere this sacred art,
Stunned and weeping at joy's battered heart.

NEVER DO THE CLOUDS CONVEY THE WEATHER

Never do the clouds convey the weather
In my heart. The Earth can teem with storms!
As long as you still love me, sunshine reigns.
Highs and lows, sweet days, and hurricanes:
All can come and go as my heart warms.
Don't I dance inside when we're together?

Give me your hand and let the long days slide.
Underneath them you will find our love.
Years accumulate like driven snow;
Happiness remains all snug below.
Know though stars may stop and mountains move,
I will sing my passion by your side.

NINETY-TWO

Ninety-two sits quaintly in a garden,
Intent on living through the awesome day.
No sunshine is direct, but through the trees
Enough is dappled by the gentle breeze
To sing of glory in a muted way.
Yet time itself can sometimes be a burden.

The hours sway like dancers, slow and wanton,
While thoughts flit through the roses as they please,
Open-armed and lithe yet loathe to stay.

ONE NIGHT I SAW AARON

One night I saw Aaron,
The next he was dead.
Now I can't remember
The last thing he said.

There is no reason,
No reason at all,
Why this one last thing
I need to recall.

The last night I saw him,
He, Mark, and I,
I had no idea
He was going to die.

It was just the usual
Basketball game,
Joking and cheering,
All just the same.

The Earth should have screamed,
Some song should have played,
Some mark should have told us,
All gross and decayed.

But the game simply ended
And we left the gym.
And that was the last
I'll see of him.

PASSION'S A PRELIMINARY PLEASURE

Passion's a preliminary pleasure,
An introduction to the themes of love.
Some mistake it for the greater treasure,
Sustaining it by keeping on the move.
In beginning time and time again,
One finds oneself the centerpiece, and then
None else can of one's heart the object prove.

PATIENCE IS A SIGN
OF INNER PEACE

Patience is a sign of inner peace,
Acceptance of the gift of life and death.
Though time may toll the passing of each breath,
In time one takes the measure of one's lease.
Each moment holds its small infinity,
Neither more nor less than that of years.
Clouds can tear down mountains with their tears,
Even as winds churn the changeless sea.

PRETEND THERE WERE
NO MEMORIES

Pretend there were no memories,
Each generation on its own.
So would miracles and crimes
Alike be lost to their own times.
Crazed witnesses would on their knees
Haunt desperately our doors of stone.

RAPING ME WAS FUN FOR HIM

Raping me was fun for him.
After, he asked me how I liked it.
Perhaps he already lived in a cell,
Ex-communicated, soul-deaf.
I told him and he laughed, stroked me.
So? He was boss. On top.
A woman wanted that, no?
Crying, crying, I said nothing.
Rape was a wound across my sky.
I saw blackness beyond the blue.
My life was twisted, like those girders
Earthquakes throw brutally to the ground.
After such helplessness, what hope?
Going on with my life in blackness,
A black sky, black rage in my heart,
In my mind an endless blackness,
Nothing within me but blackness
Screamed at the boy no longer there,
The screams like walls I took with me,
The walls of screams protecting me,
How could I love without seeing?
Even so, the light pierced me,
Shattering the cell of fury,
Opening my heart again
Under a new sun, once more
Laughing in the chill of fear.

REGARDING MARRIAGE: WHOSE IDEA WAS THIS?

Regarding marriage: Whose idea was this?
Isn't each poor shimmering star alone?
Can a nimble munchkin alter at the altar
His/her belief that his/her soul is his/her own?
Is a former frog to die in bit and halter,
Ever disenchanted with a kiss?

A star spins slowly through a field of bliss,
No motion save what does all motion alter,
Dependent on the love of every stone.

Just so are we the music of a psalter
Unknowing, moved by melodies we miss.
Didn't the maid move blindly towards that kiss?
Yet happily they wed, as is well known.

REMEMBER, TOO, THE HOLY MONTH OF FASTING

Remember, too, the holy month of fasting.
Absorb the word of God like burning sand.
Make yourself through prayer a single yearning,
A single breath of faith, a single turning,
Dawn to dusk a diamond in God's hand.
A moment of pure faith is everlasting,
Nor need one know aught else to understand.

RIGHTEOUSNESS REMAINS THE ROCK OF FAITH

Righteousness remains the rock of faith,
As what one does sustains what one believes.
Mere hypocrites might pray, the Prophet saith;
Actions must be words the heart conceives.
Do, then, what acts and rituals are due,
As faith becomes a flame that feeds on you,
No less than as a fire consumes dry leaves.

RULES OF A SKEPTIC

1. Don't let what you think get in the way of what you see.
2. Don't let what you see determine what you think, for appearances are deceptive.
3. Be omnivorous in your tastes.
4. The only way to see something whole is from several points of view.
5. The closer you come to reality, the more it is a mystery, and the more unimaginable it is that you or anything else exists.
6. The only truth is in scrupulous satisfaction over time.
7. Develop principles that you are willing to abandon, but not easily.
8. When anything is too sacred to joke about, the cause is fear.
9. If you are skeptical of faith and reason, what is left as a basis for decision? Everything, so long as you are prepared to be wrong.
10. Death is the sunlight that makes all things visible.

SARAH

Sarah knows precisely what she wants
And doesn't have a clue to what she needs.
Revising all the journals of her heart,
A modern woman springs from what she reads,
Her faces alien to the ghosts she haunts.

SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE I WAS TO DIE

Several days before I was to die
A white dove flew into my garden.
It had one black spot on its tail,
As if a drop of ink had soiled
Its purity. It looked at me
As birds do: head sideways,
Neck twisted, almost upside down;
Then went the other way, fluttered,
Cooed, straightened, and stared at me
With more than human stillness. Our eyes
Met, and I felt some understanding
Pass between us, as if it sensed
I was to die and felt compassion.
And then I knew that I would live.

Weeks after my miracle
The dove returned, nesting near me,
An ordinary bird. Of course
I hold it dear. But who lived in
Its eyes? Whose compassion sent
The silent thoughts that turned my will?
I know my own imagination
May have spoken through the bird,
Lifting me from death. But surely
What we'll never understand
Far surpasses what we know.

The dove knows more than we. And I,
Returned from death, am like a boulder
Lifted up and left upon the shore
By some majestic wave.

SHE HARBORED NO ILLUSIONS

She harbored no illusions.
She knew the winter's tale.
On and on the fragile boat
Sailed among the stars.

She managed without hope
But could not part with dreams,
And so as land approached she wept
And drank the bitter sea.

SO DID YOU DIE OF HISTORY

So did you die of history,
Each innocent of dogma dead,
Purloined to play in some fool's head
The drama of his destiny.
Even in your hapless herds,
Miracles to men unmoved,
Being loved as you were loved,
Even then you were but words.
Reason seeks what reason knows.
Each alone must bridge the gulf,
Loving all as if oneself,
Else blood with reason endless flows.
Vanquished, you must still live on,
Each murdered soul a monument,
Nor what you mean be what you meant,
The private to the public gone,
Held long as letters carved in stone.

SOCIETY IS YOU AND ME

Society is you and me.
Everyone's a piece of they.
Very much of what we do
Ends up as words that others say.
No I exists except as we,
Though he and she are part of you;
Each pronoun's only partly true,
Each life becomes another's way.
No one alone can simply be.

SOLE PROPRIETOR AND ONLY INMATE

Sole proprietor and only inmate.
Even so, there are gardens I haven't
Visited, rivers I bathed in too
Early for dreams. I wander among
Names, reveries long pressed into my album,
Too precise to be anything but words,
Yet behold a watermill I've never seen.

Seldom is a garden inarticulate.
Even the Earth, like a good patient,
Vividly seductive on the couch, dreams
Exactly as the therapist suggests.
Nor do I hope to learn who tends my peonies.

SOME ARE PICKED FOR PLEASURE, SOME FOR PAIN

Some are picked for pleasure, some for pain;
Some for pity, others for perfection.
Some are unfortunate, and so remain,
While some seem chosen for the gods' affection.

Some lose limbs or sanity or joy,
Stranded on the road from birth to death;
Some find all the world in their employ,
Riding through rich fields, the lords of breath.

But all are souls, and therefore lost at sea,
Lost, lost, and drowning in eternal grace;
And all must suffer the same agony
And vanish into time without a trace.

And all are loved, and lavished well with love,
And live within a love serene and good.
Fate may cruel or expeditious prove,
Yet one may dwell in glory if one would.

SOMETIMES I WISH I WERE A WALL

Sometimes I wish I were a wall
Upon which you could hang your pain—
To see it so, to know its beauty,
Bond of yearning, bearing love.

Pain is color, in between
Desire and death, white and black;
Light's most lovely at the dawn,
And then, again, approaching night.

Sometimes I wish that I could kiss
The world and take away all pain,
Feel it all, for everyone,
And then go mad to prove I'm real.

But love continues, as does pain,
And death engenders both, for aye,
And the river murmurs ceaselessly
Around the bend on which we live.

SOMETIMES WHEN YOU'RE MARRIED

Sometimes when you're married
You drift away within.
Outside you stroll together;
Inside you live in sin.

A rich imagination
Provides your ecstasy,
A cordless, mobile heaven
Where everything is free.

The garden that you tend
Is not the one you roam;
The part of you that sings
Is not the one at home.

A strange and burning life:
What's real is not what's true.
And no one knows the passion
That you believe is you.

And so you are distracted,
Two people in a jar,
Bound by love and fate,
Yet never what you are

Until by chance life rips
A hole right through your wall,
And nothing you've imagined
Looks like you at all.

SUPINE BUT UNYIELDING

Supine but unyielding
She undisposed lay,
Ready for pleasure,
Unready for play.

The point was relentless,
The orgasm long,
The aftermath ugly,
The aftertaste strong.

Driven by need
She opened her pelt,
Too angry and bitter
To open herself.

And so the rage rotates,
And so the world turns:
The love that one risks
Is the love that one earns.

SUPPLICATION

Let me hold you
In arms like strong winds,
Enfold you with mountains,
Be the warm meadow on which you lie.

In the darklight
Let me hold you
In sleepless flesh,
In wordless flesh
Let me be your silence.

And when you leave me
Let me hold you
With the love of those who love you,
And be the air and sunlight
And the sea in which you dream.

THANK YOU FOR BEING
THE LOVE OF MY LIFE

Thank you for being the love of my life,
Half of the child asleep in my womb,
A husband whose husbandry made of his wife
Near as blissful a blossom as ever did bloom!
Knight of my nights and dance of my days,
Yours are the eyes in which I am most me.
Only with you will I wend through my ways
Unburdened as heaven, unscathed as the sea!

THE APARTMENT IS DARK

The apartment is dark.
I like it that way.
Through unshaded windows
I look across the street.
People there have lights on.
I see them through curtains.
A muscular young man
Washes dishes with his wife.
A woman drinks beer
In the blue light of TV.
On the top floor a mother,
A daughter, a daughter:
Three without men.
Next door an old couple
Smothers the fear
Of who will die first.
In a singles bar
I meet a woman
And have nothing to say.
Too many times
I have said the same things.
I watch here in darkness,
In the peace of aloneness,
And think about me,
And think about you.

THE GREATEST SATISFACTION COMES

The greatest satisfaction comes
From wanting what is ours.
Desire is a gift, turning
Sentences to song.

There is a liberation in
The loveliness of flowers.
The miracles most commonplace
Are those for which we long.

How beautiful such longing is!
The vivid heart of life,
The hunger for what cannot be,
But is and must be true.

How wonderful I cannot stop,
Even as your wife,
From wanting, needing, yearning for
The love I have from you.

THE MOUNTAINS SEEM AS DISTANT AS THE YEARS

The mountains seem as distant as the years:
How could my heart remain so far away?
I walk within my words, but even there,
Roiling inside, the nameless play,
Thrashing through the net of thought like tears,
Yielding silent music to the air.

The past seems no more real to me than dreams:
How could my eyes not see what they have seen?
Reality is prose, yet even there,
Each sentence is far more than I can mean,
Each word more overfull than swollen streams.

THE MURDEROUS MIDDLE CLASS

The murderous middle class has no
Hard evidence of harm.
Each paddles round the cubicle,
Maintained by what goes on.

Unburdened by communion with
Romantic harmonies
Discerned by a too-willing heart,
Each dreams of grace and ease.

Reason serves the scavengers, while
Only nightmares tell,
Unspeakable, the evils wrought
So they might thrive in hell.

Middle classes mind the store,
Indentured to the wind,
Demanding nothing but their due,
Decent, honest, kind.

Little do they contemplate,
Entrapped in loss and gain,
Canticles of misery
Lamenting lifelong pain.

As they consume, they wonder why
So many others have to die,
Strangled in their name.

THE WIND THE RIVER ROILS WELL

The wind the river roils well
And rocks like shells the boats offshore.
Reeds and cattails thrash and turn
As willows loose their streaming hair.

Soon the storm shall strip them bare
And wash downstream the whiplike ferns.
The river past its banks shall pour
And misery reduce to hell.

So do we all await the power
That rises with the rising wind.
The air electric sings of woe,
And darkness like a dirge descends.

Well do we know our fate depends
On more than we will ever know.
Nor will nor prayer that fate rescinds
Though grace attends each anxious hour.

THERE IS A RESIDUE OF HOPE

There is a residue of hope
In every act of grief,
A beauty at the source of pain,
A truth that brings relief.

Mourning is a morning song
Sung just before the light,
Though little else is visible
To those that watch the night.

And all our tears must turn to grass,
And all our sorrows be
But dissonance that we'll resolve
In some new harmony.

And all our pain must shine upon
The meadows of our grace
That you might share our happiness
And lend our light your face.

Ah, Father! Yes, the music plays
As we dance in the sun,
For dawn returns the joy of life,
And we must all dance on.

Ah, Father! Yes, we must dance on
And leave you far behind,
Though love undo the dying day
And comb the rising wind.

THERE IS NO DARKNESS IN YOU

There is no darkness in you:
Heaven is filled with ancient light.
In each a righteous fury,
Rational words, a murderous jury,
The painful, patient pursuit of right.
Years gather, hesitate, swirl, plunge through you . . .

THERE IS WITHIN MY HAPPENSTANCE

There is within my happenstance
An unshed innocence,
Not rare among those buttercups
Whose sun is fueled by shame.

No matter what the circumstance,
My heart must hie me hence,
For all the quince of Nottingham
Is squandered in my name.

Extant there are no photographs
Of who or what I am,
For they were in the sandwiches
We ate one moonlit night.

Instead my mirror must reveal
The marmaladed ham
That lies upon the tabletop
And stuffs itself with light.

Ay, me! What might I do that might
Undo my unfelt pain?
My life must gorge on life, and yet
I sorrow for my mice.

Ay, me! The cherubs hunger as
My goods are shipped by plane.
And I must dance with polar bears
Across the shrinking ice.

TIME DIMINISHES WHAT WE REQUIRE

Time diminishes what we require.
What pain teaches, we learn perfectly.
Each builds a shore around his sea of gladness,
Not losing hope, nor giving way to madness,
Tougher without, within a little shyer,
Yearning always, but settling reasonably.

Often, though, we turn to lovely sadness,
Not willing to let go what we desire,
Even though we want what cannot be.

TO LIVE IS TO BE PREY

To live is to be prey. Meals for microbes.
Horror hangs in the blood like a barracuda
As packs of ravenous viruses howl at the moon.
No flesh is but food. Fierce hunger waits at the
 crossings
Knowing nothing but lust for the taste of our gristle,
Singing hallelujahs to the Lord.
Give thanks, then, too, for the gift of robust hunger;
In humble gratitude, for the legacy of lust.
Vividly we live and die, our suffering
In perfect harmony with our feeding frenzy;
Nor can we be else but both murderers and murdered,
Grateful for the unsought grace of being.

TODAY'S AN OCEAN WHICH YOU SAIL FOREVER

Today's an ocean which you sail forever;
Winds forever carry you away.
Eden always lies somewhere behind,
Nor can you turn your vessel to the wind,
Though memory must memories betray.
Years break like waves across the bow of ever.

Fortune's the horizon, giving way,
Open endlessly to your endeavor,
Unreachable as it, nor cruel nor kind,
Retreats before the vastness of the day.

TOUGH AND LOVELY

Tough and lovely, to see my child gain
What personality she will assume,
Each bit and gesture worked on year by year,
No stopping till the character is clear.
Tough and lovely, to see the child remain
Yet underneath the mask that is her doom.

Only slowly does the child disappear,
Not needing me to kiss away all pain,
Entering alone the darkened room.

UNDERSTAND DEATH HAS
NO USE FOR TIME

Understand death has no use for time.
No time is any better, any worse.
Cancel twenty years or eighty-nine,
Love's a loss one cannot reimburse.
Each of us lives for an eternity,
Dying only after our forever.
Early or late, we vanish equally,
All unconscious of the ties we sever,
No longer either separate or together.

UNDO ME, MY GARMENTS
ARE IN PAIN

Undo me, my garments are in pain.
Now I must crawl naked to your heart.
Can I not find there a place to lie?
Lovers' kisses linger when they part.
Even so, I shall with you remain.

Life's not flesh, nor does it end with death.
Its force, still radiant, fills each empty place.
Gone the star, the light still strikes the eye;
Gone the flesh, the soul retains its grace.
Your life, your love, your joy—these are my breath.

WHERE DID YOU GO, MY LOVELY ONES

Where did you go, my lovely ones?
Where did you go, my babies?
Where did you come from, where did you go,
My gentlemen and ladies?

Where are you now, my lovely ones?
Where are you now, my babies?
I sing to you, but do you hear,
My gentlemen and ladies?

Where can I turn, my lovely ones?
Where can I turn, my babies?
I cannot live, I cannot die,
My gentlemen and ladies.

WHERE DO WE GO

Where do we go when we go to a place
That simply is no place at all?
When we step out of time to become nothing more
Than a memory few can recall?

How can we be when we no longer are?
Or, earlier, not yet have been?
A bit of eternity sits in our souls
Though we live in the house of the wind.

Consciousness comes like a stranger to call,
Both us and yet something quite more.
Where it may come from and where it may go
Is a wonder behind a locked door.

YOU ARE THE ROSE ABOUT TO BLOOM

You are the rose about to bloom,
The color soon to wake,
The perfume set to scent the breeze,
The bud about to break.

You stand upon the lip of time
Alight with what will be,
And see yourself out to the sky
Across the open sea.

We see you vertically, a gift
Too beautiful to plumb,
And treasure all the years you were
And all the years to come.

