

NUMBER POEMS
2nd Edition

Nicholas Gordon

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Published 2007

Printed by CafePress.com in the United States of America

ONE

One is like the first fish from the sea:
Near crazy with delight merely to be,
Each stone or star an equal mystery.

TWO

Two is happy to be happy,
Wondering at so much wonder,
Overjoyed at simply joy.

THREE

Three year olds have friends grownups call toys:
Honey-colored bears with grumpy eyes,
Raggedy Anns whose smiles smother cries,
Elfin princesses and rag-tag boys,
Each doing what friends do with tears and joys.

FOUR

Four year olds are children of the sky:
Opening to mystery and light,
Understanding sorrow and delight,
Racing towards the farthest reach of why.

FIVE

Five year olds are children of the shore:
In a wash of letters, sounds, and words,
Viewing them like small, web-footed birds,
Entranced and frightened by their hungry roar.

SIX

Six begins the road to sixty-five:
Inducted and seduced into the hive,
Xeroxing the frenzy to survive.

SEVEN

Seven is an age of right and wrong;
Each choice is shaped to fit its proper slot;
Vacancies have partners that belong
Exactly in their customary spot;
Nor would a truth dare be what it's not!

EIGHT

Eight year olds have fantasies of power:
In space or castles old, or under sail,
Grappling against darkness they prevail.
However foul the night or bleak the hour,
Troll-spirits wake, and dream a hero's tale.

NINE

Nine is an age when children like to lie:
Instantly, the world is rearranged!
Nothing is the same, and nothing's changed,
Except an angel waves one last goodbye.

TEN

Ten is time to tell a different story:
Early dreams turn grey and lose their glory;
Now teens are queens, and bears are history.

ELEVEN

Eleven is a lovely, slender tree,
Leaves fluttering like bright green butterflies.
Each root is tuned to murmurs in the skies,
Veering deep dark down deliciously.
Even as the root winds towards its lair,
New winds caress the sapling's long green hair.

TWELVE

Twelve stands in the lobby of a grand hotel
Wondering which way to adult bliss.
Each imagined pleasure soon will flower;
Love paces anxiously in some dark hour;
Vacant dreams await a fairy's kiss.
Each corridor runs where cruel angels dwell.

THIRTEEN

Thirteen is a very lucky age!
Happiness comes tumbling out the door
Instantly a-giggle with a friend,
Returning with the bounce of empty bliss.
There's no better ecstasy than this,
Even when the strange teen changes end,
Even when one finally knows the score.
No time of life's more bubbly than this stage.

FASHION FOR YOURSELF A PERFECT MIRROR

Fashion for yourself a perfect mirror
On which to gaze when you are quite alone.
Undertake to view yourself completely,
Resisting being more than passive eyes.
There is serenity in merely seeing,
Even when the object is your own,
Even when you notice pride or loathing,
Not avoiding anything but lies.

FOR YOU LIFE OUGHT
TO BE A SILVER DANCER

For you life ought to be a silver dancer:
In moonlight, starlight, dancing through your heart.
For you the dream of beauty should be burning,
Trembling with the passion of your yearning,
Even as your days may come apart;
Even as you rummage for an answer,
Not knowing that it lies within your art.

SIXTEEN

Sixteen is intent on being lovely,
Immersed in the sweet rivers of her day,
X-ing out the chubby childhood ways
That I must cherish now in memory only.
Even as time steals the time away,
Each moment is a gift I treasure dearly,
Nor would I for my love the time delay.

SEVENTEEN

Seventeen pounds heavy in the bass
Exactly ten feet from the danger sign.
Vandals had less chaos-lust than these
Ecstatic children of our mores and malls.
Now they tumble, burning, molten steel
To their molds like white-hot waterfalls,
Empty, plunging hearts too sheer to freeze
Each time the lights go on, the worlds align,
No wall of sound across one's ravaged face.

EIGHTEEN

Eighteen is a windswept borderline:
In a moment, gates forever closed.
Gulf of dreams behind the vanished child,
Halfway round the corner of her smile.
The change flaps in the breeze, but in a while
Each motion turns to dance, each gesture wild
Eventually is placed, positioned, posed:
No leaping for sheer joy but by design.

NO MORE FAVORS, PLEASE

No more favors, please!
I'm already choked with people,
Nice people, sweetly moved,
Expecting themselves in the mirror.
Time to look at your watches,
Ease yourselves into lounges,
Enjoy the quiet of taking,
No more intrusive than trees.

TWENTY

Twenty is a time for dreaming;
Wishes are the dark myth's moon.
Each dimple in the darkness gleaming,
Night provides its tragic tune,
Though mist and ease must vanish soon.
Youth flies by, its passions streaming.

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.

TWENTY-TWO

Twenty-two's the edge of the abyss:
Welfare over, Medicaid to end.
Each waif must wander henceforth on her own,
Not wholly, but essentially alone,
There being need to earn what one would spend.
Years of dreaming have come down to this:

The sculpting of the self in selfless stone,
Working by the light of one's own bliss,
On which, like nothing else, one can depend.

TRUTH IS JUST THE OPPOSITE OF SENSE

Truth is just the opposite of sense:
What we know will lift, eventually, like fog.
Each paradox is like a shining face
Nodding vacantly across a room.
The only source of thought is innocence,
Yet we must wear the colors of the wog.

The signature of arrogance is grace:
How can we know, except that we presume?
Reason robs the soul of nutrients:
Each heart constructs its own bright carapace;
Each mystery divides within its womb.

THE CENTER STAGE IS EMPTY

*The center stage is empty. Stage right
We see THE YOUNG MAN, only partially
Emerged from shadow, staring at bright
Nothingness. Stage left, in dimmer light, stand
THE MOTHER and THE FATHER, separately,
Yearning for something they no longer feel.*

For us there seems little to understand:
Ordinary movement through darkness and light.
Underneath, however, all moves vertically,
Reaching for more than life can reveal.

TWENTY-FIVE

Twenty-five has come into her own,
Wise enough to winnow what she dreams.
Even in the landscape of her face
No destination but has found its place,
Though growing up is harder than it seems.
Yearnings do not die through will alone.

For now there is a firmness in her tone
Indicative of some internal grace
Vividly attentive in its space,
Elegant and certain what it means.

TWENTY-SIX

Twenty-six reserves the right to change,
Well aware the years are in her favor.
Even as her possibilities
Narrow to reflect her qualities,
The open space is something she can savor,
Young enough to range and rearrange.

Still, the touch of passing time is strange,
Interrogating sensibilities,
X-ing out unsuitable behavior.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Twenty-seven's not a time for scheming:
Winds within will find the western shore.
Each choice seems near immobilized with meaning,
Nor does one dare indulge the drift of dreaming,
Though winds and dreams alone tell what's in store.
Years dwindle as one wrestles with a door.

Some morning you'll be young again, and sailing
Easily along a quiet bay,
Viewing hills you've walked among, and failing
Even to recall one tortured day
Nothing told your heart what it must say.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Twenty-eight's a time to settle down,
Work a couple of jobs, have some kids,
Eventually, burst forth into bloom.
No time for schemes of glory now, no room
To set up stars. Your dreams have lead-lined lids.
Yet knee-deep in love, you earn your crown.

Easy now to leave the golden loom,
Instead to weave your life in green and brown,
Giving reluctant nods to lower bids.
However, Earth still wears its nuptial gown
That you might wake each day its passionate groom.

TWENTY-NINE

Twenty-nine enjoys a certain peace,
Well beyond the waterfalls of youth.
Even though the current still moves on,
Now it slowly slides beneath a calm,
Tranquil surface mirroring the truth.
Years bring change, but now change will decrease.

Now the restless surges, raw, uncouth,
In passing through the heart will do less harm;
Nor will the ravages of wonder cease,
Even as they take a different form.

THIRTY

Thirty has arrived at a plateau,
Having climbed a long and arduous way.
In another thirty years she will
Reverse the process, traveling downhill.
The look back will reveal a rich, full day,
Yet looking forward, years on years unfold.

THE THIRTIES: WHEN DREAMS CRASH AGAINST THE SHORE

The thirties: when dreams crash against the shore,
Hungering to change the littoral.
In time, the lulling rhythms of these surges
Realign the objects of one's urges,
Threatening a fade to pastoral.
Years break like dreams that sing of something more.

Often one forgets the miracle,
Not recalling how delight emerges
Easily, the sweet, sweet days of yore.

THIRTY-TWO

Thirty-two's a slowly ripening field,
Hot and happy in the summer sun.
Intense and long, the days are filled with light.
Reason knows that past the blue is night,
That all that ever is will be undone;
Yet for now that letter is still sealed.

Time moves slowly, certain of its yield,
While gentle breezes through the barley run.
Odd wisps of memories float high and white.

THIRTY-THREE

Thirty-three: the age Christ died on the cross.
Has one need for birthdays more than this?
In such short span one may our souls revise,
Remake our worlds and liberate our eyes,
Terrify us with the threat of bliss—
Yet years roll on with neither gain nor loss.

The secret of happiness is always love,
However long one lives. Birthdays wheel
Round and round this truth like raucous cries,
Eased into a vast silence, unreal,
Eased into a calm winds cannot move.

THIRTY-FOUR

Thirty-four comes barreling down a highway
Hell-bent on some blue vision of success.
In joining avidly the adult race,
Remodeling the inner voice and face,
The valiant one abandons happiness
Yet hopes to find some love along the way.

For years our hero will make do with less,
On course towards some long-cogitated place,
Uncertain where the treasure chest once lay,
Regretting deep dark down a loss of grace.

THIRTY-FIVE

Thirty-five's a whisper in the sunlight
Half-submerged in butterflies and bees.
Intimations run like rutted scars,
Remembrances of wounds beneath delight
Thick with summer bloom like rainbow seas.
Yet night brings on a wild rage of stars.

For what is this ejaculate of light?
In pain and wonder, agony and ease,
Viewing silent, distant ecstasies,
Estranged from emptiness by silken bars.

THIRTY-SIX

Thirty-six is an island in a river
Halfway in between two distant shores.
In childhood, the bank is rich with flowers,
Receding hills, hot fields, and long, slow hours,
Thick old trees, wry words, and open doors.
Yet on the opposite bank white aspens quiver,

Song birds flit like gems through windswept bowers,
In distant mountains thunderheads deliver
X-rays of our dark, unsculpted cores.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Thirty-seven's way far out to sea.
Home is now within. The child's the dream.
In darkness you're a lantern in a chain
Reaching cross the waves in love and pain,
Though less alone by day than you might seem.
Years pass. The wind is yours. You're strong and free.

So does your late youth linger gracefully,
Even as your eyes subdue their gleam,
Vibrant still, though darker. And the plain,
Easy truths dissolve in mystery.
Nor will you want to visit them again.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Thirty-eight is more than just a number,
Having joined through love the flow of flesh,
Inheriting the future, choosing life,
Rejoicing in the wisdom of a wife,
The seed of which the person is the crèche,
Yielding what the years cannot encumber.

Even as the tree is not the lumber,
Infinity awaits your will, as such,
Graced to be the cradle of a grief
Howling through the tapestries of touch,
The passion wrapped in swaddling clothes of slumber.

THERE ARE NO WORDS TO SAY
HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU

There are no words to say how much I love you:
Half my love might fit into a song.
In times of prayer I look for you to hold,
Reaching for you more as I grow old,
Taking, as I gave when I was strong.
Years have turned the tides of Being towards you.

Now my hopes are reconfigured for you:
In me there's no bright dream for which I long,
Nor measure of my pride as I behold
Each day the grace your childhood foretold.

THERE ARE GOOD THINGS ABOUT BEING FORTY

There are good things about being forty:
Still young and attractive, still
Free to try again,
Knowing what we know now.

Not so bad being forty:
Not old and sick, not
Dying, but still
Close enough to understand.

Having grown children,
Watching parents die,
Looking equally ahead and behind,
Knowing failure, inner weakness, disappointment,
Knowing bitterly our limitations,
Knowing death's bitter beauty,
Watching the black sun rise with the night;
No longer naive, not yet wise,
No longer stirred by hope, not yet at peace,
And still

One would think by now we would be settled,
But no.
We are alone, restless, still
Like children,
Even knowing what we know now.

It's OK, being forty:
Still a child,
Always children,
Lying equally in the arms of life and death,
Knowing beauty and terror,
Peace and agitation,
Mother and daughter,
Father and son,
Giver and needer—

Hold me to your heart,
Be still.

FORTY-ONE

Forty-one is filled with precious longing,
Overcome by sea and earth and sky.
Reason sees no reason for such yearning,
Though the heart knows well the reason why.
Years like fantasies flow swiftly by.

Only in that inner, restless burning,
Need like waves receding and returning,
Eloquent and spare, is the reply.

FORTY-TWO

Forty-two surrenders to desire,
Opening the door to greet the wind.
Revelation ever comes unbidden,
The gift of sight to those who travel blind,
Yielding all a pilgrim might require.

To love is to go through an open fire,
Witness to what life one has been given
Only after fear is left behind.

FORTY-THREE

Forty-three knows well the western wind,
Oracle of paradise regained,
Rhapsody for wanderers bereft,
To tide surrendered once the winds have waned.
Yearning drives the sailor from behind.

There is, of course, neither sea nor shore.
How things turn out is how they ever are,
Remaining in the Eden we have left,
Ecstasy eternal, though the bar
Extend beyond the dream we hunger for.

FORTY-FOUR

Forty-four goes voyaging at home,
On a journey deep into her heart.
Rest assured she does not go alone,
Though none who travels with her can take part.
Years flow swiftly through the gates of stone.

For her there are old continents to chart,
Old shoals new revealed, old harbors known,
Unvisited but by the dames of art,
Restored now in a mirror, one by one.

FORTY-FIVE

Forty-five reads well the book of life,
Open somewhere in the muddled middle.
Reading does, of course, allow one space
To putter round the self, at least a little.
Yet yearning cuts through solace like a knife.

For now she is the mother and the wife,
Intensely joyful, rich with hard-earned grace.
Vested in the moment, life's a riddle;
Eventually, each moment finds its place.

FORTY-SIX

Forty-six has much to celebrate,
Open as she is to wind and song,
Riding what rough beasts might come along,
Traveling through the wilderness of fate
Yet knowing that the soul is ever young.

So may she weather well the storms of state
In love that lies beyond all joy and longing,
Xerox of the unknown infinite.

FORTY-SEVEN

Forty-seven has a flair for dreaming,
Opening her heart to what might be,
Restoring to delight the empty moment,
Testing the terrain of mystery.
Yet there is much in life beyond redeeming.

Still, for dreamers all, the world is teeming,
Exuberant with excess ecstasy,
Veiled though it be with mindless torment,
Ever fit for fruitful fantasy.
Nor does one glimmer, but the whole is gleaming.

FORTY-EIGHT

Forty-eight finds little to regret,
Opening her arms to what is hers.
Revelations are a daily joy,
Though there is much that weighs upon the heart,
Yearning for what now will never be.

Everyone would change some things, and yet
In truth the gift of life is what occurs.
Given that some would sweet days destroy,
Her love's a gift from which she would not part,
The denouement no actor could foresee.

FORTY-NINE

Forty-nine is certain of the evening.
On her the passing of the days depends.
Remote from the requirements of winning,
To her there is a point to means and ends;
Yet slanting light a melancholy sends.

No passion is more precious than her yearning,
Infinite far more than it intends;
Nor can love, though with compassion burning,
Ease the pain that with her pleasure blends.

FIFTY

Fifty's full of life and well-tuned vigor,
In full career across a fertile field.
Fears of night from time to time may trigger
Thoughts that an exquisite sadness yield.
Yet life is still as rich and sweet as ever.

FIFTY-ONE

Fifty-one's a broad, slow-moving river
In between the fall-line and the sea:
Flowing full of rich, red-tinted clay,
Taking much encountered on the way,
Yet looking towards the teeming shores to be.

One must be a taker and a giver:
Needing, loving, wanting, swept away.
Even rivers cannot help obey.

FIFTY-TWO

Fifty-two is like a full-blown flower
Iridescent with the sheen of days.
Fine petals droop just slightly towards the floor,
Thin velvet strokes of beauty, wanting more,
Yearning in the sunlight of our gaze.

There is no loss of happiness, for our
Wishes haunt the windings of our ways,
Opening each turn another door.

FIFTY-THREE

Fifty-three remains an open field,
Intimate with solitude and sky.
For her the child still lingers in the light,
There being wonder in the winds of why,
Yielding all of life that life can yield.

There are no memories that must be sealed,
Holding tears too terrible to cry,
Resting places restless in the night.
Each ghost is hung out in the sun to dry,
Each wound recleansed until completely healed.

FIFTY-FOUR

Fifty-four finds few to sing her glory.
In what one is must be one's sole reward.
Fair fortune is no substitute for being
The passionate apostle of a word.
Yet endings do not vary with the story.

For her, it is enough to bear the beauty
Of singing one small note of some vast chord,
Unknowable but in the act of seeing
Resplendent the hard road she has endured.

FIFTY-FIVE

Fifty-five has learned to dream more wisely,
Inventing only what might come to pass.
For her the gifts of life are more than plenty,
Though at times she hears the distant brass
Yearning for what now has no reflection.

Fear not, for the moment is perfection,
In which one finds a mirror for one's fancy
Vast as time, inclusive as creation,
Eternity redacted to a glass.

FIFTY-SIX

Fifty-six feels frequently at home,
Internally at ease with who she is.
For her the journey's flattened to a sea
That has no moorings marked as hers or his.
Years yield peace, though yearnings yet may roam.

So do the turning days become a poem
In which the questions vanish from the quiz,
X'd out by an unchained serenity.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Fifty-seven's not afraid of silence,
In which the self can take a well-earned breath.
For her there is no urgency to time,
There being an eternity till death.
Years are but the borders of remembrance.

So does she find the doorway to her presence,
Entrance to which needs no shibboleth,
Visiting an oft-neglected shrine.
Even as she walks her length and breadth,
Not moving she beholds her radiance.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Fifty-eight still finds delight in learning.
Implicit in her passion is her love
For being and devotion to its treasures,
The things that in one's life most lasting prove
Yet never cease to fill the heart with yearning.

Ever in her eyes the lamp is burning,
Innocence regained at one remove,
Granted those who pioneer their pleasures,
Habitué of lands they know not of,
Travelers to morning, turning, turning . . .

FIFTY-NINE

Fifty-nine is where the trail steepens
In the downward rush towards car and shower.
Fierce sun is dappled now, the veil deepens,
The chill of shadowed breezes tells the hour;
Yet all the day's sweet joy retains its power.

Now is time to muse upon the evening
Instead of looking to the roots and stones.
No dreams of life more rich, more full of leavening,
Even as one's thoughts take deeper tones.

SIXTY

Sixty is an age a bit too ripe.
If our hearts deny it, still we know.
X-rays may not give us cause to gripe,
Though old-age aches have just begun to show.
Yet we have many, many dreams to go.

SIXTY-ONE

Sixty-one has stumbled through the fire
In which all pain and heartbreak must be burned.
X-rays show the bones beneath desire
Thinned by what the days and years require
Yet braced by what of glory she has learned.

One moment beyond fear can life inspire.
Needs fade as dreams of sovereignty retire,
Even those for which she long has yearned.

SIXTY-TWO

Sixty-two is not an age for mourning.
In time one takes a long and varied tour.
Xylophones may tinkle without warning,
Then turn to screams one hardly can endure.
Yet of change itself one can be sure.

There is within us all, forever dawning,
Whether chaste or wisely immature,
Of hunger wrought, a joy unbound and pure.

SIXTY-THREE

Sixty-three is finished for the evening.
In gratitude he searches for his seat.
Xeroxes of papers back his claim
That he has labored long and not in vain,
Yet those in charge refuse each proffered sheet.

They say they care not one fig for his reasoning,
However philosophical or sweet.
Regardless of the protests in his name,
Each day he must continue all the same:
Earnest, honest, too engaged to cheat.

SING A SONG OF SWEET BUT SILENT BEAUTY

Sing a song of sweet but silent beauty
In which a pensive soul might be sustained.
Xerophytes prefer to be arraigned,
Tough and spare, before the bar of duty.
Yet there are those whose wills are more restrained.

For such, there are no goals to be attained.
Open to the wind, nor wise nor witty,
Unmoved by wealth yet wounded well by pity,
Rich in harmony, they live unchained.

SING OF ALL THE GOODNESS YOU'VE BEEN GRANTED

Sing of all the goodness you've been granted
In a life where little might be sung.
Xylophones and bells will play along
To give you the embrace you always wanted
Yet always had, the wellspring of your song.

For though the past can never be recanted,
In every moment love is ever strong.
Visions may be heavenly or haunted,
Even as sweet music can't be wrong.

SIXTY-SIX

Sixty-six sits quietly at home,
Immersed in the sweet turpitude of time.
Xylophones play softly in the wind,
The chattering of children in their chime,
Yet distant, as though faintly on the phone.

So does nostalgia come into its own,
Innocent as passion in its prime,
X-ing out what laws it would rescind.

SIXTY-SEVEN

Sixty-seven is a man of dreams,
Invested purely in what ought to be,
X-ing out the barriers to will
That make it hard to see what one would see.
Years need not accomplish much, it seems.

So does his passion sing like swollen streams
Enveloping the islands that agree,
Vast armies of the afternoon, who still
Elect to hope their fighting words might free,
Not slaves, but those whom self-respect redeems.

SIXTY-EIGHT

Sixty-eight sings silently of light,
Inner song reflecting inner grace.
Xylophones send messages by wind:
Tapestries no hand can hope to trace;
Yearnings no beatitude can blight.

Even in the fortress of the mind,
Intimations of the coming night
Give way to what no fortune can rescind:
Here, and only here, is paradise,
The moment that gives beauty time and place.

SIXTY-NINE

Sixty-nine looks back across the sea
In search of land where there is only sky.
X's mark where sunken treasures lie,
The galleons long lost to memory,
Years gone beneath the waves that greet the eye.

Nostalgia hungers for identity,
Intent on what, not interested in why,
Needing need, ever poised to cry,
Embracing the sweet pain of finity.

SEVENTY

Seventy's a lush, high mountain meadow
Eerie in the silence of its sky:
Vividly awash in alpine flowers,
Easy in the soft and vagrant hours,
Not quite at home but loathe to question why.
The moon shines through the veil, pocked and sallow,
Yet still the sun casts down its golden eye.

SEVENTY-ONE

Seventy-one looks back far more than forward
Even as he sails on towards death,
Vast as ever, infinite as ever,
Ever inmate of the house of breath.
Nor does he fear the future he goes toward,
The end that more and more means less and less.
Yearning sends him stumbling upriver.

Old memories, like landmarks, draw him hither,
Nearer what he never can recover,
Exactly what he never did possess.

SEVENTY-TWO

Seventy-two is in the thick of things.
Each day he meshes like a gear with power.
Vested in the future, he discerns
Entrances everywhere he turns,
Nor does he mourn the passing of the hour.
To be is to be rich in all life brings,
Yet he finds greatest joy in what he earns.

There is but little he does not devour.
Working as he does, his hunger churns.
Over him the darkness spreads its wings.

SEVENTY-THREE

Seventy-three refocuses on love
Even as she now must live alone.
Very little waits behind the door;
Every day is like the day before;
Nestled in her heart are sleeves of stone;
Time hangs like fog no sun will soon remove.
Yet there is much that makes her yearn for more.

To be is to be loved and blessed with grace,
However one might live or soon might die.
Revelations come like words long known,
Each an invitation to embrace,
Ecstasy unbearable but shy.

SING ME AN OLD-AGE LULLABY

Sing me an old-age lullaby that soothes
Each age-old plaint of a bewildered heart.
Vision me a melody that lingers
Easy in the hallways east of dreams,
Naked once again to passion singers
Touch with the precision of their art,
Yearning neither joy nor pain removes.

From Brighton Head the dark ship moves
Offshore to wait its part.
Unbind the moon, O pale-eyed singers!
Regard what the hour redeems.

SO MANY TIMES I'VE WATCHED MY TIME GO BY

So many times I've watched my time go by,
Even as I know it isn't mine.
Visiting's the best that we can do.
Eventually, all lovers say goodbye.
Now my children celebrate my day,
Though I myself am sometimes far away.
Years pass. The train goes on. Their faces shine.

For me the only thing that's mine is love.
I feel its god-like grip, more true than true.
Very little else the heart can move.
Emptiness passes, but deep-felt love abides.

SEVENTY-SIX

Seventy-six is steadfastly old fashioned,
Ever certain of his old-world ways.
Vested in the truth of what he knows,
Each parable in place, he comes and goes,
Not seeing what his landscape overlays,
The stream that underneath the ice still flows.
Yet only what he ordered meets his gaze.

So is his understanding strictly rationed,
In keeping with the passion of his pose,
X-ing out whatever time betrays.

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.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

Seventy-eight swims violently upstream,
Emerging, like a fish, where she was born,
Very near to death as well as dawn,
Equally at the borderline of dream,
Now stripped bare of the identity
That years put on, once more no more to be,
Yet in the shallows, where shadows dart and gleam.

Each singing moment finds an open seam,
Invading with its music worlds forlorn,
Granting with renewed simplicity
Heaven's gift to those of shelter shorn,
That would alone with beauty death redeem.

SEVENTY-NINE

Seventy-nine is in the best of health
Even as he relishes excess.
Vast quantities of fat and alcohol,
Embellished well with sugar, salt, and gall,
New flood him every day with happiness.
Then he settles down to cigarettes,
Yielding every time to pleasure's call.

Nor does he visit doctors, for the less
Involved he is with medicine, the more
Natural his commerce with himself,
Exemplified by butter best of all.

EIGHTY

Eighty is once again in love!
It is a bit ridiculous, but true.
Glad as a teenager just to linger near him,
Happy just to silently revere him,
The full heart and empty head not new,
Yet again the yearning we are made of.

EIGHTY-ONE

Eighty-one feels sorry for himself.
In constant pain, he often wonders why
Gifts of time are never made to last.
How bitter one might be! For pleasures past
Trade for little when the price is high
Years later, in the maelstrom of ill health.

One can to such despair find no reply,
Not being in such agony oneself,
Except within one's love to bind him fast.

EIGHTY-TWO

Eighty-two is in the golden years,
In tolerable good heath and well secured.
Granted luck, advantages well used,
Having saved, temptation oft refused,
The pensioner is comfortably insured.
Yet past the bright blue sky lie certain fears.

There is in each a child bereft, in tears,
Whose pure, untutored terror has endured,
Out of darkness come, alone, confused.

EIGHTY-THREE

Eighty-three is happy to be here.
Inclination makes her so inclined.
Gifts of temperament, like gifts of grace,
Hang the veil of choice across her face,
Thus making will the uncaused cause of kind.
Yet one wears clothes that one was born to wear.

There is much, of course, that she must bear,
Having lost a portion of her mind.
Recent trains are difficult to trace,
Ending up in alleys dark and blind.
Even so, there's much she still holds dear.

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.

WHEN ONE HAS REACHED THE AGE OF EIGHTY-FIVE

When one has reached the age of eighty-five,
And years, like mountains crossed, are soft with haze,
It is a triumph simply to survive.

One is where few have managed to arrive,
Where consciousness alone is cause for praise,
When one has reached the age of eighty-five.

And when one can do more than be alive,
Can cope, can comprehend, can turn a phrase,
It's still a triumph simply to survive,

To breathe, to be satiate, to desire, to derive
Solace from the lingering ends of days.
When one has reached the age of eighty-five,

And memories of infancy revive,
And faces long forgotten meet one's gaze,
It is a triumph simply to survive,

To hold together this one world, to strive
To keep what life inevitably betrays.
When one has reached the age of eighty-five,
It is a triumph simply to survive.

EMPTINESS COSTS A BIT EXTRA

Emptiness costs a bit extra:
In distant horizons there is peace.
Given two windows on a whitewashed world,
How could one not long for the sea?
The soul wings it out to the horizon,
Yet stays contented in a well-ordered room.

Sing to the gauze-covered shallows,
Inlets and coves and the open sea!
Xylophones tingle on porches unseen.

EIGHTY-SEVEN

Eighty-seven lives within his means,
Immensely happy with his lot in life.
Glad simply to be, he knows that soon
He'll finish his remaining macaroon,
The one left since he lost his rabid wife.
Yet time was far more troubling in his teens.

So he floats with pleasure through its seams,
Embracing reveries that timeless tune
Voices otherwise still locked in strife.
Each day is like the last, as nothing looms,
Not even death, through which the sunlight streams.

EIGHTY-EIGHT

Eighty-eight spends much of life in bed,
Interred beyond her time in drugs and pain.
Grateful only for the gift of sleep,
Having lost the will to laugh or weep,
The shrunken doll repeats just one refrain,
Yearning for the comforts of the dead.

Even so, the trail of pills has led
Into a world she grapples with in vain,
Grasping for a grace she cannot keep,
Harsh and vivid hauntings of the brain
That make of life a stew of joy and dread.

EIGHTY-NINE

Eighty-nine is more or less content;
In love and labor lucky, more or less.
Given the loss of his long-tended wife,
Having made himself another life,
The final sum, he thinks, is happiness.
Yet all he sees ahead is a descent.

Nor does he see the need for his consent:
In death he finds the ultimate duress.
Nothingness awaits him like a knife,
Even as he keeps his anger pent.

NINETY

Ninety is a burst of mountain glories!
In remote valleys wild memories bloom.
No meadow is not carpeted with stories,
Each sending forth its delicate perfume.
The mind stays on the mountaintop, as night
Yields only to the peak the last day's light.

NEARER THINGS MUST TAKE THE PLACE OF STARS

Nearer things must take the place of stars;
Intimacy replaces panorama:
Not by choice, though one does well to choose,
Even without senses one must lose,
To savor what remains of Earth's Nirvana.
Years pass within the gates that illness bars.

Often, though, the passion of guitars,
Near ecstasy, one's inner flame renews,
Enriched by all the turnings of life's drama.

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 in 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.

NINETY-THREE

Ninety-three is infinite and whole,
Interred by Nature in a ruined city.
Neither sea nor sky knows streets or squares,
Edges, angles, opposites, or pairs,
Time or yearning, pleasure, joy, or pity;
Yet both reside within the prisoned soul.

Though years of brick and stone must take their toll,
Horizons are as functional as prayers,
Removing ancient boundary lines and stairs.
Each truth is neither old nor young and pretty,
Eternally at rest upon no shoal.

NINETY-FOUR

Ninety-four remains a little lonely,
Incarcerated in her single room.
Now quieted, now full of empty yearning,
Each aged organ still with passion burning,
To her betimes the body seems a tomb.
Yet life itself is no less lithe and comely.

Friends and loves long past live in her only,
Open as a garden in full bloom.
Upon her, then, a world of wonder turning
Rides undaunted into gathering gloom.

NEED IS NOTHING MORE THAN STRONG DESIRE

Need is nothing more than strong desire.
In fact, there is not one thing that we need,
Not even life itself. For nothingness,
Eventually our fortune, is no less
Than being at the center of our seed.
Yet we rage for what we would require.

For all there is an unsought tenderness
In homage to the fierceness of that fire,
Vivid in the grimness of its greed
Even as we know what will transpire.

NINETY-SIX

Ninety-six looks forward to one hundred,
Intent on reaching that elusive goal.
Not that life's particularly pleasing;
Even so, the signal thought of squeezing
Time to fit an arbitrary whole
Yields a satisfaction to be savored.

So he lingers, withered, weak, and wheezing,
Imagining The Moment, from time severed,
X upon a sea that knows no shoal.

NINETY-SEVEN

Ninety-seven's lived to see her children
Into retirement and golden age.
Now she has become a burden, though
Each of them insists it isn't so,
Their voices not too difficult to gauge.
Years of love allow for no confusion.

So be it, then. She has no further mission
Except acceptance, to pass this final stage
Veiled in dignity from head to toe,
Embracing what no yearning can assuage,
Needing only clarity of vision.

NINETY-EIGHT

Ninety-eight still looks forward to eating
Instant mashed potatoes, frozen peas,
Noodles and butter with non-fat cottage cheese,
Eggplant parmesan that keeps repeating,
Tapioca pudding, tepid tea,
Yearning less for food than company.

Each meal provides the matrices of meeting
Into which he pours his energy,
Grasping interstices he can seize,
Hours of laughter, rage, anxiety,
Till the next meal's quiet, offhand greeting.

NINETY-NINE

Ninety-nine enjoys a bit of sun,
Installed upon the terrace in her chair.
Nestled in her heavy woolen coat,
Extra-heavy scarf tucked round her throat,
The tiny figure relishes the air,
Yielding to a moment come undone.

Now she cannot feel the current run;
Inside, the heart holds still, just barely there.
Nothingness and being become one
Even as the end remains remote.

ONE HUNDRED

One hundred is a milestone indeed!
Now one knows at least one has lived long.
Even so, life finds much good to read,
Having loved good reading all along.
Underneath the years one still has wonder,
Naked as it was when it was born,
Delighted to be blessed a little longer,
Reluctant to request much of the dawn.
Each year of life's a gift of grace untold.
Do, then, find pleasure rich in growing old.

