

# The Skeleton of Water

Poems, 1979-1984

Gordon Fisher

## 1. Who that say that?

Passed Past

Friends blur and cities melt like ink in rain.  
What I read before or meant to read  
is now trapped dots and runny dissolution,  
though gravid dots remain which may give birth  
to fictions, schemes, regrets or benedictions.

Anyway, some messages arrived today  
I still can read with fresh precision,  
in the right light, with my glasses on.

Dec 1981; Jun, Jul 1982

memory mist

breath of blown days  
puff of Trebizond  
blast of Alamein  
wracks of moving on

sparrow days  
flying past  
swallow graves  
shy epitaphs

woven to disguise us  
binding winds to rest  
patches of remind us  
on cloaks of nothing left

Jul 1984

## The Old Order

The old ones, for all I knew,  
had always been there like the Dipper.

Grandfather in his special chair,  
a white-haired lion at the gate.

Miss Waite the spelling teacher  
shaking her finger at the tide.

Mayor Louie guiding the village  
from his cave in the feed store.

Chief Herman shining his spotlight  
like a comet in the night  
as we practiced being grown,  
darting into alleys,  
our pockets stuffed with stolen apples.

Now that was order.

May 1984

shower

sounds of rain spring legerdemain  
sticky tires  
moist road desires

sounds of water walk on leaves  
rain's daughter  
stalking eaves

might and may  
rainy day  
may and might rain tonight

Jul 1984

Promenade

The moon creates no color.  
Black leaves are chattering  
above the bushy beasts.

The footsteps trailing me  
fire like pistols on the walk.

Is that roar inside my ears?  
Is that metal in his heels?

Just before he passes,  
I leap suddenly aside.  
He doesn't break his stride,  
and starts to whistle.

Who was the savage in the night?

May 1981

Watch It, Clown

Here comes Mr. Death  
with white bulb nose  
and warning on his cheeks

riding a unicycle.  
Be careful how you circle Mr. Death  
Be careful where you goes.

May 1984

## Reflection

This brook is fresh,  
circling like a lover,  
tickling the rock.

The sun's a vasty genius  
that calls up sparks  
by rubbing water.

The rock, old smoothie,  
holding ground,  
marks a place  
the swirl and flashing found.

Mar, Jul 1984

## Polarity

Go north and look for messages in ice,  
the skeleton of water. You did  
a time in heat and now that you are rid  
of macaws, giant ferns and paradise,

be blinded by the sharp reflected light  
of arctic suns and drops of ice in flight.  
Let snowflakes, falling, form a cold delight  
and crystals be the letters of your night.

Mar 1982; Jul 1984

## Permanent Press

No matter what the vernal resolution,  
the themes return: the rise and fall of fleshed,  
the providential snapping of the precious  
traps and elementals of illusion,  
the wracks and lacks of vapid dissolution.  
An itch I have for contemplating edges  
entices me, I tumble into meshes  
and nibble at climactic absolution.

Since the power of this plenary obsession  
as broad and meddlesome as time itself  
will not be wheedled into absences,  
why not let the pattern speak its lesson  
of constraint and get from it what help  
we can to navigate what silences?

Dec 31, 1981; Jul 1982

## Maybe

Perhaps and then the surly earth will care  
holes rebirth what precious they dress  
atoms burnt to curling air regress  
liquid swirls emerge from their down lair

Perhaps and yielded flesh regenerate  
centers of our love appealed express  
reeling suns X-ed energies address  
reap and seal and recapitulate

Perhaps then secrets pairingly we share  
patterns glaringly we imitate  
puzzles daringly we postulate  
caringly will deepen then and there

Perhaps and then and where the certain lapse  
the curtain end perhaps and fair perhaps

Sep 1984

## Birth

Come into the light,  
the end is now beginning.  
Crying in the morning,  
watch the sky.

Some screw their faces,  
ask for other weather.  
Others chirp and gobble,  
might as well be bright.

Hunters glisten,  
jaws are sharp.  
But what the hell,  
it isn't dark.

Aug 1983

Out to Pasture

"I fear death,  
But once when it was close to me it was cowlike,  
It went moo."

Reed Whitemore (1974)

Fey ogre, dragon, reaper, skull and bones,  
dark siren, empty executioner,  
I dub them gentle cud-caressing cows,

so now there's not one Death but a placid herd  
of hit-cows winding up to put us down  
and softly moo at us when laying low,

and as we toil our homeward ways we know  
a curfew ruminant will sidle near  
to part us. What are you afraid of now?

Cows.

Sep 1982

## Making the Cut

Death may find them undisturbed,  
    these easy cronies of the barbershop  
who check in every now and then to swap  
    their tales of foreign parts and hearts perturbed  
and how their doctors do their medicine,  
    and what's been lately cut from those now stopped  
at patient nurseries for the coming crop,  
    and who have lately had their final trim.

They sound as used to death as dropping in  
    to gossip with the barbers while they trim  
the growing, graying, falling, turning bare  
    barometer of our decay, our hair.  
To them that snicking scythe today appears  
    as easy as the barbers' clicking shears.

Jul, Aug 1982

"The earth hath bubbles, as the water has"  
    Hamlet

I'd like bubbles for the days  
    to cuddle our sweet bodies in  
    opaque to other time  
and rainbows on their faces  
    and when one day explodes  
    a swift decay to tickle us.

May 1981

## Mine Eyes Have Seen

The undergrowth is spreading here like smoke  
and not much sun slides through the summer leaves  
up where the branches try to hold you back.

Here's a place the printed guide says someone  
mined for copper a hundred years ago  
and sure enough the site still shows some ore.

But that's not why this trail is in the book,  
it's not the abandoned mine but the waterfall  
that's roaring like a mill of summer rain

and that now you see above you out of reach,  
a sudden brightness embracing green,  
a weaving spirit wrestling with the trees.

Jun, Aug 1982; Jul 1984

## Doubting Thomas

"Do not go gentle into that good night"  
Dylan Thomas

Go gentle to that cuddling, curdling night.  
Let lilac leaves and soda pop remain.  
Do not, in raging, wreck the gentle rain  
nor, angered, bind sweet sinning from its flight.

Though faith decant and hope and fair be blight,  
and fertile love itself at last prove bane,  
let peppermint and panoply attain  
what chancy careless anodyne they might.

Though future fail and heaven not requite  
our ghost descendancy to this bright plane,  
your cheapjack Armageddon raves in vain.  
Not all exploding hate will set things right.

So friend, lie gently down to restful riddle.  
Do not rage. Well . . . maybe just a little.

Nov 1984



Pat Impending

Not I nor you nor brain's artillery can lapse  
the cracked encroach of bleak display  
and God

    that crafty country boy  
        gives way to lack of information.  
Pray for He.

How come you rule me like you do, did, dung?

That Tuesday rose and dendrons didn't know.  
Dull Wednesday, Armageddon didn't show.  
Some garden plots are better not begun.

Not eye nor U nor rain's exhilarary can crack  
the lapsed approach of gleet array  
so dog  
    that crafty country boy  
        whose way is stacked with invocation.  
Merrily.

Go gently in that fright  
    for wotthehell  
It serves the higher purchase

    Just as well.

    Nov 1984

Splitting

Time pods we are,  
    containers of our histories.  
The old, whose time is short,  
    hold more of it  
        than those whose time (perhaps) is long.

We scatter seeds,  
    our DNA and what we say and build,  
and when (for pods should burst)  
    we die,  
        we scatter seeds again.

    Aug, Oct 1981

Queen of Circumstance  
(for Aunt Thelma)

Hobbling, as she has to, on her canes  
she walks the three blocks to the corner drugstore  
in half an hour, past the sword palmettos.  
Now alone, she makes this pilgrimage  
the pivot and affection of her day.

Her well-intentioned doctor wants her in  
a nursing home because of her wobbly knees  
and cancer of the colon, but she says no,  
she won't give up her customary places,  
her doiled chair and choice of television.

So most days now she plods her patient way  
to the drugstore where the old clerks teach  
the new to brace and pamper her among  
the patent pills and tuna sandwiches,  
no less than queens of circumstance deserve.

Jan 1, 1982

Salute to Sasha

When he referred to his predicament  
those months, he used the ancient metaphor  
of going on a journey (trite, perhaps,  
but then he claimed no poetry). When  
he bumped into a wall or broke a cup  
he said he was always tense before a trip.

At last he left by fire and air and water  
and bequeathed a kind of wordless poem  
by ordering his ashes to be flown  
and dropped into the harbor of New York  
where he had entered 50 years before.

Apr, Jul, Aug 1982

## Obituary

Professor S. died recently at home who once had loved the classics which he taught and filled his house with souvenirs he bought on journeys to the Middle East and Rome, and ever since his wife died lived alone among his tarnished coins and smelly pots, his paintings, cards and cheap forget-me-nots, no longer comprehending what he owned.

He died without a will and what he saved passed to the state whose agents weren't displeased when they had some of what he left assessed, a pictured vase an ancient whore had craved, the golden coins and emperor had seized, a cross he thought some ancient saint had blessed.

Nov 1980; Aug, Sep 1981

## Star Peace

I'm waiting for a weekday hero,  
no sorcery or space escapes,  
just a natural kindness  
and a gift for blinding Death  
with laser-like illuminants

so people seated awkwardly  
in X-ray waiting rooms  
will see their shadows glorified,

so people drunk with bleeding  
through any openings we have or give  
will bathe in massless photons  
as the red blood cools and blackens,

so all the people I could mention  
but who would make this poem too long  
and probably depress you,

will liquefy to light,  
the only thing, some physicists say,  
which really lasts.

July, Aug, Oct 1981; Jul 1984

## 2. Turns Among Many

### Harmonice mundi

The scans and dots enhance these other worlds,  
the red rock plains of Mars, the red spun reel  
of Jupiter, the brash and crystal wheels  
of Saturn, all the moons, their pocks and swirls,  
blue ice and hot volcanic curls,  
the planets' clouds and what the clouds conceal  
and what the rifts and surfaces reveal  
to Voyagers, the silver spiders hurled  
a billion miles and still a part of Earth  
since what they signal to their place of birth  
reminds me what the tantrum world might mean  
and makes me happier for having seen  
in pampered safety here, from my TV,  
a vision of the gorgeous harmony.

Nov 1980

### Entropy

Parting pairs  
and states betray  
the patterns of the holy.

Even the stars  
on course decay  
although, of course,

more slowly.

Jul 1982

### Cosmologists

"The radiation from the early universe should  
by now have expanded to such an extent that its  
temperature has dropped to as low as about 3 K."

1. There's no one ranks them for audacity.  
They say the world, well-loaded point in wait,

blew up one day and spewed out t (time), s (space)  
and then a slew of spiral galaxies.

I bow before their wild ability  
to theorize and slickly calculate  
the birth of stars from quantum states  
and other wonders leading up to me.

But I sometimes think how pleasant it would be  
if they could find behind the background haze  
some acts more touching than the lepton phase ---  
a song, perhaps, or notes on perfidy,  
an ancient pas de deux, a family tree  
with portraits of the causes of 3 K.

2. Swift origin: a singularity  
exploded to expanding time and space  
and from excited quantum states created  
our spun light, the spiral galaxies.

So bow before the probabilities  
that turned the universe from early rays  
into an older world in which we brave  
and which we chalk with strange cosmologies,

and though I think how pleasant it would be  
if we could find within the background haze  
a past more touching than the lepton phase,  
still, theories too contain a poetry.  
Though crabbed equations lack humanity,  
they glorify the genesis of blaze.

Sep, Oct 1981; Aug 1982

## We Also Swerve

"If the atoms did not have this swerve,  
they would all fall straight down  
through the deep void like drops of rain . . .  
Thus Nature would never have created anything."  
Lucretius

This is a world with convictions  
in spite of hesitant hands.  
Though faith fail to furnish prescriptions  
the trees swallow rivers and stand.

This is a world with conditions  
in spite of plangent desires.  
The world has its circular missions  
and we are its tangents to fire.

Jun, Jul 1982

## Thinking Time

"And the source of coming-to-be for existing things is that into  
which destruction, too, happens, 'according to necessity; for they  
pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice  
according to the assessment of Time' . . . "  
Anaximander, 6th century B.C., containing the earliest  
words known today of any Greek philosopher

The air our ash, the earth our solemn bones  
the sea our cold remains, the elements  
demand a payment for our chance offense,  
due when our culminating act atones  
for our epiphany, that threat to stones.  
attack on space and matter's eminence  
made by burgeoning intelligence  
that no materiality condones.

Or are they thinking too, the stones, the seas,  
the restless atoms, quarks, the elements  
of elements, our thoughts, our very thoughts  
alive and thinking thoughts of thoughts like these  
but all consigned to such impermanence  
and recompense as trying Time allots?

Feb, Mar 1979

## Darwin's Music

Disciples of Pythagoras report  
a music made by bodies as they move.

When Newton, plagued by time, tuned in his muse,  
he manufactured theories for the chords.

"And ... whilst this planet has gone cycling on  
according to the fixed law of gravity,  
from so simple a beginning endless forms  
most beautiful and most wonderful have been  
and are being evolved." (These are the final  
words of Darwin's Origin of Species.)

The worms and plants of Darwin's tangled earth  
and other forms produce a music too,  
and protein codes are scores that carry tunes  
for protean performances of birth.

Apr, Aug, Oct 1981

## Evolution

On just one day, a single turn of earth,  
some unknown millions of years ago,  
the first dicotyledon must have grown,  
and every spring the earth salutes its birth.  
No one can know the shade tree as it was,  
whole types are gone whose grace no longer grows.  
A random few have left their shapes in stones,  
the rest have disappeared, as living does.

The patterns stay which fit the changes most.  
The last dicotyledon may ascend  
one day, and shade trees never grow again.  
Time makes the most insistent matter ghosts  
but nothing time controls will bring an end  
to beauty in the patterns which have been.

Apr, Aug 1981

## Life on Earth

I may make do with having been  
    an instance of profusion,  
my species one of many,  
    not framed so colorful as some ornate varieties,  
and less at home, although  
    adept, at times, at saying so.

Jan, Mar 1982

## 3. Love Laughs Last

### **time was/is**

a company of suns is down in flight  
    and will not burn the brilliant rains again  
nor rise to saturate with days the bright  
    and absent lands where we have been

those suns gone down no longer heat as when  
    they crossed and left their trails of feeding light  
and now we cannot touch that altered then  
    nor bow to set the ancient motions right

my love alive we find ourselves near night  
    and mourn the suns which tumbled to their end  
in that far sea where still our dreams descend  
    and shall until a darkness stops our night

still let's conceive that somewhere set away  
    those suns that elsewhere burnt burn yet today

Jan, Mar 1979; Oct 1980

### **Last Divide**

If ever I banked on ending at our skins  
    I know now I was wrong.  
You or I will tell some disposer of remains



to burn the other down  
but what he burns will not be one of us.

I've been practicing at pulling us apart  
in case what's left is me.  
As lovely as our coupled bodies are  
what really marries us  
is power joining parts no one can see.

Feb 1981

**To you I say**

In none of our bright cities do we stay  
when we are dead  
nor shall we cherish views  
when sky blue grass green earth brown  
matters weigh  
if you and I are not still I and you.

The pieces wholes and parts of parts decay  
and if there be an everlasting glue  
which holds the world  
then though it stay  
does glue love strive sing  
wait for wonders too?

I madly dream that we shall find a way  
when we are dead  
to meet and set out new  
or barring that  
I plot that worlds replay  
and we may join again what we now do.

But if we die for good  
why then  
goodbye.  
We had the world we loved in,  
you and I.

Nov 1980, Aug 1981

## **To Dawn**

Warrior, we constituted battles.  
You honed yourself on my blade, I on yours.  
With mounting joy, we wrestled in the flesh.  
Our souls were hurt but healed like woven snakes.

Builder, we manufactured people,  
made them peaks and fabricated valleys.  
And coveting Pythagorean spheres  
we turned the whirling world into our minds.

Voyager, we're taking on some water,  
two creaking convoys in a common sea.  
Whatever we are guarding will remain  
as long as we are close enough to shout.

Dec 1978

## **Consolation**

And well, you know, some day the sun will die  
and spoil the neighborhood, and all bright games  
will slough at night, and all of Plato's names  
take flight. No problem, heavens, you and I  
will be persuaded to transmogrify  
and settle down to toast uncircled flames  
before the great palatinate proclaims  
the world to condescend to, bye and bye.

Well then, no matter, do the tricks you try  
to play on me, upend my drawing near  
to you and (sigh) no matter how you cry  
to me about the pinions of the year  
I know that I can still identify  
with burning toasts and stars the disappear.

Oct 1984

## **Excelsior**

The hill sings grass but you hold back,  
afraid to test the path which seems  
to drop to nowhere, while I  
push on to someone's old remains,  
small stones arranged like messages,  
amid ashes, beer cans, condoms,  
left in this slight declivity,  
shelter on the summit,  
with room enough for fire.

Come love, we'll overcome the trash  
and lie as if we were alone,  
together,  
higher than the world,  
but low enough to keep us warm.

Jul, Aug 1981

## **when we were young**

remember love when we were young and where  
insistent to each other we would be  
incorporate in gritty ecstasy  
in fields of moon and we were lovelike there  
and inside when we lay we could outwear  
the night and listen to the strategy  
of banging freight cars being joined while we  
set voyages of which we weren't aware

no greater mystery excepting death  
will penetrate our days and make fulfill  
the monuments of flesh in which we care  
until the day we break our beating breath  
and time must discontain us waiting still  
remember love when we were young and where

Jan 1979

## May

The waves from the open window  
wrest gently here  
as I nest along you.

The traffic sounds are locusts,  
the fumes of spring  
stronger than exhaust.

Today I do not feel  
I must apologize to you  
for the world.

May 1984

## 4. Roomers of Wars

### Opening

Cheap bars sell razor blades  
so I bought a pack  
and sawed at my wrists a little  
in the men's room  
and tried to look as if I were dying  
of some red victory  
in front of the urinal.

Some guy who came in  
to relieve himself  
went and told the bartender  
there's a soldier  
in the men's room  
with his wrists cut  
but not too badly  
so they left me there  
like a dripping mop  
and started talking  
about something else  
which you understand was  
was not what I expected.

After a while I got up  
and like a cat who hurts its paw  
swiping at a bug

I slunk from the bar  
as nonchalantly as I could

That was a long time ago  
and they *were* little cuts, I guess,  
but my wrists still show the scars  
and it's only sinking in now  
how dull death really is.

Jul 1982

### **War Story**

That distant war was in its final year.

We labored in the bloated island sun  
to get a ward for wounded sailors done,  
the air too thick, the sweating sky too near.

An engine roared and all of us could see  
each time the fighter pilot made a run  
and practiced his maneuvers one by one,  
diving, rising, twisting to get free.

A loud descent began.  
Then something failed.

I said out loud, that guy is going to crash.

The plane, so close I saw the pilot's eye,  
was stopped by earth. The engine parts impaled  
the flying man.  
We saw his body splash.

It was, I thought, a messy way to die.

Dec 1978, Jan, Feb, Mar 1979

### **Letter Fragment (World War II)**

He used his skull. He stuck it on a post.  
Some Jap had lost his head (ha ha). To get  
at home with death, I guess. Or maybe let  
his meanness out, or maybe just to boast.  
Whatever. A marine I know has rows  
of testicles in alcohol. He set  
his heart on getting balls and you can bet  
he did. Some shit. But that's the way it goes.

Another friend of mine put lots of work  
in, pulling teeth from skulls and stringing them  
into a necklace. Then he sat and wrote  
his girl and told her he was bringing her  
a gift. I feel a little funny when  
I think of those old teeth around her throat.

Jan 1979

### **Delayed Green**

"Yet, if, in the foggy Aleutians, if on the misty  
Island of Kiska, island of Attu, any  
Flower, however weak and bleak, appears  
In spring ...  
We must ask the men who have been there; they will know."  
Edna St. Vincent Millay (1940)

"The pressure of public events turned her more and more  
toward propaganda-verse before and during World War II."  
John Frederick Nims (1981)

I undertake to answer, even now.  
I was there and foggily recall  
the flowers, not weak or bleak, though small  
that sprang surprisingly from earth somehow  
in spring and collected in blue moving crowds.  
The Aleutians, we used to say, get lots of sun:  
I think last year the sun came on a Monday.  
But then the flowers rose and spoke out loud.

I guess there *was* a lot of fog but I  
remember most the biting sand that blew  
through fastened windows, into food and teeth,  
and formed a howling grit that hid the sky  
Well, that was long ago, before we knew  
the missiles make those edges obsolete.

Jul 1982, Dec 1984

### **The Hostages' Release**

The former hostages were mostly masked  
by duty; by the strangeness of their stay  
by wanting to display the wholesome grace  
a hundred million viewers asked of them;  
and masked again by television news,  
a play on lives, whose flickers tattled to  
humiliate us nightly with defeat  
and then to mass us for a late success.

A tearlit girl, beside a road to cheer,  
when asked what all this meant to her, said she  
could pass it on, a souvenir, and she  
was now a part of history: and Pauline  
on the road to memory, she clutched  
at time to frame and fasten on the wall.

Feb 1981, Jul, Aug 1982

## **How The Battle Begins**

On October's day in the year unknown  
The soldiers without claim are standing,  
Waiting, afraid before the cave, the gate,  
The red screw of morning, the livid dawn.

"Be fast," the Captain whispers, "when the  
Bugle sounds the reveille. We will  
Undertake the enemy, rapist of our pay,  
Usurper of the bells, anomalies."

"The Captain," says Private Sticking, looking  
Sidelong at this watch, "is an ass. I wish I  
Were with Giants, or artful Dodgers.  
What self-consuming program made us this?"

"Quite, men," the Captain hisses, "I see  
The sweat of perfidy shining juicy  
In my crosshairs. Forward, you bastards,  
Do you want to respirate forever?"

And the Captain bares his weapon and his wand  
And is translated to a moist powder  
Whose spray is not lost on Private Sticking  
Who nevertheless cries, "Shit!" and fires.

May 1984

## **Passing Through Three Intervals of Time**

*1944*

The struggling hills looked drowning in the fog  
the winter noon we sailed from San Francisco.

By dusk the frames were gibbering like cats  
and made me wonder how the rivets held  
and plates kept out a cemetery sea.

At chow that night the ship rolled wild and trays left unsecured  
jumped out and slammed against the bulkheads. Before the



crapulence was done a greasy slop of gravy gravitated back and forth across our boots.

First day on Guam I went to pee  
beside a path and suddenly  
    five or six Chamorro women  
walked solemnly surveying me  
toward a hut I found out  
later was their church.  
It only struck me then  
that ordinary people  
might be doing ordinary things  
around a battle for their home.

We wondered if the natives kept their Japanese money in case we lost, having had their paths peed on first by the Spanish, then by us, then the Japanese, then us again. This time with landing barges, tanks, B-29's, a hundred thousand troops, and all the passing piss of war.

*1963*

The beaming hills were bathing in the sun  
the afternoon we sailed from San Francisco.  
By dusk the waves were splitting at the helm  
like cream. At the rail I hypnotized  
myself with the rhythms of the ship and sea.

That night at dinner waiters dressed in white  
served consommé and duck and pastry trays.

Before the elegance was done we felt  
the lure of artificial privilege  
and the poised excitement of first nights out.

The day we landed in Tahiti, vanilla filled the air and we saw  
the local dancers practicing like athletes for the annual trials. We  
had to dodge the motor scooters and bought two tikis from a  
Frenchman who carved them himself.

We overheard a tourist ask an islander  
if there were any places still unspoiled  
and he said not since Captain Cook.

An ex-insurance agent from  
New Zealand found us a breadfruit tree  
and said the making of the movie

“Mutiny on the Bounty” nearly wrecked the island’s economy.

Then he took us to a black sand beach  
and diamond waterfalls  
and mountains set in clouds.

*1967*

The smell in Papeete’s bay this time  
was diesel fuel, hot fresh vanilla  
because de Gaulle sent out the legionnaires  
to build a place for testing atom bombs.

But Guam, somebody says, was smelling better.

(date unknown)

## **Matched Pair**

### *1. Common Place (c. 1950)*

For months I scanned the teletype’s strange creeds:  
late weather, short supplies, condensed commands,  
the Air Corps flight plans, and codes I couldn’t read.

Upstairs the Air Corps also got its plans;  
downstairs the Signal Corps, by way of me,  
got duplicates that no one seemed to need.

One day I saw that where two air lanes crossed,  
two airplanes had been scheduled to collide—  
Red 40, Green 8: same time, same height.  
I ran upstairs and told an officer.  
“You’re drunk,” he said at first—but I was right.

He radioed one plane to change its course,  
and since we didn’t want to get some crew  
in trouble, no one else there ever knew.

### *2. One Track Mind (c. 1890)*

My grandfather’s first job was driving drays,  
horse-drawn wagons, to and from the trains.

One night (the family story goes) he ran  
and shouted at the agent that two trains  
were on one track and headed for a crash.

“Go on, Brown, you’re drunk,” the agent said.  
(We always laughed at this—he never drank.)

My grandfather went and looked and then ran back.  
“God damn it, Bartee” (another laugh—we had a  
myth he also never swore) “God damn it,  
Bartee,” he said, “those trains are on the same track.”

The swearing (we said) convinced the agent, who ran  
and threw a switch and made young Brown a hero,  
for a while, though now not many of us know.

(date unknown)

## 5. The Play Goes On

### Counterattack

This is a poem with rhythm,  
not suited for those who despair,  
for the lanterns of tragical vision  
shine poorly in this simple air.

This is a poem with rhyming,  
not fit for the steadfastly mordant  
for the jangles of cultures declining  
seldom sound so naively concordant

This is a poem with meaning,  
not suited for static defense,  
for the rhythm reflects the world leaping  
and the rhymes, the world making sense.

Jan 1982

## **Structure**

I like these thicket theories:  
sound systems, mused harmonies  
of meter with natural strains,  
contrapuns, apologies,  
economies and ironies,  
linguistic sexuality,  
metaphors, metonymies,  
sin and diachronicity,  
die and synchronicity,  
time tumbled by eternity,  
chains, change and counterclaims.

But why will some words hurt or heal  
as well as herbs can do, or steel?

Dec 1981, Jul 1982

## **The Progress of Poesity**

He dabbles in profundity  
on every other Mundity  
& wrestles with lucidity  
afterwards on Tuesity  
& argues with acerbity  
on Wednesdity & Thursdity  
to convince his wife, the mightity,  
of what he means by Fridity.

(Off Saturditties & Sundelays.)

Jun 1982

## **2-tuples**

Many lines roast time and death.  
Nicht neues noch am Westen.

Other lays toast love and sects.  
Maxime regnat pontifex.

Still other spokes adorn the day.  
Il y a bien un âge dorée.

Every poker ascertains so.  
La vida, Sancho, sea sueño.

Nov 1984

## **Basketball Fans**

In church they sit as silent as decay  
to which, perhaps, they mean to pay respect.  
At work, at home, they're quiet and correct  
and usually as careful when they play.

But here they bounce around and stamp and roar  
while business-suited coaches sweat out schemes  
for baffling the hopes of other teams  
and making players, briefly, something else.

The game is fleeting as an ice cream swirl  
but deeper than desserts. That skinny girl  
who danced for cheers and near the end was spread  
like a flamingo doing splits, her head  
bent down as if in prayer -- was the grace  
in that great hall a blessing out of place?

May 1981

### **Three-Part Invention**

This mote is rustle dust and filigree,  
a fine divide of chaos from conception,  
no messages intended past reception  
like music, wind and sugar in the sea.

Be like a nectar drop and bumble bee  
and nimble cart of fribbling confection,  
a sting or two inserted for protection,  
like peppermints and counter melody.

and be a sound of burble pot and tea  
and tinkle cup and moderate intention  
according to a temperate convention,  
so bound, so free, so calm intensity.

I had in mind to speak you mysteries  
like ting and tang, like surface lines like these.

Mar 1982

### **Sweet Maybe Blues**

Sweet, someday, maybe, this big bus will take me,  
sweet, maybe, someday, bring me back to you,  
but now there ain't no way for you to make me  
just hang around and be your honeydew.

I know you'd like to have me do my duty.  
Sweet, maybe, someday, that's the way I'll be.  
I'd like to wait and be your tutti-frutti  
but now I got to ride this bus and see.

Sweet maybe someday blues is what I got  
and wonder if I'd maybe better not.  
I'd like to be your Sunday baby someday  
but someday may be longer than I thought.

If this big bus won't bring me back, I'll lose,  
and maybe have to sing sweet maybe blues.

Jan 1981

## **Farewell by Callimachus**

(translated from the Greek)

They told me your fate, Heraclitus  
and I began to cry;  
I thought how often with our talk  
we chased the sun from the sky.  
Friend from Halicarnassus, though you  
were ashes long ago,  
your songbirds live; light-fingered death  
will never reach for those.

Spring 1976 (?), Aug 1981, Aug 1982

## **Epitaph**

Traveler  
His Motto Was  
Endure  
And So He Does.

Jan 1982

## **Affirmation**

I am singing to you,  
singing,  
words that rise to mind  
the pinkish blossoms blowing  
and seeds for days to bind.

Green is promissory,  
the currency of spring.  
Sunlight promontories  
color what they bring.

Scatter, blossoms,  
blowing,  
beckon to the rounds.  
Swirl, pleasant petals,  
skirring.  
Summer gently sounds.

Apr, Dec 1981, Feb 1982

## **Names**

The people are marching the ridge.

What was the name of the ridge  
Between the first and the second great ice?  
Between the second and the third?  
Just before the last retreat?  
What were the names of the people,  
Your father a thousand times removed,  
Your mother in the snow?

What were the names of the rivers  
Before the rivers had names?  
What did the gods call the living  
Before the living could hear?  
What were the names of the gods?  
What is your name?  
What are the names of the people?  
Where are the names?

(date unknown)

## **Trees**

The cabbage priest with sauerkraut hair  
Rules the ravenous kingdom.  
Trees, it says, nothing but trees,  
Bilateral trees, looking with leaves,  
Roots in the earth, afraid in the dark,  
Deciphering news from the air,  
Dancing drops, cilia, dendrites,  
The branches and roots of wandering trees,  
Some in tight embraces,  
Reaching to touch and devour,  
The turkey king with maggots for hair  
Rules the slobbering trees.

The sparrow prince with feathery hair  
Rules the spellcast kingdom.  
Trees, it says, sing me the trees,  
Trees written large, trees written small,



Roots in invisible subjects,  
Deciphering news from the air,  
Sending signals to nowhere,  
Dancing sounds, waiting signs,  
Some in tight embraces,  
Reaching to touch and declare.  
The cosmical count with starbeams for hair  
Rules the rustle of trees.

(date unknown)