A River Gray with Rain
Selected Poems, 1985-2015

by

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The Way of the Wind in the Summer Fields

A hot summer night in the wake of the war. From my bedroom window I looked out across the deserted highway where, captured by chance in the light of the open garage door, a t-shirted trio of older boys stood leaning against the hood of a Hudson. The GULF sign creaked in its frame and the drone of the dashboard radio drifting across the highway was intermittently lost in the rustling that rose up out of the fields. I was five and a half years old and believed such country extended without any end and that undercurrents of wind amid corn were the voices of all who had ever labored or died in those acres, their murmured phrases suffusing our long summer nights like the sigh of an inland sea, and their presences, like thoughts that not entirely formed, converging upon the peripheries of our pastures at dusk.

I leaned on the sill, detecting a sudden freshness of rain in an eddy of wind and, looking out over the darkened highway, I saw the boys shielding their eyes from the blowing dust. Then, slowly, as the wind tapered off and the exhalation of all the surrounding fields became still,
two of the boys began walking away
while the other opened the Hudson’s door,
slid in behind the wheel and drove off,
heading westward into the night, his glowing
tail-lights receding until they were lost.
I leaned from the window, attempting to see
where it was the Hudson had disappeared,
gazing until I could half imagine
headlights traversing a ghostly terrain,
a terrain of distances measured out
by mile after mile of telephone poles,
darkened farmhouses, silos, barns
and glimpses of moonlit acres of corn
receding to darkness.

And as I watched,
there arose such a sighing from all the sea
of unmown grasses and midsummer corn,
such a weltering chorus that I could feel
a singing vibration in every vein.
Then peering off into the dusk of the fields,
I saw the unnumbered souls of the dead
like a river of silver beneath the stars,
a multitude rising up out of the corn
in tendrils of vapor, their voices distilled
into long ethereal dirges of loss---
whispery, dispirited voices
as legion as all the quivering leaves
on myriad stalks in a thousand fields
extending across the breadth of the county.
A loose board banging on a neighbor’s barn dispelled the illusion. The pump and garage of the filling station, the old sycamore maintaining its vigil beside the road, had all subsided to shadow. The fields were indistinguishable in the dark.
An Abandoned Bridge on Spoon River

The decrepit ironwork spanning the Spoon has carried no traffic for decades now except for the truants who brazen the bowed timbers to cross it. As such boys will, in the manner of boys immemorial, they loiter midway, lounge about, lie down and, peering through rifts in the rotted wood, beguiled by that which only boys know, they gaze on the mud-laden current below.

Cumuli pile above a near meadow where breezes conspire, ruffling the calm of leaves and rippling the water’s film. The boys hardly notice, gazing as though the bridge were the rim of a sacred well and the river---some whispering oracle.
The Morning You Came to the Hayfield

The swath overturned and tumbled like surf before the tines' whirling--- side-delivered, folded and fluffed in a windrow. The earth was rolled in a humid warmth, it was steeped in a summer fragrance, but I was stirred less by aroma of hay lightly heaped as by your appearance there at the far edge of the hayfield, a shy visitor.

The sky was a curved limpid shell of blue eddied with breezes. The sun-cured harvest, hoisted by fork to the high spacious loft, would last the winter. The image of you, your skirt in clover, your lineaments soft, would in half an hour be all but lost.
The Itinerant

He had stayed on a week, this taciturn man, this man who, despite having taken meals each day at her table, had never once found reason to speak of his purpose or past--never, that is, until the last evening when, as she was reaching to pass a bowl of boiled potatoes, he told her that he would leave with the morning.

And, later, as they stood framed in the doorway, their talking done and he on his way to the barn, she told him, "Wait here a little," and disappeared back through the parlor, returning almost at once to place a few bills in his hand. She desired to ask him where he would go, to ask him where he was going the morning he passed the farm and had stopped to inquire for work, but she felt a reluctance to ask what he had not volunteered himself, and she said, "I am grateful to you for all you have done."

He nodded and thought once again of how he had seen her that day alone in the field, doggedly heaving bales on a wagon, and he asked of her, "How long can it be, with your husband dead and two hundred acres of crops coming on-- how long can you last, a woman alone on so large a farm?"
"For as long as Heaven intends," she replied, and he nodded once more and, squarely placing his hat on his head, made ready to leave. "Must you go just yet?" she asked him softly, "I have put on a pot of coffee." He turned and seemed for a moment to study her, then once again took his hat in his hand. "You can sit on the swing," she motioned, stepping back through the door. "I won't be a minute," but when she returned with two steaming cups, she found him sitting instead on the rail with his back to the post. She smiled and said, "Do you dislike comfort, Mr McCann?" He seemed to be gazing at something out in the dark of the night. "I am fine," he said. She held out a brimming cup. "It is strong and scalding," she warned, "and probably bitter." He took it with what she thought was a smile, the merest trace of a smile, and eased a savoring sip. She moved to the swing and sat on it lightly, holding her cup, and he saw how the simple hem of her skirt swirled once at her ankles and then was still. From somewhere out of the darkness there came, from a distant pasture, the melancholy lowing of a bull... and she knew, however long before daylight she might walk out to offer him coffee or food for the road, she would find him gone and, struck by the thought, she asked of him quickly, "Where will you go?" "West, I suppose," was all that he said.
"Have you no family?" There, it was out.
"None that would have me around," he replied,
and she knew by the way that he turned to look
at nothing at all, at the empty night,
she had asked too much, and she feared that he
would rise to his feet and bid her good night,
but he kept his place and, to her surprise,
looked back at her gently. And what she said next,
what she found herself saying, was nothing that she
had so much as thought: "I would like you to stay,"
and she almost gasped to hear herself say it.

She thought that she heard him sigh as he said,
"It wouldn't work out." "I could pay you more,"
she countered at once, with a sinking sense,
but he shook his head firmly. "It's not the pay."
"Well, what is it then?" and she heard in her voice
a tremor of pleading and hated the sound.
"I am sorry," she said. "I have no right to ask."

He sought for some word to reassure her,
this woman with whom he had felt more at peace
than with any woman that he had known,
but the distance between what he felt somewhere
in the depth of himself and the words he would need
to tell of it here in this woman's presence,
was a distance that he could not hope to bridge,
and so he said nothing. Beneath the porch,
a cricket began to chirr and they both
gave all their attention to it, keeping
their thoughts at bay.
It wasn’t that she, now that the haying was done, couldn’t find and hire some capable hand— it wasn’t a matter of labor or need— it was more, more than she knew how to say, and more than the circumstance that had led him here and just as surely would lead him away, would ever permit.

With his coffee gone, he started to rise, so she left the swing and stepped up before him, taking the empty cup from his hand. He put on his hat and regarded her for a long moment. "I’ll leave at daybreak." She nodded, but found there was nothing to say. "I have liked it here," he said, and started to say something more, but then merely tipped the brim of his hat and turned away toward the barn.

The next morning, expecting to find him gone, she only entered the barn to see if, by chance, he had left anything behind. As she swung the great door aside she was wholly engulfed in the redolence of the few hundred bales they had stacked together. She stood for a time in the twilit bay till the wagon and bales and dust-laden rafters resolved from the dusk. She could tell by the broken twine and scattered timothy stalks where it was he had slept.
and, standing there lost in his absence, she felt more tired than she had felt since the day her husband was buried--and for the first time in her thirty-eight years she was overcome with the sense that more of her life had passed than remained to her.

She emerged from the barn to the sight of treeless fields stretching out to a level horizon far to the west where, just for a moment, a thought carried her, and she stood there poised on the instant, as though in expectation of something..., and then, entrusting the thought to that hidden place she had long ago made for herself, she turned once more to the work that awaited her.
Class

was what she hoped for a little more of
but wasn’t holding her breath--- it was something
in short supply on the farm and valued
accordingly, like seedcorn or credit---
a thing to be cultivated with care
and hoarded like so many precious jars
of late-summer fruit. Class was a velvet
upholstered chair where the men never sat
in a parlor always dusted--- if only
she’d had a parlor--- so sometimes Class
was only a corner of yard fenced off
from the hogs where, tucked among onions,
she cherished a hidden bed of alyssum.
Class was keeping her six daughters clothed
in handmade dresses, not hand-me-downs,
while strictly admonishing every lapse
of grammar or bearing or common grace.
Class was a lyric by Longfellow learned
as a child and softly recited
(on mornings when all the men were afield)
to a disapproving chorus of hens.
Class was a few stolen moments sitting
alone at the kitchen table, slowly
turning a page in the WARD’S catalogue.
Class was something to do with great cities,
with distances traveled by night, a wordless
prayer in her child’s heart and a silvery
horn from an east-bound express suspended
above the fields as she drifted to sleep.
Nights by a Window, Listening for a Train

After a year, the pain of his leaving had settled within her as though a small insidious seed had taken root and folded her heart in filament.

As the morning of his departure passed to the never-ending night of his absence, the stark, untenanted rooms around her, rooms of inveterate shadow her lamp was powerless to dispel, and of cold, indifferent walls that had never warmed, in spite of the usual fire she kept—each of the rooms closed in like a prison whose windows could only return a pale reflected face, a face she could scarcely mark as her own, so hollow and white and strange it had grown. In those unrelieved, unrestful hours that made up her nights, she could feel a filament of the seed insinuating itself in her soul, a seed of forboding that lay in wait for the single thing that would draw it forth to flower into a terrible grief: a knock at the door and a telegram.

A night together as husband and wife was all that circumstance had allowed, a night which, lest he leave her widowed with child, they spent in separate rooms,
joined by the distance that lay between them.
The following morning she rode with him
to the depot where, with orders to join
a battalion forming for duty in France,
he would board a train for camp in Virginia.

Parted by only the width of a hand
as they sat on the wagon's wooden seat,
they composed but a single silhouette,
belying the sense of isolation
that each began to feel in the other.
He urged the mare to a trot, but offered
little in the way of conversation
while she, in the grip of apprehensions
so strange and particular to herself
she could find no way to permit them voice,
sat wrapped in a silence deep as his own.

When they reached the station, she held him close
for a fiery instant, then rushed away
without looking back and hurried ahead
till she found herself on the outskirts of town
by the edge of a field, and there she stopped.
Somewhere off to the east she could faintly
distinguish the clack of wheel upon rail
suspended upon the late morning air...
and then it was lost completely, as though
she had only dreamed it, or only heard
the murmurous rasp of wind sweeping in
over acres of bleached and drying corn.
A lifetime of waiting had passed since then, and letters received in the interval, letters in envelopes mottled by rain and mud from places unknown, each bearing a censor's stamp and, for postage, a phrase--each letter held something less of the one she remembered, as though what kept them apart had turned to a distance more than miles, more than the lapse of time. She was helpless to stay the gradual drifting apart of something unnameable they had shared, of a feeling altogether too frail to survive the prolonged monotonies and sporadic storms of a soldier's life, or even the simple, merciless fact that many letters took months to arrive while many others were lost. She as well might have sought to hold the peculiar, soft and lyrical presence of light that filled her room for an hour on certain days in the aftermath of autumn. She felt the close of a promise that once had lain open between them--she felt it now like the close of evening beyond her door, dimming the distant fields.

In the months that followed, the dread she had always known, the dread that he might be killed, was replaced by something less understood, by a fear whose origen she was uncertain of,
unless it began with an unexpected
darkness of phrase in one of his letters
or else with the premonitions that rose
unbidden as birds from out of a field--
a fear that he, in a part of his soul,
had suffered death of a different order,
a death to be nursed in his heart, to be borne
back into life, to the woman he loved,
like a plague-carrying ship into harbor.
And she felt, without the strength to admit
so much as a breath of it to herself,
that the leave her husband had taken of her
the morning after their wedding, had proven
final at last. He would not return.
The soldier who would survive to step down
from the somber train as it hissed to a stop,
who would search the crowd for her face until
he feels the touch of her hand on his arm
and hears his name spoken-- this same soldier
would turn to her with the eyes of a stranger.
The Dark Fields

A rap at the door. She dropped her sewing, disconcerted, and rose to her feet, but already her husband had crossed the room and stood at the window, peering through blinds. "It’s all right," he assured her, "they’re neighbors." He stepped to the door and opened it wide. Four haggard faces stared back at him. "You’d better come with us," one of them said, "there’s been a murder." The woman’s hand rose to her open mouth. She pleaded "Al?" but her husband had put on his coat. The men looked uneasy. "Give us a moment," he said to them. They returned to the dark. "This isn’t something they’ve seen before," he told her softly. He saw her shudder and turn away. "Go on," she whispered, "you’d better hurry."

How long after that, how long after hearing the clatter of hooves recede into silence, she sat alone in the soft wavering light of a lamp and stared at her hands, she could never say. That which awaited her husband disturbed a deeper part of herself than she knew and, unaware that what he would find at an isolated farm up the road was a woman shot and a man hanged, she imagined the killer loose in the night and herself alone in the empty house.
Dimming the lamp, she moved to the window and stared down the vacant road, unable to fathom a thing in the heavy dusk, unable to see where her husband stood in a ring of silent men in a barn, cutting a dead man down from a rafter.

Too many winter nights she had watched at this same window, delving the darkness beyond the reflected face in the glass, beyond the porch and the yard, throughout the months that her husband was overseas. For weeks she had watched an old disfigured oak on the hilltop, silhouetted like a shape of anguish against the stars, a shape nearly human, twisted in pain. A voice from the Revelation of John grew audible in those nights, a voice heard as a child, hectored in ominous tones from the depths of some evangelist’s tent, a voice that conjured apocalyptic shapes from her own interior night, shapes in a vapor that never resolved-- and now, as she stood alone in the house, alone but for all the spectral fears that closed upon her, she grew aware of something with neither face nor form against the sky on the hill, something stark. Abruptly she ran to the kitchen door and fled out across the yard to the gate, tripping and stumbling but still running on, away from the house, the hill, the road,
running until the remotest light
had vanished and there was nothing at all
but a black and indeterminate void
of field and starless sky and the sudden
unendurable pounding of her heart.
Her Father's War

On the very morning that she was born,
he collected and packed them up for good;
a few he consigned to the bottom drawer
of an old bureau--- the rest he stowed
in an iron-bolstered trunk in the barn:
the moth-balled remains of a buried war.
For a dozen years they were sealed away,
terred like a memory long-suppressed,
till she asked him once, on a winter’s day,
if he’d been in the war. He looked surprised.
Come to the barn, he said. When he lifted
the lid of the trunk, she saw a folded
winterfield jacket, an overseas cap,
a compass, canteen, and a battered cup.

When later she asked again of the war,
such innocent things were all he revealed.
If it hadn’t been for a door left ajar
one night, as her father sat up alone
by the open trunk, she would never have known
of the other objects he kept concealed:
a holstered pistol, papers, a medal,
foreign citations unrolled from a tube,
and darker relics retrieved in battle
from the rocks and ravines of Belleau Wood:
Iron Crosses and buckles, a bayonet
with its hilt in the form of an eagle’s head---
all torn from bloody tunics of the dead
and then smuggled home in a service kit.
Later that spring, on Memorial Day, her father and other veterans marched the length of a cedar-lined path to pay respects to the local fallen. She thrilled at how stern he appeared among the men, at how smartly he bore himself, unmatched in the curt retort and snap of his drill. She shuddered to hear the synchronized crack of volleys fired again and again from a line of rifles slanted above the white wooden cross of a soldier's grave. Observing the set of her father's face, like statuary, she pondered the lack of expression, the marble stare into space.

That night, as she huddled asleep in bed, a spasm of coughing rose from below to disorient her dream, coughing so consumptive she woke with a nauseous dread. She tried to ignore it, turning her head to stare at the silhouette of the silo outside her window, surrounded by stars. But it was impossible not to think of the deathly noise. She stole downstairs to the light in the kitchen where, because he had never spoken of mustard gas, she was startled and scarcely understood when he buckled abruptly at the sink and brightened all its enamel with blood.
Last Stand

When he woke in a cloud of pain to find that he’d been installed in a narrow bed in a strange room, a part of his mind returned to the morning he lay half-dead in the Argonne Forest, awaiting help, expecting deliverance, counting upon a fellow Marine---but no such hope supported him now. He was on his own. He ripped that abomination, that tube and needle, ripped it out of his vein and, laying hold of the lamp like a club, he raised a thunderous shout till a rain of running feet on linoleum poured indignantly down the hall to his door.

Like Bowie near death at the Alamo, propped against pillow with pistol cocked, the old man waited for faces to show in the open door and launched his attack, hurling bedpan, lamp and telephone at the scrambling nurses. They had him packed and escorted home within the hour. That evening, dug in like a cornerstone on his own farm, resolutely locked against all reason, lord of his tower, he defied his family’s threats and pleas till they crow-barred the door and found him dead, draped in a coat, sitting upright in bed, a Winchester rifle across his knees.
The Harvest

Toward evening they found him out in the field behind the tractor, lying face down.
The husking-bed of the cornpicker held a mangled glove, but no blood or bone.
His hand was intact.

They puzzled it out.
Something, most likely a stalk, had jammed the snapping rolls. As he freed them, they caught a finger, ripped the glove from his hand, and gave him so unexpected a shock he dropped on the spot from a heart-attack.
They laid him out in the bed of the truck and ferried him home.

As they neared the yard, she stepped from the doorway, twisting a lock of hair round her finger, staring hard.
Nowhere to Nowhere

When they sold off the farm she took the child and caught a bus out of town— as for him, with everyone gone and everything grim, he opened a pint of bourbon, piled pictures, letters and clothes in the yard, doused them in kerosene, struck a match and watched as they burnt to ashes, watched and worked on his whiskey, working hard.

The next morning he caught an outbound freight heading god-knows-where and he didn’t care— he was down to nothing, a gypsy’s fare— down to a rusty tin cup and a plate, dice and a bible, a bedroll and fate, down to a bone-jarring ride on a train through country dying and desperate for rain, running nowhere to nowhere and running late.
Hanging Out the Wash in the Midst of Fall Plowing

The sight of billowing sheets in the wind
caused something to break in the little child,
not only because, like anything wild,
they wrangled and whipped but because their fall
and lift afforded glimpses of all
the impending darkness that lay beyond:
the sinister acres of cloven land,
the miles of merciless black without end.
Proprietress of the Party Line

It wasn’t so much that she listened in on our every call, it was that she took not the slightest trouble to mask the din and clatter of pots and pans as she cooked, or bothered to set the receiver down as she bellowed out the door to her boys or cursed a pig off the porch. All the town had to talk above or around the noise of Lucinda’s chaotic life, and yet, we’d not have embarrassed her on a bet by letting her know we knew she was there—the dullness and drill of her daily fare had left her, like most of us, deadly bored; whenever she blew off steam, we just paused and held our tongues till the turmoil passed: we wouldn’t want her to miss a word.
The Exile

On the winter morning that they were wed, she made of her husband a sole request: that before old age should overtake them with infirmities, pills and all the rest, they would very sensibly move to town. The thought of a widowhood spent alone amid all that silence filled her with dread and she begged his promise. He nodded once in cautious accord. Now, fifty years hence, she lives contented with neighbors at hand and a house she can manage. As for him, he stands at the window in reverie as though in the empty street he can see acres and acres of newly-plowed land.
The Prodigal

In the end the thing that disturbed him most, the thing he remembered most through the years, was when he returned to the family place, to the hard unforgiving acres where his father still farmed, and recalled again the inherent knowledge he once possessed simply by being his father’s son— a knowledge foregone, consigned to the past, till he saw it rise up in his father’s face as a look of reproach: that nothing gained by talking has worth, that cattle and land are the only wealth befitting a man; that a landless man is like Adam cast from the Garden, shamed, and forever lost.
After the Auction

With nothing left but a rented room
in town, after which the county home,
his remaining choice was plain enough:
by dint of grit and a cane, he made
his way up a steep and gullied road
to the wasted oak that crowned the bluff
and there, looking back on what was done,
on his fathers’ acres auctioned off,
he pulled from his belt a loaded gun.
There Are Stories

There are stories you know without knowing quite how it is you know them, stories without any point to speak of, except the point of their own peculiar strangeness, stories as empty of purpose as any abandoned barn in these barren fields, enduring against all likelihood or good reason.

One such story took place around here a lifetime ago. An old couple died---

whether, as may be, by Providence or simply by luck---they died, either way, on the very same day. He died before lunch.

The daughters decided to tell her nothing. She appeared to take no notice of sharing her bed with a corpse, except to complain of his icy feet. She was dead before dark. And that's all there is to that story. No one recalls anymore who they were.
The Widower

It may have been only the consequence
of his deepening age, or of something more,
something to do with the unendurable
starless nights or the drifted acres
of whiteness stretching forever away
like a dream of death ~ but whatever the cause,
he heard the scrabbling patter of mice
over carelessly piled forks and plates
as the sound of his wife downstairs at the sink
drying the supper dishes. And later,
forgetting he’d put on the kettle himself,
he waited for its insistent shrill
to summon her from her sewing, and when
it persisted, dismissed it as nothing more
than the endless and purgatorial keen
of wind in the eaves. He tendered his watch
in the nameless hour, sunk in his chair,
submerged in a phantom procession of shades
that moved through his mind like glimmerings cast
on the wall from flames in the grate, all the while
expecting to hear her foot on the stair,
till like some old sorrow from somewhere deep
in the subterranean soul of the house,
a timber groaned and he knew she was gone.
He hoisted his overcoat up to his chin
and, turning his back to the deepening cold,
slumbered by fits and starts. In the kitchen,
a curtain, darkened and limp with steam,
adhered to the windowpane till it froze.
The Old Masterson Place

Though barren for years, still it crowns the knoll,
walls weathered gray, roof a gaping hole,
windows like empty sockets in a skull.
The Greying Edge of a Winter Evening

In Stark County, in his eighty-third year, my grandfather died. The tall gabled house overlooking the creek and bottomland from a rough oak ridge stands empty now, but nothing changes. The west-facing pane of the window-bay where he watched from his desk again glazes red as sunset crowns the rim out beyond the timbered slopes and, again, a raw wind sculpts the snow into curving drifts across the back yard. A familiar hour, the graying edge of a winter evening, when day and night walk the same bare fields. An ice-refracted ray of rose imperceptibly moves among old mementos lying upon the darkened oak of his desk, igniting the interior of a glass paperweight and warming the copper of four old coins. In a matter of days, we will all convene for the sorting out and dividing of goods, the auctioning off of machinery, of cattle and parceled land, the settling of last accounts. But for now it's as though my grandfather's only just left his chair and wandered off somewhere along the hall or down the darkened stairs to the cellar. Nothing has changed. Once more, as in all the uncounted winter days of his life, the early dusk haunts the empty house, the quiet rooms darken, the furnace kicks in.
The Old and Obdurate Shade of Yews

A disused knoll between fields, set apart as burial ground when the first settler died: some ninety years later a horse-drawn cart conveyed the last coffin. Now no one knows of any visitors other than crows---the gate is grappled in vine.

This is no fit place for the living, where weedy rows of lichen-encrusted slabs recede in the old and obdurate shade of yews. There are presences here, not only of those bewildered and disembodied souls that cower about their bones like ghouls, but of something residual, more to do with the knoll itself, with the grating caw of crows in the distance, the muted blue of skies through a barren tree---presences intrinsic as death, indifferent as dust, that discompose and deter the senses, instilling a dull unease . . .

All but lost, the west is like absence: each fencerow ends on that gray horizon where field and mist and darkening sky converge to a blur. Mourning-doves murmur. Night impends.
Epitaph

Concealed under corn, the wreckage of farms,
rotted timbers of buried silos and barns,
the hard rusted shards of harrows and plows,
the fallen-in hollows of cellar and house,
long-buried fragments of saucers and crocks,
doorknobs and buttons amid clay and rocks:
such are the secretive depths of the sea
of corn that extends to eternity
from the banks of Spoon River: beneath the sky,
beneath all we see, generations lie.
The Tower at the Edge of the Wood
The Tower at the Edge of the Wood

Demure, nestled fields so intensely green
they appear to float amid clouds of swallows...
shimmering fields of incipient wheat
awash with scarlet of poppies, like those
my grandfather mentioned. Here, where arises
on battlements of crag and ravine,
the huge and shadowy bulk of a wood,
a sole brigade of Americans met
the army that swept towards Paris and stood
against it, dying by hundreds. I stare
at its rocky defiles and crevices
till my scalp begins to tingle and crawl.
My grandfather spoke of the poppies here,
how petals by hundreds would break and fall ~

how every sullen recess of the wood
flickered a vicious flame ~ how a mighty
moan arose from the ranks as poppies,
soldiers and grain were cut down together
till not one man or stalk of wheat stood ~
how those still breathing cringed behind bodies
crumpled or sprawling ~ how raking fire
shredded their haversacks and pinned them
close to the earth ~ how strangely, somewhere,
the note of a warbler, piercingly clear,
emerged for a moment above the din ~
how the fire hit them again, again,
as curse accompanied prayer ~ how cries
of the wounded tore the heart with pity.
Grandfather never spoke of such dying
directly ~ there were clipped allusions,
disquieting, never intentional
and, often, there was the lapse of silence
that fell like frost on the otherwise green
and pastoral heart of each reminiscence.
Mostly what he imparted were small
vignettes and stories of commonplace things
reassuring to any farmer's son:
how he stole up into the loft of a barn
with a bottle ~ how he hauled ammunition
on a night so dark that he walked his team
by the flare of shells ~ how he stole a swim
while washing his lathered mules in the Marne.

One evening he held the porch like a stage
for a crowd of us boys and told of the time
that he turned an all-but-terrified team
straight in the teeth of a rolling barrage ~
how he calmed the creatures, holding reins taut
in his left hand, with a watch in his right
and, timing the march of the fiery wall
that bore upon them until the earth shook,
how he barked a brusque command to his mules
and bullied them straight through the coiling smoke.
But there was a darker side to the war
not found in his tales or among his letters,
or even between the lines of the battered
diary stashed in the back of a drawer.
In all his words there was nothing of what, years afterward, while exhuming the past in the cold crypt of an archival vault, I found by chance in a written account by a young corporal in Grandpa’s detachment: he told how the dead lay in summer heat all swollen and black ~ how soldiers were sent on burial parties, not from a sense of rightness, but only to stop the stench ~ how, unceremoniously, they tossed the corpses in shell-holes ~ how when they pulled on limbs they could feel the joints separate ~ how flies buzzed up from the flesh in a cloud ~ how, mostly, the bodies were left to rot.

Such images weltered up in a flood as our taxi turned through the somber gate some minutes ago and proceeded straight through a corridor of identical trees and bordering hedges of clustered roses. Directly before us, positioned midway up the side of a hill, in a brooding wood, an immaculate, white, unworldly tower commanded a field of white marble crosses. As we stepped from the car, the driver leaned out, explained he would wait for us one hour, and turned off the meter. At our surprise, he told how his father had also fought on the Marne, and with that he looked away.
In the years just after the war they came
by the thousands here ~ the parents, widows,
and fatherless children ~ to walk among rows
of crosses in search of some single name
out of all the rest ~ and there came, as well,
the soldiers themselves: alone, in pairs
or, ever more frequently through the years,
together with wives. For months afterward,
Grandfather talked of a long journey back,
of showing my grandmother what had occurred ~
of trying to show what he couldn’t tell.
But he gave it up ~ with too many rows
of his own to walk, too much acreage, stock,
and too little savings, too little time.

When, long after that, I asked him whether
he might still return, he said, with a frown,
"That was decades ago. Your grandmother's gone.
Nothing would be the same." I remember
the way he looked out at the evening sky
as though he might peer through miles and years
to those far-off events, and how I arose
from the sofa and silently left the room.
And now, what a strange, ironic turn
that it should be I and not he who has come,
and my wife rather than his who should see
this place of all places. ~ She takes my arm
and, almost touching her lips to my ear,
quietly whispers, the circle is closed.
We wander along the avenue, dazed by the sheer translucency of the air, by all the surrounding miles of wheat and myriad poppies, by wheeling ares of swallows suffused in light. Everywhere we turn it is almost as though we gaze upon the first morning before there fell the first intimation of any night.

My wife, knowing little of what has passed in this sorrowful wood, sees it most of all as a beautiful and mysterious place and, venturing off on her own to where a stair rises dimly into the dark of the trees, she slowly climbs out of sight.

And now for the first time I am alone, alone in that place of legends to which my grandfather always longed to return, a place of apocalyptic fury, carnage and devastation... a place of villages and reclusive pastures and rivers that haunted him all his days. At the close of this wrathful century which he, as a boy, observed at its dawn, I have come in his place to stand and watch at post, as a cloud moves over the sun, as a shadow moves slowly across the face of the tower that stands like an ancient cairn, marking the derelict bones of warriors.
I cross a rectangular swath of lawn
to the base of the hill where, step by step,
I mount an austere and gradual stair
to the terrace that foots the tower and stop
to face the imposing arch of a doorway.
Passing beneath an armored Crusader
surrounded by archivolts like a fan,
I find myself standing within a small,
obscurely-lit chapel. The afternoon sun
inelines through narrow, faceted windows
of tinted and leaded glass, muted rays
of colored radiance slanting through air
to hallow, in auras of blue and rose,
names of the missing chiseled on walls.

Since before the last war these ghostly rays,
pivoting on axes of window-glass,
have cloven the cloistered air of this place,
their indiscernable movement across
the walls precisely in opposition
to the arc of the sun across the sky.
In shadow, a Gothic altar of brass
and marble stands recessed in an apse,
presenting a stark, solitary cross.
I turn from its presence and wander out
into warmly showering light, a vision
of uninterrupted tranquility
rising above me: a sky without cloud,
a single swallow that soars and dips.
I watch, completely absorbed in its flight
till it skirls into aether, and then I turn
and follow the terrace around the wall
of the tower from where I can see, above,
the stairway vanishing into the wood.
The air is less cordial here, with the sun
eclipsed by a circuit of conifers
closing on every side. A residual
atmosphere, haunted and unresolved,
hovers about their boughs and they brood
like portals opening into the night,
into a purgatory of craters,
of trenches and dugouts clouded with fern,
of corroded cartridges, buckles, spoons.

But there are are darker ravines in this wood
where more survives than detritus of war,
where memory stains the air and where cries
of huddled and immaterial forms
are like shuddering leaves... ~ ~ She catches my eye
from the stairway, suddenly stepping forth
from out of the shadows, a strange, uncertain
regard on her face that makes me afraid.
I rush up to meet her. She grasps my arm
and urges me rapidly down the stair
toward the waiting taxi. I pull her near
and ask her to whisper what she has seen ~
she turns with a look that is oddly removed ~
her eyes are unaccountably grieved
The Cramer Sonnets
Cramer and the Irksome Fly

Chin squarely on chest, feet up, fedora pulled down over eyes. The telephone hasn't rung in a month. An acidic aura of cigarettes and residual gloom turns everything dingy: desk and chair, the windows and walls and the very air. He could do with a solid client, and soon. Beneath a pint bottle, bottom drawer, a bundle of unopened bills attests to the tide of ruin that laps his door. He dozes, half-hearing the traffic's drone. The insolent bluebottle fly that rests like an ex-wife's taunt beside the blotter bestirs him at last. He lifts the swatter.
Cramer and the Lost Client

A jangling ring like a detonation
snaps him awake with a violent start.

He lunges, sending the ashtray tumbling
and snarls Cramer Investigations
into the mouth-piece, slapping and scrambling
to rid himself of the fiery spark
that chews a smoldering hole in his pants.

What’s that? . . I doubt it . . couldn’t say Bub . .
no, no . . depends on the circumstances . .
forty-five dollars a day plus expenses,
with a small retainer paid in advance . .

Yeah, likewise . . He slams the receiver, snubs
the butt to a pulp and, with crossed feet up,
fedora pulled down, returns to his nap.
Cramer and the Cool Glance

He can see at once she is pure trouble,
leaning sinuously in the open door
like a watchful leopard, sleek and supple,
with eyes of a color he cannot name.
She raises a thin cigarette to lips
that summon to mind a just-bitten apple,
scarlet and moist with a poisonous nip.
Cramer stands and flicks a match into flame,
extending it over the desk. She moves
like something they ought to keep behind bars
or let loose in a jungle, crossing the floor
with a smile so slight it is almost grave.
She draws at the flame till her cigarette flares,
then with one cool glance she is out the door.
Cramer and the Hint of Perfume

Cramer attends to the intermittent, insignificant sounds of the city, still savoring just a hint of perfume and cigarette smoke. The image of her drawing provocatively at the flame overcomes him like an intoxicant.

He remembers when he was in the flower of youth himself. He remembers a blue-eyed beauty, his tormentor and lover. He feels in his gut a pang of self-pity, but puts it down to a touch of the flu. Distinctly off-center and off his mettle, he reaches into the bottom drawer of his desk. He extracts the trusty bottle.
Cramer and the Late Hour

Forsaking the office, he makes his way
from Third and State, over State Street Bridge
and down the old stair to the river’s edge.
What has brought him here he’s unable to say,
not about to admit or just doesn’t care.
He removes a small leather flask from his coat
and, as a precaution against the night air,
takes a long and lingering pull till his throat
grows warm and relaxed and the dreary town
goes soft at the edges. He listens awhile
to the screech and slam of a shunting freight
on the far side of the river and frowns
at a twinge in his gut and taste of bile.
He shivers and coughs. It is growing late.
Cramer and the Body in the River

As soon as he sees the three black & whites and two men in trench-coats kneeling beside a body in the garish pulsing lights, a half-dressed body in the river trash, Cramer feels something turn sour inside. He forgets the cigarette burning to ash between his fingers and, under his breath, he finds himself saying . . . pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death.

A trench-coat chuckles, Well, lookee there, Mitch, speak of the devil -- then to Cramer he growls, Got something here you might want to inspect . . . a client of yours . . . a regular doll . . . ain’t she the one you were paid to protect?
Cramer and the Hungry Moon

With night nearly gone he returns to his room
and stands by the window an hour or so
in a kind of daze. The archaic glow
of a mica lamp only deepens the gloom
as he gazes beyond the grimy pane,
beyond the grid of the fire-escape
to the hungry moon . . .

now the crumpled shape
of her body among the flotsom creeps
into Cramer’s brain like a stealthy rat
to gnaw at his thoughts. There will be no sleep
for Cramer this night, he is sure of that---
he is kneeling beside her now where she lies,
beside her now in the sleet and the rain,
rapt in the mercury stare of her eyes.
Cramer and the Two Eggs

What’ll it be, Sugar? You’re all done in.
Half a sandwich and soup?

Just coffee, Rose.

She pours it up black. And maybe a dose
of Kentucky straight? You barely look human.

He cradles the steaming cup in his hands
and blows on it softly, saying nothing.

Ah come on, Sugar, you gotta eat something.
Why don’t I fix you some nice ham and eggs?

Cramer shrugs. I’m a little low on funds.

Well just some eggs then.

Ah, forget it, Rose.
It’s been a tough month. I’m down to the dregs.

She looks at him hard. Two eggs and some toast.
And don’t you say nothin’. It’s on the house.
You’re lookin’ bad, Sugar, like some kinda ghost.
Cramer and the Grimy Pane

Cut the crap, Cramer. Get to what happened. Got a witness who places the two of you here in this office the same afternoon she washed up dead.

Like I told you, Captain, she was looking to hire a bodyguard, which isn’t a service I offer these days, so I sent her to Adrian Montague down on Fifteenth Avenue.

So you say, only Montague swears she never showed. Cramer says nothing. The Captain looks hard into Cramer’s face, then turns to the window. A nice view you got here of the trainyard and the river and all . . .

Yeah, Cramer says, you should see it under a harvest moon.

ii.

You’re givin’ me a bellyache, Cramer. I got me a body and nothing much else--- nothing but you--- the last one to see her with rose in her cheeks.

Cramer shrugs, pulls out
a crushed pack of Luckies and shakes one loose.

That's all there is, Cap--- to the final jot.

She wouldn't unveil the particulars
till I promised to take the case, so that
was that--- there was nothing more I could do.
The next time I saw her, she'd had a swim.

The Captain’s smile is humorless, grim.

He looks down at a long line of boxcars
crossing the yard. Oughta wash the grime
off your window, Cramer, it spoils the view.
Along the Thames
A Widow in Rosemary Lane

London, ca. 1840

The winter my husband died, I was thrown on my own resources, such as they were--I lost each of my children, one by one, even my youngest and dearest daughter--dead of the cholera, all of them dead.

I covered their coffins in cedar boughs.

Now I've four bare walls and straw for a bed, but I'll never go willing to workhouse, not while I'm able to make my round: Aldgate to Whitechapel, St. George's East, then Stepney to Bromley, eyes to the ground for scrap of linen, or dog's dung at least.

I look to no one, I pray and I curse.

I keep a copper or two in my purse.
Tincture of Oblivion

I.

To soften her acute distress
Rossetti to his Lizzie gave
a balm that calmed her to the grave,
a nectar like a warm caress,
a dark narcotic lullaby
that soothed her into dreamless sleep
so indecipherably deep,
its emptiness eclipsed the sky.

And as her body was reposed,
Rossetti made an offering,
a symbol of her suffering---
before the casket lid was closed,
before the lid was hammered tight,
he lay his sonnets at her cheek
as though her muted lips might speak
his lyrics to the airless night.

At length a season passed away---
the grass upon her grave stood tall---
Rossetti could not sleep at all
for dreaming of her where she lay.

He numbed his sorrow and regret
with little sips of laudanum,
with tinecture of oblivion
that wrapt and held him in its net
and drew him into visions such
as only thralls to beauty see,
that verge upon insanity
and teach what others never touch---
then dead at last to all but art,
as though possessed, he drew and drew,
his every line a root that grew
around and through her buried heart.
II.

The light that pierced her deathly sleep
that fell upon her dreamless eyes
was not of angels come to prise
her body from the musty deep---

the light was from the fire built
beside her grave one moonless night
where diggers worked with main and might
to pry the lid, to quell the guilt.

On Highgate’s old and holy ground
they knelt beside the open grave,
beside the desecrated cave
and could not speak of what was found,

except the hair of poppy red
that down upon her shoulders spilled
in such luxuriance it filled
the confines of her coffin-bed.

The little book was lifted out,
was wrested from its resting place
beneath the hair, beside the face,
and then again the lid was shut

and Lizzie, rocked within her berth,
disturbed in her eternal sleep,
was lowered in the wordless, deep
repository of the earth.
The sonnets that were stolen thus
ensured Rossetti’s lasting fame,
secured Rossetti’s secret shame
and so bestowed the darker loss.

Thereafter, as Rossetti swore,
whenever and wherever he
might be alone, uncannily,
behind the wall or through the door,
a melancholy whispering
like fitful breezes in the trees
or rustling in the draperies---
a momentary glimmering
among the shadows of the room---
a passing chill--- Rossetti had
no peace at all as myriad
memories gathered in the gloom.

The other lovers that he sought,
the beauty that he wrought in art
could not restore his mouldered heart---
his each endeavor came to nought.

The laudanum and chloral he
resorted to did all the rest---
the low light dying in the west
assured his lasting agony.
Port Meadow, near Oxford

What country is this?--- this land of meadows
extending beyond the northernmost haze
and blue of distance, where untold hundreds
of cattle and wandering horses graze
or lie recumbent, resting their heads,
while limpid swallows,
pursuing a languorous curve of the Thames,
encounter their own reflections, deftly
tipping their wings to water or swiftly
tracing the river’s course where it wends.

Along the eroded bank of the river,
a meandering footpath winds its way
circuitously under cottonwoods
whose tiny catkins unloosen a splay
of indifferent fluff in drifting clouds
with every shiver
or stirring of wind . . . and high over all,
flotillas of billowing cumuli
in weightless serenity cross the sky
as the long day eases, and hours lull.

Already to westward the sun recedes,
softening trees to a rouge, as varied
rays mellow slowly to rose and shadows
lengthen across the land. Unhurried,
a swan delves slowly among the shallows,
rooting in reeds,
dipping its beak into eddies of shade...
Above the meadows, a lingering light
resists the violet stain of night---
eastward, the glimmering spires fade.
Embers of a Gypsy Fire

In the middle of nowhere, a crossroads,
a few straggled oaks on a barren heath---
overhead a raven, but nothing more
except dust in my eye, grit in my teeth
and a wind that harries me to the core.

There is nothing that bodes
well in this place--- from the branch of an oak
a disquieting cipher: a dangling bone
with curious markings, hanging alone
on a knotted cord like a twist of smoke.

Sign of the Devil’s spawn, if you credit
what villagers swear underneath their breath
(for crossroads indeed are the Devil’s haunt),
but this is no rosary hung by wraith,
no unholy relic to tempt or taunt---
no demon tied it.
This bundled-up bone is a gypsy sign,
nothing more than a Gretel’s crumb to show
in what general direction one should go
in pursuit of the wagons’ winding line.

But when did they pass? The wind has so scoured
their wagon-wheel ruts no traces remain.
In the distant gray, beyond the last tree,
a scatter of swallows like sunlit rain
intrigues the horizon. Gradually,
the lingering hour
concedes to evening. I shoulder my pack
and set out to westward, pursuing the sun
where it moltons to rosy oblivion---
once begun, there can be no turning back.

Now darkness emerges and overspreads
the incumbent earth, having pooled in caves
and craters until it was conjured up,
conjured from old mausoleums and graves
where vapors congeal and turn corrupt
and the dreamless dead
in insensibility sleep their sleep.
Impereceptibly night subsumes the sky---
in the distance I hear a despairing cry
and resist a strong compulsion to weep.

With the world as it is, the single hope
is to break out somewhere beyond the pale,
beyond the realm of the sun, beyond
the constraint of reason, to follow the trail
of gypsies into that borderless land
where travelers stop
for the night and find a night of no dawn---
for gypsies divine what emptiness lies
at the end of it all, under wasting skies
where the moon is gaunt and the stars are gone.

A gnawing insistence riddles my bones.
I huddle more deeply within my coat
and trudge along grimly, bowing my head
and drawing my collar about my throat.
Perhaps even now I am lying dead
under broken stones
in some vandalized graveyard half-destroyed,
with all of this lying before me only
a corpse’s dream: an unspeakably lonely
highway vanishing into the void.
Along the Seine
Above the Rue Nicolo

In a small hotel room close to the Seine,
a woman leaned over a casement sill,
rested her arms on the wrought-iron rail
and, half-asleep, raised her face to the rain.
The sheets were disheveled where she had lain
and the dress that she had tossed on a chair
fell in yellow linen folds to the floor
like a swath of lilies. Now and again,
slivers of sun were emerging through gray,
though few of these brightened the alleyway
or buildings that shadowed her view like cliffs.
And when she looked up she saw, very high,
hundreds of traceries pattern the sky---
a cloud of elusively darting swifts.
Along the Rue Saint-Dominique

In another country, in later years,
she often remembered the mornings spent
surveying the street from her balcony---
the cats that curled beside bundled figures
of vagrants huddled on warm-air vents,
or the lean and shadowy toms that prowled
from the alleyways to preen in the sun,
attending each tattered laceration
from a night of mauling and being mauled.
And, across the street, when the small café
would open, with waiters setting up chairs,
cats would materialize out of air
to crowd at the doorway, collectively
meowing for their *petit déjeuner.*
In the Jardin des Tuileries

Decrepit and wrinkled as an old root,
with dirt begriming his skin and his clothes,
I almost thought him a statue at first,
so completely did birds envelop him.
They lit on his shoulder, his knee and wrist,
on the bench and ground and toe of his boot---
pompous old pigeons and squabbling sparrows,
of all commonplace birds the commonest.
Yet all by his crumbs were equally blessed
as they used his arm for a crooked limb
or crowded around with skitter and hop.
Nor with birds alone did charity end---
as I passed him by he spoke as a friend
and offered a crust, but I didn’t stop.
In the Metro

Through a wrought-iron arch, down littered stairs, we entered beneath the streets at midnight, threading our way through the hard-edged light of an endlessly twisting corridor where chord-progressions of swirling color like mother-of-pearl pervaded the air---
then, reaching the platform, we found him there, a hollow-cheeked man playing jazz guitar and drenching the chamber in liquid chords--- and when the train came he slipped on board where, immersed in the tunnel’s streaming light, he stood in a dreamy repose and played rapturous strains as the car rocked and swayed and plunged through the subterranean night.
Along the Rue Victor Massé

In a crude argot of repellent slang
from the gutter, mixed with jargon unheard
since the days of Villon, he sang and slurred
discordant refrains to all who would listen,
dark, disquieting verses delivered
in a biting, vitriolic harangue.
His cavernous eyes appeared to fasten
on nothing at all, and a sneering grin
like rictus affixed to his bloodless face.
He sang of the streets and the alleyways,
of nights under bridges along the Seine,
of cravings and sickness and scrounging franes
till I felt obliged to offer a coin---
he smirked and spat on the pavement for thanks.
Along the Rue Passy

Amid noises of street and of marketplace,
the fluted trebles of someone playing
Mozart for coins. Overhead, the sighing
of fragrant lindens that shade the terrace.
Nearby, the tinkling of silver and glass,
the intonations of stylish couples
involved in intimate talk at tables.
Unexpectedly, an evocative face
so hollow-eyed and hauntingly lovely
I marvel, inadvertently staring---
a drawn and willowy woman slowly
drifting through elegant tables, imploring
the alms of a morsel, with fingertips
lifted in virtual prayer to lips.
In Père Lachaise

Except for the carrion crows or the eyes
that looked at her from the vacant faces
of angels, effigies, crucified Christs,
she thought that she was alone. What she missed
were the eyes of cats that watched from places
she never saw, and the derelict sighs
of spirits that she could only discern
as the tremor of leaves. Yet it was due
to a voice as haunting that she’d returned
after thirty years to this place, and she knew
when at last she’d found it by all the strewn
and clustered lilies that lavished the stone
and by all the faithful who stood to gaze
at the name of PIAF amid the bouquets
On a Rainy Boulevard

~with strains by Satie, faintly heard

It is true that I was obsessed with her,
but where, I ask, is the shame in that?
It may even be, in another life,
that we were brother and sister, orphaned
and separated by accident, only
to meet again after years had passed
and, under some vile, pernicious star,
to discover a love we could not deny.
However it came to be, she refused
to speak of the matter ever again
and she took to disappearing for days,
forsaking all my attentions
for the solace of cold, indifferent streets.

Night after worrisome night I wandered,
imbued in the scent of her absence until
by some wry mischance we passed unbeknownst
on a rainy boulevard, peering from under
tilted umbrellas, her startled eyes
soft in the moistened air.

At times,
when the lindens that lined the streets were strewing
their violet air-borne fragrances
and the night was limned
with a drifting implication of rain,
we would wordlessly conspire to meet
at a nondescript café by the Seine.
Invariably she was late, appearing
as an afterthought in the open door,
iimmersed in a rain-grey dress, requesting,
as always, a table quite to herself,
an empty glass, a partial pear.

Our conversations were cryptic, consisting
of tentative phrases on napkins which
the waiters would whisk away with our plates,
all our guarded avowals crumpled up
and cast amid crumbs.

At other tables
the patrons appeared as little more
than transitory impressions, scarcely
occupying their places, sometimes
vanishing altogether.

As minutes
conceded to hours, I’d watch her watching
the green and milky nimbus that swirled
in the mesmerizing depths of her glass.
The hiss of the street through a lowered blind
found no response in her face, while her eyes,
for all their gray, unspoken sorrow,
asked nothing of me, nor of anyone.
For this, above all, I desired her.

And always, whenever she took her leave,
I would manage to miss her, turning to speak
the moment she stepped away . . . a glimmer of falling rain through a darkened door.
Miscellaneous Poems
Through a Strange Latitude:
three sonnets of the sea

1. Young Girls by the Seashore
---on a painting by Puvis

It eludes analysis, wholly disarms
a cadre of critics, in every respect
falls short, in nothing is quite correct,
and possesses inexplicable charms.
Its half-robed figures, lifelessly formed
as statues, look out on a lifeless sea
or nothing at all--- its simplicity
is all of a piece and unadorned.
And throughout, an inexpressible sense
of strangeness, a vague inviolate air
of dream and primordial innocence,
distilled to exquisite immanence
in a girl who can only stand and stare
at the sea, twisting the sea from her hair.

2. Sigh of the Siren Sea

Was it ever enough that she would appear
from the foam of a rounded swell to sigh
with the whole dark soul of the sea in his ear,
urging him darkly to take her, to die?
The cold salt silk of her skin against his,
the swell of her own small breast like the swell
of the sea itself--- the salt of her kiss,
the pulse of her sunken heart like a knell.  
And all of her thus in his arms until  
the breaker recedes and beckons her back,  
drawing her down and away and beneath,  
forsaking him there on his barnacled rock,  
forsaking his desolate arms to trail  
where the sinuous seaweeds writhe and wreathe.

3. Memory of Wind

The vibration singing through all my veins  
is the beating of endless tropical rains,  
a pulsation of far-off breakers breaking,  
with every tendril of hair on my head  
the cry of a gull.

I am eighty years dead,  
having perished at sea in a howling squall  
off the African cape when a monstrous swell  
overpowered the deck and crushed me choking  
into the brine.

Now I drift without end  
through a strange latitude, a slackened soul  
drawn by a distant memory of wind,  
past feeling but hardly at peace, possessed  
of a thirst that will admit no slaking,  
of a restlessness that will not rest.
Carpe Diem

Where willows weep beneath the moon
and sodden leaves are softly strewn,
we walk alone except for one
of eerie watchfulness
who wears a cloak of twilight sewn,
a hood that darkly drapes upon
*a hollow face of hollow bone*
*and eyes of emptiness.*

The time has come to disavow
whatever hindered us till now,
come lie beneath this mossy bough,
*come lie within my arms*
and listen to the doves that call---
forget the rest, forget it all---
*tomorrow, love, tomorrow,*
*we shall lie with worms.*
The Dead Man Seeks for his Love

~~after an old ballad~~

Where the moon exudes a sickly light
and the woods are rotten with rain,
the Dead Man travels throughout the night
to visit his Love again~~

to visit his Love who abides alone
in an ancient hollow oak~~
her eyes are onyx set in bone,
her words are wreathing smoke.

The Dead Man travels throughout the night
through lands irredeemably cursed,
where the countryside is black with blight
and trees are gaunt with thirst.

The Dead Man travels throughout the night
to visit his Love with the dawn,
but the dawn has died with all its light,
for night has swallowed the sun.
On Haworth Moor

Our childhood vow a holy trust
betrayed but once & all was lost
& we forevermore accursed.

Never could we be apart,
we invoked the lover's art,
devouring each other's heart.

No lord of earth or beast of hell
could chasten what we were or quell
the storm that held our soul or tell

the thing that drew us both as one,
darkening our sun & moon---
utterly we were alone---
yet after all the ruinous cost,
for all I strove to hold her fast,
like any mortal she was lost.

Insensibly I paced the moor,
howled my craven heart, a cur
shriven by a cruel allure

until, within a dismal place,
I plunge a muddy spade, expose
a coffin, a shrouded face.

Years have passed -- still I wait,
empty glass, empty plate,
embers crumble through the grate.

The wind tonight unties the trees,
makes the shepherd draw the fleece
about his ears--- a strange unease

possesses me, I faintly hear
a broken wail upon the moor
forsaken as the damned--- I swear,

a moment at the window as
I raise my eyes I see her pass,
shadowy beyond the glass,

but I have kept too long alone---
I know no longer what is known, 
cannot tell a shade from stone,  
cannot tell the day from night---  
I keep the doorway bolted tight--- 
I live my life by candlelight.  

Endlessly from west & north  
cold & darkness issue forth, 
beneath the door, across the hearth. 

The wind sustains a piercing note, 
I wrap myself within a coat, 
I pull the collar to my throat. 

Over, over again, 
drum upon the windowpane  
frenzied fists, driving rain.
Old Locksley among the Ruins
Old Locksley among the Ruins

---a fragment

It was the sort of evening he had no right to expect in July on the Monongahela: a lingering light turning slowly to gold, the atmosphere cool, with a faint caress, a premonition of Fall.

In a neighboring yard, a tall weeping-willow, drenched in the rays of the distant declining sun, flared up into momentary transcendence, bestirring old Locksley out of his thoughts, and he turned to watch as the trailing and feathery limbs swayed each of its own accord, almost of its own volition, a slow ballet of entangling and loosening, clasp and release, till the sun slipped under a low-lying cloud and the willow returned to dusk.

It was, for Anthony Locksley, the sort of evening which invariably summoned to mind a languorous strain from Fauré’s Pavane and a time
irretrievably lost: of lying on grass
under murmurous elms through a long, suspended
midsummer’s night, lying motionlessly
with a gray-eyed woman now long-since gone,
their temples just touching, their fingers entwined,
scarcely exchanging a word, just watching
as, locked in the interstices of leaves,
in the deepening opalescence, the first
few stars were beginning to show.

He could never
entirely lay to rest the suspicion
that all of those long-ago stars and trees,
those tentative lovers deep in the past,
were somehow still, in some parallel state,
alive in the present, for otherwise how
to account for their hold upon him now? ---
a hold as inexorable as the pull
of the moon on the tides, a mysterious pull
that remained even after the moon itself
had receded far out of mind, obscured
by a veil of cloud.
Old Locksley was haunted,
haunted by shadows of darkening trees
against the stars, and haunted by shadows
resolving themselves into faces that seemed
to look at him bleakly and close their eyes,
but most of all Locksley was overcome
by a sense that the world was slipping away,
just slipping away wherever he looked,
even as remnants of earlier years,
reappearing as apparition or dream,
lent a fleeting reprieve.

Such paradox then,
in Old Locksley’s mind, conjured up a flood
of allegorical visions: of ruins
resisting the tides of forgetfulness,
of derelict arches amid the receding
waters of Lethe, of ivy-entangled
vestiges of mythic perfection
enduring into the present, even
as the present itself flowed swiftly away.
Such paradox then, for Locksley, became
insistent obsession, for as he moved
more resolutely into his autumn years,
with losses compounding, ruins became
the leitmotif of his innermost self,
a motif he began to see everywhere,
but especially so in his garden:
from a half-dead oak by the crumbling wall
to the granite angel with half a wing
keeping vigil beside a sunken grave,
to a fossilized bone which he came upon
one evening among the ferns. For Locksley,
such ruins embodied the plainest of truths,
that all in the end is ruin and loss,
and yet, in themselves, were undeniable
objects of beauty which, over the years,
through ebb and erosion, had been transformed
from their original state into something less
but more essential.

And so, for Locksley,
the inevitable and necessary
digging for sources began: When was it
that ruins, as an idea in themselves,
emerged first into human consciousness?
When was it, in other words, that ruins
appeared first as objects of pilgrimage,
or were first a presence in poetry,
or a prominent feature in landscape?
What catalyst first drew symbol from stone?
Whenever such questions took hold of him, Old Locksley would hoist himself from his chair and retire into the depths of his house—and there, along some imperfectly lit hallway or vestibule, stairway or niche, or any of the shadowy lamplit rooms from basement to attic, where every last inch of wallspace from ceiling to floor was encased and shelved and all but groaning with the weight of some ten thousand antiquarian books, Old Locksley would set out upon his quest. He would pull down a volume, blow off the dust and, by parting its pages, release a bouquet of age and venerability and a faint evocative fragrance of death. And from that point onward Locksley would be all but lost to the outside world, consumed by any one of a hundred or so insoluble mysteries which, for as long as Old Locksley could quite remember, had preoccupied most of his waking hours and not a few of his dreams . . .
But for now,
as the burnished sunlight returned to rust
and evening withdrew itself into night,
Old Locksley wished only to sit awhile---
to sit awhile among shadows of such
duration that ivy would clasp his foot
and curl up around his calf and knee---
would circle his torso and quietly tie
his slumbering form to the ivied wall---
would wrap all about his arms and legs
and around his shoulders and over his head
until ivy was all there was to see---
and Locksley would dream a celestial dream
of a gothic ruin beneath a pale
archetypal moon--- of archetypal
vapors encompassing columns of stone,
of arches supporting an archetypal
vaulting of stars . . .

It was later that year,
after weeks when the heat of midsummer
had driven Old Locksley to seek the shade,
had driven him, like a disgruntled bear,
to take sanctuary deep in his house,
deep in the cavernous gloom of his house,
with bats in the attic and dripping eaves
and high steepled windows where mystics, monks
and martyrs shone softly in sunlit glass---
it was later that year, after summer’s heat
had driven Old Locksley into the hushed
recesses and curtained-off rooms of his house---
a house that was more a cave than a house,
with ivy-encumbered and blackened stone
and deeply-set doorways interred in vine---
or more like a mausoleum, perhaps,
with its bordering arbor vitae and yew---
a haunted old manse as cold as a crypt,
with crumbling foundation and groaning pipes
and crickets in corners, its redolent rooms
 provisioned with humidors of tobacco
and crystal decanters of peaty scotch,
its snug little hideaways fitted out
with old leather sofas and mica lamps
enveloped in amber light--- it was later,
much later that year that Locksley, at last,
emerged amid whirlings of leaves released
from willow and maple to clutter the air
all about his head and skitter across
the garden to lodge in the lower boughs
of the conifers--- it was later that year
that Locksley returned to his garden seat,
returned to consider and contemplate
the melancholy decline of the year
with its shedding of gold and crimson leaves
and dropping of berries and migrating flocks
of sparrows in spruces, and all the subtle
foreshadowings of the coming cold . . .
For Autumn to Locksley was no mere bridge of transient days linking Summer’s close to the snows of Winter--in Locksley’s mind, Old Autumn was less a condition of time than of place---less a recurrent phase embracing the Earth for a day, than a place of endless ending through which the Earth moved as a ship through a shifting sea, a region unalterable in its alteration, immutable as the mutable moon.

It was, for Locksley, as though he were bound on a slow-moving train through a golden realm of eternal Autumn, where singular oaks dispersed their glittering leaves in a cloud all across the heavens---a slow-moving train from which Locksley could never disembark, a train which, even while pressing his face to the window, was steadily gathering speed and bearing him further and further away, out of Autumn, into the wintry North.
And so, as a tatter twist of leaves
torn loose by the wind made a glittering arc
against the trees, Old Locksley refused
a revisitation of old regret
and, taking note of an ominous cast
to the sky, he set about grubbing the last
potatoes and turnips out of the earth
and cutting the last half-cord or so
from the dead, dismembered oak that lay
out along the creek. The foreshortened days
and icier winds that whipped the ivy
against the window bestirred in Locksley,
bestirred in the deep and liminal dusk
of his brain, a bear-like urge to retreat
from the sky, to pile up barricades
against all and sundry and hollow out
a snug, impregnable burrow against
the world and the very passage of time.