

W I R E

It binds and cuts

We must have it

Like politics

Washington Poems

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1995-99

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Until I lived in Washington,
I thought Pontius Pilate
the most interesting character
in the Passion.

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P R E F A C E

Considered individually, these poems are like a painter's studies of the urban garden where our constitution is contested, and of life in the provinces that hardly figure in the metropolitan consciousness of the new economy. Considered collectively, the poems comprise one traveler's view of American politics.

This may be an odd project for these times. Recent American literature, particularly poetry, tends to be concerned with private matters. Politics, when it figures at all, is usually treated with superficiality, righteousness, and banality – as if the subject did not merit the full attention of sensitive minds.

This need not be so; politics is a fine subject for poetry. The combination of possibility and constraint that attends political power delineates the human condition as sharply as subjects that are more conventional with us, like erotic love. Moreover, poetry can be a civilized response to the burdens imposed by power. The Chinese have a long tradition of bureaucrats who write poetry. Maybe we should emulate them; perhaps the poetry of our bureaucrats could also come to be regarded as one of the glories of the empire. (Although I understand that the American project involves the denial of history, it's never too early to consider how we wish to be remembered.)

My sketches may appear to be unfaithful to their subjects. Loyal Americans might protest that our situation is not so pervasively gloomy as my poems suggest, that this collection is too dark. I agree. Although I believe all politics is pathetic, even American politics, there is much to be said for our constitution and for the lives it fosters. Similarly, although I worry about the poverty of our culture, many good things are possible in America.

I do not think the dark tone of these poems can be fairly ascribed to my personal situation. I have been tolerated, indeed privileged, and it would be dishonest of me to pretend that I have not been lucky.

Many poets embrace cynicism because it is the easiest stance to defend, and poets, like all naked people, are defensive. Moreover, opposition is *de rigueur* in certain circles. Knowing this, a certain vanity makes me worry that the tone of these poems will be taken to reflect my small courage and desire to be regarded as an intellectual.

Finally, I regret the darkness of these poems because I do not want those who care for me to be unduly impressed with my alienation, or to feel that they have somehow failed me, or to think that I have not appreciated them.

Despite these misgivings, and my wish that I had written a bit differently, these poems are what they are, like children, a bit wayward but undeniable. Which leaves me

with the question, as I kiss this book goodbye: why do I look out, from my position of social privilege and private happiness, upon such a gloomy world?

Poems resist having their sources mapped like rivers, even by their authors, but I suspect the dark quality of these poems is traceable to their genesis. I became a poet after the birth of our first child. The world then became even heavier with meaning, profoundly unreasonable, and in the press of time, denser, more compact – in short, the prosaic became poetic. As a father, I learned what it was to fear the world, and that there is no longer any possibility of escape, if there ever was. I was forced to acknowledge this world as home, these relations as the only polity which I have. And in this time of life, I began writing short dark poems, efforts to say in a small space why it was terrible and beautiful and ours to be at this very moment in the wave.

It has not been easy for me to admit being home, to lose faith in travel. We have devils here. The dangerous ones are unnamed, waiting in the bright sunlight of what we think we know of our politics and in our souls. Just as the soul's terrain may be depicted by landscape, these poems describe political life in an effort to call our devils out of the bright sun where they hide and into the shadows, where such struggles can be fought.

Loop

Amidst the nation's capitol buildings
Men grow old tending bar, telling jokes
About divorce, penises, failure generally.

Two lawyers fresh from the Court
Where they had played minor roles
Helpless to stop their argument --
 drinking single malts in celebration;
 career was going well, card? --
Convincing at least themselves
Of how right their side had been.

It was all over but the bickering
Far too much had been said already
And he just wanted to get away
To where it was clear and cold and hard.

The Magic of Davos

In a certain light, clarity
with a view of great distances
and no possibility for strong emotion,
Thomas ascended from the village.
He asked his wife
in whom he confided much
if the people who lived here
so high up in the Alps
are as poised as we,
minds balanced by iron cold
and the precariousness of life
at altitude?

Mandarins

Under the dreary pewter skies of August
we Mandarins retreat to our villas
and sailboats upon the inland sea.

There we ponder weighty matters like
dalliances with one another's wives
or new alliances with pretty things
and whether the sun has dipped beneath
some yardarm somewhere.

But seriously, isn't it pleasant
to drink out here on the lawn
talk about taxes, war, your career
work to shape the insider opinion
and watch the ospreys fly to roost?

So maybe our government isn't lovable
there's a lot to be said for this sort of ease.
Every empire needs to pay for its Mandarins
you gotta keep young Cassius sleek, wondering
where he's gonna park his diddly next
it's the only way to ensure he doesn't
reach
 . . . and upset everything.

I think you understand what I'm getting at -- hey, let me freshen up that drink for you.

Equity

Henry brought his new friend Jeanne
to their old summer place in Maine
where a familiar crowd amused itself
and found some Genevoise entertaining.

Alone late the next morning
they drank coffee out on the deck.
She looked like a catalog girl,
his robe covering some of her skin
that yearned for the eye of the sun.

“It says here,” meaning the New York Review of Books
-- which she read like a woman accustomed to being
the most beautiful person in rooms of smart people --
“that progress is the movement from status to contract.”

“How comforting,” Henry replied,
“to know that I really deserve all this.”
And he looked out across their lake, and
back in to the boat, the house, her thighs.

Eight Inches

When we returned from our walk
Crowds milled in the lobby
Police swarmed the building
An officer stood by our door.
As he stepped aside I asked
“Do you mind letting me know?”

“There’s no danger, sir.”
Easy for you to say, I thought
You’re six two maybe three
Athletic, black, with a gun
An unlikely target -- well,
a likely target, though doubtless brave --
But you don’t even live here, and
Who said anything about danger?

Locking our door behind us as always,
she and I decided it was a drug bust,
Since there were far too many police here
for the post mortem on yesterday’s jumper.

When I took out the trash
Young vultures were waiting
Loitering by the elevator
Black pants white shirts black coats
white gloves, rubber gloves.

I asked a boy
(Was he more than sixteen?
How old does one have to be
to work removing bodies?)
if there had been a death?
He mumbled that he heard
There had been a killing.

Just as I opened the chute
To throw out coffee grinds
and last week's cut flowers
I thought, as always,
Of bodies, or worse, parts
hurtling down from above.

I later saw the gurney waiting
But I missed the body's exit
And still later the building manager
assured me it had been a private matter
no fault of security, nor management.

I read about my neighbor's death in the paper:
A hairdresser brought a customer to his bed
A single shot, from behind, at point blank range
The killer stole the sports car in which he had come
Parked it outside his own apartment a few miles away
Where he was arrested in a day or two.

My wife and I had been home that night
And we could honestly say,
When the police asked
That we had heard nothing.
Concrete walls eight inches thick
Deaden most noises
It's a luxury you pay for.

City Sidewalks, Busy Sidewalks

He could not remember
when the urban fears began
Hurrying along the sidewalk
bound for a meeting,
or at night, the Metro
With each honking cab
he saw himself struck
his body thrown and broken
Or a rat, less drama, a flea
would bite and infect him
with some disease of the blood
Or good cholesterol and sea salts
would conspire against his heart.

Working Dog

Are you ready for the short leash
the desperate need to get ahead
and a mild sense of choking?
Because if you are not, if you dream
of roaming easy, few or even alone,
quiet forests with no direction set
open ridges where night falls late,
coming down into darkness below
You may never feel the mighty pull
of the rangy pack joined in harness
Countless strong, all who count
their breath on your thrusting thighs
sharing their power, urging you on
down the rutted trail of your career.

Alienating Labor

Are we our own works
Identities hammered out
Each in his own smithy?
Daily comes the hour
When duty requires more
Than we want to give.
Our work is our bond
Each in his own irons
And we know ourselves
Only in rebellion.

Guide to Usage

Once, a professional was someone called to practice institutional beliefs acquired through wearying years of university study.

Now, a professional is someone expected to work hard and late in consideration of the chance of gratifying ambition.

Professionals are distinguished from workers Who receive overtime pay in lieu of respect.

Petty Nobility

Trivium and *quadrivium*
then pick a profession:
medicine, law, or theology
(transitory, durable, or eternal);
A way for poor boys and latter sons
to outrun their unfortunate births.

We kept the self-interested bit
it's really the genius of the institution
This place has rarely been an ivory tower
though we have monks, artists and suchlike
who nowadays have no place else to turn
But everybody else here is on the make.

Of course the faculties are up to date
The halls ring with learned discourse
about sex, gender, tastes and fashion
[an urge to juvenilia was here quashed]
And about being busy making money
(better to discuss work than actually do work)
And about -- there is just so much to talk *about*
Like race, obviously the linchpin of a critical mind,
And while psychology has been a bit disappointing
Freud had the right idea: professionalize life!
My favorite subject, however, is creative writing
(talking about something you hope will be different
from anything you already have to talk about).

If something can be discussed at all,
some people ought to be paid to discuss it,
while keeping just anyone from discussing it.
Only through specialization will we get anywhere
else we are just sitting around, jabbering.
And children ought to be assigned their places
in accordance with their skill at discussing
whatever subjects we currently think worthwhile.

The university has fulfilled its ambition to be a microcosm, better, a simulacrum, a functional scale model of our social order, hardly more interesting than anyplace else, just more privileged.

Metro

All the usual barriers to talk
Man and woman, white and black
Almost rich and not quite poor
Were in place.

But the woman in the seat ahead
Had a mane of spiraled coils
Each cord longer than my forearm,
Tied back with a rubber band.

I touched her shoulder, apologized,
And said her hair was marvelous.
Taken aback, calling me sir,
She told me that it took nine hours
To weave her into art.

Untitled

The associate prayed to Kafka
the German lost in Prague
the Czech adrift in Empire
the Jew in Christendom
the patron saint of lawyers

To tell him what it was
that he was writing.

Deaf People

Many deaf people live near me;
we ride the Metro together.
I like to watch them sign
though I don't understand,
and wonder if I am being rude
Eavesdropping on foreigners.

Their faces are exaggerated
no doubt lending timbre and tone
to the messages flashing from their hands
And when they grow really excited,
they cry and croak and make strange noises
like herons or other awkward birds.

Out Upon the Plains

One day the great man simply left.
Looking back, we might say Tolstoy
Went to die in that obscure train station
But maybe he just lit out for the territory
Like the old woman who took off
Wandering across a West now empty
Farmers gone and ranchers few
She crazy drunk, dreaming poetry, love
Staring into the quick of small fires
Lit against the cold of the forsaken land.

Nomads

Even after it was plain that
we were all nomads again,
she fought a rearguard action
stubbornly launching missives --
electronic messages, voice and print
traces of a semblance of community
reminders of brief times spent together
auguries of what might have been --
that kindled the smoky fires of memory.

Traveling Invalid

Predictably enough, the American
answered by talking about her self
and the problems it posed for her life.

She said she had certain issues
that she still had to work through
and she was very grateful to those
who had helped her, were helping her
in various ways
which she enumerated.

I could not leave her there in the cafe,
her friend my sister would be furious,
or even invite a passing acquaintance
to sit and distract the American,
so I ruefully ordered
a second coffee.

We Viennese don't go in for therapy,
a new way of representing the world
(Wittgenstein once said of Freud)
a new mythology, shared imagination
culture's semen, and we have
far too much culture here already.

In the silence informed by her discussion of her self
I understood that she had come from a far country
with its own citizens and authorities, priests and sinners,
and that there was her home, to which she would soon return.

Nothing to Declare

I'm always clean at borders
Would travel naked if I could
(Except once between countries since redrawn
another story altogether, told elsewhere)
And I'm generally respectable,
with little to hide, anyway little
that petty officials would understand
really ought to remain suppressed.

So why does routine questioning
"What was the purpose of your trip?
Was this your first visit to _____?"
while thumbing through my passport
as if it were a teenager's journal
that might contain dirty pictures
of the neighbor girls' pubescence
fill me with -- rage? fear? loathing.

Sometimes I like to think that they're embryonic Nazis,
kleine Beamten drunk with their power to treat people like cattle.

A friend with a long layover and a perverse sense of humor
Once said that he had not packed the luggage that he was carrying
Just to watch officials search and search like dogs after a stick
he had only pretended to throw.

But I am not so feckless and when they ask I answer straight,
my egalitarian and class prejudices rankled by subservience to a cop.
It would only be fair to let us ask them a few of the questions:

Are you bought by drug money?
Have you beaten anybody pulpy
Just for your own peace of mind?
And, really, why are you hassling me?

This last maybe is the heartland of the insult at the borders
Some cop deciding if I return to the only place I can call home
Just suppose he discovers that even here I don't belong?

Forgetting Civil War

So many of the men who survived
their wartime jobs as butchers
became alcoholics
That drunkenness became ordinary
a way for a man to elide
both manifest destiny and
his own condition
And the General of the Drunkards
the Drunkard of Generals
was elected President
To the embarrassment of future
nationalists.

Conquistador

I. Commander

Sire, to your everlasting glory,
and that of the one true God,
I offer you rich lands
lying far to our west
open and little defended.

A band of hard men who
force the game to risk all
will there win great glory.

Send just a few brave soldiers
I trust that the common folk
seeing the path we cut through
the jungle that stands against us
will approve our standard
and rightfully make me lord
To the increase of your dominion
and the magnification of your renown.

Awaiting your command, I humbly remain . . .

II. Historian

When the Conquistadors came
lion-hearted men, pitiless,
they were received as gods
who walked upon a shining path
And the ancient cities said yes
opening themselves to history.

Many years later
when the Crown withdrew
when the Yankees went home
(despite superior weaponry)
hearts and minds had changed.
The heirs of the conquerors
(the children, as always, were
on both sides and in between)
knew in hearts that had grown dark
that they were doomed to fail.

III. *Tragedian*

So Hail the conquering hero!
and Viva la Revolucion!
What else am I to say?
I owe allegiance to the future.
And yet with each cry of assent
I mourn for all that is lost
and half-wish I too were a lion.

Tamerlane

The barbarian king promised the city
that if it surrendered, now,
no blood would be shed.
So the gates were opened, and
the warriors dismounted to enter.
They bound the citizens,
dug long trenches
and buried them alive.
Man. Woman. Child.

The king hoped,
like a barbarian would,
that his trick would show
who was clever after all.
But after it was over,
and each man, woman, child
lay choked by the dirt,
Only soldiers could explain
the mighty cleverness of the king.

Palace Coup

So my little sister I know
Your mouth is dirt, your eyes blood
And your sweet cubs lie dead
But now we have a New King
Who drove the Old Lion off
 hurt, maybe dying,
And scattered your cubs
 the Old One's seed
to the birds and the sun.

Let the New King cover you anyway
He won, and deserves that much now
How else can you still hope for cubs?

But do not conceive, not yet
You cannot be too careful
His regime may not last
Long enough to raise his cubs
Maybe the Old King will return
Maybe the King so New will lose
To the lion we heard last night

Wait and make certain
that our New King is strong
Before you open to his seed
Sex is not just about forever
It's also about plausible denial
Picking your moments.

On the Way to Self-Defense

Skinny and thin-boned in the way of small children, brother and sister, she taller by a head
Dark brown little ones wrapped in white canvas tied by yellow belts wait to cross, holding hands.

The Assent of Masada

Masada fell because the Romans forced it to
But the garrison killed themselves for thinking
the Romans were more powerful than the Jews.

Had they believed otherwise those Jews, of all people Jews
would not have entrusted their telling to the enemy chronicler.
They must have argued differently, probably like Romans,
that each man would be free beyond the edge of his own knife
(a bit harder to believe for the dying of women and their children)
Or maybe that God and the Romans loved a good spectacle so,
that their memories of the fearless Jews should be glory enough
Or perhaps the garrison forgot themselves like warriors do
and killed to steal Roman triumph and miss the bitter gloating.
Anyway, the Jews surrendered politics along with their rock.

But it's tough to blame them
for this act of cowardice cloaked
in physical courage and harsh faith.
From their island in the desert sky
they looked out upon the empire,
its legions implacable as waves,
and lost hope

. . . in sons and daughters
even slave daughters and sons.

Almost

A young man who is not liberal
is said to be heartless
While an old man not conservative
is said to have no head.

For we young, Not There Yet
the almost, the possible
is like a mirage on the horizon
toward which we rush, reaching.

For we old, Almost Nowhere,
having becomes losing
the world itself rushes
things tend to fall apart
despite our efforts to hold
onto a semblance of order.

Fatigue

Fatigue was becoming moral
when the young man approached
well dressed and
no doubt well spoken
As the saying goes.

A university student
here for a conference
Lost his wallet
And therewith bus fare
To his city not too distant
for buses.

If I could only lend him
Twenty dollars
He promised to return it
in the mail
As soon as he got back
to the University.

Of course I had the money
I am more comfortable than most
But I must have seemed worn
To get a routine that old.

I doubt my con knew
the real play he made.
I'd like to care enough
to want to help.
And that night,
I was too tired to say
even to myself
I don't believe you.

So I gave him twenty dollars
But I made him go through the charade
of writing down my address.

Voyages to Unhappy Reaches

Who has not launched
ships that sailed forth
unready, ill-provisioned?

Who has not seen
their brave hopes
shuffle back to port
beaten and bare?

Who has not crew, cargoes lost
taken by pirates
foundered upon shoals
overwhelmed by the sea . . .
Gone, anyhow.

Who has not blamed
difficult circumstances
the fallibility of men and
the perfidy of the gods . . .
The list goes on but
the bitter taste remains.

Helpless

I, you, who wouldn't
want to take the gun
away from our old friend
running through the mall
crazy, threatening, bullying,
before he ruined his life.

But that Socrates is a nut.
It's almost never a gun.
Usually it's the wrong fuck
Self indulgence at tax time
A drink too many on a bad night.

Maybe Socrates can see such things coming
Maybe he knows how to avert
 inappropriate endings.
The old man really is very clever--
that's what makes him so irritating
to those of us who must watch
the bodies of our friends
fall on the spears of their furies,
and hear the splintering of ash.

Play in the Works

We repeat tales of merit and true worth
like “you can’t keep a good man down”
steeling ourselves, to look at injustice
to hide our fear of being thrown away.

But meritocracies need their injustices
If we really believed that the system
perfectly matched each of us to our station
we could not abide those on rungs above
and we in turn would condemn the poor.

Unintended

Progress is liberation from the will of others
or so it must have seemed to Jewish legal minds
besieged by the specter of oppression
who reached for the Constitution
to be their shield against tyranny
and the vessel of their freedom.

Their rewritten Constitution articulates our society
a confederacy of consumers, freely choosing
where corporations speak and doctors are veterinarians
So old words more artful than ours have come to mean
that politics is the guarantee of shopping opportunities
as the market dictates, to those who can afford to obey.

There are reasons besides law and minority fear
that this is our brave new world, of course
Yet our law apologizes for where we are
making it difficult to think elsewhere, limiting.

While I doubt politics will ever be abandoned
as the terrain on which the righteous decide morality
I see no reason for me to bother contesting your sins
It's so much easier to watch the sun slide
and the glaciers glow pink.

Constitutional Amendments

“We have become a nation of mere gentlemen . . .”

“-- Actually, gender no longer matters morally . . .

-- We hardly ever refer ourselves to land . . .

-- The press of competition leaves us

little room, less time, to spend being gentle . . .

But what I have not let you say is true

Our places in the world are defined

by the relations in which we each stand

to commerce that binds and blends its own space

-- Calling much besides the nation into question.”

Shopping/Education

A truly foreign observer of our society
might expect us to be a people refined
by the daily exercise of aesthetic judgment.
Rolling in our wealth of possibility
we ought to be ascetics, Japanese,
choosing nothing less than perfect,
or maybe we ought just the opposite
Rococo bordello, Louis Cat-whores.

It hasn't worked out that way.

Algebra/Agora/Metaphor

When this nation of economists learns
that elements in opposition, orthogonal,
define space through functional relation
We will cease to see the market space
as the aggregate of our desires
democracy's doom unto itself
And see it as the place created among us.

The Enemy of the Good and the Art of the Possible

Begin with the proposition
that each bureaucracy
is defined by its efforts
to achieve some ideal.

but

Politics, like engineering,
requires compromise
among different goods.

and

Framing declares it art
Whether worth your time
is another matter.

Spiders, Starlings

Capital, money distilled
is the purest of meaning
a creature of the void defined
by the communication of desire.

Men who fancy themselves hard nosed realists
spin financing as though they were spiders,
webs of commitment, understanding, endeavor
far more ethereal than cathedrals or poems
which can be touched, seen, heard.

So we build our nests, cities, out of cards
that is, conventions, chunks of public faith --
grubby birds with rainbows in our wings.

Business Romantic

Last flight tiny plane
from some city
of dwindling stature

Caspar's done the deal
and dreams the details,
sleeping gape mouthed
against the window

Turbulent waking to
a full moon across
thunderheads like glaciers
sharpened by lightening
and clouds below like ice floes
jammed upon themselves
opening leads of black sky
where Caspar sees city lights
as a drowning man sees people
plunging into fog
hail on the plane.

Oh wonder! Oh joy!

Heretics

Dionysus was a god, and a likely god too,
for a nation fat and besotted with its own youth,
that, like most invader cultures
thought, in rather Norman fashion,
that truths were proved upon the body.

After the train had passed, the way strewn as always
with the wetness of excess and the occasional corpse
after fluids had dried and minds lurched throbbing clear –
I grow distracted with the overripeness of it all . . .

In Luxembourg of all places,
well-oiled after a conference,
I found myself telling a girl
(fortunately unlikely because certainly wrong)
what dancing had once meant to me.
But all she understood was screwing suggested
“vertical expression of horizontal inclination”
which had I been younger or truly drunk,
I would have taken to be encouragement.

She was thinking about seduction,
and she was right about ballet
But her stoner friend and I were trying
to talk towards Savonarola, about
dancing (humping, snorting, swilling, singing)
in the throb from the heart of things, and
about not dancing like that, any more.

And after it was over, what was left?
Just tired people facing middle age, and later
Same as ever, perhaps more ashamed
But the Bachae still found it upsetting
to be regarded by their own young
as sluts, worse, unhealthy, frivolous
as if they did not know anything
about what was important in life.

Crazy Bitch in Sixteenth Street

There's that crazy woman God-damned to wander into the middle of my rush hour

Light cotton dress mostly covering her bony naked body in the almost boastful way very sick patients wear their sweaty gowns, flaunting the fact that our conventions don't matter much in their world, a world yes more real than our own because so close to death or the madness of reaching for a man or a needle or a drink or a meal

Foul open hole of a mouth crying, clutching hands imploring -- What?

That we get out of our cars and
join her? fuck her? help her?

She's in front of me now, and I swerve, missing her once again,
praying I would know and would stop if she really needed any help I could give
praying that this City, which can do nothing right, will take care of her in my stead
praying.

Ides of March

At 3:00 or so in the morning she came
over the retaining wall in a heartbeat.
Her fall was cushioned by ditchwater, so
she waded ashore to meet their anxious jaws.

It was really too perfect for poetry:
a woman from the country
homeless off the one-way bus
killed by the nervous lions of the capital.

I wondered why restless beasts didn't escape
a cage into which a crazy woman could stumble
and realized that lions could never
leap out of four feet of water
up the face of our ditch, their wall
to journey out upon the land.

Letter from Frederick

Our crazy friend Frederick
(in advertising, brilliant,
you've heard his jingles,
you know the type)
was evidently again on a tear,
his scrawled letter wine-stained
and gritty with exotic sand.

"Nineteenth century Germans,
ancestors of Katrina further tanning yonder,
whose nipples have turned the color of hazelnuts,
and with whom I am spending these weeks,
though I wish you two were here
(everything is so fine and bright),
so I would have somebody to talk to . . .

Where was I? In history -- you know the thought:
Nineteenth century German thinkers,
while landlocked in various ways
discovered themselves as history
and thereby defined our world.

This seems only half-right, and
the less important half at that.

In understanding the world as history,
in conceiving life as hermeneutic effort,
nineteenth century German thinkers
made it again possible to be Greek,
to see the human condition
as essentially and everywhere the same
for the last man as well as the first.

This despite Jerusalem's London triumph:
Our life is a march toward the eschaton
Or eternal progress to shopper's paradise
Whichever comes first on time's autobahn.

Putting my silly jingles aside,
it was twentieth century Germans
who actually buried historicism
by conjuring from modern banality
a transcendent experience of evil
Thereby making real historicism

Sacrilegious.

Timeless

That American Washington Irving
Anxious about art and history
Visited every tavern in Eastcheap
Searching for Falstaff's memory.

. . . a memory of a fiction,
the fiction that all memory is . . .

Speaking still of the dead,
and myself, of course,
I once got drunk in the White Pony
Sitting at the very table where
Dylan Thomas put himself down.

Who doesn't like what happens to people in bars?
For that matter, in brothels, strip-joints, naked?
We are all together in our biology
And there is great freedom, even love
in requiring no more of ourselves, of each other.

Here, she guides your finger into her wet
Touch this dancing orchid, her vulva
human all too human *nicht wahr?*
you thankful, she proud of your lust
(bashful, showing off, this is a social event)
but this girl, you, will soon be gone
the house will serve other bodies so . . .
and we animals will get on just fine.

Of course you can drink yourself into the hereafter
But you cannot achieve immortality, even fame,
Without a name, a community of memory
Bars and brothels remember nobody for long
Would we know even Falstaff without Hal's betrayal?

Monuments

Speaking as usual from on high
the utilitarian rulers directed:
Find another use for poetry.

One of the small made this reply.
Our lives are quite segmented,
without benefit of polity.

But in lyric, however we try
to represent single moments,
we intimate history.

Just as we train our eye
to see the movements
in marble statuary.

A matter of some concern to rulers . . .

Still Life

Is it an accident that painters in Holland
Perfected the still life, that is, death
At the height of that nation's wealth?

And here in the wealthiest of lands
We are obsessed with our health
And painting is irrelevant.

Prayer for Tantalus

The perfect guest de Tocqueville
commented on our abstraction.
He didn't say we were really silent
that our speech served its purpose
but was less than fully human.

So why do we confront America
as if she were mute, or
a baby crying to speak?

Because we are strange one to the other
and we are equal in our strangeness
and fiercely proud of that equality
and find it difficult to be more than polite
lest we expose circumstances.

Because we are young as a matter of principle.
We have exiled history that must,
in its gear and works, distinguish
and so we speak as if we had yet to live
even though we cannot know our future.

Because without a sense of history
and so the reconciliation of drama
it is better to be silent
than to talk about guilt.

(Every nation has guilt, a condition of being,
but some nations have more than others,
in some places it is fresh like blood.
And though there are those
who say that blood will out
I do not believe them.)

Because we long to rest beyond time
no doubt in the women we see
in the city where we are known
in the place where it is happening.

Through this never ending pursuit
of happiness/*Verweile doch*, etc. --
so exhausting, so futile, so hopeless --
we have lost what selves we might have had
out beyond the talking and the hearing
where only song and longing goes.

Graffiti, Ideology

Whenever wherever we look
Across the wide walls
We discover ourselves
So we must be at home.

Lest there is any doubt
We paint our names
 again yet again
Filling our big shallow world
With scrawled pathos.

Texas

Why stop?
Why now?
Why here when we're rolling so merrily along?
Cold white noise and hard warm glass
shielding us from the sun bright land
glowing sere gray white under the blue . . .
What's here besides death and eternity and other desert crap?

You're right, keep going -- move on.
Everything you could want to know
about what happened hereabouts, once --
and it was the first time such a thing had happened, maybe the only time, here --
is in this book, so we need not lose time being here
that might be spent where we're going.

Why go at all?
Everything that ever happened back there
is open to me like a book but with pictures, sound, and a cold drink on the side.
And what is so wonderful about just right there under the buggy hot sun?
Far better to see the filled open pussies of Xanadu the great underground shopping of the
frozen Northland the bloody ebb of the capital
This world and countless others at my sticky fingertips,
I'm already there, the only place there is to be, me.

Oh? What's so great about you?
You abide with yourself nowhile -- pretend you're someone else
Maybe you bore yourself, cowboy.
You would be motionless, but you're running too,
running out of mind under the clean hard sun.

Symposium

Red wine coursing around the balloon
Slowing, spinning, falling to the floor
“Good legs, marvelous esters” she smiled.

“This entertainment, as you call it,
the fluff I produce
It’s all politics, really.”

“Of course it can only be understood
in terms of some agenda,” I agreed,
hoping this banality was helpful.

“No that’s not what I mean
[I toyed with my meat, frowning]
Entertainment is the stuff of our politics
what we as a people have in common
the experiences, the space, we share

Everybody, that is, except you, Baby
who utterly lacks interest in Hollywood
who doesn’t care at all about Camelot
You don’t even know who today’s star . . .
 sleeps with.

You are an outsider, almost a traitor
skulking out beyond the Pale
which I find endearing.”

Wetting her fingers, she flicked
red wine into her décolleté
and smiled.

Republic: Empire:: Theater: Circus

Art is to entertainment
as philosophy is to rhetoric
It's a question of devotion
to truth or to solidarity.

Due to our numbers,
and the passing of trust
We tend to the second
with a certain contempt.

Veins, Veritas

I was in my local hospital around midnight,
again being responsible for others,
when a youth was brought in strapped down,
his head shaved, beaten about the mouth.
The ambulance driver wheeled him to Psych.

Once Dionysus was a god,
and excess needed no excuse.

But tonight I wondered whether
it was all just hormones –
my own rage back then?

Romantic child, I grieved my woes
against my times, modernity itself –
as if my unhappiness lay in politics.

But doesn't political thought
arise from just such belief?
And isn't it true that our politics
leaves much to be desired?

At some point, I became wary:
even when I was not exhausted,
letting go had become scary,
and maybe dangerous,
and I too old?

Au Revoir, Ma Geneve

By the time of Aristotle, Alexander
the *polis* was mostly a memory
the way things were done around here
after the tribes and before the emperor
like the republic that arose from the *gens*
only to bow low before Caesar.

The citizen has had few moments.
Athens declined, Rome triumphed
The great replaced the small, and
the world became too vast for
one's own truth to count much.
Men used a thicket of symbols
(titles, mostly, legal rights
to land, to capital, to persons)
where once names had served.

The city has fallen otherwise:
Lithe young bucks over the wall,
Armed horsemen past the gates.
And everyone left alive,
the victors and the slaves,
survivors conspiring in the hills,
girls open to the new men
pledged their allegiance to blood.

Something to ponder *mon frere*
With the morning latte,
The news from Sarajevo,
And the financial pages.

Survival Training

Epigrams for an American Child

Do babies who wake in the dark
cry because the cavefire is out
and those who did not cry
were eaten by big cats returning?

The duty of every American
Is not to be a victim.

Victims make us feel guilty
. . . therefore vicious.

Children and lawyers have difficulty
Distinguishing complexity from depth

That we do not understand something
Does not make it worth the thinking.

Each day we write on a new page
virginal
But what we have already written
matters.

Resist the urge to confess
Unless you are sure
of yourself as an artist
or that your listener
is duty bound to love you.

Better to be judged by strangers
That the heart may deny the verdict.

Better to be praised by strangers
disinterested and therefore honest.

Fear is the guarantor of authenticity
But the brave heart needs no guarantees.

Professionals and stallions live for service
of anxiety or mares, as the case may be.

May you be
so free of problems
yet so full of passion
that when you drink too hard
it is to forget only concern.

May you be lucky and find
something to read before bed
neither exigent nor trivial.

Power is more interesting than impotence
Tyrants are more vital than their victims.
(An unpleasant truth *en route* to piety.)

When we speak of a woman's time
we mean a birth.
When we speak of a man's time
we mean a death.

Longing for justice
Is noble expression
Of anger at history.

Leaving Washington was like getting out of a pool:
Cordial relations slid off like chlorinated water.