

# 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bachelors

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# Part 1. The Mills Years (1998-1999)

At a Rally to Save Headwaters Forest

*You shall drink from the wadi, and I  
have commanded the ravens to feed you there.*

A boy named Elijah with bushy  
white-blond hair and grubby  
clothes carries a sign, *Stop  
Cutting Down Trees*. Off the top  
of a brick a sick raven leaps.

*The god who answers by fire is indeed God.*

I'm born in Eureka, California  
I have white-blond hair.  
The history is in the trees.  
For laboratory work  
Father moves us to the city.

*Who dies in the city the dogs shall eat.*

A philosopher prefers to live in London.  
The history is in the buildings.  
Country folks are base, he says  
and Nature so much more  
beautiful than our own lives.

*Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person's  
hand is rising out of the sea.*

Elijah drops his sign on the pine-needle floor.  
He points to two Steller's Jays and calls them *Bluebirdies*.  
Their black crowns sail over and under tumbling air.

*Who dies in the country the birds of the air shall eat.*

Elijah chases his blue shadow like smoke  
between redwood trees pierced  
by sunbeams and disappears.

*He lay down under the broom tree.*

The hand that sweeps the dark  
is the hand of a child painting  
the colors of air with dusky chalk.

The hand that sweeps the light  
is the hand of a man painting  
the prisms in the eyes of a bat.

*The Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake,  
but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake  
a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire  
a sound of sheer silence.*

Trees and the absence of trees.

## Maple Syrup

Our philosophy teacher says truth  
is like maple syrup, the right amount  
sweet, but too much is grotesque.  
We look at each other and smirk.  
After class we joke about wanting to kill ourselves.  
We've seen him eat, like a farm animal—  
Dr. Brüder—never married, no wonder.  
He's angry at the world, like a cactus  
and he's taking his revenge out on us  
darkening our minds with cynicism.

But later, alone, I wonder  
if there's some truth to it—"like maple syrup."  
What about the pancakes, the butter  
the waitress?

On a balcony overlooking South Kensington  
the muffled BBC—something about the tube  
being closed at Piccadilly Circus, bomb threat, IRA  
suspected, static, U.S. troops in Iraq.  
I tune it out.  
Below, on the street, a boy grabs  
an unattended doughnut crate and scampers off.  
A grey shroud of pigeons flutters and coos  
around a hunchbacked old woman  
while the black cabs, the Bentleys, stop  
and go beneath a blue hole  
in a grey sky.

Dust

Snowfall fills evenly every  
clear-cut from Washington to California.  
A gun-shaped hand aims thru a small concave window  
past an aluminum wing and a column of vertebral cloud  
at an A-framed peak, Cascade.

Scribbled across foothills dirt-trails slither.  
In Los Angeles, a smoggy halo around the zoo  
where a diamondback probes the glass wall of her box.  
Beside her, asleep, a coiled bulge—cell-mate, a recent convert  
a believer now in futility, the luster of his jewels faded.

She has gold diamonds and canary-yellow rubies  
embedded in cobblestones of bulk.  
Her rattle is a giant black caterpillar  
her swallow-tail tongue darting to taste  
sterile air, her eyes crystals set in onyx

but she can't see thru the bullet-proof glass.  
She can't see anything  
but the almost microscopic  
flakes of dust tumbling  
down the glass cliff.



## The Prospect of Spring

Beside a church a goldfinch is perched  
on a green branch of flowering dogwood.  
A mallard couple cruises a pond, his velvet  
emerald crown and purple underfeathers enticing her.  
An orange cat laps up a luminous puddle.

Then, a dead waxwing on a sandbag  
a small stain on the window above it, the cat  
slinking away behind rock-rose and rosemary.  
A woman's voice at the crematorium cracks  
as she pronounces her son's name—*De La Cruz*.

His cremains will be scattered over the Sea of Cortez  
I think of my friend's nephew, Kekoa  
playing inside a sand-pile when a sudden storm  
moves above Maui. His older brother, Kavika  
digs him out, too late.

Green mist clings to the slender arms of the dogwood  
birdsong increasing complexity. Some spirit  
has seeded in the sleek feathers of their bellies  
the E sounds in midair turning into A's  
as if *grief* is being subsumed by *grace*.

## Squaxin Island

You tied up to it before but the crooked planks creaked so you pushed off, keeping only the image of a solid black eagle carved into a broken shack. Trolling close to shore, a flag with stripes and a singed black hole like a mask where the stars used to be. Now you beach the boat and walk. Used fireworks and lottery tickets, broken glass smelling of booze, ripped and tangled nets, the back of a quarter (silver talons clasping a silver crag), part of a dollar bill (a smudged green eagle, thirteen olive leaves and thirteen arrows), pierced and flattened buoys, a busted canoe, long kelp stems like whips in the mud and a rotten fish stench. A branch jerks and a heron makes a dinosaur sound so you run through the slosh, throw the brick back in the boat, yank the chord and motor, full-throttle, out.

## Points of View

Try a different approach.

Only a few lines

of the finger point to and touch the small

black button which activates

the car alarm system's

unbirdly double beep.

The book being held by the other

hand is titled *What to Say*

*When You Talk to Yourself*.

Erase the hand.

Place the book

inside the car.

Now someone is dying

to paint a snow-goose

on a white canvas.

In the book in the car the word *self*

whitewashed

*silence* rhymes with *violence*

the alarming command

to place over one's mouth

one's hand.

No Gods Today

You

          may or may not                  have anything to do  
with ordinary miracles  
          the uniqueness of a thumbprint  
          a pebble dropped by a thought  
          into a pond whose ripples correspond  
          to a print set in motion      expanding until  
a mirror returns      waiting for an eye  
                                          or finger to split open time like a book  
                                  in which lines intersect  
                                  at angles of sunlight  
                          surrounding  
edges of steady-breezed leaves  
                  saying something clearly  
                  human: is  
alone along the oblique      shore  
                                  of footprints  crabgrass  a door of teak  
                          and glass.

## Mosaic

anomaly      green      obedience      desert      egocentric      gravity  
platitude      hermit      torpor      silhouette      lust      torpedo  
magpie      cupcake      eelgrass      smoke      homerun      headdress  
meander      goosebump      dandelion      hobo      trampoline      jungle  
energy      obfuscate      moonlight      homage      obtuse      confiscate  
zebra      breast      electron      blitzkrieg      parabola      Zen  
rainbow      neuron      agnostic      mantra      grief      wavelength  
iridescent      malfunction      rhythm      sloth      knowledge      salmon  
pride      embryo      peacock      holocaust      shark      liquidate  
objective      infinite      nexus      Virgo      fraud      oxymoron  
boomerang      telephone      bomb      turnstone      emerald      greed  
goddess      geometry      metaphor      saxophone      blue      paradox  
squash      ampersand      television      envy      microscopic      embrace  
angelic      misanthrope      diameter      gobble      singed      epiphany  
quintessence      wrath      juxtapose      diabolical      air      redundant  
freedom      gluttony      purple      prayer      dust      fireflies  
karma      Chrysler      stingray      sunflower      muse      zenith  
sunrise      skyscraper      egret      blackening      avarice      mystery  
web      mastodon      megabyte      sturgeon      scalpel      ram  
telophase      starfish      Venus      entree      snapdragon      galaxy  
forgive      entropy      acute      snowflake      obsidian      pitch

## Dream Notes

1.

Plant the desert behind the mission and paint yourself.

Blue paint.

The night sky with blue

holes through which meaning slips.

Diffusion is crucial: blue as vortex reversed

removes iris

as the order shards of it.

2.

Black and White Still-life. Savior. Sailor.

Pop its eye out, the sky's, to determine whether

the black wave rising is external or inter-

fering with one's ability to reason

response: moonbow initial: apparition.

(Sidenote: Charon's oars are grey.)

3.

Palimpsest.

Erase the sky what ok paint over it.

Tangerine Oriole Screams Inside Cactus.

4.

Shore's Razor Slits Rainbow, Splatters Cherries A-

cross Blade Held by Fisherman.

## A Cheap Idea for a Novel

Nothing but desert dust while the yellowing  
dusk comes on, glowing in panoramic.  
He comes to a hill with a monstrous rock  
utterly silent as if it's sucked in all sound  
the way the circular horizon's sucking in all light.  
A crack like a black lightening bolt radiates  
from the rock, and then it speaks.

He jolts up, pulls the metal beads of his lamp  
scrambles through a drawer for pencil and paper  
and scribbles it down as fast as he can.  
He lays back down and falls asleep.  
When he wakes he opens the drawer.  
It's a playing card he's written on.  
You decide which one.

You invent his name, occupation  
supporting characters, the woman  
who loves him, whom he forsakes.  
You describe the madness that prevails  
until his death. You decide how he dies  
so long as his last thought is not of a desert  
the mysterious card or even the terrible stone.

## Advertising

The word *art* is in so many other words: sweetheart, K-mart, Antarctica, etcetera.  
I have a thing for burned-out signs, shorts in wires, a running out of watts.  
In Oakland, land of few oaks, Giant Burger has been reduced to *ant urge*.  
In San Francisco, where Saint Francis seems irrelevant  
the Silly Zone sign shines *ill one* in aqua electric.  
You wouldn't imagine the Software Center to be deficient but  
*re enter* blinks on and off.

The sign that welcomes you to Sharon, Vermont says, simply, Entering Sharon.

Sometimes I get up too fast and blood rushes to my head.  
Dizzy and weightless, a dam ready to give, and butterflies.

In unison they fly a little ways off  
and return, the order rearranged—  
starlings, leaves. Bare branches.

Setting the distance between us at six feet  
a seagull stands on a damp shore  
the portion the ocean just licked like a stamp.  
Others patch the sand like puffs of snow

but a plaid patch on the back of a waitress's tight black  
pants gives me thoughts too explicit to name.  
Her name is Sharon. Every letter of her looms in full wattage  
the way a sky of different shades of grey gets  
after the sun sets and sends its afterglow  
up to the underbelly of a voracious cloud.



Rope (for Marci)

When we've given up  
a notion of stars as God's  
eyes looking down on us

and a belief in the whole world  
as a metaphor for something else  
what do we do with the words?

Sunset, ribs of evening  
before a graveyard shift  
at a crematorium

the curl and crash  
shimmer and fade of summer  
whitewash rushing ashore

whether the tide moves  
in or out, the waves come  
and darkness

a rhythmic *shshsh*  
if I abandon my dark shore will you  
cut your anchor's rope?

Meditation on the Greek Word for Lust (for Marci)

Two bubbles in the paint  
on the wall are breasts.  
This is where the cracks  
will start, and the stripping away  
in long peels like a statue's drapery  
over centuries unraveling.

This is the way the wind lusts  
for eucalyptus, peeling away  
painted bark in tan scarves.  
If my soul were made of wind  
I'd unleash it with just  
enough force to unbuckle your belt

unbutton your buttons and push  
your bra up over your nipples  
while all the while your hair  
blows above your head like a wing  
but since it's made of dust  
I'll leave it on your desk

the one you write at, by the window.  
You'll sweep most of it away  
with your feather, and the rest  
with a swift blown kiss  
you'll swirl up like a scroll  
of smoke into the light.

Whisper, It's Sexier (for Marci)

If I told you I was a harmless  
garden snake would you?

If I go down  
a coastal trail hauling over  
my shoulder a sack of clocks like a cross  
between Kronos and Atlas will you?

There is not "but world enough and time."

On the rocks I smash the clocks  
and the glass returns  
to Blake-sized sandgrains.

O the sweetness of our ball  
revolving around

HORSE

*shshshshsh*

HORSE

*hissssss*

HORSE *sh!*

chariot.

## Part 2. The Chico Years (1992-1997)

## Alphabetical

*Alfalfa*

*boomerang*

*crosswise*

*dillydallying*

*eelgrass*

*farfetched*

the making of something, a rock, a planet, a word

pink earthworms make a healthy garden

*gargantuan*

*hiphop*

*Istanbul*

*January*

*kangaroo*

*lisp*

*Mississippi*

the flat ones will skip across the water

a loneliness in the ticking of a clock fifty years too fast

*nexus*

*orchid*

*perpendicular*

*quail*

*riproar*

*skittering*

*teetertotter*

a flat word won't skip around a round world  
it plunges into the Sound, an osprey swooping for fish

*ultraviolet*

*vixen*

*wily*

*Xavier*

*yelping*

*Zen*

## Yellow Car

I sense my growing in these days  
like spring thru winter haze.  
Up shoots a warm wisp of wind  
thru a thin dark tree  
a yellow car in a grey smog  
running on  
electricity.

## Colors of Pain

1.

Charcoal-grey basalt boulder patched  
with mint-green lichen, the same rock  
covered with mussels and barnacles  
a description of drowning  
I can't feel my face beneath the ground.

Tan hills mostly bare, in sparse grasses little clusters  
of white daisies, an orange sun sinking turns  
the tan hills violet  
a description of surfacing  
I can't face the ground beneath my feelings.

No castle, only the snake-black moat.  
I mean motes rising and falling with lightning-quick twitches  
transparent bees, my conscience a coffin full of smog  
a building with 500 glass eyes  
the jump is romantic, not the landing.



2.

A sloping wall of iceplant lines the freeway  
broken glass glints as I pass  
under the overpass imagining a wave's lip  
throwing over me, I fade into shade then  
burst into sunlight, fade again

into traffic and smog, the devil's halo  
around the city of angels.  
Embedded in the blackest street  
if the sun is right  
mica crystals glimmer.

Sitting on a beach at night watching  
something in the blackness glow, bioluminesce  
I don't know if it's shrimp, squid, algae, dinoflagellates  
I hear they use crushed diatoms for reflective surfaces  
license plates, street signs.

I have no reflection.  
Melancholia, an ocean  
of black bile  
not the sad man who can't smile  
but the madman in the icy

blackness of the aftermath.  
Plans don't matter  
a phosphorescent glimmer  
like love driving  
me madder.

From a Mental Hospital in Hollywood

I'm not the only one, no one  
can distinguish between smoke and fog  
sanity and in-, but which image weighs more  
the pickup truck in the parking lot

trailing a grey ghost of exhaust, or the white  
almond blossoms wafting a pre-spring smell of sperm?  
It's not that we can't handle ourselves out there  
chipping away at our walls

until we can't distinguish between ourselves  
and out there. In here we accept the walls  
as levees, our frail egos having forgotten  
how to swim can't be forgiven.

Outside my window a raven on a wire insists  
on making a symbol of herself, beguiling me  
into believing she knows some malevolent secret.  
Three liquid ambers, sweet gums

drop rusty amber leaves on dry yellow grass  
the raven leaps from the wire, a neon red  
Toyota sign, a palm tree, imaginary white  
almond blossoms, and won't forgive me.

Fall and

The caved-in remnants of despair  
lying there, wilted breath, collapsed whisper  
I feel like I'm inside somebody  
else's mouth, not angry but scared  
and angry at myself for being scared.

Lightning splits cedar, spite splits heartwood  
bleeding sap, my split-open world spilling.  
Sunny blue day I feel the spill, a spell  
throbbing rain, pelts of self-punishment  
I want the black cloud to take me

a black cloud of words. Grim  
you can gouge but can't fathom  
relentless, eluding, winged, cut  
a little summer out of the storm  
the notes, the chorus of form will come.

## Separation

You emote

crying in anger, helplessness, confusion, despair

I'm short of breath, shocked, silent.

Now the universe won't rewind

shrink down to a pin

and they'll never be together again.

The three of us move from apartment to apart-

ment, Dad moving in

a few blocks miles a town away.

You join the service, survive Desert Storm

then marry a southern belle, have three children

and stay together no matter what.

I go to pieces called

anxiety-guilt complex called melancholia

so I move to Wash-

ington, walk the shores of Puget Sound

drink Rainier in a little boat and hear

bird-infested forest coves, hear them breathe.

To find everything in the nothingness

of nature, cleansed and whole

(the hole in both of us filling

with black, draining love)

to return rejuvenated

this is the myth I tell myself.

Sonata

Running up  
and down black  
and white keys

that unlock  
a mute childhood  
flooding it with screeches

each bird that died  
comes back  
thru glass

to find you.  
When you hold  
a single note

feel the frayed edges  
of its feather  
falling tones shape

a hundred tears  
neck of egret  
mark of question

what do you look like  
a hundred years  
before you're born?

## Keyring Ornament

how do you like your blueeyed boy

Mister Death

e.e. cummings, *Tulips and Chimneys*

I don't know Nathaniel Hawthorne  
but D.H. Lawrence calls him a blue-eyed boy.  
I'm a blue-eyed boy once, browsing the blowsy shores  
of Manhattan Beach alone, alone I discover

the transparent bees, the motes in my focus.  
I follow the seagulls with it but never  
pin it on one of them. Backlit in blue  
the seagulls flew away.

In the back of a black drawer I find  
my mother's old keyring ornament, the faint trace  
of a seagull engraved in brown leather.  
I remember now the seagull was blue, I hear

with ten-year-old ears Mom's keys clink  
as she opens the maroon Honda Accord.  
I cannot accord sympathy to those who  
do not recognize the human crisis. When

do I get pinned on a keyring ornament?  
Now the sky is brown leather ripping, tracing out  
a black pterodactyl. From alcohol and cigarettes  
my eyes are red with fire.

## Just a Phase

Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Nerves tremble like shot glasses before a tremor  
you believe it's coming, so it comes.

Run like hell from the boy in you, his hell  
his boogiemán chasing you thru the narrowing  
hallway of time to escape time.

Stooped in a barstool, four years of stupors  
each year the glass more sure of itself, more  
a part of your hand – all this to fill an abyss  
stay its phantoms, so you might throw  
up your soul and be done with this mess forever.

When the glass cracks you peer thru a jagged  
hole at the gloom in the muddy river  
despair in gradual swells, torsos  
walls of faces, impervious  
dull pebbles, eyes that are only eyes.

Tho you can't see your reflection in a clear stream  
drink it, and give yourself back to yourself  
it's in your hands now, shaky or sure  
the thing you've been loving and killing  
in vain, without form.

## Train

At a wedding reception we make  
a dancing train, hands  
on the hips of the one  
in front of you, all around  
the dancefloor onto the balcony

and back to the dancefloor.

Thoreau calls the train an iron horse  
steaming from black nostrils  
rolling over the sleepers  
who slaved to build the rails.

When the long mystical whistle wakes me  
at three in the morning I half-open  
my sleeper's eyes and realize  
I need this reminder, *momento mori*  
the black train's alien cargo inside me.



## Learning Up from Down

I break the basement window  
trying to kill a wasp with a plaque  
of Albert Einstein that reads  
*in the middle of every  
difficulty, lies opportunity*  
the lines broken like that.

The wasp is dead  
Einstein is dead  
I still have the plaque  
I keep the basement as clean as I can.  
Sometimes I crawl out thru the paneless window  
I go outside to see the world.

I was wrong about a lot of things  
about being in hiding without pain.  
Sometimes, in hollowing wind  
the sky smells like roots.  
Sometimes, between the cracks  
it smells like glue.

## To Myself Two Years Ago

Erase them, all the faces  
stamp them out like sparks  
the spirit fears.

What do you lose in finding  
faces seared into one face  
infinite space between fire and flame?

The world never looks for you  
you move thru each other  
like currents of air.

What happens in passing?  
When you hide your face in a faceless crowd  
will despair eclipse your fledgling grace?

## To a Poet Departed

As a child you scribble  
notes to God, you figure  
what separates leaf from tree

salt from sea, stars from eyes  
and you from yourself  
is the same thing

but God never writes back  
and the world goes on  
laughing and dying

til the notes go white  
and your hand disappears.  
You learn to write

with eyes and ears.  
Carried on capricious wind  
notes become gusts

of fire-skinned leaves.  
Thru your eyes  
mesmerized

the world sees itself  
you die with your eyes  
open.

Alicia

I'm her  
mesmerized audience upon a little floating dock  
the full moon her spotlight on a liquid stage  
(this moon-white page)  
the lake likes her, licks her all over  
dark streaming hair sparks in moonlit ripples

an arced twirling without a splash  
the curve of a hip, a breast, part  
of her neck I ponder the word *nectar*.

Let's be clear  
she's no waternymph, no mermaid  
just a spontaneous midnight skinny-dipper

who disappears, no one knows how  
if someone inside me knows they're not telling  
I only know I'll be back here  
on this dock at midnight beneath  
a nearly full moon waiting  
for Alicia to reappear.

## Creek Talk

Fullblown purple lupines and California poppies want  
no part of my small talk, sitting on this  
basalt boulder patched with chartreuse lichen  
holding this blue nib full of sweet talk  
beside a creek that dribbles gibberish.

The top of a redwood is a spire, aspiring.  
Torn red-orange hair of peeled bark glistens.  
Blackberry and periwinkle talk to the creek all day  
long about now. Blackberry doesn't say  
*I'll have ripe black fruit for you in a fortnight*  
its shark-toothed brambles bite.

Periwinkle doesn't look at me, but I see  
white-yellow eyes inside open purple faces  
miniature monks cloistered in periwinkle shells.

Hear the creek talk louder, smooth-polished stones  
clearly visible near a bubbling riffle of whitewater.  
This spot is safe, a good place for crossing.

I slip off my shoes and cross easily  
a scrubjay crosses the creek on air, wherever he wants.  
O holy heavenly bird of the airy cross  
I drink too much, I smoke too much, I fuck too much  
then again, not enough, not enough, not enough.  
Look, I too am nothing  
but I won't surrender to roots or diamonds.  
I put my shoes back on and feel the warmth  
return to my feet.

When the Party's Over, Death by Water

The secret is to learn to enjoy  
the pleasure of being  
permanently deceived.

No, not that  
the egret is not even the secret  
the secret is *bon voyage*.

Irony is our iron escutcheon  
I'll take mine off and leave this party  
this passion play, this humorless joke  
after I've written my last poem  
and smoked my last smoke  
unscrewed my last bottle

and screwed my last love  
made successful amends with the raven  
and the dove. When I'm good and drunk  
I'll walk the plank and fall spread-eagle  
into the abyss, a watery womb  
my final nest, and be resumed.

Tidepools (for Kaarin)

No voice spoke, saying

*let there be tidepools.*

No one will do our work for us.

You like the green sea anemones

how they squirt and squirm

under the sand when you touch them.

I like how they survive

when the tide is out.

Your tropical eyes are bluer than these

pools patched with purple stars

where life begins

streams away.

The sunstar sinks.

Clear night, we hear

sapphire and white

wave motion onshore, stars see

every direction of this fathomless

cosmic ocean.

What were they called

before the Greeks named them?

What African eyes gazed back into those eyes

and asked the same question

*do you dare*

*love me in return?*

On a Beach in Todos Santos with Five Pesos Left (for Kaarin)

Up thru the intricate pattern of void  
arise blue waters, hallowed shallows  
hot tropical bodies an unlimited supply  
of materials for the richest of artists  
inconceivable to us, petty and poor  
living on bread and beer, summer

heat blanching sand, tanning carved  
ripples of baked rock, a sky alive within  
an aqua mirror. Waves revise endlessly  
the shore, imagine the astronomical  
revisions of islands, undulations  
gaping breakers somersaulting

toward what end, what origin  
the potential of paradise a paradox  
intact, growing by changing forms  
insisting on newness every instant  
the elements imagining us melded  
effaced in primal bliss.



Protesting Loneliness (for Kaarin)

Mounds of orange and purple starfish in mud  
legs interlocked, orgiastic  
red rock crabs wrapped in brown kelp  
spider crabs stop fighting and begin feeling each other's feelers  
I'm lonely as Thoreau, the first spider in a new house.  
Amber, an old golden retriever with a rock in her mouth  
stares at me while Roxy, a mutt puppy who pops dead crab shells  
chases a great blue heron.

She can't understand how it can fly or why  
it prefers to be alone.  
It makes a hoarse squawk in the air that scares her  
so she returns to Amber and me.  
Amber drops her rock and stares at it.  
If art is what makes a stone stony  
what makes it lonely?

I watch the heron land by the shore and resume  
studying silver flecks beneath the surface.  
Maybe the tall hoary bird has its own name  
for those shiny little snacks, the only sound  
it makes is prehistoric, a feathered pterodactyl  
lost in this world, this wild  
hesitant stone that can't figure out  
whether it's lonely or happy.

Basement (for Kaarin)

You dream of two tigers  
prowling our basement  
I wake to find your hands  
sweating fear. I'm here, I say.

On the wall above our bed  
a black rug with two nestling tigers  
behind it a black widow creeps  
we cradle each other back to sleep.

We wake, we go on  
living the only lives we've got.  
Days are bright leaves dying  
beautiful deaths.

The emptiness of the world  
slips thru our eyes, our fingers  
peel away cobwebs to find  
the diamond-sharp tooth of the mind.

## Gravity

Six o'clock.

The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

T.S. Eliot, *Preludes*

Bumper to bumper in San Francisco  
I pull away from the smell of rotting  
exhaust like the singed hair of graves  
a force that wants to keep us all here.  
I reach a Ventura beach by dusk  
sit in salt and pepper sand and watch  
the orange cherry of the sunset cigarette  
stream in and swirl off my ale-colored bottle  
Marlboro, Newcastle, two seagulls  
and a darkling sea my only elements.  
Sunset fades to a campfire.

Then I see the black stiletto heels  
sticking out of the sand, torn stockings  
and a sliced red teddy with a bloodstained crotch  
the stench of a world that can't figure out  
what it's trying to be because it's being used  
a world of butts, empty bottles and fluidless lighters  
a world in which you enter your own locked house  
and find it ravaged by scavengers  
where your best friend gets shot in the chest  
for five bucks and a lottery ticket and you think  
politics has something to do with it  
but it's just chance, chaos and chance.

I can't stand the thought of a woman  
trudging thru the sand naked, hysterical  
screaming for help from anyone  
so I leave the beach's seagulls, two faint white  
headlights vanishing in blackness, the stars  
positioned as they were a billion years ago  
the horned moon a cosmic weapon  
some force whirling them around this world  
forever reaching for those lights  
I walk back to my yellow truck  
that looks grey against the night.

## The Light Which Puts Out Our Eyes

In the grey light of an alley  
pigeons in pot-holes  
between oil-stained rat-infested dumpsters  
against the back of a rotting brick building  
MOTORHEAD FOREVER in black above her head  
a homeless woman squats.

In a clean bright bathroom  
chartreuse and maroon towels  
a Georgia O'Keeffe on the wall  
a beautiful young woman pulls  
her white skirt up her black  
underwear down in one motion.

## Watching

A young brunette walks briskly along  
the sidewalk holding  
two books like she holds herself  
something to protect. A heavy-set  
messy-haired man eyes her as she hurries by.  
A tall black man and a short  
white man pedal their red Schwinn's slowly  
down the road watching two

sycamore leaves fall in spirals  
they touch hands and smile. Two  
turkey vultures pattern the blue space above  
with smooth swooping arcs, circles circling  
circles. I sit on a primrose planter smoking  
watching dry orange sycamore leaves blow  
in whirlpools around the sidewalk  
cars anticipate green lights

a stereo blasts hiphop, a young man  
in a tanktop and flipflops on top of the Copyman  
building sees a young blond woman running across  
the street beneath him. *Go thru the green door*  
he shouts, *the green door by the primroses.*  
When I hear that word I know  
we're inside a poem  
with no way out.

## Ginkgo

1.

Lying under a ginkgo tree on campus  
I picture a Chinese garden, Yellow Mountains  
painted on a delicately ruffled rice-paper fan.

Lonely in sunlit California  
fanned by this easy breeze  
I fall away, hungover  
before fall.

2.

Ginkgo trees in November are beautiful  
yellow flames  
“burning for the ancient heavenly connection”  
to the big blue Buddha sky.

Thin sliver of pale moon  
Buddha's fingernail.

Now I can't see  
the moon or  
the finger.  
Now.

3.

The gingko trees have stripped naked  
but I'm bundled up – coat, gloves, pants, boots  
cigarettes and coffee try to warm me.  
Do their souls burn like blue coals in autumn?  
These trees will still stand  
after Taylor Hall, the English building  
has crumbled, after this  
whole town has crumbled  
its dust mingled with yellow leaves shaped like fans  
(someone called them hands).

The oldest plant  
on the planet  
the gingko still stands  
turning Zeus, Lazarus  
and Buddha back

mocking the Afterlife  
and the Void, Nirvana  
on the radio.

The gingko says something  
the domesticated dogmas don't  
older than mastodon.  
Dawn, the gingko still stands  
assuming nothing.



## Listening in the Cold

As a boy I call them R2D2 birds, now  
at 22, meadowlarks and warblers are calling  
their songs the scrawlings of ancient  
young Japanese poets singing  
in perfect-syllabled haiku  
vast contrasts coming together

in a universe of pitches  
I don't understand. Their throats  
are musical shuttles that conduct  
every high note imaginable  
their little wings are conductors  
that have the wind memorized.

I can't sing  
in perfect-syllabled haiku  
I don't understand R2D2  
but the tall grass ducking  
the whistling blasts  
keeps listening.

## Colors of Song

1.

That parrot speaking Portuguese on top of the elm tree  
has no idea  
that the world revolves around me

a twenty-two-year-old dreamer dreaming  
of spinning a blue spider web  
of words, filaments  
attaching themselves delicately  
in concentric spirals around  
a fluorescent yellow spider

and if a few flower petals and moth wings happen  
to get stuck  
like light in a black hole  
I'll leave them there  
unwriting their own stories.

2.

Broken web and orange-green lichen  
cover my grey stone, barnacles cling  
to my grey whale's back, luminous grass  
shoots up out of my sopping floormat.

That parrot speaking Portuguese on top of the elm tree  
throngs his holy hymn at me, me, me  
unaware that the world revolves around him.

## Blueprints

After the earthquake we have to put on a roof –  
plywood sheets, tarpaper felt, two-by-eight bats  
and crates and crates of Life Tile.

I break quite a few – this isn't symbolic  
it's a given some will break, but which ones  
is as unpredictable as the next quake.

Dry summer heat turns my skin reddish brown  
the hammer rubs my right palm raw.  
After the job I rip off the dead skin and ponder  
bright red flesh – no lines, raw meat  
the consistency of a snail. It heals slow enough  
to see the lines crease into infant skin

wise enough to know exactly where they belong  
to fill in the missing puzzle piece.

After a summer storm the sky revises itself  
erasing grey stanzas, moving clear lines over.  
When the world puts on a clean new body  
the snail finds her way into the light

inching up the side of a blistered wall  
twenty feet high. How on Earth  
she makes it or why, I don't know  
but on the roof she shows me her antennae  
backlit an instant in a single sunbeam  
when seer and seen seem one.

James Dean

I like to think of you pondering an orphaned  
spider dangling from a broken filament  
refusing to believe in futility  
accepting briefness as a challenge  
walking casually away on all eights  
over a sullied ground to construct another web

more intricate and ordered  
another frail world more hidden from wind.  
Your spider gave you the knowledge  
of speed, too much  
to find the world  
in time, not enough.

I like to think of you chasing  
a dream of the garden before  
the fall, before deprivation  
became a fashion statement.  
With no father's shoulder  
to cry on this far east

of Eden, a lost childhood trapped  
in a flaming barn, what chance did you have.  
I don't like to think of you believing  
we're all afraid to love each other  
because the thought of loss  
is a good enough excuse.

Dorothy

Your friend dies, and she is your dead friend.

Memory won't go in the ground.

Gary Thompson, *Cricket*

Beyond the coward-colored bricks of a dream  
whose curtain you raise with watchful eyes  
mind like a knife that makes time the sharpener  
the lion realize his lion-heart, thank you  
for being the warm presence of strength.

A man of skin and bones who thinks he's made of tin  
whose memory rusts, a scarecrow woman  
whose strawy nose scares only herself  
you listen to and love, fill in the starry map  
of a mind you know by blood, and so pass on.

A little man behind a big curtain asks  
what'll it be—Shanghai, Crazy Eights, Solitaire?  
Something tells me you're playing Hearts.  
Who knows why the wind does what it does, your eyes  
are bluer than they were. Look

you don't have to click your heels anymore.  
The ground makes a home for everyone  
like a family that can't rid itself of resemblance.  
This memory resembles you, entering  
its own ground, like the living do.

The Maui Poem (for Jimmy)

Little Jimmy's climbing in the big jungle gym  
when he hears the sirens and knows  
it's his mother they've come for.

Some people die doing what they love.  
She's wrapping presents a week before Christmas  
when her heart stops, and Jimmy's heart stops too

for a moment in the hospital waiting room that day  
where a frightened boy bites his lip and dries his eyes.  
He's only ten when it happens, ten million years ago  
this ocean floor boils, spewing red-orange liquid fire.  
Now we sit on Hana's jagged basalt watching  
waves' white froth bash black lava rocks

beneath wind and spray and a grey sky.  
Today the Hawaiians say the ocean is angry  
a warm fragrance of orchid, mock orange and hibiscus  
in silver mist. Tomorrow we'll leave this place  
where roots of banyan, bamboo and papaya intertwine  
where coconut palms and fern fronds combine

with banana boughs, mangoes and guavas.  
Tomorrow we'll wrestle monstrous surf.  
Some people die doing what they love.  
There, among lavish foliage, a solitary protea  
he calls it a big eyeball  
I think of his mother.

Santa

I don't remember how old I am  
when I start wondering why Mom and Dad's  
wrapping paper and Santa's is the same  
how he can fit billions of presents into one bag  
or fit all his fat thru our narrow chimney.  
In 9<sup>th</sup> grade I take the bus thru downtown L.A.

to Manhattan Beach, meet a tall thin man  
with a hard brown face, grey ponytail down to his sacrum  
who lives in the back of a warehouse downtown.  
He's a bodysurfer with a pair of Voit swimfins  
a brown paper bag with an egg salad sandwich  
an apple and a pint of Jack Daniels.

He knows where the waves come from and why  
it's flat at this spot, walled at this one  
but good over here, he knows which direction  
each beach faces, the contour of the sea-floor offshore  
and he gives me a shiny black pendant  
from Da Nang.

That night the whole house fills with water  
I swim downstairs into the livingroom  
wondering if the shark knows where I am  
then I see the ponytailed man swimming  
up the chimney, Voit fins  
disappearing.

## Uncle John

From a little airplane your ashes  
powder over Puget Sound.

I'm too young to remember anything  
but that picture of you holding two  
enormous muddy geo-ducks.

You must be in an enormous amount of pain  
to take up heroin, a pain as wide as the needle is narrow  
to be so high in the passenger seat of your friend's car  
while it flies off the bridge beside the Sizzler in Glendale  
fifty feet down into the concrete wash, the L.A. River.

It's low tide now on the Sound, buoyant white gulls  
orange and purple starfish strewn about  
the barnacled shore in love with mud  
and the geo-ducks squirting  
trying to tell me something  
deep beneath the surface.

Water shoots up out of the mud, arcs, falls  
back to mud. I don't believe you  
or anyone else could decode the secrets  
beyond gravity.



They

If you can love yours  
the way Donne loved his  
until it's done for

if you can love your ghost  
the way your body lusts  
a little hole in a big door

dust-particles in a light-beam  
and if you can't  
and you won't

then let them whisper  
thru your mouth.  
They.