Here is genuine American poetry at its best.

-Karl Shapiro
THE COAST STARLIGHT

COLLECTED POEMS
1976–2006

BY
HANS Ostrom
Other Books by Hans Ostrom


Acknowledgements

Many of the poems in this collection were published earlier in magazines, journals, newspapers, and anthologies, listed below. I am grateful to the editors, printers, supporters, and readers of these publications.

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A few poems also appeared in my chapbook, Subjects Apprehended (Johnstown, Ohio: Pudding House Press, 2000) and in a chapbook co-written with Wendy Bishop, Water’s Night (Mariposite Press, 1994).
The poems here are best left to speak for themselves, but I want to take a moment to express gratitude to some friends, family members, and teachers. Several teachers helped me along the way—so many, in fact, that I can’t mention them all here. I am especially grateful, however, to Sally Creviston, Patricia Swafford, Ralph Henry, Michael Murphy, Nadine Hyde, Don Hicks, John Hayden, George Sessions, Bill Hotchkiss, Elmo Daley, and the late Karl Shapiro—my poetry teacher at the University of California, Davis. I treasure the kind words Karl wrote about my poetry—in a letter sent from our old stomping-ground, Davis, California, on July 18, 1987. It was Karl who, in the same letter, suggested The Coast Starlight as the title of this collection. His comments, which concern an earlier incarnation of this book, appear on the back cover. I will always value the example of Karl’s poetry, which endures. I am very glad that God, fate, geography, and luck brought me into his sphere of influence. I am deeply grateful to the late Stephen Spender, who selected my poem, “Spider Killing,” to receive a national poetry prize offered by the University of Houston, way back when, and who later sent me a kind letter. And I thank Rita Dove for reprinting my poem, “Emily Dickinson and Elvis Presley in Heaven,” in the Washington Post. To Jane Kendall and Craig Smart: a simple but deeply felt thank you. My extended family—by birth and by marriage—is too numerous to mention individually, its presence too profound and varied to articulate well. They know who they are, in more than one sense of the phrase. I am especially thankful for having Alec, Brady, Sven, Carol, and Ike Ostrom and Robin Ali and Jim Bacon in my life, then and now. By mentioning a few individuals, I don’t mean to slight all the many others who have made my life better than it would have been otherwise. Thanks to you all. I do need, though, explicitly to count the blessings brought my way by Tim Lulofs, Bill Haltom, David Macey, and the late, dear Wendy Bishop. To former and current val-

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ued colleagues at the University of Puget Sound: cheers. To St. Leo’s Parish in Tacoma, Washington: God bless you. Finally, my constant love goes to Jackie and Spencer, to whom the book is dedicated.

Hans Ostrom

Lakewood, Washington
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To War Again

To see them go to war again,
Again, will clarify the choice,
Which is that either nothing or
A Mystery will save us from
What comes when love and reason fail.
And love and reason always fail.
Perversity and cruelty,
The will to power, greed, and hate
Will overwhelm what better selves
Would want to do and be, will grind
The planet and devour us—
Unless a prescient Mystery
Can manage us away from our
Capacities, propensities—
For otherwise we just
Combine our smarts and viciousness,
Our genius and ill will anew.

The Coast Starlight
Winter Nocturne

This is still unbroken country: granite that buckled a million eons ago, diorite boulders, manzanita—and coyote, as lean and sharp as death itself.

I think of the ridge in darkness where ponderosa pines creak like beams of sunken ships. If you think about a slab of slate beneath the snow,

you are glad to be in bed, three blankets toward sleep. It can be that simple. A winter night in the hills allows

the luxury of plain choices, whether to freeze or not. Out there the bear's brain sleeps. A coyote cries like a victim.
No Uncertain Term

I would like to have a word with you. It is apricot. It shall determine our exchange.

Confiding apricot, I will lean in and murmur. You shall pose as one who understands. I will have a moment of your time.

There's something I've been meaning. To tell you. Apricot, I tell you. Apricot, I say. Apricot, you realize.
Hurricane Season

The quay is quiet
after the day’s riotous
weather. We wonder, stunned,
about such fundamental
concepts as property.
Suddenly how very strange
it is to think that anyone
would claim to own
a piece of Earth. Our
ponderings give way
to hunger, fatigue, and vertigo.
Horizon
is florid like the face
of our friend caressing whiskey.
Birds scream in palm trees.
Tackle on the boats knocks
as battered boats rock. We
ended up here, and this day
is ending—facts. We’ll
be alive tomorrow—conjecture.
Tornado In The Pennsylvania Hills

On the morning afterwards, I could not find the driveway, and East was gone.
I tried to reinvent direction.
Where the north woods had stood now there was sky, a blasted space our barn had entered.

Now out of hardship, we make board feet.
Loggers call to bid on damage.
Lithe trees stiffen, ooze sap through splinters. They’ll go for suburban studs, veneer, chips, paper for the memoranda from the Bureau of Natural Disasters.

The twister took my words for terror when it went back to sky.
In place of them I give our friends bland facts: It sounded like a train.
It was 6 miles wide and 12 miles long. We don’t know how we’re alive.

Now out of harm my wife and daughter make tunes. Their simplest songs help us trust the calm again.
After tornado, the farm’s afraid to make a noise. After tornado, our unassuming love seems loud.
Listless

He made a list
Of all the lists
He’d ever made.

He made them for
They made him feel
Much less afraid.

He did not know
Why he desired
This Lists of Lists.

It looked so sad
When it was done.
He now insists

There is just one
Item to list
In life “to do,”

And that’s to die.
Before that though
There are a few

Errands to run,
So why not start,
He thinks, a list?

Hans Ostrom
Spider Killing

With two too many legs
and a gossamer treachery that stopped flies
and bound them in their own terror, spiders,
when I was younger, were to be killed.
The logic was unspoken, but we faithfully assumed
that insects were bugs; spiders, evil.

Wound a daddy-long-legs anywhere
and it would fall into a little pile
like so many broken brown threads;
guts of a wolf spider stuck with a stick
oozed out creamy white like the center of a chocolate.

But now, on a Wednesday of nuclear-weapon tests,
nothing seems so uncertain as arachnicide:
Technicians subvert the arid, flat face
of Nevada, testing gadgets that melt planets in theory,
incinerate revenue in practice. I stand
in a steamy bathroom and debate with myself
the death of a spider poised on perspiring
ceramic tile.

I spare the spider this time; then step
into the blasting shower and clouds of steam
pouring forth like fallout. Spider and I
each stay in fogged, vague corners
as Nevada’s strata rumble
with secrets of modern warfare.
The shadow of the Final War is a delicate cruelty,
strung across doorways and other passages,
sometimes stopping the mind and binding it
in a moment of terror.
Deer in the Headlights

Why are you out here driving?  
Are you just driving, as Americans do?  
Are you looking for oil?  
Are you looking for you?

Night, asphalt, speed—and a dashboard  
lit up like a little city: this is what you love.  

Your driven lights seize a tawny-gray doe.  

This deer in the headlights is an angel come down  
to tell you to pay attention. She stands  
at the end of your car’s long braking scream.  
She allows you not to kill her,  
steps deftly, hard hooves  
on pavement, reaches soil and stone, springs  
back into grace. You curse, not knowing what  
you curse. You take a breath, cut the engine,  

not the lights. Night’s landscape crashes  
around you. The doe is there  
moving into the rest of her life  
as you move into the rest of yours, which begins  
here, dark highway, where you stopped, now start  
again, slowly, attentive to the edges of your way.
Little Lyric

Life and God are
Always right there,
As close to one
As one’s hair.

That is, life and
God are always here,
As far from one
As one’s fear.
January Solitaire

Lay out a patience
(Winter has come down.)
Watch logs in a fireplace
disarrange into orange dice.
(Next year regulations
will prohibit burning wood.)
“Try again, Sir Tommy.”
(Desperation is one parent
of whimsy. The other is unknown.)
Best not to count the times
you look out on the gray and sigh.
(“Quantitative judgments do not apply.”)
Of Apocalypse

I heard a man say
The world would end
Not when God desired
It to end but when
We were ready. I
Know I'm not ready.
I know I'm too petty,
Driven, afraid, obtuse.

I understand what
The man said. God
Is not just ready. God
Is infinite readiness.

It is toward that readiness
That our better selves move
When they are well
And good enough to move.
Peaceheads

Powers announced today they've replaced all nuclear warheads with unconventional peaceheads. Several Powers asserted first-patience capability while others adhered to a doctrine of mutual pacification. One Power stated unequivocally that it would consider the launch of any peacehead to be an implicit declaration of all-out harmony. Experts say that, upon impact, a peacehead splits open like a big butternut squash, releasing varieties of sacred texts, packets of heirloom seeds, recipes, difficult math problems (with answers), musical scores, spices, medicine, back-scratchers, embroidery, pliers, coupons, sweaters, string, and shoes. Used in combination this way, such items apparently have enormous productive potential and can render whole regions bemused. There is a sense tonight in which the threat of peace has never been more great. An eerie ebullience strolls the land.
Deutschland

(circa 1980)

The Rhine ran brown and stank. It was just being a modern river. A drunk woman came to my rented room, stripped, and put her breasts in my face. She was just being assertive. Something called East Germany existed then. A checkpoint guard winked almost imperceptibly at me, and I winked back. Dé tente, I think it was called, or foolishness.

Sometimes I think the Germans taught me to hate myself. Other times I think they taught me that no one gives a damn whether you hate yourself or not. They were just being Europeans.
St. Petersburg, Russia

A stain on linen is a flower represented if we see it so. So we saw it so.

A train at Finland Station was a hope represented when we saw it from the frozen bridge.

Can too much history happen to one city? It would seem so.

Famous tennis players—Connors, Borg, McEnroe—paced the lobby of Hotel Nevsky Prospekt, caged in opulence, waiting for the Exhibition Match. They’re merely the latest invaders, will be gone by the next evening on SAS to Stockholm. St. Petersburg’s massive avenues shall yawn.
On Finally Understanding the Notion of a Happy Hunting-Ground

Killing is not possible on the Other Side. One variation of God, though, will want to hunt empty-rifled with my father, greet a blue morning open-coated, snort pine air, listen to lunatic hounds, watch epic-bodied bears break trees running, recall how hunting requires no prey, is mainly mischief, dance, and gab.

And now bears are long-gone five ridges away, the dogs stoned on loads of scent and frenzy. Comes the long ride home in an old green steel-bodied truck, the expression of long brown lariats of tobacco juice. God for kicks tries out my father’s talk, says, Sonofabitchin’ bear must have gone five hundred pounds, had to.

On a star-bashed night, bear’s spirit mixes with my father’s. The hybrid soul rumbles through canyons of a river in the sky. Sitting on a galactic porch somewhere, God might like to hear a coyote chorus cry an oratorio, one so eerie it summons bears out of hibernation, calls them to the altar of the moon.
Homage to Emily Dickinson

A bird came up
My mental walk.
It pinched a Dickinson
Scholar in half.

In my scrappy hometown,
I knew weirdoes like you,
Liked them. They
Lived their lives,

And just their lives.
How rare that is
I began to know
Even at age six.

Your poems are prim
Graffiti scratched
On the back of Piety’s pew.
Good old you.

Your poems know more
Than ever they let on,
Were postcards sent
From privacy, anon.
Jean Toomer

(1894–1967)

To write so beautifully then withdraw from writing—quite a gesture, as if the magician disappeared but the trick endures, the cape hanging on air, the cane upright on its own.

You moved along illusory lines where color disappears like sawmill smoke at dusk.

You slipped through seams of social wrappings.

You built your body, prose, life with sure discipline, cool will, freedom.

“I have worked, it seems to me, at everything.”

We missed you, we miss you, you are missed.

The vanishing act keeps working. A good audience, we go on agreeing to pretend we don’t know you’re hiding in Cane.
Langston Hughes

(1902–1967)

In a wilderness of reasons
not to write, he wrote. Just wrote.
Each word was the belief
in the possibility of the next.
He kept it going.

Mostly his days and words talk
quietly, though he could rant and rage.
In this world of self-convinced noises,
mention is what his voices usually do.

Truth mentioned is a sweet brass
note you'll never forget. Writing,
Langston showed writing to be
an unashamed act, one of the few
in a shameful, shaming world. Words

grin. Words reside. Words throw
a meal together for unexpected friends,
make a garden in front of a brownstone,
come back from long sea voyages
alive. Words aren't everything,
are not the rent, often
may be only change left from
a last dollar spent in Paris or Reno.

Morning: Hallelujah.
The world goes to its terrible work
of silencing souls. Out
of an open window comes a tapping—
the tick, the tack, the click and the clack,
Jack, of writing. And all those sorry rooftops
get red, get glad, get suave, get saved.
Shapiro was by nature Luddite and Iconoclast—ironic then that he
So liked to frame his poetry with lines
Laid out like rows of bricks, with stanzas of
Fixed persons, places, things. He played a lot
At saying No but never thunderously—
The Beats embarrassed him. He rather liked
The post-War comforts brought to us by Ike
And Coke and IBM. Mischievously conform—
That’s what he did. A solidarity of one
Appealed to him—bad bourgeois white-haired boy
Who’d hurt a fly but little else, and then
Only with imagery of snot and rage
That scanned. He was a little bored by fame,
By his own poetry, by life on land-
Grant campuses, where doe-eyed kids would turn
In heart-felt free-verse stuff to him.
One hopes that Wystan Hugh was waiting when
Shapiro entered Afterlife’s Drugstore.
Perhaps the two every so often cruise
In a Corvair, smoke cigarettes, quote Yeats
And Keats, mock Eliot, admit they’re glad
That lust for beaus and belles belongs now to
That other life; and prosodize until
Nebraska cows come home—Imperial Wys,
Old Karl Jay, the blue-eyed brightest Beep
From Baltimore. Of course they need not love
Each other, and they died already, so
What’s left is love of words and irony;
Satiric tendencies;—oh, and Eternity.
Impromptu Étude for Baruch Spinoza

(Spinoza, 1632–1677)

To affirm the self, don’t you
first have to catch it?
You’d think so, though Spinoza
seemed to say, Hey,

live and be and only thereby
see essentially what
essential Who you are.
Then essence springs from

living’s motion? Is that the deal?
Maybe. You may be. You
are (apparently) allowed to be.
Living is a mess of data

that gathers itself as it goes.
See where it goes. See who
you are when you get there.
Interesting how Spinoza’s

self still runs around in his
words even as Baruch,
mortal philosopher, cannot,
so to speak, be bothered.

Hans Ostrom
Stephen Spender

(1909–1995)

When I saw him, his hair was white,
His complexion pink.
He seemed surprised by his own height.
I do not think
Continually of him, but he was great
For those who like
Clear poetry. He was that rare
Creature—an unassuming Modernist.
His sentences persist,
Appear so sure
Of what they know and do not know.
He never seemed to write for show.
His poems and he: sturdy, delicate,
Plain and intricate,
Sober and wise.
Pale eyes.

§
Wendy Bishop: A Quick Study

(1953–2003)

1974: You were already married, to the Bay Area musician, and writing accomplished poems. You and I and the guy who’d read everything met after class to go over our poems. You really went over them. We sat on steps outside your stucco apartment—baked California—drank iced tea, not booze, talked image and line, faked being laid back, were self-conscious and ambitious.

The revolution in Nigeria almost caught you. Germany lay in both our fates. The second husband was a poet. You got to know Navahos and Alaskans, hot to cold, and an ethnographic Ph.D. in between.

1989: We each rounded a corner near a book-exhibit, and there we were. Talked as if we hadn’t not talked in ten years. An uncanny, reticent trust. We wrote like crazy. Were crazy. Books and poems and chapters and books. The third husband was a librarian. Your two kids ran around with my one under the Space Needle. We ate German food in Milwaukee.

Email—and we discovered we could mumble electronically. I was so happy to see you so happy as a reluctant star of our oddball profession. The last husband—another musician. You fell in love with a place called Alligator Point. 2003: You died,
and these failing words are all right by me. We never let the fact that everything crumbles keep us from working. Just to make it official: You were a great writer; you made my life better than it otherwise would have been; you had blue eyes; were the quickest of studies.

§
You and This War

You are part of this war. You pay taxes. You are not part of this war. No one in charge cares what you think. You are part of this war. You go to work each day and remain quiet on the subject. You pave the path of least resistance. You are not part of this war. You watch images of it and read words about it from a great distance. You are part of this war. You are one 280 millionths of this nation. You are not part of this war. You do not fight in it or fight to stop it. You are part of this war.

§
Weaponry Quatrain

How shall we manage our Weapons? With fear.
How shall we manage our Fear? With weapons. Oh, dear.

§
Emily Dickinson and Elvis Presley in Heaven

They call each other 'E.' Elvis picks wildflowers near the river and brings them to Emily. She explains half-rhymes to him.

In heaven Emily wears her hair long, sports Levis and western blouses with rhinestones. Elvis is lean again, wears baggy trousers and T-shirts, a letterman’s jacket from Tupelo High. They take long walks and often hold hands. She prefers they remain just friends. Forever.

Emily’s poems now contain naugahyde, Cadillacs, Electricity, jets, TV, Little Richard and Richard Nixon. The rock-a-billy rhythm makes her smile.

Elvis likes himself with style. This afternoon he will play guitar and sing “I Taste A Liquor Never Brewed” to the tune of “Love Me Tender.”

Emily will clap and harmonize. Alone in their cabins later, they’ll listen to the river and nap. They will not think of Amherst or Las Vegas. They know why God made them roommates. It’s because America was their hometown. It’s because

God is a thing without feathers. It’s because God wears blue suede shoes.

§
A Bar at the Folies-Bergère

(Manet)

If you're interested, the mirror will show a flat, brilliant image of our lustrous clutter, of much white flesh draped in black, of green bottles, brown bottles, other mirrors, crystal, lanterns, jewels—glass and gems we've arranged as a barricade against dawn.

The woman behind the bar lets her gaze wander until you express your pleasure. She wears black velvet trimmed in lace, a brooch depended on a black ribbon, a golden bracelet on her arm.

After you order, your gaze wanders to the mirror behind her. There her back looks earnest and endearing. There's our society, too—busy, cramped, posing, political, small. Your gaze prefers the solitary woman. Nonetheless you take it and your drink, and you join the tables, and sense someone gazing at you, too.
Impression, Sunrise

(Monet)

Confusion simplifies:
sun’s a red dot in murk,
boat’s a black patch
on murk, just a spill
of red light lets seeing tell
a difference between one
murk and another. It’s all
a seeming in which morning
looks as vague as thoughts
or the other way around, and
blended seemings compose
a soup which eyes will taste as light,
air, water. A painter makes
one moist concoction seem
like another, and we look at
what seems to have been seen
and imagine we see it.

§
A Woman In Paris

In an unambitious café
on one of the smaller avenues,
she took her evening meals. She
kept the objects, events,
and duties of her life orderly.
Was therefore surprised by love;
by a man's kindness, crooked smile,
large soft hands. This pleasant
passion didn't make life less
immensely mysterious to her.
Soon love concluded anyway.
He was a restless, ill-focused
fellow. Goodbye to him.
The café didn't change, or
the avenue. Love like weather
had passed through. She grew
fond of cello music and neither
waited for nor ruled out another
incarnation of the love-phenomenon
coming up the avenue some day,
some night, into the laconic café.

§
The field of our day lay ordinarily before us. Gravity and practice tethered our thoughts to checklists. Helium swelled fabric beyond wrinkled rainbow to painted light-bulb. Up—

and foreheads; then hats and coiffures, quickly pigment on the landscape. Cheers littered the wind. We thought we knew the limits. But late in the day the continent of air between field and cloud shrank to an urgent isthmus.

The causes were final and cited accurately. In the meantime, we bartered in good faith with Earth, starting with sandbags, moving through provisions, ending with camera, compass, and hope. Rapid descent reduced the gondola and us to ballast.

By the time the trees and rocks were close enough to name, choice had changed to fate at a predictable rate.
According to our records, three moons orbit the planet of consciousness inside your brain.

Also, we do not regret to inform you that, by privilege of eminent domain, the City intends to build a boulevard through an area zoned formerly for your long-term memory. You have the right to remain silent.

If you have reason to believe our records are in error, you shall suffer the added pain of knowing you are correct.
Permission to Treat the Witness as Hostile

I refuse to answer on the grounds that language is terribly imprecise, and that whosoever swears to tell the whole truth (as I was just compelled to swear) by definition lies.

§
A Photograph of the Day Shift:
North Star Mine, 20 June 1938

This print grays their mission like carbide. Denim and cotton fall from shoulders, enwrap legs in a fog of fatigue.

Miles under Grass Valley, they carved roads & inhaled breath of blind mules. Went where consumptive foremen said to go. Fall with them now

a thousand feet to First Level, depend on cable, hug a dinner-bucket to your chin, stand bone-and-muscle close. Smell dynamite

and manufactured air. Meet my father, there in a crevice of the mission, hard-hat tipped back, alongside older men hard with rage and booze.

Seventeen: He shouldn’t have been hired. North Star needed backs and shoulders, the will to muck in space too small to stand in. The camera hires him. The rest is a sullen day crew. Ghostly battalion: two hundred acolytes of labor. Gold was the Company they kept in business. They kept women in whorehouses.

Gold was a way to box with poverty. And lose. The camera situates faces between Wars, miners wary between missions, shadows in history’s tunnel.

A caption floats: EMPIRE STAR MINES CO. LTD. FRED W. NOBS, GENERAL MGR M.E. NEWLOVE SUPT. GRASS VALLEY CALIF. JUNE 20 1938 DAY SHIFT
Get to work: They enter the cage of their lives, drop into work’s planet, excavate the 20th of June. Their light stays in that company pose. They went down, set charges, mucked detritus of Blast, loaded cars, stayed alive. They went down into their granite time. They mined their pulses in quartz veins.

§
The Last Place

Not long from now
nor far from here's
the place where all
that matters now,
even if it matters then,
must matter to
somebody else.

To anyone who finds
this note: good luck
and look ahead
to your last place
not far, not long
from when and where

you read this—your
eyes, your mind
alive and quick
and liquid, not
concerned with doom.
Ah, bless you on

your way to where
what matters now
must matter to
someone besides
the one you are,
the one I am.

§
Mist, Earthquake, Grace

If the mist lifts,
Let me know.
Meantime, I will
Be inside.

If the Earth shifts,
I'll lie low.
I never liked that
Liquid ride.

If God sends gifts,
I won't say No.
One must assume
They're bona fide.

§

Hans Ostrom
Her Confession

Reluctantly I joined
the school systems, the
workforce, the more
or less normally regulated
life. Some discomfort
and no enthusiasm were
involved. I saw what was
expected and operated
along those lines. These
are not systems I invented,
nor have I the power
to invent others. One joins.
That’s all. Society is strange.
It is not something I
take to easily. Reluctance
has made me wary but steady.

§
Fossil of a Wing

News: a signature of flight stays imprinted on blue-black strata in Earth’s uncertain crust. (The body vanished long ago.) The British, desperate like everyone for fuel, mining in the vicinity of Hell, uncovered this icon of wing, which dates from when flight went unnamed in air. We glance at accounts concerning “the fossilized wing of Earth’s first flying thing.” Shall we congratulate this synecdoche of dragonfly set deep in Derbyshire coal? In its disappearing act, it left behind a single-image autobiography. It induced the very rocks to recall that once it possessed the golden air.

§
Remodeling

We were after other forms, more light.
The house itself suggested other versions
of itself, faces within a face.

Rooms refused to add up. We
petitioned partitions. Shadows
fell against their will.

Blue meant one kind of life,
yellow quite another. Annuities of fate
sat in paint cans, quiet, unmixed.

In Plato’s formal heaven, two-by-fours
are Two By Four, grainless, ideal.
Here lumber rankles at our plain

geometry, gets nailed to the crosses
of our blueprints. We model, mold,
remold, remodel. And still we sigh.

§
Inside a pyramid, its reason:
A former king parched like a leaf
And now impervious to grief,
Bacilli, and a shift of season.

Dust of a million builders’ bones
Informs the wind with grit, lingers,
Then scrapes with unbelieving fingers
Familiar blocks of hand-hewn stone.
The Cherubs, The Harbors

Your constancy inspires me to refurbish pavilions of hope. Your sweetness unfurls yards of woven sky that luxurious tailors applaud. Ah, my dear, what a long way we’ve traveled together. Harbors have looked out for our best interests, San Francisco, Stockholm, Mobile, Tacoma, Barcelona. Love is a province we inherited from an oligarchy of cherubs.

I wish I were as wise as you deserve, as patient as the moon, as extraordinary as you. I desire all blessings to come your way like voices from a choir, secrets from a wizard, sung light from behind blue mountains.

The Coast Starlight
Yes, I Do

I take full responsibility for what I’m about to write, which is that when she eats chocolate, some ends up in a corner of her mouth. She reprimands cinematic villains, speaking directly to the TV screen. I take full responsibility for the fact that this is turning into a love poem. She runs a business in a sector of the global economy known as “not-for-profit.” She appreciates eccentricity. Has long, melodramatic nightmares, from which she wakes refreshed. She eats the whole apple, core and all. It’s my fault that I see these qualities and details from the vantage-point commonly called love, and that I’ve already used the word “love” twice, now three times. I hold myself accountable. She sings on pitch. Likes swing, rock-and-roll, Sinatra, soul, rockabilly reverb, opera, and the cello. It was my foolish error to begin with the detail about chocolate in the corner of her mouth. To the degree this is a love poem, an embarrassingly domestic one, I’m to blame. She’s unabashedly happy when a hot dinner’s waiting for her after she’s been driving in the rain. I do love her. I take full responsibility. I do.
Pay attention: You constitute a clutter of fear, regret, despair.

You are old. Indeed, it is always late.

You eat, sleep, and ogle too much—are an odd blend of hog, hibernating bear, and cat.

You’ll never grow up. And so on.

You’re just another routine example of grace—

that is, of its absolute necessity, obvious presence. If I were

God, I wouldn’t bother with you. God, however,

is God and apparently bothers. Pay attention.

§
Skylights

My soul, in search of skylights,
Climbed flights of stairs,
Hit its head on attic beams,
Fell over cast-off chairs.

It went back down to rooms
Of routine, fearful days,
Persistent anxious nights,
And weary, wearing ways—

Went further—to a basement,
To be desperate and low,
Stumbled there on blueprints
For skylights, what do you know?

§
To a Passenger in Mainz

There’s the experience of being the last one left on a railway platform. The desired train wails away toward a city that was not expecting you.

You feel a mixture of regret and satisfaction as you retreat with your ticket and luggage. A taxicab takes you back to the apartment. You don’t unpack.

You’re not going anywhere. There’s the experience of not going anywhere. There’s a mental exercise of wondering why you didn’t catch the next train. There’s the apartment’s window.

You look out on a cold wet scene—February, Mainz. What is not gray out there is brown. At least the furnace is working. At least there’s a facsimile of Gutenberg’s press in the museum. Here’s tea, also pastry. Into your mind by way of your mood comes a notion that your soul is leaking. You travel to your bed.

§

The Coast Starlight
Night Bus In Frankfurt

Some of us seem just to drift toward death, our heartbeats dissolving quietly into bloodstreams like clay pebbles in a creek. On the night bus, for instance, I daydream.

I look into darkness through reflections of passengers, of gleaming chrome. Out there my mind wades in fog on a muddy hillock, terrified by sound of hooves, smell of marrow. Turning from this,

I enter the life of the night bus, which calls to mind a casino: well lighted, solemn, ceaseless motion; shards of noise and paper; tiny bells far off; fear and weariness known by their disguises; the effort of faces to be placid, to glance only when the other glances at another. Perspiration and minutes accumulate in muggy silence.

The night bus lights itself up from inside like a grape. The driver behind his curtain is deaf to confessions, especially to those of honest poverty. He spits the name of my Wagenhalt into an acid intercom, opens darkness for me to enter. After the sinister hiss of pneumatic doors, after the last steel step, I sniff the fog for spore of violence.
Düsseldorf and So Forth


§

The Coast Starlight
Soon someone will be rich
Enough to purchase Earth,
All private land, all goods
And services, the lives
Of all who work: Supreme
Consolidation. Then
The planet shall be re-
Presented by one share
Of stock. No one will have
The means to buy The Share.
Ur-Owner, then, will need
To advertise in Space
To find a buyer and
To make a profit on
Dominion. And what
A day that day will be,
When Earth at last is one
Packaged commodity.

§
April Primary

Winter’s filibuster fades to mumbles. The delegates are nominating Spring, signifying their favor by piercing soil with green digits. Birds work the precincts, natural politicians:

quick with impromptu speeches, always groomed, crisply garbed, well coifed. I support Spring. I think it has a lot of good ideas.

§
Morphine

My eyes turned feral, made visitors feel hunted. When I talked, interlocutors thought of machine-gun turrets, wolf-children, and town drunks. I sold grand schemes to myself, Mad Morphine Dauphin.

I became characters in stories my mind told my mind. I softly ceased to exist. The stench of the hospital, my tube-invaded body, Cubist quarrels with nurses—none of this had to do with old what’s-my-name. Morphine slew ego. I was a parsonage without a parson, a jukebox mausoleum. Later I reintroduced myself to myself. Long time, no see. There are still hard feelings between us.

§
Instrument of Good Works #59

(St. Benedict)

My will is good at what it does:
insist, persist.
I despise it as I hated
rocks I used to bust up
with a sledge-hammer at
the gravel-plant, minimum wage.
I loathe how my will prolongs
foolishness, knocks wisdom
aside, and belches pride. I will
pay attention to St. Benedict
and despise my will. I will.

§
The Leopard and the City

“A leopard shall watch over their cities.”

—Jeremiah 5:6

Rain fell out of the cloud of time. It made no argument. Droplets blotched a blond meadow. Out of the pattern a leopard arose. Its eyes reflected the cloud of time.

An old small city is my soul, such as it is. The leopard watches over it, her breathing and her heartbeat syncopated. I do not visit there as often as I should: Work is elsewhere in factory-towns of will. When the small city seems to call, I take a road curved round a cliff. Up there sits the leopard. The ledge is blue. Arrived, I seek a sanguine plaza. People I have tried to be loiter there. They slouch and lean and gab. They know me well.

Out of the rain in a baked café, we share a meal. We speak of the leopard, become one person in the cloud of time.
Orientation Meeting in the Afterlife

“Welcome. You may and can and will have whatever you want here.”

“This is Heaven, then?”

“No. Listen carefully. I said, ‘you may and can and . . .’”

§
Judeo-Christian Codicil

Thou shalt not use any of the Ten Commandments to rationalize what you intended at the outset to do anyway. Thou shalt not kid a kidder.

§
Of One

It is the most boring number—
a thin, sour preacher flagging
in the second hour of an August sermon,
an enraged father pounding on an anvil.

It is priapic but sterile, one tree
remaining after clear-cut.

“One” wakes up drunk, snarls
at the television. “One” demands
compliance and calls it consensus.
“One” complies. “One” is the arrow
that killed the crow.

§
For Four

It’s the only number
I’ve befriended. Others see
it as sailboat or
tree. I see it
as a sentinel in
the snow, a draftee
more lost than zero,
more alone than one.

Circular and disorderly, I
love nonetheless angles, geometry.
I spent summers truing
four corners of foundations
with my founding father.

Four’s the only number
that romanced me; it’s
the beat, the measure,
the box, the square.
Quarter and *quarto*, quad-
rangle and corner, a
small number always big
enough to house itself.
Grief For The Number Ten

What would we say about ten if it died? –The 1

and the 0 lying in a box
of cotton, a salacious minister

sliding into the crowd
to read the unimportant

Tenth Psalm. Oh, Ten,
we would think, you were right

in the midst of everything
we thought about numbers.

You unified by dividing.
You got those zeroes rolling

in a train roaring past that
pipsqueak town, Arithmetic,

into Infinityville. Or maybe
we’d just look at our fingers,

count like crazy, hymning
& humming desperately.

The data suggest we,
take away ten, are nothing.

§
A Hod-Carrier Reflects

Stone walls get the last word.
This wall, my father built. He’s dead.
It stands. He hefted each rock, troweled mortar, composed High-Sierra granite, quartz, diorite, mariposite, slate. Made the thing true, good, pleasing, and useful.

I mixed and wheeled the “mud,” cleaned tools and rocks, etched mortar lines, tacked into storms of his cursing, laughed and sweated with him. The ones who ordered up the wall are gone, replaced by ones who don’t know who the mason was.

The wall’s become a secret, an encoded version of my father, his work and way with stone. The wall is obvious, obscure, plain, inscrutable. No one cares I know who built it, nor would I argue anyone should. That’s the way it is with masonry, which gives the last word to the wall.

§

Hans Ostrom
Fox and You

If you saw the fox,
know the fox saw you first,
and not out of the corner of her eye.

If your breath caught
when image of a precise
snout, wise eyes, thick bristling
stone-and-cinnamon fur struck
your optic den,

know that’s the sort of guiltless,
guileless reverence the best of
the best Beliefs have in mind.

If she returns
to you, taking a path through dream,
know by dawn she
went back to milk-drugged pups.
And slept, the scent of you
included now in her edition
of Foxes' Encyclopedia of Wariness.

§
Squirrels

I've watched squirrels my whole life. They inhabit a zone just outside domesticity, are diplomatically wild. They worry and stare, behaviors of which I approve. They horde forgetfully, gorge daintily. Sometimes they just stop. And fall asleep, mid-day, on a limb or a fence post, all energy drained. Sometimes frenzy possesses them—something to do with sex or fleas—mad bursts of wants followed by a frozen pose. Squirrels are not everything I had hoped wilderness to be. They are though everything I would want squirrels to be, and slightly more, for there's always just one more surprise ready to leap out of squirrel-evolution and seize the nut, bury it, and pat fresh soil over the nut-grave. And run away!

§
Regarding Badger

I have seen the badger, and I approve. Its body argues for badgerness. The rhetoric is fierce, furry, low, leveraged, and necessary.

I prefer not to point to tall buildings and small computers and say *Look at what we’ve done!* I am, however, in favor of sewer systems, electric light, and medicine. Have we done right by the badger? That’s a measure of civilization, too: a judgment to limit ourselves, to leave badger and woods alone enough and well.

§
V For Surrender

It's not a question of letting go but of never having had hold. It's not a question.

Our hands are empty often and at best only transfer, never own. Possession is nine tenths of illusion. Hands operate as points lines use to reach points-next.

We might say all lives are way-stations to nowhere: The I passes through the Me, connecting points to point of ceasing-to-be. In a related story, animals demonstrate how to live fully engaged even at rest and without ambition, careers being a quaint human invention. Will is quite the contraption, too—the right tool for a few
jobs but misapplied in most—an anvil in a solarium.
And so again this Fall

I'll read the geese. I will be thinking V as they are knowing fly. I’ll “let them go.”

§

The Coast Starlight
Sea Monster

I drift beneath a grammar of sharply etched shapes and clear contrasts. Eddies dance as if to mock my dumb back as I pass under a cove’s calm surface. Sometimes a seabird’s shriek thuds through thick water. I feel forever dark weight of water. It’s as present to me as my own body as I push through it with ridiculous flippers. One day I will just stop and drop to ancient mud; clouds of mud will mushroom out about me, swirl, disappear on currents. I’ll roll on one side with one eye buried in muck and one still staring at black water mottled with insinuations of light. A sound will grow in me, rise out of my mute years, build into a moaning like a sunken ship’s crushed hull, then race into a scream smothered by seawater, seaweed. A white bird will cock its head, thinking it’s heard a fish, dip to the surface, and seeing nothing, sail back to bright bluffs. I will have become an inundated continent of grief, overwhelmed.

§

Hans Ostrom
Jack Benny and T.S. Eliot Do Some Club Dates in Heaven

Tom gets second billing, starts the gig by shouting, “Anybody here from St. Louis?!”

In the room the waitresses come and go, with drinks and change. Eddie Anderson (“Rochester”) owns the joint, a nice clean place called The Celestial.

Jack comes on, speaks the opening lines of “Prufrock,” milks the pause following “etherized upon a table,” does the deadpan, says, “Well, Gee . . .”

After the show, Jack helps Tom with timing. They talk about violin concertos, the Thirties, Freud, Chicago, banking, and real estate. Sometimes Tom tries to explain about Ezra Pound. Jack’s polite but changes the subject.

Tom’s faint Missouri drawl is coming back. He dares to eat fried catfish, remembers everything he hated about Europe, loved about his boyhood. Jack prefers Palm Springs to Heaven but says he can’t complain—it beats the Catskills.

One night they’re about to step into separate cabs, black Chevrolets, get home to warm milk, Mary and Viv; Jack pauses, shouts, “Hey, Kid—I finally get The Waste Land!” Tom shouts, “Yeah?” “Yeah,” says Jack, “you gotta read it as Vaudeville, am I right?” “You’re not wrong!” says Tom.
Truth to tell, neither likes the other much, nothing personal. Each figures he deserves the other in some obscure Talmudic, High-Church, or Show-Biz way. Whatever. God has reasons. God's a tough crowd.

§
Sierra Nevada: Cold Work Moment

In a sense it’s always winter

in this wooded county of our psyche,
where my father and I build a house,
the rest of the crew off drunk somewhere.

The contractor has taken blueprints

and a cash advance to Reno.
A white sky pays out
kernels of snow. My father saws.

I nail. Partitions take ghostly shape.

In the forest of our days, coyotes
eat bread crumbs we scattered
to find our way back to where we left for work.

We lift walls into iron wind,

and brace. Ropes of snot come out
of our noses. Sierra cold’s meticulous.
It polishes our eyeballs like a monocled jeweler.

One junco, round as a musical note, lands on a board.

In this shift, we share a willed,
relentless push against work, which
is endless, more like Time than Time.

Our hands stick to metal we pick up.

The Coast Starlight
Say in this work-moment howling witches
fly down from glacial diorite Buttes.
Say maybe God leans closer or pivots away.

We’re smaller than an echo of traveling geese.

I know my father in the white meadow of work.
Women have always been more sensible than men.
Up there on a ragged ridge a coyote yawns.

I feel as if we are the wages we are due.
§
Padre, Noonday

Old padre, dry
as a cricket’s chirp,
as a lizard’s burp—
old padre, why

do you go to the well
at blazing mid-day
when everyone’s away
in shade, in sleep. Tell

why even the town’s
lunatic has enough sense
to nap under an immense
oak, but not you. My own

notion is it’s not
for water that you
come, surely not to
set examples. What

then? Is it to show
yourself to God’s blaze
of scrutiny, God’s gaze,
before you go?

§
North San Juan

(on Highway 49, California)

There’s no South or West or East San Juan, only North San Juan, alone with its name, cut in half by a highway. Once miners loved it, then Hippies, now no one special. It’s a place boozers who like to stop at every place stop. Its graveyard is enormous, with regal vestiges—tall tombstones, wealthy oaks. In summer-swelter, flies stick to diesel oil. Sloppy screened-doors flop in breezes. Sadness seems to soak into the town, sink into deep, sealed tunnels. If you go through there in Winter, don’t speed up too much because outside of town there’s a bad curve where ice holds all day, and you could end up almost dead just east of North San Juan.

§
The Ride, The Badge

Tonight my memory is
a palomino exuberantly hooved
in an alpine meadow.

I ride the palomino bareback
and fall off, replacing air
in lungs with fear,

pushing fear out and breathing
again. I hold out
a sugar-cube on a flat palm

for my memory,
which nuzzles with a soft
gray mouth, nips

the cube, leaves lovely
equine slobber. The tail flicks out
at a fat fly, makes broom sounds.

Sunlight, the old sheriff, jumps
up on my memory,
and everything goes golden,

gathers
into a bright badge of
summer.

§
Poetry, Sex, Heat

Reading poetry in full sun,
Central-Valley California blaze:
I liked that. Words conjured images,
which melted into heat-mirages. Reading

one poem made me want to read
another. I binged, sweated
as I read. Sex in a stifling
room: I liked that. To be

young and naked in a hot dark room—
that was fine for us. Poetry and sex
in summer heat: I still
ponder the connections.

Poetry seemed to have a body. Sex
insisted. Like a difficult good poem,
it wanted something from us.
Sex and poetry on the Valley floor:

That's what I wanted then.
That's what I was for.

§
Heat Stroke

One day in July,
Sierra Nevada
(sun unblocked, high, blazing)
—I was splitting and
stacking tamarack-rounds
for somebody
in town. Heat
came up
through my body to my head.
I
went blind. I was seventeen,
had learned by then to be
more embarrassed
than frightened
by affliction. I saw
just well enough
to stagger down to the general store,
stumbled
into an old man, who laughed. I found
a bench,
waited for
eyesight to clear.
Somebody got water. I went
back to the wood pile
eventually.
This has been
a pattern of sorts in my
life—
work hard until I go blind or fall over,
recover, go back to
work.

The Coast Starlight
Tamarack sap smells sweet, and a person’s brain can get too hot—how strange life really is.

§
Charles Baudelaire and Richard Brautigan in Heaven

At a café table, Richard waits as Charles climbs down off a nude giantess. Images of Mickey Mouse clinging to the Matterhorn come to Richard’s mind.


“But of course,” he replies. The giantess, clothed, returns, gazes at these mischief-making poets, gathers them into her laugh, which is as large and unembarrassed as a freighter filled with acrobats and dance-hall girls, steaming from Marseilles to San Francisco, via Tokyo and Tacoma.

§
Sigmund Freud and Babe Ruth in Heaven

Sigmund sits in a cool dugout, theorizing The Babe, who daily trots out in Heaven’s perpetual Spring Training and wrists pitches over marble walls. The Babe plays in his underwear, looks like a white radish atop toothpicks.

Dr. Freud is addicted to a revulsion he feels for this Orality of a man, who even in Heaven devours raw steak, rashers of bacon, barrels of ale, potatoes, fudge, cigars, brandy. Ruth’s lips are immense. His voice burbles up like raw crude. The doctor cannot keep himself from watching George Herman’s buttocks flinch when he turns on a pitch. Wearing a Brooklyn Dodger’s cap, Freud scribbles notes toward a paradigm of Baseball As Dream. At home plate, Bambino belches, breaks wind. The doctor is discontented. Apparently, there’s no treatment for this Promethean American adolescent—voracious as a bear, incorrigible as a cat.

Babe calls Sigmund “Doc,” of course. When they play catch, Babe bends curves and floats knucklers—junk for bespectacled Doc, who squints and shies when ball slaps mitt. The ball falls out as often as not. Sometimes, though,
a principled grin grows on Freud’s grizzled face. For the doctor is day-dreaming he’s an American boy in Brooklyn—that Herr Ruth, Der Yank, is his step-father. When the ball does slip snugly into dark webbing, no sting, Freud feels the power of Catch as Ritual. Hey, there you go, Doc! growls His Babeness—and spits brownly, O prodigiously onto Heaven’s green.
Dialogue on a College Campus

“Excuse me. Are you in philosophy?”
   “Yes.”
“What are we doing today?”
   “Not much. We just talked about reality.”
“Wait a minute. Did I miss class? Oh my God I missed class. Is class now?”
   “No. We just had it. But don’t worry. A lot of people were sick.”
“Oh good. I don’t feel so bad now.”
   “The prof said we’d finish with reality Wednesday.”
“Cool.”

§
Night Hunt

circa 1963

Black sky sagged
with load of stars,
Sierra: November.

Rapture seized hounds,
Blue-Tick, Red-Bone,
Black-and-Tan.

They yowled, yapped, slobbered.
Feet, ears, tails, and
tongues flapped, spasmed.

Fiercer, stronger than I,
dogs didn’t scare
me, age nine.

My father yelled, willed them
to leap in the bed
of the Jeep truck;

& off we motored down an
"unimproved" and crooked road
into woods. To hunt raccoons,

to whom night is day
and humans are strange,
intermittent threats.

Jeep’s lamps brought tree
trunks, boulders, and
snow patches

The Coast Starlight
out of black. Haypress Creek’s Canyon: hounds loose.
Their noses snuffed

snow, muck, and air,
unrolled an elaborate,
detailed odor-map.

Coon-scent, wild scent,
recent spore of hair
and glands: track.

Soon manic yelps and long,
low howls told
secrets from deep woods.

Father chewed snoose,
kept a wool coat
open to cold air.

My feet ached, grew
numb. I wearied, not
knowing what secret,

if any, I was part of.
Father told me what
voice went with which
dog—Jack, Jocko, Striker.
We walked a mile in,
found all three savage

under an oak. Flashlight
beam showed racoon’s
face, which seemed
to question the premise
of this situation.
Father kept a .22
pistol holstered,
didn’t use it,
called off the dogs,
leashed them, their lungs
pumping steam into
alpine air.
He took two dogs, gave
me one. I was
nine and short and
tired and cold, so just
one dog was barely not
too much. I wouldn’t
ponder excursions like
this til later, or
realize they had to do with
getting out of the house
into cold air, away
from worries about
work, money, time. Night-
hunts let hounds go
to Animal City, let
us stand on crusted snow
in cold air under star-soaked
sky, hearing dogs go

The Coast Starlight
nuts. Night hunts let us live just where we lived. So of course a treed raccoon had to be released. Dogs, coon, & I slept late next day,

whereas Father and Mother were up early fixing something or working for money.

§
At Gate 17

An old woman in an airport, sunken cheeks, turns toward a window

where sky comes in and we can see metal villages take off, glide down.

Her face suggests she knows how society got this frenzied, worried, driven to vacate.

She may know too where each of us is going, returning from, and why airports reek of grief—

her face is a rare manuscript of grief. Her years spiral slowly in memory like a galaxy.

Her attachments drift aboard a listing barge on a harbor without a city, on a coast

discernable only to her blue eyes. She must be awed sometimes to think

before a mirror that her eyes have come all this way with her, interpreted

The Coast Starlight
light and shadow of a whole life. She qualifies for pre-boarding, is among those who may need more time. She declines the privilege, waits. She folds her hands.

All answers she knows ennoble her. Age rests on her, a coronation.

§
Hospital

Welcome to our vertical facility. Affliction put you in your current horizontal state. Our machines will swallow then disgorge you. Our nurses will swaddle you, lay you in a basket of morphine, float you out upon a reservoir of misery. Our physicians will take note of you. Lie flat, please, as little waves of pain lap, nip at your being.

§
Psychic Windows Washed

Red sun dropped below a psychiatrist’s left brain, not to mention the Cascade Range. The psychiatrist’s opinions rose:

“Computers aren’t anything, and no one knows how the brain produces emotions. Anyone who claims to know is lying.”

On their tiny platform, window washers dropped into view, 17th floor. Patient and psychiatrist looked at them. They looked back.

The patient promised to call the psychiatrist, especially if the patient were to feel like a blackbird flying over ice-fields or to sing obscure anthems in retail stores.

The psychiatrist and the patient shook hands. Dusk now. The window washers winched themselves down. The patient took the elevator. The psychiatrist could not tell whether the windows were cleaner. That would have to wait until morning.

§
If I understand Einstein correctly, and I don’t, my whereabouts are, strictly speaking, unknown.

No one is the center of the universe, but anywhere can be. Therefore everyone’s coordinates are contingent, just a song at twilight.

Don’t worry: If I say I’ll be somewhere at a certain time, I’ll be then there—unforeseen whereabouts notwithstanding.

That you know where to find me, and I you, exemplifies relative dependability, a feature of our companionship—love’s old sweet Newtonian song.
Hick

He grew up assuming others
had a right to speak
before he spoke.

He grew up in a region
named Not Really.

He eats too fast in restaurants,
walks too slowly in cities,
does his own repairs.

Elegance makes him claustrophobic;
opulence, morose.

The entitled fascinate him.
He watches them.

Shown evidence who he is and
what he does might
matter, he doubts it.

I know him: he hangs on
to worn-out things too long,
for at his house of fears,
someone’s always about to
break in and confiscate it all.

The grin—too broad. The stare—
too intense. He embarrasses me.
There he is—hanging back,
watching. Oaf.
Sierra Nevada, November: An Appropriate Weather

It must have been late in September. Or, perhaps my memory has invented an appropriate weather for the occasion.

—Dag Hammarskjöld, Markings

Twice, perhaps, I have awakened surprised by snow in the wide field. November: bare oak branches like cast iron. A long breath drawn down a blue canyon in my lungs. A superb stillness, plenty of room.

My mind sits in a corner of such weather. It sees a few men in brown clothes cleaning an auditorium. They slam metal folding-chairs back into two-dimensional space. That sound echoes like gunshots across the bare field between November and March.

Someone incinerates a newspaper containing today’s weather forecast. My eyes follow cinders and smoke into a pale sky, into a dream of weather in which a storm descends to devour my mind’s desires in a whirlwind, delivering them as dark rainspots on a dry valley.

§
Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robinson Jeffers in Heaven

It’s a coast neither recognizes. Una’s there, assuring RJ things could be much worse. Gerry’s seeing a former nun from Philadelphia.

In private meetings, each poet tries to out-reticent the other. Shared love of hawks hovers silently over talk of prosody, weather, stones, blood, notorious shipwrecks, scoundrel Whitman.

Fog lifts off this craggy region of afterlife. They must laugh at irony curving toward them on a skate’s blade: Jeffers believes devoutly in the hopelessness of humans. Agreeing, Hopkins doubts terribly his own knowledge of God. Their outlooks converge at a lone cypress battered on a bluff. The fact of heaven buffets both men. They are embarrassed by the godlike intensity of what they wrote, by how right they thought they were.

They buck each other up, deride anthologies and postmodernism, cook clams on the beach for the women, just back from a refreshing walk away from their grave poets.

“Una, where’s the wine?” asks RJ. “Never mind,” says Gerry, “we brought some. I hope you like red.”
Of Reticence

One of us stands at a window, and one on the street below.

Oh, let’s stay strangers. It’s so much easier. We’ll thereby circumvent betrayal, boredom. We may pre-cancel appointments for occasions that would not happen as we would remember them anyway. Disappointments, *schadenfreude*, impositions—all precluded.

It’s not as if one more friendship will markedly improve either life in question. Oh, let’s speak briefly, move on separately to days remaining.

Let’s let unfamiliarity be. Here’s to us. It’s on me.

§

*The Coast Starlight*
Eligible

Because you are unworthy, your value is set.

Because you are doomed, you are deemed ready. For no cause, for nothing you have achieved,

you are eligible. Because a recent sojourn featured an unlovely foray into self (vile reconnaissances),

you loathe yourself: this is good preparation. Actually, anything low, honest, sober, and clear aids alertness.

Everyone and no one is better than you. Write your name in the book of change. Grace has voted. You do not deserve to be elected; therefore, you are so elected. You shall represent a ludicrous, graced constituency of one.

§

Hans Ostrom
Units: An Introduction

He had fully comprehended that no personal influence could possibly save him, that he was virtually sentenced by millions, and that units could avail him nothing.

Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

Everything is made of little units, which are made of even smaller units. The smallest units, undetectable by us, are reality. All units larger than these are rearrangement, illusion, phony structure. They constitute a kind of molecular cinema watched by us and understood by God, who is exempt from the unit-arrangement.
The Quiet Child

1

World says,
“Why don’t you do more,
be more, say more?
Be louder!” says World.

Quiet child eats this shout.

World says,
“Answer me!”

Metallic wind blows across
dark reservoirs
of the quiet child’s speech.

World wants to know:
“How can you if you don’t,
if you don’t stand up, how
can you expect for yourself
if you what do you expect?”
World’s language ceases to be
Speech, becomes a menacing
sky, weather to fear.

I expect, the quiet child thinks,
more shouting and questions
all my life; noise to negotiate.
Noise: a continent to traverse.

Hans Ostrom
Opinions crowd against glass
of the quiet child's inner world.
Mean lips. Muffled commands.
No matter what the crowd pretends
to want, it only wants in.

In most talking, all arguments,
many polite questions,
quiet child hears
a menacing whine
& the cold whir
of an identity-eating machine.
To interrupt, to determine
terms, to subdivide
silence and create private
language property: these
are conquests & dominations
quiet child sees
in what he's forced to hear,
in what she's made to understand,
to stand under.

3

Quiet child starts to speak.
Mouth is a dry cave
littered with bones of battered selves.

Quiet child starts to speak.

Inside a rage screams, louder
than tornado. It picks up
all the houses in which the quiet
child was trapped, hurls
them against Sky.
Sky on a still day choked with humidity; sky that will not, sky that cannot rain.

Quiet child
starts to speak, but only gulps noise of the world. Chews noise. Swallows it. Keeps Mouth shut.

4

There is a person within each quiet child whom the quiet child tries to protect from shouts and manipulations, from sarcasm and slaps, from quick, clever demeaning arguments, verbal slashes. That person inside is the only one the quiet child believes to exist. All other persons are forces and masks, uniforms, electronic images, shifting shadows, abusive shapes. All other persons are signs that need reading. Quiet children learn to read early but never trust speech. They listen as if listening were breathing. The quiet child’s only instruction on how to protect the person inside comes from

Hans Ostrom
instinct—a signal sent by an invisible ship on an ocean of consciousness.

Often the signal’s faint, hard to hear above the malignant din

that seems always about to swallow the person within each quiet child.

The forest is the forest of noise. The fears are the fears of being abandoned to noise and of being overpowered in the forest. The path is the child’s belief that he, that she has the right to walk the path. The beast is the beast of need. The ogre is the ogre of seduction and betrayal. The lake is the lake of risk across which the child must swim to find the path again. The stone is the dark stone at the bottom of the lake on which is carved the image of a quiet child. Victory is not victory. It is hope in the form of seeing other quiet children walk out of the woods to help the child out of the water, bring the quiet child toward a fire, and food, and the kind of listening that welcomes the quiet child’s speech.

Something the quiet child said:
“Peach orchards. A path through tall, blond grass. A stack of flat stones. I cherish these... Hello? I’m calling long distance. The lines stretch far into a blue-gray stone. Trucks in there haul vibrations of my speech. I talk and you listen—a commonplace, I know. But to me it is as breathing is to a person who stopped breathing almost forever. Belief is a skill I have not mastered. Doubt is my favorite sweater. Fear is a heavy coat I keep in a closet. Goodbye—for now.”

§

Hans Ostrom
**Interior Departments**

I am the Minister of Leaves who writes memos in re: deciduous policy. I strike compromises between the forest and the trees.

Someone in the Ministry is singing a song, a green song as insistent and calm as succulent leaves in the Amazon Basin.

I am promoted beyond bureaucracies of my own beliefs, am carried on melody to ancient stands of timber.

§
Animals and Investment

1. The Managed Fund

Crows guarded his retirement plan. They marched around its perimeter. Squirrels managed the fund. They wore small green visors, used their cheeks as briefcases, embezzled by accident, forgetting where they buried the dividends.

2. Fixed Income

One day so dispirited by his work was he that he decided to retire. He asked to begin to withdraw his pension. The account-manager, a raccoon, presented a box to him, removed the lid, and waddled away. The new pensioner peered in. Feathers and leaves were all the box held. His income was fixed.

§
Venice, *Carnivale*

Who will you be in Venice
beneath the year’s third moon
when crowds of *Carnivale*
pour toward you all in greasepaint,
all in masks and capes? Who will
you be in this humanity and alleys
floating on moonlight and sewage?

Laughter from a canal-taxi
skips across painted water,
ricochets off rotting brick.
Your personality hangs like a rusted
iron shutter. Be anyone but yourself
and John Ruskin, *Carnivale* advises.
Be sewage, puke in the canal, beg,
sleep with cats, eat rats. Be

moonlight, fall in love, swell
like Caruso’s voice. A Danish woman
winks at you from across a restaurant.
An Italian boy lights a firecracker; therefore,
pigeons scuttling along your tourist’s boredom
panic and swoop up through your heart.

Be Italian. Close your window
to riotous streets. Return to your tidy
apartment, your statuette of Mary, and
a proper life of grief, lace, and spices. Be
American: gawk at gaudy jazz architecture
of San Marco; order beer and puzzle
at this sinking city (why don’t they fix it?). Be
European, wear that history for an evening.
Work hard at language, gesture, shout, pose,
strut. Forget your Kansas, blond in corn heat.
Forget about flat American English that naps
on your tongue, then saunters toward a barn.
Be the crowd, be the anonymous mime’s face,
talk another’s conversation, kiss another’s other,
tilt your head back and laugh a lunatic’s
hysteria to Carnivale moon.

§

Hans Ostrom
Victory

At the party the husband tried to defeat his young son.
At croquet, perhaps. Or table tennis.

The wife at the party watched the husband leaning over the game
or leaning into talk, setting his jaw, winning.

She turned to a listener. Dusk chilled her.
Breezes dragged her hair across her face. She said,

"My husband is very competitive."
The listener watched
a highway of loss and fatigue
form in her mind, stretch for miles.
All the women
in that neighborhood are deciduous wives

married to evergreen husbands.
All the men
practice a smiling rage. The children

seem all right. Hard to say. They
are not ready to know they are lost
in the forest of fathers and mothers.

§
Mr. Brown

The truth is the basketball coach assigned to teach geometry disliked both sports and angles. Plays he drew on chalkboards looked like problems, problems like plays. He calculated the area of the rectangular court to be most pleasant when empty and only echoes cheered. He coached his classes best when a fire-drill called time-out and he might stand shyly in the courtyard next to her, the English teacher—close enough to look, for instance, at her ears, or smell her sweet breath, care for her tender shoulders.

His job was an amorphous shape between two points: sports, math. He was always only one chapter ahead of us. Against him, life ran the give-and-go.

§
Go, Tigers

When our team played in basketball tournaments, I was secretly enthralled with the Consolation Bracket. Winning and losing made no difference in our lives, couldn’t affect acne or change news from Khe Sanh. The Championship Bracket offered either losing without consolation, or a trophy: a toss-up.

Consolation Brackets offer something close enough to reassurance to seem essential. Aside from the simplicity of a medium-range jump-shot, the game didn’t especially interest me. I was drawn to cheerleaders, the surreal smear of a crowd’s faces, and odors of cheap perfume, burnt popcorn, and sweat. I pretended to be a serious athlete and spirited team member. It was no use. I had begun to read Poe and Kafka. I had heard Aretha Franklin sing, “Chain of Fools.” In my uniform of black and white and orange, I was inconsolable. The word consolation sang like a creek. A bracket devoted solely to such stuff as consolation beckoned sweetly, seemed to whisper from iron rafters and dented, rusting lockers.

§
High-School Football

We stuffed our crotches into hometown pants.
Clacked on concrete out to mud and grass.

Hit each other. Bled. Got dizzy.
Sweat, got knocked down, got up,
got down, puked, hit each other, bled.
We were having fun.

I swear reasons existed then
for playing. Honest I swear
there was a girl on the goal line
promising a slow dance. A referee
waited to whistle me into manhood.

We were not good.
Often we had to buy the ball back
from the other team. Once we were down
forty points before the game began.
Our coach sold real estate at half-time.
Our cheerleaders hung us in effigy.

We pounded each other
until no one was left on either team.
The pads and helmets and shoes
went on grunting and blocking and tackling.
Fans stayed to see which set
of equipment would win.

We could hear that Homecoming crowd
roaring in the stadium
as we loaded the cars. We drove
to the bus station, took
the midnight express out of there.

§

Hans Ostrom
Letter of Recommendation

I am delighted to write on behalf of one applying for the position of the one who will have been hired.

This person is reliable, pliable, but not diabolical. He has demonstrated an impressive grasp. He works well with people, also with animals and obelisks. Without having to be asked, he once showed me an impressive collection of dried beetles. Several times he agreed to retrieve me from obscure parts of the city after I had become disoriented.

Here I stand on the ledge of my highest recommendation, ready to jump. Please contact me if I urge you to read his application with as many considerations as you can, for I have almost every confidence.

§
The Son She Never Had

The son she never had visits her one night. He’s grown, a man with stories to tell and scars, big knuckles. At the table under yellow light, she asks what it was like to be a son without a mother.

“Oh, I had a mother,” he says. The lines on his face are rivers of her dreams. “She just wasn’t you.”

He takes her hand and leads her past fact to worn brown carpet of the “family” room. They dance.

She lays her head on his chest. Above her is the ceiling where her husband’s cigar-smoke settled.

Later they sit in the two big chairs. “Do me a favor,” she asks, “and walk out the door. I want to know your manner of leaving.” He obliges, a good son. Silence rushes back into the house like winter air.
On the porch she tells herself
he would have had such knuckles
and danced with her that way.

He would have traveled far but come back.
In a factory he would have paused some
days in machinery roar and thought of her.
Fable: Noah and Raven

And he sent forth a raven
Which went forth to and fro
Until the waters were dried up
From off the earth.

Genesis 8:7

Notice: Raven didn’t return and make a report.
Didn’t like the voyage from the first in fact.

Wasn’t surprised when, deep into the cruise,
Noah went sea-mad, tossed birds

Up into the wind. They fluttered back
To deck, bewildered, bruised, and flappable.

Raven thought, *This isn’t working.*
Then Noah, becalmed, dispatched Dove

And Raven on recon. Dove cooed.
Raven cawed, wondered *Why not send*
Seagull or Duck? Hence the term “water birds.” Humans—as thick as two planks!

A portly black kite, Raven rode the breeze, Alighted on a shred of dry land,

Ate surfaced slimy creatures. Told Dove, Hey, you’re nuts to complete the mission,

Said, You watch, they’ll make your image A symbol of something fine, hunt

Your kind, cook tenderness off your hollow Bones, thank God not you for it, eat.

No big surprise to Raven when The Noahs finally showed, parked the Ark,

Unloaded, promised God to be good, Began to subdivide. The grandkids

Laughed like apes, threw rocks at Raven, Flung filthy anti-avian epithets.

The little bullies wept for days When Raven hired snakes to put

The fear of God in them. Old Bird-brained Noah, though, turned out

To be almost all right. His hair went wild Eider-white. He’d stumble out,

Toss bread-crumbs Raven’s way, Tell the brood, Stop being s’goddammed
Mean to animals. The Old Man seemed
To have his doubts about Dry Land,

Spent most nights alone in the mildewed
Ark, playing cribbage with God. So

Wonder not, children of the Weather Channel,
Why millennia later ravens are resentful,

Strut snidely, rustle wings,
Curse us in Squawkese—us and our endless

Multiplication. They build nests like
Carpenters, love hard rain, keep their black

Exteriors as sleek as gangster cars,
Dive-bomb languid lovers two-by-two

In the pigeony park, know how
To read the rainbow signs.

§
Genitive Case

Of eucalyptus, of acacia,
of rhododendron, tubers,
and pubescence, essence and
viola. Of pulse, of frond,
of pool, drool, and cool, of breeze,
arrest, and musculature. Of
hush and curvature. Of rush.
of whisper, moan, variety,
shoulders, piety, also variegation.
Of ripe, of lip, of full. Gladiola,
of. Form, firm, fern, tongue, smell:
of these of course. Of you. Of to doze and of
to languish. Of liquids, tubas, lobes,
and drums. Of cheek, chin, choice.
Of moist. Of measure for leisure,
of olives of all, of grape and fig,
laze and sprawl, days and quirks.
Of sycamore and buttocks, of
cedar, water, smoke. Of willing
and of waiting, salt and wit.
Of grin. Of sum.

§
Variations on the *Cogito*

( if it’s okay with René)

Cogito; ergo sum.
    I think; therefore, I am.
Cozy toes, argue some.
Coach, eat, or grow some.
    Aye, think: their faux, wry aim.
Close that Tower-Gruesome.
    Icing there, four a.m.
Go see ol’ Edgar’s bum.
    Eye tincture for eye-pain.
Joe got over Margo’s mum.
    i.e., think, “Wherefore I am?”
Coaxing her slow motion.
    I think/therefore: iamb.
§
**And Now, Whether**

Today’s whether report calls for increasing perplexity in the morning hours, followed by intermittent quandaries in the afternoon, with wonderstorms tonight. Tomorrow ought to be fraught with absurdity, though there’s a possibility of patchy meaning late.

§
Tide Flats, Commencement Bay

(Tacoma, Washington)

The mill on the bay processes night.
An engineered beast, it never inhales.

Workers have come and gone on the bay’s sludged tide.
The mill processes them.
It manufactures my sleep.

§
Tacoma Blues

Some days you just want to get out of a cab and punch the rain.

Some days the sky’s so dark birds wear miners’ lamps.

Some days rich people from Seattle drive down in Benzes just to laugh at your clothes.

Some days tap-water stinks, and elephants escape from the zoo.

Some days your family from Wisconsin arrives but then keeps driving, not even a wave.

Some days you see a famous poet, fall in love with a hardware store, drink

with a friend you wouldn’t trade, cash a paycheck without ID, harmonize with a tugboat, spot a red rhododendron bud, forget why you took the job here. Anyway, it’s all good

some days in Hardluckville, feeling these smoky, rusty,

these Point-Defiance, T-Town Blues.

§

The Coast Starlight
Cheap Labor

The ones who cut and stitch my garments visited me last night. Their murmurs pressed against my windows. I traveled the rooms, economic envoy to my own abode. Long mirrors admired my attire. Outside, cutters and stitchers draped the house in textiles. It became a mortgaged mannequin.

Now I hear miners down there. They tunnel up through old inequities. I gather they will not be interested in remorse, fatalism, or liberal empathy. They shall refine their rage into jewels with which to accessorize me.

§

Hans Ostrom
Expect Delays

At the annual International Patience Festival, held every other year (or so), participants double-park on each other’s nerves; wait in lines leading up to unstaffed stations; are notified appointments with a chiropractor have been rescheduled; ache; stand by for further announcements; get the runaround and put on hold; pray, hope, digress; pass the time; consult obscure religious texts; sigh; check their watches, their messages; ask each other if there’s been “any word”; fall behind schedule; and, and believe people are basically good.

§
On the Tour

... And here is a ruin of the palace where the emperor claimed to have made love to three virgins every night. That was Emperor Zikka, nicknamed Zikka the Liar. And just off the coast here is where a fleet carrying several tons of important poetry sank. The poems were heavy and decorated with allusions, tradition, and so forth. Salt-water depth has preserved them. SCUBA gear may be rented at the wharf. Here is a refreshment stand, not radically different from a public hearth in the ancient city whose ruins we have toured today. This stand represents perhaps the strongest link between our civilization and theirs.

Those people, too, were concerned chiefly with replenishment of liquids on hot days, getting inexpensive food, having a few laughs, and finding shade in which to ponder why they let someone talk them into leaving their own beds to join a package tour in quest of illusory gains in foreign lands.

§

Hans Ostrom
Tour of a Painting

Please open the gray door,  
follow lavender light  
all the way down  
the long blond slope  
into the valley checker-boarded  
with blue with green.  
Stop at the silver silo.  
Speak to the brown holy woman  
wearing the one enchanted ruby.

§
The Trafficiad

There's a legend hereabouts concerning a commuter O infinitely on his way.

His existence is wholly one of commutation. He is mythically in transit,

en-routed into Kafka County on the Sisyphus Tollway, thence along the Mobius Viaduct, which connects to the Escher Freeway. Sightings are alleged.

§
Of the Valleys

Some valleys you passed through replaced themselves in memory. Their mystique deepens like loam. A glacier of forgetting moved into others. You never know: should mind’s climate change, these might be recalled.

You cannot remember entering even one valley without having felt changed:

Maybe you sensed descent into routine, or escape into meadowed ease— or knew involvement with anonymous mass humanity lay ahead, urban sea.

You entered that one valley—remember?—by train. A pleading wish to be from that valley seized you, a wish not be you. As you gazed on and out, your forehead touched compartment glass. Someone stole your baggage, got off. You and your wish stayed on. The thief became mayor of that valley’s town. Your suitcase withers in his attic.

In valleys you variously hunted and gathered education, work, sex, circuses, and solace. Some valleys merely hosted highways, trails, or rail beds. You’ve seen some from 30,000 feet. Many were only virtual valleys, smeared with concrete, stucco, steel, neon, smoke. A few seemed weirdly cozy: The white steeple was too perfect.

The Coast Starlight
The waitress’s eyeballs were hopeless and hard, her smile stiff like wax.

Valleys have hollowed out a self’s terrain, invited settlers, sustained crops of possibilities in shadows of the peaks.

§
Sestina: Ellis Island/Amelia Earhart

There where confounded tongues once tried to voice
A couple words to get a start here in New Europe,
Now only pale Atlantic sunlight from a Winter sky
Articulates the warehouse-like dimensions
Of Ellis Island. And yet you just can’t help but think
Of an astonished din of immigrants talking to new lives.

Ellis Island held such completely possible lives
In the way I have imagined a Pacific sky
To keep Amelia Earhart from returning. I think
Of how she started—fronting a PR flight to Europe,
Then playing Aviatrix in brown newsreels, no voice,
Waving from a wing, symbol of an era’s new dimension.

For her, controls must have been a fine dimension:
Such peace—to rev, to pivot, to taxi. To sense over-coated lives
Below her—gone like a cloud of insects, or like a voice
Passing on the street. After the phony flight to Europe,
Was it fame & G.P. Putnam that kept her flying? Or the sky?
Sky widened into a world where she could act and think,

I think. I imagine those last moments. I think
Of panic, hacking engines, useless compass. Of two lives
(Amelia; her navigator, Fred) as far from Europe
And hope as possible, in the absurdly peaceful dimension
Created by a graceful glide toward waves—the voice
Of U.S. Navy radio talking to a dumb Pacific sky.

Like Icarus, she was rejected by simple physics of the sky.
But Amelia is mythic because she’s lost. Lost lives
Speak to us with an infamous, sweet, unheard voice
Keats heard in a vase, spoken from a dimension
Of Plato’s pure possibility that I think of when I think
Of Ellis Island talking American to Europe.
Let's think of routine tourist-flights to Europe.
Of particular endings to specific lives
In a world that kicks, thus proves, its three dimensions.
Fine. But what convinces like a dream is a sky
Abruptly vacant, a silence in which we're afraid to think,
A radio transmission that still waits for Amelia's voice.

When I think of her voice lost in sky, I want the lives
Of all scientists devoted to proving the dimension
Claiming her, where Ellis Island shapes a new, a perfect, Europe.

§
Decoration

On the Gold Coast Theatre building, a concrete mask pretended to moan. Or sing? We weren't sure which.

We deduced it despised a violin and bells hanging below it, an architect's tacky gifts.

There was concrete. There were bricks, glass, wood. To these we donated our need of symbol,

our weakness for decoration. Our bodies represented us in front of the old Gold Coast,

which had left behind its design in order to become. We are there no more, have scattered to a heresy of heres. Our memories are synaptic masks that pretend to moan—

or sing? We're not sure which. Our memories design an architecture of absence.

§
The Exiled Dead

The list of those who did not live
to witness reconciliation is a long one.

Leaves of foreign trees tremble and toss
and their shadows shift on damp ground
that covers caskets of the dead exiles.

A monarch, or a president, at least a high-ranking official of the New Homeland places a wreath on a new monument erected just outside the city.
The speech is appropriately simple.
People start to forget it as they scurry through drizzle that steams off the hoods, still warm, of their automobiles.

Bodies are just bodies, some will say,
and some will say death exiles us all.

But in a tavern here the other day,
I overheard some people say this:
The dead exiles won’t be forgotten by being officially remembered by a monument. It does seem as if their souls linger at the edge of this present calm. They touch the New Administration’s dream of order like silent probing legs of spiders.
One way or another, they’ll come home, the exiled dead. Come home to remind us of their version of the past, one the New Cabinet tries to alter in our minds with fine visions of gleaming smokestacks, things to buy.

The shadows of the exiled dead brood and shift over the new bodies and the new peace of the New Homeland.

§
Fortuitous Twos

A pair of spats. Two herons, early morning, bending

necks to water. Windows on each side of a carved door.

Cells dividing in a newborn baby. A mother and a daughter

singing two-part harmony. Two lovers waking up near

the ocean. Two moons circling one planet. A couple of old men
golfing in a thunderstorm two minutes before midnight.

Horns on a moonlit skull, two miles from the water hole.

§

Hans Ostrom
William Blake and Matsuo Basho in Heaven

It's hard to say who's more tedious in Heaven than a prophetic poet. William spent about a year shouting, pressing angels on their breaks to read his stuff. Matsuo kept smiling a thin smile.

One day they took a narrow trail north through mixed timber—a little too wild for Bill. He talked the whole way, convinced Here-Now was Unmarried Hell.

Mats pointed to a pile of snow-leopard droppings steaming in Heaven's blue morning. Bill adjudged it to be the work of Urizen. Mats shushed him, pointed again.


Mats said, "You know, we were both wrong about everything in just the right ways." He walked ahead, leaned down to look at Roses of Sharon.

Bill watched him appear to disappear into mist. Bill Blake pointed at the mist, caught a glimpse of Nothing, fell into God's empty embrace.
“Oh,” Bill whispered. And “Oh” again—and again, each time more quietly until the word went away, leaving only a gesture of lips.

Basho reappeared. Blake felt stranger than Tiriel that day, standing next to Stick Man from Japan who wrote vertically in script that seemed neither language nor illumination.

§
You and You

You must be you for you to be.
I know: to be the only you
is difficult. You must repeat
the same old strengths and flaws, ensure
quirks and habits stay organized,
a regiment of personhood.
You cannot disappear from you.
When you're asleep, you're sleeping you;
your altered consciousness is al-
tered you, but you-never-the-less.
It could be worse. I know you can
supply examples of just how.
But still—how strange to have just one
attempt at consciousness in all
of Time, to have to spend it on
one incarnationality—
the only I you'll ever be.

§

The Coast Starlight
Apertures

Life imposes on us.
Memory superimposes,
layering life’s imprints.

Into an aperture
between life and memory
moves the photographer,

who listens to light,
convenes shadows,
constructs position.

In the dark room,
life and memory wait
while hallucination bathes,

inscribes itself on a
pane of white-space,
coalescing like epiphany

and now rising from the
translating pool, prepared
to confess to eyes.

§
Outside a cabin in snow,
we are, and hear our, breathing here.
And wind in pines shucks

itself through sound like snakes
slipping through their summer skins.
And it is easy out here. And out

here it is easy to admire
an image-aided concept
of cabins in snow. And

it is easy inside a cabin
now to believe in an Idea
of Winter, for notions of snow

furnish our true cabin,
consciousness—which, fragile amidst
oblivion’s drifts, stays sturdy against howling.

§
After Auden


This solar beauty
is excessive and late.
Is ceaseless blast,
determines determinations.
It is just too much,
all shadow-cause,
every leaf and day,
each ignition ever.
Wystan Hugh, everyone who
utters “sun” is one
coalescence of sun-essence,
a wrinkled pouch
of sunstroked marbles.
Sun names us, who are
of its molten fundament.
The long explosion is
by definition worshipped.
Is God-flung, Ur-sprung.
Solar beauty is basis,
is firmamental gaslight
in the street of time
and the stone of lime.
Is amenable, amen.
Mortal Devotion

(The Cloud of Unknowing)

Life suggests I should prepare to die,
implies it would be glad to help me get set. Death might occur before the end of this or that sentence. St. Denis, about prayer, says this:

Start by praying you may live long enough to pray.

I try to get ready, am no quick study,

think that it is all done, that I hear a call.

I don’t know, so help me, God, to go on.

§

The Coast Starlight
Social Interaction

Say a mellow hello
to the fellow
following you,

just to ring his
bell a bit,
just for the celestial
hell of it.

§
Lyric For An Oval Window

I am not a catamaran.
I am not a peach.
It does not therefore follow
That I am out of reach.

In answer to your question
Posed so long ago,
I can definitely say Maybe,
Tentatively No.

§
Bobby’s Crop

Bobby leased two-hundred acres, planted clarinets & saxophones. Come harvest time, he hired bands to play them. It’s a good life, farming instruments. Folks say even Bobby’s pigs root rhythmically. His cows chew the blues. Oh that sweet Kansas breeze, swagging through sugar beets and wheat—and catfish nosing into dusky muck. That tornado shuffling up I-35 from Oklahoma—ain’t no thing to Bobby. It skirts his acres, sniffs the barn, now doglegs to Nebraska. Bobby calls the twister Coltrane, goes inside, fetches ice-tea for himself and the Missus, plenty of sugar and a downbeat of lemon. Hey, now, Bobby. Hey.

§
Generic Elegy

You will have grown accustomed to a great many things without understanding them. One day comes the last day. Your tournament of delusions closes. No one will have heard songs your deepest needs composed. Someone will place in boxes objects associated with you. The absence of your heart’s humming will not affect rhythms of the world. Nonetheless: Well done; good show. Consider this an elegy of sorts, perched like an odd hat atop your future, which never existed. No one’s does. You will die as you lived—in the present, which is chiefly a condition of waiting. Wait for the end of this prefabricated elegy. Here is the end. Here it is.

§
Broken, Amazing, Awful

Everything is broken.
Everything is amazing.
A lot of it is awful.

Among others, Jesus,
who certainly put himself
among others, had a fine

sense, one senses, of
broken, amazing, and awful.
Lawfully wedded to a human

condition, he performed
his rendition of grace. It was
amazing. They broke him.

That was awful.

§
Balzac’s Ghost and the Crucial Detail

She brought the wrong clothes to Paris, which wasn’t as warm as imagination. She borrowed a sweater and a coat from me; also shoes, and the heavy socks that made them fit. My sweater, especially, seemed to enjoy having her wear it at cafés, brasseries, and markets. I explained all this to Balzac’s ghost at his residence on Rue Raynouard. Even though I wasn’t speaking French, he understood immediately. I went on to observe that almost everyone almost everywhere works hard and life slips past so quickly and then all of a sudden you’re a ghost listening to a tourist. Yes, yes, said Balzac’s ghost, but tell me, what color is the sweater she borrowed from you? Green, I said. That, he said, is today’s crucial detail.

§
Prayer In Twelve Words

God, thanks.
Please forgive.
Help and
heal me.
Watch over
love. Be.

§

Hans Ostrom
Knight

Court had forgotten where it had sent Knight. Squire had quit to settle down in some village. So here then was Knight, alone, propped up against a deciduous tree, his armor bleeding rust, and more rain coming. Sitting in his own waste and pain, Knight peered blearily through the visor at sodden, green Druidic hills. Cold rain ripped remaining leaves from branches. The horse stood a good way off, dry and napping under an evergreen, one rear foot cocked like a catapult. Knight felt the jail of armor locking. A chill rattled his flesh. He thought of his murdering, the blood and terror, was about to ask forgiveness once more when he died.

§
Have I seen evidence of God?  
I think so. Have I seen 
God? I don’t know. Will 
I see God? I think so. How 
will I know? Oh, I’ll know. 
What does God have to do 
with anything? Well, God 
has to do with everything, so 
anything must be no trouble 
for God. Do I have doubts? 
Yes. Are my doubts a threat 
to God? Be serious. On what 
basis do I believe in God? Yes.

§
Silver Valley Vision

The river swims in time. Sky flies through emptiness. We live forever every moment as love falls in people. Fuel consumes fire, and rain drinks Earth. I saw a thousand angels moving through a silver valley. Low clouds picked them up, changed them into snow, conveyed them over mountains, let them go. Let them go.
Oklahoma Is

In Oklahoma and everywhere, despair only makes life seem more unyielding. A better tactic is to signify that life is what it is: If you practice law, fly a pirate-flag atop your office-building. If you run a tattoo parlor, arrange for your phone number to be 435-OUCH. If you’ve owned a used-book store for twenty years and are going out of business, hire a temporary laborer, and when he announces he’s fixin’ to get sick, tell him, “Use the bathroom.” When sounds of his retching drive browsers out, say, “Thanks for coming in,” and resume the final inventory. Wait for the man to return from his undeniable nausea. Tell him to watch things. Run your errands. Most of your life has gone away. Some of it remains. That is the God’s-honest truth. Oklahoma is.

§

Hans Ostrom
Maja used to say,
"Thank you for today."
From her I learned
everyone's old and
young at once.

At night in snow
near Maja's bus-stop
on Maja's basic street—
*Murargatan* means
street of bricks—wild
rabbits sometimes paused
like caesuras in Swedish
conversation. I waited.

I felt wiser after leaving
Maja's house. Life itself
was a tutorial. I'd gathered
no facts. My Swedish
wasn't much better. Nonetheless . . . .

The night-bus back to
the University from Maja's
place seemed hopeful and
lonely, cold and bright, safe
and desperate. Uppsala—
winter, night. Nonetheless.

§
Gävle, Sweden

Gävle surprised me. It marched out of my expectations looking like Garbo—brusque, beautiful, never weak. Baltic air struck like hammer blows. At the Joe Hill Museum, they’d stacked Joe’s stuff in a back room. A carpenter worked on a rain-gutter. Next door two union-men muttered into cellular phones, going over figures. In America, where Joe was not incidentally hanged, Gävle became Galveston, put together with gaskets, rivets, and wharves. It marched west of expectations like Joan Blondell, buxom, adobe blond, played broadly, wanting no truck with mystique. Gävle surprised me with its impossibly sharp air, its organized gulls, its almost finished Swedish museum in honor of America’s most famous Wobbly.

§

Hans Ostrom
Little Blue Cups

Uppsala, Sweden

All Winter, walking back from brick-heavy downtown, I knew a path from the big library called Carolina Rediviva through English Park as terror and reprieve. I was privileged to traverse slush and ice, huffing like an old dog, or an aging human. It was good to realize I was nothing and strong. The green copper statue honors someone, I forget who. April, and grass, children staggering in shocking sunlight, lovers in each other’s laps, me in lighter shoes—wow, go crazy—Rediviva’s burnt orange hide refreshed. Birdsong. And a low flower, which Spring translates from the original Winter as little blue cups, blåsippor.
The Collector

If you’re his wife, you’ve quit
asking why it all piles up out there
in the yard for everyone to see
from the highway. Hubcaps from ghostly coupes.
Beer signs in neon cursive. Coke machines,
cars, cars, cars. You keep the house
and the backyard according to your principles.
You hate the mechanism in men
that drives them to love machinery.

If you’re his dog, you
urinate on tires encircling weeds.
You sniff varieties of rust,
chase squirrels until they disappear,
until you ram your hot wet nose
into angle iron; it all
makes the yard difficult.

Now, supposing you’re the younger son,
you don’t hate him yet.
Your friends think he’s a wealthy man,
a pirate maybe; they beg
their parents to let them come over,
crawl through doorless cars, turn
cranks, patent imaginary uses
for useless contraptions. You know
what it’s all for. It’s there
to look at, to touch; it’s part
of a big landscape that whirls by
every day outside of School.
You’re the collector. You can’t help yourself. You’ll fix one thing and trade it away for three things you can’t fix. The dog pisses on it all, knocks over cans going after squirrels, laps up rust-water. You can’t keep the neighbor-kids away. The younger boy, he follows you around all day asking What’s this for? What’s this for? You can’t understand why your wife can’t understand why iron and motors and axles are necessary, why strewn is the best way to keep it all in order.

You stare right back at people who drive by and scowl at your yard. You know they’re driving junk. Their houses are filled with junk that works. You’ll get hold of it soon enough.

§

_The Coast Starlight_
Bread and Bus: An Essay

Somebody is always, always baking bread. It's been that way for thousands, thousands of years.

Additionally, if life is short, then there is no such thing as a long bus ride.

In conclusion, the bus rolled onto a street of shops, and we smelled bread, baking; baking bread.
Career

I got into my car. I drove it so it joined other cars in a long, noisy line between one city and another. To my left another long line of cars moved from the city to which my line was going to the city I'd just left. When my car and I arrived, I stopped it and left it amongst other stopped cars. I entered a building. On one of its upper floors, I entered a room. I sat down. For several years I looked at a computer monitor or talked. Sometimes I looked out a window and down to see my car. After more years, I left the building. I got into my car.

§

The Coast Starlight
Aubergine

Eggplant, the bruise-fruit, heals in a darkroom as photographs of contusions develop.

Gathered in a farmer's truck, eggplants appear ready to travel into outer space, there to visit purple planets in our galaxy.

The mayor has disappeared. He was last seen getting into a taxicab near the produce-market. He was accompanied by an eggplant, which he carried in a burgundy valise.

Shiny, soft, and smooth, eggplants suggest patent-leather shoes worn by a species whose feet differ from ours in certain respects.

Although I dislike eating its slippery flesh, I pay aubergine certain respects.

There is eggplant. There it is—a pliable stone sitting in purple patience waiting for us to go away.
**French Rabbits**

Rabbits greeted our airplane in Paris. On grass between tarmac strips, they looked like brown pockets plump with tobacco and francs. They moved cautiously, as if we were hungry or German. Some of them were shopkeepers, worried and energetic like Balzac’s people. Others were grand in their miniature arrogance, standing on hind legs like De Gaul, looking down and up at once, saluting the sun.

§
Quake

The birds knew. They heard Earth thinking about a shift, a shrug. They repaired to the stability of air, where they might rest assured on fine individual engineering. On alleged ground, in our immense, inappropriate structures, we were by comparison large in our self-regard though miniature in our soon-to-be shaking skin. Solid ground is a compelling myth. Our material condition is liquid when it isn’t vaporous or vacuous. Our feet knew. They felt Earth pass under us in squirts and waves. The planet is pieces and paste. It is going somewhere, we’re on it, and that is that.

§

Hans Ostrom
Monastery, Montserrat

Christians' belief will outlive these particular monastic bricks, which will, in their present configuration, outlast us—visitors today in bright sun. A child accidentally kicks a soccer-ball over the parapet. We all move to the wall, peer over. Rocks above the monastery will outlast Christians' belief in its present configuration, will persist past words like rock and kick that visitors today, tomorrow, speak.

Can belief make the face of a simple wooden statue last forever? The face of the Black Madonna shines, seems to gaze past the parapet of Time. Geology promises that wind will outlive rocks above. Wind roaming past bluffs above Montserrat is holier than now, is eternal liturgy of displacement, is inspired.

§
Sierra City—September

Two hours before dawn your eyes open
and you tiptoe across cold linoleum
to check the thermometer outside: the thin,
red capillary’s clipped down to thirty-one.

After breakfast you glance at your father’s garden:
it’s going underground: carrots and a few potatoes
duck the frost. After last night’s freezing, leaves
of tomato vines curl and harden like arthritic hands.

From the kitchen in late afternoon, you watch
your father in his dying garden, oak boughs already
yellowing. They toss all around him in northerly gusts.
He patiently surveys the damage.

When you see his cotton shirt pulled taut across his back
as he stoops to pull a carrot, you try to steel yourself
against a quickened fear—perhaps
by counting the last tomatoes lined up
to ripen on the window sill: an even dozen,
and most of them still apple-green. But as you count
the twelfth, a pang of fear chills you
into glancing back at him: for a moment

your mind staggers in a solstice
where you the son think a father’s thoughts
to your father: *Get inside Quick come inside.*
Sorting The Tools

With such fashioned metal and wood, he didn’t mean to leave his mark, imprint "I am." Mostly he was building shelter, earning wages, securing premises. Also, he was one to impress his will on the present, not the future. That rubbed handle nonetheless bears an inadvertent mark only his palm could have left. This other handle’s darkened by days, by years, of perspiration, his specific salts. This mechanism here—he repaired it himself. Note his deliberate, improvised way, the practical jazz of rural labor, making things keep functioning when parts aren’t available right away. This workshop is cold.

Outside, oaks have dumped all leaves and acorns, stripped themselves down to lithe gray-brown muscle, ready for Winter. A bear broke down the biggest apple tree. This duty of ours makes us sorters sad when we’re not smiling. Mostly this is tedious work, though occasionally we recognize we’re awed by what the tools report about how difficult, steady, and determined his work was in his time.

§

The Coast Starlight
Little cold-water springs bubble up in the throats of pigeons.

In the throats of pigeons, weary orderlies push medicine-carts down dim hospital corridors, and one wheel always wobbles;

old men and women sit around tables, mutter alibis, lullabies, and goodbyes. In the throats of pigeons . . . untravelled highways, upholstered in ground-mist . . . gray purses full of phrases from a lost lingo . . . pearl light of coastal windows.

§
Carpooling

I'll meet you where horizon catches a ride with the tollway and There tells Here where to go.

The Commissioner of Asphalt will snip a ribbon, a way will open, and we'll commute on into Nowhere. We'll sing of carts and dirigibles, trucks and tri-planes, trains and schooners and other means of trans-importance. We'll best be getting along into the shaking sky. Why,

we'll be late and early both at once, nearing and disappearing. Together!

§
Avalanche

In my hometown, an avalanche ran over an empty shack, crossed the highway, crushed the schoolhouse. The children were all home eating boiled peas, scratching themselves, wanting to go outside in the snow once more before bedtime. That evening’s event ended schooling in the town. Children ever since have traveled twelve miles to go learn in the next town.

Cameras remembered the sight of snow versus building. People would recall the sound without describing it. They couldn’t go around talking about how loud snow could be—how long the sound lasted, how it was sustained, patient, and terrible. No, better to say, “That was really something, that was.”

So far, all descendants of the avalanche have stayed on the mountain, melted, slipped into the river, and traveled toward San Francisco—there to continue their education in the Bay.
Sacramento

1.
There's something fine about city-towns, which annoy anyone who wants them to be more or less. My mother was born there. My father died there. More or less a hick, I grew up thinking Sacramento was Civilization, for it was bigger than Reno and hotter than Hell. My thesis is that Sacramento—its adjacent gold, its purchase on mountains, ocean, delta, and valley—changed civilization. London, Paris, New York, Rome, L.A.—loudmouths in a saloon. The other drunks pretend to listen, are bored by urban legends rehearsed by these unctuous megalopoli. Meanwhile, mere Sacramento sits in a back room like an elected sheriff, smoking, pretending to listen, reading faces, cutting cards, watching the clock.

2.
Now it floats on an ocean of stucco suburbs. Now it hosts muscle-bound, spray-tanned politics. Now its prostitutes and street-drinkers remain the ugliest and most beautiful of their kind. Now the old trees have grown bigger than thunderheads, and the thunderheads loom like white capitols, and the engines never cease their blasted coursing across concrete slabs which Highway Money lifted like altars above Sacramento. O Sacramento.
3.
Sacramento, I'm writing to you on one of your postcards. Who buys postcards from Sacramento? I do. It's a cramped little love-note that burps profundity, something like I love your sacred profanity, your big brown river, your one-way nightmares, your legislative theft and retail mania. I love how my luggage disappears in your airport, how I always got lost in you after midnight, the green Camaro doing shooters of tequila. The longer the night ran in Sacramento, the further away I found myself from where I was supposed to be, and the closer I came to finding the center of a city-town with no circumference.

4.
I'm looking at my mother's graduation ring, McClatchy High, 1940, a lion on each side of a red stone. Its circumference surrounds the little finger of my right hand, which jabs numbers as I phone Sacramento, which is never home. I'll never know and always love Sacramento, which will never love and always know me.

§

Hans Ostrom
Early Childhood

By the time I was aware
That I knew I was me,
I was already there,
Or here, from what I could see.
In High Country, Like Snow

Bonanza’s signal crawled over walls of North Yuba Canyon. NBC Living Color was lost on our Zenith, black-and-white. Ben Cartwright, Hop Sing, and the lads sauntered behind flurries on a screen.

When Winter broadcast snow to Sierra, reception got worse, and still worse when ploughs clearing black-asphalt Highway 49 jarred TV signals with metal mass. A blizzard moved into the picture, locating our living room between snow and snow. Our father’s blue cigar smoke filled the room.

When our father trudged out into snow to rotate the antenna—pointing it at one canyon wall, not the other—he kept a stogie (Roi-Tan, Dutch Masters, or Crooks) in his mouth; one of us was posted at an open door—blast of January. We were to yell whether “the picture” had improved. (It had not; it would not, ever.) He shouted at us. We shouted to him.

Four hounds began to howl. Our father ordered them to shut up. They were confused. They believed he’d invited excitement by coming outside wearing his wool jacket, which he wore hunting; and by smoking—olfactory siren. The dogs returned chastened to their houses, out of the snow. They looked at dog-thoughts televised on screens of their minds.
We were entertained. Our situation included difficult TV. Before the advent of Cable, satellite dishes, and high definition, the medium was the conflict and comedy, Lucy in the sky with flurries. Television was something of a problem in high country, like snow.

§
Message of the Barn-Swallows

Between granite and sky occurs
the culture of a barn—

a parliament of odors,
treaties of seed.

Every one of those barn-swallows
transports a secret word
under its wing until at dusk

a statement gathers—
a large calling

with accents of loam. Day
utters this immense phrase
to night. The message

cconcerns entirety.
From Another Part of the Forest

How are you today?
   Ten dead fish float in the harbor.

May I help you?
   Five cattle lie in the shade.

Won't you please sit down?
   A bobcat rakes a deer's back.

Do you love me?
   A butterfly folds up its wings.

What are you waiting for?
   Seven geese waddle toward a pond.

Are you sure?
   A frogs jumps from a log into mud.

§
Sonnet Rhyming On Its Left Side

Let’s get the rhymes done right away and then
See where the lines go when they go. Are all
Bets off when lines don’t seek but rather
Flee the scene of rhymes? Yes—just as you
Suspected: anti-sonnet aimlessness
Ensues, loose lyric strings—and iamb dis-
Respected. Still one wonders if the rhymes
Would choose this way, away from constant
Glare of end-rhyme notoriety,
Holed up in the beginning of each line,
Where readers listen laxly for a sound.
Old rhymes especially—for instance loon
And goon—must crave retirement, desire
Sand-dune blandness of lines’ primary feet.

§
Making the Soul’s Re-acquaintance

It seems you must give up your long-term lease
On being right and wronged, righteous and hurt.
No doubt there’s someone else who would be pleased
To lord over that haughty piece of Earth.

Move to a cottage of humility,
Cross-breezes, and a pantry full of jars
That hold your faults, preserved for scrutiny.
Live with the wretchedness of who you are.

Chop kindling from the stump of your assumptions,
And ask forgiveness from each simple wall.
It won’t be long before you sense resumption
Of basic gratitude for life, for all.

Of course you’ll want to pray again, poor sod.
But keep it basic: pray there is a God.
I ponder you. You ponder me.
Thus we create a palpable
ponderability,
a kind of interstasis
or interpersonal oasis
that's both and neither
Other and Self.
Shuck and jive and humming hive,
the twixt between us is alive.

§
The Woman in the Iron Sonnet

She was trapped in his
Sonnet for three hundred
Years. Finally one reader
Set her free. She

Breathed deliriously,
Drank in some of everything
Which that precious lyric
Bastard had kept from her.

Her liberating reader
Told her then she
Could stay with him
And be his love, but she

Said Forget it, I’m
Going on a cruise.

§
The Coast Starlight

(1)

That’s what the railroad named this train, which runs its steel from Seattle to L.A., from green and rain to brown and sun. We’re confident we’ll see the coast. but what about the starlight?

(2)

California’s Valley, expansive as an arctic ice-field, drifts by. We see our groceries splendidly unharvested but organized like infantry: rows of lettuce-heads clinging to dark soil; cattle reviewing flies and mulling over the cud they’ve made of alfalfa; orchard rows whose spacings burst for an instant into view as clean and true as spokes.

The Starlight’s ride rocks, shakes, and shove us. After Washington, after Oregon, our nerves began to probe for sleep but haven’t taken root even in this, the Valley of valleys.

Even in such agitation, we are attentive to small destinations. Well before a porter sings a name, we anticipate a billboard or a water tank proclaiming we’ll be pausing in a town renowned for a single crop grown well—onion, perhaps, or artichoke—or famous for a company that bottles vanilla, or for the World Tractor Pulling Championship.
Out where cities are zoned Industrial and Dark,
the train tiptoes its absurd mass on diminutive casters
and comes in wailing, as if to warn and surprise
somebody both at once.

We scrape and squeal along each city’s battered edge
of burnt brick and corrugated iron:
heaps of automobile husks, warehouses rusted through,
alleys inflicted like dirty wounds—

out where homeless ones wrap themselves like weapons
in newspapers and oily rags and stare yellowy
into our yellow windows and warmer faces:
where in the morning children with wise faces

hover for a moment on bicycles to wave,
or simply stare from backyards and corroding playgrounds
of neighborhoods which, rotting, nourish mudflats
and monstrous blackberry patches;

where the hand that’s not a fist
scrawls arcane rage in chalk or paint.

The coast comes in glimpses, not vistas.
The starlight must have taken another train.

Finally Los Angeles,
overrunning its guardrails,
its empty concrete riverbeds bleached white.
We sit more rigidly, begin to fidget,  
seem unready for this Los  
Angeles, this fact  
taking sun in its brown concoction.

On blond knolls that waver in a heat-mirage,  
grasshopper pumps suck oil from the desert’s glands.

When the *Coast Starlight* stops,  
We see ourselves reflected in a pool of water  
on the concrete of the depot;  
we hold on to this medallion of water  
in this waterless Jerusalem,  
an ultra-city in remorseless sprawl  
between Sierra and Pacific. All  
the houses have gobbled all  
the orange groves and meadows. Houses  
stand on the coastal lip, eyeing ocean  
as if it were dessert. Our burnings  

shape the sky into a pumice stone  
that grinds our oxygen and polishes our prayers  
as we pray to be alone and separate  
and someone other than the one-billionth Angelino  
stepping from the train into Los Angeles.

§
Request

Hey, come out of death and follow me, father, back to my childhood, where you must work and hunt and drink less and spend time next to me, being there a father, talking to me kindly, listening to my words, being there a father.

§
Paying Respects

The iron garden-gate
was hard and wondrous to open.  
Ornamentation dated it. 
Up the walkway then,  
into her stifling house, 
where she sat in her purple dress and parchment skin, 
saying what she thought her whole life 
had taught. She was too old to pity, too austere to embrace.  
The voice seemed to come from years ago.  
Our minds assured us we would never grow that weird if we ever grew that old. Our minds were confident we could open the gate again, get away. The gate stood out there in advanced darkness. Inside, the seconds of her clock ate the minutes of our patience.

§
Theology and Banking

He tried to confess
his sins to a bank.
He told the teller
about his specific
enactments of sloth,
lust, deception, cruelty.
Did he have an account?
she asked. Everyone,
he replied, has an account
in Heaven. Would he step
aside to let the next
person in line advance?
she asked. Yes, he said,
but first I need to withdraw
forgiveness, quite
a lot of it. She summoned
Security, who said they
would have to ask him
to leave. He said he
would have to ask them
to forgive him. They
said they excused him. No,
not excuses, he said—
forgiveness. They took him
to the door and beyond. He
wandered to a church
and deposited some money.
May I have a receipt? he asked.
Yes, a liturgical minister said,
and gave him a wafer, a sip
of wine. He ate and drank
the receipt. Will you tell me
my current balance? he asked.
Yes, the minister said, you are, like everyone else, overdrawn, so I wouldn’t push it. Go now and sin much more frugally if sin you must, and apparently, you must.

§
Cup

I am contained in the cup of me. Originally, it is claimed, we came from the sea. Actually, what emerged were versions of something that could turn into us. Nonetheless, here I am, a full cup of me, a compound composed of me, salt water modified, elaborated, prorated, not quite yet evaporated.

§
Location

I am my home,  
my real estate.  
Memory contests the deed  
and title, would  
force me to live  
in recall, a phantom  
condominium of fate.

I am the shack  
of me, a self with rooms,  
a past out back,  
an attic that looms,  
a pantry with brooms.  
This is why blankets  
at 4:13 a.m. feel  
(why rain badgering  
roof over the roof  
of me sounds) so  
fine, appeal.

§
Wonder

for my son, Spencer

We’ve marveled at animals: raccoons and eagles, black bears that are brown, Russian cats which are gray, fox, rat, koi, moose, spider, dolphin, chickadee, flicker, trout, possum, dog, squirrel, and caribou. You and your grandfather wandered around, wondering about animal-tracks.

You’ve wondered about big rivers—Kenai; and small—North Yuba. About human-made harbors like *Fyris Hov*. And mystery-made ones: Commencement Bay; Marseilles.


Wonder as in question. Wonder as in marvel. Wonder as in dream and create. Never question that I love you, or why. Marvel at you and your friends. Marvel at miracles: your mother and your laughter. When it comes to wondering, you are nobody’s fool. You are you, and that—and you—are very cool.
About the Author

Hans Ostrom is a native of California's High Sierra, having grown up in Sierra City, a town of 200 that is situated near the North Yuba River. His father was a stone mason and a carpenter, and his mother was a home-maker and a substitute teacher. Early on Ostrom was educated in a small school in Downieville, California, before attending high school and community college in the Central Valley. He went on to study at the University of California, Davis, where he took poetry classes from the late Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet, Karl Shapiro. Eventually, Ostrom earned a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. at Davis, where he also began his teaching career and directed the Campus Writing Center.

Ostrom is the author, co-author, editor, or co-editor of over a dozen books. He has published a novel, *Three to Get Ready*, and he has edited an introduction to short fiction, *Lives and Moments*. He wrote *Langston Hughes: A Study of the Short Fiction* and *A Langston Hughes Encyclopedia*. With Wendy Bishop, he co-edited three volumes of essays: *Colors of a Different Horse: On Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*; *Genres of Writing*; and *The Subject is Story*. With Bishop and Katharine Haake, he wrote *Metro: Journeys in Writing Creatively*. A chapbook of poetry, *Subjects Apprehended*, appeared in 2001 from Pudding House Press. Ostrom's poetry has been appearing in magazines, journals, and anthologies in the U.S. and abroad for nearly 30 years. *Ploughshares, Poetry Northwest, Spoon River Quarterly, California Quarterly, Commonweal*, and the *Washington Post* are among numerous periodicals in which his poems have been published. He has also published short fiction.

*The Coast Starlight: Collected Poems 1976–2006* brings together poems from three decades of writing. It includes formal and free verse; lyric poems, meditative poems, and narrative poems; and poems touching on a wide variety of subjects, events, persons, and things. "Spider Killing" won a national prize judged by the late dis-
The distinguished poet Stephen Spender. The poem “Emily Dickinson and Elvis Presley in Heaven” has been reprinted often, including in the popular anthology, *Kiss Off: Poems to Set You Free*. Other heavenly pairings in Ostrom’s poetry include Sigmund Freud and Babe Ruth; Matsuo Basho and William Blake; and Jack Benny and T.S. Eliot. Many poems concern the wilderness near which Ostrom grew up; others are set in urban and suburban environments. Peace, war, spirituality, absurdity, loss, memory, language, and work are among the other topics *Collected Poems* engage.

Of Ostrom’s poetry, the late Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet Karl Shapiro wrote:

“Reading Hans Ostrom’s poems the second time, one wants to read them a third time and more. This is the test of poetry, after which no other test applies. It is not only the memorability of the voice in its quiet assurance but the introduction of a new experience that make the reader want to return and to see and hear again. The range is geographically immense but the persona remains intact and rooted in its time and place, the poet of Scandinavian descent in the new American west. At home in nature and at home among handicrafts, at home in the academy and in far-flung places: one has an image of a Paul Bunyan—and Rilke! Here is genuine American poetry at its best.”

Hans Ostrom is currently professor of English and chair of the English Department at the University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington. He is an award-winning teacher of creative writing, literature, and rhetoric. He lives in the South Puget Sound area with his wife and son.
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“Reading Hans Ostrom’s poems the second time, one wants to read them a third time and more. This is the test of poetry, after which no other test applies. It is not only the memorability of the voice in its quiet assurance but the introduction of a new experience that make the reader want to return and to see and hear again. The range is geographically immense but the persona remains intact and rooted in its time and place, the poet of Scandinavian descent in the new American west. At home in nature and at home among handicrafts, at home in the academy and in far-flung places: one has an image of a Paul Bunyan—and Rilke! Here is genuine American poetry at its best.”

~Karl Shapiro (1913-2000), winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry

The Coast Starlight: Collected Poems 1976-2006, by Hans Ostrom, is a rich collection of poetry on a broad range of subjects. Some poems are set in and concern Ostrom’s native region, the High Sierra of California; others are set in Sweden, Russia, Italy, Spain, and Germany. “Emily Dickinson and Elvis Presley in Heaven,” an award-winning, much republished poem, was featured in the “Poet’s Choice” column in the Washington Post as well as in the popular anthology Kiss Off: Poems to Set You Free.

Hans Ostrom was born and grew up in a small town in California’s High Sierra. Ostrom attended high school and community college in the Central Valley of California before enrolling at the University of California, Davis, where he earned a B.A., an M.A., and a Ph.D. in literature. There he studied writing with the Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet Karl Shapiro. Ostrom’s poems have been appearing in journals, magazines, and anthologies for three decades, and they have won several prizes. Currently professor of English at the University of Puget Sound, Ostrom has taught at Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, and he was a Fulbright Senior Lecturer at Uppsala University in Sweden. He has also worked as a journalist, an editor, and a laborer. Ostrom has written, co-written, edited, and co-edited numerous works, including Three To Get Ready (a novel), Subjects Apprehended: Poems, Langston Hughes: A Study of the Short Fiction, A Langston Hughes Encyclopedia, Lives and Moments: An Introduction to Short Fiction, Metro: Journeys in Writing Creatively (written with Wendy Bishop and Katharine Haake), and the five-volume Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Literature (edited with J. David Macey). Ostrom lives in the South Puget Sound region with his wife and son.