

REMEMBER



Balsam Apple and Vegetables by: James Peale

KEITH R. PARRIS

[POEMS]

A provocative and masterful collection of fresh poetry that stimulates the intellectual genius and emotional passions of its readers...

REMEMBER

REMEMBER

KEITH R. PARRIS

B K C
B K

B K

B K C
B K C

Black Knight Classic
San Antonio, Texas

REMEMBER

All Rights Reserved Copyright 2006 by Keith R. Parris
www.keithparris.com

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

Black Knight Classic

For information address:

Black Knight Classic
18410 Apache Springs Drive
San Antonio, TX 78259-3604
www.keithparris.com

Edited by Dr. Janet K. Parris

ISBN: X-XXX-XXXXX-X (pbk)

Printed in the United States of America

FOR JOHN

CONTENTS

A DECENT MAN...	3
A MUCH DIFFERENT DIRECTION...	4
ACCIDENTAL ASSOCIATION...	5
ATTACHMENTS...	6
AUTUMN WINDS...	7
BEYOND TIME...	8
BY THEIR FEUDAL HAND...	10
CLOSELY MOWN SPACES...	12
CONSTANT REMINDING...	16
DRAWN BACK...	17
EVENING FOG...	19
FLIGHT TO SPAIN...	20
FLYING...	22
GIVING UP THE REMOTE...	25
HOME...	27
I HAVE SLIDES...	29
IF BEAUTY COMES...	31
ILLUSIONS...	32

CONTENTS (cont.)

IMPRESSIONS...	34
IN OUR YOUTH...	35
IN THIS COCOON...	36
INTO THE ABYSS...	38
LOVE...	40
MORNING DELAYED...	41
OLD FRIENDS...	43
OUR CIVILIZED PILLARS...	46
OVER OLD FORGOTTEN SHADOWS...	47
PERFECT SPOT...	48
PERHAPS...	51
RED CABBAGE...	54
RELATIONSHIPS...	57
REVERIE & REVIVAL...	58
SAYING FAREWELL...	60
SCIENCE...	63
SEARCHING...	64
SEEING A CHILD'S VIEW...	65

CONTENTS (cont.)

SILENCE...	67
SOMETHING...	69
STILL...	70
TERRORISTS...	73
THE BARGAIN...	75
THE COLONEL...	78
THE HUNT...	79
THE MILL...	81
THE PATRIOT'S PRAYER...	82
THE QUARRY...	84
THE TIDAL SEA...	86
THE TRANQUIL FOREST GLENS...	88
THE TREASURE...	89
THOSE THE SPIRITS SLEW...	90
TOO FAR EAST...	93
TOO MUCH A DREAM...	95
TRAPPED...	96
VOICES...	98

CONTENTS (cont.)

WAITING...	101
WASHDAY...	104
WE...	105
WHEN DEATH FINDS ME...	106
WITNESS...	108
WORDS ...	109
WORK...	111
WOUNDS...	112
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	

REMEMBER

A DECENT MAN

This man was sitting silently apart.
He looked to have withstood a world of pain,
To have outlived uncounted lifelong friends
And to have stumbled into loneliness.

He was someone seen to have witnessed life
With all its foolishness and forebodings.
Each episode of his life, now settled,
Showed no visible remnants of regret.

Had there been years of promise where patience
Made the improbable seem possible
And invited a kind of happiness
That moved to the sweet music of romance?

Had the minstrel's song spoken long of love,
Rejoiced in all that might be worth desire
And celebrated life's every madness
As if excess filled each silver chalice?

The insatiable appetite of youth
Had surely savored impatient innocence
Before dreams were consumed by capricious doubt
And age advanced beyond life's belonging.

His fingers gently held a glass of wine,
His palate, a few bites of fresh-baked bread.
Unspoken words retreated from his tongue
As memories played, then escaped elsewhere.

A MUCH DIFFERENT DIRECTION

Have you ever walked by an old barn,
been in the exact spot where the stable once stood,
looked up and seen the streaks of rust on the tin roof
and smelled the fresh scent of the corn bin,
still as alive in your suddenly awakened nostrils
as it would have been if you had come there
fifty or more years before the farmer
became too old and frail to reach up and grab a bridle
or to bend down and raise a stone-bruised hoof?
I doubt your pathway has led to a place
where your frenzied life could find such a world.
We could have shared our grand experience,
if we had reached this rustic country together,
but you chose to strike off in a much different direction
and I couldn't bring myself to follow into your future.
So, we went our separate ways
and this has left my mind to search
through past, carefully preserved memories
when these private moments present themselves.
I've missed you and, in these brief glints of reflection,
I've come to see and feel how much more frequently
the emptiness of your absence touched me
than I'd allowed myself to realize.
As I watch the pearl mist march steadily across my meadow,
I'll invite these memories into the world I've arrived at,
but, for now, only to rest beside me
until I retire for the long-drawn night.
I'll bet the crickets will begin to call to each other soon
and the damp evening air will cool and sleep will come quietly.

ACCIDENTAL ASSOCIATION

All day, yesterday, I searched frantically,
in my solitary quest, to find you,
and you, *aquatic*, quite unknowingly,
found a place in my eye,
with your aqueous good humor
and your cousins,
the constellation and the zodiac.

You announced your stuttered sound to my ear
like these flightless fowl announcing their arrival,
quacking away, as if it were you approaching the bench
where I sit, stammering excitedly
with my newly discovered associates and
a bag of sandwich bread and wheat crackers,
drinking and spilling my
blue-tinted bottle of water.

Your aquatic brothers waddle down the hill like water,
dragging themselves so closely to the ground,
sometimes rushing in line,
sometimes pooling in indistinguishable collisions
and muddying their tracks.

They are delightful in their undistinguished way,
presenting themselves without names,
reference, or formal introduction,
yet, each eager to make my acquaintance.

My afternoon is all the better because of you and them.

ATTACHMENTS

How attached is the whippetree

To its traces and its tongue?

How attached are mind and body

To their heartstrings once they're stung?

AUTUMN WINDS

Her home displayed the ruins of a red roof with splotches of black tar where hapless patches had been placed to prevent frequent rains from flooding through increasingly apparent and unmanageable fissures in age-forgotten asphalt shingles.

She was alone, for all practical purposes, vainglorious and a pious recluse, rarely venturing far from her front veranda, a peeling, whitewashed porch that looked like it had been borrowed from somewhere else before it settled on this secluded structure.

Her days were dispatched by rocking and singing the old gospel songs she had learned as a young child while attending tent revivals that traveled across her southern landscape in step with carnival camps, which arrived and departed on warm, storm-washed autumn winds.

She was a scornful, scowling sight, according to freely given gossip by many of her former friends, acquaintances who long since had abandoned their farms and plots of land on the outskirts of what was considered, by even the least of knowledgeable citizens, a dying town.

She could have left her chicken-fenced yard years ago and left behind her weathered, whitewashed walls and left life's clutter that threatened to crowd her out and left, as well, the memories that gave her so much pain.

But she had come to her own terms with fate's tribulations long ago, leaving her free to rock and sing the old songs of revival and to refuse to consider that the carnival camps would never again arrive and depart on the warm, storm-washed autumn winds of her youth.

BEYOND TIME

Time draws us near to death and, as we're drawn,
we realize how untenable and insane it is
that death has become the inescapable imperative
of our life.

The logic of death's attainment,
the capricious and incoherent nature of its lurking
irrefutably and resolutely in our future,
ultimately consumes our uncertain existence,
devouring our senses and infecting us
with contrition and the complicity of anxiety.

Death is insatiable in its appetite,
insistent at our arrival,
and insidious in its treachery and betrayal
of our purpose and our expectations.

Death is not transparent;
it bewilders our faith and trust,
intruding when least expected,
absent when obliged to end suffering.

It is a chilling illusion
until it unfurls itself
and wraps our withered dreams in extinction.

It is our great abyss,
rendering great wealth and great power meaningless,
almost absurd.

No matter how reluctant, how recalcitrant, how innocent,
neither we nor death are indifferent to our passing.

Our days, count them if you will, are not inexhaustible;
neither can they be rationed or locked away for safekeeping,
and, though we may delay our living,
we shall, inevitably, not delay our dying.

No matter how cherished or how condemned,
the opaque curtain shall be withdrawn
and what is diminished and abandoned shall,
beyond the suspicion and desolation of death's door,
rise and be reborn.

BY THEIR FEUDAL HAND

I set my foot in Normandy
And touched a thousand years of war.
Its castled hills called out to me
And showed the scars their faces bore.

The knights that held dominion here
Were felled by arrow, lance and sword,
And chivalry was buried near
To every peasant's noble lord.

A wilderness of ruin rose
From ground the sweat of poor had tilled
And spread immortal fear to those
Who crouched in darkness death had stilled.

Then, benighted servants dared to stand
And wrought upon this wicked place,
Of European Medieval grace,
An order by their feudal hand.

These persons born in servitude,
Long bound as animals to land
And scourged by tempest and by feud,
Cried out in absolute demand.

By force of arms and mighty will,
They overthrew their master's throne
And crushed the age of winter's chill
With raging fire and fists of stone.

Ask freedom what they sought to gain
And shackles what they sought to lose
And, in the fall of any reign,
Ask any power what they fought to choose.

Their voices still reverberate
Among the hills that guard each soul
Like sentries posted at the gate
Where spirits form one final shoal
And warriors, fashioned as of old,
Are moved to honor those whom freedom tolled.

CLOSELY MOWN SPACES

A frail and withered dame lives next to me.
Her days are spent among her garden's blooms,
Or supervising neighbors whom she finds
Within earshot of orders hurled their way.
She's careful to observe the line that marks
What's hers and what exists beyond the space
That holds her feet more firmly than the chains
I sometimes see on convicts, cutting weeds
That grow in drainage ditches by our roads.
They sling their blades and chant a mournful song,
While tattered clippings fly around their heads.
Their sweat drips hot from naked backs and brows
That furrow deep to keep the sun at bay.
Guards fiercely watch their moves from dawn-till-dusk,
With shotguns lain across an arm or neck
And pistols hung from molded leather belts.
I wonder what this dame would hurl at me
For seeing how her feet were chained like theirs?
 "Will you be mowing grass this week?" she asks.
 "It's much too dry to mow this week," I say.

A stark-faced man and gauntly boy come near.
Around each head is worn a cotton band
Of red and black, while shirts of green and gold
Announce that they are called Perez and Son.
The roar of idle engines bellows out
And pierces morning air with mindless rage,
Until the stilted duo finds its voice
And turns the fury into music's calm.

Then, back and forth they go like marching men
Who chant a somber cadence none can hear
Above the steady drone that comes and goes.
A heaving truck, with paint as flat as soot
And windows rolled full down, meanders up
The street and parks near where the old man points.
A half-grown girl displays the same green shirt
And frees a trimmer from its pierced steel cage.
She pulls its tight-wound rope until it coughs,
Not once but twice, before it belches smoke
And starts to wail like wind lamenting cause
To swirl and hurl beheaded stalks around.

Each pass lops off the tops of vanquished blades
That fall like scraps of paper on the walk.
Trained legions of disturbed and angry ants
Race out to save their sacred mound from harm
By plastic line revolving overhead.
An old dog barks, but can't deter the surge
Of countless creatures cast away from home,
To spill like boiling water onto fire,
Until the strain of self-exertion breaks
The dreaded fear imposed upon their hill.
The music of the mowers falls away
And quickly travels down the garden path
That leads through portals guarding promised lands.
The swinging gate reveals a running stream
That empties in a pool of fashioned stones.
Each step that falls thrusts forth the hungry swords
Upon the grass and past the water's edge,
But they've been tasked to shield the humble pool

From vicious storms created underneath
The metal frames and fevered engine parts.

“You’ll have to water soon,” I say to her.

“The sun is hot and you have mown too low.

You’ll have to water when the day has cooled.”

“Why, don’t you think the lawn looks nice?” she says.

“They always do their job with utmost care.

I love to see the grass so closely mown.”

She stands beside a thin green strip of steel

That holds our grass from crossing far beyond

The line that keeps her land apart from mine.

Her lawn is Augustine, so I’ve been told.

I think that mine must be Bermuda grass.

“You should have asked for better grass,” she says.

“Your builder gave you cheaper grass than mine.

I have Saint Augustine, both front and back.”

“I think your grass was grown from sod, not God!”

I quip beneath my breath and bite my tongue.

“You’ve seen my summer plot, I’m sure,” she says.

“I set most of my flowers out last spring.”

“Out there, along the walk, were more,” she says,

“But white tails made a thorough mess of those.”

“The deer have eaten mine, as well,” I say.

“It’s hard to fight the heat and keep the deer

From every stem and twig they care to graze.

Their hooves imprint the ground around my house

And trample even plants they dare not eat.

Their brazen theft of all my work and toil

Would test the papacy as much as me.

I've never had a chance to see or hear
Them make their pilgrimage from wooded stands,
Or seen them come from nature's hidden spots;
And yet, each day, I find their sorry deeds.
Oh, I have sprayed more scents than man has known
On each broad leaf and branch they've grazed upon,
Without so much as barely saving one.
Some day, I'll lay a gun across my arm
And dare the little beasts to do me harm."
"I like it when the grass is closely mown,"
She states with no regard for what I've said.
"Will you be mowing grass this week?" she asks.
"It's been a pleasure meeting you," I say.

CONSTANT REMINDING

Some men need constant reminding.
Their excesses go beyond greed...
They grab for absolute power
And pirate every treasure,
Taking other's lives for granted.
Some men need constant reminding.

DRAWN BACK

Pouring more cane sugar into sun tea
than could possibly be dissolved
in the same fruit jar filled two or three times over,
that's how I remember my grandmother.
In a small country kitchen that was constructed
simply to bring the water well indoors,
standing in a full-length housedress,
printed, shapeless, sweeping over the linoleum floor,
she would welcome me with a warm, watery smooch
and a huge hug that slapped my back
so heartily I would reciprocate
nearly as much in self-preservation
as out of genuine love and respect.
No sooner would I be swallowed by her embrace
than dish after dish of three days' kept meals
would materialize from her mist-blue icebox
and love and food would be piled together,
in no particular order,
until I acquiesced and accepted both gifts
in the princely portions in which
they were inevitably and generously offered,
notwithstanding that she was poor as a country church mouse.
If I stood long enough in that kitchen
to gather my fill of gloriously irreverent gossip,
I would soon see her stiff, sun-spotted hands
grab an ice pick or bent-tipped butcher's knife,
big enough to slit a sizeable watermelon in one slice,
and attack a block of ice with unapologetic,
Methodist enthusiasm.

She would chew and crunch cracked ice chips
that splintered and whirled wildly off,
and then force the larger crystal fragments
into old jelly-jar glasses
that should rightly have given way
under the pressure of slippery hands
and crystal cubes of slithery brilliance.
The chill of this scene would send shivers down my spine
and frighten my shattered imagination
forever and a day, or worse yet, a night.
So began each of my genial visits with my grandmother,
another chance to stroll past quilting racks,
hung high above the dining room table
and raised or lowered as church and prayer meetings permitted,
another chance to view and visit with the propped-up pictures
of my three aunts and six uncles when they were young and still home
or with those of my passed-away relatives that I had seldom seen
and mostly failed to remember, except on rare occasions.
Her quick, staccato steps; the swish of her dress; her slight smile;
and her hands crammed into the pockets of her prodigious cotton aprons
or clapping in unison with her raucous, ready laugh,
these are the memories that draw me back
to the days of fried chicken platters, fresh corn and string beans,
and sufficient milk gravy to smother a mountain of mashed potatoes.
These are the memories that time and again draw me back
to my most cherished pictures of those country, childhood years,
as if I had never really left, not really.

EVENING FOG

A sullen darkness has devoured the road ahead,
foraged through the upper reaches of stately trees,
climbed down their cross-pieced ladders of dismembered limbs
and plundered their fingers of carbon-green foliage.
The world has dissolved in a steaming caldron of disguise
and cloaked itself beneath the cover of blurred confusion
that masks what the mind might otherwise make of it
if mortal thought could fathom that which lies hidden
within its suffocating stillness.
Everything has been erased, wiped clean,
replaced by an ever-expanding emptiness
that fills the void then vanishes
in wave upon wave of deceitful floating webs,
woven fabric spun by the work
of some warlock's wicked, spindle-shanked spider.
Its lustrous, silver-laced threads of gossamer
slip past my dimmed headlights
like powdery moths drawn from darkness to a flame
and then are dead and gone,
forgotten, forever buried in shallow graves
alongside the tar-blackened gravel left behind.
I stare into this silent sea of gods and ghosts
that surrounds me in my increasingly imprisoned carriage,
driving toward a door, a bridge back to the world that's disappeared
as I've crept forward, pushing further into night's careworn journey.
Perhaps, if I persist, undeterred by doubtless hidden perils,
I shall meet with Morpheus' father
and he will welcome me and show me the way.

FLIGHT TO SPAIN

We launched upon the wind,
Our solitary plane,
With plans for Torrejon
When evening falls on Spain.

We trimmed our tapered wings
To sail in level flight
And watched the mountains soar
Beneath our crystal sight.

The snowcapped peaks rose up
From hidden valley plates
And stretched with ancient reach
To grasp at heaven's gates.

The great white glaciers cloaked
Their hardened face of stone
And bathed in brilliant sun
What clouds and wind had sewn.

The mountains spoke their name,
Both Alps and Pyrenees,
And whispered how they came,
And how they would remain,
When tin men turned to rust
And flesh returned to dust.

They stood erect and showed
An air of confidence,

Steadfast in all their old
Ancestral prominence,

Existing, while changing,
And ever yet the same,
Never quite revealing
All their silence claimed.

They were, from what's been seen,
Once crossed by Hannibal,
Who conquered Rome's elite
By sword at Trasimene.

But after his brief age,
With no more wars to wage,
He'd taste his poisoned hand
And face his last defeat.

The mountains rise ahead
While Hannibal lies dead
And we have trimmed our wings
To sail in level flight
And watch the mountains soar
Beneath our crystal sight.

FLYING

I

I dreamed a precious child
came frenzied through a summer's field.
With hair electric in the freshening breeze,
the youth's entangled tongue outran excited feet,
exclaiming all the while,
"Mommy, Daddy,
did you see me?
I flew! I flew!
I really flew!"

II

I've flown planes,
sleek, clean, free,
gleaming perfection,
glittering, sacred, radiant.
Their ivory threads of silken trails
roll like ribbons,
carried on wisps of softly whispered currents.
So fragile
are these things of wings,
always lifting,
upwards soaring,
graceful, ever graceful.
But still,
I marvel at their flight,
casting themselves toward the blue beyond,

piercing the misty whiteness
that climbs in towering columns
and billows around itself
before cascading into waterfalls of crystal light.

They're spirits,
these planes,
piloted by a helmsman's dream,
rekindling flames of being before reality
caught man
and gravity pulled him back to earth.

In turn upon turn,
they spiral up the lofty heights
of man's imagination,
glistening in his sheltered eyes,
expanding,
retracting,
then repeating.

How easily they bank and bend the invisible light,
into,
through,
leaving behind the clarity of space,
inviolate,
caressed.

Exalted admiration,
fascination,
the mind abandons comprehension,
accepting,
rejoicing,
asking how but not questioning why.

Man's chariot becomes the mind's corsair,
hushed in rapture,

rising,
immortal.

The gush of passion
rushes to hurl itself along,
painting its own shimmering arcs,
weaving, unfolding, diving, extending.

The heart, emphatic,
pounds,
pulsing,
swelling,
alive.

GIVING UP THE REMOTE

Fall rains were pelting down upon the roof.
I could hear the countless droplets gather
Strength within the steep pitched veins that ushered
Their gushing streams toward no particular
Destination with neither thought nor care.
Thunder reverberated across miles
Of obscure and indistinct grayish haze.
Its rumblings rolled without apparent end,
Through barren and dwarf-like neighboring hills
Like cannons, pounding the fertile expanse
Of veiled fields that opened and drank their fill.
I lay silent within my warm cocoon,
Trying to focus on filtering light,
Sneaking through cloth-darkened windows and doors.
My eyes pulsated with sight and blindness,
As slivers of vision came and vanished.
The clock by my bed was flashing its time,
Warning of a power outage before
I had awakened and come back from sleep.
What did time matter, in any event?
Retirement had arrived before its time,
Ending the ritual of sleepless nights,
Early mornings and never ending days.
The warmth of the covers was inviting
Me to linger and listen to the storm.
The coolness of the morning captured me
And stole any motivation I might
Have had if the rain and coolness had not
Descended upon my listless body

At that particular moment in time.
The raindrops and the unclear expression
Of their thumping and dripping from the sky
And into the gutters lining the roof
Reminded me that I had been turned loose
To manage and supervise none but me.
Perhaps I was responsible for Rags,
A disheveled cat long past his best days,
But this gave little meaningful purpose
To replace the feeling of worthiness
That came with having an office and work.
My ego slid into obscurity,
And today merged with yesterday like rain,
Gushing into a pool, going nowhere.
I had arrived at no destination,
With no particular plan for my life.
Plans and chores were holdovers from the past
That filled the voids, plaguing me like disease,
Or acted as crutches for broken dreams.
Thunder reverberated and fell near.
An empty bottle and a dirty glass,
Having been pushed carelessly aside and
Still standing in too close proximity,
Chattered in response to the noise outside.
Another soldier had fallen victim
To late nights and never ending boredom.
Why was night so difficult to accept?
I had grown accustomed to sleeping late,
But giving up the remote was torture.
I pushed back the promise of a new day,
Slid down, and hid from the pulsating light.

HOME

The pier, populated with vendors and this season's families,
vacationing from their lace-curtained homes on the mainland
for the first or perhaps, for some, the final time,
stretched far out toward the grayish blue where
ocean and sky form the faintly painted line of a perfect horizon.

See it there, with your own eyes, the point where the sky
seemingly dives irretrievably into a vast, dark ocean
that invites and pulls it, with unyielding determination, down,
one wrapping and one being wrapped within the other's arms,
embraced, as finely sculptured lovers embrace, for all of eternity.

Wave upon wave ventures forth from this distant place
and winds its way past gigantic pilings,
rising like Roman columns from the rolling, foam-capped sea.

The plaintive roar, that soulful sound of the onward rush of water
crashing relentlessly upon the shell-encrusted sand,
bathes my senses with its soft insistence
and its playfulness and its unharnessed power.

This ever-present roar woke me at first light with its magical music
and will serenade me through my evening until I accept sleep
in the otherwise silent starlight of my night.

This roar is married to its waves
as the rustle of leaves is married to the wind
or the gurgle of a cool mountain stream
is wed to its smooth-washed pebbles.

Always, the first waves build far out and roll over themselves,
crested and spilling forth beneath whirling splashes of foam
as they race for the white-sand beach
and, always, they crash and crumble
before smoothing out and skimming like liquid glass
across the last few feet of their sun- and moon-washed journey.

This stage of pier and beach is a magnet to man
and his family, drawing them back again and again
to their home with the dolphin and the whale
and the strange serpents that lie in man's imagination
beneath the roll and the roar of the timeless sea.

There is so much satisfaction in being here,
so much joy in just sitting and quietly listening.

It is a wonder that we ever chose to leave,
to stand up and walk upon the beaches of Greece and Italy,
and build our majestic columns
and pay homage to Poseidon and to Neptune
and be lured by the music of the mystical sirens.

We dream and we're carried back by the roar
of the onward rushing, ever crashing and crumbling waves
and we think, *if only we could get back,*
if only we had never left.

But then, without leaving, how would we ever have known?

I HAVE SLIDES

I have slides from Europe.

You know, pictures, photographs taken thirty years ago,
immortalized with an Asahi Pentax Spotmatic and four
special lenses, each with its own light-sensitive filter.

The camera captured everything.

It's all there, etched in celluloid,
framed on each morsel of magical film
just as it was the moment I snapped the shutter.

Every detail is focused crystal clear.

Each scene is preserved for all of posterity to see,
as I saw it on the day, date and time
that the image and celluloid first met and were married.

I wore out my shoes, my legs, even my scrawny fingers.

I searched out stone monuments, museums,
brilliant green and pale yellow gardens, and great royal parks
in picturesque villages and bustling cities
until my pictures, my personal view
from my small window on the square-framed world,
dared to impersonate the great masterpieces
imprisoned in my many museums.

But no one looks at my innocent impostors.

No one will ask to look
at tray upon silent tray of
impromptu and impetuously taken slides.

If they would, they'd be amazed, as I am.
I didn't see so very much of what's found on this film,
and I'm the photographer, the picture taker,
who eagerly exposed and finished roll after Kodachrome roll.

Of all that I faithfully filmed, fully half cannot be recalled.
How can I explain the young boy or the building
or the fabulous flowers, those tulips at Keukenhof,
without making up half of my lost or elusive memories.

So many people are shown here whom I have forgotten.
Many more are here whom I never knew,
and much of what I saw, I never saw,
or, at least, I didn't bother to really see.

Life came so fast, seemed so seriously packaged.
Life didn't just meander by and scream,
"Here I am! Make me count."
College, the war and work dulled and deflected life's focus.

Yet, what would my life have been without them?

IF BEAUTY COMES

Within each shriveled pod
we find a bean,
a seed that bears a fragrant flower
as pleasing to the stricken eye
as to our sense of touch or smell.
Yet, its outward look deceives
unless we're blessed to look upon its bloom
and discover its secret, hidden heart.
So, if beauty comes by unexpectedly
and allows your eyes to feast upon her form,
only imagine caressing her with a soft embrace
until she settles in your arms
and you barely know her nakedness.

ILLUSIONS

Some of us spend our lives searching for ancient secrets,
some try to find a path to truth,
and still others seek to unveil and be bound by sacred rules
that govern the greatest and least of us alike.
At least we begin our lives in such quests,
but by the time we're capable of finding our way,
we've given up on many of the things that mattered
and we meet at Starbucks to tout our career choices
or to lament the great misfortune that befell a friend.
Afterward, we go bargain hunting at the mall
for another pair of progressive glass lenses
to better compare scorecards with old classmates,
those counterfeit partners on their third spouse
or some sad case undergoing counseling for a fifth straight year.
There are many who have acquired stock in material goods,
but few have taken it of their own abilities and worth.
We've given up on saving society
and stopped climbing to the top of the mountain
in search of our soul or whatever good exists, trapped, within us.
We've taken our hopes for ascendancy from faith
and placed it in the hands of escalators
and gold-leaf-clad elevators that have an express key
set aside for the private use of penthouse guests.
Somewhere between success and failure,
we've tried and come up short.
There had been so much promise
before our view of life's passage lost sight of its destination
and our trip was beset by boredom,
and the slow-baked ruin of our dreams

spoiled our expectations for perfect truth and knowledge and justice.
Our perfect world played out in postcards sent to a few friends
and our search became a pretense to save ourselves
from the relentless rains that washed over and ran down our mountains.
Still, we know that something is missing,
something has been lost from life.
Perhaps it's our illusions.

IMPRESSIONS

Each impression leaves a mark,
a notion upon the mind,
but later reflection may not find
a vein of truth or fiery spark
beneath the embers buried there.
Yet, disappointments etch a stubborn scar,
far deeper than any scratch or scrawl,
and though we tear our hearts away,
it's these that stir what thoughts recall.

IN OUR YOUTH

In our youth, there were cantaloupes and grits
And eggs cooked easy with ham on the side.
On the stove, were steaming gravy and bread
And hot black coffee as strong as our pride.

On the porch, there were gas oil lamps that lit
The steps we kissed on when parents were home.
In the glen, were soft gurgling streams that fed
Lakes filled with lilies where we swam alone.

Cool country mornings, not measured in time,
Bathed in the sunshine that played on the grounds.
Soft yellow pillows and blankets spread near,
Sheltered our secrets from bunnies and hounds.

In all of the years that I believed mine,
When all in my life was framed by desire,
Your delicate breath was all I could hear,
And all that I wished would never expire.

IN THIS COCOON

This beauty that's the butterfly
Springs forth each year as first loves grow,
Just as the changing seasons cry
For flowered fields to wake the snow.

It darts and dives and flits its wings
From who knows what, to who knows where,
And yet, its momentary flings
May smile upon an old friend there,

Or there, or there. Such wandering
Attracts the birds above its height,
Which flirt with flight and nimbly sing
A tune that echoes with delight.

From branch to bough, against a breeze
That swirls among the sun-splashed leaves,
They contemplate what course would please
Their nature, perched among the trees.

In time, they swoop upon the path
Where this small creature's circling trails
Surround each smell and pollen bath.
They vanish and the picture pales.

I'd gazed at length upon this frail,
And seemingly so delicate,
Morphed life, inspecting each detail,
Until it seemed inviolate.

Now, in the twilight of the day,
A shiver slides with cool hands past
My breath and steals my thoughts away
Before I clasp my collar fast.

In this cocoon, this joy I see
Is first to flourish, first consumed,
And then is lost to me,
As youth is lost once bloomed.

INTO THE ABYSS

Why do fearful players grasp at false hope
or fold their cards in the face of a bluff
so simple that the affront begs one's brain
to fail entirely... no logic needed?

They breathe quickly, abandoning reason,
quivering within tightened, sweat-soaked skin.
They close their eyes and see the face of doubt.
They feel foolish while yearning to find truth.

Believe it! They are terrified inside
and ready for any fiction that falls
into the abyss where their minds dangle
perilously, searching for conviction.

Answer with any lie. They'll accept it.
Draw an image that frames the mystery
of life so that the circle is drawn closed
and they'll invite you in and set a feast.

Salesmen know this, as do politicians
and false prophets searching out their victims,
scheming to transform them into converts,
acting as confessor and confidant.

Each fear solicits another quick voice,
forgiving guilt, dispensing indulgence,
promising refuge from private horrors,
then taking liberties with precious lives.

Heed my advice and learn. Conceal yourselves
beneath some veil of romantic disguise
before the gray mist dissolves you or drops
one more acorn upon Chicken Little.

Forget punishment. Forget rich rewards.
Push away the morning paper's bold print.
Its headlines may herald your worst fears and
ignorance lacks more than a touch of truth.

LOVE

Don't smother love in startled admiration
or suffocate the fragile specter
of her enchanting flame.

Listen to the velvet strumming
of her fingers across the lyre
and gather her threads of music
into patterns that please the ear.

She'll tell you she's not lost to you,
not fled from your fickle heart.

It's you who were too weak to welcome her
to your world of troubled thoughts.

It's best to leave your door ajar,
to live with the latch unbarred,
and invite love's silent footsteps
to come, at first unnoticed,
like dawn across the eastern sky.

MORNING DELAYED

The sun has yet to shine
through your vast cobwebbed skies
that silently conspire
to imprison man's anticipation
of morning.

You clouds, you blur of undetermined confusion,
you hang together and then spread apart,
your misty vapors hovering low and
exerting dominance for now.

But how long before you break and concede?

And tell me, without pretension,
how certain of your chosen character
are you, my tumultuous canopy
of grayish fluff?

If you falter and fall to earth,
if you touch the majestic mountains or
lay softly upon the tranquil meadows,
if you befriend our belching smokestacks or
quietly soothe our soiled suburban shores,
do you not become fog or, worse yet, smog?

Do you not forfeit your identity
more certainly than the atmosphere you
obscure?

You are as uncertain
as your past prediction,
breaking to show a ray,
a glint of light,
then reasserting your unreasoned might
and surrounding everything
within your diminished sight.

Life wants to concentrate on being life.

Birds were meant to fly,
not skitter along the asphalt streets
or sit in prayerful rows,
folded wing beside folded wing,
feet wrapped tightly around electric wires.

How could you, how dare you,
capture morning's first light?

How long do you plan to hold it hostage?

We have a civilization to attend to!

OLD FRIENDS

I feel certain he'll remember.
Perhaps not, but it's no matter.
Unless, of course, he knows nothing
Of who he is, or even where.

Our friendship began long ago,
At a land grant school in the south.
He never studied, not ever,
But he found lecture important.

Who's to say what is important?
Each of us must somehow decide
For ourselves, or abandon all
Hope of finding independence.

Let me not digress into dreams,
Not even momentarily.
Age has a way of distracting
Thought and leading the mind astray.

I should be leaving rather soon.
Travel is a terrible waste
Of a commodity of which
I've had much, but have little left.

We were in the war together,
And we both survived, more or less.
We were officers, but too young
To know what was really at stake.

Afterwards, we moved on with life.
Some didn't. That's unfortunate,
But it's true of more than memory
Will allow me to push aside.

My friend lived. That was important.
I would have cried if he'd been lost.
I'm certain that tears would have come,
Until my anguish washed away.

Many tears have since washed our cheeks.
There were weddings and children born.
His beautiful bride passed too soon
And pulls heavily on his heart.

He'll be going home soon enough.
I wouldn't begrudge him leaving,
But friends are harder to come by
As the years outrun the runners.

He lives alone in the country,
If one doesn't count the rabbits,
Or the old gray and red foxes,
Or the deer and the frail songbirds.

It's peaceful there and cool breezes
Blow across the southern porches
And through the half-open windows.
Linen curtains caress his air.

His house is much too big for him,

But he has a friend, a woman,
And they go to church on Sundays.
He may still teach Bible lessons.

It's hard to say what he still does.
I have never told about him
Or the things we've done together,
Not too often, at any rate.

Some stories are just old stories,
But, mostly, they tell of our lives.
They tell of our proudest moments
And some that are best forgotten.

Too bad he lives so far away.
I'd like to visit more often,
But we'll have ample time to talk,
And I'll just rest before I go.

I feel certain he'll remember,
But it's no matter.

OUR CIVILIZED PILLARS

Who knows of clerics and scholars,
Or legislators and Congressional lobbies?
Are they our civilized pillars,
Or simply well versed adversaries?
Why do we carve their statues in old stones?
Will not dust reclaim their old bones?

How vertical are their columns?
Will their monument be a cloister or a cage,
And how well hidden are their problems
From us, who stand as one and support their stage?
How honored, how enduring will their legends loom?
Who will leave a name, who a somber tomb?

OVER OLD FORGOTTEN SHADOWS

We have set aside our frail beliefs
in tattered boxes hidden beneath our beds.
Each faded hope, each shattered dream,
is found in frayed silk ties and fabrics worn too thin.

We have stacked the frozen years upon themselves
and watched our winter trickle past our fall.
As days have come to precious dusk,
we've stared, anxious for life, stiff from sitting still.

The young look longingly into our eyes
for any rise or glint of recognition.
On good days we peel away their pain
with smiles that promise to repeat a name.

Finally, the drops of life have dried
and the clatter of the city fails to greet us.
The grace of small uncertain steps is gone
and we stumble, spilling painfully

over old forgotten shadows...

over old forgotten shadows...

over old forgotten shadows...

PERFECT SPOT

The ocean welcomed me to its windswept beaches,
warm sand and frolicking waves filled with water sprites
that plunged and tumbled inland and sang the hypnotic melody
you imagine when you lift the underside of a conch shell to your ear
and listen, if only for a moment.

I sat in the same yellow-green chair that I had occupied yesterday,
covered myself in the latest lotion and felt the fresh sea breeze
flowing through my hair, tossing it freely but ever so gently,
as it would have tossed the palms of palmetto trees,
if there had been these small trees on this stretch of beach.

A man in an old, stenciled T-shirt and short pants,
his feet bare and toes digging into the retreating surf
and the gray-white glare of wet sand,
strolled past my undisturbed spot with his golden retriever,
which tugged at its leash, then circled
to return and check with its master for confirmation
before venturing out again to explore for half-buried shells.

The animal's nose rapidly skimmed the sand, turning at first left,
then right, then up and finally back down
to where the air might yield a hint of any faint, sought after scent
but, if this energetic companion unearthed what it was searching for,
it never acknowledged its find, never gave up on its important quest.

A cyclist, a blonde-haired, beautifully tanned, athletic woman,
peddled past on her bike, iPod tuned to
some far away satellite station, I suppose,

downloading a lifestyle I might never experience.

Her dark, wraparound, designer glasses and baseball cap made her look mysterious, attractive in a dangerous, yet seemingly vulnerable, sort of way.

Perhaps she had escaped, from what I don't quite know, but I was happy for her and wished I could go with her to wherever and find who she was or who I was.

Later, this older couple came to where I was sitting, stared directly at me and talked quietly, no... whispered, or tried to whisper between themselves, but without success.

His hair was pulled backward and banded into a short ponytail, which he flung to-and-fro with each expressive movement of his head, as if he were communicating with animation rather than words spoken with care and concern for the meaning and message conveyed.

His stoic companion accepted her role and stood almost motionless, almost silent, almost devoid of warmth and soul, but most assuredly fulfilling her part of a bargain that had existed between the two of them for a long and lonely time.

When their fascination with me was finally and thankfully finished, they moved on with their journey, with life together, joined in a practical sense, I judged, by mutual surrender.

Then came two young girls, laughing and giggling as they shared secrets only they would ever know, and closely behind them came a fisherman with two boys

carrying buckets and long cane poles with huge reels
fastened securely to their largest ends.

Though the ocean stretched out its broad expanse
from this place as well as any other,
they walked on, as if another hundred feet up or down the shore
would be the perfect spot to fish today.

I had come with my chair and claimed my spot
without thought or worry about seeking a better or more perfect one.

I was happy in my own ignorance, I guess,
so I decided to watch and write, accepting the first words I found here
and enjoying the hypnotic melody of imagined water sprites.

PERHAPS

Sometimes, when I see someone strange
up close, too close for casual observation,
I struggle to avoid becoming blindly defensive
and letting absurd, illegitimate differences instantly consume me.

I classify each foreign, bewildering facet of a person's being; no,
I judge, incessantly and irrationally,
without plan or purpose or coherent pattern,
as if my vulnerability would vanish
once the unknown danger, the unidentifiable strangeness,
is discerned and unmasked.

This persistent practice betrays rational thought,
ravages logic and leads to a smoldering madness as immoral
as it is reckless and obscene.

Is the world within my glorious gates somehow sanctioned
and theirs to be senselessly scorned?

What kind of hypocrisy breeds in my holy waters?

Has tolerance been twisted by turmoil and sheer terror
into a trembling hand, incapable of mending the
intricate fabric of humanity, unreceptive to another's warm touch?

Around the clock, around the globe, our news and their propaganda
depicts outraged citizens, radicals or fanatical remnants we call them,
militantly aggrieved at the mere contemplation of civil discourse.

Has the long thin thread of common civility been lost,
banished and abandoned because of ancient, unspoken hatreds
and grotesquely hollow and unreasonable doctrinal artifacts?

Are imagined forebodings and historical happenstance our
inescapable impediments to freedom from fear?

Let's admit it.

None of us are pure, innocent.

None are perfect.

We all have faults.

We toy with illusion, make the impractical our sole imperative,
intrude upon reality only reluctantly and seek inspiration impatiently.

Our appetite for indulging obedient fools is insatiable,
but our willingness to trust the divergent faces of mankind
is weakened by wounds that are not easily healed,
not quickly forgotten.

Will anyone find the elegant elixir that eludes our forbidden taste,
the substance our medieval ancestors, alchemists,
sought to cure our ailments,
or the quintessence, thought to prolong life,
or, better yet, the philosopher's stone, believed to change base metals
into pure gold?

It is not the ichor of mythology that is being spilled,
flowing like water into the thirsty sands of scarred middle earth,
while we search for answers.

How can we liberate ourselves from these menial, menacing feelings and deal with the fears caused by our world's insufferable tensions and our own deeply ingrained distrust of everything that's distant.

Perhaps chance, or fate for some, will one day allow each of us to experience the exhilaration of life's friendships before our fascination with finality closes in upon us, and we can embrace freely and passionately before we are blindly cast into extinction.

RED CABBAGE

We didn't have red cabbage for Thanksgiving this year.
Rain prevented our ritual pilgrimage to Mier's Grocery,
The German grocery that carries the rounded and compressed
Heads of red leaves that we so crave on Thanksgiving Day.
I say crave, but perhaps a better word would be love,
For love is undoubtedly a far better choice than crave.
But despite this love, during this season of our celebrations,
Our fear of the rain, thrashing and gushing through root-filled gullies
Before erupting from its channeled course and sweeping,
Without plan or purpose, past our stationary existence,
Held us prisoner inside our hand-made homes of mirrored walls and marbled halls.
Inside, we were safe from the wickedness of raging water while, beyond our door,
Torrential rain washed across roads and swept over cars,
And swept away trucks with trailers and tossed aside the big rigs, as well.
Some had their drivers and even their passengers still within their melancholy embrace,
Clinging to a flawed belief that the swift flowing streams were only inches deep.
But the depth of their belief proved insufficient to dissuade the indignant currents
From claiming them and counting them as victims,
And not, somehow, allowing them to become or to be made or called our bravest heroes.
Failing in their final effort to cling to a tenuous claim on their fading belief,
They were deprived of an even more tenuous hold on life and were lost.
They were lost and vanished as certainly as if they had been sent into exile,
Or cast into some calamitous purgatory beyond this temporary place.
The fate of the fallen was darkly foreign to all who cowered behind closed doors,
Where life and death became but one brief comment on the evening news,
And we sighed and busied ourselves with the memories of last year's meal
Before sitting down to eat sweet yams and Caesar salad in place of our sacred cabbage.
The cabbage neither knew nor cared that its berth in our chrome-plated basket
Had been vacant or that the trivet on our dutifully decorated table

Was devoid of the Pyrex bowl that should have been filled with its old-world flavor.
Of course, there was plenty of the usual turkey, sliced to culinary perfection
And accompanied, as is always the case, by cornbread dressing and chicken-broth gravy,
Not to mention the cranberry sauce or the green-bean casserole and sourdough bread.
We had planned ahead for all of this and had purchased all these fixings
 weeks before our big celebration,
But we had postponed the pilgrimage to our German grocery.
Though not compelled or obliged by any force or promise to travel as we had planned,
I feel compelled to acknowledge, with great respect and profound regret,
Those people usually among us who weren't in their accustomed seats.
By those people, I mean my uncle, dead last June of cancer,
And an old friend who died suddenly after being left behind by his life's work.
That's all we know about this decent man's dying, but we all believe,
Well, we all suspect it was more than he could handle,
More, I should say, than he could accept of life or living without his work.
So, he left this life and, in his leaving, he left behind no more and no less than a memory.
I expect our memory of red cabbage will be replaced with the dish itself come Christmas,
But not so for the memory of those lost or those taken or washed away.
Memories of my uncle, whose life I entered and who was a part of mine for fifty years,
Won't be so easily erased or replaced by the escape of time from my fragile grasp,
At least not for many celebrations and many years of not having him here
And not having his chair filled by him on the most important of our special occasions.
Though others may join us and become a part of us and be welcomed,
We'll always think of those who've been lost and who no longer share in our sharing.
We'll know that we weren't able to share the simple pleasure of our beloved red cabbage,
And we'll know that the cause of its absence was the unfortunate upheaval,
Or perhaps, more precisely, the wantonness of lightening and the clashing of thunder
And the pouring down of torrential rain upon our day of celebration.
We'll know, that is, when we take a token of our precious time and pause to remember
All that we have and the half-forgotten history behind our having it,
As well as all that we have lost to time or given up of our cherished traditions.

When we grieve for that which is forever gone and passed beyond our fragile grasp,
We must also pause to remember all that has been bestowed upon us
And to celebrate, with eternal gratitude, all that has been so generously given,
While accepting that all the souvenirs of life are but momentary keepsakes
Held in the half-forgotten memory of each one who endeavors to make this pilgrimage.

RELATIONSHIPS

I sent my friend a pleasant note,
To which he's not replied.
I wonder if he thought I wrote,
To please my lovely bride?

REVERIE & REVIVAL

What is it holds the clouds aloft,
'Mid corridors of unseen wind,
That whispers o'er the fallow croft,
Where widow's weeds knell labor's end?

What darkened towers fill the skies,
And upward bound in bursts of gray,
To deluge earth as thunder cries,
When lightning paints the plow-scarred clay?

What, after all the torrent falls,
Brings forth the reassuring rays,
As if the songbirds' feathered calls,
Had rescued man from heaven's craze?

And if the raindrops rushing by,
Were traced unto their final home,
What wondrous sights would catch my eye,
As life emerged from graven stone?

Would sounds of children reach my ear,
Or howling dogs run close at heel,
Still playful as the night drew near,
And mothers served their evening meal?

Would calm embrace the world at rest,
When chores were done and heaven dressed,
In multitudes of shining spheres,
To guide the earth till morning nears?

Would stars cast down their golden dust,
To seal my eyes in solemn trust,
And let me dream of flying free,
Beyond my window's tapestry?

And at the hour when I must rise,
Would clouds or sun then bless the skies,
'Mid corridors of unseen wind,
That whispers o'er the croft I tend?

SAYING FAREWELL

It's the last day of my father's life,
the day that I never thought would come,
the day that neither of us prepared for,
but at forty-two years of age
I find myself flying back to my past,
as if going home to say good-bye will change things,
as if saying farewell will set either of us free.
I can't recall the last time we talked
without each word crawling in agonized indifference
through the silence that preceded it
and would just as surely come after it.
His words, and my words, labored to be born
and then fell to their deaths
as soon as they escaped the thin line of our pursed lips.
He was such a hard man to know.
I lived with him, under him, for eighteen years
and never understood who he was.
My room might as well have been a thousand miles away
from the door that shut me off from his world.
His phonograph played Hank Williams
and the Blue Ridge Gospel Quartet
while I listened to the Beatles and Bob Dylan.
Who could have heard the silent cry
of another drag on cigarette after cigarette
that burned through sleepless nights,
filled by smoldering rivers of men's blood,
running like torrents of molten lava over uncounted islands
whose mountains were the ashes of men's burned-out lives
piled high and picked up by the winds of war

and spread over boundless oceans of despair?
What could have brought comfort to the soul of a man
who endured endless days of shuttled bobbins
slamming into the cradled arms of cast-iron looms,
weaving the woof and warp threads of life's toil
into other men's wealth
as cotton dust built on sweaty brows
before falling like avalanches of powdered snow
and burying the almost forgotten dreams
of a man once as young and as strong as his son?
After I left, I dreamed of flying home in my jet,
dipping a wing to look down on the old house,
his old truck parked by the shed
that leans into the north wind,
and then buzzing him as he napped in his old recliner
with his *Reader's Digest* lying face down on the floor.
I've flown around the world
and flown twice the speed of sound,
but no matter how long or how fast or how high I fly,
the miles between us never close.
Perhaps we're too distant to find common ground.
Maybe we've always been afraid
that one of us would grab the stick and throttles
and take control,
leaving no hope of the other reclaiming command.
If I wanted,
I could fly so low that I rattled his windows
and then do roll after roll until he knows who I am.
How could I dare to let go now?
But how can I not tell him before he goes,
"You've got the airplane."

You have the controls.

You've always had the controls.

Now, advance the throttles full forward and let go.

Climb!"

SCIENCE

I'm tired of things with seeds.
They appear a bit... old fashioned.
Everything mankind needs,
Could be stored until... it's rationed.

SEARCHING

What once was our life's bond
is caught in our curse of separation.
We've wandered long, alone,
each searching for our own identity
on our different islands of free expression.
In searching for Utopia,
El Dorado or Shangri La,
in the quest for the mind's lost horizon,
we are isolated.
And in finding myself,
what will I have misplaced,
given up or frittered away?
And you, in discovering some rare, distant dream,
what will be your reward
and when will it be realized?
I would have given myself to you happily,
not knowing who I was,
and I gladly would have accepted you,
as you were then, without pretense or property.
In my thoughts, you consumed each day and night,
unrelenting in being you,
being life's pure passion.
I can't forget you; I dare not,
for, in forgetting, I would lose myself.
What would be left to find of me,
if you were not with me?
Will you not return, so we can find each other
and discover our freedom, together?

SEEING A CHILD'S VIEW

Uncle, was this the plane you flew?
One day I want to fly like you.
Is this helmet the one you wore?
I'll bet it's fun to fly and soar.

Tell me, how high up have you been?
Have you flown where the air turns thin
And where you have to wear a mask?
I've got two more questions to ask.

No three! Please let me ask you three.
I thought of one from this movie
Where a plane spun and hit the ground.
Then, there was this terrible sound.

Have you ever crashed in a plane?
I mean, have you shot at a train
And had it explode in the sky
While your plane was still flying by?

I really think it would be neat
If I could fly in your backseat
And I hope you know what I mean.
There are so many things you've seen.

Could you tell me how fast you've flown
And how many pilots you've known?
I wonder if anyone knows
How fast the fastest airplane goes,

Or how Lindbergh could have remained
Aloft, above clouds where he strained
To climb before his engine froze
Or before stormy headwinds rose?

Did you know anyone like him,
Or those terrorists? I saw them
Fly into the World Trade towers
Just as school began, then winter.

Uncle, did you see where they stood,
High in Manhattan's neighborhood?
I saw how airplanes knocked them down.
Could that happen in our hometown?

I wish the planes had flown away
And let the city's buildings stay.
I wish the dead were still okay.
I wish evil had died that day.

SILENCE

Moments ago, the quarterback
was barking his staggered signals
like a caged, mongrel dog,
growling at the steel gridiron
confronting him and challenging
the courage buried deep within his heart
to show itself, unbridled by headstall, bit and reins.
Only, he was their quarterback
and he was at our five-yard line,
having traversed the entire field
with fewer than forty ticks of the clock
left to prevail or be vanquished.
We yelled and cursed, caught up by our primal yearnings,
and hurled thunderous waves of taunts
toward the young man who stood beyond our grasp
but not beyond the reach of our frantic, fanatic, roaring chants,
our expressions of raw spirit.
This was our hated enemy,
under center, taking the snap, faking the toss, charging forward,
but then, suddenly down,
slammed against the narrow chalk boundary,
head and neck beneath shoulders and hips,
feet flying before crashing to earth,
spilling into an awkward pile of human flesh.
Whistles blew and action ceased,
just as it had time and again,
but the young man lay motionless,
a mannequin without regard for time,
outside the limiting lines of play.

His last moments faded, all but consumed
as the breathless air escaped his chest,
his piercing stare losing focus,
his last thought held in hushed despair.
A teammate bent down to one knee.
Another motioned and quickly turned away.
Silence traveled a great distance.
It hovered and fell heavily,
covering the field and all who looked upon it.
Then silence stole one final breath
and barked at the air's emptiness.

SOMETHING

Everyone has something to which they cling:
A tune they hear or song they love to sing.
Everyone has a way of making do,
When there's no other way to make it through.

Life has hills to climb and valleys to cross,
With fierce storms that battle fortune and toss
One's fate a thousand times against the rocks,
As if it were a ship spilled from failed docks.

Life has dreams fulfilled and others broken
Before there can be a single token
Of any treasured moment tucked away
And held to keep the anguished tear at bay.

It's good we have something on which to cling
When bells hang silent and refuse to ring
Across the first six days of every week.
I love that Sunday morning's when they speak.

STILL

I heard the distant rumblings from the shore,
That told of armies marching into war,
And saw their colors carried through the sky,
Above the gallant soldiers marching by.

Still, hear the sounds of marching echo loud,
As men run charging bravely into war.
Advancing, ever onward, always proud,
Good soldiers live for country and the corps.

I heard the drum beats pounding from the hill.
Their cadence broke the early morning chill.
Surrounded by the cannon's boom they came,
Ten thousand strong with not a single name.

Still, hear the sounds of marching echo loud,
As men run charging bravely into war.
Advancing, ever onward, always proud,
Good soldiers live for country and the corps.

I heard the haunting rhythm of their song,
That filtered past the battle's warring throng,
Until the day expired and coughed aghast,
At tattered soldiers fighting to the last.

Still, hear the sounds of marching echo loud,
As men run charging bravely into war.
Advancing, ever onward, always proud,
Good soldiers live for country and the corps.

I heard the sounds of evening settle down,
Obscuring scars on faces crudely bound,
While nature's every barely hidden sound,
Brought soldiers' heartbeats lunging to the ground.

Still, hear the sounds of marching echo loud,
As men run charging bravely into war.
Advancing, ever onward, always proud,
Good soldiers live for country and the corps.

I heard the mortars thunder in the night.
They broke the restless slumber into fright,
And brought the armies rushing to the front,
Like boys with dogs let running join the hunt.

Still, hear the sounds of marching echo loud,
As men run charging bravely into war.
Advancing, ever onward, always proud,
Good soldiers live for country and the corps.

I heard the soldiers crying, crying out,
As bodies lay down dying, all about,
Strewn round the fighting fields now growing red,
While war's machine was feeding on the dead.

Still, hear the sounds of marching echo loud,
As men run charging bravely into war.
Advancing, ever onward, always proud,
Good soldiers live for country and the corps.

And, back beyond the shore I heard a bell,
That told of mourners weeping where they fell,
When silence claimed the children marching by,
In place of fathers slain for glory's cry.

Still, hear the sounds of marching echo loud,
As men run charging bravely into war.
Advancing, ever onward, always proud,
Good soldiers live for country and the corps.

TERRORISTS

G U E V A R A . . . A R A F A T . . . B A A D E R . . .

what predaceous rebellions are you planning now,
with your cold, zealous craze for six-o'clock-causes,
couched in the cloak of evening news,
and your addiction to black and white,
never seeing the red hue of innocent blood
or the red-hot steam of life's passion?

One day was as abstract to you as another,
as bare of expectation as it was of beauty,
a time without the promise of tomorrow.

Was there a cross you claimed to bear, some burden,
or only an enigmatic emblem your eye chose
to blind your heart to the humanity you despised?

When did you decide there would be no reprieve
from the death and senseless ruin you dispensed,
no appeal or small kindness or consideration?

You came early to a place of privilege
but contrived to lay claim to the commonplace
and then you conspired to destroy
all that came within your fist's wrath.

While the rest of us feigned decency
and asked politely for someone dear
to pass our bleached-white bread and creamless, whipped butter,
you slaughtered your servants and consumed your children
out of blind rage, mindless betrayal and raw, brutish amusement.

Your actions were too inexcusable to be those of sane men.

Beneath your garments were hairy legs and cloven hoofs,
but those you trod upon would not bow to your butchery forever.

The sleeping suddenly awoke and, seeing you

stealing past their shuttered doors, as if on tiptoe,
rose and stood steadfast against your dark sword,
dripping, black with the blood of their brothers.
History has bequeathed to you the title of monster,
but beyond our mortal breath, as generations renew life's promise,
this name too will be swept aside and forgotten,
leaving little more of you than myth that lingers.

THE BARGAIN

Their favorite pastor preached his fiery sermon
on the serpentine Satan in the garden of paradise.
Another week's worth of wickedness was condemned
and the favor of God's forgiveness, Almighty absolution,
followed each confession of faith
and penance for one's primordial sins.
Upon every man's back was borne
the weight of a starched white shirt, stiff collar,
and the constant itch of a woolen coat,
not warm enough for winter's cold
but too hot for the impassioned words that simmered
within this sanctuary of sorely blessed Christian souls.
The scolding of a fine wife's stern finger
was silent for an ecclesiastical hour,
but even a mother's instinctive glance
couldn't stop a child's quick mind from chasing imaginary friends
or idle hands from finding misfortune.
Men patiently kept their promise to sit
for the dutiful portion of this day of rest,
stern faced and back braced tight and as straight laced
as the benches on which restless bottoms ached.

But it was fall on a fleeting Sunday afternoon
and the air was hiding an early wintry coolness
that nipped at pink ears and sniffling noses
every time they slipped into the shadows
where shells of cicadas, seventeen-year locusts,
were still clinging to a rainbow of painted trees.
The flight of translucent wings and the piercing sound

of vibrations from beneath large underbellies
had ceased to waft through the swift nighthawk's sky.
The dusk's pale light had already begun this year's religious retreat
and it was now that nature shared abundant fruits
with all who came forward to partake of her generous bounty.

Five had come to the mountains to buy tree-ripened apples
by the bushel; a father, his wife and three kids.
Their circuitous trip had taken two uncounted hours,
through Cowpens and Chesnee to see aging kin folks
and then past Forest City and Lake Lure
before breaking for grilled burgers and salt-laden fries.
It was getting late by the time they arrived
at the end of a farmer's drive near Asheville
and a lank old man loaded them and three baskets
onto a flatbed trailer and started his tractor,
suddenly lurching into the part of his orchard
that hadn't been picked. "Go ahead, be quick," he hollered.
Three bushels were found and three bushels were filled before
the old man called, "Ten dollars for the lot."
"Five is more what I had in mind," the father responded.
"I'd rather let 'em rot on the limb," the old man bristled.
"I could go without 'em, but I'll offer six," the father replied.
"You drove a fair piece for them apples
and your kids already 'et' four or five.
I shouldn't be sell'n 'em on the Sabbath, anyways,
but since you drove so far and picked 'em yourself, take 'em on!"

The old man took the six dollars and turned
and smiled at having sold apples so late in the season.
His visitors, happy at having a trunk full of fruit,

left on the homeward leg of their journey
and headed into the curving turn-upon-turn
of the mountain forest that framed the twisting road,
past Flat Rock, Tryon and too many other towns to remember
in the failing light of a weary sun that bathed
the westernmost slopes of the Great Smokey Mountains.
It's hard to believe apples by the bushel could bring so much joy
to the worldly children of those cast out of life's paradise by a single bite.
I judge the burden of acceptance, even surrender, must be in the bargain.

THE COLONEL

He was a relic from the Old World,
dignified... disciplined... distant.
His right hand was chiseled
to match the contour of his plane's control stick.
His left conformed to the curvature of its throttles.
I wondered, as many others before me had wondered,
how many times had he strapped himself
into his faithful fighter's welcoming cockpit?
How many times had the canopy been pulled down and forward
to wrap *him* in its solemn embrace?
How many times had he been forced
back, into the steel skeleton
that housed restraint straps and harnesses,
and the precious, silken parachute,
as he advanced the throttles
and felt the surge of unleashed power
and heard the reassuring roar of the engines?
How many times had he tracked his prey
with calm determination
and squeezed a fatal burst of fire,
a burst that pierced the blue horizon
and shattered his enemy's life, his hopes, his dreams?
What had he felt in the quiet solitude
of darkness, after a battle,
after the toasts to victory were done,
and the glory of the moment had passed?
What gave him comfort?
I wondered, but dared not ask.

THE HUNT

Winter morning wind broke through the brittle air
and brought a shivering dustiness to our door.

Nothing dared stir,
except a few reddish-brown leaves
that scurried recklessly
across flat, freshly frozen fields.

The frostbitten grass, fearful of being crushed underfoot,
ticked hesitantly as the dried and burnished blades
tumbled past in acrobatic splendor.

Waking and rising was a Herculean chore
and I wasn't the first to plant my feet
on the bitterly cold
wooden boards of the cabin's floor,
nor was I the last to leave precious warmth.

Rugged men danced in bucolic balance around an old potbellied stove
and its blue tin pipe rose up, belched and glowed
an ominous, but brilliant, blazing red.

Arthritic fingers and weathered faces
pressed inward to lay their claim to country comfort.

Steaming black coffee was placed in the company
of discarded checkers and packs of playing cards
on a deeply scarred knotty-pine table.

The tingling clank of heavy ceramic cups
quickly overshadowed all other urgent needs.

The smell of fresh cream and sugar
permeated the frigid air
and soon the savory scent and taste of honey-rubbed ham
and scrambled eggs with gravy and grits and sourdough bread
were being remembered

as a call came, coarsely whipping
across age-bowed shoulders,
to head for the fields before light was lost.

A host of plaintive murmurs matured into clomping and complaining
as hunters grabbed wool-collared coats and well-worn gunstocks
and recoiled in unison from their rude greeting by the exiled air.

The bulky silhouettes of hunters,
with bellies full and bulging beyond their cartridge belts,
became scattered along a bleak and unmerciful hillside,
covered with cut cornstalks and scattered scrubs.

Their feet, my feet, nearly froze; fingers burned and ached.
Wind blew withered stalks and rustled their tattered leaves.
Barren earth was picked and tossed toward watery eyes.

Nostrils, more bulbous than in bygone youth,
flared wide like fighting bulls
and forced each agonizing breath.

Cold exposed every pitiful, aching muscle
and punished the raw skin
underneath every cotton layer's slightest crease.

The memory of the cabin's blistering fire
burned strong in each man's mind.

Then a resounding explosion from the first shot
was heard and each heartbeat
echoed the weapon's burst
and the cold was carried away.

THE MILL

The mill stood solid, bound by rock,
Stood within sweat-built, stone-walled block,
Stood filled with cotton on its dock,
Stood running like a well-oiled clock.

And men ran fast to reach the gate,
Before the whistle marked them late,
Before its summons sealed their fate,
Before they had to stand and wait.

The mill employed all those around,
Employed them more like servants bound,
Employed the lost, employed the found,
Employed those buried in the ground.

And men ran fast to reach the gate,
Before the whistle marked them late,
Before its summons sealed their fate,
Before they had to stand and wait.

The mill was full of cotton dust,
Was full of old machine-oiled rust,
Was full of boom and full of bust,
Was full of crumbs and burned-out crusts.

And men ran fast to reach the gate,
Before the whistle marked them late,
Before its summons sealed their fate,
Before they had to stand and wait.

THE PATRIOT'S PRAYER

What grows within my restless mind now screams,
Please let me live tonight in sleepless dreams.
Deny me not the chance to see brief light,
Nor hide from me this stage to stand and fight.

For, I have come by chance or reason here,
To leave my mark upon the face of fear,
And banish doubt from those who'd turn to run,
Before the work of soldiers has begun.

Outstretched, the arm of death no comfort gives,
While cannon, silent till the morning lives,
Then break the battle on the misty field,
And clothe with rays of sun the bodies killed.

Hold tight the lines of faces born of doubt.
Hold tight the lines of futures cast about.
Hold tight the arms of comrades lost from sight.
Hold tight the arms of battle at their height.

Pump fast the blood of valor through each vein.
Unleash the flood of honor on our pain.
Rebuke the thoughts of anguish in our souls.
Advance upon the thunder as it rolls.

Courageous deeds belie the carnage dealt,
And bugle charges fade as wounds are felt.
Beneath the flag now waving all alone,
The fallen lie in silence and unknown.

Dare not we ask the questions for their kind?
Dare not we seek what answers we can find?
Dare not we challenge what still seems so wrong?
In heaven's name, where has the glory gone?
In heaven's name, where has the glory gone!

THE QUARRY

I think I saw them on public television
Or, possibly, on one of the travel channels.
There are too many selections to be certain,
But I watched with more than my usual purpose.

They, these old men, standing in the heat of noontime
With nothing but small, pick-like hammers, ancient tools,
Were sectioning such enormous blocks of granite
From majestic, vertical towering rock cliffs.

Crystalline quartz, feldspar and mica stood as one,
Existing for thousands upon thousands of years,
In this place, before showing itself to Earth's man,
Not knowing what man was or of its own future.

I watched the repetitive plinking of each tap,
Each hand, each arm withdrawing and then returning,
Striking the omnipresent surface without pause
And appearing to be repulsed with equal force.

Then, a breath of dust rose as the pick descended.
The great giant lay broken before David's sling,
Fractured, as space is fractured by the fragile lens.
The noon sun flashed as it found its perfect angle.

A perfect face, gleaming at the stares of old men,
Precisely cut from the face that looked upon it.
No longer a part of its mother but of man,
It has been claimed by man as one of man's treasures.

Old men are soft in comparison to this stone,
And their age is but a moment in its shadow.
Yet, they are hardened by their ancient toil and ways,
And their shadows fall triumphant across its face.

THE TIDAL SEA

Dare I dawdle and drift away,
So far removed from life with you,
And dare forget the once remembered thoughts
And flee forever hoped for dreams
That still might cast their joy across the tidal sea,
Or shall I come and gently stoke the fire
That sleeps so restlessly beneath our discontent?

Shall I return to quell the lies
That blazed like flames across our lips
As if some acid froth spilled forth
To burn our unsuspecting tongues
Before the insult could be felt
Or chewed and spat upon the frigid ground?

Fires drown beneath their suffocating clouds
And smolder endlessly toward death
More times than sorrows... washed beneath the flood of drink...
Unless a sip of ageless innocence
Relieves the ache of love's sweet, tortured breath.

Harsh words between our hearts were never meant.

Those patches that we stitched upon
The fabric of our fragile bond,
As if to look beyond some small offense,
Were never mended by a caring hand
And fell untended from their needful place.

I wish I'd paused to watch their flight
And chanced to mark the space they chose to rest.

I could resolve to seek them out
And paint my mind with perfect strokes of hope,
But then I fear it's best this glimpse of you and I
Be sealed from memory's darker eye.

And yet, a few found words, just common sense,
An earnest gesture... bound with threads of silken gold...
And penned in lofty woven verse and rhyme,
Would surely find a voice to softly ease your reticence
And save love's fire from growing cold
Like dying embers flung upon the fickle winds of time.

Shall I come home and gently stoke the fire
That sleeps so restlessly beneath our discontent?

Harsh words between our hearts were never meant.

THE TRANQUIL FOREST GLENS

These woodland vales wind slowly toward our seas,
Under sunlit skies that reveal no hint
Of any cloud or silent, wispy breeze.
I think no branch of any tree is bent.

THE TREASURE

Have you never watched Saint Elmo's fire,
Dancing above a star-filled canopy?
Have you never soared through pristine skies,
Beyond the bonds of earth's reality?
Have you never had intense desire,
To test the passions of humanity?
Have you never seen a child's bright eyes,
And held the key to immortality?

I have watched Saint Elmo's fire,
Flash across the nighttime sky,
And I have burst with uncontrolled desire,
To look the sacred eagle in the eye.
But, though I've soared where only God could see
My soul unbound by earthly ties,
I treasure most the child's bright eyes,
That held my heart in rapt serenity.

THOSE THE SPIRITS SLEW

His eyes became aware of light,
Just as they had become aware
Of all the other ghostly sights
The spirits wrought or laid half-bare.

There was no clearly known event
His mind could grasp or glimpse, in brief
And vaguely judged impressions sent
His way, except for disbelief.

His deeds had never come to be
Through ordinary means or course.
He swam within a bottled sea
That washed his shores with no remorse.

His life came ripe and sharp like cheese
Or finest blades, with razor edge,
That cut too quickly and with ease
When rotten luck betrayed his pledge.

The lights were thrust into his face,
Much like the swordsman's hurried burst
To parry an opponent's chase
Or lunge with foil and laughter cursed.

There came but two, and not one more
Nor any less, though both were poor.
They came through night's most hidden door
With life's, or death's, engaging roar.

He woke, both cold and soaked with rain
Or blood that oozed with numbing fright.
Perhaps, a crash had caused the pain
That came before... no... after light.

Words asked of him to please step out,
Then thought to ask if he could walk.
He reasoned there could be no doubt
That he could walk the line of chalk.

It really wasn't chalk at all,
But paint that lined the curving lane
Where he had swerved and hit the wall
That cried in anguish and in vain.

"There was no wall," the words had said.
The lights had come from dimmed headlamps
Of those who recently had wed
In Saint Mark's Church, near migrant camps.

"Can you perceive what I have said?"
The words meandered past his ears.
"Two people there are lying dead,
The worst I've seen in all my years."

"You last were seen at Baron's Bar,
With drinks in hand 'til after dark.
The barmaid helped you to your car,
And thought you'd sleep, content to park."

"Stay where you are. It's blood you taste.

Your wounds are worse than I had thought.
My words were said in too much haste,
Drawn out by feelings too distraught.”

“It’s just as well you slip away.
No judge would let you leave your din
To weave a path through night and day,
And drink your fifth of scotch or gin.”

“Rest where you find a tranquil place,
If such a place exists for you.
The tragedy you’ll never face,
Will burden those you never knew.”

“It’s left for me to deal with truth,
And cover those the spirits slew.
There is no innocence in youth.
These newlyweds embraced drink, too.”

TOO FAR EAST

Temperatures reached 100 degrees
Twenty days in succession. The old folks
Told of past droughts that burned croplands and turned
Tiny cracks in the soil into canyons.

Try remembering the fresh smell of rain
Tumbling onto your face. Then inhale it
Through your nostrils and pause to permit it
To trickle down your thoughts. Feel its wetness.

Today, the threat of rain is real. Thank God!
True believers always said it would rain
Torrents the next time rain came. I believed
Them and saved my sprinklers for tomorrow.

Thunder rumbled across the stone quarry
Toward my subdivision three miles away.
The sound hastened my desire to finish
Trimming my hedges before rain poured down.

Tornadoes of dust and grass and leaves rose,
Twirling recklessly across yard and street,
Tightly twisting inward upon themselves,
Tossing debris directly at my face.

Time seemed short. I hurried to finish chores
That had been delayed by other reasons
Twice before and desperately sought to
Triumph over my procrastination.

Tumultuous clouds built and moved closer
To my house. I rushed and trimmed anything
Trying to send a leaf or branch skyward.
Then I saw that the storm veered too far east.

TOO MUCH A DREAM

Your sweet scent distracts me,
like a summer shower,
falling lightly through the morning glare.

I lie here,
gazing upon your gaze,
reflecting your beauty in my eyes.

I touch you, fairest vision,
with loving care.

Your tenderness is soft
upon my fingertips.

Our lips are briefly kissing,
our voices rising without speaking.

The world goes round dismissing
this moment.

I pray you are too much a dream
to be found only in my mind.

I pray you are.

I pray
you are.

I pray.

You are.

TRAPPED

A rebellious rain swept into your sleeping city
before dawn could assail the countless towers of crackling thunder
that flung their jagged spears across ill-drawn skies
and pierced the conduits of power
to thousands of those not quite recovered,
those not quite ready to be returned
to the realm of thought and time.
Clocks, with flashing angular arms of red and green and blue,
called out in absolute silence
that the tempest had played with reckless disregard
and left you to collect and repair your twisted toys.
You citizens of Main Street and Madison Avenue,
you frenzied warriors of the four-walled office
with your disarranged desk of wood veneer
and your frayed wicker chair,
a picture of the spouse and children prominently displayed
to remind you and others that you're still
remotely related to the branches of your family tree,
you sit, stalled in long lines of storm-savaged traffic,
snarled like stagnant streams, steaming, pumping out clouds
of toxic vapors from coughing, fevered engines,
factories of combustion.
The guy behind you cradles a cell phone to his face,
sips scalding hot coffee
and munches on what appears to be a doughnut or neglected bagel
while you surf satellite radio from your steering wheel
and give voice-activated commands
to your wireless, internet-connected personal assistant
before pausing to read the graffiti, ghetto art,

that covers the concrete overpass
spanning your year-end bonus' bright red hood.
You're amazed that, before this moment, you hadn't seen this creation,
this uninhibited expression of defiance and freedom.
Then your answering machine mentions that your big-idea boss
met with the boys from "the Street"
and bravely boasted about this quarter's profits.
Start planning how to pump up earnings to match his pride.
Traffic is moving now.
You'll be at the office soon,
surrounded by structural steel and glass,
safe in your indemnified domain.
Call your mom and tell her you love her... no reason.
Straighten the diploma hanging stoically
above your company's most public policies and procedures.
There was that meeting on ethics last Monday, remember?
No!
Don't worry.
You can't be expected to recall every meeting, every decision,
not even every action that consumes your choreographed day.
Everyone forgets the dirty little details.
Traffic has stopped again.
It's playing tricks with your thoughts and time.
You feel trapped.
You feel like a frightened freshman about to be late for English lecture.
What would this be, the fourth or fifth or final time?
Forget this foolishness... class was cancelled... it let out a long time ago.
Then it hits you where it hurts.
What will you feel when your children find out,
when they find that this is what you left them for?

VOICES

What once was spirited debate
is now turned too critical in spirit.
We have politicians who refuse to admit their faults
for fear of being faulted for their admissions.
Many of these politicians learned to speak, learned oratory,
without understanding that men frequently have
little of consequence to say.
They inundate the unwary and the needy
with reckless indulgences and
hurl passionate provocations
that stir the fiery embers of slumbering prejudice.
What is promised for clarification,
is often issued for obfuscation.
What begins as an impulse to impress
those who have neither learned to raise their voice
nor to feign some pretense of patient listening,
ends in waste, in needless consumption of invaluable resources.
Words conceived without inspiration or insight
are spoken with the weight and strength of conviction.
They are, however, in hindsight, in retrospect,
sour deeds with a sour ring to our embattled ears.
The true meaning of our words does matter.
The tone of the spoken word bears its sense.
Its context suggests a foundation for its true message.
The artifice of being always on message
is stiff sauce, a fraudulent medicinal cure, a black tonic.
It attempts to obscure intent and direction.
It stands still: it plunges message into monotony
and forces straight talk to curve, to become crooked.

A suggestion of truth is not truth... cannot become truth.
What is born in the darkness of invisible motives
will not be condoned when bathed in visible light.
No subterfuge shall survive the scrutiny of deliberate men and women.
Meaning does not melt away after the fact.
It is always fresh and vigorous.
It has substance and moral strength.
Meaning, in truth and fact, does not seek out false approval.
It does not cavalierly or deliberately forget itself.
Neither can it be snatched from the bosom of old order
for a new order or a state without law and order.
Our Declaration of Independence,
our Constitution and our Bill of Rights...
they all have meaning: all are cherished.
They are not the product of a referee's unreviewable decision.
No court granted us our rights, to be held at their pleasure.
We shed our blood in payment for those rights
and they are not subject to unjust judicial interpretation or abrogation.
We, the people, are the final authority.
It is we who advise, it is we who consent
and what we have granted to our elected governors
may not be consumed by the greedy or
grabbed and parceled out among the most powerful.
We cannot be deemed Government's underlings or
be disenfranchised of our inalienable rights
by a conspiracy of self-righteous supreme beings.
We cannot be compelled to surrender our property to pirates or
to cede our sacred trust to barbarous scoundrels.
It is the nature of humans to befriend their fellow beings
in spite of their differences and grievances.
But nature has its storms and the force of man's nature

will not yield its freedoms in the face of fear
for empty promises of false hope nor
be forced to kneel in obedience to tyrants who would
steal the very thresholds of our treasured homes.
It is we, the people, who have the right to plant, to tend, to harvest and
to hold the fruits of our democracy,
but we must never forget that it is also we
who must continually bear the burden of our freedoms or
we shall, inevitably, forevermore bear the burden of our oppressors.
We have a voice: it is ours to choose to stand and be heard
or to forsake and forget those majestic words with majestic meaning.
Democracy listens for our voices, but it listens... impatiently!

WAITING

My board-certified doctor is a Diplomate
and the door to his office is locked tight,
even though I've had an appointment at
forty minutes past twelve noon, September
twenty-second, for three full months, maybe
all of four months or more... at any rate,
more than can be remembered easily
in my uncertain state of mind.

I've checked a large white clock, high on the hallway wall,
and called my wife on my cell phone to ask
that she find the appointment slip I left
behind in my rush to reach this moment,
this mountain, this dark shadow in day's light.
I've looked at my wristwatch repeatedly.
Why? I don't know. Habit, possibly, or
perhaps seeking some confirmation or
wishing for reassurance that might come
from such mindless repetition.

I'm standing in the company of a TV,
located behind the plate glass window
of a nearby pharmacy and tuned to
CNN, silent with subtitles scrolling
across the bottom of the screen, telling
of a major storm that's working its way
into the lives of many millions of
expectant and increasingly fearful
families who have already witnessed

Katrina's wanton destruction.

Rita is roaring through the Gulf, gathering strength
and pointing toward a restless Galveston
as residents are evacuating,
an emergency having been declared
yesterday in order to avoid the
now infamous mistakes of New Orleans
where so many are only holding on
to the fading traces of absent lives
in the city's dire aftermath.

The innocence of just three weeks ago is gone
and people listen to advisories
and warnings as eagerly as they watch
every turn of the storm's track to the north
or west, toward the Texas coastline.

Many of those who left their homes this morning sit,
stranded on roads unable to handle
the enforced exodus migrating to
hoped-for safety, some out of gas and soon
out of patience and not likely to find
a source of new supply for either one
anytime in the near future.

They wait through the oppressive heat, made worse by the
heavy, clinging, thick humidity of
a Houston afternoon, passing slowly,
tediously, in its own unconcerned
and inexorable fashion.

I feel a rush of sorrow and guilt that reaches
past my public veneer as I wait, cool
in my air-conditioned comfort, trying
not to feel annoyed at those unseen and
unknown faces finishing lunch in the
quiet confines situated behind
the security of this door.

The afternoon empties its uncounted worries
and, from where I stand, the wrongs of this world
are mounting, gathering in strength before
erupting and ending the endless wait.
If only he would tell me the results
of this procedure, this test by trial
to prove if positive or negative,
before my hidden cloak of hope wears thin,
I would not be breathlessly waiting for
this senseless storm to make landfall.

WASHDAY

Hands that long ago had lost their childhood
to a young mother's cares and endless chores
were hanging clothes along two lines of twisted cord
stretching between a tree of rustling Maple leaves
and a rust-covered, cast-iron pipe,
the lowest part of which had been buried
with pickax and shovel in the same rock-filled soil
that chewed at her and her children's bare feet
as freely as it chewed at the scarred blades
of plows and the cracked hooves of dusk-black mules.
Blue jeans, coveralls and light denim shirts
were being fastened at their waists by wooden pins,
but legs and sleeves flapped freely in the blustery fall wind
as if there were some real possibility of running wildly away
or, perhaps, blithely lifting off in reckless flight.
The jeans were clustered together,
as were the coveralls and shirts,
like families of familiar siblings
spending a long afternoon in a sun-splashed parlor,
peering past each others' shadow-painted faces and into private thoughts
and whispering about things of not much importance.
The shadows of the stiffening garments
played on the well-trodden blades of grass beneath their reach
and were guided back and forth by each new gust of wind,
cooler and less fragrant than the youthful summer breezes
of a weary mother's fading recollection,
but just as favored now as then,
and warm enough and constant enough to dry cotton fabric
and, of course, to implant the fresh, clean smell of crisp, country air.

WE

The magician succeeds in keeping disbelief at bay
while the juggler keeps the inanimate alive
far longer than any audience thinks likely.
We are all magicians and jugglers
in our own man-made maze
of intricate, winding pathways
that form the confusing patchwork we call life.
Minos housed the Minotaur
in no more complicated and perplexing labyrinth
than the world we wander across today.
Too bad we have no Theseus
to rid our crowded, confined cities
of the sinister monsters that
lurk in the shadows to lure our young
and to feed on our frail and feeble.
It's no wonder we retreat into the mystery
of inexplicable illusion
and the rituals of pretend,
but it's frightening how little distinction we make
between clever tricks and callous deception.

WHEN DEATH FINDS ME

What causes one to run away from home?
Perhaps, it's that we're chased
By some strange voice that hastens us to roam
Before death's hour is faced,

As when the voice I heard called out until
I ran without a thought,
No cowardly moment of doubt, no chill
Of being killed or caught.

The punishment of staying would be worse
Than facing fears unknown
Or bringing down upon my brow a curse
From hell's own demon's throne.

The self must learn to leave its flimsy shell
And overcome its pain
Or be trapped within its ivory veil
As chaff within the grain.

I've seen the chaff in their thin-walled cages,
Chewing each other's lies,
Feigning survival on widow's wages
Till hope withers and dies.

Always anxious, they search to find defeat,
Not expecting too much
Respect from life, familiar when they meet
Fate's unmerciful touch.

I've seen them; still, I see them, crouching there,
In the same dark shadow,
Guarding against each dream or breath of air
That might spark light to glow.

“Say, you're no better than the rest of us,”
They boast before I turn
To flee the brunt of their burgeoning fuss,
Feeling their tempers burn.

Each day, they worship the god of worries.
Desire has fled their eyes,
Tired, as they are tired, of reeking alleys
And tenement clad skies.

I'll not litter their lonely streets with life
Or curse their empty night.
When death finds me, he'll find I paid the price,
Not to watch champions fight,
But to exalt the crown the ancients seized
And breathe the air the laureled victors breathed.

WITNESS

How many of you have watched as the daylight fell dim
and the heavens began to give birth to their brightest stars?
I'm grateful that I grew up where I could watch
the early evening unfold and witness the natural order
of nature's bustling fields and her bewildering firmament.
She showed me so many of her closest secrets.
I knew her noble court and how she ruled her realm.
I've observed the nighthawk lift its prey and soar
above the nervous quiver of exaggerated stillness, that expectant hush,
as small creatures, searching for seeds and roots and insects,
cowered at the splash of fur and feathers, the strained collision
of hunter and hunted. The event wasn't seen so much as felt
through instinct that said now is not the time to travel
that grass-paved trail, the path where moonlight reflects against a leaf.
Nature is practiced at giving her last rites
and the calm evening air easily carries the panicked squeal
of an aging mouse back to its waiting nest
as the poor creature is being carried to what seems a cruel demise.
Life and death live so closely here, collide so frequently,
and still they go on with the new being born
and the old being beset and reclaimed by time.
I don't think of them as helpless,
not tokens or pawns or toys for nature's play.
They are what they are... happy, I think, to be a part of this.

WORDS

So... you rose from ashes, sprawled upon your bed,
and flushed another failure down
the same porcelain chamber pot
that carried those fermented excuses
and the unfounded dread of a tormented soul
to be reclaimed.

How ironic that this reclamation,
of all that's ever rescued from error or vice,
should be brought back by a city that once condemned
your most frequented bar
to quench its own consuming addiction.

You shouldn't have been so distressed.
Your addiction condemned you long before
the city closed the doors that led
to the coffin where your tired body rests.

Today, I think of all the battles that it fought...
for it had to fight hardest against you.

Not literal battles, it's true.

Some would say, "Not battles at all,
but more like great tribulations."

I imagine that your last trial
was more than your intoxicated thoughts
could clearly comprehend.

Arriving at those gates, so unexpectedly,
would be a great deal more than most of us could stand.

I found you with the bathroom bowl you hugged,
as if the jaundiced jowls that you embraced
would offer sanctum from the pain you faced.

You did love your liquor more than fame or wealth

or family or friends that finally retreated from your wrath.
I always hoped your steps would tread a different path,
but stubborn feet and stubborn ways and all the rest
could hardly do the math that life required.
When you woke this wicked morning,
did you again forswear to walk away
from fire-brewed spirits that sordid demons
befriended every night?
Those horrid visions must have plagued your mind
with blinding fright. I shudder at such thoughts.
Despite the treasures time's brief course
extracted from your grasp
and wild-sewn fields of briefly plowed romance
that withered in the darkened shadows of uncounted dens,
be thankful that your young barflies and old bought friends
never wrote your epitaph on public walls
or in those not so private stalls.
I'm thankful I still counted you a friend
and wish a few kind words of mine had caught your ear,
but all the cabbies that came by
were selling consolation to their fares
and kept you company
as you crawled down into the deep
beneath the tortured pull of life and death
where meaning might be found or lost
or faith betrayed by truth.
The cost was less to take the cabbies' points of view.
Their meters' constant counting was not bothered by
the potholes in your path or by the broken promises
that piled like burned-out bridges all along life's way,
and all the old regrets that rode along with you rode free... until today.

WORK

Stopping, parking my life out of the rain,
I avoid the elements of nature.
I run to escape the cold. Fleet flying,
I dart past life without being alive.
I hide from spring's vulnerability.
Work, we have only met and already
I see your new walls, surrounding my world
as though I had surrendered my freedom
while you accepted and mocked my defeat.
The dust of your building covers my soul
as it covers your dull, unfinished floors.
The scream of the carpenter's sharpest blade
slices through your steel-lined, red skeleton
and urges me through your self-locking doors
that signal, by their ominous latching,
I am in. I am lost to the outside
and it is lost to me. Each step takes me
further into your embrace. You count me
as your own, under your care and control.
Everything I am, everything I own
is not me but you, is not mine but yours.
The steel buttons of your elevators
own my fingers. Your web of cubicles
extend beyond my distant horizon
and guide my journey toward obscurity.
I found you and I am forever lost.

WOUNDS

I have paint spray on my favorite pants,
probably the result of yesterday's mindless piddling
when the wind was whipping across spreading leaves
and I was trying to apologize to my oak tree
and doctor wounds that had been inflicted
by the sharp teeth of my next-door neighbor's eager saw.
Pruning paint had claimed a prominent position
along the length of my trouser legs
and was reluctant to release its grip on their cotton fibers.
Oak wilt can be a problem for trees with open wounds
and my neighbor hadn't considered closing his chainsaw's
wicked scars with any protective paint, so I acted.
His driveway is close to my precious tree
and, although its limbs have grown lower
and less limber in recent years,
his young son's frequent forays with their family car
into its unforgiving reach is not reason enough
to punish my tree and put its usually peaceful life at risk.
I haven't decided how to respond to this unwarranted intrusion
but, at the moment, discussing the matter in any meaningful manner
is out of the question.
My inability to exact retribution against the pruning paint
for ruining my trousers is currently testing my patience
and neither a private nor a public discourse on the issue of the tree
is likely to leave me with either satisfaction or solace.
That tree and I have grown old together
and our grievances have gotten little notice.
I could construct a friendly wall or fence
between my property and his,

and protect my tree and privacy from further harm,
but a wall would put us on different sides.
One day, when I find him by his drive,
I'll tell my neighbor that the tree deserves better care
and see if *he* means to make a wall.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KEITH R. PARRIS

REMEMBER

Keith R. Parris was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 1946. He graduated from Clemson University in 1969 with Highest Honors and was a Distinguished Military Graduate. He received a Regular Commission in the United States Air Force and served nearly eight years as a fighter pilot, flying F-4E Phantom II aircraft, in Europe, Asia and the United States. He married Janet K. Baugh, of Waco, Texas, in 1974 and later returned to school at The University of Texas at San Antonio and graduated at the top of his class in 1979 with an MBA Degree. He earned his CPA in 1984. He worked for 21 years in the gas and gas liquids industry where he served as Director of both financial and operational areas at Valero Energy Corporation and Pacific Gas and Electric Corporation's Texas subsidiaries. He retired from industry in December 2001 and began devoting himself to his lifelong passion of writing. In 2004, his first novel, *The Servants of Freedom*, was published and received the "Editor's Choice Award" from iUniversity. *REMEMBER* is his first collection of poetry. He and his wife lived in Europe and Asia before returning to San Antonio, Texas, to make their home.

For more information on the writings of Mr. Parris go to
www.keithparris.com.

The beautifully descriptive and vigorously musical poems contained in this collection are a worthy testament to the careful thought and uninhibited rendering of the author's experiments in form and verse. Here, the poetry of the sentence and the mastery of rhyme are imaginatively woven into a rich and comprehensive whole. From the sensibilities of life's most intimate moments to the celebration of life's most festive interactions and from the continuity of social order to the undercurrents of social unrest and even to death itself, the author's singular dedication to his artistry is faithfully embraced. This is gifted and gritty, intense and daring work with unmistakable heartfelt vitality and sincerity.

This book stands as a coherent vision of what independent creative expression from outside of our academic institutions is capable of delivering. Its contents are important, exciting and new. The poems unfold in generous and wondrous proportion and are destined to make a meaningful impact on the community of readers who care intensely about having poetry in their lives. These poems are certain to bring the experiences of our bustling world to all who open their soul to the vivid imagery and profound ideas expressed through attention to the subtleties of language.

Author

South Carolina native Keith R. Parris graduated with Highest Honors from Clemson University and earned his MBA from The University of Texas at San Antonio. During the 1970s, Mr. Parris flew fighters in Europe and Asia. He published his first novel, *The Servants of Freedom*, in 2004. He and his wife Janet reside in San Antonio.



ISBN
(Barcode)

Price
(Barcode)

www.keithparris.com

(Price U.S.)
Black Knight Classic