
THE SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE FRONTIER

SELECTED POEMS
1966-2002

J. QUINN BRISBEN
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THE SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE FRONTIER

J. QUINN BRISBEN

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PREFACE

I do not call myself a poet; a fair percentage of the best who have done so in my time have ended up killing themselves, and there are limits to what I will do to entertain even the most select audience. I write prose when I can, poetry when I must, when there is some felt connection between things that which does not make plain sense, which needs sleight of tongue to be made clear.

My first real poems were written when I was in my early thirties. I wrote quite a few passable poems from 1966 to 1968. Then I fell into a deep depression and spent part of the winter of 1969 in a mental hospital. I received a number of electric shock treatments. This may or may not have helped the depression, although my bad times were never so bad again. Those shocks did kill the poetry for a while, damaged that subconscious connection between seemingly disparate things and suppressed the urge to express that connection in ambiguous but precisely ordered language.

That was all right; I needed other people's art, but nobody had ever expressed a great demand for mine. I had sufficient outlet for whatever creativity I possessed in my job as a public school teacher, and I gladly sacrificed the ability to write poems for the stability that enabled me to do that job and help support my family. It was only when I began contemplating retirement in the 1980s that the poems started coming again. My candidacy on behalf of the Socialist Party for the presidency of the United States in 1992 forced me to abjure doubt and ambivalence for many months in public and starved me for the complexity of expression that only poetry can bring. By the mid-1990s the poems were coming as frequently as they ever did. I have omitted dates of composition from this selection so that a future scholar may have something to do.

Except for one 1968 course from the generous Gwendolyn Brooks, I have been blessedly uninfluenced by formal instruction in literature and have picked up what I could where I could. All my experience influences my poems. I am a nonviolent revolutionary and democratic socialist in politics, a secular humanist and mystic agnostic in religion, a teacher of history by vocation. I have been called a joker, a ghost maker, and an encyclopedia, and I can go along with that. I have been singularly fortunate in my family, my teachers, my students, and my friends. I have had my share of pain.

May these poems pioneer a road between us.

I.

The Significance of the Frontier

Frederick Jackson Turner's great thesis, first announced at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 when my grandparents were preparing to take part in the great land rush opening the Cherokee Strip, put ordinary sodbusters at the cutting edge of the national saga, which is where they belong. I was born in Enid, Oklahoma, the Cherokee Strip's central town, and grew up among living reminders of pioneer days. My parents and I loved each other but were seldom at ease in each other's company. I knew early on that I would have to leave my hometown to survive as an independent person. Of course I carry my upbringing with me always.

BORN AND RAISED THERE

From where the trees slack off
To where the mountains thrust,
Anywhere wheat is raised,
And alfalfa, and cattle are pastured,
Anywhere you can take in
More than one town with
Its sky-stabbing grain elevator
In a single glance, and dust
Hazing the dry grass, and cracked
Posts linked with knotted wire,
And the sense that nothing
Is forever except delusions
That all this goes on forever,
And I am barely moving at
Seventy miles an hour, I am home.

THE CRACK IN THE MAP

The crack in the map runs through
My life, crooked rivers do not quite
Match, the names of cities
Wobble, and there is difficulty
Explaining where I come from:
Some dry and cracking place where
Gritty winds muffle words, so
The fault line runs through time
As well, isolating me in books
From those whose words did not
Match what I saw and the bonds
Between us wobbled and were lost.

ANCESTOR

His bull-deep rough and loving voice
Is my first remembering (warm lap,
Vest scratch, glint of pinch-nose specs,
Magic tick of thick gold watch,
Iron mustache rusty with tobacco,
Smell of sweat, pipe, soap, leather, old man)
Rumbling of breeding stock, price of wheat,
FDR, old friends, the dust, tractors, heat,
Now and then echoes of the day before history:
Trail herds grazing where we now rocked, Indians
Bought off with lame beeves, still respected,
Not like their solid ghosts on the courthouse square
Squatting blank-eyed, pole-axed by change;
Cow towns shot up by rowdy saddle tramps
Whose sweatless, clean film shadows mock us,
Dealing death with practiced grace on turdless streets;
Soon land claimed in an epic rush, sod houses built,
Earth tied down with barbed wire, raped by plows:
Churches and jails, high-wheeled Fords in wagon ruts,
Wheat combines, radios, unions, DC-3s:
He did his best to welcome each new world.

Then times turned hard, rain stopped, dust came
Bringing gaudy sunsets, thieves with fountain pens.
He watched the women tack wet sheets
To staring windows, observed a new-made ridge:
Dust entombing a fence, watched families drift west,
This time without hope, squinted toward the sun,
Saw a pale dime in the noonday sky.

That last harvest was a dusty joke:
Eight bushels to the acre, two bits a bushel,
Dry grains pinging thinly in the hopper,
Then hauled to town and burned to drive the price up
While swollen-bellied children begged for bread.
That smashed old man who lived on pioneering
Died in a rage, still looking for a trail.

WILD MARY SUDIK

I have a hard-edged recalling
Of something that could not
Have happened: a blackish smudge
On the southernmost edge
Of the yellow-brown world,
Beyond the big cottonwood,
Beyond even the last unpaved street:
The Wild Mary Sudik, a gusher
Spewing thirty-five thousand gallons
For each of eleven black-rain days,
Droplets falling fifteen miles downwind.
But that was at least a thousand
Days before my first sure memory,
And that wild well was too far
Over the curve of the land
To be seen from the back porch
Or even from a cottonwood branch.
I must have been told of it,
Mixed it up with the burning waste
From the local refinery and the gushers
Tamed by Clark Gable in a movie
I saw when I was six, but still
Real, ineradicable, not flushed
By therapy, arising causeless,
Not evidence of anything,
Just an image, pre-literate
And provably false, but there
On the dark edge of my memory
For as long as I live.

THE WAY TO SCHOOL, 1943

“Third call to breakfast,” and I run
But looking both ways first, for Maine Street
Is also US Sixty-Four and the chains spark
As they drag on the pavement from the
Big tanker trucks as required by law,
And slow as I reach the corner of Eighteenth,
For choices, irrevocable choices, must be made.

“Third call to breakfast,” all the way
From the Blue Network studios in Chicago
In the Merchandise Mart with Don McNeill,
Aunt Fanny, Sam, and all the rest, telling
Me that I have half an hour of Central
War Time before the tardy bell to get
To Adams Grade School, and I must not dawdle,
Or dawdle only a little, if I run fast before
And after each dawdle, and run straight,
Not like a poky lazy tardy little puppy.
“Third call to breakfast,” through the screens
Of Mrs. Haskins’ open window with the smell
Of baking bread with caraway seeds because she
Is Bohemian and they bake bread with caraway seeds,
And also from the screens of Mrs. Coldiron who,
Like Grandma Quinn nearby, is a Past Matron
Of the Eastern Star, and today I choose more
Maine Street and run down into the hollow by
The small and nameless creek where Mr. Barton
Has a Champlin station and will pay you if
You get there first one nickel per pump to
Pump up the amber and ruby gas in the graded
Glass, and that is real money because a nickel
Will buy pop or a candy bar or get you all the way
Downtown on the bus, and a dime will buy this
Week’s chapter of *Spy Smasher* plus Wild Bill Elliott
Doing fast draws although he is “a peaceable man”
And Dub Taylor falling into the horse trough and
A Porky Pig cartoon, or it will buy sixty-four pages

Of a full-color comic book of Captain Marvel
Fighting the Nazi worm-genius Mr. Mind.

“Fourth call to breakfast,” and I run
Up Twenty-First Street past the Sunday school
Of University Place Christian Church where
God commands us to be bored each week,
Across Broadway and wave to Mrs. Bird
Who is snapping beans or shelling peas,
And I might help her if she is still there
On my way home, for that is good for
A cookie or two, or perhaps help toothless
Mr. Ballard who gardens bottom land between
Broadway and Randolph and sells produce
From a wheelbarrow and will sometimes give
A mother-pleasing ear of corn to those
Who help him push, but now I must run
Across Randolph as permitted by the huge
Sixth grade safety patrolman in his white belt
And get to the door just ahead of Margie
Who lives just across the playground and can
Listen almost to the end of the fourth call of
The Breakfast Club, and I am on time and
Have not sinned by taking the alleys between
Maine and Broadway where a snow drift froze
My hands last winter or crossing the wild
Jungle by the creek full of lions and Japs
And the dirty words on the boarded-up Eason
Station “closed for the duration”; I have
My times tables memorized, pencil sharp,
With a clean sheet of tablet paper, ready.

DROUGHT, BAPTISMS, PROGRESS

Out in Major County, Oklahoma,
The Hook-and-Eye Dutch
Disdained buttons as vanity, and
There were also River Bretheren
Who thought baptism was valid only
By total immersion in a real stream;
So drought delayed the saving ceremony
Often for months, sometimes for years
Until the Cimarron or its tributaries
Had water sufficient to thrive
Repentant souls, and the river in spate
Was muddy and dyed the robes
Of pastor and supplicant and
Choked the nostrils of the newly saved,
But not enough to repress
The long-delayed glory shouts.

Meanwhile, back in the metropolis,
One county eastward, we never learned
To swim, for pools were closed
In dry summers because of drought,
And in wet summers our congregating
Was banned because of epidemics
Of much-feared poliomyelitis,
Gone now with progress, and most of
The river-dipped or Hook-and-Eye Dutch
Have not survived either, for the young
Will visit museums but not live in them.

Somehow all this came to mind
When shiny-buttoned generals
Announced that, with better weather,
They had been able to test their new
Cluster bombs in a place that was
A place before they blew it up.

FAILURE TO LEARN A SIMPLE THING

Birds fly.
(noun-verb)

That block filled up with home folk
Twanging under gray skies,
Talking about going back
To where there was nothing
To go back to.

Autumn birds fly south in patterns.
(adjective-adverb-preposition)

First time I went down to stoke the furnace,
Smoke drove us out of the room.
The landlord tried to show me
The trick of banking fires
So the thing would burn all night.
With three whooshes of the shovel
He did it just right every time.

*Guided by instinct autumn birds fly south
in patterns to demonstrate
the mastering of seasons.*
(participle-infinitive-gerund)

I thirst after January sun
Warming my back through a cotton jacket.
Why should the devil
Have all the good climates?
I hunger after March daffodils.
I see by my outfit
That I am some kind of nut.
Twice the furnace came near to exploding;
Often I waked up shivering.

*Guided by instinct autumn birds
fly south in patterns to demonstrate
the mastering of seasons, but the man
has not learned how natives build fires
that stay controlled
and burn until morning.*
(compound-complex)

Grammar lesson is over.
The smeared and chilly slate
No longer has meaning.
A kindling rage changed nothing.
Nothing glows any more.

CHANGES

Green leaves going lacy and pale,
Something is raddling the elms;
And the cottonwood tree has been lopped,
Making room for the carport
Leading in from the side street
Which is newly paved with concrete.
Grass is strangely lush, un-played upon,
The backyard clothesline long gone.
The fenced area at the yard's end
That once housed live decoy ducks,
Then bird dogs, then a victory garden,
Then nothing, has been removed.
My father watches his friend,
My friend, too, George Streets,
Who gives me a hard time for
Not backing the latest war, but
Dad glances to make sure I know
That George is in pain and speaks
From pain, but I knew that
Already, just as I know that Mama
Is in worse pain but will not
Speak from it. The two men
Have baggy pants like low comics
And move slowly. I am ushered
To the door, time to see Mama.
Dad at least knows enough
Not to say "Welcome home."

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FRONTIER

Lost: 1”d. keyring medallion
with lathered horses, straining men
in thunderous dust, commemorating
“The Opening of the Cherokee Strip---1893”
with my name and word
“grandson” dimly inscribed on reverse.

I End of an Epoch

Now is the asking of untrivial questions:

*Why did all the buildings
Have false fronts?*

grandmother died
slowly
half a lifetime back
I recall her
sometimes
more clearly
than I want

Upended desks, misdealt books,
Papers deranged on the floor

*Who pushed the sidekick
into the water trough?*

Semipermanent mementos in crude strokes
Of felt-tip pens on scaly walls:
MIGHTY MIGHTY SYNDICATE RANGERS
SPANISH KINGS, nothing taken
Except my keys with the medallion
That bound me to a stiffened past.

grandma
what were you

looking for
that it took you
so long
to die

II Safety Valve

Officer Dibbles twirls a billy
Made to his order in our wood shop,
Grins, strokes his gun, and tells me:

“We got no chance of getting back
Your keys and stuff, I know which ones
Done it, but I can't prove it
Without I crack heads, and you can't
Do that no more; don't worry none,”

*How did the dusty cowpoke
defeat the crooked sheriff?*

“They ain't thieves; it's just a thing now
To carry around zillions of keys
Like old time cat burglars; the chief one
That hit you dropped out here last year,
Just now flunked his draft mental,
And your room was handiest to bust.”

at eighty broke her hip
learned to walk again
mixed up past and present
called me by names
of long-dead men

Somewhere a disk of memory flashes,
Dangling proudly like a scalplock.

*Who had been stirring up
the savages?*

laced her babble
with startling obscenities
saw the dead child
in the glass
replayed scratchy
cowboy records
ceaselessly

*What were the Sons of the Pioneers
searching for?*

III Manifest Destiny

Stash has sprouted up six inches
Dropped his voice an octave, hardened
Superbly since he was my student,
Sergeant Warzynkowski now, he judges me:

“Oh, hell, it don’t bother me none
That you’re a peacenik; you always were
Crazy that way, and we’ll win there
Whether you like it or not;
I know it’s a dirty war, but when
Was there a clean one? And we can’t
Let them turn us back now.”

*Why did Great White Father
speak with forked tongue?*

“Remember, we used to argue in class
About the colored? Well, you win.
Give them decent treatment and
They’ll kill those yellow commie bastards
As good as anyone; see, I’ve learned.”

she wore us raw
taking care of her
my hate welled up
but still she was
the only root
I had

IV Moving Line

This line has fourteen for-sale signs
And one porch still jagged from a bombing,
Panic in the air as real as dust.

to blot out her pain
I stared at the tintype
on her dresser
brown and faded
like frost-nipped grass

Fierce-mustached Pappas hauls me as I ride:

“Hey, schoolteacher with a cowboy hat,
Come drink ouzo and talk awhile.”

*What is behind the whiskers
of the prospector?*

“The first time I seen big hat like yours
Was on William S. Hart; him and Charlie Chaplin
Was my first notion of USA; remember,
Charlie et shoes like they was fancy meal;
I laugh like crazy; too bad they don't let Charlie
Back here no more; he knew us good.”

*Why did the Virginian
lynch his best friend?*

the young couple stood
with stiff pride
before the low sod house
nothing
between them
and earth's edge
but waving grass

“A lot of colored people moving in here
But I ain’t moving out; my son,
He want me out in suburbs with him:
I tell him no; any content I get,
I get just as good right here; same thing
Happen out in suburbs pretty soon anyhow.”

they missed bonanzas
again and again
but further west
was another new land
and another

“This world too small to run away in anymore.”

V Leveller

Indifferently this bridge spans
A gouge of rigid white concrete,
A blurry torrent of lights and steel.

*Who were we heading off
over the pass?*

at last harvest
I watched wheat combines
tried to find the place
where the sod house had been
I could see nothing
but machines

Savoring the brief joys of terror,
Boys dance toward the showdown,
The only open gate to manhood.

*Why did no one run
from the Alamo?*

mother stayed to watch
I went to the movies
she must have died
when Fred Astaire
was dancing

Juggled skyward by a prancing boy,
A stiff-barreled gun glints bloodily
Against the trackless round bronze moon,
Strikes concrete and absurdly fires
Into his gut; the others flee.
He cries to no one: "Grandma."

*Why did the gambler
cough so much?*

despite much pain
I could not
remember her
whole and lucid
or even weep

and now
with arching pain
come contractions and learning
in the ugly molt of stale dreams
in the blindness and the choking
and the shared color of blood
new world
coming

UNCLE SAM

He sat bolt upright in bed
And said God had commanded them
To move to knew country.
By that time the family was used to it.
Next day he loaded the still on the wagon
And prayed, with his gun by his side
So he would get what he was praying for.

We are all his descendants somehow,
That impulse to move on marks us all,
Which is how I knew you.
Welcome, cousin.

SUMMER BOTTLES

I Feeding the Washer

I learned the machine at the age of fourteen
In the summer of nineteen forty-nine, at first on
The section feeding bottles to the slots, seven-ounce
Dr. Pepper clear glass and green for Seven-Up,
Slightly larger nubbly bottles for Barq's root beer;
Every clank inching the rows of bottles up, every
Third clank exposing a new row of sixteen that
Had to be filled four at a time in one clean move,
Bottles grasped with both hands between pinky and ring,
Pointer and tall man, four moves filling a row,
Six moves emptying a case, eighty cases on a sled
In two stacks of five, alternating the twos and threes,
With time, once you mastered the complex meter,
To take a wash room break, pull up a new sled, fish
With a hook for straws in the bottles, or sometimes
Something really serious like a mouse that could get
Us all sued if it went out in a full bottle, once a
Condom, which gave us all a good laugh, but easy.
Once you got used to it you could do it nine hours
And not ache seriously but be consciously proud
Of new muscle and a real job competently done.

II The Foreman

The foreman smoked three packs a day,
Two Chesterfield, one Kool, and his stomach
Could not stand water, so he drank beer.
No one knew the machine the way he did;
He would rush to the master switch hearing
A wrong sound the rest of us missed, and he
Would be right every time. He would connect
The syrup barrels or precious jugs of extract,
The carbonation tanks and the pure water,
Adjust the capper and shaker which turned

In front of the big clean street-facing window
Where the steam-cleaned bottles would march,
Get their squirt of syrup, their fill of bubbles,
Then get crowned and thoroughly mixed before
The conveyer turned the corner toward candler
And stacker and the sleds stacked seven high
That would fill the trucks and be sold to taverns,
Lunch rooms, groceries, filling stations with coolers,
Wherever trucks could go that was our
Exclusive territory, the foreman watching
Every bottle at the moment of creation.
If we had a late run of Seven-Up on Saturday
And the foreman was feeling generous, he would
Take a bootleg pint of Seven Crown and pour
A shot in a bottle for everyone and take them
Off the line when the highballs were mixed,
The best highballs in the world when I was fourteen.
But once he missed and the candler missed it, too,
And some farm hand at the elevator in Hillsdale or
At the Cozy Dine Café in Pond Creek received a
Totally improbable but very real miracle that he
Was wise enough not to trace to our foreman.

III Candlering and Scars

Once during my third summer there, I had
A driver's license by then, I took the pick-up
To the Coke plant to exchange bottles picked up
In error by our drivers for bottles picked up
By theirs and saw their operation, much bigger
Than ours with a machine that filled cases and
An old woman with a crutch next to her seat
Who stared at bottles moving past a bright light,
Taking out the ones not quite filled or colored
A slightly wrong shade or with a foreign object.
She had relief when she needed it, but boredom
And the temptation to let the mind fade out
To waking sleep must have been terrible; but
There were not many jobs for a crippled woman,
And she had done it many days for many years.

At our plant the candler and stacker were one;
The bottles moved onto a slowly spinning
Table, and you grabbed four, put them in a
Candling box, then cased the bottles, stacked
Them, seventy cases to a sled, got a new sled
When you had to, easy moves, if you were
Young and strong, and the mind did not go
Quite blank, for it took a knack to place
The cases with their capped bottles squarely;
And there were dangers, especially from
New bottles, about two percent of which
Would shatter under pressure, often in the
Candling box or being cased. I recall
A stitch in my little finger once; the scar
Is still there after more than fifty years,
And another scar that only required taping,
And others recalled but faded entirely.
Workmen's comp covered these injuries,
And the old woman with a crutch got
A pension if she lived long enough, but,
If the body works to rhythms of machines,
Both body and mind break down in time.

IV The Bookkeeper's Lesson

The bookkeeper asked for me my second summer
Because I could add figures and transfer them
From one sheet to another and read well enough
To master the task of getting drivers' receipts
Transferred to sales cards. It was easy but dull,
And I was ready by late afternoon to help drivers
Unload empties and reload fulls for the next day,
But the bookkeeper pointed out that all of us who
Did the heavy work were under forty and that
Doing figures could be done as long as the mind
Lasted and that minds lasted longer than legs.
I was urged to stay in school, but I needed no urging.
I loved books and old lore and equations.
I even read the trade magazines in the office and

Knew that thick glass bottles were obsolescent,
Far too small, and that huge supermarkets and
Huge trucks with automatic lifts were coming,
But I did not mind. This summer job would last
My high school years and maybe longer. I took
No family man's job, for bottlers hired extra boys
For summer. The minimum wage had gone up
To seventy-five cents an hour, enough to buy
My clothes and save a bit for college, and not
Depend entirely on my father who expected
A perfection that was not in me. Wages
Were good here and the bookkeeper warned me
Never to ask for more. All the boss had to do
Was wall off the beer warehouse from the
Bottling plant and us bottlers no longer
Would be interstate commerce and thus
No longer covered by minimum wage. The Coke
People got fifteen cents an hour less than
Us and at Pepsi thirty cents less. Of course
Pepsi hired colored people and they could live
On less, but they were hungry enough to take
Our jobs if the boss did not value the race
Enough to keep us working. I thought
About that a long time and maybe
Learned more from the bookkeeper than he
Intended for me to learn, a guide to how
Things work and even how to fight them.

V Memories in the Fingers

The three summers at the bottling plant and two
More as driver-salesman for Hires and Squirt
In Madison and North Chicago were good
Despite the scarred hands and the leg that
Made a funny pop when I jumped off a truck,
Which turned out to be the first of many
Traumas. All my bosses were fair men
And good investors who scrapped the old
Shelved trucks and the machines that

Would not handle plastic liters and
Branched out and merged with big-time
Operators in plenty of time, and lots of
The drivers and bottlers like me moved
Onward and upward and did not end up
Ruptured and gimping in alcoholic wards.
It is pleasant to remember stacking
Beer cases fifteen high close to a tin roof
And the hot, sour-smelling freight cars
With once a month kegs of Bud on ice
That we broke among a case of cans from
The other end of the car, charged to
The Frisco Road as freight damaged in transit.
Even at night when fingers ache and I
Dream of rolling kegs from the hot truck
To the cold storage locker I mostly
Recall a good job done early on.

THE OMISSION OF BESTIALITY

Mama was dying and making
More farewell appearances than
Buffalo Bill, the cancer spreading,
Nothing effective to be done for pain,
But not letting down the side at
University Place Christian Church,
Whose new young pastor touted
The nude antiwar pro-pot rockfest
Hair, so when my parents came
One more time to Chicago
I got tickets, expensive ones,
For Mama could not handle stairs
Anymore, and we watched attentive
But unmoved, for the music was
Neither mine nor theirs, and the dope
Was not working for our local hurts.

At intermission Dad indulged his
Passe vice of smoking tobacco and
Quizzed me about the “Sodomy” song:
“Which one of those big words means
Diddling the livestock?” he asked,
Thumb hooked in gallus, looking country.
I said “They haven’t heard of that
Up here yet,” and he coughed and laughed.
Then he asked “Are you all right? Is this what
You really want? Teaching colored people and
Living among them?” I said yes and thought:
I am as old now as he had been when he
Raised welts on my butt and damned near
Cauliflowered an ear because I was reading
Instead of lawn mowing or suchlike.

We both enjoyed good marriages and
Lived well without sweat but raged
Out of control too often and clashed

When we were too long together, for
We hated the reflections we saw when
We observed each other's faces. Inhaling,
He said "I'm told they strip down
Before this is over." "In a dim light,"
I said, and he said "Your mother will
Lean to me and whisper "If you've
Seen one you've seen 'em all."
I knew he was right and laughed.

It was our last good moment.
He picked the first quarrel he could
After Mama died, and I never saw
His face for the seventeen years
He lived on. This hurt and still does,
But maybe less than I might have
Hurt him without meaning to. His face
Faded and became in my dreams
John Wayne, deposed from his cattle herd,
Stalking me, but the night I heard
He had died, I dreamed of him staying
In my hospital room when I had
My tonsils out, and that was good.

II.

Sonnets and Other Hermit Crab Poems

The hermit crab lives and moves in shells discarded by other creatures. Mostly I let the images in a poem determine its unique form even if it comes out a bit shaggy. Now and again, however, I get a notion that seems to call for one of those traditional forms used by earlier poets, the rules for which are found in many standard reference works. The sonnet is the form I have used most often, and I have selected a dozen of them for this volume. I have used other traditional forms for special occasions. My wife, watching Cyrano de Bergerac compose a ballade while fighting a duel, wanted a ballade of her own. My oldest granddaughter deserved a haiku. The formal but not subject matter restrictions of the tanka seemed right to mimic the restrictions imposed by a blizzard. Cinquains, an American form designed to mimic haiku, served to celebrate a famous friend. Spenserian stanzas honored a request for a poem about a superhero. Blank verse seemed proper to replicate the meter of the interstate highway system. Nothing less than the most difficult and complex form I could find, the sestina, seemed fitting as a memorial to Dr. King. I am stubbornly monolingual, but my dissatisfaction with existing translations of a favorite Brecht poem, prompted me to ask a multilingual friend to make a literal translation, from which I made a very free version of my own. I have never done villanelles, but I think about it.

DEPARTURE

Trees are not native to my native ground
Except thin growths that mark the banks of creeks
More surely than their phantom flow which leaks
So sluggishly most months, past aching sound
Of dry winds rocking crooked cottonwoods.
Most useless trees, they must be soaked in pitch
To hold the raw barbed wire stretched tight and which
As posts still rot and crack. Nice shade, though, hoods
That masked me often as I planned escape
From churches, dust, straight lines on prairies, scope-
Constricting worlds I did not know I held
Within me. Fooled and happy, I went bold
Through fields like New Jerusalem revealed
To John on Patmos: bright, four-square, and gold.

CONNECTIONS AMONG THE LOST

The Big Lost River fails by my miles to meet
The Little Lost, they disappear in mud
And ash still separate. Their fading could
Mean lava tubes which drain them down to great
And unseen depths which surface in some neat
Conjunction way the hell and gone that would
Not make a mark on any map but should
Make wonder. Lines that should not miss a beat
But do, in central Idaho, a place
As real as any other on the chart,
Beyond our ken unless we try to trace
An unseen flow between two things apart
By etching lightning jumping space
Between synapses making thought and art.

LEARNING FROM FLAWS

A pure perfection cannot teach. It takes
Some clumsy journeyman to show us how
To breathe a life in things so we can show
Good ways to break the form and cook the cakes
Of art, astonish tastes, build sound that makes
The mind start up and blows the straining prow
Through waves resisting thought. So let us now
Praise famous clods who made mind-forming quakes:

Our Steinbeck, Lawrence, Wright, O'Neill, Celine,
And Sandburg, Faulkner, Lindsay, Dreiser, Crane,
Brash country boys who never met the queen,
Matriculated in saloons, the bane
Of canons, coarse, unwashed, and green
In thought, who broadened language with crude pain.

AN IMAGE ENCOMPASSES SAINT URSULA

The brand-new color printer chuffs and spits
Hans Memling's unhistoric virgin saint
Who shrouds the midget myriad limned in paint
That smoothly glows. The real one sits
In Bruges. A reliquary chest admits
An opportunity for pride to taint
The holy. Copies spread the real but faint
Reflection of this sin which art commits.

Step up and pay your euros, see
It turn, and use the glass to magnify
This gilded gothic box. It's worth the fee,
Though looking at it will not these days buy
Indulgences or cures; but art can be
The finest thrill we share before we die.

PECANS

Dividing railroad land from public street,
The breeze impales Fall jetsam on the fence
Where pecan sacks are hawked by hustling gents
Who know these nuts make pies, so smooth and sweet,
Or lovely salted snacks, a tempting treat.
But we pass on, for laziness prevents
Our buying. Time is scarce. It makes more sense
To pay for shelled ones, just enjoy the meat.

An Alabama uncle used to crack
All evening as he talked of early days,
Of mules and mud and work that pained the back,
Of sweat-soaked folk whose stern and steady gaze
Hand-tinted, looked upon us, judging our knack
Of prizing comfort more than hard-earned praise.

A SERIES

The Fibonacci numbers start with ought,
Then one, then one, then two, then three, then five,
Then eight, thirteen, and onward, spiraling toward light,
Infinity, and all the things that live.

They rule the “stately mansions” of the leaves
And blooms and seedling cones and gyring thoughts
Of Yeats, the ordering that chaos loves
To build as chance deforms our sprawling lots.

There is no perfect order, chaos neither,
In any macro-micro world perceived
By human probes. A number series, rather,
Teases to thought with certainty removed.

The backyard Norway pine has dropped Spring cones,
And children’s romps extend the living zones.

A TENTATIVE SKETCH OF EVERYTHING

Asymmetrical, arrhythmical,
Each particle is built from number but
Always feels the lazy sidelong pull
To chaos from the primal knot or nut
Of nothing breaking into speed of light
Electroweak and binding strong and mass,
So oddly faint but oriented right
Side up for daily use, no clues, alas,
Of meaning, save our wonder at the curves
And spirals, matter missing somewhere there,
But lack of certainty alerts the nerves
And drives the need to witness what is where.

Equations with their multiple unknowns:
Nothing mirroring nothing in these zones.

MILLENNIAL SNOW

Near Sleeping Bear Dunes the snow fell straight
To cap the posts with perfect cones and toques
On pediments eroded by the windless weight
Of days that cycle ice to crystal yokes.

Stiff branches bend, steep roofs grow thick with white,
Sclerotic roads lose lanes, big plows cut paths
Through malls and hospital lots, where speed just might
Save lives, to shower blanched curbs with slushy baths.

The children's arms make angels, track the fields
Beside the wilder game. Ongoing time demands
Disruption, pristine cover quickly yields.
The perfect snow distorts with living hands.

Gone back to school, we sense the children's power
On floors whose polish will not last an hour.

CELEBRATING BLOOMSDAY

He was in love with daily bread and beer
And female butts imperfect only in
Their uncompactness, blessing din
With tongues, mnemonic stroller who could hear
The babbling brooks and drunken Citizen's jeer,
The layered nightmare underneath old Finn
Again arisen, and Homeric kin
As great as anything but here and now.

To celebrate quotidian works and days
With lore from Here Comes Everybody makes
Conundrums for the scholists, forces ways
Of knowing common things so preening fakes
Must blow away. In Dublin's artful maze
We learn our oneness for our loving sakes.

AUSCHWITZ JANUARY, 2002

These rails go nowhere now, no ash
Stains New Year's snow, the chimneys spew
No guilty profits bringing dread and cash,
But pain recycles always, stark and new.

Subtract a million if you must, it was,
It is, we are like that, we do it still
To please a power that cannot look, a cause
Enslaving us that never pays the bill.

We try to see the bodies in the bunks,
Spare buttocks on the holes at midnight, hair,
A roomful, back on heads, the shoes on hunks
Of freezing feet, lenses perched, despair.

Some luggage labeled Kafka joins the game,
But no relation, just a common name.

REFLECTIONS ON CAILLEBOTTE

The shining paving stones of Paris here
Preserved, the light controlled so not to fade
The image, moisture content monitored and made
To keep the paint forever bright and clear
Until a bomb is lobbed or fire makes sere
And dark a temporary thing by time betrayed
As all must be, these strollers once arrayed
In what is not yet costume, real and near.

We cannot speak Homeric Greek nor know
Quotidian glory in a beaver hat,
Assured with bustled lady making show
Of up-to-dateness on this brushed and flat
Illusion with its smoothly frozen flow.
We turn our backs. They move. We can sense that.

150 DAYS AFTER 11 SEPTEMBER 2001

The fix is wearing off. The flags are frayed;
The ones on aerials are almost rags.
The roaring mob dims down, retreats, and sags.
The cheaply colored window banners fade.
Distrust asserts itself once more, betrayed
By greedy guts in power. The uncaught quarry nags
But is not worth more deaths than all have paid.

The poor are out of work. The rich are graced
With interest on their bribes. The lying shout
That truth is treason and must be erased
By star wars, zapping cardboard cutters: rout
The swindled who resist another waste
Of sweat and blood for those with stolen clout.

THE PIRATE'S BALLADE

Like pregnant horses marked in caves and funny papers,
These flashing pixels on a glass became an art
Despite the vulgar hands that crafted them for gapers
In need of cud for weary leisure, an easy start
For numbing dreams which form in trifling part
That excess gibber which is us, just something to fill
That awful gap from thought to thing which marks our heart.
 These lovely luring shadows shape us still.

The tonic rumbling Rosebud whisper, trickster apers
Who make us see the giant Kong, the mazy mart
Where Pepe Le Moko lurks, brash Cagney's sloven tapers
Who swathe his swaying stiff, the flat rat guards which thwart
The plaguesy Palance, the foaming horse before the cart
Which stumbles Scarlett home to Tara, guns that kill
In blazing close-ups, thrills to zoom our fever chart.
 These lovely luring shadows shape us still.

When Charlie eats his shoes he is the king of shapers
Of our fantastic dies and molds, too, Buster's dart
Past shot and shell in locomotion sweetly capers
Through some bright synapse always. Henry's brimming quart
Of ale in Laughton's fist, the melting tearful tart
Loyal to her hooligan are always on the bill
To color works and days, keep mind and murk apart.
 These lovely luring shadows shape us still.

I've stolen every one for you, my dear, in part
Because I love you, also, I'm reeling drunk with art,
With memories of dreams which bend us as they will.
 These lovely luring shadows shape us still.

GRANDDAUGHTER

she hugs me in snow
I would freeze each instant now
but she must move on

WAR LESSONS AFTER A BLIZZARD

soft sidewinding snow
comes in on no feet at all
stalls harbor and city
cripples my fine teaching plans
and then stays on forever

this beautiful blow
knocks our gross city out flat
slaps us with some truths
of unplanned inhuman grabs
smears old greed in our faces

our arteries clog
messages do not get through
we are all strung out
each loud bloody forward thrust
smothered stopped frozen tense

your trail-wise guide slumps
on dead white chopped up days
jangling to harsh bells
dragging tired slogans through slush
dissecting our mute grim past

Matt Brady's wet plate
grays us drains us stiffens us
in the wilderness
dyed with a century's mud
crawling toward kingdom coming

freeze thaw freeze thaw freeze
we warp are scored get cut up
ground into new soil
come spring maybe seeds will sprout
from raw gaps in outgrown shells

CINQUAINS FOR STUDS TERKEL

cigar
brass voice checked shirt
all heart all thumbs projects
a WPA mural
of sound

tape splice
makes a new thing
out of clashing voices
we hear so plain that we must act
in time

recall
Cisco he would
lay hands on big-bellied
women laughing shouting right on
honey

Big Bill
been here and gone
echoes gritty in grooves
telling new times that just folks sing
the blues

art is
the part that means
more than the sum of wholes
re-shaped in pain to make old words
new worlds

giants
called back in wax
bring home old dreams to us
so we can take it easy but
take it

CAPTAIN MARVEL

Dear son, I once read comic books like you
But more, I drank them deep, caressed them till
They fell apart, believed them, loved them, too,
The superheroes most of all; I'd fill my play
With flight and painless conquest. Still,
I sensed my game was air. The hero best
Embodying dreams was Captain Marvel. Will
No yellow thunderbolt stitched on your chest.
He's out of print, collector's item, laid to rest.

The death of Captain Marvel is a shock
To true believers in a legend's right
To immortality, defying clock
And calendar, some heroes live to fight
Outlandish evil. See them, floating light
As smoke in your new comic books, still clean
Flat-bellied stern steel-muscled. They're a sight
To urge a boy toward manhood. Death is mean.
So how could Captain Marvel ever split our scene.

The Captain Marvel they draw now is not
The one they had when I read lovely junk
Like this. The old one dressed in red and fought
Sivana or Mr. Mind the worm with spunk.
Young Billy Batson yelled SHAZAM! And plunk,
Became a superhero, flying with cape
Unfurled, immune to failure, ready to clunk
All criminals and Nazi creeps and shape
A post-war world from which we'd never need escape.

We left him, laughed at him, moved on to things
More suited to a graying world, more keyed
To second chances. Failing interest brings
The death of profits. Publishers decreed
His end. A phantom hero spreads no seed.
Poor Captain Marvel, shadow of a wish
Grown staler with each number. Heroes need
Support of fans to make great deeds their dish,
To hold as firm as carrot on gefilte fish.

But I should not be joking, heroes die
With startling frequency in times like these.
No super powers allow a myth to lie
Untouched by changing times. The urge to please
A fallen age by killing gods will seize
Us all at times. No super gift is all
We'd hoped. Some super problem comes to tease
You to defeat. It does no good to call
SHAZAM! For lightning. Life dooms heroes to a fall.

A NEW BIRTH

The interstate in Alabama ran
Through cuts vibrating with a red so bright
It hurt my eyes and falsely greened the slab,
A fine white wake of death. I conjured up
Some murdered friends, one shot three weeks before
For riding in a car less mixed than this:
With blacks and Jews and Japanese and me
With grits on tongue and kin in half these towns,
Come back with hope to force alive a dream.
Through dark and twisting hours in Tennessee
My worried mind had held four shapely lines.
Because we were not persons, merely threats,
I could not stop to write, so, damn! They blurred
And faded with the impact of the dawn.
They were well lost. One crooked gold-toothed smile
On court house steps from one seamed, earth-black man
Who had unlearned his fear paid for them all.

Old Williams hated five-beat lines like these,
But interstates make fresh the cadenced words
Inside the heads of drivers, and he would
Have understood my risked recalling when
He delved and pulled new life from bloody muck,
Quick pen and forceps used with equal grace,
Then pummeled butts and words until he forced
A yelp of song from everything he touched.
He did not always split his time with ease.
Sometimes he let a breech or strangling cord
Obscure a cunning phrase and cursed himself
For holding six-pound lumps of angry flesh
Worth more than verse that would outlast them all.
Sometimes a human need makes craftsmen dare
To drown the book but liberate the song.

RESURRECTION CITY

Among the monuments the meek grow mad
With roaring in the skies. The powerful slant
Toward earth to guide and patronize again,
To talk of dead men and ideas. Yet,
The poor hold center stage. The high look down
With blinding fear on something ending now

Or something starting. What's the difference now?
The main man's dead. A bitten world went mad
And foaming. Many prophets were struck down
For truths that did not match the crazy slant
Of lies we've told about ourselves. We've yet
To make a future from a past again

Re-learned, re-wept, re-bled, to be again
Fit dreamers of his dream that haunts us now.
He was too much; we don't deserve him yet.
Perhaps we never will. The crowds were mad
In love with all his words. His laughing slant
Of eyes saw hope for us. He was put down

By small minds only, dull with hate. Go down
To hell my country, never rise again
Until your dark of hating goes and slant
Rays of a loving sun make gold these now
Warped roofs and muddy streets that stink of mad
Defiance. He said we could make it yet.

The fact that we are here shows hope and yet
We do not listen to the speeches. Down
With talk. We've heard it all. This time the mad
Must pick up on the sane. We won't again
Walk peacefully. This world's last chance is now.
So we are here. The stone can't climb the slant

Without old Sisyphus to push. That slant
Is ours, who haven't given up just yet,
Who don't care if the world is ready now
Or not. The power of the word came down
To change us all. So we turn right again,
Cast out the devils in us, save these mad.

Once more one mad revolt against the slant
Of history, again the failure, yet
The struck-down dreamer dreams our glory now.

QUESTIONS OF A STUDIOUS WORKER

(a version of Bertolt Brecht's *Fragen eines llegenden Arbeiters*)

Who built seven-gated Thebes?
The names of kings appear in books.
Did the kings haul the blocks of stone?

And Babylon devastated again and again,
Who rebuilt it so many times? In what houses
Did the masons live in Lima resplendent with gold?
Where did they go, those bricklayers on the night they
Finished the Great Wall of China? Mighty Rome
Is choked with triumphal arches. Over whom
Did those Caesars triumph? Far-famed old Byzantium,
Did everyone live in palaces? Even in long-lost Atlantis
The drowning shouted in the night
For their faithful slaves.

Young Alexander conquered India.
Alone?
Caesar enslaved the Gauls.
Did his army have at least a cook?
Philip of Spain wept when the Armada
Was sunk. Did no one else cry out?
Frederick the Great won the Seven Years' War.
Who was victorious besides him?

Every page has triumphs.
Who cooked the victor's banquet?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?

So many records.
So many questions.

III

Letters to Friends

I have lived a long time, traveled widely, and done many things, so my friends are extraordinarily diverse, especially as I take pains to stay in touch with as many phases of my life as possible. I like writing my friends, writing about my friends, introducing my friends to each other, commenting on issues in which I know they are interested, sometimes making site-specific poems about places and phenomena we like. I have omitted the dedications to these selections, but my friends know who they are.

REUNION

My friend the clock repairer
Has revived an old brownstone,
Half a house wide, two houses high,
With a working cast-iron coal stove,
Where our pasts make harmonies
In whole tones of a Brooklyn hour.

Once we heard all hours chime
And sawed at the same bars.
We have been eccentric
To many circles together.
Now our orbits intersect
So seldom that we celebrate
Each time we make it happen.

The clocks stutter, ticking
Layers of overlapping minutes,
Collaged waves engulfing us.

And other clocks in our minds
Are half a continent away,
Some four decades back, but
Not gone, with thunder steps
Of giants and hurts to grow on.

Now badger-bearded, wrinkling,
Older than the giants were
And certainly no wiser, we laugh.

A crank winds up the Edison,
And, in weary vertical grooves,
A soprano gone before our coming
Tells how she has lived
For art and love
Which, if we define these things
Ourselves, ought to be enough.

WEATHER FRONT

The front is moving somewhere in the west,
Not here yet but in the outer tendons
Of my right knee an ache smolders
And another on top of my metacarpal arch.
Pain is good for predicting the weather.
Pain is the one sure sign of life.

The front slips east as the planet turns.
Somewhere on I-80 near the Mississippi bluffs
A belt of ozone and troubled dust
Hangs in our nostrils like sour-mash fumes.
The tv weather line glows and sidewinds,
Confirming my leg as a prophet of turbulence.

Five hours west behind the front
I hope you see kids jumping in puddles.
I hope you are making love by a streaming window.
I hope you have taken in every leaf on every tree
In this last month of the green season
And are keeping on top of your pain.

There is nothing for it except to live,
Burying iron for next May's hydrangeas,
Planning better puddles for the kids,
Trying to keep poison out of the rain,
Catching the voices in the wind,
Connecting across the weather front.

Let the Bible-thumper in the bare-walled church connect us.
Let the yarn-spinner in the front-porch chair connect us.
Let the psalmists, prophets, and Walt Whitman connect us.
Let Emma Goldman and Marx and Debs connect us
Across the weather front.

TELLURIDE: A CENTURY OF LUMPEN

Early 1900s

Looking out her south window squinting
Into the sun, she hung wet diapers on a line
Above the sink, for they would surely freeze
Outside on this cloudless day, and saw him,
A hobo with a bindle, cold despite his layers
Of raggedy cloth, doubtless needing a meal,
And thought:

“I could use some kindling; he looks as if
He would do some chopping for bread
And molasses, which we can spare.
The bindlestiffs have chalked our gate,
For this family shares what it has
With those who deserve a share, not
With the tramps covered with sawdust
From sleeping on saloon floors until
The liquor bosses vote them, not
The blackleg scabs and goons
The mine bosses use to rob us.
This one, though, is just a boy,
Most likely from that pinched-out vein
Across the ridge, shyness in his walk
As he comes to the door, most likely union,
At least I hope so, for this family
Would break a scab’s bones or worse
To hold itself together. My good man
Stands one payday round for friends,
Then brings the envelope home to me,
Keeping only enough for smokes.
We are different from the hobos. At least
We are a family. At least we have
A roof until the vein runs out or
Until the next cave-in or strike. My man
Will come home tired and be glad
Of all the kindling chopped. Maybe

Someday the union will be something, and
Everyone can have a roof. Until then
This family can defend itself, maybe.”

Late 1940s

After mid-morning coffee with the mayor
And some of the other leading merchants,
He strolled back to his new Studebaker,
Proudly admiring its modern lines,
Glanced at a store window with dusty canned goods
And a faded woman with her baby behind it
And thought:

“She is there every day for sixteen hours
And sometimes longer. No wonder she sickens
And keeps her oldest from school to mind
Her shabby little dump. She owes everyone.
The wholesalers are squeezing her hard.
She must know the place is finished. Everyone
Has cars again, even those who walked pre-war.
Her husband knocked her up one more time,
Then died in a veteran’s hospital.
She wants to be her own boss but cannot
Match the chain’s prices, cannot work longer
Hours than she does, would be better off
Clerking at the chain at decent hours
For certain pay. Whoever closes her down
Will be doing her a favor. Someone
Will change the zoning, call the health board,
Drop a hint at Rotary or over coffee. She will
Have to, like the rest of us, face
The facts of these new times.”

Mid 1990s

Behind her Ray-Ban shades she sat at the counter
Facing the window, ignoring her coffee and repeating
The police koan about doing everything while
Seeming to do nothing, watched the whispering

Group in the doorway across the street, nodded
Discreetly to her back-up, patted not her gun
But the search warrant in her pocket, eyed
The blonde youth's alligator labels coldly,
Watched for the deal to go down,
And thought:

“His togs would cost me a whole week's pay.
This will be a good, clean bust.
It will stick even if his family hires the very
Best lawyer. This fancy kid with his
Ivy League degree and his manners smooth
As the powder he deals will be everyone's
Canon City sweetheart from four to seven years.
I have followed the chief's advice and watched
My ass, for Columbo on television reruns
Is the only cop who can habitually bust
His social superiors, but this one is off base
Far enough so connections cannot save him.
I really love tagging out one of them. Someday
I want to bust a whole ski lodge full
Of bankers and congressmen and movie stars.
But this cutie pie carrying enough to keep
The whole damned town high all season
Will do nicely, thank you, get me a
Sergeant's pay and fewer station house jokes
About the dick without a dick.
This fancy player got careless after his
Big rich woman left town without him.
His folks must have stopped his allowance
Because his plastic is no good. But,
All of a sudden, he has piles of cash
And the attitude he was born with: too
Arrogant to look behind him and see me.
So he goes down, and I go up
In this land of opportunity.”

FOSSILS

Dear Jay Parini,

Thank you for the book
Which I had wanted as soon as I saw it
Was called *Anthracite Country*, so excuse me
For taking so long to answer. Tim Wickland was
Tardy in sending it, and I was even more so
In getting back to you, for metaphors
Are fearful things and sometimes feelings get
Too complex for the plain prose Monsieur Jourdain
Was glad to find he had been speaking all his life
And in which Darwin's bulldog, T. H. Huxley, explained
The great mysteries to eager workers with his piece
Of carpenter's chalk and some lanternslides.
Poems are, of course, obsolete just like the slide rule
With which Tim still figures his taxes and the silver
Tray on which elegant Arlinda serves high tea,
But sometimes too much collides for ordered prose.

I telephoned Karleen, my mother-in-law, in her double-wide
Among the branched saguaros in Tucson's glare
And told her I had been gifted with some hard black
Letters from a Scranton raising, although you now
Live near our friends on Weybridge Hill among the turning
Leaves so admired by Asian tourists and the roads
Marked FROST HEAVES in Spring because the "Something
There is that doesn't love a wall" is a pun I did not
Get until I paced that ground. But I have never plunged
Into anything more dark than the field-trip mine at our
Museum of Science and Industry just a few miles
From where I write, and on my native ground in
The Cherokee Strip our dinosaurs, discreetly decaying,
Made natural gas which did not begrime my father's
Arrow collars, although the lowering dust
Made ample nightmares, also mined for art
By Steinbeck and friends, whom you have chronicled.

So I asked Karleen about the French chateau given
To a town already stuffed with fossils as a shell not
Really suited for a library but which her husband,
Great-grandfather to my grandchildren, guided
With some skill for six years, penning Dewey
Decimals in white ink on spines you may recall, for
A dozen years later you must have been a stackhound,
A bookworm they called you then, fondling thick bindings,
Then burrowing toward something as real as the press
Of a fern extinct for a million years on the coalface,
Coveting the dirty books locked behind glass,
Trying on styles like sports coats off the rack,
Glorying in this anarchist heaven with open shelves
Where the fruit of the peoples' labor is read by all.

Alert Karleen, who is ninety, disremembers
The name of that book-crammed chateau:
Aldrich, maybe, or Albrick, or I suggested
Maybe Alberich after Wagner's niebelung,
But she told me the niebelungs had left
The central building upright. But one of the branches
Called Providence, she thinks, had crazy floors,
And once she descended from Nay Og Park between
The time the Coral Sea was re-floored with fuselages
And pearl-eyed skulls and the time when Nazi stiffs
Served as sleds near Stalingrad. With her was
The thin-shanked redheaded ten year old
Who has been my wife for two-thirds of our lives,
And the good librarian whom you never met,
For he left Scranton the year that you were born
And died before I had a chance to meet him either,
And a dead but legendary and unforgotten dog
Who slid forward across the sloping varnished planks
And yelped in alarm. For Scranton was an anthill
Where you could not forget that you lived on
Compressed past ages that made hard coal
For Phoebe Snow to ride the Lackawanna
All in white from the veins which
Tangled like the very eyebrows of John L
Beneath the gray and leaning houses and

Trolleys filled with men with a dried-sweat stink,
Pale under blackface who yearned to smell of
Stogies and rye whiskey and think impure thoughts
Of lisping Emma Matso who made it to Hollywood
As Lizabeth Scott. But mostly they were family men
Who got married in church and sat proudly
At first communions wishing their eyebrows could
Come clean, not even guessing that suburbanites
Would turn their backs on black anthracite before
Their granddaughters received the sacrificial wafer.

I hope we soon meet face to face sitting
On Tim's front porch with elegant *hors d'ouvres*
From Arlinda's silver tray, telling some stretchers
About hanging out in libraries, recalling
That ancient German film about a cave-in
Where miners smashed frontiers to save
Their comrades, and, of course, watching namesakes
Shooting hoops in the driveway, and now and then
Raising our glasses to the fossils: a greenhouse
That once existed in Saginaw, a government camp
In Arvin, and all the language in the coal seams
And the chalk beds, for, like old Huxley,
I believe in fossils absolutely.

EAST OF BLACK MOUNTAIN

Black Mountain is red this morning,
A frosty glow picking out turning
And still attached leaves on deciduous
Trees among the green conifers which
Will show black enough when the light
Is less direct. Uneven ground threatens,
And my cane sinks through the leaves
To something oddly angled and upsetting.
I must follow the sun over the mountain.
No slow idle on my mind. Others can look
Forever at one mountain. I can only
Move on and learn to negotiate
Tricky slopes and let remembering
Of mountains yeast up in me.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Official history is always phony,
But it never lasts because,
As an old folk singer once said:
“The most dangerous political force
In America today is a
Long memory,” and memory
Will not die in the special
Collections room of a good
Librarian, on fireproof shelves
Which spark as you touch metal
And open the brittle brown pages,
Or the drawers of dusty tapes
Of widows recalling the glory
Of nationalities uniting against
The lead mine bosses in 1921
In the Little Balkans of Kansas.
Alexander Howat was their leader,
And the women, an Amazon army,
Backed those hard rock men doomed
To be shot by goons or buried
Under caved-in slate or poisoned
By the ground they dug for others.

It meant the blacklist to remember,
But blacklists cannot endure.
John L colluded with the bosses,
Betrayed Howat, and got his scowl
On statues in a dozen parks,
But statues can be undermined
By burrowers. J. A. Wayland’s
Appeal to Reason was suppressed,
But the issues were preserved,
For a librarian grooms a battlefield.
The *Girard Press* lied, but a poet
Can read between the lines.
As long as documents are saved

The gutted past can be made whole.
Those with courage to delve and recall
Howat and his Babel of hard men
And their Amazon wives and Wayland
And Debs and all the rest including
Of course Gene DeGruson among his pile
Of real things which would not go away
Are bound to triumph after all.

PARALLEL 49

Bodies on bodies leave marks
Engendering more bodies and
Transmitting germ and virus
Just as mountain mist
Swells the joints of the old and
Fever the mind of the young
Into song which can be
Indelible if anyone hears it.

Once a legion of demons crossed
A line unacknowledged by them
And which conformed to nothing
Natural. An officious troop
Of self-help books and hosts
Of talk shows accompanied
The demons to the dead straight line
Where, astonished, they met
One calm ego, deemed sufficient
On its side of the line for
There was only one legion.

The ego transmitted the legion
To a dream of red horses, for
On that side of the line,
Pure products don't go all the way crazy.
So the red horse demons gentled
And sought reassurance that
They still existed, nuzzling
And saying "We are, eh?"

KABUKI IN CHICAGO

Seventh of his line, Beiko,
With me wedged cushionless, achy
Knees bumping in the gallery
Designed for Nineteenth Century proles
Moving up the cultural ladder,
Suspended above the glowing cave
Of Adler and Sullivan's Auditorium,
Seeing through binoculars like
Rommel's army, hearing the clap
Of woodblocks, koto strum, flute wail,
Alien to my ignorant ears,
And seeing the red-crowned lion
Thrashing his mane in the garden,
Not much like familiar Leo
Roaring "Ars Gratia Artis" but
Kin in some way. Somehow decoding this
Is good for us, eases our pain,
Puts a frame around chaos
So we can paint it by the numbers,
Reminds us not to incinerate
Those producing an actor who becomes,
With the help of black-clothed assistants
Whom I already know I should not see,
A girl becoming in furious dance
A lion bedeviled by butterflies.
But, looking over the gallery rail,
I do not know what I am
Supposed to be reminded of,
Not knowing when to shout "Beiko!"
At the right split second into the light,
No gorgeous lunch box under my feet
With raw fish curled in drawers,
Not even an acceptable cross-legged
Sitter at low tables, not even
Believing that art ennobles me and
Makes me worthy to live on the sweat
Of narrow-assed proles, and not even

Having fun sometimes when learning
Is hard, but nevertheless becoming
One with Beiko the Seventh, becoming
A dancing girl possessed who
Becomes a long-maned lion
Absorbed with careening butterflies.

ORANGERIE

(a gift poem to follow Frank O'Hara's *Why I Am Not a Painter*)

Two large ovals down below with
Curves of canvas covered from
Almost floor to ceiling with blobs
Of white on blobs of green and blue
And a little pink and lavender:
And I knew I was supposed to see
Them as water lilies, and I have seen
Them as water lilies ever since Mama
Showed me one in a book and said
"These are water lilies," and I believed,
And they have been in my mind
Between me and real water lilies
Ever since, even here where I see
The blobs close up and further back
The edges of the canvas and hear others
Praising in many languages and not
Faking it all, because our mamas
Told us true, and it is true for sure.

Like Frank O'Hara I am not a painter,
Although I sleep with one, and he
Slept with many and could say like me
"Some of my best friends are painters."
But poets magic your ears
And mostly leave your eyes alone.
The words are not the same thing
As the shape direct, but they move
In similar ways if they are good.
And gifts for painter friends must be
In words, for that is all I have.

SHARP TOOLS

Carlos Cortez leans on his cane, but the old skills still inform his fingers and wrists.

He cuts and gouges the resistant block with his finely honed tools.

The mothers of heroes and enduring earth knowers cry out to us.

The bodies of martyrs are made to appear with their lost land and alien machines.

Carlos would pass on his skill with his gentle hands and gentle voice if he could.

Those he would teach are numbered and confined, moving to harsh bell signals.

The authorities with reason will not allow them the use of sharp tools.

The young are full of rage that Carlos would channel into gouging the resistant block.

The mark of the tools is endlessly multiplied with ink on paper.

The lesson that Carlos Cortez would teach is there and will be learned by anyone

Who can reason from the picture to the tools and hone edges for a new beginning.

THE WATCH ON THE ELBE

We just passed the guard tower on the bank
Marking the line once thought indelible
That split East from West, Us from Them,
Good from Evil or Evil from Good depending
On whom you believed and eventually
Nobody believed anybody and both sides
Picked up remaining marbles and quit.
The half-life decay of poisons slowly comes,
And that tower may decay to quaintness
As others hereabouts have done,
Unless, as in Charlemagne's time,
And Wallenstein's, and Napoleon's,
And as recently as smiling Reagan's,
We change to Them and Us once more.

ONE MORE REPORT ON NASHVILLE

The twisteroo in O. Henry's *A
Municipal Report* is that Uncle Caesar,
Who talks like Stepin Fetchit, is
A killer in defense of sweet
Gentility, for Nashville had as much
Romance as anyplace even before
Minnie came from Grinder's Switch
To be seen from the Confederate balcony
Of the old Ryman, a few doors down
From the synagogue where boy ushers
On high holidays would misdirect
Country folk looking for the Opry,
Betting on how long it would take them
To realize they were hearing
The wrong kind of nasal drone.

Athens,

With a concrete Parthenon to prove it,
Signs in the park commemorating
A battle fought in 1864 with its 1960
Sequels still unmarked in the grandeur
Of the old L & N depot, the lunch
Counters long since battered down, and
The gritty outdoor platform where
O. Henry once passed through and fugitive
Poets of the 1930s came and went.

In the

Distance glows the Opryland Hotel,
A slick and sanitary place where
I got busted with a mob of chanting
Cripples in 1993 and carted off
To a privatized for profit cell
Which could not hold our crowd,
For Uncle Caesar's descendants
Now sit in judgment locally.

Even

A fake baroque-style depot and

A fake Parthenon become real,
And “Wildwood Flower” and “Orange
Blossom Special” are wired to
Everywhere; and the twisteroo
Is that jailbird pop writer
Porter, alias O. Henry, was
Absolutely right: Nashville, though
Unique as Vassar Clements’ fiddle,
Is our common universal romance.

YOUNG MAN WITH A HAT

Nothing wrong with the head
Or with the hair for that matter,
A good Caucasian mop, middling brown
And of a profuse teenage thickness,
But nearly always covered, sometimes
With one hat, often, at least today, with
Two, Always the cap exactly backward
With the bill shading the neck, today
A broad floppy brim borrowed,
I believe, from a friend, making him look
Like a pulp fiction hero who thrilled me
When I was his age: The Shadow, master
Of disguise, even, on radio, invisibility,
Who knew what evil lurked in the hearts
Of men. This one may know, too,
Although he is too polite to blurt it out.
At any rate his head is so full
Of pin-wheeling notions that they might
Dazzle us to blindness if he did not
Discreetly cover it at all times.

BASEBALL OPERA

A ballet overture commences
With stadium and auditorium
Waltzing and boogalooing,
Fusing diamond horseshoe
With skyboxes, astroturf
Losing its unreality among
The other stage set elements.

Then Rheingold is praised
In paper cups by a chorus
Of watery beer maidens,
And a pants-part batboy
Sings a tale of long ago
Told him by his grandfather,
Of teams long since wizarded
To alien shores, but the memory
Of the clutch homer hit
By Bobby Thompson to win
The playoff echoes resounding
In a high A above high C
Caught in the upper decks
By a suddenly enriched hearer.

The crowd is urged to be
“Moved uniformly by a spirit
Of uselessness which delights
Them,” enjoying the shake-offs
And time-out recitatives.
For no one is truly a fan
Without reveling in dull spots
So meaningful to the connoisseur.

After the celebrated stretching chorus,
The tenor pitchers duel in
Alternating bel canto trills is
Stopped by the baritone thwack

Of one going to Waveland Avenue
Or into orbit with the memory of
Sutherland and Horne in *Semiramide*,
Or Ted Williams trotting diva-like home,
Or the other moments for grandchildren
On tape or disc, but the best is memory
Of being there, seeing and hearing
A body akin to ours exceed itself
Just for the humanity of it.

BILOXI BEACH, 1969

If we have a common country anymore,
This bone-white stretch of sand is almost it.
Even between the Pascagoula and the Pearl,
South of US 90 you can ease up a little.
Even in Mississippi you can feel almost safe
When the air is seasoned by refuse from the sea.
The Gulf Coast lives on fish, war, and tourists,
All of which flourish in warm water ports.
Yankee dollars make old enemies discreet.
The MPs guard you from the locals.
A black man in uniform, you nearly forget
How close you are to infection's core.
Yet you can drink cold beer on the beach
With no trouble at all, if you're careful.
The out-of-state plates are your shield
Near the docks among the pirate ghosts.
Go on eating gumbo as a regular thing.
Taste twenty dozen kinds of fish and veggies
Miscegenating in perfect harmony.
But keep an eye on flags in the harbor
Which warn of danger from the sea,
And keep an eye on the set of men's mouths
Which warn of danger from the land.

THE PRIVACY OF THE EYE

All right, Marlowe---You've been sapped, shot at, and filled
full of dope until you're crazier than two waltzing mice---Now let's see
you do something tough---

---Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*

Each morning he pauses
Between the pulling up of one sock
And the pulling up of the other
To focus on the two waltzing mice
Who get crazier every day,
Just as he hurts a little more
From the beatings that are part of the job.
But he would rather have the beatings
Than give up the right to insult
The rich who are the only ones who can
Pay him to find out as much of
The truth as can be found out.
He is a fantasy of integrity.
Thus, he is alone in the real world,
Not settling down to everyday peril
With an always dangerous female,
For a serial adventurer must
Go it alone except for a
Tired and compromised cop who
Gives him forty-eight hours to
Solve the mess, which he will,
For this is what we want of him,
Even when the truth is bitter
As it always is, with no relief
But buying himself s drink
From the office bottle and watching
The door through which someone
Will come waving a gun.
And though the waltzing mice
Never get anywhere, we envy him.

THE HUNGRY MADISON CABBIE, 1958

The sign on Atwood Avenue says
HUNGRY, HUNGRY, HUNGRY! And he is
For old memories in books, for movies
He has heard about but never seen,
For the pizza awaiting him at State and Lake,
For his pregnant wife on Johnson Street,
For the dead hours when he can read
C. Wright Mills and Kerouac with light
From street lamps on the square
Before the Sunday morning shuttle
Of drunks to the bar on Packers Avenue,
Allowed to open at eight a.m., and the good
But non-tipping communicants going
To mass in the center of town.
There is a fare at the 400 Bar,
And he speeds down Williamson to get it,
Taking a generous drunk who wants no change
For his dollar when he gets to Regent Street.
Then back for pizza, then a short haul
To the Belmont where he can munch
And leave greasy stains on *The Power Elite*
And look up now and then at the dome
With Miss Forward on top and recalling
Jane Addams writing about her childhood
And seeing Old Abe there, a famous
Bird, the stuffed remains of the
Eagle mascot of the Wisconsin militia
At Shiloh and later. The effigy admired
By nostalgic veterans, but there no longer,
Destroyed by fire decades ago,
For Old Abe was no phoenix.
But the scholar cabbie can see it
Along with the small bent girl
And aging men with tear-wet beards.
The cabbie's mind shifts sideways
As he wonders whether Frank Lloyd Wright
Looked at Old Abe and envied the dome

So well-sited and how early he thought
Of complementing it with a circular
Sweep into Lake Monona, a plan
Recently scuttled but seen anyhow,
Spreading east of Doty Street, by
A cabbie possessed with past and future,
Already wanting to be home listening
For life in his wife's belly while
Watching *Camera Three* on a round tube
Echoing past dome and future terrace,
Staying hungry in all dimensions.

BELLE STARR'S DAUGHTER

She delves in our equilibrium,
Knowing it must be punctuated
By upheavals, seeing
Some secret truth connecting
Green corn shoots splitting
Hard ground, overthrowing
Something always rebelled against
Even when we had no name for it,
Knowing only that our bodies
And what we worked on and with
Were rightfully ours.

Now she stands on the fault line
Far from Younger's Bend seeking
A labyrinthine thread in
An ecology renewed by fire
Among the plague victims,
Not waiting but working,
Recalling the dust of fields
In the dust of archives,
Hopeful for the cleansing rain,
Certain of the growing seeds.

CHICAGO WINDOWS AT SUKOTHAI, THAILAND

Observation of destruction can be
The beginning of wisdom: railroad
Bridges that Jenney blew up for
Sherman in Georgia taught him
The fluid spirit of steel, and Root
Rebuilding those bridges in haste learned
That steel would brace the future.

Chicago burned and boomed, receiving
Builders from all over, and Root made
A superb valedictory to the mass
And thrust of stone, but Jenney lifted
Storey upon storey whose walls could be
Open to the light and followers made
New arrogant staring transparencies.

The new surge of power lifted but
Could not cool for another fifty years,
So the great fixed central panels
Were flanked by sashes that could be
Opened to aid the fan gyring up
Warm air to the high and noble ceiling.

All desire causes suffering, even
The desire to know how one place
Differs from another and different
Ways of being human. Illusion
Must be conquered, but humans must
First know it to its very depths.

Here in Sukothai among the stripped
Illusions of wisdom, the peeled image,
The lithe but transitory movement,
The warring mix striving for purity,
We are strangers but at home, seeing
Sukothai through Chicago windows.

BIG BLUE STEM POEMS

BIG BLUE STEM RULES

Sometimes tall as a person, sometimes
Taller, forming deep and complex sod,
Good for tribal lodges and farmer homes,
Sometimes almost nothing but big blue stem
For many miles, at least in the old days,
But not forever: nothing is forever
In an ecology ruled by fire. Lightning
Strikes in late summer when the stems
Once green have really turned to blue,
And the rabbits, voles, and prairie dogs
Scurry ahead of flame, and bison thunder
Shakes the earth, leaving a char that
Soon renews, leaving room for shorter
Grasses: red clover beloved of Lindsay's
"Flower-fed buffaloes", hairy puccoon
For butterflies, phlox, black-eyed Susans,
Ragwort, milk weed, colic root, asters,
Coreopsis, Joe Pye weed, a bloom for
Every warm month, for spiders, bees, moths,
Snakes, toads, meadow larks, quail, and
Big animals well adapted for flight,
With big blue stem renewing from
Its earthy tangle among the worms and
Mice and crickets, always richening the
Food of our food. The once and
Future big blue stem rules.

BIG BLUE STEM AT NIGHT

Wind raises dust in dry months,
And sometimes a full moon just above
The horizon will seem to expand into
A terrific disc of glowing orange,
And, for a once in a lifetime
Treat, something on a rise miles away
Will expand to the limits of the disc.
I have never seen this, but Tecumseh
And his brother the Prophet and Black Hawk
Perhaps saw a distant buffalo framed
Like the one depicted on the nickel
They stopped minting in 1940,
The one celebrated by Sandburg when
It was brand-new: "Runners on the prairie,
Goodbye"; but we can see again
Big blue stem grass at night. Moons
Like that do come. I saw one once
East of Decatur after delivering
Food to locked-out workers and
Helping an old friend get sober for
That stupendous moon, so possibly,
With big blue stem coming back
And the buffalo raised now to keep
Alive some sense of the past of
Our prairie, someone might stand
Among big blue stem and see a buffalo
Framed in a great moon. Runner, hello.

BIG BLUE STEM NEAR WATER

Water seeks its level, and the land
Slopes toward it with the grass
Giving way on the banks of steady
Slow streams to cottonwoods lifting
Their seed on the wind in the late spring
And the willows dipping tendrils
In the shady water with bark
That will ease aches when chewed,
With big blue stem roots holding
Dark soil created by the grass itself
And its symbiotic tunnelers.
So the clear water teems with perch
And catfish and tender-legged frogs,
And the land in August is loud
With locusts by day and crickets by night.
The water carried burnt-out half logs
Ingeniously made for humans carrying
Beaver skins from far timber country,
Returning steel and glass and doom,
In time, for tall grass country.
But old mounds where people lived
And a system always destroying and
Transforming itself predict a return
Of big blue stem again by water.

BIG BLUE STEM COMES BACK

Short grass for cattle succeeds.
Wheat, which is grass, succeeds.
Corn is grass, too, though its
Kernels feed hogs and us, who
Have only one stomach and cannot
Eat grass directly but know that we
Live on grass and that seeds of
Grass are chicken feed and the
Leaves of grass are liberating
Words. Big blue stem comes back
When again it is the fashion to
Lament poison in field and stream,
Brown rivers flooding the towns,
Too inbred and fragile a gene pool
To feed the teeming urban burners
Of fossil fuels and poisoners of
Aquifers. Big blue stem comes back,
For it is not extinct like the
Passenger pigeons that once flew
Above big blue stem and crashed
Entirely when their numbers imploded.
Big blue stem can flourish between
The lanes of interstates below
The sonic boom of fighters as it
Once flourished with the urgent
Horny boom of prairie chickens
And will again long after the fighters
Vanish. It will flourish until the
Heat makes cracked, dry land or
Until the ice advances and
Retreats once more and then
Big blue stem comes back
Again and again for as much
Forever as we can think of.

CONGRESS KILLS ERGONOMIC RULES

at the ultrasound right arm
braced to ease pain's repeats
left hand cues glowing screen
under re-revised rules
no one's boss responsible

always and everywhere work
kills hoop-bent harvesters
black brown and mineral-fibered
lungers sleepless drivers
gilders of cathedrals us

led on by a smiling face
in old cigarette ads
much-married asbestos heirs
greenhouse gassers oil leaches
burying us in piles of shit

aches in knuckles recall kegs
rolled to cold rooms from hot trucks
new bottles exploding in hands
knees wrenched on uncleaned floors
rage turned inward gun-eating cops

hardened hearts worst of all
decreeing bricks without straw
refusing to let the people go
ignoring the long series of plagues
finally drowning without heirs

ODE TO JOY

That powerful tune first entered my mind
In a plain frame church with the words
“Grant us wisdom, grant us courage” and
Others I long since forgot. Then I recall
Picking it out again from one of my first
Long-playing records, splendid disks
Of Toscanini conducting Beethoven’s Ninth.
And I recall identifying the theme driving home
In a van full of wheelchairs after one more
Tilt at the windmills of Washington in 1982,
And most memorably in Spanish with bongos
In Havana with an orchestra and chorus of
Inmates at a psychiatric hospital in 1993,
Forging an unbreakable comradeship.
Last night in the music shell named for
Labor’s great Petrillo it was preceded
By Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw*,
Smashing, then re-imagining the old ways
In memoriam to the victims of the reaction
Against the great enlightenment of which
The “Choral” Symphony is a jagged peak.
Beethoven follows Schoenberg with no break,
The tone rows merging into open fifths
As I looked at the almost full moon
And saw the rabbit of the Maya and the Japanese
And the man that Schoenberg and Beethoven saw
Both together. And I heard under the low strings
The lowering traffic of the Outer Drive and sharp
Whistling signals in Grant Park and a rude
Motorcycle gunning, but Beethoven has more power,
More power even than the silent, gliding jetliners
Descending, as the “Ode to Joy” theme slowly rises
And courses through the veins like subtle liquor.
And finally the baritone and chorus break out
And the quartet soars over the chorus
And the vaulting soprano soars over all,
Making the Grant Park thousands one, those
Who see the rabbit and those who see the man,
From Pill Hill, Skokie, London Towne, and Phoenix,
All exalted in the great affirmation.

DESIRE FLOURISHING

She looks; I listen.
I write; she paints.
She covers the walls;
I fill the shelves.
I drive; she stitches.
She displays her portfolio;
I harangue the masses.
I admire each day
The William Morris pillows
Stitched so carefully at
One square inch per hour
While she listened to me
Read Faulkner and I knew
When to breathe as the words
Cascaded. Later we traded
Lines from old movies:
“A perfectly tip-top name.”
“A girl, an adolescent girl.”
“Not unlike the *Mona Lisa*.”
“Boy, you watch that knife.”
And so to bed under
The color-wheel quilt
And the accustomed warmth
Beyond sight and sound.

A GIFT OF PAPER DOLLS

Growing up in a new millennium
You will nevertheless be bound
By memories of the construction
Of gender, class, “race, milieu, and moment,”
And an infinity of shared memories
Which you must somehow make your own.
It is progress when you learn to hold
The scissors properly and cut along the lines
And color with even discretion between them:
Becoming your great-grandmothers when you
Deck them out in middie blouses, and further
Back in sunbonnets, mobcaps, wimples,
And chaplets of extinct white flowers
So luring to redolent mammoth hunters.
Play with your mother’s nursing uniform
Or your aunt’s badge and boots and the
Glock nine-millimeter she cleans so carefully,
Or make your doll a star with your father’s
Fringed and studded black leather jacket,
Each flying strand separately pasted on,
Or his proud engineer’s bib overalls.
Find a charcoal crayon for the business suit
With Joan Crawford shoulders, and bright red
And turquoise for Grandma’s tango outfit.
You can put absolutely anything on top of
Those white utilitarian undergarments.
Accessorize with scalpel, Uzi, and palm pilot.
Wear Hong Kong split skirts, chadoors, jeans.
Imagine your doll borne screaming skyward by
Fearsome Kong. Practice being Kong yourself.
And climax with your great-aunt’s 1940
Ziegfeld staircase fantasy with Hedy Lamarr
Blank faced descending with stars on diaphanous
Sleeves and in her crown meditating on
The player-piano anti-jamming radio device that
Will glorify her in post-paper doll years.

SZYMBORSKA

To say thank you in Polish remember
That *dz* is like *j*, and *j* is *y*, and an *n*
Not written sounds after the *ie*,
So *dziękuję*, *jen COO ya*, and also
All wubbleyou are *vees* and an *l*
With a slash through it is a wubbleyou
And *sz* is *sh* and even a single *s*
Sometimes has the hint of an aspirate,
With many other rules but nothing
Unpronounceable, for even small children
In Poland say everything perfectly,
Quoting reams of school-taught Mickiewicz
And twirling their hoped-for mustaches
As they re-enact Sienkiewicz at play.

Frost said that poetry is “what is
Left out in the translation”, but that
Is not always true, for a lot of
Szyborska comes through as clear as
A broken trumpet call in clear January
From the church tower in her Krakow,
Floating over the neighborhood still
Haunted by ghosts of Jews who did not
Escape and the memories of those who
Helped or were afraid to help or even
Were infected by the ancient poison,
And the universities and battlements
Of a city whose heart was always free
Despite the many occupations, the latest
Of which brings the mildly adventurous
Tourists gawking at women with net bags
Full of good bread and slender bottles,
One of whom might be the sly and witty
Szyborska, so clear-sighted that words
Jump borders like winged cavalry but
With no swords, just wisdom that heals
The cracks in our sphere. *Dziękuję*.

TEAR THIS BUILDING DOWN

I recall a clear memory from 1964
In this new millennium while watching
The slow and mostly unreported
Demolition of the high-rise ghettos
Called Robert Taylor Homes, forty years
A failure, bringing misery to those
Confined by overseers and masters
Of the poor on Chicago's South Side.
The bosses were certain they knew best.

The buildings one by one are stripped
And blindly stare for months before
Finally leaving a hole in the air, and,
For those who had to be there, a whiff
Of urine from elevators and stair wells,
A sight overlaid in mind by the searing
Fireball of last September repeated
Endlessly as the innocent were crushed
And the calls for revenge boomed
From ass's jawbones braying death.

The pungent memory returns unasked
Of a late night on North Halsted Street
The fall after the Freedom Summer:
It being Sunday, Gary Davis sang no blues
Before midnight. The blind back man was
A preacher after all, even in those fumes
Of tobacco and booze. The crowd wanted
His famous song about Samson, the one
Covered by Peter, Paul, and Mary, except
We wanted his Delta rasp and grit,
The down home hurt of it, acknowledging
His triumph over systematic terror,
His overflowing rage between
Levees built of chords and sweat.

“If I had my way in this wicked world”
And then that night he chose not to say
The rest which we knew anyhow but
Banged his palm on the guitar’s shell
Saying “Whomp!” and up close after
The furious slap you could hear
The faint scratch of callused finger tips,
Recalling the returning Godly power
Of the man once deluded by the ways
Of the Philistines and their temptresses,
Blinded, chained, and mocked in the
Thronged temple of the idol Dagon in Gaza,
Pressing his callused hands on the pillars,
Dying with the glory of crushing more
Thousands of God’s enemies and of course
People who just happened to be there
Than in the rest of his holy-war life.

We applauded this superb retelling
Of a story three thousand years old
By a brave and righteous old man
Singing for his oppressed people,
Whom we would help all we could,
Sharing their outrage but hoping
For better justice than endless
Crushed bodies forever. I loved it.
I am not sorry for that. He was
A great artist performing a classic.

But, as I watch the shamefaced
Dismantling in an oil-consuming jam
On the Dan Ryan Expressway now,
I realize why the Gaza mob might
Have cheered last September,
Although the cheering might have been
An ass-jawbone lie, and I pledge
Never to cheer for death again.

IV

The Cicerone

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines "cicerone" as a guide who conducts sightseers. Its preferred pronunciation is with the cees pronounced as esses, as in Cicero, Illinois. The word ultimately derives from everybody's favorite didactic blowhard, Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106-43bce. The cicerone is a comfortable persona for me. I spent thirty-two years as a high school history and social studies teacher, conducting many field trips. I delight in being learned with my friends. The cicerone poems are the only serious verse I have ever been able to write on commission. If you have a place you would like the cicerone to take you, please let me know.

THE CICERONE NEAR TERRE HAUTE

On old US 40 two miles east
A caravan of true believers go,
Threading through the cemetery gate.
They look for an artificial deer
Over the grave of a furniture merchant,
Useful for finding the plain word Debs
In modest granite a few rows back.
Pilgrims home to the site expecting
The cicerone to strut his stuff:

“The state ranks dead soldiers more impressively.
Pullman is deeper down, better protected
From us. Grant’s vault is bigger. Buffalo Bill
Has a better view. His favorite, old John Brown,
Lies with his sons at their New York farm.
He also liked Tom Paine whose bones
Have the world for their country.
This common marker in a common lot
Will do for the herald of our common triumph.
In death as in life our Debs
Stands for millions of wandering hoboes
And for the yard bulls who had to chase them,
For those imprisoned for waging peace
And for those who killed when they had to.
Our group with too many martyrs
And no clout, chronicled only
By trivial pursuers, honors this
Saint with relics strong enough
To keep creating faith.
The ones who live for others
Need nothing carved in stone. ‘As long as there is
A lower class, I am in it. As long
As there is a criminal element,
I am of it. As long as there is
A soul in prison, I am not free.’”

The lips of the people move with his.
Nothing more needs to be said.

THE CICERONE AT GETTYSBURG

With wheelchairs, walkers, canes
White canes for the blind, signers for the deaf,
These weaponless but militant maimed,
Homeward bound from successful protest,
Tube-chronicled and button-bedecked,
The all-time logistic masterpiece
Of the drum-major cicerone,
Ascend the needle to the sun-glassed eye
For a full panorama of hallowed ground.
Good-naturedly they mass to indulge
Their cicerone's wordy fix:

In her motorized and customized chair,
Operated by her one working big toe,
Laurie spins to sense it all.

“As you can see, or as the Braille plaques tell you,
This view is studded with a century's granite shafts,
Quite unlike the field at Waterloo
Where crops and lived-in houses tell us
That slaughter is more common, land more rare
Than here among these honored dead
Where a record for half a globe was set:
More guts and brains spilled out,
More limbs hacked off, more deafened by the cannon,
More crushed by screaming horses, more spitted
By steel cast for that very purpose
Than in any other American melee.

“There Buford's horsemen held the ground.
There Ewell advanced on that first day.
There's Wheat Field, Peach Orchard, Devil's Den,
The much-disputed Little Round Top,
The center of the line where Pickett charged.”

The dervish cicerone whirls besotted:
“Stuart leaves Lee blind, Longstreet delays,
Hill should push here, Meade follow there.

Sickles dares too much. His right leg leaves stains
Beneath the peach trees. Sixty thousand pawns
Groan for water. The crows feed
On their eyes when silence comes.”

Laurie cannot nod but rolls her eyes
Because she knows the joy of fusing
Into an army marching with banners.
“It heats the blood to kill for peace,
To regiment for freedom, to blockade
For sidewalk cuts and toilet pull bars.
A hazard worse than Patriots and Scuds
Is the beauty of our pleasant poison, art:
The matchless prose engraved on hammered pennies
After the corpses have been covered up;
Timber-toed Sickles guiding Griffith and crew,
About to celebrate *The Birth of a Nation*,
Over the monumented ground fifty years later,
Perhaps recalling his old teacher da Ponte
Who helped Mozart intone that women are like that.
It was not news that men were: fucking killers.”

The cicerone zooms toward a big picture:
Draft rioters torch blacks in the Big Apple.
Shaw and his heroes bloom in the unmarked glory ditch.
The bloody machine crushes the chess master egos,
Then, save us, tells the tale in *Pilgrim's Progress* prose.
He connects it more recent freedom fights,
Not excepting, of course, their own.

The cicerone was never better.
When he stopped, he got good mitt
Except from Laurie and some others
Who could not clap.

THE CICERONE CROSSES THE TRAIL OF TEARS

No start, no ending, no place
Better than any other place
To cut a seamless fabric:
The cicerone and his friend drift
Downward on the big river,
Or, more exactly, on the roads
That bracket it but are ruled
By its presence, hundreds of miles
Below the two-color junction.
Now the muddy Missouri and
The blue Mississippi are no longer
Distinguishable to the naked eye
Above the point where Huck and Jim
Missed the turn to freedom in the fog.
They pause above Cape Girardeau,
Stopped by names, nothing else,
For the forests and swamps are like
What they have seen for many miles:
A state park on the Missouri side,
A state forest in Illinois bearing
The words *Trail of Tears*,
A name the cicerone has known well
Since his Oklahoma boyhood.

“A crime so great it could not
Be kept out of textbooks, an eddy
Challenging the patriotic flow
Of Andrew Jackson’s squatter triumph
On the endless stream of twenty dollar bills,
An atrocity all right, small by standards
Of the next century, but real, thousands
Of corpses from despair of uprooting
Hunger and cold, perfectly unjust,
No excuse but greed, treaties broken,
The courts defied, the very troops
Shocked into tears when following orders.”

But the cicerone wants to present
Something foggier, more complex, more
To the taste of his companion who fights
Righteously and well but has a
Proper awe of compounding currents,
Of subtleties in words and things.

“There were those who faded
Into the hills of the Great Smokies,
Lived like deer or rabbit until
The fury died in their tormenters,
But most went because they must
Survive, and they were good at that:
Telling tales of the trickster god,
Holding their hills against the powers
By playing Catawba against Creek,
Spanish against French against British,
Living in log cabins early on or
Maybe invented by them, mingling
With trappers and adventurers. Chief John Ross
Was seven-eighths Scotch, helped Jackson
Smash the Redstick Creeks at Horseshoe Bend.
Sequoyah, inventor of marvelous letters,
Had a German father. Some read
Wordsworth, drank from crystal, owned slaves,
Which proved that they were civilized
And could despise blanket wearers.
They had a written constitution
Which was state of the art,
Could read the Bible in their own language:

“Too smart to figure they could win,
Smart enough too twinge the consciences
Of killers and land grabbers, smart enough
Even to run a few scams in real estate
For themselves and kill for profit
And revenge, editors of history and myth,
Victims but seldom saints, exploiters
When they had the chance, like us,
Also like us, keeping alive
The complex memories of injustice,
Hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

“They wintered here, some of them,
Later met here to make peace
Among themselves, some of them.
There are other crossings farther down
More bendings, changes of course,
More tears. Go read the river.”

THE CICERONE IN CUBA

The Museum of the Revolution in Havana
Is the Presidential Palace recycled, for
After the revolution there was no
Pressing need for palaces, and the cyclists
Circle before it pedaling tutti-frutti bikes,
Which have come from China in Model T black,
But the locals must have their local color
Along with their elaborate flirting with
The tourist women, their sighs full of
Cigar smoke, for although the revolution
Is quite real, the US blockade keeps out
Revolutionary chic. Even the posters
Of Che, Haydee, Camillo, and other martyrs
In the museum store can be bought only with
The chic hard currencies of the visitors,
Which makes the cicerone and his group,
Fellow travelers in the oldspeak sense,
Ashamed, but not ashamed enough
To pass up bargain souvenirs of
Their somewhat clandestine pilgrimage.

The museum has blown a bubble,
And in the plastic sea under its transparency
Is the original authentic *Granma*,
The namesake of the party paper,
The fifty-seven foot motor yacht
Bought with \$15,000 of an old crook's graft,
Which landed eighty-two pale greenhorns
At Playa de los Colorados in Oriente
On December 2, 1962. Three weeks later
Fifteen survivors made it to the mountains
And heard a great speech from Fidel.
Two years after that Batista ran,
And the famously hairy army triumphed.
Everyone wants pictures, especially for
Grandchildren: Grandma confronting *Granma*,
Becoming Saint Joan La Pasionaria Grambo

“To the working class she’s a precious pearl.”
For we all live myths, and there is even
A kernel of fact in some of them.
The group is all-American, dissident cells
Of a mad Goliath shaming itself
By swatting mosquitoes with missiles
And risking a planet to stop
Something which can never be stopped.

In the calm eye of *Granma’s* plastic sea
The cicerone is moved to speak:

“I had a Cherokee friend once who refused
To play Squanto in a fourth grade pageant,
Saying he was as much a *Mayflower*
Descendant as any of us, and he was right.
So I denominate us all *Granma*
Descendants and say that the good
Medical research and health care delivery
And the literacy for all are ours, too,
And the quarantined gays, imprisoned socialists,
And the skewed economy, legacy of
Half a millennium of being someone’s colony,
These are ours, too, and the fight
To loosen the chains girding this island,
The blockade which is hurting good people
And driving them a little crazy, ours.
For this boat proves that even
The most ignorant and chartless voyage
Gets to the destination, if, of course,
You are going in the right direction.”

THE CICERONE SEES A TRASHED COLUMBUS

The tour group is amused to see
HONKY GO HOME splashed on the base
Of far-staring bronze Columbus
At the foot of Columbus Drive in Chicago.
The cicerone is caught between
His beloved mind-quakes and
The jumbled attic of his lore:

“The cops gassed us in 1968
When we gathered at the old band-shell,
Long since torn down, marked only by memory,
And we played hide and seek with them
Around the base of Columbus here.

“Chicago schools still get his holiday.
Catholics make sure of that, especially Italians.
They learned they had to control a piece
Of the great national ruling myth.

“Maybe it can be moved to a safer place,
The way they moved the Haymarket Square cop
To an always guarded spot in police headquarters
After we blew it up a couple of times,
Or Kosciuszko that they moved across the way
When they feared Puerto Ricans would not value
A Polish statue when the neighborhood changed.

“Maybe they can make it invisible for a while
By re-routing the traffic the way they did
The Roman column that Mussolini gave Chicago
‘In the eleventh year of the Fascist era.’ Really,
Check it out. It’s less than a mile away.

“Maybe this statue could be art again. Don’t
Laugh. Museums are full of preserved Apollos
Once made dickless and noseless by Christians.
Mosaics are revealed under plaster in mosques
That once were churches and are now museums.

“Of course it is too late for leaden George III,
Melted for bullets that were fired at his soldiers.
And Kalinin, whom I saw in his namesake city,
Now once again Tver, with PUNK ROCK
Chalked on his shoes, may never come back.

“Graffitists triumphant, we anti-imperialists,
We anti-racists, we true preservers
Of ecologies and cultures, we caught
A symbol off balance, saw a teachable moment,
And proudly flaunted our black belts

“The imperialist recessionary goes
‘Lest we forget, lest we forget,’
And no one can predict who
Will be the last statue in the park.
We are fused with Columbus. Like him
We would not go home and could not
Even if we knew
Where home was.”

THE CICERONE IN THE TRIANGLE

Mapping before we escaped gravity
Was endless triangulation.
A theodolite on a tripod focussed
On two known points, calculated angles,
Then moved on to a new apex,
Et cetera, ad infinitum.
Then grids were laid on triangles
To divide mine from yours,
Which left out the natives who
Thought all of this was ours
And could never be divided.

Now triangles swell and fade.
The cicerone and his friend the planner
Find themselves edging a big one
Connecting three cities which are
Not urban according to the planner,
Because the young, old, poor, and crippled
Cannot access the needful on foot.
So downtown is gone like the
Family farm, although a few of those
Still exist, suffering from
Changing tastes in poison and
Processors who want, as usual,
Power without responsibility.

Unlike pilots in the last propeller war,
They have no relief tubes.
They gyre off I-40 to exchange
Fluids and stoke up on the
Always superb greasy fries.
They sit in Eames chairs
Where they are joined by a trucker,
Both wired and wirelessly,
Whose dispatcher told him by cel
To crash for a few hours.
His chin approaches the table
More closely with each nod.

The planner admits a guilty pleasure
In driving these well-engineered
Slabs where you can go
A mile and a quarter per minute
To shop for bargains in outlet malls
With freedom to go anywhere
As long as the road goes there
And you have wheels and can drive:
“But this is slavery to many
And degradation of the land
And poison in air and bodies
To make profit for a very few
Who are hard to attack because
They have enclosed the commons
Where we once addressed each other.”

The cicerone nods in agreement:
“I love to loop and yo-yo on
These roads listening to a tape
Of Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*,
Glorifying in freedom from slowness,
And from long hikes with no rest
Because benches are no longer there
To comfort those going nowhere.
I wish I could believe that you can
Reverse this fading century’s race,
Confound Frank Lloyd Wright, and
Make elevators outrace cars
And rails trump highways after all.
My slogan for the new millennium
Is HEY, HEY! HO, HO!
FOSSIL FUELS HAVE GOT TO GO!
And age will soon make me as you say
A Slave and beggar to those with wheels.
I wish I could still take the North
Robinson bus from Aunt Effie’s house
To downtown Oklahoma City where
They had a bookseller who knew books
And a jazz buff behind the record counter

And a skid row, a place for misfits
Temporary and permanent, a relaxed stretch
Crowned by my uncle's Reno Street bar,
A chivalric and well-regulated dive,
Dealing in measured oblivion.
I miss it. I miss downtown.
The place where it used to be
Is twelve hundred miles west on I-40,
Which bulldozed that beery refuge."

The trucker lifts his head and says:
"I can score you some bennies,
So you can drive straight through."

THE CICERONE AT KHAJURAHO

From the roof of the Terraza,
Kashmiri and Swiss food their specialty,
The cicerone and his niece look down
On a sunburned blonde sandaling behind
Her guru and decide that she is
Faking it because she can return to
Smorgesbord, Kierkegaard, and comfort
Anytime she likes, unlike the man
Pedaling rickshaw number seven who
Importuned them when they insisted
On walking half a mile from
Their luxury hotel to the temples.
The cicerone needed exercise and
His niece, winner of the family's
Lone varsity letter, actually
Wanted it, but they did promise
Number seven that they would
Allow him to pedal them back
After their sightseeing, realizing
Once again and with chagrin
That they are fabulously rich here
And that nothing they can do
Will even things soon. "The golden rule
Is resolutely to refuse
To have what others cannot,"
Gandhi said, and there is no way
On their pre-booked excursion
Even to fake it like the blonde
In the white sari. They believe
In putting nature and the past
To the question, experimenting,
Analyzing, and fighting for a
Superhuman objectivity, strangers
In a land where the wheel
Of time is something one must
Escape and Puritans go naked
And God IT not HE

Is everything and all forms
Of worship are acceptable,
Although of course they fight
And hate just like Westerners.
After lemonade and chat
Of the heavyweight variety
They stroll to the temples
Full of tourists watching
Compound-complex copulations
And hourglass asparas,
Seldom looking up to see
Love becoming spiritual
And, above that, the casting off
Of worldly things and,
Above that, union with
The great everything which
Is also nothing, quite like
Plato's ladder of love,
And the spires which
Are fifth above earth,
Water, air, and fire. It
Is as good as Chartres or Tikal
For getting out of time.
But the lotus on the spires
Has twenty-four petals standing
For time which cannot be escaped,
At least not on a packaged tour,
And the lions, symbol of
The minor thieves who ruled
Here once, compel the cicerone
To praise Vishnu the preserver
And Lord Cunningham also,
A preserver despite his shock
At all the naked pleasure here,
By orienting for his niece,
Who is learned in nerve endings
And the electric impulses
Which rule our movements,
The fourth-dimensional location
Of the wonders of Khajuraho.

“When these great towers arose,
One of Leif the Lucky’s gang
Dropped a bodkin on new-found earth.
Gunpowder first amused the Sung.
Lady Murasaki told of Genji.
Ibn Sina healed in Persia.
Vladimir converted at Kiev.
Basil the Bulgar-killer raged.
Gellert was rolled down Buda slope,
And the Aymara dug moats
On the high plains near Titicaca.
And whether this was an arc
Of a wheel turning without
Meaning, or whether we merge
With the force at Omega Point,
No one can say. But all of us
Can wonder, and wonder is
The best part of you and me,
The sunburned blonde, her guru,
Rickshaw driver number seven
And all of us who may or
May not add up to zero.”

THE CICERONE AT PERE LACHAISE

A dead Rothschild has outwitted the jokesters,
And they laugh hugely at the tasteful
Black block with only the back
To back double R logo to mark
The great baron's vault, smaller than
The actress Raquel's flamboyant stone
Nearby, smaller even than the tombs of
Lesser financiers, quite unlike the joke
About the shtetl dweller who came here
Knowing only Rothschild's name and aura,
Gazed at the allegedly colossal
Mausoleum, and sighed in envious awe
"That is what I call really living."
The baron had gone beyond mere wealth

To the protective coloration marking
All discreet modern dynasties
Who leave display to others and luxuriate
Beyond our envious eyes.

It is a luxury even to be dead here,
Although, as Wilde says, "Hardly showing
A serious state of mind at the end."
And Oscar himself is under Epstein's sphinx
Near Gertrude Stein and more newly
Scandalous Jim Morison who has a guard
To keep fans from decorating his tomb
With used condoms and syringes.

Uphill they find the really sacred spot:
The wall where the Communards died
In 1871 for lifting the curtain too early
On the just society, and, across from the
Bullet-riddled wall, the spiky
Monuments to the Holocaust Jews.

"This is as serious as death gets

In Paris,” the cicerone says, “and
Even here it invites ordering and
Analysis according to the genius
Of the language, and we have had
Enough of that. Come down the hill
To the Metro and to life at the
Musee d’Orsay, that great blooming
As object and image were freed
From each other, and everyone’s
Holiday picnic loomed as large
As a saint’s apotheosis or the
Royal whore as Blessed Virgin.
This sense-proud city is full of
Ways to feel the vibrations
Of past and future merging.”

THE CICERONE AT ANTIETAM

A perfect day for imperfect bodies:
The mild sun on the well-ramped walks
And glinting in the creek as the pair
Roll and gimp among memories of bodies
Suddenly shattered by a leadstorm,
Then hacked by quick unsterile
Surgeons with nothing to kill the pain.
How they would envy the cicerone's
Plastic and aluminum knee, his elegant
Cane which blooms into a chair
For rest and observation,
Also his friend the architect's
Power chair humming subserviently,
Agile beyond the smoke-wreathed dreams
Of those who triaged snapped spines
To death tents and lopped limbs
While cursing and being cursed.

Like McClellan, they have the slows,
Drifting westward on the union lines,
Following the eruptions of death
Through the long day of 17 September 1862.
Hooker assaults Lee's left flank.
He cannot reach the Dunker church.
Nor can they. The reconstructed building
Has too many steps. They lack ability
To deploy bodies where needed, again
Like McClellan. Further left they note
No corn in Miller's cornfield.
The sunken road is now on the level.
Sinking his cane the cicerone finds
The shallow fords ignored by Burnside,
Who let his men be slaughtered by the bridge,
Then got across so late that A. P. Hill
Had marched his troops to the field,
Driving the unlucky Burnside back.
Then Lee withdrew; McClellan did not follow.

Upwards of a score of thousand corpses rotted:
One more bloody compounding of errors.

The architect asks: "So who won?
McClellan lost more men, but then
He had more men to lose. Lee had
The field but had to go back home.
McClellan should have pursued but did not.
Lincoln pretended the stalemate was a win,
Although he fired McClellan, then issued
The Emancipation Proclamation, a very
Tentative thing on a shaky base."

The cicerone sees their wives
Approaching laden with a trove
And eager to move on. He knows
There is no ending on the surface
Of a sphere, nor in time moving all
At the rate of one minute per minute,
The past receding into warp and blur,
The future forever beyond our kenning.
Anyhow he speaks: "There is no victory
When so many die. Maybe Lincoln,
Everybody's favorite rail-splitting
Corporation lawyer and bloody saint,
Our master of myth and spin control,
Did well to use this mess as a fulcrum
To move a nation to a good end.
You and I are joined for a good end, too,
Using what is at hand, which is all we have.
Come, no more time to rake this over,
Though it has been a good and useful pause.
It is time to roll the movement on."

THE CICERONE WITH A LADY IN VENICE

Nothing new to say or see except
This time with one's own eyes the storied
Fantasy, "the world's greatest cliché,"
And, hands down, this theme park's best ride,
The vaporetto through the Grand Canal,
Every eely twist a digital snap on the
Camera bought for this very occasion, twenty
Between the stazione and the landing
At San Marco where the cicerone awaits,
Stetsoned as always with his twang
From their home town of fifty years ago,
With his apertif from Harry's Bar, ordering
"Un *tiziano* per la signora," explaining
That it is grapefruit juice with champagne,
Dyed festively with grenadine.

The lady has
No taste for the casino or the beaches
Today, already has all the Murano glass
And Burano lace she needs. She will
Take pictures of gondolas, but they are
Too expensive to ride in, and besides
She was more enchanted by the Coca-Cola
Boat delivering and the water-borne mails,
The dailiness of life in all these slowly
Sinking churches and palazzi. Really,
She wants to see tons of pictures and
Learn to tell one painter from another
And hear the legends of the famous
Enchanted by this gorgeous unreality.

The cicerone obliges: "Hemingway ate well
And wrote badly at this very table. Your
Digital box has already snapped the gaudy
Palazzi where Browning died and Wagner
Found a grand setting for his going. My favorite
Death here, imagined by Thomas Mann, was
The balanced bourgeois genius Eschenbach
Toppled by obsession, rouging himself

Like the scandalous old spiritualist Strode
In Enid, Oklahoma. For nothing happens here
That does not happen everywhere. It is
Just that sets and lighting here are better,
And the traditions have roots here that
The reflected buildings so obviously lack.”

They cross the piazza where Louis Jourdan
Seduced a virgin by clapping for pigeons,
Where the cicerone was once mistaken for
Orson Welles, past the bank where Katherine
Hepburn backed into the canal, past La Fenice,
The cicerone talking of Verdi and Stravinsky
And the unsurpassed stage magic when he saw
Rossini's *Armida* with an American Orlando
Madly seeing the sorceress's realm appearing
And vanishing, then across the Accademia bridge
To that museum with nature freshly observed by
Jacopo Bellini and his two long-lived sons,
Rare and elusive Giorgione, and light-struck
Titian for whom the drink she had at Harry's
Was named, and the dramatic Veronese and
Tintoretto, so different from the solemn
Florentines.

Lunch break: *pasta e fagioli*,
Then on to acres and acres of Tintoretto's
At the Scuola Grande de San Rocco which,
Surprisingly, is not too many Tintoretto's.
Then Peggy Guggenheim's palace guarded
By Marino's phallic equestrian angel, but
The phallus is removed when the Patriarch
Glides by. Old peasant Roncalli, later Pope,
Probably had a good laugh at that one. And
Inside, cubists, expressionists, surrealists,
Especially Max Ernst whom she married, but
They slept in a bed designed by Sandy Calder
Who had been mobile with Peggy also.

Later as the west walls brighten amid
Old squares, the cicerone reads sign:
“Ghetto, where these looter’s of saints’ bones
Made charcoal for gunpowder and later
Allowed Jews, for looters always become
Traders, and traders must trade with anyone
And live with them: shocking to the Church,
Even a bit shocking to Shakespeare,
Although he could see the humanity behind
The imposed persona, shocking to Wagner
Longing for roots and purity that did not
Exist, shocking to Eliot who wrote here
‘The rats are underneath the piles,
The jew is underneath the lot,’
A salutary shock to us, too, to know
The origins of words and worlds, the
Costs of blind crimes and restless meetings.”

Dinner near the Rialto: the local crabs
Granseole veneziane, chilled *soave bianco*,
And dessert candies roguishly translated
By the cicerone as “nipples of Venus.”

Happily married to others for nearly half
A century, the cicerone confesses to
The lady an ancient ardor: “Of course I loved
All the girls at a distance, but your
Forehead with that pale hair ‘as a flock
Of goats that appear from Gilead,’ and
As a piece of pomegranate are thy temples
Within thy locks.”

The lady laughs and
Deftly turns this geriatric flirting, asking
“Who is your favorite Venetian? Casanova?”

This requires an unexpected silence.

“Vivaldi,” he decides. “In a girl’s orphanage
Near the Riva with begged instruments and
The chance talent that came his way,
He turned out work that Bach admired,
And we admire, but he did not do it
To be admired. You understand. So does
Your husband. Your father would have, too.”

Back to the vaporetto, back to reality.
She has learned the trick of rooting words:
Holiday, holy day, she thinks, and smiles.

THE CICERONE AT EPIDAUROS

Arms locked in a fireman's carry,
The young men elevate the smiling woman
And bear her like Aphrodite toward
The cicerone in the upper seats
Where he lounges like a country Silenus
In the perfect curve of worn marble,
Retaining heat from the departed sun
In a theater as old as drama itself,
Next to the temple of the healing god,
A place which worshipped human bodies.
Even when these steps were unworn,
There were those who gimped heavily up them,
The blind led by hired youths, those in litters,
And those who crawled, and the deaf who got
Only mask and gesture without music:
Part of and yet not part of healthy cities,
The realm of athletes and ideal gods,
The demos relying on oars and shields
And sound, rational male wholeness,
Whose free and equal citizens excluded
Slaves, women, foreigners, and the maimed,
Who nevertheless keep rising up,
Reminding us that power never lasts,
And too much faith in reason is
An assurance of catastrophe.

The play begins with modern lights
In Modern Greek, but close enough
To the old tongue and rhythms that
The cicerone can even mark time,

Counting the dactyls and caesurae,
Hearing an echo of Longfellow,
But spiced with unaccustomed terror.
Medea is outlandish, dangerous,
Her very name a memory of pillage,
Someone who had betrayed her people,

Given up the fleece, and got knocked up
By a hero lover whose passion cooled
As home hove into view and homely things
Blinded his heart. Disaster
Comes for those who cannot see
That servants are not clowns, that
Women who have given all can still
Work roots with burning gifts
And stab out life with greater pain
Than birthing caused, that no one
Can be left out of life and thought.

The crowd leaves, the woman must stay,
And the cicerone is silent,
And she is silent, but finally he says:
“You asked for a beginning,
But this old play in this old place
Is already piled high with second thoughts,
With its own present day
Layered over countless pasts,
As in the high mounds of cities
Uncovered by careful brushes and picks
Down to the lowest campfire ash.
But some stories were old
Even before the first fire,
Especially the one about strangers
Who are always melting into us
Whether we like it or not.”

The young men carry her down,
The cicerone gimping behind them.
They place her on her motorized chair
And will not take the offered tip.

THE CICERONE ABOVE THE PITS

Below the goddess Ceres at the foot
Of LaSalle Street in the visitor's gallery
Of the Chicago Board of Trade
A crystal-clear language barrier,
Double-paned, dims the shouting below,
But dumb show which is, despite the seeming,
Anything but chaos, can be clearly seen.
The rainbow Joseph coats of fortune seekers
Mean something, the steps on which they stand
Mark times to come, palm in means buy,
Palm out means sell, the fingers signal prices
To the quarter-cent, each pit signifies
The abstract quantities of grain or oil
Or of precious metals, no standard but another
Shimmering uncertainty, and half the pits
Trade only options to buy, somewhat troubling
For farmers accustomed to judging grain by feel,
Melons by thump, composting dung by heat
And ripe odor, fodder by delicate shadings.

They are villagers and the cicerone,
A village explainer, faces another barrier.
Although some of his best friends are Transylvanians,
He speaks no Szekely Magyar or Romanian
But relies on an elfin firecracker woman
Speaking idiomatic body language supplemented
By some English and nudges, who translates
The cicerone's musings into the dancing
And astringent common talk of Janosfalva,
One of a string of Unitarian villages
In the Homorod valley of Transylvania,
In Romania but Hungarian by speech and custom,
A real place with real soil, livestock, and crops,
Burdened with a cacophony of history and myth
And now thrust shivering above the pits
Where flashing signs determine shapes of lives.

The cicerone searches for a connection
And finds one unexpectedly in his grandmother
On a far frontier a long time ago:

“She hoped for a heavenly view like this
With a big window slanting hellward on the writhing
Of middlemen who bilked Oklahoma’s honest farmers,
And this place does recall Dante’s eighth circle:
The evil ditches for frauds and malefactors,
Grafters, panders, sowers of discord, evil counsellors.
But Grandma and Dante had certainties that we
Cannot have however we desire them.
And we can even pity, seeing by the
Lightning impulses that these noisy desperados
Are as obsolete as sickles and fountain pens,
Railroad firemen, or the crew laying sleepers
For rails near Walden Pond, observed
With amusement by the heir to the
Latest thing in pencil factories. No return,
And freezing the frame is art but never life.
We can only move one minute per minute,
Always forward and afraid as the world shrinks
And accelerates, but this is earth not hell,
For we have not abandoned hope.”

THE CICERONE IN CICERO

The cicerone strolls up Cicero Avenue,
Stops for the red light at Cermak Road,
Observes chaotic shards where once stood
Western Electric's Hawthorn works,
Points skyward to a vanished tower:

“Longer than a lot of lifetimes,
Wires plugged in, boxes were lifted,
Synapses proliferated, news
Of billions of works and days
Hummed through boards assembled here.
Elton Mayo elegantly proved
When the color of boxes changed
Or the light or stacking style,
Jobs went better and faster.
Human beings functioned like themselves
When the job was worth looking at,
Worth the attention of someone
With necktie, notebook, and stopwatch
Who validated a task worth doing.
Few choose to remember this.

“Power demands the rule of fear.

“A few doors down on Cermak
In a building gutted long ago
Capone lay prone beneath the fusillade,
Rising up to die another day.
Ghosts of clip joints shrivel in daylight.
These bodegas once served dumplings
And advertised Dick Butkus portions
At George Halas prices, a joke we need
To footnote for the young.

“Memories of rocks and sometimes bullets
Used by those with little on those with less,
A gritty town whose best poems
Were boxes stacked and wires attached.

“Maybe a mall next, identical to hundreds,
Maybe herds grazing on a mound
Of some interest to antiquaries.”

Amid the confusion of tongues
The cicerone points
To the memory of a tower.

THE CICERONE AT THE MILLENNIAL DEFEAT

The interval between the thumps
Of his cane increases as the cicerone
Climbs the narrow stairs, but finally,
Gulping for air, he achieves the top
And enters the poster-covered room
With the scarred and leaking furniture.
He puts a bottle on the table, hoping
The ignorant young will not pollute
Good bourbon with sweet soft drinks.
The room is too quiet so he tells
A joke fit to bring a blush to
Man or beast or plant or virus,
Which gets tolerant smiles except
From the candidate who has smiled
Too much to suit himself for a year
And is eager to be a dour man again.
They had expected the defeat but not
The terrible humiliation of begging
For attention and not getting it,
Of being classed with mumbblers
In cafeteria lines. And the temptation
To do anything at all for tube time,
An extra column inch, a drive-time spot,
Representing a group miniscule
To begin with and then diminished
By powerful or pure temptations.
The cicerone has been through it,
And the candidate has been through it
Again and again all his life and
Bears honorable scars and has respect
From those in power whom he does not
Respect but whose sleep he troubles.
The message has been repeated
Truly and well and leaves a mark
That cannot be erased and will
Triumph maybe because maybe is
The best we have and all we need.

The cicerone tries another joke,
A favorite of the candidate:

“How many straights does it take
To change a light bulb? None.
Straights do not fear the dark.
And a sequel: How many light bulbs
Does it take to change the world? Only
One, for those who do not fear the light.”

THE CICERONE AT THE BARNES

In those days it was a secret perfection,
The street unmarked, the suburb itself
Under an alias, the neighbors pledged
To secrecy, open only to odd types
At odd hours. But the cicerone
Knew his way to the Lipschitz gargoyles,
The Matisse dancers in their lunettes,
The Seurat dots unblurred
By reproduction, knew of the guarded list,
Desired to gift a friend with splendor,
A lovely friend with a righteous heart
And innocent eyes who lived nearby
But had never looked in before.
They stared at Room XIII's east wall
While the cicerone reverently whispered:

“This cranky old quack laundered his money
And almost bought respectability
With this loot. Good God, the Renoirs,
Five of them on this wall alone,
And acres of soft and glowing flesh
Seducing the eye in every direction.
Those two Cezannes are major, particularly
The young man looking at the skull
With the Renoir women basted with light
Back of his mind and beyond that
The Van Gogh whore, maybe the one who gave
One-ear the dose which fueled his demons.
She unbalances the wall. The Sisley and
The little Delacroix cannot drag our eyes
Back to the left, though they are good enough,
But such a grouping needs imbalance.
Financial sharks, Marx called this bunch
Who feed off genius and justify their thefts
With well-schooled taste that is even real
Sometimes. They must keep moving or
They die. They need art like Pharaoh

Needed cloves to keep his corpse from stinking.
The pirate who framed and hung these and,
Make on mistake, enhanced their glory with
His own craft, saw through the con and
Placed in tension with approved curriculum
These honest, hinges, locks, and hasps,
These chests and stools and chairs
Built by farm people who rejected wealth
For the sake of their souls, then invited
The rejects of the skin-proud and
Purse-proud academy to share his joy.

“He has been dead a long time now.
The rejects have bred sharks of their own
Who make common cause with descendants
Of breakers of newsboys’ legs and others
Who want to validate their loot through art.
And every nosepicker on a school field trip
Needs to be awed by the weight of this wall.
So it is time to brave these gargoyles
And let in the muddy-footed gapers.
The best thing that can happen to a cicerone
Is not to be needed anymore.”

THE CICERONE IN GOLDEN

The name of this elevated place,
Safe, so far, from the ever-rising
Brown haze suggests an origin in rape
Of mountains, if mountains can be raped.
The cicerone silently reflects that miners
From that first great rush might say
The mountains were asking for it, and
Manifest destiny made their picks and sluices
And dynamite historically inevitable, but
He does not say this aloud, for his companion
Has witnessed rapes, counselled their victims,
Been betrayed and hurt by careless
By-blows from mindless wills to power.
This canyon is her refuge, even when once
She encountered a nest of rattlesnakes here.
It is an honor for the limping, sagging
Cicerone, taking extra gulps of the thin air,
To be invited here to share and reflect,
To see what he can see and say words
That might inform and even heal.

He looks for a sign of harmless joy
And sees it on the road below, buffed
And gleaming, a 1937 Lincoln Zephyr:

“He lives near here. I know him.
Keeping that beautiful thing almost
As old as him and me purring and
Climbing, and others like it, is his way
Of ordering his mind, preserving skills,
Even skills that may never be needed again,
And astonishing us with mostly forgotten
Splendor. That is his way of spending
His modest and well-earned surplus
And showing his love for those like me
Whom he has only met once and those
Like you whom he has not met at all.
It is like designing a book for those
Who may or may not have something
To say. It is like freeing those caged
By ignorance, arrogance, and bad metaphors,
A vocation practiced by those I have seen
In the company of that happy restorer.
I do not know whether there is more
Motiveless good or motiveless evil,
But this refuge should celebrate good.”

They drive further up the mountain
To see where famous “buffalo bill’s
defunct” with a great view of Coors
Where pleasant poison is brewed and
Unpleasant lies spread with the profits.
Lives may be in or out of balance here,
But there is always something to do next.

This is J. Quinn Brisben's first proper book of poems, although he has been contributing poems to periodicals since 1967. He also writes stories and has contributed literally hundreds of articles, essays, and reviews to a wide variety of publications. He frequently lectures on cultural and political subjects. Born in Enid, Oklahoma, in 1934, he was schooled there and at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He held a wide variety of jobs before beginning his public school teaching career in 1959. He taught for thirty-two years, mostly high school history and social studies in inner city Chicago schools. He has traveled to every US state and 38 foreign countries. He is a veteran of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and many other progressive causes and is currently active for the rights of disabled persons. He was the Socialist Party USA candidate for president of the United States in 1992. He has been married since 1955 to the artist Andrea Brisben, whose Changing Woman Designs needlepoint canvases are in over 200 shops nationwide. They have two grown children and three grandchildren.

SCARS PUBLICATIONS

BOOKS

sulphur and sawdust
slate and marrow
blister and burn
rinse and repeat
survive and thrive
(not so) warm and fuzzy
torture and triumph
oh.
infamous in our prime
anais nin: an understanding of her art
the electronic windmill
changing woman
harvest of gems
the little monk
death in málaga
the svetasvatara upanishad
the swan road
hope chest in the attic
the window
close cover before striking
(woman.)
autumn reason
contents under pressure
the average guy's guide (to feminism)
changing gears

COMPACT DISCS

music: The Demo Tapes MFV (Mom's Favorite Vase)
music: The Final (MFV Inclusive) Kuypers
music: The Beauty & The Destruction Weeds & Flowers
performance art/spoken word: Live at Cafe Aloha Pettus/Kuypers
performance art/spoken word: Rough Mixes Pointless Orchestra
performance art/spoken word: Seeing Things Differently Kuypers
performance art/spoken word: T&T audio CD Assorted Artists
internet CD: Oh. Internet CD Assorted. Artists
performance art/spoken word: Change Rearrange Kuypers
performance art/spoken word: Stop Look Listen Kuypers
performance art/spoken word: Tick Tock 5D/5D
performance art/spoken word: Six One One Kuypers