

Denis Wood's

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An Analysis of Man-Environment Relations

Denis Wood's

SITTING

An Analysis of Man-Environment Relations

Raleigh, North Carolina
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- from "Epilogue" (pages 66 and 67) of Haniel Long's
PITTSBURGH MEMORANDA, Writer's Editions,
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- from "Surfers at Santa Cruz" (page 350) of Paul
Goodman's COLLECTED POETRY, Random
House, New York, 1972
- from Meng Chiao's "Laments of the Gorges, Two
Selections" (page 159, translated by Stephen
Owen) and from Mei Yao-ch'en's "The Boat-
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cheng Lo's (co-editors) SUNFLOWER SPLEN-
DOR, The Anchor Press, New York, 1975

for Ingrid at Christmas

SITTING

Breathing

It's late: the evening breeze
breathes in and out the blinds.
Small green bugs cavort across the page.
I've not much done today
of any merit.

I'd hoped to write this morning,
but instead I answered mail,
silly requests for information,
useless letters of recommendation.
Other junk.

But now I know the feelings
of a sink unclogged:
water runs swift and clean,
swirling down the drain.
I inhale deeply.

Academia

It is May. The magnolia is blooming.
Here and there its leaves turn brown
and fall. Underfoot these crackle
and shred
like the ten thousand words
I have written this past year.
Few of them are worth repeating.
Diligently we teach our son
how to use this language
and wish him the luck
to make more sense with it.

The places where I sit...

This chair, the john,
the edge of my bed—
the places where I sit...

I sit a lot.
I walk, I sit, I lie down;
these are the things I do,
little more.
Mostly I sit, here on this chair,
at this machine;
on another chair at the table;
on the porch swing, porch chair,
reading;
on the couch, listening to records;
on the chair at my desk at school;
on the seats of buses, airplanes;
in the seats at theaters—
I could go on.
Sitting.
Leaning back.

Sometimes I get tired
sitting.
I get up.
I go to the kitchen.
I make a cup of tea.
After a while
I sit down again.

Here I am,
the places where I sit...

Dark Waters

I must get up
fifty, sixty times a night
for a gulp of water
and a little pee.
When the moon's up
I pull aside the bathroom curtains,
drink the light instead of water.
Tonight the light comes back to me
from the surfaces of puddles.

While peeing I stare into the toilet bowl:
moonlight never shines
on toilet water...

Geomorphology

Only thirty-one years old—
my hands are deeply furrowed.
Pleased with these signs of my life,
I wonder what to make
of the chasms and ravines
topographically
variegating the hands of Ingrid.
Some rows
she's had to hoe!

Just Doing

"What's to do? What's to do?"—
the pagan cry my brother used to give
I give myself this afternoon;
not enough time for this, too much for that,
so much to do.
Shall I write? but no,
the dirty dishes beckon.
I set to work,
but Ingrid enters and demurs:
just in the way.
I end up
watering liriope.

Nice
for a change
to rain.

A Mouth's Memories

Across the street
from somewhere
they come home.
Carefully they open the door
not to be knocked over
by their lonesome dog.
"Hi, Lady, how've you been?"
they shout, petting and hugging
and being wagged and slobbered over.
It's been thirteen months
since our own dog—

Sometimes I still whistle for him
when I for a walk go out the door...

Definitions of Insanity

We were right to stay away.
In five minutes I'm covered
with flat red ticks
and black mosquitos
and small gray bugs
whose names
I do not care to know.
Convinced
by the science of these times
that all must live
I know that all must eat.
Fascinated
I watch these
start to suck my blood—

OFF, damn bugs! OFF!

A Dusting of Stars

At night the low light on the floor
reveals the aggregates of dust,
dark there against the polished yellow wood,
light against the shadows.
Some look like the Crab in Taurus,
though sixty-four, not sixty-four quintillion, millimeters wide;
others like the Veil in Cygnus,
but growing by accretion, not expansion.
Still closer to the floor lies the film of grit
out of which the dust clouds rise,
like stars from the interstellar background gases
in the outer disk of the Milky Way.
I know that dust's a housewife's curse,
and yet, a vital sign of life:
no life, no dust—no dust, no life.
Clean are the hems of curtains
that have never known the wind's embrace.

How Like Pigeons We Do Fly

Along the gutter
dangling from the roof
the pigeons start to fly,
falling from the eaves
like dominoes.
Leaning forward, they drop in turn,
pick up speed
at 32 feet
per second squared,
and flapping soar—
nice to watch the line
tumble into flight.

After a while we too
fall forward
at 32 feet
per second squared,
put our legs out
to break our fall,
and walk.

You can lead a sink to water...

Though I regard so little
this two-eyed monster
when all it does
is drain
the kitchen water,
when it doesn't work
if fills my universe.
Tonight it clogged
and all the Drano,
plumber's snakes
and plungers
did their do to no avail.
The damn water sits there,
putrid,
my two-eyed monster laughing,
refusing to drink.

Structures are processes
we notice only
when they
fail.

Southern City Summer

We shell beans,
shuck corn,
this ear like the Crysler Building,
each tapered kernel pointing to the silky head;
this like the polished teeth of endless babies.
I pick crab apples for a batch of jelly:
on the tree they look like new potatoes,
in the bowl like tiny apples.
Randall splashes in his little pool.
Clouds climb the sky
like tomato vines,
the sun glows like melons.
No rich Roman had it better...

From porcelain the white of babies' eyes
we eat fried squash, our inland oyster;
with our hands the corn, our continental caviar.
In the sea above our heads the cloud fish swim,
we, about to drown in glee.

Professional Geography

It's July.

The crepe myrtle is in blossom
and the ground is thick in its purple flowers.

Here and there among them lie the bodies
of fledgling birds who never learned to fly.

It is six of one, half dozen of the other
in this business:

my best ideas never make it off the ground,
and those that flower, fall
and are trampled on the sidewalk.

Of All the Reason Not to Go

Ingrid and Randall come with me
to the Holiday Inn
where I catch the airport limosine.
They will not join me
on this trip to Mexico
where I am going after five years absence.
I shall leave with them
the many wondrous reasons
for another visit;
I go to collect a bad debt
and administer a questionnaire.
The limosine is late,
the omens lousy.

About Six Miles High

Thirty-two thousand feet over Charlotte
in a deep blue sky
marbled like the finest beef.

On the ground below
the swaths cut for power lines
look like cracks in shattered glass.

And still climbing...

Like a Gigantic Frosted Lens

Through the thickness of the atmosphere
between me and the ground
I watch an Interstate run south
like a fine two-laned river
broken up by clover-leafs.
Nothing else stands out
from the murky blue-gray-green
these miles over Florenceville.

And I Don't Mean Han Solo

My God, Georgia's a Han landscape!
green, dark green, like the sea
with clouds beating up into the sky
ripped like wainriding spoondrift
from the jaded land below.

Now rising to us, row on row,
stone-head, horse-head, dragon-head,
they tilt off into the gray nothingness
that soon enshrouds us.

A sudden squall
tears a window in the vapor:
there lies downtown Atlanta
as whole and crisp and clear as a vision,
the pencil of Peachtree the pivot of our turn,
the stadium round as a finger ring,
the highways as crazy on the ground
as ancient Nazca scratches.

A shift in the wind furls up the sight.
Outside my windows the cloud monsters dance again,
heedless of the passing scene.

A Triumph of Anticipation Over Foresight

We come out of the flying ragged clouds
above a storm of hills of green
and the light is bright
and the air is fine and clean.
Not far away another plane appears,
same size, speed, altitude and bearing.
Passengers point, some lean across the aisles.
Everyone's excited: "Will there be a crash?
What's going on? Does the pilot know?"
As if on cue his voice breaks in.
Everyone relaxes.
Mimicking each other's moves,
on parallel runways
the two planes land together.
We touch down smoothly in this southern city
where the light is bright
and the air is fine and clean
and I on my way to Mexico
am full of glee.

Crystalline Verities

On the field
the air is warm but cooling
and the wind is strong.
Against the gray-black wall of storm
the sunlit planes
are very white and very blue.
Dusty white and gray
are the pigeons
that we embarking scatter.
Lumbering into flight,
these too sparkle in the polished air.

Once It Was Some Deal

It is crazy.

I leave my home in a cab
to pick up the limo
that takes me to the plane
I take to the plane
that takes me to Mexico.
Like that.

At nineteen thousand feet
we're still climbing to our cruising altitude,
six mighty miles in the bright blue sky,
and I am thinking of Magellan bleeding in the Philipines.

They Rain, I Dribble

More spectacular
than Bryce multiplied by Zion
the clouds outside my window
march to rain
across the plains of Alabama,
carting arch and spire,
tower and buttress,
whole cities—
phalanxes of cities—
as I like an idiot
dribble Coca-Cola on my shirt
and babble on about these very ordinary clouds.

Just a Different Kind of Jerk

Everybody (CLICK CLICK) taking
pictures

Except (SCRIBBLE SCRIBBLE)
me.

Despite the Army Corps and Soil Service

The waters do not sparkle
near to land
where spendthriftly
America
throws herself
clod by clod
into the Gulf.

The Price of Flying

Still near to shore (though out of sight)
the Gulf looks like a book
bound in simulated leather.

How just:

we are everywhere.

Plumes of smoke spout
from tiny three-legged platforms
squatting here and there across the shelf.

In the sky

we sign our names
in the flat-out roar of planes.

Once I found it novel,

this ubiquity,

but now I worry—

on the other hand,

I could have stayed at home.

Barton's Intersection

In the midst of my flight—
beside the lady with lacquered fingernails
reading The Promises of Israel a Novel—
quietly,
like a dream,
more like a dream than anything,
like the lining of a dream,
muted,
O so very softly,
rose a couple of rows ahead
the unbelievable sound
of the trumpet part
of the allegro to Haydn's
E flat Concerto
and afraid to look slowly my eyes I lifted
to the heads of two young boys
golden haired and brown
hanging over their seat backs
looking at the trumpet player
in the row behind
and they were excited and smiled their clean teeth
and he was proud and played his trumpet till my heart broke.
The plane was silent.
Out the window a line of little clouds
straight as a ruler
crossed the Gulf like a bridge
and tears streamed down the face I pressed hard against the window.

Blue

The Gulf was sky blue
and the sky was Gulf blue
and there was no horizon
and we hung there in the blue,
roaring in the blue.

Pulque

Muy macho the cloudscape
south of Tampico
where we hit the coast:
a boiling of roiled tortured clouds
churned into hummocks, humps and mountains
above a sere fermented land—
very hot and very dry,
seething
this convectionscape
riding high
above the mesas' cloven sides...

Coming Down

Falling like the rock on wings we are
everyone is gaga at the windows
looking at this crazy unknown place.
The dotted streaks of lights along the runways
are the last signs of home;
the open fires on the field, the clustered kids,
the first signs of another place.
After and despite the countless trips
I am paralyzed with foreignness,
the fierceness of the flurry for attention,
the competitions and the cons,
the volume of the voice that booms
"Rrrrrrrrrradio Trrrrrrrrres" without cessation.
I am stiff with competence and fear
in the back seat of this Toyota,
the jamaï vu and deja vu running through me
like an alternating current.
The southbound bus is full: why hurry?
I take another cab downtown
slowly in the heightened traffic calming down.

In the Alameda I relax. The necking couples
in the pools of darkness, the bustle on Letran—
I go to bed, late, just from being here...

The Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria

Cristobal Colon—yes, it makes some sense.
He might have known these buses;
he must have known the heat
and smells and press of people.
Because my seat is just before the bathroom
I've opened the window: it begins to rain.
Fortunately no one behind will ask me to close it.
The new corporate logo doesn't mean a thing:
the same young soldier gets over-overcharged
for excess baggage, the same milling passes for a line.
It's the same shoving and jamming with the bags,
the same crowding at the door, stomping on the steps.
And of this I dream!
I scanned the crowd for hours, picking seatmates:
I didn't see the nine year old who sits here dripping
melting ices from her father's cache across the aisle.
Pine-Sol, that's the smell.

As though even with my glasses I could see so well...

In the dark the bus comes roaring from the hills,
rushing toward the flatlands like a rolling boulder.
Inside, people sleep to the sound of sushing tires.
I stick my head out the window, listen to the wind-borne fugues.
Off in the distance I catch the light of an open door;
a family in the fullness of its ordinary life makes dinner.
Suddenly I want to be with them around the fire—
desire turns the wind's song sad.
I turn to face the music and to watch
the headlights slice the night to ribbons.

Mountain Dew

It is six a.m. and foggy on this mountain climb.
The bus sticks close to the high stone walls,
but I hug the windows and their view of all creation.
We snake down from the pass; the clashing echoes
crashing cliff to cliff down through the valley;
in and out of mists; snatches of pine, green and gray,
clutching it like coverlets against the day.
We come around a bend; in it stands a home.
Smoke trails from the roof, the family stands outside.
It's been five years with the space of five long winters
since I was welcome here—as the bus slows down
I catch the sound of wind soughing in the pines,
the smell of morning fires burning off the night.
But these people; who are they I've never seen before?
Five years; roads change, rivers are dammed,
people move from place to place...

San Cristobal las Casas, Chiapas

The rains have ceased for the afternoon,
the sun slants through low-hanging massy clouds.
I walk from the hotel down along the river
to the edge of town where the vultures have their trees.
In the heart of town loud men make brave noises,
but here brave men wheel quietly
their bicycles across the fields.
San Cristobal throbs in my veins,
breathes in my breath, knits the muscles in my arms.
Wherever I am, I am always a little here,
though when I'm here I sometimes wonder if I'm here at all.
I am defined in part by it, but it by me?
Can I willfully appropriate this town as mine,
or shall I always set a date
for going home?
The Rio Amarillo slides dirty beneath the bridge,
rushing with the burden of the rains.
Out toward Chamula the air turns gold.
The grasses in La Isla blaze with light.
Somewhere toward the Zocalo I hear
marimbas start to play. Night is coming,
dinner, and an empty room...

Avec Ma Solitude

When no one's looking I break away;
I want to climb this hill alone.
I walk quickly up a road that seems to lead to the top.
It dwindles to a rock strewn path.
Soon I am climbing rocks.
The view exhilarates;
the confusing road we took this morning
suddenly makes sense,
and I can read my future in the route to come.
Still above looms the peak.
I struggle up.
Tall grasses whistle at the summit.
The horizon curves around me;
after all this climbing
I find myself
on top of the hump
at the bottom of the bowl.
All alone.
From somewhere, thin and distant,
come the sounds of barking dogs;
from somewhere, clean and sharp,
hammer blows on anvils.
I move to the other side;
the town lies below and those I came with.
Looking up, they gesture and shout.
I can hear nothing, then, as if on a trailing wind,
"Hurry up! We've got to leave!"
I slither down, stumbling now and then
in my anxiety.

Cheek to Cheek

Footsore from a day's excursion
I lounge on these benches
shaped at the hands of indian slaves
before Alexander Pope set first pen to paper.
These stones have known a thousand asses
times a thousand more.
Look; how smooth the stone!
See where the cheeks plumped here
—and there.
Whose butt am I touching
through four hundred years of stone?

"Operator, could you try again?"

Long distance telephone calls,
placed all day;
fathers talk to sons
at night.

Calma, calma.

The guests are in bed,
the sala is empty.
By the dying fire
we share a comiteco
and talk about our fathers,
like us, equally compounded,
of silliness and sanity.
Afterwards you go to your home,
I for a walk beneath the stars.
Above the new bridge
over silent waters
they hang fat and low
like crystal moths,
they lie,
reflected in the puddles
along the streets
through which my ringing footsteps
echo sharply.

To Valeriano

For many years your example blazed
among the constellations in my mind,
an honest man who took joy in life,
untroubled by ambition.

Now you too have fallen from that sky
and lie awake at night worrying.

What are you thinking of this minute
there in San Cristobal?

The bar is closed, the sala quiet;
in the streets, only the drunks are moving.

Trains

From the train watching hills—swift engines:
a hundred knobs and knolls flash past.
Valleys suddenly yawn before us,
walls behind shut off the view.
I look up: against the bright blue sky
a young boy's silhouetted on a deep green hill.
I wave from the platform, he waves back,
our shouts, lost in the wailing of the train.

Somewhere South of Monterrey

Slowly the train pulls into the station.
People crowd on the tracks ahead, behind.
People getting off hand down their luggage to the porters;
hawkers swarming on force their goods on the passengers.
Standing on the off-side I look across the dry brown fields—
Suddenly! a dark brown head appears asking for money.
I refuse the request but smile and ask his name;
he disappears, but climbs aboard again when the train begins to move.
He forces a small stone into my hand, leaps down,
runs waving beside the car as long as he can...

Long Shadows

The train pulls round a bend;
the wall of hills falls hard away.
The smoke of the engine drifts down the slope,
the shadow of the train runs a thousand feet in the setting sun.
A man and his son trudge home from the fields,
exhausted, but with the innocence of labor.
I wave to them, the train blows its whistle.
The boy smiles, the man takes off his hat and waves.

One of One, One of the Other

It will have been five years
with the awful heat of five long summers
since we came to Raleigh
and I can still not answer why.
Though I outlived my first rejections,
I've not outlived my questions;
though since I've yet no answers,
I can't be sure they matter.
Between irresponsibility and luck
is razor thin and razor sharp
and I do not know what I should do
in this impasse:
condemn my lack of self-control,
or praise this gift of chance?

Low Rent

The morning-glory vine
that shaded the porch
lies a brown tangle beneath it.
A few petunias still enliven
the dusty green jungle
along the sidewalk.
It is late afternoon in the end of summer
and I who stopped smoking
sit on the porch with a cigarette.
Another paper has come back
from another editor who changes
"kids" to "children" for no good reason.
So it is that academics
evince control of the world around them,
pomposifying pretty prose.
If only they'd relax,
take the fall and winter off,
lie a dormant tangle on the ground.

The Simplest Proof

In Washington for a bunch of boring papers—
I slip out when the lights go down on the first slide tray.
It wasn't the pendulum that caught my attention,
but the rosy ring of pretty upturned faces,
open, clear, clean, unselfconscious, healthy, tan,
the youth of America imbibing science.
The pendulum bob swung back and forth.

I too sit down and join the circle,
hypnotized by the fishnet shirts and glowing skin,
the flowing hair, infectious smiles,
the perfect teeth, the smooth uncovered legs that tense
whenever the bob begins to near a pin—
without a sound it knocks one over;
then the bob swings back again.

A few faces change, some positions,
but the circle stays intact, hour after hour.
What to make of these shining facts I cannot say:
this America is sweet—not beautiful—and the absences are ugly;
but I read no guile in these faces: perhaps it is another generation.
Back and forth the brass bob goes:
the earth turns round and round, hour after hour.

... and do not call me sentimental

When I was growing up, no, younger even,
I made a string of promises to Bear and Bunny
to keep them with me in the coming years.
Perhaps it wasn't, as I like to think,
my first betrayal when I left them home,
but still it rankles, still it stings.

Though yet a toy, a dog is no stuffed animal.
What of the many vows I made to Homer when I whispered things
to calm his racing heart? I know, a dog's a dog,
a kid's a kid—but when will I betray this trust?
Homer went to still our fears of mangling Randall;
but Randall, when will Randall have to go?

This stench of rotting promises makes sour all my walks...

A First Lesson in Anatomy

When I wax eloquent
about the moving qualities
of the Star Wars soundtrack
my academic colleagues get upset
mimic disgust, mime disdain.

"How can you listen
to such worthless drek?"
With my ears, I tell them
while they pretend
not to hear me.

I'll Take Manhattan

We come in low over Jersey
dropping on the Verrazano
carved in soap
like a hawk, sailing smooth
above the docks in Brooklyn.
The day has twenty minutes left.
The shadows of the World Trade Center
fall across Manhattan, across the river,
lap Long Island like an airy surf.
We wheel east, away from the bridges.
Midtown is a forest of mighty trees,
the sun on its windows
like light on wet leaves.
The avenues, not dark, are veiled,
except where slashed by molten streets,
flowing west to east across the island.
We continue our turn, the view is lost.
All that remain are the endless homes
that make the vision possible.

Tellus

For months
a plant will greet me
on the porch
or in my room
with stalks
and leaves
and flowers.

Then Ingrid cuts it back—
and I have yet to learn to love
the signs of this
domestic autumn.

An Autumn Afternoon

I sit with idle hands
stupidly incapable of doodling.
Thirty teachers sit in a circle,
brown shoes on every pair of feet—
except the Dean's;
he wears shiny black.
On the windowsill
a green Sprite can
flames in the failing light.
The faculty's meeting;
nothing to think,
nothing to say.

We seriously debate
class starting times
like insects clacking
in the undergrowth.
After an hour's quiet mayhem,
we rush for the door.
At the top of the rise
the autumn leaves—
and the first drops of rain—
lie scattered on the sidewalk
like my friends across the continent.
The late sun
striking deep beneath the bank of clouds
drips from the magnolia leaves
like fiery ice,
drenches the prison walls
with blood
where the pigeons
flap to roost.

Coming Home

I work hard
to say what I must
as concisely as possible.
Do not ask me to epitomize.
Even in these times of men
there are clouds of birds
this autumn evening.
The water in the fountain
goes round and round.
The sun rises, the sun sets.
The wind runs through the trees,
flares quiver on the unfinished bridge.
A freight train rattles
beneath the evening star,
ghost stories whisper in the waving grasses.
From the door where I enter
I see your letter on the table;
in my head "Dear Tom" already.
My typewriter sings
like a night of crickets.

Community and Privacy

If it were only Star Wars
it would be a different matter,
but in the subtle academic wars
of staggering sophistication
and unattested excellence
enthusiasm is always regarded
as an instance of the plague
or a virulent strain of social disease.
Put-down piled onto put-down,
the exculpatory smirk mingles
with the obligatory good sport's laugh
in what manages to pass for bonhommie
in the faculty lounge.
So boring do they find me
I have ceased to trouble them
with the latest results of the investigations
which I only any longer share
with nameless people between showings of the film
in the darkened theater where I can talk my heart out.

It's the Nature of the Beast

I try to pay attention
but the voice drones on—
University Open House,
reinstatement of the D,
whatever...

I find myself counting
the number of holes
in a piece of acoustic tile,
the number of louvers
in the ventilation grills.
Are my lectures
half this dull?

Look! The Clouds Are Blushing!

It's late in the afternoon
and cool on this September Sunday.
The sky is water and pearl
draining color from trees and houses.
Kevin drives by and waves.
In the distance hundreds of birds
move like scratches on my eyeball
across the sky.

Hush for a moment, O tumult of the world!

Not Mine To Give Away, Not Mine To Sell

Though I know neither
your name
nor your kind,
eat your belly full!
The pyracantha
does not grow red each fall
for me.

... as for pink flamingoes!

The strictures of the young
are awful: having taught Randall
some rudimentary ettiquette
he now tells me the way to eat!
Two kids fighting
about THE GREATEST PICTURE IN THE WORLD
—Guernica or Mona Lisa—
end their battle with
"Let's bet!"
I'd like to hold those stakes.
On the porch next door
night after night
they argue the value of foreign cars,
determine absolutely the relative merits
of GM and Ford.
The energy, the tone of moral certainty
is what gets me.
Yesterday a student
ranted for an hour
on the unnaturalness
of the act
of painting wood.
The cotton in his shirt was dyed—

but that was different!

They Don't Sing Very Well Either

No monopoly in Imperial China
on eunuchs in high places;
though ours dance attendance
on the harems of power
instead of the harems of flesh,
chancellors, associate deans—
the towering layers
of petty officials—
all cover their asses
in the ancient way
by whipping ours.
As with mosquitoes
it's pointless to fret;
their buzzing is a fact of life
and you can only swat them
when they come in range.
But don't ask me to empathize
or share their point of view;
they've no balls and six long legs
of each of which I've two.

Victims Together

Masters exam:
cigarette smoke
in an uptight room.
Beyond the door,
snicking jeans,
crinkling paper.
In my office
she takes off her parka
standing in the streaming sunlight
like a flower unfolding in spring,
but our conversation moves
like the uneven tops
of the letters in this sentence.
From the next room
the clicking of keys
runs not quite in counterpoint.
Another cup of styrofoam
once full of coffee
hits the basket.
I bend to toss it in
hoping she'll be gone
when I sit up.
It's not their fault.
Students are like stones along the shore:
only on the beach
do they shine, a sea of stars.

The Gestural Background

Like a dance many times rehearsed
Ingrid enters the dining room
to light the candles.
The glow of light,
reflected in her eyes,
is suffused about the table
and the light from "high mountain"
shines again from the plates.
Randall sits beside me on the sofa
paying attention to the sounds
of the velvet gentleman,
furniture music
for a furniture dance.

Like a Handful of Diamonds Tossed on the Road

Though most broad-leaves
have turned and fallen
the magnolia makes shade in the bright prenoon
like a copper beach,
shines in the afternoon like a summer's oak,
twinkles in the ruddy evening like a field of stars,
glitters in the dawn like wet grass on an August morning.

Hyperbolic Geometry

As the earth turns east against the sun
the shadows cast by the railings on the porch
grow closer together.
Just before the final move to face the night
they melt into a solid patch
of purple porch.

Congeaed Thought

Two butterflies chase each other
back and forth across the porch
in paths like mating helixes.
I sit here with my feet up
watching,
thinking.
Unbidden
thoughts condense
like drops of water
on a cold Coke bottle,
dripping into phrases
that have somewhere to go.
I rise
and drag my words inside
and put them down
one before another.

Now We Are Four

Among the many deaths
of October's scuttling leaves,
the swelling forms of autumn apples
and pecan shells
illuminate a human endosperm:
ballooning Ingrid.
Nine months pregnant,
the doorways have narrowed,
the bus rides grown bumpier.
Every night we've wondered,
but this is it:
three minutes, two minutes,
we time the cramps.
I take Randall to a neighbor's;
Ingrid calls Martie for a ride.
Warm in my arms, delighted with the night,
Randall's life will never be the same.
"Stars," he says, looking at the sky:
all I can say is, "Better."
Slowpoke Martie, tardy friend,
is here in a second, robe and slippers flapping.
It's been nine months of hurry up and wait,
and now at the nurses' station—
"Oh, no! Not another?!"
In the waiting room
I read the Bible ads in Christian magazines,
holding my lungs against the acrid smoke.
Under delivery room lights
clean hands shuffle and deal;
only mine are idle, clutching the stool.
In a movement too fast to follow
another pair enters the room,
Chandler's,
not idle, not yet busy.

Later in the nursery they're clenched,
where he sleeps among the infants
arranged in rows like fruit at the market.
A still rocker stands in a corner.
At home, fumbling pots and pans
I feed Randall more than he needs
and after his bath read him to sleep.
"Juice," he cries from his bedroom,
but in the bathroom he looks at the moon.
At the airport my mother deplanes—

though skin and bones,
again a grandmother!
Later I hear
water dripping in the humidifier,
my mother's snores;
silent night.

3/4 Cup butter (a stick and a half)
1 Cup brown sugar
1 Cup white
2 Eggs
1 1/2 Cup flour sifted with
 1 teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon soda

1 Teaspoon vanilla

3 Cups oatmeal;

Emma's oatmeals swell in the oven.

My mind runs on madeleines.

Dark as night, hot as hell, sweet as sin;

Puerto Rican coffee!

When Randall gets up from his nap we visit
a chic wooden linked-play playground,

Randall, Denis, Nancy:

still son, father, grandmother—still.

With Chandler, Randall, both in bed,
we linger over dinner-table gossip.

Nancy brings news of old high-school friends.

Recalling those hallways I lie all night awake,
shaken by the news that Norman Gordon's dead.

Echoes of Li Ch'ing Chuo

The sun bounces off the porch
as off the tiles at the Espanol.
Warm in the light
it is bitter in the shade
and I must move against the sun
to keep the pillar's shadow off my face.
In the fading light of the waning afternoon
airplanes high above the earth
fill the sky with tracks
difficult to follow,
with writing
impossible to read.
In the day's last minutes
they blush
and disappear...

Mr. N

It's been a dozen years
at least
since we who'll never meet again
last met,
but seldom were you
far
from my thoughts.
Once a day, once a
once a week,
I would make a note to
to tell you...
this or that
when we should see each other.
Very ambitious
you made it to the starting gate
while I lingered in the paddock.
But I didn't mind;
you were always innocent of malice
and full of care.
I wonder
if
before the end
you learned to make your shirt
stay in?

I carried you
with me
a constant compass.
It didn't matter
that we didn't meet;
we would.
But you have set
a morning star
in the dawn of our beginnings
while I
a sun
have just begun to rise.

Michel Leiris Wrote This

Poussiere:
elle pousse
entre les serres
de la lumiere.

Exams

Three mornings a week—
for fifteen weeks—
I summon myself to deliver
a series of lectures
on the landscape
from the close of the ice age to the present.
Thirty faces pay rapt attention;
sixty eyes follow the slightest gesture.
After class, students cluster around,
make points, ask questions.
What am I to make of this,
faced with the emptiness of these exams.

Shh!

Chandler rocks and stirs and cries all night,
creaking and squeaking his crib across the room,
wham, wham, whamming it against the wall
like the big drop forge at Wymann-Gordon.
There's no calming him, he's not awake,
but still we watch, back and forth, back and forth.
With this bedlam in the bedrooms I sleep downstairs,
but not too well for even Ingrid's passing wakes me.
Swick, swick go her slippers on the floor,
click—there's the light beneath the door.
SShhhhhhhh runs the water in the pot,
SShhhhhhhh runs the water in the jar.
Snick, snick, snick goes the stirring spoon on glass,
SSSSheeeeeee blows the teakettle, guggle-guggle pours the water.
SShhhhh, snick, snick, then swick, swick, swick upstairs.
Dimly I hear the thunk, thunk, thunk of the rocker through the floor,
as I turn and try to go to sleep once more.

Evening in Paris

My feet ring sharply on the frozen ballast between the tracks
and on the way to school
my breath is crystal in the bitter brilliant air.
The classroom I enter
however
is dark and rank with sweat and breathing of a hundred
perfumed students.
I throw up the blinds and open the windows
— a dozen students decide to move
to the front of the room.

Getting Lost Coming Home Late

Having seen Tom off
I come home via Martin Street.
Late in the year, the leaves are mostly fallen.
From the height of the viaduct
I see the strings of lights
arcing out South Saunders.
In the dampness of the night
the lights fatten like insects
squashed against a window.
Fairmont Boulevard
in a thickening fog
once wore this necklace,
that first I watched flicker into life
winter evenings in the Projects.
Worcester borrowed it
for seven years,
draped it over Vernon Hill
to make its daytime chaos simple,
seen at night from far away.
In San Juan it was a bracelet
the Condado dangled on the arm
it waved toward Miramar,
where in the winter
the damp sea air is almost cold.
The dampness from the railing
has soaked my sleeve.
I straighten up, continue home.
In the distance red lights wink
off and on, off and on...

Litmus

Leaning against the window
I watch the evening spread to darkness
like honey over buttered biscuit.
My breath condenses on the glass,
runs down the pane in streams.
The color of the world is broken,
but as the air recalls the moisture in my breath,
it's reassembled.
Hypnotized I stand and breathe
against the glass
until it turns to mirror
and it is myself
I break and reassemble.

December Sunday

All morning
waiting for your coming
through clenched teeth I chanted
"Oh do not ask what is it,
Let us go and make the visit,"
while Randall keened in counterpoint
"Sunday—we going to get the Christmas Tree!"
until we, all mad from the strain,
broke up laughing.

The pot of coffee,
on against your promised coming,
has warmed itself away.
Shall we put another on
or are you never coming?

Something of Christmas

I put my glasses on the counter,
examine my face closely in the mirror.
I squeeze paste on the brush, run it under water,
start to clean my teeth—up and down, up and down.
Tooth brush moving in my mouth
I move my feet across the sewing room
where I can see the Tree
through many doors.
It's changed; the one I left
had lights and balls,
but this has moons and suns and stars,
fat pools of color
like the shattered irises of angels' eyes,
pinpoints of brilliance
like fast-moving metal flake at neon noon,
resonant depth
like tropic fish deep deep in tropic ponds,
soft refulgence
like the afternoon on dusty wildflowers;
a pyramid of cream puff color
melting in my mouth—
like toothpaste...

With my handkerchief I swipe the floor
where I've been dribbling,
pad back to the bathroom to rinse my mouth.
I wash my face, put on my glasses.
Looking at the Tree,
before I pull its plug—
all I can see
are lights and balls.

Twelfth Night

In the windows
through which I watch
the day's late peach-blush fade
to bleach and blue and finally black
I see reflected
the glowing lights
of our Christmas Tree.
It's Twelfth Night
and tomorrow the Tree must fall.
One of its lights
moves
across the window—
and I watch the plane
fly out of sight.

I Just Don't Have the Touch

On cold mornings the flies are stuck to the screens.
Dead to my touch I brush them to the ground.
But when the sun fingers them,
their blood quickens:
they up and fly away.
Tomarrow morning I'll find them
stuck to the screens...

Gracefully Getting Nothing Done

Into the cup of pale Beleek
I pour the Morning Thunder,
like amber into alabaster,
set it down before the bamboo blinds,
a tabby in a field of sedge.
The rising steam is sectioned
by the streaming yellow sunlight,
warm on my right cheek
this January morning.
I look out at winter grasses
like a cricket from its cage.
Long after the sun and tea are gone—
still, I'm staring...

Nap Time

Randall will wake up soon
and then—unless Bob comes—
we will wander hand in hand
among the covered hoppers
in the Southern railway yard,
among the clacking winter weeds,
trying to catch the setting sun
between two cars...

Close to the Fatal Edge

In the light of a winter afternoon
objects silhouetted against the dying sky
have the sharpness
of a classic put-down.
Stacked down from night:
light blue beneath dark blue,
clean blue beneath light blue,
peach beneath clean blue,
bleach beneath peach—
then the inky blackness of the ground
spilling on the blotting paper sky
along the veins of trees,
in the blotches of the buildings.
Receding into darkness
like disappearing stars,
taillights of homebound cars
trail the sun
over the edge of night.

Joey

Very personable, young Joey,
handsome, comely, quite well-spoken.
Proudly he tells me he only read
half of my assignment
but fails
predictably
to connect this fact
to the grade on the exam
about which he's complaining.
How can I make sense of this generation?
Angrily I call him a jerk
and a turkey.
He just shrugs.

Southern Snow

It's February:
the news is filled
with feet of snow
in Buffalo
and Boston.
Here it threatens,
never delivers.
Too cold to play outside,
Saturdays are filled
with Tintin
and the game of office.
We breakfast at dinner:
bacon and eggs
and grits that fall
under the table
at Randall's place
like snow.

Of the Class of Subtle Suppressions

All my life—
ah, hell, as long as I can remember, then—
I've wanted to be able
to flick the hair from my eyes
with a toss of the head,
to really feel the wind in my hair
streaming on the wind,
to run my fingers through my hair
and have it not snap back
like the tufts on a brush,
but I never had the hair
or the courage
to let it grow, to brave the
"MyGodDeniswhathaveyoudonewithyourhair?"s,
the snide assumptions of "a change in life",
the knowing looks from all of those
who've cast their fates
politically long,
politically short,
until last year, that is,
when I began to let it grow.
Today, yes,
for the first time in my life,
a lock of hair
fell into view
and it was wonderful
to have the top of my head
in front of my face!

At Booksellers Everywhere

Basho
travels
everywhere
with me;
Penguin Classic!

How Sweet It Is!

It rains and rains and rains,
like sweet frosting
on a too sweet cake.
Randall's crying,
Chandler's crying,
I'm alone with the kids.
Marvin Gaye, Mozart—
nothing quite drowns out
that special tone
in Chandler's crying.
Can people who hate washing dishes
learn to love kids?
I dry my hands,
head upstairs.
Rubber pants in one drawer,
diapers in another.
Beneath the hem of cloud—
the sun! It's been like this
two thousand years:
"Great Form without Forms",
silly nonsense nonetheless!

Still

Seen

in the brutal objectivity
of a Worcester winter
long enough after a heavy snow
for it to all be gray and gritty,
but not for the streets to be halfway clean,
under conditions of maximum fatigue
and disappointment
still
the city is beautiful
in its startling variety
its many hills
and bright-cheeked Adonises—
curly of hair
who smile in line to see a movie,
flashing orthodontia
and brilliant teeth
through a sharp-blue haze of exhaled smoke,
into the eyes of Aphrodites
of carmine fingernails—
and its fine buildings and sharp and lively voices
its hot water and over-heated rooms,
its Puerto Rican kids
yelling "Maricon!"
at every passerby.

Saturday Evening, Leaving LaGuardia

The gangway is moved away from the door;
"Tie a Yellow Ribbon" ooohs and ahhs
its Muzak way above our heads:
I'm glad to be going home,
despite the little time I spent with Bob,
the little more with Arthur,
the very little more
with Dan and Stacy, Aaron and Maru.
I spent more time with the stranger on the bus!
Out the window I scan the field:
wing-tip lights, white and green,
now and then, a lighted tail.
The plane shakes and shudders turning from the gate,
to start to taxi to the runway:
the field is crazy with red and blue,
criss-crossed like the scratches on my window.
Above the green-white garlands of the Whitestone Bridge
distant planes cross the sky like distant friends,
following trajectories that rarely meet
except to crash,
or in the past where our worldlines gathered,
clustered for a moment like a bomb
ready to blow us all
to the many cities we now inhabit.
Poised for takeoff on the yellow string of lights,
we accelerate through little thumps of growing grandeur to our liftoff.
The insane lights upon the field make sense from here;
but where must I stand to make sense of these lives?
East across the Bronx to Jersey—into clouds
which thin and thicken, flaming from the lights below.
Now and then a break and I glimpse Manhattan,
before the clouds again furl up the view,
like the lives of my friends I see for a moment,
and from a single perspective—before we're parted.
Suddenly above the park the clouds give way:
midtown towers; black holes against the yellow streets,
but around the brilliant crystal of the Empire State
already wisps of cloud begin again to muster.
At the tip of the island, the World Trade Center
floats its lights of yellow-green a furzy haze
above the flat dark black of Hudson's river.
There are few ships tonight upon these waters
I can scarcely tell from clouds—those lights?
Some on water, some in air: airport, lighthouse beacon;
ships and planes. The others, who can tell?
Not much enlightened I fly home tonight
from friends...

Stupid Waste!

I watch them from my porch;
angry they drive home
at five o'clock, exhausted,
to park the car in the garage!
I can't help recalling,
the last leaves fallen,
Homer bleeding in the street—
they didn't even stop!
Too many times
I have rushed to the vet's;
how easy to not see Randall .
chasing a ball...

I watch them from my front porch,
breathe their filthy vomit!

The Back of a Greyhound Bus

My stinging eyeballs beg my lids to close,
that the rest of me to see want open;
the lining of my nose is dry and itchy,
but the rest of me see little point in sneezing.
The smell of other people's Kents and Camels stinks.
Trying to avoid what can't be avoided—
this alone gives me a headache,
not to mention the desire
for a deep breath of unpolluted air.
For years I've subscribed in self-abnegation
to the putative psychosomaticism
of the headaches I always blamed
on my father's smoking: sitting here
between two fire-breathing dragons—
carved in stone but for the motion of the smoking hands—
I'm not so sure...

Among Their Multitudes of Weapons

I look to my mailbox as a font of joy,
but my pleasure's lately turned to loathing.
What next species of preposterousness,
carefully marked with a CAMPUS stamp,
will I be forced to read,
attacking my style
or mode of address?
What new species of human worm
will manifest itself in its displeasure
at the way
I name the chancellor?
The letters mean nothing,
I throw them away;
but my rage at what they've done to my mailbox;
this, this knows no bounds!

Just Take It Nice and Easy

Coming up the steps
I can feel each foot,
the muscles tensed to lift it—
and to put it down.
From the sidewalk to the porch
I climb against the world,
shrunk
to the all-in-allness
of this body
dense and palpable.
I sink into a chair
exhausted with the torpid squalor of the day.
The sun lies on the road
like a coat of paint.
The sky is dull like a cloud of chalk.
Vacant I gaze in its direction,
scarcely aware of its changing color,
chalk to mauve, mauve to violet.
But now against the violet
spokes of cadmium and yellow-orange role out.
Azure canoes are rowed across the sky
by aluminium oars;
encarnadine horses
gallop madly on the roads of night.
While heavenly orange-peels paper the west,
in eastern innocence star petals flower
and evening blossoms like hydrangeas in June.
Out of myself I float away
and on one's here
when Ingrid comes
to call me in for dinner.

Dear Jerks

In the back of the dictionary

"Forms of Address"

run on, page after page:

Dear Mr. President,

Dear Dr. _____,

To Her Gracious Majesty, the Queen...

Every conceivable station is covered,
except those of prick and humbug and frump.

How shall I call the numbers of these?

Dear Jerk?

The Disastrous Consequences of Unwarranted Assumptions

This time I leave Atlanta Row 26 Seat D,
jammed between two fierce old novel-reading ladies —
Trinity A Novel to my right,
Castle Ugly A Novel to my left —
smelling of lacquer and wreathed in smoke,
their fingernails groping in the brocade cases
for cigarettes
at every second paragraph.
Illuminated
I learn to appreciate
the art of shallow breathing,
as rigid in my seat
rammed up against the bathroom wall
I squint out at twenty rows of three abreast —
the same!
a stringy mass of shiny tortured curls
bobbing on a gray-green sea of smoke...
Trinity lights up,
Castle Ugly lights up.
Rings on fingers, flab on arms,
hands through the hairweed rise like molting snakes
maneuvering the air
to better blow
the smoke
my way.
Castle Ugly lights up,
so does Trinity.
One angles the smoke from her mouth like a jet,
the other lets it out, then sucks it through her nose again.
Across the aisle another drops her lighted hand,
swings it up again, inhales,
and lets it drop,
swings it up again, inhales,
and lets it drop,
like a walking beam
with an overheated bearing.
The two novels, umbilically connected,
light up together.
For years I smoked: did I act this absurd?

New Orleans

I've come again
for my annual chance
in the lottery of geographic
fame and fortune.
With three thousand others
I pursue my notoriety
through the corridors of these hotels
too young to be gracious
too large to be nice.
Although I've checked off
many papers
vital to attend,
my first visit to Regency D
is the last
and I slip out
with the dousing of the lights
for the first carousel.
Gordie and I take the ferry to Gretna,
with Marc and Arthur share a drink,
like everybody else,
partly tourist, partly not.
I thought it would test my will,
my first meetings free of cigarettes:
instead my stamina has undergone the strain.
The red packs everywhere
have scarcely caught my eye,
but the smoke and ashes!
these have scarcely let me breathe.

Here I Sit, Broken Hearted
Came to Shit, Only Farted

Trousers down around my feet,
I stare at the scars on the battered door.
I share this ring of wood I sit on
with a thousand students.
Scarcely room to turn around,
the walls are stained with come
and covered with graffiti,
dirty in the dirty light.
Windowless, the smell is strong
of flatus squared by disinfectant.
Over the partition I can hear
people enter, pee and flush,
wash their hands
and throw away the paper towels.
Clunk-clunk goes the flap on the trash can lid.
When I was young I liked to shit and read.
Curtains flapped in the summer breeze,
pleasant on my naked knees
where the light fell on the book.
There're no excuses
for these places where I'm forced to sit,
except the cramped and crummy nature
of the minds and bodies
of the men who make them possible!

Les Pas Perdus

Very late I lie abed this morning
juggling a cup of coffee
with a coffee-table book,
filled with the gossip, fifty years old,
of a resolute band of crazy men.

I turn the page
in the middle of a story
and lose its thread;
the birds outside my window
are chattering and yammering
and from the hills to the south
come the sounds of bells playing
"O Come, All Ye Faithful" —

How could I resist?

Nosegay Garni

Coming home from work
along the tracks,
blinded by the brilliance
of cornflower, daisy and other showy weeds,
I pluck a handful
to carry home,
walking down the street
conspicuous
with my bouquet,
like a young man
on a first date
sixty years ago.
On the mantle
it sheds
a soft bright powder
of stamen and pistil and petal parts,
a dull refraction of that light
that stopped me
coming home
along the tracks.

Toward a Domestic Cosmology

Ingrid and Randall have taken a trip
leaving me with Chandler.
Though she's fixed all our meals
and made other arrangements
still
I can lift a corner of the veil.
But even now,
changing diapers, washing clothes—
little do I know of these,
though since I do the dishes
I have figured out
that household chores
are done
with the rising of the sun
and the setting of the sun
and the insistence
of eating and shitting.
Every night
we fall asleep,
once a month
the moon is full,
every year
the spring waxes and wanes.

Privilege and Duty

Overdue books pile up on my shelves,
fines mount—
but not for me:
faculty privilege.
Still, I read diligently,
these shrillings of academic insects
though I'm not sure why.
Their lack of spirit weighs me down,
their lovely bindings make me envious:
such a waste of money, such a waste of time...

Faculty Meetings

I am forced to interrupt
at nearly every word—there is
no venom this snake won't use
to advance his notions of design.
In my failings of dogmatism
I am called hysterical
until those who call me this
also catch the drift—
then they too
stand and shout.

Efficacious Remedy!

My back hurts,
I've got a stuffed up nose.
Ingrid and the kids
take a walk around the block.
I make a pot of tea,
lie in bed,
get a chance to read
Watson's Su Tung-P'o.

That's all...

Background: Foreground

Under a sky
of Chandler's eyes,
seen through gaps
in the canopy of leaves
I write
while drops
quivering from trees
heavy with the morning's shower
spot my paper.
Cloud foam
climbs sky poles;
in the distance
cumuli
rise pink and dimly seen
beyond the day's horizon.

Existential Probabilities

As I've grown old
the few abilities
as seer
I had
have atrophied—
I cannot tell their futures,
these bright-eyed scions
of what pass for rich
in Raleigh.
Undoubtedly
they'll go their many ways,
put to lie
the bodings
of all my facile
social scientific truths...

The Objective Quality of the Subjective Point of View

Since I do not own a car
I take the bus to see a movie
which strands me at the Mall—
the only place in this benighted land
to see a film—
long before its starting time.
For a while
I wander through the shops
till sated to nausea
with the surfeit of stuff
I plop on a bench
among the human stream.
The faces on the passing people
do not improve my mood.
What are they so mad at?
What makes them so unbeautiful?
Finally it occurs to me
I'd feel much better
quiet
in the prefilm darkness
of the theater.

Moonrise

Just before bed
we sit together on the roof
cool and clean.
The full moon has risen
and is turning white
before our eyes.
In the distance
an ambulance
begins to wail
and Randall and the sudden dogs
ululate together
with the rushing sirens.
The empty street,
white beneath the moon,
is a ribbon
in its nighttime hair.
On the horizon
the radio tower
winks
off
and
on

off
and
on.

Sun, Skin, Sweat, Sit

Walking to work along the tracks
I pass three guys at work on the tracks,
winching quarter-mile lengths of steel
preparatory to replacing
a piece of track with welded rail.

One mans the winch, the others,
heave on the clamp,
drive home the skids,
hook the hook
and guide the rails
between the wheels.

It is seventy out beneath the roiled clouds
and endless blue,
here on the tracks where the horizon's a horizon
and the sky's a sky.
One of them has his shirt rolled up
to beneath his breast
and his skin is moist with exertion, dark with sun.
His hair tumbles from his hardhat and he smiles a greeting.
Suddenly I'm in his place:
I know his every move, predict precisely
when he'll join the others for a cigarette.

The job is done.
They chat and smoke and watch the clouds.
Some birds fly north.
My excuse for watching gone
I retrieve my papers, trudge on to school,
my heart with them along the track,
my hands richly soiled,
my pants stained with oil,
my mind at rest—
sitting there with them
along the track.

Laying Rail

In the chilly light, sharp and clear,
standing awkward in the trackside grasses
where the glittering dew wets their cuffs,
looking silly in their ties and jackets,
it was mostly bosses
acting busy with their walkie-talkies.
The morning sparkles.
Down by the machines, things are humming.
The work train backs and forths,
the crew comes in in dribs and drabs.
They laugh and joke, open faces, open hands,
grabbing and touching and pushing and hugging,
picking up hammers and claw bars and wrenches,
knocking off C-clamps and pulling up spikes,
spinning off nuts, poking out bolts,
on hands and knees,
backs bent, backs straight:
the business before business.
Everybody trusts, everybody knows what each can do...
As the morning shadows shorten
work spreads out along the shining rails,
white and blue before the orange hats giving way.
Twelve or thirteen guys
line up beside a bar,
by sight and voice assembled
not by memo.
They work together because there's work to do,
and they know together what it is,
and they know together how to get it done.
The innocence of labor has nothing to do with money:
pay cannot explain their energy, their willingness to get things done.

"It wasn't a question of dollars," the workman said to Carnegie.
"The boys would have let you kick them, but they wouldn't let that other man
stroke their hair." How many years? and still we will not understand...

The machines chug up, the track is rolled to the ground,
squealing like a new chalk on a fresh blackboard,
high pitched like panicked mice who know they're going to die,
and fwham it hits the first cradle and fwham the rail shoe snicks it into place,
and fwham, fwham, fwham they tie it down.

The tie plate broom cribber, ugly orange machine,
raises dust as it growls by,
sweeping plates for the spike-pulling crew,
FWUMP they go, fwump, fwump, fwump,
littering the track with twisted steel
for the scrap buggy cart's conveyored maw.
Its crew, backs doubled, picks and tosses, picks and tosses,
up and down, up and down like picking melons.
They pace themselves, speeding up, slowing down,
behind the wide gauge threader on its double set of wheels,
pushing the wide-gauged older track aside, riding on the narrow new.
It's ten o'clock and hot beneath the sun;
green has replaced the gray in the kudzu on the cuts,
purple has left the shadows in the shade below the bridge.
Shirts come off, get rolled up.
Salty dew glistens on the moving muscles.
The arrogance of labor has everything to do with money;
they flaunt their easy graceful strength to flout the value placed on labor.

"how beautiful they are
their youth and human skill
and communion with the nature of things,
how ugly they are
already sleek with narrow eyes"

Plug setter, multiple cribbing, adzing machines roll by,
setting fires in the cuts with their rotary saws,
coughing, whipping up dirt,
preparing the ties for the plate-laying crew.
Up-and-down men, their polished skins
rain like a tropic forest.
They crenelate the rails with upturned plates,
on the buggy, off the buggy, plates in place,
their hair—a lovely mess—damp foreheads, sculpted curls.
Up front, switches slow the work, bring it to a stop.
Men dig in each other's pockets for smokes and lights,
packs of Marlboros flash from hats and sleeves.
Hats come off, hair is freed, streams of perspiration
run in streaks through dirt on cheeks and temples.
Sweat drips from an upper lip, mouthing a Camel—
pleasant acrid smoke; transparent in the sunshine,
silver in the shade.
Sweat drips from an upper lip, flapping in the breeze—

conversation: pungent, witty,
vapid, dull.

Few of the sixty men can tell me
how to call the weight of rail,
132 pounds per running yard,
they handle so superbly.

Few can tell where the tracks are
they're replacing.

Few can tell me where their camp is,
fewer care.

None

can name the president
of Southern Railway,
discuss the profit picture,
say their feelings
about the capital investment plan.

Many, ashamed of their ignorance, smile
and lie to me and make up stories—what could I care,
a passerby?

though flattered by my interest
generously

they give me things.

The stupidity of their labor owes everything to money:
dumb labor is compliant, willing to settle for increases in pay.

"It is Judge Gary endlessly repeating: 'As heretofore publically and repeatedly
stated, our corporation and subsidiaries although they do not combat the labor
unions as such, decline to discuss business with them...' as though
there were something else to talk about... something else of interest..."

The standard gauge threader spreads the new track
out

to the fifty-two inch standard;
at every fourth tie a spiker tacks the rail.

It's a furnace in the cuts:
the rail heater's along only for the ride
in these mercurial eighties.

The gauger, liner and spiker does a final gauging job:
the spiking crew nails down the rail for good.

The crew's spread out, a quarter-mile now.

It rains rail anchors as the shadows start to lengthen;
the rail anchor renewal machine knocks them into place.

Then the rail greaser and the welding crew—
in the sand-packed molds around the rails,

making perfect welds with molten steel.
In the low sun the members of the crew
stand like gnomons
waiting for the sign that it's time to go,
clustered into chatting groups like homing birds.
The track bends out of sight without a break,
running west into the sun beneath the bridge.
Crammed like cattle in a truck—
off to their camp of trailer homes.
It cannot be a rich life,
no matter that I want it so...
Most of the men, married, with kids, get home
—part of every weekend.
Others aren't so lucky.
Six bucks an hour—steady—is all it takes to wrench them from their homes;
no job so alienates as road work.

"—Boat-pullers, this is how you live,
and yet it's better than shouldering the tools of war."

Their clickity-clack a dream already,
the rails lie smooth and seamless,
flaming in the setting sun.
On a parallel track
a freight train hurries west—
new cars from Detroit.
Its tri-level auto cars are shielded
to save the Thunderbirds and vans
from the heavy stones of vandals.
Little this afternoon
makes sense
except the innocence and beauty
of work and working men...

New Memories

The crescent moon hangs low in the western sky.
The steady breeze,
pushing the mercury into the sixties,
brings a mild fragrance
like the smell of burning pine.
Of all the remembered nights like this,
whose passing I've so mourned,
none was like this.
Lovingly we put the kids to bed,
Chandler with his wishes for never-ending kisses,
Randall with his arms around my neck,
calling for his arms around my neck.
Sipping tea we chatted on the porch.
Later in the porch swing
I read poetry.
From my bath beside the open window
I watched tree shadows
moving in the darkness.
The night's lively stillness
—these feeble lines.

Kenny Dantley

After the movie my step is light, my stride is long.
Gladly I embrace the outside air, hot and muggy
after the cool dry of the air-conditioned theater.
Crossing the parking lot, I enjoy dodging cars,
bright and useful-looking this sunny afternoon.
Seeing my bus in the distance, I hurry along the Mall.
Across its shadow the pulsing slaps of sunlight shock,
as I rise into the light on the balls of my feet
and on the soles of my feet sink back to the shadows.
Becoming a camera, I track in and out of darkness,
exhilarated by the self-induction of the ocean motion.
Even Meng Chiao's "the edges of the gorges hack up sun and moon"
cannot dispel the wonder of this moment!

Deeply

Usually
when I can't sleep at night
I fret
but last night was different.
A soft breeze
and many kinds of birds,
insects
and the noise of distant cars,
wind chimes
and the sounds of Ingrid breathing,
proved far more interesting
than my trivial and tortured thought.
Listening,
I slept.

Unending Amazement

It's been a long time since I thought I'd finished,
but still the pages —
grinding past,
paragraph after paragraph,
line after line.
Dickens? Balsac?
No, the continuously surprising
and tortuous ways
of this thing I call my heart...

Inhale, Exhale

Here I sit.
The mail comes in,
the mail goes out.
Special offers of special prints,
how can I resist?
New books of signal importance,
how can I refuse?
Memos from assistant deans,
how can I fail
to pay attention?
Among the crap, your letter.
All day long I feel good thinking of it.
This evening I sit to write an answer.
The mail comes in,
the mail goes out...

