Reading notes for 2nd Wind 2000

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THIRD RAIL; AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LASTNESS

WEDDING MARCH

IN THE HOSPITAL

HORSE

THE POINT OF EMPTINESS

AT THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING, WHICH IS DYING

MEA CULPA

WHAT RUSHES BY US

WHIRLING DERVISHES

AFTER LOVEMAKING

SOMETHING ABOUT STICKS

LOST

THE WIND THAT SWEPT UP GREAT HOMER
A couple of weeks ago I gave a reading from AS EARTH BEGINS TO END at the University of Nevada, and a group of people from the Literature and the Environment Program there came and asked some interesting questions about what they called "The Literature of Loss" –

Well you know, Robert Hass has already said it: “All the new thinking is about loss. In this it resembles all the old thinking.”

Nevertheless, suddenly I realized that all my life I’ve really been writing about loss; about the terrible knowledge we all have that, no matter how wonderful life may be, eventually it’s going to end –

-- about what Robert Frost called “What to make of a diminished thing”

-- And so I decided to do something different tonight, and instead of reading from just one book of poems, to try to read something from all of my books. Not necessarily in chronological order, though – in fact I’m going to start from my most recent one, and read you – while we’re all still fresh, I hope – the whole of a very long poem called THIRD RAIL; AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LASTNESS

It’s a poem haunted by the sort of helpless anger one feels, maybe especially towards the end of life, when both the physical and the mental powers begin to fail, when everything seems to go wrong and, as usual, even in the most ordinary circumstances, each partner in a relationship can’t help blaming the other. But it’s also trying to deal with something about which the novelist Jeanette Winterson says:

“What is it that crouches under the myths we have made? Always the physical presence of something split off…

Suppose the moment of Creation and our torn-off universe were recorded in the star-dust of our bodies?…

We compulsively act out the drama of our beginning, when what was whole, halved, and seeks again its wholeness.

Have pity on this small blue planet searching through time and space.”

– And yet, my poem wants to say. We don’t know, we can’t know everything, Earth may – or may not be – ending.

Here’s THIRD RAIL: AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LASTNESS
So, Now I want to read a poem from my very first book, a book Harcourt Brace published way back in the dark ages of 1968, 32 years ago now! It's a poem in three voices -- first a third person narrator, then a man and a woman. And it's

WEDDING MARCH

and here's a poem that appeared in my second book, which was published several years after I'd met Leonard, my late husband.

IN THE HOSPITAL

Well, there are all kinds of loss; some much worse than others. This one's from a book called CROSSING THE SAME RIVER.

HORSE

I was reminded of this next poem, which I wrote many years ago, and published in PAUL BUNYAN'S BEARSKIN, by hearing a wonderful remark the great Simone Weil once made, to the effect that "The apparent absence of God in the world is the actual reality of God." It's a poem I'd never have been able to finish if I hadn't, after several years of working on it, been led by the rhyme scheme to nothing less than that all important formula, $E=MC^2$ squared. It's, astonishingly -- astonishingly for me, that is, a villanelle, and it's

THE POINT OF EMPTINESS

-- and here's a poem about the kind of loss we bring on ourselves, out of that seemingly unconquerable fascination we have towards evil, that secret, sometimes not so secret urge we all have towards self destruction, towards the ruin of all we say hold most dear.

AT THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING, WHICH IS DYING
Okay, this one is from a little chapbook of poems about my father, and it came to me from a time when I suddenly realized that in many ways my father and Richard Nixon were very much alike. What the poem's really interested in, though, is power -- specifically, how power that refuses to admit its own vulnerability, is not real power at all.

**MEA CULPA**

Well. This poem's from my first Copper Canyon book, *THE WIND OF OUR GOING*.

**WHAT RUSHES BY US**

And here's just a little one from my next to last book, *INVISIBLE HORSES*, which some of you may remember is a series of attempts to deal with "what it feels like to think". And so now to go from the outside to the inside -- specifically the inside of our heads, here's

**WHIRLING DERVISHES**

And now I want to read you at least a couple of love poems. -- I wrote so many of them in our lives together -- so here's one from the "new" section of my New and Selected Volume.

**AFTER LOVEMAKING**
And, to continue with basically the same metaphor, this next poem was one of Leonard's favorites. It's from the book of love poems, and listening to it, I hope you'll remember, "The point of emptiness is that it's always there...in all that matters, insubstantial as air..."

SOMETHING ABOUT STICKS

-- Anyway, now have only two more poems to read, --

and the first is a poem I don't understand very well. But that's okay, because it's trying to evoke something I think very few of us can ever really understand. It's from THE DOG THAT WAS BARKING YESTERDAY.

LOST

-- and the last poem I want to read tonight is a poem whose amazing epigraph I swear I found only after I'd written it. The poem's called

THE WIND THAT SWEPT UP GREAT HOMER

-- and the epigraph is from John Allen Paulos' book, INNUMERACY.

huge applause