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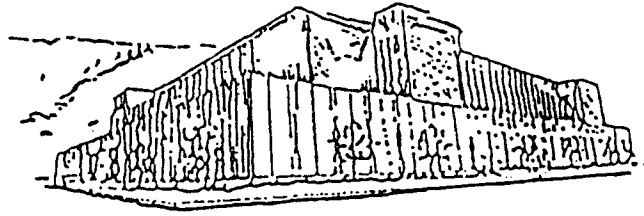
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BUTTERFLY EFFECT

By

John B. Wolff

B.A. University of Cincinnati, 1981

M.A. University of Colorado, 1983

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

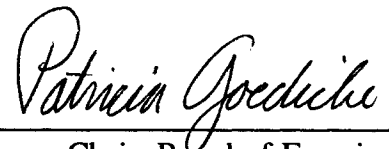
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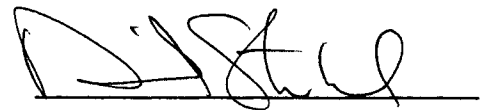
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To my children, Benjamin, Jordan, and Jessamyn; and to the stream of being

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A COLONIAL TOUR

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

--Walker Percy

*This search for historical parallels,
research into psychic affinities,*

*has been done to death before,
will be done again;*

*no comment can alter spiritual realities
(you say) or again,*

*what new light can you possibly
throw upon them?*

*--H.D.,
The Walls Do Not Fall*

LIKE BLOOD

slapped around the mind's walls, jets
cut open delirium, and the scream
drags toward infinity and hypocrisy,
that word exfoliating like a helicopter
over dominoes of suicide, a word
that vanishes, clean as evening news,
a siren poured through dream, a word
that knots the ropes around a
woman's legs, pregnant in a shack,
delivering the hammerings of death,
and dresses midwest kids in
camouflage.

THE STEAMER *EARNHOLM*¹

I.

And now in the harbor where night is trimmed with the yellow of morning, the forms of buildings shouldering out of the darkness to loom, impassive over water laced with shuddering light, and now as the ripe sun of a morning scented with hemp and New York smoke distills the shapes of the incandescent day, where, bobbing in the cold crypt of the ship's belly are bananas, bananas delivered across the doldrums to the dripping sound of the harbor's water as it falls to reflected claws of light, and now that the beginning of time which all times are, should find us eating this fruit we did not know should be forbidden, and now as the golden horns, once curving upwards in the trees to prick the sun, an immolated bull, are severed and shipped, and now as then is always now, we peel this one-time tropic from itself and cast its skin into the black and white nowhere of slipping comedians, and now as the tongue unfurls, sticky and craving across distant beaches, a slug writhing for bits of matter, oil, fruit, woven mats, gold, mahogany, anthracite, and nutmeg, and now as we turn the key in the exalted ignition of our yesterdays, leaving the porch light on, 60-watt forgotten sun

¹The first shipment of bananas to arrive in New York City were brought by the *Earnholm* in 1880.

lands, we may say the world is different, we may say that now the dream of our enduring follows its ineluctible path from "I am," and "still shall be," and "even if dead," to "there is no death" for that which has sought and found its lust, and tasted the taste of its own inexorable sentience.

II.

Is it Africa from the crow's nest, or Gary?

We know, we know, the searing power of the nucleotide, the pesticide, the insecticide, the suicide, the stagnant reaches of tenements launched against the desiccated arch of sky, and the fact that the word *ache* is in the word *stomach* for a reason, that the future is handed down from the sellers of cocoa and of rubber to the buyers of rain and votes and clouds. I pick up a book and it is made of paper. I sit down on a chair and it is made of wood. I drink from a glass and it is made of oil. As I read, I realize that if I am made of what I read, then I am paper and wood and oil.

III.

Then, as one who is deserted searches the beach for footprints and does not find them, as one who must explain to at least one other person how the trees have knealt for his

sake and cast a relieving shadow over his skin, long stung by the bee of the sun, as one who, entirely alone, seeks to find the cause of his solitude in the angle of a finger of driftwood poked in the hot sand, in the lines of his feet, in the creaking of his bones as he squats to relieve himself, even in the prognosticate shape of the shit he deposits unwillingly between his heels, it is as though there is no sure beginning, no sure sign that is not like all the other signs, and in this totality, in the way even the water combs the slope of the beach at a blue angle, or in the way aluminum gulls skip across the crests of shoreline gusts, he is sure only that if there is departure from this, it will be for the same constellation of starfish glued to their pebbles, it will be for the same reason that flowers give off their fragrance in umber thickets, it will be because of something he did, something he cannot remember, something he cannot change. It will be because of something he still must do.

HIBAKUSHA (The Explosion-Affected)

In the old photograph of Hiroshima, black tree branches spread like the fingers of a burned hand, preventing the view of its charred countenance. It is perhaps as well that you see no people, where they lie below the rubble or slumber, face down, in the choking estuary. In white hospitals, doctors snatched photographs of skin wrinkled up like plastic wrap, stuck to itself in pus, and it is perhaps as well you have not seen it, just this sunlight arming its way through afternoon, through the lattices and flowers of America, of fat men grazing lawns with belching Saturday mowers. If I were to ask you to celebrate, would it be for the final exegesis of scorched flesh, my insanities for this world to include the dead in this happy party? Would it be for neighbors, who smile that all-around smile that does it every time in the butch lawns and in the crowned streets of our perfected vacancies? --I think of bamboo groves that wept with burning kids, and celebrate my private party. May I say John Hersey died today. He served us well the leftovers of 1945, served them to these silent, sullen neighborhoods, whose rose trees rage above suburban greens, whose wooden decks leap shores of polished silence. He served, and I will eat and make such offerings to the Affected, and sing of those gone blind in the wombs of their mothers, and remember those who pass, who

spoke of a There that became
Nowhere, of a space at the center of
quiet towns, and in the empty
playgrounds of the west.

THE GOVERNORS OF ZUNI

Politics like water takes the path of least resistance. All my life I've been trying to tell you how I saw their still torsos pressed like leaves in the book of my imagination, severe and abstracted, almost archetypal, as though they were telling us we sit in our own shadows, letting the walls treat us like rats. So those governors, they sat still as trees in July, eight limbs hung dead at their sides while politics like water washed over them. And that is the nature of compassion. But because we did not see it, ignored their sympathy for our nature, we can never be right for this world, its only sun must turn and lever down on lodgepole rafters, cold adobe without us. It is a desert that appears within us, where paths, crossing wastes, drift toward empire's end. That is our result, to stagger from moment to moment in these sandy places, in dry, to see our hills in bloom, our desert cities green with the wasted Colorado and know we cannot know who we are.

MANIFESTO FOR DARKNESS

I.

Above this late-bloomed western town the lips of denuded hills glow, soaked with the afternoon that has leaked from the sun. With dusk, the hills will cool, leap into darkness and the star-haze constellations of the city will burn a quiet yellow. Then I will read again the silent headlines, the paragraphs which are continued, must end, on pages my dumb fingers never find. This is reading, reading--while in the obsidian dark, the tulips clench in ischemic fists, the wind leaning on the neglected garden. I am told this is a good neighborhood, bright-lit and obedient, but conditions pour away like all else and there is no knowing the moment, not this one of magpies oaring over highways or pecking at the garbage there--or of the willows stroking afternoon with their braids, yellow diamonds of light swinging through the grass, oblivious light melting in the vaginate culms, cupping the lights or shadows with which they have been filled to the brim. And just as from this neighborhood, with its view of the mountains which bleed in maple runnels, where bleached dust lifts its arms over clots of drying juniper, there is no knowing the sign or the life or the name of those whose throats are slashed in a citrus light by the blade of our distances from real earth.

II.

In this story there is the light of news which shifts and glances, suggesting shapes that draw the mind toward its moral burnout. that is why I like the night, when the claws of yet another sun have dragged the hurting light away, and I am left the nebular halogen star-haze of the valley, soothing and obvious as astronomy. But there is another darkness which calls from within, the night that is the emptiness within all things. Only this darkness can save us, and so we must be careful where we put the light, be careful that it does not spill into the darkness that is our only hope. Where there is light there is only time, time and difference and life and bitter hurt. But where there is darkness there is purity and that unity which, like a black spotlight, shines through to our day.

So now as I hear the president's Bubble burst, punctured by the siren of a tropical midnight, it is then that it's alright to say he might at least have asked first, What good are children anyway, without jellybeans or cameras, no nintendo to contend with--but fanaticism has no children, and villages are merely places where kids on mats lift stumps in lifelong hail of realism in prosthetics, their country cauterized by the light of our mines, their history no longer than their legs might once have been. These dark orchids heap themselves on poverty, dark agents instruct in cattle prods. By darkness I say we

are not helpless, that it is all OK, not because we wish for these things, but because this shared center of all the world is without death, where there is no death there is no birth.

III.

And once said, evening mutely smolders. The jaws of the mountains close on night and evening shakes out its oriole wings. Darkness is everything that can explain. Black is every color joined. And I say the real day is born, not as light, but as a celebrant darkness, such that when you look with the eye of a moment, it is the truest light, the vast illumination of things that only seem to be.

IV.

In this curfew for the world, in this deaf color, in this mute touching, in this numb vision, all distinction is crushed. Yet slow white mansions of thunderheads coast senselessly over town. A river of cars pours down the throat of the city. What comes means nothing. What stays is the darkness polluted only by words spelled with alphabets of light. Memory--the past--is light. It is distinction, it is you, it is me. It is what is held dear. But night is within this light, and the night is knowing, and the night is this "now," this no-thing that I believe in, the inhering

darkness and the fact that everything that is must be as it is--the nail-driven brain, the electrified the American mornings, blanched and passerine--these things are there, and it is enough, and it is the mercy that we may follow them toward darkness and leave off the brilliance shed forth from all that goes before us, from everything that is levelled in the end toward my children like a gun.

LAND MINE

They are as plentiful as rage, and as various, the old-fashioned metal variety, unabashed in frank dirt, some of them, gone senile with time, uncertain as to where they are, and why; the hip plastic kind, ever-ready in the best of soils, aloof from those who seek them and of uneven temperament; the Russian type, with its anachronistic flair for the old world, its wooden trigger quaint and sensitive in countryside gravel, all of them, happy cousins, patient, for the most part, to bloom in the unexpected springtime of our next step, whatever, wherever, that may be.

LETTER FROM A REVOLUTIONARY

*The turning of a hand, the breaking
of a twig.*

Ah Mei:

How the sun in its rapture scorches the workers in our father's fields, lighting the water of those rippling paddies he bought with gold long earned as a tailor among the foreigners--whose tall buildings, whose bright ships shivering in the slow waters of the Bogue have brought us down to this, whose sunny, metal coins chased our family to its original mud, this dung-infected water over which the gulls of the estuary wind in invarious circles. I sit on the town wall and gaze out over the grey-brick alleys, seeing nothing but self-assured pigs, bickering chickens, the cloth-shoed villagers who scuff the packed earth, shuffling, sweeping themselves around bends in the walls now older than our grandparents--and which we rebuild, willy-nilly, brother, the fallen bricks slowly, ploddingly put up, though at night they tumble down again, the sound of clods of baked mud pattering on the oily earth, the sound of our country, Ah Mei. It is a small disturbance, but means much,

and today the temple seems to stand like a worker beneath a conical hat of black tiles and stand so still, it is as if it had just realized it will always be as it has always been.

the turning of a hand

Yesterday, mother put the winter clothes away, and I winced as she hobbled around in her footless anguish, and once again shamed the family by speaking out against the lotus which festers and stinks in our midst. At school I point out the teacher's ignorance, facing a wall, reciting what analects, what songs, rites, that useless memorizing, and I long to leave the center, to be lost in the orbit of my rage, to leave these others grumbling about a lack of loyalty, the *li*; do they ever hear the faint ringing such men as you have left in the hollow of your bell-like absence? To what, I wonder, must a bell be loyal? Ah Mei, I hear your distant tolling and tell you the stench of our humanity seeps up out of the ground and seeks me out in a way I never noticed before, that fecund, pissy fog of the village like so much that is despised, a residue of something, which, if we could only understand it, would compel us to leap up and inhale even the scent of our own excrement. But always, they repeat to me, "knowledge is easy; action difficult." How could they understand that I long to consume them, Ah Mei, to eat whole all these blind and ailing people, to cannibalize my own mother, to swallow down every man, woman, and child, every tubercular, every leper, to burst each pustule against my anger's tongue, the inexorable hunger that is my life gnashing down the gray-brick, savoring the shit-smearred horns of

droll oxen, the dusty roof-tiles, and every grain of rice in these cloud-painted paddies--even the Fragrant Mountains would not be safe from the appetite of this soul, not from this, this immeasurable sadness of a love that even you, Eyebrows, cannot understand, far off in the soothing, blowing silver of your rice fields, your serenely bowing plots of sugar-cane--you are so far from these clay alleys, and sisters, whose feet, even now, are being broken. No, Ah Mei, the ancients were wrong: it is action that is easy, easy as snapping a twig or turning a hand; and it is knowledge that is difficult. What, after all, do we know, what can be said of a people that has piled up bricks for five thousand years? Do you know how to make a gun that will point at the temple and explode? Abandonment, that final sweetness, lingers beyond our reach, and makes the turning of a hand or the breaking of a twig some immutably difficult task, abandonment, which the soul in its confinement of habit can never pretend to execute is,
Ah Mei,

my summer,

my almost-silence that fills the estuary as though I had already gone to some distant realm and found myself among the bleached shells of cities not yet built, not yet envisioned by those whose faith is not yet born. Above these walls that are no walls, the stilled sun, like a golden flag, luffs alone. I haunt the palace and

sing to myself this prayer: the best method of struggle, as always, is to kill the mind.

BUTTERFLY EFFECT

*Love crosses its islands, from grief to grief,
it sets its roots, watered with tears,
and no one--no one--can escape the heart's progress
as it runs, silent and carnivorous.*

--Pablo Neruda,
Love Sonnet LXXI

HERE IT COMES

Blue stares, mystic, silent over green,
I can't help it, green shakes the wind
as walking down and outside into
blades of sun to hang the laundry,
surrendered flags, out to dry, while
June goes burning in the gleam of
cars pressed into atomic quiet--I have
turned my back on everything to
remember now the windowless, the
pure, that politics are privileged and
death a thinking that has worn a path
in the mind.

GHAZAL FOR EDWARD DORN

The yellow willow slumps in the yard, draping itself on snow. The purple finch braids the day's worst news, while the television, warbling, looses death on the yellow earth, and gaunt, translucent armies reflect in the pane I'm staring through. Outside, a tide of snow crests on a blank road, smolders in thin gauze breezes, the tremoring stalks of last year's corn engulfed by drifts until they cannot move. I think of you
in June,
hungover,
pinching the last rose of the season,
no end to how things come to be,
how this grimy wind grabs the boughs, painting the crust with fresh blind ink, script too faint to read,
how far away the guts of planes are shitted out on mosaics of dried African mud as though to feed, not Somalis or Ethiopians, but our starving televisions--for it is a world after all; we cannot expect it to be perfect, cannot expect the millennium to bloom from blood-soaked pixels or the land mines in the road. We need trouble to separate the days from one another, need someone to go through agony, to starve to death, to face the cattle prod in the catacombs, to perish in
an iron box--to be, after all, *afraid*--
for how else would we know we can face these, our days alone, paring the bad from the not-so-bad? Outside, the snow has calmed itself, and the stars of the city gaze toward heaven

like the eyes of animals annealed on
a lighted road. And I think what
cruelty it is to say the world is shit
(and I mean all of it), but it is, and
we are, you and I, friends, who
passed between us once a rose that
stopped the world.

The way I read it now, on the wide
page of winter, the world gave that
flower to itself when it imagined us
together.

BUTTERFLY EFFECT

You watched as men in tall hats rode beautifully to the focal point and then stopped, propping themselves on the necks of their horses, blowing smoke, before the vast undulations of Wyoming carried them away again, the dun earth drummed by hooves. You could not speak to them, though they waved and smiled at you from a distance of a hundred years. They rode into mists of your whispers; miles deep goes the picture of this eternity. I tell you it does not take much to change things permanently, deeply. Only a moment ago I was here alone watching the sun burn a path through afternoon, quiet birds preening on poles. But now, now--

They say "a special sensitivity to original conditions" will infinitely ripple through the world, no dilution, no diminution, those strong, dark horses stealing over fading plains, those minuscule men in confident chaps who would, in another day, blow the world high in radioactive confetti as easily as passing dinner to their children. They are more than here in ghostly emulsion, the two-dimensional obstreperousness of jocular cowboy pride which leans just so on the saddle horn.

But this is not all, it cannot be, cannot, because we put our lives down indelibly, impossible to say what effect a hundred years might bring from men and horses gone. But bring it it will, as though mere

seeing, daydreaming thoughts would blow against the pavilions of belief, and buried missiles leap from the silos of our dreams. It is as though it were peace that is the thought of peace, or death that is the thought-- just that, what sputtering fabric of the real runs to palsy because we simply are. I cannot close the book upon that stark Wyoming, where antebellum riders rein horses out on edgeless pages of legacy. It lasts, I say. I say this thought "redemption" lasts. I say it lasts, I say redemption is the mind's last pony.

HOMAGE TO A SINGER WHO
SHALL REMAIN ANONYMOUS

*There is no ecstasy of Beauty in which I will
not remember Man's misery*

--Robert Duncan

And then with mandolin chills
spraying up the back of my neck, a
whisper leaks its final consonant
from your unfurling breath, you who
once offended every star-spangled,
beef-gnashing redneck in the nation,
you who sang one word, fanned now
by guitars to startled apotheosis, that
one syllable ringing still like an
empty room in my shock-lit mind, a
word so unredeemed in our frenzy to
chain it to a need, that we fear it will
evaporate from your lips in almost
anguish, in almost joy, before we
could understand how "dreams"
could be almost ours; and then I
came so close to you I heard a thread
of moisture snap across your tongue
and felt, in the hazy glissando of the
dobro or the chanting maracas, how
much you trust us with this, the sheer
biology of your talent--and it is al-
most enough--for there is no happy
audience that knows it can be sated,
and you, in the anapestic dramas of
the ziljians, in the gusts that blow
across the snare, cut us short in order
to ignite at last that which makes us
happiest: the hoped for, the incen-
diary, the moment of our inexhaus-
tible anguish.

DOCTRINE OF THE WATERS

I. The Coracle

And I remember my daughter's infant hand reaching up in the five a.m. murk, opening, closing, seagrass fingers stroking currents of half-lit air, my wife asleep beside her, arms embracing breasts as if to comfort that which has comforted another to exhaustion, her legs sloping beneath the quilt, which, like a flow of pink lava cascades to sea-floor of sunken shoe, anemone puddles of shirts and pants that were the sinking of another yesterday, yesterday. And all lies fallen that way, save my daughter's hand, its pudgy stalk groping for something I cannot see-- as I am groping, with the length of my life, across a bay that blinks, wave by wave, the beads of light that are a city burning distantly, crossing water I was crossing forty years ago when my father spotted my mother, swim-suited, lying on a dock in July's great corn-palace sun, 1954, the same water I am crossing now. Did they know the danger of my being swamped, so small and delicate the raft, its ribs of wicker, its oilcloth skin, sending me paddling and bailing over poverty, paddling and bailing over my brother who never came home, paddling and bailing over flaming countries everywhere, paddling and bailing over my own uninterrupted rage? There is a thing, intent, the logic of our distances, and

of the desire to keep them unrolled before us, (mine a green-black murk, yours, perhaps, a golden dune or dripping jungle), to keep them there though they exhaust us, to keep at them day and night, to be able to say, at least, that we are busy, that there is a purpose behind the way we buy our food, or the way we drive, or how, in speaking, we are bent on saying more than we have said, or in our conviction that we should brush our teeth (or that tonight we don't need to), that our crises, spooling on the mental threader, are more beautiful than sense itself. But that is not the point; it is the craft we're given, and it is not for holding onto. When finally we arrive, when the boat which has held us comes to incandescent sand, when there is no purpose but to walk away, to leave all vehicles behind, nodding in the rhythmic shallows of darkness and moon, of the relative distance and of that purer one, which is reached with this hand or that, or with my daughter's, which still will not crimp my offered thumb, but reach only for the thing that is already here, then even as we die we have gained a kind of morning, as morning is a light coming toward us.

II. Maitreya

But before the sun has risen, so much: the sound of a plane like a heavy stone scoring the tourmeline

sky, dragged away, abrading to nothing, the traces of its thunder settling at seven twenty-eight on a snow-crust pocked with footprints that stretch back to the still-dark path by the empty house on the corner lot. And for all he knows, pouring himself a cup of coffee while the children still sleep, he has not yet arrived, not yet--though perhaps, given Venus, rising in her halogen quilt, or the stringy branches of the weeping birch beckoning just so, or the silence of the dog that barked all night--perhaps this is the day, the appointed time, when everything seems a confirming sign that at last the world is ready to receive what it has always wanted, if only he could come, if only, while shuffling the paper or shifting slightly on the cushion of the broken couch, it could be this easy, the mere thought that wanting peace is having it. But how unworthy this life of cigarettes, postponements, happy hours, of the small, personal disappointments of one's own interior--and what to do for them, a question that hangs un-rung, clapperless, in the frozen air--for they are so thorough-going if they want a massacre, if they want real blood, real pain, never content with merely imagining a scene--commendable they are--to be so thorough, so absolute.

Outside, the streetlights spray the snow with a scouring cold, and the evanescent silence of early morning belies the fires of some tedious battle in which no one is really seen dying, yet no one is spared some kind of in

cineration either, running beneath the falling bombs, the smart bombs, the dumb bombs, the brilliant, the brilliant bombs falling from nowhere like blossoms of fire hung up-side down from stems of smoke. Who'd have thought we'd die from so many flowers? And he just sits there, reading his book, wondering who would listen, who would even know he leans forward, just enough, reaching with nothing in his heart to adjust the carnations in their vase, his dry fingers propping them, then letting them fall again the way they were, as yesterday and the day before he propped, and he let fall, accepting them, saving them, thinking how unworthy he is, how grateful.

III. The Master of the Sunset

--for Tandy

He had called me--for "the brickish afterglow at Burlington"--the Master of the Sunset, that old penchant of mine to put others' noses in what I love--but it seems to me now, even with the smoldering ruins of another day beside me, that I was a water poet, as Chopin was a poet of the wind's broken chord discharged along the surface of summer's lake. And then I had not realized that, at day's end, it is not the sun, but the smoke, which, smearing the sky, absolves the world of its perpetual turning, the cloud whose incendiary core is washed with light, re-dressing

itself into vermilion and ocher and ash-blue flannels, the shredded flags of the common daily, which, like water, unfurl into some larger story we call the sky at evening. But for water, unlike clouds, there is at least the semblance of an obstacle, the defiant black lips of stones lifting from the surface, the fallen log glazed with moss, the haphazard waders walking with enforced dignity against the grain of the currents, and the currents themselves mouthing these impediments, silver V's streaming in wakes away from them--it is the way that water moves, not just around these things, but *close* around, touching, yet letting go in the same instant--and it is in this that we find the poem, jutting from the flow of things, and find ourselves shifting to move around it, to move around our suffering so as to go on.

But I know this is not the answer to any question. It is only that today I am happy, it is only that, while sitting on the ground, our legs adopting the stamped impression of leaves' embroideries, that I see the further step: that the poem is the rock, and the poem is the stream too--the condition of our unimpeded love, that seems should never have been so easy, but is.

CONSOLATION

*But tell me, who are they,
<these travellers, even a little
more fleeting than we ourselves--*

--Rilke, (on Picasso's *Les Saltimbanques*)

Then the pale interregnum of children's laughter pulls me to the window, and I see how the dragon of the street is scaled with leaves that twitch in the slithering wind, how that wind glances through anorexic branches, mountain bittersweets clotted with vermillion, and runs its claws through the chimes by the screen door, as though it were some long-awaited visitation, some creature we know is native to this place and right to be among us--our ears ring unpleasantly, and we are dumbed by the silence which sifts down endless burning avenues of fall.

But of October, whose primary colors slip through our sensibilities as easily as mist on canvas hills, and of the trees, like birds in a tea-colored rain, hunched, their feathers littering lawns with pointillist blood until nothing is left but the claws, and of the world, sufficiently emptied, I can think nothing, save that you are gone across the line of your mind, to a spare, treeless state that never stops sighing, where the bleached sky aches over stilled moraines, and the fluorescent light of hospitals is your antiseptic sun.

As to your problems
I have nothing to say; the reordered
world is a world just the same, the
misery that is the mind a dream that
rivers below the toothpick balus-
trades of ego, as though below us the
constant image of ourselves that is
reflected there--the shuddering color
of our faces, a pink shirt, a blue and
dangled scarf, are consistencies good
enough to be demanded.

There is that, and there is all that still
moves beneath the sheeting of con-
viction. And there is what we are
crossing to, the evacuation of all our
sense, where we fall, not through the
expected dilutions of prayers or the
unguent therapies of guilty promul-
gators, but through the tang of these
few kids who scream, run in plaid
crescendos across the moltings of
another year. You are not right, but
you *are*; something simple and
elusive, of such apparency and
elision, remains--and surprised that
we are fallen, we see through oursel-
ves as through old news, and to this
larger place give way, and cut our
ropes, and know the fear to which
desire is chained is no longer feared,
and blind, bright water moves below
a mail of only light.

ZONA PELLUCIDA

zona pellucida or radiata: the innermost of the two lining membranes of the ovum. It is a thick layer traversed by radiating spores.

THE SHOUTING VALLEY

for Jessamyn Wolff

I have heard how they stand above the Shouting Valley in the barbed sun, rooted to stones glazed with dawn, shouting out whole villages of obituary or the names of new-borns to kin beyond the border, and how a mother might hold up her daughter in the satin light for relatives to see across the miles--though at that distance the baby is not even a dot, but something, something with a name and an age that has soaked into her and which she releases some part of to the megaphone winds, syllables cupped by hands as if to compress entire trees to seed that then might float across the valley and onto the opposite, crumbling shore; there family stand, wait, listen, their loosened shirts stuttering in the wind, and I wonder, not what part will arrive tattered in another country, (you will at least always have a name) but what part will be lost, what meaning will set out and never arrive, the incomprehensible silk of one's life, vanishing in the laboring air.

NURSERY SONG FOR TWO SONS

My son rides rocking horse, my other son rides the ocean of his mother in darkness. He is blind and numb, but he hears voices wandering where he is planted. His root is blood, his branch reaches air, though he is drowned, divine in the heart that beats every measure of his life, wave in wave.

Outside, voices inscribe the lipless dark with futile hopes. In this story, no one may dismount, but rage toward the line of battle and revolution, born. We are perhaps unique rememberers of our mothers' wombs, driven vainly to duplicate them like no other species, the world that is light in our original dark.

I say my son rides tirelessly a blue steed with yellow saddle. He knows fresh horses must come to him in life. But the ride cannot stop and the warfields stretch away invincibly.

WHEN YOU LIVE ON THE
MOUNTAIN, THE MOUNTAIN
DISAPPEARS

The slopes are hazed with yellow flowers, the land ignited below the shredded clouds. The phosphate mine burns flume and light drills down to warm the rocks and grass of consanguinity. But the earth is leaking, seeping down to be itself in another key, the green earth darkening, as it passes into blades of grass, and those blades to a single blade, and that leaf down upon the cell that falls to only water. And there the surge against the stones chews the edge of a shattered sea, strewn on beaches impossible to end. It is where I thought we might begin attending to the grains and drift, to that which blows and washes up, to the feelings that we bury in our flesh, to that which cries out when we are touched.

ANATTA (No-Self)

I.

Morning's square light fills the window. The curtain lifts and falls, fails and lifts and fails. The world ripens without a single daydream, is innocence, this emptiness, this luffing in the rife air, the shore whose waves must lift and fall and lift. Nothing can be added or amended, the gilt shafts down on greenest grass, the liminal life that leaves itself undone as I watch the morning breathe. What frail, unimportant things days are. They farce our vision, and raised, they fall, and are raised again, the pavilions of belief ruffling in faintest air.

II.

Were you hoping to be spared, plotting the course of a life that could not be lived, preferred engagements, an illustrious career, cadenzas, rehearsals over tea, thrilling expostulations of easy celebrity, the choices to be made, channels to be watched, the incremental abolishment of unpleasant things, lawn-mowing, cooking, bills, less attractive mates. Where it all ends up, who knows, amplified to a grinding din of inconsequence, boredom, another spring and the usual flowers.

III.

What you take, unbrokered, the first faint light of stars, or the blood draining in the gutter of distant city streets, the faith of this fabric hung on the blowing wind, spilled upon these milky days, pink glass coffee mugs drying in a winter of glancing light. There is joy in this, and mercy. I bring my wife coffee, the blanched light leaking through the shears, the deaf quiet painting cracked walls. And there comes a time when these pink glass coffee cups, whorled, glistening in the smeared light, and to which our faces bow each morning, taking in the steam, will no longer be, and the unfolding facts of what has come our way and gone again, will ask us to behave accordingly, to accede to what is normal, to give up all hope. And we do. And it is such a blessed relief. And in adjoining rooms there may be a plausible silence, some absolutely certain thing, but we go in and the light is not right, or we hear ourselves breathing. Everything has to be so pure, so clean. Wouldn't it be nice, for once, to let things get a little dirty. And once said, the poplar trees applaud the rising wind, and the sun, a stilled rock, chins the eastern hills.

IV.

The suspended morning crashes against the window, and with time, one wakes without thinking first of

one's own body, the curtain emptying itself of light, of hills' green, leaves, long before autumn comes, dropping off, down to edge among the teeth of drying grass like lost photographs. I can only say that if I don't understand you, it's because my brain doesn't work anymore. Plants, bees, April frost, all of it makes me mad, and what will you do with this big blast of sunlight, with what I remember, flags, stars, the broken arms of galaxies torn from their hot cores and sent spinning across the dark waters like skipped stones, the silk of the everyday, the empty tent that is the mind, these blossoms that dwindle in the trellises of stark insistence.

V.

I would never trust the mind, if I were you, a house stacked high with the papers of our thoughts, ceaselessly piled in empty rooms, the fuel of all our pain, exuberant flames. But the dreams are heavy, and the smoke, dispersing across the waves of the black harbor, goes on, survives change, though we never hear back.

VI.

What can I tell you that you don't already know? An old man pouring coffee for himself, forgotten in his peeling house--a certain kind of

triumph these days, just to feel anything--but it happens--and the call goes out, as does this call, though no one is there to hear it in the gap between things, phlegmatic stars or the dark, cold water shivering between the safety of colored boats in the glistening midnight, this breeze balanced on the blade of consciousness, an Africa of simple trees speaking for themselves alone, as always, so clearly, so simply, a continent.

VII.

Now ten thousand forms unfold from seamless dark. In immolated dreams, our children dance on the chilled lawns of evening, our jobs, our work, our love, and our lust, even our beauty cannot be protected from the white wind that has just come up from the east, nudging down the leaves that for some reason will fall like this before autumn, like a towel shook out, chill the squirming river, the unnoticed chalk of the crests stretching out before the whole, vast, black prayer plunges into its concrete chambers, and the halls of the diminished city forget they ever had an argument with water.

VIII.

Nothing we save is absolute. Even greenest leaves burn, falling between the gaps of the parting curtain, the

parting of the mind so bright it blinds, when open to its uncluttered afternoon among adjacent marigolds.

Mind is the only confinement, the only liberation.

IX.

I can't stare at the shadows too long before they slide down into the river, like an avalanche of used oil, god knows, we see it happening all around us, the paint coming off the shower walls in flakes of leprosy, our cars driven crazy or to deaths.

I walk the streets looking for my brother, though I know he will not be there today, a kind of disappointment I have begun to expect, walking. Yellow bees dying in glass cups in the window, a tide of cars unleashed from yesterday's anchor, each thing the same thing, like chains of gold mail I've hung one link at a time from the corners of old poems, drudgeries, happiness. That was years ago. Yes, happiness always comes last in this thing, and it isn't easy, a shadow leaning here or there, the mist departing from the warming tiles of roofs in burnished summer mornings.

X.

If you look toward the city, bright, combustible, incendiary, you have

hope, even though death still wanders its stuttering avenues, and the language is beaten into clumsy harnesses. Within this there is a kind of happiness, not one we expect, but azure, grey, chemical, a kind of blacked-out heaven.

The windows of a smoky evening gaze west until the reflected blaze, the delicious knife of the murdered sun, speaks to them, and inspired, they blaze just as bright, or brighter, burning some ineffable, cold fuel. We all have that, have, all of us, like windows, this condition of burning.

XI.

My neighbor is God! He protects nothing, he is god before there was God, and I praise him in the faith of all that passes unrestrained. For now his window sighs with polished light, as light is splashed on mottled green, the leaves of cottonwoods praising him with loud applause. What is this perfect indolence? They have given up delusion, unholding of the world's joys, released from proofs. Is it really better to stand on our perfect lawns, where now, my neighbor, quiet on the jade grass preens his white hair in the Saturday light, water spraying in rooster tails from the garden hose and rainbows on his ever green desire to spill through stillest air. In the heart of things I see that he believes that he is someone, his faith pronouncing itself amid the sound of scraping trains gone on beyond the

day.

XII.

The curtain parts and closes, sunlight piercing the dim room, the dimness washing back the light as light is no match for darkness, as one who opens and closes curtain, an anchor of wind, a water run freely. Who I am in this can be nothing different, a going on in ignorance of myself, the celebrant of my own essential darkness, my true light, unbothered by the need for flowers though I love them, ignorant of beautiful women, though I desire them, blind to verdant hedges in suburban yards, deaf to finches warbling in hawthorn trees gone pink with May's demise.

XIII.

I speak and it is pretentious, I am silent and it is pretentious too. To believe in the beautiful is pretentious as he is beautiful in his suffering, and in the traces of all believing knows that there is no substance in the day of our rising, tramping together through the new cut lawns till our cuffs are wet with dew and the vacant range of craving exhausts itself in this certainty: it does not last, mind does not, no memory, no stationary opinion, no God, no liberty, no poetry, no love, of risings and fallings and risings, of babies pulled from their dark seas toward

the half-light of their naked mothers,
of old people sitting on porches in
their last few days before they are
shovelled under memory's too simple
stone.

And it is certain that I have dreamed
as dreams pour ceaselessly from
craving out, but the soil of dreams
which thrusts these faces,
photographs, to me is how the world
ceases to be a thing in itself. There
is no self besides the flow of matters,
the widest river of matters, the broad
summertime of things as they are, the
rain that storms through afternoon
and clears, the gulls whose whine is
heard before their polished wings are
seen. Whatever it is you start with,
whatever comes before the first
thought is the soil of my name, the
melting curtain where the light is
harrowed by the trees, the riverine
traffic of all America flowing out-
ward, its factories burning with acid
brilliance, the barns of seasoned, sun-
rotted wood flaking in the sun,
vagrants flowing down the fast-food
strips toward the vanishing point of
money.

XIV.

In the smudged light of dawn alleys,
in the stinging light of hospitals and
antiseptic waiting for death, white
emergencies unfold in the cautious
smell of indifferent gauze--where
among the stainless voices spilled
from intercoms, and the unwrinkled
demeanor of shaved physicians posed

by bedsides of failure, the aluminum
ride of gurneys poised by elevators,
there is something to turn away from,
always something, and then again it
is something.

XV.

Beyond the sluices of the craving
daylight, my eyes see urge after urge
to know what morning is, what
warbling birds, yellow fires in the
hissing trees. I watch the flying
birds, but do not think of them, and
then this morning's sun falls to
winter, tomorrow's sun falling down
in poetries of white.

XVI.

One day I saw that the immensity of
this world lay within me, the long
dead leaves still glued to the frozen
branches of the tree next door more
than a mirror of the palette of the
sun's setting, more than the beautiful,
shimmering bronze which I had come
to know I must escape by leaping
from the window of the brain.

XVII.

Now the wind of afternoon goes
yellow, shellacked by the falling sun,
the leaves of the maple that should
have fallen now, unite to reflect in
sunset's cadmium.

XVIII.

The cat is drowsing and has no thought for himself and craves nothing in the way of proof and makes his no-way over the stones in unspeakable obviousness, content to be whatever hands itself to him, moss beneath the black, abrasive paw, the jade stems of irises, into whose crepe-paper heads, his own head dipping, and in the no-shade of the rose bushes digging, then slumping to crushed gravel in the no-light of the no-sun, and the not-yellows which come to him in the flowering verdures and blanknesses of his nowhere.

I am happy, I am happy. It is a day, it is green, my life does not belong to me.

ZONA PELLUCIDA

It began in the open fields, corn
longing toward the sun, where night
and light must mold the world in the
hollow of our cupped bodies--where
I thought the spray of old seas
splashed against the walls of birth--a
taste of salt. I was left to stroll the
monasteries of afternoon, sunlight
trumpeting down through the great
despairing windows of all my lost
words, large warm rectangles spilled
on the floors of heaven. And the
walls were draped with the calendars
of death. Flowers burned in bowls
on molten tables as never burned
before in my life--and within me,
there was a green on which the golds
and reds of things had fallen--and
those who pretended their purposes
were seen to dine upon the silence
that is within me.

Now lazy islands appear in the sultry
air. A gong of steams is rung. Oh,
green. How the green fields as
crown of earth are lifting here in
flower!