

Mysteries

of Silence



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WISTERIA

*(At St. Michael's Orthodox School, Santa Rosa,
on grounds once owned by the horticulturist Luther Burbank)*

A tapestry of sky woven into your balconies.

Graceful arms stretch the canopy in clustered blooms.
Each is a bell announcing one of the hours.

Under the veil of your perpetual incense,
children learn to listen, sing and play..

The mysterious gardener that planted and pruned you, trained
your branches to embrace and overshadow these buildings...
Flowering during the fast, how many years to grow this large and strong?

Silent witness of the interior secret,
whisper—what is in the seedpod?

“The secret is this: when it falls
safely cradled in its pod,
the pea does not know
it has separated from me.

“When the dried hull shrivels open
and disintegrates into rain,
the seed does not know
the earth that its tiny fingers explore
is not its mother.

“Learns to turn over, learns to crawl;
one day sitting up,
head erect with wonder,
the seedling does not know
that its parent everywhere overhead in bloom
has not always been there.”

And the children in the old house where the master gardener studied
look around at the images and writings of their fathers,
hear the words of creation in the old secret way.

“It only believes,
when the purple towers of thunderstorms
are scattered across the evening distance,
that clouds are full-grown wisteria,
when the tall rain leans down to feed its roots
and splash the hills with rainbows.”

Preparing the Manuscript

of a

Garden Journal



PREPARING THE MANUSCRIPT
OF A GARDEN JOURNAL

I. Invocation

Give me a corner of the Santa Rosa plain
with skies to every horizon
made beautiful by the changing angles of the sun
or slow incoming clouds,
or the splendid vesting and monthly disrobing of the moon
on the high turntable of stars.

Give me a field bordered by a creek
with its trees of nesting birds
embraced by the slender arm of a spring-fed mountain.
I will build my garden hut within reach of the waterfall's voice
and answer with my song,
dawn and dusk, the low flight of chanting geese,
swallows diving through the tall last light,
early shadows invaded by the dove-note
and quail like whispered shadows that run in the grass.
As the sun climbs its vast-wheeled altitudes
they fly into higher branches,
calling one another from hushed distances.
And the coarse statements of crows and jays,
the eloquent mockingbird and full-throated pheasant
in a rush of flight and song and theophany
follow the flight of the sun to its soaring zenith,
then silence. The hawk's high scream.
White falcons hover, flashing in the light.



II. Philosophy and Scholarship in Gardening

While the winter rains took thought
for the preparation of soils,
inside the window of my steep-roofed shed
I studied the topography's ancient poetry
of drained wetlands, the headwaters
of rivers long vanished beneath the earth,
and perused great books:
Hesiod and Virgil, the philosophy of farming,
studies of intensive companion plantings
and my grandfather's notes, scratched into the soil.

Before the earth was broken,
it was fertilized by the flowering silver planets
Jupiter and Saturn in sublime concert all winter.
September, they first rose together
from the silhouetted eastern mountain.
December, high in the fields of Pleiades,
behind the brilliant bull they dug through the stars
while I sat in the plowman's wagon
with my telescope in the outer galaxies,
and aged Bootes cast out the shining seed
that blossoms in constellations.
By the time they went down in the late growing sunsets,
fully open in the rarest blossoms of light,
I had mastered their names and seasons, their trajectories, and moons.



III. The Labors of Adam

The sun comes up hot
as soon as it clears the mountain.
Already through the dawn hours from first light
I've labored, turning the soil while it still holds moisture,
digging in manure, leaf compost, calcium.
Now I retreat to the shade of my garden hut
to listen to the quail's sweet recitations
while I sing the psalms and matins of inspired triodion
that watered the ancient deserts.

In the poet St Walafrid's lenten garden
were gathered the blossoms of solitude
which, when they came to miraculous fruit,
bore sweet fulness indescribably descending
like the breeze that comes over the plain in the cool of evening.
He, too, with his hand pulled stinging nettles
that choked the soil by his cell,
obedient to his monastics' contemplative table.
He, with his hand obedient to the rule,
measured and prepared on sacrificed vellum
the illuminated manuscript of his labors,
leaving in quiet lyrics, written in the sweat
of the fountain of miracles in his radiant brow,
a mist that came out of the earth.

Now I return to the hot field-work,
to the exhaustion of my grandfathers laid in the earth,
and the sun goes down
at a more severe angle
to the trees of the level horizon, farther and farther north,
where its last burning minutes are endless
as the prehistoric speech of standing stones.



IV. Seed and the Secret of Creation

Twelve beds, their plantings charted, soils prepared
and opened for the sun's inspection,
sleep in a gentle wind with no moon,
waiting for the tenderest slender crescent
when it swims barely visible out of sunset.

Corn, beans, sunflowers, squash and melons,
hard-shelled seeds which the ancient Americans favored,
soak one night only in the dark of the moon
then bury in moistened earth
on the first day of the new moon.
While its silver influence increases,
the seed erupts its shoot, in two days
unfolding preliminary leaf-lobes,
sending down the taproot.

Two weeks to the first true leaf
if kept from dryness during germination,
invasion of insects and the devouring snail,
the plant will be established
by the increasing crescent root of time
and white blossom of the moon.



V. Watchfulness and Cultivation

But the most beautiful corner of the world since paradise
was St. Paulinus of Nola's garden plot.

He had just been carried into Africa
a slave, deprived of every outward dignity.
His identity as monk and bishop unknown,
his hands were satisfied with the cultivation
of hard clay, in a despot's garden. A cruel north wind,
the Vandals had blasted through Spain and Italy
destroying Roman cities, taking prisoners
for their proud new kingdom near Carthage.
At first, when they raided his white-fleeced intelligent flock,
he paid full ransom for their release
with golden vessels out of his sanctuary.
When these were gone, he sold himself,
the last thing he owned, for a widow's son.
And how he loved that garden
and tended every vine and fruiting stalk
is known by God alone,
furnishing the table of a king
with the unknown nourishment
of secret, divine whisperings which no one heard.

Among sweet singers of the hymns of paradise,
was he not the one who tasted, in Ovidian meters,
freely distilled for inspiration, pure Godhead?

From the vine-burdened villas of Aquitaine,
garden of the empire, from cultivated minds
that flowed with verses elegant as wine and flutes,
and from high inheritance and the Consulate
he had turned to the desert already,
thirsting for the deep truths hidden in God.
To be made a slave was nothing to such a one
made free by taming his will to obedience.
From a master of silence he learned the unseen knowledge,
from the most wise Martin, that in kindled senses
blazes through the secrets of eternity.
Ceaselessly refreshed with song
of praise in the hard labor of the soil—

was it not in the original language of paradise,
in a garden more resplendent, under a sun
that weeps with the oils and wick of the Resurrection?

In a dream of revelation,
the barbarian king at feast
at the foot of a throne of indescribable glory,
with liturgical gifts and theandric thunderings
was served by his most humble gardener.

Songbird

from the Seasons of Paradise

SONGBIRD FROM THE SEASONS OF PARADISE

I. The Season of Forty Days

An avenue of suns, those daffodils
interrupting the wild horizon of grasses,
float in atmospheres of alyssum
that cloudlike run on the hilltop
where the firmament of irises
cascades its darker blue lobelia.

The inspired brush of the sky
in a bending hummingbird,
his tongue immersed in fragrant water-colors,
invites you to an orchard beyond that hill.

From purest white to pink and glowing purple
plum-blossoms explode, then pale pink cherries.
Apricot petals, peeled from dark bare wood
unfold and fall, then clouds of apple-bloom
in their perfect order of days, like burning shadows
ripple down the slopes and disappear

to lead you by the heart to a door in their shade,
a garden enclosed in their valley.

To walk through its curtain of climbing roses,
no words replace the secret invasions of fragrance.

No perfect line of poetry is like
a thick-trunked hedge of ancient camelias.
Your footsteps soften and change into falling blossoms.
Small dark leaves their own backdrop and trellis
for scattered pale trumpets of jasmine,
pianissimo symphonies of perfume,
while in their sunlit middle
the melismatic fountain.
Lavender peasblossom vines
pull themselves up by the supports of the sky.

II. The Season of Forty Years

If you sit on the bench by this fountain,
close your eyes and turn within your heart
while listening to that bird that sings so sweetly,
you might imagine a hint of fragrance
from the garden that was visited
by this bird of paradise, and what inspires
such raptured melodies beyond all words.

It was walled with towers built of thundering fire,
and at the impassible gate, a command and warning,
the garden that Moses walked in, his mind in God.
Forty years he watched and cultivated
its grasses dewed with crocuses of immaterial flame,
hibiscus growing breast-high, exploding fragrance.

The shape of its trees and arrangement of its groves
are perfect in comprehension and filled with wisdom.
All the bushes on its higher slopes
blossom in the same unconsuming fire
in varying intensities of brightnesses.

But the summit wholly involved
in a conflagration reaching beyond the sun
remains invisible behind a rock.
One glimpse through the cleft
wrapped him in visionary experience
far, far beyond the created
and sublime speech of the order of days.

III. Season of Labors and the Day of Freedom

Enraptured songbird wrapped in the flaming feathers
of rainbows beyond the knowledge of the skies,
I have heard of others who found that secret entrance:
how Joseph the quiet of the Holy Mountain,
in our own days stumbled across your song
while fainting in the desert, and following,
ascended with ease an immeasurable slope.

And I have heard of the secret entrance opened
mysteriously, deep within the heart.

To walk through its curtain of climbing fragrance,
no words replace the secret invasions of vision.

And determining to search for it myself,
I was sent to labor in the monastery orchard.
To prune its branches for that perfect fruit
I was told to put my mind on a single prayer.

I asked the holy father, and was told
to cast off every other thought.
Even to gather the severed branches
for the dried arrangement of poetry will do no good
until the heart has tasted the purity
of the perfect unending prayer.

I asked the holy mother, but she showed me trees
that have grown too many years with no fruit.
She told me to dig them out,
to lift the ax against the root.
Quail chanted in the shadowed distance
and silent hawks climbed the singing wind
while I dragged them over the long rows to exhaustion
and fainting with the exertion, piled them for the fire.

(Inspired by St Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns on Paradise)

THREE DROPS OF SILENCE

i.

Three drops of silence at the solstice.
There was something that I wanted to tell you.

I am so discouraged, kneeling in the world's gravity
while the days roll ahead and splash against the seasons.

A virgin lights the stars, and we sleep,
preparing for dawn, the voice of God.
I am so discouraged, wading in my dreams.

ii.

Black morning, I see you
in your blue robe
with the cord of white stars
night has tied around you.

Let me walk downhill with you.
Four planets among the fading stars
show us where we are

so fully when we walk in front of the window
with one oil lamp and an icon,
and go inside that door—

no need to run down to the ocean
where the bluing tide washes stars away—

kneel in the light
in which the planets were kindled.

iii.

Now the virgin extinguishes the stars.
Below, men turn off their lights, one by one.

The Ancient Teachings

of the

Winter Silence

THE ANCIENT TEACHINGS OF THE WINTER SILENCE

I.

When winter speaks,
trees with their whole concentration listen.
The dreaming stars float off in nights of fog
that remove the visible world in creeping veils.
It is useless for a man to continue thought
when winter speaks. The silence walks too loudly.

Disrobed, the scattered oaks,
reveal the terrible beauty of their twisted limbs:
each knotted so uniquely, kneeling
in their slow, millennial ballet
choreographed by thunderstorms and drought.
Remembering primeval forest and floodplain
when the river, brown with untamed waves,
scraped out its bed with a breast of wild song,
on the half-drowned edge of cultivated fields
the oaks thrust out gesticulating branches
receiving, now and then, the silent owl.

A man may sit within the illumination of his fire
and book, but he will turn the white page
to find it darkened with strange and crowded letters
he thought he knew. Why he would abandon shelter
for cold drizzle in the dark, beginning
musical sprinklings with slow refrains
and movements of low winds
so much like hidden thoughts and harpstrings...
In a moment of almost remembered poetry,
the simpler roof of a garden shed
calls him out of the blinding downpour.
Lightning opens the east. Clouds,
ripped and floating, fall, deflated
where frowning Orion reaches down
with his blue sword. A loud voice
closes the whole sky in hard rain.
Walking near, delicate footsteps of fire
flash along the other side of creek
behind the skeletons of oaks, then turn
and run back over the mountain to the east
while I shiver inside the shed without a word.

The heart of light revealed,
tall white towers under the moon,
clouds reshape themselves and sail
with ease, extending the complexity
of rain-obscured horizons.
Dark-wombed, the setting moon
elongates her glowing belly toward the slender
fingers of the tallest redwood and sighs
while I sit in the darkness of my garden shed
with a prayer rope in my hand
like a man that knows nothing at all.

II.

Do not presume to have entered silence!

Many winters ago, desiring the source of existence,
you began the long journey into the darkness
eyes closed, watching your breathing, stepping back from thoughts
until there was nothing but calm watching;
then, without knowing how, crying out for the light...
do not, because of this, suppose yourself
to have come to the edge of silence,
or, because you wrestle with tortured poetics,
to have searched the pure intelligence of prayer.

Or because you wandered the alleys of San Francisco,
an unknown street poet and half-crazed historian,
compare yourself to a Russian exile, barefoot,
who searched all night for starving orphans
and fed them the intimate whisperings
and over-abundant oil of weeping icons
and self-moving festal chandeliers.

Do not delude yourself that you've met the silence.
You have not touched even the hem of its garment.

Long before, it was carried into India
in the strongly radiant heart of a silent witness,
the investigator of divinity
and destroyer of doubt, the first
to thrust his hand into the Resurrection.
With centuries, its pure sound was broken,
dropped off of some mist-encumbered mountainside,
and echoing down from fog-corroded caverns
lay shattered, and was buried in a field.
The resting-place of that perfect invocation
was broken into, robbed
of the half-disintegrated golden robe.
A poor repair was made, patched up
corrupt asceticism,
confused the names of gods that were woven in it.

But where it was watched carefully, it grew
hidden in the caves of Mt. Athos,
earth huts in deep Romanian wilderness
concealed under unscalable Carpathian summits;
in forests from Novgorod to the White Sea
and rain-forsaken ravines of the farthest deserts.
To an upper bastion of bare cliffs built out
from precipitous mountainside, storm-buttressed against the sea,
a star descended, unfolding in magnitudes of brilliance
then fading where the child lay wrapped in white linen,
while Simon the anchorite stood with the shepherds and stared
at the terrible promontory sanctified
for the towering monastery,
a singing-school of new prophets
and master architects of interior silence.

III.

Soon, the sun will turn
from its long stillness in the north,
its deep conversation with the painter of its rays
across the stretched canvas of seasonal heavens;
the sun will turn from its elementary silence
in the presence of the birth of its God.

I, too, turn, involuntarily,
from where I stand at the windows of contemplation.
There are those who do not turn,
but staring into the preternatural cradle of super-existence
transfixed by unspeakable glory, transfigured, say nothing—
how could they turn away?
Among that midnight watch
at a manger of utter humility
I cannot say that I ever stood,
nor whether I once even glimpsed,
in quiet concentration of poetic knowledge,
the things that stand exposed
in the ruins of the northern wind.

And yet it is such a simple thing,
with your frost-blackened vines, hillsides brittle
and patient in blight since the first brine of ice,
now that your deciduous canopies lie
in delicate withered skeletons underfoot,
and you, inspired and soaring, firs still green,

though even while the brief noon tries to climb to your shoulders
you hold torn threads of the night in your deep fingers

it is easy now, at least, to uncover the question,
to turn to it with intelligible words, and make them heard—
though how to address the silence itself is frightening.
And the simplest thing of all,
to enter the fundamental
creativity and stillness
that is the constant invocation of your creator!

Why, then, is it more difficult than anything?
Was it not as natural as breath
when there was no need for the nakedness of winter,
when hunger was unnecessary
to drive a man out in the crying wind
for dead and broken branches, flint in his fist
and this strange pursuit smoldering in his heart?

For the pure embrace of stillness
one might travel north as far as possible
through the long nights of December
then stand on the cold shore, staring
deep into nothing, freezing rain that covers
even the faint pulse of polar fluorescence.
Raindrops dancing in the wild wind
change into their white robes;
and floating out of the invisible
snow is somehow seen where the land
gives way to the rolling immensity of ocean's tongue

until the first ray
divides the distant islands.

Not even then
is one able to capture by concentrated thought
the light that breaks across the deep
and rising through time to eternity
makes itself known in layered radiance
of cloud-forms reshaping every moment
along the breathing storm-front of simple existence.

Come, hidden mystery.
Come, treasure without name.
Come, reality beyond all words.
Come, person beyond all understanding.

Come, true light!

PILGRIM

Pilgrim, what do you look for in the shadows
crawling over the windows? Strange caricature, you stand
like a weed cracking the sidewalk, long black robes
sweeping the dirt and beard like a rag in the wind.
On the distant hilltop of the world
avenues seem to converge,
but you walked past the right road again,
the one that begins in the heart and leads
within, the long, painful walk along the words
you found, choking on the bones, dog drowning in the
too clear pools of wisdom.

You stare at the young politicians
hawking petitions on the library steps, while smiling winos
lean from behind statues sweating death.
You press your finger to your lips
like Juvenal, poet of Rome, the outrage
has gone so far. Dare you refuse to say it?
Such matter for satire! Now he demands
your signature to get the Supervisors back
in the neighborhoods, and you answer, what of the poets?
The artists? What of the Russians and Greeks
with their little shops of icons and invisible
saints? Get them back in the neighborhoods!
Here, sign in blood.

He tells you, go fly an angel, and you
begin to sing, but no one hears you! Hush! Waves
quench the hot sand of your own passions, and summer
blinds you with fog thrown over the Golden Gate.
A cello at night, the streetcar
strums the granite substrata,
leaves whispered strings in the audience
of muffled buildings, and in the sidewalk trees,
a forced alliteration, echo footsteps.
City noises drift like precipitate mist,
mingle in one silence great as prophecy
and you are home now.

Like a child that swallowed words too big,
walk alongside someone.
Take him deep into the forests of silence
where he won't know where he's going, but believes
the wind, that the cliffs of the ocean are very near,
and the poem swells to a mighty conclusion within him, although
never quite heard.

Nobilissima Visione

NOBILISSIMA VISIONE

(Variations on a Theme by Paul Hindemith)

Movement I: Introduction and Rondo

In the first awakening
when universal beauty was simply given
there was no need to reach for poetry
since the trees were heavy with it.
Mists watered the ground with so much meaning
he walked among them in the fullness of wisdom.
His language was concentrated with power in naming.

There was no sadness in the fading summer
when you stop within a turn on the mountain trail
to taste your own existence,
astonished at the blossoming of the sky
just out of reach of the trees,
and the broken, inaccessible splendor
of rising distant ranges
is closer than your own soul.

One realization—gone; and leaves a reflection
of thought as close as you come
to something like paradise.
It is as though you had never learned to speak

lost in the desert, like a conquered knight.
His thirst, his cruel mirage
a city in those mountains,
maybe only a legend.
Survives, God knows how, hot unending hours,
at evening crawls up the rock face
and wonders if it could be hallucination:
the towers that cling to the cliffs! The endless
branching terraces of crumbling walls, abandoned...
above them all, a rock pile wavering in the heat
in and out of focus—cathedral ruins—
staggers to the dry monastery well
and dies, knowing

Adam sat outside
the gates of impassable fire
and wept to hear the leaves
of the trees in paradise.

Those intimate conversations
in the cool of evening! He
believed with his whole being
every word until

that fatal moment.

Movement II: Pastorale and Rondo

Reconsider: paradise in the poetic tradition
(or dream of walking in medieval walled gardens.)

Writing with dexterous command on the theme,
a scribe of Lindisfarne with honed attention
dips his stylus in the inkwell.
The resonant swell from the words of his spiritual fathers
silent in their places of resurrection
in the earth under monumental
crosses unafraid of time,
returns to his memory with increasing power
while the songs of birds overhead
are translated by angels in the words of the manuscript.
Reconsider: Dante's perilous heights of contemplation
stolen from the gold-leafed miniatures
in manuscripts of vision by the Celtic poet-saints.
And even if Milton's Adam, disfigured by desires,
was frail in his nakedness in comparison
to the light-inheriting heart of Symeon the mystic
in converse with the lightning-tongued Godhead
behind the towering hedges of enclosed coronas,
in the fertile interior illumination
unveiling the proportions of original existence,
reconsider: the blind poet's invocation
and the poetry that led him
to a place of sublime imagination
out of his years of darkness!
The thesis: paradise, and the state of prayer.

Alone in his cell,
one smoking candle blackens the walls.
No ink left for the scratching pen,
he mixes his tears with soot.
No time for sleeping, lying on his side and writing
until the ribs break open,
copying—took years to find these words,
wisdom of the ancient desert.
Would not quit, could not quit, the prayer had become
undying, breath of God and he
rose from the dust
and walked in the garden

I have seen the manuscript:
the bold and thoughtful hand and beauty
in every letter a tree from paradise.

Movement III: Return to the Introductory Theme

In the first illumination
on the first page, in the shadow of the gold initial
where he lifts himself from the jeweled grass,
there was no desperate reaching for enlightenment.
God's breath moving in him, he opened his eyes...

There was no reason to try to remember
while you're driving through the tall summer morning
what it was in the long conversation last night
that almost touched the stars just before sleep.
Fresh thoughts rise now like humidity
but vanish before they mature.

There was no necessity for failed thoughts to force us
to reconsider while we struggle with work
and you meditate out loud, with your hand on the broken wires,
if there is another life after this, or if it might be better,
or how the two together might be one life
and what is the origin of their tragic separation.
There was no need to think I might be crazy
because I have visions in sleep:

my grandmother's screen porch,
early morning tea, you and I. I pointed:
the sun just out of the wide hills of pastureland,
sweet as ripening melon. And I said,
this is how it always was, perfect, whole,
the same sun, in the same place, in my childhood.
And I said, contemplation: from the word for 'temple',
a place with an overview, a hilltop like this.
Transformed with attentiveness, you
lifted your cup,
a simple taste,
a sip of it

 evaporates,
that fragrance of steam
like the landscape of a dream I tried
to illustrate today while working in a dark attic.

Movement IV: Resolution and Rondo

In June we were searching unconsciously
for the fullness of light in one lovely field.
Broke flowers, not knowing what we were doing
or who to take them to.
Maybe where the path returns to the woods
in a brighter clearing, noon
lives like an unapproachable mystic,
and we would leave our thoughts in the shadow
of his door, like the pile of wilting roses.
Maybe we would hear a little of his
inebriating song, just enough
to torture us with forgotten dreams

(dipped his finger
in my tears,
his radiance
inside me, I
knew poetry)

THE MIDNIGHT SUN

So much light
on a cloudy, windy night!

From where we stood on the shore,
we could see the wind
wildly lifting clouds
from off of the rim of the west

luminous with the full moon setting
to the right of the midnight sun!

So much light in the searching gaze of Ellen
standing on the edge
on top of the grassy ridge
that rolls into the waves.

And when that ancient ship
leaned over the horizon
we ran down to the dock
and kindled towering fires.

Those skilled men were making
no mistakes in the wind
with their torn sails, nearing
over roughest oceans.

They threw down the gangplank,
chanting with a laugh:

“Come with us,
and we can cross the sea.
You are the ones
we have been looking for.”

Now you take Ellen aside by the arm
to ask: “What is this ocean?”
no longer sure it’s the one you knew,
and built your house near to.

“This is the sea
of epiphany!”

Dry Season

in an Ancient Orchard

DRY SEASON IN AN ANCIENT ORCHARD

I.

Why can I not be a poet of the pagan dances?
In luminous paintings, where he sits in the orchard
nude except for a wreath and a reed
while the girls run clothed only with warm shadows,
and he, thoughtful among their bell-like echoes...

Could I not be the one whose verses they love to sing,
or one whose poetry most of them at least understand?

But I have been chosen for an invisible audience
among decayed trees, hollow, half-uprooted,
their apples slowly rotting into the dust.
And the fallen branches will be gathered
for the heap which will dry through the summer
and then be used for fire. Smoke fills the air
and you wonder at the conflagration.
For now, deer come to get drunk on fermenting apples.
The sun sags, a rotting fruit, and splashes
fire across the sky. The swallows, erratic
as though to feed on the fermenting light,
while all my ancestors in dust and ashes
are silent to hear what I have remembered.

Why did I read about their impossible toil of heart?
I would like to say their writings are indecipherable
as the whisper of high clouds in a strong wind -
and as irrefutable. My heart pants after them
no matter how I argue with it.

II.

When the dormant season is over
the cracked trunks lean, no longer able
to contain the rising sap. Its incense invades the wind
while ladders go up to the top of the tree and poke through
and saws work down the branch. Many tender buds,
soft as sleeping eyelids, fall
for daring to think of opening.

A man will finish only a single task
between the rising and setting of the sun!
Either go out in the garden where earth begs
for seed and order, or walk through the orchard. Its wisdom,
huge and broken boughs with too many years
of too much fruit, is not enough to stop them
from growing heavy again.

A tower for water
was built in the middle of the sapling rows
above the well, a tank on the top floor,
windmill on the roof. Those rotting veins
ripped out long ago, and the turning blades
thrown down by storm: an abandoned well house
left standing for the view where I cut windows
and made a place to set my studies in order.
I climbed the stairs while the sun rose.
Gazing at the young men who prune the old trees
I wrote as though I'd found old poetry under the floorboards.
When I came down, the low sun
was looking under the arched trees.
In a perfect moment, the path between rows
was lighted toward the sun.

There is no more time.
There is no light for working in the garden.
The constellations, blossoming when the leaves decay,
made a wilderness of heaven
through which Orion finished his winter walk.
In youth, he decided on the hunt. In death
he chooses contemplation. This I lamented,
and knew it was wrong—the trees all agreed:
in age, the moment for passion has passed.

Jupiter, so far away in the west,
Jupiter, refusing to be dimmed even by the moon;
the horses of Jupiter trample in the orchard.
The white moon makes its blossoms turn
and yield their mystic fragrance.

III.

Deep in the shade of a wilderness
beyond where the orchards are bordered by the river
that sings of a thousand years in this wilderness,
chronicled by no one, I slept, and dreamed:

A riverboat of strange construction,
sailing so quietly upriver.
Its multiple decks were galleries
of crowded, pointed arches—in each one
stood one of the white-robed like a breathing statue:
men so perfect and wise,
women unimaginably lovely.
They sang, and the breeze on the river fell silent,
magnolias enchanted into bloom.
All the way to the river's source
it glided; then
repeating the song,
returned to the sea.

DAUGHTER

Daughter, why do you no longer look up,
child's wonder at the sky so much like your face?
Every day now when you climb to the top of the hill,
see the apple orchards, lattices of shadow;
dark vineyards that bow with their offering,
obeisance to the sky as wide as your eyes were -
now they are deeper, with a different intent
upon horizons. Where, this ribbon of highway,
beyond the last low range? What is the city,
and what is its music? Has it been enough
to learn to dance on the hills at Michaelmas?

Soon, soon, you will leave, having grown to be
the voice of the trees you walk under, the form
of all my long contemplations on beauty
thirteen loving summers. You don't know yet,
but you will go, leaving me with the sky for a portrait,
and the rain. Meanwhile your beauty will increase.
The music of your thoughts will deepen, and the danger
will rear itself where you recognize it less.
And what will you be able to do? You will believe
it is summer now for the rest of the journey.

Stand, one foot in the water, perilous
swimwear defining beauty intensified with water
and sun, gaze at him and smile. Get in, settling
in the rocking boat gracefully as a fallen leaf,
and the canoe sets forth! Not even then will you know
you have left.

Everyone is from somewhere;
when you long to return, it will be only to remember.
He dips his paddle noiselessly, the surface calm with light,
and the trees in their full gowns look down at you
gliding as silently as in a dream of early childhood.
You know nothing of the whitewater, thirsting
for excitement, or the devouring ocean.
What will I say if you turn to see me
wave? God bless you on your journey?
And the amen of silence falls like the glowing
drapery of autumn.

MARATHON

Running through the centuries, his preoccupation
the true shape of a man, alone through dark years,
in the night of hardship he arrives.
You receive the torch. It sears your breath.
You would kneel under the hard recognition
of your own weakness, but no choice: even the dust on the road
despises your doubt. Run. The sky catches flame like sunrise.
The mountains of your heart appear, and you burn to climb
the landscape of a man.

They hardly recognize you
or the morning you bring with your torch
confronting tired men on the sidewalk
and overturning their gravestone eyes:
“See! This is the land for which we yearned
long ago in awakening youth. Remember?”
It was a legendary map, volcanoes
by which one must stand, unafraid
of feelings buried since birth.
Vast plains where others stand alone, waiting
for you to sink your highest thought into their smiles.

Now you look up at the surrounding mighty walls
you’ve entered: the fortress of Virtue. On your face
courage from the gates of Hellepont,
fortitude from the front line of defenders
and strong love, strong, able to found the world.

Come now, scribe, record this victory like a poem on my wall
and hang a sword nearby.

LES LARMES NE RAPPELLE POINT A LA VIE

*written at the St. Raphael cemetery,
White Castle, Louisiana*

Standing water on the newer monuments
shining with mist, neglects the sun
smearing low clouds behind the nude pecans.
The inevitable fogs shoved in
from the Mississippi, so many warm winters condensing
in cool depressions of the last century's names,
broke corners from under the Virgin's knees. Governor Hebert's
high slab, like his uniform, is gray and stained.

Lead me down, Raphael (see, my hands
convince the dead; they push the wire gate's
letters bent when your sun-tipped feathers passed
on fire to embrace them) into the dark grove.
"No pecan picking in graveyard". Curled leaves
wrinkled into dirt no longer scare,
but cows on the levee turn and don't stop gazing.
Fleurs-de-lis and the winged-faced seraphim

guard arching windows sealed
in marble forever; plaques
attest the sleeping tenant:

*Il ne nous reste plus, hélas
que les... et la Souvenir
de leurs vertus que la morte les
a moissonnés à la fleur de son âge.
Il ne connut la vie que pour savourer
tous les amertumes. Mais Dieu sans
doute a réunis leurs vertus dans le
Ciel comme celle tombe les renferme
sur la terre.*

The sky clears when the sun in wounds is dropped
beyond ground-fogs. Purple cirrus grope
for dusk. Without shadows to lengthen their reach,
aspiring branches—a split crucifix,
discarded, leaning against the dead trunk—
thrust across the horrible west.

Translation of the title: “Tears will not at all recall to life.”

Translation of the rest of the hand-carved epitaph: “He no longer rests among us, alas for the...” [text illegible] “and the memory of his virtues which death has harvested in the flower of his age. He did not know life enough to savor all its bitterness. But God without doubt has reunited his virtues in heaven as this tomb re-forms them under the earth.”

Elegy in Autumn Mist

ELEGY IN AUTUMN MIST

Somewhere in the gray, among fallen branches,
the explosions of autumn. Close your eyes, dull silencing mist,
trust sunset working outside you wonders,
deeply feeling the fog's upblossoming edge.

Are they so forgotten, these ancient forest women
revisiting their husbands' graves, thinking on their own
final utterance and rest,
mounting of one interminable word?

The dull green does not resist blackening.
Complaining waters steep in the dead leaves
to bless us with a season when they'll rush clear,
veins of the sun, spawning in decay the ultimate
blossoming: the lily, goldenrod, and rose.

Understand, there's a rusted wagon chassis
the thorn grew up through, encircled, concealed.
Thorns blossom across the path; and on the ridge down,
spruces in their thread-bear cloaks,
solemn, breathless, lingering
to answer the sun's fading face
and pull the veil of fog across the light.

Where the oldest spruce at the bottom falls,
the sweet-gums, inspired young dancers,
purple hands embracing the somber pines.

When will the undergrowing primrose
unfold at last from the rainy heart of the thicket?
Everywhere, their sealed red lips,
do not drink. The fatal berry
will make you forget.

One hill and its hidden waters, island in the sky,
rises from the muddy stream, once deep and clear
when these women were young and read of water nymphs,
dammed up against the sky.

Gasps of aeolian wind in the vines
like elegies of twisted rhyme
ascend the russet-flecked violet leaves
to the lost hilltop, but where the mist is severed—
branch of the crowning oak's impassive leaning.

Each flaming leaf, each fading cry
of sparrows unstitching fog with scattered leaves,
affirms in thought a seraph choir,
a white-faced sylph, or soul of fire.

The vacancy, when mist withdraws in dusk,
and clouds, imperative, reach for the black
and solitary hilltop oak,
has reasons, out of reach, exalted waters
cling and tumble precariously aslant
into night rain's subliminal speech,
each droplet voice...

The barrenness, when autumn's ended,
blasted elms in the cold furnace, night;
in damp soil their splendid colors blended;
evening fires behind their trunks burned out...

I've seen a sky beyond the clouded stars;
a clear pond, except for a floating leaf;
invisible horizons beyond the rotten wood.

Even the entire shoreless night
is just a smile on the gesturing face
of ancient Oceanus.
The moon has full sail, and a course to follow.

MIMESIS

written on the north shore of Lake Erie

The long clouds cross the sky in lines like an alexandrine.
Their speech divides the heavens, too high for my understanding.
The long, low whispering waves give a broken reflection; risen
on the same soft wind, they repeat, in the language of universals,
with masterful elocution, what I feel but cannot say.
And the wind, one voice in the poplars, willows, and maples, agrees.

I am the poet sitting out on the point of rock.
My voice is sublime but silent, submerged like the ancient reefs
where the water finds first utterance, rising from its depth
to the meeting of other elements, air and syllabic rock;
where the sirens shipwrecked men driven mad by melodic sweetness
that none could describe, not Homer himself, had he survived it.

On the opposite shore, the skyline, like a hallucination,
mirage out of the deep blue desert of the distance,
crowds soaring freeway with towers—a babel of architecture
unlike the purer order of rambling, eroded mountains.
The black, abandoned smokestacks, old stone, begin to lean,
apocalyptic, like Valery's graveyard by the sea.

In the clear waves, the silhouette crumbles. The sculptor, crazed,
sandblasts a face too smooth, while his own, somewhat abstract,
shatters, and he falls like a broken statue
by the storm and thrown headfirst in the violent, satisfied waves
stirred up like the song that begins and builds great whirlpools around me.
Broad as the lake, it slams the breakwater guarding the city

and is seized by the jubilant river. Sure of itself and mighty,
it grabs up lawns and houses, and stones untouched by time
but given by old decrees to the voice of torrential Niagara.
Its undeterrable roar is a certainty which seems madness,
Socrates. You only half understood the sibyl.
Poetry is madness, since speech itself is the nectar

of heavenly banquets, where the most potent fruit is knowledge.
Its wine is an inspiration your madness failed to distill
with your strong dialectic distilling reason from exaltation.
The fermentation went sour; insanity was given
to poets for drink—their song is pandemonium
while metals buried in hell were resurrected as cities—

instead of the intoxicating meditations
of the pure heart; as when, in quiet walks on the beach,
you suddenly find yourself in a dialogue with the sky.
And you use all the words of your life; repentant and prophetic,
you make your vows to the sky, promises too high
for your understanding, but see, the clouds receive them, spreading

where they dissipate in infinity, without breaking the perfect
circle of the horizons, and you are no longer afraid.

Harvest

HARVEST

I

Learn to reach, empty-handed—

like the naked dead
when a certain sound in the wind upends the ground,
you stand, and reach for the light,

2

wondering why you hold nothing
of the glory of golden cornfields as far as you can see.
Where is your harvest? Like your heart, the sky loses its glow,
deepens with afternoon and goes down, but look, the circuits return;
the planets lightly trace you out in low parallels
like a faint rainbow in the mist you can't hold.
You crave the meaning of just one moment in their passage,
knowing you can't have it. Weeping, you beg them

to call you out to dance in the red leaves,
to sleep with broken branches in the moonlight,
then catch the rising October sun in a cup and drink it,
the taste of light, squeezed out of the sun like a grape.

3

Like you, though, I gathered
too little from the summer's flood of light and inspiration.
I know I wanted to grab imagination!
Holding my best thoughts still in my fist...
but I grew lazy in our field and only dreamed
of pumpkins like an orange pavement,
of grapes, soft purple clusters mixed with the leaves,
of orchards hung with speckled globes, of golden corn and wheat.
The dream went out of control when I smiled and said, harvest!
I saw, on the other side of the road, the broken gravestones.
That terrible storm that ended summer woke me
to watch the lightning take our pasture in its fire.

4

And it's too late to start over. Last night
the sun struck the scales with the tone of autumnal equinox.
We hear the echoes in the wind, in dead leaves settling,
in the difficult thoughts at battle within us.
We see it in the shadows—an equal intensity of darkness and light.
On one side, the sunny field; on the other, the deep net of darkness
under the cedars. Walking from one to another is hard.

Are we the darkness that does not comprehend,
or if we've gone through a door into it, can we carry
the light in with us? Is it something we should have taken?

5

But the harvest has its own light, reaching in the window,
stabbing the middle of the dusty room,

commanding angels to appear. We weren't able to call them,
crying their names, but now that it's proven we have nothing
they are abundant. We ourselves are the harvest

like a row of sidewalk trees going gold in a sky
of deep autumn blue along a crowded street,
like the old brick cathedral dwarfed by skyscrapers shining severely.

Have you not noticed how much more swiftly the fall sun
plummets down the sky this year?
Haven't you seen Time with his feet in the southern sky
moving in greater steps, quicker, nearer, looming,
his two-handed scythe taller than himself—

with one sweep, the stars are down. Then, suddenly, frozen,
his figure uncontainable now, he
is no more—through the places where the constellations
hung, adorning panels on dark closed doors,
the sun shines from twelve sides.

GOLDEN GATE PARK

to spend the night with the solitude of ferns
and the darkness of ponds which whisper:
who are you, taking this road to not find out where it goes,
hoping to get hopelessly lost after every turn?
and wandered into a steep valley of red flowers at the end of a storm.

or thick with burning tulips, woven at the ocean's edge...

No, you can't take your eyes off, the bottoms of sea cliffs complained,
where cracked waves gnarled into crevices forever
withdraw and hit the chosen portion of rock stained with infinite sea.
No, you may not leave, creaked the bent, barren cypresses above the shore,
never step inland past us until you define our anxieties.
You hear the wind in us. Do not say it is our voices.
Any of the old myths you serenade us with, we are sick of.

I walk the edge of an unexplainable forest,
content, no longer desiring to sleep.

A NEW SKETCH OF THE HIDDEN SEASON

Fall, the earth bleeds.
The sky introduces vast new atmospheres
with the long clouds of the west and their promise
of the end of dry months, and rivers full of the blood of whole forests.

Things are dying—
the color of the sun deep in the western clouds
and the things you try to say, which deepen as they come.
Where will you go if you drive down the long road lined with yellow trees?

Moments are shorter.
At first you feel you're fighting for your inner life:
but then, things that were familiar, like your leisurely thoughts
in the late afternoons now choked by autumn sunsets,
or the axiomatic positions of the constellations
from which your love and the sun itself hung,

you use them for the fire.
And things that were terrifying,
like darkness, like the loneliness of self-judgment,
become your home. You sell your car so you can walk home,
because the paths are no longer dusty, but are paved with wet, red leaves, and
you know
each leaf that fell revealed a star
until the treetops were filled with only

cold wind and the morning sun.
You walk toward your house deep in the comfort of shadow.
You abandon the ground floor and move into the attic,
wipe dust from the old furniture, fill the oil lamp,
and move the chair over by the window still a little open
for the new breeze in the evening to reach inside

and shake the lamp flame, while your
human mind reaches for the cause of its wonder.
Maybe you'll begin study. Maybe you'll close in on some question.
Maybe you'll grow afraid the sun so low in the south at noon
is traveling toward some vanishing point after which there are no more
tired seasons.
But if you remember an old vow to discover in every season
a new sketch of hidden rhymes, your blood will be full of thought and
sound
while the long clouds move in with their summons of quiet
and you sip coffee or wine and the rains begin.

THE PALACE OF FINE ARTS (SAN FRANCISCO)

you sleep in the grass the sun on your hand
while I study people's speech until their clashing cadences become
eternal in the mixed clichés of passing conversation
in the troposphere surrounds you
drenched in the sweet waters of sleep where you smile
since you do not dream
I don't explain why I came by the water
dome of the Palace of Fine Arts reflected
in the water like in yesterday's sunset
when the pretentious colonnades seemed taller against the first star
I reach through the arches
for the sun where it had come in under the dome
as we came in by the water by the water
the identical statues on top of the colonnades
backs turned faces buried weep
there are no individuals among nymphs standing over the water
as there are no great artists only some great Muse
we are the same weeping for what is unrevealed
you wake, smile put on a serious eye after so much smiling

SEVEN DAYS FROM HOME

Evening with you,
I was seven days from home.
Where am I?
What's taking so long?

Who is the musician
you were trying to tell me of?
There was something about him.
You could see he could sing.

Three strange birds
when I decided to listen:
one blue, the others white,
flew singing through the fence I lay against!

And who is the child
that began that dance,
when, almost crying,
I reached out for my pen?

I'll build me a cabin
and live in it alone.
Where are all the people
you and I have known?

Morning, I awaken,
seven days from home.
Where am I?
What's taking so long?

THE FUNERAL OF FATHER THOMAS

Under the pines, deep shade begins to blend
with the luminous secrets of twilight; the moon
emerges out of the eastern plain.
She sits, a graceful silhouette,
her gestures floating, released from gravity
while the moon, immense, breaks free and begins its flight.
Her conversation is slow and deliberate,
beginning over again. A black-veiled nun,
unseen until the nets of shade were shaken,
not more than a girl herself, unmoving, listens.

Words float between the worlds,
and her hands, like dandelion parachutes
that dream in the evening breath for a bed of soil—
or fireflies that wait in the grass, considering
their choreography when the cooling breeze
begins to glow in their wings. Words
settle between the eyelids of day and night
upon a meadow where words never fade,
like a poem incised in the headstone
on the plains where her father was buried today.

Three mountains were watching from the western horizon,
serene, white-haired elders of the ancient Pacific coastline
under a sky that seemed to go on forever
even while the sun in silence turned its dimming face
toward its roost in their inaccessible crags.
And the color of that sky, pure and calm
like what was in the eyes of this physician and priest
before he fell asleep on the last day of April.
Twenty priests carried the plain pine box,
too deep in thought to chant.
Deep in the heart of thought they took slow steps,
steps too slow to count.

Tell us, white-haired mountains, and pale aging moon,
how does a man step from the middle of an afternoon
into eternity? Sirens scream, but he does not wake,
living as he did a simple life,
kindling a wick of prayer at dawn, and again returning
under the slowly rising candles carried by the stars.
Is it possible even for you, earth and sky,
to enter into the knowledge
that the dignified revolutions of the sacred hours
seem endless, but are not?
Therefore he took his time with the words of writings
trusted by ages of holy fathers,
taking his turn in the divine services
and serving in the hospitals, dispensing
silence and the warmth of his sober glance
and raising his children in peace.

Instead of an eloquent funeral oration,
until the moment of the final kiss
it was the veil of the chalice that covered his face,
threads golden and purple, dipped in archangels' wings!

NOTES

Preparing the Manuscript of a Garden Journal:

The poem began almost as a “found poem” from gardening notes as I sketched plots and made studies in companion plantings and wide-row planting. I planned twelve individual plots around my garden shed. The shed was built in the fall, and I spent all my spare moments through the winter in it, writing poetry and working on my novel *The Natchez Treasure*, which was completed the following winter. As spring approached I turned my attention to gardening. I began reading guides by master gardeners, and these made me desire to read again the ancient agricultural traditions recorded in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Virgil’s *Georgics*, and St. Walafrid Strabo’s *Hortulus*.

All the time that I spent in making these notes was interrupted by the spectacular bird activity in the trees along the creek throughout the day, and I soon found myself including sketched descriptions of their behavior among my field notes. By then I knew I was working on poetry.

All writing activities were suspended during the season of preparing the beds and planting, which was also the season of Lent.

The Song of the Plowman:

Bootes is said to be among the most ancient of the constellations. He is known as The Plowman because of his invention of the plow—as great a gift to the ancient world as any. He is known as The Wagoner because he drives the Wagon, an alternate depiction of the Great Bear—the seven stars of the Bear, more commonly known now as the Big Dipper, are the seven oxen pulling his plow. His myths attach him to the inmost circle of the constellations, nearest the north star, with the greater and lesser bears. These myths are Arcadian, linking him to pastoral traditions, to the era of innocent shepherd songs and idylls. His name, on the other hand, links him to Boeotian tradition, the land of Hesiod, who sings the song of the plowman. The Greek provinces of Arcadia and Boeotia, both inland, both concentrating on agricultural traditions rather than on sea-going, city-building empires, are home to ancient indigenous peoples unmixed with the new conquerors, the bronze-age Dorians; and their lore also is more ancient, pastoral, and peaceful.

The plowing of the earth and the secrets of agriculture, essential to survival, without which the city and civilization cannot be maintained, are among the most sacred mysteries sung by the ancient poets. Hesiod makes clear the amount of labor that is necessary. Virgil’s research is impressive, but one does not feel that he has tasted the actual labor.

What St. Walfrid Strabo looked out of his cell and saw:

The *Hortulus* of St. Walfrid Strabo is the most celebrated garden poem from the Middle Ages, but those who regard it as one of the earliest expressions of medieval humanism completely misunderstand the culture in which it was written. St Walfrid is in the midst of his Lenten labors when he looks out of his cell and sees his garden patch overrun with nettles. The labor required to clear the patch and prepare cultivation of good fruits was a result of the Fall. This is constantly referred to in all the prayers and Scriptural meditations assigned to Lent. During this time the Church studies the book of Genesis, concentrating on man's exile from Paradise. The hard work of repentance is concentrated on, with the expectation of the help of Divine Grace. This difficult labor is referred to in patristic writings under many metaphors, as an inward battle with the passions (perverse movements of the heart, or sins), or as a difficult journey. One of the main patristic metaphors, taken from Christ's parables of the sower and the seed and the one of the wheat and tares, compares the work of prayer and obedience to Christ's commandments to the labor of weeding a garden or field. The weeds are the passions and wordly concerns that threaten to choke the growth of Grace.

Now St Gall's Monastery, where St Walfrid was abbot, was not in any way a humanistic institution of the later Middle Ages, where the main work of prayer and watchfulness (over the heart) was relaxed. Rather, this was founded by one of St Columbanus' spiritual sons, St Gall. Nor was this monastery under the influence of Charlemagne's school. The Lenten practices were strictly followed, especially by the abbot. The preparing of St Walfrid's garden plot would not have been allowed in any way to become a distraction from the inner work. When he looked out the door of his cell, what had he been doing within the cell before he opened the door? Fasting, praying, watching the movements of his heart. Nor would the abbot have allowed himself to step over the threshold of his cell until he had gained some degree of mastery over himself in these regards, so that he would not cease from the inner activity while participating in the outer activity—nor, indeed, would he have been abbot unless he had become master of the inner life, with Grace dwelling abundantly in him. This was simply the life of Irish monasteries, as it had been in the monasteries of St Martin of Tours, spiritual father of the Irish monasteries, or in that of St Benedict, or in those on Mt Athos in Greece today.

This is not to say that St Walfrid Strabo was not also a master gardener. It is plainly evident from his poetry that he deeply understood how to bring forth the best fruits of the earth, and what their gifts and properties were. As a unique personality—which is something that no real saint is without—he had a gift with growing things. But to insist that the poems are not also allegorical of bringing forth gifts of Grace during Lent is ridiculous. Allegory

was second nature to the medieval mind because it was one facet of the patristic mind, and St. Walafriid's poems are steeped in it from the first line.

St. Paulinus of Nola:

The graceful Latin verse of Paulinus of Nola is much admired by students of medieval poetry. Its long, elegant lines, classical in tone but lively and original in content, are often contrasted to the short lines of the little quatrains of St. Ambrose which became the stock of medieval Church chant. The story of his life, however, is usually passed over with only a few notes to his up-bringing at the end of the Roman classical world and his conversion to Christianity by St. Martin of Tours. And yet his unique heroism in the midst of the violent collapse of Rome is unlike any other. The story forms a major part of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*.

The Ancient Teachings of the Winter Silence:

The descriptions in Part I are of the Santa Rosa floodplain in California.

Although Part II explores the history of *hesychasm*, “silence”, or the so-called “Jesus Prayer” with the use of the prayer rope, it was never my intention to do so consciously. The poem is simply a record of my own struggles, distractions, and failures as a result of real spiritual hunger during the fasting period before Christmas.

For the best description of the practice of this method, see *The Way of the Pilgrim*. For the writings of the masters of its pure prayer, the authority is *The Philokalia*.

Lines 50-54 describe Eastern meditation techniques, which I myself practiced in my youth. It has become popular to compare the repetition of Eastern mantras with the Jesus Prayer. The most profound difference between the two methods lies in what God is invoked. The Buddhist supreme principle is impersonal, while the Hindu gods invoked by mantras are selected from a pantheon. The Personality of Godhead invoked by the Jesus Prayer is the difference, as is seen in the lives of all those who persevered and were finally given the gift of unceasing prayer of the heart (lines 83-88, which describe the homes of the writers of *The Philokalia*). The difference is to be experienced, not explained; but the explanation is found in the theology of St. Gregory Palamas (selected writings in *The Philokalia*). See also Bishop Kallistos Ware’s anthology *The Art of Prayer*.

Lines 61-65 refer to St. John (Maximovitch) of San Francisco.

The theory that the ascetic practices of the Far East are in fact a corruption of the practical teachings on prayer from the time of the Apostle Thomas in India (lines 68-82) was proposed long ago in *The Way of the Pilgrim*.

Lines 89-97 refer to the founding of Simonapetra Monastery on Mt. Athos, at the site of the vision of the Nativity by St. Simon the Myrrh-Gusher—so named because his relics emit a fragrant healing myrrh.

Part III was written after my move to the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, and continues the record of my frustrations. Lines 133-135 refer to the natural state of man in the original condition of paradise. See especially St. Symeon the New Theologian, *The First-Created Man*, translated and published by the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, California. The final lines are from the hymns of St. Symeon the New Theologian, whose poetry is the most complete record we have of the experience of deification (God-likeness).

Nobilissima Visione:

Paul Hindemith, exiled from Germany by the Nazis, said to be the most scholarly of modern musical composers, was perhaps the only major artist of the early twentieth century to have pursued the study of the early Church Fathers. His ballet *Nobilissima Visione*, a musical masterpiece of lofty emotional power based on the life of Francis of Assisi, I have replaced with the even greater visions and legacies of earlier Celtic saints and the later accomplishments of the Russian St Paisius Velichkovsky who, in a far more complete manner than Francis, revived the life of ancient desert fathers. The poem, with its movements and rhythms, attempts to place the music of ideas within the context of spiritual and literary tradition.

Movement I:

Monastery ruins deep in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine, so remote and forgotten that they are considered as legendary as the saintly lives of the whole cities of monks that lived in them in the fourth and fifth centuries. Their unexpected discovery by a dying pilgrim becomes the focus of the conflict between the idea of paradise and modern existence.

Movement II:

The actual visions of St Adamnan and St Walafred Strabo were the prototypes of Dante's visionary epic. The literary tradition inherited by Milton is compared to the direct theological experience of St Symeon the New Theologian. This section ends with a description of the work of St Paisius Velichkovsky who in the sixteenth century translated the writings of the desert fathers.

Movements III & IV:

After repeating the themes of I and II, the poet examines his own experience.

Dry Season in an Ancient Orchard:

The pretty hymnody of pagan lyrical poets—I think of the chorus of girls dancing out the rhythms of the flute and lyre as they sing the poet's odes in the festivals to Hera or Dionysios—is contrasted to the more interior searching of a poet surrounded by apocalyptic imagery. Among the ancestors of the last stanza of Part I, I was referring to the writers of *The Philokalìa*.

Part II. explores the more literal setting of the poem, in one of the decaying apple orchards of Sonoma County, California, during the drought year of 1989-90. I had my study in the second floor of the old well-house, with a visionary view from the first hills over the lowlands of the Laguna Santa Rosa and toward the mountains that climb from the eastern side of the Santa Rosa plain toward Mt. St. Helena, Cobb Mountain and Geysler Peak. It was in this well-house that I began my second drama, *The Philokalìa*, and published my studies of Origen and early Latin hymnography. This was the old Sparks place on Sparks Road, built around the time of the 1906 earthquake, I think, planted in vineyards and converted to apple orchards during Prohibition. The enchanting unfolding of the apple blossoms around our little house I will never forget. Every Spring I encounter this struggle: the desire to work long hours in the garden against the awakening of thoughts for new writings; and, in an entirely different direction, the undeniable (and completely unexplainable) call to interior explorations prompted by the Lenten fast.

Mimesis:

Mimesis, from which we take the word “mime”, is the name given to Aristotle’s theory of art. He explains that true art is an imitation of nature, an act of truly depicting what we see in the universe.

The first stanza attempts to give this theory of art in sweeping universal imagery. The long lines of verse imitate the beauty and regularity of the long lines of clouds. As the clouds come in waves like the waves on the Great Lake, and as the clouds are moved by the same wind that moves the waves of water, the poet sees into the harmony that exists between them. That same wind is like the breath of inspiration that moves in him; and his speech mimics, with inspiration, the harmony of movement that he sees in the universe. His speech moves in long lines of poetry, in regular but powerful rhythms.

It is true that my rhythms do not have the regularity of classical prosody; but I do not speak a classical language. I speak American English, and the “irregularity” is the natural rhythm of thought as it occurs in the speech which I have heard all my life. If I refer to a line of verse as “Alexandrine”, it means simply that it is a long line of six accents, and that each foot or accented portion, rather than having simply two beats, one accented and one unaccented, as in an iamb, trochee or dactyl, generally will have three, such as an anapest. In classical prosody, using languages which because of their more prolific structuring of both noun forms and conjugal verb forms, and allowing for more flexibility in the syntax as well, are more easily manipulated into strictly musical time signatures (if one assumes that is easy—please forgive me all great lyricists of the past), such meters were possible. My speech is not of that kind, and neither is my sense of poetics. The scanning of my verses, however, is not displeasing to my ear. It is ruled by patterns of thought. I do not argue with my Muse, but I give the scansion of my first stanza as I would read it:

‘/	/	/’	‘/	“/	‘/
‘/	‘/	‘/’	‘/	“/’	/’
//	/’	/	“/’	‘/’	/’
“/	‘/	“/’	“/’	‘/’	/’
‘/’	/’	/’	“/’	‘/’	/
“/	//	“/’	/’	‘/’	‘/’

A study of masculine and feminine endings to the lines and stanzas will reveal where thought is concluded (masculine ending) and where thought is being led further (feminine ending).

In the second stanza, all the power of universal harmonious speech becomes concentrated in the act of being a poet. This is to illustrate that “art as imitation” is not simply an impotent slavery to the environment. Rather, it is to reveal the power that moves through the universe, and to enter into it. The poet is a prophet sitting in the pure meeting of elements—air, water, and earth, on a promontory of rock in the lake—understanding the speech of the elements and interpreting them with the power and participation of all the faculties of his existence. Homer, the supreme poet of the long line of powerful verse, is here represented as the man that he himself depicted in *Odysseus*, a man who heard the song of the Sirens. Homer is the man driven mad by their song, who sings in their cadences, as does the true poet who enters the divine madness of hearing and understanding the divine beauty of universal harmony so brilliantly displayed on every side of any wakeful consciousness.

This is the purpose of the first two stanzas, then, to contrast the true art with the false pretensions to art which have clouded the modern consciousness and obscured our natural appreciation of beauty.

From this point on, the poem considers the historical origins of thought and theory which have misled the modern artist to his more destructive and suicidal madness.

Stanza three describes Buffalo, New York, from far across the lake on a bright summer day. At first, the skyline is barely discernible out of the blue of sky, yet as soon as one sees it, the strange sight seems to be a mirage. The tangle of elevated freeways with tall buildings and, at the time of writing (1986), abandoned steel mills, dwarfed by the distance yet stretching so far along the shore, appears so out of place against the peaceful lake and sky and the trees and sand of the nearer shore, that one wonders if he is really seeing it. Its description as a “babel of architecture” seemed natural to me: this is the art of modern man’s hands, out of harmony with the universe. It is not in imitation of nature as is the pure beauty of the mountains. It is not art as mimesis.

Stanza four begins my portrait of the modern artist. I know I am being somewhat unfair to ideals of harmony which exist in some practices of abstract art; but it does not bother my conscience to contrast it to the ancient ideal of art and condemn it not only in itself but also in how it distorts the natural harmony within mankind. The suicide of the modern artist is accepted by the powerful forces of the universe as a terrible sacrifice. Abstract art is just one example to represent all modern theories of art and science. The poem was, like *The Philosopher of Monterey* (where the practitioner of daring contemporary theories was a modern philosopher), written under the spell of the metaphysician René Guénon.

All the thoughts of this poem really did occur to me within a few moments as I sat on a point of rock thrust out into Lake Erie, and then walked away from that spot along the beach. I was aware that the still beauty of the blue lake was gathering its waters into the currents that feed the Niagara River and thunder over the great falls; and this same movement seemed to be occurring within me as my own thoughts built toward their crescendo. Though it may seem, because of the strict order of lines of poetry, that the poem and its idea of Mimesis may have been contrived, it really was not. It simply occurred to me. I worked for some hours on the lines, but only because it seemed that thoughts had been really crashing over me like long and powerful waves.

Of course it is not just to accuse Socrates as the source of all aberration of modern thought. Nor was it my intention to deny the philosophical perfection (within certain limits) of Platonic Ideas, which, after all, were the source of Aristotle's theory of Art as Imitation—or as Plato would have said it, Participation in the Ideas. Nor is Aristotle to blame for the over-rationalization which has come to rule modern thought since the Age of Scholasticism, when his influence over-reached that of the Western theologians, and the still stronger vise of reason since the so-called Enlightenment. My intention is to insist that thought has a natural order of its own which is superior to the strict rule of reason, and that this poetic structure of thought is inherent in language itself—the nectar of banqueting gods, which heavenly banquet the symposium was supposed to imitate.

On the other hand, the distinction between divine “madness” or true inspiration must be made from that of demonic madness, which makes a person less than human, rather than fully a person. Too much demonic inspiration drives modern art as it attempts to break free of the prison of strict rationalism. That is why I invoked the image of Milton's Pandemonium, the palace built by the fallen angels. It was clear to Milton in his description of the building of the kingdom of hell that he considered the inspiration of the Industrial Revolution to be demonic. That day as I stared at the skyline of Buffalo's steel mills, I was seeing his prophecy had come true in the inspiration of the modern city.

Writings by Christopher Lewis

EPIC POEM:

Weapons from Paradise: the epic of the grail

The epic poet invokes powers of extraordinary vision to tell the story of the origins of a people. It was in the midst of the heroic resistance of the Gauls and the legendary British kings and queens to the most ambitious of the Roman invasions, that Joseph of Arimathea brought the sacred relic, the chalice of the Last Supper, into the very court of the fierce king Arviragus, and was accepted as a bringer of peace. 2001.

NOVELS:

The Natchez Treasure

As Masonic controversies over the purpose of the new nation of America degenerate into the political turmoil that precedes the Civil War, one man is searching for clues on the mysterious origins of the United States. When he finds himself following the trail of the pirate-patriot Lafitte's buried treasures, he comes into a land of bayous and mysteries he had not known could exist within the boundaries of America. 2001.

Feast of the Exaltation

Set in a small New England town, troubled by centuries-old legends of witchcraft. The story explores the deterioration of character in modern times, rather than its development. Who is what he seems to be? Who is what he wants to be? Only those most humbled by tremendous adversity see the light that shines in the darkness! 1992; re-written 2007.

The Prophecy of the Icons

A strong-minded and idealistic son of Russian exiles returns to his homeland after the fall of Communism. He is intrigued by rumors of a lost chronicle on the secrets of Russian history—written by his own ancestor—and on the traditions of ancient wonder-working icons. Appalled by the near anarchy of political power struggles, he quickly finds himself hunted by previous agents of the KGB, and is forced to flee into remote regions of the countryside. In progress.

The Four Ancient Books of the Prophet Merlin

A new rendition of the Arthurian sagas. Arthur's attempt to establish order in the British remnant of the Roman Empire becomes no less than an ambition to restore the Western Christian Empire itself, even while St. Gildas warns against such ambition. Arthur is opposed by Merlin and the priestesses of the pre-Christian religion, who have experienced the powerful talismans of the pagan Goddess. Their spiritual battle is focused on the search for the grail and its lore, Christian and pagan. The complex character of Merlin and his own cathartic failure, and his strange transformation under the influence of St. Kentigern, becomes the fulcrum of the drama. In

four books: *The Book of Taliesin*; *The Black Book of the Weapons of Magic*; *The Red Book of the Grail*; *The White Book of Riderch*. In progress.

The American Book of the Dead

Semi-autobiographical, sad and humorous attempts of a young poet to make sense of intense spiritual search in the era of the early 1970's. In progress.

DRAMA:

The Wedding Night

A romance doomed by the Russian Revolution. The fiery passions of Russian religion and politics drive these highly-developed characters beyond tragedy to a strange, mystical conclusion. Based on the journals of witnesses. In verse. 1986.

The Philokalia

When the print shops of Renaissance Italy were the new intellectual centers of Europe, fascinating personalities, many driven by ambition and caught in intrigue, moved among the most famous men of the time. Deeply philosophical yet with moments of human tenderness, this tragedy explores the love of Beauty through Jacopo, a humble typesetter who commences his search among the likes of Aldus, Erasmus, and ecclesiastical and political dignitaries. In verse. 1993.

Perilous Ascent of the Pyrenees

A young and zealous priest is sent as chaplain to a castle suspected of being a stronghold for Albigensian heretics. The late medieval peril is overwhelming; the Church of the West seems to be losing the strength of its spirituality, while the "secret teachings" are becoming popular among intelligent people. The secret of the castle is terrifying; escape could only be miraculous. Three acts, in verse. 1994.

VERSE NARRATIVES:

The Saint Joseph Cycle

A series of dramatic monologues, following the life of the foster-father of Jesus and his expressions of inmost wonder. 1984; re-written 2007.

The Sacrifice

A Cajun legend of a French intellectual who emigrates to Louisiana. Shocked by the Cajun superstition of books, he is forced to hide his own literacy. The disarming beauty of descriptive verse leaves the reader unprepared for the stunning conclusion. 1980.

The Philosopher of Monterey

His childhood in the coastal mountains was idyllic, and the girl who was his friend grew beautiful with the years. In maturity a respected thinker in the vanguard of post-rationalist thought, he is alienated from his past and from her. When he sees the legendary sea-monster of Monterey Bay, he goes mad and wanders aimlessly back into the mountains, seeking an end to his suffering. The majestic poetry at

every turn contrasts ancient mystical philosophy with the madness that parades as modern thought. Based on the fictional history of Alan Forbes, Ph.d, Stanford. 1983; re-written 2003.

Meditation and Lullaby for the Epiphany

Season In the Sierra midwinter a tiny girl begs her father to let her go searching for the Christ child; he finds himself unable to explain why they won't be able to find him. She leads him, but as readers we follow his thoughts deeper and deeper into the unutterable silence and breathtaking beauty of the snowy landscape until...out of the dusk walks a beggar who claims to know the way. 1984; re-written 2006.

The Unknown Radiance of Angel Island

A young scholar in San Francisco is stunned by the extraordinary wisdom of an unknown hermit who lives in seclusion on an island in the bay. 1985; re-written 2004.

The Theophany of the Three Holy Hierarchs

A telling of the Christmas story in simple verse, but following the treatment of theophany ('revealing of God') in famous sermons of the three most highly-regarded Greek theologians. (Follows the strict but inventive forms of classic Greek odes as developed by Pindar and transformed by the hymnographer Romanos 'the sweet singer'.) 1999.

SHORT FICTION:

Diane of the Oaks

This story, set during the origins of the community of Penngrove, is told by an early settler in the Santa Rosa Valley. His love for Diane and for the valley brings him into conflict with the increasing development of the new Yankee squatters, who are his own people, until he finds himself among the disinherited Miwoks and Spanish Californios. 1992.

This is Paradise Here

The harsh life of Mexican migrant workers in the wealthy Russian River vineyards. This story examines how severe child-abuse is passed from generation to generation. 1990.

The House

Ruined by divorce, a devastated man seeking shelter in a dilapidated house in San Francisco finds a mysterious old book in the wall. This book becomes the object of an invisible but terrifying war of darkness and light. The story is told in language of such power that the reader finds himself walking between different worlds in the changing light of an ordinary day. 1994.

The Story of Mt. Tamalpais

This fantasy incorporates myths of earlier civilizations. Two thousand years ago a Miwok girl climbs the forbidden mountain in hopes of saving her dying brother. A strange star appears, and the shamans recognize that this is no ordinary girl, and no ordinary night. 1983.

Althea

A young woman in the English lake-country explores underwater worlds. An allegory of the subconscious forces of adolescence. 1982.

The Silver Maple

A children's story. Animal characters rebuild their village around a miraculous tree. 1981.

LITERARY ARTICLES (PUBLISHED):

The Fountainhead of Western Poetry

Origins of poetic thought and form in the patristic allegories of Scripture and in liturgical hymns. Metaphor as the content of poetry. Ambrose's four-line hymns, a perfect vehicle of the four levels of Scriptural allegory, as the prototype of the rhymed quatrain. Byzantine hymnography as a development of the Greek ode. Paraliturgical processions and medieval drama. The new European languages, and the sonnet as a parody of Latin liturgical forms.

Epiphany Magazine.

Origen: Perennial Enigma

Life and thought of this early Church father, his tremendous influence in his own day and again in the Renaissance, and the condemnation of the Ecumenical Council. Part I: *Origen*—his life, his Scriptural interpretations, and the controversy of "Origenism". Part II: *Theologian or Philosopher*—distinguishing the two kinds of thought. Early Christian apologetics, and the emergence of mystical theology, soaring above the limitations of religious philosophy. Part III: *The Path of the Christian Philosopher*—overviews the history of western philosophy. The Christian as a moral philosopher; Christian natural philosophy; and the supreme illumination of true theology, as illustrated by Origen's own exegesis of Proverbs (moral philosophy), The Wisdom of Solomon (natural philosophy), and the Song of Songs (divine philosophy).

Epiphany Magazine.

The Conferences of St. John Cassian: An Introduction

The life of Cassian, a disciple of Evagrius and Chrysotom. The tragedy of Western history in the loss of its original spirituality. The Orthodox monastic West: Martin and Gregory of Tours, Cassian, Celtic monasticism. The new ecclesiastical empire: the rise of Roman church authority and the loss of the ascetic struggle. The Pelagian Heresy and the misunderstanding of Cassian's essential identity with the thought of the desert fathers. Cassian's use of the Platonic dialogue as the search for truth, and the spiritual elder as the supreme philosopher.

Epiphany Magazine.

Made in the Image: Vocation as Participation in Meaning

Craftsmanship and initiation in the medieval craft guilds. The mastery of all crafts collected and displayed in the great masterpieces which are the cathedrals of Europe.

Epiphany Magazine.

From City to Community

The history of cities and the idea city, contrasted to the modern metropolis. Augustine's city of God and city of man.

Epiphany Magazine.

LITERARY ARTICLES (UNPUBLISHED):

Notes on Medieval Manuscript Hands

Origins of our modern lower-case alphabet in the humanistic hand of the Italian Renaissance. The Carolingian miniscule. Medieval manuscript hands. Greek influence, both in early centuries and in the Renaissance. Letter-forms and their evolution in manuscript styles. Ornamental lettering. The alphabet and the evolution of language. 2003.

The River of Calamity

The source of Western thought in patristic writings, presented in the metaphor of the springhead of inspiration at the summit of sacred mountains. The course of Western thought as departure from its sacred origins, presented in the metaphor of Augustine's "river of calamity", his image of the increasing tragedy of history since the Fall of man. 1987.

A Pilgrimage That Leaves the Stars Behind

Examination of astrological allusions in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reveals the main cosmological theme, identical to the thematic use of allusions to Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Framed by astrological parentheses of major symbolic importance, the pilgrimage theme moves from this world to the next. Meanwhile, the astrological references throughout the poems explore the philosophical conflict between fate and free will in the context of individual destiny and choice, along with theological questions of the role of divine providence. 1978.

Thematic Sketches of Spencer's Faerie Queene

A proposed outline of the unfinished poem's thematic unity, assuming that the so-called *Mutability Cantos* reveal a thematic climax. 1978.

History of Education:

Mystery schools in ancient Greece. Hebrew Temple Schools. The teachings of Christ. St. Basil the Great and education. Education in the Roman world. Fall of Rome, and monastic education. Influence of Celtic monasticism. Decline of monasticism, and the rise of Scholasticism. Secularization of learning. Education in America.

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