

INTRODUCTION:

This is the introduction to a book of poems by Dean Blehert entitled *Blank Pages* -- the sort of introduction written by some noted poet or scholar or critic who appreciates the book and wants others to know how best to approach it, but in this case the introduction is by the mostly unnoted (though self-annotated) Dean Blehert, because I don't have time at the moment to hunt up an appropriate introducer, nor am I sure one exists, and also because I love this book, think it my best and want to give it its immodest due.

The book consists of 256 pages, each of which is a poem, though the book might better be considered a single long poem, since all the poems share a theme and include many links from poem to poem and running across several poems. Or call it 256 variations on a theme. The theme is blankness: the blankness of a blank page (and how it bedevils, teases, betrays and rewards poets), the blankness of a psychopath's eyes, the nothing out of which all creation emerges, the blankness of snow, of light, of darkness, of a gray autumn sky, of silence, of nonsense babble, of mirrors reflecting mirrors in a barbershop; the presences and absences that infest apparent blankness, what's left after books are burned, the blankness following loss or the act of reading past misunderstood words without looking them up, the blankness of senility, of tip-of-the-tongue groping, the alleged blank slate of childhood, the emptiness of American politicians -- yes, this book gets around.

Why 256 poems? Because I wrote the book to fill a volume of blank pages given me by a fellow poet (see "Foreword" below), and that book had 256 pages. And because I've always liked the number 256 (get out your pens and notepads, numerologists, and tell me all about me). As a child, I preferred even numbers to odd. If I scratched one leg, I'd scratch the other, just to keep things even. Since I liked 2, I liked 4 even more (two twos), and 16 and 64. I thought of 16 as my favorite number, but then thought, well, 256 is 16 16s -- what a fine number!

Blank Pages is more discursive than most of us allow poems to be, loopy-goopy, perhaps aims at occupying the baggy-prosed pantheon that includes *Tristram Shandy*, *Moby Dick* (or at least the long disquisition on "The Whiteness of the Whale" contained therein -- though these poems have more in common with Melville's later, less well-known work, *The Confidence Man*) and Wittgenstein's long, rambling discussions in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Other works, less discursive, helped me understand better the various aspects of blankness, including those of Nabokov (especially *Pale Fire*), Borges and Kafka. (And perhaps, aiming for these stars, I will reach no higher than the ornate pretensions of James Branch Cabell, all my preenings merely coy. But I don't think so. The false modesty of the "perhaps" is as close as I get to coyness. I'm not modest. I know what I've done here. This is good stuff. I'm just trying to give it a provenance. That is, I'm name-dropping.)

For some reason, the work that crops up most in this book is *Hamlet*. (Duly noted. So what?) But how could a book on variations of blankness not deal with a drama where the line "The rest is silence" is immediately followed by "Enter Fortinbras with drums and trumpets"?

The book is free-form and multi-formed. Most of the poems are free verse, but two are villanelles, there are some pages of linked haiku, and there are bursts of other rhymed and metered forms. The

word games proliferate rapidly, the puns are often elaborate (and labored?), the fascination with word derivations, word sounds and word games is pervasive. I prefer puns that are miraculous – to see that the language contains such connections, there all along, but (I hope) never before noticed. But I also use puns to introduce a sort of imp of the perverse, an element that resists my proudest significances.

For me (and I hope for you) the book is a romp. I aims to please. Its covert theme is the joy of creating. I think of creation as instantaneous and never ending (and never beginning). One creates and creates and creates -- and that includes the creation of all that one is. Author creates self in order to be that self and communicate and creates audience to receive the communication. Reader similarly creates the author in order to receive communications from that author and creates him/herself to receive and return communications. Quite an intricate dance.

I don't aim in my work at finding a good point to end. I prefer to find a perfect ending point that creates the illusion that all has been said that can possibly be said on the subject, and then to go on and find a great deal more to say on the subject, then hit an ending to beat all conceivable endings, then go on.... I like to find mountain ranges beyond mountain ranges, to toy with the illusion of being all-encompassing, knowing that on any subject there's no limit to what can be said, a viewpoint I try to convey by my tease of not ending...until at some point I simply do end.

I doubt there's any end to our creating, certainly not death, since, though bodies die, I don't think you and I do. No end except our deciding that this is the end of something. (And I could end this intro with those words, but won't.)

To some extent the form of this book derives from Nabokov's description of his plans for the novel he later entitled *Invitation of a Beheading*. While he was working on it, he described it as an essay called "The Texture of Time" in which the play of ideas would gradually evolve into characters and settings and all the other apparatus of the novel – and flux in and out of being an essay on time. But I didn't want a novel. I wanted the ideas, not to become characters, but to BE the characters, to be voice and attitude and dream. I'm lazier than Nabokov – or more impatient. When I have an idea, I want to communicate it. I like to play with words, ideas and feelings. If I can get you to surround them with characters, fine. If not, I hope the fact that this book keeps leading you back to something solid (the page or computer screen a few inches from your eyes) will allay the nausea that accrues from too many ideas associated with too little mass.

My ideas don't have names and faces and eyes with named colors and birthplaces and wives and children. But I did want something of what I sense in Nabokov's description of his intention. I wanted ideas to throw off their prosy solemnity and wave at the camera and say "Hi, Mom!" or mock the reader's intentness or become indignant or sad. I wanted them, at times, to break up into words or characters or dots of printer's ink or pixels, incomprehensible, then re-emerge, unexpectedly as ideas. I wanted them to become voices that would keep turning into me, then reveal themselves as you – only to become alien to either of us, lost in a maelstrom of puns.

I wanted them to argue among themselves, fall in love, live.

(I guess I wanted all the perks of the novel without having to sustain a plot or describe details of settings, etc.)

I've mentioned a few literary influences (to which I should add Joyce's *Ulysses*, but NOT *Finnegan's Wake*, which is mostly a great achievement, since no one but Joyce could turn the vastness of his wit and creativity into something so boring) and one philosophical influence (Wittgenstein), but for my understandings of the various anatomies of blankness (and much else) I am indebted more than to all the others combined to the work of L. Ron Hubbard. At the following link, you will find the main source of my inspiration, though there are many other passages in his writings and recorded lectures that have contributed to this work and, indeed, made it possible. If I overrate the quality of my poems, if this book is a dud, don't blame Hubbard's work, which answers only for itself. If my work sucks, please keep in mind that one of the signs (and burdens) of greatness is the inspiration of generations of mediocre work, none of which detract from the power of what inspired them. No one does Shakespeare like Shakespeare, and most who attempt it look foolish. Here is the link:

<http://www.scientology.org/wis/WISENG/34/34-scax.htm>

For the view of games that runs through these poems, the best summary may be found in the book described at this link:

<http://www.truthbooks.com/>

For the views of communication and entrapment suggested in these poems, I am indebted to the book described at this link:

<http://www.amazon.com/Dianetics-55-L-Ron-Hubbard/dp/0884044173>

I've annotated the poems (perhaps excessively) to lessen the difficulties and nudge the reader ("get it? Eh! Eh!") where some bit of word play or allusion delights me, and I want to share that delight (or insane glee). I know, I know, never explain, and if you have to, that's the poem's failure, etc. I know it, and I have never agreed to it. I like to communicate, and I like to communicate about communication and about my own communications. Both poem and notes can be of interest. Why shouldn't I write my own Talmud (with its commentators on commentators on commentators). [Also see Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, though my notes on my own work are far less tricky than the annotations in that novel (where an insane scholar tries to usurp ownership of a poem). Mine are almost just notes.]

Moreover, I've been amazed in recent years to find that I'm old, and that many people don't recognize allusions I'd thought universally apparent to anyone vaguely literate. These days I'd rather over-explain than under-explain.

Probably this book is best read (if at all) in small doses, one or two poems a day. But if you get

greedy and want it all in one sitting, go for it!

I've added, besides this introduction, a foreword, though I might as well have put both under one heading. But having both an introduction AND a foreword is impressive, no? Besides, this introduction is close to straightforward, nice dry sidewalk for a stroll whereas the poems are awfully ice-slicked, blinding in sunlight, treacherous underfoot and over footnote. The foreword will give you a transition, as it begins to sleet slightly by the end.

Best,

Dean Blehert (and I am definitely the best Dean Blehert available)

p.s. Since writing the words above, I have sat through too much of a New Years Eve/New Years Day marathon of Marx Brothers Movies, and realized that what they achieved at their best is part of what I aim at in my poems, gradations of zaniness, though I try to achieve this without losing the illusion of serious discussion.

Raymond Chandler, wonderful with character and setting and dialog, was not so strong on plotting. He wrote that whenever things slowed down, his solution was to have someone enter with a gun. Similarly, when a Marx Brothers film slows down, they have Harpo enter, destroying things and creating chaos.

Harpo never speaks (though he beeps and whistles – and inspired the mute, honking, seltzer-squirting clown of a later kiddie's show (Clarabelle on "Howdy Doody"), so is tremendously expressive, a phenomenon observed in a more serious context in Ingmar Bergman's "Persona", where one of the main characters (played by Liv Ullman) has given up on speech, so seems to say everything and absorbs the personalities of those around her.

My poems toy with solemnity, but when the solemnity begins to bore me, the poems "degenerate" (and I don't really accept the idea that it's a degeneration) into wordplay that – if I play my cards right – may suggest the logical illogicality of an exchange between Groucho and Chico. But the real imp of chaos in this poem, shattering even the relatively restful madness of the punsters, is the blank page, that, like Harpo, says nothing, says everything. (For what is it that speaks all the poetry that is ever spoken (or "spoken") on a page if not the blankness of the page – or of the poet, since either there IS such a thing as creation, in which case something comes from nothing, or there is no creativity, in which case (to mutilate that other font of zaniness, he of the shaky spear) I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

p.p.s. Happy New Year to you too. For me, it's 2007, but you can use this wish any year you please.

FOREWORD:

Dear Reader,

In December, 2004, a good friend and excellent poet, Hilary Tham Goldberg, gave me a Christmas gift: A book (black, hard-covered, with a tiny Chinese painting glued to the front – Hilary was a painter as well as poet and story teller). The book consisted of 256 blank pages. I decided to fill it with 256 poems, all variations on a theme: Blank pages (truly a white-Christmas gift). (Actually a Chanukah gift, since Hilary was Jewish.) (Was. She died in October, 2005. I'm not sure she ever had time to read the manuscript. She'd seen the first 70 pages and told me she loved them. But few of my friends managed to get through the whole thing. You may be the first!) (If you can get through this introduction.) (If you read all 256 pages, you're definitely my friend -- if you still wish to be.)

(To strain my parenthetical strain, I, too, was Jewish, but didn't have to die to earn my was-iness. I may still be Jewish. I haven't checked recently.)

What does one say about blank pages? I don't know, never having met "one" – but I've met many blank pages, and never met a blank page I didn't like. Since it is my wont and my will to fill (with font) blank pages, I suppose you might think I dislike them, but consider love: I meet a woman, adore her, want to be part of her life, try to fill up her life with my life – not because I dislike her as other and potential, but because I find her beautiful, and want some part in that beauty – or in the creation of beauty. A farmer's love of fields full of ripening wheat does not necessarily preclude a joy in fallow fields in early spring.

That's my life. I'm a poet. I love blank pages. I destroy their blankness. Yeah, yeah, we always kill the thing we love. Nonsense. It's not like that. The blank page and I co-create my poems. (I keep telling people, it's not my fault!) That's us, Ma and Pa Poetry. Except we have a triangle, since, bored and suburban in our literate sophistication, we try to liven things up with a threesome. Welcome, reader! Or, if you prefer the farmer simile, welcome, eater!

The book is a long riff. It wanders in and out of poetry (or recognizable poetry), puns self-indulgently, shifts in and out of borrowed and invented voices, and is tricky enough that, on re-reading it, I find passages I no longer understand. So I'll provide some notes along the way, to remind myself what I'm talking about. At least I'll try to provide notes that are notes. The poem's very nature seduces footnotes, tries to involute them into the poem, but I'll be good. I'll be very prosy. Even more prosy than my poems. (If prose blossomed, would it be poetry? But I never promised you a prose garden.)

OK, Dean, you wrote the damned book, enough already. So here it is, "Blank Pages", broken up into rather arbitrary chapters named 1, 2, 3 and other famous numbers. Or maybe I'll have just one chapter. "Chapter" derives from Latin for "head". I'm a one-headed poet. Why not a one-headed poem?

Dean Blehert

(I'll be your poet tonight. The other guy will bring your menu and water in a moment.)

BLANK PAGES

Chapter 1 (and only)

[The rest of this page has been intentionally left blank]

[Except the author, me, Dean Blehert, just wants to say once more that he thinks (I think) this is the best thing I've ever written, at least, as of 26 Dec., 2006, as I type this violation of intentional blankness]

[But the rest of this page is really REALLY left blank intentionally – here it comes:]

A book with blank pages --
we call them blank, but actually
crowded with woody and raggy life,
grain, sap, fiber, bits of bug,
all pulped and bleached
to a uniform white --

if seen at a proper distance;
no doubt pitted and discolored
under magnification, and to an
electron microscope, a grid
of discrete particles opening up
into galaxies.

Ah, my incredible shrinking
viewpoint, rest here awhile,
where inky rivers shrink
to meaningful squiggles, where blank
is blank and words are words
and the gift is given us to enter here
emblems of what, alone, is without limit,
assuming any or no scope -- thought;

this gift conditional (DOWN, Thought!)
on our being able to maintain
a proper distance.

Note: A communication, to be a communication, must cross a distance and reach someone. To get where it's meant to go, it must be able to penetrate barriers of matter, energy, time and space. But when it gets where it's meant to go, it must stop, or at least be slowed enough to impinge, not pass through ghostlike. The ball is supposed to get past the batter, but not the catcher. A similar game of penetration and opacity is the reading of a poem: Where to stop and smell the communication. What, if anything, is to be considered a distraction: the grain of the paper, the molecular structure of the ink? Or in the macrocosmic direction, whether a volume is thick enough to weight down a toilet seat against rats in a house closed for the season?

The point of the above poem is not to answer such questions, but to suggest that we play these intricate games all the time, setting limits with an ease and precision beyond any capability we imagine in ourselves. The alternative to a game is that absence -of-game infinite vacuum suggested by the old movie, "The Incredible Shrinking Man". At first it's interesting: His own cat becoming a tiger to him, then grass blades towering over him, then he's picking on molecules, and then he's shrinking right out of "his" universe (no return possible, it seems) into one where he's a giant -- still shrinking, world without end and no hallelujah. It becomes no universe at all.

Trees are pulped and bleached and flattened
into something one can contribute to,
a blankness that more than allows --
DEMANDS contribution.

For what could I give to a tree?
Not beauty of form nor complexity
of texture nor hum of life
nor wind songs changing with each
seasonal nuance -- and how many seasons
of earth, air and sun,
unknown to man,
are part of the vocabulary
of even the youngest trees?

I could carve in the bark, "Dean loves Pam"
or "Dolores fucks anyone: Call..." (some
phony 555 number, since even poets
can be sued; lawyers fuck anyone).

These seem a taking, not a giving,
like a green twig of a girl,
her child's face hardened by mascara
and other maskings, tender bare midriff
exposing a small blue butterfly
(washable?).

A giving, that tattoo, or a taking?
She feels unable to contribute
to the beauty of her young body
(not realizing how much her smile
enlightens it), so desecrates it.
What we can't contribute to,
we can destroy. Her tattoo is like
the over-winding of one's first watch.

The window shows me a bristling
of bare branches, to which, just now
(brief but indelible) a cardinal
contributes.

[A friend replies, we give the trees our
exhalations, carbon dioxide. But that's
a fair trade: They give us oxygen, so that
we can inhale in order to exhale. It's like
a kiss on the lips, given and taken
in both directions equally. Or since each breathes
what the other wastes, it's like sniffing
each other's farts -- what could be
more intimate?]

Note: Remember, readers, when wrist watches needed winding, and one could ruin a watch by over-winding it? In this digitized world, our digits grow slack from lack of exercise – nothing to wind! (Our old watches are gone with their

wind.)

First snow of the season:

The night I received this book full
of blank pages (perfect gift
for a poet), it snowed. Next morning,
our yard was a white expanse, devoid even
of bird tracks, a newborn world, *tabula rasa*,
as blank as (according to John Locke)
a baby's mind, though perhaps babies have

too much to remember,
and not just prenatal dreaming
(as hermetic as the chipmunk's
in his snowed-in, fur-lined lair,
just beyond our front door),
but life after life, a chain of lost bodies,
friends, languages and worlds dwindling away
beyond whatever time uses for a horizon.

Perhaps the baby's alleged blankness
is only a forgetting. Snow covers
only briefly (except where it never melts,
but who lives there?) our familiar brown
and green world.

Is the blank page, too, a forgetting?
A false innocence? At the instant
I recognize most undeniably my words
as a poem, it feels, not like a new thing,
but a remembering, perhaps of what
the blank page has been refusing to say.

Note: Most of you don't need to be told, but be nice for those who do: John Locke, 18th Century philosopher, said that a baby begins as a blank slate (tabula rasa), upon which life scribbles experience. Every baby I've met knew exactly where to look to find me.

Our damned cat (whom we love) has since destroyed that chipmunk (whose energy we admired, his linear zip, like the Energizer bunny).

A blank sheet: if we must designate it
by choice of bedding (sheet), why not choose
the natural bedfellow -- a blank blanket;
both words deriving from blanc (white) and
that from a Germanic word meaning "shining."

With snow we get it right: Snow "blankets
the earth." And our shining virtue
"blankety-blanks" from view the nasty words.

What shines is blank. To shine, be empty,
be light, in which the ampleness of things
(apples, babies, cabbages and the rest
of the alphabet) are beheld, their solid colors
made up of spots of shine and, mostly,
empty spaces.

Again, DOWN, damned thought! Pause here,
where things are things. Leave photons
(wave or particle?) and gaps between atoms
to physics. Enough that I can, with a blink,
blank out the visual world,

perchance to dream another; my own blankness,
like any other, a magnet for things,
an excuse for obsessive creation.

Nature and poetry abhor vacuum. Vacuum sucks,
or rather, suucks! That double U (not W),
you and you, so rare a combination
in our language, you and you together
in the belly of nothing, or rolled up
in a blanket, together, shining.

Note: Re "suucks" – siiiic. (i.e., sic.)

Blank is my ambition. What fat poet
does not aspire (bank on it!)
to B lank?

And yet it is my duty as a poet
to destroy (or consume? or decorate? --
choose your weapon, er, metaphor)
blankness.

Or do I but recycle it, my words
(sweet nothings?) briefly shining, fading,
merging into the white background noise
of the next generation, a noise which,
decades later, is (like the noises now
of traffic, air conditioners and our own blood
beating in our ears) what is called "silence"?

(Am I shooting blanks at blankness?)

But in a noisy crowd facing a noisy crowd
(on a battle field or one emerging from plane
or train, the other there to greet), how often
and how quickly we've been able to disentangle
from the commotion (co-motion, for at our most
random, even in war, our lives are a moving
together) -- disentangle the eye-gleam
(tiny shine, tiny blankness), the hello ("hell",
and "O", one emptiness ending in another)
or aimed gun that reaches out its invisible vector
to meet our own.

Another day,
another blank page conquered,
or so we readers think, our eyes
obsessively drawn to the ink squiggles,
ignoring (how else can reading happen)
the surrounding blankness,

as if islands
 (lands of is, lands where our eyes land)
sprinkling an ocean
 (is-not-land)
should be thought to conquer ocean,
rather than to provide points
from which to view what surrounds us,
perhaps IS us.

My ocean of blankness today is a page
and what surrounds that page; for example,
the green bed sheet against which
now it rests, air, light, my awareness
of being aware.

But I've made this page speak - to humans
of this or neighboring generations
who know my language and can read and can
make out my hand-writing.

Ah, but the blankness hides all
that can be spoken, of which is darkened
but a single broken thread out of quintillions
held in blankness. Trivial, yet marvelous
to be able, from such a rich weave, to elucidate
(or the opposite -- to darken) a single thread.

Note: Mechanically, the ability to read depends on our being able to ignore the blank spaces around the letters – that is, the “negative” shapes of those spaces. Imagine learning to read the white on the page, as a shape carved out by the letters. Artists relish interesting “negative spaces” in their paintings, hope, for example, that while our eyes take in the nude lady, our hearts are captured by the graceful forms suggested by the spaces between the body and its arms. Trying to read letters on a page with that sort of attention-spanning would be a challenge for most of us. Can you hear the silence from which my words pitter patter to the page?

Blankness needs our poetry
to delineate it. Even when we are asked
to "fill in the blanks," each blank is marked
by an underline _____. And of course,
the blanks aren't blank, since there can be
but one correct answer. The blank to be filled
is surrounded by the incompleteness
it must match, like a neighboring
jig-saw puzzle piece.

What we call a "full life" is full
of such false blanks: "Would you like to
come up for...coffee?" "Is he...is he...?"
"It's nothing." "Never mind."
"Well, your work is certainly very...
interesting." "We'll call you." "Thank you
for your interest."

All the vacuous words, empty smiles, vague
affirmative grunts -- all those apparent blanks --
that mean only one thing, if you can hear --
but why do I call these "apparent blanks"?
Is there some other kind? Is there a blankness
that is NOT expressive, does not tell all?

Well, there's "the void," "chaos," "the whiteness
of the whale" that Melville found overwhelming
and seductive. And the blank page, not informed
by Tristram Shandy's coy context -- or a whole
blank book. And yet what is a poem, in its
asserted inevitability, but the unique expression
(or its illusion) of the blankness from which
it emerges? And what should be the subject
of poems written to fill a book of blank pages?

Note: Melville's Moby Dick includes a whole section on "the whiteness of the whale", a whiteness which becomes, I believe, the narrator of his later, less well-known book, The Confidence Man. Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy (actually, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Esq.) might be considered, in its entirety, a discourse on blank pages, including some very odd pages of its own in the process. Other books that delve into blankness include Nabokov's Pale Fire and perhaps Kafka's The Trial, and (less effectively, I think) much of the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Alain Robbe-Grillet. So why read these poems? Well, my blankness is particularly my own. Blankness is like rice or potatoes: It soaks up anyone's flavor.

Nothing loves anything. That is, nothing
is needy and will bestow its love
on anything. (Or no thing can love
any thing or anything?) What to write?
Something, anything, thing. THING for your
thupper, poet!

But WHICH thing? ANY thing. This
or that. Come on, WHAT must make
a difference. What is a GOOD thing,
a BEAUTIFUL thing to say?

Of course, I'm not SAYing anything.
(Can you hear me here, not speaking?)
Nor am I an I, nor you a you,
unless you (who are not you) make it so.

You and I, the only real blanks there are,
one blank creating a voice
to speak to another blank,
who creates a voice to hear,
speaker and listener co-creating
something -- that process being the point
all our pointed points point to,

so what matter what thing (what matter)
we create? Hello, Blankness, my old friend...

Note: Last line owes its form to the Simon & Garfunkel song, "The Sound of Silence", with it's line, "Hello, darkness, my old friend".

Note: One problem with this poem is that it contains many lines that lose one level of meaning if read aloud – for example, "Of course, I'm not SAYing anything", which might mean that I'm talking nonsense or that ideas aren't things, but which has the obvious meaning that these are words on a page, not spoken, until the reader gives them a voice (mental or aloud), and that meaning vanishes if I read the words aloud to you, which is a shame, because I'm fascinated with the way we give voice to ink on a page and with how that suggests all the other less obvious ways readers co-create poems (or viewers co-create art).

Nonsense. What we say (or don't say) matters. Any game is better than none. The rules change from writer to writer, reader to reader, language to language, generation to generation, but always there are rules.

The size and shape of the ball I toss tells you which game we are playing. We are not limited: There's no end of things to do with a football -- wait, not hit it with a baseball bat, surely? Well, we can, and still have a game, especially if we know we shouldn't.

We can break any rules if, in the process, we create new ones. (Poetry follows the rules of Calvin Ball. The imaginary tiger always wins.) We can even create new alphabets:

/ mm*
/ ##T- ^
_/?~[/\)

What did we just say? Critics? Anyone?
Reader, can you read me?
Over.
Out.

(I continue to think, but outside the page.
You can't hear me now...)

Note: In the magnificent comic strip, "Calvin and Hobbes", about a boy and his tiger (whose reality varies with the beholder), boy and tiger play "Calvin Ball", in which they make the rules up as they go along,, but still manage to have a game.

I am the main character of this poem
(or "I" is), one of those characters
so alive that he leaps right off the page.
In fact, I've already done so -- I flew
right past your left ear -- remember
brushing away a gnat that wasn't there
or feeling as if you'd just dodged a bullet?

I'm out "there" now, being alive -- hell,
maybe I'm you -- so there's nothing of me
here now. And even if there were,
my apparent substance is just a stain
on nothing at all.

Merely ink, we say, as if we knew
(even most writers don't know) anything
about ink. It could be blood,
crushed seashells or flowers -- someone,
please, what is ink? How does it remain
capable of flow until released onto paper,
then almost instantly go bone dry,
the last line already beyond blotting?
Is it allergic to air? Absorbed
by this porous stuff?

It's easier to sponge ink
off a glossy blankness.
Beware, poet, of shining too blindingly.
Nothing can adhere to absolute blankness.
It is easier to leap off a glossy page.
This erose, dull wood pulp sucks the life
out of me -- or into it.

Blank pages are white. If you stare
long enough at bright enough white rectangles
(this book open in direct sunlight),
then close your eyes in a dark room,
you will see black rectangles

or dark ones whose colors, say, dark violet,
reveal that early or late light has given this page
a complementary reddish tint.

Or you could -- eyes open or shut --
decide to see -- and see -- a black --
or any-colored -- rectangle -- or any shape,
that is -- dash it all -- you could if you can;
some can't, apparently. Try it and see.
I mean, see for yourself; that is, if you can
decide to see something and then see it,
you are, without the aid of things-as-we-all-
agree-they-are, seeing for yourself.

But I digress. The difference between black
and blank is one character. Black has C
(because we can c it? Because we live
in a c of it?) where blank has n (because
each poem is the n of blankness and returns
to it? Here's the n of this one.)

Note to the pun-challenged: Black has C because we can c (see) it? Because we live in a c (sea) of it, where blank has n (because each poem is the n [end] of blankness and returns to it? Here's the n [end] of this note.

Note to the pun-unchallenged: Sorry.

On the other hand, even the pun-unchallenged may not have noticed that the "n" that separates black from blank is also the mathematical "n", the letter most often used to designate "any integer" or a number that may take on any integer value, unlimited. (Where "x" is usually the unknown to be solved, "n" in a formula is more often a number that moves from 1 to 100 or from one number to another number (or infinity) to give different answers for x. Thus, like blankness itself, n, that sounds like "end", signifies both an end (the oblivion of blankness) and an infinity or n-finity. How numberlessly numbing!

Black and blank -- unnatural twins,
since blanc goes with noire, while
black goes with white, the first pair
French, the second from Old (ye olde)
English.

But there must be a plan here, for blanc
ends with the "c" that makes black
out of blank; and noire begins with the "n"
that makes blank out of black.

Here's a spectrum of sounds, from shiny white
to rich dark: White, blank, black, blanc (blanc),
noire. Interesting how English bleaches out
the French vowels, even its black (bright night)
brighter than blanc.

To compensate, the French lighten
their darkest sounds, cutting vowels short,
impatient to leap from consonant
to consonant and swallowing (into their
nostrils) even those: that famous
consonantal cuisine (keeps the vowel
movements regular).

I'm tired of being an idea (if not dry ink)
on a page. I'm going to come to life.
I'm ready to make that leap. Here I come:

SPROINGGGGG!

(Where am I? What is this? An inner ear?
Someone's brain? Did I splat against
your lamp bulb like a moth? Where the hell
am I?? Whose mind is this? Who do you think
you are, anyway?) (With all due respect.)

The trouble with leaping off the page
is that ideas and characters leap
all topsy turvy and hugger mugger like fleas,
never knowing where they'll land (comes
of my being so flippant).

I imagined flipping into the mind
of a lean, tough, pipe-smoking man
of few words. But this could be a plump
giggly girl who thinks this is really
neat stuff or maybe not giggly, but skinny
and sullen, her eyes gothically black-circled,
thinking "whatEVer!" or "heLLO?"
(I'm ten years behind in my ideas
of hip sarcasm.)

Or maybe I landed on your carpet
and am about to have an unpleasant adventure
with your cat...

Oh, I want to be back on my page
with the book closed shut: BANG

A blank page and a poem are not proper opposites. A page blackened, so that nothing more can be written on it (not in black, anyway) would more fully oppose the invitation that is blankness.

What is the opposite of filling in the blank? Erasure? But creating blankness lacks the specificity of creating some thing, unless you create just anything -- but once created, anything becomes some particular thing and begins to imagine it is inevitable and immortal and isn't sure YOU really exist.

Whereas blankness is general and always only blankness. Though a specialist in blankness (a blankologist?) could tell one blank page from another, and when humans make nothing of things, they make rubble,

very variegated stuff, no ruin like any other. To make REAL nothing, a tank must fire, not blanks, but blankness. It takes a blankness to make a blankness.

We are told that nothing can come of nothing. True, nothing can come ONLY of nothing.

Note: Most of the means we typically use when we attempt to make nothing of things or people do not make "nothing", but a random profusion of things, particles, disordered energies, shattered bodies, etc. The problems we attempt to eradicate by such means do not become nothing, but persist in ever more difficult to confront forms (for example, the responsible citizens who, because they make trouble for those who would be in control, are persecuted and become "freedom fighters," who, in turn, are destroyed and become martyrs to inspire others or who are turned into masses of impoverished, diseased bodies or insane black-holes that exude only hatred -- whose contagion threatens ANY order, etc.

A bullet (a "something") can't make nothing. To make nothing, fire...nothingness. "Nothing can come of nothing", said someone (the fool?) in King Lear.

The apparent sameness of rubble
is the mind's giving up on so much variation,
like the sameness among a billion snowflakes,
each (seen for itself) unique. but who,
in a blizzard (vast emblem of blankness)
sees a single snowflake, or amid rubble
after battle, sees or wants to see
the unique shapes of bits of debris
that could turn out to have been the wall
of one's bathroom, that spot made by the blood
of one's child, that rag...a torn sock?

No, it's best to keep things homogeneous,
ground or sifted fine,
like sausage or cremation ashes,
no half-way destruction allowed. What's gone
is gone, we prefer to think,
though there may be dreams.

But in dreams, what's gone
returns intact, unless alloyed by the unwanted
distinctions among bits of rubble.

This is too confusing. All these ideas,
all these poems are too much alike.
I can't tell them apart.
Are the good ideas winning?

Note: Don't you, too (assuming you enjoy poetry) have days where all poems seem to be the same poem, and that poem one you've heard too many times before? As if, listening to the radio, you can't tune out the hum of the carrier wave to distinguish the commercials from the news (not that the news is any less subsidized by vested interests...).

It's a poet's job to make connections
(me to you; blank to black, thing to no thing),
so he puts things down on the blank page,
where he can connect them up (islands
becoming continents). But why bother?
What could connect more fully
than blankness to blankness,
one blank page (in our minds)
not the brother, but the SELF
of another? Can you tell this blank page
(or the blank page it once was)
from the next?

But that's too much connection, too easy.
Where's the game in making nothing
of nothing, linking absence to absence?
I am not here. You are not here.
Can you distinguish your absence
from mine?

(Although I like to think I could tell
a disembodied asshole from a
disempastried donut hole from a
hole in the ground. Is this a groundless
assumption?)

We write to interpose barriers. Blank
is NOT black, so can be *discovered* to be
its kin. Isn't that the crux of every melodrama?
"Luke, I am your father." And the word was
light, and the darkness knew Him not.
"Oh well, there's always tomorrow" --
another blank page. (Or as the lascivious lady
muses amid the guilt of her hotel room,
"Another day, another page
boy!")

Note: And perhaps you've noticed that ending a rather profound or profound-sounding ramble with a silly play on words (page, pageboy) is another failed attempt to make nothing.

In the last stanza above, "Luke, I am your father" is a line from the movie The Empire Strikes Back, second of the Star Wars Trilogy, spoken by arch-villain Darth Vader to the hero, Luke Skywalker. The stanza moves from there to the Gospel of John to the close of Gone With the Wind. How the stanza does this, I don't know. I'm just the magician's assistant.

To be or not to be, that is the question
every blank page asks every writer.
And the decision IS...(tada!)
TO BE! Or not to be? **MAYBE**
to be, just maybe. It all depends
on whether I want to suffer, nobly,
the slings and arrows of critics
(including long-ago critics who now view
my work with my own eyes and populate
my own voice).

There's also the decision to become.
Fish in an ocean are almost the ocean,
shaped to its pressures, moving with its
motions, a comfortable going-with-the-flow.
Dare they evolve, replace fins with arms,
raise their hands to the stars, thus,
taking up arms against a sea of troubles?

I make such puns to attract critics, like ants
to honey or mutts to assholes: It's refreshing
to find critics of my work who aren't
me...yet. (I spent years in grad school
absorbing critics and millennia being them.)

Also, I mess around to relax.
It's hard work making connections among
the words and ideas on a page, connections
that are striking enough to distract you
from the obvious connection: that they are on
the same page. Perhaps this, as much as clarity,
is why we want our poems in print:
to separate the letters, joined in our long-hand
scrawls, where connection is efficient:
A pen is a heavy tool to lift between
each letter. This could explain why so many
of the most prolific writers prefer
large words.

But I apologize for mixing possible profundities
with trivial jokes. I'm sorry. There --
I hope we're back on the same page now.

Note: The last lines of stanza one, above, suggest that when I view my work critically, I am sort of possessed by the views of critics past (including parents and teachers, as well as long-dead literary lions). Or perhaps I was some of those critics in a past life? The "slings and arrows" and "arms against a sea of troubles" are fragments from Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy.

Speaking of slings and arrows,
is it a coincidence that a sling
(to sling meaning to throw) supports a cast
(to cast meaning to throw), for example
on a broken arm? My dictionary is not
conclusive, but apparently sling
and cast (two dour Scandinavians, both
fatalists) meet by chance:

A sling is a loop of cloth or other
flexible stuff used to hurl a stone.
It resembles the hanging loop of cloth
used to support a broken arm (but not,
one hopes, to hurl it).

Thus a sling supports a cast. One throws
(casts) metal (or the plaster of a cast)
into a mold. Also the animal who throws off
his skin (the shape of himself, like a mold)
is said to cast it (only molting, not molten).

(At least once each lifetime, we cast off
the body itself, casting off, indeed,
as a ship is unanchored from land.
The bodies, thrown with throes, go still,
are thrown away. Myths tell of thrown-off souls,
nearing a throne. Or slinking back to find
another body -- another blank sheet --
to articulate and throw away.)

Thus this shape of one's arm (soon, one hopes,
to be thrown off) is a cast. And so
my broken arm (from battling too many
seas of trouble or from tripping on a throw
rug) is held in position by a throw
supported by a throw, strange supports
for what can no longer throw.

But no stranger than bolts (arrows);
for what is bolted down
cannot bolt (though bolted food
can boomerang, another primitive weapon).

Note: I call sling and cast "two Scandinavians" because of their Norse derivations. "Thrawn", says my dictionary (and yours too, you lazy reader!) is Scottish dialect for "thrown", but has come to mean "crooked, twisted" or "perverse". (Why must they bring verse into it?) In the last stanza, bolt means "arrow", then "eaten rapidly" (bolted down), then "run away". The boomerang is that bolted food may be vomited up – a VERY primitive weapon, even more so than the boomerang itself.

A slingshot hurls a single stone.
A giant sling could be designed
to hold and hurl a thousand stones at once,
thus supporting a cast of thousands
(all on set for the next great shot,
then a break for lunch: Every modern drama
must include cast rations.)

To a serious poet like me, complex puns
are that undiscovered country from whose
bourne (boundary, I'll be bound, bounding
off the page) no traveler returns.

With puns I become deathless: What need
of death, if I can get lost in words? It's
as efficient a means to ditch all debts,
all responsibility to reader or page or
meaning.

And eventually I can be reborn, refreshed,
from the chaos into which I plunge
(O! The slippery slope of punning!)
where everything means everything else
(seemingly seamlessly, seamily unseemly) --

reborn, emerging molten, white-hot gold,
cooling to a form simple and true.
(Emerge? or be spat out? -- even chaos
gets sick of puns; hear blankness groan!)

(Really puns are how I tread water
while deciding which way to swim next.)

O where O where is the old pond,
the frog leaping in, the water sound.

Nausea (sea of now), wasted blankness, too late
not to be, and it is useless now to ask
not to have been. (I'm enjoying all this
pathos. Are you?)

Note: "Cast rations" (and you caught this, didn't you?) is also castrations, staples of Freudian-fraught dramas. "Bourn" or "bourne", as used in Hamlet's To-Be-Or-To-Be...NOT speech alluded to above, means (poetically) a domain or archaically, a limit or boundary. I guess the archaic would be yesterday's bourne, if you were bourne yesterday. Stanza three, above, suggests that we die because we think we need death (a solution to indebtedness, for example, a form of bankruptcy relief). Or we THINK we die because we think we need death. I do believe that – or perhaps I only think I need to believe that?

The frog-pond part refers to Basho's famed poem that is usually considered the beginning of the haiku, a form whose simplicity left no room for complex word play – one might think, wrongly. As death is even in Arcadia, so puns show up in haiku.

The puns are not my fault (say I?
Says the vanishing blankness?)
Shakespeare did it. I evoked him,
and he made me do it.

He, whoever he was, great
filler of blanknesses, himself
is blankness, an emblem of blankness,
fill in the blank: Will Shakespeare,
Bacon, Marlowe, Earl of Oxford.... Will
the real Will please stand up?
Or if Shakespeare is/was simply Shakespeare,
who was that?

Easier to say who he is than who he was.
And, except for a clutch of scholars,
who cares; ah, there's the blankness.

To find Shakespeare, read the plays:
The play's the thing wherein we'll catch
the conscience (that empty thing)
of the king -- who was only the distorted
image of the real king -- who was but
a ghost -- and ghosts, we like to think,
are blank sheets, which brings us back
to this page's recent past...

"O Page! Go find my nephew, Hamlet."
(Dark-Clouded Claudius to non-entity Osric.)
And the page runs to Hamlet's quarters
(something indecent about "ham" with "quarters").
Time to entertain the majesties
with a spot of fencing. The page goes
"BEEP!" And the rest is silence.

Note: More Hamlet: "Ah, there's the blankness" (referring to truths ignored by all but a few scholars) alludes to "Aye, there's the rub" ("to sleep, perchance to dream, aye...") – more from "tube he or not tube he" (aren't we all tubes with openings at top and bottom? And full of tubes -- veins, arteries, pipes for attachment to other tubes...). Stanzas 4 and 5 are also, obviously, all about Hamlet. Hamlet stages a play, hoping thereby to "catch the conscience of the king. Osric is the page sent by Claudius to invite Hamlet to his final duel (fencing – another form of boundary or bourne). Osric is a page. Pages beep, right? Hamlet's quarters – indecent because a hamlet would seem to be a small ham, and hams attach to hind-quarters (which support our head-quarters).

In Hamlet the poem returns us to blankness, much ado ending in "The rest is silence," followed by Horatio's "Why does the drum come hither" (Recruiters and rock stars use drums because of their "come-hither" appeal) and Fortinbras enters with drums and trumpets (distant cannon fire too). Some silence!

Poor Horatio. (Something has been rotten in Denmark, which has markedly increased the whore ratio. Enough puns. Puns, get thee to a none-airy.)

And yet it is -- all that clangor -- a kind of silence, a relief from self-agonizing sophistries and rich language, these having precipitated a fine crystalline concentrate of action, quick and furious, then a looming up on all sides, like shadow rising on stone walls as the sun falls below the windows, darkness softening the flung shapes of dead and dying and grieving; one voice, quiet, a little hurried, but calm, having found the readiness that is all, now content with the growing silence

that may as well be, after all, full of cannon thunder, drums, trumpets, (tiny tinny noises now almost lost in growing darkness or light)

and men strong in arms -- Fortinbras means that, though also strong in brass, you strumpet trumpets, blowing as hard for smiling assassins and foreign conquerors as for the true king, the one true thing that blankness (we like to think, especially we who think each blank page must have just THESE words, no other) requires of us.

Note: Yet more Hamlet. In my edition, Hamlet's "The rest is silent" is followed immediately by Horatio's question and a stage direction: "Enter Fortinbras with drums and trumpets". (Fortinbras is the invading king of Norway.) Earlier, when Hamlet tells Ophelia "Get thee to a nunnery," his words are cruel, since nunnery then had a second meaning,, "whorehouse". When I direct the puns to a none-airy, THAT pun is meant to suggest a domain of blankness (none), and fresh (airy, not stale) with its nothingness. (Though puns, too, have been called mere nothings. And I suppose anything a mirror can reflect is a mirror nothing.) (Perhaps, "Get thee to a punnery" is more appropriate.) I think the key words in Hamlet are "The readiness is all", expressed even more pungently in King Lear: "The ripeness is all." Some, relishing a spring morning, would have it that the allness is ripe.

Stop listening
to rain on the roof.
The blank page.

Yes, those pictures
are still on that wall.
The blank page.

Whatever is in
the refrigerator...still
the blank page.

The rain has stopped.
You've seen sunshine before.
The blank page.

Write something. OK,
the letter "T". Now what?
Maybe an "h". An "e"?

I've said "the" before.
This page is no good now.
Start a blank one.

The blank page.
The blank page.
The blank page.

Car noise. An airplane.
No bird sound, not even crows.
A blank page.

The blank page.
A voice leaps out.
Mind ripples.

Note: This series of haiku (more or less haiku – I always try to anticipate the “Good, but it’s not Perrier” school of haiku critics) concerns a poet’s attempts to cope with the blank page before him – letting distractions pull him from his efforts to write (which efforts are perhaps the real distractions from the writing itself) – rain sounds, pictures on the wall, desire to snack, etc., the page’s blankness becoming obsessive, and eventually becoming him, so that he, now blank, begins to fill up with what surrounds him, and now someone new, begins to speak on the page. Something like that. I know it’s a terrible thing to offer explanations, but it’s also fun. I like to explain, as long as I don’t HAVE to.

Uncle Claudius was a naughty poet:
He killed the King by pouring poison
in his ear. I want to be a good poet.
Here's a workshop I can take:

"Can every line in your poem stand
alone in terms of language/intensity?"
What's this? Must I write lines to write
poems? If so, why stop at lines?
I want each word, each character,
each serif, each comma to stand alone
in terms of language/intensity. I want
the blankness surrounding the words
to stand alone in terms of language/intensity.

(But I hope these lines and words and
so on -- and even the whole poems --
won't get lonely, standing alone
out there being intense. Can't my poems
talk to each other, to you, lean on
each other just a little, like voices
in a conversation? Even blank pages
want other blank pages to play with.
At least, as a child, I found it easy
to think so.)

Here's a workshop that promises "to kindle
or rekindle the keen sense of observation
so crucial to poetry." Would it make me
keen enough to distinguish one blank page
from another? I'm not sure I can tell
one poem from another or a poem from a
blank page. Am I speaking to someone
other than I? (Worse -- is it I speaking?)

Note: I wrote this one after browsing through a bunch of descriptions of poetry workshops offered at my local writers' center. As satire, this is unfair – knocking over straw men, taking lines out of context. Brief descriptions of poetry are bound to seem glib or pretentious or just dull, I guess. However, the two chosen here do represent two of my own pet peeves: To stress language/intensity and poems “standing alone” seems to me not wrong, but a mis-emphasis that leads to neglect of the poem's belonging to the domain of live communication, people talking to one another. You can amp up (or camp up?) intensity and aesthetic tightness without achieving communication. On the other hand, if you communicate well, the intensity will be there.

As for “keen sense of observation”, I don't doubt it's a good thing, but the stress on it as the end-all of poetry is a modern fad, no more basic than the 18th Century fad that rejected keen detailed observation in favor of witty abstract statement – as in Samuel Johnson's argument that it is not the job of a poet to “number the stripes of the tulip”. (Of course, both moderns and Age-of-reasoners include fine examples of keen observation and resounding abstract statement. The proper study of mankind is a man with a mole shaped like North Carolina on the tip of his nose.)

Another workshop: "Specific exercises
will free the imagination...celebrate
the force of our language...explore
formal considerations, stylistic choices...
moments when the poem catches its own
voice." Well meant, but why are such
dull things written? We must have
a surplus of blank pages!

I celebrate the force of language (Hooray!),
which probably does not mean fuck, shit,
and great green gobs of greasy grimy
gopher guts, but why not? Now this poem
will catch its own voice by the tail
(ouch!).

It is too easy to mock such things,
too hard to compete in silliness with the notion
of a poet, about to write a poem,
having his imagination do sit-ups and push-ups,
then exploring (with magnifying glass? safari?)
formal considerations, choosing a style,
searching for a voice -- where AAAARE you,
little voice? -- too easy to mock, so
why do I do it? (Because they never invite me
to run a workshop?)

Workshop: you work, earn money, then you shop.
Work, shop, work, shop, work, shop...
That's not all of life: You also use/eat/wear/
consume what you buy. So a more complete course
in poetry might be a work-shop-eat. Better yet,
a work-shop-eat-watch-tee-vee-fuck-sleep.
Would you like to attend my new poetry
workshopeatwatchteeveefucksleep?

(My spell checker says to hell with it.)

I will teach a Blank Page Workshop:

"The first thing I notice about your poem --
very well written, by the way -- is that
it makes black marks all over the page --
really no longer blank. On the other hand,
it does leave much of the page blank,
cutting the blankness into neat ornate shapes
like a cookie cutter."

"I like this poem, but if it were cut
to the bone (and all poetry must be
cut and cut and cut...and cut),
it would leave more of the page blank."

"It's wonderful
the way the
skinniness
of your poem
brings out the
spacious blankness
to the right
of the page,
a vastness
in which the
soul may
luxuriate,
hearing your
distant
tiny
tenuous
lines from
afar,
a
trickle
of bird sound
in the
mist-muffled silence
of early
morning."

Why a workshop? How about a poetry
PLAY shop? Or we could get our
kinkier erotic poems unbent
in a bawdy shop.

Since workshops specialize in cutting
(critics secretly being in the service
of silence, considering that all writing
soils the sacred innocence of the
blank page), we should have poetry work-
CHOPS (less nutritious than pork chops,
but with hisses sweeter than swine.)

Too many poets have been taught
to mistake themselves for surgeons.
Poetry is not brain surgery. (It's more like
rocket science, since it is argued
that an intense enough flame
beneath a poem will make it go
from here to there.)

All this cutting to the bone gives us
less fatty tissue, but too much prosthetic
poetry (where the scalpels have slipped) --
handy, though, to be able to unscrew
one's passions each night, leave one's set
of fresh new voices to be rejuvenated
in a glass of water on the bedside table.

Pardon (says a sonnet, shedding a sonnet tear) --
Pardon my wooden feet -- or have they just
gone to sleep?

Notes: Stanza two above suggests that critics are defenders of silence (and blankness of pages), since many, failed writers themselves, operate on the assumption that most poetry should never have been written. (Whoops! Sometimes I think they're right. On the other hand, most readers think that most annotations to poems should never have been written.)

Apart from the general slash and burn tactics of some critics, editors and reviewers, there's the modern dogma of criticism (a dogma that would wipe out much of the work of, for example, Shakespeare, Melville, Faulkner and other artists who favor lavishness, richness, excess) that a poet should never use two words where one will do, and, it is implied, never use one word where none will do. Thus, at every poetry workshop, one hears first from the helpful critic who says, "I think this poem has wonderful possibilities, but it could use trimming – to about one third its length" (which is the critics version of the doctor's "take two aspirin and call me in the morning"). The worst thing about such critics is that often they're RIGHT! (All my fine phrases must go? All my little ones, in one fell swoop!)

The phrase "fresh new voices" in stanza 4 is a critical platitude. Every new author who follows the latest critical fads (and thus sounds exactly like every other author who follows those fads) is hailed by reviewers as a "fresh, new, strong, authoritative voice". (Adjectives may vary, but inevitably include "fresh"; but with time, all these freshmen/women begin to sound sophomoric.) Where scalpels slip (stanza 4) too much is cut (or never written, since we write with our internal censors set to anticipate the critics of the day), so we have, for example, poems that are prosthetic, using passionate words as a substitute for passion (almost a coded thing, what I call "blood-and-bone" poetry), sonnets with

wooden feet, etc. (But MY voice will always be fresh – says one of my voices.)

Poetry workchops.
Woe? Try porkchops.
(In the best of all possible worlds,
Work and pork would rhyme.)
(I do think it good advice to Poe:
Try workchops. Cut that long-winded Raven
to the bone. Quoth Poe, creepily –
for Edgar Allen is ever edging along --
“Nevermore”.)

Poetry -- the other chicken. Not
a frivolous thought. Every edible meat,
however esoteric (sauteed rattlesnake slices,
fried grasshoppers) is said to "taste like
chicken," and everything that's poetry,
however esoteric (Oedipal meat), sounds
like poetry, damn it, I get really tired

of poetry sounding like poetry. Sometimes
even before I begin to write, already
the blank page sounds like poetry,
and anything I can think of to write,
to make the blankness stop sounding like poetry,
already sounds like poetry.

If it were chicken, I could refuse to eat.
Maybe if I stop writing long enough,
the blank pages will again be merely
(and mirrorly) blank. (Does that sound
like poetry to you?)

Note: Line two (“Woe? Try porkchops”) is line one (“poetry workshops”) with the letters “p” and “w” exchanged. And later in that stanza “Poe: Try workchops” is, again, a play on “Poetry workchops.” Though Poe’s “Raven” is more a ham than a porkchop. (We can loin from him.) Stanza two compares edible meat to Oedipal meat, since one of the ways poetry was long expected to sound was Freudian – or at least many critics used to find value in a poem only after locating its Freudian implications. Though poets are urged to trim the fat, pork belongs in a wok shop.

In stanza one: Poe is creepy, and creepy suggests edging along, and edging suggests Edgar – almost Edger. At least these things were suggested to suggestible me. And the author of as long-winded a work as “The Raven” is not likely to be eager to cut his work to the bone. He wants lots of bits of reeking flesh attached.

In the last stanza, I say the blank pages will be merely “and mirrorly” blank because, hey, you can always make something out of “mirror” and because I like the pun (on “merely” because mirrors are so mere, so trivially profound, so glib in their depth, and also because like meres [“mere” being an archaic word for “pond”], they reflect, and finally because if I stop writing long enough, I, too, will be blank, so that the pages mirror me with their blankness as they mirror my clutter with their clutter. If that doesn’t suffice you, I can invent a dozen more justifications for “mirrorly”.)

The scornful critic says "a waste of paper"
or "a waste of trees," but what of the waste
of blankness? Cannot blankness be wasted?
Is it too abundant to count the loss?
Are all our voices, all our poems, stories,
groans, ads, speeches, horn-honkings, farts,
lectures, motors, breathing, throbbing,
ear-splitting amplifiers, artillery barrages,
drums and trumpets -- are all these no threat
to endless silence?

And yet, a silence into which a single
"Hello" has dropped (spreading circles
on silence) is no longer nor will ever
again be absolutely silent, everywhere
devoid of any slightest reverb
of that hello, nor does the question arise
whether anyone remains to hear,

for if no one is here to hear,
silence (not unheard) would not be silence,
would it? And if no one were there
to hear, would not a hello create
someone to receive it? Children give dolls
life enough to receive their lonely hellos;
what we create to hear our prayers
becomes as real to us as you, reader,
are to me now, writing these words.

Before the hello, was there silence?
How would we know it in the absence
of hello? Silence is an unanswered hello.

What other trap is there than waiting
for an answer? Looking at a blank page,
I imagine a question
(What should I say here?
To be or not to be?)
and wait for an answer,

and there I am
in the forever we call
writer's block and some call
hell.

Note: The words "What other trap is there than waiting for an answer?" paraphrase a killer sentence I found in a book called Dianetics 55 by L. Ron Hubbard. Since that sentence gains immensely from what precedes and follows it in that book, I won't quote it here, but invite you find the book in library or on the web, and read the whole thing.

What answers are YOU waiting for?
Have you ever spoken or written to someone
who died without having answered?
Have you ever asked a vital question
("Do you love me?" "Can I PLEASE
go to the movies with Danny?") that was
never answered or -- the same thing --
answered with a non-answer ("I find you...
fascinating," "Don't bother me with that
now! Do you have any idea how much I have
to do around here? The meals, the clean
clothes you wear, keeping this house, that YOU
turn into a filthy pigsty, clean -- did you
track that into the living room! -- and do I get
any help from you or your father?...") or a printed
rejection slip (Thank you for considering us,
but alas...);

or you said "Hi" to someone who walked past,
ignoring or not having heard -- you never
found out which, and now it would be silly
to ask. And you've been waiting so long
for so many answers, all this waiting
congealing into your private notion of Heaven,
where all will be answered or obliterated

(for an answer is simply a way to make
a question vanish, which is why nothing-at-all,
oblivion, nirvana are popular notions of Heaven),
and you may become starved for answers, so that any
are welcome, even the most vicious irresistible:

"What is the source of all this misery?"
In the long absence of answers,
any answer seems better than none, even,
"The Jews are responsible for our misery" or
"You have a chemical imbalance in your brain."

(Another clumsy chemical just slipped
and fell from tight-rope wire to safety net.
Our poor brains, full of chemicals that
trip over their own feet!)

How much of your attention has been snagged
on these blanknesses? Where, in your life,
are you trapped, unable to move forward or back?

If you can find the questions, you can, yourself,
answer them. Fill in the blank:
Say anything.

Perhaps we are all critics, infatuated
with the blankness, our excuse to create nothing
while waiting for the blank page to answer us.

To be trapped is to be free of responsibility,
for one cannot help oneself. So where there is
no blank page, we create one; for example,
you can create gaps on this page ("page gap" --
a palindrome); you can white out my ink

as you read, degrade my cleverest reasoning
to footling flippancy, set all my clarifying crinoid
asterisks afloat (feathery schools of comatulids,
unanchored to footnotes), reduce my most
delicate qualifications -- but is this qualification?
No, it is epanorthosis! -- reducing them
to a uniform mush.

The words are there, you've just read them, and yet
I'm sure that if you trouble yourself to look up
in a reasonably complete dictionary the words
(not mere music after all) "footling," "crinoid,"
"comatulid" and "epanorthosis," you will
discover on this page words, perhaps entire
sentences, that weren't there on first reading;

and some unexpected apparitions may greet you
if you study and apply each definition of, for example,
"of" and "to".

You, reader, can become a threat to pandemic
blankness.

Note: I wrote that more than a year ago – and I've forgotten what "epanorthosis" means. Words – use 'em or lose 'em. Anyhow, for those allergic to dictionaries (but you wouldn't be here with me if you were), "footling" means "trifling", "silly and unimportant". "Crinoid" means "lily-like" and also designates small, flower-shaped marine animals. A "comatulid" is a "free-swimming animal related to the starfish," and means, literally, "having hair neatly curled". "Epanorthosis" is not an inflammation of the north pan. It is, rather, the vehement substitution of one word (the correct or more exact word) for a preceding word, as, for example, in stanza 3, above, where I create an epanorthosis by substituting "epanorthosis" for "qualification".

But do check your dictionary. The derivation of "footling" is worth your trouble.

That was a cheap trick and a prosy one at that.
The blankness of reading past words not grasped
is a cumulative thing, as we gloze over
tens of thousands of words, missing a sense here,
construing a reasonable one there (to save time,
imagining a likely meaning that almost fits
the context), planning to look that one up
later, having a vague notion of what a word
must mean, simply never having learned that
putting the window to is closing it, that
the depot on the page is the deepoe on the tongue,
that when she said she got into the shower
with her old man, she didn't mean her father --

Oh we pile up volumes of blankness
over the years, enough to swallow entire
subjects. The ones you can't deal with
at all, or in which you can recite the rules,
but not produce the results -- these subjects
are full of words you could never define.

So much depends on what "is" is (and if
whatever is is right) and whether
a blowjob is sex -- and what WAS meant
by impeachment? Was he impeached when Congress
held impeachment hearings? Or would impeachment
have occurred only if the Senate had voted for it?
I prefer to think it would require
imprisoning him in a large, juicy peach.
(Probably he felt that way with Monica.)

But that's play, most fun if we understand
the toys. It's more fun to play soccer
with your big sister's favorite doll
if you know it's supposed to be a doll.

[Since we've raised the question of what "is" is,
I'd like to point out that William Jefferson
Clinton, like Alexander Pope, managed to use
the letters "is" only twice in a row. Lame.
I've put them in a sentence that makes sense
and contains the letters "is" eleven times
in a row: Here's the buildup: Isis, confused,
having just discovered that she is her own
sister-in-law (being both wife and sister to Osiris),
says to herself (get ready, here it comes!):
"Whatever Isis is, Isis is I, Sis, is Isis not?"

Removing punctuation, upper case and changing nothing else
but the positions of blank spaces between words --
blank spaces count! -- this gives us:
Whatever is not?]

Note: A childhood friend of mine, proud of his vocabulary, was embarrassed one day, asked to read aloud in school, when he pronounced the “t” in “depot” and learned for the first time how the word he’d known as “depoe” was actually spelled. (As a child, I heard it as “the deeple” – rhymes with steeple.)

For more data on the effect of misunderstood words and symbols upon literacy, intelligence and ability, check out:

<http://www.studytechnology.org/10-barr.htm>

Since the words most commonly misunderstood or poorly understood are small common words like “of” and “to” (each with about 30 distinct definitions), well may one ask what “is” is. That leads me to Clinton because when questioned about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, he answered one with a double “is” – something like “That depends on what ‘is’ is.” (The question implied his affair with Monica was current -- something like “Is it true that you had an affair with Monica Lewinski?” to which Clinton replied, “That depends on what ‘is’ is”, meaning, apparently, that he HAD had Lewinski, but that was old news now. Or perhaps he meant that he wasn’t having an affair with her at that moment, but was answering stupid questions and hadn’t touched Lewinski for hours.)

Alexander Pope’s famous double “is” is from his “Essay on Man”: “Whatever is is right,” the idea that Voltaire skewered in Candide, though I vaguely recall that Voltaire was rejecting Leibniz’s expression of that thought, not Pope’s (inspired by Leibniz).

One could skip the Isis story and simply go with “Whatever “is” is, “is” is “is”, is “is” not?” and extend that (to any number of repetitions by repeating the pattern as follows (for example): ‘Whatever “is is” is, “is is” is “is is”, is “Is is” not?’ But the I find the story of Isis more interesting. (Isis is a sure bet. [That is, ices are a sherbet.]

Is is? Si si! Much ado, all this, about nothing.
Ado you do? "Do you take this man..." "Ado!"
Cock-ado: An interrupted rooster or
a definition of sex or a cockatoo
with a head cold.

What else should much ado be about
if not nothing? Writer and reader dance
a dance *a deux*, then part (adieu),
leaving words on pages, tattered old books,
moldy paper too soiled and flimsy to use
as toilet paper, much adoodoo. And yet

"*Du, Du, liegst mir im Herzen*" --
Thou, Thou art a weight in my
heart, O Dynamic Du, intimate form of you --
the thou of you, dearest dear, a dear, a doe,
a female deer....

Speaking of much ado about nothing, "*a dieu*"
means "to God", as, in parting, I commend you
to God, good-bye, God be with ye.
God in reverse is dog, who leaves behind
a doodoo, a doggy *adieu*; God being
no thing, not form, space, matter, energy, time,
nor any thing, for there is much nothing
about a *Dieu*, perfect in non-being, like,
as was earlier noted (made not?), a goddess, for
whatever Isis is is right.

Note: Here's where most of my readers have left me. Those who enjoyed this barrage of word-play won't need much more annotation – but will get it anyway. I'm particularly proud of the move from "much ado about nothing" to "much nothing about adieu" (whether in the sense of much nothing about God or much nothing about farewell (Not that God is nothing, but that God is no thing.)

Note: The mystic's prayer: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt, resolve into a dieu."

If God is nothing, and also feminine, God may be nothing like a dame.

Even filled with words, this page retains
the blankness of one mirror facing another
across an empty barbershop. I mirror you,
and you mirror me, an infinite regress,
losing itself in repetitions with or without
fractal variations, as when, looking into
a lover's eyes, one sees (still thinking
oneself one) their gleam resolve into
a tiny reflection of one's own face, and
in that reflection sees or imagines one sees
one's own reflected eyes reflecting
her face, whose eyes...but here vertigo
intervenes, for one knows not vertigo
from here.

I must create you to speak to you,
for you are not here as I write
these words -- unless I put you here.

[Most of the candidates for hereness
are not here and have been gone
since I started punning, if not before,
and so, dear reader, dear toy to which
I've given a name and a personality,
dear imaginary lion whom I address
as I perch upon my childhood toilet -- and so
I must create you, hoping that your
you-ness attracts a co-creator
to become it, to receive these words.]

You must create me in order to hear me,
for I am not with you to speak them
as you read. Am I serious? Joking?
Ink can't joke, can it? Ink can't sing
an ancient incantation.

(Well, some type fonts are silly, some
as solemn as a procession of priests.)

But mostly I am your creation.
It's all your fault. Now don't ask
for a share of my royalties. You've created me
greedy. (I wish my royalties were commoner.)

I have nothing to say. The mirror has been
drained of reflection. It is a glass half empty.
And yet, mirrorly we roll along,
role after role, playing.

Note: Line 6: A repetition with variations can be as dizzying as a mirroring, as in the chaotic near-repetitions chaos theory's finds in coastlines and cloud edges and in the geometrical patterns called "fractals".

What is flat and white (the page
not yet trodden), seems safe. What is black
and deep may contain any monster
we can imagine -- something able to
reach out with hooks, claws, beams
and pull us into the blackness,
never again to be seen, never again
to see.

The blank page is wide open, nothing
up its sleeve, no sleeves, baring all.
It is flat (run your thumb over it)
and thin (look at it edgewise,
compressed between two fingertips,
thinner than a finger nail, too sharp
to dare run thumb over paper's edge) --

no room here for lumpy things to lurk,
white whales, for example, though
ghosts are pretty thin. The page is flat,
and monsters and men fall over the end
of the page.

None of this is rational: A blank page
could be poisonous to the touch, loaded
with anthrax spores, magically cursed,
able to release the voices of the dead
or unborn to haunt us; the point is,
the illusion: a clean, well-lighted space,
no nooks, no crannies, no shadows
hiding spiders or dust bunnies. Here,
we are in control.

But once blackness enters
with spurious depth (see how the letters seem
to rise up off the page -- even these
slender skeins of black), who knows
what may learn to lurk in pages?

Note: Lines 1 and 2: "The pages not yet trodden" perhaps alludes to Frost's poem about the two diverging paths and choosing the one less traveled. A choice of blanknesses.

Re last stanza and lurkers in blankness, even the author, years later, may lurk among the footnotes, like an artist in disguise visiting the museum to see how people are reacting to his work.

We start with this thin illusion of safety
(thin and shiny is safe? What of ice? Knife
blades? Paper cuts? Hey, don't mess with
my dichotomies; a blank page is harmless,
OK? Ok.), then add these dark squiggles,

an attempt to tame darkness and depth
by taking great care to put on the page
precisely the one thing, the inevitable thing
that must be said -- the poem.

Just a small, controllable trickle of darkness,
following a narrow course, confined, dammed
to be released in spurts to produce
measured amounts of dark energy, our new friend,
blackness.

We have alphabets that we've made our own
in school by singing them to a friendly tune:
"ABCDEFGH, Now I learn my ABCs, HIJK-elemenopee...."
We have words, each carefully categorized
and explained in dictionaries full of
dry, brittle bits of ancient darkness,
museums for words, no harm in those fossils now.
We have grammar and syntax, fonts neatly
serifed, lines of type, straight left margins,

nothing here to remind us of the scream
of someone under torture or a child's laughter,

as, letter by letter, we tame the darkness,
ending each sentence with a tiny round dot --
what could hide in such a tiny dot? How
could a poem make a page dangerous?
How could there be anything in a poem?
Where would it fit?

Note: To make it safer, we often tame blankness with blue or red or green or brown ink. Using black ink, however delicately, is risky, but I do it for you, reader.

Re the word "serifed" at the end of stanza 4: "Seri" is a preface meaning "silk", so a serifed letter is a letter that has been fed a diet of silk, and that's how we do it, reader! That's the secret of poetry. Silk-fed fonts go down as smooth as milk-fed veal.

And yet, having learned language,
we have learned to be hurt by language.
(The scream wants to be heard.)
Having learned to write, we have learned
to hurt and be hurt with and by words
on a page, even gentle words, like "Dear
John" (worse than "Greetings" from our
rulers). Politicians rob us "for our
children and our children's children."
(Our children having children? The fruits
of political child abuse?)

And poets can befuddle us, anger us, bore us,
inflame us, make us weep. Even the blandest
begin to think writing a dangerous activity
when, reading the reviewers and learning that
their metric rhymes are fascist in form,
their sentimentality is deadly, their poetry
a plague and, more simply, they have somehow
broken the rules of a culture by being there
(plain to see on the page) and communicating.

You, poet, can be ridiculed, feel that your poems
are being held away from you and smirked at,
as in school, kids snatched your new cap
and kept it beyond your reach.

Grotesque little things, these poems
in the hands of sneerers. You can feel betrayed,
as when the one assumed to return your love
tells you you've always been a fool;
it was NEVER good. So you feel the badness
of your poetry being shoved in your face.
You can't push it away, because you've
entrusted it to others, who now have
the power to use your own words against you
(in a court of taste).

Or you write, are published and...silence.
Did anyone notice? Was anyone between
the two mirrors to halt the otherwise endless
echoes? "It's only the wind in the trees."

In your head, yelling full blast, you put "SCREAM!"
and "FUCK!" on the page; they lie there,
silent. No one opens the book. An entire forest
crashes on this page. No one is here to hear.

Note: Stanza 1: The words "Dear John" hurt because they begin "Dear John" letters, indicating letters where the girl tells her guy in the foxhole that she's just married someone else. Letters from the draft board ordering you to report to duty used to begin with "Greetings". Rejection letters from editors begin with...ah, too painful to recall!

The poet begins to feel the blank page
is dangerous because of what he may say
or fail to say, what the most tenuous thread
of blackness may contain or fail to contain,
what unintended hidden monsters may be unleashed,
what cherished life may languish on unturned pages
or be lost to inattentive winds.

The poet begins to stare at the blankness
and ask himself, "What, after all, do I have
to say?" Then he waits for an answer,
for surely the blank page -- as full of danger
as he knows it to be (and danger implies
power, and power implies knowledge)
must hold answers. The poet tries
various solutions -- methods, not of communicating
via writing, but of prodding the page
for answers: He tries to write any old thing,
keep the pen moving, riff on nonsense words,

anything to "get the juices flowing." He tries
"Automatic writing," guided by "the spirits" or
the "Unconscious". He tries to be a hunter,
tracking down the feral poem. He tries to be
exquisite, releasing words to the page
one by one after rolling each on the tongue
like a wine taster.

The more solutions he attempts, the more solid
and impervious becomes the blankness of the page.
He can no longer see or imagine you, Dear Reader,
on the other side (and he grows as obscure to you).
He forgets to put you there to be talked to:

"Don't bother me, reader -- I have this blank page
to deal with." And no longer creating a reader,
he has no reader, his words piling up
unread, filling his head with their ghostly
moans, the rising cost of unsold inventory.
The blank page stares at him, as implacable
as an IRS accountant.

What a shock, the first time,
when no one notices (and if Mom says
the poems are wonderful; that almost
makes it worse). Because, after all,
the poems are in print. They look
official. They are in black and white,
each character correctly curlicued,
each comma a perfect black ball with a
perfect half-crescent tail (a comma comet).

It must be true: It's printed in a book.
Behold, the blankness of the page
has been broken up into well-marked lots
for the housing of public minds, a
wilderness tamed and landscaped. People
can live in these words; they have gardens,
hot and cold running ideas, space (see
all this space) -- but where, Oh where
are all the people to live in these words?
Where are the hands to turn these crisp pages,
the fingertips to caress these neat lines,

the eyes to slip into these I's and you's,
the you's the poet uses to show you
that you are already here -- but where?
Where are you? Where am I without you?

These poor, vacant pronouns, like decoy ducks,
rock gently on the water as I wait,
watching distant schools of you fly past
far overhead. I'm alone here with my
gaily painted wooden pronouns:

YOU ARE HERE!

A critic says -- well, it's less what he says
than how: That presumed certainty that
your words have been weighed in the only balance
there is and found wanting. It's not only
that a verdict has been rendered (whether
harsh or gentle); it's that now the poet
has the idea that a verdict CAN be rendered,
and that such a verdict is the aim of a poem,

that a poem is not a communication,
but a case to be submitted to a court,
where it will receive a final verdict
from a critic or some vague final reckoning
with time.

Every day a man walks to work, saying "hello"
to people he recognizes. They smile, say "hi,
how's it going?" One day he says "hello"
to someone who looks away or to an old friend
who says, "Go to hell," then walks quickly
away. Our helloer never learns why. He becomes
careful about saying hello. Each time he says it,
he braces himself, awaiting a verdict
from the blank face that has not yet found
its smile. And now the poet, facing the blank page,
thinks of something to say, and before he can
write it down, the blank page stares at him,
about to render a verdict.

No critics, none, no response at all.
A few books sold to friends and family,
applause at a few readings, but no louder
than for the other readers (whom he'd
never heard of before and whose names,
already, he's forgotten, their books,
politely traded for his, shelved or boxed,
unread or glanced through out of a cursory
sense of duty). The curse of polite applause,
the usual response, which is no response at all.

No the blank page is not blank, but indifferent,
busy with other matters of its own.
The poet feels he must shock the page,
tickle it, somehow attract its attention.
The poet is a middle child, the page
a distracted parent. There is no reader there.
The poet must kidnap a reader and force him
to be there or seize the page and force it
to be the reader.

It is a noisy world. The poet must impinge.
Anything to create an effect. But everything
the poet can think of to do is just more ink
on a blank page. Nothing, no shape of ink,
no contortion of words, seems enough,
all writing merely the reduction of mental
thunder and lightning to inky silence.
Why bother the blank page?

The book gets critical raves.
People line up after each reading
to buy copies ("...and another
for my sister -- she'll love the one about..."),
invitations, success (more wine and cheese
than drugs, sex and fame, this is just poetry).

But the blank page holds new dangers,
for even success is a verdict. What can be ruled
"a fresh new voice" can become "stale and lifeless,
disappointing." And if the praise
is fulsome enough, the blank page delights
in ironic greetings: "Well, if it isn't
the great poet himself! Quick, transmute me,
make me golden."

The poet must pause then to run each idea
past the friendly critics, who now
haunt him and threaten to become him.
But unless the certainties of critics
(for or against) have blinded the poet
to the simpler presence of readers,
success makes the blank page easier
to confront and fill up with words,

not that blankness is kinder, but that
it has been replaced by transparency,
with readers on the other side, people
to talk to who always smile
and reply to the poet's hellos.
He writes among friends.

In a way, it really doesn't matter
what you put on the page, because
the poem that finds readers is,
in the long run, the poem that
makes it possible for you to put
more words on the page.

Each word makes the blankness
of pages more or less solid,
more or less resistive to your words.
If, after filling one page, you can fill
another, you must have said something
to someone. If the pages get easier
and easier to fill, you are doing
something right. If the blankness
increasingly stares at you and dares you
to write a word or sneers or pretends
to ignore -- it is your ability
to write words on that blankness
and continue to write words
on that blankness -- not what you say,
but the saying, the implicit reach
of life to life, the hello in even
the grimmest good-byes; the ability
and the act -- that makes you...

what does it make you? A writer?
An idiot savant? Alive? Yes, alive.

It isn't just a matter of reaching readers,
but of reaching them with life, not death.
Hitler wrote MEIN KAMPF in furious spurts.
The result? A brief flare of black noise
followed by the long silence of Europe.

So there is the easy filling up of the page
with words that -- oh, but this is making
the sun go round the earth, awkward
for computation. But, of course,
it matters what we say, not because
pages full of words can instigate
burning books in heaps
and set the sources of words to erasing

each other, but because what am I
trying to do here? I'm trying to create
an effect on you (what else is any game
for?), and the greatest effect I can create
is to inspire you to create effects
on others, who, in turn, create creation
in others and so on *ad infinitum*.

I might also get you to blow up
the earth, our playing field, a big bang,
a dandy effect (won't Mom be surprised!),
leading to no game, no players, no effects,
no possibility of creation. Did I then
fill blankness? Is anyone there? (I mean
right now, is anyone there?)

Note: Ideas very familiar to me may be obscure enough to others to slip off the page unnoticed. The point is that we love to create effects, and, more basic than goodness or badness of effects, apparently, is a yearning to create BIG effects (on others, on oneself if one despairs of reaching others...), but the most evil effects we create impede future creation by self or others (for example, wiping out a city or a planet or a single person), so that, without otherwise broaching the subject of ethics, we can conceive of a positive creative act creating a bigger effect than a destructive act, even though no visible explosion results, since the creative act (if not overwhelming) inspires others to create, and their creations inspire yet others, and so forth, so that the total effect (if it can ever be totaled up) exceeds, accumulated over the millennia, the destructive effect of blowing up a planet.

Or so a poet who tries not to step on ants would probably prefer to believe.

But let the sun orbit the earth.
Hitler wrote busily away (in his prison cell,
making space for himself by writing a book
that surrounded his millions of readers
with the ideas that confined him,
turning all of Europe into his cell.

He filled blank pages with his scrawl
as a spider elaborates his web, filled
blank faces with the fire of his rhetoric.

The result: Millions of voices, past,
present and future, were silenced,
and perhaps the burning of books
made blank the pages that had been full.

Blankness (shiny, remember) flared up,
leaving a smudge of black ash --
remains of words? Or did the words rise
from the flames and ascend? Long ago,
a revered Rabbi, watching his fellow scholars
immolated on a pile of Torahs,
said that as they burned, he saw the words
rise like sparks from the burning scrolls
and ascend to Heaven.

An imp that may be me wonders if these words
reassembled themselves to become
the credits of movies like STAR WARS
that zoom toward us or away, out of
or toward far distant galaxies.

Surely our words are out there.
I suspect, long after they've ceased to adhere
to our passions and ideas, they become
all these flitting things, so fatally drawn
to our candle flames and light bulbs.

Note to movie buffs: The Star Wars credits moved one way (towards us?); and soon after, the first Superman movie had its credits moving the other way (away from us?), both against a star-scape to the music of John Williams. I began to think of a future space ship encountering what seems at first to be an asteroid field, then, just before the fatal collision, the crew realizing that they've run into a bunch of old movie credits, long lost in space. (The ship collides with "Princess Leia's third hair-dresser:...".)

Probably ghosts of words ascended from Nazi book-burnings or Roman Torah/martyr burnings would not damage a space ship, only cause mysterious and disturbing moods among the crew.)

Criticism, however "constructive", arms
and cocks the blank page; the poet
must now produce at gun point.
Safest for a poet to be a moving target:
He must expose his poems, if they are to be
"discovered", but by the time he's been
discovered, the poet should be someone and

somewhere else. And those who read the words
of this someone else will reread earlier works
to discover that he had always been
someone else -- but by then he will be
yet another someone, always a step ahead
of what can be discovered, thus,
neither scathed by pans, nor sticky with honeyed
raves directed at someone he no longer is,

not even stymied by the silence
of never having been discovered at all,
each blank page new, unvoiced
until he gives it voice, fresh as morning
to one who rises, a new man, not trailing
mortgages, resentments and a million old
maybes, along with all the decisions ever made
to solve those maybes never resolved.

(Wait! We know, don't we, that poets lead
miserable lives, drug-raddled, promiscuous,
self-doubting, irresponsible, cadging
from people they despise, pissing
on respectable rugs? How can we think
that it's all about the ability to confront
a blank page, if that comes from
the same unfetteredness we call
a good life?)

Note: I've read that Dylan Thomas, invited to homes of fawning poetry patrons and matrons after one of his readings, well-stoked with booze, was known to have entertained one or more of his hosts and hostesses by pissing on the carpet -- or was it into the fireplace? Probably they were shocked, outraged, deploring. But I wonder if patches of those carpets are now available on E-Bay?)

Odd that the opposite of a critical pan is a critical rave. I suppose the idea is that the deadly bad review hits the poet in the face like a thrown skillet -- or a cream pie in a pie pan? (Then the poet is out for a pan nap.) There is no critical pot, for some reason. (Nor does one smoke pan.) Did Pan the piper get panned? (A Pan pan.) Would a poet of little skill get skillet-ed? I'd think the opposite of a rave would be a mope or a dumbness or a sullenness or a laconicism. And perhaps a deadpan. The opposite of a pan? I suppose a breath of fresh, pine-scented mountain or salty sea-side air, if we're speaking of being hit in the face by something as positive as a pan in the face is negative.

A poet hit in the face by a flying (not frying) pan should try to take it with pan ache (i.e., panache), which resembles pun ache.

There it is: Make the blank page new,
as once -- child or adult -- you could make
the morning new. Make the blank page --
not the words, the voice, the poem
you write on the page, but the blank page
new, open, nothing, never been before --
make the page new. Pound advised poets,
"Make it new" -- meaning the poem,
the language: tinker, tweak, achieve
his quaint, curmudgeonly authority
or some guise as unfamiliar. (Some people
even read Pound.) I say, if the
blank page before you is new,

a blankness never before experienced,
a new day, empty of old voices
and plans, then whatever you put onto it
will be new, as new as dew drops
on grass blades, as new as your first steps
out the door, as new as each action
of the day, each meeting of eyes, each
opening and closing and curving and flowing
of space to surround you, you sexy
air foil, you! Have you never
been made new by moving into
a new space, standing on a new mountain top
or peak in Darien with vast surmise?

How can your words be other than new,
conceived in so new a space?
How can your reader's eyes not open wide,
entering upon such newness?

Note: One undergraduate day, while pacing in the library stacks thinking through a paper just about due, I came across and read an Ezra Pound polemic (a thin volume) about poetry entitled Make It New. That's not a bad idea ("Not a bad idea" -- the language of tiny surmise, anathema to Keats, I'm sure).

For one or two of you -- which may be most of you -- I should add that in his sonnet "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer", Keats compares the revelatory first look at that translation of Homer to the experience of Cortez when he first viewed the Pacific from a peak in Darien ("with vast surmise").

Darien is in Panama, and the surmiser would have been Balboa, not Cortez, so scholars think Keats made a mistake. Perhaps Keats had no room for tri-syllabic "Balboa", so preferred Cortez. Anyway, Balboa carries too much baggage. (At least, in good hotels, it's the Balboas who carry your baggage and expect tips.)

Can we jolt the page into newness?
Sure: Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck! (No,
that's not it.)

Maybe
fun ny
sha pe
swill
doit.

Why not play with old forms and subjects?
It can work, if already, before the poem,
the page is new.

But if these hijinks are an attempt
to force newness on a tired blankness,
adrone with critical voices saying "Oh,
this stuff is a bore; I'm so hip, I'd be
the essence of hip, if snakes had hips.
Please shock me, make me twitch and seem
alive, or else put me out of my misery" --

then all our contortions are fads
in utero, born jaded, like the addicted babies
born to addicts. And drugs are apt:
One can make the morning new
by popping stimulants, but how soon
the day, thus forced, becomes deadened
and distant, a TV cartoon stared at
by a child who has nothing else worth
looking at.

It sounds radical: Make the blank page
new. But it is all as old as Grandma's lace
doilies: A clean conscience makes a new day;
the only beauty we can put on a page
or bestow upon the dawn is our own.
The only beauty the reader can find
on a page is the reader's beauty.
Ditto ugliness (sorry, Reader).

The page is blank with possibilities:
What can it be given? What we can give it.

Note: Yes, I know stanza 4 is a clutter of truisms, but that's the point: newness is not derived from laboring to be original. On the other hand, stanza 4 begins with a less obvious point: Grandma's lace. Lace shows blankness (the openings in the design) as adornment, holes as definitude.

Sounds like "Poet, ask not what the page can do for you. Ask only what you can do for the page." But I have nothing to say about pages. It's me I make new.

I remember who wrote the previous page -- some page freak (no doubt afraid of paper tigers lurking in paper jungles). Not a bad bloke -- me a few minute ago -- but this is (was) (will be) now. And,

come to think of it, enough about me; it's YOU I would make new, you whose face hovers (unidentified saucer eyes) over the words I now write,

I would set you free from that face's fixidity, as, in the mirror, looked at long enough, a face begins to blur, flow, change shape faster and faster, its flicker become that of time itself.

(And I? And you? No longer any face -- from where do we watch?)

Why? Why free myself or you from what fixes us? To make you good? To make you happy? No, to give us choice, the newness of the page (really of the poet who faced it, able to be nothing and create anything, glad of a game), to leave us poised on the brink of possibility, ready to decide to be.

Why? Because one day I will knock on your door and ask if you can come out and play. Every poem does that.

Note: I like the challenge of a poem like this, that should be the end of this collection, but isn't – so how does one go on? But one does, and it's good to know that one (or more) can do that, because we always start at the end of something.

It's a sufficiently twisty and (I hope) refreshing elaboration upon Grandma's lace (in the previous poem) to remedy or balance the truisms of that poem.

One could sit down at a table
with a blank sheet of paper on it
and do nothing but look -- not stare,
just look at the blank sheet --
nothing else -- for hours. I recommend
this exercise for poets and readers
(selfishly for readers: I offer a lot
of pages I hope you'll be able to face).
I've done it. It's one way to face
one's demons. Seen clearly, they vanish.

We think of writer's block as facing
a blank sheet for hours, but it is
the opposite: It is inability
to confront a blank sheet of paper.

Writer's block consists of deciding NOT
to have blankness (needing to have
the blankness go away), then sitting
(and standing and lying down and pacing)
in the vicinity of blankness, unwilling,
simply, to confront it, unable to do
nothing BUT confront it, without jitter,
finger tapping, alcoholic encouragement,
cigarette twiddling (bathroom break, and
while I'm at the sink, unwilling to face
the mirror, I'll look down and maybe
jack off...that's better, now, what
should I write on this fucking page?) --

anything but looking at the page
and doing nothing else.

Note: Stanza 1, "Selfishly for readers" – that is, I recommend this exercise for readers selfishly, because I, with all my pages praying (or preying) for readers, will benefit if readers can confront pages.

What happens if you just look
at the page for, say, two hours?
(Am I safe in assuming that you have not
done so yet?) We each have our own
demons, but, typically, for a minute
or two or three or ten, it's easy,
big deal, now what? (Don't stop then.)

Then you get a little uncomfortable --
an itch, the chair seems not to fit
your ass, your neck feels stiff, eyes
too heavy -- anything! And you know
"This is impossible. Man is not meant
to sit this long." And you quit (but
don't -- there's more. It gets worse before
it gets much worse -- and then better).

Just sit there and look at the page
and do nothing else. It becomes
torment -- and if you continue,
the torment suddenly or gradually
is not there. If you try to "solve"
the torture (maybe go into a trance),
the solution becomes a problem
(you get dopey, your head wants badly
to drop onto the table; you start seeing
hellish monsters or paradises or faces
in the blank page; the room turns white
or black) --

there's no end of stuff lurking in that page,
persuading you that it is dangerous,
and when you just look, it all flies off
in your face. Feelings, too, like a swarm
of furies (those who attacked you for writing --
for daring to be here and communicate -- have been
hiding on that page), and then --

you've been sitting there now for nearly
two hours, sitting where it was first too easy,
then for an eternity impossible to sit;
and suddenly it's easy to be there
with that blank sheet of paper. You could
do it forever. You and it are what you and it are;
you are what you choose to be.

Shall we put some words on it?

Readers, too, might find this exercise
of interest. But there is nothing
we cannot benefit from facing;
we've hidden our demons everywhere --
in faces, because faces remind us
of the faces that snarled at us
as they attacked us, smirked as they
ridiculed us, wept as we punished them,
peeked up at us through their deepest sobs
to see if we were buying it... --

hidden demons in a stick, a stone (they've
hurt us, we've hurt others with them),
a chair, a bed, a room, a ceiling
(theaters for all our dramas) -- we've a world
worth confronting, but these words

are unraveling out onto blank pages -- no longer
blank once they get to you. Why should YOU
(you're no writer, are you?) -- why should you
confront a blank page?

First, because we all create, or if we don't,
it is because we cannot confront blankness
and find it newly again and again. Second,
because, dear reader, consider how,
in a lifetime of reading, you must,
in order to read, focus on black lettering
to the exclusion of the whiteness of the page,

which must be suppressed, pushed back,
so that you see the page, not as incomprehensible
white shapes delineated by black lines,
but see only the black, comprehensible shapes
of letters. Years of reading deadens us.

An explosion is a plume of dazzling brightness,
followed by black smoke and ashes that burn
and stick to flesh, then a sense of desolation.
Orgasms borrow the same production values.
Scholar, how desolate it must feel,
day after day, to stare at ashes and deny
the explosions.

And if you looked at a blank page for a long time
and did nothing else, reader, from what habitual
grimaces (held in place by your effort
to hold back the whiteness and cling
to black shreds of bereft significance) --
from what gargoyle grimaces might you be unfixed.

Have any of you tried it? Surely
I've left you a blank page somewhere
in this book. (I could leave
the next one blank, but that's
a cheap trick. I'm not that kind of poet,
am I?) Do you not own a blank sheet
of paper? A table or desk? A chair?

But no, you are a sane person. Sane people
don't sit for a long time, doing nothing
but look at a blank sheet of paper.

How long have you been looking at THESE
sheets of paper? Rules of the game:
I've scribbled on these sheets,
using the agreed-upon letters and words
in configurations that make sense,
or at least mimic talk enough to suggest
the possibility of sense, of a speaker
and a listener -- someone for you to be.

It is OK to look at THESE pages,
because they are not blank. One can know
which way to move one's eyes.

Oh, there are rules we follow
that we know not of. Look at us,
staring at these squiggles
and not doubting our sanity.

Note: Or staring at each other through the squiggles – and through the separation of hours or years or decades.

While I recommend the exercise of confronting a blank sheet of paper -- or one full of scribble, I do not recommend looking for a long time at a blank computer screen or (a la the child in the movie Poltergeist), gazing for a long time at the static of a TV screen after broadcasting hours. Or, for that matter, DURING broadcasting hours. I doubt that two hours or dozens of hours would suffice to neutralize those hypnotic frequencies or recover vision. Some blanknesses (the sun is another) are more aggressive than others. YOU can confront them, but your body's eyes and nerves may be very upset with you.

This is the page that would be blank
if I went in for cheap tricks -- even cheaper
than words (and we all know that "talk
is cheap" [and bird talk is cheep cheep]).

It is a point of honor with me that I give
strangers only pages on which I have written.
As a poet, I am espoused to the blank sheet.
As I am free to enjoy my wife's nakedness,
but prefer not to share it with strangers
(And the gynecologist? O treacherous simile,
is there no end to you?) -- so I dress each page
in ink, sometimes with the old-fashioned modesty
of long, dense poems, sometimes leaving much
uncovered, sexy outfits, even (forgive me,
Basho) haiku bikinis, leaving little
of the page's unabashed buff to your imagination.

I don't know where to take this simile.
(Rowdy simile! I can't take you anywhere!)
For example, does the page undress for me
each night? (Does my wife?) No, but I do
come upon the naked page most days and
"have my way" with her. But that's not
dressing her. I don't dress my wife.
I don't even buy her clothes. Oh
never mind! Why are you reading this stuff!
(I begin to miss the naked page
this once was.)

Note: In the poem above, you get to be a live witness to a poet's struggle (like that poor Trojan priest and his sons wrestling with the serpent sent by Apollo) with a metaphor that refuses to behave.

At the end of stanza two, I particularly enjoyed abashing, but not bashing, Basho (by comparing haiku to bikinis), though I doubt that would bother Basho. It only bothers the excessively solemn ideas some have about Basho.

Blankness is easier to fill than to talk about. In government (and other legalistic) documents, you may encounter the following:

All or part of a page has been left blank (perhaps to leave room for late additions without need to change pagination), but not entirely blank, containing the following:

[This page has been left intentionally blank.]

or

[The remainder of the page has been left intentionally blank.]

When I first saw this (I mean, one like it), false, for all its implied rigor, its pickiness, I felt impelled to make it true. My suggested wording:

[This page, except for the words you are now reading (and this statement applies even when you are not reading these words, that is those beginning "This page" and extending at least to the 2nd "here" here -- the one without quotation marks), extending from the open bracket 46 words before the previous use of the word "bracket" -- but without the quotation marks -- to the closing bracket, coming up (words not yet counted because not yet written as we speak -- that is, emulate speech in these words) and inclusive of the brackets themselves, and not counting page numbers or other footer or header material at the bottom or top of this page -- assuming that "this page" refers, throughout, to the page where this paragraph began and to any other page into which it may have overflowed -- this page, as defined above, has been left intentionally blank.]

Note: In a government specifications document, one might say "This page shall support blankness" (or rather, since governments are too irresponsible to allow active voice: "Blankness shall be supported by this page"). (If you've never tried to respond to a government bid and had to wade through Government RFPs (requests for proposals -- invitations to companies to bid to offer products to the government), you should (but, alas, not "shall") have skipped this note.

All blanks have been left blank
intentionally. Of course they have.
We think of blankness as their native state
(and ours? Naked we come into the world.
Nothing-at-all, we precede the world
and dream it, so that our dreamed-up selves
may come into it), but books and tablets
and reams full of blank pages are blank
for our use. Or should be. To make
a blank page blank, it may be necessary
to look at it -- and do nothing but look
at it -- for hours. The writer cannot write
because his blank page is not blank;

it is crowded. There isn't room on it
for anything more. Each day
would be new if we were not crammed full
of bad lost days. (Odd how hard it is
to lose what has been lost. How do you kill
a ghost?) We may once have been blank,
but if ever again we are to be, for a moment,
blank (not obscured, fogged over, blurred; simply
alert emptiness), we must achieve it
intentionally.

I, too, prefer to look at trees,
whole ones (but roots unseen)
rather than pulped tree flesh,
watered, bleached, sized, pressed, dried,
snipped into convenient white rectangles,
some black or blue liquid dabbled over them,
to be absorbed in curved and kinked patterns.

But trees must be sacrificed
for this partial proof of God's existence,
for look you (as they used to say),
look you: A tree fell in the forest,
perhaps with no one there to hear,
then became this paper, upon which
this writing (by-passing your ears,
going from your eyes direct to where
you create the voices in which
you converse eternally, all other
unreal voices merely grace notes
to your music) becomes a voice speaking
to you -- right now I am speaking to you --

and that is the sound of the tree
falling in the forest, one distant
ripple of it, and you are here
to hear.

Note: The first line (apart from being a dim echo of Marianne Moore's poem "Poetry", which begins "I too dislike it") refers, perhaps, to the suggestion that it would be a good thing to look for a long time at a blank sheet of paper. I, too, would rather look at trees than at these wood-pulped tree products.

Let us consider the flatness of this page --
for all the fullness of the worlds
it may birth, it remains a nearly
constant distance from your eyes.

Thus, it is safe for you to read
about snarling tigers leaping at your face
or the loved woman one leaves,
never to see her again, her face,
her figure as she stands at the door,
waving, growing smaller, smaller, now
she is just a dark spot in a rectangle
of light, can be blotted out by
a passing car, a thumbnail at arm's length,
now gone, far far away, we can't remember
her face -- but all this lies on a flat page.

Nothing comes near, nothing goes away.
Turn back the pages: There she is again,
waving, smiling through her tears.
There's no tiger, merely a rustle --
not of tall grasses, but of a page turning.

Nothing leaves the page in either direction.
Everything (no thing, really) keeps its distance.

Yet reading has made me laugh and cry,
spurred nations to make war and peace,
enraged youths to fill the streets with
chanted slogans, shattered glass and
smouldering overturned cars. Oh yes,
the flatness of this page, outlasting
its blankness, is only a mockery of safety --
though there is a greater safety
in knowing that its depths and distances
could only have been put there by you,
for if you are the creator of space,
where can you not be safe?

Note: The syllogism is simple: when you read (if not these poems, then any good novel or history), do you not enter a universe? Does that universe not contain dimensionality, space? Are you not looking at and deriving that universe from words on a flat page? Then you must be the creator of space, at least in this instance.

I wonder if our first step in creating
real space out of literary space
is the tiny elevation we give
(pushing back the blankness)
to the print on the page, not the thickness
of printer's ink, barely perceived
by expert fingertips stroking the page,
but the elevation our eyes create?

Not that we need literature
to create space. Besides, reading can be a way
to forget that there is such a thing as space
(or all the things that space might conceal),
a way to splurge on a spurious space
until we've become addicted to it,

as people compulsively read the daily news
to feel connected to a grimy gray world
they mistake for their own. It is a strange
and bracing moment, when, long immersed
in reading about all the places in "the world"
where it is unsafe to be and all the words
spoken by people who say the things
people always say in newspapers ("We'll
take it one game at a time", "I can't
comment on a case in progress") and all the
spaces forbidden us (peopled only by
unnamed sources and officials close to
the president) -- it is bracing (like

looking with both eyes after days
of having one eye bandaged -- the thrill
of rediscovering depth) to look up, feel
that one is sitting on a bench under a tree,
that a woman is walking a large dog
over there on the grass -- she catches
your eye briefly, smiles. There's sunlight
breaking through a purplish gray sky,

pigeons, the darkened bronze statue
of a dead president, one unnamed pigeon
close to the president's ear...

As a child I was thrilled by books
that seemed to cheat the page out of
its flatness: Pictures of ducklings
coated with real felt, pop-up pages
with cut-out forms rising up off the page.

After much stroking, the felt went shiny
and flat and was never, anyway, the softness
I'd imagined. From much opening and shutting
of pages (to make the pop-ups pop up,
then vanish again) and fingering them
to test their realness, the cut-outs became
torn, creased, soiled – and they had never been
as full and solid as what I'd imagined.

Years later, I'd stare at the picture
(called a "frontispiece", odd word) at the front
of my Hardy Boys' books, trying to make
Frank and Joe come to life and be
my friends, but it was harder for the
illustration (though it had things right
and I tried to draw ears and hands as detailed) --
harder for it to become Frank and Joe
than for Frank and Joe to become my friends.

(Was I not already pudgy and fond
of making jokes, just like their best chum,
Chet? But where, oh where, is Bayport?)

We do best to work with the blankness,
not try to usurp it. The blankness leaves room
for the reader to contribute to my words
a life.

Note: All those years of looking at "frontispieces", I assumed the word "frontispiece" meant a piece at the front of a book. I was right about "front", but the last part comes from the Latin "specere", to look, view.

Since my Hardy Boys days (age 7 to around age 11), I've met some Franks and Joes, but never a "Chet" (Chet Morton, their best friend). The Hardy Boys lived in Bayport, but no state was ever specified.

I'm filling this page while pretending
to listen at a poetry reading. I hear
the best and worst that way -- good
or bad enough to seize my delinquent
attention.

Is the air in this room blank?
Can voices fill it? A large, resonant room
presents to a performer a temptation comparable
to a blank page's attraction for a writer.
Could Olivier enter a room without wanting
to try out his best voices on its walls
and ears (the ears that walls always have)?

Perhaps, sated by bouncing his voice across
vaulted auditoriums and filling movie theaters
with it, he could join a small party and sit
quiet, listening, learning new voices.

Do performers (slightly less vulnerable
to critics' cuts because they can SEE
their audiences) encounter performance block? --
air in the room solid as concrete, voice
become the same old voice, why must my
voice always be only my voice? -- even
divas stammering to silence in the shower,
head under the water water water,
a blank noise on all sides.

Note: In case these poems last long enough for some to forget, or in case some have already forgotten, I will note that "Olivier" refers to Sir Lawrence Olivier (please fill in his two numbers yourself), English actor (stage and screen), generally considered one of the finest actors of the Twentieth Century.

But the air, to human perception,
doesn't long hold the echoes of our voices.
Safer to fill up the air, that spills out
our voices as fast as we pour them in.
No paper trace to haunt us, only
the memories of our hearers, harder
for us to see (and seeing is believing),
no black on white, oh, we BELIEVE
in black on white, but (not to get
too esoteric about print) we believe

in what appears to last: He's in
MOVIES! He's real! He's in print!
He wrote a real book! He's got his DVD
in the stores! What lasts is real
and dangerous. You have the right
to remain silent. But a poetry reading?

Instant vanishment, a safe place for anything,
a blankness that is self-sustaining --
as are all media, really, but we are
easily fooled by print.

Note: Interesting corollaries: At a poetry reading, my words exist only in you, my listeners...which is tantamount to not existing? What does that say about the existence of you, my listeners? (But perhaps I have no listeners.)

(Re "tantamount": After having his antonym, the French lad decided his tantamount. [Translation: After having his aunt on him, the French lad decided his tante to mount.]

Speaking of blankness (Have you noticed we've been speaking of blankness? Have you noticed we've been speaking?), on "old-time" radio I heard Mel Blanc speaking as Mel Blanc, not as Bugs Bunny, Yosemite Sam, Donald Duck, Porky Pig, Daffy, Sylvester, Tweetie, Jack Benny's Tin Lizzie or anyone else from the impish legion.

This was just Mel Blanc, his voice oddly ordinary, a bland, middle baritone, just faint flashes of the metallic resonance that could be wound as taut as a gleaming wire to become, "Eh...what's up, Doc?" (you wouldn't find it if you weren't looking for it), an empty voice dimly haunted by the thousand loony voices he'd fathered.

We become, some say, our names: wordy Wordsworth, pontificating Pope. Blank, a neutral sound, a potential, an empty voice to fill with voices; Blanc, that hint of shine, a sound to emulate in cartoon voices, a mischievous eye's twinkle.

Mel's blankness birthed no horrors, but that's the Mel, which is a word for honey, sweetness. But Mel easily becomes Mal, and the Wascally Wabbit is hard on poor Elmer. (Someday I, too, will say, "abd...abd...abd...That's all folks.")

Note: The stutterer in the last line imitates Porky Pig's sign-off. Most of you will remember the cartoon characters mentioned above (some of them "Loony Tunes" characters, hence "loony voices") to which Mel Blanc gave voice, some might not remember Jack Benny's "Tin Lizzie", his ancient and unreliable car (Benny representing himself always as too cheap to buy a new one). Mel Blanc's voice provided the radio sound effects for Lizzie's difficult start-ups, with grinding, pops, hisses and rumblings.

Crazed boys and men with automatic weapons
have shot up restaurants, school rooms
(even kindergartens), playgrounds,
offices full of managers and co-workers...
Why? Perhaps children are dangerous
(they may grow up) and co-workers
say cruel, sharp things (they know us
too well), and bosses overwork and underpay
and fire us just because; restaurant staff
poison us, the eaters are gross...

but I am safe here, in a chair at a poetry
reading. No one ever shoots up a poetry
reading (knock on the current reader's head),
not in the United States, where no one believes
that poets are dangerous.

Sometimes at poetry readings, I wish something --
almost anything -- would happen, something
that would make us all know that something
had happened, exposing as imposters
all these pale pretenses to happening;

yes, blankness can be wasted, but bullets
won't give us renewed blankness,
only a clutter of headlines more tired
even than our poems.

Morning drizzle. Black branches
divvy up a milky sky. Not black,
but almost -- a dark, smoky gray;
can one speak of a pale black?
A wet gray-brown?

Talking about it, it sounds ready-made
for another metaphor -- network of branches
a scrawl on the sky's blank page,
but it looks nothing like writing
on a page (though seen through
rectangular windows). Even in this drear,

it's too unflat, droplets sliding
down the glass so clearly depths
nearer my eye than the varied depths
from branch to branch. Only the sky itself
seems flat.

I want to make the page evoke worlds,
not to turn worlds into pages.
Sometimes it seems I am about to tell
a terrible secret that will relieve us
all forever of the need to fill blank pages
with poems. It's the sort of secret
with which one wakes up excitedly
to scribble in a notebook at 2 a.m.,
then deciphers the next day, wondering
why one bothered. Here it is:

"Everything is like everything else,
but nothing is anything other than
what it is."

No, that can't be the secret.
That won't stop us.

The cricks and dodges of branches
(slow motion wriggling to compete for light,
like sea gulls maneuvering for tossed chunks
of bread) make us think of branches
as eely, moving every which way, undulant;

so it is a surprise to see (if you look
closely in winter, no giddy leaf tremors
to distract) how trees move in wind,
the whole superstructure swaying in one piece,

branches as stiffly attuned to the trunk
as, to each other, the taut strips of wood
that frame a kite or the timbers of a house,
the whole tree moving back and forth
in one unchanging brittle design --

and not really "swaying" -- no give to it
relative to itself, no dancer's swing
of hip and ass going one or two ways,
torso another, no, it ain't got that swing;
just neat, stiff bends, like an oriental
diplomat's bow to one who must be accorded
the minimum respect.

Yet there is decisiveness to such rigid motion,
as when a flamenco dancer holds head straight,
every superfluous muscle rigid while the feet
celebrate and protest the floor's solidity,
make it dream it is a river, rippling
with sound (I wish I could say "cantata" --
"pounding out cantatas", why couldn't flamenco
dances be called the word they sound like?)

Each move, each tap -- because all else is
held still -- a small explosion; thus,
the tree's stillness, in motion, is focus:
This is no time for branches to fool around.
A tiny creaking bend too far in any direction
could lead to snap and crash, with, maybe
no one there to hear, the sound of our fall
depending on God's doubtful ear.

Part of the illusion of random motion
in the juddering of bare winter trees
comes from the way of winds
in many trees at once, the saplings
bending further and at a faster
pendulum rate than the thicker-trunked
and trees in one row moving one way
while those a row behind or in front
move another,

winds seeming to travel through trees
on parallel, but staggered courses,
perhaps in a Vee, like geese, so that
one gust's invisible wing brushes against
its swath of trees just before the next gust
nudges the neighboring swath, bending it
forward as the first trees recover,
swinging back, row after row going through,
each, its own sets of motions (according to
flexibility within each row) like one stage set
behind another, each drop trembling
its own way.

Why do the droplets on the window move
in starts and stops? Collision with dust?
With other drops? Why do I write these words,
no others? One wind through all of us,
staggered? Many winds?

There's something in all that. The body's
a machine. I know little about it --
have no operator's licence, can't tell an enzyme
from a protein. Even a poem is a machine.
For example, this one's about due for its
"And yet...", and yet I write these words,
no other words, written by no other I.

Note: Some dictionaries omit "judder" (and my word processing software wants to substitute "udder"), but it's easy to find on the WWW. In stanza 2, "each drop trembling" refers to stage drops – the painted settings that can be dropped (like curtains) at the back of the stage.

The modern lyric is typically delicately abrupt lines etched, nay, graven on a mostly blank page, words selected the way a person dying of a wasting disease shrinks to green-tinged luminosity, each image as spare and honed as the rib cage of a pelican picked clean by piranha. Such poems are serious matters, like legal contracts: Should any concept(s), phrasing(s), emotion(s) expressed or implied, word(s), character(s) or symbol(s) in any and/or all of these poems be found to be prohibited by law or commonly accepted usage in any one or more of the 50 states of the United States of America or in the District of Columbia or in any territory of that nation or other nation on earth or province or territory thereof or of any comparable unit on any other planet or other intelligent-life-supporting system in this or any other galaxy or universe, let it be understood (and nothing in this poem is to be otherwise construed) that whatever part of these poems must be waived/annulled/voided in any area as a result of said prohibition(s), none the less, those parts nullified in certain areas shall remain valid in areas not prohibiting them, and in the areas where nullified, all other concepts, phrasings, emotions, words, characters and symbols shall be considered a valid and living part of the contract herein expressed and/or implied between author and reader, with all attendant penalties for violation thereof and rewards for observance thereof, Whereto I would place my signature on this, the _____th day of _____, _____, _____, were I not a figment of your equally fictitious imagination...

Such poetry is air tight. I can't breathe in it. I prefer to provide a conversation of which you can't help partaking. In poetry workshops, the talk often pleases me more than the poems. Yesterday a poignant "postcard" poem (English Lake Country, sheep, collies, old stone bridge, a weathered church-yard angel, wish you were here) included sheep flowing past like streams, their profiles "walking pillows". It spoke of the curve of their snouts. I asked, "concave or convex?" She said, "Concave -- I mean convex, like pillows." "Pillows just fluffed or after I've slept on them?" "Roman noses!" There were also tarns, because, I suggested, England is a tarnation. Where else could one talk about pillows and sheep without threat (not in vain) of sleep?

My ideal poem is, perhaps, found in *Pogo*: It's Christmas, and the critters (not critics, critters!) are caroling (Albert Alligator roaring past his SEEgar, Turtle, his waving flagon leading the chorus). They've finished "Deck us all with Boston Charlie" and cavort onwards into "Good King Wenceslaus looked down on his feets uneven, Whilst the snoo..." – and off to one side the three bats (Bewitched, Bothered and Bemildred, unshaven little imps, each in checkered or striped suspended pants) chime in with "What's snoo." "I don't know. What's snoo with you?" (Further off, perhaps, Deacon Mushrat, in black letter text, condemns such folly. (I wish I hadn't lent someone my copy. They're getting hard to find.) Someone (Rackity Coon Chile?) is pounding out the time on an inverted pot with a spoon. Someone is pushing someone's head into a mince pie. No one dies. The next day, an opossum and a porcupine exchange rueful wise jokes on a raft until one (still joking) is stuck in the mud, hanging from his pole, the raft drifting on past lily pads and a mamma ladybug and her tot, who wants to know if those are... (what? Republicans? I can't recall. Help me, Walt. I have met the enemy, and it is memory.)

Several notes: The above loose and prosy poem is meant to be an argument in favor of loose and prosy poems, in contrast to the constraining girdle -- like a legal contract -- of the terse, short-lined, go-for-the-vivid-image poetry now in favor.

“England is a tarnation” -- that is, a nation of tars, sailors. Or a nation of tarns (small mountain lakes), which is what appeared in my friend's pastoral poem. And, of course, the literal meaning is that England is a damnation. (It has dams, too. But more than any other nation, it has relied on its tars -- navy and merchant.)

The mention at the end of stanza two of the “threat (not in vain) of sleep?” refers to a couplet in Alexander Pope's “Essay on Criticism,” where he chides poets for their overuse of certain rhymes, saying that whenever “streams in crystal murmurs creep, The reader's threatened (not in vain) with sleep.”

The last stanza (or paragraph) is about an actual scene from one of the Pogo comic strips, written and drawn by Walt Kelly in the mid-20th Century. Some of you may not be familiar with them (or even with the more recent “Calvin and Hobbes”). If so, you are to be pitied. The last line refers to Walt Kelly's most famous and most quoted line, which occurs in two forms in his work, one of which is: “We have met the enemy and he is us” (The other form is, “We have met the enemy and they are us.”) [In my case, I meet the enemy, and it is me, Morry. (memory)] [Me, Morry, because my full name is Maurice (Morry) Dean Blehert, but in early childhood, the Maurice got lost -- or lost it's moorings.]

Kelly's line is a take-off on an American naval hero (Oliver Hazard Perry), who, having defeated the British in a naval battle (War of 1812), reported, “We have met the enemy, and they are ours.” (Just what every nation needs: An enemy of it's very own!)

“Pogo” appeared in a few comic books and in many daily papers. Book-length Pogo “annuals” also were published. As I mention (“I wish I hadn't lent someone my copy...”), I used to have many of them. I didn't actually loan them. I gave them to people for whom I cared enough to want to introduce them to “Pogo”. I did so, assuming that I'd always be able to find them in used bookstores, as I had for years. But they've since mostly vanished, or, when I find one, it is priced out of my range. But I still have one or two. And I remember....

If you have a complete set, I'll gladly trade you a century of two of English poetry for them.

Perhaps a Googling of “Pogo” or “Walt Kelly” will reward your time beyond expectation.

The blank page as the core of evil
(poet as knight -- WHITE knight? -- challenging
evil): Serial killers and psychopaths
have, as our lurid media assure us,
eyes that are dead, flat, blank.

Criminals have the blank "thousand-yard stare."
The Ted Bundys practice before mirrors, disguising
blankness behind crinkly smiles, large-eyed
sympathy, mimicking what, through sniper eyes,
they see in the faces that bob past, ducks
in a shooting gallery.

But we expect human eyes to be alive, to return
(without calculation) our smiles, to share or resist
our tears. That's why we don't consider
the lack of response we receive from stones,
furniture, sidewalks, doorknobs and ash trays
evil -- do we?

But things don't kill us the way blank-eyed
humanoids do. Do they? Have you ever
stubbed your toe or bumped your head
or cut your finger on a thing, landed
on sidewalk, been burned by fire, frozen
by ice? As you fell from your bike
to skin hands and knees on concrete,
did you tell the sidewalk, "Don't!" or
"Please!" or "Help!" Did it respond?

Even the blank-eyed killer is blank because
he is waiting for something he mistook for life
to respond. He's been waiting so long
that he has become his waiting.

Note: So the Ted Bundys must practice at seeming human. I wonder about the McGeorge Bundys and their ilk. (The true species of our politicians is an ill-kept secret. They belong to an alien species known as the Ilk, because the secret is so ill-kept.)

IF we talk to a friend, a lover, a child,
looking them in the eyes, and there's
no one there, that's upsetting. Strange,
that we expect so much of eyes (balls
of jelly with muscle-molded expressions)
and brains (folds of fat). This reliance
is a nasty habit so deeply ingrained
that we prefer to buy cars draped with
smiling females and elect leaders
with weathered skin, toothy smiles and
bright, leveled eyes.

If we talk to a dog and get a sluggish response,
that's upsetting. From a cat we expect at least
a head turning away, the flick of a pointed ear.
Some of us expect trees and grass to sway and rustle
for us. We expect our machines to work (God
knows how), expect less of our furniture, stones,
doorknobs -- at best only the most slavish obedience
to the laws of physics.

Expecting less, we are less upset when these things
we don't consider alive fail to respond, fail to
be there, fail to recognize us. The psychopath
learns to mimic recognition, perceive the signs
of upset and speak the expected lies.
Stones are slow learners.

And the blankness of the page? Is it
the flat stare of a stone-cold killer?
Or the servile utility of a doorknob? Or are these
the same? Why do we not fear our furniture,
planets, stars, toothbrushes, so intimate,
yet alien, their agendas unknown? And these words --
life? Or blankness mimicking life? When I say "you,"
do you feel recognized? "Hello" says the recorded
message, "Hello, this is...Hello, this is...Hello, this is...".

Note: If you follow the logic of this poem, you'll note that it leads to the confusion that a poem or any page with text (blankness mimicking life) is much like a serial killer. IF what we call poetry is mimicry and not simply life. That depends on how much life you and I give to it and to "you and I" (also words).

Our expectation determines our upset
with blankness. Doorknobs need not respond,
even, when, bumping into one, we curse it

(unless we are nuts, which means, really,
unless we hold unusual expectations
for doorknobs).

If we have found the blank page
(meaning certain blank pages -- how easily blankness
is generalized!) responsive, easily endowed with life
by our scribbles, magically possessed of a Voice
that can say what we, ourselves, could not have said
before we discovered the blank page (as a child
exchanges with a rag doll love only dimly dreamed of
before first hugging that doll) --

if, after days or years of filling pages with life,
we, one day, meet a blank page that just
stares back at us and will not come to life,
no matter what words we write or cannot write on it --

and now, looking back, our old beloved pages,
even those printed in journals with famous names,
seem as lifeless as canned pitches from computerized voices,
passive-voiced lingo from government contracts,
wooden masks, ancient attitudes in an attitude museum,
formulaic passions we know all too well --

Oh, NOW the blank page is as scary
as Ted Bundy's smile or Manson's mantic mutterings
or a mirror in which, seeking one's own familiar eyes,
one finds no reflection at all.

Note: Need I mention that Bundy and Manson are two notorious serial killers? Has my work lasted THAT long?

Hard for mere poets to compete in longevity with serial killers. I'm am merely a serious borer.

No reflection in a mirror means Vampire.
The page remains blank because
we've sucked the language dry, bloodless.
Whatever we use as a solution will become
the problem. Writing as a solution
to not having a life, not living well,
is like sugar as a solution to no energy:

The poet-vampire drains his childhood miseries;
his parents, lovers, landscapes, feelings; drains
all the words that once were strong for him;
drains the profundity of his despair
at being thus drained; the absurdity of despair's
tautology; the silliness of the act of writing,
of no one talking to no one about nothing;
of awareness as folds in the surface of blankness
where it faces itself and winks; drains
the hectic special-effects blood of formal gimmicks,
screams, tears, tantrums, laughter, insane laughter,
grim or numb silence -- HEY! I'm talking to
you! To YOU! Yeah, YOU!

(Don't believe a word of it. It don't mean
a thing if it ain't got that swing.)

When everything is sucked dry, when the 4-letter words
are just four letters, no life given, all life taken,
then the blank page becomes a mirror, reflecting
what we'd rather not see.

Note: "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing" – Duke Ellington's words, right? (It suddenly occurred to me, could it have been Louie Armstrong? Hence the question mark. I leave precise scholarship to my reader.

The "HEY! I'm talking to you!" stuff alludes dimly to Robert De Niro haranguing his mirror in the movie Taxi Driver ("I don't see anyone ELSE here...".)

So a page is more troublesome than a chair
or a table: We've learned to expect a page
to talk to us. We expect life from a page
and think of a blank page as potentially
alive, as when, catching up with someone,
we say to the back of a head, "Hey...excuse
me..." and expect that head to turn, and,
when it does, we expect to see a face.

Remember in PSYCHO when we see
Ma Bates' gray hair over the back
of her rocking chair, and the chair is turned
to face us, and...

The shock of no life where life is expected:
"Mom...MOM!" Or the car going dead,
in motion on a downhill, suddenly wooden,
hard to steer, heavy, unmagic. Or after a stroke,
a paralyzed arm, or the old dog, after he'd
quit eating and just lay there in his own shit.
Or, tacked onto a work of art by insistent
investors -- a Hollywood ending.

But I have this backwards: So much poetry
is dead on arrival, a layered academic artifact,
gush of hyperbole full of borrowed passion,
charm bracelet of images with each short line
neatly centered on the page, as if turned out
by lathe, surreal wax museum or blood-bone
telegram, flayed of adjectives and articles --

that it is now a shock when the page
looks up and says something
to each of us.

Note: Here's a shocker: Someday a poem referring to "Psycho" will require a footnote. Memento Mori! (Sounds of an abruptly shrieking violin!)

It is my faith (perhaps my knowledge)
that everything is alive, even the molecules
of concrete. What has life as its source
lives. Thus, when I, alive, laugh or make my arm
move, we say my body is alive. What responds
intelligently lives. What can recognize us
lives. But what is an intelligent response?

A determinist argues that all action is
mechanistic, chemical, having no core of choice
or being, that choice itself is a brain state
best described via neuro-chemistry, that so many
scadrillion atomic and subatomic particles,
lightning-stirred in a primordial pot
(add another pinch of carbon, two cups oxygen...),
will convulse, contort, seethe, moil, condense,
coalesce, ferment and eventually spit out
from its writhing, unknowing cloud (PLOP!)

this book (wet and shivering), its pages strewn
with these markings, spit out this pen, this hand,
this body, your eyes following where my hand
moved...

I think, rather, that before the beginning
is pure causation (what I am, what you are),
a nothing that can create and admire its creations,
that every impulse, every particle we can perceive
is our agreed-upon creation, its persistence
dependent on our willingness to forget
that we've created it -- how else could we
have a game? Barriers vanish for one who realizes
his part in putting them there. To make things last,
we must be complex, lest right hand remember
the left hand's doing.

Note: Stanza 4 (and much else in these poems) owes a great deal to writings you can find at:

<http://www.scientology.org/wis/WISENG/34/34-scax.htm>

http://www.scientology.org/p_jpg/wis/wiseng/34/34-fact.htm

We must be complex, create Rube Goldberg devices that turn our tiniest impulses into “incurable” ailments, run even our simplest creations, our poems, our hellos, through the cumbersome machinery of inspiration, milieu, mood, family history, social history -- ah, the universe writes this poem, not I -- I’m innocent, a social construct. (Deconstruct me!) It has nothing to do with me, since I don’t exist.

Solidities, too, we create: Old, tangled-up unanswered, unacknowledged communications, no boulder nor diamond so solid that it would not vaporize in a gust of laughter if we could untangle its dense clump of ancient, compressed communications

(For there’s nobody and nothing here but us beings),

if we could understand them precisely. Just greeting all we see makes the world less solid. Every small child knows this (“Hello, car, Hello, bug. Hello, cloud.”) Even a bruise may go away, when kissed.

If you speak to a complexity, your “hello” and its response (both having to travel over kinked and tangled lines) take time. If the circuitry (like a wary psychopath’s, set up to evade detection) includes an instant-answer machine, you’ll get a quick response, but it will be robotic, non-sequitur. The live response takes longer. You say to the sad sad face, “How are you doing?” A machine says, “Fine.” Hours or days later, the face meets yours and says, “My life is fucked.”

Note: Rube Goldberg: 20th Century cartoonist and sculptor best known for his drawings of ludicrously complicated machines for accomplishing trivial tasks.

“Deconstruct” – part of the language of a late 20th Century mode of thought (and literary criticism – not to imply that thought has much to do with literary criticism) called, among other things, “post-modernism.” A post-modern critic doesn’t discuss a poem. Rather he “deconstructs a text”. What does that mean? Ask your local post-modernist critic. (Or don’t.)

And that is what we call blankness --
our waiting for an answer. The only trap
there is (as I mentioned before).

When, falling from a building, you beg
the concrete to be gentle, soft, yielding --
it would yield for you if it could, if your plea
could get to it in time, but it takes
billions of years for stone to receive
live communication, billions more
to respond, for a stone is the perfect bureaucracy.

(Eat your heart out, IRS, poetry editors who take
years to send out a canned rejection slip, traffic
courts.)

A stone's officials are helter-skelter, every which way,
colliding with one another, dodging in frenetic dashes,
a zillion self-important particles frozen in the randomness
of each going its own way, their collisions cancelling out
the motion of the whole, presenting the stable facade
of a government; a catatonic humming
with fragmented, opposed thoughts; a stone.

The blankness of a psychopath's stare (far briefer
than a stone's, but we expect so much more
from a human face, from letters on a page)
is the waiting. Stones and sticks and nasty names
have hurt him, or, in his mouth or hands,
hurt others. Now he is masked and barricaded,
surrounded by cautious layers of machinery
all disguised as a person. If you say to him,

"I love you," this reaches him -- after many
dissections and misinterpretations (for example,
"I am about to betray you") years after his apparent
blank-eyed answer, and years after that,
his real answer may find its way to
what's left of you.

Note: The idea that a stone's solidity derives from the random motions of particles that collide and thus cancel out motion of the collection of particles that comprise the stone (or any solid) is part of statistical mechanics and related disciplines, but is also derivable (in a far more basic sense) from the notion of a universe whose persistence is guaranteed by its creators taking no responsibility for their individual parts in their co-creations

“Oh no!” cries Mom, seeing the small child’s blank gaze, knowing the child is about to soil another diaper, the blankness a waiting, savoring the slow complex bowel motion, enjoying mysterious sensations as something slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.

We have multiple machines, all of us, some quick, some slow. Two criminals converse, some communications (the safe ones) getting across instantly (“he’s threatening me”; “he fears me” -- it is safe to receive these, because these are the safest assumptions to make),

others taking hours or years (“he’s a person like me”; “he once wanted to help someone”).

The cop who politely “Sir’d” you, but gave you a ticket anyway -- was it hours or years later it dawned on him that you, too, were a person and that maybe even he is a person? How many generations did it take for people to learn to hear a voice on a piece of paper, silently read?

How many years to forget?

Note: Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” ends wondering what great beast now “...slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.” Since Bethlehem is Hebrew for “house of bread”, I suppose the beast in my metaphor slouches FROM Bethlehem to be born, since a child’s tummy is sort of a half-way house for bread (though more likely for milk).

We take silent reading for granted.
As recently as a thousand years ago
(when most reading was aloud to a crowd
of illiterates), your being seen reading silently,
not even moving your lips, might get you
suspected of having a pact with Satan
or gawked at as a freak.

(I say “a thousand years ago”, forgetting
that even in these awfully sophisticated
post-modern days, millions of people on earth
do not read.)

It isn't easy to forget literacy, once learned,
even these scrawls (my lousy handwriting),
hard to perceive as incomprehensible patterns,
harder still with print -- hard to unsee this
as words and sounds and meanings.

If you try, if you stare at these words a long time;
maybe forgetting for a flash that these
are words, you become aware of all the machinery,
the cogs and cams and conveyor belts, condensers,
generators, colossal factories full of habitual
automaticities that we have constructed
(and forgotten, pushed out of view, like what goes
into our sausages) to let us read a page,
any page -- machinery that dwarfs
the minor, specialized machinery
(though far more books are written about it)
that tells us the words on a page are a poem.

Note: Similarly, most poets think that what's difficult to communicate is “the meaning of life” (or “meaninglessness” – I'm all for less ness) or profound joy or profound distress, all of which (experienced by all at some point) are far easier to communicate than, for example, the meaning of the word “of”. Go ahead, convey to me the experience of being “of” something or moving “to” something. And what is the difference between experiencing “a thing” as opposed to “something”?

When are words a poem? Who knows?
At least there's no doubt that a book is a book,
a page is a page and writing is writing,

although, when first dug out of the ruins
of Herculaneum (buried in 79 A. D.
beneath the hot mud, ash and gas
of Vesuvius), 2000 papyrus scrolls were initially
mistaken for vaguely cylindrical lumps
of charcoal.

Now, nearly 300 years after their unearthing,
scholars have learned to peel them apart, patchily,
and even, under infra-red light, discern their Greek
and Latin characters. (To me Greek is already
a blankness, not an achievement of clarity. It's
not even Greek to me.)

The scholars are excited -- fragments of late
Epicurean discussions that quote until-now-lost
passages from Sappho, and who-knows-what-more
may speak to them from lumps of charcoal
(like the small still voice of the bush that burned,
but was not consumed) --

isn't that the fun of literature? Lumps and sheets
of stuff (the stuff of old wood, doorknobs, furniture,
walls, star dust) speaking to us in our own voices?

Note: The bush that burned, but was not consumed is not George W. (the Bush to whom alone God reveals his plans for Iraq -- or through whom that God perhaps speaks to us, if God is a Neoconservative), but the bush from which God spoke (or spake) to Moses. Those charcoal scrolls (usable as fuel) were burned, or buried beneath hot ashes and thoroughly blackened, but not quite consumed.

Re last stanza above: Wouldn't that be a great way to review books? "This book is wonderful! As I looked at its paper pages, words appeared, and I understood them. It was as if someone were speaking to me! What a neat trick!"

I recall but dimly the excitement
of first recognizing human words in the print
on a page. I've been reading and writing
for aeons – even aeiousns! In my most recent
childhood, I knew before I was supposed to know --
not the words, but that words were there
on the page from which my Mom replenished
her harried day-time voice, made it big
and small and hard and soft with stories
out of books we called “Golden” that had covers
with lively pictures in ornate golden frames.

The moment of revelation I recall (age 7)
was on first finding and (standing there --
in the Hebrew School library, of all places!)
starting to read THE TOWER TREASURE by
Franklin W. Dixon (someone with another name
who used to be Mr. Dixon died a few years ago) --

my first Hardy Boys book. I couldn't believe it!
This was no children's story, no Alice and Jerry
saying “Run, Jip, Run!” to their dog, no fairy
princess, no ogre -- look at the picture (oddly called
the “frontispiece”) -- two kids a little older than me!

This was good stuff, like the gun shots on the radio,
overheard by a child who was supposed to be asleep.
This was two older kids catching real crooks -- WOW!
I didn't know they had good stuff like this in books.
Frank and Joe Hardy even had a buddy (Chet Morton)
who was plump and cracked too many jokes,
just like me.

*Note: In line 4, above, “aeiousns” is simply aeons extended to include ALL the vowels, and perhaps express our shrieks
at confronting the aeons before and behind us as we ask Y? O Y? (Oi!)*

*There were moments in my elementary school days when it was discouraging to realize that Frank and Joe Harding
were fictions. (I used to look for them in people I saw on the street.) Odder still to discover that Franklin W. Dixon was
also a fiction (pen name for several ghosts). But that's OK – I, the reader, was also a work of fiction. Don't tell the
Hardy Boys – it would disappoint them, I know.*

Later I had the kind of realizations
one is supposed to have on first reading
Chapman's Homer (which I haven't read) --
hours of living with Tolstoy's characters,
who became my closest friends; the day
when the narrow-alleyed, cluttered Dublin
of Joyce's ULYSSES suddenly leapt off the page
to surround me with people I could no longer
dismiss as quaint; the day Shakespeare's
ornate Elizabethan poetry, as homogeneous
as tall meadow grass full of wind,
turned into many voices, each distinct and alive
and speaking to me; the day I reread Kafka's
TRIAL and, suddenly, got the joke; the day
I realized that D. H. Lawrence was making
fine distinctions, not smearing everything
into one passionate jelly --

Oh, no doubt these were deeper, richer realizations,
but none held that warm sense of adventure,
of entering a world where I could be whatever
I dreamed, that my first page of the Hardy Boys
gave me. After all, I cycled through the ones I owned
for years. I read THE SECRET OF THE OLD MILL
eleven times. I've only read WAR AND PEACE
three times.

I can no longer live in Franklin W. Dixon's
world. I'm too big for it. (When last I owned
the books, their seams were torn from the strain.)
But I'm not too big for what I felt on first
looking it over with a wild surmise.

Note: But three times through War and Peace and 2.5 times through Anna Karenina left me with friends who have stayed with me, while Frank and Joe Hardy (if not the joy of first meeting them) are cardboard figures in the attic now.

I spoke of the perversity of French,
making blanc (so close to black) mean
white -- white as snow; and just today
(one “just today” or another)
I notice that French snow is neige,
with its distant echo of negri (Negro).

Neige is pronounced nezh; as with most French,
to say neige, you look down your *nez* at
the rest of us.

It's early March. Our snow got dirty,
then melted, even the remaining white of it
serving only to darken our soil.
Water on sidewalk darkens cement too,
unless a puddle catches the slant sun,
becoming blindingly blanc (shiny).
Will you have a glass of light water
or dark water? How can whiteness
soil the soil? Eau-eau! What can
matter be?

Neige in the nez, that painful freshness,
the icy nip of everything, every atom,
slowing down, the frantic spin of particles
that seemed to fill up the gaps in solids
staggers like an old phonograph record
winding down, the shrillness of things
swallowed into a drunken basso-profundo
stillness -- but, Oh,

the nip in nose is not cold, no, it's the
poetry rushing in to fill a void, warm blood
raging at the cold.

Note: “Eau-Eau! What can matter be” alludes to “Oh Dear, What can the matter be”, eau-eau (meaning water-water) sounding like “OhOh” to my barbarian Yankee ears. “Neige in the nez” – literally “snow in the nose”, that nip of cold in one’s breath on a winter day. Cold IS a slowing of particle motion in matter.

For those who don't recall what happened when an old wind-up phonograph “wound down” (needing rewinding by turning a crank on the side of the console), the record would slow, gradually, a fast treble sound becoming a slow, deep bass sound, a baby's cry becoming a low moan – and then continue to slow and deepen until the phonograph (and sound) stopped. Hence the idea of shrillness swallowed into a drunken basso-profundo stillness, drunken, because thus slowed down, the sounds revealed unevenness. (Profundo: This may describe a professor untying his shoes or removing someone's bra [prof-undo], or it may describe a come-hither hairdo [a pro-fun do], and there are other possibilities.)

What if money were blank?
Would you take it? Would you spend it?
Save it? Wads of blank white bills --
easy to spot counterfeits,
with ink all over them, even a clever one,
blank expanse delicately tinged
by a single haiku. No denominations --
each bill is worth whatever you want it to be worth,
or whatever you can imagine it to be worth
(if you imagine well enough
to persuade others). Who would give you
your supper or a new car for blank scraps
of paper?

But perhaps if you offered them as poetry
futures? Options on words yet to be coined?
Relics of ancient trees, worth their weight
in poetry -- and poetry, of course, has gravitas.

But let us compromise, not be fanatic
about blankness. We'll humor
the Philistines, add a few words and pictures
to our scraps, if necessary, make them fancy,
columned and acanthus-draped, Latined,
numbered, signed, given noble purposes,
emblems -- sounds like poetry, like
far too much poetry.

Note: Money is poetry backed by gold – or confidence it can be exchanged for substance or services. These poems can perhaps be traded for smiles or snores. It is not my intention to write redeemable poems, though I do hope they can locate some redeemable readers.

I once worked for an organization,
writing reports that had to go on pink paper
(to distinguish them from the white sheets --
in the same folder -- whose data they summarized) --

pink; it was policy. But, not being in the pink,
sometimes we ran out of pink
before we ran out of urgently needed reports,
so at the top of a white sheet, in big letters,
I would print (underlined and circled) the word
“PINK,”
and enter my report.

(After all, the policies were headed “Policy.”)

Your dreams (the ones you’ve never noticed,
surrounding you as invisibly and vitally as air --
air within the air you breathe, a twinkling, as if
the full moon had dissolved and turned to slow snow) --
your dreams are shy. It takes a pure blankness
to draw them out, to tease you into
making them visible to yourself.

You have run out of blankness. These poems
I scribble on pages are here to lead you
to that blankness in which your dreams
(like your breath on a cold day) appear.
Each poem marks the page for you, labeling it
BLANK.

Note: If you stare at a blank sheet long enough, images will appear, and with more staring, become more vivid and solid. One’s own mind (consisting mainly of images fancied or of past experience) can be rendered visible – you just have to look. The images are there (and not necessarily in the brain or even in the body, though probably in the body’s field). They have mass. That’s why, when past experiences of impact or injury (for example) are stirred up, they can become vivid and include re-experiencing pain and pressure and other sensations. But even when past experiences are light and joyful, they can be seen more clearly when nothing else intervenes or distracts. (People who spend enough time in sensory deprivation settings can scarcely differentiate between thought and “actuality”.) Trying to see one’s own dreams in a world all a-fizz with the manufactured dreams we call commercials, TV noise, computer demands and small talk is like trying to view stars from Times Square or the Vegas Strip – too much light pollution. All but a few stars are invisible, as unreal as, to most of us, our own dreams.

There’s lots of room on a paper that has been written on – one could write between the lines, in the margins, etc. But I find it easier to see my poem if the page is blank when I begin.

Telepathy, considered by many impossible,
or, at best, a giggly parlor game
with an eerie edge -- telepathy is not
too hard for us; it's too easy -- each mind
pixilated with images, words, feelings, circuiting
melodies, numbers, smells, ear-ringing, hungers,
pains... -- how to tell what comes from where
or whom?

If we were swamped always with everyone,
we would learn to turn off the noise,
to fine-tune ourselves, like radios,
to what we could live with, become
oblivious to all the other static and melodrama
passing through us.

Schizophrenia may be weak or wandering tuning;
poets do that too, perhaps on purpose.

If we could accept all that noise
passing through us (if we knew ourselves
well enough to trust that we could not lose
ourselves in too many voices), we could
silence them all (like a good mother, shushing
her children), create blanknesses,

and in the resultant clarity, receive (and know
we were receiving) wordlessly from one another
poetry or any chosen thing.

What we call blankness is static,
not an absence, but a presence,
the white noise of which custom
makes "silence." There's the blankness
of a television screen filling with snow
and the blankness of a gray screen -- full of
drifting reflections -- ghostly fish bowl
that has been clicked OFF. Which
is blanker? Which sadder?

An astronaut is lost in space, heading outwards,
cannot be retrieved. At first we hear his voice,
his farewells, his brave chitchat, attempts
to joke; increasingly the human sound
is pocked by cosmic blips, gradually
(it seems years, but is only hours or days)
"fades out," that is, turns to static,
is supplanted by a random noise

in which, we, accustomed to listening hard
for the breaking-up voice, keep detecting
wisps of him, whispers, half-syllables;
cannot quite unhear his trying to reach us,
though we know, by now, he's long out
of oxygen.

No wonder we want stories, words,
anything human, even ghosts.

In the movie "Poltergeist,"
a child sneaks out of bed to sit on the floor,
rapt, before the TV, listening to static
and watching the radiant snow
of channels that have gone off the air
for the night. We listen, too, begin to hear
a fine broth of witchy, whispery, just-barely-
incomprehensible voices. Later the girl
is drawn into and through the TV screen,
lost in a world of dislocated spirits.
Her parents strain to hear her voice there.

We all know that fascination with static
trying to become voice, meaning fading
in and out of gibberish. Who has not
repeated a word over and over until it
begins to lose, regain, lose, change, lose, regain
meaning as rapidly as sea changes beneath
a sky dappled with swift-blown clouds?

Who has not tried to decipher the secrets
hidden in songs like "I Am a Walrus",
that dip in and out of verbal chaos,
or Louie Loueye, with its blurred lyrics?
Number nine, number nine, number nine....

(With what glee some discovered a secret Beatle message --
send in for YOUR code ring TODAY, Video Rangers! --
"Paul is dead," they announced. It must have been
true, because it was concealed in gibberish.
It still is.)

Note: I feel better about the future if I assume (foolishly) that no one will ever need a footnote to understand the references to the Beatles and their work. In case some have forgotten, the "Number nine" line comes from one of their least impressive experiments, so I don't mind referring you to the long version of "Revolution" on the White Album. "Louie Loueye" is not Beatles, of course (people who say "of course" in such contexts are pompous asses), but from earlier rock. (I don't recall the name of the group, sorry. Ask Google.)

I did know people who, in 1968, were certain, from various signs and symbols in the Beatles albums (particularly Abbey Road) that Paul had died, and that this was being covered up. They entertained themselves greatly with decoding the signs. In 1980, John died, and that wasn't entertaining at all. (Actually, it filled the news for weeks, so I suppose some found it entertaining. If it doesn't entertain, it never makes the news.) Now George has moved on as well, only Paul and Ringo remaining. And lots of great songs, for those who can value anything NOT concealed in gibberish.

Nothing like chaos, gibberish, static
to attract decoders like ants to sugar.
Is Shakespeare a trifle obscure in spots?
Not when you recognize it's all a code
to help you bring home the Bacon.

In late Beatledom, fans proved wondrous things
from album cover clues and backward messages
an unchosen few could hear in the most chaotic
tracks, where songs descended into jungle-noise mixes
of old clips from *King Lear*, traffic noise, zoo noise
and Lennon-knows-what. Though, from my own
decipherings of the Dully Nudes, I conclude
that John Lennon is as dead as he can be
(not very, actually).

Fans proved, around 1969, that "Paul is dead" --
an imposture, barefoot ("like a corpse!") on the cover of
Abbey Road. And somewhere on the Internet,
I suppose one could find a clutch of aging fans
who still exchange clues that positively prove
Paul died then, our current Sir Paul a phony.
(Imagine -- as John was wont to sing -- imagine
the REAL Paul writing disco hits!)

Someday he'll die. If John and George can die,
anyone can. I'm sure Paul hopes it will have
mattered -- that the years between death and death
were worth delaying being young again.
Me, I liked him young, but I liked me young, too,
and am in no hurry to live in a crib again.

What's odd is that the cavernous abysses of chaos
that open in our work should attract spelunkers
(see them bent over in the most tortuous passages
of our poems), eager to make sense out of the abhorred
nothing (blankness as static); yet, so often the sense
they construe, reflecting their fears, is that we are
someone else or dead or never wrote.

Note: Bits of a performance of King Lear weave in and out of the chaos that underlies the final goo-goo-ga-Joobs of Lennon's "I am the Walrus". Traffic noise, animal noises, etc., clutter the background of "Good Morning", "Revolution #9" and a few other songs, mostly Lennon's, all post-LSD, mostly pretentious (as Beatles music goes), though in "Walrus" just about everything works. (Anyway, bad Lennon is damned good just-about-anyone-else. Not counting "Two Virgins", his album of primal screaming with Yoko. Listen to it if you want to appreciate the value of silence -- which is the audio form of the blank page.)

Where a work of art becomes chaos,
it doesn't let us in. How can we contribute
to a game with no rules? We don't know
whom to cheer, whom to boo. What blanks
can we fill in with our dreams, when we
can't tell the blankness from the text?

The moral to be taken from those who decipher
art is: Artist, give us a game to play, or we'll
make YOU the game. We'll prove
you're secretly gay (and not in the old sense)
or even dead. (Being secretly gay in the old sense --
filled with joy that is revealed only to those
who can see the glitter in your eyes -- is too
intimate a thing for even decoders to allege.)
(Death, on the other hand, is public,
like a frog. Croaking is croaking.)

Many authors are, of course, secretly dead.
And much scholarship is decoding -- the dead
leading the dead (or burying their dead?).
And seeing that critics and scholars often prefer
what's obscure, many writers, wanting attention,
throw the scholars juicy red meat, their work
become encryption demanding decryption.

Encrypt contains crypt. It is risky to play dead.
It makes it hard to tell if you are.

Note: I mock art as code to decrypt, yet provide these notes. Hah! (Decrypt: Raise from the crypt. Lazarus, my poem, ARISE!)

The lines about "gay" and glittering eyes allude to the Yeats poem, "Lapis Lazuli".

"How public, like a frog" is one of Emily Dickinson's gems.

But if you're dead, perhaps you'd prefer
not to know it. Much poetry I read
seems to advertise, but not reveal,
a secret -- perhaps a secret the poet
keeps from the poet: The poet is dead,
but please don't let on -- you'll hurt
his/her, well, not feelings, but
whatever ghosts have -- reputations?

Of course, poets do die; that is, bodies do,
and poets are often suffered to have bodies.
And then some who die become classics.
What harm in practicing to become classic?

The living dead are ghosts, and ghosts
are mainly old white bed sheets (or so
we're taught each Halloween) with giggling
children inside, which suggests there can be
something lovable about blank sheets.
(Can you hear this paper giggling in the background,
barely able to pretend to take my words
seriously.)

But real ghosts (living or dead) contain nothing
they are certain is real. They flicker
in and out of being -- unlike our sturdy classics:

Have you ever seen a classic,
A classic,
A classic,
Have you ever seen a classic
Go this way and that?

Note: The last section plays on an old Scottish dance or nursery rhyme: Have you ever seen a lassie.... In this case, going this way and that refers to the flickering presence of ghosts, though it may also echo dimly the two meanings of "gay" in the previous poem: "Oh, does he go THAT way?" And eyes that glitter with an older meaning.

Nothing (of which the blankness of a new page
is a subspecies -- the nothing of no words,
the possibility of any words) is what we,
creators and observers of somethings, most natively
are, or, removed from it by our becomings,
is yet what we sense lurking in our lives
as the library to which we are overdue,

dreaded when we fear the dissolution
of all we think we are and of all that that
holds dear; embraced when these become
burdens, confinements.

(That's a mouthful of marshmallow.
I must really be something to weave
that sticky a web!)

So, as I was saying, I says to myself, Self,
I says.... But, seriously, folks, a poet,
fearing blankness, insists on knowing
who he is before creating who he is
by writing words on a page.

But no living poet enters the stream of words
twice. To write is to act: each pen stroke or key stroke
changes who we are.

Not wanting that flux (nauseous), a poet relies for self-definition
on the critic (friendly or not, himself or another --
but if himself, always the ghost of some other)
to make pronouncements, tell him who he is,
what he'll be (or not) to future generations, what sort
of a sort of a poet he is -- the verbal equivalent
of mortuary science. Stone by stone, criticism --
constructive crypticism (what else builds crypts?) --
surrounds the poet with his echoing -- he hopes
echoing -- vault.

Note: Stanza 5 – Heraclitus said “It is impossible to step into the same stream twice.” At least that’s what we think he said. It’s a little unclear across languages and centuries. We asked him to say the same thing again, but he said that would be impossible.

End of stanza 6: For echoing, I prefer the shower to a vault. I nipped the echoing vault from Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress to Make Much of Time.” The poet here (end of last stanza) hopes the vault is echoing with his own words, with words praising his words, etc. Seems a poor consolation.

Critics and reviewers tend to categorize poets. Some poets live for this. Others are always elsewhere by the time some critic categorizes some decoy the poet left behind.

Choose, poet, a leap into and out of blankness
or a fine and private place
where none embrace --
a vault? Or a vault?
(Oi gevalt!) (And vat about Vault Vitman?)

I like a dolphin-dipping poem, myself,
a quick blue plunge (breaking the water
with a hard smack: BASHO!), splashing
about a bit, luxuriating in the absence
of gravity, the urgent tangibility
of breath, the familiarity of a medium
in which, yet, it is alien to be this body
(as if I must have known water -- or art -- better
when I was something other than a body) --

coming up sleek-haired, dripping beads of blankness,
shivering, hunch-shouldered, glowing.

A poem lasts longer than a few quick twists
and somersaults in the pool, but cameras
can still the droplets' tiny tiaras of re-entry, freeze
the lacy draperies of our splashings. Conversely,
is there no anti-camera to turn our poems back
into joyous splashings?

Note: The "fine and private place where none embrace" cadges words from Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress, to Make Much of Time": "The grave's a fine and private place,/ But none, I think, do there embrace." "Vault Vitman" – Walt Whitman. And Basho is Basho (his name, by the way – by some way, I hope – is Japanese for banana leaf). I enjoy the splash-like burst of his name, since he is best known for the haiku about the frog's leap, which ends with "Splash!" or, in some translations, "water sound."

The two vaults in line 4 are the leap (or vault -- a low leap being a low vaultage) and the tomb (or vault, an ancient tomb having a high vault-age). I'd apologize for the other vaults in line 5 (Oi gevalt and Vault Vitman), but it's not really my vault. The language did it!

Stanza 4: Time-lapse photography shows the drop, as it hits the surface (re-entry) creating a tiny tiara of droplets, seen by us as a "splash".

Shackled to my narrow theme (a book
of blank pages to be filled with poems
about filling blank pages with poems),
I can say, it seems, anything,
be as serious or silly (or both at once)
as I please. Though, taken singly, most
of these pages would be snipped to pieces
by any workshop, yet, read as a group,
the various discordant voices on any given
(very much given -- but received?) -- any
given page join similar voices on other pages
to become intertwined threads (doesn't that
sound pleasing to the critical ear), winding
through the "greater work."

I relearn here the old lesson: Find restrictions
to find freedom. By limiting my theme, I'm free
to range. A kite can't get away with wild
cavortings in the sky without the tether
of a strong, taut string.

If I walk up to you, stranger, on the street,
there is little I can, acceptably, say to you.
But on paper, in sonnet form (or whatever
it takes to identify "poetry"), I can hold forth
on my sexual preferences, fears, the stickiness
of burrs, how a spring morning is still
a spring morning or any damned thing.

Now I write in the strictest -- and thus,
the richest -- of forms: each poem must fill
a blank page.

Note: Each poem must fill PARTS of a blank page. The parts of this page not filled with ink were intentionally left blank, including the holes in the o's. Of the interstices between molecules of ink we say nothing. (Except "Of the interstices between molecules of ink we say nothing." Logic is so much simpler – paradox free – without nothing. No wonder the Romans preferred not to discover the so-called number, zero.)

Free flow of communication -- the ability
to talk to anyone about anything:
it comes from strictures. Form liberates,
says the artist. Some artists repudiate form
(or tell themselves they do) and simply
spew words, but this freedom comes
at great price, restricting, not the words,
but the audience, which is limited to one,
or often none, since such poets seldom listen
to themselves.

Love liberates: I can say anything
to my wife (though she mocks me when
I burst in upon her to read her my latest masterpiece,
misquoting my own quip at me: "I can say
either yes or no before you read it to me, right?").

But we have worked long and (in several senses) hard
at crafting this love that can both speak
and listen. (Someday I'll learn to listen, Dear, honest!)
I suppose if I love others well enough, we will all
find more things we can tell each other.

As for simply being able to talk to anyone
about anything (and receive as freely) --
that, too, is based on a restriction, the most severe
of all restrictions: to be that free, one must be oneself
(no other) and be able to find in others (even
in mother, in a cop, or a rich man or a beggar) --
in each, the self that person is.

Note: The quip (my own) that my wife likes to throw back at me is an old poem of mine:

*The child wants to know if I
want to see something. I can say
either yes or no before he
shows me.*

Not that freedom is limited to one fixed identity.
It's a matter (or absence of matter) of being
no identity at all, being, rather, that which can
assume any identity.

If I am a gentleman, I cannot cuss you out.
If I am a caveman, I don't know how to bow
and kiss your hand.

Oh, poor most serene and inscrutable Guru,
you can't get pissed off -- not where anyone
might notice. Mr. President, there is so much
you cannot say to us or anywhere a journalist
might overhear -- and they are everywhere.
Husband, what must your wife not hear?
Wife, what might make your neighbors
think less of you? Child, never never
NEVER speak to your mother, father, teacher
that way again; and, tough kid, don't let your
friends know that you once liked to play
with dolls.

Each identity is sealed off into the secrecy that
defines it. Each is a blankness -- a blank wall,
that is, a face (eyes pretending a mild interest)
ballooned outward by the pressure of what cannot
be said, a face that finds the blank page
a secret facing one's own secrets,
a problem: what can one make the page say?
What can one get out of it? (Confess, page!)
(You be the good reader and I'll be the bad reader.)

But if I can choose to be anyone at all
(can, for example, be a poet when I want to use
words in mixed company that gentlemen must not use),
I need have no secrets from the page, so that, always,
the page is eager to tell me all.

Note: The line "You be the good reader and I'll be the bad reader" refers to the "good cop/bad cop" approach to getting a suspect to "talk", as you and I are now endeavoring to get these once-blank pages to talk.

Re "words in mixed company: there are MANY words in mixed "company", including "yon camp," "copy man" and "cop many".

Yet even the most free-spirited writer
must make himself a secret, just to play
the game, which insists that every work of art
be a revelation. Blankness
must be made to assume the guise
of secrecy ("I know a secret! I
Know a secret! And I'm not telling!").

Only then can I unfold myself to you
or unfold you to you --
release the blank page from its oath
of silence, tidbit by excruciating bit.

Like any art, a poem begins with mystery:
What is he saying? How will it all
come out? Who is speaking, anyway?
Sneak a peek at the last line -- no help,
it makes no sense.

"Holmes, where can this twisting argument
be leading us? It feels eerily familiar!
And these odd markings on the page --
can you make any sense of them?"

"Elementary, my dear...WATCH YOUR STEP,
WATSON! That's a personal pronoun -- of the
2nd person singular, I should think. They are
horridly sticky. If you fell into one, I should have
the devil of a time extricating you."

"But Holmes, what does it all MEAN?"

"Ah, see this -- step carefully -- this cliff
where the page ends? Let us peek over
the edge. I think all our questions
are about to be answered."

In each poem, I must unfold myself to you,
unfold you to you -- all this folding and
unfolding! No wonder, Dear Reader,
that each year we are more deeply creased,
even our laughter inscribing us, for it, too,
is how we reveal or conceal ourselves.

Young faces hold no secrets, blank and unlined
(kept out of rough drafts),
instantly revealing every grief and joy,
retaining nothing of either an instant beyond
its outbreak, a sky swept by storm clouds
once again an unblotted baby blue. That's why
we speak of the child as "artless." What mystery
can there be? Is it a smile or gas pains?
(Riddle of the Sphinx or sphincter?)
Which spoonfuls will be swallowed, which
spat in all directions? By what miracle
does he learn our speech? What will he
become? How can he ever conceivably
become what we are?

How boring! The same old profundity;
the same old secret no one wants to know,
the old oracular shit! Must the answer
to every riddle be me, just me again,
is this all that poor baby has to look forward to --
me and you, our blank baby faces scribbled
all over with memos that remind us,
"YOU ARE HERE"?

Note: Or you WERE here.

Blankness is blankness, a secret
about nothing, the child's hilarious secret,
whispered incomprehensibly (all warm moist breath
and bubble-gum scent and giggles) close to your ear,
a joke, gibberish, no secret at all, you've been had,
the writing on your face, laugh lines, crows' feet,
tear channels, smile channels, dark bags of anxiety --
all folds on a baby's blank face, as alien
as weather, laugh lines where we've realized too often
that something big is nothing at all; grief lines
where we've realized that what we knew we had
is no longer ours and probably never was;

all these presences of absences, sign posts pointing
to one-time futures that never happened,
incomprehensible skin-scrawls marking a blankness
to remind us that nothing is there -- it's like death:

The body is vacant, so we put it in an ornate box
(see, everybody -- there he is!), then seal the box,
so that it contains something, but what it contains
is nothing unless that body contains something,
so by putting nothing in a box, we are telling ourselves
that nothing is something -- our friend is in that box
(strange consolation), because who would seal up
nothing in a box? -- it must be something!

Look, Time, you've written all over my face!
I must mean something!

With great flourish, put a spirit in a body, put
the body in a box, put the box deep in the earth
or into a fire -- this sounds just like a magic trick,
with all the glib, distracting patter (cadaver
palaver) along the way (“Dearly Beloved...”,
“So sorry for your loss...”, “We’ll always
remember...”, “...into a better world”),

But at the end -- WHERE’S THE “PRESTO!”?
When do we get to see the box opened,
the out-rush of white doves and red roses, no
body there -- what have you done with our
friend?

But, LO! Here he is, in your own breast pocket!...
and here (nothing up my sleeve) -- here he is again!
He’s been hiding behind your ear all along!

But no one says “Presto!” No magician appears,
so, knowing the show can’t be over yet,
we feel compelled to invent conclusions:

The empty tomb, a heaven full of dove-like angels,
heaps of wreathed flowers -- but the real trick
is so much simpler: He was never in that body
in the first place. And you and I are not
on this page.

As long as it's the same page we're both not on,
we can communicate. If you're not really
in that body, and I'm not really in this one,
not only can we make them talk
at each other, but we can understand
what they say. Brain science will never
discover us (phew!). We're hidden
in plain know -- nothing to see here, folks,
just a brain -- marvel at its convolutions, its
trillions and billions and quadrille lions of
thingies that connect to thingies that receive
and translate signals into signals -- but never ask,
"Who is listening at the receiving end?"

For there is no "who", no you nor I, no one is
here -- ah, my fellow non-existent neuro-scientists,
you are SUCH mystics!

But that's just one more way a wrinkled blob of fat
comports itself (see here: this is the section of the brain
that, if stimulated, makes one imagine he is a
psychiatrist), or perhaps symptomatic of chemicals
losing their balance after being spun through
too many DNA spirals. Most neuro-scientists suffer
from Nobody's-Here-But-Us-Brains Disorder
(or NHBUB) -- these NHBUBs of negativity --

for which we have a new miracle medication:
Imbibulac! -- active ingredient, pure alcohol.
Neuro-scientists need a dose of spirit,
the lift that keeps on leaving (or is it
living?), the fighting nothing that always wants
to make something of it, make lots of somethings,
see all the somethings bubbling up out of it,
the ever effervescent spirit!

Note: My coined acronym, NHBUB, reminded me of ex-Vice President Spiro Agnew's description of journalists then hostile to him as "Nabobs of Negativity" -- pretty damned good for a politician (and, supposedly, a corrupt one). What ever became of him, poor dwindling Spiro? (Note: "Dwindling" because he dwindled from view and because "dwindling spiral" describes the way entrapment leads to greater entrapment (addiction, for example, or the way the hatreds left over from a war lead to a worse war) in a downward-spiraling world.

I don't want to get your hopes up.
When you die, you're dead -- that's it.
If I'm wrong, just come right back and
show me your receipt (one life, slightly
lived), and I'll give you double your money
back. (Of course, you won't be able to
take it with you.) Hard words, but I
don't want to set you up for disappointment.

After all, how would you feel if, expecting
to find yourself immortal and face to face
with God, you wake up one morning
to find yourself nothing at all, just dead
(whatever that is -- I mean, who is it
that's dead?) -- wouldn't that be
disappointing? What a drag! I'm dead
and I don't even know it! But,

hey! what if we're all dead and we don't
even know it? And hey! what if we're
all alive and we don't even know it?
Would that be death too?

But truly, I don't want to get your hopes up
by telling you you're immortal, because your
immortality is nothing to hope for. It just is,
right now (if ever). You don't have to knock off
your body to know you're alive, to know you exist,
always have, always will (well, I certainly think that
if I'd been absolutely nothing for an eternity
before 1942, I'd remember it; don't you?),

with nothing to hope for other than
the games we here and now create
for each other out of nothing.

Note: Think about it: If you were immortal, and if immortality were simply a matter of duration, rather than a present-time knowing, at what point would you know you were immortal? You could shed body after body, survive death after death, and only know that you had survived so far. Don't wait for time to prove your immortality to you. Time knows nothing about it. Surviving the death of a body rids you of one of the lies that impugn your immortality, but the only way you can KNOW you're immortal is to be it and be aware of being that which is immortal.

Not that it isn't sometimes a pleasure to be
a few feet in back of that oddly familiar
head or a few thousand miles from my body
among snowflakes over an empty ocean or
anyway, outside. Being out of the body
(a brief vacation or for good) can be
refreshing.

Imagine being locked up in a closet full of
warm, undulant, slimy, intestines. Imagine
an auditorium where you are surrounded
by Muzak sounds systems, all thundering, to the
heart's ostinato, "YOU ARE HERE! You
are MEAT! There is no other you, no other
place you can be! This is the taste of you.
You taste like saliva, and just give thanks
that the anus has no taste buds. You can't spit
yourself out. This is the sound of you,
the smell of you, and this pressure here
on the forehead is where you hit the swing,
and here is where you fell off your bike,
and that growing ache is where she left you,
and this one is where your dog died, and
that voice, the one that goes on and on,
circuiting, fixes everything for you
by saying, 'I'm special, and no one
understands me,' and this one helps by saying,
'I don't eat broccoli' and this one forgives you by saying,
'Oh, I'm SUCH a klutz!' and here's one saying,
'You have to lose, to win' and..." --

and, God, it's good to be here in all this silence,
requiring no justifications, no explanations,
amid snowflakes swirling over an endless sea.

Note: Why snowflakes over the sea? Because, one night, after a long drive, as I settled in to sleep (but still wide awake), I lay back and found myself out over the ocean (Atlantic, I think), watching snowflakes swirl into the waves (far from shore).

We prefer the familiar horror. So many, these days,
can't recall ever having been anything but
their current hunk of flesh (love the one
you're with -- your width, your breath, your
death)

Partly it's habit: When I drove a cab,
after a 12-hour shift, I'd become the cab.
Walking home from the garage, I'd be aware
of the tree I passed invading the space
that had been my right fender. Ghost dents.
Someone waving for a cab -- for an instant, I,
in my little body with no room for big
passengers in mink coats, would start
to respond.

And not knowing we are the source of all games,
fearing the nothing we think we are (apart
from these bodies), the absence of games
to play (And how, without bodies, will we
know one another? How speak and know
we've been understood? Will I still be able
to have sex? Taste hot pecan pie with real
whipped cream? Can a spirit laugh? [Can
anything else?]) -- all the things we think
we won't have if we slip out of our cells --

too risky. We will tolerate only a light misalignment,
say we feel "high" or "beside ourselves", then
dodge back into our heads, to become
headaches.

Note: If one must experience "hot pecan pie with real whipped cream", it is safer to do so without a body. Or without the pie. For example, you probably experienced it as you read the words "hot pecan pie with real whipped cream" and for an instant (that blipped by mostly unobserved) tasted and smelled it vividly, a taste that "the real thing" couldn't match. How many times I've gobbled up half a slice of apple pie before I realized that it wasn't very good -- crust a bit card-boardy, apples too sugary, etc. -- and that I hadn't noticed, because I'd been eating my IDEA of apple pie, which is delicious.

Unready to be out of our heads,
pushed out, for example, by intolerable pain or
death (whoops -- did I drop that body?), we are
disoriented, cannot at first tell what we perceive
from what we now, so solidly, hallucinate --
our perceptions being our own, unrestricted
to what eyes can see; and our imaginings, too,
are unpent, no longer drowned out by the body's
amplified senses.

It can be terrifying to be out of our heads,
to be nothing, to be all these things
at once, to be wherever and whatever
we think of, we who have never had to
take responsibility for our thoughts
("Can't be blamed for thinking," we thought),
depending on our spongy bodies to absorb
and dampen them, turn our "I wish I was
dead" and "Let there be light!" and "More
ice cream NOW!" and "I am the sun!" --

turning these unappealable, instantly-to-be-
obeyed commands to the universe, which is
what our native thoughts really are ["thought"
is too pale a word now, more tarnished silver
than gold, our sicklied ore] after trillennia of
our being stuck in bodies, where the sun
don't shine) -- turning our thoughts
to rueful wishes, our I'll to ill, intricate figuring
about what might be plausible,
explanations for failure.

Note: Calling thought our "sicklied ore" refers to a line somewhere in Shakespeare (a romantic title for a novel: "Somewhere in Shakespeare"), HAMLET, isn't it, that refers to resolution as being sicklied o'er with thought. And I, too, am an o'er - I owe a great deal to Shakespeare. (Or perhaps time runs the other direction, and he owed me a great deal.)

A car that has forgotten it can do other
than idle in a garage suddenly finds itself
on a highway going 80, trees and boulders
spinning past on either side -- disconcerting.

So we, free of body, tumbled about
by thoughts with no idea how to make them
once again our own, moving through walls
easier than through our ideas of walls
(is there now a difference?) -- and how
can one see spherically, all sides
at once? I mean, one is doing so, but
how?

Safer to be (and with that thought, with a ZZZIP!,
one is -- as if yanked back on a rubber band)
smack in one's good old head, more tightly tethered
than ever, and isn't it nice to be me, good old
me, a real character, you know -- everybody
knows good old me, a character as familiar
as THESE characters (a, b, c, etc.),
filling up blankness, making it safe.

And yet, I have been apart from this body --
it was a gentle parting, leaving,
not in pain nor forced out by pulling the
ejection lever (that is, by taking a drug),
nor, really, was it a leaving, for I did not leave,

but, instantly, was elsewhere: For example,
that time at camp, age 12, when I lay back,
all the way back, on pine needles to look up
through spiraling branches along rapidly tapering
trunks, depth beyond depth, to a summer sky
crossed by puffy cumuli, vast cloud fleets
with wind-swollen radiant sails, and these
I suddenly saw in full perspective, as if my eyes
caressed each vapory convolution, as if
I'd always seen sky and clouds with one eye closed,
and now suddenly I saw with both eyes,

and even more suddenly I filled up the sky,
clouds passing through me, knowing myself
nothing at all, and yet I was -- I am -- I,
and all this was familiar: I knew I was I and
always had been, knew it with more certainty
than anything I'd ever known; could feel
and see each shift of pine needle in the
piney breeze, felt a compassion and good will
toward my tiny body lying there -- a feeling that,
as a 12-year-old, I could not have felt,
for it was a wisdom beyond that rather whiny
and desperate-to-be-liked and clownish 12-year-old.

Then, noticing the other ants around the campfire,
I, some masquerading I, felt pride at my knowing
what they could not, which is when, suddenly
(why are all these things, so persistent in themselves,

sudden?) -- suddenly, I was a pudgy, smart-alecky
12-year-old, lying on pine needles, and Mickey
tossed sand in my face, and, blinded, I cried
at my own silliness (he and the counselors thinking
it was because of him).

Before I blew it, came down to earth, ate dirt
(quicksand, really, it came so quick to meet
my pettiness), cried -- when I was full of clouds,
was it lonely in the sky? Certainly, I couldn't tell
the others where I was. Easier to think superior
thoughts about them ("They'd never understand
this"), which, like a programmed switch,
triggered my return, for it is impossible
to remain huge while thinking small thoughts.

Oh, one can think anything. It's the believing
that shrinks one.

Actually, the thought itself took me back
into my body, for it was a decision to return;
not just "They'd never understand this," but
"They'd never understand this; therefore,
I'm better than them, which makes it OK
that I'm this pudgy, sloppy nerd whom
girls don't like and..." -- and there I was,
being what I'd just proven was the only thing
to be, the one thing that made me right
and them -- the jeerers and ignorers -- wrong,

all the better that they, the fools, would never
understand, for to do so, they'd have to see through
my impervious disguise, this thing where I hid
from the summer sky, blind, crying,
with sand stinging my eyes.

Love is, perhaps, overrated, but something about it,
not sex, exactly, but the giving it represents and the trust
that can follow thirst and thrust --
the shock of a first intimacy,

I mean the sheer intimacy of it, you know -- hard to believe
how much of ourselves we two 18-year-olds had invested
in mere nakedness! Anyway, when lying beside her,
naked, I realized I knew her thoughts, and she
(Oh, I want to say "you," not "she" -- there was no she,
no third person in the world -- a world into which that she
has vanished, but then densely populated with you,
only you, who are also I) -- she knew mine, and I noticed

I had become a space that included our bodies, a large space
(at the time, it seemed to me to be the room, because that
was the message from my body's eyes, to which, somehow,
distantly, as if through a tunnel, I was still connected,
but I recall, now, being aware -- intimately --
of buds on spring trees, cars, streams, ripples, small
water bugs skating) -- and you filled up the same space
I filled up, for there was no filling it, both of us
in everyone's space, filling up our own spaces

in the same place, more naked than naked,
both knowing it, making our little bodies
on the bed speak of it, a redundancy that
charmed us, for isn't it fun to pretend
to have to talk, each saying, "Yes, I know,"
each knowing the other would say
the same?

Our bodies are possessive lovers, demanding
our complete devotion. That's why they tremble so
at taking the terrible chance of letting us
touch one another. It's the only way they know
to create more bodies, so they risk our discovering
one another and finding allegiances beyond bodies
to keep their own game going.

That's what it's all about, our bodies haranguing us,
FUCK! PROCREATE! BE FRUITFUL AND
MULTIPLY! (A bed is a multiplication table.)

And when, together, we escape them, contain them,
move to and away from them freely in one another,
playing tag with flesh, fascinated that it can be part of
what is so little a part of it -- then our bodies
ape us clumsily (damage control), say, Look!
Sex! A neat way to join one another,
interpenetrate, be one! THAT'S what has you
walking on clouds! So to make it happen again
whenever you want, fuck! Procreate!

And here I am in my little engine-that-can,
puffing arduously up your hill (I THINK I can,
I THINK I can, I THINK I CAN...), and you,
in yours down there chuff-a-puff,
WHAMPaWHAMPaWHAMP!

Oh, this is impossible, my body can't be
your body! Do your nerves tingle the same
tingle my nerves tingle? Is it good for you too?

Note: Stanza 3 – “fascinated that it can be part of what is so little a part of it” – that is, spiritual beings fascinate that bodies can be part of (share the space of) spiritual beings that are so little a part of flesh” – with “so little a part of” suggesting something being a small part of (flesh having some small spiritual component), but also not being to any great extent a part of flesh or having, innately, much to do with flesh. The point is that the very perception of oneself as NOT being chained to a body adds a certain fascination to body games. In stanza 4 that detached sense of self as not body has vanished, and sex becomes a failed effort to regain it. And the strong communication (which was between beings, not bodies) diminishes, so that (as in stanza 5) men think women are impossible to understand and vice versa, and much of sex becomes a pre-occupation with mechanics – “Am I rubbing the right spot? Does she really enjoy this? I hope I can get off. I hope she has an orgasm. Etc.”

Our investment in nakedness went out the top,
but it proved to be a balloon, puffed up by years
of wild adolescent speculation. The balloon burst,
and soon you couldn't trade a young male or
female body for a pair of wrinkled pajamas.
Bareness had gone into a bear market,
and we haven't seen the bottom yet.

(It is not bodies that are topless
and bottomless.)

I could still look at hair and breast and crotch
and all that soft curvature, feeling
nothing at all. ("Such maturity," I suggested
to myself.) I could touch them and feel
the texture of things much like
the things I see in the bathroom mirror;
my tongue in your mouth no more exciting
than my tongue in my mouth (maybe if
just once, unexpectedly, you bit me...?)

It's not love that's to blame, for it wasn't
bodies we loved. Never was -- no matter
how loudly our hormones tried to out-scream us
(silly whore moans). It's true we valued nakedness,
which made it useful as a token, something
we could give each other. Remember, reader,

when you lay in a crib, bored with spit-sticky toys
and shifting shadows, and then a gentle finger
poked your chubbiness and gave you words --
said "baby!" and you said "bahbah!",
said "Good!" and you said "Goo!", curling up
into an ecstatically giggling ball, then uncurling
to kick out your feet, as if kicking free
a joy too big for your body? ("Foot! Oh
little foot! I've GOT it! I'm going to
EAT IT UP!" -- warm lips teasing
your foot with loud kiss-kiss noises.)
What a joy in words! Why? Because they meant
"Someone is here to play with me!"

Note: Stanza 1: When love and communication cease to illuminate sex, the flesh of another becomes about as exciting as rumples pajamas (a word that suggests "bottom" which leads to infinite (topless and bottomless) spirits (stanza 2). People try to solve this by using odd positions, having affairs, anything titillating. That uses itself up fast. What's missing is someone here (me, her -- not just two clumps of cellular life) to play with.

That's right -- it isn't these words
that stave off blankness. It's someone
here to play with you. These words
are like your words. I can make them
nasty, pretty, colorful, cranky --
these symbols of sounds that bodies make.
I know as many tricks as any whore.
I can drape my words with Victorian flounces.
I can trim the excessive use of "the,"
show you, not a leaf, but the vein network
of a tattered rusty maple leaf
(be specific! Show, don't tell!);
I can avoid triteness, keep things moving, prune
those superfluous (spelled with You, Oh You!)
adjectives; I can alliterate, assonate, rhyme, half-rhyme,
make metaphors, metonymies, similes,
synecdoches; I can be cosmic, mythic,
detailed, wry, ironic, direct, rich, sparse, grim,
joyous, despairing and all that jazz;

yet the blankness won't be fooled
unless it dawns on us both that
someone else is here and wants to
play: Words! Oh, Readums, Poety-poo loves your
itsy-bitsy words and I'm going to
EAT THEM UP!

Note: I suggest you look up metonymy and synecdoche, when you're in the area. After you've looked each of them up 5 or 6 times, you may begin to recall which is which. (I think I need to look them up again.)

“I’m going to EAT YOU UP!” Why do we say such things to babies and children and lovers (and Readers? No, never to readers...)? And why does it convulse them with glee? Because it combines love and danger, being the verbal form of tickling;

because to play, one needs a game, and a game requires the possibility of loss -- that is, danger; for what could be more dangerous than letting another become part of one’s life? Remember kids grabbing one’s hat, knocking one down, pinching -- and then, one day, one lets someone else a few years from the playground grasp one by one’s [fill in body part as is gender-appropriate], tug at it playfully, rub it, stroke it; doesn’t warn “Remember, it doesn’t come off!” -- thrilled by the danger of it. The danger in it tells the baby or lover how safe he is. Mere endless security, like too-long nakedness, is no game at all; We must teeter on curb-stones, then on walls, then on the edge of the garage roof, then on the high wire to make our safety meaningful.

Any game must reach and withdraw from safety, from risk. Terror is fun when (like teenagers screaming through a scary movie or anyone snuggling up to a fireplace with a horror novel or kids delaying sleep in a cabin in the wood by exchanging tingly tales -- “GIVE ME MY BONES!”) -- when you think you know you’re safe... but how could this play a part in a poem?

You, reader, how could a poem, words on a page, threaten you? We poets aren’t Stephen King surely? So enough talk of play; let’s get back to the stuff of harmless poetry, all about how when you die, you’re alone, and you’re dying right now and always, so you must be alone now (did you think someone was here? Spooky!), and you always will be alone, dying, in pain, in the dark (in the rain -- the importance of being Earnest Hemingway, when dying alone), and there is no game, never was, never will be -- I don’t know about you, but I’m scared!

Note: I don’t recall if or where Ernest Hemingway said “dying at night, alone, in the rain” (or something like that), but if he didn’t say it, his ghost does or his many parodists do. (Aren’t they ghosts, too?)

I don't think there's some ground of material being
from which games arise -- not "being human,"
for that, in itself, is a game we play (one of the
bodies-on-a-planet games). When I read of
"Poets Against War," I think, "Why take
man's war games away from him?" but say
nothing much, for Poets Against War
must have their games as well.

But some games mess up the playing field,
destroy the possibility of future games.
War can get out of hand when we forget
it's supposed to be fun -- had you forgotten? --

like standing before the attacking warriors,
daring them to come near, seeing how many
I can touch without harming them -- "counting
coup" -- kitchee kitchee coup! Dying
can be heroic; pain can tell us we're alive.

And all that motion -- Christ! Peace time is
a drag. But when it's no longer fun? When
you're no longer a game maker or even
a player, just a broken piece? Here's
the rule: No one will relinquish a game
(any being better than none) until given
another game, as good or better, to play.

Note: "Kitchee kitchee coup" might be a take in Longfellow's "Hiawatha," but isn't. I'm simply toying with baby talk again (gitchee gitchee goo), and suggesting that teasing the enemy by touching, not harming, is like toying with a baby. But since "kitch" has its own meaning (kind of campy, corny, slightly pseudo culture, a bit too Hollywood, etc.), a kitchy coup would might be the takeover of Victoria's Secret.

The best summary I know of what a game is and how games relate to living is in the opening chapters of the book of a book available in most bookstores and libraries and at the following link:

http://www.amazon.com/Scientology-Fundamentals-L-Ron-Hubbard/dp/088404503X/sr=8-1/qid=1168316799/ref=sr_1_1/104-8570699-5523932?ie=UTF8&s=books

What sort of new game can you give to someone
who thinks the only way to reach out and touch someone
is to kill? (People who think that will always say,
"It's better than sex!" It is probably better than
the sex they've known.) What better game will satisfy
someone who thinks the only game left to her
is to cringe in the gutter in a rag-wrapped child's body
with a maimed foot, whimpering piteously
to make passers by avert their eyes?

The new and better game must be
at least as much fun (yes, fun!) as the old one,
both easy enough and hard enough to play.
It must be a game that can be won,
that can be lost. One who must kill
already knows he can't win the game of love.

The sick, dull-eyed cat won't eat, won't
even lurch toward his bowl, but if you put your hand
close to his paws and snatch it away --
again...again...ah! He reaches for it, now
faster...he's getting interested --
OOH! You got me! But this time I'll be
too quick for you (Oooh -- I'm afraid of you!)
and behold! He's standing up, he's wiggling his rear
to pounce, eyes glaring -- made well
by being made dangerous. You gave him
a game he could play.

The girl in the gutter -- you might ask her
for help. Or tell her what a terrific job she's doing
of being pitiful. (Sometimes one can stop playing
a game one has thoroughly mastered. I've won --
what else can I do?)

The soldier's new game must be hard enough.
He'll go apeshit or drink or drug himself
into oblivion if there's not a lot of fierce
motion in it. The pinball arcades won't do it.

Are you happy with your life? What new game
can I suggest?

Note: "Reach out and touch someone" (in line one above) is the line used for years in advertisements for long-distance telephone service.

Better than creating new games for people
is making people more able to play games
and create games for themselves. War as we
now play it is a dull, repetitive thing.
That so many make war is a sign
of lack of imagination. (Who ever heard of a
government or terrorist that could dream up
a future anyone would care to live in?)
They can think of nothing better to do.
What has stunted their imaginations so?
I can't imagine.

And how dig their imaginations out of the trenches,
for when making war, it becomes dangerous
to have enough imagination to think
the one you kill could be you.

To play, one must feel there's a chance of winning.
(What happens after too many losses?) One must
be able to confront the possibility of losing.
(What happens after too many losses -- or wins
where others are hurt?) One must be able to tolerate
motion. (What happens after too many painful
accidents?) One must be able to tolerate motionless
waiting -- a tiger waiting to pounce or almost
any baseball player, prison inmate, golfer.
(What happens after one has been waiting for years
for answers that never arrive?) One must be willing
to cause effects on others and have them cause effects
back. (Could that become intolerable? Are there things
you'd rather not say to anyone? Things you'd
be unwilling to hear?) One must be capable of
loyalty, responses to unexpected motion, co-motion
with others....

So how do you like your playing field, reader?
Our motions, waitings, the co-motions of our eyes
and minds, leaping from serif to serif? Are we
on the same side? (Of what? This page?)
Who is the opposition? (No, Who is on first!)
Who is winning? Are we beating the blank page
into submission? (To whom should I submit
these poems?)

Note: Yes, this is more essay than poem, as are several of the preceding poems (all, some would say). So what? Hey, we're just talking here. And I think you'll find some poetry emerging soon from this soil.

Many no-longer-blank pages ago, I said
that the opposite of a blank page is not
a page with writing on it, but a page fully
blacked in. Upon due reflection (I studied
my swollen reflection in a dew drop until
the sun lapped up my reflection), I would amend that:

The opposite of a blank page would be
no blank page. If we load a blank page
with poetry, we have a blank page bearing poetry.
If we blacken it completely, we have
a blank page full of ink (or turned to ash).

But if we have no blank page where now
we have a blank page, just think of all the poems
we could never write on it!

And yet, if these blank pages vanished,
I'd see their stubs stuck in the notebook's spine,
and if the notebook vanished, yet there'd be
its impression lingering on the bed quilt
(where I'd now be writing on air, or my pen
sucked into an eddy of air, rushing in to fill
the book-sized abhorred vacuum). The removal
of a paper or book from existence is not
merely none of something, but the presence
of other things; for example, I could then see
whatever the blank page had blocked from view --
no perfect no-blank-page, but a patterned bed spread
or the wood grain of a table. But that makes
no sense: how can the opposite of one blank page
be the pattern of a bed spread, while the opposite
of another blank page is the wood grain of a table?

And so I conclude (but not for long) that the opposite
of a blank page is nothing, nothing at all,
nothing left of this dry den, all for love,
the world well lost.

Note: In the last two lines, above, where the world vanishes, the "dry den" refers to the poet John Dryden, author of the play (his take on Anthony and Cleopatra) entitled All For Love, or The World Well Lost."

The discerning reader will note that this page is almost poetry.

Let's see...where were we? Oh, we were
right here! Sorry, these distinctions between
blank somethings, blank nothings and no-nothings
put me to sleep. My sleep is neither blank
nor poetic. I dream better wide waking.
Why replay jumbled fragments of old games
when I can make new ones? (New jumbled fragments?)

A blank life -- add significance and stir --
or shake (how we are shaken in our shackles
by a Sheik's death!) The first significance comes
when we decide to be, and then to be someone.
You can't play a game unless you're a player.
(Can't tell the players without a program. "And in
the tall pink male body with excess gut, blue eyes,
dark, kinky brown hair, growing bald spot and...")

Since we fill our lives with poetry and narrative --
yes, we're story tellers as well as poets -- what pleasure
we take in connecting our lives with the already
available dramas: children pretending to make war
(BAM! BAM!), drive cars (urghh...urghh...[bad
starter motor]), play doctor. More thrilling are the
moments (just before commonplace sets in) of
realizing, wow! I'm... -- I'm a third-grader!
Wow! I have measles! An erection! A period!
I'm driving a car! I'm having sex!
I have a real job! My God! I'm my father,
my mother, Grandma, Grandpa! No,
I'm someone else -- could I be
me?

Note: The first stanza is perhaps radical: Poets are supposed to be fascinated with dreams and omens and the deep dark Freudian Unconscious. I prefer the dreams I create, awake and aware of what I'm doing, and find most of my remembered sleeper's dreams (and those of others) a bore.

The last three lines of stanza 2, above, describe me, more or less (though the dark brown hair has more gray than brown now, and there's a bit less gut-excess.

The "shaken in our shackles" part is just a brief digression to play with sounds. (Shhh — don't tell the reader!) Actually, when I wrote this I'd just seen headlines about the assassination of a Sheik in Iraq, millions of mourners, etc.

For some reason I always expected to read, and never (finding myself doing so easily) said to myself, “Wow! I’m reading!” Kindergarten was a place where, one day, my Mom said, “This nice lady is Miss James,” and left me there. I didn’t know enough to say, “Wow! I’m in school!” And when I skipped first grade (because I could read) and found myself in second, I wasn’t sure I was there yet. (Nor, seven years earlier, did I think, “Wow! This is it! Birth!” or even “Not this again!”)

No, the first time I remember thinking, “Wow! This is it! I’m...” was, one day walking home (I remember the concrete wall that held the playground fence with its rusting metal lozenges, the wall diminishing or I rising above it as I walked) -- and I thought, “Wow! I’m really in third grade!” I have no idea now what was so exciting about being in third grade -- third graders must have seemed to me to be “the big kids” when I was in second grade -- but I remember, can feel, the excitement almost like “I’m a grown-up!” Or that Bar-Mitzvah chestnut, “Today, my son, you are a man” -- a 13-year-old nerd -- had I even jacked off yet?

Maybe it’s just exciting to be here with all the others who’ve decided to be here (think of all the games we can play!), so we seize upon any excuse to express our joy at being here: “Good to have you here, Dean.” “Good to be here, Jay, David, Johnny.” “Thank you for joining us here at the...” Thank you for welcoming the Dean Blehert Memorial Talkathon into your living room.

Note: I guess in first and second grade, I’d thought of third graders as “the big kids”, so suddenly I realized I was a big kid. Also, I was probably feeling a bit safe in third grade, since the previous teachers had been a bit crabby, but Mrs. Anderson was nice. Also, I had the realization (“Wow! I’m in third grade!”) while walking past a wall with a tornado fence on top of it, and the wall was increasing in height as I walked down hill, catching up to me, an experience (diminishing and rising walls as one walks) that brings to awareness one’s own changes.

In stanza 3, the banal “good to be here” talk is often addressed to talk-show hosts, like Jay (Leno), David (man of letters – that is, Letterman) and, over a decade ago, Johnny (Carson).

Obviously, being here (a blank page) isn't enough for us. "Wow! I'm here" quickly palls. (See the Americans on their couches in front of their TVs, being there -- a pallor of pall-bearers.) We want stories, dramas: "Give me material NOW!" screams our hot-tempered editor, our internal narrator. So desperate are we for story that we relish disaster in preference to nothing at all.

I remember the night my first wife confessed she'd been having an affair for the past year. ("Affair" from the Latin for "to do to" (such a todo!) -- she was doing it to someone and the verses of vice.)

We were both sobbing. The tears were hot. Really they were lukewarm, but they burned me. I felt all the things I might have expected to feel, plus something I'd never read about: broken to pieces, not my heart, but me become fragments of a continental crust floating about on hot molten stuff just beneath, a layer of me I'd never known existed. Intense, complex; thinking this is what death is; non-sequitur horniness (they're arguing, thinks my body -- that means they'll make up, and I'll get laid -- or maybe it's like the hanged man's erection, a last spasm towards survival), excruciating tenderness, convulsions of forgiveness, despair, numbness, not enough numbness, time bunching up, catching in my throat, then lurching forward, her face becoming mine, then distant, then...WHAT A SHOW!

And through it all (here's the point; the point isn't to delineate disaster -- go have your own disasters; you can't have mine!) -- through it all, this perverse exhilaration (SOMEONE'S exhilaration, some unsmashed atom of me), that this could be happening to me, that, WOW! I'm a cuckold! (Not those words, but wow!) And this is it, the end of everything!

It was miserable, but powerful -- as adventurous as, six years earlier, "She loves me, I love her, I'm a lover, it's a whole new world!" The end of the world is always great box office.

Note: Stanza 2: "The verses of vice" are the vice versa of "vice versa". She was doing it to someone, and someone was doing it to her, so these lines, being in a poem, are the verses of vice.

Describe what you are being in a few words:

Now get the idea, “Wow! I’m [description]!”

But you’ve been doing that all along,
filling in the blanks, the hesitant among you
using pencil or invisible ink.

When all one’s interior dramas become
an endless whispered shouting match,
an argument with a madman or a child,
even the water’s sneeze following a frog’s leap
can be superb drama, yanking us out of
ourselves (out of the dramas left to us
when we have given up the possibility
of sharing the stage with others or the world --
those impossible hams!) as heroically as ever
firefighter snatched child from inferno.

(Take a bow, frog and ancient pond;
thank you, thank you -- sorry, Ladies and Gents,
there will be no encore tonight. Go home,
lie down in bed in the dark alone and
listen...listen...-- can you hear them,
the tiny ripples still spreading
in oceans-wide (but almost imperceptible) circles
from where that frog interfered
with the surface of a pond
and shattered the best mind
of a generation, to that mind’s
vast relief.)

Note: Here’s Basho’s frog again, leaping into the old pond with a splash. It’s Alan Ginsberg’s “Howl” that (in it’s first few lines) refers to the ruination of “the best minds” of his generation, but in Basho’s case, the mind that shattered was something superficial, something he could do without. (He was a Zen monk, and supposedly wrote the haiku to describe a moment of “Satori” (realization? enlightenment?) that he experienced when, while meditating by that pond, he was caught up in the sudden sound of water splashing.

“But we can’t help what we are.”
“The moving finger having writ...”.
Bullshit. “But what if you’re born
blind...?” Why did you decide
to be born blind? “That’s cruel.”
It’s what I remember. I remember --
increasingly -- many lifetimes, each full
of decisions that always came home to roost,
sometimes a second, sometimes lifetimes later.

“Who could possibly decide to be born blind?”
Someone who’d watched too many reality TV shows.
Someone who had a blind brother who got
all the attention. Someone who saw
horrible things and wished never to see
again (but I already said that about reality TV).
Someone feeling degraded, who thought “THIS
will show them!” Someone who tortured and blinded
others. Someone who made people watch
as he tortured their loved ones. (Someone who thinks
the words “loved ones” are mortuary jargon.)
Someone who, loving deeply a blind parent or child
or lover who died, has ever since tried to keep that person
alive by being blind. Or just “Blind -- that
would be an interesting thing to be!” or “Wow!
I’m blind!” or “Let there be no light!” A decision
is an easy thing to make. It’s what we do.

“You remember other lifetimes?” Some of them
are closer to me than my most recent childhood.
“Tell me about them.” Why? They’re just lifetimes.
Find your own. “To prove they’re real.”
Get a life. “Why don’t I remember mine,
if they’re there?” If they’re where? And
why don’t you remember your early childhood?
“Why don’t I?” Decisions, decisions. Did you
eat supper a year ago? “Yes.” What did you eat?
Prove to me a year ago was real. “The newspapers...”.
Yes, we are such as can be made real by newspapers.

[“What makes YOU so much smarter than me?”
It’s my poem. In your poem, YOU get to know
all the answers. You get to prate, endlessly, that
“we all die alone forever” and other nonsense, and I
don’t get to say a word. I fall over backwards like
a comic book straight man, nothing left of me
in the frame but parallel motion lines slanting
downwards and a cloud of dust.]

Note: The comic-strip delivery of a punchline, leaving the recipient bowled over with lines tracing the direction of his/her fall seems to have largely vanished from our sometimes-funny pages. Find some old “Mutt & Jeff” comics.

Early childhood -- the blank slate, *tabula rasa*
(Farewell, Beulah! -- that is, Ta, bula).
It's a magic blankness on which,
first dimly, then with increasing vividness,
things appear as I look at it -- not seek,
just look, pay attention. It's like
knowing where someone's hiding, saying,
"I see you there" and waiting for him
to appear. Out from behind that tree emerges

the silky warm sour-sweet musk of nipple
(as big as my mouth) just before milk flows;
a yellow cave of light carved out of night
where a huge hand supports me in water
surrounded by rubbery smells (a bassinet,
someone says);

two little blankets -- cotton? --
with silky edges, identical (I would try
to persuade myself that they were perfectly
identical) except one was pink and the other blue.
I'd suck my thumb through them -- that is,
push the cottony part (NEVER the silk)
into my mouth with my thumb and suck away.
When one blanket was matted and tacky with saliva,
it would be taken away (washed), while I
sucked at the other (always good to find
a fresh spot).

They were identical, yet it was a point of dogma to me
that the pink one tasted better, because I knew
pink tasted better than blue.

There are more of you behind that tree -- the smell
of baby powder, the hugeness of a safety pin, the
pleasant rough feel of a fresh diaper; feeling relieved
to be here, America -- a relief that had begun when
the German in the sidecar of the motorcycle (whose driver
I'd shot) machine-gunned me, though too late
to stop the crude bomb we partisans had just planted
from blowing up a railroad bridge -- somewhere
southeast of Paris. Why did they have to hook
carloads of Jews (standing room only) to carloads
of munitions? When it blew, what a relief to be shot,
to be done with deciding...

Note: In stanza one, "Ta, Beulah" (for tabula -- the slate that John Locke says is blank as is each newly born child) might also suggest a farewell to innocence. (In Pilgrim's Progress Beulah is a peaceful paradise reached near life's end, not exactly childhood, but this poem suggests that childhood innocence and the blank slate are lies, and the end of one life abuts on the start of the next.)

It's as if our memories were words written
with lemon juice for ink, appearing only when the paper
is held near a flame.

“How do you know you're not just imagining...?”

Sometimes I'm not sure. Sometimes I know.
Flame, after all, flickers. I don't worry about it.
I'm not an academic historian of myself (no notes
on my feet). Remembered plaster ceilings
look like plaster ceilings. Remembered bathroom
floors, paths through woods, even faces in mirrors...
Remembered -- no, RE-EXPERIENCED motion, regret,
agony -- remembered or imagined? Who cares?

But when re-living, I encounter an old decision
(an atom of decision at the core of an agony
I've peeled away, layer by layer) --

a decision, for example, that it is safest
not to feel much -- at last, here,
at the point of decision, I can now unmake
my old decision. Ah, the laughter,
as if I'd tugged on the red thread that opens
a package, my life, my wonderment), and I find
myself feeling things I'd forgotten could be felt
(thought others only pretended to feel) --

yes, that's the smell of cut grass, and me
alive with it, the ice in my face melting!

When right now I am freed of an old
decision -- to be nobly sad, to avoid dogs,
to distrust all smiles, to hide, to be misunderstood
(but NOBLY misunderstood) -- Oh, that is beyond
imagining.

Note: “No notes on my feet” – that is, no footnotes.

Here and in an earlier poem in this sequence I refer to something being opened by one's tugging on a red thread. I hope all my readers have performed this trick, but not too often, as it's most often used for opening the wrapping on Bandages.

Spelunking has its joys as well as perils,
but introspection palls. I penetrate
the blankness of myself only to find
and strip away old, paralyzing decisions,
leaving myself a true blankness
upon which I can create myself.

It's the art of making each morning
the first morning ever; each blank page
the first blank page.

But don't try this at home, kids.
The past can bite. There are ways
to peel onions and avoid being blinded
by stinging tears. Time insists,
"Stay with me!" When you elude time's embrace,
all the clocks are furious. You can hear a
cross ticking.

Do
it
accompanied.
Never
explore
time
in
cavernous
solitude,

Nor any blank page
without, Reader, you.

Note: Both a riddle and an answer lurk in this poem.

These days the story teller prefers
whimsy to aching intensity, not “Wow!” but
“Ah, yes.” From melodrama to mellow drama.

“Wow!” finds it difficult to contain its
“Ow!” and is always about to become “Woe” or
“Whoa!” (Who, indeed! Nearly every woe
is a who mistaken for a wow, carrying
a concealed Ow.) We think “Wow” is timeless
because it’s the same forwards or backwards
(though upside down, it’s, of all things, MOM),

but an old wow is not easily recaptured.
You can’t pull the wow over my ice.
Or so we’ve been told. It’s a lie.
(“Mellow,” too, contains “Ow”.)

Whimsy is a pale echo of real play,
where, with all the fierceness of adolescence,
I can, as quick as saying “C’ mere!”
(with or without rouge)
or “What’s a place like this doing
in a girl like you?” or simply not saying
all the things that don’t need saying -- I can
discover the New World, as, in bed,

we wrap around one another (getting
old and flabby, the better to wrap
and overlap fully and softly, at the core
a hardness all the more precious amid
the glut of softness) and WOW! WOW! WOW!
The wows come hard and fast (fast because
we hunger), no less wild for knowing
we create them, no less music
because we’ve learned to play the notes
perfectly.

Note: The horny “C’ mere” being with or without rouge – though roguish – refers idiotically to the Khmere (C’ mere”) Rouge, the Cambodian so-called communists who turned Cambodia into “The Killing Fields”. I suppose this suits the idea of a fierce predator and, therefore, of an ardent pick-up line. It also suggests “with or without make-up, anything to youthanize us, for the lovers here are not young. (I say “youthanize” since my silly joke about the Khmere Rouge makes me think of both death and youth in Asia. And the flab in the last stanza reminds me of my appalling pot, which leads me back to Pol Pot. I like to think that my puns condemn him to be lost for aeons in a silly hall of mirrors. (As I write these notes, my pot is not so appalling. I’ve been dieting and exercising and am back down to writing weight.)

“Ow?” asks the cockney -- “ow’d oy get hinto this poem?” An owl should screech “OW!”
But the owl knows (another “ow” word -- know) -- knows every pain is a who, usually a hot who one has wooed -- what a hoot!

“Howl!” cried a poet, who really wanted to cry
“How’ll?” -- “How’ll I get into that angel-headed boy’s pants?” “How well I howl!” cried the owl, a foul fowl. The owlish poet cried, “How well I howl! How’ll that get my honey of generation into your angel-headed-hipster-hugging pants, Honey?” and the best minds of his generation dropped their pants and bent over in the Negro streets, panting, looking for a fix. And the poet trance-fixed them.

Howl. Unfair to the owlish poet, but how else could I get howl, how well, how’ll and how else together (at last!) in a single sentence?

[The remainder of this page and of that poet’s poems have been intentionally left blessedly blank, both here and in my best-of-generation (A-to-Z) mind.]

[I lied! But the rest of this page is really REALLY blank! See for yourself. (See yourself there, seeing the blankness of the rest of this page?)]

Note: Here and in the poem a few pages back, I point to woe and ow being a who – that is, a person, a being, a someone. This is what most psychiatrists complicate with their vague notion of “stress” as the villain. Stress ins SOMEone. If you are stressed, it’s because someone is putting that stress there for you. It helps to know this and to be able to spot the source of stress – leads to the possibility of doing something unmedicated about it. Oops, this part of the page was supposed to be blank. I lied!

“Howl”, “the owlish poet”, “angel-headed hipster”, “the best minds of [his] generation” and the “Negro streets” all refer Alan Ginsberg (who seems owlish to me), his most famous poem (“Howl”) and to passages near the beginning of that poem. The part about those best minds bent over and transfixed by the poet refer to Alan Ginsberg’s love life. He liked youngish boys – not children, apparently, but late teens. He was a horny owl, perhaps.

The owl hoots or screeches or howls
voweluminously. Double O's and E's are
cheaper in English than vacuum's double U --
but how rich in nothingness must be WOW
or UUOUU!

The Indians and Japs in my childhood comics
always died in vowels: "AIEEEE!" they screamed,
while cowboys and Yankee soldiers grunted their
blunter deaths: "Uh!" and "Ugh" -- but why
isn't "Ugh" pronounced "You"? -- that is, U,
as in "Hugh," who can never hug?
(Like my reader, Gee, you are silent.)

I should visit Europe to learn whether
those Slavs, who have villages with names like
Brzn and call themselves names like "Czechs"
(suffering from acute vowel deficiency)
die with vowelless avowals, going out, perhaps,
with a "fzzzt" or a "Krggghcz!" (The Welsh, too,
welsh on vowels.)

(There has been much recent Bosnian research
into how Slavs die. Has no one studied this aspect?
What a terrible waste of a war!)

Could we not, in these globalist days (vowels
being globular, spanning consonants), open
a flourishing trade between the Slavic countries
and East Asia (with expert aid from Hawaii),
vowels for consonants, tight, brittle Slavic words
opening out lusciously like concertinas
or becoming the sharp hard beaks of song birds,
and in Asia, mellifluous streams of words encountering
cataracts (and we mustn't waste the alternative
metaphors: Asian words becoming babies graduating
from pabulum to crunchy treats; Asians learning to chew
their words cautiously, as if fearing sand in their rice....)

Note: I equate "wow" to "uuouu" because the letter W (double-U) was represented by "uu" in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts until around 900 A.D. These days W refers to the President of the United States, because he's George W. Bush and because so many of us find ourselves pointing at him, furiously trying and failing to tell him what he is: "You...you...!"

"Like my reader, Gee, you are silent" refers to the silent G (or Gee) in "Hugh".

I hope to die a man of letters.
“He’s moaning. Stuff some words in his mouth.”
“Goodbye” has a nice balance --
a hard beginning, but it is open-ended, like
“die,” suggesting it may lead to another
vowel-enriched “Hello” -- open at both ends,
lightly limited only by those most ghostly ripples
of consonant, “H” and “ll”.

“Goodbye-hello” sounds like “Goodbye yellow” --
you’ll wonder where the yellow went
until you hold your blank page full of poetry
written in lemon juice up to a flame.

I knew I could get blank pages into this!
(Hey, Bud, not so damned near that flame!)

I can do better than that: A blank page
is an open broad vowel (Open your
mouth and say Ahhhhh...), our marks on it
the consonants, demarcations, ways to make
the stream of voiced breath pause or
stop or stutter or trail off (Ommmm...),
all our goodbyes (like dog-piss on new snow)
ways to claim tiny territories
on this endless expanse.

Note: “You’ll wonder where the yellow went” is a line from long-ago (1950s?) toothpaste commercials. The second line was “When you brush your teeth with Pepsodent”. (Or was it Pepsident?) Americans think teeth aren’t supposed to be yellow. How odd.

Stanza 3 suggests that the best way to decode a difficult poem is to burn it.

In stanza 3, I had a typo (just now spotted and fixed): I’d typed “blank age” instead of “blank page”. I like blank age, perhaps the tabula rasa Locke imagined babies to be. Or perhaps instead of blankness, we should look at blankage.

Our snow is long gone -- or turned
into our pear tree's blossoms. The world
is no longer the blank page it was when
a friend gave me this book for Christmas.
I've filled half of it now. I've run out
of things to say about blank pages.
Nothing left. The world is filling up
with fullness, and so am I.
I must have said, by now, all that
can be said about blankness.

You know me too well -- no need
to say I'm lying. Spring is full of
springs, all these buds curled tightly
into themselves, about to burst, bodies
of every species leaping, thrusting, caroling,
all a-dance with sperm about to spring forth,
a taut rubber band in every loin
(live and loin!), even a gray-haired fellow
in his 60s, walking out to fetch
the junk mail, wants to squirm like a puppy.

Stroke my freckled pink belly, and my foot (the one
sticking up in the air) will jiggle for you.
Woof! (I'm warped.)

The blank page is a bud, coiled tight.
Words spring from it. (Like sperm?
Be a good egg, won't you, Reader?)

These days we notice, not the blank page,
but the blank screen. In fact, the word "BLANK"
is an acronym (a crony, mmm?): "**B**ad Local Area
Network! -- Kaput!"

If you are reading these words, they came to you
via a computer screen, though, thanks to
Windows (when it works), never a blank one,
the page always bordered and crisscrossed by
helpful doodads and flickering thingies --
it's like trying to write while various
winged muses, teasing cupids, good angels
and bad angels battling for my heart
and the rest of the rococo allegorical mob
flit and hover about my head,
guide and impede my hand --

ah, my software, must you keep capitalizing
that letter for me? How many times must I tell you
the period it follows only denotes an abbreviation?
And NO, I do NOT want to change "uuouu"
to "enough" or "union" or "youth"? A textbook
once showed me a complex design containing a word
which appeared to be "union" or "onion"
depending on whether or not the reader
suffered from blue-green/red color blindness.
It is hard for me to imagine the world
my software sees. My software is as alien to me
as a jellyfish or a termite.

Or perhaps it is rationally arguing for birth control;
seeing too many Wows (and detecting the "wow"
in "uuouu"), it chants, "ENOUGH UNION, YOUTH!"

I miss the simple DOS prompt. But I do it, Reader, put my
once blank pages through this humming, hypercritical device --
I do it for you! (How do you like this font?
It stands for all the good Times Roamin' with you.
All my angels become serifs.)

Note on last two lines: I tend to stick with tired old Times New Roman, which, of course, is serifed. Angels are more likely to be seraphs.

I do it all for you, Reader, because
I need your lovin', gotta have ALL
your lovin', 'cause no one else
can do it like I do it for you, O
I give great page, 'cause
you're my reader 'n I'm your
poet and we're stuck to each other
like Velcro on Velcro (here me crow!),

because this is a blank page speaking,
and blankness sucks, abhorred by nature,
and if blankness could talk (and it does,
it does -- nothing else talks), what blankness
would say to you (blankness pretending
to imagine that you are its opposite)
is "Fill me up with yourself! Become me!"

This particular blankness is a blank page
of poetry, so must be filled up only
with Premium readers. (Try sonnets
for really high Octet.) (Or put Blake's
Tiger in your tank.)

And why shouldn't we fill our blankness
with blankness? It's as logical
as our government's attempts to use
American tanks to fill America's tanks.
It's the new chicken in every pot:
After enough lies we'll have,
in each car full of fuel
a car full of fools. Careful!

Blankness and fullness. I am fullness;
therefore, I fulminate and fulgurate,
am fulsome to my admirers (lovely
admirers!), blow smoke (fuliginously)
up the sunless orifices of critics.
Poems out of full cloth (a fuller fulls
cloth). My attitude? Fuller than thou.
Burp.

Note: Stanza one echoes several old love songs. Re stanza 2: We're told by physicists that "nature abhors a vacuum." (Our cat abhors a vacuum cleaner.) The blankness says "fill me with yourself" to readers, since it remains blank, in a way (though full of printed words) until a reader contributes life to it, fills it's vacant pronouns (such as "you") with him/herself, etc. But poetry, snobbish stuff, wants to be filled up with only the best readers (premium), like a high-class whore. Since filling up with Premium refers to the gas pump, it leads us to Blake's tiger (the one that's burning brightly in the forest of the night), because for many years one of the major oil companies advertised it's gasoline with "Put a tiger in your tank" (seems a cruel thing to do to a tiger). "Use American tanks to fill America's tanks" refers to our current (as I write) war in Iraq, where it seems to me we are really fighting to procure a supply of oil. A tiger in every tank and a chicken in every pot (and pot in most chicks as the war on drugs loses to the war on terrorism).

Last stanza: "Fulgurate" –flash quickly like lightning or caffeine (Fulgur's Instant Coffee).

Have you noticed, despite the apparent one-page-per-poem format, that this book is all one poem, one repetitive, self-indulgent, discursive amble (or romp?), a format for a door-mat reader (and welcome to you!), mostly chatter, with, here and there, tight image or witticism?

Many have told me (at least 5 of my 6 readers), "I like your short witty stuff best -- your long ramblings lose me." But if I publish only my pinnacles, you miss the sweep of my landscape. Do you think of blankness as a surface with a poem on top? To me blankness is a sea, covering the topology of poetry, as if we were Noah, at mercy of wind and critical currents, with no idea what mountain ranges, forests and prairies and towns full of drowned neighbors slip beneath our keel.

(Writer's block: a stormy sea, but revealing nothing beneath the broken surface. Once, pissed off by the failure of my words, I pressed so hard my ballpoint tore the page. Beneath the surface -- my jottings on the previous leaf.)

I try to evaporate blankness, drop by salty drop, revealing first only the peaks (very sharp! May pass for wit, restraint, intensity), then islands, eventually letting it be seen that they arise from continents, woods, plains, swamps, endless canyoned and mesa'd horizons...

but this is a lousy metaphor, a landscape strewn with dead, stinking fish. The truth is, this IS self-indulgent. I yield to myself. I am kind to myself. I give way to myself. (If I don't, who will? Will you?) This is bad for me and will be bad for you. More hot fudge on your banana split?

Note: How about a hot-fudge hair-split?

Racism is a distraction. While we cope with skin color, we ignore all the people-sized spaces that have no one at all in them. Where are the spacists to pass laws granting special privileges to those of us who take up space, thereby incurring such liabilities as gravity, hunger (the body's own gravity), illness and death -- just to make ourselves available as playmates?

The space around planet earth is packed with people-sized holes. One such hole is filled by what we call "me," another by "you" (essentially, emptinesses wearing name tags called "bodies").

It's hard work filling these holes with ourselves. We are heroic, like the boy who plugged the leaking dike with his finger. We are plugging up leaks where, but for us, space would inundate us.

For this reason, I favor spacist discrimination: Empty space should not be allowed to vote, for example, or attend our churches or fill up our pages. And yet, increasingly,, our polling places and churches are filling up with empty space, and our poetry says nothing.

Sometimes I leave my body, securely embedded
in its hole in space (no danger of a leak)
and look around. It's such a relief
not to be squeezed into the hole assigned me --
a vacation. I can be as large or as small
as I please, can fill any or no space...
and -- I don't know if I should be
happy about this -- no one notices
I've been gone. It's like leaving these letters
on the page; reader, have you noticed
I'm not here, haven't been for a long time,
perhaps was never here?

Perhaps no one notices because no one else
was there to notice -- all the others, like me,
on vacation, leaving their habit-driven flesh
to mark their place. Or perhaps they are
so pre-occupied with filling their holes in space
that, like anyone who becomes his job, status,
credit cards, family, lover, opinions, etc., so that he
can no longer conceive himself as separate
from them, these people have become their bodies,
head, eyes, tongue, shifting pressures in
the brain, genital tingles -- so many ways
not to be here.

Identity's a slippery thing. My nephews (identical twins) at age 6, were going out on a rainy day. Their mom helped them into their raincoats. One said, "What about our head?"

My wife and I, searching the parking lot for our car, spot it. "There we are," I say, and, indeed, I can see us over there.

When a small part of my body is in her body, we speak of ME being inside HER. When we both fill the same space at once (our bodies rattling around inside us, seeds in a gourd beating time to tether us to this universe), I begin to wonder if love (as in "I love you") is a transitive verb (you receiving the effect I cause) or a linking verb, like "am" (I am you). This would be clearer in a language like Latin, where "you"-nominative differs from "you"-objective.

Do I love ME? Or do I love I? Perhaps love is a word that cancels itself out: If "I love you" means that I become you (or rather, that you and I both become something that is neither you nor I), then "I love you" equals "I you" equals a new "I". Love zeroes itself out.

That would account for its meaning in tennis. While we're off being nothing at all (nobody here but us no-bodies), our bodies are making a racket, stroking and igniting each other like matches. Nobody scores. We both win -- a tie that binds, but doesn't chafe. Set for life.

Love all.

Note: Maybe someone "here" doesn't know that in tennis "love" means zero, no score, and "love all" means "nothing to nothing. Love means nothing – to nothing. When we love, we don't "score", since we're both on the same side. Maybe.

Writing poetry is not necessarily heroic --
not mythically speaking. We like to view ourselves
as Promethean -- agonizing to bring the forbidden
divine fire to mankind.

The difference is, the poet tries to fill in the blank,
while Prometheus gets a bill in the flank (the bill --
hard to pay -- of a vulture eating P's liver)
until he's unbound. Prometheus is a liver pate
(pronounced pahtay, which means -- in Boston --
to get drunk and screw, as in "Let's pahtay!").
The poet, unheard, must live in his pate
(rhymes with fate).

The poet has a culture (rhymes with vulture)
refusing him a living, though his books be
perfectly bound. Poor martyr, or so he persuades
himself, because no one is paying him for his playing,
for the joy of creating (as the commercial says,
"Priceless!"). It takes money to write poetry,

for the poet must eat and have a place to sleep,
needs paper to write on, pens, etc. Therefore, says poet,
"I must make money from my poems." (Birds are
opening up space-safe-for-me-to-wake-up-in right now
with their morning songs. I owe them.)

The poet eats. It's not just the cost of food. There's also
silverware, a place to eat, a place to store food...),
Therefore the poet must make money from his
eating? Who will pay him to eat, to breathe, to
screw (paid to screw? Whore!), to write poems?

How about I make some money any way I can
to pay for my poetry habit? How about I repay the Gods
for the borrowed fire? Or, better, I make my own,
I burn and burn and am not consumed (one reason,
purely aesthetic, to hope President Bush goes to hell --
where he'd become the Bush that burns and burns
and is not consumed -- from the center of which, however,
comes a small still voice; from the center, a nucyular voice,
but I digress...).

Haven't we been bound to this rock (Oh! It's a planet!)
before? I think I'll keep my day job. Vous?

[Nothing in the above lines shall be construed to condone
the cheapness of assholes who think you shouldn't have to pay
for poetry. BUY THESE POEMS! But, poets,
let's not let the bastards get us down. After all,
look at all the fun we're having.]

Note: "Perfectly bound" -- a "perfect bound" book -- the type of binding used for most paperbacks. "Nucyular" is our

president's pronunciation of "nuclear". "...day job. Vous?" plays on "deja vous."

It is socially incorrect of me to confess to being
a spacist (wanting space filled up with people),
when experts claim we are overpopulated.
I admit that I'm overpopulated. I'm just too much!
Probably you are too. But space is mostly empty.

You, too, will learn to hate a world full of
holes-where-people-should-be if ever you
lose someone -- who then keeps haunting
your every emptiness, being persistently
not there and not over there either, not
where you turn to say something clever
you heard today, not across the room or bed
or phone line, not even in your mind (can't
see the face so well now or hear the voice, only
sense the vivid absence of a should-be-there).

So you go to a group for help, and they are
to teach you trust. You fold your arms, close
your eyes and let yourself fall backwards --
no one catches you! The space between your head
and the floor lets you pass through it. CLUNK!

Oh, we've been far too nice to space, letting it
cohabit our rooms, our kitchens, our beds.
Who is with me now as I write? (Are you?)
This room is full of space -- there, where nobody is.
Nobody is noisy, distracting; nobody has no
face -- how can I tell what nobody is thinking?
Nobody crowds around me. I pace the room,
back and forth, filling up all the holes I can,
but wherever I am, nobody is everywhere else.
Nobody embraces me. Nobody, when I let words
fall from me, catches them. I trust nobody.

“Holes where people should be” -- a description of prostitutes? This page -- the one you are reading right now (Reader!...Oh Reader...? Are you there?) -- when blank, was one kind of hole; filled, is another, because I, who now speak to you, am not here.

That serves you right for not being here (where I am) to catch me as I fall -- that is, catch my words. Bodies, words -- both are particles of communication we or others send out into the world. (I can send my body to you, having loaded it with meaning -- significant smiles, noble expressions, energetic attitudes, acceptable-or-not clothing; or someone else can send it to war or Congress or school or on a blind date or to a booby hatch. I can be sender or message. I can even receive myself -- welcome home!

Communication is quite a trick: We want our communications to reach out, go through walls, cross oceans and time zones, cover distance, be unstoppable. And yet we want them to be stopped -- to reach a point where they are received and go “PLOP” in the catcher’s mitt, be understood and acknowledged, as if fitting precisely into a slot (CLICK) in another mind.

(Is it inspiring or just sad to conceive of signals passing us from stars long dead, roving endlessly through the galaxies?)

We want our words immortal (we poets do), and yet we want them to end -- and we want to know they’ve ended (been received) so that we can move on to other games. Please catch me!
In Reader We Trust.

It isn’t “I create and then I communicate my creation.”
It’s “I create so well and with such gusto that others want to join in and help me paint this fence.”
I create, and we co-create. Otherwise I fall back and fall, endlessly fall, no floor to catch me, not even earth; though it receives the body (MUNCH!), I still fall, yes, folks, you can SEE my endless, miraculous falling right here on this page where I put it!

Note: The fence painting refers to Tom Sawyers trick: Getting others to help him paint the fence by pretending he’s having fun doing it.

Tom Sawyer painted the fence white.
The joy of creating a blank page – for future
graffiti artists? Does the poet create the blankness
of his pages? Were they blank (or just paper full of
papery texture) before the poet decided they needed
filling? When I first opened this book of blank pages
(no longer blank), it looked quite natural --
as surprised by my presence as I was by finding
no words, but, by and large, well-adjusted,
at peace with being blank paper. I felt no compulsion
to write on it. I just decided to -- like saying “let’s play!”

Tom began painting the fence reluctantly --
an enforced chore. He made up the “fun” part
to entice others to do the work -- though he perhaps
began to believe it himself, or at least enjoyed
his own cleverness. I suppose this art can be
a chore, a “sullen art,” though I seldom find it so.

Or am I only pretending this is fun so you’ll join me?
Is all our joy in creating and communicating
no more than the false twinkling of hostess and guests
and ice cubes with holes in them at a party,
each (each hole? Each person?) having “a wonderful time,”
each thinking “When can I leave?” or “Why do I come
to these things?” or “Smile, mustn’t forget to smile” or
“Now we’ll have to invite HER over in return.”

Do we enjoy our social rituals -- at least enjoy
knowing we love one another enough to join
in the pretense? Is all my art only false smiles,
the click-clack of ice cubes, reflecting
cigarette glows, the hands ever-so-urgently
touching wrists, brittle chatter, the drinks
that loosen us, a bedroom I know of where
you and I can get away for a quickie...?

[What, by the way, is a time? Can a time
be red? Yellow? Deep? Shallow? Wonderful?
Are you having a time of it?]

*Note: Dylan Thomas refers to poetry as a “sullen art” (not sure if that’s his phrase or taken from someone earlier).
Papers need filling, then filing then...fling!*

No. When I popped out and was given
(by someone who didn't own me) to my mother
to hold -- no ice cubes, no brittle pontificating,
nothing of the cocktail party except, perhaps,
one of us wondering "When can we go home?" --
her touching me, afraid, unafraid, cherishing...

do you think that leaves us? -- that ability to touch
and be touched by one another and the world?
Some parties leave a bad taste; I wash my mouth out
with poetry. Some poetry (even some of mine)
is like party chatter. (Haven't you heard!?)

Painting the fence IS a chore -- because someone else
(Aunt Polly) made Tom do it. If he'd decided to do it
himself -- what fun! Brush strokes, just so, smooth,
creamy caresses.

Poetry I have to write to get a passing grade
is no fun. Poetry I have to make you hear
so that you'll buy my book and have to write more of
to prove to myself that I still can (and that the first book
wasn't just a fluke) and to avoid disappointing editors,
readers... -- well, all this can be part of the fun,
why not? Why can't I have fun playing "Let's please
the critics!" or "Let's see how long I can keep writing
when no one's reading me!"

Any game is better than nun. (A virginal nun is God's
blank page-girl. Odd to have to qualify "nun" with
"virginal", but these are corrupt days -- and nights.)

Are we having fun yet?
Is it good for you, too?

We'd better rejoin the party --
they'll be wondering about us.

It's a joy to create this stuff, a joy
to share it. (That's my story, and I'll stick
to it. Here I am -- stuck?) I don't write this
to make money, but I'm glad to be paid for it,
because it helps you feel you've given
something in exchange. Even songbirds get
from us bird houses, bird baths, bird seed
in winter and (we hope...eventually -- please!)
a planet safe for birds, with enough trees and
untoxic air for them. I suspect our admiration,

our willingness to wake to a new day
because they sing the same songs
that ushered in each fascinating childhood day --
I suspect these in themselves remove poisons
from air and water. (I wonder, do abused children
hate birds -- wanting to kill the messengers
of each new day, each new torment? Some, perhaps.
Others want to be birds, to be able to fly.)

For a few people, my words will be invitations
to come out and play, and their play
will enrich my life -- another exchange.

A bird call here...there...another,
newly made corners of a huge space
out there (I'm not really a spacist. I love
space, because we can be in it -- or not) --
a world. Slight seepage of gray light
beneath the shade, bird whistles and
a world.

(Or, somewhere a poet dies or stops singing,
and the world shrinks.)

The blank page is not space. It's a shade
pulled down to stop the light from preventing
sleep (but not dreams). I don't fill the page;
I let my chirping pass through it to suggest
a world beyond it where, wide waking,
you can continue to dream.

Let's fight a duel: "Gentlemen, choose your metaphors!" I can fight as well with either. You choose first. Take "dream," for example -- to dream while awake: metaphor of sanity or insanity?

But any insanity is simply an exaggerated, overly specialized area of sanity. The madman dreams too well, but not wisely. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis -- good grief! Have I become Hegel?

I'd rather be Bagel, which, as a poem's ink distracts from the page's blankness, with its buttery eggy substance makes us forget that it is a mobile hole. How odd -- we nosh on the stuff that, by surrounding nothing, creates a hole, nosh until the stuff is gone (descended into the hole our own substance surrounds -- partly goes through us to other holes, partly becomes part of the substance that holds our hole intact), and all that's left

of the bagel is the hole, now become the whole bagel, the whole hole, that is, nothing at all, not even a hole. The hole is a limited thing, with a function -- to hold coffee, to let light pass through or other food. The bagel's hole is a handle, a means to hold the bagel while we consume it, ungratefully destroying the hole that helps us.

Is the blank page a handle for holding the poem while you consume it? Do you consume poems, part passing through you (the roughage? All these jagged consonants, prickly serifs, ragged right lines, indigestible thises and thats?), part becoming you?

(You, not even a hole, you holy whole!)

Yet what you've consumed is left for others to consume (each poem a burning bush that burns and burns and is not consumed.)

Which of us is losing this duel?

Duel?

Us?

The pen as sword, slashing script-shaped
slits in the page to let this darkness through,
this boundless night beyond the blank shade.

As kids we'd fold napkins elaborately,
make random cuts -- a crescent here, a triangle there --
then unfold them, careful of tearing, to reveal
design, 4-way or 6- or 8-way lacy symmetry
(depending on the fold), making art of random snips,
kaleidoscopic magic. This paper
has not been folded, but is, at least,
doubled, a minimal symmetry,

since, reader, you mirror it. How odd
that we are both on the same side
of this page. Lucky we are separated
by time, or we'd be an uncomfortable
crowd, not good company.

But time's a fragile lie, for I am right here
now, where you are, using your eyes
as you use them -- without, I hope, crowding you.

I've shifted metaphors a few times in this poem,
but so has physics. You and I CAN occupy
the same space at the same time. Hmmm...

excuse me, while I scratch our head.

Note: One tends to think of reader and author facing each other through the paper, from opposite sides, but reader (or readers) and writer are both facing the paper (or computer screen) from the same side. Unless you read through the paper, backwards. So here we are, as big a crowd of us as I have readers, all in the same place (if there were only one copy, if there were no time). No wonder our head feels crowded. Now let's resume time, so that it can come between us., but get it going in the right direction, because if we start going backwards, our literary efforts become a vast project whereby libraries full of printed material are converted to blank pages as part of the process of creating forests.

Re physics shifting metaphors – that's what happens when we have a "paradigm shift". It was probably one of Einstein's admirers who inspired the depression-era song when he gushed, "Brother, can you paradigm!"

Life, say some so-called (hiss!) Scientists,
was stirred by lightning into spontaneous
serendipitous awareness of being aware
out of somnolent primordial soup.

What KIND of soup? Perhaps another silly
simile for the blank page: a clear consommé,
named for the process by which its juice
absorbs (consumes) meat and vegetables
and grain into its simmering clarity.

Where can we take this simile? For miles,
I hope, but only because “miles, I” has me
in its simile spell.

The poet tries to convert consommé
into alphabet soup? We readers (how
French of us!) become consummate
consumers of consommé? (Truly
for that sentence I wrote this poem.
Bah! What piss-tepid, insipid soup we sip!
Give me to drink of the red red stuff!)

I shot a simile into the air.
It fell to the page, I know not where.
(Absorbed by the blankness? A zillion failed
figures of speech texture this paper?)
Simile’s missiles -- who knows what, once
fired off, they’ll blow up. Quibbling squibs,
wise-fire-crackers -- poetry is a sky racket,
or a roaming candle.

Once, I myself was simply who I am,
now layered in unwanted comparisons
and borrowed bits of envied styles,
no longer I, but only
alias, I, alas.

Note: A sub-theme of this poem is anagrams: “alias” and “I, alas”, “simile’s” and “missile”, “simile” and “miles I”. The “red red stuff” is the soup for which Esau trades Jacob his birthright. (Doesn’t “birthright” sound like a buzzword from the abortion debates?) Esau was a tired hunter home from the hill, and the redness of the soup suggests heartiness, something richer than clear alphabet soup. Simile’s quibbling squibs light up the horizon into a miles-long simile smile.

Why the anagrams? Perhaps the rearranging of letters to make new words parodies the life-from-primordial alphabet soup theory, all those random elements churning about being zapped by that mad-scientist, lightning, and happening to become us.

It's July 5th. Last night, lazy, we watched
(for a few seconds before clicking to something
with a story) fireworks on TV, no doubt
magnificent in the real sky, but on TV
nothing is brighter than a white spot on the gray screen.
It's like an oil-painting of the sun: the viewer
must create all the magic, and why should he?

How magnificent my poems would be
if the blankness they decorated
were the sun -- if you could bear
to read them there, these, my little
sun spots.

How odd that we spend our lives
beneath a sky that contains a light
that we must not look at. Science tells us
it is the source of life, of all warmth
and wind and energy. And, I suppose,
of all our poems (mental sunburns? Solar flares?).
And yet...

well, if I told you I remember (even hazily)
how we created suns, you'd think me nuts,
but if I am, it must be the sun -- which (if I'm nuts
to imagine you and I can create suns)
moves us all, even our thought -- it must be the sun
that's nuts.

Speaking of last night, what boots it to be
independent of olde England if we must be
slaves to the sun -- the even older sun,
for there is nothing new
over us.

Note: The lives of bodies must depend on the sun, but I doubt that the life that is us is younger than the sun, even if England is. The reasoning in stanza 4 is that if the sun is source of all life on earth, it is responsible for any crazy idea I have (that, for example, something we are is older than suns and may have contributed to their creation); or if we do transcend physical limits, then my idea isn't so crazy. So either I'm right, or if not, blame the sun. Does my logic stun? Nuts! (Please note the sunny palindrome: "stun nuts".)

There are things “in this world” -- I put
“in this world” in quotation marks because
that phrase belongs in quotation marks even more
than all these other phrases, which also
belong in quotation marks; language has been
so overused (or “overused”) that even quotation marks
belong in quotation marks; people who wag
two fingers by either ear to stress
each sentence should have silent authenticators
who stand behind them, hands held just outside
the speaker’s hands, wagging external
quotation marks. Anyway, there are things in this world
(I say this nakedly) that might go away

if we all just stopped writing and talking about them.
I won’t even say what they are, but they are
what everyone is talking about, reading about,
making war on, expressing outrage about,
deploring, defending, explaining, claiming
to understand, claiming no one understands --

Ah -- I deplore deep lore. I am
out of rage. I will head for the hills
and become one of them (am I not old enough?),
At which point I shall be an ex-plain,
a whole grounded nation of ex-planes,
an ex-play-nation (for we used to play, once,
remember?).

For a while I shall continue to stand under
the sun, which no man understands.
(With global warming, the sun becomes moreover.)

I will collect volumes full of pages bristling
with lucid, well-informed arguments and fill
each page with blankness, blessed blankness.

(Then, I will lie in bed and suck my thumb
through my baby blankness.)

Note: “Baby blankness” – as an earlier poem reminisces, I used to suck my thumb through my baby blanket. “Blanket” – a small blank? Should girls have blankettes?

When I wrote this I think I knew what it was that would go away if we stopped talking about it, but now I’m not sure of that, probably because I did (stop talking about it) and it did (go away). However, what would NOT cease to exist for us if we all thoroughly agreed it wasn’t there? But there are two ways to do that: One is to agree it’s not there while continuing to put it there, in which case it persists in some unwanted, unknown way. The other is simply to stop putting it there (for example, resisting it puts it there, as does hating it, making a mystery of it, sweeping it under the rug, etc.).

Partly I refer to the “events of the day”, which are everywhere, and yet have very little to do with anything anywhere. Look about you now to see if your walls or floors or front lawn or trees in the breeze or doorknobs or carpets are worried about today’s headlines. Sometimes the brute negligence of the physical universe is refreshing.

As a child (7 or 8), I sat on the front steps one day and thought, "I will look right at the sun." It was easier to do than I'd expected: just hold your eyes there, forced wide open and don't move. I did it, and after the first few second of feeling blinded and wanting to blink, I could simply look at it. It surprised me,

because it wasn't yellow or orange, nor were there spoke-like rays. It was a perfect circle, blue-tinged white and appeared to be spinning fast. As I gazed, it shifted back and forth between being a solid thing (a glass or platinum disk) and a hole in the sky. I could look at it (as long as I kept looking at it) easily, but it worried me that it was too easy. When (after a long minute) I looked away, it was still there, wherever I looked, blazing, spinning -- it or its dark red complement. Closing my eyes did not dim it, not for a long time.

(But I think it is gone now. I just closed my eyes to check.)
Later I read of wisemen who meditated while staring at the sun. I read also that doing so permanently destroys bits of retina (cones and rods? Who IS Rod Cohn?), and you go blind -- or cut a black hole into your visual field, but I'm 62 and using the same eyes -- so far, so good. I can still read about how I've been made blind.

Perhaps I AM blind. How would I know, since I can't see what I don't see. Whole universes may be swallowed up in retinal lacunae. Did you know that right now you have a blind spot where the optical nerve attaches to the eye? If you close one eye and move a fingertip about in front of the other, while keeping your eye fixed on a spot on the wall, at some point that finger-tip (though within the eye's visual field) will vanish?

I read that once and tried it out, and it worked. I just tried it now, and the damned thing wouldn't vanish. Stupid body tricks!

But it's true! It's true! We cover it up by having two eyes. Or by seeing for ourselves, independent of eyes. And what if the detail that slips into a blind spot, like the clue in a murder mystery, that, once seen, changes all that has gone before utterly, is, for example, this universe's exit sign?

I MUST be blind. There are suspiciously few images on these pages. And you, you're right here reading this, but I can't see you.

Note: Without rods and cones, we plunge into the heart of darkness, so Rod Cohn may be related to Joseph Conerod. "Stupid body tricks" alludes to the "Stupid Pet Tricks" featured on the Dave Letterman show.

Even in sunny California, most people never look at the sun. They know it's there and think they know what it looks like, even think they've been looking at it all their lives. Wasn't it, after all, a friendly yellow spider, hung just left of the chimney smoke or above the green or orange tree in all their childhood crayonings?

What else is always there that we assume we see, but never look at? I've spent an entire evening chatting with people, none of whom ever looked directly (eye to eye) at any of the others or met my own (perhaps dazzling?) eyes.

And I've faced, eye to eye, others who were not seeing me. Stand on any busy street and watch those who pass. Nearly all are looking at something other than what their eyes see -- and if you look at them, you can see this: that they do not look at what their eyes see, and cannot see what they do look at.

From time to time a person looks at what he sees and is startled, as if by sudden waking from a persuasive dream. Sometimes I wonder if I've ever been awake, knowing times when, after great exhaustion, I've fallen into deep sleep, then, waking, been told by a puzzled spouse that while I thought I slept, I got up, answered the phone, held a conversation and went back to bed.

For some of us, life is learning to see what we look at and look at what we see. But many spend their lives (life after life), each blinded by the sun of himself, which he never looks right at.

When you look at things, it's surprising. (Duh!)
For example, trees -- not just that there are
all those leaves, but that every single leaf
is a different distance away from you,
degrees of leaving (each divorce begun
with the first kiss or long before).

Who knew there were so many depths!
Wow! 3D! Things come right at you!

Enter wind, and every depth (there are thousands)
changes, and you see it all, just like that! --
something that must be you making all those
inconceivably intricate calculations instantly.

I've been looking at trees through a window,
and I just noticed the window glass -- and,
look, the screen! I've been looking through it
all this time. I'll be damned! How did I
train my eyes to look through a wire grid
that cuts the view into thousands
of tiny squares, separate the squares
from the grid and reassemble them
to achieve a wire-free view of trees and sky?

(How do thousand-eye flies sort things out?)

How did I learn to unsee things with such
precision? And you (that's one of my
overworked themes -- "and you?") -- how
did you learn to hear a voice here
without seeing the words that comprise it?
On this page have you seen a single serif
of a single letter? Have you seen an "e,"
an "I"? ("Give me an I!...")

Note: "Give me an I!" in the last line could be the voice of a contestant on Wheel of Fortune or Jeopardy or whichever, asking Vanna for an "I", but I had in mind the cheerleaders demanding of the crowd: "Give me a C! Give me an E! Give me an N!..." (My high school was called Central. Central High -- high and in the middle of something, I don't know what.)

If you can hear my voice here
without losing sight of the letters and even
the serifs, you, sir or madam (I cannot quite
make you out or make out with you)
are a visionary.

William Blake saw a tree full of angels --
and what's the difference between a seraph
and a serif? When we've lost our angels
(they've fallen, tread the brimstone
with weary feet, walking on fallen arch-
angels), we are in Hell (sans-seraph) or
Helvetica.

I should be ashamed to say I don't see angels
when I look at trees or suns. Not unless
I want to, and why should I? I like leaves.
The angels I see are the conventional ones:
small children, unexpected smiling faces,
anyone who actually listens and understands.

“Angel” means messenger. I suppose a poet is a
messenger -- all this talk of inspiration.
But when I create my message and know
I create what I create, then, in this metaphor,
I am God (and any universe, perhaps, begins
as metaphor), and these, my shiny pages,
stand ranked and filed before me, reams
of angelic quires, at attention, waiting
for me to give them my messages to you.

See my angels? Riffle through them,
and you'll hear the beating of wings.

Note: Helvetica is a sans-serif font – no serifs (or, like Hell, no seraphim). This is Helvetica. This is ordinary Times New Roman hell. Or hellish times. Blank angelic “quires” (ready to carry my messages to you): A quire (thank you for inquiring) is one twentieth of a ream, 24 or 25 sheets. A poet's work is soon gone with the wind, a wind drunk with poetry, thousands of sheets to the wind. Lost reams drift through our dreams.

Each angelic page is also a leaf,
folio or foliage -- like the fig leaves
in which, at the age of folly (foliage),
we clothe the angelic imps who once
frolicked as naked as not-yet-written poems
on the beach.

So I, too, see a tree full of angels.
(Eat your heart out, William Blake!)
Like leaves, each page has its unique distance
from your eyes. Riffle pages, noticing
depth. Or read one flat page and notice
(I hope) depth. (Topography: Science of depths
and flatnesses, nothing more certain than
depth and Texas.)

Pages live longer than leaves -- some do.
Most leaves fall each fall. Some books
last a week, a day. But many gather dust
on library shelves for centuries. Only when
a civilization falls apart (always while
appearing more than ever a forever thing,
shiny towers bristling in the sunset)
do all these shriveled leaves fall from their shelves,
get swept into heaps, become a bonfire
(from "bone fire" -- for burning bones,
says Webster), around which children dance
in and out, dodging the black boots
of drunk, laughing, red-faced storm troopers,
burning in their bones,

pages curling brown, then ashen flakes, hard buckram
buckling, bubbling -- I remember my hairless
8-year-old chest turned pink from the dye
of the book I rested against it, reading and reading
in the hot bathtub until the water went
tepid, then cold, my flesh pruned
like book covers warping in flame.

(But I am here. They have killed a few messengers --
that is, angels, the pages that attend me.
I have many more blank pages. Have you ears
to hear?)

Note: "Flesh pruned (2nd from last stanza) -- perhaps life cut short, but mainly, skin wrinkled from long immersion in water, prune-like. I just remembered that the book that pinked (again, not cut; this time, made pink) was a Ted Scott book. That series used red covers. The Ted Scott books, like the tan/brown-colored Hardy Boys books, were attributed to Franklin W. Dixon. Ted was a barnstorming pilot out for adventure. (Seems to me some of the Tarzan books had red covers too. Red in tooth and claw.)

In late December, 2003, a poet friend
(not quite an oxymoron; mutual respect
can hold envy at bay) -- a poet friend
gave me a gift: a hard-bound book,
black, that close-textured stuff we associate
with book-binding, but never think about --
what is it? Buckram? Glue-stiffened cloth,
says my dictionary; what ram is not
a buck? Doubly male, stiffened, binding.

Anyway, a proper book (perhaps it's "bookram" --
how many books did teachers ram
down our throats?) -- a book to which my friend
had glued (more glue) a tinted ink-sketch *a la chinoise*
(no, not "*a la*", for she IS Chinese)
of two spindly horses galloping
before low green hills across a gigantic
setting sun, surrounded by concentric ribbons
of itself, orange against a yellow sky --
signed lower right in English and Chinese;

between the book-rams, pages, 256 blank pages
(You're on number 151 now) for me to fill
with poetry. The book was itself,
content without content, as perfect as any
living room chair or kitchen appliance.
The pages were just pages, demanding nothing --
quick, when I removed my impeding fingers,
to close ranks, as neat in their blank uniforms
as any drill squad, aligned at the edges
into a fine-grained surface, a brick of paper
concealing its separate surfaces.

My handwriting is ugly, uneven, a cramped scrawl,
unworthy of such precision. If I must mess up
these pages, let it be in celebration
of their uniform blankness, lost, like the gleam
of soldiers on parade, as they straggle home
after a battering, rending
Borodino or Sebastopol or Waterloo.

(I do much of my reading to the sounds
of water in the loo.)

Note: I didn't pun the semblance of a bored Dean in Borodino. I spare you much. The gift, as noted in the Introduction, was from poet Hilary Tham Goldberg, who for some reason (per doctors, cancer) died less than a year later. This is mysterious: To give another poet a book of blank pages, then vanish. I hope I've done her gift justice. After all, it just is.

The poet who gave me this book discovered
six months and about 140 pages of this book later
(though she's only seen the first 70 and said she
loved them, which I know she meant, because she
never shies away from telling me one of my poems
"doesn't work" for her -- for a poet is a temp agency:
Hire my poems to get the job done; they type,
they take dictation, they do floors and
Microsoft Windows, they will work for YOU!) --

anyway, six months later she discovered
her smoker's lungs had an unwanted presence.
(Shall we call the X-ray a blank page some
idiot had blotted with spilt ink? Shall we not?)
Now she's getting tested (no answers
at the back of the book), diagnosed, chemo'd
and, soon, radiated.

"Chemo" suggests a long-term companion:
Tonto always called the Masked Man
"Kemosabi" -- why not Kemo for short.
("Whassup, Kemosabi?" could be shortened
to the spicier, "Wasabi?") Why should
a close companion be so exhausting?
(But they often are.) Why doesn't radiation
make one feel radiant? Why is "diagnosis"
such an ugly word? -- bald, gaunt,
with a long sharp hooked nose, wearing
blinding glasses (no eyes visible in the glare) --
buglike. Dr. Diagnosis, arch-foe of Superman
and Captain Marvel.

"Dia" -- through, across, apart; "gnosis" --
investigating, knowing (with just a hint
of diagonal -- through agony?): The doctors know
through you, gnaw -- I mean know -- you apart.

My friend is being tested. What does all this mean?
Who knows, Kemosabi, quién sabe?
Quiz, Friday.

Note: Since the Captain Marvel comics vanished in the 50s (sued out of existence by DC Comics, who said Marvel too closely mimicked Superman in his form and powers), most readers may not recall that the arch-villain of the Captain Marvel comics (his equivalent of Superman's Lex Luthor) was a scrawny bald Dr. Sivana (or some such name), who did, indeed wear the blinding glasses I've given Dr. Diagnosis. To visualize Dr. Diagnosis, just repeat rapidly the word "diagnoses" ten or more times. "Quién sabe?" means "who knows?" and sounds a lot like "Kemosabi". As for the meaning of "Kemosabi" or "Kemosabe" (and several other spellings of it) -- a bit of Googling will find you several possibilities, the most likely of which is an Ojibway word for "scout" or possibly "trusty scout". But there are other, weirder possibilities.

I've got to stop interrupting my sentences
with long, quibbling parentheses. It's mannerism.
It's too easy to do. I don't want to be easy
to do. I'm not that kind of a poet.

Though it can make for popularity --
if the fashion catches on. Hemingway may be remembered
as one of those most skilled at doing Hemingway.

Nobody does Tolstoy. Even he gave it up
long before he died. Don't try this at home, kids.
It looks easy, but to do me is to be me,
and the job is taken -- a dirty, nasty job,
but someone imagined he had to do it.

Since another of my mannerisms is self-contradiction,
I should fill the rest of this page with consecutive
and concentric parentheses full of dead-ended metaphors
and puns, the ones that failed to make the Major Leagues.

That's what my parentheses are for --
a place to use up the ideas that couldn't sustain
their own poems. And here and there
a mock parenthetical that is really
my main point, under cover -- a form of understatement.

But no, I will not put my words between
a vertical frown and a vertical grin; rather
will I be doubly self-contradictory by not
contradicting myself after all. That's all for now --
I've got to dash ----

Note: You can readily verify that hundreds of writers (including Hemingway) "did" Hemingway. But it is hard to find anyone who has found a way to "do" Tolstoy (especially the Tolstoy of War and Peace, Anna Karenina and The Death of Ivan Illych). This isn't a matter of popularity. It's simply that there are no obvious gimmicks in Tolstoy. His style is as transparent as air. But he, himself, gave up on what he did better than anyone before or since, put down his own finest work (said it was elitist and insufficiently moral, in that the illiterate peasantry of his land could not read and understand it or learn needed values from it), mostly abandoned it and began writing religious parables and moral tracts, fine in themselves, even moving, but to many readers, it seemed a great loss.

A long open sound
(aaaahhhh) starts to itch for
a consonant.

Muted rustle
of consonants. I wonder what
the next page is saying?

It begins with
writing a number on me.
Here come the words.

First opened, I was
a blank daze; now my daze
is numbered.

July night. We must
write on it in light --
photo-graphy.

Fireworks! Fire
plays. Then ash trails on darkness --
invisible ink.

Fireworks over,
a few fireflies, unawed,
blink on...off...on...

After fireworks,
fire flies -- my words
in your mind?

I was blank, but
I could feel. Who said my daze
was numb, erred.

Dog-ears, paper clips --
your scribbles make me a place
to be marked.

Someday all this space
will be filled with poetry --
mark my words.

Words? You want words
from me? What a nice surprise!
I don't know what to say...

Note: The "I" of the above poems (more or less haiku/senryu) is the page, blank or recently blank. (A senryu is haiku-sized, but with more emphasis on wit, humor, satire and social matters than is typical in haiku.) The last of this sequence is dedicated to a fine poet and old friend who died in 1994, David Ross, whose voice I borrowed for it. He doted upon and expected admiration, but received it always with "What a nice surprise!" And he would precede his long, eloquent, on-and-on-rolling speeches on any and every subject (he was expert in so many) with "I don't know what to say." The

false modesty of the blank page?

The Sleep of Nations

My friends are taking sides: which candidate?
I join in, make good points, go blank...it's late.
I'll think this through tomorrow. Now I'll sleep...

In shallow currents tossed, can't reach that deep
Dark empty reassurance; no, this blankness
Spawns dreams as slipp'ry as the studied frankness
Of politicians; endless arguments
That shrink and stretch and twist to fit events --

Events that, clothed in logic, melt away
(Each witness sees a different crime; each day
Dies with its headlines' din), leaving a pile
Of logic, proving either choice too vile
To contemplate: A pile of rumpled thought,

And in the mazes of our hearing, caught,
The echo of the last shriek of events:
"O! What a wicked world!" We start to sense
We're not in Kansas anymore. Each claim
Is linked to sticky web-sites, each the same
As every other in its certainty,

Insider scoops, dismissive punditry,
Its pack of subtle facts that others miss --
But you and I are now elite, they hiss:
We know the Truth. WHICH truth? Do all sides lie?

Where nations roll in sleep, their children die.
We, Godlike, will determine with one vote
Who lives? Lard logic with authoritative quote...

I cannot dream this dream -- if I awake,
Will morning still be there? Will songbirds break
Dream logic into shards of colored glass? --
The daily news sunk, dew-sopped, in the grass?

Note: When the news (TV, paper and Internet) blurs to sameness, that, too, becomes a blankness. The way reported events slip away from us (hard to discern among conflicting reports, soon forgotten), but leave behind their asserted logic, the sense that we know something (we no longer recall how we know it – just something everyone knows, so there must be something to it) – I compare the rumpled left-over logic (devoid of specific experience or events we've actually experienced ourselves) to the clothes left by the wicked witch after Dorothy pours a bucket of water over her, and she melts, screaming "What a world! What a world!" During the 2004 presidential campaign, I watched friends (and myself at times) convinced from articles on various websites that they had the real truth of one side or the other, drunk on data, it seemed. Any cool morning, noticed, blew away such pseudo-certainties, like Alice's pack of cards. (Still, there are several politicians I wish would blow away as easily. Not that I suggest anyone should blow them away. The winds of change should suffice, poor platitude that they are.)

This page, too, was once as blank
as tomorrow. This very line was blank,
this phrase, word -- you and I,
we were not here (some say, not anywhere).

Is anything ever absent? Is anything ever lost
in this world so chock-a-block with presence?
Is everything its own opposite? (I could have said,
as truly, that this page was once as blank
as yesterday, as full and rich as tomorrow.)

The world is motion, ceaseless (Cecil-less,
perhaps lacking Cecil, the Seasick Sea Serpent,
sea-sickness being an objection to motion),
but can I not make my thoughts stand still?
(But where would my thoughts stand?)
(On the head of a pin?) Into what abyss
can God (who is everywhere? Nowhere?)
Endlessly plunge?

I think the blankness that is God becomes man
by saying "blankness" or "there's no one here."
Man is what names the beasts (those that be --
Beast, thou be'st!). When man names "nothing,"
that is his most profound discovery (of God?
Of self? Of the Arabic number zero, so crucial
to modern mathematics? Of pages on which
to write poems? Of endless strings of questions?).

Words emerge -- no, more simply, they come to be --
no -- are! How simple! Not from or on a blankness
that pre-existed ready to receive words. No, words
are here (no words are here); I make them
punctuating nothing

But as I dwindle into merely human,
I find a blank page and must fill it with words.
There never was a blank page. I make blankness
with my words. The blank page is my creation --
my first poem.

Note: I suppose we become aware of blankness by putting words on it or trying to. The wall (patternless paint) is not blank. I don't think of it as blank, because I don't think of it as a place to put words. Children often do, as do revolutionaries and others who object to walls and put words on them as a way of owning walls and preparatory to tearing them down, perhaps. If man names the beasts, is "nothing" a beast? Then why does "Revelations" assign 666 as the number of the Beast, rather than 0? Perhaps the Beast (like the title of Jules Pheiffer's first book of cartoons) is sick sick sick..

Stanza 3: "Cecil the Seasick Sea Serpent" was a character on a TV puppet show in the early 50s ("Beany and Cecil") and on a cartoon version in the early 60s. The show was not ceaseless. It ceased. We have since been Cecil-less.)

I have this nightmare in which whatever I am
aware of being (this body, these thoughts, this sense
of self) is front to what I really am, but cannot
perceive, as if I've put my head through
the hole in a state-fair photographer's
painted cardboard scene, perhaps my face
pushing through beneath a painted black cowboy hat,
my head comically three-dimensional
like a drunk's red nose, posed atop
a painted cowboy body on a painted bucking bronco,

and I've stood there (on a stool behind the cardboard)
for minutes that seem hours while the photographer
tweaks his camera, changes film and lighting, adjusts
lenses...so that my hidden body has gone numb,
and I have slipped into a cowboy dream, or
into the dream of being who I think I am.

What's scary is, I don't know what goes on
behind the scene, what fingers pick my pockets,
poke and fondle, point and mock, torment,
caress, inject, sneer, put silly signs on my numb,
invisible, legendary, half-forgotten derriere.

Enchanted by this hypnotic world,
I've lost track of what I am
in some other universe, am perhaps
a hollow hand puppet, some alien hand thrust up
my long-lost asshole to make me squirm, voice
alien words -- O when will the photographer
duck beneath his black cloth and with
loud pop, blinding flash, sizzle and black smoke,
wake me from this dream?

Note: In so awkward a position, one would almost prefer not to wake up.

As peremptory as an angry parent, he says
“Parentheses do not belong in poetry.”
(He read that somewhere, written, not
in parenthesis, but in bold caps (caps
to cover the baldness of statement).)
Down with all such otiose appendages!
(Pare to the nth these -- that’s my thesis!)

“Para” -- beside; “en” -- in; “thesis” -- from Greek
for “to put”: To put in beside, to insert beside.
(Greek-style? From the days when complex syntax
was not shameful and young comrades in arms,
between battles, slept slipt parenthetically
beside one another, in arms, inserted? But
such love is like two open parentheses nested
without close. Deathless love? Or content-less?)

Poetry is claimed to be the antithesis
of parenthesis. (My cousin’s parent -- the sister
of my parent. Oedipus re-enters, stage left,
bloody after battle, dazed with revelation,
Pa, rent, he says.)

I like to insert beside (note to grad students of the
optimistic(?) future: sometimes a simile is just
a simile; this poet has bedded no boys, boys).
The best poetry is beside the point. There are too many
points. It’s the politically correct, with their horror
of hierarchy, who would not allow the “flow”
of language (Hemingway’s syntax: a battle-numbered soldier
putting down one aching foot ahead of the other)
to be interrupted, paused, drawn out, stressed
by differentiation, one thing more important than
another, one clause governing a descending, branching,
upside-down, rippling live-oak of clauses, some
mere twigs, whispers (aside) like bed-talk
between lovers after battle.

Note: I really have had poets in workshops tell me (as if passing on revealed truth) that parentheses are not to be used in poetry. You’ll notice that advice didn’t take. It comes from the same people who routinely recommend cutting any poem they are shown (thus, “pare to the nth these” – playing on “parentheses”). The baldest statements are often in uppercase – “caps” to cover their baldness?

Stanza 2: “Content-less” -- empty parentheses, no words between them; or love without contentment. The idea is that the Greek men probably lay together spoon fashion: “((“ – two open parentheses, no closure ,(Deathless) nothing contained between them.

Stanza 3: Antithesis (Auntie thesis) is the sister of parenthesis (parent thesis). One of the revelations in Oedipus is that the man he killed in battle is his parent (Pa rent – rent, that is, torn, by sword). In stanza 4 I refer to the future as optimistic, because it is optimistic to assume that this poem will last long enough to get meddled with by grad students of literature. I refer to the politically correct as dreading hierarchy, because they do: The politically (really psychologically) “correct” have infiltrated the education system in the U.S.A., for example, with the notion (borrowed

from Communism) that hierarchy is evil, that children shouldn't respect parents or churches, that "born equal" equates to all being of equal value, that it's dangerous to reward people for performing better than other people, that everyone should get an A and be encouraged to esteem him/herself, even in the absence of achievement. I connect that disdain for hierarchy to the rejection of prose that delineates the relative importance of its points syntactically, using devices like complex sentences, dashes, parentheses, etc., to indicate levels of hierarchy of importance. The implied contrast is between the prose of Sam Johnson or Jane Austen and the prose of Hemingway. We've so strongly rejected Johnsonian prose that it seems formal to us, esoterically musical, almost poetry.

The blankness is what comes next,
not necessarily a page -- could be
the next sentence, word or letter.
Of course, often what's gone before
seems to determine what is to come,
one good sentence leading to another, one page
to another, one life... -- but if you always know
the next word, why write? Why talk?
Why play "Peek-a-BOO!" with the baby
hiding and peeping over Mom's shoulder
ahead of you in line at the post office?

I write to surprise myself with (not surprisingly)
myself, who, surprisingly or not, often turns out
to be you. I like it when line two makes nonsense
of line one, but line three turns it all
into a sense so obvious you can't quite recover
the clarity of chaos that had flared up
for a flash in line two -- like that brief whiff of...
is it shit? Yuck!...NO, WAIT -- Ahh!
Peanut butter cookies baking!

Is this what's meant by thesis, antithesis, synthesis?
(Isis is the sis to Osiris -- "Ain't I the sis,"
says she. Sin thee, Sis?) (But whatever Isis is
is right.)

I also like to extend the nonsense to the point where
plain sense is irrecoverable, then salvage it,
like rescuing imperiled Pauline from the train tracks
or old-saw mill (Hallmark is one), where she's tied down,
the train or saw blade inches from her vulnerable bosom,
approaching, and approaching again and yet again....

(I think the camera has a stutter.) (Thank God,
this camera isn't lisping, or how could I ever
enunciate thesis, synthesis, antithesis? Or dare
to speak of whatever Isis is to Osiris?)

*Note: Perhaps the circumstance in stanza two is not as universal as I think. Sometimes I smell something only very
distantly, and am not sure whether to react to it with pleasure or disgust. As I come nearer, the odor defines itself, and
I realize that heavy musky scent is not something foul, but the even more dangerous (entrapping) scent of cookies baking.*

*In stanza three I re-introduce Isis and Osiris, who so generously donated to an earlier poem in this sequence a sentence
with eleven repetitions in a row of "is" -- this time to recreate "thesis, antithesis and synthesis. For the pun-imperiled,
"Isis is the sis to Osiris" decodes to "Isis is thesis to Osiris." "Ain't I the sis" approximates "antithesis" and "Sin thee,
Sis?" suggests "synthesis."*

*In stanza 4, Pauline is the name of the hero of early silent films. She is often tied to the train tracks or to wood being
sawed. The train (or saw) seems to take forever approaching her, giving her rescuer time to save the day. Often in one
shot the train is almost there, but in the next, it seems to be no closer, as if the camera is stuttering. But not lisping.
Imagine saying "synthesis" or "Isis" with a lisp -- or read the next poem!*

Had Hegel lisped, his students would have struggled with
thethith, antithethith, thynthethith, the thequenth
of Hithtory leading, ultimately to the divine
Conthiouthneth that Whatever ith ith right.
(Ithith, being, Herthelf, divine, we may thafely thay
that whatever Ithith ith ith right.)

Poor German philosophy students, drenched in
Hegelian spit, having to shake themselves dry
as Harmonica players must, after a hard, wet blow,
shake their harmonicas dry, and speaking of hard
wet blows and Monica, tell us, dear, with Bill, spit-shiny
in and out of your mouth, is that sex you're having?
"That dependth on what ith ith." (Hard to talk
with your mouth -- mouse?-- full.)

But Bill's "is is" line was not his quibble
about whether sucking is sex or sex sucks, but his
quibble about whether now is then. Since most of us
can't tell the difference (except now and Zen)
between now and then, still fighting ancient battles
against long-dead foes, still living to prove things
to people who are no longer around (like Bill
and Monica), I'd say that "is" (or "ith") is (or ith)
rather was-y (or wathy), and also, alas (altho, alath)
[STOP DOING THAT!] -- also will-y (or
William Jefferson's willy -- or, conditionally, wouldy).

As to whether a blow-job is sex, my penis thinks so,
but what does my penis know? A blow-job could be
considered eating (or feeding), massaging (very relaxing,
some say therapeutic!), prophylaxis, cannibalism (that's
human sperm, even from a politician) (SPIT! SPIT! -- or thpit!),
assisted masturbation (and how they baited her master!),
A form of domination, a parody of prayer or good clean
exercise for an orator, like Demosthenes holding pebbles
in his mouth while talking into the wind and waves.

Surely, if you can speak intelligibly with a cock
in your mouth, you'll become another Thithero!
(Thithero, antihero, thyntherey yours,

Dean

(And, yes, after all that practice, Monica did learn
to speak loudly and clearly and became the shout
heard round the world, teaching us all that if we persist,
we can all reach the Starrs.)

Note: Since headline news (even of heads of nations receiving head) is notoriously soon forgotten, on the small chance that this poem will be read long enough to outlast Clinton's disgrace, I'll decode this poem a bit: Hegel's teachings, including terms like "thesis, antithesis and synthesis", may very well have showered his students with spit. The image

of harmonica players shaking spit out of their “mouth organs”, suggested [har]-Monica (Lewinski), who mouthed President Clinton’s organ. That brings up (wrong word choice?) Bill’s having denied he lied about not have sex with Monica, because, he argued (on TV), blowjobs are not sex. His other infamous quibble, under formal questioning about his actions, had to do with whether a question applied to the immediate present or not. He was asked a question that included the word “is” about whether he is having intimate relations with his intern (Lewinski), and he said that that depends on what is is – meaning, no, he’s not, but he had them earlier. (Nice to know he wasn’t getting a blowjob beneath the table while answering his inquisitor.) I then conclude that “is” has some “was” qualities (is rather was-y – or, if you lisp or have your mouth full, wathy), based on the idea presented in the same stanza that most people live in a present time that is heavily infiltrated by the painful past, are still fighting old battles, etc. And since “what is” also influences what will be, “is” is rather “will-y”, a word that suggests both William Clinton and his “willy” (slang for penis), which, when hard, is called a “woody” (slang for an erection), which nicely coincides (a word that suggests “go inside”) with the fact that to the present time (now or is), the future is subjunctive, or “would-y”.

My meditation on what a blow-job might be considered to be (if it isn’t sex), leads to the possibility that Monica was developing her ability to be an orator (by analogy to Demosthenes, who also held something in his mouth – pebbles). I don’t know why, but the idea of someone trying to talk while performing oral whatever-it-is-if-not-sex amuses me. Talk about a speech impediment!

That leads to a great orator: Cicero, whom I lisp into thithero, then crudely decline (on the analogy of thesis, antithesis, synthesis) to Thithero, antihero, thyntherely. It pleases me that Cicero, when lisped, acquires “hero”. The arbitrary “ly” added to the last in the series is my way of saying, enough already and signing off that joke. (Supposedly, the Romans pronounced Cicero “Kickero”, but fortunately we’ve long since corrupted it to the lispable “sisero”).

Monica didn’t really become an orator, but she certainly became a celebrity. And of course, the “Starr” she reached was Kenneth Starr, the investigator who ran Clinton’s impeachment trial.

The joke was on those of us who thought Clinton was awful. We elected a good Christian.

So maybe Bill was training Monica to be a great orator. Stuff your thumb in your mouth (THUMB! I said Thumb!) and try to say “Four score and seven years ago...”.

Hmmm -- makes the tongue twitch, might be a real turn-on. Perhaps I've just discovered a future sex-fad. The johns will pay extra for a fellator orator -- or fellorator?...orfellator? (Having an orfell time latterly?) You'll overhear “She likes to go down on me, but I can't get her to memorize a rousing speech.” “But Honey, it's bad manners to talk with your mouth full!”

Could any man (any REAL man) hold off coming so as not to drown out the peroration? I can hear myself now -- skipping to Lincoln's conclusion, taking, as it were, the words (but ONLY the words) out of her mouth: “Ah...AH...O! OF THE PEOPLE BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE **PEEEEEPLE!!**” (Drive a new Lincoln Incontinental today!)

And in the background, a shrill hum, as millions of sperm scream, “Give me liberty or give me death” and get both at once. It's a learning experience for them: Live in loin.

Of course, it is traditional to associate fellatio with presidents (press-it-ins), though not with oratory, since such mouth-filling work (a job, after all) supports only the inarticulate purr and wet sucking sounds. (It's called fellatio because of all the sucking up required to win fellowships. And maybe because it's how some fellows do it with each other. Fellows make strange bedfellows.)

Note: Stanza 4: “Live in loin” – that is, live and learn. The sperm are still alive when in a man's “loins”. Hundreds of millions of them die in each sex act, one surviving (as part of the newborn) if impregnation occurs – I guess two surviving with fraternal twins. Bad odds! Sperm – not a recommended career choice.

A Hoover is a vacuum cleaner. Why
would one want to clean a vacuum? To create
a double blank? Zero Squared, 0 0 (two blank eyes
staring at us). How odd to have three double-O presidents
in a row: cOOlidge, hOOver, rOOsevelt -- and almost, but
not quite, trOOman; those three and a half, plus
Teddy, no others. Double-O, licenced to kill.
Or orgasmic (also a kind of death-dealing): Oh! OH!
Cool! Who Rues? That is, Cool(idge), Hoo(ver), Roos(evelt).
True? (Man) (I sin. How are you?) (If I answered, Adlai to you.)

But their orgasms were discreet; whereas, Bill Clinton's legacy
("Is that a leg I see?" he perhaps said to start things rolling)
is a frozen heraldic profile, female kneeling, head vanishing
between legs of plump male, engorged, gules on a field
urgent, pants descendent, semi-reclined, head back,
mouth overt, eyes covert -- a tableau-
job.

Odd, how obsessed we were with the rise and fall
of Bill's little tower, how dwarfed his folly seems now
in the shadow of twin towers collapsing.

(But wouldn't it be nice, if some reporter were to ask Bill,
"How is your relationship with Hillary now?"
so that he could reply, "Close, but no cigar"?)

I'd rather remember his blowjobs than his snow jobs,
his lame apology for Rwanda, 800,000 slaughtered
because it was an internal matter (to humanity?).

Double-O, licence to kill, Double-U, found only
in a vacUUm (the two blank eyes have stared too long,
their eyelids now drooping), or a Bush (dubya, or
so they dub ya): Double your pleasure, double your fun
with Doubleyou, Doubleyou, Doubleyou Dumb.

But he's no dumber than you and you, fellow voters.
His particular W initializes "Walker". Only a walker,
but that suffices, for where can we run to?

Note: We'd apparently gotten off our theme (blankness), but, aha! "Hoover" (a brand of vacuum cleaner) is used as a verb to refer to giving a blowjob (as in "She hoovered him" – the hoover maneuver).

Stanza 1 is puny or punny: I take the first syllables of the three presidents with "OO" in their last names, and of them make "Cool! Who Rues?" Since FDR preceded Truman, I go forward with him ("True? (Man)), who is followed by Eisenhower ("I sin. How are you?) and Eisenhower's election opponent, Adlai (I'd lie – with a Southern accent) Stevenson. Just ignore the poet. He puns that way when he's tired.

Stanza 2: I mention their orgasms (also double "O!"s) were discreet. As was noted at the time, Bill Clinton was not the first president to fool around, just the one who got caught and was much attacked in the press for it. Roosevelt is one

example of a President whose affair was known to the press, but not exposed. Later in the stanza I raise Clinton's disgrace to heraldic coat of arms status: "Gules on a field urgent", etc., play with terms of heraldry. "Urgent" puns "argent" (silver), so "gules on a field argent" means red against a silver background, but in this case, it's Clinton's aroused state, red on a field "urgent".

Stanza 4 refers to the testimony that Clinton teased Monica's public private parts with a cigar (not lit, I hope).

Stanza 5 refers to Clinton's apology for not having the United States intervene in the genocide in Rwanda – not even admit that genocide was occurring until after the killing was done. (Does Bush ever apologize for anything?)

Stanza 6 alludes to the old commercial jingle for Doublemint chewing gum: "Double your pleasure, double your fun with Doublemint, Doublemint, Doublemint Gum."

Stanza 7 requires a disclosure: The dumb voters ("you and you") who elected Bush include MOI! I wasn't fooled twice, though. One of the things I most resent about Bush is that he made me vote for John Kerry. Bush is, indeed, George Walker Bush. And indeed, with a Super Power waging its war on terrorism around the world, there's no where to run to. Perhaps one can hide on a blank page.

How the political mind rambles -- from Clinton to a cigar in the Bush (worth two in the hand?) to the vacUUmous W, a man of acuity or vacuity -- opinions vary; from literature to politerature (a form of pollutics -- no relationship to Clinton's IMpolite rapture); from words to those who waste our words, doing so much crap "for our children," that "children" becomes a nasty word. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear," says mud. "We are not going to be [fill in the blank-ed] by a [fill in the blank] who [fill in the blank -- or please don't!]." All political speeches are the same, except for occasional syntactic blanks to be filled in by speech writers, based on the latest polls. I'd like to hear a speech with just the hot buttons found by polls and surveys, minus the trimmings: "Unjust war based on lies, huge budget deficit, economy stalled, I'm smarter..." Or better yet, just the structure, minus the so-called substance (political speeches are a form of substance abuse): "I stand before you today, a man who, if elected, will _____ and _____, bringing you a nation of _____ and _____ for ALL the people...". Or best of all (by far) just give us the blanks, ten minutes, no, an hour of silence, followed by "wild applause", which is what we call the applause of the very tame), no, TWO hours of silence, a flat, smooth silence upon which a poem might splatter and stick.

Note: "A cigar in the Bush" – Clinton apparently stimulated Monica Lewinski with a cigar. "Bush" is slang for a woman's genital hair. The two U's in vacUUmous adumbrate the dumb (supposedly) George DoubleU. "Politerature" – political or politicized literature, with hints of pollute and polite.

Per the last two lines, a blank page (to hold onto a poetry pancake) should probably not be Teflon. Poetry requires a little skill (or skillet). (This metaphor needs oil.)

Here blank page faces blank page,
cheek by jowl, cheeky indeed, for when I
open the book, these pages, packed together
and swelling out in a gentle curve
from where they are glued to binding
(like plump, hairless thighs from their juncture),
seem sleek, solid, sensuous things,
far more substantial than the same number
of unbound sheets.

I remember the pleasure of running a finger
over the gilded edges of pages, with the book closed
(as if mocking the sharpness of each page),
knowing this solid, interestingly milled surface
to be composed of sharp, flimsy edges;

fun, too, to open a book, hold all the pages
curved back, compressed between fingers and thumb,
then riffle them (PFFFFFFFT!) off the thumb.

These pleasures were the same, whether or not
the pages were blank, perhaps increased by printer's ink,
for it was a distinct joy, halfway through a book,
to find that the pages I'd read formed a fullness
that could sustain riffling or compressing
to a slim brick, and that yet another substantial mass
(hundreds of pages, tens of thousands of words)
yet remained to be processed.

This creation, thin page by page, of a manifold brick
of stuff, nothing like a page, too thick to tear,
too smooth-edged to cut me, was my achievement,
my making a book by reading it. Or by writing it here
where, until I write the next page, this littered page
(I hope literature) faces the blankness it has
left behind -- or rather, will soon encounter.

Note: In the last stanza, the page, now filled with writing, has, thus, left blankness behind, but also it faces blankness – the next page, not yet filled.

Stanza 2 refers to the “gilded edges of pages”, but I see no such books on my shelves. Remember when fancy hard-back books had gilded (or other wise covered) edges of pages, so that some books, until opened, looked like golden bricks? (And I, when not wanting to confront homework, would lock myself in the bathroom with a book – goldbricking.)

Blankness facing blankness, backed by
blanknesses yet unopened (one page's emptiness
concealing another's) -- nothing to nothing,
a scoreless game. Actually, nineteen to nothing
is also a scoreless game, for is not a score
twenty?

When I make love to my wife, I don't call it
"scoring", since love means no score:
We're on the same team now; it's no longer
the boys versus the girls or the shirts versus
the skins or the vice versus the verses (fornication
is SO distracting!). It's you and me, Babe,
against the world! (But please don't tell
the world.) Monogamous --having a single gam,
but at least a leg to stand on. (Is not marriage
tetragamous?)

In music a scoreless sheet is blank (he noted).
"To score" -- from old Nordic, to cut notches,
or, in stud parlance, to perform au notchurel.
"Scoria" -- slag (meaning, having no refinement)
is from the Greek word for "dung" (skatos).

Scratching (sss...) to get to the the core that we hope
isn't dung. Loveless love, score without succor,
N-ding in scorn. I prefer courtly to escourtly love.
Remove that piece of S, leaving core -- heart;
and refine scorn to corn, silly, but wholesome,

not yet poetry, nor even love, but the words we speak
when we should be looking, just looking, even less
than looking, seeing more than we could possibly see,
looking at each other, blank with the fullness
between us, scoreless, uncut (the original uncut
virgin versions of selves, loaded with extras),
but not, unless we insist on upstaging ourselves
with the words we've learned
from the movies -- not clueless.

Note: Stanza 1: If a "score" is twenty (as in "four score and seven years ago", then a 19 to nothing game is scoreless.

Stanza 2: I call marriage tetragamous, because we have four gams (legs) – two each. Some of you (especially females, who kept their shirts on from an early age) may not get the reference to "shirts versus the skins": In school, boys would be divided into two teams, sometimes, by having half of them take off their shirts. The shirtless were the "skins", their opponents the "shirts". For some reason, we never had the pants vs the skins.

Stanza 3: The "he noted" refers to the notes found on a musical score. A stud is sometimes said (when he screws someone) to have cut another notch on his gun, which, in the context, seems gory – like multiple circumcisions. I refer to sex here (I'll do almost anything to extend a pun) as performing "au notcheral", referring to "au naturel", that is, naked.

Stanza 4: I break up “score” into “s” (the scratching) and “core”. “Courtly love” refers to the traditions of chivalry. I mean “escourtly love” to refer to the hiring of “escorts” for sex. The piece of S (piece of ass) or nitty gritty of sex, removed, leaves core, the heart, which is not the scorn in which “score” ends (scorning those with whom one has scored, for if we remove the S from scorn, we get corn – corny romantic “heart” stuff, often silly, but with redeeming value.

Stanza 4: “Scoreless, uncut” – another meaning of score is to cut, to make scratches on something. Here we encounter something that is not mere scoring, but is also not corny – unless we insist on filling these already bursting silences with “the words we’ve learned from the movies”, that is, out of fear of the bigness and strangeness of the experience, attempting to categorize it. If we DON’T do that, we are scoreless, but not clueless (referring to a movie that does get into the ways kids corn up love, but also referring to one or more related meanings of “score” and “clue”. For example, someone who “doesn’t know the score” is “clueless”. But in this case, the scoreless person is NOT clueless.

Eighty-seven -- say it over and over,
blypty-blifil, nothing to it, but "FOUR SCORE
AND SEVEN," now THAT'S a sublime mouthful,
especially "Four Score" -- hollow solemnity foreshadowing
"ago" (it's gone gone gone) and "fathers" (mine
is gone; so is father Abraham. Yours is gone or going).

And how shall we now speak of 1776? "Nine score and
eight years ago..." -- where did the magic go? "Two
centuries and 28 years ago"? No lucky seven, no deep
O-zone sounds. "Twenty-two decades and eight years ago"?
"Two hundred and twenty-eight years ago"? How many days?
How many minutes are we from the Minutemen (were they
fast or tiny or both?), how many seconds? (Was it sexually frustrating
to be wed to a fast, tiny minuteman? Is one in the bush
worth two if by hand? Did their wives Revere them?)

Surely the passage of time has somehow accrued to us
greater dignity! No wonder we say to hell with History,
when four score and seven beats nine score and eight.
We quit, we throw down our cards, say that Now is Now,
a full-sounding word. Past is past, a nasty, pasty, hasty,
gasp word. Future is richer, like culture and nurture,
with a FEW of YOU. (Ure U, aren't you?)

We can be solemn without orotund oratory. John Kerry's mug
is longer than Lincoln's and would look sadder too (poor Kerry-on!
What luggage do you drag behind you?) if ever the anaesthesia
(or whatever it is that numbs his heavy-lidded eyes) would
wear off, for though less resonant, 228 is a bigger number than 87,
so though we have not grown more grand, we are numb-er.

Lincoln, too, had heavy-lidded eyes. I know -- I used to draw
his face in the margins of notebooks, copy him from books
and five-dollar bills (don't tell the Feds), mold his huge head
in plasticine. And maybe he tried tinctures to tame the pain,
but the pain won.

I don't think he could bear being a politician, the possibility
that mere politics slaughtered 600,000. But 600,000
had been slaughtered ("slaughter" contains "laughter" --
why do we dwell on Lincoln's humor?), and his son
dead, his wife maddened, and he -- was he anything more
than a gifted politician? No use saying, "I'm just a plain
man doing my best," no, that would be hypocrisy now,
like saying, "I didn't lead you guys to slaughter. I just
followed along with the rest of you." (But if I, too,
am shot, would that make it true?) Well, then, if it can't be
less than politics, it must be more. Fine words and phrases
make it more than carnage, make it noble, tragic or at least
very sad.

What slave will free Father Abraham? Slave to what mad cause?

Note: This poem returns to a semblance of seriousness, though it takes a few stanzas. The wordplay along the way includes an analysis of the start of the Gettysburg Address and why it “works”, while other equally significant numbers (the time since the Revolutionary War) don’t sound as impressive. This leads to the minutemen, and the possibility that a woman might want her lover to last longer than a minute. How could I not work Revere (Paul) into that?

When rhetoric cheats us of the dignity of history (assigning more significance to “four score and seven years ago” (the time in Lincoln’s day since the revolution) than to the various ways of indicating the much longer time between US and the Revolution), we take NOW for our consolation, and the future, “future” being a word with a rich sound that includes “you” and “few”, etc.

“Kerry” (candidate who ran for President against Bush in 2004) leads to Kerry-on (carry-on or carrion) and from both of these to the baggage this man of woeful countenance seems to lug along with him, baggage under his droopy, numbed eyes. And we too, though we (as a nation) don’t seem to have acquired additional grandeur or nobility since Lincoln’s day, have, with our greater number of years between us and the origins of the American dream, grown more numb (number).

We come to Lincoln’s pervasive sadness, especially during the war years, a sadness that is, in a way, admirable, compared to the perky glibness with which other presidents have pursued war. I suggest that Lincoln felt forced to raise the issues of the war above politics, lest he should feel that mere politics was killing so many. That’s a truism, really – don’t we all do that with our issues: Justify bloodshed by sanctifying our purposes. But Lincoln did a great job of it, for others, at least. I’m not sure his justifications satisfied him. I suggest that his getting killed was a solution for him. He freed the slaves (or so we are taught), and a slave freed him (in a limited way): Booth, by shooting him, made it clear that he’d transcended politics. And Booth was a slave to his own mad cause. This is just my attempt to paraphrase a poem (though mine). I hope the poem is better than this paraphrase.

What if we had currency (say, the three-dollar bill) with a blank oval where the face (Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, Hamilton, Franklin...but not Bill, no, no Bill on our bill) -- where the face should be. Or blank, but for the words "Your face here -- attach photo" -- each man able to pay with his personal bank (or blank) note? They personalize credit cards. Why not customizable dollars -- or to tame money, replace the face with reflective material (we should all reflect on our good fortunes), so that we can see ourselves in our money.

Why not a little legal tenderness for oneself? Of course, A wife is legally tender, even legally tender where the laws of suttee apply. This quibbling or my loving makes my wife sore -- that is, tender. Tenderness gives to the touch (touching), gives more than it owns. That green piece of paper (no connection to Green Peace) is legal to give, offer in exchange for.

Money is scary stuff. It teaches that not all tenderness is legal. Beware of the love. You can get crucified (the X in exchange) for illegal tenderness. (Emperor Gods and their ambitious godlings are jealous of those who are too much loved. He who loves too much must be angling or angeling for love. He must want to be King. Listen to the whispering of the high priests. All agree, this man is dangerous to the common good.)

In olden times, money might be a cow. I like the idea of using meat for money, so that when the fat man says to his wife, "I'm not made of money, you know," she can cock a shiny eye and say, "You could have fooled me!"

Funny how beings become bodies and bodies become faces with ruffled or high-collared necks and just a hint of shoulders; then faces become ideas: The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI -- Yay! Minnesota! Have I mentioned I was born there?) -- the MMPI asks if you prefer Washington to Lincoln (the presidents, not the cities), and its oracles proclaim that juvenile delinquents prefer Washington. Is it something about powdered wigs? Wooden teeth? Warrior? Ruler? (Reluctantly both, but sucking it up and seeing it through.) Wealth? Clean shaven?

No, probably a matter of simple chronology: There was a book of American History. Washington came early (first in war, first in peace -- he da man!), then came many words not understood: treaty, Constitution, inauguration, term, federalism, fobblede flippery fuck history! History sucks! The delinquents are the ones who never made it to Lincoln, never made it to John Adams. They're the ones whose votes are so eagerly pursued by both parties

two centuries of blankness later.

Note: From the blankness of Kerry and Bush to the blankness of money. Suttee is the Hindu custom whereby a live widow used to throw herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband and burn up with him, thus becoming legal tinder.

I say that “this quibbling or my loving makes my wife sore”; be ye consoled, reader, to know that my wife, though she says she married me for my sense of humor, can get irritated by my long strings of allegedly humorous word play.

In stanza 4, the wife can “cock a shiny eye” – that’s a perhaps arbitrary echo of a childhood rhyme, something about “Birdy with a yellow bill/ Hopped upon my window sill,/ Cocked a shiny eye and said:/...” – probably “Rise and shine, you sleepy head!”. (A less sarcastic wife might prefer to eye a shiny cock.)

In case the last stanza is confusing, the idea is that the reason preferring Washington to Lincoln is, allegedly, an indicator of a juvenile delinquent might be because the delinquents are often kids who never achieve literacy, so soon after they get started on a subject, decide it sucks and give up on it. Since Washington gets praised early in their American History textbooks, they might have gotten that far, but seldom far enough to appreciate the textbook views of Lincoln.

History, politics -- sometimes I don't know if I know anything. I learned long ago that I don't know the things I know from newspapers and not always the things I think I know deep down: A woman who would never leave me left me; friends who would always be my friends became less than nothing to me; Cleveland lost the World Series four straight to the Giants, but my Dad wouldn't take the \$10 he bet me, said he just wanted to teach me that what you're certain of isn't always so. And yet, the moral of this is not (I think I know) going to be that living is the process of learning that one can know nothing, no, because there are things that I know and know that I know -- for example, that I am I and you are you, and here we are (or so this page screams to no one as flames engulf it, but the ashes will reach you and smudge you, and somehow you are getting this...).

As for living, it is often the process of bolstering with rationalizations our knowing things we "know" the way fans choose a team and know it is the best team; the way we know our opinions must be truth because they are ours. (And oddly enough, once we know how to know, we CAN choose a team and by our knowing it is best, make it best. Knowing becomes creating, in the absence of lies.)

It is hard to tell someone the truth (for example, that you are not a body, but an immortal being), not because the truth is unknowable or difficult to experience or recondite, but because it collides with all that we know that is not so.

Living should be learning how to know, and must begin by removing the barriers to knowing and knowing that we know (painful lessons, these extractions of false knowledge dearer than eye teeth) -- must begin by learning how much of what we know we do not know.

Note: I guess this sums up to the idea that what we call "knowing" is actually various higher and lower harmonics of something ("possessing data about" being one not-very-high harmonic).

Perhaps newspapers (All the News that We Deserve) do try to be “objective” (the quotation marks clinging like leeches to that word -- they won’t be shaken off), but why is one thing news and not another. Had you ever before taken the breath you just took? (If so, that’s news indeed! If this poem is breathtaking, relax, breathe deep, reread.)

At state fairs (more common than fair states) and Penny Arcades (that have not for decades heard of pennies) there are machines that will print an authentic-looking front page with headlines and photos you provide. I’d suggest a newspaper full of, mostly, blank pages with “Your story here,” “Your photo here,” “Your obituary here” --

but these days, with pot in every chick and a personal website for every user, we can each create our own daily news -- look, Ma, no paper! By God, we can ALL be ob-fucking-jective! (The “fucking” scared the quotation marks away, fluttering like moths disturbed by a just-missed SWAT.)

But can we create our own new day? Or even our own nude, eh? There’s nothing new under the sun and little nude in these skin-cancer-wary summers. How do you like it up here, over the sun? We can drop our newspapers into it for fuel, for though we cannot make our sun stand still, we can make it run.

The only new paper I see is blank. I age it with old, reliable words. This is not the news. This is the Olds (and I don’t mean the car). Read All About It! The old made new in my oldspaper.

Note: Line one mocks “All the news that’s fit to print”, some rag’s motto (is it the NY Times?).

“Though we cannot make our sun stand still, we can make it run” echoes the close of Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress to Make Much of Time.”

“The old made new” is a way one might describe poetry.

Speaking of blankness (that is, writing of it),
I always went a bit blank as a kid, listening
to kids my age, on radio shows, shrilling
“EXTRA! EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT!”
What was “extra”? They said it, too, in word clouds
in comic strips -- brave, scrappy kids chirruping
“EXTRA!”, then “Thanks, Mr.”, trading papers
for nickels, growing up to be James Stewart
as Mr. Smith going to Washington.

Years later I learned what a late, “extra” edition was,
and now I can’t recall what spurious sense I dubbed in
to make those strange words fit -- maybe “extra special”?
Surely not, “superfluous, no real need to read this crap,”
or “we throw in bits of blood, violence and juicy gossip
at no added charge -- extra!” And only now would I wonder
if the “fa” in “falalalal” replaced the “tra” in “tralala,
in which case fa would be an ex-tra.

I know I made something of it -- what weirdness, I wonder?
And what following words stumbled, blind, into the blankness
that followed those newsboy cries?

I think I got it nearly right -- some issues that had
extra good stuff. (How about “extra issues cheap --
all issues MUST GO!”) After all, Superboy had just
saved the world, and here’s the news, a cry
on the street, almost instantly. THAT’S something
EXTRA!

Actually, it’s quite ordinary: Every day the news proclaims
in huge banner headlines something -- whatever it can dig up,
there must be something fantastic happening to us all,
says the news, every damned day. Every ordinary day,
scream the headlines, is EXTRA-ORDINARY.

And this is true. It becomes obvious if, one day,
after years of reading the daily news, you skip it
and look around. Life is ordinary. Life is extra,
the added ingredient. “Ext” -- outside. We are not
this or that. We are extra, but extraordinarily so.

*Note: For non-Frank-Capra fans, James Stewart plays Mr. Smith, ex-Boy Scout (or some such thing) appointed to fill
a vacant U.S. Senate seat. When he gets in trouble, all the boys’ clubs he worked with and had belonged to himself
(including lots of newsboys) go to the rescue.*

*The last stanza may seem unreal to some. To me it’s obvious: A chemical heap or soup; Just add life and stir – instant
universe. The chemicals don’t come together to hit on life by accident. Life is not any thing. It’s what is capable of
becoming any thing and making it live. It grants life.*

There's a haunting similarity between having the word, but not the meaning, and having the meaning, but not the word. The first often befalls a child, who hears words, knows they are important, but not quite what they mean. The second applies more to us elders (I'm 62 now -- am I old?), who know exactly what we mean, but often grope for an old familiar word, grown estranged, as it does for a child who repeats it rapidly, many times. (In the beginning was the word; later comes the blankness.)

There should be a science with a fancy name (lexamnesiology?) for word-grope -- or tip-of-the-tongueness. It would consider various stages of groping, have a name for remembering it starts with an "m," when, in fact, it turns out to start with an "r," but contains a prominent "m" sound; a name for remembering the word's color, but not its sound; a name for the panicky, stuttering desperation as one tries for it, calling out words, no, that's not it, getting mad, cursing the unfaithful slut of a word; a name for the way, when it comes to you, you fondle it with the tongue, repeating it, as if to say, "Good word, I'll never never forget you again, wonderful word!" --

a name for the phenomenon of giving up and having the word pop up (quite casually, as if saying, "Oh, were you looking for MOI?") next day in mid-waking or while you're chatting, reading, having sex... --

why at this time or that?-- popping up when least expected, like the police in "Law and Order, coming to arrest you as you present an award at a banquet or dragging you from a lover's arms, or (I always like to give you a choice of similes) like Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition.

Note: I'm sure – if this poem finds readers – that several of them will refer me to a website that defines in great detail all the terms for the many forms of what I call "lexamnesiology" above.

Have you noticed the glee with which the cops on the various "Law and Order" shows make arrests at the worst possible times for the arrestees? So far they've resisted the temptation (unless I missed that show) to haul someone off the toilet in handcuffs. For those who don't know about Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition: on one of their shows, they began with a silly skit about the Spanish Inquisition, in which the Inquisition shows up unexpected, and in reply to being told it wasn't inspected, the head honcho cries out "NO one expects the Spanish Inquisition!", which, at first, seems a lame punchline, but then other skits follow, set in diverse times and places, and each at its key moment is interrupted by the arrival of the Spanish Inquisition (in 14th Century dress, arriving at, for example, a 20th Century tea party, that sort of thing), accompanied by "NO one expects the Spanish Inquisition," and by the end of the show, this lame silliness is damned funny – to those of us who find it so.

We grow blank after passing too many words
we don't understand -- just blank, like a sponged-off
blackboard or someone who has just been told
that his entire family was in that plane....

When we are blank, anything -- any unreasonable
hatred or panic -- may be written on us. Oh,
we abhor even the vacuums that we become.
"Feed me!" we demand, and the world fills us
with misunderstandings -- better than nothing at all.

We don't like whatever, then, attracts our attention.
We disagree, not because we are able to disagree,
but because we can't agree. Our highest wisdom
has become a wary cunning, because someone
or everyone (whatever we don't understand
becoming a generality, an everyone) has been trying
to make fools of us.

In the absence of meaning, words become heavy,
solid things. We use them as clubs to bat away
or hatchets to cut to pieces all communication,
or we collapse beneath their weight, becoming
sullen, dumb masses, incapable of giving or receiving
communication -- like those, who, in school, sit mute
to the teacher's simplest questions, driving teachers
to despair.

Learning the meanings of missed words, we arise
as from the dead, shedding hatreds and leaden passivities,
feeling, again, part of the game, admitted to the inner
mystery of action. "Part of the game" -- for isn't it
a game? There are rules with which, it seems,
everyone agrees -- what a word means, when
to use it, how to say it, how to spell it?

And if you don't know what it means,
but don't want to be left out of the game,
what do you do? Pretend to know and pray
you don't say or do something that gives you away?
Admit your ignorance and PROVE you are stupid?

The older kids next door were joking
about Tom, who would jack off
in the basement of their church.
“What does ‘jack off’ mean, I asked.
They laughed and wouldn’t tell me.
One said, “Ask your Mom” and they laughed
some more, but I asked her anyway.

She got upset and wouldn’t tell me either,
except to say it was NOT a nice word and that
I wasn’t old enough to know about it.
(I got even later, when I did it again and again
and didn’t tell her.) (And never knew if she knew.)
(And still wonder. Wasn’t I a smart one!)

At least they didn’t tell me a stupid, wrong meaning.
I remember on a school bus, two older kids
talking about our elementary school having
a baseball team. I asked what it was called,
and one said, “The Linwood Pricks,”
and they smirked, so I knew it was a dirty joke,
but not what dirty thing “prick” meant,
so I asked, and they gave me some nonsense
(I don’t recall what), but I knew it was nonsense,
so I never proudly pointed out to an adult
a fire hydrant or a teacher or whatever trap
they set for me, saying, loudly, “Look, a prick!”.

Nonetheless, I felt a fool, since I’d been
foolish enough to ask and let them think
I was an idiot. (I didn’t know yet
that being thought an idiot has its privileges.)

Much of life is about learning it is dangerous
to ask. Trying to learn is like asking for a date
or getting up for the first time on a bike:
You have to be willing to look like a fool.
Even the special tame learning in schools
fends off those with questions. It is much safer
to be nobody’s fool and never learn anything.

What about all the sounds we understand
only as not-to-be-understood-that-way?
Car sounds, bird and insect noise, clicks, hums,
something falling somewhere, the house settling,
scrabble of, perhaps, tiny feet in the walls,
mingled voices at a party, stomps of feet
and booming basses heard from the floor below
the ballroom (the ceiling filtering out all treble) --

could these be words in languages we don't recognize
as languages (well, not "lang", since not of the tongue,
but you know what I mean -- famous last words)?
Could all our lives be blankness beneath a miasma
of non-understanding?

I don't know. That is, I don't know anything about
something I don't know can be known. Certainly
an ornithologist makes out meanings in bird chirps
that I don't hear (though poets are supposed to be
translators for the birds; most poets are just
for the birds -- a cheep shot!); the buzz of party chatter
can be broken up into voices and words; a mechanic
hears meaningful pings in what, to me, is just
car noise -- so, yes, the wall of noise around us
is telling me more than I can grasp -- telling me
with infinite patience.

Or not so patiently, as when the engine of my car
seizes up and must be replaced, because I would not
listen. But at least I suspect I am surrounded by
alien languages. The autistic child, perhaps, has cut
that link, perhaps hears the noises we call speech
as mechanical background like the air conditioning;
listening to speech, if at all, as we might listen
to distant wheezes and clunks of machinery
while waiting for an elevator. (As a child,
I thought the deep, chunky sound of a bus starting
was like chocolate cake, and that the rising whine
of the transmission --is it the transmission that whines
when a bus or truck accelerates in first gear?--
was sugary icing.)

Or perhaps the autistic child is ravished
by our chatter, as I am by the variety
of bird calls from beyond my morning window.

There are dim borderlines where noise becomes language
or vice versa. Exhausted, marinating in cold sweat,
you stir from a long fever, the room just coming
out of its spin, someone saying something, a bright,
cold voice -- female! -- questioning, "Look? Flunk?
Who knocks? Podunk? Who? Do you?..." -- no, it's water
dripping into water -- a sink? Yes! The bathroom sink!
(An instant release from misunderstanding, knowing
that what you couldn't understand was simply
not to be understood that way.)

Or you drift off to sleep on the couch, TV voices
becoming other voices, other times, rain on the roof,
geese overhead, their creaky honks, a tree groaning
as it falls (wondering if it will be saved
by no one's having heard it and will it count
that it has been heard in someone's dream?)....

But at the borderline between language
and noise -- there's the hovering point,
the philosopher's howevering point (a transition,
after all), the blankness, words without meanings,
meanings without words [fish without bicycles,
doctors without borders -- and then there's the landlady's
daughter who used to flirt with all the boarders, but
her Mom sold the place, so now she's joined
Daughters Without Boarders; I'm a snake
in digression] --

no man's land, where only the autistic or senile boldly roam,
oblivious (or pretending to oblivion); where the rest of us
grope, knowing that we know, knowing that we
don't know, denying both, struggling to be blank,
to wrench free of this sticky mire of blankness.

Note: The point where philosophers hover and "however" is referred to as "a transition, after all" because "however" is a transition word, a way of getting from one line of thought to a different line of thought -- like "moreover", "but", "yet", "and", "albeit", "although" and "Oh shit! I left the gas on!" The line "I'm a snake in digression" puns "snake in the grass" and refers to my frequent trailing off into silly or serious digressions that coil sinuously about the main themes (if there are any).

And yet, we experienced gropers take a refined pleasure
in our forgetfulness, our stretched-out periods of expectant
blankness, for we've learned that our struggles do not
bring back the wanted word; it will come to us
in its own good time, arriving like a gift, a homecoming
ceremony. We've learned the patience all lovers learn
or go bonkers -- and so, instead of struggling,
we watch, bemused, as the lost word finds its way
back to us, machete-ing its path through jungles
of words we haven't used in decades; puzzling it's way
through yes-no mazes of brain neurons; without our help,
negotiating a vast bureaucracy full of waiting rooms,
long lines and bored, gum-chewing clerks
who are filing their nails and making
personal phone calls. (Pick your metaphor or
make up your own -- your metaphor here: _____
_____.)

The pleasure is in the prolongation of foreplay,
this process which occurs, quickly, unnoticed,
whenever we choose (or say without sense of choice)
any word, here extended in excruciatingly slow motion,
so that we can sense each step, like each throb
heralding orgasm; long minutes of knowing
the word is about to come, here it comes!
(The head of a newborn, cresting)...coming!
Coming!...and -- there it is! "Atrium," yes, I knew it well!
Of course, atrium! Dear old atrium, you scamp, you, come
to Papa!

And it's not just the joy of attainment,
but also the clear separation of self from brain mechanics,
the knowing that we know, have known all along;
the sense of the brain panting ("bear down, dear")
to catch up with our knowingness, give birth
to what is already fully formed in our wordless
knowing, which was there long before the brain
could supply a word for it.

A new bottle is empty. Then it is filled with wine.
Someone drinks the wine. The bottle is empty.
How come a page doesn't work that way?
It should: The page is empty, then filled with words.
Someone reads the words. The page is empty.

Well, shouldn't it be? Is not a reader
a consumer of words?

In myths we read of a milk pitcher that,
no matter how much is poured out, remains full.
Restaurants in our own unmythical day offer
"The Bottomless Cup of Coffee" (and a few offer
bottomless waitresses and even more offer
topless -- and cupless -- waitresses. Waitress,
a jug is a ewer, so I eye your topless ewers,
I, eyer of ewers, incurring ire -- yours. O, to topple
the topless! [Would a bottomless
Mother Superior in Ethiopia be an abysmal
Abyssinian abbess?]) And Moses met a bush
that burned and burned, but was not consumed.
(Perhaps his spouse had a social disease?)

These words are not consumed by your reading.
Or you, reader, are a fire that doesn't consume.
Or the words bubble up newly, however many
are poured out. Well, Reader, are we not infinite
in our nakedness (and in fine nighties)?
Topless and bottomless? (A good thing
we can't see each other.) (But some of those
topless dancers, endowments much enhanced,
are front-heavy, their cupless couples
far from toppleless.)

Or are those who burn books or bury remaindered books
(the topless ones -- minus their covers)
the true consumers of words? And the word I needed,
yesterday, but could not remember and have not yet --
WHO HAS EATEN MY WORD!

Note: Speaking of "endowments much enhanced", those enhancements are usually silicone, made from the same sand on which our houses are so insecurely built and on which we now depend for the security of our treasured words and images -- the silicon chip. This poem (if you are reading it on my website) is as silicon-enhanced as any chippie. (Does "chippie" still mean whore, or is that obsolete now, ruining my pun?)

The bottomless milk pitcher belongs to an old couple (talk about words vanishing -- can't recall their names) in Greek mythology who are visited by two men (Zeus and Hermes in human disguise) and offer hospitality, but are short on the means, so are amazed and pleased when their pitcher keeps coming up with more milk. They're a loving old couple, so the gods grant them their wish to remain united after death in the usual Greek-god way: They turn into two intertwining trees. (What do the trees become when they die? Mythology is silent on the afterlife of trees.) Ah! Philemon and Baucis! The old couples' names return, haggard after their trek among the wild synapses. O the mind, mind hath mountains, cliffs of fall, sheer, no-man fathomed -- so saith Gerard Manley Hopkins.

T...he...

Still blank, old page? I'll write a "The." Now what?
That's capital T with lower-case h-e...
"Teehee!" it cries, and claps the sentence shut.

The book? The page? The dog.... Oh, anything BUT!
A "thuh" the or a the that we call "Thee"?
The page was blank. Now it says "the". The WHAT?

You traitor, "The"! You empty hope! You slut!
An article is snickering at me!
"Teehee!" it cries, and claps the sentence shut.

The ant? The apple?... "Thee," thou'rt in a rut.
We call you "definite" -- be SOMETHing. BE!
The page says, blankly, "the," but won't say what.

A poem not working? Critics tell us "Cut."
What's there to cut? Without your "T", you're "he"...
"Teehee!" it cries, and claps the sentence shut.

Let's have a noun, a verb! Get off your butt!
Tee ticks. Aitch aches. The eerie EEK! of EEE!
You're better blank, dumb page, without the what.
"Teehee!" it cries, and claps the sentence shut.

[Now, Reader, unless vile knells are not your cup of T,
you too may clap. Thank you, thank you.]

[A few days after writing the above lines, I read this poem
to ten poets. Not one seemed to notice the miraculousness
of dumb, thudding "the" opening out into giddy "Teehee!"
Not one recognized Chaucer's great line from the Miller's Tale:
"Teehee," she cried and clapped the window to."
I fill these pages with words, but each page,
like the bottomless milk pitcher of mythology,
remains full of blankness.]

Note: "Vile knells" because the first 6 stanzas, above, are a villanelle. I've tried the trick described above, tried to outsmart a blank page by writing the word "The", expecting to have more words follow, only to confront the one thing blanker than a blank page: a page blank but for the word "the". It's a line without a hook or bait and keeps coming up empty.

Writer's block lacks the tease of tip-o'-the-tongue groping.
(I particularly relish the tip of my tongue groping for
the tip of HER tongue -- or tip of any part of her,
or a sirloin tip, yes, nothing like this lusty
English tongue!) With writer's block, one doesn't have,
usually, that certainty that something's there
to be said, that one knows exactly what it is,
this word one can't quite say to oneself.

Writer's block is more like the restlessness
of one who can't get off the phone,
must listen politely, grunt all the appropriate grunts:
"Uhuh...yes...I know...Oh no, that's all right...uhhuh uhhuh...
I see what you mean..."; and while the monologue dribbles on,
one doodles with pen or pencil, draws an ornate A
(perhaps for "asshole!"), and goes round it over and over,
thickening its outline, adding new curlicues, aimless,
distant -- that's how it feels to write when one can't write.

We say we're blank, but really we're involved
in too many boring mental conversations, are too polite
to tell our minds to shut up -- think that, like a boring friend,
the mind is needed. We are dispersed among the billion things
we should or shouldn't have said, but didn't or did, attention
so thinly buttered all over our known universe,
there's scarcely enough left to complete a doodle,
much less an iambic line that will be able to stand
on its own five feet.

Some poets insist one must write
in the heat of passion, but if attention is buttery,
heat is risky, since the world of distractions
is porous toast -- or perhaps a hot cornmeal muffin --
and will gladly absorb all the melted butter
you can exude. So be cool, poet, be cool,

but not so frigid that attempts to shape your rapt attention
on the page (cutting and slashing) leave it as gouged and torn
as bread by hard butter. (O, this simile, I can't
do ANYthing with it!)

A goat is a hard butter and could butt one
in one's butter-fat butt, but the hardest butter
is one who says, "I love you, truly, but..." or
"I think your poem is wonderful, but..." or
"We have enough water to hold out for weeks,
but...".

I prefer to abut you (said the Abbot to the Abbess)
and softly butt you, my more-than-merely-a-piece-of
butt, pelvis to pelvis, interlocking, two become one,
almost one, all but...but...but... (it's like churning
butter out of sweet cream)...Ah, God!

Now we are buttered all over each other, absorbed
in one another. And yet I am I, you are you.
We claim each other: No butts! Cool in our warmth,
no one is the goat. I love you truly, AND...

Note: Most of the plays on "but" in this poem I trust you to have grasped (a word that goes better with butt than with but), Dear Reader, but some of you may not recall when "No butts" was the way a child claimed sole ownership of something, as in "I get the cherry popsicle and no butts", meaning, no one else gets a taste or share of it. You were supposed to say "No butts" before someone else said "butts" (meaning they'd get a taste). That's how I remember the usage (St. Paul, MN, circa late 1940s). Perhaps we were saying "Butts" and "No butts". Hard to say: We were cautious in those days; we put nothing in writing.

The blank page is pure potential,
which, to those who insist on knowing what will happen
before it happens, means uncertainty -- a big but.
But what? If one must know what is to be created
before one creates it, then there can be no such thing
as creation, for one would be unable to know it
without first knowing what it is one is about
to know -- and we're back to the empty barber shop,
blank mirrors reflecting blank mirrors
ad infinitum -- the infinite regress.

When I write, I prefer the infinite aggress.
I know you, Reader -- I know you
BEFORE I know you. I decide (a form of deicide) NOW
that I have known you forever, and it is so.
Let there be communication. Knowing --
the opposite of but. Palindromically,
that would be tub. (A tub of butter?)

“But tub” -- two mirrors facing one another
(or back to back in a hot tub -- a “butt tub”).
“Hot-tub butt -- oh!” (A hot-tub tugging?)
“A butt about a tub at tuba?”

Wait a minute -- we were so serious
just six lines ago. What happened!
Reader, we were so close! How could you
trivialize our relationship that way, letting my mind
drift into childish babble? Take some responsibility here!

As I was saying, when we were so rudely rebutted,
let there be light, for unless we put (tup) it there
(VOILA!), the infinite is, *en fin*, night.

Note: Since stanza one led to mirrors facing mirrors, it seemed appropriate to wax palindromic. “But tub”, “butt tub”, “hot-tub butt – oh!”, “A butt about a tub at tuba?” and “put (tup)” are all palindromes (weak ones). Odd that uncertainty is a big but, since nothing has more definitude than a big butt. To decide is a form of deicide (killing God or a god) to the extent that God or the gods are believed to make all the decisions, man simply fated in his actions. Such gods are killed by any decision you or I make. Decide becomes deicide by adding I – appropriate. The one-eyed word gains perspective (two eyes). One can also make much of removing the I from deify to get defy or from deification to get (almost) defecation. If God provides certainty, than creating a God (deification) is de-if-ication – removing the Ifs. Dei – absence of I (De-I). Or remove the “a” from deification to get dei-fiction. (But “a” is less fraught than “I”.)

The last stanza above gets back to the first stanza’s point about the timelessness of creation, no knowing a creation in order to create it, just “let there be light”. “Unless we put (tup) it there” suggests the creation enTAILED in the sex act, since to tup is to copulate (with reference to a ram mounting a ewe (not you!)). The final statement is, I think, the most graceful pun of this lot: Unless we create light – that is, put it there – the infinite is dark – no light, which is to say the infinite is en fin night (is, at last, night) or the infinite is infinite. Ain’t that profound sounding? Makes it sound as if I know French too, though I remember only a few scraps of it.

What do *I* know about writer's block,
you may well ask -- I, so glib, with my
70,000 -- or is it now 80,000 -- poems,
as prolific as I am prochoic and perhaps
Pro-Lifshin (though I have fatter lines and
little to say about obsessed Mothers, passions
strained taut like violin strings about to snap,
shattered glass, crisp sheets, the stroke of velvet
on cool, smooth thighs, self-absorbed lovers,
perfect hair -- nor do I end, usually,
with that noble discovery of the Moderns:
The Image. But doesn't Lyn do Lyn well,
again and again and a gain!).

How, you ask, could I be anything BUT prolific,
my poetry being just chat, after all. Anyone
can say "after all." "My four-year-old could do
as well -- if he could write, spell, punctuate and
construct endless, rambling, self-referent sentences."

Yes, often that's who writes my poetry -- four-year-old me.
"Oh yeah?" "Yeah!" Like every challenged four-year-old,
I wanna make something of it, yeah! But it took hard work
to remain four years old while learning to write, spell,
punctuate and construct endless, rambling, self-referent sentences.
Just try it yourself and see!

And yet, I do know writer's block. In 1971, I decided
that whatever was worth saying had been said,
so quit writing. A two-year blank page -- until I realized --
choose one or more of the following: There's always more
worth saying. Nothing's "worth saying", but isn't it fun
to say stuff? A thing worth saying is worth saying again.
Every robin sings the same song, but each
makes it his own. It's the singing, not the song.

Or no realization. I just decided, "Write!"
Right?

Note: Stanza one refers to one of our most prolific and most published poets, Lyn Lifshin, but belies the variety of her poems, though she is more inclined to short lines, images, tautness, etc. than I am.

I don't have to write, you know. I'm no addict.
I can take it or leave it -- no, really!
I only write socially, just when there are readers here
to talk to. I'm not one of those solitary writers.

(You ARE here, aren't you?)

I can leave pages blank any time, doesn't bother me
the least tiny bit. You think I'm in denial? Well,
watch THIS:

[URGHH!]

[t...t...th...the...(SLAP! SLAP! Pull
yourself together, man!)]

[Thanks, I needed that.]

[er?...uh...(STOP that!)]

There, that's enough (Whew!), isn't that enough?
I mean I COULD just leave whole pages blank, at least
the rest of this one. Hell, I could leave the rest of this book
blank, but the principle's the same, isn't it? I know
I can stop anytime. I just came back to check
if you were still here, make sure you'd seen for yourself.

(You ARE still here, aren't you? I wish you'd answer me
just once.)

Hell, I know how to stop. I can even stop
right in the middle of

“Welcome to Poets Anonymous. Who’d like to go first?”

My name is Dean. For many years I lied to myself
about my writing, just as all poedicts and writards do.
I told my wife, sure, I write a poem now and again,
but it’s just for the fun of it. OK, sometimes words
intoxicate me -- so what? Can’t a guy get high
with his pals a few times without you all over him
like flies on Bukowski?

I began to write every day, sometimes two, three,
four poems a day. I’d be late to work because
I had to finish a sonnet, late getting home
because I’d walk past the house for blocks
(unraveling a sestina). The kids would cry,
“Where’s Daddy? DADDeeee, we’re late for school!”

Some nights I’d stay up writing until my wife,
God bless her, would drag me to bed, and --
it shames me to tell you this -- sometimes
I’d get savage, trying to wrap up a villanelle
at 4 a.m. -- I’d yell (waking the kids), “You sadistic,
illiterate bitch, l-e-a-v-e m-e ALONE!”

Well, after I lost my job, my wife, my children,
my health, my house and (when the rejection slips started
to pile up) my self-respect, one day I squatted
in my tar-paper shack, my hand trembling over
my last scrap of toilet paper, as I thought, “Just
one more sheet of poetry, then I’ll stop
for good. Just one” and I put my pen
to the flimsy sheet (only a little soiled) and

went completely blank -- sat there for an hour,
unmoving. Then I got up (bumping my head
on the tar paper ceiling), broke my Bic and tossed it
into a smelly puddle in the alley, and knew
I would never write again.

Besides, I needed that toilet paper.

Note: “Poedict” – my coinage for poet-addict, though it could refer to Poe’s diction or edict. I know I had something equally cogent in mind when I coined “writards”, but I can’t recall what. I’ll leave it in. It’ll come to me. I’m sure I wasn’t aiming at a pun on “retards”. I’ve heard that the late Charles Bukowski kept himself fairly clean, but in his poems and stories, he represents himself, often enough, as drunk and down and dirty enough to attract swarms of flies – and calls himself a barfly. (A movie about him was called “Barfly”, which suggests one who lies in his barf, and in this case perhaps lies about lying in his barf to magnify his scruffy self-mythologizing.) Appropriate to introduce Bukowski so soon after Lifshin, since both have been tremendously popular and well-published and prolific as twentieth century poets go. (Do we go?)

Fuck You, Blank Page!

Words? WORDS? Hey, I don't need no steenking words!
Hey! You want words? I fill you up with scribble!
I tear you up to make nice nests for birds.

I shit on you! My periods -- little turds.
I vomit on you, piss and drool and dribble!
You want words? I don't NEED no steenking words!

I rip in thirds...again!...again in thirds,
Then shove them into crannies where mice nibble.
I tear you up to make nice nests for birds

Or fill you up with numbers (for the nerds) --
Or prophesies, then cage you like poor Sibyl.
You beg for words? Who needs your steenking words?!

I stampede buffalos, crush you with herds!
To feed my mutt, I grind you into kibble!
I shred you up to make nice nests for birds.

This dumb banditto accent quite absurd is --
It comes and goes, it's fake, but let's not quibble.
The point is, I don't need no steenking words.
I tear you up. You make nice nest for birds.

[I also don't need no steenking critics who object to exclamation points.
I'm excited, OK!!!]

Note: Another villanelle, this one based on the immortal line uttered by the bandit chief (played by Alphonse Bedoya) in the classic movie, Treasure of the Sierra Madre. When he and his men pretend to be Federales so they can search the knapsacks of Humphrey Bogart (looking for gold), Bogart gets suspicious and demands to see their badges. Bedoya, who has weirdly striking delivery in this and other movies (e.g., The Big Country), says, "Bahj?! BAHJ!! I don' need no steenkeeng baaahj!" Here the poet addresses the blank page. He's tired of trying to supply the demanded words.

Life, like one of those pretty striated drinkypoos
(red grenadine topped by yellow, green and
chocolate liqueurs), comes in tiers, teary layers
of nothing, something, nothing, something...

At bottom (there is no bottom) life is what we are,
neither something nor nothing, creator of both,
but since it is most easily defined (by us, in our
clotted something state) as what it is not,
we think of it a nothingness, fear what we are
or yearn for the oblivion we've confused with ourselves..

(It takes a heap of oblivion to make a home a house.
It takes a leap of hiving to make a home a socialist dormitory.
Funny that the poet remembered for lines about making
a house a home was named "Guest" -- Edgar, E. Guest,
almost "egest." But I jest.)

Then we put something there and lie about it, say
it was always there, nothing to do with us, the authorities
did it, everyone knows that -- and the lie makes
what was once our creation persist (Home, Sweet Home).
Now we have something to have. And when we have
lots of somethings (reality, when many agree to it),
sometimes lots of lots (if realty is our reality -- or our lot),
we may decide that enough is too much and try to make
our stuff and the ticking time we've made for and of our stuff
and the space we've anchored with it all vanish,

implode, explode, collapse into nothing; but they
won't go away, or they crumple into an even more sticky
and unwanted mess -- ashes, bloody bits, rusty junk,
welters of energy as chaotic as a stormy sea or the random
blue szzzzt of a live severed power line brushing with each swing
the top of a wrecked car; dying stars, black holes, twisted time
full of painful lacunae, warped spaces that spin and refuse
to distinguish up from down; children with hyena smiles
who wait for a chance to kill.

Then we (I hear you, critic, you have a problem, you say,
with this "we", who is this "we"? We have a problem with you,
critic. Are we amused?) -- we sweep our mess under a rug,
behind a black screen or simply say it isn't there, making it
(for us) invisible or at least translucent, growing dim and pale
like our knowledge of our own power to create. Having
made this parody of "nothing", we call it chaos, and,
forgetting who we were or that we were and always are
before chaos ever was), we make nothing of nothing.

Note: One poet friend, in particular, typifies the critic in the last stanza who "has a problem" with the use of "we" to nudge the reader into conformance with my ideas. I enjoy mocking this "having a problem", but she's a sharp critic, and will probably be one of the few to get this far into these poems. (Hello, critic!)

Until we learn again who or what creates
all creation, our lives are successive nothings
we make of nothing. Is the page blank,
or a parody of blankness, a screen hiding chaos,
the empty eyes of a serial killer or the simple
readiness of a child who can be anything
he chooses to be in the next game he chooses to play?

I think I can now get away with oracular stuff,
because for many pages I (slick seducer) have
plied you with silly puns (baubles and trinkets of the trade).
Oh, you've got me spotted, said the leopard to God.

Black pages, to be written on in white ink
would make my paradoxing easier to grasp,
for we're used to querying darkness, entering
an unlit cave or room or forest cautiously, asking ourselves,
is this blackness a black something or a black nothing?
Are there snakes here? Bears? Unspeakable things?
Am I about to step off a cliff or stub my toe
on a foot stool? ("Foot stool": What clings to one's foot
when, in the dark, one steps into a fresh pile of dog shit.)

And which is it we fear most in the dark? That it may be
full of hazardous somethings? Or that it may be
endless nothing at all? No light ever again,
even the memory, the possibility, the idea of light gone.

(I thought of that in a cave in New Mexico, when the guide
said we were a mile down, and I thought, what if the lights
failed, the elevator failed...but in no light at all, no ghost of light,
in time my thoughts would be dazzling, like stars in the night sky
when one gets far from city lights.)

But whiteness (cloak of invisibility) we think holds no secrets,
no maybe in it. We can see there's nothing there to stumble over --
unless it is blindingly bright. The blank page is a tame,
indoor whiteness, just substantial enough to be opaque.
If I move my finger under the page, I see no shifting shadow.
This is safe nothing. Nothing here to see, Folks. Move on.

(My moving finger having writ, your moving finger having
guided your eyes -- let us move on; for all your tears and all
my wit shall not bring back a jot of it, unless you'd like
to read it again....)

But might not white ghosts haunt white pages,
sheets on sheets? One could, while walking, a naked spirit,
toward the rumored white light, step in a pile
of sheet. ("Suit up; you're going on ghost duty!")

White contains all colors, all but black
(which is absence of color),
no black in the spectrum, no black where light is;
hence, Monet and most of the Impressionists
refused to include it in their palettes, arguing
that it could not be found in nature (though Degas
used it, perhaps feeling that ballet dancers, too,
could not be found in nature).

These black letters on the page -- somethings or nothings?
Rents in the page through which rayed light may pass?
Ornate slits narrow enough to break light into rainbowed auras?

Run your finger over the page.
(I may be talking to myself, but if not, you, too,
please, run your finger over the page...ooh!
That tickles!)

Yes, there's a page here. It has smoothness, also
texture, a light friction, a minuscule graininess.
My nail can scratch it. Scratch it lightly
with YOUR nail. Notice the sound, the scuffing noise?
What pitch is it in? Scratch it again, and see if you
can get the pitch. (If I scratch harder, the pitch
deepens. One could scratch a tune on it.)

But my ball-point pen moves across it almost
inaudibly. Was poetry different when sharp-nibbed pens
scratched-scratched out the letters?

I just remembered the fascination with which I watched
my mother dash off a note, her pen scribble-scrabbling
so quickly and surely across the page (as neatly and surprisingly
quick as a small cluster of nearly transparent crabs
I later saw scuttling aslant a Florida beach), jot jot jot,
sweep, loop, dot, cross, dart, shhjtjtchshhrftt...
The pen sweeping away blankness to reveal
scratchy patterns, letters leaning forward, ardent,
eager to run, all a tip-toe.

Note: Stanza one originally ended with the following string of puns (propelled by the reference to Monet:

*[But not Degas, an indispensable exception, for one uses
Monet to purchase Degas to make the Van Gogh,
and if it runs out, add more of Degas to make it
Gauguin. Use all-Cezanne oil. If it still won't Gogh,
que Seurat.]*

For once, I decided to under-indulge myself, but you still get it in this note. I also, in the original, followed "rainbowed auras" (stanza 2) with "[But Rimbaud died unwed.] [Rainbowed = rainbo + wed. Sorry. Not.]", but at last decided I was sorry, yes. But I thought, as a footnote, you might feel less distracted, yet somewhat pleased by the "wed" in "rainbow", which sounds to my ear a lot like the French pronunciation of "Rimbaud" (the rim of baudiness).

In third grade, we were given pens -- black wooden cork cylinders that tapered concavely to rounded nubs. The wider end had curved slots to receive a pen point (nib). Our desks had ink wells. Pen points and black ink -- what awful tools to entrust to eight-year-olds! Especially boys sitting behind girls, who, in those days, had all the long hair. But that's from ancient children's stories. I don't recall any inky pigtails. I stained only myself and many sheets of innocent paper.

Why did we have to learn "hand writing" -- cursive script? What's wrong with printing right on the faint blue lines, which, I assumed, all paper came with. But we had to learn. (I call myself a writer, after all, not a printer.)

Ink runs, and we had to learn to make our letters run even faster. I botched it -- still do. You have to tease the meaning, slowly, from my "hand", a script-tease. My traveling ovals were crimped and uneven, leaning every which way. (I have never learned to travel in the right circles.) My letters (like my character) were blotched and smeared. So were my fingers, my shirt. Inka dinka doodoo. The nib would snag on paper (I must have pressed too hard in my effort to make it go right), then spring free, sprinkling ink. Sometimes the nib tore the page.

And how unforgiving this ink! I could not erase it. I tried -- and tore the page. For many years -- adult years -- I used number 2 pencils to fill notebooks with poems (or some would say they were full of number 2), until one day I retrieved an old notebook and opened it to find dim gray graphite smog through which ghostly words were barely discernable. (These adult years were really quite young years, but they aged quickly.)

Computer viruses or viri, at least, don't stain my shirts and fingers. Only my eyes (if I shut them) seem to retain some faint blotting after hours of staring back at a screen. Even with my eyes open, my vision becomes haunted by the maneuvering of shadowy detachments, the ghostly retinal retinue.

Note: Children's stories used to feature mischievous boys dipping girls' pigtails in inkwells. "Inka dinka doodoo" refers to "Inka dinka doo", nonsense words from an old song (How old? Ask Google. I mainly remember Jimmy Durante singing it on radio (1940s) and on TV in the 50s.) "Doodoo" because of all the ink "droppings".

In early high school, I would write my papers (final copies) with a fountain pen, still hazardous, but far smoother than the 3rd-grade dip-sticks (really, bald quills), and it was pleasant to make the ink flow smoothly into letters, pleasant to wield the gray device (a gift), with its gleaming gill-like apertures, complex and almost organic.

The Bic (with which I write these poems before typing them into my computer, which is surely jealous of my notebooks) -- this Bic is even smoother, but it lacks the sense of liquidity, the drama of making a sharp point glide -- like the muscular flow of a sharp-tapping, yet feline Gene Kelly. A ball point is, after all, pointless. And until it clots, this Bic rolls along uniformly, no thin versus thick, no character to its strokes.

Later in high school, I learned to use my first typewriter, a Royal gift from Uncle-Leon-in-New-York-who-never-traveled, and had no children, so liked to send us gifts. (It was rumored, he had dandled me when I was a baby, but not since). (I have no children myself. I send you poems.)

That gift I associate with guilt, because I took more than a year to send poor childless Uncle Leon a thank-you note, not that I wasn't grateful, but I hated writing thank-you notes, and no gift seemed worth having to say things one is expected to say, and it was worst of all when I felt most grateful -- or that I should be.

(I send you poems. Where are your thank-you notes?)

So one thing I see if I look too long at a blank page is that expectancy -- that I say the things one is expected to say. Critics are just far-away uncles and nagging parents, who remind you that Uncle Leon (long not of that body) will be very hurt if he doesn't hear back from you. (But if I say the expected things, will that be me?)

Perhaps a guilt-inducing page is better than a page waiting in ambush to snag my pen and splatter me with my own ink, as if to say, "Who is writing on whom?"

Note: The typewriter was a Royal gift – that is, it was brand-named a Royal Typewriter.

Typewriters require getting smudged by white-out and inky ribbons. They can jam. Erasure is often awkward. And yet, no computer or Bic can offer a satisfaction to match those striking metal keys (swack! Swackity-swack!), the music of pre-electric typewriters (noises that can be added electronically, to computer keyboards, but are NOT the same), the pleasure of stroking out in relentless rhythmic taps a line of words (no errors!), then ending the line with a hearty carriage return (scaRROMP -- DING!), then, the tapping instantly resumed, without a missed beat, as if never interrupted. You could see and feel the process that turned delicately waggling fingers into flailing typewriter thingies (a technical term for metal arms, stamped with characters on their flying extremities) into words on a page.

(Typewriter, *mon semblable*, you are the type of writer I am!)

(But when I write with Bic, it seems I am Bic.)

What are fingers, but claws, paws, for tearing off hunks of raw meat and cramming them into our maws (eating is a maw-and-paw business), for grabbing one another in anger, lust or play, for scratching where we itch?

But at my typewriter, I could see my ideas taming my fingers, turning them into instruments of thought; the dance of my transformed fingers would charm mere metal and plastic mechanism, make it come alive; finger to key, key to ribbon, ribbon to page, characters (neatly serifed) leaping from fingers (which have outrun thought -- I could not think to place them so quickly, so deftly)

from fingers to the page, as the page rolled upwards, processed, line by line, in my little blankness-decryption (or encryption?) factory, magically converting nothing into words.

Note: "Typewriter, mon semblable" – Typewriter, my likeness, something like me – an allusion (for what reason? I don't recall) to T. S. Eliot's similar line in "The Wasteland", calling the "Hypocrite Lecteur" (Hypocrite reader) "mon semblable..."

"When I write with Bic, it seems I am Bic" – the last three words pun "iambic", the most commonly used metric foot in English formal poetry (and in my formal poetry. Bic is my favorite brand of ball-point pen. It's plastic cap is perfect for cleaning out earwax (a no-no! Don't try this at home kids) or picking teeth (preferably not just after using it to clean out earwax).

The noisy typewriter becomes a factory for filling blank pages – or decrypting the blankness by discovering what the blankness is saying or encrypting blankness, encoding it in words that, ultimately, say nothing. It is, in any case (UPPER or lower) amazing all the devices we've developed for making words appear on blank pages.

False nostalgia. I would not trade my umpty-ump-jillion-mega-or-giga-or-mega-giggle-or-tera Herz or byte computing monster (“monster” is what “tera” means) for 50,000 Royal typewriters with the monkeys thrown in at no extra charge. (Though in time of power failure, we may type again -- by candlelight.)

But even now, I first fill up notebooks with ink before “entering” my poems to hard disk. (Odd that we “delete” things. Shouldn’t what is entered be exited?) (Entered, entranced, excitedly exited, re-entered....) Crystal diodes, magnetic ons and offs – too ghostly! I must again run my fingers over this page, roaming, rampaging (ram those pages through, like a typewriter); ROMless and RAMless -- the two founders of Roam, suckled by a warped woof (for this paper has a weave, tangled to deceive).

I suppose I could create my poems entirely on the computer, but I’m old and have a BIOS in favor of blank page over blank screen.

Besides, I can write (as now) sprawled naked on the couch, not so easy on, even, a laptop. And no printer required: My notebook is both screen and hard copy. And it never jams, unless someone leaves chewed gum between the pages or a smear of honey. And the pages don’t irradiate my eyes.

I’m tired of stroking this page to keep it solid amid all the significance I’m churning up. I’ll stroke the couch cushion, my naked body lying here. Odd, I can tell you to stroke this page, and you can do it (given a loose interpretation of “this” -- depending on is this THIS or is THIS this?). But most of you can’t stroke my body. You’ll have to stroke your own. (Hey! Get your mind out of my gutter! I stroked my WRIST!)

(No, I stroked my penis, but my penis and I are just good friends.)

Note: ROMless and RAMless (referring to an old typewriter, that lacks the computer’s Read Only Memory and Random Access Memory) suggests the legendary founders of Rome (not Roam – like fingers over a keyboard), Romulus and Remus, who were suckled by a wolf (not a woof, as in “warp and woof” on a loom or in the grain of paper, hence a “warped woof”). The idea that the grain of paper is like a weave suggests the tangling to deceive (perhaps the deceit of art or the deceit of words pretending to be a voice, but also the way my over-elaborate metaphor grew tangled. “BIOS” (Basic Input/Output System) puns “bias”).

In stanza five, the stuff about interpreting “this” refers to telling you, the reader, to stroke THIS page. Am I, for example, referring to the actual page I’m stroking (with pen or finger) as I write the poem or the same text on a printed page in your hands or...?

It seems selfish to stroke myself, just myself,
when so much lonely skin (pale and bluey-pink
and every shade of gold to dusk to dark -- dance
of the hours) cries out for stroking, for the stoking
of our dying embers. To be stroked by another
includes surprise, the tinge of danger:

Who knows what secret signs will be inscribed
(invisibly, indelibly) on skin by eloquent fingers --
not quite invisible, always that momentary whitening
or graying, that instant when coy blood retreats,
then returns (blushing) for more. One has to learn
speed-reading (where one finger strokes quickly
down the center [I love to stroke, quickly, your downy
center] of each page, a few inches from the spine,
axis of literature and all our tingling nerves) -- one must
speed-read to catch the inscriptions that so quickly vanish
beneath our fingers.

I gave up masturbation years ago, because I could
(just as I started at age 13 to find out if I could)
and because of all that it is not,
and because, having come to think well of myself,
I began to think it a selfish act.
But if, still naked from sleep, I grope for my notebook
(careful not to upset the lamp or sweep pens behind
the bed-table, noticing the thin skin of dust on its surface),
and lie, naked, writing, might I not excite myself,

speaking of the petal-clinging softness of labial skin,
the sleekness of the inner thigh (thy inner thee),
the give and take of breasts -- might I not begin to notice
penis-creep along my own thigh, touch the rascal,
stroke once or twice, just to establish a hand-shake,
remind myself that I am online; the pilot light yet burns,

and perhaps you are here with me. Perhaps I am not
talking only to myself?

Note: Imagery entails dangers and responsibilities.

Stanza 2 refers to the human spine, but also to the spine of a book. One can read a book slowly (the markings don't quickly vanish), but those made by caresses are soon unreadable – hence the speed-reading metaphor. A lover's skin is the latest variant of the blank page. Since "the inner thigh" is pronounced "thee inner thy", it is neatly reversed by "thy inner thee" (though the "th" sound in thigh is not voiced as it is in "thy").

The dream whose almost-spent wave cast me onto waking:
A guy who identified himself as Rick Celesta (which, in the dream,
seemed familiar) asked if I would help him solve
a square root problem (there, at a table in the hallway
of the old Hebrew School in St. Paul). [42 years ago,
I completed a math major, but have never touched the stuff
since. I just wanted to know how math worked.]

I told him, "Why 'solve' for square root? Just
look at the number and figure it out." Then, half-awake,
I started working it out, and discovered (hey, it ain't
the benzene ring, but it was new to me) that $1 + 3 = 2$ squared,
 $1 + 3 + 5 = 3$ squared, $1 + 3 + 5 + \dots + n$, where n
is the m th odd, positive integer, equals m squared. Also, $n = 2m - 1$.

Thus, for example, the sum of the first 1000 odd positive integers equals
1,000,000 (1000 squared) which equals $1 + 3 + 5 + \dots + 1,999$.
($1,999 = (2 \times 1000) - 1$.) And before realizing I was awake,
I worked out that adding even numbers the same way,
starting from 2, always gives you m squared plus m
(where m is the number of even numbers). Thus, $2 + 4 = 6$,
which equals 2 squared plus 2. $2 + 4 + 6 = 12 = 3$ squared plus 3.
 $2 + 4 + 6 + 8 + 10 = 30 = 5$ squared plus 5.

Thus, the sum of the first 73 digits ($1 + 2 + 3 + \dots + 73$),
where the number of odd digits (m) = 37 and the number of
even digits ($m - 1$ for an odd number like 73) = 36) is equal to
the sum of the odd digits (37 squared) plus the sum
of the even digits (36 squared plus 36) = 37 squared + 36 squared
+ 36 = 1,489 + 1,416 + 36 = 2,941 (except for an error or two
I probably made along the way). But I did it in my head
in a minute, which is a lot faster than adding 1 to 2 to 3...to 73.

(I have done terrible things in my head.)

WOW! Pretty useless, eh? Is this a non-poem or is
this a non-poem. I mean what's the point in being an English major
(you must be if you've read this far) if not to get away
from ever having to look at such stuff.

But poets are dreamers, right, and there's something innately
poetic about our dreams, right? (All the best critics
tell us so.) Well, eat your heart out, Martin Luther King,
because I had a dream, and this was it!

Dreams, symbols, poetry, sneaky underminings of the villain,
consciousness, rot! Sometimes a cigar is just a scar...I mean,
cigar. Four cigars and seven years ago....

Note: I know, I know. No excuse suffices. This is not a poem. But...maybe it is, you know. That's what interests me about it. And certainly it amounts to significance on the rolling crest of blankness. And I did NOT work all this stuff out before hand (not this lifetime, anyway); I was half-asleep, as the poem describes, when I flashed on all this. It's no falser than the usual false magic with which we endow dreams.

Why does a number
make us so numb? BRRR!
Or so we often say,
but what is most vacuous about a number
may also be what most comforts us:

One is lonely when it fails to be
one breast to touch, one friend to talk to,
one large pizza with everything, one perfect morning –
all gone, sucked into the chill of outer space,
leaving *only one*, the only one, or only two
(worse than one – we've lost BOTH breasts!)
or only three (no Father, no Son, no Holy Spirit)
or only any number, even a trillion only multiplying
our poverty.

But *one* is a safe, dry, place compared to one
Holocaust, one murder, one politician, one
psychiatrist, one carcass, one fingernail scraping
down a blackboard, one more burden
on a bent back, and if you say ONE MORE WORD...
one more loss, one more fear – give me
a mere one, a simple two, let me spend a lifetime
curled up in abstraction, in a warm room
where nothing ever happens.

Sometimes the choice is difficult: Would you prefer
one to one angry spouse? Would you prefer
a one and only to a one and only person with
good hair and fast wit, but bad breath?
Would you prefer two unreliable friends
to two. Would you prefer zero to zero dollars
in your wallet?

Always the choice is difficult. *One* offers
one no game. Even one Holocaust is better than no game,
no possibility of winning or losing, no goals, no freedoms,
nothing to overcome, just one and perhaps one's weary awareness
of oneness.

Always the choice is difficult. One breast to touch
is a fatty lump (concupiscent curd)
with a limited repertoire,
a distraction from the pure
one that one is.

One alone is zero turned sideways.

Note: That is, sometimes pure abstraction is a relief from unwanted specifics. Sometimes specifics are a relief from lifeless abstraction. In the last stanza, "concupiscent curd" is a throwaway allusion to a Wallace Stevens image (of ice cream, among other things) in his poem, "The Emperor of Ice Cream."

When I was small, numbers and letters,
like the fronts of cars and houses, had faces.
We didn't have television,
no cartoons or Sesame Streets to give us numbers
with eyes and mouths and expressions, so I
contributed them myself.

Zero looked surprised, perhaps astonished
at having been ferreted out by the Arabs
after centuries of avoiding capture by the Romans
(and yes, my loyal workshopper, the child I was
knew nothing of Arabian and Roman mathematicians;
Pardon this distraction I could not sacrifice
for the purity of poetry and point of view.)

1 seemed earnest and dull, perhaps standing
on a country road, sucking his thumb.
2 seemed innocent, simple, with a high, reedy voice.
3, I thought, was sincere, good-natured
(nearly all my numbers were friendly; I felt no need
to create villains, though 7 seemed sharp and sneaky).

Three was, more complex than 2, a bit
anxious (the "ee" of "three" influenced my view
of their forms). 4 was sturdy, honest, stubborn.
(The full sound of "four" hid from me
the semblance of a sagging pennant, as the snippiness
of "six" added pertness to bottom-heavy 6.)

When I learned to write 4 with the top opened,
I saw a whole new 4, more square, and yet,
more free. Five, six, seven – each had faces,
personalities, not worked out – I don't recall
thinking about this, just being aware
of personalities. Sometimes the look of the number,
the sound of the number and the look of the word
for the number would each have a personality.

I suppose I could have given them each a color,
a voice, a melody, but I remember only faces
and personalities. I must have had a scarcity
of faces and personalities, a boy, after all,
not allowed dolls, nor did we have a pet dog or cat.
I did have lots of younger brothers and sisters,
but not until I was three, and by then I'd filled the world
with faces and good will and personalities.

There was little (if anything) in my childhood world
that didn't look at me out of eyes much like my own.

Note: I'm told the number zero was filched by the Arabs from Hindu mathematicians. It is generally agreed that the Romans, though stupendous engineers, were limited in science and math by their lack of a zero in their number system. Though a system beginning with "I" may be said to begin with zero, for am I not the zero of my universe?

This book has 256 pages -- 60 more to fill.
256 is 16 x 16, which is neat, because
I've always liked 16, 4 x 4 (and I was born
on April 4, 1942: 4/4/42), two to the fourth
power, and what an odd even number
4 is, 4-square, sturdy, stable,
the four corners of the earth fending off
seven seas, full sounding "four" -- fower,
almost a flower, as filling as flour,
a mouthful forever (unlike the shrill and lemony
"seven seas").

And yet, 4 balances its hefty, cornered mass
on one skinny leg, a wind-swollen sail
on its straining mast. But I must remember
that I live in an alpha-numerophobic society,
in which most non-children refuse to see
that numbers and letters are persons
just like you and number one (that is, me,
not piss).

It's awfully hard, these days, for a number
(14, for example) or letter (say, G) to find
a good job, housing in a nice neighborhood
or legal recourse. Someone is always doing
a number on you. Even in liberal Michigan,
(not the actual state), a young woman who married
the letter T received hate mail, had bricks thrown
through her windows, had crosses (or T's) burned
in her front yard -- after two weeks of terror,
she left Michigan to start over in Utah (not
the actual state).

Many numbers and characters have had to
"pass" as human in order to live among us.
It is touching to hear our neighbor, 15,386,205,
explain to her children why they can't take
swimming lessons with their friends...

What happens to blank pages that simply remain
blank -- the ones that no one ever writes on?
You see a few in every book -- at the start, at the end,
between sections, being inconspicuous, lurking
blank spies in the land of letters, hoping
not to be noticed, each like a child still hiding
long after the seekers have given up, forgotten the game,
gone off to play step ball, lick purple popsicles
with purple tongues or ride their bikes in shrill circles.

And you may come across whole books
of blank pages, buried in drawers, in boxes,
on high closet shelves (seldom in book cases),
books purchased to be filled up with diary entries,
but never begun, now yellowed, browned,
cob-webbed, their perhaps flowery covers faded,
smelling of dust, evocation of an unwritten life.

What do we do with them? Write in them (new wine
in old bottles)? That seems a desecration or a waste
of words (is there a shortage?), as if consigning them
to instant obsolescence. May as well fingertip
one's name on a dusty table top. Put them on a bookshelf?
Why? Can we put them in a Home for the Paged?

"Hey, I'm hiding in here, and you can't find me!"
cries Mother, trying to rekindle the game, but there's
no one there to seek, and mother's dead or someone else now,
and nothing is hidden behind those old, stained, brittle pages.

There never was anything to write on them, though
after tossing the book in the trash, I quickly
bury it in more trash, not wanting to know
it is there, not wanting to change my mind.

Note: If you can read, you should note (really, you should) that this and the preceding three poems poem are brilliant. Thank you. I mention this, not to brag, but to point out that they closely follow a poem or non-poem filled with dry mathematics. If I got that far (as a critic/reader), I'd say, " This poet is reaching. He's worn out his theme. It's all downhill from here." But then along came these pieces. There's a moral there, though probably not a poem.

Blankness should be a beginning, not an end.
We should die (or end our games)
with every page filled, scribbles
in every margin. I fill myself up
with significance or stare, blankly,
as a sign-if-I-can't. "The unevaluated life
is not worth living." Who said that? (I mean
before I did -- I saw it on a tea bag tag. Was it Plato?)

There's also something memorable (in the Talmud?)
about a book and its cover. Christ, am I
littered with significance. I'm a homeless shelter
for lost, tattered significances. Oh, that's right,
"You can't tell a book by its cover" -- who
said that? Yes, Talmud. (But who would want to
tell a book anything? I suppose if critics tell poets,
books of criticism tell books of poetry. Critics,
have you forgotten what every child knows: It's not nice
to tell.) (Horrible thought -- could it be "You can't JUDGE
a book by its cover"? If so, don't tell me.)

But though you can't tell a book by its cover,
you shall know the tree by the fruits thereof (said Christ?
Bright carpenter's son, saying "thereof"). "By their fruits
are they known" -- describing San Francisco and Greenwich Village?
A cover isn't fruit, but an afterthought. Well,
I'm glad I can't be told by my cover, since I'm
old and fat (Shhh! I'm a spirit under cover!
The name is Bond, 20-pound Bond), but I'm dieting,
exercising and youthanizing; hoping to see you then (me thin --
buff and trim, so you can know me
by my cover. Anyway, I'm well-written-on.
Like that of some computers, my memory is paged,
and what I am is mostly a memory now, which is why
you see me (or seem me) here, now, on a
RAM page.

(If I were a Torah scroll, I'd be goat skin, not ram.
One long page full of sentences beginning "And..." --
"And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying..." [pardon
my English], all ands -- the Torah is an all-and
operation. How odd, a goat
without butts.)

Note: Spirit under cover (in pages of poems under a cover) suggests spy, perhaps James Bond, but here, 20-pound bond, the paper I print on that now bonds me to you. Odd that "youthanizing" (presumably, making young) echos "euthanizing" (mercy killing, usually of the aged -- who, if reborn as babies, are also, thus, youthanized). In the last stanza I refer to all those Biblical sentences that begin with "and". "All ands" puns "all-hands" -- on a ship or in some businesses, some big action that requires everyone to help out. And, for a book, the Torah is well-manned. When it's read in the synagogue, there are people to carry it, people to scroll it, a person to point to the passage to be read, people to read it and recite blessings -- it's like one of those light bulb jokes: How many Jews does it take to read a Torah?

This is another poem that will suggest to many readers that I've capsized my poem, am treading water, buoyed up by

gassy puns. But stay tuned. (I love the suspense, and will perhaps be hanged for it.)

Can one be too much oneself? I love
the way I'm writing here, utterly self-indulgent,
each page one more hot-fudge sundae (with
almonds and billows of whipped cream) to slurp up --
well, perhaps less lush, less sweet, less known by my
fruitiness, more sour, grainy and spicy -- brown rice,
shredded chicken, crisped bacon, onion, green pepper,
garlic cloves, cashews, strong cheese melted in, mustard,
cayenne, green and red peppers, tomatoes, corn,
mushrooms...what else shall we chop up, throw in
and stir? Salt, yes, olive oil, curry powder. Raisins?
Pineapple bits? Almonds? Sure. MORE! OK,
so I'm a messy casserole ("Slumgooney", my Dad
would have called it), but I love this stuff,
my finest work! I eat it up! But who else
can stomach it? One doesn't write this way,
make logic leap and never land, put my
awful puns where my mouth is (and your ears?) --
one mustn't write this way and one doesn't.

I am writing myself into a cozy corner,
a self-indulgent Jack-Horner corner -- both thumbs
sticky from licking off plums (for I've been
plumbing the depths?). Soon even my wife (are you still
here with me, Pam?) Won't be willing (able?)
to read these poems. And eventually I, myself,
will find them unreadable. And then I will have
achieved it: A book of blank pages full of
themselves, nothingness manifest in the fullness (burp!)
of self.

And then, Reader, we will live happily ever after
more.

Note: My wife has read all these poems, at what sacrifice I cannot say. The last line can be construed variously: We will live happily after yet more poems. We will live happily ever in pursuit of yet more. I use "we will" and not "we shall" in stuffy recollection of the almost abandoned distinction between what is predicted to occur (what SHALL occur, when in first person: I or we shall) and what one is determined to make happen or will into existence: I or we WILL. In other words, the poet is telling the reader that we will damned well live happily ever after or else. But not quite that, since we live happily ever after MORE. And don't we? -- that is, don't we love having more to be after? Or what's a Robert Browning for. (I'm thinking of Browning's "Ah but a man's reach should exceed his grasp [or is it the other way 'round] or what's a Heaven for?" from his poem "Andrea Del Sarto". Or is it Jean Paul Sarto?)

“Manifest” -- as when, sated with bowl after bowl
of steaming casserole, I can say I am filled
with many feasts. For I am Man: I feast,
then fester. Fearing fester, I feast faster,
thumbing plums, fistful after fitful fistful.

But I would share. Here my many fustian feasts
are made magnificently munificently manifest --
feast your ears!

Sorry. I had to get that out of my system. (What?
You didn't know there's system to my sadness?)
I can read the reviews now (the reviews
that these poems may never receive): “This poet
succeeds in disappearing up his own asshole” --
yes, I'm a Kline bottle doing a Mobius striptease.

Speaking of “feast, then fester,” there's a chain
of funeral homes (home being where the heart is,
even after it stops beating) in Florida (where funerals
are all the rage) called ‘Moss-Feaster’.
Given such richness, would it be ungrateful of me to ask
that either Mr. Moss or Mr. Feaster be a Mortimer?
(Mort, you are he!)

The English of Jack Horner's day (*circa* Henry VIII)
knew how to bake trick pies with living blackbirds inside
(for real -- a surprise for guests). So Jack could have had
his thumb nipped off. But that's OK, for we are told
by those who plumb the depths of Pi that it has
no end of digits. Irrational, but there you have it.

Well, we have come full circle (pie are squared),
but we still don't know Jack.

There, this page has done it. I'm ready to find it
unreadable, a blot on blankness's escutcheon.
No, I love it. But will I still respect me
in the morning?

(Slight nausea. Can it be that last awful pun
escutcheon up to me?)

Note: “Fearing fester, I feast faster” – just pausing to admire that one. The Kline bottle is a hollow three dimensional object with no distinction (in terms of topology, the mathematics of surfaces) between its inside and its outside. (It's a cylinder of greater diameter at one end – like a bottle – whose narrow end is attached, through a hole in the lower section, to the hole at the lower end, looking like a wine bottle that has bent over and gone into itself to suck out its own lees. Its 2-dimensional equivalent is the Mobius Strip, which you can create by taking a strip of paper about an inch across and 10 inches long and attaching one end to the other, first making one twist. The result is a hoop with a twist in it. If you move a pencil along the center of it, lengthwise around the hoop, you will come out on the opposite side of the paper. Or rather, you have a hoop formed by a strip of paper, where the strip has only one side. The two sides we intuit (of bottle or strip) relate to each other as my shallowness relates to my profundity.

In the next stanza I say funerals are all the rage in Florida because Florida is Retirement Paradise, where Americans go to die. I suggest the name Mortimer because “Mort” means death. “Mort, you are he” is “mortuary.” Or, after a sex-change operation, “O bitch, you are he!”

The Jack Horner stanza goes from pie to pi, the irrational number times which diameter must be multiplied to derive the length of a circle’s circumference and times which the square of the radius (pi time r squared or “pie are squared”) must be multiplied to get the area enclosed by a circle. Oddly enough, I find some people, otherwise bright, don’t know that. Pi does have no end of digits (after its decimal point). An irrational number just keeps going, never hitting a pattern of repetition of digits, and a spare digit is what Jack would need after plumbing a plum pie and getting a finger nipped off by a blackbird. “We still don’t know Jack” – don’t know much about Jack Horner, or have gone round a Mobius Strip or Kline Bottle, and can’t readily define where we are, or, in the slang use, we don’t know anything (“don’t know jack-shit” is the fuller form).

In the last stanza, I’m not sure if “that last awful pun” is supposed to come before (does “in the morning” suggest “in the mourning” in this poem’s deathly context?) or refers to the one that immediately follows. (Don’t ask me, I’m just the writer. Ask the director or the producer. (You’ve read the poem! Now see “Blank Pages – the MOVIE!” (perhaps a musical, starring Keanu Reaves as the blankness).

Last week, Pam (rummaging, as, rumly, we age) found letters we exchanged 21 years ago. Mine were long, and, rereading them, I could taste my certainty (21-year-old certainty -- beyond its shelf life, likely to be rancid, or, a better metaphor, since such certainty is a heady vintage, gone to vinegar) -- my certainty that I was writing brilliantly. I could even see the brilliance, the subtleties, rolling sentences, twisty logic anchored in common sense, with bits of apt examples and many clever asides.

I read a long letter, most brilliant of the batch -- and also an asinine letter, saying things that didn't need saying (brilliantly, though). It was a long letter to my wife-to-be about what I then found fascinating in my previous wife -- Oh, brilliant! Pam sent back a sharp retort -- opportunity for more brilliance from me, agreeing, qualifying, seeing how it is and isn't that way) -- in short, I wrote dumb letters that upset someone I loved (made her think -- rightly? -- that the one I loved must be the only person I could possibly be talking to, myself), and knew as clearly as ever I've known it, that I was writing brilliantly.

Well, I think I had an inkling even then that I was being an otiose ass. But I knew that somehow my brilliance justified that. (I was a golden ass.) And, reading it now, I gag slightly at all that smarmy brilliance. It reminds me of someone dear to me, whose cleverness always seems "off" to me, and it is hard to stomach the possibility that I have been that person. How could I have so misheard myself?

And here, now, I love my brilliance, but what do I know?
May there be an ounce of wisdom in this ocean.
May I (and you) still be friends in the morning.

Note: "As, rumly, we age" -- a play on rummaging, with a nod to the British, for whom "rum" can mean "odd" and "poorly done" and a few other things that sort of fit (as, rummaging, we sort through clothes and voices that no longer fit).

And these are the most fearsome critics:
Oneself a year, ten years, 20 years after
the joy of creation; oneself 400 years later
(whether or not we remember it is oneself
we criticize -- and isn't it always?).

A century later is the hangover morning after,
when one is the generation that, in its great wisdom
(derived from being later), knows that any once-doted-upon
stuff is crap (and yet, it must have been more than crap
to have been imitated by so many bad poets
until it became indistinguishable from its reflections
in all those warped mirrors),

and the great lover rises from bed,
drags his bleary headache to the bathroom mirror
and grimaces at what he hopes no one else
will ever see. (I go through an old poem,
deleting half the adjectives -- like applying Visine
to red eyes.)

The early work gets the worm
in the apple of my eye.

Though sometimes, looking at my own early work,
I find a gem and wish I could have written something
that good...and I did! Or someone I once was did it,
isn't that good enough?

When I visit on-line poetry groups,
much of what I see is embryonic -- or already
miscarried. Here's one by an English teacher
who thinks it is noble and original to call a tree
"a lone sentinel." A forest, I suppose, is a mob
of sentinels. Yes, I'm a critic. Everyone's a critic.

Silence is the best (worst) critic. Should I tell her
that trees as sentinels have been done to death?
Obviously the metaphor yet lives for her,
or perhaps she's not alive yet. It is dangerous
to tangle with the undead.

Note: As I recall, a lone sentinel pine is used as an example of triteness in one of those frigid essays by Yvor Winters, probably in his In Defense of Reason. (Winters lived up to his last name. When he's right he's even harder to take than when he's wrong. But he knew some things about poetry -- taught at Stanford for many years, one of the "New Critics" of the mid-20th Century, died in the 70s, I think.)

I can't just hand these people real poetry --
as if handing them their heads. They don't know
what they don't know. What they are willing to hear
from another is lavish praise, and only general praise
at that. Anything more is overwhelming.

Long ago I wrote the following:

Other Silences, Other Voices

Walking through the park,
I pass with embarrassment
a ragged man who talks loudly
to no one I can see.
Is that the way I sound
to passing angels
who hear my thoughts?
And in what stillness dwells
one who can hear
the incoherent babbling
of angels?

Perhaps to some my visions would be angelic
(or diabolic) -- overwhelming. If they saw
their own work through my eyes, they would
wither, die, never become their own worst angels.
But there are those whose most casual glance
would char and blacken my brightest page,
and I keep becoming them, tier upon tier,
Cherub to my own archness, Seraph to my Cherub
(Aye, there's the rub), but no end of orders,
never an absolute font of all,
sans seraph. Absolutes are just not my type.

Note: The first stanza refers to people like the poet mentioned in the last poem, who proudly presents poems replete with textbook triteness. The point here is that there are apparently no end of levels of excellence, so that, no matter how angelic I may seem to "lesser" poets, there are always orders of angels above me who will find me inane (and you may belong to one of those orders). Nothing new about that idea – the old "Great Chain of Being", where Pope says that, as apes are to us, so we are to angels. My next point is that I keep becoming angel to my own ape: I look at my old poems and see their faults (as described earlier), Seraph to my own Cherub (Cherubs are supposed to be one order lower than Seraphs), which takes me back to my Seraph/serif pun (and probably I'm one of thousands who've made that pun), which leads to other puns. The last chain of puns begins with "my archness", referring both to a quality of my poems (often) and to the Archangel, one step down from Cherub. Then we have the shift from Cherub (CheRUB) to "the rub". Then we have "absolute font of all", suggesting both a type font (sans serif?) and a fountain or spring, a source point for all, thus an absolute above all angels (knows all the angles). And the last word ("type") refers back to fonts of type.

The Age of Reason poets who presented the Great Chain of Being thought of us as fated, without appeal, to our place on that Chain, a concept alien to this poem, where changes are as rapid as shifts in rank in a small army gone to war.

I think part of angelic duty is to spare us
themselves, keep their distance, lest they blind us
with their gaze, inflame us with wing tips.

The worst critic is the existence of what I could be,
but am not or am not yet. It is a great gift to be able
to play with children, befriend stray dogs and cats,
step among spiders without alarming them, admire
(without rising gorge) the crudest poems, resist
the fall of Lucifer, the match who ignites cloddish Adam
and Eve; Lucifer, who can't resist (in the name of sharing
knowledge) flaunting his superiority, overwhelming them
with all that they don't know.

He didn't have to leer, smirk, insinuate. It was enough
for him to be there, his brilliance (light spilling off
every scale) paling Eden. It's not that Adam knew Eve,
not the shame of sex, but that in that knowing,
he knew knowing, knew the difference between naming
("...and you are cow, you are lion, you are woman...") and
knowing (a pervasion, easily mistaken for a perversion
by one who mistakes himself for a body); knew all that he
did not know and was both stirred and abashed. And yet,

an angel is a messenger, must be among us, not in pride,
but to be visible to those who can see. There's the excuse
for writing well (otherwise a crime against mere humanity):
Those it would overwhelm can't see it. Their raves and applause
go equally to the banal and the brilliant. They can't see
well enough to be blinded. (It's like looking at the sun
with your eyes shut tight and covered by your hands.
At best you may notice -- if you pay attention to them --
that your inner eyelids have a reddish tinge -- and your face
is getting hot.)

My pages are blank to them as are others to me.
I am dangerous only to those who are ready to move on,
who force their eyes open and squint at my work and
gradually look at it as simply as, once, I looked at the sun.

Note: No, the point isn't that I'm brilliant (though obviously I tend to think I am), but that to SOME I am brilliant. I'm a sun of just the right magnitude to enlighten some, blind others (who will not suffer from me, because they won't look at me) and be a dull cinder to others. One's audience finds one. The questions raised in this poem have, at various times, given me pause: I have used my wits to overwhelm. After such excesses, I have wondered if there's any point, any humane point, to brilliance (brilliance in itself). This poem is one set of answers to that question.

Those who hammer us with their brilliance
are in hell. "Hell," like "blank," means brightness --
at least it does in German, and I think, Your Honor,
that we can stipulate to the German's expert knowledge
of Hell. What greater evil than to turn us away
from the light by using it to destroy? We become
saucer-eyed -- deer in the headlights, reflecting
satanic brilliance back at Satan. The reflection includes
his intention to overwhelm, which, reflected
from blank, dazzled eyes, becomes agony,
just as a face swollen with rage becomes hard
to distinguish from a face ravaged by pain.

And here's the hell of it: The worst of angels
was trying to help us. He could not help
but help, by presence alone, but came to doubt
his powers. (It was a joke: Someone pretended
to be harmed -- groaned too realistically at a pun, perhaps.)
Doubting his powers, he tried too hard, all that "pride"
merely the reflex of effort; he felt the waning magic,
solved it by flaring up overwhelmingly, saw or misread
agony in astonished eyes (perhaps it was pity),
tried (ah, pride!) to save us all from his brilliance
by going out like a snuffed candle (wicked!),
became one of us, fearful of magic, consoled
by labels (you are a cow, you a lion, you a tree)
and labels of labels (you are a lowing beast, you
a tawny nobility, you a lone sentinel on the hillside)
and labels of nothing at all (you suffer from Oppositional
Defiance Disorder; you try to read my words, but fail because
of your chronic clinical Attention Deficit Disorder) --

moving always away from knowing. Silly angels, persist
in your folly! Hammer us! Show off! Spread
iridescent wings! Blind us! You can't hurt us,
for we are of your angelic seed, and have better eyes
we've forgotten how to use. Teach us our blindness,
that we may learn again to see.

Note: The poem shows the angel Lucifer's descent to Satan, Satan's descent to man, man's descent to bad poetry (labels of labels), and poetasters descent to psychiatrist. One could, perhaps, go even lower.

Mid-poem, the candle is "wicked" because (groan) it has a wick.

Astonied (mid-stanza 2): Old word for astonished, astounded -- as if at sudden thunder, says the derivation. Why are we not warned by the lightning? But always, those with vision are ignored, and others are surprised by the outbreak of easily foreseen wars. I like the suggestion in "astonied" of "turned to stone," like one who sees the Gorgon's face.

Seraphim, Cherubim, Archangels -- I can never remember
the others -- let's see, Thrones, Dominions, Powers...
at the bottom, mere angels. I don't know where poets belong;
if, truly, we create, then we are above them all, angels
being merely messengers of the word.

And what are these names? Celestial secretaries, deputy
secretaries, assistant secretaries, officers and dogs' bodies?
(Whence these hierarchies? Ah, we can't help
filling in the blankness.)

Do the Thrones LOOK like thrones or SIT on thrones?
I often write poems while on the toilet. And, living
in Virginia, I write by light from "Old Dominion Power."
Embarrassing to think of, but people often die
on their toilets (or worse, someone else's -- you can tell
I'm bored with angels?). It's Shitterdämmerung,
Twilight of the Toilets. That last squeeze does it.
The heart gives out, soul squeezes right up out of the head,
like a slick bar of soap squeezed in the hand.

Someone else has to deal with the slumped form.
Husband, wife, embarrassed by the bare ass once
embraced, its soft heat now embered (just a flush),
soon embiered; by throes thrown from the throne.

I think I'd rather pop off *in flagrante delicto*
(or fragrant delighted licking): My love, let's die
together, good missionaries, one beast with
two asses, mooning the world both ways (leave 'em
laughing), each savoring the other's last breath
while a hundred million stranded sperm
wring their handlessnesses, moaning,
"NOW where are we supposed to go!"

Note: In stanza 4, the flesh of the recently dead has lost most of its warmth, so may be compared to an ember (embered) (BRRR!) and will soon be in a coffin on a bier – embiered. In stanza 5, "good missionaries" – that is, making love in the missionary position, which, I suppose, is not how missionaries did it, necessarily, but is what they told the natives was the only decent way to do it. Any position that is Emissionary suits me. (Sending sperm out on a Mission Implausible?) [An Emissionary position pertains only to sex via Email – between an E-male and a FE-male.]

This discussion has perhaps gone on too long
when (as now) I get bright ideas, and can't recall
if I used them already, perhaps 200 pages ago.
Do I repeat myself? Well, then, I repeat myself.
We'll call it a *leit motif*, a variation on a theme,
a test of your alertness, reader -- anything but senility.

Now what was that idea I can't recall if I used before? --
Oh yes! Angels! Have I mentioned they are messengers?
Yes. But have I mentioned that a page is also
a messenger? That's why pagers page you. And "blank"
derives from a word that means white, bright, shining.

So a blank page is a bright angel -- or perhaps,
a pageboy, out-of-breath, embarrassed because he can't
recall the message he rushed to deliver. A child comes to us
with a message, rushes out into the blankness (shining)
of new snow, plops down in it on his back
to waggle arms and legs, printing odd ideograms
on the day. Snow angels, blank pages filling up
the blank page. We fill up the something called nothing
with nothings called something.

If angels are characters on the snowy page,
then the messengers are the message. And if those
who create the message are angelic --
who is left for us to shoot?

Why, then, are we shooting each other? A bullet, too,
is a message, much like my poems, but I'm only shooting
blanks at blanks.

Note: This poem moves fast. It does make sense. I wrote it, but I had to read it twice just now. In the last two stanzas, the hackneyed "Don't shoot the messenger" takes on a broader meaning. In stanza 3, the "nothings called something" are angels, or more broadly, spirits – you and I, for example. Or they are the words and symbols on a page, whose substance we must continually create. "The messengers are the message" (for example, if snow angels are the message, and angels are messengers – or children are angelic – it fits in several ways) – this echoes McLuhan's The Message is the Message (or is it vice versa), but not too much, I hope, since I think he got some things backwards.

“Page” (the messenger) derives from “rustic, of the country” -- Latin. These, my pages, come to you from another country. But “page” (this sheet of paper) comes from the Latin for “to fasten” -- because they fix our attention? More likely because they are fastened to one another in books -- fastenating! Thus fastened, they are easier to flip through, which fastens (as opposed to “slowens”) the act of reading.

A more superficial derivation (shared by “pageant”) is from a Latin word related to “fasten” that means scaffold, stage, plank. After all, a sheet of paper is a very thin plank -- though fallen farther from the tree.

Here, then, is my stage and, I hope, my pageant.
(A page ant is one of millions of tiny ants whose lines, trickling over the page, form my words and sentences.)

A blank page is an empty stage.
The audience grows impatient, starts
to hiss -- when...out rushes a messenger,
it could be anyone, any Tom, Dick or
Herald.

For lesser crimes than puns, poets
have been fastened to scaffolds by the seat
of reason -- or “nous,” the mind, a nous
that snares the world. Never mind.
I never do.

(Perhaps we should turn over a new leaf.)

Note: The last line suggests that, here on my scaffold of puns, I've run out of rope. So time to turn the page. “Nous”, of course, puns “noose” (just entre nous). [“Entre nous?” is French for what the mice say to the cat: Are we an entree?] “Nous” is also Greek for “mind”.

]

When we turn over a new leaf (which is how
Adam came to know Eve -- he flipped up
a fig leaf; came to know, then knew to come),
the untouched page is new, clean. It sparkles,
like the white shirt washed by the name brand,
coruscating with tiny twinkle marks (pulsing starlets).

Write on it? How can I smirch it? How can I speak
here, thus, tongue-Tide with Joy. Here is a pure
Ivory tower of page (pre-Fab); what if
my pen Oxidal to pieces? Easy Duz it.

Odd how I buy laundry soap without noticing
the brand name. It's all brand X to me. I see without noticing --
it's brand ecstasy. I notice "free of artificial fragrances",
"biodegradable" (why not bioUPgradable?), "64 oz." and
"\$7.99" (yes, reader, way back in 20 aught 4, one could purchase
a bottle of detergent for less than \$300.00.) But the only
brand names I recall are from the radio commercials
of my childhood (1940s), when "the soaps" were really soapy,
Duz did everything and Fab was only a soap, not Paul,
George and the Ringo that Ivory never left around the tub
in the John.

Segue to high-tremolo Wurlitzer organ chords and
we return to Helen Trent, Grand Central Station, Juanita
and Back Stage Wife...

Recently I bought new undershirts, and, putting them
in the drawer, realized my old ones were gray, though
regularly sloshed with detergent. (DeterGent -- brand name
for a chastity belt? Garlic-scented mouth wash? DeterGent,
the lesbian's second-best friend!)

I want to parallel this grayin- through-use with pages of books,
but it's no go. I leave this simile to simper. Similes
should be discovered, not manufactured: "A simile! Well,
I smile!"

*Note: Stanza 2 is full of name-brand laundry detergents – mostly still around, I think (Tide, Joy, Ivory, Fab, Oxidal, Duz).
Stanza 3: The old ads for Duz said "Duz does everything!" The Beatles (Paul, George, Ringo and John) were the Fab
Four (I hope you all knew that already!). Stanza 4 recalls the ambience of the soap operas, the daily radio serials
("Helen Trent," etc.) sponsored by the soaps, whose only musical background was usually the Wurlitzer.*

Ah! That new-page scent! Someone should market it.
We could spray our old letter-littered literature with it.
Grandpa's brittle yellowing leather-bound Harvard Classics –
just brush off the attic cobwebs, one shpritz of Newscents, and,
ahhh! -- a spring morning in the Rockies.

Leather-bound -- a curious concept: "Hey,
why don't we pulp some trees into flat, white flakes,
then fasten them between pieces of cow skin?
How do we come up with such things?
It's not the first thing I'd think of,
watching a bulky beast (say, a Guernsey,
brown with white spots, high, squared-off rear,
belly and its equipage swaying as it moves,
big gentle eyes, flicking tail) grazing in a field;
far off the blue haze of horizon trees: Let's see,
if we peeled the skin off that creature, and cut it
into little rectangles and glued flakes of those trees
to it...

On the other hand, we are all skin-bound,
we bags of significance and wind. (Scramble
"similes" to get "missile". I shoot one
into the air, it falls to earth, some poor cow
knows where.) And some of my most savage critics
are hidebound: "Why do you trivialize your poems
with silly parenthetical interjections and godawful puns?"
(Why is "godawful" worse than "awful? How odd
that God has become an intensifier, The Infinite
as spice.)

But sometimes we are free of our skin or at least
unbounded by it. And words escape with us.
You and I are the means by which words
escape the page and even the brain. We are the
prison laundry trucks. Hidden in baskets heaped with
old worn-out forms, dangerous living words are loaded into us,
leave with us, ride past the unsuspecting critics, editors
and even the most rigorous of scholars,
leap from us, run free.

If you have nothing to say, say it. The talk is the thing. This notion of art as endless conversation emerges from time to time, a bold, eccentric thread that has long been hidden on the obverse of the tapestry -- emerges, led by a needle, a teasing penetration, emerges as Rabelais, *Tristram Shandy*, *Pogo*, *The Confidence Man* (Tristram's evil twin, Melville's only novel narrated by the whiteness of the whale), even Winnie the Pooh -- all works mused by the imp named "Hodgepodge", discursive, never beginning, never ending, works that speak of themselves speaking of themselves, speak through characters that emerge from and subside into a single flexible voice that (if you turn it to the right slant of light) becomes letters on a page or, by turns, a coy smirk or a tragic mask or a calm twinkling.

Endless conversation, art as companionableness, tales told around the hearth, hypnotic flame and its shadows making darkness dance, familiar voices becoming, briefly, strange as one nods off, jolts awake; and for the most sober words, the grandest eloquence, somewhere, off to one side, an embarrassing truth from a child or a mutter from a sot or a rhinestone necklace of silly puns from a chorus of good-ol'-boy jesters (Yorrick? Toby? Holland Owl? Churchy LaFemme? Bewitched, Bothered or Bemildred?) -- hate and envy and pain all, for one endless night, domesticated, quaint or at least unable to undo the safeness of this place for talk;

sentences that unpeel in onion layers, rooms in which even the tiniest children, though unseen, may be heard, and why not? Talk is talk. And if the voices go still, the log crackles on, the flames continue to waggle their fingers, shaping and misshaping the darkness. (Pope wrote of endless night swallowing all. But I speak here of endless nights that linger, toying with their food. As endless as we have another log to add to the fire.)

Some logs become blank pages. Others become a mild warm flickering light in which it is safe to say anything at all. What's the difference? Even in this age of computers with their cold, shadowless flicker, we begin our chats with a log-on.

Note: Lawrence Sterne's Book is actually The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Esq. In stanza 2, Yorrick and Toby are characters from Tristram Shandy, participants in that book's seemingly endless chattiness. In stanza 3, Holland (i.e., howling) Owl and Churchy Lafemme (i.e., cherche la femme) are characters in Pogo, better known as Owl and Turtle. Bewitched, Bothered and Bemildred are the three bats, also from Pogo. In stanza 4, Pope's lines about endless night swallowing all are from his mock-epic poem The Dunciad, where the night that swallows all has to do with the emergence and predominance of really bad poets (in Pope's far-from-humble opinion). The trouble is that later opinions agreed with Pope to such an extent that most of us have never heard of the then-prominent poets he mocks so well.

We are people, we are voices (to one dozing
by the fire), we are noises, we are letters
on a page, we are ink scribbles, we are the forms
that enclose bits of blank page...we are people....
How rapidly the shift occurs, the magic comes
and goes, as quickly as lust becomes boredom becomes
disgust -- what are my lips doing here? Why are we
making these motions like an oil pump or a man starting
a motorcycle, these noises, pretending to like it?
As quickly as with a touch, a view of shadowed clefts
beneath silk, indifference flares to lust; as quickly as,
eyes catching eyes, someone is there, then
no one is there; as quick as quick becomes dead --

so one moment, we are in a world, the next moment,
“Kim knew what Jessica was only beginning to suspect,
knew it the instant Darrell shrugged, tossing his jacket
on the couch, and grunted, ‘C’ mere,’ as if...” -- Kim? Jessica?
Darrell? There is no WHO here; some charlatan is juggling names:
“Step right up! Guess which hand holds the Kim!”

And yet, last night, when Kim thought of Jason, poor lost Jason,
and with him all her lost dreams, you got teary, reader
(“Reader” is a name I juggle -- or is it you? You is a pronoun
I juggle.)

It’s a funny thing about “Frankly, Scarlett, I don’t give a damn!”
Rhett Butler says it in a book. But does he really? I can’t unhear
Clark Gable saying it. Since I saw the movie before I read the book,
I’ve never known what Rhett, in the book, sounded like
before he was possessed by Gable. Movie trumps book.
And yet, though I saw the movie before reading *War and Peace*,
my Natasha sounds nothing like Audrey Hepburn. The book
had stronger magic, better medicine, more mojo.

If you met me before reading this (and all too likely, only a few
close friends will read this far), will you be able to unhear
my remembered voice, the one that, heard on a tape recorder,
seems to me thin and alien? Will you be able to hear my real voice,
the one that is only here?

And if what you hear is your own inner voice,
perhaps it is a voice you’d forgotten you had,
a capability of thinking new thoughts. And how can
any voice you hear on this page (hear here!)
be other than your own?

Note: First stanza: The comparison (which takes some long leaps) is between the way, in an instant, what seems a living voice on a page can come to seem meaningless ink squiggles and the way lust can turn off (so that one’s ardent love-making can become mechanical motions like those of an oil pump, etc. Maybe that was clear to you – it was to me when I wrote it. But in rereading it now, I found it difficult, so added this note. The stanzas about Kim, Jessica, et. al., refer to no one in particular, just once-trendy names in some potboiler that has suddenly lost my interest.

I just opened the window -- crisp October air.
And I thought, this next page should start with "Early autumn" --
something about bare trees and blank pages or brown leaves
and old, sere pages...at which point it occurred to me
(with a giddy sense of freedom) that I don't have to write
about autumn; I don't have to convert this tingling air
into blank page metaphors. Hell, I don't have to write
about blank pages or even fill blank pages with words.
(The only air here on the page is spelled a-i-r. You can't
breathe it. [You can b-r-e-a-t-h-e it.])

But this is art: It's not just freedom. Freedom alone
is no game. We need barriers, too. (Welcome to my
great barrier riff.) The pen must be stopped
by a page (or some smooth, yet absorptive surface)
for writing to occur. We want forms to pervade with our freedom,
a trellis for our vines. We want freedom to savor
the limits of our forms. I decided to fill a book of blank pages
with poems (or reflections or smirks or riffs...) on
blank pages. And, for a moment, I thought this one
would begin with early autumn:

Each season is a form to express freedom. There's freedom
in budding, burgeoning out in an endless plenitude of forms --
spring, of course. (It makes my coarser springs creak.)
And early spring -- those tightly coiled buds: That's a kind
of freedom too, like the invulnerability of a pubescent boy
swinging before a mirror to enjoy the taut heft
of his newly discovered hard-on -- and, girls, when your
nipples first harden, do you think, "Is this, too, me?" --
isn't this a kind of freedom -- to be hard, indomitable,
ready to flower?

Note: While eschewing the obvious links (in an autumn day) to the blank-page theme, this poem seems to stumble on other links. Each season is a freedom, based on a barrier. Is the blank page a barrier or a freedom in the game of poetry?

I hope you didn't miss the Great Barrier Reef, lurking in line 3 of stanza 2.

I began with autumn, but ended coiled up
in early spring, a young snake, like a long limber line of poetry,
relishing its own sinuosity.

Autumn's freedom is the freedom of dropping everything
(it Falls away) -- shedding old serpent-skin desires (for with maturity,
we may crave freedom from our more urgent freedoms;
some would say we move from unbridled to brided [NO,
spell-checker, I mean "brided", not "bridled"] to abridged,
perhaps abraded, worn smooth as old stones in a creek [and
beginning to creek]). Spring's freedom to create spawns
summer's plenty: freedom to have, to roam among
endless variations in the key of green. Having been sated
with hot-tar-sandy summer, we can begin to detect
the subtler perfume of autumn, the freedom of
letting go, of not having to have, the heavy skyless clouds
opening to a dryer, more distant blue than summer's,
tickled into pungency by fiery-feathered treetops
(more angelic disguise?). Our thoughts, embracing
that tickled blue, find themselves containing a world
tinier than summer's. Sky shrinks world
as paper swallows stone.

I began to fill these pages in winter, for there's a freedom
in nothing at all, the world blanked out --
a milky sky over endless expanse of snow.
It would be too much freedom (fences and walls lost
in drifts) if we didn't sense the factories of spring
humming beneath frozen earth.

When I walk out into new snow, form emerges
to meet my motion, my adjusting senses -- senses both
bundled up and newly naked, like babies. Each step I take
makes marks. Each surface hidden by snow is also
highlighted by it (branches, fence posts, chimneys),
especially when the slant sun breaks through, revealing
blue and purple contours (hints of pink) -- and look!
A delicate gilding where some mutt has declared,
snow or not, this land is MY land! And so
I mark this page.

Note: In stanza 2, unbridled adolescent lust is both freed and bound by marriage (brided/bridled), abridged by age (cut short, perhaps better defined), etc. Connecting fiery-feathered autumn treetops to "more angelic disguise" – I think I had in mind the feathers of angel's wings, the fiery fall of Lucifer (in the fall?), the fact that a "leaf" is a "page", a "page" is a "messenger" and "angel" means messenger, and the Biblical stories of angels in disguise among men (and a few other things – like children as angels in disguise) and the idea of the autumn trees as another guise. But also I meant "disguise" to pun "the skies", as the treetops are leading our vision skyward.

The rest of stanza 2 deals with falling (as spirit) into that vastness of that autumn sky, a sense of space in comparison with which the earth that seemed overwhelming in its summer's bounty seems to have shrunk. "Sky shrinks world as paper swallows stone" refers to the game two players put their hands/fingers out in various combinations to see who wins. The three configurations are paper (flat hand), stone (fist) and scissors (two fingers spread). If one person holds out paper and the second holds out scissors, the second wins, because scissors cuts paper. Paper beats (wraps) stone.

Stone beats (breaks) scissors. My version has sky, world and...? (Not us, because we can't be beat. Perhaps words.)

You may think I'm worrying -- will I run out of ideas before I've filled these 256 pages? (You, of course, can see I've filled them.) No, I worry I'll have too many, fill the last page, then think of another blank page poem, then another...what to do? Fill another book? Cut it off -- no more blank page poems? (If I typecast myself as amiable Tristram Shandy, they'll never let me play stern Hamlet!) Turn editor -- or barbarous barber, select, cut-cut-cut? (Scissors cuts paper.) (Dangerous, for when I edit, I'm more likely to add vines to my columns, finer fluting, Amaranthus leaves to the vines, additional scrolling, like one doodling on a pad while listening to a telephone that won't let him go. I'll see see new connections, pursue them, sprout new limbs, new foliage. I'm no gardener. I'm crab grass!)

Not worry, no, I just keep on keeping on, and when I get there, I'll decide to know a little more of what now I can leave unknown without coloring my not knowing with the jittery tints of worry.

I call this form "a book of filled blank pages." Any form exists to provoke a delayed knowing. How will it come out, who done it and why, what happens to Jessica, how can the writer top this, what is Jeremy's secret, what could possibly rhyme with silver? If Bobby gets killed, I don't want to know, so I'm skipping to the last chapter to see if he gets killed because if he does, I won't read anymore because I don't want to find out about it.

In art, we suppress our knowing intentionally, thus taking control of the game-run-amok that got us stuck in solidity, the game of not knowing who and what we are. One mates an unlimited creativity that can make, of nothing, anything (infinite potential, nothing known) with a certainty (the form of a sonnet, a villanelle, a confessional poem, an epic), and produces...What? It has its father's mystery (just look at those eyes!), It's mother's definitude (see the sharp, fine lineation of that jaw). The form enables us to surprise ourselves.

You get to the end and are sternly stopped (a barrier). Or left hanging over a void, free to fly. Or have both new freedoms and new barriers, knowing more. Limerature or flitterature? Ligaturiture or Lighterature? Pinioned by opinions or lofted on pinions?

Pinion -- a feather, the source, also, of pen, which is also a place of confinement (as birds, deprived of feathers to keep them from flying, are said to be pinioned). The pen, the sty, that is the man. Unpen us, O pen! Open us, O pen! Ripen us! (Prepare us for RIP?)

Notes: Stanza 1: The line about typecasting myself as Tristram Shandy and never being allowed to play Hamlet refers to the fact that if I keep being the self-indulgent punster, I won't be taken seriously when I want to be. (So perhaps I should be stern about foregoing any temptation to add more poems on this theme after #256.) Fortunately, I don't much care. The me that would be taken seriously wouldn't be me anyway.

Stanza 2: At the end we are "sternly stopped" – an allusion to death, and particularly "The Death of John Whiteside's Daughter", by John Crowe Ransom, who says of those who visit to see the girl's body laid out, that "we are sternly stopped" to see "...her brown study there." I don't know what the girl's death has to do with getting to the end of my book, except that the girl liked to chase the goose, and I'm getting to flight and feathers in this poem (see last stanza). And also the book (as you may already suspect) will not end with a bang, but with a conversational question, in hopes that the conversation will continue beyond the book. So this book is STERNEly stopped (Lawrence Sterne, author of Tristram Shandy, a work that rattles on and hasn't stopped yet), but owes little to Thomas Sterne Eliot, I hope. (Actually, I don't want to emulate Tristram in all ways. It cloy's at times. I hope I don't. But it's mostly fun.)

Stanza 5: "The sty, that is the man." What the French critic (19th Century – Sainte-Beuve, I think) said is "The style, that is the man." (But he said it in French, for some reason. I guess that, too, was the man he was. Since the French love to drop final letters of words, "sty" seems appropriate for "style".) Since I write with a pen (which is both a feather and a place of confinement or sty), I, becoming this voice, in various ways become what confines me. Goes back to the inseparability of freedom from barriers in any game. In another poem, referring to style and sty, I pray, "Oink Oink O ink!"

Yes, art (like any game) depends on barriers as well as freedoms
(for there are many freedoms -- the open road lets you go
anywhere, as long as it's on or near the surface
of a blue-green ball; what of freedom to be at the earth's center
or that of the sun or Alpha-Centauri or an atom of plutonium
or an electron?) And yet, I must say a word for my sponsor
(or my spawn, sir): Total Freedom. When any place
is as good as any other, why go anywhere?
When I can be instantly when and where I choose,
why snail my way through time and space? When I can
BE you at will, why try to speak to you? What game remains?

But after aeons of spicing up games with barriers,
abandoning game after game, but leaving their barriers
in place (our ancient codes of conduct and the codes that
countered them and counters to the counters -- for we are
mostly thought, and we are the thought that counts,
growing number the while) -- our old barriers orbiting our heads
like litter from abandoned space stations in endless drift,
old games occasionally flaring into view like flashes
of lightning in attic windows that startle
cobwebbed pinball machines into brief,
rusty excitement. After enough abandonment,
the old barriers (their spicy savor lost, mere hunks
of stuff, millennia in which nothing happens -- parodies
of eternity, brick walls, wind-swept deserts, unapproachable suns
and interstellar vacuums, HOT! COLD! Don't touch! Beware
of the dyslexic Dog!), it becomes hard to play ANY game,
because the new barriers (the ones we know about -- the goalie
blocking our shots, the IRS, the mortgage, menopause...)
are reinforced by the ghostly ones (no less solid, but dimmed)
that we've forgotten about. We know we must pay our taxes,
but that sick hollow in the gut comes from an old game,
when we were a few zflatigers short, so were tortured,
mutilated, tied to a post to die publicly (an example)
after watching our families fed to scaly beasts.

After too many abandonments, too many games gone bad,
too many games won to the real or fancied detriment of others
(fancied because often those we defeat get even by playing dreadfully
dead), our barriers cease to be barriers, for how can there be
barriers without freedoms? How can we collide with anything,
when there is no space in which to move? Our barriers congeal
into a thick skin that we assume to be ourselves.

Note: Stanza 2: Since I describe old barriers as codes of conduct and codes that counter them, I pause for a chain of puns: moral codes and counter-codes, because we are, basically, thought (as opposed to body: Not eternal figuring, but an older sense of the word "thought", so we get into codes and counter codes because we are the "thought that counts", and in our confused profusion of abandoned codes (Never kill anything, kill the bad guys, etc.), we grow numb-er (number). Later in that stanza, among the barriers, I include "Beware of the dyslexic Dog!" -- the reference being to fear of God as barrier, where God is frequently supposed to be misread as "dog" by dyslexics. Six lines later I refer to "zflatigers", a word you probably won't find in dictionaries -- just a made-up unit of money from some long-long-ago society or world.

Overwhelmed by our barriers -- as mentioned
in another universe (with an uncanny likeness to this one, alas),
long ago on a far far distant page in this very volume --
we can hunker down in our desert canyons and play
smaller games (shall I be the God of that red ant hill
forever? As the walls close in on me, I can find room
to play by becoming an electron) or give up on all games?

Or we can confront our old abandonments and understand them --
after all, we allow our barriers to overwhelm us
only to prevent ourselves from harming others; yes,
we become harmless drunks and even psychotic killers
(inviting others to control for us what we demonstrably
cannot control -- ourselves) because we want to HELP, to be of USE
(United States of England?); so when we discover
that our old failures to help were not based on evil,
only on misunderstanding, we trust ourselves again
to learn new games.

But quite apart from such fastidious (but lasting) remedies,
it is a sinful delight to arc the gap to total freedom, nowhere
I would live, but infinitely refreshing for a brief visit, and how
invigorating, from the sticky webs of my games, to know
I can, at will, renew myself; for what could be freer
than the instant of creation out of nothing (not from
my spidery guts, like the cobwebs of my old games) --
the creation out of nothing of something, anything?
(God knows what -- and I know; how redundant!)

There's a balancing point, a moment of knowing
at the instant it is. You know at the instant
you perceive it as creation and become aware of,
for example, giving voice to my voice. There is no joy,
no freedom, no INSTANTNESS (Yare! Yarely now)
like the instant of creation.

(You're not God!
Iamb so!
Y'are not!...)

["Yare" -- another old word. Look it up -- quick! --
and when you do, give it my love.]

Note: The other universe referred to at the start of this poem is the preceding poem.

End of stanza 3: "God knows what -- and I know; how redundant!" -- redundant because I am God? Not exactly, but God of the universe I create (as artist), perhaps. But what limits the extent of the world I can create? I suspect there are no limits that one can't come to surpass. But I'm not serious about that. (Stress "serious".)

"Yare" (ready, active, quick, etc.) is a key thematic word that zips about in and out of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra like a visiting hummingbird. It's Cleo's word at first, too light for heavy Roman Antony, but it becomes Antony's as well. Also see Hamlet ("The readiness is all") and King Lear ("The ripeness is all"). "Iamb so!" because "yare" comes to me from Shakespeare's iambic drama.

If I can close my eyes and dip an imagined tongue
into a mountain of whipped cream [sorry - I'm on
a diet; my own universe is currently a forbidden landscape --
too rich!], the pleasure is in knowing I am tasting
my own creation, but that is a pale ghost
of the instant of creation. And most of what we call
"creation" is as ghostly an approximation, for we let
circumstances co-create. We are "inspired" by our
"experiences" (as if we didn't share in THEIR creation).
We have a vital message to impart. We are following
the rules of a genre, delineating social issues, unveiling
a pre-existent beauty -- nothing as simple as "Let there be
whatchamacallit...wait! First let there be a dictionary!...
Well, first a language, good, NOW a dictionary, yes,
there it is, light, that's it! LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

And by the way, to whom am I saying these things?
(All poets must wend from whom to to-whom.)
Let there be someone to whom I'm speaking!
Let there be hearing, someone here to hear!
Let there be HERE. Let there be forests
whose trees are falling, making a noise
that may be heard!

Or maybe it's not verbal, just a sort of "OOHNGE," but
minus the sound and the effort, and occurring in no time
at all, until we see the light and that it is good ("Let there be
good! Good!! Oh yes, let there be letting be!") -- all in that
timeless instant, and we say, "Let the light persist,"
and the instant becomes timeful, and stretches out
into space, full of changing light.

For pure creation (which is total freedom), there can be no reason.
Any reason is a barrier, as is any source other than the point
of creation (you, me). Inspiration is a name I call myself
as creator, lest anyone find me guilty of it. I can say,
"I'm innocent! God did it! The Devil did it! Inspiration
made me do it! My brain chemistry made me do it!
I was possessed!" Yes, possessed: I've been had
by my own language.

(Language: tongue. Can you lick your nose with your language?)

Magic is simply creation, pure creation. If we could say “Let there be...” -- it would be; that is, if we could simply and only say that one thing, no other, no second thought, no rush to cover our sorcerous asses. It would be, not because we said it loudly or mysteriously or in some exotic tongue or very softly after spinning round three times within a circle circumscribing a pentagon, after sacrificing the world’s last virgin and drinking her blood mixed with tongue of gnat (not newt, anything but a politician!) and wart-sweat of toad; it would be because we said/thought/decided it simply, meaning (have I said this already?) it and nothing else, not it plus “Oh, but maybe this won’t work” and “I’m being silly” and “I must really concentrate [squinch squinch]” and “Where should I go for dinner?” and “My wife really likes this wall; maybe I shouldn’t make it vanish. What if I do, then can’t put it back?” and “If only Dad could see me now” and “Am I sure I should be meddling with the world” and “damn toe won’t stop itching” and it’s way past time to say “etc.”

I, of course, am far from pure creation in my awareness of what I’m doing here. I may be creating, with taintless purity (meaning it tain’t impure?), a universe of my own which overlaps with yours to become a subset universe in which you and I co-create this book (that’s more than I know), but this book has a REASON: Someone gave me a book with blank pages to be filled. Its theme has a reason: “Blank pages? OK, I’ll write about blank pages.”

(Not much of a reason, you say; that’s called freedom, not irrational, just unmotivated.) But my reason for writing (blank pages to fill) and the reason for my theme (blank pages, their being filled) face each other like barbershop mirrors, approximating a canceling out, a making nothing of my reasons, which become lost in the maze of reflections on reflections on reflections. (Why is three repetitions infinity?)

There is a faint aftertaste here of total freedom. You can almost imagine that these poems mean exactly what you want them to mean. (But you are only temporarily surmounting barriers. Don’t fall off the wall, old egg, until you are quite hard-boiled.)

Note: Stanza 1: Newts (various species of salamanders) are often mentioned in witches’ concoctions (e.g., in MacBeth). Newt Gingrich is a politician. (The Grinch is...but it’s not Gingrinch, is it.)

Stanza 3 is perhaps difficult. Somehow the constraints that make this poem possible for me (for example, the theme to which I am doomed to return, blank pages) so closely mimes no constraints (no theme) at all (just the filling up of actual blank pages I was given), that my self-assigned barriers are both huge (after all, how much can one say about blank pages?) and non-existent, so that in the interplay between form and formlessness that results (the double-mirror system), you get flashes or hints of total freedom (I hope).

I ask “Why is three repetitions infinity?” This alludes to a book written about 60 years ago called One, Two, Three, Infinity, by George Gamow? The title refers to the fact(?) that some primitive peoples have only four numbers: one, two, three and infinity (or a whole lot, too much to count). There’s the concept of infinity, and then there’s the number of

repetitions with variations required to get us to recreate that concept for ourselves: How many mountain ranges beyond mountain ranges must one see before getting the feeling that the mountains go on forever? How many reflections of reflections (in barbershop mirrors) must one see before getting that feeling?

You and I are the gods who create whatever universe
is real to us (or unreal, because we deny our own role in its creation).
That, perhaps, is what Kim knew, though Jessica
only suspected it, the instant she saw Darrell
so insouciantly toss his jacket onto the couch, shrug,
and quietly, staring unashamedly at her cleavage, clearly
visible in the upper V of her bathrobe, say
“c’ mere.” I say “perhaps,” because in his (or His) own universe,
a god can afford the luxuries of polite uncertainties and
not knowing everything until the last sentence of the last page.

We do it, but don’t know we do it. Our word, our thought
is LAW-di-daw. So when you say, “Let there be the
perfect man/woman for me, standing before me now,
loving me,” there, instantly he or she (or he/she or she/he or s/he
or it or s/h/it!) is -- there and gone in a flash, obscured as soon
as half-realized (mistaken for a futile wish) by our almost
simultaneous thought that “of course, this is ridiculous and
can never happen.” And that is what remains with us,
like a faint cloud on our horizon -- the perfect lover who,
of course, can never happen.

Our lives ARE magic. We get what we wish for.
We would wish for the ability to wish (and wish only) for
what we wish for, but when we think of this, we think too
of the last time we wished the excruciatingly turtlish driver
of the car ahead of us, blocking the left lane, would curl up
with a grimace, then straighten out stiff and dead of that
awful sounding thing, a myocardial infarction -- but somehow
make it to the shoulder in the process...oh, clearly it wouldn’t do
to have wishes come true.

(And so each wish, as soon as wished, is realized, then
gone with the wind: WHISHHH!)

Note: Stanza 2: “LAW-di-daw” puns “la-di-da”, an old way to express jaunty, aristocratic mockery of foppishness.

In a fit of grammatical/political correctness, I decided to extend the priggishness of “s/he” to neuter, since why should she’s and he’s be treated as superior to it’s? I got a kick out of the result: “s/h/it”, which is what I want to say about anti-sexist grammarians. (But let’s not disrespect shit, which is as good a thing as any he or she. It’s just nutrient-challenged or something. La-di-da!)

Stanza 3: If you DO succeed in wishing without reservation that the slow-moving driver who hogs the road would drop dead, do be sure to include the qualifier that the driver gets off the road and onto the shoulder first!

But wishes DO come true. You wished that oblivious obstructive driver dead, then unwished it, but both wishes took effect, the second only delaying the first. (That's why you feel a little deader after such wishing -- some old agreement to experience what you visit upon others.) How could he NOT die sooner for it (his own wish according with yours), he who turns himself and his car into a barrier, a stone in the road, who makes himself oblivious enough to shut out the feelings of all the drivers behind him? When one has shut off all communication, one is dead; when one has shut off a little of it, one is a little dead.

But you, too, have inhaled some toxic faery dust, wished a wish you wish you could take back (and more secretly, rooted for, a covert glee). When you wish against your own wish, you create a stasis, an impossibly exact balance between wish and counter-wish, between alternate futures, a part of you standing still in time, a sea anchor that pulls you back against the current of life, a small piece of deadness.

But our pro and counter and otherwise wishes overcome one another, and, though encumbered, take effect, leak into our lives drop by drop. The lover who flashed up before you out of your knowing -- an approximation shows up next day, ahead of you in line for caramel latte, but ignores you. Next day, while you're thinking you should have been more bold, an even better approximation asks you for directions, and years later (years after your painful divorce from Ideal Lover Mark III, who turned out to have irritating qualities you -- literally -- never dreamed of) you meet the one for whom you now realize the others were rehearsals, rough drafts -- at last the one who speaks the words you would have expected, had you cared to know your dream fully; but surprise was part of the plan, so your lover comes to you like great music, each note, each chord, an utter surprise that, instantly, has always been and could be no other.

Death, too, comes in successive approximations.
But you have wished for something beyond death.
All wishes come true.

I hope each of these pages is as much a surprise to you
as it is to me. This is -- no denying it -- one long riff --
or rather an irreverent unravelment, rife with rough
refulgent riffs. Rough, but, I hope, ours: These words I speak now
(inwardly) -- do you not speak them too? Each of you,
all of us together -- becoming a long choral riff, supporting
a spectacular tropical splurge of impromptu life,
shoals of neon-blue words swimming in tiny left-right darts
through shoals of black and gold words (like fish,
mostly face, each species thousands of identical round-eyed
masks flicking left right up down in synchrony), and,
poking out hideous jack-in-the-box faces from the riff, mores.
(Tired of snorkeling? Climb up here on my riff raft.)

However shall we bring this to a close? For a bad end hovers,
needle-sharp, in the pellucid language just ahead --
but can we bear a coda? (Reader, such puns hurt me
more than they hurt you, and if you believe THAT....)

(And then what's left for me? Decades in the Library of Congress
stored in micro-fish.)

Riffs and reefs both fascinate me. I got the worst sunburn
of my life (calves and ankles) snorkeling just off the dock
in Bon Aire -- couldn't tear myself away from all those
intermingling galactic clouds of creatures every color I could name,
and, even with the aid of "cerise," "periwinkle," "saffron," "indigo" and "puce" --
far more; how, in their flickering ten thousands, millions,
they all but touched one another and my sprawling lobster pinkness,
came kiss-close in deft, darting dares, but never once
touched me or each other! In my parboiled hours of paddling
and peering, I saw thousands of species, each maculately uniformed
in its own vivid, brilliant stripes and stipples (school colors?),
each bearing its own perfectly replicated expression -- bulldog
underbite or wide-mouthed gawk or grim smile...schools
passing through one another like playful galaxies
redesigning heaven, but no one being eaten (maybe plankton?),
All dancing the same dance. Nor, later, did I rue
(rude unruful riffer of reefs) the next day, lost in my dark cabin,
nursing my raw-beef-red calves (veal-red, I, well-read, suppose).

If you spend enough hours among tropical fish, you are bound
to osmose a bit of their color. The words that flicker though your thoughts --
aren't they turning opalescent, with flashes of electric reds,
blues, yellows turning to you the sudden leers
of a thousand clown faces?

Note: In stanza one, "choral riff" spawns a coral reef, of course. The hideous faces poking out among the colorful words are mores, that is, morays. (An ugly eel – that's a moray, as Dean Martin used to sing.) Why should mores be ugly? I suppose when words just want to play, they feel imposed upon by folk customs that have grown rigid and taken on the official stance of law, not that art should be immoral or amoral, but that it operates on a finer frequency. In stanza two the pun referred to is "bear a coda" (can we bear a final closing passage?), which suggests "barracuda", because often just ahead of you, as thousands of vibrant blue and yellow and red fish dart and swirl about you, you will see, hovering

needle-like in the water, a barracuda (which, for some, will be a bad end).

Speaking (as I briefly did) of morays and mores [pun alert! Pun alert!],
this “now” creature is eely (Time winds all eels).
Now I write these words, and now (the SAME now)
you read them. You may be many or few.
You may be me, rereading what I wrote a day
or a year before. You may be my wife or an old friend.
(If you were not an old friend when you began
reading this work, perhaps by now....) You may be
people not yet born (not to your current names)
as I write. (A reef has many currents, as do some eels.)

Here I am (here, now) in 9 October 2004. One of you,
perhaps (one cell of that awkward composite creature,
you), is in 2008, another in 2020, another – dare I hope that
not only these poems, but also this language, this planet
may endure so long – another is in 2317! And that you
just discovered in these words a pun that no one
had noticed before, not even me!

And all these different nows are one now,
not only in the trivial sense that always and only
we live in an eternal now – true enough –
but what is vast in the dimension or dementia
we call eternity is Occam’s-razor-thin here
where words are spoken. You’d think you couldn’t squeeze in
an edged wise word, much less a poem. But from the start to the end
of “the” is an infinity of eternities. The gap between noise
and meaning is even greater, here in eternity
where, instantly, all is known, all space pervaded.

[That last stanza must be great. Even I can’t remember
what I meant – when I wrote it, long, long ago, in a far distant...]

But in this parody of here and now, where an excruciating
parody of eternity (called “duration”) is required
to snail-creep though inches, miles, light-years of space
(Why are light years so heavy?), here we string together
our separate nows on a thread of shared configurations
of objects, landscapes, newspaper dates, clock hands,
calendar pages, constellations, walls, ceilings, any shared
frame of reference. And so we can string these pearls
we call “now” on our awareness of shared words,
one “now” in which I write and you read, another
in which I write while you watch the news (not the news),
trillions of strands of pearls, crossing, entangling,
reflecting wavery shadows of eternity.

Note: Line one says “Now is eely” because “time winds all eels” (makes eels unreel in winding ways) – a play on “time heels all wounds” and its humorous inverse: “time wounds all heels”, but “wound” is past tense of “wind”. Some eels having “many currents” refers to electric eels. Re stanza 2: I’m now in 25 Dec. 2006. Merry Xmas! As for the pun no one has noticed before – I still haven’t noticed it. Stanza 4 explains stanza 3 (not). “Edged wise word” plays on “Word in edgewise.” I guess the huge difference between nothing and something is also a very tiny difference. Yet one can make something (or everything) out of it.

Hey, I just noticed the pun you and I hadn't noticed before (word play, if not pun): Just before that remark comes the hope that "...this planet may endure so long" -- or "endure 'so long'" -- that is, outlast goodbye.

In my mind, the words “in my mind” – now.
In your mind, the words “in my mind” – now.
We’ve just achieved time travel. Now – I am touching
my left index finger to the tip of my nose
(I really am, right now). You touch YOUR nose
with YOUR left index finger – no, not my nose,
YOUR nose (far more important than my nose,
demanding upper case). No, really, just do it,
why not? Be wild and crazy, touch your nose.
(If you’re embarrassed because someone who
“wouldn’t understand” is in the room, you can
pretend to scratch your nose. Be brave.)
(I know I’m good, but I don’t think these words
will be understood when we no longer have noses
or fingers.)

I wrote a poem like this one 30 years ago, said to
watch the sunset as I’m now watching the sunset, touch
your nose as I’m touching mine, or, if you no longer have
fingers or noses, touch the sunset as I am now touching
the sunset. Isn’t that touching? These days I’m less likely
to end on a sunset note. I don’t like to be pushed around
by clocks and third-rate stars. Synchrony is synchrony,
and a scratched pimple on the nose is as lurid as sunset.

[Nonsense, pure bravado! I’ve never felt vast and calm
while admiring a pimple-set.]

I hope you haven’t been touching your nose all this time.
I stopped ten lines ago, or, depending on when you’re reading,
years, decades ago – hell, I’m dead, buried, reborn as someone
who can’t quite recall having ever been whatisname and is,
right now as you read these words, screaming at his mother
that she never understands him or her. Or it.

And there you are, all by yourself with your finger on your nose
(SURE you weren’t picking it, oh sure!) and don’t you feel
a fool, all alone in time, betrayed by these ink-squiggles-
pretending-to-be-a-voice-speaking-to-you-right-now!

[Hearing voices here? You should see someone about that.
You need to chill, lay back. Visit your local Club Med-
ication. Chase all those voices out of your head
with a pill, which is mental white noise, like a clunky
air conditioning system, drowning out all else,
while all your voices – stale ancient ones and fresh
new ones – strain their throats, screaming,
trying to get through to you. But if you think
you heard me say any of this (including this),
something is still getting through the noise.]

There's something subversive about art (well, duh!) --
 all these necklaces of now; now Hamlet says "To be
 or not to be...", now Lear says "Never never
 never never never" [he does, you know], now
 Molly Bloom says, "yes I said yes..." (but, say the
 politically correct, she may have MEANT "no"),
 while Leopold Bloom eats "...with relish the inner organs
 of beasts and fowls" and now Hemingway Hemingways
 away (the Hemingway is NOT the Hawingway – though
 his prose shares a yellowy-greenish tint with Hawthorne's --
 but I can't recall anything he said or is saying, Nada),
 and now 70 versions of Rembrandt look us in the eye
 (his own eyes slightly worried, soft spaniel eyes,
 wondering how he'll paint us all)
 and Beethoven thunders at us and Bach ripples through us,
 rounding us like pebbles in a brook, polishing us
 to reveal our elaborate patterns of streaks and glints,
 and all this is now now now, each its own
 now (When we have now, we have won our own – neatly
 acronymic, now own won – but not one), linking us
 in separate, criss-crossing continua: Will all those
 now speaking, inwardly or aloud, the words "To be
 or not to be" please raise their right hands?
 Thank you. Will all those now being told tunefully
 that she loves you yeah yeah yeah please raise your hands?
 My, such a mob of you after all these years – yeah!
 All of you now in gymnastically intricate *flagrante delicto*
 and about to have eye-ball-whitening orgasms, please
 raise your right hands...oh, never mind!

The larger and more rapt the audience (riff-rapt),
 the more real and radiant the now, the shared universe
 running on B-Minor-Mass time or Beatles time or
 Nabokov time or, if we are very quick, Issa time.

We pause for universe identification:
 Bong BONG Bong. This must be the Mutual Broadcasting
 System. You are partaking of Blehert time.
 You've just reached (all of you – all together now,
 you are SO well trained!) the end of poem 226.

Notes: The "yes I said yes" begins the final soliloquy in James Joyce's novel Ulysses. The joke about how Molly may have meant "no" comes from some academic feminist complaints about how even women who say "yes" often mean "no," so were really raped. Leopold Bloom (Molly's husband) relishes those inner organs (nutty gizzards, etc.) much earlier in the same novel. Hemingway/Hawingway – refers to "hemming and hawing" and to Hemingway and Hawthorne, between whom I've always sensed an affinity (both being Cancer? Yes, and for some reason I associate both with a yellow-greenish, almost sallow hue). Rembrandt painted some 70 self-portraits. Bach "ripples" – perhaps because "bach" is German for "brook." One has to be quick to be on "Issa time" because Issa's great poetry is in that very rapid form, haiku. There was a major radio network called the Mutual Broadcasting System (is there still?), but here the word "mutual" refers also to the way writer and readers share in the creation of any poem – if the writer is able to solicit that contribution. The three Bongs represent another network, still going strong. (NBC? CBS? I forget!)

If you're staring at a blank page, raise your hands.
What! No one? That's a hard one. I can write,
sensibly, "This is a page" or "This is a page with
words on it?" I can claim, arguably, that "this
is a poem." But if I write, "This is a blank page"...?

The blank page can't say "here I am" or "now
I am blank." Nor (unless you've inherited
my old notebooks) does it entirely make sense to say
that when you "now" look at a blank page,
we are both looking at the same blank page, both
NOT saying, mentally, the same words. I suppose,
looking at blank pages, our minds drift their separate ways,
each wandering in and out of its own collection of nows,
nouns and renowns.

I suppose if, looking at blankness, we each looked blankly,
filled up with nothing but that pure potential, earlier
than early spring, the germ of the bud, the potential POP!
(and Mom) of creation (creation being a bomb-and-pop
busyness), the nothing about to become something –
at that instant (too skinny for fat words), we share
that most trivial of nows, that now that is eternal.

(Trivial – from tri [tri, tri again] plus via, a meeting
of three roads, where we riffraff exchange
small news, complaints about aching feet, bad crops
and lousy weather; but eternity out-trivializes trivia,
being omnivial: where ALL roads cross –
on their way to roam.)

Eternity is the great now that is haunted
by the great now-what? (Ahab? Kept awake and
keenly on edge [but not edgeWISE] by his first mate:
the coffee-driven Starbuck!)

I don't like the word "eternal": Come on, God,
tell us another story. I don't WANT to go to sleep!

(Will God, like some daddies, be fooled, or pretend
to be fooled, if, at the threat of sleep, we say
"And then...? What happened next"?)

(But this book will end – very soon, too.)

(Unless you start over. Unless we start over.)

Note: In stanza two, I say we can't rationally say "now we are both looking at the same blank page" unless "you have inherited my old notebooks". This alludes to the fact, mentioned in an earlier poem, that I used to write with soft (#2) pencil in my poetry notebooks, so later found the pages smeared almost to blankness (recidivist blankness). So if one of those pages "says" that author and reader were looking at the same blank page, that may come true.

In stanza 5 I must be missing a pun. I don't know how I got from "the great now-what" to Ahab, hunting for the white whale, his first mate not coffee driven, but named Starbuck, so doomed to suggest coffee to our generations. I do get that Ahab is edgy (and out to harpoon Moby Dick), but not so wise in his edginess. I guess just the idea of someone haunted by and hunting the great something brought the great white whale into it.

The last two lines MIGHT be taken to refer to death not being the end if we can choose to move on to other lifetimes. But one doesn't need to die in order to start over. (Always glad to give you an out, you folks who think you are some body.)

Poetry – a good way to kill time. Between moments of poetry – dead time. But enough about me – that is, time and eternity. Do you come here often? I'll bet you can't guess my sign (he says, hoping her sign is "YIELD," not "STOP".) (My first marriage was largely my failed attempt to guess her sighing.)

Let us consider the similarities of a singles bar to Hell. (It should be easy for me to consider, since I've never been to one. I don't even go to doubles bars. But I've been alone – there's my Garbo (anagram of bar-go) voice: I've been alone. And in my days of childhood candy greed, I went to Hershey bars, but that's an old pun, isn't it, looking for Mr. Goodbar. Nuts!)

Hell, I think, is where the worst torment is immortality. Where immortality is torment, we try to shut down consciousness; briefly getting results from tiny winking bubbles of booze, even more briefly, in the oblivion of orgasms and soused sleep – but these and their attendant small cruelties accumulate until eternity seems conquered, and hours, days, years rush past, untasted, forgotten, lost.

But eternity lurks in ambush: Lost weekends are followed by the interminable seconds of hangovers, when every crack in the ceiling must be tasted, swallowed, regurgitated; every discoloration, every grunt of not-distant-enough traffic become as solid as a fist, every spoken word pushing outward from mid-brain like a tumor.

Even years lost to drugs, smoky rooms, blue-sparkled ice cubes, must, at some point, be repaid. We build up mountains of debt owed to eternity. We try to refuse to know that we are. But contrary to the current escapist fad that mourns (pretends to mourn) the coming death of all that lives (and some say that coming is a death in itself), death is neither end nor escape: for every deadening must come a quickening.

The fury of a demon is its rage at being stirred to awareness that it is still alive, poor ember. Even the stone you kick down the gutter only HOPES it is not alive (sullen, stony hope),

caught up in hectic, disjointed dreams. By jerking one's head rapidly from side to side, one can keep interrupting an unthinkable thought to prevent it from being, after all, thinkable; such are the jillion contrary motions of a stone's molecules that hold it in dream-stasis by their mutually canceling randomness – a dream of not being for aeon after Brownian aeon.

Note: Stanza 2: Garbo voice: She is associated with the words "I want to be alone." "Goodbar" – referring to a novel, Looking for Mr. Goodbar, dealing (as I vaguely recall) with single women looking for company of men at singles bars. But "Mr. Goodbar" is the brand name for a candy bar similar to a Hershey Bar with peanuts.

Last line: "Brownian aeon" – refers to Brownian motion of very small particles – the "jillion contrary motions" earlier in the last stanza. In other words, the stasis of an object for aeon after aeon because of the randomizing motions and collisions of the small particles of which the object consists.

Stanzas three through seven of this poem have a lot to say. I hope they say it. For starters, this is a pretty damned good definition of hell, maybe not so far from Augustine's (Hell is an absence of God -- or the variation on that -- absence of love): "Hell, I think, is where the worst torment is immortality". You can generate the rest of the poem from that line, or generate your own.

We are taught that Heaven and Hell are absolutes –
a fancy way to protest too much their reality –
but there are numberless gradients. We can be more or less
in Hell – there being no bottom – as we can be more or less
dead, more or less in love with immortality as a chance
to play, more or less tolerant of silence, of the blank page,
the empty canvas, eager to fill them up –
but not desperate to do so, amused by the rainbow play
of possibilities as radiant blankness passes through
the crystal spectrum of awareness.

Believing yourself mortal is more than half way to dead.
And if that consoles you, you are yet deader. The living
seek out the living. Those alive enough, by their mere
presence, quicken the dead, and if the very alive
can confront the limpness, then grief, then terror,
then sideways smirking, then rage of the newly revived dead,
their unabated life will return the dead through boredom,
gingerly tiptoe them into the shallow end of hope, cheerfulness –
eventually to dolphin-plunging, eagle-soaring reaches of limitless play.

I don't know if I'm alive enough to make a crabby baby laugh,
much less revive a corpse, animate a catatonic or penetrate
the almost solid miasma of spirit surrounding most psychiatrists,
but gladly I tell you (in case you need to hear it) that you are
you and have always been you, and that the blankness
of the prospect of immortality (and, indeed, of you, who are
no thing) is, like the blankness of the page (not this one,
but the next one – now, as I write) -- is only as empty
as you are unable (that is, unwilling) to create.

(You are no laughing matter – no matter at all,
but creation is a joy. I laugh all the way to the blank.)]

If unable is unwilling, your deadness (mine, too)
is the accumulation of regretted creations. Long ago
the joy of creation sufficed and suffused. What made us doubt it,
made us think each creation had to help, be of use?
What persuaded us we had failed to help?
Why did we feel compelled to attack those we'd failed
to help with our creations? (To prove to ourselves that
it was all their fault?) And yet, having become monsters
(still creating), we tried once more to help others
by becoming dead. If we can delineate that twisting primrose
(and psycho) path, we can trace it all the way back
to the joy of creating, where a blank page greets us
gladly.

Note: Stanza 4, “laugh all the way to the blank”, puns “I cried all the way to the bank” (a phrase that implies the speaker doesn't give a damn about anything but the money, however ill-gotten, was not really saddened, since he got rich off whatever is supposed to be making him cry).

Hell, then, is immortality in the absence of a willingness to create. Hell, then, may take the form of a blank page. So all we have to do is write? Not so. Just dribbling words only exacerbates blankness. A man alone in a room, cheerful, begins to speak; his good cheer begins to strain, becomes hectic, down shifts into mild interest, indifference – as if his talking is chewing up his life force, but he keeps talking in voice after voice: Who says, “What I mean to say is...” – Dad? an uncle? Who, becoming hostile, said “I’m sick and tired of this. Enough! That’s IT! I MEAN it!” -- and went on talking? Mother? Sister? Son? Who, becoming angry, said “Fuck this shit!” and “DON’T TELL ME WHAT I CAN AND CAN’T SAY!” Who said “Tough titty.” Who said, with a toothy smile and fanged eyes, “Oh, this is excellent, isn’t it excellent? Look, folks, more words! GOOD writer! You just keep writing, and Mummy will give you a big messy kiss!” Who said, “Oh God! I don’t know what to say! What else can I say!” (Why is the room getting so dark? It’s still morning. And why are the walls so close around me?) Who is saying, “I’m afraid. Let’s be logical now. This is just talking. It can’t hurt to talk. It will be OK. NO, it’s NOT OK. I don’t want to talk about this...”. Who says, “Please! Please! Please! Please! O God! O God! O God! Just stop, O God!” Who mutters “pleasepleaseplease...”. Who says nothing, sits hunched in a chair, staring at a space on or far beyond a windowless wall. And this – if the man is alone in a room writing – we call “Writer’s block,” but nothing has blocked him. He has simply talked away the room, the world, the sense of location and ability to be, to act, to have anything. He has talked himself down to apathy. He fits neatly into the air, as if it were concrete in which a body-sized niche had been chipped out for him. Nothing matters now because there is nothing left to matter (it’s all just talk, all the same), and matter itself (chairs, doors, walls, bodies, stars) is only dimly perceived through the solid air, perceived as condensed words, words evoking a twinge of nausea (safest not to try to move), but only if one touches them, so there’s no point in speaking, no reality in which speaking may occur, no one, really, to speak. Words have become as inimical as, to one who is sea sick, the slightest motion or the scent of roast turkey with stuffing.

You may never have heard a monologue quite as extended as what I've just described – unless you, too, had a mother who was disappointed with something she mistook for her life, her husband, her children...

Or unless you've become more aware than you like to be of your own internal monologue. Typically a cheerful man would have to talk for hours to slip into such sloughs of despair and stick there. How long to talk oneself to death? How many years of psychoanalysis, decorating occasional "I see"s and "yes"s with the regurgitated shreds of your childhood?

But we've all experienced talking that leaves us more exhausted, more sour, less ourselves than when we began – especially when we simply keep talking, as if into an impenetrable blankness that swallows our words as we speak them or just before. Ah, but my exemplar was talking to himself – is that what makes it deadly? I hope not,

since I am writing in my bedroom,
no other body in the house except a few autumn crickets chirping themselves dry in the basement (but still too spry for me to catch in a cup and toss outside) and several spiders and enough tiny prey to keep their webs visible (note to self, metaphor for blank page?) No, talking to someone doesn't prevent the spiraling descent to apathy. You speak, the therapist nods encouragingly, you tell him more, he lets you run on, nods, grants you an occasional "umhmmm" or "hah!" (eyebrow twitch) or "yes, OK, and?..." – working on the idea that if he can just keep you talking, all will be well, and when you begin to get irritated, he thinks, "Good, he's working through something," and when you yell at him, he thinks you are freeing yourself of your hate for your father (as if rage ever rid one of rage), and when you are terrified, then sobbing, why, yes, go on, we're getting somewhere, and when you reach apathy and go silent, despite all prodding, he is pleased that you are calm now, malleable, suggestible. And so stable – solid as a cinder.

Why is this? Because silence, blankness (when abhorred) acts as a vacuum and tries to suck us inside out. Because in the past, when we've been caught up in vacuums (as when unconscious, a way to escape pain), the voices of those surrounding us (panicked parents, blaming each other, joking surgeons, curious classmates...) rushed in to fill the void; one of many ways self becomes infested with voices that go round and round, applying themselves to everything and nothing, emerging in vacuumous moments (those moments when, like vacuum, you have two you's) – emerging to take over, bringing with them old pain and an increasing sense of emptiness, which stirs up yet more desperate voices from deeper vacuums. We bring our own blanknesses along when we face blankness, and our own past efforts to fill in the blanks. This is our world, our light and shadow, our textures, warmth, cold, colors, smells, tingles, pressures, space, duration, form, heft, hardness – all ours. But when we are supplanted by these voices not our own, these usurpers, desperate solutions to ancient silences that we clung to because just beyond those silences (the unconsciousness that is our attempt to make time hold still) we would be swept up in horrible motion, confusion and pain – long vanished, but held in our mind by our attempt to stop them by stopping time. The turmoil keeps the silences adrift in time, always with us, along with their sucked-in, borrowed voices (everything sticks to pain-enforced silence), forever alive, all held in endless suspension lest we slip back into too much motion, too much pain, the sudden tree where highway should be...

The more we are supplanted, the less we, ourselves can reach out to anything or anyone, the less we can have a world in which to be; and the more we talk, the less we are there, the more we are supplanted by increasingly dire voices until we have nothing, almost nothing, are, perhaps, not dead, but doing a good pretense of it in hopes that all the voices will just go away.

(Vacuum has two you's. And weewee has two we's [WHEE! Oui oui!] And, like most of us, Hawaii has two I's. I was saying important things. Why am I being silly? Just tuning up: me me me me...)

Note: That last stanza, say my critics, is a perfect example of what's wrong with Blehert's poems. Or maybe not. Maybe I thought, I've been talking a long time, and dire voices, however profound, are taking over, so nyah nyah nyah. Or maybe I was taken over briefly by the Marx Brothers or, worse, the Three Stooges. "Yes, but there's a time and a place for everything." I never agreed to that.

So we've come back to the act of writing
as one empty mirror facing another, each filling up
with infinitely regressed reflections of emptiness
and a giddy resistance to falling in through
looking glass beyond looking glass *ad infinitum*.
(Does that describe network TV: infinity of ads?)

Here are some things that don't resolve the difficulty
of retaining sanity while spewing words onto pages:
Stop writing. (Writer, that's like telling a fish
to get out of the water.) Yes, we can talk away our ability
to have a world, but writing only about things (red
wheelbarrows, rain-slicked, petals on a wet black bough)
is, at best, a delaying tactic; at worst, an accelerant,
forcing chewy bits of world through the word-grinder.
The voices that want to supplant us can supply things
(often parodies of the things we know, like loved ones
in our weirdest dreams) as well as we can; and
(if the game is to dote on the most undeniably vivid image)
even more obsessively. It doesn't help to exclude objects,
to become a thinking machine (something else that
supplants us and our world); to be passionate (you think
your passions are your own? Perhaps some are,
but impostors crowd on all sides. If you are wise enough
to know your own passions – to know, for example,
when wife has merged with Mom and you with Dad --
then you have already solved this puzzle); nor does it help
to talk gibberish, let the mythically-endowed-with-wisdom-
or-vitality Unconscious pour out its slavishly unfree
associations – that is simply inviting a deluge of voices,
making a potluck of authenticity, a surrender likely to
plunge you rapidly to and below apathy, below death
(the body yet alive, but only as machinery) into syrupy
solemnity, hallucinatory binges of pity, regret, obsession
with bodies, rigid control, obedience, violence, solidity,
catatonia, the endless automatic possession of too many worlds
you desperately cannot have; you out here (out THERE),
separate from you, unable to approach that body (once
someone's), now obscured; you can see through it –
down there, at the far end of the room, its appendages
twiddling something – is that writing?

It's not subject matter or an emotion or a stylistic gimmick or being postmodern (words meaning only themselves, whatever that means) or surreal or realistic – none of these trump the wordiness of words, their absence of mass, their susceptibility to being usurped by voices not your own. (Look how the words “your own”, as the dress designer says, become you.) Automatic writing won't do it. Your (or The) Un-or-unconscious doesn't know anything you don't know. (Your Unconscious wears army boots.) It is as mysterious as the dull stare of the kid a teacher always calls on (to the despair of the bright kid, his hand waving in the air – I know! I know! Ask ME!) -- the glassy-eyed kid, like a sledge-hammered steer, who sits there in stunned silence.

Having a listener won't solve it: Years of shouting at a spouse or unraveling (or raveling) in analysis will not make the blank page more inviting.

What DOES work?

Hey, what the fuck do you think this is? A self-help book? A poetry clinic? (I blow my nose in clinics!) Do you see any before-and-after pictures here? A young despairing me curled up in bed, starring at a blank wall? A mature me (graying urbanely) smiling in leather-patched tweeds from a book jacket? (Jackets on books, sleeves on records – books get a better deal.)

But, yes, this is a self-help book. So help yourself
Enough, I can't resist the urge to know everything
and share scraps of advice. You have come to find me
here on my mountaintop (a pain in the ass), O poet,
and I say unto you: Don't talk so much more than you listen.
Read. Take a walk, notice things, touch things, don't talk,
keep your day job. Neither a borrower nor a lender be – oops,
wrong voice.

Get a life. Know that you are you and no other,
for the more you know who you are, the less easily
will you slip unknowingly into being others. Be honest
(lie, but only for the fun of it), because lies, especially lies
about what you've done to others, make you withdraw,
which diminishes your ability to be in touch with here and now,
and makes you vulnerable to your old solutions to not being.
Always you must pay for borrowed – unknowingly borrowed – voices.
Know what words mean, lest reading itself induce little vacuums
that suck in anxious voices, a buzzing in the hive
or your not-there-ness.

Note: Stanza 4 – “I blow my nose in clinics!” – that is, in Kleenex. End of stanza 5: The wrong voice is Polonius in Hamlet, who pompously condescends to advise his son, “Neither a borrower nor a lender be...”

These are short-term ways to stave off busy buzzing blanknesses. For the long term (how about anti-vacuophobia for a long term?) – it helps to be able to confront both something and nothing, both the moments of excessive motion (bullets whizzing, cars crashing, laser swords humming, ship up-and-downing) and the deadly stillnesses such motions surround, stillnesses embedded in the eyes of hurricanes, days under deadening drugs in dark rooms, moments of unconsciousness, years in solitary confinement –

the silence (or is it silences) between thunderclap and lightning bolt, between the baby's head clunking against the floor and forever later (thank God!) the baby's YAAAHHHHH! Between taking a sip of, you thought, milk and realizing it is orange juice, between your lover's beginning to tremble and – after she slowly, jerkily turns to face you – your realization that she is...laughing? Crying? Dying? Is listening, not to you, but to a cell phone?

It helps to be able to play. Children at play can get hurt, but just before they are in rage or tears, you can see play become something more hectic, with forced laughter, manic glee, eyes you might imagine admiring the rainbow blur of a fly's wings just before chubby fingers tear them off.

Poor fly, seeing those manic eyes in each of his thousand dimming lenses. I think it was Kikaku (my favorite name for a haiku poet) who showed Basho his haiku that said, if you strip the wings off a dragon fly, you get a pepper pod, to which Basho replied, that is not haiku; haiku is adding wings to a pepper pod to get a dragonfly. Play without tears does not tear off wings. It is soar without sore (or sour?), wing without wring – I notice I'm not saying anything. Have you noticed I'm not saying anything? And what's wrong with a pepper pod? I'd rather have a flightless jalapeno than a mosquito.

What does play have to do with this. I'm writing alone in my bedroom – playing with myself. Where are YOU? But that's what I create to fill the blankness: I create playmates. I create me. I create you. No, don't thank me – it's my job.

The trick is, creation doesn't stop at the page.
I can continue to speak to you here (without emptying myself out,
leaving nothing but the foul wind of nostalgia [stale nausea]) because
I speak to someone or many ones – I create them to speak to them.
If I build you, you will come. If I make a pretty bird house,
some bird will make it home. If I create you well enough,
real you's will (as the dress designer promises) become you.

Because I want to play, the you I create wants to play,
wants to contribute to these motions, boom ostinato to my melody,
add curlicues to my serifs and speed lines to my logical leaps
(Look! Up in the sky, it's a Bard!...).
You are no hmmmhmmming analysts; no, you respond,
you create back at me. You do this because that's the you
I create as I create these poems (or whatever).

(Creating a reader is a lot like creating play with a dog:
If I say to the dog, in a playful voice, while hugging him,
"You bad bad dog!" and at the same time swat him hard,
he wiggles in ecstasy, panting, pouncing with forepaws,
wanting more. If I swat him far more lightly while saying
in a deep, scolding tone – frowning – "You good dog!",
he cowers, ducks his head and peers up at me from below
and sidelong, propitiating. Dogs and readers are such
stupid creatures. But loveable. Yes, yes, reader, we'll go out
for a poem together later, but now I have to go to work.
Sorry. Poor reader, waiting so avidly for something to happen,
for someone to say something to him.)

I even create moments of doubt that you are here with me –
in response to your own moments of doubt that I am here
with you. Hide and go seek. I feign panic (or feign feigning),
loneliness, desperation, monotony. Yes, given play, given
knowing that we are all here at play and that everything
damned well comes out all right, I can do all the deadly things
(passion, endless talk-talk-talk, despair) and emerge
unscathed. (Why is no one ever scathed? I used to be scathed,
so now I'm speaking ex-scathedra – scatheter of the absurd.)

(That's the manic glee I was talking about. Soon one of us
will be going to Mom in tears, saying "He punned at me!")

Shall we plunge into depths (we have the entire ply of the page
beneath us) and rise up out of the page in great, arching
dolphin leaps, bring good cheer to tired sailors
who cling tight to the surface?

(I take back the part about readers and dogs. In trials
before a carefully selected cross-section audience in
Indiana, that part didn't go over well. The producers insist
that I rework it. Maybe compare readers to cockroaches
or angels.)

Note: Stanza 4: "Scatheter of the absurd", etc. – plays on ex-Cathedra, catheter and theater of the absurd. If I can speak as I do in my poems and emerge unscathed, then, no longer "scathed", I am ex-scathed, or (if we add in the possibility of speaking with that much praised "authoritative voice" that critics laud, then we add "ex Cathedra" (speaking from the seat [but not ass] of authority). Hence, ex scathedra. Since a catheter is a tube inserted into a body's orifice, usually to withdraw fluid (e.g., urine), "scathedra" suggests "scatheter", poet acting as a tube/an authoritative voice/a scathing voice (all of these) to draw out or convey, in this case, absurdity (as the Brits say, I enjoy taking the piss out of you -- British slang for mocking you), since "catheter" suggests "theater" which leads to "theater of the absurd". If this string of puns seems strained, it's because I'm scathing on thin ice.

Or one may not be anyone to begin with, write only
in borrowed, unchanging voices, pouring out rhymed lyrics
("Youth" and "Spring"), underground rants, sadly wry
academic eloquences in which factory-produced symbologies
mime passions – all the usual suspects (with academics
being highest on the suspecking order).

Why should a poet do what a machine can do better?
You can talk endlessly without danger of being usurped
if you aren't there to begin with. Let your fingers
do the gagging, let your machinery to the talking.
(Let the lingerers do the gawking?)

And all this, perhaps, is MY machinery. You've been fooled
(poor, plastic you, extruded from my pronoun machine)
into thinking someone is here. Thank you for touring
my Turing Machine.

No, you haven't been fooled. I am here (I tell myself).
You are here (I tell myself?). I will take a walk now and
notice things. (Since my fingers won't do the walking,
I carry them along on our walk.)

("Let your fingers do the walking" through YELLOW pages,
say the ads. If these words have lasted long enough to peer at you, my peer,
from yellowing paper, I've done well...but be gentle with me –
I'm brittle!)

I took a walk and noticed trees and houses.
Now here's the page, and scribble scribble scribble.
"Hello," I say, and "You" – good bait...no nibble.
The magnetism's gone. Glibness degausses
The pull of pronouns, presidents and spouses
Say something bold; puncture a hoary shibbol-
-Eth. Make something POP and fizzle – any squib'll.
Build huge and pregnant chords, like Richard Strauss's
In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; make smart talk,
Like cocktail chatter, urbane, arch and arty –
Fake knowing why you're here, and NEVER gawk
At the parade of tinsel words, bared breasts – let's PARTY!
[I don't know – whadda YOU wanna do, Marty?]
I think it's time to take a longer walk,
Touch toads and mossy trees, grow gnarled and warty.
(It's so...official! Words decked out in sonnets,
All my thoughts in fancy Easter bonnets:
"Today's a special day!" Some talk is poetry –
And does it take a special spot to grow a tree?)
[I think that I shall never never
Find on a page a God worth rever-
-Ing, yet forever I'll endeavor,
In the faith that I end never.
Quoth I, raving, "Ain't I clever!"
Never! More? But never the less,
in verse I'll strive to effer-the-vesce.]

Note: Stanza 2: "Let your fingers do the gagging" – mimics telephone company ads for the Yellow Pages: "Let your fingers do the walking."

Stanza 3: "Thank you for touring my Turing machine." Alan Turing, British cryptographer (known for his work in World War II at decoding enemy transmissions) postulated a machine that could pass for human (as poetry machinery sometimes masquerades as a human voice). Turing had the idea of testing such machines by putting them behind black curtains (or some enclosure), having people address questions to them and receive back (in some form) answers, then see if they could detect the answers were coming from a machine.

The last section above begins with a sonnet (which should end at the line "I think it's time to take a longer walk", but keeps going, still, more or less, in sonnet format, for another 5 lines to become more meander than walk, then shifts (in brackets) to 4-beat lines (tetrameter), mimicking Joyce Kilmer's "I think that I shall never see/A poem as lovely as a tree", then slips into Poe's "The Raven" and, given the temptations to subside in a torrent of gibberish, ends rather well, I think.

The sonnet's theme has to do with being there in order to communicate, and one way to get oneself there (here) in present time is to take a walk, look at things, touch things. In my overstuffed sonnet, I didn't take a long enough walk, apparently, because trying to create big effects on the page is like pretending to enjoy a boring, incomprehensible party. It also deals with one of the stumbling blocks (or writers' blocks), the idea that specialness must be discovered beyond whatever specialness we can create. I chose to abuse the sonnet form here (burst it open at the end, like the effervescence of champagne popping the cork) because its strict form is, for some, a machine for imposing specialness.

Early on, you think someone will teach you to write great poems.
You think someone knows how it's done, knows what you
should be writing. You just have to find the right someone –
teacher, poet – the one who knows all about what you
should be writing. It's all known. What have thousands
(or billions?) of years of fancy talking been for
if not to figure out what you should write?
But the page before you is blank.

You think, "I don't need someone to tell me how to write.
I just need to say what I have to say."
You think you must have something to say, because,
after all, you have experience of a rich world
full of Mommy and Daddy and trees and houses
and cars and your first fuck and someone dear
who died and isn't war a nasty thing and your despair
about how all this has already been said –
O, you have so much to say, it's all right here,
but the page is blank.

[How odd, the idea you must have something to say
before you can say something. Saying is an action.
You don't have to have in order to do. Having comes
from doing, not the other way round. Do you have to have
something to hello in order to say hello? Do you have to
have something to walk in order to walk? Or can you
walk a world into existence? Hello a friend into being?]

But at least the world is here, full of itself, full of people
and books and things to see, so you can look at it,
touch it, taste it, share its pungency (sorry about the pun, gents) --
how simple, it's all here for you, blue and green; it keeps
puffing up brand new cloud shapes every day. (Such a
talented world! Like a kindly uncle entertaining us by
blowing smoke rings.) (Is he coughing? What did he
die of years later?) How convenient! The world clearly
has things to say. But the page is blaring blankness.

The horrible truth is (someone is insisting), you have
something to say when you create something to say, and it's
worse than that: First you have to overcome the illusion
that the world is already there, and create a world of your own
in which to say it – and people to say it to who will
understand it and respond. And that's not all – first
you have to create you! (I just created you, but, no,
sorry, that's just a decoy. I leave it to you
to create the real McCoy.)

*Note: In the last two lines, the "McCoy/decoy" chime amuses me. This poem is addressed To My Coy Reader to Make
Much of Him/Herself.*

4 a.m. car sounds.
As a child, hearing the train's
chuff-puff far...far

The endless going away
of a train in the night
of a child.

Sun beneath the shade,
bird chatter. Must have slept...
The train is gone.

The child tries to stay awake
all night to find out
about night.

Night's mystery
comes from sleep. You can't find it
by staying awake.

In the dark a child sleeps.
In me, a child sleeps.
Am I the dark?

A child, perfect
in sleep. How might a poem
sleep?

"God is in everything" --
low on the list of
ingredients?

"God is in everything?" --
efficacy claims not
FDA-approved.

"God is in everything" --
darkness and sleep are what
everything is in.

"To dream – aye, there's the rub."
The rub is from trying to erase
one's dreams.

Erasing so hard
the paper tears. I can see you
through the tears.

Note: The 3rd from last haiku is a twisty syllogism. If God is in everything, and everything is in darkness & sleep, then God is in darkness and sleep (perhaps forms or prototypes of blankness).

One of the nasty tricks I play on myself is to hold nothing back. I think “what a great line! Save it to end the poem, the book.” Then I say, fuck it! USE it! This forces me to come up with something better. A hundred times, by all the unwritten laws of climaxes and orgies, I’ve ended this book and kept going, wave after wave, throb after throb, like all-night passions in bodice-ripping, breast-and-ball-wringing romance novels or Wagner’s “Liebestod”: Isolde laments over dead Tristan so long that one heroic dead tenor – Melchior? (Lawrence, not the Mage) – is said to have interrupted her endlessly crescendoing aria with sonorous snores. (Long-lunged was her longing.)

(I suspect the tenor had to pee. In German a heroic tenor is a *Helden* Tenor. Heroically, he held it in.)

However, as Sgt. Pepper remarked, it’s getting very near the end. Of course, there are other books, other blank pages to fill. But our blanknesses are sufficient unto the day thereof? That can’t be right. Bartlett? Bartlett? (I say it twice because Bartlett is a pear.)

Anyway, here’s another trick: If I can be trivial awhile, you’ll forget the last big moment and be set up for the next big moment. But that’s a kind of holding back, which I never do, right? So let’s get profound, guys, and give this poem the kind of WHAMMO culmination I know you’re capable of (thereof?). (Would a diminutive female Bartlett be a Bartlettette?)

C’mon, guys, you can do it! Say something about the nothingness of nothing or do some funny voices that turn out to be voices of desperation. Bare-handed pluck a fiery gem from the furnace (hot potato! Tepid peut-etre) and juggle it (an arc of flashing facets) so fast it has no chance to burn your hand. That’s not bad, if I do say so myself. (Do you see anyone else around here? Hey, I’m talking to YOU. Do you see anyone else here? I don’t see anyone else here.)

Truth can burn. Poetry makes it – not safer (no oven mittens allowed) – but briefly, by putting rapid spin on it, makes it viewable, touchable.

Juggle faster, please. Be a blunt, passionate reader: Go for the juggler!

Note: Bartlett – a kind of pear, but also the author of a book of famous quotations where I could find the exact words of the Biblical passage about our troubles being sufficient unto the day.... “Peut-etre” sounds a bit like “potato”. It’s French for “perhaps”. “Do you see anyone else...” – Deniro in The Taxi Driver. “Juggler” – and, of course, jugular.

I juggle words, ideas. I feel like a nudist,
my balls always In the air. I just thought of that,
but having said it, I wonder if it isn't an ancient joke,
a bit of Internet flotsam. But here's one that HAS
to be mine, all mine – soon, sadly, yours: Zaftig ladies,
when they see me coming, flee, squealing “It's that
terrible jug leer!” I'm not so bad. I warn you when the worst
puns are coming. (That's like holding a flaming match
to my farts.) But I'm not bad, really – I just thought
of a far dumber pun, and I'm sparing you. But beware
of the puns. It's a juggle out there. (No, that wasn't
the really dumb one.)

That was me juggling ideas. Now for words (forward!)...
I mean, that was words. Now for ideas. Here's an idea
(or possibly a You-dea): Poet and reader as a juggling team –
I get the bowling pins, tables chairs, teacups, saucers
all circling through my hands, then toss them, one
at a time, to you, and you keep them in motion
between your two hands (or however many you have)
and occasionally a helpful toe or knee, and between
your hands and mine, a blur of ideas, only their arcs
of motion visible now, no way to attribute them
to you or me, nor could a bystander tell if,
when we stop, the table will be at the bottom
or rest on upside-down tea cups atop bowling pins
atop the elephant that stands on the back of the
tortoise...but what is this bystander business?

Toss him something – preferably a knife.
He's in or he's out. Only jugglers allowed here.
No standing by, of or for. If anything stands still here,
it and we may vanish.

[Can one vanish while moving? Certainly,
if one is feeling moving-vanish.]

[A groan is the sound of failing to vanish.]

Note: “Jug leer” – the leer of a man gazing at a zaftig woman's jugs (breasts). “It's a juggle out there” – that is, a jungle. The coinage “You-dea” substitutes “You” for “I” in “idea”. It also suggests a Zionist group for kids (in the U.S.) called “Young Judea”. (Does that still exist?), for which “You-dea” would be a good portmanteau. But I didn't try to work that in. I'm proud of my self-restraint. Perhaps I thought of Judaism because stanza one uses the Yiddish word “Zaftig” – soft and full-figured.

What stands still does vanish. What happens to matter at absolute zero (the temperature where all motion ceases)? I think the way small-particle physics encounters a continual shifting quality in matter, wherein what is treated as a particle turns out to be a wave and vice versa (like the duck that, looked at again, is seen to be rabbit – and vice versa) – I think this has to do with the way a particle is given persistence: It is created, created, created (no one creation, but a continual creating, but altered in some way with each creation. In a way, it IS change. In another way, it is IT. If you try to find a particle, you find a change (a wave flow). If you try to find a wave flow, you hit a particle. It's an endless tease, a persistence. In a more humdrum sense, stand around doing nothing and see how soon you become invisible.

After astonishing jugglers bounced acrobatically to the wings,
Ed Sullivan would introduce (next on this wonderful shew tonight)
Senor Wences. A very funny man who kept a poker face
throughout his act, but must have laughed a lot off stage –
he lived past age 100, like others in whom Hope
ever Burns. (He came, who knows Wences,
and went who knows whither – to wither? It ain't
neces-serely so.)

Senor Wences (whose real name, more Jewish
than Spanish, I've forgotten) spoke through and to a daffy
falsetto blonde girl (what WAS her name?) whom he created
before our very eyes by lip-sticking a pair of generous lips
around the "mouth" where thumb meets base
of index finger, then holding (somehow) a yellow wisp
of wig over the hand. And this mobile hand, as soon
as he spoke to it, would disappear, leaving only
(unforgettably) the gum-chewing, enthusiastic foil
to his suave, solemn, mustachioed straight man.

But some nights, he brought a more sinister friend, the Head
in the Box. The Box was about the size of a cigar box.
(It probably WAS a cigar box, but it wasn't
the cigar box that is sometimes just a cigar box.)
He'd flick open the lid and reveal to us
a dark-bearded head with glaring, Rasputin eyes.
Senor Wences would say to the head (rolling his Rs
with abrupt Yiddish accent), "Tsawwright?"
to which the head, moving only its mouth,
would reply, "TSAWRRRRRIGHT!" Senor Wences would
CLAP the box shut, and we would laugh and laugh.

What a fine book of poems that would be!
I open it to a blank page, and
there you are. I ask you, "Tsawright?"
You sing out, "TSAWRRIGHT!"
I clap the book shut.

The "you" would not be you, of course,
just my puppet, but somewhere,
someone laughing with me.

[Hell, if you prefer, you can laugh AT me.
I'll laugh at me too, so that you'll still be
laughing with me. Or you can simply
refuse to laugh. I'll refuse to laugh
with you.]

Note: Like Senor Wences, Bob Hope and George Burns also lived past their hundredth birthdays. Something about comedy? Wences suggests whence, which leads to whither and wither, but if he or his work live, he doesn't necessarily wither – neces-serely, because what withers grows sere. The part about the cigar box that is just a cigar box alludes to Freud's supposedly saying (to poopoo those who, calling themselves Freudians, too ardently sought sexual symbolism

in things) that “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” Freud may have said this in self-defense, not because his disciples were more symbol-happy than he, but because Freud liked to smoke cigars, and preferred not to consider his smoking a form of fellatio.

“Tsawright?” “Tsawright!” A brief Yiddishy conversation. Translation: “It’s all right with you?” “Yes, it’s all right with me!” Or “It’s all right?” “It’s all right!” But it’s SO much better in the original phony Yiddish. Actually, nothing is phony to a conglomeration like Yiddish. It consists of a combination of German, Hebrew and other languages, varying from locality to locality and incorporating as needed bits of Russian, Polish, Hungarian, English, etc. – a language by means of which Jews from a great variety of nations could converse – a hybrid or “lingua franca”. I never learned much of it, though my grandpa, who read his Yiddish newspapers every night, kept suggesting I should learn it, that it was the coming thing.

There were many Jews (lovers of Yiddish, which has it’s own literature, it’s own theater) who resented the Zionists who said that the new nation of Israel must make Hebrew its language. The dissenters felt that Yiddish was now the language of and for Jews, and a more modern language than Hebrew. Somewhere, no doubt, there are books about how Yiddish is still a flourishing language, perhaps journals of new Yiddish poetry, etc. What a lavish and abundant universe!

From time to time a poem comes to me.
I can see it coming a long way off, though,
at first, I may not recognize it as a poem.

From such a distance, it's hard to tell
what it is or even that it's moving, much less
moving towards me. Perhaps it's just a bump
on the horizon that I hadn't noticed before,
a rock or stump or pile of dead leaves.
Or, on a hot day, an illusion, a slight bend
in the horizon's arc caused by heat waves.

But look, it's bigger than it was a moment ago.
Yes, it's definitely coming towards me – collision course!
Is it a person? My old dog come to greet me,
leap up and lick my face again and again?
Trees from *Macbeth* gone astray? Hard to say –

it still has no form I can perceive, though
when I squint, it takes on many forms,
shifting among them as the intensity of squint
varies. I know it is coming to me, because
if I try to move out of its path, it changes course
accordingly.

It is huge now, towering, only a block away,
yet still vague, hard to delineate – is that a face
or the pattern of veins on a dead leaf or breasts,
navel and bearded groin of a giant nude...?

No, it's much smaller than I thought, must have been
near me from the start, the distance an illusion –
no more than a gnat dive-bombing my eyeball,
almost part of the eye's moist surface...it's...
it's here, suddenly is huge again. It has
come to me. I still can't make out its form;

but from within it, I can see you
with renewed clarity.

(I guess this is a poem that came to me.
Now I wish it would come to. C'mon, poem,
Wake up!)

(Reminds me of the story of the six blind poets
and the simile.)

Note: Stanza 3: "Trees from MacBeth gone astray" – at the end of MacBeth a forest (used as mobile camouflage by an army) moves. This fulfills part of a prophecy, that no one will kill MacBeth until a certain forest moves from a certain place to a certain place. But perhaps some of those trees are still wandering.

Stanza 5: "Only a block away" – perhaps writer's block?

The last stanza alludes to the story of the six blind men and the elephant, each describing the elephant he touched ("like a snake" says the one who touched the trunk, etc.).

Lucky the page is blank, or I'd never be able to see
the poem coming. Here on the wide-open, sunlit prairie
of page, no rocks or trees or purple prose to hide a poem.
If the page were vined and interlaced with words,
a jungle of serifs, ascenders and descenders and suspenders
that snap in one's face, monstrous hungry
significances looming between the lines – on such a page,
you might be ambushed by a poem. It might pounce
on you from behind or drop onto you from above, its sharp
consonants sinking in, its soft vowels tightening,
squeezing your rib cage before you'd had time to think:
“This is IT – a poem!”

Some poems are lithe, subtle, sinuous. You don't hear
the thud-thud of the's, the crackle of wit –
the sudden silence of a thousand shrieking similes
and chattering iambs as they sense the shadowy presence
of a fierce, swift appetite that can devour them all
unless they can evade its attention. (I hope it enjoys
all the fat, juicy adjectives I've been dropping to distract it.)

“What is it?” one of us asks, voice cracking.
“Shh!” We stand very still, wondering what
will emerge from which shadow, wishing we were
on the next blank page already, anywhere but here
in the depths of an inky maze of possible outcomes
that could lead us anywhere or nowhere.

Sometimes the silence is only silence. Sometimes
the shadows are only our own. Sometimes the poem
ended at the start: “Lucky the page is blank,
or I'd never be able to see the poem coming.”
Now that's a poem. The rest of this page
is an attempt to make something out of
what is already complete. Sometimes the poet can't see
that the poem (like the swift sword that has killed a man
who is still standing there, not yet realizing
he has been killed) has already come and gone.

Note: Stanza 1: In printers' parlance, letters like “do” and “b”, with extensions upwards, are called ascenders, while letters like “g” and “p” with extensions downward, are called descenders. “Suspenders” (not part of printer talk, that I know of) might be ellipses: “...”, but mainly they are elastic gizmos that might snap back on one like the branches one moves past in a jungle.

I like this one. It's true, I said it all in the first two lines, but it's also true (for me, as one reader) that the first two lines become more meaningful by my having taken many more lines to re-discover them.

Here are some words that don't look much like poetry.

Perhaps with repetition...?

Here are some words that don't look much like poetry.

Here are some words that [still] don't look much like poetry.

Perhaps some silly puns?

Here are some words that don't look much like poetry.

I think that I shall never never know a tree

That's not endorsed by critic or by Noetry.

(You know – a Noetry Public.)

Maybe a twist of thought?

Here are some words that don't look much like poetry.

But then poetry never does look like poetry.

There's one thing that no one ever expects:

Poetry!...and also the Spanish Inquisition, so, OK,

there are TWO things no one ever expects: Poetry and

the Spanish Inquisition...and a bright red autumn leaf

lifting off the branch, a butterfly! (Or just the bright red –

isn't that surprise enough?) Anyway, haiku poets seem

endlessly surprised at petals and leaves that turn out to be

butterflies. OK, that's three things or four. And counting.

Perhaps this is ALL poetry; call it "perhaps poetry,"

or, as the French so succinctly put it, *Peut-etre*.

OK, five things: All those others and this turning out to be,
not only a poem, but a passionate, heart-rending experience.

What spans the gap between margins? The span

is ink!...who is it, John? Aha! It's the Spanish

Inquisition! It will torment you until you can see

that this is poetry. Here are some words that don't

look much like poetry. Too plain (Dactylic Tetrameter

being no match for *Iambasaurus Rex*). Plain words try to hide

on the blank page, for what could be plainer than a blank terrain?

The Inquisition will torture it to hectic semblance of life –

hours on the rack will make us visionaries. Terrain is pain;

mainly plain, defying our most ardent prayries.

Here are words that don't look much like poetry. Line

by roaring lion or boring rain on the pane where the

lion has lain tonight (a way of whimsy)

If you hate forced puns passionately, move with me

to the next, more serious page. It will be a passionate

moving experience.

Note: A few of the strained puns above: "Spanish Inquisition" leads to "The Span is ink!...who is it, John." (Well, if you say it fast....) The first line above is dactylic tetrameter: HERE are some WORDS that don't LOOK much like PO-e-try – no match for iambic (which we're more accustomed to recognize as poetic beat). I refer to iambic as Iambasaurus Rex because, like Tyrannosaurus Rex, Iambic rules (in English poetry).

I seem to recall having something to say in all this. The crux, I suppose, is the idea that poetry need not (and often does not) look like poetry. A great deal of poetry looks like what people expect poetry to look like, but what lasts in poetry, music, painting, any art form, is often work that, when it appeared, was dismissed as beyond the pale. So poetry, like Monte Python's Spanish Inquisition", is what no one expects, and this poem does repeatedly interrupt itself with perhaps unexpected and tortuous (like Inquisition theological subtleties designed to entrap) word play. Here the role of the poet is Inquisition torturer, tickling or goading some truth or inanity out of blankness. Perhaps I meant "hours on the rack" to allude to the book racks for poetry journals in some book stores. I don't think I did, but if it does that for you, I'll take the credit for it. There's also the play on "hide in plain sight" and the page, in its blankness, being plain, and, if "plain sight", perhaps the opposite of visionary (having special sight).

"Mainly plain" – shades of My Fair Lady and the rain in Spain. "A way of whimsy" suggests the song "Wimoweh" in which "The lion sleeps tonight". Lions snuck into the poem in the guise of lines.

I haven't many pages left in this book. I hope
I haven't said it all already. I hope we aren't
an old married couple, saying the usual things
to each other over the breakfast table (pass the
bacon, please). Poetry must be all honeymoon
or else despair that the honeymoon is over,
perhaps never happened. I like it to be all honeymoon,
pretend I've never seen you naked before, pretend
I'm touching you for the first time, say, "What if your
parents come home early, and find us like this" – though
both our parents died decades ago. (We are fat orphans
in our 60s, who'd've thought it would be so much fun?)

(Honeymoon, hell – naive urchin is ever wilder,
touching you and saying, "Wow! Where's your penis?")

Sorry, Reader, I've shifted "We's" on you. (What fun
to make the bed springs wheeze, our own breath yet
unconstrained, a soft sigh, both prefix and sigh
to our long-sighing lust.) That's the thing about metaphors –
it's so easy to slip into reality, for I have a real marriage
besides ours on the page ("This time YOU be the Mommy
and I'll be the Daddy!" "No, I get to be the cowboy-Indian-
Detective. You be the crook.") (Why shouldn't a cowboy
be an Indian who is also a detective? So I reasoned
as a child. I wanted to have – or be – it all.)

"Who is this 'we'?" a poetry workshop friend asks,
always trying to make me earn every pronoun. And
isn't that the way of honeymoons? Each whispered
"You! You! You!" is a brand new creation, each you
stepping naked from the opened fluted shell of each
opalescent instant? Each I, each eye made newly
by the vision of each you? It isn't what we say
across a table or page. It's me being here with you
and you with me and our knowing we are here
with each other, even HERE, where we have no
bodies to mark our places.

[But, I tell my workshop friend, I get my pronouns wholesale –
got a great deal on used Listerine commercials – "He said that
she said that he had halitosis...". Some great deals out there
on E-Bay, He-Bay and She-Bay. Tell the Queen of She-Bay
I sent you.]

Note: It IS confusing. The "we" seems at first to be me and the reader (you), but the two 60-plus-year-old orphans are me and my wife (Pam), but then, as of this writing, she's about one third of the people (besides me) who have read all of this book, though I completed it more than a year ago, so perhaps she is the other member of both these we's -- or weewee, or Oui Oui! But if a million readers join this Whee, I'll make room in my infinitely extendable metaphorical bed. In stanza 3, the plays on "sough" (the sigh of wind or breath) assume it is pronounced "suff" (one of the two pronunciations pronounced acceptable by Webster). "Long-soughing lust" suggests, I hope, "long-suffering lust" as well as the hard breathing of lovers approaching climax – and wind scattering seed from trees.

What could be more masculine than the pen (penis
circumcised by cutting off its is, but obviously it is 'is)? --
pent emblem of my always being glad to see you.
What could be more eternally feminine
than the ever-receptive blank page? There I spill
my ink out in mask-you-lines and ask-you-lines,
scudding over the pale surface, afloat on cloud feminine.

Appropriately, my current incarnation (a word that seems
to describe the United States, which has as many cars
as humans – an in-car-nation) – this body battered
its blunt head out of mother into ethereal other on April 4;
that is, I first sucked air as an Aries, the ram that Daddy's ding-dong
popped (shebop shebop) into rama-Mama's ding-dong – and wouldn't
AirEEZE be a good name for a deodorant?
How I do roll on! (If I sucked air five times, would I be,
pardon my French, more succinct?) And I'd like to clear
the air: If I am Ram, then YOU, blank page or lover or
Reader (if the you fits, wear it) – you must be Ewe!
(Why be sheepish about it?)

I'm a battering ram, a dithering ram (hear here my
dizzy dithyramps!), and Ewe are the rampage I'm on
as, randomly, I access your memories and mammaries,

and yet, I too am ewe (that's funny, I don't LOOK ewish),
for each of my assertions is followed by "but"
(or qualification), homonym (not honeymoon) of butt, the act
of horny ram, the pride of dewy ewe – oh to be you with
the fortuity of two T's (B-U-T-T)! "But" is spelled
B-U-T, pronounced "beauty", another qualification,
which, in females, is often equated to tits (I with two T's
or Tutti's most Frutti) and ass – or butt (your choice,
esses or tease (fanny tease, fanny tease – all is fanny tease,
so saith ecclesi-ass-tease), but always, like breasts or buns,
always double, though called quadruple (hind-quarters) --
because they droop? When a woman approaches,
I am greeted by her tatas, but the butt waves "Ta ta!" --
tits and ass, another assertion followed by a butt.

You see where this is leading, don't you? I hope
SOMEONE does. I'm just following the words.
(Puns lead me to Joycean happy funnies.)
Can I be you with two T's and tea for two?
Am I ram? Am I ewe? Am I I? We are so many!
Who needs ewes and rams when I can count myself
to fall asleep? And if that fails, I can always count
on poetry.

Notes: If you don't care for puns, this is a page you should have skipped or maybe already did.

Line 2: "But obviously it is 'is" – that is, it is HIS, the Cockney his ('is) (and "Cockney" is appropriate in this context

[not that cocks have knees, but they are also called “joints”, so I say the English language is asking for it]), but also playing on Clinton’s line about what is is. Later in stanza 1: “Mask-you-lines” (masculines), “ask-you-lines” (the lines, usually questions, used to start a seduction), “cloud feminine” contains “cloud nine”.

Stanza 2 reeks puns, a few of which may be obscure: The parental sex description borrows from the old doo-wop love song lyrics (mentioned in a previous note) that include “Who put the bob in bob shebob shebob, who put the ram in ramalama dingdong”. My being “Aries” is what suggests that “AirEEZE” would be a good brand name for a deodorant, and that leads to “How I do roll on” – that is, roll-on deodorant. AirEEZE (the idea that it’s easy to breath fresh, fragrant air) leads to sucking air five times to be succinct (a word that suggests suck + the French word for 5, cinque. The ram/ewe/you/sheepish stuff should be obvious (and I hope you are ram/ewes’d by it).

In stanza three, the transition from rams and ewes to “randomly accessing” memories is the word “rampage”, which suggests a computer’s RAM page, where “RAM” means Random-Access Memory, and may be “paged” (something I used to know the meaning of...). A “dithyramb” is not a dizzy ram with a lisp, but a wildly emotional song or speech. And perhaps another word haunts it here: Ditheism (belief in two Gods), since while it is usual for poets to deify the poet, it is rarer that one of us deifies also the reader. (Do I?) One thing a dithyramb is not is a pithy ram.

(I see I should have brought Cupid and his bow into these poems, since I make plays on you, U and ewe. If Cupid’s arrows are made of yew, I could extend the play in various directions. Some other lifetime.)

In stanza 5 the pun plot thickens (who’d of thunk it possible!), though maintaining throughout (I hope) two or three hard-to-dredge-up lines of linear logic. I claim to be ewe (that is, the recipient of my poetry, or a female) because I, too, am followed (in my assertions) by a but (butt), which suggests both the male aggression (butting) and the ewe’s reception point (butt), and the “but” that precedes my qualifications is spelled “b-u-t”, which, said quickly, is “beauty”, which is a feminine qualification (using “qualification” in a different sense). (Something like that.) Then there are the two t’s (or tutti’s -- all’s) of butt, which lead to a brief essay on double letters and doubled body parts and some that are quadruple (hind QUARTERS), the “druple” suggesting parts that droop. In the last line of this stanza, the approaching tits (for which one slang term is “tatas”) are the assertion. The departing butt waggles “ta ta” or “so long” (and that does lengthen me so!); thus, the butt is the qualification following the assertion – in both senses of qualification. There’s probably more to this stanza. I hope so, or why should you care? Further exegesis is left to, my Dear Reader, ewe.

In the last stanza, “Joycean Happy Funnies” refers to Joycean epiphanies. James Joyce labels the moments of realization towards which he tries to move his readers “epiphanies”. Epiphany means a showing forth, an appearance or manifestation of God, etc. (It has a more specific meaning in Christianity.) I prefer revelations that are happy and funny. (I usually read the funnies before the headlines.) The next line is a slight extension of a line in the old song, “Tea for Two”. We move from the multiplicity of beings contained in each of us (and in our surprisingly punful words) to the idea that there’s no need to count sheep (rams and ewes) to put myself to sleep, since there are plenty of me’s I can count, and if that fails, poems like mine will do the trick.

Though these poems keep ME up late. But they may work better for you. If my poetry can spare you the sleep nostrums of the pharmaceutical industry, I’ll feel my job’s well done. How can you get ‘em back on the Pharm, once they’ve seen “Blank Pages”?

Homonym – the sound of oral sex, or the word “honeymoon” as spoken by the provider of oral sex during that act, as in, “OOMPH! Va homonym if ofer!”) Other terms a poet should know: Antonym (incest with his aunt on top, one form of Synonym)’ Synonym – see above; also a dyslexic flavor associated with buns; Metaphor: archaic form of *deja vu* (as in “Haven’t we met afore?”) --

I don’t like where this isn’t going. Why am I not telling you about the obvious blanknesses in my life, such as the deaths of my mother, grandparents, father, pets? The waste of two marriages, the lost friendships, generation gaps, lost wars, lost species? I seem to have lost loss.

Every poet worth his salt tears has a poem where he picks up an object (comb, figurine, baseball mitt, screwdriver) once dear to dead Mom or Pop and broods over mortality, the loss of a presence so absent, yet achingly present – a trap for attention,

the escape from which (albeit no escape at all) is both craved and rued, as conveyed by something poetic about ducks on a pond fighting for tossed bits of bread or a wilted flower or a dying sun, and that, too, will be something else; for example, the fighting ducks will be the voices in his head that claim to be he, FIERCE ducks like the fragments of half-remembered voices competing to devour “...the stale crumbling loaf of my grief.” Well, that, but leaner, better said –

they do it so well, these poets. What can I add to the great body (va va **Voom!**) of Modern Poetry About Loss? Only this: Before I decided to dispense with the elegiac voices, eager to devour me, I first decided to dispense with loss. I decided I could have those experiences or not. I decided why bother? If ever I crave that beautiful sadness, I can always set a bottle on the sand, then back away from it, watching it grow small (how can one GROW small?) with distance.... I decided, goodbye for now, Mom, Pop, old lovers, pets, friends. I decided no one dies, only bodies. I decided boohoo. I decided goodbye. I decided hello. I decide.

(Is God dead? I haven’t Decided yet.)

Note: I can’t seem to shake off (unfortunate expression in this context) Monica Lewinski. In stanza 1, “Va homonym if ofer!” – my idea of the way “The honeymoon is over” might sound if spoken by a lady with her mouth full (these particular words seeming more likely to be spoken, if any, in such situations, than sweet nothings). “Antonym” or Aunt on him. “Synonym” or sin on him. “Dyslexic flavor” because of the “nym” in “Synonym instead of the “myn” needed to make it sound like cinnamon.

The poem or poems of loss described above are based on no one poem or poet, just my sense of a pandemic mood in poetry. It is perhaps related to what Lorca calls “duende”, especially if one weeps passionate blood-tears over it. I don’t call it and it doesn’t call me, not often. The “va va Voom!” in stanza five heralds (like “TADA!”) the entry of into my modest poem of “Modern Poetry About Loss”, but also is the drummer’s naughty way of accenting the appearance of a “great body” (the “great body...of Modern Poetry about loss).

I'm really a VERY boring poet. Not only do I have no scars to show you, no war stories, no losses to speak of, especially to speak of (and besides, Pam shall not be lost, no, Pam shall not be lost). Also I have no regrets – as you may have guessed from all the stupid puns I have NOT edited out of this work...play... Really, I'm loafing here. It's my stale, crumbling loaf. Maybe I'll have regrets when I grow up. Give me time. I'm just 62 and a half – going on 63, and how I do go on! (He, randomly, ran dumbly on.) Also I don't believe any of us ever die (we don't get off that easy; and I hear some never get off at all). And I don't believe in mysteries or complexities; that is, they are fun to contrive and resolve, but not daunting.

For example, biology (“The Mystery of the Human Brain!”) and astronomy, with its billions and billions; string theory, with its multi-dimensional dementia; any science that only 12 people understand (this is novel: to create a language that is born unspeakable, stillborn extinct).

I won't say all these vast complexities are bunk, nor the critics' analyses (I adore them) of how any poem worth its weight in reader's attention beams gets from where it starts to where it ends: The analysis will always fall short of the poem's complexity, because the poem's complexity is simple. How simple to pull the plug from a tub full of complexly agitated water. How easily you just now (when you read “tub full of agitated water”) created your own instant and complex picture or concept of agitated water! Biology! What a maze of cellular and sub-cellular interactions! Tell me about folding proteins (or Protean pre-teens) or what an enzyme does (junior officer on a ship, right?) or a hormone (or a whore's hoarse moan) or a neuron (not the old Ron!) – quick! Tell me!

And yet, this is how we hide from ourselves (as our hands rapidly shuffle life beneath hard shells) how simply we endow life – with a thought, a simple thought at that, many such thoughts (“goodbye” or “hello” or “Aren't you something!” or “Good boy!” will do) -- one thought gives us a world of life, to which we add complexity enough to conceal the thoughts that ignite life, not wanting to know how easily a thought can undo what a thought has endowed.

Notes: In stanza 1, the “Pam shall not be lost” refers to Sam Johnson's speaking of a man who shoots cats, then stating solemnly that Hodge (his cat) shall not be shot, no Hodge shall not be shot. Pam is my wife, not my cat. My current cat is Gypsy, who also shall not be lost. The “billions and billions” of astronomy refer, not to its budget, but to Carl Sagan's televised raptures about the billions of stars -- as many as my body has cells? One orgasm is a small galaxy -- no doubt a milky way (not the candy bar. [Is that what “Mr. Goodbar” means?]). In stanza 3, the folding of proteins have been in the news lately, as one sort of protein origami is blamed for Mad-Cow disease. Pre-teens are protean in the sense that adolescence hardens the personality, limiting possibility (or so it seems for many teens). Pre-teens, thus, seem relatively

flexible. "Enzyme" suggests "ensign." In stanza 4, the shuffling of life beneath hard "shalls" (social and other requirements) suggests the old shell game (which shell covers the pea?), keeping it a secret from ourselves how much the things that determine the forms our lives take are our own thoughts, our own decisions. The idea is that simplicity becomes complexity when we conceal from ourselves the sources of things.

The summary of our the motive for our usual complex approach to life, "not wanting to know how easily a thought can undo what a thought has endowed", is pretty good for a phrase devoid of puns.

From a chair (more like a tilted, cushioned basket)
in our living room, the wide-eyed, rosy-cheeked face
of a big rag doll gazes up at me. Pam made it years ago,
used it as model to illustrate my poem, "The Doll's
Journey." I looked back at it one morning
(I was exercising, jogging in place, going nowhere,
the start of most stories), and it seemed to look back at me,
undeniably looked back at me, though, of course, I knew
it could not look, only reflect my looking – and yet,

with its blank earnestness, perhaps enlivened
by almost imperceptible shifts of light and shadow,
it looked at me – perhaps enlivened further
by the way an expression changes from sheer
persistence, glance becoming stare becoming
a sinister blankness, a concealed leer; and, having caught
a few TV minutes of a "Chuckie" movie (in which
an evil doll leaps on people and strangles them),
I was suddenly disinclined to let the doll
out of my sight, to turn my back on her...it.

So, feeling foolish, I DID turn my back.
Nothing happened, except that the sense of a living presence
behind my back grew stronger. And ever since,
if I look at that doll, I can, with a thought
as simple and as powerful as pity for a dying pet
or love of an old easy chair or of a woman
I've just seen across the room at a party or
fear when waking up to a fan's shadows
spinning across the ceiling – that quickly
I can make that doll live for me.

And if I began, like a child, to talk to her,
give her a name, stroke her hair, begin to hear
her replying to my words, then to my thoughts...?
She'd be alive for me. And if she became alive
for others, if those who visited me spoke to her,
paid her courteous attentions – at first just
humoring me, but we all love pets, mascots,
good old Raggedy Ann...

Note: Pursuing the theme of the previous poem (how easily thought endows life), I approach the question: When a child's doll is alive for her to the extent that she weeps for its fancied(?) sufferings, is the doll alive? As alive for her as she considers it alive for her? If we all considered it alive, would it become alive? Would it, for example, speak to us? Would words on a page? (Which, since the page is from wood pulp, mostly, is like saying "Would wood?") [If we loved the page enough; that is, if wooed, wood would.]

And why shouldn't a doll (or a poem or a complex pile of blood, bones and meat) live? You've heard of objects doing things that objects can't do – Poltergeist phenomena. I think that you and I, spiritual beings, attach ourselves to bodies (though the bodies themselves have, even when we leave them – during comas, for example, – some animal-cellular life of their own, but not speech, laughter, love, hate, alertness, positive willed motion) – I think we have an addiction to bodies much as fans can't get enough of their favorite players:

Bodies and biology seem to be the only game in town. They can be made to move and talk and play catch and exchange views of the weather, to touch, taste, see – not that we can't relearn to do these things without bodies, but bodies are ready-made sensation amplifiers (rigged to detect threats of heat, cold, toxins, predators, whatever endangers their intricate systems). So, as soon as we drop one body, we pick up another, almost involuntarily, drifting from deathbed (what's that shriveled or waxen thing down there?) to maternity ward in a daze, an oblivion, pain of death merging with the fiercer pangs of birth.

In so-called primitive nations, people remember more because the surroundings to which they orient, life after life, are relatively unchanging, and because, so often, beings remain within the family, mother expected to produce a baby just in time to give dying Grandpa his new body. They recognize him, give him his old name, and one day he remembers (without having been told – for Grandpa told no one) where grandpa buried (between roots of a big tree) a leather bag filled with potent relics, teeth of beasts, shiny stones, spicy powders in pouches, tiny figures of men, women, animals that Grandpa carved from soft stone....

The point is, Reader, we go where there are others like ourselves, where we can find recognition, things to do, people to help. What might we become in a world where dolls were dearly loved? Or machines? One day, God's or a child's love might animate a doll. A puppet might remember borrowed motion and improve it. (I hope I don't die while laboring over this damned computer....)

Note: The idea in the last stanza is, we go where we're wanted and validated. If the world rewards doctors, more people become doctors. If Mama always loves most the sickest child, the other children, wanting attention, get sick. In a world that loved dolls or was obsessed with computers, paying far more attention to computers than to other humans, some of us might find it an attractive idea to become a doll or a computer. Some (called insane) do become objects while yet in or near their human bodies. But what about a spiritual being deciding to BE a computer. (Or, as the last line suggests, dying mid-obsession with a computer and finding it hard, as a spirit, to extricate oneself – haunting it.

Life, like a puppy (bow wow!), rushes to be where the attention is,
pops into our regard, nuzzles into our hands, finds our attention
and fills it up with tail thumps, imploring eyes and hot panting.
If you put your attention on something, life will become it.
Doesn't your computer seem, at times, to be inhabited
by a perverse spirit? How is it a man who cherishes a car
has no "car problems," until one day he lets someone
"not good with machines" borrow the car; and though this driver
does nothing really wrong – just considers the car a machine,
is a bit abrupt, like a heavy-handed lover who thinks women
are hunks of meat, doesn't call the car "Baby" and stroke
its shiny fender, its leather seats, lovingly – yet,
hardly has he turned the key when the car begins
to cough and choke and refuse to run.

Mechanics fix what they can fix, but it won't run right –
until returned to its owner, who puts up a good front –
raises the hood, peers, tinkers a bit – so that we may not notice
how, the instant he touches the car, it shimmers.

Of course, when he first turns the key, it will sputter
and kill – that's a reproach: "Why did you abandon me
to that Bozo!" He understands. He pats the steering wheel,
says, "It's OK, Baby. I'm sorry. I still love you. Now
be good," and next try, she starts up, sleek as silk.

Life IS the pathetic fallacy. It is what we are and what
we endow. Don't know much about bioloGEE...
but I can make this hand fill pages with poems, or
tweak dozens of tiny muscles into a smile as broad
as this simile; and, Reader, though I've invented you,
you are almost as real and alive as I am,

and one day (like Pinocchio become a real boy)
you will greet me in an unfamiliar (to me)
genuine human body – "Aren't you the guy
who wrote about blank pages?" – and
there you'll be, with your own thoughts,
dreams, loved ones, creations – take a bow! WOW!

Note: The "pathetic fallacy" is a label in literary criticism for the attribution of human feelings to trees, objects, etc. Instead of saying "I felt sad", the poet says that "the wind moaned in the trees." While trite uses of this device are indeed pathetic or bathetic, the idea that it's a fallacy to consider that things can be endowed with our more powerful feelings – that idea I call the Apathetic Fallacy, the idea that when our thoughts attribute feelings to things, the things don't "really" feel anything. If you've ever seen what I describe above (the return of the emotionally abused car) you will probably agree that we can endow things with feelings, much as we endow these humanoid bodies with feelings. Or did you have it the other way around – that our bodies endow us with feelings? They do, somewhat, I think. After all, they have a rudimentary life of their own, even when we leave them -- in comas or in death, when hair and nails and some other cells persist for a time. But we are as alive as WE create our emotions and dreams, and our emotional "horse power", before we drug or otherwise drown ourselves in apathy, easily overrides the body's allegedly powerful passions. If you didn't add your dreams to the body's spark of lust (and attribute your contribution to the body), that spark would vanish, a firefly to your sun. "Don't know much about bioloGEE" – line from a pop song from a few decades ago. The singer doesn't know histoREE or bioloGEE, all he knows is that he loves you, isn't that wonderful!

I don't mean to spook you, but look around:
Everything you can see or touch or imagine is alive.
If the doll's blank innocence (avidity?) evoked evil,
it's because I didn't want the doll to have the life
I'd given it. Life is a blank page: It turns against us
when we try to deny its infinite potential – which is,
of course, our own. Someone we love dies, and we can't
let go. (But, Poet, admit it, that flash of thought –
“Agony! Hey, I can use it in a poem!” just as reporters
are excited/repelled by the flash of thought, walking
past a school – what if it blew up right now? What a
story! And me across the street with my camera!”

Why do we tell ourselves such stories?)
We are unwilling to believe that it is we
who continue to endow with dearness the image
we cannot part with. When my first wife decided
to have me amputated from her life (perhaps
she still itches where I have not been for 37 years;
I'd tried to spare her by having been, for a long time,
a numbness), it took me more than a year
to become again a person, not a severed limb.

It was as if I'd learned a lesson: Grant life to anyone or anything
by admiration (as electric as Dr. Frankenstein's sparks),
and what I admire will fill up the sky, bathing the world
in brilliance. Then it will say, “I'm not your bed lamp,
to be flicked on and off at your convenience. I have
my own world to illuminate. Here's a book of matches,
a bit damp, but one or two may still ignite to help you
find your own way out of my life. Goodbye.”

And I reeled through an ash and cinder world,
unwilling to know it is I, only I, who have withdrawn from it
the loving regard that seeds blossoms and flutters the air with hints
of gold. [You may wonder how a discarded limb could reel –
really! – or what amputation has to do with turning lights
on and off. Well may you wonder. Yes, Reader, it's a (tada!)
Mixed Metaphor! One must go. Cast your vote today!
Just phone 1-800-BE-A-POET or visit www.Limb_or_Lamp.ugh.
You decide, Reader! Which grrrrEAT metaphor **MUST GO!**]

Years later my second wife required the same operation: I was
removed (like a cousin – twice removed). Once again I was separated
from what seemed the source of love and life. Then one day I wrote:

Driving my car,
I flash on how I'd touch your cheek
before kissing it; now I touch
the steering wheel that way
and feel a surge of tenderness
for my car.

This page seems blanker – more stubbornly blank, than the preceding page – something to do with knowing I have only three pages left to fill, three pages in which to tie everything together or blow everything apart, three pages in which to shock and awe you or tell you the secret of “having” or leave you obsessed with some indelible image that, like a seed crystal, extends glittering facets to transform this entire book into intricate, precise crystal, makes all its planes (aren’t pages planes? or are they fancies?) – makes them resonate, so that when you tink a fingernail against any part of this book, the whole of it produces a single, pure, rich, enduring sound.

Let it be MY sound, too, my own ringing “I Am,” or at least that of Dean Blehert – a fully evoked presence. If I can leave him here, confident of his ability to survive on these pages indefinitely, subsisting on crumbs of admiration, then I can move on, become a forest or the iridescent wing of a house fly or, maybe, a concert pianist (that is, I can become the iridescent wing of a concert pianist) or an ornate door knob, or I could spend a few centuries being the word “the” or the letter “e” or perhaps “p”, so that every time you encountered that word or letter, we could exchange greetings.

This page is now accepting my words less reluctantly. It has forgotten it’s very near the end. It doesn’t FEEL like “very near the end.” It feels like it could rattle on forever.

What if I’ve become “e” already? Yes, here I am! Look, Ma! And here again. E E E (hee hee hee!) Whee! Essence of Dean and Blehert. Body of Tee and Pee and Vee and Cee and me. Not a man of letters, but a letter of men, see! (But so common!) Now YOU be E, and I’ll be U! E can comb hair. U can hold water. I can be a spool on which to wind this endless thread of words.

(Now I’m the word “moreover”. Look, Ma! No ands!)

(I think I’m going into a comma.)

Note: Stanza 1: re pages as planes: If the flat page isn’t plane enough, you can tear it out and fold it into one (a paper airplane).

“E can comb hair. U can hold water. I can be a spool...” I am (as I hope you noticed) describing the shapes of the letters – E as a three-pronged comb, U as a cup, I as a spool (unless some idiot reprints this in a sans serif font, so that I becomes I with no spool-like extensions at top and bottom). All three letters approximate pronouns (E = he, U = you, I is or am I).

2nd from last line: “No ands!” – No hands. (Or No hands, hips or butts.) One would not need the word “and” if one were willing (as people who overuse the word “one” often are) to use “moreover” instead.

Only two pages left – unless I fill up the inside back cover...
Or start another book (“Volume II” – a second I)...or I could
spend years revising all this. No, no and no. This formlessness
has rules I make up as I go along – I mean along. (One
MEANS along, since meaning relies on agreement. One GOES
alone – usually locking the bathroom door. [Sorry, I’m trivializing
again.]) When you finish reading page 256 of this book
and close it (I know, it won’t be easy), you will be alone again.
But when were you NOT alone? After all, how many readers
will finish this book? Out of the days of yesteryear,
with a cloud of dust and a hearty “Hi Yo Silver, Awaaaaay!”
[“Get ‘um up, Scout”], you’ll leave these pages muttering
to one another, “Who WAS that masked man, anyway?”
“You fool, don’t you recognize the LONE READER!”

After all, this is recondite stuff, even for poetry. Poetry
seldom sees readers. Poems are like girls raised strictly,
never allowed to talk to boys, not sure what they are.
When my poems see a reader, they are in awe – the strangeness
of those eyes! Will he finger each line, while moving his lips,
as rumor has it? Will it tickle? They want to hide in the pantry.
They want to get gussied up in adjectives and fine conceits.
They wonder what it would be like to dance, to know how to dance.
They wonder, what is a reader like if he takes off all his
starchy attitudes and expectations – they blush at the thought,
but it won’t go away.

Yes, Dear Reader, you are exotic here, dangerous, forbidden
among these chaste thoughts. Be gentle; don’t even look at me
directly, no, don’t say anything (feel my fingers on your lips?),
because how could I know how to answer; better just leave...NO!
Take me with you! Love me! Ravish me! Tear off my covers!...
Oh, I didn’t say that, I didn’t say that, please leave. (Don’t listen
to me!)

I’m sorry, it’s just that we poems are so seldom visited
by readers. In fact, you’re the very first reader I’ve ever met.
You seem nice. I don’t know why Mom (a noted
critic and reviewer) warned me about you. She said you were
crass, stupid, that all readers want one thing and one thing
only (tee hee!) from a poem. You don’t seem that way...wait!
What are you doing?! Stop! O God, you’re touching! You’re
making me your own!

[Don’t believe a word of it. All poems are whores. They’ve
seen everything. They just say what they think will make
a reader feel good. The only virgin pages are blank.
You wanna hear this page fake an orgasm?....]

Notes: I hope among my readers are a few who recall “The Lone Ranger” and his horse, Silver, whom he always hiyo’d, while his trusty companion, Tonto, told his horse to “get’um up, Scout!” And at the end of each radio or TV episode, some idiot would ask “Who was that masked man, anyway?” and be told “Why he’s the LONE RANGER!”

[This page has been left blank intentionally.] No it hasn't.
I'm not that sort of poet. (What sort am I? I don't know –
I'm out of sorts.) Last, schmast! This is just another page,
and damned if I'll be daunted by numbers,
by the bathos of lastness. Besides, there's lots of page left.
Hercules and the tortoise could take forever to race
to the end of this page. Last is elastic. (I won't bore you
with foot-shaped lasts and finishing soles and other sole-heeling
ancient puns.) (See, there's still time to waste puns.) (Keep
whistling so the ghoulies don't get you!)

(But why am I writing smaller?) If I've done my job well,
you can get to the end of this page, this book, this whatever,
pretending you aren't moved, but you are, for even this
misshapen thing lives, and its end stirs you, simply because it is
an end: you find yourself drifting away from something,
becoming aware, as it grows dim with distance (on this planet,
it turns blue, like air-drenched mountains – hence, blue is our sad color) --
aware that its voice is still a little with you, that those diminishing
roof tops in the toy city beneath your plane hold lives (however
hectic and stupid) like your own. Anything ending
is everything else that has ever ended or will end (nothing
ever does, by the way), so there's always a need to blink
a few times and swallow. (Oh, all right, BE a tough guy!)

Yes, when you've finished this page (hey, what about this
word?) and close this book, it will dawn on you that something
has ended, that there was something, someone here, even
some part of you. You can pretend you're not moved, set this object
on a table or shelf, then, ten seconds or ten years later, open it
to page one or page 63 or any page and begin to read, and
there we'll be again, good as new.

(No animals, characters, poets or readers were harmed or killed off
during the making of this book. However, a few trees had their lives
shortened – or lengthened, depending on how long these lines live.)

I just paused to think of a killer ending (got to bring in blank pages,
got to "say it all"), something as good as Eckhart's "The eye with which
you see God is the eye with which God sees you." (Or vice versa?)
The page on which you create me is the page on which
I create you. Or I could dog-trot out a last lick of doggerel:

I'm not a sage,
A mage, heart's gauge.
I'm just a page,
Your glance my wage.

Not bad (could be worse? Say yes, or I'll do a worse one),
but we're running out of blankness. (How can one run out
of nothing?) What else is there to be said? I write.
I fill blank pages.
And you?

Note: In stanza 1, “Hercules and the tortoise” refers to one of Zeno’s paradoxes, wherein, though Hercules moves twice as fast as the tortoise, it takes him forever to catch up with the tortoise, who has a ten foot head start. (Look it up, see if you can spot the flawed logic.) And (re stanza 5) If you don’t already know him, look up Meister Eckhart (Johannes Eckhart, c. 1260-c.1328) too – tell him I sent you.

Also in stanza one, “I’m not that sort of poet” – is supposed to suggest a “nice girl’s” response to a proposition. Funny how a nice girl wants a proposal, but not a proposition. I suppose a bad girl is in favor of (pro) the positions, but not the poses. She wants the real thing.

One of the key points in this poem and in much that goes before is that our “real” emotions (e.g., of grief, betrayal, joy) are also gestures, though no less real emotions for being gestures. By “gestures,” here I mean that they are names we give to certain motions. They are significances we have learned to attach to mechanical situations. If you move with a poem for a long enough time, then moving away from that poem will involve grief, not because one is sad to be leaving the poem, but because leaving what one has to some extent been part of IS sadness. In other words, without further significance or definition of character, just the movie of a man alone on the beach with the camera first dwelling on him (regardless of whether he is handsome or ugly, pensive or cheerful, etc.), then slowly pulling away from him until he vanishes from view will convey sadness. It doesn’t “symbolize” sadness. It IS sadness. Emotions are lower harmonics of mechanics of viewpoint, what position in space we assume with respect to something, and the amount of force resisting or impelling changes of position. Similarly there are space-energy mechanics (easily described) to ridicule, betrayal, anger, etc. (Ridicule: Show someone something, then pull it away, then let him approach, then pull it away, then, while keeping it at a distance, point at him, smiling. The significance of the thing pulled away is irrelevant. It’s the motion.)

For all my protestations, above, that the last page is just another page, I did notice, as I wrote it, that I was writing smaller, as if anticipating having to crowd a great deal into the last page. Probably annotating this last page ruins it. After all, when the poem ends, that could be the end of me, but here I am again, annotating. How can I recover that fade out? I can’t. And how have YOU been?