FEET AT DAWN

*very juvenilia, 1966-1972 (between the ages of 17 and 22)*

Poems transcribed from the original manuscript,

but sometimes lightly emended, since I can't always help myself.

Or sometimes, transcribed in something closer to their form

as they appeared in the 1977 manuscript *Surface Noise*.

About my lack of fidelity to my original versions. In the mid 1980s, my manuscript called *Children and Foreigners* placed in the top three for the Virginia Prize for Poetry. (The winner was a top gun poet teaching in a top tier MFA program.) Poems from that unpublished MS featured few downright bad lines, but they'd be every bit as much revised if I chose to share them here. I revise to satisfy my evolving taste, which may or not be esthetically superior. With the juvenilia, my dissatisfactions with the craft are less debatable, and my general embarrassments are broader. Still, I've made an effort to be respectful to my earlier self: to revise the work to be slightly better versions of that alien guy's output, rather than mine now.

THE PHRASES GROW LIKE FLOWERS

The phrases blow and chatter on like flowers.

In Bonn, we slept at noon, on grass,

among the beads and sandals,

and the gowns puffed out like petals.

The phrases grow like flowers,

and have lives of their own:

rummagers among the senses,

rooted in a sudden turn of darkness.

In Avignon at midnight I heard

them stir across the river:

whispering to us from the shadows;

riding slowly on the wind's long lever.

In love, the phrases bled

and hung like shattered roses;

in times of too much mind,

inclined from rock.

The phrases grow, are tended,

and bring comfort;

they start from earth, and spread by air,

scattering their scent shimmer

where we bend to hunt it.

This floral that prospers and is sung;

this mint note spilt among the brambles.

Some musk of scandal:

the pen of my aunt

on the table of the gardener;

delicate entanglements in the rose arbour,

au clair de lune.

*My father made this the title poem of a chapbook of early poems he got my cousin Julian to put together in the 1990s, as he waited impatiently for me to come out with an official book. I've fiddled with it quite a bit over the years, mostly just to keep singing its song. Yet this looks to me much like the original version, except for the penultimate line and the word choices from "scattering…" to "musk." And I think I may have cut some stanzas.*

I USED TO THINK

I used to think there was a God,

and near the Land of Nod I would pray to him,

I would say to him,

"Dear God, will you help me to be a good boy,

And teach men not to destroy," and when I closed my eyes,

I saw him, regal and wise.

I used to think all love idyllic.

Well, how silly can you be—silly me.

I used to think I could meet Cupid.

Well, how stupid can you get,

Well, how wet.

I used to think life was filled with wonder

When I was younger, and it probably was—

Because

To small kids I see it all is, still.

But I now understand *you're*

Giving life grandeur.

Or not. And I'm not.

*My notebook note on this one says I wrote it when I was 17. I've cut the uselessly repetitious last line of the first two stanzas and tinkered with lines 1 and 4 of the third stanza.*

IN THE HALL OF MIRRORS

It is a day that smells of youth.

The elms stretch and yawn,

Letting the blue wander through their fingers

Like a lazy daydream.

It was winter

When thought came grinning like a Cheshire cat

Out of the huddled purrings, and the cat-choir horns,

And the smoke-tail stalkings of a London fog.

The first image.

It was winter when

Nose blanched against the back bus-window

I saw the fixed grin's sneer;

I heard that heavy breath;

Behind me, I watched a bodiless car

Contort, its headlights glaring through the fog.

Winter, when my mind began to work and shape.

But now the day smells again of youth.

I stretch and yawn,

Letting the sun blur through my brain

Like the thoughtless drift of sleep.

It is only afterwards

That I see that this, too,

Is an image from the Hall of Mirrors.

Even elms in the sun distort nowadays,

If you think hard enough.

*I wrote this when I was 18, and published it in the high school mag. I've left it pretty much alone. At some point, I think, I lightly revised a few lines late in the second stanza.*

MICK'S HAT

When people saw Mick's hat,

their adjectives double-took—

"The hat of Mick is big and black"

became, upon a turning back,

and on a second look:

"Fritter my wig,

but that's black and BIG!"

You could wander many a far bizaare bazaar in your quest for a hat

better than that.

When we saw a fair young maiden

walking down the street we

would gather right quick round the hat of Mick

and raise it, smiling sweetly.

We loved to raise Mick's hat.

The world could go to ruin and rack before you tracked down a hat big as that

You could backpack to Iraq and back shacking up with a yak and not track down a hat

black as that.

My hat is peaked and flat—

it's a little old little ole man's hat.

And sometimes people will stop and stare

to see it perched atop my hair,

and they'll say, "That's an old *little* man's hat."

But Mick's hat was big, and fat: fritter my wig

It was big!

Mick's hat came from Paris.

General de Gaulle might have sought out a hat

such as that for his Grand Parade.

See him root about the stalls,

with his snoot ashigh as Victoria Falls,

his disdain a great, rocky cascade.

But then he spies Mick's hat.

A smile crinkles his eyes;

splashes to the bridge of his nose;

rides, reels, keels, crashes, barrels his arms up into wings;

and he says «Oui.»

*A favorite light verse piece from my college years. There are photographs somewhere of each of us in our respective hats. Mick and I also once had a sweater competition, to see how many we could wear at one time. To classes, on a very cold winter day. My recollection is that he beat me, by something like 12 to 11.*

A MEETING

The aesthete with the sea's feet

was out walking waves.

Around a few careful drawlings and curlings

kicking up surf spray; singing.

He has three principal sets of eyes:

one to furrow out long shapes;

one to sing by;

the third, wet pools, franking their eyeprints

on the shore, on faces, on places.

The wet pools spotting her, he shifted

his shapes and followed,

hauling his seas behind him, wild

singing wing waves heaving over cliffs and fields.

*This was the first poem I published in a non-student publication.*

16-19

Those years were as painful

as it became to watch the dawn,

the day draining off the night

as words did me,

turning dusk

not there between the fingers.

Hiding my changes, walking with such a stoop

I bumped into the lampposts,

my eyes cast down at rainpools,

panning for their dust of stars to cry to,

hearing the night

fatten the small noise of me and swallow.

Knowing something was wrong,

but not that it was temporary.

Discovering the furnace of words,

and how its fire crumbed to ash—

bone-bits of the broken dawn

I was drained away into.

The ridiculous sun is obsessed

with its purges, and today

it makes me feel neither grown, nor whole, nor holy.

Today, I remember that sense of loss.

*Word. I still remember. There's a pen and ink doodle from around that time of a man lying stabbed and dying in the street. He has dipped a finger in his blood, not to write the name of his murderer, but to play tic-tac-toe. Such a ridiculous, awful age, and yet somehow so magnificent.*

PHOTOGRAPHS

The sky was waiting for me as I left the house.

She had her duskdress on, the deep blue one

with bluer clouds. The house may have done

something behind my back as it disappeared,

I don't know, I was no longer there.

Roads rolled out the journey for me, always

ready as I turned corners, grass was out,

performing its grassy duty, and finally

she was there, waiting to be collected.

She assured me the sky was always ready

for her too, and led me out to prove it. "There!"

she exclaimed in triumph, though I saw nothing

till I dismissed the front parlour with a few swings

of my legs. "Also," she said, pointing up, "it is

no *dress*, but the inside of an upturned teacup."

We walked to where the park would be waiting,

me eying the scenery suspiciously, fearing

further revelations. But she was peaceful enough—

smiling, singing, kissing a little.

Sitting under the trees, we talked, at intervals.

"Last year," she began, and told me things

I could not dispute. She flicked through her life

like a photograph album; I was in none of the scenes.

"The sky," I said, "is putting on her black magician's cloak,

and conjuring stars into the folds.

Let us let her bewitch us."  
"The stars," she replied, "are drops of milk in the teacup,

into which the night is pouring like coffee.

Let us join it in a cup." We rose.

Walking back, I did not tell her the lampposts

were rising at us like dinosaurs—

she would have changed them to something else.

Instead, when I was home, I wrote her a poem.

Conclusions, I drew them; metaphors, I stuck

them in like pins. "*This,* baby doll (I asserted),

is how you *are*." When we broke up

I sent it to her, as our obituary, and shared

copies with my friends, calling them photographs,

and labeling them, "Last Year."

*A note says this was written on October 17th, 1971. Very loosely based on a date with Laura Fenn, after picking her up at the orphanage, but I don't* much *recognize it as a portrait. Just for fun, Laura!*

PLACE DE LA CONCORDE

One midnight, one winter,

they landed here, a flock

of necks, and stillness.

*How your world,*

they whispered to the streetlamps,

*is overrun with predators!*

They froze: in waves

*les bagnoles, les buses, les camionettes*

roared, poured, snarled, prowled by.

And still they wait, their flesh

becoming stone, for Paris

to fall quiet. So that if

only for an hour, maybe, one

midnight, one winter, they may look—

and dip their heads—and cry,

*Awake! Awake!* across the tall spaces.

To shake the concrete from their wings;

and dance in the fountains.

*Was it my father who cut the original five stanza version of this poem from the journal it was printed in, and framed it? For years, it sat in that frame on my bedside table.*

PERHAPS A SOUPÇON MORE PEPPER

You couldn't do without me, could you, God?

If I didn't exist, you'd have to invent me.

So you did. Oh, you could have done it earlier,

you could have done it later, under another name,

in another place—and you probably will.

I've got this crazed itch *idée fixe* about the way

the world won't quite repeat itself. I feel we

must be sifting something. He has more than all

the time in the world; what is He trying to discover?

I pull the wastepaper basket over my head.

Is this the answer?

*This one too made it into a journal. What's more, it's actually a completely true story, although I can't remember if I placed that wastepaper basket on my head right way up or upside down, so that all the wastepaper cascaded over me. Honestly, I think I tried both ways, or if only one way, it was upside down. Either way, it doesn't seem to have been the answer God was sifting for.*

CATS

Cats should be stylised:

scratching and scratching at the dusking dusk—

it hurts.

With very little extra effort,

they could achieve discordant choral effects—

or satirise the United Nations,

bemoaning the unfair abandonments of the sun.

But it's no use suggesting this:

they just sort of scratch and scratch.

I hope I'm civilised:

climbing Ben Nevis, I would not use

a lift.

With a little extra effort

I would saunter up the

hummingly

hauntingly

hypnotical

escalator.

*There was a white ink on black paper drawing that went with this piece, of a cat taking the elevator up to the top of a mountain. The drawing may possibly have preceded the poem.*

BRUGES

Remember the night

when witches fished with broomsticks

in alleyways in Bruges,

swinging from cathedral bells

that mewled and mewled?

How the bristles whispered at our backs?

How we scurried through dark arches;

clattering down stone stairs.

Crowds danced underwater

at the evening markets;

lamps like eyes afloat in darkness

hung about the stalls.

Arms interlaced, hands at each other's waist,

turning and turning again to embrace,

even my spirit seemed to swim in yours,

even the mist of you

blew its strange, slow scented notes through mine.

Briefly, our colours running, as witches

cackled from their cathedral bells,

and a clung light furred the market lamps

into white cats, blackening and blackening the shadows.

*Thanks, Irene. I've never been quite as clueless again! And yet somehow we navigated it, briefly.*

SONNETS

II. The Sec. Comm. Girls *(after e.e. cummings)*

The Sec. Comm. girls who giggle from their desks

are irrepressible, or not as yet nubbed down.

This college, half-way to the world, in reach

of shelter, lets them out into the wet,

but spares them the worst of it for a while yet.

So I laugh with when they mock me as I teach,

if somewhat wanly Friday afternoon,

and trust they'll learn to type in arabesques.

The Sec. Comm. girls believe in Rock Hudson,

preserved for them on film, the bloke next door,

in comic strips, and playing silly jokes.

They do not care if life is all a hoax.

A good hoax might endear it to them more:

sniggering deadpan in the face of boredom.

*My first teaching job was at a College of Further Education, in Barking, when I was 22. Quite a few of my students were older than I was, taking business classes. These girls, though, were in their late teens.*

*They were cute, and mischievous, and they gave me a very hard time. The e.e. cummings sonnet I based mine on is about "the cambridge ladies." It shows far less fondness for its subjects.*

VII. My Punctured Way

I love the lying colours of the past,

that tint old dreams the happy side of true,

and touch up faded fragments of desire.

I scoot among my drifting, dreaming friends,

a ghost among balloons, pursue my ends

like smoke puffed from the ruins of a fire,

with sparks that bravely call, *You aaahr, you doo*;

a heart that briefly glows, and whoops, *At last!*

I love the fragile roundness of the moon,

whose edges fade when I reach out to wish,

whose face is frail, but pumped with hope and air,

who, pricked by solemn stars that bleed despair,

nor pops, nor laughs, nor wavers, as I swish

my punctured way, a ghost among balloons.

*Using the cummings rhyme scheme again. I remember telling my friend Salli Woodward that it was shockingly easy to write a sonnet, if one didn't mind it being a bad sonnet. I poured them out, and most of them were indeed shockingly bad. Salli challenged me to write one about sheep-shearing and Lucozade. So I did. This is not that sonnet.*

HELTER SKELTER

However fast you go—

wind in your hair—

you can go faster.

In your eyes this mess of green—

the wind patching the sky

with trees not big enough—

tugging what leaves all ways at once—

*Over the years, I tried and tried to find ways to save this poem, to suit my current esthetic, so that I might put it in a manuscript. This was because* Rolling Stone *ran it, and I've never stopped claiming that credit. But the truth is I wrote it when I was 22, and I've really pretty much left it behind.*

LAURA'S AGAIN, JUNE 72

So here you are again

my fond old friend,

still running on danger.

Still talking, talking, talking.

So I hear you took an overdose—

we laugh about that—

you may try again—

we laugh about that.

And I see you still

have your thousand friends,

although their names, it seems,

have changed again.

Once, I did try to hold you still,

but you were afraid, of what

you might see, if the

world stopped blurring.

Once, I tried

to slow you down,

but you grow so scared,

of what you might hear,

when the voices

stop.

*I ran into Laura at a folk club. This is a much truer portrait poem than "Photographs." There are also a couple of later poems about a mash-up of her and two girls I was at school with when I was 11; I hope at least one of those two poems will make it into a book. She and I were on the same ferry from the UK to Amsterdam, in mid 1974. I was making a quick tourism visit before flying off to join Sally in America. Laura was now living with a Dutch guy. She was so much healthier and happier.*

FISHING IN MY POCKETS FOR HOLES

Three small boys with a folding umbrella,

fishing for cats and dogs in the thunder,

and I'm fishing in my pockets for holes.

Twelve ballad singers out in the rain,

catching their tears on the tip of their tongue,

and I'm fishing in my pockets for holes.

Look! I'm an elm-tree out in the storm,

spilling its silver around my floor.

Look! I'm a pirate with outflung arms,

finding my treasure in rainpool stars,

and fishing in my pockets for holes.

*When I was in high school I started doodling fish with their heads coming out of the top of a vest pocket, and their tails bursting out of a hole at the bottom. If I doodled people, there'd be a pocket somewhere on their person with a fish in it. I made a booklet of such doodles captioned with bad puns. ("Fishes circle." "I am frying, Egypt, frying"—we were studying "Antony and Cleopatra at the time. "Holy mackerel" for a fish in a pocket with a halo.) In college, I started creating wall art from eggshells and cardboard: the eggshells had fish eyes painted on them, and the painted cardboard was cut into the shape of a pocket with a fish tail emerging from a hole in the bottom. I didn't just leave these pieces lying about the flat: I decorated the walls of a college building with them. They stayed up for quite a while. I began using F.I. Pocket as an alias. So did several of my housemates. We had a house contest to see who could get their name most mentioned in the newspaper or some other publication, or on the radio or TV. Three of us used F.I. Pocket as well as our own names; I think it may have won the contest.*

THE BOURNEMOUTH UMBRELLA MAN

He was our controller of crowds, our conductor of traffic, our quaint, indomitable relic.

Our windmill, registering the strength of the Christchurch Road swirl,

with his tireless Arm,

up and down and wheeling round, as we blew by.

His squat hat steamed hair. Moustache blew from his nose. Which

when he blew, he blew in time with the Arm's umbrella dance, which

Was his all.

And we were his props, his raw material, from which

he fashioned the moves and the mood and the marked time.

The weight of his body leant into the Arm. Hunched shoulders, tattered overcoat,

head bunched down behind the ever-uppercut,

gaze like a drunken snooker cue sloped down over his glasses:

All merely background.

The Arm was the thing: its bright umbrella thrusts

prestidigitatory—

Chasing that space you vacated; snatching this patch you approached.

He was a buoy bobbing on our ocean—

I'd guess he hardly had a will to act on—

from exhilaration, or desperation, or even vituperation—

Though it certainly did look like a thrust to you, and a thrust to you,

and a thrust to the whole damn lot of you—

I'd wager it was hardly willful at all.

Just an Arm, and a folded umbrella.

But now, we hear, they have locked him away.

And it hadn't even occurred to me he'd had a mind to be unbalanced.

Only an arm.

*In the 2010s I wrote another poem, in fidget form, about this guy. It may yet see the light of day. This one has been left untouched.*

IN MEMORY OF A TRAMP AT BOURNEMOUTH

My friend, I thank you for the stories

your friendship let me boast:

how a tramp was my friend,

who would recognise me,

somewhere inside his pulped brain,

and stop and speak a battered language—

straws of wisdom somehow clung on to

inside his half-drowned head.

And I'd feel all kinds of brave man,

and listen on, with a voice inside me

insisting, "Walk by…"

And thank you for the cider

that night I saw you last:

drunker than usual—

angularly mumbling for a shilling—

loudly effusive with your thanks—

thrusting a bottle at me, with a grand wave

towards the "Plenty more!"

stashed in the inside pocket of your coat.

And I felt all kinds of brave man,

and listened on, despite the voice inside me

repeating, "Cross over! Now! Walk by!"

And thank you for the broken poetry

of you then: how you knew I would be

leaving for Easter; so you wanted

to wish me well, in case we never met again:

in case you said, with great, broken

poet's dignity, and not too much

water in the eyes, you had

drunk yourself to death by my return.

And may you be assured I don't believe you,

even though—as any poet would be,

preferring to the truth the proper climax—

when I returned you were gone.

*This one I think I've left completely alone. It was published soon after I wrote it.*

MUMBLED PROTEST

The world's a fine entertainer,

but sometimes the routine seems stale;

sing to need the feel I backwards,

or paint blue leaves

round whales.

I was bandying words with a lamppost—

the full moon was tap-dancing by,

to a jukebox of cars, and shoobydoo stars—

when *this* swan with no wings winked *its* eye.

But what can you *say* to a lamppost?

*Nothing* will understand why

my voice alone is the solitary moan

whose brashness I hold to be wry.

My moan can be heard in the forest.

My sigh can be felt in the town;

breezily lifting the latches,

pettishly setting them down.

*I've left this one pretty much as it was first written. (One word has been changed, in the last line."Sighfully" was just too weird.) It's in the same tone, mood, and voice as the "Cats" poem—*

*this was a persona that descended on me disconcertingly often.*