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## Emergence

Peter A. Sturtevant Jr.  
*Skidmore College*

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# **Emergence\***

by

Peter A. Sturtevant, Jr.

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE

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Readers: Sheldon Solomon, Martha Wiseman

\*see page 45

*I am a dead person speaking from the grave...I think we never become really and genuinely our entire and honest selves until we are dead—and not until we have been dead years and years. People ought to start dead, and then they would be honest so much earlier.*

*-Mark Twain*

## I

Freud attempted to explain human behavior, scientifically, as the consequence of the clash between reason and unconscious sexual drives. Rank, whose early work applied psychoanalytic understanding to an analysis of myth, returned to the core of religious activity as the basis for human activity—its preoccupation with death and meaning—and concluded that the capacity to create myth, religion and art represents a kind of solution to the matter of death by affirming life and what is valuable about life existentially.

Creative acts, such as myth-making, are responses to humanity's unique awareness of death and the challenges this awareness provokes in terms of meaning. Metaphorically, creative acts affirm life as generative, interdependent and opportunistic despite inescapable mortality. Rank differentiates those acts freely willed by the person who has confronted and accepted his mortality, who has moved beyond the paralyzing fear of death, from those acts which attempt to avoid, sublimate or escape death, where "... fear of destruction by those elemental forces accounts for his need to build up a world and a life of his own in which he may feel secure." (15, Beyond Psychology)

Inspired by Kierkegaard's insistence on action inseparable from intellectual honesty, Rank's philosophy commences with death as *the essential problem of life* and revises psychoanalytic understanding accordingly. Human attempts to rationalize, avoid or escape death undergird human behavior. A fully individuated person must confront the fear which accompanies the recognition of death and come to accept death as an essential aspect of life. Only then can life be fully understood or freely experienced. Then, only, does a person "derive mankind's eternal values," and therefore embrace, express and embody the fullness of life itself.

To embrace life is also to embrace those irrational natural forces over which we have no control. The choice is to live in "denial of death"-- to deny these forces--or to live life *heroically*. Living heroically allows one to experience life's full range by offering oneself to the universe: this way, one spends, rather than seeks to preserve, one's life. This is a tragic and illuminating undertaking:

... the fearless hero in defying death can utilize those elemental forces in himself to derive mankind's eternal values, yet in so doing, himself becomes the victim of his own heroic enterprise since the experiencing of those irrational forces must needs prove disastrous in one way or another. (Ibid)

Written during the year he would both succumb to fatal illness as well as escape Nazi death squads, Rank's Preface to Beyond Psychology (1939) makes clear that his lifetime spent as a scholar and psychotherapist has not yielded any "solution to our human problems which seem to me to be a part of man's life on earth." Such problems include incessant wars and suffering and, ultimately, the unavoidable fact of death itself. Rank thoughts nonetheless are derived from his own life of astonishing self-transformation. Here, meaning is achieved "beyond psychology," in a self-fashioned "re-birth" into "vital experience."

This book is an attempt to picture human life, not only as I have studied it in many forms for more than a generation but as I have achieved it for myself, in experience, beyond the compulsion to change it in accordance with any man-made ideology. Man is born beyond psychology and he dies beyond it but he can live beyond it only through vital experience of his own—in religious terms, through revelation, conversion or re-birth. (16)

Rank's use of "religious terms" should not be confused with a metaphysical solution. This transformation is *psychological*, located within the discrete individual; it is *religious* in that its primary concerns are death and meaning; and, finally, it is ultimately *artistic* through the primary expressive act of creation itself. As Rank explains in Art and Artist, the transformation is completed by the "self-making of the personality into the artist." (Art and Artist, 28)

In a sense the artist, as well as the observer, confronts death through creation: "the artist is...sparing of life in that he substitutes creation." As creation itself is a form of sacrifice, it naturally unleashes fears associated with death, for "he wastes as he creates and this brings him new conflicts, from which again he seeks to escape by living." This dualism (the fear of *not* living and wasting life versus the fear of *living* and wasting life) is resolved by the artist (and the audience) through a "*oneness* with the soul living in the work of art, a greater and higher entity...They have yielded up their mortal ego for a moment, fearlessly and even joyfully, to receive it back in the next, the richer for this universal feeling." (Ibid, 110)

Creation offers the "universal feeling" of life itself. The artist freely spends a piece of his or her life fearlessly and heroically in order to fuse, emotionally and symbolically (one might say "spiritually"), with himself, with his audience and with the universe itself. This process, if only momentarily, offers a sensation of integration and even permanence which counters the heroic isolation of the creative individual.

As *felt* sensation experienced within the human mind, Suzanne Langer describes art as "the objectification of subjective feeling." Through creation, or observation, of the art object, a person experiences subjective connection with the objective archetype of "what it feels to be alive" (the *feeling* of creation). Therefore, the artist and audience experience connection with the limbic self, with each other who share similarly the "universal" sensation of living, and connection to the primal forces which underlie all of creation, organic or otherwise. In this way, art is both connective and restorative.

We treasure life and therefore we fear to waste it. However, if we give in to our fears, we experience life as clouded and filtered. This is the central paradox of the human condition. Consciousness of death creates fear, but it also gives us choice over meaning. Kierkegaard insists that faith must be authentic for religion to be real; faith is an “either/or” proposition and it is not enough to go through the motions of living without fully engaging in an authentic, and often lonely, struggle for meaning which life requires. In order to re-experience a kind of Eden on earth, we must become creators ourselves! This is Rank’s ultimate lesson.

In The Denial of Death Ernest Becker applies the ideas of Rank and Kierkegaard to post-modern America, a country characterized by expanding anxiety, depression, substance abuse, violence and victimization despite its affluence. Unlike Rank, Becker eschews “religious terms” to describe the psychological transformation which must take place. Yet he does suggest that human creativity offers ways to meaning. In his somewhat dispiriting conclusion, however, Becker writes the following: “The most that any of us can seem to do is to fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force.” (The Denial of Death, 285)

Becker, an anthropological scientist by training, critiques the stranglehold of science as attempting to substitute a narrow epistemology for myth and religion, unable to meaningfully mediate the experience of human life which is “...alive to the *panic* inherent in creation.” Becker, like Kierkegaard or Rank, argues for the seriousness of life, which requires an acceptance of death:

I think taking life seriously means something such as this: that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false. Whatever is achieved must be achieved from within the subjective energies of creatures, without deadening, with the full exercise of passion, of vision, of pain, of fear and of sorrow.

Science does not offer the epistemological amplitude to mediate life’s greatest terror or thereby to inspire man’s greatest accomplishment—his ability to create systems of meaning, built on myth and art which incorporate the “maximum of experience”:

Manipulative, utopian science, by deadening human sensitivity, would also deprive men of the heroic in their urge to victory. And we know that in some very important way this falsifies our struggle by emptying us, by preventing us from incorporating the maximum of experience. It means the end of the distinctively human—or even, we may say, the distinctively organismic. (Ibid, 284)

The systemic “utopianism” of science offers its own myth to mediate the “grotesque...panic underneath everything” which results from the unique human capacity

to know death and suffering as fundamental conditions of our experience. However, the range of modern science is narrow and restrictive: its assumption that the scientific method, its cool objective empiricism and logic, encompasses all that is possibly true is inherently flawed since an observer always brings subjectivity to the process of “objective” understanding. Scientific and technological advances have done little to address the “rumble of panic underneath everything.” In fact, as Becker suggests, scientific advancement has accompanied a rise in anxiety and suffering as people, seemingly, have become less able to admit, much less confront, the “lived truth of the terror of creation.”

Like Kierkegaard and Rank, Becker’s insistence upon “the maximum of experience” places myth-making beyond simple adherence to the prevailing (today: scientific) ideology and requires, individually and collectively, persons to revitalize the archetypal hero’s journey in its many dimensions (psychological, philosophical, sociological, and religious) through self-creation and self-sacrifice. Becker does not suggest we jettison science altogether; rather, we need to balance it against a mythical understanding, where the mystery of creation, and the hero’s journey, are accorded the full range of meaning through expression, through creation and re-creation of lives lived and transformed through history. Our role is to create and re-create, not to fit ourselves blindly beneath a comfortable, narrow ideology.

To use the terminology of William James, the *twice born* individual *accepts* death as a primary condition of existence. Once the fact of death has been understood and then accepted, only then is a person free to live without fear, freely and, hence, *creatively*. At this point, he or she becomes an artist!

## II

My final project offers a “vital act,” an expression of the self-created personality freed from ideology and, therefore, “beyond psychology.” Writing poetry and the accompanying reflections represents an acted response to the challenge of self-creation as conceived by Rank, with nods to Kierkegaard, Becker and Langer.

Initially, I conceived the project as a lengthy philosophical justification of poetry writing as a logical outgrowth of my search for meaning. The choice to create, as Becker says, “to make an offering...to the life force,” is a conscious attempt to actualize the themes I have discovered. I began the MALS journey a few years ago hungering for meaning yet somewhat “lost and lonely” (as the protagonist of the accompanying “Salt Marks” says of his temptress). Now, I am perhaps more aware of my isolation but able to celebrate my connection that much more consciously, as a result. In a sense, I am more accepting of my fears and celebrate them as emotions I “lean into” in order to feel more fully the mystery and power of life. I feel keenly my own life and its fleetingness, while I am also

certain that my place within the universe is unique and archetypal. I know I feel what others must feel of life.

After being introduced to Suzanne Langer, I became interested in how Langer connects art to the shape and feeling of all organic processes, utilizing the “act form” as her symbol for the dynamism underlying all forms of life, from elemental chemical reactions to the complex evolution of the human mind. Ultimately, Langer is able to connect art, as an objective symbolic expression of subjective feeling, to essential chemical, biological and physical processes at the base of life as we know it. The act form provides a unifying metaphor for the character of all life processes, from the creation of poetry to the rising and falling of a sea anemone in the ocean column. Langer’s “act metaphor” defines the form of all creative processes, from poetry to molecular biology.

Writing poetry represents a personal expression of this creative process as I feel the gradual rhythmic windings and unwindings of the “act form” of my own life. My poetry is far from perfect or complete, but it is freely given and offers a glimpse, I hope, for others to share or contemplate.

Last fall, after “screwing my courage to the sticking place,” I signed up for a six week confessional poetry workshop at the Writer’s Center in Bethesda. This forced me to write and share poems, to receive and give feedback. Later, I took an additional one-day workshop on Prosody taught by the same instructor, a practicing and published poet. As I contemplated the form that the project itself would take, I decided to confront at last a pack-rat drawer of writings I keep in a desk downstairs, containing notebooks and stray sketches, including pieces from college, stuff done written as a young teacher and lots of unfinished scribbles. I had held onto these writings perhaps for the wrong reasons, as a kind of hedge against mortality, I think, a repository of potential which was alive enough to avoid death but not much more. In a sense, these writings are souvenirs from my own Kierkegaardian “school of anxiety,” emblems of uncertainty, longing, wish-fulfillment and avoidance. Better to keep these hidden than to hold them up to the light, perhaps discovering their flaws and the implications?

In the end, I decided to take them out and to evaluate them. In this way I would consider them somehow within the larger “act” of my somewhat unfolded life, as seen through poetry writing, jump-started at mid-life! One Saturday, I took all I could find of these dusty disorganized pieces, threw them into a bag and headed to the library. There, I sorted and culled and kept only those that seemed at least remotely important—artistically or personally. I re-typed some and edited others. When the project is complete, I intend to have an outdoor burning ceremony— Guinness and flames--- a mid-life ritual assigning the past its due, and the future and present their due, as well!

What follows is a number of poems and commentary. I reworked a few of the older fragments and left intact the ones that seemed “finished,” even though in so many cases, they are immature and imperfect efforts. My presenting these older poems is a “summing up” (something I said at the outset I would not do here), also a kind of redemption, as

well as “a staring at the sun,” a way of shining a clear light on what is, regardless of the blemishes. Now, more than ever, this seems enough.

The project, then, attempts to reconcile past and present, academic and artistic, imagistic and discursive, solipsism and relationality. Whether or not there is strong evidence of Rankian transformation is debatable. But, today, as I write, at Easter, in the cold sun which hurts as it enflames the new greens and flowers of spring, I feel time circular intersect with time historical; for me, at any rate, there seems a kind of *rightness* and *purpose* to this adventure.

Earlier this week, an acquaintance tried to kill himself by overdosing on his pain medication. I felt a strange and not-so-guilty exaltation. Reflecting, I don't think this feeling was the simple exhilaration in recognizing that I was alive and he was near-dead. Instead the feeling was the *tragic* realization that life can be so serious it hurts, so important that we might decide to end it ourselves. Each day, while we have life—in the inescapable face of death—we decide to live or to die. This is Kierkegaard: life is an either/or proposition. We have no choice over our eventual mortality but, while we have life, we have some control over how we choose to live. This is powerful. Anything else is just a lie.

Life is sacrifice, not possession. When we fear, we seek control and power as antidotes. When we fear, our isolation grows as we become increasingly preoccupied with only preserving the self. Eventually, our life has no meaning beyond the self. There is no greater terror, eventually, than the isolation that grows in time from fear-based living. Fear begets isolation which begets terror. Getting is losing. Giving is gaining.

Conversely, when we give our lives freely and tragically, we share ourselves with the universe and we receive in return. When we lean into our fear, we sustain others and ourselves by partaking in a symbolic communion with life itself. Creating our lives in this fashion, we are both unique and never alone. This is akin to the artistic process and the relationship between the artist, the recipient and the Cosmos itself:

The art work, then, as we have seen from our inquiry into the nature of aesthetic pleasure, presents a unity, alike in its effect and in its creation and this implies a spiritual unity between the artist and the recipient. Although certain temporary and symbolic only, this produces a satisfaction which suggests that it is more than a matter of the passing identification of two individuals, that is the potential *restoration* of a union with the Cosmos, which once existed and then was lost. (Art and Artist, 113)



### III

#### **Pebble**

Why do I choose to stand here alone  
Above the kaleidoscope of wave below?  
The smack of ocean on the rocks,  
The slow free turns of a cormorant,  
The flashing clickety-clack of talk behind;

I know the warmth of others abides there, too,  
But I can feel your cloudy eye  
Searching my back for some sort of sign,  
And I know I mustn't look:  
I am but another piece of granite  
Washed and smoothed by rocking sea.

Fall, 1978

Written at the outset of college, **Pebble** captures the emotion and language of a young man still not sure of himself and somewhat alone. There is something calming about the sea, and the ocean remains a central metaphor for me. The comforting rhythm of the tides and the waves against the ever-changing mystery of the seascape proves a background for life's journey which has just begun here at age 18.

#### **The Bad Infinity**

I have taken the drug,  
The harpsichord child,  
Stillicide  
In the cave  
They call chapel.

Christmas illusion  
Gives us a height  
Brushed away  
At the sigh  
Of midnight.

1979

I had written a number of poems in college during two independent classes I arranged with a professor in the English department, as well as when the mood hit me (usually at extremes of emotional highs or lows). I was convinced the professor, a vanity-publishing dipsomaniac and womanizer, was stealing my ideas while I made half-hearted efforts to mine my experience for little nuggets of truth or beauty. Drugs made me feel adventurous and helped calm anxiety or loneliness while leading me away quietly from meaningful contact with the world. This poem, published in the college literary magazine in my senior year, connects perhaps better than I knew then the emotional paradoxes growing within me. This paradox was best captured in my child-like love for Christmas (and how the illusory mystical experience of drugs like LSD reconstituted this feeling) and my troubling sense that the highs are always followed by lows.

There's a density of language here I appreciate. Whether effective or not, I am still struck by some of the words and ideas, such as "the bad infinity" (which comes from a religion class on Hegel) and "stillicide" (the single drops from a stalactite; sounds like "suicide"; evokes loneliness).

The last stanza is childish and predictable but purposefully so, emphasizing the irony between the child-like illusion (of drugs, of the Christmas spirit) and the grim reality which remains when the experience passes. This dualism is what the later poems attempt to resolve more optimistically, even if the subject matter becomes darker and more sobering over time.

### **Salt Marks**

Sorceress untrained,  
Lost and lovely  
There's open sea in your  
Kiss, and salt marks  
The lines in your hands.

Live magic on this island bluff  
Where our simple rest draws milk-white  
The moon from the cloud;  
Melting on motionless tide.

To you, I am only visitor;  
Love trickles down sheer rock  
Into still reflection,  
Like my silence, thoughtless;  
It drips through me  
And on into the night.

Spring 1980

Though the version of this I found in my drawer is dated 1980, two year after **Pebble**, I think it is a companion poem, based on the language and subject matter. This poem is about my first real college sweetheart and the woman I dated on and off from freshman year until the summer after graduation. I always thought Wendy as Miriam from Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, a wood sprite who could be maddening at times. She was an artist and former ballerina, "adorable" (according to my mother) and very shy. She was independent, nature-oriented and sometimes inscrutable. I, of course, was wild, inconsiderate, in love, fiercely autonomous and insecure!

### **A Relationship with Memory**

Summer, soon we walk alone.  
Dry-eyed and faintly,  
Your languid yawn escapes  
The slow shivered brown of Autumn.

We're waiting in the belly of silence  
Like leaves huddled in dying:  
Our existence fails at once,  
Yet apart we will fall.

1980

There's a lot to criticize in this small poem but it endures nonetheless. I used to share this poem with high school students to introduce the idea of metaphor (and to suggest that they should not be intimidated in trying to write a poem). I was commenting here on the simple irony that when love ends, it often severs completely a relationship (it becomes only memory) rather than simply downshifts to friendship or some lesser relationship.

## Got My Head Cut Off

*song lyrics*

Got my head cut off again.  
Took one word from a stranger.  
Cold eyes make me so cold,  
So c-c-cold!

Can you see me walking to work?  
Thought the pain in my heart was real;  
Didn't take too long 'til I felt hatred:  
I'm no match for these fake people!  
I say: *Oh- oh oh oh; oh oh oh....*  
*Have you ever been down*  
*Not sad or suicidal?*  
*Have you ever been really bored*  
*And seen that it's all really empty??*

(bridge)

Can you see the girl on the corner standing there?  
Caught myself looking and drooling:  
Are these modern nets too much  
To sweat off every day?  
Can you see me walking to church?  
Thought the pain in my heart was real?  
Didn't take too long 'til I felt hatred:  
I'm not match for these fake walls,  
I say: *Oh-- oh oh, oh; oh, oh, oh...*  
*Have you ever been down*  
*Not sad or suicidal*  
*Have you ever been really bored*  
*And seen that it's all really empty?*

Got my head cut off again  
Took one word  
From a stranger  
Cold eyes make me so cold  
So c-c-cold!

1982, Summer

## **Mr. Clean**

*song lyrics*

Do you know who's running your life?  
Is it you?  
Do you really think so?

Are you happy when you're crawling  
To your job  
With your mind closed?

*Mr. Clean, Mr. Zero*  
*He's no hero.*  
*He should be scared like me*  
*Because it's he that we hate!*

Do you know who's running your life?  
Is it you?  
Do you really think so?

There's the man who's so full of virtue  
While he hides  
Behind his money

*Mr. Clean, Mr. Zero*  
*He's no hero.*  
*He should be scared like me*  
*Because it's he that we hate!*

He doesn't think about you  
As long as he doesn't have to smell you  
He'll squeeze you from his office  
High above the ground.

1982, Spring

**Got My Head Cut Off** was written with Kip Boardman and John Lynch for the Legion of Decency, a three piece rock band that enjoyed brief notoriety at Bowdoin College in 1982. John had played in a band called the Guerillas and he was a Les Paul wielding showman who could captivate a crowd despite his imprecise and fractured style. Kip was a bonafide musician, self taught, who has enjoyed a nice career in Boston, New York and, these days, as a front man in the L.A. psychedelic folk scene. They drafted me to play drums and sing. This was my "number" and I enjoyed it when the drunken revelers sang the chorus with me: we understood tragedy better than we knew...

**Mr. Clean** was co-written with Kip after the band had enjoyed lots of success. Kip had dropped out of school, John was becoming increasingly narcissistic and I was more into substances than was healthy and really not that good a drummer! We began to drift apart. This song was stolen, essentially, from Paul Weller's song of the same name written for The Jam, a three-piece pop punk outfit from London. We identified with Weller's anger as Reaganomics made socially acceptable—even at a small enlightened liberal arts college in the US-- a new, arrogant brand of self-serving capitalists we simply couldn't stomach. Little did we know, but this class of folks would assume power until now.

### **The Roach Poem**

An insect lies next to me-  
A matter of rigidity-  
Of time and poison:  
What was once mine  
Is place  
But no home  
Among the infestation.

We are caught in fact and  
We desperately create  
To escape the times.  
Is that what we're in for?

1982, Fall

A bad poem but I include it here to remember what it was like to live in a soulless section of Arlington, Virginia in a roach-infested apartment building. This was a lonely time. I had broken up with my longstanding college sweetheart, my mother was dying of cancer, I was living in a space that never felt like home, I was drinking and smoking nightly and still trying to figure out how to be an English teacher. There is the opaque theme that characterizes my thinking at the time: an irreconcilable dualism between "fact" and "fancy."

## Night Prints

There exists nothing right or wrong  
Facing the eye of the moon  
Cool like your glance  
And grey  
This afternoon.

At midnight unveiled this  
Curtain of moths and fireflies  
Silver maid dusting  
Turns  
Liquidifies.

Droplets pant tongue-heavily  
Sense the distracted touch stand:  
Passionslessness  
A yawn  
And patient hands.

A poem whose rhythms, rhymes and syllabic structure organized into three five-line stanzas suggest a fair amount of reworking, **Night Prints** remains a favorite despite its lack of clarity (just who is the “silver maid dusting”?). The poem relies upon music and imagery to provide essential character. Imagism, psychedelia and the apparent influence of Thomas Hardy’s “Neutral Tones” suggest this poem was written before **Rivets**, just after I had begun teaching (and plying the Norton Anthology with my students) but before I had heard many professional readings, perhaps in the early fall of ’82. There’s the echo of the college poems with a new, gathering “looseness.” The music of the poem provides coherence.

## Rivets

The evening is air-bit Halloween  
Cooling woven shadows on the Virginia side.  
I balance the current’s edge:  
Muddy cliffs sweat vines and rock.

Closer  
Driven stubborn in the broken arm of elms,  
A steel wreck cradles oddly in the air.

Shamed to consciousness, the bloodied box  
Interrupts the river.

1983, Fall

I wrote a number of poems economizing language through multiple edits as a way to sharpen imagery and impact, using more precise language, considerate line breaks and a deliberate manipulation of rhythm. I was beginning to look outside of myself and rehashed imagery (e.g. the ocean) to capture unique images as I experienced them. The English faculty liked to take our students to poetry readings at the Folger Library and the Library of Congress. Here, I began to hear and to better understand poets as they read their own work. I had the privilege to watch Merwin read on two occasions, as well as Seamus Heaney (enjoyed a bottle of Bushmills with him and others, too) and Mark Strand, to name a few. From teaching poetry, I had taken a liking to the economy of the imagist poets, especially HD and Pound, as well as to Yeats, Eliot and Elizabeth Bishop.

**Rivets** is imagistic, a Polaroid snapshot of an odd metal box which appeared hung-up in trees on the side of a cliff on the Virginia side of the Potomac River. I was canoeing at dusk on a lovely stretch of the river above Georgetown and was struck by the cryptic oddity of this immense dumpster-sized object which had been hurled unceremoniously at some point from the massive cliff above, wedged oddly, and nearly hidden over the water's edge. Rather than angered by the human degradation, I was moved instead by something perversely majestic about the forgotten metal box. Often I find forgotten industrial detritus to be strangely alluring, albeit unattractive-- haunting and powerful, dangerous and lost. The word in the poem is "interrupting." I wrote a poem recently (discussed later) called **Urban Hiking** which returns to the theme of cityscapes and adventures.

### **Potomac Image**

And us paddling chicken-armed:  
Distant bridge  
Corroded green, iron-jawed  
Runway for  
Midnight trucks and runaways  
Eyeballing  
Sulking shadow eaten barge  
Cleated firm.

Just a little image from the same period of exploration on the river—this one was about paddling against the current for hours in a sailboat having lost the wind before dusk. My companion and I finally sensed an odd return to civilization when we reached at last the train bridge spanning the Potomac between DC and Alexandria. Here, underneath the meager traffic at midnight, was a highly corroded metal and concrete structure and an abandoned barge. In **Potomac Image**, "chicken-armed" paddlers are overwhelmed by the corrosive, impersonal bridge that crosses the river and the "sulking shadow eaten barge cleated firm." I notice, despite the sharp, quick and not very coherent brush strokes that comprise the poem, there's still the need to capitalize the first word of each line!



### **The Cat Has the Good Spot**

The cat has the good spot, doesn't he?  
A ball of yawns dyed black and white  
Sweatered in island summer.

He doesn't blink, cat-ridden wing of morning,  
Though my movement frights air,  
Tugs the hair on his back.

### **Late Winter Birding**

It's the birds who rule the frozen branches.  
The comical flicker, king of the dead wood,  
Plunders stupid insects and those asleep;  
The big flicker, a dumb dog digging for treasure.

Others join him in gaudy-headed conceit:  
The pileated, the downy and the red bellied,  
But none so funny or so charming  
As the dipping, flashy flicker marauder.

Vultures buffet austere winds  
February cracks and balds their ugly heads  
While other sky balancers manage awkward tails,  
Control flipping skirts unruly in the gusts.

Kestrels, cardinals and mourning doves,  
Merlins, mad—kingfishers huddle complacently  
And eagles measure gracefully with athletic wings  
The falling of time, the coursing of melting streams.

The brown creeper, as usual, simply minds his business  
Upside down against a mottled trunk;  
He does not wish to be seen.

At last, a tiny thing flashes yellow  
Skittering early buds and suddenly the thickets are  
Alive with warblers,  
Lemon drops in an otherwise brown-grey world.

**Late Winter Birding** (late 80's) is an effort whose subject is the frequent winter meanderings I once enjoyed between the C&O Canal and the Potomac River looking for sound and movement in an otherwise drab and silent February world. Poetic anachronism arrives at poem's end, in the form of yellow warblers (usually appearing in early May) heralding the arrival of spring, with the return of life and vibrancy to the land and to life.

Most of the poems and fragments from this time in my life feel lonely, uncertain, hopeless, angry, or silly. They are full of longing-- often as a return to more natural world, a less fallen and barren world, a place of childhood. Clearly, there is struggle and usually a lack of resolution. The poems often fail to exert control, clarity or meaning as they reflect my own uncertainty. However flawed or incomplete, they attempt to free if only momentarily-- or pathetically-- from time and space.

Reading these poems years later-- literally retrieving them from a dusty, cluttered envelope and studying them critically under the library quiet room fluorescence-- I was struck by how palpably I could re-experience the *feeling* of each one, recalling moods inseparable from the specific contexts where each one was worked or reworked (the desk, the light, the weather outside, a napkin in an Irish pub, my vacuous apartment in Arlington like a drum box or, later, the darkened walkout efficiency in DC, the humming Smith Corona, the music in the background).

Many of these poems were only spontaneous attempts to render meaning, to create stability against forces of uncertainty, isolation, anxiety and sadness. They were not intended for the light of day, much less criticism. **The Cat Has the Good Spot** is one such fragment, an evocation of a creature at peace, content in the sun, despite the author's self-conscious appearance, a frightful apparition at odds with the natural world.

## Cold March in Dublin Proper

Beneath spongy pitch,  
spirits linger:  
vague like smoke cut from these hills  
and dried.

Everywhere-  
smoke.  
Peat fires: smoldering  
sheets of Celtic history.  
(suggestions of burning flesh).

Amongst the fingers of moss,  
ley quilted  
thread labyrinth-  
sewn tight:  
water's born of stone.

Spring 1983

I worked very hard on this poem, the first that doesn't rely on the traditional convention of capitalized line breaks. Though I don't think it ever quite came together, the feeling behind it remains strong. My mother had just died quite tragically and rather suddenly. Riddled with cancer and hospitalized just after my family's return to Washington after a typical, idyllic Maine summer in September 1982, she died in December just shy of her 47<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was 22, just graduated from college, and had been pretty much handed a job teaching middle and high school English at the independent school my father headed (and ruled like a king with my mother at his side).

I was invited to accompany the school's boy's soccer team to Ireland in the early spring of 1983. I had first visited Ireland the previous summer with a friend from college during our graduation trip to the British Isles. It was not entirely lost on me how much had changed for me on my return to Dublin nine months later. That week, I lived with a host family from the Stella Maris football club. Working class people, they let me stay in their son's bedroom where his books were scrawled with pro-IRA slogans. The father's name was Archie; he was a talker and do-nothing. His wife had a steady job at a department store while Arch tried to look busy while spending most days bluffing activity before going to the late afternoon pubs. This was Dublin before the huge economic boom and transformation of the 90's. U2's *The Joshua Tree* had just been released and looped on my CD Walkman as the backdrop for the lonely, somewhat transformative experience of re-visiting "Dublin proper." The Brian Eno produced sound reinforced my feelings: atmospheric, yearning, unclear. Peat smoke was everywhere, as

were delightful little children, Celtic crosses, and weather which shifted from snow to rain to sun every fifteen minutes.

Though anything but balanced or polished, it is interesting to see how the language had evolved: less predictable, more intuitive, riskier. I created many drafts of this one, trying to make something beautiful and permanent of the experience and somehow, I am sure, trying to make something meaningful of my mother's death and of my suddenly precarious life.

### **Election Day 1984**

this morning's headache  
pounds  
mechanically  
in lawnmower rhythm

nests of clouds are low  
shocked  
held curious airily  
by the November sun  
a pale distended  
watercolor

champagne men of politics  
exalt  
momentous hysterical  
bow within glass sealed rooms  
again and again

man mower  
bends  
ice laden winds  
recalls the frigidity of winter  
dizzy curved  
dizzy cracking  
sky.

**Election Day 1984** (1984, fall) was written the day Reagan was re-elected by a landslide on the heels of the economic recovery from the recession of '81-'82. Mondale, who opposed him, barely won his home state of Minnesota and DC, where I resided on the bottom floor of a rent-control apartment near the zoo, an "invisible man" of sorts. I remember gatherings with friends in college when we'd watch Reagan and howl, too young perhaps or too optimistic to believe anyone took him seriously. I did not vote in

the election of '80 or '84 (and several subsequent elections), convinced until more recently that participating in politics was merely supporting a grand fiction.

Twenty-five years later, having endured the full transformation of the Republican revolution (and now suffering the most serious crisis both economically and geopolitically my generation has experienced as a consequence of this "revolution"), the poem senses the arrogance and power of the Reagan revolution and emphasizes the poet's alienation and hopelessness in the face of it. The image of the mechanical lawn mover, the pounding hang-over, the "dead" sunlight (echoes of "Preludes" I am sure) and the on-coming of frozen winter contrasted with exalting politicians champagne celebrating behind glassed-off rooms is sophomoric but somewhat prescient.

### **Maine**

Hard luck and its companion, cynicism,  
Removed me from your cool harbors  
Your sea stones  
Your blue-painted breezeways  
Your grey wings of dawn and dusk.

Salt memory flick flickers,  
Recalls red granite reflections,  
Sails and sounds.  
And you are here it seems:  
The same sun on shoulders.

The morning wind pricks the curtains  
In expectation;  
Somewhere else near the sea  
Behind a curtain of soft,  
Behind a curtain of sea,  
Are eyes which know everything.

1984, December 1

A pure fancy, **Maine** again attempts to solve lyrically the dualism of dreams and reality, there and here—the subjective whorl of innocence and memory and the objective world of "hard luck and cynicism." An homage poem, **Maine** returns to the dated, formal conceits of the early college efforts but its subject is simply place. The poem is romantic and searching, if childish, and aspires through contact with memories of the coastline of Maine-- sails and sounds and sun—to achieve a kind of easy, escapist mysticism: "eyes that know everything."

## **rain music**

smoke lamps breathe  
underfoot songs  
underground hypnotic  
a sister sings  
piano dreams  
fingers of ledge  
welcome bonily  
the assault of tides  
expire at nightfall.

knuckles of rock  
lighthouse beams  
cheek stiffens to  
the ocean's chill  
the eternal migration of whales.

sun rises orange  
on the sea  
and here  
on the street  
piano key houses  
drift dizzily  
within grass and gardens  
weeping.

1/17/85 (revised)

Written on my mother's birthday, two years after her untimely death, **rain music** anticipates **Urban Hiking** (2008) though I had not rediscovered this one until after composing the latter. Synaesthetic, psychedelic—images drawn from a rain-sodden urbanscape meld into ledge, tides, “lighthouse beams” and the “eternal movement of whales” before shifting back to the street where row houses become “piano keys” which weep and sink “dizzily into grass and garden.” Far-flung and far-fetched, the draft (since revised) attempts to merge imaginatively the individual self, the oceanic universe varying dimensions of time present and time eternal within the same tight framework. Escapism or integration?

## Kelly and Sheba

The slinky dogs  
the furry, furry ones  
the ones that *snnshfchstcht!*  
the ones that jump on top  
that leap to moonlight  
the energetic ones  
who kiss at any moment  
loving always  
my doggies...

Jan 85

A silly ditty *never* intended to be shared, this one is a funny tribute to two Welsh corgis who shared my early adolescence and young adulthood. I had to preserve this- that's all!

## Sometimes I Wonder If It Is In Fear That We Wait

There are the steps.  
They hang moth-like in the drunken light.

In the gathering gloom of dusk  
Cats peer and walk stiff legged

Crickets wind into cracks and cry  
Lazily against the coming cold

You can hear the river even here  
The fingertips of trees gather ancient moisture  
Free secret bursts of expectant air.

1985

**Sometimes I Wonder if it is in Fear That We Wait** (1985, December) uses images of crickets, moths and “stiff-legged” cats which inhabit a darkened, city stairwell to create a feeling of dread against the coming of winter, perhaps the seasonal onset of depression. Still, the poet senses the river’s water sound, its “ancient moisture” offering somehow “secret bursts of expectant air.” A glimpse of hope—again in the form of nature’s incessant rhythms and life force—against the gathering personal gloom. Water again is a symbol of hope in the form of the river freeing “bursts of expectant air.”

## Devil Walking

All of the animals at the zoo  
    are standing outside.  
The lamps steam in the rain.  
It is the very end of March  
    dripping into April, the cruelest month.  
I cannot look at the other nomad passersby  
    for they might think I want something from them.  
In the cold rain I really wish I had talked  
    to the girl hiding between the doors.  
I'm standing between viney walls  
    Drawing breath  
        drawing breath  
            drawing breath.

A companion poem, **Devil Walking** imagines the protagonist as a near-invisible spirit walking the city streets near the zoo, avoiding human contact yet obviously longing for relationship. A favorite conceit, never fully realized, is the sense of “breath” which almost binds self and other, sentient and inanimate—the author “drawing breath” (literally and artistically), the standing zoo animals and the streetlamps which steam in the cold spring rain. I like the deliberate staccato which mimics the halting rationalizations of the protagonist (“for they might think I want something from them”) dissolved into imagery and incantation.

The narcissistic self-absorption of the lonely protagonist ironically may preclude opportunities to discover relationship, to feel otherness.

## Desire

In hopeful flannels of deceit  
I ghost the morning without helm.

Marbled greens of deep, salt water  
Rise up from the uncertain rip.

Leviathan thoughts without reason  
Surface,  
Released to hands of wind.

December 85



### **Assurances (an address to Wallace Stevens)**

Pour wine in a glass,  
brush trash in a pail.  
Books spread on  
blankets like a fan,  
offer rest,  
hold judgment.

Dreams will bring to you  
water edges,  
deepened pools  
where fish pulsate, flash,  
reappear as shadows.

One solitary candle in  
the effulgence;  
one solitary candle in  
the dark;  
one solitary candle  
holding upwards  
a world of angles.

Barn East 1986

This poem was written at Bread Loaf while studying Wallace Stevens, specifically his great poem “An Idea of Order at Key West” whose central image I stole: “one solitary candle.” The Stevens poem as I recall offers optimism for the solipsistic artist: solace in the awesome beauty and mystery of the universe, power in the magical ability to render words into images pulsing with light and color, hope in faith and faith in hope. Here, the individual imaginative mind holds upwards like a living candle against “a world of angles.” The poem asks for acceptance and patience, based on the “assurances” of “an idea of order” perceived periodically and powerfully within the awesome beauty of natural phenomena “where fish pulsate, flash and reappear as shadows.” That’s the idea, at any rate!

## Chasing Barred Owls: West Virginia Hills, February

Owls flash steel  
white like skeletons  
soar too quickly  
grove to grove  
in this cool wedge  
below the hunch of our cabin  
the lurch of the moon  
on our shoulders

A bare creek pushes silver  
mirrors an infinity of stars  
throws sounds  
splashes hills  
with candles of ice.

More wolf than bird  
this rock and roll chorus  
like a dream inside  
time unsure space from  
everywhere lends  
mythical notes  
pass she  
fans ghostly spells  
on our reason.

1987, February

A poem about literally chasing barred owls in a moon-soaked wood in West Virginia using taped calls and flashlights. We went to sleep under a full moon so bright it hung like a huge retina in a universal eye. We woke several hours later, freezing, covered in snow beneath a darkened night. We caught glimpse of owls showered by otherworldly hoots and echoes raining around us in the cavernous, wooded hills. Crazy!

**“The ocean is always the same,” thought the boyish man**

His sandpaper knuckles wedged  
Somewhat cautiously  
Between the tide’s granite.

Sunlight shattered by gulls  
By the curve of wings.

Sand draws then expires  
In wave after wave.

Gorgeous children scatter like plovers  
Their eyes like mysterious jewels  
Their mouths sweet  
For ocean air.

**Campout**

We rest like sheep  
below beach trees at night;  
the air is salt and  
combs our skin to perfection.

The moon drowns our flames  
and so we scramble up  
to the hollow tents  
through the woods  
where pines fork my  
flushed face and  
tears drop sudden like  
ducks winging by  
like cinders.

I like the momentum which uncoils gradually and releases completely with added momentum and decreased friction by the end of each of these sketches. It’s as if the poems move from a conscious, narrative world to musical, magical places. The language becomes more fantastic, the rhythms more lyrical.

## **After the Storm**

In heavens of wind  
Chilled gulls pinion on morning's edge  
Called by the pull of ancient tides.

Measured water silences replace  
Hypnotic the tock of wave on rock;  
We're dulled by fog and shadows  
Under trembling, downed trees,  
A cryptic tangle of spruce,  
Breath curls and stills and pauses.

Here on our face and arms  
The drowned hand of nature plays  
Sloppy, somber, steady rhythms  
Like sea bobbing wreckage  
Against a ship  
After a storm.

February 1988

Seems like a lot of poems are composed in the contemplative, frozen stretches of winter or on the cusp, either in later fall or early spring. **After the Storm** is no exception and imagines a cove after a massive gale, captures the sense of spent nature, when even time and space are out of joint, exhausted, "sloppy." The poem itself is an attempt to redefine order. I consider the poem metaphorically—a view of the mind and emotions after a major psychological storm. It's interesting that the poetry writing halts here, as if the relative quietude of the bobbing wreckage is enough to pause while providing no solution, much less triumph, over the tragedies of life. This reconciliation cannot arrive until much later, after a longer, more difficult journey with an eventual return home.

## IV

### **The Meteorite Strikes!**

Amy and I were married in September 1987, and soon thereafter I was given a huge promotion (which accompanied the tragic downfall of a friend of mine, whose job I inherited in early 1989, several months before the birth of triplets in August!).

The creative flow was checked by the phenomenology of these life-channeling events. A few feeble attempts to publish work were unsuccessful (all it took for me was one rejection and I was sunk without a sound!) There was a very brief flirtation with establishing a homespun literary journal (with friends and a student who was also a fellow urban angler) called Floating Fish Press whose emblem, presciently, was a fish bobbing upside down at the top of a river! Most of my creative energies went into teaching, finding music and creating a library of musical mixes for a good friend in California (still underway) and beginning graduate school at Bread Loaf, where I still harvest ideas from courses I took there in modernism, nature writing, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Joyce as well as Frost, Stevens and a summer at Oxford on tragedy anchored in Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy.

I graduated from Bread Loaf in 1990. We left DC in 1992, when the boys were just three, for an eight-year odyssey on the Eastern Shore of Maryland's Chesapeake Bay, where I served as head of a rustic, proud, but failing, independent school. There, we were consumed with the eventual conversion of the school from an all-girls boarding/day school for students of average ability to a co-educational college preparatory day school serving the region.

This eight-year chapter would trigger a period of cloud-cover punctuated by storms and, less often, radiant sun. Separated from the comfortable moorings of home (the devil I knew, my family and friends) by just two hours of highway due east from Washington, Amy and I, our three year-old sons and yearling spaniel had moved to another world! Centreville, Maryland, population 2000: small town America, Christmas parades through town with antique red tractors, huge gleaming John Deere combines, fire trucks and floats from Rotary, Elks, 4-H, churches and scouts.

A town segregated into white churches and black churches, white garages and black garages, Centreville is the county seat of Queen Anne's, a proud farming community whose origins pre-date the Revolution and whose rhythms and simplicity and stubbornness remain largely static. Conservative and faith-based, where hunting and fishing and crabbing seasons are as regular as planting and harvest, from wheat wintering over to soybeans in the early spring to corn in the blazing summer...

Most, if not all, of my writing during this period was concentrated on promoting the school or launching, from the bully pulpit afforded a head of school, lessons and thoughts on values, education and the state of the world gleaned from my decade of teaching (!?). I enjoyed a regular column in the school *Bulletin*, wrote pieces for a free paper called *The Delmarva Parent* and was privileged to provide a graduation address each year and, in my final exhausted act, a baccalaureate address on Thoreau's *Walking* ("in wildness is the preservation of the world") which fell, symbolically, on mostly deaf ears.

We made some good friends and came to appreciate the subtle, pervasive beauty of the Chesapeake Bay, as well as its unique history and culture. We experienced a riot each spring of color and life, a fall which extended summer on the water by months, winters of long runs on deserted country roads and duck hunting, howling winds funneling down the Corsica River shaking the house like a freight train, and always the sober majesty of fields covered with Canada and snow geese, patient horses and long, flat vistas unbending to time.

I became very close with a man named Cawood Hadaway, whose family had lived on the Bay for generations. Cawood was a wildlife artist, bird hunter, fisherman and teacher who claimed to be part "Indian." He taught me to sniff out the places where Native Americans had lived and hunted ("*he was here*") and how to "feel" my way to the discovery of arrowheads. This kind of sensibility extended to everything he did, from fishing, to interacting with people and animals, to how he created and often gave away his rustic and powerful visual or carved images of the animals and bay craft he admired.

Cawood and I worked together at the school. He had taught art for years at the local high school in Chestertown and had written inquiring about a job. Our initial job interview went something like this:

*Me:* So, Cawood, what's your philosophy when it comes to teaching?

*Cawood:* Well, we do a little art and we do a little bull shit (*Cawood separated always this favorite expression into two distinct syllables*)...

*Me (a bit stunned and after a pause):* So...what do you mean by "doing a little bull shit."

*Cawood:* Well, it's like the Ingleside Wall.

*Me:* The Ingleside Wall?

*Cawood:* Well, I tell the kids that there's this thing called the Ingleside Wall up in Ingleside which was built long ago...

*Me: (after an awkward pause)* Never heard of it... What was it for?

*Cawood (after a meaningful pause):* It's bull shit...

We talked a bit more about art and I shared with Cawood that I had been a one-time poet. He said matter-of-factly: "If you've got talent, don't keep it under a pickle barrel." Finally, he asked me if I knew the world's shortest poem. I did not. He recited "The Flea": "*Adam had 'em.*"

I had made many hires for the school as it underwent a massive transition. Some had been quite good and a few had been disasters. When I hired Cawood, I was more

concerned about his prospects for success than I had been for most. Still, he had come highly recommended. I admired the simplicity of the artwork he brought to the interview that day. His quirky, irreverent sense of humor suggested confidence or foolhardiness—I couldn't tell. I was nearing the end of an exhausting tenure. I brandished confidence to the public but I was wearing thin, divorcing from my essential self like cheap veneer. Cawood somehow nudged me increasingly back into communion with myself by recognizing and befriending me. The poem I wrote, **Hunting Dog** was the first consciously organized poetic effort I had mustered, quite possibly, in ten years. Cawood liked it and suggested I publish it in one of the authentic bird-hunting magazines he left around the art room.

Cawood was hit by lung cancer during my last year at the school. He fought courageously, underwent successful surgery and chemotherapy at Hopkins, made a brief recovery before the cancer returned with a vengeance. He died in September of 2000, just after we had returned to D.C. to re-launch ourselves from a precarious and tentative position. I was able to visit him a few days before he died and I was pleased he seemed to recognize me. As my "retirement" present from the faculty, Cawood had carved a traditional swan. When the present was given to me at a final informal gathering of teachers, Cawood had been too sick to attend. I called him that night and he apologized for not having the strength to come. He was dying but he fought hard not to let his frustration and fear show: "It's got a patina finish and it's not meant to be left sitting on some shelf," he said between slow breaths. "It's meant to be handled so the oil from your hands will eventually create a nice tone. Don't leave it sitting on the shelf."

Each time I handle the swan I think of touching the hands which shaped it. The swan has a poetical curve to its neck, as if alive, its eyes nearly closed. It sits on the shelf too often but I make a habit of hearing Cawood's leathery tone and Chesapeake drawl and take it down and handle it with my hands a couple of times a year, adding shading and texture bit by bit over time to the soft white patina.

I was asked by Cawood's wife, Meredith, to be one of the speakers at his memorial service. Here, I told the story through a few tears, some hard pauses and fortunately to lots of laughs about the day he was hired to become the school's lone art instructor. At the end, I read **Hunting Dog** and Meredith later had it formally set in a frame with a line drawing Cawood had done of his prized German shorthaired pointer, Lee, who is featured in the poem.

**Hunting Dog** (~1998) is uneven, at best, but represents the memory of a great friend and speaks to the boy (or girl) residing within each man (or women). There is lots of humor to the hunt behind the junkyard: the setting is ironic, the dog's interest in chasing deer over quail, of which there are very few, is comical, and the failure of the hunters to find prey is obvious. Nonetheless the poem still works for me to recapture that feeling-- too often lost to age and technology and responsibility--of simple friendship and camaraderie: "boys at recess after rain."

## Hunting Dog (for Cawood Hadaway)

Following Lee  
like two blind men  
his nose our eyes,  
we hunted Baker's lot  
back behind the poison pond  
in a junkyard paradise

"Killed twenty rabbit there last,"  
his weather-streaked face eased  
into grin when we asked him quail,  
"must be three coveys, good size,  
and rabbits big as cats."  
We were off, the two of us, and the dog,  
boys at recess after rain.

Caged mostly,  
Lee found the sharp Thanksgiving air  
Likeable;  
surprised a covey before the guns could clear.

Just then a rabbit could stand it no more  
exploded away to Lee's great joy.  
Upon his return, slobbering, Lee was full of glee,  
But not his master,  
who explained to shamefaced Lee,  
gripped hard by the jaw,  
the difference between fur and feather:  
"Lee, fur is *bull* shit  
and we are  
after  
feather!"

On we stalked, cover by cover,  
playing the steady sigh of afternoon.  
Sometimes dove or sparrows  
broke from cover,  
but never quail.

Coursing the final corner of Baker's land  
we spooked a feeding doe.  
Blood dribbling from his ragged tongue,  
Lee offered only half-heartedly,  
knowing the way that dogs and men do,  
noses to the clearing November air,  
it was that time.

1998, Fall (composed)  
9/22/2000 (read at the memorial service for CH)



## **Popplestone**

This cove will always feel the end  
when loons haunt the arc of rock with cries  
we'll walk the precipice  
our boat below tugging  
impatiently at the line  
pausing in the slow suck and pull  
of falling tide...

To see things again as a boy:  
conquistador:  
convictions of immortality  
like a blowing sail-  
lands to conquer like a fish  
caught forever in the surprise  
of struggle.

Not here, not now  
wandering the dizzying glacial rocks  
of nameless granite on  
the edge of pre-history  
tumbling to sea.

(Orig. 8/19/98 rev. 3/22/09)

Written at the very end of summer in Maine and revised several times before being submitted to (and rejected with a nice note from) Maine Boats and Harbors magazine, **Popplestone** is about visiting Popplestone Cove on the Eastern side of Marshall's, an island on the outer, Southern reach of Blue Hill Bay. Marshall's is just distant enough to be visited infrequently and only on a day with good visibility and light seas. For this reason it is an unspoiled and wild island which receives heavier seas and, as a result, provides steep coves full of granite stones or "popples" which have been softened into rounded shapes by years in the cold, grinding surf. On the Southwest corner of the island Boxum's Cove faces open ocean. It was here, twenty years earlier, that a friend and I rode out a storm in fog and pounding seas in my father's 36-foot wooden sloop taken late without permission the day my father had headed south for the winter. We had thrown out both anchors, all of the chain and rode, and traded anxious watches, helpless against the gale, sightless, listening all night to the waves pounding against the invisible shore and trying to gauge constantly if we were dragging towards destruction or not.

This poem is about feeling time's passage and is an early mid-life poem. This winter, I searched every file, drawer, hard drive and disk I could put my hands on to find **Popplestone** to no avail. In March, when we took our "spring vacation" to our summer home in Brooklin, I searched again. Purely by accident, as I reviewed a vacation log I have kept for a number of years, I chanced upon the first draft of the poem itself as well as an account of the island visit which inspired it and its exact date! Though subsequent drafts had been lost, I edited quickly, remembering most of the major changes I think, trimming one crucial line near the end laboring in poetry purgatory under a too-heavy hand.

V

### **Slow Simmer**

In 2000, my career as an independent school head—manager, politician, businessman and sometimes visionary— dissolved slowly and painfully in a fog of exhaustion and broken compass. As a well-regarded young teacher, I had come to love the shared journey with students and fellow teachers that a healthy school community represented. As a teacher at a school whose purpose I shared, my work had a clear mission: uncover and explore life's lessons everywhere, love students and connect with them through dialogue and shared experience. As I left education under a cloud of confusion, mistrust and isolation, I felt mostly anger and sadness, a sense of being wronged and misunderstood by a world without feeling or sanity. Pridefully, I projected this pattern of victimization and blaming upon the world but I needed a mirror and new eyes with which to see.

Radical failure was the best thing to happen to me and redirected and awakened my life. Fortunately, my submerged self was just strong enough to hear again life's newly sounding call.

Some folks, living Thoreau's "lives of quiet desperation," never hear this sound. They ignore or rationalize the dissonance of an existential crisis, a life-threatening illness, the death of a loved one. They retreat, rather than absorb, when rocked by a disorienting phenomenon which requires reconciliation as it offers an experience of meaning radically other than what one had come to assume as "reality." The early American psychologist William James would characterize such a person as "once-born" as opposed to "twice-born." Kierkegaard would amplify this notion using an explicit Christian framework, offering twisting dialectical writings to illuminate how such a person remains fixed in a place of deep anxiety, stuck in emotional purgatory between childhood (where the sheep meekly follows the shepherd) and the fully-realized, fully autonomous "knight of faith," whose life is a fully-lived on-going creation attuned to a higher purpose than mere security maintained by others.

A purblind anxious adolescence awaits those who fear, avoid, or cannot hear the call to live completely. Freud, of course, built these notions into a science of psychology based on the notion of “repression” and, if unchecked, the eventual, attendant neurosis. Failure to validate and balance the tense dimensions of Ego, Id and Super-Ego leads to all sorts of manifestations of arrested development.

Rilke describes the shift from the adolescent “once-born” position towards a “twice-born” realized life of fully developed purpose in “You are Not Surprised” from Book of Hours. Here, the nascent protagonist is described as leaving his summer house fatalistically attracted by the magnetic darkness of a coming storm. The journey into darkness promises only loneliness and loss but it must be taken: an irresistible requirement of life itself. The wanderer must sacrifice the secure comfort of the childhood home in order to shed preconceptions and thereby to experience without historical, social or cultural filters an authentic sense of the self and of personal mission:

*Summer was like your house: you knew  
where each thing stood.  
Now you must go out into your heart  
as onto a vast plain. Now  
the immense loneliness begins.  
The days go numb, the wind  
sucks the world from your senses like withered leaves.*

The journey towards a fully realized self and a life of purpose is a one that requires a chapter of “immense loneliness” where one’s epistemological assumptions about life and one’s place in it are subsumed to an at-first disquieting experience of the present as new and unexplored, the ego submerged into an emerging inchoate awareness of a deeper self.

This submergence into self is a “sinking down” into life, complementing and balancing, yet apart from the upward, transcendent path espoused by most major religious traditions. This “downward” process, therefore, is more distinctly psychological.

## Jewel

In the dark hills of Vermont,  
I come face to face with nothingness  
Outside the ancient inn  
Oaks frozen like spores  
Collapsed within a heaving lung.

A germ of consciousness,  
My boots shift earth, scent.  
Her body cools  
Windows shut against the heat:  
The thought of her.

Children lean, peer in;  
A jar sits on the stove.  
Leaves fist and bump against a fence  
Her mouth open, unreflective eyes.

Candle waits to burn:  
Hint of ancient roses, rain.  
Faces rise from her books:  
Clarissa Dalloway  
Arranges the flowers just so.

Buck Mulligan  
Face soaped in mockery  
Descends the tower  
Above a shattered sea.

Stephen Daedalus,  
Unwashed and stinking,  
Instructs the ignorant, earnest boy:  
*The notion of some infinitely gentle,  
Infinitely suffering thing.*

Almost fifty, he still carries a boy's name.  
His cancer suddenly canonizing  
His courage to be.

She waits for him  
Like a picture fading  
Straining the mind  
To remember her then.

**Jewel** began as a spontaneous prose poem written one February night with the windows wide open while staying in the Surrey Inn in Saratoga Springs to attend Sheldon Solomon's *Grave Matters* workshop. It was cold and snowed a bit and I enjoyed the evening walks back to the inn after a day of classes and nights of reflection on the topic of death. Blasting the New York Dolls, Jimi Hendrix, Steely Dan and Led Zeppelin through headphones to ward off the slamming of radiators screaming their heat into the night air, these words appeared as a pastiche of ideas from the course and led to thoughts of my mother's somewhat unresolved death from cancer when I was 22. Later, I crafted these meanderings into a more formal effort for Sheldon. Here, I reduce the piece further and continue to tighten and to mine into a poem, a kind of "jewel" which remains after the body (and even memory) has gone. Facing mom's death at mid-life seemed key to my emergence.

### **Fly Tying**

Capillaries drying outside in,  
dad now wears fleece in summer,  
blankets indoors;  
his nurse takes vital signs,  
writes notes before leaving.

He knows-  
he gave me everything:  
rods and tackle,  
tying bench and tools,  
leaders, lines, flies and poppers,  
waders, boots, nets and trinkets-  
boy treasures,  
smelling of Woodsman's,  
seated in his cedar chest like  
spools to reels clicked tight.

We drop the square-stern into the Penobscot,  
glass rods glance the morning light,  
smallmouth rise and taste the tension,  
and vapor rings spin  
downstream.

We'll float the edge all day,  
drift and eddy,  
lines dance against the banks  
like herons stalking  
like jet smoke traces  
against the sky.

I wrote this poem after attending a wedding near Ludlow, Vermont this fall. We met the groom, Nick, years before when he was a precocious 8<sup>th</sup> grader. This was long before he attended Cornell and met his future wife. The wedding was a “full circle” affair and triggered many memories and feelings. Amy and I brought our youngest child to the wedding, dragged her to the dance floor and took our dutiful place disturbingly near the end when the band arranged couples according to the longevity of their marriage. Nick’s sister, Molly, a once-angelic little girl who resembled ours in looks and spirit, made a desperate appearance, despite suffering a full blown attack of mania due to bi-polar illness. She had driven 24 hours straight, calling her brother at 1:00 am the previous morning from the side of an unknown road in Maine, asking for directions.

At the wedding, we reconnected with Andy and Betsy McCown, acquaintances from our time on the Eastern Shore. Andy told me that his father, an avid outdoorsman, was failing. His father, aware of death, had just given Andy all of his hunting and fishing gear. Andy was also close friends with Cawood (of **Hunting Dog**); he and I were able to connect through memories of time spent with our mutual friend, hunting and fishing and looking for arrowheads.

My father and I love to fish; it is one bond we share. Each summer we fish the Penobscot River in Maine. My father is getting older—his knees are shot, he is too stubborn to have them replaced and it is painful for him to get in and out of boats. This poem is really about time’s passage, about father/son, and how we pierce the stream as it slips through our fingers with shared, timeless moments of beauty and connection.

## **Broken Fall**

Full limbed you appear  
Still born into a web of hands  
A shocking doll  
Blue fluorescent  
Silence where we expected joy.

A Caribbean prince  
Perfumed, crowned and oiled  
In hospital scrubs  
Works his toy bellows  
Breathes for you  
Massages you pink.

Your sputtering thoughts  
Your missing pieces  
Raggedy Ann  
Still dreams to be born.

Our daughter, Janet Reeves, was choked by the umbilical cord as she came through the birth canal and had to be revived. She was silent and blue when she appeared, eyes closed, a death mask. Nonetheless, hers was a magical birth. She was delivered by a nurse named Grace, which happens to be the name of a close friend's daughter who had been carried nearly to term before enduring a tragic stillborn delivery.

My mother, Janet, had died in the same hospital where Reeves was born. I had not been back since mom's death. It was overwhelming to return to Sibley Hospital, to experience what appeared at first like the death, and then the rebirth, of a little girl who we had already decided to name Janet. Like my mother, Reeves is a fighter and is doing well despite a rough start that compromised some of her early development.

The birth of Reeves was a redemptive moment in my life.

**City Sailing** (for HD Thoreau)

Hop the sewered rim of 49<sup>th</sup> and Dexter  
Past the hubcaps  
Stolen signs  
Leaf piles  
A shopping cart  
Down to the park  
The calloused banks  
Where eyes like dragonflies  
Skim the polished creek  
Measure its stillness.

City sand  
Acid washed  
Winking silica and glass  
Dog pawed  
Kid trampled  
The pool's edge holds  
Newts and impossible minnows  
Behind a cement dam  
Spilling water like  
Sails shedding sky.

Above the wash  
Night mammals form  
Hollows with their bodies  
Sleep in the vines  
Trace with knees and palms  
Small paths  
To resting spots where  
Scissored sun drops  
Nets of noon shadows.

At dusk drifting  
Teams of teen pirates  
Blanket lovers  
Dog walkers  
Fragile selves  
Thread the bank back  
To the highway where  
Planes drone gauzily  
Radios whine their Oriental  
Songs pour from  
Lighted windows like  
Mothers' calls like sirens.



I love the outdoors but I was born and raised in the city. I was fortunate to grow up next to large park with lots of woods, hills and a little creek and spend each summer on the coast of Maine. This park, Battery Kemble, became the central symbol of a long paper I wrote about literature of place (which focused upon the Four Corners Region but which led me, emotionally, back to the “wilderness” of my upbringing).

This is one of my favorite redemptive themes, “urban hiking.” Whereas so many of the sad and conflicted poems of my 20’s wrestled with a seeming duality between sordid city reality and imagined natural idylls, **Urban Hiking** offers to resolve this tension. There’s something uplifting and magical about the little boy’s journey through the littered, weathered, peopled park.

A theme which has eventually surfaced for me as result of experience, contemplation and study is the merger of objective and subjective worlds, self and others, time present and eternity. Art provides a vehicle and a context which sustains the seeming dualities within one dramatic tension: here, the whole live and resonates with energy and meaning greater than the individual parts.

### **Failure**

I’ve hidden for years  
In the front hall  
Like a bad coat  
Hung behind others

Footsteps like dreams  
Like streams  
Strained through wool  
To drink  
On the edge of sleep

A terror of clouds  
White birds to marry  
To drain to the sun

I’d rather live quietly  
Than die  
All tallied up.

This poem is explicitly about confronting the feelings of failure I harbored after leaving an eighteen-year career as a teacher and administrator in independent schools. The final stanza is ironic because I no longer feel this way. Living quietly and invisibly is fine (I got over my addiction to fame) but not without continued adventure and risk!

## **Adventura**

The compassionate star  
That leads you through night streets  
Down the darkened path  
Through the woods  
Towards the sea where  
Creatures stir the phosphorescence  
With sounds of waves  
Repeating their sameness  
Feeling their difference

Each breath  
Draws sky  
Stirs leaves  
Lattice moon  
Through trees  
Thatches clouds  
Rides high  
Now lace  
Now mind  
Now memory.

Stitched to time  
Like a chrysalis cracking  
A pupae emerges  
To flash and shiver  
Before the eyes  
Of the world  
Naked unadorned  
Expecting flight.

February 20, 2009: San Jose, CR

**Adventura** was written in one sitting on the edge of a bed in the Hotel Malvia in San Jose, where I stayed during a business trip to Costa Rica this fall. This is about the value of adventure, how “leaning in” to life, rather than away, opens magical doors to wisdom and insight. The image is dream-like, incantatory. The narrator is led by the hands of nature to discover birth and re-birth.

## **Running the Point**

The dull pull of memory  
As the clocks unwind:  
Stiffening.

Running the outer beach  
At low tide  
Seaweed trickery

Rootless, fading from view  
A thought of death  
And then a miracle:  
An image of fallen man  
Fully possessed  
His own absurdity.

Not yet developed, this is a quick sketch of a moment of humorous insight I experienced on one of my regular hour-long runs around a deserted rocky point in Maine across from our house on Allen Cove. Once, out of sight from the mainland and near an extremity of rock exposed at low tide, I slipped on a field seaweed and, but for a lucky escape, nearly injured myself. I recognized the irony of my middle-aged “absurdity,” a man on the downslope of life fallen below the tide unobserved by others. Still, I could celebrate also just being there, battling the elements, not giving in to fears of injury or concerns of common sense and safety. Running the point is what my therapist friend, Ruben Jimenez, means by “showing up.” If you don’t show up, you’ll never have an adventure.

Running the point has become a symbol for me. Not only have I enjoyed many sights and adventures on these jaunts, alone or with others, but I often contemplate what it will be like when I can no longer make it around the bend.

## **The Woodmen**

Each fall they load their sagging pickups  
And head for the city:  
The packed-in houses best,  
The pressured lives  
Like steam pots rattling on  
Too hot stoves shudder,  
Shelter lives  
In search of meaning.

Here they drive slowly  
Drag wires and branches  
Through mathematical streets  
Implore each chimneyed house  
To buy a rack- as  
Each short row of short wood is called-  
The wood too dry, too light,  
Some punk if you look close enough.

Wise city people  
Feign country  
Cock their heads and ask,  
“This wood’s dry, right?”

The woodmen nod their heads  
Like common flickers,  
Faces red expressions stoic  
Smile and answer  
Prehistorically with  
Valleys drawl words  
Drum like  
Tin roof  
Raindrops roll off  
Words no suited customer  
Will ever hear  
Or comprehend.

If one keeps eyes open and mind flexible, he or she can still find lots of evidence of humanity and unique culture-- even in homogenized suburbia! This poem is about the men who drive around each fall selling wood out of their pick-ups. It reminded me of traveling wagons from some other era hawking their goods door to door.

Even as a child, I remember milk still being delivered by hand in glass bottles and pouring the cream off. There was a fish salesman who came by in a truck laden with ice, an ice cream vendor. Don't see much of this anymore as we become increasingly more homogenized and separated from each other and the processes that sustain us.

There is such a gulf between the woodsmen from deep in Virginia and the world of the folks, like me, who live in suburbia managing hectic, hygienic lives. I enjoy this irony and celebrate the differences; difference itself is so important in a world increasingly patterned for commercial gain. There's humor here in the commentary on city hubris, city anxiety, as well as celebration of the timeless vocation of hustling the unaware. Those who think they know it all are the best targets!

### **Pressed Out**

Pressed out  
like a sheet  
like pie crust  
like a chart on a table:  
overwhelmed by possibility  
overmatched by choices  
overwrought. . .

Living in a corner  
with the dimensions clear:  
ratios, boundaries, limits--  
I'm safe, I'm stuck,  
I'm maddening.

This simple art:  
silent words burning in a square  
against the noise and  
the machinery;  
colors stretch and cough  
in a frame  
like fists  
against the sky.

Away from the words  
stars glisten their frozen glints  
like traffic lights  
after cars pull away  
heading home  
for the night.

2/16/09

**Pressed Out** is a work in progress and tries to synthesize several themes and images in a very tight frame. To that end, the poem is a comment about art and structure—how structure allows a poem to live beyond even the poet’s initial intentions. This began as a poem about personal paralysis as result of too many choices and options and no clear direction. The poem then veers into a brief self-critique for accepting one’s boundaries: being “safe” yet “stuck” which is “maddening” for the self as well as anyone observing, perhaps a loved one.

At this point the poet explores the notion of art as set within a “frame” and compares this to the narrator’s choice to operate his life “with(in) dimensions clear.” The poem then offers a pure image within a frame, impersonalized. This then becomes a metaphor for the power released *as a result* of boundaries. It’s a curious but interesting image: blinking lights, after the cars have gone for the night, like stars “glisten(ing) their frozen glints.” In the end, the poem offers the possibility that, like art, a person’s life within a frame creates opportunities for new perspective, rather than frustration and paralysis.

Again—this is a hopeful and redemptive theme within the overall context of these poems: the potential of art to unify disparate themes into meaning greater than the individual parts. This represents the theme of “emergence” (this project’s title):

When we focus on relationships between the parts rather than on the parts in isolation we very quickly encounter the principle of *emergence*\*, in which surprising properties appear at the level of the whole that cannot be understood through focusing on the parts alone. (p. 32, Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia; Stephan Harding)

## The First Clear Taste of Immortality

*I: Long ago songs on the radio*

In a car, alone,  
Windows drawn  
Slow creeping  
Night pushed into  
The vault of music  
Weaving the air  
The earth  
You.

Like yesterday;  
Thirty years:  
One-hundred twenty seasons.  
Winter just  
Loosening her thin-fingered  
Grip to spring again  
Driving all to heat  
And recklessness  
And contact!

The star jeweled  
Evening awes  
With laughs  
Near audible  
Succumb to vastness  
All fears dissolving  
Into all  
Fears dissolving.

Forward  
Formless  
Heart pounds  
Doors windows  
Music pours  
Like time  
Like water.

II: *Looking back*

So much water  
Under the bridge  
I can't account  
Always here  
Always gone  
Always now,  
Always yesterday  
Until so many days  
Become years and  
Then lifetimes

I feel the same but eyes  
Sometimes blur  
Sometimes dry  
Barely see the  
Winking lights.

I sleep early  
Dreams like sparks  
Within a sawdust crater:  
Nothing to show  
But desire  
Still  
With stars to steer  
But no course to sail.

Nothing lost  
In time  
All will be redeemed like  
Frog choruses  
Thrum the giant swamp  
Like mandolins  
Like fathers  
Marching sons to war.

This poem is explicitly about facing death, the loss of time and aging and discovering somehow strength and beauty. It's an unclear poem pulled from dream imagery and needs work to complete but it follows directly from my MALS work and reflection.



## **The Frozen Climber**

This avalanche of sadness  
buries exposes the oddest things.

Canvas gaiters leather  
boots wool sweater  
and military bloomers on  
his fractured arm  
a steel watch  
marks time when  
hillside flowers  
faced the sun  
springs ago  
as the sudden snow collapsed.

His tea stained face is  
leather too dissolved teeth  
like wood and jaw  
encrusted;  
until today  
who knew that life  
trapped in death  
buds upon the mountain  
each spring?

All has been ice  
shaped by impersonal winds and  
smaller thaws refrozen  
tears trapped in winter  
three generations of avalanche  
loneliness sprung  
unwinds  
a loosening clock.

What we think we know  
of feeling  
is often only fear--  
a silent frozen stream  
of ticking seconds  
trickling droplet dreams  
to cool the melt.

The most brave  
scale the mountain  
with weather eyes  
to track the final  
river to its source  
and find, circling closer,  
time before ice  
before the moon  
when bird lizards scaled  
humid skies high above  
bloody embers coughed  
by cooling mountains  
wild beneath the sun.

**The Frozen Climber** was inspired by a *National Geographic* article on the rediscovery of Sir Edmund Hilary's clothed and well-preserved corpse after it had remained hidden for decades, frozen on the mountain where the great explorer had fallen to his death. Again the preoccupation is with time and death and heroism, as well as the redeeming spirit of adventure and loss.

Rank makes it clear that one has to spend life—heroically, tragically-- if one is to experience the full impact of life itself—the sense of life's inexplicable majesty and beauty, the sense of *communitas* the lonely hero senses as she gives herself to the full amplitude of the act form. Too often, we live in fear and hedge our lives against suffering and death. As a result, we rarely participate in the exhilaration of living itself, which includes a palpable reconciliation with the limbic self, a connection with the cosmos and each other and an intuitive sense of the stunning *rightness* and *balance* of the universe.

## Change

Tripping then  
falling down a well  
past sweating stones  
blinking as I drop  
bat-like down.

Now dizzy  
now settling  
now magnetic—  
all my blood shifts to the eyes  
of galaxies chandeliered high  
in the pall of night.

Letting go to fascination  
letting go of fear  
mind shifts and sharpens  
dissolves itself  
sensing land dripping  
glowing hopefully  
sky bruised but clearing  
thunder cracks  
the breathing ground  
open like capillaries  
broken exposing wells to  
morning filter time  
like water  
fingers of grass filtering  
taste of new-born earth.

**Change** was written one morning just after waking from a dream state. The initial draft came quickly and freely as a kind of fantasy narrative. The return to pre-history through dreams, in which we seemingly access the expanded range of the unconscious (where time is not linear, space not logically defined or boundaried), represents an attempt perhaps to reconcile death as simply an aspect of universal time in which we are comfortably imbedded.

Again, the Rankian theme of “letting go” is present as the key to unlock the full amplitude of living. Letting go of the fear of death is a necessary precursor to the discovery of tragic awareness. By tragic awareness, I mean the hero’s journey, where the hero sacrifices life in order to reveal universal principles of meaning. This is the journey of Adam and Eve once they leave the garden—they must now create life’s meaning for it is no longer a given, the way it is for the innocent child under protection of the parent.

## **Threshold**

Lines; circles.

History; revelation.

Logic; feeling.

Tell; teach.

Become; Be.

In life we either cross the threshold or we do not. By crossing and re-crossing, we unite if only symbolically the seeming dualities of knowledge and emotion through acceptance and action.

Each day, we choose to live or to die, literally or metaphorically. We either lean into this realization or away from it.

These poems show a progression from dualism and fear to a more delicate, complex unity of tensions and dynamism. As such, they embody change and growth.

As works of art, they are flawed and imperfect.

As emblems of meaning, however, they represent attempts at least to discover meaning as a hero's journey towards a distant star, one we're not sure we'll ever fully see. Still, by paying deeper attention to the life around us, we feel the quickening in our very soul. And that's simply enough.

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