



*Walking at Night
Between the Two Deserts,*



*Selected Poems of
W.S. Merwin*



*Edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.,
Kassandra Soulard, & Joseph Ciccone*

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*For our families,
especially those loved and lost*



Epitaph

Death is not information.
Stone that I am,
He came into my quiet
And I shall be still for him.

On the Subject of Poetry

I do not understand the world, Father.
By the millpond at the end of the garden
There is a man who slouches listening
To the wheel revolving in the stream, only
There is no wheel there to revolve.

He sits in the end of March, but he sits also
In the end of the garden; his hands are in
His pocket. It is not expectation
On which he is intent, nor yesterday
To which he listens. It is a wheel turning.

When I speak, Father, it is the world
That I must mention. He does not move
His feet so much as raise his head
For fear he should disturb the sound he hears
Like a pain without a cry, where he listens.

I do not think I am fond, Father,
Of the way in which always before he listens
He prepares himself by listening. It is
Unequal, Father, like the reason
For which the wheel turns, though there is no wheel.

I speak of him, Father, because he is
There with his hands in his pockets, in the end
Of the garden listening to the turning
Wheel that is not there, but it is the world,
Father, that I do not understand.

Burning the Cat

In the spring, by the big shuck-pile
Between the bramble-choked brook where the copperheads
Curled in the first sun, and the mud road,
All at once it could no longer be ignored.
The season steamed with an odor for which
There has never been a name, but it shouted above all.
When I went near, the wood-lice were in its eyes
And a nest of beetles in the white fur of its armpit.
I built a fire there by the shuck-pile
But it did no more than pop the beetles
And singe the damp fur, raising a stench
Of burning hair that bit through the sweet-day smell.
Then thinking how time leches after indecency,
Since both grief is indecent and the lack of it,
I went away and fetched newspaper,
And wrapped it in dead events, days and days,
Soaked it in kerosene and put it in
With the garbage on a heaped nest of sticks:
It was harder to burn than the peels of oranges,
Bubbling and spitting, and the reek was like
Rank cooking that drifted with the smoke out
Through the budding woods and clouded the shining dogwood.
But I became stubborn: I would consume it
Though the pyre should take me a day to build
And the flames rise over the house. And hours I fed
That burning, till I was black and streaked with sweat;
And poked it out then, with charred meat still clustering
Thick around the bones. And buried it so
As I should have done in the first place, for
The earth is slow, but deep, and good for hiding;
I would have used it if I had understood
How nine lives can vanish in one flash of a dog's jaws,
A car, or a copperhead, and yet how one small
Death, however reckoned, is hard to dispose of.

The Shipwreck

The tale is different if even a single breath
Escapes to tell it. The return itself
Says survival is possible. And words made to carry
In quiet the burden, the isolation
Of dust, and that fail even so,
Though they shudder still, must shrink the great head
Of elemental violence, the vast eyes
Called blind looking into the ends of darkness,
The mouth deafening understanding with its one
All-wise syllable, into a shriveled
History that the dry-shod may hold
In the palms of their hands. They had her
Under jib and reefed mizzen, and in the dark
Were fairly sure where they were, and with sea-room,
And it seemed to be slacking a little, until
Just before three they struck. Heard
It come home, hollow in the hearts of them,
And only then heard the bell ringing, telling them
It had been ringing there always telling them
That there it would strike home, hollow, in
The hearts of them. Only then heard it
Over the sunlight, the dozing creak
Of the moorings, the bleaching quay, the heat,
The coiled ropes on the quay they would sail
And the day before, and across the water blue
As a sky through the heat beyond
The coils, the coils, with their shadows coiled
Inside them. And it sprang upon them dark,
Bitter, and heavy with sound. They began to go
To pieces at once under the waves' hammer.
Sick at heart since that first stroke, they moved
Nevertheless as they had learned always to move

When it should come, not weighing hope against
The weight of the water, yet knowing that no breath
Would escape to betray what they underwent then.
Dazed to, incredulous, that it had come,
That they could recognize it. It was too familiar,
And they in the press of it, therefore, as though
In a drifting dream. But it bore upon them
Bursting slowly inside them where they had
Coiled it down, coiled it down: this sea, it was
Blind, yes, as they had said, and treacherous—
They had used their own traits to character it—but without
Accident in its wildness, in its rage,
Utterly and from the beginning without
Error. And to some it seemed that the waves
Grew gentle, spared them, while they died of that knowledge.



Fog-Horn

Surely that moan is not the thing
That men thought they were making, when they
Put it there, for their own necessities.
That throat does not call to anything human
But to something men had forgotten,
That stirs under fog. Who wounded that beast
Incurably, or from whose pasture
Was it lost, full grown, and time closed round it
With no way back? Who tethered its tongue
So that its voice could never come
To speak out in the light of clear day,
But only when the shifting blindness
Descends and its acknowledged among us,
As though from behind a wall, always
Nearer that we had remembered? If it
Was we who gave tongue to this cry
What does it bespeak in us, repeating
And repeating, insisting on something
That we never meant? We only put it there
To give warning of something we dare not
Ignore, lest we should come upon it
Too suddenly, recognize it too late,
As our cries were swallowed up and all hands lost.

Portland Going Out

Early that afternoon, as we keep
Remembering, the water of the harbor
Was so smooth you wanted to walk on it,
It looked that trustworthy: glassy and black
Like one of those pools they have in the lobbies
Of grand hotels. And, thinking back, we say
That the same bells we had heard telling
Their shoals and hours since we were children,
Sounded different, as though they were
Moving about the business of strangers. By
Five it was kicking up quite a bit,
And the greasiest evening you ever saw,
We had just come in, and were making fast,
A few minutes to seven, when she went
Down the harbor behind us, going out,
Passing so close over our stern that we
Caught the red glow of her port light for
A moment on our faces. Only
When she was gone did we notice
That it was starting to snow. No, we were
Not the last, nor even nearly the last
To see her. A schooner that lived through it
Glimpsed her, at the height of the storm,
In a clear patch, apparently riding it;
That must have been no more than minutes
Before she went down. We had known storms
Before, almost as brutal, and wrecks before
Almost as unexplained, almost
As disastrous. Yet we keep asking
How it happened, how, and why Blanchard sailed,
Miscalculating the storm's course. But what
We cannot even find questions for



Is how near we were: brushed by the same snow,
Lifted by her wake as she passed. We could
Have spoken, we swear, with anyone on her deck,
And not had to raise our voices, if we
Had known anything to say. And now
In no time at all, she has put
All of disaster between us: a gulf
Beyond reckoning. It begins where we are.

Grandmother Dying

Not ridden in her Christian bed, either,
But her wrenched back bent double, hunched over
The plank tied to the arms of her rocker
With a pillow on it to keep her head
Sideways up from her knees, and three others
Behind her in the high chair to hold her
Down so the crooked might be straight, as if
There was any hope. Who for ninety-three years,
Keeping the faith, believed you could get
Through the strait gate and the needle's eye if
You made up your mind straight and narrow, kept
The thread tight and, deaf to both left and to right
To the sly music beyond the ditches, beat
Time on the Book as you went. And then she fell.
She should have did what she was told, she should
Have called for what she needed, she did look
Sleeping on the pillows and to be trusted
Just for a bit, and Bid was not downstairs
A minute before hearing the hall creak
And the door crash back in the bathroom as
She fell. What was it, eighteen months, they took
Care of her crooked that way, feeding from
The side, hunching down to hear her, all
Knowing full well what the crooked come to
When their rockers stop. Still could hear what she
Thought good to hear, still croak: You keep my
Candy hid in that sweater drawer, Bid,
Only for company one piece, then you put it
Back again, hear? One after the other
A family of fevers visited her,
And last a daughter-in-law with a nasty
Cough combed her hair out pretty on the plank,
With a flower in it, and held a mirror



For her to see till it made her smile, But
Bid, she whispered, you keep wide of that new
Nurse's cough, she has TB. And where
Were the wars that still worried her, when
Most were dead a long time ago, and one
Son had come back and was there hanging
In sunlight, in a medal of glory, on
The wall in her room smelling of coal-gas
And petunias. One daughter lived and dusted
A nice brick house a block away, already
Rehearsing how she'd say, "Well, we was always
Good to our mumma anyway." Outside
The crooked river flowed easy, knowing
All along; the tracks smiled and rang away;
Help would come from the hills. one knotted hand
Of hers would hang up in the air above
Her head for hours, propped on its elbow, waving
In that direction. And when she heaved up
Her last breath, to shake it like a fist,
As out of a habit so old as to be
Nearly absent, at the dirty river
Sliding always there the same as ever,
Came a black engine that had been waiting
Up the tracks there for ninety-four years, and
With its hooting downriver, making the tracks
Staighthen out in front of it like a whip,
While the windows rattled loud to break, the things
On the shelves shook, the folds of her face jarred
And shivered; and when it was gone, for a long
Time the goosed laundry still leaped and jiggled
In the smutty wind outside, and her chair went on
Rocking all by itself with nothing alive
Inside it to explain it, nothing, nothing.

The Drunk in the Furnace

For a good decade
The furnace stood in the naked gully, fireless
And vacant as any hat. Then when it was
No more to them than a hulking black fossil
To erode unnoticed with the rest of the junk-hill
By the poisonous creek, and rapidly to be added
To their ignorance,

They were afterwards astonished
To confirm, one more, a twist of smoke like a pale
Resurrection, staggering out of its chewed hole,
And to remark then other tokens that someone,
Cosily bolted behind the eyeholed iron
Door of the drafty burner, had there established
His bad castle.

Where he gets his spirits
It's a mystery. But the stuff keeps him musical:
Hammer-and-anviling with poker and bottle
To his jugged bellowings, till the last groaning clang
As he collapses onto the rioting
Springs of a litter of car seats ranged on the grates,
To sleep like an iron pig.

In their tar-paper church
On a text about stoke holes that are sated never
Their Reverend lingers. They nod and hate trespassers.
When the furnace wakes, though all afternoon
Their witless offspring flock like piped rats to its siren
Crescendo, and agape on the crumbling ridge
Stand in a row and learn.

Air

Naturally it is night.
Under the overturned lute with its
One string I am going my way
Which has a strange sound.

This way the dust, that way the dust.
I listen to both sides
But I keep right on.
I remember the leaves sitting in judgment
And then winter.

I remember the rain with its bundle of roads.
The rain taking all its roads.
Nowhere.

Young as I am, old as I am,

I forget tomorrow, the blind man.
I forget the life among the buried windows.
The eyes in the curtains.
The wall
Growing through the immortelles.
I forget silence
The owner of the smile.

This must be what I wanted to be doing,
Walking at night between the two deserts,
Singing.

The Last One

Well they'd made up their minds to be everywhere because why not.
Everywhere was theirs because they thought so.
They with two leaves they whom the birds despise.
In the middle of stones they made up their minds.
They started to cut.

Well they cut everything because why not.
Everything was theirs because they thought so.
It fell into its shadows and they took both away.
Some to have some for burning.

Well cutting everything they came to the water.
They came to the end of the day there was one left standing.
They would cut it tomorrow they went away.
The night gathered in the last branches.
The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.
The night and the shadow put on the same head.
And it said Now.

Well in the morning they cut the last one.
Like the others the last one fell into its shadow.
It fell into its shadow on the water.
They took it away its shadow stayed on the water.

Well they shrugged they started trying to get the shadow away.
They cut right to the ground the shadow stayed whole.
They laid boards on it the shadow came out on top.

They shone lights on it the shadow got blacker and clearer.
They exploded the water the shadow rocked.
They built a huge fire on the roots.
They sent up black smoke between the shadow and the sun.
The new shadow flowed without changing the old one.
They shrugged they went away to get stones.



They came back the shadow was growing.
They started setting up stones it was growing.
They looked the other way it went on growing.
They decided they would make a stone out of it.
They took stones to the water they poured them into the shadow.
They poured them in they poured them in the stones vanished.
The shadow was not filled it went on growing.
That was one day.

The next day was just the same it went on growing.
They did all the same things it was just the same.
They decided to take its water from under it.
They took away water they took it away the water went down.
The shadow stayed where it was before.
It went on growing it grew onto the land.
They started to scrape the shadow with machines.
When it touched the machines it stayed on them.
They started to beat the shadow with sticks.
Where it touched the sticks it stayed on them.
They started to beat the shadow with hands.
Where it touched the hands it stayed on them.
That was another day.

Well the next day started about the same it went on growing.
They pushed lights into the shadow.
Where the shadow got onto them they went out.
They began to stomp on the edge it got their feet.
And when it got their feet they fell down.
It got into eyes the eyes went blind.

The ones that fell down it grew over and they vanished.
The ones that went blind and walked into vanished.
The ones that could see and stood still
It swallowed their shadows.
Then it swallowed them too and they vanished.
Well the others ran.

The ones that were left went away to live if it would let them.
They went as far as they could.
The lucky ones with their shadows.



It is March

It is March and black dust falls out of the books
Soon I will be gone
The tall spirit who lodged here has
Left already
On the avenues the colorless thread lies under
Old prices

When you look back there is always the past
Even when it has vanished
But when you look forward
With your dirty knuckles and the wingless
Bird on your shoulder
What can you write

The bitterness is still rising in the old mines
The fist is coming out of the egg
The thermometers out of the mouth of the corpses

At a certain height
The tails of the kites for a moment are
Covered with footsteps

Whatever I have to do has not yet begun

Wish

The star in my
Hand is falling

All the uniforms know what's no use

May I bow to Necessity not
To her hirelings

River of Bees

In a dream I returned to the river of bees
Five orange trees by the bridge and
Beside two mills my house
Into whose courtyard a blindman followed
The goats and stood singing
Of what was older

Soon it will be fifteen years

He was old he will have fallen into his eyes

I took my eyes
A long way to the calendars
Room after room asking how shall I live

One of the ends is made of streets
One man processions carry through it
Empty bottles their
Image of hope
It was offered to me by name

Once once and once
In the same city I was born
Asking what shall I say

He will have fallen into his mouth
Men think they are better than grass

I return to his voice rising like a forkful of hay

He was old he is not real nothing is real
Nor the noise of death drawing water

We are the echo of the future

On the door it says what to do to survive
But we were not born to survive
Only to live



December Night

The cold slope is standing in darkness
But the south of the trees is dry to the touch

The heavy limbs climb into the moonlight bearing feathers
I came to watch these
White plants older at night
The oldest
Come first to the ruins

And I hear magpies kept awake by the moon
The water flows through its
Own fingers without end

Tonight once more
I find a single prayer and it is not for me

A Scale in May

Now all my teachers are dead except silence
I am trying to read what the five poplars are writing
on the void

Of all the beasts to man alone death brings justice
But I desire
To kneel in a doorway empty except for the song

Who made time provided also its fools
Strapped in watches and with ballots for their choices
Crossing the frontiers of invisible kingdoms

To succeed consider what is as though it were past
Deem yourself inevitable and take credit for it
If you find you no longer believe enlarge the temple

Through the day the nameless stars keep passing the door
That have come all that way out of death
Without questions

The walls of light shudder and an owl wakes in the heart
I cannot call upon words
The sun goes away to set elsewhere

Before nightfall colorless petals blow under the door
And the shadows
Recall their ancestors in the house beyond death

At the end of its procession through the snow
Falling
the water remembers to laugh

For the Anniversary of My Death

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And then shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what

In the Winter of My Thirty-Eighth Year

It sounds convincing to say *When I was young*
Though I have long wondered what it would be like
To be me now
No older at all it seems from here
As far from myself as ever

Waking in fog and rain and seeing nothing
I imagine all the clocks have died in the night
Now no one is looking I could choose my age
It would be younger I suppose so I am older
It is there at hand I could take it
Except for the things I think I would do differently
They keep coming between they are what I am
They have taught me little I did not know when I was young

There is nothing wrong with my age now probably
It is how I have come to it
Like a thing I kept putting off as I did my youth

There is nothing the matter with speech
Just because it lent itself
To my uses
Of course there is nothing the matter with the stars
It is my emptiness among them
While they drift farther away in the invisible morning

Looking for Mushrooms

for Jean and Bill Arrowsmith

When it is not yet day
I am walking on centuries of dead chestnut leaves
In a place without grief
Though the oriole
Out of another life warns me
That I am awake

In the dark while the rain fell
The gold chanterelles pushed through a sleep that was not mine
Waking me
So that I came up the mountain to find them

Where they appear it seems I have been before
I recognize their haunts as though remembering
Another life

Where else am I walking even now
Looking for me

Now It Is Clear

Now it is clear to me that no leaves are mine
no roots are mine
that wherever I go I will be a spine of smoke in the forest
and the forest will know it
we will both know it

and that birds vanish because of something
that I remember
flying through me as though I were a great wind
as the stones settle into the ground
the trees into themselves
staring as though I were a great wind
which is what I pray for

it is clear to me that I cannot return
but that some of us will meet once more
even here
like our own statues
and some of us still later without names
and some of us will burn with the speed
of endless departures

and be found and lost no more

End of Summer

High above us a chain of white buckets
full of old light going home

now even the things that we do
reach us after long journeys
and we have changed

The Unwritten

Inside this pencil
crouch words that have never been written
never been spoken
never been taught

they're hiding

they're awake in there
dark in the dark
hearing us
but they won't come out
not for love not for time not for fire

even when the dark has worn away
they'll still be there
hiding in the air
multitudes in days to come may walk through them
breathe them
be none the wiser

what script can it be
that they won't unroll
in what language
would I recognize it
would I be able to follow it
to make out the real names
of everything

maybe there aren't
many
it could be that there's only one word
and it's all we need
it's here in this pencil



every pencil in the world
is like this

Exercise

First forget what time it is
for an hour
do it regularly every day

then forget what day of the week it is
do this regularly for a week
then forget what country you are in
and practice doing it in company
for a week
then do them together
for a week
with as few breaks as possible

follow these by forgetting to add
or to subtract
it makes no difference
you can change them around
after a week
both will help you later
to forget how to count

forget how to count
starting with your own age
starting with how to count backward
starting with even numbers
starting with Roman numerals
starting with fractions of Roman numerals
starting with the old calendar
going on to the old alphabet
going on to the alphabet
until everything is continuous again



go on to forgetting elements
starting with water
proceeding to earth
rising in fire

forget fire

Passage

In autumn in this same life
I was leaving a capital
where an old animal
captured in its youth
one that in the wild
would never have reached such an age
was watching the sun set
over nameless
unapproachable trees
and it is spring

Yesterday

My friend says I was not a good son
you understand
I say yes I understand

he says I did not go
to see my parents very often you know
and I say yes I know

even when I was living in the same city he says
maybe I would go there once
a month or maybe even less
I say oh yes

he says the last time I went to see my father
I say the last time I went to see my father

he says the last time I saw my father
he was asking me about my life
how I was making out and he
went into the next room
to get something to give me

oh I say
feeling again the cold
of my father's hand the last time

he says and my father turned
in the doorway and saw me
look at my wristwatch and he
said you know I would like you to stay
and talk with me

oh yes I say

but if you are busy he said
I don't want you to feel that you
have to
just because I'm here

I say nothing

he says my father
said maybe
you have important work you are doing
or maybe you should be seeing
somebody I don't want to keep you

I look out the window
my friend is older than I am
he says and I told my father it was so
and I got up and left him then
you know

though there was nowhere I had to go
and nothing I had to do



Berryman

I will tell you what he told me
in the years just after the war
as we then called
the second world war

don't lose your arrogance he said
you can do that when you're older
lose it too soon and you may
merely replace it with vanity

just one time he suggested
changing the usual order
of the same words in a line of verse
why point out a thing twice

he suggested I pray to the Muse
get down on my knees and pray
right there in the corner and he
said he meant it literally

it was in the days before the beard
and the drink but he was deep
in tides of his own through which he sailed
chin sideways and head tilted like a tacking sloop

he was far older than the dates allowed for
much older than I was he was in his thirties
he snapped down his nose with an accent
I think he had affected in England

as for publishing he advised me
to paper my wall with rejection slips
his lips and the bones of his long fingers trembled
with the vehemence of his views about poetry

he said the great presence
that permitted everything and transmuted it
in poetry was passion
passion was genius and he praised movement and invention

I had hardly begun to read
I asked how can you ever be sure
that what you write is really
any good at all and he said you can't

you can't you can never be sure
you die without knowing
whether anything you wrote was any good
if you have to be sure don't write



Native Trees

Neither my father nor my mother knew
the names of the trees
where I was born
what is that
I asked and my
father and mother did not
hear they did not look where I pointed
surfaces of furniture held
the attention of their fingers
and across the room they could watch
walls they had forgotten
where there were no questions
no voices and no shade

Were there trees
where they were children
where I had not been
I asked
were there trees in those places
where my father and my mother were born
and in that time did
my father and my mother see them
and when they said yes it meant
they did not remember
What were they I asked what were they
but both my father and my mother
said they never knew

For the Departure of a Stepson

You are going for a long time
and nobody knows what to expect

we are trying to learn
not to accompany gifts with advice

or to suppose that we can protect you
from being changed

by something that we do not know
but have always turned away from

even by the sea that we love
with its breaking

and the dissolving days
and the shadows on the wall

together we look at the young trees
we read the news we smell the morning

we cannot tell you what to take with you
in your light baggage

On the Back of the Boarding Pass

In the airport by myself I forget
where I am that is the way they are made
over and over at such cost the ripped
halls lengthening through stretches of echoes I
have forgotten what day it is in this light
what time it could be this was the same morning
in which I mislaid the two timepieces
they may turn up again timepieces can be
bought but not the morning the waking
into the wish to stay and the vanishing
constants I keep returning to this was the
morning of mending the fence where the black dog
followed the water in after the last
cloudburst and I kept on trying to tie
a thread around the valley where we live
I was making knots to hold it there in its
place without changing as though this were the waking
this seeming this passage this going through

Green Fields

By this part of the century few are left who believe
in the animals for they are not there in the carved parts
of them served on plates and the pleas from the slatted trucks
are sounds of shadows that possess no future
there is still game for the pleasure of killing
and there are pets for the children but the lives that followed
courses of their own other than ours and older
have been migrating before us some are already
far on the way and yet Peter with his gaunt cheeks
and point of white beard the face of an aged Lawrence
Peter who had lived on from another time and country
and who had seen so many things set out and vanish
still believed in heaven and said he had never once
doubted it since his childhood on the farm in the days
of the horses he had not doubted it in the worst
times of the Great War and afterward and he had come
to what he took to be a kind of earthly
model of it as he wandered south in his sixties
by that time speaking the language well enough
for them to make him out he took the smallest roads
into a world he thought was a thing of the past
with wildflowers he scarcely remembered and neighbors
working together scything the morning meadows
turning the hay before the noon meal bringing it in
by milking time husbandry and abundance
all the virtues he admired and their reward bounteous
in the eyes of a foreigner and there he remained
for the rest of his days seeing what he wanted to see
until the winter when he could no longer fork
the earth in his garden and then he gave away
his house land everything and committed himself
to a home to die in an old chateau where he lingered
for some time surrounded by those who had lost



the use of body or mind and as he lay there he told me
that the wall by his bed opened almost every day
and he saw what was really there and it was eternal life
as he recognized at once when he saw the gardens
he had made and the green fields where he had been
a child and his mother was standing there then the wall would close
and around him again were the last days of the world

Waves in August

There is a war in the distance
with the distance growing smaller
the field glasses laying at hand
are for keeping it far away

I thought I was getting better
about that returning childish
wish to be living somewhere else
that I knew was impossible
and now I find myself wishing
to be here to be alive here
it is impossible enough
to still be the wish of a child

in youth I hid a boat under
the bushes beside the water
knowing I would want it later
and come back and find it there
someone else took it and left me
instead the sound of the water
with its whisper of vertigo

terror reassurance an old
old sadness it would seem we knew
enough always about parting
but we have to go on learning
as long as there is anything

Before the Flood

Why did he promise me
that we would build ourselves
an ark all by ourselves
out in back of the house
on New York Avenue
in Union City New Jersey
to the singing of the streetcars
after the story
of Noah whom nobody
believed about the waters
that would rise over everything
when I told my father
I wanted us to build
an ark of our own there
in the back yard under
the kitchen could we do that
he told me that we could
I want to I said and will we
he promised me that we would
why did he promise that
I wanted us to start then
nobody will believe us
I said that we are building
an ark because the rains
are coming and that was true
nobody ever believed
we would build an ark there
nobody would believe
that the waters were coming

The Summer

After we come to see it and
know we scarcely live without it
we begin trying to describe
what art is and it seems to be
something we believe is human
whatever that is something that
says what we are but then the same
beam of recognition stops at
one penguin choosing a pebble
to offer to the penguin he
hopes to love and later the dance
of awkwardness holding an egg
on one foot away from the snow
of summer the balancing on
one foot in the flash of summer

Wings

Among my friends here is an old man named
for the first glimpse of light before daybreak
he teaches flying that is to say he
is able to fly himself and has taught
others to fly and for them it is their
only treasure but he has not taught me
though I dream of flying I fly in dreams
but when I see him he tells me of plants
he has saved for me and where they come from
a new one each time they have leaves like wings
like many wings some with wings like whole flocks
but they never fly he says or almost
never though there are some that can and do
but when they fly it is their only treasure
he says that if he taught me how to fly
it would be one treasure among others
just one among others is what he says
and he will wait he tells me and he speaks
of his old friends instead and their meetings
at intervals at a place where they fought
a battle long ago when they were young
and won and the ancient forest there was
destroyed as they fought but when they return
it rises again to greet them as though
no harm had ever come to it and while
they are there it spreads its wings over them

The Name of the Air

It could be like that then the beloved
old dog finding it harder and harder
to breathe and understanding but coming
to ask whether there is something that can
be done about it coming again to
ask and then standing there without asking

To the Grass of Autumn

You could never believe
it would come to this
one still morning
when before you noticed
the birds already
were all but gone

even though year upon year
the rehearsal of it
must have surprised
your speechless parents
and unknown antecedents
long ago gathered to dust
and though even the children
have been taught to say
the word *witherith*

no you were known to be
cool and countless
the bright vision on all
the green hills
rippling in unmeasured waves
through the days in flower

now you are as the fog
that sifts among you
gray in the chill daybreak
the voles scratch the dry earth
around your roots
hoping to find something
before winter
and when the white air stirs
you whisper to yourselves
without expectation
or the need to know

The Odds

His first winter in that city
after years in the north a friend
wrote to me of how people there
were dealing with the cold
he told me that crews
were digging up the avenue
down at the corner all day
the men keeping a fire going
in an old oil drum with holes
down the sides and feeding it whatever
turned up and he had been watching
two men by the barrel with three
gloves between them passing one
glove back and forth
while they stamped their feet
and he had tried to tell whether
it was a right or a left glove