



EXPLODING FLOWERS
Selected Poems of Luis Garcia

Edited by
Belle Randall & Richard Denner



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Mr. Menu, Kayak, Berkeley, 1968

The Mechanic, White Rabbit Press, San Francisco, 1970

A Blue Book, Cloud Marauder Press, San Francisco, 1976

Beans, Oyez, San Francisco, 1976

Snowbird, Blue Fin Press, San Francisco, 1984

Poems for Dinner, Summit Road Press, Berkeley, 1997

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LUIS GARCIA: A POET'S TOUCH **Belle Randall**

Richard Denner has often acknowledged the influence of Luis Garcia on his poetry publicly and in print and I should too. Either one of us alone might be considered aberrant, but where two or more are gathered in his name perhaps some heed will be taken. Beyond ourselves, there are others who would also testify to Lu's influence, including the painter Larry Melnick and perhaps the poet Robert Creeley—voices more numerous and famous than even we his admirers might expect, thinking ourselves more exceptional than we are. But none, I think, are closer friends with Luis

than Richard and me. I love and admire Luis with all my heart, and, even when they were taking place, considered the hours I spent with him priceless, and prided myself on my good judgment in placing his friendship above everything else in my life (however his company might disappoint and tax me in other ways), in order to enjoy in person his beguiling lectures on Olson, Creeley and Levertov, delivered mainly while he drove, usually on some errand or another, for himself or his mother. He had been a delivery boy in a previous incarnation (“Mr. Menu”) and it suited him. Driving consumed all his excess energy and made him graceful. Dancing in and out of traffic, all the while, his hand in its fingerless leather glove restlessly tuning the radio, searching for jazz, settling for rock ‘n roll. Sometimes the hand would be handing me a roach in a roach-clip, or a bottle of French Beaujolais concealed in a brown paper bag. Luis was too nervous to sit still while he talked, or even to eat a meal. He preferred to go for a drive. Sometimes he drove past places I had lived in childhood to which I had never returned before, seeming to know my past life almost better than I did—no, this was fantasy of mine, sitting in the carriage, “having put away/my labor and my leisure too, /for his Civility.” Careful to distinguish what was real from what was not, I was ready to believe he could read my mind. It was Luis who taught me that friendship and poetry could have this kind of power. Although you may suspect that it was I who endowed him with his charisma, it was he who showed me that language could be magic. The word inside the word. The way the word “belief” unpacks its endless series of allusions to the Garden of Eden (be, belie, Eli, lie, elle, Eve, life, lief, leave, on leave, leaf, leaves), not because of etymology, but by pure chance. Poetry in the context of Luis’ friendship was a revelation.

Luis had a lot to teach me about friendship, love, and the essence of poetry. He wore a hat with a feather in the band like Holden Caulfield. He was Mr. Poetry Man (how corny, but I can’t help it, it was fact). In his company, I felt a great sense of imminence, as if something wonderful was about to happen. His appearance, both in high school, and later, after his physical transformation as a result of working-out, was always charmed, and took on a million aspects, so that at one moment I would be seeing him as a dowager empress, the next as a Hindu beggar, the next as Zapata. Nowadays this effect can be reproduced digitally on film, with one face morphing from moment to moment into faces of every age, race, and gender. If they ever make a movie about Luis they should use this effect, rather than any specific actor, to portray his character, so that the story unfolds with a kind of Everyman walking through its center.

For Luis the poet is a jazz musician, the poem essentially an improvisation. A handful of words (of sounds, of syllables) is flung out like a melody. These words can come from the heart or from a passing billboard—they can be almost anything--impassioned, amusing, arbitrary—the poet plays with those words finding in them music, puns, delight, resolution. A modest riff. A harbinger of “language” poetry, in that, way back in the sixties, sometimes he plays with words as words, not with the things they represent, pulling meaning out from under you like a rug (“This much I know: There’s a rat in the pack, and a ship in the deck”). So much for certain knowledge. The result of Lu’s play is to transform the random thing, whatever it was, into music, into art. Early on he wrote many poems that stand for me with my favorite poems of all time as a wall against the dark. As soon as I started looking, I rapidly found 80. Reading them again now I have the feeling that I have underestimated him, even while praising him, his poems are still so alive, so fresh and strange.

THE TWIN

He finds himself beside himself,
beside a dog filled with lilies,
a horse with angels.
He is not beautiful
but he is as the storm is not
what he thinks he is.

As the mountains occur
in the dream of his mother, he finds
there is certainly nothing
moreover than that.

My friendship with Luis brought me literally to the brink of madness in that in his company I was prepared to believe in magic, or in at least possibilities beyond anything I had previously deemed. Now that the language had started talking, who knew what it would say? But unlike Luis and Richard, whose belief in magic got them into trouble in the real world, I remained sane enough not to cross a line. I gave myself conscientiously to my work—writing and teaching poetry--and managed to get my bills paid etc. withal. I knew what was real. In reality, I was acting like a dunce following around a guy I wished were my lover but wasn't with my mouth open, hanging on his every word, most of which were inane and nonsensical. (There was a period of time when Luis and I actually did talk nonsense to one another, much to the annoyance, understandably, of others present). I was also stoned much of the time which greatly enhanced my powers of wishful thinking. Even so, I have never regretted the aimless hours we spent together. Long after another woman would have bailed (or so I imagined) as the result of one or another of the "tests" that his personality presented, challenges that popped up with the regularity targets in a shooting gallery (How long could you endure his sexual rejection? His incessant non-stop talk which pursued you on occasion even into the bathroom? His consuming your marijuana in conspicuous amounts? His picking up strangers while supposedly with you?). As a trophy, Luis was kind of a booby prize.

Thom Gunn did not share my fascination with the power of puns. But this is understandable. For Thom poetry was all about using words to refer to things outside the poem, and using them accurately. I wonder if Robert Duncan was able to show Thom the magical aspect of language. Perhaps no one could. Thom's honor lay in his resistance to wishful thinking--a resistance which he maintained assiduously, and (rather spectacularly) in spite of his copious use of drugs. More likely, he knew the magic of puns already, and knew, as I did not, that the fairy dust is finite and eventually exhausted.

In those days Lu's "cover" (for that is how I thought of it) was that he was a recovering speed addict who had had a nervous breakdown, whose mother, a child psychologist's solution was to "regress" him back to adolescence (we were both over 30) in order for him to re-enact leaving home, this time successfully. The reason I couldn't be his girlfriend was because he wasn't ready for the responsibility yet. This was the first of about 50 reasons offered over the course of the next two or three years in which I followed him faithfully, in so far as possible, everywhere. He was "too young" because the first time he left home he wound up marrying a girl he had known only a day with whom he got high on LSD who fortuitously turned out to be the heiress to the Baskins

Robbins fortune as well as a very nice person. She very well might have been the right woman for him, Luis said, but they had ruined it by being too impulsive. Second thoughts? You bet they had had second thoughts. And that was why he and I must wait.

In 1968, Luis's almost fifteen years of methadrine addiction, the result of the use of speed to treat his hyperactivity in childhood, had been brought to a screaming halt by policemen with bull horns blaring "Please remain calm" to the audience at the inauguration of the new President of San Francisco State. Directed to this ceremony by "voices on the radio," Luis had jumped on stage and wrested the mike from the hand of then President Elect Summerskill in order to address the crowd on what he imagined was his own Coronation as the Prince of Tides, or some such apocalyptic vision. According to the San Francisco Chronicle "the interloper had to be subdued by the police." Somehow, at the time, this seemed to me appealing. It was cool. The stuff of J.D. Salinger. It was hilarious. I told the story over and over, imagining with a wince Luis's inward downward spiral from believing the crowd were gathered in his honor at the end of Time to understanding the sordid facts of his arrest.

Borges, Olson, Creeley, Levertov were the poets whose books Lu gave me, and they were each important, Olson perhaps the least, though for a season or two I became hyper aware of my breath in relation to the line, and I listened for the pattern of heart to breath to ear (if I have the order right) as I began to experiment with free verse.

I should mention that my friendship with Luis blossomed in the months when I was recovering from an ectopic pregnancy which ruptured twice, a near death experience. I was lonely for someone to talk to, and vulnerable to believing the very laws of the universe had changed. Probably I would have entertained fantasies that I had "died" and was being "reborn" even without Luis' influence. And what did that mean, anyway? I remember Donald's Davie pointing out to me that "death" and "rebirth" used in this way were just rhetorical strategies. He clearly disapproved of what he saw as a Californian's casual resort to them. He asked me if I saw a danger in apocalyptic visions. The question was a good one, apocalyptic visions were rife at the time. My long poem "Solitaire," completed under Donald's tutelage, ended with one. But the resort to extremes of language represented real experience. Poems read with Luis seemed to speak in covert ways expressly to the reader. I was as thoroughly bewitched as when I heard my own name Belle in the lyric to "Bell-bottomed Trousers" at the age of three. I had been seduced and was living in a state of suspended definition, as if "negative capability" were the condition of my life, waiting to see where I would be led next by the word inside the word. It was like entering an underworld: the underside of the tongue.

Luis and I read our poetry out loud to one another and to friends, as I had never done before. Imagine! I was thirty and had been writing poetry for over fifteen years, but almost no one knew this about me, it was a kind of terrible secret on account of which I felt aloof from everyone, like the Little Princess in the orphanage. Luis was helping me prepare to be a poet in public, I see now. He had—mysteriously to me—connections among the avant-garde. Readings were arranged—at a San Francisco tavern, a book store, the invitation of Morton Marcus at Cabrillo Community College, the Encore, a little theater in downtown San Francisco. Reading poetry aloud at times Luis's body was so charged with energy it was as if he were having an internal orgasm. In those days, I too read with great intensity, venting my terror by emphasizing the rhythm like the elderly

Yeats—an approach that seems unsubtle nowadays, but for me then, as I think for Yeats, the heavy rhythm was a way into an altered state, a trance, almost—or, anyway, was a way of placing the language in another realm and infusing it with energy. When *Solitaire* came out, I was invited to give a reading at Stanford. That may have been one of the evenings Luis’s passed a joint among the students at a private party afterwards, somewhat to my dismay, for I never mixed marijuana and teaching. Permitting it, now seems an error of judgment, but, at the time, I wasn’t sure in which direction I was more likely to error. Most of the time, I feared I wasn’t far out enough, comparing myself to the poets who prevailed—Ed Dorn, Allen Ginsberg, Diane DiPrima—and with this in mind, probably took a toke myself.

During the time I hung out with him, Luis’s poems began to change—with a poem like “Ribbons” marking the transition. “Ribbons” could almost be Williams.

RIBBONS

Coarse grass bent
toward the old man’s imagination,
wind opened his eyes
with what he called nature—

grass, wind, sunlight,
and the thoughts of an old man
hoisting themselves into the air.

But it’s different from Williams. It was Luis who pointed out to me that William Carlos Williams claimed his Spanish roots by retaining his middle name, “Carlos,” like a spot of color between the two staid and symmetrical “Williams”—“William” happening to be the name most often occurring among poets of the English tradition. But of the two poets, it is Luis who actually manages to bring together the Anglo and the Latin, braiding imagism and surrealism, in his poetry of the sixties. In “Ribbons” the thoughts of the old man (often in Lu’s poems a stand-in for the poet) are depicted as concrete things—a reality comparable to the “grass, wind, sunlight,” and not merely their intangible “correlative.” Like the surrealists, Luis goes beyond the natural image (“what he called nature”) to express the truth of internal experience:

suddenly I could see
the branches made of blood
in the eye of some strange diety.

The poem “No Kidding” presents the same elements as “Ribbons” from a slightly different perspective. Whereas in “Ribbons”:

Coarse grass bent
toward the old man’s imagination
In “No Kidding”:
I bent toward the grass

listening for the voices
someone had hidden there.

One can't date" Luis's poems from his books, which often include revisions of earlier poems, but after "Ribbons"—after, say, about 1973—the language of his poems becomes increasingly opaque. Words are less referential and more present as palpable material substance made of sound: one and two syllable words mostly, hard consonants, long vowels, and rhymes, arrange and rearrange themselves. Severely minimalist, using very few words—almost like reefer magnet poetry (no pun intended) but with a less self-consciously “poetic” basic vocabulary—almost the equivalent in language of abstract painting. Luis poems of this period seem to be made out of a finite number of words: water, miles, morning, bell, midnight, feet, horn, etc. Sometimes Luis, would introduce one of his own poems as “political,” and then read some riff on “the bill that breaks the duck's back” (quack quack) as a protest against the rising costs of healthcare. I found this very amusing. I would have thought that because, for Luis and I, poetry was not intentional, political statements, were probably better left to prose, but here was Luis asusual showing me the way.

“No Kidding” is explicitly about the word inside the word.
NO KIDDING

I bent toward the grass
listening for the voices
someone had hidden there.

I laughed when I discovered
the words inside the words
I had already discovered—

—one of my favorite poems, all the way to its non-sequitur end:

I guess I too must borrow
the theme—how else
can I report the sadness
when there was none?

Like me, Luis is functionally dyslexic and attaches hand-wringing anxiety to fairly straightforward linguistic choices. I remember him pacing the floor wondering whether one might correctly omit “can I” from the penultimate line above.

Puns offered a running commentary, winking and latent, in the content of almost any printed matter. The voice of the collective—for language is a collective creation--was surprisingly familiar, a bit like the voice of Groucho Marx delivering a series of insinuating wise cracks. If you said “embarrass,” it said “bare ass,” if you said “therapist,” it echoed, “the rapist.” I remembered that punning is the province of fatherhood, and considered that poetry might be the working out of something in our DNA.

The spring of 1972, Luis drove me past a house where I used to live in the north Oakland hills on Merriwood Drive. For the first time that year, I noticed and named the pale blaze of the tulip magnolias. Could it really be I had never noticed them before? I was thirty-three and had never noticed spring?

It was a time of new beginnings. I had recovered from the ectopic pregnancy and broken up with the prospective father, with whom, when pregnant, I had planned to marry. Now that I was no longer pregnant, we went our separate ways. I moved out of the funny little house on Wheeler Street built on a lot so small it could not be legally re-sold, which my former boyfriend and I had purchased for the incredible bargain of \$7,000, and where I had sometimes felt I was living in a coffin with vines growing in through the cracks, into a lighter more spacious space—the top half of the duplex my mother owned on Harwood (she was now married and living elsewhere), a wonderful airy house with a creek behind it. The flat I was moving into had an extra bedroom, and Luis asked if he could rent it. His mother sent a check for \$35 rent, signaling her approval, and I bought a new nightgown in anticipation of whatever this arrangement might bring. But Luis wasn't quite ready for the big move yet. Weeks went by. His mother sent another month's rent, and another. Luis parked in the driveway, emptied the back seat of boxes of belongings, carried them up the long flight of stairs to my apartment, and stacked them in his bedroom closet. He even put his shoes under the bed.

That was a poetic touch.

MISTER POETRY MAN

Richard Denner

I will say what I have said before. Luis Garcia has been my greatest mentor, always present with insights and humorous twists of perspective. Meeting Lu right after the Berkeley Poetry Conference, in 1965, we both felt we had just experienced two weeks of white light intensity, and we wanted to maintain the euphoria induced by the poetry of Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer and others.

Lu's style of writing is unique. His playing with the sound of words and his discovery of words inside of words inspired me to re-evaluate my assumptions about what defines a poem and, then, how to write one. I remember him encouraging me to read Gertrude Stein and Federico Garcia Lorca. He helped me understand that it was important to discover my own voice, *to forge a blade*, as he put it. Here is "Worship":

Worship,
warship,
wordship —

one ship follows another;
one word follows another;
one war follows another;
one wave follows another —

one ship, one word,
one war, one wave
upon a rain-beaten sea,

my rusted knees,
my loose cannons
hidden among the screaming trees,

my invisible shadow,
my loose ends
wanting to be tied up
(again and again) —

this light, he said,
is more than light
dreaming as it does.

Lu taught me to dream with words, but his influence was also concrete. He gave me a used thesis binder with a spring spine and told me to get my shit together. I began to organize my poetry into books, and this has been a seminal part of my oeuvre for the past forty years. He instilled confidence in me, and I began to write in earnest by improvisational composing, blowing with words, in Berkeley in the 60s, in an acid-induced psychosis. I began by imitating Lu because his poems sizzle. “They move so fast, if you aren’t ready, you miss them,” Richard Silberg said. And I liked that the poems were like that.

By imitating Lu’s use of jazz rhythms and breath notation, I began to read my poems aloud. At first, he and I were street poets, cornering innocent bystanders, and then later we were invited to read in bookstores and art galleries. I learned my craft much as Leadbelly learned his by putting his spine against the piano. In my case, I associated 24/7 with a true wordsmith.

Lu is loyal to his friends, considers friendship the greatest art. I may be jumping to conclusions, but I think Belle and I are referred to in the following poem, “Pitch”:

Fly,
ball
in sunlight—

sunlight
across a plate.
Dinner is waiting.

Weights
are lifting
relief.

Bells, yes
bells are ringing
in bars.

Barbells
also seem
to be ringing.

Rusted wedding rings
are ringing too.
And a heap of hands
have just rung themselves.

As *they*
call down
to us

they realize
quite suddenly

all lines
are busy.

As this poem is in a book entitled *Poems for Dinner*, which is dedicated to me, I think I am correct in assuming this “Dinner” who is waiting is me, and that the “*they*” is Belle and myself, since I know Lu and Belle spend long hours on the phone, although it has been a while since they spent much time in bars. In another book, *A Gift from the Darkness*, in a poem “Ready”:

Denner is ready.
Another friend of mine
is also ready
to go out
for breakfast.

Further in the poem, a “cup is breaking” and a “car is going fast,” and I can remember the exact events, just as I can remember being with Lu, walking up Telegraph Avenue, as he extemporaneously composed “Hot House” while eyeballing a lovely lady:

 swinging behind
her swinging behind

is swinging behind her

like a lantern
her swinging behind.

or being in the old U.C. Berkeley Art Gallery and looking at a collage that contained a map of the Near East, which then became an element in “Old Games”:

You must not forget to play
from time to time
old games with new things.

Have you used delta as a password,
peninsula, island, Arabia, Red Sea, Persian Gulf?

Now that your world map is started,
the game of guide may be changed a little
and may be called host.

Children and guests
who come to your room might like to know
why the earth seems flat.

Notice the lines,
all the lines are exactly the same length;
they form eventually a circle.

But since you see
only a small part of this circle,
the lines seem almost straight.

Do you see why,
why these gardens are along the river
and not in other places?

If the guide cannot answer
your question, one of you who knows
may take his place.

In 1965, I felt the challenge, and now, forty years later, this prophetic poem still brims with wisdom. It seems to me that Luis Garcia embodies a contradictory mode of childish-worldishness, which he at times expresses in a kindly, albeit aloof, manner and at other times with a black, surreal humor, which is a mix of sarcasm, paranoia and biting satire. It is this type of humor that unites Belle, Lu, and I. We receive gifts from the darkness. The three of us find that words are the only light which light our way.

from *MR. MENU* (1968)

MONDAY

Monday must be on fire
because the blackbirds
that frequent the towers
of invisible palaces
have given their feathers away.

Please, leave the room
if you think
you are going to be frightened
when my words become mirrors
or exploding flowers.

ONCE

Once I lived in a simple drowse;
dumb as a feather
I fed at my father's breast
content with the eyes of his narrow dream.

now I'm awake all over;
my hands have discovered the cold skin of stones;
I've turned out a foxy dancer,
an untraditional sounder of things.

alone with my bones,
I go where the sunlight covers the ground;
there in the early morning
I seek my essentials.

They are songs within songs;
they are white sounds
that rise in the distance like birds.

THE BOY

Morning opens
like a fan;
pressure of sunlight,
intricate silences.

A boy enters my room;
he carries in his heart
a piece of silk,
a paper flower
and a hand
of fine porcelain.

Childhood—a song
fifteen summers long,
a sadness propped
in the bright curves
of the body.

Plum trees blossom
in the yard
beds of iris,
grass beginning
on the hills.

THE DAILY MENU

The eyes of morning
looking at me turn away,

phantoms sleeping in the trees,
a panhandler, greasy conversation,
trucks rumbling down the street.

As usual, on my way to work,
uneasy, afraid,
dreaming of another time.

Lovers feeding on each other
slide along the dark railings.
November,

old men, their faces turned upward,

kneeling on the grass
as if a god were speaking to them.

THE MUSICIANS

A dwarf with a bass drum
strapped to his back and
a blindman buckling under the burden
of a huge hand organ
moved toward me.

Then slowly, very slowly,
the blindman began to crank
the organ's handle
while the dwarf marched in circles
booming his drum.

Suddenly, a music,
a strange sadness, a confusion
of butterflies and owls
filled the air.

THE DAY OFF

Bird chirp, sunlight—
God knows where it started.
in the backseat of some car,
I suppose.

Saturday nights.
yipee!
spread the branches wide;
find the secret places.

THE INTRODUCTION *for Dewey*

He is beautiful, the governor of lilies,
with his blue smile and his wooden wings,
with the wine uncoiling in his glass
and the shadows hiding their children
under his house.

Time lends him its secret machine.
Stones come alive in his pockets.
Beating his head on the stars,
he makes his own way to silence.

At the end of each day,
the bones of his speech become teachers
and the people locked in his hands
are singing.

HOT HOUSE

Swinging behind
her swinging behind

is swinging behind her
like a lantern

her swinging behind.

THE RIVER

Losing hope at one bend,
gaining it back at the next,

the river is unpredictable,
the boat old and leaky.

Each day as we set out
I watch the water
slapping the sides.

Each day I am afraid.

Downstream
a glint of light on leaves,
the deep throated call
of animals.

THE ACCIDENT

The keys and the locks
have rusted. The doors to our house
will no longer open.
Or if they will

then too much is
too much. It is very difficult
to explain just how
it happened.

I had thought
it would be different,
what came to us,
love's accident.

I had thought
it would be something else,
you and me together
in that room.

But then when
I touched you, there was
no light
in your body.

FOR MY FRIEND

It's autumn,
the Red Sox have just lost the series,
singing, the Cardinals sit
high up in the branches.

Speak to me, says my friend

whose face
I never quite see,

tell me the truth about boxing gloves,
wheels, sunshine and oil,
bring me to the center of something,

a cup or a shoe,
a car or a street, the feelings you find
in the eyes of your mother.

Somewhere, a pocket is filling with silver;
Somewhere the heart of a tree
is on fire.

Listen, the smoke and the flames
are calling.

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

Yesterday,
columns of cigarettes
fell through a floor
where beggars and salesmen danced.

Today,
a desert overflowing with eyes
has covered my head
with hysterical flowers.

Tomorrow,
performers wrapped in the robes
of another time will balance silence
on the tips of their fingers.

POETRY

It all comes down to this
a bird who sings only
when the door of his cage

is left accidentally open.

THE STRANGER

He comes to loan the sky
to a feather, to angels eating frost
and clowns eating stone.

His tongue is wet
with the saliva of bees
and his veins are filled
with a tulip's blood.

There are people who say
that he sleeps
in the bones of bad weather
or the secret places
where the water kneels.

The birds that lay their eggs
in the goblets of dawn
are perched on his fingers.

WHO'S WHO

When the red dog
dived into and out of its cage
I fell to the ground
among feverish coins.

Consulted a doctor
but he really couldn't tell me a thing
about the invitation I'd received
from no one at all.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 13th 1967

A statue is telling a story
but no one is listening.

A coffin with the mouth of a fish
is talking to the lady in black
who has hidden his mind
in a box created by distance.

That's me they're discussing.
he screams, here's my I.D. to prove it.

Ladies and gentlemen,
your attention please, this is your driver
Luis Garcia.

THE PASSPORT

On the back porch
of his mother's house, a clown
watches the wind
making grass into flags.

He thinks a trip to the doctor
will bring back
his dream of the ocean.

Somewhere he saw a sign that read
"A medicine ball will be given
to all those in favor
of playing the game."

The battles begin and end
in the palm of his hand—
one zone gives way to another.

Drunken bottles are screaming,
the underwear seem to be chipmunks,
a girl unbuttons her blouse,
love shrugs its shoulders;

a child discovers the teeth
that have power over the shadows,
spiders are singing

to someone the trees have forgotten,

and the streams are flooding the meadows
with the blood
of pearls.

GOT LOST

Got lost trying to find myself,
saw the fence beneath the song.

The windows took a deep breath,
snakes were solving the problems
a man should solve.

Nothing can be done
to make conscience
obsolete.

THE TWISTER

The accident was terrible.
It completely destroyed the altar
where the grass had been known to worship.

A group of people were milling about
trying to find what they called
a sacred spoon.

At the same time, I, too, had my problems.
A blackbird was pushing me
into the darkness.

The next thing I knew
my hands were covered with thorns
my feet with flies.

I pulled a coin from my pocket
and got on an ambulance
walked to the rear and sat down.

An old man with the face of a boy
and a girl whose name no one knows
sat down beside me.

Suddenly, I could see
the branches made of blood
in the eye of some strange deity.

NEW YEAR'S 1968

Bricks and hinges,
a house in pieces, my mind,
fractured plaster,

fatigue of Paris,
and the voice of Helen
across the centuries

secured a key
to the doors of fountains, clouds
and a stadium

where my lips pursued
a football made of candy,
time out, the noisy crowd,

referees, card stunts
and yards and yards of ribbon
for victory.

The person my mother found
hiding in the attic
might be a movie star.

Long ago, the garden
sank into the gutter.

Now, jars of money overflow;
the terrible prospect, politicians
inhabiting the moon,
under eucalyptus,
my youth burnt out, twilight,
boys and girls.

from *THE MECHANIC* (1970)

THE MECHANIC

I'm convinced, it's a gear that's loose.
Outside, the day goes on and on.

Put some salt on his tail,
complicate the mess
with recipes beyond original intentions.

If everything is a passing by,
a sleeping, then it is
somewhere in the mind, a zero growing large,
a graph that measures nothing.

Also, another point I can't explain:
the orders come,
they are the only issue.

OLD GAMES

You must not forget to play
from time to time
old games with new things.

Have you used delta as a password,
peninsula, island, Arabia, Red Sea, Persian Gulf?

Now that your world map is started,
the game of guide may be changed a little
and may be called host.

Children and guests
who come to your room might like to know
why the earth seems flat.

Notice the lines,
all the lines are exactly the same length;
they form eventually a circle.

But since you see
only a small part of this circle,
the lines seem almost straight.

Do you see why,
why these gardens are along the river
and not in other places?

If the guide cannot answer
your question, one of you who knows
may take his place.

LONG DISTANCE

She moves in shadow
and smiles at particulars.

Good intentions modify the map
she makes for us.

Or if they don't
we should be

perhaps embarrassed
and certainly,

most certainly, afraid.
Right now

a mother's voice is
using up her child.

TIME OUT

Should we end
the same way we begin, do the answers

come to those
who stick it out

in spite of the fear
they always feel, who dream of graces
as they wait to watch the others
work and play?

The place becomes important
no matter what we say.
A yellow cello singing by itself
serves as a reminder.

The day is full of birds;
my nerves are shot
and death participates
in everything.

JUNE NIGHT

I am standing far out in space
on a moonlit hill in Berkeley.

A train is leaving a station,
a station is leaving a train.

People are waving.
I am waving! Waving

we watch them
go by.

DOUBLE PLAY

The Dodgers are tied up with the Giants,
tied up in the cellar.

Bats hang from the ceiling;
balls, you need them
to play the game right.

Now, write down the pitch,
write down the middle;
don't strike any out, words,
don't strike any out.

THE THREAD

Time
everywhere
songs
spring
wide
open
white
weather
ribbons
of
joy
wind
over
towns
small
and
lonely
lakes
larks
quickly
quickly
call.

THE TOURISTS

We looked out over the water
it slept, or seemed to—
dark eyes, purple leaves

and under them a quiet feeling
mingled with lust,
the moonlight understood,

I know it did, an impish grin

came across its face
and then, as if by magic,

the baskets filled
with tiny wooden birds
began to appear.

THE BIRD

Charlie Parker, The Bird,
park your bird,
Charlie,

in the yard,
bird's eye view
of inside out
side ways.

We know
we don't
how high
you flew.

The Bird
got wise,
was wise,
bird wise,

beak, beak,
kee, wee,
beak, beak,
kee, wee.

THE MISTAKE

The aftermath was a mistake—
after math

I made a mistake,
but it wasn't the same

all the same
I made a mistake.

ALL OF US

All of us live on Blake street,
but we don't, do we or do we don't,
I'm not sure you understand

the question is out of the question,
there's no Mark left, no Antony either.
Do you see why, why we shot the scene

in a different place each time?
It's dead now, but nobody cares,
in fact there's nobody left to care.

About points I can tell you very little,
about pistons a little less.

FOR SOMEONE ELSE

What I'm trying to say is don't try,
at least try not to;
three times four
should be more

but and before
we find the right amount
we must always count
on never counting the count.

That is to say—I'm Tiny and you're Tim
You're Tom and I'm Thumb
I'm a bell and you're a drum

You're the side and I'm the car,
I'm the hitching post and you're the star
We're the fairy and the tale

You're the crime and I'm the jail.

As you can see,
we all have eyes;
someone cries, I think they're spies—
Well—man, at any rate,

no one should weed
the little garden by the gate.
Now, lay it down
across the town.

THE DESIGN

At the edge of the apple's vision,
a pigeon is seeking
the seeds of tomorrow.

Even so, dawn will not show me
its sunlit skeleton
unless I discover a saint in the floor
or a long look leaning out of a window.

Over and over again,
I dream of a secret whose flaming hands
will know how to find
the philosophies hidden in a pool of hair.

Over and over again,
the weather
controls the tooth.

THE ROACH

for Ed

When the roach disappears
a bird with a thousand voices
begins to sing.

Serpents of crystal,

ashes and bees
fly through the air

toward windows of mist
and pillars of leaves.
Carnivals start their shiny machines,

their reds and their greens,
and lions devour the coins
they discover in streams.

from *BEANS* (1976)

BEANS

Rain on windows, dance of silk,
a ghost demanding a destination,
hands caressing a feather,
and beans fortifying muscles which create,

a voice asking, as usual, stupid questions,
giving, as usual, stupid answers;
solutions running down our legs,

beans, beans, beans.

FLOWERS

red flowers are growing in the trees.
They are connected to the fingers of this man
who is connected to everything,

who understands this silence
these flowers
which are connected to his hands.

Imaginary solutions are running down his legs.
His legs are running down the street.
His hands and feet are ways of water

giving up their dead.

His words are lamps which light his way
and at the same time darkness
whispering of love's imagination

quietly drowning
in the darkness.

CABBAGE

Cabbage and hunger,
a waitress slamming her despair on a table,
a comment whose meaning

makes stones whisper and whistle,
an old man transforming anger into rage,
a face twisting itself into another,

streets sprayed with darkness,
a fifty cent piece hovering between
stale air and shrill voices,

cars gathered at corners
and the language of birds
settling like dust upon my shoulders.

NO KIDDING

I bent toward the grass
listening for the voices
someone had hidden there.

I laughed when I discovered
the words inside the words
I had already discovered—

candles of the mind,
leaves nailed to a star,
a mouth filled with light

and gods invented by the sky.

I laughed at these,
all of these,
when I discovered
the words inside the words
I had already discovered.

I guess, I, too,
must borrow the theme.
How else can I report the sadness
when there was none?

RIBBONS

Coarse grass bent
toward the old man's imagination,
wind opened his eyes
with what he called nature—

grass, wind, sunlight,
and the thoughts of an old man
hoisting themselves into the air.

FOR CARMEN

The sound of tonight, she said
is not tonight.
Nevertheless, here we are
trying hard to be together.

The sound of numbers, she said,
terrifies me,
and yet the room
is making room for us.

Her voice was a perfect color
and on the end
of each of her words

I could see an ocean,
an ocean of time,
and a stone lady

who had discovered a place
where there was no place,
a place

beyond the government
of any paradise.

THE SIGNATURE

When the message in our eyes
was found in the silence of old women
and completely misunderstood,

all of the riders fell from their horses,
and someone informed us the race was over.
Mysteries ceased to be mysteries

and clowns who claimed to be kings
created other clowns who danced in the streets
with yesterday's lovers, danced

till tomorrow was finally tomorrow.
This is a song of motives that punish,
this is a song of hands and feet,

a mouth of mist that sings to a man
who has fallen asleep in a field.

SECRET PLACES

Once again they reveal
their inner life
as they offer me grass and beans.

Once again they point fingers
that touch threads

that point to other fingers.

Secret places,
threads that are also verbs and nouns,
points that are also fingers

and secret places
that are also other secret places.
Secret places,

once again their beauty
hangs by threads. Their hands open,
eyes see, mouths speak—

once again I hear their bells
and feel a deep sense
of recognition.

AS USUAL

I am thinking somewhere
someone must be turning into somewhere.
Sunday seems permanent—
the door to my room,

roses and smoke,
smoke and roses,
and one rose creating smoke.
My room is wavering.

Somewhere in my mind,
I can see Indians.
Somewhere else a young woman
is talking about midnight.

And somewhere inside her words,
I can hear time destroying itself.
If dreaming has a form,
what is it?

A form, perhaps,
that informs us of itself
only when it disappears

into itself.

Its thoughts, your thoughts,
my thoughts and the wind,
leaves and branches made of metal,
roots of glass.

LEAVES

A long poem finds its mark—
a short one also.

What says what
and what doesn't?

The leaves mark time.
Their repetition marks out

the same dimension
I see

when seeing you—a
love-encrusted alphabet.

A,B,C.TIMEPIECE

Someone said,
A Spaniard In The Works. Of course,
he's working on his work

for everyone
to show cause,
to justify, perhaps, applause,

a thing you know they say
we musn't think about. Now
don't pout, instead

look about the room.
Remember all the things he said
about the living and the dead.

from *A BLUE BOOK* (1976)

THE CELLIST

Unexpectedly this music,
this sunlight arrived.
The sky turns
suddenly clear.
Flowers sprout in my head.
Deep in my body
gardens begin.
Your fingers move
over cello strings.
The sunlight falls
breeding flowers.

I had been long unfamiliar
with greenness.
For a long time contentment
had been only a distance,
then,
unexpectedly,
this sunlight.

A CLOCK'S TUESDAY ORATION

You sit beside me,
and again the voice in your shoes tells me
of alphabets bearded with rust,
broken skulls of birds,

and children who were smothered
in the pockets of the wind.
Again it reminds me
that the silence

camped
outside my window

is the dark attendant
who will someday

pack my heart with moss.
Much of the time
I go my way
which is an odd color,

but today the voice of your feet
has placed death's name in my hand,
and I have paused, reached out,
and touched the flowers.

NEW WORDS

I am reconciled to this:
language does become old and worn,
wrinkles till it hangs,
burnt out in its

field of the mind—
bones of cracked weeds
twisted and shiny,
bending in the wind.

I know that as trees
put on leaves,
a few at a time,
I must discover a language,

must seek it
in things about me,
must hear with a stranger's ear
mountain tunes

and the clank
of a car as it passes,
must see with eyes grown clear
countries born in blossoms

and the sea
become a field of flowers,
startled into being

by the sun's glare.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

A bee is always busy
being what it ought to be.
A bee must be
what it must be
to be at all.

This is the answer.

from *SNOWBIRD* (1984)

SOUTHPAW

A plate of leftovers,
a left-handed stranger
standing on the left side
of a one way street.

A right way,
a wrong way,
a right way to right,
a left way to left.

A beautiful young woman
walking alone
in the rain
feeling left out.

A feeling
of past being present,
a right way
now being left.

OVER DEW

A blue sky
was over dew.
A bit of dew
was over leaves.

What was left
was overheard.
A struggle was left,
a struggle over dew.

What was said
hovered
overhead.

VOICE

An old man
is speaking to himself.
Voice of a small self
is speaking to an old man.

An old man
is speaking to his own voice.
An old man
is dreaming that he owns
his own voice.

An old man
is finally speaking
with his own voice.

A BLUE FIN

A blue fin was seen
in the vicinity of an island
both of us had dreamt about.

He was speaking of a blue fin

when you arrived.
And just after you left
he began speaking of a right way
and of a wrong way.

A beautiful young woman
had spoken to him
about feeling left out.

A blue fin
was seen in the vicinity
of a young woman
sunbathing
on a beach.

A SIGHTING

Someone hands him
a five dollar bill.
“Thanks for the fin,”
he says,
and puts the bill
in his pocket.

A man named Bill
puts a five dollar bill
in his pocket.

A woman named Mickey
puts a fin
in her pocket.

Somewhere a pocket
is filling with wind.
Somewhere else
a man is filling
his car with gas.

And somewhere
far off some dark coast
a huge blue fin
can suddenly

be seen.

A BLUE TAIL

A blue fin
sits beside
a basket.

A basketball
sits beside
a blue fin.

A basketball,
a blue fin,
and a basket
sit beside each other.

This is the story
of a blue fin
of a basket ball
and of a basket.

This is the story
of a blue fin
with a blue tail
pinned upon it.

A PLACE OF MORNING

He woke in the middle of his favorite dream,
thinking to dream this dream once more quickly.
The quickness with which the whole thing, as he now called it,
had occurred truly amazed him. A maze of events all
taking on the shape of a single story or in this case
a single dream. So he now comes to this morning,
this place of dreams, still morning. The sound of a bell
now takes shape in the distance. A stage and a series of events
now take their shapes from shapelessness. And so the dream
itself continues.

Empty places, traces of a cold wind, a movement toward
a place of morning, a moment there to dream of other mornings.
And so the other mornings come and go, one inside the other.
And so this morning comes and goes deep inside itself,
a place of dreams, a place of other mornings.

Now he wakes inside another place. The time is morning.
The house is cold. A cold wind traces a pattern across
the windows of yet another house. Outside in the dark trees
bits and pieces of sunlight suddenly appear. A sunlit room
and the presence of another person moving in that room
now also suddenly appear. This, he thinks, this place
is truly a place of morning.

A MORNING PLACE

A morning place,
a place where two strangers
often meet.

A morning place,
a place where two strangers
often sit suspended deep
inside a beam of light.

Now eye sees
across the light,
two snowbirds
quietly in flight.

WAKES

He wakes
among the voices
from another place.

He wakes
on board some dark ship,
staring at its wake.

MONKEY BUSINESS

A monkey in a business suit
is doing business
with another monkey.

A suit of cards,
a business suit,
a monkey wearing
a monkey suit.

Water shines,
moon shines,
monkey shines

KEY

A monkey
with a blue key
in his hand.

An old monk
with a blue key
in his hand.

A blue key
in the wet hand
of the sea.

An old man
thinking
he has seen something
for the first time

FINISH

He sits quietly
in a dark corner

of a well lit room
finishing the end of something.

He thinks,
there is always room

for one more.

A room for one more,
a piece of mahogany
breaking apart
at the end of something.

The finish of a fine piece of wood
always shines
at the end of something.

WOOD
for Natalie

This morning just after I awoke
I saw a pile of green wood
at the bottom of a deep pool
of dark water.

I also dreamt
I saw the wake
of a dark ship
once again.

Now I see a woodpecker
pecking on a piece of driftwood
which is drifting
across dark water.

And now a woodpecker
is flying high
toward the topmost branches
of a dark tree.

GLASS

A glass
once filled
with dark sand

is now
empty.

BLUE

Once again
sky is totally
blue.

A restless man
hesitates beside a pool
of water.

A butterfly is blown
from one place to another
by a quiet wind.

MADE OF IRON

The maid of iron
is made of iron.

The maid of iron
is clothed in shadow
as well as light.

The maid of iron
is a beautiful young woman
holding an iron bar
in one hand
and a tiny bell
in the other.

A bell placed upon a bar

beside a glass of water
is also made of iron.

FROM ANOTHER PLACE

Bits and pieces of a song
from another place
quietly settle
in this place.

A bunch of settlers
settles in a small valley.
Some snow settles
on the ground.

Bits and pieces
of another song
now settle
in another place.

A GOODBYE

And so,
this place, also,
becomes a place
of goodbyes.

A goodbye,
a white sail moving away,
waves washing ashore
on some empty horizon.

a goodbye,
an old man standing alone
on a dark corner
shaking his fist
at the sky.

from *POEMS FOR DINNER* (1997)

THE SOUND

for Horace

Once again,
I can hear the sound—
imagination's voice
struggling to be heard.

It is the sound of fading footsteps.
It is the sound of leaves
blown across the ground.

It is the sound of echoes
that sound like rain.
It is the lonesome sound
of a midnight train.

It is the sound
of a blind man
tapping with his cane.

It is the silent sound of mist
and the silent songs
of falling snow.

Once again,
I can hear *that sound*—
imagination's voice

struggling
to be
heard.

SNAKE

The mystery of a secret place
reveals itself
just like a snake—

uncoiling
as a river does
in a lake.

SOMETHING RETURNS

Somewhere,
something
returns.

The sound of a screw turning,
the sound of a prison guard turning,
late at night,
in a dark hallway
can suddenly be heard.

The sound of a double screwdriver
being set upon a bar,
the sound from the metal tip
of a screwdriver
as it crashes to the floor
can also be heard.

The driver of an old sedan
that is parked
in the basement
of an old building
says something
that cannot be heard.

Somewhere,
something
returns.

Another screw turns up.
An upturned face
turns quietly away.

Not far away,
one by one,
a bunch of screws are being placed
beside a screwdriver.

PITCH

Fly,
ball
in sunlight—

sunlight
across a plate.
Dinner is waiting.

Weights
are lifting
relief.

Bells, yes,
bells are ringing
in bars.

Barbells
also seem
to be ringing.

Rusted wedding rings
are ringing too.
And a heap of hands
have just rung themselves.

As *they*
call down
to us

they realize
quite suddenly

all lines
are busy.

DAWN

Chatter of sparrows,
it's dawn—
green fruit dreaming of the sun,

crickets dozing on porches,
the trees breathing,
their leaves still drenched with night—

black pearls.

ADD VERBS

for Lee and Mary Helen

Much of the time,
he thinks he's an idiot
since he barely sees
the fruit-filled trees
which populate
those orchards
where he finds himself
so lost.

Sometimes,
he thinks he's a clown
since he sees
the world
always spinning
upside down.

But sometimes,
he gets lucky
and then

he thinks he's a boy
lying face-up
in a field of tall grass,

staring
into a summer sky's
big blue eyes.

DOG'S DAY

Dog's life,
dog's day,
dog days,

blue haze,
blue ways,
blue stays,

a shirt of sunshine,
a shirt of blue sky
being worn by

a summer
afternoon's
end—

the warm,
feather-gray body
of the wind.

A SPOT

for Richard

Don't look back.
Don't look front.
Don't look now.

Don't look up.
Don't look down.
Don't look ahead.
Don't look around.

Look Dick look.
Look Jane look.
Look Spot look.

Dick has a spot
the size of a baseball
on his forehead.

Jane has a spot
the size of a baseball
on the palm of her hand.

Spot has a spot
the size of a golf ball
on the tip of his nose.

Don't change.
Don't change the record now.
Just play it again.
Just play it again.

WORSHIP

Worship,
warship,
wordship—

one ship follows another;
one word follows another;
one war follows another;
one wave follows another—

one ship, one word,
one war, one wave
upon a rain-beaten sea,

my rusted knees,
my loose cannons
hidden among the screaming trees,

my invisible shadow,
my loose ends
wanting to be tied up
(again and again)—

this light, he said,
is more than light
dreaming as it does.

OFFERING

Here I am again,
offering you
all of what little I have—

my tongue of ashes,
my words of dust.

For me
there are no stories left to tell,
no shattered road
that always leads
back to fields
planted and replanted
with empty seeds,

no family trees
whose branches
are forever hung
with cracked and bleeding stars.

For me
there are a series of cages
filled with birds
that sing only of silence.

For me
there are rows of wounded shadows
with huge mouths
demanding to be fed.

DAY'S END *for Richard*

In the end,
each day
is a passing
away.

In the end,
each day is a tiny coffin

made of black flowers
and birds of morning.

In the end,
each day is a tiny coffin
built by the hands
of the wind.

from *A GIFT FROM THE DARKNESS* (2000)

AN OLD STORY
for Lee and Mary Helen

Stop a head.
Start a foot.

Pull a leg.
Twist a tail.

Strike a match.
Throw a switch.

Break an egg.
Bend a nail.

Make light.
Make light of everything

that's in or out
of your sight.

Then light up your world.
Then light up mine.

Even though we know
it's really a shame.

Even though we know
it's always the same—

an old, old story
being quietly told,
then quietly retold,
then quietly, quietly

misunderstood.

X MASS
for Steve Fisk (1997)

They have stood their missiles up
on the tips of their toes.

Someone locked in a cage made of shadows screams,
Please, take off your clothes.

Each clause in their contract
buzzes and glows.

Each clause in their contract
has a ruby red nose.

Each clause in their contract
gives off the scent of a nuclear rose.

Their warheads are sunk
deep in banks of black snow.

One can see a river of greenbacks
beginning to flow.

One can hear the weathercocks
starting to crow.

A cold wind did blow.
A cold wind did blow.

A cold wind will blow—
blow and blow and blow.

SONGS

Small
song
wants

to
be
big.

Short
song
wants

to
be
long.

THIS WINDOW

I'm sitting here
beside this window
as morning light
returns me to this view.

Outside
it's bluer than blue.
Slow and easy ways
of unexpected places
gracefully repeat themselves.

Places past,
places present,
all present
here and now.

So, here is a place
after all— all ways
placed here
after all.

Now it is another time.
Now another place falls into place.

Deep inside another world
towns and people can be seen.

Now unseen places
are finally seen.
And now a place
I now imagine
now imagines me.

Imagine me
as morning light
now returning
to this place.

Imagine me
as this place
now quietly
returning.

Imagine me
as joys and sorrows
also now
returning.

Like they say
watch the water
when it runs
away.

Where does this place end?
Where does the next
begin?
No answer.

There rarely is.
What happens?
Time passes.
Things feel their way.

I wake.
I rise.
I work.

I guess.
I dream.
I play—

ship's prow,
seas' spray,
the only place
that's truly here
today.

IF IT

If it ever is
as it was then,
it will be
as it has been.

Even so—
enough is too much,
is more,
more than before,

and/or
if it's not
and if it still will
and still does

what dreams can do
you can use it to
construct a mouth
inside your thinking.

After you have finished,
you'll call out with it,
shout at the trees,
speak of feelings
long forgotten.

THE BLOSSOM (*A Lover's Light*) *for Pam*

He gets up each morning
to lie down each night.

Wherever he goes
connections are made.

Do not mistake me.
He's not what he seems.
His life is only and always
the shape of his dreams.

His head now,
his heart now,
his hands now,
his feet now
they are not his.

So it must be then
falling in love
is wanting
to know

the wind
and the rain,
the clouds
and the snow

as well as
this blossom
which glitters
and glows

where
and whenever
he thinks
that it grows.

OURS

What is truly *ours*
are only seconds,
only minutes,
only hours.

BEAR AGAIN

for Bobbie

A bear with no hair
in a pair of old shorts,
a bear with short hair
in a pair of old shorts,

a short bear with a bare face
and long hair,
a tall bear with a long face
beside a tall tree,

a bear with no face,
a bear with no hair,
a pair of old shorts,
an old bear.

THE POEMS

for William Carlos Williams

They come by day.
They come by night.
They come at dusk.
They come in dawn's first light.

As dew drops
do
they drop in
too.

They come.
They come
like new-
born babies come—

one by
naked
one.

YOUR HEAD, YOUR HEART
AND YOUR TONGUE
for Allen Ginsberg (April 8, 1997)

Your head was a pen.
You wrote with it.

Your heart was a drum
on which you kept the beat.

Your tongue was a match
when you struck it

things
caught fire.

REMEMBER DECEMBER
for George Bush

Remember December
that time of the year

when the homeless
are always

left out in the cold,
but always,

always, always
remembered.

SMALL

Small birds sing
as sweet a song
as large birds do.
Sweet, sweet

scent of smoke
from burning leaves
drifts high in the chill air
of a November afternoon.

A drifter dreams
of a song of smoke,
a song of wind-blown mist,
and a song of water too.

THE STOP SIGN

Two people
watching an old man
looking cool—
a cool look
from an old man.

Two things bent
beneath a wind,
two people also bent.

A bend in a road
where two people
stop to speak.

A stop sign
beside a road
that bends to cross
a field of light.

A field of light,
a curve of light,
a cross of light
hung like three golden lanterns
high above a stop sign.

Two people,
two strangers
bent by wind—

two strangers
who have stopped

to speak to an old man
who has stopped
beside a stop sign.

SOMETIMES

Sometimes I want to go back—
to return
as love sometimes returns.

Sometimes I turn
to look once more
over my shoulder,

but there's no way back.
There's forward,
only forward.