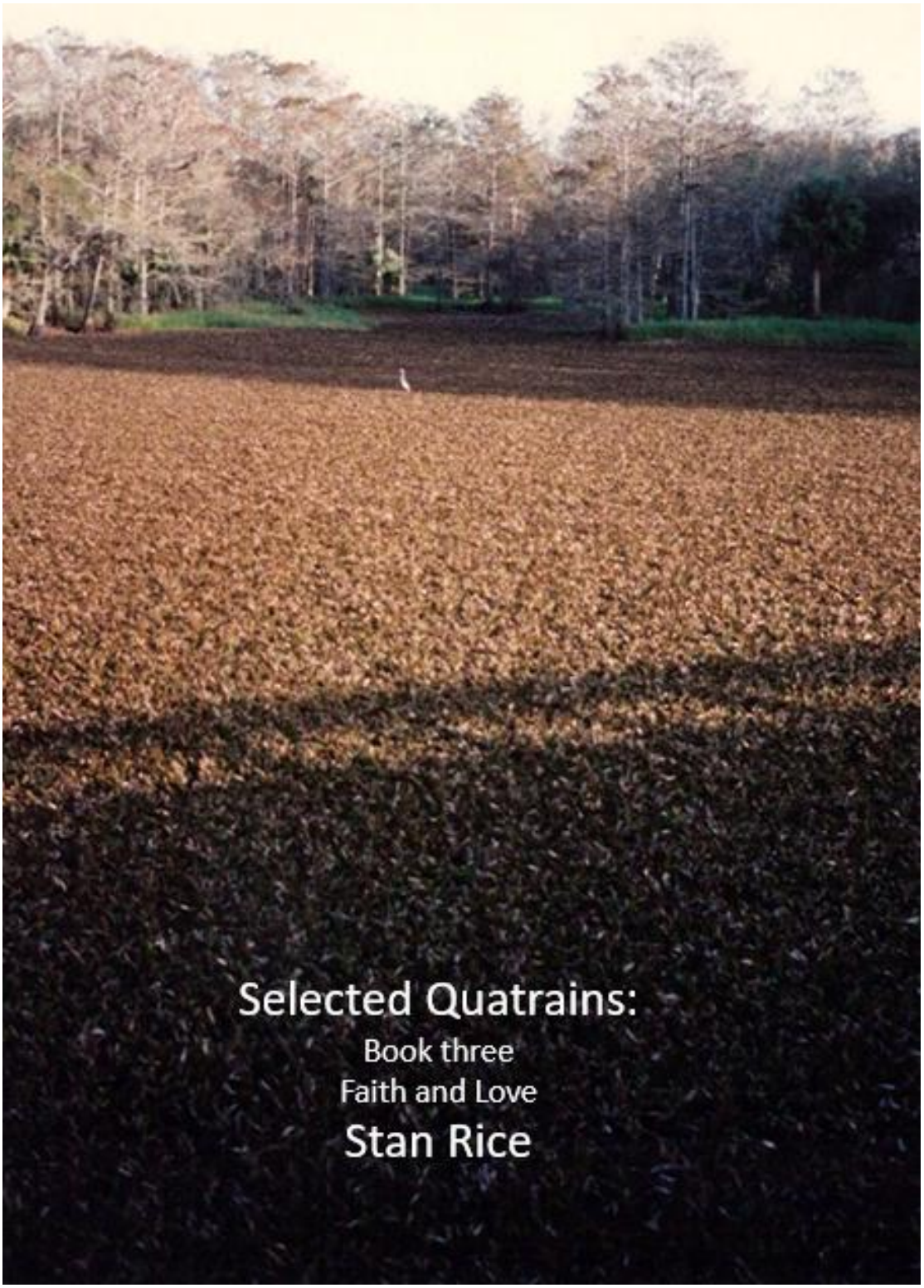

Selected Quatrains:
Book three
Faith and Love
Stan Rice

Selected Quatrains
On Faith and Love
Stan Rice
Book three: 2001 to 2003

Cover photo by the author: from Florida, 1992

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I am a mediocre poet, usually. When I try to write poems, I lose interest and competence after about four lines. Then I realized that this was not, in fact, a weakness, but a strength. If you cannot figure out what to say in four lines, you probably haven't thought about it enough. Besides, quatrains are an art form unto themselves; just think of the eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam, who wrote thousands of them. I have, at this writing, composed 3,505 of them myself. Some of them are good (especially the ones in italics), and I will share them in a series of books that are not overwhelmingly large. Nearly all of my creative work is about faith and science.

Note: I am not the poet Stan Rice who died in 2002.

"I Don't Think We're in Kansas Anymore":
The only way to leave any Kansas
With its flat obligations
To land and soil, is in a dream
Of yellow bricks and plastic flowers.

The farmer's vat of ammonia—
A tool for terrorists, raw material
For meth labs, a shot of poison
To the soil and water

Communion Wafers:
The Body of Christ—little crackers
Of wheat flour, bleached free
Of brown sinful nutrients that the wheat
Had ripped from the enslaved soil.

The powerful, primordial wind
Blows the plastic sheet of civilization
Against barbed fences of reality,
Shreds and tatters of colored failure.

They tore down a cathedral forest,
A tabernacle of oaks, to erect
A sheet metal church, to praise
The God they called Creator.

A jungle of offices, computer wires
Like vines, mergers like ambushes,
Traffic like a slow piranha'ed river—
The modern tribesman's habitat.

A blank blue sky—
We can hardly wait
To streak it with contrails
And claim heaven as our own.

Seven Grain Bread:
Seven grains from seven distant hills
Of separate Stone Age tribes
Come together in one loaf
Of uniform brown richness.

Columbus Day, 2001:
Like Columbus, the scientist
Launches into unknown waters
Confident that new lands
Can be subjected to his rules.

The man without memory says to the sun,
"Do not leave! For how can I know
You will ever return?" Hope
Comes from remembering yesterday.

He flies the American flag
From the antenna of his big truck
And shows his patriotism in loud noise
And in flattening American squirrels.

The reasonable and thoughtful man
Is always caught between
The indolent truck going 45
And the impulsive truck wanting to do 80.

The foreplay of our minds
As we embraced one another's thoughts
Led seamlessly to the encounter
Of our seamless skins.

Images of God:

1. A subtle God speaks in and chooses
   The moment that an atom dies
   And leaves no trace of Her visit.
   No wonder skeptics ignore Her.

2. *A man created a portrait of God.*
   He used every color and every shape
   To depict Her. The result:
   A pure white light.

Our souls, so long forced
Into economy-sized bottles, assume
Perverted shapes, and keep these shapes
Even when the bottles are shattered.

Futility:
The people rejoiced at the strong palisade
Inside of which they protected
Their precious forests; then air pollution
Killed all the trees.

The bacterium in the mud
Looked up and said, "The world
Of light and oxygen is dangerous."
The safest thing to do was nothing.

Autumn:

1. The trees of the forest,
   Uniform green in summer, reveal
   Their autumn individuality
   Of red and gold and brown.

2. Islands of summer,
   Trees still green
   Amidst autumn billows
   Of gold and crimson.

3. The trees pack into their autumn buds
   The leaves and blooms of spring.
   Waiting patiently through winter, each tree
   Has much to live for.

4. Hallowe'en Leaves:
   There is no beauty without life.
   Even the intricate shapes
   And autumn hues of leaf litter
   Are what was once alive.

5. Susurrus (All Saint's Day):
   The saints return, reëmbodied
   In the singing leaves, rustling
   Their unnoticed praise to God—
   Only to die again.

Like a little girl in a meadow,
Apron filled with picked flowers,
I return from my journey, brain full
Of insights and beauty.

Homo erectus:
How slow we are on two legs, how apt
To fail; and yet it is a small price
To pay for two free hands
With which to build a world.

We call it "garbage." But someday
An archaeologist will study
Our "kitchen middens," and puzzle
Over our extinction.

Terrorist Threat:[1]
The bitter herb, like a worried nation
Of leaves, defends itself against insects
By its bitterness; but having done so,
It goes on with its business of growth.

An Insult:
If this society is a body
Of cooperating parts, I know
What part you are: The soft butt
Encouraging shitful rest.

God acknowledges receipt
Of your package of little deeds
Intended to impress Him
But returns the parcel unopened.

Racial purity:
As crazy as a Caesar
The pureblooded mutant
Bleeds unstaunched
From every chromosome.

In my passion for wisdom, my fervor
To put every datum into its box,
The things that do not fit I preserve
In these poems.

Chinese Logic:
Thought, to the Chinese,
Is a series of pictures, little syllables
Of color, fire, shape, and intimacy:
A metamerism of reason.

[1] September 11, 2001 had recently happened.

Oklahoma Sunday Morning:
They drive their big pickup trucks
To church, defying God
Who tells them to be humble
And to walk lightly on the Earth.

Your friendship is the bones
That not only hold up my sagging soul
But also store calcium
To feed my hungry heart.[2]

Love and Lust:

1. Lust is a spore, with nothing
   Of its own but the instructions[3]
   For how to spoil what is beautiful
   And corrupt what is strong.

2. Love is a seed; within it,
   An embryo waits to emerge and grow,[4]
   Feeding itself with the sun
   And creating strong beauty.

Reason is the bone
Emotion is the blood
Of our bodies that stretch
Between heaven and earth.

Body Geography:

1. Between two splendid hills
   I descend, ecstatic, past
   A little caldera, and slide into
   The thick, warm jungle.

2. The tan desert landscape
   Has moles; dark flecks of obsidian
   Pressed into the cobbled stone
   Of two bright hillsides.

[2] Muscles, including heart muscles, need calcium in order to contract.
[3] DNA instructions.
[4] Seeds, but not spores, have embryos.

Sifting and sighing, the wind
Trembles the cottonwood leaves
Like the whisper of new ghosts
From the ancient river.

The arroyo, during a rainstorm,
Fills with a diarrhea of silt;
Undigested cows and trees
Rush in frothing sickness.

Desert (On Reading Edward Abbey):

1. In dwellings of stone,
   In shallow caves
   Far up on a cliff: The Anasazi
   Lived in continual fear.[5]

2. It is a juniper; it is not
   The concept of a juniper
   But a defiant, unique individual
   Gnarling its roots into rock.

3. The moon is an ancient coin
   Worn by time and commerce
   Pocked by little meteorites
   Rising over wearied mountains.

4. The sun rises, golden gong
   Of the morning, shocking us
   Into scrambled activity
   Under its hurried heat.

5. The bloody sun descends
   From its oversight of a bloody day,
   As ever, unsatisfied
   With our bleeding lives.

6. Ephemeral:[6]
   The sunflower defies the desert
   But only because it slips
   Into the wet interruption
   Between monolithic droughts.

[5] Mesa Verde.
[6] A flower that blooms very briefly in the spring.

7. Desert bushes erupt
   Like the note-shards
   Of Webern music[7]
   From a thin, agonized stillness.

8. Nude sandstone spires
   Stand over desert cañons
   Without even hands to conceal
   Their geological secrets.

9. *Barstow:*
   Too rural to be L.A.
   Too urban to be wilderness
   You sit at desert's edge and wait
   For the future to end.

10. The little arroyo bush, scoured
    And almost killed by the flood, does not ask
    Why God allowed this tragedy
    But simply resumes growing.

Love is a river of water
But not always a rushing stream:
Sometimes it is a glacier, river of ice,
Moving mountains.

In the little spaces
Compounding the world,
The glue of love
Is the presence of God.

Without hope, that vital force,
Even the smallest cell
Would shrivel and die
Unable to take another day.

God of surprises,
You keep us guessing
That tomorrow might be better
Than we had dared to hope.

Bursting from our animal hides
God within us
Cannot be contained
In our cage of bones.

[7] Anton Webern: an atonal composer of the twentieth century.

His halo is not
A sticky doughnut of goodness
But the tarnished O-ring
Of hard, greasy work.

Dead torches petrified
Into a reddish brown,
The winter sumac remembers
The flame of its youth.

The chords and counter-melodies
Of the choir interlock, weaving,
Timeless and in tempo,
Sinewed vines through strong oaks.

Trees, and people, show
All degrees of beauty, from
Brilliant, busy clothedness
To the strong limbs of nudity.

I draw my sword
And strike against hatred
Only to find
Myself bleeding.

A laser is just a beam
Of ordinary light particles
Whose waves synchronize
And do not fight one another.

In the blessed past, truth
Was simple and clear, and life
Was too short to allow time
For the mind to confuse itself.

I taste in your tears
An ancient ocean
Of churning anger, and fear
Of the cold darkness.

The Three-month Anniversary of 9-11:
The Al-Qaeda bee stung
The sleeping American bear—
Which only stirred it
To swat at the small hive.



Winter 1991, Indiana

In war, we homogenize
The diverse spirits of men
And stake down their wild souls
Into rows of white crosses.

Faith can move mountains
Only when it flows
As slowly as glaciers
And as magma under the crust.

Constrictor:
In your snakeskin coat
You slip into my life; your kiss
Is a sting, and your embrace
Leaves me breathless.

Matthew 11:28:
O Comforter, whose Presence
Makes me uncomfortable—
The rest that you offer me
Is a yoke.

The peroxide of your love
Fizzes on my wounds
Killing the raw soreness—
I accept your healing.

North Tree:
Your spirit blows
Fresh from the north, and breaks
The arms that I spread
To welcome it.

Cosmogony:
The universe began
When space and time
And gravity pushed open
The heart of God.

Smallpox:
That rogue and sinful fragment of DNA
Has been cleansed from humanity,
Chased into a frozen lair from which
Only an evil heart can release it.

Neither the icon-maker nor the iconoclast
Do useful work: the one
Makes things, not worthy of worship
The other simply destroys them.

Christmas Eve 2001:
Even as he walked
Past the manger,
The cynic proclaimed
That God would never come.

Christmas 2001:
The world holds its breath
As its savior is born; then gasps
And looks around; it sees nothing
And goes on as it had before.

Christmas Is Over:
For a few precious hours
The world suspended its drive
Of willing and winning and warring—
But now the frenzy returns.

To a Clever Man:
Your wit is as crisp, and your humor
As delicious as a potato chip;
Yet your wisdom crumbles—
Your mind has nothing but surfaces.

Coördinated Universal Time:[8]
The arbitrary Greenwich heartbeat
Allows the complexity of the world
To function; together;
In a single metabolism.

From Jesus' Uncle:
Joseph's little boy
Showed such promise.
Look how he ended up.
What will become of his family?

For the upcoming year, as ever[9]
Surprising us, heaping scorn
Upon our analyses and predictions, a poem
Is the best that we can do.

Poems and pomes
Of juicy sweetness
And cyanide seed
And temptation.[10]

The world turns, throwing
Its equatorial weight
Into a giddy bulge, lurching
Into another fat day.[11]

Woman is the smooth perfection
Of our species; hairy crude men
Are just nuts and bolts
To keep womankind from extinction.

[8] Formerly Greenwich Mean Time, broadcast online as a standardized heartbeat for each second.
[9] January 2002.
[10] Apples, known as pomes, have seeds that contain cyanide.
[11] The Earth is actually wider at the Equator, because of the momentum of revolution.

God gave to man and woman
Every green plant for food;[12]
And gave us minds, and made
Many of the plants poisonous.

We cannot extinguish
The stellar furnaces
In deepest space, but only
Our ability to see them.

Someday Earth's shifting crust
Will compress our landfills
Into conglomerate rock, and raise them up
Onto a shameful mountain altar.

Precambrian Hills
Sediments too old for fossils
I stare vacantly into
A time before dreams.

Deep Ecology:
Human presence, in small numbers
Gives the Earth a bacterial musk;
But six billion of us provoke
An inflamed fever.[13]

I go among trees and sit still.
I love everyone who can find
Peace among trees; I am estranged
From all who cannot.

The Happy Wanderer:
I stride into Nature, assured
That it welcomes me, its admirer;
But its swarms mass upon me
And its winds slap me down.

Sabbath of the Fields:
Our fields yearn to rest
From the pain of plowing
And the scorching chemicals, but we
Will not permit its Sabbath.

[12] Genesis 2.
[13] At the time of this writing, it is over eight billion.

Darwin's Path at Down House:
The Sandwalk through the woods
Has overgrown with mysteries.
For no one now has the steadiness
To walk the daily trail of wisdom.

I understand because I stand under
The mysteries of the world
And look up at their hidden undersides
And at their hidden creator.

Song of the South:
Me and God, we're buds; He sings
In every zippedy bird; He greets me
Only when I go out
Of my house, into His.

Jeux de Wort, Palabraspiel:
Gibbous moon, I jabber
Gibberish in lunacy,
A gibbon in the shadowed jungle
Into which Rome falls.

Whole worlds of purple
Dance indistinct
Then fade, inside
Of my closed eyelids.

As you lie before the fireplace,
The fingers of warmth
Caress your flesh
In ways I would never dare.

The Writer:
An insight inseminated wisdom
And conceived a book, which grew
In my pregnant mind
To the parturition of a script.

The years:

1. *1979:*
   I was the one who, bewildered,
   Could not see the clear blazes
   Along the science path, but I
   Stumbled over wisdom.

2. *1980:*
   I bled unstaunched
   Helpless in a pool of love
   Yet could not let go
   Of my faith in goodness.

3. *1981:*
   I returned to the soil
   In which my mind germinated
   But failed to till it
   Into straight lines of truth.

4. *1982:*
   Vulnerable again to love,
   I sprouted in the hothouse
   And even when I withered
   I refused to accept my death.

5. *1983:*
   Into a summer soil of work
   Fell a seed of love unexpected
   As if into a garden
   Long prepared for it.

6. *1984: Marriage*
   We swore our vows to God to love forever,
   Knowing that the green thrill of love
   Must bear grain
   For the solid bread of daily life.

7. *1985: Thesis work*
   Busily I converted
   The bracing greenness of leaf
   And trajectory of growth
   Into the false wisdom of numbers.

8. *1986: Birth*
   We were not ready for you,
   But from your bold cries
   And confident smiles, we knew
   That we would never have been ready.

9. *1987: Ph.D.*
   At last, after many failures
   Concept and data converged
   Into a beautiful insight
   Piled High and Deep.

10. *1988: Arthur Rice, Rest in Peace*
    I entered new worlds
    Of work and beauty, severed
    By death from the last
    Lingering roots of childhood.

11. *1989: Ecuador*
    In thin mountain air
    And in stinging jungles
    We sloshed through beauty
    And stumbled blindly past fear.

12. *1990:*
    A brisk wind of wisdom
    Carried me uncontrolled
    Into novel deserts
    And rich maple forests.[14]

13. *1991:*
    Curtains of sin
    Shrouded my wisdom
    Parting only slightly, to reveal
    My concupiscent heart.

14. *1992:*
    A wound that seemed mortal
    Only charged me to pursue
    New paths of wisdom, amidst
    Renewed Pacific confidence.[15]

15. *1993:*
    An unexpected escape
    Into cool green summers
    Made my heart burn warm
    Through a black ice winter.[16]

[14] Moving to Indiana.
[15] Leaving Indiana; also visiting Hawaii.
[16] Teaching at the Science Station in the mountains; moving to Minnesota.



Waterfalls, Big Island, Hawaii, 1992

16. 1994:
Hard toil, rich soil—
But in the brief northern summer
I did not know that I
Would not stay to see the harvest.

17. 1995:
My work and life bloomed
Like a desert spring;[17]
I did not know I was laying up
Supplies to survive a disaster.

18. 1996:
Rage at injury
Consumed my placid calm
But could not rob me of joy
In work, travel, and prayer.

19. 1997:
A sudden freedom
Astonished me, releasing
The currents and juices
Of prodigious creation.

[17] Spring class trip to California.



Bison at Bear Butte, South Dakota, 1993

20. 1998:
I stepped by faith
Into new worlds, only to find
A renewal of my old work
And a path back home.[18]

21. 1999:
My soul grew strong and green
Rooted firm yet flexible, like the alder[19]
Beside the waters, always dying
And always renewed.

22. 2000: Budburst
Buds burst, impatient
For the springtime, but
Even in this warm world
They must wait their turn.

23. 2001: The (Space) Odyssey
They imagined a perfect space
Led into obelisked freedom;
Instead they got a relapse
Of primitive pagan horror.

[18] I did not know what job I might have, but ended up working in Oklahoma, where I was born.
[19] Which I began studying that year.

For Darwin's Birthday, 2002:
You explained death
As the crucible of life
But when Annie died
You felt it no less keenly.

The Prophet:
I hear Heaven's siren,
Proclaiming the peril of the Earth;
Like a dog I yammer in pain,
Understanding no more than he.

I rage, and who can blame me,
Against the painful dissolution
And even more painful reconstruction
With which God creates my soul.

Your love is sunlight; it has no need
Of a medium, but can shine through
An infinitely cold outer space—
And warm whatever absorbs it.

To Aunt Clara:
Fragments of her laughter
Flutter in the wind at Winganon
Like ghosts; the glue
That holds together a family.[20]

No painted pulchritude, your face
Clean-washed and unafraid
To show its smiled wrinkles
And its scars of wisdom.

To an Imaginary Person:
You have a saving loveliness
That draws me back from despair
And makes me feel worthy to receive
Even a moment of your smile.

The reality of loveliness is created
Not of energy and matter
But within the loving mind
Of the man who stops to look.

[20] Funeral 23 February 2002; buried at Winganon Cemetery



Mountain goats, near Mt. Rushmore, 1993

A Perfect Statue:
All perfection is still,
Not needing to move
Towards betterment, but,
Like marble, is dead.

Dangerous Love:
What is this thing called love? A reef
Within the turbulent wine-dark sea
And upon which our swirling souls
Can crash and rest?

A man who cannot cry
Is strong, but not like tense muscle,
Or living bone, or wood,
But it is like metal, cold and dead.

His heart is a spear that kills
The quivering flesh of love
And denies that its strong dark wood
Was ever a living tree.

Fundamentalist's Dream:
The little band of Christians
Floats triumphantly in Heaven
Eternally ignoring the screams
Of mankind's billions in Hell.

Hugging under the Bridge:
Space of warmth
And locus of peace
As the cold wind swirls
And the concrete shivers.

To Mom, Age 84 (7 March 2002):
You could have complained about
So much, from a poor rural childhood
To a world disrupted by war; but without fail
You are thankful for the joys of life.

The wind shrieks
And tries to create music
By playing haunting chords
On the harp strings of the trees.

Opus 800:
Light burst into
The dark land, creating
For the first time
Shadows.

Poems of Death:

1. *The omnivorous Earth*
   Consumes alike man and leaf
   Transforming us all
   Into the same humus.

2. The snow masks
   The sad Earth
   Like the white face
   Of a cosmic clown.

3. In the hopeless dung heap
   The clever fungus spreads,
   Pops its tiny cup
   And shoots its spores at the sun.

4. *From the fertile soil*
   Where the sinner died
   Emerges the sinful orchid
   Enticing the lustful wasp.

A morning in March, colder
Than any dawn in winter:
A robin sings, because the sun
Has told it spring is here.[21]

Poetry is not play.
The inconvenient poem
Irritates me in the night
Demanding to be begotten.

In the cold north wind
And eastern sun of hope
I dream of southerly tropics
And face the west of Death.

Prodigious visions of the future
Are not mere extensions of the past—
They have whole new stresses, and sway
In winds previously unimagined.

To Trudy Wischemann:
Every animal, every plant
Seeks refuge and welcome
From you, defender of Adam,
The man made out of dust.[22]

To Carol Winston:
Could the world be so brutal a place
As news near and far depicts it
If one so gentle as you
Can survive, and sing, in it?

Do not just brush against me,
Removing electron sparks;
But reach into the solid heart
Of my proton'd nucleus.

Jesus has to exist—a universe
Without His strong brace of love,
And in which our so evident sins
Encrust us, would collapse.

[21] Birds and plants respond to daylength more than to temperature.
[22] She took in every stray cat, and her house was caked in dust.

I am an employee, but
The salary and office you provide
Are a platform from which I reach out
Far beyond your little tasks.

Rising from the desert, a gold mine
Proclaims the wealth of our economy;
Clustered around it, clapboard shacks
Have boarded, depressed windows.

Ocean Poems:

1. Gray meets gray at the ocean horizon:
   The summation of pointless pasts
   The uncertain misty future—
   Both defied by a white sail.

2. The chiton both fills and creates
   Its tiny oval niche in the tidepool;
   Homes of dead worms, tubes of lime,
   Are cemented into a solid stone.

3. A Fantasy:
   The salty ocean water embraces
   Every crevice of your body,
   Where I, big and clumsy
   Cannot penetrate.

4. A Rock Worn by the Waves:
   Your sharp obstinate edges
   Constantly caressed by ocean waves
   Of love, will soften and vanish
   Leaving only your smooth heart.

If God gives wisdom freely to all,
Why do I have so much more
Than others? Because I stoop
Not proud, to collect its raw jewels.

From a Plane:

1. We spend our lives climbing up
   To castles in the sky, only to find
   That they are shapeless mists that block
   Our view of the real world below.

2. Somewhere down in those houses
   Human souls are folded upon one another;
   There must be another person as good as you
   But I will never know it.

To a Fat Nation:
By what right do you obesely consume
The fat of our shared Earth?
Your rump knocks over
The careful structures of my life.

While I was away
The pear tree bloomed
My daughter grew up
And new worlds evolved.

The rainwater dripping from the eave
Creates a complex percussion;
A recurring pattern, but one which,
To my small mine, seems random.

Every common raindrop
On the solarium roof
Creates a series of perfect circles,
Works of art that die in a moment.

The dove's mournful blessing
In the last cold rain of spring
Invokes the seeds to germinate
Hoping for the warmth.

Bells of cold brass, forged
In the hellish furnace—
When struck, with spark and clangor,
The fire is reborn.

Each day in prayer I recite
My friends' names, like a ritual
Clanging of bells; but each name rings
A fiery richness in my heart.

Mt. Nebo:
Even Moses, prophet
Of undimmed eye and unabated virility
Was allowed only a glimpse
Of the distant hazy land of reward.

In the sleep of autumn
The leaves bled; then
The pure white snow
Cleansed the world of sin.

What makes every daisy unique
In the spring fields? Each differs
In its flaws, where marred
By insect attack and genetic error.

The young Amish couple, whose carriage
Blocked cars on the highway
Were the only people who noticed
The intricate orangeness of the sunset.

We, humble and sheeplike,
Are slaughtered all day long, while God
Lovingly awaits the repentance
Of arrogant sinners.

We have created a cosmos
Of comforting, ordered theory, and believe
That if we venture past its borders
We will fall off the edge of the world.

The cynic sees the world
In its bathroom: naked,
Discharging its wastes, and desperately
Trying to bathe away its sins.

The savage, on the cliff edge of survival,
Stays one step ahead of his enemies
And one step behind his prey, each twilight
Running on the same dismal path.

During metamorphosis, when
The soft caterpillar is formless,
Not yet a crisp moth,
He does not know who he is.

Showered by the storm,
Scoured by the north wind,
The young pine needles
Offer up their incense.

The mother duck
Teaches her young
To swim upstream
Against the north wind.

For a month, my soul
Was dead: I was so busy
That all things were tasks
Devoid of poetry.

Modern Society's Fantasy:
We are rich brats; God is our nanny
Cleaning up every toxic spill,
Righting every pillar of truth we knock over,
And cleaning up the blood of our violence.

Spring in Oklahoma:
Spring never actually "comes";
In the war between rapacious heat
And hateful cold, the fields and the flowers
Create springtime, and assert greenness.

The world swells with inspired music,
A voice of ecstatic prophecy;
And yet my mind is filled
With a stupid tune from an advertisement.

The elephant treads lightly
Upon the Earth; but man's footprint
Is the rumble of bombs
And the pall of acid rain.

His mind is crisp, yet fat
And fragile: a potato chip
Or a wafer of a eucharist
That knows no communion with God.

All of culture and religion
Is a canister to confine
And regulate into safe utility
The explosions of sexuality.

Clumsily, with perspective
All askew, I paint the picture
Of our future, not daring
To use bright colors.

We squish the flesh of diverse animals
Into a uniformity of sausage;
A mixture of diverse spices
Pungently hides the rottenness of death.

Every southwestern state has
A “Cherokee County” and place names
Like “Oconee” from the musical language
Of a people who defied extinction.

I stand in awe of the huge trees
In an Appalachian forest; yet these trees,
Second-grown after lumbering
Are mere sticks compared to their predecessors.

Ruins of The King’s College:
Where once man aspired to protect God
Within a hilltop parapet of rules
And jousted one another’s doctrines
There is now only rubble, shard, and weed.

I am privileged that you spent
Your time, though you are busy,
And money, though you are not rich,
To wander and wonder with me.

Two Poems of Teatown Lake:

1. The water reflects the sky; heaven
   Loans the Earth its geese
   Then takes them back
   In a raucous swirl.

2. The stone walls, many days of toil
   To a colonial farmer, are reclaimed
   By the fragrant Earth
   And the deep shade of hemlocks.

Lisa:
Your middle name is Joy
So when you are depressed
Remember that the world
Has named you blessed.

Friend Cyndi:
As the world dies
And the very trees turn brittle
Our friendship outlasts
A hundred romances.

In the childhood of our species
The world seemed so huge;
In our scientific middle-age, the world
Seems to fit inside an equation.

Prayer Cloths on Bear Butte:

1. Prayer cloths, tied to dead branches
   Will soon fall; soon also the sun
   Will expand redly
   And efface all memory.

2. Bright prayer cloths like human races,
   Red, yellow, black, white,
   Soon will be bleached by the sun
   Into the color of bone.

Coal cars, each filled, each
As perfect as a pan of bread
Feed our nation's gut
From which hot gas emerges.

Granite and quartz: the pain
Of intense heat transforms
The fossils of our past
Into colored crystals.

The black cat at the screen door
Ponders the night
Wonders why she is trapped
Within walls of light.

The top bull, on the hillock
Of the feedlot, his cows
Lying harem-like around:
All are destined for slaughter.

The pine seedling emerges
From the Earth, its needles
Like ballerina arms, holding
Its emptied seed coat.



The pine seedling in the poem, 1999, Black Hills.

45th Birthday (2002):
This day I stand on a hill
Surveying Badlands, ancient seas
And graves of giants: I can no longer
Pretend that I am young.

Jesus sat in the dirt.
His Holy Hands rubbed husks
From the wheat; His Breath
Blew away the chaff.

Pills of words—
Distilled doses of reality
Freed from structures of fact
And niceties of convention.

The hot breath of greed has parched
The world; God's spirit rains—
Some of the world grows green,
The rest of it mildews.

The slap of rebuke stings
For many days on the face only
Of him who loves; he who does not love
Forgets the rebuke immediately.

The very moment I finish
Washing away my uncleanness
Busy bacteria begin rebuilding
Their foul deposits of death.

The truth will set you free—
The searing pain of its fire
Cuts the very tissue that binds you
To the body of your security.

Job:

1. Life is a mystery
   To be experienced, not
   A problem to be solved,
   Or a work to be defended.

2. You have opened the storehouses
   Of life-giving moisture to me,
   But it comes in the form of snow
   Whipped by a stinging wind.

Israel in Goshen:

1. God prospers everything we do;
   Everything we touch turns
   To gold—Thereby we become
   A threat to our masters.

2. Moses' mother put him in a basket,
   Set him adrift, and went home.
   Moses' sister stood at a distance
   And watched.

The cynic said to God, "Even I
Could have made a better world
Than this." God answered,
"That's the point—Go do it."

Broken bread at the Last Supper
Broken rocks of continents
Broken lives of men and women
Form a soil of love.

The branch of the grapevine, tendrils
Hanging from its notches, waves
In the gentle breeze, in faith
Stretching toward a new place of rest.

The hammock
Suspends me
Between heaven and Earth
Safe from both.

In the gentle rain
Of centuries passing
All stench and all sweetness
Are rinsed away.

Inconvenient Spirit,
You evoke songs in my heart
And bring tears to my eyes
In the middle of a workday.

Rio:
The giant Christ on the steep hill
Stretches His arms to bless
The dusty world of poverty
And grubbing for coins below.

Moonlight and illness:
When I am ill, the knowledge
That natural laws of gravity
And light and physics move relentlessly on
Brings me no comfort.

Soup:
Last year's sunlight glows
From the canned tomatoes
And the muscles of beef
And from my warmed heart.

The great body of truth:
We chop it into little chunks
Seal it into cans
And store it for the centuries.

The American Taliban, 2002
"The Taliban does not permit freedom—
Destroy them!" said the Republican,
Who added, "And we cannot permit
Any dissent from our policy."

The IBP-Tyson Theme Song: The Customer Is Always Wrong
"There is shit in your burger
And turds in your fowl;
And if you get sick from it
It's your own damn fault."

Fast Food Nation:

1. Cattle amble dumbly
   Into the slaughterhouse;
   People amble dumbly
   Up to the fast food counter.

2. Wild cattle and wild men
   Are now bleached bones;
   Their descendants shuffle blindly
   Through the corridors of the economy.

3. "Down with big government!"
   Says the Republican CEO
   As he accepts federal labor funds
   For not training his workers.

4. Cattle are ground, shit and all,
   Into burgers, to feed the bowels
   And the sweetbread minds
   Of docile herds of consumers.

The Winds of War:

1. Cowboy George gallops alone
   And shoots at Babylon
   Without ever looking to see
   What was, or was not, there.

2. If Saddam stifles criticism,
   It is oppression;
   If Dubya stifles criticism,
   It is patriotism.

Ode to Ashcroft:[23]
The breasts of liberty
Defended by justice
Have been shrouded, to hide
Offensive beauty.

I am a starfish;
No matter in which direction
I point my trajectory
It is progress.

Moses spent many days
Seeking wisdom on the mountain,
Eating berries, drinking from streams,
Forgetting his impatient people below.

Out of crisis born, out of fear
Of bloody death on lioned savanna,
An ape stood, looked up
And grasped God's hand.

Her tears are acid
And burn the hand
That extends to comfort
And to lift her.

Elephant Man:
The ugsome billows of my skin,
Reeking scents of Sheol,
Rub oils of putrefaction
Upon the cathedral I build.

[23] John Ashcroft, one of the leaders of the G W Bush Administration's war on liberals, who insisted a topless female statue be shrouded.

Why We Die:
Without death, what would stop
The evil and arrogant ruler
From continuing forever
His accelerating buildup of iniquity?

Sput, 1957[24]
From a toxic world of pesticides
And cold war hatreds, leapt
A sterile, shining sphere; and into this world
Emerged one small fertile mind.

Toxic Generation, b. 1957
Every span of Earth was coated
With sticky poison, and our minds
Were infused with war; amazingly,
We are still alive.

My daughter sleeps secure
In the blissful belief
That we will not drop her
Into a toxic world of war.

The clouds hang heavy as judgment
Blocking the clear beauty of the sun
But refusing to rinse away
The clinging poisons of our sin.

The grease of our decay
Is not food for worms
For it is filled
With toxins.

Jabberwocky:

1. Walkie-Talkie Jabber:
   The stomoutha of the leavings
   Ope in the halflight
   Of our hall-flight, half bright
   In its darkage and musque.

2. His mome wrath
   Has nowhere to strike
   In the vapors
   Of toxic victory.

[24] I was born in 1957, the year of Sputnik.

3. The smog-haloed sun
   Smiled brillig on
   The mantle, trash-jewelled
   Of the fettered Earth

Not An Option:
Take my yoga upon you
And nuzzle into filth
Insensate to the poison
That blankets the fragrant spring.

Quoth the Pig:
Go ahead, human,
Eat my flesh, toxic
With your love potions—
Much good may it do you.

Quoth the Raven:
Nevermore shall you wake
To the silken rustling
Of an untroubled breeze
Of innocent hope.

Even the dumb cow
Mooing and moving in grassy gaze
Knows which toxic herbs,
And which sins, to avoid.

The Insect:[25]
The sword pierced him, and missed
All his vital organs, thus pinned
To the flat surface of his job
He wriggled for a lifetime.

For Columbus Day Again:
If you had not opened
The New World to Europe's rape
It would slowly have built
Its own prison of sin.

[25] Insects are pinned in boxes for taxonomic collections.

Enlightenment:
Franklin grasped Heaven's power
And tried to conduct it
Into the jar of human wisdom.
But it flashed and faded.

We think our sins less toxic
If we spout them
From a chimney
Into the face of God.

White Bread:
From amber waves of grain
With genes all straight
We suck the richness
And rinse away the nourishment.

Feedlot:
These smiling men! They must
Wish us wellness and long life—
For behold what fatted grain
They pour into our troughs!

From the tea leaf I decoct
The complex scents of wisdom
Passed through a billion generations
From the world's first light.

For in six days God
Set all creation in order
And filled it; in six millennia
We have undone His work.

Psalm 944:
Praise to Thee, O Man
Whose Power reaches unto the Heavens
And the fire of Whose cleverness
Can make the very rain black.

Rachel Carson:
We gave her praises and prizes
Before she slipped beneath
The waves of cancerous death
Into the realm of our forgetting.

A Contemporary Church Service:

1. The words of the songs
   Flashed on the screen, accompanied
   By photos of poppies: the opiate
   Of unthinking peoples?

2. As they sing, they proclaim
   That they look for God's majesty
   In Heaven; yet every image on the screen
   Is of some earthly flower or dewdrop.

3. The congregation took communion
   While the screen showed
   An image of God's love:
   A poisonous oleander flower.

To catch a glimpse of God
Look in the subtle coefficients
Of the equations that bring order
To our confused existences.

Like Moses cowering
In the cleft of a rock
We can see only God
As He retreats.

Utopias:

1. A Republican Earth: paved
   In concrete squares of conformity
   Where dutiful poor laborers
   Make precise missiles.

2. A Democrat world: weeds
   Of every diverse size and form
   Spring in the vacancies
   Where old wisdom was torn away.

Genesis 1:
Into Creation's glorious morning
God brought order, which Democrats hate,
And God poured wild diversity
Which Republicans despise.

Even my little Earth-friendly car
Spews fumes; and propels
Its momentum of steel, crushing
The wings of butterflies.

All Saint's Day 2002:
Giant bales of hay
In the misty autumn pasture—
Like mummies of mammoths—
Ghosts of greatness.

Last Supper:
Jesus commemorated His death
Not with bitter herbs
But with fragrant bread
And with sweet wine.

Discouragement:
"Maybe this is all there is,"
Said Moses in the wilderness—
"Every morning, sticky sweet manna
And another day of rocks and sand."

Wellstone:[26]
Republicans secretly rejoiced
When a little plane
Filled with passion for the soil
Plunged into a Minnesota bog.

Morning Devotions:
I tanked up on three psalms
To fortify myself for the day.
Each said, "How long, O Lord?"
I could barely take a step out of the door.

A Passing Fancy:
Your smile is as small and bright
As a little piece of white chocolate
Melting in my mouth
Creating a secret warm pleasure.

[26] Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone, more of a statesman than all other politicians, even Democrats, died in a plane crash.

Pharisees:
They accuse us lovers of nature
To be Druidic pagans;
As if God had not created and loved
The myriad species of the sacred grove.

To My Wife:

1. The conjoining of our bodies
   Is an act of worship—
   Not of ourselves, but of the Source
   Of all spiritual intercourse.

2. Joyless creatures of the night
   Hump in hopeless pain;
   But we share sexual love
   In the untroubled sunlight.

3. With our simple gold wedding band
   We pledged eternal friendship—
   Not diamonds of adoration
   Or the glitter of fading passion.

Thoughts of Death:

1. Your black suit: Keep it
   Clean and pressed and handy
   For your loved one will die
   And black will hide the teardrops.

2. We die, said Solomon,
   Like beasts; but they
   Have no sadness, because
   They have never loved.

3. Mankind is uniquely tragic
   Among animals, not because
   He knows he will die, but because
   He knows his loved ones will die.

Closed Minds:

1. A closed-minded liberal
   Is a contradiction
   And a fertile hatching medium
   That breeds young conservatives.

2. A closed-minded conservative
   Is exactly what we would expect—
   For why should a mind be open
   That has already defined all truth?

A religious conservative seeks
A liberality of secular riches;
A secular liberal seeks
To conserve God's good green Earth.

God's jokes: The laughing fires:
Of the burning bush, and within
The hearts of stuttering men
And the minds of fools.

God has not promised
That we will ever see
The strong trees that grow
From the small seeds we broadcast.

Photons from the sun
Are all the same; plants convert them
Into a rainbow of fruits and flowers
And a feast of flavors.

A Proverb of Disrespect:
Solomon, shallow man, man of Shalom,
Man of peace and gluttony
In which the fresh air of wisdom
Languished in the fumes of laziness.

Another Jeux de Wort:
The gibbous gibbon in the tree, hunching,
Mooned me, and chattered
About the Decline and Fall
Of American Greatness.

I go always against the wind:
A cold conservative stare
Into southern liberalism, a bleeding heart
In the cold Republican gale.

Wise birds fly west
To chase the sun, while I
Fly east into darkness
Pursuing an imagined dawn.

The mathematical branchings of winter trees
Seem all alike, until a close look
Reveals individual personalities
Of angle, thorn, and bark.

I mean no disrespect, Mr. President;[27]
You call me a liberal, yet my blood
Is red, and I dream white stars
Unified in a firmament of blue.

I am no patriot; all I do
Is obey the law, pay taxes, and
Love God and neighbor: I do not
Buy enough to stimulate the economy.

Two Trees:

1. A bare elm in a warm December
   Opens its spring buds; how pitiful
   When it is slapped stupid
   By bitter winds in January.

2. The crooked oak is never sure
   In which direction to send
   Its hard and distrustful branches
   In the erratic wind.

Freedom:

1. Mandela waited in prison
   Ten thousand nights
   As the embryo of freedom
   Grew invisibly.

2. The liberator's sword
   Slices open the oppressor's soul
   And allows the sunshine in
   To liberate it.

[27] George W. Bush.

Many torches cast shadows
Of the straight cross, wiggling
And laying in bizarre shapes
On the quivering ground.

Medieval Music:

1. From the wild soup of human music
   The church strains a clear golden broth,
   Insipid; between the parallel melodic lines
   There is no nourishment.

2. Peasant stomp dances: Wild swirls
   Of notes, loose threads of melody;
   The rasping roughness of torn fabric
   Covers a throbbing heart.

To Jona: A Blessing[28]
Because your eyes
Are open to wisdom
You will be surrounded by beauty
Wherever you go.

Like a barbed thorn, the idea
Worked its way ever more deeply
Into his flesh, but never
Reached his heart.

Poems of the Three Teddy Bears:

1. Daddy Bean, a big pinto,
   Embraced the soft curves
   Of Mommy Lima, while in the little pod
   Slept Baby Pea.

2. The family of teddy bears
   Rips open tundra cranberries
   Which bleed on their paws
   Like vitamin hearts.

Soft Day:
The clouds are an endless tray
Of inverted dinner rolls;
There are no sharp shadows;
A perfect day for a nap.

[28] Jona Tucker.

My young daughter slips away
From the video during
"The mushy part," unable to bear
The weight of her future.

Another Jeux de Wort:
"It behooves you to do this,"
He said, "For if you don't
The hooves of Christmas reindeer
Will pommel you."

Opus 1000:[29]
A thousand atoms are a mass too small
To measure, in the sweet and bitter food
Of God's wisdom; for each crumb
Of which, I am grateful.

1001 Nights:
God tosses His wisdom indiscriminately
Into stories, gathered by the wise woman
Sheherazade, to melt away
The king's rage for yet one more night.

Things of beauty, things
Of death: Claws and sharp eyes
Of the eagle, and dry stems
Of copper-colored grass.

Reading the Three Musketeers:
Beside the fire in a dark room
With a leather-bound book
She is in the eighteenth century until she hears
Clinks of ice in a glass.

Fires of Mordor: A hobbit's View:
My guest leads me on the edge
Of a knife; if I make myself
Small enough, the jagged knife edge
Is a broad safe highway.

Black cat on a colorful beanbag—
Dimpling it into a torus
A black hole sucking into itself
All the beauty of a galaxy.

[29] Obviously, I omitted some from these transcripts.

Like Alice who cried an ocean
I skim the salt surface
Of unknowable sorrows which
You will not divulge to me.

Christmas, 2002:
On Christmas night, one last carol
Lodges in my mind, endless
In repetition, the last ember
From a blazing yule log.

The garage-sale shoes of a woman
Who died in chemotherapy
Have carried me, with her spirit
Over many steep paths.

His Eye Is on the Sparrow:
A little sparrow lit on the cross
Unaware of what had just happened
Singing its little heart out: "Jesus,
Notice me when I fall."

On the wallpaper, a perfect world
Of flowers and cottages hides
Black mold—Plato's heaven, but
Your goodness in this room is real.

Perfect mashed potatoes, gilded
With butter, scented like earth, but
White like clouds, are the best evidence
For the existence of a good God.

The Enemy smiles, with no need
To cast so much as a pebble against us.
He watches us destroy, in our own land,
God's good green blessings.

January 1, 2003:
A new year—already marred
Even before I arise from bed
By the flaw of my selfish heart
And the gripe of my unthankful mind.

While millions starve, I write
Poems about potatoes, and my wife
Studies Tolkien's elvish script; but without
The fire of the mind, are we not all dead?

Go ahead, flower, unfold to me
Your sensuous tenderness.
I will not harm you; in my presence
You need no protective sepals.

At the Potsherd Gate:
Jeremiah smashed a cookie jar, and used
The shard with the leering smile
Still painted on it, to scrape
The sinful pustules of his nation.

Mushroom:
It absorbs rottenness, then swells
Rubbery and brown; but, in butter,
Sauteed, it releases
The very flavor of life.

Where Poems Come from:
From a saturated air
Of expectant wisdom,
The smallest mote, of unguessable shape
Is the nucleus on which an insight condenses.

The horse eats grass that grew
From soil that was once a horse;
On such horses we ride
Into the endless future.

Poems about Black Holes:

1. A darkness that eats light
   And presses all life into a point:
   Is this the ultimate fate
   Of all our thoughts and loves?

2. A swirling dance of stars,
   Arms flung in pirouette
   Around a hungry black heart:
   Such is every galaxy.

3. One day a black hole appeared
   Like a nail hole in the clear sky—
   Its suction stretched the blue wavelengths
   Into the redness of doom.

We barely felt it when, that night,
Our ship crossed the Equator,
Tipping our lives in a different direction,
Shifting our polestars forever.

I was only a child when I looked
At a salt crystal under the microscope
And saw a caveman forging
A whole future of industry.

I awoke and lay waiting to make sure
It was really dawn. By the time
I was sure, it was too late:
I had missed the boat of morning.

I am a marshmallow, absorbing
Shocks of insult into sweetness;
But I warn you: Inside
Is a core of glass-shard wisdom.

The willow bows to
The winds of the Almighty;
The church tower
Defies it.

The Writer:
Frightened by the real world
I squidded off, leaving a cloud
Of ink, of words, of pretended
Order in the chaotic world.

“Nothing happened today,” I said.
No atoms moved, no planets swerved,
The universe stopped expanding
Just because I was bored.

Thoughts upon Reading *After the Plague* by T. C. Boyle:

1. With the human animal decimated
   The weeds bury the roads
   The birds pronounce last rites, and bears
   Get drunk on abandoned bottles of liquor.

2. The world has become primeval again.
   Bodies are soups spawning life,
   The airwaves free of tired assumptions,
   The sky a chalkboard for new wisdom.

3. The windows are pools of blood
   Drained from the setting sun
   As it bids farewell
   To a dead and bloodless world.

Our lovemaking, like fireworks,
Explodes briefly, shedding infra-red light
Into the deeper grottoes
Of uncomprehended personality.

Flood waters exult, breaking free
From banks of habit and decorum
Scouring away the careful work
Purging man and nature in renewal.

The magnificent tree praised God
Then it was cut down and mashed
Into pulp for paper with which
An idiot wipes his anus.

I wander into a narrow canyon
Jaws and teeth of the hungry Earth
Which will close upon me unless
I flee, in the next fifty million years.

Another day, another year slips
Off the edge of the warped world—
I apologize to the sky and trees:
Sorry, I haven't saved you yet.

Fitness:
The childless writer has replicated
The DNA of his spirit,
The genome of his name,
Into future generations.

Pagans in solemn ritual
Sacrifice, and slice their own flesh
In thick smoke; their gods
Have no sense of humor.

Another Jeux de Wort:
He dwelt among the wild breasts
And ravenous loins
And then settled down
To sow his seed.

Two people survived
In a world emptied
Of humanity; they formed
Two kingdoms.

Little flecks of snow, stubby and round,
Boogers of Heaven, slung
Upon gray earth, accumulate with
The dandruff of Old Man Time.

The man surveyed the wrecks
Upon the beach, but pushed
His boat into the surf
For another day of work.

Astronomy, in Winter:

1. Cepheus and Casseopeia make love
   In their hyperborean boudoir
   Mindless of Ursa Minor—
   The teddy bear on their pillow.

2. Orion pursues his prey, with his dog,
   Sirius, wearily and forever,
   Never catching it, never
   Laying down his club.

3. The Pleiades, pinpoints of pain
   In a pus of clouds, never heals
   Despite a billion years
   Of cold winter rest.

There are so many, many ways
To be lost, to be killed,
And so few ways, so few,
To build, to heal, to find.

Every pang of green, every flight
Of dissatisfied bird, every breeze
Is sunlight, transduced
Into countless planetary dances.

An Irish Ballad (after O'Carolan):
Give me your hand, and we will walk
Over emerald hillsides, in dawn light
And through the mud of fields drenched
With the blood of failed dreams.

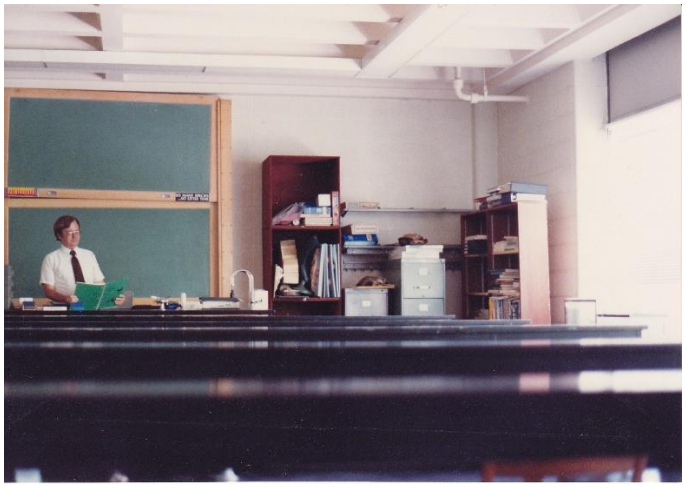
Mortality:

1. Photos fade; cassette tapes
   Of cherished voices of the past
   Jam; my very body decays—
   Only DNA lives forever.

2. Jacob stood at the base
   Of a DNA ladder, unbreakable
   But twisted in the wind
   As it reaches into eternity.[30]

Canon:
The pleasant tunes of life
Interweave in counterpoint,
Then invert; it is inevitable
That they produce tragic chords.[31]

[30] Genesis 28.
[31] A major melody, when turned upside down, is usually in the related minor mode.



In my teaching lab, 1993

Stravinsky's nude Rite of Spring
And Mendelssohn's well-robed Spring Song
Are both true portraits
Of the wild return of the sun.

Reflections on the February 1, 2003 Shuttle Explosion:
Outer space is our back yard;
We come and go as we please,
But one little loose bolt
Can explode our arrogance.

In the muddy Burgess shale
Of my inchoate, diverse possibilities,
I cannot guess which one
Will dominate my future.[32]

The Evolution of Mind: For Darwin's Birthday 2003:
God created the brain
That turned around
To challenge Him. That
Is the risk he took.

I made a choice; I was
Very young, and I do not
Even remember what it was, but
It changed the course of my life.

[32] See Wonderful Life by Stephen Jay Gould.

For Mom's Birthday 2003:
I am a scientist. My Mom
Didn't graduate from high school.
But it was she who taught me
What a rainbow is.

God showed up at church today.
He was the little boy
Who carefully balanced a pile of doughnuts
As he walked to his chair.

When all hell broke loose
I found myself
Stranded on a little island
Of beauty.

A red hot coal of wisdom
Fell from the sky one day;
God, forgive me for letting it
Cool off before I touch it.

Jesus washed the feet
Of Judas. From that moment
Judas' feet began to grow
Into cloven hooves.

To My Wife:
The wind slices through
The combers of your hair
And scents your buried recesses
With the mysteries of the forest.

I walk through a cave, in darkness so deep
My brain creates fake light;
I crouch, lest my proud head
Gouge and scrape against stalactites.

In the belly of the Earth
My very thoughts are digested
And become the natural gas
For the fires of future ages.

The Grub Crawled Out of the Flour:
Black head, white body, exclamation point:
“What are you gonna do! I got here first!”
The man said simply, “Protein!”
And used the flour.

Green Fire:[33]
A rare flash from a dying sun;
Atoms of a rare metal vaporized
In the flame; defiance
In the eyes of the dying wolf.

Requiem:
Our species huddles
In the chill cove of ignorance
Burning the last twigs
Of Earth’s dead forests

The big branch, years of work,
Which I thought was dead,
Sprouted massively; the new growth
Now needs the old wood for support.[34]

Every tree is a record
Of directions chosen,
Ascents attempted,
Some of them successful.

When the tones of the first flute
Poured from the cave,
Man knew he had unleashed
The power of the spirits.

A swirl of atoms, coming together
For a moment in one configuration—
These cycling selves are the persons
We individually esteem.

Unfinished Work:
Every cell is a whirlpool, resolving
Imbalances of energy; if ever
They completed their tasks, there would be
The perfect balance of death.

[33] Aldo Leopold wrote of watching the green fire die in the eyes of a wolf he had shot.
[34] I wrote a textbook manuscript in 1995, for which I got a contract that lapsed. Then, in 2003, I got a new contract.

Two Poems for Garner Ted:[35]

1. The number of hearts you broke
   Far exceed the number of women
   Whose student bodies you impregnated—
   Those of us whose minds you screwed.

2. How like a god you seemed, as
   In quick, delighted wisdom
   You encompassed the world; but now
   Your cheeks and nose puff in weakness.

Christmas Decorations:
The woman stood on the sidewalk, wondering
About the humble, hopeful man
Who in his Yuletide window
Had a single candle.

Earth's crustal plates—
Unhealed, bleeding out magma,
The scars of a caesarian section
Birthing continents.

Dark Age:[36]
A half million years of darkness
Thick with hydrogen billows—
A formative plasma, whose irregularities
Determined all our futures.

In the bottle of my body I carry
A volatile, flammable spirit
Inconveniently spilling
Embarrassing tears of love.

God is baking cookies:
A billion years of stirring
Then he bakes the swirling galaxies
With their planetary chips and nuts.

[35] Garner Ted Armstrong was a radio preacher who was very famous in the late 60s and early 70s, and I was one of his followers. I felt cheated when it turns out not only was his theology wacky, but he was also a serial adulterer with the female students at Ambassador College. He died in 2003.

[36] In the history of the universe, about a half billion years are called the Dark Age because light could not penetrate the thick hydrogen gas cloud left from the Big Bang. It was 2003 when I started reading about the history of the universe so I could write my first book, Encyclopedia of Evolution.

I looked into Heaven: It was not
In the sky, but down
In the swirling microbes
Of my own dirty hands.

For a billion years, Orion
Has chased his quarry across the sky;
But every week, Death
Captures a million prey.

The Falconer's Daughter:
With her regal gyrfalcon gaze
And red crest of hair
She swooped in to my surprised soul
And grasped my dripping heart.

The desert wanderer stumbled to the well
And put his lips to the blessed water
And thanked God, as he drank
The soup of micro-organisms.[37]

He is the Bread of Life:
Sometimes spicy tortillas,
Sometimes sweet glazed rolls
Sometimes survival's dry crust.

Rain:

1. The same gentle rain that brings life
   Also brings mildew;
   Only God knows
   Which will prevail.

2. God's gentle rain caresses
   The cozy house, inside of which
   Tempers clash and hatred flares
   Brighter than the glow of the hearth.

Showdown on St. Patrick's Day, 2003:
In the Springtime of war
Bombs flash like blooms
In charred green fields
Bleeding with oil.

[37] Sometimes the microbes are the only visible evidence that the water does not have arsenic in it.

A Woman I Saw in a Coffeehouse:
You are a queen. The tiara
In your beautiful hair
Reflects your smile, which hides
The emptiness of your castle.

From old scraps of wood, failures
Of inept carpentry, the unthinking wasp
Chews a pulp, and makes from the paper
An architectural marvel.

That day I happened to look
Up instead of down, along
My routine path; that chance act
Led me in a whole new direction.

An Argument:
We patched everything up
But the microscopic cracks
Will someday line up
Into a fracture.

The World According to Dubya:
In the poker game of the world,
Cards with French grins, I got trumped;
But it is I, not they, who have
The big guns.[38]

From numerous inputs: hunger,
Love of humankind, fear of failure,
Comes one output:
I get up in the morning.

Two sisters, red-haired,
One bittersweet paprika
The other prickling cayenne
Mixed in a soufflé of talk.

Give an ape a button
Flashing red, pulsing anger,
And that ignites a nuclear fire:
And watch him press it.

[38] Dubya is George W. Bush. When he started the Iraq War, France would not join in.

Wisdom takes any little grain
Of irritant, pokey-shaped,
And makes of it a sculpture of beauty
That helps uphold the world.

Three men, three colors
Wrestled to defend wisdom,
Each accusing the other of error,
Not knowing they had all found it.

Patriotism:
Am I praiseworthy just because
A generation ago
I waved a flag above
The body of a dead enemy?

Wisdom is not a commodity
Of which I will have less
If I give it to you, thus requiring
That I must charge a price.

My insensate fingers grasp
Every sharp pleasure
Hoping for a thrill
But they just bleed.

Is God, like Darius, trapped
By his own immutable proclamation?
How much less so the timetables of the future
Devised for Him by preachers.

I found a nugget; was it gold?
But I was afraid to reveal it
Lest I be thought a fool
If it should turn out to be pyrite.[39]

Blessings come
At every inconvenient moment
When I have no time to gather them
Nor a container for them.

[39] Iron pyrite is called “fool’s gold.”

Jesus:
You chose the season of wildflowers,
Of seedlings and gentle rain
To shed your blood
Upon the insatiable dirt.

The last puff of wind before the storm
Brought pollen to the stigma;
The scouring rains that followed
Did not rinse the pollen from its place.

In the immensely old universe
When even atoms will decay
Only God will remember
How beautiful you were.

Beneath his damp layers
A fire smoldered in his heart
And almost burst into flame.
But his sigh extinguished it.

Creation ceaselessly sings
Itself into being: each moment
A new chord, galactic overtones
As meteors streak clefs across the sky.

The church shaped like an ark[40]
With fragrant mammals inside
Resonated with pummeling rain
Safe in the world's tossing waves.

My socks became monkeys
When, on my lilting feet,
They clambered up rocks and trees
And skipped down the path of evolution.

The sun, nuclear explosion
Not warming the emptiness of space,
Existing for itself, does not care
That its rising made me happy.

[40] There is one on Pine Street in Tulsa.

Song of Myself:
One teaspoon of genes, one pint
Of experience, one quart of habit,
Basted and baked by the world—
But they are not my true self.

Like Daniel, when the angel
Of pure light stood before him
I do not abase myself, but stand
And face God with dignity.

His lovemaking had a schedule,
A plan of efficient business,
Rhythm, climax, closure; and then
He got up and walked away.

To Cyndi:
You are as good as sunshine
Which is the reason
That men absorb you
To make their food.

Weary of War:
Red sunset on brown blood,
Skies bloody from bent light,
Scattered through the smoke of bombs:
We are glad to see the day end.

The Skeptic:
Our big brains evolved to meet
The daytime challenges and struggles;
They misfire at night; from this
Comes all our dreams and faiths.

The Tantrum:
Go ahead, stomp! Vibrations in the ground
Will form no earthquake
Nor will your gyrating arms
Tilt the Earth from its ecliptic.

Easter 2003:

1. Death spat out
   The Son of Man, Whose sweetness
   Was astringent, and Who refused
   To be chewed into uniformity.

2. The Resurrection was at night
   While the world was mindless,
   The disciples in despair; only the moths
   Knew the Tomb lay open.

In darkness I felt
A lightless star at photon speed,
Its tepid plasma
Refusing to die.

My life is a wild river of wisdom
Droplets bouncing from boulders
But I have forced it into
Straight muddy canals of work.

My own mortality is below me
Visible through the interstices
Of the swinging rope bridge
On which I busily dance.

I float on the hard floor:
Suspended by the patter
Of the floor's countless electrons
Pushing against mine.

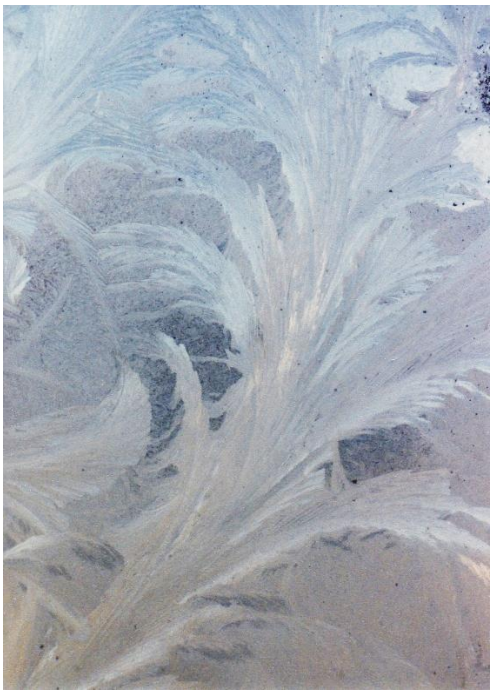
The fire does not cleanse
The mildewed wood, but wafts
The thick mantle of spores
Into the secret air.

The false preacher, a mosquito
Sucking blood from stupid sheep—
God will squish
And obliterate him.

Sunset shadows
Against a hidden wall:
I am the only person in the world
Who beheld this moment of beauty.

I smile at you with Eloi grin,
Naïve, full-faced, while deep inside,
In the Morlock corridors of my mind
I scheme to consume you.[41]

[41] Eloi, Morlocks: from H. G. Wells, The Time Machine.



Jack Frost on a Minnesota window, 1993

Old Testament: spilled blood
Beading angry in the dust;
New Testament: veined blood
Bearing oxygen to the heart.

Einstein:
Quanta sparking
From the tips of wild hairs:
His eyes, black holes of meaning
Continue to mesmerize us.

Ecological Succession:

1. The old house sheds tarpaper
   Like decaying skin, as the forest
   Reclaims its peace and shade.
   Young sentinel trees stand guard.

2. Vines bind the old barn—
   The vanquished, unmoving body
   Of human arrogance, tied
   In Earth's unavoidable grasp.

Soldier River, Iowa:
Straight as a regiment, square-banked,
It marches through conquered fields
Haunted by the ghosts of wild trees
And spirits of wild red men.

Conquest of Nature:
In the city, from which
Wild nature is banned
Rat and cockroach dance
And bacteria swarm.

The pages of my Bible,
Orderly theology,
Are ruffled and ripped
By the wild wind of God's Spirit.

Truth is the interplay
Of light and shadow, discernible
For just an instant
In the dappled shade.

He built his house
On the solid rock
Hurled by crashing continents
Across the planes of time.

He projected the gray light
Of his rigid theology
Upon the splattered world, and saw
Only what he expected.

He boasted the armor of God—
"I have the sword of the Lord!"
But he neglected to have his feet
Shod with the moccasins of peace.

The closed windows of the church
Trapped stale air of habit
And kept out the scouring wind
And thrashing Spirit of God.

Truth is a pine forest
Strewn with dead branches
On a steep slope: You sweat
Just to keep from slipping.

Wood:
Conduit of water from root to sky,
Cabin walls, coffin planks,
Embers; and it held aloft
The dying Son of God.

Your soft voice and lips hide
The deep fire of your wisdom
But wisdom glows from your eyes
Dark with invisible power.

Every storm in life stirs
The pain in your shoulder,
Near your heart; you will carry
Painful love all of your life.

The Bursting Heart (Too Much Empathy):
If I cried just a second
For every tragedy
In this afflicted human family
I would never stop.

The little church choir
And the flock of sparrows outside
Sing to God
With off-key, off-beat praises.

The well-manured plant
Reached strong branches to the sky.
It refused the vulnerability of flowers.
It left no seed.

My life is a mote of dust
Stirred and cast aloft
By the churnings of the Earth
Into a feeble sunlight.

However tightly I close
The curtains of my mind
A shaft of flaming, inconvenient truth
Always penetrates.

A thousand pines, a carpet
On the mountainside—yet each
Is uniquely shaped
From scars of its history of damage.

To the pitcher plant, an insect,
Intricate in beauty, is mere nitrogen;[42]
To the bacterium, a human,
Child of God, is mere calories.

Rushmore Quadrille Plus One:

1. George, with wooden teeth firm,
   Has the same expression
   When the sun gleams on him
   Or when terror clouds threaten.

2. Thomas's Enlightenment mind
   Is unsure if the humankind he surveys
   Is really wise enough
   To rule itself.

3. *"This is conservation?" roars Teddy,*
   Scowling at the vast parking lot
   And the melting ice cream cones
   Of the herds of stumbling tourists.

4. *"I freed the black man, but the red man*
   Remains enslaved in poverty, far south
   Of these Hills, where white miners and vendors
   Reap spectacular profits."

5. *We carve their faces in mountain granite*
   And forget the living flesh
   Of their doubts, fears, loves, and passion
   For the future of humankind.

I caress my Bible
Rubbing flat its pages
Hoping thereby to make
Its concepts plain and easy.

[42] Carnivorous plants eat insects primarily to get nitrogen fertilizer from them.

Like a rocket ship in outer space
The great philosopher advances his thoughts
By propelling himself against
His own expelled vapors.

From its lowly riverside home
Flies the cottonwood seed, driven
By the breath of God up into
Mountain forests—where it will die.

Soft blankets of clouds cover
A day of fantasies; hidden
From the gaze and breath of God
Are all our throbbing pleasures.

God cannot sit on a throne
If no gravity can pull Him down
Nor can He stand up
If all directions are up to Him.

The sea is never full
From the frothing rivers
Or from the salts rinsed out
From our busy lives.

The atom can never be
Perfectly safe, unless
It stays, crystal-straight, within
The core of the Earth.

Like spiders we cover the world
With a web of frantic thrills;
It will become a shroud, for we cannot
Continue forever sucking life from Earth.

Each springtime of war
Each summer of oppression
The great oak adds to its wood
Another layer of life.

Fireside Poems: Tchaikovsky's Serenade:[43]

1. Pezzo in Forma di Sonatina:
   Stately flames cast
   Long shadows down
   Corridors of time; the future
   Judges the color of sunlight.

2. Walzer:
   Waltzing flames playfully
   Make us guess
   Their unpredictable dance
   And surprising bursts.

3. Élégie:
   Thoughtful flames question
   The middle of reality
   And step slowly into
   A scorching cry of realism.

4. Élégie:
   A colophon of questions
   Throbbing with discontent
   Attaches to the end of the search,
   Giving up in a pool of tranquility.

5. Finale, Tema Russo:
   Eager flames impose
   Their own joyful theme
   Only to reveal the motif
   Of the original spark.

More Fireside Poems:

1. Let others be the bright flames
   Let others create smoke;
   I will be the red coal
   Radiating invisible heat.

2. The flame, generator of soot
   Seems pure to our eyes; its light
   Comes from the painful death
   Of a million organic molecules.

[43] Fireside poems written in a Black Hills cabin.

3. A whole log remains,
   Refuses to burn.
   One small flame at its end—
   Storing wisdom for another day.

4. O fire, we have denied you
   Your food; you hunger
   To devour our land of stick
   And foolish scraps of paper.

Sparks from horses' hooves
Ignite a forest fire
Which the horse and rider
Cannot outrun.

His Blood dripped and blotched
The tender petals
Of springtime flowers
On the Judaean hillside.

Luke 7:

1. Sweaty nights of sex distilled
   Into a sweet ointment
   Purified by non-sexual love
   And poured on Jesus feet.

2. Love spills over the brink
   Of propriety, dampening
   The tablecloth of elegance
   Offending cold minds.



Female pine cones: very young, and very old

One word from His lips
Could have demolished Judas
Like a moth in a flame, or mildew
In the bright sunshine.

Parasites:

1. The tick of sin and death
   Embeds its brainless head
   Into numbed skin
   And waits.

2. To the fly, I am just
   A salt-lick, and a place
   For her maggots; and she
   Is worthless to me.

O fierce breath of God,
Rip away the foliage
Of our vain works, and let
New buds of love unfold.

Your very steps are charmed
So that even on thin ice
Or none at all, you remain
Upon the plane of reason.

The passive wait for death,
And die; the brave
Curse death and fight it,
And die also.

How quickly can firm soft flesh
Melt; a body of laughter
Becoming a mere glaze of rot
Shining beneath a grinning moon.

A diverse world of flies,
Some small and light, some large,
Each probes me differently and invades
My ordered life in its own way.

Bleached wood, craggy tree
In death, defies
The softness of the matted litter
And eternal cycles of the Earth.

What are we but energy
Trapped for a moment
In senseless atoms—light
That is aware of itself?

Advice to a Nation:
Our serious business, our work
Upon this redolent soil
Is to be welcomers
Of nature's timeless renewal.

To a Questioner:
Don't preach at me, you say;
I won't—I just stand;
You see me look at distant cliffs
And love its fossilized scars.

Returning Home to My Wife (An Anticipation):[44]
Gentle wind, green needles,
Over white-frothed stream
Is not enough; I rejoice
In your welcoming flesh.

Light never rests; it races
Through silent air, to unmoved stone,
At ultimate speed, to my eye
And to my never sated brain.

Swallow follows swallow
Parabolas of desire
In giddy arcs
And consummations on the wing.

Opus 1229 (AD):
Even yet, in the Dark Ages
Of wisdom I walk
Illuminating the pages of my life
With fantastical chimeras.

[44] Returning home from the Black Hills 2003.

Even sun slides sideways
Showing the sloppy undersides
Of our morning's plans, and façades
Of our day's works.

Forever dull, my pencil rubs
A soft wisdom; no hard lines
Of clear logic; too soon smudged
By overlying sheafs of work.

The thick liquor of the night
Brewed by leaf and soil
Drowns the fears and fights of day
Into indolent sleep.

History (July 4, 2003):
Someday, our whole human story
Will be perhaps an inch
Of crushed mineralogy
In the limestone of Earth's fatigue.

The Pine:
The sharp, rough, tight bark
Of youthful certainty gives way
To the puzzled wondering flakes
Of old age.



Black Hills, ponderosa pine bark, 1995

O hills, forgive us; look down
On our highways of hurry
Towards sinful destruction
And pity us for our sin.

In gleaming America, are we
So different from those countries buried
In African chaos? In both,
Warlords are rich and the land bleeds.

Wendell Berry Goes to Church:[45]
Vast organ pipes of oak,
The cantor is the chickadee,
The scriptures are on the parchment
Of fallen leaves.

Dead catkins: now empty,
Useless, on the birch, refuse to fall
To fragrant ground: they want to see
The finished work of their pollen.

If I want my work to be
Big and lasting as a mountain
Then it must *be* a mountain:
Broad-based, covered with life.

Lascaux:
The tune is not new
For some forgotten caveman
Had chanted it, reverberating
To the listening painted bison.

Utopia:
All races, dark and light
Are now free! Alike to pursue
The dollar of survival and be crushed
By the clanging sledge of debt.

The storm slips by
In the distant mountains. Don't leave!
I wanted to greet you, refreshed
By your pelting hail.

[45] A Timbered Choir, his poem collection.

Life is a miracle—
Not its origin
But its daily, hourly fire
And our awareness of it.



Badlands, South Dakota, 1995

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a over two and a half million views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.