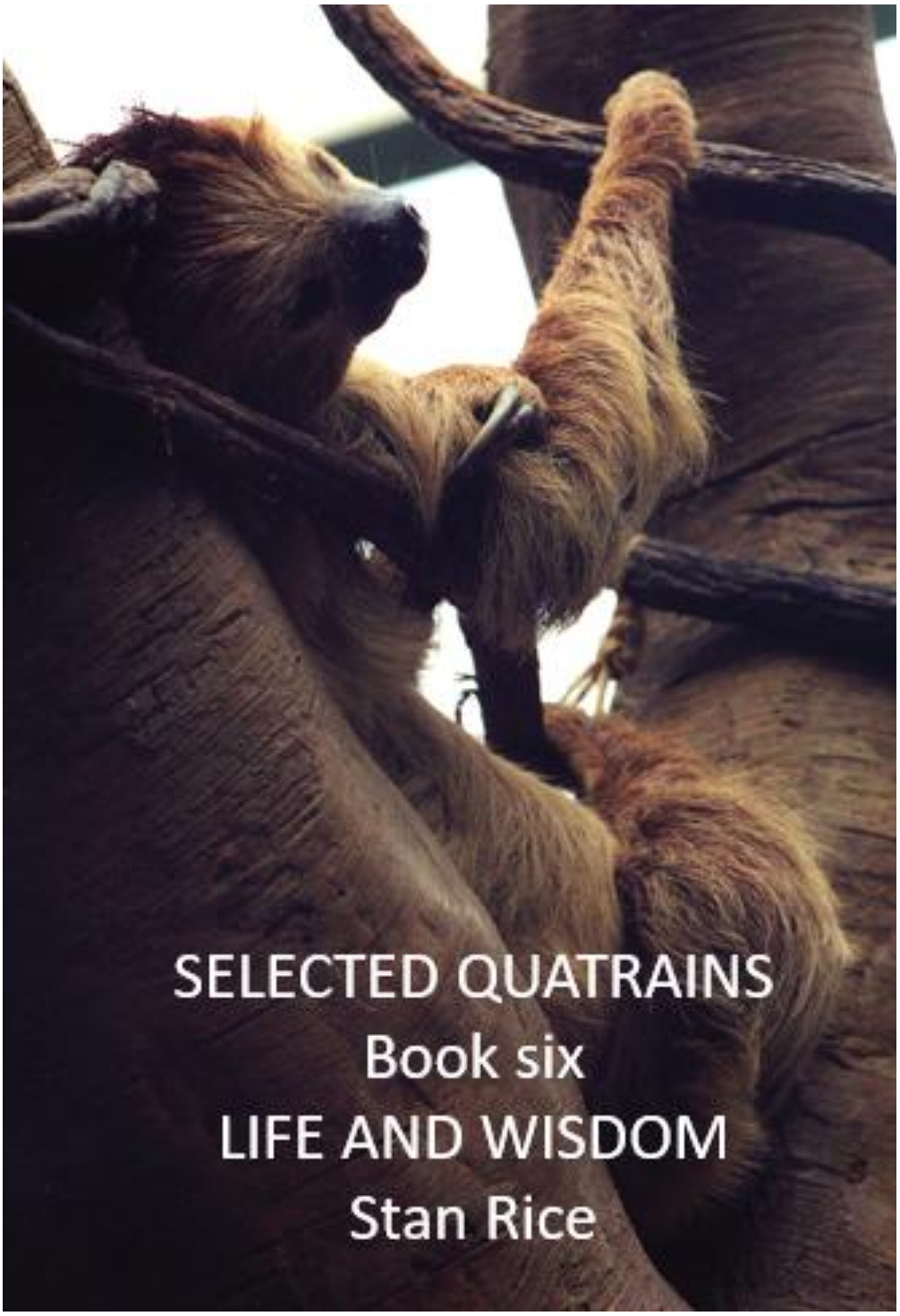

SELECTED QUATRAINS
Book six
LIFE AND WISDOM
Stan Rice

Selected Quatrains
Stan Rice
Book six: Life and Wisdom
2005-2006

Quatrains on Life and Wisdom

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.

Cover photo: sloth, Tulsa Zoo, 1998.

We intend to be the last generation
To enjoy the Earth—breathe freshly,
Listen to silence, hear birds, and smell
Fresh decay of leaves rather than corpses.

We are offended at silence and emptiness—
We must rape it with noise, fill it
With the aroma of our shit, and bid goodnight
To clotted brown sunsets.

Vacation package: Rip it open,
Paw through its contents, chew up
The native trees and peoples
Then toss it as garbage on the ground.

We hate silence: It creates terror
By forcing questions upon us—Who we are,
What we are doing, for which we have no answers;
It reveals our unbearable emptiness.

The river is my slave: my trash
Is a whip on its bleeding skin; my urine
Degrades it into squalor, in which
My boot can grind her.

Republicans exult: War is the solution
To every peril abroad, and silences
Everything at home. There is no future
That is not terrifying to us.

America is a baby
Diaper brimming, angry
At our own boredom
With smashed toys.

There is no technology
To which humankind has not
Under some or other blue or red sky
Made the worst possible use.

Mom, on Her Birthday (March 7, 2005):
Mother, you taught me to see
A world in which goodness
Was its own reward, and reasonable;
This world, I fear, is now gone.

Can we use power
Non-destructively?
Has anybody,
Ever?

I turn and stride away
From the beggar woman, taking refuge
In a thousand lies, by which
I justify my divine right of wealth.

The neat garden in the yard of poverty
Is a last stand of hopefulness
Against an oppressive economy—but its soil
Is contaminated by industrial toxins.

The land is poor because
Governors do not govern
Legislatures do not legislate
Nor judges judge, for its citizens.

The motor boat shares the river
With fishermen and canoers
The same way soldiers share
A village with its refugees.

Herr Müller:
The old German built an altar,
Bricks from an old Nazi ruin
Recycling the dust of death
Into a garden dedicated to Jesus.

My cruise ship slips
Through a fog, surrounded by
The suffering world; it toots,
While corpses bob about.

My muscles twitch, a dance
Macabre and perverse
Jerking my puppet body
Into shadows of insanity.[1]

The American soldier points his gun
At the Iraqi civilian. No matter
How nicely asked, how reasonable,
His request is a threat.

[1] One of my sleep disorders.

Why are the cosmoses we create
We of lizard brain and flatworm heart
More just and fair
Than God's own?

Americans unite!
Uniformed; uniform opinions
Unwavering drumbeat
Uniformity of death.

The sheep dog kept his wards
Protected in ordered herds;
The God of Dogs had given him dominion
And he was zealous with pride.

If God loved me, and every other
Stinking, doomed mortal, how
Would He be able to keep
The carbon cycle going?

Homo erectus:

1. Adam unfallen
   In the garden of ease
   Was like a dog, not recognizing
   His reflection in the pool.

2. Our desire for paradise,
   For heaven, is the remembrance
   Of not yet being human, not yet
   Carrying responsibilities.

A lacework of fungus weighs down
The whole world in a stench of decay;
From its midst, triumphant Republicans
Sit on a giant mushroom.

Rewriting Jesus' parable:
The Good Samaritan, on the highway,
Found a thousand victims of violence.
Overwhelmed by a weight of sorrow,
He went on his way.

What is the difference between
A rock and a man? Both are matter: The rock
Is just a rock, pulverized, then remade, but a man
Bears responsibility for Earth's atoms.

Death of Spirit:
When Nixon stumbled into Vietnam
We said, Hell no! But
When Bush stumbled into Iraq
We said, Just do what he tells us.

The Prague Spring of 1968
Happened because of the nostrils
Of a million people; but in America
We have forgotten the scent of freedom.

"You really think," snarled Caesar,
"That you and your threadbare Prince of Peace
Can change the world?" Beloved John
Knelt in silence, and soon was dead.

With the sword of the Lord
They save embryos
Only to throw them into a world
Of pollution and war.

Leaves turned crimson and gold
And fell, millions of years before
A human mind esteemed them beautiful
Or mourned their decay.

Home is not where you go, a place
Of collapse when your work is done;
It is your work, what you build
As you live in the world.

The American Disease: We use up
Land and soil and people
And ideas and morals and wisdom
And move on to others.

Why do I sit in peace, in comfort
While the rest of the world suffers?
Because to be a peaceable man
Is to be the hope of the world.

She was a bubble
A roundness buoyed up
On the greasy skin of the ocean
The steep waves of his soul.

The scientist is an undertaker
Measuring capacity of body and brain
Which is our coffin, preparing us
For the cold reality of death.

Treason! This man
Has shirked his patriotic duty.
He buys little; he walks to work;
He doesn't even have a television!

Comet:
As his cold head and colder heart
Approached the scorching truth
Of the sun, a tail of shining thoughts
Was his spectacular shadow.

The weight of evil, from past generations,
Burdens each of my chromosomes
In which the genes of both
Oppressor and victim commingle.

The world is our chamber-pot
Capacious, global; the consequences
Of our consumerism are carried away
By unseen hands of dark slaves.

A diploma is a packet of seeds
To be planted; some will sleep forever,
Some sprout and die, some grow
Briefly vigorous, some into thick-trunked trees.

Preachers:

1. The preacher breakfasts as
   An expert in psychology; by lunch,
   He is a sociologist; by supper
   He is a scientist.

2. Preachers, floating on scraps
   Of overturned prows and hulls
   Congratulate one another
   As Admirals of God's fleet.

3. Visit to a Preacher:
   "Please disconnect your frontal lobe;
   Your cerebellum's not much use either;
   Come into my office
   With your brain stem hanging out."

The universe is mostly empty,
Mostly dark, mostly cold.
We need each the other, to create
A tiny space of warmth.

My poems are the DNA of my soul,
Each a gene, encoding a truth,
Connected in complex networks
And ninety percent junk.[2]

The mower saw blood on his scythe
And mourned a bird's useless death;
The modern farmer, on a tractor,
Crushes birds unseen, unnoticed.

The farmer surveys his field
Of battle, his victory
Over plants, animals; soil
Naked before a cold winter.

Dubya:[3]
He dreams of a flat land
Like his Texas ranch
No trees or mountains
To inconvenience his authority.

New York Publisher:
They told the prophet, shut up.
You are an Okie; your job
Is to write cowboy poetry
Whilst kicking coprolites.

[2] Most DNA in chromosomes is non-coding, that is, does not encode genes. It is often called "junk."
[3] George W. Bush.

Reflections of ripples make
Your face into a contour map:
Rapid streams of zeal,
Deep pools of thought.

Description, they say,
Is least important in fiction. But
It is exactly what readers need
In a world where nobody stops to look.

Blank sheets, like slaves, lie flat
Before me, and permit me to impose
My mind upon them—but they will not
Unless my words will bless the world.

Alyabyev's Nightingale
Never lived but as vibrations
In a cosmos of air
And a swirl of human mind.[4]

The land owns me; the deed
Says, "Take care of my soil,
My grass, my worms, until
You become my food."

Ocean Depths:

1. *In Wendell's house*
   The speed of light slows down
   As in a jewel, or as in
   The ocean's deepest photic zone.[5]

2. In the dysphotic zone
   Branches forget which way is up
   And roots do not recognize
   The surface; they entangle me.

When man flies, he calculates
And thinks of how to use flight
As a weapon. But the swallow
Just flies, swooping in joy.

[4] A piece of music: theme and variations.
[5] Wendell Berry, poet and novelist.

POV:
The river stood still; its banks
Flowed past, on an unmoving planet
Around which swirls
Suns and comets and galaxies.

I become more at peace with nature
As I get older: I sag earthward,
I slow to a snail's pace, and my molecules
Approach equilibrium with the soil.

I was honored by
The Reception Committee: birds
Built a nest under my eaves
Welcoming me into the natural order.

The Truck Running a Red Light:
I have a negative worth
To the trucker: It would take
Time and money for him to wash
My blood and skin from his bumper.

Wisdom is not a staid English scholar
Imposing lines of truth on a flat world,
But a leprechaun, an Irish monkey,
Clambering among the vines between truths.

The way of wisdom is not a road
Cut and pounded through the facts
But a path that winds its way
Among the intricate connections of facts.

Advertisements:
Wealth and technology
Have filled us with joy.
Why, look! Is it not true that
Everyone, everywhere, is smiling?

My bed is a boat, propelled
Downstream, rudderless; I cannot know
If I will see tree-lined banks or pools of scum
Or be broken on rapids at the edge of the world.



Visit to the Dvorak Museum, Spillville, Iowa, 1997

I am a Kleenex; when God
Has finished blowing His Nose
He wads me up and tosses me
Like a shooting star unto Earth.

Even the laws of physics
Do not work for me; around me
Everything crashes, even if
They must leap upward to do so.

I am beyond any cure; my body
Has the chemistry of a Martian—
No potion or pharmacopoeia of Earth
Can cure my constant afflictions.

Thank God:

1. Who needs death squads,
   Sarin filling subways, anthrax
   Billowing like clouds, when God
   Afflicts our very atoms?

2. The world will soon end: why else
   Has God chosen to destroy
   So many good people, to make them
   Have utterly no effect on the world?

3. *If I treated my daughter*
   As God treats His children
   I would at least explain to her
   Why it is necessary.

One might as well try
To plow the blue sky, and make
Bricks and mortar from clouds
As to plan even a day of future.

God's sheep: We stumble along
Following whatever moves;
We stand or sit when told to,
And vote as the preachers command.

I see before me a vast green field
Of verdant sweet-meadowed future:
Why do I insanely desire
To fence it, and plow it in little squares?

There but for the grace of God go I—
Actually, there go I, as much bereft
Of God and help as they, only
In a different, less obvious way.

The same tongue that tastes the sweetness
And the bleeding salt of the Earth
Also forms words: Boasts and lies
In a mouth that chews up the world.

In the jig of the Earth
Each note takes fifty years
Each measure a millennium—
To us, nothing is happening.

Just a little extra water
From unnoticed rain
Made the entire stream change
Its course, and the world.

Gypsum Dunes:[6]

1. Gypsum dunes, reflecting heaven,
   Absorbing none of it
   Sending it straight back
   Into unwarmable outer space.

2. Gypsum dunes, shifting
   Like a wandering mind,
   Untainted by rich humus
   Or by mineral color.

A slug crawled from the drain
Of our bathtub, towards heaven—
S/he will find it, and when s/he does
It will kill him/her.

The breath of spring—birds
Fighting and mating: we interpret
Their war cries as joy
And praise of God.

Perhaps we can calculate the value
Of an oak: Its wood, its shade, the soil
It holds down; but of what calculable value
Is the beautiful twistedness of its branches?

The tiny spider in my bathtub
Scrambled to hide: alarm!
God is sending a great Flood
Upon our ceramic land!

1981:
Spurned by love, I returned
To the mindless celebration of flowers
The protective embrace of damp woods
The endless expanse of living deserts.

Sublime heavenly softness, purity,
Versus the grime of the Earth
And the drive of sexuality:
Flowers are all of these things and more.

[6] In northwestern Oklahoma.

1984 (To My Wife):
In the year when the world
Was supposed to lose its freedom
We found our freedom
By surrendering to one another.

Rows of crops in plowed fields
Like grooves on an old record:
Music of the soil
Fading into forgottenness.

1986 (To my daughter):
You came from us
But in your wild goodness
And beauty you resembled
Neither of your parents.

We drive along, blasting
Cruel music, to make
Damn sure we do not hear
The birds and crickets.

Wedges of the orange
Burst with tart sweetness—
Most of the flavor is in the bitterness
Of the discarded rind.



1990:
We went from one evangelical fire
Simmering the pot of malice
To another, which hid politics thinly
Behind a churchy paint.[7]

Each ant is a cell
Of an expanding body
Feeling; flowing; pouring
Through a tiny crack.

God creates a body
That destroys itself
Then puts a mind in it
To watch in horror.

God the Sculptor works
Exquisite detail and effort
Creating a human of salt, me:
Then leaves me out in the rain.

Ecuador (1989):
A beautiful people, colorful
In mind and garb, cannot smile
Lying drunk in hopelessness
As the very mountains melt away.

Prophet's Cave:[8]
A cave in Palestine is normally
Filled with caveman skeletons
And outbreathings of decay, but this time
The sand is pure white.

1996:
The hissing Pharisee, in stealth
Carefully planned my destruction
And succeeded in one thing: He poisoned
With hatred my mountain hikes.[9]

[7] When we moved from The King's College to Huntington College.
[8] Some caves in Palestine have both human and Neanderthal bones (not from the same layer).
[9] Starting in 1996, one man ruined my teaching career in Minnesota. I was depressed all summer despite a great job teaching in the mountains. And the next year I launched out in faith, even before I had to leave, and ended up getting a job I was able to keep for a long time.

1997:
Faith, not in miracle
But in the vastness of love
Made me leap from security
In a way I would never again.

Millions die of malaria
But God hid the cure in the bark
Of a tree, and said nothing, as if
This made everything right.

The great trees of the intact forest
Were so right—pillars of God.
No brushy regrowth can atone
For the sin of their felling.

Breath of God (To a Muslim Friend in Minnesota):
The Minnesota wind tore
The Arabic scarf from her head—
Before my astonished eyes
Her naked earlobes blushed.

Two Thousandth Poem:
Two thousand poems, or one;
Two thousand stories, or all the same;
Vivaldic expressions of diversity
Within four strait lines.

No theory, but only
Moment and chance
Can explain how Jeanne d'Arc
Ended up leading an army.

2003:
Doors into which, for years,
My fingernails had scratched
Flung themselves open
As I merely walked past.[10]

[10] For a decade I'd submitted dozens of books and stories to editors and agents, then in 2003 an offer came to me for a book (Encyclopedia of Evolution) I had not even proposed.

God is like the sun
Seen from Sedna:
Cold light, false color,
Casting no shadow, little gravity.[11]

On the Beach:
The shifting line between land and sea
Stirs up corpses from both realms
And creates a zone in which
No rules are absolute.

Illusion:
I see distant Everests from amidst
Tendrils and tropical vines—but they
Are only a trick of light upon
Hospital bed curtains and tubes.

In a shining moment
Chopin crafts the perfect melody
Then he, and it, are lost in swirls
Of eternal formlessness and void.

I am soil, flecked with little crystals
That reflect heaven, saturated
With the decay of ages, trampled
By endless footprints of slaves.

My atoms—mine! Mine!
I can let no one else have them
So I will not breathe out, nor let
Any flake of skin glide soilward.

Pomes like apples hang
Words from gnarled branches
Shaded soil of creativity, from which
Surprising mushrooms spring.[12]

Ice Cream Trucks:

1. The ice cream truck
   Clinking out Ein Feste Berg
   Invites us to salvation
   Of mindless sweetness.

[11] Sedna is a supposed planet that orbits the sun in a narrow ellipse, and just happens to be too small and too far away to see from Earth right now, but it will come back and destroy us, some say.
[12] Pomes and poems; an apple is a pome. Poetic creativity is like an old apple orchard.

2. Two ice cream trucks
   From adjoining worlds
   Create a counterpoint
   Of classical and folk song.

Bridge:
God save the weasel,
Pop goes the queen—
How confused we become
On the car-strangled spanner.[13]

"Behold how I soar!"
Proclaimed the Eagle
As he spread his wings, gliding
On the winds of coming storm.

Poetry is a neutral space
In which God permits me
To explore dangerous insights
And question even Him.

You are naked
Beneath those clothes
And your heart is visible
Behind your pretenses.

Who needs real flowers
When plastic mimics them
And whole meadows of neon
Light up our malls?

There is no evolution without death. Every blessing
Of mind and body I enjoy has resulted
From deaths of thousands of mutants
Whom God permitted to have consciousness.

Wild onions frying, popping,
Each explosion the death
Of one tiny universe
And the birth of another.

[13] Francis Scott Key wrote The Star-Spangled Banner. The Francis Scott Key Bridge over the Potomac (briefly famous because of a barge accident in 2024) has been called the car-strangled spanner.

Easter Island is the world
No trees, all mammals killed;
Humans drool as they behold
The delicious fleshes of each other.[14]

Gettysburg:
God reposed on a counterpane of clouds
While below, a thousand men
Writhed like undead worms
Filling the air with groans.

Just as to a synesthete
A major chord tastes sweet
So the flavor of your friendship
Is unique and irreplaceable.

Aroma:

1. Even when he does nothing
   The aroma of evil
   Pervades his office
   And pollutes our lives.

2. Even when her actions
   Cause us great inconvenience
   The aroma of her goodness
   Coats us in a sweet glaze.

You can sing or think any concept
But the only ones that resonate
Are those whose dimensions fit
The metrics of their landscapes.

Homo ergaster:
Laughter rings out across
The savanna; no, it is not hyenas—
But humans around a campfire
Telling the world's first joke.

[14] Easter Island's Polynesian population collapsed before European contact; historians speculate about whether they had a period of cannibalism.

Some people are like hemorrhoids—
Not particularly dangerous
But in their presence
We can think of nothing else.

Regrowth:
The forest forms a scab
Over the cut and scarred land
Trying very hard to cleanse
The blood from the soil.

Oklahoma:
This land could be so fair
But its air reeks of gasoline
And its soul of toxic religion,
Of flammable ignorance and injury.

Illness:
I lie awake, peacefully trusting
In millions of years of evolution
And that my body, descendant of survivors,
Knows how to heal itself.

The wall is broken down.
Most people walk right in
To the Garden, while some of us
Still use the old stone gate.

The world is without color; there are
Only wavelengths of light
Fantasized into a spectrum
By our beauty-creating brains.

Golden light flows down
Like oil on your golden hair
Past your penetrating eyes
Into billows that heap over your heart.

Life is the interval between
Photosynthesis and decomposition, a stage
Of brief shining complexity
Between darknesses.



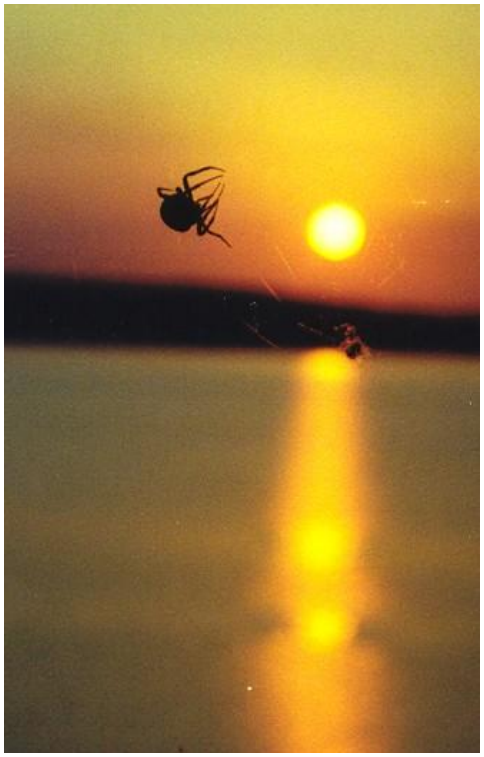
Snow on chokecherry, Black Hills, 1998

In a universe of dead planets
We will never finish
Exploring the organisms
Here on Earth.

Topology:
At the moment on sunrise
On the flat plane of truth
Even the smallest pebble
Casts an infinitely long shadow.

Roadkill:
I drive down the highway
Through the green springtime
Crying at the pain of the world
And watching vultures gorge.

Finito; curtains;
Sayonara; down the drain—
So many ways to fail
So few to succeed.



Spider, sunset, Lake Texoma, 1998

Roadside Monument to a Car Wreck:
A girl's sunshine face in a photo
Wreathed by fabric flowers—
Both photo and fabric now faded
By cruel ultraviolet radiation.

Two Poems of the French Revolution:

1. *Dr. Guillotin intended*
   To make inevitable death
   Clean and quick, but only
   Made it more Terrifying.[15]

2. *Lavoisier:*
   On the ninth day of thermidor[16]
   In year two of the Republic
   The precise blade of insane terror
   Separated divine head from ape body.

[15] The capital T is intentional.
[16] Thermidor: One of the summer months in the French Revolutionary calendar. Antoine Lavoisier was perhaps the most famous chemist in history, guillotined on that day.

Republican Jalopy:
Your ideas are a pile of junk
Running over pedestrians
The parts held together only
By stickers with shallow slogans.

The Anti-Abortionist:
He wants as many babies as possible
To be born, so that they can crowd
A planet toxic and suffocating
In the heat of his pollution.

The fundamentalist spirit, white,
Dries away from the world
All its sinful colors, making it
Half ice, half salt.

On Everest, the sunlight comes
As much from below as above,
Sharp lines of surface suddenly collapse
And in the thin air brain cells die.

Sunlight shines upon you
But in your purity
You reflect it all
And remain frigid.

We are two stones
Companions in the rockslide
Both topsy-turvy, rubbing
One another into smoothness.

God saw the suffering woman
And rather than to rescue her
He lay down beside her
And embraced her.

Your betrayal was a blade
Slipped between my ribs.
One cannot judge internal injury
By the smallness of the visible wound.

Watersheds and little creeks
Are God’s fingerprints upon the land.
Our bulldozers erase
His marks of identity.

San Joaquin Valley:
I grew up on the bottom of a lake.
Before I was there, engineers
Drained it, leaving only
Imaginary currents of fantasy.

Our grossly obese economy
Slurps whatever it desires
And sits on the remainder
Crushing small lives like ants.

We destroy our orchards, to buy
Cheap fruit from other lands.
What if some day those countries decide
To not share their food with us?

The American:
The halo above his head
Is a donut; sweet jam
Slathers the bread slices of his toes;
Butter tumbles from his tubs.

To survive, my soul became
A hard, dry seed, isolated
From the world of water and light
Waiting for spring rains.



Chimpanzee, Tulsa zoo, 1998

The Arkansas River, Tulsa:

1. Just as the negotiating herons
   Flapping and squawking, had divided
   Their fishing territories
   An airboat tore through them.

2. White plastic bags inhale
   The sewage-scented breeze,
   Then one of them, an egret,
   Takes flight.

3. In gentle trees, the terns
   Survey the river, then suspend
   Their light bodies, like angels
   With fluttering wings.

4. Looming over the river
   The flashing casino sign
   And Oral Roberts' towers: both
   Part fools from their own money.

The Stupid American:
Behold our economy! Free enterprise
Gives us air and water, and makes
Food appear by magic in the stores
And makes the sun shine.

When I was a young fundamentalist
I didn't think I was arrogant—
I sincerely regretted that God would damn
All who disagreed with me. God forgive me.

Ecological prophecies:

1. The fat butt of our greed
   With oleaginous rolls of lard
   And stench of unclean anus
   Sits upon and crushes the Earth.

2. The tumored cities have sucked
   All blood from the tissued countryside.
   Fevered, swollen, they have suppurated
   Into suburban scabs.

3. We transform a wild Earth
   Of cycled seasons and curled rivers
   Into the straight canals of progress
   And tombstones all lined up.

A tiny patch of skin revealed
From Victorian clothes ignites libido
As a plant grows grotesquely, long and spindly,
Towards a patch of sunlight.

Night soil, once made sweet
By root and leaf, now fills
Deforested, eroded landscapes
With the scent of human pride.

The big cottonwood
Lets one branch die,
Or two, or three,
And stays alive.

A red tide of marine microbes fouled
The coastline of blue-state Massachusetts
Shutting down liberal clam-bakes
And poisoning its lascivious oysters.

I crossed the Republican River in Kansas—
It was colored with blood and gold,
Its liberal, pliant willows had died
And vultures feasted along its banks.

Man:
Every narrow canyon exists only
To magnify his booming voice
And the rich loam under the birches
Exists only to absorb his piss.

She grew up in a city, but wanted
To go back to nature. She wandered
Into the forest, saw nothing,
And returned, disappointed, to her apartment.

Recovery:

1. Crops grow in soil;
   Men claim to own land;
   They spit into dirt, then
   Are buried in the ground.

2. Ground is what we gain or lose
   In battle, the foundation
   Of buildings and arguments, the place
   Where we take a stand.

3. Particles from the bricks
   Of abandoned cities, and the decay
   Of leaves from vines that shroud them
   Produce a new world of soil.

We chew the diversity of life
Into a gray bolus, which slides
Through dark caverns to emerge
As a uniformity of waste.

Slave:
The scars from the whip, on her back,
Lined up like grooves on a marble column—
All edifices of civilization
Are built upon her back.

Hypnosis washes over him
Like gentle frothy waves
Leaving him as flotsam on a beach
Ripening in the sun.

Anger is a salt water
Like blood or sweat or tears—
To drink it only creates
A thirst for more.

Flowing water:

1. Evil lies in murky sewerage
   Yet thirsty sky and sizzling sun
   Evoke water molecules upward
   To fall again as sweet rain.

2. The water, owned and commanded
   By men and money, slips
   Invisibly away into the clouds
   To fall on poor villages.

3. "All rivers flow to the sea, yet
   The sea is not full," Solomon puzzles;
   Even a child today knows
   Invisible truths that Solomon did not.

Motion:

1. *Even the Holy Ghost Himself*
   Exists only by flowing
   Through us, through all,
   And in stasis ceases to be.

2. *Jesus did not say*
   The Spirit was still air
   But wind, moving
   From place to place unknown.

God said, "Let there be light."
He did not say, "I create light."
Light came to be, because He allowed
The cosmos to ignite.

A disturbing joy disrupts
My edifice of cynicism
Like green vines binding
The broken bones of cities.

As mountains arise from magma
And trees from seeds
So songs germinate, and poems
Arise from hot minds.

"Cut down the pagan grove!"
Screamed the preacher
So they chopped down Eden
And built a factory for trinkets.

"Name the creatures,"
God commanded Adam,
And Adam named them:
Resource, Food, and Ore.

Mind:

1. A human and a bird
   Both hear birdsong,
   But only the human experie3nces
   A spiritual exultation.

2. *A water molecule knows nothing.*
   Only a human can behold
   Oceans and icebergs and thunderclouds
   And sing a spiritual canticle of them.

The psalmist considered the heavens[17]
God's moon and stars
But modern Christians hide them
In haze and artificial light.

Abortion:
Am I the only person
Who will admit to not knowing
At what point life begins
On the cellular continuum?

We draw a line on a map
Right through watersheds,
Forests, and hearts of cultures
And declare it a reality.

One tiny step after another
Into cold thin air, on slippery ice—
To turn back is quicker death
Than to keep going.

Your eyes are oceans: misty, green,
Flecked with kelp and planks
Of wrecked ships, their lightness
Hiding darkness and depth.

He hid in the smallest closet
Of his locked house, alone except
For a hundred ghosts who, while alive,
Had loved him, and love him still.

[17] Psalm 8.

Her spirit watched from Heaven,
Loving him. She was unable
To stop him from destroying himself.
She felt she was in Hell.

Why bother with a^2 and b^2
When you can be a hypotenuse
Seeing the world slant-on
In all of its glorious obliquity?

Egrets in a dead tree
Pure white hopes arising
From the grasping claws
Of lingering mortality

The okapi hides in the shadows
In the Ituri forest, its strips
Imitating a zebra; it is not quite
A giraffe, uncertain of itself.[18]

Sincere, sine cera, without wax—
Behold the splintered grain
Of my heartwood, and not
A false, shining surface.

Jacob wrestled with doubts
And epileptic spasms of truth
Which he thought was a man
And which he thought was God.[19]

You wear white lipstick
You have no blood
Even a mortal wound
Would leave scarcely a trace.

When stupid evolution,
Tailor of errors and trials,
Created bats, he had forgotten
That he had already created birds.

A man walks into a bar
And orders two drinks:
The red blood of forgetting
And the black poison of truth.

[18] The okapi is a small forest giraffe.
[19] Genesis 32.

Omniscience:
Do the math, my boy: multiplying
The fleeting moment of sex in a week
By seven billion people: each moment
In God's sight is a wriggling orgy.

Uncle Sam:
His scarred left foot in Bosnia
His infected right foot in Afghanistan
His hemorrhaging left arm in Iraq:
His right hand points a gun at Iran.

A death in Afghanistan: a soldier;
The reporter yawns;
Osama bin Laden reclines
In the shade of our inattention.

Bush:
Me worry? No, me no worry.
Because me have the biggest army.
All the topsoil, all the food, all the oil, is
Ours.

Not artful enough to be called poems
Offering no repast of beauty,
These quatrains are intense, rigid,
To be swallowed, not chewed.

Jefferson treated his slaves
With more respect and care
Than modern Americans show
To foreign sweatshop workers.

Man Walking Around with a Birdcage on Top of His Head:
We are free to go anywhere,
To do anything; cages
Imprison our brains, for cing us
To think only of appetite.

Oklahoma blackberry wine, yodeling
In brash sweetness, casked
From fruit not nibbled by horses
At pricked pasture's edge.

Lemongrass plants, out of place, scooped
From Asian rainforests to Oklahoma patio—
But you do not know this. All you know
Is light and water and air.

Of all the paintings of bowls of fruit
None show the winsome blemishes
The lumpy asymmetries of the fruit
Or the beautiful intricacies of the worm.

Disraeli wrote a novel, as forgettable
As one would wish his face to be.
Good riddance to his empire delusions
On which the sun soon set.[20]

The fungus thrives because its threads
Are content to absorb the juices of death
And hide in darkness. Once in a while
A mushroom asserts itself.

Your jewels are prisms
Casting little mouse rainbows
That skitter and try to tell you
That whiteness is actually all colors.

Truth, like liquid nitrogen
Has flash-frozen my world
Into statues completely lifelike
But which a breeze can shatter.

In summer softness, the mud
Hides all fissures; the winter freeze
Reveals and widens the cracks
That were always there.

Her body rots in a casket
But her breath forms dust angels
And weightless sighs of snow
Powdering the mangled hills.

Do not scorn me, a scientist
Who nevertheless chooses to believe
In the Great Pumpkin, which is tunneled
With wormholes of unseen dimensions.

[20] Benjamin Disraeli wrote 17 novels. It was said that the sun never set on the British Empire.

My pencil, faithful servant,
Has reached his stubby end.
With ceremony I thank him
And entomb him in the trash.

They sent me a Virgin Mary trinket
I had not requested; how can I throw
The Holy Mother of God in the trash?
Her eyes can see my anguish.

In Eternity, stories
Never end, nothing
Reaches resolution, and life
Becomes meaningless

After Finishing a Meal at a Chinese Restaurant:
My cookie had no fortune in it.
This means that my future
Is wide open to even better things
Than Confucius could imagine.

Not What Walter de la Mare Had in Mind:
Silver moonlight on silver lake
Fur of the sleeping silver fox—
The businessman looked upon it and said,
"I will put all this silver in my vault."

The Wild and Wacky World of Religious Devotion:

1. *The founder of the Manichaeans*
   Believed the physical world was evil;
   To prove him wrong, the priests
   Flayed the skin from his living body.

2. In Heaven, Penelope weaves
   Then unweaves, her fabric forever;
   Her suitors wait for an eternity
   To savor her spiritual flesh.

3. In Heaven, Ma and Pa Kettle
   Are ready for dinner
   But they never begin eating
   And the dinner never grows cold.

4. In Heaven, angels sing
   Inaudibly, then crescendo
   To infinite loudness; but it is
   All the same to Heavenly ears.

5. The Archangel Moroni
   Has a voice box, but speaks
   Through his eyes; his intestine
   Remains ever empty.

6. *In Heaven, the Tree of Life*
   Bears fruit; each seed grows
   Into a new tree; The grove
   Expands at the speed of light forever.

7. I sip no sup and crave no crumb
   As I spend eternity watching
   The woman I love, resurrected
   With her husband.

8. I Never Met a Phor I Didn't Like:
   On Heaven's infinite scroll
   There is room for every combination
   Of words; Every pun is equally good,
   Every metaphor equally apt.

The poet does not suffer
But only thinks about suffering;
Those who truly suffer
Are too busy suffering to write.

Poems about Angels, Composed with Utmost Seriousness of Reasoning:

1. *What ails ye, man? Have ye not*
   Been tooched by an angel?
   My red hair tickles your face
   With a desire unquenched.

2. *Oh Englebert, Bert of Angels,*
   Why stop at fourteen? Why not
   Have an angel for each hair,
   Each cell, each unknowable electron?[21]

[21] From Englebert Humperdinck's Hänsel und Gretel.

3. Angels continually behold
   God's perfection, and are continually
   Aware of their own inadequacy.
   They are speechless.

He found a gold ring
On the ground. If fit perfectly.
He spent his whole life seeking
The woman with the one that matched it.

What would Buffon have thought
Of an automobile? A monster, yes,
With a heart of fire, deafening growls,
And hazing the Earth with its farts.[22]

Blindness to Spirits:

1. *A spirit stood beside a tree*
   A photographer took a picture
   Printed it, and said, "See—
   There is nothing here."

2. *One day a vast weight*
   Was lifted from my mind
   But the bathroom scale
   Refused to alter its judgment.

The Mystery of Antonín Dvořák:

1. *"But he was my father,"*
   Said Otakar, "So surely
   I can explain his genius."
   Then he sat in silence.

2. *Melodies swirled like gnats*
   Antonín caught one, held it still
   Long enough for a gauze-winged symphony
   To crystallize around it.

3. *Son of a butcher serf*
   He set souls free, and worked
   As hard on his compositions
   As any slave.

[22] Eighteenth-century French zoologist.



Birch bark, Black Hills, 2000

We cannot not think—
We feel compelled to fill
Heavenly whiteness with color
And with shadow.

Geranium:
Ten stamens right next
To a voluptuous pistil
But their dream is to send pollen
To another geranium.

The poet juxtaposes
Unrelated concepts:
There are more possible poems
Than atoms in the universe.

What the Mountain Said to the Rain:
Do not be afraid of your duty:
You rinse the particles from
My body, and take them to the sea:
You send me to God.

I want a Sandwalk
Like Darwin's thinking path,
Where birds and decaying sticks
Explain the world to me.

As I plowed through Ezekiel, I realized
That God, for reasons unfathomable
Made William Shakespeare
A better writer than Himself.

Abram, Father of the Faithful:
Does faith mean to never allow
New evidence to alter our doctrines?
Try telling that to Abram, who had
Only the stars to guide him.

Freezer Door:
Every time you open your frozen heart
Briefly to the humid, torrid world
A new layer of ice condenses, until one day
That door can no longer close.

Through rose-colored glasses
Green leaves are black
And the very sky is death's gray—
But spilled blood is still red.

Tofu:
Slices of righteous protein
Sit on my plate, yet my mind
Creates landscapes of custard
Brooded with mists of meringue.

The warmth of goodwill
Can melt a blade of ice
But not quickly enough
To keep it from slaughtering us.

Archosaurs:

1. It's a good thing that the spasms
   Kept me awake all night,
   Otherwise I would have missed
   The silent dragon sleeping in the yard.

2. You are a dragon. You tried
   To hide your identity. But you coughed—
   A brief flame! From knowing you,
   I conclude, dragons are nice.

Oh, to have a small brain
Like a possum, unable to dream
Of destroying a whole planet
Or being rewarded in Paradise for it.

There is no such thing as color—
There are only wavelengths of photons
Transformed by our fantasy minds
Into the hem of God's robe.

Aimée and Eugène
Two slopes of a mountain
She, windward, fertile,
He, leeward, dry, stark.

How Chopin Saved Science:
Frédéric Chopin taught piano
To Emma Wedgwood, later Mrs. Darwin,
Whose soothing piano music
Kept Charles, and all of science, alive.

To the Trees:
You will win. Corporations
May cut all of you down
But ten million years from now weeds
Will evolve into new trees.[23]

Fertile soil, treated like dirt,
Fertile woman, treated like dirt;
Caesar's mother is remembered only
For being cut open.[24]

[23] This has already happened on some islands.
[24] The legend of the origin of the term Caesarian dates back to Pliny the Elder but is probably not true.

Farting into the Chair in my Room at the Hilton in Response to Reading and Making a Serious Attempt to Understand the Buddhist Nondistinction between Subject and Object:
How many people have done this before,
In this very chair—this palimpsest
Of layered duodenal individualities.
Of inflated joys and disappointments?

Modified from a New Age Tea Bottle:
Green tea is brewed
With wisdom beyond wisdom.
We need only absorb its teachings
And metabolize its paradeios.

Insomnia:
Flashes and crashes give way
To distant rumbles
As danger retreats, and comfort
Invites another hour of sleep.

Before you finish this poem
Someone will have killed
Someone else because
Of what they think about God.

I do not have an MFA
Therefore these poems
Are bastards, without
Any chance of respect.[25]

Poet Bio:
He won the Riting Prize
For the best poodle poem, and he won
A Purple Prose Award.
He teaches at Bugtussle College.

White Trash Obit:
His entire legacy
Is the resonance and fumes
From his red pickup; bruises;
And the stench of decay.

I kiss
The ground
Because only it
Is worthy.

[25] MFA: Master of Fine Arts, the terminal degree for creative people.

Christmas 2005:
Yes, indeed, the sun will rise
On a new world, glistening
On the black surfaces
Of shattered civilization.

"Let evening come,"
Since it will come anyway
Without my permission
And despite my disapproval.

Dick Cheney and Halliburton
Get richer
With each new war
Even if we lose it.[26]

Constellations:
Broth of hydrogen
Cooking up stars
Ladled by the Bid Dipper
Into a nebular soup bowl.

Loch Lomond:
While all aloon, I laugh
A crazy laugh, and slide
Across the bonny glassy surface
Of waters wisdom-deep.[27]

I decided to write each poem
With four lines, but I never said how long a line could be, that it could stick out like a tongue and curl around like a wild vine or like a carpet rolled out to welcome
The curious hungry seekers
Of wisdom's sloppy sandwich.[28]

When I think of God I do not envision
An old man with a long beard
Sitting on a throne in the sky, but a tree
Growing up and out and filling the world.

[26] It was widely believed, before the end of the Iraq War, that the only reason it had been undertaken was to earn money for military contractors, especially Halliburton Corporation and its leader Vice President Dick Cheney.
[27] The loon's call famously sounds like a crazy laugh.
[28] See the scan of this poem for its structure.

If it is only the fear of hell
That makes you love your neighbors
Then you are a total stranger
To the Spirit of Love.

We have glued junk to God.
We see Him jingle and jiggle
With ikons, which hide
His true beauty from us.

Jesus never intended us
To live on bread and wine alone
But to also feast on lamb and avocado
With world of friends.

What Passed for Science in 1800:
They thought the oxygenic air
Reached past the planets
Fed the sun's coal fire, and could carry
A manned balloon to distant stars.

They told me skin as dark
As yours could not be loved.
How richly, how fragrantly
Wrong they were.

Etymology:
Glass is glossy, like a tongue
But your tongue is like
Shattered glass, sharp shards
Reflecting me a hundred times.

A Thousand and One Summer Nights:
A ceiling fan caresses me;
A light bulb shines; Scheherazade, a book,
Tells me the world's best stories—
All for twenty-five cents of electricity.

I close the aperture
Of my eye and mind
Making the world darker
But also more sharply focused.

"Turn your eyes to Heaven,"
Said the preacher, arrogant fool
Who actually thought he knew
In which direction to look.

If I curse the heavens
There is no Father who hears
My words, but only
A Spirit Who feels them.

My spirit is a baby carrot
Which is merely a chunk
Of adult carrot, rubbed smooth
By adversities.

When I presented all my writings to God,
He said, "I will keep only a summary of them."
They all turned to dust, except
For a few golden threads.

Just as a real woman's body, however flawed,
Is more desirable than a voluptuous mannikin,
So I desire direct contact with the Spirit
Over theological substitutes.

Apocalypse:

1. Psalm 84:
   In a world silenced from human frenzy
   The quiet dove makes her home
   In the altar of a church
   Whose ceiling has fallen.

2. *The church where once*
   People listened to preachers
   Is abandoned, its ceiling collapsed.
   At last, a view of Heaven.

The caveman beckons: come
Down into the grotto of yourself,
The mind and deep emotions
You wish you did not have.

I am a poet. I weave words
Into patterns nobody appreciates
While the poison words of practical men
Creep through the dying world.

The suicide bomber awoke
In the next life, and got on the boat
To take him to paradise. The boatman
Turned and said, "Call me Charon."[29]

He lived in the small county
Of his income, then realized that credit
Was a vast empire for conquest.
He spilled his blood on its foreign soil.

Homer Said:
After death, our world will be
Faint shapes of purple
Like the floating forms we see
When we close our eyes.

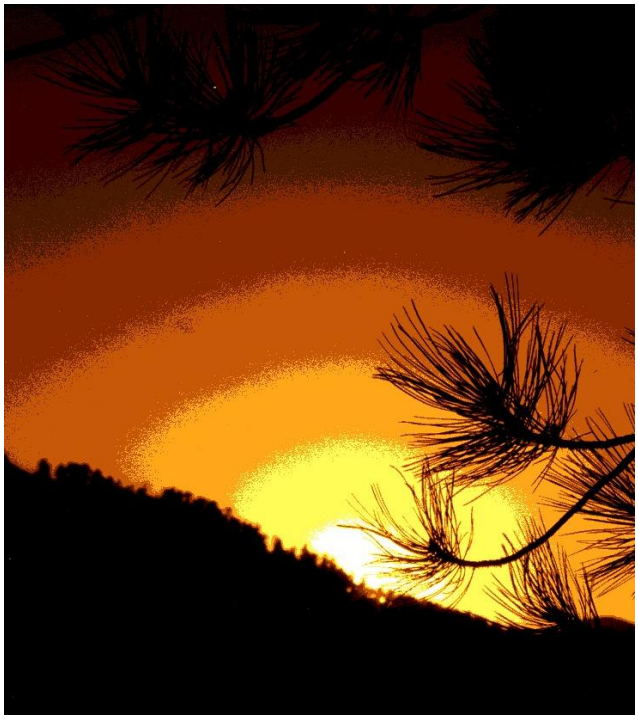
On the pentatonic black keys
Of the piano, C-sharp is D-flat
But while D-flat points down into the shadow
C-sharp lifts us up into sunshine.

On Hearing Mussorgsky:[30]
The wild night of witches' frenzy
Can be dispelled by something as simple
As the rotation of the Earth
And the rising of the sun.

A dry pillow
Is the evidence of a peaceful soul,
Of health, of good fortune,
But is not a reward for goodness.

I like women without lipstick,
Unashamed of their own color,
Whose words are true,
Whose kisses are direct contact.

[29] Charon steered the boat on the River Styx to Hades.
[30] Night on Bald Mountain.



Sunset, Black Hills, 2000

They built their town on the river.
When the river flooded, like heroes
They piled sandbags at midnight, then
Wondered why God went yet more rain.

Landscape Painter:
He painted scenic barns—silhouettes,
Or crimson in green fields.
He never painted the shit inside, or the terror
Of animals led to slaughter.

Beautiful wood, burls
And grains of rich brown, from which
Humans construct crosses
And pyres for burning heretics.

A bower of escaped clematis
In the woodland by the drainage ditch:
It releases a nectar scent that mixes
With the sweetness of decay.

The Isle of Man is the Isle of Woe:
No other creature sees
The sunset and the crashing waves
And thinks of Heaven and Hell.

The rainbow touches the ground
Like a tentacle
From a shimmering jellyfish
Swimming away.

I am falling in love again
With my wife; but I dare not
Fall too far, lest God
Snatch her away.

The hiker took a leak. He didn't know
He was inside the San Andreas Fault.
The lubricated rocks slipped
And the earthquake destroyed San Francisco.

A Scientific Study of Wild Animals:
I went to church to watch the people
Just as I would watch wild chimps;
But, unlike the church, the chimps
Would not try to kill or capture me.

National Character:
"No! I won't! I won't! I won't!
I won't recycle! I will continue to scatter
My wastes everywhere!" said the American
As his nappy bulged.

They predicted Christianity would die.
Were they right? While churches abound
And preachers control governments
The gospel of love and peace seems dead.

The human race is simply
Shitters and fuckers, greedily consuming
The goodness of the Earth, making it into shit,
Then fucking, to create more shitters.

The whole point of ritual,
Of music and religion,
Is to make the chaos of the world
Into a story.

The preachers kidnapped Jesus,
A humble man, bleeding heart;
They fitted Him with armor
And ordered Him to war.

Joy is not enjoyment, cheap laughter
From mindless diversion; it is
A careful work of art, the product
Of sweat, blood, and labor.

Nobody sings “We shall overcome”
Anymore. No one knows the tune;
No one knows the words; no one
Even expects the song to be true.

Knights:
When they found Jesus, man of peace,
They were disappointed; instead
They donned their armor, in a quest
For the Holy Grail.

There is no longer any need
For canned laughter or applause;
The citizenry has been brainwashed
To cheer and clap on cue.

By the time she finally saw the Holy Land
And her feet touched the dirt that had clung
To Jesus’ very sandals, she had lost the faith.
Now she saw only rocks and weeds.

Theology is a type of poetry:
It is meaningless when hurried
And it dies when it is forced
To follow logical rules.

She sought holiness
By rejecting all the spices
Of food and life, and all the colors
Of God’s creation.

A mortal sin is one
From which Jesus cannot save you
Because the priest has forbidden
Jesus to shed His love upon you.

The question, he said, was academic,
By which he meant that real people
Never study issues or seek evidence
Before letting their hormones decide.

Religion is a thousand tendrils
Penetrating your brain: the stem
Of emotion, the frontal swell of reason,
From which to tear free is pain.

No Place is Dead:
Scorpions and tarantulas
In a dead desert? But no:
These must find prey, and the prey
Must find living food and water.

The Human Story:
A diversity
Of food becomes
A uniformity
Of excrement.

She sprays her house with fake scents:
Of cookies baking, of bread rising,
Of fruit ripening, of flowers blooming
Of love, of hidden yeasty happiness.

I almost never think of you anymore
But sometimes your kingfisher laugh
Hahahahahaha, arises from the murky woods,
Swirls, then vanishes down the river of mind.

My “poems,” all short, will sprout
Like weed seedlings in sand,
Never developed into full thoughts:
Crowded, they starve and wither.

I finally figured out
The only prayer that makes sense:
“Oh, God, do whatever
You were going to do anyway.”

Only miracles can produce
Complex designs, they say,
Who have never looked at a snowflake
Produced by mindless molecules.

My poems are pills: small,
Bitter if you try to chew them,
Getting quickly to the point
And judged by their healing power.[31]

There is one thing
I can promise to God:
To daily open eyes and mind
To learn, be amazed, be corrected.

Tribulus:
Jeremiah gazed into the valley of Gehenna,
Rocks and corpses and smoke, and saw
A puncture vine. Though a noxious weed,
The vine was defiantly green and alive.[32]

My faith is a dog, running
In circles around me, panting
Seeming to offer me encouragement
But without a mind of its own.

In what possible way can I be said
To "own" my sycamore tree? Its roots
Are hidden, its branches inaccessible; it needs from me
Only an absence of malice.

I walk resolutely down Honest Street
To the edge of town, and see
Wild dust storms of doubt. I take refuge
In a church. Who can blame me?

Computers and accountants decide
Every medical procedure; yet it is the doctor
Who must face humanity's terror
And expose herself to its germs.

[31] Going beyond Stephen Crane's definition of his poems as pills: small and bitter, like the truth.
[32] Tribulus terrestris is the puncture vine, now invasive worldwide. It grows flat and produces fruits called caltrops.

I am God's cookpot, in agony over fire.
Is it the cookpot's fault if,
When the cook stokes the fire too high,
The spiced pottage boils over and burns Him?

I am not boasting of myself;
I merely want to do good work
Like the Carpenter
Who created me.

Republican vending machine:
Full of junk food;
Only after you put in your money
Does it say, All items sold out.

The blood of patriots and lovers
Is nothing more than manure
For the rich soil of the future
On which selfish weeds will grow.

No longer can one wear a thong
Upon one's foot, nor can a society
Have intercourse; soon every word, (like flip-flop
Or snort) will have a sexual meaning.

I am unworthy to gaze into
The shifting landscapes
Sweet and soft, of your bosom,
Or of your brain.

"Waxing poetic"—rubbing
My body with reflective metaphors
To dazzle you with light, so you do not
See my wrinkles and weakness.

Everyone else stumbles out of the movie.
We always stay for the credits:
Thousands of names no one will remember
To produce two hours of pleasure.

What we both want most
Is to restore our friendship; but I
Will never again be vulnerable
Nor will you let go of your shame.[33]

[33] I do not remember who, if anyone, this refers to.

“Fishers of men”: the church’s logo
Was a fishing lure: flashes
Of false light, spinning
Around a barbed hook.

My Burgeoning Bookshelf of Christian Books:
Religious tomes, stuffed with wisdom
Of minds afraid to think for themselves
Once delighted me, but now
Fill me with nausea.

The future, for each of us
And for all of us, is death.
Death spares us from witnessing
The deaths of others.

Serious Instructions for My Funeral:
Have a brass band playing
A happy sad song, or a sad happy one,
Celebrating a man who even in death
Wishes only to bless others.



Badlands, approaching storm, 1999

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.