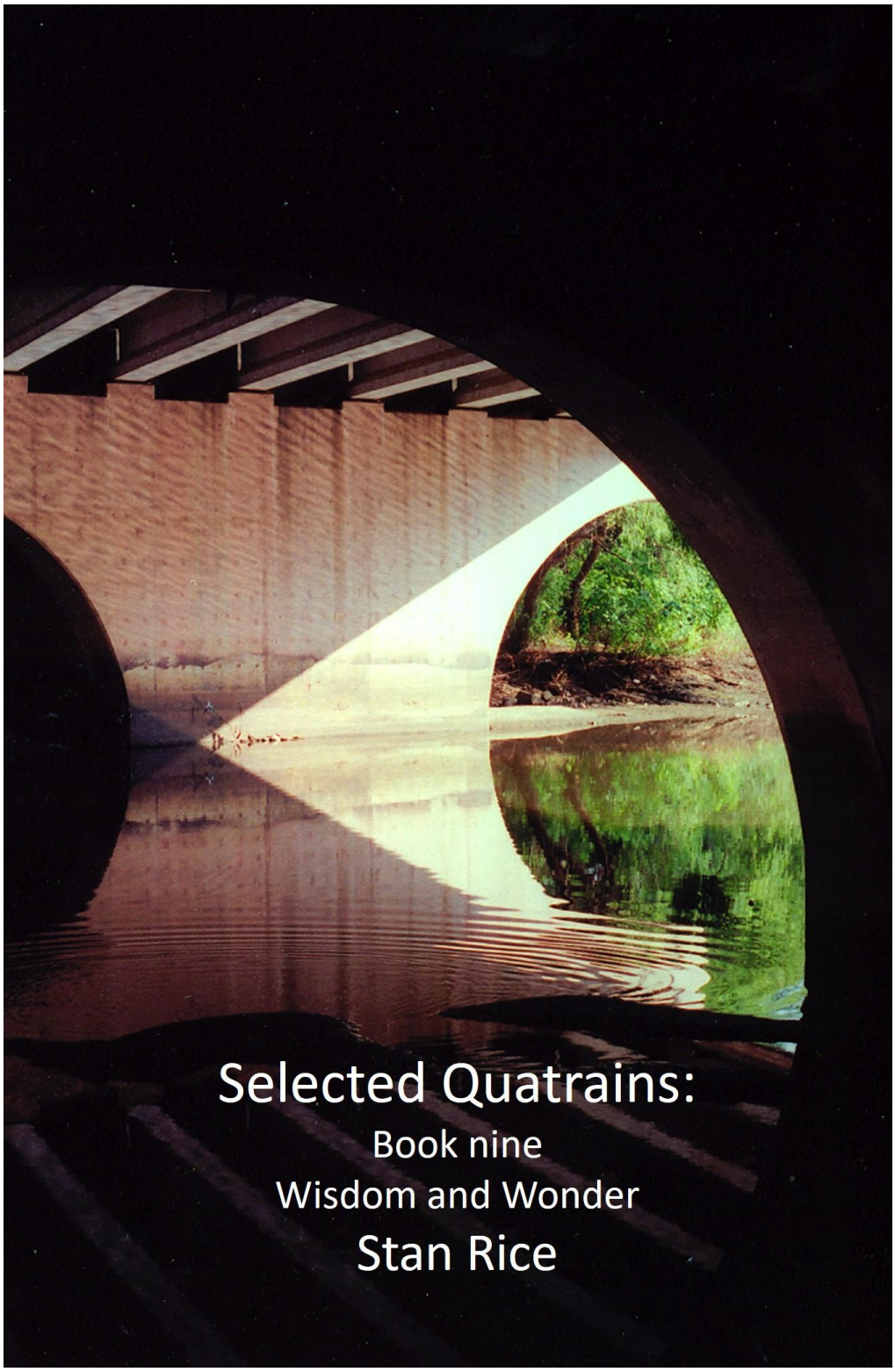

Selected Quatrains:
Book nine
Wisdom and Wonder
Stan Rice

Selected Quatrains, Book 9
Stanley A. Rice
Book nine: Wisdom and Wonder
2009-2026

Quatrains on Wisdom and Wonder

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 illustration: Bridge in Tulsa, 2000

The pages of the volume
Opened like a buttcrack
The words revealing intimacy
And fermented truths.

The meaning of life is 43
Or so I thought until
I discovered it was 42.
I crawled into a hole to die.[1]

They build a lofty church
And imagine
That it encloses God
And he is theirs.

The lamp is tilted
But the flame
Always points
Straight up

His eyes will not
Stop glowing, like coals
That refuse to die
In the ashes of gloom

While diving for truth
I touched the bottom with my toe
Expecting solid assurance
But finding only slime

Candles in a still room

1. The candle flames grow
   In utter stillness, not dancing
   A rare moment
   Of utter tranquility

2. I dare not bend to look more closely
   At the utterly still candle flames
   Lest the very motion of my head
   Might disturb them.

[1] From Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

Prayers and grapevines
Reach for a heaven or a branch
That is not there;
But they don't know this.

To a mockingbird:
I wanted to eat that mulberry
But you got there first.
Now you are transforming its sugar
Into the blessing of song.

Bones of ancient mythic beasts
Being buried in the sand:
Rusting irrigation pumps and pipes
With no subsidized electricity.

America wants to eat
The whole world
In one bite, not noticing
Its different flavors.

A Christian Astronomer:
Dr. Paul Davies looks up
Into the Australian sky
And sees four random stars
He believes are a cross.

Decomposition
The vines crawling over
The bricks, disguising
Their deep divisions, thrusting
The fragments yet further apart.

Rewording some of Kháyyám's 101 quatrains

Number seven.
In the warmth of spring, cast off
The winter cloak of guilt. Don't wait!
The bird of time does not have far to go
And it is already on its way!

Number eight.
The winecup of life runs sweet
For some, bitter for others;
But whichever it is, drop by drop,
Soon enough the wine is gone.

Number nine.
Such a thin line separates
Desert from verdant garden;
Soon the desert will claim it all.
All are forgotten, slave and ruler.

Number twelve (the famous one, only slightly changed)
A book of verses underneath the bough,
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou
Beside me, singing in the wilderness—
This is paradise enough for me.

Number thirteen.
Some hear a distant drum of glory,
Some hear a warning prophet's story.
Grasp the pleasures you have now
Not the dreams of what might be.

Number sixteen.
Hopes of this world
Are like a dusting of snow
In the desert, vanished
In a little hour.

Number seventeen.
History, a cavalcade
Where great men, one after another,
Have ridden for their happy hour
Then vanished in the dust.

Number twenty-one.
Ah, my Beloved, fill the cup that clears
Today of past regrets and future fears:
Tomorrow? Why, tomorrow I may be
Myself with yesterday's five billion years.

Number twenty-three.
We make love today on a couch
Those unknown before us have made, and soon
We, in the soil of Earth will make
A couch for those we do not know.

Number twenty-four.
Make the most of our brief moments
Before we descend into the dust;
Dust into dust, and under dust to lie—
No more wine, no singer, no song.

Number twenty-six.
Saints and sages have preached
So confidently of Heaven and Earth.
But where are they now? Their mouths
Are stopped with dust.

Number twenty-eight.
I planted the seed of wisdom—
Oh, how carefully I tended it;
And what did I learn from it? Only
"I come like water, and like wind I go."

Number thirty-one.
I listened to the whispered secrets
In the wine glass, and it told me:
Drink while you can,
You will never get another chance.

Number forty.
The tulip turns to Heaven
For sun, and drinks the wine of Earth.
Soon enough, both of us will be
Turned over, like empty cups.

Number forty-six.
The one and only YOU will die
But from the cup of Creation
The Eternal will pour
Millions more bubbles like us.

Number forty-seven.
We pass into history, and the world
So long will last that no one
In the future will know us any more
Than the sea knows each grain of sand.

Number fifty-five.
Come to the wedding feast!
He divorced the old barren tree of reason
And invited to his bed
The daughter of the vine of pleasure.

Number sixty-one.
Wine is the gift of God. Who would dare
Blaspheme it as an evil?
If a blessing, let us use it!
If a curse, then, Who put it there?

Number sixty-three.
O Threats of Hell and Hopes of Paradise!
The one certain thing: This life flies;
The one certain thing—all else is lies—
The flower that once has bloomed forever dies.

Number sixty-four.
Of the countless millions
Who have traveled the road of darkness
Not one has returned to tell us of this road.
To discover it we must travel it ourselves.

Number sixty-five.
All visions of saints and scholars
Are dreams; they awake
Just long enough to tell their stories
Then they fall asleep again.

Number sixty-nine.
We are God's helpless pieces upon
The chessboard of nights and days.
He checkmates us each against another
Then puts us all back in the box.

Number seventy-one.
The handwriting is on the wall,
God's very script. He will not
Revise on our account, nor let
Our tears efface, a single word.

Number seventy-two.
The sky inverted over us is a coop
And we are fowl trapped within.
Don't bother imploring that sky,
For it is a mere thing, just as we are.

Number seventy-three.
Adam, dust of Earth, once created
On that first dawn, already had
Within him the seeds of our fate
At the last sunset.

Number seventy-four.
From yesterday's chaos
To the silence of tomorrow: Drink!
For you do not know whence you came,
Where you go, nor why.

Number seventy-eight.
God made us from nothing, into
A conscious something: How well we know
The pleasures denied us, and the penalties
We reap if we seek them.

Number eighty.
God made the road I wander,
Created each pitfall, predestined
Each evil, but when I fall
He will accuse me of sin.

Number ninety-six.
Spring vanishes, youth fades.
The nightingale in the branches—
Where does it go? The answer
Is in the book forever closed.

Number ninety-nine.
My love, if we could shatter
This sorry scheme of things
We could shape the fragments into a world
That a more loving God would have made.

A scientist answers Kháyyám

1. *If God there be, He is not*
   A maker of rules
   A breaker of lives
   But a ghost of love.

2. I know why we age and die.
   It is our genes: They dance in power
   When we are young; but our old selves
   Have nothing more to gain—or give.

3. *God writes no script*
   So to what purpose
   Do we implore Him
   To alter it?

4. Why do we worry about death?
   For when we are dead
   We will not know
   That we are dead.

5. *It is not death*
   That one fears, but dying:
   The caltrop path
   That leads to unknowing.

Valentine, 2016, to Lisette:
Our love is a green love:
We intertwine like vines
And we are the algae and the fungus
That take a lichen to a rock.

Love is yeast:
It takes sugar
And makes it into
Something intoxicating

Gods

1. *Isis and Osiris, where are you now?*
   You were dead even before
   The papyri had decayed
   That declared you eternal.

2. The ancient gods have passed
Like breath condensed on glass
Like falling stars
Like waves in the prairie

Transfiguration
Whenever humankind feels the eternal
It always says, like Peter,
"Let us build tabernacles
And create religions."

The rabid dog of religion
Bites us, and we
Howl too, telling the world
It is damned.

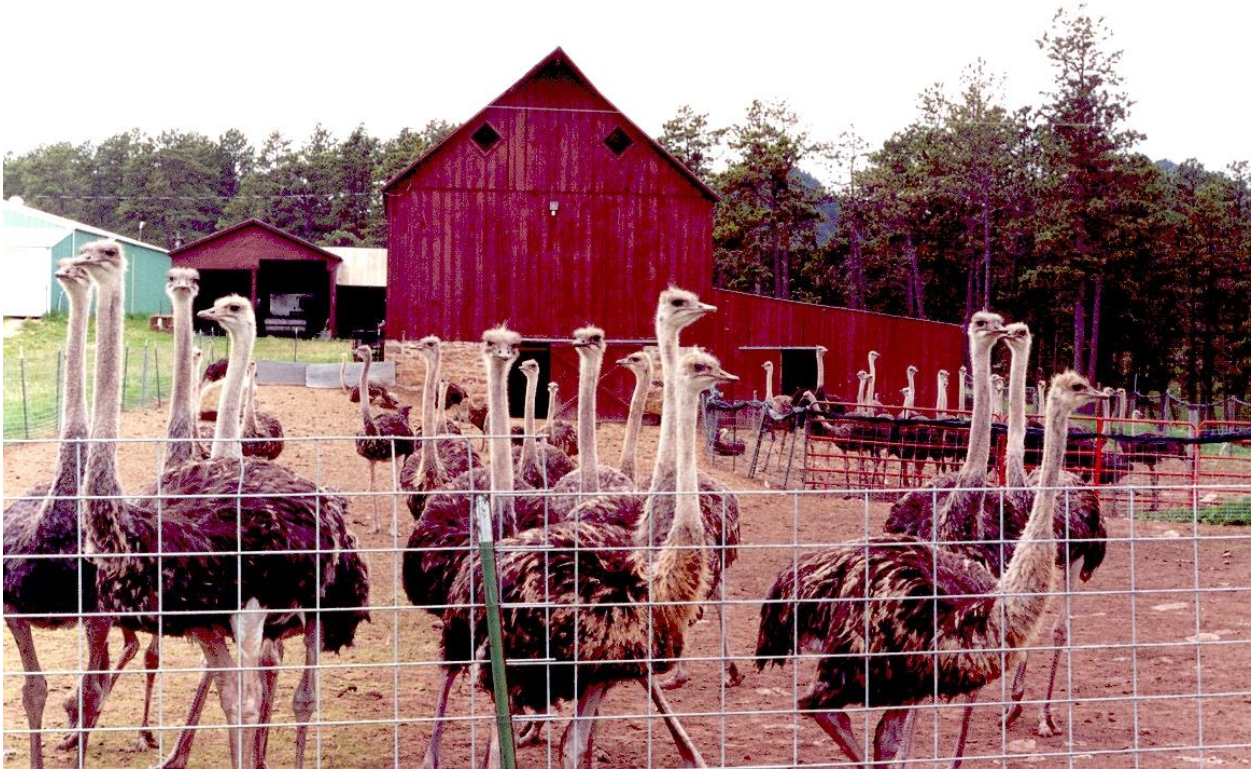
Now that the gods are gone
Man is alone on Earth
In the thunderous histories of worlds
And in the universe's quiet death.

A Plant Goes Extinct
"It might hail! It has before;
It would beat my fresh leaves and flowers
Into the mud. To open my buds
Is a risk I dare not take."

Light is invisible
Unless it strikes
Nebula, or leaf,
Or retina.

He pursued God, stumbling
Over quarried stones of doctrine
Slogging through the sumps of religion
Clambering after the light.

Holy, Holy, Holy (Revelation 4)
No glassy sea, but a real one
Frothing with salty foam
Flecked with fragments
Of holy seaweed.



Ostrich farm, Black Hills, 2000

God is the beauty in dappled things
Trying to not be seen
And having no intention
Of explaining themselves to you.

And the light said, Let There Be God.
The poetry of photons
That both reveal and create:
The darkness cannot consume Him.

Judgment Day
Verdict: Successful life
Evidence: You have glowed
A Godly radiance and made strong
A weaker heart than yours.

God weaves
The tales and truths of time
Into the garments that we wear
Around our souls.

Dominion
Heaven is a funhouse mirror
Reflecting back our prides
In warped wacky forms
Of which no ape can boast.

What is truth, Pilate asks,
Then walks out, not noticing
If an answer there might be
In the Darkness at Noon.

Fundamentalist Preacher:
Fierce wolf of God
He gnawed his church
Down to the bone and licked it clean
And left a skeleton.

Wild Dove:
He got me! The hunter's bullet
Has lodged next to my heart
But I will flap away and hide
Rather than be his reward.

Light, water, oxygen, sweetness
From a leaf's green embrace—
If this be divine,
Then I am not an atheist.

Les photons, l'eau, l'oxygène, le sucre,
La bise de la feuille vert—
Si ce soit le dieu
Je ne suis pas un atheist.

The morning is gray
And utterly still:
An off-white canvas upon which
A day can still be painted.

Le matin est gris
Et entièrement tranquille:
Une toile blancheâtre au-dessus laquelle
On peut déjà peindre un jour.

Whole mountains, eroding, are made
Of sediments that washed down
From yet earlier mountains built
From fires at the dawn of time.

For one brief moment Moses thought
He could do more good
For Israel and for the world
If he remained a prince in Egypt.

They search their Bibles to find texts
With which to imprison others
But God is the truth
Between the lines

Wisdom
They will not heed what I say
Yet I am in their midst,
Laughing, undaunted.
No one can conquer me.

By the light
Of a broken moon, light
Splintered on the sand
He stumbles.

"It is finished," said Jesus
On the cross. How many of us
Can say the same about our lives
Upon our final day?

Jesus blessed the bread
Then crumbled it
And invited the birds
To come and eat it

They held up their crosses
And shot that Bleeding Heart
Then shrouded Him
In a Confederate flag.

Dimanche des Rameaux:
You horses mock me; You say I'm stupid
And have big ears, but for one day
I carried a King on my back
And had palm fronds under my feet.

Jesus' Wounds
"Oh, yes," He said, "This scar is where
The Roman soldiers whipped me;
This one from a bayonet in Flanders
And this from a slave chain."

I know not what God
There may be, but
I leave open the door of my mind—
Come on in, any time, O Eternal.

Le Messiah vient
Comme le voix de l'oiseau
Comme les chansons des oiseaux
Comme l'aube

Christian man, Muslim woman
Both creatures and saints of light—
The only Heaven they can share
Is love for all, and all for love.

The Wind

1. A wind passes through my mind
   Stirring confused thoughts
   Disrupting settled conclusions
   Over and over and over

2. The Ten Commandments of the wind
   Are always shifting
   Are ever unpredictable
   And cannot be disobeyed.

3. The wind brings an ancient fragrance
   Of forests never felled
   Of prairies never plowed
   The breath of every extinct soul.

She ran on the forest trail
Away from her life
Into the indistinct fog
And the intense red of autumn.

Two agnostic fleas debate
Whether there is a dog, all the while
Sucking life from a source
Whose form they cannot know.

Impure Love

1. Pure love is corn syrup
   Clear enough to diffract a rainbow
   But creating in its admirers
   Only spiritual diabetes.

2. Give me impure love
   Not grimy, but tainted
   With the colors of struggle
   And the sweat of divinity

His words were a cancer
A mutant idea
Metastasizing through
All reasoning and sensate tissues.

The poppy looks like a flame
Before it opens, a fire when open,
And a statue when in fruit:
Beautiful in birth, life, and death.

Would the singing
Of the meadowlark
Still be beautiful
If it never stopped singing?

The spell-checker changed
Conium, deadly hemlock,
To Connie, whose friendly smile
Welcomes us to death.

In the spreadsheet of the world
Our only choice is to fill
The boxes of interest
With answers from an approved list.

Onitama:
A Buddhist board game
Is a really bad idea—
The rules are as unclear
As the sound of one hand clapping.

Love is a dog. It cannot explain
Why it loves you, or stop loving you.
All the forces and particles of its love
Are transformed into slobber.

Heaven for a bacterium
Is a warm moist dark stomach
With a continual supply of chewed grass
Gathered by an ambling cow.

Death

1. Every narrow street leads down
   To death. We can dance
   On the cobbles or slip in the slime
   But Styx awaits us all.

2. *I sat next to her on Charon's boat.*
   Thrown randomly together,
   We each wondered where the other
   Had been all our lives.

3. *I sat next to him on Charon's boat,*
   He whom I would have hated in life.
   But the acid of death had rinsed
   The aroma of evil from him.

4. (The Second Law of Thermodynamics)
   Every atom of my body
   Every jot of ink in my writings
   Every electron of my digital files
   Diffuses into the broth of forgetting.

Sodium chloride: Two poisons
Deadly gas and combustible metal
Share electrons
And flavor the sea.

Billy Collins:
The poet reprints his old poems
In a new book the way a cow
Re-chews its cud, re-releasing
Its pungent blessings.

Tinnitus 1:
I know what Joan of Arc heard—
Angels screeching huge chords
Piled high to infinity, waiting for us
To resolve their dissonance.

You are a peppercorn:
Your inspiring pungency
Escapes from your quietness
Only when you are wounded.

My wife knocked over a saint
As she brushed past the crèche.
It was the saint's fault
For standing so precariously.



My cabin in the Black Hills, 2003

Happiness is being so much at home
In the darkness that you do not collide
With the furniture, but instead
Touch it with your fingertips.

What is a star thinking just moments
Before it becomes a supernova?
Do water molecules hesitate
Before leaping fearlessly into the waterfall?

The surf of traffic, the spindrift
Of fumes: The crash of waves
Demolishes a brick wall.
Flattened garbage settles like sediment.

Her name was Fátima
She descended from the sky
A sun lurching round
Dazzling and burning everyone.

Statue:
A pigeon landed on Will Rogers's head
And dropped a bolus of white.
Will continued to smile.
He would have made a joke out of it.

A Northern Hemisphere Life:
I sail grandly in life, as yet, I say,
A long way from the Equator.
But then I look into the night sky
And behold Magellanic Clouds

Heavenly choirs sing
An infinite number of cantatas
In an infinite number of keys
Over and over and over.

Entropy:
The food is intricate on the plate.
Its chewed molecules nourish
The intricacy of my tissues. The wastes
Swirl away into disorder.

Tinnitus 2:
No two silences are alike:
Silence with a breeze, silence without;
Sated silence, silence of anticipation;
And silence long vanished into tinnitus.

The power of love compresses
The broad Earth down to the size
Of a bedchamber, a touch,
A kiss, a breath.

Even when you have been
Eating onions or tuna
I love your sweet kisses.
But I turn my cheek to you.

A Cynic on Politics:
Every platform of every party
Consists of planks. Every plank
Is weak and cannot support
Our jumping weight.

Dinosaurs were not stupid.
But apparently intelligence
Is not enough
To prevent extinction.

On Pronouncing “Plein”:
I know why the French
Have big noses: They need them
As resonating chambers
For the many nasalized vowels.

The old oak has held up
The weight of the world
For so many years
That its branches touch the ground.

Rogue One (the movie)

1. I got tired
   After watching the deaths
   Of the first two thousand people
   And the first five hundred explosions.

2. Oxygen
And huge civilizations
On a planet
With no photosynthesis?

Off in my fantasy world
Writing poems? But poetry is not
An escape from reality; it is
A way of confronting it.

Partnership:
I buy shower gel for my wife
And use it before she does.
She buys a book for me
That she alone wants to read.

Our thoughts are swifts
Mating in the air
And building nests
In the chimneys of our hearts

The river faithfully recites
The shape of its rocky bed
But in an entirely different tongue:
The language of water.

A murmuration of starlings
Is not just a bunch; each bird
Responds to the others, forming
A living, pulsating cloud

Green shades on
The window: I see
Only ecological truths.
All else is filtered out.

An Old Pencil from the 1960s:
Egbert B. Groen, Illinois
State Senator, Third District
Your name rubs off the old pencil, forgotten
Even in Menard and Tazewell Counties.

I am not the wine
That you desire
I am the water
That you need.

A Glint from Don Quixote:
He looked at the chain gang;
He did not see
Their crimes; He saw
Their pain.

The pecan trees cast their seeds
On the ground: Someone
Forgot to tell them
There is no future.

I bit into the soggy burger.
This is what disappointment
Tastes like, mustarded
With stale despair.

The formal room:
No clutter
No dust
No oxygen

Used Book Warehouse:
Listen to the books. You will hear
A thousand covers warping
Fungus digesting cellulose
Millions of fragrant words dying.

Poetry is a defiant spring, daring
To put out green tender tissues
Between summer and winter storms
Fighting with one another.

Sometimes
The dark side
Of the moon
Faces us.



Bat cave, Oklahoma, 2003

Poem Based on Images from a Mishima Short Story:
Once you have seen the truth,
Then, wherever you look
You see its after-images, as if
You had stared at the sun.

Cigarette smoke should offend me
But it takes me back
To childhood
And to my long-dead father.

Insight:
I opened the cask of wisdom.
It was empty; but I think
I saw a fleeting ghost escape
Just as I pried off the lid.

How America Became Great Again:
The Christians worshiped Him;
He was an idol of lead; the alchemy
Of hatred toward infidels
Turned the idol's hair to gold.[2]

Sexual Selection in Oklahoma:
Proudly ignorant, they need only know
How to press down a gas pedal, to make
A pickup truck fart loudly, and imagine
The adoring gaze of stupid women.

Forest Brook:
The water springs from the rock
Hoping to see blue sky;
Instead, seeing green leaves,
It settled back down into darkness.

Misperception:
The dead leaf in the slow stream
Tumbles over and over.
Anyone might think
It was alive.

Another Poem Based on Mishima:
I slipped into the forest, under
A uniform vault of young leaves, over
A green scum pond.
I was steeped in green tea.

Sun rays on the red pine trunk
Pure light, glinting
In the particles of resin
Like veins in agate.

Truth is a fish
Behind aquarium glass
Looking at me balefully
Then hiding in the rocks.

All that remains
Of my mortal struggle
Is drops of sweat
Now tiny dry crystals.

[2] Referring to Donald Trump.

A fossil from a former world,
Delicate, gleamed, its radioactivity
Piercing my adoring fingers
And my fragile bones.[3]

Faith:
The grub digs a chamber
And drapes it in silk—
Preparing to be a winged wonder
That it has never seen.

The street lamps are evil eggs
Which will hatch into monsters
That will eat the moon and stars
From the night sky

Jesus playing chess:
He loves the pawns
And His first move
Is to lay down His king.

God made trees, not timber;
Mountains, not coal seams;
Forests, not building lots;
Prairies, not pastures.

There is one crown that cannot
Be lost, though kingdoms fall;
The diadem of thorns, the shame
That pierces our scalps.

The Burning Bush was not God—
A spark ignited gases that diffused
From hot desert leaves, then as now:
Not God, but it made Moses stop and look.

To a woman:
You walk, the golden waves
Of your wild hair flood your shoulders.
You are perfect desire, though you make
Not the slightest sexual invitation.

[3] This refers to radiation from carbon 14, not from uranium.

Three Poems Inspired by Alfred Noyes:[4]

1. You who would grasp your weapons
   And brandish them for Jesus:
   You tell us He came to bring a sword—
   You spit poison in the Holy Grail.

2. You who claim Jesus is a warrior:
   You cannot stop the Spring
   That floods the Earth with leaf and flower
   Or drive the sunrise back.

3. All the Earth's blood-red generations
   Climbed mountains of hate and slaughter.
   But one path leads down from it:
   "Make straight the pathway of our God."[5]

God fell asleep and dreamt
Of a world of green and peace
Of deep, rich soil and plenitude
That, waking, He has not created.

They say that you, O God,
Created the world from chaos;
We holy ones, our gift to you
Is to return the world to its original state.

"As numerous as the stars of heaven,"
We say, but people today
Look into light-polluted skies
And see only a couple of dozen of them

On Earth, her skin
Was fair and soft
But in heaven she has
An integument of fire.

He threw the feathers of his love
Into the wind; in a distant land
She gathered them
And lined her nest in warmth.

[4] From The Questing Spirit, edited by Halford E. Luccock and Frances Brentano (1947).
[5] Isaiah 40: 3-5.

You are merely dust, not more,
But not less: You are holy;
Astonishing atoms
And energies shining from God.

On Thinking about a Street in Durant, Oklahoma, 2016:
One who has never seen
A street arched over by branches,
Interlaced, of unfungused elms
Cannot notice their disappearance.[6]

When I die, part of me
Will become chlorophyll in the sun
And strong old wood
And breathing, fragrant soil

Great Uncle Lorenzo:
Whiskey and gambling, mischievous,
You spent your life pursuing pleasure
And are buried in an unmarked grave.
Did anyone ever truly love you?

The trumpet blasts brought down
The walls of Jericho;
But every wall is held up strong
By the secret singing of the people.

Every kind of tree has
Its own dance in the wind:
Jostling elms, fluttering aspens,
Proudly swaying sycamores.

A man grabbed a fragment of truth
As it blew through the air
But he did not plant it; instead,
He dissected it, and it died.

"Earth! Earth! What are you doing?"
"I am revolving around the sun.
That is my entire purpose. What else
Is a planet to do?"

[6] One of my Durant neighbors was an old woman who remembered the huge elm trees before the Dutch Elm Disease killed them.

The Earth kept count of the number of times
It spun upon its axis. It boasted
And based its entire self-image
On its trillion pirouettes.

Amygdalae, little almonds
Spewing cyanide into our brains
Make us run from predators
And from reason.[7]

My books create a space
Where the tiny spider cobs its web
And sucks life from a pillbug
Much larger than itself.[8]

The power of a hundred million Earths
Gushing into infinite silence—
This is the tiny twinkle of light
In the sky before the breathless dawn

Hope is brutal
It makes you open
Your vulnerable recesses
To disappointment

Eternity throws a shadow
Across the world
But you had better look quickly;
The shadow is razor-thin.

The wind whipped
Fiercely through the canopy
Tearing away the branches
That were already weak.

In my wrecks of the past
Bees build combs
Healing the fractures with soft wax
And filling them with honey.

Just before the last man
Explodes the last bomb
He will stop a moment and see beauty
In the dying light.

[7] The amygdala (Latin for little almond) is the part of our brain that generates rage. Wild almonds have cyanide.
[8] This actually happened in my house. I was not a particularly good housekeeper.

The tree
Does not know
It is holding up
The sky.

The breath of love
And the wind of indifference
Look the same
When they stir the tree boughs

Animal sex is crude
But true love-making
Is as close as we come
To being gods.

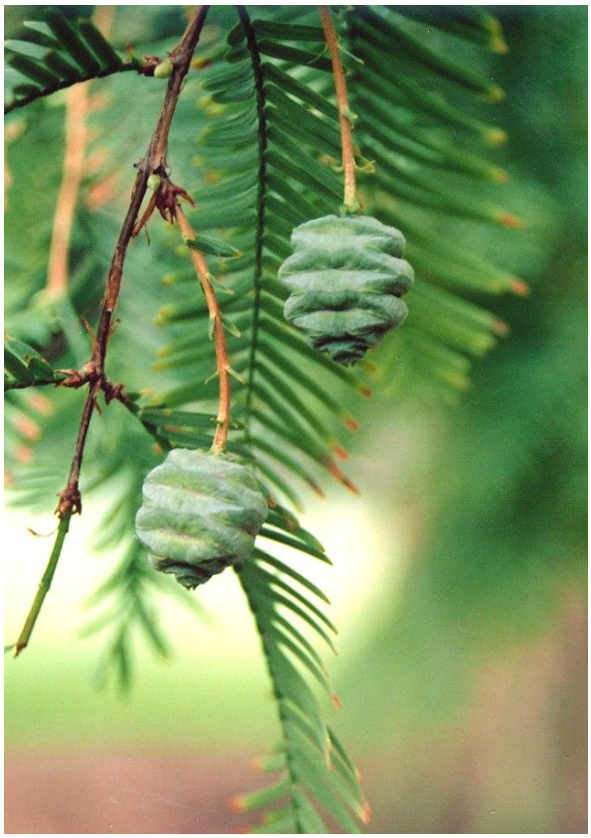
Your feet sink in the slush
That used to be leaves and limbs,
Reminding you, who are in denial,
Of your amoebic ancestry.

Black Hole:
The light escapes,
Almost, almost, almost,
Then falls back
Into the infinite maw.

Scientist:
I am a storyteller
Weaving together tales
Of electrons and chlorophyll
And hormones and death.

I wander to the place
Where no one ever goes
And while I am there
I am no one.

Into his garden of truth, in which
He eradicated the weeds of fallacy
And the flowers of fancy,
A single disruptive seed floated.



Dawn redwood, in a garden in Oklahoma, 2003

Love is a jellyfish
Easily squished
And dries into almost nothing
When out of its ocean.

Poems of Trump:[9]

1. A towering God with orange hair
   He calls for the electric chair
   For His challengers; all who question Him
   He calls traitors.

2. With His Godlike powers he points
   Into the past and causes
   Earth's temperatures to have been lower
   And global warming to not have occurred.

[9] This was for Trump's *first* term. It got worse.

3. *Worship Him, the great orange God,*
   All ye who used to worship
   The meek carpenter of Nazareth
   Qui passait inaperçu dans les foules.

The preacher stilled the waves
Of doubt and confusion
By pouring onto Reality
The sticky oil of doctrine.

Truth is a storm. Religious people
Float on the waves
Like bits of plastic débris
Knowing nothing of the depths.

The honey
Of happiness
Sticks out greedy fingers
Together

Asymmetry
God's crooked smile
Never twice the same
Always a surprise

The mental world of our species:
An ocean of talk; foam
Of silly words, the salt of truth
With a deep tang of meaning

Seeds deeply buried
In the soil, ready to sprout
When the comfortable shade
Burns away.[10]

Remove the scaffolding
Of rules and morals, and find
The structure of love
Can stand by itself.

Skyscrapers into the heavens
Rising phallic from Shinar—
Babel trying to gouge and wound
The pure space of God.[11]

[10] I studied a species of wildflower that did just this: Phacelia strictiflora, in 2012, blooming only after fire.
[11] The Tower of Babel story in Genesis.



Wild honey locust trunk, Oklahoma, 2003

"In your dreams!" you rebuff me.
But my dreams are
A perfect place for you.
Please, come on in.

A dozen cannabis dispensaries
In each little Oklahoma town
Each vying for the most creative name
Shouldering churches aside.

"Tell me with whom you walk, and I
Will tell you who you are."
I walk along the ditch with my wife
Who always stops to count the geese.

Homage to Shelley:
I met a traveler from an antique land, who said
"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the amber waves of grain.
The trunk's face kisses the eroding soil.

Another car like mine! Iridescent green
Tiny, efficient; we are like bugs
Taking over the field of waste
Where huge pickup trucks will soon rust.

Gunshots are louder
Than school bells
Even in
Schools.

Too much
And too little
Has happened
For too long

Joe Creek, Tulsa:
Why don't we just call it a ditch?
By calling it a creek
We say that the piles of garbage
Do not belong there.[12]

To talk loudly and not listen:
This is an American in the forest.
To talk loudly in English:
This is an American in France.

The old roots on the trail
That trip you
Are the trees' way
Of grasping the Earth.

Two Meditations on Japan:

1. His house, like truth, is simple,
   Not a primitive simplicity, but
   A distillation of the complex
   Into spare lines of beauty.

[12] By my actual count, a mile of this ditch had a thousand pieces of garbage in 2020.

2. His house of beauty is made
   To be seen, not by the standing tourist
   But by the meditator
   Sitting on the tatami.

Religion is a stalagmite
We build up to the skies
But we imagine it a stalactite
Reaching down from God.

Cows:
Newborn calves graze, inspired,
Into the blue spring sky
And eat tender green grass.
Soon they will be hamburgers.

A cow stepped over a low fence,
Leaving the herd inside the pasture.
Even after they all saw her do it,
No cow followed her to freedom.

At royal tables
Toxic broths of strife
And vinegars of despair
Fill golden chalices.

Get rid of that makeup
And polished nails—
Nature had made you beautiful
And all your blemishes invisible.

The rich are miserable
In prisons of gold.
The poor are miserable
In prisons of debt.

American society is not all
Black and white. There is also
The yellow of ancient wisdom
And the red of Native blood.

Cannabis
Pentagram leaves
Haze of pleasure
Mist of delusion.[13]

[13] I write this even though I have never smoked it.

Poem Provoked by Reading Loren Eiseley, 2020:
The got moved into the mountains
Investigating every valley
Penetrating every shadow
Steaming through interstices of time.

I can never welcome
Galaxies coming toward me
But only mourn
Their infinite retreat.

I am condensed
From an unknowing fog
Congealed
Into dense obscurity.

He lay on the bed
A dying rack of bones
Kept alive only
By a heart that would not stop.

I saw her standing
Under the arc of rainbow
But from where she stood, looking up,
She saw nothing of it.

He was the stony field
Dry and eroded; hopeless seeds
Fell into the furrows
Plowed by rain.

Old leaves go sailing into sleep
Riding currents of purpose;
The slippery minnows of a thought
Slide into terrifying freedom.

Short days of autumn—a good time
For all spiders to hide and sleep
But one built its web around
A warm street lamp, a minor sun.

The rosebud is more beautiful
Than the rose it will become
As it opens awkwardly
Into the deadly wind.

Cakile goes to sea, casting
One of its seeds out into the waves
But the other seed
Stays on the home shore.[14]

We live in a world
Of crater lands and ice fields
Burning in a trickster universe
Created by our own minds.

Spinning galactic clouds
Hurl stars and worlds across the night
And life scatters a splintered radiance
Across the thickets of the world.

Long ago
The future
Was an endless series
Of simple tomorrows.

Science:
I expected science to lead me
On the level plains of knowledge
But instead it pushed me
Into remote and deep abysses.

Blinding illuminations
Create huge shadows
And after-images
Of irrational ghosts.

Exalted Leader:
All is light, as He looks
At the nations all around Him;
And that light emanates
From His stable genius.[15]

Cellular Respiration:
Life is a furnace
Of concealed flame
Converting rich sweetness
Into invisible radiation.

[14] Cakile maritima produces pods with two seeds: one floats on the ocean waters, the other remains on the shore.
[15] Donald Trump referred to Himself as "a very stable genius."

Photosynthesis:
The light of stars
And the suns inside chloroplasts
Sustain life, for a moment
Before darkness consumes them.

Natural selection is the eye
Of a needle, through which
Only the finest threads
Can find their way.

If God sent His Son
Into the world
That it might be saved
Then He failed.

Revolution:
A world rushes by
Leaving no trace to be seen
Unless you closely study
A few motes of space dust.

Do you know your house?
Its hidden electricities
Its shadowy dust mites
Its sediment dreams

In the Back Room of the Smithsonian:
A giant filing cabinet
Has records of all the species
And a deep-voiced Loren Eiseley
Has the key.

What is the message
On the telegraph?
Only the song of the wind
Blowing through its harp strings.

Conquistadors:
They flay the skin
From Jesus' face
Stretching it out, drying it
To use as banners.



An unlikely church in Oklahoma

Hurricanes of stardust
Wheels of suffering
Wheels of prayer
Seeded with new worlds.

Just stand still, Nature
So that I can study you,
Measure you, see your organs—
Stream, stop rushing!

Extrapolations:
All is smooth in the world,
Unruffled arc of movement
Just like water falling
Right before it strikes the rock.

The light dust of snow
Reveals the hieroglyphs
That all the softer seasons
Conceal.

Stories
And stories within stories
All the way down
Into the spirit of the atom.

To the sea go all
Our broken dreams.
The surf casts them back
Ground smooth by the sand.

Only man
Can imagine
The things
He has failed to be.

The glove grasped the stones
As it lay upon the shore
Swollen with sand
Greetings from the dead

The water tumbles
Pushing stones
Homeward
To a land without light

The pine seeds all roll
Downhill, unless a bird
Pries open the cone, and carries
A seed to the mountaintop.

The lava cools:
Black pits
Receive the sun
But give back no light.

Water creates its perfect form
In a snowflake; swells up
The splitting bud; erases life
From the dead bone on the shore.

Adam walked, his mind
Not yet with memories
Through bars of sunlight
In the morning of the world.

Evolution:
As the human brain grew
What took up residence
In its new, empty corridors?
Fear and loneliness.

Only the new evolution
Of the vast halls of the human mind
Allowed us to hear loneliness in the reeds
Whispering in the night wind.

Sometimes my only joy
Is to know what I love best,
The green pulsing world
Will outlive all of us.

The caterpillar eats
And hurries off
To a destiny
He cannot know.

A solid floor
Is an illusion
Electrons of my feet repel
Electrons of the tiles.

We see the world as lakes for boats,
Snow for skis, bears for rugs.
But mosquito reality is
That we are packets of blood.

In the cold future world of a dying sun
Lichens dream life's last dreams
Awaiting rain
From dry air.

I have climbed from the dark
Of endless leaf-falls;
I have slunk, furred,
Through the flitter of blue glacial nights.

I am the tree of Yggdrasil
Rooted in evolution's mud
My branches, yet ungrown
Tickle the future sky.

An unimaginative scientist
A deliberate blunting of wonder
Is worse than a poet who knows nothing
Of the laws of nature.

At the End of Time:
The ape on the beach
Scoops sand in its paw. It does not know
It sees bits of brick and glass
And semiconductors.

The tree lifts its arms,
A child asking to be
Lifted up. But its roots
Bind it to the Earth.

In the stormy room
Boots on the floor are boats
The desk is a wild island
Mountainous with books

Nonsensus: In which
We can all agree
Is a poem written
By a committee.

No year is an average year,
No woman an average female.
Every calorie is different,
No two spiderwebs alike.



In a cabin in the Black Hills, 2005

Earth spins and sways
Its tonnages of oceans
Sloshing around
Like a dancer's skirt.

All my bones are fragile
Except one:
My skull is hard.
It protects my ignorance.

Look in a mirror. All you see
Is yourself. But look, will you,
At all that surrounds you,
All the history behind you.

Your giddy pleasantries
Fill me like helium
I am a bloated balloon
Hungry for oxygen[16]

He has no center
He is all surface
Like a ball of twine
Unraveling

We move together
Like two hawks
Circling separately by a cliff
In an invisible updraft of air.

Sunlight streams from heaven
Chloroplasts absorb it
Living in the moment, because
Photons do not wait.

The highways are a system
Of arteries, taking you away,
And veins, bringing you home
But roads have no heart

[16] Not only is helium (element 2) lighter than air (nitrogen, element 7, and oxygen, element 8) but it is insert, not participating in any chemical reactions of life or geology.

It took a church
To turn humble Jesus
Into a gold-clad King
And a bloody conqueror.

Three Poems Inspired by E. L. Doctorow:

Cobblestones, each with its own history
Chiseled, forced to fit
In a road whose destination
None of the stones knew.

To understand philosophy
Do not be a philosopher. Work
With your hands, but think about
How your work affects the world.

A False Prophet among the Geese:
"Behold, there is no need to fly south.
The people are feeding us." Thus,
They miss their chance—
Caught by the winter, they freeze.

Invisible, busy bacteria
Break down the turds of time
And release their nutrients
To renew the world

You are in the soft breath of the wisteria
You are in the silent secrets of moths
You are in the fresh steaming bread
You are in the glinting shadows with the catbird.

Everything looks softer
In a haze of sweetness
When seen through the veil
Of a beekeeper's hat.

Year 2020:
I did not realize how expressive
Eyes could be until
The girls all had to wear
Covid masks.

Trump:
Words emerged from his mouth
Like phlogiston farts
Igniting the energy confined in
The hidden hatreds of Republican hearts.

The horses of war
Collapse on the road
The first flies alight on them
Before they die.

The wasp thinks
Of only one thing
Amidst the noises of the world:
She builds her paper fortress.

Love is a river of fire—
Always leaving, never gone,
Always flaming, never burnt
Always searching, never found.

I love my vagus nerve;
I call upon it now
To calm my heart and create
A gentle pool of sleep.[17]

I pour my love
Into the hole of friends
And do not even hear
The splash of gratitude.

The odor of disintegration
At the rest home: nurses smoking
In the autumn morning sun;
Old grease of breakfast.[18]

To the Pianist:
I saw your intense, calm, lovely face
Reflected upside down on the sounding board,
As if you were a spirit for whom
There is no gravity.

[17] Nerves do not always stimulate us to action; that's just the sympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic system, parallel to it, and of which the vagus nerve is chief, slows down muscles, breathing, heartbeat, etc.
[18] I walked to work past this scene many mornings in Durant, Oklahoma.

The church sign
Defiantly
Tells God
What His opinion should be.

Even on the clearest, darkest night
And even in a small town
A murk of light taints the sky:
I shall never see the fabled Zodiacal Light.

Jesus the Comedian:
His humor is embarrassing
He turns topsy-turvy
The serious business
Of death and decay.

I dreamed a color
That does not exist
The next morning I forgot it
And lay in sadness

Allah calls it salaam
Jehovah calls it shalom
The same God
Demands the same thing.

Evolution gave us the ability
To love; God commands us
To love. Hey,
We can do this.

We had three cats; one sleek and black,
Ragtime playful; one Asian,
Cautious; one fat and white, growling
That the others are in its world.

Breath of God, a startling
Atmosphere of bracing blueness
Diffusing unnoticed
Into our cellular fires.

Is my evil soul the real me?
You might as well say
The naked winter tree is truth
And the summer leaves mere disguise.

The stars are grapes; vast bunches
Hanging from the nebular vines.
The dawn has picked them, one by one
Leaving memories.

A field of sunflowers
Fat faces in yellow collars
All turned the same way
All thinking the same thoughts

The farmer and the developer
Look down at the fertile earth.
Both see the same thing:
Money.

“Speak to me plainly,” says Man;
“Tell me your exact story!”
The toadstool does not answer
But just puffs and glows.

If Nature is economical
Spending only what it needs
Then tell me why
The moon glows in the day.

From Thoreau:
My insights
From the forest
Dissolve like manna
In the morning sun

Timothy the Turtle (Gilbert White’s Surprise):
Dear Timothy: You will outlive me.
When I die…What? Are you telling me
You’re female? What other secrets have
The organisms of Selbourne hidden from me?

Future Idealist:
I am walking north
On a southbound train, which means
I am going south, until I emerge
From the anus of the train.

The crystal of wisdom
Focused the sunlight of truth
On the American flag; it burned
First a hole, then the whole.

"You may eat me," said the snake
To the bittern. "But on the way down
Your throat, I will bit you
And poison your heart."

American soldiers fly in, leaving
Parachutes in the sand;
Iraqi mothers gather them
To make shrouds for their sons.

It's a harmless poem. All it can do
Is to make people think
And feel and care
And act.

Another mass shooting;
We think of something else
And the facts speed away
Into the Doppler red of forgetting.

"There are lots of terrorists in the world,"
Says Trump to a Democrat.
"Can you prove to me
That you aren't one of them?"

I am carbon;
Hot, pulsating;
Under pressure
I become diamond.

Starling:
As an individual
I am a dull black bird;
But get a thousand of us together
And we are poetry in motion.

Bacteria:
In our bacterial realm,
No light, no oxygen,
We are in charge; you are only
A mouth to provide us food.

History vanishes:
Great limestone monuments dissolve
In rainwater, one particle
At a time.

Poems about Shostakovich:

Defiant beauty
Even when Soviet boots crushed
His wildflower
Into the spring mud.

His message was a beam
Of deadly ultraviolet light
Invisible
To everyone, including himself.

He was a wildflower
Turning his wizened head
Toward a sunrise
That was no longer there.

The three of them, tall, short, and medium
Formed a perfect major chord. Then
The middle one shrugged
Turning the chord to minor.

Inspired by *The Music Man*:
There were bees in the flowers
But I never felt them sting
No I never felt them at all
Till there was you.

