

A Boy on a Roof:
(A Sestina for Stanley Kunitz)

The years like layered clothing slip
Gracefully from the shoulders of this gentle man.
His aging is a gradual unburdening.
Like the Wellfleet whale,
He sounds his depths and ours, imagination
Scanning each fresh and salt- watery world.

The poet, not the whale, embraced *his* world
When he, a lad of five, slipped
Up to the rooftop, his young imagination
Fired by Halley's comet. A child, father to the man,
Clad in a flannel nightshirt, observed a whale
Of a tale: the end of all, the ultimate unburdening.

Now, ninety-four years later, this unburdening
Continues. The layers of his life, the blooming world,
Fresh objects of inquiry, other species of whale
To interrogate, to love. Nothing slips
Entirely past him. A curious boy and man,
Tracking the snakes of September with imagination,
And the flight of Apollo, and fire stick imaginings.
That the end might come, the ultimate unburdening

A Universal Theme

“Wash me in steep down gulfs of liquid fire”
Shouts the Moor,” his heart sinking, sunk.
He’s learned how untrusting, in his ire,
He has been. He’s lost his love, drunk
The draught he himself prepared
Though another handed him the vial.
No wonder he’s demonstrably despaired:
He knows, beyond the slightest doubt, the wiles
That brought him to this point, and yet he sees
That he alone has slain his dearest, freshest friend,
The one who loved him even as he doubted. “Please,
Please come back!” His sad heart sends
This message to a corpse. No smile, no loving heart,
No fresh response survives, just art.

Don Foran

Afternoon

There is a tiny “click here”
At the bottom of the unsolicited page,
A fragile log to cling to
In a sea of spam.

Utilizing it, I free myself
From subsequent solicitations.
I click and smile as almost
Immediate confirmation

Appears across my screen.
Click, and that too disappears,
But now I’m left without
Communication, my machine

A voiceless parrot
In a shop where crowds
Surge by desiring some
Token riff from this exotic

Bird who invaded my life
Years ago and now sits
Silent on my table top
A grim reminder of

The loneliness of poets’ lives
When they wait, ruefully,
For a next communication
From beyond the pale

Pale perimeter
Of the book-lined
Photo-filled walls
Of their prosaic offices.

Don Foran

Alchemy

Poets, not unfamiliar to the art,
Do transmute dross to gold by magic means.
With fictive flair they fashion might-have-beens
More true than truth. These moderns, for their part,
Find alkahests that Paracelsus sought;
Knowing a coda can redeem life's play,
They vanquish imperfection in new day.
And thus derive from dross a golden thought.

An Unimaginable World

The one lovely world we know, sensible,
Tangible, yes, and habitable, has the capacity
To be lived in, touched, smelt, seen, felt, loved.

Swept up as we are in an unimaginable world,
We fail to see it, know it, as it is: a sheer
And shimmering network of interdependencies, fragile
Compared to the imaginable worlds which make nice believing

How little the real world impinges, impacts upon our
Best constructions, those reductions which delude us
Remove us from the cries and the music, the stench and sweetness
Of a now known truth tomorrow poeticized, not lost.

(1979)

At Ploughboy Campsite

That single fallen tree, burlled, craggy,
Which glistens above the surface to my right,
The one around which monarchs twirl, is a bit like me.
It's been settled now long enough
To appreciate gratuitous serenity.
Maggie and I hiked in here an hour ago, perched
On logs and let the breeze play with our hair.
We are not ready yet to swim.
A lone boat sits quiet on Upper Priest,
A father and son intent on catching and releasing
A Dolly Varden or two. A shocking-blue dragonfly
Bips up and down over the sand.
I'm looking straight up the lake to the layered
Mountains – green, then slate, then gray
The more they recede into Canada.
A few leaves blow into my lap and onto Maggie's back.
A light breeze blows the lake water into gentle slappings
And the white birch on the hill behind us sighs quietly.
The Venezuelan plane crash, the earthquake in Japan,
The carnage in the horrific Iraq war seem far away.
A dipping gray-white swallow skims twittering over the water,
And I pause to praise the God who embraces our daughters,
Our families, and our friends, and so soothes our tattered hearts.

Don Foran

Attribution

If I can feel the wood and know who's whittled,
Read paragraphs and know the author's name,
Can hear one riff and know Grapelli's fiddled,
Or sense in silhouettes the dancing flame,
Why can't I scan for style erratic lines
And temperamental scribblings on earth's page:
Consistent inconsistencies, design,
Caprice, rich legacies of tenderness and rage?
Perhaps the world I cherish is chaotic,
Perhaps its pedagogy is insane,
But if it is sufficiently quixotic,
The signature, for students, will be plain.
Ah, crazy-witty worldlings, pitch a tent,
Absorbing and translating sacrament.

Don Foran

Benediction

When I was in London decades ago, a crazy old man approached
As a friend and I sat talking near Westminster Cathedral.
He was wild-eyed, noisy, gesticulating, unkempt.
His flowing hair and beard gave him the appearance of an
Ancient prophet, slightly berserk, but clearly meaning no harm.
He was, I believed, quite drunk while we, with devastating sobriety,
Watched, a bit amused, as people scattered for shelter from his gaze.
As he rambled closer, I could distinguish his words, a Latin prayer,
“In nomine patris et filii . . .” and I saw his arm fly up
To shape in the misty London air a formal sign.
Some of those sitting by us told him to go away; others hoped
To pass the time by baiting him, urging on the mania and the man.
My friend observed, in lowered voice, how terribly drunk
The local vagrants can become. I said, “It’s a blessing he’s giving,”
And to the man, “Thank you.” He pointed at me, made my blood freeze,
And shouted with undiluted passion, “He understands!”
And so, out of the welter of images, the wash of literary terms,
The torment of unresolved theological questions, self-doubt, love,
Illusion, I salvaged and pass on a mad-eyed benediction, hoping,
As that man did, that my hopes for you will be somehow understood.

Cat Talk

They have it right, those cats:
Eat, sleep, cuddle, sleep some more.
They wonder why we fuss, plan, hurry, or watch football
When we could give them undivided attention, love.
Take Mickey, for example. We've been his people
Ten years now, enough time for him to know us,
Our quirks, our chatter, and our flaws.
I tell him, sometimes, what I'm grappling with,
What project looms, what back pain, what angst assails me.
He purrs, shifts himself on my lap
With studied nonchalance. He shimmies
Up the long body now invading *his* couch,
Plants himself at that perfect spot, my shoulder,
Just below my chin, the one place, he knows,
Where I cannot read my book.
He looks me in the eye and speaks:
"Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis
Recipitur," he says. Whatever is received is received
According to the mode of the one receiving it.
"That's plagiarism! I shout. He smiles –
Cats do smile – and licks, as always, my nearest ear.

Crazy Jane Still Talks to the Bishop Even Though Old Yeats is Gone

'Tis yer theological courage I'm doubtin'
When a body-soul fission ye're ever bespoutin'

Sure, the joys of the flesh ye summarily blacken
(When ethereal heaven indeed may be lackin')

Do you reckon God likes it when mortals are apter
Ta discount earth's pleasures and yearn fer the rapture?

Aye, what's good fer the body is good fer the soul,
'Tis a tawdrey salvation when none are made whole!

So leave me here sittin' in my sweet excrement.
Jesus, Bishop, yer preachin' is verily spent

God's flowerin' children are bloomin' aplenty
Relax! There no need now to wax sacramenty!

Don Foran (1996)

Dan's Boat

(For Daniel Berrigan, S.J., on his 82nd Birthday, May 9, 2003)

We own an old Larson.
It was old when we got it,
But it's managed to pull
Daughters and friends around the lake
Gladdening our summer days
With their laughter and their joy.

Dan owns no boat,
But some day soon he'll have one.
It will be rough-hewn, Corita-bright,
Powered by a constant, gentle breeze.
For, though no one walks waters,
Dan deserves a boat, a modest barque
On which he, who never would retire,
Whose resistance is an act of love
Driving him forward at improbable angles,
Might sail ever on with passion, wit, and grace.

Don Foran DOMINICA IMPRESSIONS

ON A WINDSWEPT DOMINICAN HILLSIDE, FLOWER-SCENT AND BIRDSONG BLEND.
I LISTEN AS DOVES' COOS PUNCTUATE THE MID-MAY CARIBBEAN EVENING.
SIMPLICITY, NOT GRANDEUR, IS THE ENGINE WHICH DRIVES THE WOMEN'S LIVES
WHOSE GIFTS OF CHERRY JUICE, BEAN SOUP, AND TENDER, HEALTHY FARE
ARE SET BEFORE ME WITH BOTH CARE AND GENTLENESS.
DURING MY TWO SHORT STAYS, I BATHE IN HODGES BAY, AND, CALMED,
RENEW APPRECIATION OF GOD'S SMALL GIFTS.

THE CLOTHES BLOW WILDLY ON THE LINE BELOW THIS QUIET HOUSE
SIGNALING FRESH THOUGHTS FAR SANER THAN OUR WORLD'S NOISY ADS.
IT'S DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE THAT MORE CHIRPING BIRDS, MORE PERFECT HIBISCUS
INHABIT ANY OTHER ACRE. BIRDS FLIT AMONG THE FLOWERS, SOAR,
AND IN THE DISTANCE, DROP INTO THE SEA, CONFIDENT
THEIR NEXT FINE MEAL WILL BE EVERYTHING THEY NEED, AND MORE.

DON FORAN, IVEX VOLUNTEER, MAY 1998

Dreams

Dreams, it seems, are portals, but to what?
They swirl unbidden from the depths of sleep,
Linking strange images to one another.
Many of these images are fresh, electric, incandescent.
Some evoke the past or cause anxiety about the future.

Dreams from forty years ago still linger:
Sometimes I sang a song with others,
Written down, chorded, sung again.
Sometimes I wrote a play I dreamt
Or lectured, brilliantly or catastrophically,
Then typed the scene out in the morning *verbatim*,
Or so I've felt. Sometimes the dream was
Grist for further imagining, other scripts.

Some venues were revisited: family outings,
With my parents, I a child, or with Maggie and the girls,
Novitiate conversations, classroom interactions,
Disputations and reconciliations.

Some harrowing escapes, of course, took place,
Some embarrassing failures and futilities.
Some births (yes, I even was the mother once),
Some deaths took place which had not yet occurred.
These events, persuasive, odd and
Substantive or insubstantial flicked or flickered,
Awoke me or plunged me into deeper explorations.

What might be learned from dreams I do not know.
Without them, life would perhaps be tame,
More arid, less dazzling and sublime,
My uncertainties more circumscribed.
I might even begin to feel that life, apart from dreams,
Is truly what it seems to be, not what it, inconceivably, is.

English 102

My students are researching. They buzz
About the library computers, checking facts,
Clicking “full text” and “peer-reviewed,”
In hot pursuit of the best support for the claim
They soon will make. Recent books lie beside
Authoritative studies and photo-copied pages
Hot from the printer. I can almost sense synapses
Firing, dendrites sprouting in adolescent heads.

A veritable Baskin and Robins of delicious topics:
“Mercury in Wild Fish Populations,” “Kinsey on Sex,”
“Cannibalism on Easter Island.” Do oxygen bars
Contribute to good health?, my students wonder.
Are psychologists interested in alien abductions?
I love it, love this intellectual ferment, the give and take
As students formulate tentative and final claims.
Hypotheses rise and fall, sweat flows, and laughter.

I tell each group: imagine you are junior partners
At the nation’s premier law office. It’s presentation day;
The boss and board members want to hear what you know.
What claim can you make and make stand?
Can you cite accurately the relevant quotes,
Paraphrase effectively the expert opinion, unpack
Your learning, build support for the case you want to make?
Is your thinking credible, your communication clear?

I’ll hope so. And I’ll beam when they close the deal,
Sustain the interest of the board, sit down certain
They have done their best, shaking perhaps
Or shaken, but happy, knowledgeable, satisfied.

Epiphany

I had asked who knew what the Epiphany referred to
And a lone student recalled the church feast
Celebrating the coming of the magi to the crib.
I explained the word is Greek, from epiphanein,
For “coming to light,” “revelatory manifestation.”
I even wrote it on the board in the original,
Odd letters, epsilons and phi’s and iotas
And no fraternity or sorority in sight.

I mentioned that James Joyce employed the word
In Dubliners when a protagonist had a moment
Of sudden, often painful, illumination,
And I summoned up the image of Hulga
In Flannery O’Connor’s story, stuck in that loft,
Her prosthetic limb packed away in Manley
Pointer’s bible case alongside the glass eye
And the booze and the pornographic cards.

Most nodded, the shock of recognition
Registering, and we returned to the text
To start another story, to hunt,
As English teachers do, for other tidbits
Of erudition, the better to hold the literary
Mirror up to our many human quirks.
After class, the gum-chewing chatty blonde
Who never did well on tests came running,

Yes, literally running to my desk. She asked me,
Much to my surprise, if I would please like
Write out on her note page that like Greek word
Epi-something for her. She exuded gratitude.
I was, to say the least surprised, a bit mortified
That I had so misjudged a young woman’s
Intellectual curiosity. It was then
She told me it was perfect, “perrrfect” for

That new tattoo she’d like to have (I knew not where)
Then she was gone, light playing on her hair.

Don Foran

For Malamud

Life may indeed be, Bernard,
A tragedy filled with joy,
Or, as my Irish ancestors knew,
A beautiful world some ways sad.
Yet, we agree, I suspect, that life, ultimately,
Is gift. Ideal relationship, empathic
When the heart is sound, opens
Us to the hearts of others.
The ren, 'twould seem, is neither
Yin nor yang, mustard seed nor tree,
Just circle of white in swirled dark
And dark in swirled light.

For Roethke

The light did take the tree;
In fact, it took a great many trees.
The breeze too played its part
Allowing now-bright boughs and leaves
To shimmer as they danced.

Life's like that.
We shine when others shine on us;
We dance when breezes make us bend.

The flies and spiders play
In shafts of sunlight.
In shadows, tiny creatures flit,
Though hidden without sunlight.

Today all nature says "We are.
We are here. We are what we are.
We steal light from the sun so gold
And give it back a million-fold."

Don Foran (2010)

Fresh

“My vocabulary is like 5th grade,”
said the bulky man on the bus.
He wasn’t talking to me
but to someone he’d called
on his cell phone.
I wanted to slip him a few
special words – incandescent,
exculpatory, litigious, crenellated –
but I didn’t want to appear patronizing.

I sat silently, mulling over the fragment
I’d heard, a bit heavy at heart.
A man in his thirties had felt compelled
to confess his dearth of words.
To whom? His lover, his father, his child,
A niece, or doctor? I knew not.

A few days later, while watching
the Obama Inauguration with my students
I noted that Elizabeth Alexander,
Inauguration poet, said,
“We encounter each other in words,
words spiny or smooth,
whispered or declaimed,
words to consider, reconsider.”

The world turns on words, it seems,
fresh words, expanded vocabulary,
flowers in full bloom.

Don Foran

Gaggio Montano: Liberation from Germany, 1945

At thirteen, the grandson,
Braces on his teeth,
Gangly, alert, affectionate,
Is beautiful.

His grandfather, Fabbio, a man
Seventeen years older than I,
Is touchingly obsessed. He wants
Us to feel, to touch, history,

Those fierce days at Riva Ridge and
Gaggio Montano. He pillages
Cabinet after cabinet, showing
Artifacts: Grenades, unopened packs

Of Lucky Strikes, tooth powder, and
A full array of uniforms the Germans, G.I.'s,
Italians, even the Brazilian Battalion, wore.
And here he stops, a tear in his eye.

He holds a faded photo of a soldier
From Rio de Janeiro, "mi caro amigo"
He intones. The grandson says in English
What we had already understood.

Then the old man affectionately tries to
Place a Mussolini youth corps hat on his
Reticent grandson's head, and he resists,
Playfully: "No, no, no," he insists.

His grandpa doesn't argue,
Just reaches somewhere else and
Hands me a medallion from 2005
Celebrating the 60th year of peace.

The boy's sweet smile now illuminates
The scene, restores a bit of light
To a small but cherished room
In the mountains of now free Italy.

Don Foran

Haiku for Sharbat Gula
(Muslim woman photographed for *National Geographic*
by Steve McCurry in 1984. She was discovered c. 2002
in a refugee camp in Eastern Afghanistan)

A cloud, luminous
in its most ardent instant,
plunged past a cold moon
(2002)

Heorot's Hall Warden

The Beowulf-Grendel matchup notwithstanding,
Geatland's main man, maker of formal and informal
Boasts, verbally slays intemperate Unfurth,
Speaker of contrary words. Small wonder that Hrothgar,
Lord of Heorot, Bright-Dane, Ring-Dane, host,
Trusts Beowulf, Son of Ecgtherow, and laughs
For the first time in months. Grendel, dismemberment
On his mind, now slouches toward the mead hall
As Geats and Danes go more bravely to the mead.

The Homeless

Ten men clamber out of the creaking van,
Their sweaty bodies meeting a kiss
Of cool night air.
They drift, silently, sullenly
Toward the darkened church.
Mattresses lie, two or three to a room,
Along walls decorated with children's
Drawings and almost casual crucifixions.
Carl, Eddie, Jake and the others
Throw their worn packs and bags
Onto the makeshift beds, and John,
It's always John, is first to ask
If he can have his sack lunch now,
Not in the morning as we had planned.
"Sure," I say, almost as anxious as he
To assuage this remediable hunger.
Several echo John, and soon all
Are feasting on pb and j; apples, celery,
And other healthy fare remains on the table,
But they're happier now, even communicative.
One thanks me for setting a new pair of white socks
On each mattress. Another offers a juice cup
To a friend. "Lights out!" Rick calls at ten,
And no one argues, no one hesitates. Sleep
Knits once more the raveled sleeve of care,
Obliterates the hurt, soothes the jangled nerves.
Tomorrow will be another day,
Another cheerless day embroidered
With small triumphs, fragile dreams.

Don Foran

Iconoclasts

Writers, of course, court insecurity,
Knowingly shatter forms,
Sensing life itself is but a series
Of destructions.
The new emerges, if it emerges,
Phoenix-like, from ashes.
Healthy iconoclasm I applaud:
Exploding idols, righting wrongs
In defense of human dignity,
Leaving much-traveled paths,
And taking the heat or, worse, the cold
When integrity is less than fashionable.
Poets sabotage the strict iambic beat.
They forge, Walt-inspired, on, testing limits,
Annihilating limits altogether.
Dickinson dares defend her lively line,
While Kafka speaks truth to power,
Even to his unimpressionable father.
Heaney seeks dank moss in deeper wells,
Rich dives into the watery wreck
While Hughes assails the Waldorf-Astoria
and Ginsberg hunkers down at, say,
Some supermarket in California.

Don Foran

Imaginary Friends

Sometimes a child,
Out of loneliness
Or an excess of imagination,
Constructs a playmate,
A secret presence
With whom to share excitements.
To an adult, these forays
Into the unreal
Can be touching or amusing
Or both.
Were a child to continue
Conversing with a fictive friend
Into adolescence,
We might worry, I suspect.
Such play, in a rare few,
Could become pathological.
In the days of chanting tribes,
Delphic utterance, wrathful prophecy,
And communities of monks,
Humans, lonely on the earth,
Constructed pantheons of gods,
Fierce or gentle figures
With whom some then and now
Strange intercession may ensue.
Statues are erected, statutes transcribed,
Whole institutions fill the voice,
Provide partners in the joy and misery
Of being alive,
Create some semblance of friendship.
Don't get me wrong.
The impulse to create community
Is not only not all bad;
It has done some tangible good.
It mitigates the fierceness
Of earth's plundering anarchists,
Assuages the pain, the hunger
For companionship
On our long and harrowing voyage.
But if we cling too long
To our imaginary friends,
If we compel others to believe
As we do in our personal preoccupations,
Therapy is called for,
Or at least some salvific slap
To bring us to our senses.
We might, of course, believe
That mystery shrouds our beginnings
Or that a benevolent life force
Set this world spinning,
But I doubt we would expect to receive
Assurances, much less instructions,
In return.
A healthy agnosticism would seem to be
More honest than childlike or childish
Yet arguably understandable
Infatuation. (1997)

James Baldwin?

James, if you are James, I cannot imagine myself
In your frame. You were so much better
At exorcising anger than I. You have a cup
Of coffee in your hand. That's much better than
The cigarette you smoke on the dust jacket
Of one of my books you wrote. It wasn't
Notes of a Native Son, but that's the best. I think
Your jacket is leather – another reason I cannot
Be you. I'd be sloughing off the jacket every time
The temperature got over 60 degrees. Then I'd
Lose it and be upset. The light shines on your skin,
Dark, beautiful skin which no one would ever call
Pasty. No. You probably are, like me, anxious
To write, with what passion you can probably guess.
I cannot.

Don Foran

Largesse

Every August West Olympia is rife with blackberries.
Though a case can surely be made by those attuned to the horrors of invasive species
Assailing domestic plants, I derive great pleasure
Standing for an hour breathing in the sweet fragrance
Of the ripe fruit I calmly pluck at some risk to my hands.

I reach through the prickly vines for the plumpest,
Heaviest berries. Rather than drop each berry into my bucket,
I love holding ten or twelve in my left hand
While capturing more, then still more, with my right.
It is the abundance, the sheer bounty nature provides,
Which feeds my serenity, warms me through and through.

I rarely eat when I'm picking. The expectation of later
Rewarding myself keeps me picking. The fattest, firmest berries
Plop into my bucket. I spy yet another vine, then another
Higher up, further in, laden with fruit.

I find myself whistling or singing after a while.
Sometimes I realize that time has passed without thought.
This has been, I now reflect, the essence of play,
The beauty of just being, free from care.
Yes, it is a luxury, but one which even the burdened,
Even the poor might share.

Does the bear rejoice as I do when he forages among brambles
Deeper in the wilderness? Are not the bees happy drawing nectar
From the berries? I cannot imagine that they are less grateful than I
For this largesse. (2009)

Le Bateau Ivre

The little orange boat, a wedge of pawpaw drunk with lime,
Slid toward the syrup sea, colliding with the sugared sides
Of pineapple fritters fleeing from my fork.

Coffee, companionship: small good things to taste before
We checked the readings on our sodden xeroxed maps.

Today's a break day. Trafalgar Falls, gleaming Roseau
Beckon us. We go not sighting whales but comfortable folk
Flying in on private planes from St. Croix or sailing down
From turquoise-girdled St. Maarten.

I don't begrudge them those grand things; the syrup here
Is sweet, the pawpaw subtle, the inch-long lizard on the wall
Cosmic, potent, healthily imperialistic.

Lines

The heart's eye grieves, says Hopkins,
But God knows (and I know) it delights

As readily as it grieves. What tends to the
Elegiac can as well prompt celebrations
Of what always is.

All things do pass, and all things do remain,
For the heart's eye brightens
When it beholds the sky afresh
Or smile lines around
Our aging eyes and lips.

Lit Crit

Though I don't ascend my desk
Or balance, to the wonderment of all,
Bolt upright on my professorial pate,
I often wrest attention
From all corners of the room.
I tease out comments from the shy,
Die noisily when silence meets
My best interrogation.
I dramatize the sizzle of each meaty text
Unmasking Melville's doppelgangers,
Mimicking Stevens' "bubbling of bassoons."
And when, as happened yesterday,
A question from an unexpected quarter
Breaks the stillness like a seagull's sudden yawp,
I strain to hear, then stumble as I run to intercept
This token of intelligence, this gift.
I gladly let the student snatch
Whatever morsel I have snagged
In my own beak. It's hers and hers alone!
We celebrate the find. Then, having used
This bait to tease out other thoughts,
I wheel smoothly to the literary curb
To scavenge other tidbits from the text,
Some line to share, some metaphor to prize.

Don Foran

Locks

Two hundred ten “little” wars in her thirty-seven year reign,
All this while Queen Victoria purged unseemly passages
from Shakespeare, lest women, reading them, become despoiled.
Maybe Vicky felt the bawdier 1600’s more sinful times than her own.

How does one police the chambers of the heart, navigate divided minds?
Our shifting waters, like the Ballard Locks, seek just that level where
Yacht, trawler and canoe slide safely through. Does the right hand ever
Know what the left hand does or doesn’t do? Do I intend to hash

My metaphors, or, having hashed them, do I deny the fact they’re thus?
Small wonder Raymond Carver couldn’t bring himself to say
He was a drunk, though he spent decades living in a haze. He felt
Himself “lucky,” like Karl Wallenda, to have walked a wire so long.

Measures

I walk the half-mile to the marina
swinging weights. I know I may look silly,
but, nearing 71, and living in a colder clime,
I'd rather look silly than be sedentary.

I do read a lot. Novels like *The Goldfinch*
and *The Orphan Master's Son* and *Gilead*
and mysteries like *Look Again* provide
nice breaks between writing and editing tasks.

Sometimes I pick up Nabokov or Edmund White
just to luxuriate in their intoxicating language.
non-fiction, like writings from Story Corps
and harrowing adventures like *A House in the Sky*

Send me refreshed to other projects, mentor workshops,
My Senior Center guided conversations about Literature,
and occasional letters to the editor, a long-time habit
necessary in the age of toxic disinformation.

So I walk with weights. It isn't golf or racquetball;
It isn't conversation, but Maggie comes home soon
from work, her career still flourishing after
mine draws to a close. Retirement's strange, not dull,

And there are many things to try. I have my sketching
pencils at the ready, and one day I'll learn to use them,
fulfilling a wish since childhood to capture the beauty
that I see, stunning composition in life, the unseen seen.

Moby-Dick Revisited

Though Ahab would, of course, dispute my claim,
The whale was innocent, would rather feast
On krill than Captain Ahab he has maimed.
But Ahab dubs the whale malicious beast
He must destroy, not try to understand.
This same sad tale does drive *our* sailing trip,
And Melville notes a universal strand
In human nature, bids us see the grip
Of morbid fantasies more false than real,
Imaginings which sometimes drive us all.
By sadness maddened, Captain at the wheel,
Leave off your chase. Go home. Nantucket calls.
For children need their fathers, wives their man.
The whale's a whale, not evil aimed at you,
Your grudge will scuttle Pequod and its crew.

Monasterevin, Co.Kildare July 30, 1998

Amused, I read the sign: Mooney's --
Grocery, Auctioneers, Bar, Undertaker --
This world's needs thus addressed.
Across the road a sobering tribute
To Reverend Edward Prendergast,
Hanged by the English two hundred years ago.
He dared to bear sacraments,
Signs of life beyond, to a dying man,
A fallen follower of Wolf Tone.

Today, on Lunasa cusp and St. Ignatius Day Eve,
Scholars toast an English Jesuit, the poet Hopkins
Who tasted dearest freshness in this lovely land
Along the Barrow.

Food, barter, drink and even death
Do signify, do point beyond this temporality.
The blessings we discern -- some fierce, some fair --
Though oft unsought, we must surely prize.

Don Foran

Moribund
I, Autumn-struck,
Sat,
The Other America
In my hand,
A Robert Bruce
Kent 74
100% 2-ply slipover
By my side,
The cool, Fall-gold against
Blinding-blue
Stillness
Punctuated only by
A dying leaf'
Or a magnanimous thought's
Demise.
Appalachia
Was too far away
On such a day. (Published in *Fragments*, Gonzaga University, 1967)

Motions and Moments

This nick in the table top
Modifies the grain.
Flawed or beautified by time
And accident, this wood
Is unlike any other.
It can be copied, not reconstituted.

Did it get this way as rivals scuffled,
Babies played, friends drank beer?
I do not know.
You will say it's not important.

[published in *The Berkeley Jesuit*, Spring, 1974]

Mountain Ash

I planted the spare stick fifteen years back
Filling a space in our side yard
Near where Corky, Marguerite's old pooch
Now lies buried. It grew extravagantly
But only sprouted branches six years ago.
Today it sports clusters of red-orange berries.
I see it now over my left shoulder, evening sunlight
Striking the tree at a slant.
It's beautiful, forty-some feet high, leaves silhouetted
Against the Northwest blue. It reminds me
Of my oldest daughter, Amanda, swaying soulfully
To the ripples of her beloved bassoon,
And of my youngest daughter, Erin – tall like me,
Skinny some say, but more graceful than I, and graced.
Maggie's bike helmet suddenly appears
In the driveway, and I shamble down to greet my wife,
The college counselor. The ash tree waves hello,
Dancing, proud to be alive.

Off Otter Crest

The light, Roethke knew, does take the tree
But, even more spectacularly, it takes the sea.
The blue-green waters off the Oregon coast,
Seen in a certain late-summer evening light,
Wash effortlessly against the cape,
Fingering each crevice, each indentation,
Laving lovingly the rocks, polishing the wall.
It is in this light, viewed from such an angle,
That we cleave more closely to those whom we hold dear,
Not because we fear an inevitable loss,
But because we know, beyond imagining,
The solidity of all that is and is to be.

Don Foran

Other Moons

My daughter left *The New Yorker*
With me when she split to do errands,
And I opened the pages to a Paul Noth cartoon
Wherein a serious looking man
Is seated across from a caricatured gypsy
Whose hands have spread nine tarot cards
Before her on a spotless table cloth.
“Your moon,” she says, is in the House of Pancakes.”
This strikes me as quite droll. The stuff of Billy Collins’
Poems, notes he writes in margins,
Cows he hears in Irish fields, prim poets
He mentally undresses or forgets he has undressed.
This is the kind of scene the capturing of which
Can cause that odd and special laugh, the chortle.
To slip from stomach to chest to throat,
If you happen to be an English prof who,
Sated on summer, is anxious to return to the classroom
Where his own moon may, even now, reside.

Don Foran
Particularities

The smell of newborn babies,
Salt air, the way one’s eyes
Light up—these unique particularities
Are the very heart of the universal.
How then, having been educated
By things we see and feel,
Do we yet fail to reverence earth,
Loving its every copse and pool,
Its every tremble, tang, and spark?

We long for love and fail to comprehend
Manifold loveliness. Life is in our hands,
But we must explore our heart of hearts
To understand its worth.

(1999)

Pilgrim (September 6, 1974)

Cold, tense, afraid not of the dark but of what the dark might hide,
I trod silently past sleeping dogs, pilgrimaging in September.
Across a bridge along a stream I slipped, railroad ties
Foreshortening and elongating my normal stride.
A dog barked once, was still; crickets revealed monotonously.
It should be easy to trust at night, but the choices one makes
(like the hemorrhaging woman's in Mark) are not less real for being shrouded.

At last the crossroad I'd jogged down before, comfortable remembering.
The other direction, east, was yet unknown, inland, undisclosed.
I chose east, hoping the sun would rise, and, rising, thaw out
The flesh blue-grey from which my breath blew white.
The pinkening glow of a false dawn bade me stop, prepare
To be surprised.

Quietly, expectantly, I posted myself on a roadside rock, one star
And a reddening sky backdrop for a dozen blackening firs.
Clouds caught the fingers of light and carried there for a while.

Pleased at the beauty and fooled by the pre-dawn's deceit, I wondered
How long I might stand shivering, the warmth itself nowhere near.
Was it important that I see the full sunrise? What further
Revelation would justify my chilled and less than avid attention?

Minutes passed, a few swallows noiselessly swooped without signaling.
A carcass, snake's shedding, startled me as I paced for circulation.
An hour beyond a false dawn is a trying time for a pilgrim,
But the full sun viewed from a high rock on a cold morning
Warms more than the body of the watcher who, fear-free,
Strolls homeward, the dew in his hair mirroring new light.

[In front of Centralia College's new Arts Building there stands a beautiful bronze sculpture depicting a naked man. The sculpture, entitled, "Reaching for the Stars." Unfortunately, the man is anatomically inadequate. He has no genitalia whatsoever. The following poem is a lament.]

I reach for the stars,
Yet at what price do I stretch so high?
What I've lost shielding you
From my natural endowments
May haunt me some day,
Some cold rainy eve
Or slightly sunny morn
When even nature's warmth is not enough
To assuage my loss.

Passersby may be more comfortable then,
Not needing to answer innocent questions
About my negligible, nay, non-existent
Nether parts.
But nothing will soothe my almost human form
Or smooth away my almost human tears.

Reactors

At Harrisburg
Blood was spilt on draft files,
Feds snagged priestly protestors,
Held fasters fast:
Men and women valued
Babies more than paper
And resisted the exportation
Of the hardware of death.

At Harrisburg, a decade later,
Met. Edison's Trojan Horse,
Lethal to the core, cozied up
To sleeping policemen, mothers, children:
Nuclear technology,
Jobs for the citizenry,
Death sneaking in, seeping out,
As people slept.

Reading

From Ugaritic script at Wadi el Hol
Through Phoenician and Greek alphabets
Into scriptures and transcribed shepherds' tales;
Past Pushkin, Borges, Dickinson, Heaney,
Language lopes along, scouring for subscribers,
Insinuating itself into our consciousness.

We speak, we listen, and, astoundingly, we read,
Drawing the words of others in, bitter or delicious,
Nice or nasty. We savor them or spit them out,
But having tasted of the literary apple, we are changed.
We ponder, in unlikely collaboration,
Until, glancing at the fruited tree, we turn the page.

(2009)

Reciprocation

God, Rilke says, loves most of all
Those who need Him as they need
A crowbar or a hoe, perhaps to access
Treasure or break through earth
So seeds might grow.

I like to think we need God
As we desire a spouse or special friend,
Someone to help us lever new imaginings.

Our hearts, battered though they be,
Pump on. Passion and laughter
Rock our hearts by turns.

Our human touch gladdens the heart of God
Who, needing us as much as we do Him,
Keeps covenant in ever fresher incarnations.

May, 1998

Sabbatical

On a windswept Dominican hillside, flower-scent and birdsong blend.
I listen as doves' coos punctuate the mid-May Caribbean evening.
Simplicity, not grandeur, is the engine which drives the women's lives
Whose gifts of cherry juice, bean soup, and tender, healthy fare
Are set before me with both care and gentleness.
During my two short stays, I bathe in Hodges Bay, and, calmed,
Renew appreciation of God's small gifts.

The clothes blow wildly on the line below this quiet house
Signalling fresh thoughts far saner than our world's noisy ads.
It's difficult to imagine that more chirping birds, more perfect hibiscus
Inhabit any other acre. Birds flit among the flowers, soar,
And in the distance, drop into the sea, confident
Their next fine meal will be everything they need, and more.

Silence (Hoh Rainforest, October 17, 2012)

Hungry for communion
I entered the Hall of Mosses.
A lone bird, silent, glided
over the bracken pond.

I entered that sanctuary, silent,
feeling the reverence therein,
soon veering into the maple grove
where I stood for a silent hour

watching in awe as the slanting sunlight
took the ancient moss-draped trees,
their drapery slipping toward the ground
as though, like I, stunned into worship.

One tiny fern, attached to one of three
grey-green giants, glowed not ecclesial red
but brightest green, a sanctuary lamp glowing
in a cathedral more silent than Chartres.

Silence wrapped around me, plunged deep
into my heart, as nature's sacred wafer ate me
just as I had eaten it, a silent eucharist, a legacy
of light and growth and tree, now me.

Don Foran

Siren Call

Warned by Circe of the sirens' subtle lure
Odysseus bade his sailors strap him down.
His sensual nature left him insecure,
His common sense impelled him to stay bound.
Perhaps his spirit yearned to penetrate
A mystery not himself, a oneness with the gods.
Perhaps his absence from his patient mate
Or need to see his son increased the odds
That he'd return. At any rate, his life
And that of all his crew was spared despite
His yearning for release. Their ears sealed shut
With wax, his men kept on, through dark, through light
To Ithaca. The sailors cursed; they cut
The sea with oars. The hero wept in pain
And, restless, knew he'd wander yet again.

Don Foran

Skateboarder

Once, twice, three times his left foot
Caresses the pavement of the strand.
His lithe body balances beautifully
As he displays in time and space,
Like two-page reproductions of Greek art,
All postures on the urn.

Blond hair wafts out, wheels sing,
And, leaning slightly back,
This slender youth arches
To meet with grace
The passing of the years.

Published in Fragments, Seattle
University, 1982

Sligo

Sligo is a watercolor wash of blues and greys,
Pulsing with Saturday shoppers and registrants
At the W.B. Yeats Annual Summer School.
Travellers stop along the River Garavogue
At Rockwood Parade and Tobergal Lane
To purchase soda bread at Crazy Jane's,
Unlikely to remember the Crazy Jane Yeats
Admired. She insisted that "Love has made
his mansion In the place of excrement."

Further West, beyond Drumcliffe, deep caves
In the Bricklieve Mountains not far from Moytirra
Shelter spirits from Loch Nasiul,
Reverberations from the pre-Christian past.

Today, tour busses churn past Yeats Museum
Where Jack B. Yeats' and Sean Keatings'
Paintings hang. "Communicating with Prisoners,"
And "The Turf Gatherer" shout still from tidy walls
Outside, I fling some coins into a street singer's case,
Appreciative of his enduring song.

Smoke Farm poems

Smoke Farm, Scene I

Yellow and orange nasturtiums
Slash through the dew-laden weeds.
A large uprooted thistle of some sort,
Surely an invasive species, beautiful nonetheless,
Catches sunlight in its purple hair.
A bullying blackberry vine muscles its way
Through the colorful mesh. The 70s disco tune,
“Stayin’ alive, yeah stayin’ alive” courses
Through my brain; I banish it and dive
Once again into my personal helicon,
My collection of images designed by nature
To rival Seamus Heaney’s fructifying wells
And the priest Hopkins’ “world of wild and wet.”
I notice now the purple thistle wears on its stalk
Thousands of tiny thorns. Good. I don’t trust
Beauty that is too perfect, untouched by at least
An intimation of evil, a hurt, some danger.
That’s what Heaney knew when he spotted
That rat in the slimy, wondrous, Belfast well-water.

Smoke Farm, Scene II

Following a trail of sorts, gold-brown maple leaves strewn
Before me, luring me on, I test two logs and make it across
A muddy declivity and finally encounter, again, the sun
Shooting up from where tinkling birch leaves chat with birds
Before diving to their deaths, mulch for springtime rebirth.
A bird sounds a few tentative notes, signaling, I hope, that
The river, still unseen, is very near. And, yes, there it is before me,
Dark pools skimmed by the morning breeze, quiet, relaxed, vital.
Blanched driftwood litters the sand in casual perfection,
Detritus from earth’s beautiful, inexhaustible, compost heap.
I hear it now, the river, whispering a morning song.
I see the sun slanting westward over the water, rendering it
Greenish, then a blackish blue. A leaf flies, improbably,
From an alder near the bank, and it lights upon the surface like a bird.
In every direction nature thrives. One human artifact, some kind
Of cylinder, sullies the spectacular show, a flaw, of course,
But a flaw which offsets, makes real, the ineffable light-driven array.

Smudge Pots

We often smelled the smudge
When visiting family in Orange County.
I was five then, and marveled at the strange method
Of protecting oranges way back then. Two years later,
In 1950, we left L.A. for the Northwest but the smell
Of smudge lingered a bit before fading away.
Of course, millions of oranges gave way to millions
Of people in Garden Grove and Anaheim, and little
Remains of the fruit and citrus culture there.

Thinking of smudge and oranges this morning,
Sixty-five years later, I recalled marching down
Carmona St., L.A., giving Rosemary a bloody nose.
I only remember that my only brother Billy had
Run home crying, his nose bleeding. He said
Rosemary hit him. That was enough for me.
Hardly violent, and not very courageous either,
I apparently gave Rosemary a reciprocal bonk.
I'm sorry, Rosemary, wherever you are today.

Farmers created artificial smog to protect
What they didn't want to freeze. Perhaps I felt
I could redress a wrong or two myself.
I'm just sorry I belted a girl who had never injured
Me. The incident did, it's true, create a brother-bond
Which endured as long as Bill's life held out. He's
Gone now, having paid the price of having smoked
For decades, inhaling another kind of smudge,
Succumbing to forces I could not protect him from.

(2013)

Song

Far away, far away
Your dreams, because they're dreams,
Seem far away.

Far away, far away
You chase them, then embrace them,
And tomorrow, far away,
Becomes today.

(2010)

Sources of Light (for Amanda)

My daughter's eyes, though blue,
Dart black, seeking sources of light.
She devours all that she beholds.

It's morning, and she lies between us
Happy, nourished at her mother's leaking breasts.
She is delightful, our daughter.
Amanda we named her, beloved, lovely.

Our love is thus embodied—who knows how?—
In sighs and coos no parent could ignore.
Far better than even the sweetest silence
Are these peaceful shatterings and shudders.
But it's her chubby knees, I think,
Which most touch my heart.
I sing to her "The Song From Moulin Rouge,"
"When we kiss do you close your eyes,
Pretending that it's someone else?"
I doubt it. Like the Isotoner ad, "Amanda,
Who else do you know?"
Your heart, I have no doubt, is with us,
Enfolded, apt for love, opening even now.

(1985)

Staggering Toward Spring

I dreamt I was John Lennon
Imagining there's no country.
It wasn't hard to do.

Dreams are like that.
Even in a winter of war,
We stagger toward Spring.

Don Foran

That Time of Year

With slow arthritic grace a woman clad in red –
Somebody's grandmother I suppose -
Shuffles up Spring St.
An Irish setter trails lethargically behind.
Two couples, wool caps pulled down, breath white,
Stroll past. Two small boys shuss boots though
Curled leaves.
A quiet breeze dislodges the last few leaves from now bare trees.
There is nothing decadent about their phased decay.
A distant sun, its rays diffused, almost engenders shadows
As pull-tabs, scraps, condoms, cardboard, crap
Shift uneasily on the pebbled path.
A dead branch is ironically scraping.
I think back to that aging woman, her slightly rotund form
Now supplanted by a sweated child churning furiously
On a magenta tricycle. The woman's hair was white,
Her eyes determined.

The Bridge of Sighs

About a thousand years ago
At the Doge's Palace in Venice,
The Frescoed walls, the colorful floors,
Lies the Bridge of Sighs
Across which and steeply down from
Marched whomever had crossed the Doge.

It was a walk more somber
Than that dolorous walk in 1951
Across the infield dirt and the outfield grass
Which Branca took when Thomson sent him
To the showers in a subterranean
Dressing room in the bowels of the Polo Grounds.

The metaphor, of course, breaks down
When one considers the human suffering
Of an erstwhile Venetian politico
Whose sumptuous life is shattered by a rigged
Court designed to "protect the common good."

It was hardly baseball when that man succumbs
To power and braces himself for tortures
He could not possibly imagine,
A diminishment Branca hardly endured.

In the years after the fateful Thomson homer,
He toured cities with his baseball adversary,
Regaling crowds with the saga and the sport,

Himself a hero, a distinguished opponent,
Not a victim of the machinery of state.

Not a man much more familiar with loss.

The Galway Races

I watched a beaming Irish father twirl his young daughter
To the beat of a Dixieland band; such incongruities
Standard at the Galway Races. I tried to photograph
The upperclass wagerer in yellow slacks and a black blazer,
But all I got was his retreating butt. Thousands of fans
Were milling around, digesting whiting and chips,
Or rushing to buy a pint before the next round of betting.

The bookie stands were surrounded by expectant clientele.
Cries of "the photograph" were wringing out: "Five to four,
Five to four on the photograph." The fifth race had ended
In a photo finish; the outcome depended on the photo.
Bookies seized the opportunity to milk the crowd
For a few more pounds, encouraging betting for or against
One outcome or another. As time dragged on
And no resolution seemed forthcoming, they changed tack.
"The dead heat, the dead heat" they chanted. "Two to one
On the dead heat." More time passed; the bettors who
Had scorned wagering on the photograph, now rushed
To double their pounds if a dead heat were declared.

Fortunately, for me, Alexis prevailed. The fading mare
Had had just enough to lunge up "the hill," a furlong
More than any animal should have to run,
A whisker before the charging curragh colt.
She won for me enough to offset my early losses.
Smiling, I handed my ticket to the man from Sean Casey, Ltd.,
And waited while his mate computed my winnings.
Already the chalkboard had been erased and sixth race
Odds were posted. Life went on at the Galway Races.

The French Alps

Ascending on the Aiguille du midi tram almost four thousand meters
Above Chamonix, then climbing flights of stairs to the viewing space,
One gazes, dumbstruck, across to Mont Blanc dressed in purest white.
I spot a line of hikers inching across the two-edged sword of Alps
Immediately below. There are no words to describe the grandeur here,
But magnificent, awe-inspiring, and stunning capture something
Of the beauty few encounter at 9 a.m. on any extraordinary morning.
Most people do not speak except to quietly ask a stranger to take a photo,
An attempt to capture a memory with a loved one, to say "We were here."

Families, tour-groups, lonely seekers mill around my love and me, moving
More or less clockwise to peer awe-struck at another wondrous view.
Gratitude at being alive, at such a place as this, wells up. Music swells
Unbidden, in many minds and hearts, something symphonic, for lyrics
Would surely be out of place in this lovely, non-sectarian cathedral.
When we descend in silence, sated by an experience more filling than
Fresh bread, I experience a pang of guilt that I can afford to journey
Where few of this world's billions will never, ever, go.
But I dismiss that thought and ride a wave of gratitude, alive, alert.

The Half-Light
(For Jeanne Lohmann, poet)

She said Death wants a clean house,
Is a woman intent upon her work,
This bright-eyed, life-filled poet
Knowledgeable about death, having lost,
As we must all lose, someone we love.

Here she was, light-hearted, chiding
John Donne, who also took Death
Down a peg or two. She tutored us
In the uses of fresh language.

Might it not take a woman's eyes
To see Death as she is, not some grim
Reaper, but a noisy neighbor,
A fissure in her coffee- cup,

Mildew on her driveway flowers,
Too many saucers on her serving tray?
I don't have the eyes to see my pant leg
When it bunches up around my ankle,

Or the kitten's tail protruding from the bed
The second before my foot falls upon it;
How will I notice an inadvertent elbow
Flying toward my shoulder in the half-light

As I leave the theater still reading credits,
Still fumbling for my coat
Yearning for the next meal I might or might not eat?
Or a rumbling semi fishtailing toward me on the ice?

The Human Worth

There's a handmade sign I sometimes hold
At December vigils cloaked by cold:
"It's in the shelter of each other that people live."
Sometimes shelter's hard to give.

Still, Rachel Corrie stood beside me,
Shielding those blistered by strife.
In Rafah she tried to stay the knife
Of war –
The dozer took her life.

Tomorrow the rockets may split the sky
And they'll think we're defeated when we cry,
But even our tears are prayers for peace.
We must believe the wars will cease.

We must defeat the violent beast
For those forsaken at their birth,
Souls cradled in the bloody earth,
The dead –
Who never knew their worth.

Some call us idealists who can't effect change.
They say global peace is outside the range
Of impact we have in the world so wide –
We lay down our lives; they snipe or they hide.

I have to believe that justice will rise,
Though morning may dawn to battle cries.
For each human shelters a bud inside:
A heart –
Where goodness must abide.

Erin Foran

(Age 17, March, 2003)

The Patina of Use

Limoge, gold edged, scuffed
By time, lay in the sunlit room
Reminding me how experience
Ennobles. The creaks and cracks
We all sustain bear witness
To the art we have, in time, become.

Outside, a solitary horse
Luxuriates against morning's
Canvas, a grey-white splash
Against Spring's vibrant green.
Pillows of cloud decorate the blue,
Temper the shock of Springshine.

Bagels, cream cheese, fragrant
Lox mingle with the bitter necessary
Coffee. Books line the walls: Goethe,
Maughan, Hopkins. Life is good,
And good because time's ministrations
Bless us in their careless play.

Don Foran

The Poem

It had rained
But this morning's sun
Could not have known
That now a sparkling stream
Coursed through me.
A playful breeze
Cooled my steaming crust.

Without and within birds trilled
Nonchalantly.
Scrim clouds modulated
The dazzling blue.
A dog barked once
That was all.

The medicine wheel turned.

The Process

So much of what we teachers preach
Is process. We don't think anything burped
Forth, fully clothed, from the head of Zeus,
Or even from some prestidigitatory ex
nihilo.

Teilhard, priest, scientist, phenom
Swirling in an arguably divine milieu,
Made Vatican censors tremble.
Process is everything, he felt. Even God
Comes

To articulation with our choosing.
Purity lies not in separation
From our seething universe
But in deeper penetration of it.
Ah!

He danced his did all right. Trusting
All the breaths of life, he spoke of the
Continually incarnate. We stoop,
Amid our relative uncertainties, to kiss
His face.

Don Foran

The River

I never know what's swimming toward me fast,
The questions students do or do not ask.
I flick my wrist: the fly rests where I've cast.

I make mistakes, I know. I've sometimes passed
Too quickly through a complex text or task;
I never know what's swimming toward me fast.

I've slipped on hidden shoals more slick than wax,
Or pulled the line before the hook was fast.
I flick my wrist, not knowing where to cast.

A shimmer in the swirling deep, some flash
Illuminates that dark, uncorks life's cask.
I never know what's swimming toward me fast.

And metaphorical mayflies sometimes hatch,
New theories surfacing, new worlds unmasked;
I flick my wrist, not knowing where to cast.

I've made mistakes I know; I've sometimes passed
An opportunity to revel or relax.
I never know what's swimming toward me fast;
I flick my wrist: the fly rests where I've cast.

Don Foran

This Too Will Pass

She arrived at my office door in tears,
Another professor's student.
It took me a while to understand,
Between her sobs, why she was here.
Her research paper had received an "F"
And that meant she'd flunked the course.
She'd received an "A" in an earlier
English class, she said, and the shock
Of gliding from "A" to "F" in one fell swoop
Angered her so much she sputtered.

In time she told me that she knew
Her topic on the paranormal wasn't the best;
She had revised a dreadful preliminary draft
To better qualify assertions about
The factuality of the unexplained.

I told her that students often withdraw from class
Or simply disappear (abducted?) or
Manage to flunk the research paper as had she.
I guess my point was that it's not so unusual
To bomb this gateway course, to somehow miss the gate.

My words did nothing to assuage her grief;
She wanted redress for an egregious wrong.
I suggested that she talk again to her professor
(She said it would do no good) and then
Perhaps the kindly Department Chair
(who was not in). A final recourse would be
To lodge a complaint with an appropriate Dean.
She'd dried her tears and slumped away, minutes
Before the Chair arrived who knew, as I, there was little
Such a writer could do to right anew her shaken world.

And yet, I felt a small sharp pang, remorse, regret
That I could not do more to help. I wished
I could produce a tiny spaceship, a shimmering
Disk wherein she might spirit herself away
To some happy parallel planet.

Don Foran

This World's Goods

It was as though flavors
Lay one over the other --
Sweet coconut milk, fresh mushroom,
A hint of lemon grass.
Some of this world's goods.

Outside, the rain had stopped,
Ushered out discreetly
Just minutes after bursting in.

The sky, now blue, stepped forth,
Parting curtains of whitest white.

A child spun past;
An old woman, bent with age,
Smiled broadly as she rubbed the air
Between her fingers.

The Gumps and Saks of San Francisco
Were nowhere to be seen.

A pigeon cooed, an awning snapped.
The young Thai waitress
Beamed.

"It's called Tom Kar Gai;
Oh yes, so good."

Don Foran

Vitality (for Erin)

I feel her body, limp at last,
Sheer weight upon my shoulder.
Her eyelashes, incredibly long,
Are no longer moving.
Gently, timidly, I lean over,
Sliding my left hand under her belly
And place her, a vital inertia,
On the waiting sheet.

 Hardly breathing,
I begin my retreat. She has done me in.
I'm irrationally afraid of waking her,
For she will soon enough be standing,
Whimpering softly, warm tears running
Down her cheeks. Erin is not a sleeper.
When she *has* caught a nap and is refreshed
She'll glow, bright pink,
A beatific smile on her face.
For now, I bless the regularity
Of her breathing, and hope her dreams
Are sweet, like life, when one is one.

(1986)

When

"When your children were babies,
How did you hold them," he asked.
The movie was Phenomenon, the
Question, I felt, phenomenal.
With what unimaginable care,
With what transcendent tenderness
Did we hold them then? And now?
Who are our babies? Our neighbors?
Our friends?
Is there, in our heart of hearts,
A purity of vision more spiritual
Than religious? More human than
Simply civilized?

How did we hold them? Was the holding
Merely instinctual, or generous,
Generational, generative?

We tell ourselves our utter protectiveness
Is love, but it is more;
It is *the* more, the more we are called to
When we learn the power of touch.

Don Foran

Who We Are

If I could play that Dvorsak, YoYo Ma,
Excruciating sadness yoked to joy,
I'd play it for all children of this raw
And dangerous world, the ones who most annoy
The very rich. I'd hold each note an hour
And place my quaking finger on the fret
Until my sweat ran free and sour;
Till tears flowed too, both mine and ours. I'd let
The world know that music with its charm
Redeems, somehow, much pain and many long
Long hidden wrongs, assuages grief and harm,
And sounds, at last, a plaintive, hopeful song.
Thus are we saved. You stir new mindfulness
Of who we really are and whom we bless.

Don Foran