THIS SAD KINGDOM

THESIS

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By

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*This Sad Kingdom* is a collection of lyric, dramatic, and narrative poems that are post-modern revisions of the American Romantic impulse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
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The New Republic
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The Cupidity of a Macedonian Sunrise
The Dead Sea of the Heart
Monuments
POETRY AND HISTORY

The Imagination, Bertrand Russell writes in his essay "On History," is enlarged by a knowledge of the past; because we are isolated from the past, Russell claims, we fail miserably in our attempts to make a self in the present (524). "Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history," Emerson reminds us (123). History, humankind’s search for selfhood, results when many different portraits of the self in constant movement, readjustment, are removed from the museum of our psyche and integrated into one being. This process of integration can occur only through the historical imagination which, enabling us to see beyond the linear ordering of time, integrates our many different selves (past, present and future) into a single, dynamic unity.

Czeslaw Milosz notes the importance of history to the attainment of selfhood in his autobiography, *Native Realm*:

In our kingdom, the process of becoming is history....It grows out of ourselves, out of even our smallest deeds. Unfortunately, our adaptation to historical fluidity has not passed beyond the stage of awkward beginnings, but to liberate ourselves from her magnetism we must reinforce her, not turn away from her. (295)

Milosz recognizes rightly that history holds an immense attraction for us, for history is
the self as we imagine the self to be. But to refuse history--our history--is to bind ourselves to the present with all its attendant ills and inadequacies, to accept the death of the imagination, the limiting of motion, the burden of the escapable present. To refuse history is to bind ourselves to time, to accept the burden of time's sad kingdom.

We seem to have lost our sense of continuity with the past--a condition that exists unquestionably in our modern view of self (anything antique is antiquated, and history is history). This is tragic, for as Horace Gregory in his introduction to W.C. Williams's *In the American Grain* notes,

> Human growth is far too slow to admit violent denials of its immediate past, and writers, quite like all other human beings, become voiceless should they attempt to deny the continuity of their heritage. (xv)

Without the imagination, we cannot see past the present. Wallace Stevens in *The Necessary Angel* states, "we cannot look at the past or the future except by means of the imagination" (144). The imagination propels us into the past and future by revisioning the incidence of time. The imagination compels us to choose from among the many details of history those incidents (or accidents?) that awaken our sense of self. This is to say, we know ourselves only in the tense of "I am"--the past exists only as reflection of the motion of selfhood, or, to modify T.S. Eliot's statement that "the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (38), the present sense invokes an imagining not only of the currency of the past, but of its particulars. Through the imagination, we see ourselves as *pure being* independent of time.
Emerson notes that this desire to dispel time is the reason we turn to history:

All inquiry into antiquity, all curiosity respecting the Pyramids, the excavated cities, Stonhenge, the Ohio Circles, Mexico, Memphis--is the desire to do away with this wild, savage, and preposterous There or Then, and introduce in its place the Here and Now. (127)

The burden of time is the burden of otherness. When we acknowledge time we acknowledge that who we were may not be who we are, and that this may not denote progress but may in fact denote a regression in our attempts to recreate ourselves. Nostalgia, that sudden and poignant awareness of a past self that is no longer present, is one such instance of our acknowledgement of historical imagination. This is not to imply that nostalgia is negative but merely to point out that we are aware of time as an excluding, other-ing phenomenon. Only through the imagination can we approach any sense of integration.

Without the imagination, without such active participation in the process of selfhood that we call history, without the assimilation of past and present, the prospect of the future is untenable. For, as Viktor Frankl notes in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, "It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future....He sometimes has to force his mind to the task" (94).

We cannot attain the future without a sense of the past, for history liberates the self from time, making one our past, present and future. And poetry, with its many impulses, serves as the voice of that new creation. The imagination in history enables us to create poetry. Through the imagination comes existence by which we define and
measure the pastness of our present. Octavio Paz reminds us of the importance of the connection of history to poetry:

The poem, a being of words, goes beyond words and history does not deplete its meaning; but the poem would have no meaning--or even existence--without history, without the community that nourishes it and is nourished by it. (168)

Thus, history becomes for us both a humanizing and a deifying force, poetry. Poetry personalizes history by making particular the abstract, and simultaneously uplifting personal experience by making abstract the particular. Poetry personifies history by making it human. "History is the place where the poetic word is incarnated" (Paz 169).

This incarnation of the poetic word is not the creation of "new ways of thinking" (Hayakawa 270), rather it is the re-creation of thought and feeling. The poetic Word exists in a community of people and words, in history. The narrator of Richard Howard’s "Oracles" explains,

...history does not merely touch language, it takes place in it:

The day will come when we each have turned into a dictionary:

the substance of things hoped for--our faith! (76)

Pressing through these communities, the Word is made incarnate through successful utterance, and such an utterance requires both a speaker acting from a community of
speakers and words drawn from a community of language. Thus, the impulse of poetry is a singular one, although it contains two elements, the self and the world. Richard Wilbur, however, notes two impulses of poetry: "the impulse to name the world, and the impulse to clarify and embody the self" (479). I would argue that the process of naming and the process of becoming are entirely one function of the historical imagination. This is the truth of the biblical myth of Adam naming creation--that Adam is "embodying the self" by making all of creation an extension of self. The act of naming is the act of becoming.

The poetic utterance prefigures time. To again draw on Paz: "The poetic word is historical in two complementary, inseparable and contradictory senses: it constitutes a social product and it is a previous condition for the existence of every society" (168).

The poetic word prefigures time because it is a "previous condition." In other words, poetry, a product of the historical imagination, prefigures time by integrating the self into one timeless creation. By controverting time, the historical imagination opens up the timeless realm of being, poetry.

Osip Mandelstam finds the poetic word is alive through an "inner image" (20). This image is the impression of ourselves. It is our misreading of self, our attempt to integrate experience with language, that finds embodiment through the imagination. Virginia Woolf's Orlando calls this misreading "a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice" (325). It is the self attempting to reclaim lost time through the imagination in history. It is the self that perceiving history as separate, removed, knows history as
"the self that perceives." This is Mandelstam’s "inner image," Woolf’s "voice answering a voice." Without the historical imagination we are voiceless, isolated from ourselves. Without the historical imagination our lives would be incidental, caricatures of a broader reality.

Boris Pasternak once lamented that culture views art as a fountain instead of as a sponge: "They have decided that art should gush forth, whereas it should absorb and become saturated" (23). The historical imagination is the absorbing imagination. It is the poetic Word made utterable through history. It is the neglected connection between being and becoming.

Elizabeth Bishop in "The Imaginary Iceberg" states, "We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship/although it meant the end of travel" (4). The historical imagination enables us to have that iceberg by abandoning our limited conception of self, that poor vehicle which isolates us from experience. By integrating our many different selves in time into one self independent of time, the historical imagination functions as a constructive and necessary force for our poetic creations.
WORKS CITED


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: POETRY AND HISTORY</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIS SAD KINGDOM</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misreading Our Lives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Even a Green Allegory</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Christmas in the City</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calypso on the Beach</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard Light</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another Freudian Love Song</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Intimation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Going</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitation</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Man Out</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Lowell, An Afterthought</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonnet for a Glass of Water</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monuments</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

xiii
The Cupidity of a Macedonian Sunrise ................................. 24
This Melancholy Comes and Goes ........................................ 26
The Dead Sea of the Heart .................................................. 28
Marco Polo ................................................................. 30
The Conception of Beauty ................................................... 32
Our Tired Philosophers ...................................................... 33
Happy as Walt Whitman ..................................................... 35
Things We Leave Behind .................................................... 37
Winter Quarrel ............................................................... 39
Every Day .................................................................. 41
After Planting ................................................................ 43
This Sad Kingdom ............................................................ 45
  The Loveliest of the Dead ............................................... 45
  The Prince and the Poplars ............................................. 47
  The Witch is Dead ....................................................... 49
  The Prince Admonishes the Crowd ................................. 50
  Belaboring Giant ........................................................ 51
  Last Letter from the Capitol ........................................... 52
THIS SAD KINGDOM
Misreading Our Lives

The story of which we speak is, perhaps,
not even a story, rather it is
a semblance of a story, a smudged
invitation to help you pass the time
as you travel quickly from paragraph
to paragraph, mispunctuating
as you go, taking the meanings and
contorting them, compressing them into
hard lumps that will lie heavy in your hand--
place these images before your eyes
so that if you ever find yourself
on a street corner, say, in hard light,
you might remember, that was it--a picture
for their suffering. But in other times--
there will be other times--completely
forget the plot, that it was barely
linear, hardly contained by the margins,

that even the gutters ran with words--you
will find the story is really an old
story, worn with tears and stains and brittle
pages that shudder when your hands reach out
to them so that you might wish it were someone
else's story, that you could inscribe
the fly leaf with a stranger's name, or conceal
the depths of your ownership in boxes.
Give it away--this anxiety--
for the words are hardly there, they are
somewhere else, perhaps obscured by the absence
of light where the words are no darker than
the page. Don't be afraid to pull the covers
higher in that moment, to imagine
a burning light when it happens.
Not Even a Green Allegory

The trees suggested so many possibilities--
like chopping them down,
like running a comb through your hair.
A man runs a comb through a woman’s hair.

Liking the feel of teeth against her head,
she kisses him, reminds him
that the trees were only in his mind.
And forgetting, in their contentment, the trees,

they became poor imitations of trees.
But it was poetry to them,
and so they were happy,
and everyone around them was happy,

and they all whistled show tunes,
which made them even happier.
And this was not a poem about a man or a woman.
It was not even a poem about a tree.
It was more like a distant visitation
that no one could decipher--
Daniel in his grave so many years,
Nebuchadnezzar, just another silly name.
Last Christmas in the City

Not able to take Tchaikovsky alone
that winter, I opened out the window
in silence, the air giving what comfort
the absence of heat and light afford.

The city? It was, well...the city. You
were gone from it--off in your subtle way
to the country with your arm-loads of wood,
books you saw in a shop that seemed to strike
the right chord for your Russian holiday.
Then, I was tracking you through the snowed streets,
abetting departure with that absurd
cover-up, saying, we can’t live without...?

--a lie the sadder for its truth, I knew,
but a necessary drama of what
I hoped to feel. Your arms around my neck
were more memorable when you’d gone.
of postage--smatterings of longing
we had wanted for ourselves, once--filled
with snow. On the streets, the Salvation Army
offered God's address--it was too early
in the day to call on Her. If I stopped
thinking of you, it was for a lark that
darted beyond my cathedral window.

Godspeed, I said, and wish to mean it still.
Calypso on the Beach

My god, I could have danced forever!
--my hair fallen as tears
across my face, my arms and legs
loose with the wantonness only

immortality knows.

Oh, to have clasped you in my arms
for yet another tendrilous

night, to have wooed you from
that woman, that Penelope,

which to my memory the same

as means, the one who has

faded. I would, it seems, have raised

you up to new life, to the long

pleasures of my table, this

banquet that you take to your mouth

each night but cannot taste for all

your decay. Do you stare

out to sea, Odysseus? I

wonder that you hardly turn

in saying goodbye, that
already you imagine all
those paltry years you are dying
to begin. In those times
of doubtful calm, when the raft
of your body is cut loose, adrift
from all you love, when your lips
taste again the salt of your beard,
will my name come to you, as if
in its music you could
find again some worthy pleasure?
Will you die then to be restored
to this island of your senses?
Hard Light

Consider the day's hard light, how it comes
and goes on nailed feet; how we, diminished
by a glare, stand waiting impatiently
for the camera's click, the mid-day stop
of activity talk, the cigarettes
crushed underfoot; our mute, kept memories
draw the day into focus, then recede
again through doors that open still inward.

We go too, in rented cars, adjusting
our glasses, our pants to the thin washed line
of road. So long is a good-bye we make
in a matter of hours; a chatter
of motorists who pass us tirelessly.
Home is beyond us, the light dimmer there by far.
Another Freudian Love Song

Every father hath a mother,
Deep and other--
Sweeter than the April wren.

And if there ever be another,
Tell about her--
That she's quite the specimen.

But in winter, though you lose her
For the old girl--
Bristles heavy on your chin,

Think of two girls,
For your head twirls
When your mother has you in.
Flowers

The day my wife left, I gathered her things
in brown paper sacks, and burned them away
in the garden—scattered the ashes as seed
before a rising wind, and drank myself
crazy to sleep. She never returned, but
the garden has shown improvement, though
the wisteria still comes and goes.
Such life as I have returns to me fragrantly.
But, as each season reduces me now
to a still finer dust, I feel in me
a passion for losing ways—the shuffle
of steps down the path, my hands
a flutter with the dry sleep of blossoms.
One may always expect rain, although the sun
still dries the precipitous nights; some flowers
are fed by such lights,
while the vines devour
such walls as remain.
Late Intimation

We would place a set of lines
so hard upon a page they would leave
impressions on all the pages
we have left to fill.

It could be more but isn't. And given
this recognition, assuming that beyond
the moment is the vibrant word concealed
in a sacred place, how shall we wait
with such silence, this anxious stretch
of imagination? I cannot say
for certain the reason, perhaps not
even the word can know itself, but
in its casting finds hope, potential
that it is anticipated. While outside
in the cold we imagine the wind setting
the forest free. Bound fast we wait for snow.
Party Going

For Heidi who climbed a mountain,
this rock. Who rose beyond the city,
beware--and lost the night's bright
coins. Who never pausing to view
day's foul occupations, ventured
into the rapturous air, have care:
who placed your feet on looser rock,
who edged along the world's decline,
who stumbled on the powdered line, in time.
Who stealing yourself to a stone's embrace
eased into afternoon--the spoon is gone--
and traced your name upon a mirror,
this fear: that you will not be coming down,
that, higher, I take what is left behind.
Visitation

It's true. I have seen it as you will see
in time, and it bears little notice. But

there it was, and for a moment, I was
unmoved. Many have noticed the tendency
to relate the unseen to the visible,
but few have possessed the audacity
to ignore it. I closed my book and stared
because that is what one does in the case

of accidents: one stares. As a child, I watched
a man get his from the delivery truck.

In that moment, guessing the sudden absence of air,
its passing force, he stared at his transport

as if time must always yield to contemplation.
I stared, and I cannot say I was not wrong.
What was I? Impolite? I was thinking, the chicken is going bad in the fridge

when I saw it (I cannot be sure it was not a dream). I hesitated, too long,

and it left me, bird-like, and yet, a bird, I think, forcing its way from the room

with a teasing motion, leaving by

a window I choose not to open wider.
Hospitals

Seem friendly enough when we enter them;
only their doors forbid the weak of heart.
And all those faces, anxious to please, going
over us with tendered solicitude,

remind us of the girl next door, that one
our mothers always liked. Dressed in white,
they move beside us like brides, their words veiled,
their optimism infectious but mild.

While in our hearts we know something is wrong:
that sinking feeling, the thinning breath we
hope will hold us up. Recognition comes
coldly to our lips: I'm feeling tired now.

Too soon we fade--lose our fear to sleep
interminably; eyes shut to needling
lights. Happy to enter these catacombs,
we find in hospitals what we find at home.
Last Man Out

Perhaps because we danced all night, or didn’t

listened to the voices say, go

home; you have nothing more to spend; your pockets

are empty as dark windows.

Perhaps because we bargained on the happiness

of rented rooms, on the frail

filament of conversation, when we could

have stayed home and watched night press

its face to the glass. We might have been happier

to have stayed away and not risked

going into streets empty of every promise

but closing doors. We might have saved

ourselves the vague apology of time,

pleasure and having arrived so late.
Robert Lowell, an Afterthought

Outside, the wind, a moody mower, hacks
at the sporadic landscape, taking here
or there what cutting it would claim. Tired
of ambition, I take solace in stories
raised high above the common streets that move

not a mite but would claim the widow's
if they could. What more can be taken
and not taken? My hand draws back.

While the blown breath of a cigarette consumes
me as I had hoped to be consumed

in the merciful. Mindful of everything,
though nothing seems to fill the frame
of wind and spray, I am orphan to my past;
its shutters close against the query of my head.

You could cut the brackish winds with a knife.
Sonnet for a Glass of Water

Oh, this was a myth of trees--the sun falling
for those who loved it long, the earth sighing
from its bed. None of this is relevant,
but discarding that, I would touch you so
and wave the sky to this desired joy. What
words are beautiful today? Our heads reject
all monuments. But isn’t this unusual--
to open doors and find the world so roomy?

Patiently, we would seat the waiter, or
take our trouble with a pinch of salt, and
refusing all disclosures, consider
our glancing hands, this wanting metaphor.
Why such days can make us lie, who should say?
But certainty is artless, unloved, pines away.
Monuments

In truth, the Egyptians were stoned under
by those high quarrels of geometry--
each workman making his point by constructing
certain free-standing arguments, that,
while taxing to the common man, created
vast slopes of ever-declining meaning.
Of course, the Egyptians knew everything
about time, inventing it as a leisure
of stone and hammer, fashioning it
to suit the rule of each decaying Pharaoh
with line and blood. They rushed to build such
monuments, as all builders must, lamenting
that the materials were less permanent
than the sand and wind that Niled their every
capstone. When they had finished, the Egyptians
were rather worn down and took to measuring
their shadows by the gritty market stalls.
One should not judge them harshly, these monuments,
all our words arise from such deserted places.
Vacation

Any map will do, but you will need one
that has been folded to a pulpy white,
where the names are now but dim impressions
of a marginal uncertainty.

Take any point as your departure—one
mystery is as good as the next. Choose
a point that is hard, however,
that reveals the firmness of your intentions,

that yields the maximum strain of wheel
and bearing. Should this uncertainty
daunt you, should you be found on the open
road pulled taut between two ends, then

your beginning is a good beginning,
and you have commenced to travel as
one stretched to the white bone of impulse,
to the lucid line, the flattened index
of the miles you have left to go. Go
that way, though your transport fail you, though you
are stranded in fading light. Let this be a sign
of your good fortune. Let this be your leaving.
The Cupidity of a Macedonian Sunrise

They were such good shots, the Romans, as after all, Romans will be. And how they surprised us with the accuracy of their impressions as they swept through the countryside gobbling up the scenery, taking with them so much more than we would willingly give. They were irresistible, unapproachable as time, perhaps, or history.

We fell for them, fell hard, our mouths agape or in narrow slots, our lungs pierced as with the first breath of a cold dawn. We fell before them, our idols toppled from their sanctuaries, our prayers unmade, not out of supplication to smaller gods, but with reluctance to make such barbarous claims to their attention. I hope I will be forgiven now, these thoughts that turn to my wife, to those kisses
that gathered my flesh to hers as pomegranates
from an unattended table. Oh! The pain
of this comparison—how like my wife’s,
these kisses! The pain of this second parting
is the more bearable for its brevity.
But how it elevates me, raises me,
up, as if to overcome these others,
these Romans, who, holding time in their hands,
too soon let it slip through their fingers.
This Melancholy Comes and Goes

This melancholy comes and goes--
we would have known if it weren't so.
But love? I wish you hadn't asked--
that tiresome word is often tasked
with our fond hopes to set things right

by gazing into firelight.
And surely others too have found
a more pleasant spot than on the ground
before the cheerless ember glow
where love gets hot before it goes

away again, as it always does,
on the pretense you've asked too much.
A choicer spot might be the moon,
a light whereby its shepherds swoon
to tell of adamant constancy.

A harder substance to touch, it's true,
but pleasant to have had when the screws
close a constant door upon your bed,
and friends place flowers by your head;
when the nights are spent with only sky

that you look upon with troubled eyes,
while feculent worms take your balance away
(this for starters, the doctors say).

At least you'll have the moon, and more
than this, you'll have known the horror

of inanimate possession,
far away confections,
that could have been but for troubling

Time that snatches without asking

this love from the fire, this moment, this liar.
The Dead Sea of the Heart

Oh yes, we've had our Hittites and afterwards thought we would be jugglers or potters--anything, in fact, so long as it was *interesting* or *different* or *fun*--for what's fun about suffering? We've had our fill and would share it now with another people.

On one occasion (how the memory lingers) the Hittites simply rode in, their ponies only slightly less angry and of violent deportment than their riders--and took from us our wives and daughters, carried them away like so much cheap art. And we let them go. What could we do? Their weapons so superior, their sense of righteousness throughout the whole affair--simply stunning.

Amid our numbers only the old or the very young were left unchanged, continued in their rocking by the door post or in the invention of yet another version of hide and seek.

We hated the Hittites. They represented everything we would be rid of. So, when the Philistines arrived
we welcomed them as liberators: the wisest among us
discovering favorable oracles in the earth, but all of us speaking
in their honor what words there were that remained to our hearts.
Marco Polo

My China knows no piazza,
nor campagna as planed as this
wintered sun. So these gods grow
neighborly, stone by stone, scarce
complete, wholly barbarous

in the labored fields. So they, rise
to work, singing ropes--their hands
the weights of paper. Care lines
their skillful claim to block and chain.
We divide the world between us.

But once upon the scaffold
the horizons move ever farther
than the gaping clouds admit
and drench my shirt with distant soil.
Then the need to move overtakes me,

and descending I give to earth
that desire to leave as I would
always leave. Rocked by this turning

wind, so my travels are complete,

my ghosts asleep.
The Conception of Beauty

The funniest things can happen and might--
our leisure of motion, the hand at rest,
your form inclined to a sofa uncased.
The conception of beauty is a dull thing,
composes the mind in abstract, coats
the flesh with thin imaginings
(appearance culls flowers from a table nearby).
What beauty conceals from our eyes
makes a pity of these words, and more
the wonder, I am told, caught
as we are before that puzzling art.
Why just the other day, I felt the press
of flowers, the jangle of change in the air.
You remarked to me that other thought,
the one we had formed but could not frame,
beauty receives us wanting the constant change.
Our Tired Philosophers

Long after they tire of offering proofs
for the varied but unwitting
existence of this or that, one may find
the philosophers leaning against
the clouded edge of a glass, or gazing
into those swirling depths—which one
realizes while simply listening--

lasts long enough to provoke more than one
crystalline impression. It makes one think
of amputated texts, or library
books suffuse with thin marginalia
to watch them consider the bar-maid’s end,
the way she stoops to collect their offerings.
One imagines Sartre, that ancient goat,

on his death-bed confessing, I mostly thought
of women. The rest was weak water.
Let us raise our glasses with them, the greater proof
that all is forgotten eventually,
forgiven in the flutter of pages

that coo about these high stools, leads us

home to brighter rooms, whiter passages.
Happy as Walt Whitman

My ear runs
down my face
like chocolate.
Did you say
you love me?
I lick chocolate
all day. When
evening comes
I like its look.
I lick the evening, too.
It is the beginning
of my infancy.

I taste pillows,
shoes. I tie
objects to my tongue.
They dangle
like streamers.
It is a birthday party!
There is chocolate
everywhere. You are hiding it in my mouth. I chew, a rich happiness.

You open your mouth to give me more.

I love you, I say. You call your friends over. I repeat myself.

They pat my head. You wipe my mouth.
Things We Leave Behind

This night, the whole house will shake. And we shake, too. Our baggage in hand, the troublesome lock--only these may prevent us from loosing ourselves in the flood, the hero and heroine, the ironic climbers; goodbye. But mark carefully if you will, that structure, the smoothness of its plain, the nails that bind it up, attach it to our frames.

There, the brilliant air, the dark curtains rent, unveil heavens. I can see my house from there!--white clay, the couched rooms with the error of animal urge, the salt of earth on a mat. That is paradise--a resting place if only for the night that flows away as light upon our slumber. I believe this, you know: the shaking hand that moves the body to rise, will move to other trunks and take
from them the impression of feeling separate,
of losing its own. One likes to think
it could not be any other way; who
would wake and play must know the fingering
hand. For from the subtler approaches--the plains--
we may hold nothing, not even the lie
of the image. It is diminished
for us there, a flood, a descent from higher ground,
a recollection of what we would still build, and must.
Winter Quarrel

When we lie with glacial indifference,
and all the world, spare with aspiring frost,

awaits the emptiness of spring, we harbor
colder thoughts, anxious Puritans who rock

theology in a song with bitter lines
refraining petition to sustain a world

so winter white and bleak. We fall asleep--
and at dawn love makes light of our slumber.

It should always be this way, that in the thick
of these fearful desires we should embrace

the frozen matter,
and in wanting motion find in cold creation:

so forgive her who would have waked alone
to the shudder of that night, who breaking through
held her breath against the ice. And forgive him
who would have pulled her up too late.
Every Day

If our fledgling desires, having fallen
on better days, stay the rain, this prayer
will be our banquet spread that all we love
may gather here sparrows for the feast.

Lesser prayers should aspire to churches.
The sky unearths our feet too much to care
for God, who once, I heard, moved nearby
on limbs like the sparrows, counting the least
of these our brethren fallen. It is up to us.
This broken branch, that spatter of leaves confess
no matter but our own bleary world
and makes the rainment of these sorrows bland.

And desire is beyond us, whose birds have sung
our thoughts to flatter this place of rest
with fire. Forget that home is closer yet--
this water is our prayer; rain falls on every man.
After Planting

We found it hard; the rain
always falling after
the plowing, the best growth
always falling between
our desire to plant,
our desire to uproot.
Tragic, you know, to be
found wanting as young men
aged upon their porches,
waiting for something more
to transpire, when we had hoped
to hold together wind
and the pound of one hand
slapping against the dim
earth, sounding to death seed
that we would raise above
us, to nourish again
our diminutive needs.
Now, this waiting towers
above all else. Better,
we think, to fall to earth
as clods who could not loose
that fertile, expansive
root, that from those molten
core of curses would rise
before our eyes as fire.
THIS SAD KINGDOM

The Loveliest of the Dead

Usually, as in the story, I find myself
appallingly beautiful--my hand claiming
the motion of my heart as I gazed into the mirror,
testing the edge of a murderous cheekbone
or loosing a finger in the hollow of an eye.
There are those who may find me unfathomably
shallow, whose measure is the envy
of a meaner beauty--it was never vanity
that enticed me but something more ancient,
provoked, as it were, by the mere
shred of a wardrobe I would cast off now

as rags, or cheap make-up, crumbling to ashes
in my mouth. But how would I have welcomed
some strange soul to murmur the benediction
of the hours, to mark the time with a passing
remark or two about the weather, at how
the climate heightened my color or raised my spirit,
but I had no one with whom to share these appearances—an audience of one, this mirror was forever to be my condition. The mockery of its self-effacement was at times more than I could bare.
The Prince and the Poplars

The prince is waving goodbye. *Goodbye Prince,* we shout as he ascends the steps of his coach, *Goodbye!* Then he is gone with a contagion of hooves pock-pocking the ground, and we, left to our plaguey families and yet one more season of disappointing crops, *wave goodbye.* And just when we thought he would stay with us awhile, meet the cousins, drink punch or tea with us all day, our pinkies extended, our faces a cultivated euphemism. *Goodbye! The Prince comes down* once a year, mostly--well, he simply comes by, and we gather to him--a brilliant host clad in our yearly best, our boots scraped clean, our hair slicked flat as in courting-- and meet the coach from which he steps mumbling his few words about the weather, while our tongues form a few thick words of greeting,
So good to meet you Prince. So good...

And though we never get the chance to speak,
we bow our heads to him deferentially.

What nice boots the Prince has! And what reflection
we see of our faces there ennobles
us in that black gloss. To tell the truth,
we are happy when he goes, though tired
to have contributed so very much
to his raison d’être. Another season
ends for us brilliantly, and we are free
again to wipe our mouths on our sleeves, or
to stay out of doors for days at a time, or
to loosen the winding cloths that keep
our wives in hand. We do, in fact, prefer this
life we lead, so rich, so uncommon.

And the poplars? They have grown stouter
by far. Next year, we shall cut them down.
They burned our witch last Tuesday, so sad
to watch her go up like a puff of smoke,
the pale ash excited into air
by a broom and the sympathetic

blaze. Our nostrils burned for days afterward--
a concession to progress, perhaps--
an older spell, but practical we still hope.
Well, our witch lived here by this knotty oak--

I gather you've seen the warts? So much
the better, I suppose. But what remains
when you've burned your witches behind you? We
shall see. Still, the neighborhood feels safer,

though the rats may come to plague us yet.
Mostly, we kept her around for parties,
when she'd give the children rides for a song:
ancient toys, strands of hair, lint--all dull things
we would have burned ourselves in time. Later,

we would croon her to sleep, at dawn, exhausted

by her spirits. Every village had one.

We'd praise her now if we knew what words would do.
The Prince Admonishes the Crowd

Do not touch this body,
though it lie here sleeping,
dreaming unperturbed
those half-thoughts now disturbed
by your troubling breath,
breathing swallows better kept
for evening flights or noon
among the couched ruins
of love or labored hand.

For we, too, in our dreams
have stitched a double seam
of waking and of wakes
that, in our passage, breaks
the clarity of mirrors,
those waves that cannot clear
the sea wall with its rime
that, in another time,
would have quenched the burning land.
Belaboring Giants

Great is my name and greater still
the pines that mark ambition’s weight
with a woodman’s thigh. And in the night
my one red eye to batter
the sky with its stormy caul
compels all men to these needling floors.
I stalk no man but lie in wait
upon my leeward side: my freight
demure but hard to hide. Of course,
when they arrive by twos and threes
with lumbering craft to take what’s mine,
I grapple them deftly with arms
like crooks; I pull them from their nooks
inside my home to make a feast
of bone. They chitter and scrabble
within their cage; their heroes rage
with broken hearts to challenge mine.
But cooked alive, they settle soon
in my brazen pot where they stew....
With butter I take my man fondue.
Last Letter from the Capitol

Around us now, the smoke of fallen princes. Women shriek their goodbyes from over the balustrade, while glasses of tainted punch tumble from our fingers. Is it time to go? The party is ended. Never since have we danced so long.