

Stuart Dodds

Towards a Buried Heart

POEMS

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## About the author



{Arrol Gellner}

Born in London, England, in 1935, of Scottish and Irish ancestry, Stuart Dodds served two years of national service in the Royal Air Force. In 1956, he emigrated to the United States. He has worked in advertising and publishing in London, New York and San Francisco. Before his recent retirement, he was editor / general manager of Chronicle Features, the syndication division of The *San Francisco Chronicle*.

While he has written poetry for most of his adult life, he says that his first sustained efforts, in the 1950s in New York, were inspired by a poetry workshop given by the late Kenneth Koch at the New School for Social Research. In 1961, he received the New School's Dylan Thomas Poetry Award for that year.

His work has appeared in various poetry journals in the United States. "Towards a buried heart" is his first published collection.

I dedicate these poems to the memory of Natasha Borovsky, my wife of 30 years who died on May 31, 2012, my stepdaughter Malou Knapp and her husband Larry and to the editors of Blue Unicorn.

My thanks to Jan Doets, friend, historian and biographer in The Netherlands and editor and publisher of *Les Cosaques des Frontières* and of *Éditions QazaQ*; and to Lucy Kaplan, my friend and neighbor in Berkeley, California for her perceptive readings and moral support.

I would also like to thank my dear sister Moyra Duncombe and her husband Tony, for their unceasing kindness and hospitality and for politely struggling with my poetry over the years.

--SD

# ENVOI

*Apples in a green bowl suggest the amusement of living.  
It is Autumn now and the failing light of afternoon  
shares its bed with the pomegranates and the red Anjou pear.*

\* \* \*

*It is the eyes that arrange festivals,  
the voice that rides on a silver staircase.  
A sign on your door instructs you to go out tonight  
and look for an amber jar buried in the forest.  
There are further instructions in the music room.  
Go home now. She will be there.*

# ONE

The House that Died  
Color of Night  
Grief



## The house that died

The front door of the house had been left ajar  
as though a neighborhood meeting was in progress  
and late-comers could slip in quietly—  
carpets from Turkey and Afghanistan had been rolled up  
and put away—  
strangers had come and gone—

through the empty rooms  
you could still hear a few determined footsteps on bare boards

officialdom had come in pairs  
in black and navy blue  
two paramedics, two policemen taking notes  
two priests of deep voice and graceful signs  
and two mortuary attendants  
unfolding a starched white sheet  
with the care and concentration of scholars  
opening a rare manuscript

what on earth had happened?

a grey cat with blue eyes looked up searching for an explanation  
and finding none  
settled in for a night of silence

## Color of night

Are you feeling blue today?  
she would tenderly ask  
—it is rare to be loved—  
she would adjust my tie  
round out my paragraphs  
say frankly what she meant

Now she's gone  
if something else should happen  
an earthquake or a sudden storm  
I think she would be at my side—  
It's strange but I think a sudden noise might do it  
she would just appear

In her poem, she said she would wait for me  
had merely gone on ahead—  
to the place we've yet to name—  
but didn't mention these visits I am beginning to imagine

— it needn't be a loud noise—  
a china cup crashing on a stone floor  
could bring her back today  
some accident  
some small interval of despair  
it's a thin wall that separates us  
not planets and constellations  
her voice is faint but close

She would break her vigil in the place to be named  
not like a troubled ghost returning to bemoan its fate  
more a kindly presence come to help  
that knows its own mind  
sees what is wrong and what has to be done  
there will be no need for another catastrophe  
there will be such clarity—

they will be in the Fall—these visits—  
when the wind is colder  
and the leaves have turned bright red—  
in death, she will become to me  
what I was to her towards the end—  
a protector

## Grief

Could it ever be that I will remember you calmly  
as I remember others who are no longer present  
or, somehow, hidden from me  
like portraits I once saw in a museum  
or friends who are still alive  
(friends I believe to be alive)  
living in other countries far and inaccessible?

Can I live in peace with a kindly apparition  
in the house we loved?  
thinking of you gone into exile—  
waiting for me to follow

thinking you might return  
to this excellent world  
at the end of summer  
when the leaves have turned scarlet and gold

thinking with my altered memory  
of a time when we were together

# TWO

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## Edinburgh

My memory goes back to the heyday of the trams  
lumbering down the home stretch to Comely Bank  
the smell of fresh morning rolls  
and the decorous and kindly fishwives from Musselburgh  
coming with their creel to the door  
and Uncle Willie Dunbar back for the holiday with his London airs  
and London tales, always welcome, bringing laughter  
into our grave, high-ceilinged house

I remember his energy, how he crossed his legs quickly and elegantly  
when he sat down  
(*we didn't cross our legs*)  
and, at the piano,  
hitting his brow lightly with the palm of his hand  
as a song came to him—  
*"Scots, wha ha'e wi' Wallace bled"*  
and *"Oh, Charlie is My Darling"*  
every one of us joining in  
and later in the evening, dizzy with laughter  
first Auntie Nan, then my mother, overcame their shyness  
and, nimbly, danced the sword dance.  
Jacobites all!

## Magical cat

Who would think  
a black cat  
with its tail in the air  
and slate-blue eyes  
a heretic  
would survive the Inquisition?

they nailed her to a cross  
and the nails sprang out of the oaken cross  
and she hurried away  
unscathed  
down the narrow Roman road

Bernard of Clairvaux  
tried friendly persuasion  
“I can do nothing with this cat!”  
he exclaimed  
“she has no shame”

*show her the instruments*  
they said  
and out of the window she flew  
into the forests of Gascony

burn!  
burn the heretic!  
they cried  
the unshamable cat

her nonchalance enraged them all  
so calmly, at Béziers  
did she walk through flames—  
emerging from the rubble at Montségur  
she paused to wash her face

## Urging his friend Jan Doets to listen to a sonata by Franz Schubert

At the earliest opportunity, listen to Sviatoslav Richter  
play Schubert's piano sonata in B-flat major (D. 960)  
listen to it in a darkened room  
with a glass of port  
in your tall elegant house in the Torenstraat

hear how he plays the long *repeat* which few attempt  
as slowly  
and few with grace and a purpose

lovingly, he carries with the theme  
turning the sonata into a meditation  
an evocation of warm nights at the end of time

listen to the lion's roar  
(the otherness of Schubert)  
the lion comes down to eat from the hand of St. Seraphim  
and is assuaged  
following the piano's savagery, the lion is calm  
and there is peace on earth

listen to it now  
with the lights low

## A small cut

At the end of a work day  
his work day, we were on edge—  
our laughter dying at the sound of his footsteps

so much had happened in his absence  
it looked as if we had been playing all day  
our mirth could set him off  
in that small house  
with no place to hide

my father would cast about for signs of idleness  
or disrespect—  
tired and hungry  
he looked terribly grey

with lowered heads, my mother and sister  
busied themselves with the evening meal  
fearing his temper (although he never struck *them*)  
fearing my “insolence”—  
after dinner, we were usually safe  
(he did raise his hand to my sister, once  
and she sent him to Coventry for a long time, for days)

my father got into a scuffle with a bloke at work  
who had borrowed his tools  
(no ordinary tools!)  
and came home with a cut on his forehead  
my sister disappeared  
my mother and he spoke in low tones  
as she bathed his wound

in my boyish imagination  
grownups did not fight each other  
boys got into fights and fathers and sons fought  
but this—there was blood on his face and overalls—  
was another kind of violence—  
it was an attack on the family  
and our battles at home were child’s play by comparison—  
if this is what went on in the world, I dreaded what was to come

*“To be sent to Coventry” is an English expression referring to ostracism. During the Civil War, Royalist prisoners who misbehaved were banished to the city of Coventry, a Parliamentary stronghold, where no one would speak to them.*

## Fear

You said in the morning before light  
you were visited by fear  
with fragments of a dream fading slowly  
fear like a thread  
you did say “thread”

a filament glowing in the dark  
showing the way—  
Ariadne’s thread  
a way in and out of the Labyrinth

there are those who have navigation charts and maps  
with paintings of sea horses and dolphins  
others have radar screens,  
paraffin lamps and candles  
and you have your fear  
to light the way—  
unparalleled light, unparalleled gift!

## First Person Singular

*"Young Alexander conquered India.  
He alone?"*

--Bertolt Brecht

When Americans say "I am remodeling my house"  
they don't mean personally—  
they have help, interior designers, plasterers and sheet-rockers  
to do the work

when they say  
"I am building a house"  
*they* are not actually building it  
they may not even have started

and when you hear that  
"she has buried three husbands"  
it doesn't mean that she laid them in the ground herself  
one after the other  
although it speaks for her endurance—  
there would be priests, pall bearers, cemetery workers —  
and it would happen over time

the English lost their false modesty when they came to these shores  
and in time I will lose my diffidence  
adopt the heroic style  
the royal "I"  
I will stake my claim to this earth  
and build on it a mansion  
And it is I who will go down in history

## Fragmented

Our crèche is in pieces  
of the three kings, only one has a head on his shoulders

how could we have let this happen?

Joseph has lost the arms in which he carried  
a white lamb—  
the lamb has disappeared

for another to find one day  
with those sovereign heads  
in a camphor-smelling nook  
of this immense house

will the new owners hear a faint cry  
a human cry  
and wonder who we were  
and where we are now?

Mary and Joseph are whole  
and with the undamaged king  
they will accompany us  
on the next  
the most difficult part of our journey

## Difficult child

Worse than the fighting  
were those times following a violent scene  
when my father  
offered his hand in friendship

after the hullabaloo—  
within an hour  
it could happen—  
an offer of peace

not a direct offer  
rather a nervous suggestion  
that we could be friends—  
how could he know  
that I had learned to enjoy this war  
and found it preferable—  
its clean battle lines—  
to an uneasy truce?

How could he know  
that dodging blows and trading insults  
had become for me  
(if not for anyone else) a sport?  
how could he know  
that I was touched by his remorse  
his desolation  
and found it too intense to bear?

## Chartered Bank

Standing at his mother's side  
he turned to survey the interior of the bank  
a sun-filled rotunda  
pictures of sailing ships, schooners, East Indiamen  
in the crowded harbors of another time

playfully and dreamily  
he leaned against his mother  
as she conversed with the teller  
smiling when she rounded on him  
with a torrential speech  
in a language I couldn't place

I imagine them as constant companions  
he on the verge of adolescence  
a handsome boy with lustrous brown locks and dark eyes  
sure of his mother's adoration  
with an openness and an amused countenance

as mother and son walked out of the bank together  
he almost as tall as she—  
there was a certainty in his step —  
she linked arms with him  
drawing him closer  
and, for the moment  
he was her man, her knight

## Curmudgeon

Having been *kicked upstairs*  
and given the title of associate editor  
Bernie felt cut off on the editorial floor  
like those who retire to the country  
after their life's work is over  
and find it intolerably quiet  
he missed the newsroom and its inhabitants  
he missed the excitement  
"come up and see me some time," he'd say  
he had all the time in the world now  
and no one knew what he did

he had made himself so disagreeable  
when he was city editor  
few took him up on his offer—  
in his long career at the paper  
there was almost no one he had not offended  
and, for the most part, this change of personality  
left them confused –

If management's idea was for him to become bored  
and leave, the plan worked  
At his retirement party  
(he took one of the *buy-outs*)  
I watched him talking to his newsroom replacement  
a tall, congenial sort with a loud laugh  
and a conniver of the first order  
who may well have engineered Bernie's "promotion"—  
when he told Bernie that he, David, was "a people person"  
the look on the older man's face  
a steady look of disbelief and world-weariness  
(his stock-in-trade over the years)  
was the picture of Bernie I would hold dear

## October morning in the East Bay

It had stayed hot and still all night  
with the French windows open  
until a morning coolness  
a longed-for coolness  
crept up from the garden below

a clatter and rustling of dry leaves  
a wind that had been lying in wait  
and now was its time to strike

turning and twisting through the trees and flowerbeds  
like a serpent, a cool dry wind strong and furtive  
less welcome than at first

Natasha in a white suit, dressed for the city I think  
battled a white curtain, a Japanese paper blind  
that had come alive  
that was blowing violently back and forth, snapping  
like a jib sail  
as she struggled and shouted my name

“Stuart! Help!”

and the redwoods wailed  
and the cedars cried in the rainless fury of a summer storm

## 4.2

It wasn't your life that flashed before your eyes  
upon that sickening jolt  
not exactly  
it was another life you had lived  
in a dream  
a series of disappointments  
and this was the last straw

violence was being done to time itself  
and through the cracks  
like a vapor  
there emerged scenes from a play  
with characters speaking  
a production of "Hamlet"  
(the definitive one)  
and all the quarrels and grievances laid out

then devastation

it didn't need to be an earthquake  
it could have been a knock on the door  
the sound of a telephone  
the cry of a peacock  
but it was an earthquake  
(along the Hayward fault)  
and a place in time  
had been torn open

## Knowing

"What can this be?" she said, leaning forward and turning up the car radio.

"A series of variations by Beethoven for violin and piano. It's very nice," I said.

"You have to wonder where it all comes from," she said.

"Well," I said. "it's on a theme of Handel, 'See the Conquering Hero ...' from the oratorio, *Judas Maccabaeus*."

"Yes, I know," she said.

"If you knew, why did you ask?"

"I mean where does all of this *come* from. I know what it is. "

"You mean all this stuff?"

"Exactly," she said.

## Pen-chan

I have been dreaming of her lately  
the subtlety of her smile  
how light breaks in all directions  
and all is well in her presence

how one day her hair is swept into a *chignon*  
and the next  
loose about her shoulders

how dark her hair, how black her eyes  
how pale her skin—  
in motion, with scissors and comb  
how composed

*the white swan writes its arabesques  
on the still water  
gliding to and fro  
noiselessly  
on the black and silver water*

Would I keep this sense of her beauty to myself?  
and who would I tell?

When Galileo Galilei saw four moons surrounding Jupiter  
how could he not tell all the world?

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*Note: Pen-chan is a Thai name for a woman or girl meaning  
"full moon."*

## Father Symeon

His white locks and fiery complexion  
belong to a pagan time  
when priests went to war  
he once told Natasha when she was sick  
and he came to our house to give her Communion  
that we were meant to be victorious  
“We are meant to be victorious.”  
That was years ago

now the bones in his face stand out  
and his eyes darting here and there  
as he sweeps into the room  
are as hot and piercing as only blue eyes can be  
on this day of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross—

waving aside those  
asking after his health  
Father Symeon  
a convert to the Orthodox Church  
made his way to a table laden with Russian food

we listened  
as we ate and he talked and talked with the usual relish  
leaning over to spear the champion’s portion  
scoffing at the Old Calendar Greeks and the Roman clergy  
in politics, he was more bitter than before  
more reactionary

a priest who walked miles to visit the sick  
with his holy water and somber icons  
wearing a grey cassock and a large silver cross—  
Father Symeon was an American from the South  
who might have lived a different life  
with not a word of Russian  
which he had learned well—  
a tough blue-eyed Kentuckian, a *Kaintuck*  
like Roarin’ Jack Russell and the flatboat men  
with flowing hair  
who came down the river to New Orleans  
and walked home

## Drama of Two Selves

When we (my other self and I)  
heard the news from Oncology  
my other self wondered what people would say  
how it would look  
whereas I was shattered  
he was asking himself  
if he should not walk with a heavier tread  
assume a melancholy air  
I was in a state of panic  
and he was wondering how it would affect our public image—  
we did not see eye to eye

He was put out  
and I was thinking of shining instruments in pale green rooms  
he thought of the position he should take  
in talking to friends  
how he would spend his time  
now there wasn't much of it left

He would cancel every one of his magazine subscriptions  
and concentrate on serious reading—  
would he re-read the novels of Dostoevsky  
and pick up "Middlemarch" again?  
how would he dress?—  
what does one wear at death's door?

Would he "live every day as the last"?  
Weren't you supposed to think more clearly  
in situations like this  
execute some brilliant plan?

Within six months, thanks to radiation in high and frequent doses  
we were cured  
not "cured"—  
"in remission"  
both of us

He speaks of his ordeal proudly  
as an achievement  
to all and sundry  
and I have given up my efforts to restrain him

## The Great Schism turns on a fine point

How could Christendom be torn asunder  
by the addition of a few words  
(the *filioque*) to the Nicene Creed  
by long-forgotten prelates in Rome?

Who cares whether the Holy Ghost  
emanates from the Father *and the Son*  
or passes through the Father *to the Son*  
or chooses to describe a figure-eight around them  
make a U-turn and come back?

After all, He is the Holy Ghost  
free to wander Heaven and Earth

## Shame and Guilt

Shame likes an audience  
and a red face  
guilt runs deeper  
and needs no audience  
it works in the dark  
and its face is lined with sorrow  
one makes you cower  
the other cringe  
both have a place  
on the Wheel of Suffering  
and they alternate shifts  
shame has the day shift  
and guilt the night  
one is a slave to opinion  
the other to Original Sin

## Grievance

He is a man who has been hurt long ago  
and guards his hurt like a treasure  
and keeps it alive  
he can fill the room with it  
and no one present knows quite what it is  
a coolness in the air  
the suggestion of storm clouds  
in his dark eyes, his melancholy smile—  
he is not displeased with himself  
with his deep sense of having been wronged  
nor will he let anyone intercede for him  
come between him and the cause of his suffering  
or—heaven forbid— try to put it in perspective  
(it happened so long ago!)

there is a deep piousness in him  
regarding this old injustice  
it is a theme with richness and power  
and it is *his*  
any form of intervention  
even a casual remark  
may be taken as blasphemy

those who know him  
step carefully around him  
and watch what they say

## Leopold

I am not convinced it is Saturday  
although I think tonight is my bath night  
the days sail by  
there was a time when weekends meant something  
now each day is like another  
it is Leopard's bath night too  
at least he swears it is  
there is no one to ask just now  
I call him King Leopold  
he's older than me  
more sure of himself although less coherent  
I will discuss the matter with him  
he's a heavy-set man with white hair and an air of fallen grandeur  
a soldier's swagger stick is tied to his walker  
--a green four-wheeler from Sweden--  
and on its brass tip is engraved  
the crest of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders  
as he walks, he seems to be falling forward

It's not a bath really  
we stand in a common shower  
and they rinse us off like horses  
there is loud complaining, almost shouting  
it's not a madhouse  
although the air is rank in the morning  
before the orderlies have done their rounds  
it's what Dennis, the director, calls a "faith-based institution"  
not many of us are religious  
but we go to the sing-alongs on Sunday for the company  
Leopold's voice can be heard above the others  
deep, unconquerable, slightly mad—  
I don't know if he is the right man to ask what day it is

# THREE

Love in Winter  
Severance  
Surgery at Dawn  
Uncle Willie  
At the Sentinel  
Meghan  
Only one (r)egret  
By the sea  
Root Canal  
Sunday Morning  
Longing  
Saint or Sinner  
In Silence  
Henry



## Love in winter

She came to me in the early morning  
following a whole night in the bank  
tired and strangely tense  
from counting money  
from reading *The Faerie Queene*  
she came with the night air in her fur collar  
and the cold mist of the city and the East River  
on her cheeks and hands  
look how cold my hands are  
she said, touching my face  
under her long coat, she was warm as though from a fire  
I took from her hair a silver comb inlaid with red jasper  
and, imperiously, she shook out her hair  
“If you ask me,” she said  
“I think Spenser is out of control”  
she talked of night-time rivalries in the bank  
a Civil War was being waged in the Loan Department  
she spoke of Edmund Spenser  
and the Irish background to his epic poem  
it isn’t his technique that bothers me, she said  
he just didn’t know when to stop  
I took off her clothes quietly and gently  
as she thrilled to my touch  
and continued to talk—  
now slowly, now in a whisper  
of sub-prime loans—  
how ravenously she loved  
how purposefully, knowing this to be the cure—  
bank officers, loan applicants, Spenserian stanzas,  
professors of English literature dispatched to Oblivion  
from my Bower of Bliss  
where I drank in her sighs  
and her cries I caught in a silver net

## Severance

No setting, no context, no blueprints  
No ground of being  
No strophe or anti-strophe, no bass or treble clef  
No time signature, no thermostat  
No grid, no spheres turning, no ball bearings  
No circle of friends, no enemies  
No family or country or sense of nationhood—no soldiers  
No angle of distortion, no straight line  
No frame or occasion for a speech  
No audience for a play, no play  
No writing, no publishers  
No transmission lines marching through the hills  
No sunlight or verandahs of carved screens  
No trees, no grass or flowers at the river's edge  
No ships on the horizon or fish in the sea  
No boundaries, no alphabet and no conversation

## Surgery at dawn

Waiting for the cab  
to come to my house  
I took off my gold wedding ring,  
St. Christopher medal, watch  
and placed them on the dresser  
like the Al Pacino character  
in "Donnie Brasco"  
when he got the summons  
shedding all of his jewelry  
and laying out each item quietly  
and deliberately on the dresser  
he would not be coming back  
at this early morning hour  
his wife was asleep  
and would not be seeing him again  
I would be coming back  
he was going to meet some men  
who would shoot him  
and hack him to pieces  
with a butcher's cleaver  
and bury the pieces  
this is what was running  
through my mind  
as I waited for a taxi cab  
to take me to the hospital

## The change in Uncle Willie Dunbar

When Uncle Willie wrote to me  
after Aunt Virginia's stroke  
he would write for them both  
since she was unable to write  
and sign his letters  
"Yours aye, Willie and Virginia"  
or "much love from Uncle Willie and Aunt Virginia"

when Aunt Virginia died  
he was distraught  
he signed off with "*best wishes* from Uncle Willie"  
(italics are mine) as though his love for me had died too—  
he traveled the globe  
learned Mandarin Chinese  
took a trip up the Yangtze river  
and became an expert on the classical gardens of Suzhou

he was gone for months at a time  
postcards would arrive  
with carefully wrought messages in a stylish hand  
from Western China, Mongolia  
from Sri Lanka, Sabah and Surabaya  
signed "*regards*, Uncle Willie"  
eventually just "Dunbar"  
which came as a shock

in his widower's grief  
such brevity, such distance!  
he may not have stopped loving me at all  
but with each successive card  
(there was one from Melbourne, Australia)  
he seemed to be in retreat  
(I imagined the worst)  
he seemed to be waving goodbye

## At the Sentinel

*for Katharine*

On a slow news day  
or on a day when the damned community news pages  
were driving me round the bend  
I would go up and see Ralph on the editorial writers floor  
or sometimes I would feel like flirting with him  
he seemed too young to be writing the third editorial  
(the first and second were reserved for local issues)  
although he knew a lot more about world affairs than most of us  
and wrote with an enviable flourish

he said if you wanted to trash someone, really take them apart  
you should read Cicero  
especially the Second Philippic Against Antony  
I said that wasn't the most pressing need on my daily rounds  
but I did admire Cicero  
and I liked his comments on friendship and old age

at times I envied Ralph his job  
after all, the world was his playground—  
as night city editor, I had more freedom  
and I didn't have the publisher breathing down my neck all the time  
like those poor bastards on the fourth floor

Ralph called me once when the publisher left town  
"If you want to come up, he's gone for the rest of the day"  
as if we were having an affair  
what I liked about Ralph's office, aside from Ralph,  
was the superb air-conditioning on that floor  
its carpeted serenity, and coolness  
compared to the newsroom  
with its fiberboard warrens and noisy fans  
the fourth floor was *The Sentinel's hill station*  
and without Arthur, the publisher,  
--a loud and overbearing creature--it was a divine place  
I could talk to Ralph for hours if I had the time  
which I never did

returning to the newsroom  
after our far-reaching discussions  
I always had the sensation of coming back to earth—  
on the wall above my desk is a sign that says:  
THINK LOCAL

## Meghan

What is it about Meghan  
and why do we like to remember her  
the way we flocked to her counter  
for morning coffee?  
She would clap her hands  
and point to the next customer  
who spoke above the din  
“Small with room for cream!” they’d shout

A jug of cream stood on a ledge near the door  
with a jumble of other condiments

Meghan could handle a crowd clamoring for attention  
often she would hold out her right hand  
pointing with two fingers  
as if she were holding a gun  
and, if she liked you, she would “shoot” you

A chain took over with efficiency experts  
and before long, there were aluminum stanchions  
and velvet ropes—  
and a few tables and chairs

Meghan with her freckled face and green eyes  
and her boyish swagger is gone—  
everyone is sad, we reminisce about her  
when something goes wrong  
we say, this wouldn’t have happened  
when Meghan was here  
and the coffee  
let’s not talk about the coffee

## Only one (r)egret

*To Miriam*

You know I would go out of my way  
to watch your genuflections  
your courtier's walk  
your splash of white  
your delicate journey through the shallows

but when you seem to lose your head  
and rush about  
in a frenzy  
with water and stones and mud flying  
I am disappointed  
by such a show of temper  
in a bird so regal, so white

## by the sea

a pile of books  
by the sea  
among the wind-swept grass and sand  
dumped from a wheel barrow or shopping cart  
remaindered items dropped from the sky  
tossed out of the sky  
some with their covers awry or torn  
pages yellow  
some standing straight up  
or open facing downward  
as they fell  
some in good condition

authors dead and alive  
earning no royalties here in the tall grass  
Mary Austin, Franz Werfel, Stephen King  
James Michener and Sir Philip Sidney—  
how outraged would Sir Philip be  
to see his “Discourse on Irish Affairs”  
lying here in the sun?

“Doña Perfecta” by Galdos  
(a discerning breeze has opened its pages)  
“Uncle Vanya” and “Le Père Goriot”  
a German shepherd pauses to look at “Bleak House”  
before catching up with its master—  
a young backpacker circles this literary heap with tilted head  
straining to read the titles—  
he picks up “Microsoft Word for Dummies” and moves on

Is this a message from heaven, a warning?  
are we being told that this is the end of publishing  
that the whole enterprise has failed  
there will be no more books  
these are the last—they are worthless but if you see any you like  
help yourself  
before the tide comes in and carries them off

## Root Canal

When I told him I was a marketing agent  
for newspaper comics, he said  
whatever happened to “Prince Valiant”?  
they knew how to draw in those days  
they could tell a story  
this “Far Side” he said—  
I hope you’re not involved in that—  
is a joke  
I dared not say  
“The Far Side” was my favorite cartoon panel  
looking down on me from his high chair  
with a withering smile  
it wasn’t just the comics  
a lot of things were going downhill  
the bread was not what it used to be  
no one wrote letters anymore, they were illiterate!  
and public telephones had all but disappeared  
“How many numbers do you have to remember  
to get through the day, how many?”  
—he was arranging his instruments on a small tray  
above my head—  
quite a few, I admitted—  
I would have chosen other examples  
of the decline of civilization  
besides, there are bakeries that have opened up  
in recent years (open seven days a week)  
and their bread is excellent...  
George Herriman? Krazy Kat—

ever hear of Krazy Kat?”  
he seemed angry—  
what could I say?  
my speech impaired by clamps and rubber tubes  
He spoke of the silver standard  
and the depletion of precious metals in the coin of the realm  
well underway, he claimed, in the reign of Henry VIII —  
what a fool I was to have missed that

## Waiting

Some are waiting for early Mass to begin  
in the Church of Mary Magdalen  
some for a train to take them home from work  
others are waiting for the warmth of the morning sun  
    on this cold August day  
a few are deep in prayer or meditation  
and many are still in their beds asleep—  
I am waiting for a fast-moving Italian vehicle  
    coming over the bridge from San Francisco  
with trays of *focaccio*, freshly-baked this Sunday morning  
all in rows with a dimpled, golden crust  
and lightly brushed with olive oil

## Longing

Often I would watch the Express train  
hurtling through our small station  
on the Great Western Railway  
dining cars with men and women laughing  
and glasses raised in a toast—  
a mime show in a capsule  
in the midst of a hurricane—  
how I longed to be on that train from London  
rushing towards Bristol  
through grassy embankments  
into tunnels and darkness  
and out again into the blinding light of day—  
the train that never stops—  
how I longed to be a member of that elite  
speeding Westward

## Saint or sinner

Tom had a smile on his face even then  
a saintly smile that said he would be leaving us behind—  
he was ambitious, he would be moving on  
he mixed up the skandas and the hindrances  
threw in some Noble Truths of his own  
and became a holy man in a white robe  
with a crimson chasuble  
on a Caribbean island  
with hundreds of followers  
a web site, a landing strip, a temple painted white  
and a team of lawyers  
also dressed in white  
to handle charges  
brought by former devotees  
of assault and battery, false imprisonment  
intentional infliction of emotional distress  
and fraud

whenever we tried to contact him  
our old school friend Tom  
(now known as Rub-A-Dub-Dub)  
we were told politely but firmly  
that he would answer questions  
if they were put in writing  
and when I wrote telling him to curb it  
he sent me a membership application form  
with pictures of him sitting in his earthly paradise  
before a meditation class  
of young women in swimsuits

his legal cases were settled with cash payments  
and confidentiality agreements  
and although some say  
he deserved a worse fate  
for deserting his friends  
Tom Smith died in his bed under a mosquito net  
surrounded by young admirers  
at the ripe old age of seventy six

## It happens in silence

One minute like a savage cat  
and then like butter  
a tone of voice  
full of respect and caring  
for the man  
you just fought

in that fit of savagery  
you lost me  
I don't need your solicitude  
nor will I fight back

I will be kind and considerate  
and you will go on as usual  
and you will never know  
the change you wrought

you have made me as wary as you  
and as sharp  
and you will not have noticed  
that closing of the heart—  
from now on, I am shutting you out

## Henry

*for Charly Hymore*

My meetings with Henry  
were always over a glass or several  
he was the friend you saw at discreet intervals  
five or six times a year  
I recall the evenings of music  
one evening at Christmas we played the *Messiah*  
twice through  
on an old gramophone

At this, our last, meeting  
I told him my story  
of nights on the town  
when civil drinkers like himself were home asleep—  
my other life  
unknown to him  
in various dives  
The Hedge Master's Tavern  
and the free-for-alls  
the strange beds and the Bryant street jail  
a shot-and-a- beer for breakfast  
cornflakes for dinner  
he looked concerned  
with a tentative smile  
these were foibles, manly transgressions  
especially the cornflakes  
staggering home after the last streetcar  
we have all been there, he said  
reassuringly

When I told him I had joined Alcoholics Anonymous  
and had been at a lunch-time meeting that day  
his face darkened—  
he sensed betrayal although he wouldn't say that  
how could a good friend, an intelligent drinking companion  
and a lover of music be that much off course?

he seemed to be saying  
how could you take up with such lowlifes  
holy rollers and former amateur drinkers? —

(*we* were professionals)  
he shook his head –  
I had dealt him a blow

He said “You weren’t that bad.”  
he meant, “Even if you were...  
to discredit every one of us by joining AA...”  
After all, we were a fraternity, or had been until now—  
with his hair awry,  
Henry was starting to look as if he’d come out of a storm

he pulled himself together—  
waving to the bartender  
and sliding his glass across the bar  
he said in a firm voice (fully recovered now)  
“hit me again Frank”  
and as Frank poured another measure into Henry’s glass  
with a delicacy reserved for the finest whiskey  
he nodded over to me,  
“another Coke, Stuart?  
You better watch it though—  
that stuff will kill you.”

## FOUR

Visitors in bronze  
Delving  
On your way back  
Retired  
Highlands  
Risk

Appendix



## Visitors in bronze

These harbingers of peace and stillness  
seem to be helmeted  
and armed  
their demeanor  
in the twilight  
is stern

floating across seas  
on turtles and sea lions  
they have come to cogitate  
in these marble halls and corridors  
to issue a warning  
from the depth of their being—  
creatures of reproof  
models of calm

having reached a truce in the great struggle  
they are not without art—  
in the light of dusk  
with their weapons sheathed  
their bearing holds a certain theatrical menace

captains of thought  
and rapt attention  
with an arrangement of clothes quite cavalier  
quite beautiful  
they sit in command of their space  
and fill the air with shadows

## Delving

I have decided to delve into the past  
for the sheer joy of time travel  
and with the power of a winged Devil

I will delve into the past of others  
entering their lives and changing their destiny  
I will span centuries and make mischief in high places  
disrupt the plans of princes and dictators  
I will wander into the plays of Shakespeare and change their endings  
I will advise Agricola on how to govern Britain  
tell Cicero to tone it down a little if he values his life  
I will ask W.B. Yeats to come clean in regard to the authorship  
of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*  
and if he refused,  
I would denounce him in *The Irish Times*  
I will visit China during the time of the Warring States

when I come to my own past  
I may use the power of my time ship to settle old scores  
I will send my father to live in the Karst mountains  
overlooking the city of Guilin  
so my childhood is spent with my mother and sister  
in an eternal English summer  
with Walls ice cream served in little white bowls on the lawn  
and when he returns  
he will be an older and wiser man—  
and I, the inveterate dreamer  
may take back all that I have said and done  
(since that too is within my power)  
and learn to forgive

## On your way back

How we tighten at—  
*On your way back sir*  
*Whatever you can spare*

We resent the suggestion that we have money to spare  
that we *are* coming back  
that we live in the same world

On the way back  
we spare nothing  
*Next time sir*

What phrases have been invented  
to lessen the pain  
to save the giver from falling into the abyss  
if he fails to give  
to avoid rejection

I refuse to give—  
my heart hardens towards this weathered figure  
this rag

What is he to me?

Then I wonder what accident of fortune separates us  
what stores of bitterness we share  
what wars, what wounds in battle  
what slights

*Spare change, brother?*

## Retired

Years later, when my father came to see me  
he was frail, blinking nervously in the California light  
stripped of his power  
his power over me—  
I thought years away from me had weakened him

like his struggle with me  
his life's work was over—  
in a sense, I was his life's work  
his career

no longer angry or ambitious  
but interested, deferential  
appearing to care  
(he *did* care)  
at this remove  
on a Western shore, he worked no spell  
the war was over

## Highlands

There is a way of taking a book down from its shelf  
in a library, a friend's home or bookshop  
that is cheerful and brisk  
with an air of taking charge of the book  
this was not the case here  
in a second-hand store in Santa Cruz  
when I happened on  
an old guide to the Scottish Highlands  
printed years ago  
when color plates were rare  
and mountains and rivers more somber  
than they are in books today

this find  
musty with age  
I held in my hands  
like an old photo album  
with a sense of privilege and intimacy –  
it was as if the photographer had ventured out at night  
or very early in the morning  
while others slept  
so bleak and cold this world of glens and parapets  
so keen the air  
so cold and dark the waters of Loch Rannoch  
so reluctant the light  
no hint of purple on Cruachan Beann  
no warmth at all in the sun over Lismore –  
such darkened views  
of a land I had not seen for half a century  
a land I longed to see again

## Risk

We are in constant negotiations, he and I  
he is the one that struts about  
dealing with the world in his way  
he takes his energy from me  
and some of his ideas  
and I can cut him off at any time  
although it would be suicidal to do so  
he is the worker and I am the dreamer  
he thinks I am naive, out of touch  
and I think he is a blockhead  
all brawn and no brain

and there is another "I"  
a darker, shadowy figure  
taking energy from us both or replenishing it  
whose features are clear in dreams if not in daylight  
and sometimes even in dreams a presence only  
a deceiver  
who comes to us in daylight in all guises  
whose power can be overwhelming  
to call him an "I" would be setting limits  
on a limitless creature  
who ranges across land and sea like a dragon  
and under the sea  
who is formless and always changing  
and has form too  
miraculously human or bird-like  
sometimes clothed and adorned  
a He and sometimes a She  
a carpet of thyme  
a forest of kelp  
nodding in the silence of the deep

we live in the margins of this Other  
(my active self and I)  
fearing the chaos which is its element, a kind of ocean  
and the beauty and naturalness that is also its element

in a Ming ceramic  
so white  
the camel-headed dragon of cobalt blue  
struggles there

we are at the seashore  
close to the turmoil of the sea  
there is a chill in the air

coming off the tall waves—  
we feel their breath on us as they fall  
and a risk we are called upon to take

## Appendix

### La chatte magique

Que dirait-on  
d'une chatte noire,  
queue en l'air,  
les yeux bleus-ardoise,  
une hérétique,  
qui échapperait à l'Inquisition?

Ils la clouèrent à une croix  
en bois de chêne,  
et les clous éclatèrent de la croix.  
Elle s'enfuit indemne  
par l'étroite Voie romaine.

Bernard de Clairvaux essaya  
de la persuader gentiment.  
"Je ne peux rien faire avec cette chatte!"  
s'exclama-t-il.  
"Elle n'a pas de honte."

"Montrez-lui les instruments,"  
firent-ils.  
Elle s'envola par la fenêtre  
dans les bois de Gascogne.

"Au bûcher!  
Au bûcher l'hérétique!"  
Qu'ils se mirent à crier,  
"la chatte, l'effrontée!"

Sa nonchalance les enrageait tous.  
Avec quel calme, à Béziers,  
elle traversa les flemmes!  
Surgissant de l'amas de pierres  
que fut Montségur,  
elle s'assit pour se lécher les babines.

*Traduction par Natasha Borovsky du poème  
de Stuart Dodds, "Magical cat."*

