

The Strangeness
Poems in Seven Sections

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The Strangeness
Poems in Seven Sections

U. Milo Kaufmann

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openlatch

Cuyahoga Falls, OH

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

U. Milo Kaufmann has been a long-standing faculty member of the English Department of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His scholarly interests comprise seventeenth-century British Literature, fantasy and science-fiction literature, and the works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Among other books, he has authored *The Pilgrim's Progress and Traditions in Puritan Meditation* (Yale University Press, Yale Studies in Literature 163) and *Paradise in the Age of Milton* (English Literary Studies Monograph Series 11). His first book of poetry, *Measures of Breath*, was published in 2004 by Edwin Mellen Press, and his second book, *Corners of Green*, by Open Latch Publications in 2008.

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I Beginnings**House Sparrow**

The little treadfowl on my sill
cannot deny his dame.
Deferring to that central flame
like Mercury to Sol,
he spins through leafy tesseract,
aloft and home,
again, and twice again. It's all
repetitive as Hell.

In his hard-wired abandonment
there is no time for pause.
The world was made for birdkind
and he the primal cause.

In the dimming Garden,
hard beside the fountain
there, doubtless, Eden's bird
was falling, claiming all
the topless height of sky
for wonders such as he,
only to find himself embroiled,
like all of us, in endless,
ardent domesticity.

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The Pruning

Perfect, yet made for the gardener's hand,
becalmed did the green world grow,
with Adam's endeavor a meaningful work,
quick though his hand, or slow.

Perfect the canopy, perfect the glade,
perfect the viney wall:
only enough did each plant grow,
under the Maker's spell.

Measure within was an answering voice,
though eager the longing of kind.
Longing must lapse at just enough,
filling the niche assigned.

Yet, in it all, good Adam's hand
and the eye of his able spouse
would find prepared the ready task,
as holders in God's own house.

We later born, of Seth or Cain,
are made of a curious stuff.
Save for our taking of water, or breath,
we never halt at enough.

So we are pruned by a kindly hand,
and called by the ancient voice,
offered again a measured growth,
ours by the grace of choice.

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One April Morning

One April morning I awoke to find
I had forgotten how to wear my mind.

It did not fit. The parts seemed all askew.
I dared not greet the world as people do.

What day was it, what was the hour,
and who was I, and whence the moment's power?

All things about were loud, absurd, intense.
With habit dumb, the heart awoke to sense.

Outside were men, I think, upon an emerald way,
though why they walked like trees, I cannot say.

Words fit nothing, objects roared untamed,
all roads wandered, old names went unnamed.

Afraid, I knew the naked forms were bent
upon a meaning no man ever meant.

What could I do but force the rebel mind
into its timeworn frame, and leave the dawn behind?

River Baptism, Hocking County

Baptismal tanks sounded Romish,
or at least too expensive for the
pilgrim folk in the Mudsock addition

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to Logan. So once every summer,
for those who wanted immersion,
the flock made its way late on a
Sunday to the banks of the Hocking,
a scant mile from the church.

Pastor Tom, strange to say, had asked
for himself to be baptized again.
He'd weathered a storm of suspicion
over some Lancaster woman. The story
never came clear, though a number were
willing to guess at the facts.
Being baptized again by immersion,
he said, should clear away all taint of
suspicion and any bad thoughts
on his part.

So it was done, by the hand of old Charlie,
the Bible-class teacher, in the sweet
hill-country waters of Hocking.
Down and up, and out to a murmur
of blessings and wonder. Then it
was time for the three teen-aged
children who'd been saved in the
June five-day school. They'd been
taught by Eliza Ashburton,
mother of twelve, whose oldest son Arthur
was a grief, running wild as he was in Columbus.
But Momma Ashburton was a force
in the Kingdom, for she'd prayed down
more than one healing on neighbors and kinfolk.

Then, with the last of the teenagers,
standing offshore, grinning and gleaming,
the old life dripping away,
a murmur came from the southernmost
edge of the crowd. Some say they saw
the cycle parked a half-mile away,

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so the rider could approach without racket.
Who was it? He was dressed
to the nines, in a blue linen suit, with a
new Panama hat keeping in shadow
his features.

Arthur! Young Arthur Ashburton, wildest
of all in his clan. Some guessed he'd come
to show off his clothes, or make jokes
about cleaning up Mudsock. But no,
he was wading now, splashing upstream
towards the preacher, holding his
Panama over his chest.

"Here to be washed," he announced.
"Never found nothing at all in Columbus."
So down in the waters of death he went,
his fine head held in the current, the new
linen darkening. Then he stood upright,
his face now bright as a beacon.

"There it goes," said a child, pointing.
And all watched the Panama hat sail
south towards the city. "I'll fetch it,
I'll fetch it," the child said.

"No," said Arthur. "Let it go. That's all
old clothes now. And I'm called into
preaching, like Mom always wanted,
That five-dollar hat floating off,
that'll be my first story."

A preacher he made, all right;
and a good one, riding his cycle up hollows
to road's end, searching out folks
who had little use for suits made
of linen or for hats of Panama straw,
but who had heard, one and all,

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of the time a preacher got baptized again
and a young man heard the high calling.

The Ten Things Created Last

Rabbis perusing the Torah found ten things
they supposed were the last in creation,
wonders made late on the first Friday,
lagniappes, but not afterthoughts.

First of the ten was manna, a food for the desert,
stored up beforehand in some heavenly granary,
enough for a million on a forty-year journey,
a provident God making bread before nightfall.

Second, the mouth of the earth that would open
to swallow the wicked, as in Korah's rebellion. So
the landscape is cleansed, like the seabed
folding to swallow the salt.

Third, the mouth of the she-ass, made to speak
for Balaam's instruction, showing forever that
the silence of beasts can be broken, that speech
is a gift that can seek out the humblest.

Fourth, the mouth of the miraculous well
at Beer in the wilderness, where the people
would sing in amazement, for the princes
and nobles would stoop to do digging.

Fifth, the rainbow to come after the Flood,
signaling promise beyond any bound up in nature,
for nothing is sure save the thought of the Maker,

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so the waters of chaos return only when bidden.

Sixth, Moses' rod to be raised in the dividing of waters, making dry land for God's chosen. And before that, and after, a stick for an old man to lean on, Moses past eighty when he finds his vocation.

Seventh, the shamir or thorns of the desert, not part of the curse upon Eden, but blessing. God hedges His paths to good purpose, using briar and bramble.

Eighth, ninth and tenth, the letters, writing and tables of Law committed to Moses. (And what are we mortals, also a last day's creation, but clays to be shaped by law and by words?)

All these things were perfected and stored before the first sabbath, ready to fall into place, to be found in the predestined moment.

And the ancients were certain that lists beyond counting are there in the record. Subtler than nature is the Maker behind it, and no wit is too clever in the naming of gifts.

Scientists in the College Chapel

Statues in the college chapel
tell of dealings with the apple.
Did not Newton, Bacon, Barrow
wing our age's moral arrow?

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Elders of Gorgonian glance,
they stilled Nature in her dance.

And yet the little boys of rhyme
fill with tune both space and time:
Little Milton, little Keats,
little William Butler Yeats,
they catch truth with poem-hooks,
fishing in their daddies' books.

Catastrophe, His Hand

In the east the great blows
of the past go unnoticed.
The crater's edge has been smudged
by the centuries, and the mountains
are bearded and toothless. But,
as one travels west, into the dry land,
the high rugged land,
the message comes clear—
a world is no easy making.

In Yellowstone some two dozen times
has the world's greatest volcano held forth,
and speaking, encompassed the earth
with its sulfur and smoke.
Here, too, a tree turned to stone
has ridden the land's pitching deck
for more than ten million years.

Times beyond counting have high things
been humbled. In the lofty Sierras nearby
the proud granite domes have been peeled

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without mercy. The shards lie scattered,
a midden of stoneware, in the valley below.

Yet the plainest words have been spoken
to the south of these witnesses.

As one approaches the great canyon,
of the swift Colorado, he sees the gray roads
hemorrhaging red at the edges. He knows
some grand circumstance waits.
The harebells at wayside are hushed.

Then it looms, so savagely yawning
not even the stars could fill it brimful.
Here is the rack of cold eons,
all five of earth's sufferings shown
in strata that go deeper than even
the hardiest trilobites.

One may stand at the rim peering
into the womb of earth's mystery.
Here the Hopi found their people's birth channel
and here, for certain, is the clearest
of birth signs. We are born under
catastrophe's hand. Using all time for his making,
the Maker will shake the whole to its roots
whenever he chooses.

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II Craft**Banishing The Apostrophe**

On this morning's walk I passed a neighbor's mailbox
with the apostrophe misplaced. That makes the millionth
case. It's time to act.

For thirty years I fought a losing war with
student writers. Too often, I knew the hopeful
neophyte had added all the pointing at the end,
a miscellaneous dash of pepper for the pot.

Haven't we suffered long enough? What human being
needs a speck of ink to tell him who owns what,
with all the bloody history of law and right to keep things straight?

And contractions? Better to see them go
than watch them thin our language
one word at a time. Consider "sha'n't"—which
was surely scuttled by the nasty double nick.

I say, banish all apostrophes,
Let them leach from texts, and trickle into
local tributaries and then on into the sea.

I picture them gathering briefly in warm delta pools,
like pollywogs, then wriggling
on into the depths.

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There they can provide suitable whiskers for slim eels,
 and eyelashes for the great orbs of the studious octopus.
 Let them sink to the hot vents where archaic bacteria will
 no doubt digest them into something useful to
 illiterate tubeworms and long-armed crabs.

Or else, paired up like supercooled electrons, let them
 take to flight, darting and dancing across the blue sky
 like black ephemerae, or at the atmosphere's far edge,
 mark out the latest, aptest quotes on God's own page.

In matters mundane we won't be punctilious.
 So, to the apostrophe, I say, Begone, and don't return
 Either as commas or the pied debris of once-honored texts.
 We shall have good language even so,
 with hearts and tongues to fix the printed sense.

Summoning the Hyphen and the Dash

So where have all the hyphens gone?
 Is their absence just one more sign
 of atomism's triumph, now in its
 final season: all grains and bits,
 and no secure relations?

I do see folks in their freeholds
 striking back, trying with apt resolve
 to get things more connected,
 what with sly cracks on bumper stickers,
 and wisdom showing up as witty lists
 on sweatshirt-fronts.

There—I'm sure you saw the hyphen

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in the line above, at its modest
task, linking nouns that like to stand
alone. That's the sort of thing we need.
Then, too, we need to make some sense
of all those phrases that gang up on the
noun's front steps: Sturm und Drang,
peace and prosperity, and
Book of the Month—that sort of thing.

No one wants to miss a full-blown opportunity,
but a full blown one?
And old-school architecture is not quite the same
without the hyphen.
Frankly, I wouldn't mind if,
along with the wholesale return of hyphens,
we had an in-migration of vincula
and ligatures. Think of the sweet exactness
of algebraic sense, and the pulse ensured
by those sweeping arcs we still may see
hovering in the musical score.

We could stand a lot more of connecting
this to that, and neighbor to neighbor,
so why not start out on the page?

This is my vote for I-Thou encounters, and
around-the-clock call-ins to low-profile,
high-sensitivity seat-of-the-pants pundits
who can start putting this end-of-the-age
pile-up back into perspective.

Here, too, is my no-nonsense, you-better-believe-it
Heaven-help-us-if-it-fails summons to
the not-yet-wholly-forgotten hyphen.

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Poet and Poem

The poet is stirred by the chewings of death
on his limbs and his head.
His poems are wrung from his soul, like blood.

The poet lives in a den of light.
He goes broadside and skinless,
sliding lengthwise through the
slots in the air.

The poet is a builder of roads,
working with stuffs that begin soft,
but end exceedingly hard,
proof against sledges and wheel-nibblings.

The poet drops impossible questions
into the Deep, like hot stones
down some genie's well,
and waits for them to hurtle back,
answered.

Highway 63

In their college digs
just north of Terre Haute
they found a shark's tooth,
proof the land once lay beneath
a salty inland sea

Now there's fresh sweet water,

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flowing south in Wabash River.
And on the river's shore,
at stately distance from the road,
stands the Army Ammunition Plant,
as unobtrusive as the neighboring
lily farm. Rumor says that here
the nation's unacknowledged troves
of awfulest chemicals are kept:
one gram enough to scotch
a population. A rubber company
has the contract, runs the place
as civilly as any plant that's baking tires
for garden tractors.

Strange to say, just eight miles further south,
on the highway's other side,
the Emerald City of Eli Lilly glows,
making medicine for the planet's sick.
From nature's simples—oil and coal and
earth—they charm the merciful spirits
who mock the devil and his kin.

One wonders. Will these factories one day
skirmish at the highway's center line?
With such balanced marvels of the chemist's skill,
whose will finally be the choice of good or ill?
And if, as some suppose, this fertile ground
by some shifting of the tides must lie again
beneath the sea, will sharks again shed teeth
as prizes for some future archeologist,
while little human evidence remains
to show how oddly all our works of hope
were matched by those of fear?

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The Philosopher

I too affirm your overdue appointment
to the scholars' Center, you with your many gifts
so well employed. And who could forget
that magisterial public lecture?

Too bad there had to be that one dissenting
voice, the *bête noire* of campus speakers. Rumor
has it your heckler was the young alum
halted in mid-stride towards his last degree,
struck down by some anguish of the soul

Some say he was the very one who paid
to have replaced the office window in the
rhetoric building, the window he'd put a fist
through to make some point about the Real.

I knew him casually. He found me once
in the grocery check-out lane, said we had
a mutual friend or two, then pressed on me
an urgent message. He'd send along
his recent writing. It proved to be
a hundred photocopied letters,
missives he'd sent to all the mavens
of our trade: Ivy-Leaguers, Berkeley heavies,
and the honored wits at Duke, Toronto
and the ancient English schools.
His message in the twelve or so I read
was clear enough. "Good Sir or Madam,
if what you say is true, you have nothing left to say,
and yet you do not leave off saying."

That was the message, too, that you
and all of us heard him bellow from
the last row of the lecture hall, his forehead
red and sweating, his two hands

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marking all the punctuation of his rant.

How temperate your answer,
in a baritone I have long admired.
Discourse should be civil. This forum
was no place for animus. Nor was it
suitable for any simple hopes,
for heart's ease, or for truth
neither certain nor intransigent.

How many of us, uneasy in our chairs,
wondered where this all might end,
till a broad-shouldered someone standing
in the back, walked the heckler out,
while we were left to question,
Did this youngster have some vision
when his mind unraveled,
an untamed storm of beauty
gathering at his back, while before him
shimmered the ancient hills of truth
seeming ever more unsolid
in the chilly, coiling academic mists?

A Neighborhood of Escapists

We're all escapists in these woods,
having fled the noise of traffic
and the late-night frolics of
the immoderate and young.

Across the lane is Drummond,
most gifted of us all, who makes his living
by escaping from self-patented devices.

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Some would skewer him if more than
ninety seconds pass.

I've strapped him in a straitjacket
before a crowd, and watched him
puff his cheeks, then wriggle out,
watched him hang in chains
from the boom of the builder's crane,
then loose himself and wave,
with a grin quite visible a mile away.
His dog, I swear, has learned
the escapist's skill, able to scale
a six-foot wooden fence
and go, and come again.

To the west is Johnson, able physicist.
He escapes the real world for the fairyland
of quanta, of bitty things with qualities
like spin and strangeness.
Mind you, no one ever travels to this land.
Numbers, crunched and spun
like sugar grains in a carnival device,
produce his sweet and gossamer domain,
much loved by those who see the macro-world
as chancy as any carnival event.

Further west is Stroud the wisdom-lover.
He is expert in the newest ways of questioning
the store of what is known.
He recommends escape from comfort,
from drowsy untried certainties.
His is a well-trained tenor voice,
pleasant to hear in the graduate chorale
with its dense sonority, all consonants
bent to fit the phrase, so words are lost
and harsh discourse surrenders
to the gentler claims of sound.

And I, the rhymer in the house

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at lane's beginning, am as innocent,
or guilty, as the rest, imagining
that words can sidestep time,
that tales serve well to dress us all—
though whether that mean shrouds
or chrysalis wool, only some
clear-eyed stranger, alien to our neighborhood,
would ever dare to tell.

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III Creatures**Cricket**

That cricket has rubbed
his raspy legs together
all this blessed day.
I'm losing patience.
Every time I look for him,
the sound eludes me.
He's a ventriloquist,
or this cabin-space is charmed.

I get close, and the sound's behind,
or at one side,
or grating on both my ears at once.

I swear, for some odd reason,
I think of mercy,
not the fake kind I show the cricket
because I cannot find him,
but that odd give in the web of things.
We get a break, and for a time
we want to thank the one responsible,
but we can't find him, and the gifts
keep piling up, and there's
that abrasive music in both ears,
chirring on every side.

I believe the cricket
is under the house.

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Trifles

In my sterile cell on floor seven
of the library, the fly has starved.
He lies upon his back, kicking slowly,
an engine on the last uncoiling of its spring.
Yet—wait. He flips and settles on his feet,
prayerfully inspects the front two,
then jerks along, his gauze wings cocked like thumbs.
His prow rides high, though the stern is dragging.
I know he cannot last.

Nearby, another starveling hangs,
a white and feckless spider.
Mere skeleton, she haunts the
back of my desk calendar.
Reticulum of dust, no doubt she soon
will settle to her doom
with a strand of the web
that proved so profitless.

Thinking of small things, I recall
the hearty roach who shared my summer cabin.
Almost I could hear him say
“H’lo, Guv’nor!” each night when he
appeared at 11:30 sharp. He came
to expect the cookie crumbs
from my late-evening tea.
Feeler to the west, feeler to the east,
then scratching his scruffy upper chest
(“No eats like this all winter, Guv’nor”).

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Back legs spread like those of a
trestle table, he bends, prehensile,
a gymnast in a worn brown tuxedo.
I could not put my foot down.

Yet someone will.
And all such trifles pass,
attenuated like the year,
although I wonder, recalling old words
about a sparrow's fall,
if heaven's vast occasion might be keyed
to circumstance so trivial
even these slenderest lives of autumn
would add a note or two
to the music of it all.

Cats and Machines

Regan, our Siamese cat, had no use
for machines. She despised
my old Royal upright, vintage
late 40s. When I typed, she would stalk
through the study, tail and chin
high, forswearing even a glance
at the lap she approved when my legs
weren't so close to such clutter.
She was all softness and curves herself,
like some feline Grushenka,
and the rank and file of the keyboard,
the straightforward lashing
of letters to paper, she despised.
Smoothly legato herself,
she wanted nothing to do with staccato.

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Not so her four broods of kittens.
They were clearly machines,
sidling and popping about
on stiff legs, stalking invisible
prey, their small engines moved
by eccentric flywheels.
We sold or gave them away, one by one,
and Regan, not good at her numbers,
feigned never to notice.

She lived a good twenty years,
for six of them blind, eschewing
the fact and the thought
of machines whether typewriter,
sweeper, or auto. But in time
she ran down and we gave her
a Christian interment.
For sure, truly loving and loved,
she was more than the things
one hauls off to some scrap yard.

Turtles

We never had luck with our turtles.
Plotinus, the biggest, was actually a tortoise,
large as a pie-pan, mouth in a scowl,
forever the exile in his dark carapace.
Knowing his wanderlust, we took him on
family vacations, nearly regretting it once
when he slipped from the van on the lip
of Grand Canyon. And lose him we finally did,
right in our sideyard, his route of escape

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never found. He never said much, though he had strong opinions. We never saw point in explaining that for his sort of creature the shell was also the backbone, so how, without shell, could he ever sustain a position.

The two smaller fellows, Shelly and Eddie, were turtles as green as new grass. We fed them on bacon in the fishbowl on the back of the counter. They were little comedians, striking poses, craning their necks for a laugh, as pert and as gay as Plotinus was sullen. Then things got more serious, for both developed a fungus which closed off their mouths, and who wants a world you can't eat in. In time they both turned up floating and joyless.

Then there was Hook, a mean-spirited fellow we found in our driveway, left there, we guessed, by some unfriendly neighbor. Hook had a beak like a raptor, and before we got wise each in the family got snapped. I thought of a slow-simmering soup for his next-to-last chapter, but the others said no. So we mused about places to leave him, a note taped to his back. The end of the tale is he got left in a ditch on the edge of a farm. With his razor-sharp beak and disposition to match, he's probably got that end of the county well-organized, complete with a planning commission.

What these commensals, so lacking of stature, all had in common, was a back we could look down, each shell etched like a dry-country landscape. Each in its puzzling way sequestered the soft from the hard, while our world, the world

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of the tall, is a mixture of organs and bones,
rules and permissions, things everlasting
and those things not hard, but precious and transient.

A Suitable Prejudice

You're looking for a prejudice?
I have the perfect one,
apolitical, non-religious,
unmentioned in all the value-guides.
And, I should add, it has
a noble history.

Not that I want the job
but if someone said to me
"Okay, you be the judge.
You get to separate the species—
mind you, not individuals, but whole
species, on the right, or on the left,"
I'd say, "I'll get it started anyway."
(Someone else can finish up.)

Dogs, of course, I'd put on the right.
They actually love you, you can train them.
They can learn a little English.
They want to please and they have
those big intelligent eyes. Cats,
on the other hand, would be, well,
on the other hand. They pretend
to love you for their own ends.
They have those spooky eyes and they
rip up the upholstery.

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Horses, yes, on the right. They'll be in heaven, at least all the ones that were mounts by day and by night for circuit-riding preachers.

Your typical horse will take orders, even do simple arithmetic, if you believe the circus folk. On the left, those balky mules that'll kick your eyeballs out, first good chance they get. Sterile and outright hostile over their messed-up sex life, what are they finally good for except maybe doing those tricky switchbacks on the Grand Canyon's walls or hauling in the borax, whatever that is, from some desert waste land.

But moving on to sheep and goat, and the real reason I'd take this judicial role.

I have a prejudice and no animal-rights activist is going to alter that. Besides, there's ample precedent—those old sayings about scapegoats and the reprobates. Sheep provide us lamb chops, warm sweaters, blankets and splendid models of the gregarious.

We don't need goats.

They have those alien eyes and nasty dispositions.

Besides they're smelly, stupid, lustful and every environmentalist's despair—exactly what you need to lodge a solid prejudice that no one dares dismiss by taking the high ground. You'd need really high ground, for example, to get away from the odor of a rank old billy, eager to assist the call of kind.

The Strangeness

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One summer dawn, on Uncle's farm, three cousins and I were trapped upon a haystack, after a night-long bull session under the stars and northern lights, for there was old stinking Cappy, waiting at the ladder's foot, ready to rut with bootsole or your bedroll. And stupid. One of his nannies, Uncle said, was staked with forty feet of chain in a lush field of grasses, pennyroyal and flowers. When the school bus came back, late afternoon, its passengers had a lesson never to forget. For Lil the nanny had expired, her tongue stretched out, her head and neck snug against the stake she'd circled daylong, winding up her forty feet of chain.

But here's my clincher. On the Serengeti's grassy knolls, I'm told, not less than seven kinds of herbivore graze, each with a niche, each nibbling down the food stock another inch or so. Till the smallest, like Thomson's wee gazelle, do the final trim. Except for the goat, the vagrant, untoward, stupid ungulate. He pulls the grass up by its roots. If that's not stupid, I don't know what is.

Not only that—I've seen the pictures of goats in trees, stripping branches that might bear fruit. If a farmer does this sort of thing, it's aptly called eating your seed corn. How such a stupid creature has survived calls into question, from a whole different side (the left), that popular theory about the surviving of the smart ones left behind.

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My summary judgment? Let
there be no escape for scapegoats,
no dodging by them of our hearty
condemnation. And have I not shown
my reader-friend, by logic,
prerogative case and ample precedent,
how right, right, right,
at least some prejudice is?

Forever

Their African Gray named Bert had a full hundred words,
one eighth of the total the Harvard man said
were all that one needed to empty the heart.

Having no lips, the bird never managed his *Ns* and his *Ms*,
and he never learned to mimic Poe's icon.
"Forever" was the first word he mastered,
to go with "Harry" and "Lulie," who fed him,
and with "Larry" and "Carrie", the children who loved him

No doubt he was smart as they come,
a parrot with heart the size of a thimble
yet with wit that could startle and question.

Harry and Lulie fell out, and they parted, the latter departing
with the two who had loved him.

"Forever" once called out the parrot.
But was it a question? A bird has no
knack for inflection.

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Then later, with only the man standing at sinkside,
Bert rasped out the whole of his lore
all one hundred words, as if he
were voiding some vessel.

“Hello”, “goodbye”, and “cracker” and “bastard,”
and “loser” and “liar” and “lover” and
“dinner” and so many more
ending, of course with the toneless “forever.”

Then he fell from his perch
and snapped off his beak.

It was Harry and Lulie who cradled him,
interred him outside,
him and his remarkable word horde.
Then they managed to patch up their quarrel,
the four of them all now together
for maybe forever,
though minus the questioning parrot.

Night-Creatures

I

Mort, my clowning rhetoric student
had for a totem a green talking snake,
not cursed, it would seem, since it
swaggered and swayed
upright on its tail.
But how to interpret the snake’s fat cigar
and fair imitation of a comic named Fields,

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and further, his advising folly
such as Mort's wintertime leap from
a low campus bridge to illustrate license,
so his breaking a leg, if not the ice on the river.

II

Nephew Lynne, an aspiring artist,
was visited often by Coyote.
The totem had thoughts on the colors
best suited for acrylic paintings.
Those he preferred were
dry-country hues: sandstone and sage.
But one night the coyote is gone, displaced
by a lion with mane like the sun
and voice of a great, booming gong.
So, fleeing the unendurable light and the sound,
Lynne is streaking through starfields
only to find upon waking
that he's standing at bedside
speaking in a language unknown,
the speech, perhaps, of the terrible lion.

III

Not totems, but creatures
I made up for my daughters,
were the Flattles and Nonnits.
These were not well understood
by hearers or teller, but we called them
the wonders that kept the world safe.
Flattles were flat, but not so utterly that
they could not live in the space
between flatness and thickness.
And Nonnits took joy in the space
between words. Together they
made some important connections,
like heads never fell off,
and feet stayed attached, and
thick things, in general, stayed

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fastened to thin ones.

Nonnits, who lived in the
space between words meant
words added up, just like the days,
and that children woke up in the
morning the very same persons
who fell asleep after stories.

So things stay connected, I'd
explain, while hugs
said the same thing
with big arms and little ones.

Now not so sure of totems,
I have no doubt
about Flattles and Nonnits
The former you'll find
in Chinese and Japanese paintings
where mist is so often obscuring
the connection between
high things and low.

And the Nonnits?
You'll know they are present
wherever words make good sense.
Sometimes, though not always,
you'll find them in poems,
if they're not very long ones.

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IV Fancies**The Love Song of the Massless Neutrino**

I pass through earth without a pause
and so I might through years of lead.
Massless myself, I feel no tug
to lay me in some carnal bed.

Free as any sophomore,
feckless as the gentle-born,
I bend all space to make the naught
that tender-minded thinkers scorn.

Nothing I truly love nor hate.
I have no truck with weighty things,
yet in my numberless quantity
I hold the universe in strings.

The wisdom is both old and new,
that weightless things complete the whole.
But ancient lays spent time enough
on all the whimsies of the soul.

I play my own free-loving part
from end to end of trackless sky.
Unbent bender, unmoved mover,
massless matter, that am I.

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Harrowings

On the high holy day
of Passover the holiest man
is deep in the earth.
Beneath the silt and the roots
of things he is harrowing Hell.
He preaches to Noah and Lot,
to Plato and Buddha and
Neanderthal man. He shows them
the point of the story.
In a great fugue of above and beneath,
of spool- and of bobbin-thread,
he stitches the ages together.
Numberless captives he looses.

And at time's end, when all Heaven's
ablaze with the glory of holiness,
surely the Son of the Right
will descend to the uttermost
cave of the deep, to the farthest
that any has fallen. A ray
of pure dark will direct him,
and the odor of rankest despair.
There in the gloom of the gem
of the longest-lost ego,
he will find him,
the son of the left,
Phosphorus Fallen.
He will offer him hope,
the longest-lived hope
of the prodigal's father—
the healing of father and son,

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the healing of brother and brother.

Who can tell me the issue?
Who can say that this harrowing,
done at the joint of time,
done at the end of time,
is not done for the breadth
and the length of time,
the reaching of Right
to the left ones of time?

The Descent of the Apes

Back for a spell are the apes with heads
like crystalline globes. You may find them
mixed into the crowd, or preening, perhaps, at one
of your favorite lunch places.

One must admire the great pulsing brains
beneath the shimmering pates.
Marvelous too is the ape-talk
rich with prettier names for the old:
pride and necessity, power and lust.

Where I stopped for coffee today,
three silken-haired apes were having
a food-fight, each disputing the merits
of pain, its innocent giving and taking.

Clearly one silverback's joy was in flipping
a wedge of ripe melon against another's
broad chest, while a third brayed with laughter
to see ice chips shatter the mirror behind him.

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It's all very seasonal, a regular move
from the mid-jungle. I'm told that in deep jungle
the air is not right for these marvelous
hybrids, while on mountainous slopes
the night sky hangs too low,
the sky with its tedious stars.

The Pithing of Dwarves

They look much like frogs,
but with long silky beards and soft eyes,
with great knotted shoulders
and sinews of iron. They know of the brushed gold
under tree roots. They watch
by tallow candles on rough sills
that look out upon emerald hillsides.

A pity the great spikes of time
are finding them, one by one,
in their sleep. Such a death is no mercy,
that instant of total erectness,
a stout limb for every direction.
It's the curse of a life underground,
in the anguish of being forgotten.

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True Urban Legends

My friend in Grand Rapids
tells of his uncle, a clever inventor
who actually came up with a new carburetor,
one that doubled one's mileage.
He and his wonder disappeared long ago
and no one has found him.
Exxon and Shell haven't mourned.

My student's young aunt in Chicago
tells of a walk home at night,
with a stranger's quickening steps
just behind her. Knowing she
can't make her house,
and ready to turn and scream out her terror,
she finds a great black dog
walking beside her. He sees her
safe to her door and then disappears.
Next day, eager to thank the dog's
owners she searches to find them.
But no one recalled ever seeing
the provident beast. Setters and spaniels,
but never a dog as big as a mastiff.

And not too far from that good Irish
neighborhood, my friend Tom, off his
freeway and checking things out on a map,
has a gun thrust through his open
car window. His nervous assailant
has him stand by the car, then shoots
him from ten feet away. Time slows
and Tom sees the spent cartridge roll
over his foot. He watches his car
being driven off, then sees he's been saved
by his fly's metal zipper.

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These things, I will swear, all actually happened,
though when has the truth of a tale been all that we
weighed in deciding whether or not we'd believe it.

Old Job, Feasting

The record has you at the last
replete with fortune and a second brood,
your three new daughters—Dove and
Cinnamon and Glory of the Eye—surely
the fairest in the land, and sons as well,
whose children and children's children
you will live to see.

What cheerful bustle at the family feasts,
with tens and hundreds gathering in
to share the finest from your flocks.
How natural those terse asides, as
neighbors say how well they knew—
knowing it all along—that your horrors
were nothing more than testing
of an ever-innocent man.

And your silence, both host's restraint
and the father's lingering grief.
For how could you not recall
your earlier brood, those sons
and daughters whose names
we do not even know?

Was not each face and voice
as singular as the hurt each absence left?
Did you not wonder what shape

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a true redemption had to take,
a largesse far beyond the sophistry
of sheep for sheep, new child for old,
with wealth and station once again secure?

Our scholars wonder at your ancient name,
knowing it can mean both Hostile One
and Penitent. One hopes you glimpsed
the heavenly end, when all will hear
what Heaven's just and timeless love
has meant, and see the past unspool
to prove the real intent.

V Riddles**Pure Foods and Simples**

I

At the end,
at the beginning,
the cure of form,
the purest brimming.

II

Table's tower
chockablock
with gems more square
than any in the dragon's lair

III

High in the greenery
a treasure for Danäe;
the dancing accountants
keep six-sided ledgers.

IV

This meeting of em and of el
sets the mum and the lippy
to murmurous lunching,
the extract of bone
and of languorous meadow.

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V

Sphere grown paunchy,
 meat like the eyeball's,
 cradle of hiss and of hoot,
 the first of all riddles.

VI

Aloft in the firelight and
 mind-kindlings.
 Vast, vast that inner fire,
 source of the mind.

VII

Now the embrace of length
 by width, union of ship
 and of harbor.
 Here is the far shore of light.
 Here are all riddles unraveled.

(Answers: Water, Salt, Honey, Milk, Egg, Spirit, Love)

With Daughters at Spring Mill Lake

That August evening we fed the ducks
 on Spring Mill Lake, the islets darkening
 in the early chill. The children quickly
 spent our store of crackers, battenning
 those solemn eaters with their gimlet eyes.
 You stole away to catch it all on film.

Twenty years from now, finger in the photo
 album, daughters' children wondering
 at the half-lit scene, you and I shall not
 feign to know more than one can know.

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Those quiet waters, the ducks clacking,
 filing by us on the rim of land
 like targets in a carnival tent, depthless
 each with one near eye fixed, appraising,
 hesitant, hungry—

They, like all things, surely mean
 far more than ever they could say,
 mere happenstance, but strange and pregnant
 like the dream that follows on
 some well-remembered childhood day.

Gray and Gnarled

Gray

Strange neighborhoods seen
 for a moment from the thruway.
 Rain on Sunday beaches.
 Cobbled bark of the pear tree.

Gnarled

Arthritic limbs. Joints of
 the black oak and the gingko
 (earth's oldest tree).
 Boarders at the Y. The speech
 of careful thinkers. Flesh
 of the ironwood.

Gray and Gnarled

Leg of the toad.

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Rubbed scythe-handle.
Man's history.
The brain.

Quaero

I

Any object or hap can serve as a sign.
The blank card one leaves on the floor by the bedside,
or a cloud shaped like a forefinger pointing,
or the word overheard at the airport,
echoing one's deep and holy ambition.
So one changes careers for the better,
though the word overheard was not
unmistakably clear. There's a blank
speed limit sign at the last bend
of our lane, its text long since peeled
and weathered away. So it serves
as a general caution. Go slow,
some danger ahead, change your ways.

II

Some folks are marked for every misfortune.
Consider my friend Lawrence. His
oldest son dead on the surgeon's table
at just sixteen years, another son dead
by a fall from his seventh-floor room,
both daughters unmarried mothers,
his wife bipolar for years.
"One just learns how to tribulate," he told me
one evening, adding a much-needed verb
to the language. It was Lawrence who mentioned
a minister-uncle who, searching a strange
riverbed for a spot good for baptisms,

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was caught by a swift undertow and washed
to his death.

III

We speak of still life,
but is life ever still? One checks
for the swell of the bedclothes
to be sure one's spouse has not died
in the night. And the fruit in the bowl,
or the carrot fresh in the crisper drawer?
When did they cease from their living?
Does death come with the plucking?
Does the carrot, like the mandrake once did,
protest with a sigh when tugged, quite alive,
from its bed?

IV

Consider the myriad of dreamers and poets
who are ready to better this world,
offering communes, utopias, orbiting worldlets
as models of some much-improved Elsewhere.
All of these makers take a stand
somewhere offworld, as if they can see
the whole that they're part of,
more than the total themselves, confident,
prescient, ironic, consumed by the passion
for strangeness.

At a Private Museum in County Cork

Why do they come here to die,
as they have for twenty millennia—
four-footed creatures and two-legged,

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including Neanderthal Man with the hinged kneecaps,
here on the bluff above the sea's inlet?

The curator runs a private establishment,
if established it is, this tumble-down museum
half underground in the Cork wild lands.
Her collections cover two tables,
and are added to daily. She turns up
new relics whenever her back
is game for new digging.

She's at a center, she tells me
where invisible energy lines are crossing.
She is able to put her lore to the test,
should I need a healing, just by
planting bare feet on the earth
and laying her hands on my head
or my shoulders.

I demure, but accept her herb tea
and the crackers. She has no car,
has no urge to travel, and
why should she leave, when she's here
so secure at a center? The world's experts
have come here to wonder,
and urge relocation.
Her answer is always the same.
She'll die here as the countless
creatures before her have chosen,
the great Irish elk, and the humans
who had hunted the tiger
whose unmistakable emblem, she shows me,
is etched on the predator's scimitar tooth
held in her claw-like hand.

A side room has patriot relics—
the guns, outfits, and photos
of kin in some recent rebellion.

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My eyes ask the question.
No, I am told, had her kinfolk lived here
they'd not lie now in some distant interment.

Before leaving I buy her two guidebooks
concerning Caem Hill and its relics,
pay the ten Euros requested, though for telling
how much of the text is sure knowledge,
and how much is mere notion
I'll need help from outsiders,
who've not been to this center.

Seventh-Grade Koans

Our class, I think, soon forgave her
the summer after her course,
when we heard of Miss McBride's death
from a stomach disorder.

Though just seventh-graders, we had guessed
that something was mightily wrong.
Her history classroom was famous
for its climate of hatred and icy despair.

Of course we all did our part to trigger
her flaring harangues, certain to break
into spit-ball contests the moment
she left for an errand, knowing
that anyone caught would suffer
something unimaginably awful.

It was I who was launching a coin

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at the chalkboard just when she returned from a moment outside. Tight-lipped and calm, she said "Come back after school for an hour".

And so, hours later, I would have my exposure to deep worldly wisdom, stranger than anything taught in the history text.

"I set you two tasks," she said, "and you will write for an hour." I knew she was posing me questions, but the line of her mouth and her terrible calm were unsettling. The first was "What makes people so mean?" Even at twelve I guessed she meant me and no other. The next was still harder, for it asked me to show how all I had said in reply to the first was nothing but nonsense.

So I set to it, cheeks flushed and mind addled, instructed to write for an hour with the end product a zero. I worked with a will, flustered, intense, drawing on Sunday School texts, and then, anxious, searching for ways to refute all I had argued.

Then, at the end, she read my three scribbled pages, gave me a quick bewildering hug, and dismissed me.

She died three months later, the rumor afloat that she had never forgiven a man who had left her.

The Strangeness

U. Milo Kaufmann

About that, who can say? But
this much is plain: some monstrous
half-truth, deep inside her,
was eating her up, and she was unable,
or never quite willing, to summon
the strength to refute it.

Freud in Orvieto's Cathedral

He has been here before, the old man, happy to leave
far behind the vapors of swampy Vienna,
toxic with nonsense of geist and old empire.

Here he can savor the stiffness of stone,
with the mountain for footing, and a fine
Baroque shell for the rigorous rest
of a mind never touched by belief.

In the silent cathedral there's no worshipper present.
There's only the doubter, his jaw resolute,
his knees too old for good bending.

The splendor about him might pass for the finest
of tombs, larger than all the bedizened
wonders in the crypt of the Hapsburgs.
It is death's calm, perhaps,
the absence of spirit, which he seeks here,
his mind, quite stiffened by system,
finding its rest in inscrutable silence.

The Strangeness

U. Milo Kaufmann

VI The Uncanny**The Trephining**

Like red earth waiting the plow
the old blind man lies in the
sun-filled courtyard.

First the herb-bouquet brushes his temples,
then strong drink flames on his lips.
The spear at his throat makes firm his resolve.

The flint meets his close-shaved scalp.
There's droning of prayers.
Then, the priest pries out
the wedge of skull, shows
the man's unused years
moist to the eye.

The knife on the brain grazes memories
live to the touch: he has points
of light on canal waters,
patter of lively child's running,
laughter at mealtime, first love, and death
of his children too young to claim souls.

Then holy shapes—triangles, rhombuses, lotus-forms,
swarming—and the faces of ancestors, quiescent.
His soul is off to her drowsing while
his body's all weight, a meat on the slab.

The Strangeness

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A dozen suns sky-march together,
scorching the flesh of his eyes, draw tears,
as the red iron sears clean his brain.
Not for now, a brow bursting with spirits.
Stirring, he tells in thick speech
the memories stirred by the knife,
those that were his, and those
What shall he say of those others?
Was he not blind from his birth,
and brideless and childless?
Those scintillant colors,
those gems of no color. How were they,
and all things, within him?

This one savage head—might he not fill
the world with its story?

The Christmas Star

Elijah called the fire
on the water at his feet,
on the beards of all Baal's cronies,
vaporized oceans
and the blood-covered dancers.

God thinks of eating the world.
His wish implodes to the flaming gem
high in the sky over Bethlehem.
In a field sable, the motive gules:
it's a landscape by Giotto,
the little square boxes of houses
several and pied in the single light.

The Strangeness

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In that fire, what craving,
the made world prepared
for his electric coddling,
his lightning stretched taut in corners.

His love now laves the earth
and his son is laid in the manger.
He will consume the whole,
to recast it as energy,
the Christ-fire enhancing man
by the square of light's dancing.

He will have his son back
while remaking the world.
His star is the angel of promise.

Old Souls

Carla recalls how, at age twelve,
in her bed, she felt an invisible hand
stroking the length of her body,
making it thrill like a bowstring,
and a darkly resonant voice assured her
that her soul was an old one.
Now, was this some incubus,
preparing the girl for the storm
of her puberty, telling her not to be
lost in her body? I doubt it, for incubi
seem not to care much about souls.

Greta was a gypsy-like graduate student.
For her first twenty-five years, she insisted,
she was aware of herself at a point just three inches

The Strangeness

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above the top of her head. What is more,
for that time she felt neither grief, joy, nor disdain
as other folks do, but mimicked the responses
she saw practiced by others.

Then, after trauma, she found herself aware,
like the rest of us, at some point between ears,
behind eyes, while she felt in her heart
the passions once only mimicked.

And what was the trauma? Her scrupulous love
for a boy, who left her for war and adulthood.
Perhaps her old soul descended
to give her some ballast, to adjust
her more fitly to time's firm conventions.
With her soul in her head, she now was grown up.

John was a fourteen-year-old prodigy.
At that age he had already composed
a fine symphony.

But his eyes, they were the wonder—
luminous, limpid, with a depth
that made one embarrassed to
even trade glances.

Their depth was the depth of old night,
of space, or the unchronicled void.
Of genius one never takes measure.

I have lost track of John, but no need to worry.
In mid-teens he had already prospered.

Greta took her degree, and, well-settled in time,
made a marriage.

But Carla? Old soul or not, she failed in her work,
took solace in bingeing, seemed fixed
as an eternal sophomore.

If her soul was indeed old, it seemed never
to give adequate hoist to its recalcitrant vessel
adrift on the stream of mere moments.

The Strangeness

U. Milo Kaufmann

Epiphanies

I met God on a grimly way.
He was a panther grand and fell.
I tiptoed by in canticle.

I met God in a purple storm;
I was the particle passing small
flung against the utmost wall.

By laurel bush, I have held
the night's wrist, and felt
the pulse leap, as He passed.

There is strange kinship between
bloods green and red. Truly,
God is no tale of the head.

Cars and Boats

This week every car is pulling a boat,
its vessel of promise.
No matter that black roads are buckled
by mid-summer heat, the fences outrageous
with home-crafted signs, and
every lakeside homeowner bent on a killing
offering access, bait, and safe haven
for the car left behind.

The Strangeness

U. Milo Kaufmann

Out on water,
out on the puddle of years,
the small boat beneath us
wandering over the white-green
speckled waters,
we are wondrously close
to what is not close at all,
floating on what has never belonged
to mere mortals.

So water inspires,
exalts even the drowning man,
who remembers his years
in a flash,
remembers the times
before clocks when he ran
ruddy under the heavy light,
dashing into his hope.
Remembers it all, even though lost
among greens that bloom deepest.
Remembers, should he be saved,
the ownerless deep.

In Glacier Park

We are careful to stay on the path.
This is bear country, where Snyder Creek
tumbles to MacDonald Lake.
Its chutes of water race past
red-purple stones. With grizzlies
about, one is all ears and
hears more than the creek.

The Strangeness

U. Milo Kaufmann

How Wordsworth's boyhood sleep
must have been stirred by the cold
tumbling Derwent Water, fresh
from the peaks of Windermere,
charging between narrow stone banks
under the bridges of Cockermouth,
the cataract bringing so close those
untamed fastnesses, the dells
of dream-kindling Windermere.

And here, how the spirit is stirred
by these remote and terrible waters,
in these virginal haunts of the siskin
and grosbeak. Spirit cannot deny
its kinship with rivers that search
all their way for some suitable ending.

Coleridge said all's two, the first term
ever expanding, the second term growing
to encompass the first, and here
a long way from the Lakes
he and Wordsworth held precious,
the spirit is quickened, inwardness
tapped to encompass the fact
of all waters.

In the lodge at the foot of the glacier
we swap travelers' tales, mostly of
bears stronger than lions and swifter
than racehorses. Anxieties blunted by
the warmth of the fireside, we still
have the glacier nearby to remind us
of time and of age, so ready to chill
the wide-ranging spirit.

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VII Endings**For an Efficiency Expert**

Somehow you found time for it all.
You the expert in life run by stopwatch,
help to a hundred downsizing companies.

Your native Hungary was once proud
of you, star among swimmers,
mastery of watery flux, whatever
form it might take.

Then you moved here, full of a Method,
intent on improving the slack
world about you, you with your doubts
about voting, church and the masses.
Most things were too messy,
you told me.

I recall your last time in the hospital,
most of your stomach already removed.
You had swum the day you came in for
the knife-work, and you knew the crimp
in your stomach was something you
put there. Nothing in you, around you,
it seems, was not there by intention.

You walked with me down the green hallway,
pushing your IV cart, observing the laxness.

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How foolish not to cross-train the desk-personnel,
and surgeons should work by the hour.

But the time you so carefully counted
all ran out. Did you know to the minute
how much you had left?
Of course there's a chaos behind you,
your wife in nervous collapse, untrained
for the myriad of tasks you handled
so nicely, like driving the car and
doing the taxes. Your sons are innumerate,
each with his small calculator but none
with twelve times twelve in his head.

Just six of us stood at your graveside,
counting the priest and your family.
Too many, I judge, applying your Method,
for why waste time on the nothing that's left
when the mind that counts is extinguished.
No matter to you that the whole which remains
has no measure.

Extinctions

I am raking damp leaves,
not liking the dampness, but thinking
how important it was for me
to see these leaves, these
particular leaves, hanging
throughout the summer on
the tall languishing ash tree
that I will cut down next summer.
All the ash trees are languishing,

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and no one is sure why, but
they will not soon be extinct.

Can the experts not rework
what they mean by “extinction”?
I know it’s reserved for species and genera,
but I am concerned
with individuals going extinct,
like this particular bare-limbed
ash tree towering over me and,
of course, my particular self.

Really, they should examine most carefully
this matter. I want to say
there never has been a viewpoint
just like mine.

I think all things in our universe
would benefit from a seeing in the way
I happen to see them. My view is fresh
committed, that of a maverick,
so all the more worth preserving.

I suspect you would say much the same
about your point of view,
and if very different, all the better.
You can’t have too many
ways of enjoying a thing.

Mind you, we’re not talking diversity
for diversity’s sake, whatever that means.
We’re asking that things, all THINGS,
get seen. And each thing is unique
for each point of view, and each special
enjoyment of things should not ever be lost.

I have a rich friend who says
he’d like to be famous for shooting

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the last living beast of some species,
sending it and its kind into extinction,
making him the unique hunter.
You don't need to be special that way.
Uniqueness comes with just being,
while having that place to stand
where one happens to be.

I don't really want you to suffer extinction,
anymore than myself, at least not until
you've finished this argument,
agreeing or not, as you like.
Enjoy. I can hope that in the grand
scheme I might be allowed
to see and enjoy all things
just as you do.

Meanwhile I have these interesting
wet leaves, compound, yellow-brown,
layered like reed-mats on some Tudor floor—
I have them to deal with.

Cellular

Julian never leaves her church-room,
learns the more that comes from less,
gives the ancient truth new meaning,
solitude is perfect bliss.

Truest art is self-concealing,
truest merit, unproclaimed;
Truly plumb the private moment,

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then you have the cosmic framed.

In her cellular compartment
Julian joys to see the Lord,
striding through the uncreated,
holding as a nut the world.

In another vision, later,
Julian sees the human lot
dramatized as errant Adam
stumbling, falling—who would not?

Sin's behovely, that's the footnote
to the volume of her lore,
but love's the text, as is God's pity,
and love will settle every score.

Tell me how a virgin woman
lone, sequestered in a cell,
came to grasp the boundless truth that
Heaven's not a room in Hell.

Two Thomases

Sicilian Thomas made a system.
Every truth was argued well,
Smoothing out all contradiction—
Truths of Heaven and of Hell.

Then, near death he had a vision.
What it was he did not say,

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Save to call his system strawy,
Then to write of love's broad way

English Thomas, coming after,
Dressed in roughest leather clothes,
Ate his porridge, taught his lesson:
All is ours, if we but choose.

The child in Thomas never failed him,
Nor did spirit's eye within.
He had seen, and went on seeing
All is meant to be our gain.

What though humble be the dwelling?
Like Adam, each is heir to all.
Infinite the worlds, and ages,
We shall know in Heaven's hall.

Joy resounds in joy of others.
Enjoyment, then, is multiplied
When all things that were and shall be
Make for joy that's then enjoyed.

Heaven's joy, like love, is boundless.
God will know the joy of each,
Then return it, to the many,
To the limit of His reach.

Thomas lived alone and humble,
Died a youthful thirty-seven,
Had no system, just a lesson:
Joy's the antepast of Heaven.

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Lord of Waters

First came all of our knowing
in Pisces, the fishes of divergent
vector, all quicksilver swift
in the deeps. Now comes
a true knowing of water
in the sign of Aquarius-Christ,
figure of life-giving streams.

He was ever the master of water,
walked the turbulent waves of Galilee's Sea,
his feet nimble on those soft
shards of chaos.

And how deftly he baited, and boldly,
with two thousand hogs
the primordial serpent—
Leviathan quick to the hook—
then hoisted him high
to glitter in sunlight.

Aquarius-Christ sees him tumble
like lightning, sea-serpent
evermore falling, sees always
the lapsing of death-dealing water,
himself then and now the spring of live water,
quenching and quickening,
the salver and savior,
end of man's long quest
through worlds wrested from water.

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Greek Islands

I

Our tour guide Tessa is a feisty, learned woman.
She lectures briefly on the glory of the early Greeks, how
it was they who wondered long ago
how all is one, whether water, fire, or simply matter.
Now the whole world asks the question.

II

On Santorini's mesa-height
we find we share the island
with an international gathering
of physicists.
"Strangeness" is their topic.
I learn it is a special kind.
Most certainly not that of the coiled,
barely five-inch-high grapevines
our coach had passed, their growth
shunning the wind, and so twisted
they bring to mind Medusa's
crown of snakes, or the signature
maze of Celtic jewelry.

And not the strangeness of
the island's monochrome
color scheme, white and an
electric blue. We Americans
share our wonder at finding
one thousand homeowners
who agree on anything.
No, the conference theme,
our Tessa says, is something
she does not understand,
a quality of subatomic particles.
Democritus was first
to think of atoms, she muses,

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but what makes up the atom
seems query with answer
eternally receding.

III

The Crete museum displays
a ten-inch model of a youngster's
swing. Three millennia ago, it seems
pastimes and play had much
in common with our own. One
moves in place, the swinging
motion suggestive of the cradle
and the restless, playful sea.

The Cretan ruins include the
onetime palace of the queen,
a modeling of the primal labyrinth.
The maze is each of us, we're told—
the gut, the brain, the mystery of
all beneath the human skin.
And are there labyrinths,
one tourist asks,
even at the smallest scale?

IV

Patmos, we learn, is in an island cluster,
though, unlike Rhodes, it has no place
in pagan history.
Here, of course, guide Tessa says,
is where St. John had visions.
She has us sit on stone benches
for her explaining. John's vision
is like a labyrinth. People love to go
exploring in its coils, and there's
some great mystery at the center.
It's not truly Greek, she says,
but more like Jewish stories.

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The stones we sit on
have grooves and timeworn symbols.
The guide sees one us of us
with fingers tracing out some rune.
“You’ll want to read the books”
our Tessa says, but does she mean
the guidebooks at the gift shop,
or the sacred texts implied?
The question goes unasked,
and so remains unanswered.

The Two Ways

Into the night or into the fire,
Such is the lover's plight,
Choosing to quiet the ego's storm
Either in darkness or light.

Dark is the way of the world refused—
All partial and bounded good
Pointing to naught but the primal void
Beyond all that's understood.

Dim must grow the light of the mind,
And dim the flame of desire,
If ever the good that is other-than-world
Is to be one's saving care.

But bright is the way, though mortal too,
That leads to the ego's pyre,
Through flaring lust and holy wish,
The holocaust of desire,

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For the lovely world of foul and fair
Is pointing in every part
To goods that endure beyond the flames
Of time and the longing heart.

So cold or hot, or dark or light,
It all comes to much the same.
Each love that will quiet the ardent soul
Embraces a mortal pain.