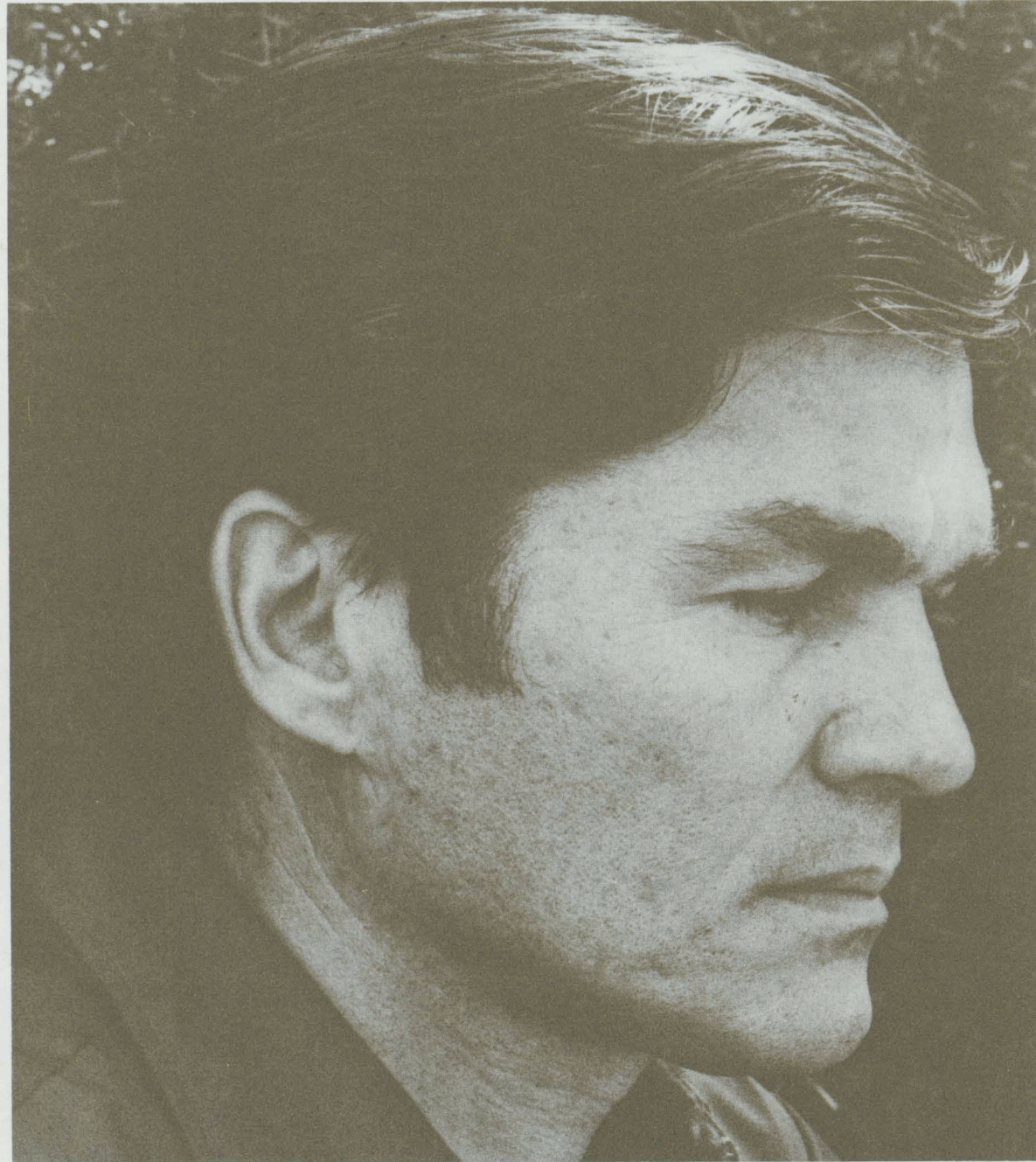


# LUCIEN STRYK



## SELECTED POEMS

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# LUCIEN STRYK SELECTED POEMS

## SELECTED POEMS by Lucien Stryk

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### Lucien Stryk

is the author of five poetry volumes and is co-author (with Takashi Ikemoto) of several translations from Japanese of Zen poetry and thought. Mr. Stryk teaches poetry, writing, and Oriental literature at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. Mr. Stryk can also be heard reading Zen Poetry (FL9855).

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# LUCIEN STRYK — SELECTED POEMS

## Return to Hiroshima

### I. BOMBARDIER

Coming out of the station he expected  
To bump into the cripple who had clomped,  
Bright pencils trailing, across his dreams

For fifteen years. Before setting out  
He was ready to offer both his legs,  
His arms, his sleepless eyes. But it seemed

There was no need: it looked a healthy town,  
The people gay, the new streets dancing  
In the famous light. Even the War Museum

With its photos of the blast, the well-mapped  
Rubble, the strips of blackened skin,  
Moved one momentarily. After all,

From the window one could watch picnickers  
Plying chopsticks as before, the children  
Bombing carp with rice-balls. Finding not

What he had feared, he went home cured at last.  
Yet minutes after getting back in bed  
A wood leg started clomping, a thousand

Eyes leapt wild, and once again he hurtled  
Down a road paved white with flesh. On waking  
He knew he had gone too late to the wrong

Town, and that until his own legs numbed  
And eyes went dim with age, somewhere  
A fire would burn that no slow tears could quench.

### II. PILOT

All right, let them play with it,  
Let them feel all hot and righteous,  
Permit them the savage joy of

Deploring my inhumanity,  
And above all let them bury  
Those hundred thousands once again:

I too have counted the corpses,

And say this: if Captain X  
Has been martyred by the poets,  
Does that mean I have to weep

Over his "moments of madness"?  
If he dropped the bomb, and he did,  
If I should sympathize, and I do

(I too have counted the corpses),

Has anyone created a plaint  
For those who shot from that red sun  
Of Nineteen Forty-One? Or

Tried to rouse just one of those  
Thousand Jonahs sprawled across  
The iron-whale bed of Saipan Bay?

I too have counted the corpses.

And you, Tom Staines, who got it  
Huddled in "Sweet Lucy" at my side,  
I still count yours, regretting

You did not last to taste the  
Exultation of learning that  
"Perhaps nine out of ten of us"

(I too have counted the corpses)

Would not end up as fertilizer  
For next spring's rice crop. I'm no  
Schoolboy, but give me a pencil

And a battlefield, and I'll make you  
A formula: take one away  
From one, and you've got bloody nothing.

I too have counted the corpses.

### III. SURVIVORS

Of the survivors there was only one  
That spoke, but he spoke as if whatever  
Life there was hung on his telling all,

And he told all. Of the three who stayed,  
Hands gripped like children in a ring, eyes  
Floating in the space his wall had filled,

Of the three who stayed on till the end,  
One leapt from the only rooftop that  
Remained, the second stands gibbering

At a phantom wall, and it's feared the last,  
The writer who had taken notes, will  
Never write another word. He told all.

### The Mine: Yamaguchi

It is not hell one thinks of, however dark,  
These look more weary than tormented.  
One would expect, down there, a smell more human,  
A noise more agonized than that raised  
By cars shunted, emptied, brimmed again.

Today, remembering, the black heaps themselves  
(On which conveyors drop, chip by chip,  
What aeons vised and morselled to lay  
A straw of light across the page)  
Do not force infernal images.

After weeks of trying to forget,  
The eye resists, the vision begged and gotten  
Is the heart's: rows of women bent over  
Feed-belts circling like blood, pickhammers  
Biting at the clods that trundle by,

Raw hands flinging waste through scuttles gaped behind  
While, a stone's-throw down the company road,  
A smokestack grits the air with substance one  
Might sniff below, or anywhere. It marks  
The crematory, they pass it twice a day.

### Notes for a Guidebook

In celestial Padua  
The ghosts walk hugely  
In the public squares.

Donatello is one,  
His horseman in the  
Piazza San Antonio  
Guards the gruff saint's heart  
Like a mystic ruby,  
The ears of the horse,  
Of the rider,  
Riddled by prayer.

Giotto, Dante are others,  
The painter's frescoes  
Float like clouds  
Above the city,  
The poet's cantos  
Ring upon its walls.

And what of us,  
Who stand with heads  
Strained back, feet tapping?  
Shall we eat, sleep,  
Be men again?  
Shall we slip back  
To the whores of Venice?—  
Dwarfs, clods, motes of dust  
In the brightness.

### Torero

Some see him dancer,  
Delight as the banderillas  
Hit and quiver from his practiced hand,  
Fall like a savage

Bird, piece by piece, talons piercing,  
Yet there are those

Who cheer him as compassionate butcher,  
Sniff the wild flesh on the hospital table,  
Marvel as sharp ribs expand, hunger  
Fades from the eyes of widows and orphans.

Others see him priest,  
Pray as he sights along the sword,  
Hosanna as he plunges toward the altar,  
See the swordhilt as  
Chalice spilling hot as flame, take the host  
Of the ears, the tail,  
While he circles the arena  
And is pelted by hats, fans, a hundred  
Twisted flowers. As the dead bull  
Is dragged along the sand, these cross themselves.

And there are some  
Who see great panniers choked  
With easy pesetas, their gambler hearts  
Choking with love  
As he kneels before the bull, spreads glistening arms:  
Only the torero,  
Sad face stiff with fear, sees the bull.  
Beyond the shrines in cheap hotels, the heaped pesetas.  
The villa by the sea—horns  
Like a fist of knives brush him in the dark.

### Escale

One remembers a port where boats  
Tap fitfully  
Against wharf-poles and wharf-side shops,

Patched awnings taut, are cool as  
Sunlit fathoms.  
At times the rooftops of the town

Swim like brilliant shoals the washed  
And briny air.  
One remembers a bar where fish-soup's

On all hours and sailors wait the  
Windfall virgins  
Of long sea-rocked nights. There, on a

Shimmered terrace, steeped in acrid  
Afternoons, they  
Lean across the tables, burning,

To watch years slip like freighters  
Down the seaways.  
And there remain, knowing the worst

Of inland days, the rot, the sloth,  
The ennui, to  
Tramp in dream the unmarked shore.

### Chekhov in Nice

#### I

Along the Boulevard des Anglais  
Tourists mistook him for Lautrec,  
Though he was taller  
And when not hunched over hacking  
His walk was straight enough.

Perhaps it was the way he stared  
At women, like a beggar  
At a banquet window, and then  
He was always scrabbling for a notebook  
While the snickering revelers

Flowed like water round a stone.  
Oh they all knew him artist.  
All, that is, except the people  
He would talk to in his  
Scant atrocious French: the waiter,

The cabdriver, the man who  
Brought his boots back in the morning  
Like an oblation to Apollo.  
To them he was a munificent  
White Russian, title snatched,

A parcel of serfs languishing  
For his return. Certainly  
He was unhappy. And the chambermaids  
Were touched by nailmarks  
Through the blood-flecks on his sheet.

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The century had just turned over,  
And the Côte was never gayer.  
Even the dowagers, strapped  
To beachchairs all along the shore,  
Felt young again and very beautiful.

And rather scornful, he was quick  
To see, of the old-young man  
Who moved among them like a noctambule,  
His back to Mother Russia,  
Seagulls screaming at his ears.

II

He had just turned forty, and now  
At times he felt himself regretting.  
Oh they had expected far too much  
Of one as sick and poor, hung with  
Unmarried sisters and a widowed dam.

Wasn't it enough to have planted  
The usual imaginary garden?  
Must he also, like some poet,  
Sing upon the ruddy boughs?  
Were he less the son, he'd have come

Here twenty years ago. Before those  
Germs, swarming, had carved  
A kingdom of his chest, before  
The flame had risen from his bowels  
To fan within his head. Were he less the son . . .

And the reputation, so harshly won,  
Did precious little good in France.  
Who'd risk displeasing one who'd make of her,  
However high her beauty,  
A thing of pity in some dismal tale?

*Foutu!* he muttered as he slunk  
Back to his room and tossed his hat  
Upon the pile of doodled papers  
On the desk. Now he longed for home.  
In the few years left to him

Would come—was bound to come—  
Another thirty stories and a dozen plays.  
Then no doubt they'd prop his bones  
Between those giants in Novo-Devechy.  
But were there any choice to make, he'd act

The part of one the world was still applauding,  
That country squire of his,  
Petulant, bored, pining for the Côte d'Azur,  
And—if one could believe those Russian hacks—  
Likely to live forever.

### Oeuvre

Will it ever be finished, this house  
Of paper  
I began to raise when I was seventeen?

Others scramble from foundations far less firm.  
Seasons of  
Pondering, name by name, the past's magnificent,

A squandering. Surely I might have lived.  
Spitefully  
Watching as rivals stole the girls, got the jobs,

Won the laurels, the misery seeped in,  
Tinting the  
Windows, darkening the fairest day.

But how should I have known, a house to please  
Need not be  
Outlandish? And that searching everywhere

The fresh, the rare, prowling the gaudier  
Capitals,  
Something of each would rub off, deface.

Well, we build where and as we can. There are  
Days when I  
Am troubled by an image of the house,

Laden, rootless, like a tinselled tree,  
Suddenly  
Torn to a thousand scribbled leaves and borne off

By the wind, then to be gathered and patched  
Whole again,  
Or of the thing going up in smoke

And I, the paper dreamer, wide awake.

### To a Japanese Poet

You stood frozen there,  
One hand gripping my arm,  
In the other your lunchbasket,  
And when I turned  
To look into your face,  
It was like witnessing a birth.

When the poem came,  
Your fingers loosened and you  
Spoke the dozen words as if  
Directing one who'd  
Lost his way upon  
A mountain path, the night descending.

Finally we went to join  
The others, but you were not the same.  
All that brilliant autumn day  
You avoided me  
As if I'd surprised you  
In some intimacy, as if my being

Near had suddenly  
Cut us off. Later, when I mentioned  
A hurt no memory of scarlet leaves  
Could ease, you laughed  
And said, "Why should you  
Have felt badly? We had an enjoyable outing."

### Zen: The Rocks of Sesshu

(Joel Temple Garden, Yamaguchi)

I

What do they think of  
Where they lean  
Like ponderous heads, the rocks?—

In prankish spring, ducks  
Joggling here  
And there, brushing tails,

Like silly thoughts shared,  
Passed from head  
To head? When, gong quavering

About a ripened sky, we  
Up and go,  
Do they waken from a dream of flesh?

II

In the Three Whites of  
Hokusai—  
Fuji, the snow, the crane—

What startles is the black: in  
The outline  
Of the mountain, the branch-tips

Piercing the snow, the quills of  
The crane's wing:  
Meaning impermanence.

Here, in stainless air, the  
Artist's name  
Blazes like a crow.

III

Distance between the rocks,  
Half the day  
In shadow, is the distance

Between man who thinks  
And the man  
Who thinks he thinks: wait.

Like a brain, the garden,  
Thinking when  
It is thought. Otherwise

A stony jumble, merely that,  
Laid down there  
To stud our emptiness.

IV

Who calls her butterfly  
Would elsewhere  
Pardon the snake its fangs:

In the stony garden  
Where she flits  
Are sides so sharp, merely

To look gives pain. Only  
The tourist,  
Kodak aimed and ready for

The blast, ship pointing for the  
Getaway,  
Dare raise that parasol.

V

To rid the grass of weed, to get  
The whole root,  
Thick, tangled, takes a strong mind

And desire—to make clean, make pure.  
The weed, tough  
As the rock it leaps against,

Unless plucked to the last  
Live fiber  
Will plunge up through dark again.

The weed also has the desire  
To make clean,  
Make pure, there against the rock.

VI

It is joy that lifts those pigeons to  
Stitch the clouds  
With circling, light flashing from underwings.

Scorning our crumbs, tossed carefully  
To corners  
Of the garden, beyond the rocks,

They rose as if summoned from  
The futile  
Groveling our love subjects them to.

Clear the mind! Empty it of all that  
Fixes you,  
Makes every act a pecking at the crumb.

VII

Firmness is all: that mountain beyond the  
Garden path,  
Watch how against its tawny slope

The candled boughs expire. Follow  
The slope where  
Spearheads shake against the clouds

And dizzy the pigeons circling on the wind.  
Then observe  
Where no bigger than a cragstone

The climber pulls himself aloft,  
As by the  
Very guts: firmness is all.

VIII

Pierced through by birdsong, stone by stone  
The garden  
Gathered light. Darkness, hauled by ropes

Of sun, entered roof and bough. Raised from  
The temple  
Floor where, stiff since cockerow,

Blown round like Buddha on the lotus,  
He began  
To write. How against that shimmering,

On paper frail as dawn, make poems?  
Firm again,  
He waited for the rocks to split.

### The Quake

Alone in that paper house  
We laughed when the bed  
Heaved twice then threw  
Us to the floor. When all

Was calm again, you said  
It took an earthquake  
To untwine us. Then I  
Stopped your shaking

With my mouth. Together  
In this place of brick,  
Held firm as fruits  
Upon a sculptured bough,

Our loving is more safe.  
Then why should dream  
Return us to that fragile  
Shelf of land? And why,

Our bodies twined upon  
This couch of stone,  
Should we be listening,  
Like dead sinners, for the quake?

### Étude

I was cycling by the river, back and forth,  
Umbrella up against the  
Rain and blossoms.

It was very quiet, I thought of Woolworth  
Globes you shake up snowstorms in.  
Washed light slanted

Through the cherry trees, and in a flimsy house  
Some youngster practiced Chopin.  
I was moving

With the current, wheels squishing as the music  
Rose into the trees, then stopped,  
And from the house

Came someone wearing too much powder, raincape  
Orchid in the light. Middle-aged,  
The sort you pass

In hundreds everyday and scarcely notice,  
The Chopin she had sent  
Up to those boughs,

Petals spinning free, gave her grace no waters  
Would reflect, but I might  
Long remember.

### Objet d'Art

The copper bowl I keep  
Tobacco  
In is thick with nightingales

And roses, up to the  
Minaret  
Its lid, incised so-so.

I no longer smoke in  
Company,  
It seems indecent:

Reminded by those birds  
And flowers  
Of a botched renown,

A Persian I once  
Had for tea  
Turned from it and wept.

### Cormorant

Men speak lightly of frustration,  
As if they'd invented it.

As if like the cormorant  
Of Gifu, thick leg roped, a ring

Cutting into the neck, they dived  
All night to the fish-swelled water

And flapped up with the catch lodged  
In the throat, only to have

The fisher yank it out and toss  
It gasping on a breathless heap.

Then to dive again, hunger  
Churning in the craw, air just

Slipping by the throat-ring  
To spray against the lungs.

And once more to be jerked back in  
And have the fisher grab the spoil.



Men speak lightly of frustration,  
And dim in the lantern light

The cormorant makes out the flash  
Of fins and, just beyond,

The streamered boats of tourists  
Rocking under *saké* fumes.

#### Christ of Pershing Square

"I can prove it!" the madman cried  
And clutched my wrist. "Feel where the nails  
Went in! By God, I bear them still!"

Half amused, I shrugged and let him  
Press the hand against his suture:  
"All right," I said, "they cut you up."

Suddenly those fingers grasped  
A hammer, it was I had hoisted  
The cross his flung arms formed there.

"Yet," I whispered, "there remains  
The final proof—forgiveness."  
He spat into my face and fled.

This happened in Los Angeles  
Six months ago. I see him still,  
White blood streaming, risen from

Cancerous sheets to walk a Kingdom.

#### The Cannery

In summer this town is full of rebels  
Come up from Tennessee to shell the peas.

And wetbacks roam the supermarkets, making  
A Tijuana of the drab main street.

The Swedes and Poles who work at Wurlitzer,  
And can't stand music, are all dug in:

Doors are bolted, their pretty children warned,  
Where they wait for the autumnal peace.

At night the cannery's like a train,  
A runaway, cans flung up like clinkers.

Sometimes on an evening hot as Southland  
When even fear won't keep the windows down,

One hears the drawl of Tennessee, the quick  
Laugh of Mexico in the empty streets.

#### The Pit

Twenty years. I still remember  
The sun-blown stench, and the pit  
At least two hundred yards from  
The cove we'd anchored guns in.  
They were blasting at the mountains,  
The beach was nearly ours.

The smell kept leaking back.  
I thought of garbage cans  
Behind chopsuey restaurants  
Of home, strangely appealing on  
A summer's night, meaning another  
Kind of life. Which made the difference.

When the three of us, youngest in  
The crew, were handed poles and told  
To get the deadmen underground  
Or join them, we saw it a sullen  
Sort of lark. And lashed to trees,  
The snipers had us dancing.

Ducks for those vultures in the boughs,  
Poles poking through the powder-  
Bitten grass, we zigzagged  
Toward the pit as into  
The arse of death, the wittiest  
Of us said but did not laugh.

At last we reached it, half full  
Of sand and crawling. We clamped  
Nose, mouth, wrenched netted helmets  
To the chin, yet poles probed forward  
Surgically, touching for spots  
The maggots had not jelled.

Somehow we got the deadmen under,  
Along with empty lobster tins,  
Bottles, gear and ammo. Somehow

We plugged the pit and slipped back  
To the guns. Then for days  
We had to helmet bathe downwind.

I stuck my pole, clean end high,  
Behind the foxhole, a kind of  
Towelpeg and a something more.  
I'd stare it out through jungle haze,  
And wonder. Ask anyone who  
Saw it: nobody won that war.

#### Awakening

*Homage To Hakuin, Zen Master,  
1685-1768*

I

Shoichi brushed the black  
on thick.  
His circle held a poem  
like buds  
above a flowering bowl.

Since the moment of my  
pointing,  
this bowl, an "earth device,"  
holds  
nothing but the dawn.

II

A freeze last night, the window's  
laced ice flowers, a meadow drifting  
from the glacier's side. I think of Hakuin:

"Freezing in an icefield, stretched  
thousands of miles in all directions,  
I was alone, transparent, and could not move."

Legs cramped, mind pointing  
like a torch, I cannot see beyond  
the frost, out nor in. And do not move.

III

I balance the round stone  
in my palm,  
turn it full circle,

slowly, in the late sun,  
spring to now.

Severe compression,

like a troubled head,  
stings my hand.  
It falls. A small dust rises.

IV

Beyond the sycamore  
dark air moves  
westward—

smoke, cloud, something  
wanting a name.  
Across the window,  
my gathered breath,  
I trace  
a simple word.

V

My daughter gathers shells  
where thirty years before  
I'd turned them over, marveling.

I take them from her,  
make, at her command,  
the universe. Hands clasped,

marking the limits of  
a world, we watch till sundown  
planets whirling in the sand.

VI

Softness everywhere,  
snow a smear,  
air a gray sack.

Time. Place. Thing.  
Felt between  
skin and bone, flesh.

VII

I write in the dark again,  
rather by dusk-light,  
and what I love about

this hour is the way the trees  
are taken, one by one,  
into the great wash of darkness.

At this hour I am always happy,  
ready to be taken myself,  
fully aware.

#### Elegy for a Long-Haired Student

He called at four a.m.: about to fly  
to Mao, he had to know the Chinese word  
for peace. Next day he was dead.

"Such dreams were bound for madness,"  
I told his mourners. "He was too good  
for this world." "He would have wanted you,"

they said. "You understood." Bearing  
his body to the grave, I saw the long red hair  
he could not stop from coiling round

their throats: Elks, Legionnaires.  
Unmocked now, it would grow. As we lay  
him down, I spoke that word for peace.

#### South

Walking at night, I always return to  
the spot beyond  
the cannery and cornfields where

a farmhouse faces south among tall trees.  
I dream a life  
there for myself, everything happening

in an upper room: reading in sunlight,  
talk, over wine,  
with a friend, long midnight poems swept

with stars and a moon. And nothing  
being savaged,  
anywhere. Having my fill of that life,

I imagine a path leading south  
through corn and wheat,  
to the Gulf of Mexico! I walk

each night in practice for that walk.

#### The Goose

Magnificent  
against October maples  
the goose  
twisting in downdraft  
crushed on my wheels—  
I braked  
wanting to rush out,  
imagined  
its strong arc south again.

Blaring cars  
shadowed  
as I started up,  
driving for miles  
in innocence  
in guilt  
not caring where I headed,  
a whiteness  
mangled  
in the maples, everywhere.

#### Fishing with My Daughter in Miller's Meadow

You follow, dress held high above  
the fresh manure,  
missing your doll, scolding Miller's horses

for being no gentlemen where they graze  
in morning sun.

You want the river, quick, I promised you back there,

and all those fish. I point to trees where  
water rides low  
banks, slopping over in the spring,

and pull you from barbed wire protecting corn  
the size of you  
and gaining fast on me. To get you in the meadow

I hold the wire high, spanning a hand across  
your freckled back.  
At last we make the river, skimmed with flies,

you help me scoop for bait. I give you time  
to run away,  
then drop the hook. It's fish I think

I'm after, you I almost catch, in up to knees,  
sipping minnowy  
water. Well, I hadn't hoped for more.

Going back, you heap the creel with phlox and  
marigolds.

#### Rites of Passage

Indian river swollen brown and swift:  
the pebble from my hand sounds above  
the southfield—

soybeans, corn, cicadas. Stone rings  
touch the bank, ripple up my arm.  
In the grass

a worm twists in webbed air (how things  
absorb each other)—on a branch  
a sparrow

tenses, gray. As grass stirs it bursts  
from leaves, devouring. I close my book.  
With so much

doing everywhere, words swimming green,  
why read? I see and taste silence.  
Starlings flit,

blue/black feathers raising spume  
of dandelions, young fluttering  
in the twigs.

I think of my grown son who runs  
and heaves me to my feet—our  
promised walk

through woods. As he pulls back a branch  
hair on his forearm glistens  
like the leaves

we brush by. I follow down the path  
we've loved for years. We try to  
lose ourselves,

yet there's the river, churning south.  
I muse on what I've given,  
all I can't.

#### Here and Now

Sunglasses upturned  
on the picnic table,  
where I try to write,

catch my reflection  
square—sweaty, vain.  
What's the use?

Hear a knocking  
at the front. No muse,  
a salesman

from the Alcoa  
Aluminum Company  
inspired by the siding

of our rented house.

### Morning

I lie late where  
sunlight floods the curtain,  
tracing dust lines here and there.

I want to remain  
floating on the sheet,  
a whitecap bearing me to shores I need,

a chosen world  
where no one waits  
and nothing cares. Soon I shall draw

the curtain  
on the window tree,  
quick birds among the leaf-trace.

They build around  
me, everything waits  
to happen. The paper on the desk

is like a distant  
sunlit pool, my pen  
an indolent bather, weary of all.

### Rain

Lazy afternoon, rain  
drizzling down the path,  
soft hum of my daughter

and her friends: moments  
of quiet, untroubling,  
But now the neighbor's child

skips out in old boots,  
umbrella arched, rain  
sopping her blue dress.

Like a small animal  
she caves against the storm:  
yesterday her father caught

messing with the sitter,  
today the hurried packing,  
and the constant rain.

### The Unknown Neighbor

The road you took to death  
I traveled on, three hours before,  
and made it safely home.

I hadn't met you, being me,  
but often saw you home  
from work, circled by kids

shrieking as you tossed  
them up, again, again,  
your wife tall in the doorway,

almost too tired to smile.  
You were the perfect neighbor—  
lawn mowing, leaf raking,

unborrowing—just so for  
our town. And now your door  
is shut, your family gone

five months since your death  
to another husband, father.  
Leaves pile high on lawn

and sidewalk, still throughout  
the neighborhood fly rumors  
of a widow's nights.

### Sirens

Someone calls for help,  
always.  
He called yesterday,

he will call tomorrow.  
Yesterday he was on fire,  
today his hand

was chewed off by the steel  
teeth of a combine,  
tomorrow he will lurch

from a smashed car,  
take two steps, collapse  
onto his red shadow.

His voice, familiar,  
pierces everywhere:  
it will be heard.

### The Duckpond

I

Crocus, daffodil:  
already the pond's  
clear of ice

where, winter long,  
ducks and gulls  
slid for crusts.

People circle—  
pale, bronchitic,  
jostling behind dogs,

groped toward lawnchairs  
spread like islands  
on the grass.

Sunk there, they lift faces to the sun.

II

Good Friday.  
Ducks carry on,  
a day like any other.

Same old story:  
no one seems to care.  
A loudmouth

leader of a mangy host  
spiked to a cross,  
as blackbirds in certain

lands neighboring on  
that history are played  
on fences, warning

to their kind. A duck soars from the reeds.

III

Man and woman  
argue past the duckpond,  
his arms flaying,

she, head down—even  
by the fully budded  
cherry, clustered

lilac boughs. Not once  
do they forget  
their bitterness,

face the gift of morning  
ducks wake to  
in the reeds.

They have things to settle, and they will.

IV

On my favorite  
bench beside the roses  
I watch ducks

smoothing feathers,  
breathing it all in.  
Catching the headline

where the bird flits  
I'm reminded  
three men were shot up

at the moon. I turn  
back to the roses:  
what

if they don't make it? If they do?

V

Lying near the pond  
in fear of the stray  
dog that daily

roams the park,  
ducks know  
their limitations,

and the world's—  
how long it takes,  
precisely,

to escape the paw thrusts  
of the dog,  
who once again

swings round to chase his tail.

VI

Radio tower  
beyond the blossoms,  
ducks

here in the pond,  
a connection  
between them—

how did I discover  
this, and why?  
Was it

the blue air? The bench  
moves beneath  
us like a seesaw,

the pond sends news of the world.

VII

What becomes of things  
we make or do?  
The Japanese lantern

or from across the pond  
beneath the trees  
a drift

of voices cultured  
and remote: water  
will carry anything

that floats. The lantern  
maker, the couple  
chatting there

would be amazed to find themselves a poem.

VIII

When tail wagging  
in the breeze  
the duck pokes

bill into the pondbed,  
keeps it there,  
my daughter thinks

him fun—he is, yet how to say  
those acrobatics  
aren't meant

to jollify the day. He's  
hungry, poking  
away at nothing

for crumbs we failed to bring: how to tell her?

IX

Ducks lie close together  
in morning dew, wary-eyed,  
bills pointing at the pond:

roused by squirrels,  
those early risers,  
air's a-whirl with wings.

Sad to think of leaving  
this place. A helicopter  
with mysterious purpose

appears above the trees,  
moving low. Its circles  
tightening,

the ducks cling to the pondedge, right to fear.

### Love Poem

Startle my wife again—  
"Where will we lay our bones?"

Harmless, you'd think, yet  
she's berserk. "Mere joshing."

I protest. She will not  
listen. I want an island

for us, apart, ringed with stones,  
clusterings of flowers

merging us closer through  
the all of time. She thinks

me mad with dreaming,  
but it's love for her

which spurs me, this need  
to know we'll never separate.

### Letter to Jean-Paul Baudot, at Christmas

Friend, on this sunny day, snow sparkling  
everywhere, I think of you once more,  
how many years ago, a child Resistance

fighter trapped by Nazis in a cave  
with fifteen others, left to die, you became  
a cannibal. Saved by Americans,

the taste of a dead comrade's flesh foul  
in your mouth, you fell onto the snow  
of the Haute Savoie and gorged to purge yourself,

somehow to start again. Each winter since  
you were reminded, vomiting for days.  
Each winter since you told me at the Mabillon,

I see you on the first snow of the year  
spreadeagled, face buried in that stench.  
I write once more, Jean-Paul, though you don't

answer, because I must: today men do far worse.  
Yours in hope of peace, for all of us,  
before the coming of another snow.

### The following poems, not from SELECTED POEMS

#### You Must Change Your Life

Of all things one might be:  
a squirrel lopes by

busy at being himself  
in a tough nutless world,

cats at his young, rain  
slanting in his nest,

night falling, winter  
not provided for—

no questions to ask  
of himself or anyone.

#### Juggler

Someone with skill juggles  
three worlds together,  
rainbow, miraculous arc.

Something compels a fourth,  
widening the circle. Five,  
six float in the charged

steep of his mind: soon  
others whirl his wrist.  
Seven, eight—now he's on

his toes, up, up, rising  
with the music of the  
spheres. Still unsatisfied,

risks the lot, down on his  
knees. He dare not drop one.  
Our lives depend on it.



### Old Folks Home

Always near dusk  
in the shadow of  
cedars, he mourns  
the loss of another

day. The empty path  
winds to fields pulsing  
gold, green under  
vapors, rain-fresh

furrows stretching  
miles. Each afternoon  
the old man ambles  
under branches,

remembering his farm,  
wife long dead, sons  
buried in lives  
of their own. There

he stands hours, keen  
to the cool scent  
of fullness—now  
without purpose where

corn-tassels blow.  
Returns to the bare  
room, high above cedars,  
gathering gold and green.

### Siberia

Small wood towns silvered  
by birches,  
sharp blue at windows, doors.

Grimed, forgotten domes,  
a gold cross:  
cows, chickens haunt the tombs.

Train lurches on: ten miles west  
of Irkutsk,  
where Chekhov, bound for convict

Sakhalin, once spent a night,  
I hear three  
sisters longing, Moscow, Moscow!

At the Siberian heart, concrete  
crammed with facts:  
who produced what, how much, when,

in what spirit. On the  
last ruled sheet  
a finger-smudge points like

a holy candle. November: in  
seven days  
drums, bugles, flags will whip

town after town. On wind-  
scourged platforms  
throng mill under likenesses

of hero farmers—ribboned,  
bemedaled,  
exalted by a fourth sister,

one Chekhov did not know, who  
pitying  
her sisters' discontent accepted

solitude and hardship, despite  
the need, at  
times unbearable, of Moscow, Moscow!

### Cherries

Because I sit eating cherries  
which I did not pick  
a girl goes bad under

the elevator tracks, will  
never be whole again,  
Because I want the full bag,

grasping, twenty-five children  
cry for food. Gorging,  
I've none to offer. I want

to care, I mean to, but not  
yet, a dozen cherries  
rattling at the bottom of my bag.

One by one I lift them to  
my mouth, slowly break  
their skin—twelve nations

bleed. Because I love, because  
I need cherries, I  
cannot help them. My happiness,

bought cheap, must last forever.

### Words on a Windy Day

Airing out the clothes,  
The odor of mothballs  
Driving me inside,  
I watch in wonder  
As the wind fills  
Trouserlegs and sweaters,

Whips them light and dark.  
In that frayed coat  
I courted her a year,  
In that old jacket  
Married her, then brushed  
Her tears off with a sleeve.

The wind blows through them,  
Tosses them about,  
These mildewed ghosts of love  
That life, for lack of something  
Simple as a clothespin,  
Let fall, one by one.

### Away

Here I go again,  
want to be somewhere else—  
feet tramping under the desk,

I study travel brochures,  
imagine monastic Hiltons,  
the caravansary of my past.

Apples, cheese, a hunk of bread,  
the road: what'll it be today?  
I ask myself: the Seine,

Isfahan bazaar, three claps  
of the hand, and Yamaguchi,  
Takayama-roshi shouting—

Down, down, and breathe!  
My feet go faster faster,  
suddenly fly off.

Calm, breathing slowly,  
I bow to Master Takayama  
who smiles all the way from Japan.

### Hyde Park Sunday

Suddenly the bronzed Spaniard,  
yellow bandanna on his forehead,  
left his companions with a leap—  
perfect somersault—then cartwheeled  
past the lovers on the grass.

The sprawlers gaped, on Speakers' Corner  
there was silence, those angry men  
turned blessed, forgiving—  
so much pure energy expended for nothing,  
for absolutely nothing.

### Noon Report

Though yesterday, as forecast,  
shot by on a wind  
from the northwest,  
promising nothing much,

this afternoon the blue  
limbs of the sky  
hang still. Up there,  
as usual, something's

concocting tomorrow  
which, despite the mess  
we're bound to make of it,  
should arrive on time.

### The Edge

Living that year at the edge  
of the ravine,  
sloped down to the woods, we listened

to the animals before the town  
awoke, blurring  
the limits of our days,

forcing its round, the needs  
of others.  
Near sleep, after loving, we felt

part of a stillness with the dark  
and all its creatures,  
holding to the edge of where we lived.

### For Helen

You chip a tooth, complain  
of getting old.  
Well, I've felt old for years.

"You're as old  
as you are,"  
I quip and parry frowns.

"Look, we're in this  
together"—that  
never fails, you're in

my arms and young. Warmth  
to warmth, we're  
bound to last forever.