

John Ashbery:  
**The Skaters**

(from *Rivers and Mountains*, 1966)

I

These decibels  
Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound  
Into which being enters, and is apart.  
Their colors on a warm February day  
Make for masses of inertia, and hips  
Prod out of the violet-seeming into a new kind  
Of demand that stumps the absolute because not new  
In the sense of the next one in an infinite series  
But, as it were, pre-existing or pre-seeming in  
Such a way as to contrast funnily with the unexpectedness  
And somehow push us all into perdition.

Here a scarf flies, there an excited call is heard.

The answer is that it is novelty  
That guides these swift blades o'er the ice,  
Projects into a finer expression (but at the expense  
Of energy) the profile I cannot remember.  
Colors slip away from and chide us. The human mind  
Cannot retain anything except perhaps the dismal two-note theme  
Of some sodden "dump" or lament.

But the water surface ripples, the whole light changes.

We children are ashamed of our bodies  
But we laugh and, demanded, talk of sex again  
And all is well. The waves of morning harshness  
Float away like coal-gas into the sky.  
But how much survives? How much of any one of us survives?  
The articles we'd collect—stamps of the colonies  
With greasy cancellation marks, mauve, magenta and chocolate,  
Or funny-looking dogs we'd see in the street, or bright remarks.  
One collects bullets. An Indianapolis, Indiana man collects slingshots of all  
epochs, and so on.

Subtracted from our collections, though, these go on a little while, collecting  
aimlessly. We still support them.

But so little energy they have! And up the swollen sands  
Staggers the darkness fiend, with the storm fiend close behind him!  
True, melodious tolling does go on in that awful pandemonium,  
Certain resonances are not utterly displeasing to the terrified eardrum.  
Some paroxysms are dinning of tambourine, others suggest piano room or  
organ loft

For the most dissonant night charms us, even after death. This, after all, may be  
happiness: tuba notes awash on the great flood, ruptures of xylophone,  
violins, limpets, grace-notes, the musical instrument called serpent, viola da  
gambas, aeolian harps, clavicles, pinball machines, electric drills, que sais-je  
encore!

The performance has rapidly reached your ear; silent and tear-stained, in the  
post-mortem shock, you stand listening, awash

With memories of hair in particular, part of the welling that is you,  
The gurgling of harp, cymbal, glockenspiel, triangle, temple block, English  
horn and metronome! And still no presentiment, no feeling of pain before  
or after.

The passage sustains, does not give. And you have come far indeed.

Yet to go from "not interesting" to "old and uninteresting,"  
To be surrounded by friends, though late in life,

To hear the wings of the spirit, though far. . . .  
Why do I hurriedly undrown myself to cut you down?  
"I am yesterday," and my fault is eternal.  
I do not expect constant attendance, knowing myself insufficient for your  
    present demands  
And I have a dim intuition that I am that other "I" with which we began.  
My cheeks as blank walls to your tears and eagerness  
Fondling that other, as though you had let him get away forever.

The evidence of the visual henceforth replaced  
By the great shadow of trees falling over life.

A child's devotion  
To this normal, shapeless entity. . . .

Forgotten as the words fly briskly across, each time  
Bringing down meaning as snow from a low sky, or rabbits flushed from a  
    wood.  
How strange that the narrow perspective lines  
Always seem to meet, although parallel, and that an insane ghost could do this,  
Could make the house seem so much farther in the distance, as  
It seemed to the horse, dragging the sledge of a perspective line.  
Dim banners in the distance, to die. . . . And nothing put to rights. The pigs in  
    their cages

And so much snow, but it is to be littered with waste and ashes  
So that cathedrals may grow. Out of this spring builds a tolerable  
Affair of brushwood, the sea is felt behind oak wands, noiselessly pouring.  
Spring with its promise of winter, and the black ivy once again  
On the porch, its yellow perspective bands in place  
And the horse nears them and weeps.

So much has passed through my mind this morning  
That I can give you but a dim account of it:  
It is already after lunch, the men are returning to their positions around the  
    cement mixer

And I try to sort out what has happened to me. The bundle of Gerard's letters,  
And that awful bit of news buried on the back page of yesterday's paper.  
Then the news of you this morning, in the snow. Sometimes the interval  
Of bad news is so brisk that . . . And the human brain, with its tray of images  
Seems a sorcerer's magic lantern, projecting black and orange cellophane  
shadows  
On the distance of my hand . . . The very reaction's puny,  
And when we seek to move around, wondering what our position is now, what  
the arm of that chair.

A great wind lifted these cardboard panels  
Horizontal in the air. At once the perspective with the horse  
Disappeared in a *bigarrure* of squiggly lines. The image with the crocodile in it  
became no longer apparent.  
Thus a great wind cleanses, as a new ruler  
Edits new laws, sweeping the very breath of the streets  
Into posterior trash. The films have changed—  
The great titles on the scalloped awning have turned dry and blight-colored.  
No wind that does not penetrate a man's house, into the very bowels of the  
furnace,  
Scratching in dust a name on the mirror—say, and what about letters,  
The dried grasses, fruits of the winter—gosh! Everything is trash!  
The wind points to the advantages of decay  
At the same time as removing them far from the sight of men.  
The regent of the winds, Aeolus, is a symbol for all earthly potentates  
Since holding this sickening, festering process by which we are cleansed  
Of afterthought.

A girl slowly descended the line of steps.

The wind and treason are partners, turning secrets over to the military police.

Lengthening arches. The intensity of minor acts. As skaters elaborate their  
distances,  
Taking a separate line to its end. Returning to the mass, they join each other  
Blotted in an incredible mess of dark colors, and again reappearing to take the  
theme

Some little distance, like fishing boats developing from the land different  
parabolas,  
Taking the exquisite theme far, into farness, to Land's End, to the ends of the  
earth!

But the livery of the year, the changing air  
Bring each to fulfillment. Leaving phrases unfinished,  
Gestures half-sketched against woodsmoke. The abundant sap  
Oozes in girls' throats, the sticky words, half-uttered, unwished for,  
A blanket disbelief, quickly supplanted by idle questions that fade in turn.  
Slowly the mood turns to look at itself as some urchin  
Forgotten by the roadside. New schemes are got up, new taxes,  
Earthworks. And the hours becomes light again.  
Girls wake up in it.

It is best to remain indoors. Because there is error  
In so much precision. As flames are fanned, wishful thinking arises  
Bearing its own prophets, its pointed ignoring. And just as a desire  
Settles down at the end of a long spring day, over heather and watered shoot  
and dried rush field,  
So error is plaited into desires not yet born.

Therefore the post must be resumed (is being falsified  
To be forever involved, tragically, with one's own image?).  
The studio light suddenly invaded the long casement—values were what  
She knows now. But the floor is being slowly pulled apart  
Like straw under those limpid feet.  
And Helga, in the minuscule apartment in Jersey City  
Is reacting violet to the same land of dress, is drawing death  
Again in blossoms against the reactionary fire . . . pulsing  
And knowing nothing to superb lambent distances that intercalate  
This city. Is the death of the cube repeated. Or in the musical album.

It is time now for a general understanding of  
The meaning of all this. The meaning of Helga, importance of the setting, etc.  
A description of the blues. Labels on bottles

And all kinds of discarded objects that ought to be described.  
But can one ever be sure of which ones?  
Isn't this a death-trap, wanting to put too much in  
So the floor sags, as under the weight of a piano, or a piano-legged girl  
And the whole house of cards comes dinning down around one's ears!

But this is an important aspect of the question  
Which I am not ready to discuss, am not at all ready to,  
This leaving-out business. On it hinges the very importance of what's novel  
Or autocratic, or dense or silly. It is as well to call attention  
To it by exaggeration, perhaps. But calling attention  
Isn't the same thing as explaining, and as I said I am not ready  
To line phrases with the costly stuff of explanation, and shall not,  
Will not do so for the moment. Except to say that the carnivorous  
Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving  
Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know involves  
presence, but still.  
Nevertheless these are fundamental absences, struggling to get up and be off  
themselves.

This, thus is a portion of the subject of this poem  
Which is in the form of falling snow:  
That is, the individual flakes are not essential to the importance of the whole's  
becoming so much of a truism  
That their importance is again called in question, to be denied further out, and  
again and again like this.  
Hence, neither the importance of the individual flake,  
Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm, if it has any, is what  
it is,  
But the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps, from abstract into positive and  
back to a slightly less diluted abstract.

Mild effects are the result.

I cannot think any more of going out into all that, will stay here  
With my quiet *schmerzen*. Besides the storm is almost over

Having frozen the face of the bust into a strange style with the lips  
And the teeth the most distinct part of the whole business.

It is this madness to explain. . . .

What is the matter with plain old-fashioned cause-and-effect?  
Leaving one alone with romantic impressions of the trees, the sky?  
Who, actually, is going to be fooled one instant by these phony explanations,  
Think them important? So back we go to the old, imprecise feelings, the  
Common knowledge, the importance of duly suffering and the occasional  
glimpses  
Of some balmy felicity. The world of Schubert's lieder. I am fascinated  
Though by the urge to get out of it all, by going  
Further in and correcting the whole mismanaged mess. But am afraid I'll  
Be of no help to you. Good-bye.

As balloons are to the poet, so to the ground  
Its varied assortment of trees. The more assorted they are, the  
Vaster his experience. Sometimes  
You catch sight of them on a level with the top story of a house,  
Strung up there for publicity purposes. Or like those bubbles  
Children make with a kind of ring, not a pipe, and probably using some  
detergent  
Rather than plain everyday soap and water. Where was I? The balloons  
Drift thoughtfully over the land, not exactly commenting on it;  
These are the range of the poet's experience. He can hide in trees  
Like a hamadryad, but wisely prefers not to, letting the balloons  
Idle him out of existence, as a car idles. Traveling faster  
And more furiously across unknown horizons, belted into the night  
Wishing more and more to be unlike someone, getting the whole thing  
(So he believes) out of his system. Inventing systems.  
We are a part of some system, thinks he, just as the sun is part of  
The solar system. Trees brake his approach. And he seems to be wearing but  
Half a coat, viewed from one side. A "half-man" look inspiring the disgust of  
honest folk

Returning from chores, the milk frozen, the pump heaped high with a chapeau  
of snow,  
The "No Skating" sign as well. But it is here that he is best,  
Face to face with the unsmiling alternatives of his nerve-wracking existence.  
Placed squarely in front of his dilemma, on all fours before the lamentable  
spectacle of the unknown.  
Yet knowing where men *are* coming from. It is this, to hold the candle up to  
the album.

## II

Under the window marked "General Delivery" . . .

This should be a letter  
Throwing you a minute to one side,  
Of how this tossing looks harmonious from a distance,  
Like sea or the tops of trees, and how  
Only when one gets closer is its sadness small and appreciable.  
It can be held in the hand.

All this must go into a letter.  
Also the feeling of being lived, looking for people,  
And gradual peace and relaxation.

But there's no personal involvement:  
These sudden bursts of hot and cold  
Are wreathed in shadowless intensity  
Whose moment saps them of all characteristics.  
Thus beginning to rest you at once know.



Once there was a point in these islands,  
Coming to see where the rock had rotted away,  
And turning into a tiny speck in the distance.  
But war's savagery. . . . Even the most patient scholar, now  
Could hardly reconstruct the old fort exactly as it was.  
That trees continue to wave over it. That there is also a small museum  
somewhere inside.  
That the history of costume is no less fascinating than the history of great  
migrations.  
I'd like to bugger you all up,  
Deliberately falsify all your old suck-ass notions  
Of how chivalry is being lived. What goes on in beehives.  
But the whole filthy mess, misunderstandings included,  
Problems about the tunic button etc. How much of any one person is there.

Still, after bananas and spoonbread in the shadow of the old walls  
It is cooling to return under the eaves in the shower  
That probably fell while we were inside, examining bowknots,  
Old light-bulb sockets, places where the whitewash had begun to flake  
With here and there an old map or illustration. Here's one for instance—  
Looks like a weather map . . . or a coiled bit of wallpaper with a design  
Of faded hollyhocks, or abstract fruit and gumdrops in chains.

But how is it that you are always indoors, peering at too heavily canceled  
stamps through a greasy magnifying glass?  
And slowly the incoherencies of day melt in  
A general wishful thinking of night  
To peruse certain stars over the bay.  
Cataracts of peace pour from the poised heavens  
And only fear of snakes prevents us from passing the night in the open air.  
The day is definitely at an end.

Old heavens, you used to tweak above us,  
Standing like rain whenever a salvo . . . Old heavens,  
You lying there above the old, but not ruined, fort,  
Can you hear, there, what I am saying?

For it is you I am parodying,  
Your invisible denials. And the almost correct impressions  
Corroborated by newsprint, which is so fine.  
I call to you there, but I do not think that you will answer me.

For I am condemned to drum my fingers  
On the closed lid of this piano, this tedious planet, earth  
As it winks to you through the aspiring, growing distances,  
A last spark before the night.

There was much to be said in favor of storms  
But you seem to have abandoned them in favor of endless light.  
I cannot say that I think the change much of an improvement.  
There is something fearful in these summer nights that go on forever. . . .

We are nearing the Moorish coast, I think, in a *bateau*.  
I wonder if I will have any friends there  
Whether the future will be kinder to me than the past, for example,  
And am all set to be put out, finding it to be not.

Still, I am prepared for this voyage, and for anything else you may care to  
mention.

Not that I am not afraid, but there is very little time left.  
You have probably made travel arrangements, and know the feeling.  
Suddenly, one morning, the little train arrives in the station, but oh, so big

It is! Much bigger and faster than anyone told you.  
A bewhiskered student in an old baggy overcoat is waiting to take it.  
"Why do you want to go *there*," they all say. "It is better in the other direction."  
And so it is. There people are free, at any rate. But where you are going no one  
is.

Still there are parks and libraries to be visited, "la Bibliothèque Municipale,"  
Hotel reservations and all that rot. Old American films dubbed into the foreign  
language,

Coffee and whiskey and cigar stubs. Nobody minds. And rain on the bristly  
wool of your topcoat.

I realize that I never knew why I wanted to come.

Yet I shall never return to the past, that attic,  
Its sailboats are perhaps more beautiful than these, these I am leaning against,  
Spangled with diamonds and orange and purple stains,  
Bearing me once again in quest of the unknown. These sails are life itself to me.

I heard a girl say this once, and cried, and brought her fresh fruit and fishes,  
Olives and golden baked loaves. She dried her tears and thanked me.  
Now we are both setting sail into the purplish evening.  
I love it! This cruise can never last long enough for me.

But once more, office desks, radiators—No! That is behind me.  
No more dullness, only movies and love and laughter, sex and fun.  
The ticket seller is blowing his little horn—hurry before the window slams  
down.  
The train we are getting onto is a boat train, and the boats are really boats this  
time.

But I heard the heavens say—Is it right? This continual changing back and  
forth?  
Laughter and tears and so on? Mightn't just plain sadness be sufficient for him?  
No! I'll not accept that any more, you bewhiskered old caverns of blue!  
This is just right for me. I am cozily ensconced in the balcony of my face

Looking out over the whole darn countryside, a beacon of satisfaction  
I am. I'll not trade places with a king. Here I am then, continuing but ever  
beginning  
My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hope and flowers  
The way the coasts glide past you. I shall never forget this moment  
Because it consists of purest ecstasy. I am happier now than I ever dared believe  
Anyone could be. And we finger down the dog-eared coasts. . . .  
It is all passing! It is past! No, I am here,  
Bellow the coasts, and even the heavens roar their assent

As we pick up a lemon-colored light horizontally  
Projected into the night, the night that heaven  
Was kind enough to send, and I launch into the happiest dreams,  
Happier once again, because tomorrow is already here.

Yet certain kernels remain. Clouds that drift past sheds—  
Read it in the official bulletin. We shan't be putting out today.  
The old stove smoked worse than ever because rain was coming down its  
chimney.  
Only the bleary eye of fog accosted one through the mended pane.

Outside, the swamp water lapped the broken wood step.  
A rowboat was moored in the alligator-infested swamp.  
Somewhere, from deep in the interior of the jungle, a groan was heard.  
Could it be . . . ? Anyway, a rainy day—wet weather.

The whole voyage will have to be canceled.  
It would be impossible to make different connections.  
Anyway the hotels are all full at this season. The junks packed with refugees  
Returning from the islands. Sea-bream and flounder abound in the muddied  
waters. . . .

They in fact represent the backbone of the island economy.  
That, and cigar rolling. Please leave your papers at the desk as you pass out,  
You know. "The Wedding March." Ah yes, that's the way. The couple descend  
The steps of the little old church. Ribbons are flung, ribbons of cloud

And the sun seems to be coming out. But there have been so many false  
alarms. . . .

No, it's happened! The storm is over. Again the weather is fine and clear.  
And the voyage? It's on! Listen everybody, the ship is starting,  
I can hear its whistle's roar! We have just time enough to make it to the dock!

And away they pour, in the sulfurous sunlight,  
To the aqua and silver waters where stands the glistening white ship

And into the great vessel they flood, a motley and happy crowd  
Chanting and pouring down hymns on the surface of the ocean. . . .

Pulling, tugging us along with them, by means of streamers,  
Golden and silver confetti. Smiling, we laugh and sing with the revelers  
But are not quite certain that we want to go—the dock is so sunny and warm.  
That majestic ship will pull up anchor who knows where?

And full of laughter and tears, we sidle once again with the other passengers.  
The ground is heaving under foot. Is it the ship? It could be the dock. . . .  
And with a great whoosh all the sails go up. . . . Hideous black smoke belches  
    forth from the funnels  
Smudging the gold carnival costumes with the gaiety of its jet-black soot

And, as into a tunnel the voyage starts  
Only, as I said, to be continued. The eyes of those left standing on the dock are  
    wet  
But ours are dry. Into the secretive, vaporous night with all of us!  
Into the unknown, the unknown that loves us, the great unknown!

So man nightly  
Sparingly descends  
The birches and the hay      all of him  
Pruned, erect for vital contact. As the separate mists of day slip  
Uncomplainingly into the atmosphere. Loving you? The question sinks into

That mazy business  
About writing or to have read it in some book  
To silently move away. At Gannosfonadiga the pumps  
Working, argent in the thickening sunset, like boys' shoulders

And you return to the question as to a calendar of November  
Again and again consulting the surface of that enormous affair  
I think not to have loved you      but the music  
Petting the enameled      slow-imagined stars

A concert of dissatisfaction whereby gutter and dust seep  
To engross the mirrored image and its landscape:

As when  
                  through darkness and mist  
  the pole-bringer  
  demandingly watches  
I am convinced these things are of some importance.

Firstly, it is a preparing to go outward  
Of no planet limiting the enjoyment  
Of motion—hips free of embarrassment etc.

The figure 8 is a perfect symbol  
Of the freedom to be gained in this kind of activity.  
The perspective lines of the barn are another and different kind of example  
(Viz. "Rigg's Farm, near Aysgarth, Wensleydale," or the "Sketch at Norton")  
In which we escape ourselves—putrefying mass of prevarications etc.—  
In remaining close to the limitations imposed.

Another example is this separate dying  
Still keeping in mind the coachmen, servant girls, duchesses, etc. (cf. Jeremy  
Taylor)  
Falling away, rhythm of too-wet snow, but parallel  
With the kind of rhythm substituting for "meaning."

Looked at from this angle the problem of death and survival  
Ages slightly. For the solutions are millionfold, like waves of wild geese  
returning in spring.  
Scarcely we know where to turn to avoid suffering, I mean  
There are so many places.

So, coachman-servile, or scullion-slatternly, but each place is taken.

The lines that draw nearer together are said to "vanish."  
The point where they meet is their vanishing point.

Spaces, as they recede, become smaller.

But another, more urgent question imposes itself—that of poverty.  
How to excuse it to oneself? The wetness and coldness? Dirt and grime?  
Uncomfortable, unsuitable lodgings, with a depressing view?  
The peeled geranium flowering in a rusted tomato can,  
Framed in a sickly ray of sunlight, a tragic chromo?

A broken mirror nailed up over a chipped enamel basin, whose turgid waters  
Reflect the fly-specked calendar—with ecstatic Dutch girl clasping tulips—  
On the far wall. Hanging from one nail, an old velvet hat with a tattered bit of  
veiling—last remnant of former finery.  
The bed well made. The whole place scrupulously clean, but cold and damp.

All this, wedged into a pyramidal ray of light, is my own invention.

But to return to our tomato can—those spared by the goats  
Can be made into a practical telephone, the two halves being connected by a  
length of wire.  
You can talk to your friend in the next room, or around corners.  
An American inventor made a fortune with just such a contraption.  
The branches tear at the sky—

Things too tiny to be remembered in recorded history—the backfiring of a bus  
In a Paris street in 1932, and all the clumsy seductions and amateur paintings  
done,  
Clamber to join in the awakening  
To take a further role in my determination. These clown-shapes  
Filling up the available space for miles, like acres of red and mustard pom-poms  
Dusted with a pollen we call “an air of truth.” Massed mounds  
Of Hades it is true. I propose a general housecleaning  
Of these true and valueless shapes which pester us with their raisons d’être  
Whom no one (that is their weakness) can ever get to like.

There are moving parts to be got out of order,

However, in the flame fountain. Add gradually one ounce, by measure, of sulphuric acid

To five or six ounces of water in an earthenware basin. Add to it, also gradually, about three-quarters of an ounce of granulated zinc.

A rapid production of hydrogen gas will instantly take place. Then add,

From time to time, a few pieces of phosphorus the size of a pea.

A multitude of gas bubbles will be produced, which will fire on the surface of the effervescing liquid.

The whole surface of the liquid will become luminous, and fire balls, with jets of fire,

Will dart from the bottom, through the fluid with great rapidity and a hissing noise.

Sure, but a simple shelter from this or other phenomena is easily contrived.

But how luminous the fountain! Its sparks seem to aspire to reach the sky!

And so much energy in those bubbles. A wise man could contemplate his face in them

With impunity, but fools would surely do better not to approach too close

Because any intense physical activity like that implies danger for the unwary and the uneducated. Great balls of fire!

In my day we used to make "fire designs," using a saturated solution of nitrate of potash.

Then we used to take a smooth stick, and using the solution as ink, draw with it on sheets of white tissue paper.

Once it was thoroughly dry, the writing would be invisible.

By means of a spark from a smoldering match ignite the potassium nitrate at any part of the drawing,

First laying the paper on a plate or tray in a darkened room.

The fire will smolder along the line of the invisible drawing until the design is complete.

Meanwhile the fire fountain is still smoldering and welling,

Casting off a hellish stink and wild fumes of pitch

Acrid as jealousy. And it might be

That flame writing might be visible right there, in the gaps in the smoke



Without going through the bother of the solution-writing.  
A word here and there—"promise" or "beware"—you have to go the long way  
round  
Before you find the entrance to that side is closed.  
The phosphorescent liquid is still heaving and boiling, however.  
And what if this insane activity were itself a kind of drawing  
Of April sidewalks, and young trees bursting into timid leaf  
And dogs sniffing hydrants, the fury of spring beginning to back up along their  
veins?  
Yonder stand a young boy and girl leaning against a bicycle.  
The iron lamppost next to them disappears into the feathery, unborn leaves  
that suffocate its top.

A postman is coming up the walk, a letter held in his outstretched hand.  
This is his first day on the new job, and he looks warily around  
Alas not seeing the hideous bulldog bearing down on him like sixty, its hellish  
eyes fixed on the seat of his pants, jowls a-slaver.  
Nearby a young woman is fixing her stocking. Watching her, a chap with a hat  
Is about to walk into the path of a speeding hackney cabriolet. The line of  
lampposts  
Marches up the street in strict array, but the lamp-parts  
Are lost in feathery bloom, in which hidden faces can be spotted, for this is a  
puzzle scene.  
The sky is white, yet full of outlined stars—it must be night,  
Or an early springtime evening, with just a hint of dampness and chill in the  
air—  
Memory of winter, hint of the autumn to come—  
Yet the lovers congregate anyway, the lights twinkle slowly on.  
Cars move steadily along the street.  
It is a scene worthy of the poet's pen, yet it is the fire demon  
Who has created it, throwing it up on the dubious surface of a phosphorescent  
fountain  
For all the world like a poet. But love can appreciate it,  
Use or misuse it for its own ends. Love is stronger than fire.

The proof of this is that already the heaving, sucking fountain is paling away

Yet the fire-lines of the lovers remain fixed, as if permanently, on the air of the  
lab.

Not for long though. And now they too collapse,  
Giving, as they pass away, the impression of a bluff,  
Its craggy headlands outlined in sparks, its top crowned with a zigzag  
Of grass and shrubs, pebbled beach at the bottom, with flat sea  
Holding a few horizontal lines. Then this vision, too, fades slowly away.

### III

Now you must shield with your body if necessary (you  
Remind me of some lummoX I used to know) the secret your body is.  
Yes, you are a secret and you must NEVER tell it—the vapor  
Of the stars would quickly freeze you to death, like a tear-stiffened  
handkerchief  
Held in liquid air. No, but this secret is in some way the fuel of  
Your living apart. A hearth fire picked up in the glow of polished  
Wooden furniture and picture frames, something to turn away from and move  
back to—  
Understand? This is all a part of you and the only part of you.

Here comes the answer: is it because apples grow  
On the tree, or because it is green? One average day you may never  
know  
How much is pushed back into the night, nor what may return  
To sulk contentedly, half asleep and half awake  
By the arm of a chair pointed into  
The painting of the hearth fire, or reach, in a coma,  
Out of the garden for foreign students.

Be sure the giant would know falling asleep, but the frozen droplets  
    reveal  
A mixed situation in which the penis  
Scored the offer by fixed marches into what is.  
One black spot remained.

If I should . . . If I said you were there  
The . . . towering peace around us might  
Hold up the way it breaks—the monsoon  
Move a pebble, to the plumbing contract, cataract.  
There has got to be only—there is going to be  
An accent on the portable bunch of grapes  
The time the mildewed sea cast the  
Hygrometer too far away. You read into it  
The meaning of tears, survey of our civilization.

Only one thing exists: the fear of death. As widows are a prey to loan  
    sharks  
And Cape Hatteras to hurricanoes, so man to the fear of dying, to the  
Certainty of falling. And just so it permits him to escape from time to  
    time  
Amid fields of boarded-up posters: "Objects, as they recede, appear to  
    become smaller  
And all horizontal receding lines have their vanishing point upon the  
    line of sight,"  
Which is some comfort after all, for our volition to see must needs  
    condition these phenomena to a certain degree.  
But it would be rash to derive too much confidence from a situation  
    which, in the last analysis, scarcely warrants it.  
What I said first goes: sleep, death and hollyhocks  
And a new twilight stained, perhaps, a slightly unearthlier periwinkle  
    blue,  
But no dramatic arguments for survival, and please no magic  
    justification of results.

Uh . . . stupid song . . . that weather bonnet

Is all gone now. But the apothecary biscuits dwindled.  
Where a little spectral  
Cliffs, teeming over into irony's  
Gotten silently inflicted on the passages  
Morning undermines, the daughter is.

Its oval armor  
Protects it then, and the poisonous filaments hanging down  
Are armor as well, or are they the creature itself, screaming  
To protect itself? An aggressive weapon, as well as a plan of defense?  
Nature is still liable to pull a few fast ones, which is why I can't  
emphasize enough  
The importance of adhering to my original program. Remember,  
No hope is to be authorized except in exceptional cases  
To be decided on by me. In the meantime, back to dreaming,  
Your most important activity.

The most difficult of all is an arrangement of hawthorn leaves.  
But the sawing motion of desire, throwing you a moment to one side . . .  
And then the other, will, I think, permit you to forget your dreams for a little  
while.  
In reality you place too much importance on them. "Frei aber Einsam" (Free  
but Alone)  
Ought to be your motto. If you dream at all, place a cloth over your face:  
Its expression of satisfied desire might be too much for some spectators.

The west wind grazes my cheek, the droplets come pattering down;  
What matter now whether I wake or sleep?  
The west wind grazes my cheek, the droplets come pattering down;  
A vast design shows in the meadow's parched and trampled grasses.  
Actually a game of "fox and geese" has been played there, but the real  
reality,  
Beyond truer imaginings, is that it is a mystical design full of a certain  
significance,  
Burning, sealing its way into my consciousness.  
Smooth out the sad flowers, pick up where you left off

But leave me immersed in dreams of sexual imagery:  
Now that the homecoming geese unfurl in waves on the west wind  
And cock covers hen, the farmhouse dog slavers over his bitch, and  
horse and mare go screwing through the meadow!  
A pure scream of things arises from these various sights and smells  
As steam from a wet shingle, and I am happy once again  
Walking among these phenomena that seem familiar to me from my  
earliest childhood.

The gray wastes of water surround  
My puny little shoal. Sometimes storms roll  
Tremendous billows far up on the gray sand beach, and the morning  
After, odd tusked monsters lie stinking in the sun.  
They are inedible. For food there is only  
Breadfruit, and berries garnered in the jungle's inner reaches,  
Wrested from scorpion and poisonous snake. Fresh water is a problem.  
After a rain you may find some nestling in the hollow trunk of a tree, or in  
hollow stones.

One's only form of distraction is really  
To climb to the top of the one tall cliff to scan the distances.  
Not for a ship, of course—this island is far from all the trade routes—  
But in hopes of an unusual sight, such as a school of dolphins at play,  
A whale spouting, or a cormorant bearing down on its prey.  
So high this cliff is that the pebble beach far below seems made of gravel.  
Halfway down, the crows and choughs look like bees.  
Near by are the nests of vultures. They cluck sympathetically in my direction,  
Which will not prevent them from rending me limb from limb once I have  
keeled over definitively.  
Further down, and way over to one side, are eagles;  
Always fussing, fouling their big nests, they always seem to manage to turn their  
backs to you.  
The glass is low; no doubt we are in for a storm.

Sure enough: in the pale gray and orange distances to the left, a  
Waterspout is becoming distinctly visible.

Beautiful, but terrifying;  
Delicate, transparent, like a watercolor by that nineteenth-century Englishman  
whose name I forget.  
(I am beginning to forget everything on this island. If only I had been allowed  
to bring my ten favorite books with me—  
But a weathered child's alphabet is my only reading material. Luckily,  
Some of the birds and animals on the island are pictured in it—the albatross,  
for instance—that's a name I never would have remembered.)

It looks as though the storm-fiend were planning to kick up quite a ruckus  
For this evening. I had better be getting back to the tent  
To make sure everything is shipshape, weight down the canvas with extra  
stones,  
Bank the fire, and prepare myself a little hardtack and tea  
For the evening's repast. Still, it is rather beautiful up here,  
Watching the oncoming storm. Now the big cloud that was in front of the  
waterspout  
Seems to be lurching forward, so that the waterspout, behind it, looks more like  
a three-dimensional photograph.  
Above me, the sky is a luminous silver-gray. Yet rain, like silver porcupine  
quills, has begun to be thrown down.  
All the lightning is still contained in the big black cloud however. Now thunder  
claps belch forth from it,  
Causing the startled vultures to fry forth from their nests.  
I really had better be getting back down, I suppose.

Still it is rather fun to linger on in the wet,  
Letting your clothes get soaked. What difference does it make? No one will  
scold me for it,  
Or look askance. Supposing I catch cold? It hardly matters, there are no nurses  
or infirmaries here  
To make an ass of one. A really serious case of pneumonia would suit me fine.  
Ker-choo! There, now I'm being punished for saying so. Aw, what's the use.  
I really am starting down now. Good-bye, Storm-fiend. Good-bye, vultures.

In reality of course the middle-class apartment I live in is nothing like a desert island.

Cozy and warm it is, with a good library and record collection.

Yet I feel cut off from the life in the streets.

Automobiles and trucks plow by, spattering me with filthy slush.

The man in the street turns his face away. Another island-dweller, no doubt.

In a store or crowded café, you get a momentary impression of warmth:

Steam pours out of the espresso machine, fogging the panes with their modern lettering

Of a kind that has only been available for about a year. The headlines offer you News that is so new you can't realize it yet. A revolution in Argentina! Think of it! Bullets flying through the air, men on the move;

Great passions inciting to massive expenditures of energy, changing the lives of many individuals.

Yet it is all offered as "today's news," as if we somehow had a right to it, as though it were a part of our lives

That we'd be silly to refuse. Here, have another—crime or revolution? Take your pick.

None of this makes any difference to professional exiles like me, and that includes everybody in the place.

We go on sipping our coffee, thinking dark or transparent thoughts . . .

Excuse me, may I have the sugar. Why certainly—pardon me for not having passed it to you.

A lot of bunk, none of them really care whether you get any sugar or not.

Just try asking for something more complicated and see how far it gets you.

Not that I care anyway, being an exile. Nope, the motley spectacle offers no charms whatsoever for me—

And yet—and yet I feel myself caught up in its coils—

Its defectuous movement is that of my reasoning powers—

The main point has already changed, but the masses continue to tread the water

Of backward opinion, living out their mandate as though nothing had happened.

We step out into the street, not realizing that the street is different,

And so it shall be all our lives; only, from this moment on, nothing will ever be  
the same again. Fortunately our small pleasures and the monotony of daily  
existence

Are safe. You will wear the same clothes, and your friends will still want to see  
you for the same reasons—you fill a definite place in their lives, and they  
would be sorry to see you go.

There has, however, been this change, so complete as to be invisible:

You might call it . . . "passion" might be a good word.

I think we will call it that for easy reference. This room, now, for instance, is all  
black and white instead of blue.

A few snowflakes are floating in the airshaft. Across the way

The sun was sinking, casting gray

Shadows on the front of the buildings.

Lower your left shoulder.

Stand still and do not seesaw with your body.

Any more golfing hints, Charlie?

Plant your feet squarely. Grasp your club lightly but firmly in the hollow of  
your fingers.

Slowly swing well back and complete your stroke well through, pushing to the  
very end.

"All up and down de whole creation," like magic-lantern slides projected on the  
wall of a cavern: castles, enchanted gardens, etc.

The usual anagrams of moonlight—a story

That subsides quietly into plain historical fact.

You have chosen the customary images of youth, old age and death

To keep harping on this traditional imagery. The reader

Will not have been taken in.

He will have managed to find out all about it, the way people do.

The moonlight congress backs out then. And with a cry



He throws the whole business into the flames: books, notes, pencil diagrams,  
everything.

No, the only thing that interests him is day  
And its problems. *Freiheit! Freiheit!* To be out of these dusty cells once and for  
all  
Has been the dream of mankind since the beginning of the universe.

*His* day is breaking over the eastern mountains, at least that's the way he tells it.  
Only the crater of becoming—a sealed consciousness—resists the profaning  
mass of the sun.

You who automatically sneer at everything that comes along, except your own  
work, of course,  
Now feel the curious force of the invasion; its soldiers, all and some,  
A part of you the minute they appear. It is as though workmen in blue overalls  
Were constantly bringing on new props and taking others away: that is how  
you feel the drama going past you, powerless to act in it.  
To have it all be over! To wake suddenly on a hillside  
With a valley far below—the clouds—

That is the penance you have already done:  
January, March, February. You are living toward a definition  
Of the peaceful appetite, then you see  
Them standing around limp and hungry like adjacent clouds.

Soon there is to be exchange of ideas and  
Far more beautiful handshake, under the coat of  
Weather is undecided right now.  
Postpone the explanation.  
The election is to be held tomorrow, under the trees.

You felt the months keep coming up  
And it is December again,  
The snow outside. Or is it June full of sun  
And the prudent benefits of sun, but still the postman comes.  
The true meaning of some of his letters is slight—

Another time I thought I could see myself.  
This too proved illusion, but I could deal with the way  
I keep returning on myself like a plank  
Like a small boat blown away from the wind.

It all ends in a smile somewhere,  
Notes to be taken on all this,  
And you can see in the dark, of which the night  
Is the continuation of your ecstasy and apprehension.

#### IV

The wind thrashes the maple seed-pods,  
The whole brilliant mass comes spattering down.

This is my fourteenth year as governor of C province.  
I was little more than a lad when I first came here.  
Now I am old but scarcely any wiser.  
So little are white hair and a wrinkled forehead a sign of wisdom!

To slowly raise oneself  
Hand over hand, lifting one's entire weight;  
To forget there was a possibility  
Of some more politic movement. That freedom, courage  
And pleasant company could exist.  
That has always been behind you.

An earlier litigation: wind hard in the tops  
Of the baggy eucalyptus branches.

Today I wrote, "The spring is late this year.  
In the early mornings there is hoarfrost on the water meadows.  
And on the highway the frozen ruts are papered over with ice."

The day was gloves.

How far from the usual statement  
About time, ice—the weather itself had gone.

I mean this. Through the years  
You have approached an inventory  
And it is now that tomorrow  
Is going to be the climax of your casual  
Statement about yourself, begun  
So long ago in humility and false quietude.

The sands are frantic  
In the hourglass. But there is time  
To change, to utterly destroy  
That too-familiar image  
Lurking in the glass  
Each morning, at the edge of the mirror.

The train is still sitting in the station.  
You only dreamed it was in motion.

There are a few travelers on Z high road.  
Behind a shutter, two black eyes are watching them.  
They belong to the wife of P, the high-school principal.

The screen door bangs in the wind, one of the hinges is loose.  
And together we look back at the house.  
It could use a coat of paint  
Except that I am too poor to hire a workman.  
I have all I can do to keep body and soul together

And soon, even that relatively simple task may prove to be beyond my powers.

That was a good joke you played on the other guests.  
A joke of silence.

One seizes these moments as they come along, afraid  
To believe too much in the happiness that might result  
Or confide too much of one's love and fear, even in  
Oneself.

The spring, though mild, is incredibly wet.  
I have spent the afternoon blowing soap bubbles  
And it is with a feeling of delight I realize I am  
All alone in the skittish darkness.  
The birch-pods come clattering down on the weed-grown marble pavement.  
And a curl of smoke stands above the triangular wooden roof.

Seventeen years in the capital of Foo-Yung province!  
Surely woman was born for something  
Besides continual fornication, retarded only by menstrual cramps.

I had thought of announcing my engagement to you  
On the day of the first full moon of X month.

The wind has stopped, but the magnolia blossoms still  
Fall with a plop onto the dry, spongy earth.  
The evening air is pestiferous with midges.

There is only one way of completing the puzzle:  
By finding a hog-shaped piece that is light green shading to buff at one side.

It is the beginning of March, a few  
Russet and yellow wallflowers are blooming in the border  
Protected by moss-grown, fragmentary masonry.

One morning you appear at breakfast

Dressed, as for a journey, in your worst suit of clothes.  
And over a pot of coffee, or, more accurately, rusted water  
Announce your intention of leaving me alone in this cistern-like house.  
In your own best interests I shall decide not to believe you.

I think there is a funny sand bar  
Beyond the old boardwalk  
Your intrigue makes you understand.

“At thirty-two I came up to take my examination at the university.  
The U wax factory, it seemed, wanted a new general manager.  
I was the sole applicant for the job, but it was refused me.  
So I have preferred to finish my life  
In the quietude of this floral retreat.”

The tiresome old man is telling us his life story.

Trout are circling under water—

Masters of eloquence  
Glisten on the pages of your book  
Like mountains veiled by water or the sky.

The “second position”  
Comes in the seventeenth year  
Watching the meaningless gyrations of flies above a sill.

Heads in hands, waterfall of simplicity.  
The delta of living into everything.

The pump is busted. I shall have to get it fixed.

Your knotted hair  
Around your shoulders  
A shawl the color of the spectrum

